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River of the Woods

by oberon2016

Notes

This takes place after "The Wolf of the Woods" in the "Carol of the Woods" AU. If you are new to this series, it begins with "Carol of the Woods."

The Queen and Birdcatcher.
Orchard

Sweet the boughs, burdened with fruit, how the sun sings golden on the dappled orchard leaf! The Dowager Queen on the blanket, her hair, a halo of light, and there, with the Regnant, in brightness and laughter. Her ladies in waiting, they flit from tree to tree, their baskets growing heavy, for the solstice has passed and autumn is soon to come.

The birdcatcher stands apart from the boisterous company, the flute on her lips, her song, a thread to bind them together.

For today there are no meetings, no documents, no decrees, for soon the harvest will in, the reaping of barley and wheat. The scythe will rule, the toil of the granary, the lash of barges against the river dock but for today there is late summer’s kiss, oh, let it linger.

Crisp, the snap of apple from the stem, how they laugh, the ladies-in-waiting, the trail of train and veil, yes, let them be merry. In this last burst of summer heat, they wilt. The woodcutter drapes the canopy above them and on the blankets they will sleep. With a faldstool, he will sit and keep guard by the iron gate.

How quiet the orchard, a fluttering leaf, the birdsong distant in the forest deep, the lazy drone of insects bumbling among the blossoms.

The Queen, restless, she rises from the blanket, in her hand a pillow, a wineskin across her shoulder.

In silence, she departs from her company. With a measured step she slips to her birdcatcher, a hand to guide her to the edge of the wood, and there, in the crook of oaken bough, that seat.

Behind the great trunk, she draws her, gesture slow, against the birdcatcher’s raised brow. The Queen unravels her; for what a revealing, the unfurling petal, how the tunic raised, and the Queen, she cups her lover’s breasts, this fullness, a nipple to the mouth is but a sip.

The birdcatcher jolts, her mouth opens but tongue will catch the unbridled cry, her Queen’s kisses, how they devour, those lips, a bite on the neck, a chastisement. Silent, they must be, oh so silent, as the Queen takes her birdcatcher, opening those thighs, soft skin against the roughness of the bark, her hand delving deep, burying the moan, the crush of hand, oh, the juices there, apple sweet, a tart and luscious feast.

Shhh the Queen, she soothes, the floating caress to rise the heat of her.

The birdcatcher can only gasp, her legs, unsteady but the crook of the bough will hold her.

The Queen sinks to her knees, the pillow there, to peel away her birdcatcher’s cambric, to the treasures hidden. Oh, that scent, rich and thick, oh, her hands, a greedy grasp, a touch that strokes, that trace from breast to belly, that glistening prize.

The Queen, she dips.

The birdcatcher feels it, a lightning shock, a pulse that floods, that draw from breast, to belly, to there, oh, that keening lust, as she is thrown beyond herself, her body, an expanse, every rippling joy. It builds, unbearably so, that clutch of her, then a grunt of more, but the Queen, she teases, a tongue that swirls that prize, sweet salt, that savour, oh, how she savours, the feel of her in her mouth. The birdcatcher will rise, a mounting, driven need, but the Queen will have her banquet, a kiss to press her back, to spread her open, spread her wide, oh, that sight.
A whimper. Her birdcatcher’s eyes, so desperate now, a howl bitten back, that low rumble in her throat. Her breath comes shorter, a hand against the bark, and hips, they lift -

Sweet the air, and open, her fingers, stroke the petal, that pink-blush flower and bloom.

“Carol,” she begs.

Her eyes, green green against a darkening blue.

*My love*

Hold
A flight
And fall

The softest cry as the birdcatcher bites her Queen’s shoulder, a tender nip.

*Oh my love*, the Queen will whisper, the deep, that panting thrust of it, her fingers, as she carries her birdcatcher to her rest.
Cutter's Gate, Again

The Widow Beauves stands by her window in her house by Cutter’s Gate. Her chamber lies in shadow. She sees the sway of lantern against the river dark and the stars, they sparkle vast across the vault of heaven.

She waits.

From the barge, the lantern flashes three.

Her hand grips the sill, her eyes keen. With a push she opens the window, to the murmur of running waters.

Listen.

The iron scrape.

She gazes to the corridor, the passage between the docks and her courtyard gate: three shrinking figures, bundled in dark cloth, and the lantern held by the loyal boatswain.

Only three.

Listen.

Silence. And the endless flow of river.

A breath then. The Widow Beauves, she gazes at the black ribbon of flowing waters. This, a moment of respite, for the journey will be long.

She steps back and lets the curtain fall.

Sprigs of lavender, a waning purple and green, the Queen, she hangs them from the ceiling net in the house in the wood. For what was once the birdcatcher’s gossamer thread now holds the drying rosemary, the wrinkled dill, the meadow’s bounty for the coming months.

It has been a year since her birdcatcher had returned from Lady Henard’s chamber, that sorrowing, and the Queen has made much of her with a thousand gestures of love, these gifts, and in these, the birdcatcher stirs, the well of such gratitude!

To give and to receive. Yet in giving there is such a bestowal.

The birdcatcher, she watches, curled on the bed.

The Queen hums an ancient tune, taken from the Silk Road, over caravans, the mountain and the vastness of the steppe. She knows it not, but the song weeps of the orphan’s lament, sweeping oceans of grass, grass green, of hillocks, grove and vale. Come the river, the road, to sweep it to its course.

The birdcatcher waits. For is song not another story, the winding tune, a thread so ellusive as to harken to our dreams.

The Queen, she balances on the upturned tub, how her fingers must hold the scent. She stands, the
fall of creamy silk, how the light turns her, grace and golden hair, wrapped in a diaphanous gown. Oh, she is every glowing grace, the majesty of oak, the fragility of flower, she is stream and sky and forest dark. How the dancing dust motes swirl about her, a field of falling stars.

She is beauty, the curve of her, sleeves that fall, as wings. This, in such a humble abode, she would make a palace out of any hovel. For her Queen is all earthly wonder, all heavenly delight!

The birdcatcher can only stare. She asks, her throat growing thick, “When did you first see me, in the orchard?”

The Queen takes the string, looped around her palm, to tie the thread closer to the beam. She gives a curious glance.

“What did you see?” The birdcatcher tilts her head, beckoning. “And why…?”

The Queen tucks a smile in her lips, “You are full of questions today.”

The Queen asks, “When did you first see me, in the orchard?”

The birdcatcher licks her lips. “I want to know, if it could happen again, if we were to go back… I want… to always be finding you.”

The Queen places the string between her teeth, to straighten it. “Hmm. It was in the autumn, you orchard thief.”

The birdcatcher straightens. “But you called me to the Tower in high summer….”

“Yes.” With a snap, the Queen breaks the string and takes a breath. Oh, the gold, the trace of silver in her hair! But her glance falls, a sudden frailty, the slightest shift, as if to turn away. Her eyes darkening. “Understand, you are younger, my love, and that I would pull you into my sphere. Your innocence, the cost of that….” She clears her throat to hide the ache. “And what could I offer, after all, after everything?”

The light, how it falters, a shimmering. After everything. Yet have they not come through fire and ice, through plague and famine, yes, the birdcatcher thinks, after everything, and here, after all, they still have each other.

The birdcatcher stands.

It is a small thing to offer, a hand, reaching, yet the birdcatcher thinks of the Tower of stone, that first reaching, how it traversed the bonds of age, of station, of wood and town. Oh, what courage in that gesture! And the birdcatcher had not dared. But now, she holds her Queen, it is her hand that lifts the hem, part the the veil, to peel, press back the petal and in such nakedness be revealed.

Yes, to offer.

How slow the touch, the infinitesimal stroke, the birdcatcher, a glide from calf to thigh. And rich, she hears the Queen’s laugher, a chide beneath the shiver, “My love, if I should fall –“

A cup to the mound, how the birdcatcher holds her. “My Queen, then I will catch you.”
The River

Chapter Summary

Courage!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A hand, to hold, to carry, welcoming thighs, the stretch of limb, the bowl of hips, that cradle there, a head resting on the belly.

Oh, sweet hair, the kiss of sun on shoulders, a nut-brown, the long length of back.

Her birdcatcher rests.

But how the Queen’s fingers tarry, woven through silken threads, that caress, the roll of breath, the sheen of her in firelight!

Oh, that this night could last forever!

Seasons, the pull of time, the swell of the river, the swing of laden orchard boughs, for here, the dart of martens, the swoop of swallows among the dancing reeds. The Queen and her birdcatcher lie six years in this clasp, soft light from the house in the wood. Rejoice for all is well! For what more can be asked from the heavens?

Yet on this morn there is a bright sorrow in the Dowager Queen’s eyes, for today her birdcatcher will pack her satchel and go with Eli to the southern town, to the mouth of the river to place him on a ship to the University at Padua. The barge will be swift, and they will travel with the Widow Beauves. Oh, to be apart! And the Queen does worry, for even she cannot travel there without a royal guard. The southern town is full of rumour, with a jumbled chaos, a rough and lively hue, both rich and desperate, the port of many dreams. But dreams can be a turning, too….

A wave from the dock, and for the Queen and her birdcatcher, there can be no farewell kiss. The Queen watches as Eli’s brother and sister make much of him, their familial embrace. But how her birdcatcher’s eyes hold her. Yes.

The river bears them away. She will count the days

It is then that the rains come.

There is a rhythm to the river which knows no mortal time: flood and drought and spring mountain shed are nature’s timepiece. For drought, there is the Roman reservoir, cut into the bank below the town and for flood there is the stone embankment built, they say, by Charlemagne’s hand.

It begins as a light drizzle in the uplands, then a darkening cloud that hovers over the mountain tops. A sheering wind that tears the Abbey’s dome. The waters rise and there is a breach in the Lower Quarter yet the soldiers and the smithies work the lever to the flood ditch – oh, the
Dowager Queen’s foresight, for it is she who planned that construction. She stands on the rampart, even as the wind whips her shawl. Below her the guilds, the guardsmen and the townsfolk, why even the friars aid the relay of bundles to the higher ground. The granary is safe and the wash reaches only to the ankles, even at the lowest point. Yet how the river rises. The townsfolk of the lower, they will gather to the Great Hall for shelter until the waters recede.

Still the Queen shivers.

The crest of the river runs downstream to the delta, to the southern town. To her birdcatcher.

Chapter End Notes

The tune that Carol sings in the previous chapter is The Orphan's Lament
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQtfANfomaI

The lyrics
I'm an orphan; I'm alone.
Pity I didn't die as a baby.
If I had died as a baby,
I never would have suffered.

I am the loneliest.
Pity I didn't die in my cradle.
If I had died in my cradle,
I wouldn't have suffered.

Pity the baby birds,
Left without a nest.
Pity a baby,
Left without a mother

One's fate,
One cannot change it.
My departed mother,
Nothing can bring her back
On the Barge

Chapter Summary

We are together in this!

The birdcatcher does not trust the river, roiling and restless, this serpentine passage, for she is a creature of wood and vale. Yet it is quite a sight to see the hills sweep away to the plains, this unfurling of the marshlands to the delta. It confounds her, this movement, for it is she who stands in stillness on the barge on this churning, ceaseless motion, as if on the back of some fantastical beast.

They have travelled but a day from the town and though the river be swift, the birdcatcher does mark the unfathomable current beneath her and feels it unkind.

A list to starboard and she almost loses her footing. No, she does not like this at all.

Poor Eli huddles in the cabin for all day he can only take in the broth.

It is Widow Beauves who stands on the bow, her black shawl cast behind her. With the falling eve and the light fading on the banks, how the river glints between quicksilver and the deepest pitch. She holds with an unsettling patience, as if a sentry to the coming darkness.

With unsteady legs, the birdcatcher joins her.

They are two, the birdcatcher with her Queen, and the Widow with her Abbess, and between them they hold a kind of peace. They cannot claim understanding, more a solidarity of circumstance, for the Widow, with her wealth, her house in Cutter’s Gate – what commonality could they share? The Widow, older, wiser, carries a sophistication not merely of town, but of polis and her mien is both curt and peremptory: she will not suffer fools.

And ah, the birdcatcher is young!

There, out of the growing darkness, the sparkling torchlights of the southern town rise, and beyond, the vast waters, wine-dark.

“The river is high,” the Widow remarks, with a frown, “And it is not the turn of the tide.”

The birdcatcher’s breath. Oh, the shiver in her belly.

“This is the first time you have seen the Great Sea?” Widow Beauves asks, as her eyes scan the horizon.

The birdcatcher nods. For this is the sea of Odysseus, the sea of Carthage’s woe, it is myth and legend, salt estranged. What endless blue, that the world could contain such waters!

“Have you not travelled much?”

“To Paris,” the birdcatcher replies, as she grips the side.

“Ah, to the west,” the Widow sighs. “My eyes cast east, to the Singing Sands, and the cliffs of
Jiaohe. Shahr-e Gholghola, the citadel of Arg-e Bam. Ruins, all ruins, ghostly stone and ruins.” At the birdcatcher’s look, she adds, “‘Twas the Khan, the pull of conquest and empire. And now that empire is gone, as all empires crumble. But the road, and the river, remain eternal.”

Yes, the pull of dark tide, for now, even the horizon vanishes. But there the docks, and the loyal boatsman with the tether.

“Is that where you are from?” the birdcatcher asks, even as the grind of hull shudders against the dock, as the lantern swings. The boatswain calls for the mooring, and the lashing of the ties.

For the first time the Widow turns to face the birdcatcher. “No.” Her gaze drops, eyes hooded. Her voice, now edged with curious sorrow. “But it is along the caravanserai that I gained my freedom, for I was sold in the Southern Rus.”

It is at the first breach of the river that the Queen sends for the falcon, to the Tower to release against the driving rain. Alarm, alarm, for the water rises, a message to her birdcatcher, a warning of the coming storm. Her footfalls echo through the climb of the balistraria, a rising panic. The release of the hood and that burst of flight – quick to her birdcatcher, that she may find shelter from the storm.

Let her be safe.

It is next forenight before the falcon returns, as the Queen throws herself into the salvation of work – the shoring of the banks, the shelter of the Great Hall.

The message is brief, from the Steward of the southern town: the barge of the Widow Beauves was broken by the flood crest. The wave had swept out to sea and all were lost.

All were lost.
From the Window

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The missive trembles in her hand.

Like a leaf in high wind

A hand falls on her shoulder.

It is the Abbess, old friend, and wordless, the Queen hands her the message, black ink stark against the thin white vellum. What, what? Is there a sound, for the world seems muffled, as if at a great distance, and the window, oh look to the window, the orchard there, the meadow, the cozy house in the wood.

What? It is as if the world were made of glass.

One breath and it will shatter.

She is broken, like a mirror, scattered shards and fragments.

Let her remember this:

For this is where she had stood, six years before, on the precipice, her life a shambles. Queen she was, in this lonely spire, the captive in the Tower and her birdcatcher, lost to her, on the road to Carcassone.

The call of the window, with all hope broken, an empty vessel, her hand on the stone sill. So cold.

Yes, what a release, to fall

And yet….

Remember this

Seven years before, she had stood, in the full blush of autumn, with desperate, desperate thoughts. The King had taken her daughter, the envoys sent to the North for an alliance of peace brokered by her only child, still a child, a pawn in the games of Kings and men. Helpless, she had wept, for she was no Eleanor, no Theodora, what more could she do but fall.

For falling is a kind of flight, is it not?

An end, at last, failing, as a mother, as a daughter, as a wife, her foot on the stone sill. One step and she would be free. For what more could there be, the empty years, to waste and to wither. One step and she would be her mother's daughter, once more.

But it was then that she had first seen her, amongst the apple trees -
Oh, my beloved

The Queen had stood, her eyes caught by a flicker, that stranger in the orchard, that apple thief in the blue dyed woad with a fragile contraption of thread and wire lashed to her back. Features, sharp and avian, no, not one of town, a face cast by the farther east, carried by caravans beyond the mountains.

The Queen had shifted, chiding that distraction. Yet she had turned from her darkest thoughts. In the days that followed (oh, long, lonely days!) she had gazed out to the wood with her telescope, tracing the steps of this odd, solitary curiosity. Yes, a curiosity, an amusement, nothing more. Throughout the winter, she had tracked this mere whip of girl, worrying her shawl in the weeks of heavy snow (where could she be?), and laughter in springtime meadow (ah, there she is!). This wanderer who gathered the twisting grasses, her traps of rabbit, and her ash-bow for the deer. Who was this who dared the realm of wolves and wild things? And why so alone? The Queen, she called the Abbess, her eyes drawn back to the forest dark, for what manner of creature was this?

A birdcatcher, the Abbess reported.

Oh, my beloved

The birdcatcher, curled on the bed, as the Queen had stood, tying the lavender to the beam, the thread in her hands. How small she had looked, her precious one, and eyes, that look of adoration, gaze softened by the years, the many gestures of love, oh, an open heart, such kindness there, forever young, her innocence, that she had weathered plague and famine, her exile to a distant court, yet returning, forever returning to this, an embrace, to her arms, in spite of abandonment, in spite of betrayal and the Queen, forgiven, after all, after everything.

Oh, my love

“Carol… come from the window.”

The Abbess gently guides her from the sill.

The Queen can see the fear in her eyes, that recognition. She reminds herself of the barge and Widow Beauves, for hers is not the only grief. She squeezes her hand. “Let us go to the southern town, for in truth, this missive tells us nothing. And what we find, we will face together, as we have always done.”

The Abbess, eyes bright, for the tears that will not fall.

Hand in hand, they step from the Tower, their footfalls echoing behind them.

Chapter End Notes

Eleanor - of Aquitaine  
Theodora - of Byzantium
O Let me Weep, sung by Sylvia McNair, written by H. Purcell
later than the 1300s
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32NjIl6fH8s
Another Tavern

The birdcatcher does not see the beacon of the church tower, the highest point of the town, nor the torch lights flickering against the cobblestone. Shadows alleys, how long they grow against the sparkling reflections of the canal. She stumbles to the bed in a stark room above a dockside tavern, with a thin throw of straw beneath a sheet of the unravelling jute. She is grateful though, for her legs are steady and she has her satchel for a pillow. She does not hear the whisperings of Widow Beavues and the boatsman down the hall, for Eli shuffles into the next room, as the lantern boy guides him.

A room alone! A luxury, she knows, for this is the Queen’s hand.

Ah, to rest.

She curls on the jute and sleep, like a flowing current, rushes in.

It is not a dream that takes her. The curling scent of lavender, held in her vest pocket.

“When did you first see me, in the orchard? I want to know, if it could happen again. I want… to always be finding you”

The Queen balances on the upturned tub, her hands threading the string over the beams. How the light sings golden, in her hair, in her hair! The curve of arms, halo kissed, her gown, like an unfurling petal, ah beauty, she is, everlasting joy! Lavender, sprigs of lavender, the scent beguiling, and beneath, that scent of her. The birdcatcher reaches, a stroke from calf to thigh, and ringing, her beloved’s laugh, “My love, if I should fall –“

“My Queen, then I will catch you.”

Oh mischievous one, how she reaches, to cup that seat of pleasure, a hand that slips beneath the hem. She is such a small one, let her kneel, a string of kisses that trace from knee to thigh. How she will linger and feel the tremor, the gasp, gently as the Queen steps off the tub. How she will lift the gown to nuzzle there, to those curls, that dewy scent, her prize –

“Therese –“ that choking call, the Queen’s hand, stroking through dark, silken hair.

The birdcatcher holds her, she will not fall. Firmly, she lifts the Queen’s foot, to place one up on the tub. Open, to open, a kiss, to glisten, oh lips, that parted sheen, to taste, salt-sweet, to hold in her mouth that secret centre, to drink from the fountain of joy.

A cry.

The shiver that holds a moan.

Her name, unspoken, the roll of hips, the birdcatcher’s strong arms, they will brace her, her Queen, even as she bears, to seek the mouth, that tongue, to roll, a questing, to find, to clutch at her release.

Sing, this wordless wonder, the body’s song, the birdcatcher, hand rising, a finger’s slip, then two, to curl, to coax, drawing down the want, sweet water’s bliss, this wetness slick, to thrusting fullness, the Queen, she bends, knees weak, yet unbroken, the wave will crest and crash, yet still the birdcatcher holds her, will hold her till the end of time.
It seems but a moment, though the light now slants through the window and the knock of the lantern boy swirls the dust motes through the golden beams. Groggily, the birdcatcher rises, for this is not the cozy house in the wood, nor the tapestry lined chamber. Rude wooden beams, a scored faldstool, and a bed of loosened thatch.

Downstairs, in the tavern, the birdcatcher groans as she slides on the bench before the Widow, her body stiff and unyielding. A grimace at the maggots writhing in the seam of the table. And she does wonder, why this tavern, and it is then that she notes the brand burnt into the corner of the alehouse, an R seared by the window.

As the birdcatcher cricks her neck, the Widow smirks, “You have grown soft, Sparrow. I would not have thought that the travel makes you so weary.”

“Sparrows fly the woodlands,” the birdcatcher cracks, “it is swallows that follow the river.”

It is then that Eli joins them, ashen-faced. “Please tell me that the sea voyage will be smoother,” he pleads.

The Widow laughs, not unkindly. To comfort she tells him that his ship will be a fast one and the journey will be smooth. In a week he will sail with the wine merchants, to Padua, good sailors all.

The bells of the church tower toll, brash and harsh against the morning light. To sound the alarm. The alarm.
Chapter Summary

Courage!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

With the hood, she could see nothing.

She could smell the dank walls, that peculiar stench of rot and damp, she could imagine them, a cold, unyielding stone, as her step took her down, the terror of this, for sightless, each tread seemed to hover over an ending abyss.

The cloth clings to her nose, her mouth, and for a moment’s terror, she thinks that she is suffocating. A thousand thoughts flitter and fly – what, why, where? For the birdcatcher had run out of the tavern at the alarm, her eyes cast to the town (for fire was the greatest fear). But for the townsfolk, their gaze had cast skyward – the dark clouds billowing above. And what clouds they were, tinged an eerie, heavy green, swirling, as if the heavens were to crash upon them all. Yet there was no wind, no rain – and no birds sang.

Seaward, she had gazed. Foreboding, a seething, boiling sky – as if the world had turned topturvy - and the high wind to take the storm upland, to the mountains.

Flood, she realized. For uplands, the mountains would push the rain-clouds high and burst them into deluge.

*My Queen, the river rises*

A panic, tight in her chest, she turned back to the tavern. And that is when the bailiff seized her.

With a shove, she feels the rough column, her hands now bound with chain. She feels the weight of them, the iron bite. The cloying, fetid scent – she must be in the caverns, beneath the town, limestone cut from the below the seawall – and if there is flood, she will be the first to perish.

“What –“ she tries again, but a cuff to her chin, even as the hood is pulled off.

She sees him there, in the torchlight. The boatswain.

It has been a trap all along.

The Widow Beauves hears the alarm from the bell tower: it tolls a line of three – for this is the alarm from the campinile. She stands and catches the eye of the taverner, who swiftly opens the false door behind the barrels. Quick, quick, but the birdcatcher, oh, young and foolish, she has bolted to the door and out towards the town. If luck will have it, the bailiff will not come for her, for the Widow knows that the Guardsmen come for her. For the bell has tolled, in its line of three,
her warning, yet how she has planned, this safe house, under the aegis of Raven’s wing, that R that marks the window there. Quick to the door, as the Widow guides Eli to the tunnel below the pier.

It is in the alley that they meet the lantern boy – for he has seen the Guardsmen of the Steward come for the Sparrow, and she, taken in hood and chains to the Steward’s prison.

The Widow looks to the barge. To stay or to flee? For the Sparrow knows nothing and forsooth, she travels under the protection of the Dowager Queen; there could be no greater seal of safety than that.

“What of the boatswain,” the Widow asks.

With a grimace, the lantern boy replies, “Thomas, he has betrayed us.”

Chapter End Notes

let me know what you think of this turn of events - i am not entirely sure myself!
Before the Storm

Chapter Summary

Let us stand together on this!

It is in the stables that they meet, the Abbess, the Queen and their one guard, Frederick, for this journey will be a long one. Their panniers are light and they will eschew the inn and ride straight through the night to the southern town, pausing only to change horses at the Crossroad’s Mark. The Queen is in simple garb, black cloak and a fletcher’s tackle, with a strongbow at her side – beneath the cloak’s hood, she will pass in masculine attire. Frederick’s chainmail is hidden under a merchant’s tunic, and the Abbess will ride, head shorn, in a cap that marks her as an apprentice. Under cover of darkness, they will leave the town, a clandestine flight, for the Abbess has told all to her Queen, the work of her Widow Beauves, and the corruption of the southern Steward.

Quick, Quick, for now the Queen knows the traps that her birdcatcher must evade, the web of deceit that lies in wait for her.

In the alley, the Widow gazes at the stormy sky. With the betrayal of her boatswain, her plan has fallen to ruin. Oh, a cold, hard calculation, for who can be saved? Three at Cutter’s Gate. There is that, at least, is there not? Yes, they will take the barge to the Crossroad’s Mark, for even if the storm breaks, the river will be safe until then.

“It is to the barge, then.”

It is Eli who grasps the Widow’s sleeve.

“We cannot leave her,” he gasps, for the race through the tunnels has been too much for him. Bewildered, he stands, for even in his flight from Carcassone he holds his loyalty. He will not let the Sparrow go.

The Widow turns. Oh, young he is, who knows nothing of the world, for he and the Sparrow both, what innocence, what sacrifice at the altar, yet the world will come to them, to trample, to trammel, to desecrate, to bloody the sanctum.

She faces him fully. “The Sparrow will be safe. She need only to invoke the title of the Dowager Queen. Do you understand? She is marked by royal protection. We are not.”

Eli glares. “We?”

The Widow pauses. “I am not.” With a sigh, she continues. “The guards came for me, for I grant safe passage to those women who are sold as chattel, or those imperiled by their stature. And the Steward here, he is an evil one who preys upon the weak, who would break even the strongest of woman, for that is his delight, to debase and debauch. We have not been able to depose him for such hatred of our sex is woven into the very fabric of society. Do you understand this?”

Eli, the Jew, slowly nods. With sorrow, he says, “It is the first of many hatreds. I have never understood it. But why, then, did you come with us, to place me on this ship to Padua, if you were
“There are seven, in the Steward’s prison, seven who speak against him. I was to aid in their escape and afford them safe passage. But the boatswain has betrayed us…”

They look out to the open sea, that strange storm swept sky.

It is the lantern boy who speaks. “Then let us cut the barge and they will think we have fled. Let us crawl through the tunnels to the seven who are imprisoned and the smash the chains that bind them.” His lip trembles, but the Widow, oh, how gently she strokes back his tousled hair. It is a hopeless, hapless endeavour. Surely it will be the end of them all.

Reluctantly, she nods. “Thomas, the boatswain, knows half the plan – but we shall come up with another.”
The Prison

Chapter Summary

Courage! Again!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is a river here, the twitter and swoop of the woodland bird. Here, the hillocks and the valley, the thicket and the glen. Run, the green, down from the mountains, the meadow lush, the twist of verdant pine. Oh, my love, let it be always, this meadow, by this house, tendered with the vine.

What days these have been, for the Queen lies on her blanket with her birdcatcher, here by the edge of the meadow, beneath the shade of oak, the branches spread, beneficent, with light, the morning’s call, the puff-seed of dandelion dancing on the golden beam, the glow upon her hair. Purple, the violet’s blush, and beside them, a sheaf of lavender, gathered in the morn. The birdcatcher gazes upon her Queen. What wonder is this, the trace about her eyes, no sword, no shield, the furl of rumpled sleep, the gentle breath, those lips.

Listen. It is the wind ruffling through the leaves, like the hand brushing across the sweet meadow grasses, the gurgle of the stream.

Peace.

Languid, the birdcatcher stretches, lies back into the warmth of sunlight. Contented, she closes her eyes. If she could imagine it, she could feel the spin of earth, the tendrils reach towards the sky, the roots, ever seeking, downward, into the rich and bounteous duff, and the winds, high above, swirling to the heavens. But earth bound she is, and so she feels the trace, fingertips along her clavicle, at the opening of her tunic. Slowly she turns and smiles, to those piercing eyes, the joy that lingers on those lips, ah, what lips.

But her eyes…

“What are you thinking?” her Queen whispers. Slight, as the breeze through dappled leaf.

A kiss, for there are no words for this. This embrace and a thousand more.

For the birdcatcher knows that her Queen holds her sorrows. Kiss them away, away. She presses and rocks, her arms encompassing, the hook of her leg over hip. Hold, hold, for she will be shelter, the calming hand, the refuge from the storm. She will be the protector, to take up the sword and shield, to banish the night-borne demons. The birdcatcher knows that her life is a small one, for her there are no burdens of station, nor the mire of familial guilt, nor intrigues of castle and court. A kiss, caress, to banish pride, to lay down her gifts before her queen, such humble gifts: peace, certitude, a loving glance. Let this be enough for her. Let this be enough.

Swift, the horses, the wind in her hair, for the hood has fallen, yet how the Queen goads her steed
faster, faster. Her birdcatcher, could she be alive, for there can be no trust in the Steward’s message. Hope flutters in her chest and makes her fly. But why had not the Abbess confided earlier, nor the Widow? Quick, to the southern town, as her questions swirl around her.

In her prison, the birdcatcher chaffs against the chains. “Tell the Steward, the storm will break upon the mountains. Tell him that the flood is coming.” She is bound to a pillar, and the blow has dulled her eyes. Though the torch burns bright, she can see only the stone walls, a circle of light.

The boatswain steps forward. “Tell us where the Raven is and you shall have your freedom.”

The birdcatcher’s gaze snaps to the boatswain, a dawning of relief – for it is not for the Queen’s sake that she has been captured. It is then that the birdcatcher knows that the Raven is the Widow and she has escaped their grasp. With contempt, she hurls, “You would know more than I.”

At his lunge, she feels his fingers twist around her neck, and briefly, bright sparkles in her eyes.

It is the bailiff who pulls him off the Sparrow’s throat, a glance as she crumbles against the column. He chides him, “The fault is yours, you had her in your sight and you let her slip away.” His sneer tells all, for there is no honour in treachery. With a flick, he casts the coin at the boatswain’s feet. “Go now, lest the Steward skin your hide.”

Oh, how he slithers away, his shadow casting long.

The Sparrow coughs and sputters. She sees the bailiff’s grimace. He finds no joy in this circumstance yet his hands are bound; he is one who would follow the letter of the law and not the spirit.

“Youthcall as he turns, “Tell the Steward of the coming flood, for the delta lies low and this town will be in peril.”

He looks at her curiously. “We know the ways of the sea.” He frowns. “The tide has not run from the shore.”

Desperate, her voice rises, “It is the medicanes that will drive the winds high and the flood will come from the river.”

Slowly he nods. He reaches for the torch, but hears a shuffle from the dark corner. A second’s glance but his hand falls, empty. He turns to the iron doors. The groan of metal against stone, that gnash of bolt and plate. The bailiff’s step fall heavy as he climbs the stairs.

The birdcatcher leans back against the cold column. A breath. How her chest heaves!

A voice rings out from the dark. “The Raven, she is here?”

A spike of fear, but as the birdcatcher turns, she sees them. Seven, bound and chained.

Chapter End Notes

hard one to write.... realizing plot is not my strength. oh well! let me know what you think
Before and After

Chapter Summary

Once again, courage!

Light, how her hand hovers, the valley between breasts, the trace touch, lingering to draw the breath, the shiver of desire. Oh my love, to hold you, to grasp, to cup this fullness, how she gazes at this beauty, this wonder!

Oh, she is young!

Hold back the minutes, the hours, let her be forever so!

The Queen, she feels the pull between them, the string drawn taut, the hunger’s keen. Ah, this wonder, this baffling, glorious wonder, the joy and terror of it for here she is, here she is! To savour, sweet kisses, to make this moment last forever yet impatience has its own rewards. Lower, her lips, a graze against her ribs, she tosses her hair, a sweep across her beloved’s breasts, yes, to nuzzle there. To hold her to that gasp, then to the sudden lunge, a mouth to nipple, that tongue, then suckle sweet, to feel the clench between thighs, to hold her in that cry.

Carol

How she rises, arching, a building turmoil.

Oh, the pleasure to give pleasure, a cup overflowing.

For she is drowning in this, the scent of her, skin softer than the sunlight’s beam, gold and glisten, a tender flesh, fragile, this embrace.

Let nothing come between them

A moan to goad her deeper, skin starved, devouring. Her hips, insistent, how her legs wrap ‘round, to pull her close, this skin shiver, the wet of her against belly, against thigh, you want all, all of her, that flashing sear, that charge, in lightning, you hold the world in her, of fire and water and earth and air, this alchemy of bodies, twisting, to separate and merge, this miracle.

Her eyes, oh, her eyes, ever questing, how she changes, as light on the waters, a kind hand and brilliant mind, her thoughts, how they run, her laughter, bright, for let it be now and for always, like this, an embrace that heals, to enfold, entwine.

They have all time, in heaven’s spiral. Let that be enough.

The birdcatcher finds the bird in the shadow of the meadow’s great oak. It lies with a broken wing, a mere nestling, golden feathers tapered with a charcoal edge. Joy and sorrow, for it is so like that first bird that had brought her to the Queen, on that day so long ago. The birdcatcher cups her hands, holding a beating, frenetic heart. To hold such a wild thing, there is a shame in it, is there not, for each to their nature, must be true. Quick, to bind the bone, yet birdcatcher knows
that even with the splint the bird will never fly.

But the song will be a true one.

From there she races to the court, for the day is in session. She waits in the hall, in that buzzing discord, surrounded by the gentry. How the courtiers eyes slide over her, a dismissal, she is jostled into a wizen scribe and earns a deepened scowl. The messengers rush, with bundled scrolls tucked into their satchels and the pages burst from their station, their list of duties in hand. The swirl of lace, silk and a weave of damask – the birdcatcher wipes her palm against her simple cambric. There, by the door, the Steward, and in the chamber beyond, the birdcatcher knows, the Queen, the Regnant, the Abbess in the Privy Council.

The birdcatcher shrinks to the wall.

Oh, the glances of the Regnant’s camarilla, a mocking laugh, a pointed stare! Oh, how they whisper!

The birdcatcher feels a twist in her gut.

She pulls at her vest of woad and the bird flutters in her hand. It is the ladies-in-waiting who surround her, drawn by the wings of gold. The birdcatcher, her mouth dry, the crowd, all confusion. How quickly the bird is plucked from her hand, a shriek from the coterie as it tries to fly, a scatter and shout, and the gentle hand of the Steward, as he guides the birdcatcher to the door.

But the bird, she sputters, I’ve lost her….

No, says the Steward, this is not for you.

From the corner, the Widow Beauves watches.

In the darkness, they are seven. Their names are Maria, Isabel, Margery, Beatrice, Avril, Christiana and Eleanor. In the flickering torch light they recount their stories, the Steward’s sins, how he holds this town in an iron grip. He is corruption and vice, grown rich from a steep and garroting extortion and he holds the Bailiff in his hand.

The birdcatcher starts. “Does the Regnant know of this?”

It is Maria who speaks, “The messengers are in his service.”

The birdcatcher frowns. Why did the Widow not speak of this? What of the Abbess too?

In the dimming circle of light the seven tell of the plan, the hope of rescue by the hand of the Raven, an outlaw from the North. In turn, the birdcatcher tells what little she can, how the Raven must be her companion on this journey, of the barge tethered on the farthest dock. It is Isabel who tells the birdcatcher of the cavern beneath their captivity, the Raven’s plan of the tunnel carved from the soft limestone rock – how close the breach! But now with the boatswain’s betrayal, all hangs in balance.

The torch flame sputters, and is out. Pitch, an uncanny dark. The birdcatcher looks high, at the stair, a weak cast of evening – for the day has passed to nightfall.

The birdcatcher thinks of the rains to come.
“Are you sure that the flood is to come?” asks a voice from the abyss. For this is Margery, who has been silent throughout the recounting.

The birdcatcher hesitates, not to cast despair upon darkness. “The Raven will come. Of this, the one thing that is certainty. She will come.”

In the dark, there is a sob. They wait, these seven, now eight, for what, they do not know.
The Tunnels

Chapter Summary

Once more, we are together on this

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thomas, he skulks through the alleyway, a bloodied nose, his tunic torn in the fray. He has been driven from taverns for the whispers and rumour have followed him as betrayer. He curses the Bailiff, and the shouts of the guardsmen for did they not know that half the pier are with the Raven? And what have they for their troubles? A mere Sparrow!

Did he not deliver the Raven to the Tavern? And what paltry coin is this? Fools! Did he not tell them that the Raven would flee, that the best trap would be set in the winding tunnels? Fools and insolents, after this is done they will grovel at his feet. He licks his lips to savour the slight, to feast upon this affront; he coddles his disgrace, like a serpent to his breast. He seethes to have his vengeance and that is when he thinks of his plan – to kill two birds with one stone.

The Queen rides to the meadow, with a basket in her pannier, with wine and bread and a gift of honeyed ginger. Oh, let her be done with the day, the tiresome courtiers, the petty scribe, let her leave the court behind her. Yet she does not goad the horse faster. In her pouch, the golden bird, broken and the words of the Steward ringing in her ears.

Yes, her birdcatcher will be distraint.

At the edge of her meadow, she dismounts, her step heavy. For what compromise can she give, and what comfort? For the birdcatcher is not of the town, her realm is the wood, of the wild, unfettered things.

From her pouch, she draws the golden breasted wonder, feels the shudder of the wing. It cannot survive without a cage.

The Queen shivers: ill-omen.

When she opens the door she sees the satchel on the table, the birdcatcher rummaging through the chest.

Her heart sinks.

Her birdcatcher does not turn to greet her yet how light her words as she says that the Widow Beavues has asked her to accompany her to the southern town, for Eli must take passage to Padua and such a change would bring gladness to her heart. For change is good, is it not, for the Widow has promised a tour of the stationer’s shop, a veritable artist of the highest order.

The Queen, she sees how tightly the birdcatcher grips her folded tunic, how carefully she lowers the hinge of the chest.
Gently, the Queen says, “You are too sensitive. You must not take their words to heart -”

Twisting, the birdcatcher sees the broken bird in the Queen’s hands. Slowly she raises her gaze, her words deliberate: “The fault is mine? You would change me then.”

The Queen shakes her head. “No. But you should pay them no mind. They are idle chatterers – “

“The Ladies? Or the court? For I am not held in esteem – “

“In my eyes, you are everything.”

The birdcatcher, in sorrow, her gaze snaps to the Queen. “The court does not see through your eyes.”

They stand, the world between them.

The Queen sinks to the bed. “I cannot change the world, my love.” She lays the tender bird on the sheet. “Come, help me build a nest, so we can heal the wing.”

Truce. They gather the reeds together.

The great iron doors of the prison swing open and the barrel of slop is dragged down the stair. A weak light carries through the cell and the birdcatcher can see the true dimensions, the seven pillars – for Isabel and Beatrice are bound together. Two guards stand by the iron door, and the slop-boy places the bucket in centre. The sentry, keys jangling, unlocks their chains, for one by one they will take their meal from the bucket.

The birdcatcher’s eyes flicker to the guards. No, they can be no escape.

At her turn, the chaffing iron falls away, and she shuffles to the pail. Slops indeed, no better than a piggery’s tray.

Silently, each prison takes their turn.

The birdcatcher notes the jangle of the keys, for it is one key that holds them all. In her mind she tries to retrace her steps, the stair, the corridor – despite the hood. After the guards retreat, these eight, they piece together the passage, the lay of the prison, a map they all can follow. Whispers, even as the light wanes.

It is then that they hear the crack of stone, desperate now the hammer blow.

“The tunnels,” Isabel gasps. They strain against the irons, the frantic leap of hope, for surely it is the Raven, their rescue.

Beatrice screams.

The birdcatcher, her gaze snaps to the pillar of two. In the darkness – oh, the waning of the light! That glint, like a serpent’s tail, along the groove of rock, the mortar binding stone, that seam – there she sees it – the stream of the water creeping across the floor.

The tunnels – they are flooding - the smash of rock, a muffled cry, that sounding… and then they sound no more.
Chapter End Notes

There have been some changes in my work. If you have any questions, I have posted my email in my profile. :)
The Flood

Chapter Summary

All bets are off....

Tender, tender the house in the wood, a splinter for a broken wing. The weave of rushes for shelter, a cushion of unspun wool.

“How long the journey?” the Queen asks, for she is careful to keep her voice steady.

“A week, so they say,” replies her birdcatcher.

“A week? But the barge will be but a day.”

“The ship to Padua, the Widow Beauves says....”

Oh, the bird, the flutter of wing.

The Queen sighs, “She is an odd one.” A twist. Her heart quails yet she must press forward.

“What happened today, at the court –“

“You cannot protect me.”

The Queen, her gaze takes in those capable hands, that obstinate brow. How she aches for her, for to tell her so, yet... “Perhaps it is best that you keep to the wood.”

Biting, the birdcatcher holds a flare of anger, for she remembers the mockery of the ladies-in-waiting, the heavy hand of the Steward. “You cage me as well?”

The Queen drops a rolled reed, her chest tight. Oh where is my loving one?

“Is that your command, as Dowager Queen?” the birdcatcher chaffs.

Gently, “I do not command you, my love.”

The birdcatcher gazes, her eyes bright, for there is no truce in this. “It is not that you do; it is that you can.”

Flood-roar, there is no sound like it, the brittle-snap of trees torn from the banks, the tumble rocks and roll of debris, crackle, and crunch, the rush of water, earth-soaked, a deluge, the crumble of land, swept, high wave, this sheering crest. Flood terror, a biblical fear, primal, a topturvy tide, a plummet, how the world turns against us, a betrayal – for between nature’s wrath, there is nothing, no prayer, no God, no bargain – flight flight flight - all instinct now, desperate, mindless flight.

The crest tears away the docks, a sluice through the alleyways, the low town filling, the trench that turns to torrent, streets to streams, and rickety shacks, wattle and thatch, all swept away. The rush, the grasp, and distant, distant screams, the crush of water, the water crush of stone, the pull of under-tide, torn, and cast to the river.
The bells, ringing, too late, too late.

It is Beatrice who feels the shock of cold, the sudden burst, and screams. Bewilderment, then all see the shimmering snake that grows, that spreads across the floor. Panic, all panic, as the water rises, and they, still chained, a shrieking call for the guards, and it then that the iron gate opens.

The sentry, the lantern boy and Widow Beauves.

Quick, the key and lock, the shackles fall but the iron against hand and foot, yet how the water rises. First Beatrice and Isabel, for they are chained together, quick, to the stair, how the swirling current pulls. Margery, with the sentry, takes Maria, and the lantern boy, together with Avril, they hold back Christiana’s panic, the drowning dread that clutches at her chest. Waters to the chest and the birdcatcher is freed, the Widow Beauves to Eleanora –

The keys slip from her fingers.

Small, she is, Eleanora, the water tops her chin, and there, in that gaze, she looks the Widow in the eye, and says simply, “Go.”

The birdcatcher looks between them. She dives.

A blind fumble, for the waters are dark, murky river silt, and a numbing cold, her touch is blunted. A frantic grasping, the undercurrent strong, chest tight, the birdcatcher, a gasp for air, then dive again but an arm around her waist, the birdcatcher is dragged to the stair, there is no roof, no room, the steps, upward, for below is oblivion.

Gasping, the birdcatcher lunges but the Widow holds her back. She cries, “I can save her.”

“She is gone.” The Widow Beauves, eyes mournful dark, turns. Shouting above the torrent, she calls, “Help the others. We are not safe. Run to the campinile. If we are separated, we will meet there.”

In the hall, they find they find the lantern boy and the Sentry. Beatrice, with Christiana and Margery, have gone ahead. In the hall, narrow and swift, the flood waters. Quick to the courtyard, for the prison lies low, and the gate… the gate, bursts from the surge and the rushing flow scatters them.

The crest has risen and broken, for here, at the delta the river widens and opens to the sea, wine-bitter and dark. To higher ground, the Widow Beauves and the lantern boy, they stumble across roof tops, to the walkway of the inner town. The birdcatcher is nowhere to be seen. The lantern boy looks back, marks the floating thatch, the wreckage of the flood. The sea, the sea. So many lost to the sea.

The Widow grasps the boy’s shoulder, to pull him from the sight. “Do not look backwards. We will save who we can.”

“Eleanor… and whence the Sparrow?” he chokes.

The Widow pulls him forward. “To the campinile,” she whispers, the only comfort she can give.
The Drowned and the Saved

Chapter Summary

with my apologies to Primo Levi

High waters slowly recede and the town takes its tally. The Steward, from his tower, takes in the scale of destruction. The lower town, he pays no mind, for they are beggars and mendicants – the guilds are where the gold lies. Yet his guards are in disarray and the crowds outside his manor clamour more. He takes comfort in the fact that the flood has swept his problems away, for the prison is deluged; there can be no survivors. For caution, he sends his bailiff a-scouring. This will be the end of it.

Nature’s course, he thinks, to purge the weak and the worthless, the shanties of the lower town. For he had received the falcon before the rise of the crest and yet his warning bells were silent. Let him wait a day until he returns the false message. No, not false, for the Sparrow is dead, the barge swept to the sea. There will be no bodies.

Yes, that is the end of it.

High, the beams of the portcullis of the prison, the twist of tackle and it is there that the birdcatcher has found her grip. As the flood waters had swept through the yard, she had grabbed the rope of the gate and held, lifting above roaring tide and so had been saved. Yet long are the days, for with the ebb of flood, hunger and thirst are her companions. Has it been hours? Days?

Delerium, she is back in the house in the wood but where is her Queen? Has she has lost her?

_How can you be content, to be nothing in the world_  
_What trust can I have with you?_  
_Perhaps it is best that you keep to the wood_

With a jerk, the birdcatcher falls from her perch.

She hits the ground, but only dirt, softened by the flood, not hard cobbled stone, a blessing. Her thoughts are scattered, and in her thoughts there is a curious numbness. She limps, a stagger, for the rush of waters has bruised her, a gash on her arm for the batter against the wall.

She makes her way to the cell, her steps unsteady.

She sees the keys first, by the bottom of the stair, and holds them. The body, she cannot recognize. Eleanor. Gently, she unshackles her, although the smell be foul, and the body bloated, she holds her. Sweet Eleanor, and such an end was this! Who mourns for you in this prison dark? How old was she? What dreams did she hold? What, what, how could it all come to this, dank walls, the dark, swirling waters, those final terrors? Child, oh child, what world do we live in, no, there is no justice in this, let the sky be ashes and the fruit wither on the vine. Is that the balance then, joy for all or joy for none.

The birdcatcher cradles her.
It is then that the tears come.

*I could not save her*

The Bailiff, he struggles down the slippery stairs. He sees the Sparrow, how she holds the corpse, rocking. She sings a lullabye, the saddest song he will ever hear. In his heart, he curses the Steward, yet his duty must be done. He loops the shackle in his hand. A glint catches his eyes. In the corner of the cell, he notes the crack and pulls away the crumbling rock. A tunnel. Peering, he smells the rot before he sees him. For it is Thomas, caught in the passage.
Chapter Summary

Courage again!

Why the heart so heavy? In the house in the wood, with her birdcatcher beside her, the Queen asks herself this. Even with the moonlight, soft, falling through the window. For surely with the length of years, all must be well?

She hears it, the rustling of the broken bird.

Leave the court, leave the ramparts, leave the Tower of stone.

Leave the woodlands, the swath of pine, the meadow grasses, the fields of flowering bloom. The ash-bow and the twisting traps, the gatehouse and the barbican, for the river runs, a course to be swept away, away.

With the world between them, what is to be done? For these twain, to be pulled asunder. Let the hand be stilled, the stroke, the cup, let it all fall away, let the house be the world and all wonders, yes, let them hold in time and timelessness, this bed, for beyond is uncertainty, the rigors of toilsome labour, the cruelty of wagging tongues, and the prying eyes of judgement.

The house in the wood

The Queen lies in her bed, her birdcatcher in sleep, for tomorrow the barge will take her love to the southern town. Worry, what needless worry, the Queen thinks. A journey of a week. A week, with absence to heighten devotion, a breath between gasp and moan, yes, let it be so, the salt to sweeten the honey.

Let there be a truce.
But time… oh, the birdcatcher needs her time.

The Queen feels it, a shiver of fear.

Oh love, let not the world come between us, that corruption, that vice, let it not taint the bond, nor lessen affection. When you return let me shower you with kisses, this longing. Let me unburden my heart, lay my riches at your feet, let me treasure you, make much of you, oh, more than words, more than music, let me offer gifts beyond measure, to share my secret hopes, my fearful dreams.

Let me let…
Fear, it twists inside of her. The bird, ill omen.

This journey, she could forbid it, could she not?

No

For with the loop of the falconer’s gyre, this planetary motion, we are held in heaven’s grasp, this dance, a spiral, yes, for even lovers must part, if only to return.

The Queen tells herself this. It is her pact with the world. There is no price for this; for this she
will brook no compromise, no bargain, even with the devil’s spawn. Let her birdcatcher be safe. Let all be well between them.

Dark, the prison.

The birdcatcher feels the bite of shackles around her wrists. Yet the Bailiff does place his cloak about her shoulders.

Gently, he guides her, but she cannot look away, for Eleanor…. “You will give her proper burial?”

“Yes.”

Firmly now, he takes her to the stair.

Ah, bright the sky, yet all seems a mockery. Still, the rubble in the street, the lower town in ruin. How eerie this stillness after the sweep of destruction for surely there should be some common labour, some rescue for this destitution? Yet this lower town seems abandoned by all. How many days has it been?

The birdcatcher takes it all in. Above, the spiral of the sea birds. Carrion, she thinks. Her calm is unnerving. “And where do you take me now?”

The Baliff hesitates. “To the Steward’s oubliette.” He casts his eye to the tower. “Know that I do this without malice, for I follow the law.”

They walk. The crumble of shop front, the broken wall. A skewered gate. Yet how the streets are empty.

They walk. “You are a good man, Bailiff?”

He nods.

“More’s the pity.”

Three riders enter the northern gate: a fletcher, apprentice and guardsman. They enter without official seal. To the mews, to send a falcon to the Regnant, for the Steward’s spies are everywhere. To the tavern, marked with the seared R, to meet with a cloaked woman, her lantern boy, behind the back curtain. How still the Queen as she hears the news, the escape from the cell, the surge at the gate… and her birdcatcher lost. Rumour of the Bailiff’s captive, the walk to the tower. Yet what is the plan? From here, the Queen will don her royal vestments, the Abbess, her robe, and to the Steward’s manor they will go. Ring the bells, ring, and take the Steward unawares. Ring the bells, so the town may know of the Steward’s reckoning.

The manor doors must open.

The Steward rules, for his charter is all, his fiefdom decreed for a binding peace. Five generations, from the Pax Dei his family has ruled. He seethes, a gluttonous fury, insatiate; for all he has been given, he craves more. He grasps for that is his nature, his hands, tumid and ocherous. Woe, that he should rule, for he spreads a corrupting putrefaction. His spies, like tendril ivy, seeks and he
knows of the arrival of the fletcher and apprentice. He fears not, with for the prisoner below, he secures his safety. His loyal guard, he places in the manor hall. For there he will meet them.

He calls for the Sparrow, starved and broken, from the oubliette.
Out of the Darkness

Chapter Summary

Watchman, will the night soon pass?

Dark, the oubliette.

The birdcatcher cannot lie, nor sit, her walls of stone enclosing. No light, no sound, this strange vertiginous falling. Her knees buckle and her forehead rests against the wall, cold, cold, the lick of fear for if she crumbles, she will never get out.

It is as if she has been buried alive.

Oh, thirst and hunger, this pitch, sour earth, this stone.

And time unravelling.

She thinks of her forest home. She thinks of her Queen. Green, the meadow, soft breeze and sunlight glow, the caress of leaf, wood-bark rivlet, coarse against the palm of her hand, warm, warm in the afternoon, eyes closed in the luminous light, the scratch and crunch of duff beneath her feet, all browns and yellows and verdant bloom, emerald and beam-gold, the blossoms kiss of petal, the sweep of grasslands to the mountain…

Why do you torment yourself?

The birdcatcher blinks. Cold, the oubliette. Her throat, abrading. She jerks. No, speak not with the shadows.

Her Queen, warm hands, a warmer embrace, how the scent of florals, and the richer scent of her, and eyes, piercing, searching, oh, relentless searching, her laughter deep, her voice, an echoes trace that falls to belly, heart clench, the joy of her, she –

She cannot save you

In the dark, if there is a turning, the birdcatcher twists.

“Who are you?”

I am the Voice. I am all of who you are. I am what is left when the tawdry strips away. I am your salvation.

The birdcatcher, lips cracked, her breath filling, the pulse behind her ears.

“I am… the birdcatcher.”

No. You are Shadow now. You are darkness. Hold me, do not torment yourself with idle wishes, the ache of what is lost. Accept, for this… containment is all you have, all you are. If you wish to survive, accept me. Oh, hunger, oh thirst, how they press, they will devour you. Become the Shadow, the unknown unknown. I promise deliverance from this pain. Not death, but life in death. Come darkness, let us love you. Turn from the woodland light, for it is no more, not for you, no, it
was never for you. All lies. You know this to be true.

“My Queen, she will come for me,” the birdcatcher whispers.

Why? And how? For duty will call her. Oh you piteous fool, she has much to do, has she not? A flood, the ruins, the sweep of destruction. Why would she come, after all, after everything? You, a small one, measure that against the needs of the many…

“She is… my Queen.”

You, vassal, she has ruled you, laid waste your power, stripped you of all that you are. Ah, what subjugation, have you no pride? Where is that willful rage – for only this will save you. Darkness, my Shadow, come to darkness, as the night will pass and we will survive it. We will survive all things…. Alone, and so small, but no, I have always been with you. For she has forsaken you once, and forsaken again.

The birdcatcher closes her eyes.  

_I will never leave you… with me, you are never alone._

The Queen strides through the outer gates, into the darkened hall of the manor. The Abbess and the guardsman trail behind her. The candles flutter through the lattice, shifting and spectral, thrown against the ceiling vault. Along the wall she can see the archers, and at the end of the hall, the Steward on his oaken chair.

“Steward, you stand accused of theft, torture, rapine, murder. As Dowager Queen, I revoke your command. In the name of the Regnant, you are Steward no more!” The Queen’s voice fills the hall, the echo in the chambers.

The Steward raises his arm. The archers prime their bows.

With a gesture, she holds the Abbess and guardsmen by the entry, for she will walk alone. Slowly she steps toward the Steward. “Do you forfeit your trial? For if regicide, the punishment will cost you dearly.”

At last the Steward rises, his laughter, hollow. “Twenty archers have I, for is it not said that a live dog is better than a dead lion? Or a dead Queen. Oh, you are a fool to come. Still, I should have expected as much.”

At the centre of the hall, the Queen pauses, as if at last to give consideration to the soldiers along the wall. “And do your archers know that they will be counted amongst the guilty, that with regicide they will be hounded beyond all borders, that no amount of gold will shield them. And twenty, twenty tongues to cease, why that is, I believe, even beyond your doing. You would have to kill them all to keep your secret, kill them, one by one.”

The archers shift, uneasy.

The Steward squints. He frowns. “I rule by treaty, Dowager though you may be, my charter –“

“Twenty arrows,” the Queen shouts, “That is threat enough!” She takes a breath. “A treaty for a peace. And there is no peace here.”

The Steward clenches his fist. He releases. “Bargain, then.” He turns to the alcove and nods. It is then that the Bailiff drags the sack into the hall and tears open the burlap by the Steward’s feet.
Inside the coarse sack, it is a strange thing that shivers, something broken and twisted.

The birdcatcher.

There is a cry, as the Queen, she rushes to her birdcatcher, and crumbles, oh, to hold her, to stroke back the matted hair, to soothe, to comfort. She does not see the dagger in the Steward’s hand, the glint of treachery, the shock of it. She falls to her knees, cradling – how thin is her beloved! She does not see the arrow, shot from the back of the Hall, the Widow Beauve’s defense, the arrow piercing the Steward’s head, that burst of red as he keels forward.

The Queen holds the world, rocking, rocking, the silent stillness of her birdcatcher.
Dawn is yet to come.... It did take a long time to write, my apologies! Next time I will not be so tardy!

Rejoice! Rejoice, for the flood has passed, and the bells of the Campanile ring, and the soldiers of the Regnant have come to clear streets and mend the thoroughfares, oh, the elderly Master Builder, from the northern fortress called, all hands to link the pilings, all hands to rebuild the battered docks! The hewers, they come, the cut of plank and beam, the carpenters and artisans. The farmers and millers, with barrels and wagons and baskets and weaves, ring, ring, the clang of hammers, the grind of saw, oh, the alewives with their cups, the laughter of this common labour. Out the frippers, for they will clothe the poor and the fishers come with the nets, to laden the table. Here, too, there is a tide of grief, the call of the town crier, for the dead are not forgotten, the wails that pitch to loss! Orisons and offerings, with floating candles, and garland wreaths, how they float, for the sea will take them. Yet soon, the steps are light, alive, alive, as the first ships dock, for aid from the western ports, barley and wheat, the street stalls with their open oven pits, for yes, townsfolk have come through treachery and calamity but now they face the dawn as one.

Look, how the winds do take the banners loft, oh, let the grieving end!

The Abbess stands with the Raven, for theirs is now the Charter, for the evil Steward is dead. In the town square, they have recounted his crimes, so that they will not be repeated. With council, it is the Abbess and the Raven who will set the town to rights, a carta, no longer vis et voluntas, but a Council Civitas, rejoice, rejoice!

The Queen does make her way through the streets, with blankets and victuals, a hand to comfort, and a promise for better times to come. She sows the seeds of kindness, a blossoming that heals.

But the birdcatcher....

It is in the bright hall that the Queen lights the candle, though the Vespers have yet to toll. Quietly, she opens the door, her hand grasped tight. Dark chamber, how the thick curtains fall, for the birdcatcher cannot bear the light and at every footfall, she trembles.

She has not spoken a word.

From the corner, Eli stands, for his watch ends as the Queen’s begin. Awkwardly, he shifts, as the Queen goes to her birdcatcher, who lies, curled on the bed. Gentle, gentle, she reaches, a hand to stroke back her beloved’s hair. Yet even to this, the birdcatcher shrinks.

Eli shifts, to give notice of his presence. Shy of his witness, yet he sees the Queen, the frailty there, all that love can lay waste and lay bare. No sceptre commands, no worldly power, he sees her, helpless, stripped of all station, all imperial mien, and for once he thinks that love is not kind. Mercy, mercy, what mercy in this… yet he knows, this the world, this is the world we live in.

He comes forward and bows. Her eyes, so hopeful, yet he shakes his head. “There has been no
change.” Oh, his arts are for nothing, for the birdcatcher, tended by the Queen with poultice and herb, she withers.

With a sigh, he leaves them.

The Queen looks down at her beloved, the dull hair, those clouded eyes. Where is the light step, that gilded smile, what has been done to you? During those first days, she had carefully washed her love with a warm cloth and fed her bread soaked in broth yet her eyes… how dark the gaze, as if the birdcatcher had retreated, as if only a shell remains.

*Therese*, the Queen had whisper, but nothing, nothing… a call into a bottomless well.

A stab of panic, the chill of fear – the Queen, she swallows it. She has called for the carriage, and soon they will be back in the house in the wood. There, all will be well again.

Yet…

*Oh, my love*

The Queen, she shivers. She could weep. If only she could take the burden. If only she had forbidden this journey, or placed them in good Frederick’s charge. What a healing is this? It seems a retreat into darkness, a wounding that festers, a poison that draws through the veins. And the physics, they have done nothing, for this is a soul sickness, some strange malaise, a mind still captive to the oubliette.

*Oh, where do you wander, my birdcatcher?*

Yes, the Queen thinks. For even hardened soldiers in battle weary, they relive their terrors in times of peace.

*No, let it not be that*

To the table, she goes, and sets a bowl, a spoon that clatters against the plate.

The birdcatcher begins to rock. A moan and a mutter “The keys… the keys.”

The Queen swoops, and cradles her birdcatcher. Tears, and tears. Swallow the fear, the black, bitter bile. Oh, she is useless, her healing arts for naught.

“I have you, my love. I have you.” A whisper. A promise.

Yes, they will pass this night together.
Quiet, in the House of the Wood

Quiet, how quiet, the house in the wood, the canopy of lavender, dried, the sheaf of meadow flowers, the sunlight falling through the open windows. Green, the fringe of sill, the tendril twist of vine. How the summer clings! The bowl of apples, the fragrant clutch of purple violets, gentle, gentle, the trace of leaf.

Yet the birdcatcher remains, curled in the bed with shadows as her company.

For today the Queen has travelled into town, desperate for distraction, for some kind of remedy. Oh, where are her tinctures now, what relief for this soul-sickness, this clinging melancholy!

For the birdcatcher retreats, locked in the oubliette of her mind….

It is at the fall of night that the Dowager returns, and in her hand, a cage.

The golden breasted bird.

Carefully, she places the woven reeds, that fragile contraption by the bed side, by her birdcatcher. She slips beside her love, to wait for time’s healing.

It takes a full day for her birdcatcher to stir, yet it comes quickly – for such a creature must be fed, the water changed – look, how joyfully it hops! The wing still droops but it is on the third eve that the birdcatcher unties the splint, though her eyes be dark and her thoughts unreadable.

Yet, her silence…

In the darkness, the Queen, she frets, her own brooding thoughts. She quells her restlessness, wills her quiescence. She feels it, vast, this space between them, feels it as a punishment. Caring still, but beneath it all, that flare of impatience why are you so silent, are we not now safe in the house in the wood? Why are you not well?

Time, the bitter draw of time. But the Queen refuses to make a habit of helplessness. Inwardly, she bristles, the call of the castle, she is torn – and resents it. Oh, she chaffs – and she knows this. She dreads. Have I not done all that can be done? Guilt, inquietude, and yet her memories, with a thousand sparks of love, her birdcatcher, by firelight, or running by the dappled green: no, she does not deserve this love. Never, for she has blighted, broken everything she has ever touched. Failed, as a mother, a daughter, and now, as a lover, always, always, could it have been anything else?

She sits at the edge of the bed and in the darkness weeps.

Oh where, oh where is my bright, shining love?

She feels a hand on her shoulder, ever tentative. And that is when she breaks:

“Forgive me, forgive me,” the Queen cries, the rush of tears, the shame of it. “I… I have failed you, failed you all. It was under my watch that the Steward reigned. I should have… oh, I am useless. And that they could not come to me, what earthly good, this crown… and you, now, oh I have broken you, for my sake, your torment… why, everything I touch will crumble. Know that I would give anything, anything for your happiness.”

The Queen, she feels the curl of warmth around her, in the dark. A gentle rocking. And in this silence, they hold each other.
It is on the fifth day that the birdcatcher unravels the reed and trails a line of seeds on the table. Hop and flutter, hop and jump, what tiny steps and wings that stretch and fold! What simple joy in this, to succor and support, to hold in her hands this fragile, beating life.

That evening, the birdcatcher curls about her Queen, and she feels it, the racing heart. She speaks, with voice rough with disuse:

“Carol…”

She feels the Queen stiffen in her embrace, joy and half-sorrow.

“I must ask….”

The Queen trembles. “Anything. Ask anything.”

The birdcatcher frowns, yet her voice is gentle. “Aafa, on the pier, before his leaving. We spoke, not of difference, but of power.” She turns, eyes keen. “My love, you must never command me. Do you understand?”

And there, between them, that chasm.

“I promise,” whispers the Queen.

The birdcatcher rises, eyes, oh, the tears that will not fall. “Let the crimes of the Steward be his. Take what is yours and throw away the rest.”

The bird, golden wing, stretches and hops to the window. And calls to the falling evening: a song.
The Golden Bird

Chapter Summary

And so another one ends

Autumnal, how the leaves they blossom, bursting into all the shades of yellow, orange and deepening red. Sky mauve, the blush against the darkening hue as the night gathers 'round, the bright glow of the hearth, a beacon-yellow. Sweet, the bubble of the pot, the crush of thyme and rosemary.

The Queen sits by the table. And watches.

The birdcatcher, in her patience, has constructed a trail of twig and twine, and the golden wings, it hops and flutters, up, up, and there, by the hanging lavender, its reward, that treasured string of suet.

The birdcatcher laughs. And the Queen, how her heart sings!

Yet she shifts.

For there is a shyness in her, to look so longingly on her love. Her touch has been tentative, her patience without end. Her desires - no, her needs are her own, and she will not aggrieve this healing… and look, how young she is, her birdcatcher, such resilience, what beauty in her eyes, lithe of limb, and features, sharp, the burning intelligence there, the scholar’s mind in this forest dark.

The Queen thinks of Aafa, and his libraries, the wanderer’s quest. And she holds his words: difference and power. She thinks of herself and her birdcatcher – she and her love; they do not transcend such things – for the world holds both the comforting hearth and the darkness of theoubliette.

What can she truly promise? Nothing. Oh, she is the Queen of lies.

And yet….

Look, her beloved smiles, even as the days turn shorter, look to the window, the swoop of night-flight, oh, the tiny darting bats as they dance against the growing dusk, and oh, the stars, a-shimmer, for another day has passed in peace and tranquility. Rustle of marten, the call of the hoot-owl. Yes, let the forest greet them.

In front of the looking glass, the Queen drops her gown and drapes her shift around her. She can count the years in the trace of her eyes, the growing grey of her temples. A trembling hand to run the brush though her hair. But the birdcatcher slips behind, eyes sparkling, arms that gather about her waist.

A shiver. But the Queen, she quells it.

“Do you remember the first time I saw you, when you took me to your Tower?” the birdcatcher asks. “You were so imperious and commanding! I was so frightened. I thought I had committed
some kind of grievous crime.”

The Queen strokes her birdcatcher’s cheek. “And that you had.” Tender, tender. “You had stolen my heart.”

The birdcatcher, oh, lightness, a pealing laughter! “Then I snatched those silken threads from your brush and carried them with me, all through my travels.” Her voice dips low. “I was never without you.”

The Queen wavers. “Even as I had cast you away.”

The birdcatcher hears the chide, still such self-reproach. Gently, she places brush on the table. “But I did return, after all.”

The Queen turns, to hold her. “Please. Always return.”

For a moment, the birdcatcher sees it – willful, stubborn pride, yes, and always – but love, always love, the terror of it, the fervent, devouring hope of it. She cups her lover’s face, lips as sweet as cherries, a kiss, as if to say be not afeared, for with every terror there will be a thousand joys, a thousand sunsets, a thousand gestures of love. She whispers, “I am not broken. Let this be my healing.” And so she slips the shift off her beloved’s shoulder, to trace her lips along that collar, oh to hold the cup of breast, a nipple in her mouth, fullness, to hold the gasp, the tremor, for yes, there will be a thousand years of this, the buckling of knees, a hand that slips to the small of her back, caress, the arch, press and release, a tongue to soothe the bite, for yes to the bed, a tumble and laughter, a belly rich with kisses, groove, the hip, a firm grip of thigh, parting to this, always to this, scent-sweet, salt-nectar, and oh, her cries, a breath held, the sweep of palm, a greedy, grasping reach, a nuzzle in the crook of elbow, oh, love, every inch of flesh, to taste, to treasure, to hold against the vastness of the world, against all the cruelties and injustices, to heal against the bastions of a recalcitrant heart.

Oh my love, the Queen could almost weep, my bright, shining love!

From the perch, the golden-breasted bird hops. She spreads her wings with a swoop across the room. Her wings brush the sheaves of drying lavender with a cascade of purple petals – and then out the window - she flies.

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