

*Dark Lights*  
*The Awakening*

*David Vanavermaete*

*Emma's Books*

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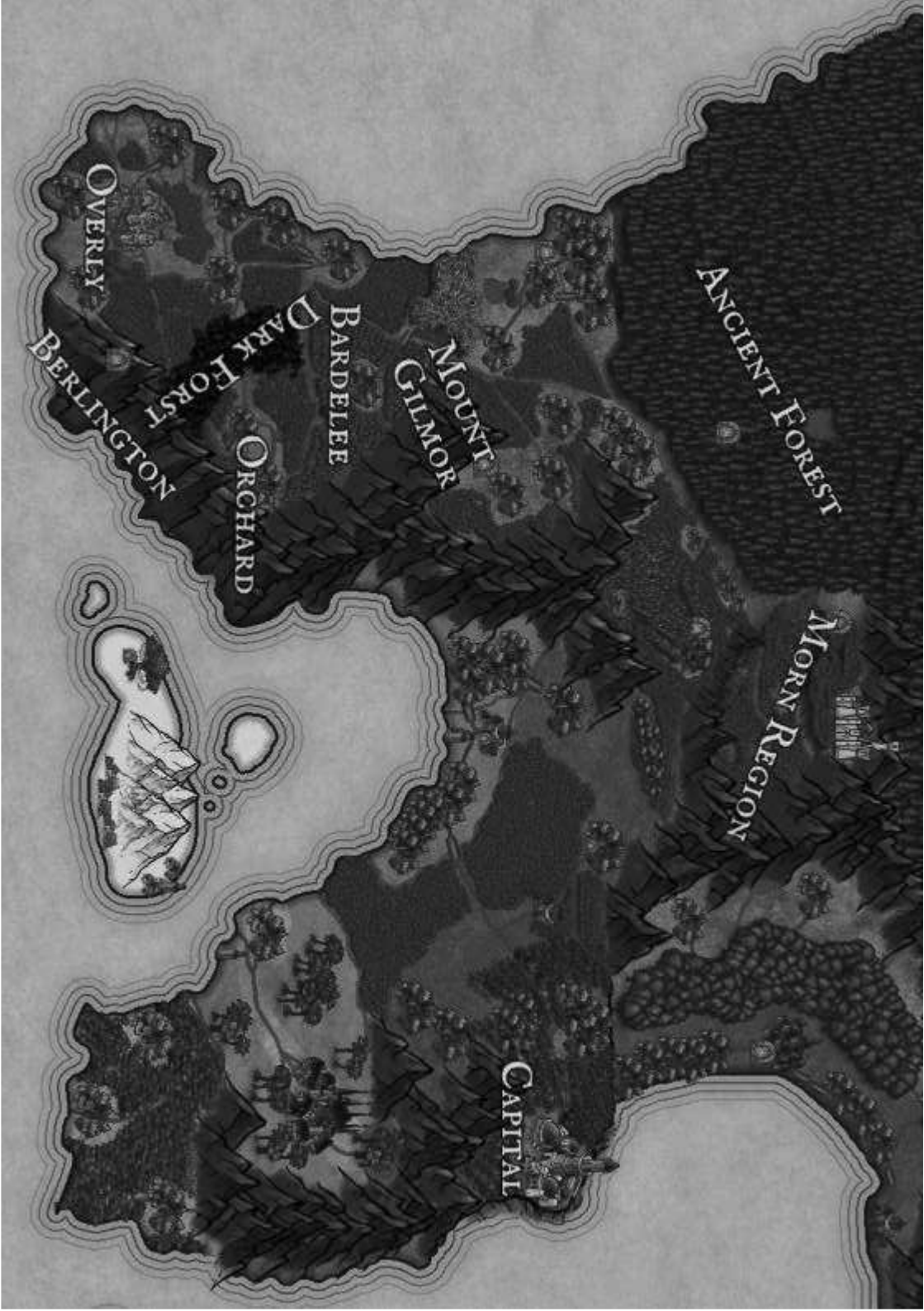
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OVERLY

BERLINGTON

DARK FORST

BARDELEE

MOUNT  
GILMOR

ORCHARD

ANCIENT FOREST

MORN REGION

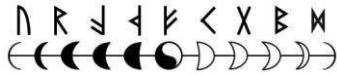
CAPITAL

*The world you build, the stories you tell, are only limited by your own imagination.*



# Chapter 1

## *An unexpected hunt*



The sun was setting over the forest, and Evelyn knew she had little time left. Just a few hours ago, she had slipped out of the house and into the forest, hoping to catch something to supplement tonight's dinner. So far, her efforts had been fruitless. She veered off the main path in search of tracks. A soft breeze made her long, curly, dark brown hair dance to the rhythm of the wind. A sudden rustling in the leaves caught her attention. Evelyn's bright blue eyes immediately scanned the ground, looking for the source. She finally spotted what she was hoping for: a small fuzzy rabbit peacefully chewing on a few long blades of grass nestled between the roots of a large birch tree. Slowly, she knelt, careful not to make a sound. A few small bushes concealed her from the rabbit's gaze. With practised precision, she placed a black feathered arrow against her bowstring, drawing it back in a smooth, controlled motion. She took three deep breaths, aimed carefully at her target,

and exhaled slowly while she released the string. The moment the arrow left her fingers, she knew it would fly true. It soared through the air and struck the rabbit's neck, killing it instantly. Evelyn made her way over and skilfully removed the arrow, ensuring it remained undamaged for future use. She then unsheathed her hunting knife, which was securely strapped to her leg with leather bindings, and made a clean cut through the rabbit's jugular. Blood quickly drained from its lifeless body into the dusty forest ground. She removed the organs and wrapped the meat in a cloth.

Meanwhile, the sun had sunk below the horizon, casting a deep red glow over the forest. Evelyn took a moment to enjoy the breathtaking scenery. She always liked spending time here, much to her father's dismay. He would rather she stayed safely at home. She had often thought he was just exaggerating. Most villagers feared going into the forest, but that was only because they believed all kinds of evil were lurking within. Yet there was a moment when she had almost died in this very forest. She still remembered it as if it were yesterday. She must have been barely eight at the time.



It all started with her father taking a nap. Young and restless, Evelyn decided to seize the chance to get out of

the house. She knew she wasn't allowed to, but it was such a beautiful day. It would be a pity to stay inside. Normally, when she snuck out, she would spend hours wandering in the forest or resting against the trunk of a broad oak, listening to the birds chirping in harmonious melodies while watching a squirrel gathering nuts or a spider weaving an intricate web shimmering in the golden light of the early morning. Every time again, she was mesmerised by all the life around her. But today, something felt off. She couldn't quite place it, but an uneasy sensation curled in her stomach. A warning that something terrible was about to happen. Trusting her instincts, she decided to turn back. Perhaps she could still manage to return home before her father woke up. She had barely taken a few steps before something huge leapt out at her from the nearby bushes. Instinctively, Evelyn dashed sideways, nearly slipping into a small mud puddle. She quickly recovered her footing and ran for her life. A rapid glance over her shoulder confirmed her worst nightmare. A terrifying creature was chasing her, and it was gaining ground fast. In that critical moment, she had only one option with no room for mistakes. As the creature lunged, claws outstretched, Evelyn hurled herself sideways, narrowly escaping its razor-sharp nails. Its momentum carried it past her, sending it crashing into a nearby tree with a heavy smack. The beast shook its head in agony but quickly

recovered, preparing itself to strike again. Evelyn panicked. What else could she do? She didn't have enough time to run away and couldn't evade it forever. Was this the end? The monster charged at her, ready to kill. Evelyn backed up, but in her haste, she slipped and fell flat on her back. There was no escape now. She closed her eyes, bracing for the agony of claws tearing into her flesh. Instead, she heard a sharp whistle, followed by a loud thud. The expected pain never came. When she finally dared to open her eyes, the creature lay dead by her feet, a short bolt with familiar black feathers protruding from its skull. Surprised, she turned to see her father running towards her, a crossbow in hand. He was breathing heavily, with sweat dripping from his forehead.

“What did I tell you about sneaking out of the house?” he shouted. “You could have died if I hadn't found you in time!”

Evelyn swallowed hard, torn between guilt and overwhelming relief.

“I'm so sorry, Dad, it was so nice outside and—” she stammered, shaking a little as the shock of what could've happened dawned on her.

Robert's anger softened as he examined her for injuries. “Are you all right? Did it get you?”

“No, I don't think so.” She accepted her dad's hand, which pulled her back onto her feet.

Robert was a middle-aged man with mid-length black hair and a full beard. Streaks of grey had begun to pepper his dark hair and beard, reminding him he was getting older. Yet the fact he had found Evelyn so quickly showed he was still in top condition.

“I’m just relieved I found you in time,” he murmured, taking her into his arms.

He had always been overprotective and slightly too severe for Evelyn’s liking. She was of the opinion he needed to relax. She often wondered why he was so tense all the time. They lived in a small, secluded village where hardly anything interesting occurred. But as she stared at the grotesque corpse of the creature that had nearly killed her, she wondered if he had been expecting something like this to happen. Now that she thought about it, how did he know she was in danger, and more importantly, how did he find out where she was?

“How did you find me?” she blurted out, taking Robert by surprise.

“Oh, I... I just had a bad feeling. I guess I was lucky I ran in the right direction.”

Evelyn suspected he wasn’t telling the whole truth. Still, she also realised that seeking a better explanation would be futile. Now that the creature was dead and her heart rate had settled, Evelyn’s curiosity took over, and she approached the contorted body lying immobile on the forest floor. It almost looked human. The creature

had leathery grey skin, long fingers, sharp, pointy nails, and a strangely distorted face. The more she looked at it, the more it made her feel nauseous.

“Ugh,” she said with flared nostrils. “What the hell is that thing?”

“A ghoul,” answered Robert.

He scanned the horizon with his crossbow.

“I hope it’s the only one. I don’t like having them so close to our home.”

Evelyn was still looking at it with great interest.

“What are they exactly?”

“Cursed creatures.”

Robert leaned over the creature and removed his bolt. “People who fell so deep into despair that they embraced darkness and feasted on the flesh of the innocent.”

Evelyn recoiled. “Wait, that thing was human?”

“Once, yes,” Robert admitted. “But all humanity has faded from them.”

He crouched in front of Evelyn, holding her hands, and made sure she was focused on him and what he was about to tell her.

“I hope you understand certain actions may have serious consequences.”

Evelyn’s gaze guiltily dropped to the tops of her shoes. “I’m so sorry, Dad, for disobeying you.” She shuffled her left foot over the dusty ground. “I... I just

really needed this,” she stammered. “I cannot sit around in the house all day.”

Robert sighed, and to her surprise, a gentle smile appeared.

“I know, kiddo. It’s just—” he hesitated, then draped an arm around her shoulder. “You know what? Tomorrow, we start your training.” Evelyn’s eyes widened. “Training?”

“Well, if you insist on wandering off, you might as well learn how to defend yourself.” He laughed nervously.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“But I’m still very disappointed in you,” he uttered.

They exchanged glances before bursting into laughter, the tension between them easing as they headed back home.

The following morning, Robert woke Evelyn up early.

“What’s happening?” she murmured, still half asleep.

“Rise and shine, kiddo.”

He opened the small window curtains, letting the first rays of sunlight enter the room.

Evelyn yawned. “Do we really have to leave this early?” Unlike her father, Evelyn had never been a morning person.

“I want to take you to the mountain while I pick up the runic stones for the shop, so yes, we need to leave this early.”

Evelyn was suddenly wide awake. Her father went up the mountain once a week, but she had never been allowed to go with him. Ms Fiddle always came to babysit her, as if she needed a sitter at her age. Excited, Evelyn slid out of bed and into the bathroom. She splashed cold water on her face. A girl with a small, oval face and freckles dusting her nose and upper cheeks stared weary-eyed into the mirror. She didn't resemble her father much. He once told her she had her mother's beauty. She had inherited her narrow cheekbones and a gentle, warmer skin undertone. But Evelyn had never met her mother. It was a subject Robert preferred to avoid. After trying to tame her curly hair, she joined her father for a quick breakfast before they headed into the forest.

“Do you think we will run into any trouble today?” she asked.

“I don't think so. Normally, these parts of the forest are safe, but after yesterday, I'm not so sure anymore.”

It wasn't long before they reached the foot of the mountain, where the path began to climb. Robert stretched out his arm, stopping Evelyn.

“Before we go up the mountain, I want to give you something,” he said. “Follow me.”

She followed her father, trying to guess what he had in store, but Robert remained silent. They reached a small glade nestled along the mountain's edge.

"This way," he said, pressing his hand against the rock.

The stone before them vanished into thin air, revealing a small cave. A bright blue glow pulsed from the stony walls, illuminating the cavern. Robert stepped inside and gestured for Evelyn to follow.

"I found this cave a long time ago," he explained. "To be honest, I use it as a resting spot when I travel up the mountain."

As far as Evelyn could see, the cave consisted of one cavernous room. On one side was a small desk. There was a sitting corner containing just a tiny table and chair. She could imagine her father sitting there, reading a book while smoking his pipe. As Evelyn turned around, she could see an old bed. At the far end of the cave was a working table. Different parts for a crossbow and a small set of tools were spread across the table. A longbow was leaning against the side. A bit further, a few training dummies lay scattered on the ground. Arrows were still pointing out of one of the dummies.

"Here," Robert said, handing Evelyn the bow she had seen earlier.

"Are you going to teach me how to shoot?" she asked enthusiastically.

“I am,” he said, smiling at Evelyn. “Help me with the dummies, will you?”

Together, they dragged the dummies outside.

“All right, stand here,” Robert said, guiding Evelyn into position. “We will try to hit the targets.” He pointed towards the dummies.

Evelyn readied her bow with an arrow.

“Not a bad posture,” Robert said, impressed.

Evelyn took a deep breath, aimed, and fired. The arrow soared through the air and missed the target by only an inch. She looked disappointed.

“Don’t worry, kiddo. I would have been impressed if you’d hit the target on your first try.”

They trained for over an hour. Evelyn’s arms ached by the time her father called for a break. After dragging the dummies back inside, they sat outside in the sun, eating a loaf of bread before continuing their journey. Evelyn was now proudly strolling beside her father, happy to have her very own bow and a quiver full of arrows.

They returned to the main path and climbed the mountain, following the hill’s irregular shape.

“So, what exactly is this place we are going to?” she asked, trying to keep her breath under control.

“Why don’t you guess?” Robert sounded like a teacher, prompting a student towards an answer.

She frowned and thought back on the many lessons and books he had made her read over the last few years.

“If I had to guess,” she said slowly, weighing her words, “I would say it’s one of the rift tears?”

Robert grinned proudly. “I’m glad to see you’ve been paying attention.”

“I’m still unsure what they are, though,” Evelyn admitted.

“Ah,” he said. “You see, the magical plane is filled with energy, and it pours right into our world through these tears.”

He pointed up the mountain.

“And that is where the runic stones come from?” Evelyn asked.

Robert smiled, enjoying Evelyn’s interest in the matter. “Almost, kiddo,” he said. “The stones are mined down in the village, but they need to absorb the magical essence from the tear before we can use them.” “Cool,” Evelyn said.

As they climbed higher, the air grew colder. Snow covered the grassy vegetation, and the wind tugged at Evelyn’s clothes. By the time they reached the final, nearly vertical stretch, she had to use her hands to climb. Her legs burned with exertion, and the wind bit at her fingers. All she wanted was to collapse at the top. The unbearable cold no longer mattered, though she knew she would freeze to death if she stopped moving.

At last, she dragged herself over the edge and let herself fall onto her back, utterly tired. It took a few moments before she realised she wasn't freezing anymore. Blinking up to the sky, she was startled to see pine trees towering above her.

"You alright, kiddo?" asked Robert, sitting down beside her.

"It's so warm here."

"Wait till you see the tear," he said, standing back up and giving Evelyn a hand.

He pushed aside a few bushes, and Evelyn's mouth fell wide open.

Hidden behind a dense layer of vegetation was a small piece of paradise. A large weeping willow with vivid red leaves caught her eye as she walked past her father. The mountaintop was a small, secluded meadow covered with fluffy moss. It was surrounded by dense vegetation. Only at the far end of the meadow, just beyond the willow, did the land open up to reveal a majestic view over the forest stretching far below. A small puddle of fresh water was located on the cliffside. Evelyn could hear the water streaming over the edge, down the mountain. Walking through the meadow, she saw small blue and red flowers growing between the green moss. Right in front of the willow stood a large circular stone platform. Strange markings were engraved into the stone. The platform softly hummed with a blueish light,

just as she had seen in the cave. Here and there, Evelyn saw large boulders, all covered in colourful herbs. One of which she immediately recognised as the one her father used for tea. As she approached the willow, she could see a dozen runic stones lying by the tree's roots. All were gleaming with a bright yellow light. Evelyn let herself fall into the fluffy moss. She leaned against the tree and looked over the puddle of water at the magnificent view.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” sighed Robert.

Evelyn just stared around in fascination while Robert started collecting the runic stones and placing a new bunch by the tree's roots.

“Can you collect some herbs over there? My tea pouch is almost empty.” Evelyn groaned as she got up, slowly making her way to the closest boulder covered in herbs, where she filled the pouch.

“Dad, aren't you afraid someone will steal the stones when we're gone?”

“Not really. This place is too isolated. Most villagers still think the forest is dangerous. They will never wander this far.”

Robert glanced up to the sky.

“We should leave if we want to make it home before sunset.”

If Evelyn had hoped the way back would be easier, she was deeply mistaken. Going down the mountain was

as challenging as going up. She was happy when the path grew wider and flatter. As they walked through the forest, Robert suddenly stopped.

“Evelyn, look there... tracks. With a bit of luck, we can hunt something for dinner.”

Evelyn tried to follow her father silently, but accidentally stepped on a branch, snapping loudly under her weight. Robert turned around, making a sign she had to be quiet. He stopped a few times to examine the tracks before they finally found a small rabbit cheerfully hopping through the bushes. He pointed from her bow to the rabbit.

Evelyn readied her bow. Taking a deep breath, she took the shot. As the arrow left her bow, a sudden bursting pain split her skull in two. In a flash, she could see a much younger girl, who looked oddly similar, holding a bow. Judging by the scene, the girl had just shot a small deer. As abruptly as it started, the pain faded away, and the little girl disappeared. She saw her dad’s anxious face looking at her.

“Kiddo, are you okay? What happened?” Evelyn groaned. “I just hit myself with the bow.” She didn’t feel like sharing her vision with him yet. Robert’s piercing blue eyes seemed to look straight through her. It almost felt like he was X-raying her, trying to unravel her thoughts. But he did not question her any further and

turned back towards the rabbit. It was not her arrow but her father's short bolt that had pierced the rabbit's head.

"Your arrow is over there," he pointed.

Disappointed, Evelyn stood up and pulled her arrow from the tree.

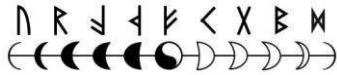
"Well, we can still call this your first hunt. Don't worry. It took me a lot of training as well. You will get there," he reassured her. "We will have to work on your clumsiness, though," he chuckled.

Evelyn laughed, too. "Yeah, good luck with that."

Evelyn wasn't entirely certain if this truly was her first hunt, though.

## Chapter 2

### *Strange Visitors*



To this day, Evelyn had still been unable to make sense of the vision she had seen all those years ago, but it hadn't happened again. One thing had changed, though. By now, she could handle her bow easily and with grace. She wasn't a helpless girl wandering through the forest anymore. She reached the tree line, and their small cottage appeared on the horizon. The light was shining from the living room, illuminating the front porch. Smoke rose from the chimney, and Evelyn was already picturing herself in front of the fire with an enjoyable book. Her father had built the house a long time ago. They lived a few miles from Bardelee, the only village in the region. The villagers had learned to be selfsufficient, as the closest city was more than a two-day ride away. Bardelee had everything one could need. Its arable fields and meadows provided ample food, the river supplied fresh water, and a mine a bit further down the road yielded coal, limestone, and runic stones. Her father was the village leatherworker. Thanks to his

knowledge of runes, he could enhance clothing, light armour, and tools, improving their efficiency and durability. Usually, that was done by the village archmage, but no one in Bardelee could use magic. Instead, they relied on Robert's expertise and a limited stock of runic stones. For Evelyn's sixteenth birthday, Robert had made her a perfectly fitting set of light, leather armour. Of course, it was his way of keeping her safe. And while the armour might have been excessive, she cherished it. As soon as they could spare a few runic stones, Evelyn tried to enhance them with various incantations, making her armour unique and wholly suited to her needs. She had encrusted her leather boots with an incantation of stealth, smothering the sound of each step, proving its worth during her many hunting sessions. The top piece of her armour consisted of a leather corset she often wore with a white blouse. She had hardened the leather around her chest with an incantation of significant strength, which should protect her chest from small projectiles. From the waist down, Evelyn wore a skirt with a small front. Something Robert had insisted on to make her more girlish. Yet she still wore a pair of trousers underneath, which were improved with an incantation of minor endurance and a repellent for dirt, keeping them nice and clean. She used different straps to attach her hunting knife and work utensils around her legs and waist, and her knees were

reinforced with leather patches. She also had a pair of bracers and leather gloves she exclusively wore during her hunting activities. She was very fond of her outfit. It was far more elaborate than the armour the village hunters wore. Of course, no one begrudged her for this luxury. They all thought Robert was mad to have built his house on the forest's edge. Most villagers believed the forest to be dangerous and thought it would only be a matter of time before some monstrous creature attacked them in their sleep. By some miracle, they had never had any trouble, and tonight was no exception. When Evelyn entered the cottage, her father was already pacing in front of the fire. As expected, Robert scolded her for being late before preparing dinner. They spent the rest of the evening by the fire. Evelyn couldn't help but notice her father's attention drifting toward a half-open letter sitting on the coffee table. She wondered what it was about but chose not to ask.

The following morning, Evelyn awoke to the delicious smell of fried eggs and bacon. After brushing her teeth, she joined her father downstairs for breakfast. Robert sat by the table with a cup of coffee, re-reading that same letter. "Morning, kiddo," he murmured, his attention on the paper.

Evelyn growled as a way of saying good morning and poured herself a large steaming cup of coffee. “What’s in the letter?” she asked after a few sips.

“One of the lords from the nearby city is coming to the shop for a large order.” He didn’t sound pleased.

Evelyn was astonished. “Wow, is he really travelling all this way just for your work?”

“Apparently,” Robert muttered, still studying the letter as if it might contain a secret code.

“Isn’t that good for our business?” she asked, noting her father’s worried expression.

“Yeah, the Von Dovers just moved to that city. They might have spoken highly of us.”

He folded the letter and looked at the small clock on the wall.

“They’ll be arriving soon. We’d better get going.”

*Robert’s Craft* was a small shop on the village’s main street. It only had two rooms. The front room housed mannequins, displaying various garments and working clothes. There was a big wooden table in the middle of the room. Various pieces of armour Evelyn was working on were scattered across the table. The second room was much smaller and mainly functioned as Robert’s office. It had no windows and contained cabinets filled with books, tools, and runic stones. A small desk stood against the wall, where he worked undisturbedly on the more intricate incantations. As they arrived, Robert

nervously glanced up and down the street before finally entering the shop.

“Evelyn, could you work in the office today? I would like to receive the clients in private.”

“Sure, no problem.” She gathered the loose pieces of armour and moved to the office. She sat behind the desk and looked at a scrap of paper pinned to one of the armour pieces.

“Only a few minor incantations,” she thought. “Nothing too difficult today.” She retrieved a few runic stones from the cupboard and sat down. She placed the first stone on one of the armour pieces and engraved the first incantation. Carving runes had always been Evelyn’s favourite part of the job. Especially when she had to create new combinations, it was like solving a puzzle. She had to find the right combination to bestow the desired properties while counteracting any undesirable effects. Each rune had its drawbacks, which she had to balance with others, all within the confines of the small runic stone. When she finished carving the first incantation, the runes glowed a bright yellow. She took a small, long silver dagger and pierced the stone. It cracked in two before turning to ash. The armour piece momentarily glowed in the same yellow before returning to its normal state. “Only ten more to go,” she thought. A few minutes later, she heard movement and different voices in the front of the shop. The client had arrived.

Evelyn continued working in silence. It was nearly noon when she finally pierced the last stone. She was collecting her tools for the final assembly of the scraps into one sturdy armour when she heard her father raise his voice. He sounded agitated. Should she check on him? He would likely prefer she'd stay out of it, but he had never spoken to a client like this. Moving closer to the door, she pressed her ear to the keyhole. The voices were muffled, making it difficult to understand anything from their conversation. The clients sounded angry. She caught only a few words. Something about doing his part of the job? She stepped back, unsure of what to do. Rich people often had the habit of being a little supercilious towards those they believed to be beneath them. Was this just another case of that, or was something more unsettling at play? She approached the door again, this time determined to act. She would enter the shop under the pretext of retrieving some utensils, allowing her to assess the situation. But when she tried to open the door, it wouldn't budge. The lock didn't even make its usual clicking sound when Evelyn turned the doorknob. Had he locked her in? There had never been a key on this door before. How had he even done it? She returned to the desk and worked on the armour again while keeping an ear out for any alarming sounds. After ten minutes, the door opened, and Robert entered. He was pale and visibly shaken.

“Are you okay, Dad?”

“Oh, yeah, difficult clients, but they pay well, so I’ll manage.”

A feeble smile appeared on his face. His eyes flicked to the half-completed armour on the desk.

“How’s the armour coming along?”

“Incantations are done; I just have to assemble them,” she said proudly.

“Good, good,” he replied absent-mindedly. “I have some business to take care of. Do you mind finishing your work in the office?”

Evelyn frowned. “Are you sure you’re okay, Dad?”

“I already told you I was,” he snapped. “Just don’t go wandering around this time.”

She had never seen him like this, and now was not the time to argue. Robert put on his coat, cast her a final, troubled glance, and disappeared through the door, locking it behind him.

The afternoon was relatively uneventful. Evelyn was able to finish the armour, which was now gleaming on one of the mannequins by the front window, ready for its buyer. When her father returned, she was reading *‘Algebraic Dimensions of Runic Spells.’* He was still pale but seemed less agitated. He carried a long black cloak in his hands.

“It’s getting chilly outside. We’d better get home before it starts to rain.”

He paced uncomfortably, choosing his words carefully.

“Listen, Evelyn. I’m sorry for being so on edge earlier.”

“It’s okay, Dad.”

Her eyes flicked to the cloak he was holding.

“So, what’s that?”

“It’s for you,” he said, handing her the cloak. “I thought you might like it.”

The cloak was made from thick, heavy, dark blue fabric, but when Evelyn put it on, it felt soft, comfy, and as light as a feather. It certainly wasn’t an ordinary cloak. Evelyn nearly jumped on her father as she hugged him.

“Thanks, Dad. It’s awesome.”

She strode out of the office, twirling as the cloak billowed around her.

“What is it made of? It’s so light.”

“Oh, that’s just a minor incantation, nothing special,” he replied, gazing half-distracted out of the front window.

They left the shop and stepped down the main street. Robert constantly glanced over his shoulder as if afraid they were being followed. Evelyn narrowed her eyes.

“Something wrong?”

“Edgard spotted a pack of dire wolves on his hunt today. Just making sure nothing’s lurking.”

When they reached the house, Robert quickly closed the door and drew the curtains shut.

“Can you start the fire?” he asked before disappearing upstairs.

A few minutes later, he returned downstairs to prepare dinner. As he chopped carrots, he turned to her.

“Listen, kiddo, I know you can handle that bow of yours, but I want you home until the dire wolves have been dealt with, okay?”

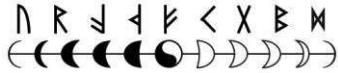
Evelyn sighed in exasperation. “Sure, Dad.”

She didn’t know what was going on, but it wasn’t fair she was being punished for it. She wasn’t going to argue just yet, but she wasn’t happy about it either. She ate her dinner in silence, ignoring her father. When he finished, he retreated to his room; an unusual habit which only deepened her suspicions. Usually, he would sit by the fire, reading one of his books and enjoying a cup of tea. Something wasn’t right, and whatever it was, the answer was hiding somewhere in his room. She slowly walked up the stairs, avoiding the squeaky steps. She crouched outside her father’s door, peering through the keyhole, but she couldn’t see a thing. Nor could she hear anything from inside. There was something unnatural about it, as if the room behind that door had ceased to exist. Frustrated, she retreated to her room. She didn’t know who those clients were, but she would find out. All these years, her father had been overprotective and

paranoid about the slightest thing. Had he been running from something for all these years, and had it finally caught up with him? Evelyn quickly changed and collapsed onto her bed. As she closed her eyes, she could only hope that by morning, everything would be back to normal.

# Chapter 3

## *Robert's secret*



The next morning, Evelyn woke early. She rubbed her eyes and climbed out of bed. Yesterday had been such a strange day. She gazed out of her small bedroom window. It was still dark outside. Her gaze lingered longingly on the rough outlines of the forest, which she was now forbidden to enter. But she was certain she'd soon find plenty of opportunities to sneak out of the house. The only thing that worried her was how anxious her father had been. She had never seen him like that before. Whatever was going on, she decided it was better to stay out of the forest until she knew exactly what the hell was going on. Usually, her father had to drag her out of bed, but this morning, she was wide awake. Staying in bed felt pointless, so she decided to make coffee. She had stepped into the hallway when she noticed a sliver of light shining from beneath her father's door. Was he awake already? He never stayed in his room. Curious, she tried peeking through the keyhole again, but she couldn't see a thing. There was

undoubtedly something peculiar going on behind that door. It was as if something was keeping her out. Disappointed, she gave up and descended to the kitchen. The oil lamp didn't give much light, but Evelyn was used to it. She lit the fire under the stove, poured milk into a saucepan, and added the porridge. Just as she finished making coffee, she heard footsteps on the stairs. Robert entered the kitchen, looking terrible. Dark circles framed his eyes, and his face was even paler than the day before. He had clearly not slept much.

"I didn't expect to see you up this early," he yawned.

"I couldn't sleep."

She poured him some coffee and stirred the nowsimmering porridge. She was dying to ask him questions about yesterday, but she already knew he wouldn't answer them. If she wanted to understand what was happening, she'd have to be more creative. Her father's room was definitely worth investigating. There was also that story about the dire wolves. Maybe she could pass by the hunter's quarter later today to check. After breakfast, Robert disappeared into his room again before they finally left for work. On the way, he kept scanning their surroundings. Although it was warm outside, he had insisted she wore her cloak. The sky was clear, and it promised to be another beautiful summer's day. When they arrived by the shop, Evelyn immediately checked the list of orders she needed to

work on. Meanwhile, Robert gathered his tools and sat by the large table.

“I’ll need the space to work on that new order. Can you work in the back office again, kiddo?”

Evelyn sighed, “Sure, can’t wait to sit alone in a tiny room all day,” she said sarcastically.

“It’s just for a few days, and I’ll make it up to you. How about apple pie for tonight?”

Aunt Muriel’s apple pies were hard to resist. Even if it was the only bakery in the village, no one could rival her skills. “Well, I hope it’s at least a pie per day,” she said with a grin.

Robert smiled, and for a moment, he almost seemed like himself again. Evelyn gathered the textiles she needed and settled into the back room. At some point, he came in, took a book from a cabinet, and left, making sure to close the door behind him.

“You can leave it open!” she called, but his footsteps had already faded.

The office always felt claustrophobic. She stood up to open the door, but it was locked. Again. Why did he keep doing this?

“Come on!” she yelled, slamming her fist against the wood. But the door remained firmly shut.

That was it. She wasn’t putting up with this anymore. He would regret treating her this way. Yet, beneath her

anger, frustration gnawed at her. There was no way she'd make it to the hunter's quarter now.

Why was he acting like this?

Oh, he'd need more than an apple pie to make up for this.

Fuming, she dropped back into her chair, grabbed a handful of fabric scraps, and began stitching pieces of textile and leather together, trying to focus on anything other than her growing resentment.

Her anger made her careless. She kept stabbing her fingers with the needle. At one point, she pulled too hard on a thread, snapping it, forcing her to restitch an entire patch all over again. At noon, Robert joined her for lunch. Evelyn was still furious and ignored him as much as she could.

"After lunch," he said with his mouth half full, still chewing on a chunk of bread. "I'll deliver the armour to the blacksmith. I'll close the shop so you can work undisturbedly."

"I suppose I can't come?!" she snapped.

"Watch your tone, Evelyn!" Once again, Robert's exhaustion was clearly visible on his face.

"Why won't you just tell me what's going on?" she yelled. "You still treat me like a child."

"Well, maybe you should try growing up a bit!" Robert snapped, slamming his hand on the table before storming out of the office, the door rattling in its frame.

“Maybe I would if you’d just let me!” she shouted after him, though he was already gone.

How could he expect her to just accept this without an explanation? She had always been there for him, yet he didn’t trust her enough to tell her what was going on. Moments later, she heard the shop bell ring. He had left. Once more, she was stuck in that little back office. In her anger, she stomped her foot against the door, and to her surprise, it swung open. Well, at least something good had come from their argument. Apparently, he’d forgotten to lock her in. This was her chance to go to the hunter’s quarter. The shop’s front door was locked, but she had the key to that door. After making sure her father was nowhere in sight, she stepped outside, closing the door behind her. The main street was bustling with shops and small businesses. The blacksmith was near the east entrance, far enough to ensure she wouldn’t run into her father. She turned north, passed Aunt Murial’s bakery, and took a left turn into a narrow street. The hunter’s quarter was just ahead, next to the herbalist. It was a small building. Hides hung on racks outside. As Evelyn stepped into the shop, her stomach twisted. At the far end, several carcasses dangled from the ceiling, blood slowly dripping on the floor. A small, stocky man appeared behind the counter. He was almost bald but made up for it with his magnificent moustache. His apron and face were speckled with small flecks of blood.

He had likely been skinning something when the doorbell rang.

“Oh, hello there, Evelyn. What brings you here today?”

“Good afternoon, Mr Rogers,” Evelyn greeted politely. “I heard there were dire wolves in the forest. Were you able to take them down?”

Mr Rogers frowned. “Dire wolves? Here?” He looked perplexed. “I hope not! I spent all day in the forest yesterday and again this morning. I haven’t seen a thing.”

Evelyn’s stomach dropped. That was it, the proof her father was lying to her.

“Where did you hear about that?” Rogers asked, his eyes narrowing.

Evelyn hesitated. “Oh, uhm, I was eavesdropping and must have misunderstood.”

He looked suspicious but didn’t press further.

“Well, I must be going. Thank you, Mr Rogers.”

“Stay safe, Evelyn.”

She walked back towards the main street, her mind racing. It had been foolish to ask so directly about the dire wolves. She only hoped Mr Rogers wouldn’t mention it to Robert. As she neared the main street, she spotted her father through the apothecary window. What was he doing there? The blacksmith was in the opposite direction. She peered through the glass.

Behind the counter, Elisa handed him a small flask of bright blue liquid. Evelyn didn't have time to wonder what it was as her father suddenly turned toward the front door. Heart pounding, she sprinted back to the shop and slipped inside just in time. A minute later, the bell chimed as Robert entered, but he didn't check on her until the evening. When they finally left together, it seemed he had already forgotten their fight.

"So, uhm, Dad, any news about the dire wolves yet?" Evelyn asked on their way home, her voice laced with innocent curiosity.

Robert glanced around, momentarily caught off guard by the question.

"Oh, uhm, no. The pack is still at large," he replied, his attention clearly elsewhere.

Evelyn decided she had given her father enough opportunities to tell her the truth. Tonight, she would break into his room and find out what all the fuss was about. A brilliant plan was taking shape in her mind. She knew her father was a heavy sleeper, so she just had to wait for him to fall asleep. That evening, she made sure to drink enough water so she would wake up during the night to go to the toilet. If her father caught her, she could just say she heard something in his room and wanted to check on him. It was early morning when she woke up. No light or sound was coming from her father's room. She slowly turned the doorknob, but the

door didn't move. A force was keeping it sealed. It had to be magical. She took the silver dagger she usually used to carve runic stones. As the point touched the door, a faint yellowish shimmer appeared. He must have used runic stones to create a barrier, but why? What was he hiding? Did he really believe someone would try to break into his room while he slept?

Whatever the reason, it only made her more determined. But breaking through wouldn't be easy. It would take time, and she would need runic stones, a lot of them. Downhearted, Evelyn returned to bed.

The next day wasn't much better. Although Robert seemed slightly improved, he was still on edge, his nerves frayed and his temper quick to flare. Evelyn wasn't faring much better. Her patience was wearing thin, and tensions ran high. Back in the office, Evelyn leafed through different books. She was still determined to find out what he was hiding. She knew that if he had indeed created that barrier, the solution to bypass it had to be somewhere in these pages. Based on her observations, he had used at least three types of incantations. Probably a muffling spell, a blinding spell, and a blocking spell. Evelyn knew two possible ways to break through. The first was to use a strong, piercing spell to rip the barrier apart. Although it was an easy solution, runic stones were not powerful enough to

create such forceful magic. Besides, she needed to get inside without alerting her dad. The second method, which was far more difficult, was to locate the barrier's weakness and design a counter-spell. It would be easier if she could determine which runes he had used to construct the shield. Otherwise, she would have to test how it reacted to different runes. Fortunately, it wasn't her first time solving such puzzles. For as long as she could remember, Robert had crafted small rune challenges for her to solve. She would spend hours poring over books, piecing together the answer. But breaking into Robert's room felt far more daunting than any of his past riddles. Since smuggling books from the shop without her father noticing was impossible, she quickly scribbled some notes on a scrap of paper before spending the rest of the day making new work clothes for the miners. After dinner, her father once again retreated to his bedroom, only emerging occasionally to check she hadn't sneaked out. Not that she hadn't considered it. She simply needed to know what was going on first. Somewhere upstairs lay the answer to her father's strange behaviour. And whatever it was, it had to be significant. He was strict and protective, but always fair. Lying to keep her at bay was not something he would do without good reason. She spent the evening reading by the fire before heading to bed. Waiting several hours to ensure her father was asleep, she crept

down the dark corridor. There was no light shining from under his door anymore. She might have found another way to get through the shield. If her father could walk through the barrier unimpeded, she should be able to do the same by crafting a well-designed confusion spell, one that could convince the barrier she was Robert. With his blood running through her veins, the task should be easier, but it was still not a simple task. It took every bit of knowledge she had, but she finally devised a formula she believed would work. Using a runic stone, she cast the spell and slowly turned the doorknob. Still, nothing happened. Frowning, she reviewed her incantation but couldn't figure out why it failed. Had her father anticipated this? Why was he so determined to keep her out? This was a setback, but she refused to give up. Maybe after a good night's sleep, she would see where she had gone wrong. If not, there was always Plan B. She had found a rather simple incantation to mimic the barrier's properties. With the help of a few runic stones, she could replicate the shield on a small jewellery box she had found in her room. With this mini barrier, she could experiment through trial and error. Each evening, she tested incantation after incantation. The only thing holding her back was the limited number of runic stones. She could only sneak a few at a time. Fortunately, their stock was large enough Robert wouldn't notice a few missing stones. In the meantime,

things settled somewhat. He seemed to relax a little. She was still confined to the back office, but the door now remained open, making her work more bearable. She still wasn't allowed out in the evenings, and she felt as if her father was always watching her. That only fuelled her determination to uncover what he was hiding. One evening, she nearly leapt through the roof with joy when she finally managed to disrupt the barrier on her box. This would buy her just enough time to get inside without destroying the barrier completely. Now, all she needed was an opportunity to slip into the room unnoticed. Attempting it at night was too risky. She'd never be able to explain how she got in.

Three weeks had passed since the visit of those strange clients, and Evelyn was getting impatient. She had even considered feigning illness to stay home alone, but she suspected her dad would just close the shop and stay with her. No, she had to wait. The perfect opportunity arrived the very next day. After dinner, she went upstairs to revise her spells. When she returned, she found her father fast asleep in his leather chair. This was the moment she had been waiting for. Carefully avoiding the creaky floorboards, she retrieved the runic stones from her room and sat down by her father's door. As she carved the runes, the air in front of the door shimmered like a thin veil of mist. With the last

rune inscribed, the mist vanished with a quiet pop. The spell would only disturb the barrier for a few minutes, so she had no time to waste. She slipped inside. The room had just four pieces of furniture: a bed with a nightstand, a wardrobe, and a desk. Her father had always preferred a simple life. He believed possessions were an obstacle to true happiness. She had never quite shared his philosophy. She checked the nightstand first. The drawer held only a candle and an empty blue bottle. It was labelled '*Noctebrevum.*' It was a powerful sleeping draught. Had he used this to compress his sleep into a few hours each night so he could work on his secret project? She moved to the desk, but it was completely bare. If he was hiding something, it had to be in the wardrobe. As she opened the door, the wood creaked sharply. She froze, her heart hammering, listening for movement. But the house remained silent. Exhaling, she quickly searched through the wardrobe. Nothing. A faint mist began to form by the door. She was running out of time. Dejected, she closed the wardrobe and turned to leave, but as she stepped forward, she felt a floor tile shift beneath her foot. Through the gap between the tiles, she spotted a small chest concealed under the floorboards. It was only the size of her hand, sealed with a gleaming golden lock. She took out her knife, searching for a weak point to pry it free. At some point, the tip of her knife touched the chest. An invisible

force hurled her backwards. Stupid. Of course, he had protected his hiding spot. She was sure her father must have heard her. She scrambled to her feet, shut the door, and was just in time to grab the attic ladder when she heard footsteps. Robert appeared at the top of the stairs, his eyes darting towards his door.

“What are you doing?”

Evelyn casually set the ladder back into place.

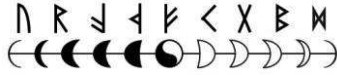
“Oh, I just went into the attic, and the ladder slipped.”

“You hurt yourself, kiddo?”

“Nah, I was already on the last rung,” she said lightly, hoping he wouldn’t hear the tightness in her voice.

For a moment, he studied her, searching for something in her expression. Then, without another word, he turned back towards his room. Evelyn quickly returned to hers. She could see him through the keyhole, inspecting his door. The barrier was completely restored, and she was sure she had left no trace. She just hoped her father had been too deeply asleep to notice what she was really doing.

*Chapter 4*  
*The awakening*



As the days passed, she kept wondering what the small chest might contain, but it was too risky to try to break into her father's room again. Besides, things had begun to return to normal. She was allowed to work in the front of the shop again, and her father was his usual self once more. The only thing that had still not changed was his ban on leaving the house without him. So, she resolved to employ her most incredible skill: sneaking out of the house. Robert had locked himself in his room. She had less than an hour before he would return to check on her. Silently, she slipped through the front door and into the forest. The cool air wrapped around her like an old friend, carrying the scent of damp earth

and pine. The weight of the past few weeks lifted from her shoulders as she moved deeper into the forest, finally feeling like herself again. She hoped she wouldn't run into any trouble, as she had left her bow in her room, deciding it was too risky to fetch it. Luckily, she still carried her hunting knife. A soft breeze blew in her face, bringing with it the sound of birds singing in the trees. She lost track of time, and before she realised it, the sun had dipped below the horizon. She'd better return home; she didn't want to linger in the forest at night without her bow. Her father had likely noticed her absence by now, so there was no need to sneak back inside. She knew he'd lecture her for at least five minutes before grounding her. With that in mind, she took her time, enjoying her last moments of freedom. She reached the forest edge and looked at their house. A clear rectangle of light came through the front door. Robert was probably already looking for her. But then she noticed unfamiliar horses standing in front of the porch. Evelyn slowed down. They had never had

visitors here before, especially not at this hour. She approached the front porch cautiously, wondering who could be inside. She gasped. The door wasn't just ajar. It was barely hanging on its hinges, splintered as if it had been forced open. Evelyn's pulse pounded in her ears. She gripped her hunting knife, cursing herself for not having brought her bow. She tried to peek through the door opening when voices drifted from the living room.

“Oh, Robert,” a man sneered. His voice was deep and cruel. “Did we give you the impression you had a choice?” The man chuckled. “You should've known we'd find you eventually. Be grateful. We need you; otherwise, you'd already be dead.”

When her father spoke, his voice was weak and trembling. “Please, I... I tried. I swear I tried, but I couldn't get it to work.”

The man with the harsh voice spoke again. “You've never been a good liar, but maybe we should give you a choice.”

Another voice chimed in. It was smoother but laced with something vile.

“I heard you have a lovely daughter. I wouldn’t mind introducing myself.”

Evelyn stiffened. A shiver ran down her spine.

“Stay away from her.” Robert’s voice broke, followed by a violent cough.

A third voice, sharp with anger, joined the conversation.

“Did you really think a simple cloak would hide her from us? Do you take us for fools?”

Something heavy was smashed against the wall, followed by the sound of splintering wood.

“So, Robert,” the first man continued, his tone dripping with malice. “Are you willing to risk your daughter’s life as well? Or shall we talk business?” “Go to hell,” Robert yelled.

A deafening blast shook the house. Evelyn recoiled as a surge of energy slammed the door against its frame. A bloodcurdling scream tore through the air. Evelyn

pushed the door open and ran into the living room. A scorched mark blackened the floor. Three men in long, dark cloaks were squirming in pain. The table had been blasted apart, and the armchair lay on its side. Robert stood silently in the corner. He was barely upright, his breath ragged and his body battered. His clothes were torn, blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

“No, Evelyn, get away,” he gasped.

His voice broke with fear and desperation. Before she could react, an invisible force slammed her against the wall. She cried out as a searing pain shot through the hand holding her hunting knife. Instinctively, she dropped it. The blade clattered loudly across the hard wooden floor. Dazed, she barely registered the rough hand that clamped around her throat, yanking her upright. She tried to tear away, but the man’s grip was too strong, and he held her firmly in place while cutting off her air supply. As her vision blurred, she tried to kick in every direction, but he was out of reach, and her time

was dwindling fast. Suddenly, his grip loosened. She fell to the ground, coughing for air.

“Lambert?” The gruff voice came from the other side of the room.

“It’s her, George. It’s her,” said Lambert.

For the first time, Evelyn saw Lambert’s face. He was a man in his thirties with a goatee, and his right eye was clouded with an old wound. She stepped back, and another man appeared. He looked much older, with long, greying hair. His face was traced with small scars that deepened the grimness of his expression. She could feel George’s hand closing on her face. The stench of alcohol, sweat and soot burned in her nostrils. His pupils wandered over every inch of her body.

“That... that’s impossible,” George muttered in disbelief. “How did he do it?”

“Look at her eyes,” said the man called Lambert.

“I can see that,” George replied, his voice laced with arrogance. “Make sure she can’t attack us. We’re taking

her with us. I'll have a short talk with Robert." Evelyn felt Lambert binding her hands and legs.

"How's Thomas?" he asked.

"Out cold," George said flatly.

She tried to move, but the ropes held fast, cutting into her skin. It was too tight to slip free. She watched as George now stood over Robert. It was her father's cry of pure agony and torment that jolted her back to full awareness. Through the legs of her attackers, she saw her father lying motionless, a knife embedded in his leg. His breathing was ragged, his face twisted in horror.

"Where did you find her?" George asked. "You did it, didn't you? You actually did it?" He chuckled as if Christmas had come early. "Where is it? Come on, Robert, I might even forgive you for that scar you gave me."

Evelyn saw her father shaking, his hand pressed tightly against the wound in his leg.

“You’ve played all your cards, Robert,” George continued. “All that pain can go away if you just tell me what I want to know.”

A note of impatience crept into his voice.

Without warning, Robert grabbed the knife. In a single motion, he yanked it from his leg and lunged at George. Blood gushed from the wound as angry red runes lit up across his bare chest. They were etched as if carved with a blade. Robert cried out and dropped the knife before landing a blow. His whole body convulsed, spit and blood flying from his mouth as he trembled uncontrollably. George stood there, watching with delight while Robert was being tortured. “You know, Robert, I was really hoping it would come to this,” George said.

He picked the knife up from the floor. Evelyn could hear the sickening laugh of Lambert, who was watching the scene from a distance.

“Please,” Evelyn begged, her voice finally returning. “Stop!” Tears streamed down her face.

All she wanted was to make them pay.

“Look at that,” George sneered, still relishing the moment, “someone who cares for you.”

Evelyn tried to fight against the ropes holding her.

“Ha,” Lambert barked, “struggle all you want; those ropes won’t budge an inch; I enchanted them myself.”

She felt a heavy boot press into her back. Her gaze shifted to her father. More and more runes flared across his chest, glowing with an unnatural light. Blood dripped from the wounds as he gasped for air, his face twisted in unbearable pain.

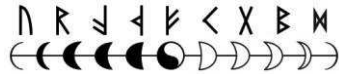
“No,” Evelyn screamed.

Hatred, as she had never felt before, burned through her veins. She writhed again, every part of her aching for vengeance. A sharp, searing pain erupted from behind her eyes, like a hundred hot needles piercing through her skull. Her vision blurred, but the red glow on her father’s chest began to fade. Something bright was filling the room with a blinding light. Were they torturing her now, too? The pain in her eyes became unbearable. She tried clawing at her face, desperate to

remove whatever was causing it. In the background, she heard the attackers' voices rise in alarm. Suddenly, a burning force surged through her body, and the ropes that were cutting into her wrists disintegrated. Her body felt ablaze, as though fire licked every inch of her skin. But she didn't care if it killed her. She would take these bastards with her. She stumbled forward, drawn toward the sounds of panicked murmuring. Light burst from her in violent flashes, followed by screaming. They were screaming. That was good, Evelyn thought. The hatred she felt dulled her pain. Her vision began to return. She could see the outlines of two men: one on the ground, the other holding something. Another wave of pain crashed through her, dropping her to her knees as she howled in agony. Still, something raged inside her. The fury spread until she couldn't contain it anymore. She had the feeling her body was on fire. Her eyes, swollen and raw, still throbbed from earlier. In the distance, a man screamed, feeding her rage, as everything turned black.

## Chapter 5

### *A window to the past*



It was a sunny day with only a few clouds in the sky. After weeks of rain, the warmth and dryness were more than welcome. But not everyone was paying attention to the local weather. A man walked briskly along a country road. He wore long marine blue robes, each sleeve embroidered with a dragon in red and gold thread. The golden dragon symbolised the hardworking commoners struggling to survive each day. The red lining symbolised their oppression by the rich and nobles, who feasted on their hard work, safely behind the thick walls of their castle, while the common folk stood defenceless, fighting against every vile creature nature had to offer. Growing up in the countryside, the man could still remember how monsters attacked the village at night. Each time, they killed more and more innocent people. The villagers pleaded with the local landlord, begging for more protection. But he just mocked them openly, saying he had no man to spare for peasants. If they wanted more protection, they would have to pay with

more than just vegetables and grains. The man could still remember leaning out of his bedroom window as a little boy, wondering how it would feel to sleep peacefully behind the solid and safe walls of a castle. He genuinely believed by joining the Order, he would have been able to change the world by overthrowing the king and starting a new era of peace and prosperity. What a dream. Sadly, it quickly became clear the Order was no better than the current regime and their Inquisition, being filled with power-hungry people who often resorted to the cruellest methods to achieve their goals. They had known exactly how to lure people with false promises of a better future. How deceptive those words had been. He, too, had been drawn in by their ideas, but the time had come when he could no longer turn a blind eye to the truth. He decided to turn his back on the Order and flee. He had hiked for more than ten days to gain as much distance as possible between him and the Order. He knew it would only be a matter of time before they would hunt him down. With supporters all over the country, it would be challenging to hide from them. It also meant he had to be careful not to perform magic publicly anymore. The Order was always on the lookout for new recruits, especially those with magical abilities. Until he reached a safe place, it was best not to take any risks. He had hesitated to conjure a portal. Not only was it one of the most challenging pieces of magic to

perform, but it would also leave traces. No, he had to continue on foot and only use magic when he was alone in the wilderness or as a last resort. He needed to change his clothing. Not only would the robes give him away, but they were already tattered from twigs and thorns. He was almost sure there would be a village further along the road, which was good, as he also needed to restock his food supply. The road turned towards the nearby forest. A small, old sign was pinned on the first tree:

*'Orchard*

*Village, five miles.'*

It looked like the path had not been used for a long time. After a few steps into the forest, it became clear why. There was an unnatural darkness in this forest. The foliage was so dense, no sunlight could penetrate. He would have thought it was nightfall if he hadn't known any better. But that was not the only strange thing about this forest. No birds were chirping, and there was no roaring sound of the wind blowing through the trees. The only sound that reached his ears was the rhythm of his steady breathing. He opened his hand, and a small orb materialised in his palm, illuminating the path in a golden light. He didn't want to dwell too long in a place like this. He briskly walked along the route, hoping to see the forest edge. He was suddenly blinded by a bright flashing light, followed by a deafening sound. It was as if something massive had obliterated the surrounding

trees. Perplexed, the man scanned his surroundings, searching for the cause. Unsure of what could have caused the disturbance, the man curiously veered off the path. He was thinking about heading back when he saw an unexpected ray of sunlight gleaming through the trees. He continued warily, readying himself for what could be a trap. When he finally reached the clearing, he was surprised to see a little girl lying unconscious on the ground. She was wearing a dress made from an expensive red fabric. After he made sure no one else was around, he approached the girl and crouched next to her. He gently turned her around, so her face was pointing upwards. She looked so young. She had to be six, maybe seven. He gently pressed his fingers to her neck, searching for a pulse. She was alive, but barely. What was a child doing alone in this forest? She couldn't have caused all that tumult, could she? He stood up, investigating his surroundings. Big chunks of wood were scattered on the ground. Did she do that? He looked back at the girl, who was still lying immobile on the ground. His attention was caught by a strange pattern on the ground.

“This cannot be?” he mumbled.

He gently took the little girl in his arms and stepped backwards. Burned into the ground was a large circle. Different runes and strange geometrical figures could only indicate one thing. This was a long-distance

teleportation circle and an improper one, too. He looked at the girl who lay barely breathing in his arms. Why would anyone try to get rid of her? She was lucky to have survived the spell. There was a reason almost no one used teleportation circles. Luckily, this time, it only destroyed a small patch of forest. The girl moved slightly in his arms. He couldn't leave her here like this. He gently carried her in his arms towards the main path and continued his journey through the forest. He was happy to see the forest edge and the sunlight caressing his face again. It was like finally being able to breathe again. He gently put the girl down on a small patch of grass, stretching his sore arms. The village was still far away, and he felt so tired he decided to rest a bit first. Hoping no one was around, he murmured something under his breath, and a dense, fluffy moss formed a soft tapestry under his feet. It was like walking on a cloud. He then examined the little girl. He put his hand on her chest and began to chant in a strange language.

“Hmm,” he said.

Something had almost drained her life force. He took some herbs from his pouch and started boiling water over a small, conjured fire. After soaking the herbs, he began covering every inch of the girl's skin with them. After he finished, he sat beside her, taking the cup the herbs had soaked in. He took a sip and could feel energy soaring through his body. He knew it would have been

better if she could have drunk the draught, but she was still unconscious. This was the best he could do. He rested his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. The girl should be safe for now. He knew it would only be a matter of time before someone would pass here. It was better he wasn't seen with an unconscious girl. Especially one depleted of her life force. He wasn't even sure a poorly designed teleportation circle could do that. Taking someone's life force was often associated with dark magic, something which was strictly forbidden. He started to walk towards the village, convincing himself he had done the right thing. He was already running from the Order. He had to avoid attracting attention in any way. After half an hour, the man finally saw the little village of Orchard appear on the horizon. The town was surrounded by fields and pastures. At the foot of the mountainside, multiple villagers were working the fields. The town itself consisted of a clustering of small cobblestone streets and wooden houses painted in different colours. Further down the street was a large plaza mainly functioning as a local market. There were several small shops, and in the middle of the plaza was a colossal fountain used as the primary water source by the villagers. The man spotted a small shop selling clothes. Happy he could finally change, he bought a new robe made of blue fabric and leather. He now only had to restock his food supply. If he was in luck, he could