

Devious Arcana

Book One – Nefarious Allure

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Devious Arcana

DEVIOUS

1. SHOWING A SKILLFUL USE OF UNDERHANDED TACTICS TO ACHIEVE GOALS
2. A LONGER AND LESS DIRECT ROUTE THAN THE STRAIGHTFORWARD WAY

ARCANA

(SOMETIMES ARCANUM)

1. A SECRET, OR KNOWLEDGE ACQUIRED AND KNOWN BY ONLY A FEW
2. A GREAT SECRET OF NATURE SOUGHT BY ALCHEMISTS
3. A SECRET AND POWERFUL REMEDY; ELIXIR

NEFARIOUS

1. EXTREMELY WICKED OR VILLAINOUS

ALLURE

1. TO ENTICE BY CHARM AND ATTRACTION
2. THE POWER OF ATTRACTION OR FASCINATION

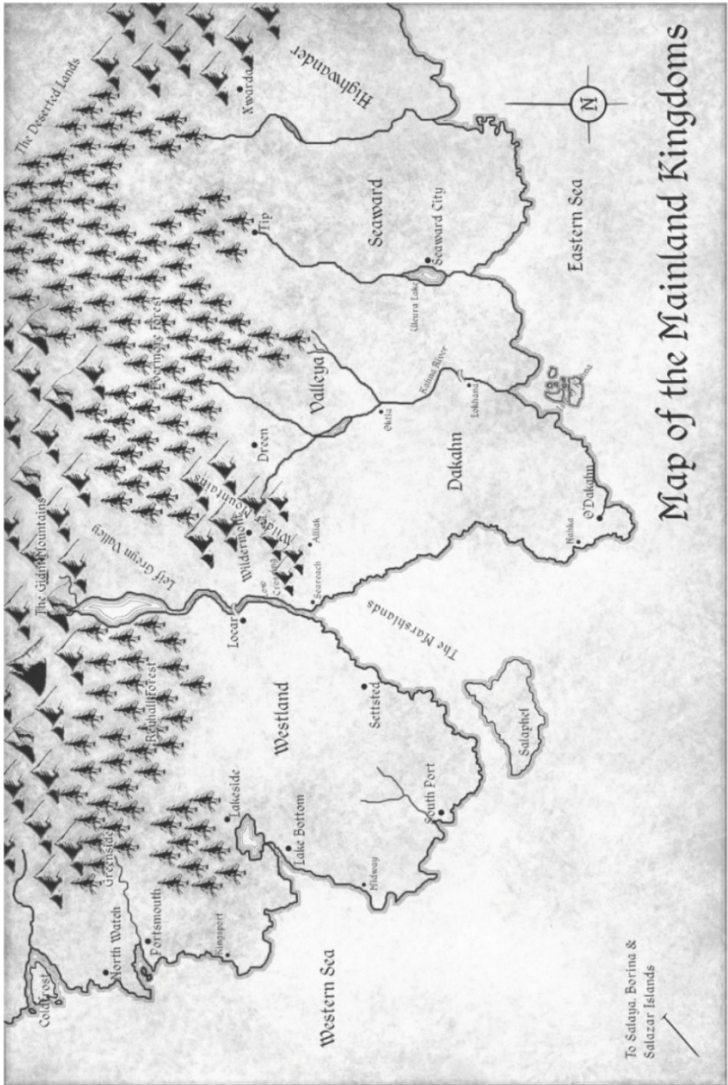
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For my wife, Allyson
Breast Cancer & Parkinsons
are but bumps in the road. They
may slow us down a little but can't
stop us. Hopefully we will be able to
travel and enjoy the world a bit
more, before the years catch up.
Either way, I'll be right here, lost in
a book when you need me.

- M

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Map of the Mainland Kingdoms



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Chapter One



Deep inside Seaward City, the air was so thick you could cut it with a dagger. Braiden couldn't ever remember it being this hot, this early in the summer. Granted he had only been alive for seventeen years, so there weren't many other summers to compare with. Even though the sun had long since left the sky, sweat was leaking from his every pore. Even the wealthy merchants, perched on their elevated verandas, being cooled by wardstone powered airscrews, were sheened with perspiration. But it was worse at street level, where no wind or fresh air of any sort found anyone. The stone cobbles held the day's warmth long into the night, and the three- and four-story buildings built directly against each other along each side of every road, made certain that every season save for winter was miserable for those who sometimes had to sleep outside.

Summer was just getting started, and Braiden couldn't wait for it to end.

Stifling was the word for it.

Even the roaches and water bugs sharing the deeper shadows with him, were too hot to move. He wanted to scratch the rash on his arse so bad he was about to scream, but he didn't dare make a sound.

Being mostly just an overgrown boy, he imagined himself with a hound's leg raking away at the discomfort over and over again, with his chin held high, and his foot thumping like an alley dog, but he couldn't really do that. He was hiding between two stinking barrel kegs full of tavern waste, at the intersection of a narrow alley and a cobbled lane. He was waiting on some welcher who was about to get slobber-knocked, or worse, because he either lost more than he could pay or hadn't been honoring his debts. While he waited, Braiden tried to stop thinking about his persistent irritation by diverting his thoughts.

The things they were doing with wardstone these days amazed him. Braiden saw cooling fans, boats, carriages, a millstone, grain conveyers, even a fancy carousel big enough for two dozen children to ride, all working without people to peddle or animals to pull them along. He never saw the carousel in use, but the men assembling it told him it was being built just so they could take it back apart. They explained how they would transport it to the upcoming Summers Day Festival using wagons to get it to the Leif Greyn River and then barges to take it north to the festival.

The annual gathering took place a long way away, and from what he'd heard, it was the most exciting happening there was. People came from everywhere in the realm, and from other realms, too. Wild half-human creatures called the Breed, took bridge tolls, and elves and dwarves and all sorts

of others competed for glory and fame. Some day he hoped to take Aurraella and her brother Kifferd. First, he had to get them out of the squalor.

The men constructing the carousel amusement were mostly tumblers who squatted in the bailey of a local monastery during the colder seasons. They went on and on telling stories of excitement and danger revolving around the Summer's Day competitions, the hawkers, and the Red Wolf soldiers who kept the peace, and of course the infamous Brawl. The strange men who controlled the carousel's wardstone didn't say much at all, and they shushed the tumblers every now and then, as if their banter might contain secrets.

Braiden thought they were silly.

When Braiden daydreamed about his future, he considered going to Xwarda, the great city in Highwander, where they teach ordinary people to manipulate wardstone. It seemed like an honorable profession. But his boss, Big Bolly Boreck explained it differently. He said standing around, making sure the leaves of a fan kept turning, or that a loom kept spinning for some snobbish old twock, was akin to being worse than dead.

Braiden still thought it would be a good skill to have, and if he had such a skill, he wouldn't waste it standing around a loom. He had all sorts of ideas of what he would do, and even a few ideas about how to do even more with the magical stuff. But as of late, he found that like-it-or-not. most of his plans revolved around a girl. Aurraella, or Aurraella as her

younger brother called her, had him wanting to be more.

Part of the carousel was already loaded onto a barge that could move upstream, against the current, with nothing but the power of its wardstone transom. At least that is what he learned, when he was left standing in the monastery's bailey while Boreck did one thing or another inside. A long canal had been dug between the bailey yard and Lake Ultura, to float the bigger parts all the way in from the sea. It was interesting, and he did his best to retain everything he learned about everything.

Someday he would attend the great mid-summer event, he vowed, and he would journey there with Aurraella, on a fancy boat powered by a slice of the magical stone, or maybe in a luxurious carriage. But right now, a pinpoint of incredible discomfort was assailing his rump right where his tailbone met his butt crack, and it demanded his attention.

Holding lookout and spying for big Boreck and his current partner Pate, wasn't very hard work for a fit young man such as himself, but tonight it was uncomfortable. The heat, compounded with the fact he hadn't been to the lake to wash in several days, had his filthy clothes possibly infested with fleas, or bed bugs, or worse. Slick and grimy, he could feel dirt and gunk all over his skin. His teeth were gritty and his breath as foul as the dump barrels beside him. He felt disgusting. His normally shaggy brown locks were matted and clumped, his

clothes tattered and stained. He was covered in insect bites and sticky sap from spying on Boreck's current mark from trees, and shrubs, and garbage piles for the last several days. He even had to bury himself in damp hay for part of a morning. Boreck never said why they were watching this welcher frequent whores, drink expensive dwarven ale, and try to catch trout at a lake cottage, and neither he nor Pate bothered to ask.

It didn't matter.

What mattered was his itchy arse.

If Braiden gave himself away, or didn't whistle when their man came out, he wouldn't get his two coppers. And if this particular mark didn't have enough coinage on him to satisfy Boreck and Pate, it might get messy. The last time it got messy, a man had to be buried in the dark. Worse, Braiden didn't get his coins for several days. He didn't want that to happen. If they got caught by the blue cloaked city guards, he would have to spend a year laboring for Queen Rachel or lose a hand. As bad a prospect as that was, it was likely better than what Bolly Boreck would do to him if he didn't do his job.

It was dark, and the wavering light from a nearby ensconced brand allowed Braiden enough shadowy cover to brush a bothersome fly away from his dripping brow. He grimaced, doing his best to avoid breathing in anything nasty. He tried to ignore the inflamed area along the top edge of his backside, but it really needed a stiff brush to rub the itch out of it.

It was driving him insane. He just needed to get his fingernails back there for a moment. If he could get that much relief, he knew he could make it a while longer.

No one emerged since Pate confirmed their man was inside. No one at all, so Braiden decided now was his chance. He twisted around and allowed himself the space he'd need to keep from coming out of the shadows and went for it.

No sooner did he get a hand in the back of his damp sweaty britches, did someone come stumbling out. The person mumbled something that didn't make any sense, but let Braiden know it was a man deep in his cups, then he collapsed in a heap.

Braiden couldn't help himself. The itch was so intense, he scratched it with all the intensity he could manage.

A second person emerged from a tavern and Braiden knew he'd let out some sort of audible sigh, because here the man came. Neither of the two was the man he was watching for, but it still wouldn't do for him to get caught. He wasn't sure what to do, so he froze. What would he say, when the man found him there, on his hands and knees, with a hand in the back of his britches?

He wasn't even sure he could think of something.

"Hey," a voice called from the deeper recesses of the alley. "Get away from there. Go on home fellow. Help your friend. Unless you want trouble."

It was Pate, Braiden knew by the rasp in the voice, and when Pate stepped out of the darkness, his bald head seemingly floating in the torchlight because he was dressed from neck to toe in black, the inebriated man about to discover Braiden paused. The man looked around then smoothed his partially buttoned vest. He glanced right at Braiden's hiding place. His eyes squinted, then opened wide. Not in shock or fear, but probably to focus his sight. Luckily, the wavering illumination thrown by the single torch didn't quite reach the refuse barrels.

When the drunkard peered deeper into Braiden's hiding spot, Braiden could see the crimson veins spreading across his jaundiced eyeballs. The edges of his inflamed lids were bright pink. As he stepped even nearer, Braiden saw the day's stubble on his chin, the brown spittle from his chaw at the corner of his mouth, and the hard lines of age etched into his confused and possibly curious looking face.

Braiden was terrified. It was clear by the way the man's gaze never settled on exactly where he was, that he hadn't spotted him. But he knew someone was there.

Pate snarled. "I said run along."

The man glanced at Pate, and Braiden thought he might call out, but he didn't. After taking in the bald thug again, he gave the barrels a second look, then shrugged before helping his fallen companion to his feet and stumbling off, down the cobbled lane.

“Sit still boy,” Pate hissed as he slid back out of sight. “We’ll get you some Witch Hazel by morning, if you just sit still.”

“Tell the little bastard to stop itching himself,” Braiden heard Boreck growl from the distance. “Tonight is the night.”

Braiden managed to get a few more scratches across his inflamed skin and then settled back trying to ignore the rash.

Pate was alright. Only he ogled the older girls at the orphanage all the time. He was old enough to have fathered any of them, and most of the ones he focused on were of a marrying age, so it wasn’t that awkward they interested him. It was something stranger. Whether lusting in the deep recesses of his mind, or just obsessively looking over them, he was often seen leaning against the orphanage’s gate with a twig in his mouth just staring, sometimes from after dinner long into the evening.

Braiden hated being called a bastard, mostly because it was true. He’d been left at Gramble’s Orphanage when he was still in swaddling. Lady Kaami, Gramble’s fat wife, said his parents died in a fire. Boreck said they were killed long before the place was set ablaze but never would elaborate. The idea he’d known them was enough to keep Braiden hanging around, though. And Boreck wasn’t the easiest person to question. The thing the old thief hated most was people who talked about other people. Asking him about his own parents, to Boreck, was asking him to be a snitcher, or some

shite, even though they were dead. He never would say why he'd taken a liking to hiring Braiden either, but Braiden knew there was more to it than just luck.

Not only could Braiden sneak around and use his keen young eyes, but he could pick a pocket with the best of them and even pick a simple tumbler lock or two. He could scrap as well but wasn't much for it. The last fist fight he was in; he was by far considered the winner, but he was sore for three days after, and he decided then, no one ever really won at fisticuffs.

He chuckled, remembering something pretty Aurraella, from the orphanage read recently. She'd been reading to them every night since she'd come to the home with her strange girlish brother Kifferd, and all the orphans loved to listen. There was something about the two of them Braiden couldn't finger just yet, but he was determined to learn all about Aurraella.

He was in love with her, and she with him, or so she portrayed. Over the last year, she'd read dozens of stories to he and the others. He'd learned enough about people and life over the years. Now, inspired by some of the audacity and ingenuity of some of the characters, and his own inner yearnings, he was forming a plan to lift the three of them out of the squalor. Even more though, he'd been thinking of ways to *stay* out of Seaward City's Southeast Quarter for good. Out of Seaward completely, if he could manage it. So many who

found a way out ended up right back on the cobbles. But if he made it out, he wouldn't come back.

He swore it.

Before his mind could drift too far away, the door creaked open and a leery looking man, about the size and shape of the one who owed Boreck's employers, peered out. Braiden wasn't yet sure if he was the one, so he resituated himself to get a better look. His movement startled something away from the barrels into the torchlight and caused his heart to hammer up into his chest like a startled bird.

It was a rat. A big fat rat that went scurrying right in front of the man. A wavering of the torchlight revealed it was the mark. The fact the rat must have been there with Braiden this whole time, caused him to shudder. He made to whistle, like he was supposed to do. But when he drew breath, he tasted the foul rot hovering in the air around the barrels. The stench turned his whistle into a cough, then he gagged and heaved.

Just before he vomited up the bread Boreck and Pate shared with him earlier, he managed to let out a whine. He was sure they heard it but wasn't so certain they'd be able to save him, for the panicked mark threw one of the heavy barrels aside and reached for him. Braiden's eyes teared up, not from emotion or fear, but from illness. He glimpsed the strange, but now familiar insignia the mark wore on his left breast, and the stringy glint of his pocket watch's thin chain, then his faculties were no longer his own.

Braiden's gut clenched. Normally he would have been able to elude the coming backhand, but his body wouldn't cooperate. The blow sent his mind reeling into a dark plane full of bright splotches and strange wavering patterns. He vomited again, and a second fist, this one to the other side of his head, caused almost everything to explode into sparkling flashes. He heard shouting and a scuffle.

"Impossible," Boreck growled at someone or another. "It can't be you."

Then the ringing sound of a sword being drawn filled the night.

He blacked out for a while after that, but when he next came around, he was no longer on the cobbles. He was being jostled around on a plank wood deck, and thought he heard horses and the jingle of tack.

Through all the haze and confusion assailing his spinning mind, he couldn't believe how damned hot it was. It was absolutely stifling. And he only knew that word because beautiful Aurraella recently read it to him from one of her many books. She was a breath of fresh air, which he desperately needed now. He was so hot he couldn't even draw a breath.

The sensation intensified. He was suffocating. No, he was being suffocated. His mind was spinning into a sweltering blackness. He was sweating so profusely he felt like a slippery fish. He tried to use this to his advantage and wiggled. Something shifted. A great weight was lifted from his body, and then he could taste salty brine, or

maybe blood. His lungs filled with cool sea air and his skin prickled, causing him to shiver. The feel of the breeze was such a relief, that from deep down in the dark, he felt himself smile.

And his arse. Could he scratch it?

Why yes, he could. When he did, he opened his eyes and realized he was no longer in Seaward City proper, but he was still lying on a plank deck.

By the look of the stars twinkling above and seeing the big, mostly full moon getting low in the sky, he knew it was past the deep of night.

This was no wagon bed; he decided almost immediately. The lean and roll, followed by a slow forward tilt, told him he was on a boat of some sort. It had to be a sizable one. Then they leaned to the left and something heavy rolled against him. He saw it was the lifeless corpse of the man he'd been paid to watch. Sitting up, he looked around. When he didn't see Boreck or Pate, and realized his ankles were roped to the same millstone as the mark's, his calm evaporated and panic set in.

As fast as and quietly as he could manage, he worked his feet free of the bounds and crept to the gunwale. Everything was glossy teakwood, and the brass fittings gleamed under the stars. This was no cargo barge. This was a vessel made for a nobleman or a wealthy merchant. He peered over the rail and saw they were passing a semi-populated area. There were plenty of lanterns and lamp-lit windows along both banks of the Southron River and more spreading out across the hills beyond. Looking

forward he felt the breeze coming in from the ocean. He figured they had to be riding the powerful current south, away from Lake Ultura toward the open sea.

Braiden looked again at the distance between their swiftly moving craft and the riverbank and decided to go for it. It was a long flipping way, but he could scrub the grime from his gritty skin and scratch his arse while he swam.

And that thought settled it.

He took three deep breaths and started to jump over when something caused him to pause. Boreck's mark still had that shiny watch chain dangling from his pocket.

Braiden chuckled. The act caused him to wince in pain and reminded him how swollen his face must be. Still, he went back and snatched it. The timepiece at the end of the chain was fancy and worth far more than the two coppers he would have made if he hadn't been left for dead. He noticed the patch displayed on the man's garment had been ripped away. Braiden remembered it though. It was a small dragon wrapped around a sword. Not just any sword either. It was mighty Ironspike, he knew. Everyone knew. Only a few years ago High King Mikahl, and the great wizard Hyden Hawk, used the blade to kill a demon that tore apart Xwarda.

The mark served High King Mikahl.

Well, he had before he died, anyway.

Braiden rubbed his swollen jaw. It was hard to have sympathy for someone who pounded his face in and tried to kill him in an alley.

Without hesitation, he yanked the pocket watch from the corpse.

It might even be worth enough to set his greater plan into motion.

He figured Boreck and Pate thought he was dead, or some such. There was no reason for them to get rid of him. Right now, that didn't really matter. Whoever was taking his body out to drop in the sea, might not even know Boreck or Pate. They might not care Braiden wasn't a snitcher. The kind of people who sank the bodies of the High King's men surely had strict masters that didn't like excuses or have any reason to care about an orphan.

After rummaging through the dead mark's other pockets, Braiden found four coins, a folded parchment, and lint. There was a dagger as long as his forearm in a sheath on his belt, too. He started to remove the sheath, but a bright yellow line formed across the deck and spread into a rectangle indicating a hatch or a door had opened. The shadow that filled the space was that of a buxom woman. That was all he could make out before he pulled the dagger from the sheath at the corpse's hip, put it sideways in his teeth, and leapt to the rail. He dove from the boat, unprepared for the great distance between him and the surface. Then he splashed into the unexpectedly warm water and tried to gather his wits.

While securing the watch and coins in his britches pocket, he decided one of them might have been heavy enough to be gold. He slid the dagger under his woven belt, and really didn't care if it stayed there. He wanted to be smart. He could look at the coins later and not fumble them while drifting in the current. Besides, he couldn't get his hands free fast enough. At long last, no one was nearby. As he lazily swam toward shore, with minimal leg kicking and one arm guiding his way, his free hand went to furiously scratching and scrubbing the rash.

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Chapter Two



“I’m sure he is okay, Aurraella,” Kifferd tried to comfort his sister. His attempt was kind, but it was no use. “He has stayed away as many days before.”

“I’m not so concerned that he has been gone five days.” She answered and stopped wringing her hands, as if doing so was an admission to something. “My concern is that I am so worried, obsessed even, over his absence.”

The two of them were not identical. Aurraella was two years older, but they shared the same olive skin and long, straight blonde hair. If she didn’t have breasts, she knew they could pass as twins. Kifferd was effeminate if he was anything. The thing she loved and respected about her brother most though, was that he didn’t try and hide who he was or act any differently to impress anyone.

What he was, was another matter. What she was, too. But those stones were better left unturned for now. The moment’s concern was for Braiden.

“Should we find Boreck,” Aurraella asked herself more than young Kifferd. He was only fifteen, and she doubted he had any concern at all for Braiden.

“He would know where he is,” Kifferd stated the obvious. “If we can find him.”

“We aren’t going to be the ones looking.” She smiled, licked her lips hungrily, and threw her hair over her shoulder with a dramatic whirl. “Braiden isn’t the only one I’ve hooked these claws into.”

Gramble’s Orphanage was an old estate house on the outskirts of Seaward City. It boasted a view of Lake Ultura like no other.

Inside the estate, from the top of the blocky waterfront retainer wall, the vast blue surface of the lake extended to the horizon. In the near distance, but still most of a day’s boat ride away, was a wide emerald-green mass rising from the lake. Sitting on top of the heavily forested Island, was the tall and majestic palace, where Queen Rachel ruled over Seaward. Seven marble spires jutted heavenward from a blocky base structure with crenels along the wall tops. On a sunny day it looked like it was made of sparkling sugar and topped with sharp coppery peaks. And at night all the yellow orange specks from ensconced torches, candle and lamp lit windows, and the stronger luminance emitting from the newly installed wardstone powered lamps, made it glow like something out of a fairytale. The way all of it reflected on the ever-wavering surface of Lake Ultura was breathtaking at the very least.

Aurraella heard more than one person say they’d willingly become an orphan, if it meant they could wake up to such wonder. The estate boasted a sizable inner bailey, with stone and mortar walls

twice as tall as a man, and stout iron gates. Gramble's was on the skirts of the Proper, not too far from some of the most violent streets in the heavily populated trading city. The protective barrier kept the score of children who lived there protected from the rough and tumble debauchery happening only blocks away.

Every bit of goods and stores produced in the kingdom of Seaward and many from Highwander, along with a good number of the High King's Valleyan horses meant to be sent abroad, had to go through Seaward City on their way to sea. All sorts of dangerous men, from places near and far passed through.

Aurraella knew some of what was beyond the bailey walls and didn't like it one bit. She'd been molested by some filthy sailor once, and now wouldn't venture out alone, or even with just her brother, unless she was hunting. Sometimes the way the men who visited Gramble's looked at her, left her feeling hollow. This reminded her of how Pate stared at every girl but her. Braiden told her Pate was harmless, but she wasn't so sure.

Someday soon, this was going to end for her and Kifferd, and since she was a parentless girl with good teeth and narrow hips, she hoped it didn't end under some obese lackey whose entire existence depended on their father's labor or the family store.

It was a real possibility, and it was as frightening as being raped by thugs in an alley. Terrible stuff happened in the shadows after the sun

went down. And once something like that happened to a woman, not even the lackeys wanted them for more than sport. But she wasn't kidding herself. Terrible things like that happened to wives, too.

She wouldn't be one of them, in either case.

She couldn't. She had to take care of her brother.

Aurraella smiled back at Kifferd. He didn't yet have a clue what they were up against. But Braiden did, he was going to save them from all of it. She just knew it. They'd looked into each other's eyes for hours on end. They'd rolled in the hay a few times too, but she hadn't given in to him. At least not all the way.

She smiled to herself. Nor had he tried too hard or demanded more from her than she was willing to give freely. That meant more than he could know.

The question was, did he want her bad enough to take her and Kifferd with him when he left this all behind? She thought so.

Ughhh! She hoped so. With boys one could never be sure.

No one had seen him for days now.

Inside the walls of Gramble's Aurraella had a little power. Despite the yucky feeling it gave her inside; she sometimes used her feminine persuasion to her advantage. This time, she was doing so to find out about Braiden, after all. So, it was excusable if she kept it from getting far.

She stalked over to a group of young men standing around the orphanage's well. They were of an age to be working. In the mornings, men would come and take them off to labor, but inevitably some were left behind, because there were more orphans than work. The unspoken duty of the unchosen young men was to spend the day manning Gramble's well pump so any of the locals who came in for water could just hand over their skins or buckets and not have to work the aging pump themselves.

Braiden once told her Gramble made enough to feed them all twice over, just from the clipped coins the boys collected at the pump. He said Gramble and his wife made far more than what they let on, and since he figured they couldn't allow anyone to find out, they had to have all those extra coins rat-holed away in a chest or lock box somewhere.

"Would one of you go and fetch Boreck for me?" Aurraella asked the pump boys demurely. She was seventeen years old and fully aware of how few girls paid attention to the orphans. These guys were younger than Kifferd, but still old enough to be swayed by batting eye lashes and a bit of suggestive posturing. It was more than that, too. She read stories to them in the evenings and her voice, and her natural charm was becoming harder for them to resist.

"I'll go," one of them offered.

“Are you off of it, man?” Another chided. “Boreck eats kids like us. I bet her bo, Braiden is being cooked in a pot.”

Aurraella started to snap at him, but he was already red faced and rubbing at his forehead. He and Aurraella both looked at Kifferd at the same time. Kifferd was smiling and brazenly toying with another small rock.

“Take it back, Lonny,” one of the boys said.

“You don’t have to take it back,” she looked back at him, knowing that her brother had to have thrown the rock before Lonny even finished speaking. He’d known Lonny was going to disrespect Braiden, probably before Lonny did. It was one of his gifts.

“Would one of you please go and fetch Boreck for me?” she asked again. “If he won’t come, ask him when Braiden will be finished working. He is needed here.”

“I’ve been wondering where Braid is, too.” The first boy said. “I’ll go.”

She thought his name was Garth but wasn’t sure.

“Thank you,” she faced him and batted her eyelashes, then smiled. “Please, find me as soon as you return.”

The afternoon passed without a word from Garth. Aurraella ended up in the kitchen helping Lady Kaami and her sister Lady Jaani. There were a handful of younger orphans trying to assist but they were creating a bit of chaos with their antics.

Lady Jaani was the kinder of the siblings, for she would only scold the youngsters. Lady Kaami, the larger of all the women who worked here by far, would grab up a wooden spoon or even a rolling pin and throttle any one of them, no matter how big or small. Aurraella wanted to get Lady Jaani alone and ask about what happened to orphan girls when they were no longer little girls, but she thought she knew the answer. The real gist of her question was how long did *she* have before it happened?

The opportunity for privacy she was hoping for never came about, but just after they put all the trays of rolls in the oven, here came Garth, poking his head in the door all breathless and disheveled.

“Is that blood on your head?” Lady Kaami gasped when she saw him.

Aurraella saw a dark matted area on one side of his noggin. And his cheeks were as mottled as his clothes were dirty.

“They said Bolly Boreck was found dead in the harbor last night,” he managed before his head was twisted by Lady Kaami. “Only Pate got away.”

She put a wet rag on the wound. It saturated quickly and when she squeezed it out the stuff that released was deep crimson. Aurraella thought she saw black lumpy clots, too.

“What of Braiden?” Aurraella asked. She had to step around to see Garth’s face over Lady Kaami. Aurraella could feel the panic rising inside. From across the estate Kifferd must have sensed her

anxiety as well, for here he came, squeezing in the doorway past several curious little faces.

“Ouch!” Garth yelled when Lady Kaami finally found the gash across the lump on his temple. Lady Jaani came back in. She held a lamp high so they could all get a good look. Aurraella almost vomited, for she could have laid a finger in the wide-open gash.

“You’ll have to find Pate.” Garth growled through his pain. “What I heard was told secondhand, but it must have struck true, because I got clobbered right after I heard it.”

“Well, what’d you hear, boy?” Lady Kaami asked.

Garth swallowed hard. “Wollard Kipps said Pate is hiding out because he saw the men who killed Bolly Boreck.”

“But what about Braiden,” Aurraella asked. “What happened to him?”

“I’m sorry, Aurraella,” Garth dropped his eyes and winced from the pain caused by the shifting expressions. Lady Janni, even Lady Kaami stopped what they were doing to listen.

“Wollard said Pate told him one of the High King’s men killed Braiden,” Garth explained. He paused to wipe away a stray tear. “Said he broke his neck strangling him, and then Boreck killed the bastard for doing it. Right after that, out came some guild men, and they killed Boreck, and almost got Pate.”

“It’ll need seven or eight stitches,” Lady Kaami informed her sister. “But not until the swelling goes down. Someone go and fetch me a bowl of cool water and a clean cloth. This one is all bloody.”

“Where is Pate,” Aurraella asked. The smell of Garth’s blood fueled a fire in hers. Combined with all the fear and concern, she might have lost control and revealed herself, but Kifferd saved her from the primal urge.

“Shhh, sister,” Kifferd whispered and put his arm around her shoulder. Of all the things assailing her in that moment, the anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and desperation, it was the raw power coursing through her sibling’s veins that was most potent. It enveloped her and soothed her, and she wondered just when he’d gained so much control over himself.

“He is alive,” Kifferd whispered so quietly no one else could hear.

Is it true, she asked with a thought. She searched his eyes, hoping not to see a brother shielding his sister from harsh reality with a lie. She didn’t. What she saw was honest confusion. Confusion and power.

Braiden is alive Aurraella, Kifferd confirmed with a mental voice he was just beginning to find. Lady Kaami looked at them, as if she’d heard, too. They way Kifferd cocked his head, Aurraella knew he was considering the very same possibility. Almost everyone who lived along the basin where water flowed out of the wardstone rich Highwander

Mountains via the Southron and Pixie Rivers, had some traces of the supernatural senses, the siblings shared, but Aurraella and Kifferd didn't pick it up by consumption, as most folks had. Their ability came from their very blood.

"The two of you will be meeting with a family of sorts on the morrow," Lady Kaami informed, her demeanor changing suddenly and sharply. A dark look Aurraella never saw before slid across the woman's plump face. "I think the pair of you will fit right in with these sorts of folk. After dinner find a couple grain sacks and put your stuff in them." She gave a smile that could have held deep concern but was probably more of an expression of subtle malice. At least that was how it felt to Aurraella.

"Lord Gramble loved that thieving little bastard, Braiden" she said to her sister, dismissing them with a wave. "We surely will miss his coins."

"I don't want to meet a new family," Kifferd suddenly pouted. One moment he was a powerful young man coming into his own, now he was just a scared boy. Aurraella knew she had to be strong for them both. She took his arm and led him out of the kitchen hoping beyond hope Kifferd was right, that Braiden was still alive.

"We will have to play along and bide our time," she whispered after they were away from everyone else. "You'll be hungry soon, anyway. Hungrier than you've ever been." She looked around. "None of these poor folks have any meat on

their bones. Maybe our new home will have better to offer.”

“What about Braiden?” Kifferd asked. She saw that he was genuinely concerned. She wasn’t sure if he was concerned on her behalf, or if he had taken a liking to the resourceful young man, too.

“We will have to be patient,” she answered, knowing patience was the thing she had least of. “If he wants to finish what he started, he will find us.”

With that thought, a deep aching burn filled her belly.

There was no doubt she wanted him to finish what he had started, but change was literally on the morrow’s horizon. She and her brother, no matter what else they were, were proud. They would face what came head on, just like they were raised to do. But she couldn’t help and wonder what sort of people Lady Kaami would describe as, “those sorts of folk?”

Devious Arcana

Chapter Three



Braiden woke on a wooded riverbank nowhere near the lights he'd started swimming toward. This came as no surprise because after swimming until he was exhausted, he was barely halfway to shore. Through the night, the current swept him past not one, but two other clusters of lights. Cities, or towns. He wasn't sure. He was just glad he found solid ground before he washed all the way out to sea or was eaten by one of the many green scaled snappers that populated the more brackish water this far south.

It was still dark, though the orange-pink light of dawn could be seen behind the trees lining the far side of the powerful flow. He only had a general idea where he was, and he didn't like the feeling at all. So, he took a few deep breaths and tried to gather his wits.

The Southron River was before him, moving to his right or South, that much he knew for certain. And the boat had been moving with the current, so he needed to go against the flow.

Remembering the few maps he was forced to take in, back when the Lesson Masters randomly

stopped by the orphanage, he knew the Pixie River, was farther west. It and the Southron River created natural borders. West of the Southron River was Valleya, and between the Southron and Pixie Rivers, was Seaward. West of the Pixie was Highwander, where Queen Willa the Witch ruled.

Except for south of Lake Ultura, Queen Rachel had full control of both sides of the Southron River, because the lake served as Seaward's main port, where Valleya depended more on Dakahn for shipping trade.

That was where he thought he was standing. So, he should still be in Seaward, even though he was on the western bank, and Seaward City should be a day or two north, or upriver, by foot.

The situation was maddening. He was hungry and despite being fairly certain of his location, something just did not feel right. He decided he would take the time to study all the maps he could gather if he ever made it home.

Home?

What was home?

For now, home was Gramble's Orphanage in Seaward City. That was his destination at least, if only because he'd promised Aurraella, he wouldn't abandon her and her brother.

He took a moment and checked his belongings. He had the dagger he'd taken, plus four coppers, a silver, and a golden crown. His boots were wet, but in pretty good shape because one of Boreck's mantras was "...never skimp on boots."

He could hear the grouchy old hooligan, even now.

“We think on our feet. We move on our feet, and if the need arises, we use our feet to save our fargin skin. Never skimp on boots, boy. Never skimp on boots.”

He also had the fancy watch he nabbed. As soon as it dried, it would go right back in his pocket. The silver coin alone was enough to hire a carriage back to Seaward City. But he would have to use two of the coppers to buy some food and clean, better fitting clothes, right off. No one would hire a carriage out to a filthy orphan. The golden crown he would keep out of sight, with the timepiece.

Mightier men have been killed for far less than either. In his mind he heard Boreck’s voice spout another of his many mantras of cobble wisdom.

The watch captivated Braiden. It was carved silver or maybe stamp-hammered and covered in intricate designs that repeated around the center point of each side. Even in the moonlight it held him transfixed for some time. Before, he hadn’t tried to open it, but now it felt like there was water inside, and the last thing he wanted was for it to rust or ruin. There was a tiny button at the top, and around it, a scored little ring he thought you twisted every now and then, to keep the spring wound, only this one didn’t spin all the way around, it clicked into three different positions, one notch at a time. He clicked it once each way, then back where it was

when he started, he hoped. When he pushed the button, the clasp released and there was an audible click. He felt a deep pulse radiating outward as it opened. The entire world seemed like a calm pond a sizable stone had just landed in. The watch was the point of the splash, and ripples rolled right through the fabric of everything, including him, on their uniform trek outward.

The sensation startled him. But then it was gone. Probably just the weird sucking sound of the seal fighting the moisture to open. He couldn't yet make out the sun beyond the foliage, but the sky was bluer now, and he saw the fancy numbers painted on the dial had little droplets beaded up on them.

Braiden used the driest part of the tunic belted over his britches, which was damp at best. He put an effort into cleaning it, and making it shine. He must have gotten caught up in the work, for the next time he looked up half the morning had passed.

Quickly, trying to shake off whatever had gotten hold of him, he put his things away and started moving against the river's flow, which he knew was north. He found if he stayed between the wide, shallow span and the edge of the trees, it wasn't so hard to walk. Where he was forced to leave the water's edge, because the foliage grew too close, or the water too deep to traverse, he had to fight through all sorts of thick undergrowth.

He wished he had something better than the dagger to hack with, but he could use it as a weapon

if he needed one. So far, he hadn't felt unsafe, but some of the sounds he heard as the day wore on were upsetting, and a little nerve racking.

There was the constant hum and buzz of insects, and just above it the nearer chirps of an angry sounding bird carried over a more distant songbird's sporadically repeating call. Everything was lush and green. The leaves of some of the trees were thick and leathery, while others were sharp with prickly little thorns that jabbed and scratched him as he passed. Several strange bushes, with blue flowery blooms were scattered about the rest of the dense foliage. These attracted bees, and seemed to repel the rest of the undergrowth, for around them was an open space where nothing else but grass grew. A few smaller critters rustled the brush as he came upon them, and one rabbit darted right at him. He was so used to seeing rats in the city, not bounding rabbits, that it scared him quite badly.

He laughed it off but wished he had had his wits about him. He could have kicked the life out of the varmint and eaten it if he had a way to cook it.

It was not long before all the swimming and scrubbing from the night before was but a memory. He was sweltering hot again, as sweaty as he'd ever been, and now held to a snail's pace because of branches, and vines, and thorns, and tangles. The sun was high in the sky and seemed to send its rays straight down through the forest directly at him.

He needed to drink some freshly hauled well water. He was sure the river was clean enough, but

it tasted like dirt, and no matter how much he swallowed, he never felt as if he quenched his thirst.

He was about to collapse from exhaustion when he caught a whiff of woodsmoke. More than that, it was the smell of charring meat. He trudged on, toward the savory source, and was glad he pushed through. Once he found the water again, he was able to get some shade and a bit of a breeze coming off the wide span of the Southron River. He was left salivating and hungry, though. There was no cooking meat to be found.

It was at this point he noticed a pair of hummingbirds swerving and dancing around each other. At first Braiden thought he might have disturbed their nest. They were aware of him, he was certain. They followed along behind him as he went, their wings buzzing loud enough to be heard when they came near.

A while later, he saw there were now four of the pinky-finger-sized birds hovering and following. Even after he left the open area along the water's edge, and fought dense foliage for part of the evening, when he emerged into the fresh breeze again, the hummingbirds found him. Though they kept a better distance, they followed him just the same.

It turned out the smell of meat must have been coming from across the river. Braiden lost the scent not long before he lost the light of day. Dusk passed so fast, he barely had time to find a place to stop.

The idea he wouldn't find anyone or anything before nightfall hadn't occurred to him. He was famished and didn't know how to start a fire or hunt. The prospect of sleeping on the river's edge, where creatures and critters might come to drink in the shallows, wasn't on his mind either. Eventually he settled in against a mound of rocks and fell into a deep well-needed sleep.

He woke with a shiver of fright. Something huge was in the darkness. In that terrifying moment, he discovered a few of his many mistakes. But they didn't matter. What did was the musky smelling monster, before him.

The beast wasn't friendly, either. It snarled deeply and growled, and he almost shat himself in terror when he saw an eyeball the size of a cantaloupe glaring *down* at him. Braiden was petrified, fully consumed with fear, and defenseless. All he could do was huddle and stay still. He didn't even know what it was.

The silhouetted shape of it rising onto two legs from four, as if it was about to pounce, filled the deep blue of the night sky. Seeing it was easily five times his size, Braiden clenched his eyes shut and drew into a fetal ball. It was all he could do against something so--

A fetid roar sounded. All thoughts were forced out of his mind. He was blasted with hot breath and spittle from a maw big enough to swallow his head, but he didn't dare look at the wild smelling thing.

He wasn't sure why he rolled out of the way, but when a heavy foot or claw stamped down exactly where he was, he cried out. It was too dark to see much, but he was sure he would have been crushed into a lumpy pulp, if he had stayed still.

Whatever it was reared up again and tried to stomp him, but he dove back to where he started. It missed him again, which was a relief. But he started to shake with fear, because the rocks he'd been huddled against were now pushed almost all the way down into the soft ground.

Then something huge and heavy, like a slick tree limb swept him onto his side. He squeezed and squirmed but couldn't avoid being softly pressed under something huge and scaly. It was so heavy it crushed the air from his lungs.

Braiden could do nothing, not even move. His body convulsed trying to draw a breath that wouldn't come. He sighed inwardly, regretting all the things he'd yet to do. What he regretted most though, was not keeping his word to Aurraella. Running away with her was all he had been thinking about since she showed up at the orphanage. Now, here he was with enough coins to get them good and gone, yet he was lost in the wilderness, and now dying under the immense weight of some feral thing so big it hadn't bothered to eat him.

Chapter Four



Braiden woke to the sound of songbirds chirping and whistling at one another. The smell of grass and flowers filled his nostrils, and he could sense the open space around him before he even opened his eyes.

Am I dead? Is this the heavens?

The memory of the creature and its crushing weight filled his head. Panic rose in his system, but he pushed it aside once he realized he survived the night. Out of curiosity he checked the area for tracks and immediately wished he hadn't. Not only were the clawed prints he saw huge. There was more of them than one creature could have left. Even more unbelievable was the prints were sunk into ground so hard; he thought it was rock. Using his boot heel, he couldn't find any soft dirt or mud, and the cluster of rocks he'd originally huddled against were nowhere to be seen.

He couldn't imagine what prevented the monster from eating him, but something must have caused it to move on. Either that, or he was so skinny and bony, it didn't think he was worth the effort.

His stomach rumbled. The last food he'd eaten was two days ago, and that was only some old, hard-bread Pate and Boreck gave him. He thought he vomited that up, but he wasn't sure. He had no idea what berries and roots were safe to eat, or which ones would kill him, so he didn't dare try anything. And there was no way he was eating a bug.

Once he laid eyes on the river again and knew which way to go, he started back against the flow. He couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. Not only was he weak and famished, but he felt out of place. Before long, he glanced over his shoulder half-saddened that the hummingbirds from yesterday were no longer trailing him. He strode on like that, checking for them every now and again, and making the best time he could despite the terrain and fatigue. But exhaustion quickly got a hold of him again.

He had to stop and rest. He simply had no energy left.

Plopping down on a large, but smooth worn stone, in an open area near the bank, he took out the pocket watch he'd stolen from the dead man and polished its outer, silver surface with his tunic. No sooner did he have it shining, did he hear a girlish giggle coming from up the river.

"Probably a boat," he muttered to himself. He eased to the water's edge and peered upstream as far as he could see, but no one was on the river, and there were no boats of any kind to be seen.

He was about to go back to the smooth stone when he heard the giggling again. This time he was certain he was hearing not one, but two girls laughing and carrying on.

With a burst of gumption, more to get sustenance than anything else, Braiden started toward the voices. He hadn't taken but two steps when a hummingbird shot past. The deep buzzing of its wings sounded like a giant hornet and caused him to duck.

"He has ambiance," a feminine voice stated matter-of-factly. Braiden saw her form through the trees. She was thin and wispy, and young like him. Only she was nude. Her hair was golden white, and her eyes and smile were full of what looked like hope. The slight curve of her narrow hips, and the shape of her apple sized breasts, transfixed him.

"It is okay, sister," the fair skinned beauty said to no one he could see.

"At your own peril, Pia," a slightly different feminine voice responded. Behind her a shadow shifted. Another hummingbird left the trees near her, buzzed around his head a moment, and then went zipping away.

"What are you, out here, so far from the others?" she asked him. The certainty she showed when speaking to her invisible companion had evaporated. Now she looked akin to a cobble rat startled and frozen in a beam of lantern light, only it wasn't dark. And she was no cobble rat.

Apparently, she wasn't bashful about herself, and he did his best to keep his eyes off her strawberry nipples, and the slight gap between her thighs.

Braiden was in some strange state of aroused shock. He didn't know what others she was talking about, or what ambiance he had. He didn't know what ambiance was, for that matter.

"Did your friend just turn into a bird and fly away?" he asked stupidly.

"Oh dear," her dainty hand covered her pink lips. "Maybe he isn't-- But I can still feel his radiance?" She waved her hand in front of her face as if she were shooing away a fly or trying to get a bad smell away from her nose. She looked as if she was about to do something drastic, then stopped when he gathered enough wits to speak.

"Where am I? Do you have any food?" He gave her an imploring look. "I am very hungry. How far away is Seaward City?"

He winced and swallowed hard. He didn't intend to blink, but he did. When he looked again, she was gone.

It took a while to force himself to get back underway, but when he did, Braiden was rewarded. On the ground exactly where the strange girl had been standing, there was a pear lying on some sort of platter sized frond. It looked like it was set out to be seen.

He knew it might be a trick, that he was taking a great leap of faith by eating it, but his body didn't

care. Poison or not, he devoured the whole thing, save for the seeds and stem. He even ate the crunchy odd textured parts of the core he would normally discard. When it was gone, he felt better, but was all the hungrier.

“Thank you,” he called in the direction the hummingbirds went.

His mind wasn't quite wrapped around what transpired, and his thoughts kept returning to the girl's body. He didn't dwell on it though. He was just glad for the pear, wherever it came from.

The one thing he knew for certain was, if he kept moving against the river's flow, he would eventually find people, and food. He knew if he didn't find someone, or some safe place before dark, he might not make it through another night.

A deep primal urge to survive was blooming inside. What little sustenance he gained from the fruit was used up just replenishing his previous exertions. He was worn down to skin and bones. And now he kept his eyes on the branches looking for more pears. It took every bit of concentration he had to keep putting one foot in front of the other. As the day wore on, he told himself again and again, if he stopped it was over.

The warm look of trust he found in Aurraella's eyes helped him lift his heavy boots. The taste of the kisses they recently shared in the orphanage's hayloft, the feel of her warm soft body pressed against his, was enough to drive him forward.

At some point he realized he was on a game trail, or maybe a herdsman's path. Probably the latter, for he saw thousands of small uniform hoof prints, and lots of long dried dung piles along the way.

After a while, he found he'd lost the trail and grew concerned. Had he gotten turned around? Where was the river?

He was stumbling and having to work very hard just to stay on his feet, when he thought he saw two of the hummingbirds. They were up ahead of him this time. He heard their girlish giggles too and focused on following the sound.

He was dizzy and everything spun as he went.

"Come, human boy," he heard the naked girl say to him.

He felt like he was being lifted and carried, or at least being held upright as he stumbled. When he looked, he saw a tiny hummingbird at each shoulder. They were struggling mightily to get him somewhere. And then he was there, falling softly into a grassy glade near one of the strange blue flowered bushes.

His head was in the lap of the beautiful pale girl. Her breasts were right there above his face. And her smile was inviting. He felt a hand from another, slide up his thigh and realized his clothing was gone. He wiggled his toes and knew his boots were off too, but he didn't remember removing them. Another pair of hands found his abdomen. The girl cradling his head resituated herself so she could lean down

and kiss him. Her lips were delicious, and her hot wet mouth caused his body to respond.

Other hands found him. Fingers traced across his skin. He heard several girls moaning and cooing over him, and each other. More than one grip gave his manhood a squeeze. It was bliss, but it ended abruptly to the sound of an angry old woman screaming, and utter confusion.

When Braiden sat up, he was walloped by a crone with a broom handle or a cane. His first thought was that he was naked, but he wasn't. Getting to his feet he realized he was erect. It wasn't arousal that had him stiff anymore, though. He had to urinate as badly as he ever had. Then the thick stick the woman was wielding cracked him across the forehead and he felt piss, warm and slick, run down his leg as he fell.

Devious Arcana

Chapter Five



Aurraella had to tell herself not to squeeze Kifferd's hand too tightly. She was probably more terrified than he was, but she was the older sibling and more mature. She couldn't let on how upset and unsure she really felt, though by the pale look of terror on her younger brother's mug, he knew exactly what was going on with her. They were following Lady Kaami down the hard pack that led from the orphanage into the more densely populated parts of Seaward City. They were on their way to meet their new family. For Aurraella, it was crowded enough out here in the outskirts. She wasn't much for people, and she was hoping deep down that this family didn't like them and sooner than later sent them back to the orphanage.

When they didn't turn toward Seaward City proper and took the stretch of road that led to another part of the lake, Aurraella grew curious. The only people she knew of, out this way, were some strange monks, and a group of even stranger tumblers who wintered there because of the fair weather.

They kept on toward Lake Ultura's shore, where a massive structure rose up ahead. It was the monastery she knew, for she'd ventured out here with some of the other older children begging for donations, before.

"Don't worry," Lady Kaami laughed sarcastically. "I 'ent going to turn you over to those root loving bark heads."

"Are we going to the tinker camp?" Kifferd asked nervously. "Braiden told me about them."

"I think they are performers, Kiff." Aurraella gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. "Mimes, and clowns and the like."

"They are," Lady Kaami confirmed. "They live inside the walls of this monastery and help tend the grapes and, well... They are all queer as can be, dear. Young Kifferd will fit right in."

Before Aurraella could respond to such a terrible remark, Lady Kaami gasped and Kifferd squealed.

Aurraella looked up and saw a ten-foot-tall ogre crashing out of the trees beside the road. Green colored skin flashed, and gnashing teeth clacked. It had huge white eyes, flailing arms, and a tattered tunic. It was coming right at them.

She started to flee with Kifferd in tow, but realized it was just a man on stilts wearing only the top half of an ogre costume. She wasn't sure, but didn't think ogres wore tunics. It turned out Kifferd did not need to be towed away and hadn't seen

what it really was. Already, he was sprinting back down the lane attempting to flee.

The young man threw off the upper part of the costume and gave Aurraella an apologetic look before using his long strides to head off her little brother. He looked a few years older than her; she guessed. But he still wasn't quite a man, for his amusement over scaring them, gave away his lack of maturity.

As hard as she tried, Aurraella couldn't detect any sort of queerness about him. He was just a boy, like Kifferd.

She wasn't sure about Kifferd's sexuality either, but she knew he was more than they understood him to be. In truth, she thought he had a bit of growing to do before the drive to procreate took away his innocence, if that were what you would call it. Currently, she didn't think sexuality was part of his thought process. She knew what soon would be though and pulled him close when the boy on stilts ushered him back.

"Where is Master Hoops?" Lady Kaami asked sharply, giving the young man a whack with her walking stick. "You almost scared the life out of me."

"Good," Kifferd smarted, and both he and the other boy laughed despite the terror that bloomed on their faces when the big woman's eyes flared.

Still striding on his stilts, the young man led them to the monastery's ornate but abandoned entry. The gate was wide open, but the gatehouse was flanked by head high, stone and mortar walls

and the boy had to duck under an ornate arch made from iron bars. The grounds beyond were well tended, and most of the vast acreage was lined with diagonal rows of grapes. Aurraella could see woodsmoke rising from a cluster of tents and people, and beyond that was a huge rectangular building with crenelated wall tops, made from the same dark gray stone as the perimeter barrier.

When Aurraella saw some of the other tumblers up close, her anxiety faded a little. Lady Kaami's mind was small, she decided, and the smile on her brother's face told her this was as good of a place to wait on Braiden, as any.

And with that thought, she knew she had something else to do before Lady Kaami returned to the orphanage without them.

Thinking about it caused her to lick her lips in anticipation.

The tumblers seemed ordinary in every sense of the word, save for a few; a thickly bearded woman with huge swinging breasts and garishly exaggerated eyelashes, a man with no arms and strange snakes tattooed on his chest and wings inked on his back. There was another pair who were robed and veiled so you couldn't see any part of them. Behind those two, was a man so huge and well-muscled, Aurraella was sure he could crush her in his grip. All of them wore ordinary rough spun attire, or a tighter, lighter-looking material that hugged their well-built forms. They hovered about nonchalantly, all eyeing she and Kifferd as they

approached the tent the boy on stilts was leading them toward.

Master Hoops came out of his abode in a forward rolling tumble and was on his feet in front of them before Aurraella's eyes could focus.

Kifferd drew in a breath, and she too was awed by his sudden presence. By the way the thin but tightly corded man used the back of his hand to gently ease Lady Kaami out of the way, Aurraella could tell he was sensing them, trying to discern what they were about. And then the intense moment ended with a snap of his fingers and a perfectly white smile which spread across his clean-shaven face like a warm summer breeze.

"Come," he bowed and implored them to follow. "I will show you to a tent you can share until we get under way. In a few days we will start our journey to the Leif Greyn Valley, and the festival of festivals. I will see you have your own divided tent to share on the road."

She felt Kifferd tugging at her hand after he turned away, and she absently answered, "I don't know?" before he even asked her if Master Hoops sensed their blood.

"Kiff, I need to have a moment with her," Aurraella indicated Lady Kaami with a nod. "Before she leaves us."

He nodded and hurried to Master Hoops's side. Aurraella knew he almost grabbed the man's hand like a toddler might but was glad he thought better of it. He was a strange one, her brother. But

he was himself, and she loved him more than anything else.

“Ma’am,” she eased near to Lady Kaami. “Could I have a word in private? I mean after we see our tent or whatever?”

The plump woman looked relieved everything was going to her plan. Aurraella wasn’t sure why she so suddenly wanted them gone, but she wondered if Braiden’s supposed death had anything to do with it. It almost seemed as if the only reason she’d been allowed to stay for this long was Braiden’s fancy.

This seemed like a better place to wait on him anyway, and once they were on the road, feeding Kifferd wouldn’t be such a problem.

“I suppose,” she conceded, as if doing so was some great favor. “But I ‘ent got any coppers, lass.”

There was at least a dozen tents rowed on each side of a trampled lane. The camp might have seemed festive if there wasn’t a giant ominous structure looming behind it, but it wasn’t so bad. Master Hoops indicated the last tent on one side. Kifferd went in and came out, gave Aurraella a wink, then held the flap open for she and Lady Kaami.

As soon as they were both inside, Kifferd let the flap fall closed behind him and started asking Master Hoops about the Summers Day Festival, leaving Aurraella and Lord Gramble’s mean wife alone.

“I need you to do something for me,” Aurraella said.

When the other woman didn't respond, she reached over and grabbed her chin and forced her to look into her eyes. Lady Kaami tried to pull away, but Aurraella let her charm take over.

Something happened then. Aurraella expected it, but Lady Kaami didn't. Aurraella leaned in slowly putting her lips very close to Lady Kaami's. To Aurraella's surprise the woman tried to kiss her, but she turned her head aside by her chin and put her mouth on Lady Kaami's sweaty neck instead.

Lady Kaami reached around Aurraella and squeezed her arse gently. The older woman's breathing was getting heavy, and she pushed her ample breasts against Aurraella wantonly. She was clearly aroused.

Aurraella chuckled inside. She wasn't turned on. She was thirsty, and she needed to make sure she knew exactly when Braiden returned to the orphanage.

She was going to kill two birds with one bite.

She felt Lady Kaami grind her fleshy body against her and she buried her face in the woman's neck. Her teeth found the pulsing artery they sought and for long moments she drank in spurts of blood while her entranced victim squirmed and sighed and was lost in some sort of bliss.

She only took enough to sate her immediate bloodlust, and after she wiped the two droplets of crimson from the big woman's neck, she used her newfound persuasion to send Lady Kaami on her way, knowing the woman had no choice but to tell

Braiden the truth about where they'd gone, and to send Aurraella word of it, just as soon as he returned.

Chapter Six



This time when Braiden opened his eyes he was in a cottage. The scent of savory cooking filled his nose, and his mouth began to salivate.

“Here,” a girl, whispered. She was very pretty, angelic, even. “Drink. You need food. How long were you wandering around out in the Riverwood? Did you fall from one of Grimm’s ships?” When his eyes winced in confusion, she leaned in close and whispered even quieter, “Did the marauders make you walk the plank?”

He shook his head slightly in the negative. He wasn’t sure what the girl was talking about, he’d never heard of the Riverwood, or anyone named Grimm, but he drank the meaty stew from her cup greedily. He felt it go all the way down to his belly, and he savored it. Reaching nonchalantly to scratch his arse, he realized two things; one, his rash was no longer raw and irritated. It was almost gone completely. Two, he was naked under the thin covers.

The girl must have realized what he was thinking, for her face flushed crimson and after he finished taking the spoonful she was already holding

out, she hurried from the room without a word to him.

“He opened his eyes and drank, Mother,” the young woman called as she exited. She stopped and gave him a glance, despite being flustered. She wasn’t one of the strange females he’d hallucinated about while he was lost. This girl was well rounded, where they’d been thin and wispy. Her hair was dark and wavy, where theirs had been light and straight. Her complexion was honey brown, as if she spent long hours in the sun, where they’d had milky-white skin.

No, she had nothing to do with them. Whoever or whatever they were?

The pocket watch and coins came to his mind, and despite not being clothed, he did his best to wrap the crisp sheet around his waist then crept out of bed to the pile of his things he saw cleaned and folded on an end table.

The room was illuminated by several candles on a dresser. It was modestly furnished, and he was standing on a carpet, so he knew these people were not dirt poor. To his great relief, the coins were in one of his britches pockets with the timepiece.

He pulled it out just to lay eyes on it. The intricate surface shined and reflected the dancing flames of the candles illuminating the room as it swung back and forth.

It was hypnotic.

“Sir,” an older woman, maybe the one who’d clubbed him said with a harrumph. She was flanked

by the girl who fed him, and another woman. It was clear he was looking at three generations of family. The girl had nearly grown into her figure. Like her mother, she would end up curvy and voluptuous. But she would still have her grandmother's scowl.

The mother smiled at him. Her eyes seemed to slide from his gaze down to his midsection. She then gave a sideways glance at the other two, displaying what he took as annoyance.

"He is distressed," she said. "Nanna, why did you hit him so hard? Look at those lumps. Sissy, go fetch a damp cloth and more stew." She came over to him and helped him cover himself back up. He hadn't realized he'd dropped the sheet, but when he grabbed the watch, he must have let go of it.

When she laid him back on the bed, she stayed there, her heavy breasts laying on his chest. She raised them just long enough to resituate the sheet, then leaned over again, letting them jiggle right in his face while she adjusted his pillow.

"There," she smiled. "We will see about the rest of it later, dear." She pulled a blanket up over his groin and let the bulk of the partially folded fabric hide his state of semi-arousal. "Where is that damp cloth, Sissy."

"Coming, Mother," she called from another room.

The mother's hand went to his relaxing member and gave it a seemingly practiced squeeze through all the material piled atop his groin area.

“Keep that out of my daughter, and you can have all of me you like.”

Had he been thinking for himself, he might have declined her then and there, to save any confusion. He had no desire to be with anyone other than Aurraella. But his mind was not his own, and his hand involuntarily reached up and squeezed one of her huge, melon-sized breasts. Her eyes shifted to a look of pleasure, when his fingers found her thick, thumb-sized nipple. Her grip on him tightened a little, but then footsteps approaching caused her to give him a knowing look and stand.

“Here give me the cloth,” she said. The daughter came in. She was just as red-faced as she’d been when she left. His mind was reeling, but when he felt cool wetness on his forehead his thoughts slowed. Looking up he saw the woman mothering over him, her breasts brushing him this way and that.

She pampered him that way, and fed him more stew, until he fell back asleep.

He woke this time, to the feeling of a hot wet mouth on his ear and a hand stroking him. It was dark. Not only were the candles all extinguished, but there was no light trying to get past the curtained window. He squinted trying to make sure it wasn’t the old crone, or the timid girl and didn’t have time to think about his feelings. Once the mother’s hand was under the sheet and had hold of him, he was hers.

She climbed atop him and expertly positioned herself so that when she eased down, he slipped inside. She was hot and wet and the way she wiggled and grinded into him had his mind spinning. The weight of her, and her steady rhythm was almost too much for the bed to handle. Each time she bore down he felt the frame beneath the mattress flex and bend.

It felt amazing, and the way her nipples kept finding his lips kept him from thinking about anything else. Fervently, almost frantic, her pace quickened. The bed creaked with each hump until he was sure it would break, or at the very least wake every creature in the area. Then he was overcome with his release, shuddering under her in waves of sheer pleasure, as she bore down on him.

Her breathing slowed with her movements, and she let out a long slow sigh. Then she leaned down and kissed him softly.

“That was nice,” she whispered.

“How far are we from Seaward City?” he asked out of nowhere.

She looked at him curiously, her expression nearly hidden in the dark. She didn’t answer immediately but climbed off and found her discarded gown on the floor.

“Seaward City? Never heard of Seaward,” she smiled demurely. “Nothing out here but wild pirates, us simple folk and the witch queen’s men.” She pulled her long gown back over her head and

adjusted it after it fell into place. “Until you get back your stamina, you can stay right here with us.”

Who hasn't heard of Seaward City? He wondered, not sure if her reference to his stamina was a slight. *And why would Queen Willa have men this far west?* She was queen of Highwander, not Seaward. Queen Rachel ruled from Lake Ultura to the sea.

He tried to recall his fleeting time on the boat. How far south had they gone while he was out? The memories escaped him, as did any tendrils of reason his mind grasped for. Every thought evaporated before it could form, and he drifted off again, carried into tranquility on a wave of exhausted satisfaction.

“Wake up. Hurry,” the girl shook him. “We must hide.”

“No,” he shook his head, trying to clear it. “I was told not to touch--”

“A ship full of marauders sailed in.” Her finger found his lips and stopped him before he could speak. “The brutes come here for Nanna’s brew, and—well—My mother’s affection.”

“What about you,” he managed. It was still dark.

“My hidey hole is under you.” She pulled the sheet from him with a yank, turned and grabbed his things then slid under the bed out of sight.

He heard men laughing outside. A drunken howl followed by a few catcalls. “What are they

doing here?" he asked her, but she didn't seem to be there anymore.

Wishing he knew where *here* was, he sat up and threw his feet off the bed. It had to be the deep of night still, and his mind had a hard time explaining to his conscious, exactly how he'd ended up wherever he was. He felt vulnerable and exposed, for he was still naked, and he still couldn't figure out where the girl had gone with his things.

"You're always welcome here Captain Wheeler," the girl's mother said loudly, and in a way that he felt the warning in her tone. "We have stew from this evening, and Nanna just brewed another batch of your commander's favorite hooch."

"Captain Wheeler is the worst of them," the girl's voice hissed.

Braiden almost yelled when she grabbed his ankle from under the bed.

"Get down here," she rasped urgently. "He and those ravishers will only kill you. They'll have me for sport until I'm ruined."

He heard the insistent fear in her voice now and dropped flat on his belly. She grabbed his hand, and he barely saw her head and one shoulder awkwardly protruding from a hole in the floor under the bed.

She half pulled him toward her until he was able to work his upper half face down into the space. His heels whacked the bed frame hard as he dropped awkwardly into the cramped area. She

shushed him again as he situated himself cross-legged beside her.

He started to whisper a question but her whole hand pressed hard against his mouth. It was so dark he could barely see, but he could tell she was shaking her head in the negative.

Light from a lantern swept across the room, and he sensed the girl ducking her head below the level of the floor. In the new illumination, he saw she had her hands clamped over her ears and her eyes squeezed shut. Then he heard her mother giggle while one of the men repeated that he was ready for a romp in various terms of phrase.

Braiden chanced a peek by lifting his head to eye level with the floor. He saw the woman's dirty bare feet facing the pirate's well-worn, but expensive looking boots. Then her gown fell to the ground, blocking his view.

It didn't matter. There was nothing to see from the hidey-hole. Wishing he at least had his britches on, he huddled beside the girl. Out of a desire only to comfort her, he put his arm around her and pulled her close.

He decided he had to figure out where he was. Or more importantly, where Seaward City was, before he ended up in a different kind of hole in the ground.

Slowly at first, but then more insistently, the bed creaked and groaned above them. Without uncovering her ears or looking up the girl leaned into

his hug. He responded with a reassuring squeeze and wished again he had his britches on.

At least if the damn bed gives out, he thought. We won't be exposed unless we get crushed.

Devious Arcana

Chapter Seven



Oggy, the boyish young man who'd scared them with the stilts, was either assigned to helping Kifferd and Aurraella prepare for the road, or maybe he'd just taken a liking to her. Either way, not a moment passed when he wasn't around them.

It was alright with her. She liked that he entertained Kifferd, and that he didn't look at her in any unsavory sort of way, at least not yet. She didn't have to try very hard to use her charm on small, minded folk, it came naturally. Oggy didn't stand a chance of having a will of his own around her, but she didn't abuse the situation any more than by getting him to move this or that, or to fetch them water or other simple errands, like retrieving her heavy box of books from the orphanage. Oggy helped Kifferd craft his own pair of stilts and was teaching him how to use them. Next, they were going to make him a costume. At the Summer's Day Festival, Oggy and a few others roamed the lanes and entertained people while looking for easy marks for other less conspicuous members of the troop to pilfer. Among them were trapeze swingers, heavy lifters, and a pair of men who ran on the inside and outside of a round cage that spun them high up into the air.

All the acts were a little dangerous, but the attraction going north with them that interested her most was the magical carousel, and the strange, hooded mages from Xwarda who controlled it.

Jephran and Judden were what they preferred to be called, Judden having a rounder belly and darker hair. Other than Aurraella, they spoke to no one, and they seemed to regret everything they told her while they were still walking away, yet they answered her every question, when she asked them.

Neither she nor Kifferd ever attended the event, but they'd heard all sorts of stories about the yellow eyed elven archers, and the stern Redwolf Knights of Wildermont who kept the peace and settled disputes. More than one tale about the fierce Westland Lion Lord who once destroyed the competition at the great fight called the Brawl found their ears.

Not long after Kifferd was born, the realm was assailed by war. In the western most kingdom of the known lands a rogue wizard killed Westland's king and used the prince and then his own daughter to try and destroy them all. Aurraella's parents died in Xwarda after having them spirited south. Eventually, the High King used his fabled sword to end the wizard's reign of terror and then sent his army of undead soldiers marching right into the sea.

All of that started at one Summer's Day Festival, and from what everyone told her, the event

was a hundred times greater and more fantastic than any words could describe.

Form shifters, Dwarves, feral half men called the Breed who took tolls on the great crossing bridge, and wares of every sort, could be seen at the festival. There were enchanted items, and powerful potions one could have for a price. Men, and women too she supposed. Everyone wagered on everything from throwing horseshoes and javelins, to who could drink the most liquor, or stay dancing the longest. The archery contest interested her greatly. She'd only seen one elf and his yellow, oddly slit eyes unnerved her, because with them, he could see what she was. What was strangest about that interaction was that he'd reacted as if her type was commonplace.

The elves won the archery event every year for some time, and humans were always talking about beating them, but even when the hawk wizard entered, the fair folk took the prize.

There was the Brawl, where men beat each other senseless, and her favorite, though she was told they stopped the event dozens of years ago, over injury, was the dwarf tossing. Giants, mannish folk two and three times as large as big men, came down out of the mountains to attend and barter.

They were the ones who threw the willing dwarves as far as they could out into the swell of the Leif Greyn River near the fairgrounds. Painters, sculptors, and all other sorts congregated freely, and were allowed to do anything they wanted.

There were some rules of course, but those only mattered if the red armored Knights of Wildermont caught you breaking them. She'd heard they had the skulls of wolves mounted on their helms, and that their horses were afraid of nothing.

Then there was the Spire. Otherworldly in origin, some claimed, it rose like a needle out of the valley into the sky, with no doors or windows, and black as pitch. The winner of every event, each year, had their name carved into the base for all to see for eternity.

She wanted to lay down at the foot of it and stare up into the sky and see where it was pointing. In all of time, not one wise king, or powerful wizard had been able to figure out what its purpose was, and that made her want to see it even more.

"Want to see the carousel horses?" Oggy asked from outside her tent. She'd scolded him for entering without her consent once already and was pleased he remembered to announce his presence. "They are having to unload the carousel for they decided we will be travelling to Dakahn on wagons now and not boarding a barge until we reach the Leif Greyn River."

"Possibly," she considered giving them a look. All the tumblers and performers spoke of how amazing they were. If she didn't look for herself, she wouldn't know if they were exaggerating or not. "Where is my brother?"

"He is with Master Hoops, at the barge they are unpacking," he tried to be persuasive. "Come,

Aurraella.” He spoke. “You don’t want to miss this opportunity.”

She allowed him to think he was the reason she was coming with him, but it wasn’t. Something Braiden once told her was stuck in her mind, and with Lady Kaami bound to her will, she and Kifferd could make sure they would be able to afford to partake in anything and everything the festival had to offer.

It bothered her when Oggy took her hand in his, on the way to the barge, but she didn’t pull away. If he kept his affections to a minimum, she would go along. Her brother talked of him as much as he did Braiden now that they’d been there a few days. For that alone she decided she would allow him the thrill of her touch.

She wasn’t sure what sort of creature Master Hoops was but he like her, and her brother was more than he seemed. That left a lot of room open as to how, though and she was curious as to why he had taken Kifferd off alone.

Her worries were wiped away when she saw Kifferd helping the Master Tumbler and a few of the others using buckets and sponges, to wash all the brilliantly colored wooden horses as they came out of their crates. Yesterday Oggy suggested that her job at the fair might be to attend the carousel, for she had no tumbling skills, and Kifferd was already as good on the stilts as any of them. She couldn’t imagine herself hawking goods or announcing acts as they started. It was only fair she pulled her own

weight while among them and spotting easy prey would be even easier from a post like that.

As far as earning any coins, she didn't think they'd need to, not after she and Kifferd talked about one of Braiden's ideas for Master Gramble and his fat greedy wife. Kifferd turned when she was getting near and then came to her. He already knew she wanted to speak with him, so he indicated Oggy to give them some space.

He met her where three of the carousels' mounts were sitting in a row. She traced her hand along the turquoise painted mane of a unicorn and then went to a blue pony with a jeweled mane colored pink.

"Master Gramble has a stash of coins hidden in the orphanage somewhere," she whispered. "I want to take it, because Braiden earned those, and if we never see this festival again, I will regret not having the means for us both to enjoy it properly."

He told me once, Kifferd answered without speaking. *If you keep dragging Oggy along, Braiden might not want to--*

Don't say it, brother. Her look stayed his thoughts, but his smirk told her she should be careful. *Can you sense him? Is he still alive?*

Kifferd closed his eyes and looked as if he might fall asleep standing there, but after a few moments, he opened them and nodded. *I can sense him so he is alive, but I can barely reach him.* He continued speaking softly, but out loud. She felt the fatigue brought on when he reached out like this.

“Yesterday when I felt him, his ambience was far stronger.” He winced, and that alarmed her.

“What does that mean?” she asked louder than she attended. “Is he not well?”

“Farther away,” Kifferd said, fluttering his slowly closing eyelids. “Or maybe unconscious. It’s hard to know from here.”

I will get you excused for the rest of the day. She returned to using her mental voice. *Tonight, we will visit Gramble’s and take back what they stole from Braiden.*

Devious Arcana

Chapter Eight



Braiden woke slowly. He wasn't sure where he was at first, but he knew he'd been sitting cross legged for far too long. Remembering the fear of being impaled by bed splinters or crushed by a fornicating pirate and his lover caused him to panic. He wanted to find Aurraella more than anything but didn't even know where he was.

The girl wasn't there, but Braiden was still naked. Dawn must have come and went for he could see his things well enough to dress. It wasn't as easy as it should have been. His face was still swollen, his brain surely concussed, and his inner thighs ached. He couldn't fully stand until he crawled out from under the bed, and he felt a bit of unease hoping Sissy's mother didn't see him before his britches were pulled up and secured with his old woven belt.

He decided he needed to get a sheath for the dagger. Without one, he might as well keep it in a pack or roll it into some extra clothes. If he kept wearing it just shoved under his waistband, he would eventually slice open his thigh or stab himself trying to walk, or some such.

He wondered about Boreck and Pate. Were they looking for him? Did they think he was dead? He imagined Aurraella was worried beyond reason.

If Boreck told Gramble he was put on a boat and tossed in the sea, there was no guessing how she would react. All he knew was he needed to get back to Seaward City, and since he was fully clothed, he figured he could find one of the women and ask them. He wasn't even sure what was outside. As he thought about it, he didn't remember coming here. But he hadn't forgotten the beating he took from the older woman's stick.

After a few more moments of deliberation, he decided he needed to go find a tree and piss before he did anything else. He hadn't eaten enough to need a privy, and with that thought came a long deep rumbling growl from his belly.

He made his way out into the warm day and relished the feel of the sun on his skin. The cottage was built in an area that looked as if the trees had been hewn down in the middle of dense growth. Lush forest surrounded the clearing and knee-high grass had taken over the cleared expanses.

Sissy was standing near her grandmother, who was sitting on a wooden stool in front of a wash tub scrubbing clothes. When she finished with each garment, she passed it off to her granddaughter who dutifully pinned them to a line strung from the house's eave to a nearby tree. Seeing a few other trees on the other side of the home, he made his way to one of them and relieved himself, before going to ask his questions.

"Uh, your mother said she never heard of Seaward City," he said to the girl as he walked back

over to the washtub. "It's just a day or so upriver. How could she not know?"

It took him all of three heartbeats to realize something was terribly wrong here. Neither of them showed a lick of recognition.

"This side of the river is Seaward," he spread an arm out indicating the land around them. Though he couldn't see the water from where he was, he knew it wasn't far away. He could sense the direction of its flow and could smell the familiar brackishness in the air. "Is Rachel, not your queen?"

"We have no liege, boy." The old woman spat near his feet. "Nor have we heard of your Queen Rachel."

"Nanna," Sissy chided. "Be nice."

Nanna's glare softened, probably because he was dumbfounded. "I was born two days hike north," she explained. "On this side of the river in what Willa the Witch claims is Highwander. She still hasn't sorted that out yet, with the Valleyan horse men, but she will. That one has a wicked streak, and a taste for the flesh of her enemies. Not wise to cross her. Either way, no Queen Rachel rules around here, nor have I heard of a place called Seaward."

Braiden found a little relief learning that at least Highwander was where it was supposed to be. Valleya was a kingdom of horse breeders to the west. He'd seen a map of the realm, or two. The new Kingdom Seat was being built in the Valleyan capital of Dreen. A palace for High King Mikahl to rule over all of them. What could have happened to Seaward?

Entire kingdoms don't disappear in a few days. That wasn't right either. Nanna said she was born right where Seaward City should be. A couple days north, on this side of the river.

"What is there?" He asked Nanna. Realizing his question didn't make much sense, he elaborated. "I mean, is Lake Ultura anywhere near where you were born? Queen Rachel's palace is built right on the island." He would have sat down right there in the grass if his thighs weren't sore from sitting in the hole all night.

"Of course there is a lake, but I don't remember no island," Nanna shook her head and cocked it at him. "So, there isn't no palace." Then she looked at Sissy. "Maybe I did whack him too hard with my cane. Something isn't right with him."

None of it made any sense. His heart was starting to ache for Aurraella. He only wanted to see her beautiful smile and taste her lips again. With the pocket watch and the gold crown in his pocket, he could get them out of Gramble's with plenty to spare. His mind reeled with anxiety and his distress must have shown for Sissy came to him and gave him a nudge before putting an arm around him.

"Are you certain you aren't mistaken?" She asked. "Your head is still swollen from whatever got a hold of you before Nanna did. And her lumps are rising from the old lumps. You barely ate mother's stew, and you've had even less to drink since we- found you in the Riverwood."

Was he certain? He had to think about it, which told him he wasn't. He was famished and quite thirsty. Those things he knew. Maybe if he filled his belly, his mind might clear up a bit. In truth he wanted to bury his head in Sissy's shoulder and cry. The last thing he wanted to do was let go of her warm embrace.

In that moment it was only her kindness that kept him grounded. Without it, he might have taken off running and screaming, waving his hands around like a lunatic. This had to be some sort of fever dream. He was probably still huddled between the barrels of tavern waste, unconscious from the pounding the mark had given him. Or maybe he was still on the ship, tied to a millstone with a corpse. He might have found hope in the revelation that none of this was real, but Sissy squeezed him a little more. The comforting gesture, her warmth, the breeze and even his skin stretched tightly over the knots on his head left no doubt he was really where he was, even though it didn't make sense.

"I was about to be thrown over--" he started to try and explain what he remembered but instead shook his head dejectedly, regretting the action immediately. "I'm sure of where I came from. I grew up at Gramble's Orphanage on the skirts of Seaward City. A few days ago, I ended up on a boat coming down the Southron and I—I—I fell over the rail." He grabbed two handfuls of his hair, understanding he sounded like a raver, or a loon.

"I swam to-- to the bank. It can't be too far from here, where I wound up." He crossed his arms across his chest without disturbing the girl's arm around his waist. "At least I think that's what happened. I met a hummingbird who turned into a girl. She left me a pear."

"Nanna, you might have knocked a poor orphan boy senseless," Sissy squeezed him again and then held him at arm's length. "He says he saw fairies in the Southron Riverwood."

"That 'ent the Pixie River," Nanna returned. "The fae stay close to the witch."

"Look Nanna, he is shaking and—and—Oh no."

Braiden fell toward her. Sissy wasn't strong enough to keep him from finding the turf altogether, but she managed to keep him from collapsing like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

On his back, looking mindlessly at the sparsely clouded blue expanse above, he wanted to scream, but knew he shouldn't. The sun was on its way out of the sky. He'd only climbed from under the bed a few moments earlier. His stomach grumbled again, louder than before.

"He needs food and water, Nanna," Sissy said again. "He needed to be resting in a bed, not sleeping all morning in the hole."

"Well, all that is probably true, dear," Nanna stood and looked down at him. "We may need the wheelbarrow to get him back inside, though. Your mother should return from the river market soon."

She will help you get him back into that bed, I'm certain. Until then warm the rest of the stew and bring a bowl out here to him."

Braiden could hear them, as well as men shouting in the distance. He tried to sit up but couldn't. Sissy was right. He was famished and thirsty, and he couldn't get a single thought to stay in his battered head.

He heard the men again. This time they were closer. Nanna and Sissy heard them, too. It was hard to be sure, but they sounded excited, as if they were fighting, or fleeing something.

That thought completed itself in his head, and this time he managed to sit up when he ordered his body to do so.

"What is all that ruckus?" Nanna asked. "What are they hollering about?"

Braiden saw one, two, then a dozen men clad in mismatched sailors garb emerge from the forest in a disjointed rush. A few of them were firing arrows into the deeper woods behind them.

"Sissy, you need to go back under." Nanna's tone told Braiden, at least, that she wasn't asking. "Hurry before they get too close."

"Nanna," she met Braiden's concerned gaze as she spoke to her grandmother. "What about his stew? He's had but a pear and three bites I gave him, in several days." She looked at the group coming out of the trees and cocked her head. "What are they running from?"

“They aren't going to bury their swords between his legs, like they will yours!” Nanna snapped. Her tone brooked no argument. “Get in your hole and stay there. I'll take care of this one.”

“Come,” Sissy reached a hand down to help Braiden to his feet. “You said they were going to throw you overboard. Come with me. You're in no shape to do anything but sleep.”

Sissy was her Nanna's granddaughter, for she didn't allow Braiden to refuse her offer, or her grandmother to send her off. Nanna scowled and grabbed the hand she hadn't, and the two women pulled him to his feet. Once upright he was able to make his way back inside, but he didn't crawl under the bed after Sissy. Using the wall to keep from falling again, he peered out the door, looking to see what was happening.

From behind the frantically approaching group, behind the trees even, something went up into the air. It grew larger and larger as it rose and then began to fall. No, it was coming closer and closer he realized, arcing its way through the sky toward them.

For a moment he thought it might make it all the way to the house. Looking at the now scattering group racing in their general direction, he winced.

He still couldn't figure out what it was, but he knew where it was going to land. Before he could step out and warn the men, Sissy yanked him back in the doorway.

The object looked like a barrel keg.

He understood then, and turned, lifting Sissy off her feet. He carried her on rubbery legs back into the bedroom, and half threw her toward the bed.

Outside, the powder keg impacted the ground. A sound as loud as any he'd ever heard erupted. Earth and branches, as well as a few human limbs went twisting through the air, and Braiden was thrown into Sissy. They both half-slid, half-belly crawled under the mattress.

“Where is my Nanna?” Sissy asked with tears streaming down her pretty face. “Is she okay? Did you see her?”

Braiden shook his head in the negative. He started to tell her that everything would be okay, but another wave of force washed seemingly right through him. The second blast impacted the front of the house. The powerful concussion pounded the breath out of his body and terminated his senses. Unable to hear or see, all he could do was huddle protectively over Sissy, in the hidey hole.

Devious Arcana

Chapter Nine



Debris clattered down around them, but he saw nothing. He rubbed his eyes and the pressure from his fingers on his lids caused bright splotches to appear. He held his hand out, trying to see it, but couldn't.

"I can't see," Sissy whispered from underneath him. "What happened?"

He heard her, but her voice sounded like it was coming from two rooms away. *What did happen?* His mind reeled with confusion and uncertainty.

She worked herself out from under him and let out a sigh that he could barely make out but still sounded like relief to Braiden. He still couldn't see, but then the girl braced herself with a hand on his shoulder and stood. A large section of the wall board shifted when her head lifted it.

A bit of moonlight found them. He stood beside her and helped her shove the debris out of their way. A half-moon was high overhead. It was bright and yellow, and the stars shone brightly in the cloudless sky around it. A large section of forest was burning in the near distance, and what looked like

half a dozen or so bodies were strewn this way and that between them and the blaze.

The house was gone, not much more than a pile of rubble with a crater large enough to hold a carriage where the entry door had been. Sissy was crying softly, and she found his hand and squeezed it.

“Nanna,” she yelled. “NaaaaNaaaa!”

Braiden heard her better this time, but his ears rang with a strange echoing reverberation. He shook his head to clear it and again regretted doing so. A throbbing wave of pain and dizziness washed over him. He still had lumps from the mark, and knots from Nanna’s cane all over his swollen melon. He leaned away, overtaken by the urge to vomit but only managed to heave up foul tasting bile. He heaved again and his head felt as if it might explode.

He knew he needed sustenance, and badly.

“NaaaNaaa!” Sissy called again, and then she let go of his hand and hurried away, skirting the huge new hole in the earth.

Braiden saw what she did, and it wasn’t good. He drew as many deep breaths as he could, trying to clear his addled mind. A crumpled form was laying at the far edge of the crater, and as Sissy neared it her pitiful whine cut right through his muffled hearing.

“Oh Nanna,” she fell beside the unmoving body. “Oh Nanna,” she repeated as she leaned down and then raised right back up. The noise that left her this time resounded clearly in his ears. He heard the

anguish and fear clearly, but there was something else in the sound. Something he didn't expect from the timid girl. It was rage.

He figured Nanna was dead. He and Sissy would have been too had they not made it into the hidey hole. He made his way over to them, not sure what to do. His senses seemed almost normal now, the fresh air and raw emotion from Sissy, cleared most of the cobwebs away. He knelt beside her and put an arm around her again.

Nanna looked at peace, save for the trickle of blood trailing from the corners of her mouth. Sissy cradled her grandmother's body in her lap, rocking back and forth, sobbing.

Braiden wasn't sure what to do. Looking around he saw two people carrying a lantern moving from body to body down by the growing section of burning trees. He had no idea who they might be, or if he should be concerned. He wasn't sure of anything anymore. Of course, he had to go upriver and see if Seaward City was there, but beyond that he was as lost as he'd ever been.

"I have to find my mother," Sissy stood and followed Braiden's eyes to the men. "Who are they?"

"I have no idea," Braiden responded.

"You! Hey, you!" a deep commanding voice shouted from behind them. His accent was thick, but familiar to Braiden. "By order of Queen Willa, stay put!"

A handful of men on horseback entered the clearing with him. Illuminated by the raging forest fire and two torches held aloft by the riders not training arrows on them, Braiden could see them well.

The one who'd called out eased his mount forward. He had a sword drawn and showed little fear as he moved to the far side of the destroyed house. Sissy moved close to Braiden and hid her face against his shoulder.

"Don't let them have me," she whispered, the fear leaking into him from her trembling body.

"The men of Willa's Blackword are honorable," Braiden responded uncertainly.

"Men are only honorable to other men," she corrected. He could barely make out the words, and might have taken the time to consider them, if the situation was different. She gave him another quick squeeze and then turned and pointed toward the orange red flames behind them.

"From the bank to the Riverwood to Red Creek is Hanora Guntright's property, and I am her granddaughter." She called over her shoulder. "What have you done to us? Why are *you* here? They are the trespassers." She pointed again.

"There," one of the other riders aimed the brand toward the men with the lantern. "Come Lonny," he heeled his horse around the destroyed house, past Braiden and Sissy.

One of the three men holding a drawn bow followed him. Braiden held the gaze of the leader, who looked unsure of what to do next.

“Are you harboring any marauders?” he asked, looking around the destruction, but still following the course of the two men now galloping toward the flames.

Sissy turned and glared at the horsemen. “Grimm and his pirates only come around here to steal my grandmother’s wares, and bed my mother.” She spat. “Look what you’ve done.”

“This was not our doing. It was Grimm’s fargin beast,” he shot back, but something happening with his men drew his attention. “The gods be damned,” he cursed. “I hope it isn’t here.”

The way his eyes grew wide caused Braiden to look, too. He wasn’t sure what he was seeing, but the sound of the remaining riders galloping past them toward the Riverwood was a relief. He saw it then, and was unable to move, transfixed by the size of the giant mannish thing emerging from an area of forest that wasn’t completely engulfed in fire.

Rippling with bulky muscles, the huge creature hurled most of a tree across the night like a javelin. It roared and backhanded the closest rider. Man, and steed went rolling violently into the burning trees, sending a bright shower of sparks high into the night. Silhouetted by the new flare of illumination Braiden saw the tree the thing hurled. The riders hurrying toward the fire apparently

didn't, for the trunk crashed into them crushing two of them and sending the others sprawling.

"Here it is!" A new voice came from behind them. "This way!"

"We need to end it right here," another called.

More men, some on horseback, others on foot ignored Braiden and Sissy on their way around the destroyed house to confront the monster. Braiden was unable to peel his eyes from the scene. Holding one of the writhing horses as if it were a bread roll, the giant raised it high then slammed it to the ground.

Cherry embers and ashy soot fell from the sky slowly, like snowflakes. There might have been a hundred men racing into the madness. It was hard to tell. Arrows streaked upward, some stuck true, but they had little effect. Like prickly thorns, they were but an inconvenience to the destructive giant.

Sissy pulled him by the hand and dragged him from the openness of the homesteads clearing. Braiden gathered himself when he saw she was not leading him away from the wild creature, but toward it. A part of the Riverwood that wasn't engulfed, was also free of men, and he was glad she angled them that way.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked. The dagger in his belt jabbed him good enough to make him yelp and he pulled it and almost tossed it away. Thinking better of it, he put it in his teeth for a moment and had the sudden desire to make sure his

things were with him. He patted his pockets and was relieved his coins, and the pocket watch were still there.

“The river market is where mother went,” Sissy used the hand that wasn’t dragging him to wipe away her tears, but didn’t slow their pace even when they ran full into the forest.

Braiden put the dagger in his free hand and let Sissy pull him along. Behind them, screams of pain and men shouting orders could be heard under the greater noise of crackling wood and the roaring monster. The further into the undergrowth they went, the less light reached them. Sissy didn’t slow though, at least not until something came crashing into the trees right in their path.

Several branches as big as a man’s arm were cracked away from their hosts as the weight of another horse fell through the canopy. It spun and flipped and then thumped into the dirt with a sickening bone shattering thump, landing right where they would have been had she not stopped.

“Help me,” a voice came from above. “Gods be damned, I’ve been impaled.”

Braiden followed the leaves slowly floating down from the disturbed upper branches and saw him. Before Sissy’s eyes found the man, Braiden covered them.

“Don’t look,” he said firmly. “He is done.”

It was a sight he knew he might not ever forget, a man with a stream of blood pouring from his mouth, wide eyed and frantic, knowing death

was inevitable. A broken limb jutted out from his guts, holding him three stories above the forest floor. It was a terrible end, and who knew how long he might live before mercy finally found him.

Boreck once told him about a few battles he'd been in. He mentioned how the worst wounds a man could take were not the ones that killed, but the ones that wouldn't let a man die. He found he missed Boreck and his cobble wisdom, almost as much as he missed Aurraella. It frustrated him to anger that he couldn't figure out why these people knew nothing of one of the mightiest trading kingdoms in existence.

Another glance up, and Braiden thought maybe the gods were with the poor man, for his eyes had shut and his head was lolled to the side.

He tried not to think as he followed Sissy. They couldn't hold hands now. The undergrowth was too thick and there was very little light. More than once he was whacked across the face with a stinging swat from a limb the girl forced her way past. He had to fall back to the point where he could no longer make out her form, to avoid the painful lashes.

They went on like that for a short while, and then another huge fire could be made out through the growth up ahead. Before long he saw the unmistakable sheen of water reflecting moonlight, and then they came out of the woods completely.

Here was the river, wide and powerful, flowing away to their right, but she went left toward

the source of the inferno. They were moving along the bank, almost completely in shadow, until they rounded a bend and were washed over by a wave of intense heat and firelight.

A ship was engulfed in roaring fire, and a second ship was partially ablaze beside it. Another vessel, and maybe a fourth were tied up beside them and men were scrambling along a shabby wooden dock, and up in the riggings. Some were trying to unload cargo; others were hauling buckets of water trying to save the ships not already consumed.

“She’s loose. The charger is away,” a man yelled over the din. “Get the lines clear.”

“Aye Commander Grimm,” came a response. “What about the flyer?”

“Save as much cargo and scavenge as much brass as you can,” the commander returned.

Braiden couldn’t see Commander Grimm, or figure where he was in the mayhem, but he must have been a force because man after man ran into the holds of the burning ships as if they weren’t about to be ashes on the riverbed.

“Follow me,” Sissy whispered. She eased them against the trees and kept moving toward the commotion. There were dozens, no, maybe a hundred or more men and a few women scurrying around madly. It was chaos.

A hundred paces up the dock was a cluster of small shops and a few larger buildings. A battle was raging along the bank and for the first time Braiden

saw there was yet another ship, this one upriver, but not moving with the flow. The flag it flew was familiar, at least. The plain white field with a horizontal sword in black showed it was Queen Willa's men battling the marauders. From the vessel's bow, a flaming harpoon launched and went arcing into the rigging of one of the ships not yet afire.

"Where are we going?" Braiden asked.

"My mother was here at the markets," she looked at him, a mixture of sorrow, fear, and yet a glimmer of hope reflected in her firelit eyes. "I know where she may be holed in."

Braiden figured Sissy's hidey hole wasn't the only one of its kind, so he continued after her. Before they were close enough to be detected, she huddled in the undergrowth and pointed at a building with a large, open, canopied area directly in front of it.

"They sell Nanna's hooch here," she gave him a look that conveyed her determination, as well as her uncertainty.

He didn't like the idea that they would have to emerge from the thickets and be exposed, but with all the commotion around them, he doubted anyone would stop them.

He was about to charge out and simply sprint across, but a sudden light radiated upward like a beam. It came from a building a few doors up the lane toward the battle. The beam unfolded, like a blooming flower, only shafts of stark white

luminance opened out instead of petals. In the center of it all stood a robed and hooded form.

“That’s Grimm’s wizard Kizzon Ahlm,” Sissy said. “Now is the time, while all eyes are on him.”

She didn’t wait for his response. She bolted out of the cover and didn’t bother to look back to see if he was following.

Braiden chased after her but didn’t stop watching the mage.

Kizzon Ahlm reached out towards the docks. Silver-blue streaks shot from his hands. The wavering strands of energy wrapped around the mast and sails of one of the burning vessels and then swirled down around the hull into the water, and outward.

Around his feet Braiden felt the river water churn. He was twenty paces from the bank, only a moment ago, but here came a wave that splashed hard against his body, nearly pushing him over.

Was the water rising? It was, but only around him and the ships.

A few more heartbeats passed. River water swirled up into a ropey arm and bashed itself into the riggings. Water splattered and sprinkled everywhere, like rain, and the fire on one of the ships was snuffed out. The wizard looked as if he was about to repeat the act but suddenly stopped and jerked his head toward Braiden.

Braiden froze in the sloshing knee-deep surf. Flames rose high above his head and sparks and pieces of burning cloth were floating through the air.

Men were screaming orders, and the loud sound of splintering timbers came from the docks. Around him the water was swiftly receding.

The wizard was looking right into his soul. Braiden couldn't see his eyes, but a slow smile crept across the mage's face. Kizzon Ahlm's right hand pointed at Braiden, and the smile turned into a snarl.

The sensation of having someone else inside his mind abruptly ended when he was tackled by someone way too large to be Sissy. The place he'd just been standing was splattered with a blob of strange yellow glowing liquid. The man who'd saved Braiden hadn't avoided the shimmering fluid; he looked at Braiden helplessly. He screamed and fell writhing on the muddy road. Tendrils of smoke rose from his blackening flesh and his pained expression was slowly overrun by dark veiny lines that bubbled and pulsed as they spread under his cheeks then across his forehead.

Sissy yanked Braiden under the canopy and out of the wizard's view, just before a second splash of the vile stuff splattered in the street. A few ducking, running strides later, they were behind a bar. Sissy cursed and fumbled around until she found a small piece of rope on the floor and then pulled it. A hatch opened and down a ladder they went.

Chapter Ten



Sissy's mother was in the large room beneath the tavern with three others. Two women who looked like sisters, and an older man who might have been their father. She grabbed her daughter, and gave Braiden a look that was uncertain, yet held a hint of her attraction in it.

"What happened to Earlo?" one of the women asked, hopeful. Sissy turned and shook her head. "Grimm's wizard got him."

The woman sobbed into her sister, leaving Braiden unsure of what to do next. It wasn't lost on him that Earlo just saved him from a similar fate.

On a table in the corner was a half-eaten block of cheese, some hard bread, and an open bottle of wine. While Sissy explained what transpired at their home, he smiled weakly at the older man then, realizing he still had his dagger clenched in his hand, he started cutting and eating slice after slice of the savory cheese.

Sissy's mother's name turned out to be Dayna, and Sissy's name wasn't just a random nickname, it was Cecilia. Calling her Sissy made sense. It turned out the man who died saving him,

wasn't kin to the old barkeep, but a long and trusted employee.

Braiden felt he needed to be away from here. Already someone lost their life trying to help him. The idea of it assailed him to the point he had to struggle to eat despite being famished. He didn't like it one bit. None of it. He had to figure out his situation, and then the idea these people might know more than Nanna and Sissy came to him.

"Sir," Braiden got the man's attention. He looked worried but not frightened. Braiden wondered how often Grimm's pirates had battles here. After only a moment's consideration he knew it happened often enough for everyone around to need a hole to climb into. "Do you know how to get to Seaward City?"

"He's convinced we are in a land called Seaward, not Highwander." Dayna said over Sissy's head, which was buried in her bosom. "It's nonsense, I know but he brought Cecilia to me unharmed. We should help him, if he can be helped."

"She spoke of you earlier," the man said to Braiden. "Said you knew of Highwander and Willa the Witch."

Braiden introduced himself, and learned the man was named Paddon and the two women were indeed his daughters. He then told him as much as he thought would help Paddon help him, but nothing seemed to make sense of his madness. "I

wish I had a map of the realm,” Braiden finally heaved a sigh of frustration. “This is pointless.”

“I have a map, but it is older than my father,” Padden offered, and went to a chest. As he rummaged through it, Braiden ate more cheese. The wine in the bottle was so watered it no longer had any sort of effect from the alcohol, so Braiden sipped, trying hard to not just down it all.

Paddon dug through the chest until Braiden grew dejected. Sore and still hungry, he paced around trying to calm his building panic. While standing beside the ladder that went up to the hatch, he heard footsteps above and shushed everyone.

He could hear voices but was unable to make out what they were saying so he climbed up and got his head near the opening.

“...don’t care if it makes any sense, Harrol,” a voice chided. “The wizard says find him, so we find him.”

“But who is him, and why would he be in an empty tavern?”

“Harrol, you don't question orders. That’s why they are called orders.”

“Our ships burning, Vic,” the one called Harrol argued. “Grimm is under sail in his other schooner, with all our shares of loot. The witch is killing us three at a time, and we got no way out of here. If Grimm ordered, you to sleep in a shark’s belly would you do it?”

“I guess you're making sense,” Vic agreed. “Clearly, he isn't in here, unless...”

Braiden heard the footsteps growing closer. It sounded like they were behind the bar. He had a bit of hope until a board creaked right above him. Fearing they were about to be discovered; he dropped from the ladder and whispered a warning to the others. It came too late though, for the hatch flew open and a thick well-muscled arm reached down and grabbed him by the hair so fast he was got.

For a moment he was lifted off his feet, but he hooked an arm in the ladder, twisted and used the leverage to get a foot on a rung. Not sure what to do, he reached up and grabbed a handful of what he hoped was beard hair. Before the man could pull away, Braiden wrapped his fingers fully around the bristle and dropped back to the floor forcing the man to lean his entire upper body down into the hatch to avoid having his chin hairs ripped out. From there Braiden yanked again and sat down. Then he had to roll out of the way to avoid being crushed.

He was surprised when Sissy pressed his dagger into the bearded man's neck deep enough to draw blood. Without thinking Braiden understood he needed to stop the other man from being able to tell everyone where they were hiding. He started up the ladder but was met by the man poking his head down to look.

If he had his dagger, he could have shoved the blade right through the man's wide-open

mouth, but he didn't. This one didn't have enough beard to grab hold of either. Before he pulled away, Braiden grabbed the collars of his blouse with both hands. This time when he dropped onto the floor the only thing that followed him was the material that ripped away. Before he could regain his feet, the hatch slammed shut and the sound of something heavy being dragged over it came.

"Fargin bastard just left me," the man under the dagger groaned. "Go on kill me. That wizard will do worse to me if you don't."

"Then why serve him?" Sissy asked.

"Bah!" was his only response.

"Is there another way out?" Braiden asked Dayna first, then Paddon.

Neither immediately responded, but then Paddon shook his head in the negative and moved to ease his now sobbing daughters as if this was the end for them.

Braiden took in the way the hatch was built. There was a slot for a bar that could keep the door from being easily opened from above. Looking around he didn't see anything that might fit.

"Here," Dayna handed him a piece of heavy iron. "They'll have to tear the building down to get to us, but if they try, eventually they will succeed."

Braiden slid the bar into place. He could tell a couple men with axes could get in quickly if they wanted to.

"I don't want to end up a ship's whore," one of the women whined. "What will we do?"

“You’ll need to keep us out of it, Dayna, please,” Paddon said. What started as a command ended more like a plea. “It matters not who your mother is now.”

“Nanna is dead,” Sissy shot at him.

“The wizard only wants him,” the bearded man under Sissy’s knife pointed. “Give him up and no one needs to know you helped him.”

Braiden knew he meant him, and he knew if he wanted to spare these kind people from his terrible fate, he would have to give himself up.

“We won’t just give up,” Sissy looked to her mother for agreement. “We need to think of something.”

“What would you have us do?” Dayna dropped her gaze.

“I don’t know, mother” she pulled the dagger from the bearded man’s neck and tossed it to Braiden. “But he saved me, and we owe him.”

“You owe him,” the sobbing woman said.

Braiden made sure their prisoner wasn’t going to pounce now that his life wasn’t under threat, but he kept the dagger in his hand just in case. He’d been left for dead though, so he doubted he would do more than act like he’d been defeated down here to avoid scrutiny in the end.

“Is there any more food down here?” Braiden asked. “Let me fill my belly and think for a bit.”

There was more cheese and some dried meat, and several bottles of watered and untouched

wine. Braiden avoided the potent stuff but was glad the women, save for Sissy had some.

A long, low rumbling vibration of some sort shook the underground room.

“Wizardry,” Sissy hissed.

“I’ll tell you where Grimm’s treasure is hidden if you give me a bottle,” Harrol, the bearded captive offered. Braiden agreed, knowing whatever the marauder told him would be a lie. He gave him the good stuff too, hoping he would drink it all and not be a bother.

Braiden listened to Harrol explain how to find the place where a ship’s hold full of jewels and golden crowns was buried east of there, along the Pixie River. “Billard Waltin,” the bearded thug said, as if he’d recited the name a thousand times or more. “Son, Father, and Husband. May he rest here undisturbed.”

Braiden didn’t try and correct Harrol when he revealed a stash that size was hidden under a single grave in the cemetery near where the river meets the sea.

There was no way the amount of wealth he described would fit under a whole graveyard, much less a single coffin.

Before long Sissy was sitting close beside him. He liked her forceful side. Long after Harrol stopped rambling, Braiden fumbled through his things and retrieved the pocket watch.

“What’s that?” Sissy asked with what seemed like genuine curiosity.

Her head was on his shoulder, and she was leaning into him. It was nice, he decided. Were he not in love with Aurraella, he would have no qualms getting to know her better. The idea he might never see Seaward City or Aurraella again wasn't lost to him either. If he were forced to leave it all behind and stay here, he could imagine making a life with her.

He pushed the button atop the timepiece which caused the lid to open. Sissy traced her finger over the edge of the lid and oohed.

Braiden saw the hands hadn't moved since last time he'd had it out, so he fumbled with the scored ring. It hadn't twisted and tightened the spring last time, so it hadn't been keeping time.

This time he only turned the ring the way the hands of the clock turned and was disappointed when it would do no more than make a single click. He tried and tried to get the little thing to turn more but it just wouldn't go.

Above them something exploded. The room didn't shake this time, but a roar as savage as anything he ever heard came after it.

Sissy put her hand around his which caused the lid to snap shut. She raised her lips to his cheek and gave him a soft kiss. "No matter what happens," she kissed his cheek again. "I wanted to thank you for saving me and helping me find my mother."

He smiled and put an arm around her drawing her even closer. She hugged him back and nestled her head on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry about your Nanna,” he kissed the top of her head and slipped the watch back in his pocket.

Only Paddon was still awake. He hadn’t found the map, and things from the trunk were strewn about. He had his head in his hands and was sobbing now, probably consumed with worry for his daughters.

Braiden decided to allow himself a rest because there was no doubt someone, be it a powerful wizard or an angry giant, would be trying to extract him from their hiding place soon enough. His hunger was sated on little bits of dried meat and a lot of cheese, but it was enough to cause his eyelids to grow heavy. He would need his wits about him to survive the inevitable encounter, he knew without a doubt.

Closing his eyes he relaxed against Sissy and let exhaustion take him into slumber.

Devious Arcana

Chapter Eleven



Kifferd, to Aurraella's dismay told Oggy what they were going to do. She was angry to no end about it, but now the three of them were hiding near the orphanage's entry gate in the dark, waiting for Pate to retire to his own abode down the lane.

There were no girls for him to ogle, yet he was still staring into the yard where they skipped rope and took turns on the swing as if they were all out in their underclothes or some such. She wanted to go ask him about Braiden or throttle him and find what his perversion really was, but didn't want to foul up their plan.

After what seemed like an eternity he finally walked off. "Go Oggy," she kissed his cheek for good measure, "Get Lady Kaami to come outside."

"The fat one, right?" He asked again but nodded that he knew who she was and didn't really need an answer.

After he was off, she turned to her brother trying hard not to let her fury get control of her. *Why in all the heavens and hells did you bring him, Kifferd?*

The grinning smirk he returned nearly caused her to slap his face and knowing this, his defiant expression faded.

We can only trust who we know we can trust, he answered.

It sounded exactly like something Braiden would say. She could still sense his attitude, but it made sense. If they were going to be travelling for the rest of the summer with him so close, they needed to know.

We do know old Pate can be trusted; Kifferd went on. *After we are done here, we should talk to him.*

The aggravated sound of Lady Kaami's voice found their sharp ears, and Aurraella stood and jogged toward it. All she needed to do was make eye contact and her natural charm would make sure the woman wanted nothing more than to please her.

"I still don't understand, boy," Lady Kaami looked up to see Aurraella approaching. The older woman's lids dropped into a more seductive gaze, and she licked her lips.

"Go back to Kifferd and wait there, Oggy," Aurraella commanded.

Once he was gone, Aurraella reached up and squeezed one of the plump woman's breasts. She wasn't attracted to Lady Kaami, but there was no doubt she was turned on by how total her control over the simple-minded woman was.

“Go fetch me the coins Master Gramble has holed away.” Aurraella licked her lips seductively. “Bring them to me at once.”

Lady Kaami shuddered and after biting her bottom lip, she turned and walked away.

Aurraella waited for longer than it should have taken, growing more nervous with each draw of breath. She was about to run back to the others when she heard the woman returning. When Master Gramble peered out the door instead of his wife, she wasn't sure what to do.

“What have you done to my wife?” he asked angrily.

Before she could answer his meaty hand grabbed her by the hair and yanked her inside. He slung her into a wall and then held her off the floor so he could meet her eyes with his.

It was a terrible mistake.

As soon as she saw into his green orbs, she used her knee to rub against his crotch. He dropped her immediately, then fell to his knees.

“Please,” he begged. “Please.”

Bring me the coins, Aurraella ordered Lady Kaami with her mind. She wasn't sure if she could communicate with a simpleton that way, but she had to do something. She hadn't sunk her teeth into Master Gramble, so her control over him was limited. Besides, the thought of putting her mouth on any part of him disgusted her. Feeding from his like was the last thing she wanted to do.

To her surprise Master Gramble stood, “As you wish.” He said and turned.

“Not you,” her words stopped him.

From deeper in the structure one of the younger children was crying. She was relieved when the big woman returned to the entry lugging a leather sack the size of her huge head.

Help me Kiff, she voiced with her mind. Bring Oggy.

Her companions opened the door and were at her side in moments. “Take the sack, Oggy.” she said. “Take it to my tent and don’t get caught.”

She started to have Kifferd tie them up or some such, but her brother must have sensed what Master Gramble did to her.

He shoved her and Lady Kaami out the door and slammed it behind himself. The sounds that erupted were gruesome at best. Beyond the roar of his raw power, the calls and screams of terrified orphans and Lady Jaani’s shrill squeal filled the night.

Aurraella wanted to run away, but Lady Kaami was in front of her, waiting anxiously to be told what to do, and Kifferd was still inside. She wouldn’t leave without her brother, yet his voice found her and was full of raw power and tempered with the sort of control it took years to master.

Pate might know something, Kifferd told her. Go ask him what you must and return to our tent.

What about you, she asked in return, but the strength of the power he allowed her to feel was

overwhelming and let her know he was in full control of his situation.

Devious Arcana

Chapter Twelve



The sound of something heavy being shifted overhead brought Braiden and Sissy both out of slumber with a start. As soon as he opened his eyes, he knew something was amiss. Sissy seemed just as disturbed by their unexpected surroundings.

“Where is my mother?” She asked.

Braiden didn’t know the answer. He and Sissy were the only ones in the room, and nothing about the space was the same. There was no wine rack and all the bottles they’d emptied earlier were gone. All the old books and parchments Paddon had taken out of the chest, and even the chest itself was missing, too. Where the table and cheese once sat was a cabinet, and beside it was a fancy wooden desk.

“How could--” she asked but they both saw a pair of fat bare legs stepping down a staircase that started where the trap door hatch had been and ended right where Padden’s daughters and Dayna had been clutching each other while passing their bottle back and forth.

“Wizardry?” Sissy was trembling.

Braiden could not explain it. Everything was different. The humidity from the previous night, the lack of smokey char filling the air, even the way the woman’s dress was hemmed at her knees instead of

her ankles, and the odd look of her squared off shoes, seemed wrong. The only thing more surprising than their current situation was the look on the woman's face when she was far enough below the upper floor level to see them.

"Dikky!" she yelled. "Help me Dikky!" Then to Braiden and Sissy, "How'd the two of you get down in my cellar? Who are you? What are you after? We don't keep our coins around here."

"What gives woman," a man, most likely Dikky, came stomping down toward them. "What in the seven hells of Doon?" He looked at them, clearly perplexed. "It was locked up when I left yesterday. I swear it."

"It was locked when I just came down," the woman gave him a look that showed she might not believe him.

"Ma'am, Sir," Braiden stammered. "We don't want anything from you. If you'll answer us just one question, we will be on our way."

"Ask it boy," Dikky said.

"Where are we?" Braiden asked, unsure if he wanted to hear the answer. He felt Sissy holding him tighter than the night before.

"You are in the basement of my trading house," the woman snapped. "How'd you get down here?"

"What kingdom are we in," Braiden asked, being more specific with his query.

"You're in Seaward, boy." Dikky's tone was sharp.

He heard Sissy draw a sharp breath and make a sound that signaled her confusion. Only yesterday her grandmother was killed, and now her mother, was... was... somewhere?

The man was clearly as scared as he and Sissy were. Dicky's wife didn't look so scared as she was angry.

"Answer my wife." Dicky managed.

"I don't know how we ended up here," he shrugged sheepishly. "But I'll give you a copper, if you let us on our way."

"Were they rummaging?" Dicky asked his wife.

She shook her head in the negative. "Looked like they just woke up. They's dressed like scavengers or beggars."

"Give me the copper and we will discuss it."

Braiden reached into his pocket making sure not to accidentally grab the golden crown or the silver. He pulled the two coppers out, opened his palms, and frowned. "It's half of everything I have." He shrugged. "But a deal is a deal."

He tossed one of the coins to the woman, who caught it deftly. She gave it a look and then handed it up to Dicky. "One of them older ones."

"These are worth one and a half of King Balinger's newer coppers." Dicky grinned, then motioned for his wife to follow him up, so they could leave.

Braiden squeezed Sissy's hand before she could ask the question he saw forming on her lips.

She could ask whatever she wanted, after they were up the stairs and no longer trapped. He had a dozen questions to ask, too. Starting with, who was King Balinger?

Emerging from the stairs Braiden half expected the strange wizard to be waiting on them. He saw nothing that looked familiar. The only thing about the place he remembered from the night before was the bar. It was still there only not being used to serve drinks and store bottles.

“It’s different,” Sissy said quietly so that only he could hear. “And look.” She pointed at the area beyond the building’s open door. “The canopy is gone.”

“Have you ever heard of Queen Rachel?” Braiden asked Dicky and his wife. “Or of High King Mikahl?”

Both shook their heads in the negative.

This was surprising because only a few summers back, the High King and the great wizard Hyden Hawk fought a raging demon that tried to destroy Xwarda, the kingdom seat of Highwander, which was, or was supposed to be a few days ride north, just on the other side of the river. A few summers before that, one of Westland’s rogue wizards marched a horde of undead into the same city. Queen Rachel’s mighty warriors, Seawards finest men, fought alongside the ranks of Highwander’s Blacksword to defeat the enemy in both instances.

“How long have you owned this place?” Sissy asked.

Braiden liked the question.

“Seven years now,” the woman answered while her husband nodded agreement. “Had to fix a lot of things.”

“Braiden,” Sissy hooked her arm in his. “Would you please escort me to my Nanna’s place.”

Braiden could have asked a few more questions but could feel her trembling. He wanted to see what remained of her house anyway. And what of Nanna’s body? He was smart enough not to mention that pondering to Sissy. He thanked the couple and walked beside her arm in arm to the door. He wanted to get to Seaward City as soon as he could get Sissy settled, just to see if--

“Have you heard of Seaward City?” the question rolled out of his mouth.

“That I have,” Dicky nodded. “Supposed to get the bridge and the main structure finished by next Autumn.” He grinned. “It’ll make my trading go a lot smoother once they finish the waterways and get all the barges out of the way.”

Braiden understood then, at least part of his strange situation. He was in the same place, or very close to where he swam ashore after jumping ship. The first time he messed with the pocket watch was to dry it, that very night.

The next day is when he saw the strange hummingbirds who gave him a pear and said he had ambiance, whatever that was. He faintly recalled

some huge creature squashing him before the hummingbirds led him-- where? He wasn't sure, but it was the place where he was assaulted by Nanna and hauled to that squeaky bed.

Looking around, he saw the dock the burning ships had been tied to. It was a little farther away than before, and no ships were there. He could tell by the coloring of the wood that it was a fairly new construction.

Something stirred in his mind. The marauder who fell into the cellar with them and his tale of booty hidden in a grave itched at the back of his brain. He had no idea how much time passed between yesterday and today, but clearly time had passed. A dozen years? A hundred? More?

He decided if he made it back to his time, he'd study the history of the kingdoms until he knew how to better figure these sorts of things out. He grinned deeply, despite the odd situation he was starting to get a grasp of. Running the cobbles for Boreck taught him a lot about ways to make a coin or two. He decided it didn't matter what time he was in.

Maybe there was a more exact way to use the time piece, if that was what happened. Like going ahead a single day, before an event, and returning knowing who the winners would be.

"It's the pocket watch," he told Sissy as soon as they were working their way back down the riverbank toward Nanna's estate. "We are in the same place, just not the same time."

“That makes no sense,” she shook her head. “Does it?”

“You never heard of Seaward, much less Seaward City.” He scratched his head trying to wrap his mind around the idea of it, of the possibilities. “That means your time came before this time, because they know of Seaward here, and Seaward City is still being built.”

“But mother, and oh poor Nanna,” Sissy stopped and turned, putting her head in his chest. She held him tightly as sobs wracked her body. “How will we ever get back to them? Can we?”

“That I can’t say.” He hugged her in return. “I just now reasoned out what is happening. We need to figure out how to manage it more precisely, if that is possible.” He searched his mind for any other explanation. “I may be wrong.” He resigned himself to standing there comforting her until she got a hold of her emotions.

Hoping to provide at least a little comfort, he added, “I will try my very best to get you back before—before Nanna’s end.” As soon as he said what he said next, he regretted it. “I must be honest though. I am trying to get back to something, as well. Someone in my time is waiting for me.”

“Oh, well,” she looked down at her semi-fancy boots, then put her hands on his chest and pushed herself away. “I should find some restraint.”

He started to protest, but she turned and was already stomping away. She wasn’t sobbing

anymore, at least, but he heard her snuffle and saw her wipe her eyes a few times.

“One copper is all you have to your name?” she asked without looking back. They were getting in the thick of the woods now, and he was glad he could see the branches swinging back at him in the daylight. “I remember several coins,” she went on. “One of them was gold.”

“I lied to them.” He remembered Boreck saying something about how a woman would count your coins for you, if you let her. He wasn’t sure if this was what he meant but he was grateful he still had them. More than once, he could have been robbed.

“Sometimes lies are easier than the truth,” he repeated another of Boreck’s sayings. “Sometimes a lie is the only means to an end.”

“I understand,” she turned and let him see she was smiling through her evident concern over bigger issues. “A few of the boys tried to lie to me, to get what they wanted.”

“I imagine they would,” he smiled when she showed him a reddened cheek.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was,” he decided he should have waited to see how things played out before he said anything about commitments. “How much farther?” He was hungry again and regretted not asking if there was anything available near the market, but after seeing a man killed with violent magic, in his stead, he was also glad they didn’t hang around.

When they finally emerged from the Riverwood into the area cleared for Nanna's estate, they were both taken aback.

A trio of cottages sat around the crater where Nanna had met her end. The hole from the powder keg's impact had been lined with stones and turned into a fire pit of sorts.

"Look," Braiden pointed at a pair of young girls who looked so much like Sissy, he had to look at her and then back at them. "Your mother clearly made it back."

"The sign," Sissy's dirty cheeks had clean streaks running down them, from all her tears. Despite everything, a smile crept across her face.

Braiden followed her finger to another barn-like building. There were several horsedrawn carriages lining a lane near its huge set of doors. At the point the road split, one part leading away from the river, the other going right into the barn-like construction, was a large fancily painted board.

It read: Guntright's Ale and Spirits

Braiden stood there beside Sissy, not sure if he should say anything or not.

When he heard her snuffle, he dutifully put his arm around her and pulled her close.

"Can I go with you?" she asked, her voice full of sadness, and understandable fear. "Theres naught for me here."

Before he could answer, she turned toward him and lifted her lips to his.

The kiss was brief, but in that moment, he felt his heart skip a beat or two.

He never expected her to stay here in a time not her own. Of course she could go with him. He was already figuring out a way to steal one of the carriages and had a fair idea where he wanted to go first.

Thoughts of Aurraella found their way into his mind though. After all, getting her and Kifferd out of Seaward City had been his goal since he started having goals.

“You can go anywhere you’d like,” he leaned in, but kissed her forehead instead of her lips. “It will please me greatly if you choose to help me figure all of this out.”

“Even if I kiss you again?” She forced a smile. “I mean, in the future. Or--” she gave him a goofy cross-eyed look. “Or maybe in the past.”

He nodded and couldn’t have stopped the grin that formed if he had to.

Chapter Thirteen



“Since you are family it's not really thievery,” Braiden reasoned, trying to ease Sissy's angst over having taken a carriage and two horses from the busy supplier of ale and spirits. “You saw the rows and rows of barrel kegs lining the barn. They'll probably not even miss it.”

“I suppose I am family, but who would believe it?” She gave him a look. “Besides, I think one of them saw us.”

“Did you not see those girls at the cottages?” Braiden had only driven a horse drawn wagon once. He could manage a mule cart on a crowded cobble lane though. This carriage was a little trickier, but he was getting the hang of it. The biggest difference was the location of the driver's bench, outside and on top of the enclosed compartment. Jostling around so far above the ground was unnerving at best. If either of them fell, they could break a limb. “You could pass as their big sister, or at least a cousin.”

“If you say so,” she looked behind them, for the seventh or eighth time, since they'd absconded. “Explain again why we are going all this way to chase Grimm's booty, when you have asked everyone, you've seen where Seaward City is?” She turned to

meet his gaze. “Even if it was once in that grave, what makes you think it will still be there?”

“The Pixie River should meet the sea about two day’s ride east from here,” he repeated the logistical reasoning, hopefully for the last time. Each time he went over it, the idea seemed a little more foolish. Harrol the marauder was most likely lying, and this was all a waste of time, but that didn’t have much to do with it. The treasure was what Boreck would have called a long job. Even if it wasn’t there, it might have been, and if he figured out how to use the time piece, or accidentally ended up near here again, he would be familiar with the cemetery.

She was partly right about his shifting priorities. But he wasn’t ready to toy with the timepiece again. Not yet. Seeing the effect of the sea wizard’s magic kill a man who’d only been trying to save him, weighed heavy. He hoped he might find someone who could tell him more about it, but even revealing or just asking about such a thing might cause them to end up tied to a millstone and dropped overboard. He’d already defied those odds once and wasn’t so sure he’d be as lucky if he ended up in the same situation again.

There was something to say about Harrol being left for dead by his companion. And the way he’d memorized-- No, the way he’d closed his eyes and recited what was on the tombstone struck Braiden. He was a good judge of people. Especially the marks he and Pate worked. The story might not be true, but Harrol most likely wouldn’t have taken

the time to etch something like that in his mind, not if there wasn't a valid reason.

Braiden believed Harrol believed the loot was there, and that was enough to warrant looking. Stuck on a ship with his peers though, they could have made it all up and spoke about it so often they all believed it to be. For that matter it could be something as simple as the lines to a poem, or sailor song, or some shite.

Rather than go through it again, he cut to the chase. "If we don't take the extra time to go look now, I won't be able to stop wondering." He gave her a sideways glance and laughed because she was already looking behind them again. Before long, it would be too dark for her to see, which opened another bag of problems he hadn't thought about. They couldn't stop. He would have to drive through the night and into the morrow, and hope the horses made it, because there was very little between them and their destination, at least in his time it was nearly deserted.

"I'd rather put it to rest, than carry the regret and uncertainty around," he nodded, liking the simplified answer better. "Aren't you curious?"

"That makes sense, because I want to know, but I want to return to my time. Or better yet, the day mother and I saved you from Nanna's cane," she grinned at him, through her saddened expression. "We could save Nanna."

They hit a section of road where there was bump after bump. Braiden had to hold onto an iron

grip bar set in the middle of the bench to keep from bouncing off.

Sissy had to cross her arms over her chest to keep her breasts from bouncing. Watching her fight the bob and sway of the well-worn road was comical, and a little arousing. She looked frustrated and tired of it though. She needed rest, as did he.

Before long, the sun went down behind them, but he pressed on through the night. Most of the next day was uneventful. They passed over slow rolling hills covered in green knee-high grass that swayed and leaned in the breeze, as if it were a wavering emerald sea. The road wound through a few small sections of forest, but nothing nearly as dense as the Riverwood. Save for the slow circling predator birds above them all, a small herd of deer leaping away from an isolated copse of trees, and a few rabbits and squirrels was the only other life they saw. When evening closed in and their shadow stretched long before them, he started to grow concerned.

He wasn't sure if there was anything ahead on this road, an inn or a small town. At least not until right before the Pixie River entered the sea. There was a pair of massive piers in his time, where larger ships from other realms transferred their cargo to the wardstone powered river barges to be hauled north to Xwarda, or west and then north to Seaward and Tip. Wares made by Highwander craftsmen, and a lot of the crops grown in the flatter areas of

Seaward and Valleya were then loaded on the huge ships and taken places Braiden hadn't heard of.

He'd been through the inlet a few times on boats with Boreck. Once, he had to make sure one of their marks didn't abscond. He ended up doing dock labor to have a reason to loiter near a certain boat.

A barge went back and forth across the channel, several times a day, carrying people and goods from one kingdom to the other and back. Even in this age, he was certain there would be a way across. Trade depended on it.

According to Harrol's account the graveyard was near there, not very far from the barge landing on the Highwander side. As far as he understood, no matter how far progress carried a place, a cemetery wouldn't be built over or moved. Braiden figured by the time the sunset on the morrow; they'd know the truth of it and then have the option to travel north on the opposite side of the river. That would avoid Sissy's kin and any authorities who might be looking for the missing carriage.

"If we come across a place, can you afford me a new set of clothes?" she forced a smile and twisted her nose. "You smell. You'll need an extra set as well. I will wash these, when we have an opportunity."

He hadn't considered the idea, but it was a good one. He wanted at least one set of quality wear. At Gramble's he had a couple pairs of britches and some rough spun tunics in his chest of drawers, but the orphanage seemed as if it was on the other

side of the world right now. One thing he'd learned running the city streets was, you were treated according to your appearance, so he nodded that he would get them something better.

The sun sank itself below the horizon and Braiden figured they might have to pull off the road and sleep inside the empty carriage. He was as tired as the horses were. He was nodding off when Sissy suddenly stood, nearly tumbling out of the elevated bench.

"I see lights ahead," she said after steadying herself. "They're still a good distance, but we can make it."

Before long they came upon a tavern inn. Braiden smelled savory meat and roasted garlic. He showed Sissy how to hold the reins, just in case they had to leave in a hurry and jumped down to see about a room.

The innkeeper didn't seem to mind the way he was dressed and explained that since it was late, a platter with a portion of everything left in the kitchen would be brought to the room in short order. After that a boy would haul in hot water for a bath.

Braiden handed him the silver coin and waited with his hand out. He was given seven coppers in return. He liked it when people didn't ask questions, and this keep didn't have a one. Braiden asked him where he might find a tunic that wasn't sweat stained and maybe something for his female companion to wear.

“You can cross on your rig by ferry at dawn or mid-day for a copper,” he was told. “On the far side of the great pier is a bazaar. You can find almost anything there, though many of the merchants are preparing to leave for the Leif Greyn. The festival is upon us, you know.” He paused as if regaling some memory from Summer’s Day. “Someone will have something worth wearing. Take your things when you cross,” he made sure to be holding Braiden’s attention before continuing. “Once you’ve boarded the ferry and leave our side, there ent no coming back claiming you left something. If you do, it’ll be gone from here before you even get across to the witch’s land.”

“Thank you,” Braiden was certain he wouldn’t leave anything. “Do I owe you for putting up the horses?”

“If you stall them yourself, its included.” The keeper’s eyes twinkled, probably realizing he might get another coin here. “For another copper, my boy will even brush them out and make sure they are fed well and watered.”

Braiden never dealt with an innkeeper himself, but he’d watched Boreck and Pate, and the kind of folks they followed around. “Here,” he laid two more coppers on the counter. “One is for the stable; the other is for your pocket. Make sure we are not bothered after the bath is brought and then forget us after we are gone.”

“Done,” he kissed the one coin and put it in his pocket, showing it was a sealed deal. “Last door

on the right.” He indicated the stairway leading up then turned and pulled a rope. Somewhere beyond the building a bell rang, and here came a boy not much younger than Braiden, through a side door.

Braiden followed the boy out and helped Sissy down, pleased they’d gotten out of harm’s way.

The room wasn’t very large, but it was better than sleeping on the high grass along the river, or in a hole under a bed.

“The tub is right there in the middle of the floor,” Sissy said, a little unease in her tone. “You’ll have to take a walk while I bathe, sir.”

“Sir?” Braiden chuckled. “You’ve seen me naked. What’s the big deal?”

“There is no *big* deal,” she smiled.

A soft knock came at the door. “Supper!” a voice called.

Sissy opened it and took a large tray holding a platter of savory food, and some dinnerware. “Grab the pitcher, sir,” she smiled at Braiden.

A desk against the wall opposite the bed provided the only flat surface so she sat it all there.

Braiden took the pitcher and two wooden goblets from a girl that looked so much like the stable boy, he wondered if they were twins.

“I can fetch a bottle of Xwardian red for a copper if you’d like.”

“I’d rather you bring us more water and maybe some juice and fruit in the morning.” He returned, “-- and ask your brother to have our

carriage ready early enough to make the dawn crossing. I'll have a copper for you and him to share."

"Sir," she curtsied with a huge grin and hurried away.

After Braiden closed the door, Sissy hurried to the platter and grabbed a piece of sliced meat. The way she leaned her head back and lowered it into her open mouth was comical. It reminded him just how attractive she was, and how badly he needed to eat and rest.

The privacy ordeal over the bath worked itself out. Braiden ate his fill and fell into a deep slumber on the bed. He didn't even wake when the boy clumsily lugged in three buckets of steaming water, one at a time.

However, when Sissy climbed onto the soft mattress and eased her body against his, he opened his eyes and saw that she was only wearing her lower undergarment. Her nipples were large and dark, like her mother's, and her breasts though not as large, were ample and perfectly sized to accentuate her well rounded hips.

He could not deny her beauty, and he felt himself reacting with a twinge of something in his groin.

"You smell, Sir," she hugged the blanket to her chest covering them. "Go wash away the stench while the water is still warm. If you lather up your britches and tunic, then hang them on the rack by the stool pot, they should be dry by morning."

“I thought you said you’d wash them, when we had a moment,” he half joked.

“I said if you buy me new clothes, I’d wash the old,” she gave him a soured look that showed she wasn’t trying to be promiscuous, but didn’t look away when he began disrobing.

Braiden faced away from her when he dropped his britches, and she gave a sigh that was full of mock disappointment. He grinned inwardly, dropping his undergarment, exposing his arse then climbed into the tub of grey lukewarm water. He used the provided brush and block of lye to scrub away the grime, noticing the rash on his crack was thankfully gone. Just to be certain he scrubbed the area extra well.

Sissy had her back to him now and was sleeping as hard as he’d been. Her snores were soft at first but eventually she sounded like old Gramble did after chopping wood all day or hauling barrels.

He thought of Sissy, and then Aurraella, as he soaked. Oddly, after only the short time he’d known Sissy, he felt closer to her than anyone he ever had. Maybe because he’d bedded her mother and knew what sort of beauty she would become. Maybe it was because she was uncomplicated and kind, and despite terrible circumstances and the loss of her grandmother she was still able to joke a bit.

He knew very little about Aurraella, but he felt strongly for her as well. She wasn’t timid or uncertain about anything. She was confident and he couldn’t see her hiding in a hole under a bed, not

that it wasn't a wise thing to do. With lecherous pirates and drunken rivermen at every turn, keeping one's chastity probably wasn't all that easy.

Both were beautiful beyond words, though and he hoped, even prayed to Thane the god of orphans he would never have to choose between the two or harm the heart of one for the other.

He started to grab his tunic and wash it in the tub but decided he would replace these filthy rags. Another thought occurred to him then. Eventually he would have to break the golden crown. They were down to just a few coins otherwise, and after giving the attendants the tip he'd offered for the morning and paying the ferry toll. The gold piece would be all they had left.

Hopefully, the crowded bazaar would provide a solution. If he just went and tried to change his golden coin for ten silvers, he'd probably get clubbed and robbed. Ragged looking orphans didn't exchange large coins or buy fancy things. They were mostly fodder for the rest of the world to order about and look down upon.

As he climbed out of the tub and dried himself, he let out a sigh of hopeful resignation. It didn't matter if there was treasure buried in a grave or not. After tomorrow, no one would look down on him, or know he was an unwanted street urchin, ever again.

Devious Arcana

Chapter Fourteen



They had to hurry. Dawn was fast approaching and the poor girl who'd brought the food pounded on their door until other guests at the inn protested and finally joined her in waking them. It was worth the stress, Braiden decided, for Sissy was hurrying around the room topless, her bouncing, jiggling breasts on full display.

Red faced and flushed with embarrassment; she gave him a hard look that softened when he faked shielding his eyes. "Sorry," he said turning his attention to getting his own still filthy clothes back on, "you are very attractive."

"As are you," she made a sour face. Feeling the material of the garment in her hands. "It's all still wet."

"You'll have to put it on anyway," Braiden found himself watching her again, and despite not allowing his mind to wander into sexuality, he was assailed by arousal. She wasn't thin, but a very long way from what he'd consider large. Her hips and thighs looked amazing and those breasts, he couldn't draw his eyes away.

"Second call for the ferry," someone called from the yard below their window. "The buggy is ready."

An orange hit him in the chest, with a thump that caused him to cough. He found the face above those large nipples glaring at him with a narrow browed scowl. He remembered being caned by Nanna then and grabbed up his pants by the belt he'd left in the loops.

"Get those britches and boots on," she ordered, pulling the damp slip over her head with a wince. "Gah, its cold and wet."

"We can go to the bazaar before we bother with the rest," he offered. "I didn't wash mine. Because I plan on replacing them."

"You'd better bathe again before you don the new," she tucked the thin, almost sheer slip into leggings that hugged the curves of her rounded arse perfectly, then she put her arms in what he would call a long tunic, more than a dress. "They'll smell just as bad as those britches do."

She looked far better than he did, and he decided they might have to use that to their advantage when spending the gold coin. It wasn't that she looked clean either. Her garments weren't rough spun, or coarse. They hadn't been cheap.

On the other hand, his tunic was threadbare in places and had several rips and tears, some mended, some not. His britches were standard workwear for most men who labored, only the knees had been patched, and then patched over again. He found he felt a little embarrassed over his appearance and vowed to keep the promise he'd

made the night before, to never settle for looking like a cobble rat again.

At least his boots were of a quality most others of his ilk couldn't afford. They were a gift from Boreck, and he was glad he had them, though he doubted they'd been purchased. They weren't brand new when he'd received them, he knew. Pate had joked that they looked better on Braiden than the dead fool he'd taken them off, but Boreck had a brother who ran a small mercantile and might have gotten them from the secondhand shelf in exchange for something or another.

"Last call," the man below shouted.

Sissy put another orange in a pocket at her hip and it barely fit. In one hand she held an apple and in the other a small green fruit he'd never seen before. Putting the smaller fruit in the crook of her arm, she picked up a pitcher and poured some of the contents into one of the goblets, then chugged a few deep slips directly from the vessel. "We need to go."

Braiden patted his pockets to make sure he had everything, then grabbed the orange she'd pelted him with from the floor and took the pitcher. After he took a long swig, he grabbed the goblet and took it with him as he followed her out the door and down the stairs.

Draining the goblet, he handed it to the boy who'd tended the horses then climbed up onto the bench. The look of disappointment on the boy's face reminded him he'd made another promise, and he carefully slipped a copper out of his pocket while an

older boy helped Sissy onto the perch from the other side.

He flipped the copper to the boy who deftly caught it. His grin threatened to split his face in two, until Braiden snapped at him. "Hey," the boy's smile evaporated, and he gave his full attention to Braiden. "Half of that is your sisters."

The youngster nodded and then motioned for them to get going. "You'll need to hurry, or you'll have to wait until midday."

Braiden nodded, took the reins, and looked to see if Sissy was ready before snapping them to get the animals moving. The way to the ferry was easy enough to follow, but the large flat barge was nearly full. Two loaded wagons, a few smaller carts, and a carriage very similar to theirs were packed onto it already.

Sissy must have spotted the carriage too. "What do we do? Is it one of the people from the brewery? Are they looking for us?"

Braiden didn't panic. Reason defeated panic almost every time. That wasn't one of Boreck's sayings either, but Braiden found it was just as profound, and he enjoyed the idea of creating his own mantras.

"If they were, they'd have found us at the inn," he stated, trying to ease her concern as much as he was able. "The question is, can they fit us on?"

He drove the carriage right up to the man who looked in charge. Older and seemingly in no mood for nonsense, the ferryman yelled curses at a

younger man who was holding a rope tied around the neck of several sheep. The rope was long, and the animals were tethered in a single file line, so some of the wooly creatures were on the barge, and some were not.

“Animals have to be penned in,” he said louder than before. The ferryman was clearly angry. “You’ll have to wait until the evening when it’s not so crowded if you want to cross them like this.”

Seeing that the herder understood and was now backing his herd off the deck, he looked up at Braiden and his expression went from angry to confused then to Sissy. He stood and ran his hands down his chest as if to smooth his shirt.

“Sorry,” he looked at the ferry and seemed to be calculating. “No one told me anything about this, or I’d have kept a place for you upfront, like we always try and do for Master Henrick.”

Braiden started to speak, but Sissy leaned over him so she could look down and meet the ferryman’s eyes. “If you could just get us on in any fashion,” she wrinkled her nose at Braiden and gave him a look a debutante might give a smelly beggar. “I’ll tell Henrick myself, how you saved my morning. What is your name, sir?”

“I am Hibbit Monahugh, Second Lieutenant of the Southern Ferrymen’s Guild,” he gave her a look of uncertainty, then a quick bow. “No need to bother him with it. It’d be my pleasure to wedge you in Ms. Guntright.”

Braiden reached into his pocket to grab a copper coin for their passage, but when he handed it down, the ferryman refused it and looked at them again suspiciously. Braiden offered it again, not understanding the issue. No one refused a copper, where he came from.

“No,” the older man shook his head at him and scowled. “Are you new? I’ve never seen you before.”

“Yes,” Braiden nodded leaning down so he could whisper. “My cousin Rikky got me on. They won’t let me haul any goods just yet. I think this is some sort of test, carrying her to the bazaar to buy dresses and hats.”

The ferryman considered it and then nodded as if he understood. “Never tip the ferrymen when you are on duty. Master Guntright keeps an account. You may need a bigger buggy to bring her purchases back across though,” he chuckled. Then he leaned in and spoke in his own conspiratorial tone. “It’s a good job, boy. He treats his men well. All of them. If you want the work, you’ll need to clean up. Spend that copper on better clothes. Those look a hundred years old.”

“I will,” Braiden nodded his thanks. “Can we get aboard and get across? I need to fill a pot, if you know what I mean.”

“Aye,” the ferryman stepped to where a pair of men stood by wheelbarrow style push carts full of something or another. A short argument ensued,

and the ferryman ended up slapping one of the men. After that they both exited the ferry in a hurry.

“Come,” the ferryman grabbed one of the leather leads dangling near where the horses were connected to the buggy. “We are already running behind.”

Mercilessly he walked the horses right into a group of foot-travelers, forcing them this way and that.

Behind them a voice called, “Clear!”

“Pull the brake lever,” the ferryman’s expression showed he wasn’t sure Braiden was qualified for his made-up employer. “It’ll roll right backward into the river.”

Luckily, Braiden pulled the lever yesterday. The sudden skid to a stop nearly sent he and Sissy into the horses. He pulled it again now and let out a long slow sigh of relief when he felt the ferry shudder and ease away from the riverbank.

“They can’t turn it around, can they?” Sissy asked, the sudden fear in her tone grabbing Braiden’s attention. She was looking back, just as she had most of the two days before, but her eyes were glued to something this time and she was squeezing the wooded seatback with knuckles as white as snow.

He followed her gaze and felt a wave of tingling unease course through his body. A cloud of dust caused by several horsemen riding at a full gallop was nearing the inn. A few of them peeled from the group and stopped there. The others kept

coming, but they were moving at a rate he figured wouldn't be quick enough to make it.

Already, the ferry was moving faster. He found Sissy's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Let's hope not," he grinned at her, "Ms. Guntright."

"Can they get word about us to the other side before we arrive?" she asked, still watching the scene shrinking behind them.

It was another good question, and after only a few moments' thought, he decided they probably could.

Chapter Fifteen



Aurraella wasn't so nervous for herself. Nothing she'd done was heinous, and stealing coins from a grown man who stole them from orphans hardly seemed criminal. But she knew that wasn't what the troop of Queen Rachel's Blue Cloaks was here asking about.

She could only imagine what sort of mess Kifferd made of Master Gramble. Young males with as much natural vampish blood in their veins as she and Kifferd had, were known to lose control, and make a big mess their first few feedings. The looks on the hardened faces of the soldiers, wincing and carefully choosing the words they used to describe it all, told her all she needed to know.

It was a bother that he'd ripped apart the greedy scum licker in a building full of children, but it was done. There was nothing she could do but hope none of the youngsters witnessed his actions.

Only one person besides her brother and Oggy, could place her at the orphanage. And she felt deep down Pate was the last being alive who would ever give them up. After leaving Kifferd to feed, she'd found Pate's humble shack.

He was happy to see her, and she learned something about him and herself, that she vowed to try and never forget.

“The mark clobbered Braiden good,” Pate rubbed his jaw as if he was feeling the blows himself. “Braiden was only trying to scratch his rump. Then Bolly charged in and stuck the bastard. He ran the High King’s man through over our boy. Gave his life away for him.”

She was looking around his little hovel, taking it all in as he went on.

“A group of do-gooder guildsmen almost got me, but I have a trick or two up my sleeve, kind of like you and Kifferd.” He didn’t elaborate and she didn’t ask because all she cared about was her brother and Braiden. “They got Bolly though, he was covered in blood, had just ripped the insignia from the dead Kingsman’s chest when they came rushing in.” He shook his head.

She felt for him. Bolly Boreck had been his employer and maybe more. He did well to disguise it, but she sensed the two of them might have been partners in a different sort of way. And after seeing a few things a young girl might craft or cherish while growing up, displayed proudly on his meager shelves, made other things clearer to her. Pate was or maybe had been a father. Maybe his daughter ended up at Gramble’s or maybe he just pictured her when he was staring off into the place. Maybe she’d died. It didn’t matter. The point was, he was no lecher, as she’d presumed.

“What about Braiden,” she got him back on track.

“They threw his limp body in a cart with the mark,” he chuckled through his thick emotion. “Bolly was too big to fit. I came back with different clothes on and saw Braiden being loaded onto a barge. He was still limp, and his feet were tied to a millstone along with the king’s man. After they started away, I never saw him again.”

“So, you never actually knew he was dead?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I suppose not.”

“Thank you, sir,” she offered him a handshake and then a hug. “I wasn’t here. You haven’t seen me.”

“Aye, girl,” he nodded. “Go before they are crawling all over this area looking.”

She did exactly that, but as she went, she wondered why they would have tied one of the High King’s men to the millstone. It made a morbid bit of sense to sink the likes of Bolly and Braiden, but why an honorable official?

Now two days later, several serious looking soldiers were at the tumbler camp asking all sorts of questions, and she had no idea where Oggy hid the sack, but he swore the coins were safe. Safe and going with them on the morrow when the carousel wagons left for Dakahn.

Kifferd slept most of the day after and then resumed practicing his stilt work in his clever yellow eyed, fat elf costume. Everyone said the proud

snotty elves would hate it, and that made it all the funnier to her brother.

She parted the tent flap to find one of Queen Rachels' guardsmen about to call on her. "Ah, miss," he smiled. "A few questions?" When his eyes met hers, he shuffled his feet and grinned like a schoolchild. It was a disappointment that not even a small challenge arose. She dismissed him with a flippant wave and off he went to talk to someone else.

Oggy held up under scrutiny, though the whole time he was alone with Queen Rachel's men she was worried it would go the other way. And when they talked to Kiff, she worried he might try and feed on one of the questioners.

Eventually the guardsmen tacked up a few posters offering rewards for information about the killing, then left.

Kifferd prepared for the upcoming journey, while Oggy helped her load her things. As a reward for holding his tongue and helping them, she gave him a long slow kiss, but not much more, though he might have gotten further had he the gumption to stoke her desire.

When morning finally came, they and a few of the tumblers, along with the two stone mages, were bouncing out of Seaward toward Dakahn.

Oggy didn't mention or otherwise reveal anything about the sack of coins until they'd transferred the carousel crates from the wagons to

a barge that would take them the rest of the way north into the Leif Greyn Valley.

Only after he, Kifferd, and Aurraella were locked in Aurraella's private quarters did he tell them they'd gotten sixty-four whole coppers, and half as many nicks. But the best news was the sack contained six silvers.

Aurraella was flush with desire. Had Braiden been there he might have gotten more than he was ready for. He'd been spot on and knowing he helped them escape Gramble's without even being there made her miss him that much more. Master Gramble *had* been pilfering innocent children.

She, nor Kiff, mentioned Braiden or his part in any of it to Oggy though, and later when he returned to her quarters, he had a bottle of quality red hidden under his cloak.

Maybe he does have a little gumption.

Aurraella still missed Braiden deeply, but someone else helped her and Kifferd out of Gramble's too, which in the great scheme of things was all that mattered to a girl who had to think like a mother. Braiden of all people, she knew would understand.

At least she hoped so. It seemed impossible he would return to Gramble's and then come to the festival before the event ended anyway, so she decided to enjoy herself, and help her brother do the same.

What else was a girl to do at the greatest, most fantastic event in the realm?

Devious Arcana

Chapter Sixteen



A group of hard-looking soldiers was waiting when Braiden and Sissy's ferry eased into its place on the Highwander side of the Pixie River. They all had the familiar emblem marking them as Queen Willa's treacherous Blacksword soldiers and they seemed eager to find who they were after. They questioned the folks in the similar looking carriage at that end of the ferry, then shouldered their way past the exiting foot travelers. They spread out moving between the carts and wagons until they had the buggy surrounded. Then one of them trained an arrow on the door while another flung it open.

"Empty," the archer yelled.

"They knew we would be waiting," one of them growled. "Must have scurried off with those on foot."

"At least we can return the carriage," another added. "There's no damage."

Braiden and Sissy were a hundred paces away turning a corner into a crowded lane full of hawkers and street vendors. Braiden chanced a peek back around the corner and saw one of the Blacksword talking to the ferryman. He was explaining, with

plenty of wild hand gestures, what happened, probably elaborating on his suspicion. And surely telling them what he looked like and what he was wearing.

Braiden wasn't all that concerned now. The bazaar was very similar to Seaward City, built on cobbles, and full of chaos and action. They could disappear here easily enough, at least for a while. They'd be able to blend right in after they found some new things to wear.

Sissy kept her hand in his, which drew more than a few odd glances. A beggar and a merchant's daughter are what they saw, he figured. And with that thought he led them into a huge tent with several differently decorated tunics and a few dresses and gowns displayed near the flaps.

"Get yourself three sets of whatever you need," he said. "Make sure at least one outfit is road worthy and durable."

Sissy looked wide eyed at everything. He imagined it was overwhelming and a little exciting seeing things created hundreds of years after those in the world you grew up in. To him, things from her time and now, and even his time, were not all that different, yet they were. This helped him choose what he would buy, because he-- they needed to be able to blend in now, and wherever, or whenever they might end up.

"Get things that won't seem out of place no matter what," he smiled at the wonder showing in her deep brown eyes. Without all the worry and

sorrow showing through she was even more beautiful.

“Mother once told me ladies shouldn’t wear britches,” she said with a laugh. “But mother probably didn’t like how hard it was to get them on and off.”

“Wear whatever pleases you, but doesn’t draw unwelcome attention,” he let go of her hand to pick up and look at a strange leather hat. It was like the tall, pointed caps they always depicted wizards and witches wearing, only the point had been sheared off for a flattened top with strange indentions on each side.

He put it on and got her attention.

“Nah,” she shook her head. “You need to have all that shag trimmed down, Braiden,” she smiled. “Hats like that are for men who haven't got any hair left.”

“You’ll need to be Lady Guntright again,” he frowned at a man wearing leather britches that were so tight you could see his manhood mostly flattened by them, and a frilly sleeved white shirt. He looked like a dandelion. “When we use the golden crown, I mean.”

“You need some like those,” she laughed.

“Not a chance,” he returned with a genuine grin. “You did well,” he went on, making sure to meet her eyes. “On the carriage I mean. That was good.”

She seemed to brighten after his words. As if his compliment lifted her spirit. For the first part of

the morning, they took turns holding things up to their bodies, until they both had plenty they liked. Braiden found a pair of well-made leather britches and two other pairs of the same made from a heavier canvas like material. The tunics he chose buttoned in the front and were made for either cooler weather or labors that required a bit of protection from the elements. The sleeves ballooned a bit, which he didn't like, but Sissy convinced him they looked amazing. All were light in color, tan, sky blue, and a soft green. But he picked one in black. He added a few thinner pullover style tunics, and a leather vest that matched the britches and went well with the ballooned sleeves.

Sissy picked two pair of britches, one of black leather like his, but cut to fit a form like hers, and some of a thinner material that felt like silk but weren't nearly as expensive. She also chose a long tunic like the one she'd been wearing, and a dress that was both fancy and functional at the same time. A few other things found her pile, including a few frilly undergarments and a new slip. When she said she needed some shoes, Braiden repeated Boreck's mantra about not skimping on footwear.

She found a pair of long boots that folded down at the knees, and after he inspected the soles, he approved.

He found he'd lost track of the dagger he had. He didn't remember having it since the Riverwood, which didn't matter because he was certain they could find a better one, with a sheath that fit his new

belt. Now they only had to pay for all the garments and then buy some bags to haul them in.

His concern over using the golden crown was justified when the merchant declared he'd never seen such a coin.

Braiden realized it was a King's Crown. A newly minted coin made in honor of High King Mikahl, the man who ruled over all the other kings and queens in his time. There was a bit of a commotion while it was valued by another merchant, but luckily, they agreed it was gold and weighed the same as all the other golden crowns, so it was accepted.

He found a backpack that he could fit everything in and added a belt pouch to help with all the silvers and coppers that came on his return. Sissy couldn't fit all her new stuff in a single backpack, so she added a handbag she could carry at her side.

When it was done, Braiden was glad they still had several silvers left because he doubted, they would be able to travel far on foot with everything. He hadn't donned the outfit he wanted to wear because he still needed a bath to wash off the crud from his old garments. Those he threw in a bin.

He wore a leather vest over the light blue balloon sleeved tunic, but didn't like the vest all that much. He would save the leather britches for after he was clean, too, and hoped they weren't as stiff and chafing as the dark canvas-like pair he was wearing now.

He didn't know what Sissy chose to wear out of there yet, for she was still behind a curtained booth with a seamstress who was helping her with something or another. He waited just outside the tent, feeling accomplished while trying to sense how others who saw him reacted. No one laughed or pointed at him, so he figured he didn't appear ridiculous. And after a while he stopped worrying about his appearance. Several other men were dressed similarly, and he found he liked the look. It showed a bit of taste and wealth but blended with what normal folk were wearing.

He saw a small armory farther into the bazaar, and decided he would go look while he waited. It took him only a moment to choose a dagger. It had a leather wrapped hilt with a small dragon's head for the pommel. The blade, the merchant claimed, was forged from Wildermont steel. It had a dragon etched down both sides. It fit its sheath perfectly and did not poke his thigh when he walked. It cost as much as the clothes had, all by themselves, but once it was in place at his hip, he felt like a fancy lord or even a knight, wearing it.

When he started back to find Sissy, she emerged from the tent. She looked like a hero from one of the stories Aurraella read to them at night, and when he thought of Aurraella this time, it was fleeting. Sissy was wearing skintight leggings under her new boots. The long tunic belted around her waist hung to her thighs, and made a deep vee revealing plenty, almost too much cleavage. Clapsed

around her neck was a dark cloak, which she closed and then opened with a whirl when she saw him.

He knew he was gawking, but he didn't care. Not only did she look beautiful, but she also looked dangerous. As he neared, he saw her cleavage wasn't actually all that exposed. Under the tunic's deep neck was a thin lacy undershirt, or some such. Her hourglass figure was accentuated. She no longer looked like the timid girl he'd met just a few days ago. Here was a woman grown, and one even a hard man might think twice about bothering.

It was impossible to take his eyes off her. Several other men were taking notice, and he felt a twinge of jealousy, causing him to swoop in and give her a solid kiss on the mouth, for them all to see.

He ended his smooch before it started anything else, but with a grin. "Other men are leering at you, Lady Cecilia" he whispered. "I'm trying to ward them off. To protect you, of course."

"Here," she kissed him this time, open mouthed and with a grind of her hips against his thigh. She grabbed a handful of his shaggy hair and probed her tongue into his mouth wantonly, then pulled away with a smile as wide as her face.

"You still need a bath," she said, her smile didn't falter though. "The smell of those nasty clothes is soaked into your hide. And your breath smells like burned grease, but you look like a wealthy man of means, sir."

"Burned grease?" he asked, running his tongue over his front teeth. They were gritty and

something was hung between one of them. A piece of dried meat from the other night maybe.

He frowned. "We should get something else to wear. Something more fitting for grave robbers," he half jested. "I'd wager there is a bathhouse around," he used the collar of his new tunic to rub at his teeth.

"Most likely," she stopped him from using his shirt on his mouth. "We can get some lemons for your teeth. All those sailors have to wash when they make shore. And all these traders and travelers can't live here, can they?"

"Probably bathe at whatever inn they are lodged at," he answered. Growing up an orphan, he had few adults, man, or woman, who cared enough to teach him how to dress and stay clean. He'd never heard of cleaning one's teeth with lemons, and he lived in an age centuries after hers. He wondered what else he didn't know. It seemed a small stiff brush might work better to get the piece of meat unstuck from his teeth than a lemon.

"That reminds me," Sissy reached down and grabbed her backpack from the floor and slung it around one shoulder. "I know right where the graveyard is." She picked up the duffle, indicating for him to lead her to the next destination. "The seamstress told me how to get there."

"What did you tell her?" He stopped beside her, hoping she would walk beside him, instead of following.

“Only that my father died at sea and was buried there, and that I’ve finally come to visit his stone.”

“Amazing,” he nodded. “You are a natural. I wonder if there is an inn near the place,” Braiden couldn’t help but smile at his good fortune. “An inn with a bath, and maybe a barber?”

“It’s a port town, Master Braiden,” she grinned. “Of course there will be an inn.”

Devious Arcana

Chapter Seventeen



The Royal Tavern and Inn was far fancier than the inn they'd used on the Seward side, but it was only a short walk along the bustling wood planked harbor front to the cemetery, so he happily paid thrice the amount for their one-night stay. The location was good because every other establishment was a tavern or parlor that most likely had its doors open all night long. They would be able to come and go unnoticed if they waited until the wee hours when the bulk of reveler activity subsided. And if that didn't work, the alley behind the dock row was an option.

The tub in this room was sectioned off in an alcove with a curtain they could close for individual privacy. There was a privy pot in the corner of the bathing room too, which was good because no one wanted to haul a pot full of piss down four flights of stairs to dump. The bed was larger and softer, and instead of the dusty wooden floor there was a fancy rug covering most of it. The furniture was cleverly fitted hardwood, and the cushions and drapes were velvety red trimmed with dangling golden frills. A life-sized painting of some fancy lord hung on the wall, the frame around it was intricately carved and looked far too heavy to be hanging by a simple nail. The subject of the portrait must have been

somebody with power Braiden decided, for he was glaring down his long nose at him, clearly in disapproval.

Braiden wasn't proud of the fact, but this wouldn't be the first time he dug up a body. He and a man named Lemmy, Boreck's partner before Pate came along, once dug up a man's brother because their father's ring was on his finger when he was put under. Luckily, this corpse wouldn't be fresh like that one was. Billard Waltin died long before Harrol told them about it. And Harrol told them about it, possibly as far back as a few hundred years ago.

It was only midday, and he still needed to purchase a good shovel and a few burlap sacks, just in case there was something there worth hauling away. He didn't want to bring the shovel back here and raise suspicions though, so he decided he needed to stash it near the grave and maybe give them a few options to cover anything unexpected that might happen with a trick he'd learned.

They also needed a lantern, and to see if there were any pitfalls, or fences they might have to avoid if they were chased. There was so much to do, he wondered if they might need to stay two nights, or more.

"What if there is no stone with Billard's name on it?" Sissy asked from a large chair that looked like a cushioned throne. "Maybe we could go stroll around and see if it is even there."

"I was thinking something similar," he sat up. "Maybe a barber, and some food, too."

Since the kiss, they kept a little distance between them, as if they each knew it would get out of hand if they let it happen again. Braiden didn't mind, as amazing as Sissy's lips felt against his, a twinge of guilt had formed in his gut because of Aurraella. Half the excitement of finding a great treasure was that he was going to use it to lift her and Kifferd out of the muck. Yet part of him longed for more of Sissy's affection. Both girls were beautiful, and both were great to be around. Neither made him feel less than he was, even though he was nothing in the great scheme of things and had little to offer either.

He knew he could have kept pouring on the charm and buying trinkets until Sissy was in his bed, but also didn't think he needed the trinkets to impress her. He helped save her, after all. Aurraella wasn't superficial either, but she was picky, and constantly worried about her brother. So often their heated activity in the orphanage's barn stopped cold when she sensed he needed her, or when he came stalking in complaining about the way the other orphan boys were treating him. The fact the two of them could feel each other's emotion like that was a little unnerving, but since their parents died when Kifferd was still in swaddling, she had raised him. As much as she denied it, she was more his mother than a sister. But Braiden liked Kiff, too. In fact, half of the way into Aurraella's heart had been impressing Kifferd and earning his trust.

It was hard to believe, but in only a few days, all that effort and desire was slipping. Until he could get Sissy back to her own time, with her mother, he had to watch over her, and since Aurraella and Kifferd were safe at Gramble's, Sissy was the one who needed him. Either way, he had no immediate way back to Aurraella, and possibly none at all. Even if he tried, he might end up in a time where there wasn't cities or towns yet, when dragons still controlled man's destiny, or worse in an era of slavers.

Thinking about all of that, he realized just how important and precious the pocket watch was. Not for either of the girls in his heart, but for himself. If he lost it or it was stolen or broken, he and Sissy would be stuck in the time he lost it in, and he was certain beyond doubt that none of the places he could end up were as livable as where he was now. If he lost it here and was stuck with Sissy in a time belonging to neither of them, he wouldn't mind that at all.

That idea wasn't so bad, and if this was his fate, he had to believe fortune was on his side, but nevertheless, he felt he had to try and get Sissy back to her time before he tried to get himself back to his. It was the honorable thing to do.

"We can ask about a barber on the way out, Sir," she stood and opened the curtains, and gasped.

Not understanding why she made such a sound, Braiden hurried to her side. He wasn't sure, but he thought the noise that escaped him was

similar and full of just as much raw, awe-struck emotion.

They were four stories above the harbor facing the vast openness of the sea. All the buildings on the opposite side of the boardwalk were only one- and two-story structures mostly built using the dock itself for a floor. Their huge window was higher than all but a few of the masts on the ships swaying back and forth below. The harbor area was protected from the rolling swells by a long row of giant stones set side by side in a perfect line paralleling the lane. The waves slowly curled as they came toward the shore, but instead of tossing the ships about and leveling the buildings like the one they were standing in, the water crashed into the rocks, sending gouts of spray and seafoam upwards in a magnificent display of natural power.

He remembered Pate calling it a jetty, but he'd never gotten more than a glimpse of it and hadn't understood its purpose. On the near side of the jetty the sea was smooth and barely wavering. The ships tied to the docks only moved slightly, all the masts swaying together in near unison.

Sissy eased to his side and nestled against him. He was reluctant to respond, but he didn't fight it, instead he put his arm around her shoulder and gave her a soft hug. He could see no reason to pretend the odds of ever getting either of them back to their own time were good enough to bank on.

As an orphan, not having the unyielding love of a mother always protecting and sheltering him,

left him craving this sort of affection. There was no way he would deny himself a moment like this. Nor would he deny her the comfort and reassurance his embrace probably gave her in return.

Beyond the still harbor and the crashing breakers the sea extended into the horizon, its shimmering surface reflecting the sky and clouds in an ever-shifting mosaic. It was striking how small he felt standing there. Humbled beyond words he just stood there enjoying the moment as much or more than any he'd ever imagined.

"This explains why it was three full coppers for the room," he eventually mumbled. "Imagine if you never opened the curtains."

"What are those men doing," she pointed. "On the rocky wave stopper."

He didn't see them at first, but following her finger he spotted two men standing on a flat section of jetty. One of them was standing there with a long stick held high, the other was waving his stick around as if trying to sling something with it. It took him a while to decide, but when the man holding his stick still pulled back causing the pole to bend and shake, Braiden figured it out. He waited until the man hauled a silvery flopping fish the size of his leg up onto the rocks and then said, "They are fishing, Lady Cecelia."

"I can see that now, Lord Braiden," she put both arms around him and squeezed him again. "Don't get me used to all of this-- this fancy

nobleman's lifestyle. Much more of it and I may beg you not to take me back to my time."

"Aye," he agreed. "I've never lived like this. Not for a day in my life. I've never even dreamed this sort of happening, yet here I am with the most beautiful girl in all of time holding me tightly, talking about begging me not to take her home."

He felt her heart race and her whole body seemed to warm. He wondered if he should have kept thoughts like that to himself. He had no regrets over saying them though, for they came from his heart. And more importantly, they were the truth.

"We should get some air and go see if we are going to buy ourselves a castle here," she turned and kissed his cheek quickly then stood in the mirror by the bathing room running her fingers through her hair like they were a comb.

"We can get you a comb and brush when we get a lantern and shovel," he said. He stood behind her, looking in the glass at his shaggy hair. No longer tangled and matted, but still an unruly mop, he tried envisioning it shorter and trimmed around his ears and neck. "Maybe I'll have them take it all off," he joked. "Let's go find out if Harrol was full of beans."

"Let's," she agreed, grabbing her cloak from the hook by the mirror and swinging it around her shoulders in a flourish. "When we find a barber, I will do the talking."

They left their backpacks and her duffle in the room, but under the bed. There was an attendant on each floor, so it wasn't like something could be

taken without a witness. It wouldn't make sense for the sort of people staying here to steal a few silvers worth of clothes, but he took the minor precaution anyway.

The tender in the tavern section of the establishment had strange tattoos reaching up out of his collar. They looked like tentacles from an octerror, or some other fabled creature of the sea. Again, Braiden had to credit Aurraella for the knowledge. She'd read a story about a dragon named Crimzon who battled such a beast in a cavern and nearly been defeated. The man was polite and directed them to a barber.

Sissy told the hair cutter how she thought the trimming should go and when the barber gave him a look of askance, Braiden just shrugged and sat in his chair. As it happened, he felt the heavy clumps landing on his shoulders and chest and felt lighter and lighter as it went. When it was done, he held up a small reflecting glass and Braiden was shocked at the difference.

No longer did he look like an urchin. With his neck and ears now exposed, and the hair in front no longer in his eyes, he looked like a noble, or a merchant.

"Milord looks like a king in waiting," Sissy offered, the glowing in her eyes was something to behold. He knew the look. Her mother had the same wanton gleaming when she'd climbed on top of him. He thought it was a mixture of attraction and desire.

He looked at himself in the hand mirror again. Then he stood and saw himself in the larger reflecting glass on the wall. No longer would folks look down on him. He could talk to anyone and be taken seriously now.

“Come, Milord,” she took his elbow. “Pay the kind barber so we can go check on my father.”

“Yes, Lady Cecelia,” Braiden grinned at himself, at his silliness. He’d never been one to spend time gawking in a mirror, yet with his new clothes and the fresh trimming, he found he was looking at someone else. He was no longer a cobble rat spying from shrubs and haybales. He was Lord Braiden, Keeper of the Clock, or maybe Lord Braiden, Traveler of Time, or some shite like that. It didn’t matter if he had a real title. He looked like he did, and that is all it took to change the perception of the whole world around him. Or maybe it was all it took to change the way he saw himself in the world, but either way, he was brimming with confidence.

He needed to know what others saw, so he could evaluate how much persuasion he could muster. He was pleased. Outside of the itchiness around his neck, where a few hairs fell into his collar, he felt amazing and renewed. The way Sissy was looking at him only added to the sensation.

He gave the man a copper, knowing he’d have been happy with a clipped half, and after Sissy hooked her arm in his, they strolled into the early

evening as if the whole world belonged to them alone.

Chapter Eighteen



The cemetery was far larger than either of them expected. Three dozen or more rows of headstones ran parallel to each other, some tall and ornate, some blocky and rounded at the top, but most were just flat markers laid at ground level. This went on for acres and acres. Only one thing gave the space any sense of order. At the far-right end of all the rows a three-rail fence ran perpendicular to them. It clearly marked the end of the graveyard.

“This could take days,” Braiden grumbled.

Though there was a small building where they might have asked the location of the stone, they dared not let on which one it was. No telling how many marauders from Sissy’s age and after had come here looking. It was doubtful it mattered now, but there was no sense in needlessly giving themselves away, at this point.

Braiden gave another huff of disbelief over his reluctance to ask for help. For all these people knew, he was a Blacksword soldier on an excursion with his family, or a traveler from some distant land looking for a long lost relative. He decided he could change his mind, if it turned into a struggle, but they would never find it if they didn’t start looking.

“It will be in an older section,” Sissy said matter of fact. “These are not laid out all willy nilly. They must have added rows as the need grew over time. We should split up and just look at the dates. He died long before my time,” she spoke encouragingly. “It’ll be in one of the oldest areas, I’m sure.”

“Beautiful, and brilliant,” he chuckled. Braiden looked at the whole place, then, trying to peel back the layers of time. Using her sound reasoning he scanned the rows, and quickly started seeing the sections, as she’d called them. He was thinking the road winding through the entry gates was where it all started, but something stirred a flock of birds beyond the far fence and drew his eyes. He almost stepped up on one of the larger graves but thought better of it.

“Look,” he pointed and took a few steps toward where the birds were spooked. “Let’s stay together. Walk with me Milady. Your Lord requires your company.”

“How could one refuse such a request?” she copied his mocking tone. “I’d like nothing more than to spend the rest of this day by your side.”

He thought he saw a wall, or maybe a tightly spaced row of pickets, out beyond the boundary fence where the grass wasn’t tended, and a few stunted green shrubs were growing. No one would be visiting the stones of folks that long dead.

There were at least a thousand, maybe five thousand markers in this area and they were the

only people to be seen. It seemed no one bothered to visit the recently dead either.

“You can see where the lane used to wind through,” she indicated where a flat depression about as wide as a wagon cart worked its way through the lot of otherwise softly rolling hills. Rows of markers were set where she was indicating, but he saw what she meant. Those markers were newer than almost any other he could see, and each side of the would-be lane once had some sort of ditch that was never really filled in. It was as if the road grew over and was long forgotten and when they buried people over here, they ignored it as if it never existed.

Where her traces of road would have met the darker line of pickets there was once most likely a fancy gate. The opening left by the missing gate was clear, and as they neared the newer wooden three rail boundary, he knew there was something out there.

“It might not be the old section we are looking for,” he said optimistically. “But it is definitely the oldest part of the cemetery I can see.”

He climbed over the wooden fence first and then helped her do the same. Beyond the opening left by the missing picket gate there were several larger grave markers, and a row of even bigger vaults.

“Why are they so big?” she asked. “In all my days, I’ve never once been to a cemetery. Do we

really have to do this now? It's going to be dark sooner than later."

"Whole families are put in each of those," he peered into what looked like an entry hall. "These had stout wooden, or maybe iron doors locked over the opening. The coffins are above ground on shelves."

"How do you know so much about this sort of thing?"

"There are several cemeteries in Seaward City proper," he answered deciding not to tell her that this wasn't his first time doing something like this. "Look around these markers and see if you can make out any names."

Most of the headstones set at ground level were so worn the letters were gone, but a few of the more ornate monuments with the letters carved into the vertical face of the stone were plain enough to make.

"Here is Dorma Jennis who died of the pox," she let go of his arm and moved to another, bending down to get a better look. "This one says Orvil Howard, may the gods forgive his traz-grat-ion, I can't read it all."

May the gods forgive his transgressions, he figured but didn't bother to say anything because it didn't matter. He read a few names that were not the ones they were after, but he felt they were in the right area.

"Billard Waltin, Son, Father, and Husband." She said. "May he rest here undisturbed."

“That’s what Harrol told us,” Braiden acknowledged, and kept looking.

“No, Braiden,” her voice held more than a little excitement. “Here it is. He wasn’t lying. It is right here as if we were meant to find it.”

Braiden went over and looked. The first thing he noticed was how out of place the chest high stone was. All the others were in uniformed rows, except this one was sitting in the middle of where four gravestones should be. Growing excited he leaned down and read the inscription. Sure enough, it was Billard Waltin’s headstone.

“Maybe there is something buried here,” he said. “This serves to mark four plots. Not just one.” He moved around it making sure he wasn’t trampling any unseen headstones. Seeing that it wasn’t in the actual middle of the four unmarked plots, he had a thought.

“Step back,” he put his boot against it and pushed. The heavy thing rocked over a little and when it came back it went farther than it should. “I think it’s been moved.” He looked around in the overgrowth. “There should be a flat stone base, like one of the plain markers, only made for this to sit on. It would be the same size as the bottom.”

She helped him kick tufts of grass, and dead leaves off everything that looked flat, but neither of them saw what they were looking for. They searched for a while, and then Sissy put her hands on her hips. “We need to get back.” she declared. “It’ll be dark soon.”

“I agree,” he looked at the heavy rectangular monument again and then put his shoulder against it. “Help me push it over.”

She got beside him, and after getting it to rock back and forth a few times it was easy to make it fall onto its side. He’d hoped to find the base underneath, but there was only a depression the shape of where the big block of stone had sunk slightly into the ground.

Sissy sat on the turf cross-legged and tried to catch her breath.

He scratched his head wondering if someone had already dug up the loot after setting this aside but when he glanced back at the bottom of the block, he noticed there was a space hollowed out of the thing from underneath.

His blood electric with excitement he dropped to his knees and reached inside. His fingers found something that clearly wasn’t stone. “Blessed Thane is with us today, Milady,” he could feel his grin about to split his face.

“What?”

“I wonder what is inside of this,” he met her eyes and saw the giddiness he was feeling reflected in them. Carefully, not to break it, he pulled an ancient wooden box out of the base of Billard Waltin’s headstone.

Sissy slid over to him trying to maintain her cross-legged position and he knelt with it between them.

“Open it,” she said. “Let's see it before it's too dark.”

Braiden inspected it, trying to see if there was a lock or hinges or anything like that, but there was only a single little clasp. He flipped it and started to raise the lid, but his heart went thundering through his chest when a voice spoke harshly right into his ear.

“It says, may he rest here undisturbed, boy!”

With the words, Braiden felt icy cold breath on his neck.

Sissy's scream was deafening and scared him almost as much as the frigid thing hovering behind him, but he grabbed the box, pulling Sissy to her feet as he went.

After sprinting a few dozen strides he turned and saw a pale mannish figure standing where they'd just been. It was wearing a full set of armor, less the helmet and it was glaring at them with black vacant eyes.

“G-- G—Go--” Sissy stammered, pulling at his arm. He thought she was saying go, but he was transfixed on the shimmering, translucent knight.

“Return what is mine,” it said in the same raspy voice. “Bring back the key.”

“G- Ghost,” Sissy finally managed to blurt.

Braiden knew it to be true. Even now the place where its breath touched him was aching cold.

He didn't resist as she dragged him out of the old cemetery and into the newer sections. Nor did he slow his pace as they ran side by side as fast as

they could, until they were on the crowded boardwalk among the living.

Chapter Nineteen



By the time they were back in the inn, the mind-numbing terror of feeling a frigid ghost against his flesh, subsided. Braiden was shaken, and possibly still trembling, but he'd gathered his wits enough to be more focused on opening the box now, than fleeing for his life.

Sissy was visibly shaken, too, but she hadn't said much. She was in the throne-like chair, and he sat at the foot of the bed. The box was sitting on a night stand he'd dragged between them.

Braiden took a few deeper breaths and steadied himself. The box was heavy for its size, and he was as curious as he'd ever been. "Shall we?" He asked.

Sissy nodded, her mouth a tight little line. Her arms were hugged across her chest, and Braiden thought she might not be well. Still, he had to know, so he scooted closer to the box.

He gave her another look, then flipped the tiny clasp and opened the lid.

Both leaned back as if a curse or a booby trap might be about to pop out of it, but nothing happened.

"Oh," Sissy sounded as amazed as he felt. "Oh my."

From inside the box jewels sparkled ruby, sapphire, and emerald. There were a few gold coins, but only three. And the jewels were encrusted into the strangest looking key he'd ever seen. Beside the key and coins was a leather scroll case of some sort, and a small sapphire ring. Braiden took the tube out and pulled the stopper cap off one end and stuck a finger in to pull out the contents.

"One day, you'll reach into a spider web or find a nasty scorpion waiting on you." Sissy chided. "All sorts of biters and stingers could have been waiting in the base of the tombstone. A poisoned needle or a smaller bug could have been waiting in the tube."

Braiden gave her an incredulous look. "You couldn't tell me that before I stuck my arm, or my finger in?"

"Would it have mattered?"

He knew it wouldn't have, so he didn't argue. It was good advice, and he would try and remember to use a little more caution next time.

Not dead or writhing in pain, his fingertip slid out a rolled parchment that could have been put there five or six hundred years ago. He was careful, gingerly even. But he slid the roll out and carefully opened it. There were two pages. One was a map, the other a fancily penned note.

"What does it say?" Sissy asked before reaching in a taking out the jewel encrusted key. "Tell me, Milord. Please. I must know."

He smiled because she was already being silly again and for a time he'd wondered if her mind had cracked. Braiden could read well enough, but keeping a page unrolled after it sat in a tube so long was no easy task.

Loyal marauders and men of the crew, Braiden read. No one stole your shares. We had to relocate the hoard to a safer place. Already the shipping lanes and port mouths are crowded with the witch's Blacksword soldiers. They've been trained to fight by ship and have taken enough of us into her cells that we can't chance this location any longer. She is a witch after all and might extract this location from any one of our brothers.

I'm not calling them ratters or snitches, and they should never be treated as such, because she has powerful magics at her disposal and all the precious wardstone there is. She knows ways to read a man's thoughts even if he is defiant.

Tis true, sometimes death cannot stop her prying eyes from peeking into the minds of those she presumes to hold in her dungeon.

For those reasons Kizzon Ahlm and I are transporting the whole of the hoard from this location to that marked on the map. It is not near the sea or a port, for a

reason. The key will get you in and help you find your way, but you will need your wits about you to bring out your share.

Heed this warning mates. Your share is yours, but if you even try and take a single clip from another's pile, I will curse your line until time runs out.

If you have found this, I am most likely no longer roaming these seas.

If the key remains with these parchments, the hoard is still intact and waiting to be reclaimed.

The map will lead you there, but watch for signs and symbols, for they will save you if you heed them, or may end you if you don't.

You've been warned.

Commander Everett Grimm

Braiden unrolled the map next and wondered what he'd done to please Thane for him to be rewarded so.

The "x" on the map was in the middle of the Leif Greyn Valley, at the tip of a sketched structure Braiden figured could only be one thing, the fabled Summer's Day Spire.

"Lady Guntright," Braiden stood and bowed to her with a flourish. "It seems we are required at the Summer's Day Festival."

Her smile grew wide. "I've always wanted to attend."

“And I,” he dropped his imitation of a noble. “Caravans going that way are forming, even now.” He reached into the box and retrieved the three gold crowns, and the mocking tone resumed.

“It is a long arduous journey, Lady Cecilea.” He felt giddy. “We will be travelling by land and sea.” He extended an arm toward the vast expanse outside their window. “Do not fear. Only the most luxurious accommodations will do, for one of your ilk.”

“My Lord,” she stood and took the parchments from his hand and placed them back in the box on the bedside table. She then pounced onto him, forcing him to lay back in the bed beneath her. This time neither of them pulled away from a deep open-mouthed kiss that lasted long into the night.

Devious Arcana

Chapter Twenty



Even though Aurraella warned him about it constantly for the last year or so, Kifferd hadn't expected the surge of bloodlust to be so overwhelming. He was still feeling sick over what he'd done to Master Gramble. It wasn't remorse, or regret, but disbelief. His normal mind would never conceive such an atrocity. The idea he could commit violent murder in that heinous fashion was bewildering. Yet here he was contemplating, even planning, his next feeding.

The long wagon ride through the farmlands of Seaward and Valleya, to Dakahn was mundane at best and served as a heavy thrill kill for the feeding rush that had lifted him to the heavens and carried him the first few days into their journey.

Bouncing on the hard planked wood seat across the empty plains and crop fields might have been bearable if he'd had a few extra souls to feed on. Even just one might have kept him sated until they reached the valley. But like all things that were fun, or savory, partaking too much of them was frowned upon or terrible for your wellbeing. He was hungry though and would have to feed before they were back underway, or he'd have to wait until the

next time they were around enough people for one to disappear without notice.

Since they left the wagons, he'd been riding beside Master Hoops on top of some crates on one of the barges. It worked out well, because he didn't feel wanted in the small private quarters Aurraella was given on that same barge. At least not lately. The old acrobat was wise and had been just about everywhere there was to go, which helped Kifferd keep his mind off his sister. Master Hoops told him all sorts of stuff about places and landmarks as they passed. Kifferd was especially excited to see the naturally formed Dragon Fang in the western marshes and the Red Wolf Guards of Wildermont, and of course the spire, but the latter was still a few days away, and the fang wouldn't be visible until the morrow, and only then if there wasn't fog hovering over the marshlands.

The barge they were on was but one of five in their group, and two more smaller vessels were tagging along with them now, to enjoy the protection that came from travelling in greater numbers. Currently the barges were tied to a dock a few days south of the festival grounds, along the marshlands. Everyone was busy purchasing this and that while they could still get what they wanted at a normal, if not slightly more expensive rate. Once you were at the festival, you had to pay the festival price for something, no matter what it was.

An example Master Hoops gave was bread. At the festival, a loaf of bread cost thrice as much as

it would here, which was still way more than a loaf at the market back home. Kifferd laughed at himself, but there was no mirth in it. A monastery bailey full of squatters wasn't home. Nor was Gramble's Orphanage, even though it wasn't as bad as the place he and his sister were at before, but it never felt like home. He couldn't remember ever feeling safe and secure, or loved and protected, for that matter. At least not until they met Braiden.

It wasn't that Braiden could protect them, or that he put great effort into making sure he and Aurraella had the everyday things many orphans had no access to. It was deeper and more complicated. Braiden wanted to do those things. He offered them and asked for nothing in return, like a father might. And he didn't just want to provide so he could have his way with Aurraella.

His kindness was genuine. Braiden wanted to, fought to, and worked days on end because he strove to elevate his way out of the desperate cycle, he and most normal folks found themselves trapped in.

He missed Braiden and he was growing angry at his stupid sister for some of her recent choices. If Braiden found them and learned about what Aurraella and Oggy had been doing, he doubted it would end well. If she cost him Braiden, it would be the end of her and Oggy. The end of Oggy for certain. He swore it.

She was his sister though, and he was deeply connected to her. He understood her need to use

her charm and prowess. Being born with vampish blood, it was part of who she was, her nature. But to use those gifts to fornicate with some lumpkin when Braiden might be out there lost, alone, and in need seemed blasphemous.

Is she messing with Oggy because he gave me attention? Kifferd wondered to himself. *Is that why she fell for Braiden?*

He hoped not. He already decided Oggy went too far when he tried to get Aurraella intoxicated. Oggy was nice and took the time to teach him the stilts, but he only did so to get closer to Aurraella. The fact he was sitting here alone on a barge in some wild foreign land was the proof. At that very moment Oggy was off in the small river town spending Braiden's coins on trinkets and liquor he hoped to use to take Aurraella out of her wits and into his bed.

Oggy had no idea that neither the finest wine, nor the strongest dwarven ale affected those like he and Aurraella.

It irked him, but Aurraella was no better. It was one thing to seduce a boy if all she was going to do was feed on him or maybe use her charming ability to have him achieve something they couldn't manage themselves. But to let some lucky like Oggy grope her body while she pretended to be drunk, wasn't very becoming, and was enough to warrant his intervention.

Kifferd watched a confused looking woman mistake the space between a wall formed of water

kegs and the side of a building for a lane. She was putting a swollen coin purse in her bag, not paying attention to anything around her. There were folks wandering about up and down the entire length of the Leif Greyn River that knew nothing about where they were, only passing through on their way to the festival. Most of them were fools with too many coins in their life. He found himself salivating and had to wipe away a strand of drool dangling from the corner of his mouth with his sleeve.

Here was an opportunity that might not come again.

He looked around, more to make sure none of the tumblers or his sister were looking, than anything else. He only saw three others. All of them busy, and none of them aware.

Using what some might consider supernatural speed and stealth, he was behind her, walking along the stacked wooden containers, in just the span of a few heartbeats. The keg formed alley dead ended as he'd hoped, and when she finally figured out it wasn't a lane, she turned.

He was right there.

"Where is the way to the fresh market," she asked him with a start. "I might have gotten lost."

He knew he couldn't lose control like last time, and he didn't want to leave a mess or cause a scene that might hold them up. Deciding he could manage, and only feed from her, instead of devouring her, he smiled and met her gaze.

Using his will to hold her panic at bay, he gently grabbed a handful of her curly brown hair and pulled her head to the side. She didn't resist, but her expression showed she wasn't nearly as enthralled by his charming power as she should have been, and more than a little resistant.

"What is this?" She fought his control, her wide eyes looking behind him now. "Get him Riggin. He isn't huma--"

Kifferd's bloodlust surged. A rush of heat and desire rose from deep within him, he didn't hear her words but felt her futile attempts to break the grip of his will. He clamped his fangs on her neck and when he tasted her blood, he drank fervently.

Something cracked across the back of his head. Had he not been in his current elevated feeding state it might have knocked him unconscious or caved in his skull. As it was, the blow barely phased him.

Something wasn't right, but he drank another gulp anyway. It tasted wrong, but he had little control now, over his desire to feed. When the heavy club came swinging at him again, he side stepped it, spun around and flung the woman into the man who bashed him.

She awkwardly crashed into a hairy, angry looking man's midsection causing him to fold over and the two to roll into a tangled heap.

Kifferd was in a rage, but a wash of dizziness swept over him and what should have felt like raw power coursing through his body felt more like he'd

eaten chicken that sat out too long or maybe like he'd just chugged a few mouthfuls of soured milk. The contents of his stomach churned violently.

"What in the hells," the man's growl was feral, his eyes wolfish as he shoved the woman off him and stood.

"He ain't no boy," she growled rubbing her neck. *He's a blood sucker.*

When Kifferd heard her thoughts, he realized she wasn't a typical human, or maybe not fully human. He turned and vomited up a gout of foul-smelling blood and bile while managing to avoid another blow from the club. He understood now, he'd been their mark. She came back here to lure someone in.

Then the man addressed him mentally, and then he knew he made a terrible mistake.

Can't drink no lycan blood toothy boy, he grinned. Lycan blood make you slow and weak. Lycan blood make you mine.

Kifferd reached out for Aurraella but a second, more powerful heave caused another belly full of nasty fluid to surge out onto the hardpack. He wanted to get away, had to get away, but knew if he didn't vomit up the rest of this poison, he might not survive.

Seeing the wild-eyed, over hairy man grab up his club and swing it down at him like he was chopping wood, Kifferd held up a hand to stay the blow.

“Aurraellllllaaaa,” He screamed again, with both his mind and his mouth, as loud and with as much strength as he could muster, but the crushing impact of the weapon forced his hand back into his face as if it wasn’t even there.

The sick heavy sound of crunching bones and traces of his futile scream echoing around inside an endless pit followed Kifferd as he tumbled into the blackness.

Chapter Twenty-One



Braiden grinned from ear to ear watching Sissy change into her brand-new bed clothes inside the small but fancy berth he acquired. The ship was named Misadventure, and it was about to sail west along the southern coast to O'Dakahn. Turning north from there, the ship would travel up into the Southernmost reaches of the Leif Greyn Valley to Locar Crossing, where they, like many aboard, would hire a carriage or a boat to go the rest of the way.

The berth on the ship was expensive, almost a full gold piece for this leg alone. The area might have had enough room for them to stretch out in, but they'd also purchased a traveler's trunk, and it consumed what floor space the wall mounted, fold out bed didn't.

It was evening, and the ship was just departing the harbor and excitement was in the air. Several other passenger groups had the same destination and the talk earlier on the deck had been optimistic, save for warnings of a storm that might cross their path.

"Why bed clothes," Braiden asked, his curiosity genuine. She was cleverly using the trunk's open lid to keep him from being able to see anything while she went on changing.

“I will be covered with a gown and my cloak,” she explained. “It is late and once the lights of shore have faded; I can go directly to bed. I’m very tired, sir.”

He shrugged and waited patiently for her to be ready. Soon she was walking beside him down a short hallway that led to a section of railing they could watch from.

Already the ship was underway. Braiden could see the windows of the inn where they’d been staying. He found the view looking up from the slowly rolling deck didn’t offer the same sort of humbling perspective, but all the torches and lanterns glowing along the pier was something to see.

“It looks like a swarm of fireflies descended and is hovering among the masts.” Sissy mused.

As they exited the protected area of the harbor the ships’ movements became exaggerated. They rose high on a swell and then slid down the other side. The next swell was even bigger, and when the ship started sliding down the other side, the forward lean was drastic and came with a shoving twist.

The front of the vessel caused a huge rolling swell that curled near their perch along the rail. Several others, as well as Aurraella, gasped when a handful of long silvery fish leapt clear of the black water alongside them. It was amazing and yet Braiden was overcome with an empty feeling. He just couldn’t keep his mind still, not even when a

larger creature, this one with a long bill filled with needle-like teeth broke the surface with a splash that chased the other fish away.

Braiden felt his stomach churn. He'd never been to sea and was now slightly nervous but not willing to let it show. Maybe it was more than nerves? He didn't know what it could be.

"Don't fall from the rail again," she joked, and gripped his hand. "Look," she pointed up at half a moon surrounded by twinkling stars, and a few light clouds. "Such a beautiful night."

"Not nearly as beautiful as you," he swallowed the knot forming in his stomach and forced a smile. He wasn't sure how much longer he wanted to be out here. At least in their compartment, everything moved with them, so the bob and sway of the rolling sea was far less pronounced. Here, when he looked at the unmoving lights behind them, their every little rise and fall was getting to him.

"Do you like Lord Braiden or Master Braiden better?" she asked, her smile enough to evaporate the yucky feeling.

The sparkle of her eyes shone as bright as the stars and unlike the lights on shore. She moved with him and the ship, so he locked his gaze on her. "I think all you have to do to be a lord is own land," he shrugged. "To be a master you surely must have mastered something. But both are pleasing to hear."

"I've something for you Lord Master Braiden," she kissed his lips softly.

“Hmm,” he had no idea what it could be, but she’d taken a few coppers over to the bazaar while he secured their passage.

The ship slid down another swell and caused them both to grip the rail for a beat. Braiden felt he needed to lay down. “Let’s return,” he urged. “I want to see what you’ve gotten me.”

“Come,” she took his hand and led him back to their cabin.



“What do you mean, have I seen Kifferd?” Aurraella looked at Master Hoops. “He said he wanted to ride up top with you, so he didn’t miss the Dragon’s Fang or whatever it’s called.”

“That’s why I’m after him.” The old acrobat scratched his head as if trying to remember. “You can see it now. When did you see him last?”

“Yesterday a short while before we stopped at the market.” She leaned out of her rack and pulled on her boots. “He wanted to go with all of you, but I told him no. Oggy said he would bring back a looking glass so he might see it better.”

“Did he?”

She didn’t understand the question. She thought Oggy had given him the trinket and that is why he’d been up top for so long.

“Did he what?” Fear rose inside her, a moment later growing into a full-blown panic

because Kifferd didn't answer her mental query. He always answered, sometimes responding before she sent her thoughts. Something had to be amiss unless he was just asleep somewhere.

"Did Oggy bring him back a looking glass?" Master Hoops turned and ducked out of the hatch, not waiting for an answer.

She was right behind him and trying very hard not to let her imagination get the best of her. "I'm not certain. He could be asleep somewhere," she offered. "When did you last see him?"

"He was on the boxes where we've been riding when I went to help Kenna and Dell haul back some bushels of fruit." He stopped at the short ladder rising out of the hold to allow her to get on the cargo deck first. "I don't think he was there when we returned."

"Oh no," she was shaking so bad with worry, she thought she might fall. "I hope we didn't leave him behind. I told him never to leave this barge unless he is with me."

Her mind went to a dozen places, and none of them were good. Poor Kifferd had just killed Master Gramble and might have needed her to deal with it. His bloodlust could have led him off the boat and taken him anywhere. And she'd been holed up with Oggy like some giddy twit. If something happened to him, she wouldn't be able to forgive herself.

When Master Hoops stepped off the ladder she glared at him.

“You adopted us,” she said. “If he isn’t on one of these barges, you’ll turn this one right back around.”

“I will,” he nodded without hesitation. His response was more assertive than she expected. And she hadn’t tried to use her gaze to charm him, either.

“Oggy!” Master Hoops stepped up onto the crates where he and her brother had been riding. “Ooooooggggyyy!”

“Kiiiiiff!” she joined him, turning slowly around.

Kiiiiiffeeeerrd! This time she used her mental voice. She saw the dragon’s fang then, way off in the distance. It rose up out of the sloppy marsh and curved to a point just like a fang. She might have marveled at how accurately it was named; if she wasn’t fighting tears and worry like a doting mother.

Some mother I am she chided herself. *Poor Kifferd is probably traumatized, and I wasn’t here for him.*

Part of her wanted to blame Braiden, of all people. Had he been here, all three of them would have been in her compartment, playing with dice Braiden carved out of lye soap, or making up silly names for everyone in the tumbler’s crew. Unlike Oggy, Braiden didn’t act like touching her breasts and groping her crotch were more important than all else.

Oggy’s head popped up from between crates a little bit farther back on the vessel. His hair looked

like he'd just stepped out of a windstorm, and he was stifling a big yawn. He saw her and her expression, and he hurriedly climbed up with them.

"What is it?" he looked at Aurraella, his face paling with worry.

"When did you last see Kifferd?" she asked. When he relaxed and scratched his head and didn't immediately answer she slapped his face so hard the "pop" caused Master Hoops to come striding over.

"Shake off the wine, Og." Master Hoop's expression had caught up with the situation. "Search every nook and cranny on this barge," he told him.

Oggy had tears in his eyes and was rubbing the stark red handprint on his face in utter confusion.

"Listen Oggy, this is no farce." Master Hoops grabbed his shoulders and looked him directly in the eyes. "Get to searching, otherwise we will have to turn back."

"What?" Oggy looked at Aurraella, then at his master. "Is he not on the barge? I got him a looking glass for today. Where would he have gone?"

Luckily for him, he started searching instead of waiting for an answer.

Aurraella heard Oggy asking questions and wanted to throttle him again. No, she wanted to throttle herself for falling prey to her own selfish desire and not taking care of her little brother.

The barge was only sixty strides from one end to the other and half as wide. The cargo area was searched and cleared quickly.

Oggy went below, his head hanging in what she hoped was shame. He'd brought back two bottles of wine, and spent far more of their stolen coins than he should have. Why hadn't anyone bothered to see if Kifferd was on board?

She was the one who should be ashamed. She was the one who loved Kifferd more than anyone else alive. Kifferd was her responsibility, not Oggy's. Master Hoops had a share of blame too, for Kifferd was with him when they'd docked. He should have made Kifferd come to their compartment.

Then she remembered the door was locked, and she grit her teeth.

She felt tears streaming down her cheeks now. She crumpled onto the crates, sobbing, wanting nothing more than Kifferd to come save her from her distress, like he always did.

"Kiiifffeeerrd!" she wailed out. She wanted Braiden, too. He wouldn't have let them leave without her brother.

A surge of guilt, mixed with shame, and fear over what could have happened if he'd gotten caught up in his bloodlust, or worse, fallen off the barge, held her there fighting racking sobs.

She called for him with her mind again and again, and with every passing moment he didn't respond, another terrible fate that might have assailed him found a way into her mind. It was too much. She had to stop envisioning all the awful possibilities. A dark shroud of self-loathing

enveloped her and grinded her whole being into mush.

“He isn’t on the other barges,” Master Hoops told her as he strode across the crate tops to the drivers. “Turn us around,” he ordered them, “He must be back there somewhere. Has to be!” He looked over at Aurraella who was hoping beyond hope there wasn’t some reason they couldn't go back.

“He was right there when I left him,” he pointed to the exact crate they’d been using for a perch. “He was right there.”

She couldn’t tell if he was speaking to them or her, but when she felt the vessel slow and twist around in the wide slowly flowing river, she let the small bit of relief give her some hope.

Knowing he should be able to reach her mind but hadn’t, didn’t help keep her hopes up. Nothing would keep the weight of her guilt and shame from crushing her. Nothing save for Kifferd himself.

She was sobbing and unconsolable when they finally reached the dock. Thankfully, everyone told her to stay put while they searched, because she doubted, she could take as much as a step without faltering.

Master Hoops had the bargemen turn the boat again after they climbed off. She watched the riverfront through teary eyes and called on Kifferd with her mind, every now and again, but still there was no response.

Early afternoon passed into evening and then the sun was going down. No one saw or had seen Kifferd. No one at all. To humor Master Hoops the bargemen retied the barge up exactly where it was tied the day before. He sat where Kifferd had been sitting and from there looked around as the last bit of sunlight faded into night.

Aurraella was done. Her heart and mind saturated with guilt, worry, and a feeling of helplessness that not even Braiden could save her from. Blackness pulled her under.

She didn't see Master Hoops hop up, leap from the barge and jog over to a seeming alley that was formed by a row of barrel kegs. Nor did she hear him call with frantic excitement for Oggy to bring a lantern.

She woke later, when Master Hoops gently shook her.

The way he hugged her closely and held her head against his shoulder told her they hadn't found him.

"I don't know what to say," he handed her a kerchief. "He couldn't have gotten far."

"He didn't just vanish," Oggy said softly from somewhere. He wasn't talking to her, but she heard him plainly. "That smelly mess back along the keg row is from some sort of river critter. If it was Kiff, there'd have been a sign of him or his clothes, or boots."

"That's the truth of it," someone with an accent that revealed they were a local, responded.

“Don’t scare the lad’s sister with this, but there are things in the Leif Greyn River that’ll eat a big man whole and not even make a swirl on the surface. I ‘ent saying its so, but if he fell in, even right here along the docks, he might well—Let’s just hope those searching the roads and woods at first light have a better go than we did.”

“Aye,” Oggy responded.

Aurraella doubted Kifferd fell into the river. He could move faster than lightning when he wanted. He’d grown so strong as of late she just knew he’d gotten caught up in the bloodlust.

But that didn’t explain why he wouldn’t respond, and the truth of that thought sent what fleeting hope was left tumbling down into the hole where her heart and soul had receded.

“We cannot leave here until we find him,” she forced herself to meet Master Hoops’s gaze. She was glad when he hugged her close and spoke soothingly into her ear.

“We will go over the barge again in the morning, when we can see better,” he told her. “It can go on to the festival without us.” He held her away so he could see her face. “These are good folk around here. Twenty or more have volunteered to search by horseback in the morning, dozens more on foot.”

She nodded, using the kerchief to wipe her running nose.

He gave her another squeeze. “Once we find him, we can hire a carriage to haul us up to the others.”

“If we find him,” she corrected, trying not to let the darkness drag her back down. But it was no use, before he managed to walk away, she heard the pitiful sound of her own wail carry into the night.

As if in response to her sorrow, a wolf of some sort or another, from not so far away, joined her with its long, lonely howl.

Chapter Twenty-Two



On the way to their cabin, twice Braiden had to hold the rail due to the unexpected wag and wiggle that came randomly between the expected rise and fall of the craft. He couldn't remember being as glad to be somewhere as when she pulled the door closed behind her and locked it. When he turned to sit, he saw the cloak fall from her shoulders.

Under, she was wearing an incredibly arousing combination of frilly lace and sheer fabric that accentuated her form. Demurely, she strode to him, her eyes were afire with heat, and her nipples threatened to burst through the thin material struggling to hold them back. She squeezed her breasts together with her arms and the look of wanton desire on her face shifted to one of confusion, then concern.

She was beautiful. Braiden couldn't pull his eyes away. She wanted to give herself to him, to take their budding romance to the next phase, and he didn't object. Only he was feeling something else along with the ardent swell between his legs.

He wanted her. And the way she'd dressed for the occasion let him know she wanted it to be

memorable, to cherish it, but the burn that flared in his stomach wasn't connected to her advances.

He stood back up, intending to grab her in his arms, but was assailed by the need to vomit. He stepped toward her, then around, shouldering her aside. He fumbled at the lock and couldn't manage it before he heaved all over the inside of the door. "I'm so--" he started but the smell of the stuff that just left his stomach, filled the tight space and as he flipped loose the latch; he threw open the door and vomited again.

From somewhere down the hall the sound of someone else getting seasick found them.

He felt terrible, and not just his stomach, but there was nothing he could do save for fall to the deck into a fetal ball and suck in fresh air as if his life depended on it. Every time he thought he might be over it, up came another heave.

She shut the door behind him, probably angry, he decided. But she came back out once she had suitable attire on and tended to him. Even cleaned up the mess he'd made, with her nose pinched, but without a fuss.

"Poor man," she cleaned his face with a damp rag. And then went to find a mop bucket and a towel.

Before long he was emptied.

She cleaned their space a little more then helped him into the bed. After that she mopped his mess on the deck. When she returned the mop and

bucket, she brought a cup of water, and he used it to rinse the puke from his mouth.

Throughout the night he would have short spans of time where he felt just fine, then the queasiness would creep back in. Sweaty and weak, he slipped into some sort of fever dream. Only after she lay down beside him and held him in her bosom did true slumber find him.

Braiden dreamed he was flying along the edge of the sea. He had no wings, nor was he riding a dragon or a giant owl, like in the stories. He was moving at a brisk clip while below waves crashed into a rocky unforgiving shore. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind he could hear her steady voice but couldn't make out the words. It wasn't Cecelia, speaking. It was Aurraella reading a story.

Far ahead he saw the sun break the horizon, and somehow, he knew to change his direction north. What was below no longer mattered, for the sharp tip of the Spire held his gaze and seemingly drew him nearer. Around it, there were fields full of tents and pavilions. Carts and wagons were lined along every road, and banners of all sorts wavered in the wind, yet no one was there.

Not a man, or a horse, or so much as a field mouse was alive. Sliding from the sky, his feet ended up ahead of him and they gently found the turf at the base of the black spike jutting from it all. He scanned around it. Taking the time to walk around its massive girth. Names and numbers were etched into it, but he couldn't read them. He was about to

leap back into flight when he heard someone sobbing.

He turned at the next corner and there sitting on the turf was Aurraella, her head in her hands, her blond hair messy and tangled, with specks of grass, in it as if she'd been sleeping there for several days.

"Aurraella?" he said in confusion. "How?"

"Something is wrong," her gaze lifted, and her eyes met his. He felt a wash of emotion come over him. He missed her, but somehow not so much in the same way he thought he should.

"Kifferd is gone," her expression twisted into anguish.

"Gone," he heard himself respond.

"Disappeared, missing," her eyes welled with tears. "He won't respond, not even to me."

Part of him wanted to run to her side and comfort her, but he knew it was a dream. Why else would she be sitting at the base of the spire? Why else would he be able to fly?

"I fear the worst," she found his eyes again. "And I am to blame for it. Why have you not returned, Braiden? Did you die out there with Bolly Boreck?"

Boreck dead?

Braiden heard another voice calling him then. This one also female, but more insistent. Everything around him shook and he tried to force it all back so he could try and understand what happened to Kifferd.

He thought the world of the youngster, and knew how close the two of them were. She sobbed and he looked around again. Not too far away was a robed and hooded figure standing there. The material he was wearing wavered and twisted in the breeze, but whoever was under the hood didn't reveal himself.

"Interesting," a deep voice came from whoever it was. "You must be very careful boy," it warned in a voice far less intimidating than he expected to hear from such an ominous looking form.

He turned back to Aurraella, but she was no longer there. In her place was Kifferd. The boy was gaunt and curled into a fetal ball. His face was swollen and misshapen, and he had bruises all over his arms and legs. He looked dead, or very near it.

"Kifferd?" he asked. Overwhelmed with concern he stepped over and leaned down.

The huddled form was no longer Kifferd. As he drew back a large wolf, far larger than any he could imagine, snarled up at him with gnashing teeth. In less than a heart beats time it was looking down at him. "He is mine!" it snapped.

Shaken again, this time almost violently, Braiden's eyes fluttered open.

"Who is Aurraella, Braiden?" Sissy's face was mottled and tear streaked. "Why are you calling out for another woman?"

"I was sick," he said the only thing that came to mind.

She pushed him back down into the bed and stood, hands on hips. “I knew better,” her face twisted into anguish. “You’ll take me back where you found me, at once. Or I will—I will--” she turned and threw open the door. Unexpected sunlight, bright and unforgiving, filled the small room.

“I will never again--” she called over her shoulder, then the door banged shut and she was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Kifferd wasn't sure where he was, but he was glad his body stopped shaking and the fever that had been raging through him finally subsided. He felt foolish for thinking he could just go out and feed on some random person in an alley. In a place he'd never been. He wondered if Aurraella heard his calls, or Braiden. He'd called out for them both every time he could muster the strength. He thought maybe there was something about his confines that was keeping his mental voice from reaching them, because he'd been able to feel Braiden before, but couldn't now. He couldn't feel Aurraella either and was as scared as he'd ever been.

He'd never been this separated from his sister. Since he could remember, her consciousness was right there, making sure he was safe, and fed, and warm. He could feel her presence, no matter where she was, until he filled his guts with poison lycan blood. Now he was a prisoner of the strange wolfish group, who admitted they weren't sure what to do with him.

He wished he knew how to pick a lock, like Braiden. If he did, he could probably have escaped by now. His captors came and went, sometimes

leaving him for stretches long enough that, if he had the skill, would allow him the time he needed to make such a move. But he didn't know how to pick a lock, or make a campfire, or even wash his own clothes. He'd spent fifteen years doing little or nothing, and nothing is exactly what he had to show for it. If he found a way out of this, he would change that.

The pack of gruff captors made sport of him those first few days. Poking him with a stick and kicking him. He'd had a handful of the clipped coppers they stole from Gramble's in his pocket, but they'd taken those right off. He was too ill to do anything about it, and he was certain at least one of his ribs was broken. Not to mention the wounds he suffered from the heavy club. His nose felt flatter than it had, and more than one tooth was chipped and loose.

He should have listened to his sister when she told him to stay on the barge. He should have listened to her when she warned him how powerful his first few feeding surges would be too. He was paying the price for not taking the warnings seriously. If Aurraella was as wound up about the absence of his presence in her mind, as he was, then he supposed that was his fault, too.

How was he to even know such a thing as a lycanthrope was real. Much less that mistaking one for a human and feeding, could be deadly. Aurraella never spoke of such a thing, except in a single story he barely remembered. She barely told him

anything about their vampish blood, which bothered him before, but not so much now, because he was beginning to understand why.

When he was younger, he thought she knew everything and was holding back. But now he'd decided she probably knew very little. Who would have told her? Their parents were killed when he was but a babe, and her not much more than a toddler.

If he made it back to her, he would repay her for all she'd done. No one forced her to try and be his mother, and he had taken advantage of her, and took her love, and her constant presence, for granted, like some spoiled noble brat.

All he knew about his strange lineage was that he wasn't turned from a bite, like many of the vampish. He was born with the blood in his veins. Aurraella read stuff to him and the others at Gramble's, but sometimes she read to him alone. A book had touched briefly on their condition, saying the notion of garlic, and holy water harming them was a myth. The wooden stake, he figured, might be real. A wooden stake through anyone's heart, vampish or not, would be fatal, as would removing his head or burning him at the stake.

She'd read to him a little about the lycan from a book, too. But not enough for him to think he needed to worry about them. Without the ability to shapeshift, they were just men, with wolfish characteristics. But like the vampish, the wolfish were supernaturally strong and fast, and they fed

mostly on humans. He knew little else about them or himself.

Aurraella never told him how their parents died because she didn't want him to know. Everything she'd gathered about their lineage was self-learned and he'd wondered more than once when she first felt the bloodlust. Who helped her stay in control? It couldn't have been that long ago. He seemed like the only thing she ever worried about, and now he knew why.

Thinking about feeding made him all the hungrier. No longer did the idea of drinking blood cause him to get queasy. He wanted to learn all about his kind, and other similar beings. If he'd known lycans were real and a few more things about them, he might have avoided this mess.

For that matter, had he just minded his overprotective sister, he would be on the barge looking at the Dragon Fang, and Seareach, and the four-lane wide toll bridge at Locar Crossing. Instead, he was the prisoner of a pack of mostly foolish wolfen, who cared little for anything besides food, and spent most of the time he'd been awake, off roaming the night.

The one called Riggin was in charge. None of the others dared to defy him. He wasn't certain but thought that there were seven of them in all. Four males and three females. Remembering Braiden's stories about hustling and collecting with Bolly Boreck, he figured if he could find out what they wanted most, what drove them, he might be able to

trick them. But just getting a few bites of grub and some water to drink was proving to be a challenge.

The female he'd bitten was called Sharl. She gave him a good-sized bite of raw meat from a cow they killed. It didn't start a bloodlust or do more than satiate him for a few hours, but at least it didn't make his veins feel like they were full of infected pus.

Riggin wasn't very smart. The few short spans of time the pack was there while Kifferd was alert, Riggen used fear and threatening posturing to keep the others from getting too unruly. He might have even saved Kifferd's life after their stick jabbing became more violent once. In his normal state, not full of nasty lycan blood, or locked in a room that somehow dampened his ability, Kifferd thought he had a fair chance at out maneuvering Riggin, but in a full bloodlust he knew he could destroy them all. The first blow of the wolfen's club hadn't so much as fazed him. The second blow, the one that broke his hand and crushed his nose, came after Sharl's blood hit his belly.

"The toothy one is awake and hungry," Riggin's voice broke his train of thought as he came in.

He and the others used a set of stairs when they arrived and left. Kifferd heard a few of them breathing heavy and whispering. One of them howled but was immediately shushed.

There was a second door at the top of the flight that was locked, or at least sounded like they

locked it, when they left. He listened as they came in, but didn't hear them shut the door.

"Give him a morsel, Panny," Sharl barked the order as if she had a bit of sway among the females. Panny snarled and shook her head no, then sat in a corner and returned to gnawing on whatever was in her hands.

"Panny! Do as Sharl commanded," Riggin snapped, causing Panny to grumble and throw something as big as Kiff's arm at him.

Riggin picked it up from the floor, and held it up near the small, barred window set in the door holding Kifferd in.

It was a bone with a few chunks of meat still on it. Kifferd felt the stirring of his inner power give him a rise, but after Riggin unlatched the bars and opened the head high square to shove it in, the typical coppery smell of raw meat found his nose. The slow simmer inside eased off, and like one of the wild dogs running around Seaward City, or like maybe Panny, he went to a back corner and started gnawing at the thing greedily.

"Found one wants to buy you, Toothy, I did," Riggin looked in, his face blocking most of the light when it filled the opening. "You are not going to like him none. He got no pretty beard like me." He laughed himself into a snarl, and a few of the others barked and grunted, seemingly in approval.

"He pay us good," he stepped back and slammed the little barred window closed with a

crack. "You rest. He comes soon enough. Comes to make you his little toy, little toothy boy."

Kifferd tried not to listen while he worked stringy bits of meat and fat from the bone. He hoped it came from a recently killed cow or an elk and not from some bloated carcass floating down the river, or some such.

He was more terrified than he'd ever been before but resolved to get away. After all, that is what Braiden would do. When he had worried every morsel from the bone, he cracked it apart over his knee.

He tried to call out to his sister and Braiden again, but there was no response. Needing good sustenance more than anything, he started sucking the gritty but delicious marrow from inside the bone. When that was gone, he sat there and waited with tears streaming down his face.

It was all he could do.

Devious Arcana

Chapter Twenty-Four



Aurraella took in the Wildermont Mountains as she had the rest of the sites. She could find no joy in their majesty. It was as if the fire of her soul had been snuffed out. She and Master Hoops, and another tumbler named Franco stayed in the town Kifferd disappeared from for two more days, but no sign of her brother was found. She reluctantly agreed to go on to the festival. Several towns folk were continuing the search and would find them if anything was discovered.

She knew there was little they could do, and the idea he fell off the barge and either drown or was eaten by one of the scaly two legged lizards known as zardman or one of the giant snappers that dominated the river's food chain, was becoming more and more likely the truth of it.

Her heart ached for him as any mother's might. And Braiden's continued absence made it all the worse. When Kifferd was there, she could ask him if he could feel Braiden. Without his reassurance, she was beginning to think he was forever gone, as well.

She stayed out of the way while Master Hoops and the others erected a huge pavilion to set up the carousel under, and thanked Franco for helping set her and Kifferd's tent up near theirs.

Oggy stayed away from her. Master Hoops made it clear he should leave her alone, but she wasn't mad at him.

He was just a young man doing what young men do. She was the one responsible for Kifferd. She was the one who left him on the barge alone in some strange part of the world.

She fell into a heap of racking sobs, but she was all out of tears. Nothing could cheer her or bring her out of the deep well of guilty emotion save for seeing Kifferd again.

The festival would have been amazing if her brother was here to see it all. It might have been perfect if Braiden had been there too. The second day of being fully set up was coming to an end, and she hadn't so much as wandered the lanes for a moment. She'd barely eaten and had no desire to feed. She was about to bury her head in her pillow, but a big hand reached into her space and threw the tent flap aside.

"Hey you," Oggy yelled from behind the hooded figure looking down on her. "You aren't supposed to be in there."

"Nooo-" Aurraella screamed when a sword rang free from the hooded man's belt. The figure turned and threw back his hood. Immediately, she thought she knew who it was just by the sight of his bald head.

"Pate?" she wondered aloud, but knew it was him. "Don't hurt him."

Oggy stepped up aggressively only to meet the flat bottom of Pate's boot right in his chest.

The shocked boy fell back and rolled away but might have come at Pate again if she didn't dart out the tent around Pate and stop Oggy's assault. The idea the idiot tumbler would face such an intimidating figure to protect her wasn't lost on her, but she decided she would consider that later.

Master Hoops and a few others came jogging up, no doubt alerted by Oggy's voice, but Aurraella waved and jumped in front of them.

"This is Pate," she informed them. "He is from the orphanage. He is a friend."

"What is your business here, sir," Master Hoops asked. His expression showed he wasn't going to step away just by her words.

Pate was wearing all black, and in the dusky light Aurraella saw Braiden's description of him looking like a floating head, was spot on. Only Pate had a shiny sword drawn and she knew beyond doubt that he wasn't too shy to use it.

Pate looked at Master Hoops and gave a stiff nod of what might have been respect, but as he slid his long wide blade back into its sheath he turned and met Aurraella's gaze.

"I need a few of these men," he said flatly. "I need fifteen silvers, and either a horse drawn wagon or a few riding horses with good saddles."

She had no idea what was going on and looked at Master Hoops the same time Pate did.

“What for man?” Master Hoops asked as if the idea of it was insane.

“To get young Kifferd away from the blasted crew that grabbed him up.” Pate growled aggressively. Clearly, he wasn’t afraid of them. He repeated what he needed. Then to Aurraella he said, “They nabbed him to sell him back for ransom. Most likely didn’t know he is—is an—an orphan.” He spoke to them all. Then let out a slow sigh, showing how close he’d come to saying too much. The rest he said under his breath so only she could hear. “They are lycan. He must have tried to feed on one of them. Their blood is no good. It almost ended him.”

“How did you know he is missing?” she managed, finding the hope of his words lifting her from the gloom and stoking a fire of intention inside her.

I can hear you calling for him, Pate said with his mind. I can hear him too, now that the muck has thinned in his blood.

Why fifteen silvers? Master Hoops’s mental voice found them. It didn’t seem to surprise Pate, but Aurraella was shocked and wondered how much of her anguished wailing he’d been privy to.

“Four horses and the best three with a weapon you have,” Pate spoke aloud again. “I am to meet with them tomorrow’s eve, and purchase him for the silver, but I do not plan on it ending there.” He grinned. “The coins will find their way home, I promise.”



Kifferd was scared. In his mind, when he was in the cell, he was capable and ready. Now, outside the room, with heavy cuffs on his wrists made from the same stuff that dampened his ability in the cell, he felt like the helpless fifteen-year-old orphan he really was.

Who was coming to buy him from these fools? And for what?

Each answer his mind provided was awful, and the agony of waiting, worse. Of course, being hungry beyond measure, with the back of his throat all sandy and dry, didn't help.

He was standing against a tree at the edge of a field with Riggin, Sharl, and two others of their pack. The rest were in the trees or hiding nearby. It looked to Kifferd like they might try and rob whoever was coming, which would put him right back in the cell, so he hoped he could find a way to escape, if something like that did take place.

Before long a lone rider approached. He was tall and robed in black and his horse was taking its time getting there. This seemed to make Riggin and the others fidgety and anxious. When the buyer was a few dozen feet before them he tossed a bag on the ground and the unmistakable dull chink of silver coins sounded when it landed.

“Get the silver,” Riggin hissed at Sharl, and she cautiously eased out to pick up the bag.

“The boy,” the man said from his horse, still not showing his face. “Send him out to me.”

Riggin nodded over his shoulder and Kifferd was shoved, stumbling on weak legs into the space where Sharl was standing, now holding the bag of coins.

Duck, Kiff, a deep voice boomed into his head, *Lay flat.*

Kifferd fell forward right before Sharl started back toward Riggin. She tripped over him but hadn’t fallen fast enough to avoid being shafted by an arrow. Kifferd wasn’t sure what was happening, until he saw a familiar face in the woods. He couldn’t remember the man’s name, but he was one of Master Hoops tumblers. Kifferd couldn’t remember feeling so much relief.

Then he sensed, more than saw, his sister huddling nearby. “Come on,” Aurraella spoke urgently. Her tone brooked no argument. He half rolled, half knee crawled toward her and then felt the cuffs holding his hands behind his back release.

Stay right here, she ordered.

Kifferd did as he was told, even though he wanted to join the fight.

Aurraella pulled him into a thicket and hugged him so hard he nearly passed out. Then she held him at arm’s length, looked at him for a moment, then hugged him even harder.

There is food and water, she voiced. Once this part is over.

I'm sorry, Aurra. He pulled himself away and looked at the scene unfolding around them. He continued thinking to her without taking his eyes off the battle. *I've been a dolt. I should have listened to you. I will do better in the--*

Kifferd saw Riggin retreating through the trees and bolted after him. No longer slowed by the power of the cuffs, he caught up and then passed the fleeing wolfen in a matter of heartbeats. Riggin darted ahead and didn't see the arm sized branch swing out from behind a tree. It hit him square in the face with a crunch Kifferd knew from experience, did massive damage.

Riggin howled out in pain, but his form shifted into that of a snarling wolf as he went sliding through the undergrowth. Kifferd was shocked by the transformation and had to use every bit of stamina he could muster to avoid the set of gnashing teeth coming for him.

Aurraella was by his side then, her eyes glowing slightly crimson with her power. A gruesome sounding howl erupted near them and one of the wolfish women stumbled to the ground. Part of her shoulder and one arm had been sliced away.

Riggin snapped at Aurraella, and then dove at her, but before his jaws clamped shut on her pretty face, another tumbler put himself between them.

It was Oggy, Kifferd saw, and the wolven now had its teeth clamped on him. Oggy was no match for the shapeshifter, and he was shaken violently.

Kifferd used all his strength to bring the branch down where the lycan leader's hackles were standing along its back. The high-pitched yelp that resulted from the blow was muted when the creature's breath was forced out and its spine shattered.

Kifferd was yanked backwards then, by his sister. The dark shadowy form writhed and shifted back into Riggin. His hairy face twisted in utter anguish, and he searched with wide open eyes for something that wasn't going to come.

How many were there? Kifferd heard Master Hoops's voice in his head and searched the area looking for him. He didn't see the old tumbler, but he saw bald headed Pate pulling his sword from one of the lifeless bodies on the ground.

Behind Pate, the big well-muscled strong man of the troop was dragging Charl by her hair. She wasn't dead but she wasn't fighting him either. Master Hoops and another of his men, were leading Panny, and one of the male lycan with arrows trained on their bruised and battered bodies.

Seven, Kifferd answered finally. *I think there were seven of them.*

Pate walked toward the two Master Hoops forced into the clearing and without so much as a bat of his eyes went to swing his wide silvery blade.

Wait, Kifferd called. *Stop.*

Pate managed to avoid cleaving one of the snarling things in two, but just barely. He turned and looked at Kifferd as if waiting for an explanation.

“She is the only one who fed me and showed mercy,” he indicated Sharl. “And him,” he spat at the male. He’d been the one doing most of the poking when Kifferd was first nabbed by the pack.

Kifferd thought about something for a few moments then laughed at his cleverness. “Him and this one,” he pointed at Riggin still rasping and twitching. “I think they followed us all the way from Seaward. I thought I saw them at the orphanage the night Master Gramble was savaged. I’d wager we find a bunch of clipped coppers if we search the place they held me.”

“Wasn’t there a reward?” Oggy groaned as he gained Kifferd and Aurraella’s side. Aurraella put an arm around him to help keep him standing. “I thought they put up posters the day we left.” Oggy was bleeding profusely and would probably need some stitches and a full season to heal, but otherwise Kifferd thought he would be just fine.

Kifferd turned to Aurraella and smiled broadly. “You said there is food and water?” He looked at Oggy and then his sister again. *Better hurry Sister, before I feed on your new bo.*

Chapter Twenty-Five



Braiden found Sissy at the same section of rail where they watched the ship leave port. She was crying, but didn't look as mad as she had before.

"I'm sorry," he offered sincerely. "It was a dream, and—and I think my friend and her younger brother might have gotten into something over their heads. In my time, I mean."

"I apologize as well," she faced him. "It hurt my feelings. I went too far."

He wanted to hug her but was afraid to upset her again.

"It wasn't too far," he shook his head. "You are amazing. Everything about you makes me feel good. I was seasick and had a fever dream. It's just I don't have any idea how to get you back to your mother. And I don't want to lose this, for something so far beyond reach."

"If your Aurraella was right here," she turned, her face finding a more serious, even hopeful looking expression. "Which of us would you choose?"

He started to say her, but she put a finger to his lips.

“Search your heart before you answer. I only want to hear the truth.”

Braiden winced and swallowed. He could still taste bile, and wished he would have at least rinsed his mouth out and washed his face before coming to check on her.

He looked out at the rocky shore, and the waves crashing hard against it. He no longer felt ill from the sea, but what he was about to say caused an empty pit to form in his gut.

“Aurraella is nice,” he said, still not turning away from the view. “She and her younger brother Kifferd came to the orphanage about a year ago. Not after losing their parents, but after growing up in several other homes that weren’t so good.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw she was listening intently. He decided to just tell her everything about everything and continued before he lost the nerve.

“She had several books,” he smiled thinking about it. “And she read to all of us orphans every evening. Unlike most of them, I kept busy and would sometimes work away from the orphanage days at a time, so she would read most stories once for all the children, and then again when I was there.”

“That’s nice,” Sissy said, which surprised him.

“Her brother is a little strange, but not in a bad way,” Braiden went on. “He was barely a year

old when their parents died and never had a man or other boys around him.”

Thinking about it made him chuckle.

“He took to me, like a puppy to a bone, and I guess as some sort of reward for not letting him down, she started paying me more attention. She has this knack, this way she can ask anyone, man, woman, or child for something, and they just do it.”

He shrugged and glanced at Sissy, marveling at her beauty. “Only Aurra never tried to use her charm on me. I was curious about her ability and tried more than once to get her to persuade this person or that. We all wanted out of that place and her, and Kiff were never going to be adopted, so it sort of became my duty to help them.”

“One thing led to another, and we spent my free time together, always talking about what we were going to do, and where we were going to go when we had enough coins to leave.”

“I would have to tell her about you, if she was here, right now,” he squirmed in his boots, but continued. “How your smile is contagious, and how you never worry about you, so much. I would have to admit to her that I care about you both, and that I never meant to fall in love with you, but I hav--”

Her mouth found his, cutting him off. What might have been an amazing kiss, was cut short by the disgusted look that twisted her face up, but didn’t remove the smile.

“Gah,” she made a sour face. “You need to clean up. I have some lemons in the trunk.”

“So, you aren’t mad anymore?” he asked stupidly.

“My feelings were hurt,” she took his hand in hers and led him back to the compartment. “I don’t know why I reacted that way. You were honest and told me there was someone. It’s easy to forget you are lost to your own time, too.”

She stopped at the door and positioned herself in front of him. “I apologize for getting ahead of myself. I mean for coming on so strong.”

“One of the things I like about you most, Lady Cecelia,” he smiled at her. “Is that you have the gumption to go after what you desire.”

“If you think Aurraella and Kifferd need help, I want to help you help them.” She grabbed his chin and made sure he was seeing her eyes, the seriousness in them. “All I ask is that you remain honest and no matter what you do, do not make me a fool for believing in you.” She let loose of his chin and opened the door. “Now let’s find those lemons and a washrag.”

The next few days went by in a blur. Braiden was only slightly disappointed she didn’t don the wicked bedclothes she had before. But she wasn’t stingy with her smile, which was enough for the time being.

They passed the Isle of Kahna, keeping it between the ship and the shore. It was a rocky place that jutted high out of the emerald waves. Large chunks of stone had fallen into the sea, over the

ages, and they skirted far enough south to avoid hitting any of them.

Later that day O'Dakahn revealed itself. A huge palace sat proudly on the hill. It was surrounded by a bustling trade metropolis, easily three times the size of Seaward City. They were told by an attendant they would be docking for the night, but they didn't go ashore because of the crowds of people all making their way to Summer's Day.

"In my time," Braiden explained to Sissy while they sipped a fruity drink at the rail. "That great palace, or at least a good part of it, is in ruins. The High King's wizard supposedly caused a dragon to tear it apart, when they ended the reign of the tyrant King Ra'Gren."

The smaller trade village of Nahka and its meager little dock slid by in the morning and then they turned north, into the Leif Greyn Marshes, hugging Dakahn as the ship forced its way against the current.

The next day they glimpsed the Dragon Tooth. Braiden could barely make the shape of it in the heavy fog hanging over the marshland. Seareach came and went and then the ship docked at Low Crossing, where they hired a carriage to haul them the rest of the way after buying a decent sized tent and more provisions.

Outside the bobbing and swaying, horse drawn carriage, the Wildermont Mountains rose up beside the river. Braiden was taken aback by the

sheer number of travelers, on foot, by boat, or by buggy, all on their way to the same place as they.

Sissy slid aside the curtains and gawked at the majesty of the jagged snowcapped peaks, until she had to rub her neck. Then they entered the lush green valley of life, where the great needle like Spire sat beside the swollen river.

“Any ideas where a good place is to set up our camp?” Braiden asked the driver before he left them.

“There will be rows of tents like yours,” he nodded toward the chaos of more people than Braiden could count. “If you need help ask one of the soldiers in red armor. It’s their job to make sure you get where you need to be.”

Braden thanked the man and wondered if their trunk would be safe while he went looking for a spot they could claim. To his surprise, a man twice his size, or maybe a small giant from the mountains north of the valley, threw their trunk on his shoulder and motioned for them to follow.

They did. And he and Sissy were pleased with the area where he sat their cargo down. It was only a short walk from the makeshift risers being erected for the annual Brawl and even closer to the archery targets.

While they figured out how to put the tent together a pair of yellow-eyed elves walked past them.

He watched them curiously while Sissy stared at them slack jawed.

“There is a dwarf over there,” Braiden pointed at a squat man with so much hair all you could see was his pipe and his nose under the brim of his fancy hat.

“I see,” she grinned. “There is so much here to take in and do. Have you come up with a plan yet?”

“Once we are settled, I think we should visit the Spire,” he said, his eyes drawn to another group setting up their things. After watching them erect their similar canvas dwelling, he understood how their tent went together. Before the sun faded from the sky, they had their gear put away and their trunk inside. From other attendees, they learned a real Redwolf Knight was stationed at the end of each row, and that it was safe to leave your things unguarded, even out in the open, if you took the time to introduce yourself, and offer a tip.

They saw the Redwolf Guardian, and Braiden found his knees trembling when they approached. Emotionless, he towered over everyone from where he sat atop a destrier as intimidating and well armored as he was. Braiden remembered how the ocean view from the Royal Tavern and Inn made him feel small in the world. He decided he felt even smaller now, and in more ways than one.

Both the horse and the man’s armor were painted a deep shade of red, and to hide any sort of expression, a closed, full-face helmet with the skull of a real wolf on it, barely cocked toward them.

Braiden started to hand him up a silver, but the destrier leaned at him and snorted in warning. A cloaked man, clearly in the massive peacekeeper's service, reached for the coin, instead.

"An unclipped copper coin, per day. Or a silver coin for the whole of your stay," he repeated, as if he'd said the same thing ten thousand times.

Briden gave him the silver, and he asked the location of their tent. Then they were shooed away from the guard post.

After that, they were off into the crowded lanes to take it all in. Both, completely unaware of the two sinister looking men who soon began to follow them.

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