

The Moorehawke Trilogy

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THE POISON  
THRONE

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CELINE KIERNAN

  
ALLEN & UNWIN



## THE VOICELESS CAT

**T**HE SENTRY would not let them pass. Even when Wynter's father showed their papers, and explained that they were expected at court, the guards had remained sneering and unpleasant, and refused to open the gates. Eventually, the sentry door was shut and Wynter and her father were left outside while the watchman went off somewhere to 'look see'.

They had been waiting there, ignored and bewildered, for an entire quarter of the shadows – two hours on the northern clock – with that heavy sentry door shut in their faces, and Wynter could feel her blood beginning a slow rise to anger.

The men that Shirken had paid to accompany them from the North had gone long ago. She did not blame their guides for leaving. Their job had been to get herself and Lorcan safely from one kingship to another, to get them home, and that they had done. She had no quarrel with them. They had been polite and respectful all through the long journey south, and Wynter did not doubt that they were

good and honest men. But they were not friends, they were not *loyal*, except to Shirken and the job he had paid them to complete.

No doubt Shirken's men had watched from the top of the rise as Wynter and her father had reached the foot of the hill and crossed the thick beams of the moat bridge. And no doubt they had waited until the two of them were safe within the protective shadow of the gate arch before turning back into the dark pines and heading home. Mission accomplished.

Wynter's horse, Ozkar, shifted impatiently beside her. He smelled the warm grass baking in the sun behind them, and the dark clear water of the moat. He was thirsty and hungry, and Wynter couldn't blame him for snorting and stamping his hoof. Still, she tugged his rein to get him to settle and shifted her weight discreetly from one foot to the other. Wynter, too, was tired, saddle-sore and generally weary to her bones of travelling. But, at fifteen years old, she was no stranger to courtly protocol and she remained outwardly stoic, as if undisturbed by this unending wait in the heat.

The well practised remoteness of her expression may have given nothing away, but she was, in truth, barely in command of her impatience. All she really wanted to do was throw off her boots and run up the meadows in her bare feet, fling herself down into the long grass and watch the sky.

They had been so long in the grey cold of the North that this singing heat and the clear sunlight of home were like white wine to her. She longed to revel in it. She longed to get her father out into the sun somewhere and let the summer heat bake some warmth back into his bones. He had

wisely remained astride his horse, and now he sat there so quietly that Wynter glanced sideways to check that he was still awake. He was. She could see his eyes gleaming in the shadows beneath the brim of his hat. He looked neither left nor right, his gaze focusing inwards, just sitting, waiting for permission to come home.

His long body had a weary curl to it, though, and the palsy in his hands where they folded patiently against the pommel of his saddle was worse than usual.

Wynter eyed her father's trembling fingers with concern. Old men shook like that, not strong-shouldered craftsmen of thirty-three. *Stop fretting*, she told herself, looking forward again and straightening her back. *A good night's rest is all he needs, a nice dinner and then he'll be right as summer rain.*

She rubbed the tips of her fingers against each other, feeling the reassuring numbness of scar and callus. Worthy hands. That's what the two of them had. Worthy hands, capable of supporting them through anything. Out of habit, she glanced back at the roll of carpenter's tools on her horse's rump and then over at the similar roll on the back of her father's saddle. All present and accounted for.

Imperceptibly, Wynter shifted her aching feet again and, for once in her life, wished she was wearing her women's clothing and not her boys' britches and short-coat. It was so much easier to move your feet and legs when they were hidden by a skirt. She sighed again at the misguided enthusiasm that had sent her leaping from her horse. She had flung herself from his back on their arrival, expecting the gates to be swept wide and a boisterous welcome to have been orchestrated. What childish conceit. And now, here she stood, pride and protocol not allowing her to remount,

forced to stand here like a lowly pageboy until the sentry returned with their permission to pass.

An orange cat trotted delicately along the base of the wall, glowing like a sinuous ember as it passed out of the shadows. At the sight of it, Wynter forgot to be calm and courtly, and she allowed herself to smile and nod and follow the cat's progress with a turn of her head. The cat paused, one paw raised to its white chest, and regarded Wynter with affronted curiosity. Its very posture said, *Can I believe my eyes? Have you dared to look at me?*

Wynter's smile became a grin at the familiar weight of feline disdain, and she wondered how many generations of cat brothers and cat sisters had been born in the five years that she had been away. Before taking up her apprenticeship, Wynter had been the King's Cat-Keeper and she had known all her charges by name. *Whose great-great-grandkitten-grown-to-cat is this?* she wondered.

She inclined her head and murmured, 'All respects to you this fine day, mouse-bane,' fully expecting the usual reply, *All the finer for you, having seen me.* But instead, the cat's green eyes opened in shock and confusion at her greeting, and it flickered suddenly away, a flame in sunlight, flowing across the moat bridge and disappearing down onto the loose gravel of the far bank.

Wynter watched it depart with a puzzled frown. Imagine a cat having such atrocious manners and such easily shattered composure! Something wasn't right.

The rattle of the sentry gate brought Wynter's eyes frontwards, and the shadows under the portcullis were sliced by a sharp blade of sunlight as the gate opened a crack. The Sergeant of the Watch stuck his head out. He regarded the

two of them without a trace of deference, as if surprised to find them still there. Wynter's court-face slipped smoothly into place.

Without a word to them, the Sergeant pulled his head back in and shut the sentry door with a snap of the lock. Wynter's heart dropped, but rose again instantly as the heavy door chains began to pull backwards with a grinding whine of metal on stone. Somewhere within the wall, the Master of the Entrance was turning the big wheel that wound the chains onto their spools.

*Yes!* thought Wynter. *We have been granted access!*

Slowly, slowly the shadows under the gate arch were eaten up by sunlight as the heavy horse-gate swung open to reveal the inner gardens and the King's domain.

Victuallor Heron was striding down the wide gravel path as they passed through the gate, his office robe flapping. He must have been at business to be dressed so formally and, indeed, Wynter saw that his fingers were stained with ink. His wrinkled old face was filled with joy and he was advancing on her father as if he would rise up from the ground, a great amiable bird, and descend upon Lorcan, horse and all, to wrap him in a hug that would hide both of them from view.

'Lorcan!' he cried as he swept along the gravel. 'Lorcan!' His immediate informality undid a thousand anxious knots in Wynter's mind. Some things, at least, were still all right.

Her father leaned forward from the height of his saddle and smiled tiredly down at his old friend. They clasped hands, her father's big splay-fingered shovel of a hand wrapped tightly in the long-fingered agility of Heron's. Their smiling eye contact lingered and spoke volumes.

‘Friend Heron,’ said Lorcan, his warm, rasping voice an embrace in itself, the feeling in it going far beyond the words.

Heron’s eyes sharpened and he lowered his chin a little, his grip on Lorcan’s hand tightening.

‘I believe you were kept waiting,’ he said, his eyes flicking almost imperceptibly to the sentry. Something in the set of Heron’s face made Wynter glance at the attending guards, and what she saw made her heart do a strange little pitter in her chest. The soldiers were openly staring at this exchange between Heron and her father. In fact, they were almost perceptibly *lounging* in the presence of the Victuallor. She swallowed down a lump of uncertainty and glanced back to where her father and Heron were exchanging a meaningful look.

Suddenly her father straightened in the saddle, drawing himself up so that his full height and the true width of his powerful shoulders became apparent. Wynter saw his face go very still. His eyelids dropped to hood the vibrant cat-green of his eyes, and his generous, curving mouth thinned and curled up on one side.

This was what Wynter thought of as ‘the Mask’ or sometimes ‘the Cloak’. It pained her to see it here, despite its magnificence, and she thought wearily, *Oh Da, even here? Even here must we play the terrible game?* But she couldn’t help the familiar surge of pride as she saw him transform, and there was a touch of cruel pleasure in her smile as she watched him turn in the saddle and put the weight of his suddenly imperious stare onto the lounging guards.

Lorcan said nothing for a moment, and for that little while the guards met his eye as equals, not yet registering

the transformation from mere craftsman to something more dangerous. Lorcan sat regally in the saddle and swivelled his head to take in each man, deliberately examining their faces, one at a time, as if adding them to a list somewhere in a dark closet of his mind. His long guildsman's plait swung in a heavy pendulum down his back, sixteen years' worth of growth, uncut since the day he'd been pronounced master of his trade. The deep red of it had only recently been distinguished with swathes of grey, and it gave him the air of prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner.

Wynter saw doubt begin to grow in the soldiers' faces, saw iron begin to creep up their spines. Still Lorcan didn't speak, and as Wynter watched, the sentry crystallised into a military unit. Just like that. A gang of rabble-rousing louts one minute, a unit of soldiers at respectful attention the next.

'Bring me a mounting block,' said her father, purposely addressing one man, leaving no doubt that this was an order. That one man, the Sergeant of the Watch himself, took off as sharp as you like and crossed the lawn, disappearing around the corner into the lesser stable block at a quick trot.

*My God, thought Wynter. He doesn't even know yet who my father is, and there he goes. A carpenter – for all he knows a lowland shepherd's son, a fisherman's bastard, or any such variation on nothing at all – just told him to run fetch a mounting block, and look at him. He's off.* She looked up at her father in absolute awe. *And all with the weight of his stare, she thought.*

The Sergeant returned at a fair clip, a mounting block held out before him like some precious baby. He placed it carefully beneath her father's horse and stepped back a respectful distance as Lorcan slipped from the stirrups and dismounted. If it caused him pain to step to the ground he

managed to hide it, even from Wynter, who was finetuned to see it.

‘Take our horses to the main stables; leave them in the care of the head boy. Tell him they are the property of Protector Lord Lorcan Moorehawke and his apprentice. Tell him I will be around to check on their comfort later today.’ If the softly rasped orders came as a blow to his pride, the Sergeant certainly didn’t show it, and it was to his credit that he didn’t bat an eyelid when this lowly carpenter’s powerful title was revealed. Instead, he snapped off a crisp salute and gathered Wynter’s father’s reins from him without any further antipathy.

Wynter met her father’s eye. He would need to go with Heron now. Things were obviously afoot. ‘Go with them,’ he said, gently inclining his head to indicate the horses. ‘Make sure the tools are safe. Get some food and rest.’ He put his hand on her shoulder, briefly. She longed to tell him to lie down, to rest, to eat. But the Masks were on, for both of them now. And instead of daughterly concern, she dipped her head as an apprentice in deference to the master, and stood watching as Heron led him away up the broad sweep of gravel, to the King’s quarters, no doubt, and the entanglements of state.



## RAZI

**A**T THE rear of the palace, a door fronted by wide stone steps swept down to a gravel path. The path wound away from the castle, through an acre or so of tame woodland, and from there across a guarded moat bridge to the densely packed wild forest outside the bailey. The King used this route when he was in the mood for an informal day's hunting or fishing. He called it 'the back door'. He'd say, *I'm sick of state, let's go out the back door, lads, and dally the day away like wild boys.*

Wynter had often watched the King and her father head out that way together, their fishing poles or bows slung across their shoulders, a little knot of companions in tow. She stood now, looking up the path, and recalled how Razi, Alberon and she used to loll about on the steps watching the men leave, sulking that they couldn't go along. By the time the Great Changes had begun, Razi had already turned fourteen and she and Alberon had for years been accustomed to the sight of him disappearing up that path with the hunters. It was one of her most vivid memories: Razi turning

to look back at herself and Alberon, his affectionate smile meant to lift their spirits as he left them alone.

'I'll bring you back a rabbit!' he'd call, and he always did, or a pheasant or a clutch of quail eggs. Always some little thing to alleviate the fact that he had abandoned them; that he'd left Alberon, who haunted Razi like a shadow and felt his absence keenly.

*When you're eleven*, that's what they were told. *When you're eleven you can join the hunt*. But by the time they had turned eleven, everything had changed. Razi had been sent to the Moroccos with his mother; Alberon was prisoner to the throne, a constant presence at the King's side; and Lorcan and Wynter had been dispatched north, to the cold and damp that had destroyed her father's health.

A high, modulated wail broke into her thoughts, making Wynter jump and then laugh as she realised what it was. She hadn't heard that particular sound for years, and it had taken a moment for her to recognise it. The Musulman boys were kneeling in the shade of the trees, making undulating prayers to their god. Wynter rose onto her tiptoes and searched their bobbing ranks for Razi, but he wasn't there. Perhaps he hadn't been brought home at all? That thought sent such a sharp pang through her that she pushed it away. Razi had never been one for prayers, she reminded herself. He *was* here, just elsewhere in the complex.

The smell of roasting mutton intruded on her and her belly cramped in response. Good God, she was hungry. She dropped her recollections and turned away from them, her desire to be in the kitchen suddenly overwhelming.

At the foot of the stairs leading to the King's back door, the statue of the Cold Lady stood gazing wistfully up the

woodland path. Despite the heat, her stone face was covered in frost, and little icicles dripped from her delicately carved fingers. Wynter glanced up at her as she passed, marvelling, as always.

The maids and dairy-men had placed their pitchers of milk and cordial, pots of butter and bowls of cream all along the plinth at the hem of the Cold Lady's dress. It reminded Wynter of the offerings that the Midlanders left to their Virgin. She caught the sharp tang of cheddar as she passed by, and she was so hungry that her mouth filled instantly with spit. She almost ran down the dark stairs behind the Cold Lady into the fragrant gloom of the kitchen, the Musulmen's prayers rising musically into the sunlight behind her.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust. A pot-boy pushed past her carrying a basket of onions, but no one paid her any attention and she was able to survey the organised chaos from her slightly elevated position at the foot of the stairs.

Oh yes. Here was what she had missed. Here was the true heart of home and the spirit of the kingdom she had longed for.

All the mixes of race and religion that summed up King Jonathon's realm seemed focused in the palace kitchen. All the brown and white and cream and yellow faces, everyone sweating and shouting and running about. A high, continuous cacophony of multilingual patois and pigeon-talk, gestures and pantomime, combined into an efficient, if disorderly, unit. And at its steaming hub, Marni, huge, bear-like, her meaty arms, her enormous red hands and absurd bulbous face towering over everyone. She was the centre of the cyclone, the perpetual-motion goddess of the kitchen.

Wynter lifted her head to look over the produce-laden chopping table and sought out the poultry-spit-boy. When she saw him she smiled and some small thing settled in her chest, calming her.

The poultry-spit-boy was the lowest of the low in any palace kitchen: the little lad who would be employed to turn the lighter poultry spits, while the older men turned the heavy meat spits. She had seen spit-boys of six or seven, naked because of the heat, matted in grease and soot, being screamed at by the basters for flinching when the scalding fat of the meat had burned their hands. She remembered watching in horror as a Midlands castle cook had beaten one tiny child with a wooden ladle. It had made it all the worse that the little child still kept turning the spit. Even as his eyes swelled up into black puffs, he kept the handle going for fear the meat would burn and his punishment would worsen.

To Wynter, the spit-boy was the ultimate indication of the soul of a palace; most of them were blackened, hollow-eyed things, forgotten and abused.

The spit-boy who sat in Marni's kitchen was laughing while he turned the meat. His tiny hands were gloved, and a big metal disc attached to the spit handle shielded him from the worst of the scalding splatter. He was sooty and shiny with grease and sweat, but he was clothed in a proper uniform and he was plump and jolly.

He was leaning forward, talking to someone just out of Wynter's line of sight, who appeared to be crouched on the floor. As Wynter watched, the child took a piece of chalk from the unknown person and, still expertly turning the meat with one hand, he wrote something on the flagstones.

Wynter leaned to the side to get a better view. A man was hunkered down beside the child, his dark head bent to look at the chalk marks on the floor. He was clad in the sky-blue robes of a doctor and, though his voice was too low for Wynter to hear the words, he said something to the child that brought a grin of pride to his greasy little face.

A pot-girl set a beaker of frothy milk down by the child and a plate of horse-bread and cheese. The little boy went to grab for it, but the doctor stayed him with one brown hand on his arm. Wynter saw the man's head tilt up to address the girl, and her heart leapt as she recognised his profile. Razi.

‘Did you boil the milk like I asked, Sarah?’

The girl nodded, her eyes wide.

‘Boiled, not just warmed? Made to bubble, and then skimmed so that the evil humours dispersed?’

The girl nodded again and bobbed a curtsy as if that sealed the question. Razi, his back still turned to Wynter, released the child's hand and stayed crouched for a while, watching him cram food into himself. Even while eating, the little fellow continued to turn the meat at the exact speed necessary to let it cook without burning. It was as natural a movement to him as breathing.

As her friend rose from his crouch and turned, Wynter realised that she was not the only one to have grown. She had expected to come home – in her fifteen-year-old body, with her new length of leg and her new height – and find herself the equal of the fourteen-year-old boy she'd left behind, his counterpart in riding and swimming and climbing.

But Razi too had changed, and it was a nineteen-year-old man who now stood before her, rubbing chalk dust from

his brown hands. He was much taller. His face more defined somehow, all cheekbones and nose, his dark eyes just as large, but hooded. He was clean-shaven, but his glossy curls were in need of a trim and he kept pushing them back from his forehead with an impatient sigh. His blue doctor's robes suited him, and she felt an almost violent stab of pride in him, that he had finished his studies and graduated, despite the terrible times they'd just survived.

*Alberon must be so proud of him, she thought.*

Razi pushed his hand through his curls and looked around him absently as if trying to remember what came next. His eyes met Wynter's and she saw them pass her by, then snap back with sharp attention. She quirked an eyebrow at him, a challenging smile rising up on her face. *I dare you not to know me, Razi Kingsson. I dare you not to recognise my face.*

'WYNTER!' He *bellowed* it, his deep voice taking her by surprise and shocking the kitchen into stunned silence. The staff jerked and ducked as though a cannon had been fired. 'WYNTER!' he shouted again, spreading his hands as if questioning her.

Wynter was so pleased to hear Razi say her name that she laughed out loud and tears sprang to her eyes.

She had sense enough to put the tools down before he waded through the crowd and snatched her from the bottom step. He swung her in a twirling arc that stole the breath from her and had the kitchen staff laughing and clutching for bits and pieces put in peril by his flying robes.

*Good Lord, he's strong!* she thought in surprise as he lifted her high. He was all deceptive grace, this new Razi, his powerful strength well hidden, his muscle so close to the bone as to make him look skinny. *You've been working with*

*horses*, she thought, recognising the type of wiry power that the work gave to a body.

He flung her out and held her at arm's length. She hung like a cat in his hands, suspended under her armpits, her feet dangling above the ground, laughing. He looked her in the face and then up and down as if marvelling at her. This close up, she could see the gold flecks in his dark eyes. She noticed that there were fine lines around his eyes and mouth. The harsh African sun and five years of uncertainty must have added them to his young face, and she was suddenly fighting a lump in her throat. Razi. It really was him. Razi. Here and now. Alive.

'Hello, big brother,' she said, her voice not quite steady, and he hugged her to him with a strangled laugh. He squeezed her so tightly that she had to knock him on the back to let him know she couldn't breathe.

They parted, breathless and laughing, their eyes shiny, and Razi kept his hand on her shoulder as if to stop her from flying away. 'You're in my way, you tinker's whelps,' Marni's gravelly voice boomed behind them, and they turned to grin at her – her preposterous face, her cloud of frizzy orange hair. She scowled at them, couldn't keep it up and beamed her gap-toothed smile on them instead, batting them with her huge hands so that they knocked into each other like nine-pins, giggling. 'Your da's still determined to turn you into a man, is he?' she growled, eyeing Wynter's uniform. 'Ah well,' she said, not quite able to hide her pride in Lorcan's unorthodox parenting. "'Tis a damn site better'n marryin' you off to some musty lord.'

Marni practically carried them, one under each arm, and deposited them in a corner out of the way. She laid the table

with bread and cheese and cold chicken, a bowl of salt, a bowl of mustard paste, two knives and a fork. She met Razi's inquiring glance as she set down two beakers of cold milk and rolled her eyes to heaven.

'It's *been* boiled!' she exclaimed impatiently. 'God forbid there should be *humours* in it.' And she lumbered off, wiping her hands on her apron and scowling at some under-chef who was slicing something too thin. Razi smiled to himself and took a piece of chicken onto his plate while Wynter began to pile bread and chicken and cheese onto her own.

Razi played with his meat, shredding it into a pile of neat strips, then shoving it around with his finger. He eyed the amount of food Wynter was packing away and a slow grin began to creep over his face, making his big dark eyes dance with suppressed laughter. Wynter's mouth was too full to permit any kind of conversation, but their eyes kept meeting as she shovelled yet more food down her throat. It was just like the old days, when they could make each other dissolve into giggles simply by looking.

'Stop it!' she warned, spraying breadcrumbs from a too-full mouth. 'I'll choke!'

He grinned more widely and contrived an innocent expression that only made her worse. Razi's grin, her full belly and all around them the kitchen doing its work – it was so wonderful, so *right*, that Wynter thought she might start to cry if she wasn't careful.

She took a deep breath, saw some similar emotion in Razi's face, and the two of them looked away from each other suddenly, taking great interest in the convoluted machinations of the kitchen. Marni glanced over at them, a moment of unguarded tenderness on her face, then she

turned away, scolding some poor scuttling man who was in her way.

‘Where is Alberon, Razi?’ Wynter asked. She kept her voice low and only glanced sideways at him. They had had no contact for the last five years; had, until now, not even been sure if the other had survived. Now, questions, if asked at all, would have to be asked gently, obliquely, for fear of opening old wounds or uncovering secrets best left hidden.

Razi cleared his throat and shook his head. ‘I don’t know where Albi is, darling. He is not here. Father says . . . Father says that he has sent him to the coast, to inspect the fleet.’ Their eyes met briefly and Wynter looked away.

Razi’s face told her that he doubted the King’s story, and Wynter’s mind filled with questions and her chest tightened with fear.

Why would Alberon, legitimate son and sole heir to the throne, be sent so far from home after such a long and dangerous period of unrest? On the other hand, why would the King lie to Razi – his eldest boy and bastard son, much loved and trusted by the throne? Wynter had no answers, only fear, sly fear, skittering about in her heart like a secret disease.

She glanced around the kitchen, at the sweating, toiling faces, the familiar domestic scene, and sensed the cold waters of politics running beneath it all. Vast and dark and rushing, ready to sweep any of them away. *We must be careful*, she thought, *we must be careful*.

There was so much that she wanted to ask, but in court life there were things you could not ask, not aloud, not in a crowded kitchen, not even of your oldest friend.

Razi was tense as a horse at a starting gate, his dark eyes

roaming the room, his agitation almost audible. He rubbed his fingers anxiously against his palms and Wynter longed to lay her hand on his, to stop him betraying himself so obviously.

Behind Razi there was a tray of jam tarts cooling on the rack near the high window and, as Wynter watched, the Hungry Ghost lifted two of them to its invisible mouth and they disappeared into midair, a bite at a time. Wynter nudged Razi with a smile and stole a glance at Marni, waiting for her usual stormy response to the pesky spirit. Things would be thrown! Curses would be bellowed! Marni's ongoing feud with the Hungry Ghost had always been good for a laugh.

Razi lifted his eyes to see what Wynter was nudging him for and his dark face lost some of its colour. Wynter had just had time to register this when she saw Marni notice another two tarts float up and disappear in a shower of crumbs. The cook's face clouded over with a moment of pure rage, and her expression stole Wynter's smile from her. This wasn't Marni's usual melodramatic overreaction; this was something deeper rising to the surface, some seething undercurrent, tapped and exposed as if Marni's head had been cut open for a moment and its contents revealed.

Wynter saw the cook's hand tighten around her ladle, her whole body shaking with the ferocity of her emotions. Then the giant woman turned her back, her face still wicked with feeling, and pretended not to see, as the invisible spirit demolished the tray of tarts.

Wynter turned to Razi, her eyes wide. He was sighing with huge relief, his eyes on Marni as she stalked away.

'I met Rory on my way here.' Wynter said it quietly, her voice purposely inaudible to anyone but her friend. Still,

Razi's reaction was shocking. He turned on her, spinning completely around in his seat to face her, his fists clenched, and she pulled away from him, momentarily frightened by the anger in his eyes.

'Did he speak to you?' he hissed, his voice a deadly whisper.

She shook her head. 'No. He wouldn't. I . . .'

All the anger drained from Razi's face in an instant, to be replaced by the same shaky relief he'd shown when Marni had allowed the tarts to be eaten. He slumped against the table and put his hand to his forehead. The breath seemed to be knocked out of him, and it was only when he murmured, 'Good man, Rory. Decent fellow,' that Wynter realised his anger hadn't been directed at her, but at Rory Shearing and the thought that the spirit might have spoken to her.

'What's going on, Razi?'

He lifted his eyes and scanned the kitchen again, not answering.

'Razi?'

He tilted his head, resting his cheek on his hand, and Wynter realised that he was shielding his mouth from the view of the rest of the room.

'Wynter. There are no ghosts anymore.' He locked eyes with her; he was telling her something very, very important here. Life-or-death important. 'Father has decreed it. And so it must be.'

Wynter laughed in disbelief, glanced furtively around the room and leaned in closer, searching his face. 'What . . . ?'

'Listen to me. *Listen*. There are no ghosts, Wyn. Understand? Anyone who says otherwise, anyone who *communes* . . . ? They're gibbeted, Wynter.'

That made her sit back, with a snort of disgust. ‘Razi, that’s not funny, I can’t believe you’d think that was funny—’

He grabbed her hand and pulled her in close. ‘I’m serious.’

She snatched her hand away, rubbing the wrist. ‘It’s rumours. That’s all. Razi, have some sense! It’s your father’s enemies, spreading lies. The King would *never*—’

‘What way did you come home? Over the mountains, yes? Through the forests? Nothing but hamlets and woodcutters and boar, am I right?’

She nodded dubiously, still rubbing her burning wrist.

‘I came home via the port road, Wyn. I came up through all the main towns. There are gibbets at every crossroads. There are *cages*, Wynter. Father has reintroduced the cages, and people seem more than willing to use them.’

Oh God. Gibbets? Gibbets and cages? Here, where they had been illegal since the very day Jonathon took the throne? No. No, no, no.

Since her journey north, Wynter had become accustomed to the sudden scent of rotting flesh on the air; to turning a corner and being confronted with a ragged corpse, caged in iron, swinging in the breeze. But she’d never thought to find them here, never here.

Even at the beginning of the Great Changes, when the insurrection first threatened the kingdom’s stability, and the Circle of Lords was pressuring the King into an inquisition, Jonathon had not succumbed to temptation.

*The easiest way to make a people hate is to torture them into submission, he had said. Happy people are stable people. One will win more hearts and minds with justice than one will ever do with the whip.*

‘What has happened here?’ she whispered. Something else occurred to her and she looked up at him sharply. He flinched, as if anticipating what she was thinking. She swallowed against a suddenly dry throat and said, ‘Where are my cats, Razi? I met a stranger kitten on the moat bridge and it didn’t even reply to my greeting.’

Her heart dropped to the soles of her feet at the look in his eyes. Then he couldn’t look at her anymore. He turned his head and gazed out into the kitchen for a moment as if trying to find a way to break terrible news.

‘No one speaks to cats anymore, darling. Please, *please*, don’t mention them to anyone.’ He looked her in the eye again. ‘Please.’

‘Why?’ she whispered, but then almost immediately held her hand up to stop his answer. She didn’t really want to know. Jonathon’s kingdom was the last in all of the Europes where cats still spoke to humans. Everywhere else, fear and superstition had driven a wedge between the species that had ended all but the most basic of communication. Wynter had missed many, many things up North, not least among them her cats and their strange, inhuman conversations. She looked down at the table, her lips compressed, and Razi waited patiently until she said, ‘What happened?’

He took her hand, gently this time. ‘I don’t know the full story, Wyn. I don’t know much, if the truth be told. But Father got it into his head that the castle cats . . . well, that they knew *secrets*. That they knew something specific that he did not want known. I think he was afraid that they would talk, that they would tattle.’

Wynter sniffed derisively at the thought of a cat tattling.

But Razi's expression was terribly sad, and he squeezed her hand. *Oh Razi, what? Just say it.*

'He had them poisoned, Wyn. All of them.'

She cried out, a high lamenting sound, and Marni turned her head sharply to look. Wynter tried to pull her hand from Razi's grip, but he held on, and reached to grab her other hand, pulling her around so that she had to face him.

'Shhh now,' he said, very firm and low. 'Shhhh.' His look said, *Remember where you are. Remember who we are.*

Overwhelmed with sorrow, she struggled against his strong grip, and turned her head up to the ceiling, tears flowing freely down her face. *Oh no, she thought, oh no. Not that.*

'I'm sorry.'

'Oh, Razi! Even GreyMother?' He nodded. 'Even ButterTongue? SimonSmoke? Coriolanus?' A nod for each beloved name, and then no more nods, just a tragic, sympathetic tilt of his head as the list went on, Wynter's wrists still trapped in his hands, held up before him as if she was his prisoner.



## A BLATANT TOMCAT

‘**T**HAT IS *enough* now, girl! And you! Boy! Let go her wrists; you look like you’re trying to *arrest* her.’

Marni’s harsh voice was low and commanding as she loomed above them, blocking them from prying eyes. Razi and Wynter leapt to obey her. He released her wrists as if burned and she took a sobbing breath and scrubbed the tears from her eyes. Marni handed Wynter a wet cloth, her face hard, and at the same time she shifted to keep her hidden from view. Wynter was grateful for the privacy while she cooled her burning face with the cloth.

Marni looked from one to the other of them, her face a thundercloud. They had spent their childhood in her care, tottering around her feet like strays. Razi’s mother had never been interested in her son, except that he brought her nearer to the throne, and Alberon and Wynter had lost their mothers at birth, their love never known to them at all. Marni had raised the three of them like some kind of maternal bear lumbering through their early years. She had been their comfort and their rock, but she wasn’t soft or

tender as some might expect a mother to be. She was loving in the hard, protective way that animals are loving. They were her cubs, and her cubs would survive, but to survive they'd have to be tough.

'Oh, Marni, my cats . . . the ghosts . . .'

'There's worse than dead cats and silenced ghosts afoot, child. Remember who you are. Get yourself under control.'

The bustle of the kitchen continued unabated behind her broad back, but still Marni spoke so low as to be barely audible to them. She put two wooden beakers onto the table with a sharp smacking sound.

'Drink that,' she whispered fiercely, 'all of it. Even you, boy!' She jabbed a finger at Razi. 'Your Musulman God won't strike you down for the sake of a little white-wine cordial.'

She glared at the two of them, the question in her eyes unmistakable. *Are we all under control now?* And they nodded their reply. *Yes, Marni.* She snorted like a bull and barged back into the fray.

*Alcohol should be avoided when angry or depressed.* This was what Wynter's father had taught her about drinking. *Wine is for pleasure, not pain.* Still, Wynter drained her cordial in a few swallows, because her throat was burning with tears and because the drink was cold and sweet and numbing. Razi sipped his obediently and then sat like a stone beside her. The kitchen pretended that nothing had happened.

In the long silence that followed, Wynter felt the drink go to work on her head, and immediately regretted that she'd gulped it down so fast. Thank God she'd just eaten, because she began to suspect that there was a little more wine than cordial mixed into the brew.

The drink, the heat of the kitchen, and Razi's steadfast presence all combined with her long journey and her shock, and she was suddenly drenched in an almost unmanageable tiredness. If she could have laid her head onto the crumbly table and drifted off without shaming herself in front of the staff, she would have.

'Razi,' she mumbled, dredging up the words with an effort, 'let's go outside. Let's walk down to the river. Razi, let's . . . let's go for a swim.'

Yes, they could find a place in the shade, under the willows maybe, and they could kick off their boots. She could strip to her underthings and just sleep like the dead while Razi watched over her, as he had done so many times when they were children.

He shifted beside her, gave a shrug. There was genuine regret in his voice, but even so, his words gave her an unexpected and terrible pang of jealousy: 'I can't, darling. I'm waiting for someone.'

'Who?' she demanded, but Marni's sudden bellow startled the two of them and distracted him so he didn't hear.

'Where the *hell* have you been?' The giant cook's ferocious voice silenced the room for a moment so that everyone turned to see the object of her fury.

A plump little maid was slinking up the basement stairs, cheeks all pink and heated-looking, a guilty expression on her face. She scurried towards the plate board and ducked past Marni, who lifted a meaty hand to her in mock threat. The blushing girl pushed her way in between the other maids and grabbed a cloth and a bottle of sweet oil and commenced oiling the wooden platters for that night's meal. There immediately rose up an urgent and giggling whispered

conversation between herself and her companions.

Wynter was just turning to repeat her question to Razi when she noticed someone coming down the backstairs. Her immediate impression was that the King had hired a troupe of entertainers and that they'd sent a representative to negotiate with the kitchen for food.

She watched him glide down the stairs, as light as a cat in his soft leather boots. *Acrobat's boots*, she thought. He had that blatant confidence that comes from being part of a clan; the bold look that men only got when they had a gang of brothers backing them up. He'd either charm you or slit your throat, this one, and you'd never know the reason for either. Wynter suspected that you could search him for days and never find all the blades he had hidden behind his smile.

She imagined that this young man's people found him invaluable, but his skills wouldn't be needed here. Unlike most castle kitchens, this one freely supplied the transient trades with food and drink. Still, he wasn't to know that, and it would be interesting to see how he'd deal with the force of nature that was Marni.

Wynter propped her heavy head in her hand and yawned; she was so very tired. She watched the man through bleary eyes, waiting for him to approach the cook. He paused halfway down the stairs and tucked his long hair behind his ear, assessing the room from a position of advantage, and Wynter had a moment to take a good look at him.

He was young enough, eighteen, maybe even nineteen. Slight, with a cat's sly grace. Maybe a head shorter than Razi. He was pale as milk and his face was narrow, watchful, almost amused, framed by a long curtain of straight black

hair. He looked brazenly around him with no pretence at deference.

*Blatant, thought Wynter, and dangerous. Very dangerous, to himself and to others, because this one doesn't know his place.*

She saw his eyes find Marni, who would make short shrift of him indeed if he kept that expression on his face. Wynter waited for the courtier's mask of obsequiousness to slide itself into place, but to her surprise, his eyes moved past the big woman and settled on the pink-cheeked maid who had come in before him.

A cold blade of comprehension slid up Wynter's spine as the maid's companions nudged each other. Wynter saw the girl shoot a quick glance over to where the young man now stood. He grinned at her, and she ducked her smiling head, her cheeks flaming, as the whole gaggle of maids dissolved into giggles. There was no doubt now where the young woman had been, and what had made her late for work.

Wynter sat up slowly, her distaste sparking to hot anger as the young rake dropped the maids a knowing wink and bit the tip of his tongue between his teeth in a gesture both suggestive and crude.

*Oh, you're in for a shock, she thought viciously, you may be used to different, but this is not a household that makes toys of its women.*

Her hands bunched to fists and she went to say something to Razi, but stopped when the young man spotted them, raised his chin in greeting and began to come their way.

*He's seen the doctor's robes, Wynter thought, and wants a consultation. Some ache or pain, or some fever in the troupe. Well, I'll give him something to need consulting about . . .*

She bristled as the man crossed the room, ready to let

rip at him. But to her amazement Razi, his face wry, lifted a finger in greeting and murmured to himself, 'So that's where you've been, you bloody tomcat. You'll get yourself tarred if you're not careful.'

Blissfully ignorant of Razi's comment, the young man slid and sidled his way through the kitchen turmoil, his mouth lifted in a crooked smile as he rapidly approached their table. *My God!* thought Wynter, her face incredulous. *This? This is who Razi was waiting for? This rake? Has the world gone mad?*

Her mouth was actually hanging open when the fellow finally got to them, and she had to make a conscious decision to snap it shut as he sauntered up and lounged against the wall by their table.

'Razi,' he said by way of greeting, drawing the name out into something insinuating and sly. At the same time, he looked Wynter up and down with undisguised interest. She'd seen that look before, had become accustomed to it ever since her body had blossomed into all its various curves and roundnesses. She treated it to an even greater measure of shuttered disdain than usual.

'Christopher,' murmured Razi, putting a similar sly emphasis on the name, and Wynter was astounded to see that he looked amused.

*Christopher, eh?* she thought. *Well, I've met people like you before, Christopher.* Wynter said the name in her head, drawing it out as Razi had done, but without the obvious affection that her friend had put into it. She found herself glaring up at this man, her rage such that she made no effort to hide it. *I've met lots of people. Just. Like. You.*

You saw them all the time in palace life, people who *latched*

on. People who *used*. They would find someone close to the throne and befriend them, usually separating them from the people who cared about them, before bleeding them dry. Not that Razi was any type of idiot. But Wynter had seen fear, isolation and need make fools of the wisest men. *I'm watching you*, she thought as the young man curled his lip at her in a very speculative smile. *I have your measure*.

She opened her mouth to say something sharp about the maid, but Razi was already talking. He was smiling up at the young man, his slow-spreading, generous smile. The easy tone of his voice and the amused affection on his face filled Wynter with a sudden and childish jealousy and she had to bite down on her bottom lip to stop unreasonable tears from springing to her eyes. It dawned on her that she was really quite drunk.

*Step back, step back*, she thought urgently, sitting up straighter and breathing deep to clear her head, *'speak not in your cups, lest ye regret when sober'*. What had she been thinking, slurping down that cordial when she was already so tired? She forced herself to focus on the conversation and tried to quell the urge to leap up and push this *Christopher* right over on his backside and kick him up the kitchen steps.

*Stop looking at my friend like that!* she thought. *He's not yours*.

Razi was murmuring low, his head tilted to look up into Christopher's face. The young man had slanting grey eyes, the eyelashes so thick and black as to seem kohled. He was leaning down, listening to Razi with an indulgent smirk, his hands tucked behind his back.

'If you get one of those girls with child, Marni will march you up the aisle herself and I'll help her tuck you

into your marriage bed, you bloody rake.'

Wynter expected the young man to affect innocence, to spread his hands, or to play the man of the world, but his face settled for a moment into genuinely hurt inquiry. 'You don't think I'd ever ruin a lass, do you, Razi?'

Razi smiled and shook his head slightly, and the young man straightened, his tomcat grin back in place. 'Anyway,' Christopher said, turning his eyes to the maids again, 'I only give what's asked of me; never go where I'm not invited, so to speak. And you, of all people, should know there's ways and means of avoiding *that* kind of trouble, what with being a doctor and all . . . aye . . .' he murmured, his eyes drifting along the row of giggling maids at the plate board. 'There's enough bastards in this world without adding to their poxy ranks.'

Razi just continued to smile, but Wynter felt the sting of that remark on his behalf and bristled. 'Many of those bastards are more worthy than you,' she said sharply, and she was surprised that Christopher didn't just burst into flames at the heat of her glare.

Christopher levelled his grey eyes at her and half-smiled. 'I meant no offence, little mankin. There are only bastards standing here.' He bent his waist in a small bow.

Oh! He was assuming that she'd been offended on her own behalf, and was telling her that he, too, was the product of an unwed union. Blind indignation rose up in her and she almost said, *My parents were wed, thank you very much!* The retort actually leapt to her lips but she realised, just in time, that the indignant pride in those words did nothing but insult Razi and expose a previously unsuspected prejudice in herself.

*Careful*, she thought, quickly gathering her wits, *the wine has tied your head in knots.*

‘Your little friend looks tired, Razi.’ Christopher’s lilting voice swam through the fog. ‘Would you not let him to bed?’

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake!’ exclaimed Wynter, slapping the table with one hand, the other pressed to her pounding temple. ‘You know full well I’m not a boy! Stop acting the jester, you haven’t the wit!’

She felt rather than saw the young man draw himself up, and thought, *Ah, here we have it. You suffer from pride, don’t you, you dangerous braggart. Pride controls you.*

‘I only meant not to insult your disguise, firebrand.’ His voice was cold. ‘But you might want to work on it a little harder. You’ll never pass for a boy with all those bumps and curves.’

She lifted her head and raised her lip in what she hoped was a disparaging sneer. ‘I’m not disguised as anything,’ she said, ‘I’m exactly what you see.’

‘A boy who butchers wood for a living?’ Sarcasm dripped from every word, and Wynter glared at him.

‘A fourth-year apprentice, guild-approved, chartered for the green.’ None of it meant a thing to him. She could see him trying to process the meaning behind the words and failing. *Where are you from*, she thought suddenly, *that you don’t know guild ranking in something so prevalent as carpentry?*

Even the lowest dung-hauler, attached to the tiniest principality, would know their ranks and roles off by heart. For a courtier to be so utterly ignorant about the symbols of professional rank would be tantamount to being blind, deaf and dumb.

She straightened slowly and looked at him anew. A newcomer, then; a stranger to court life. This made him the most dangerous of idiots, ambitious but ignorant. She had seen people like him cut bloody swathes through a royal household. Intentionally or otherwise, people like this could be a poison that would blacken the body of state, spreading death and corruption in their wake.

He saw the antipathy in her eyes and she saw a steel rise up in his.

Beside her, Razi shifted, but Wynter didn't look at him. She just kept her eyes locked on Christopher's. Then the young man suddenly tilted his head into an unexpected smile. Dimples showed at the corners of his mouth. His eyes sparkled with wicked humour and, just like that, Wynter found herself ensnared in a staring contest, unwilling to be the first to look away.

*How did this happen?* she thought desperately, feeling panic building at this ridiculous turn of events. *How have I let this dolt corner me so badly?*

He was, after all, just one of the many flies that buzzed around the dung heap of state. She should be able to brush him off Razi without breaking her stride. But here she was, stuck in a childish staring match, her dander up and too proud to break off.

Razi cleared his throat. 'Children, children...' he admonished mockingly, but his warm voice sounded troubled.

'When does your troupe move on?' Wynter asked coldly, not breaking her stare.

She saw incomprehension in Christopher's face, and he shook his head and squinted at her. 'What do you mean?'

She waved a hand up and down to indicate his clothing. Unconsciously, her eyes followed the gesture. *Damn!* But Christopher appeared not to notice. 'You're an entertainer, aren't you? A tumbler of some ilk, or a musician?'

She heard Razi hiss in a breath beside her, and a strange, cold stillness came over Christopher.

'Christopher Garron is my horse-doctor, Wynter.' Razi's voice was hard and had an odd quality to it. 'In the four years that I've known him, he's taught me more than I'd ever hoped to learn about horses and their care.'

Four years? They'd known each other that long? And, judging by Razi's body, horses had become his passion, so he and Christopher must spend a great deal of each day together. Four years of being in each other's company, working together at something they loved. *While I rotted alone in the dank North.* She squashed this thought as viciously as she could, it being unfair to both herself and to Razi. Would she truly have denied him a friend in all those years? Hadn't she longed for a friend herself? *No*, she thought, *I longed for home. For home and for Razi and for Alberon – no other. And anyway, I would have made a better choice than this . . . this dangerous sybarite.*

Even as she thought those harsh things about him, it was already becoming painfully clear to her that the main reason she distrusted this Christopher Garron was the very fact of his friendship with Razi. She was so jealous of him that she could happily have stabbed him in the heart.

Christopher was speaking again, in that lilting Northland accent. His eyes were cold, his expression flat as iron. The dimples had disappeared from the corners of his mouth. 'You're right. Very observant. I am a musician. I tend to Razi's

horses because of my skill and love of them, not because it's my heart's passion. I'm the best musician in all the North Countries. Famed in Hadra, where I'm from, for my skill on the guitar and fiddle.'

Later, when she was lying in bed, trying to sleep, she would remember the way he'd said that, the look in his eyes still eating at her. I *am* a musician. Not 'I was', or 'I used to be', but 'I am'. As though the music still burned inside him as a living thing, trapped and scrabbling to get out, but never capable of escaping.

'I'm not in disguise, despite your implications. I don't need to dress myself up as something I'm not in order to win some attention.' His tone was acidic and he sneered down at her carpenter's outfit. 'And though I know there are some men who like *those* kinds of games, I don't believe our friend here is one of them.'

Razi scraped out another little hiss. 'Christopher . . .' he warned softly.

Wynter held her hands out, with all their lumps and scars and calluses.

'It's not my clothes that make me what I am. Nor my proximity to the throne that earns me my bread. I make my own way. These are workman's hands, they speak for themselves.' She lifted them up to him, palms out, and that gesture, too, would haunt her in the night. Why that? Why had she chosen that particular gesture with which to prove her worth?

Christopher just stood looking at her, his grey eyes opaque, his face unreadable.

'I see that you think I make use of our mutual friend,' he said coldly. 'I assure you I do not. Perhaps this prettied-up

little farce of a life suits you, but I no more want to be in it than a cat wants to dance, I—'

'Oh God, that's *enough!*' Razi kept his voice low and he slapped the table only lightly, but the two of them leapt, startled by his sudden sharpness. 'Why don't I just stand up, here and now, and let the two of you mark your territory out on me like dogs! Wynter, you can have my left leg, Christopher, you have my right! Then we'll all know where we stand and this bloody . . . this bloody *prowling* can stop!'

He glared up at them in exasperation. His words cut right to the bone of the matter, shaming them both, and they deflated like pig-bladders after a stick-and-ball match.

'I just . . . I wanted you to be friends!' he said gently. 'I want you to *like* each other. Can we at least give it a try?'

Wynter looked at Christopher. There was uncertainty in his grey eyes, and hurt, and she still felt a bitter gall of jealousy in her heart, and the not-unreasonable fear that he was a destructive influence. He *was* a destructive influence, goddamn him. But for Razi's sake she half-stood and held her hand out to shake Christopher's.

She felt an immediate flash of anger when he hesitated, and she withdrew her hand and glared. Christopher released a grunt of frustration, looked about him in distress and then submitted with a sigh. Reluctantly, without looking at her, he held out his hands, not for her to shake, but for her to see, and Wynter gasped and pulled away slightly.

Even with all her experience of wounds and scars and the terrible disfigurements that war and hard labour brought to men's bodies, she found his hands shocking. They were so out of keeping with his easy, self-confident grace. It was

with a sudden pang of admiration for his skill that she realised he'd managed to keep them hidden from view the whole time since his arrival.

*He's a thief*, she thought with a shock.

'I'm not a criminal,' he muttered, as if reading her thoughts, and Wynter could tell that he was used to people jumping to that conclusion. It was a natural enough one, this being the punishment for theft in the North. But she'd never seen it done so viciously, with such awful scarring, and never to both hands. She gazed at the terrible wounds as if expecting them to speak, or transfigure.

He had fine, strong, white hands, the fingers slim and nimble-looking. *Yes*, she thought, without satisfaction, *a musician, God help him, and it's obvious*. But the middle finger of each hand was missing. The one on his right was a relatively clean amputation, the finger chopped from its socket, although the mess of shallow scars and runnels up the back of his hand told her that he must have fought madly. The knife had skipped and slid about, mutilating the surrounding flesh and the other fingers around it as the blade dug out his finger. The wound on his left was truly awful, because it spoke of such tremendous brutality. Only a small, gnarled stump of the finger remained, and that was badly crooked, as though the perpetrator had attempted to literally twist the finger from its socket. A long, pale ribbon of scar ran down the back of his hand and disappeared into his cuff, clean and surgical, as if someone had drawn an infection, releasing the pressure on an abscess.

Wynter couldn't help it – her first thoughts were, *He has the advantage on me now; anything I say will make me look an ignorant brute*. And then, no more to her credit than the first

thought, *You seem to have a talent for annoying folk, Christopher Garron. Whoever did this really wanted to hurt you.*

She looked up into his face, expecting triumph, and waited for him to press home his advantage. He had all the weaponry he needed now to make her look small in front of Razi. But there was only a shy kind of apology in his smile, and her heart jolted in her chest like an abrupt bang on a drum. *My God, you really have no idea how to play the game, do you?*

He remained standing there, this slim, pale young man with fine black hair and slanting grey eyes, shyly holding out his mutilated hands, unaware of her ungracious thoughts. She must have stared at him for a long moment, because eventually he said, 'Do you still want to shake my hand?'

*Oh, Christopher,* she thought, with a sudden surge of sympathy, *this life will eat you up. It may well choke on you in the process, but you won't survive it.* And then, with much colder intent, she thought, *I'm not letting you take Razi down when you go.*

She stood smoothly and smiled and took his hand. He accepted her handshake with no further self-consciousness, looking her in the eye and nodding a smile at her, the dimples back in force.

'I'm Wynter,' she said. 'Well met, Christopher Garron. God bless you and your path.'

And Razi grinned with delight.