

CHAPTER ONE

Megrithe took a deep breath, holding it in to steady herself as the empty room spun gently behind her eyes. The *eallowif* had been right next to her, but now she was gone, her whispered injunction still ringing in Megrithe's ears. *He is trapped. He cannot be trusted. Find him. Find him before he shatters us all.*

She still felt ill from whatever the Siheldi had done to her – she shivered and sharply thrust the memory deep into the back of her mind – and she ached to stay tucked up in bed where she could rest and sleep. It was safe and secure at the Guild House, and she was surrounded by red iron that would protect her.

There was no place Megrithe would rather be, but the *eallowif* had set conditions in exchange for saving her from the Siheldi Queen. The price for her favor was very heavy indeed.

Megrithe had agreed to leave her position as an inspector in the Guild of Miners – the position she had spent her whole life grappling away from richer, prettier, sharper girls – and the thought of doing so was nearly as bad as the death she had narrowly escaped.

Even though she knew she had to keep her word if she wanted to keep her life, she would fulfill the bargain on her own terms. She would not let the Guild Master expel her. Not in front of her superiors and her colleagues and the hopefuls who would trample over her to vie for her place before she could even leave the room. Not in front of the rows of spotty novices and the snickering enforcers and the entire building's curious, gossipy staff. She had done nothing wrong to deserve such treatment. She had only tried to do the duty she had sworn to do. It may not have worked out quite as she might have hoped, but she would accept no censure for it.

She would resign before they could oust her, and avoid the worst of all fates: a black cross next to her name in the record books; a stain upon her family's reputation for all eternity.

Getting out of bed took a bit of trial and error, but eventually she found her feet and staggered over to the writing desk. There was paper in the drawer, and an inkwell nestled in a snug hole in the corner. She sat down and smoothed a piece of the parchment in front of her,

trying to think of what she could say that wouldn't make her sound utterly mad.

The words did not come quickly, and they were not written well. She was angry, and full of sadness, and she was probably about to vomit. Nothing she wrote would make much of a difference to anyone, anyway, so she folded the page over a few scribbled lines of regret and secured it with a shaky dribble of candle wax. It would have to do.

The only thing she had in her possession was her borrowed dress, and it had not fared well after being soaked in the ocean's brine after several weeks of sea and more than one rough handling of its owner. The silk was worse than spotted: it was shrunken, stiff, torn, and wrinkled, with ribbons of dye bleeding down the skirt, mimicking the tears that threatened to burst from her cracking heart at any moment.

She didn't want theft to be her last act within the walls she had loved so much, but she couldn't even get the blasted garment over her head again. There was no other choice besides wrapping a bed sheet around her shoulders before she slipped down the stairs with the letter in her hand to find an unattended closet and face the Guild Master, hopefully in that order.

The Master would give her any outstanding wages and let her have the balance of her accounts in gold coins. She could buy some decent clothes, and perhaps a hairbrush. She could find some lodgings in a quiet part of town. She could collect her wits, let her spirit settle, and allow her body to heal. She could find new employment in some commercial venture that might value her skills. In time, perhaps she could find a new purpose. In time, maybe she would learn to feel safe again.

Or she could go back to Niheba. She might no longer have the authority or the desire to arrest Arran for smuggling counterfeit red iron from Cantrid to Paderborn. She might no longer believe that he owned a false and criminal heart worthy of punishment, but the heart he did possess - a mystery to her in nearly all its actions - needed saving, and quickly.

Beneath the waves, she had seen the darkness of unnatural fire, and at the hands of the Siheldi, she had seen the damnation of her soul. The endless abyss had yawned open to swallow her, drag her screaming down through the fraying knot that held the demon underworld at bay. Arran had stopped the Siheldi from consuming her, and the decision had probably claimed his life.

There had been no reason for him to do it. He could have let her die. He could have used those scant few moments to run, to flee, to save himself. But he had offered himself in exchange for her, unbidden and unexpected. She owed him for that, and she was not used to

leaving debts unpaid.

The paper in her hand complained with a dull crinkle as her fist tightened, and she released her grip to smooth it out again. She could try to find a new life of quiet, anonymous contentment after leaving the Guild - or she could complete the task that had nearly driven her to death.

Find him before he shatters us all, the *callawif* had entreated her. Well, she would not be shattered, and she would let no one destroy her. Not with the sickening sorcery of the Siheldi or the honey-coated cunning of the *neneckt*. She would find Arran, wherever he was, as she had found him once before. She would put an end to this madness of seas and stones and nightmare spirits soaked in hate and shadow before anyone else had to suffer for it.

The Siheldi Queen had not defeated her. And if the *callawif* could be believed, it had not yet defeated Arran Swinn. But how long could he fight? It would take days upon days to ride the winds back to Niheba. It might take her several weeks more to gather the help she would need to find a way back under the drowning mountain. She wasn't even sure where she should begin.

With Faidal, most likely. The traitorous sea-dweller had offered to help Arran escape his predicament - right before shutting them into the stony peak's heart and leaving them to die. Certainly, he could not be trusted, but he *would* have the information she would need.

Hunting a *neneckt* who had gone to ground was no easy task, however. Faidal would take extra precautions to keep himself quiet, and there were hundreds of places in Niheba where humans were forbidden to go.

Megrith would need to enlist the aid of someone with experience in such matters, and that sort of specialized knowledge did not come cheaply or easily in Paderborn. She had a notion of where to look for it. She just had to get past the Guild Master first.

"I can't say I'm all that surprised, due to your recent erratic behavior," the Master said, adjusting the lenses of his spectacles as he read her letter of resignation. "But I am still disappointed, Miss Prinsthorpe. You have always shown great potential and capable service."

"I am disappointed too, sir. But I'm afraid I have no choice. I hope I have not lost the entirety of your good opinion."

"I think that rather depends on what you plan to do with yourself now."

"I thought that I'd like to travel and reconnect with my extended family. One of my father's old friends may be able to help me with that. Does your clerk have a recent address for

Andrus Gunhilde, by any chance?"

The Master took off his spectacles entirely to peer at her with palpable disapprobation at the sound of Gunhilde's name. "I am well aware that we encourage lasting friendships with our colleagues, Miss Prinsthorpe, but I cannot in good conscience give you information that might put you in contact with someone like that man again. For your own good - and for ours - I must forbid it. I forbid it completely."

Megrith was expecting the reaction. Gunhilde was well known to be a violent and dangerous fellow with little sense and even less self-control. The fire she had started in her dormitory had been nothing compared to the damage Gunhilde had inflicted during his time as an inspector, and he had been expelled unequivocally after nearly murdering a senior official with nothing more than a sharp pen.

Based on the tales he had left behind him, Megrith certainly would not have held any love for such a man, nor any desire to extend her acquaintance with him, despite his close association with the father she had lost many years ago.

But Andrus had a brother, and that brother had a son. If the rumors were true, that son knew more about the *neneckt* and their peculiarities than any other man or woman who lived on dry land.

"I thank you for your concern, sir," she said. "But if I may be so bold as to remind you, you no longer have the grounds to forbid me anything."

"Neither do I have any obligation to help you."

"Yes, sir. I understand. I just thought I'd ask."

The Master sighed and cleaned his lenses against the hem of his robe. "What are you up to, my girl?" he asked in a much gentler tone.

She knew that voice. It was the voice that grown men used to entice secrets from children who hadn't yet learned the pain of false friendship. She had always had the utmost respect for Master Hawken as a shrewd leader, if a ruthless one, and so it didn't wound her that he was treating her like a babe in arms, but neither did it do much to foster any inclination to be transparent with him.

"It was just a passing thought, sir," she said with a warm smile. "There aren't many of my father's friends left. With my mother gone as well, I just assumed he might be able to put me in touch with some of my relatives. I will find him another way. He may be in the city directory."

"The hangman's directory, more likely."

"Perhaps so."

"Go on with you, then," he said. "On your own head be it. You can ask Parry for information when you settle up your accounts, though I don't think he'll know. I doubt there's anyone here who would rather remember than forget him."

"I assure you I feel the opposite about everyone here, sir. I have enjoyed myself immensely during my employment, and I wish you all the very best in luck."

"You will leave an address for yourself with Parry, please," he said pointedly. "I shouldn't like to lose track of you entirely."

"I certainly will when I have one to give."

"See that you do."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

After a quick curtsy, she was practically trotting her way towards the head clerk's office. Under normal circumstances, a term in Parry's company was nothing to rush into. He was a dour fellow, self-important and achingly bland, but she didn't want to be caught in the halls by someone who might ask her why her eyes were blurring with tears.

The truth of her parting words was weighing heavily on her. She *had* enjoyed herself, and she would miss all of it most terribly. Even the slightly moldering smell of the ancient corridor leading to the clerk's room was making her nostalgic already, and she took a deep breath of it to keep as a memory before stepping through the door.

"All I need is the name of the street, Mister Parry," she said for the third time, her patience quickly waning as the man rummaged uselessly in some large and dusty books, trying to exasperate her so much that she would give up and leave. "And my money, please. Mostly my money, if we're being honest," she sighed when his stubbornness showed no sign of abating. "I can find the address on my own while you collect my funds."

"Not from my books, miss," he warned, holding the tome to his chest like a frightened child when she reached for it. "You might get soot on it. I'm sure there's still some under your fingernails."

Megrith bit the inside of her cheek as the clerk grumbled off towards the vault to fetch her coins. She really was never going to live that down.