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Opening extract from

Dragonfly

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Published by

Oxford

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Chapter 1

The Fourth Crown Princess of the Blue Crescent Islands had sixteen rituals to observe from the moment of waking to when she broke her fast. These included getting out of bed on the right-hand side; turning to the east to bow to the sun; submitting to having her hair groomed with forty strokes from a silver-backed brush by the Under Mistress of the Royal Chamber; and—

Princess Taoshira paused. *What have I forgotten? Goddess rot the Etiquette Mistress's rule book, I know there's something else.*

'Your fingerbowl, Your Highness,' intoned the Senior Mistress of the Chamber, holding out a bronze basin.

Fingerbowl! Why do I always forget the fingerbowl? Taoshira rinsed her fingertips delicately and dried them on a white linen towel.

Probably, chimed in another voice in her head, *because when you were at home—before you were chosen as princess—you had to wash your hands under the pump in the yard, jostling the serving girls for your place in the line.*

Taoshira, or Tashi as she used to be known to her family, almost smiled at the recollection—then remembered that the Crown Princess was not allowed to show emotion until she had said the Four Blessings, the true beginning of the day in the Royal Palace, and accompanied the words with the appropriate gesture.

'Eternal Goddess of Mystery, give our people wisdom (*touching her head*);

Gracious Mother of Mercy, look upon our people with compassion (*right hand on heart*);

Kind Sister of Healing, bless all who are ill (*hands outspread*);

Joyful Child of Hope, prosper our work this day (*fingers arched, thumbs touching in a triangle*).

The four attendants gathered in her bedchamber gave the required response in unison: 'As the Goddess wills.'

Tashi was relieved that was over. She liked the morning prayer to the four faces of the Mother Goddess but had not yet got used to the fact that she was now an official priestess for the entire nation. If she forgot to say it—or even fluffed the words—her people believed that dire consequences would be felt throughout the land. It had been very different mumbling the same prayers to herself up on the hills of her family's estate on Kai, the northernmost of the islands that made up the Blue Crescent, named for the curving shape of the isles in the Sapphire Ocean. In those days, as a faithful Kaian, she had said the words with only her goats to hear her as the sun broke over the jagged crests of the

Marine Mountains. She had never dreamed that she would be snatched from that life as abruptly as a kid is plucked from the ground by a bird of prey. From insignificant daughter of an impoverished matriarch, she had become one of the four most powerful women in her world.

Tashi stood with arms outstretched as the Assistant Under Mistress of the Chamber removed her night-gown. That was another thing that had taken a lot of getting used to: standing stark naked in front of her attendants with only her long fair hair to veil her while they went through the ceremonial dressing. Over the last four years, from blushing furiously she had progressed to thinking of other things while they fussed over her. The ceremony had its set order: first placing on the white silk under-robe, then the sleeve-less orange tunic of the Fourth Crown Princess, next the flamboyant embroidered gown (today was one of her favourites—the dragonfly design), and finally the orange sash.

Four items of clothing. Her life was ruled by that number. It had decided her fate when the last Fourth Crown Princess had met an untimely death at the age of twenty. The Blue Crescent Islands always had four crown princesses, one from each isle of Rama, Lir-Salu, Phonilara, and Kai. It had been the princess from the smallest and most northern island that had died, so the priests and priestesses of Kai had gathered to identify the next candidate. Their choice was restricted to all eligible twelve-year-old girls of matriarchal families.

Normally, the choice fell on the greatest and most wealthy households, but it seemed that in Tashi's year something had gone awry and she—the youngest daughter of a family whose claim to matriarchal nobility was largely on paper—had been chosen. Her family had long since ceased to be noticed at court, their wealth dwindling until they had become hill farmers in an obscure province.

There had been no question that she would accept the role. Tashi had known that her family would benefit hugely from having their daughter at the seat of government—and she also shared the belief that the Goddess's hand was behind such decisions, no matter how imperfect her human agents. Though Tashi had wondered many times over the years that had transformed her from free-living goat herder to a key part of the most formal court in the known world, whether the Mother had not chosen her for a bit of light relief from her three co-rulers. She sometimes felt she was more court jester than ruler as she struggled to submit to her new life.

Only to herself would she admit that the ceremonies and duties were driving her mad; and yet she was committed to repeating the same pattern day in, day out for the rest of her life, for the good of the nation.

The Etiquette Mistress, one of the highest ranking officials in the court, arrived even before the breakfast.

'Now, Crown Princess, shall we revise our lesson on the right degree of bow to give the Gerfalian ambassadors?' she asked, opening her scroll at the correct place.

'As the Goddess wills,' replied Tashi, keeping her face inscrutable.

Ramil ac Burinholt, Prince of Gerfal, had risen before the sun for the hunt. The dawn had found him and his friends riding pell-mell through the Royal Forest, leaping fallen trees, whooping with excitement as they picked up a trail. Ramil loved the reckless speed of the chase and rode like the wind when the mood took him. His mother had originally come from the hot deserts of the far south, princess of a dark-skinned people known as the Horse Followers. His friends always said it was her blood in him that caught fire when he and his stallion, Leap, set off on one of their mad careers through the forest, leaving all the others behind. The professional huntsmen just shook their heads in despair and let the young Prince go, knowing from experience that he would return when it suited him, having caught nothing.

At one with his galloping horse, Ramil entered a state of mind of pure happiness. The greens, oranges, golds, reds, and browns flashed by as Leap streaked through the trees. Twigs snatched at Ramil's clothes but were unable to catch him. The rush of air was cool on skin. Harness jingled and leather creaked in a tuneful counterpoint to the rapid thud-thud of the hooves. Leap's footing was sure, he was fresh, ready to run for as long as his rider wished. It was their great game; their moment of release from stable and council chamber.

Having covered a mile in this fashion, Leap barely slowed for the stream that crossed their path, jumping it in one bound. Once on the other side, he pulled up by a thicket of hawthorn and snickered to his rider.

'What's the matter, boy?' Ramil asked, patting his mount's sweat-stained neck.

Leap shook his black mane and snorted, shifting his hooves nervously.

In the joy of the ride, Ramil had almost forgotten the purpose of their outing this morning, but he trusted the stallion's instincts, not to mention his sense of smell. He reached for one of the short spears strapped to his back.

'We're close, are we?'

Ramil strained his hearing, listening for the tell-tale sound of snuffing or movement in the undergrowth. The ancient trees of the Royal Hunting Forest were particularly gnarled and squat in this part as if, like old men, they had stopped growing taller and started putting on weight round their middles. Dark-green holly and brambles swallowed up the space beneath the oak canopy. Plenty of places to hide; very hard to see. He nudged the horse forward. There! Definitely something moving through the bushes. Ramil shifted his grip on the spear and held it ready over his shoulder.

Twigs snapped aside as a boar erupted from the undergrowth. Stubby tusks lowered, it charged towards the horse and rider. Leap side-stepped deftly, moving to give Ramil a clear shot with his spear. The boar passed them and reached the bank, trapped between huntsman

and water. With gritty spirit, it wheeled round to face the spear, small black eyes glaring. Ramil rose in the stirrups, paused, and then let the weapon drop.

'Luck for you that my friends were not here, brother,' he addressed the boar. Replacing the spear in its holster, he spurred Leap forward, jumping back over the stream, leaving a confused boar in sole possession of the bank.

'Fine prince I am,' chuckled Ramil, apologizing to Leap with a pat. 'But we have meat and he was magnificent—a fine sire for lots more boars just like him, don't you think?'

A horn sounded in the trees to the east, summoning the stray Prince to return to the hunt. Ramil and Leap trotted back at peace with each other. As they neared the old road, three young lords on fine horses joined them.

'There you are, Ramil!' called Hortlan, the Prince's cousin. 'So what have you caught?' He gave Ramil a huge grin, already knowing from the empty space on the pommel that the chase had been fruitless.

'I had him. I was this close!' replied Ramil, holding up a gloved hand, finger and thumb indicating the distance. 'A massive boar, enough to feed the whole household for a week!'

'And?' Hortlan mocked, giving no credence to his cousin's description.

'He charged and I—' Ramil began to laugh, both at himself and at his friend's expression of scepticism. 'And I ran for it.'

'Now that I don't believe!' Hortlan slapped Ramil on

the back. With his long light-brown hair and blue eyes, Hortlan was as unlike his curly-black-haired, dark-eyed cousin as one could get. 'A Burinholt run from a little hairy pig? Never!'

Ramil shrugged. 'All right, all right, I made that part up.'

'And the boar too, if you ask me,' muttered Lord Yendral to the trees, but loud enough for all to hear.

'Ramil the Unblooded, that's what we should call you. Bane of every hunt,' quipped Lord Usk, son of the Gerfalian Prime Minister. A big-framed youth, he had the reddish-brown hair of his Brigardian mother. 'My father should propose a law to keep you in the castle come winter. We'll all starve else.'

Ramil bowed in his saddle. 'Thank you for that vote of confidence in me, my friends. Come, let us take back the tale of my heroic deeds to the castle and dine on fresh air and spring water in my honour.'

Ramil always insisted on grooming his own horse so waved away the stable boys waiting in the courtyard for the huntsmen's return. The stables were his favourite part of the royal palace, built within the walls of the old fortress, the castle keep. The first King Burinholt had established his throne in dark days when the Gerfalians were little better than raiding barbarians. The core of his old coastal stronghold reflected these times: a simple round tower, a landmark to ships at sea, built on a motte, with the rest of the castle sheltered in

the bailey. Times had changed for the kingdom: no enemies had come knocking at the door for so long that the palace had spread down the hill in more elegant and much less defensible buildings. A splendid feasting hall now sat on a low promontory opposite the original tower; its high windows and vaulted roof, decked with beautiful stone pinnacles, was in clear view of every house in the valley. Ramil knew that his people thought of the feasting hall as the centre of power, but he preferred to think of the modest round keep as the true heart of the kingdom. It was where the King and his family still lived, simple in their tastes and dress when not on show.

Ramil hummed a folk song to Leap as he groomed him. He loved the deep colours of the horse's coat. Unless you were this close, you would call him black but Ramil knew he was really a deep blue—the colour, his mother had claimed, of the night sky over the desert. Leap, a birthday present, was one of the last links to her since her death seven years ago. She had died giving birth to his little sister, Briony, a honey-skinned creature with round scared eyes, an exchange for the vibrant Queen Zarai of Gerfal. The entire nation had mourned Zarai. Ramil had found it hard not to hold his mother's death against the little girl, her only fault being that she had been born.

Thinking about Briony as he groomed Leap's mane, Ramil wondered if he over-compensated by being too kind and polite to the young Princess, rarely if ever showing her the rough-and-tumble, easy love of a

brother. She had always treated him with suspicion as if she sensed his resentment. They spent little time together but still he felt as if he had let down his mother by somehow failing to love his sister enough.

'I know, I'll teach her to ride,' Ramil told Leap. 'I'll get a nice docile pony and take her round the palace park tomorrow. She's half Horse Follower too: maybe that will set things right between us.'

Happier with himself, he slung the grooming equipment into a bucket, gave Leap a final stroke on the nose, and headed back to his rooms. As he entered the dark archway leading into the keep, he was intercepted by one of his father's servants.

'Your Highness, His Majesty requests your presence in the council chamber immediately,' intoned the elderly man with great self-importance.

Ramil sniffed at his sweaty hunting clothes, muddy brown breeches, and leather jerkin.

'Not like this, surely?'

'Immediately, Your Highness; those were his very words.'

With a mild curse, Ramil retraced his steps, crossed the courtyard separating the keep from the feasting hall and entered a long, low building to the right of the grand entrance. His feet echoed in the cloister, disturbing the scribes at their desks in the administrative heart of the kingdom. Seeing who was passing, they all stood and bowed. So used to this treatment, Ramil did not notice them bend, no more than he questioned the breeze through long grass.

King Lagan ac Burinholt was sitting at the head of the table in the White Stone Council Chamber when his son clattered into the room. And he was not alone. Ramil saw at once that most of his ministers and three foreigners were with him. King Lagan frowned when he noticed the state of his offspring, covered in mud and distinctly windblown, wearing clothes that little distinguished him from the stable boys. A well-built man with brown hair silvering at the temples, Lagan always appeared in simple but impressive robes when meeting foreign dignitaries. He did not want them to forget that Gerfal, with its riches of mines and forests, was amongst the most prosperous of the known nations. Today's robes of green velvet were edged with gold. Underneath he wore a loose fitting black tunic and completed the ensemble with a circlet of gold in the shape of intertwining branches.

Ramil did not need to be told that the servant had been overly eager to hurry him into the royal presence. A stop at the palace baths would have been advisable. But, a prince to the core, he decided it was best to pretend nothing was the matter.

'Father, I came as soon as your message reached me,' he said, going down on to one knee on the white paved floor.

'So we can see,' the King said drily. 'Ambassadors, may I present His Royal Highness, Ramil ac Burinholt.'

Ramil bowed to the three ladies at his father's right hand, all from the Blue Crescent Islands from the look of their elaborate embroidered robes, veils and

white-painted faces. They stood in unison and folded in the low bow due to royalty, even mud-stained young princes.

'Ambassadors, your presence does our court great honour,' Ramil acknowledged them, wondering secretly what on earth had brought these envoys from the other end of the known world. The Islands lay far to the west, a long sea voyage around the lands of the Spearthrower's empire. A dangerous journey not to be undertaken lightly, thanks to the depredations of the warlord's imperial Pirate Fleet.

The King rose, giving the signal for all to do likewise.

'Ladies, now you have seen my son, let us reconvene this time tomorrow, giving you a chance to recover from your arduous voyage.'

The ambassadors bowed again, this time a shade lower as fitting for a monarch.

'Ramil, come with me.' Lagan beckoned his son to follow him into the retiring room behind the king's dais.

Perplexed, Ramil trailed after his father. Lagan dismissed the servants, threw a log on the fire and sat down in an armchair with a grunt of contentment. Compared to the White Stone Chamber, it was a comfortable room, much like an old slipper after the pinch of formal footwear. Ramil felt more at ease in his muddy clothes and slumped in his favourite chair.

'Wine? Kava?' Lagan offered his son a drink from a tray set ready on a low table. Ramil accepted a cup of the dark, bitter kava that had been his mother's favourite.

'Sorry about that,' Ramil said awkwardly, gesturing to himself and then into the hall. 'The messenger made it sound as if I had to come at once.'

'A wise king never hurries without knowing to what he goes,' said Lagan, quoting from the *Book of Monarchs*, one of Ramil's least favourite texts from his days in the schoolroom.

'Yes, but the wise son jumps when his father whistles,' Ramil countered.

Lagan laughed. 'How true. Never mind all that now: I have something very serious to discuss with you.'

'Would it be to do with the ambassadors, by any chance?'

Lagan nodded and sipped his wine. 'You won't have failed to notice that Holt has been regarding us with less than friendly eyes of late.'

Ramil nodded. The coast had been raided by so-called pirates—really privateers working for the warlord of Holt, Fergox Spearthrower. There had been several skirmishes along the border between Gerfalian troops and men from Holt's latest conquest, Brigard. War had not yet been declared but it was already being fought.

'The Blue Crescent Islands have also had their fair share of attention from the warlord. In our different ways, we represent the next logical conquests for Holt.'

'But that'll never happen,' Ramil objected. 'Gerfalians will never let Spearthrower invade. We'll fight his armies street by street, field by field—'

Lagan held up his hand. 'I know, Ram, I know. But I also know that the Brigardians had a brave army, as

well equipped and trained as ours. They did not give in easily, but yet they fell.'

'They were starved into submission. Fergox cut them off by sea—that's what broke them.'

Lagan sipped his wine. 'I'm glad to see you've been paying attention at council. I will never again say that your glazed look is because you are daydreaming. But you are right. Fergox exerts his power by both land and sea. We might be able to match him with our armies, but we will never be the equal of the Pirate Fleet. That's why we need an alliance with the Blue Crescent.'

Ramil nodded. It made perfect sense. The Crescent navy was famed throughout the known world for its strength as a fighting force. Used mainly to defend the waters of the Sapphire Ocean, the four crown princesses could call on at least a thousand ships with highly skilled crews who also trained as land-based fighters. These marines were a remarkably versatile force, even more surprising in Ramil's view because half of them were female. Women did not train for combat in Gerfal. But the Islands were a long way away and though Gerfal and the Blue Crescent were not enemies, neither were they exactly friends. Their cultures were worlds apart.

'So how are we going to make this alliance? I can see we will benefit from their navy. What do they get from us?'

'Initially, raw materials and promise of military support in the event they are attacked. We do not know

which country Fergox is going to strike first, but we both have an interest in seeing the other survive. And there's something else too.'

'Oh?' Ramil was feeling tired after his long morning of riding. He yawned. For all the threats to Gerfal, his father appeared to be on top of everything. He had little to do but approve the sound preparations for their defence. 'What else?'

'A royal alliance.'

'What?'

'In short, you.'

All tiredness vanished. 'No! I'm not marrying one of their matriarchs. I don't want a white-painted she-witch as a wife.'

Lagan frowned. He had expected his son to react like this, which was why he was holding this meeting in private. Prejudice against the strange people of the Blue Crescent ran deep in Gerfal—indeed the King was not too keen on them himself.

'Not a matriarch. The match is to be with one of the Crown Princesses.'

'But that's no better,' thundered Ramil. 'She could be anyone—the most recent one was dragged from the gutter if the stories are to be believed.'

Lagan sucked his teeth, waiting for his son to finish his outburst.

'There's no royal bloodline—just a series of nobodies dressed up in stupid costumes! Heaven's sake, Father, they prize poetry and paper-folding over swordsmanship. I doubt a native of the Blue Crescent Islands has

ever sat on a horse. They're all for boats and canals, not roads and carriages like a civilized country!'

'You're being ridiculous, Ramil. The waterways of Rama are among the wonders of the world.'

Ramil was annoyed with himself, recognizing he'd gone completely off the point with his sweeping attack on Crescent culture.

'Look , Father, put yourself in my shoes. You know as well as I do that marriage to one of them would be a living death. They are so formal they have sixty things to do before and after belching. God knows what you have to do before kissing a crown princess!' Ramil shuddered at the thought. 'Don't do this.'

'We have no choice. It is the only way our two countries can be brought to trust each other—we need the Blue Crescent if there's to be a throne for you to inherit.'

Ramil tried a different tack. 'I thought the Crown Princesses didn't marry.'

'This one does.'

'Which one? They're all near ninety, aren't they?'

'You exaggerate, Ramil.'

'So I'm to marry one of four but I'm to have no say in the choice, not even to say which I'd prefer?'

'Correct. This is a marriage of state, not a farm boy picking a milkmaid at a barn dance.'

Ramil bunched his fists. 'I'm not going to do it, Father.'

'You will do it for Gerfal. You will do it to show that you take your responsibilities seriously.'

Ramil stood up abruptly, with half a mind to storm out. 'You can talk. You always said you married Mother for love.'

Lagan threw another log on the fire. 'I married selfishly. I weakened Gerfal by choosing your mother.'

'She was a princess—'

'Of a people that counted for very little here in the north. If I hadn't met her at the Great Horse Fair, I would've been married to Fergox's sister, did you know that?'

Ramil shook his head.

'I ducked out of the match, I admit. Junis was not the woman of my dreams. I knew my father was planning the wedding so I took the decision out of his hands and married in a ceremony in the desert before he could stop me.'

Ramil suddenly understood. 'So is this why you have not told me any of this before? You were afraid I'd bolt and hitch up to the first likely looking woman?'

'Yes. You are very much like me, Ramil. I was afraid you'd make the same mistake.'

'But your marriage to Mother was not a mistake. You were happy—you had me and Briony—'

'We were happy, yes, but Gerfal was not. Think what might have been if I had allied us to Fergox by marriage: we wouldn't now be fearing for our future. But if you do your duty, you give Gerfal a good chance of surviving free of the warlord. Indeed, even better: you stand to expand our own power westwards—we could see Burinholts on two thrones.'

Ramil seethed with anger—he felt like a sheep herded into the shearing shed, about to lose the comfortable fleece of dreams and pleasures that had so far made up his life. 'But you forget the elections they've got there.'

Lagan waved his hand airily. 'Practices can change. Those elections are open to abuse and have been manipulated by Fergox. Why do you think an insignificant girl was chosen as the new Crown Princess? He's bribed some of the priesthood—he's weakening the rulers. When the Crescent Islanders realize this, they will want to put a stop to it, drag the Islands away from the vagaries of elections into the modern age of strong hereditary leaders. To men.'

Ramil considered his father's words carefully before replying. 'So what you are really asking me to do is to marry this crone to cement an alliance while all along we're planning to take over?'

'Not a crone. I have already said we will only accept a woman of child-bearing years. And yes, we can offer the Crescent Islands strong leadership when the time is ripe.'

'Can I refuse?'

'If you refuse, I will open negotiations with Fergox for a suitable match for you. I understand his sister is still unwed. The Inkar Yellowtooth will no doubt accept a fresh young man like you in her bed.'

'You are joking!'

'Sadly, I am not. I wish to spare my people a war we cannot win. Without the Blue Crescent, the only future

is as a vassal state of Fergox. He would ask just such a sacrifice of us—a pledge of our loyalty.'

Ramil was overwhelmed by a desire to start the day again, go back to the forest but this time forget to come home.

'So I have no choice?'

'No, I'm sorry, but you don't.'

'The wedding—when, where?' Ramil snapped.

'The details are yet to be decided. Go and take a bath.'

Lagan dismissed his son with a sigh. Ramil stalked out with his shoulders hunched. It grieved the King to know that he had just shattered his relationship with his only son. He remembered exactly what it had felt like to have his father behave as king rather than loving parent. His father had never treated him the same after his marriage to Ramil's mother and his beloved wife had barely been received at court until the old king died. He feared Ramil would now hold a similar grudge against him.

Once the Prince had gone, the King rang a bell. The chief of his guard came in.

'See that Prince Ramil does not leave the castle until further notice,' ordered Lagan. 'Make sure he does not visit the stables on any pretext.'

If the guard thought the order strange, he did not say. He bowed and left quickly to organize a twenty-four hour close watch on the young heir to the throne.