

Before we went ashore, our birds would need feeding.

They became mean when hungry.

As I opened the hatch, and started down the steps into the gloom, the smell hit me. It was not just the smell of eighty-eight raven-like birds the size of stags, we were all used to that. It was not just the smell of their waste, which was made worse by the warmth and lack of fresh air. No, the worst of it was their food, rotting in barrels. After weeks at sea, the pieces of goats and sheep and dogs, of fruits and moldy hard biscuit, and of fish caught in the ship's nets, had ripened into a stew that devils of any hell would be ashamed to serve the damned. But these huge cousins of crows and rooks were carrion birds at heart, and they had stomachs like anvils. They preferred fresh meat, of course, and would puff their feathers at the smell of organ meat, which was the best for them—but they were hungry, and they wanted the foulness in the barrels.

And I would need to watch my hands while feeding them.

"*Nourid*," one said, in the flat, rough voice they use.

Food.

Now several others echoed this. One even said "Galva," and that was my handsome boy, Bellu, who I think was the strongest of all of them, though I am not unbiased. Dalgatha, my skinny girl, added "dom Braga, Galva dom Braga," because she was the smartest and could learn long names. I wondered sometimes if my father, Roderigu Elegius dom Braga, the duke of that rich province, crippled in the first goblin war, would be offended to hear our name come out of a mouth about to consume filth. Perhaps less offended than he would be to see his daughter shoveling it.

I wheeled the first barrel out, took up the shovel.

All the dams in my lanza had worked with these war corvids for nearly a year, bonding to our pairs, but also trading sometimes so the death of a raven knight would not mean her birds had to be put down. We took turns feeding so they knew each of us was at least useful. To our own birds, we were something like a parent, teacher, and comrade in arms all rolled together. Or so I liked to think that is how my pair, Bellu and Dalgatha, saw me.

Certainly Bellu.

“Galva is a bitch,” said Richu, Inocenta’s wicked male. She taught him that, I heard her do it. Though the sting is lessened because I have heard Richu say “Inocenta is a bitch” as well. Sometimes swords cut their owner. The word Richu says most is “Ow,” not because he has been hurt, but because he has made humans say that so often he imitates it. He likes to cause small hurts. Of course, war corvids’ sharp, hardened beaks can pierce chain mail if they try, or tear the muscle whole from your arm—grab, twist, and pull. Birds who attacked their mistresses in earnest were put down, they all knew it, and so the ones who had survived were the ones who did not truly hurt us. But Richu would pinch you through leather or chain, where he would bruise and hurt, but not maim. And you would say “Ow,” and he would say it back, like the *jilnaedu* cruel idiot he was. The bird’s full name was Censerichu, because he was given to fart evilly and much, like a censer-boy swinging incense smoke, though this incense could be sold at no market.

Soon it was sunset, and I stayed on deck instead of going below to drink and play Catch the Lady with the others of the lanza. Though I like this card game better than Towers, which makes kynd into devils. Much blood is spilled over Towers, I have seen this. Nobody dies playing Catch the Lady, which is not for money, at least not among people of quality.

Also on deck was our commander, Nouva.

"The sunset is beautiful," she said, inviting me to speak with her. We were not to start conversation about trivial matters with those of higher rank, but could speak freely if they did. She had extended me a courtesy. And what she said was right. The sky sat purple over a sea, finally calm, that lay like metal, or like mother-of-pearl. Clouds here and there. I am not a poet, like Amiel, but it is enough to say this sky deserved his words, not mine.

"Very beautiful," I agreed.

Nouva was beautiful, too, in her way. Not like a maiden in a flowered crown, not romantically, but in the way that the right tool is pleasing to the eye. Her dark brown skin and blue-black hair spoke of Ispanthia's mountains, where the blood of the old Keshite empire ran strong. She looked like a wooden thing, with her sharp cheekbones and noble blade of a nose. My family had some of these features, but our skin was fairer, diluted. Our eyes ran to common blue rather than the imperial golden brown.

Nouva had ten years more than I and had fought in the Threshers' War. A goblin had bitten her left thumb off, but she could still hold a shield, and command came easily to her. Her birds were Gannet and Whistle. Gannet was a bit too gentle for this work. Whistle was not gentle, and neither was Nouva. She had never married, or, to say it more properly, she had married the sword and shield. I wondered if I might follow such a path. I would rather this than to be packed off to some foreign prince's bed to wail in childbirth a half dozen times, and, if I survived that, to oversee cooks and stewards and to overlook infidelities, and poor manners, and to be loved less than a hunting dog.

Nouva Livias Monçera was the *lanzamachur*, or spearboss. Not that many of us used spears, but a lanza is also a unit. Forgive me if I tell you too much of military matters, I will try not to. But some points seem to require clarification. If I say a *lanza*, I can mean an actual spear, or a unit of fifty to one hundred soldiers. If I say a *daguera*, I can mean a dagger, or one of those in command under the *lanzamachur*. Inocenta was the first *daguera*, next in

command after Nouva. I was second daguera, though I had no experience of combat. I had been offered lanzamachur owing to my birth, but if I were interested in rank, I would not have volunteered for this unit. It was right that one who has seen combat should command. I joined this terrible experiment, against my father's wishes, to forget I am the Duke of Braga's daughter, not to use it for advantage.

I wanted to put the skills I had learned to test, and to service.

I was going to Gallardia to kill goblins, because they had killed our horses.

Our family was rich in horses before the goblin-brewed plague we call the Stumbles, as if it were something funny, came and took all of them. Well, almost all of them.

"I have heard your brother Pol has been made third-in-command of the entire Western Army now that Jabat has been slain."

"I have a letter from him that says the same."

The battle of Orfay had been lost a month before, and lost badly. My brother knew more about it than most—he wrote to me about it. I received the letter just before I took ship. Here it is.

Dearest Galvicha,

How excited I am to see you again after so many years, though of course one could wish for happier circumstances. I know that our several duties will prevent us spending as much time together as we would like, but I will do all I can to make you welcome in my tent when our schedules allow. If there is any way I may be useful to you or our little Chickpea, please send word to me via any military runner you see, or with a member of the Runners Guild if that is all you can find, and reverse the charge.

Your flotilla is expected at the port town of Espalle, which we have recently recaptured. It was not in goblin hands long, but long enough, so brace yourself for what you might see

there. You will see that it was a pretty town once, and still is in places, but Our Friends are a murderous scourge who ruin all they touch, Sath burn them all to ashes.

I have news.

Owing to the lamentable death of General Jabat, a very brave man who served with Father in the Knights' War, in the fine old days of cavalry, when we used to beat the biters to every battlefield and ride them under hoof, I have been jumped up from quarut-general to terce-general, with a like expansion of my responsibilities. This is not something I have desired, but there is a feeling on the part of the king and his Council of Pillars that younger blood and fresh ideas are needed. I feel neither young nor fresh with the weight of the defeat at Orfay upon me. I feel both guilt and relief that the forces under my command arrived too late, or I should be dead like Jabat and Prima-General dom Lubezan, first commander of the western armies. Lubezan is to be replaced by a terce-general who has won a series of victories in the east, a woman of merit rather than blood whom everyone calls the Pragmatist.

I hope she can turn things around here.

If I may be blunt, we are losing.

Orfay was the worst defeat since the Threshers' War.

I will step in here to say that the second goblin war, called the Threshers' War, sticks hard in my memory, though I was too young to see it.

It was mostly fought in Gallardia, as is this war, but of course it also spilled into Unther, Ispanthia, and other countries of the Crownlands, which you call Manreach. My father, being who he was, was always among the first to learn of our kynd warriors' defeats, and these were many.

I remember the yellow surcoats of the Runners Guild boys who came to the gatehouse of the estate when I was a girl. How they carried a message to my father, taking only a quick gulp of

water before they ran to where he was. You can tell the urgency of a message by how the runners drink on a hot day, after a long run, and whether they stop to cool down and dry off.

These did not, and it was the first time I had seen that.

It was not the last.

I remember asking my Holtish governess, Nunu, about it all. The war was already on, we had already sent our first men, and even children knew this. But because the first war, called the Knights' War, had gone so well, everyone thought this one would, too. It was not yet called the Threshers' War, because we were not yet down to sending farmers with flails to fall like wheat.

Like many children, I had dreams about goblins.

Of course, I still do.

They are just more informed.

"Would you be afraid to meet a goblin, Nunu?" I asked that day of the first runners, early on.

"I shall never meet a goblin," my governess said, "and neither shall you."

"How do you know?"

"Because goblins do not come to Ispanthia. And especially not to Braga."

"What if they do?"

"In that case they will be making a terrible mistake, because your father will kill them."

"He cannot kill them, can he? He walks with two canes now because of goblins."

"He will send his men to kill them, then."

"Like other men are killing them in Gallardia?"

"Just so."

To return to the letter, here is what Pol says of Orfay:

First, our armies heard the sound of the carnyx, a strange horn they blow to cause fear in us. I have heard the sound from afar, and sometimes I hear it again in nightmares.

One wizard of theirs sent sigils aloft into the sky that sickened our soldiers to look upon. He could not work direct harm upon our armies, mailed and plated as they are in steel, which damps magic, but he worked far from the battle, and sent the sigil high. By the time word went round to look down, not up, fully a third of our heavy infantry was vomiting in their helms and barely strong enough to stand. Then they hit our lines with ghalls, frightful creatures of human stock they bred up underground for size and strength. Pale as codbellies and half-blind, eight feet tall and crazed with mycological brews—among these godsmilk, their wretched pleasure-drug, which yellows the whites of the eyes and enslaves the mind. Imagine these quarter-ton behemoths, oblivious to pain, armored heel to crown, swinging great mauls and two-handed swords neither you nor I could lift, let alone wield, crashing into our vanguard just as our lads and dams were heaving up their oats and found their legs made of grass. Once our lines were in tatters, in came their palisades, chariots pushed by war boars, rolling with their shin-high blades, ridden by biters shooting crossbows or gigging with spears. I hear you have been training to face these. We have some hope that your corvids might prove effective in flanking them, or leaping them.

Sath the All-Seeing knows we can use some advantage.

Another battle is coming. The great city of Goltay is threatened, and if it falls, the killing will be worse even than on the plains of Orfay. The Western Army will march to prevent its fall, or to take it back. This contest may well decide the course of the war, and whether Gallardia will be liberated, or Ispanthia enslaved beside it.

I will not shy from telling you I wish you had not come.

Your rank allows you certain privileges, the king knows the blood of the great houses must survive. I am quite sure that, as the duke's only marriageable daughter, a match

can be made, and a good one, even after the impression you made on King Conmarr's boy when he came to court you three summers ago.

To interrupt the letter once more, I will say that this Durwain, third son of King Conmarr of Holt, called on me at the High Sword Academy of Calar Bajat between lessons. He insisted, with my father's blessing, that I meet with him. He proposed a meal by the river nearby. I received him politely enough. My fellow students made much of his visit, of course, Holtish princes being something rare in Ispanthia. I enjoyed the musicians he brought along, and his conversation, at least at first. The quail was good. The apple cider was not bad, nor the apple brandy, though I prefer wine, and the cold in Holt kills all grapes but those too sour for pleasure. He told me my Holtish was excellent. I told him that if that were true, I had my Holtish governess, Nunu, to thank. I complimented his mint-green doublet, which was silk, and quite fine if one cares for such things. When he dismissed the musicians, I told him I should return to my dormitory. He insisted I remain, so I did, with reluctance. When he took advantage of my inexperience and attempted to lay hands on me, it was clear to me that he had spent more time studying seductions than grappling, and he had more ribbons than muscle. To his credit, I will say that the spot he chose by the river was very fine. I still have an image of him bent over its waters, drooling blood from his broken nose, next to a cracked cider bottle and a very pretty willow tree. I also remember cattails, and delphinium. I walked home unmarked except for a small cut on my knee from his tooth, which I later heard that he lost.

My father made apologies to the king of Holt, saying it was unfortunate that the prince had slipped and hurt himself—that he should have been warned how treacherous the bank of that river could be. King Conmarr replied that the boy needed to learn how

to tell dry ground from slick, and to proceed, or not, according to terrain.

Durwain died near the beginning of this third war, killed in an ambush. Another thirty of his guard were cut down trying to save his body from being taken.

They were not successful.

To continue Pol's letter:

Little sister, this is the worst place I have ever been, and I tell you this not to scare you, because I think you do not scare easily; but to let you know honestly and without ornament what awaits you. The biters regard us as animals, and, when they take us, show us nothing of the small mercies kynd allow one another in war. They do not ransom us back to our families, they do not treat our wounds. You will hear no accounts of life in their prisons, for these are rather livestock stalls, and no one returns from them. The cities lost in the Threshers' War that were not destroyed are under Hordelaw, which is to say that they are left to govern themselves, but forbidden weapons and armor, even metal tools. These cities are required to tithe of their own populations, giving over one in nine to the manfarms, with preference to those who have not produced children. Also, at sexual maturity, every citizen receives the Hordelaw cut, and an outer tendon of the dominant thigh is severed. Kynd with this injury will heal enough to walk, and to work, and to farm, but they will never run swiftly or jump well. They will tire at marching, and have pains to keep their balance under duress. So, you see? Under Hordelaw, we are kept as docile as cattle, but left to feed ourselves, and to breed. Whatever towns fail to meet the biters' requirements are butchered at once.

There is much discussion in the high command about why the goblins are pushing so hard this time. Some think a disease

of the seed has spread in the manfarms, and that the biters seek fresh bloodlines. Others say their seers have told the Imperatrix and her council of generals that the Horde's military advantages are temporary—that kynd will soon make some advancement in arms or magicks, and that Gallardia should be broken and occupied and Ispanthia bled dry while they still master us in the field.

I like this latter theory and hope it is so.

Of course, Ispanthia and the other Far Banners are fighting to keep the parts of Gallardia which are still free out of their grasp. Small pleasures may be found even in such a place, and I have found more than my share. This was a beautiful country, perhaps even more so than Ispanthia, if I may utter such heresy—but where the war has touched it, it is death, and ruin, and sickness, and among those who survive there lingers such a palpable despair that it might settle into one's joints and unravel one's resolve.

But that is what the gods are for, is it not?

To lift us when we are broken, and to stanch us when we bleed faith.

There is vital work to do, and, with Sath's light and warmth in our hearts, we might yet prevail and drive the Horde back at least to the borders settled by the last treaty, if not out of Gallardia entirely. Sath is a great enemy to goblins, his light burning at the edges of their darkness, sure to drive them away even as the sun, after a long night, takes back its due. Some say the Vaults of Mysteries kept by Sath's temples house pieces of the sun itself, burning in glory only the priests can stand to see. I heard a song about how Sath will one day decide we have suffered enough, and teach his priests to forge these pieces of sun into weapons of blinding light. Could this be what the goblin seers fear?

I do not know how much more Gallardia can suffer.

Perhaps it bears the heaviest burden because it honors so many other gods before Sath.

Perhaps this is why Ispanthia prevailed in the Knights' War, and why it suffered less in the Threshers'—we honor other gods, of course, especially in the country, but in civilized places, at least, such as our esteemed capital of Seveda, and in the rich lands of Braga overseen by our father, Sath sits at the head of the table.

I believe that, with the Bright One's help, we can win. We must. What else, retire to Ispanthia and wait for them to come home to us? They will, if we do not stop them here. They will try to cross the Blue Mountains before winter and put Ispanthian towns under Hordelaw, first in the north, and then everywhere.

I see the need to muster women, and the old, and those of gentler natures.

But I would rather fight unburdened by worry for you, and for Chichún.

Find me, little sister.

I will serve you as I can.

*Yours in all respect,
Pol dom Braga*

But I showed you the letter because Nouva, my commander, had asked me about my brother's promotion. Let us return to the deck of the *Rain Queen's Dagger* that last evening before we made landfall, during a sunset of particular beauty.

"I met him, you know," Nouva said, of Pol.

"Yes?"

"In Seveda. Very kind. Reminds me of Gannet."

I laughed at this, because I saw it, too. Nouva's corvid Gannet, like my older brother Pol, was large and strong, but not always quick enough to defend himself when others squabbled for

advantage. Still, I thought, how could Pol do else but rise? He was so competent and strong. He was fair and truthful, and I thought surely such traits would be enough.

How little I knew of the world.

Nouva and I spoke for a time, as night birds cried, and as unknown things moved in the water, and until the sky had become a blue hardly brighter than the black sea. She retired below, with the hard, wild dams under her command, and left me to the wind and stars. There is no night sky like that at sea, though they say the same of the desert, and I had not seen a desert.

Here were the Eyes of Nerène, two stars the color of amethyst peeking over the western horizon. They would rise high, summer being their season. Nerène was the most popular of several goddesses whose province was love, so of course she was Gallard.

Gallardia was a country of art and food and sculpture. Every court worth its crowned heads had a Gallard chef, or portrait painter, or dancing master. No soil was so fertile or black, except perhaps in Unther. No wine was so good, except perhaps some of Ispanthia, which I honestly believe to be the best. But, again, I know that I might be biased. I like wines best that are too dark to see through, and so dry they almost burn to drink, and such qualities are the gift of drier, hotter, browner Ispanthia and its chalky soil.

Gallard wines are lighter, and sweeter, though a few in the south of Gallardia rival those of my country. Gallard wines, according to their songs, are made to be drunk from the bodies of one's lovers. Nerène's temples are found in every worthy town. They do not have a native god of war, or of death, but borrowed theirs from us, and from Unther, and the Gunnish Islands.

Of course the goblins went to soft, pretty Gallardia.

And now we were coming, too.

We sailed into Espalle, a town of medium size with a calm, deep harbor. Its brightly painted houses and manors had been built up gentle hills that embraced the bay in the shape of a crescent. On both the east and west sides of town, the cliffs of Espalle stood white against the blue sky and darker sea. On Crab Island, to the east, the lighthouse still stood, though its lantern had been put out and would warn no more ships off the rocks known as the Widow's Teeth. These rocks stood on the other side of the eastern cliffs, visible to us though not the town proper. On the western cliffs, we saw the fortress I later learned was called the Drum, but this drum had been beaten hard; its north wall had collapsed, tunneled under by the sappers of the goblin Horde, its limestone charred from where its hoardings had been burned. Farther west, I saw the amphitheater, which dated back to Keshite times, and also strange, giant faces.

These faces had been directly carved into the cliffsides, their features simple and with overlarge eyes. These were the works of ancient tribes, I guessed, before the Kesh came north with roads for their elephants, and with math, and science, and perspective in art. A soldier of my lanza stood near, as though she knew I wondered about the figures. This was Alisenne, whose father had been a Gallard of the Runners Guild, and famed in his youth for winning races. I outranked Alisenne, so I said, "Do you know who they are?"

"The Fishers of Espalle. Old gods. They stare at the sea and charm fish into nets."

Seagulls and terns cried, wheeling in the sky over the cliffs.

"I suppose the biters had not been here long enough to clear