



CHAPTER

ONE

When my father was newly King Tir of Valenia, he went hunting alone for wildfowl. He lay in wait along the shores of the lake but instead of geese, he saw swans on the water. As he watched, one drifted in, close enough to shore that he could easily retrieve the bird after he'd shot it.

As he trained his arrow on her, waiting for a clean kill, she began to glow. She rose up in the water, showing her breast, but the brightness around her dazzled the king, and he didn't shoot. When he could see again, a lovely woman stood in the shallows. She had pale skin, blue eyes, and black hair like midnight against the white feather cloak covering her. She smiled at him, hiding there in the reeds, and he forgot his bow and his hunting.

And that was how my father, Tir of Valenia, met my mother, Tianis of the swanfolk.

The day my mother brought three swanfolk to foster with me and my sisters was the day I knew I would never get my wings.

I was thirteen the day the swanfolk arrived. I looked like my father, with hazel eyes and curly, red-brown hair that tangled with the slightest breeze. My older sister Adana was almost sixteen, and my younger sister Orla was eleven. Both looked like Mother, with her fair skin, blue eyes, and black hair straight as rain.

And like my mother, both Adana and Orla could take swan form, a gift I envied with all my heart.

I remembered the day Adana first took her swan form as clearly as if it had happened to me. It hadn't started as something to envy. Adana was twelve. She woke up one morning in the bedroom we shared and immediately began scratching her arms.

"I'm itchy all over!" she exclaimed.

"Did you get into a patch of prickles yesterday?" I asked. We'd been out along the riverbank, where grass with prickly seedheads grew in large swaths.

"No, this is different," she said. "It's underneath my skin."

We dressed and went down for breakfast. By the time we arrived at the family table in the great hall, she couldn't sit still for itching. Mother took Adana's chin in her hand and turned her face, looking at both cheeks.

“You have a rash starting, swanling,” she said.

Adana held out her hands. There were tiny, raised bumps on the backs. Mother took one look and stood up.

“Come with me,” she said. She took Adana up the stairs to the solar, a room that was warm even on the coldest days, and they stayed up there all day. Elena, mother’s lady-in-waiting, took food up and brought the dishes down, but nobody else, not even Father, was allowed in.

Father was worried and trying not to show it. In the afternoon, the smith reshod Father’s big grey, Cloud, and Father took us over to watch. He held Cloud while Sylard removed each old shoe in turn and trimmed Cloud’s hoof before putting on the new shoe.

When we came back into the hall, people were bustling up and down the stairs to Mother’s solar. Elena met us halfway across the hall. She curtsied to Father.

“Sire, the queen requests you come up with your daughters.”

“Is everything well?”

She smiled. “Yes, Sire.”

Father took the stairs two at a time, and we ran up behind him. At the door we ran into his arm, braced to keep us from charging in. Mother sat in her chair, with a smile on her face and a finger to her lips. Resting on the hearthrug, looking at us out of one bright, black eye, was a swan.

“Gently, girls,” she said. “Don’t startle your sister.”

“Adana?” I whispered.

“Yes.” She glanced at Father. “The next Swan Queen.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Adana is the oldest. She’s going to be queen of Valenia after Father.”

“No, swanling,” Mother said. “I’m the only child of my parents. When your father and I fell in love, your grandfather, my father, made us promise that the first of our children to take swan form would become his heir in my place. Now Adana has fulfilled that promise.”

“That means,” Father said, putting his arm around my shoulder and pulling me to his side, “that you’ll be queen after me, Kiar.”

“And I’ll be queen after Kiar!” said Orla, clapping her hands. Adana started back at the sound and Mother hushed her.

“It doesn’t work like that, sweetheart,” Father said.

“You’ll have a destiny of your own,” Mother added.

The next day, Adana came downstairs for breakfast with Mother, looking no different than she had the day before except that her rash had disappeared.

“You’re not a swan anymore,” Orla said. “You’re just the same as you were.”

“Not quite,” Mother said. “Now she can be a swan whenever she wants to be.”

“I want to be a swan, too!”

“All in good time,” Mother said. “When you’re ready, you’ll know how.”

“Me, too?” I asked.

“Of course, swanling. Tir, I’m going to the lake this morning. My father should know about this.”

“I agree,” Father said. “He’ll be glad we’ve been able to keep our side of the agreement.”

“I always knew we could,” Mother said. She leaned over to kiss his cheek. “I’ll also take Adana for her first flight.”

Adana, who had been shoving bread and honey into her mouth like she was starving, stopped eating and looked at Mother.

“Today? Now?”

Mother just smiled. Adana finished eating quickly and bounced up from the table. When she and Mother had left the room, Father turned to me.

“Kiar, it’s time for your first lesson in something new as well. A queen should know how to fight. Today you’ll start learning to use a sword.”

There were more changes in our lives after Adana gained her swan form. She moved out of our shared bedroom into a room of her own. She spent more time with Mother, and more time at the lake with our swan family and the flock. The lake was the nesting grounds for the flock, where they spent half the year. The other half was spent at the winter grounds, far to the south of Valenia.

We all visited our grandparents during their stay at the lake. They always took their human forms out of courtesy, but it was clear they were not at home in them.

My grandfather in particular had a way of looking at us with one eye, with his head turned sideways. It was not his fault that his voice sounded harsh, but I found him a little frightening. After Adana's change, she and Mother visited much more often and occasionally stayed overnight on the lake.

They also went flying. Mother had never talked about flying before. She must have done it, at least when she visited her family. Later I thought she might have tried to put it aside, to be a good queen to her human subjects, and to fit into her new life. But after Adana fledged, they went out several times a week in good weather to let Adana practice and build up her strength.

"Is it necessary for her to spend so much time as a swan?" Father asked. "She won't go south with the flock for years yet."

Mother didn't answer him directly.

"It's a long journey, days of flying," she said. "Even with practice, it will be harder for her than for those who seldom take human form. The more used to swan form she is, the easier it will be."

It was the first time I'd seen them disagree about something to do with us.

Autumn came, and the flock left without Adana. We had the autumn festival, when the hard weather closed in, with bitter cold, snow, and wind, Mother and Adana no longer flew. Things returned to how they had been

before. Except now I spent an hour every day with Dar, the captain of Father's guard, learning how to use a blunt, wooden sword, a shield, and a spear.

"Well done, young Kiar," Dar said one morning, when he'd knocked the sword out of my hand yet again and caught me a rap on the shield that sent it smartly into my shoulder.

"How can I be doing well? You always beat me!"

He took the shield from my arm and rubbed my shoulder with his hard palm.

"I've done this since I was younger than you are now," he said. "And when I started, my sword master beat me, every time. You're stronger and faster than you were a few months ago. Give yourself time."

"Why does everything take time?" It wasn't really a question I expected Dar to answer. He was a guard and a sword master, not someone I thought might consider other things, or even take my question seriously.

"If I told you everything I know about fighting all at once," he said, "you'd never remember it. You have to learn things little by little. Look at your right hand."

I held it out and he ran his finger over the stripe of callus starting at the base of my fingers.

"If you could do all the work in an afternoon that you've done in the last months, your hand would be raw and bloody at the end of it. But now you can swing a sword for a long time," he said, "Things have to happen when

they're ready. The kingcups don't bloom in the winter, nor the lambs come before they're ready to be born."

I shook my head.

"Have some patience, young Kiar," he said. "Everything comes with time and work and patience. Or at least most things."

I thought of those words often as I learned the sword and spear and bow. Spring came, the flock flew back from the winter grounds, and Mother and Adana began to spend time flying again. Work improved my skill with weapons, and time brought me closer to my twelfth birthday—when I was sure I, too, would be able to take swan form.

Patience was hard. It became even harder when, late the next summer, Orla developed the same rash and bumps on her skin.

"It's not fair!" I said to Adana when Mother and Orla had shut themselves into the solar. "It was supposed to be me next!"

"I know," Adana said.

"I don't understand why!"

"Maybe it's because we—Orla and I—look more like Mother?"

"I'm almost twelve. In the autumn, I'll be the same age you were when you took swan form—but she's only ten."

"You'll have to ask Mother."

The next day, when Mother and Orla joined us for breakfast, Mother beamed with pride, one arm around her Orla's shoulders.

"Tir, our little girl is a black swan!" she said. "The first since Queen Amala, five hundred years ago!"

"What does that mean?" I asked. "A black swan?"

"Someday," Mother said, smiling down at Orla, "she'll be able to use powerful magic. Perhaps that's why she fledged early."

My heart sank. My older sister could fly, and now my younger sister could, too. And on top of everything, she would do magic. Compared to that, what was learning to use a sword or a bow?

I was Father's heir now, and one day I'd be queen. But when I looked at Mother, Adana, and Orla and thought of flying, somehow the thought of being queen didn't comfort me.