



ACT ONE

THE WIDENING
GYRE

~



ONE



MY GRANDMOTHER BEATA had matched the squabbling drightens in might and cunning, and ruled the fractious Turasi tribes unchallenged for nigh on thirty years. Her hold on the throne was so sure even the blasphemy of allowing a Skythe shadow-walker to pour foreign memories into her skull had not unseated her, though it had sorely tested her power. Her command over her children had been less successful. Not long after her beloved son (and my father) was executed, her head-strong daughter chose exile over a marriage that would have secured our House's hold on power.

As we waited in the sharp spring wind for the return of that same daughter, Grandmother wasn't inclined to overlook any of my delinquencies, pinching my elbow when I rose onto my toes for a better view.

'A Duethin stands *still*, Matilde. None among the Turasi will bend their neck to a fidgeter.'

None will have the chance, with my coronation two years past due, I thought peevishly, though I knew better than to voice it. If I talked back now, if I failed even one of her myriad tests over this coming month's Aestival celebrations, Grandmother might not step down at the gadderren and I'd have to wait another year entire for the drightens to ratify me as Duethin.

So I held my tongue, dropped my heels to the flagstones, tucked my hands into my sleeves, and stood as still as I could despite the exhilaration bubbling through me as I waited for my first glimpse of Aunt Helena in thirteen years.

The messenger who'd brought word of Helena's imminent arrival claimed beauty and youth still graced her. I scarce remembered her – I scarce remembered my own parents – though I'd noted, over the years, the sour set of Grandmother's mouth when anyone asked after my aunt, dismissing any such queries with a curt, 'Helena is travelling.'

People crowded the upper courtyard, the thanes in their embroidered tabards pushed cheek by jowl against merchants, freeholders and farmers. Thralls dotted the throng, too, their bronze collars glinting in the sunlight, their duties temporarily abandoned. Everyone jostled for a glimpse of the prodigal daughter, blocking my view of the gate so that I had only a mere glimpse of the triumphal arch of its pale pink stone, the swan crest carved on the keystone.

My place, on the dais formed by the broad midmost stair at the courtyard's end, was more spacious, with only Grandmother beside me. Thanes and court officials ranged along the stairs to our left and right, the highest among them standing a careful step below us.

To my left, tucked into the gap between the master of horses and the wall, stood Sepp, my closest friend despite the

difference in our rank. He had pleaded for any other duty, but Grandmother would hear none of it – and it was that cold-eyed command, after years of gleaned rumours and hidden whispers, which banished the last of my uncertainty. Sepp was Helena’s natural son, born on the bloody side of the sheets, and today Grandmother wanted that reminder of Helena’s disloyalty in plain view.

Sepp was not the only gambit Grandmother had on display. Closest to her right hand stood a collared housecarl wearing the colours of House Falkere. He had arrived from the Ayrholm last week with an offer for my hand in marriage. Judging by the hours Grandmother had since spent closeted with him, she was considering the offer with some seriousness.

The irony did not escape me – it was a scion of House Falkere whom Helena had spurned when she chose exile.

Movement eddied through the crowd and, glancing sideways to check on Grandmother, I popped up on tiptoe again. As the ermine-trimmed hem of my dress lifted, a ferret poked her nose out, blinking in the pale sunshine. The dark markings of the kit’s face stood out against the white hem like soot on fresh snow.

Grandmother’s fingers tightened around my elbow, hard enough to bruise. She didn’t need words to express her disapproval.

Summoned by Grandmother with a glance, Sepp lured the wriggling kit from my feet, flashing me a sympathetic grimace. He’d come prepared – his closed fist, no doubt holding a sliver of chicken bone, distracted the kit immediately.

‘A Duethin does not cart kitchen ferrets to official functions. Particularly not at nineteen. A little decorum,’ said Grandmother, ‘or I won’t take you with me on tomorrow’s progression.’

‘I’m not Duethin yet,’ I replied, my impertinence only

deepening the iron of her stare. 'And I don't know how you expect me to govern if you insist on keeping secrets.'

'My daughter is not the province of politics,' she said – resolutely glossing over the way Helena's betrayal had plunged our House into chaos, threatening longstanding alliances, dissolving several trade agreements, and weakening our hold on the throne. Sepp wore a thrall's collar to both exclude and protect him from those very politics.

'If you've been paying attention, you know all you need to,' Grandmother went on. 'Including how to keep silent. Now, stand still, or do you have yet more creatures beneath your skirts?'

From his place against the wall, Sepp winked at me, chasing away any sour mood before it could take hold. He had always been able to cheer me, despite his own less-than-favoured treatment at Grandmother's hands. I didn't laugh, though, because I knew exactly what Grandmother would say: *A Duethin doesn't giggle, Matilde.*

Suddenly, the crowd before the gate pressed aside, a narrow path opening to reveal an enclosed chair advancing. People surged back as soon as the shuttered box passed, closing the path in its wake. Stares and silence followed the chair, and the four olive-skinned men bearing it. The latter wore short linen tunics over trews and sturdy leather boots, cloaks trimmed with fox fur their only concession to the left-over winter chill hanging in the air.

Another two men walked behind, both with short upper lips and beetled brows. The elder bore battle scars and rheumatoid-swollen hands, the younger sported hair untouched by time. Their clothes were finer than the bearers', a rich dark blue instead of undyed linen. Each wore a foot-long blade belted to his hip.

A coldness that had naught to do with the wind touched my nape. Helena had been among the Ilthean.

I'd heard rumours, of course, but other rumours had placed Helena among the luxurious Morvingen courts, or with my mother's people – the nomadic Skythes – wandering the plains under the eastern sun. Some even claimed she'd fled north to the chain of islands scattered among the white-capped waves. The idea that she had gone south, into the nest of vipers that was the Ilthean empire, had seemed too fantastical, too great a betrayal, even for the brash Helena of House Svanaten.

Yet now she dared worse – she had brought those white serpents north, brought them into the Turholm itself, the very heart of the Turasi nation.

I chanced a glance at Grandmother. No wonder she'd looked like a storm brewing this past couple of days.

The chair halted at the base of the stairs, the faint squeak of its door opening setting my teeth on edge. It wasn't hard to stand still anymore.

Helena stepped forth, dark hair twined through with slender braids and coiled atop her head. Pale sunlight flashed off the rubies threaded in her hair and strung around her throat. Black edged her eyes in a face made pale by cosmetics.

Two followed her from the chair, a flaxen-haired woman who kept her eyes downcast and a boy of about ten, sulky-mouthed and wearing a circlet of silver in his short dark curls. The hair and the shape of his eyes marked him immediately as Helena's son, though he stood as far from the women as he could without disappearing into the crowd packed close behind.

I snuck a glance at Sepp, but his dark, curly head was bent over the ferret kit he still nursed. I didn't need to see the slope of his cheekbones or the shape of his eyes now, however, to recognise his mother when she stood before me at last.

Flanked by the Ilthean noblemen, trailed by her son

and the other woman, Aunt Helena climbed the stairs, her gaze slipping over me without pause.

She didn't notice Sepp, although he'd finally lifted his head and was staring at her.

One step from the top, she stopped, meeting Grandmother's eye with a bold tilt of her chin. 'Mother.'

There was an awkward pause as Grandmother cast her eye over Helena's retinue, though my aunt made no attempt at introductions. In return, despite their obviously high status, no thrall stepped up to them with the traditional welcome of traveller's meat and mead.

'You must be weary after your journey,' Grandmother said at last, her tone turning the civility into something close to a command. 'None will begrudge you rest, if you wish to forgo Aestival.'

Helena had poise enough to withstand such an artificial welcome. 'Not so weary I cannot greet family,' she replied.

Grandmother didn't flinch, her expression as hard and set as bedrock. 'You've arrived at an awkward time, if it's family you seek. My granddaughter and I leave tomorrow on the Aestival progression, and won't be back until the gadderren. Come. I've had rooms prepared for you. I'm sure you'll want to change at least,' she said, raking an eye over my aunt's red gown.

Beneath the cream, hot colour stained Helena's cheeks and made her eyes glitter.

Standing between them, heeded by neither, I looked from Helena's temper-flushed features to Grandmother's implacable expression.

'So.' Helena folded her hands. 'We're back to this. I had hoped for more.'

'As had I, a long time ago.'

I stepped forward, thrusting myself in between them. 'Aunt Helena,' I said, claiming her kinship and attention

both. 'You're welcome in the Turholm. My parents spoke of you so often this feels more like a homecoming than an introduction.'

Helena rewarded me with a smile which unfolded like petals stretching towards the sun. 'You have the look of your mother about your eyes,' she said. 'Her height, too. I wonder you remember them – you were young when they passed.'

Warmed by the comparison, I beamed back at her. 'I also have my father's dislike of the chill. Come, let's inside. We've rooms with fires prepared for you all.'

Like an oak picking up its roots, Grandmother turned and walked ahead, gathering Sepp to her side as she did so. Helena's frown hinted at darker thoughts as she watched her firstborn walking away, a thrall's collar around his throat.

Falling into step beside me as we followed, she leaned close and murmured, 'Well, you have my ability to prick her temper.'

I smiled back at her as we crested the steps, but dared not reply. Grandmother had a bat's hearing.

The Turholm's great oak doors stood open, and we stepped through into the white-marbled foyer. The seneschal waited for us, his bronze collar intricately carved; Jonas had been in thrall to House Svanaten since his birth. Now, catching sight of Helena, he blinked away tears.

Sigi, Jonas's granddaughter, waited by his side, her hands dusty and her feet bare. She spent most of her time in the dovecote and rarely wore shoes, for they made too much noise and disturbed the birds. Sigi had Jonas's large, dark eyes, which were now fixed on Grandmother. Her presence meant the birds had brought a message of import.

Grandmother turned to Helena. 'Jonas will show you to your rooms. You must excuse me.' Without waiting for an answer, she gestured for Sigi and Sepp to follow her, and swept away.

Ashamed of such churlish hospitality, I surrendered the Iltheans into Jonas's care and led Helena to her rooms myself. Though her Ilthean companions weren't welcome, Helena was still kin.

She stared at everything we passed, from the tapestries cloaking the walls to the carved wood panels depicting past victories, the standards of loyal and conquered Houses and the many statues. Perhaps she was noting changes from her own days.

'Thank you, Tille,' she said when we reached her rooms. 'May I call you Tille? It's what I used to call you when you were little. Such a quiet thing you were back then, with such wild hair! But perhaps you don't remember,' she said, laughing.

Instinctively I touched my hair, smoothing it behind an ear even though my braid was still tight.

Helena noted the gesture, sharp eyes belying her easy manner.

'No. I don't, I'm sorry,' I said, uncomfortable beneath her gaze. 'I'll leave you to prepare now.'

'Stay,' she said. 'Sit with me a while. It would be a kindness, to talk of old times.'

I hesitated, then decided against it. 'We'll talk at supper. You must rest, get warm. Prepare for the battle,' I added with a smile.

She flinched at my joke, her answering smile watery and too late.

I took a step back. Perhaps Grandmother was right to have treated her coldly. Helena had been years absent, after all, and probably all of them among the white serpents of the south. Maybe this wasn't a simple visit home after all.

'Before you go –' she began, and I braced myself for a question on politics, or how best to win over Grandmother these days.

Instead, slipping her hand into the folds of her skirt,

Helena fetched forth a closed fist. 'I have a gift for you,' she said, opening her hand to reveal a necklace.

My breath caught in my throat as I bent over it. The central piece was solid gold, worked in the shape of a swan with a slender pointed shaft growing from its brow.

'The swan, for your father; and the spear, for your mother,' said Helena. 'I'd tell you it's enspelled to keep you safe, but you're long past the age of believing such prattle, so I suppose plain gold will have to do. Go on, take it.'

I picked it off her palm. The piece was heavy and warm. A tiny sliver of gem formed the swan's eye, flashing crimson as I turned it to let the light run over it. 'Thank you. It's fine work.'

'I thought you might like to wear it to Aestival tonight.'

The glint in Helena's eye told me she knew what being raised by Grandmother was like.

TWO



GRANDMOTHER HADN'T STINTED on the evening meal, which had less to do with Helena and more to do with Aestival. Tonight's feast marked the end of winter, and the late-night revelry would give way to a night of prayers to herald the dawn of a new day and with it a new year. This afternoon's confrontation had soured my eagerness for the Aestival feast. Still, my hopes for a peaceful evening rose as I took my seat. It was hard to remain angry when food flowed freely.

The feast included haunches of venison and entire roasted pigs for all, even those who took their meal in the surrounding courtyards. There was apple sauce for the pig, cheese sauce for the vegetables, fruit pastries with cream in between courses – even lark's tongue.

Coming hard on the heels of winter, the court was