

Devious Arcana

Book One – Nefarious Allure

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Devious

1. Showing a skillful use of underhanded tactics to achieve goals
2. A longer and less direct route than the straightforward way

Arcana

(sometimes Arcanum)

1. A secret, or knowledge acquired and known by only a few
2. A great secret of nature sought by alchemists
3. A secret and powerful remedy; elixir

Nefarious

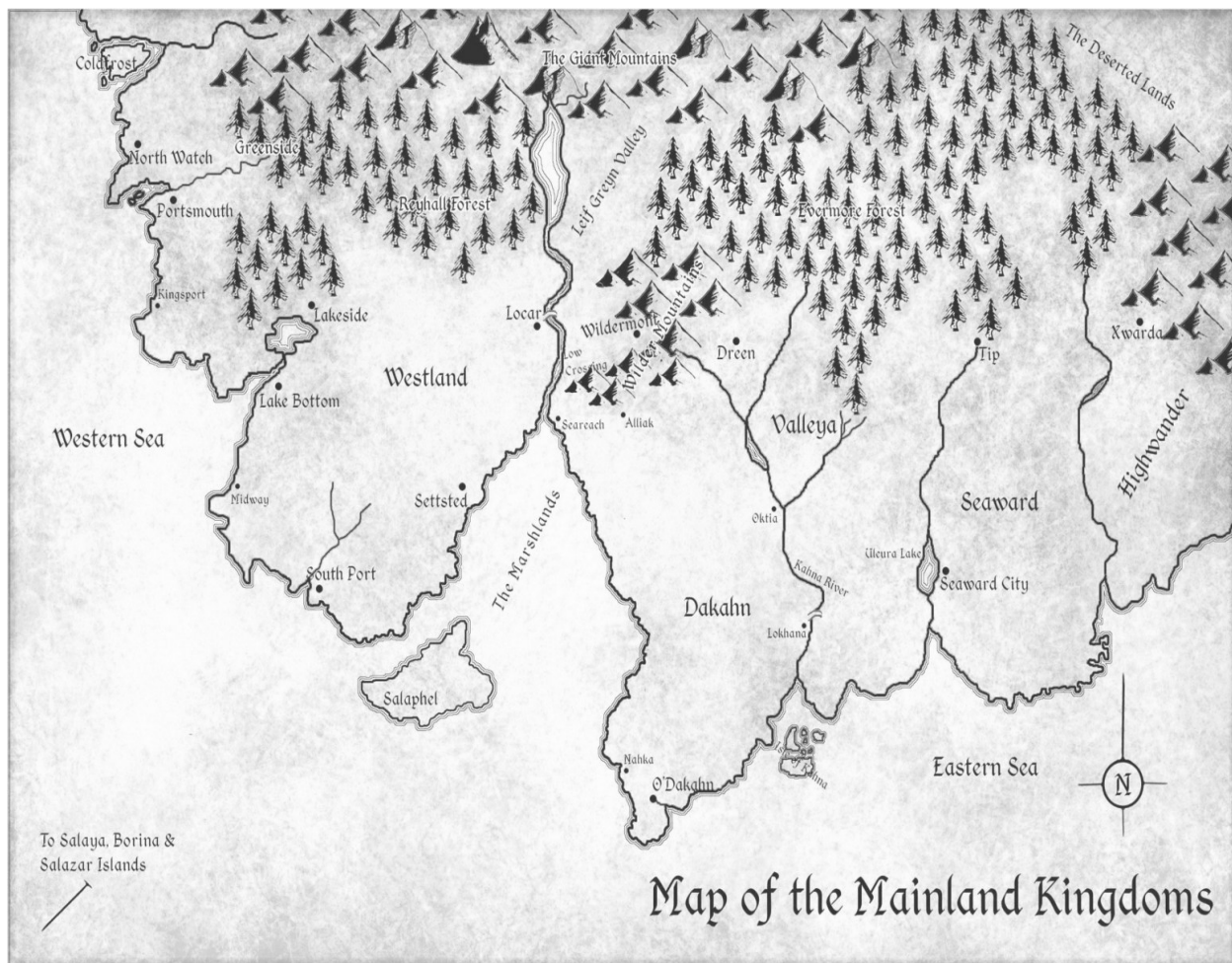
1. Extremely wicked or villainous

Allure

1. To entice by charm and attraction
2. The power of attraction or fascination

For my wife, Allyson

Not even Breast Cancer or Parkinson's can slow you down.



Chapter One

Deep inside Seaward City, the air was so thick you could cut it with a dagger. Braiden couldn't ever remember it being this hot, this early in the summer. Granted he had only been alive for seventeen years, so there weren't many other summers to compare with. Even though the sun had long since left the sky, sweat was leaking from his every pore. Even the wealthy merchants, perched on their elevated verandas, being cooled by wardstone powered airscrews, were sheened with perspiration. But it was worse at street level, where no wind or fresh air of any sort found anyone. The stone cobbles held the day's warmth long into the night, and the three- and four-story buildings built directly against each other along each side of every road, made certain that every season save for winter was miserable for those who sometimes had to sleep outside.

Summer was just getting started, and Braiden couldn't wait for it to end.

Stifling was the word for it.

Even the roaches and water bugs sharing the deeper shadows with Braiden, were too hot to move. He wanted to scratch the rash on his arse so bad he was about to scream, but he didn't dare make a sound. Being mostly just an overgrown boy, he imagined himself with a hound's leg raking away at the discomfort over and over again, with his chin held high, and his foot thumping like an alley dog, but he couldn't really do that. He was hiding between two stinking barrel kegs full of tavern waste, at the intersection of a narrow alley and a cobbled lane. He was waiting on some welcher who was about to get slobber-knocked, or worse, because he either lost more than he could pay or hadn't been honoring his debts. While he waited, Braiden tried to stop thinking about his persistent irritation by diverting his thoughts.

The things they were doing with wardstone these days amazed him. Braiden saw cooling fans, boats, carriages, a mill stone, grain conveyers, even a fancy carousel big enough for two dozen children to ride, all working without people to peddle or animals to pull them along. He never saw the carousel in use, but the men assembling it told him it was being built just so they could take it back apart. They explained how they would transport it to the upcoming Summers Day Festival using wagons to get it to the Leif Greyn River and then barges to take it north to the festival.

The annual gathering took place a long way away, and from what he'd heard, it was the most exciting happening there was. People came from everywhere in the realm, and from other realms, too. Some day he hoped to take Aurraella and her brother Kifferd. First, he had to get them out of the squalor.

The men constructing the amusement were mostly tumblers who squatted in the bailey of a local monastery during the colder seasons. They went on and on telling stories of excitement and danger revolving around the Summer's Day competitions, the hawkers, and the Red Wolf soldiers who kept the peace, and of course the infamous Brawl. The strange men who controlled the carousel's wardstone didn't say much at all, and they shushed the tumblers every now and then, as if their banter might contain secrets.

Braiden thought they were silly.

When Braiden daydreamed about his future, he considered going to Xwarda, the great city in Highwander, where they teach ordinary people to manipulate wardstone. It seemed like an honorable profession. But his boss, Big Bolly Boreck explained it differently. He said standing around, making sure the leaves of a fan kept turning, or that a loom kept spinning for some snobbish old twock, was akin to being worse than dead.

Braiden still thought it would be a good skill to have, and if he had such a skill, he wouldn't waste it standing around a loom. He had all sorts of ideas of what he would do, and even a few ideas about how to do even more with the magical stuff. But as of late,

most of his plans revolved around one of the newer girls at the orphanage. Aurraella had him wanting to be more.

Part of the carousel was already loaded onto a barge that could move upstream, against the current, with nothing but the power of its wardstone transom. At least that is what he learned, when he was left standing in the monastery's bailey while Boreck did one thing or another inside. A long canal had been dug between the bailey yard and Lake Ultura, to float everything to the river, and eventually the sea. It was interesting, and he did his best to retain everything he learned about everything.

Someday he would attend the great mid-summer event, he vowed, and he would journey there with Aurra, on a fancy boat powered by a slice of the magical stone, or maybe in a luxurious carriage. But right now, a pinpoint of incredible discomfort was assailing his rump right where his tailbone met his butt crack, and it demanded his attention.

Holding lookout and spying for big Boreck and his current partner Pate, wasn't very hard work for a fit young man such as himself, but tonight it was uncomfortable. The heat, compounded with the fact he hadn't been to the lake to wash in several days, had his filthy clothes possibly infested with fleas, or bed bugs, or worse. Slick and grimy, he could feel dirt and gunk all over his skin. His teeth were gritty and his breath as foul as the dump barrels beside him. He felt disgusted. His normally shaggy brown locks were matted and clumped, his clothes tattered and stained. He was covered in insect bites and sticky sap from spying on Boreck's current mark from trees, and shrubs, and garbage piles for the last several days. He even had to bury himself in damp hay for part of a morning. Boreck never said why they were watching this welcher frequent whores, drink expensive dwarven ale, and try to catch trout at a lake cottage, and neither he nor Pate bothered to ask.

It didn't matter.

What mattered was his itchy arse.

If Braiden gave himself away, or didn't whistle when their man came out, he wouldn't get his two coppers. And if this particular mark didn't have enough coinage on him to satisfy Boreck and Pate, it might get messy. The last time it got messy, a man had to be buried in the dark. Worse, Braiden didn't get his coins for several days. He didn't want that to happen. If they got caught, he would have to spend a year laboring for Queen Rachel or lose a hand. As bad a prospect as that was, it was likely better than what Bolly Boreck would do to him if he didn't do his job.

It was dark, and the wavering light from a nearby ensconced brand allowed Braiden enough shadowy cover to brush a bothersome fly away from his dripping brow. He grimaced, doing his best to avoid breathing in anything nasty. He tried to ignore the inflamed area along the top edge of his backside, but it really needed a stiff brush to rub the itch out of it.

It was driving him insane. He just needed to get his fingernails back there for a moment. If he could get that much relief, he knew he could make it a while longer.

No one emerged since Pate confirmed their man was inside. No one at all, so Braiden decided now was his chance. He twisted around and allowed himself the space he'd need to keep from coming out of the shadows and went for it.

No sooner did he get a hand in the back of his damp sweaty britches, did someone come stumbling out. The person mumbled something then collapsed in a heap.

Braiden couldn't help himself. The itch was so intense, he scratched it anyway.

A second person emerged from the tavern and Braiden knew he'd let out some sort of audible sigh, because here the man came. Neither of the two was the man he was watching for, but it still wouldn't do for him to get caught. He wasn't sure what to do, so he froze. What he would say, when the man found him there, on his hands and knees, with a hand in the back of his britches?

He wasn't even sure he could think of something.

“Hey,” a voice called from the deeper recesses of the alley. “Get away from there. Go on home fellow. Help your friend. Unless you want trouble.”

It was Pate, Braiden knew, and when Pate stepped out of the darkness, his bald head seemingly floating in the torchlight because he was dressed from neck to toe in black, the inebriated man about to discover Braiden paused. The man looked around then smoothed his partially buttoned vest. He glanced right at Braiden’s hiding place. His eyes squinted, then opened wide. Not in shock or fear, but probably to focus his sight. Luckily, the wavering illumination thrown by the single torch, didn’t quite reach the refuse barrels.

When the man peered deeper into Braiden’s hiding spot; Braiden could see the crimson veins spreading across his jaundiced eyeballs. The edges of his inflamed lids were bright pink. As he stepped even nearer, Braiden saw the day’s stubble on his chin, the brown spittle from his chaw at the corner of his mouth, and the hard lines of age etched into his confused and possibly curious looking face.

Braiden was terrified. It was clear by the way the man’s gaze never settled on exactly where he was, that he hadn’t spotted him. But he knew someone was there.

Pate snarled. “I said run along.”

The man glanced at Pate, and Braiden thought he might call out, but he didn’t. After taking in the bald thug again, he gave the barrels a second look, then shrugged before helping his fallen companion to his feet and stumbling off, down the cobbled lane.

“Sit still boy,” Pate hissed as he slid back out of sight. “We’ll get you some Witch Hazel by morning, if you just sit still.”

“Tell the little bastard to stop itching himself,” Braiden heard Boreck growl from the distance.

Braiden managed to get a few more scratches across his inflamed skin and then settled back trying to ignore the rash.

Pate was alright. Only he ogled the older girls at the orphanage all the time. He was old enough to have fathered any of them, and most of the ones he focused on were of a marrying age, so it wasn't that awkward they interested him. It was something stranger. Whether lusting in the deep recesses of his mind, or just obsessively looking over them, he was often seen leaning against the orphanage's fence with a twig in his mouth just staring, sometimes from after dinner long into the evening.

Braiden hated being called a bastard, mostly because it was true. He'd been left at Gramble's Orphanage when he was still in swaddling. Lady Kaami, Gramble's fat wife, said his parents died in a fire. Boreck said they were killed before the place was set ablaze but never would elaborate. The idea he'd known them was enough to keep Braiden hanging around. And Boreck wasn't the easiest person to question. The thing the old thief hated most was people who talked about other people. Asking him about his own parents, to Boreck, was asking him to be a snitcher, or some shite, even though they were dead. He never would say why he'd taken a liking to hiring Braiden either, but Braiden knew there was more to it than just luck.

Not only could Braiden sneak around and use his keen young eyes, but he could pick a pocket with the best of them and even pick a simple tumbler lock or two. He could scrap as well but wasn't much for it. The last fist fight he was in; he was by far considered the winner, but he was sore for three days after, and he decided then, no one ever really won at fisticuffs.

He chuckled, remembering something pretty Aurraella, from the orphanage read recently. She'd been reading to them every night since she'd come to the home with her strange girlish brother Kifferd, and all the orphans loved to listen. There was something about the two of them Braiden couldn't finger just yet, but he was determined to learn all about Aurra. He was in love with her, and she with him, or so she portrayed. Over the last year, she'd read many stories to him and the others. He'd learned enough about people and life, to start forming a plan to lift the three of them out of the squalor. Even

more though, he'd been thinking of ways to *stay* out of Seaward City's West Quarter. Out of Seaward completely, if he could manage it. So many who found a way out ended up right back on the cobbles. But if he made it out, he wasn't coming back.

He swore it.

Before his mind could drift too far away, the door creaked open and a leery looking man, about the size and shape of the one who owed Boreck's employers, peered out. Braiden wasn't yet sure if he was the one, so he resituated himself to get a better look. His movement startled something away from the barrels into the torchlight and caused his heart to hammer up into his chest like a startled bird.

It was a rat. A big fat rat that went scurrying right in front of the man. A wavering of the torchlight revealed it was the mark. The fact the rat must have been there with Braiden this whole time, caused him to shudder. He made to whistle, like he was supposed to do. But when he drew breath, he tasted the foul rot hovering in the air around the barrels. The stench turned his whistle into a cough, then he gagged and heaved.

Just before he vomited up the bread Boreck and Pate shared with him earlier, he managed to let out a whine. He was sure they heard it but wasn't so certain they'd be able to save him, for the panicked mark threw one of the heavy barrels aside and reached for him. Braiden's eyes teared up, not from emotion or fear, but from illness. He glimpsed the strange, but now familiar insignia the mark wore on his chest, and the stringy glint of his pocket watch's thin chain, then his faculties were no longer his own.

Braiden's gut clenched. Normally he would have been able to elude the coming backhand, but his body wouldn't cooperate. The blow sent his mind reeling into a dark plane full of bright splotches and strange wavering patterns. He vomited again, and a second fist, this one to the other side of his head, caused almost everything to explode into sparkling flashes. He heard shouting and a scuffle. Then the ringing sound of a sword being drawn filled the night.

He blacked out for a while after that, but when he next came around, he was being jostled, and thought he heard horses and the jingle of tack.

Through all the haze and confusion assailing his spinning mind, he couldn't believe how damned hot it was. It was absolutely stifling. And he only knew that word because beautiful Aurra recently read it to him from one of her many books. She was a breath of fresh air, which he desperately needed now. He was so hot he couldn't even draw a breath.

The sensation intensified. He was suffocating. No, he was being suffocated. His mind was spinning into a sweltering blackness. He was sweating so profusely he felt like a slippery fish. He tried to use this to his advantage and wiggled. Something shifted. A great weight was lifted from his body, and then he could taste salty brine, or maybe blood. His lungs filled with cool sea air and his skin prickled, causing him to shiver. The feel of the breeze was such a relief, that from deep down in the dark, he felt himself smile.

And his arse. Could he scratch it?

Why yes, he could. When he did, he opened his eyes and realized he was no longer in Seaward City proper, but laying on a plank deck in the deep of night. It was no wagon bed; he decided almost immediately. The lean and roll, followed by a forward tilt, told him he was on a boat of some sort. A sizable one. Then they leaned to the left and something rolled against him. He saw it was the lifeless corpse of the man he'd been paid to watch. Sitting up, he looked around. When he didn't see Boreck or Pate, and realized his ankles were roped to the same mill stone as the mark's, his calm evaporated and panic set in.

As fast as and quietly as he could manage, he worked his feet free of the bounds and crept to the gunwale. He peered over the rail and saw they were passing a semi-populated area. There were plenty of lanterns and lamp-lit windows along both banks of the river and more spreading out across the hills beyond. Looking forward he felt the

breeze coming in from the ocean. He figured they had to be riding the powerful current south, away from Lake Ultura toward the open sea.

Braiden looked again at the distance between their swiftly moving vessel and the riverbank and decided to go for it. It was a long flipping way, but he could scrub the grime from his gritty skin and scratch his arse while he swam.

And that thought settled it.

He took three deep breaths and started to jump over when something struck him. Boreck's mark still had that shiny watch chain dangling from his pocket.

Braiden chuckled. The act caused him to wince in pain and reminded him how swollen his face must be. Still, he went back and snatched it. The timepiece at the end of the chain was fancy and worth far more than the two coppers he would have made if he hadn't been left for dead. He noticed the patch displayed on the man's garment had been cut away. Braiden remembered it though. It was a small dragon wrapped around a sword. Not just any sword either. It was mighty Ironspike, he knew. Everyone knew. Only a few years ago High King Mikahl and the great wizard Hyden Hawk, used the blade to kill a demon that tore apart Xwarda.

The mark served High King Mikahl.

Well, he had before he died, anyway.

Braiden rubbed his swollen jaw. It was hard to have sympathy for someone who pounded his face in and tried to kill him in an alley.

Without hesitation, he yanked the pocket watch from the corpse.

It might even be worth enough to set his greater plan into motion.

He figured Boreck and Pate thought he was dead, or some such. There was no reason for them to get rid of him. Right now, that didn't really matter. Whoever was taking his body out to drop in the sea, might not even know Boreck or Pate. They might not care Braiden wasn't a snitcher. The kind of people who sank the bodies of the High

King's men surely had strict masters that didn't like excuses or have any reason to care about an orphan.

After rummaging through the dead mark's other pockets, Braiden found four coins, a folded parchment, and lint. There was a dagger as long as his forearm in a sheath on his belt, too. He started to remove it, but a bright yellow line formed across the deck and spread into a rectangle indicating a hatch had opened. The shadow that filled the space was that of a buxom woman. That was all he could make out before he pulled the dagger from the sheath at the corpse's hip, put it sideways in his teeth, and leapt to the rail. He dove from the boat, unprepared for the great distance between him and the surface. Then he splashed into the unexpectedly warm water and tried to gather his wits.

While securing the watch and coins in his pocket he decided one of them might have been heavy enough to be gold. He slid the dagger under his woven belt, and really didn't care if it stayed there. He wanted to be smart. He could look at the coins later and not fumble them while drifting in the current. Besides, he couldn't get his hands free fast enough. At long last, no one was nearby. As he lazily swam toward shore, with minimal leg kicking and one arm guiding his way, his free hand went to furiously scratching and scrubbing the rash.

Chapter Two

"I'm sure he is okay, Aurraella," Kifferd tried to comfort his sister. His attempt was kind, but it was no use. "He has stayed away as many days before."

"I'm not so concerned that he has been gone five days." She answered and stopped wringing her hands, as if doing so was an admission to something. "My concern is that I am so worried, obsessed even, over his absence."

The two of them were not identical. Aurraella was two years older, but they shared the same olive skin and long, straight blonde hair. If she didn't have breasts, she knew they could pass as twins, though. Kiff was effeminate if he was anything. The thing she loved and respected about her brother most though, was that he didn't try and hide who he was or act any different to impress anyone.

What he was, was another matter. What she was, too. But those stones were better left unturned for now. The moment's concern was for Braiden.

"Should we find Boreck," Aurraella asked herself more than young Kiff. He was only fifteen, and she doubted he had any concern at all for Braid.

"He would know where he is," Kifferd stated the obvious. "If we can find him."

"We aren't going to be the ones looking." She smiled, licked her lips hungrily, and threw her hair over her shoulder with a dramatic whirl. "Braiden isn't the only one I've hooked these claws into."

Gramble's Orphanage was an old estate house on the outskirts of Seaward City. It boasted a view of Lake Ultura like no other. Aurraella heard more than one person say they'd willingly become an orphan, if it meant they could wake up to such wonder. The estate boasted a sizable bailey, with stone and mortar walls twice as tall as a man, and stout iron gates. These kept the score of children who lived there protected from the rough and tumble, often violent streets of the heavily populated trading city. Every bit of

goods and stores produced in the kingdoms of Seaward and Highwander, and a good number of the High King's Valleyan horses meant to be sent abroad, had to pass through Seaward City on their way to sea.

Aurraella knew what was beyond the bailey walls and didn't like it one bit. She'd been molested by some filthy sailor once, and now wouldn't venture out alone, or even with just her brother, unless she was hunting. Sometimes the way the men who visited Gramble's looked at her, left her feeling hollow. This reminded her of how Pate stared at every girl but her. Braiden told her Pate was harmless, but she wasn't so sure. Someday soon, this was going to end for her and Kifferd, and since she was a parentless girl with good teeth and wide hips, she hoped it didn't end under some obese lackey whose entire existence depended on their father's labor or the family store.

It was a real possibility, and it was as frightening as being raped by thugs in an alley. Terrible stuff happened in the shadows after the sun went down. And once something like that happened to a woman, not even the lackeys wanted them for more than sport. But terrible things like that happened to wives, too.

She wouldn't be one of them, in either case.

She couldn't. She had to take care of her brother.

Aurraella smiled back at Kiff. He didn't yet have a clue what they were up against. But Braiden did, he was going to save them from all of it. She just knew it. They'd looked into each other's eyes for hours on end. They'd rolled in the hay a few times too, but she hadn't given in to him. At least not all the way.

She smiled to herself. Nor had he tried too hard or demanded more from her than she was willing to give freely. That meant more than he could know.

The question was, did he want her bad enough to take her and Kifferd with him when he left this all behind? She thought so.

Ughhh! She hoped so. With boys one could never be sure.

Inside the walls of Gramble's Aurra had a little power. Despite the yucky feeling it gave her inside; she used her feminine persuasion to her advantage. She was doing so to find out about Braiden, after all. So, it was excusable if she kept it from getting far.

She stalked over to a group of young men standing around the orphanage's well. They were of an age to be working. In the mornings, men would come and take them off to labor, but inevitably some were left behind, because there were more orphans than work. The unspoken duty of the unchosen young men was to spend the day manning Gramble's well pump so any of the locals who came in for water could just hand over their skins or buckets and not have to pump themselves.

Braiden once told her Gramble made enough to feed them all twice over, just from the clipped coins the boys collected at the pump. He said Gramble and his wife made far more than what they let on, and since he figured they couldn't allow anyone to find out, they had to have all those extra coins rat-holed away in a chest or lock box somewhere.

"Would one of you go and fetch Boreck for me?" Aurra asked the pump boys demurely. She was seventeen years old and fully aware of how few girls paid attention to the orphans. These guys were younger than Kifferd, but still old enough to be swayed by batting eye lashes and a bit of suggestive posturing. It was more than that, too. She read stories to them in the evenings and her voice, and her natural charm was becoming harder for them to resist.

"I'll go," one of them offered.

"Are you off of it, man?" Another chided. "Boreck eats kids like us. I bet her bo, Braiden is being cooked in a pot."

Aurra started to snap at him, but he was already red faced and rubbing at his head. He and Aurra both looked at Kifferd at the same time. Kiff was smiling and brazenly toying with another small rock.

"Take it back, Lonny," one of the boys said.

“You don’t have to take it back,” she looked back at him, knowing that her brother had to have thrown the rock before Lonny even finished speaking. He’d known Lonny was going to disrespect Braiden, probably before Lonny did. It was one of his gifts.

“Would one of you please go and fetch Boreck for me?” she asked again. “If he won’t come, ask him when Braiden will be finished working. He is needed here.”

“I’ve been wondering where Braid is, too.” The first boy said. “I’ll go.”

She thought his name was Garth but wasn’t sure.

“Thank you,” she faced him and smiled. “Please, find me as soon as you return.”

The afternoon passed without a word from Garth. Aurra ended up in the kitchen helping Lady Kaami and her sister Lady Jaani. There were a handful of younger orphans trying to assist but they were creating a bit of chaos with their antics.

Lady Jaani was the kinder of the siblings, for she would only scold the youngsters. Lady Kaami, the larger of all the women who worked here by far, would grab up a wooden spoon or even a rolling pin and throttle any one of them, no matter how big or small. Aurra wanted to get Lady Jaani alone and ask about what happened to orphan girls when they were no longer girls, but she thought she knew the answer. The real gist of her question was how long did *she* have before it happened?

The opportunity for privacy she was hoping for never came about, but just after they put all the trays of rolls in the oven, here came Garth, poking his head in the door all breathless and disheveled.

“Is that blood on your head?” Lady Kaami gasped when she saw him. Aurra saw a dark matted area on one side of his noggin.

“Boreck was found dead in the harbor last night,” he managed before his head was twisted by Lady Kaami. “Only Pate got away.”

She put a wet rag on the wound. It saturated quickly and when she squeezed it out the stuff that released was deep crimson. Aurra thought she saw black lumpy clots, too.

“What of Braiden?” Aurra asked. She had to step around to see Garth’s face over Lady Kaami. Aurra could feel the panic rising inside. From across the estate Kifferd must have sensed her anxiety as well, for here he came, squeezing in the doorway past several curious little faces.

“Ouch!” Garth yelled when Lady Kaami finally found the gash across the lump on his temple. Lady Jaani came back in. She held a lamp high so they could all get a good look. Aurra almost vomited, for she could have laid a finger in the wide-open gash.

“You’ll have to find Pate.” Garth growled through his pain. “What I heard was told secondhand, but it must have struck true, because I got clobbered right after I heard it.”

“Well, what’d you hear, boy?” Lady Kaami asked.

Garth swallowed hard. “Wollard Kipps said Pate is hiding out because he saw the men who killed Bolly Boreck.”

“But what about Braiden,” Aurra asked. “What happened to him?”

“I’m sorry, Aurraella,” Garth dropped his eyes and winced from the pain caused by the shifting expressions.

Lady Janni, even Lady Kaami stopped what they were doing to listen.

“Wollard said Pate told him one of the High King’s men killed Braiden,” Garth explained. He paused to wipe away a stray tear. “Said he broke his neck strangling him, and then Boreck killed the bastard for doing it. Right after that, out came some guild men, and they killed Boreck, and almost got Pate.”

“It’ll need seven or eight stitches,” Lady Kaami informed her sister. “But not until the swelling goes down. Someone go fetch me a bowl of cool water and a clean cloth. This one is all bloody.”

“Where is Pate,” Aurra asked. Her blood was on fire with fear and concern. She might have lost control and revealed herself, but Kifferd saved her.

“Shhh, sister,” Kifferd whispered and put his arm around her shoulder. Of all the things assailing her in that moment, the anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and desperation, it

was the raw power coursing through her sibling's veins that was most potent. It enveloped her and soothed her, and she wondered just when he'd gained so much control over himself.

"He is alive," Kifferd whispered so quietly no one else could hear.

Is it true, she asked with a thought. She searched his eyes, hoping not to see a brother shielding his sister from harsh reality with a lie. She didn't. What she saw was honest confusion. Confusion and power.

Braiden is alive Aurra, Kifferd confirmed with a mental voice he was just beginning to find. Lady Kaami looked at them, as if she'd heard, too. They way Kifferd cocked his head, Aurraella knew he was considering the very same possibility.

"The two of you will be meeting with a family of sorts on the morrow," she informed, her demeanor changing suddenly and sharply. A dark look Aurraella never saw before slid across the woman's plump face. "I think the pair of you will fit right in with these sorts of folk. After dinner find a couple grain sacks and put your stuff in them." She gave a smile that could have held deep concern but was probably more of an expression of subtle malice. At least that was how it felt to Aurraella.

"Lord Gramble loved that thieving little bastard, Braiden" she said to her sister, dismissing them with a wave. "We surely will miss his coins."

"I don't want to meet a new family," Kifferd said. One moment he was a powerful young man coming into his own, now he was just a scared boy. Aurraella knew she had to be strong for them both. She took his arm and led him out of the kitchen hoping beyond hope Kifferd was right, that Braiden was still alive.

"We will have to play along and bide our time," she whispered after they were well away from everyone else. "You'll be hungry soon, anyway. Hungrier than you've ever been." She looked around. "None of these poor folks have any meat on their bones. Maybe our new home will have better to offer."

“What about Braiden?” Kifferd asked. She saw that he was genuinely concerned. She wasn’t sure if he was concerned on her behalf, or if he’d taken a liking to the resourceful young man, too.

“We will have to be patient,” she answered, knowing patience was the thing she had least of. “If he wants to finish what he started, he will find us.”

With that thought, a deep aching burn filled her belly.

There was no doubt she wanted him to finish what he’d started, but change was literally on the morrow’s horizon. She and her brother, no matter what else they were, were proud. They would face what came head on, just like they were raised to do. But she couldn’t help and wonder what sort of people Lady Kaami would describe as, “those sorts of folk?”

Chapter Three

Braiden woke on a wooded riverbank nowhere near the lights he’d started swimming toward. This came as no surprise because after swimming until he was exhausted, he was barely halfway to shore. Through the night, the current swept him past not one, but two other clusters of lights. Cities, or towns, maybe. He wasn’t sure. He was just glad he found solid ground before he washed all the way out to sea.

It was still dark, though the orange-pink light of dawn could be seen behind the trees lining the Eastern side of the river. He only had a general idea where he was, and he didn’t like the feeling at all. He vowed to study all the maps he could gather, if he ever made it home.

Home?

What was home?

For now, home was Gramble's Orphanage in Seaward City. That was his destination at least, if only because he'd promised Aurra, he wouldn't abandon her and her brother. But first he had to figure out where he was.

He took a moment and checked his belongings. He had the dagger he'd taken, four coppers, a silver, and an old golden crown. His boots were pretty good because one of Boreck's mantras was "...never skimp on boots."

He could hear the grouchy old hooligan, even now.

"We think on our feet. We move on our feet, and if the need arises, we use our feet to save our fargin skin. Never skimp on boots, boy. Never skimp on boots."

He also had the fancy watch he nabbed. As soon as it dried, it would go right back in his pocket. The silver coin alone was enough to hire a carriage back to Seaward City. But he would have to use two of the coppers to buy some food and clean, better fitting clothes, right off. No one would hire a carriage out to a filthy orphan. The golden crown he would keep out of sight, with the timepiece.

Mightier men have been killed for far less than either. In his mind he heard Boreck's voice spout another of his many mantras of cobble wisdom.

The watch captivated Braiden. It was carved silver or maybe stamp-hammered and covered in intricate designs that repeated around the center point of each side. Even in the moonlight it held him transfixed for some time. Before, he hadn't tried to open it, but now it felt like there was water inside, and the last thing he wanted was for it to rust or ruin. There was a tiny button at the top, and around it, a scored little ring he thought you twisted every now and then, to keep the spring wound, only this one didn't spin all the way around, it clicked into three different positions, one notch at a time. He clicked it once each way, then back where it was when he started, he hoped. When he pushed the button, the clasp released and there was an audible click. He felt a deep pulse radiating outward as it opened. The entire world seemed like a calm pond a sizable

stone had just landed in. The watch was the point of the splash, and ripples rolled right through the fabric of everything, including him, on their uniform trek outward.

The sensation startled him. But then it was gone. Probably just the weird sucking sound of the seal fighting the moisture to open. He couldn't yet make out the sun beyond the foliage, but the sky was bluer now, and he saw the fancy numbers painted on the dial had little droplets beaded up on them.

Braiden used the driest part of the tunic belted over his britches, which was damp at best. He put an effort into cleaning it, and making it shine. He must have gotten caught up in the work, for the next time he looked up half the morning had passed.

Quickly, trying to shake off whatever had gotten hold of him, he put his things away and started moving against the river's flow. He found if he stayed between the wide, shallow span and the edge of the trees, it wasn't so hard to walk. Where he was forced to leave the water's edge, because the foliage grew too close, or the water too deep to traverse, he had to fight through all sorts of thick undergrowth.

He wished he had something better than the dagger to hack with, but he could use it as a weapon if he needed one. So far, he hadn't felt unsafe, but some of the sounds he heard as the day wore on were upsetting, and a little nerve racking.

There was the constant hum and buzz of insects, and just above it the nearer chirps of an angry sounding bird carried over a more distant songbird's sporadically repeating call. A few smaller critters rustled the brush as he came upon them, and one rabbit darted right at him. He was so used to seeing rats in the city, not bounding rabbits, that it scared him quite badly.

He laughed it off, but wished he'd had his wits about him. He could have kicked the life out of the varmint and eaten it.

It wasn't long before all the swimming and scrubbing from the night before was but a memory. He was sweltering hot again, as sweaty as he'd ever been, and now held to a snail's pace because of branches, and vines, and thorns, and tangles. The sun was

high in the sky and seemed to send its rays straight down through the forest directly at him.

He needed to drink some freshly hauled well water. He was sure the river was clean enough, but it tasted like dirt, and no matter how much he swallowed, he never felt as if he quenched his thirst.

He was about to collapse from exhaustion when he caught a whiff of woodsmoke. More than that, it was the smell of charring meat. He trudged on, toward the savory source, and was glad he pushed through. Once he found the water again, he was able to get some shade and a bit of a breeze coming off the wide span of river. He was left salivating and hungry, though. There was no cooking meat to be found.

It was at this point he noticed a pair of hummingbirds swerving and dancing around each other. At first Braiden thought he might have disturbed their nest. They were aware of him, he was certain. They followed along behind him as he went, their wings buzzing loud enough to be heard when they came near.

A while later, he saw there were now four of the pinky-finger-sized birds hovering and following. Even after he left the open area along the water's edge, and fought dense foliage for part of the evening, when he emerged into the fresh breeze again, the hummingbirds found him. Though they kept a better distance, they followed him just the same.

It turned out the smell of meat must have been coming from across the river. Braiden lost the scent not long before he lost the light of day. Dusk passed so fast, he barely had time to find a place to stop.

The idea he wouldn't find anyone or anything before nightfall hadn't occurred to him. He was famished and didn't know how to start a fire or hunt. The prospect of sleeping on the river's edge, where creatures and critters might come to drink in the shallows, wasn't on his mind either. Eventually he settled in against a mound of rocks and fell into a deep well-needed sleep.

He woke with a shiver of fright. Something huge was in the darkness. In that terrifying moment, he discovered a few of his many mistakes. But they didn't matter. What did was the musky smelling monster, before him.

The beast wasn't friendly, either. It snarled deeply and growled, and he almost shat himself in terror when he saw an eyeball the size of a cantaloupe glaring *down* at him. Braiden was petrified, fully consumed with fear, and defenseless. All he could do was huddle and stay still. He didn't even know what it was.

The silhouetted shape of it rising onto two legs from four, as if it was about to pounce, filled the deep blue of the night sky. Seeing it was easily five times his size, Braiden clenched his eyes shut and drew into a fetal ball. It was all he could do against something so--

A fetid roar sounded. All thoughts were forced out of his mind. He was blasted with hot breath and spittle from a maw big enough to swallow his head, but he didn't dare look at the wild smelling thing. Then he was under something huge and scaly. It was so heavy it crushed the air from his lungs.

Braiden could do nothing, not even move. His body convulsed trying to draw a breath that wouldn't come. He sighed inwardly, regretting all the things he'd yet to do. What he regretted most though, was not keeping his word to Aurra. Running away with her was all he'd been thinking about since they showed up at the orphanage. Now, here he was with enough coins to get them good and away, yet he was lost in the wilderness, and now dying under the weight of some feral thing so big it hadn't bothered to eat him.

Chapter Four

Braiden woke to the sound of songbirds chirping and whistling at one another. The smell of grass and flowers filled his nostrils, and he could sense the open space around him before he even opened his eyes.

Am I dead? Is this the heavens?

The memory of the creature and its crushing weight filled his head. Panic rose in his system, but he pushed it aside once he realized he survived the night. Out of curiosity he checked the area for tracks and immediately wished he hadn't. Not only were the clawed paw prints he saw huge. There was more of them than one creature could have left.

He couldn't imagine what prevented the monster from eating him, but something must have caused it to move on. Either that, or he was so skinny and bony, it didn't think he was worth the effort.

His stomach rumbled. The last food he'd eaten was two days ago, and that was only some old, hard-bread Pate and Boreck gave him. He thought he vomited that up, but he wasn't sure. He had no idea what berries and roots were safe to eat, or which ones would kill him, so he didn't dare try anything. And there was no way he was eating a bug.

Once he laid eyes on the river and knew which way to go, he started back against the flow. Before long, he glanced over his shoulder half-saddened that the hummingbirds from yesterday were no longer trailing him. He strode on like that, checking for them every now and again, and making the best time he could despite the terrain. But exhaustion quickly got a hold of him again.

He had to stop and rest. He simply had no energy left.

Plopping down on a large, but smooth worn stone, in an open area near the bank, he took out the pocket watch he'd stolen from the dead man and polished its outer, silver surface with his tunic. No sooner did he have it shining, did he hear a girlish giggle coming from up the river.

"Probably a boat," he muttered to himself. He eased to the water's edge and peered upstream as far as he could see, but no one was on the river, and there were no boats of any kind to be seen.

He was about to go back to the smooth stone when he heard the giggling again. This time he was certain he was hearing not one, but two girls laughing and carrying on.

With a burst of gumption, more to get sustenance than anything else, Braiden started toward the voices. He hadn't taken but two steps when a hummingbird shot past. The deep buzzing of its wings sounded like a giant hornet and caused him to duck.

"He has ambiance," a feminine voice stated matter-of-factly. Braiden saw her form through the trees. She was thin and wispy, and young like him. Only she was nude. Her hair was golden white, and her eyes and smile were full of what looked like hope. The slight curve of her narrow hips, and the shape of her apple sized breasts, transfixed him.

"It is okay, sister," the fair skinned beauty said to no one he could see.

"At your own peril, Pia," a slightly different feminine voice responded. Behind her a shadow shifted. Another hummingbird left the trees near her, buzzed around his head a moment, and then went zipping away.

"What are you, out here, so far from the others?" she asked him. The certainty she showed when speaking to her invisible companion had evaporated. Now she looked akin to a cobble rat startled and frozen in a beam of lantern light, only it wasn't dark. And she was no cobble rat.

Apparently, she wasn't bashful about herself, and he did his best to keep his eyes off her strawberry nipples, and the slight gap between her thighs.

Braiden was in some strange state of aroused shock. He didn't know what others she was talking about, or what ambiance he had. He didn't know what ambiance was, for that matter.

"Did your friend just turn into a bird and fly away?" he asked stupidly.

"Oh dear," her dainty hand covered her pink lips. "Maybe he isn't-- But I can still feel his radiance?" She waved her hand in front of her face as if she were shooing away a fly or trying to get a bad smell away from her nose. She looked as if she was about to do something drastic, then stopped when he gathered enough wits to speak.

"Where am I? Do you have any food?" He gave her an imploring look. "I am very hungry. How far away is Seaward City?"

He winced and swallowed hard. He didn't intend to blink, but he did. When he looked again, she was gone.

It took a while to force himself to get back underway, but when he did, Braiden was rewarded. On the ground where the strange girl was standing, there was a pear lying on some sort of platter sized frond. It looked like it was set out to be seen.

He knew it might be a trick, that he was taking a great leap of faith by eating it, but his body didn't care. Poison or not, he devoured the whole thing, save for the seeds and stem. He even ate the crunchy odd textured parts of the core he would normally discard. When it was gone, he felt better, but was all the hungrier.

"Thank you," he called in the direction the hummingbirds went.

His mind wasn't quite wrapped around what transpired, and his thoughts kept returning to the girl's body. He didn't dwell on it though. He was just glad for the pear, wherever it came from.

The one thing he knew for certain was, if he kept moving against the river's flow, he would eventually find people, and food. He knew if he didn't find someone, or some safe place before dark, he might not make it through the night.

A deep primal urge to survive was blooming inside. What little sustenance he gained from the fruit was used up just replenishing his previous exertions. He was worn down to skin and bones. It took every bit of concentration he had to keep putting one foot in front of the other. As the day wore on, he told himself again and again, if he stopped it was over.

The warm look of trust he found in Aurra's eyes helped him lift his heavy, waterlogged boots. The taste of the kisses they recently shared in the orphanage's hayloft, the feel of her warm soft body pressed against his, was enough to drive him forward.

At some point he realized he was on a game trail, or maybe a herdsman's path. Probably the latter, for he saw thousands of small uniform hoof prints, and lots of dried dung piles along the way.

After a while, he found he'd lost the trail and grew concerned. Had he gotten turned around? Where was the river?

He was stumbling and having to work very hard just to stay on his feet, when he thought he saw two of the hummingbirds. They were up ahead of him this time. He heard their girlish giggles too and focused on following the sound.

He was dizzy and everything spun as he went.

"Come, human boy," he heard the naked girl say to him.

He felt like he was being lifted or at least being held upright. When he looked, he saw a tiny hummingbird at each shoulder. They were struggling mightily to get him somewhere. And then he was there, falling softly into a grassy glade.

His head was in the lap of the beautiful pale girl. Her breasts were right there above his face. And her smile was inviting. He felt a hand from another, slide up his thigh and realized his clothing was gone. He wiggled his toes and knew his boots were off too, but he didn't remember removing them. Another pair of hands found his abdomen. The

girl cradling his head resituated herself so she could lean down and kiss him. Her lips were delicious, and her hot wet mouth caused his body to respond.

Other hands found him. Fingers traced across his skin. He heard several girls moaning and cooing over him, and each other. More than one grip gave his manhood a squeeze. It was bliss, but it ended abruptly to the sound of an angry old woman screaming, and utter confusion.

When Braiden sat up, he was walloped by a crone with a broom handle or a cane. His first thought was that he was naked, but he wasn't. Getting to his feet he realized he was erect. It wasn't arousal that had him stiff anymore, though. He had to urinate as badly as he ever had. Then the thick stick the woman was wielding cracked him across the forehead and he felt piss, warm and slick, run down his leg as he fell.