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*This book is dedicated to
ugly ducklings everywhere.*

*Don't worry about those fluffy
yellow morons: they'll never get
to be swans.*

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The Swan Kingdom

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PART ONE

to life, shining and beautiful, awash with eddying power. Astonished, I lifted my eyes to look at my mother's garden. I could see the same beauty in all the plants and in the trees that ringed us. The clouds above us were alive too – the current of life even swirled in the air.

When my newly awakened eyes returned to my mother, she was suffused with the intense glow – my eyes were filled with the brightness of her. Power flowed through her body, coursing in her veins like blood. She leaned towards me, taking my tiny hands in her dirt-caked fingers.

"It is the enaid, Alexandra," she whispered. "The life of the world. It is in the earth, in the waters, the animals and the green things. It is in the air. And we – you and I – are its heart. As long as we are here to care for this land, nothing can change that."

I remember how her words seemed to resound within me, as if something inside my heart had stirred and murmured my name. And when I looked down at my hands, clasped in hers, I saw that same rush of power shining in my own veins.

CHAPTER ONE

You probably know me already. In every story you've ever been told, someone like me exists. A figure in the background, barely noticed by the main players. A talentless, unwanted child. The ugly one. The ugly one only ever gets in the way. She is as out of place as a sparrow in a clutch of swans. This was the role I had in my father's Hall.

It was the role my father gave me.

I have a memory. It's smudgy, almost faded into nothing now. It's a memory of my father. I can remember him picking me up in his big arms and whirling me around until I shrieked with laughter. I can remember him calling me his sweetening. But that's the last – the only – time I can ever remember him holding me.

I don't know what changed. Maybe it was me. I was

not like my brothers – whom, it must be said, he did love a great deal. I must have been a great disappointment as a king's daughter. I could not be married off to his advantage, for who would want to wed a creature so plain? And I was a strange little girl, always talking to things other people couldn't see, running off on my own, never listening to his orders. I can understand why he might have despaired of me. I don't understand why he stopped loving me.

But I adapted, in the way that children do. For I held another place in my father's Hall – the place my mother and brothers gave me.

It's not enough to say that my mother was beautiful, though she was, almost unbelievably so. But her beauty was the least that people said of her. She was a wise woman, renowned throughout the Kingdom. That was why my father, the king, had wed her. In truth, her compassion and gentleness made her better loved than Father, with his harsh ideas of justice and his brusque manner, could ever have been. Everyone adored her. I idolized her.

And then there were my brothers. I loved them almost as dearly as I did my mother.

David was the eldest, my father's heir and the most like him, with his dark hair and eyes. He was calm and steady, and it was he who endeavoured to keep my dresses unmuddied and the twigs from my hair.

Next came Hugh, the tallest and most handsome,

with golden hair and the careless, flashing smile of our mother. He was quick and witty and could tease even our father from a black mood. He was the inventor – and victor – of all our childhood games.

Robin was the closest to me in age as well as temperament. He was not a brilliant swordsman like David or a fine horseman like Hugh. He was a thinker, and kept his nose in a book as often as he could manage; but for me he always had time – to talk, paint pictures, play games. When I found the sparrow with a broken wing, it was Robin I ran to, and he put aside his book and showed me how to splint its bone and feed it, his hands and voice gentle. Robin and I were alike in many ways. We had the same deep auburn-coloured hair. We had both inherited Mother's eyes, the vivid green of newly unfurled leaves.

But there, I'm afraid, my resemblance to Robin and my mother ended.

When I said I was ugly, I meant it. Though I had my mother's hair and eyes and her pale skin, somehow I was ... ugly. Or perhaps that's too strong a word. It was just that my small, white face, with its delicate features, faded into insignificance, especially next to the dazzling charms of the rest of my family. They said David would make a wonderful king, in time. There was no doubt that Hugh would be a fine lord, and defend his brother's lands well. And Robin, of course, would be a great scholar.

No one said what I would become. They looked at me with pity, I think. I was nothing. I was the wanderer, the dreamer who listened to the tides of magic in her sleep. I knew it was not my destiny to be great. I would only be Alexandra, and I would be free.

So I wasn't unhappy, then. The wood-frame Hall, with its curved walls and thatching that almost reached the ground in places, was a true home to me, and I loved it, especially Mother's beautiful gardens that spread out over most of the hillside. I grew up running wild through the amber fields of the Kingdom, sleeping in the green and silver shadows of its forests, diving through the clear sweetness of its waters. My brothers ran with me, and my mother watched over us all. When I look back now, my memories of that time seem to stream and dance like dust motes gilded by the sun.

I remember one afternoon in late summer when I was about ten. Robin and I lay next to each other in the grasses by the hawthorn hedge, watching the clouds wheel above us in the sky. The hump of thatching that was the roof of the Hall was just out of sight over the curve of the hill, and below us was wild land dotted with daisies, forget-me-nots and ammemnon flowers.

Hugh and David had found some long sticks and were mock duelling near by. Their shouts and swearing didn't disturb me – I was far too used to it – but Hugh's yelp of pain at David's blow to his knuckles was particularly

loud, and I rolled my eyes at Robin as Hugh proceeded to curse his opponent soundly.

"How can David's father have been a mongrel cur with one leg?" I called lazily. "He's your father too."

"I refuse to believe it," Hugh said dramatically. "Obviously David is the goblin child that Mother found by the wayside one day and took pity on."

"Unlikely," David said, lowering his stick. He leaned on it, continuing thoughtfully, "But it might be true that one of us is a changeling."

I blinked in shock, and sat up. "Do you mean me?" I asked, my voice sounding too high-pitched even to my own ears.

"Don't be stupid," Hugh said hastily. "You're the living spit of Mother."

"I mean Hugh, of course," David agreed calmly. "You and Robin both look like Mother, and I obviously take after Father. But who does Hugh look like?"

"Oh," I said, relieved. "Mama says he looks like her sister."

"Hmm. Possibly. But if Hugh is a goblin child it would explain his abominable sword work," David said.

"Pah!" Hugh raised the stick in his hand threateningly. "Say that to my sword, coward."

"Oh, no more, please." Robin finally spoke, rolling over. "You're too noisy. Come and watch clouds, or else go and fight in the stable yard."

"Too noisy?" cried Hugh dramatically. He flung his

stick into the hedge, startling a pair of blackbirds into flight. "I'll teach you to cheek your elders, worm!"

Robin looked at Hugh in alarm, scrambling to his feet, but Hugh grabbed him and easily wrestled him back to the ground.

"Help!" Robin shouted, the word muffled by Hugh's arm. "Alex!"

I threw myself onto Hugh's back and began tickling him mercilessly, knowing this was his greatest weakness. He immediately convulsed with uncontrollable laughter, and was forced to release Robin as he tried to swat me away.

"Treachery!" he shouted between gales of laughter. "Betrayal – ow!"

Robin wormed out from under us and sat on Hugh's legs. "Surrender!"

"Never. I'll die first!" Hugh squirmed helplessly under our combined weight. Weak with laughter myself now, I almost fell off, and laughed all the harder.

David watched us wonderingly. "Well, I think that settles it," he said. "I must be the changeling, since I refuse to admit I'm related to any of you."

Hugh, Robin and I froze, and turned to look at David. Then Robin shouted, "Get him!"

David dropped his stick and ran, and the three of them jumped up and chased after him, laughing like loons.

* * *

But as much fun as I had with my brothers, the brightest point of any day was that spent with my mother, in her gardens. Before I was old enough even to talk, my mother had given me lessons in her gardens each morning – lessons I took much more seriously than the sporadic lectures I received from the household women on embroidery or how a lady should curtsy.

In Mother's gardens, all things were named, and all named things were beautiful, from the tiny, glistening beetles that crawled under the rocks, to the magnificent fragrant roses, to the birds that streamed by overhead. Mother taught me about everything important in the world, about the plants and trees, animals and feathered things, about the weather, about how to care for the land and make it fertile. She taught me of the countries to the west, where the rulers loved music so much that they spent every crumb of gold on harpists and singers, while their people starved to death. She taught me of the nation to the north, where ambitious men had ripped the land apart with civil wars until roses would no longer bloom in the place they had once called the City of Flowers. Only here, in the Kingdom, she said, were peace and plenty known. Only here were the Old Ways truly followed – the land respected and loved, and the Ancestors remembered and worshipped as they should be.

I soaked up her words as parched earth does the first rains of spring, always thirsty for more. By the time I was ten I knew more plant lore than many herb women five

times my age – I could identify and name the uses of every plant in the gardens and the woods, knew all the draughts, poultices and potions that my mother could teach. I even added one or two new recipes to the huge, heavy tome of handmade paper that Mother laughingly called her spell book.

When I was eleven she began to teach me other things – what she called “small workings”. The small workings were just that: workaday things, little tricks for everyday life. I learned how to invite warmth into wood, so that kindling and tinderbox became unnecessary; to find the tiny flicker of life in even the most shrivelled of plants and coax it forth so that it might bloom again. I also learned how to call to living creatures with my thoughts and interpret the jumbled mix of images, smells and sensations that made up their language.

The power to do all this came from the earth, from the currents of life – called enaid – that ebbed and flowed across the land. Like many people, I had the ability to use this ambient power and draw strength from it. There were other women in the household and the surrounding villages who could do the same. Mother called them “cunning women” but not disparagingly. The folk of the Kingdom needed the women who could do these small things, for Mother could not be everywhere.

Mother, you see, had a different gift – a blessing from

the Ancestors that allowed her to perform Great workings. The gift was one of healing, and it came from within her own body, not from the land. Mother could make people well whom any cunning woman would have given up for dead. When every poultice, potion and draught had failed, Lady Branwen could succeed. People came from all over the Kingdom and sometimes beyond, to seek her help; and she always gave it. She said that was the price of the gift; that it must always be used. She also said that once there had been many women who had such power.

Now there was only her.

Mother never made me feel that I was a disappointment to her. In fact, sometimes I wondered if she was relieved that I had not inherited her gift. I knew such Great powers could be a burden, as well as a blessing. I had seen Mother grey and shaking with exhaustion after expending almost all her strength to save a life; and I had seen her weep bitterly when the gift was not enough to do so. Perhaps she was glad I had been spared such suffering. I could do small workings well enough; in some of them my skill even surpassed hers. With my knowledge of herbs and plants, of poultices and fomentations, I could offer comfort and the hope of recovery. But with that I had to be content. I had no Great gift.

My brothers thought my skills very useful. I would be asked to soothe a fractious horse, quickly warm a cold

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room in the Hall or hide the evidence of their picking fruit from Mother's gardens without permission. But when Hugh asked me to summon a deer to be shot, I grew so upset that Robin and David made him promise never to speak of it again.

My father did not find the turn my lessons had taken nearly so agreeable. After having heard the thoughts and feelings of animals – for, make no mistake, they have thoughts and feelings just as we do – I could no longer bear to eat meat. My mother had never done so, but to have his own daughter rebel in such a way was a great annoyance to Father. He was used to his people greeting the return of the Hunt with joyful faces and much anticipatory licking of lips, not tearful reproaches at the sight of the poor deer or boar slung over the rump of the horse. The first evening that I pushed my meat-filled trencher away was the first time I saw him argue with my mother.

That night the atmosphere in the long room was heavy and oppressive, as if thunderclouds lurked under the rafters, waiting to burst. The household people, wary of my father's mood, cleared away the remnants of the meal and hastily departed, and my brothers and I were dismissed from the room with a curt gesture from Father's hand. But I did not go. Disobeying his orders yet again, I hid behind one of the tapestries, and from my hiding place watched their fight in a churning of guilt and terror.

"How will I find a husband for her if she refuses to

welcome the Hunt, Branwen? It will be hard enough, homely as she is; but if she is seen to be simple-minded as well, no one will ever want her." He paced before the great stone mantel, his heavy boots thudding dully against the flagstones. "Is the satisfaction of defying me worth harming your own child? Because, make no mistake, you are harming her by insisting on this nonsense."

My mother sat dangerously still in her chair, hands clenched into stubby freckled fists on the tabletop as she faced him; but her voice was calm when she spoke. "What nonsense do you speak of, My Lord? The teachings of the Ancestors? My teachings? That nonsense has kept this land fertile and rich for centuries. It has saved your blighted crops, healed your ailing animals, calmed the floods and bade the sun to smile on you. Is that the *nonsense* you mean?"

Father's face reddened in sudden rage and he slammed a hand on the mantel, making the whole hearth shake. "*I rule this land. I am its master. The Old Ways are dead. The Ancestors smile on me because of the strength of my sword arm, not because of spells chanted by a witch woman!*"

I gasped silently in my hiding place. Mama flinched as though he had struck her and swiftly turned her face away; I saw Father blanch as he realized the effect of his words.

It was then that I crept from behind the tapestry and into the gardens. I climbed up onto one of the low