

## CHAPTER ONE

### Flight

Toward evening, Alyse DeJune and her cousin, Kate DeJune, rode along the dirt road into a sleepy town nestled at the edge of a forest and stopped by an inn to water their horses at a trough while townspeople meandered along the sidewalks and street. The anxious throbbing of Alyse's heart sounded like rapid drumbeats in her ears. Caldon was only a half day's journey behind them, which allowed plenty of time for news of their flight from the city to reach here. Then she pressed her lips together in a grimace. She and Kate had been traveling at a medium canter to not tire their horses. Few people on horseback had passed them, and the ones who had, hadn't even given them a glance.

An icy stab of fear shot down Alyse's spine when she heard the faint but rapid sound of hoofbeats behind them. Horses running at full gallop. She swapped panicked looks with Kate. "They've come after us!"

Alyse glanced wildly around for some place to hide, just as someone in the inn across from them put candles on the windowsills. "We'll go in there!"

She and Kate scrambled down from their saddles. But they had reacted too late as a woman and two men on horseback galloped into town. The cousins put their hands on the hilts of their swords, readying themselves for battle.

“Here they come again,” a woman’s irritated voice said from somewhere behind them.

“I sure wish they’d go to some other town,” a man responded. “I’m gettin’ sure tired of ‘em comin’ here to raise the dickens.”

Other townspeople muttered their agreement.

The three drew rein by the tavern, scooted off their horses, and disappeared inside.

Alyse’s anxiety gushed out of her body like a rapidly flowing river, and she swapped relieved looks with Kate. She uttered a shaky laugh. “I’d call that overreacting.”

Kate sent her a tight smile. “Same here.”

Alyse glanced up and down the street. Now that the newcomers had disappeared, everyone had returned to their own business. Some walked along the sidewalks while others went into the inn as oil lamps were lit in its two unshuttered front windows, emitting warm, welcoming glows. The inn’s lanterns must have been a signal to the other townspeople because, one by one, dancing yellowish flames from candles and oil lamps in the windows of the shops, taverns, and homes lining both sides of the road began appearing.

Alyse and Kate traded relieved looks.

“If anyone’s chasing after us,” Alyse said, “they’re still behind us.”

“Thank Goddess for that.”

Alyse and Kate brushed road dust off their nondescript commoners' rough woolen pants and vests and white linen shirts, then stretched their aching muscles. Kate watered their mares and refilled their canteens from a small circular fountain in the town.

Alyse glanced up the road that disappeared into the gloomy forest beyond the town. The sight of the woods sent dread slinking across her shoulders. She had never spent the night outside of Caldon before, except for the times she had stayed at her family’s villa in the country. And the prospect of sleeping tonight in the forest, surrounded by trees and wild animals and Goddess knew what else, gave her the chills. “I wish we could spend the night here.”

Kate handed Alyse a canteen heavy with water. “We can’t. We've barely put a half-day's distance

between us and Caldon—”

Alyse pulled out her canteen stopper and swallowed a mouthful of cool water. “Mora told us she'd delay telling my parents we'd run away. But I bet she went right home and told Grandmother Maude. I can just picture the glee on her face as she's doing it.”

Kate nodded in agreement.

“Then Grandmother will expel me from the family, and Mora can marry Troy Estati instead of me.” Alyse paused, then added heartfelt words. “And she's welcome to him.”

Kate wrapped her canteen's strap around her saddle pommel. “Even if Mora kept her word, and I'm sure she didn't, she knows we left by the Public Gate. That's the road to The Marches. It leads to your uncle's legionary camp there.”

“We have to reach Uncle Leoc before they catch up to us.” Alyse pushed the wood stopper into the canteen's mouth. “He'll protect us.”

“You hope.”

“He gave me his word.”

“He might be the Commander of the Eastern Legions, but he's also subject to the Magesterium. If they order him to hand you over, he will.”

Alyse tightened her saddle's cinch, suddenly eager to set off again. “He won't. Unless he crosses the border into Caldonian territory, the Magesterium can only suggest, not command. Besides, the Magesterium won't get involved because this dispute doesn't involve the state. It's between two families.”

“Which happen to be among the most powerful in Caldon.” Kate brushed back strands of black hair from her forehead. “It's the matriarchs who pull the strings in the Magesterium. If your Grandmother Maude and Ariella Estati—”

“The DeJune and Estati matriarchs won't involve the Magesterium. And Uncle Leoc won't hand me over to my grandmother. He'll smooth things over.”

“I don't think so,” Kate muttered.

“Besides you,” Alyse said, “Uncle Leoc is the only person in the whole world I trust. He’ll keep his promise.”

“He’s defeated Mittan, and he’ll want to celebrate his victory by holding a magnificent triumph on his return to Caldon when his term of service ends. If he succeeds in defeating any of the other countries, he’ll want to have an even greater celebration. He’ll be allowed to bring some of his legions back as well to take part in his triumph. And I bet your enemy First and Lesser Families will do everything they can to prevent him from having his victory celebration. Your uncle would be furious if he was denied his triumph. Goddess knows what would happen then. He might even want to overthrow the state.”

A coldness gripped Alyse while her mind rebelled against Kate’s accusation. “He would *never* do that.”

Kate shrugged. “It’s too late now for second thoughts. We have to see this through and hope your uncle keeps his word.”

“He will.”

Kate eyed the forest, creases of apprehension working their way into her face. Alyse was relieved to see that her cousin was just as frightened of the forest as she was.

“Let’s get going.” Kate mounted her gray mare. “We have lots of distance to cover.”

Alyse swung into her saddle, then pointed her mare’s head toward the forest. She and Kate started off at a walk.

A couple of passersby eyed them curiously, but one elderly man stepped into the street, blocking their path. “You girls headin’ into the forest?”

“That’s our business,” Alyse said.

“That’s Malagnar Forest yonder. There’s brigands holed up in there. Wise travelers don’t pass through Malagnar Forest except in groups. And they avoid it at night.” The man pointed to the inn. “I’d stay there tonight if I was you.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Alyse said.

With a shrug, the man stepped aside. “Don’t say I didn’t warn ya.”

Moving past him, Alyse urged her bay mare into a trot. Kate kept pace beside her.

“Travel fast,” the man shouted after them. “And don’t stop for nothin’.”

As soon as Alyse entered the forest, tall pines and trees bristling with leaves loomed up on either side of her, creating a partial canopy that threw the road into shadow. She’d never been this far east before, and she’d never heard of Malagnar Forest. The forest’s name sounded ominous. Alyse recalled the man’s warning and her heart tightened with dread as she suppressed a shudder.

Alyse didn’t go too far along the dirt road, riding side by side with Kate, before Kate reined in her horse. “We’re breaking for food.”

Alyse peered uneasily at the darkening woods. “I thought we were riding straight through.”

“We are,” Kate responded. “But we should eat first and give the horses more of a breather. We won’t get any more food or rest until we reach the other side of the forest. And Goddess knows when that’ll be.”

Dismounting, Alyse and Kate led their mares behind a clump of bushes a short way off the road and tied the reins to branches, unfastened feedbags from their saddles, and fed the horses. Afterward, they settled down on a fallen tree trunk with their own travelers’ fare—a loaf of crusty bread, a large hunk of cheese, and a leather wine pouch.

They ate in silence as the sun began its slow descent behind the forest canopy. Hoots came from somewhere nearby, sending shivers down Alyse’s spine. She traded nervous looks with Kate. Then, as if on cue, they both uttered nervous laughter.

“We’re city girls through and through,” Alyse said.

Kate bobbed her head in agreement. “Take some poor villager and put her in the city, and she’d be just as frightened.”

“Rill told me once that he goes into the woods hunting with Jedd—” Alyse stopped abruptly as memories of her last encounter with Rill Larkin flooded her mind. Or, rather, memories of what he’d done to Dayson Florens, the wine-shop owner she’d treated at the One Goddess Temple.

Rill had beaten up the old man to force him to sign over the larger share of his business to the Estatis for not repaying money he'd borrowed from them. Rill's lust for becoming a mage had made him into an Estati thug.

Alyse exchanged a quick glance with Kate, who appeared just as troubled by the dark thoughts Rill's name had conjured up.

"At least Jedd had the good sense to walk away from it all," Kate said.

Alyse couldn't hide the sadness in her voice. "And it's too bad Rill didn't walk away too. Deep down, he's a good person. But the Estatis have led him astray to get back at his mother."

Kate took a sip of watered red wine from the pouch. "I still can't believe it. Kendra Larkin is actually Death Estati's older sister, who renounced her family and married Rill's father, a commoner and a blacksmith. Livia Estati is really Rill's half sister. And her brother, Troy, is actually her cousin. And Rill's too. Phew! That's enough to confuse anyone. Can you blame Rill—"

Leaves rustled off to their right. Kate jumped to her feet, half drawing her sword. Alyse gripped the handle of her dagger and held her breath, listening for more sounds and peering at the dark, dense foliage. The mares snorted and pawed the leaf-covered ground. An animal's high-pitched scream erupted from deeper in the forest. The horses snorted again and jerked at their reins, making the leaf-covered branches bend.

Alyse and Kate swapped fearful looks.

"What was that?" Alyse asked in a tense whisper.

"An invitation to be off," Kate replied.

Alyse and Kate hastily unfastened their mares' reins from the branches, led them back onto the road, and continued on their way at a trot. Soon sunset turned into twilight and eventually into darkness. To Alyse's relief, the partial canopy of branches and leaves allowed the full moon's pale light to shine through, revealing the contours of the road as a barely visible carpet running between thick walls of blackness.

Even though they were halfway through First Fruits, the hottest season of the year, the air grew

chilly. Alyse took her light woolen cloak from her saddlebag and wrapped it around herself. After a while, she lost all sense of time and distance as her body moved in rhythm to her mare's gait. The sounds of the horses' hooves on the hard-packed dirt weren't loud enough to deaden the terrifying barks, screeches, screams, and howls that continuously erupted in the woods. Fear clutched at Alyse each time she heard them.

To Alyse, it seemed as if the journey through the gloomy, sinister forest was taking forever. She was an occasional rider, not a frequent one. And she'd been in the saddle for so long that the muscles in her buttocks, thighs, and legs sent out sharp pains in time to the drumming of her horse's iron-shod hooves against the road.

"Let's stop for just a short time," Alyse said. "I can't stay in the saddle much longer."

"All right," Kate responded, hesitancy in her voice.

Alyse stood in her stirrups and began to move her right foot over her mare's rear—and froze. "Brigands!" she yelled. She swung her foot back into the stirrup and drew her sword.

Dark figures charged into the road from both sides of the forest.

"Get 'em!" a rough voice shouted.

A hand closed on Alyse's leg. Whipping out her dagger, Alyse stabbed the hand. The attacker yelped in pain and let go. Then murky figures brandishing swords and clubs surged around her mare, trying to wrest Alyse out of the saddle. Alyse slashed at them wildly. But as soon as one attacker fell away, two more seemed to come at her. Frantically, Alyse tried to kick the horse into a gallop but more brigands barred the way. The mare reared, almost unseating Alyse.

All of a sudden Kate appeared, swinging her sword at the attackers and opening a path for the mare. "Ride!"

Alyse dug her heels into the mare's flanks, and the horse exploded into a gallop.

A dark form lunged at Alyse as the mare sped by. Alyse cut at the brigand with her dagger, slicing through flesh and bone. The attacker screamed and stumbled back.

And then Alyse broke free of the brigands. Her first thought was for Kate.

Galloping hoofbeats sounded behind her.

“Keep going!” Kate cried.

Alyse rode furiously, with Kate chasing after her. Alyse’s heart beat fiercely against her rib cage, striving to ignore the desperate pounding of her bay’s hooves against the ground. In her mind, she felt the brigand’s hand on her leg. A shudder swept through her body. *If he’d unhorsed me*— She kicked the thought from her mind. He hadn’t.

Kate drew up beside her, and they rode together. After a while, Kate slowed down to a trot, and Alyse matched the pace. Finally, Alyse pulled in on her reins. Kate did too.

“Are you all right?” Alyse asked as she strove to get her breathing under control.

“Just a few nicks,” Kate said. “I think we surprised them with our spirited defense.”

“You did. Not me.” Alyse raked her fingers through her reddish-brown hair. “I feel so vulnerable with just a dagger. I appreciate you teaching me how to use one. But when we get to Uncle Leoc’s, I want you to teach me how to use a sword.”

“You have your Kinesi magic.”

“No!” The force of Alyse’s outburst astonished even herself. She lowered her tone but kept it firm. “I won’t use Kinesi magic. Or any other magic except Healing magic. Besides, I don’t know how to summon the Kinesi power. I can only access it in times of stress. Sometimes not even then. And I don’t know how to control it.”

“If you learned how to summon and control it, you could use it whenever you wanted.”

Alyse shook her head doggedly. “I won’t use Kinesi magic.”

“Kinesi magic can be better than a sword for some things. You’ve shown me that.”

“I won’t use it.”

“Why?”

Alyse urged her mare closer to Kate’s and spoke in a tone teeming with determination. “Magic is the root of all that’s wrong in the world. First and Lesser Families raiding and killing one another for their charms and staffs. Conscripting fledging mages who don’t receive patrons at The Bidding or who don’t



join the legions or the sea service. And this ages-long war with Gaetan. We started it because we wanted to recover the charms and staffs Toran the Usurper took with him when the Caldonians rebelled against him, and he fled the city to found Gaetan. Also—”

“All right. Point made. I’ll teach you how to use a sword.”

They broke free of the forest a little after dawn and stopped to eat a quick meal by the edge of the woods. Both girls’ buttocks and thighs were sending them agonizing streaks of fire. Alyse applied healing hands to ease Kate’s aching muscles.

“I wish you could use healing hands on yourself,” Kate said as they waited for the healing magic to take effect.

“So do I,” Alyse responded. “But a healer can’t heal herself. Only others.”

“We’ll take more frequent breaks so you can stretch your legs,” Kate told her.

“But our pursuers—”

“Probably haven’t set out until this morning. We have a good lead on them. So I think we can afford to go a little slower.”

Remounting, Alyse and Kate continued to ride.

As the sun climbed into the sky, they began passing farmers riding in wagons piled with produce or firewood, and fellow travelers on foot or on horseback. The road brought them through a combination of woodlands, hills, and open land dotted with small farms, a few large prosperous ones, and an occasional inn. Every so often a crossroads split off from the main road, but Alyse and Kate continued east. Once, Alyse spotted a young teenage girl fishing by the stream using a rod made from a stick and envied her carefree attitude.

Around midmorning, they passed through a village. By this time, both girls, who hadn’t slept since the night before they left Caldon, were dozing in their saddles.

In the early afternoon, they entered a prosperous-looking town where they stopped to buy a flask of weak beer, a couple of cold meat pies for themselves, and grain for the horses. A short distance out of town they spotted a stand of trees and shrubs on a knoll that provided good concealment.

“I think it’s time we got some sleep,” Kate said.

Alyse heaved a relieved sigh. “At last!”

As Alyse swung down from the saddle, she stifled a groan and hobbled around to ease her aching muscles. Meanwhile, Kate unsaddled and fed the horses. By the time she began brushing them down, Alyse came over to help. Afterward, they greedily devoured the pies and drank the beer. Then they laid their cloaks on the ground and stretched out on them, thankful for the warmth of the afternoon sun.

Alyse fell asleep instantly . . .

And was awoken by Kate shaking her shoulder. “Get up!”

Alyse’s heart leaped in panic. “W-what?”

“We overslept. It’s almost evening.”

Blinking to sharpen her focus, Alyse spotted the sun drifting down toward the horizon and turning the sky into a pale orange.

“We need to get going,” Kate said.

After saddling the horses, Alyse and Kate resumed their journey. They traveled all night, the soft moonlight lighting their way like a constant beacon as they trotted through sleeping hamlets, villages, and towns. When dawn broke, the cousins stopped to rest and eat. Then they remounted and kept going all morning and into the afternoon, taking short breaks and stopping once in a town to buy food.

In the evening, they happened upon a large, two-story inn by a crossroads near an ancient red oak. In the faltering daylight, the sign swaying in the warm, gentle breeze said Red Oak Inn. The unshuttered windows glowed with friendly lamplight, and a plume of smoke curled up lazily from one of the two chimneys until it faded into the darkening sky. Several horses were hitched to iron rings set in stone blocks, and a few wagons were parked near the stable beside the inn, their horses waiting patiently in their traces. Music, singing, and laughter drifted out through the unshuttered windows.

“This place looks cheery enough,” Alyse said. “Let’s stay here tonight. Besides, I can’t go any farther.”

“Neither can I,” Kate said.

As the girls dismounted, a boy with freckles—he couldn't have been older than twelve—who was standing outside the stable door, ran up to them and asked if they'd like him to take care of their horses. Kate handed him some coppers and instructed him to feed and brush down their mounts. After wiping the road dust from their clothes, the cousins put on their cloaks, slung their bulging saddlebags over their shoulders, and went into the inn.

The large common room was bustling with activity. Trestle tables were occupied by all sorts of commoner travelers, from merchants to farmers to wayfarers. A wandering bard stood near the unlighted hearth, strumming a mandolin and singing a rousing song. Some guests were singing along with her, waving their beer mugs in time to the music, while others were talking boisterously or focused on eating or simply listening. Many of the women and men clustered around the square tables along the walls ignored the commotion, preferring to chat among themselves.

Opposite the front door, a heavysset man in a soiled apron worked behind a counter that ran half the length of the room. He filled ceramic beer mugs and wine goblets from a bank of wooden barrels and handed them to customers at the bar or to a teenage serving girl to bring to the tables. The people at the counter appeared to be regulars because they bantered good-naturedly with the man, whom they called Deek. A sharp-faced woman came out of a door by the staircase to the second floor carrying two wooden trenchers full of stew, topped with thick slabs of bread, and headed toward a table.

“Is that man, Deek, the innkeeper or just a servant?” Alyse whispered to Kate. “I’ve never been to an inn before.”

“How would I know?” Kate whispered back. “I’ve never been to one, either.”

Inhaling deeply to settle her jittery nerves, Alyse walked up to Deek. “Are you the innkeeper?”

Putting his elbows on the counter, Deek leaned toward Alyse, his gaze taking in her plain commoner clothes. His eyes lingered for a moment on her sword and dagger partially hidden beneath her cloak, and then skipped over to Kate to check her out. “I am.”

Alyse wrapped her cloak closer to her body to conceal her weapons. “Ya got a room for two? A private one.” She cringed inwardly at her poor attempt to sound like a commoner. She'd never tried

imitating their speech patterns before. And neither had Kate, who was brought up speaking like the noblesse.

The trace of a smile plucked at the corners of Deek's lips. "A private room for two, huh?"

"Yeah."

Deek stroked the sides of his mouth with a thumb and forefinger. "Just so happens I got one private room left."

"We'll take it," Alyse told him. "Your stableboy's already tendin' to our horses. We want supper too. What ya got for food?"

"Stew. Stew. Or stew."

Alyse couldn't hide her disappointment. She didn't like stew. "That's all?"

"Bread comes with it. Is there anything else you'd like?"

"A bath. Have two tubs taken up to our room. We wanna bathe before eating."

"This here is a *public* inn," Deek said, amusement in his voice. "The washrooms with tubs are communal. One for women. One for men. You take your baths there or stay dirty."

"All right. How much?"

Deek fingered his stubbly chin again, calculating. "Let's see now. Private room for two. Baths for two, including soap and towels. Supper and breakfast for two. Stabling two horses for one night." Deek named a price, which Alyse knew was much too high. He smirked at her, a challenge in his brown eyes.

Futile anger burned in Alyse because she knew he wouldn't budge. "Very well." She nodded to Kate. "Pay the man."

Kate took the money from her belt purse and handed the coins to Deek.

He pocketed them, then leaned across the bar, putting his face so close to Alyse's she could smell his bad breath. He spoke in almost a whisper. "A word of caution. The two of you might be dressed like commoners. And you did a fair job of talkin' like one. But ya gotta work on your el-lo-cution more. Here's a tip. Only a noblesse has her servant hold her money and pay the bills."

"My mother's a merchant," Alyse said sharply.

Deek handed Alyse a wry smile. “Maybe. But she didn’t teach you no common sense. You don’t display a heavy purse in a public place. That can prove dangerous for two young girls traveling by themselves, even if one is a backwatcher. There’re brigands in the area. If I was you, I’d go get myself an armed escort.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Now we’d like to go to our room.” Alyse held out her hand. “The key.”

“Key?” Deek guffawed and slapped the counter, causing nearby patrons to glance at him. He leaned toward Alyse again and spoke softly. “Here’s another tip. To further your ed-u-cation. Public inns have common sleeping rooms, which ain’t got no locks. But I can tell that you’re used to fancier ways than us common folk. So I gave ya the one room that can be barred from the inside. When you’re in the room, I suggest ya keep the door barred at all times.”

“Thank you,” Alyse said. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Deek summoned the serving girl, who led them upstairs and down a dim hallway, which had windows at either end, to the next-to-last door on the left. Weak light from the setting sun filtering through the unshuttered window barely lit the room. The furnishings were plain and simple. A bed large enough to sleep three people. A nightstand on either side, each with an oil lamp. A clean chamber pot. A washstand with a bowl, a pitcher of water, soap, and towels. And pegs along a wall for hanging clothes. The single window looked out onto the stable and the woods beyond. There was no fireplace, and Alyse thanked the Goddess that they were traveling during First Fruits instead of the colder seasons of Reaping, Sleeping, or Awakening.

Kate closed the door while Alyse lit a lamp using flint and steel. “It’s almost a two-week trip to your uncle’s camp. But a few more nights at inns with prices like this one, and we’ll be broke before we reach it.”

“I know,” Alyse said glumly.

“And only the Weavers know what other expenses we’ll have to pay for before we get there.”

“Like food.”

“Maybe we should spend the nights in the woods from now on.”

“Or try harder to pass ourselves off as commoners,” Alyse said quickly. “We can work at it. Perhaps starting with our e-lo-cution.”

She and Kate giggled.

“That’ll take some doing,” Kate said.

“We can practice while we’re bathing.”

After their baths, Alyse and Kate put on their extra set of clothes and went to the common room to eat. They found an empty table in a corner and sat across from each other.

The serving girl brought them wooden trenchers of chicken stew with slices of wheat bread on top and ceramic goblets of watered red wine. While they were eating, anxiety crawled up Alyse’s spine on spidery legs because she sensed that she and Kate stuck out in the noisy room, like a pair of signal beacons. Whenever she glanced furtively around, though, everyone appeared to be more interested in the bard’s songs or in their own conversations or food and drink than in two teenagers eating chicken stew.

After chatting for a while, Alyse and Kate turned their attention to the minstrel who was singing about two ill-fated lovers whose families were dead set against their marrying. Alyse wished she had a lover who would defy his family to marry her instead of having to flee a prospective husband who wanted to make her his wife against her will. Tuning out the bard’s words, Alyse imagined what her lover would be like—

Kate touched Alyse’s arm, then grinned and laughed as if Alyse had said something funny.

Alyse gave her an odd look, puzzled by Kate’s bizarre behavior. “What—”

“Don’t look now,” Kate said, still grinning but her voice tense. “Two men at a table behind you have been eyeing us for some time now.”

Alyse’s shoulders turned into gooseflesh, but she managed to giggle back at Kate. “Do you recognize them?”

“No,” Kate said, laughing. “One’s wearing an eye patch, and the other has pockmarks all over his face. Ugh! They’re definitely not anyone we want to know.”

“Do you think they mean trouble?”

Kate grinned. “Well, they definitely seem interested in us. Let’s finish eating and go up to our room. But don’t hurry. And whatever you do, don’t look at them. Let them think we haven’t noticed.”

At Kate’s first words, Alyse’s appetite had vanished. But she forced herself to continue eating, leisurely spooning her now-tasteless stew into her mouth. When she and Kate finished, they returned to their chamber. Kate barred the door.

“We’ll leave first thing in the morning,” Alyse said, “before breakfast. If those men mean trouble, we’ll be long gone before they wake up.”

Alyse and Kate climbed into bed fully clothed, leaving only their boots on the floor, and slipped their unsheathed daggers under their pillows. Despite the anxiety that looped around her like the coils of a snake, Alyse—exhausted from two days of travel—quickly fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

And all too soon, Kate shook Alyse’s shoulder. “It’s time to go.”

Alyse yawned and stretched. Through the thin walls on either side came sounds of snoring. Golden light from a rising dawn trickled through the window. Kate buckled on her sword belt. Then she and Alyse slung their saddlebags over their shoulders, picked up their boots, and quietly stole along the corridor and down the stairs on stockinged feet. Sounds of someone working in the kitchen filtered through the closed door. The front door was barred. Kate quietly lifted the heavy oak plank from the slats, and they stepped outside into the warm morning air.

The happy chirping of birds in the branches of nearby birch, elm, and poplar trees welcomed them. Alyse studied the trees and bushes, searching for telltale signs of the two men. Quick movement among some birch trees caught her attention. Her heart stopped. And then beat again when a fox trotted into view with a squirrel in its mouth.

Alyse sent a triumphant smile to Kate as they pulled on their boots. “We gave them the slip.”

When they reached the stable, Kate opened one of the doors partway, and they sidled through the gap. Fortunately, the door to the hayloft was open, allowing enough amber sunlight inside for the girls to see. Alyse hastily saddled and bridled her mare and tied her saddlebags into place, then led the horse out of the stall.

Kate emerged from the adjoining stall at the same time. "I'll open the door all the way," Kate said, handing her reins to Alyse.

Before Kate could take a step, a hand gripped the partially open door and opened it wider.

Kate's hand dropped to her sword.

Two men came through the gap. They wore expensive but well-worn clothes. The taller man wore an eye patch. The shorter man had a pockmarked face and hefted a battle-ax menacingly.

"Well, well," Eye Patch said. "The chickens are flyin' the coop."

The men stepped forward a few paces.

Drawing her sword and dagger, Kate placed herself in front of Alyse.

Just then, several more women and men came through the doorway and fanned out on either side of Eye Patch and Pock Face. They were dressed in what looked like discarded, threadbare trappings of noblesse and noblesse commoners. They were armed with various weapons.

Pock Face hefted his battle-ax. "A backwatcher. As soon as I seed them two girlies last night, I knowed one was noblesse and the other her backwatcher."

Eye Patch's lips curved up into an unpleasant grin. "The little noblesse'll fetch us a tidy sum."

"Run!" Kate hissed. "Go out the back while I keep them busy."

Alyse drew her dagger. "Not without you."

"Don't be a fool. Flee!"

Two brigands—a man and a woman—sprang at Kate with their swords. She parried their blades, and the three of them danced back and forth across the floor planks, fighting. Instead of helping their two companions, the others watched the three fight as if they were observing a sports contest instead of a desperate life-or-death struggle. When the man stumbled away wounded, two of the onlookers replaced him.

"That's right," Eye Patch said. "Wear her out. She might be young, but she won't last forever."

"Tag-team match," Pock Face said, laughing gruffly.

Eye Patch sneered at Alyse, then nodded at a brigand and said, "Time to take the golden goose."



The man walked toward Alyse. The smirk on his lips told her he thought Alyse was easy prey. When he reached for her, she slipped under his arm and thrust her dagger into his side. He stumbled away, clutching the wound.

“She stabbed me! The little bitch stabbed me!” Then his eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed. Blood flowed from his side, painting the floorboards red.

Alyse charged the brigands who were fighting Kate. She knifed one in the back.

With a shout, the brigands on the sidelines raced toward her.

She spun around to face them, but someone came up from behind and put his arm around her throat. Another seized the wrist of the hand holding the knife and squeezed. Alyse struggled, but the arm around her neck cut off her air, and the fingers pressing her wrist felt like the jaws of a vise. Her hand opened unwillingly, and the dagger clattered onto the pine planks.

Unsheathing his dagger, Eye Patch approached Alyse, grabbed and twisted a handful of her long chestnut hair, and jerked her head back. He positioned the blade against her throat.

Alyse dared not move or breathe while her heart slammed against her chest, like a prisoner trying to break out of jail.

“Drop your weapons, girlie,” he called to Kate. “Or I’ll slit her throat. Your matriarch won’t like that, eh?”

Kate’s opponents stepped back out of sword range. Kate looked toward Eye Patch, keeping her sword and dagger up.

Eye Patch drew the blade lightly across Alyse’s neck. Blood dribbled down her neck, staining the front collar of her white linen shirt red. He leered at Kate. “Want more blood?”

He positioned his knife to make a deeper cut.

Kate threw down her sword, her face a combination of anger and disgust.

“And the dagger.”

The knife clunked onto the planks.

Two brigands seized Kate by the arms. Dagger in hand, a third walked up behind her, grabbed a

handful of her black hair, and yanked her head back to expose her neck. Then the woman placed the blade just below Kate's Adam's apple and shot Eye Patch a questioning look.

Eye Patch nodded. "Kill her."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Pursuit

Rill Larkin squinted at the late-afternoon sun while his gray gelding drank its fill from the trough near the inn. Frustration grabbed him in a choke hold. They had spent most of the day plodding along the road with the hot First Fruits season sun blazing down on them and hadn't covered much distance. Yet it was obvious—to him anyway—that Alyse and Kate DeJune were heading for The Marches in the east where Alyse's uncle, Leoc DeJune, was encamped with his legions.

Why couldn't Troy Estati admit that and head straight for The Marches, too, instead of insisting on stopping at every bloody hamlet, village, and town they came upon to ask if anyone had seen the girls passing through? Rill snorted to himself. Troy probably was doing it because he wasn't much of a rider and had a sore butt. None of them were experienced riders, except for himself. They could have traveled a lot farther if they hadn't dawdled.

Rill turned his gaze to the inn where Troy and his backwatcher, Yall Throwstarr, were inside asking if anyone had spotted the girls as a new thought struck his mind. *Failure*. Maybe Troy was so frightened of failing that he was setting himself up to do just that. *If it was me, I'd ride straight through till we caught up with 'em.*

Beside him, Livia Estati finished watering her horse—a bay-roan mare whose high spirits

matched hers—led it to the hitching rings by the inn, and secured the mare next to Jade Channer’s horse. Putting a hand on her buttocks, Livia arched her back and walked stiffly to Rill, using her mage’s staff as a cane.

“My backside’s killing me from riding that horse!” Livia wagged a finger under Rill’s nose. “Slap me if I ever insist on doing something like this again.”

*So you’d leave your little brother to go with this bunch by himself.* The chiding thought—made in jest—longed to escape from Rill’s mouth as words. But he couldn’t say them because his and Livia’s blood relationship was a secret known only to the Estati adults. Despite his dislike of Troy, Rill’s conscience squirmed uncomfortably because Troy wasn’t privy to the secret. Troy still believed Livia was his sister.

Rill smiled at her and for the first time realized how soft and pampered the noblesse were, including his newly discovered half sister. Many noblesse walked within the walls of Caldon but refused to venture too far outside on foot. Some insisted on using litters inside the city, even to go to the public square when, in fact, walking would get them there faster. When traveling to their country villas, most went by litter and sometimes by wagon. And those few who went on horseback kept at a leisurely pace. Despite his political and magical powers, Death Estati, an archmage, was just as soft and pampered as the rest. The disparaging thought about his mentor and Livia’s uncle caused a twitch of guilt in Rill because it seemed like he was being disloyal. And disloyalty toward Lord Death was one quality Rill refused to consider.

Rill shot Livia a playful smile. “For me, this has been an easy ride. One for beginners.”

Livia rolled her dark blue eyes skyward. “That’s because you’re a country bumpkin.”

Earlier, Rill would have considered her retort an insult. And perhaps it would have been. But Death’s revelation about the mother Rill and Livia shared in common had resulted in a tectonic shift that had changed everything between Death’s apprentice mage and his niece. Their shared secret was known only to the older generations of noblesse and commoners. Rill suppressed a smile. Anyone who wasn’t in on the secret would have seen the playful banter between the two teenagers as a noblesse denigrating a

commoner.

“Maybe it’s just that I’m the better rider,” Rill said, mischievousness lacing his words.

Livia performed another eye roll.

Rill slid his blue-eyed gaze to Jade Channer who was standing by the circular water fountain. She wore the distinctive Dejune livery of a tan light wool tunic with red trim around the neck, cuffs, and bottom and tan pants tucked into black boots. Like many female backwatchers, she wore her dark-brown, shoulder-length hair in a ponytail. He’d expected her to give some sort of reaction to Livia’s supposed insult—perhaps a flicker in her hazel eyes or a twitch at the corner of her lips to signal a quickly suppressed snicker. Instead, she took a long swig from her canteen, pushed in the wood stopper, wrapped the leather strap around the pommel of her saddle, and then wiped an arm across her sweaty forehead. Maybe the Dejune backwatcher was paying more attention to the aches in her body than to the chitchat between him and Livia. Or possibly there was another reason. Jade had been broody ever since they’d left Caldon early that morning, giving Rill the impression she was an unwilling member of their little band of pursuers.

A short distance away, Magnus Roeback approached yet another local to ask if he’d seen two teenage girls passing through town yesterday. Magnus, a warrior mage who wore the black, purple-trimmed tunic and black pants and boots that marked him as an Estati backwatcher, had begun questioning locals in the street after Troy and Yall had disappeared into the inn. So far, everyone Magnus had stopped had complied instantly. And who wouldn’t when confronted by a tall gray-haired mage in Estati livery who was traveling with two noble teens and two other backwatchers, one in Dejune livery and the other—Rill himself—wearing Estati livery?

Pride swelled Rill’s chest as he tapped the butt of his staff against the dirt road. *But I ain’t no backwatcher. I’m Lord Death’s apprentice mage.*

Rill’s attention snapped back to the inn as Troy and Yall emerged onto the dusty street and approached the water trough. Troy wore a discouraged expression as everyone gathered around the leader of their “rescue” operation. Troy ran his fingers through his reddish-brown hair as if he wanted time to

pull together his thoughts.

Yall stood silently beside Troy, his black eyes cold and calculating as they swept across his companions and came to rest on Troy, waiting. Watching him, Rill always had the feeling that Yall examined people as if they were insects to be studied.

“The innkeeper didn’t see them,” Troy finally said, his voice betraying a note of frustration. “And no one else did, either.”

Livia appeared to be the only one who seemed happy about Troy’s announcement.

“Someone did.” Magnus’s lips formed a triumphant grin. “And I just spoke to him.”

Everyone’s eyes jumped to the middle-aged mage, who jerked a thumb at the forest farther up the road. “They headed into *that* last evening. It’s called Malagnar Forest. And it’s infested with brigands. He said he warned the girls about riding through it at night and suggested they spend the night here at the inn. But they refused.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Rill said. “Let’s go after them while there’s still daylight.”

The others stared at him as if he had just said something idiotic.

Rill blew out an impatient breath. “Come on! We’re wasting time.”

“Are you insane?” Troy said, his tone indicating he already knew the answer. “The man said the forest’s crawling with bandits.”

Rill waved Troy’s words aside as if he were swatting a fly. “So what? It ain’t nothin’ we can’t handle.”

Troy’s jaw tensed. “You *are* crazy.”

“Look,” Rill said. “We got one bladeswoman, one bladesman, two mages, and me. I can cast spells, plus use a sword and a longbow. No one in her right mind would take on a group this strong.”

“And you’ve got me too,” Livia chimed in.

Rill loved her pluckiness. “Umm . . . no offense, Livia—”

“*Lady* Livia to you,” Troy said.

“Lady Livia. And I don’t mean to belittle your kind of magic. But you’re an illusionist. I don’t

see how illusions can help in a fight.”

Troy cut Livia off before she could reply. “That’s a moot point because we’re staying here tonight.”

“Just because of a few brigands?” Rill said, striving to conceal his disdain.

“Because there’s more than ‘just brigands’ in that forest,” Troy said. “There are animals there too. Wild ones.”

A snicker burst out of Rill’s mouth before he could stop it. “Wild animals?” He dismissed the notion in a puff of breath. “They’re more scared of us than we are of them.” His gaze hopped like a bouncing ball from one face to another, reading fear in their eyes. Disdain rumbled in his chest. City folk! But he knew better than to say the disparaging words aloud.

“I’ll go with you.” Livia lobbed a challenging look at the others. “Anyone else willing to come along?”

“*I’m* in charge here,” Troy said, clipping each word. “We’re staying at the inn.”

“That makes sense, actually,” Magnus said in that reasonable tone Rill was beginning to dislike. “If the girls had the misfortune of being captured by brigands, there might be indications of it on the road.” He pointed his mage’s staff at Rill. “Lord Death said you can read signs. If the girls *were* captured, we’d miss those signs at night, wouldn’t we?”

Rill cringed at the prospect of being showed up in front of Troy, but he had to concede Magnus’s point. “Yeah. Probably.”

“Then it’s decided,” Troy said, shooting a smirk at Rill. “We’ll stay here tonight.”

The next morning, they left right after breakfast. They traveled along the road through the dense forest at a slow trot, their horses’ hooves kicking up small puffs of dry dirt. While they jogged along, a delicious sense of superiority filled Rill as he watched the fearful way the others gazed at the seemingly sinister screens of bushes and trees that hemmed them in on both sides and the partial roof of branches and leaves that arched overhead. He struggled to conceal his grins at the way they appeared to expect vicious, snarling animals to leap out at any moment.

“There ain’t nothin’ to be scared of in here,” he told Livia quietly during their first rest stop. “Not as long as I’m with you.”

All the while, Rill studied the road and the foliage on both sides for signs. It wasn’t long after their second rest stop that he found some. He dismounted and studied them. What they told him made his muscles tighten.

“Something happened here,” Rill said, pointing at a confusion of hoofprints on the road. A few were legible, while most had been partially obliterated by other hoofprints. “A lot of horses were here.” He crossed to a wide gap in the bushes on the left side of the road and studied the ground. “Horses were here. Four. Maybe five. Probably brigands lying in wait for victims.” He went across to a trampled-down section of bushes on the other side. “Some waited here too.”

Troy leaned in the saddle toward Rill, reddish-brown brows knitted together. “Then brigands did capture the girls.”

“Don’t know.” Rill pointed farther up the road. “More tracks. They indicate a chase.” He swung back onto his saddle. “Let’s go see.”

Rill led them at a moderate walk, his eyes studying the road while anxiety squeezed his chest tighter and tighter. Finally, he drew rein. His companions did the same and gathered around him.

“Well?” Troy said, cupping his hands on his saddle pommel and leaning toward Rill.

“They escaped.” Rill indicated two sets of hoofprints heading up the road at full gallop, then at a jumble of prints their own horses were standing on. “And the brigands stopped here.”

“Thank the One Goddess!” Livia said. “They’re safe.”

“As far as we know,” Rill responded, worry still churning in his stomach. “That man said this forest is *infested* with brigands. So there’s probably more than one group operating here.”

The concerned look that crept onto Livia’s face made Rill wish he hadn’t given voice to his own fear.

Rill’s anxiety about Alyse and Kate’s possible capture by another band of brigands dissipated by the time they left Malagnar Forest because he hadn’t found any other traces on the road pointing to



bandits. He noticed that his companions appeared more at ease too. Especially Troy and Livia.

The new landscape they trotted through was more friendly than the forest, consisting of open, rolling grasslands and hills and a scattering of woods. It was a countryside studded with small farms—and some large ones—sitting on tilled land sprouting rows of ripening crops and pastures dotted with grazing cows, sheep, and goats. At one point, the little cavalcade followed alongside a murmuring stream lined with oak, birch, and spruce trees—some with fallen limbs poking out of the water—until it veered off in another direction. They also encountered crossroads. Troy hesitated at each one, as if unsure of himself, before continuing east toward The Marches.

In the late afternoon, when an inn came into sight, Troy announced that they would stop there. Rill argued that they should keep going. “We still got some daylight left, he said. “And Lord Death told us we gotta catch up with the girls before they reach Commander DeJune’s camp.”

“We’ll stay at the inn,” Troy said.

“Why? There ain’t no forest to go through like last night.”

“We’re staying at the inn,” Troy said, brows furrowed and an edge in his voice.

“Spend the night here if you want, Little Brother,” Livia said. “But I’m going with Rill.” She turned her mare’s head up the road. “I see now why it’s the women who rule Caldon. Because the men are too timid.” She nodded at Rill. “Let’s go.”

“Wait!” Troy called out before Livia could press her heels against her mare’s flanks. “We’ll go. But we stop at the next inn we find.”

They came upon “the next inn” during a magnificent sunset of reds, oranges, and yellows and set out again the next morning. To Rill’s increasing frustration, Troy followed yesterday’s routine of pausing at even the tiniest hamlet they passed through to inquire about the girls. But Rill kept his teeth clamped down around his tongue. He’d complained enough yesterday to earn Troy’s ire and didn’t want to get him even more riled up today. Fortunately, Magnus suggested they pass through the hamlets without pausing to ask about Kate and Alyse.

“The girls are more likely to have stopped in a village or town instead of a hamlet to buy food for

themselves and feed for their horses,” Magnus said. “The hamlets are smaller and tend to be suspicious of strangers. So let’s bypass them and focus on the villages and towns to ask our questions.”

Grudgingly, Troy agreed.

Magnus’s advice paid off. That afternoon, when they asked about the girls, in a cozy little town by a crossroads, they learned that two teenagers matching Alyse’s and Kate’s descriptions had bought meat pies, beer, and grain feed there the previous afternoon.

“They have a day’s lead on us,” Magnus said, fingering the silver ring on his left earlobe. “That shows they’re traveling hard—”

“Or we’re traveling too slow,” Rill said, not masking his impatience.

Magnus ignored the comment. “We’ll have to travel hard, too, if we want to catch up with them before they reach The Marches.”

“Let’s stop wasting our time stopping to ask questions,” Rill said. “Lady Alyse and Kate got their food. So there ain’t no need for them to buy more for a while. And I got a hunch they slept outdoors last night.”

Jade disagreed. “I believe we’re closer than we think because they probably stayed at an inn last night, not outdoors. Lady Alyse is used to the soft life.”

Rill shook his head stubbornly. *Jade don’t know Alyse at all.* “She ain’t soft. Which is obvious ’cause they turned a half-day’s lead into a full day’s. Like Magnus said, they’re traveling hard. Which means they’re probably sleeping outdoors.” He hurled a malicious grin at Troy. “In the woods.”

Troy returned the look with a scathing one.

They spent that night at another inn and left before the serving girl could clear the dirty dishes from their breakfast table. Late in the day, they came upon a quaint inn at a crossroads near a huge, ancient red oak tree.

“How appropriate,” Jade said dryly when she read the name on the sign hanging over the inn’s door: Red Oak Inn.

While they were climbing out of their saddles, a young freckle-faced boy raced out of the stable

and offered to take their horses. While the others went inside the inn, Rill accompanied the lad to the stable, leading three of their horses to help out. Inside, he let the boy curry the others' horses but insisted on grooming his own to make sure the job was done right. Afterward, as he slung his quiver over his shoulder and picked up his staff, the bag containing his longbow, and his saddlebag, he noticed the boy sneaking wide-eyed glances at the longbow bag. Smiling to himself at the kid's fascination, he went into the inn to join the others. He found Magnus in a heated conversation with a stocky man behind the bar wearing a dirty apron. Rill figured he must be the innkeeper. Livia, Troy, and the others stood a short distance away, watching. The frown on Troy's face kept deepening.

"I don't care if the two rooms are taken," Magnus said. "We want them for the night."

"The guests have already paid for them," the man said.

"What's your name again?"

"Deek."

Magnus grabbed Deek's arms near the shoulders and half pulled him over the bar. "Listen, Deek. Do you see the livery I'm wearing?"

"Y-yeah."

Releasing Deek, Magnus pointed to Rill and Yall. "And theirs?"

Deek nodded.

"Black with purple trim. Ring any bells?"

Deek's jaw dropped open as if on oiled hinges, and his face paled. "Estat!"

Magnus grinned at Deek. "Give the man a mug of his best! Yes. Estati. Now, tell me. Do you really want to anger our matriarch because you denied us rooms? After all, her arm has a long reach. Even to here."

Deek's Adam's apple bobbed as he gulped down a huge mouthful of saliva. "N-no. Of course not."

Magnus patted Deek on the cheek. "Smart man. Give the people back their money. If they have questions, they can speak to me."

As Deek made to leave, Troy grabbed his arm. "I'm looking for two girls traveling by themselves. One's petite. Long, chestnut hair. Emerald-green eyes. Brown eyebrows. The other's taller. Black hair. Hazel eyes. Wiry build. Have you seen them?"

Deek's eyebrows shot up. "Yeah. They spent the night here."

"When?" Magnus asked.

"Night before last. They left yesterday just before breakfast."

"Which way did they go?"

Deek shrugged. "Don't know. No one saw 'em leave."

Magnus turned to Troy, his silver eyes shining with triumph. "This is the first time they've stayed at an inn. That means they think they must have a good lead on us. If we ride hard tomorrow, we'll cut down their lead and maybe even catch up with them sometime the day after."

Excitement rippled across Rill's shoulders. They were closing in!

Jade grinned. "Well before they reach The Marches."

Troy pressed his lips into a determined line. "Tomorrow we ride as hard as we can. No stragglers."

The next morning after breakfast, Magnus told Deek to tell the stableboy to saddle their horses and bring them to the hitching posts. Rill preferred to saddle his own horse himself instead of entrusting it to a young boy he didn't know. So, after gathering his staff, weapons, and saddlebag, he walked to the stable. The stableboy was tightening the girth on Livia's mare, and Rill noted approvingly that the lad knew what he was doing. After he saddled his gelding, Rill was about to attach the bow bag to the saddle when he noticed the boy eyeing the bow bag again. Rill smiled at the kid. "What's your name?"

"Dane, Lord."

Rill chuckled, inwardly pleased that the boy had mistaken him for noblesse. *Not yet, anyways.* "I ain't no lord."

Dane's eyes latched on to the bow bag again.

"Ever shoot a longbow?" Rill asked.

Dane shook his head.

“Ever want to?”

“Yeah!” Dane let out a discouraged sigh. “But my dad . . . he says I ain’t got no time for such foolishness. ’Cause I gotta work. Besides, I’m too young to use a longbow. The draw weight’s too strong.”

“You ain’t too young,” Rill responded with a smile. “I began using a longbow when I was seven.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. My dad gave me one that had a draw weight I could handle.”

“Wish my dad would.”

“Wanna try mine?”

Dane’s eyes lit up like a pair of lanterns. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

Dane frowned. “But the draw weight—”

“Don’t worry about that. You’ll manage.”

Rill slid the longbow out of its brown-cloth case, strung it, and slid an arrow from the leather quiver. He searched for a target while he nocked the arrow. “See that discoloration on the wood on the wall over there? The one the size of your fist?”

“Yeah.”

In one deft motion, Rill drew and canted the bow and let fly the arrow. The broadhead struck dead center with a loud *thunk*.

Dane clapped his hands in delight.

Rill handed him the bow. “Now you try.”

He gave Dane some pointers, but of course, the bow was too tall and the draw weight too heavy for the boy. So, standing behind him, Rill helped the lad shoot. The arrow, thanks to Rill, pierced the discoloration.

Dane shrieked in delight. “I shot a longbow!”

“And hit the mark too,” Rill said, grinning.

The happy light in Dane’s eyes suddenly dimmed, and his hand tightened on the longbow’s leather-wrapped grip until the knuckles showed white. “If I’d knowed how to use this yesterday, I could of helped those ladies.” Then he gasped in dismay and clapped a hand over his mouth.

A ball of anxiety formed in Rill’s stomach. “What ladies?”

Dane dropped the longbow and backed away, his expression fearful as if Rill were an evil apparition from Shelar, the Underworld.

Rill stepped toward him, brow narrowed and eyes hard as blue diamonds. “What ladies?”

“I . . . I ain’t supposed to tell. My dad . . . he said it would bring us trouble if I did.”

Rill grabbed Dane by the front of his tunic and yanked him in close. “And I say it’ll bring you trouble if you don’t. So talk!”

“T-the two ladies who stopped here the night before last—”

“One with chestnut hair and the other with black hair?”

“Yeah.”

“What happened to them?”

“Brigands. They took ’em.”

The words felt like barbed arrows piercing Rill’s chest. “How do you know that?”

“’Cause I watched ’em do it.”

“You actually saw them being captured?”

“Yeah.” Dane pointed to the hayloft. “I sleep up there. At least, when the inn’s full and my dad’s gotta let out my room, I do. Like two nights ago. The girls . . . they woke me up when they came in and saddled their horses. Then the brigands came in and took ’em away.”

Snatching his staff, Rill spun around and dashed out of the stable and into the inn and past tables where travelers sat eating breakfast, his heart racing faster than his feet. He stopped short at the trestle table where Troy and the others were chitchatting over empty bowls and mugs.

“I just learned about the girls,” Rill said, his voice low and urgent. “It’s not good. Come with

me.”

Everyone jumped to their feet and followed Rill to the kitchen door. Rill tapped Yall on the chest. “Stay here and don’t let anyone in. The rest of you, follow me.”

Without waiting for a response, Rill barged through the door. In the kitchen a thin, middle-aged woman, with sharp features whose edges were beginning to dull, was kneading bread at a long, wide wooden preparation table while a teenage serving girl stirred the contents of a kettle hanging over the hearth flames. Deek, who was across the table from the woman, was lifting an earthenware mug to his mouth. Startled, all three glanced at the intruders in surprise.

Rill knocked the mug from Deek’s hand with his staff, oblivious to the sound of it shattering on the floor. Then, dropping the staff and drawing his dagger, he grabbed the innkeeper by the shirt and wrenched him in close. He touched the tip of the dagger to Deek’s throat. The point nicked the skin, drawing blood.

Deek jerked his neck back in terror.

Troy, Livia, Magnus, and Jade crowded around the two of them.

“You lying bastard,” Rill said through teeth clenched so tight the words came out in a low, angry whisper. “You knew those girls didn’t leave yesterday. At least, not by themselves. Brigands took them.”

Livia put a hand to her throat. “Alyse and Kate were *kidnapped*?”

Troy, his face dark with unsuppressed fury, pulled his fist back to strike Deek in the face. “You son of a bitch!”

Magnus grabbed Troy’s wrist. “I think the knife at his throat is doing nicely, Lord.” He nodded at Rill. “What’s this all about?”

“Alyse and Kate never left here,” Rill said, his voice tight with anger. “At least not of their own free will.”

Troy tilted his head, mystified. “What do you mean?”

“They were captured by brigands. In Deek’s stable. The stableboy saw it all.” Rill pressed the dagger point deeper into Deek’s throat, increasing the dribble of blood, which slid down his neck and

soaked into the collar of his brown tunic. “And this little piece of shit told him to keep quiet about it.”

Taking hold of Rill’s wrist, Magnus gently drew the knife hand back from Deek’s neck. “I think a dead innkeeper won’t be of much value to us right now. You can kill him later if you want.”

Rill released Deek’s shirt with a shove toward the preparation table. Deek struck the table edge, then sank onto his knees. Troy stepped up to him, the toes of his black leather boots almost touching Deek’s kneecaps. Deek clasped his hands together, imploring. “Oh, Lord, please don’t—”

Troy kicked him in the stomach. With a shriek of pain, Deek clutched his belly and doubled over so his forehead struck the floorboards. He flopped onto his side and groaned.

Troy towered over him, glowering. “You fat little piece of horseshit. I’m betrothed to one of those girls.”

Troy brought his foot back for another kick, but Livia pressed herself between him and Deek. “Beating him to death won’t help us rescue the girls.” She looked down at the groaning innkeeper. “Why didn’t you tell us the truth before?”

“Cause if the brigands learned I’d told you,” Deek said, the words wheezing from his mouth, “they’d take it out on me and my family. Maybe even kill us.”

An angry rumble sounded in Troy’s throat. He reached down to yank Deek to his feet, but Livia batted his arm aside and knelt in front of the innkeeper.

Then she took a white linen handkerchief from her sleeve and pressed it against Deek’s still-trickling neck wound. “Is that true?” she asked.

Deek put his hand on the handkerchief, forcing it against the wound as Livia removed hers. “Yeah.”

Troy motioned to Magnus. “Get the kid in here.”

“Please, Lords—no!” the woman said, moving around the table and kneeling beside Deek. “Our son meant no harm.”

Magnus arched his brow questioningly at Troy, who nodded.

Rill glanced at the serving girl huddling fearfully in a corner and recalled the sincerity of Dane’s



desire to help Alyse and Kate. “Ain’t no need to get the kid involved. He can’t add nothin’.”

The woman flashed him a grateful look. “For the love of the One Goddess,” she said, “have pity on us. The brigands . . . they got a camp somewhere in the hills nearby. If they find out we told you about them taking the girls . . . My husband spoke the truth. They’ll murder us and burn down the inn.”

“That’s the Goddess’s own truth,” Deek said as he struggled into a sitting position with his back against a table leg. “I beg you, Lords. Think of my son and daughter. Those bastards will kill me and my wife and take my kids as slaves.”

Troy’s lips curled into a snarl. “Not if we kill ‘those bastards’ first.”

“There’re too many of ’em, Lord,” the wife said. “And there’s mages among them.”

“Rohan!” Magnus muttered.

Troy prodded Deek with the toe of his boot. “Where’s their camp?”

“In the hills.”

“*Where* in the hills?”

“I don’t know.”

Troy pulled his leg back for another kick, but Livia, who was still kneeling beside Deek, blocked his ankle with her hand. She spoke to Deek. “You’d tell us if you knew.”

Deek nodded. “Yeah.”

“No one knows its location but the brigands themselves,” Deek’s wife said. “And that’s the Goddess’s honest truth.”

“How’d they learn the girls were here?” Rill asked.

“A couple of the brigands come here most nights. To look for victims to waylay.”

“And you let them.” Troy spat the words at her like arrows.

She thrust out her chin defiantly. “They’d kill us if we warned our visitors. We ain’t got protectors and backwatchers like you.”

Troy hurled her a look brimming with disgust.

“We warn ’em,” Deek said quickly. “But it’s up to them to take the hint.” He began struggling

onto his feet. Livia grabbed him under the shoulders and helped. Deek leaned back against the preparation table for support. “I warned the girls. Told ’em they should go back and get an armed escort.”

Rill’s brow crinkled as a plan formed in his head. “Will the brigands come here again tonight?”

Deek shrugged. “Don’t know. Sometimes they come the very next night. Other times they wait a day or two. Maybe even more. They didn’t come last night.”

“Let’s hope they come tonight,” Rill said.

“What do you have in mind?” Troy asked.

“We’ll capture them and make them take us to their camp.”

“And what happens if they don’t?” Magnus asked.

For the first time, Jade spoke up. “It might not make any difference one way or the other.”

“Why?” Rill asked.

“Because they might already have killed Lady Alyse and Kate.”

The expression on Jade’s face told Rill she’d be happy if they had.