

Kiran Millwood Hargrave

IN THE
SHADOW
OF THE
WOLF
QUEEN

A GEOMANCER BOOK

Orion

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Hodder & Stoughton

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 510 10781 6

Typeset in Sabon by Avon DataSet Ltd, Alcester, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The paper and board used in this book are made from wood from responsible sources.



Hodder Children's Books
An imprint of
Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder & Stoughton Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

Book One:
In the Shadow of the
Wolf queen

*perhaps the tips of trees
are roots that drink the skies*

– from *Orchards* by Rainer Maria Rilke (translated)

*But there is a long way to go before then,
and the path takes many turns.
It begins at the trunk of a tree.*

– from *The Children of Ash and Elm* by Neil Price

Wakening

It woke the world the way wind wakes air.

Where once things were still, now they stirred. The trees of Glaw Wood took up a lazy swaying, straining their roots as if to walk. The birds took off from the branches and made shapes like flung silk in the sky, and in the mulch of the cool, wet dirt the ants trailed determinedly away.

In the cold salt-and-dark water of the Tarath Seas the whales heaved their bodies from the waves, the sharks sank to the sea-bed, and the stingrays flew from the water, bodies like spinning blades. In the cloud-strewn Drakken Peaks, the earth-old rocks rippled like water and shook the snow from their summits. Beneath the tidal heave and pull of the hidden meridian, in the halls of the dead the spirits paced like caged tigers, rootless.

In a castle built of broken boats, a wolf queen sharpened her spear. In the hall that was once his fortress, a rebel lord buried his wife. In the mountains, an ancient girl opened her cobwebbed eye, and flexed her stone-clad fingers with sounds like dropped pebbles.

The earth music had begun, and they must make ready.

CHAPTER ONE

SNARE

‘Nara, hush!’

The forest was speaking. Beneath the deep copper fire of the Elder Alder, Ysolda sat cross-legged on the ground, and tried to listen. To her heart she pressed an amber amulet, worn smooth and orange as flame by constant touch, and her feet were bare and buried in moss. Nara was flying a wide loop above her head, and somewhere to the left a sparrow was calling a warning to its mate as the sea hawk swooped her circle.

‘Hush, Nara,’ hissed Ysolda, glaring through a half-closed lid.

The hawk snapped her beak as she glided past, cuffing Ysolda’s cheek lightly with her speckled feathers, but obeyed. She knew not to make a fuss when Ysolda was

attempting to listen.

Ysolda closed her eye again and pressed the amulet tighter to her chest. She tried to block out Nara's huffy chitter, the sparrow's continued panic, and focused on the forest again, straining to hear the water below her, the trees sharing space and eras and passing knowledge between them like blood. Hari said it was all there, all the time.

They're not speaking words. You can put our words to what they say – 'follow', 'down', 'here' – but they don't reach for what is actually meant. It's instinct that truly passes through you when you're listening, a feeling. Words aren't enough, like 'hunger', like 'love'. They fall short. You don't have to be special to hear: you only have to listen.

It was easy for her to say, with her milk-white skin and bronze eyes. Ysolda knew better than to judge by appearances, but if anyone were asked to imagine what a special person who could hear trees looked like, they would think of someone like Hari. So when her sister said listening could be learned, Ysolda didn't really believe her.

Crunch. Crunch.

Ysolda cracked her eyelid again. Nara sat atop a mossy branch, having skewered a large black beetle with one nail-length talon. She was now pulling its legs off one by one and staring back at Ysolda as she did so, clicking her beak insolently.

'Sea hawks aren't meant to eat beetles,' said Ysolda.

Nara bit off another leg.

Ysolda rolled her shoulders, blew out a short, impatient breath, and tried to retreat once more into the place Hari had described, where your body was only air and listening. If she was going to hear it anywhere, it would be here – beneath the first tree that began their forest, and where all the words of Ogham, the language of trees, were inscribed – with Hari’s amber amulet pressed against her heart. But now her neck was aching, and her stomach was rumbling, and her leg had gone to sleep.

She threw the amulet from her with a frustrated little shout. ‘I almost had it there! If you hadn’t scared that sparrow—’

Nara’s feathers ruffled, and Ysolda’s anger went out of her. She sighed, and slumped back on the springy ground. It was damp, as always. In Glaw Wood, if it wasn’t raining, you were inside. It’s what gave the place its fierce green, so vivid it was almost iridescent as oil on water, containing all colours: gold and blue and purple and green, green, green. It was beautiful, and dangerous to all those who didn’t know it, its paths and its bogs, its stories and its rules.

Nara stopped crunching the beetle and swooped to land near Ysolda’s head, kneading her hair like a large, feathered cat. It was quite painful, and the juice from the beetle was seeping into her plait, but Ysolda knew Nara was trying to say sorry, in her own sea hawk way.

‘It’s not your fault,’ she said, reaching a finger up to Nara, who nipped it lightly. ‘I wasn’t close really.’

It was the truth, and it punched her in the heart. She had been so sure that today of all days, she’d get somewhere. She’d woken with a tug in her toes, a tingle like her feet knew where to go. She’d lifted Hari’s amulet from where it hung by the door, and her feet had led her to this spot in the forest, an invisible path snaking through the trees and ending at this clearing beneath the oldest tree of the wood. It was a pull, a charge as strong as lightning plucking at the matter of the sky, and it had brought her here. She was sure of it. But what for?

There were some in their village who could scent water and ore wherever they were, dowsers who could pluck a stick from the forest floor and charge it with their spirit, send it swinging and sniffing out hidden streams, or seams of shining silver and lead. Still others would never be hungry a moment in the forest, knowing as they did every type of leaf and moss, every mushroom and every insect by sight.

Most prized were the listeners like Hari, who knew trees and understood the language of their roots, the routes they took to pass messages of water or danger, or an unnatural turn in the air. It was none of it magic, only a special sort of attention, but it might well have been to Ysolda, who could not scent, nor see, nor listen. She felt a connection to

her twin tree, of course, the tree planted the day of her birth and growing a ring for each year she grew, but it didn't talk to her. The forest was a vast silence, and she longed to hear it speak.

Hari found it too loud – where other villagers had built their crofts from the plentiful wood of the coastal forest, after Hari was born their parents had had to rebuild their own with stone. She couldn't have wooden buttons on her clothes, and even the amber amulet, being fossilised sap from their Elder Alder, had to be kept on a hook unless she needed to listen.

Now their parents were dead, Hari would drag a complaining Ysolda to the cliffs to roll home slabs of slick black slate on logs to repair their roof, or heat-holding sandstone for their floor. They could not even burn wood because Hari heard it screaming. They used only peat, which smoked their house out, making it smell like Clya's smokehouse with its hanging kippers and cloudy-eyed mackerel. Even with these precautions, some days Hari stopped up her ears with beeswax and sheep's wool to keep the clamour of the trees from her head. Though Ysolda knew that Hari did not always love her gift, she would rather hear.

The Elder Alder was dazzling in the late afternoon sunlight, leaves burnished and the deep grooves of the Ogham alphabet illuminated. Ysolda soothed herself by

reciting them aloud – the grid of *ae*, the nest-like weave of *ar*, the diamond of *oi*. She could read them as well as Hari, though it was learned by heart rather than inscribed there. *But just because one thing is nature and another thing skill, does not make it less special.* Easy for Hari to say.

Ysolda watched the light trailing long fingers through the leaves above her, fine mist-like rain shimmering as though suspended in amber, making her squint as it hit her pale grey eyes.

Before Hari became busy with her gift, she and Ysolda would come to learn the alphabet, to tell stories of the planting of this ancient tree, of the forest that once stretched to the End-World Wood, covering the entire country. Ysolda loved telling stories, though sometimes hers were a touch too convincing. Lies, Hari called them, but Ysolda thought there was nothing wrong with a little imagination.

Still, it was a long walk home and it would be dark soon. Now the festival of Mabon was approaching, signalling the turn of the season, the sun seemed to drop out of the sky like a hawk diving rather than sinking slowly as a feather as in summer.

‘Home now, Nara,’ she said, pushing herself up and buckling on her shoes. She retrieved the amulet, turning it around in her hand. It was slightly too big for her palm and shaped like a stretched-out raindrop, its pointed tip crenated like an oak leaf, its surface marked with the brush-like lines

of *nion*, ash, meaning open: open your ears to the forest. *I'm trying*, thought Ysolda.

She needed to return it before Hari realised and besides, she was hungry. The handful of blackberries her foraging had yielded that morning was a distant memory, and Hari was making goose pie for dinner, with real butter churned herself and flavoured with parsley picked from the herb patch outside their house. Ysolda's stomach gurgled again, and she sucked her purpled fingers for a taste of the berries.

Nara took flight and lifted suddenly out of sight. Before Ysolda realised what she was planning, the hawk was plunging back through the leaves, and the sparrow was suddenly silent.

'Nara!' Ysolda shuddered and hurried to the thick bracken where Nara had disappeared. 'Not the little ones!'

Ysolda was squeamish about these things, though she tried not to be. Hari had warned her when she had decided she wanted to train a sea hawk that you could not train it out of its nature. This was another thing Hari had been right about, though in Ysolda's mind her sister's tabby cat, Sorrell, was far crueller than Nara ever was. At least the hawk did not play with her food before killing it.

Nara was hunched over her meal, broad wings hiding it from view.

'Nara, come.'

The hawk turned her imperious head towards Ysolda.

A strip of grey fur was hanging from her beak, and Ysolda's empty tummy churned.

'Nara, come. Home.'

Nara swallowed, and lowered her beak for more. Ysolda reached for her impatiently, and then froze. Sparrows did not have fur, grey or otherwise. She knew Nara had probably just caught a squirrel, but something did not feel right.

Her hawk was in a place clear of bracken and fern, lit with the last sunlight, a circle that echoed in miniature where Ysolda had sat waiting for the trees to speak to her. But it was mossy beneath the remains of Nara's kill, and moss grew only in shadow.

Ysolda's mind worked, but it was too slow. Even as she gasped her hawk's name and went to pull her clear, something tightened around Nara's feet. The bird felt the shift in the ground, her wide wings stretching to lift her away, but it was too late.

'Nara!'

The snare tightened, and like a pebble loosed from a slingshot, Nara was yanked away. Ysolda ran after her, the thin soles of her rabbit-skin shoes yielding to the brambles as she fumbled through them, thorns tearing her clothes. The hawk's cries were just in front of her, just out of sight, but Ysolda kept up, legs aching, heart hammering, eyes fixed ahead.

So focused was she on reaching her hawk that she did not notice the change in the light, the sudden thickening dark, the ground becoming boggy underfoot. If she had stopped to look down, there would have been a root or line of stones engraved with X, Ogham for *danger*. But it was not until the arm reached out and caught her about the waist that she realised she was in a trap, too.