

CHAPTER 1

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“ME MASTER BEAT me yesterday.”

The blond-haired boy moved closer to Reis, his head bent as if tying his his bootstrap.

“Now why would he do that?”

The boy cupped a hand over his mouth to hide his words.

“Said I didn’t clean his boots well enough.”

Reis nodded. He knew Master Snelling, a surly man with a heavy hand which he freely used on his young apprentice. He was always kicking him or raising a fist in his direction. Already he’d yelled at him twice since Hugh stirred out of bed.

“But I HAD cleaned them,” Hugh said fervently. “They was a-shining like the sun itself.”

He got up quickly, hearing his master’s voice bellowing from the camp.

“You’d best be hurrying,” Reis warned and watched Hugh run off. Reis sighed, feeling sorry for him. The boy was only nine, after all, torn from his family and still with a lot to learn about keeping on good terms with his master. Many a

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time since they'd set up camp in this New World, he'd seen him slacking off, leaning against the trunk of a tree with the half-cleaned boots on the ground before him. Now he'd been caught dreaming and whipped for his laziness. Reis wondered how many times he'd be disciplined before he learned. He shrugged. Did no good to worry about another. He was certain the boy would keep incurring the wrath of Master Snelling until he did things right or ran away. Either, at this point, was impossible, for to please Master Snelling would be when the sun fell from the sky and broke into bits and to run away, why, where would he go in this wilderness land of Virginia where home was but a misty dream far across the ocean? Reis gathered his things and walked from the river's edge toward the encampment to find his own master, Dougham Gaunse, thankful he was a fair and just man.

'I be lucky,' he thought, 'for as Master Snelling's apprentice, t'would be hellfire and brimstone for sure.'

Reis could hear the surly man yelling at poor Hugh and he, in return, whimpering and sniveling.

"Crying for your mother?" Master Snelling's voice boomed across the camp. "Ye be looking for a teat to suck on, Hugh Salter. Never you mind the snot from your nose, pick up them boots and do a thorough job this time. What good be you apprenticed to me? Should I get a stick now and knock your head about?"

Reis watched Hugh walk dejectedly over near the fire, there to keep some warmth in his bones on this cold morn and to get away from his master's wrath. He

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caught Hugh's eye and gave a sympathetic nod. Wouldn't hurt the boy to know his friend was cheering him on. Hugh nodded back and gave a small smile. Then he turned and began to finish what his dreaming had made him forget, the careful shining of Master Snelling's boots. Reis saw him spit on the boot to give it shine, knowing in his heart that Hugh was probably wishing it was his master he was spitting on. Reis turned and bumped right into Dougham Gaunse.

"Well," said Master Gaunse with his strange accent, "and what is my apprentice doing, staring at our fire with nothing in his hands?"

He glanced over and saw Hugh vigorously rubbing the boots.

"Aah," he commented, "so it is young Hugh that Snelling was raising his voice to. For what is he being punished?"

"'Twas not what he did but what he didn't do. The boots..." and Reis pointed where Hugh was working close to the fire. Dougham Gaunse nodded.

"A man needs his boots strong and polished in this wild country or the mold will eat the leather and then, they are fit for nothing!"

Reis glanced down at Dougham's boots. They gleamed back at him, the result of his getting up before the sun to shine and spit-clean them so his master would be pleased.

"A good job," said Dougham Gaunse, slowly and thoughtfully pulling on his beard. He nodded his head.

"You are a good apprentice. You serve me well as you learn the trade. *No*

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labor, however humble, is dishonoring.”

Reis felt a glow in his heart. Praise from Dougham was rare but when it came, it fell like silver rain upon a thirsty land.

“We go digging again, boy. You are game then, to follow and keep the samples?”

“Indeed, sir.”

“Then gather the instruments and meet me by the river in five minutes. Forget nothing.”

Reis turned and ran back to the tent, there to gather the glass bottles, the measures and weights, the digging implements which were the tools of Dougham’s skill in metal, thrusting all carefully into the knapsacks which were strung together. When they were full, he glanced around to make sure he’d forgotten nothing. Then he slipped the harness to which the sacks were attached over his shoulders, buckling the thongs and straps until he felt like a cart horse with his heavy load. He staggered under the weight, righted his shoulders and strode out into the early morning light. From the distance he saw Hugh watching him enviously. Because of the boots and a long list of grievances on Master Snelling’s part, Hugh would be required to remain at camp all day, scrubbing, polishing, sweeping dirt floors, hauling wood from the forest and water from the river. He gave Hugh a cheery goodbye but the youngster merely turned his head away. Reis thought he saw his shoulders heaving.

Then he forgot Hugh in the excitement of another journey. This time they

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were heading up river about five miles, there to dig the soil and search once again for signs of rock in which might be hidden the iron ores and metals that were Dougham's dream, his life-long vocation. Sir Walter Raleigh had paid Dougham Gaunse's passage across the Western Ocean for just such purpose, to locate copper and other ores for the greater glory of England and her navy. And though Master Hariot, astronomer, mathematician and surveyor was one of the leaders of this expedition, it was clearly Dougham, with his dark eyes and intensity, his thick accent and strange ways, who was favored for his skills as the Queen's own mineral man. The others of the group, some of them Cornwall tin workers and German miners, kept to themselves in the camp and on occasion, had shown discontent at the thought of subservience to such an argumentative and headstrong person as Dougham. Troubles had risen already, but Reis thrust them from his mind as he ran to meet up with his master.

He struggled with his load of sacks which seemed to get heavier with each step. The group of men striding ahead barely glanced back to see how he was faring, nor did he expect them to. They were too busy discussing the possibility of what they might find once they began digging. Already some of the men were arguing, giving vent to loud cries of disagreement. Only Dougham remained calm, walking slowly and pulling always at his black beard. Reis glanced around but there were no other apprentices save for one, a thin, narrow-shouldered boy named Jeremie Whitton, who walked even further behind than Reis, his back stooped under the weight of his

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master's tools. Jeremie, like Hugh Salter, was about nine or ten. Reis felt so much older at twelve, almost thirteen. He wished there were others his own age, boys he could talk to with some semblance of intelligence. Both Hugh and Jeremie still cried at night for their mothers; he could hear them sometimes when he couldn't sleep for the ache in his own joints. He often wondered why their mothers had let them go. He had no such concern for he had no mother nor father to care where he was or how he fared. But Jeremie and Hugh had been thrust into apprenticeship back in England by parents too poor to put food on the table. Six silver shillings for the one, seven for the other, a veritable fortune in a shanty landscape so sparse and barren it could barely support its hungry inhabitants. Mothers wept and wrung their hands, fathers cursed and took to their drinks again, but what else was to be done? Masters bound for the New World didn't want females and the girls, bent over sewing or cooking or tending the babes, watched out of the corners of their eyes to see their cousins and brothers sold like cattle to the highest bidder. Hungry eyes the girls had, black as coal dust or else, green like jade only duller, with no light shining in them.

Some of the young boys didn't want to go, kicking and ducking out of the new master's arms which reached for them. Then a swift kick, a curse and a clout on the ear. Back they were dragged, protesting and crying, while the sisters clung to the mothers' skirts, weeping along with them. But silver shillings meant food on the table and the rent paid so they could keep the roof over their heads and not have to

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sell the last cow. Even the Peter's Pence per annum was too much to give, though out of fear they did so, not wishing to incur the wrath of Holy Mother Church.

Reis was different. Unlike the rest, he had stepped forward and volunteered himself, glad he was older and not so puny-looking. His aunt didn't seem to weep much, he remembered later; his uncle just nodded and gave him a small push.

"See you mind," was all he said.

The aunt, herself surrounded by six or seven youngsters, seemed relieved in a strange, sad way. One less mouth to feed. Reis, who had long ago forgotten how to cry, squared his shoulders and saw his opportunity. He marched right up to the dark-haired, bearded man and said,

"I be Reis Courtney, your new apprentice."

The man laughed a slow, dark laugh, not at all like the Englishmen nearby, but thick with foreign tones. The children stopped weeping, the fathers stopped cursing and they all stared at the stranger who, along with several others, had come into this realm of poverty to seek their helpers.

"Why not in London?" was the question asked. "Why do they come all this way to Surrey when they could have others?"

"Country lads are strong," was the answer, "and all are hungry. Parents will sell their children to keep the landlord from breathing down their necks."

And so for twelve silver shillings, Reis Courtney was apprenticed to Master Dougham Gaunse, to travel with him across the vast, demon-plagued sea to a

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heathen land called Virginia, named for the Virgin Queen herself sitting on her throne in London Town, in this year of Our Lord, 1585. The aunt took the money from her husband's hand and counted it carefully. It was an immense sum.

The way was getting tangled as they moved further north, keeping the river always to their left. The dig was a greater distance than they'd traveled before and the territory fraught with danger. Savages roamed the thick woods and the men were ever alert. Reis stumbled and would have fallen but caught his balance just in time. His toe throbbed and he realized he'd stubbed it on a stone jutting up from the hard ground.

'Damnation,' he thought then quickly crossed himself. No need to bring the wrath of the Almighty down upon him for his evil tongue! Jeremie Whitton puffed at his side.

"They go too fast," he whined a little, then stopped when he saw Reis's glare.

"Ye need to toughen up, boy," Reis said, sounding just like one of the masters. "This is what we're needed for, to carry the tools of our masters' trade."

"You like it, I know you do. Carrying all those instruments and shovels."

"'Tis not a bad vocation, I must admit. I watch and I learn. One day," he said thoughtfully, "I might be a mineral man just like my master."

"Your master is a strange man with strange ways," Jeremie replied. "I hear the men talking about him all the time. They say he's a heathen, as bad as any Savage."

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Jeremie turned his head to glance into the dark woods on the right, as if fully expecting to see a painted figure step from the thickets. He shuddered. Reis smiled. Jeremie was afraid of his own shadow. He listened to every story about the fierce tribes and how they cut Englishmen up into little pieces, skewering them before they were roasted over slow-burning fires. He listened to the stories about Dougham Gaunse, too, from a strange place called Bohemia who was, worst of all, a pagan and a disbeliever in Jesus Christ.

“They say he drinks the blood of Christian babes,” Jeremie whispered.

“Not true,” Reis snapped back. “Where do you get such ideas?”

“Me master told me and his friend, too. They say Master Gaunse is a Jew.”

He spat the word, then quickly made the sign of the cross. Reis said nothing, not wanting the conversation to continue. But Jeremie persisted.

“I’ve never met a real Jew before. Is it true he killed Christ?”

Reis turned suddenly upon the younger boy, his fists clenched.

“If you mention this bloody nonsense to anyone, I’ll thrash you myself!”