

One true Queen, Volume 1: Crowned by Stars

So many books.

And out of all of them you chose this one.

Chapter 1

It can take so much courage to open a book.

Alice in Wonderland. Today I intend to break one rule after another, I'm going to be in the biggest trouble of my life anyway. I could have set fire to the roof over our heads; that crime would look pale and insignificant next to what I've just done. I'm still shaking with rage.

Vicky has got a cocoa-moustache – proof of my last, harmless transgression. She normally only gets cocoa at the weekend. But Mum definitely won't say anything about it today, no: "She hardly burns any calories, sweet things will make her fat and sick!". We'll have other problems as soon as she gets home.

"Are you ready?"

My sister is smiling. She looks tired, as if she hasn't slept for days, whilst she hardly does anything else. But she is smiling.

I read slowly, take breaks and keep looking at her. Paying attention to her blinks, to every movement of her lips, to the slightest stirring. Are her hands still open and relaxed? Is her chest rising and falling in the same rhythm? Her many teddies and cuddly toys give me looks ranging from scepticism to accusation, despite their friendly faces.

But I think Vicky likes the poem Lewis Carroll starts the novel with; she always loves it when I read poetry to her. And I think I can sense that she likes the first chapter too; about two sisters reading a book together.

Nevertheless I'm taking a risk. The doctors say we mustn't let Vicky watch television or switch on the radio without thinking when she's in the room. And when we read anything to her, it should be harmless, with no conflict or excitement. It absolutely mustn't confuse her. Nobody knows what she consciously or partially understands, and what scares her, somewhere deep behind her constant tired child's smile, because she supposedly can't distinguish between stories and reality.

Alice in Wonderland is anything but harmless. But something tells me that she is fed up of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *Peter Rabbit*, this feeling – my connection to her – is the only thing that still lets me get through to her. I can't allow her to be destroyed by my uncertainty. As soon as that happens I will only see in her what Catherine Pakert had meant before with her repulsive words.

Victoria has been in a coma for seven years. Seven years, during which I have spent every hour hoping she'll wake up. Just as suddenly, inexplicably and without reason as she slipped into this state. Back then I thought she had taken an important part of me into her world. Everything was suddenly so quiet around Mum and me. My life as I knew and loved it, and wanted to live it was gone and Vicky watched silently smiling, as the rest of my childhood turned to ash. I was angry for a long time, even though I obviously knew that she couldn't help her condition. It was only much later that I started to fight and the sword in my hand helped me to accept what can't be changed.

Meanwhile my sister is nineteen. But here, in her room, everything looks almost exactly the same as how she decorated it when she was twelve. Amongst posters of horses and cats, hangs one of Justin Bieber. Even he was cute back then. On the shelves are stacks of comics, horse books, and cuddly toy after cuddly toy, because it's the only thing you can give her at Christmas or on her birthday. A few of her flowery children's dresses are still hanging in the wardrobe. We haven't brought ourselves to sort them out, as if they'd magically fit Vicky if she got better and woke up.

Whereas with me everything has changed, multiple times even. The baby animals have made way for posters of singers, bands and football stars until I took even them down and threw them away.

Meanwhile a few landscapes are hanging on my walls – incredible pictures of the most breath-taking places in the world, all of them on practically the other side of the world. Souvenirs from the USA, Australia and Japan that I got on eBay because my travel experience is limited to books and YouTube videos. As well as a metal “London” sign and an empty picture frame. It used to have a photo of Fynn and me in it, but after we broke up, I turned it into art. I called the piece: “Nothing, just a pretty frame”. These words are on the little sign underneath it.

But regardless of how differently we’ve developed: there’s still a special bond between Vicky and me. This bond, I swear, will never be broken. I know her better than a care assistant with thirty years of experience with people who are *different*: better than a doctor who hooks her up to his machines every few weeks for tests. Her constant smile that people call *vacant* – it says a lot to me.

And that is how I read, observing her reactions, make us both a second cup of cocoa and let her smile slowly relax me.

When I hear the key in the front door, I slam the book shut and shove it in the gap between the cushion and the arm of the chair. Now I’m for it.

“Mum’s back”, I say and gently kiss her cheek. “We’ll carry on reading tomorrow, okay?”

Vicky is smiling and I leave her room so that she doesn’t have to listen to the argument that will inevitably follow.

“Tell me it’s all a misunderstanding!”, Mum snaps at me, as she’s still hanging up her coat. The hook breaks off, she hisses the first syllable of a curse through her teeth and drops the coat on the floor.

I close the door to Vicky’s room. “Hi Mum.”

“Mailin!” She’s angry.

She rarely gets angry. Stressed, yes. You can’t blame a working single mother of two teenagers for that. Especially not when one of the daughters is as independent as a newborn baby. “I wouldn’t want to trade places with Mrs Walsch!”, is what people say about my mother. And by that they mean the fact that her once strawberry-blonde hair has long been grey and still grows so quickly that she can never keep up with the roots.

But Mum never takes her stress out on me, quite the opposite. Normally she adds to her load in order to hide from me how exhausting her everyday life is. It takes a lot of effort for her to stay in control in front of me, I go quiet and all of the arguments I have carefully constructed seem scattered and muddled all of a sudden.

With pursed lips she walks past me and disappears into my sister’s room to say hello.

I go into our little kitchen-diner, where there are now only two chairs left at the dining table to make space for the wheelchair. The washing up is still in the sink from breakfast. Damn, I forgot it again.

Mum comes into the kitchen, slumps down at the table, leans on her elbows and holds her head in her hands. “What were you thinking insulting Catherine like that?”

In the meantime I’ve run the tap for the washing up and I’m sinking the first glass into the bubbles. “You weren’t there, Mum, if you were, you’d know.”

“You have to call her and apologise. She’s angry, but I think she’ll accept an honest apol...”

“Mum! I’m not going to call her. You have no idea what happened!”

“What happened?” She raises her head and looks daggers at me. “I will tell you what happened, Mailin. Because of your rudeness our carer has quit without notice and I’m facing having

to explain to my boss that I can't come to work tomorrow. Or the day after tomorrow either. Only once I've got a new carer for Vicky. You know yourself how hard it was to find Catherine." Her voice has gone quiet, which unsettles me more than if she screamed. "Your behaviour could cost me my job. *That is what happened, Jesus Christ!*"

I mechanically wipe a plate that is already clean.

"It was the only way."

"Stop it, Mailin."

"But, it's true." I let the plate slide into the water and turn to face her. "You didn't hear what she said about Vicky." Even thinking about it makes me so angry that my chest feels too tight for my heartbeat. "She said she was just a shell with no sense or reason." Tears well up in my eyes. "*A corpse that forgot to die!* And Vicky was there, Mum! She heard it all!"

Mum looks down. "She didn't mean it like that. She's got a hard job, Mailin. You get...pragmatic." She sighs, almost releasing a sob. "She can't say things like that. I would have spoken to her. But you can't take things into your own hands and scare her off. Catherine said you called her an evil witch."

"That's not true at all."

"What did you say then?"

I had to smirk bitterly. "I called her *a poor man's Dolores Umbridge*", I replied and Mum's face dropped. "How was I supposed to know that someone like her knows *Harry Potter*?"

My mum didn't reply, she just went red. I should leave it there, but some things have to be said.

“She’s no great loss, Mum. She was disrespectful the whole time. As soon as you were out of the house, she treated Vicky like she was a burden. Today was just the tip of the iceberg and...”

“Shut up!”, Mum screamed at me. “Damn it, Mailin, if I could have chosen a carer, it definitely wouldn’t have been Catherine Pakert! But I had no choice, don’t you understand? I spent weeks looking. Months! At the moment she’s the only one who’s qualified, reliable and affordable.”

I clench my fists so tightly my fingernails bore into my palms. “You’re taking the easy way out! Catherine despises Vicky. And you don’t want to admit it because it’s inconvenient.”

“That’s enough now!”, hisses Mum. “You are over-exaggerating. And as long as we’re all dependent on me going to work and earning us money - all three of us, you too Mailin – we’ll just have to put up with it.”

The dishwasher drips from my hands onto the lino floor and leaves little circles on the fake wood grain.

“You *will* apologise to her.”

“No, Mum. Please. We’ll find someone. If it’s about money I can get a job. I’ve been saving too, for Australia. I don’t have to go to Australia yet, it can wait! And I can look after Vicky until we find someone.”

“No, Mailin.”

“Doc Madeley will sign me off sick for a while if we explain things to him. I can do all my school work at home.”

“Mailin. No.” My mother speaks to me like I’m a small child. “School is important. That is absolutely out of the question.”

“Then...”

“That’s enough! You *must* apologise to Catherine.”

“To hell I will!” Furious, I storm out of the kitchen, but stop halfway. “You merrily believe the crap Catherine always feeds you. That Vicky doesn’t understand anything anyway and we should put her in a home. Yes, don’t look at me like that – I know. I’m not blind or deaf, Mum. But Catherine is wrong, I know it. And you know it too. You just don’t want to admit it. You convince yourself she’s an empty shell without feelings because otherwise you couldn’t give her over to that witch in good conscience!”

“Mailin, stop it with that immediately!” Mum’s voice is shaking with horror. I have never spoken to her like that before. The blood is rushing in my ears. Her mouth is still moving, but I can’t hear what she’s saying anymore.

I grab my bag, run outside and slam the door shut behind me. My eyes burning I walk round our little house, kick the garden gate open and jump onto my old bike that’s leaning on the wall next to the rotary clothesline in the yard.

I have got to get out of here.

[...]

Chapter 4

Damp grass is stuck to my cheek. Rays of sunlight and shadows dance over me as if they take pleasure in it. Pulling myself together, I rub my face and look around me. Where am I and what on earth has happened?

I'm in a clearing in a forest and there is a strange thudding reverberating in my head, as if a huge bell were being hit under my skull. Did I have something to drink? That much? I can't remember. All I know is that I was in the Dōjō, had a shower and then got dressed again. My clothes fit this memory exactly – I'm wearing jeans, a vest and my trainers are undone. Even my hair is still damp and dark. Maybe I tripped over my shoelaces and hit my head? But what am I doing in the forest then?

I find my phone in the grass, but the display remains black, no matter how many times I press the button. Ice cold the thought occurs to me that somebody could have slipped me a date rape drug or something. But there's nobody here and there's nothing to suggest that anything has been done to me.

My mind feels strangely clear. My senses almost seem to be sharper than usual. The leaves on the trees and the grass are a more intense green and have an odd shimmer. It must be drugs!

I don't recognise this clearing. Which means I can't be near Killarney, because I know each of the few woods there inside out. There can only be one explanation: somebody must have brought me here – wherever *here* might be. I'm shivering despite the warmth. I should make myself scarce before whoever it is comes back and does to me what he planned. My first impulse is: run! I struggle to resist the urge. First I have to get my bearings. The height of the sun suggests it's midday, which almost makes me despair. I was in the Dōjō in the early evening. I can't have been lying in the grass for an entire night and half a day?

Never mind. All will be explained. I just mustn't lose my nerve. Deep breaths. And then off I go, if I keep going straight, sooner or later I'll get out of the forest and get to a road or village. I've often felt a sense of regret that there are hardly any real forests in Ireland anymore, now this is happening.

When after an hour I haven't seen anyone or anything – not even a rocky hilltop between the trees, one of the many inflows of our lakes or a simple footpath sign that are on every other stone and every third tree in Kerry – my worry turns to bare fear.

The plants here look different. I pass blue iridescent mushrooms as big as coffee tables. The long narrow leaves of a tree I brush past seem to reach out for me. Ferns in shades of red and orange sway in the wind like blazing flames, and a bird is watching me; its plumage shimmering between black and a deep bluish green. None of it belongs to Irish flora and fauna. I knew it.

"Hello?" I whisper the word at first, turn around in a circle and try to frantically suppress the rising fear. What will Vicky think if I don't come back? "Hello!" And Mum? Is she worried, looking for me everywhere?

"Hellooo?", I call into the forest. Several birds flutter up, but there's no answer. It's gloomy, so at best it must be early afternoon. But the thick branches above me intertwine to form a roof that lets hardly any daylight through. "Heee-looo! Heeeelp!"

Eventually a sob bursts out of me. I don't want to howl like a child – that won't get me anywhere. A few tears still run down my face before I wipe them away with the back of my hand. To my despair I feel thirsty. After the sweat-inducing training I didn't have anything to drink and if that really was a day ago, it is gradually becoming critical. That's not how I feel though. Thirsty, yes. But not dehydrated.

Despondently I sink down onto a moss-covered tree root, hold my head in my hands and try to think. But the only thought going round and round in my head is the idea of mum anxiously waiting for me at home, first ringing all of my school friends and finally informing the Garda. They would hardly search the woods for me. The police expect seventeen-year-old girls who disappear after an argument to be in Galway first, then Dublin, and finally London. They'll put up a few posters of me and sympathise with my family. That is that.

Pull yourself together!, I demand of myself, as desperation threatens to take over. I can't rely on someone searching for me here, so I have to find my own way.

I'm just about to stand up when a few metres away I see a strange little animal peep out from a fern. To begin with the round head with tiny ears and big ears reminds me of a little monkey. But as the animal ventures a step further out of the cover, I recognise the body and movements of a rabbit.

I want to swallow and can't. A rabbit with a little monkey's face...fuck. Where am I?

"Drugs", I whisper. I *must* have taken something – God knows why or when and what happened afterwards. I'm on an awful trip.

The little animal scuttles over to me hesitantly. Long whiskers quiver as it sniffs.

I carefully reach out my hand. "What sort of monster are you then?"

It stops briefly in front of me, tilts its head to one side and makes a "Frrr" sound.

"Yes, I've had a bloody terrible day too."

Slowly, slowly it ventures nearer to my outstretched hand. Its whiskers touch my knuckles. It tickles and despite everything I have to smile.

That's when the beast shoots forward, I see a flash of sharp teeth and before I know it they're embedded right in my thumb. I yelp in horror and jump up, but the little animal has bitten down hard

into my thumb. I have to hit it multiple times on the head with my other hand before it finally lets go and falls to the floor, shaking itself. Terrified I look at my hand. Blood runs in a thin steady stream out of two wounds.

“You evil little shit”, I whisper. “Why bite me?”

“Frrr”, goes the animal, this time louder than before. “Frr. Frr. Frrrrrrrrr.”

There’s rustling in the ferns and the next moment more of the strange little monkey rabbits scurry towards me; three, four, half a dozen – oh what, a whole dozen.

And then they start to attack.

One of the animals jumps onto my leg and grabs hold of my thigh. One manages to get higher, gets its mouth caught up in the material of my top and pulls it down. The third animal gets me on the arm, I throw it off and its sharp claws leave scratches on my skin. They’re so quick. And there are more and more of them! They hunt in packs, these vicious little beasts – and they’ve chosen me as their prey!

I flail around and run. After a few hundred metres red-orange glowing ferns block my way. I instinctively avoid touching them, swerve and have to fight through thorny undergrowth. The little animals are chasing me and as soon as the vegetation slows me down, they jump at me and grab at my legs. I hit them, tearing them off my trousers like vicious living velcro and throw them off me.

“This is not real! This – is – not – real!”, I pant. What a waste of breath! I can see it’s real. But the only way to not lose my mind is to cling to my sense of reality. “Not! Real!”

The thorny bushes I’m fighting through with my bear hands now reach up to my waist. My legs are getting tangled in the intertwined plants, more and more animals catch up with me and attack

me. My strength wanes, my heart is pounding so hard in my chest that there is hardly room for my lungs to take in air. I have to get out of here.

There are more and more killer rabbits, I can see them everywhere, in every direction, and they are still calling more of their fellow hunters with their “Frr, frrr!”.

To the left the undergrowth is getting thinner. I fight my way through, a little beast bites down on my calf, but I just keep running, grit my teeth and gulp for air. My legs are burning from the wounds as if I’m running through fire. I trample over ivy and through ferns punching at the creatures with my fists. I have no puff left to scream and every breath hurts my throat as if it has been rubbed raw. By now I’m stumbling more than running.

In the meantime there must be around a hundred killer bunnies on my tail. They’ll hound me to death and eat the flesh from my bones if I don’t immediately...

A wide greyish tree trunk appears in front of me. Branches as thick as arms wrap around it like ropes. I grab hold of them and climb up them – and desperately hope that the beasts don’t follow me. The branches feel strange. Rough on the outside, but squishy on the inside. My feet slip a few times, but I still have enough strength to hold on. Bit by bit I climb higher, brushing past thick smooth leaves and branches that look like bare bones. What a hideous tree. But it is saving my life, because – I’d hardly dared to hope – the beasts are staying on the forest floor snarling at me with their revolting “Frr, frrr”.

Three metres up I sit in the fork of a branch and catch my breath. Absurdly I’m reminded of Mum, who was always scared when I climbed trees as a child. “You will fall and break something!”, she used to say. And now the years of practice have saved my life. The beasts will disappear at some point and then...

My stomach tightens not knowing what I should do *next*. I look at the wounds on my legs, hips and hands. My jeans are covered in multiple holes and rips, and soaked in blood. The bites aren't deep, but there are lots of them, they're burning hellishly and every scratch has the potential to become badly infected.

Suddenly the beasts go completely quiet, stare in the same direction without making a sound and then disappear into the forest as if in response to a secret signal. Within seconds there are no more to be seen.

What drove them away?

I squint and try to make something out in the undergrowth. And then my heart nearly stops. A few metres away there's a shadow lurking behind a tree trunk. A very big shadow.

It's suddenly silent in the forest; a deeper silence than can be right in any forest. And I have the uncanny feeling that the thing I've seen there is more dangerous than a pack of blood-thirsty killer bunnies.

Suddenly I feel something on my shoulder. I scream out, flail about and almost fall out of the tree. It was only a branch. Damn it, I'm just seeing things. Now that the adrenalin is wearing off the muscles in my arm are trembling and my legs are heavy. Painstakingly I climb further up the trunk as far away as I can from the shadow down below. But just as I look up to find somewhere to safely hold onto, out of the corner of my eye I see it come closer. When I turn around it's disappeared.

Out of breath I reach for one of the white branches that look like bones, and as it comes loose and I'm suddenly holding it in my hand I realise I've made a mistake.

These branches don't look like bones.

They *are* bones.

Something moves again down below and I hear footsteps in the leaves.

I just need to get out of here, I have to climb higher, but my foot is stuck between the leaves. No, it's not stuck. The leaves...are squeezing it. I'm anxiously trying to free my foot when I see something move right next to me. My head jerks around – and I can't believe my eyes.

A pair of overgrown branches are getting closer to my shoulder.

They are getting closer to my shoulder?

This tree...is moving.

Already its thick leaves are resting on me like big hands. I pull at the branch, really having to scratch the green from my skin because the leaves are sticking to it. Thin, but tough branches reach for my wrist and elbow pressing my arm hard against my chest, whilst I desperately – and unsuccessfully – try to free myself. The end of another branch encircles my hand, squeezing my fingers together. A sticky liquid is oozing from the fleshy innards of the leaves, burning my skin.

This tree is a god-damned flesh-eating plant!

Screams stick in my throat. I try again to break loose and get my arms free, but the tree is unbelievably strong, the branches and leaves are everywhere. It will hold me tight and sooner or later only bones will remain of me.

Below, in front of the tree, the shadow steps out from its cover and stares up at me. It's a human form, I can just make out the outline of broad shoulders and a hood over the head.

It's Death himself standing there.

Panic boils up in me. I'm just whimpering, my attempts to free myself have become pointless wriggling. It must be a dream. "Wake up!" I want to scream at myself, but I just wheeze. "Wake up, wake up, it's only a dream, just a dream!"

“It’s not.” The voice is enigmatic. It’s a man standing down there watching. “It’s not a dream.”

“Help”, I beg him. “Please. Please help me.”

But he just calmly gazes up at me. As more and more branches grab me and take me in the firm grip of their sticky leaves. I can see bare bones between the branches: the skull of a deer and something that can only be the spine of a large animal – maybe a horse.

Dying here would mean leaving Vicky and Mum alone. And there is no question of that!

I take a deep breath and concentrate like in a Kendō fight, looking for a focus. Take my opponent seriously and decide to beat him. Once more I gather all of my remaining strength and quickly jerk my arm as hard as I can to get it free. Again and again and again. To start with it seems hopeless, but I silently promise the damned tree not to give up before I’m either free or dead. And suddenly my left arm loosens from the chokehold. The leaves grip immediately again, but in doing so the branches and one of the animal bones hanging on them ends up within reaching distance. It breaks off when I pull on it with all my might. Now I have a weapon – a thin, porous weapon, not even as long as a bread knife, but with a pointed end. Shaking I ram it into all of the leaves I can reach. With every stab the tree yields and I can loosen myself from its clutch and climb a bit higher. Fresh, unscathed leaves are already reaching out for me from below. The ones coming from above are smaller, their leaves narrower, but even they reach out hungrily towards me. I estimate the distance from the ground. It must be five metres. Even if I roll skilfully, I could break every bone in my body.

I can’t fight anymore. My skin isn’t burning anymore, it is gradually becoming numb. Black dots dance in front of my eyes forming streaks. Maybe the tree has poisoned me. I have to get out of here – better to jump before I fall.

“Wait”, calls Death. As if through a black mist I see that he’s still looking up at me, but now he’s holding a knife in his hand. He’s bending down and touching a tree root that’s sticking out of the

ground with his finger tips. Then he forcefully thrusts the knife in – it sinks into the wood to the hilt. Then the branches suddenly wilt, all the leaves hang down limply and some of them even fall to the floor and burst like overripe fruits.

I only dare climb down slowly. By now I'm shaking like a leaf and can hardly hold on. I jump the last two metres because I don't have the strength to climb anymore.

And I practically fall into the guy's arms. Reflexively I want to grab his jacket to hold on, but with a sharp intake of breath he steps back and I flop like a sack of potatoes onto my hands and knees.

My head is buzzing, my whole body is shaking and I'm getting more and more black dots in front of my eyes. With great effort I manage to lift my head.

The guy is standing over me tall and threatening, and I want nothing more than to get as far away from him as possible. I struggle to my feet, but even standing up he's almost a head taller than me. Under the hood I can't make out much more than an angular, stubbly chin. He doesn't look like Death anymore – but unfortunately not much less dangerous. Although I can't see his eyes, I can sense them on me and feel naked in my partially shredded vest top.

"You aren't from here", says the guy and crosses his arms over his chest as if I've broken some kind of rule I had no idea about.

"No. Is the tree...dead?" I desperately hope so and try to get my breathing under control – in vain.

He nods. "Sadly."

"Why didn't you help me sooner?" I screech.

He tips his head gently to one side and without being able to see it I can hear the patronising smirk in his voice. "I was curious to see if you'd make it."