

SWORD

AMY BAI

Prophecies have a way of coming true.
Whether you want them to or not.



She drew her sword.

She didn't question why. It was an act as necessary as breath, and every nerve in her was insisting on it. As soon as its comforting weight was balanced in her hands, Ainhearag shifted to a wider, more dangerous-feeling stance and turned one white-rimmed eye back toward her rider.

"Easy," Kyali murmured to her horse, listening hard. "Be easy."

Far off, a branch snapped. Closer, the bushes rustled.

She took a slow breath, willing herself calm, and pressed Ainhearag gently forward. Then the brush behind them spoke and she hissed a curse and kicked her horse into a run, not questioning that instinct either. Ainhearag bolted forward. Branches whipped into her face and eyes. Suddenly, a bow seemed like a very useful weapon.

Behind and all around them, the woods were coming alive.

It wasn't a lesson. It was an ambush, and it was deadly...

Sword

Amy Bai



Candlemark & Gleam

First edition published 2015.

Copyright © 2015 by Amy Bai
All rights reserved.

Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Please respect the author's rights; don't pirate!

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

For information, address
Candlemark & Gleam LLC,
104 Morgan Street, Bennington, VT 05201
info@candlemarkandgleam.com

ISBN: 978-1-936460-61-8
eBook ISBN: 978-1-936460-62-5

*Cover art, design elements, and illustrations by Jenny Zemanek
Seedlings Design
www.seedlingsonline.com*

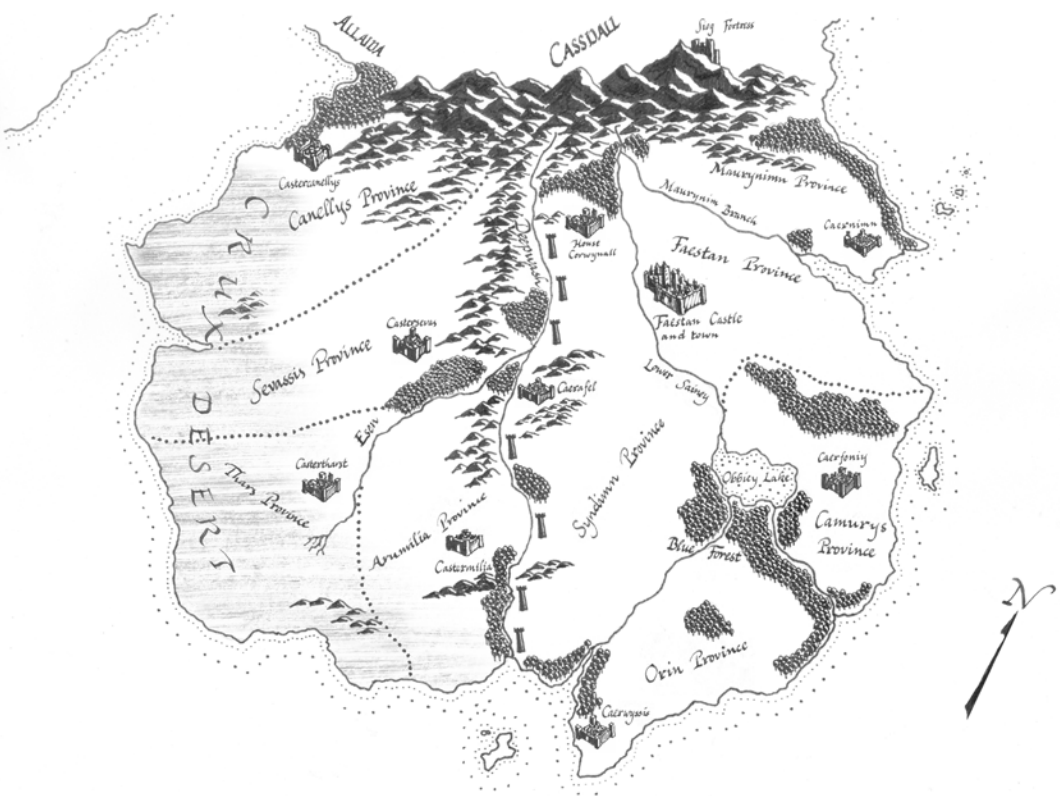
Map by Alan Caum

*Book design and composition by Kate Sullivan
Typeface: Alegreya*

www.candlemarkandgleam.com

To Art:

my rock, my goad, my shoulder, my always.



Iardan

*Dark the wind that brings the storm
and lost, all, to its breaking,
Yet firm shall hold Sword, Song, and Crown
A land of their own making.*

*Sword shall guide the hands of men
and Song shall ease their sorrow,
Crown shall harbor all their hope
And lead them to tomorrow.*

 BOOK I 
 THE GENERAL'S DAUGHTER 



*Merry we'll meet till the tides they all turn, then dance with
the blades as the shadows return..."*

Children skipped and sang an old nursery rhyme in the parched air of the late afternoon. Their shadows fell strange in the slanting light. In the shadow of an oak thick with age, a girl crouched glumly on her heels, drawing aimless lines in the dirt with a battered practice sword. She was noble, this girl, a scion of the great House of Corwynall, whose oak it was: the oak and a great deal more. The silver locket at her breast declared it even if her patched dress did not.

*"Sing we a new song, for sadness and woe,
kings and queens all shall the darkest road know—"*

The children, passing under one another's linked arms,

stared at her and interrupted themselves with whispers. The girl never spared them a glance. Only someone who knew her very well would have marked the way her gaze held them always in its periphery, how her face tightened when a gust carried their words across the yard.

*“Rise shall the earth and the heavens shall fall,
fire can guard from what water can call...”*

It was the most senseless thing she had ever heard. Why couldn't they sing “Skip to the River” or some other silly rhyme?

The tip of her sword dug into the earth. She blunted the only weapon her father would allow her till she had proved herself worthy of better, and recited the Five Tenets of Siege Defense in her head, hating that she hated their stares.

They were too young to help in the fields, barely able to toddle. But they learned it from their parents, who were too far away right now to stare. *What did the general's daughter do today?* those parents would ask when they were home in their cottages over supper. And their eyes would follow her in to-night as they headed home to talk—she hoped—of something more significant than the state of Kyali Corwynall's gown or the battered old sword she carried everywhere.

Bold thoughts, coming from a girl crouched under a tree.

She pinned her gaze on the far hills, refusing to notice the sly looks of the children. The mountains were wrapped in a haze of summer heat, little more than shadows against the sky. The soldiers always teased her when she looked in that direction: the mountainfolk taught the Gift and the sword to all who proved both worthy and Gifted... and they took girls and

boys both for study. *You ought to go*, her father's officers often jested, secure in the knowledge that no Corwynall of the royal line ever left the family estates. *They'd like you up there.*

Síog girl, fae child, her brother would usually add, being less wary of her temper and endlessly amused by how those names made her blush. *Surely they would have you, you look enough the part.*

Sometimes, like now, it almost seemed like a good notion. Up there, the air would be cool and there would be snow in the winters, which she had never seen. Up there, no one would know her name, or stare at her.

Bind them together with holly and rue, the next lines of the song were, and she heard it even though they didn't sing that one. Kyali bit her tongue, annoyed that they had managed to fix the silly thing in her mind. *Those that will follow the heart's voice be true.*

This was the last time she tried to be helpful to the estate staff.

The headman's niece, whose rightful custody these little imps were, was probably behind the barn with one of the soldiers, looking to get herself a marriage the old-fashioned way.

That was unkind. Arawan was not a fool. But Arawan was not here, *she* was, minding babes with eyes like pointing fingers, and likely providing considerable amusement to the soldiers of the Third Battalion, who were scattered about the estate on boring guard duty today. Those men didn't find her odd, if only because she'd tagged after so many of them in her younger years. They weren't above a jest at her expense. But jests she would take from them, and from her brother Devin, as she took orders from her father and her father's officers... and neither from anyone else. Even now the men posted at the

stables were sneaking looks at her, grinning. It was almost enough to make her smile back.

In the sunlit yard, the children sprawled like puppies, panting in the heat, and argued over what to sing next. Their voices hung in the air like dust.

*“Dark the wind that brings the storm,
and lost, all, to its breaking;
yet firm shall hold Sword, Song, and Crown
a land of their own making—”*

Fierce shushing from one of the guards stopped that rhyme, which was senseless but lately seemed much less silly. There were no smiles on the soldiers’ faces now. There was a scowl on hers. Now nobody ventured a glance toward her. Somehow that was worse than the stares.

A shiver twisted over her and Kyali bent her head to look at the ground so nobody could see her expression.

Arawan would have to come back soon.

Hopefully her father and her brother would come back soon, too: they had braved the court to meet with the king on some matter or other, leaving her here to manage the estate and be skewered by the ungentle curiosity of children.

She made her way across the yard with the sun setting fire to the tops of the northern hills. Behind her, the fieldhands stacked their hoes by the oak and gathered their children for debriefing. She had no appetite, and no interest in the book on siegecraft her father had pointedly left her. She decided, since her father wasn’t here to forbid it and her brother wasn’t here to poke fun at it, that tonight she would sleep in the root cellar,

where the earth was still cool and damp. Sleep was an attractive alternative to watching the candles drip and pretending to study. Or to sharpening her sword, which definitely needed it now. She wished Taireasa were here to prod her out of her moodiness. But with Taireasa came the bodyguards that were always in the princess's presence, and a witness to the bothered state she found herself in was the last thing Kyali wanted.

She was out of sorts, and annoyed with herself for being annoyed.

It's youth, her father would tell her, with that dry impassiveness she never could quite manage. *You're fifteen*—and then she would snarl, and he would raise one wry eyebrow, and she would trip over her own feet in sword practice and look like a fool.

Her limbs were growing longer, and banged into things at the worst moments. Her dresses fit badly and her head ached, and she knew her temper showed in her eyes, which sparked with an odd golden sheen whenever she was upset. That was her father's heritage, passed down from some questionable relation or other, and it was extremely awkward when she was trying to keep her face still. There was a grim irony in the fact that her private inconvenience had half the kingdom convinced she was fearsomely magical—and yet, unlike her brother Devin, she could claim not the slightest smattering of the Gift her House was known for.

It wasn't particularly amusing at the moment. She was a daughter of House Corwynall. She had duties, and things to be that she wasn't, and didn't yet know how to become. She stood in the midst of brocaded chairs and tapestries holding a sword, scowling at nothing. She didn't need the mirror on the far wall to know how out of place she looked at the moment.

“Damn,” Kyali said aloud to the walls, and felt a little better.

Devin and Father should be back tonight, and if she couldn’t manage a better balance than this, she had better be asleep before they arrived. Her brother was quick to scent a moment of uncertainty and turn it into a prank or a gibe, which would either improve her mood or worsen it considerably. Plotting an extravagant retaliation to this imagined slight, she descended the cellar stairs completely occupied, and so she noticed nothing odd until she reached the bottom. There she froze without knowing why, as every hair stood on end.

An arm reached out of the dark and wrapped around her neck.

She saw it coming from the corner of her eye but only had time to twitch uselessly sideways. Another arm immediately followed the first one, muffling her startled cry and stealing her breath.

Too shocked to be afraid, she bit down. The hand over her face jerked away. Her elbow drove backwards and her heel went up into a knee. The awful crack of bone that followed drew a pained groan from behind her and brought her panic in a thundering flood. Her attacker staggered, pulling her with him. The dropped candle sputtered on the floor beside them, throwing huge shadows everywhere. Spurred on by the thought that she might have to finish this struggle in the dark, she shouted. It was a much softer sound than she’d intended, but the floorboards above them creaked ominously, the arms around her fell away, and her attacker screamed as though she had burned him.

Leaving this mystery for later consideration, Kyali flung herself at the steps and scrambled up, leaving the back panel of her skirts in his fist. Her sword clattered on the floor as she snatched at it. He came hard on her heels and, as she turned, drove himself obligingly onto the blade for her. Stunned, she froze again.

Her blood sang in her ears. By the look on his face—a fair face, some much colder part of her noted, with the Western short-beard—he was at least as surprised as she was. He drew a bubbling breath. A dagger dropped from his hand and hit the floor between them.

They stared at one another.

He made an odd face then, and coughed a gout of blood all over her. She blinked through the drops. She knew she had to move—*not dead till they stop bleeding*, Father would say—but she couldn't. For all her years of study, all the secrecy and sword-play, she had never killed a man. She supposed, watching his face in a perversely distant way, that she still hadn't quite managed it. But he fell forward onto her then, going limp; after the instinctive terror of having him land on her subsided, the sight of his glassy gaze, of her old practice sword sticking out of his ribs, made it clear that she had done it now.

She watched his face closely while his blood dripped down her cheek. He didn't move. He seemed not to be bleeding anymore, though with all the blood on him already, how could one tell? She didn't intend to get closer to check. She couldn't hear anyone else in the house. Through the haze of shock, she was grateful the soldiers weren't here to witness this bizarrely personal moment.

"Well," Kyali said, beginning to be pleased at how well she was taking this—and then threw up on him.

Damn.



New lessons were the result of the ordeal, which was not shock-

ing: new lessons were the result of nearly everything.

Devin, when her family had arrived to find her scrubbing blood out of the floorboards, had predictably deemed her hopeless, right before he slipped on an overlooked puddle. Their father, also predictably, had directed the House guards to bury the man in the south field, made her drink half a cup of unwatered wine, and sent her to bed.

Kyali spun and parried as her father's sword came at her. The jolt when their blades met made her whole arm ache. Sweat pasted stray tendrils of her hair to her face. Her leather armor creaked with every move. She wobbled back on guard, her arms and legs trembling with fatigue.

It was both comforting and disturbing that she was not the only one out of breath this afternoon: beads of sweat stood on her father's brow and his armor was creaking, too.

He waved a hand at her, meaning, she hoped, that they should rest. Prudently, she waited until he leaned against a tree before staggering to one of her own, pressing her back against its bark. Her legs were barely able to hold her weight. Every time she grew accustomed to the lessons, he would add some new element and she would spend a week sore and winded and stumbling before she began to get the hang of it again. These lessons were both harder and easier than the other things he taught her: the movement of troops across provinces, the tricks of supply lines and alliances, the careful use of spies. An odd sort of childhood—but as the alternative was learning to sew and do accounts, she wasn't about to complain.

Except now she had killed a man, and she could no longer pretend her father was merely amusing himself by teaching her.

Her father sighed, and Kyali darted a worried glance at

him. He'd been very quiet since last night, which in her experience meant she'd done something wrong. But he avoided her gaze and so she looked elsewhere, determined not to be seen as a child today.

The wheat fields stretched out below them, brown stalks peppered with kerchiefed heads and teams of dray horses, and in the distance, the wide expanse of the Sainey River sparkled back up at the sun. It would have been a far more peaceful view if the fieldhands weren't watching them so closely.

By now rumor would have reached the capital; there was no way the soldiers who had found her in the aftermath of last night's little debacle had kept silent about it. She glanced over again. Her father seemed to be contemplating the same view. But she had learned the trick of staring at things from the corners of the eye from him, and she knew it was her face he really watched. Caught between gazes, she pretended to be absorbed in a rock under the toe of her boot. Her shoulders drew up.

"It bothers you, then, does it?"

There was no curiosity in his question; the answer was probably plain on her face just now. She shrugged. He sheathed his sword and folded his arms, looking a bit like a statue of himself as he considered the expanse of his fields.

"No," she said, which they both knew was an outright lie, but her father let it pass with mocking civility and spared her having to invent a justification.

"It'll only get worse, now that they've evidence it's not play we do here," he said.

She glared, feeling a rush of heat in her eyes. There was no hiding it; he knew exactly what it meant, having the same trait himself, though it almost never showed in him.

“What is it then, exactly?” she asked. “You’re not preparing me for marriage, unless you were planning to marry me to an outlaw. Why—”

She choked the words off, flinching away from her own anger. There was more of it than she had believed.

Why are you teaching me to be you?

She could never ask him that. Just thinking it made her heart thump.

Her father tipped his head like an old battle crow, looking like he’d heard the words she was holding behind her teeth. “Don’t you like it? I was perhaps mistaken.”

Gods, there was no way to win with him. She wasn’t even sure she *wanted* an answer— ten years at this; it couldn’t be a whim that the Lord General chose to teach his daughter the sword. Surely not.

But what if it was?

“You know I do,” she said, and they stood a moment, listening to the distant shouts from the fields. “But,” she added, having recovered her argument, and he cast her a weary sideways glance—he hated that word. “But I’ve put this practice sword to a somewhat different use than you intended now, have I not? The villagers may find it a good tale to tell, but I doubt the gentleman’s kin will. And others who have found my... hobby... amusing will think again. Won’t they?”

“You’ve the Gift now, yes? You’ve used it—against, dare I guess, young Lord Alusyn in our cellar last night?”

How could he tell? She’d said nothing of the strange effect of that shout, or—

Wait. *Lord Alusyn?*

It was one of his strikes from the side. The surprise made

it to her face; she could feel it there, widening her eyes. Kyali thought hard. She knew the name; a moment's thought gave her the lineage and the location, and her knees went weak.

She'd killed a baron's nephew. A *Western* baron's nephew.

Her father gave a grim smile then, seeing her understanding dawn. "I need not explain to my daughter the repercussions of this," he said, looking her steadily in the eye. "Need I?"

He had explained it enough already, in lessons and lectures. Relations with the four provinces of the West were difficult: the rule of the kingdom sat in the East, on the other side of the Deepwash River, and all sorts of things from trade to taxes to the old names of the seven gods were points of contention—but the real issue, she suspected, was simply that the throne sat in the East. A girl raised in House Corwynall, the more martial of the two royal lines of Lardan and the one on whose estate the Eastern provinces' soldiers were trained and housed, could hardly be unaware of the tension. A girl who sometimes couriered orders to troops stationed near the Deepwash's winding border as part of her training was aware of a bit more... like that the men on their side were matched precisely in number and location on the other. It was not common knowledge, and her father wanted it not to be.

She was of the Blood, as was her brother: as eligible for the throne as Taireasa was, though nobody had voted a Corwynall onto the throne in so many generations it was just history now, something to read in a book. She was of the Blood and she'd killed a *Western baron's nephew*.

A *Western baron's nephew* had come to kill *her*.

Kyali shook her head, swallowing a thousand questions, beginning to be truly afraid now. She sensed in a vague, star-

tled way that her whole life had just turned on this point. Her father watched as though every thought in her head was already known to him, and they probably all were. He was the Lord General, after all, and troops moved at his orders, as did she. "Good enough," he grunted.

It wasn't; not nearly. But she held her tongue and stared, a tactic that sometimes worked. He laughed without much mirth and tipped his chin out, toward the fields.

"Just look," he said. "Look at it."

She did. The habit of obedience was too ingrained in her not to: she heard his voice and her muscles moved before her mind caught up. Devin, older by a few years and having studied music instead of warcraft, had escaped such thoughtless compliance. *Why* was Devin's question, generally before one was done speaking, and his flighty attention skipped over half the explanation anyway unless you caught his interest. *Change-ling*, he had called her last night. Outside of *Síog girl*, it was his favorite to throw at her, because of her eyes and her hair. (And because she hated it. But he had given her the best of the pancakes this morning without a word, and that was Devin too.)

"Change in the wind," her father murmured, dragging her attention back to this strange morning and all the things she didn't want to think about. He nodded at the distant field-hands. "They know it. They watch because you're part of it, daughter. They're looking to see which way it blows, and what it brings. Allow them that with whatever grace you can."

Well, *that* was hardly comforting.

"*Look at it*, Kyali Corwynall."

It was utterly unlike him. Kyali gave up obedience to stare at him, finding his face as impassive as ever when she turned,

but there was a haunted look to it just the same. She frowned, worrying, waiting for him to tell her how to mend this mess she had made.

His eyes wouldn't quite meet hers, and his mouth tightened.

"Time I told you a few things," her father declared then, and turned to gather his sword and walk down the hill. Kyali followed silently, in confusion and dread.



2



Taireasa's face was unusually impassive, for Taireasa. A strand of curls wafted into her eyes, which darted to the river, then to the bramble on the far side, and finally came to rest on her hands, tying knots in a blade of grass. Even when she was trying to be as stone-faced as her father, Kyali thought, some part of Taireasa always gave her away.

"You already knew," Kyali accused, and watched those fine-boned knuckles whiten. Taireasa's hands stilled a moment, then tangled into her skirts, twisting into fists. Tailors and handmaids were on hand at every court event: good cloth suffered whenever the princess's nerves did.

Taireasa sighed. "Not about Lord Alusyn, Ky, I couldn't possibly."

A poor attempt at misdirection. "And this stupid rhyme

that's been around for gods know how many centuries, that everyone's now calling a *prophecy*? When did you hear about that?"

That earned her a glare. "Oh, *say* you're surprised, Kyali Corwynall, and I'll know you're a liar. We've both known since we were old enough to skip to it that *that* one was more than whimsy. What else do folk do when the gossip gets stale and they need something to whisper about in the night? They've whispered about this one forever. Are you about to claim otherwise? Do you say you weren't whispering with me, when we'd run out of mischief to do and the shadows in my bedroom all had teeth?"

Taireasa had a very sharp tongue when pressed. It was normally one of Kyali's favorite things about her friend.

Kyali felt a flush heat her cheeks and knew her eyes were admitting everything for her. "You still could have said," she snapped. "Or are you about to tell me you've never known more than what we scared each other with when we were ten? Say that and I'll know *you* for a liar, Taireasa Marsadron."

It served to bring a matching flush to Taireasa's cheeks, if nothing else. Which she was immediately sorry for. Kyali softened her tone, trying to be more patient. "When did you know... more?"

"You never come to court anymore—"

"Gods, what has *that* got to do with it?"

"If you'd come, you'd know!" Taireasa's eyebrows rose as if even she were alarmed by the outburst. Kyali used the small silence that followed to gather the remnants of her composure. Nothing ever went as she planned with Taireasa.

Well, to be fair, things rarely went the way she planned *without* Taireasa.

Taireasa cracked her knuckles, then winced at the sound. She made a face. “Not that I blame you. Who wants to have their hands stared at for hours by the Western barons?”

“You could have said something. I would have come.”

“You have better things to worry about, Ky.”

“Oh, aye, so many things preferable. I have so many pleasant pastimes. And my audience of fieldhands and farmers and soldiers, who it seems now think I’m something from a children’s skipping rhyme.”

Yet another pause, quite different from those before it, and Kyali rose to escape that very direct green gaze. Taireasa followed, perfectly willing to press an advantage.

“It *does* bother you, then. I wondered.”

“How can you ask me that? Why is *everyone* asking me that lately? Does it seem enjoyable? Would you enjoy being watched every hour of—”

The idiocy of complaining to the king’s only child about audiences and stares caught her by the throat. She glared at the river and sighed. A leaf drifted serenely onto the water and floated, spinning, downstream. The birches rustled, dappling them with sunlight—all around, the forest went peaceably about its business. It was hardly a day made for brooding over dark and ancient prophecies that might or might not be true. And might or might not be anything more than stupid rhymes their grandparents’ grandparents had sung as children.

“Gullible fools,” she muttered to the water, which only burbled back.

Taireasa’s arms came around her shoulders. Her sharp chin dug a hollow just above a collarbone. “I don’t think you credit yourself for that expressionless face of yours. But for your

eyes, Ky, I doubt I'd have the slightest idea how you feel about anything. Unlike me, with my hands, and my skin—

“—and your eyes.”

One arm came away from her shoulders. “My eyes? They stay green, at least.”

“And your elbows.”

“Now you're mocking me.” Taireasa stepped to the side and buried her hands in her hair, sticking out the offending elbows. The locket at her breast, etched with the Marsadron hawk, winked silver in the sunlight. “You'd make a much better queen than I'm going to. Perhaps *I* should take up the sword and you can learn to enjoy ruffles and misdirection.”

Gods, what a thought that was; it made her shoulders twitch. “You'll damn well make a better queen than I would.”

“Don't curse, Ky.”

Kyali glowered, irritated at having to state the obvious. “Imagine me dancing with Anders of Orin. Or trading barbs with your cousin Lainey?”

The corners of Taireasa's mouth twitched unwillingly upwards. “You *are* somewhat ill-suited to negotiation,” she admitted.

“Mmmn. *Somewhat*. And what choice do we have, after all?” She struck a swooning, tragic pose, a thing she would only ever do when there was nobody but Taireasa to see. “I am Sword, you are Crown, and foredoomed both to our fates...”

“Gods bless, don't make light of this!” Taireasa snapped, utterly unamused. “Let be, Kyali.”

Kyali sent a single frustrated glance at her friend and folded her arms. “It's a *children's rhyme*, Taireasa.”

But it wasn't, not anymore. She'd been able to tell herself so until she'd heard her father speak it aloud yesterday; until

she'd seen the worry in his eyes that he didn't quite manage to mask. Until she knew he believed it was a true foretelling, one of the old rhymes of legend, from so far back the burned library of the buried years was probably the only place that had ever held the truth of it... and that his children were tangled up in its verses.

Now it would never be that simple again. *Nothing* would, she suspected, even if by some miracle this turned out to be nothing more than a bad children's rhyme after all.

She'd just hoped for one more afternoon with Taireasa where she could pretend, but all along Taireasa had been ahead of her in this, as she so often was. Kyali pulled in a deep breath, let it out carefully, and made her face perfectly still. There was an ache sitting in her chest, one that felt too much like a farewell, and it probably lit her eyes like lanterns.

Taireasa took her hand, unfolding it and rubbing her fingers over the deep calluses made by the sword. "It's on the lips of barons and kings these days, Kyali Corwynall," she said softly. "Some think it's more than that."

Kyali tugged her fingers free. "And are you one of them?"

"I don't know, Ky. A year, even half a year ago—no. But it is passing strange that the only children of Houses Corwynall and Marsadron should happen be a Bard, a swordswoman, and the heir to the crown. When have we last seen a Bard?"

"I am not a swordswoman! And Devin's not a Bard."

Not yet, anyway. It was something of an event, the naming of a Bard, and it had not been done in living memory.

"Not yet," Taireasa retorted, echoing her unspoken thought a bit too closely. "We both know he will be one day, though, don't we?"

Gods, wouldn't her brother chortle over the notion of himself as a figure of prophecy? He'd preen like a swan. And tease her endlessly... if, she thought in sudden dismay, he hadn't already drawn such conclusions himself. What might their father have told his eldest, on those occasional trips to the capital she did her best to dodge?

"Well, I'm not a swordswoman."

Taireasa had paused, knowing there was thought happening, doubtless knowing there was distress—how she always saw such things was a source of constant consternation. Now she took up the argument again, putting her hands on her hips.

"You are," she said simply, wielding that piercing stare of hers like a blade. "Or you will be. You probably know as much of martial strategy as my own father does. And you're more skilled with a sword at fifteen than half the gentlemen at court. It does occasion comment."

"And you wonder why I never come to court anymore," Kyali muttered.

"I never thought you cared."

"Well... I don't." This conversation had gotten far from where she wanted. Her shoulders kept trying to hunch.

"You can't have it both ways, love."

Kyali looked away, feeling her face pull at itself. "Now you sound like Father," she grumbled, and Taireasa snorted with a decidedly unladylike lack of grace that Kyali loved to see. Court had made her lifelong friend so careful as they got older; it was good to see a glimpse of the waif she had skinned her knees with.

"*Dark the wind that brings the storm...*" she muttered. "I suppose it is a rather morbid rhyme to skip to. Whose hands shall

I guide, if all are lost? If this Eairon person who's supposed to have written it foresaw the end of everything, why did he only write two damned lines of verse about it? It's stupid, Taireasa! I'm sure Alusyn of Arumilia had some business in my father's cellar besides scaring me half to death, but shall we go to our fate like sheep to a shearing?"

"I don't think the idea is that we go to it, rather that it comes to us."

"While we sit in our fields counting comets and the Western barons grow ever more bold. I think not, Highness."

In the heat of the argument, Taireasa barely flinched at the title, usually something to bring her to a blushing silence. That was nearly as alarming as this sudden fascination with the old rhyme. Kyali realized suddenly, in the length of her bones, in the spare beauty of her face, that her childhood friend was no longer exactly a child. She wondered what changes were being wrought in her own form, and what they spoke of to the prying eyes of soldiers and country folk.

Taireasa drew her attention with a hand on her sleeve. "Is that what your father told you? He spent hours with Mother and Father this last visit."

"I don't know. I think so. He never tells me very much of anything, you know that. Just 'you must be on your guard,' and 'discontent is not to discount'." Taireasa murmured the last adage with her and they grinned at one another in exasperated amusement; it was a favorite of both their fathers. Kyali pressed a finger to the bridge of her nose, trying to figure out how to steer the conversation elsewhere. The things her father had told her were still settling in her head, and thinking of them made her heart pound. "Nothing we haven't both heard a

thousand times before,” she finished.

Green eyes met hers for a long moment, penetrating.

“There was somewhat more than that, Kyali Elliana Corwynall. You’re unsettled. What?”

Damn. So much for the benefits of a straight face. For all her claims to the contrary, Taireasa had an unerring talent for sniffing out the heart of a matter and pecking away at it until she got what she wanted. Keeping secrets from her was like trying to dam a river with bread.

“You’ll make a very decent queen indeed,” Kyali sighed.

“Ky.”

“Oh, *all right.* We discussed the Gift, which I do seem to have now. The... prophecy, or whatever it is. The West. The man I killed, and what he was doing there. Father was a bit more foreboding than usual. I don’t want to talk about it now. I’m still sorting it out.”

Taireasa was silent, thinking.

Eairon’s old rhyme, stripped of all the innocence of childhood, sat between them like a third presence. Kyali looked toward the wide expanse of the river, unable to meet Taireasa’s sharp gaze.

“Ah,” Taireasa finally said, and stopped there.

“*Ah* yourself. What point is there in worrying? It will come or it won’t. Father seems to think it will. So I’ll keep studying. Shall I single-handedly hold off barbarian hordes from the lands over the mountains?”

“I don’t think that’s required. My father is aware, and, one supposes, taking precautions.”

“I hope so. Gods. Why couldn’t this century be as quiet as the last few? And when did you become so gloomy? I thought

you'd be thrilled I'm wearing this wretched frilly dress."

Taireasa had dimples, which were very much in evidence at the moment. "It *is* becoming. Though I figured it would be better not to mention it, somewhat like salt in a wound?"

"Fie. My favorite is ruined, thanks to Lord Alusyn of Arumilia, who had not the courtesy to bleed decently on the floorboards. Prophecy or no, I'm not so ignorant of court fashion I'll go wandering about covered in the blood of my enemies."

There was that wide-eyed gaze she'd been hoping for. It was a bad day indeed when she couldn't shock Taireasa. "Ky, that's horrible."

"Isn't it?"

They wandered along the bank of the Sainey in silence, followed at a discreet distance by Taireasa's mounted escort. Kyali closed her eyes, letting the sounds of forest and river wash over her, and found some peace for the first time since a man had run himself onto her sword.

She said nothing when Taireasa linked arms with her, willing to be a child for this brief bright afternoon, sure in her heart that there were few opportunities left for doing so.



Dinner was unusually quiet that night.

Kyali kept her eyes on her plate and wondered if all the crops would be as dry: Cook had clearly struggled to make this palatable. She thought she tasted both butter and wine, not things one would normally expect to be in a barley stew. All the farmers were suffering for the lack of rain.

It would be different on the mountain, where there were

almost always clouds. Cooler, and windier, and probably rainier. Did they even grow crops on the mountains, or did they just hunt? Her father's first lieutenant had told her once that they did, that the mountain Clans cut great flat stretches like stairs into the very earth—but Deryn had also tried to convince her that they made magic with their swords, which was just mad, so he might have been having her on.

She supposed she'd find out soon enough.

She glanced up, mouth full of stew and sour unease, and was caught in her father's stare from across the table. His eyes narrowed. Kyali froze, feeling a chill twist up her spine. He gave a barely perceptible nod.

Devin's gaze darted between them. He frowned, and a spoon slid from the table to the floor. The general transferred the narrow-eyed look to his son.

"A little more control would be prudent, I think."

"I try."

"Try harder. The last time you played the flute, we lost another window. Do you think glass grows in the fields?"

"I haven't got anyone to teach me," Devin said reasonably. "The last tutor you sent me to made me eat flower petals and told me all I needed to do was *plant the magic in the earth*, for the gods' sakes. I think he was actually a confused farmer. If that's the best the kingdom can offer in the teaching of magic, we're in trouble." He took a bite, waving his fork lazily in his sister's direction. "Wait till Kyali comes into her own. Then you can blame us both for the broken glass."

"I doubt she'll break glass with her Gift."

"What, then, iron? Bones? The hearts of swooning noblemen from here to Madrassia?" Devin brightened, warming to this

speculation. “Do you suppose she’ll call lightning from the skies?”

Their father seemed to find this subject interesting in spite of Devin’s gleeful foolishness. They both looked at her thoughtfully, in identical poses of contemplation, and Kyali rose and plucked the spoon off the floor, escaping to the kitchen.

Useless. Devin’s voice, trained by years of singing, carried easily.

“I expect you’ll have to bring some dried-up old wizard from the provinces here to keep her from bringing the house down around our ears. It will be a nice change of pace. I can offend him with bawdy lyrics and Kyali can frighten him into an attack of nerves hacking about with that chipped hunk of steel. Perhaps we can even invite some of the cousins in for some *real* sport. I haven’t seen Bran and Conall and Bryce in years.”

“There won’t be a wizard, at least not one to come here. You’re both well beyond the hedge-witches. And the last time that lot was here, you disarranged half a battalion.”

Kyali shut their voices out, concentrating on her plans. It would be a long walk to the mountains, and horses were too precious to take one. Gods knew she wouldn’t miss the hard-mouthed, spiteful gelding she’d been stuck with for the last year; walking seemed peaceful next to that gait. She wouldn’t need much. A pack with bread and cheese, her practice sword and a few daggers. She would wear her leather armor under a peasant’s dress and hide the sword in the skirts. It was a pretense she had managed more than once, couriering messages in secret in her father’s service.

She debated leaving a note and decided against it. There was little she could think of to say, and her father clearly knew enough to tell where she had gone. And there was nothing at

all she could say to Taireasa. Just thinking of that made her throat hurt, a hard lump of self-pity that she swallowed fiercely. She couldn't afford such things anymore: they belonged to children, and she was, after tonight, on her own path.

Whatever that was.

"What say you, sister mine?" Devin shouted from the dining room, conveniently interrupting a chain of thought that was beginning to tend toward panic. "Will you make the ground tremble or burn the forest down?"

"Leave me out of this," she hollered back.

Their father finally raised his own voice, sounding dryly annoyed. "Keep shouting, the both of you, and we will likely have one or the other."

Devin's generous laughter rang out, and in the kitchen Kyali felt that ache come back to her chest, a perilous slide toward sentimentality that she smothered in a reach after a wine bottle. Her father cast her a sardonic glance as she emerged and set it on the table.

"No goodbyes for your family? That seems cold."

Devin's laughter came to halt so abruptly she had to fight an unwilling smile, bowing her head to hide it. For a long, uncomfortable moment, nobody spoke. Their father calmly poured the wine for the three of them, the clink of glass the only sound in the house. Kyali looked up, feeling that dratted heat in her eyes undoing all her efforts at poise.

"There seems no use for them," she said. "You already know, and you would have guessed anyway."

Devin exploded, slapping both palms on the table edge. "I knew—I *knew* it! Where are you going this time, you secret-loving little wretch? I *hate* it when you two do this. Damn you

both. Kyali, you're as bad as he is."

The general leaned and righted an empty water pitcher. "She's going to the mountains, a course you've suggested often enough yourself. Sit down."

"I will not sit down!"

"I sent to the Fraonir yester-eve." Her father turned a bland face to her as he collected several forks on their way to the floor. "You'll be meeting a party on the road, I expect."

Several comments sprang to mind. She bit them back with an effort. "Aye," Kyali said tensely, almost as outraged as Devin was now.

"Aye! Aye, she says!" Devin snapped. "How long have these plans been going on under my nose?"

"I imagine it's about two days, boy, roughly since a young man died on the point of your sister's chipped hunk of steel. I would have thought a Bard would be a bit more observant."

"Well, I'm not one yet, am I?"

"If you're waiting for the affirmation of the court before you learn to marry your mind to your mouth, it will be some few years. Do us all a grace and get an early start."

"*Enough*, you two. Father, don't make this worse, we're running out of cups again. Gods bless."

Devin made an inarticulate sound of frustration and wilted back into his chair. The general merely raised an eyebrow. Then the table itself shivered and they all eyed it warily. "Don't break a single cup, Devin," their father murmured.

Her brother sighed and rested his head in a hand with a look of intense concentration. Kyali sipped at the wine and watched him as he recovered. "The countryside will be remarkably free of bandits along your path, I imagine," he said mild-

ly, which was Devin at his absolute worst, and the wise braced when they heard that tone from him. “When are you going?”

Kyali met his eyes, cautious.

Her brother blinked once. “Not tonight, then, is it? Gods, stay till morning, at least get a decent breakfast in you.”

“Mmm, and leave under the fieldhands’ watchful stares. Why don’t I just have it proclaimed?”

“I could write a song about it.”

Devin’s eyes did not change color, announcing his state of mind to the world. *His* mother had been a quiet, un-magical baron’s daughter, unlike her own. She glared across the table at him, and their father cleared his throat.

“It’s settled. Enough bickering. Devin, you know perfectly well why she’s going and if you’d use half the wit you were born with, you’d know why it has to be now. Don’t throw anything, and if we lose so much as another cup, you’ll muck stalls till dawn. Kyali. *Kyali.*”

She moved only her eyes, keeping her brother in her periphery. “Don’t hit him,” was all their father said, dry as a bone. “I’m going to see to the horses.”

He left with admirable indifference. Devin watched him go and then blew a slow breath out, staring fire at her. Kyali held his gaze, feeling the heat in her eyes ruin all her effort at keeping her face schooled.

“I can be just as stubborn as you, sister.”

“I don’t doubt it. It’s my practicality you’re lacking, not pig-headedness.”

“Oh, I can be practical enough when I want.”

Crockery was in danger. Again. And she was having a difficult time keeping the smile off her face. “We should be past

such things by now. Aren't you supposed to be the eldest? Act like it now and then. It would be far more shocking than any of your feeble pranks, I assure you."

"Ah, but this is so entertaining. And you shrieked like a banshee when you saw those spiders, don't deny it."

"Sad to be reliving past glories at seventeen, brother."

They leaned back at the same time, never looking away—one didn't, with Devin in this mood. Not twice, anyway.

"Changeling," her brother accused, unoriginally. "S'og child, with your hair and your sparking eyes and your sword, you belong in some bedtime faery tale... yes, I do think I could make a very *nice* ballad out of you. Ought I? Would you enjoy that?"

She blushed in spite of herself, and he smirked.

"And what does that make *you*, I wonder?" she retorted. "An ogre, perhaps."

"The storyteller, of course. Silly girl."

"Court jester, rather." The insult brought a matching flush to Devin's cheeks. She *did* smile this time. Devin grinned back at her, all teeth, and Kyali braced both feet under the table and eased the chair back as her brother toyed with his wineglass in an obvious parody of disinterest.

"A wandering mendicant," she suggested, to have it over with—and ducked under the table as Devin launched himself over it without warning. She heard glass break (mucking stalls it was, and never did a brother deserve it more) and scrambled on her knees for the other side as Devin tried to untangle himself from her chair, cursing and laughing. His hand closed over her ankle. She kicked. He pulled. She slid backwards, inadvertently gathering carpets. By now, she was laughing too hard to fight, and emerged breathless and sneezing in a rumpled mess of rugs and dust.

Devin leaned against the chair and wiped at his eyes, shoulders shaking with silent hilarity. “I ought to give you a sound thrashing for that,” he declared, grinning at her outrage. “Alas, I’m not completely certain I’d win. Now that I have your undivided attention, dear sister: *what* is our father talking about?”

“As if you could!” Kyali struggled back to her knees, spitting grime and horsehair, her hair having escaped its braid to fly in her face as it always did when freed. “Devin,” she said, trying not to struggle too obviously for breath. “What do you think that man was doing in our cellar? I killed *Alusyn of Arumilia*, brother mine, not some common thief. It’s not going to go unnoticed.”

“I just assumed he was looking for Father’s maps, or the House heirlooms, or some such.” His wry glance made a jest of the words. House Corwynall held lands and arms as old as the kingdom itself; it was rich in history and nobility, but little else. Their comfort was at Crown grant, as it had been for as far back as memory went. It was how the kingdom was run: Marsadrons ruled, Corwynalls held the borders. Except for the rare times when Corwynalls ruled, and Marsadrons lived on these lands and trained the soldiery—but the barons hadn’t voted a Corwynall heir to the throne in so long nobody alive remembered it happening. Her House was made for war, and Lardan was not. She huffed at the humor and wiped the hair out of her eyes.

Then Devin frowned. “Wait. Alusyn? *Alusyn*? Isn’t he—”

“Baron Walderan’s lackwit nephew? Yes.”

Her brother paled, his customary silliness giving way to horror and a shrewd, startling cleverness. Few had seen that, and fewer still suspected it existed—more fools they. He was

a Corwynall, after all, raised by a man reputed to be the most brilliant strategist the kingdom had seen in centuries.

Devin's brow furrowed deeper. He stared at her, waiting.

"I'm too young to hold my own," Kyali said, unable now to meet her brother's gaze. She found a spot on her dress and rubbed at it, until the memory of Taireasa's hands twisting silk made her cringe. "I need training. The kind no one will question and few will dare try. And a few years in the hills will cool tempers here."

"What tempers? The barons can hardly *acknowledge* that he came here, sister... do you expect duels at sunrise? No one's going to be that straightforward about it."

That was the general's son, though still a bit naïve, which she was not, after nearly a decade of study with her father and his highest officers. The weight of her isolation from all others of an age with her struck her suddenly. When she thought about it—about couriering messages to troops dressed as a peasant, about learning the sword in a way none of the soldiers did—it didn't seem ordinary at all. But she had lived like this for as long as she could remember.

And now, would she would learn to live a different way, and put all this odd teaching into practice?

She stared at the floor until she could speak past the tightness in her throat. "Precisely," she said at last: there was a quiver in her voice. "They won't."

Devin's eyes widened. "You think they'd try—you think the barons would send an assassin? No, Kyali. They—" he stopped, frowning, and sighed suddenly. "They already did. It wasn't maps at all. He was here for *you*."

"Or you."

Devin huffed, looking startled at the thought. Kyali shrugged. “But likeliest me, yes. Father thinks so. Unfortunately, so do I.”

This conversation had gotten well past what she wanted to speak of. She stood, brushing at her clothes, and righted her chair. Devin made his way back to the other side of the table and sat, absentmindedly gathering the shards of his broken wineglass.

“But why now, when—”

He stopped again, cutting off the question. His eyes were suddenly intent on hers. The silence stretched out awkwardly between them and Kyali fought a flinch that seemed to start somewhere deep inside her. The old rhyme they had both heard and disregarded all their lives was suddenly weighing down the air between them, so plainly present she could almost hear it, and, in fact, Devin’s lips shaped the first few words.

He did guess it.

She raised a hand, stopping his words.

“Let’s not speak of... it. Let’s just say I feel that instruction with the Fraonir would be useful.” Devin closed his lips over his words and silently mouthed “useful.” She could almost hear the doubt. “And see that you don’t get caught alone with any Westerners,” she added under her breath.

They were still sitting in silence when their father came back in, carrying a sword in a plain leather scabbard. He handed it to her without ceremony. If he noticed the state of the room, or the dust in his children’s hair, he gave no sign. “You’ll wear it belted until they’ve determined you’ve earned the baldric, mind,” he said, looking at the sword instead of at her. “I don’t think you’ll grow much taller, but it ought to stand you in good stead for a few years even if you do.” He set a pair of

daggers, sheathed and bound in a belt, atop the sword. “You’ll learn these before you learn the sword, I expect.”

Kyali blinked up at her father wordlessly, arms full of weapons, and he looked impatiently about the room. “Right. Bread, cheese, water... and I suggest you get out of that silken target. Wear one of the roughspuns. And put a scarf over that hair of yours.”

“Are you so eager to be rid of me?”

Gold flashed briefly in his eyes, then sank like a stone in a stream. *I must learn how to do that*, Kyali thought. His hand came up and smoothed briskly over her head, dislodging a drifting cloud of horsehair. Across the table, Devin’s jaw had dropped.

“You’ve a lot of hard work ahead of you, girl,” her father said. “Now’s as good a time to start as any.”