

THE BLOOD MAGE CHRONICLES BOOK 1

ANNALS OF BRIGHTSHIRE



JAMIE WILSON

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ANAIS OF BRIGHTSHIRE
Book 1 of the Blood Mage Chronicles

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In dedication to
Madalyn Reese Duarte

CHAPTER 1

THIS WAS MY fifth trip to Brightshire with my Uncle Gil, and with each return trip home, my mother became more distressed that I would never be accepted into the Great House as a handmaiden. My mother had been a handmaiden before she married my father and thought she was doing me a great service by insisting I follow in her footsteps. At the age of eleven, I was no longer a child, and my mother had made it quite clear that I was expected to find work outside of our home. My feelings on the matter were mixed. I wished to please my mother, but I didn't think it was fair that I had to abandon my life to do so.

"You alright back there, girlie?" Gil called from the front of the cart, where he led the mules along the bumpy road. "That was a nasty bit of wind."

I lowered the blanket from my face. "Mm, I'm okay." I narrowed my eyes and imagined him as a walrus, which made me giggle. Gil had grown a long mustache that ended in a wide curl on each end. He was much larger than my father and brothers, who were as skinny as weeds and taut with muscles earned from the harsh life of fishermen. Gil's grin stretched wide from ear to ear. Gil was always bursting with city gossip or a cheerful song. My mother often alleged that it was Gil's ever-flowing supply of ale that caused him to find such pleasure in life. Gil was unlike my father in other ways too. He often suggested odd schemes to Dah, including a plan to dry fish in foreign spices. And once he told us a story of an inventor from a shire west of the Barrier Mountains who had built a box that would keep food cold indefinitely. Dah always scoffed at these plans, preferring to deal exclusively with smoking or boiling. Mah and Dah had no desire to foray into the unknown, whereas Gil was a dreamer.

Dawn emerged on the eastern horizon, and I heard the blurred sounds of carts, horses, mules, and voices - city noises.

Gil turned back and eyed me. "We're almost to town. Today will be mighty busy. A lot of business to be had." Gil whistled a tune as he led the mules around a sharp right turn.

I peeked out of my blanket again and caught the smells of the market wafting toward me. Thick odors of people and animals blurred with the sweet and salty

aromas of market food. Brightshire Bazaar stalls contained every imaginable food stock: the ripest plum-berries from north of Barriershire, the sweetest cream from the Moore Dairy, the moistest lamb from Blumstead Farms, the finest vintages of Brightshire wines, and - of course - the freshest fish to be had from the Bright River. My eyes glazed with excitement as the town clarified.

A large brick archway signified our entrance into the city, and as we passed through, the dirt path transitioned into a cobbled stone. Two men, dressed in red jackets with gold plated buttons and crisp black pants sporting thin curved swords, nodded to Gil after he showed them his trader's papers. A man dressed in a crimson robe spoke to Gil for a few minutes and looked over our cargo. He was a sniffer. Gil had told me on our first trip that the man in the robe was sniffing for artifacts holding enchantments. Because magic was prohibited, if we were caught carrying contraband, we would likely be executed. Gil had promised that it was nothing to worry about since there was no magic left in the world, and the sniffers were all frauds.

We worked our way from the city entrance toward the bazaar. A smile crept to my face. I felt like a small cog in the machine of commerce whenever we visited, and I appreciated that feeling of inclusion. I liked to watch large sums of coin change hands. I sighed. It must be wonderful to have money. The surge of adrenaline coursing through my veins was hampered by the knowledge that when the stalls closed, Gil would bring me to the Great House again. Would they take me this time? I half hoped so. I didn't want to see my mother's face fall in disappointment once again, but the notion also scared me. I would be a stranger here. I would be alone.

Gil pulled the mules to a stop next to a muddy square occupied by an empty wooden stall. Ambitious merchants had already filled the other stalls in the row with their goods, and I knew Gil would soon transform our space into the greatest fish stall in the entire Brightshire Bazaar. I dropped my blanket and hopped off the cart, landing softly on the cobbled stone floor. Gil took longer to pull his hefty frame to the ground. By the time he was off the wagon, I was standing in front of him with outstretched hands.

"Here you go, girlie." He dropped four copper coins into my small hands. "Sign us up." I knew that Gil trusted me, and I felt full of pride as I took off in a fast tripping gait towards the Bazaar master. The Bazaar master's name was Harry and the name fit, for he was covered from head to toe with coarse brown hair. Harry was also a dwarf, the only dwarf I had ever met. Gil had lectured me sharply that I shouldn't stare or comment. I hesitated before I approached him.

"You again, huh?" Harry asked as I reached the front of the line.

"Yeah, I'm with Gil. We took stall nine on the main strip. It'll be a fish stall."

Harry smiled. "That'll be just fine - four coppers please - and you need to sign the registry." I dropped the coins into his hand. Using a quill still felt daunting as I had only learned how to sign my name five weeks ago when Gil had taken me to Brightshire for the first time. My cheeks flushed hot and pink at the sight of my poorly formed letters.

By the time I returned to our stall, Gil had everything organized. The biggest fish hung from broad iron hooks on the highest wooden plank, and assorted fish were artfully arranged in wooden bins. The majority of the fish stayed tightly wrapped to avoid spoiling in the heat the day would bring. Gil wrote a single word in bright red paint on a large plank of wood that spanned the front of our stall. I wanted to know what the word meant, but I felt too embarrassed to ask.

Feeling anxious, I stood next to Gil while waiting for our first customer. My eyes drifted to our neighboring traders: a young man boasting dyed cloth, a wizened old woman with a huge variety of fresh spring vegetables, and a squirrely looking man selling jewelry and foreign coins. The man selling cloth tempted market goers with long scarlet scarves gently floating from his hands. I wished I could have one. I had never seen anything so bright and perfect.

Gil boomed in a deep voice that must have echoed through all of Brightshire, "Fresh fish! Get your fresh fish! Tastiest fish in all of the Seven Shires!"

Our first customer was a young woman with three children in tow. The woman bought two large catfish that Gil claimed he was giving away at the bargain price of two coppers apiece. Though, I knew that two coppers was the standard price for a large catfish. Soon our stall was flooded with local townspeople and travelers. I sold a bag of shrimp, three large crabs, and two cod all on my own as Gil helped other customers.

A tall gangly youth approached our stand. He let his long arms rest against a bin filled with shrimp. "Shyte, Gil it's good to see you."

"You too, kiddo. Where have you been?"

"Dah and I were out near the border towns for the last few weeks. The wheat crops just came in." The boy swayed back and forth as if uncomfortable standing still.

Gil frowned. "That's late for the border towns."

"Yeah well, things have been strange near the border - all sorts of delays. You see, a few of the farmer's kids disappeared. Just vanished."

"Runaways?"

"Nah. One of the farmers said it was some sort of monster. They found one of his kids tore up real bad, but still alive. And the kid told him that an - an animal, or monster," the boy shuttered, "or maybe even a fury crawled out of the darkness and grabbed him and his two brothers right out of the barn in the dead

of night.”

“What happened to the kid’s brothers?” Gil’s eyes narrowed.

The boy scratched his head. “Still gone. The border families held a service for them. I guess the farmers figure those kids ain’t never coming back.”

“They believed the kid then? His story?”

“Yeah. Guess so. There are other kids down there gone missing. Dah says we aren’t going back next season, or ever. Dah’s gonna move the family north, maybe even across the mountains to Courtshire. This might be our last market day.”

“Really?” Gil snorted. “Your Dah should know better. There’s no such thing as monsters and certainly no furies, just bad people. And there are bad people everywhere. I’ll talk to your Dah. The kid was lying or just confused.”

The boy smiled weakly. “Maybe you can talk him into staying. Mah is real upset. She doesn’t want to leave.” The boy paused, his eyes darting around nervously. “I don’t wanna leave either. There’s Mary, and if I go, I fear she’ll forget about me.”

Gil nodded. “I’ll talk to him, kiddo. I promise.”

Wordlessly, I watched this interchange play out. I didn’t like the idea of people disappearing. It made me think of the scary stories Mah would sometimes tell about monsters that would steal children in the dead of night. She also called them furies. She said that their skin was green-black and slick like a lizard. They had sharp hooked claws and a mouth so crammed full of teeth that there didn’t seem to be room for anything else. Otherwise, she said, they were shaped like men but stooped by the weight of evil deeds. She said they hadn’t been sighted in generations, but still it was always the reason she gave for us to stay inside once the sky turned dark. She would sing this awful song about them. I shuttered. I wondered if this boy’s family told the same stories. Despite my uncertainty, I took strength in Gil’s words that this too was just a story. Not real. There was something certain in his assessment. He didn’t believe in monsters. So neither would I - at least I would try not to.

After the boy left us, Gil told me he needed me to watch the stand, so that he could purchase goods for my family and our neighbors who also made their living from the Bright River and its easy access to the ocean. Gil had left me in charge for a short time on our previous trips, so I was prepared to run the stand in his absence. He had trained me in acceptable price ranges for all our goods.

While Gil was absent, Fraenkle, an elderly trader whose white curly hair masked most of the features of his face, appeared and bought two small crabs and a haddock. Fraenkle was a regular who ran a small general goods shop south of the main strip. He doffed his cap, offered me a broad smile, and wiggled his

thick white eyebrows. He must have done this to suggest that he was friendly and would, therefore, be an easy mark, but I knew he was a shrewd trader. Fraenkle bargained long and hard to get the best deal out of me.

When Gil returned, he patted me gently on the head. I could tell that he appreciated the sales I made, and I felt proud. He dropped a warm copper into my palm. "Go on now, and enjoy yourself for a bit." I beamed. This was my favorite part of the day. I maneuvered through the narrow lanes between stalls, which were teeming with country folk, a handful of wealthy squires, and even a few men in velvet suits and pluming white cravats, whom I imagined might be nobles from the Great House.

In the crowd, a boy dressed in dirty coveralls shoved me, forcing me to drop my copper. Another boy snatched it from the ground and started running off into the distance. I hissed, wishing my mother hadn't insisted I wear skirts today. Three underskirts of rough cotton billowed under my top skirt. I often wore my brothers' old trousers when at home because they were so much more comfortable, but my mother would not tolerate my careless attitude towards my appearance during my journeys to Brightshire. I sighed, hiked up my skirts, and took off in a run after the boy who had stolen my coin. I wove through the crowd, keeping him in sight. Eventually he stopped running, and I slowed my gait to match his. He stopped in front of a group of brightly dressed jugglers who were passing knives to each other through the air. I chose the moment when he was clearly distracted to jump on his back and pummel him.

"What - what're you doing? You're crazy!" The boy yelled as he tried to throw me off his back.

"I want my copper back. You stole it." I whacked him on the head as hard as I could. "Give it back!"

The crowd parted a little, and I could feel the stares of those around us. Their gazes were silent. No one interfered.

"Okay, okay. I'll give it back, if it means so much to you. Just stop hitting me," the boy cried.

I climbed off his back, hopped to the ground, and took the copper he reluctantly offered. "Thanks." I smiled quickly, stuffed the copper down a pocket in my skirts, and bowed before running away from the boy.

My nose led me to a pastry stall where I bought myself a peach tart. I found an untended wagon and climbed into it so that I could enjoy my purchase while spying on the crowd. Sweet gooeyness spilled out of the crusty edges of the tart and into my hands, and I sucked the juice from my fingers. I found myself staring at a young woman dressed in a delicate yellow gown, embroidered with a gold edging. I had often helped my mother sew clothes for our family out of

coarse homespun cloth, but I had never seen anything like the sleek and shimmery material that draped the noblewoman's slim frame. I could not help but think it must be close to heaven to wear something so fine.

I pushed back strands of limp, black hair from my eyes with sticky fingers, so that my view of the woman would not be impaired. I watched the woman advance through the crowd while deftly controlling the flow of the panels of her skirts, which flirted with the cobbled stone floor. A deep surge of envy pulsed through my veins; at that moment, I wished I could trade places with the woman. I searched out her sparkling blue eyes, and the woman looked through me as if I were invisible. I hated thinking of myself as so utterly inconsequential. The young lady's companion, an elegantly dressed young man, led her through the crowd until the two disappeared. I envied them, and a part of me hated them.

As I walked back to our stall, I passed by a puddle and stared at my rippling reflection. Even my eyes were unimpressive, a dull ashy gray. I could not look more different from the noblewoman. Knowing the certainty of my common birth and lack of beauty, I couldn't help but feel empty. I closed my eyes and let the shifting cadence of the market break my heartache. I needed to stop wishing for a life that was not mine.

Lost in reverie, I bumped headlong into a large cage on wheels that a dwarf was pulling through the street.

"Careful there, girlie," he called out. "You don't want to get too close."

I peered through the thick wooden bars, and saw a boy, maybe as old as my eldest brother. He was dressed in filthy rags and crouched in the corner. Thick metal bands were wrapped round his neck and round his wrists. His skin was thick with sweat, and his head lolled back and forth, his eyes fixed on the bottom of the cage. He looked so thin, so helpless.

I gasped. "Why is he in there?"

"He's a fury, I swear it. I bought him from some outlaws near the border towns. They captured him."

"Shyte. He's not a fury - he's just a boy. Can't you see that? You need to let him out right now. You can't keep him trapped like this."

The man laughed at me. "You don't know anything, girlie. Why don't you take a good look at him, and you tell me if he's normal? I'm going to take him to Barriershire and sell him."

I stared through the bars. "Look at me," I whispered to him. "Please look at me. What's your name?" I touched his hands, which grasped the bars so tight they had lost all of their color.

"Azriel," he croaked in a hoarse whisper. His head turned slowly, and when his eyes met mine, I jumped back in revulsion. I couldn't help it, my stomach

tightened, and I suddenly wanted to flee. It wasn't that he looked sickly or ugly. He was almost too handsome, with sharp hawkish features, which couldn't be disguised by the layers of grime covering his face. But despite his prettiness, his eyes were not right; they were too large and all black. I knew he wasn't right, wasn't human. How strange. I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply, steadying myself.

"Told you, girlie. He's a monster alright." The dwarf started to pull the cage in his original direction.

"Wait," I whispered. The dwarf didn't hear me, but in truth, I wouldn't have known what else to say to him. There was nothing I could do to free the boy - and I wasn't sure I wanted to save him.

Gil looked up at the fading sun after I returned to our stall. "Only a few more hours until the sun goes to sleep for the night. We need to get you to the Great House before nightfall." He smiled at me. "I just know they'll take you this time."

CHAPTER 2

THE GREAT HOUSE, with its black stone turrets that scraped the sky and its thick red-rimmed defensive-walls, made even Gil, who towered over me, appear insignificant. At the rear servant's entrance, Gil requested the mistress of the house, and I was reminded of my first visit when I mistook the grand lady who answered our call for Lady Seve herself. Gil had explained that the woman was Mistress Laurey, the head of housekeeping. Lady Seve didn't answer the bells rung in the servant's quarters.

Mistress Laurey appeared in a stiff black dress adorned with a long line of ivory buttons. Her dark red hair was pulled back in a severe bun, which pulled the skin of her face taut against her high cheekbones. Looking at Gil and me, she sighed deeply.

"How can I help you?"

"We wish to place my niece into your household as a handmaiden."

The woman laughed. "Rather presumptuous notions you have. I remember you now. Remind me of the girl's age."

"Eleven years." Gil removed his hat and grasped it in front of him, his knuckles whitening.

Mistress Laurey was clean, and she held her frame as straight as an arrow. In many ways, her bearing resembled that of the noble girl I had observed in the market.

"She's small." Mistress Laurey's lips tightened into a frown, her nose twitching. "I can't place her as a handmaiden now, but perhaps she will earn that position in time. We are in need of another scull." My mother had told me that most servants working in the Great House started out as scullery maids, more often called sculls, although she had the great fortune of being selected as a handmaiden upon entrance to the Great House. Sculls had the unfortunate privilege of performing all of the dirty undignified chores disliked by the apprentices or masters in a given discipline, or the handmaidens and valets who served a single mistress or master.

Mistress Laurey was silent for a moment, before addressing me. "You will

work for Mallory, the head kitchen maid. It's a hard life, and it will be three years before you have an opportunity to advance your status here. If you leave your position, we'll not take you back. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," I whispered.

"What is your name?"

"Anais, ma'am."

"Well, Anais," Mistress Laurey said with a tight smile. "Welcome to the service of Lord and Lady Seve. You are very fortunate."

Mistress Laurey turned back to Gil. "Her entrance fee is two silvers."

Gil offered the coins with no protest, and then grinned at me before taking his leave. I felt cold. Without him, I was alone. I gulped and hoped I would at least be able to see him from time to time in the market. I rocked back and forth on my heels steadying my nervous stomach.

As Mistress Laurey led me through a long hall lit with floating candles, I couldn't help but wonder if a real mage lived in the Great House. I had never seen magic before. The truth was that I knew there weren't any mages left, but I couldn't force the hope out of my blood. Though I was curious, I didn't question Mistress Laurey about the candles or their origin. My lips felt as if they were frozen in place, and I was afraid to speak, afraid I would say something wrong. The hallway opened into a large airy kitchen. The last fading rays of sunlight filtered into the room through several small circular openings in the far wall, and three large fireplaces heating bronze pots and a large oven kept the room too warm.

"Mallory, we have a new scull. Please show her around, she will be one of yours," Mistress Laurey said and then turned on her heels and left the room.

I was not alone with Mallory - perhaps fifteen others occupied the room, scrubbing, cooking, and talking. Mallory frowned at me, and sniffed haughtily. "You smell like fish guts, and you look like you've never bathed. Why do I always get the grubby ones?"

I reddened. I'd never considered it bad to smell like fish, but under this woman's scrutiny, I couldn't help but cringe. Mallory motioned to a girl who was scrubbing dishes, and whom I guessed was also a scull under her direction. "Addie, it's your lucky day. Show fish girl your work. Once she's trained, you can start working in the stables."

A girl with sandy hair tied into two swinging braids, looked up. Her mouth curved into a grin. "Thanks Mal."

"What's your name?" Addie asked me.

"Anais." I responded.

"Good to meet you." She extended a red swollen hand, and I shook it

gratefully. “Well, let’s get you started. Grab a rag.” She motioned to a large pile of dishrags on the stone floor.

I pulled one off the top, and sat on a stool beside the girl. We washed an almost endless succession of ceramic and bronze pots, iron pans, wooden dishes and long wooden spoons.

“Every evening you’ll wash dishes, not the important stuff mind you. Mallory or one of her apprentices usually cleans the silver and valuable china. You’ll be washing the servants’ dishes and all the cooking utensils.”

We continued to scrub dishes for several hours while the girl chatted about her family and her situation as the youngest of ten. Her brothers operated a small farm, but no place existed for her there. Most sculls in the Great House came from similar backgrounds, tradesmen’s or farmer’s children but not the ones slated to take over the family trade.

In a brief respite from the girl chatting, I gathered my courage and looked at her with wide eyes. “I saw the floating candles in the hallway. I thought magic was illegal in Brightshire.”

“Oh those. A long time ago, in the age of kings, King Sirmon banished a mage named Grayson, along with the queen, to Brightshire. The king’s court was a long way away. They say the queen was unable to bear King Sirmon a son, and so he ordered Grayson to accompany her into exile to prevent her from seeking aid from her family. At the time, our shire was little more than a trading post, a fitting exile for a disgraced queen. They say that after several years living here, Grayson fell in love with her and during that time they had the Great House built. Eventually they sought out her family’s support to overthrow King Sirmon, beginning the war, of course. Grayson was a powerful mage and left some residual magic in the house, not serious magic mind you, just the floating candles that always shine, and the bells that ring mysteriously every seventh day at sunset. I’ve also heard that there are still some spells in place that provide protection against invasion.”

“What happened to Grayson and the queen?”

“They won the war, dissolved the monarchy, set up the seven lords of the Seven Shires, and then just disappeared. No one knows what happened to them after that. I’m surprised you didn’t know that already.”

“How can there still be magic here without a mage?”

Addie shrugged. “I haven’t the faintest clue how that stuff works...”

“Have you ever been to Barriershire?” I asked.

“No, I’ve never been that far north. I’ve never had an opportunity to travel. Maybe once I’m working in the stables...”

“I saw a dwarf taking a boy to Barriershire. He said he was going to sell the

boy.” I decided not to tell Addie that the boy might be a fury - I didn’t want to sound like a foolish child.

“Maybe the boy was a thief. Sometimes they sell thieves to the Arena master and make them fight. If that’s what happened, he’ll probably die. The regular arena fighters are pretty fierce. One of my brothers got caught stealing a few years back, and he was sold to the arena master in Barriershire. One fight and he was dead. My parents never got over it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

I looked down to see that the pile of dishes had diminished to nothing, and then looked back up into Addie’s eyes.

“Looks like we’re done here. C’mon, let’s get some sleep.” She smiled.

Standing, my knees creaked and I felt my arms go limp. I wondered how many hours there were left until daylight, it seemed like we had scrubbed dishes for forever. We were the last ones to leave, and Addie snuffed out the lone candle, leaving the room in inky darkness.

I scuttled after Addie into a small dank windowless room just outside of the kitchen. She lit a candle, and I noticed that she dragged her left leg a little as she walked. I couldn’t keep myself from staring.

“I know, I know. There was an accident when I was little. A horse stepped on my foot.”

“And you still want to work in the stables?”

“It wasn’t the horse’s fault.” She half grinned. “It was mine.”

The room held a set of bunk beds and Addie indicated that the one beneath her bed was for me. She then pointed to a pile of clothes in one corner where I found a brown cotton nightdress that billowed around my slight form.

I closed my eyes and the face of the boy in the cage swam into my mind. He couldn’t have really been a fury. He was just a boy with horrible eyes. I should have tried to stop the dwarf. I should have attempted to free the boy. I could have at least told Gil. What if he died and I could have saved him? I groaned. Not a fury, not a fury, not a fury. I heard my mother singing, as I drifted off, “Dark at night, feel your fright, they creep and crawl, you cry and fall, you’ll never get away. Hide inside, my dearest child, or the furies will catch and eat you...”

The next morning came too quickly, and I woke with a headache. As the early morning wore on, Addie indoctrinated me into my new life, which started with scrubbing floors. Shortly after we started, another girl joined us.

“How was your day off?” Addie asked her.

“Lovely,” the girl twirled around in an awkward circle before settling her eyes on me. She wore a beige pinafore over a brown dress, identical to the clothes Addie and I wore.

“Who are you?” She asked in a sickly sweet voice.

“Her name’s Anais. Be nice, Kirsten. Please.”

“Oh, I’ll be nice. What does your family do?” Kirsten asked as she fiddled with a loose strand of dark red hair.

“Fishermen.”

“Really? How dreary, no wonder you smell so horrible.”

I sniffed at my hands. “I don’t smell bad.”

Kirsten sneered. “She can’t even tell. She’s probably always smelled like dead fish.”

“Leave her alone.” Addie sighed.

Kirsten smirked, before exiting the room in a swish of skirts.

After Addie and I had finished scrubbing the floors, we reported back to the kitchen.

“Got anything else for us?” Addie asked Mallory, who looked up from the silver she was polishing.

“Empty out the chamber pots and water basins in the east wing, third floor, after that you may take your break.” Mallory then stood and addressed two of her apprentices who were helping her. “Set the dining room table for breakfast.”

I followed Addie up a short flight of stone stairs. There were no pictures, ornaments or windows adorning the servant’s areas. I didn’t like the narrowness of the staircase and hallways.

“These are the servant’s stairs. Never take the main stairs; if you do and get caught there will be hell to pay. We may only go into the dining hall and entranceway to clean before breakfast, after breakfast you’ll be smart to stick to the servant’s areas. Mallory will skin you, or worse, if you are seen or heard by anyone of consequence.”

We walked through a winding hall to a long row of doors. I coughed.

“There’s so much dust.”

Addie shrugged. “You’ll get used to it. Nobody cleans these halls.”

“Where are we?”

“East wing of the third floor. This area is for wealthy visiting tradesman, governesses, tutors, and artists, or anyone who is an independent citizen, living and working here. Right now, only four of the rooms are occupied, but you need to check all of the chambers. No one will tell you if someone new arrives. You just need to know.”

Addie paused at the first door. “Always knock first, just in case.”

She knocked and when no one answered, we entered. The room seemed huge, and was dominated by a dusty rose hue and decorated with large murals of women posing in intricate garden scenes.

“Blanche Howard lives in here; she’s Clara’s governess.”

“Clara?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Clara is Lord Seve’s daughter. You shouldn’t have trouble getting into Blanche’s room, because she starts her day with Clara very early.”

We checked her storage of candles, and Addie pulled two candles from a large satchel wrapped around her waist and added them to the pile. We cleaned the candleholders of the used wax. At Addie’s instruction, I swept the excess char from the fireplace. The room held a smaller partition hidden by a heavy plum-colored velvet curtain. Addie opened the curtain to find a small white ceramic washbasin filled with sudsy water, and a copper chamber pot filled with urine.

Addie picked up the washbasin and indicated to me to pick up the chamber pot. We walked down the servant’s hall and stairs, and outside to a small stream and sewer line. She and I dumped the contents of the pot and basin into the sewer, and I scrubbed the chamber pot while she filled the basin halfway up with fresh water.

“Where does the sewer line go?” I wondered aloud.

“Don’t know.” Addie shrugged as we walked back to the house.

“How many sculls are there in the Great House?”

“Oh, about seven sculls report to Mallory. The guild price is low, so supply is high. There are usually more of us, but over the last few months two sculls disappeared. I don’t mean that they ran away, for that frequently happens. They vanished,” Addie confided. “When sculls run away, we know because they are spotted in town, but the two that disappeared, they haven’t been seen at all.”

“Do you know what happened to them?”

“No.” Addie shivered. “I’ll admit it has me nervous though.”

I inhaled sharply, remembering the boy in the market. She looked back at me as if wanting to ask me something. I changed the subject. “How long have you been here, working here I mean?” I asked.

“Mm, oh about two and a half years. Sculls are apprenticed off after three years, but I got lucky and am apprenticing a little early. Bertram, the master of the stables, just got in a shipment of Greys. Lord Seve wants to breed them, so it’s been crazy in the stables and they need an extra hand.”

“Does every scull get apprenticed after three years?”

“Most of us, I think. If you don’t get an apprenticeship after three years of service they ask you to leave.”

“Why?”

“I think it’s supposed to prevent sculls from, well, remaining sculls forever. It should be easy enough for you to get on the kitchen, laundry, or bath staff after

you've completed your service. They always need people."

"What about becoming a handmaiden?"

"Ambitious, are we?" Addie snorted, and then quickly looked apologetic. "It's possible. Not easy, but possible. Kirsten says she is going to try for it next year, but I doubt she'll make it. There are a few positions open in the household, but handmaidens are often poor relatives of someone important. And I don't think Kirsten's important, and I hate to say it, but I doubt you're important either."

My stomach dropped; this was going to be impossible. How had my mother ever believed that I would become a handmaiden? For that matter, how had my mother done it? I barely suppressed a moan.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I'm fine."

We finished emptying the washbasins and chamber pots from the other occupied rooms, and in the second to last room we found four large locked trunks of dark brown leather. Other than the trunks, the room was bare.

"Those weren't there yesterday," Addie commented, her brow furrowing. After a moment, she shrugged it off.

The last room, a small room with yellow walls, was also empty.

"You hungry?" Addie asked.

"Starving," I said, realizing that we hadn't eaten a thing since waking up.

"Good, let's go down to the kitchen. The remains from breakfast should be back from the dining hall. The best thing about being a scull is that we get to eat all the food the family wastes."

We scurried down to the kitchen and I ladled out a bowl of broth for myself, and managed to snag a piece of bacon, a hard-boiled egg, and a mug of warm cider. Sculls and young apprentices crowded in the kitchen, shoving each other, and chatting over the leftover breakfast.

Addie led me to an open seat at the end of a long wooden table. I sat quickly and started shoving food into my mouth. It didn't take long for the dull ache of emptiness that had filled my stomach to dissipate. I sighed, happy for the moment.

A tall hearty young man clamped Addie on the shoulder. "Congratulations Addie. Can't believe you're leaving the sculls already."

A wide grin lit Addie's face as she stood and hugged the boy. "I feel like I've been waiting for this chance for an age."

I looked around, wondering if I should try to make friends with the other sculls while Addie was engaged in conversation. My eyes darted around the room, and without intention settled upon Kirsten, who was huddled with a group

of girls. She caught my glance, glared at me, and then started a hushed conversation. I watched one of the other girls steal a look at me. I frowned. Was she talking about me? Why? How could she hate me already?

“C’mon, Anais.” Addie touched my shoulder lightly. “We’re free until sunset. Then we need to report back to Mallory and scrub dishes again. I’ll be going to the stables for the afternoon to help out. You should think about how you spend your free time. Some of the others will likely try to convince you to go to town and fool about. It’s not so bad to indulge occasionally, but you ought to think about what you want to do after your time as a scull is over, and make yourself useful in that discipline. It’s a hard world outside of these halls. I wouldn’t want to see you forced out of this house after your time as a scull is over. Oh, and whatever you do, don’t make friends with Kirsten. She’s going to have a lot of trouble when it comes time for her to be apprenticed.”

I did want to find something useful to do, but the truth was I was so tired that the thought of more work made me want to cry. So instead, I crawled into bed and slept the sleep of the dead. Tomorrow, I promised myself. Tomorrow I would start planning for the future.

That evening, I scrubbed dishes from the dinner meal until the skin on my fingers became so deeply wrinkled and pink that I wondered if they were permanently fixed that way. I liked Addie’s easy kindness, but there was no one else who had extended me even the smallest sign of friendship. It scared me that she would be gone soon. Yet, I was happy for her. She achieved her goal. That should give me hope. I should be excited about this new life - this new beginning.

The next morning, I dragged a wet rag over the last square foot of dry flooring, and sighed with relief. It took so long without Addie’s help, and my knees were aching from all of that time crouched on the floor.

“Ahem,” I heard a voice calling to me. At first, I didn’t notice Kirsten standing a few feet away from me. She traced her fingers delicately around my bucket of dirty water, and pushed.

“Shyte! How could you?” Without thinking, I jumped up from the floor and pushed Kirsten against the wall. I grabbed her left arm behind her back and yanked it upwards. Even though she was bigger than me, I was stronger, and I knew I could break her arm with little effort.

“Let me go!” she screamed.

What was I doing? Nothing good could come of this. Reluctantly, I released her and she ran off crying. I expected her to run to Mallory or Mistress Laurey. What she did instead was worse. She turned all of the sculls and younger apprentices against me. I don’t know what she said or how she managed it. But

after she set herself against me, even Addie would barely meet my eyes at meal times.

CHAPTER 3

A HALF-YEAR passed. I had only one full free day a week that I should have spent seeking a more permanent position in the Great House staff. But, although Addie's warnings buzzed incessantly in the back of my mind, I didn't heed them. Everything to do with the Great House made me miserable. Instead, I would disappear the moment my work was done and wouldn't return until it was necessary. I escaped to the only place worth going - the market - where I would lose myself in the hustle of other people's lives. Occasionally I found Gil hawking my family's fish, and he would regale me with stories told by my parents and brothers. However, never once did he bring with him a request for me to return to my former life. There would be no welcome homecoming for me.

My greatest find was on the western edge of the market where the buskers entertained, practicing their craft and collecting coins from market goers. Amateur acrobats, jugglers, singers, lutists, false mages and dancers all lived off the benevolence of the day traders, all hoping to be discovered. I was at first taken in by the false mages, thinking their small tricks were real magic, but after watching for many hours I was able to discern the trickery behind their 'magic'. I also watched the day traders buy and sell, and buy and sell, making profits where they could.

On a cold morning that threatened rain, I approached a crowd developing around Sendi and Mendi, two hairless twins who juggled knives and breathed fire. They were dressed only in short calfskin breeches that were cut to their knees. I was imagining what new additions they might have added to their act and didn't see the gentleman crossing my path. I ran right into him, bowling him over and forcing the small wrapped package he was holding to tumble to the ground. I jittered as I picked it up for him, hoping as I handed it to him that this wouldn't get me into more trouble than I could handle.

"I am sorry, sir." Our eyes met for a brief moment.

"No trouble at all." He paused. "My, my, are you the little waif who cleans my room?"

I narrowed my eyes. I knew him. I bowed curtly, and turned my eyes to the

ground. I had watched his room on the third floor of the east wing expand from a few worn trunks to a room crammed with books and cauldrons filled with bubbling liquids of the oddest colors and long thin reeds hanging over the fireplace. I wondered if he were a mage. I wanted there to be magic in the world, more than I wanted anything. I wanted to believe in something more than this sad life I lived. Something better. His room seemed different from any other I had ever seen - so full of possibilities. I had caught occasional glimpses of him before, but didn't realize that he had also seen me. He wasn't old, but he was a grown-up man, perhaps in his late twenties. He had thick brown hair that curled over his forehead, was broadly shouldered, and dressed as a noble in fine silk and tweed.

He outstretched an empty hand, gloved in soft brown leather, toward me as if he wanted to shake my hand. I stepped back, causing him to grimace, but he continued speaking to me anyway.

"Thellium Vance," he introduced himself. "Though, I imagine, you already know my name. If I remember correctly, the servants always know everything. And you're Anais?"

How could he know my name? It was strange, his ability to shrug off our differences in class as if they were a dressing robe. Although I knew with utter certainty that it was important to maintain the lines between our stations, I couldn't ignore a direct question.

"Yes, sir," I muttered, hoping he would realize the ridiculousness of this conversation and leave me alone.

He bent to his knees, crouching on the ground. His eyes were now at my level. "Well, Miss Anais, you don't need to be scared of me. I'm not a monster." He paused. "I find myself at a loss here, perhaps you can help me."

I sighed. It had been hard for me not having anyone to talk to, so much so that this small moment seemed somehow worth keeping, even though it was risky, and even though Thellium was just a grown-up, at least he was someone.

"What do you need?" I replied.

"I was recently appointed as a scribe to the Seve household. I'm sure you have seen the pots of ink in my room, and quills hanging by the fire."

"They aren't magic potions?" I blurted out.

"Hardly." He snorted. "Well, I'm running low on parchment, and I've been wandering this market for over an hour and I can't seem to find an appropriate merchant. I'm sure one must be here somewhere." He looked around in frustration.

His problem was understandable as the market could be a maze to the uninitiated.

“Follow me,” I said and smiled at him. This was my area of expertise.

I could move amongst the vendors we passed unmolested, but with Thellium in tow, we were held up at every turn. The merchants and the street children would call out to him or reach toward him. His fine clothes drew too much attention. I pulled him into a deserted alcove, so I could speak to him hidden from the eyes and ears of those eager to take his money.

“Look, sir,” I reasoned.

“Please call me Thellium.” He smiled.

“Look, Thellium. It will be difficult to get a fair price if you come with me. Any merchant will charge you triple what they would charge me alone. You’re too well-dressed, too out of place,” I explained as we approached a half-hidden shop that I knew kept parchment in stock. “Tell me what you need, and I’ll purchase it for you.”

He looked surprised, and seemed almost embarrassed. “I suppose you might be right. I never thought of myself that way. How much do you think three rolls will cost?”

“Perhaps a silver, but you better give me an extra few coppers, just in case.”

He removed a small brown suede purse from his belt, and handed me the coins. I felt a wave of annoyance toward him for trusting me so easily. He was foolish. I didn’t intend to cheat him, but he should have been more careful, the streets of Brightshire were littered with thieves. I considered reprimanding him, but stopped myself. I was already overstepping the bounds of my station. With a deep breath, I took the money from him and entered the small shop. This was new territory for me, although I spent the last six months watching traders turn a profit, I had never had enough money to buy anything beyond a few cheap trinkets.

“Hello there, girlie. What can I do for you?” Fraenkle, the old man who owned the shop, asked in a pleasant voice.

I took my time, fingering a row of badly chipped good-luck porcelain sister of mercy figurines. I looked up. “How much for a sister doll?”

“Three coppers apiece.”

“A lot for a doll.”

“Well, if you buy five, I’ll only charge you ten coppers. A mighty fine deal.”

“Maybe. What about this box? What is it anyway?” I pointed at an elaborately painted small wooden box.

“Why don’t you open it and find out?” Fraenkle grinned.

“Okay,” I murmured. When I opened the box, and odd doll with bright red hair made of dyed yarn and large black button eyes popped out at me. I jumped and nearly dropped the odd box. Gulping, I put it back, not wanting anything

more to do with it.

“How about your parchment?” I asked pointing to a row of neatly rolled sheaths tied with twine.

“Umm, seven coppers each.”

“Would you give me three rolls for a silver?”

“No, of course not.” He scratched his beard. “I guess I would give you three rolls for a silver and three coppers though.”

“How about a silver and one copper?”

“I suppose I can do that. A special discount, for a special girl.”

I handed him a silver and a copper, and he looked slightly dazed. “I didn’t think you were really buying, girlie. Where’d you get that silver?”

“I’m not telling.”

He looked miffed for a moment as if he didn’t really want to hand over the parchment, but his mouth turned into a smile and he started laughing. “Someone has taught you well. You wanted the parchment all along.”

“Perhaps.” I giggled.

When I returned, Thellium seemed impressed with me. After that, I bought goose feathers for him from a young woman selling poultry. He told me feathers from geese and swans made the best quills. I was good at trading, and I couldn’t help but feel happy to do something useful with my time.

“We’d best head back soon,” he stated as the sun began to fade. “The curfew starts soon after sunset.”

The road back to the Great House was long, and we barely made it in time. If we had reached it too long after dark, the guards would have stopped and questioned us, an undesirable fate that I had already endured several times. The guards were not kind to those who broke curfew. On the walk back, I regaled Thellium with stories of the market, my concern over our acquaintance having faded after our shared day.

Thellium turned strangely quiet as we came closer to the Great House, and it made me wonder if I had somehow offended him.

“Thank you, for all of your help today. I would have been lost without you,” he told me suddenly as we reached a fork in our path.

I nodded, starting to feel, perhaps as he did, that we needed to part before we were seen together. I darted down the right path, towards the servant’s entrance while Thellium headed straight into the front hall. I slipped into my room quietly, but was not as invisible as I had hoped. I found Kirsten sitting on my bed.

“Where were you?” she hissed.

“In town.”

“Mallory needed you to wash dishes this afternoon, and I ended up doing them instead. You’re low scull; you should have been the one to do the work.”

“It was my day off.”

“I don’t care, and neither does Mallory. You disappear every time you’re off, so whenever there’s any extra work you never have to do it. Mallory recommended to Mistress Laurey to have you replaced.” She paused. “Just so you know.”

“You’re not serious?”

“Yeah, I am. Good luck on the streets. It’s where you belong,” she spat.

Kirsten swept by me, pushing me to the ground on her way out. I wasn’t prepared for the shove, and hit my head on my way to the floor. Kirsten often called me names and ruined my work, but I had gathered that she was a little afraid of me since our interlude in the dining hall last spring. I was wrong. I rubbed my head, from my sprawled position on the ground. Shyte! I was so angry, and yet also afraid. Although I had no love for kitchen work, I feared being turned out, and having to return home to my family. I didn’t want them to think I had failed. I didn’t want my mother to think that I failed. Shyte! The back of my head stung, and I felt lightheaded. I had just enough strength to pull myself up and fall into bed.

The next morning, head bowed, I stood in Mistress Laurey’s study, in my cleanest pinafore, and fought the tears that threatened to form.

“Mallory tells me that you are not fitting in well with the kitchen staff. Is this true?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Have you been neglecting your work?”

“Not exactly, Ma’am.”

She arched a manicured eyebrow.

“I do my assigned work.” I fidgeted. “I just don’t do any more than that.”

“Is there anything else?”

“They don’t like me,” I whispered.

Mistress Laurey inhaled. “Ah. That is unfortunate. You have only been here six months, and it’s disappointing that you are having problems so early in your tenure. However, we are currently short staffed and Mallory did admit that you are not entirely useless. Do you wish to leave the Great House?”

“No.”

“You may not understand this, but I appreciate that you are not crying or begging me to let you stay.” Mistress Laurey grimaced. “Mallory can be difficult, and Kirsten, well, she’s not here by my choice. This would have been easier if you had made other allies here in the house, but it seems you have not.”

Mistress Laurey remained silent for a few moments. "I'm willing to try transferring you to the laundry. Don't make me regret this."

"I won't, Ma'am."

"Good. Report to the laundry immediately, and tell Ernesto that I sent you. Run along now, and don't make a nuisance of yourself."

The laundry was as dull as the kitchen, but strangely painless. I scrubbed dirty clothes and linen instead of pots and pans, and after three months working there, my hands had turned the same pale yellow color as the lye soap. Ernesto, a quiet man, had three other scullers that worked for him along with a half dozen apprentices, and unlike Mallory, he did not permit us to speak while we worked. I knew very little of the other girls working in the laundry. The silence should have tormented me, but remembering Kirsten's acts of cruelty caused me to appreciate the peace, at least I was grateful for it at first. Before long, I gave up my forays into the market and spent my free time doing extra work in the laundry. I was starting to feel safe - but also a little bored.

One late-winter morning, in a large basket of cotton towels, I found a pale blue silk scarf. It was thin and embroidered with dark blue flowers. Occasionally, the laundry staff would find fine clothes thrown in with the main laundry, and we were supposed to report these finds to Ernesto. Ernesto was the only one of us who washed fine clothes; often the handmaidens and valets came down to the laundry themselves to clean their master's clothes personally. The scarf felt smooth in my hand. Although I knew I should tell Ernesto, I didn't. Instead, I quietly slipped the scarf into my pocket.

In my room that evening, I ran my fingers over the delicate scarf. It had a set of initials embroidered in one corner, M.E.B. I wondered whom it used to belong to; I wondered if the owner cared for it or if they had so many fine possessions that this one didn't matter. Upon closer examination, I realized that it was neither old, nor worn through in any spots. As I looked for a decent hiding spot for the scarf, I heard a noise outside my room. In response, I quickly pushed the scarf between my rag filled mattress and the wall.

Thellium appeared in my doorway, and I jumped off the bed in surprise. I hadn't seen him since our meeting in the market during the summer. He shouldn't have been down here in my room. I didn't want to get in trouble.

"What're you doing here?"

"Looking for you. It seems you no longer clean my room. I thought you might have left the Great House entirely."

"No such luck." I sighed. "I work in the laundry now."

"Well, that doesn't mean we can't be friends, does it?"

"Friends?"

“Look, I’ll be honest with you. I need your help. I need someone to go to the market and buy supplies for me from time to time. I’ve been having trouble making ends meet with the funds provided by Lord Seve. I think you were right that the merchants won’t give me a fair price.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“I can pay you,” he added.

The laundry was safe, but I longed for something else, and I found it hard to ignore this proffered opportunity. “How much?”

“A copper a week.”

“How about two?”

Thellium laughed and rubbed his chin with long thin fingers. “Done.”

He must have made a mess of trading on his own if he was willing to pay me that much.

“I can only help out once a week, on my day off. And, not for the whole day.”

“That should be fine.”

He handed me a piece of parchment with writing on it, and a small purse filled with coins. “Here’s a list of things I need this week.”

My heart sank and I backed away from him.

“What is it, what’s wrong?”

I sighed. “I ... I can’t read.” My cheeks grew hot in embarrassment.

“Oh, of course. I’m sorry.”

“Are you going to change your mind?”

Thellium paused. “No,” he said slowly, “I can teach you how to read, if you like.”

“I don’t know,” I whispered. “What if it’s too hard?”

“It won’t be. I promise.”

The following day, my free day, instead of offering to help to Ernesto, I went to the market to pick up the supplies that Thellium needed. He had talked me through the list the day before.

I had not lost my skill at trading, and by mid-afternoon, I had collected everything Thellium had requested. I made sure to walk by the west end on my return trip. I had missed the market so much, and I was excited to see which performers were out that day. There were fewer people on the streets than there had been the last time I had visited, and no buskers. It was probably only due to the biting icy wind, but I could not help but think that there could be something to the rumors of street people disappearing at night - street people, who were little missed. I did not dally too long at the west end as I wanted to be able to give Thellium his goods quickly, so that I could get back to the laundry. Two

coppers a week was more money than I had ever dreamed of, but I had learned first-hand how dangerous it was to spend too much time away from the tasks that would lead to a permanent position at the Great House.

“You found everything?” Thellium looked up from his workbench as I entered his suite of rooms, his packages piled high in my hands.

“Yes.” I smiled.

“I’m impressed, it’s early still,” he commented as I handed him his packages and his change purse. He opened the purse and smiled. “Two silvers, four coppers, I would have spent it all,” he murmured as he handed me two coppers.

I lifted the left side of my mouth in a half smile, and turned to leave. “Don’t go yet, I did promise to teach you how to read after all.”

“The money’s enough. You don’t have to teach me.” I felt a sudden jolt of nerves at the idea of my ignorance being on display.

“Of course I do. It will be good for you, I promise.”

“Maybe...”

“Sit down.” As I sat in a brown suede armchair near the fireplace, he handed me a manuscript. He sat in the armchair’s neighboring twin, and leaned toward me. “The manuscript is a primer.”

“A primer?” I asked.

“It’s a basic learning tool. It will teach you about the alphabet. It will also demonstrate how simple words and simple sentences are formed to communicate ideas.”

Those first few hours, during which Thellium taught me the rudiments of written language, were the longest of my life. It was harder than I ever imagined, yet I was entranced. I wasn’t sure if my interest was due to the words, or because for once someone was talking to me.

“I should go. I need to wake up early in the morning. ” I finally broke the rhythm of the conversation. It was already too late to volunteer at the laundry, and it was starting to feel like it was too late for me to be up in his rooms at all.

“Yes, I suppose it has gotten late. I didn’t notice. I’ll leave a few manuscripts for you for tomorrow. You can stop in anytime. I won’t be here though; I have some sessions with the Seve children.”

“I can’t come tomorrow. I have to work.”

“Oh yes. I forgot. I’ll leave them anyway.” He grinned. “Maybe you’ll be able to sneak in a few moments.”

I left his room through the back servant’s door. This would be tricky. I wanted to avoid being caught exiting his rooms this late at night, so I was slow and quiet as I slipped down the stairs to my room. As I tried to fall asleep, I played with the scarf I had taken the previous day.

I supposed I could go to Thellium's room and practice reading during my afternoon break, but I had been so good about working through it since I joined the laundry. I worried about ruining my chances at an apprenticeship. I finally fell asleep to dreams of letters dancing on parchment, still having not made up my mind.

When the sun rose, I buried my head in my pillow and wished I could keep sleeping. I was so tired. I felt like I was under water as I mechanically performed my work that day. During the mid-morning break, I sat with the other girls from the laundry as we ate the leftovers from breakfast. It must be something about the quiet atmosphere of our workroom that kept us quiet during meals as well. It felt as if we were under some spell that required us to stay silent. As I ate, I pondered whether I should return to the laundry after eating or visit Thellium's room to study the books he said he would leave for me.

Lost in thought, I didn't notice Kirsten walking near our table, and only saw her once she sat down.

"Hi," she whispered.

"What do you want?" I scowled. After everything she had done to me, I couldn't believe she had the audacity to pretend we shared some sort of friendship.

"Look, I'm sorry about the way I treated you before." She took a long hard breath, steadying herself. Her red-rimmed eyes were puffy. I wondered if she had been crying.

"Really?" I sneered.

"Please, Anais please believe me. I am terribly sorry about everything."

"Why are you telling me this?" Kirsten seemed sincere, but I didn't care. I hated her so much.

"I want to fix things between us. We could be friends."

"We can never be friends."

"I suppose I deserve that."

"Why are you talking to me?"

"I want to join the laundry; do you think Ernesto will have me? My three years will be up in a few months and I need an apprenticeship."

"I thought you wanted to be a handmaiden?"

"I tried. I begged Mistress Laurey to recommend me, but she refused. And Mallory doesn't want me as an apprentice - no one does. I don't know what to do. This is my only option. Please, you have to help me. Everyone knows Ernesto likes you. I think he'll take me if you recommend me. If they force me out, I'll have nowhere to go. I'll end up like one of those - those street people. I know there is something dark out there. I don't want to disappear in the night as

if I never existed.”

I couldn't believe it, Kirsten had been horrible to me, and now she just expected everything to be forgiven. I didn't want to help her, but there was something so desperate in her face. I felt sad for her. Something snapped in me, and I knew no matter what else, I didn't want to be responsible for her disappearance. I remembered the boy in the cage in the marketplace - I should have tried to save him but I didn't. I wasn't going to be a coward twice.

“Fine,” I hissed. “You don't deserve it, but come with me after lunch and I will ask Ernesto if you can help out at the laundry during your free time. If things work out, maybe he'll apprentice you.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You don't know how much this means to me.”

Initially, Ernesto allowed Kirsten to join the laundry only during her free time, but when Kirsten hit her three-year mark, Ernesto offered her an apprenticeship. Kirsten's desperation at the end of her tenure as a scull forced me to take my own situation more seriously, and I made sure to spend my workdays immersed in the laundry. Thellium seemed disappointed that I confined my work with him to one day a week, but I hoped that, at least partly, he would understand the position I was in. It would be easy for Ernesto to voice displeasure with me, and with my tenure at the Great House at stake, I couldn't take such a risk. However, I continued to go to the market for Thellium during the mornings of my free days. And I would spend an hour or so with him afterwards, in which he would endeavor to teach me to read and write. The intermittence of my study made learning slow and challenging, and, at times, I was convinced that I just wasn't smart enough to master this particular craft.

CHAPTER 4

“ANAIS, I THINK you’re improving,” Thellium said one afternoon as he helped me work through a difficult passage of a manuscript that detailed the formation of the Seven Shires after the fall of the monarchy.

“Thanks.” I smiled ruefully. “But, I feel like I’m still struggling.”

“You would learn faster if you could spare more of your time.”

I grimaced. “I can’t.”

“I know, I know, you are dedicated to your work in the laundry. On another note, I was wondering if next week you might look for bound books for me when you are at the market? I have so few that have been printed from the new presses in Courtshire. I’m not sure if any traders deal in books here in Brightshire, but it’s possible some might come in from the West. I’m always interested in histories, religious texts, or natural sciences. You’ve saved me so much money that I’m confident I can afford the luxury.”

“I’ll look. I’ve seen printed books sold in a few shops.”

“Also, if you see any manuscripts on mage-craft, please inform me.”

“Mage-craft, as in magic?”

“As you well know, magic is forbidden in the Seven Shires and if any texts are getting here from other lands I would like to destroy them before they fall into the wrong hands.”

“Why is magic forbidden? In the manuscript, we’re reading about the fall of the monarchy. It sounds like mages helped the Seven Shires, and they made life better for the people. The mages improved crop yields, transportation, and kept the peace. I don’t understand why magic is forbidden. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It’s complicated, Anais. I’d prefer not to discuss it with you.”

I frowned. I hated being treated like a child. There was so much that I didn’t understand. I loved the idea of magic, it seemed like such a hopeful thing. It didn’t make any sense that it was outlawed.

For about a year I kept up this balancing act. With two coppers a week from Thellium, a copper a week from the laundry, and with few expenses, I soon

accumulated a small fortune. Considering that fifteen coppers could be traded for one silver coin, I had what amounted to more than nine silvers. Unfortunately, everything I considered buying, from fancy dresses to decorative jewelry, seemed impractical. The only indulgence I had allowed myself was the purchase of a small gray suede purse lined with pink silk. I would carry the purse, filled with my coins, across my neck and underneath my shirt each time I ventured to the market for Thellium. I welcomed the reminder that, at only twelve years of age, I had the means to buy almost anything I liked.

One autumn day I walked through the market, my feet interrupting the floor of dead leaves below. I entered a dimly lit shop owned by a cadaverous old woman named Lilithan. Lilithan sold mainly paintings bought from traders from the West, but she would also sell printed books, when she had them. She was one of the few shopkeepers I found in Brightshire who dealt in books and manuscripts on a fairly regular basis.

“My favorite customer,” Lilithan greeted me as I entered. “Here to peruse my books again? A trader from Barriershire came in this morning and sold me a small lot. They’re on the shelf in the back. You know where.”

I made myself comfortable sitting cross-legged on the dirt floor, and slowly read the titles. There was one book that Thellium might want about Candel, a kingdom, north of the Seven Shires. I carried the small book to Lilithan, who charged me a silver for it, which I claimed was well overpriced. We eventually agreed on seven coppers.

“There is one more that you may be interested in,” Lilithan said in a hushed voice as she looked around the empty shop. She pulled out a thin, poorly bound manuscript. “I shouldn’t have this. I didn’t realize what it was until after the trader left. The lettering on the cover is faint, and reading is such a trial for me.”

The title read, ‘On the Application of Mage-Craft, a User’s Guide’. I held it in my hands and shivered with excitement.

“How much do you want for it?” I whispered.

“Eight silver coins.”

“That seems high,” I said as I handed the manuscript back to Lilithan. I couldn’t breathe, and gooseflesh crept unrequested over my skin.

“Anais, on this I won’t bargain. I’m a fool to sell it at all. I should destroy it, or arrange for it to be sent to Lord Seve so that he can have it destroyed. It’s because I trust you, that I’m showing it to you at all.”

I breathed in deeply - a book on magic, real magic, had fallen into *my* hands. I had to have it. I gave her the coins from my small purse, took the book, which Lilithan carefully wrapped in brown paper, and didn’t look back. I would not give this to Thellium so that it could be destroyed. It was mine.

In a hidden corner of a seedy pub on the edge of town, I sat on a splintered wooden bench and waited for the bitter lemonade I had ordered. As I cracked open the book, I inhaled the scent of lime and butter. To my disappointment, I could only understand a few of the words, and none of the content. This text was well beyond my reading ability and vocabulary. I closed the book, re-wrapped it, and sighed in disappointment.

I returned to the Great House and hid the book with the scarf and my purse in the dark recess underneath my mattress. Later that afternoon, after I worked with Thellium for my hour, I stood up to leave and then turned around again.

“Do you think I could stay longer? I want to work on my letters a bit more.”

“That’s wonderful.” Thellium grinned. “I’ll leave you to it. I’d like to take a look at that book you brought for me, and also I need to cut the shafts of a few feathers. If you have any questions, I will be in the other room.” I struggled through the primer, dutifully copying each simple sentence onto a piece of parchment. Thellium claimed it helped to write down sentences as you read them.

“You ought to get going now, Anais. It’s getting late.” Thellium touched my shoulder.

I jumped, startled out of my concentrated effort. It was well past dark, and I couldn’t believe how much time had passed. I hadn’t stayed this long since our first day. It would be a nightmare waking up the next morning.

It took me until the end of that autumn and all through the deep winter, and the beginning of spring before I could decipher the first few chapters of the book. My thirteenth birthday, along with my two-year anniversary as a servant at the Great House, came and went, but I hardly noticed. I focused all of my attention on this one burning task. When I felt confident with my translation, I carried the book, along with the supplies I had gathered, to a small glen in the woods west of the Great House and the market. I kept all of the supplies in a small leather satchel - bought for two silver. I put the satchel down in the grass, pulled out a paper bag of salt and encircled myself in a poorly constructed ring. The book said the salt would prevent other mages from detecting my presence. I sat in the center of the circle, my legs crossed, and the book open in front of me. The first spell that the book offered involved levitation. I was to choose a light object, holding some personal significance, and place it in front of me. I used the scarf.

I dug a small hole into the soil, and then pulled the small knife that I had taken from the kitchen, out of the bag. I poked the skin on my index finger just hard enough for a drop of blood to emerge, and I let the drop fall into the hole. I put my left hand with the pricked finger into the hole, and held the scarf in my

right hand. The book said I should look at the object I wanted to levitate and imagine a stream of energy flowing from the earth, through my blood, and into the object. The book said that the energy was tiny moving particles. I didn't know what that meant and hoped I didn't need to understand. I was supposed to close my mind to everything but the idea of energy flowing. I focused. Nothing happened. The book had said not to be discouraged if I couldn't levitate the object at first and that it was often necessary to be given assistance from a master mage.

I screwed up my face in a grimace. Finding help would be something of a problem for me, since I didn't know a master mage, or any mage at all for that matter.

On my next free day, after purchasing supplies for Thellium, I came to the same spot in the woods and tried again. This time I thought I noticed the edges of the scarf flutter a little. It could have been the wind, but I preferred to believe there was some greater meaning in the movement.

Several months later, I could make the scarf dance in the air. It was amazing and beautiful, and I felt special. As I had gotten better and better at levitating the scarf, there started to be a small dusting of ash that formed on the ground as I worked at it. The book said I should collect the ash and cover it with fresh soil, which I did carefully after each exercise. The book suggested I next attempt to levitate an object made of metal or stone with the same spell. I would have to find something appropriate.

On a quiet day in the laundry, several weeks after I had perfected levitating the scarf, I saw a small brass ring in Ernesto's empty office that looked perfect for the levitation spell. Looking carefully over my shoulder to make sure that no one could see me, I moved my hand over the ring and gently squeezed it into my palm, and pulled my hand away. I slipped the ring into my pocket, leaving the space it had occupied bare. I went back to work, without a word, and willed myself not to feel anxious and accidentally give myself away.

"Anais, do you have a moment?" Ernesto touched my shoulder. Shyte. I quivered. Did he know I had taken the ring?

"Yes," I whispered. I finished folding a large brown sheet and then followed Ernesto into his office.

"Your friend Kirsten did not show up today. She wasn't here yesterday either. Do you any idea where she is?" he asked.

I felt instantly relieved. He didn't suspect anything.

"No," I responded slowly. "I hope she's alright. I can ask around."

"I hope she's alright too. Let me know if you find out what happened to her."

"Okay." I bit my lip. I hadn't even realized Kirsten was missing. I had

become so wrapped up in my work for Thellium and my mage-craft exercises, that my day-to-day activities in the laundry were little more than a blur.

“Oh, and Anais, I thought when you first started here, that you would want to apprentice with me. I hope that is still the case? There isn’t much time before you’ll need to start an apprenticeship.” His question, though softly stated, held a threat. He knew my commitment had faltered. I couldn’t risk losing favor with Ernesto. I would have to stop the mage-craft work for a while, unless, of course, I needed it to find Kirsten. Then I would have to use it, wouldn’t I?

After sunset, I went back to my room and searched the manuscript for some method of locating Kirsten. I had queried every scull employed in the Great House about Kirsten’s whereabouts and had even asked Mallory, who still despised me. No one knew what had happened to her. Finally, I found a location spell, but I feared it would be hard. It was well into the heart of the manuscript, and therefore, likely much more difficult than the levitation spell. But I had to try.

In addition to the ring of salt, three round stones, an ounce of my blood, and a belonging of Kirsten’s were also required. I stole a frock from Kirsten’s room and then snuck into the court garden in the hour before twilight to find the stones. It was not a safe place for me to be. If I was caught there, I would be in all kinds of trouble. But I didn’t want to sneak out into the woods beyond the city, I was scared to go so far in the dark.

Again, I drew a circle of salt around myself, and dug a hole in the earth. This time though, I placed the three stones and the frock into it. After I cut myself, I let my blood drip onto the frock, staining it a dark red. I hoped the blood I spilled was enough. I buried both of my hands in the soil, imagined the energy flowing, and pictured Kirsten in my mind. My head started to feel like it was on fire, and then I began to feel as if my mind were no longer connected to my body. My stomach felt acidic, and I tasted iron as I licked my lips. I jumped out of the circle, breaking the ring of salt. It felt better to be outside of it, but I still felt weak. I looked around the garden, and it sparkled. Every drop of dew on every leaf, every petal on every flower, every mineral in the earth glowed for me. I felt wholly integrated into the world. I needed to breathe. Shyte! My sight went black, and I fell. Sprawled on the ground, I slowly regained control of my limbs.

I buried the traces of my intrusion into the garden, not wanting to give myself away. I could feel Kirsten. I didn’t know exactly where she was, but I felt a pull, it was as if a rope was attached to my gut, leading me forward into the night. I had no choice but to follow it. It didn’t matter that I was afraid. I put a hand on the tall stone wall that fenced in the garden and that blocked me from the

direction; I would have to climb over it.

“What are you doing?” A voice called out in the night.

I turned, startled. “Who’s there?”

“Just me.” A barrel shaped boy stepped out of the shadows.

“What are you doing here?”

“Watching you. You shouldn’t be leaving the grounds this late at night. It’s dangerous in the city after dark.” His hand rose to move a flop of curly brown hair from covering his violet flecked eyes.

“I have to leave. I think a friend of mine is in trouble. She ... she needs me.”

“You could wait until morning.”

“I can’t. I really can’t. I have to go now.” The direction pulled harder as I stood talking to the boy. This situation was horrible. Why was he distracting me?

“I’ll go with you, then. I can’t let you go alone.”

“It could be dangerous,” I warned.

“Then you need someone to protect you.”

“Fine.” I rolled my eyes. I didn’t want him to come with me, but I couldn’t stand around and argue with him. Any resistance I employed against the strength of the direction that was pulling at me, made it hard to breathe.

He helped me climb over the wall, and then scrambled over it.

“My name’s Cedric by the way,” he said as we walked, breaking the silence.

“Okay, thanks,” I murmured.

“Do you want to tell me your name?”

“Um, Anais.”

“Okay. It’s good to meet you Anais.”

“Uh huh.”

He laughed softly. “You’re not very talkative.”

I glared at him.

“How do you know your friend is in trouble?”

“I just know.”

“How do you know where she is?”

“Stop asking so many questions,” I growled.

“My apologies. I was curious.”

I let the direction pull me into the woods; Cedric followed. The moon was full and bright over our heads, lighting our way. We walked through dense brushes, over a shallow stream and up a small hill, and then the direction stopped. I stiffened. I didn’t know what to do. I felt suddenly empty of purpose.

“Is this it? Is this where we’ve been going?” Cedric asked.

“I think so. I don’t know.” I started looking around blankly. “I think she’s here somewhere.” I pulled my hands through the dense foliage, searching for

something, some sign. “Help me.”

Cedric nodded before searching through the thick bushes to his left. “Come over here.” Cedric pointed to a body hidden by greenery, his eyes wide. “Is this the girl you were looking for?”

“Oh no,” I moaned. “I mean yes, she’s the one.”

“Well, I don’t think you can help her now. She isn’t breathing, and she looks pretty torn up.” He was kneeling next to the body, his hand hovering over her mouth.

Kirsten’s skin looked like rubber, and she was cold to the touch. Long gashes interrupted her face, and her clothes were ripped and bloody. There was no doubt that she was dead.

“Who could have done something like this? Why?” I murmured, biting my lower lip and trying not to cry.

“I ... I don’t know,” Cedric answered. “But, there have been other people who were found like this. A few years ago, the body of a little boy was discovered just outside the city gates. There have been others, usually a couple every year. That’s the reason for the curfew.”

“I knew people had disappeared, but I didn’t know they had been killed. I didn’t think...”

“We should go back. It’s dangerous out here. Whoever or whatever did that to your friend could still be around.”

“You’re probably right.” I paused and turned toward him, my eyes narrowed. “Wait, you knew there had been these murders, so why would come out here with me? Why were you outside in the courtyard so late at night in the first place?”

“I saw you from my window. I wanted to find out what you were doing.”

What exactly had he seen? This was terrible. Had he seen the salt? Did he know my secret? Maybe it didn’t matter. I gulped. If we were killed tonight, it wouldn’t matter what this boy knew about me. But, if we survived ... would he tell?

“Look Anais, I’m sorry about your friend, but there’s nothing we can do now. We need to go back. We aren’t safe here.”

“You’re right.” It was all so horrible. As we stumbled through the woods, I couldn’t stop the tears from filling my eyes and rolling down my cheeks. I couldn’t believe Kirsten was really dead. We were never close, even after we made peace with each other. But I never wanted her to die. I breathed in deep, and looked more closely at my companion. “I’ve never seen you in the kitchen. Where do you serve?”

Cedric looked over at me. “I don’t serve.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lord Seve is my father.”

“Oh, shyte.” My eyes widened. I should have known. I looked closer at him. His clothes were not that of a servant, he was too clean, and he didn’t talk like one of us either. Of late, I had been accused of affecting an upper-class accent, presumably a result of my association with Thellium. I should have been able to peg Cedric as a lordling. I knew how they talked.

I sighed. “You shouldn’t have come. I shouldn’t even be talking to you.”

“It’s too late to change it now. Besides, I’m glad you didn’t have to find your friend alone,” he said.

When we reached the stone wall, Cedric scrambled up to the top and held out a hand for me. I took it. Just as he finished pulling me up, he lost his balance and we both crashed with a thud to the grass floor of the court garden. It was loud, and we were heard.

Two guards ran toward us from their post and were able to grab hold of us before we were able to make a run for it.

The guard holding Cedric pulled him closer and turned the boy to face him. “Cedric is that you?” the guard asked. “You know you aren’t supposed to be out at night. What in the name of the sisters were you doing?”

As Cedric’s eyes met the guard’s, his face stopped looking so young, and he smirked and glanced at me. “What did you think I was doing?”

The guard looked at me as I struggled to get out of the grasp of the other guard who was holding me tightly to him. The guard shook his head in disbelief. “I’m going to have to report this to your father.”

“I’d rather you didn’t. I was just trying to steal a moment with the girl. You don’t want to get me in trouble. I can trade you some valuable information. Make it worth your while.” Cedric’s expression was blank as he made the offer.

“Oh you will, will you. I don’t think so.” The guard laughed.

“We found a dead body. It looked torn up.”

The guard’s eyes widened. “Shyte, Cedric! Did it look like the others?”

“I haven’t seen the others. But, it looked pretty bad.”

The guard squeezed his arm. “This isn’t some sick joke. You stupid brat! You will show me the body now, or I will wake up your father.”

Cedric looked at me and shrugged in apology. “Alright, alright. Let the girl sneak back to her room, there’s no need to involve her in this mess.”

The guard looked at me more closely. “Who are you?”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I just continued to struggle.

“Cedric?” the guard asked.

Cedric shrugged, his manner turning superior. “She works here. Probably a

scull. I'm surprised you weren't able to guess with your advanced observation skills. She's not important."

"Shut up." The guard tugged on Cedric's arm. "Take her inside. We can't have sculls running around at all hours of the night." As the first guard dragged Cedric off toward the guard tower, the second knelt beside me.

"Look, girl, this can happen two ways. The easy way or the hard way."

I stared at him, silent.

"I'm going to have to report you. But, if you're a good girl and tell me your name, I'll wait until morning. And I'll downplay it a bit; make it sound like it was all Cedric's fault, which it probably was anyway. What do you say? Tell me your name, and your real name, mind you. I know what you look like."

My frame slackened. Cedric was gone, and I bore no chance of maneuvering out of this man's grasp. He was too strong. I considered lying, but it seemed pointless. I was finished. "My name's Anais. I work in the laundry."

"That's a good girl." He smiled. "I know Ernesto. I can talk to him instead of Mistress Laurey. Who knows, it might not go so badly for you."

It was hard to sleep at first. I was afraid of what would happen to me, but I also felt funny, burdened with something I didn't recognize. The feeling had been intensifying since I worked the magic to find Kirsten, but I had been so preoccupied that I hadn't been able to focus on it until now. I was sinking.

Even though the room was poorly lit, I could tell that the boy was older than I by at least a few years. The boy's porcelain features were striking, all sharp edges framed with short black hair. His honey colored eyes, his only feature not black or white, looked so hard, so determined. He crouched down next to a man sprawled on the dirt floor below and lightly touched the man's face. I wondered if the man would wake up, but he didn't. The boy's hands, which looked so pale and delicate, flicked open a small silver knife. The boy's mouth turned up in a half grin half sneer, and he ran the knife rapidly across the man's throat. A thick line of black blood welled up where the knife had laid its course. I wondered if the man was dead. Light shown on the boy's face, and I recognized him, but I didn't know how I knew his face.

I jerked awake, breathing heavily. Oh god - what an awful dream. But it was just a dream - just a nightmare. I tried to remember the boy's face from the dream. I could see him now. He was beautiful, I had never seen a person so beautiful before, and I remembered how I knew him. He was the boy in the cage in the market; the one the dwarf said was a fury. I relaxed back down on my bunk grateful to be awake. Except, I couldn't calm myself. Even though the dream was over, I was still in just as poor of a position as I had been in before I slept.

When I showed up in the laundry for work, Ernesto was waiting for me, his face frozen in a harsh frown. “I spoke with Mistress Laurey this morning. We’re going to report to her now.” He grabbed me by the shoulder and led me toward Mistress Laurey’s office.

I fidgeted, shifting my weight from foot to foot as I waited for Mistress Laurey to speak.

“I was informed early this morning that you were apprehended sneaking into the castle late last night with Lord Seve’s son. You have been with us for almost three years now, and you know the rules. You are to obey the curfew, but more important, you are to stay away from the nobility. Your actions are an embarrassment. They make me look like I have no control over the staff. Do you understand?” Mistress Laurey’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know he was Lord Seve’s son. I thought he was a scull.” I cringed. What was going to happen to me?

“Your intentions are irrelevant. As a servant, you should be invisible to the upper class. I also know about the time you have spent with the scribe. Against my better judgment, I allowed you to continue. Perhaps your time with him gave you a false impression of your place here. In addition, I have also inquired with Ernesto about your work in the laundry.” Mistress Laurey nodded her head to Ernesto, who was standing beside me. His hands were neatly folded in front of him, his face flushed with embarrassment.

“Although Ernesto has reported that your work is satisfactory, he does not want to keep you as an apprentice. He feels that you don’t respect your assignments.”

“There has to be something I can do. If I could just have more time?”

“I fear not, my dear. You are expelled from your position here. Effective immediately.”

“But ... but what am I supposed to do? Where am I supposed to go?” I crumbled.

“Seek work outside of these walls. You don’t belong here. If you did, you would have put more effort towards staying, and you would never have cavorted with the family. I am sorry. I can’t help you now. It would be best for all concerned if you left before nightfall.”

CHAPTER 5

BACK IN MY room, I slid my leather satchel over my shoulder, and stared at the room that had been my home for the last three years. It was hard to believe that it was over. I hoped I could find Gil in the market. Maybe he would let me work for him. I liked trading. I sighed deeply. Or perhaps I could offer to apprentice for one of the shop merchants. I wished I hadn't spent so much of my money on the manuscript. But, of course, if it weren't for the manuscript I wouldn't be in this mess in the first place.

"Anais, what are you doing?" Thellium asked from the doorway.

"I'm leaving. I've been expelled. I'm not a scull anymore." I sighed, looking up at him.

"Ah. I was afraid of that. Cedric told me what happened. He feared you might suffer from your adventure last night."

"It was hardly an adventure."

"I know. I'm sorry you had to see your friend that way. Death is terrible, especially when it happens to someone so young, and especially when brought on by violence."

I nodded; it was indeed terrible.

"You don't need to leave, you could stay. I could use an apprentice."

"I can't be your apprentice. I mean don't scribes have to be from noble families, and you said yourself you had to go to a school to be a scribe."

"Normally, yes. But, exceptions can be made. And I'm currently in a position to make an exception. The truth is, you've been very helpful to me, and you already know how to read. That'll save me time. Also, Cedric seemed very concerned with the idea of you being expelled. We wouldn't want to upset him."

"Why should he care?" I tightened my jaw. I didn't know what to think of Cedric. His actions were bizarre. He should never have followed me. I wasn't sure if he had been trying to help me or hurt me.

"He's a good boy, and it doesn't surprise me that he wouldn't want you to suffer because of him."

"It wasn't his fault."

“Perhaps.” Thellium appeared unconvinced. “But my offer is still a fair one. Will you stay and be my apprentice?”

I smiled, biting my lower lip gently. This opportunity could be good. It could be what I needed. I let out a long breath. “Yes. I mean ... what would I have to do?”

“We’ll work that out. Why don’t you take a few days off before you officially report to me? After what you just went through, you probably need a little time to recover, and I need to travel to Barriershire briefly before we start your training.” Thellium looked around my room. “Hmm, I’ll talk to someone about having you moved out of these quarters - somewhere closer to my rooms perhaps. We’ll talk to Mistress Laurey about it. I suppose we have to do that regardless, for the Gorgon can’t be left in the dark about anything.”

“The Gorgon?”

“Oh, my apologies.” Thellium blushed. “Cedric and Mediera rub off on me sometimes in the worst of ways,” he muttered. Who is Mediera? I wondered.

I couldn’t prevent a small smile from slipping onto my face as I waited for Thellium to finish explaining to Mistress Laurey about my upgrade in position.

After he had finished talking, he left me there alone with Mistress Laurey. As she perched herself on the tip of her chair, she indicated for me to sit down.

“So, it looks like we have a little rearrangement to take care of.” Her lips twitched.

I hoped she wasn’t angry. It was hard to tell what Mistress Laurey was thinking. Her features seemed perpetually pinched.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“There is a vacant bedchamber next to Thellium’s room, the yellow room. You know it, I imagine. You will join the household for meals; I believe you already know the schedule. There are four benches near the outer rim of the dining hall. You may sit at one of those, but no other. Thellium eats with the family, but you will not. Let’s hope your apprenticeship lasts.”

When I entered the yellow room and thumped onto the soft bedding, a huge smile broke onto my face. This room was heaven. I had been in the room before, but never did I imagine it would be mine. A small fireplace in the corner provided a dry heat in the evenings. The oddly yellow colored stone walls were bare, but there was no mold, and the room actually smelled good. The mid-morning light filtered onto the face of a small wooden desk and a wooden chair.

I moved to an opening carved out of the wall. I could see the garden. Rows and rows of herbs outlined patches of lilies and orchids. It was beautiful. I wondered if Cedric had a similar view from his room. I couldn’t see the area I had used the night before. I wondered again exactly how much Cedric had seen.

Maybe I would never find out. Maybe I would never speak to him again. Maybe it didn't matter.

There was a small pile of clothing on the bed consisting of several pairs of loose black trousers and starched white cotton blouses. I was happily surprised that I wouldn't be required to wear skirts. I would have to remember to thank Thellium for his thoughtfulness.

At supper that evening, on one side of me sat a young man who was an apprentice painter visiting with his master. On my other side sat a quiet woman who wore a white headdress that completely covered her hair and a full black gown - she was a sister of mercy. I couldn't believe it. I had never seen a sister of mercy before, and I couldn't keep myself from stealing glances at her over my porridge and bread.

By my fifth day in my new position, Thellium had still not returned. I had spent my days sleeping, eating and worrying. As an apprentice, I could also go to the baths to bathe anytime I liked, and I spent more time than I should have scrubbing myself until I was cleaner than I had ever been before.

"Did you know her?"

I looked up, confused.

"Know who?"

The sister of mercy was speaking to me as our dishes were cleared. "The unfortunate young woman who died. I heard she worked here. I thought you might know her. I'd like to attend her burial. If you wish, we could go together."

"Why?"

The sister smiled. "You seem troubled, dear. Perhaps you are in need of some time to make peace with the girl's death. The burial ceremony can be very reassuring, and you shouldn't have to go alone. It's my mission to offer support to anyone in need. And you appear to be in need."

It bothered me that I was exhibiting weakness. But the woman's expression was so guileless and kind that I felt myself warming to the idea.

Tall blue grass swayed in the wind, masking the smaller headstones, as the sister and I watched a gravedigger bury the wooden box that held Kirsten's body. We were the only attendees, and I felt suddenly guilty that I had never made an attempt to know the dead girl, that I had let our early problems taint my view of her.

When dawn broke the next morning, I walked up the main stairs to Thellium's room to begin my career as his apprentice. I had received a note the evening before that he had returned. It was strange for me to walk along the main stairs, and not via the servant's corridors so, even though I knew I wasn't breaking any rules, I tread quietly. Thellium's door swung open in response to

my knock.

“Come in, come in.” He smiled at me, and then pointed toward the worktable that was covered with feathers of beige, gray and white. “I would like you to cut and pluck goose feathers for me today. I’ll show you how to prepare one, and then you can continue while I go to the north tower to lecture Thomas and Cedric.”

“You tutor Cedric?”

“And his elder brother, Thomas. They have a tutor who teaches military protocol and estate management, but I do spend some time with them as well. A few hours a week I teach them languages, history, and mathematics, though mostly I think Lord Seve hopes I will provide them with a taste of western culture.”

“You’re from the West? Over the mountains?” I knew so little about him. I couldn’t fathom knowing someone who had traveled so far.

“Yes, I grew up just outside Courtshire. Oh and of course, attended the academy for scribes in Courtshire.”

“Oh.” I imagined I could never become a master scribe. How could I ever travel all the way to Courtshire?

“Thellium, did you come here just to tutor them?”

“No. Brightshire always has a scribe in residence. We record all of the significant events that occur in the house, and send our reports to Courtshire to be kept in the library. We take five year shifts. My tenure will be completed in two years, and then another scribe will come to take my place.”

Would he take me with him when he left? I couldn’t work up the courage to ask.

Thellium gave me a small hard leather case that contained a small steel knife, a narrow file, a long curved steel needle, and a pair of tweezers. He showed me how to extract the meat from within the shafts of the feathers with the needle, how to cut a crescent shape out of the tip of the shaft with the sharpened knife, how to pluck each hair out of the feather, and how to clean and dry the plucked feather shafts. After these processing steps, the feathers became quills, and Thellium explained that the narrow tubular shape would suck ink up into the shaft after it was dipped into an inkwell.

In Thellium’s absence, I constructed quills, my fingers growing numb from the tight grip I held on the knife. When Thellium returned, he wasn’t alone.

“C’mon Thell, I’ll bring her back in one piece, I promise. How much trouble can we get into in the middle of the day?” Cedric asked as he walked through the door, following Thellium’s entrance.

“If she wants to go, I suppose it will be acceptable.” Thellium sighed and

turned to me. "How many quills did you finish?"

"Seven," I answered. "They're drying on the line near the fire."

"Good, good. Do you want to go running off with young Cedric?" He raised a fine eyebrow.

"Yes." I smiled, despite myself.

"Return after supper then. I want to show you how to treat parchment today, and if you end up in town, pick up three or four limes for me, and a jug of thick cream." Thellium handed me two silvers.

"Okay." I agreed accustomed to Thellium's odd requests.

"Well, it looks like Old Thell didn't waste any time. He put you right to work."

"Old Thell?"

"That's what we call him."

"He's not that old." I followed Cedric down the stairs.

"He acts like he's old."

I rolled my eyes and asked, "Where're we going?"

"You'll see."

"Did you get in trouble for getting caught out of the house after curfew?"

"Yep, that's why it took me so long to come looking for you. My father wasn't pleased, but like most of his rants, this too passed. I was confined to my room for the past week. I could only come out for meals."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, it was nice to be involved in something important. Sometimes I feel like my whole life consists of useless activities aimed at keeping me busy and out of the way."

"I would think that being Lord Seve's son, everything you did would be significant. How could you have any idea what it feels like to be useless?"

"I might be Lord Seve's son, but I am not blooded."

"What does that mean?"

"My father's first wife was a noble by blood; when my father married my mother she was just a commoner. Thomas and Clara are nobility by blood, but with a commoner for a mother, I'm little better than a by-blow. I will inherit nothing - neither title nor property. So you see, I don't have any real resources. I'm of no consequence to the line of succession for the lordship of Brightshire. Don't feel sorry for me though, my family likes me well enough, and I'm going to be a soldier. If I were blooded, they would never let me do that."

It seemed so easy for Cedric to blurt out his whole life to me. Had I ever been so carefree? I didn't think so. "Cedric, you said that you saw me in the garden. What exactly did you see?"

“Just a girl - you - sitting in the garden in the middle of the night.”

“That’s all you saw?”

“Yes, why, was there something else I could’ve seen?”

“No,” I faltered. “I was just curious.”

Cedric brought me to the stables. I had never had the opportunity to visit them; they were about a half-mile south of the Great House, away from the market.

“Have you ever ridden a horse?” Cedric asked.

“No, I don’t know how to ride.”

“Do you want to learn?”

I grinned. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m definitely serious.”

“Yes. Yes. Yes,” I replied, and then considered how odd his actions were.

“Why are you being so kind to me?”

“I just am.” Cedric sighed. “Don’t ask so many questions.”

The stable consisted of hundreds of box stalls, most occupied with a sleek bodied horse. I forgot about being skeptical. “I want to ride.”

The stable master helped us, and I considered asking after Addie, but decided against it. She would be busy, and wouldn’t appreciate an interruption.

We rode the horses into town, so that I could pick up the supplies that Thellium had requested. Cedric picked out a small sweet-natured mare, a gray that Cedric’s father had imported from the West, for me to ride. He said I needed to warm up on an animal that wouldn’t be inclined to throw me, and would offer a steady gait. She was a lovely horse. I stroked her soft and silky mane, and felt content. It took no time at all for me to feel comfortable.

As we sped along the path, I could see sunlight sparkle across the green leaves of the trees and the blades of grass. It was a perfect cloudless day. I was glad I wasn’t a lady of importance who had to protect her skin from the sun, had to wear endless petticoats, and had to be chaperoned at all times. I felt free.

Back in Thellium’s rooms later that evening, he instructed me in how to concoct a thin paste made of cream, butter, flour and lime juice. The paste’s function was to treat parchment, to make it smooth and white. We stretched out dried animal hides, tightly onto hooks and painted thin layers of the paste onto the surfaces. Thellium said that after twenty-four hours we could rinse off the paste with water and dry the hides into parchment.

“Thellium, what really happened to Kirsten?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“What do you mean?”

“I saw her body. It was like my mother’s stories. Did a fury kill her?”

Thellium looked hard at me. “I don’t know. But, I think so, yes.”

“Then you believe in them?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Have you ever seen one?” My eyes widened, and my breath tightened.

“Yes.”

“Where? Do you think they are really here, in the city?”

“I saw one once in Barriershire, he was a prisoner of sorts.”

“Are they responsible for the recent deaths?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was the one you saw very dangerous?”

“Yes. Very much so.”

“If they are so strong, will they be able to destroy us all? How do we stop them? How do we stay safe?”

“It’s true that they’re stronger than men, but they’re also impulsive creatures. Men can out-think them. In hand-to-hand combat a man will often lose to a fury, but furies do have weaknesses. I’m sure you heard the myth that they fear daylight.”

“Don’t they?”

“They are nocturnal, but daylight does not kill them. That notion is just a fairy tale - so don’t depend on it. They are cruel creatures. They brutally murder and eat any human they cross, but they rose in mass once before and our armies drove them into the Southlands. If we must, I am certain our armies can do it again.”

“That doesn’t make us safe now. Brightshire borders the Southlands, and the Seven Shires armies are all the way in Courtshire - they’re not here to protect us now. If the furies are rising...” I said.

“You have to have faith.”

Faith? How could he be so naive?

“What did it look like? The one you saw in Barriershire?”

Thellium sighed. “It had the shape of a man, but its skin was that of an amphibian - a blackish blue color. Its ears were elongated, and its teeth were razor sharp. And what I found most intriguing was that the joints in its elbows and knees could turn in either direction. It was a fascinating creature to behold. It seemed to breathe out fear; the crowds would become dizzy with nervousness and discontent just by watching it.”

That didn’t sound like the boy I saw so many years ago. Maybe, the boy was just a boy.

“Why were there crowds?”

“He was held at the arena, where they fought him against prisoners and outlaws. The arena is an unfortunate addition to our culture. I’ve never agreed

with it as a form of entertainment. Men should not enjoy such things.”

“Couldn’t mages fight the furies with magic?”

“No.” Thellium answered abruptly. “Magic will only make things worse.”

I didn’t understand how Thellium could be so cavalier about our lives. My life mattered to me. For all of her flaws, Kirsten’s life mattered to me. What was wrong with him?

“I think I should go to bed,” I said.

“That’s fine, I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow.”

“Of course,” I whispered.

I didn’t sleep well that night; I was plagued with uncertainty. Our world – our lives were so fragile.

Later that week, as Cedric and I sat eating bread and cheese under a willow tree in the gardens, I confided my concerns to him. I hoped that maybe he would have the answers that Thellium withheld from me.

“Don’t hate Old Thell. He isn’t the only person who argues that magic should stay illegal.”

“But if the furies are such a threat, shouldn’t we use whatever power we have available to stop them?”

“I don’t know, Anais. My father agrees with Thellium, he always commands his ambassador to vote against removing the ban on magic. There is much contention about it in Courtshire. My father says that if the mages regain their position, our family will lose the small amount of power we have.”

“Your father, your father. I don’t care what your father says. What do you think, Cedric?”

“It’s not my place to have or express an opinion about it, and it certainly isn’t yours.”

He was right, in a way. I should be more careful.

“I’m sorry, Cedric.”

“Don’t be. Let’s just forget it and enjoy the day, it’s pointless to worry so much. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

I stood, my head brushing against a branch of the willow tree. I pushed it away. “I ... I’m going back to my room.”

He sighed and started packing up the basket. “Anais, please don’t be mad at me, okay?”

“I’m not. I’m just tired.”

Back in my room, I put the book, the scarf and the brass ring into my leather satchel, and took them into the woods. I sat in my circle of salt and placed my bloodied hands into the warm earth. I tried the spell to levitate the ring, but my head hurt, and my nose bled. I turned to the scarf next, but regardless of how

hard I tried, I couldn't lift it either. I closed my eyes and cried. My power was gone; I could feel that it had left me, I felt so empty. How could I protect myself now?

CHAPTER 6

THE COOL DEWY days of early spring turned to into the hot dry days of summer, and as Thellium's apprentice, I was learning more than I had ever imagined. However, I only felt truly happy during my hours with Cedric. Cedric taught me how to fence and I taught him how to fish in the babbling streams in the woods. Cedric taught me how to ride a horse as if I were born on one, and I taught him how to swim. Cedric taught me how to box, and I taught him how to navigate the market. Our days were peaceful and good and not clouded with guilt, for Thellium did not seem to mind or notice my absences, and no one cared about Cedric's whereabouts.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked as Cedric and I sat with fishing lines unmoving in the placid waters of a small brook. "You've been jumpy all day."

"I wasn't going to tell you, yet. I wanted it to be a surprise, but I'm too excited to keep this a secret. My cousin Mediera is coming to stay with us for the rest of the summer. You'll love her. She's a year younger than we are, only thirteen, but she's great - she's my best friend."

I suppose I should have been excited to meet this girl, but I wasn't. I didn't want Cedric to have another friend. I didn't want someone else to invade our idyllic time together, and I didn't want to lose him.

"That's great," I lied, focusing my attention on the water.

"Yeah, we'll have the best time. Her parents are sending her here from Barriershire."

"Barriershire?"

"Yes. Lord and Lady Evangiline of Barriershire are her parents."

"I'm surprised she doesn't spend her time with your sister Clara?"

"They always argue. Clara is impossible for anyone to get along with."

"I wish we could stay here all day," I said quickly, changing the subject. I pulled a dandelion clock out of the ground with my left hand and blew its spores through the air.

"Me too, but we need to get back. Thellium is teaching Thomas and I how to speak Candelish. Does he instruct you in languages as his apprentice?"

“Yes,” I grimaced. “Thellium has started teaching me Southee and Candelish. I have to learn how to write in those languages too. It’s difficult.”

“Learning Candelish will be helpful for me. I hear it’s easier to advance in the military if you’re fluent in at least one other language.”

I laughed. “Your father will never let you enlist in the Seven Shires Armies. I don’t know why you keep thinking that it’s going to happen.”

“Let me! I’m not going to give them a chance to let me. I’m going to run away on my eighteenth birthday.”

“Yeah, sure you will.”

“You’ll see. I’ll race you back to the house.” We dropped our fishing rods by the water and ran. Neither Cedric nor I looked back at the forgotten rods, even though we had spent one long week whittling and stringing them.

A week later, I was working in Thellium’s room, copying a tedious history of the last war between Candel and the Seven Shires. Appropriate, I thought, that I was doing copy work in the same language that Cedric was learning to speak. Thellium was up in the north tower lecturing Cedric and his brother, and I was alone.

I heard a knock on the door and opened it to find a girl standing in front of me in a halo of golden curls. I knew who she was, she had been introduced in the main dining hall the evening before; she was Mediera Evangiline, the daughter of the Lord Evangiline of Barriershire and Cedric’s cousin.

“Anais?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s me, and you’re Mediera.”

Mediera nodded and entered the room, even though I hadn’t invited her in. “Cedric told me all about you after I arrived yesterday.”

“Is that so?”

She nodded with a devilish grin, and flounced onto a chair. “I think it’s good for him to have someone to spend time with. Of course, he wouldn’t need you if I were here more frequently.”

I pursed my lips. Who did this girl think she was? “Perhaps, but whatever would he do while you are learning to fold your hands and legs, whilst plastering a fake smile on your face?”

Mediera laughed. “Fair play. I have to practice etiquette. It’s miserable. Visiting Brightshire is my only escape from my governess and our finishing lessons. My parents ship me out here every summer.”

“Do you have to take lessons with Clara and her governess?”

“I used to, until Clara complained about my lack of propriety. She takes everything so seriously.”

“I think we should find something amusing to do,” I said.

“What do you have in mind?” she asked.

“I know where Cedric hides a set of blunt-edged rapiers, we could practice fencing. Cedric fences with me sometimes to help him perfect his technique.”

“I hope you don’t encourage his military aspirations.”

“No, but they do sometimes seem like nice dreams.”

Mediera smirked. “Let’s go. Will you get in trouble for leaving?”

“We’ll find out.” I grinned.

In a hidden section of the gardens that Cedric and I often frequented, Mediera and I giggled while we practiced fencing. When I fenced with Cedric, he considered every blow as serious as life and death, but with Mediera it was more of a joke.

“How dare you defy me,” Mediera shouted, “I am the King of the Seven Shires, and you are merely a mage, Grayson, take that.” Mediera pointed her rapier at me about to attack.

“Those are your last words. I am going to remove your heart with my blade, and bring peace to the realm.” I defended myself from Mediera’s blow and thrust my rapier in the air where she had stood a moment before.

Mediera jumped backwards. “You may have taken my traitorous wife, but you will not defeat me!” Mediera started laughing, threw down her weapon, and fell onto the grass floor.

“I’ve missed this,” she gasped.

I fell to the ground next to her giggling.

Mediera turned to me with a critical eye. “You’re very pretty, did know that?”

“Don’t be silly.” I blushed.

“I’m not. We should get you some new dresses though. You dress like a servant.”

“I *am* a servant.”

“No you’re not. A scribe isn’t a servant. You are an independent; you may dress in whatever manner you wish. You have more freedom than I do.”

“I suppose. It’s strange though. Where would I even be able to buy nice clothes?”

“We’ll hijack Clara’s dressmaker, tomorrow.”

“Hey, were you two fencing without me?” Cedric entered the hidden garden and dropped to the ground next to us.

“Yes we were, Ceddie,” Mediera said sweetly.

“Don’t call me Ceddie.”

“Hmmm, what will you do for me if I promise to stop?”

“Anything.”

“Do you think Anais is pretty?”

Cedric's eyes widened. "Sure, I suppose."

"Well, I think she's adorable. All that midnight colored hair, such flawless porcelain skin, and eyes like fog. We're going to have her fitted for dresses tomorrow."

"No you're not. The three of us are going to the market tomorrow. Anais needs to pick up supplies for Thellium."

"Fine, we'll get her fitted after we go to the market."

"When did you start caring about clothes, Medi?"

"I don't know. I care. It doesn't mean anything."

Cedric winced. "I don't want you to grow up."

"I won't, not really," Mediera said.

I stood, trying to lessen my intrusion into their conversation, their world.

"Are you leaving?" Cedric asked.

"Yes, I need to get back to my work with Thellium."

"Okay, but don't forget tomorrow the three of us are going to the market, and don't let Medi force you into the whole dress thing," Cedric said.

"I'm not forcing her. Tell him."

"She's not forcing me," I agreed and left them to enjoy the sun and the garden.

Against my intentions, I couldn't help but like Mediera Evangiline.

The next afternoon, Mediera lounged on my bed as I modeled my new pale blue day dress.

"You look perfect. Don't get me wrong, I was jealous when I saw that you were allowed to wear trousers, but you should have one nice dress. It's an absolute necessity."

"It's exquisite. Thank you. I would never have had the courage to use Clara's dressmaker without you. I hope she doesn't find out," I said as I twirled around in a circle.

"Oh I don't know, it's always fun to upset her."

"You're terrible."

Mediera jumped up on my bed and fell down laughing; my pillow flew up into the air revealing the blue scarf. My eyes widened, and Mediera picked it up and ran her hands over it.

"What a lovely scarf. I think I had one like it once." Her eyes moved down to the embroidered initials, and her fingers traced over them. "Hey, that's my monogram! This is mine!"

I bit my lower lip. "I know. I took it from the laundry a few years ago."

"Hm, you can have it if you want. I have hundreds; I always lose them."

"Thanks," I said with a small frown.

Mediera rolled over on the bed. “Did Cedric tell you that Thomas and I are betrothed?” she asked, forgetting the scarf as if it didn’t matter at all.

“No. You seem too young to think of marriage,” I said. “Do you love him?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He’s nice enough, but he’s always busy with his father, I never get to spend any time with him. I suppose it will be for the best. I’ll live here someday and be Lady Seve of Brightshire. It’s hard for me to believe. My brother will be the Lord of Barriershire. It’s so funny to imagine us as grownups.”

“Will it be terrible to leave your home?”

“Not really. I like it here.” Mediera hopped off my bed. “Let’s go find Cedric.”

“I can’t. I have to go to Thellium’s rooms. I haven’t finished some copying work that I promised I would have done today,” I lied.

“Okay ... I had fun today.”

Mediera slipped out of the room, and I changed out of the dress and back into my trousers, white blouse, and thick brown belt. The dress was nice, but for today, impractical. Instead of going to Thellium’s room, I brought the book and the scarf out to a secluded alcove in the garden. I had begun to prefer the ease of staying within the Great House grounds to the long trek into the woods, even though there was a risk I could get caught.

I tried again to raise the scarf, and again failed. I thought maybe my power would have returned. Now that I had Cedric and Mediera, I wanted the magic back. I wanted the power to protect them. But it didn’t seem to matter what I wanted. It seemed the magic had fled. I feared leaving the book in my room, now that Mediera had access to it. She was in no way discreet. I dug a hole in the soft earth and buried the book, carefully wrapped in linens stolen from the laundry, and draped the scarf around my neck. I would have to be content with my new life. I would have to be content without magic.

One rainy day near the end of the summer, Mediera, Cedric, and I sat in Cedric’s room playing a game of dice. Mediera was winning. We were betting coppers, and I was getting nervous that I would end up parting with more coins than I could spare.

“Do you know of any secret passages in the Great House?” Mediera asked. “We have one at our estate in Barriershire. My brother and I found it last year.”

“Of course,” Cedric responded. “There’s one in the clock room.”

“Really?” I asked.

“No, there isn’t,” Mediera said.

“Sure there is.” Cedric hit her playfully on the arm.

“Where does it go?” Mediera asked.

“I don’t know. I think there are bats in it. I’ve never followed it all the way through.”

“We should go explore it; that would be fun,” I said trying to put a stop to the dwindling of my pile of coppers.

The clock room was not a room full of clocks, as I had imagined. One large grandfather clock loomed in a corner of the room, imported from the West by a previous Lord many years ago. The rest of the room was empty. Cedric pressed a round stone, on one wall and an opening appeared out of nowhere, revealing a secret passageway.

“Wow,” I said. “You were telling the truth.”

“Would I lie?”

Cedric, Mediera and I crammed together in the dark crawl space and crept down the narrow passage single file. “Shush, I hear something,” Mediera whispered as she led our crusade.

“What?” Cedric asked from the back running into me and causing me to stumble into Mediera.

The three of us tumbled down a ramp and out of a large fireplace opening. Covered in char, we lifted ourselves off the ground and found ourselves facing Lord Seve, Thomas, Thellium, and a roomful of other men sitting around a large square oak table. Lord Seve was a bear of a man with a mane of golden brown hair, a large sweeping mustache and beard. He looked angry.

“Is that you, Cedric, under all of that grime?” Lord Seve asked.

“Yes, father.” Cedric looked down to the floor.

“And your cousin, Mediera, I presume.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And who are you?” Lord Seve bellowed at me.

“Anais, sir.”

Lord Seve raised an eyebrow.

“She’s my apprentice,” Thellium murmured.

“I see. It seems that the three of you have nothing better to do than get yourselves into trouble, sneaking around as if you were wastrels. I will make sure that in the future, your time is better employed. Go to your rooms; you are not invited to supper tonight,” Lord Seve said in a low roar.

I left Mediera and Cedric at the set of stairs that led to my room. “I suppose I won’t see you tonight,” I said looking at the two of them.

“I suppose not,” Cedric answered.

I walked up to my room and sat on my bed worrying. Hours later I fell into a fitful sleep.

For Mediera’s last week, Lord Seve proved to be a man of his word; he

prevented the three of us from spending any time together. Mediera had to join Clara in lessons, Cedric had to join Thomas in all of his activities, and Thellium tasked me with enough work to keep me awake every night until well past midnight.

“Mediera, I wish you didn’t have to leave,” Cedric said as the three of us met in my room, one last time, on the evening before Mediera was scheduled to depart.

“Well, I’m glad I’m leaving. I don’t think I can live through another afternoon being compared to Clara,” she said.

“I’ll miss you,” I told her.

“I’ll miss you too.” She smiled and hugged us each tightly. “Both of you. I’ll send you letters in the monthly post.”

“We’ll send you letters too,” Cedric promised.

As Mediera left the next morning, I watched her carriage depart from the north tower. Cedric was down in the courtyard with the rest of his family seeing her off. I was alone.

CHAPTER 7

“MY FATHER ASKED me to start attending his council sessions,” Cedric said as we pulled our sleds to the top of the snow-covered hill. “What are they like?”

“Tiresome.” I shrugged. “I sit in a corner taking notes. I don’t say anything.”

At Thellium’s request, I had been attending the council sessions to record notes for the last few weeks. He had traveled north to Barriershire, and he thought it best to have an impartial observer update the archives.

“I don’t really want to go. What is my father like in the meetings?”

“He yells a lot. I don’t know why he asks for opinions if he intends to disagree with everything.”

“That’s my father.” Cedric rolled his eyes.

“Thomas doesn’t speak much. I keep expecting him to stand up and take charge. Doesn’t he become Lord Seve when he turns eighteen? That must be fairly soon.”

“One year, until Thomas is of age. Thomas has always been internal. It doesn’t surprise me that he keeps quiet in council sessions.” Cedric paused.

“Anais, do you know why Thellium is visiting Barriershire?”

“He wouldn’t tell me,” I answered.

“Hmm, that’s curious. He’s been traveling a lot.”

We both took one more run in our sleds down the snowy hill. I tumbled to the ground at the bottom, and the flakes of snow that covered my hair and clothes melted as we walked back to the Great House.

Cedric, Thomas and I spent the three hours of the next council session in silence, me with a quill in hand, while the other men at the table discussed next season’s crops, crop rotation strategies, crop fertilizers, the slaughtering and smoking of pigs, sheep and cows, and taxes. I struggled to keep my eyes open.

Sister Sebella stood and said, “I would like to reopen the discussion of the construction of an abbey for the people of Brightshire.” Sister Sebella was visiting Brightshire, and had insisted on being granted an audience at the council session.

“No,” Lord Seve roared. “No abbey will be constructed in Brightshire. The

sisters are nothing but trouble. I tolerate you, as I tolerate Thellium, but I will not relinquish taxes to support an abbey.”

Sister Sebella’s jaw clenched as she sat back down.

A squire from the Blumstead farming district stood. “Have there been any more unexplained deaths?” he asked.

Moricutt, Brightshire’s sheriff, stood. “Three this month.”

Lord Seve frowned. “At least the count is down.”

The squire stayed on his feet and asked, “Is there still no response from the West? Did you report that you suspect that furies are rising in the Southlands?”

Lord Seve sighed. “I send word each month to my ambassador, and each month he sends word back that the western lords discount our suspicions. The soldiers who hail from our district are returning, but the majority of the army will remain in the West.”

“Lord Seve, it may be best if you visit court yourself to voice our concerns,” the squire suggested.

“Perhaps, but I do not intend to leave Brightshire in these dark times.”

“Lord Seve, I believe it would be useful to at least request that the remaining mages return to determine if these deaths are truly the result of furies,” the squire continued. “And if the worst case is true, and the furies are not just wandering but mobilized, we need the army and support from the mage community. We cannot stand alone.”

“I do not support the return of power to the mages.” Lord Seve’s hand crashed down on the table. “Magecraft is evil. The solution can only be with the Seven Shires Army, and if Courtshire will not send the army, they certainly won’t send what few mages can be unearthed from the sewers.”

The squire frowned, but did not argue further.

“If there’s nothing else, I will adjourn this session,” Lord Seve said.

Lord Seve looked at me. “Anais, please summarize your notes and come by my office this evening so that we can discuss your record.”

“Yes, sir,” I murmured.

As I walked out of the council room in the wake of the squires, I overheard their strained conversation.

“It’s a travesty that Lord Seve continues to vote against reinstating the mages. He never listens to me,” the squire who had spoken in the meeting whispered.

The other nodded. “It’s no wonder he can’t get support from the West, when he holds on to such antiquated beliefs. He’s the last hold out. I’m taking my family away from Brightshire. We have no hope here.”

I caught up with Cedric and walked beside him. “What did you think?” I asked him.

“Everyone seems tense and angry,” he replied, frowning.

“I know.” I bit my lower lip.

“I didn’t realize that my father’s missives to Courtshire had been ignored.”

“It makes sense, who wants to believe that furies might infest the Seven Shires again,” I said.

“The last time the furies rose and attacked, the mages and the army pushed them back. It will be different now, with no centralized magic community. We might not be able to do it again. I wish we could figure out if furies were behind the murders. If the West would send us one mage to sense out the root the murders we could know for certain,” Cedric said.

“So you’ve changed your mind about mages?”

“Maybe.”

We turned down a secluded hallway. “Cedric, there’s something I have to tell you.” I exhaled.

“What is it?”

“Last autumn I bought a book.”

“Uh huh.”

“A book on magic, a book that describes how to perform spells.”

“No ... no way. Why didn’t you tell me?” Cedric whispered.

“I don’t know. I suppose I was scared. I didn’t tell anyone.”

Cedric inhaled sharply, and stopped in the middle of the hallway, his back to the wall. I sank against the wall next to him.

“Can you cast spells?”

“I could cast a small levitation spell, and I cast a spell to find Kirsten.” I bit my lower lip. “The night that we met...”

“I can’t believe it. This is amazing.”

“But, it doesn’t work anymore. Every spell I tried after that night failed.”

“Can I see the book?”

“I buried it.”

“You what?”

“I buried it in the garden.”

“Why did you do that?”

“I was scared that someone would find it and I would get in trouble.”

“What if it gets damaged or someone else digs it up? We should go get it.”

“We can’t get it now. Someone would see us.”

“What about after dark tonight?”

“I can’t. I have to summarize the meeting for your father.”

“Tomorrow, we will dig it up tomorrow. I won’t wait any longer than that.”

I sighed. I knew that telling Cedric about the book was inevitable, but losing

sole control over it worried me.

“Okay, we’ll get it tomorrow night,” I promised.

Late the next evening, I dressed in a fur-lined coat, a gift that Mediera had sent me through the post from Barriershire. It was expensive to send letters, and I couldn’t imagine how much it had cost her to send the coat. I also wore a white wool hat pulled tight over my hair that I had pulled back into a messy knot. My leather satchel that held the salt, stones and scarf, rested against my shoulder. As I waited for Cedric, I saw the moon looming large and bright from my bedroom window, and I felt grateful that it would be in the sky to light our way tonight.

I didn’t notice Cedric slip into my room. “Are you ready?” he asked.

I jumped startled by his voice. “Yes.” I nodded.

I followed him out into the garden and showed him the spot where I had buried the book. The ground was now stiff and frozen. Cedric and I tried to dig into the earth with our hands, but blood from our ice bitten fingers seeped into the soil.

“This isn’t going to work,” I panted.

“You’re right. I’ll get a shovel.”

I stood in the shadows waiting for Cedric and feeling nervous. He returned with a broad iron shovel, and I watched him dig a shallow hole into the earth. When he uncovered the book, we removed the frozen dirt from its cover by hand.

“It looks okay,” Cedric said as he flipped through the moist pages. “Does it have a spell to figure out how the people are dying?”

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“It’s hard to read. The language is archaic,” Cedric commented.

“It took me forever to be able to decipher parts of it.”

“Well, maybe you should look,” he suggested.

I took the book from Cedric, and sat next to him on the ground. My breath showed dense and heavy in the air, and I fell into a fit of shivering.

“C’mon Anais, we need to know what’s happening.”

“Okay, okay.” I paged through the book, and stopped at a passage near the end. “This one might work. It’s supposed to cause the spell caster to dream the last night of someone’s life.”

“Perfect. Can we cast it now?”

“No. We need something they were wearing the night they died.”

“Hmm, that might be difficult.”

“You think?” I asked, my question laced with sarcasm.

“But not impossible.”

Thinking of Kirsten, I shuddered.

“The bodies of the dead are kept in wooden coffins in the graveyard. We could steal something off of one of the bodies, some piece of clothing.”

I paused. Even though I wasn't sure if I even wanted to try casting this spell, I was taken in by Cedric's excitement. “I suppose we can try it. But, we shouldn't go to the graveyard tonight, it would be too dangerous.”

“We'll go early tomorrow morning. We need to get there before the gravedigger arrives.”

“Fine,” I groaned, not eager for an early morning jaunt through the graveyard.

The next morning, Cedric and I walked to the cemetery and climbed over the low stone walls that fenced the grounds. Cedric and I stole a shoe off an old man whose body rested in a cheap coffin waiting to be buried. The old man had the same long gashes on his face that had mutilated Kirsten, and one of his legs appeared to have been gnawed to shreds. I turned away from the dead man's empty stare, burying my face in Cedric's shoulder. Cedric seemed surprised at this intimacy, but not upset.

The next evening we met again in the hidden alcove in the garden. A dense fog surrounded us and blurred the scene. “We should both get in the circle,” Cedric said. “Our chances might be better if we both cast the spell.”

“Maybe,” I admitted, drawing a large messy circle of salt. I stared at the ground. “I don't have enough salt.”

“It doesn't matter, we'll make it thinner.” Cedric knelt down and thinned out the line.

“I don't know, Cedric. I've never done this with two people.” I frowned.

“It'll be okay. We have to find out what's happened to those people.”

We sat and I cut the inside of my wrist, and let my blood trickle onto the earth. Cedric cut himself too and we watched our blood pool together on the hard icy ground. Cedric and I spoke the words of the chant written in the book in unison, although the words were meaningless. I didn't know what to expect. We waited, and waited, motionless and silent.

A figure cloaked in darkness emerged from the fog. As he approached, I grasped Cedric's hand, breathing shallow nervous breaths.

“Thellium?” I asked, when I could distinguish the form of my master.

“Do you have any idea what you've done?” Thellium growled.

“So you're back then,” Cedric said lightly. I glanced at him. How could he be flippant about this?

Thellium glared. “Get up, and give me that book.”

I stood and handed the book to Thellium, staring at the ground. Cedric pulled himself up languidly and eyed Thellium with an impish grin.

“Cedric Seve, you’ve committed a grievous crime.”

“Perhaps. But, what harm has it done? Why does everyone talk about magic as if it will destroy the world? We are trying to figure out if furies are here in Brightshire. No one else is going to aid us; no one is coming to protect our lands; no one is doing anything. We have to take responsibility.”

Thellium sighed. “Performing powerful magic this close to the Southlands will rip apart the boundary.” Thellium paused.

“What boundary?” I asked softly.

“An age ago, after the last rising of the furies, the mages of the Seven Shires erected a boundary that lies on the border between the Southlands and Brightshire to prevent the furies from crossing into our lands.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said softly.

“Very few people know. The secret was meant to prevent panic, but it may have been wiser to share it with the public, especially now with the current cries for the return of the mages. How long have you been practicing magic?”

Cedric and I looked at each other. “This was the first spell we tried together,” Cedric admitted.

“But not the first spell? Anais? The truth please.”

“I bought the book over a year ago. I performed a few levitation spells, and a locator spell. But, I haven’t been able to get any of the spells to work for a long time. I stopped trying. This was the first one I’ve attempted since the summer,” I answered, shivering.

“It’s freezing out here, let’s go inside and talk,” Thellium said. We followed him through the dark frozen grounds to the stone walkway that led into a side entrance to the Great House. He then led us through a dark hallway and up the spiraling staircases to his room. Cedric and I sat in the leather chairs near the fire, while Thellium paced. As I played with my fingers, Cedric sprawled his legs out in front of him and stared up at the ceiling.

“Magic has to be fueled,” Thellium began. “A mage, or in your case a foolish amateur, fuels magic either from reserves in their body or from blood magic, which draws power from the earth. Drawing magic from your body is the simplest method, and I hope, the only thing you would have been able to accomplish at this point. If you try to use magic from your body, and you don’t have enough magic within yourself, you will suffer from bad headaches, nosebleeds, and cramping. The more complicated the magic, the worse off you are in terms of pain and the harder it is to replenish what you used. Did you feel any of these effects?”

I nodded. “Yes. I had a bad nosebleed and headache after the locator spell, and after that everything I tried failed.”

Thellium looked at me and nodded. "Good. You burned out. I hope that's all that happened."

"Did I make things worse? Do you think I caused the furies to rise? Am I responsible for the people who died?" I asked with quivering lips.

"No." Thellium sighed. "The kind of magic you performed isn't powerful enough to draw the furies. It is the second method that wrecks havoc. As you experienced, your body only holds a fixed amount of potential magic. Once you use it up, there is nothing left, and the byproducts stay harmlessly inside you. However, when mages draw fuel from the earth and use their blood as a catalyst, the reaction that occurs between the blood and the soil is unclean. The reaction produces a residue in the air that the furies smell. If the reaction is very strong, you can see an ashy byproduct, it is that ash - that residue - that draws the furies. Even though you spilled your blood, it's very unlikely you could have used blood magic; it's much more likely that you used up your internal supply. Blood magic is extremely difficult, very few mages ever succeed in using it." I remembered the ash I had seen after levitating the scarf, but I kept silent.

Thellium continued, "And even if by some chance you used a little blood magic, the erosion of the boundary has been occurring for longer than you've been alive. This has been a slow process. There are blood mages active in Candel, and even though the Seven Shires outlawed magery, there are still practitioners of the art in our realm in hiding. The residues from their activities have been diffusing to the boundary and destroying it for years. However hard I've tried, it's proved impossible to stamp magic out of our world."

"Why," Cedric started, "Why would a mage ever use blood magic if they knew about the furies?"

"Because they can extract much more energy from the earth with blood, and at little sacrifice to themselves. That initial surge of power is a rush, and what they can accomplish with it, is almost limitless. Before the war, blood mages operated whole cities - every convenience was supplied by their power. Droughts and famines were a memory, everything that the people needed or desired was provided by a few, seemingly innocent trickles of blood. The world was a different place then."

"And those who still practice?"

"It is a difficult temptation to resist. Risk versus reward."

"How do you know all of this? How did you find us?" I asked Thellium, suddenly suspicious.

"Because he is or was a mage," Cedric answered. "There is no other explanation." Cedric turned to face Thellium.

"Yes, Cedric, I was a mage," Thellium acknowledged. "A long time ago,

before I understood the terrible repercussions our actions would have on the world, I was a mage. I've given it up."

"But, that must have been ages ago?" Cedric asked. "Magic has been illegal for a century at least."

"We live longer than most, even those of us who turned away from the art," Thellium answered.

"You already knew this was happening? You know, for sure, that furies are killing people?" Cedric asked.

"Yes, Cedric, I know. I haven't been visiting Barriershire; I've been traveling to the boundary to assess the damage done. As of now, only a few have crossed, but we have very little time before the boundary is completely eroded. And then all bets are off. Your father knows too. There is no question."

"Then, where is the army?" Cedric asked.

"The western lords refuse to send it."

"That's unfair!"

"Yes, perhaps it is. There isn't much we can do to force their hands. It's late, and I've told you too much already. You should both get to sleep. We'll sort through this mess in the morning." Thellium turned away from us, my book tucked gently beneath his arm. "Go, get out of here," he said.

Cedric and I returned to our rooms in silence. I couldn't believe our situation. It seemed hopeless. If the monsters that had ripped apart those people were left un-hunted, free, what hope was there? And almost as bad, had I just lost Thellium? Had I just lost my position as his apprentice? He must hate me. I was so confused. How was I supposed to sleep after all of this? After Cedric left me, I tried to stay awake, but I felt so heavy, like I was merging into my bed.

I screamed. My leg, something had my leg. I looked up at the slick dark creature that held me pegged to the ground. Another one crawled towards me, and slashed at my face with long sharp talons. Cold seeped into my bones, and I faded away.

~ End of Part One ~

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THANK YOU FOR reading the 2015 revised edition of *Anais of Brightshire*. I hope you enjoyed the story. Book 2, titled *Anais of the Stolen Road*, Book 3, titled *Anais of Gable's House*, and Book 4, titled *Anais of the Protector's Path*, are currently available at select retailers. A boxed set of the first three books, titled *The Anais Collection*, is also available now. I am in the process of writing Book 5, tentatively titled *Anais and the Broken War*. The first chapter of Book 2 is included below.

ANAIS OF THE STOLEN ROAD: CHAPTER 1

DEAREST ANAIS,

I spent today's lesson time hiding in a cupboard in Mildred's rooms. She was quite agitated that she couldn't find me and complained to my mother. In response, my mother - normally such a sweet woman - has instructed that I stay in my rooms tonight and not attend the dinner or the festivities planned for Lord Reginald Pendragon's visit. I've enclosed with this note a rather pretty ruby pendant that Lord Pendragon gifted me last evening. Although it's very nice, I fear that he has given it to me for unnerving reasons. My brother is very sick, and there has been talk that if he dies I will have to break my betrothal to Thomas and marry some westerner, who will rule Barriershire through me. I don't like it at all. I think Lord Pendragon wishes me to marry his youngest son, assuming my brother dies. His son is awful and I hate him.

My love always,
Give my best to dearest Cedric,
Mediera Evangiline

Dearest Mediera,

I'm sorry to hear of your brother's illness. There have been many who have fallen ill in Brightshire, as well. Cedric says that Thomas is bedridden. I will ask the sister of mercy to pray that both Thomas and your brother recover, and that you never have to marry against your will. Thellium has been occupied trying to help Thomas, so I have been left with little to fill my time. Although, the truth is that even before Thomas fell ill, Thellium and I had been on difficult terms. I don't know what will happen to me if Thellium decides he no longer wishes to keep me as his apprentice. It's a constant unspoken threat and I can hardly bear it. I don't feel free to tell you in this letter about the details of the unfortunate situation that caused me to fall out of Thellium's favor, but when you visit, I'll tell you everything. Cedric and I are anxiously awaiting the summer and being with you once again.

All of my love,

Anais

Dearest Anais,

This letter has to be my last for awhile. I've begged Mildred to find a runner in the market to deliver it instead of using our post, for I'm certain my letters are being seized. Lord Pendragon returned to Ellshire, but he left his son Colin. My father named Colin Sheriff of Barriershire, and I'm certain my father is ceding too many decisions to him. Colin says my family must leave the Great House, that the country air will be better for my brother. He will rule the city in my family's absence. I think my father is making a grave mistake, but he will not listen to me. I fear I will not be allowed to visit Brightshire this summer. Do not send a letter in response. Colin has replaced all of the women in our household besides Mildred, and I think any word you send will be intercepted before it reaches me. I am scared of what the future holds. I will write again when I find a safe method. I hope this letter finds you well.

Give Cedric my love,
Mediera Evangiline

I never told Mediera about the spell that Cedric and I had cast so many months before. I hinted about it in the letters, but I feared that if she knew I had dabbled, she would hate me. I thought that if Cedric and I could tell her in person, we could make her understand.

I shook a pair of cold bone dice in my hands and threw them onto a wooden square we had set on my bed. Five and six. I smiled and placed my hand on the small pile of coppers.

Cedric rolled his eyes. "That's your sixth win in a row. You must be cheating."

I shook my head. "You're just having a run of bad luck. Another game?"

"No," he growled. "Did you know that they're going to hang Ceven?"

"He's the guard who went mad last month and killed that shopkeeper in the market, right?"

"That's him. He'll be executed in the square next week."

I nodded. "Good. I'll watch." I had seen the shopkeeper's children weeping. I had no pity for the man who was responsible for their grief.

"I saw him in a cell in the guard's tower. His eyes had changed. They turned solid black and shiny - looked like stones of onyx. It was strange and scary."

Black eyes, I thought. I wondered if that meant something. The boy in the cage at the market I saw so many years ago - his eyes had been solid black too. Sometimes, I attempted to scratch out the image of him that seemed so etched

into my memory. But the more I tried to erase him, the brighter his face appeared in his mind. He was always with me.

A sharp knock interrupted our conversation.

I opened the door to find a winded scull, clearly a runner from the kitchens. The boy's thick mop of ashy hair was prettily disheveled, and his cheeks glowed bright and rosy.

"Are you Anais?" he asked.

"Yes." I was curious - I had hoped for weeks that Mediera would have found a way to send another letter - perhaps he held a note from her.

"Your father requests you return home. Your mother is very ill."

"What?" That wasn't what I had expected at all. "My mother?"

"Who sent the message?" Cedric asked.

"I have no idea." The boy shrugged.

I handed one of my coppers to the boy.

He flicked it in the air, caught it, and grinned, before running off.

Cedric looked at me, his forehead creased. "You never speak of your family."

"There's not much to say." I stood and paced the small confines of my room. I would have to go home, of course. Perhaps she had recovered already - not everyone died of this sickness.

"Are you going to go home?"

"Yes, I think I must. I should go talk to Thellium before I depart. Even though he hardly speaks to me, it feels wrong just to leave." I was officially apprenticed to Thellium Vance, who acted as a scribe in the Great House, but lately - ever since he caught Cedric and I trying to cast a spell in the courtyard - he had grown distant. I feared he would tell me he didn't want me as an apprentice any longer.

"I think you are being too difficult on Old Thell. He's just anxious about Thomas."

I narrowed my eyes and frowned at Cedric. How could he act like that night never happened? How could he act like things just went back to normal with Thellium? Did he even care? "I think it's more than that, Cedric. He hates me."

Cedric rolled his eyes. "You mean because we played around with that book. It was just a game, nothing happened. He overreacted. We didn't do anything wrong."

I grimaced. Maybe it wasn't real to him, because it didn't work for him. I never asked him if he dreamt of the dead man that night after we cast the spell. My dream had been so horrible that I was afraid to speak of it aloud. And here he was acting like it didn't matter at all. The truth was I knew why he didn't care. To him, Thellium was just a servant, and his feelings were irrelevant. For

that matter, so were mine.

“How are you going to travel?” He smiled and blithely changed the subject.

“I don’t know.” I sank back against the stone wall, grateful for its support. “I suppose I’ll go to the market and see if I can find Gil. He could take me home.”

“He might escort you home, but there’ll be no guarantee you’ll come back. I’ll go with you. We’ll borrow horses from the stable.”

“We? You aren’t coming with me.”

“I’m not letting you go alone.” His lips pressed firmly together and he glowered, an expression that he often formed when he was trying to get his way.

“Cedric, be serious. I may be able to disappear for a few days, but you certainly can’t.”

“I’m coming.” He stared at me, his gaze firm. He put his hands on my shoulders.

I closed my eyes and inhaled sharply. Did I really wish to stop him? “Fine.”

When I requested a leave of absence from Thellium, his only response was a distracted nod. His lack of interest caused my stomach to twist up in concern, a too familiar feeling these days.

Cedric and I walked to the stables in silence. Addie, who had advanced to lead stable hand, provided us with our mounts. Her hair was shorn so short she looked like a boy. I grinned at her wordlessly. Her promotion must have been recent, for we hadn’t crossed paths in the stables before and only lead stable hands interacted with the members of the Seve household. She smiled a broad open smile back at me, and touched my hand briefly after she helped me gain my seating.

“Are you friends with that servant who gave us the horses?” Cedric asked in a harsh tone as we rode out into the field.

“Yes.” I didn’t feel like trying to explain my relationship with Addie. Cedric wouldn’t understand.

“I see,” Cedric grunted.

“Is that a problem?”

“No. I’m sorry, let’s just forget it.”

The mood between us darkened as we rode on, perhaps aided by the overcast sky and my fears over my mother’s health. We were moving at a fast pace, making it quicker than my initial trip with Gil. It only took four hours before we approached my family’s land on the river. We stopped our horses a mile from my old house. “We can’t take the horses any further. The land’s too marshy. It would be dangerous.”

“It doesn’t even look safe for us to walk here.”

“Are you afraid, brave Cedric?” I taunted.

“Me? Never. Lead me onward.”

We tethered the horses to a tree and walked, careful of our footing, while moving long jagged brushes out of the way with our hands.

“Shyte!”

“What happened?”

“My hand...” I lifted up my arm and showed him a long scratch extending from my palm to my elbow.

“Does it hurt?” he asked as he touched my shoulder.

“Not really. I was just surprised.” I looked up to his eyes and then turned my face toward the horizon, where a small house lay hidden in a mess of vines. “This is it,” I said quietly, pointing to my old home. Built of marsh wood and roofed with thatched brushes, the house seemed smaller than I remembered.

“Should we knock?”

“No,” I whispered to him. I put my right hand up to my mouth, and called loudly, “Hallo!”

The door swung open, and a young man with tousled blonde hair poked his head through the opening. “Who’s there?” he called.

“It’s me, Anais,” I called in answer.

He opened the door wider and ran out to me, while whooping loudly. He threw me over his shoulder and twirled me around before dropping me to the ground in front of him. “My god, sister, I thought we would never see you again.”

“Oh, Simon, I’ve missed you. It’s been so long.” I didn’t want him to let me go.

“Look at you,” he cried, eyeing me up and down. “You’re all grown up.”

Even though I didn’t agree with him, I smiled. I was still the same little girl I was when I left. It felt as if nothing had changed. “Is Mah okay? I received a message that she was ill.”

Simon’s long narrow form deflated. “Oh sweet sister, I’m sorry to be the one to tell you.” He inhaled sharply. “Mah’s dead. She held on as long as she could.”

“I’m too late then.”

“Yes. We sent Gil with the message a few weeks ago. We hoped you would get here sooner.”

I breathed deeply, and fought the stinging that threatened my eyes.

“Where are Dah and Petey?”

“On the water. I would have been with them, except someone has to stay home and salt the fish, now that Mah’s gone. When Dah comes back, he’ll take you to Mah’s grave.” Simon turned to Cedric. “Who’s the fella?”

Cedric extended his arm and shook hands with Simon. “My name’s Cedric. I

also live in the Great House. I didn't want Ani to have to make the trip alone."

I glanced sideways at Cedric. I was surprised that he hadn't disclosed that he was Lord Seve's son. But, perhaps he meant to keep it a secret. Revealing his identity would create an immediate sense of tension and separation, and Cedric's situation put him in more than enough scenarios of social isolation, he likely didn't want to step into yet another.

"How kind of you, Cedric." There was a sense of hesitancy in Simon's words, as if he wasn't entirely happy with the presence of an unknown boy in our midst.

Simon turned back to me. "You didn't come with Gil?"

"No, a runner delivered the message. I don't know why Gil didn't find me himself. I hope he's alright." I paused. I didn't want to dwell on Gil's odd method of communicating with me. I looked up at my brother, a half smile forming at the corner of my lips. "We rode horses," I whispered.

"Really, now? Horses! That is exciting. You left them up in the drylands?"

"We tied them to a tree, just where Gil ties up the mules."

Cedric and I helped Simon with gutting and salting at the large wooden block table in the center of the kitchen. Poor Cedric was close to useless. I don't think he'd ever done anything close to manual labor in his entire life. He kept looking at me in confusion as Simon and I walked him through the process.

As the sun started to fade, I got up to make a big pot of fish stew and liberally added spices Gil had brought us from all over the Seven Shires. It didn't take long at all to remember where Mah had everything stashed.

"Oh Anais, I hope Dah can talk you into staying. I miss your cooking desperately. Petey and I have been trying, but we always mess everything up."

"You, hush now Simon. Don't tell your lies."

"I'm serious. It never made any sense that they sent you to Brightshire in the first place. You should have stayed here with us."

"You know Mah insisted."

We heard the sounds of men approaching. I smiled in my certainty that it was Dah and Petey coming home.

"Dah, we have to try the east bank tomorrow. I'm certain..." Petey stopped short as he entered. "Sweet sisters of mercy - Anais, you're home." Petey dropped the satchel he was carrying and embraced me.

I let myself disappear for that one moment in his affection.

"My girl," Dah said with a smile as Petey and I broke our embrace so I could hug him. "My little girl. I was so afraid I would never see you again."

I cried against his shoulder. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here for Mah."

He brushed my hair out of my eyes. "She understood. It was her time."

“I should have visited. I just didn’t think...”

“Shush. We’ll talk about your Mah tomorrow. Tonight let’s celebrate your homecoming and devour whatever concoction you cooked up. The scent of it is dazzling; you were always such a good cook. I should have known you were home based only on the smell.”

“You’re so grown up,” Petey said, as he patted my head. “You must be fourteen now, my beautiful sister. I can hardly believe it.”

I nodded and smiled through my tears. I was so happy to see my father and brothers, my heart felt full in a way I had almost forgotten.

The next morning Dah woke me up at dawn. “Come out with me for a walk, we’ll leave your friend to the hands of your brothers, I’m sure they’ll keep him busy.”

I followed Dah out to Mah’s grave, a simply carved headstone standing alone in a secluded grove. We sat down and I bowed my head and prayed silently to the sisters of mercy, even though I knew they couldn’t help.

Dah patted my head as I cried against his shoulder. “Why did she make me leave?” I choked.

“I hoped you knew by now. Didn’t Anabella find you?”

“Anabella?”

Dah sighed. “There’s so much I need to tell you. I don’t know where to start.”

“Dah. What’re you talking about?”

“The beginning then,” Dah sighed. “There were three sisters, the daughters of the Lord and Lady of Brightshire. Corrine was the eldest, Melise the middle child, and Anabella the youngest. They were beautiful girls, beloved to all of the townspeople. Your Mah, my Magda, was a distant relative of the family, and she came into the household to be Anabella’s handmaiden. Magda looked just like the three sisters, with the same bright blonde curls and big cornflower blue eyes. The girls were sweet to her and treated her just like another sister. They would flit around the market, all four of them, like little birds. I had a shop in town then, where I sold odds and ends that Gil would bring back from his travels. Gil should have run the store, for he was the older brother, but he couldn’t manage to stay in one place for very long. Gil would bring me these pretty little glass figurines from Barriershire. The girls loved them; they would come into my shop at least once a week to look at them.” Dah dabbed his eyebrow with his sleeve and I itched absently at the scratch on my arm.

“When Corrine’s fiancé, Robert of Kinshire, came for the wedding, the sisters were so busy that only Magda still made time to visit my shop. We would talk for hours, and sometimes I would close the shop and she and I would stroll

around the market together. It was lucky for me that I fell in love with Magda. I could never have had a chance with one of the sisters. In truth, I shouldn't have had much of a chance with Magda, but I think with all of the wedding preparations, there was a sense of romance in the air. When I proposed, she was surprised at first, and she took some time to consider. That month I waited was torture. But finally, on the evening after Corrine's wedding, she came to me and gave me my answer." I had never heard this story; I had always imagined that my father had always lived here in the marshes, forever separate from the city.

"We had a small wedding, and lived quite happily in the rooms above my shop. Corrine and Anabella came to the wedding, which was sweet. By that point, Melise had been shipped off to Barriershire, as she was affianced to the Lord of Barriershire's eldest son, Uthur. She was to spend some time there before the wedding, which was set for the following year. Magda was pregnant with Petey less than a year after we married, at the same time that Corrine was pregnant with Thomas. Corrine was so busy, which we understood, so it was only Anabella who would come to visit us, but even her visits eventually stopped. My Magda and I were busy with Petey and then Simon, so although we were sad when Anabella stopped visiting we were so distracted with the children that we didn't give it much thought. And then Corrine died in childbirth with their second child. Although the baby, Clara, survived, the Lord and Lady of Brightshire, just seemed to waste away in their grief. Robert was named the Lord of Brightshire until Thomas came of age, and then he remarried rather quickly. Robert's second marriage was quite the scandal; I think the girl was with child at the time, for a son was born only six months later. That poor boy will never really belong to any class. The talk around town was that the child would have been better off if Robert hadn't married his mother."

Dah paused and cleared his throat. "Oh, but I digress, one grim night, some months after Robert's second marriage, Anabella came to us. She had a little black haired baby with her, a baby with big gray eyes. I had never known Anabella to be so terrified. She gave us the baby and told us to take the baby and leave Brightshire."

"A black haired baby?"

He nodded.

"Me?" I squeaked as I put together the pieces of his story.

He nodded again.

"Anabella told us your name was Anais. She asked us to take you away with us and to hide. She made us promise to send you back to the Great House when you were of an age to serve. She said she would find you and keep you safe. Gil took us out of Brightshire in the back of his cart. Keeping a two-year-old, a

three-year-old, and an infant quiet was no mean feat. Gil drove the mules east until we reached the water. Magda and I were taken with the beauty of the marshes and we made a home here. Sweetheart, you have to understand, we didn't want to let you go. We loved you - we still love you - but we had to keep our promise." Dah brushed his fingers gently against my forehead. "Letting you go was the hardest thing we ever did."

I buried my face in the soft sheepskin of his shirt.

"Anabella never found you?"

"No. I've never even heard of her."

He patted my head. "We shouldn't have sent you back there. We should have kept you. I'm sorry."

I stared hard at him, wordless. I had no idea what to say, my mind was numb.

We stayed near her grave for a long time. Finally, my father stood and took my hand. I expected him to lead me back to the house, but instead he brought me deep into the marshes, toward the ocean. After we pushed aside the final layer of tall reeds, my gaze was broken by a large square-rigged ship, whose three square-rigged masts seemed to scrape the sky. It was far bigger than any fishing sloop I had ever seen.

"Dah?" I asked.

"We're leaving the Seven Shires, for the new world east of the Great Sea. Too many of our own have gotten sick and died, and there is talk of furies rising in the Southlands. I know the idea of furies seems like a bad fairy tale, but, my dear, I think I believe it."

I nodded. "It's true. Lord Seve has sent word to the West requesting the troops be sent across the mountains to fight the furies, but the western lords do not believe."

Dah nodded. "Gavon and Mitchum's families have helped us build the ship, and as soon as Gil returns we're going to leave. In his youth, Mitchum worked on large trading vessels that exported goods out of Barriershire's port. He knew how to build her. We all pitched in on the design and material costs. Will you come with us? Now that you know the truth."

I stared at him. "I don't know," I whispered. "I don't know."

He nodded. "Take a little time and think about it, but don't tell your brothers about our past. They don't need to know."

"The ship's a beauty." I smiled sadly; knowing that the only family I had ever known may be leaving me. "I bet you're excited about getting on the water."

"I am. She's seaworthy. Your friend Cedric can come with us." I think my father must have understood somehow that my reluctance to leave Cedric was, in part, responsible for my uncertainty.

“I doubt he would agree. His ties here are too strong.”

When we returned to the house we all worked together to gut and salt the haul of fish my father and Petey had brought home yesterday. Cedric was slightly less useless than he was yesterday, but I still wondered how obvious it must be that he had no experience with real work.

Cedric and I decided to spend the night sleeping on the floor of my brothers' room on a pile of straw and blankets. But I couldn't sleep.

Bleary eyed, I stole outside and stood alone staring at the twinkling stars while absently scratching my arm. I had picked at the scabs until they bled, and a few drops of blood rolled off my arm and sank into the wet marshy ground below. I felt too young to make this decision. It was unfair. Even after my father's disclosure, I still felt as if Dah and my brothers were my family. How could I not go with them? But if I left, I would never see Cedric or Mediera again. I shuddered. I wished something would happen to make this easier.

“I can't sleep either.” Cedric blundered outside and stood next to me. He placed an arm around my shoulders.

“My Dah and brothers built a boat, and they're going to sail across the ocean to the new world. Do you think I should go with them?” I asked in a whisper. My chest felt hollow at the thought of leaving him.

Cedric's fingers gripped my shoulders and he turned me around so that I could see his eyes boring into mine. “I don't want you to leave me.” Then he cupped my face in his hands and kissed me. It was my first kiss, salty and sweet in the misty light of dusk. It seemed to take an age before we broke apart; perhaps we prolonged it because we were both so scared to deal with the aftermath. I couldn't even start to imagine what it meant.

“You could come too?” I asked breathless, although I knew he would never agree to it.

He took a long time to respond. “No. I'm not going to run away. I can't leave my family if there is really a risk that they could get hurt. And Mediera needs me. I won't abandon her,” Cedric whispered back, his eyes searching mine. I envied his certainty. And as I thought about what he said, I realized that if Anabella was really my mother, then Mediera, Thomas, and Clara were my cousins - my family. My real mother might still be alive somewhere in the Seven Shires. Even if it was a secret, Cedric's family was my family, and my ties to this land were as unbreakable as his.

I shivered as Cedric's arm encircled me again. “I'll stay.” The pieces fell into place. I would stand or fall here in this land with Cedric and Mediera.

That night I dreamt that Cedric and I were kissing in a field of wildflowers, but Cedric changed into the black eyed inhuman boy from the market. Another

boy broke into the field and stabbed the black-eyed boy and told me to run away. But instead of running, I turned into a crow and flew into the sky.

We left the next morning. The bittersweet goodbyes to Dah and my brothers were hard, but I was happy for them. I knew they would have a better chance of survival if they fled from the shores of Brightshire.

“If you change your mind, there are many ships docked at Barriershire’s port that trade with the new world. You could find us,” Petey said as he hugged me goodbye.

“Maybe someday.”

“Deri,” he whispered in my ear.

“What?”

“That’s our family name. I know Dah never told us, but I made him tell me after Mah died. I’m taking the name again once we set up a home. Remember the name Deri.”

I kissed his cheek. “I’ll remember.”

We rode the horses hard in the direction of Brightshire. After we returned them to the stables, I wanted to retreat to my room to consider my new reality, but at the entrance to the Great House, a guard grabbed me.

“You’re the scribe girl?” he asked roughly.

“Yes,” I responded, shrinking away from his grasp.

Cedric grabbed my other arm, and another guard pulled us apart. In the foray, my leather satchel, carrying my most guarded possessions, clattered to the floor.

The guard started dragging me out of the Great House.

“You have no right to take her,” Cedric demanded.

“Lord Seve commanded that she be taken to the guard’s tower immediately.”

“Why?” Cedric asked.

“It’s none of your concern, boy.” The guard grunted in response. I slackened as I realized that I couldn’t pull away from him. I let him take me away.

“I’ll find Thellium. I’ll fix this,” Cedric shouted to me. “You’ll be okay, I swear.”