

LÄHTETEKST

Part One

Crown Princess

Chapter 1

She was born Anidori-Kiladra Talianna Isilee, Crown Princess of Kildenree, and she did not open her eyes for three days.

The pacing queen directed ministers and physicians to the crib. They listened to her breathing and her hummingbird heart, felt her fierce grip and her tiny fingers soft as salamander skin. All was sound. But her eyes did not open.

For three days the grave-faced attendants came and went. They prodded her, lifted her lids, slipped thick yellow syrups down her throat.

“You are a princess,” the queen whispered to her ear. “Open your eyes.”

The baby cooed in her sleep.

When the third day had worn away to the lake blue of evening, a hand parted the nursery curtains. All was still for the night. The queen dozed on the bed. The baby in her crib dreamed of milk, her round, perfect lips nursing in sleep. A woman in a fern green robe pulled aside the curtains and tiptoed across the carpets. She slid her callused hands under the infant’s back and head, held her up, and grinned.

“Did you call me out of my house to come and tell you stories?” she said. “I will, my fat one, if you will listen.”

The queen awoke to the sounds of the rocking chair creaking and a voice singing about magpies and pigeons. She stood up, ready to call to the guards, then saw that it was her

own sister who sang to the baby, and that the baby was looking back at her aunt with wide eyes.

It was the aunt who shortened the crown princess's name to Ani.

On clear days she took Ani to the north edge of the palace grounds where no wall had been built. That far out, the garden was allowed to stray out of its ordered beds and rows and merge with the occasional copse of ash and pine. The aunt felt easier there, and she held her niece's small hand and named all she saw.

"You see the bird on the tallest branch there, the one with a yellow breast? She's migrating farther north now that the weather is warmer. The bluewing there is looking for twigs and says he has found himself a picky mate."

Ani began to speak sentences at one year. The aunt knew too well how Kildenreans disliked anything outside the common, and she tried to keep Ani's progress hidden. But the household staff noted it, and rumors began that perhaps the queer green-clad nurse-mary possessed unnatural methods of awakening a child's words.

The queen was uncomfortable with the talk and careful never to call the new nurse-mary "sister." But the king was too stubborn to worry much. "Why shouldn't she be a quick learner? She is our daughter, of pure of blood as are ever born in this world, and has every right to speak before her time."

But the king saw little of his firstborn, and the queen even less. Calib-Loncris was born, the first son, and then Napralina-Victory, who from birth so resembled her mother that the nurse-marys were inclined to curtsy to the crib. With the parents' attention parted, the aunt became Ani's constant companion.

In cold weather or spring rain, the aunt sat on the nursery floor and told Ani stories of fantastic and faraway things: a land where mares pawed gold nuggets from the earth and chewed them in order to breathe out music; a baker who baked birds from dough and sent

them out the window in search of a treasured pot of apricot preserves; a mother who loved her baby so fiercely, she put him in a tight locket around her neck so that he might never grow up. The aunt sang songs again and again until Ani learned the words, her toddler's voice as dry and delicate as a sparrow's call.

A day in early summer when Ani was five, the two companions sat in an aspen's dappled shade on the edge of the garden swan pond. Ani loved the birds that were as big as she and begged them to eat bread out of her hands. When the bread was all gone, they shrugged their wings and skronked at her.

"What did they say?"

"They wanted to know," said the aunt, "was there more bread for the eating or should they go back to the pond."

Ani looked at the nearest swan straight in one eye. "No more bread. You may go."

The swan shrugged his wings again.

"What does that mean?"

"I don't think he speaks your language, duckling." The aunt turned her profile and one eye to the swan and made a sound like the swan spoke, not quite a honk and almost a whine. The swan padded back to the pond.

Ani watched with a solemn expression and after a moment repeated the sounds she had heard. "Was that right?"

"Perfect," said the aunt. "Say that again."

She repeated the noise and smiled. The aunt looked at her thoughtfully, the corners of her mouth tight with suppressed excitement.

"Does that make you happy?" asked the aunt.

"Yes," said Ani with little-girl certainty.

The aunt nodded and took Ani into her lap to tell her a story about beginnings. Ani leaned her head against her aunt's chest and listened to both the story and the sound of the story.

"The Creator spoke the first word, and all that lived on the earth awoke and stretched and opened their mouths and minds to say the word. Through many patterns of stars, they all spoke to one another, the wind to the hawk, the snail to the stone, the frog to the reeds. But after many turnings and many deaths, the languages were forgotten. Yet the sun still moves up and down, and the stars still shift in the sky, and as long as there are movement and harmony, there are words."

Ani leaned her head back and, squinting, tried to look at the sun. She was young and had not yet learned that things like seeing the sun were impossible.

"Some people are born with the first word of a language resting on their tongue, though it may take some time before they can taste it. There are three kinds, three gifts. Did you know your mother has the first? The gift of people-speaking. Many rulers do. You see? And people listen to them, and believe them, and love them. I remember as children it was difficult to argue with your mother—her words confused me, and our parents always believed her over me. That can be the power of people-speaking.

"The first gift is the only reason this little land was not taken over by other kingdoms long ago. Rulers like your mother have talked themselves out of war for centuries. It can be powerful and good, and it can also be dangerous. I, unfortunately, wasn't born knowing people-speaking." The aunt laughed, and the surface of her eyes gleamed with memory.

"Do I have it, Aunt?"

"I don't know," she said. "Perhaps not. But there are other gifts. The second is the gift of animal-speaking. I've met a few who are able to learn animal languages, but like me, those people feel more comfortable near the mountains, among the trees and places where

animals are not in cages. It's not always a pleasant life, sparrow. Others are suspicious of those who can speak with wild things. Once there were many of us in Kildenree, I believe, but now, so few remember.

"The third is lost or rare. I've never known one with the gift of nature-speaking, though there are tales that insist it once was. I strain my ears and my eyes and my insides"—she tapped her temple lightly—"but I don't know the tongue of fire or wind or tree. But someday, I think, someone will discover how to hear it again."

The aunt sighed and smoothed her niece's yellow hair. "Not many know the story of the three gifts, Ani. You must remember it. It's important to know stories. I felt the earth shift to make a place for you when you were born, and I came to tell you stories while you are young. And like me, you were born with a word on your tongue. I don't know what word it was. You will grow older and discover it one day without my help."

"Maybe fire or wind or tree?" said Ani.

"Maybe," said the aunt. "I don't know those tongues. I can't help you discover them."

Ani patted her aunt's cheek as though she were the elder of the two. "But you can teach me to speak with the swans."

They returned each day to the pond. When no gardener worked within sight or courtier walked near, Ani practiced the sounds she heard.

"They don't have such a complicated world as we do and need so few words," said the aunt. "Did you hear? The tall one there was greeting the one with the tail feathers missing. They are brothers. If they were sisters, the sound would go up at the end."

Ani listened. "I just heard it. Like this." She mimicked the greeting, drawing up the last sound slightly.

"Very good," said the aunt. "You know, most people wouldn't notice that. You can hear the tiny differences and imitate them—that's your talent. But it takes work, too. You have

to learn what it all means, like studying any foreign language. And it's not just sounds. Watch how that one there bobs her head and moves her tail. And holds still. It all means something."

On walks, the aunt called down the little birds from ash and beech perches, but they were anxious, busy things and would not stay long from their trees. Ani learned some of what the chickens in their coops and pigeons on their ledges complained and cooed to one another. They visited the small gray falcons and gold hawks when the hunt-master was out, and the wide-eyed owls in the barn rafters.

On one walk back from their wild garden, they passed the corrals. The warm, earthy smell drew Ani close, and she stood on a fence rail and watched the stable-master ride a graceful gray. She pointed.

"I want to speak to that one. The horse."

"What a smart girl to think to ask." She leaned behind Ani, her cheek pressed against her niece's, and watched the animal run. "I have tried to speak to so many animals, Ani. The wild ones like wolves and deer will not stay still to listen or be listened to. Lizards, toads, rats, and all the little animals—I think perhaps their language is too simple for us bigger animals to understand. The domestic creatures like dogs, cows, and cats are sleepy in their comfort and used to communicating with people on our own terms. And birds, as you have seen, are perfect for speech. Always wild and yet always listening, and the larger ones especially, for they speak more slowly.

"But the horse, ah, Ani, I will tell you a story. Several years ago, I helped a friend with his foaling mare, and the little colt fell into my arms. I heard him, just after he tumbled out, emit a mournful little sound, something like 'Yulee.' His name. Horses are born with their own name on their tongue, you see? I repeated it back to him, and he heard me, and ever since he can hear me and I can hear him. It's a horse's way to give you the key to their

speech once and never repeat it. I've tried the same with a calf and a litter of kittens and a kid-goat, but only the colt has responded. What do you think of that?"

"I would like a horse friend," said Ani. "Very much." Perhaps a horse would not hit her with play swords, like her little brother, or treat her like a glass vase and then whisper behind her back, like the other palace children.

The aunt shook her head. "You're too young. Sometime, some year, when you're older and you can go to the stables and your mother will not question why. For now, you must listen to your winged friends."

Ani was eager to learn the voice of every bird that nested on the palace grounds, but the swan pond drew her return day after day. She loved to watch them swim so slowly that the water hardly rippled and watch every silent, mild movement shimmer into meaning. Soon her throat and tongue could make nearly all the sounds of the swans, and she trumpeted gleefully.

"Hush a moment, Ani," said the aunt.

The key-mistress and her daughter, Selia, passed by the pond on the walk to the gardens. The aunt waved, and the key-mistress nodded. Her little girl was pretty and poised, with hair already to her waist. She walked with hands clasped in front and eyes centered on the path ahead. As a little girl she had been prone to violent tantrums, notorious for turning all shades of pink and purple and for kicking the floor like a landed fish. But she was seven now and prim as a court lady.

"Hello, Crown Princess," said Selia. "We are going to the gardens. Come for tea sometime."

"Um, yes, thank you." Ani was not used to being addressed by other children, and besides, this strange little girl had always made her feel uneasy—at once willing to do whatever Selia asked and eager to escape her notice. The same way, in fact, that she felt

around her mother. The aunt raised one eyebrow in the blue shadow of her hat and watched the pair stroll away.

“That one has the gift of people-speaking,” she said. “It can be powerful. Mark me and watch her.”

Ani watched the serious little girl stroll away and tried to remember. *People-speaking. That one has.*

That year, when the trees burned the fire of late summer into their leaves and the ground mist was a ghost of the river, long and wet and cold, the aunt looked from her window to the walls around her and imagined another winter inside them. She began to see the world as a bird sees bars, and she scratched her arms beneath her sleeves.

The aunt took Ani to the shore of the swan pond where the lazy-armed trees dipped themselves into their own reflections and the aspens’ hard little leaves shook in the wind with a noise like snapping fingers. The aunt pointed north, where few people lived and trees grew thick and prickly green all year, and where the girl could not follow.

“I’m going home,” she said. She kissed Ani’s forehead, but her eyes did not leave the purple horizon. “Don’t forget all you have learned. If your mother discovers what I have taught you, she will take it away. I know her. The only thing she has ever wanted is shiny and fits around her brow. Still, you are better off with her, gosling. I would not wish my solitude on you. Stay and learn to be happy.”

The princess sat on a stone, rested her arm on the back of a swan, and thought how her chest felt like a gutted walnut shell, and wondered if that sensation might last forever. She watched her aunt walk away, disappearing into a tiny spot of green that the eye tricked into a shadow of a rock a long way in the distance.

The next morning, Ani was dismayed to see she had been given a new companion, a weak-hearted nurse-mary with skin like sour milk. They were not to go to the pond because “the

young crown princess might fall in and drown, with her face bloated and purple like a sauced plum, would you like that?"

Despite her aunt's cautions, Ani was certain if she explained to the nurse-mary that she just wanted to speak with the swans, then it would be all right. When the woman's eyes widened, Ani mistook it for eagerness.

"I can understand what they say," Ani said. "I'll teach you how, too, if you like."

The nurse-mary rose from the garden bench, gasping, and tossed bits of grass in the air before her to shake loose the evil.

"You'll curse yourself. People don't speak to animals, and it's not such a clever game to say you do."

Ani overheard the nurse-mary report to the queen in hushed, hurried tones that made Ani feel she had done something unspeakably bad. Thereafter, outings were limited to the gardens and the nursery porch. Her mother looked at her now with a distant, disapproving frown, and Ani resolved to keep to herself until her aunt would return and carry her off into the freedom of the mountains. Long hours she spent watching the purple horizon, willing her aunt to walk back out of it with welcoming arms.

She missed the sound of bird words, and the feeling that came, like a cricket leaping inside her chest, when she heard and understood. In her world of cold marble floors and aged tutors and whispering children, only the animal-speaking felt like her own thing and the pond her own place. Once or twice when the nurse-mary was bedded with a head cold, Ani escaped the nursery porch and ran to practice with the swans. As she approached, two gardeners stepped between her and the pond.

"Can't come around here, Crown Princess," said the hard-skinned man. "Dangerous."

When she tried to slip into the mews to converse with the hawks, the hunt-master carefully escorted her out with a firm grip on her collar.

“Sorry, Crown Princess,” he said. “The queen was clear that you were not to play near my birds.”

She tried many times in the two years she waited for her aunt’s return, and each time someone stopped her. It felt like dreams when she ran but could not move. Sometimes in secret, Ani lay on her belly and tried to mimic her puppy Lindy’s whines and growls.

“Listen to me,” she said. “Can you understand me, Lindy?”

The nurse-mary must have overheard, for when Ani returned from her tutor’s apartment one afternoon, the puppy was gone and her mother stood in the center of the nursery, waiting.

“He is in the kennels now,” said the queen. “I think it best that you no longer keep pets.”

“I want Lindy back.” Ani was hurt and angry, and she spoke louder than she ever had before. “You give him back.”

The queen slapped Ani’s mouth.

“That tone is unacceptable. This fantasy has gone unchecked for too long. If I had known that woman was teaching you those mad ideas she had when we were children, I would have sent her running from this city without her pack. It is time you learn your place, Crown Princess. You will be the next queen, and your people will not trust a queen who makes up stories and seems to talk to wild beasts.”

Ani did not answer. She was holding her stinging mouth and staring at the purple horizon.

The queen turned to go, then paused before the door. “I came to tell you. We received word today that your aunt passed away this winter. I am sorry if this hurts you.”

Ani watched her mother’s back walk away and felt her seven-year-old world tumble like a hatchling from a tree.

That evening her parents held a ball. The nurse-marys stood in the nursery doorway and smiled toward the music that came down the corridor like a sigh. The wet nurse held the new princess, Susena-Ofelienna, to her breast and spoke of skirts and slippers. A young, pretty nurse-mary held Napralina-Victory to her shoulder and whispered about men and secret things.

Every word they spoke seemed to empty Ani more, like buckets dipped into a shallow well. She pretended great interest in building a city of many towers with her pale wood bricks, and when the nurse-marys wandered into the corridor for a closer look, Ani slipped out the nursery porch to run away.

The light that came from behind pushed her shadow forward, a very thin giantess stretching across the lawn, her head pointing to the pond. She ran on the damp night grass and felt the breeze go right through her nightgown. It was early spring and still cold at night.

She reached the pond and looked back to where the pink marble ballroom gazed brilliantly out at the night, the glass and walls trapping the music in. The people inside looked beautiful, graceful, and completely at ease in their place. It helped her resolve to realize that she was nothing like them. But when she turned her back to the lights, she saw that the night was so dark, the stables did not exist. She could not see the stars. The world felt as high as the depthless night sky and deeper than she could know. She understood, suddenly and keenly, that she was too small to run away, and she sat on the damp ground and cried.

The water lipped the pond's sandy side. The swans slept, blue and silver in the night. One swan roused at Ani's sob and greeted her, then nested in the sand near her feet. *I am tired*, Ani told her, *and lost from my herd*. The swan words she spoke sounded to her human ears like the mournful wail of a child. *Sleep here*, was the bird's simple reply. Ani

lay down and, putting one arm over her face as though it were a wing, tried to shut out the world where she did not belong.

She awoke when two strong hands lifted her.

“Crown Princess, are you all right?”

She wondered why the world was so black, then realized her eyes were still closed. Her lids seemed too thick to open. She let her head fall against the man’s shoulder and smelled the strong goat milk soap of his clothing. He was carrying her away.

“Who are you?”

“Talone, Watcher of the East Gate. You were asleep with the swans and would not rouse.”

Ani creaked open one eyelid and saw that the sky above the mountains was eggshell pale. She looked at the man and was about to ask a question when she shuddered again, from her bones to her skin.

“Are you hurt, Crown Princess?”

“I’m cold.”

He pulled his cloak off his shoulders and wrapped it around her, and the warmth lured her back into a fevered sleep.

It was three weeks before she was well enough that the lines on the physicians’ faces relaxed into wrinkles and the youngest nurse-mary did not exclaim whenever Ani opened her eyes. Long after the fever, her name was often replaced with “that delicate child.” She was kept indoors. She was never alone. She breakfasted in bed and supped on a couch and never laced her own boot. The incident with the swans was mentioned only in secret tones.

“We almost lost a future queen.”

“And not just to death, but to wildness.”

“What shall we do with her?” said the nursery-mistress.

The queen looked down at Ani, who lay sleepily awake, her eyes half-open, her ears pricked for the judgment that would fall from her mother's powerful mouth onto her head. Somehow by getting sick, Ani felt she had badly betrayed this woman, and remorse pricked at her with the fever chills. The queen was like some terribly beautiful bird whose language she did not yet understand, and she felt her thin body fill with the desire to understand, and to please.

The queen squinted, briefly creating spider leg-thin lines around her eyes. She laid a cool hand on Ani's forehead. The gesture was almost motherly.

"Keep her resting," said the queen, "and away from birds."

Chapter 2

Ani set down the cold remains of her peppermint tea and hoped she was still smiling. The view from the window tugged at her attention, teasing her with indistinct movements in the direction of the stables, brown spots that might have been horses running. But she kept her eyes firmly on the brown freckle on the key-mistress's upper right cheek.

"Let me express again, Crown Princess, how honored we are that you accepted our invitation this afternoon. I hope the meal was to your liking."

"Yes, thank you," said Ani.

"I have begged my daughter for some months to invite you to our apartments. You have grown as tall as your mother, save her, though not quite as pretty, and I wonder, since you seem to always be quite busy, if you have yet learned what duties are most important to your station?"

"Um, thank you, yes." Ani winced. The key-mistress had been waiting months for this afternoon because Ani had taken great pains to escape it. This kind of thing was, apparently, supposed to be social and relaxing. But like every visit and tea and party Ani attended, she was aware that others expected the crown princess to act, speak, and think as queenly as her mother, a feat that for her, Ani was certain, was as likely as her blowing down the wind. "Yes," she said again, and winced again, conscious of just how dim she sounded.

Silence hovered between them like a tired moth. Clearly she was expected to say something else, but panic at having to speak stole thoughts from her head. She glanced at Selia, but her lady-in-waiting's serene demeanor gave no clues as to how to respond. Selia often reminded Ani of a cat, seemingly bored yet taking everything in with her lazy gaze. At age eighteen, Selia was two years Ani's senior, four fingers shorter, and her long hair

was one pale shade darker than Ani's yellow. In appearance, they were almost as alike as sisters.

Her eyes lingered a moment on Selia, and she found herself thinking, *She would be better at playing princess than I am.* The thought stung. Ani wanted so badly to do it right, to be regal and clever and powerful. But too often her only truly happy moments were the bursts of freedom, stolen afternoons on her horse's back, brief, breathtaking rides past the stables to where the gardens turned wild, her lungs stinging with the cold, her muscles trembling with the hard ride. It had been nearly ten years since she had last thought of running away, staring out at the too big night from the shores of the swan pond. She would never try again. She was the crown princess, and she was determined to one day make a decent queen.

The key-mistress cleared her throat, and Ani looked back, thankful her hostess had taken it upon herself to crack the silence. "I hope I don't show presumption to say that you have been more than mistress to my Selia since the queen your mother chose her to be the first—and might I dare to say, most honored—member of your retinue, but you have also been her friend."

"Yes." Ani readjusted her hands in her lap and fought for something new to say. She only smiled again and said, "Thank you."

"Crown Princess, you look as though you wish to ask for something," said Selia. Ani turned to her gratefully and nodded. Selia lifted the pot. "More tea?"

"Oh, yes, um, thank you."

Selia filled her cup, and the key-mistress looked down at her own, mumbling, "Tea, yes."

"Actually," said Ani, and her heart pounded at having to speak out, "actually, if you do not mind, my father and I are to go riding today, and so, you see, I had best go soon."

“Oh.” The key-mistress glanced at her daughter and gave one shake of her head.

Selia touched Ani’s hand. “Crown Princess, Mother has been looking forward to this visit for a fortnight.”

At once Ani felt Selia’s words burn her cheeks red, and she looked down. *I’ve fouled up again*, thought Ani. “I’m sorry.” She sipped her tea. It was too hot, and she felt her heart beat in her burned tongue.

“Riding,” said the key-mistress.

“Yes, Mother, I told you. She finds time to ride almost every day.”

“Yes, rides a stallion, I believe. Do you not think, Crown Princess, that it is inappropriate for a princess to ride a stallion? Should you not ride a nice, gentle mare or gelding? Are you not afraid that you will break your crown?” The key-mistress turned to her daughter. “That was a pun, dear. Break your crown.”

Selia laughed her high, lovely laugh.

Something about that exchange burned Ani’s pride like her tongue. She set down her cup and stammered an awkward reply.

“Yes, well, I do ride a stallion, and if my father, the king, thinks it is inappropriate, he will tell me so. At any rate, thank you for the tea and the dinner. I must go. I’m sorry. Thank you.”

She stood up. Selia looked up at her and blinked, unaccustomed, it seemed, to even that much of an outburst from her mistress. It took the key-mistress a few moments to refurbish herself with words.

“Yes, yes, off you go, Crown Princess. For the best. It is, you know, inappropriate to keep the king waiting.”

They exited the key-mistress's apartments and walked briskly down the corridor. Selia's heels made her nearly as tall as Ani, and they clicked on the tile floor like a cat's claws grown unchecked.

"Are you all right?" said Selia.

Ani let out a breath and laughed a little. "I don't know why I let myself panic like that."

"I know. But I thought it would be good for you to practice."

"You are right, Selia, I know you are. I hate the way I get so muddled and say everything wrong and take everything wrong."

"And as you are to be queen one day, you have to learn now how to converse pleasantly with people you don't care about."

"Oh, it's not that I don't care about her, or anyone else." Ani thought perhaps it was that she cared too much. She was constantly worried about what others thought of her, and how every word she spoke could condemn her further. Ani thought how to explain that to Selia and decided that she could not. Selia's ease with strangers and friends alike made Ani sure she would not understand. Besides, Ani was eager to shrug off the unpleasant feelings of another failure.

She felt herself relax a little when they passed under an arch and outside. It was an afternoon in winter, the sun bright and the air like early morning, new and wet with coming snow. When they approached the stables, Selia curtsied and walked to the gardens as she often did when Ani went riding. The lady-in-waiting was allergic to horses. Or so she said. Once, from a distance, Ani had witnessed Selia willingly entering a stable holding hands with an unknown man. But Ani had refused to inquire. She, too, had her secrets.

Ani entered the first stable. The familiar smells of warm bodies and clean hay greeted her like a friendly touch. She made her way past bowing grooms to the stall she knew best.

Falada, said Ani.

A white horse raised his head and made no audible sound.

The first time Ani had spoken that name, she had been eleven. The prime minister of Bayern, the kingdom on the other side of the mountains, had been visiting at the time, and all wary-eyed parties were so busy entertaining road-weary dignitaries that Ani had been able to steal away to the stables a few times to bring to pass a childhood wish. So it was that Ani was by the stable-master's side when an overdue mare foaled her white, long-legged colt. Ani had helped break open the birthing sac and cleared the fluids from his nostrils. She had steadied his middle as he first tried to stand, balancing his long body on stick legs and staring at the lighted world with oversize eyes. She had listened when he spoke his name, that word that had lain on his tongue while he still slept in the womb. And when she repeated it, he had heard her. After this initial connection, it was not long before she discovered they could speak to each other without other people hearing a sound.

And Ani was grateful for that. She remembered how it had taken all her father's power just to convince the queen that Ani should be allowed to keep her horse. Certainly he would have been sent off to the provinces the moment the queen suspected Ani and Falada of having such a bond.

Falada, I am late. Tirean is gone from her stall. My father must already be riding.

The boy did not give me enough oats, said Falada.

His voice entered her mind as naturally as her own thoughts, but as distinct as the smell of citrus. Ani smiled, with sincerity now, and worked off the glumness of the lunch visit by attacking his white hide with quick brush strokes. *I wonder sometimes how much is enough.*

You give me enough.

Because I love you too much and I cannot say no. But I will for now because my father is waiting.

She saddled him, and he teased her by holding his breath when she tightened the girth. *What, you want me and the saddle to fall off your back at the first fence?* And she led him with a loose rein out of the stable and into the bright afternoon. A thin, stiff layer of snow crunched beneath their feet and reflected hard sunlight into their eyes. Ani squinted into the brilliant distance where her father rode his black mare, Tirean. He waved and rode up. He was a tall, slender man with hair so pale, Ani could not separate the natural from the graying hairs in his beard unless she was close enough to touch.

“You are late,” he said.

“I was being a crown princess,” said Ani.

He dismounted and gave Falada a friendly pat. “Off playing pins and balls with your siblings, no doubt. I heard them in the west hall.”

“Come now, Father, you know the queen would never permit such nonsense from me. ‘Anidori, a crown princess, like a queen, can succeed only by staying apart. Separation, elevation, delegation.’”

The king grimaced. He had long ago ceased to argue such points with his wife. “Tell me, then, what your business was this morning—separating, elevating, or delegating?” He clapped his hands twice as though it were a song.

“Oh, all three. I breakfasted alone while sketching a map of Kildenree from memory for my tutor, I was surrounded by my ‘lessers’ all morning as I received mendicants and courtiers, and then I solved all their problems by assigning them to other people. Oh, and a social visit with Selia’s mother to end it all with a flourish.” She nodded and curtsied.

“That is wonderful, Anidori,” he said with all the force of a proud father. “And how did you do?”

“Fine.” In truth it had been, from dawn until then, a horrible day full of trips, stutters, and stupidity. She felt her chin tremble a little and covered it with a hand. His assurance

that she was wonderful was a stab in the soreness of her insecurity. He more than anyone knew how she tried to be what her mother was, and how often she failed. It was he who in earlier years had held her weeping at his chest and told her that she was good enough, that she was his best girl. She had not sought his comfort in years, trying as she was to grow up, to be independent and queenly enough not to hurt, but she longed for his succor now.

“Or, you know, well enough.” Her voice cracked a little, and she turned away to mount Falada. But he caught her shoulders and pulled her into his embrace. The little girl in her won out, and she sobbed lightly against his chest.

“There, easy now,” he said as though calming an anxious horse.

“I was terrible, Father. I’m so worried that I will say all the wrong things and that they think I’m a dim, sickly, bird-speaking girl that I actually shake, and my mind goes blank, and I just want to run away.”

He stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head. “But you don’t, Anidori, do you? You stay and you try. You are so much braver than I. And as you keep trying, the rest will come.”

She nodded and soaked in his comfort for a moment in silence.

Falada nosed her shoulder. *I thought we were going running.*

Ani smiled and smeared the tears across her cheeks. “I think my horse is anxious for a ride.”

“Yes, ride.” His face brightened as he put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her brow. “And as much as I love you, my dear, I am afraid Tirean and I are going to have to teach the two of you a lesson in speed.”

“Oh, really?” She laughed, knowing that the king’s mare rarely outran Falada.

“Yes, yes, off we go.” The king mounted and immediately began a canter that streaked into a run. He was heading for a fence that separated the ends of the training grounds from

the loosely wooded wilds, and he was, indeed, riding fast. His speed made her feel uneasy. She called out to him. He waved a hand in the air and continued his assault toward the fence.

“It’s too high,” she shouted, but he could not hear her now. She mounted Falada and asked him to follow. They had only halved his distance when the king reached the fence. Tirean leapt.

“Father!” she said.

There was a sound like bones rubbing together as the mare’s hoof just scraped the post. Tirean’s balance tilted. The king looked down as his mount fell. It looked wrong to Ani, that graceful, long-legged horse and that tall man, creatures that should stand and run, instead hitting the earth like discarded things. When Tirean regained her feet, the king remained on the ground.

Ani jumped off Falada’s back and ran to the fence. Other stable-hands were there before her. “Easy, easy,” she heard more than one voice say. When they tried to approach the prostrate king, the mare screeched, stepped over him, and straddled his body protectively. They stepped forward slowly, and Tirean glared with one round black eye and huffed warning through wide nostrils. The stable-hands stepped back, afraid the horse would trample the king.

Ani slipped through the fence and put out her hand. “Please, Tirean, step away.”

She could not speak truly to this horse or any other, just to her own Falada, who had heard her speak his name at birth. Tirean was dumb to the words and shook her head at Ani’s hand. Ani reached for Tirean’s halter, and the mare nodded up and down, whipping the reins against the snow. Ani felt too tired to move. Her father was facedown, one arm sprawled, one tucked beneath his chest. She could not tell if he was dead or if he slept, only that he did not open his eyes. Ani turned to Falada on the other side of the fence.

Falada, she needs to move.

Falada circled back, began a quick canter, and jumped the fence. The mare started at his leap but did not move away from the king. Falada shook his mane and walked forward to touch noses with the mare. He nudged her with his cheek and breathed on her neck. Tirean seemed to sigh, a gust of warm breath that played in Falada's mane. She stepped back carefully and huddled against a tree, her neck and mane shuddering, her head bent to the ground.

Ani rushed to him and heard his breath rattle strangely in his chest. She bade the stable-hands move the king to the stable-master's bed, where he slept for three days. The palace physicians could not wake him. The queen sat by his side, dry-eyed, sleepless. Calib, Napralina, Susena-Ofelienna, and the toddler Rianno-Hancery took turns holding his hand. Ani sat in a chair, gazing at his still face, and felt again like the little girl who had watched her aunt walk away into the purple horizon, her chest an abandoned snail shell.

On the fourth day, the king woke briefly to smile up at Susena, who was holding his hand at the time. His eyes fluttered closed, then he turned his head to one side and did not breathe in again.

The Great City was decked with white on the day of his burial. The royal family in white mourning dress walked like ghosts after the funeral wagon. Ani gripped her skirts in her fists and concentrated on the single note of the flute player and Rianno-Hancery's high, sobbing cries twisting about one another in a painful harmony. She looked up where the White Stone Palace stretched its walls like low wings and raised the head of its single high tower to the winter blue—so like a swan, the bird of mourning. She took a shred of comfort in imagining that even the palace mourned. Her mother walked at the head of her remaining family, elegant and poised in her sorrow. Ani thought, *These people watch me,*

their future queen. I need to seem strong. She straightened and stopped her tears, but next to her mother, she felt only half-formed.

After the burial and ceremony, the queen stood before the tomb and spoke to the gathered people. She recalled the king's diplomatic and military successes, the alliances he had formed, and the peace Kildenree had enjoyed since his coronation. To herself, Ani remembered other things, like his smile that pulled stronger on his right side than his left, the smell of the sheep oil he kept on his beard, and how these last years he had begun to smell less of parchment wax and more of stables. That made her smile.

Then the queen said, "Do not fear that this sad day means more than the end of this king's life. We will go on. I will continue as your queen and keeper of the realm. And in that distant day when you will carry my body to this place, my noble and capable son Calib-Loncris will be ready to take up the scepter and crown."

Ani looked up, her mouth slightly agape. Selia at her side pinched her arm.

"Did you hear that, Crown Princess?"

Ani shook her head slowly. "She made a mistake. She must be . . . she is confused in her sorrow, that's all."

"Calib doesn't look confused," said Selia.

Ani caught sight of her fifteen-year-old brother standing to her mother's right. *When had he grown up so much?* she wondered. He was as tall as his very tall mother, and his face was smooth and controlled like hers.

The queen finished and descended the tomb steps. Calib looked at Ani for the first time, hesitated, then stepped close to her.

"I'm sorry," he said. His forehead creased, and his eyes filled with the concern of an uncertain boy.

"How long have you known she would do this?" said Ani.

Calib shrugged. There was a trace of smugness in his refusal to smile, before he turned and walked stately after his mother.

Selia prodded, but Ani refused to talk to her mother until after the six weeks of mourning white.

“She is your mother, and she owes you an explanation.”

Ani sighed. “First, she is the queen, and she owes me nothing. Besides, I don’t want to soil my father’s mourning with greedy or offended thoughts.” And also, Ani admitted to herself, she was afraid of the answer. Was her mother really capable of taking away everything Ani had worked and worried and studied and sweated for just on caprice? Ani took Selia’s hand and they leaned back on a courtyard bench, the sides of their heads touching.

“After the six weeks, then. But I will not let you avoid it. She is fooling with your future.”

“Thank you, Selia. I would feel so alone right now without you.”

Selia patted her hand. Ani was thoughtful, watching the winter sky warm up into a bird’s-egg blue. The brilliant pain after her father’s death was subsiding into a mean ache, but Ani was not yet ready to let it go.

“Selia, why do you worry so much about what my mother said?”

It suddenly seemed to Ani that Selia’s passion on the subject went beyond the feelings of a concerned friend. But Selia did not answer. They sat in silence, the question hanging between them in the chilly afternoon like a frozen breath.

At the end of six weeks, Ani stood outside the queen’s study, rallying her nerve. Selia waved encouragement from down the corridor and then went into her own apartment to await the outcome.

“Enter,” said the queen.

Ani took a deep breath. The queen was gifted with people-speaking, and Ani knew that arguing against her mother’s powers of persuasion was difficult—almost as difficult as explaining to Selia if she did not question her.

“Mother, I ask pardon for intruding so soon after the mourning period, but I must ask you about your statement some weeks ago—”

“Yes, yes, child, about Calib-Loncris. Sit down.” The queen was at her desk, looking over a parchment. She did not glance up. This was one of her tactics. Ani had been forceful and prepared, and now she was made to sit and wait at the whim of the queen.

When the queen at last set down the parchment and met her daughter’s eyes, Ani was expecting an accusing stare and was surprised by the sorrow that weighed down her features. She could not tell if the sorrow was for her father or for her. A thought buzzed in Ani’s head: *I do not know this woman at all*. Her stomach turned uneasily.

The queen met her eyes with a firm blue stare. “You remember, five years ago we received a visit from Prime Minister Odaccar of Bayern.” Ani nodded. It had been the year Falada was born. “It was not an idle visit. The prime minister does not journey for three months to have tea with the queen and king of Kildenree. There were issues of land.”

The queen stood in front of the wall map and put her left hand, fingers spread, over the mass of Bavara Mountains and the great Forest that separated the two kingdoms. She looked at her hand a moment before speaking. “Bayern has long been a rich country, maintaining their wealth for centuries by launching successful wars.

“The current sovereign is less belligerent than his ancestors. His own father and two brothers were killed in war when he was a boy, and he has ruled differently. But war was their business, and to replace that kind of income, the king spent years financing mining in their mountains. Successfully. They are following a rich deposit of gold that brings them,

each year, closer to Kildenree. At this point, five years since Odaccar visited, they must be very near indeed. There have never been roads through these mountains, so official borders have never been made.”

The queen looked up at Ani, her expression forcefully smooth. “Bayern’s king was becoming greedy. He claimed the bulk of the mountains for Bayern, leaving us a thin range, weak protection from a country so much larger than ours. And stronger. Your father feared intrigue. As did I. Your father did nothing but fear. I acted.”

Her mother’s magic with words was worming into Ani’s mind. Already she was thinking, *Yes, fine, whatever you did is fine*. She pricked herself again and warned herself not to fall into the role of complacent listener.

The queen sat down and pressed her fingers against the corners of her eyes. “I have done what a queen should and what is best for Kildenree. The wide mountain range and the vastness of the Forest have kept us separated from our dangerous neighbors. In the past it would have taken an army four months at best to reach us by the Forest Road—the only road. Now, what is to defend us when the pass is cut? What will prevent that monstrous army from pouring into this valley? Nearly a generation of our men was killed in the civil war before your father and I were placed in power. Our armies are insufficient.”

She seemed to be talking to herself now, and her tone was near pleading. Ani felt dread begin to prick her skin. Her mother never pleaded.

“You are the crown princess. If it had to be one of my children, it should have been Napralina, I know. She is the third child, the second daughter, just the prize such an arrangement would require. But she was so young, and you—you were different. After the trouble with your aunt, I worried that the people would never trust you, that the rumors of your being a beast-speaker had sunk too deep.”

“What did you do, Mother?” said Ani.

The queen ignored the question. Her voice twanged defensively. “A queen is never so secure that she can ignore what her people think of her, Anidori.”

“What did you do?”

“Did you not pass your sixteenth birthday during the mourning period?”

Ani nodded.

The queen took an audible breath and looked back at the map. “It was fortunate, truly, that Odaccar wished for peace as much as I. In private counsel, we arranged your marriage to the king’s first son. After your sixteenth birthday.”

Ani stood, her chair scraping against the tile floor with a whine. The sound roused her, and she found she could argue back. “What? But, but you can’t.”

“I do not want you to tell me that what I did is not fair. I know it is not fair.”

“But I am the crown princess. I am supposed to be the next queen. The law says I am the next queen.”

“Your motivation has always seemed to come more from duty than desire. I imagined you might even be relieved.”

“Do not pretend that you are doing me a favor, Mother. You can’t just take away who I am. Whether or not you think I . . . I am good enough to be queen of Kildenree, that is what you have raised me to be, what I have worked at all my life.” Ani narrowed her eyes as realization burned her blood, and her voice softened with the pain of betrayal. “Is this why you kept me away from my siblings all these years? Not because you were training me to be queen, but rather protecting them from me because you knew you would be sending me away? Separation, elevation, delegation—it was all just a ruse.”

“You will still be a queen, Anidori.”

Ani shook her head. “You know it’s not the same. It will not be my crown. It will not be my home. I’ll be a stranger, the foreigner wife of their king.”

Her mother glared. “What do you want? You want me to coddle you and feel sorry for you?”

“I just—”

“I will not have you questioning me!” The queen bolted upright. Instinctively, Ani covered her mouth with a trembling hand.

“You are understandably angry, but that will not change the promises I have made, nor will it change what you will do.”

Tears stung Ani’s eyes, and she slowly lowered her hand from her mouth. “Did Father know?”

“No, he did not,” said the queen with some contempt. “He did not want to know. I told him I arranged the marriage for Napralina, that we would tell her when she turned fifteen, and by the time he found out it was you, it would be too late for him to change it. Had he known, he would have felt he needed to protect you. Protect a future queen! You should have been strong enough not to need protection.”

“I was only a little girl then.”

The queen shook her head. “You should never have been only a little girl, you should have always been a crown princess.”

“All right, enough,” said Ani, too hurt to bear another word, and to her surprise her mother did not answer back. Her heartbeats shook her body, and she stood in silence awhile, trying to think of more things she would like to say. Battling her mother exhausted her, and hopelessness readily sucked away her anger.

The map glared at her from the wall. The Great City Valley nestled in a curve of the Bavara Mountain Range. Farmlands radiated west and south like fingers from a palm. To the north and northeast, a mass of arrowheads represented the mountains. To the east and southeast, a tight group of crossed lines indicated the Forest. Past those great barriers was a

white space and, in its center in script so perfectly tiny that it looked to have been written by a cricket's claw, the word *BAYERN*.

Her eyes followed the long road that began south of the Great City and moved east, curving northeast and then north to eventually form three-quarters of a circle. It wound for weeks through the Forest and ended in that white space, that unknown. She looked down at the lines on her palm. They were all straight, not curved and long like the line of the road.

"Bayern," said Ani.

"I am sorry, Anidori," said the queen.

It was the first time she had heard her mother speak those words. They did not console. In them, she heard her mother saying, *I am sorry I had to choose such for you, and I am sorry, for I know you will do what I chose*. Ani saw herself clearly in that moment, as a face in darkness gains sudden dimensions in a flash of lightning—a young girl, a silly thing, a lapdog, a broken mare. She did as she was told. She rarely gave thought to her duties or spent deep hours or acted alone. She realized she would never have been capable of taking her mother's place. That realization did not bring relief. Instead, the thought of the journey and her unknown future chilled her skin and pricked her stomach with dread.

"I will go, but you already know that, don't you?" Ani looked at the window where the bare branches of a cherry tree crossed out the view. "I'll go."

Chapter 3

Spring shrugged off its late snows and early pollen and settled into warmness, keen for summer. For Ani, the sudden dismissal from responsibilities was bewildering. She and Selia spent days wandering around the corridors, looking for something to do. Courtiers nodded to her but did not meet the eyes of the crown princess who had been deemed unworthy to rule. Those who did address her clipped her title to “Princess” and the “Crown” was passed on to her brother. All except for Selia. Stubbornly loyal, her lady-in-waiting still insisted on using her full and original title.

Selia was, of course, wrathful to hear what the queen had done.

“You cannot just allow her to take away what is rightfully yours.”

“And I cannot take it back. I have no power here, Selia.”

But quickly Selia seemed to see the futility in mourning the inevitable. At least she stopped berating Ani’s passivity and even began to show eagerness for the journey.

“Just think of it, Crown Princess, you can start a new life with new possibilities. You will decide who you are.”

It was little consolation at the moment, knowing that she was leaving everything she had ever known to marry a foreign prince whom no one seemed to know much about. And the betrayal still stung, as did the knowledge that had she been good enough, she would still be crown princess and Napralina would be looking forward to a long journey after her sixteenth birthday.

Selia asked to spend much of her remaining period with her mother, and Ani suddenly found time to squander in the summering world. It was a relief to be with Falada, who had never cared if Ani had a “Crown” before her name. Calib was busy with his new duties and seemed to guiltily avoid Ani’s presence when he could, but Ani stole afternoons with

Napralina and Susena and regretted having known them so little before. Days pushed by. The time to journey quickly arrived.

On the morning of departure, Ani woke with a gasp. The total blackness disturbed her, and she sat up quickly, touching her eyes to see if they were still there. A little moonlight seeped through her curtains and comforted her. It was just early.

Her nightmare still clung to her like the smell of smoke to cloth. Heralded by trumpets, serving boys had carried her into the banquet hall kneeling on a platter garnished with blue cabbage leaves and water lilies. She wore her white nightgown. Purple cherries dripping syrup had replaced her eyes. Her arms were strained backward as though she wished to fly away. They set her down before her mother, who lifted a carving knife and said, "It is your duty, daughter, for the good of the feast."

Remembering the dream made her laugh a little. "Don't be so dramatic," she told herself. "It's not as though she is sending me off to be killed." The dream, no doubt, had been inspired by the farewell banquet of last evening. The main course had been white swans roasted in their feathers.

Ani opened her curtains and breathed in the warm night air. Cricket voices battled for more night, and she wished she could grant it to them. Her brown travel dress with wide skirts hung over a chair. When the sun rose, she would go.

From her window she could not see the direction they would travel, so she sat facing north and contemplated the familiar view. No more crying, she told herself. It was not difficult. Her eyes were dry and sore. She concentrated on forming the images and sensations of her Kildenrean life into a body, and in her mind burying that body, peacefully, next to her father's tomb in the soft summer earth.

Ani was still at the window watching the sun conquer early morning blue with hot gold light when her maid entered. She exclaimed at the late hour, helped Ani dress, and braided

her hair in one long plait down her back, unadorned. Ani felt keenly unroyal, boyish, and sick to her stomach.

The escort was waiting for her at the front gates. The queen had arranged for a forty-man company, led by Talone, former watcher of the east gate, to accompany Ani on the nearly three-month journey to Bayern. One-fifth of the escort drove wagons full of supplies, as well as dresses and cloaks and gilded things that were given to Ani as last gifts. Her siblings stood before the wagons, squinting against the rising sun. Napralina and Susena cried sleepily. Calib looked distant, though when he returned her gaze she saw his eyes were full of emotion.

Ani embraced her sisters, then stood before Calib, placing her hands on his shoulders. He looked down.

“It’s all right, Calib,” she said. “I was upset at first, but I’m resigned to it now. The crown is yours. Enjoy it, and do it better than I would have.”

His chin began to quiver, and he turned away before he could cry.

Next to Calib, Selia was smiling and mounted on her gray horse. Falada stood alone. His new saddle was a pale golden red, vibrant against his white coat. *At least he looks royal*, Ani thought. She was grateful that in this one regard her mother had respected her wishes—she would not be made to ride the endless weeks inside a carriage like a caged bird.

It is early, said Falada.

Yes, but I am late coming, said Ani. *I am not happy to leave.*

Nor I. My stall was nice and food was good. But the new place will have nice stalls and good food, too.

She imagined it would, and she wished she was as easily comforted as a horse, but the long road intimidated her, and her inability to imagine any part of her new life left it dark

and daunting in her mind—a distant place, a warlike people, a shadowed husband with a face she could not imagine. Tales of naive young girls marrying murderous men performed grimly in her mind. Ani put her arms around Falada's neck and briefly hid her face in his mane. His warmth encouraged her.

“Behold, my royal daughter,” said the queen.

Ani looked up. The attention of the forty-man company, royal family, and small group of well-wishers turned to the queen, who was holding aloft a beaten gold cup. A reflected glare of sunlight made Ani close her eyes and Falada lower his head. *Ah*, thought Ani, *time for the show of affection*.

“The road is long, and she will walk upon fir needles rather than velvet carpets. So let her always drink from this. The lips of our honored daughter will never touch the vulgar thing.”

Ingris, the camp-master, nodded gravely and took the cup from the queen.

“And let all who see her mark her as our royal daughter and princess.” At that the queen placed on Ani's head a circlet of gold with three ruby droplets pressed against her brow. The gold was cold. Her neck pricked with goose bumps.

The queen gave Ani a mother's adoring stare, and Ani returned it coldly. She was in no mood to pretend love between them. She had no more duty to these people save to leave them. The queen flinched under her gaze, and her eyes hinted at guilt and sadness. A childlike hope tickled in Ani—*Is she sad for me? Is she sorry to lose me?*

The queen pulled a neatly folded handkerchief from her sleeve and smoothed it open. It was made from a thin ivory cloth with green, rust, and yellow lace edging.

“The stitching was done by my grandmother.” Her voice was soft, as though to convince Ani that the words were for her alone and not a performance for the crowd. She unfastened a horse-head brooch from her breast. “My mother used to carry it, and then she gave it to

me before she died. I have always felt it held a part of her. When I wear it, I feel her eyes on me, approving, guiding, protecting. So I send with you my own protection.”

The queen winced first, then stabbed her third finger with the brooch pin. She squeezed three drops of blood onto the handkerchief. Her hands were shaking.

“I have nightmares that the Forest, like a great-jawed beast, swallows the road in front of you and sucks you into its mouth. If anything should happen to you, it would break my heart.” She put the stained handkerchief in Ani’s hand and held it a moment, sincerity straining her brow. “We are of one blood. I will protect you.”

Ani felt overwhelmed by this sudden force of affection. Should they embrace now? Should she kiss her cheek? They stood there, the queen vehemently earnest, Ani awkward, until the queen turned back to the fifty-some watchers with an attention-calling flourish of her hand.

“The Princess Anidori-Kiladra Talianna Isilee, jewel of Kildenree. Let the road carry her lightly, for she is my daughter.”

Ani felt the crowd shudder at the power in the queen’s voice. *Would that her voice accompanied me*, thought Ani, *and not a stained handkerchief*. The thing felt thin and warm in her hand. She squeezed it and wished it were more than a token, wished it really could somehow carry safety and home and the love of a mother.

The escort was mounted and waiting. Ani tucked the handkerchief into her bodice and mounted Falada. She, who had never ridden through the palace front gates, would lead the way. Her mother stood beside them, straight as the stone posts. Again Ani thought, *How lovely she is*, and again she thought, *How unlike her am I*. But now, for the first time, she also felt a yearning like the beginnings of a yawn arching in her chest to have that separation and to become, finally, who she would be.

To the southwest lay the beginning of the Forest Road and the beginning of any answer she might find. She pushed her legs against Falada's sides, and he started a fast walk. She could hear the key-mistress's wailing cry, so like a mourner's song. It trailed after them until the company turned a corner, and the song snuffed out quick as a candle flame between wet fingers.

It was early. With at least two wagons full of treasures, Ani felt more like a thief sneaking away with a bounty than a princess on her way to her betrothed. And she felt exposed and sore, alone at the group head and vulnerable outside the palace walls.

Once they passed through the outer palace walls and down several blocks of the main avenue, Ani and Falada pulled back and let Talone lead the way. The guard fell into a triangle around her, and the feeling of walls their mounts made comforted Ani. Selia joined her in the center. Her horse stood three hands shorter than Falada, forcing Selia to look up to speak to her mistress.

"We will reach the borders of the city by evening, Crown Princess, and can sup and sleep at a tavern just outside the city gate. The Blue Mouse. Ungolad recommends its pork pies especially. He says we will wish for good tavern food once we're dining only on rough travel fare."

"Ungolad?"

Selia pointed to a guard riding on the heels of Talone. He had hair longer than most that he kept in two yellow braids down his back. He did not appear tall, even on horseback, but the broadness of his shoulders and the thick muscles of his arms and chest pressed through his tunic and vest and demanded he be recognized as a warrior. He turned his head as though he had heard his name spoken. Ani quickly looked away.

"Ugh, I am so glad to finally leave everything behind and just get moving, aren't you?" said Selia.

Selia was in an eager mood, and she made light observations as they rode. Once or twice she managed to get Ani to laugh. The morning almost felt pleasant. Ani looked at all the marvels of the city, the wide avenue and branches of narrow streets, the thundering of blacksmiths and calls of hawkers and click of shoed horses on cobblestones, and all the people who looked up from their work or out from windows to watch her pass. Why had she never insisted to her mother that she be allowed out in the city before? Her life locked inside palace walls seemed stunted and dull.

They arrived at the Blue Mouse just before nightfall. Ingras arranged for Ani to have a private room to sup. As Talone, Ingras, and Selia escorted her through the main room, Ani looked longingly at the huge fire, tavern singer, and crowd of unknown people. She thought about asking to eat downstairs with the rest of the escort but knew that Ingras, a man fanatically devoted to the queen, would refuse.

Selia, too, seemed to desire the excitement of the public room. Throughout supper, she watched the door and drummed her fingers to the rhythm of the tavern song that leaked through the walls.

“You may go down if you wish, Selia,” said Ani.

She smiled. “Oh, I am too saddle-sore for wood benches. Anyhow, I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“You are a good friend.”

“Mmm,” she said, tapping her foot in time.

Ani noted that Selia seemed anxious that night and every night they spent in tavern lodging. During the day she was high-spirited and eager to talk, but then she seemed to begrudge the hour when they had to stop their journey.

“I would walk straight there if I could,” she said once.

Ani did not understand her enthusiasm for arrival. For her, the journey was freedom and new sights, but the end of the road meant a return to both acting and failing at the part of princess, as well as a marriage to . . . to someone.

He is probably a colt with wobbly legs, said Ani, or an old gelding who slobbers and has to be fed oats by hand.

Falada whipped her heels with his tail in a teasing acknowledgment of what she had said but did not respond. Ani knew he did not care whom she married as long as she still brushed him and fed him and took him out for wonderful, leg-stretching rides.

Three days from the palace, the party left city dwellings behind and entered the rolling lowlands of wheat, corn, and hay fields dotted with farmhouses and small town clusters. The air was sweet and dry, and the company was in a good humor.

They stopped each night as soon as they found an inn, and occasionally they were its only occupants. On those nights, Ingras allowed Ani to sup with the company in the public room. Yulan, Uril, and some of the others were boisterous and sang rowdy songs to satisfy the absence of a minstrel. Ingras endured it, blushing, and even let Ani try a sip of ale, which she found she did not enjoy at all. Talone, the captain of the guard, did not quiet them until, like a father with unruly children, he felt the furniture was in danger or the hour too late. Ani noticed on these nights that Selia and Ungolad often stole moments in quiet conversation. Once she saw him rub Selia's arm in a familiar way.

After two weeks of travel, the landscape began to ease upward, and scatterings of pine and fir trees gathered in with the birches. They passed no more farms. The land was wild with grasses and patches of purple heather like new bruises. A dark spot loomed on the horizon, a great green, lightless sea submerging their path. To the left, the mountains rose and the trees climbed their heights, leaving just the peaks as bare, gray rock. To the right,

the open lowlands reached wide to the south. But ahead of them, in the east and north, the land was completely lost in the greatness of the Forest.

The party grew quiet as they neared the lip of the Forest. Ani took a last look behind her at the friendly lowlands, a deep breath before plunging underwater. She felt the cool shadow of the trees pass over her, and she shivered.

That first day in the woods seemed to stretch as long as the road before them, full of new noises, new smells, a feeling of closeness that was not comfortable like smooth palace walls or stone tavern rooms. Most of the company had never been inside a forest and cast uncomfortable glances into the ragged darkness, letting the sharp, sweet smell of pine mix in their heads with the tales of dark deeds and unnatural things. As the darkness slowly thickened into evening, Ani observed more and more guards instinctively gripping sword hilts.

That night was the first slept under the sky. Ingras ordered a small tent, the only private one in the camp, assembled for the princess. Even under the eaves of evergreens, he insisted on treating Ani as her mother had wished. Drinking from a gold cup in that wilderness seemed ridiculous to Ani and, she thought, to the rest of the company as well, but she was accustomed to being served and made no protest. Selia helped her undress in the privacy of the tent and then set up her own bedroll just outside.

“There is room for another,” said Ani, though there scarcely was.

“No, I am fine out here, Crown Princess,” said Selia.

Ani lay down in the strange solitude of her tent, closed in by walls only paper-thin. She could hear Falada move somewhere near.

Falada, the camp horse-master wanted me to tie you up with the others.

I will not run away.

I know, she said. Neither will I.

The night was cool. The day world was summer, but the night still dipped its ladle into the well of spring air. Even through her mat, Ani could feel the stony earth, and its chill hardened her bones. The trees made noises that she had never heard, hissing and sighing like a new kind of animal. The wind brushed through the tent flap and against her cheek, waking her with words that she did not understand.

In the first few days, Selia and most of the others seemed silenced by the forest shadows. But the Forest did not spook Falada, and Ani soon caught his mood. She liked how she felt surrounded by trees, mixing the feeling of safety in close quarters with open possibilities. Dew fed the moss and lichen, trees creaked and moaned with growing, and birds conversed in the spiny branches. Ani's ears reached for the sounds of their chatter, and she felt like smiling to discover that she understood. She did not know what birds they were, but their language was so close to the sparrows' she knew from the palace gardens that it was like hearing someone speak her same language but with a different accent. Besides the birds, other forest animals appeared—intermittent sightings of foxes, red deer, wild pigs, and, once, wolves.

Just a week into the forest, Falada woke Ani, saying, *Mad wolves. Coming toward the camp.*

“Wolves! Rabid wolves!” Ani crawled out of her tent, shouting. The night guard shook himself awake and kicked the bodies of the best archers. They rubbed their eyes and strung their bows.

“Where?” said the guard with sleepy incredulity.

Falada told her, and she pointed. Other horses were prancing and testing the ropes that held them. The commotion woke the camp, and all sat up in their bedrolls and looked into the distance that was neither near nor far in the absolute dark. Out there, something moved, shadow sliding on shadow.

It leapt. The dying fire picked out eyes and teeth. Then, with a whisk of wind, a pale shaft pierced him through the throat. He fell to the earth at the first archer's feet. His two companions were similarly downed with the hard, sharp whip sound of arrows in the dark, and in the long silence that followed, someone sighed in relief.

The next morning, Ani noticed how many of the guards now looked at her with the same wariness that marked their eyes when they contemplated the dark profundities of the forest.

I thought they would be grateful, said Ani.

Falada snorted and idly pawed a stone. In his opinion, people never made sense.

Ani scolded herself. Just because they had left Kildenree did not mean these companions would feel any better disposed to her speaking gifts than had the sour-skinned nurse-mary. A brown-speckled forest bird whistled at her passing. Ani looked down and refused to listen.

Some days later, Ani felt the tension finally ease. Spirited conversation and laughter returned, mostly centered around Selia. Many of the guards sought to ride near her, and Ungolad most of all. Ani observed that he often rode by her side and seemed to find reasons to touch her, reach out to pick a pine needle from her skirt or examine a scratch on her hand. Ani hoped a romance might make the journey worthwhile to her faithful lady-in-waiting.

Ani had been lagging behind, talking with Falada, but at the sound of wild laughter she trotted forward to join the lively group. As soon as she neared, the laughing ceased. No one looked at her.

“Did I miss a good joke?” said Ani.

“No, not really,” said Selia.

One of the guards said something to Ungolad that Ani could not hear. No one else spoke.

“The days are certainly warmer now,” she said.

“Yes, Princess,” said the guard Uril.

“Well, that breeze is pleasant, isn’t it?”

“If you say so, Princess.”

“Mmm.”

Ani, confused, looked at Selia. Her lady-in-waiting glanced up briefly and gave a subtle shrug that said, *What do you want from me?* Coolly, she set her gaze at the passing trees as though Ani did not exist.

Ani scowled, scraping her memory for everything she had said and done that day. Had she inadvertently offended Selia and half the members of her escort guard? They could not possibly still be upset just because she knew the wolves were coming before they did. No reasons made sense to her, and the silence became unbearable. At last she flicked Falada into a trot. Once she left the group, conversation resumed behind her and Selia’s lovely laugh rang out. Emotion caught in Ani’s throat, and she hummed quietly to ease the tightness.

As always, Talone rode at the front of the company, his ardent gaze sweeping about as though he expected a bandit attack any moment. Ani asked Falada to slow to a walk beside him. His silence made her wonder if what she had done to affront the others also included Talone, but soon he spoke.

“I don’t know if you recall, Princess, but we have been alone before.” His stoic face relaxed a little as he raised his eyebrows in an amused query.

Ani tried to remember. She had so rarely been alone.

“It was about ten years ago, I think.”

“Oh,” said Ani, “was that you who took me from the shore of the swan pond?”

“Well done. You were very young. It scared me how the fever chills racked your tiny body. And know, Princess, that it is not easy for a brave soldier to admit to ever being scared.”

“I’ll remember that of you if ever I’m in need of a brave soldier,” said Ani, teasing.

“Yes, well, if the danger can be stuck with a sword, I am your man.” He smiled at her and quickly returned to watching the road.

“You are ever vigilant,” she said.

“Mmm. For such a long journey, this terrain is dangerous. If there was a road cut through the Bavara Mountains, one could reach Bayern in a matter of a fortnight. But the Forest Road circumscribes the mountains. The Forest itself is striped with gorges, and the road doubles in length to avoid them. A straighter path would have to cross many bridges.”

As he spoke, Ani saw the way in front of them begin to wind sharply up and left. The road cut across a long arm of mountain, and between there and the next arm the ground dropped into a deep and narrow ravine.

“Gorge to the right, mountain to the left,” said Ani.

“There’s much flat land in the forest, but the climbs and drops are unpredictable.”

The Forest did not seem dangerous to her, just dark and brooding. She envied the permanence of the tall, thick-trunked firs that had stood in one place for generations. Her own family had always lived in Great City Valley. She was the first of her line born as crown princess, the first to leave the valley, the first to see the Forest. She wished it had been her choosing, that she had been the kind of person who would steal a horse and leave in the night to find adventure instead of one who is handed duty and numbly complies.

This road is long, said Falada. How long until we arrive?

Weeks yet, said Ani.

A warm breeze came up from the gorge beneath them and stirred their hair. Falada flicked his tail at it and walked a little faster.

That evening a stream passed near the road and Talone called for an early camp. It had been a week since they had found moving water. Their water barrels were low, and the company was irritable with dust, stink, and horse hair. Ingras set up a metal tub in Ani's tent and ordered water heated for her bath. While Ani soaked in the hot water in her thin privacy, the rest of the company hiked to the mountain runoff to scrub their clothes and themselves, Selia upstream and the men down. Talone assigned Ishta, a thin man with a long, tipped nose, to guard Ani. Ishta did not seem too concerned about bathing.

It was dark before the others returned. Ani dried her hair by the fire and waited. Ishta stood on the other side of the fire. The light turned his face orange, the hollows of his cheeks still in shadow. She could hear him scrape the undersides of his fingernails with a knife.

When he spoke, his voice was soft, with a lilt that seemed feminine. "How is it, Princess, to bathe in nice, warm water in your own little tent?"

"It is nice, thank you," said Ani with some unease.

"Mmm." He took a step forward. "You like being a princess?"

"I don't know. It is what I am. Do you like being a man?"

He walked to her, dead pine needles breaking like glass under his boots, and crouched beside her. He leaned in. Her pulse snapped in her throat.

"Do you like that I am a man?" He smiled. His teeth looked rotted at the roots.

"Step back," she whispered. He held his face there, and up close his expression was leering, inhuman, his face as sharp as a weapon, his breath the promise of ugly things. Ani gripped her brush in both hands and could not seem to let it go, not to push him away, not

to push herself to her feet. Never had she felt this way, helpless, alone, no servant to call, no guard outside her door. No door. And a man who came too close.

“Step back, Ishta,” she said again, but her voice held no more of the authority of her mother than the chattering of a magpie. He sneered.

There was a sound of bent underbrush and low laughter. Ishta stood and casually walked away as a group of guards, their faces shiny and red from bathing, entered the camp. Talone added a branch to the fire and sat beside her. Ani looked down at her shaking hands.

“Princess, is something wrong?”

She set her brush on the log and folded her hands. “I’m all right.” She had never felt before that someone could hurt her—and enjoy it. That new awareness made her look at Talone with suspicion. He had assigned Ishta to her watch. Had he known? Could she trust him? Who could guard her from her guards?

Ani made her way to her tent, feeling blindly with her slippers for rocks and shooting roots. Selia was readying her own bedroll beside the tent. Her wet hair was luminescent in the near dark.

Ani sat on a corner of Selia’s blanket, held her knees against her chest, and hoped for conversation. *Something just happened*, she wanted to say. *There was something strange, and I wanted to tell you*, she would say, if Selia seemed in a mood to talk, like they used to do for hours on her balcony, Selia brushing oils through her long hair and relating gossip that had slipped up the stairs from the kitchen or out of the idle mouths of waiting ladies, their promises of secrecy dulled by the tedium of embroidery. Ani longed now for such an hour, the comfort of casual talk and a warm blanket around her shoulders to hold off the heavy blackness of so much space at their backs. She waited for Selia, who liked to start conversations on her own terms. Selia finished with her bedroll. She stood by her pillow and said nothing.

“How was your bath?” said Ani.

“Cold.”

“Oh. I’m thoughtless, Selia. Of course you should bathe in camp in warm water.”

“You mean in your used, tepid bathwater? For who is to heat water for the lady-in-waiting? No, thank you, I would rather use the stream.”

“Selia, are you angry?”

Selia turned to her, and in the dark of a night before the moon and too far from the fire, all Ani could see was the pale outline of her cheek and the glint of one eye.

“No, of course not, Crown Princess,” said Selia. Her voice was ordinary again, a lilting tone, pleasing and artless.

“Once we get to Bayern,” said Ani, “there will, thankfully, be hot water and beds again.”

“A very apt observation, Crown Princess.” Her voice was still even and polite. “Yet I believe in Bayern there will be much more waiting for me than just water and goose feathers.”

“What do you mean?”

Selia did not answer. Someone added wood to the fire, and in the sudden flush of light she could see Selia’s face. She was looking across the camp. Ani turned. Ungolad stood by the fire. His eyes were on Ani. He smiled a closed smile, not showing any teeth.