

*She must fight to save  
the land she loves...*

# The Girl King

A gold ring with a large, oval-shaped red gemstone, possibly a ruby, set in a decorative bezel. The ring is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the cover, resting on a dark, ornate metal surface that features intricate scrollwork and a large, circular medallion.

MEG CLOTHIER

# Contents

About the Book  
About the Author  
Title Page  
Dedication

Maps  
Prologue

## Part One

Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen  
Chapter Fourteen  
Chapter Fifteen  
Chapter Sixteen  
Chapter Seventeen  
Chapter Eighteen

## Part Two

Chapter Nineteen  
Chapter Twenty  
Chapter Twenty-One  
Chapter Twenty-Two  
Chapter Twenty-Three  
Chapter Twenty-Four  
Chapter Twenty-Five  
Chapter Twenty-Six  
Chapter Twenty-Seven

### Part Three

Chapter Twenty-Eight  
Chapter Twenty-Nine  
Chapter Thirty  
Chapter Thirty-One  
Chapter Thirty-Two  
Chapter Thirty-Three  
Chapter Thirty-Four  
Chapter Thirty-Five  
Chapter Thirty-Six  
Chapter Thirty-Seven  
Chapter Thirty-Eight  
Chapter Thirty-Nine  
Chapter Forty  
Chapter Forty-One  
Chapter Forty-Two  
Chapter Forty-Three

### Epilogue

Historical Note

Copyright

# About the Book

## **Georgia, 1177**

For twenty years King Giorgi has defended the throne of his fragile kingdom against all comers. Now on the threshold of old age he faces a grave new threat: he has no son to succeed him. There is only his daughter, Tamar; a clever, indomitable and fearless girl.

When a revolt threatens her life, Tamar is sent to live in the mountains, disguised as a boy, until a devastating betrayal places her in the hands of her enemies. Her courageous escape convinces Giorgi she should be his heir, but the nobles are outraged – no woman will ever rule them.

While her father is alive, Tamar has some protection from the hostile forces that surround her, but once he is dead, she is truly alone. She must find the strength to control the bitterly warring factions at court. She must win the respect of her friends and the fear of her enemies. And she must marry a man of whom the elders approve.

But her heart belongs to a reckless boy from the mountains – a poor match for a queen. With rebellion brewing at home and powerful foes circling her borders, Tamar must make a terrible choice between the man she loves and the land she adores ...

## About the Author

Meg Clothier studied Classics at Cambridge, spent a year sailing a yacht from England to Alaska, then – after a few false starts – became a journalist. Her last job was working for Reuters in their Moscow bureau before coming back to London to study for a Masters degree in post-Soviet politics. She first read about Tamar while writing a paper on Georgia and decided not to get another proper job but to write a novel instead. She has visited Georgia several times, most recently on honeymoon. She likes mountains, boats, learning languages and adventure stories.

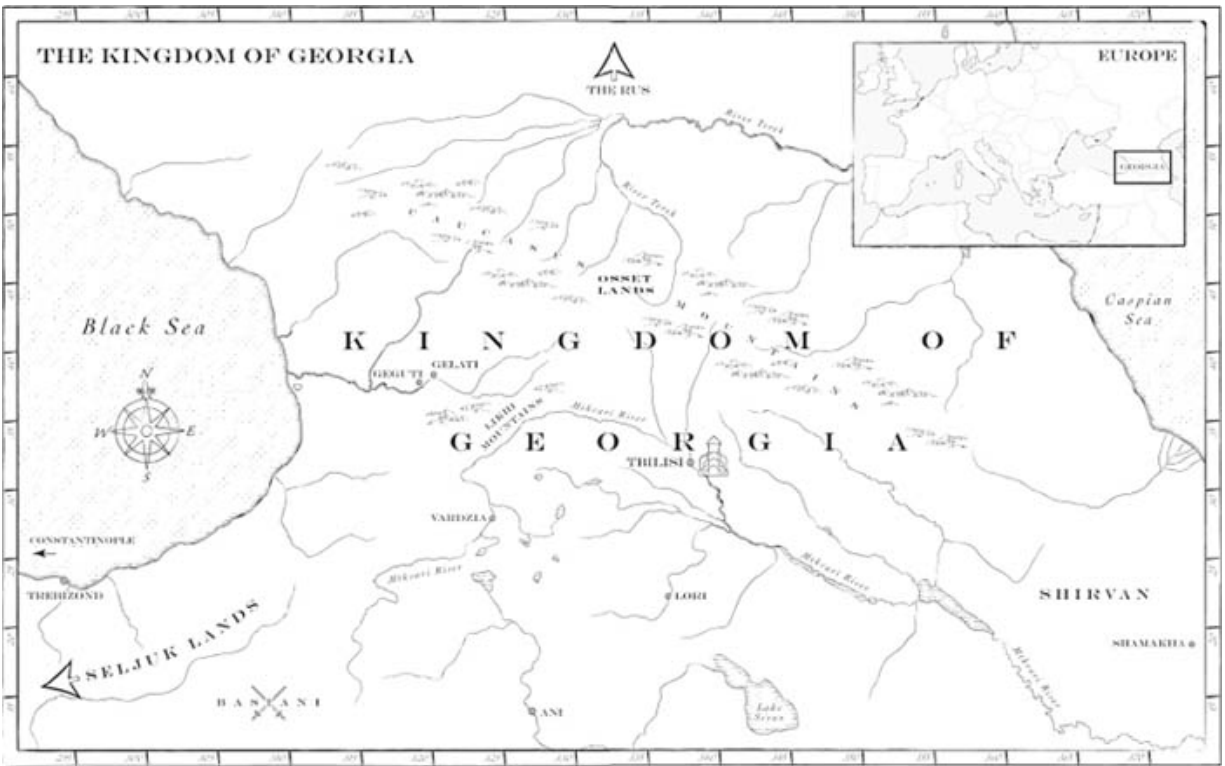
# The Girl King

MEG CLOTHIER



CENTURY

For Rupert





## **Prologue**

It is 1177 in Georgia, the land of the Karts.

Hemmed in by mountains to the north, two great seas to the east and west and unfriendly neighbours to the south, the small kingdom in the Caucasus has always struggled to survive. It isn't many years since the Seljuks all but obliterated the country and its people – only the great King Davit saved them from ruin. The kingdom's natural ally, the Christian emperor, or basileus, in Constantinople, could not help. His power is waning as the might of the Seljuks and the audacity of the Frankish crusaders increases.

And so the Karts stand alone.

Davit's grandson, Giorgi, has defended his throne against all the odds for twenty years and now stands on the threshold of old age, proud of the victories of his reign – but he faces a grave new threat. He has no son to rule Kartvelia when he is gone.

## *Part One*

# Chapter One

The palace nursery was so hot it was hard to stay awake, hot and powerfully sweet-smelling as every morning Nino threw pine branches in the grate to ward off fevers and chills. Bearskins covered the walls, heads dangling down, eye sockets empty, the claws scraping the floor, while rich red rugs, brought up by mule train from the south, lay two or three deep to protect the girls' bare feet. Books half read, games half played, food half eaten littered the room.

Winter had lain unusually hard on Tbilisi that year. The Mtkvari, which in the summer tumbled mindlessly towards the eastern sea, rolled thick and cold between banks crisp with ice. Storm winds scythed down from the mountains, packing the narrow streets with snow and driving everyone indoors. Prayers to the city's many gods floated up to the skies, mingling with the woodsmoke and freezing mists.

Tamar burrowed her nose through the layers of felt draped over the windows, wanting a sharp lungful of daylight. An upside-down forest of icicles hung from the roof like the jagged teeth of a big beast, droplets skimming down their sides. She smiled to herself. Spring, at last, was near.

Ladders clattered and boots thumped overhead, followed by a couple of warning shouts. Tamar snatched her head away from the window as a party of palace servants set about shovelling the slush off the roof, hacking at the icicles with long poles. Two years ago a boy from the kitchens looked up at the pale sun and was dead a second later, a blade of ice in his eye. Her sister, Susa, had cried for hours.

Tamar grimaced across the room at where Susa was lost in lazy contemplation of her pink-white hands, folded neatly in her lap. She was three years younger, soft and delicate, her hair heavy about her face. Just like her mother. Everyone said that. Just like Burdukhan, the mountain flower, the Osset rose. More like a caterpillar, thought Tamar. *A caterpillar coiled up on a leaf.*

Susa looked up and saw Tamar. 'I'll tell Nino.'

'Tell her what? What will you tell her?'

'Tell her you're letting the cold in. Again. You know Nino says it's bad for me.'

'But it's good for me.'

Tamar tucked her legs underneath her, cupped her chin in her hands and turned back to her inspection of the day. The sliver of frost that snaked over the trees in the courtyard was melting. On summer nights lanterns would wink in their branches and the soft whisper of their leaves would mask wonderful secrets in the shadows.

'Nino says your legs will grow bent and crooked and knobbly as a beggar's if you sit like that,' Susa said, giving Tamar the pitying look she normally saved for dead animals.

Tamar clenched her back teeth together, clamped her throat shut and tried to keep calm. She longed to leap across the room, wrench Susa to the floor and shake her until all serenity vanished from her perfect little face.

It had been the worst winter of Tamar's life. When she was younger, the slow, dark months meant playing hide-me-find-me or endless bouts of the Persian battle game or hours with the beautiful books that Shota bought from Armenian merchants. Or else – best of all – her father's men-at-arms would spin her gory stories about her great-grandfather Davit's wars with the Seljuks. She would sit on the floor at the feet of a rheumy old Kipchak soldier, arms gripped tight about her knees, as each deliciously bloody episode made her flinch and cower.

*Death came like a wind from the east. It blew men's heads from their shoulders. Their skulls were like balls in a playground. Their bodies like tree trunks stacked in a forest.*

But this year courtesy had crept into men's words, restraint into their eyes, the same uncomfortable feeling as when the cold wormed through the cracks in the palace walls and fingered the nape of her neck. She was never alone. She could not cross a room without being followed by a pair of half-lowered eyes. But nobody did anything with her. Her old friends avoided her, mumbling something about sword practice and no she couldn't come this time, sorry. The women handed her embroidery and told their own stories, which also made her shudder, but not in a way she liked. So Tamar retreated inside the nursery, inside herself, while her sister laid siege with digs and hints.

A shout flew up from the gatehouse.

Tamar, most of her head already outside, saw a shapeless figure on a muddy bay horse canter into the courtyard and skid to a standstill. The day was cold enough for both to be sheathed in a snorting cloud of sweat. The man leant forward, swung his left leg stiffly round the horse's rump and dropped heavily to the ground. His hood fell back.

Dato.

At last, he was home. After weeks of careful eavesdropping, all she knew was that he had been sent deep into the south on the king's best horse with the king's kinzhal strapped to his side, the dagger that was as good as the king's word. And now he was back.

'Who is it? Who's come?' Susa tried to squeeze up next to her on the seat. 'Make room, Tamar, let me see, I want to see.'

Tamar shoved her shoulder in the way. 'Remember what Nino said. Cold air is bad for you. Get back to your fire.' She shoved a bit harder, knocking Susa off balance and on

to the floor. A huff, a stamp and her sister was out the door, shouting, 'Nino! Nino!'

She paid no attention, but listened to the scrape of the triple-planked, iron-backed doors of the great hall as they arced slowly outwards. King Giorgi filled the entrance. Tamar held her breath. It was days since she'd seen her father.

'Dato, at last! Get inside, man.'

His voice was always a little less terrifying than she remembered, but it still made her stomach jerk.

'You - bring food, wine - you - take his horse. Come on, faster, the man's exhausted. Here, lean on my shoulder.'

He strode into the courtyard, orders flying left and right as he clamped an arm round Dato's back and walked him slowly inside. Tamar leapt to her feet - she would try to bump into them before they holed up in the king's rooms - but a hand landed on her shoulder. She looked up into Nino's face, the thin eyebrows raised, the thin mouth turned down.

'Fighting again, my girl?'

Susa was behind her, tears standing in her eyes.

'I ... she ...'

As always, Tamar struggled to remember why she wasn't in the wrong.

'I just wish she wouldn't hurt me so,' her sister stammered.

A tear broke away from one of her eyes and curved gracefully down her cheek.

'There, there, kitten. Your sister doesn't think. She's not like you.'

*Why can't you be more like Susa?*

The unspoken words sent angry red blood to her head. Standing tall - she already towered over them both, which helped - Tamar marched out of the room, making her most gruesome face as she passed. She heard Susa protesting

and Nino ordering her to come back, but she ignored them, hoping the old nurse wouldn't actually give chase.

But she had not gone far before she heard the determined flap of Nino's feet behind her, with Susa's slippers dancing alongside. Ahead of her, around the next corner, two Kipchak guardsmen would bar the way to her father's chamber. There was only one thing for it. She ducked into the cramped, windowless antechamber where the palace women stored clothes and bedding out of season, and scrabbled between two mounds of quilts, squashing herself against the far wall. The thick scent of lavender and juniper, scattered everywhere to ward off moths, made her eyes tickle.

'She's in here somewhere, Nino, I know she is.'

She froze as the door opened.

'For shame, Susa, your sister would not behave so childishly. But one of the maids does seem to have left this door unlocked. We'd best set that to rights.' Tamar heard the jangle of Nino's keys. 'Now, let me see, ah yes, here we go.'

Nino shut the door with an expressive humph and Tamar heard the key turn triumphantly in the lock. Their footsteps retreated back up the passageway. Tamar cursed - then laughed. Nino was unbeatable in her own domain. She wasn't going to scream and shout and beg to be let out, so she settled down to wait.

Now that her breathing had stilled, a distinct mumble and rumble sounded behind her. She swivelled round, making sure she didn't knock over the stacks of material, and pressed an ear to the wall. Men's voices, several of them, but all talking at once so it was hard to make out what each was saying.

As she dropped to her knees to make herself more comfortable, she came level with a thin line of light, a gap between two planks of wood. Gingerly, she pressed her eye against it and saw a row of backs crowding round

something in the middle of the room. She was as good as inside her father's chamber.

Suddenly, to her right, close but out of sight, she heard a door open and the king, taller and broader than any man there, shouldered his way into the room.

'Give him some air.'

The men stepped back to the sides of the room. Not one leant against the walls. Not one sat down. Her father was so close it felt as if every pair of black eyes was trained on her. Some of them she knew well, others she knew only by name. They were the men the king fought with, the men he hunted with, the men who used to play with her. Many were Kipchaks, fighting men from beyond the mountains in the pay of the king. All had been born outside the tight circle of noblemen, the proud tavads who had long ruled Kartvelia.

Now she could see what they had all been so interested in. Dato, quietly massive, sat on a low chair. His right arm was bound across his chest and his face was bruised. His left knee stuck out straight in front of him while his free hand rubbed the joint rhythmically. Tamar sought out his eyes, wondering what she would find there, but his gaze was down, his face still.

'Come,' said her father, 'tell us what has happened.'

Dato looked up and took in the room with his familiar slow stare. 'I travelled south to Lori,' he began. His voice still carried traces of an Osset accent although he had come down from the mountains years ago, as part of her mother's guard of honour when she married. 'I went to talk to Orbeli.'

Tamar frowned. Ivani Orbeli was her father's amir-spaslari, the commander-in-chief of his armies. Was he the reason why everyone had been so tense and strange all winter? She pressed her eye so tight to the wall that she was worried her lashes might protrude the other side.

'The king sent me to ask why his tribute did not arrive in Tbilisi before the snows. Sent me to ask if his wagons had



been attacked, if his harvest had been poor, if our enemies troubled him. I was to offer understanding and aid. At first, Orbeli's people received me well, with much food and honour. But after five days I still had no answer. After five days I had spoken to Orbeli only once. I demanded an audience, in private. I waited another day. I asked again. And then I went to his chamber and encouraged his advisors to let me see him.'

Tamar caught the looks shared by a couple of men in the room. She too had some idea what it might be like to receive Dato's encouragement. Even her father's lips twitched.

'The news is bad. Ivani Orbeli renounces his ...' - he stumbled, searching for the right word - '... his fealty.'

Some men blinked, shifted and rubbed their faces. Others rocked on their toes and pursed their lips. They might be trying not to show it, but Tamar could see they were all thinking that was worse than bad.

'There is more. Orbeli says Demna is now old enough to rule.'

'That hermit's boy,' Giorgi spat. 'The weakling son of a weakling. A newborn lamb is more fit to rule my kingdom.'

Demna was her cousin, the son of her father's elder brother who had been king before him. Her uncle had not been long on the throne when he'd heard God's call and hidden himself away in a monastery, and so the crown had passed to her father. All this had happened before she was born, but she'd heard whispers that her father had somehow been responsible for his brother's passion for religion. Not that she believed them. It was simple: her father was meant to be king and her uncle wasn't. A real king would never have put on a monk's cowl and then collapsed and died of a stomach upset.

'Weakling, maybe, but he has Orbeli behind him now,' Dato replied, sterner than any other man would have dared speak to the king. 'They tried to keep me prisoner, but I left

and returned here to bring word. I fear they are not more than three days' march behind me. They boast that Demna will be on the throne by midsummer.'

Tamar now understood why Dato was limping and pale. She also saw that her father's face had changed. His thick black brows, blacker than the hair on his head, had knitted tight together.

'They, Dato? What do you mean they?'

'An army is moving against you, my lord.'

'You'd call Orbeli's band of thugs and pretty boys an army?'

'No, I would not. But he has Qutlu Arslan and Gamrekeli with him. Jakeli and Dadiani, too. I saw them all gathered at Lori. I fear the lord Mkhargrdzeli also rides with them.'

He had named five of the most powerful men in the kingdom. Her father looked shaken.

'How is this?' he asked the air in front of him. 'Qutlu plays some game of his own - that I expect. Jakeli and Dadiani would only have needed a few days sucking grapes from the fingers of Ivani's slave girls to be persuaded. But Gamrekeli ... Mkhargrdzeli ...'

He turned away, his words unfinished. His back was to the others, but Tamar could see his face. It looked beaten. But, suddenly, a fierce, joyous light flared in his eyes, as when a watchman on a high wall removes the hood from a signal light. It burned brightly for a moment and then disappeared.

'So,' he said, slowly, the word fading to nothing. 'So,' he said again, facing the room once more. 'We have come to it at last.' He looked searchingly at each man in turn. 'Speak, men, speak.'

The king's black eyes, hooded until now, shot wide open and tracked slowly about the room. Tamar dug her nails into her palms as all eyes fell on Kubaza, the commander of the Kipchaks and the one man whose opinion truly

mattered. Short and broad, his head hairless, he squared himself to speak. He did not need many words.

‘I hate treachery. Orbeli will regret this day.’

As if on cue, the others echoed him, and as each man spoke, her father nodded to himself.

‘Your loyalty warms me. I am relieved no man here is thinking that I have no son, nobody to rule after me. Or am I wrong? Is not Demna my nephew? The only son of my only brother? Speak up. What have you to fear?’

Silence. Every eye in the room was fixed on the floor.

‘That is well. My brother was soft in mind and body. His son is worse. Demna does not have the stomach to ride north with an army at his back and call me out to fight – instead he cowers under Orbeli’s cloak. I will not allow him to cheapen the throne of my grandfather, the throne of Davit Bagrationi.’

He circled round the cramped room, men shrinking deeper into the shadows as his voice tore into them.

‘Burdukhan will produce an heir, one you will be proud to call your king. But until that day comes, I remain master of my fate and my kingdom.’

Every man nodded in furious agreement.

‘Now, leave me, all of you.’

The men trooped out under the low door. Dato swung his left leg to the floor and stood up, wincing, but the king put a hand out. ‘Not you, stay awhile.’

Dato sank back into his seat. The king crossed over to the window and tore aside the coverings. Cold air swarmed into the room and he breathed in deeply.

‘So, Dato, war it is. The thought does me good, although I did not expect to find myself so outnumbered.’

‘Yes, you look like a boy ready for the spring hunt. I admit I had thought my hunting days were done. Yours as well.’

‘Never. Fear not. We will prevail. We must prevail.’ The king grasped the back of Dato’s neck with one massive

hand and embraced him. 'One thing troubles me. My family. I must send them to safety before Orbeli attacks. My wife could go to the monastery at Gelati - she loves to be surrounded by the monks - and Susa could go with her. They do well together. But for Tamar, I would prefer somewhere more remote. You understand?'

Dato nodded. 'You fear what would happen if Orbeli had hold of her.'

'Yes. If a man wanted power over me he would have but to show me Tamar in the palm of his hand. Akilleus the Hellên hero had his heel. I have a daughter. And I fear that Orbeli knows it.'

Tamar's eyes widened.

'Dato, is there anyone in your lands you would trust? Someone deep in the mountains. A man of honour. A man who does not talk.'

'Yes,' he replied eventually, almost reluctantly. 'Yes, there is. But are you sure? The mountains are hard and lonely, with their own dangers.'

'Maybe you're right.'

Tamar couldn't bear it. She had never heard anything so appealing.

'No, no, I'll be fine. Let me go.'

The words had burst out before she even thought of stopping them. The two men gaped at each other.

'Where the hell are you?'

The king sounded furious. Dato looked amused. Maybe she should keep quiet. Maybe they'd think they'd heard a spirit voice. But her father had already flung open the door as if expecting to find her crouched outside.

'Come here now or I'll flay the skin off your back.'

He waited, obviously expecting her to trot round the corner and into the room.

'I can't.'

'Why can't you? You have legs, don't you?'

'I'm locked in.'

‘Locked in where, for God’s sake?’

‘In the linen cupboard in the women’s quarters.’

The king snorted, then nodded to Dato who stumped out of the room. Tamar wondered what he was going to do without a key, but the door gave way with one shove of his shoulder.

‘Out you come.’

She emerged, blinking.

‘Hello, Dato. Welcome back.’

One of his eyes flicked shut and open, a whisper of a wink.

‘Hurry up – we don’t want you to lose your skin.’

She stood before her father, not sure what to do with her hands. Men normally rested their right hand on their sword hilt or, if they weren’t wearing one, looped their thumbs into their belt. She didn’t have a sword, nor was she wearing a belt. She put her hands on her hips, but that felt stupid. She tucked them behind her back, but that felt pathetic. She was just about to fold them in front of her when at last he spoke.

‘Tamar. We shall pretend I have just summoned you here from your quarters where you were busy doing something appropriate with your sister and Nino.’

She nodded. ‘Yes, father.’

‘Tamar. Your cousin Demna is trying to steal my throne. Do you know why he is not to be my heir?’

‘Yes, father.’

‘Why?’

‘You don’t will it.’

‘Good answer. Are you pleased I don’t will it?’

‘Yes, father.’

Tall as she had grown, she barely came up to his chest, but the same gold light glittered in both their eyes.

‘Even better. Now, listen close. It is too dangerous for you here on the plains. Fortune’s favour switches faster than a falcon can dive and I will fight better knowing you

are out of reach. You understand that, don't you? They will try to find you, hold you hostage, use you against me. Do you understand me?'

She nodded. *I matter.* The thought was as invigorating as thunder.

'One question remains. Where are you to go? Orbeli's arm would have to be long indeed to find you under the Kavkaz peaks. You go north, to Osset country. There you can disappear from sight, from rumour until I send for you.'

*Thank you Mary, thank you Jesus, thank you, thank you.* Tamar felt as if she were already racing through a high meadow.

Her father's tone changed. 'Daughter, now listen close. Remember these words. Whoever comes to tell you that I have sent for you, whatever story they bring, they can tell you I am alive, dead, captured, plague-struck, devoured by vultures, I care not what they say, you must not believe them, you must not trust them, you must not follow them unless they show you this sign.'

He turned to Dato. 'You still have my kinzhal.'

Dato swiftly unbuckled the king's dagger from his side and held it out, the blade perfectly balanced in the palm of his hand.

'You know this?'

'Of course.'

'I do not know who will be dead and who living once I've whipped the whelp back into his kennel. But I do know that my messenger will be carrying this. Trust no man else. Do you understand?'

She nodded, entranced. 'But father, how will I know they haven't stolen it? How will I know the message truly comes from you?'

She expected him to bawl at her. But then, slowly, every line in his face softened. He reached out, put both hands on her shoulders and looked hard at her. She kept her eyes

turned up, on his face, without quite daring to meet his gaze.

‘So, I am right to believe there is something in there. Well, daughter, a second sign you want and a second sign you shall have. If you have the stomach for it.’

Dato broke in. ‘But, sir, she’s only—’

‘Silence, man. Tamar, if your belly does not like the man who comes to fetch you, say *There is a second sign*. The man I send will put out his shield hand and say *I am ready*. Take up the dagger and make as if to cut. He will not flinch. That is how you shall know he is true. Now, enough talk. You leave at dawn. Both of you.’

Tamar grinned.

‘Yes,’ said the king. ‘Dato will be your escort to the mountains. He will see you safe there. Now, go.’

## Chapter Two

*If I just see him and explain.* The thought sustained Sos as he drove his yellow horse north. The quicker he made it home, the quicker his father would let him return. He refused to consider that Jadaron might be even less amenable close up than at a distance. *I'll explain ... he'll understand ... he must understand.* Like a chant, a prayer, the words thrummed in his head in time with the horse's hooves. Nobody overtook him, but he passed small trains of merchants, families walking to markets and a broad man and a slight girl on horseback.

Twelve hours earlier he'd been creeping, less than quietly, down a corridor in the palace towards the stone hall he shared with a dozen other boys of the court. The moon had set long before. The torches had burned out and would not be re-lit for another hour. In the darkness his heart was running wild, filling his eyes with blood, blocking out everything but love, his great discovery, the one thing in life better than fighting, better than hunting, better than blood congealing at the neck of a skewered boar, the sight, the smell that made him dance for sheer joy at being alive, that was nothing compared to her. *Chito* ... He ricocheted off the door and swerved blindly inside.

Sos disentangled himself from his cloak and boots and slumped on to his narrow bed, as unsteady as a boy swinging in a hammock on his first sea voyage. He flung himself on to his front and buried his head in the pillow, wriggling ecstatically in rejection's sweet grip. Her face danced indistinctly on the back of his eyelids, he smelt her hair and felt a long white finger trace his jawline.



'I quiver like a sunbeam on water. I twist like a serpent with a bruised head. My heart bubbles like a jar of sweet new wine.'

He mumbled the magical Persian words through lips swollen the colour of pomegranate flesh. Sleep hovered attentively at his side, ready to step in when the delicious anguish ebbed. His eyelids flickered and he passed out.

Sunlight tiptoed across his bed, lingering to dance amongst his curls. The other boys laughed at his slack-jawed snuffling and left him to sleep it off. Nothing disturbed him until an exasperated servant shook him roughly awake long after noon. He smiled up through gummed lashes at the shape looming over him.

'Soslani?'

'S'me. Wha' you want?'

'For you. A letter. The low road out of the mountains is open.'

The servant placed the roll of parchment on the boy's chest and exited, shaking his head. Sos was now unpleasantly awake.

A letter from his father. Correction, he thought. A letter from his father's steward. Jadaron didn't approve of writing and had refused to master the art. Sos had sent word before the snows asking leave to remain in the plains in the king's service for one more season. He had heard the rumours that war was coming and longed to fight. But the captain said he needed his father's permission before he promoted him out of the schoolroom.

He fumbled the message open and started to read. It didn't take long. There were only two words and his father's mark.

*Home. Now.*

His cheeks flared red. No explanation, no apology, nothing. He turned the paper over a couple of times, wanting to make it mean something else. He damned his father to hell.

Ever since Burdukhan had married the king, the noblest-born Osset boys travelled south in their fourteenth spring to live with the Karts in the plains. Sos's father had nearly forbidden it, but to go to Tbilisi was a great honour, the greatest there was, and Jadaron's love of honour conquered his loathing of *ssifilissation*, as he always hissed the foreign word. So Sos set forth, unescorted, a wildly exciting journey, and plunged into the rough, bloody, brilliant world of the court. There were boys from all corners of Giorgi's kingdom, living on top of each other, no fathers to contend with, no mothers and sisters to undermine them. There was some attempt to corral them into book-learning, but for the most part they hunted, fought and experimented with love and wine. In short, they grew up.

Sos had been in Tbilisi for three years. He stood taller than most of his friends and could outrun anyone, but he was still beardless and his chest, shoulders and thighs lacked power. Lithe, wiry, fit, agile, he was all those things. But maybe not quite a man.

And now, just when everyone would be going to fight, his father ordered him home. Could he just not go? He tried out the idea, but fast realised it was impossible. Without his father's blessing, his father's gold, he was just another penniless camp boy, brushing horses, polishing shields, hurrying through the city carrying other men's letters to beautiful girls.

*Girls.* The night before flooded his memory. A large - and cheap - meal, a dare, a bet, some unsteady creeping around the snow-silent streets and a precarious ascent of Chito's house. *Chito.* Her shutters had opened and he'd caught a glimpse of her shocked face before she hissed at him to be gone. Maybe she'd have let him in if she'd known he'd be spending the rest of his life with his father's goats. *Damn him.* His belly smouldered with resentment, smoking and hissing like a damp wood fire.

Without quite realising what he was doing, he started to bundle his odd collection of things together – a book of Persian poetry he'd have to hide from his father, a boar tusk, the result of a lucky spear thrust, a couple of coins, clothes – and made for the steward's quarters to see about provisions for the journey home.

Shota was an unusually popular steward. He was dangerously open-handed but because no man mistook him for a fool, he was never cheated. He knew when to give credit and when to refuse. He knew when a young man genuinely needed coins for a new horse and when the silver would be squandered on amber ear-bobs or mink slippers. Unlike most stewards he had a comfortable face, enjoyed good health and, stranger still, was poor. One look at his room and it was plain to see why.

The walls were crammed with dozens of books, a private collection unrivalled in Kart lands. Only the greatest monasteries and the king had more. Shota could bargain mercilessly over silks and spices, cheese and honey, but everyone knew that faced with a book he wanted – and there was no book he didn't want – he was defenceless. Merchants who tucked an Athos bible or a beautifully copied *Iliad* in their saddlebags always made a profit on that trade, even if they were bested over their main cargo.

The door was open, but Sos knocked anyway. Shota looked up and beamed.

'Come in, Sos, come in. What can I do for you?'

Sos started to speak, but his voice sounded odd in his ears so he stopped. Shota smiled encouragingly and waited. Sos tried again.

'My ... my father calls me home. I need money for the journey. I have less than I thought. It seems I ...' His voice trailed off again.

Shota was already nodding, businesslike. 'I understand. Winter's end is a bad time for us all, but you must bring

gifts for your aunts, your sisters. I imagine you'll have no end of trouble otherwise.'

He took a key from the loop at his waist and opened a wroughtiron box at his feet. He took Sos's right hand and placed two coins in it, clapping him on the shoulder. 'No need to put it in the book. Just pay me when you return.'

'If I return,' said Sos glumly.

'Come Lord Misery, you've money in your pockets, a spring journey ahead of you and you'll leave behind more broken hearts and jealous husbands than a pup your age has any right to. You'll be back. Fathers just need to remember what their sons look like every once in a while, that's the truth of it.'

Sos refused to smile. 'But the war. Maybe it'll all be over by the time he lets me return.'

'War?' Shota asked, one eyebrow cocked.

'You know, the war everyone says is coming. The war with ...' Sos stopped. 'Shota, you know everything, who is attacking? Is it the Seljuks?'

The steward snorted and made to cuff Sos about the back of the head, but he ducked just in time. 'The Seljuks? No, Sos, the king's enemies are closer to home. The Seljuks have been too busy with the basileus in Constantinople and his Frankish friends to pay heed to what's afoot in our kingdom - and we must all pray it stays that way.'

'But—' Sos began.

'No, no, I don't have the time to give you politics lessons, not today anyway. Off with you and ride safe.'

Sos was out the door before he heard Shota call him back.

'Word of advice.'

'What?' Sos followed the steward's gaze. 'My boots? What? What's wrong with them?'

'In my experience, fathers don't have much time for Constantinople fashions. I'd save those handsome fellows

for the plains.' He winked, picked up his quill and started scratching away on a piece of parchment.

*I'll explain ... he'll understand ... he must understand.*

His father's messenger had come via the long, low road but Sos decided to take the direct route home through the high Kavkaz peaks, where spirits and demons crouched nameless under the Fire Mountain, the Ice Mountain and the Mountain of Chains. Only a bishop could fail to hear the voices of the old gods in the summer storms and autumn rains, feel their power in winter avalanches and spring floods.

The path all but disappeared once he was in the foothills, but by then every spur, every ridge, every peak was as familiar as morning. Day by day he wound higher and higher, leaving the forests behind, until he came to the great pass that marked the boundary of his homeland.

He was too early. He should let spring creep higher up the mountainside, but he was impatient. Death from a snowslide was less daunting than waiting. So he crossed, slow, silent and tense, leading the horse until it was safe to ride again.

Two days later, as dusk deepened into night, Sos glimpsed houses planted deep into the rocks, part-cave, part-hut. Little black smudges, fingerprints in the granite. Woodsmoke bobbed in the air, like a ghost at rest. A chill north-easterly wind carried the smell of evening cooking fires. Smoke and animals and mud caught in his throat. He was home.

He galloped up to his father's house, chickens flapping out of his way, and tied his horse to the gatepost, wincing a little at the squalor, the meanness. He did not see his father standing in the shadows at the door until he spoke.

'So, boy, you are home.'

'Yes, father, I am.'

Death was tracking him close, like a wolf lying unblinking in the long grass at the forest edge at dusk. Anybody, even Sos, could see that, but he could not accept it. He could more easily imagine looking up and finding the mountains had grown legs and jumped off the rim of the world than that his father might be near death.

Jadaron, standing deep inside his furs, cast a long, sneering look over his son.

‘I hardly recognise this fine knight.’

He turned stiffly to enter his house. Sos ducked under the door beam, squinting in the gloom, and stood uneasily as his father placed himself on a high stone chair.

‘Tell me news.’

Sos swallowed hard. Conversations with his father had always terrified him, but now he also had to contend with the embarrassed deference of vitality before age, the painful awareness of his own strength. Jadaron’s face had collapsed, every bone was prominent, the flesh gouged. With everything else stripped away, his eyes had grown more intense until it seemed there was nothing but glowering black between him and his father’s mind. Sos stumbled his reply, incapable of saying what he meant and hating himself for it.

‘I ... I know not what news you seek, sir. I thought to ride with the king when he went to fight. I thought to serve. I want to—’

‘Want. Thought. I care not for those things. Tell me news. Who is loyal? Do the Kipchaks still have the king’s ear? Who will follow Orbeli and the boy?’

Sos looked blank. ‘I know not—’ Again his father interrupted.

‘You would know if you had spent your time at court wisely.’

Sos had the unpleasant feeling that his father knew everything he had done – and failed to do – in the last three years.