

CHAPTER ONE

Hilde

THE SUN SINKS below distant mountains, sending a riot of colour through the sky. The lake in front of us reflects its hues: reds and oranges, purples and pinks. I inhale the crisp evening air, wishing I could draw the sunset's beauty down inside of me. Let its brilliant colours fill my emptiness and conceal the darkness that hides inside of me. This is my prayer, although it is not one that would satisfy the priests. I exhale and let go of my bleak thoughts.

"Hilde." Drystan speaks barely loud enough to disturb my contemplation. He fears anyone else hearing. "They come soon. I feel it."

"I know, brother." My voice is just as soft, although it sounds harsher to my ear, not melodic like his. Drystan could have been a druid with that voice. When he speaks, the world around us quietens, as if the elements draw closer to hear him.

"You will protect them, won't you, Hilde?" He turns to me and his eyes reflect the red of the sunset, making it seem as if their depths burn with fire. "You must protect them. The priests will kill them if they find out."

"I will protect them with my life," I tell him. "Our brothers were wronged and it is our duty to provide them with safe harbour."

Drystan nods and resumes his vigil, scanning the sky for any sign that the swans are returning. "Soon, Hilde. Tonight perhaps."

I open my mouth to reply but stop as I see something, far off in the distance, almost as far away as the setting sun.

"What is it?" Drystan forgets in his eagerness to be quiet. He catches himself and lowers his voice. "Is it them?"

My eyes have always been keener than his, but still I squint, trying to make out shapes I'm not even certain I see.

"I can't be sure. Smudges against the sunset is all."

"They come."

His absolute faith in an old family tale shouldn't surprise me after all this time, and yet it does. Seven brothers. I say their names silently, my lips swift to form each familiar name. Eremon. Yestin. Hael. Uistean. Inis. Eamon. And Fionn. Cursed Fionn. Their family had the three sons each man hoped for in those days. An heir, a soldier, and one for the druids, plus four sons to spare. It was the youngest who doomed his brothers: Fionn, the seventh son of seven sons. Fionn, the bard. He lived long enough to regret the deed and died of old age, weary and still heartsick at what he had done to his brothers.

There's magic in the blood of the children of Silver Downs. How many times had I heard that expression? It was usually said as a warning, sometimes with amusement, and occasionally as a curse. Fionn was the one who got all the magic in his generation. He was a bard with the power to bring his tales to life. They warned him, it was said. He was told what he could do. Whether or not he believed it, I've never known. But one day in a fit of rage, he told a tale of six brothers who were turned into swans. Six brothers who took wing into the sky and flew off towards the setting sun. Six brothers who in three hundred years would be restored to their human form.

The tale of the swan brothers has been passed down through the generations of Silver Downs, from heir to heir. Mayhap some didn't believe. It doesn't matter. The exact year of their changing has been forgotten, but we think the time to be close. Drystan had thought it would be last summer. When they didn't come, he said it would be this summer. I am supposed to be at the battle front but was injured

and sent home to recover. So as the sun sets each evening, we wait for them. Drystan and I stand beside the lake and let the encroaching darkness slide its cloak over us, and we wait.

The smudge I couldn't quite see has grown closer and now it is not one, but six. I still can't make out their forms, but suddenly my heart thuds in my chest. I hadn't entirely believed Drystan when he said they would return during our days. I'm not sure I had even completely believed the tale of the six brothers turned into swans. Priest Pius would say it is a heresy. A test to trick us and turn our faces from Sulis Minerva, the One True God.

My heart hammers in my chest as I wait, my gaze fixed on those six tiny specks. They move so slowly. Beside me, Drystan is still and silent. I can't even hear him breathing. Perhaps he doesn't. This is the moment he has waited for all of his life. As heir, the responsibility was passed from our father to him. It is Drystan's duty to wait and watch, to greet our brothers when they arrive.

"I see them," he murmurs. "Hilde, I see them. It's true. They come tonight."

I nod but don't respond. My mind is working furiously, planning for the moment of their arrival. The transformation. Will they be confused? Disorientated? We need to get them into the lodge quickly and quietly, before Priest Pius sees them. It may take some time for the brothers to fully return to their human minds, and if they say the wrong thing in front of him, it could mean their deaths. Better that they die, he would think, than that they live and challenge the truth of Sulis Minerva.

The specks come closer, closer, and finally I can make out their forms. Six white swans, their wings moving almost lazily as they glide

through the air. I can think of no more perfect backdrop than the brilliance of tonight's sunset.

"Magnificent," Drystan says, and I can only nod in agreement.

But then my sharp eyes spot something behind them, and the furious hammering in my chest slows. Disappointment seeps through me as I watch the seventh swan, its wings beating furiously as it tries to catch up to the flock.

"It's not them." I am reluctant to say it, but he needs to know. The tale is very specific: seven brothers but only six turned to swans.

"Of course it is, Hilde. You know the tale." His voice trails off as he too sees the seventh. "Oh." His disappointment is palpable and I feel bad, even though it's not my fault. I was just the first to realise.

The swans come closer and closer. One turns its head and its profile is sharp against the setting sun. It seems to look back at the swan that's fast catching up to them, and I'm sure I see its beak open and close. Encouraging or scolding, I can't tell.

I marvel at the sight of seven white swans in flight, even as I swallow down my disappointment that this is not the day we have waited for. Drystan will be desolate. I reach out and clasp his hand briefly. His fingers are smooth, a contrast to my own hands which are chapped and roughened from weapons practice.

Now they are close enough that I can see their eyes, their beaks. I fancy I even see a feather that comes unattached from a wing and drifts lazily down to land on the water. Drystan and I stand tall as we watch their progress.

They are right in front of us now, and the seventh swan has almost caught up. One of the swans trumpets and I fancy it tells the trailing swan to go away, go back, don't follow. The seventh swan

looks strained, breathless. I wonder how far it flew alone before it caught up to the rest of the flock.

The glint of sunlight on metal catches my eye a moment before the arrow pierces the side of the seventh swan. She screams — suddenly I am sure she is female — and crashes down into the shallow water. The other swans are descending right beside us in a rustle of wings and a swirl of wind as it happens. Even as they land, they are already changing. The moment of transformation is too quick for me to make out the details, but suddenly six men stand in front of us.

Five of them step closer together, staring at us with wary eyes. One holds his arms out awkwardly, before remembering he no longer has wings. He lowers his arms to his sides. The sixth is already running.