

Prologue

Thom stared straight ahead, ignoring his brother Liel. Tired of his older brother throwing tantrums when things didn't go his way, he ran his finger along the new bow hanging from his saddle. A present from his father this morning given to celebrate his fourteenth year.

"'Tis your fault I missed that deer, you stupid fool." Liel glowered at Thom as he leaned over and shoved him.

"I am not the fool." Thom grabbed the mane of his horse and righted himself. His stomach clenched. Going hunting with Liel had been a poor idea. He hated the fact that Thom could shoot better than he, but Thom had so wanted to try out his new bow and his father had insisted they go together. "'Twas your bad aim and nothing else."

Liel's face flushed crimson and he kicked Thom in the shoulder.

Thom landed with a thud, the wind going out of him. Damn. Liel would see him hurt before they got back to the castle so he'd have an excuse for not bringing home the deer. The horse snorted and pawed at the dirt. He rolled to the side so as not to be trampled. He scrambled up and dusted off his breeches. "You are only upset because you have nothing to bring to Father. You boasted you would provide a feast for tonight." *The Enchanted Hawk 2*

“I would have if you hadn’t spoiled my aim.” Liel crossed his arms over his chest and huffed. “I should have made you stay behind with Mother. You’re hardly old enough to be on a hunt.”

“I’m not a baby to stay with his mam or Father wouldn’t have given me a new bow.” Thom hit his horse on the flank to move him forward.

“I don’t know why Father wasted that bow on you.” Liel ground his teeth. “It should have been mine.”

“Tis my birthing day, not yours.” Thom stood as tall as he could. “I would have brought home the feast if you hadn’t bumped me so you could take the shot.”

“What a liar you are, Thom. You would never have had that deer.” Liel leapt from his horse and landed on top of Thom. The two rolled across the dirt, stirring up a cloud.

Thom yanked away, gave a kick at his brother and stomped toward the horses. “You’re a poor hunter.” He faced his brother. “I can shoot an arrow straighter than you on my worst day.”

Liel lunged and grabbed Thom by the ankles, felling him. He raised a fist to smash it into Thom’s face, but the younger boy twisted and the fist hit the dirt. “Hah!”

“Ow.” Liel moved to pin Thom to the ground.

Thom lifted his hips and dumped Liel. “Give it up, Liel.”

Liel’s face contorted. He scrambled to his feet as Thom leapt up. Liel butted Thom, spilling him into the pool of wa-ter.

“Hah!” Liel stomped to his horse, mounted and rode away. “You’re nothing but a drowned pup,” he hollered over his shoul-der, “while I’m the heir of the McGarrey castle and fiefdom.”

Thom sank like a rock, the pool deeper than he’d real-*The Enchanted Hawk* 3

ized. He pushed against the bottom, but his foot sank into the mud. His lungs burned, wanting air. Forcing himself not to breathe, he kicked to push himself upward. Large plants swayed with the water and his foot became entangled as he tried to get to the surface.

Don't panic. He'd drown if he did. Bending down, he tried to pull the plants free, but they seemed to have a mind of their own and his feet became more entangled. Never would Liel best him. He refused to drown.

He needed to breathe. His lungs would explode any moment. He yanked against the plants, but he couldn't get his legs free. The harder he pulled, the more the plants twisted about his legs. They would hold him and not allow him to leave their pool.

He righted himself. He'd seen but fourteen years. He wouldn't give in to the pool. Bubbles escaped his mouth. His life's air was leaving him to rot in this damn pool.

Coming toward him was something. In the murkiness of the water he couldn't tell what it was, but he knew it wasn't Liel. He couldn't swim. It must be some monster who would eat him for sure. As it came closer, he let more air escape his lungs. It had the tail of a fish and its arms were covered with scales, but the face was that of a girl, though gills pumped along its neck. It could breathe under the water. He couldn't. His mind felt fuzzy, as though he could no longer concentrate.

Is this creature death come to take me?

It skimmed along the bottom and grabbed at the plants. He had fought so hard against them, they had tangled upon themselves and it couldn't get him loose. The plants would never let him go. They would keep him.

He let more bubbles escape. His lungs burned and it did *The Enchanted Hawk* 4

no good to hold the air he had. He could settle onto the bot-tom of the pool and rest. He was so tired. So very very tired.

It grabbed the hilt of his knife that showed above the top of his boot. His eyes widened as it pulled the blade free and he put up his hands to defend himself. He was nearly drowned and a strange creature stole his knife. Will it carve out my heart? Will that be less painful than not being able to breathe?

It smiled, a strange lopsided smile, scales on its cheeks, but definitely a girl. A fish girl. He opened his mouth and let the rest of the air out. Breathe in the water and end it.

She hacked at the plants, and his legs came free. As she gave him a push toward the surface, he floated up. Before he reached the surface, he sank back into the water. His lungs held no more air. The water swirled in larger and larger cir-cles and she swirled with the water. After grabbing him, she pulled him up and shoved him toward the shore. He coughed as his head broke free of the water, then sucked in a mouthful of water rather than air, gagging.

She grabbed him from the back, under the arms, and pad-dled toward the shore. Fighting against her, he coughed and twisted. She still held his knife and she could still use it on him. Now that he could breathe, he wouldn't die today. He wouldn't let her take his life.

"It fine," she cooed, a soothing sound.

After three tries, she got him close enough to the shore so he could grab at the grass that lined the edge. With great effort, he dragged himself from the pool and lay upon the grass, gasping. "What are you?" he wheezed.

She blinked and studied him for a moment before she spoke. "Your saver."

He coughed and retched up water, holding his chest. *The Enchanted Hawk* 5

When he'd finished, he looked at her again. She wasn't a fish girl. She was but a girl and one smaller and younger than him. But he'd seen her tail and gills. He knew he had.

"The devil you are." His heart raced and he clenched his hands into fists. "You're the evil that tried to drown me."

She sat up and folded her legs before her. "Your saver." She planted his knife into the grass between them. "Your saver."

He stared at her for a long moment. "'Tis too much wa-ter I have breathed. You are but a dream." He stood, wobbled toward his horse, and pulled himself up into his saddle. "Imag-inings from the depth of the water. Nothing more." He rode away, clutching the mane of his horse to keep him in his seat.

His lungs still ached and his breath came in rasps. He let his chin rest against his chest as he rode, trying to suck in enough air to ease the pain.

His ire against Liel leaving him to drown burst forth. A fine birthing day he was having. He nearly died because of his brother's jealousy. Then he saw a strange, impossible creature who saved him.

The worst was he hadn't caught a deer for his feast to-night. *The Enchanted Hawk* 6

Chapter 1

Fifteen Years Later

Brylyn caught an updraft with her wings and floated higher in the blue sky. No clouds decorated her course today as she drifted on the swirls of air and danced across the sky. Freedom. That was what flying was.

The draft spent itself and she flapped her wings, soaring lower to catch another draft. Flying was one of her favorite pastimes, and doing so as a golden red hawk was her favorite form. After all, she was of the hawk clan. Her grandfather scolded her regularly for spending so much time away from home now that her mother was gone. She should marry and give him great-grandchildren before he went to join her mother, but she'd found none who caught her fancy. Besides, living concealed in the mountains had become wearisome.

Not only that, Thom stood in the east tower of the castle, watching her. She'd soared close enough to make sure. Most afternoons he watched as she danced along the air currents. Danced just for him.

He'd grown into a fine, strong feond since she'd rescued him from the pond. A feond who caught her fancy, but the *The Enchanted Hawk* 7

trouble was, he was a feond.

As the updraft threw her off, she let herself drop lazily across the sky. She wanted to sneak into the castle and be near him again, as she'd done on several occasions, each time at great risk. Usually she went as a cat, that he would stroke and talk to about his brother and the trials he had as the second son. His touch, as she sat in his lap, made her tingle all over in a strange manner.

She giggled. If anyone could hear her, they would not know what to think. Hawks didn't giggle. She flapped her wings and lifted herself up in a great arcing circle. She swooped back toward the castle. A large structure made of rough cut stone, it filled most of the area cleared from the forest. From the road built leading out of the forest, all that could be seen was the walls, but she could see within and she loved to watch the feonds. The walls enclosed a large yard, partly grass, partly dirt, with stone walkways leading from the castle itself to the outbuildings. Horses were kept in one. Feonds seemed to live in others. The yard always seemed filled with feonds doing much the same as her people did. They made cloth, tended small gardens, cooked, moved about and talked. One area of the castle yard however, was much different. Feonds with swords practiced fighting. These same feonds took turns standing upon the wall looking down the road.

Not many people came down the road. More often Thom or his brother would ride out with others to hunt in the forest. Once in awhile, she'd seen a stranger approach the gates to the castle. The feonds on top always held their bows and arrows at the ready, but never loosed them. The strangers were always admitted. Sometimes the feonds' behavior confused her. *The*

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The castle itself was very large and she loved swooping around it in a great circle. She watched for Thom's brother. He'd more than once tried to trap her and she feared him.

Two great towers stretched toward the sky as though trying to reach up to where she flew. She did a swoop around the east tower as Thom watched her. She swooped low and back over the top of the wall.

She did one last long loop and headed back toward the mountains. She needed to return before dark or her grandfather would worry. She let the air currents carry her along and gazed over the countryside. What is coming up the road?

The air current dropped her and she plummeted until she remembered to flap her wings. She soared over as an entourage made its way up the dusty road. A covered carriage was pulled by four matched gray horses. A feond, who must be a lord, rode in front of the carriage, holding himself erect. He had a sword strapped to his side and an emblem around his neck. His beard was a golden brown and matched his hair over which he wore no cap. He appeared the feond in charge.

Behind the carriage rode a similar feond, but younger. Behind him came twenty armed feonds. Straggling behind were loaded wagons driven by dusty looking feonds. Walking behind the wagons were feonds dressed in plain woolen breeches and kirtles. They trudged as though weary from their travels.

Brylyn floated overhead. Who could be in the carriage behind the dark blue curtains? Why are these feonds heading toward the castle? In all the years since she'd saved Thom, she'd only seen groups of a few feonds enter the castle. Never had such a large group arrived.

Is Thom in danger? Do they plan to take the castle from *The Enchanted Hawk* 9

him? They had to be here for some important purpose. Her heartbeat sped up and she flapped her wings harder. She had to know why they came to the castle. After all, it might affect her people.

She flew into the trees. Landing on a low branch, she slipped down to the ground as a woman. She wore a plain cream colored kirtle and should blend in with the feonds at the end of the line. If she was careful. Would they all know each other and discover who she was?

She stood for a minute, hidden by the trees from those who wandered past. Her heart threatened to jump from her chest. Sweat trickled down her back. Taking a deep breath, she eased forward until the last of the feonds came abreast of her, then she slid out of the trees and joined the line. If they discovered her, she would take wing and be away before they could cause her harm. She had to know what was happening within the castle. She had to know Thom was safe. Even if she faced peril herself.

“Tis a long way we’ve had to walk just for the mistress to wed,” grouned a female feond in front of her with a long blonde braid.

“You’ve had your turns riding on the wagons.” An older feond with gray hair wound about her head stomped along be-side the younger one. “More than your turns.”

A wedding. That was a joyous thing. Who is to wed? Thom? Seemed unlikely. Liel would be the first to take a wife. Unless their father was wedding again. She had watched as they’d lowered their mother into the ground five summers ago. Seemed a strange thing to do with a body when the essence had left, but she had watched and seen the tears rimming Thom’s eyes. *The Enchanted Hawk* 10

“Doesn’t matter.” The younger feond kicked her foot in the dust, sending up a cloud. “Don’t know why we had to fol-low. Surely the lord of the castle has attendants of his own who can wait upon our lords and lady.”

“Hush,” the older feond warned. “You won’t be wanting the master to hear your bellyaching. He’ll stand for none of it.”

“Bah.” The younger feond glanced around.

Brylyn stepped to the side to shadow them. As they were the last in line, they might notice they’d picked up a straggler. She held her breath.

The younger feond brushed the dust from the front of her kirtle. “Our lord wants nothing more than to show his wealth to the prospective groom.”

“’Tis important in such a union.” The older feond stopped and stretched her back. “Wouldn’t want the groom to think our Lady is unworthy of him.”

The older feond reminded Brylyn of her aunt, who had seen one hundred and fifty summers. She stretched her back often when she worked too long. She also made treats for Brylyn and listened for hours to her adventures away from the village.

“He is unworthy of our Lady.” The younger feond paused next to the older one. “This castle is far from aught else. They cannot be of such grandeur.”

Unworthy. Nothing but a cnapa judging Thom and his clan. They were a proud and rich clan. Brylyn had seen how the villagers lived farther up the mountain. They barely sur-vived, especially when the winters came. They did not tend the plants correctly to have the food they needed.

But within Thom’s castle they never wanted. She’d even *The Enchanted Hawk* 11

seen wagons taking foodstuffs to the villages. Might be that the lady was unworthy of being part of their clan.

“You are just miffed because the man you set your eye upon was not included in our party.” The older feond walked forward again. “He’ll have found another before our return.”

“If we return. Some of us will be left behind to rot in this dismal place.” The younger feond tossed her head so her braid swayed from side to side.

“I for one would be glad to stay.” The older feond rubbed her knee. “I have no desire to walk home and this seems a quiet place to spend the rest of my days.”

“I shan’t walk back to our castle. I’ll find someone else to care for me.” She stomped ahead leaving the older feond behind. “If I must return, I shall ride.”

The older feond laughed and made a face. “Thinks herself mighty fine when she’s nothing but a lower maid too willing to part her legs for a bauble with nothing but a pockmarked face to set her off.” She paused again and heaved a great sigh. “Such a long way our lord expects these ancient bones to travel without aid of a wagon.”

Brylyn stopped behind the woman. She wanted to tell the woman the castle was just ahead, but she feared talking to her. She wiped the palms of her hands against her kirtle.

“Come along, child, and catch up.” The older feond turned and stared at Brylyn.

Brylyn took a step back. The woman had a kindly face but she was a feond. She should flee before she was caught. Her breath stuck in her throat and she couldn’t move. Her stom-ach flipped and fluttered.

“I saw you step from the forest and join us.” She smiled. “Don’t worry. Tyra is too concerned with her own lot to see *The Enchanted Hawk* 12

what is happening about her.” She held out her hand to Brylyn. “Now if you’d been a handsome man, she’d have seen you the moment you emerged, but another woman she has no eyes for.”

Brylyn didn’t move. She glanced toward the forest. It was thinning the nearer they came to the castle. Escape would be harder farther on, but a great wedding was to take place and she sorely wanted to witness it. The trees called to her. And the wind. She took in a deep breath and held it.

“If you wish to join us and enter the castle to see the festivities, I won’t give you away. I’m sure not many of the surrounding folks are invited. Our lord is too nervous about endangering his daughter to allow such.”

Brylyn glanced at the feond with a kindly face. Really wanting to see the festivities, she’d have to be very careful not to let anyone suspect who she was. She could sneak away later and let her grandfather know she was safe. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d come home after the sun had taken its rest. Stepping up beside the feond, she strolled with them toward the castle. The rest of the entourage had left them behind. “Won’t you be in trouble for lagging?”

The feond laughed. “No. I often lag. ’Tis my age. They can’t expect an old woman to keep up if they don’t provide her with a ride.”

“Why do they make one as old as you walk? Seems cruel.”

“Oh, I have ridden my share, but one of the attendants is with child and will birth any day. She couldn’t walk anymore so I gave her my seat.” She rubbed her backside. “Riding the wagon is not so comfortable anyway.”

“Why would they bring a woman with child?” Brylyn stared at the ground. Seemed a strange thing to do. Could *The Enchanted Hawk* 13

harm both the woman and the child.

“They believe she will bring them good fortune.”

Brylyn stopped. She opened her mouth to speak, then stopped. All the words she wanted fled her mind.

“’Tis a silly superstition, is it not?” The woman rubbed at her back as she trudged along.

“Most.” Brylyn looked at the woman, then smiled. She liked this feond. She was nothing like what she’d been told feonds were like. The young woman who had stomped off might be evil as her grandfather had said, but she felt no evil from this woman. Only a soundness of mind and essence.

“I’m Fia.”

“I am most glad to make your awareness, Fia.”

“Awareness?” Fia laughed. “And I’m glad to make your acquaintance.”

Brylyn shrugged. “I am Brylyn, of...” Of the hawk clan she’d almost said.

“Of what?” Fia looked forward.

“Of a nearby village.” Brylyn touched the feond’s arm. It was warm and the skin soft, belying the wrinkles and hard look of the woman.

“Well, Brylyn, of a nearby village, join us and watch the festivities. Once we are within the gates of the castle, none will care that there are another pair of hands to help with the work. Our Lady is not disposed to do anything but sit and look beautiful, though ’tis more convincing when she wears her hair arranged around the side of her face. It hides the scars from her accident, but she is comely enough.”

“Thank you, Fia. I very much wish to see the festivities.” She patted the woman’s hand that rested upon hers. “’Tis not far to the castle now. We shall be there within moments.” *The Enchanted Hawk* 14

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Thom McGarrety stood in the tower and watched the hawk as he had many afternoons. He drew great pleasure from watching the graceful soaring of the bird, wishing he could join it as it floated upon the wind currents.

He shook his head. Fanciful is what his father and brother would say, but he didn't care. He still remembered the day he'd nearly drowned and the strange half girl, half fish creature had rescued him. He'd heard the myths of the strange creatures who once inhabited the forests before his people had come to live here. They were able to take shapes other than those of men, but they had been evil and had been driven from the forests. The first of his kind had hunted and killed them until they were no more.

Of course, that was naught but a myth. No creatures existed who could change their forms and soar into the sky or become fish and pull drowning boys from the water. It had been nothing but a lack of air that had caused him to see things.

He had gone back to the pool many times over the years, hoping to find the young girl who had saved his life. He wanted to thank her. He wanted to know if she was real.

He watched as the reddish golden hawk soared toward the forest and disappeared. He glanced down the road. A rider thundered up the road, coming around the bend in a great hurry. The lookout for the entourage that carried his brother's wife-to-be would not be far behind. They weren't expected for two days yet. Hell, he was supposed to ride out to meet them.

He slapped his green plumed hat on his head and took the stairs out of the tower two at a time, buckling his girdle *The Enchanted Hawk* 15

woven with golden threads over his best linen tunic. Sword bouncing against his leg, he hit the bottom stair and raced to-ward the bailey where he skidded to a stop when his boots hit the dirt. He looked around and found several of the men look-ing at him, their mouths hanging open. Usually he made a more dignified entrance, but if the McShanes arrived at the castle without his meeting them, Liel would be unbearable for days.

“Quickly.” He drew in a breath and waved toward the gate. “Mount up.”

No one moved. The rider thundered through the gate. “The McShanes are neigh upon us.”

“Mount up,” Thom ordered.

A flurry of activity ensued as the horses were covered with estival, the armor that protected them. A bright green plume was attached to his horse’s head. He mounted, raised his sword and headed out the gate. He hoped the men were following.

He forced himself to smile as he rode toward the guests. He had been against this union. Liel had offered for the hand of another in a domain far from theirs, but before the offer could be accepted or rejected, an offer had arrived from the McShanes. The exact terms of the marriage had never been agreed upon and that made Thom uneasy. The McShanes seemed to demand a great deal and didn’t seem to want to re-pond in kind.

Liel had been enraptured that someone had heard of their little domain nestled within the mountains and had leapt at the offer. Even Father hadn’t been able to dissuade him.

He glanced over his shoulder. His men followed him in perfect formation.

The hours they spent training showed even *The Enchanted Hawk* 16

if they'd never had reason to go into battle. As Captain of the Guard, Thom took his responsibilities very seriously. The day might arrive when they had to defend themselves, though it hadn't in the two hundred years his family had resided within the mountains.

Besides, what else did he have to occupy his time? Liel had refused to leave the mountains to find a wife. He strutted about acting as though he ruled the domain, but the reality was that his older brother was a poor hunter and swordsman. Father had finally sent a messenger to find Liel a wife so that Thom could then look for one since none existed within their domain worthy to wed sons of the castle.

As he rounded the bend, the entourage crept up the road toward them. It seemed to extend into forever. The attendants within the castle wouldn't be pleased about having to share their quarters with the newcomers, but naught could be done about that. He just hoped there would be sufficient food and drink for so many. Liel would grouse and stomp around if his guests weren't well attended.

If Thom didn't love the mountains so much, he would go in search of a new life outside, but he knew he would miss them and his hawk.

He reined in his horse in front of the man who had to be Lord McShane. "Greetings from the McGarretys and welcome to our castle."

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Thom sat to the left of his father as the greeting feast for the McShanes began. His father was propped in his chair at the head of the table, but Thom feared he would collapse before the meal finished. Maybe if the McShanes drank enough, they wouldn't miss his father if he retired early.

His father was holding on to see Liel married and his line secured. Not expecting him to last much beyond the wedding, Thom would miss his father when he left them, but he also knew his father missed his mother very much. His strength had gone into the grave with her and he'd wasted away since the day they'd buried her.

Thom glanced around the table. Looking most pleased with himself, Liel sat at his father's right and leaned back from the table, holding a goblet in his hand. Already Liel had consumed too much wine. Thom had seen him at it before they came to the banquet room. Gordan and Iver, the McShane brothers, sat to Thom's left while Lord Barclay McShane sat to Liel's right. All of them held goblets of wine which had been refilled more than once and the food had not yet been served. They no longer wore their swords, but daggers were affixed to the girdles which held their tunics closed. Tunics made of a rich material Thom couldn't identify, but they were embroidered in gold with lions. The same emblem was emblazoned upon the handles of their swords.

Anna, Liel's bride, sat next to her father. Her long brown hair was braided on the left and hung over her shoulder. With her hands folded in her lap, she looked demure, her eyes downcast, giving furtive glances toward Liel from time to time. She wore a kirtle of the same material as the men with flowers embroidered on it in purples and blues.

A page came with more wine and Thom waved him away. He'd taken but a sip of his and wanted no more. He wanted this feast finished. The McShanes had brought over fifty people with them. Mostly attendants by the looks of them, but quite a few of them men. He questioned why they needed so many and how they would house all of them. *The Enchanted Hawk* 18

Between the end of the table where his widowed aunt sat and the honored guests were four men who McShane had insisted join them. Supposedly they were relatives, though the relationship wasn't clear. Their dress was not as fine as the lords, but daggers were strapped at their waists.

Aunt Siusan, looking lost and alone, acted in the role his mother had once filled, but she was a quiet woman who managed the attendants poorly. He'd learned after his mother's passing to make sure the attendants performed their duties.

He fidgeted in his chair. Usually the family ate in the small dining room or in their own rooms now that Father seldom joined them. He'd never much liked entertaining, but preferred to be outside or in his tower with his books.

Leaning over, he said, "Father, 'tis time to call for food." Otherwise the guests would be in their cups and already Gor-dan's and Iver's voices had increased in volume as they boasted of their feats of bravery.

Bhaltair blinked at Thom. His hand shook as he took up the silver bell. "Is it not the duty of your aunt to call for the food?" His voice barely carried to Thom.

"Yes, Father, but she will sit all night waiting for some sign, afraid of offending someone. Soon our guests will have drunk so much wine, they won't care if they eat."

Bhaltair gave Thom a weak smile. "Might be better. They appear to be able to consume a great deal of food."

Thom laughed. "I'd say they've hearty appetites in every-thing."

Bhaltair nodded and rang the bell. The tinkling sound could barely be heard above the guests' boasting, but attendants entered the room with trays of food and placed them upon the table. *The Enchanted Hawk* 19

Lord Barclay McShane rose as the attendants unloaded the food. “First, a toast to the couple. May their joining bring us many grandchildren and a new strength with our two lands joined.”

Bhaltair raised his glass. Thom held his own, but kept an eye on his father’s in case it slipped from his hand.

“Father, you must speak.” Thom took the goblet from his father after he had taken a sip. His father’s fondest wish was to see Liel married, but Thom wasn’t sure he would make it. The wedding was not scheduled for ten days yet. The McShanes had arrived several days early and a final agreement of what each would bring to the marriage had not yet been arranged. Some disagreement existed over exactly what McShane meant by added strength to each house. Bhaltair didn’t wish to involve his people in wars of those from with-out the mountains. McShane wanted a guarantee that they would send men if he were attacked. The McGarretys had not been involved in the politics of those who lived without and he wanted it to stay that way.

A young woman with reddish golden hair placed a bowl in front of Bhaltair. She flashed Thom a smile, then knelt be-side Bhaltair. “Tis a nice soup made from the meat of the stag the others will feast upon, but is made special for you to give you strength.”

Thom stared at the woman. He didn’t remember her be-ing among the attendants, but then several new ones had been engaged with the anticipation of the McShanes. She must be one he hadn’t yet seen. Something about her fascinated him.

Something about her was familiar. Her hair color re-minded him of the hawk. Something. A very long time ago, he’d seen her. He knew he had. *The*

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His father, who barely ate, took a spoonful of the soup with the woman's help. He smiled and took another. Thom smiled. If the woman could get him to eat, Thom's gratitude would be boundless.

Gordan hacked off a piece of meat and slapped it on his plate. "Now this is the fare for men, not that slop they serve a feeble old man." He inclined his head toward Bhaltair.

The woman stood, her hands on her hips. Her hair swished as she moved. Her kirtle was the finest bleached linen with tiny hawks embroidered around the edges. "Tis the fare of kings." She stretched upward and looked down at Gordan. "And only kings may eat it."