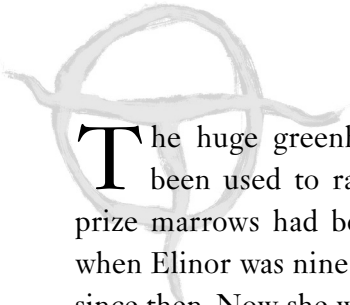




# 1



The huge greenhouse that generations before had been used to raise bountiful crops of flowers and prize marrows had been remade into a theatre of sorts when Elinor was nine years old, and constantly improved since then. Now she was nineteen, the dolls that had once provided her supporting cast had long since been relegated to being her audience, seated in two rows of garden chairs at the south end. They had been replaced as performers by life-sized plasterboard cutouts, repainted as necessary. Elinor still played nearly all the parts and did all the voices.

She was doing one now, standing behind a bright red-and-gold cavalier to deliver the most famous speech from Breakespear's *The Three Noble Kinswomen*, Sir Merivan revealing he was betrothed to all three ladies but would marry none and was in fact in love with the orphan Kit Catchpenny.





‘None of thee could but be more than a sister unto me—’

‘Elinor!’

The agitated voice of Mrs Watkins preceded her into the glasshouse, the tone unusual enough to wake Ham Corbin, who had fallen asleep among the audience, despite Elinor’s rousing performance over the last hour as the entire cast of the Breakespear classic. He *was* eighty, so Elinor did not take it as a criticism. Besides, he had been primarily a circus performer, and loved only the parts of plays that called for tumbling and swordplay and knife-throwing, all of which he had taught her since he had first come to Coldhallow House, ostensibly as an elderly and thus inexpensive groom but in fact more of an unlikely assistant and sometime foil to his niece, Roberta – though like everyone else, he only ever called Elinor’s governess ‘Mrs Watkins’.

Elinor sighed and let the rest of Sir Merivan’s soliloquy subside back into the lower reaches of her mind. She stepped out from behind the cavalier cutout, revealing herself to be a full head shorter than the knight, as she stood no more than five foot three in her stockings or, as was the case now, in socks. She was wearing her long-dead father’s clothes, a subdued tweed suit in brown and green, which matched her eyes. They were brown with flecks of green, and her hair was simply brown, a very undistinguished brown to her own eyes. The suit had been altered somewhat to fit, but was still baggy. Her father had been no taller than her, but considerably weightier and notoriously slow-moving. Elinor was slim, strong, swift, and dexterous, and Ham had said she was the



physical equal of any of the circus folk he had worked with, though he qualified this by adding she was not as strong as 'Helena, the Strongest Woman in the World' nor as flexible as a contortionist known as the 'Mirror Snake'.

She looked a drab sparrow among the bright cutouts, Elinor thought, not for the first time. But even though she played all the parts, she never dressed as the flamboyant characters in her favourite dramas. She wore her father's old clothes simply because they were more comfortable and it was much easier to do all the things she liked doing in trousers rather than in an ankle-length dress and a tightly buttoned jacket, not to mention several layers of flannel underclothing.

It had been a tactical error to step out from hiding, Elinor realised, as Mrs Watkins saw she was once again wearing her father's clothes, with a cloth cap pulled down low over her forehead to hide the unsightly brand there, rather than a bonnet or even a scarf.

'Elinor! You have to get dressed. The doctor is here.'

'I thought he was coming tomorrow,' protested Elinor.

'The pony trap from the station is halfway up the drive! It must be bringing the doctor,' exclaimed Mrs Watkins. 'Hurry! Oh, Ham, not now!'

Ham ignored his niece, throwing four wooden balls in quick succession at Elinor, who caught them automatically and began to juggle, cycling the balls around in front of her face before she threw them back with great speed and accuracy straight at Ham's nose.

He caught the balls with a coughing chuckle and slipped them back into the pockets of his shabby

greatcoat. Though it was the tail end of summer and the days still had some warmth, and the greenhouse with its iron-framed glass roof caught the sun, Ham had begun to feel the cold. Great age had not so far lessened his dexterity, but it had reduced his resistance to extremes of temperature.

‘You’ve the sure eye, Miss Elinor,’ he said. ‘Knives next time.’

‘You’ll do no such thing,’ scolded Mrs Watkins, though she knew full well her uncle would pay her no heed, and that Elinor had been juggling knives for years anyway. Though not usually when Mrs Watkins could see, to spare her feelings. ‘Come on, Elinor. I have put out your Sunday dress and the blue bonnet.’

Elinor hooked her arm through Mrs Watkins’s elbow as they left the greenhouse, and gave her a fond smile.

‘What would I do without you, Mrs Watkins?’

The governess sniffed.

‘Become even more of a hellion,’ she said.

‘I wish I was a hellion,’ said Elinor sadly. ‘Wearing men’s clothes and staging plays all by myself hardly counts.’

‘It would be more than enough if word spread of it,’ snapped Mrs Watkins. She was almost dragging Elinor across the courtyard between the greenhouse and the main house now, in her eagerness to get her out of sight before their visitor might see her, though the doctor would come to the front door on the other side.

‘How could it?’ asked Elinor. She paused, forcing Mrs Watkins to release her arm. ‘No one ever visits. I never go out.’



She gestured at the hills around them, good grazing land for sheep, though there had been none there for years and the once well-managed woods on the heights had begun to encroach upon the fields. Elinor's father, the late Edmund Hallett, had been a very indifferent farmer anyway, and since his death eight years before, Elinor's mother, Amelia, had let everything go: the land lay fallow, all the farmworkers and most of the servants had gone, and no social calls were made or allowed.

Now Amelia Hallett herself lay close to death, up on the four-poster bed in the grand bedroom that took up a good quarter of the old house's second floor. Elinor looked up at the windows there, even now half expecting to see her mother peering down at her, the same distant figure she had always been, leaving Elinor's education and well-being almost entirely to Mrs Watkins, intervening only in usually unwelcome ways on those rare occasions when she roused herself to leave the bedroom or parlour.

Mrs Hallett had taken to her bed three weeks previously, after feeling 'light-headed and odd', and had thereafter quickly lapsed into a state closely resembling death, while not actually being dead. The local doctor having proclaimed himself entirely baffled, he had suggested telegraphing the famous Dr Branthill and that worthy had eventually agreed to make a visit.

Though Mrs Hallett was not in the window, a sudden and miraculous recovery not having occurred, Elinor kept staring up. The weather vane atop the house was screeching as it slowly rotated, the screech almost seeming to come from the bronze owl that sat atop the directionals. The





winds were extremely set in their ways here, usually coming from the south or southeast. The weather vane rarely moved much, if at all.

Now it had swung all the way around, and the arrow clutched in the bronze owl's claws was pointing north.

'A wind from the north,' said Elinor softly, almost to herself.

'What's that?' asked Mrs Watkins. She looked up too, and gasped. 'No, that can't be—'

The weather vane screeched and moved again, slowly circling around to point in a more accustomed direction to the southeast. But it didn't stay still, jerking northward for a few seconds before swinging back, as if the wind from the north was simply waiting its turn.

'I don't remember the last time the wind came from the north,' said Elinor. 'The servants all think it brings trouble, don't they?'

'It does,' said Mrs Watkins. She did not sound at all like her usual self. 'I hope not here.'


'What do you mean?' asked Elinor.

Mrs Watkins was still watching the weather vane. It was twitching between south-southeast and nor-nor'-east.

'We're a good fifteen miles further south than Bain,' she said, apparently to herself, for when Elinor repeated the question, she shook her head and gripped the young woman's arm again and pulled her along.

In the end, it took Elinor fifteen minutes to dress in the ridiculous layers of flannel and corsetry, many-buttoned coat, and flounced long dress that the year-old copies of *The Gentlewoman's Magazine* from Corvere said were suitable





for a young lady of middling social status and wealth. Though in Elinor's case both these things were notional. Even before Amelia Hallett had put Coldhallow House in near isolation, her parents had always kept her secluded from local society, such as it was, and she had begun to realise from the lack of upkeep to everything that while the family may have been wealthy once, it was no longer. Or her mother was even more of a miser than she had always seemed to be. As with many other subjects, money was not something Amelia Hallett would discuss with her daughter, even before she became ill and could not talk at all.

The finishing touch was an unfashionable bonnet, pulled low to hide the disfiguring scar on her forehead. Amelia always insisted her daughter keep her forehead covered to hide the brand, and did not care to hear that bonnets had been out of fashion for at least several decades, even in the country.

Elinor accepted it was a disfigurement. She was relieved it was sometimes hardly visible, but it always became more distinct when she was upset or angry, probably something to do with blood flow, and it could not be concealed with paint or powder, somehow always showing through. Elinor could often forget about it, but Mrs Hallett had an absolute horror of the brand, possibly because it had been mysteriously inflicted by her own mother, Elinor's grandmother.

Elinor wasn't clear on exactly what her grandmother had done, or how she'd done it, as her mother refused to discuss the matter. She had no memory of any traumatic

pain or, indeed, anything else that might have made the mark. Mrs Watkins had already been her governess then, but she had not seen what happened, having been sent on an errand clearly to get her out of the way. She had returned to find the baby's forehead indelibly marked and Mr Hallett threatening to whip his mother-in-law off the property, forbidding her ever to darken his threshold again, a sensibility shared by his wife.

'Come along, Elinor,' urged Mrs Watkins, returning to check on her charge's progress for the third time and help her with the final buttons. 'The doctor wouldn't take tea or anything, he's already gone straight in to your mother. These city folk, always in a rush!'

Elinor followed her governess, feeling both excited at finally meeting someone new, and nervous, in case the doctor somehow discerned her disfigurement under the bonnet and cried out in disgust or whatever it was her mother was always afraid was going to happen.

But the doctor hardly spared her a glance. He seemed very eager to conclude his visit and be gone.

'I'm afraid I can offer no more promising diagnosis than my esteemed local colleague,' said Dr Branthill hurriedly, even as Elinor walked into her mother's bedroom. 'I concur with the treatment to date. Continue feeding her. It is a good sign that she can still drink. Clear soups and the like, calf's-foot jelly, tea, a little lime juice. You have done well with the nursing. There is no better course than clean linens, regular bathing and turning, and if you can take her out in the chair when the weather is clement, that I also advise.'



‘Maria, my mother’s maid, has been responsible for her care,’ said Elinor quickly, not wanting to take credit for something she hadn’t done, and in all honesty, did not want to do. Her mother had never liked Elinor touching her, had always shrugged off any attempt at a hug or a kiss. Mrs Watkins said this was because Amelia had been forcibly taken from her own mother at birth, and raised by two of her dead father’s strict and judgmental aunts in Corvere, so she’d never learned how to love *anyone*, or be a parent herself. This explanation, while it made perfect sense, didn’t make it any easier for Elinor.

‘Do you see any hope of . . . of recovery?’

‘I simply do not know,’ said the great man. Many a lesser doctor would have offered some meaningless claptrap that upon close examination would mean nothing. ‘She breathes, albeit incredibly slowly. Her pulse, likewise. She lives, but in a very lowered state. The pallor of her skin is curious, but her lips and fingernails blush, showing no trace of blue. Her blood is red, her breath sweet. Her temperature is normal . . . she is not cold, despite what you think you saw—’

‘I have seen it several times!’ protested Elinor. ‘The thinnest layer of frost that forms upon her skin. But when I touch her, it disappears. It only happens at night—’

‘Ah, late at night, when you are very tired and of course anxious,’ said the doctor hurriedly, making quick motions with his hands as if to sweep away whatever Elinor had seen or thought she’d seen. ‘You are certain she never speaks?’

‘No words,’ said Elinor. ‘Sometimes I have come into the room and thought she was singing under her breath.’

Or humming. But it is so faint I'm never really sure whether I've heard it or not.'

'While we have made many advances in medicine these last few decades, much continues to be unknown,' said the doctor. He hesitated, then added, 'Particularly when considering the . . . ah . . . oddities of this locale.'

'What do you mean?' asked Elinor.

The doctor gave her a look she couldn't decipher. It wasn't exactly suspicion, nor puzzlement. Something between the two.

'The North,' he said finally.

It was Elinor's turn for a puzzled expression to form upon her face.

'What has that to do with anything?'

The doctor glanced at Mrs Watkins.

'It's not really the North here,' said the governess nervously. 'We're miles and *miles* south of Bain. We don't have . . . the oddities . . . usually.'

'The oddities of the locale,' repeated Dr Branthill, almost to himself. He glanced out the window as he spoke, and hurried to close his bag. Elinor looked out too, and saw the tops of the poplars in the drive were beginning to sway.

Not in their usual direction.

The wind was blowing from the north again. Not fiercely, but certainly enough to set the treetops swaying.

'You are a local woman, Mrs . . . er . . . Wobkins?' asked the doctor.

'Aye,' she answered, not correcting his mangling of her name. She hesitated, then added with a touch of defiance



Elinor had not often seen in someone so concerned with social differences, 'Bain born and bred, as it happens.'

'I too,' replied Dr Branthill, surprising both women. 'Rather further north, in fact, even closer to the Wall. I do not often come back. I . . . trust . . . trust you recall the childhood warnings pressed into us all. Given the condition of Mrs Hallett, I do not think this is quite so far south as one might hope and . . . and I do not like this wind.'

He no longer looked the picture of the confident medico but rather a slightly apprehensive middle-aged man whose side whiskers were quivering.

'So I am most anxious to get considerably further south myself before nightfall. I am sorry I cannot offer you any greater certainty or any relief for your mother, Miss Hallett. Good day!'

He was out the door before Elinor had a chance to even thank him, or offer any parting words. She followed him more slowly, only half listening as he clattered down the main stairs, strode swiftly down the gallery, and went out the front door like a jack-in-the-box, shouting for his coachman, who was to take him post-haste to the station and the soonest possible train southward.

