

THE RISING

By Kristen Ashley

Part Four

The Rising

Chapter One Hundred & Eighteen

The Work

Marian

Farm Six Miles West of the Ancient Ritual Ground

WODELL

She was beginning to feel the pain in her back becoming an ache in her entire body, which was good.

Everything else was bad.

She lay on her side on the floor in the farmstead, peering into the lifeless eyes of the dead child not five feet from her as she heard the screams of the mother coming from the other room.

The father had already been consumed.

Consumed.

The screams stopped but worse started as she heard the noises of sobs and pleas.

And then noises of something else.

What have I done? she thought.

After some time, she heard the familiar sound of the Beast's release and the crying and moaning of the woman abruptly halted.

Marian tried to move her legs, and they moved, but it made the pain in her back excruciating, thus she was forced to stop.

She needed a draught for the pain.

She needed to rest.

She'd have neither.

Where is that bloody priest? she thought.

"We must be away, Daemon," Jellan stated in a voice of genuine obsequiousness, false calm, but still managing to convey not a small amount of urgency.

“Fetch me some of the man’s clothes,” the Beast ordered.

“Of course,” Jellan murmured.

“You don’t do some too,” the Beast went on.

“As you wish.”

“Pack more, and I want my female bathed. She is dirty. I do not like her dirty. Bathe her and dress her in the woman’s clothes,” the Beast finished.

“It will be done,” Jellan, the arsehole, the fool, the duplicitous sycophantic *cretin* assured.

She heard steps ascending stairs as she heard others approaching her.

She also heard the rain coming down in sheets and sheets.

She saw his feet, filthy with mud and grass, before he crouched and she saw his member hanging between his thighs, large even flaccid, and now tainted with blood.

Marian’s mouth filled with bile.

She then felt his gentle touch as her hair was pulled away from her face.

“Do not be angry at me, my witch,” he clucked.

Don’t be angry?

Her mind reeled for ways to play this.

Jellan could shove his nose right up the creature’s arse.

She would be who she was.

“You might have broken my back,” she snapped.

“You could have a broken back, but you would still have your magic.”

She lifted her eyes to his and saw what she did not see all these months she had been with him.

He was still beautiful.

In this form.

But he was not innocent and docile and misunderstood. He was not simple and easily led.

He was devious and crafty.

She had been played.

By her Beast *and* Jellan.

“You connived with him against me,” she accused.

He shrugged.

She turned her eyes away.

“I needed you both,” he shared. “I could not ascend without your power, and his. But when I ascended, I needed a meal. And such it was.”

“Will you do me like you did that woman in the kitchens?” she demanded.

“I like you willing. You have much exuberance.”

Her gaze shot to his handsome visage again.

The new definition of twofaced.

“I can hardly be of service to you in that manner if my spine is snapped,” she spat.

He fell to his arse, and Marian gritted her teeth against the moan welling up her throat wrought by the pain in her body as he pulled her into his lap.

He then smoothed her hair again before he chucked her under the chin.

“I will not hurt you if you do not earn it. You are too important to me,” he told her.

“Important how?” she asked.

“There is more work to be done, important work, and I need you and our friend to do it.”

Marian was not feeling joyous about this news.

“What work is to be done?” she inquired.

“I fear it would be foolhardy to tell you of this at this juncture,” he shared.

She opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted when Jellan appeared at their sides, stating, “I have your clothing, Daemon.”

Marian glared up at the fallen priest.

He was dressed in the dead Dellish farmer’s clothing.

It was too big on him.

However, as fate would have it, it would fit *Daemon* perfectly.

“Heat water for Marian’s bath,” Daemon commanded. “We must soothe her aches. And see if this dwelling has medicine. She is in pain.”

Jellan’s eyes flashed his displeasure at his service, but he said nothing against it, nodded, set the clothing on the floor beside Daemon and moved away.

“And get these bodies out of here,” Daemon added.

“I am but one man, Daemon,” Jellan reminded him.

Daemon twisted his head to look at the priest. “Then we shall have to find you some assistance. But for now, it’s just you, and your standing there, glaring at me is not seeing to the things I’ve asked you to see to.”

No, this Beast was not simple, docile, innocent and easily led.

Jellan bowed his head and scurried off.

Marian would have smirked, but such was the direness of the situation, she could not even take enjoyment in Jellan's subjugation.

"He, well he..." Daemon began, stroking her cheek. "Black of soul, is he."

Marian lay still in his arms, held to his body, seated in his lap, and stared at his face for she felt something had changed about him and she'd experienced enough change from him that morn, she could take no more.

"You," he whispered, still stroking her cheek. "I regret you. You were guided to your darkness."

"I don't..." She swallowed. "What do you speak of, Daemon?"

"If I did not need you for what must be done for me to succeed this time, kill the gods, claim their kingdom, I would have used you like the one in the kitchen and then put you out of your misery."

Kill the gods?

What gods?

"Daemon," she whispered, "what do you intend to do?"

"They created us; they cannot forsake us. They will learn this time."

Us? she wondered.

Who was *us*?

"But you could have veered away from the darkness. You did not," he murmured, studying her face. "This was your mistake."

Oh, *Gods*.

"Daemon—"

"Thank you for releasing me, my witch."

After saying that, he stood.

And when he did, Marian rolled out of his lap, onto the floor with a painful thud that forced a grunt from her before she emitted a groan.

She watched him walk out the front door into the rain.

Then her gaze fell again on the dead child.

The child he killed.

The child was, perhaps, four.
Her Beast.
The one she'd helped ascend.
Marian closed her eyes.
“By the gods,” she whispered. “What have I done?”

Chapter One Hundred & Nineteen

The New

The Great Coven
Silbury Henge, Argyll Forest
AIREN

In the clearing of the forest, the first flash of light came before the first of the five standing stones.

The light was crimson.
The witch Nandra of Firenze.
The next was green.
Rebecca of Wodell
Then came marine-blue.
The witch Lena of Mar-el.
The last was coral.
And there stood Melisse of the Nadirii Sisterhood.

“Why did you bring me here?” Melisse straightaway snapped, and she did this angrily. “My sisters are—”

“There is something very wrong with the veil,” Rebecca stated, openly concerned. “You must have felt it.”

“Nadirii and Airenzian ride on the revolutionaries *as we speak*,” Melisse returned irately. “Ophelia is lost. Of course, there’s something very wrong with the veil.”

“It is not that,” Rebecca replied.

“It cannot be the Beast,” Lena murmured, and Melisse’s body shot straight at her words. “His ascendancy would be more...dramatic. Don’t you think?”

“It’s something,” Rebecca said.

“It is something,” Nandra agreed.

“I must get back to the mountain,” Melisse decreed.

“You are of the Great Coven now,” Rebecca told her quietly.

“It should be Elena, though I am glad you did not pull her here at this time, for she is needed. And I might not be at my greatest strength, but I can still string a bloody bow with an arrow and that’s needed as well.”

“It is you,” Nandra shared.

“Right. Fine,” Melisse clipped. “Now release me, I must return.”

“We must hold the ceremony,” Lena said.

“Later,” Melisse gritted.

“You are of the Great Coven now. In this time as in any time, but particularly in *this time*, we must be at our full strength. Thus, we must hold the ceremony.”

“*Later!*” Melisse shouted, turned, rushed to her standing stone, touched it...

And she was gone.

Chapter One Hundred & Twenty

The Miracle

King True

One Hundred and Fifteen Miles over the Border

AIREN

They were riding east, rain streaming down, hell bent for leather in order to get as many miles under their horse’s hooves before the necessity came to allow the steeds, and the men, rest.

And the next day they would do it again.

But as they rode, True was assessing the distance they had to cover, and the days that would take, and coming to unhappy outcomes.

Unless the allied militia was thoughtful enough to give Elena time for mourning, and Elena elected to do that mourning on the side of a mountain three hundred miles away from Sky Bay—both of these unlikely—the ambush could happen in the Night Heights any day.

Thus, True was coming to terms with the fact that the best-case but entirely impossible scenario was that somehow, Cassius with five hundred soldiers, Elena with the same, could defeat twelve thousand militia, and True and Farah would meet them on their victorious return to Sky Bay.

However, what was far more likely to happen was that he would lead his men, and his wife, to the sight of a massacre, deep in enemy territory, in five days' time.

To be of any assistance to his friends, he needed magic he did not have.

But even knowing this, he did not turn back.

He prayed to Gennara, the Dellish goddess of magic and protector of the charmed folk, but he did this with a sinking heart.

They were too far away.

They were simply too far...

He pulled back on Majesty's reins and lifted a hand up at his side.

He heard three calls of "Halt" around him, more down the line, as Majesty skidded to a stop, the steed's body shifting sideways at the quickness of it.

"By the gods, True," Farah whispered.

By the gods, indeed.

"I did not even know—" she began but stopped when the unicorn before them dipped her proud head, and when she lifted it, she did this away from True, as if indicating she wished them to follow her.

"Go to the back of the line," True told his wife.

"Sorry?" she asked.

He tore his eyes from the magnificent creature and looked to his queen.

"Darling, go to the back of the line."

She only studied his face a moment before she nodded, wheeled her mount and started to the back.

True looked the other way, to Wallace, who also nodded, turned his steed, and followed Farah.

True then returned his attention to the unicorn.

He dipped his chin to her.

She lifted her head and shook it as her way of saying his message was received.

She then turned and started galloping away.

“*Ride!*” True bellowed.

He felt Majesty’s haunches bunch before his horse burst forward after the unicorn and then True heard the thunder of hooves behind him as his men followed.

They went perhaps a quarter of a mile when, for some reason, the unicorn’s body adjusted as if she was intent to clear a gate in her path when there was nothing to clear as before them lay nothing but road.

She rose into the air.

Without guiding Majesty to do so, True and his mount rose into the air after her.

He heard cries and shouts and knew the line at his back rose as well.

There were more cries and shouts when all about them faded to purple and it felt like they were soaring through the air.

But within mere instants, the purple was gone.

And their horses landed with a thud someplace else altogether.

King Mars

On the Journey to Airen

WODELL

Mars was forced to admit, he was rather unnerved at the knowledge that his queen was a better horseman than he.

She rode at his side, in full charge, her body bent over her steed, her head tipped back, face determined, and she did not fear the breakneck speed they were using.

Indeed, it seemed she did not even feel it.

These were his thoughts, for he refused to acknowledge the dread settling like a weight in his gut at what they might be riding to.

He’d assessed their distance from Cassius and Elena, and even if they rode their mounts to a lather each day—something he refused to do, he was a Firenz after all, and horses (and animals as a whole) were not treated thus, no matter the reason—it would take them at best, ten days to reach the Night Heights.

It was likely more akin to fourteen.

And the closest being on this earth he had to a blood brother was Cassius. They'd known each other since youth. Cass had saved him during an attack and prevented him being violated. He was the only person outside his father and mother, and Silence, who had given Mars loyalty and love that was not attached in some way to duty.

Like his father, who had died nearly six years previous, and Mars still could not reconcile it, he could not imagine this earth without Cassius on it.

But there was no way, save a miracle, he was going to get to his friend in time.

He was praying in vain, he knew, but he was still doing it to all his gods, The Muse, The Grace and The Spirit, in hopes they would come to him and bestow a miracle.

He was doing this when he pulled so sharply on Hephaestus's reins, his steed did a full circle beneath him.

"*Arresto!*" he shouted.

He heard his men come to a halt behind him.

"Faith," Silence breathed from beside him.

Mars sat astride his mount and stared at the unicorn stallion in front of them.

The stallion had his head slightly turned in order to stare Mars directly in the eye.

"*Bellezza*, go to the back of the line," Mars said.

"All right, my love," she acquiesced immediately, and he felt her leave his side, but did not look away from the unicorn.

"Kyril," he called.

"He's already following her," Basil said behind him.

Mars gave his queen time to make her way to where she needed to be.

Then he jerked up his chin.

The stallion turned and galloped away.

Mars bent over Hephaestus's neck and dug his heels in his mount's sides.

They burst forward and followed the unicorn, and he heard the thunder of horses' hooves behind him as they did the same.

They could not have gone half a mile before the stallion curled his front legs and pushed off his back ones, leaping in the air in order to clear nothing.

Hephaestus followed suit.

There were noises of alarm behind him that Mars ignored, for all about them turned purple.
And then the purple was gone as they landed in wet turf in the middle of a blinding rain.

***The Rising* releases
in digital and print on July 28, 2020.**

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