



QUEEN HEREAFTER

PROLOGUE

Eva

Anno Domini 1078

Caught between two willful queens, I am, and should have taken more care to tread lightly—like crossing a stream over slippery stones when the current is strong and cold. Now that I have stumbled deep, who can say whether my two queens will forgive me or condemn me for what I did at each one's bidding. No servant, I am free to do as I please. Margaret and Gruadh disagree.

I am called Eva the Bard, daughter of a short-lived king. I have been a devoted student of Dermot, once chief bard in Macbeth's court. He trained me in the ways of a *seanchaidh*: a thousand songs, a thousand tales, a thousand heroes keenly remembered through ancient ways of diligence, and more. Though I do not know my fate, I know my calling—to tell the old tales and coax melodies from the harp strings to soothe or excite the spirit. Some now accuse me of scheming, but my aim has ever been my craft, and honor. So say I.

The king and queen would order some monk with ink-stained fingers to record my betrayal on parchment, which would crumble over time; the lady in the north would order the account

destroyed much sooner. Yet I would compose a song-poem to tell it whole, then take up my harp and sing it to some, who would teach it to others, so it would never be lost.

One queen might call it treason, the other tradition. But I might call it vengeance.

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Dunfermline, Scotland

Autumn, 1074

As the wooden beam that crossed the door of her cell was lifted and stowed aside, Eva rose to her feet. Cold and damp penetrated her thin wool tunic as she waited, the door opened, and as torchlight bloomed there, Eva blinked, her eyes used to darkness after weeks of incarceration.

Still and wary, she heard the rumbling voices of the guard and the Saxon priest who answered, then mellow, clear notes as a woman spoke. When the guard appeared in the doorway, he gestured for Eva to approach. Defiant, she did not. He stood back.

A woman crossed the threshold, skirts gathered in long, pale fingers as she stepped down to the deeper floor of the dungeon cell. Behind her, torchlight illuminated the small space. The lady paused, slender and lovely, her veil translucent as a halo for a moment, like some saint or angel bringing relief and blessings to the prisoner.

“My friend,” Margaret said quietly.

“Lady,” Eva replied, watching the Queen of Scots. Daughter of a king, a bard in her own right, Eva also had a privileged rank—but the old Scotland was changing, she reminded herself.

Margaret approached, the hem of her blue gown, banded by gold-thread embroidery, sweeping across the straw-covered earthen floor. Calmly, she clasped hands before her. Tall and slim, a mother of three little sons already, the queen looked girlish still. Her face was lovely on a long neck, eyes blue as her gown, golden hair woven into two long braids beneath her veil; perfect, ethereal. Margaret’s beauty was as well known as her charitable nature: Scotland’s young Saxon queen, at first reviled, now increasingly beloved.

Yet Eva had glimpsed beyond the saintly virtues to the fears and flaws beneath. She knew that Margaret, who could be genuinely good of heart, had a core like stubborn rock. Once decided on a matter, she would not be dissuaded for good or ill.

“Eva, we must talk.” There was steely will beneath the gentle voice.

“Say what you will, then leave.”

“I came to seek your counsel,” Margaret said, while Eva glanced at her in surprise. “My husband the king bids me advise him on your fate. He will make the final decision, but he wants the truth of it.”

Dread wrenched within. Eva could not tell all the truth, or give up one she loved. “What does it matter? Others will twist what I say. You know that well.”

“I never expected betrayal from you, or hints of witchcraft. I do not know what to believe. But I must make a recommendation.”

Eva frowned. Though Margaret sometimes thought of herself weak and sinful, she was strong-minded to a fault, and her opinion counted for much with the king. “The accusations are unfounded. Tell Malcolm that I am no witch.”

“And the Lady of the North? What does she have to do with this?”

“Very little.” What she had agreed to do had seemed right at the time. Now she was entangled in old conflict between Lady Gruadh in the north, her kinswoman, and King Malcolm.

Scotland's former queen was wise, though bitter, and Eva would honor what Gruadh had asked of her.

"That is not so easy to believe. There are punishments established by the *witanagemot* for criminals and witches," Margaret went on. "Malcolm has asked me to consider those laws." Her intonation was flat, cool.

"Saxon law does not apply here," Eva said. Yet over several years, Malcolm had instituted several Saxon practices and punishments, and employed his council like a *witan*, a group of wise advisors to the king. Eva had good reason to fear her fate if accused of witchery. Margaret might be her only hope.

"Recommend that I be judged according to Scottish law, not Saxon," Eva said.

"Such crimes merit severe consequences," the queen answered. "Glowing iron, boiling water, or worse, fire. My ancestor, great King Alfred, helped devise that system of justice. The king could ask for such trials to find the truth." She spoke calmly but the knuckles of her hands went white. "If you are innocent, as you claim, all will be well."

"Why will you not believe me? I have done no wrong to you."

The queen looked away. Eva sensed her uncertainty; perhaps Margaret wanted to believe her.

"I could pass any test you give me," Eva said impulsively. Guilty or innocent, who could survive such ordeals? "You are a believer in miracles. You will see."

"Miracles?" Margaret seemed intrigued. "Has your faith improved in the last weeks?"

"Lady," Eva said wearily, "we are both in need of miracles, some days."

Margaret sighed, and for a moment Eva glimpsed the young woman she knew, though the longer Margaret was queen, the more she perfected a cool, haughty side. "In England, they burn witches. Do not let it come to that." She stepped closer. "Pray with greater devotion and ask forgiveness for your sins, and heaven may grant mercy. Convince the king of your loyalty and he will show earthly mercy. You are ever stubborn, Eva, but your very soul is in jeopardy now. I will send a priest to speak with you."

"Which one?" Eva looked at her defiantly. "One who follows the will of the Roman Church over the Celtic? Or the one who follows all your will?"

"Tor says naught but good of you," Margaret chided. "I will send a confessor to cleanse the wickedness from your heart and set your foot on a better path."

"Can wickedness be turned in a savage Scot?" Eva felt bitter. "You have not succeeded in turning our faces and hearts entirely toward Rome, though you deserve credit for trying to improve us all."

"You are much like your kinswoman. I see that now."

"I consider that high praise."

"Many would not." Turning, Margaret moved toward the door, then paused. "If the priests agree that you did treason and witchcraft, no one can save you from the fires."

"It is not the custom in Scotland to burn witches."

"I am not Scottish," Margaret said quietly. Gathering her skirts in her hands, she stepped across the threshold. The guard closed the door, shutting out the light.

Eva sank to the floor in the darkness and tucked her head in her arms.

CHAPTER ONE

Margaret

Anno Domini 1057

My lady mother was so sure the English king planned to be rid of us the moment we set foot on his Saxon shores that she refused to sail there from Denmark. But we had been journeying for months after leaving Hungary, the lot of us: Papa, Mama, my sister and small brother and a few servants. We were exhausted and sore in need of a home. Papa said we belonged in England, after all. I heard my parents arguing it at night.

My father, born a prince of England, had been exiled to the kingdom of Hungary as a small boy. Lately King Edward, his royal and childless uncle, had summoned Papa—another Edward—home to England to restore his birthright and name him heir to the throne. Mama groused that while our uncle-king had beckoned, he would not pay our traveling costs, and she feared he might lay claim to the priceless treasures we hauled about in crates and chests. My mother, Lady Agatha, was Russian and Hungarian by birth and blood, and little liked the English. Her warrior husband she excused; he had left England at a young age.

My father was Saxon royalty of the old Wessex line, and so were his children, harking back to wise King Alfred, to unready Aethelred and stubborn Edmund Ironside, my grandfather. Our brighter future lay in England. Lady Agatha would be queen there, according to both Edwards. Dignified if stubborn, she acquiesced.

The year I turned ten, we left Hungary, where my two siblings and I had been born. Traveling with a Magyar escort over high mountains into Russia, carrying heavy packed chests in carts the whole way, we stayed weeks in Kiev with my mother's kin, then sailed northward to winter among the Danes, my father's cousins. That place was dull and smoky indoors, but splendid outside. I saw how much we resembled the Danes and the *Rus*, too, for we were long limbed and golden fair, with taut cheekbones and sky-colored eyes. Only my sister Cristina took after the dark and stocky Magyars, the tough bloodline of our mother's maternal kin; she had a bold temperament, too, outspoken where I was acquiescent, hot and impulsive where I was cool and devout as I tried to emulate my pious mother and grandmother.

We crossed the wide, pitching North seas, while my mother murmured of impending doom and prayed over her black-beaded rosary. Despite her worrying, the Danish vessel skimmed the waves like a winged dragon and brought us swiftly to English shores.

In London town, we were welcomed by lords who spoke the Saxon language that my father knew and we did not. The king was away, but we were housed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who spoke German, our preferred tongue, with us. We were dined, entertained and assessed by a parade of bishops, priests and notable lords and ladies; servants, too, I suppose. Assured that he would be king eventually, my father gently teased his wife that her fears were unfounded.

A week after our arrival, he fell dead at my feet.

A few of us were walking in the archbishop's gardens after supper with some of England's earls and thanes when my father collapsed on a path. We could not rouse him. To this day, years on, I can recall my disbelief and shock, my father's gray face, my mother's paleness, and the scents of lavender and thyme.

Poison was the rumor, denied and dismissed. The king's physician said Edward Atheling had a weak heart, though my father had been a lion of a warrior with spare habits and good health. Tainted food was suggested by others, though no one else had fallen sick that night.

Taint or poison, I alone knew the truth: I had killed him.

At my insistence, he had eaten sweetmeats from a golden tray set on the table before him. At first he had refused, intent on his discussion with a Saxon bishop. But with girlish silliness, I pushed the tray toward him, saying he must obey Princess Margaret. Distracted, smiling, he downed the treats in a fistful or two. Within the half hour, he was dead. Likely there was strong poison in those honeyed almonds and hazelnuts—and my father would not have eaten them that night, but for my urging.

Mea culpa, mea culpa, but I never confessed my deed to a priest, only adding to the heinous sin. Fear kept me silent. I wore bruises into my knees praying self-imposed penances, while my lady mother approved my pious grieving, mistaking what moved me so. I could not tell her and hurt her even more.

At court, some whispered of the ambitious men who would have benefitted from the death of Edward the Exile: Harold Godwinson was one, brother of the queen and son of an ambitious Saxon earl, and William of Normandy was another. King Edward, rumor said, had bargained his crown to both men secretly and then gave the heir's right to my father. Whether one of them had ordered Edward the Exile killed or some other had done it, my own hand had aided the killer. I shared the sin.

That gnawed at me, crept into my dreams, perched on my shoulder like a demon.

Overnight we transformed from exalted royal family to the foreign wards of a king who took little interest in us, yet would not permit us to return to Hungary. My siblings and I were educated as befitted our status in that formal, refined court. But we were in effect hostages housed as king's wards, our little freedom spent witnessing the hunt, hawking, or taking the short and frequent journey between the London and Winchester palaces. Often my sister and I refused to ride in the canopied van that carried the women, delighting in a chance for the saddle. We had been partly raised by Magyar kin, after all.

At five years old, my brother Edgar was named king's heir in a ceremony, while the other claimants for the English throne remained avid and interested. The year I turned twenty and Edgar thirteen, our aging royal uncle died, leaving Edgar the Atheling, Harold Godwinson and William of Normandy each believing in his own right to be king.

Harold was quickly chosen by the *witanagemot* and duly crowned. England needed a warrior-king, not a stripling boy, that year. Had Harold taken hawk's wings to soar over the cliffs of England, he would have seen two threats at once: the Danes sweeping in from the east, the Normans from the south.

Within months, in the autumn of *anno domini* 1066, the mail-clad warriors of Normandy slid their boats, silent and lethal, onto our English shore. Harold died on Hastings field and William took us for his wards—and as soon as we could get away, my kin and I fled.

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England

Autumn, 1069

The thud of iron-heeled boots in the corridor startled Margaret from sleep. She sat up in the darkness, alarmed, shaking her sister's arm until Cristina woke, too. As the door shoved wide, two men stepped into the room, mail armor glinting in the moonlight that slipped through a small

window. The maidservant, Kata, shrieked, leaping up from her straw pallet, while Margaret and Cristina stumbled out of bed, clutching blankets to cover themselves.

Margaret felt a twist of fear—surely these were Normans, she thought, and rude devils to enter a convent by force and moon’s glow.

“*Mes desdemoiselles,*” one of the men said in French, resting a hand on his sword pommel, “hurry! *Dépêchez-vous!*”

Margaret gathered her younger sister close, aware that Norman knights treated even high-ranking Saxon women with brutal disrespect.

“Hurry!” the knight repeated in French, stepping forward. “We cannot waste time!”

Flinching, Margaret nonetheless lifted her chin. “*Partez ici,*” she replied in French. “Leave! How do you dare! We are princesses of England.”

“Ready yourselves by order of the king, or we will carry you out as you are. Bring their belongings—there are valuables here.” The man motioned to his companion, who snatched a linen sheet and began to toss their things onto it. Margaret watched in astonishment as he grabbed her gospel book from the small table, snatched Cristina’s needlework basket, too, and opened a wooden chest to dump its contents, garments, veils, stockings, belts, ribbons and other items, into the sheet. As he began to tie the clumsy bundle, Margaret stepped toward him.

“Give me the book,” she said, grabbing the leather-bound manuscript to tuck it under her arm. The gospel had been a gift in her childhood from the English queen, and she would not lose it to a Norman.

“*Diebe und Schweine!*” Kata muttered in German, the language they often spoke among themselves. She grabbed cloaks from wall pegs and handed them to the princesses, who shrugged into them. “Thieves and pigs! Will they take what little we have? If we had stayed in Hungary we would be safe.”

This had been their nurse’s constant complaint ever since they had left Castle Reka eleven years earlier. “There was rebellion in Hungary, too,” Cristina snapped.

Margaret shoved bare feet into leather shoes and smoothed her long, tousled golden braids, and though she wanted to appear calm, her hands shook. In grim silence, the two knights grasped the girls’ arms to lead them through the door.

“Norman pigs indeed,” Cristina said in German. “What does King William want with us now? He shut us in here three years ago, and no word since. But this must be by his orders.”

“I hoped we would take vows here and live in peace,” Margaret said.

“You can take vows, not me,” Cristina said. “You are suited to praying and studying. I want my freedom, but not like this!”

Outside in the thin moonlight, Margaret saw men, horses, and a cart. A few nuns and novitiates huddled with the abbess, their faces pale as they watched. Looking at the familiar walls of the abbey, Margaret began to panic. The shelter of Romsey had seemed so unassailable.

“*Monsieur chevalier,* where are we going?” Cristina demanded as they walked to the cart.

“Away from here, and quickly,” the leader answered. “We soon sail for Scotland.”

“Scotland? Why?” Margaret asked. “It is only fair that we know.”

He did not reply as he and another knight lifted the women into the cart. It was lined with straw, humble fittings for royal women. The bundle of their things was tossed in after them.

“Even when William’s men brought us here, we were not treated like goats!” Cristina said.

“Hush,” Margaret warned, wary of her sister’s abrasive temper. She forced a calm expression, determined to show regal dignity despite her fear. As she looked around, blonde

braids sliding over her shoulders, heart pounding, she reminded herself to pray for protection and forgiveness, too—but she was agitated and on the verge of losing her own temper.

Over a dozen riders were ready to depart, tough warriors all, mail armor and weapons gleaming in the moonlight. The cart carrying the girls lurched forward and the escort rumbled through the gates and out into the chill November night. For one panicked moment, Margaret wanted to leap from the cart and drag her sister and maid with her to run to the sanctuary of the abbey church.

Instead, she watched the abbey fade into the distance and darkness.