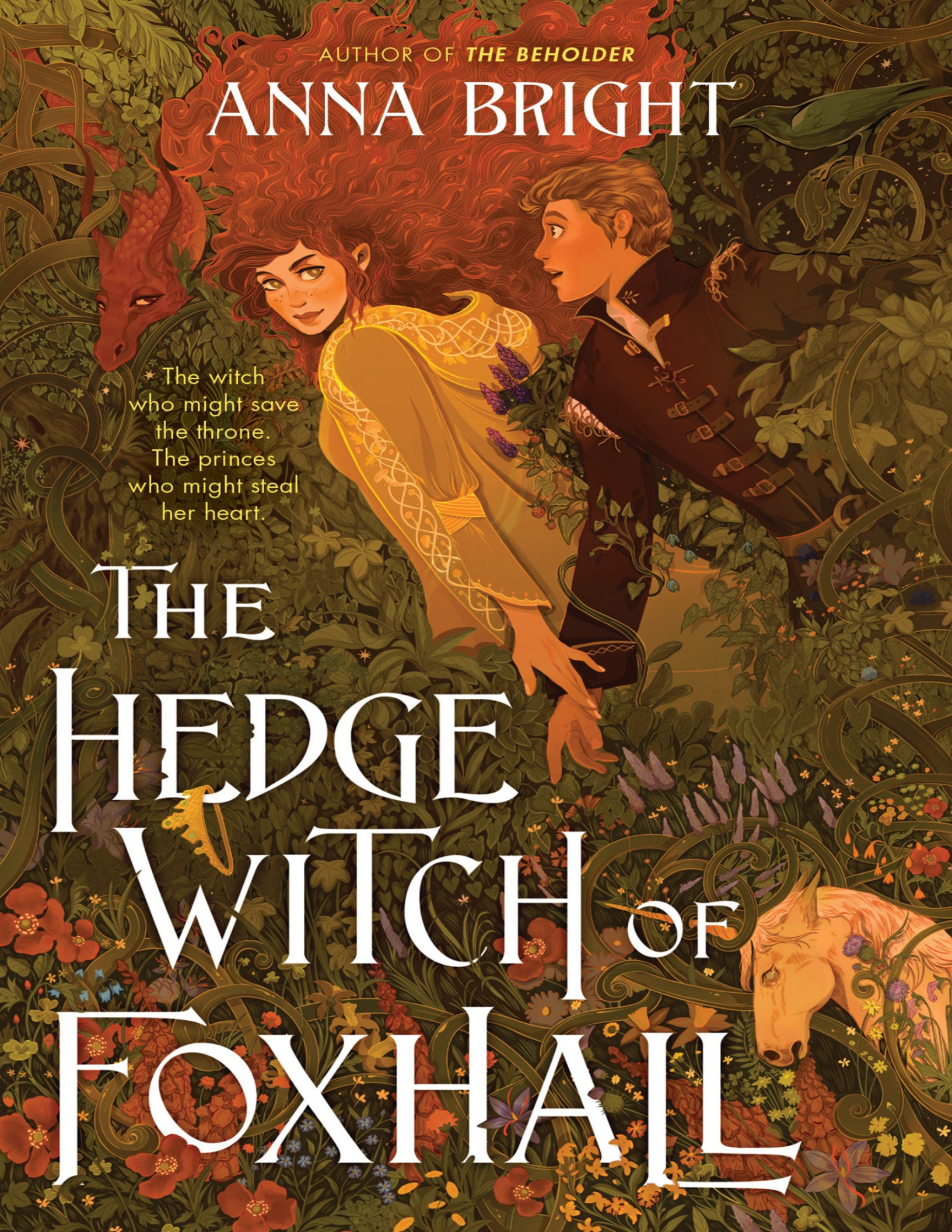


AUTHOR OF *THE BEHOLDER*

ANNA BRIGHT

* The witch
who might save
the throne.
The princes
who might steal
her heart.

THE
HEDGE
WITCH OF
FOXHALL



THE
HEDGE
WITCH OF
FOXHALL



ANNA BRIGHT

HARPER TEEN
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

To Grandmother and Mamaw.

*Thank you for
a childhood full
of magic.*



Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Pronunciation Guide and Terms

Ten Years Ago: Ffion

1. Ffion

2. Tal

3. Dafydd

4. Ffion

5. Tal

6. Dafydd

Interlude

7. Ffion

8. Tal

9. Dafydd

10. Ffion

11. Tal

12. Dafydd

13. Ffion

14. Tal

15. Dafydd

16. Ffion

17. Tal

18. Dafydd

19. Ffion

20. Tal

21. Dafydd

22. Ffion

23. Tal

- 24. Dafydd
- 25. Ffion
- 26. Tal
- 27. Dafydd
- 28. Ffion
- 29. Tal
- 30. Dafydd
- Interlude
- 31. Ffion
- 32. Tal
- 33. Dafydd
- 34. Ffion
- 35. Tal
- 36. Dafydd
- 37. Ffion

Four Years Ago: Tal

- 38. Tal
- 39. Dafydd
- 40. Ffion
- 41. Tal
- 42. Dafydd
- 43. Ffion
- 44. Tal
- 45. Dafydd
- 46. Ffion
- 47. Tal
- 48. Dafydd
- 49. Ffion
- 50. Tal
- 51. Dafydd

Five Days Ago: Dafydd

- 52. Ffion
- 53. Tal
- 54. Dafydd
- Interlude

55. Ffion

56. Tal

Epilogue: Tal

Author's Note

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Books by Anna Bright

Back Ad

Copyright

About the Publisher

Pronunciation Guide and Terms

Ffion: FEE-un

Taliesin: tal-ee-AY-sin

Dafydd: DA-vid (the “a” is like “apple”)

Mathrafal: MA-thra-val

Osian: OH-shan

Powys: PO-wis

Brycheiniog: Bri-KHAY-nee-og

Gwynedd: GWIH-neth

Afanc: AH-vanc

Ceiliog neidr: KAY-lee-og NAY-der

Draig goch: dryg gokh

Gwiber: GWY-ber

Arianrhod: ah-ree-AN-rhode

Mam-gu (grandmother): MAM-gee

Llafnau (blades): HLAV-nye

Ap (son of): ap

Vch (daughter of): ferk

Diolch (thank you): DEE-olkh

Arawn: ah-ROUN (rhymes with “clown”)

Annwn: AH-noon

Ten Years Ago

Ffion

I was seven years old when I met wild magic.

I shouldn't have been out at all, what with it being midnight and there being Mercian soldiers at work only a few miles to the east. But I was a stubborn little gremlin even then.

It was my mam-gu's fault, really. Earlier that day, she'd shown me some amber she'd found in Foxhall Forest, and I'd thought the stones looked like a fistful of honey. "Why didn't you bring me some?" I'd asked. Amber made for powerful protection charms.

But my grandmother told me it would serve me better if I got it for myself. She hadn't told me it would take half the night to find, though. Nor had she told me what to say to Mam when she scolded me for disappearing for hours after dark. But that was a problem for later. Besides, I wasn't alone, not with Cadno trotting after me, red tail swishing as he snuffled at the roots of trees.

Mam would've said I didn't need a protection charm, as long as I didn't go looking for trouble. But with Dad gone half the time, and Mercian soldiers digging ditches and piling up dirt only a few miles off—well.

I was a witch from a long line of witches. I already knew better, even as a child.

As I came to a glade of naked birches, my irritated sigh smoked on the air. Mam-gu had found the amber in a stand of pines; it was late, and I was certainly already in trouble, and these still weren't the trees I wanted.

But when the dragons emerged into a strip of moonlight, I forgot about charms, or trees, or trouble. I forgot about everything.

They were dreigiau goch—red dragons. Red like cinnabar or copper or blushing dawn, red like foxes or flame or fresh blood or madder dye. There were six of them.

The larger adults had flanks grown over with lichen and mushrooms and ivy, but all of them were scaled and horned, with power in their wings and

chests and jointed legs. They looked like fire and moved like water, like boulders tumbling downhill; they were the brightest things in that winter forest.

Later, I would learn that the color of a dragon's scales reflected the heat and age of their flame. I would learn that dreigiau goch could fly from one Welsh kingdom to another, farther than gwiberod or afancs or ceiliogau neidr, without even stopping to rest. I would learn how easily they could destroy farms or fields.

As a child, I only knew that they were made of magic.

I stepped into the glade slow as slow, making myself smaller than I already was, knotting my hair around my fist so it wouldn't catch a sudden breath of wind and spook them.

The largest of the six—it must have stood twenty-five hands high, it *must*, I was little and all the world was large but I knew the beast was truly massive—hung back. So did the other full-grown dreigiau.

But the smallest dragon stepped forward. The forest was quiet enough that I heard its amber claws clinking against pebbles on the ground, like rain falling on glass.

I waited, breathless, for it to come to me. And it did.

The smallest dragon's back came as high as my chest. I longed to run my hand over its side, to see if its copper scales were cold or if it would feel warm like the horses stabled at the Dead Man's Bells. But I didn't move a finger.

It pawed at me gently, lifting one blunt-clawed forefoot to nudge at my bare shin as if to ask *what are you?* It sniffed at my kirtle, too, snorting and sneezing when it reached my underarms; I'd been as ill-washed a child as I was a woman. When a laugh rippled out of me, the little dragon startled back, like it was surprised to find me as loud as any bird in the woods.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, desperate to save the broken moment, watching it watch me out of curious gold eyes.

But when the largest of the six roared a soft summons, even I wouldn't have dared to disobey. The smallest dragon bumped me once with its head, then turned back toward the others and galloped with them into the woods.

I'd stared after them, watching their scales shimmer until they faded out of view, feeling the woods fall silent once more.

In that moment, something in me fell silent, too. Something that would always be listening and looking.

I would search for dragons in later years. I would search the roads for gwyllgwn, the rivers and lakes for ceffylau dŵr. I never found them.
And I was never the same again.

Ffion

*Foxhall Forest, Powys, Wales
Spring Equinox, AD 796*

The Mercian soldier couldn't see me when he fired the shot. But I saw him. I saw his arrow fly through the cold, wet dawn.

The stag was grazing down the ridge, crowned head low. And the soldiers were much, much farther into our territory than they should have been. I dropped into a crouch behind a holly bush, putting a hand on Cadno's scruff.

Maybe the soldier was fooling around, or maybe he was just a bad shot. But his arrow flew wide of the beast's torso and buried itself in its right hind leg.

Whether the hart lived or died, it would suffer.

The forest felt as it always did, close and full of secrets. But it felt a little less secret, a little less magical, as the animal let out a bellow of pain and ran crashing through the tree line.

I wondered what the Foxhall would have to say about this. Not the hart; they wouldn't care about him. But maybe they'd care about Mercians straying farther into our kingdom than I'd ever seen them.

Probably not.

The Foxhall—the coven for which our town was named, for which the forest was named—was untouchable. They wouldn't trouble themselves over a few Mercian soldiers, or read anything into their presence here. And the stag was just a stag, after all.

If he'd been a magical creature, they might have cared. But those had all gone to ground. After I'd seen them once as a little girl, I'd never seen the pod of dragons again, or any other uncanny beast.

Ordinary animals like the hart limping deeper into the woods were all we had left.

“Should we chase it?” the soldier called to his mates, voice coming harsh down the ridge.

No, I thought, you shouldn't.

“Cadno,” I hissed. “Rocks. Hurry.”

Wales favored a hedge to mark a boundary. But a wall would do.

“*A wall, a wall, a wall,*” I chanted under my breath, panting a little, pushing tangled red hair out of my eyes. “*A wall, a wall, a wall.*”

As Cadno darted away, quick and neat from his pointed fox's nose to his well-groomed red tail, I dropped to my knees just inside the tree line, scratching a ditch in the dirt with my nails. When Cadno returned with a mouthful of stones, I scraped them hurriedly into the trench.

And then I began to sing.

*Ravens and crowns, sweeties and gowns
Are out of my reach, are out of my reach
Treetops and roof thatch and castle walls high
Are out of my reach, are out of my reach
Thistles and nettles and beetles and stones
Are under my feet, are under my feet
But you, o my true love, lady so fair
Raven of hair, who moves on the air,
Are out of my reach, are out of my reach*

A line of crocuses popped out of the ground alongside the trench.

Boots pounded closer down the hill, one soldier trampling a patch of gorse and swearing when it snagged his trousers, another laughing at him.

They didn't hear me singing. They didn't notice anything about their surroundings. In fairness to the soldiers, most people didn't.

Sleeping beneath hedges and surviving off the gifts of the forest, having left my mother's home behind—I'd learned to notice.

I scrambled backward on my hands and knees behind a tree, pushing all my magic and my song about untouchable things toward the little trench I'd dug directly in their path.

“It can't have gotten far,” said the soldier who'd fired the shot. The toe of his boot nudged a stone on the trench's edge, sending it clattering inside.

I held my breath, clinging to Cadno. My magic was always stronger when he was close.

“Leave it,” another said suddenly. “We need to get back to the watchtower. Don’t have time to chase some beast into the woods because you can’t shoot properly.”

The first one drew up, offended, and made to push through the trees. “I can shoot—” He paused. “Stop. Is this the place they told us about?” He dropped his voice. “The witches’ wood?”

Just one witch, actually. The Foxhall only came to the forest when they needed a grove or a meadow or a herd to sacrifice.

The soldiers were too casual as they talked over one another, overexplaining why they needed to get back and away from the forest. When they finally trooped up the ridge, I dropped my forehead into the dirt, heart hammering.

It had only been a song my mam-gu, my father’s mother, had taught me, sung beneath my breath. Only a little line of stones a couple feet wide. It was nothing like Offa’s Dyke, the wall of earth their watchtower guarded. Eight feet tall and three kingdoms long.

But I’d built a wall here on the edge of Foxhall Forest, and it had held.

After a moment, I hauled myself to my feet and dove into the trees, Cadno at my heels. Twilight was coming. And I’d sent the soldiers off, but there were more where they’d come from.

The stag had left a path of broken branches and crushed bracken leading into the forest. I followed his tracks across the clearing and through the trees on the far side, toward the brook that ran a mile or so from the forest’s edge. The water was edged with rocks and lichen-covered ash trees large enough to hide behind to lick your wounds; and there, beside the brook, behind a boulder taller than me, lay the stag.

Though spring had come, he had yet to shed his crown of antlers, and his coat was a rich red-brown. The arrow still jutted from his leg.

At Cadno’s soft whine, the stag wheezed a cry of distress and rose—or tried to. His forelegs jerked up, but his back right leg buckled beneath him as he tried to dart away. I felt a stab of pity. “I’m here to help you,” I said softly. “It’s all right.”

He watched through liquid brown eyes as I crossed to his side.

“I’m here to help,” I said again, gentler still, and he let himself collapse.

When I reached for the arrow in his leg, the stag wheezed again. Again, I shushed him, one hand pressed to his muzzle as if he were a dog and not a king of Foxhall Forest.

Maybe he could sense that the forest trusted me. Maybe he'd just lost too much blood to fight.

The job was hideous. When I'd finally worked the arrow free of muscle and gristle and fur, the stag lay defenseless in front of me, ribs appearing and disappearing as his side heaved. But I wasn't done. I rinsed my bloody hands in the brook and reached for the pouch at my hip.

A feverfew charm, first, for the wound. I always carried my grandmother's spellbook, the one Dad had passed on to me, but I didn't need it for this any more than I had for the wall I'd built. I held the stag's leg firmly; but when I began to sing, he fell still and silent.

It was a different song than the one I'd sung earlier. This was the song I'd sung to the forest the day we'd come to our understanding.

Foxhall Forest was more my home than the town had ever been. It was where I'd taken Mam-gu's spellbook the day I'd found out Mam was expecting my little brother Hywel, and I was five years old and jealous and miserable right down to my guts.

I was a curmudgeonly little thing, even then. So when Arianrhod and Gareth, my older sister and brother, had told me to find a friend in town, I'd asked the woods for a friend instead.

The spell had called for a poppet—a little doll to represent the person being summoned—alongside a few of the person's belongings. My mother was a Foxhall covenwitch, and therefore able to read and write; but I was five, only slightly literate, and not at all attentive to detail. I'd twisted together a clumsy poppet of twigs and grass and offered alongside it a pair of mushrooms and a fistful of foxfire I had found on a log.

The foxgloves had grown thick and tall that summer, so I had offered a bouquet of them, too. I hadn't known any better.

In later years, I would realize that the summoning charm I had performed that day, with the poppet and the childish little song I made up on the spot, might have—*should* have—gone horribly, desperately wrong.

Anything could have happened. But the forest had been gentle with me.

A fox kit had come trotting out of the bracken toward me, nose down, tail up.

He had followed me home. He'd been with me ever since.

As I sang the panting stag the song that had summoned Cadno so many years ago, a butterfly began to push out of its cocoon on a branch beside me.

My mam-gu had always sung as she worked. Foxhall witches like my mam and sister never did; they didn't need to. But singing lent rhythm to my work, helped me gather my focus and make the best use of my lean resources.

Besides. I was alone so much, it was good to hear a voice, even if it was my own.

The hart stayed calm as I circled his wound with amber to encourage it to seal itself, then wrapped his leg in felt and linen smeared with the white of a lifeless egg I found beside the brook. When my work was done, he laid his head against my knee with another weary huff. Cadno watched with mildly jealous eyes as I stroked the stag's neck, humming and murmuring words of comfort.

Finally, I got to my feet. It was almost full dark, and my stomach felt as empty as my pouch.

I had more work to do.

Tal*Mathrafal Castle, Powys*

Dafydd hadn't even bothered to change his clothes. That was my first thought the afternoon my brother and I really became rivals.

I'd changed my shirt, washed my face and hands, and changed my shirt again when I got our father's summons. Presentation was vital. But Dafydd showed up in his leather blacksmith's apron, nails and palms seamed with soot.

Dafydd never worried about what side of himself to present to Mathrafal Castle as he greeted high men and the help alike. He actually seemed to think he had more in common with the latter than the former, even as the elder prince of Powys.

Absurd.

From behind the throne room doors came the blunted sound of bickering. "They're fighting about something in there," Dafydd said dully.

"Just another day," I said under my breath, nodding at one of my father's high men as he slipped into the throne room past us. The sounds of argument grew louder as the doors opened.

But before I could follow, Dafydd caught me by the sleeve. "Are you friendly with Elgan?" he asked, frowning.

"Keep your voice down," I hissed. "And yes, I'd like to be. I'm hoping he'll invite to me to his hunt this summer. Father doubled his holdings last year."

My brother snorted. "Of course. And now you have to court his favor, court his daughter—"

"Maybe. If Elgan doesn't get overeager and deplete the new fields, she might end up rich enough to be worth my time." Inside the throne room, the squabbling turned into shouting. "What was her name aga—?"

Dafydd shook his head and pushed through the iron-studded doors.

He had no patience. He had no discretion. It didn't matter.

Unlike me, Dafydd wanted nothing my father had to offer.

Unlike Dafydd, I wasn't our father's favorite. I wasn't even legitimate. But in Powys, a bastard prince could become king, if he was clever about it.

So I was clever about it.

I found the throne as empty as the rest of the bannered red-stone hall. My father, King Cadell, paced the length of the high table. He was blond, like Dafydd, with braids in his hair and a scar running through his right eyebrow and a gold hoop in his right ear. His eyes were bloodshot from drinking the night before with the chieftains who now sat around the huge yew table.

"My king," said one, "we should press the Foxhall into service."

"No need to bring the hags into it," said another—Elgan. "We should levy a tax."

"We can afford to recall troops from the southern border!" said a burly chieftain. "Powys has cowed Brycheiniog. King Meirion poses no threat to us; is his nephew not imprisoned beneath our very feet? We—"

My father interrupted him. "Prince Dafydd. Prince Taliesin. You're here—no, stand." He held up a hand when I started to sit next to Elgan. "Neither of you will be here long." Face heating, I backed away.

Ordinarily, this room would've been crowded—peasants paying taxes and making petitions, kitchen varlets tending fires, soldiers delivering reports and taking orders. Men of little stature trying to attain more.

Ordinarily, my father's men didn't look like children waiting to be punished.

Maybe today wasn't just another day.

Either Dafydd didn't notice the tension in the room, or he didn't care enough to be delicate about it. "Dad, what's happened?"

"An attack," Dad bit out. "And one that is apparently bound to kill me."

"An attack?" I straightened. "Who? Where?"

Beside my father's empty throne sat his magician, Osian. Cross-legged, half naked as always, he was studying a spread of bones carved like the phases of the moon. "From Mercia," he said. "But I don't know where. The attack has not yet fallen."

I'd always been wary of the magician. With thinning light hair and strange light eyes, he looked almost elderly, though he was actually younger

than Dad. His tattoos had always unnerved me, too, his white,ropy-muscled stomach and thighs and neck and arms inked in red and green with Welsh dragons—the afanc and gwiber, the ceiliog neidr and draig goch. Wings, scales, nostrils, curling tongues bursting flame.

Osian never wore more than a loincloth, the better to show them off. The better to remind everyone at Mathrafal of his power, even when he wasn't lighting fields on fire or butchering flocks of sheep to fuel his magic.

“One day last week, I performed my nightly sacrifice. A raven—an unsighted one,” Osian clarified unnecessarily, as if all the magical monsters hadn't been missing from our kingdom for a decade. “I wrung its neck, and in its broken bones, I foresaw an attack from the east, beyond Offa's Dyke. In my vision, I saw your father dead on an enemy spear.”

Dafydd and I gaped.

Osian always did this, made pronouncements without seeming to watch how they landed. Though, given his connection with my father—the connection that let them sense the other's feelings, see or speak to or even speak *through* one another—maybe he'd decided tact was pointless.

More than his tattoos or his near nudity or even his magic, that brutal honesty was why I'd always avoided him. Not that I didn't hate the magic as well. It stank like earth and the air before a storm, sounded like a pot on the boil. I looked forward to his twice-yearly departures, when he presumably left to search for long-gone unicorns or take naked forest walks.

“Did you see when this would happen?” Dafydd asked.

“The leaves were green,” said Osian. “It was spring, or a very wet summer. There was no moon.”

“This spring?” I asked. “Next spring? Five springs from now?”

“This year.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I cannot say.” Osian shifted, glancing significantly at Dafydd.

But Dafydd didn't acknowledge the look. “Could you ask the forest to show you more?” he suggested. I frowned, unsure what he meant.

Osian cracked the knuckle of his left thumb, then his right. His left hand was tattooed all over with gwiberod in green ink; the right was covered in dreigiau goch in red.

“I cannot,” he said simply. “My magic is gone.”

Silence.

Without thinking, I met Dafydd's eyes.

When we were young, Dafydd's white skin had had an almost bluish cast to it. The past few years at the forge had left his arms and face tanned, sometimes burned.

Just now, my brother looked bloodless. Gray, like a corpse. But despite everything, for my part, I felt almost relieved.

I knew the loss of Osian's magic was a blow to the throne. I was still planning to dance at its funeral.

I understood now why today wasn't just another day.

But why had my father called us here?

"Gone?" Dafydd seemed to choke on the word. "Magic is Powys's only sure defense. What do you mean, it's gone?"

The chieftains murmured angrily. One rose, face purpling. "Our *only sure*—?"

"Do you know why?" I interrupted.

"Prince Taliesin." Osian turned his odd light eyes on me. "You've been a sharp one since you were just young. Do you know whence my magic comes?"

I shrugged. "I assumed it came from your sacrifices. That missing nail of yours. The animals you kill every day to be sure my father won't be joining them." Osian rubbed idly at the empty spot at the end of his right index finger; last month, he'd sacrificed the nail for a spell.

"The beasts are fuel for the fire, so to speak," he said. "But my magic is tied to Pendwmpian Forest. It is the source of my seeing and working."

Pendwmpian. I bothered with very little outside Mathrafal, but I knew I'd heard the name before, and recently.

"According to our scouts, Mercia has felled Pendwmpian. The last tree was cut two weeks ago," Osian said. "My vision was fragmented, cloudy—I suspect it was the forest's last effort to reach me before its spirit departed."

"Wait." Suddenly, I remembered where I'd heard the name. "Didn't we grant the Mercians logging rights to Pendwmpian? Because of its proximity to the dyke?"

Dad's jaw worked. "Only to the northeast quadrant."

Meaning: We had extended Mercia a concession.

Meaning: They had ignored it and taken what they wanted, as they always did, and the loss of Osian's magic was the consequence.

My boots suddenly became extremely interesting to me.

“Do neither of you have anything to say?” Dad burst out, beginning to pace again. “Welsh magic is already on the wane because of their cursed dyke, and now my magician, who has aided me since before you two whelps were born, is useless on the eve of an attack during which I am apparently fated to die. All because the Mercians could not keep to their agreement.”

I tried to look nonchalant, like I wasn’t imagining a spear piercing my father’s chest.

I didn’t want him to die. I especially didn’t want him to die before he’d named me heir.

A cold thought. But I had more than one parent to worry about.

“We did debate the matter at length, my king,” said one chieftain. *We did warn you*, he didn’t say.

There had been discussion here in this room, he meant. Among my father’s men.

Because there was no negotiating with the Mercians. It was true now, and it had been true ten years ago.

About a decade earlier, their King Offa had redrawn the border between Mercia and Wales with an earthwork running from sea to sea. The dyke became the new eastern boundary of the Welsh Marches—our kingdom of Powys, Gwynedd to the north, and Brycheiniog to the south—and it had severed more than a few Welsh villages, forests, moors, lakes, and rivers from the eastern edges of the petty kingdoms. Upon its completion, all our magical creatures had gone to ground. My father also believed the dyke was responsible for the loss of our magic.

Offa mocked us with what amounted to a wall running from one end of Wales to the other. And we had “agreed” to the new boundary, as if we’d had any other choice.

It was an eight-foot-tall, 180-mile-long insult.

“I’m listening, Father.” I didn’t know what he wanted me to say.

“Taliesin, always listening. Always planning.” But Dad wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at the burns on Dafydd’s arms, the soot lining his palms and brow. “And Dafydd, always somewhere else, hard at work on something that does not matter.”

My father’s expression was all bitter disappointment. Dafydd watched him, silent and stolid as a cow.

“What angers me most is that Mercia thought itself safe to do this—felling one of our magical forests, cheerfully violating an agreement not one year old.” Father thrust a hand at us, speaking now to his men as they picked their teeth or dug their knives into the table. “My two sons are our future. And when Mercia looks at our future, they feel no fear.”

“Father.” I spoke carefully, sensing his mood shift toward something precarious. “What are you going to do?”

“I am not going to do anything. This attack is a threat to my life. But the two of *you*—” He broke off, eyes glinting, shaking his head at Dafydd and me.

My heart hit the pit of my stomach.

“Tradition mandates that when a king dies, his lands are divided evenly among his sons, though only one is chosen as heir. I have not yet named my successor. But the promise of that tradition has made you too comfortable,” my father said. “So I am going to break it.”

“What do you mean?” Dafydd’s voice was steady, but there was dread in his eyes.

“I mean that you and Taliesin will solve our problem,” Father said. “The Mercians’ constant incursions, the slow leaching of magic from our land. I have had enough of concessions and agreements that do not profit Powys. So whichever of you can destroy King Offa’s miserable dyke and restore magic to Wales will accede to my throne and inherit all of Powys when I die. The one who fails will be his candler.”

The high table exploded.

Frantic whispers filled the space between shouts of confusion and complaint. This changed everything for my father’s men. Everything they expected about the future.

It could completely upend mine.

Candling was done to purify places so used-up or polluted magic couldn’t inhabit them—salted fields, fouled wells, and the like. Some said it was a trick that magicians had learned from housewives, who lit flames to burn dust and filth out of the air. Others said candling was an homage to dragon fire, which scorched a place to ruin so it could come back to life. The king’s candler spent his life traveling from one damaged place to another, where his job was simple: to light a candle and wait as it burned down, at which point magic could return.

A candler's job meant leaving everything behind. Home. Friends. Family.

My heart was pounding. I couldn't be candler. I *couldn't*.

I had to think. Quickly.

"But we already have a candler. Your cousin—" I racked my brain. "Bronfraith." It was such a minor role, I could hardly remember his name.

"Old, and likewise in need of a successor," Dad bit out.

"You could just recall our forces from the north and south," Dafydd said, challenging. "You could withdraw troops from our borders with Gwynedd and Brycheiniog. They aren't a threat. We'd have the numbers to defend ourselves, whenever the Mercian attack fell."

"I could," Father agreed, eyes glittering, mouth a grimace. "I could do that, if I wanted to. Because I am king. And if you were king, you could make that decision."

Dad crossed the room and stood nose to nose with Dafydd, the son with his eyes and his hair and his shoulders.

I might as well not have been there at all.

"But you don't want to be king, do you, Dafydd?" Father said, so quietly only the three of us could hear. "Tal wants to be king. You want to play at peasant in your forge and pretend that you don't sleep in a feather bed and that laundresses don't wash your clothes. You simply want to inherit a parcel of land when I'm gone and not be bothered with any of this."

Dafydd didn't deny or confirm what he said, didn't apologize or defy. He just stood there.

"Well, son," Father breathed. "How about now?"

And that was when I knew that Dad's plan had nothing to do with me.

He only wanted to force Dafydd's hand. It didn't matter what happened to me, or anyone else, if Dafydd would agree to be his successor.

"Nothing?" Dad asked, his whisper growing loud. "Tal has a plan, I'll wager," he said, finally turning to look at me. My thoughts raced.

I hated that his attention made my chin lift, my spine straighten.

I hated that the slightest bit of effort on Dafydd's part would be welcomed the way all my trying never, ever had.

"I'll speak to you in private very soon," I said. I had to be discreet. I had to be patient.

Patience. Discretion. They were foreign concepts to Dafydd, but essential to an effective scheme.

I'd learned this from my father. But my mother was why I'd absorbed the lesson.

Dad huffed a laugh, seeming to approve for just a moment. And then, as quickly as it had landed on me, his attention was gone.

Briefly, I dared a look at my father's men. I'd spent years politicking for their favor. I'd wanted it even when I'd only *hoped* to become king and failing meant being a prince forever until I became lord of some nowhere patch of ground.

I would need their favor now. Because now, becoming king was the only acceptable outcome.

The throne. My father's respect. My mam's safety.

Everything hung on my next move.

"Go," Father said. "Go, Dafydd and Taliesin, and prove that our enemies should be afraid."