

## Chapter 1

“Is that your apprentice?” William, Duke of Thrussex, gestured across the courtyard below, where a young woman on a bare-backed horse was weaving out through the gate at a break-neck pace. Ladimore’s eyes shifted quickly from where he had been watching a squad of the duke’s men neutralizing one of the Baron of Ellingham’s remaining knights; he swore under his breath.

“I told her to stay in her chambers,” Ladimore said. The sorcerer stroked his beard, thinking. Lennart, the baron of Ellingham, had been dead since early that morning. “If she remains loyal enough to Lennart to flee after his son, she is a danger to you.”

“Joachim,” the duke called over one of his knights. The younger man who responded was splattered with blood, most of it not his own. He saluted as he stopped a pace off. “You’ve been here a year; you’re familiar with them. Follow them; find them. Come back when you have them dead or in bonds.”

“Yes, sir.” He saluted again and headed off down the corridor.

“If he’s been here a year, do you trust him to do that?” Ladimore asked the duke.

“I should think so; most of the blood he’s wearing is Lennart’s,” William replied.

Aster clung desperately to the horse’s mane; she was unfamiliar with riding, and she hadn’t dared try to saddle the horse before making her escape. She had been at Ellingham for almost fifteen years, apprenticed to the wizened sorcerer, Ladimore. It had not been the best match; after so long she was not sure he would ever teach her more than tending his alchemical apparatuses, given his daily declarations of her ineptitude.

He had told her, when the army had appeared outside the walls of Ellingham’s little keep, that if they made it inside they would most certainly abuse her, and he had locked her in her room, a small study off his lab, with a knife, “just in case.” She was *not* going to wait around and see if his predictions were accurate, nor whether the suggested solution was necessary. There was ivy outside her window, and if she could do nothing else, she could climb.

Among the things she *couldn’t* do well, however, was sit a horse. After a haphazard barreling out through the disarrayed soldiers that were securing the keep and the nearby town and then across the narrow siege-bridge that had been laid across the moat, Aster found herself holding on ungracefully as the horse bolted for the tree line to the north.

She was trying not to scream girlishly, with marginal success, every time the horse jumped a ditch or a low wall. The forest, the imposing Woordinal against which everyone she had ever known had warned her entering, was three or four miles off, and the horse was running wildly for it.

Ellingham was the northernmost barony in the kingdom of Orrania, and it was under the Duke of Thrussex’s oversight. The River Woord lay off to her left, several miles to the west, where it was turning towards her to flow just south of Ellingham’s keep. The Woordinal unfolded to the north; the land rose sharply enough as it moved south into Orrania that she was still above the tops of the trees, and she could see across it like a field. Somewhere, off to the north, there were mountains, although she could not see them through the afternoon haze.

Mid-morning, as she had watched out the windows of her room, Aster had seen the baron’s son Hermann and about a dozen others flee the keep on horseback. The hushed rumors of the servants as they flitted furtively about from hiding spot to hiding spot were that the baron was dead. But now, following the general direction he had taken that morning, Hermann was

nowhere in sight, dead or alive.

Not that it mattered whether she could find his trail to follow him; she really didn't know how to *steer* the horse. Getting off seemed to be hazardous, as well, at least while it was still moving. She dared glance down, noted how quickly the ground was falling away behind them, and turned her eyes back to the trees at the bottom of the slope, still probably a mile or two off. Somewhere behind her there was a heavy, dull thud; she glanced back and noted that the drawbridge had finally been lowered.

No one was following her yet, though. Aster was still looking over her shoulder when the horse suddenly entered the trees, stumbled on a root, and fell; she lost her grip on its mane and flew forward over its head, landing on her side at the base of a large oak. The horse staggered to its feet, shook its head, and headed back the way it had come.

Aster lay longer where she had fallen, waiting to see which aches dulled and which remained stabbing pains. After several minutes had passed, she eased herself carefully to sitting. Nothing seemed to be broken after her initial assessment, but her ribs had hit a stone when she'd landed and were at least bruised. She pulled herself to her feet with the aid of the tree she'd landed by, looking back through the trees towards the slope to the south. Someone was following her now, although at a more cautious pace than the one she'd come down the hill at. She turned and headed north into the forest.

## Chapter 2

Joachim had not expected it to take so long to find the sorcerer's apprentice, especially since he had left the keep to follow her after only about a quarter of an hour. Once she had been thrown from the horse, however, her tracks disappeared into the forest, becoming inscrutable on the needle-laden forest floor in a stand of pine. A quick scan of the edges of the pine grove did not turn up any promising leads, so he headed off to find the baron's son's tracks, based on where he'd seen him enter the forest earlier that day.

Hermann had left the keep with about a dozen men, all on horse; Joachim was, for the moment, on foot, but depending on where Hermann had headed, the tracklessness of the forest would not slow him down as much as it likely would the horses. The closest road followed the river, wending off to the west—and the tracks he had decided were Hermann's party ended in the middle of a small clearing.

He stopped in the middle of the open space, turning a full circle. The tracks didn't just fade on their way through; they *stopped* in the middle of the clearing. He didn't see any other tracks approaching from another direction. Over the past year he had seen hardly any magic from the apprentice, and Ladimore had assured him earlier that day that she was mostly incapable of serious magic. Yet vanishing into thin air suggested that a sorcerer of some sort was involved.

After he had checked the area again for tracks, Joachim headed off to the north. The Woordinal was sparsely populated, but there were logging towns near the border that occasionally traded with Ellingham. Even if they did not turn up his quarry, they would at least provide somewhere to spend the night.

The village of Kensart was further north than Joachim had expected; he had spent an uncomfortable night in a misting rain in the forest, and he walked into the village square about mid-morning. In the center of the square, wood had been stacked around a stake, to which a woman had been chained by her wrists over her head. He didn't recognize her at first – her face was blooded – but when he got closer, her eyes flicked open, and the distinctive shade of lavender of the sorcerer's apprentice's eyes was clear.

She was not any happier to see him than she had been before she saw him, he noted, and her eyes continually flicked to his right as he walked over to her.

"So, have you gotten the impression that running off into the woods was a bad idea?" he said to her.

She just frowned at him, but her eyes almost immediately drifted to his right again, and he glanced back over his shoulder. The square behind him was empty, but several men were approaching from the other side of the stake.

"What are you doing here?" one of them said to Joachim as they got closer. All three men were stockily built, dressed in homespun and leather. He looked them up and down once.

"I could ask you why you've got Ladimore of Ellingham's apprentice chained to a stake, too," he replied. That angered one of the man's companions, and he caught him as he moved towards Joachim.

"She's a witch, and she'll burn when the priest gets here to do it proper," he said. He was shorter than the other two, with a wicked scar under one eye.

"Maybe, yeah, but what do you think the sorcerer is going to do to you if you kill his apprentice?" Joachim said.

“Who says he’s going to find out?”

Joachim settled his hand on the hilts of his sword. “Want to find out?”

“Your baron has no rights up here.”

“The baron is dead. No telling what his successor will decide to do about all you folks up here in the Woordinal.”

“Dead? Since when?”

“Yesterday morning. The keep had been under direct assault most of this week. You’re not dealing with a known entity anymore, forester.”

“So you serve the sorcerer now?” the forester countered.

“I do what I’m told,” Joachim said with a shrug, but the inflections sounded to Aster like a threat.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “These manacles are not designed to open with something still inside them.”

“What do you mean?”

“The hinges only turn one way,” she said. “The design isn’t seen this far west, generally, but they’re fairly common among Llandin slavers.”

“So how does one remove them?” he asked.

“Generally by removing the corpse’s hands,” she said.

“Right, well, assuming that I need you alive for the moment,” he said. “How do you get them off?”

“You don’t,” the forester said.

“You’d likely need a blacksmith to do it,” Aster said. One of the men belted her across the mouth, which drew a disinterested frown from her once she’d recovered her footing.

“Hey, now, there’s no need for that,” Joachim said. “I do need her relatively functional.”

“For what?” the forester asked. His tone was almost salacious, and Aster’s brow twitched.

“I’m looking for someone,” Joachim said, “and she can help me find him.”

“You’re fooling yourself if you think I’m going to go anywhere with you, knight,” she said.

“You’d rather just stay on that stake till their priest shows up to kill you?” he countered.

“Rather than be paraded around in Llandin slave chains again? Yes,” she snapped.

“There’s no proper smithy here. If you’re not intending to cut off my hands, these things are staying on until a blacksmith can remove them or I’m dead.”

He was quiet a moment before replying, “Do you *need* your hands?”

“Holy God,” she said, exasperated. “Do you really think these three are even going to let you take me anywhere?”

“*Let* me? Do you really think they can *stop* me?”

“Just who do you think you are, anyway?” the forester said, and his two companions shuffled around a little to half surround him. Joachim glanced back at them each before replying.

“Well, you’re a friendly bunch,” he said. “My name is Joachim, and I’m a knight of Orrania. She is coming with me.”

“I think you should get on your way,” the forester said, taking a step closer to him.

“The only way I can do that is with her. So let her down, and—”

One of the men behind him lunged at him, but he had been expecting it; he ducked to one side as the other two moved in on him as well. Aster sighed, rolled her eyes, and settled back

against the post to wait. She had not been expecting anyone who showed up to try to stop their plans to burn her as a witch, and now that she knew who had been following her, she was almost *less* interested in being rescued, such as it were.

Joachim had been at Ellingham for the past year, but Aster had never really seen him do anything except lounge around and figuratively pursue the chambermaids. After the first few moments of the brawl he had landed in the middle of, it was becoming clear to her that he did at least know how to fight. The forester who had done all the talking was also hanging back more, letting his companions do most of the actual fighting, but they were taking more than they were giving in the exchange of blows. One withdrew, stumbling, after the knight broke his nose; the other was more persistent, but the steady stream of blows to the head began to make him stagger. The third turned and ran in the direction of one of the buildings across the square.

“Arms!” he yelled. “To arms!”

“The regional sheriff has his office here,” Aster said flatly to Joachim as he pushed the staggering forester over.

“Oh?”

“Sheriff and four men-at-arms, who have crossbows, last I saw them,” she said.

Joachim’s eyes shifted to the manacles around her wrists, held to the stake by a rusted bracket. He climbed up onto the pile of wood next to her to take hold of the chain, brace himself against the stake, and pull. The effort snapped the weakened bracket, but also destabilized the pile of wood, and they tumbled to the ground as it slid. The sheriff and his deputies were coming out of the building where the forester had run, and Joachim found his feet, threw Aster over his shoulder, and headed off out of the village at a trot.

“Are you *insane*?” she snapped, covering her head with her arms as the men-at-arms loosed bolts from their crossbows at them.

“They missed,” he said. “And we’ll be well into a screen of trees by the time they’ve reloaded.”

“You think they won’t come looking for us?” she said. “I didn’t exactly hang around when the villagers started throwing the term *witch* around.”

He changed direction suddenly, which dug his shoulder into her stomach and jarred the bruise on her ribs, and she gasped.

“Oh, God, you’re lucky there’s nothing in me to vomit down your back,” she wheezed.

“Could you shut up for say, two minutes? If we want to lose them, you’re not helping.”

Aster grumbled something unintelligible to his back, but fell silent. Joachim picked up the pace, moving almost effortlessly through forest she had thought dense. He didn’t stop for almost an hour, when he finally set her on the ground next to a spring. Aster sank almost immediately to sitting, woozy from the position in which she’d been carried.

“Let me see those wrists,” he said, dropping to one knee next to her, and she proffered her arms weakly.

“You really didn’t need to bother with all that,” she said, her voice more tired than when she had been arguing with him earlier.

“I need to find your precious Hermann,” he said.

“Ugh, he’s not *my* precious Hermann,” she said, frowning.

“Then why did you follow him?”

“*Devil you know*, as they say,” she shrugged. “My master was very clear what those soldiers would do to me if the keep fell. I didn’t intend to wait around and find out how accurate he was.”

“You know the baron had been talking about the two of you marrying,” the knight said, and her frown deepened.

“Really.”

“He seemed quite enthusiastic.”

“We’ll add that to the list of reasons I wouldn’t have cared if you’d left me chained to that stake, then,” she said. He was still inspecting the manacles. “The only way to remove them is to somehow fit the hands back through or to remove the pins in the hinges.”

“I don’t suppose magic is an option,” he said.

“If I were capable of enough magic to get out of these manacles, I’d have been able to avoid getting chained to a stake in the first place,” she said. He shifted his eyes up to her face, picking out the cut on her brow that had done most of the bleeding.

“Well, we can at least get you cleaned up,” he said.

The spring water was cold, and by the time the blood was washed off her face and the wound was cleaned out, Aster was shaking. Joachim pulled her to her feet.

“Can you walk?” he asked her.

“At least for a while,” she said. She was sore; after being thrown from the horse the day before, getting roughed up when the villagers had caught her, and being chained to a post with her arms above her head for most of twelve hours, she really just wanted to sleep, but she tried to keep up with the knight as he headed off through the forest again.

“So what’s your name?” he asked as the spring fell away behind them.

“You were at Ellingham for a year, and you know who I am, and you never learned that?”

“You’re almost exclusively referred to as ‘Ladimore’s girl’ among the people I generally spent time with,” he replied, shrugging.

“Oh.” She was wrapping some of the slack of the chain around one arm to keep it from rattling too much. “Aster.”

“Like the flower?”

“Yes. Pretty enough until you realize there are no decent nicknames for it,” she said.

He was quiet a moment, working through that in his head. “Ah. I suppose not.”

“Where are we going?”

“Away from the village. Do you know where Hermann went?”

“Not after he crossed over into the fey lands,” she said, and Joachim stopped walking to turn and look at her.

“What?”

“There wasn’t a fairy ring, and there was a residue in the area, so either he has friends on the other side, or someone with him knows how to open a gate,” she said.

“*Your* tracks weren’t in the vicinity of his,” he said.

“Do you really think I was apprenticed to a sorcerer for so long without learning some basic divination?” she said. “I did look. He was not in the human realm when I was looking.”

“Well, shit.”

He continued walking, and after a moment, Aster caught back up with him.

“I don’t suppose you can get us into Faerie,” he said after several minutes.

“I’ve never tried. And even if I can, I certainly can’t do it with my hands bound.”

“Then I guess we know what our next step is.”

### Chapter 3

The Woordinal extended northwards from Orrania for hundreds of miles, but the southern glades were mostly devoid of the trolls and goblins that gave it much of its reputation. Villages were widely spaced, mostly inhabited by woodsmen and their families, but a handful of cities were scattered among the vastness of the forest: Stryne on the Woord, Kelten, Weesling. After three days of walking without finding another village, Joachim was starting to hope they didn't have to walk all the way to Stryne, the closest of the cities, to find a blacksmith.

"Do you actually know where we're going?" Aster asked when they stopped around noon on the third day to eat – dried fruits and meat that Joachim had brought with him from Ellingham.

"Generally," he said with a hint of irritation. "It's been a while since I spent any length of time in the wood, and that was mostly further east."

"So you don't actually know if we're even close to *anywhere*," she said.

"We could head west until we hit the Woord, but a larger town is going to be difficult to dissuade if they decide to go with the witch-burning course of action."

"Bah."

"I wasn't aware asters were delicate flowers."

"You know, I'm really not inclined to help you, and if you're just going to be irritating, you're not really improving your odds of me doing so."

"There are ways into Faerie without a mage's assistance," he said, shrugging.

"Certainly, if you *want* to be a brownie's amusement for the rest of your life," she agreed.

"And do you have a better idea of where to find a village with a blacksmith?" he asked.

"Not with my hands bound," she said, frowning. "If I had a staff or some other magical focus, that probably wouldn't matter, but I never really got past lab assistant."

"Seems kind of odd that Ladimore would take you on as an apprentice if you didn't have the potential for more than that."

"Does it? He bought me off a slave line when I was nine. He's told me more than once I wasn't really worth the two hundred crowns."

"Two *hundred*?" the knight sputtered.

"Apparently young, virginal girls sell for a premium on slave lines," she said, shrugging. "He was quite upset with the slavers that I was there at all."

"Ah, so he saved you from a life of torture and abuse," Joachim said. His tone was ambiguous enough that Aster wasn't certain whether or not he was mocking her, so she ignored it.

"I suppose. The problem was more in that after he'd bought me, he was stuck with me. I never knew my parents, and the tinker who had been raising me was killed by the bandits who sold me to the slavers. So I really had nowhere to go at the time."

"At the time?"

"Well, I've ruled out the Woordinal as a viable destination at this point."

"The villages up here have always been witch-shy," Joachim said, nodding. "Eighty or ninety percent of the people with enough magic in them for it to manifest in their eyes go insane, and a lot of them drift up into the woods."

"Eight or nine out of ten?" Aster said. "That seems kind of high."

"Ellingham is pretty small, and this close to the Woordinal there aren't a lot of native magic-users left. Larger towns with more people see the problem more."

“I don’t know why they’d come up here. Thus far the travelling has been less than pleasant. It’s constantly damp, the light is bad, and the *rodentia* are rather forward.”

Joachim laughed, drawing a glare from her.

“If you think this is bad,” he said, “you’ve been shut up in a lab too long.”

“That’s likely anyway.”

He stood and dusted himself off before picking up his bag. “Well, come on. Sitting doesn’t get us anywhere.”

They had been climbing a slight slope for most of the morning, and Aster wondered if they were getting close to the mountains she had heard about. Instead, towards dusk, they came to the top of a ridge, and the ground fell sharply before them for almost a hundred feet. Aster set her hands on her hips as she frowned down it.

“Well, that’s irritating,” she said. Joachim settled on his haunches at the edge of the ridge, looking out over the valley below.

“There’s a river down there,” he said, “and it’s not the Woord. The Tyne, probably.”

“I’m really not that familiar with the geography here,” Aster said.

“The Tyne runs into the Woord, but its headlands are several hundred miles east of here. There,” he said, pointing.

“There what?”

“Lights, which means people, which means food that isn’t field rations,” he said, standing. “Let’s see if we can find a way down this ridge.”

“Here doesn’t work?”

“If you want to break your neck, maybe.”

She raised a brow at him, then leaned forward to peer in the direction of the lights.

“Well, don’t take too long to catch up.”

“What are you—”

She was halfway down the outcrop of rock that made up the upper band of the ridge before he could move again to look down, climbing nimbly despite the chain, and he sighed slightly before moving to follow.

“Where the hell did you learn to do that?” he asked as he caught up to her halfway down the steep slope at the base of the cliff.

“My master locked my room at night,” she said.

“What has that got to do with anything?”

“It was off his lab, on the upper floor of the keep. I had a window.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Why? The ivy is probably older than anyone currently living there, and the stonework isn’t exactly perfect.”

“Why was he locking your door?”

“He said it was safer for me.”

“Ellingham never struck me as particularly dangerous.”

“Probably not for you. Unmarried women tend to be objects of sport there, and he said he preferred I didn’t get drawn into that.”

“So why were you sneaking out of your room, then?”

“The bread comes out of the ovens at about half past three, and my master is rarely up before eight nowadays.” She paused. “Is he all right? You said the baron was dead.”

“That didn’t seem to concern you, either.”

“That didn’t answer my question.”

“Ladimore was fine the last I saw him.” He glanced down her frame once. “You don’t look like someone who would get up early just for food.”

“If I didn’t, I wasn’t likely to eat until tea.”

“You sound like you were thinking about leaving.”

“I asked, when the formal apprenticeship ended two years ago. He said no.”

“Why would that matter?”

“Technically he still owns me.”

Joachim let the conversation fall off, uncertain which way, if any, he wanted to take his questions. Shortly they were at the river, walking along the tree line at the top of the bank, heading for the lights a mile or so off. Aster was sticking closer to him than she had most of the three days they had been traveling, and he realized now that the manacles were making her nervous.

The lights became clearer as they got closer, and their source proved to be a small, walled town at a bridge across the river. Joachim stopped while they were still a ways off.

“They’ll almost certainly have a smith,” he said.

“Will he even still be awake?”

“Don’t know until we look,” he said. “Well, come on.”

The guards at the gate had a handful of questions for Joachim (“What’s your reason for entering Tynebridge?”) was answered with “To get out of the damned forest.”), but after a glance at the manacles she was wearing, Aster was ignored.

The pair of smithies they found were both darkened, their smiths gone for the day, and Joachim turned his attention to finding an inn for the night. The one he eventually chose, which had a signboard bearing nothing more than a picture of a broken bottle, had a busy bar on the first floor, filled with rough-looking men drinking and women with varyingly scandalous necklines. After a moment to digest the scene, Aster decided she was not surprised at his choice.

“Don’t let any of them bother you,” the knight said to her, passing her the key he’d gotten for a room somewhere upstairs.

“I’ve really never had that kind of problem,” she said.

“Probably because your eyes glow in the dark,” he said, clapping her on the arm in what was apparently supposed to be a consolatory gesture, but it just made her brow twitch. “Don’t wait up for me.”

“I wouldn’t anyway,” she said to his back as he turned and waded into the crowd around the bar. After a moment she found an open seat to eat at, answering the handful of questions that came her way with a glare. By the time she had finished eating, the crowd had thinned out somewhat, and she made a concerted effort not to make eye contact with the knight as she headed for the stairs to go up to the room he’d gotten them.

The upstairs hallway was dimly lit, and between the poor lighting and the grime, it took Aster several minutes to interpret both the number on the key and those on the doors to find the room. The room itself was small, with a bed and a washstand and little else, but after spending the better part of the week in the woods, she really didn’t care. She moved to lock the door behind her, then paused. She had the key; Joachim would be unable to get in if she did. On the other hand, given the direction his solicitations seemed to be going in the bar, she wasn’t sure he would even be coming up. Erring on the side of possibly being woken up in the middle of the night, she locked the door.

## Chapter 4

Aster wasn't sure what time it was when she woke, but there was dim light outside the window, and birds were chittering relatively nearby. She pulled herself to sitting after a moment; she was still alone in the bed. On some level she was relieved; she had been more or less cloistered for much of her life, and she was unfamiliar with the etiquette of sharing sleeping space, platonically or not.

"You, at least, don't snore," Joachim said as she got out of bed, and, not immediately seeing him, she had to look around to find him. He had unrolled his blanket next to the bed on the other side of it, and he sat up as she walked around it.

"Dare I ask how you got in here with the door locked?"

"Probably not," he said. His eyes followed her as she walked back around the bed for her shoes. "We'll go see about that chain after breakfast."

The first smithy they stopped at that morning refused to even look at the manacles Aster was wearing, so they headed to the other they had found the night before. In daylight, the town was not quite so dreary as Aster had thought it the night before. The streets were narrow; the entire area within the walls covered maybe fifteen acres. Tightly-packed buildings rose three and four stories on either side of them, and the streets, cobbled with what looked like river-bottom stones, had no sidewalks.

"They seem so crowded," she said when they stopped short at an intersection for several carts to pass.

"Walls are expensive to build," the knight said. "They probably can't afford to expand them."

"Why wouldn't they just build outside them?"

He glanced at her. "We're half a week into the Woordinal. Do you really *want* to know what's likely out there that they daren't be outside the walls at night?"

"I don't know. How likely are we to be running into it?"

"Depends how quickly you can get us into Faerie."

"Ugh."

"Have you ever been over?"

"*Me?* I hardly left the main keep since I got to Ellingham."

"Ah."

"I'm not sure why you think I'm going to be useful to you."

"I don't exactly have a lot of other options for someone with some kind of magical training, now do I?" he said.

The other smithy was not as busy as the first they had tried; the smith was alone, working at the forge. He was a short, burly man of proportions that seemed off to Aster. Joachim stopped just under the awning over the shop front.

"Murder or treason?" he asked, and the smith turned to glare at him.

"What?"

"Never met a dwarf aboveground who wasn't guilty of one or the other," the knight said. "So which is it?"

"Neither. Piss off if you're looking for trouble," the smith said, turning back to the forge.

"That's a dwarf?" Aster asked.

"You *are* a sheltered thing, aren't you?" Joachim replied. "He can get those off you, if

anyone can.”

“Get what off whom?” the dwarf said, turning to look.

“Llandin slaver chains,” Aster said, holding them up.

“Oh, really? And how did the pretty lady get *in* Llandin slaver chains?”

She frowned. “How doesn’t really matter so much as I’d rather keep my hands in the process of removing them.”

He walked over to look at them, studying the hinges for several minutes before peering up into her face and throwing Joachim a frown.

“You’re sure you want these *off* her?”

Joachim raised a brow. “She’s no use to me bound.”

“You’re not a very smart boy, are you?” the dwarf said. He caught hold of the chain between Aster’s wrists and headed for his forge. “Come on, then, girl.”

Aster had expected the smith to use a hammer and some kind of chisel to remove the manacles – that was how they had been taken off her years before. Instead, he took a long-handled, hinged tool with short, thick blades off a hook on the back wall.

“What is that?” she asked, stooping slightly as he adjusted the angle of the manacles on his work table.

“Bolt cutter,” he said. “Mind your fingers.”

Her eyes widened slightly as the tool sheared through the hinge bolt just below the head, seemingly with no effort.

“That’s terribly efficient,” she said, and the dwarf laughed as he set up the other manacle to easily reach the bolt.

“Dwarven ingenuity is all about working *smarter*,” he said, then squeezed the handles together and popped the other bolt head off. Aster straightened as the manacles fell free, and Joachim took a few steps into the shop.

“What do I owe you?” he asked.

“Owe me? Leave me the chains,” he said. The knight’s brow furrowed slightly.

“That’s all?”

“That’s *all*?” Aster said. “Llandin bonds are made with feyward iron. It took me most of the twelve hours I was in them to rust the bracket that was holding them.”

“You got magic through Llandin bonds?” the dwarf said incredulously.

“It was excruciating,” she said with a frown.

“You may regret loosing her yet,” the dwarf said to Joachim.

“Maybe. We need to be going,” the knight said to Aster. She stretched her arms once.

“All right.”

Rather than leaving the town, however, Joachim headed for the market in the center. Aster stuck close to him so she wouldn’t get lost.

“What do you need to do to find him?” he asked her.

“If he’s still in the fey lands, I can’t divine his location from this side without an open portal. And depending where he is in there, we may only be able to get relatively close.”

“And if he’s not still in the fey lands?”

“I can’t know that until I have a chance to look.”

He waited a moment to see if she was going to elaborate before continuing. “And how would you do that?”

“I need an undisturbed stretch of water,” she said, shrugging. “Without a focus object, I’m fairly limited in what I can do. Water is... full of energy, even at rest, so it can substitute

well enough.”

“And the portal?”

“That will be harder. This forest is...” She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

“There are pockets of it that have enough latent magical energy that I can probably make a path.”

He looked her up and down once. “We should probably get you something more travel-worthy to wear.”

The knight spent about a half an hour going through the market, mostly getting them a supply of food that would travel well, but he eventually found a heavy woolen cloak to go over the thinner robe Aster was wearing. Once he’d decided he had found what he could there, he led her back in the direction of the gate they where they had entered the town the night before.

“Was there one of those places you can open a portal near here?” he asked.

“We passed two yesterday,” Aster said. “Both are back up the ridge.”

He swore under his breath.

“It was barely twenty feet of exposed rock,” she said, a little impatiently. “It’s really not that bad.”

“You’re not carrying an extra forty pounds of food today rather than last night, now, either,” he said.

“Did you really need to get that much?”

“If we’re lucky, that will last us a week,” he said. “If we’re luckier, we’ll find enough forage to stretch it longer, but you have to be careful what you eat in Faerie.”

“I should hope we don’t have to spend that long there,” Aster said. “If you don’t want to go back up, we’ll likely find another just wandering randomly at the rate they seem to be turning up thus far.”

Joachim stopped short a block from the gate, and Aster almost tripped on him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“We aren’t going that way right now,” he said, and over his shoulder she could see, in the distance yet, a mass of soldiers in ranks along the river bank.

“Where did those come from?” she asked as he turned and caught her arm to turn her around after him.

“I don’t know, and I don’t really care, but they’re goblins, and we don’t want to get stuck here when they close the gates,” he said. “Come on.”

He was moving much more quickly now, not quite a run, but fast enough they were getting glares as they wove through the crowds on the streets. They were passing through the market when the bells began tolling, and Joachim broke into a run, pulling Aster along with him. The gate in the wall along the river had not yet been closed, although there were men-at-arms actively moving people away from it to do so. Joachim pulled Aster through them behind him, ignoring their shouts, and darted through the gate as it started to close.

“You’d better hope there aren’t more of them on the other side of the river,” she said to him as they were suddenly confronted with an empty bridge as the gate slammed shut behind them.

“It’s much easier for two people to avoid an army than vice versa,” he said.

He loosed her arm as he slowed to a fast walk. The bridge’s arches and pilings were all stone, but wooden planking lined the walkway. Aster pulled the cloak he had gotten her closer as they crossed the water, flinching when a pair of arrows struck the bridge behind them.

“They—they’re setting fire to the bridge,” she said, seeing the flames when she looked over her shoulder.

“Then they’re concerned that there may be goblins on the north side of the river, too,” he said. He glanced back. “We’ll be across well before it burns this far.”

A thicker *twang* from the gatehouse drew his attention, and a cask hit the walkway behind them and shattered.

“What was that?” Aster asked.

“Uh... Lamp oil, from the looks of it,” Joachim said, raising one brow. “These guys are serious about cutting themselves off.”

He broke into a trot again to keep ahead of the more rapidly spreading flames behind them, and Aster gathered her skirts in one hand to keep up. Once across the river, Joachim quickly deviated from the narrow road to take them back into the forest.

“So I guess that explains the walls then,” Aster said quietly when Joachim stopped to redistribute the weight of the goods he had bought that morning. “Do you want me to carry something?”

He glanced up at her. “How much do you really think you can take?”

“Probably not a lot,” she admitted. “But if it will make it easier to carry...”

“I’d rather you focus on getting us into Faerie,” he said.

“Assuming we still need to go there,” she said.

“Ah, right. Well, then.” He pulled a shallow bowl out of his pack and poured a small quantity of water from his canteen into it, then handed it to her. Aster raised a brow at him.

“Do you know *anything* about magic?” she asked.

“You said you needed still water,” he said.

“Quantity makes a big difference,” she said, dropping to one knee to set the bowl on the ground, twisting it to settle it securely in the fallen leaves that lined the forest floor. “If he is here, and not in the fey lands, this is going to give a pretty poor picture.”

“If he is here, we’ll go find you a bigger body of water to look at,” he said.

Aster didn’t answer, watching the water, waiting for it to settle in the bowl. Once it had stopped moving, she gingerly set her fingers along the edge of the bowl and closed her eyes. Joachim took half a step back as a breeze stirred around her, lifting the dark hair that fell down her back, but she didn’t seem to notice it. After a moment she opened her eyes, and the glow that he had earlier noticed only in the dark of night was more apparent, but quickly fading.

“He’s not here,” she said. The water in the bowl rippled, and Joachim turned his eyes back in the direction of the road. Hoofbeats were just becoming noticeable above the noise of the nearby river.

“We should get moving,” he said, the ripples in the bowl growing more noticeable. He poured out the water and stuffed the bowl back in his bag before pulling Aster to her feet as he slung the pack over his shoulder. “Come on.”

Something had unnerved him, although Aster didn’t know what, for they were running again, dodging trees and tangles of thorns. She struggled at times to keep up, for he didn’t stop for most of an hour, when the forest floor suddenly dropped out from under them in the middle of a patch of briars, and they tumbled to the bottom of a gully.

“I hope you had a very good reason for—” Aster fell silent mid-goad, only halfway through disentangling herself from where they’d tumbled together, her eyes focused down the gully.

“What?” Joachim murmured.

“It’s been a very long time since I’ve seen that much magic in one place,” she said, a tremor in her voice. “I hope it isn’t sentient.”

“What?”

“It was a manticore last time,” she said, carefully resuming the disentangling. “That was just after the slavers bought me. I had never seen anything like it before.”

Once she could stand clear of him, Aster started carefully down the gully, not waiting for Joachim to find his feet. He hurried to catch up. A shallow stream ran down the middle of the gully floor, meandering slightly, and when the gully narrowed, they found themselves picking their way along the stones that dotted the water. The gully itself was deep, the sides twenty and thirty feet above them and getting steeper the further they went.

After almost a hundred yards, the gully ended at a sheer, solid wall of dark gray stone; at the bottom of it spread a deep, still pool, from which the stream was flowing. Aster cautiously moved to a large, flat stone closer to the edge of the pool, and she moved over so Joachim could join her.

“What is it?” he murmured.

She didn’t answer, kneeling next to the edge of the water to delicately dip the fingers of one hand in – and then fought the urge to jerk her hand out of the water and slowly withdrew them.

“There’s a naiad here,” she whispered back. “I think she is asleep.”

“A naiad? She would not appreciate the intrusion,” Joachim whispered. Aster turned her eyes up to him.

“I can open a portal here, and with a pool like this, I can get a very clear idea of his location.”

Joachim hesitated, glancing back the way they’d come, but finally nodded. “All right.”

Aster set the fingers of both hands back in the water and closed her eyes, and the subsequent gust of wind as she tapped into the magic in the spring almost knocked Joachim off the rock. He dropped to one knee next to her. While the water itself remained still, a nebulous, violet film formed on the surface and began to swirl.

“That’s the portal,” Aster breathed, her voice strained. “Now I’ll try to find him so we come out near him...”

The wind shifted, and an image appeared on the surface of the water – a forest, but nothing like the one they were in. The trees on the other side of the portal were all unfamiliar, and the forest floor was covered in silver and golden flowers. The image shifted suddenly, rapidly, skimming through the forest until it burst out into a seemingly endless meadow filled with flowers of every color. The focus was heading rapidly towards mountains in the distance that were coming into closer focus.

Beneath the divining image and the swirl of the portal, Joachim saw movement in the water. Aster’s eyes were still closed; something in the water was moving rapidly, and as it got closer to the surface, he could make out the lithe form of the naiad, swimming towards them. Still below the surface, she locked eyes with him, and the fury in hers was undisguised. Joachim caught Aster around the waist and flung himself towards the portal.