



Translated by Andrew McDougall
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THE ASHES OF
THE LAST PHOENIX
The Legend

bromera



MORE INFO
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*For Norma and Joako, for always believing.
In Meiv's story, in me, in everything.*



Map of Nartega

NEBAR
SEA

SUNKEN
ISLAND

Asuo

La Mellada

Mendria

THE GREAT
ERTAYU FOREST

*Naked
Mountain*

Landa

DUSEN

LOST
WATERS

TUNDRA
FOREST

Belid

Tevega

NARTEGA



*The Dragon's
Ravine*

**Ronco
Avinma**

**Nebar
Mountains**

Hilmun

**Forest of
the Paths**

⊕ **PAVERS**

Arteixo

*Centuro
Bay*

Rean

Bailadero

Blons

Branwen

⊕ **EMROS**

Carez

⊕ **DORLEM**

Tlion

Noken

**MASTAR
ISLAND**

Prologue

Vardur's promises tended to be empty ones. For days I'd been waiting for him outside what had become my new home, in my new hideout, the only place I could show myself as I truly was outside of Emros.

When the sixth day began to dawn, I sang the song that Vardur asked me for whenever he had to go. Back to his real wife or off to hunt. Despite never knowing if I'd see him again, every night I blew a kiss to the sky in the hope that the wind would take it wherever he was.

Above the treetops I began to see the sun welcoming another day without answers. The Tundra forest had become my only companion. I got up, straightened the skirt of my dress and went to go back into my hiding place. But then I heard it.

'Alanna!' roared the depths of the forest.

Nothing within appeared to be moving. Was I missing Vardur so much that I was starting to hear his voice? The second time, I knew he was in trouble and I had to go help him.

'Alanna!'

'Vardur!' I ran towards the forest.

There was no creature to be seen, not even a trace. I kept running.

‘Alanna!’

His voice sounded broken, desperate. It was a wail, it was a cry for help, it was a plea. I couldn’t see him, he wasn’t anywhere.

‘Vardur!’ I shouted until I was hoarse.

Then, suddenly, I heard footsteps running towards me. I turned and saw Vardur sprinting as if his life depended on it. Behind him more than ten black omens were chasing him on horseback.

‘Stop them!’ he shouted at me.

But he knew the toll that would take on me, because I had renounced using my wand. I had told him a thousand times that I would no longer perform magic with my hands. But there he was: the arhvud I loved, about to be executed before my very eyes. The omens brandished their swords and were almost grazing his back already.

I had no other choice.

I raised my hands. I looked directly at the sun, dug my feet into the ground and rolled my head back. I sung the song. The wind began to form a vortex around me and bestowed upon me all the power I needed.

The sound of the horses’ hooves could no longer be heard. Their riders had died.

I looked Vardur’s in the eyes. Behind him lay the bodies of the omens. Everything began to spin.

‘I’ve got you.’ He grabbed me in a flash.

The crackling of the fire caused me to open my eyes. I was lying down in my bed, covered with a blanket, in what had become my home in these last few months. Vardur was sat on the floor in front of me, lost in thought and gazing into the fire. I was furious with him. I sat up.

‘You’re awake at last,’ he said, joyfully.

‘How long have I been asleep?’

‘Not long, a few hours.’

I stood up. I was still a little dizzy.

‘Not so fast.’ He caught hold of my arms. ‘Sit back down. Here, drink some tea.’

‘You know I hate tea.’

‘It will do you good to drink something hot and sit calmly here by the fire.’

‘Now you’re worried about me? I’ve been waiting for you for six days and when you arrive...you come chased by a group of omens and force me to use my hands to do magic!’

‘Everything has an explanation, Alanna.’

‘You put me in danger, Vardur. You know I hide in the mountains for a reason. Because I want them to think I’m dead, because I want them to forget I exist.’

‘On the bright side, there are no witnesses left to tell what happened, so...’

‘No thanks to you.’

‘Alanna, I know you’re mad at me, but I have something to tell you.’

‘Do you know what infuriates me the most?’

‘What?’ He lowered his eyes.

‘That you told me you were going to stop hunting beasts. You promised me you’d stop taking creatures to the omens.’

‘I was taking care of my final assignment.’

‘You always say the same,’ I sighed.

‘But this time it’s true.’

‘And where’s your wand, eh? Why didn’t you get rid of your pursuers yourself?’

‘Because I don’t use my wand anymore.’

‘What?’

‘Alanna. Can you calm down for a minute and listen to me, please?’

Vardur was the sort of arhvud all the girls went crazy for. He had a penetrating glare, strong hands and a deep voice. But what I liked wasn’t any of that. With him I felt alive, brave, powerful. He was the kind of person that didn’t even need to open their mouth for people to listen to them.

‘Please,’ he insisted.

‘Fine.’ I sat back down.

Very nervously, he sat down next to me. For the first time, I sensed weakness in him.

‘You have to help me to create a story that will become legend. Something that will endure even after we die. Maybe we could even make it rhyme and everything, so that it’s easier to memorise.’

‘Okay,’ I nodded. ‘What’s the story about?’

‘I’ve already thought of a title, you know. *The Legend of the Phoenix*. It’s all I’ve been able to think about the

last few days. That and how mad you were going to be at me. Because when I told you I'd come to see you, this wasn't my intention at all, but these six days have changed my life completely. As I said, this was my last assignment, I won't be using magic or going hunting again. In fact, I'm going to settle down in Emros in my in-laws' house and devote myself to harvesting grains.' He was shaking.

'Vardur.' He looked at me. 'What have you done?'

'For my last assignment, the omens ordered me to do a terrible thing, Alanna. Something that...' he cleared his throat. 'Something that I'll never be able to forget.'

'Vardur.'

'But, to prevent the omens getting their hands on him, I had to kill him.'

'Who?'

'The last phoenix. I killed the last phoenix left in Nartega.'

I felt like throwing up when he said it.

'But how did...?'

'Scattering its ashes.'

'But that's...you can't kill a phoenix like that.'

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'It didn't recompose itself.'

'What did you do?'

'Most of it I threw in the air, some in the river and some, well...'

'Well what, Vardur?'

‘Meiv, where are you? Meiveara!’

The water muffled the shouts that brought me back to reality. The kuovas tilted their heads with an expression that reminded me I shouldn’t upset my mother in her condition and they made me leave towards the surface. My mum was always complaining that I spent more time with the “water bird women” than with her. The fact is those undersized mermaids, known as Kuovas, instilled in me something she always lacked: calmness.

‘I’m here!’ I popped my head up.

‘Get out of the water. Come on, quickly!’ she hurried me with her usual nervousness.

I moved towards the riverbank, swimming to the tempo of the watermill. My house was so close to the bank that when the river overflowed, we had to scoop the water out the kitchen with buckets.

I reaccustomed myself to the sound of the mill grinding grain and to the shouts that came from inside the house as I got out the water. I sighed. *Calm, I just want to live calmly*, I thought.

I sat down on the bank to dry my hair and try to go into the house leaving as little trail as possible. If anything

annoyed my mother, it was finding wet footprints all over the place. That was when she shouted my full name, no shortenings, so I knew she was really mad.

A gust of cold air made my hairs stand up on end. The first of the year. The leaves on the trees were already succumbing to the imminent arrival of autumn. The forest, which stretched out on the other side of the river, was beginning to shake off its summer coat. I sat there, awestruck, looking at the landscape I saw every single day of my life, although I wasn't always able to appreciate it. But the changes in season fascinated me and made me value the scenery on display all around me. Autumn was my favourite season, with its orangey-brown tones taking over the place. I sunk my toes into the moist earth as the kuovas swirled around in front of me.

Once more, my mother shouted my full name. This time with surname and all. *Meiveara Grehm!* echoed even in the sea. I put my shoes on and went inside.

'Reika, what's going on?' I asked one of my sisters, who was hurrying out of the house.

'Steinar! Steinar has returned with good news!' she shouted as if she already knew what that 'good news' was.

'Steinar?'

Steinar was eldest of the eleven siblings. I was the eighth. Steinar hadn't lived at home for fourteen years. I could barely remember his face or figure. I searched in my memory for his voice, but I didn't find it. When he left, I was only three years old. Steinar probably never

held me in his arms, he'd barely remember I existed. I saw the excitement in my sister's eyes for finally meeting the famous Steinar, the only one of the siblings who had managed to leave the territory of Emros.

I put on my red skirt for special occasions and the least-wrinkled white blouse I saw in the wardrobe. For a moment I doubted whether it was mine. I only had one pair of shoes, my black boots, so there wasn't much of a choice there. If I went down barefoot...I didn't even want to imagine it.

I descended the stairs from memory, with my hair still wet and dripping down my back.

'Come on, Meiv,' my mum whispered from the doorway. She looked at my hair, looked me in the eye, sighed, and told me where to stand. My nine siblings were all outside, dressed up like I had never seen them before, in a row in age order. What were the boys wearing on their heads? I ducked under my mum's belly, which was carrying the twelfth child. I realised that if we were arranged from oldest to youngest, it would be easier for Steinar to recognise us.

He had arrived.

I analysed him glumly. He was a man of average build with blonde hair faded by the years and several days' growth in his beard. I recognised his Grehm eyes. The yellow right eye and the blue left eye, like mine, like those of all my siblings and my mother. Heterochromia was the most distinctive trait of an Arhvud, just like Elves have their long pointy ears. At least that was what

my grandad Vardur told us by the fireplace before we went to sleep. No one, apart from Steinar, had left the Arhvuds' land, Emros, and so we had to blindly believe what grandad had taught us, as he had been a great traveller before he got married.

Steinar wore a long brown coat, an orange sweater and black trousers. A wand protruded from his sleeve. A wand! My heart began to race; he gulped.

'Steinar!' My mother approached him, eyes wet and voice dry.

'Mum.' They fell into each other's arms. 'Merinda! You're pregnant!' He hugged her, visibly emotional.

Merinda was my eldest sister, the second of the eleven, almost twelve siblings. Merinda and Steinar had grown up together, before he left Emros. Merinda was perfect, perfectly irritable. I didn't like her long, wavy blonde hair that looked like an elf's. Why in the world was she wearing flowers on her head? I didn't like her smile either. Behind that row of perfect teeth hid an icy, jealous glare. That glare had accompanied my seventeen years of life. She was someone who needed the constant attention of everyone. To feel observed, the centre of attention, the most beautiful arhvud.

'Come in, Steinar. You have so much to tell me...'
She grabbed him from my mother's arm while she planted a firm kiss on his cheek.

My eldest brother looked sidelong at all of us, lips pursed and swallowing hard. He seemed like a shy arhvud who didn't know how to be the centre of attention, just

like me. Merinda walked past us, cradling her enormous belly and looking back over her shoulder.

Behind them, a few seconds afterwards, the rest of my siblings went inside. I watched them file in one by one, drawing up a plan to return to the river. Until I saw Ayrat, the youngest of us all.

‘Ayrat, what’s going on with your hair?!’

‘Mum didn’t have time to brush it before Steinar arrived,’ she replied, looking at her feet and sniffing.

‘Come with me, I’ll braid it for you.’

Ayrat and I shared a room. As I went up the stairs, I could no longer hear the murmur of the river. Something inside me feared I’d never hear it again. Steinar’s visit didn’t exactly feel like a *coincidence*. From the stairs, I saw that my mother was suddenly very serious and she closed the living room door so no one interrupted her conversation with her first born. What had Steinar come here so suddenly for?

Ayrat leafed through one of the few books we had at home while I brushed her hair.

‘*The bird burned and didn’t survive. Four birds on fire. One went out, the other one was eaten up,*’ she read with difficulty. ‘What does it mean, Meiv?’

‘I don’t know, but what I do know is that, no matter how much you read it, you’ll never understand it.’

‘And why not?’

‘Because someone needs to explain it to you,’ I sighed heavily.

‘Who?’

‘Someone who understands it.’

‘Who?’

‘I don’t know, Ayrat!’ I said, exasperated. My sister had been obsessing for weeks, perhaps months, over that stupid legend.

‘The book was grandad Vardur’s, he could have explained it to me.’

Hearing his name out loud and not in my thoughts made my whole chest ache. I calmed myself down.

‘I’m sure someone else could explain the legend to you.’

‘*The Legend of the Phoenix*,’ she reminded me of the title.

‘Yep.’ I held a mirror towards her. ‘Do you like them?’

Open-mouthed, she turned round and round.

‘I love them! Thanks, Meiv!’ She hugged me.

‘Meiv.’ My mother popped her head in. ‘Can you come for a minute.’

2

‘I was surprised to see how grown-up you are,’ said Steinar on the way to the market, looking ahead.

‘Well, fourteen years have passed since you left.’

‘Yeah, of course.’ He scratched his head. ‘Did you remember me?’

‘To be honest, no,’ I shrugged shyly.

A deafening silence fell over us. Between the trees, I could see the market stalls in the distance. Dad would be there, selling our grain, and he would get us out of this predicament mum had put us in when she made me go for a walk with Steinar. She knew how uncomfortable I felt with complete strangers and, as much as he was my brother, he was a complete stranger to me. As was I to him.

As my feet made the first fallen leaves crunch, I calculated his age. Thirty-one years old. Steinar was thirty-one now! He was practically an old man. Had he married? Or had children?

‘I was your age when I left home.’ He finally looked at me. There was tenderness in his eyes.

I was afraid he could read my mind.

‘Oh, yeah?’ I acted casual.

‘Yes, I was seventeen when I went to Branwen. Grandad Vardur paid my fees. Unfortunately, he could only pay for me.’

‘What is Branwen?’

‘Has no one ever told you about Branwen? Not even mum?’ He was dumbfounded.

‘No,’ I shrugged.

‘Branwen is the most prestigious school for Arhvuds, Elves and Aemirs.’ He looked at me expecting a big reaction. ‘That’s where I work.’

‘You’re a teacher?’

‘Yes, I teach Conjuring to arhvuds in third, fourth and fifth year.’

‘Sounds interesting.’ We carried on walking.

‘More than interesting! Branwen is unique,’ he exclaimed, passionately. ‘You have never cast a spell, have you?’

‘No, of course not. You know how forbidden magic is for kids.’

‘Sure, but you’re not a kid anymore, Meiveara.’

‘I know, but... I don’t even have a wand. They’re very expensive and there’s eleven of us. And using your hands...’

‘No! Don’t even think about trying it! Only great arhvud sorcerers can do without a wand. And when I say great sorcerers, I mean masters! Only a few ever reach that very high level. I have a deep admiration for them.’ He frowned.

‘You can’t?’

‘No,’ he smiled. ‘I’m not *that* good.’

The first market stall was always the bookshop. For the last few months, the bookseller's son had been helping him and learning the trade. Like all of us in Emros, professions and shops were passed down from generation to generation. Seven months, to be exact, was how long he had been learning the job for. Seven months was how long I hadn't been to the market.

In my village there were very few people of my age. He was one of them. We had been great friends in the past until I made the mistake of letting him kiss me. When his lips brushed against mine, in that second that our first kiss lasted, I knew he could never be more than a friend to me. From the moment I told him so, he had distanced himself from me and he told everyone in town I wanted to kiss him. My hands burned with rage when I saw him. A burning that tingled in my arms and thundered in my head. He held my gaze, laughing at me, provoking me.

'Do you have another copy?' Steinar asked the bookseller, showing him a torn book.

'Mr Grehm! How many years has it been?! Of course, of course we have other spellbooks.' The only thing missing was a reverential bow.

Everyone at the market looked at him and murmured. The maidens looked him up and down and the men mentally calculated how many gold coins he would have in his pocket, although there were also plenty of girls who eyed his wallet carefully and men who memorised those rosy lips.

‘I’ll be back later, I’m having a walk with my sister,’ he smiled good-naturedly.

‘Of course, sir.’ The bookseller appeared breathless.

Steinar was one of the few arhvuds who practised magic. Emros was a territory with few resources where the humblest creatures in all of Nartega lived. Magic, after the Elven War, came to be seen as something which didn’t bring wealth, and so gradually it dwindled away. Except for Steinar and a scant few others. Having a sorcerer son was a symbol of wealth.

‘As I was saying, Meiv, Branwen is a school that...’

‘Do you think I’m an idiot? Do I look like an idiot? Do I?’ interrupted the deep, booming voice of the fisherman.

‘Of course not! What about me? Do you think I’m an idiot?’

‘I...well...yes, yes you are,’ he dragged his words out weightily.

The second man threw a punch at the fisherman. The impact made his blood boil and he grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket.

‘I’m gonna...’

‘Gentlemen, gentlemen,’ Steinar cleared his throat nervously. ‘Can I ask what the matter is?’

I looked at him wide-eyed. No one should ever get involved in the fisherman’s fights, unless they want to take a black eye home or the have the mark of his teeth in their shoulder.

‘He says I gave him false gold. And he’s lying!’

‘How dare...’ the fisherman raised his fist and gritted his teeth.

‘Gentlemen! Gentlemen, there’s no reason to throw resort to violence,’ he continued, before the stunned expression of everyone present. ‘How much was it?’

‘What?’

‘How much did it cost? No more than four coins, I presume?’ From his pocket he took out five gold coins with the shield of Tundra on them. ‘Look, here you go. Five gold coins. Settle your debt with this man.’

‘Th...thank you Mr Grehm.’ The man took off his hat.

Moodily, but with a quick hand, the fisherman took the money Steinar offered him before he had a chance to regret it.

‘Well, Meiv, as I was saying...’ And we continued our stroll towards our father’s stall.

I didn’t know what to say after what had just happened. I was bewildered.

‘Branwen is a great school. It trains the best sorcerers in the whole of our country. In all Nartega, Meiveara! And...and for me it would be an absolute honour if this term you would come with me and begin your studies there.’

‘What?!’

‘I know grandad would have wanted his grandchildren to study at the best magic school in the world.’

‘But...’

‘As a teacher, I’m allowed to enrol one student with all expenses covered until they graduate in fifth year. I’ve

spoken to mum and she says you're the one who would get the most out of the time at Branwen. Also, we wouldn't have to wait until you're old enough to start. You already are!' my brother continued, noticeably nervous as he tried to convince me.

'Steinar...'

'Meiveara, I know it's a difficult decision. I know that leaving your whole world behind to start a new life in Branwen isn't easy. I know what it's like because I did it. And it was the best decision of my life.' He took a deep breath. 'And besides, I think we're more alike than you think.'

'Steinar? Steinar!' Dad came running over to hug him, almost hoarse.

I watched how my dad lifted him off the ground as I felt the earth swallow me up.

Around the crowded dining table, the dance of glances between my mother, Steinar and I began. My thoughts bounced around so intensely within the four walls of my head that the stories my siblings told Steinar didn't reach my ears. I was sure that any one of them would have accepted and not looked back. Some quicker, some slower, but all of them would have come back from the walk with their chest puffed out saying, *I'm going to be a sorcerer*, and the follow up, *and you're not*, would have echoed in all our minds. That's why I struggled to understand why my mother had chosen me.

I spent the whole dinner moving a pea from one side of my plate to the other. I longed to be a sorceress. Of course I did. It was what every arhvud growing up in Emros dreamed of being. Because magic flowed through our veins and there couldn't exist a greater feeling of failure than knowing you were destined to be something you could never be. How many times had my mother caught me running around the forest with a stick pretending a great spell was coming out of it. Maybe she remembered that image and that's why she had chosen me. Despite being the clumsiest of all my siblings.

My mother looked at me and followed the back and forth of my pea with her eyes. I could see in the corner of her lips that she wanted to tell me something, but she didn't open her mouth. Not in front of everyone. Not in the only meal we had shared with Steinar in the last fourteen years. That I was absorbing all of our mother's attention was something that nobody noticed, because they were all so busy trying to impress our eldest brother, refilling his cup and serving him more mash before his plate was even empty. Everyone, except Merinda.

'Well, Meiv, don't you have anything to tell us?' She tried to catch my eyes with her malicious smile.

'No, nothing,' I spluttered.

Steinar looked crestfallen to see my lack of excitement for his proposal. Merinda noticed. That he empathised with me, that he looked at me affectionately. At me.

'That's a lie. I've been hearing the big news for weeks.'

'What news?' asked one of my siblings.

'Haven't you heard?' She feigned surprise. 'It's all anyone is talking about at the market. And more so around the first stall.'

'Merinda,' I stuttered.

'Oh, don't be shy, little sis. We've all been there.' Her smile widened.

'Been where?' someone chimed in.

'Did something happen with the bookseller? Any trouble?' my father intervened, worried.

'Of course not, dad. I've not been there for months.'

‘And I’m not surprised.’ She leaned towards Steinar, who was sitting to her right. ‘You see, it seems our Meiv was in love with the bookseller’s son and he rejected her. And he was her only friend. Just think how lonely...’

I stood up and felt a wave of heat wash over me from my feet all the way up to my head. I glared at her furiously, in a deathly silence where the only sound in the room seemed to be Merinda’s smile.

‘Well, he seemed like a very nice boy to me,’ Steinar interjected. ‘And it’s very smart of Meiv to bear in mind that, if she’s friends with the bookseller’s son, she’ll have all the books she could want at her disposal.’

I felt relief. Merinda didn’t know what to say.

‘You’re right there,’ agreed my mother.

‘But, do you like him, Meiv?’ my father wanted to know.

I sat back down holding Merinda’s gaze, her face now red with embarrassment and impotence.

‘No more than other boys in the village, dad. I suppose I learnt well from Merinda.’

With that answer, my father, who was much slower in grasping what was truly going on in his house, realised that this was in fact another of the many battles between Merinda and I in which the only truth was the mutual hate we had for each other. Steinar carried on smiling for several minutes, while I didn’t take my eyes off her. The adrenaline-fuelled fire I felt inside wouldn’t let me. My other siblings whispered to each other and chuckled softly. I ate for the first time all evening.

Merinda wiped her lips carefully and stood up.

‘I’m going for a walk along the riverbank. Steinar, will you join me?’ She smoothed out her dress over her large belly.

‘Well, I haven’t finished eating my...’

‘Nighttime is dangerous in the forest. Especially for a pregnant woman. The protection of a sorcerer would be very handy.’

He swallowed and nodded. As soon as they went out the door, I got up and went to my room.

The nest I'd made with my bedsheets held be down. I tried to think over and over again whether I wanted to pack my bags for the abyss that had opened up before me, or stay in Emros. Stay in Emros with my parents, my siblings, the kuovas and the grain. Stay and hear my mother's laugh, the patter of bare feet on wood and the watermill grinding grain. Stay and smell the humidity of the river, freshly baked bread and my mother's perfume when she kisses me goodnight. The good morning from Ayrat. My feet on the moist earth and sinking my toes into it. The gentle breeze between the trees. The smell of salt from the sea.

My mother poked her head round the door.

'Can I come in?'

'Yes, come in.'

She closed the door, sad down and put her hands on my legs.

'Are you okay, Meiv? Tomorrow I'll talk to Merinda about what happened. She was completely out of line and I want her to think about it. Although Merinda should be the least of your worries right now. I know that Steinar has suggested you go to...'

'I'm not going to go,' I interrupted her bluntly.

'Why not?' she blinked.

'I don't want to leave home.' My eyes welled up.

'Meiv.' She hugged me. 'This is a great opportunity, though. What are you going to do here? Get married, like Merinda?'

'No, I'll go to the market with dad to sell the grain.'

'Dad doesn't need you with him at the market.' She moved a tuft of hair away from my face and smiled sadly.

'He's always complaining that he needs people and...'

'Meiv...'

'Mum, I don't want to go.' I felt my heart racing at the idea that she'd force me to.

My mother parted my blonde hair away from my troubled face.

'I'm not going to force you to go to Branwen. I know why you're scared. Leaving Emros and going to Tundra isn't easy. Nor is going five years without being able to leave Branwen and come home.'

'I didn't know Branwen was in Tundra,' I sniffled.

'Oh, yes. Next to the forest where the most fascinating creatures you can imagine live,' she replied, trying to act casual.

'I don't care,' I murmured.

'Can I ask you something?' She took my hands in hers and looked me in the eye.

'Yes.'

'Can you live the rest of your life without practising magic? Without being a sorceress?'

‘Well... There are sorcery schools in Emros.’

‘Yes, to the south, about an hour from here. You’d come home on weekends and only study for two years.’

‘See? It’s a...’

‘And in one month at Branwen, you’d learn more than in two years at a school here. You won’t just learn how to use magic. You’ll learn to understand Nartega and you’ll meet other arhvuds, elves and aemirs.’ There was hope in her voice.

‘Mum, I...’

‘I’m not going to force you, Meiv. I just want you to be aware of what you’re choosing.’ A tear fell down her cheek. ‘Do you know how bad I feel for not being able to give my children the education they deserve? Only Steinar has been able to study and work in something he likes. Steinar is the only one of my children who could allow themselves to dream. Not even Merinda, who is the second oldest, has been able to. What can I give you, the eighth? Or him,’ here she touched her stomach, on the verge of tears, ‘who will be the twelfth?’

‘I know, but...’

‘Steinar is offering you the chance to become a sorceress, to get out of Emros, to expand your horizons.’

‘I know you’re right,’ I whispered, almost hoarse. ‘But I’m scared.’

‘Any other reaction would be strange, darling.’ She stroked my hair. ‘But five years is a small sacrifice for a better life.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘Steinar is leaving first thing tomorrow morning for Branwen. You’ll have to decide before then.’

‘Tomorrow?!’

‘I’ll leave this here for you in case it helps.’ She placed a black box on my lap.

‘What is it?’

‘Open it,’ she smiled.

I opened it. I couldn’t believe it. I was scared to even touch it. It was the first time I’d seen one up close.

‘It was your grandad Vardur’s. No one has used it for more than thirty years, since he retired and married grandma.’

‘But...is the wand for me?’ I felt like I couldn’t close my mouth.

‘You’ll need it in Branwen.’

I looked at my mother, smiling at me, full of emotion, then at the wand. A red wand, two palms long and not very thick. I didn’t even dare to hold it.

‘I’ll leave you to rest.’ She kissed my forehead firmly. ‘Tomorrow will be a long day.’

‘Thanks,’ I breathed, feeling moved.

Just like the previous day, my brothers and parents went outside. But this time it was different. It was a farewell. Steinar hugged our parents. Meanwhile, Ayrat came over to me.

‘Are we never going to see you again?’ she asked with deep sadness.

‘Of course you’ll see me. I’ll be back as soon as I can. I promise.’ I hugged her, holding back the tears.

‘Meiveara,’ my mother called me.

‘Yes?’

She took off her necklace and put it on me. I looked down at it hanging there. A beautiful bright blue stone that that been around my mother’s neck for as long as I could remember.

‘This way you’ll always have me close to you and I’ll be with you from the first day until the last. Whenever you need strength, squeeze it and I’ll be there.’

‘Are you sure you want me to take it?’

‘I couldn’t be surer.’

I threw my arms around her and gulped back all my tears.

‘I love you, Meiv.’

‘I love you, too, Mum.’ I hugged her as tight as I could, wanting that moment to last forever.

‘I’m sorry to interrupt, but we have to go,’ said Steinar as he approached us.

I smelt my mother for the last time and, closing my eyes, I tried to memorise her arms squeezing me. I said goodbye to my father, who wasn’t able to say a word, and all of my siblings. Except Merinda. She hung back on the threshold of the house, behind everyone, cradling her belly and looking so serious I could feel her glare boring into me from head to foot.

I didn’t look back. Seeing my house and family get smaller as I got further away was something I couldn’t have handled.

Steinar led me to the forest and we passed by the river. The kuovas, worried, followed my progress, sensing something was going to happen. *I’ll be back*, I mouthed to them. They talked amongst themselves and looked back at me. I didn’t even have time to stop to see if they had understood me.

Steinar walked quickly among the trees. I had no idea where we were headed. My brother seemed to be looking for somewhere in particular. When he found it, he stopped dead, took a whistle out his pocket and blew. I didn’t hear anything.

I looked around me, expecting something to happen, but nothing. I looked at him, trying to guess if he knew his whistle didn’t work. He took a breath and blew again. Although it still wasn’t working, I heard the flapping of

heavy wings approaching. The dry leaves began to flutter in circles and my hair swirled around as it covered my face. That tornado seemed like it wanted to eat us up. My brother looked to the sky, smiling ear to ear.

It wasn't a storm, it was the descent of a winged horse. Quickly, I stepped back three or four paces. My mouth was dry. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

'Is that a...?' I said, agasp.

'Yes, it's a pegasus,' he smiled. 'It will be our mode of transport to get to Branwen. They lent him to me to come to get you.'

The pegasus was huge. Its white hair glimmered in the sunlight. Its hooves and strong wings made me take a few steps back. I thought about running all the way home. The pegasus had its black eyes locked on mine. It neighed.

'Don't be afraid, he's harmless.'

The black marbles it had for eyes looked me up and down and blinked. The Pegasus wasn't challenging me, it was analysing me, trying to get to know me. Finally, it lowered its head, which I took as a good sign.

'He just allowed you to mount him.' Steinar couldn't stop smiling.

'Really?' I was overcome with joy.

'He only lets riders with a good heart mount him.'

I looked at the pegasus again, feeling incredibly flattered. He was still bowing to me and then I saw the saddle on his back.

'Come on, Meiveara, this way.'

Steinar picked up my suitcase and took out his wand.

‘What are you going to do?’

‘You can’t ride with it,’ he laughed.

Then he said an incomprehensible word and it began to shrink so much that Steinar was able to put it in his pocket. Without another word, he helped me climb onto the pegasus.

‘But, Steinar...’

‘Don’t worry, I’m going in the front seat. See? In this saddle we both fit comfortably.’

I remained completely paralysed, unable to feel a single muscle.

‘Here, put these glasses on. Meanwhile, I’m going to put on the security reins.’

The glasses stuck to my head with an elasticated band, the reins tied my legs and waist to the seat. Between the front seat and mine there were two notches for me to hold onto. Once my brother had finished fastening me, I moved my legs to reassure myself that they wouldn’t come loose.

With an agile jump, Steinar got into the seat in front of me and put the harnesses around him too.

‘And...now what?’

‘Now, I’ll whistle to him and he’ll take off. People often feel nauseous or a bit faint during the ascent. Don’t worry, it’s totally normal, okay?’

‘Okay,’ I said uncertainly.

‘Once we level out, the flight will take three hours.’

‘Three hours?!’

‘Yes,’ he laughed. ‘We’ll see the sunrise.’

‘Steinar, I...’

‘Hold on!’ And then he whistled.

The pegasus began to run before I could cling on. In a matter of seconds we were ascending. I didn’t realise I’d begun to shout in genuine terror until the birds took flight, fleeing from me. Even I wanted to flee from myself.

I understood the purpose of the goggles. The wind battered us violently as I felt gravity trying to pull me back down to the ground. I felt the horses’ strong muscles contracting beneath me during the ascent. In the thickness of the night, I heard Steinar laughing and whooping and at that very moment I knew I would never be the same again. Because the Meiv of just ten minutes ago wouldn’t have laughed while riding a pegasus.

When the winged horse stopped ascending and levelled out, I looked back. I managed to see the roof of my house over the trees. I blew a kiss to my mum, in case she was watching me. And then I didn’t look back. I felt an emptiness inside, which rumbled, hungry to discover new realities.

‘How was it?’ he asked.

‘Not as bad as I expected,’ I lied.

‘That was the worst bit. Now relax and enjoy the views.’ He patted my leg twice to reassure me.

Forests, plains and mountains. The river I bathed in with the kuovas among the trees and the smoke from the bakeries which rose before the sun. Soon we began to

leave the sea behind, at the very moment when the mountains were so high that the pegasus had to climb higher again. Among them I made out the smoke from the embers of a fire that had just been put out.

‘Do people live in the mountains?’ I squinted, trying to see better in the distance.

‘No, not in these ones.’

Then where is that smoke coming from? I thought.

Soon I got used to the sound of the pegasus’ wings, so much so that I would swear my heartbeat was synchronised with it. The sun rose behind us, tinging the trees with an orange light.

‘We’ll arrive at Branwen soon,’ said Steinar.

The mountains were replaced by a dense forest. The damp smell reached us all the way up there. Humidity and flowers. The orange light of the dawn mingled with that green was the most beautiful combination of colours I had ever seen. I tried to memorise everything around me in case I couldn’t return.

Gradually, the pegasus descended. On firm ground, a deafening ringing in my eardrums confounded me.

‘It’s normal for them to hurt. It’ll pass soon,’ he said as he untied me. ‘Here, your suitcase.’ With a second spell, my suitcase regained its usual size.

‘Thanks.’

‘I’m going to take the pegasus with the rest. Stay here, okay? I’ll be right back.’

I nodded weakly. Steinar had left me at the edge of the forest. The legendary Tundra forest. I hadn’t imagined

it like that. Timidly, I turned while my legs were still shaking from the journey.

The trees were so high my eyes lost track of them. The smell of the forest was intoxicating, a smell my nostrils didn't recognise. Everything about it attracted me, inviting me to enter it. I could even have sworn there was a voice inside that called out to me. The light didn't reach the whole forest; there were parts of it that remained submerged in the shadows.

There was something in there that beckoned me.

I snapped out of that daydream when I heard a hoot. I looked at the nearest tree and there was an owl with the feet and tail of a cat. The creature was staring at me.

'It's a catowl.' Steinar appeared behind me. 'An owl and a cat at the same time.'

'You don't say.'

Whoever was in charge of naming things didn't waste too much brain power on it, I thought.

'There are lots of creatures that will surprise you in the Tundra forest.' He fell silent for a few moments. 'Are you ready to discover Branwen?'

Steinar and I went around the mountain: there it was.

‘Wow,’ I whispered breathlessly.

Branwen was a colossal fortress with a huge castle in its interior. To get in, there was a heavy wooden door which descended and allowed you to pass over the river.

The wall that housed the door was orange, orange like the whole construction. Inside the wall there was a large building, so large that I couldn’t count how many windows it had. That building was located between two mountains upon whose summits were two circular towers connected by a bridge. Near the left one was a massive waterfall, created by the river my brother and I crossed when they lowered the drawbridge.

‘Welcome, Mr Grehm. I see you bring company.’

The person talking to us was a small man standing on a stool inside the booth that controlled the raising and lowering of the drawbridge.

‘Yes, Estik,’ he laughed as the drawbridge thundered shut. ‘Do you have the enrolment form I gave you when I left?’

‘Here you go,’ the little man handed it to me.

I looked at my brother and then at the sheet which had *Grehm* in one corner. I took it and began writing with one of the pens they had there.

‘I see your sister hasn’t come across many gnomes in her life,’ laughed the little man.

As I wrote my name, I noticed that it became embedded in the paper. I stated that I was an arhvud and that I’d be entering first year. Then I stopped when I got to *subjects*.

‘Here you have to mark an X in *general* and in *elective* you have to choose a subject.’

‘Elective?’

‘First years can choose between Botany, Swimming and Music,’ the gnome read out.

Swimming, I wrote.

I signed at the bottom of the page and handed it to Estuk.

‘Very good, Meiveara,’ he read my form. ‘Now, come.’

I followed his finger and went through a little door.

‘Nice to meet you, Miss Grehm.’ He held out his hand.

‘Likewise.’

‘Look, see that pile of books.’

‘Yes.’

‘Great. Take them. They’re yours.’

‘Mine?’

‘Yes, you don’t want to start the term without books, do you?’ he laughed. ‘Come on, I’ll help you with it all.’ My brother helped me with three books and the suitcase.

‘Until next time, Grehm family!’ the gnome bid us farewell.

‘Goodbye, Estuk!’

We walked in silence towards the large building with a thousand windows. We passed by the waterfall, which made no noise.

‘But...how...’

‘The students couldn’t sleep from the noise of the waterfall, so it has a silencing charm.’

Gobsmacked, I could only look at it, and admire Branwen.

‘Impressed?’ smiled Steinar excitedly.

‘Very, very much so.’

We went inside the building and a pixie bumped into my brother’s face.

‘Oh! Sorry, Mr Grehm!’

‘It’s fine, don’t worry about it.’

Amazed, I discovered that dozens of pixies were flying along Branwen’s corridors. Winged men and women no bigger than my hand and with high-pitched voices and rosy cheeks. What were the pixies doing in here when they had the vast Tundra forest right outside?

‘Come on, Meiv. Let’s go to your room.’

Walking quickly, Steinar led me to the far right-hand side of the corridor, where there were some stairs. The stairs emerged from the walls and the ceiling and connected with the tower.

‘This way,’ he pointed, walking a little in front of me.

We went up more than forty stone steps until we reached the tower. It was much wider than I had imagined and had several corridors and floors.

We climbed the spiral staircase to the highest point. In that corridor, where the first rays of sunlight came in and there were views of the other tower, there were only four doors. We went to the last one and he took out a key from his pocket to open it.

‘This is your room.’ He extended his arm, inviting me to go in first.

My heart rate accelerated.

The room had a curved ceiling and what stood out were the drawings of flowers and leaves. In the room, everything was green, white and brown. In the middle there was a fireplace and a round window with views of the waterfall and the forest of Tundra. There were two beds, one on either side of the chimney. Beside each bed was a table with a chair and lantern. The bedroom was four times bigger than the one I had in Emros.

‘I don’t know who you’ll share a room with, but it will be a first-year girl, like yourself.’ This tower is for all the girls that study here. The other is for the boys.’

‘Okay,’ I replied, still admiring my room.

‘Most students will arrive at the fortress tomorrow.’

‘Why is Branwen a fortress?’

‘Before it was a school, it served to defend Tundra from invaders during the Elven War.’

‘What invaders?’

‘The Omens.’

‘Omens?’

‘It’s a lot of information for one day,’ he laughed. ‘Right now the most important thing is that you get settled in and unpack your suitcase, okay? Tomorrow there will be a reception in Branwen Hall that you cannot miss.’

‘But how will I know where the hall is?’

‘Don’t worry. Tomorrow a pixie will come to collect you all.’

‘Steinar...’

‘I have to go, Meiv. I’ll be around Branwen if you need anything okay? In that bag I’ve left you your uniform. Here’s your key.’ He spoke and moved hurriedly.

‘Okay, thanks.’

He kissed my forehead.

‘You don’t know how happy I am to have you here,’ he smiled at me before closing the door behind him.

Nighttime in Tundra was silent. It felt like only I was awake at those hours, which gave me the privilege of feeling like that scenery was only for me. The white moon welcomed me. Holding onto my mother's necklace and with my forehead pressed against the window, I told it all my worries.

I confessed that my biggest fear was returning to Emros the same person. I wanted to become a great sorceress, to show my family they were right to have trusted in me. I felt my mother's presence, although I knew that it would be the first night she wouldn't come to tuck me in before sleeping. The first of the rest of my life. And that made me feel helpless, unprotected and lost. I closed my eyes, begging myself to be up to the task.

Suddenly, I heard knocking and a blinding light came in through the window. I didn't remember having gotten into bed nor having fallen asleep.

'Sorry, sorry, did I wake you?' she said with a worried face.

'Don't worry, it's fine.'

'Really, I'm sorry. Are you Meiveara Grehm?'

'Just Meiv.'

‘Nice to meet you! I’m Shiana.’ She offered me her hand.

‘Are we roommates?’

‘Yes. Are you in first year, too?’ she asked me enthusiastically.

‘Yes.’

‘Great! We’ll be in lots of the same classes.’

Shiana was the first aemir I had seen up close in my life. I had to hide my excitement at seeing one of the drawings from grandad Vardur’s books in flesh and blood moving right before my eyes. A real aemir. Aemirs were half arhvud or elf, half animal. Centaurs, fawns and mermaids were the most common aemirs in that part of Nartega. According to my grandad’s stories, they weren’t as powerful as us and couldn’t perform magic without a wand, while some arhvuds could achieve that feat after a lifetime of preparation and sacrifice. Almost all Arhvuds who practised sorcery renounced that path to follow other more achievable goals, but even so, magic flowed through our veins.

My new roommate had the horns of a gazelle with the tips pointing inwards and rings going from the base to the halfway point of them. Her long, pointy gazelle ears, which poked out through her hair, gave her a funny appearance. She had large, clear eyes and a small button nose. My eyes were drawn to her hair: her short brown locks had several red strands. My grandfather told us that this was another of their distinctive traits: their bicoloured hair, which could appear in various ways.

I swallowed.

‘You’re an arhvud, right?’

‘Yes and you’re an aemir,’ I smiled nervously.

‘It’s impossible to hide,’ she shrugged.

‘I like your horns a lot.’

‘Thank you.’ Her eyes opened wide. ‘I like your round ears.’

Shiana unpacked her suitcase and put on her Branwen uniform. I hadn’t looked at mine yet. My roommate’s short robe was yellow and she wore brown trousers with matching boots. The sleeves of the robe were white and she told me it was mandatory to wear a belt tied round your waist on top of the robe.

I got changed as well. In the bag there were three uniforms, which only differed in the colour of the robe: blue, green and yellow. I put on the blue one. There were also several pairs of black trousers and a dark green cape.

The uniform fitted like a glove.

As we went down for the reception, guided by a pixie, Shiana told me that those three colours represented Branwen and they weren’t for distinguishing between races. Shiana turned out to be much taller than me and the aemir who looked most like me in the whole school. All the aemirs we saw in the corridors running here and there were hairier, with hooves and snouts.

I realised straight away that Shiana was very talkative and easily surprised. Just like me, she didn’t appear to know anyone else in the school. Although it was glaringly obvious that we were very different, her apparent

joyfulness and innocence made me instantly want to be her friend.

Once we had reached the main building, there were more than twenty pixies waiting for the first-year students to take us to the reception.

In the corridors there were so many people it was almost impossible to move. Elves, aemirs and arhvuds. The Arhvuds were by far the majority at Branwen. Everyone greeted each other, hugged each other and talked loudly. We finally made it to the hall. The pixie that had accompanied us told us to sit down wherever we liked. Shiana and I looked for a place amongst the throng of people.

The hall had a layout like a theatre. On the enormous stage, it seemed like they were going over the final touches.

‘So many people!’ exclaimed Shiana with eyes like saucers.

Students from all five years piled in to take their seats.

‘But, why does it seem like they haven’t seen each other in ages? Did they go home?’

‘No. At Branwen there’s a month’s rest every year. Some students go home, but the majority stay to prepare for their next subjects or do catch-up sessions on the previous ones.’

Shiana gave a start when several voices began to sing in unison. An owl accompanied them on the piano. The students from Branwen’s choir sung and moved like a single organ. While clutching my mother’s necklace, I prayed for them never to make me sing.

Soon, a middle-aged elf with a solemn expression and an assured manner appeared on the stage. She introduced herself as Professor Naiwen, headteacher of Branwen. She reminded us that we could only leave the fortress during Riding or Archery classes or with her authorisation. Neither were we allowed to go to the dwellings of the teachers or the pixies. She explained that classes would start the following day and that our timetables had been left at the end of our beds. She gave us permission to drop out of Branwen at any time. In fact, with the pressure of the classes and the workload, many wouldn't see their five years out. After this statement, she took a pause in which you could hear us gulping. Literally.

After her, numerous teachers and fifth-year students gave performances of magic. The Arhvuds excelled at conjury, the discipline my brother taught and which neither Aemirs nor Elves could perform. I spotted him near the stage, making sure everything went well, and it did. I could see his expression of satisfaction as he watched his students.

When the show ended, they told us that, as it was a special occasion, that day we would have lunch in the back garden.

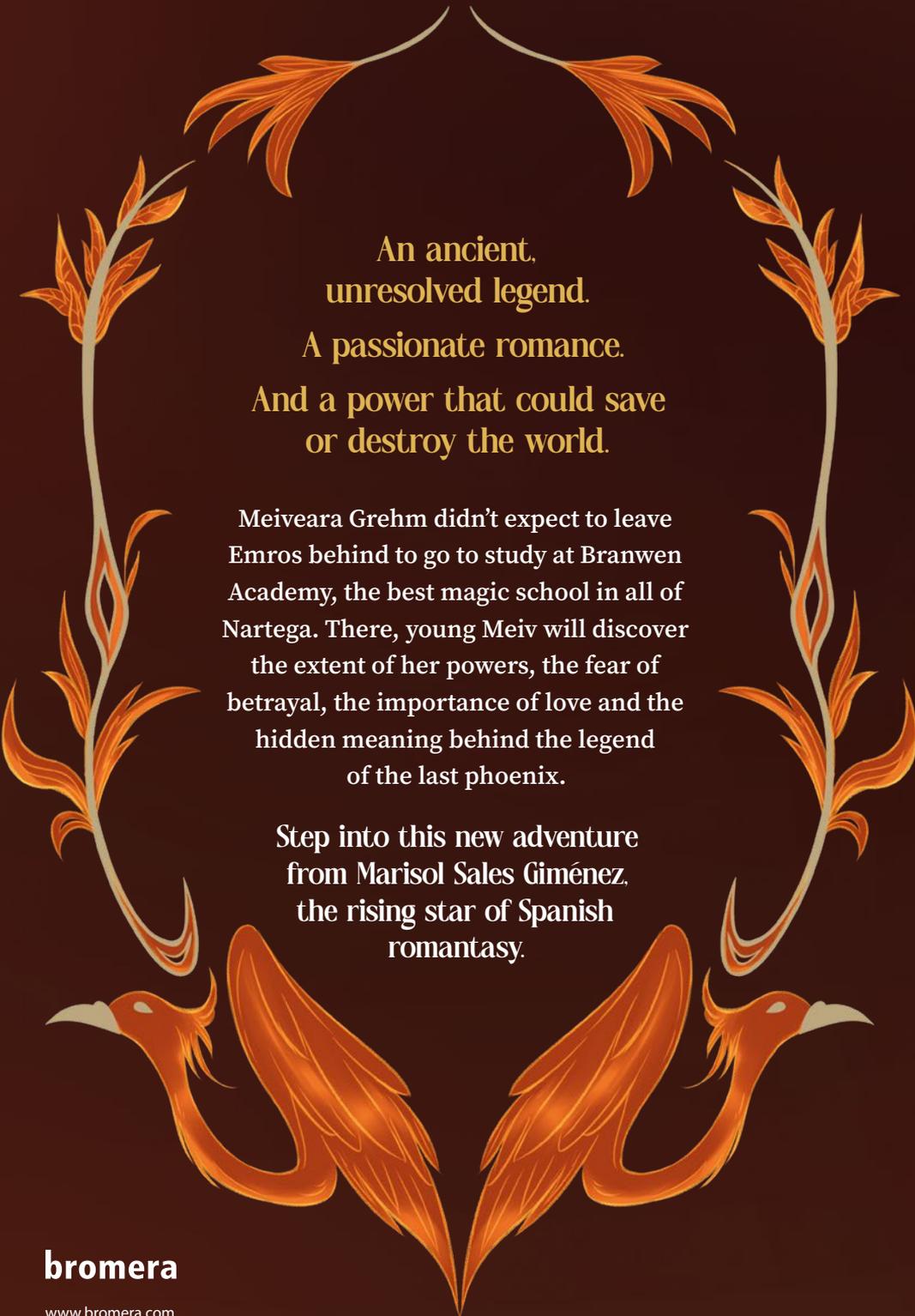
I fled to my room as soon as I had filled my stomach.

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