

Prologue

The traveler wiped a weary hand across his eyes. He looked down at his dust-laden boots as his feet touched upon something harder than the packed dirt he'd tread upon for the last three days. Stooping, he brushed grit away from ochre stone, puzzling at the pattern of cobbles spreading out before him. He raised his eyes, straining to define his surroundings in the last tint of twilight, and faced a towering, crumbling edifice of the same color stone. He stood back up, weary, achy, and confused.

As he stepped cautiously across what appeared to be an abandoned lane, the cool night breeze dried his damp hair and sent a shiver down his neck. But it was more than cold wind that caused his knees to shake uncontrollably. Uneasiness plagued him the moment he entered the shambles of what looked like a once-thriving village. He could make out the remains of finely crafted stonework: corniced walls of buildings, corrals for animals, even a nearly intact archway adorning the entrance to a land that had once boasted a beautiful, wide avenue running the length of its commercial center. In the failing light, he ran his fingers along inlaid scrolling of ebony and oak, polished wood that wrapped doorways in designs of leaf and flower. He smelled the mountains in the north as hints of snow, of pine forests, wafted down, encircling him in a flurry that made him wrap his cloak tightly around his neck.

The young man knew he was lost, for this place was not on any map. Anxiety rose in his throat; he had hoped to find warm shelter for the night, a hearty meal, and a soft goose-down mattress in an accommodating inn. Instead, he heard eerie, discomfiting sounds carry on the air, drift around his ears. He stopped, every nerve heightened, and pressed his back against a wooden lintel of a doorway the led to a field of tumbled stones and a tangle of weeds. He closed his eyes and sifted through the sounds, hoping for familiarity: crickets, nocturnal animals, even wolves, whose howling would at least remind him he was still in his world and not some strange aberrant one.

His heart pounded in expectation but was not consoled. A soft voice, high in pitch and achingly sad, drifted on the suffocating night air. His heart wrenched at the anguish underlying the indecipherable words, which tugged at him and made his feet move of their own volition. Confused, he found himself running, his boots clacking against the uneven roadway beneath him.

He passed a broken, waterless fountain at the center of a paved square, saw shadows flit in darkened doorways. A weak voice, deep within his gut, yelled at him to run back, but both the words and the urgency dissipated before he could recognize them as his own. His feet took him down one constricting lane and another. He lost track of time, of his exhaustion, of his fear. More voices, muddled and pressing, swelled around him like a tide, attacking and receding, entangling him like a fisher's net.

He stopped abruptly at the remains of a wrought iron gate that swung loosely from a thick wooden post. Beyond the gate, the cobbled street ended, and perhaps the very world itself came to naught, for the young man trembled at the sight unfolding before him. An impenetrable darkness, so much darker than the night, gathered around him,

expectantly watching. He heard the rustle of branches and took a hesitant step, pushing aside the gate. Tendrils of pitch reached out to him, swirled around him, coaxing, urging. A child startled him by calling his name. He thought he saw a flash of a tiny hand reaching out of the gloom, but it was quickly devoured by the surge of blackness shifting and oozing in front of him. Now, his mind raced with a dozen warnings, but they came too late. For he was a stranger to this part of the world and had never heard of the tales whispered in dark corners over mugs of ale, or told in harsh threats to badly behaved children. He had set out, as many do, to find his fortune. But now he would only find misfortune, for fate or carelessness or stupidity—it didn't matter which—had led him to the Land of Darkness.

The shepherds of the surrounding hills knew not to venture near the ruins of Antolae, the ancient name given to the once-thriving region. *Shamma* was the common name spoken under bated breath, meaning “city of destruction” in a long-forgotten tongue. Even if one of their flock strayed near, they surrendered it to a certain fate. They didn't worry their herding dogs would follow, for even venturing within one league of Antolae, the curs would whine and whimper, and slink back to their owners to cower beneath their legs. It was unfortunate that this young traveler had no dog to warn him, and that the sheep herders had only last month moved their flocks further south, to warmer winter climes. The entire week that he journeyed across a windswept, barren land, following a rutted cart road, he saw no one who could have given him warning. It was too bad indeed, for all the reassuring promises he had given to his aging mother of his safe return would not be kept. She, along with his younger brothers and sisters, would forever wonder in misery what tragedy had befallen him.

All emotion emptied from the traveler's mind and heart, leaving nothing but a dim curiosity that nudged him forward. Now, close, he could hear bells jingling and sheep baaing, footsteps clacking briskly across stone, a pail sloshing with water, a giggle, chickens cackling. His heart warmed at the sounds of everyday life, sounds that removed any last vestige of hesitancy. As he stepped into the swallowing blackness, he left no footprint behind, or any trace that he had crossed an invisible line. Yet, even if there had remained any sign of his passage, what good would it do? No one who entered that bewitched land ever came back out.

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Chapter One

Callen could feel Beren's eyes boring into the back of his neck long before he smelled the burly man's pipe tobacco. A tendril of smoke wended its way in front of the block of chestnut wood Callen leaned over, a rich aromatic scent that permeated the huge workroom and lingered in his clothes and hair for days.

"Go a little lighter with the deep gouge, Callen lad," the master craftsman told him. "Here," he added, taking the tool from Callen's hand and setting his pipe in the wooden bowl on the work table. "You've got to set your wrist so, or it'll get away from you. Especially working with the grain as in this instance."

Callen watched closely as Beren's thick hand pressed the gouge along the marked line on the wood. It swam through the grain like a knife through butter, leaving a smooth, even channel. A thin ribbon of dark wood twisted and fell to the planked floor of the shop. He pulled back and gestured to Callen with bright encouraging eyes. "See?"

Callen nodded and took the gouge back. Beren stepped past Callen's stool and studied the sketch pinned to the wall. He played with his thick, short beard, as he often did when thinking deeply. "Ambitious design. But it's coming along nicely."

Beren raised his voice and addressed the other apprentices in the room. His eyes lighted on the lanky red-headed youth sitting at a workbench by the door. "Darial, this is

why I harp on you young'uns about sharpening your tools. Callen here spends a good portion of time with his slip stone and, in the end, saves time and waste." Beren laid a firm hand on Callen's shoulder. "A master apprentice like Callen knows the value of a finely-honed tool. You'd best to follow his example." Beren winked at Callen and strolled over to another student hunched over a workbench.

Callen examined the scrolled design he'd been working on for the last few days. The pattern he was presently tackling was taken from a spandrel off the famous bridge in Sherbourne that crossed the river Heresh. The other four students were first order, so Beren had them crafting simple things, like turned legs for chairs and blind mortises for hinged cupboard doors. Callen had been here the longest—four years—and was usually given the more complicated custom jobs that came into the shop. With this lull in orders, Beren had him teaching the beginners and, in his spare time, Callen challenged himself with difficult designs he gleaned from the stacks of old parchments on Beren's shelves.

Callen had spent much of his life carving furniture and small pieces like walking stick handles and ornamental bowls back in his home village of Tebron, but he yearned to craft something bigger, more dramatic. Few if any took such an interest in ancient architectural styles, but Callen was enamored with the artful beauty and elegance of line found in the drawings of old buildings and bridges. This triangular piece, nearly two feet across, displayed entwining vines and swirls of interlocking ropes that gathered in the center around a circle of sycamore leaves. The channels ran deep and narrow, challenging Callen's steady hand and skill.

Eliab stood up and stretched kinks from his back and came to Callen's side. "That's unbelievable, Cal," he said, his sawdust-ridden curls shaking along with his head.

“How are you able to do this?” Eliab picked up a stool and set it next to Callen so he could watch him work.

“Practice, that’s how. You’ll get there,” he said encouragingly. Callen gave the younger man a smile, and thought how this new student reminded him so much of his brother Joran. He missed his brothers—all three of them—and hadn’t taken a break to see them in over a year. Only Felas had been able to visit last spring, and just for a few days. Living in the Logan Valley, or Loganvale as the locals called it, was so different from Tebron. Instead of towering trees and clinging fog, Callen enjoyed waking each morning to sunshine and warm breezes fragrant with the rich fertile loam that Loganvale was famous for. Farmers in this oak-strewn valley of gently rolling hills grew every kind of crop imaginable—from barley to hay to bogberries—and carted their produce out to many distant towns and villages Callen had never heard of. Wine pressed from grapes in this region far excelled those grown elsewhere. Even the beer brewed from Loganvale hops tasted brighter and satisfied even the meanest thirst on a hot summer day. Now that he was spoiled by such year-round warmth and abundance, he wondered if he could ever live in Tebron again.

As Callen picked his gouge, the front door blew open. Wood shavings flicked up from the floor and tables and danced around in the air. Beren swung his head around as his wife, Laera, stepped inside the shop and let her eyes adjust to the dimmer light. A swath of bright sun spilled onto the floor and Callen could smell hay waft in from the harvested fields. Through the open door Callen watched a horse-drawn carriage pass, hooves and wheels kicking up dust that drifted into the shop.

“Laera,” Beren yelled, “kindly shut that door behind you before that dirt sticks to every bit of fresh varnish.”

Laera, her dark eyes wide and excited, shut the door and rushed over to Beren’s side with her skirts swishing the floor. A rope of black hair lay over one of her shoulders, braided—Callen noted—much like the pattern carved in the wood block in front of him. Callen thought Laera was the most striking woman he had ever met. With her creamy skin and natural poise, he imagined she had been breathtaking in her younger days. Even at this age—Callen didn’t dare guess how old she was—she radiated a youthful energy and inquisitive spirit that caused all the students to grow enamored with her. He imagined that since she never had children she adopted all who came to apprentice with her husband, made evident by the mountains of delicious food she prepared for them each day and the way she fussed over the slightest cut. Many of the younger students, first time away from home, found Laera’s comforting words a remedy for homesickness. Even Callen let her baby him from time to time, although at thirty-one he hardly needed coddling. A twinge of guilt cut him as he thought about his own mother living with his brother Maylon. He was overdue for a visit home, even if his mother still failed to recognize him.

“Have you heard this latest travesty?” Laera whispered to Beren, her eyes pinning him in place. Callen turned his attention back to his carving, catching a quick, questioning glance from Eliab. The younger boy followed Callen’s hint and pretended he didn’t hear the scathing words pouring from Laera’s mouth. Beren stood a few feet away, his feet planted, with hands on his hips. Although he was only a couple of inches taller than his wife, Beren drew himself up like a bear and tucked in his chin.

“Let me guess—more railings about Ka’rel’s wife, no doubt. Woman, you just have to leave it alone.”

From the corner of his eye, Callen caught a flash of Laera’s hand grabbing Beren’s sleeve. “Beren, ever since Ka’rel married that witch, the manor has become a madhouse.”

Beren sighed. “You’ve run into Azar at market.” It was a statement, gleaned, apparently, from the tone in Laera’s voice. “If you’re so concerned, you owe it to your brother-in-law to tell him to his face.”

Laera snorted and pursed her lips together. “You know he won’t see me. He told me never to step foot in his home until I had kind words for Huldah. Can’t you see what a spell she’s cast over him? He nearly slobbers at her feet!”

“Laera, it’s his life. You had no right to chastise his choice in a bride.”

“—Only *months* after M’Lynn’s death. Come now, Beren, even you must think it odd for Ka’rel, who takes weeks just to choose between rye and wheat for his upper field, to rush into such a marriage.” Laera lowered her voice and her face softened. “I’m worried about Jadiel. Azar has seen the way Huldah treats her. He says she beats the poor girl.”

Beren pried Laera’s fingers from his shirt and took her arm. Callen could tell by the look on Beren’s face that he was already weary of this conversation.

Beren gave Laera a sweet smile. “Come now, love, you know Ka’rel’s a proper father. He dotes on the girl, and he has the richest estate in all the vale. He gives her everything her heart desires. Surely he wouldn’t let Jad come to harm, would he?”

He led her to the door and stopped. “I know you love Jadiel, and that you grieve with her over M’lynn’s death. Nothing harder than losing a mother at such a tender age.” He brushed a rough hand across her cheek and wiped away tears. “But, Laera,” Beren said softly, “you mustn’t begrudge Ka’rel from seeking comfort in a new wife. If she makes him happy—”

“Then why choose a stranger over a local woman? No one knows where Huldah comes from, what life she left behind. She just blew in with the wind one day and swept Ka’rel off his feet. He’s either lost his mind or she’s enchanted him somehow.”

Beren cocked his head. “Woman, you have a wild imagination.”

“And Jadiel hasn’t visited us once this past year. Don’t you find that odd? Aren’t you the least bit worried over your niece?”

“Enough,” Beren conceded. “We’ll take a ride to Northfold Manor. Pay a friendly visit. Will that suffice?”

A rush of relief filled Laera’s eyes. She cracked open the door and leaned over and kissed his ruddy cheek. “Tomorrow,” she said, with no room for dispute.

Beren watched the door close behind his wife. Callen let out a breath and turned to Eliab, who appeared afraid to move. “Well,” Callen muttered, “back to work.”

They both looked over at Beren and noted the scowl on his face.

“I think I’ll go back and work on my lathe,” Eliab whispered as he stood up.

Callen nodded, noting the somber mood draped over the room. He turned his attention back to his drawing, then picked up his gouge, and with a slight adjustment of his wrist, dug into the smooth, grainy wood and carved a perfect, deep channel.

Chapter Two

Jadiel threw herself back onto the soft covers of her bed and let the autumn light bathe her face and neck. The smell of cut hay hung moist and heavy in the air. Fall was usually her favorite time of year, a time of bountiful harvest. But fall also reminded her of the apple tarts she used to make with her mother, and the carriage rides they took through the woods ablaze with golden leaves. The brisk hint of winter in the breeze coming through her window only sharpened her keen awareness of her mother's absence. She had tried to find solace in a walk along the creek, but it hadn't help to alleviate her sorrow. Nothing could.

She let her eyes drift across the shelf of porcelain dolls her mother had bought for her over the years. They stared down at her with glassy, empty eyes, not a one smiling, as if wondering why she neglected them so. How many hours had she spent dressing her dolls in their frilly smocks and untangling their long locks with the tiny brush she kept in her dresser? Not that many months ago she found happiness in such simple play. Now, nothing brought a smile to her face except her treasured moments with Papa, and those were growing rarer now that he had remarried.

Just the thought of her step-mother sent a shiver across her neck. It was bad enough to lose her mother. Why did Papa have to go and marry anyone at all? A deep-

seated ache returned to her gut. She wanted to share in her father's joy, but the hurt pounded at her. Why couldn't it just be the two of them, comforting each other and grieving together? Marrying Huldah had been a slap in her face. Had Papa forgotten Mama so readily?

Jadiel felt hot tears run down her cheeks. She chastised herself. Her father had always been devoted to her mother, loved her more than the world. Her death had shattered his heart. For the first time in her twelve years she saw Papa, a man usually confident and capable, completely fall apart and wander the estate like a lost foundling. Jadiel would watch him pick at his food at the table, stare into space, forget where he was. In a few months, he had grown gaunt and feeble, wasting away from grief. Maybe he needed a wife. Jadiel didn't understand that need, but she did understand the pain of loss. No one could ever replace her mother—and certainly not someone as vile as Huldah.

Her mother had been dead now nine months and the wound felt as raw as the day Jadiel had heard the news of the accident. A runaway horse in the marketplace had trampled her down. Jadiel cringed and squeezed more tears from her eyes. She fought to push the image of pounding hooves from her mind, but it battered her, replaying over and over.

Jadiel heard heavy footsteps on the tile floor down the hall. Huldah had returned. From shopping, no doubt, with her two arrogant daughters—Kinna and Ramah. Spending as many silvers as humanly possible in a short afternoon. Jadiel smirked. All those years she had longed for a brother or sister, and now she had inherited the two most unfriendly, mean-spirited sisters possible. Kinna was fifteen and Ramah seventeen. All

they did was whine and complain, fussing over their clothing and wild red hair, trying to make themselves look beautiful but failing miserably. With their big hooked noses and pointy chins, they looked more like crows than girls. Jadiel chuckled. How they clamored for suitors to call on them at the manor. Did they think that with their wily ways and heavy face paint they could hide their petty temperaments and selfish prattling?

Jadiel reached over to her dresser and picked up her ivory hand mirror, a gift from her mother. She looked in the glass at her tear-streaked face, and smoothed out the thick black hair that cascaded down her shoulders with the matching ivory comb. Her mother had always told her she was a beautiful child, but reminded her that the more important beauty was under the skin. True beauty came from within and radiated outward. Jadiel ran a finger down her pale soft cheek. What did she care if she was beautiful? How could that help her survive this miserable life? How could she go on each day like this—missing her mother so terribly and suffering such harsh treatment at Huldah's hands?

As Jadiel questioned her reflection in the mirror, the silver surface of the glass shimmered. In the background behind her, her mother's face appeared, smiling the warm, loving smile that Jadiel so missed.

Mama! she whispered. *Help me. How am I to go on without you?*

Jadiel watched, enraptured, as the image of her mother drew closer and stroked her hair with her hand. Jadiel felt the gossamer touch on her head as a ray of warm sunlight. She smelled her mother's rose water, inhaling it greedily. Her mother, so radiant and pale, spoke softly.

Jadiel, my sweetest, do not fret. Things hidden in darkness will come to light. You are strong and clever; you will find a way. Know I will always love you . . .

Huldah's voice startled her, causing her to drop the mirror onto her bed.

“Lazy child! Look at you, preening yourself when you should be working. Your father will be home soon. Go set the table.” Jadel cast down her eyes and scurried off the bed. She dared a glance at Huldah's face. Her step-mother clenched her teeth and slapped her on the backside of her head as she passed by. Jadel bit her lip to keep from crying.

As she set the large oak dining table, Jadel heard Kinna and Ramah arguing in their room down the hall. Jadel rarely ever heard either of them speak a kind word to the other, or to anyone for that matter. They snapped disrespectfully at her father's caretaker, Azar, and yelled at the cook whenever their food wasn't perfectly prepared. The eggs were too salty; the fish too bland. If they were so picky, why didn't they make their own meals?

Jadel had always worked hard on the estate alongside her father, helping him buy and plant seed, hitch up the plow horses, muck the stables. Even when his fortune grew and he could afford to hire workers and servants, Jadel still accompanied him to market and on deliveries. Up until her mother died she joined him on all his trips encompassing the entire vale—from Eastfold to Westfold, even as far south as Swiftwater. And he never minded her riding alone to Kettlebro to visit aunt Laera and uncle Beren. But Huldah put a quick end to all that, insisting she stay at home and help with the household chores. And her father agreed!

She was soon to learn that “helping” with the chores meant mostly doing them herself. She never saw her step-sisters lift a finger to clean their own room or carry in firewood, and Huldah only barked orders at everyone in a rude, condescending tone. Just

looking at the faces of the workers told Jadiel they were just as displeased by Papa's marriage as she was. Once, her home had been a joyful, peaceful place. Not anymore.

As she positioned the cutlery beside the plates, she heard the jingle of breeching outside on the circular cobbled driveway. Her father was home! She rushed to the front door and saw him lighting down from the carriage buckboard and handing papers to Azar.

"Papa!" she called out. Ka'rel looked up the steps to where Jadiel stood and gave a little wave. Just as she meant to run down to him, she felt a tug on her collar of her dress. Huldah yanked her back into the house and pinned her with a hostile look.

Jadiel, furious, stared back, then something odd caught her eye. She had never been so close to Huldah's face before. Her step-mother's skin gave off a strange, pungent scent and Jadiel's head grew dizzy. From a distance Huldah could be called a beauty, with her streaming bronze hair and delicate features. Jadiel guessed Huldah was younger than her mother had been, for she had not a wrinkle on her face or neck, not a blemish seen anywhere. Huldah's hands were smooth and adorned with long fingers and painted nails. Her figure was a slender hourglass. Her luxurious eyelashes hovered over deep, alluring eyes. Every tooth white and in perfect alignment. Jadiel often watched Huldah flash her smile and cause men to stutter. Only Azar seemed immune to her charms, but maybe he was too old to be stirred by such attractions.

Yet, now, Jadiel saw something underneath all that beauty. As if a thin veneer coated Huldah's face, transparent enough to see through. Jadiel pulled back, puzzled. Huldah's eyes widened and then narrowed.

"What are staring at, you little brat?"

Jadiel could not take her eyes off her step-mother's features. Wavering under Huldah's perfectly shaped nose was a bulbous, flaring one with little black hairs protruding from her nostrils. Her pale, unblemished cheeks turned to wrinkled, weathered skin, with pockmarks and scars and a big brown wart under her left eye. Her fiery hair turned white and stringy, splaying out from her lumpy, misshapen head. Jadiel gasped.

Huldah slapped her cheek hard with the palm of her hand and suddenly all the strange things Jadiel had seen vanished. The young, beautiful step-mother took a step back and scrutinized Jadiel's disturbed face. Jadiel thought she saw a flash of fear flit in Huldah's eyes, but it passed too quickly to be certain. They both turned their heads as Ka'rel skipped up the steps to the house.

Jadiel's father stomped the dust from his feet on the entry mat, then found her with his open arms. Huldah backed away and smoothed her hair. Odd, Jadiel could almost detect Huldah's hands tremble as she watched her warily while ensconced in her father's embrace.

Jadiel lingered in his warm, strong arms, feeling his love pour through them straight into her heart. "Oh Papa, how I've missed you!"

Ka'rel brushed a lock of straw-colored hair out of his eyes and grasped Jadiel's shoulders. He squatted down to meet her gaze. "Silly goose, you saw me at breakfast. Was that so long a time to be parted?"

"Even a minute is too long, Papa."

Ka'rel laughed warmly and tousled Jadiel's hair. "My gorgeous princess, you are right—it is agony to be away from you. Come," he said, standing upright and taking her

hand, “I want to hear all about your day and what mischief you’ve been getting into.”

Jadiel gleamed up at her father and let him pull her into the hallway. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Huldah leaning against the threshold to the dining room. Her step-mother’s voice came out syrupy.

“Ka’rel, my love.”

Ka’rel stopped abruptly, as if a hand pressed against his chest. His head turned and he let go of Jadiel’s fingers. Jadiel felt her face heat in anger but she clamped her mouth shut.

Huldah sauntered over to Ka’rel and with her body pushed Jadiel out of the way. She draped her arms over Ka’rel’s shoulders and lowered her head coyly. “Don’t you want to know how much *I’ve* missed you?”

Jadiel’s mouth dropped open as her father’s eyes glazed over. From where she stood, she could hear his breath catch in his throat. Jadiel cringed as she watched Huldah run a manicured finger through Ka’rel’s neat beard and let it rest on his lips. Her father’s bright, eager manner faded, leaving him paralyzed and unflinching, like some hypnotized quarry.

Finally, he opened his mouth. His words came out hoarse and fluttery. “Just how much—have you missed me?”

Huldah whispered something in Ka’rel’s ear, then turned and smiled sweetly at Jadiel. There was anything but affection in her look. Ka’rel’s attention riveted onto Huldah’s face; he had forgotten Jadiel was in the room. A chuckle echoed against the stone walls. Jadiel jerked her head around and saw her two step-sisters watching in amusement.

“Tell the cook we’ll be a little late for dinner,” she said in a lilting, measured voice.

Jadiel shook her head in disbelief as she watched Huldah escort her father down the hall and up the stairs, like leading a blind, feeble man. Anger welled up in her heart, mingling with the hurt of rejection. She stood with her fists clenched and let her anger lift her and carry her out the front door, down the stairs, and into the herb garden where she collapsed on the grass beside the well. In the cool breeze of the evening, she cried her heart out, cursing the day her father brought Huldah into their home.

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