

Avlía

- Wicked Fire -

Sabrina Fackler

First published in 2019, Aberystwyth

Original title: "Avlia - Hexenfeuer"

© Sabrina Fackler

Cover by Johanna Fackler, Jessica Auer

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the author.

ISBN: 978-3-9819799-4-7

**Domínium
generosa recusat¹**

“The proud one does not accept a
master”

¹ Heraldic motto of the city of Pisa

The Healer's codex

1. Treasure life.
2. Speak no lie.
3. Be aware of the consequences
before you act.

Prologue

Torches lit up the village and the gathering crowd. Night had fallen; dark figures surrounded a woman with flaming red hair. A malevolent silence had claimed the place and swallowed every sound. The woman was neither young nor old; laughter lines crowded her eyes and her lips, but at this moment she did not feel like laughing. She kept her head held high, refused to show her fear – despite everything, she was too proud, too haughty, to allow her tormentors that triumph. A thought flashed through her mind: This was how Marie-Antoinette must have felt like on the way to the guillotine. Knowing she was about to die, as vengeance for misdeeds she had not done. Misdeeds she had not even been aware of.

Haughtily the woman stared into the dark eyes surrounding her. At that moment, these people were spawn of the devil to her. She tried hard to ignore her fear of dying – this was wrong. She should not die. Not here, not yet. But it was too late to berate her fate, so she forced herself to stop – she blanked out her immediate surroundings and imagined she saw different faces in front of her. Beloved faces. Nuallàn. How much

she longed for him now... How much she regretted that she had not stayed at home. And her girls – Avlia and Lubica. What would she give to see them once more, hold them in her arms again? She could forewarn them of the cruel pain that lurked. How could she have been so stupid?

“Well, then... It is time to let justice reign.”

Hatred poured from the speaker’s voice and made Ceara shudder. How was it possible to feel so much hatred? Of course, she did not feel sympathetic towards him – especially when two men grabbed her bound arms and started to drag her towards the giant pile of wood that waited in the middle of the place.

The stake.

Fear, deep and instinctive, crawled up her neck. She was going through the same nightmare that so many women before had to suffer...

But this was the twenty-first century!

The men tied her to a high pole that rose from the middle of the pile. Despite her former decision, Ceara started to rail at them.

“Why?”

Her voice sounded hoarse, but still held something of its normal beauty – softness, clarity and a certain tone that used to make people turn around in wonder when

they heard it. Some of the figures flinched. She asked again, "Why are you doing this? It will not change a thing, not for good. You may burn as many women as you want, but all you will achieve is—"

"Silence!"

The man who had spoken before barked at her, his voice full of hatred.

"You are like her – exactly like her. She bewitched us with her goddamned beauty and her siren's spells. But we will not be that stupid a second time. The other one has learned her lesson, and so will you."

He laughed, but it did not sound amused.

Ceara shuddered.

The man turned on his heel and ordered loudly: "Burn her!"

Dark figures approached, holding torches. For the first time in her life, Ceara feared the flames. She closed her eyes, calling on her beloved ones – her husband, Nuallán, and her daughters: Avlia, the firstborn – how happy Ceara had been when she realised she really carried a new life beneath her heart! And, later, when she saw her child for the first time. Avlia, her sassy, light-hearted firstborn, who grew up to be a similarly light-hearted and joyous woman. Self-confident, straightforward, open-minded and sparkling with ideas

and charm. Ceara could see herself in her daughter, but also Nuallàn – Avlia had his humour, his eyes, his long fingers...

And Lubica. Her little girl. More petite and introverted than her sister and mother, she resembled Nuallàn even more – calm, attentive and way smarter than people expected. She had her grandmother's eyes, unique in an indeterminable way. Eyes that were so sharp and yet so blind to her own brilliance. Every time Ceara saw how self-critical Lubica was, her heart felt like breaking. She was so insecure, especially when it came to dealing with people her own age. How much Ceara wanted to show her daughter how brilliant she was!

Flames started to lick at the bottom pieces of wood and Ceara felt tears floating in her eyes. She did not want to go. Not yet. There was so much more to see, to experience – she wanted to watch her daughters fall in love, have children and grandchildren. Who would they fall for? Avlia had quite a wide range of choices already, but Lubica was clearly blind to her own effect on the male species. Ceara wanted to help her daughters, reassure them, laugh with them, enjoy spending time with them...

Heat crawled upon her skin and reminded her how fast the end was approaching. She blinked away her tears and swallowed.

An old saying her mother told her, a long time ago, suddenly leapt to her mind. An old rhyme from some fairy-tale her mother used to tell her and that she had told her daughters:

*“If you are in dire need,
Danger too big to defeat,
Call for light and love alone
Let trust and strength be your patron.
It may not stop Life’s wheel from turning
But balance will be reached at last
Let mercy reign instead of damning
Trust in Fate’s capricious cast.”*

Ceara had never understood the meaning of that rhyme – in a slight touch of gallows humour, she thought about how stupid it was to brood over such a silly matter during her last minutes. How could it be Fate making her burn here like a witch from medieval times?

The warmth beneath her feet had grown to heat and she felt panic rising. She did not want to burn!

The filigree necklace she wore also grew warm, although the fire was not high enough yet to reach it. It reminded her of her mother, who had given it to her years ago. How badly she wanted to see her again, ask her to take care of Nuallán and her daughters!

The flames started to lick at her bare feet. For the first time in her life Ceara desperately wished she was wearing shoes.

Some of the men around her shifted uncomfortably. Not everyone agreed with what was going on, but nobody felt confident enough to protest.

Suddenly a light, clear voice disturbed the deathly silence and the menacing crackling of the flames.

“Stop.”

Ceara tried to see who was speaking, but the heavy smoke brought tears to her eyes and blurred her sight.

She recognised the former speaker’s voice, full of hatred, as he answered, “What do you want, nipper? To accompany the witch?”

The smoke made Ceara cough.

The clear voice replied in an amused tone, sounding odd in the maleficent darkness that seemed to loom over the gathering. “Let her go. You will not find relief in burning an innocent soul.”

Ceara could not suck in fresh air. She felt desperate, wanted to breathe – but that would mean death.

The flames crawled up her feet.

Hard, spiteful laughter. “You have no idea, nipper.”

She could not breathe! Pain ripped through her body and Ceara bit her lip, desperately trying not to gasp.

A wisp of sadness shimmered through the clear, somehow familiar, voice as she answered. “Life would be so much easier if you were right.”

The insufferable heat suddenly vanished. Ceara, unable to control her body any longer, gasped for air – but instead of deadly smoke, she inhaled cool, fresh oxygen.

Her eyes opening wide, she stared – and blinked.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

The heat was gone, but the flames were not. Instead they flared up around her, dancing over her head and over her skin.

They did not hurt her.

Judging by the men’s pale, terrified faces, she was not hallucinating; they all saw what she did.

How on earth...?

She felt her fetters loosen and fall off. As soon as they fell away from her skin, the flames leapt at them, hungry predators engulfing their prey.

Ceara stared around in shock, trying to understand what was happening.

“Never try that again.”

The voice, all she was able to get from that mysterious speaker, ran clear and powerful through the darkness with an assertiveness that nobody dared to counter.

“The outcome would be exactly the same.”

A hand touched Ceara’s arm – gently, not a man’s hand. Light flared, too bright to stand.

She closed her eyes and shielded them with her hands.

When she opened her eyes again, the fire was gone.

As was the village and the men. Instead, she stood on the edge of a cliff – fortunately, not close enough to be endangered, but she could hear the thundering of the waves far beneath.

“Ceara!”

Mum?

She turned around, stunned, her brain still frozen in shock, and staggered. Strong arms wrapped around her and kept her from falling.

“Ceara, darling.”

Her mother hugged her as if she would never let go again.

Suddenly Ceara realised – really realised – how close she had been to death. Sure, she had tried to end her life on the fire, but even then she had not been able to understand the truth as deeply as she did now.

She clung to her mother like the little girl she had been years ago who had been afraid of the dark, and tried to gather her wits. “What... what happened?”

Her mother squeezed her tightly. “I am not sure... but if my guess is right, then you almost died.”

Ceara nodded slowly. “Yes, that I know. What I do not understand is... why am I still alive?”

Alastriona took a deep, shaky breath. “I can only guess – and you know I do not like guessing. All I can say for sure is that I found a slip of paper in the cottage - ‘Go to the cliff’. No signature. I had a feeling it was urgent... and here you are, in a ripped dress, smelling of smoke, and with dishevelled hair. I had a picture in my mind...”

Ceara shivered again. “They would have burned me. They have burned me – but suddenly the flames stopped hurting me. It was magic – but a kind of magic I never

saw before. I have never seen anything that powerful...”

She let go of her mother when she caught a glimpse of something small and pale on the dark ground. Ceara stooped and picked it up. It was a piece of paper – thick, somewhat ruffled paper that was definitely handmade.

And covered with writing.

They both read it and Ceara felt a part of her joy die.

“I am not allowed to see my daughters again?”

Sympathetically, Alastriona touched her arm. “At least you are alive. You can watch them grow, even if only from afar. And if that mysterious writer is right, you may still have Nuallán.”

Ceara swallowed. “Yes. I...”

She lowered the letter and looked into her mother’s eyes. “Who is powerful enough to rescue me from certain death, even though” – she looked at the letter and read a sentence out loud – “my death would be Fate’s way?”

Alastriona stared, unseeing, at the horizon. “I do not know. But we will do what this somebody asks us to – nobody except me, your father, Muira and Annag will learn that you are alive. If Nuallán manages to find you, he will be declared dead, too. It will look as if you both died, to everyone except us few, until Fate’s wheel

has turned far enough and the truth about what happened tonight in Glendan will not disturb its turning."

Ceara took her mother's hand for support and the women went back to the cottage, where Ceara's father waited. Unnoticed, the letter slipped out of her hand and floated down to the ground. The paper remained a pale spot on the dark ground, a silent witness to what had happened.

Chapter 1 - Avlia

Morning dawned over the mountain range. A tall young woman stood motionless and stared at the landscape unfolding beneath her. In the early morning light, a warm glow made it look almost surreal - magic. That impression was only underlined by the breath-taking flow of flaming red hair which welled down the woman's back. She wore a long, velvety green skirt with a cream-coloured blouse; her hair gently swaying in the breeze.

Avlia Hava, First Healer of the Mountain Range, watched the almost endless forest beneath her reach out to the horizon in all directions, only interrupted here and there by patches of fields. From where she stood, she could every now and then guess the outskirts of said forest, but only with sharp eyes - and a lot of patience. She had both, though not always. Some gossips claimed that patience was a total stranger to her, but if she wanted, she could wait indeed.

Usually she didn't see the necessity to do so.

Early morning hours were the only ones she had for her own. The only time she allowed herself to

give in to those damned yearnings that had tortured her with increasing force during the last months. Yet she knew she was merely making things worse. When she, after almost half an hour of waiting, could finally make out distant shapes of houses far away, well hidden in fog and mist, she grew even more restless than before. The wanderlust grabbed her, pulled on every fibre of her being, urged her on to be on her way – leave the villages behind, just start wandering and head for that breath-taking, gleaming, terrifying world down there.

Downstairs.

The villagers called it *downstairs*, the word being easier than the correct term ‘world around the Mountain Range’. Nobody bothered to be correct; the term ‘down there’ or simply ‘downstairs’ had come into use a long time ago.

“He’s downstairs, doing his studies”, they said, or “My aunt came back up again. Couldn’t take it any longer downstairs, I guess, with that much noise and ev’rythin’.”

People thought differently up here. Many found it hard to live in a society which, as a whole, neither believed in magic nor Fate nor the spiritual world. As for all the prejudices and hatred, homophobia, racism, sexism and whatnot – no, that was one part

of the world downstairs nobody missed when they returned home to the Mountain Range.

Avlia's neck started to hurt, but she ignored it. Pictures flashed through her mind. She had already spent time there, had seen many curiosities, drawn back... yet she couldn't get enough. Sure, it was noisy and smelly, at least in the cities. Sure, most people weren't even able to concentrate on the person they were talking to, not without checking their mobile every minute. She had met people who had never in their whole life written a letter, or collected fresh eggs, or picked an apple from a tree... But there were so many things that *she* hadn't seen yet. Things she wanted to try, experience, marvel at. If only so she would know she didn't like them.

With a quiet sigh, Avlia relaxed and slowly turned away. It was time to go back; if she wasn't home for breakfast, Lubica would get worried.

Hell, *she* would be close to freaking out if Lubica was ever not where she was supposed to be. After all that had happened to –

Don't. Don't think about it.

Lost in her thoughts, the young woman climbed down the steeper bit from the top, until she met the narrow trail winding through the sparse vegetation.

Here, they were above the timberline; trees started to grow only a few hundred feet further down. The path was anything but even, yet Avlia knew it well enough to find her way blindfolded. Thinking about the view she had enjoyed, she started to brood over a way to —

Stop it!

Abruptly, she came to a halt and pressed her fingers to her temples. “This needs to stop. It’s stupid.”

And she wasn’t stupid. Cheeky, vivacious and sometimes a bit rash, yes. But not stupid. She had a duty, a responsibility, and she would never neglect that. No matter what her personal wishes might be.

I am, who I am, that’s just the way it is. Mum is dead; I am her oldest daughter and therefore her successor. First Healer and Head of the Havae.

Shaking her head, Avlia continued on her way and forced herself to focus on the day that lay before her.

After breakfast, she would go to the village for the compulsory tour; she had arrived the day before from her journey through the Mountain Range and would stay for one week, maybe two, before setting off again. Avlia looked forward to spending time with her sister, but a part of her was already shifting from foot to foot restlessly, urging her to

get moving again. Her duty as First Healer was a blessing and a curse at the same time – without it, without being always on the move from one village to the next, she'd have gone crazy long ago. But at the same time, it was only her sense of duty that made her stay here, in the Mountain Range, instead of heading downstairs. She had to be within reach, had to take care of the village healers and help them, to settle conflicts and much more.

Avlia reached the first trees and started to run. The ground was rocky, strewn with boulders and giant roots, but she hadn't grown up here for nothing. Her feet knew where to step and carried her safely further down until she reached the broader, more level paths that were used by far more people. There she slowed her pace. Even if she didn't give a damn about people's gossip, she didn't have to fan the rumour fire on purpose.

Not if Lubica got the worst of it while she was on the way somewhere else in the mountains.

Avlia reached the mansion – *her* mansion, at least officially – without meeting anyone. Well, not many villagers were crazy enough to roam the forest at such an early hour.

She skipped over the bridge that led from the forest directly into the giant garden and couldn't help staring for a moment: She definitely had to admire her little sister. Lubica kept the expansive and meandering gardens perfectly in line... and more. On her journeys, Avlia had seen many well-kept properties, but none had radiated such calmness. A sense of peace, of safety that she felt every time she came home; nearly strong enough to dim her wanderlust. And since Lubica took care of everything alone, that feeling had grown even stronger.

So much had changed since their parents had vanished.

Avlia wiped her dirty feet at the door – like her sister, she only used shoes if it was unavoidable – and entered the warm hallway. Spring was coming, but now, after several hours spent outside, she clearly sensed winter's cold in her bones.

With a shiver, she closed the door and went to the kitchen, intending to make breakfast. The smell of fresh bread told her that someone else had been faster. With a grin, Avlia stepped behind her sister and peeked over her shoulder. "Do you even know where the baker lives any more, Lica?"

Her sister made a funny little hop. “Ava! Good Lord, you startled me!”

Lubica turned around and smiled at her. Her wild curls were as red as Avlia’s, but even crisper. Her most impressive feature, however, were her eyes: one in a light shade of brown, almost amber, the other as dark as ebony.

Together they settled at the table and ate. Avlia enjoyed the silence; unlike being with other people, here she felt nothing but calmness, peace and contentment. Lubica just had that aura.

Finally, Avlia cleared her throat. “What are your plans for today, Lica?”

Lubica chewed thoughtfully and swallowed. “Plant some bulbs and dig up some more beds. You?”

Avlia grimaced. “Guess what. Village. Any tips?”

Her sister was responsible for the village while Avlia was travelling, but for some reason the villagers had never really warmed to her. Mostly people helped themselves; here in the mountains, everyone knew at least the basic things about healing themselves and only called for a healer when they had tried everything else. Overall, people in Busbaidh, their village, were used to

being self-reliant; like Avlia was now, her mother Ceara had been away quite a lot back in her day.

Most villagers had no idea what Lubica did with her time. Yet Avlia knew her sister spent nearly every second outside – maintaining the garden where she had established a new herb bed (well, more like a small field), or in the forest. While Avlia was the First Healer, Lubica was far better when it came to rare and unusual herbs and where to find them. Lubica denied it, but Avlia was sure her sister had a photographic memory. She was way smarter than anyone Avlia knew – and she knew loads of people.

“Donnan will want to see you. He said he had to talk to you but didn’t give any details.”

The sisters shared a look. Donnan was the head of the village’s council. Each of the many villages that were strewn over the Mountain Range had a council, and each council had a leader, who filled this job for a certain length of time. Avlia had never understood why on earth Donnan had been chosen – maybe because he was the only one both meeting the criteria and not refusing to accept the position. Donnan was selfish and pushy with a tendency to narrow-mindedness, and he could be quite arrogant. Avlia, being the village’s healer, had a seat

on the council too; since she was away most of the year, she had decided to give her voice to Aodh and Maébh, two women she got along with quite well and who used to have a similar opinion to hers in most topics.

Council meetings, visiting sick people – shouldn't my time at home be a rest from what I do the rest of the year?

A thought that had been slumbering in her mind for quite some time now craned its neck. Avlia halted for a moment before she asked, "What do you think about doing something significant, Lica?"

Her sister looked up. "Depends. What are you thinking about?"

"We could visit Glendan."

Chapter 2 - Avlia

As they ran through the woods three days later, Avlia started to wonder whether her idea had been a good one.

Glendan was another village in the Mountain Range, about a week's march south of Busbaidh. Like everywhere in the mountains, its inhabitants made do without technology – they might have power for light and running water, but they did not have the internet, a telephone network or anything like that. That was one of the biggest distinctions between the Mountain Range and the world around it: whoever decided to live here also decided to do their work with their own hands instead of using machines. Of course, this was no permanent decision; many people studied downstairs, travelled the world and finally moved back up.

Some people regularly spent time downstairs – the hard, bitter winters, for example. But most villagers (and hermits) were proud of their life – and of their healers. Usually, that job was passed on from mother to daughter; sometimes another girl was talented and became apprentice to the village's

healer. Every once in a while there was also a boy settling for that way of life, but not often.

Being a healer meant being connected to nature – keeping balanced, learning from the environment, feeling humble and therefore gaining knowledge and wisdom to help others.

Avlia knew this sounded much like superstition to people from downstairs, but in the mountains, the villagers grew up knowing that nature was much more powerful than humankind. They were dependent on the weather, living every day with the risk of being killed while cutting down a tree, or being hit by an avalanche in springtime.

At the same time they knew their existence was balanced on the earth's giving: they gave thanks to the weather, the trees and the animals, and didn't care whether someone called that superstition or not.

Well, at least most of them kept the balance thing. One single village, however, stood out like a scorch on a rooftop: Glendan.

Avlia remembered countless horror stories at school about the village and what had happened to every poor woman who lived there. She hadn't believed in those cruel stories of enslavement and abuse, and had frowned when her mother had

drilled into her that she should never get too close to Glendan.

Then she had found out suddenly that these horror stories had only proved to be part of the gruesome truth.

If I had known earlier...

Avlia forbade herself from continuing her walk down memory lane. She had finished with all that – with self-reproach, desperation and fury. Only the grief had remained: grief and the determination to change things.

Glendan's inhabitants had decided to make a journey to the past. They enslaved their women, forced them into complete submission, didn't respect their lives. During the past thirty years, there hadn't been a single woman who had succeeded in fleeing the village and its tyranny; knowledge about Glendan's conditions only came from visitors who had told them about it.

And, of course...

Stop it!

Avlia forced her thoughts back to the present. She and Lubica were making a short trip to a place Avlia remembered, a place Glendan's inhabitants would know, too. Now, in springtime, tasty salads were growing there: it was a delicatessen for every

meal. Her gut told Avlia that they would see more than nature this morning... And she trusted her gut.

Lubica followed her wordlessly. She hadn't hesitated for a second after Avlia had come up with the idea; now she complied with her sister's instructions and together they crafted a camouflaged shelter in a tree close to the clearing Avlia had had in mind. They knew how to handle plants without hurting them; in a short time, the hide was ready.

This day, they simply wanted to watch. Depending on what they saw, they would either go back to Busbaidh to gather some helpers to attack Glendan, or...

Avlia didn't know what alternative she had, or if they really could motivate people to help them, but she didn't care. At least she would be doing *something*; the decision about how to continue, she usually made at last minute. Of the sisters, Lubica was the level-headed, deliberate one who always had a plan (and a plan B, C, D and E) for safety. Her little sister preferred to be on the safe side, while Avlia just... improvised.

Something Avlia hadn't borne in mind? Waylaying somebody usually included a certain amount of waiting. And waiting required patience -

but Avlia had spent all her patience several days ago on top of the mountain. She took a sidelong glance at Lubica, who sat straight as an arrow on her branch and stared at the clearing without blinking.

Avlia told herself to be strong – now they were here, they wouldn't leave until something had happened.

But why did *something* have to take so long?

She tried to busy herself with thinking about something nice. Her thoughts went back over the last days to her visit in Arascain, another village maybe two days from Busbaidh. That guy trying to catch her eye had been quite cute, sure... But, sadly, a total moron.

Before she knew what had happened, her memories slipped back to that morning on the mountain near Busbaidh. How she would love to live downstairs, not knowing a thing about Glendan. She was ashamed of her selfish thoughts, but the longing remained, and grew even stronger, no matter how much she tried to deny it. Avlia started to move uncomfortably on her branch until Lubica cast her a warning glance. She gave her sister an apologetic smile and made an effort to stay still. Avlia tried, she really did, but it was useless.

The more she tried to concentrate, the stronger grew her urge to move. To climb down from the tree, run over the field and balance on the fallen tree at the other side of the clearing.

Avlia inwardly shook her head. She was behaving like a child, not the grown-up woman of twenty-three years she was!

Just when she really couldn't stand it any more and wanted to get up, Lubica bent forward and hissed, "There!"

Avlia went still and stared in the same direction as her sister. For a moment she saw nothing, then she glimpsed a movement and saw a man entering the clearing on their left. He was followed by two more men, and then the women came.

If there had been any doubts about what they were seeing, they were erased at that moment.

Avlia stared in shocked disbelief at the bent figures who stumbled, shackles at their feet, towards the clearing. They reminded her of slaves in eighteenth-century paintings... They were barefoot and clothed in rags. A small part of Avlia's brain soberly acknowledged that Glendan's men may have watched *Pirates of the Caribbean* once or twice too often. The rest of her conscience was busy controlling her temper. How *dared* they?

She wanted to march over to the group, cut the women's shackles and go for the men like a harpy.

However, that probably wasn't such a good idea since she was outnumbered – three men in front of the group, four at the rear and two at each side against Lubica and her.

Avlia cast her sister a quick glance. Lubica was unusually pale. Too late, Avlia realised how this situation must feel for her. Lubica still felt guilty for what had happened to their mother.

Too late to change plans. Let's make the best of it.

Avlia leaned forward and tried to get some details. What were the shackles made of? The women carried baskets; obviously they intended to harvest the fresh greens. But therefore they had to come closer to her hide...

A quiet crack was all the warning Avlia got. Next to her, Lubica gasped in horror and grabbed for her arm, but it was too late. The thin branch Avlia had used to sit on gave in and broke.

Loudly.

Avlia tried to keep still, but it was too late. There was yelling, then half of the men drove the women together and positioned themselves around them while the rest went looking for where the sound had come from – and headed directly for their hide.

Avlia didn't need to be psychic to know what was going to happen if these men got their hands on her and Lubica.

Avlia nodded towards the ground. "You go first."

Her tone didn't permit any resistance. Lubica climbed down the tree as fast as she could. From the opposite side of the clearing came a loud shout. Avlia risked a look and fought down a curse. They'd been seen.

Lubica made a move to turn around. Avlia growled and called out, "Damn it, run!"

Simultaneously she jumped off the branch. The landing was quite rough, but she had no time to recover. Another curse on her lips, she grabbed Lubica's arm and dashed off.

When they saw them, the men gave chase like wolves that had sighted their prey.

Avlia let go of her sister's arm and lengthened her stride. She felt Lubica close behind her and jumped over the roots and fallen branches that blocked their path. Her legs moved instinctively and a wild wave of joy washed through Avlia, so suddenly that she couldn't even see it coming:

Finally.

It was ironic – they were fleeing, running from a danger she wasn't stupid enough to underestimate. Never would she have knowingly put Lubica into danger... But at this moment her stupid heart danced with joy at her supple movements and the strength behind them.

Avlia noticed her sister falling back and slowed down a bit. Lubica was shorter than her and could never keep up with her sister over longer distances.

But this time Avlia couldn't leave her behind.

Heavy footsteps came closer and Avlia fell back until she was next to her sister. "Come on, Lica. Just a wee bit further! We're nearly at Crow's Cross. There's a thicket where we can –"

She paid a high price for her encouraging words. In her worries about Lubica, Avlia forgot to watch her feet – and promptly stepped into a hole. Her ankle twisted and she fell to the ground.

Lubica stopped immediately.

"Ava? What's wrong?"

She was out of breath, but that couldn't hide her upwelling panic. Avlia tried to get up. A sharp pain flashed through her ankle and she sank back to the ground.

"Damn it!"

The deep voices were already way too close – at any moment, the men would spot them.

Avlia realised with frightening clarity that there was indeed only one possibility.

“Lica, go.”

Of course her sister didn’t move. Avlia took a deep breath and called on her power, the power of her position, one last time.

“Lubica Hava, hereby I name you First Healer and head of the Havae family. It is your duty, for the sake of the Mountain Range, to ensure your own safety.”

The words didn’t come out quite as majestic as she had intended them, to since she needed to speak as fast as she could. Ignoring Lubica’s terrified expression, she hissed, “Get lost!”

To her, it felt like forever until her sister finally turned away and ran. Avlia scrambled to her feet with a groan and turned around – just in time for the first men to reach her. One of them – tall, lanky, with a shaven head and a wild beard – wrenched her arm behind her. Avlia fought back a whimper and held her head high to watch the men running after Lubica.

Please, please let her be fast enough...

Simultaneously she tried to bend her ankle. The pain quickly convinced her that this was a bad idea. She bit her lip and stared challengingly at the man who stood opposite her. He was probably thirty-something. He examined her with a calculating look she didn't like – but she definitely wouldn't blink first.

In quiet mutters the men discussed; two of them finally made their way back at a somewhat slower pace, probably to tell the rest of the group that the chase had been successful.

As long as they don't get Lubica...

Avlia fought back the urge to defend herself as the lanky guy shackled her with a coarse cord. *With a twisted ankle, I won't run very far...*

When the two men who had been chasing Lubica came back with scowls on their faces, she allowed herself a contented smile: Their hands were empty.

Lubica had got away.

Thank goodness. Thank God. Thank Fate...

Relief washed over her and left her strangely wobbly on her feet.

Then attention focused on her and Avlia's smile froze. Suddenly all the horror stories she had heard about Glendan rushed to her mind. She realised that neither her position – which was no longer

hers, anyway – nor her talent for improvisation would help her out of this situation. As the lanky guy pushed her forward and forced her to hobble back to the clearing, she thought with a sudden spike of dark humour that, at least, she was going to find out more about Glendan. First-hand.

However, she hadn't imagined that the 'find out the details' part would go quite like this.

Chapter 3 - Avlia

Glendan was...

Intimidating.

At first sight, it looked like one of the many villages Avlia saw all the time on her travels. She searched for a sign – *any* sign – that would have tipped her off in another situation, and found nothing, except the giant wall surrounding the village like armour. Instead, she almost felt as though she was coming home, which was more than weird since a) she was tied up and b) she didn't even feel at home when she returned to Busbaidh after a year of travelling.

Then she realised what was odd: the people who came towards them and stared at her were solely men.

Avlia shuddered.

She wasn't easily scared, but this... There was something in the men's faces that rattled her.

They brought her to the village square where all the inhabitants seemed to have gathered – again, mostly men. Low whispering and mumbling filled the air. Avlia stared stubbornly straight ahead of her and managed not to flinch as the lanky man

pushed her again. She stumbled a few steps forward and suppressed a groan of pain, but for once, she felt certain: she wouldn't give them the satisfaction of wailing. *Never.*

"Look what we picked up in the woods!"

Laughter rang out. Avlia took a deep breath and tried not to think about her ankle – it was twice its normal size and was throbbing strongly.

The answering comments came from all directions, none of them appealing to her. Nevertheless she stood still and looked blank and inexpressive while some of the men separated from the crowd and walked slowly around her, examined her, as if she was a cow in the sales.

Disgust welled up inside her, mixed with fear. Until now, she had carefully distracted herself, had thought about Lubica and how her sister would use her new position. But now she was running out of time. She was held captive, caught by Glendan's inhabitants, at their mercy for better or worse.

And the more Avlia thought about it, the worse it looked for her.

One of the men pinched her side. Without thinking, she struck back – limited because of her bonds, yet the guy reeled back with a curse. His

flabbergasted look granted her a moment of satisfaction – and a ringing slap in the face.

At first, she was too shocked to react. Fortunately, this didn't seem to show on her face; the man who had slapped her grabbed her throat and squeezed. "Sassy beast!"

Panic welled, but this time she was prepared for it. Avlia dropped to the ground, her chin pressed to her chest. The man lost his balance and she broke free.

Pain glistened; in the heat of battle she had forgotten about her ankle. Avlia refused to give in to it and stubbornly held her chin high. The people surrounding her muttered and mumbled, but it didn't sound friendly.

Quite the opposite.

She stared them down.

The man who had slapped her didn't look away. She examined him with an inexpressive look, but a faint hint of her disgust clearly shimmered through.

"Asshole."

Her voice sounded a touch hoarse, yet it cut effortlessly through the mumbling and rang out over the square.

The people held their breath.

Her opponent narrowed his eyes and turned towards the lanky one, who wrenched her arm. "Did she say something?"

Avlia snorted loudly. "Lame excuse, really. But what else should I expect from merely *one X* chromosome?"

The watchers looked from her to him and back as if they were following a tennis match.

The man stared at her with his mouth dangling open before he regained his brains and eyed her coldly. "Watch your tongue, shrew!"

Avlia threw her head back and laughed uproariously. The sound echoed over the square and she could hear the collective gasp that went through the crowd. When her laughter slowly died, she looked around and fixed her stare on her opponent.

"Shrew?" Her voice dripped with mockery. "I think you've missed out on some centuries here." She shook her head in amusement. "Well, okay, history for dummies: the term 'shrew' isn't in use any more. Women have been allowed to participate in elections since about the middle of the nineteenth century. Even downstairs, they now are equal to men when it comes to the law."

She ignored the hellish pain in her arm and continued: "Slavery was abolished some years ago, too - at the end of the eighteenth century, if I remember correctly. And I usually do."

A ghostly silence covered the square like a blanket.

Then the guy who had slapped her cleared his throat and said to the lanky one, "Take her to the dungeon."

And with a malicious grin at Avlia, he added, "I think we need to tame that kitten a little before it may pleasure our doctor."

The crowd laughed as if he had given a command, loud and dirty. The lanky one dragged her with him and she gritted her teeth as weight was put on her ankle.

Staring haughtily, she pretended not to notice all the hostile glares.

The dungeon seemed to be taken directly from one of the dark pirate movies she used to secretly watch in her teens. Avlia was pushed through a low door. She tumbled and fell down several steps. The lanky one must have followed her; she heard his steps and the *click* as a second door at the bottom of the stairs closed. Then the sounds faded and disappeared and the upper door closed as well.

She was alone.

It was dark and cold. Avlia straightened with a low groan and groped around. The ground was made from loam and smelled of urine. She wrinkled her nose in disgust and started to crawl around to get a picture of her prison.

The dungeon was tiny. She could cross it in less than three strides. When Avlia finally managed to stand up, her bun touched the ceiling and brought down some earth.

“Great.”

Her voice sounded thin and lost. Not very cheering. She tested the door, but there was no way to break it.

Avlia tried to remain optimistic – hey, at least Lubica managed to escape! – but it didn’t work that well. Fact was, it didn’t look good for her. She was imprisoned, alone, had no idea what was awaiting her – and was injured.

She carefully moved her ankle and grimaced. Her fingers slid over the injury expertly and after a while, she sighed in relief. At least it wasn’t broken. Probably strained, but not more.

Some days of complete rest and being careful for a few more weeks, and it’ll be all right again.

Avlia hopped back to the wall, laid her head on the earth and closed her eyes.

“Now the big question is, what do they have planned for me?”

We need to tame that kitten a little before it may pleasure our doctor.

What did they intend to do with her?

And who was ‘that doctor’?

She suddenly pictured a corpulent, over-forty man with a paunch and shuddered. Never. She would never serve somebody. And definitely not like that!

If they think I'm going to give in... then they'll probably learn a lesson.

Chapter 4 - Lubica

Lubica fled.

Her frizzy curls whipped against her face; her feet drummed on the ground and she breathed heavily, feeling like she couldn't get any air.

Run, run, run...

She was beyond exhausted, but panic drove her on. The pictures she'd seen haunted her – the women, tied together, their hopeless faces. The empty eyes. And Avlia – alone, on the ground, worn out and angry and determined.

They've got Avlia.

The thought dug deep into her mind. A violent sob welled up inside her and escaped from her chest. Terrified, she pressed a fist to her mouth and forced her tired legs to run faster. Had the men already ganged up on her? She thought she heard a *crack*, but she didn't dare to turn her head and look.

They've got Avlia.

Her lungs burned like fire. She wasn't a runner, especially not over longer distances. Even though she went for a jog every morning, she got out of breath quite soon at high speeds. Other than her sister...

They've got Avlia!

Lubica felt herself slowing down. She tried to speed up again, but her legs simply refused. Finally she came to a halt and, gasping for air, bent forward to lean on a beech for support.

They've got Avlia.

The men must have given up. She had probably lost them in the wood... Exactly as her sister had predicted. But they should be standing here together, not her alone. This was *wrong*.

They've got Avlia, damn it!

Only now did the full extent of the catastrophe reach her brain. Lubica sank to the ground and started to cry uncontrollably. She tried to stop, to restrain herself, but the sobs broke out of her with a power that rattled her whole body.

Eventually, the tears dwindled.

Lubica wiped her face and drew a deep, shaky breath.

Enough crying. This won't help Avlia.

She struggled to her feet, brushed the dirt from her trousers and started on her way back to Busbaidh. Crying had helped, though; she felt weirdly relieved and managed to think at least somewhat clearly.

In order to free Avlia, she would need help. Alone, she wouldn't be able to pull it off. But to get help, she needed time – as hard as it was to even think the words, a rescue mission would take days, if not weeks.

The idea made her gut hurt. What would these monsters do to Avlia in that time?

What if she was too late?

Lubica swallowed hard and quickened her pace.

I'll help her best if I concentrate on my task. Crying won't do any good to anyone.

And imagining what cruel torture her sister would have to endure wouldn't help either.

Despite her aching feet, Lubica arrived at Busbaidh in record time. She was lucky; the leader of the village's council, Donnan, had just come out of the council's building, waving his fellow members goodbye. He blinked, a trifle surprised, when she approached him – usually, Lubica avoided both the village and its inhabitants as long as they didn't need her help.

“Donnan? I need your help.”

Lubica hadn't thought she would ever have to speak these words.

Donnan raised a brow. “My help?”

Shortly, Lubica described what had happened. She managed to keep her voice calm and objective, even though a storm rattled her insides. Donnan's brows kept wandering up and when she finished, he stared at her mutely for several seconds.

"You went to that village on your own?"

Lubica nodded and bit back a comment about how she and Avlia were grown-up women who were quite capable of looking after themselves.

"And now you want me to endanger people from this village in order to get your sister out of the trouble she brought onto herself?"

Lubica felt a strange feeling settle inside her. Suddenly Avlia's words echoed through her head: *Lubica Hava, herewith I name you First Healer and head of the Havae family.*

A cold shiver ran down her back. Stopping in her tracks for a second, she suddenly noticed the weight resting on her shoulders.

She now *was* the First Healer. And therefore she was responsible for the well-being of everyone in the Mountain Range.

It was difficult to describe, but with that realisation her perception... changed. The yearning, the need to free Avlia still burned untamed through her veins. Yet Lubica knew she couldn't risk

everything. Her life no longer belonged to her alone – she carried a responsibility even heavier than the one Avlia had. Because she, Lubica, was the last person in the main line of the Havae, the last heiress to that position. Her mother’s sister, Edana, was a philosopher, not a healer; she had a son, but he had no connection at all to ‘that healer stuff’, as he put it. Probably she had some distant cousin, but nobody except her had grown up with that knowledge – the awareness of what it meant to be the First Healer.

Donnan interrupted her thoughts with a disgusted snort. “That’s the price for always being smarter than everybody else. We don’t keep away from Glendan for no reason, do we?”

He turned briskly and called over his shoulder to Lubica: “Maybe this will teach your sister a lesson, Lubica. No matter the odds, nobody from this village is going to risk freedom and their life to pay for her stupidity.”

Lubica stilled.

How dare he...?

She felt a disaster-heralding shudder and abruptly lifted her head in alarm.

Calm down. Calm down!

Donnan had been right about one thing. She couldn't - wouldn't - put Avlia's life before the others'.

No matter how hard and painful that was going to be.

But she could ask others to help her solve the actual problem.