

Princeweaver

Elian J Morgan was born amidst the flat farmlands of the Netherlands, but spent substantial time in their father's familial homeland of rugged Wales. They studied bones, folklore, history, and death at universities around the world, and followed their love of mountains to Japan, where they worked as an English Language teacher. They now live by the sea with their partner and dog, writing queer SFF with a focus on language and identity.

PRINCEWEAVER

ELIAN J MORGAN



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*To my parents,
Thank you for roots and wings,
and all the little things.*

Author's Note

The following is a work of fantasy fiction, but draws upon Welsh history as a backdrop. Wales, or Cymru, still suffers from the fallout of multiple English conquests and the attempted quashing of the Welsh language, Cymraeg. Even so, the world of *Princeweaver* is one of hope and love, and will always be queer-normative. I hope readers will come to find a home here, as I have.

As the author, I urge you to read widely and engage with the stories and works championed by marginalised authors, and BIPOC authors especially.

Flexible pronunciation notes, for words inspired by Cymraeg (Welsh):

Please roll your 'r' softly if able.

'C' words should be hard like the 'k' in kettle, 'Cy' often sounds like 'kuh', whilst a 'y' later in a word is often like 'ih' or 'ee'. For example *Celyn* is generally pronounced KEL-in.

Meilyr is generally pronounced MAY-lir.

Osian is generally pronounced OSH-an, OH-shan, or OSH-n.

There is a more extensive guide on the author's website, along with a full list of content warnings. Have fun, and most importantly, happy reading!

THE DENELANDS



BY ORDER OF HIS MAJESTY KING UHTRIC
ARDEN-DRACA

*Gods-sworn sovereign and ruler of Khaim and the Isles of Mhrydain,
His Holy Majesty, Gods-blessed descendant of the
Saviour King Adair*

*The wickedness of sorcery must come to an end.
The blood of the Sundering shall be bled clean from our shores.
The dark magics of the so-called princes of the Denelands are hereby
forbidden, on pain of death.*

*If you suspect sorcery, alert the crownsword at once.
Peace will reign.*

Royal decree across the Isles of Mhrydain, Year 613 A.S.



Khaim, Year 713 A.S.

The Council fell deathly silent as the prince entered, purposefully late.

Murmurs spread as he strode down the central aisle, boots echoing on the stone. Past rows of filled benches, through jagged coloured light streaming from high stained-glass windows, depicting stylised renditions of Khaimlic *order* and *honour*. To his vacant seat atop the dais at the end of the chamber.

All eyes on him, he sat, folding one long leg smoothly over the other. ‘Please, do not stop on my account.’

The Speaker cleared their throat and continued. ‘Unless there are any other motions—’

‘If I may.’

The Speaker acknowledged the prince with a reverent bow.

‘I would motion that the Court of the Council in the Dominion and Principality of the Denelands, and the Marches of the Same, henceforth meets in session in Eascild, where I intend to move my holdings.’

There was stunned silence in the wake of the prince's words.

'Majesty,' one of the four Justices began, 'Eascild... is in the Denelands.'

'In Cyngalon, yes.'

The name evoked wincings, even grimaces. Some intakes of breath.

Cyngalon. The lands across the Splintered Sea now more commonly known as the Denelands, annexed to Khaim at the end of a long and bloody conquest that had lasted generations. The lands whose laws the Council currently presided over.

'Majesty, certainly it is impractical to move the Council in its entirety? Many have their holdings here in Khaim. It would be a monumental undertaking.'

'Your concern is noted. As stated, I will be moving my holdings to Eascild forthwith. Those Justices who are unable or unwilling to resettle have the option to nominate myself or another representative to speak for them, until such time as they can make the journey.'

The Justice scoffed and searched their peers for mirrored incredulity. Found none.

It unfurled before all four of them, then. The subterfuge. The trap.

Everyone else already knew what was happening, only they did not.

'Majesty,' another tried, 'the issues this Council discusses are very much Khaimlic.'

'Yes, but Khaimlic common law already exists in Cyngalon, ergo a relocation will not affect the cases brought before it or the writ discussed.'

'The Council has stood in Khaim since its inception. Since the time of your grandfather, His Majesty King Aldrich.'

The prince smiled slightly. 'I am well aware. But I am not my grandfather, and to live in the past is to shun progress. Let us put it to a vote, if we may, Lord Speaker.'

'Certainly. All those in favour.'

More than half of the king-appointed officials' hands rose swiftly into the air. The other half joined them more slowly, as did the bishops'.

Only the four Justices representing the Marcher Lords did not raise their hands.

'It is settled, then,' the Speaker declared. 'Henceforth, the Court of the Council in the Dominion and Principality of the Denelands, and the Marches of the Same, shall convene in Eascild, under His Majesty

Prince Osian Arden-Draca's stewardship. Are there any further motions to be presented to today's session?'

There were not.

The Council adjourned, and the four Justices muttered furiously to each other. No doubt seething over the prince's push for power. The underhandedness of the Crown against its own Marcher Lords, who had shielded Khaim from the wilds and wickedness of the Denelands since the conquest itself.

The prince watched them as he turned the ring on his thumb idly with the fingers of the same hand: a tell as much as a habit.

Let them say what they wished. Today, both he and the king had got what they wanted.

And so their song began, as most things do,
with blood
and with flowers.

The Book of Heart

ONE

Cyngalon, Year 713 A.S.

Meilyr was the reason his own family was dead.

He carried that truth with him, buried deep in his chest like an arrowhead: long scarred over but never removed. Bringing him pain even when he least expected it.

Perhaps one day it would kill him as well. Perhaps it should.

The sharp, earthy scent of golden henbane still sought to take him back to that night. It had been the last thing his mother had helped him crush with their worn mortar and pestle. Nearly twenty years later, and his connection to the plant still made him feel as though he was right there.

But no matter how keenly his blood could make him relive it, he could not change the past. He could only live, as they had made him swear to do.

‘Come on,’ Celyn said, returning him to the present. ‘You can finish that later.’

Meilyr tipped the last of the ground gold-flecked dust into its little jar with practised precision, and genuine amusement at his bond-brother's huffing. 'I have not seen you so eager to be off to the faire since we were children. Kind of adorable.'

Celyn flushed. 'Hardly. Now hurry up, or I'll leave without you.'

He was definitely on his way to meet a girl. Many things made Celyn impatient, but few things would make him eager to venture further into town, today of all days. 'All right,' Meilyr said, hiding his smile, 'almost done.'

He sealed and tucked the jar inside the cloth-wrapped bundle for the Bevans, enough for five days' worth of tonics for Wade Bevan's rheumatism. Then he scrubbed the last of the sparkling powder from his hands, the scent evoking the faintest image of another, smaller kitchen. His mother's bubbling laughter. The pop of the fireplace.

Swallowing the visual, he hung up his worn apron and tugged off the kerchief that kept his long dark hair from his face. He refastened it into a messy tail as he checked the flames in the burners were extinguished and all the glasses quite cool, the other jars were sealed, and the windows were latched. Then he refreshed the saucer of cream before the hearth.

'If anyone sees that...' Celyn began.

'We pretend we have a cat, as always.' Most homes no longer catered to the bwbachod, but Meilyr was eternally thankful for how clean the smallest of the otherfolk helped keep the apothecary.

'You said you were done,' Celyn said, holding Meilyr's cloak by the door.

'*Almost* done,' Meilyr corrected fondly. 'I know impatience is your virtue, calon bach.'

Celyn grimaced. 'Don't call me that, I'm not a child anymore.'

The reproach caught Meilyr off guard, though his bond-brother's heart was not in it. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I know—'

'No—' Celyn sighed. 'No, it's just... today.' He gestured tightly. 'My mind was elsewhere. Sorry.'

Meilyr picked up the Bevans' bundle, went to him and squeezed his arm. 'Nothing to forgive. Come on.' He stepped into his cloak and took Celyn's hat from its hook, having to go onto his toes to deposit it firmly on his brother's head. 'Let us not keep your latest conquest waiting.'

Celyn blushed almost the same shade as the berries of his namesake. ‘That’s not—’

Meilyr opened the door of the apothecary with its habitual creak and the clattering jingle of its bell, and the wave of noise took further complaints away. It was still early, but even their little side street teemed with people heading deeper into town. The feeling of the amassing crowd set his skin buzzing, and he exhaled as Celyn stepped past him.

‘Are you all right?’

‘I will be.’ He donned his own cap, locked up the shop and took Celyn’s arm as they moved off the doorstep onto the bustling cobbles. ‘As long as you behave.’

Celyn shot him a petulant look, but nodded.

The main thoroughfare beyond the apothecary’s street was set to burst. Townsfolk swarmed the countless carts and stalls heaped with produce, the tang of meats and sweets and all things in between thick amidst the cloy of human and animal bodies. Voices clamoured. Colours streamed, blanching always into bright and blinding white. So very much white.

Across nearly every inch of wall and sky, the royal banners had been strung, layering the sounds of humanity with a papery susurrations: a rustling like the wings of a thousand paper crows picking at the land of Cyngalon’s still-breathing body.

White banners, for the White Dragon of Khaim.

Meilyr kept his head down. They would be fine.

‘Don’t they have any pride?’ Celyn hissed, like a curse.

‘You know how it is. They have no choice, especially today.’

Celyn said nothing, but his bitterness plucked at the back of Meilyr’s eyes.

He understood Celyn’s rage. It was just... dangerous, to glance at his own feelings, lest they drag him off and rip him to pieces.

Lest they make history repeat itself.

No, not looking at those emotions was easier. Safer. It had worked well enough all these years: keep his head down, remember there was no other way. The complete occupation of Cyngalon was all they had ever known – all their parents and grandparents had known.

The age of princes and dragons was long dead. That world existed only in forbidden stories, clung to in the dark like the final embers of a fading hearth.

There was nothing Meilyr could do, except keep small. Keep quiet. 'Meilyr! Celyn!'

Heulwen, ink-black braid swaying down her back, pushed through the crowd towards them. It was rare to see her out of her work apron, and several heads turned after her.

Some of Meilyr's tension eased. 'Heulwen! I thought we would only see you later?'

'Nonsense, I came to save you.' She took his arm, giving Celyn a look. 'Some people are likely to be distracted today. Briallen and Cadi are looking for you, Celyn.'

'I—' Celyn began defensively.

'Briallen *and* Cadi?' Meilyr said. 'Celyn.'

'I thought we, well, Cadi wanted—'

'I love it when we get to tease him even on my day off.' Heulwen set off smartly, escorting Meilyr. 'Thank you, by the way. I know how much you hate to close the shop.'

'You deserve the day,' he said. 'And everyone is seen to once I drop this off. Besides, Celyn told me if I stay stuck inside like a – what was it? A spinster?'

'I didn't mean—' Celyn started.

'*Make way!*'

The shout came less than a heartbeat before Heulwen hauled Meilyr to one side. Two horses thundered past, inches away, their riders clad in pristine whites.

Khaimlic crownsworn.

'Watch yourselves!' Celyn cried. Thank the gods they did not hear.

'Are you all right?' Heulwen asked Meilyr.

'I'm fine,' he lied, pulling the brim of his hat lower.

He had known there would be crownsworn everywhere. There would be more than ever, now, but it was fine. There was no way anyone could know just from looking at him, so long as he did not draw attention to himself.

Beside his boot, a small shoot of bittercress that clung to life between the cobbles curled minutely towards him.

He stepped away.

'I know there's royalty about,' Heulwen grumbled, steering him firmly through the thoroughfare, 'but they could kill someone.'

Celyn glared after the riders. 'I don't think they care.'

‘Celyn,’ Meilyr warned.

His brother set his jaw, but let it go. They were in public, and there were crownsworn around; he could at least be quieter about his abject hatred of those in power.

‘Come on,’ Heulwen said. ‘Let’s find the girls, and something to eat.’

They met Briallen and Cadi near the main square, where Heulwen detoured with Meilyr to the Bevans’ lodging down a side street. Sioned was still bedridden, and Wade did not have the strength to come to the shop to collect his medicine. The old man’s eyes welled as he greeted them, and Meilyr was very thankful he had tucked some bread, leeks and carrots into the bundle.

As they left, Wade Bevan touched his hand, and Meilyr *felt* his aching bones so sharply he almost swayed – a side effect of their woven connection, and his already-heightened nerves.

He would add more golden henbane next time. To live in Wade Bevan’s body must be agony.

They rejoined the others in the square, finding food from the stalls amassed beneath tents and awnings, though Meilyr declined, feigning a large breakfast. It was much busier here; drums and strings offset the talking and the hawking, discordant with the sharp sound of children laughing at a puppet show.

Once, the square had been a green, and on this day would have streamed with skirts of daffodil yellow and the sound of hundreds of tiny bells. Now, it centred around the town’s one and only Khaimlic church: a near-luminous monstrosity of pale stone, imported from across the Splintered Sea. The intricately carved wings of the pallid dragon looming from the building’s roof cast sharp shadows over the damp cobbles.

White petals were being tossed from the church’s upper windows, catching the wind and scattering like snow. Congealing in corners of wet and dirt.

Meilyr had never set foot inside the church, and had no mind to. There was a steady stream of people moving about the doors, many clutching the white pennants given out freely for this, a day of great Khaimlic celebration. A celebration that would go on for the next six months, probably longer.

Though Meilyr wondered if anyone else in the bustle caught glimpses and sounds of the long-gone past, he knew not everyone felt

the keen sting of the occupation. The walled town of Eascild, once known as *Caer Tarian*, was home to a constantly increasing *Khaimfolc* populace, and some of the *Cyngaleg* locals found it easier to coexist, at least on the surface. *Khaim* prized usefulness above all else, and those able to meet demand had an easier life. Upward mobility was still hardest for those born into the *Cyngaleg* peasantry, but with the apothecary, *Meilyr* and *Celyn* were lucky. Certainly, far luckier than some.

Still, assimilation had always been easier for those not directly impacted by the *hunts*.

Meilyr grimaced when he thought no one would notice, trying to ease the onset of a headache. It was warm for early spring, and the breeze blew from the east. From *Khaim*. It compounded the smell and the clamour.

More crownsworn surveyed the square in well-armed pairs.

Even in this sea of people, he felt exposed: a spindle of bright ragwort in an otherwise perfectly tended field.

‘Things were bad enough, now we’ve got royalty moving in. And what kind of *Khaimlic* prince has a *Cyngaleg* name?’ *Celyn* scoffed. ‘They’re mocking us, titling him *Prince of Cyngalon*, as though they didn’t kill all our—’

‘*Celyn*.’ Pain pricked behind *Meilyr*’s eye. ‘Not so loud, please.’

Celyn huffed. He had been showing off for the girls. ‘No one heard. Besides, I’m not the first to say it.’

He certainly was not, but that did not soften the treason.

Luckily, the din of other voices seemed enough. No crownsworn parted the waves to shove them to the ground, on this day celebrating the beginning of the coronation of said prince and the establishment of his court. *Meilyr*’s heart thrummed regardless; he placed his hand there by habit, to the soothing, secret press of metal beneath his clothes.

It had been a while since he had been amongst so many people. He was out of practice dulling the noise his weaver blood made him so sensitive to.

‘Everyone’s heading out!’ *Cadi* pointed to the head of the square. ‘Shall we? I want to see the sword tourney.’

Briallen agreed eagerly, tugging *Celyn*’s arm.

The tide of the crowd slipped around *Meilyr*’s ankles. ‘I think—’

‘Any excuse to watch some *Khaimfolc* smash each other’s faces in.’ *Celyn* turned his grin to *Meilyr*. ‘Come on, just for a bell or two.’

The current wrapped around Meilyr's shins, carrying him into the throng.

The crownsword called over the mess, moving to prevent chaos. One swept their eyes through the crowd and looked directly at him.

Meilyr stopped mid-stream and dropped his eyes, squeezed Heulwen's arm and forced a smile. 'I will find you all shortly. I need a little air.'

'Meilyr?'

'I'm fine.' His pulse pressed against the roof of his mouth, and he pulled away. 'Go with Celyn, I'll just be a moment.'

'Meilyr?' Celyn's voice.

Meilyr waded through the crowd, out into a now-deserted side street that jutted downhill. He stumbled, the wave of sound and pressure still looming behind, heavy and loud.

He plunged into the sunlight of the wide street beyond and sucked in air. It was blissfully empty, everyone heading for the tournament.

Celyn grabbed his arm. 'What happened?'

The last thing Meilyr wanted was to ruin his day. 'I'm all right,' he insisted. 'Go back, I will join you soon.'

'You're not all right.' Celyn pulled him around to face him. 'Is it happening again?'

'Please, go back to the others, I will—'

There was a crash. Motion.

Down the street, someone had been hauled out of the smithy and shoved against the wall. Their assailant, cloaked and hooded, struck them hard in the stomach and head repeatedly.

Meilyr and Celyn moved together.

'Hoi!' Celyn shouted, veering in front of Meilyr, but neither of them slowed.

That was Sawel, against the wall. The blacksmith.

'What are you doing!' Celyn barked. 'Stop!'

He grabbed the strongly built attacker and hauled them off. Meilyr stepped in to steady Sawel: barely conscious, mouth split, bleeding at the temple.

The assailant threw Celyn off with surprising force and skill.

'This has nothing to do with you *people*.'

Meilyr put himself between the two of them. 'Why are you doing this?'

But they had miscalculated. Beneath the plain cloak lay the gleaming whites of a member of the crownsword. The attacker – sworn to Khaim and its laws – grabbed Meilyr, and everything happened appallingly quickly.

The air thudded out of his chest as he fell hard across the cobbles, losing his hat. Celyn's shout, raw. A blurred struggle.

Through splitting stars of pain, above a rumble of thunder, Meilyr looked.

A flash. The glint of metal. The knife scored Celyn's shoulder as he blocked it, and there was another heart-rending struggle.

Meilyr shoved himself to his feet. '*Celyn!*'

A lurch, and *that* slick, awful sound. Everything went very still.

Meilyr's insides blanched cold as the taste of iron bloomed on his tongue.

Celyn stepped back, hands covered in blood.

No—

Meilyr grabbed him, pulse pitched to a gale, already reaching with his senses. Searching for the wound, the terrible splutter of *wrongness*. Finding nothing.

The crownsword stumbled, their own knife embedded in their chest, seeping red.

The growling of thunder was not from the sky. A column of white-clad riders descended upon the street.

The crownsword slumped and went down, curled inwards like a wilting flower.

Horses clattered to a halt, forms dismounted.

The empty echo as the life left the crownsword's body winded Meilyr again, throwing him back to a place of burning houses, suffocating smoke and blood.

One of the soldiers stood over the dead man. 'That's...' They knelt, confirming. 'That's Bede. *Gods.*' They rose, a hollow, metallic rush as they drew their sword and faced Celyn. 'You've killed a crownsword.'

The sound of more steel. Someone grabbed Celyn, another Meilyr, pulling them apart.

'No! It was an accident,' Celyn tried.

'Silence!'

'*Hold.*'

The lead rider did not raise his voice. He had no need to.

He might have been beautiful, the way a wolf might be beautiful even as it hunts you. But in his radiant presence there was only terror. Recognition. He was golden hair and flowing white cloth, death made brilliant flesh, carved from legend atop his white horse.

Meilyr's heart crumpled. The panic of a cornered rabbit – a cornered child, the woods snaring around him.

No, please. Anyone but *him*.

The soon-to-be-crowned Prince of Cyngalon steadied his horse, voice ringing through the stillness. 'What happened here?'

'That's Bede.' One of the crownsword gestured. 'Works with my cousin. Worked.' They looked at Celyn, emanating hostility. 'And that's a 'sword knife sticking out of his chest.'

Meilyr needed to stop this, needed to speak. But he was a little boy again, alone in the forest. Khaim was coming. Coming to kill him as well.

'It was an accident,' Celyn bit. 'That sod hit my brother, drew his steel, so I defended.'

'You expect us to believe he attacked you?' Another voice. 'Killing a crownsword is a capital offence; you'll lose your head for this.'

'No!' Meilyr heaved himself back to the present with the words, the fear.

Celyn could not die. He could not watch him die.

He tore free from the crownsword's grasp and threw himself in front of the prince's horse. 'Your Majesty, please, it was an accident.'

The prince looked as though something had physically struck him.

'Please,' Meilyr said, as arms grabbed him from behind. 'He is telling the truth, they attacked the blacksmith!'

'Hold.'

All of the crownsword stopped.

'Let him go.'

Meilyr was let go.

'What happened?'

His blood pounded, thick in his throat. 'Majesty, it was truly an accident. My brother was trying to protect Sawel, the blacksmith – trying to protect me. Your crownsword drew the knife.' He glanced at Celyn.

Scarred-over agony strained his chest.

Celyn had killed a crownsword. They *would* kill him.

Faced with that great, merciless hunger – faced with the beast of Khaim, bearing down upon his family – he knew whose neck he would rather turn towards their teeth.

He would never again watch, useless, unable to save someone he loved.

His gaze settled on the prince. ‘It was my fault, I got between them.’ A blatant lie, but it would only be Celyn’s word against his. ‘If the law decrees someone be punished, take me in my brother’s stead.’

‘Meilyr!’

Meilyr dropped to one knee, bowing with every ounce of supplication he could. ‘Please, Your Majesty. It was my wrong. My life, I will readily forfeit in return for his.’

‘No!’ Celyn struggled fiercely but could do no more.

A beat of silence.

The prince dismounted. A gust hissed through the street, stirring stray petals, agitating hundreds of standards and shifting his heavy white cloak. He drew closer, measuredly.

Meilyr stared at a crack in the dirtied cobbles, where finely polished boots stopped.

Please, gods, he thought. Let Celyn live. Let this be enough.

He could not lose anyone else.

Prince Osian touched Meilyr’s chin and gently lifted his head, a touch that drew him all the way back to his feet. The prince’s eyes were devastatingly blue, brimming with disbelief.

‘There is no need for that. I... have been searching for you everywhere.’

The world tilted off its axis.

The prince took a moment to search for something in his gaze. Seemingly unable to find it, he leaned in as though to kiss Meilyr’s cheek. A brush of warmth beside his ear, and words barely more than a whisper. ‘Follow my lead. If you do, I swear no harm will come to him.’

What...?

The prince pulled back, released Meilyr’s chin and looked to his retinue. ‘All is in hand. Siddel, have the blacksmith seen to. Garrick, Macsen, cover and move the body. Pedr, Blythe’ – he called the two closer in an aside and nodded towards Celyn – ‘see him taken to the rooms in the southern wing, under guard. Speak of this to no one.’

The crownsword moved, after only a flicker of hesitation.

Crownsblood, Meilyr remembered sharply, when they were sworn directly to royalty. Far higher-ranking than the crownsword. Crownsblood *knights*.

Prince Osian's knights, from the dark blue accentuating their otherwise pale uniforms.

What in the name of the gods was happening?

'Meilyr!' Celyn struggled, eyes wide in askance and fury. 'Let us go!'

The prince turned, cloak sweeping behind him, and swung into the saddle with artful ease, offering Meilyr his hand. 'We will return to the castle.'

Meilyr's flesh screamed for him to run. The prince had pretended to know him, but why? He had certainly never met a prince of Khaim.

But the crownsblood pulled Celyn towards their horses, away from the body of the crownsword being covered and hauled aside.

Follow my lead.

And there was the prince's hand – his bare hand, and his white sleeve with golden embroidery. Waiting.

It was not a choice at all. Meilyr had offered his life, and if this was how the prince wished to take it, so be it. He stepped forward and took his hand, letting Prince Osian pull him up behind him, the warmth of his back sudden as a hearth in the cold.

'Meilyr!'

Meilyr met Celyn's defiant gaze. The prince slowed, allowing the exchange.

'Celyn, do as you are told. For the family.'

Celyn's expression fell.

But he was alive. Meilyr turned away as they began the climb to the castle. He should be dead – had expected to die there on the stones at the prince's feet.

He would have, gladly, for Celyn.

Would he soon regret it had not ended so cleanly?