

# CHAPTER 1



PAUL AWAKENED TO the sound of a man's screams. By the time he reached his master's room Philip was already inside with his weapon drawn. He nodded to Paul, indicating he saw nothing. Paul rushed to his master's side. The middle-aged man sat on the edge of the bed, his clothes soaked through with sweat.

"Master, some water." Paul grabbed the water pitcher and gently handed the man his glass.

The man drank the full cup before he spoke. "Thank you, Paul." He handed the glass back to him then turned to Philip. "I'm sorry I disturbed you both." He gripped his mostly gray hair and shook his head in frustration.

Paul patted the man's shoulder reassuringly. "It's no bother, Master. It's almost time to rise. Listen." The three paused to hear the roosters crowing.

"Would you like some more rest, Master?" Philip gestured to the easy chair.

The man waved his sun-kissed hands. "No. Please, help me get dressed. Some breakfast please." He nodded to Paul.

Paul shot Philip a tentative glance, then walked into the hallway in search of breakfast. As he wandered through the halls and down the stairs of Reagan Manor, he worried for his master. He and Philip had begun serving the man at the manor nearly ten years ago. At that time Master Reagan had been younger, good-humored, and appeared to have the strength of an ox. He and

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Philip even had difficulty keeping pace with the man once they started working in the fields alongside him. The manor and its surrounding lands, Paul's favorite in all the Southern Regions, were renowned for their abundant harvest and overall beauty. His master had made a good life for himself, and yet . . . each servant knew the man held a deep and quiet sadness inside him. For though it seemed none matched him in wealth, he had no one to share his good fortune with. *Maybe it's the loneliness that's done him in.* Paul realized it was the third time this week his master had encountered something foul in the night. Two years prior to this harvest season something dark and oppressive had settled on the man. He seemed to age overnight—his wrinkles deeper, hair grayer, eyes droopier. Paul and Philip had tried to cheer him; they saw him not only as their master but a father figure as well. The cousins had dedicated their lives in grateful service to this man who had taken them in as orphans.

As Paul set up the breakfast tray he wished there was something he could do to make his master feel more at ease. The maids had not set up the dining room yet, so he hurried inside before his master arrived to draw back the thick, floral drapes and set out the breakfast silver. The sun was just beginning to rise over the mountains. *Good. He needs to see the light.*

Paul soon heard his master's sighs and shuffling feet. "Come, Master, see the fields this morning." Paul led him to the window. "Look, you have fields of gold." He was delighted to see the man smile as he took in the wheat fields glowing in the sun's morning light.

He squinted at the view. "Yes, I see."

The two gazed across the vast fields in front of the manor ready for harvest. The orchards and vineyards stood behind the manor, so they were able to observe the wheat, cotton, and sugarcane fields with an unobstructed view. The fields stretched out for miles until met by the green mountain hills in the distance.

"And look at your wildflowers over here—they're saying 'good morning, Sir.'" Paul walked to the opposite window.

The man inhaled deeply as his brown eyes surveyed the brightly colored knee-high blooms surrounding the front of the manor. "And what do my trees say today, Paul?" He pointed to the rows of cypress trees that lined the private drive.

"That all will be well." Paul hoped in his heart these words were true.

The man nodded and pursed his chapped lips. “Yes, they would say that for they are pointed west, but look behind them.”

Paul saw a host of dark clouds forming near the mountain range. “Rain’s no harm, Master.” *Focus on the light. We must get your eyes off the darkness.*

“Rain, no, but a storm, yes.” The man slouched forward as his face began clouding over.

“Master, breakfast.” Paul pulled on his burly arm in an attempt to distract him, but the man didn’t budge.

Philip cleared his throat from across the room and shot his cousin a forceful look.

*I’m trying, okay? What do you want me to do?* Paul grabbed a spoon from the table and placed it in his master’s hand.

“Oh, yes, yes.” Master Reagan nodded then murmured on under his breath.

Paul hated the fog he saw in the man’s eyes. The twinkle he had known for years was now gone. “Master? Are you trying to tell me something?”

“Fields of gold you say? I am a rich man.”

Paul heard the sadness in his voice and quickly tried to bring his master back to reality. “Indeed, and you need not worry about your trees. They have withstood storms and can do so again.”

The man nodded to Paul then turned toward the green pillars again as if to check on them one more time before heading to the table.

As Paul lightly tugged at the man’s arm again, Master Reagan jerked upright. He thrust his hand across Paul’s chest, knocking him against the window.

Paul searched his face. “What is it, Master?”

“A message . . . a messenger!” The man rushed through the dining room into the nearest hallway.

“Master!” Paul panicked as he ran after the man. *He’s finally lost it.* He raced through the manor after him until the man broke into a full sprint out the door. Paul stopped to catch his breath at the bottom of the stone steps that led onto the sandy drive. He felt something wet drop on his head; the rain was beginning to fall. “Master!” Paul started the chase again, now accompanied by Philip.

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Philip held the man's shoes in his hands. "Your feet are bare! And, it's raining! Come back, Master! You—Paul, look!" Philip slammed his hand into Paul's chest.

Both stopped, as Paul rubbed the tender spot. "Did you *have* to do that? What is it?"

"Master was right. Look! There's a rider." Philip gestured to a figure barreling down the drive. "Come on! And . . . man up." He pounded Paul's chest again then rushed past him.

"Ow! Really? Again?" Paul hurried behind him, the rain now misting. Though Master Reagan was well ahead of the cousins, Paul made out the rider's signal to his horse, "Whoa!"

"News! You have news!" His master yell as the rider jumped down from the horse and ran toward the man.

"Yes, Sir!" the rider gasped as he held out a satchel. "I have news about your son."



Joel's heart pounded as Augustine's eyes fluttered, and he gently shook her awake. "Wake up!"

"Wha-what's going on?"

He looked over at the window again. "The train's stopped."

"Is that all?" She started to roll back over.

"Augustine, wake up! We've been stopped for nearly an hour."

She sat up quickly. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I just have a bad feeling." He carefully lifted the window shade for the tenth time in the past hour. "They've been unloading and reloading the same stuff—like they're searching for something."

Augustine moved next to him at the window. "I-I don't think we have anything Waiz would want. Do you think it's the Green Cloaks?"

Joel ran his fingers through his auburn hair and noticed Augustine studying his face. He knew it was still pretty bruised up from the night before—the night he escaped from Differe . . . again. "Any better?"

“Some.” She reached out toward one of his cuts then jumped as a loud horn blew outside their window. The two covered their ears as the train’s PA system started up with a screech.

“All passengers off! All passengers are commanded off this train for inspection by order of His Majesty, Master Dark!”

“His Majesty? Who does he think—”

“Joel, what are we going to do? It’s the Templins! Why are they involved with a Waiz train?” Augustine grabbed his wool cap and started piling her hair on top of her head to disguise herself as a boy for the second time in twenty-four hours.

Joel clenched his fists in anger and frustration as he heard compartment doors open and shut around them. He wondered why the Templins, the headmaster’s elite followers, were hunting a Waiz train. *We can’t get off but we can’t stay on . . . or, at least I can’t.* He looked over at Augustine and knew what he had to do. “Augustine, you can get off.” His words were so quiet he wasn’t sure if she heard him at first. “Augustine, you’re a boy they’re not looking for—they think it’s me and a girl. The guy you chained to the wall in Moonstruck will have told them that.”

Her face crumpled in dismay. “No! I’m not leaving you!”

He knew her tone wasn’t defiant—it was fearful. He took her hands. “This is where you keep your promise. Remember? You promised to get away even if I couldn’t . . . I’m sorry. You’ve got to take your rhydid to Sebastian . . . I’ll be fine. Anyway, one of us has a much better chance of not getting caught versus two of us.” He shrugged nonchalantly attempting to hide the explosive pressure he felt in his heart. “Come on, hide your rhydid under your clothes. Get your backpack. Is there anything in there we need to get rid of . . . anything that would be suspicious?”



Augustine trembled as she lifted the backpack, knowing Joel’s temple file was stashed inside. She had stolen it from Moonstruck the night before. *What should I do?* Sebastian lay heavy on her mind, but she hated the thought of leaving Joel, the one who had led her every step of this journey. She hated the

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thought of leading herself and being alone even more. She told herself not to cry as Joel straightened the cap on her head.

“Do I look like a boy?” She looked intently into his face as she hid the rhydid dagger under her top layer of clothing.

His eyes darted toward the door. “A pretty one, so keep your head down.”

The horn blew again. The blaring reminder let her know it was time to leave the train . . . *without him*. “What will you do?”

“Try to stay free.”

Something in his voice made her turn back and hug him. “Thank you. Thank you for everything. I don’t deserve it.”

He quickly pushed her away. “Don’t worry about it, and don’t worry about me.”

She nodded but knew inside that she would worry about him until he was safely back in Waiz with her. She felt him grab her fingers after she opened the door and smiled as he swung their hands back and forth just as he had in the dungeon of Moonstruck.

“Go show ‘em what you’re made of.”

The stunning brunette cautiously marched through the train corridor and made her way to the exit. She kept her head low and tugged her cap even lower to cover her eyes. Her heart raced as she neared the exit, the image of Joel hiding back in the compartment haunting her thoughts. She was surprised at his terse response to her hug and wondered if she shouldn’t have let her guard down in that way. Uncertainty mixed with jealousy crept in as she thought about how he had looked at Isabelle and reached out for her the night before.

The blonde was small, graceful, and beautiful beyond words . . . *And, she can sing*. Of course Joel would want her. She couldn’t blame him or any other boy for being enchanted by the striking songbird. Augustine knew comparing herself to another rarely brought peace of mind, but she hadn’t been able to forget what the burly boy she’d imprisoned in Moonstruck had said to Joel. It had something to do with Joel writing about Isabelle in his journal. Why had Isabelle been “bait?” Had Joel loved her? Did he still love her? And, if he still loved her, why did he leave her there?

“I can answer that,” Augustine whispered as she opened the door to step off the train. *Me. It was my fault*. She knew after her outburst on the trail—

attacking Isabelle—that Joel had lost all confidence in her. Though her head was already low, her countenance fell as she recalled the moment.

A loud speaker interrupted her thoughts. “This train will be delayed indefinitely. If you have any information regarding two teenage boys traveling alone, you are to report to the Temple Guard immediately. Please escort your belongings to the nearest train station in order to secure a connecting train to Waiz.”

*Two boys?* Augustine paused on the last step as she pondered the announcement. *Two boys!* She hastily retreated up the steps back into the train. She pushed into the next train car, leading her further from Joel, and searched frantically among the empty compartments for a place to hide. The dining car looked promising so she ducked into the small pantry. She quickly removed her hat, loosened the hair piled on top of her head, and studied her reflection in front of a pot hanging on the wall. She fiddled with her thick, wavy locks then froze. From somewhere in the room, a man cleared his throat.

“So, you’re a girl.”