ROSE EDWARDS

The EMBER DAYS

uclanpublishing

The Ember Days is a uclanpublishing book

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
uclanpublishing
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, PR1 2HE, UK

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978-1-91297915-8

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Set in 10/16pt Kingfisher by Nicky Borowiec.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

To my Best Boys,
Tom and Devon

CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE TELLERS

Torny Vafrisdota: survived possession, lost in the mist

Ebba Rathnasdota: survived martyrdom, looking for her place

THE REGNA: VELLSBERG, MERZEN & LUGHAMBER

Berengar of Vellsberg: a young nobleman, happy to be home

Bilhildis: Berengar's mother, concerned about the company he keeps

Theogault of Vellsberg: Lord of Vellsberg, has plans for Berengar

Rosamund of Merzen: pretty and promised, all part of the plan

Neklaus of Merzen: too pretty to trust, has his own ideas

Gisla: Abbess of the Hekateran Order, knows where the power lies

Raiders/Rus: marauding seafarers, destructive but useful

THE QESAR

Aisulu of the Blue Wolf Clan: a Carrier with her own burdens

Kizmid: a Captain of Water Qesar, knows Aisulu

Varkha: Negotiator of the Lughambar Concession, decisive

Serke: healer from the Stahranid Empire, many things at once

Uryz: Negotiator of the Ban Granis Concession, on his own side

Tsomak: a boy with a burden

The Kagan: spiritual ruler of the Qesar, lives in secret Izoloh

The Noyan: commander of the Qesar Horde, military leader

THE CORDA: THE GOLDEN WAY & BAN GRANIS

Seargent Hadric: a mostly good man

Ceol, Lotho: Merzen soldiers, unlucky bystanders

Ormund, Bishop of Corvennes: knows what he wants

Emperor Merovec: a ruler with a story to sell

Various villagers, guards, raiders, priests, children, Water Qesar, horses, judgy old women, hapless merchants, servants, and suspicious cart drivers.

BACK IN ARNGARD

Aud, Kelda, Sorleyson: old friends from the wayhouse in Frithberg

Jarle: the stable hand, hidden depths

Fetch: Ebba's wolfhound, too recognizable

Berger Dagomar: a merchant with a demanding patron

Rathna: Ebba's mother, now living in Birchhold

Rafe: Ebba's cousin, back in Eldinghope

Erland of Hellingap: Captain of the Bearskins

King Kolrand: pays tribute to the Southern Emperor

The Bearskins: the king's personal guard, known for their discipline

GHOSTS

Prester Grimulf: priest of the White God, killed by the Harrower

Galen: Torny's companion, had his wish granted

Fenn: Torny's guide, died protecting her

Uncle Ulf Berrson: Ebba's uncle, got what he deserved

Lana: a casualty of war, helped across by Ebba

Arf Berrson: Ebba's father, murdered by his brother Ulf

Brenna: raised Torny grudgingly, then forced her out

Vigdis: Torny's birth mother, a staffbearer, died on Far Isle

Staffbearers: magic-workers of the Arngard gods, wiped out

GODS & SPIRITS

White God: only god of the Southern Empire

Blessed Hekatera: a martyred saint in the White God's religion

Harrower: ancient goddess of destruction, set free by Ebba

Taghr, the Daylit King: sky god of the Qesar

Sarik, the Sunlit Queen: sun goddess of the Qesar

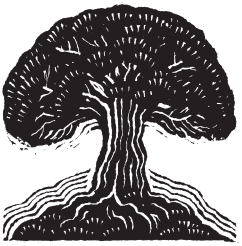
Gamlig: god of death, lives in the Dark Earth, land of the dead

Ai Nakota: genderfluid god of the moon (they/them), guides spirits between realms, called upon by Qesar shamans

Needlemouths: the Hungry Ones, ghosts of the despairing dead

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The names of people and places in Arngard are loosely based on the Norse language. The letter 'j' is pronounced as a 'y', so the name Jarle is pronounced 'Yarle'. People are known by their first names, while their second names are patronymic, meaning 'son/daughter of X'. So Torny Vafrisdota is Torny, daughter of Vafri (her father). In rare cases, maternal names are used: Ebba and her brother Stig are called Rathnasdota and Rathnason, after their mother Rathna.



Part One:
REGNA

"To Merovec, most pious Patriarch, great and peace-giving Emperor, crowned by God, against whom all enemies break like waves against a bastion, life and victory.

Fruit of the *Corda*, defender of the *Regna*, son of an unbroken empire, unity resides in you. One God, one soul, one reign, eternal and indivisible."

Oath of the *Imperium Infractum*

"What are the three souls of all living things?
The breath that moves the body,
The shade that passes between realms,
And the self, without which we are empty of ourselves."

Qesar catechism

One
POOL

TORNY'S TALE

The Borderlands

I wake up choking, my hands covered in dried blood.

In my dreams, they're always bloody, and my eyes are failing, and the mist is all around me. But now I'm awake and the blood is still there, even though the spring sunshine comes streaming through the barn door.

My heart kicks.

What have I done?

I lie still, trying to remember. Outside I can hear swift water and birdsong. We came here late last night, whispered through the dark by unfamiliar voices. I search my memory, feeling for the nothingness I've come to fear worse than discovery.

But it is all complete, and I know where I am, and I am alone. No one lies near me, no horrible stillness spoils the morning.

I can't feel any pain, other than the ache in my side, and even that is fading day by day.

I sit up, my nearly-healed ribs grumbling, and that is when I feel the wetness between my legs. I touch myself there, and my fingers come back covered in fresh red.

Even though I'm alone, I can feel my face burning.

Cursing, I kick away the blanket from my legs. Hero, my horse, is tethered by a manger. She snuffs at me as I fly past her. I stumble outside, drop to my knees beside the mill pool and plunge my hands into the clear water. I scrub the blood from them as best I can, then pull my shirt over my head. I'm not looking forward to this next bit.

I screw up my face as I step into the pool. The water is freezing, and my whole body comes over gooseflesh. I force myself to crouch down, the water up to my waist, and I wash myself, still thinking of how lucky I am that the other two aren't here.

That would be all I need.

It's hard enough being around two people in love. Their smiles, the softness in their eyes when they think you can't see, the way they touch each other in passing, all the time. I was relieved when they suggested they go on ahead of me to Vellsberg. It's enough to make you scream, all that tenderness.

Of course, it doesn't help if you're in love too.

If Ebba had been here, she'd have worked it out. Then she might have thought it was her I was thinking of, while I was getting blood on my hands.

Just thinking it makes me want to die of embarrassment.

I splash my face with water, trying to cool it.

"Bit early for that, isn't it?"

My head shoots up.

Someone's coming down the path between the bushes. Silently, I curse myself. I'm naked in the pool, my teeth chattering, and my weapons are inside the barn. I stand to drag my shirt on over my head, and that's when the person steps out onto the grass beside the pool.

For a moment, we just stare at each other.

I've never seen anyone like her.

She looks a little older than me. Her black hair is tightly braided and looped up around her head, she is wearing a quilted wrap-around jacket in what was once a bright blue, bound around her waist with a faded yellow sash. Her skin is a warm brown, her cheeks reddened from the spring breeze, and her winged eyebrows arch as she looks me over in turn.

I can't look like much. A tall, boney girl with white skin, nearly-white hair, cut short, a jagged burn-scar across one shoulder, and no common sense. Plenty of people mistake me for a boy when they see me clothed, but I suppose that won't happen this time.

The woman's hand rests on a knife hilt tucked into her sash, but she seems more amused than anything.

"My people have laws against dirtying clean water," she says.

I blink. She's speaking the tongue of Arngard, but—

"Are you going to stand there all fucking day? Get some clothes on."

I stare at her. She stares back, her calm stance completely at odds with her words.

"Move."

Bewildered, I step out of the pool and pull my shirt on over my head. It sticks to my skin.

"Who are you?" I ask, trying to stop my teeth from chattering.

"Aisulu, Carrier of the Blue Wolf Clan, so watch yourself," she says. "And you're one of the crazy Rus, that's plain enough, though I didn't expect to meet your kind here. What trouble are you stirring up?"

"No trouble," I say. "I'm going to get dressed." I point to the barn.

"I'll come with you," she says.

I don't have much choice. She follows me into the barn, going straight up to Hero while I pick through the packs for a loincloth. Once I've padded it and pulled on my britches, I see she's nose-to-nose with my horse, blowing air through her nostrils as Hero snuffles back. If I weren't so cold I might laugh, but I'm shivering, and it's making my ribs hurt.

She catches me watching. "What are you looking at, Rus?"

"My name's Torny. Why do you keep calling me that?"

She reaches into the pocket of her riding britches and pulls out some dried apple rings. Hero lips them neatly out of her palm.

"I don't know what you're doing here," she says, "but I'm a guest of the Lord of Vellsberg, so my advice is keep your fucking nose clean. Go back to whatever hovel you came from and tell your people there are no pickings for you here, understand? We have our misunderstandings, the Empire and the Confederacy, but on one thing we are both clear."

She covers the distance between us in two strides, and grabs a fistful of my shirt.

"I only need to know your name if I kill you," she says, her face still unnervingly calm. "To add to my accounts for the Unlit King. Until then, I don't care."

She lets me go, gives Hero one last pat, and walks out of the barn.

I groom Hero. I rubbed her down last night, but after seeing her so friendly with my unexpected visitor, I want to be close to her. Maybe I want to remind her who I am, or maybe I want to remind myself.

When we left Frithberg all those weeks ago, Berengar carried letters, with both Captain Erland and Prester Grimulf's seals. They gave us free passage down the War Road, but here in the Empire's lands they won't mean much. The Lord of Vellsberg is Berengar's kin: he'll see to something for Berengar and Ebba. But me?

They've been not-saying it for weeks.

There's no place for me here.

Ebba has her healing, her herbs. She's learned some of their tongue, and she's learning to write. And, of course, she has Berengar. She'll be fine.

Me, I have nothing. I have weapons I can barely touch, ever since Ebba saved me from the Harrower. I have aching ribs and nights full of horror. I have muscles that have stiffened and shrunk, and even if I build them back up, who will let me use them? Here, women are expected to wear skirts and cover their hair. I will never wear skirts again.

And now I'm bleeding. Another part of womanhood I would happily foreswear, along with skirts and long hair. I've no need for it.

I have knowledge that I am now the sole possessor of. I have blood that inherits a bloody throne. I have two dead friends, and so many dead enemies.

It's selfish, but I miss Galen. I miss the way he cared for me. If I could raise him from the death he begged for, I would. Without a thought. Without mercy.

Sometimes I wish Ebba had believed everyone when they told her I was lost.

It was easier, sometimes, to be lost.

It's evening when I hear a rider approaching. I'm ready this time. I have my knife and my sling at my belt, and I wait under cover of the trees to see who it is.

It's Ebba, on Berengar's mount. She's much better at riding these days. I remember when even leading a horse made her nervous.

I should go straight out and greet her, but I stand under the trees a little longer, watching as she checks the clearing by the pool, the burned-out remains of the old mill, then swings down and leads her mount into the small barn. I walk to the door and lean on it, watching as she tethers the bay gelding next to Hero, making sure he has food to eat before she unbuckles the saddle.

Her dark hair wisps loose from under the kerchief she covers it with, and in the evening light it gleams reddish, like the bay's coat next to her. The ochre dress she wears is better fitted than the smocks we wore in Frithberg, and it skims her waist and flares out over her hips, twirling out as she turns to lay the saddle and the blanket over the post, and turns back, the brush in her hand.

She sees me, and smiles.

"How was your day?" she says, as the bay whickers.

I shrug, and hold up two rabbits.

"Oh, good," she says. "Dinner."

I settle myself outside the barn by the fire pit, skinning and cleaning the two carcasses. After a while, Ebba comes and joins me.

"I thought you'd stay there tonight," I say. "I thought—" I stop, but Ebba raises her eyebrows. "I thought Berengar wouldn't want you to ride by yourself."

I mean *let you*, not *want*, but I don't say that.

"He en't seen his ma since last year," Ebba says. "They've a lot to talk about."

"Including why he brought a Northerner home with him?"

She shoots me a look, half-amused, half-exasperated. "At least I din't have to meet the lord. Berengar has to report to him tonight. There's a banquet tomorrow. Some kind of feast day."

Something about the way Ebba says this makes it sound like she's not looking forward to it, and that surprises me. When Berengar talked about his return, he always talked about presenting her. Not me, of course, but he was all for her being introduced to his family.

"What's the matter?" I ask. Some stupid little piece of my heart is jumping, and I know why, and I try to shut it up, try not to even think what it wants me to.

"Who am I goin to be to em?" she says, her eyes down, her hands busy with the meat. "I knew who I was back in Birchold. I had a place an a purpose. Here . . ."

The sky is darkening over the new green edges of the spring growth. Our fire lights up her face, the smoke mixes with the first stars and the rill of the mill stream tumbling from the pool to the ruined wheel is sweeter than music.

"I thought I knew my place," I say quietly. "Turns out—"

"What?" Ebba asks, the fire lighting the depths of her brown eyes.

But the words catch in my throat.

I do know my place, I think, looking into her eyes. *It's beside you. It's you.*

Ebba jumps up.

"The herbs," she says, and I'm left knowing I showed too much of myself again.

The awkwardness between us needles me. I hate it. I hate that I used to be able to put my arm around her shoulders, or sleep with her curled against me, and now those things feel forbidden. It's not just her who jumps. I've shrunk from her touch as well, and she's seen me do it. So has Berengar, though he never says anything. He doesn't have to. Everything he does for Ebba says: *Mine.* There have been times when I wished him gone, and for Ebba and me to be back at Sorleyson's wayhouse in Frithberg, warm together in the dark, ignorant of who we really were.

And then I remember why I never deserve to feel those things ever again, with anyone, and something inside me folds up tight and hides itself away.

We eat our rabbit stew by the fire, wrapped in the horse blankets. We're further south than either of us ever imagined we'd travel, but the nights are still cold here.

Berengar told us this mill was destroyed in a border raid, back before King Arn united Arngard, when the borderlands were wild territory, and instead of rebuilding it to be burnt again, a new one was built within the walls of Vellsberg. The barn is newer, used for storing hay from the far fields.

I'd like to know what that strange woman was doing out here

when by her dress she's no Southerner, but Ebba just shakes her head when I ask her. She seems distracted, but I don't want to ask why in case the answer is me. In the end she brings it up herself.

"This is where Prester Grimulf came from."

At the mention of the prester, we're both quiet. I never knew him, though it was my hand that slit his throat at the end, but Ebba . . . She doesn't speak much about him, but I can feel her hatred. I know he kept her close when they first travelled east, and she's told me, briefly, how he killed her uncle and took his holdings, but more than that seems locked away between her and Berengar, one more thing I can't ask about.

She doesn't say anything for a while. Then:

"She cried to hear he was dead."

"Who?" I ask.

"Berengar's ma." Ebba sighs. "I've a bad feelin about this, Torny. That woman weren't pleased to see me, not one bit. She near enough glared a curse on me. An Grimulf . . . no one pretends he an Lord Vellsberg got on, but . . ."

"But if they knew what we did," I finish for her, "they wouldn't be any happier to see us."

She pulls the blanket tighter around her.

"More'n more," she says, "I see the only way we'll fit here is if we keep our mouths shut an our selves secret."

We both stare up into the star-scarred sky.

"I en't sure I can do that," she says at last.