

2



Particles dance upon the chilled air, moving at my command. They flicker and twirl in the light of a small candle that has melted into shiny globs over a tarnished metal holder. A thin film of snow accumulates on the windowpane, fulfilling the promise the sky made yesterday.

Nellie pokes her flushed face in my open door. “Tambrynn! Good, I caught you before you left.” She steps into the open doorway, her hands behind her back. “Gads, it’s freezing in here!”

I stretch my stiff limbs and stand. I reach for the shawl that isn’t there and self-consciously rake a hand across my silver, braided bun. The shawl hasn’t been returned to me, and I miss its protection. “Adelia sent word that I was not to have any coal or wood last eve. As if being dismissed isn’t punishment enough.” I nod toward wooden planks balanced on crates that serve as my bed. “Sit?”

“I can’t. If I get caught ...” She holds out an old brown cloak with shaking hands. It’s long, several sizes too big for Nellie. “I found this in my room when I arrived. Must’ve been the last

maid's? Anyway, it's far too big for me." A noise echoes from the stairway. Nellie glances behind her, sighing in relief a moment later when nothing materializes. "I'm sorry you were dismissed. It's all my fault."

I'm touched by her generosity and take the cloak from her. I curl my chilled fingers in the fabric. "It's not your fault. If Adelia weren't so vindictive, there would've been plenty of eggs. She's the one to blame."

Nellie glances up. Tears well in her eyes. "Still, I wish it hadn't happened."

I ignore the bees buzzing in my stomach and force a smile. "Me, too. Don't believe everything they tell you, okay?" I wrap the cloak around myself, thankful for the added warmth. I flick the hood up to cover my hair. "Thank you, Nellie. This is the kindest thing anyone's done for me in a long time."

Before I can button the cloak, Nellie is gone. I whisper a quick prayer for her and myself and tuck my arms inside the sleeves. Though it was much too large for Nellie, the cloak is still a bit small for me, falling short of my dress that I'd had to lengthen with other disposed dresses, but I'm thankful for it.

Mrs. Calvin's heavy footsteps sound in the hallway. "It's time, Tambrynn. The attendant will get your things. You need to get moving. 'Twill be dark before you get to Pauper's Square in Grousefield." She levels a harsh glance toward me, though not directly into my eyes, as if waiting for me to answer a question.

I bite my lip to keep my expression neutral, but I can't help the glare I give her, daring her to look at me. I wait a moment before I respond. "No need for an attendant, Mistress. This is all I own." My possessions are few. The leather case I clutch was given to me by an old dairymaid years before, and all I own fits easily inside its small confines.

Cherished among my belongings, though, is an ornate

silver ring. Larger than a signet ring, it has an elaborate tree carved into the metal. Etched inside are words in a strange language I can't read. In the moments before she died, Mother told me it was my inheritance, my salvation, and that I should watch for a man who wore the same ring. He'd bring me safely home.

It had to be my father, though she never spoke of him. I desired to search for him. As a child, I had dreams that he was a king and I was his lost daughter. Like the fairy tales Mother told, there'd be dragons and a handsome prince to put the ring on my finger and return me home to my castle.

The disapproval on Mrs. Calvin's face is a douse of cold wash water.

I sigh, knowing no one would believe the ring, or anything so pricey, would be mine. So it remains tucked inside the scraps of cloth and feathers that make up my pillow.

"Need I inspect your case before you leave?" Mrs. Calvin's narrow nose cuts a sharp line between two charcoal-colored eyes.

I match Mrs. Calvin's glare, looking down into her pinched face. Let her get her fill of my strangeness. By the end of the day, the stories about me will have spun out of control, and I can only imagine the false atrocities I will have committed. "You may look through whatever you wish. I hide nothing." A half-truth, but my conscience is clear.

The cloak is frayed and has a couple of holes, but she flings one side and then the other open to see if I have anything stashed inside. The movement makes the hood fall, and, at that moment, she glances up into my eyes. I have the satisfaction of seeing her momentarily cringe.

She opens the case and rustles through it as if on a mission, finding only a stained dress, worn shift, undergarments, and stockings. She leaves them in a messy pile. My pillow and

blanket she picks up with the tips of her fingers. Her face pinches as if smelling something rotten. She drops them, then turns and walks out to the hallway without another word. Her black skirt swishes as she moves, and the heels of her boots echo through the hall and down the stairs.

I start to replace the hood but stop. A hot flash of defiance rises inside me, and I decide I want to observe their discomfort. I tidy my clothes before stuffing the pillow and blanket inside and hurry after Mrs. Calvin.

I wind my way down the servants' stairs, my suitcase in hand. I spy Cook standing in the shadows of the kitchen with a grin on her face while she waits for me to pass. Had Adelia not lied, and had Cook not been such a bitter, hateful woman, I never would've lost control. Cook won't miss the mole anyway. Maybe she'll thank me when it heals, and she no longer resembles a fat cat.

I remember what I told Nellie about the forest and running away. I'd finally have the freedom I so desire.

No. Surely Mrs. Calvin will send notice to the commonwealth office. If I were ever to be found, I'd be recognized too easily. Even if I could conceal my hair, my eyes would give me away—they're too unique. I'm indentured with no rights, not even to defend myself against anyone's accusations. I'd be sent to the noose. It's a common enough fate for disobedient servants in Tenebris. I fight to hold back the bitterness rising in my throat.

The noise in the kitchen mutes. Hushed words are muttered behind servants' hands. Sweet scents of baked goods fill the air, making my empty stomach pinch with hunger. They'd obviously recouped from the egg devastation of yesterday.

Mrs. Calvin and I march in a procession, reminding me of

the formality of a public hanging in the market square. There's no escape, no use running away.

I hold my head high. My hair, which I'd rebraided and pinned in a bun last night, pulls tight against my scalp as we move through the kitchen, past curious workers at the wooden tables, and toward the back hallway to the pantry. All eyes are upon us, except for Nellie's. She has the grace to turn her head as Mrs. Calvin proudly escorts me in full view of everyone who witnessed yesterday's events.

My chest burns as I swallow my humiliation even as I relish their disbelief and flinches. I refuse to leave without a final act of retribution, though. I swing my hand up to feign pulling at a loose hair behind my ear.

Responding to my unspoken command, the rug bunches up under Mrs. Calvin's feet, and she topples to the floor with a squeal. My lips quiver as I restrain a laugh. Without looking back, I march past her and out the heavy door to the waiting carriage that will take me to my new prison.

Flocks of birds fly overhead. Unlike me, they're headed for a better place.

The driver, a slight man, nods me to the carriage quarters instead of the upper bench without even a glance at me, thank the Kinsman. It is a rare indulgence, to be sure, one I will take advantage of. To my dismay, the magpie perches on the open door. A cold gust of wind ruffles the bird's inky feathers, and though it stares at me, I refuse to look into its dark eyes. It twists its head back and forth as if sizing me up. *Flee*, screams the voice in my head. I swivel around, wishing it were my father, but there's no one here besides the driver and me. I avoid the magpie and grasp the handle to heave myself into the cab.

I take in the dark, forbidding forest. There's no place to run. I swing the carriage door shut, and the bird flutters away. Its

repetitive chatters sound like it's saying, *come, follow me*, over and over. I quench a sudden urge to do what the bird asks. It's ridiculous. Birds don't talk, let alone try to save the likes of a scullery maid.

The carriage creaks under the weight of the driver. With a crack of the whip, the horses jerk into action. We're on our way.

Finally alone, I loosen my posture and unclench my hands. The bruise on my wrist burns from where Adelia gripped it yesterday, so I cradle it to my chest. My bravado extinguishes, and tears dampen my cheeks. I had tried this time, really tried to control myself. Freedom had been so close. A knot of defeat and anguish settles in the pit of my stomach.

The driver heads west onto the narrow road that coils through the dark woods, the quickest path to Grousefield. As Nellie said, all the maids think the forest is haunted. But I've found that people fear that which they can't explain.

And I've learned much of life defies explanation. Like me.

I pray silently to the Kinsman for a miracle to end my servitude forever. An appeal for him to end my cursed gift. It never seems to get answered, but I continue to ask nonetheless.

No one believes in the Kinsman here, at least no one I'd met. But Mother had, and she'd passed that reverence on to me. Even if the almighty Kinsman didn't listen to the petitions of someone as insignificant as me, it doesn't hurt to try.

I pull the quilted pillow and blanket from the case, put the pillow behind my head, wrap the cloak tight, and curl into a ball. For added warmth, I tuck my hands under the fabric. Since I'd worried about when Mrs. Calvin would come to collect me, and it had been so cold, I'd had little rest last eve. I'm grateful to be the only passenger. Otherwise, I'd have had

to sit outside with the driver. I don't envy him this trip, having to face the icy wind and the snow starting to fall.

The wind rocks the coach, the motion lulling me to sleep. I dream of Mother planting herbs in her garden, of picking flowers and playing with a dark-haired boy whose voice speaks to me in my mind. I'm jolted, and the dreams scatter like seeds on a stone floor.

It takes me a moment to gather my wits. The carriage shifts and lurches to the side. The motion throws me from my seat across the interior of the compartment. I fight to sit back up, but we are moving too fast, and the road is too bumpy.

What is happening?

"Whoa! Whoa!"

The driver's alarmed calls set my heart pounding so hard I can hear the beats in my ears. I catch the door handle and pull hard to regain my balance, but the handle moves, and the door opens. The hinge bends and detaches. Mounds of snow and tops of brush weed assault me in a blur of brown and white as I dangle from the hanging door frame.

Frozen flakes pelt my face sharp as needles. My head spins, and I pull myself back inside the carrier as the door moans and cracks. Though the interior was by no means warm, the air and snow steal what meager protection the cab held.

My eyes dart to and fro as I try to make sense of where we are. Nothing looks the same as a week ago when I traveled through the forest the first time on my way to the Broodmoor Estate. The carriage's curtain lies crumpled on the floor, tripping me as I scramble to get to my feet. Through the falling snow, I view our precarious position. We're headed directly for several trees, all larger around than Cook's waist.

We're going to crash.