

# The Nesslands 2 – Victims of the Winter War

## Prologue

### Before the Ice Winter



A tawny owl took flight from its shelter and disappeared into the forest. Smoke whirled in the bird's slipstream and wafted between the branches of the trees. Shouts and screams came from the small village. The longhouse was ablaze, and the villagers were fleeing down the streets. A few minutes earlier, Muldness had been slumbering quietly in the cool, late-summer night, but now several of the houses were in flames.

In the middle of a street stood a warrior yelling commands in a foreign language. Then he pulled back the hood of his cloak and watched the warriors surging through the village as they struck down the villagers.

Conian Bistortas' face glowed in the light of the burning houses. He looked around and squinted his dark eyes. Then he gestured to the group of warriors waiting near him and set off at a run. The warriors followed him, keeping a lookout from behind their hoods.

Chaos ruled around them. The streets were congested with smashed furniture, carcasses and corpses which had been dragged out of the houses. Finally, Conian found the woman he was looking for and slowed down. He made another gesture to his warriors, and they halted in a closely gathered group behind him.

The woman was calm and unfazed by the terrors surrounding her. She turned slowly. In front of her was a man, who looked up at her with wild eyes. The man was gagged and bruised. He was held by two Radix warriors, and he seemed to have given up the fight for his freedom. Beside the woman was a shapely, young woman. Probably the woman's daughter, thought Conian and studied the young woman's body. He sighed. Maybe later. The woman smiled triumphantly and moved towards him with a confident stride.

'Angeliga Perduelli,' she introduced herself. Her sharp features and thin body reminded Conian of a bird that had lost its feathers.

It annoyed him. He did not like her. In general, he did not like ugly things. Ugly things were infinitely insignificant and only a source of annoyance.

'This is my daughter Meya...,' Angeliga gave a sycophantic smile and Conian's pupils dilated at the sight of Meya's full lips shaping her name, as she introduced herself. '... And my sons,' added Angeliga. She waved her hand towards four young men behind her.

Conian's eyes rested on Meya a couple of seconds, before they drifted over the young men's serious faces.

'And him?' He indicated the man held by the Radix warriors. Angeliga's lips rippled into a smile as, with ice-cold eyes, she studied the man who had begun to writhe in the warriors' iron grip.

'That is my husband, Runar Perduelli,' she answered in a toneless voice. 'My access to this wretched village.'

Runar widened his eyes and made a hoarse grunt, and a murmur swept through the row of Meya's brothers. A wet stain had spread on the front of Runar's trousers. The brothers studied their father slumped in the grip of the Radix warriors, but there was no sympathy in their gaze.

Conian smiled at the brothers' non-existent feelings towards their father. The old hag had at least raised her children properly, he noted. He glanced indifferently at Runar and gestured to the warrior holding him. The warrior nodded, gripped Runar's throat with his claws and ripped it. Then he let go of the quivering man, and Runar writhed in the mud in his last death spasms.

Meja screamed, but Angeliga gave her a forbearing smile.

'There, there. You know he was only a tool,' she whispered and stroked her daughter's hair.

Meja straightened her back and attempted to smile. 'I was just... shocked,' she whispered. She looked at Conian, and her eyes glowed as she saw the acknowledgement and desire in him.

'Show us the way!' he commanded without releasing her gaze.

'This way. It's just around the corner.' Angeliga beckoned to Conian and his warriors and led them with quick steps to the nearest street corner. 'There! That's the place!'

Conian and the warriors formed a semicircle in the street in front of the small house. He sent some men to the back of the house to prevent the inhabitants from escaping. The windows were dark, but Conian could hear voices from inside. The hunt always sharpened his senses.

He made a quick gesture, and two more warriors left the semicircle to stand on each side of the door. The door was torn open from inside. In the doorway stood Kierstin with her sons. The eldest son, Bjorn, let go of the door handle as if it had burnt him, when he saw the warriors in the street.

The sight of Kierstin's horrified stare delighted Angeliga Perduelli. Greedily, she absorbed the scene in front of her. She watched one of the warriors at the door grip Bjorn and throw him to the ground. However, it bothered her that the daughter, Oona, had escaped. She tried, unsuccessfully, to push away the thought. Lucili Bistorta would not approve... Nor would her brother. That much was certain.

She looked sideways at Conian and sent Mother Melia a vicious thought. If it had not been for her... The witch had wielded extraordinary powers at the meeting at the Crossroads the day before Oona's Initiation. Powers which had let her hide the girl during the journey from Muldness, but which had eventually dried up. Reputedly, Melia had gone on a Pilgrimage with Oona after the Initiation, and while she was gone, another witch took over her duty of maintaining control over the Guardians of the Boundaries along the Outermost Holloway. That was how it had appeared during the first couple of weeks.

However, instead Oona had been escorted across the Holloway by unknown men. On the very night of her Initiation. The Radix warriors had not seen the girl at the Holloway, but she must have been there.

A runner from Lucili had come to town many years ago, disguised as a wool-pedlar. Oona had been just a little girl. At the Outermost Holloway, the runner ran into trouble just like everyone else with malicious intent who shared blood with the Radix. The Guardians of the Boundaries would not let him through and he had been severely injured. Melia brought him to her hut with the feigned intention of helping him. But Angeliga saw through it. It had all been very suspicious, and her constant spying on Melia's hut and activities confirmed her suspicions.

No one had seen the wool-pedlar arrive; he never got that far. Melia had fetched him herself at the Outermost

Holloway and dragged him away from the Guardians. Angeliga had knocked and offered her help, when she 'completely by chance' passed Melia's hut and heard the screams of the wool-pedlar. Reluctantly, Melia let her help.

The wounded wool-pedlar lay on the dining table in the main room of Melia's hut, when Angeliga came in. Melia was allegedly helping the wool-pedlar, but she had clearly been in the middle of an interrogation.

Angeliga had pretended that she did not notice. Quietly, she had introduced herself to the injured man: Angeliga Perduelli.

The face of the runner lit up as he recognised the name. He had stuffed a crumpled piece of parchment into Angeliga's hand, when Melia looked away for a moment, and thus the runner had fulfilled his mission.

A few days later, he died by Melia's hand and, as far as Angeliga knew, without spilling any information. But after that, Melia had seemed suspicious and kept a close eye on her.

Somehow, Lucili had found out where and who the Chosen One was. In the note, it had said that the Chosen was Oona Kinsgood and that Angeliga should notify them, when she knew the day of her Initiation. The Radix would then ready themselves to come and fetch her, but only after the Initiation, because the Chosen had to be initiated in her hometown for her to fulfil the prophesy. If she was not initiated, Lucili would not be able to use her to find the Shield.

A feint attack against Hogbight would let a small group of warriors disembark and advance west undetected.

However, the Outermost Holloway was a problem. It was impossible for the Radix warriors to cross. They had to wait until Oona was brought over. Lucili knew that one day someone would come to fetch Oona and bring her across the Holloway. One day, the descendants of the People of Light would

need the Chosen to fulfil the first part of the prophesy: The rescue of a child, Princess Ceinwen.

Angeliga still wondered how. How had Lucili suddenly found out that Oona was the Chosen? And why had it been her? Angeliga saw nothing in the small, mediocre girl which even hinted at her becoming a woman with special powers and the fate of the Nesslands on her shoulders.

However, it was not for her to question such things. At that point, she had just been honoured that it had been with her in Muldness that the Chosen had appeared and not with one of the other members of the Perduelli clan. The members of the clan had been distributed throughout the Nesslands for years to ferret out the location of the Chosen. So Angeliga had found someone willing to gain Oona's trust for the cause when the time was ripe. In case the girl said something about the Shield.

Angeliga was torn out of her thoughts by the sound of a scream which cut through the clamour from the chaos around them.

'Bjorn!' Kierstin fell to her knees beside her son, but another warrior at the door grabbed her and forced her away from him.

She gripped her youngest son, whose cheeks ran with tears as he clutched his mother's skirt.

Conian slowly flexed his leather-gloved hands, while he coldly observed Kierstin being dragged towards him. She fought and tried to turn to look at her son.

'Bjorn!' she called again. Then she saw Conian and froze.

He put a finger to his lips. Then he gestured to the warrior holding her. The warrior let her go, but grabbed Eiric instead and pulled him away. Eiric screamed and whimpered and, swiftly, Conian stepped forward and struck him so that he tumbled backwards. Kierstin screamed again. She rose

and instinctively sprang towards Conian to help her son, but stopped when he whirled to face her.

Terrified, she stared into his eyes. There was no more than a hand's breadth between their faces, and his eyes were two black slits in his perfectly shaped face. Their depth was infinite. They contained an evil so ancient and terrible that Kierstin at once knew who he was.

This is Conian Bistorta, she thought. Lucilis' brother.

Something constricted inside her, and old memories welled up inside her. Memories she would never be able to repress, but which she nevertheless had spent many years trying to come to terms with. She saw nothing but Conian's eyes, drilling into her soul. His raised index finger prevented her from moving forward... Prevented her from breathing...

She clutched her throat and tried to make her petrified chest release its grip on her lungs. Then she fell to her knees before him gasping for breath. Scornful laughter sounded behind her. She wrenched her eyes free from the ground and caught a flickering glimpse of Angeliga and her daughter Meya observing the scene. A circle of Radix warriors towered behind someone in a cloak whose face she could not see. The shapes rippled in front of her. Meya's brothers were also here, she saw.

'Good,' sounded Conian's voice above her. He reached down a gloved hand, gripped her chin and forced her to meet his gaze again.

Kierstin's eyes wandered. Where was Eiric? Then she spotted him out of the corner of her eye, but the sight of his fearful face tugged at her. She heard Bjorn groan from over by the house.

Maker be praised, she thought. He is alive.

'Who took your daughter, and where is she now?' Conian's voice was so ominously low that the dread made her stomach turn.

She hesitated. How should she answer him? A hard, leather-armoured hand whipped out from nowhere and struck her temple. Through the searing pain she heard Eiric scream. Conian's face reeled before her, twisting into a furious grimace.

She shook her head. 'On a pilgrimage,' she stuttered. 'She's on a pilgrimage... With Mother Melia...'

'Liar!' Another crushing blow struck the side of her head, and this time she staggered and fell.

'Mother!' She heard Bjorn scream and felt Conian's hand grip her throat. With inhuman strength, he lifted her from the ground with one hand. His face was only centimetres from hers, and she gasped for breath and her eyelids prickled.

'Two strangers rode out from here and crossed the Outermost Holloway... Seemingly alone. We patrolled the Holloway for days after having fought our way there and distinctly felt magic around the two strangers,' Conian said.

Kierstin's eyes swam.

'I know your daughter was with them,' Conian snarled. 'Somehow, they had her with them.' He flung her down and she landed on her back. The air was forced out of her lungs, but she felt relief spread through her body in spite of it. Oona had been concealed by Mother Melia's spell long enough for her and the men to escape. Kierstin hoped that they had made it all the way to the Groves unharmed.

'You!' Conian whirled and pointed at Angeliga. 'You should have known that the old witch was capable of concealing the Chosen during the trip! That the Chosen would be whisked away that very night!'

'But... ' Angeliga squirmed before him. 'We thought that the Pilgrimage had begun... That Melia...' Her eyes wavered. 'If Oona was taken during the Pilgrimage, you would... You were on your way. They would not be able to cross the Holloway without you noticing.'

The cloaked person stepped forward. 'My lord, we did everything we could to find out when and how Oona would be taken. We did not know it would be the day of the Initiation, and that Melia would be able to conceal her as they travelled through the forest, we...'

Kierstin did not recognise the voice. There was a ringing in her ear where Conian had struck her. She could not discern whether it was a man or woman speaking.

'Is this the one you brought in to help you?' interrupted Conian and gave Angeliga a stinging glance.

She nodded quickly, and Conian turned to the cloaked person.

'Then be silent,' he hissed. 'You still have work to do! Off with you!' Conian frothed with anger and threw another glance at Angeliga, who cringed. She bowed her head.

The cloaked man bowed and disappeared into the darkness. Crashes of crumbling houses were sounding all around them, as the heat of the fire enveloped them.

'Anyway, we'll bring the mother. My sister wants her.' Conian gestured that Bjorn should be brought over to Eiric. 'And get him over there! We're taking the brothers as well.'

'No!' Kierstin crawled to Conian and clung to his leg. 'Not my sons!' she screamed.

'My sister wants you in Aisgard. The more to lure the Chosen to Aisgard the better.' His eyes bored into Kierstin's and the blood drained from her face. She trembled all over.

'Now you can get a taste of what awaits you, if you and your sons should try to escape. What do you know of your daughter's powers? Has she told you anything? Anything about the Shield of Querqus?' he snarled.

Kierstin shook her head.

He puffed out his chest and watched the kneeling woman with an ice-cold stare. Then he carefully removed one glove. He tilted his head and began rolling up his sleeve.

'I don't believe you. You're her mother. Of course you know about her powers. What did she tell you about the Shield?'

'I don't know anything,' she whispered hoarsely. 'Oona didn't tell me anything. She doesn't know anything herself ... yet. It's true.' Her voice trailed off, and she watched the rolled-up sleeve with growing dread. 'I don't know anything,' she repeated. 'Please...'

Behind them, the circle of Radix warriors was like a dark, impenetrable wall. Beside them, Angeliga and Meya watched the scene with uncertainty in their eyes. Angeliga's confident attitude had disappeared after Conian's reprimand. Conian reached out his gloved hand to Kierstin.

'Give me your hand.'

She hesitated, but then reached out her hand. He gripped it and raised the hand with the rolled-up sleeve. His hand began to fume slightly. Then the skin folded back from his fingertips. The flesh slipped away from his bones, mirroring the sleeve he had rolled up a few seconds earlier.

Kierstin screamed and desperately tried to tug herself free. Behind her, Bjorn emitted a hollow roar and hid Eiric's face against his chest. He had realised what Conian was going to do, when he saw the exposed fingerbones, which at once melted into a sabre-like claw. It all happened in seconds, and Bjorn heard his own and his mother's scream, before the sabre separated most of her arm from the rest of her body.

The blood showered into the air and glistened in the glare of the fires around them, and Bjorn buried his face in Eiric's hair and sobbed. Again and again, he saw his mother's hand falling in his mind. Slowly falling towards the ground with blood raining from it...

Then Conian bent over Kierstin and touched the wound lightly. The bone sabre had disappeared, and the skin of Kierstin's stump closed over the bloody wound at his touch.

‘There. We can’t have you bleeding dry before we reach Aisgard, now can we? Now you know what will happen to you and your sons, if you don’t obey me.’

A handful of warriors came running towards them. They dragged a screaming woman with them. Her words were incomprehensible and chanted like shrill, warbling trills, so high and desperate that they grated in Kierstin’s ears. The woman was naked and bound with some sort of rope which glittered like metal. One of the warriors tossed the rope as he ran. However, they had difficulty controlling the woman, who spouted incantations which made the rope snap and fall to the ground. Kierstin recognised the witch, who had taken control of the Guardians after the death of Mother Melia. In a mist of pain, she tried to get up, but her legs refused to obey her. Conian stepped over her as if she was a piece of trash littering the ground, as he slung jumbled lengths of the metallic rope through the air. It twisted around the witch’s body and face, and her shrieks were abruptly silenced. Kierstin’s vision clouded, and she felt that she was slowly losing consciousness.

Conian turned towards the semicircle of waiting warriors behind him. He gestured to some of them.

‘Bring her to the water! We’ll need her to get past the Guardians out to sea. She’ll do what she’s told. Kill some prisoners, if she won’t open the boundary.’ He pointed at Kierstin, Bjorn, and Eiric. ‘Take them to the shore! Quickly!’

A warrior picked up the unconscious Kierstin and began carrying her away. Behind her came Bjorn, carrying Eiric, with a warrior following him closely.

‘What about us? We were supposed to...’ Angeliga’s voice was only a low squeak and was drowned out by more warriors dragging captured villagers – men, women and children – towards the sea. She clutched Meya’s hand.

Conian watched Angeliga coldly. Then he turned and began walking. He made a quick gesture and his magic

warriors moved out. They turned to Angeliga. Bjorn closed his eyes, and the sound of Angeliga's skull being crushed reached his ears. He opened his eyes and saw that Meya's shriek made a smile ripple across Conian's face. Her brothers shouted, but they were quickly silenced, interrupted by wet, crunching blows.

'Not the sister,' said Conian without turning, as he passed Bjorn. 'We'll take the sister alive.'



Bjorn kept quiet, as they were led down to the sea, last in the row of Radix warriors and people from Muldness. The stench from the numerous warriors was carried on the sea breeze. A warrior pressed his sword against Bjorn's back, as they walked. In front of him, Kierstin was being carried by a warrior so broad that he could only discern his mother's limp feet swaying with each step of the warrior. The darkness enveloped them, and ahead he noticed large ships anchored far out on the glittering surface of the water. Out of reach of the Guardians.

There was a grunt from the warrior behind him and the sword against his back disappeared. He gasped. A soft thump sounded behind him in the darkness. Then another one. Someone had leapt down from the trees behind them, but the warriors in front of them had not noticed and continued unperturbed through the darkness.

'Aril? What are you doing?' he whispered, when he saw his friend Aril, Racnar, the smith's Arnio and a couple of others, whose faces he could not discern in the darkness. He looked sideways at the lifeless warrior stretched out on the ground. Then he noticed the bloody sword in Aril's hand. 'You stabbed him?' He stared wildly at Aril.

'Come!' Aril grabbed him. 'We have to go!'

'But... No! I can't leave my mother!' Bjorn tore free, as Aril tried to pull him into the thicket.

Racnar looked at him and put a hand on his shoulder. 'There's no time!' he hissed between his teeth. 'There are still warriors in the village, and they're coming this way! Help us pull this one into the bushes.'

'But...' Bjorn felt cold sweat spring from his scalp, as he saw the row of warriors, disappearing over the last dunes into the darkness. His mother was out of sight. Eiric began whimpering and whining for his mother and Bjorn quickly put a hand over his mouth.

A gutgling interrupted them. The Radix warrior moved.

'Aril!' Sounded Linn's voice in the darkness, and Aril turned to his sister.

'Run, Linn! Run!' he hissed. Then the Radix warrior was upon them, and Aril was thrown to the ground. The warrior grabbed Bjorn and blood and slime splashed in his face. The Radix warrior's growl turned into a roar, and Bjorn watched in terror as long, greyish roots left the warrior's hands and curled around Eiric. Racnar dashed towards the warrior and tried to push him away. Meanwhile, Bjorn felt his grip on Eiric slip and shouted, not caring the least about the warriors who were on their way from the village. Eiric shrieked as he slipped out of his brother's hands, and the warrior quickly pulled the screaming Eiric close to his chest. In an instant, Aril got to his feet and tried with Racnar and Bjorn to tear the terrified Eiric away from the warrior, but he was too strong. The warrior jumped back. In large bounds, he escaped out of reach, and before long he was far down the path. There were shouts from the other side of the crest and the warrior answered with a grating roar. He picked up the pace and disappeared towards the sea.

'They're coming!' shouted Aril. 'Bjorn, we have to go! Now!'

Blinded by tears, Bjorn was tugged, dragged, and lifted through bushes and thickets, which tore his arms and legs. He was oblivious to all but his friends' panting and attempts to encourage him to continue, while behind them the roar of the Radix warrior fell silent.

## Chapter 1

# The Winter of Pain

Four lunar cycles later

Exhausted, Oona rubbed her forehead. No matter what she tried, she could not make the perpetual headache cease. She threw the book on the floor and rose painfully. Her body was stiff and sore. However, it was not from sitting still for too long. No, that was just how it was now. After she had returned to the Groves with Ceinwen, a nightmare of pain had developed. It worsened every day.

It had begun so well. Kerr had stayed in town. He had insisted on keeping her company and had received lodgings at Mr and Mrs Hatch's on the castle grounds. He helped the elderly gardeners through the hard winter, and Don Jacoby benefited from his help as well. Every day, when he was done with his chores, he had fought his way through the park and into the castle to keep her company. They had spent their time training with swords. As Kerr told her, it would aid her in the future. There was no doubt about that. And the many days of training had distracted her from her worries... For a while at least. Kerr was good company and motivated her to train hard and she had quickly become engrossed with it. She was already an ambitious archer, and she was sure that the Firewand had a purpose. It had to be more than just an

easy way to get a fire going. She felt that there was still much she did not know about it.

Kerr had tirelessly taught her everything he knew about sword fighting, and that was a lot. She had taken it all in and had to her own satisfaction quickly become good at it. As the son of one of the Groves' finest warriors, Kerr had practically been born with a sword in his hand, and he was a good teacher. However, for the sake of his mother, he told her, he had not become a warrior although it would have been natural.

It was enough that she had to live with the constant fear of her husband dying, so his parents had forbidden him to become a warrior, and he had accepted it.

Many weeks had passed with training, until Oona had insisted that he should go to Herluf's and take care of his mother instead. Oona would manage.

She had been sincere that he should leave, but there was also another reason. She had begun feeling strange. The dream with the severed hands had returned, so her sleep was lousy, and she had begun to be tired and lethargic when he showed up. He had complied after studying her for a while with a frown. She could see that he suspected there was another reason, but he did not ask. So he left and thus did not get to know what was happening: She was slowly getting worse.

She sighed. This was unbearable. The winter seemed like it would never end. She hoped Radulfir and the witches would soon succeed in tearing the Winter from Lucili's grasp. But what if they failed? It was ages since she left Muldness on the night of her Initiation. What had become of her family? She had begged and pestered Queen Ingaea for permission to leave. Take off with some warriors. Something. Just doing something other than reading in Radulfir's chamber every day. Instead, she was forced to stay here to no purpose whatsoever. And for what? Was she not the Chosen?

She clenched her fists in anger.

'You should stay here and recover your strength,' Radulfir had said, before he left. The voice grated in her head. Afterwards, Ingaea had attempted to make her understand or at least accept their decision that she should stay in the castle until Radulfir returned from the Northern Crown. Besides, the hard winter made travel impossible. Even the minister of the Territory of Moegelhaim, Fargar Andorr, had been caught in the Groves by the sudden icy winter. The minister was presently at Herluf's with the inhabitants of the Groves.

However, she refused to accept it. Did they not understand that she was being driven insane by being forced to stay? When she did not know what had happened to the men at Aisgard? When she had no certainty of the fate of her family? Were they at Aisgard, as she suspected, or were they still in Muldness? What if her family were hiding somewhere around Muldness? Could the scout who was sent to find out what became of the Radix who sneaked past Moegelhaim have overlooked someone? Overlooked the Radix that she, Marck, and Stigandir met at the Outermost Holloway ...

She tried to push the memories away, but the thoughts whirled through her head. Muldness had been razed to the ground and Aisgard was certain death. She fought to keep her hope alive, but it was difficult, and uncertainty tore at her like a physical pain. Maybe that was it, maybe it was the uncertainty which made her whole body hurt, she thought. However, deep down she did not believe that idea.

She continued brooding. Maybe she should let Doctor Potentilla examine her. She had refused since the pains began, a few days after Sigmon left.

The thought of Sigmon and Beti, who had gone south before Radulfir left the castle to go north, made her sigh. Would Sigmon and his army of Bear Warriors be able to find the men, now that she had apparently called the Albinari for help

without knowing? And would the Albinari help them at all? Sigmon and the witch had been away for more than a lunar cycle now, but still there was no news.

She pushed away the swarming thoughts and decided to go to Mrs. Potentilla. Otherwise it might end badly one day, she thought. She snapped at the drop of a hat. Her miserable mood became worse and worse. She could feel that each day she lost her temper more often, and she had noticed Potentilla's worried looks. Sometimes she had to escape into another room to prevent the rage from taking over. She felt an inexplicable relief and satisfaction every time she let her anger lash out at something nearby or slammed a door, but she could not smash anything in the Queen's or Radulfir's chambers.

Irissa had noticed the many broken things in Oona's own chamber. She did not comment on it though. She just quietly took them away and replaced them. But Oona knew that Irissa was worried. Everyone around her was worried. Even Aestrid. It was unbearable.

She sat back in the armchair and covered her face with her hands. A sob escaped between her fingers, and she let them slide down her cheeks, which were puffy and tender from her pimples. The anger surged again. What was happening to her. She barely knew herself. She also kept sweating. She put her nose to her armpit. The sweat reeked. She probably had to go to the doctor... Maybe tomorrow.

She rose and went to the window on stiff legs. Radulfir had stood here, when he pulled the wide door aside. A bird had twittered outside, she remembered. Sunlight had filled the room, and the wind had made his robes billow. It felt like ages ago. Now the dim light, which penetrated the thick layer of ice and snow, erased the contours in the room and made it dead and silent.

She put her palms against the milk white, opaque glass, but quickly withdrew them. The glass was of course ice-cold.

The snow outside was several stockades high. She knew it was morning, but one had to go to the rooftop garden, where a single door was kept relatively free of ice, to see what time of day it was.

Then she changed her mind. I'll go to Potentilla now, she thought. I can just as well get it over with.



Half an hour later, she was in front of the door to the sickroom. She stopped to catch her breath. The many stairs and relatively large distances between the different parts of the castle had not previously been a problem. However, now all her joints hurt and it had been a torment to climb all those steps. She groaned and put a hand on the wall to steady herself.

The door to the sickroom sprang open and she was face to face with Doctor Potentilla. The doctor's small eyes stared in astonishment at her through half-moon spectacles.

'Oona! I must say! What a surprise!'

Oona withdrew her hand from the wall and straightened her back as much as she could.

'I...' she began, but Potentilla interrupted.

'Come inside, my dear, we'll speak in here. You don't feel very well, do you?' She gave Oona a serious look.

Oona cringed. 'No,' she mumbled and lowered her eyes.

Potentilla took her by the elbow and led her down the empty sickroom. It was slow going. Although Oona tried, she could not walk any faster. The trip to the sickroom had drained her. Doctor Potentilla noticed, but did not say anything. She placed Oona on the edge of a bed. The silence roared in the large empty room. Ceinwen had been discharged a long time ago and spent most of her time getting in the way in the castle's kitchen with Mimi's youngest son, Ailan. The two children were the same age and had

always been good friends. It had been touching to see them reunite after Ceinwen's return. At first, their joy had infected everyone around them, Oona included. However, now their noisy games and darting around in the castle's kitchen had become a source of annoyance to her.

She had not visited the kitchen for weeks.

Doctor Potentilla gave her a sharp look.

'You should have come sooner, Oona,' she mumbled as she took her hand. She patted it thoughtfully. Then she let go and stood up. 'Take off your clothes. All of them. I'll help you.'

Oona felt the indignation prickling under her skin, but she stopped herself and lowered her eyes, when she saw Potentilla's grim gaze. Then the doctor's face softened, and she unbuttoned Oona's dress and pulled it down over her shoulders.

'I think I understand how you feel. You're not in an easy situation. But I'm glad you'll let me look at you.' She hesitated. 'You should have recovered from the cold your organs were exposed to and the frostbite, so I don't understand why you are so unwell. Do all your joints hurt?' Potentilla helped her to her feet, and Oona nodded, while she let the dress slip to the floor.

There was nothing unusual to be seen, but all her joints and muscles burned when she moved.

'Does it hurt anywhere else?' Potentilla walked around her, poking and prodding her in various places. Oona grimaced.

'My head. It keeps throbbing. I have nightmares, and my sleep is interrupted, and it hurts here.' She laid a hand on her chest and blushed, and Potentilla gestured for her to sit down.

'I see.' The doctor gently removed her hand, which hid the tender, adolescent breasts. They were not much more than light swellings on the skinny chest. 'Now that is natural for someone your age, Oona,' answered Potentilla in a soft voice.

'But... But it's as if it's not only on the outside... It's also inside, behind... the ribs and deeper. It hurts when I breathe. Also...' She blushed again, and her eyes flickered across Potentilla's shoes. 'I've had the monthly, you know, every day since the pain began,' she mumbled.

Potentilla frowned. 'I see,' she repeated. 'That explains why you're so pale and tired. Hmm, curious.' She hesitated for a while, studying her patient. Then she sat down beside her.

'Oona. When you were in Aisgard ...' Potentilla searched for the right words. 'Were there any incantations, while you were there? Or during the journey? If there were, do you remember whether any of them affected you?'

She shook her head. 'Lucili cast an incantation, when she conjured up the winter, but at that point I was escaping with Ceinwen. So that incantation didn't affect us.'

Potentilla nodded slowly.

'I can't remember anything else ... My head ... It's all so unclear. It's as if something's changing. In here.' She put a hand to her temple. 'I get so angry... I can't control it.'

Potentilla studied her with a furrowed brow. 'What about you? Did you use any?'

'Use what? Incantations?' She looked at Potentilla. Then she looked away and picked thoughtfully at the bed linen. 'Not as far as I know ... Or remember.' She looked up. 'Actually, I don't know any.'

Potentilla studied her expectantly.

'Except perhaps the one with the Albinari. Apparently, I summoned them... Unconsciously. Beti told me,' she finished.

Potentilla widened her eyes slightly, and Oona sensed that a train of thought was running through the doctor's head.

'Yes,' she said seriously. 'She told me.' She stood up. 'We have to do a thorough examination and take some tests.' She patted Oona's shoulder. 'I'll get the nurse.'

Oona watched the doctor walk away from her.

‘Doctor Potentilla?’

‘Yes?’ The doctor turned.

‘It’s something else. It’s a bit weird.’ She hesitated and her eyes flickered, but the doctor waited patiently.

Then Oona looked up. ‘Some of the books I read a couple of weeks ago, some of Radulfir’s books... Some of them were completely incomprehensible to me before. Now I read them easily, and I understand everything it says. How can that be?’ Later that day, there was a knock at Queen Ingaea’s door. The knock echoed in the high-ceilinged corridor. It was late and the castle was quiet.

‘Yes?’

The door slid open and Ruun, the Queen’s handmaiden, took a surprised step back. ‘Doctor Potentilla? What brings you here so late? I’m sorry to say that the Queen has retired.’ She fell silent, when she saw the grave look on the doctor’s face. ‘Has something happened?’ she whispered.

‘To be honest ...’ The upset voice of the doctor frightened Ruun. Potentilla had always been an expert in restraining her feelings and maintaining her professional aloofness. Something had thoroughly unsettled her.

‘I have no idea,’ she continued. ‘Not yet. But something is *happening*. I must speak to the Queen. Now.’

Ruun quickly stepped aside and let Potentilla in. Then she closed the door.



Oona stretched cautiously. Small pops and cracks were coming from her body from under the eiderdown. She groaned. The mornings were the worst. She sat up, swivelled on her backside and put her feet on the floor. So far so good.

Irisa had offered to help her with her morning toilette, but she had declined. She was perfectly able to do it herself.

There was a knock at the door. Oona answered and Irissa came in. It was early, she thought in annoyance. Without doubt, Irissa would once again insist on helping her.

‘Are you hungry?’ asked the Queen’s cousin cautiously.

The way she asked made Oona turn and study her before she answered.

‘Yes.’

She followed Irissa with her eyes as she placed a tray with breakfast on the table. Then Irissa sat down on the bed beside her.

‘I heard you went up to Potentilla yesterday. It was the right thing to do.’ Irissa hesitated for a while, but could not keep it in. ‘You should have asked me for help. It’s a long way and there are so many steps.’

‘It was on impulse, but I made it.’

‘Why am I not allowed to help you, Oona? It’s obvious how much pain you’re in!’

She looked at Irissa in surprise. It was the first time Irissa had blamed her for anything, and she had no idea how to answer.

‘What does Potentilla say?’ Oona asked instead. ‘Has she found out anything?’

Irissa stood up and stepped away. Then she turned and studied Oona with an indeterminable expression in her eyes.

‘Potentilla has not really found out anything yet,’ she answered. She glanced towards the door. ‘But that’s why I’m here. I was supposed to see whether you were awake. If you weren’t, I was to wake you and get you dressed. Potentilla is on her way. She would like to speak with you.’



It was only a few minutes before Potentilla arrived. Oona had resigned herself to the help that she had already expected

Irissa to insist on giving her. Now she was at the table eating her breakfast and she was ravenous.

‘Please don’t get up, just finish your breakfast,’ said Potentilla, when she entered the chamber. She sat down opposite Oona, and Irissa nodded to them both before leaving the room.

Potentilla cleared her throat. ‘It seems that your body is undergoing some sort of... transformation.’

Oona put down her spoon and stared at the doctor dumbfounded.

‘You’re not ill,’ she added.

‘Transformation? Am I turning into... Something else?’ Oona’s voice faded into a squeak. A stream of images of shapeshifters – Dolomedes, Sigmon and Beti – rushed through her head. ‘Not ill? But...’

Potentilla smiled. ‘I doubt it’s that bad.’ She quickly became serious again. ‘To be honest, I have no idea what’s going on. All the tests we took match what you are: A young girl going through adolescence. But if your body is going through some sort of magical transformation; and this is where it’s maybe... not so good, well, then it’ll be difficult for me to find out. Not impossible, but challenging. Very challenging.’

Oona swallowed a lump. She pushed away her plate. ‘But then, maybe I...’

The doctor raised a hand to stop her. ‘You are not about to shapeshift. Don’t worry. Don’t you remember Sigmon?’

Oh, yes. She remembered that all too well. Sigmon had lain in the sickroom. She blushed at the thought. He had been stark naked. The sheets which had been covering him had slipped and... He had come to, just as Doctor Potentilla had put a hand on his brow. The touch had woken him with a start, and he had nearly harmed the doctor, he had been so angry. And he had noticed her, Oona, and he had looked at

her, as if she were the most annoying thing he had ever seen. For some reason it made her sad.

‘So that’s why I don’t know what’s wrong with you,’ said Potentilla’s voice.

‘Sorry?’

The doctor had woken her from her thoughts and she had not heard what had been said.

‘I told you that Sigmon is a shapeshifter, as you remember. We found out while he was here. All the tests clearly showed that his body is capable of shapeshifting. That’s why I can say with great certainty that it is not that which ails you, so to speak.’

Oona nodded thoughtfully.

‘And that’s why it will be so difficult for me to find out what’s wrong. It would be straightforward, if shapeshifting were the cause. The only thing I can do is give you some painkillers. I’m sorry, but we just have to see how it develops. I know it’s been bad for many weeks now, but it can’t be long before Radulfir returns. Maybe he can help me.’

Oona nodded again. She was not sure whether she was relieved or not. She sighed. It would have been nice to know what it was, because something had to be wrong.

For a couple of minutes, the only sound was the whistling of the storm which hurled itself against the castle’s icy walls.

‘You say that you understand things... That you understand Radulfir’s books much easier now than a few weeks ago?’

‘Yes.’

‘It makes me wonder.’ Potentilla looked at her. The sharp look had softened. ‘I wish I could help you, I really do, but I simply have no idea what’s happening.’

Despite her words, Oona though she saw a glimmer of doubt in the doctor’s eyes.

Potentilla stood up. 'I'll tell Irissa to bring you an elixir to relieve the pain. If there is anything, anything at all, send for me. Understand?' The sharp look was back behind the glasses. 'No need to run around more than absolutely necessary. And make use of Irissa! She really wants to help you. And there isn't much else for her to do, when the castle is practically deserted.' She patted Oona's hand. 'I'll see you tomorrow. It's possible that we'll want to take some more tests at some point. We'll see. Also, I talked to the Queen last night, so she's informed.'

Oona nodded and Potentilla opened the door. 'I'll see you later, Oona.' Then she closed the door behind her.



Irissa returned later in the morning. 'Aestrid is asking for you. Don't you want to make a quick visit to the kitchen? I think Ailan and Ceinwen are playing somewhere else. In other words, it's quiet down there at the moment.' She gave a wry smile and handed Oona a goblet of pain-relieving elixir. Oona took it, swallowed the contents, and grimaced.

'I'll help you go down there,' continued Irissa.

Oona frowned. She wanted to go. She missed Aestrid's company, but she felt completely drained, and the pain had not eased since earlier in the morning like it used to. It would probably take a while before the elixir kicked in. Also, there was the clanging sounds of pots and pans in the kitchen, which drilled straight into her head and left her with a ringing in her ears for the rest of the day. In addition, the mood in the kitchen was a bit glum after the men had been caught in Aisgard. The kitchen was not the same without the sound of Cael's laughter and cheerful remarks. The cook, Mimi, and her daughters, Aestrid among them, missed their husband and father, and it influenced the conversation down there. It was difficult to find something to talk about.

Irissa looked at her with worry. 'Do you feel worse today?'  
'Yes,' answered Oona hoarsely, 'I think I just want to go back to bed.'

Irissa frowned. 'Can I get you anything?'

Oona shook her head and staggered to the bed, and Irissa pulled the eiderdown aside for her. Then she took the tray from the table.

'I'll check in on you soon.'

Oona nodded and pulled the eiderdown up to her chin. She closed her eyes.

'There is one thing,' she said before Irissa left the room. 'I'd like to speak to Ingaea if it's possible.'

'Of course,' answered Irissa, 'she mentioned that she would visit you today. I'll tell her.'



Not long afterwards, there was a knock at the door. Oona struggled into a sitting position and tucked her hair behind her ears.

Queen Ingaea stepped in and smiled at her. Then her face turned serious. 'I'm sure Radulfir will return soon. Doctor Potentilla and I discussed whether he might know the cause of your condition. Maybe he can help.' She sat down in the armchair beside the bed. Oona shifted to the edge of the bed, but Ingaea stopped her with a gesture. 'Please, don't get up, Oona.'

Oona studied her for a while. The Queen's cheeks were not as gaunt as they had been and they even had a bit of colour in them. But her eyes could not hide her feelings. The joy of having Ceinwen returned had been diminished by the sorrow and worry concerning Marck's fate. Not to mention her brother Cael's.

There was a painful tug in Oona's stomach at the thought of the seven men she had been forced to abandon in Aisgard.

Or eight men... Dolomedes had also turned up. If it had not been for him, it would have been impossible to escape.

She saw Stigandir's face in her mind, as he said farewell to her and Ceinwen in the tower. He had promised her that he would come. That the men would try to catch them up. It did not happen.

Stigandir had been like a father to her, and Cael and Marck had been like brothers. She hoped that they had survived the battle at the top of the tower, but the chances were slim. Without permission, images of the fight flickered before her eyes. She closed her eyes and dried away a couple of tears.

'There's something I'd like to ask you.' She opened her eyes again and continued: 'Do you remember when you showed me the image of Lucili at Three Peaks? From the time after the Radix took Ceinwen?'

Ingaea nodded.

'I was wondering: Would it be possible to do that again? So that we'd be able to see exactly what happened in Muldness and what happened to the men in Aisgard?'

The Queen looked at her for a while before she replied.

'I tried it after Fargar Andorr, the minister of the Territory of Moegelheim, came to visit. It was he who told me what happened on the west coast... And what happened to Muldness.' She hesitated and Oona straightened up. 'I didn't succeed. Something stopped me. I had to flee to escape in time.' Her voice was quiet. Oona lowered her eyes and stared at her hands.

'I know you think about your family all the time, Oona. I think about them too. However, the scout didn't find anyone. Not a soul.'

Oona looked up. 'But what if he overlooked someone? What if they were hiding? When I was brought home by the Albinari, I felt that I had seen Eiric in Aisgard. What if it's true? What if that's where my family is? If we could

mindtravel to Muldness, maybe we could... Or we could try Aisgard?’

The Queen shook her head sadly. ‘I’ve tried Oona. I’ve really tried,’ she repeated. ‘My mind was nearly caught... In Lucili’s mind.’ She hesitated. ‘She showed me Ceinwen during her imprisonment, and she let us both see her triumph at the top of Three Peaks after the kidnapping. However, in Muldness something must have happened which she wants to keep secret. Something she doesn’t want us to see. Maybe it’s true that your family has been brought to Aisgard, and that something happened in Muldness which she doesn’t want us to know about.’

They looked at each other for a while.

‘When Radulfir returns,’ the Queen continued, ‘hopefully soon – if he succeeds in releasing the Winter – I know the ministers are mustering their fleets for a large attack. We will journey to Aisgard as soon as possible, Oona. As soon as the sea has thawed.’

Oona felt tears rising to her eyes. ‘But what if it’s too late?’ she whispered. ‘It will be many lunar cycles before it’s possible. Before we can reach Aisgard.’

The Queen watched her with shining eyes. ‘We can try Aisgard,’ she said. ‘I can try again.’

They looked into each other’s eyes for a while without saying anything. Then Ingaea broke the oppressive silence.

‘It’s not at all certain that we will succeed. There must be something about the battle in the tower, which she doesn’t want us to know. I would think that’s a good sign. Maybe she’s trying to hide the fact that some of the men are still alive. However, there could be other reasons for her to hinder us. If she does let us in, you have to be prepared for the worst. We might see something terrible. I attempted it when I found out that you and Ceinwen had returned without the men, and I’ve tried many times since. But it just doesn’t work. My mind ends

up in a quagmire of cold. It's like a wall of snow and ice prevents me from getting in. It doesn't seem dangerous as such, but I can neither see nor hear anything. I think it might have to do with the curse on the Winter. That it has filled all dimensions.' She fell silent and studied Oona thoughtfully. 'But maybe we can succeed if we go together... Maybe with your moon mastery...'

Oona nodded. 'I think we should try. It seems like something changed in me, when I left Aisgard. It was as if I got access to Lucili's deeds. And without your help.'

She described her experience, as she and Ceinwen rode from Aisgard. She had gone into a trance and suddenly found herself in Leander's body more than two hundred years ago. She had sat beside Lucili on a bench, and she had experienced the moment Leander figured out who Lucili really was. The moment he chose Vivien instead of Lucili. She had gained insight into the story surrounding the love triangle which was part of the cause of the Second Great War.

Queen Ingaea nodded thoughtfully. The already dim light in the room had faded, and the day was already waning.

'Do you remember how I told you that more pictures, like those I showed you of Lucili on the top of Three Peaks, will come to you in time?'

Oona nodded, but did not understand where the Queen was going with it.

'I opened your mind that day so that it could receive information like that. Sometimes, it can be useful to be able to conjure up these images, but it requires...' Ingaea hesitated. 'It requires that one knows about the event already. Has anyone told you about Lucili and Leander's encounter?'

Oona shook her head. 'Not really. Radulfir told me of the love triangle between Lucili, Vivien and Leander, but not in

detail. I didn't know anything about when Leander realised who or what Lucili really was.'

The Queen's eyes followed the patterns in the carpet as she spoke. 'You didn't know about it. Still, you went into a trance and experienced it...' She raised her head and met Oona's gaze. '... As if you were in Leander's body?'

'I was Leander,' declared Oona.

'Something's not right.'

They sat for a while without talking until Ingaea broke the silence.

'Let's try,' she said, 'but if there's the least sign of danger, we get out. At once. No matter what, you obey me.' Her blue eyes looked at Oona with an authority which made Oona shudder. It reminded Oona of Doctor Potentilla, but the Queen's authority was different. It was the way it seemed to fill the entire room.

Their eyes met, and Oona locked her gaze onto Ingaea's.

'Take my hand and don't let go,' she heard the Queen say. Then she felt her slender hands and clutched them.

'When I tug at you,' the Queen continued, 'you shall obey me and follow.'

'Yes.' Oona had not opened her mouth; she could not. The answer was only in her head.

'Good,' sounded Ingaea's voice. 'We'll try.'

Oona gasped for breath. The familiar blue flicker accumulated, and the blue, whirling fragments of the Queen's irises paled and spun faster. The temperature dropped. The fragments had turned to snow and flurried around them in a snowstorm.

Oona shivered and she felt Ingaea tremble. The pains in her body dimmed. A sound broke free of the fierce storm. A cracking and creaking which became stronger and Oona felt the Queen's grip tighten. She felt her hair being blown back as they were hauled into the snowy vortex. The smell of

snow and ice filled her nose and the icy air made her lungs hurt. Suddenly, they slowed down and the creaking sound became stronger. The whirl of snowflakes stopped, and she could feel the Queen tugging at her hand, but she could not see her. In front of them was a gigantic wall of ice.

She heard Ingaea sigh. 'This was as far as I got. The Winter is blocking the way. It is still under Lucili's control.' High above them the sky was black. The ice glimmered in the light of a moon far behind them. The space around them was infinite. There was nothing beneath them. It was impossible to see where the wall began and ended in the silvery expanse.

'We can't go any further, Oona. I don't think we can get through.'

'But I'm a Moon Master! I have to be able to use it for something...'

'Then try... But be careful!' Ingaea's voice echoed off the wall of ice.

Oona let go of Ingaea's hand and grabbed the small moon far away in the black sky. She tipped her head to one side and squinted with one eye. The familiar ice-cold and spherical form filled her hand. She grunted.

'I have to use both hands ... Or ... Oh! It's too heavy!'

The Queen let go of her other hand and gripped Oona's skirt instead. Oona clutched the moon with both hands. Then she flung it with all her might against the Winter's seemingly impenetrable shell. The smash reverberated in infinite echoes behind them, and she rubbed her hands against her thighs to warm them up again. Groaning, she squinted and found Ingaea's hands. A shower of shattered ice fell towards them, dissolved in the air and reached their faces as light droplets. Oona noticed a colossal hole in the wall. She cheered excitedly.

'It worked! We can get through!'

‘Oona! From now on we have to be extra careful. From now on, you hold my hand. No matter what.’

Oona squeezed hands in answer and studied the hole in front of them. It was pitch black on the other side of the wall. The moon was back in the sky behind them, but it did not illuminate anything inside the hole.

‘I have a bad feeling about this,’ she heard Ingaea mumble. ‘I’m not sure...’ She hesitated and then changed her mind. ‘Come. Quickly!’

They moved towards the hole and at once Oona felt something sucking at her. The Queen clutched her hand tighter. An ice-cold wind blew in their faces, as if it were trying to prevent them from getting any closer. They fought their way forward until they finally stepped through the opening.

Oona gasped. On the other side of the wall gaped an enormous, black void. Like outside there were no boundaries. Moonlight shone through the hole in the wall, and Oona threw a glance over her shoulder. The wall of ice was no thicker than a windowpane. However, strong magic had still been required to break through it. She turned her face and inspected the darkness in front of them. The moonlight was caught in thousands of threads which crisscrossed the space. Slowly, they moved forward, and she felt Ingaea tighten her grip on her hand. A feeling of hopelessness gripped Oona at the sight of the black dreamscape and a consuming fear chased the hopelessness. Because it was a dreamscape, was it not?

‘We have to go back! At once!’ Ingaea was gripped by anxiety.

‘But...’ Oona did not have time to say any more, because at that moment all the threads seemed to come to life. A shrill whine began, and the threads lifted and whirled towards them. She screamed.

'Run, Oona!' Ingaea tugged her back towards the hole. Oona looked over her shoulder. All the threads were covered with black, spider-like beings, and they were the ones who were screaming. The tangle of threads caught up with them and began sticking to their bodies.

'Faster, Oona!' shouted Ingaea. 'They mustn't get in front of us!'

The threads assembled with a wet sound into an increasingly thicker web. Oona's vision blurred and she felt her knees weaken. She felt the web against her face; the wet, ice-cold feel of something sticking to her skin which tried to enter her mouth, nose, eyes and ears. The stench of the sticky threads filled her nostrils. She tried to shield her face with her free hand. Then Ingaea's voice disappeared and all she felt was Ingaea's hand in hers.