

ELIZABETH  
CREITH

THE  
LOST  
KING

WINGS OF VALENIA  
BOOK TWO

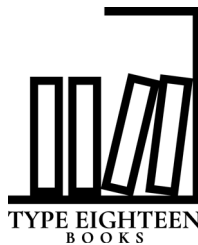
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*To the memory of Ravi Nair*







CHAPTER

# ONE

The morning my sister Adana came to say goodbye for the winter, I was up early. Willow, my foster sister and friend, muttered something in her sleep from the other side of the bed when I got up, and then she fell silent again.

I dressed quickly and washed my face in the cold water from the basin. I combed my hair out and braided it, then slid behind the curtain that covered my window to breathe in the autumn air. It hadn't snowed yet, but the smell of frost and dying leaves announced that winter was on its way.

My mother stood in the courtyard, almost directly below my window. She was easy to recognize; no other woman in the castle wore her long hair loose instead of braided or coiled into a knot. Bands of white streaked her black hair. They'd widened in the half-year since the death of my sister Orla.

She faced out toward the wall. Nobody else stood as quietly. Even the guards on the wall and the one at the gate shifted or

paced to keep warm and limber. She might have been a young tree, or a woman carved of stone except for the way the slight breeze stirred her hair and clothing. She might have been watching for Adana. I hoped she was. I hoped she hadn't started believing once again that Orla was still alive and on her way home. Those times were hard on her and everyone around her, and hardest of all on my father.

I stepped back into the room and pulled the curtain closed. Willow sat up and swung her feet out from under the blankets.

"I'll see you downstairs," I said, and she nodded.

In the great hall, my father and Tuan sat at the king's table, nearest the outer door of the hall. Six months ago, the king's table had been full every morning. We all sat there—my father and mother, my two sisters Adana and Orla, along with Willow, Gil, and Tuan, the three swanfolk my parents had fostered.

Now Gil and Adana were married and gone to live with the swanfolk, my mother's people. Orla was gone, too, never to return. She'd always been Mother's favourite. Mother ate little now and didn't linger at the table with Father as she once had.

There was less on the table than a year ago, and not only because of our family's diminished size. The spring planting had gone as usual, and the crops had grown well. But in the last weeks of summer and into the fall, the fields had been plagued by deer, rabbits, even boar. Nothing seemed to keep the creatures out—not clippings of hair hung around the fields, not the dogs, nothing. The intruders ran, but always returned.

The boar were the worst; they trampled what they didn't eat and were dangerous to confront and drive off. Father and

some of his men had gone out six times to hunt boar, bringing home five. Only one had run; the others had stayed to fight, although I'd never heard of boars defending food. Wild pigs ate everything; there was always something for them, whether it was acorns or beech mast, or the root vegetables in the fields.

Nias, the cook, had begun to serve less at each meal, and while nobody went hungry, little was left over. The chickens were still laying; they would stop for winter, but without a good supply of table scraps, they would stop sooner. I didn't know if there were fewer eggs already; Nias had said nothing about it. The boar, thinner than usual and tough, would not make up for the crops they'd eaten and ruined, and the same was true of the deer and rabbits, grouse and other wild birds we snared in the gardens.

Every day I expected Nias to say something about the food stores. I worried we had a lean winter ahead, and a leaner spring.

"Good morning, Father," I said, and leaned to kiss his cheek.

He put his arm around my shoulders and hugged me. "Good morning, Kiar."

He tugged on my braid, and as I slipped into my place next to Tuan, he smiled at us. Tuan squeezed my hand under the table.

That was something else that had changed. A year ago, Tuan had been my friend; now he was much more. We hadn't spoken of betrothal, nor had he said any of the formal things a suitor was supposed to say to my father. All the same, he now sat next to me at court occasions. Father had ordered a chair for him, not as elaborate as my own throne, but carved and cushioned and clearly a seat of honour.

“You’re dressed up this morning,” Father said.

I raised my eyebrows. He’d put on the embroidered surcoat he wore for feasts, and his beard and hair were freshly trimmed.

“I thought I’d wear something pretty for the occasion,” I said. “We won’t see Adana now until spring. Do you think Gil will come, too?”

“He’ll come,” Tuan said.

“They’ll be cold without feathers,” I said. “We should have cloaks for them.”

Father lifted a fold of blue wool from the empty chair beside him—Mother’s chair. “I asked Elena to bring their cloaks down. Your mother is out there watching for Adana.”

“Has she eaten?” I asked.

“Yes,” Father said. “She had some bread and fruit before she went out. I think she’d like to go down to the lake and say goodbye to her parents. I thought I’d take her after she’s seen Adana.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said, although privately, I wondered if it was. My grandfather, king of the swanfolk, had banished Mother, his own daughter, from the flock. He was the first to say she was mad, that her presence frightened and angered the rest of the flock, and he had decreed that she could no longer come back to the people she’d grown up among. Even now, my father wouldn’t admit Mother was not simply deep in grief for Orla.

Sianna, the wisewoman who lived half a day’s ride from the castle, had said that Mother would probably get better. My father, I thought, clung to the hope that she would return to being the woman he had courted and married, the swan princess



who had kept her human form to be with him. She was better, but that didn't mean she'd ever be cured. I no longer hoped for the mother who had loved me to come back.

Willow came in and sat on the empty bench opposite Tuan and me. She eyed my clothes. "You're dressed up."

"I think Adana will come today," I said.

The swanfolk had been restless over the past week; small groups circled and came back to land on the lake. On the autumn breeze, their calls carried from the lake to the castle, an unceasing gabble of sound that signalled the fall flight.

"Eatha told me she wants to bring in the cloth from the bog today," Father said. "She'd like a guard with her. Do you have an idea about who should go?"

Every spring, Eatha placed lengths of woven cloth into the shallow, peaty pool at the edge of the bog, and every fall at the early frost, she pulled them out. The bog-water dyed the wool a soft, dark brown, lighter on white, darker on grey and black. Moths didn't seem to eat holes in the peat-dyed wool as much as they did in undyed cloth.

"I'd like to," Willow said before I could answer.

"We three could go," I said. Of course, Eatha would want a guard. This summer and fall, the wild animals had been behaving strangely, coming closer to the fields and the castle than usual. It wasn't only the deer and the wolves who preyed on them, but bear as well, even the shy wildcats.

Wolves mostly left us alone, but bears sometimes attacked one or two people. Wildcats were unpredictable. Until this year, we hadn't seen them around the castle or fields. Even the outlying

farmsteads usually heard wolves at a distance, and seldom saw bear or wildcats close by

“Did she see anything in particular?” I asked. “What should we watch for?”

“She said she didn’t,” Father said. “but she still felt uneasy going to the bog alone.”

He didn’t say “after last spring.” Nobody talked about it, but the things Orla had done, or nearly done—before she died and after—had shocked and frightened people. Her dark magic had created an aura of fear, and it had faded slowly.

“Weapons are no good against magic,” Willow said, spooning honey onto her bread.

“True enough,” Father said, “and I’ll thank you not to say that to Eatha, Willow.”

She ducked her head. “Yes, Sire.”

“Orla’s gone,” Tuan said. “nobody needs to be afraid. Not with—” He stopped.

“I know who keeps this country safe,” Father said, “whether or not you say it.”

So did we all, and for a few moments, we were all silent. I felt my cheeks burning. It should have been Father who cast Orla out of Valenia. The fact that I’d been the one to do it still made me feel uncomfortable, as though I’d somehow betrayed him.

“Then you’ll go with her, all of you?” Father said at last.

“Yes, of course,” I said.

He nodded. “It’s good to let her know we take her fears seriously. You don’t leave a candle burning in a child’s room

because there are monsters in the dark. You leave it so the child knows that if there are monsters, she has protection.”

I was drinking the last of my hot mint tea when one of the guards on the wall called out.

“The princess! The princess!”

“Adana!” Father picked up the cloaks from Mother’s chair and almost ran to the courtyard. Tuan, Willow, and I followed.

The two swans were still in the air, gliding down to land in the grass in front of the castle. Almost as soon as the first one touched the ground, the blue-white glow of magic flared up around her. When it faded, my sister Adana stood there, her long black hair settling around her bare white body.

“Welcome home, Adana,” Father said. He shook out the blue cloak he’d brought for her and swirled it neatly over her shoulders, and she slipped her arms through the two slits in the sides and fastened the silver pin, shaped like a rose, which held the cloak at her throat.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling. “I’m happy to see you, Father. Are you well?”

He kissed her forehead and hugged her for a moment. “I am,” he said. “Gil, it’s good to see you looking well.”

As the glow of magic around the second swan faded, Adana’s husband stood slightly behind her.

“Thank you, Sire.” He took the green cloak Father offered him and draped it over his own shoulders. “It’s good to be well.” Gil had been very sick all last winter, first from the lung fever that happened sometimes in cold weather, and then from Orla’s enchantments. He and Adana had married

at midsummer and taken their place in the flock as heirs to Mother's swanfolk parents.

"How is Mother?" Adana asked.

"She's well. She eats, and she sleeps indoors. It's hard for her to be under a roof for long." Father glanced back through the gate, but Mother wasn't quite in sight.

Adana held out her arms. "Kiar, you look beautiful! Did you put on that dress for us?"

"Yes, I did." We hugged, and slender as she was, she still squeezed the breath from me.

She kissed my cheek. "It's a pleasant change to see you dressed prettily. Tuan, don't you think so?" She held out a hand to Tuan and Willow and drew them into our hug.

"Can we offer you something to eat?" I said. "Nias has made your favourite cakes every morning for the last three days, in case you arrived."

"I'd love that," Adana said. "but we can't stay. Grandfather wants to leave today. He's waiting for us to come back."

"It was good of him to let you say goodbye," Father said.

Grandfather was the Swan King; he could take the flock south to the winter grounds at his pleasure. Even Adana, his granddaughter and heir, had to obey him.

"It wasn't only to say goodbye," Adana said. "I have a message from Grandmother."

"Then we'll talk in private," Father said.

When we were all settled in his council chamber, with a plate of cakes still hot from the oven, Father said, "What is this message?"

“Grandmother says the past has come back,” Adana said. She crumbled the little cake in her hands. I hadn’t seen her so troubled for months. “She says it’s angry and dangerous.”

“How can the past come back?” I said.

“I know,” she said. “It doesn’t make sense in human speech. She told me in swan form, and the meaning isn’t the same.”

None of us asked why Adana hadn’t simply asked Grandmother to repeat her warning in human form. A human could make such a request, but among the swanfolk nobody asked the king or queen to change form, or to explain themselves again.

“What might it mean?” Father asked. “Someone from the past is coming back to make trouble? An old enemy?”

“Maybe,” Adana said. “But the way she said it didn’t sound as though she meant someone from Noermark, or a person at all, or even another swan.”

“You mean, nothing alive?” I asked.

“I suppose.” She frowned. “Gil, didn’t it almost sound as though she might mean something dead? Or at least, not really alive?”

“A ghost?” Father said. His frown matched Adana’s. “Was she speaking of—”

“No!” Adana said. “It wasn’t Orla. Besides, Kiar banished her. It couldn’t be Orla.” She reached to take Gil’s hand.

“Are you sure?” I asked. Orla had been more powerful than any of us had known. She’d used her magic to make places around the castle where she could stand among us, unseen and unheard, and she’d used them for years. I wasn’t altogether confident her

spirit was banned from Valenia, even though she'd left when I'd thrown her out.

"I'm sure," said Gil. "It's not Orla, Kiar. Nobody will see her back here for a long, long time. And if she came back, I'm sure I'd know. What she did to me, that kind of magic, it leaves a shadow. I think I'll always know if she's around. And I say she isn't."

"You're certain of that?" Father asked.

"Yes, Sire," Gil said. "I'd stake my life on it."

"I think we have to believe you, then," Father said. "But if not her, then what? Or who?"

"I wish I could tell you," Adana said. "I don't know whether Grandmother will say any more, and I won't have time to come again before we leave."

"When will that be?" I asked. Once the flock left for their wintering grounds in the south, there would be no way for Adana to send us a message.

"Perhaps today, or tomorrow. Grandfather flew around the lake this morning, and I thought he'd give the call to leave, but he came back to feed. He knew I wanted to say goodbye. And one more thing," Adana said. "I think the bog is growing larger. The edges have moved out in some places—a little, but they have moved."

"Bogs move and change," Father said. "There was no alder or willow growing along the creek until perhaps twenty years ago. The dyeing pond was bigger, too, if I remember rightly."

Adana smiled and shook her head. "I suppose Grandmother's warning made me nervous," she said. "and I was looking for something to be wrong. It hasn't changed that much, after all."

"No long, boggy arm crawling up the hill to the castle?" I asked.

She laughed. "No, nothing like that. Grandmother didn't say anything about the bog, but I noticed it from the air."

"Never mind," Father said. "I'd rather you let me know. It's good to have a swan's-eye view of the world."

We talked for a while of smaller things, and then Adana rose. "We have to go."

"Of course," Father said. "We'll see you off."

We walked back out into the sharp autumn air.

In the courtyard, Adana stopped. "I want to speak to Mother, or at least try."

"She was around that corner when we came in," I said, pointing. "She was watching us. Maybe she's waiting for you to speak to her."

Adana's look said she didn't altogether believe me. "I'll meet you outside the gate." She walked along the wall and around the corner. She was gone long enough for my fingertips to get chilly. When she came to the gate, her eyes were pink-rimmed, as though she was holding back tears.

"She wants to come with us," Adana said to Gil. "She asked if she could fly back with us, and I had to tell her no."

"Will she listen?" I asked. "Maybe she'll try to follow you."

Adana shook her head.

“Adana is the heir,” Gil said. “The voice of the king when he isn’t there. I don’t think your mother can disobey her.”

The word *can* was a blow. Mother as we had known her would probably have chosen to obey Adana’s word. More likely, she wouldn’t have wanted to fly south and leave us. But now Mother was so much more her swan self that she couldn’t choose to defy Adana. She might look human, but in her heart, she wanted to be back in her swan form, among her true people.

I wanted to comfort Adana, but I couldn’t think of anything that would help. Gil put his arm around her, and she leaned her head against his shoulder, only for a moment. Then she straightened up.

“I’ll come and see you in the spring,” she said to Father. She hugged him, and he held her tightly and kissed her hair. Then she hugged me and kissed my cheek, and did the same to Willow and Tuan.

“Take care of yourself,” she said to Father.

“Look after her, Gil,” Father said.

“I will, Sire.”

Then he and Adana unpinned their cloaks. Willow took Gil’s cloak. I reached for Adana’s, but Father got it first. He folded the cloak over his arm. Then Gil and Adana called up the magic, and two swans stood where two human people had been a few seconds before. They flew away without a backward glance. We watched until their wings were a scribble in the air. I didn’t dare look at my father’s face; I could feel tears in my own eyes.

I had thought that no winter could be more terrible than the last, with the lung fever and Gil slowly dying under Orla’s



enchantment. Now what I remembered was all of us—Orla still alive, Mother still herself, and Adana and Gil with us, even through all the bad things.

I walked back inside the gates, but Father stayed where he was. Tuan and Willow fell into step beside me.

“I’m glad you didn’t go south, too,” I said to Willow.

“I like the snow,” she said. She was biting her lips, trying not to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” I asked. “I wouldn’t mind something to laugh about right now.”

“Oh, Kiar,” she said, “It’s funny that you’d think I’d leave. You and Tuan are as much my flock as the swanfolk are. More, maybe. How could I fly away and never see you all winter?”

“This is going to be a strange winter,” I said, “with only the four of us.”

“Five,” Tuan said, glancing towards the corner of the castle. Mother stood there again, but this time she wasn’t watching the sky. She was looking towards the gate, and Father as he gazed at the place in the sky where their eldest daughter had flown away.