

Worlds Unseen
Book 1 of the Seventh World Trilogy

Rachel Starr Thomson

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[Prologue](#)

The house was full of the little noises of life. A bright fire crackled in the hearth, and over it the contents of a small iron pot hissed and bubbled. Mary's rocking chair creaked as her deft fingers wove a world in cross-stitch, visions of sunset and starlight. A mourning dove, tucked away in a nest in the corner of the stone window ledge, cooed softly.

Mary did not look up when a shadow fell across the picture in her hand. Through her eyelashes she saw a tall, dark-cloaked form with a gleaming knife in its hand. For a tenth of a second Mary's fingers faltered; she regained herself, and continued to sew. She bent her head closer to the cross-stitch and her chestnut hair fell over her shoulder.

"So you've come," she said, her voice perfectly level.

The cloaked figure's voice dripped with venom. "You expected me?"

The creak of the rocking chair filled the momentary silence, and the fire crackled. The pot was near to boiling over.

"I knew you would keep your promise," Mary said. "Though you have been much longer than I expected. And even now you are waiting."

The tall figure sneered. "Where is your fool of a husband?"

Mary said faintly, "He is coming."

Outside, the cooing of the dove had ceased. A man was whistling as he came up the path to the cottage. His tune died out, choked by sudden fear, and his footsteps hastened to an urgent pace.

The cloaked figure raised the knife in the air. Mary lifted her head suddenly, and her blue eyes pierced through the black cloak to the woman beneath it, momentarily halting the hate-filled advance.

"Take care, woman," Mary said, "lest the power you seek to control someday overpower *you*."

The door of the house opened with the striking of wood against stone as John Davies rushed into the danger he sensed all around him.

The pot boiled over.

* * *

The cloaked woman hurried down the hill. She turned to look at the cottage once more, watching as the flames reduced even the stones to ash. She laughed wildly, her laughter swirling into the smoke-filled wind. The green hills around seemed to mourn as the heat and smoke blurred their ancient sides into wavering, uncertain mirages. High in the hills, a hawk cried.

The woman turned and strode along the path that led to the town. In the distance she heard a sheepdog barking, and her eyes narrowed as she pictured the small figure who was even now making her way to the ruined house.

It would be so easy to kill her, too. The woman's fingers clenched the handle of the knife, slippery with blood, that was now hidden beneath the black folds of her cloak. But no. The master would be angry. The girl was nothing and he did not want needless killing. It was not wise—it was better to let the ignorant live in fear. So he said.

She spat. Master Skraetock was a fool. True, at times she sounded just like him, speaking of wisdom for the sake of the future. Only now, with the stench of the kill hidden under her cloak and the wind carrying ashes up to the heavens, with the power of the Covenant Flame running wild in her veins, she did not care about wisdom.

She could hear the girl's footsteps on the hard earth, as the dog barked around her heels. Her fingers gripped the knife tighter... and relaxed. The rush of the Covenant Flame was beginning to die. She felt it slip away. She wished to kill if only to bring it back; but wisdom came with the going of it. She would obey. The girl would live.

For now.

* * *

Chapter 1 **A Shadowed Past**

The war is over, and the King has gone from our land. Gone with him are the faithful children of men, and now only I am left! I alone remain to sing the Song of the Burning Light over this bloodstained ground. The Earth Brethren are gone; I know not where. It seems they are vanquished who once made all men tremble with fear before the strength of wolf and wind and water, of growing thing and of fire. They are gone, and never more shall I hear their battle cries all around me. My heart quakes to think of them conquered, yet how could it be otherwise? Their power was shattered in grief when the King's heart was pierced by the treachery of his beloved ones. Surely the anguish of his heart-breaking must shake this world so that nothing can stand untouched.

And the Shearim, the merry ones, the Fairest of Creation: they too are gone. They whom no one could kill have destroyed themselves that the children of men might be protected from their own wickedness. With the life-force which once danced in their eyes the Shearim have woven a Veil, a barrier between the Blackness and men. Yet my heart tells me that even the Veil cannot last forever. One day it will grow weak and tear, and the Shearim will pass out of the world forever. How the stars weep for us!

But now my blood grows hot within me and visions pass before my eyes, and I, the Poet, I, the Prophet, will speak! The Blackness will not reign victorious always. In the end the hearts of men will yearn again for their King, and he shall come! Hear, all you heavens. Listen to me, all you earth! Rejoice, for he will come again!

Yet quietly will it begin. His reign shall not be taken up first on the Throne of Men, but in their Hearts: in the hearts of small things, of insignificant things, of forgotten things. In their hearts shall be kindled the Love of the Ages, and they shall sing the Song of the Burning Light!

And he shall come.

* * *

The air was just beginning to take on a metallic chill when Maggie passed the Orphan House. Its tall wrought iron gates frowned down on her and striped her face with shadows where they blocked the orange light of the windows. Creepers, brown with the coming of winter, wound their way up the red, soot-covered brick walls. The windows were barred and tightly shut. One, on the ground floor, had been cranked open, though bars crossed it. Maggie could hear the clanging and shouts coming from that window, and though she was too far away to feel it, she

could imagine the oppressive heat drifting out into the evening. It was the kitchen, a room made hellish by the constant activity of twenty ovens. In the winter the window would be kept shut to keep the icy wind from blowing in and the expensive heat from drifting out. But not yet.

Maggie picked up her pace instinctively, as she always did before the glaring visage of the House. Had she been caught outside those walls as a child she would have been locked in the cupboard, or worse. Now, there was no one to shout her name, no one to threaten her and slap her and tell her not to try running away again. It had been years since the Orphan House had held her prisoner, yet the tyranny of the place still held some sway over her soul. So she walked faster.

From the kitchen came the harsh shrieking of a matron in a foul mood, and in the yard a dog sent up a dismal howl. The cold seemed to cling to Maggie, seeping through her heavy brown overcoat. She pulled it closer to her and shivered. It was a cold evening in an autumn that had thus far been unusually warm. A dragon-headed iron train screamed over a bridge in the distance. An elderly man with a decorated sword hanging from his belt nodded to her as he sauntered past.

The Orphan House behind her, Maggie turned down a residential street lined with old houses that were crammed in next to each other like books on a shelf. The street dead-ended in an iron fence that closed in a large property: a stately old house with yellow paint that was peeling and a flower garden that bloomed like the sun in summer. In the quickly fading light, the old house looked somewhat mournful. Most of its flowers had already succumbed to the frost. In an upstairs window a candle was burning, and a stout shape moved around the room in what looked like a waltz. Maggie smiled.

She turned from the view of the yellow house and ascended the creaking steps of her own home, the last on the bookshelf street, a slim, two-story brick house with peeling blue shutters at the windows. Maggie sighed when she thought of the hours she and Patricia had put into painting them just last summer, while Mrs. Cook, the owner of the house, puttered around in the kitchen baking cookies to feed “her girls” when they finished.

Maggie twisted the brass doorknob and pushed the door open. It protested loudly, and Maggie made a mental note to oil the hinges soon. If Pat had been home, surely the door would have been attended to earlier. She always noticed such things.

A bright fire was burning cheerfully in the fireplace, casting its glow over the small room. A painting of a river in the country hung over the mantle, which was covered in little glass figurines, newly dusted and glowing proudly in the firelight. On the wall, tucked in the shadows of the fireplace bricks, a slim sword hung on a hook. Pat had insisted on leaving it with them—how she expected either Maggie or Mrs. Cook to use it was a mystery.

Maggie collapsed into a high-backed stuffed chair near the fire without taking off her coat or boots. She closed her eyes and let all of her muscles relax, while the heat folded around her like a cocoon.

A loud, cheery voice interrupted her near slumber.

“Well, then,” Eva Cook exclaimed, her ample form filling the doorway to the kitchen and blocking most of the light from that part of the house. “You’re home. Did you get the parcel?”

Maggie sighed with the effort of pulling her body back into action. She reached a red-gloved hand inside her coat and pulled out a small packet wrapped in brown paper. She started to get up, but Mrs. Cook stopped her.

“No, dear,” she said, “Don’t you move. I know a tired body when I see one. Was it a really long walk?”

Maggie nodded. “Not too long, really, but I am tired. I always want to go to sleep after being out in the cold.”

“Winter’s coming after all,” Mrs. Cook commented, “though I had hoped we would cheat it this year.” She disappeared into the kitchen for a moment, and the light from the homey room came streaming back. She reappeared bearing a saucer and tea cup, steaming with hot tea.

“Here, dear,” Mrs. Cook said. “Drink this.”

Maggie took the cup and saucer and let the steam from the bittersweet drink warm her face. She took a sip and leaned back again with a smile.

“Thank you,” she said. “But you don’t need to fuss over me. You’d think I’d been gone as long as Pat.”

Mrs. Cook didn’t seem to notice Maggie’s teasing tone. “I’m just taking care of you, Maggie Sheffield. You know as well as I do that you’re not the strongest bird in the sky. One of these days you’ll catch pneumonia, and I’ll fuss then. How’s your cold?”

Maggie chuckled. “Much better, with your tea steaming all the congestion out of me. It’s been years since I was really sick. You needn’t worry.”

“I’m not worried,” Mrs. Cook said with a sniff. She caught sight of Maggie grinning at her and said, “Not about the likes of you.”

Maggie dipped her little finger in her tea, stirring it idly. “Something’s missing from the tea,” she said.

“Linlae leaf,” Mrs. Cook said. “I ran out and was too busy to cut more.”

Maggie set her tea aside and pushed herself out of her chair before Mrs. Cook could protest. “I’ll get it,” she said. She walked lightly to her guardian’s side and stood on her tiptoes to kiss the tall old woman’s cheek on her way out.

Mrs. Cook watched her march out the front door with a smile. She was so different from the old days, this girl. Eva could remember the days when even a hint of sharpness in her voice would send the little orphan into a fit of shivering, anxious fear. Maggie had been so small and skinny then, her auburn hair tangled and dirty.

“You don’t want that one,” the man from the Orphan House had said. “She’s no good for nothin’—too weak, and ugly besides.”

Mrs. Cook had seen through the dirt and grime to a child who desperately needed freedom. Margaret Sheffield was precisely the child she wanted.

She remembered clearly the first few days, when Maggie learned what it was like to be clean and well-fed and loved. She had accepted everything warily, as though she expected to wake up any moment and find the dream turned into a nightmare. Her greatest fear in those days had been that Patricia Black, herself an orphan, might prove to be an enemy. Pat, in true form, had taken the scared little thing under her wing.

Pat had cried the day that Maggie was sent off to Cryneth to live with John and Mary Davies, old friends of the Cooks’. Eva had cried, too, but she knew it was best. The mountains and Mary’s songs were what Maggie needed to heal.

Even now, Mrs. Cook had to fight back tears at the thought of the way those years in Cryneth had ended. She remembered how Maggie had appeared on her back doorstep, half dead and nearly unrecognizable. She remembered how Pat had run for the doctor at the Orphan House. She remembered the doctor’s words.

“She were never a well one. I don’t see how she’s made it this far, with all that smoke in her lungs. If I was you, Mrs. Cook, I’d be looking for a nice burial plot.”

But Maggie had recovered. Her hands and arms were forever scarred from the burns. She never told anyone exactly what had happened, although they found out later that John and Mary had been killed in a fire. Maggie had been seen digging through the still-smoldering ashes for

some remnant of the happiest days of her life. The villagers had tried to help her but she had run away.

Somehow, Maggie had found happiness again. Somehow, she had put it behind her. And every time Mrs. Cook saw the young woman smile, she thanked the stars for the power that had brought Maggie all the way back to her doorstep in Londren, and home.

* * *

The linlae tree grew between the house and the iron fence. It hugged the wall like a vine, its silvery bark and the last of its light green leaves beautiful against the soot-smudged brick. Maggie smiled as she reached up into the thin branches, pulling them down so that twigs and leaves brushed her face and baptized her with the scent of life. The leaves rustled as she searched for a good bunch to clip. The warm autumn had been good to the hardy little tree; it was still green in the face of coming winter. Maggie started to hum to herself when a sound made its way to her ears. She frowned, releasing the branches so that they jerked away and quivered above her.

There it was again. Something was moving in the dark shadows behind the house. Maggie peered down the alley, but she could see nothing. *A cat*, she thought. *It must be a cat.*

She shook off the uneasy feeling that had settled on her and finished clipping a branch. As she took a step toward home, something in the alley clattered. She turned, her heart leaping in her throat.

What was back there?

She turned to leave when the sound of a deep, racking cough sent shivers up her spine. That was no cat.

Maggie turned back around and walked quickly, deliberately, toward the safety of the front door. Pat, she thought, would have been in the alley by now, forcing a full confession from whoever was skulking in the shadows. Pity the fellow caught by *her* fierce questions. But Maggie was not Pat, and Pat was far away in Cryneth. She kept walking.

"Maggie Sheffield?" It was a trembling voice, old, and strangely familiar. It was deep with illness.

Maggie turned slowly to see a small, hunched old man step out from the shadows. He stood silhouetted against the fence, and Maggie could not see his face or his features. He stretched out a hand toward her. It was shaking.

"Maggie?" he asked again. He took a step forward and Maggie realized that he was about to fall. She dropped the leafy twigs in her hand and rushed forward, grabbing the old man's arm to steady him. He looked up at her with weary, gray eyes.

"Thank ye, Maggie," he said.

She knew who he was. The relief of recognition flooded her. Those gray eyes had regarded her kindly when she was a child in the Orphan House, and once they had watched her from the safety of the little house in Cryneth. In the Orphan House he had brought presents for the children once or twice a year—mittens and scarves, pieces of candy, sometimes even dolls for the girls and trains for the boys. She hadn't known why he had come to the Davies' in Cryneth. Evidently they were old friends. She had never known his full name—the children called him Old Dan.

She certainly had no idea what he was doing here now, hiding in an alley behind her home.

He began to cough again, and nearly doubled over with the effort. Maggie clutched at him, wishing she could somehow transfer strength from her body into his. He sounded as if he might

never stop coughing. But the fit did come to an end, and he leaned against her, exhausted. She was alarmed at how thin and light he was.

"Come," she said, guiding him. "I live here, just a few more steps. We'll take good care of you."

Maggie helped him up the steps and opened the door. The hinges squeaked out an announcement of her return.

Mrs. Cook appeared from the kitchen, already talking. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd run away out there. Heavens, Maggie, what took you so—" she stopped in mid-sentence.

"Heavens," she breathed.

Maggie helped the weak old man into the high-backed chair near the fire. He nearly fell into it. Maggie removed his threadbare gloves and began rubbing his fingers between her own hands. She wanted to say something, but his eyes were closed and so she kept her mouth shut. When his hands felt a bit warmer, she took the muddy boots from his feet and set them near the fire to dry while she wrapped him in a blanket snatched from the arms of Mrs. Cook's rocking chair.

The lady of the house emerged from the depths of the kitchen with a washtub full of hot water.

"Come on, Maggie," she said. "In with his feet."

Mrs. Cook pressed a hand against the old man's wrinkled forehead. "Fever," she muttered. "Maggie, get another blanket from the cupboard upstairs. A thick one. Make that two. He's shivering."

Maggie rushed up the stairs, taking them two at a time, and threw open the cupboard at the end of the narrow hallway. She grabbed two thick blankets and flew back downstairs with them.

Mrs. Cook was stoking the fire, while the kettle shrieked its readiness in the kitchen.

"Get the tea, would you, dear?" Mrs. Cook asked in a tone of voice that made it clear she was not asking.

Maggie went into the whitewashed kitchen where the copper kettle rattled on the surface of the wood stove. She snatched it off and poured the water into a white teapot.

She reentered the living room with Mrs. Cook's largest tea cup and saucer, as well as two more just in case, and ducked back into the kitchen to fetch the teapot. When she came back out, Old Dan's eyes were open and Mrs. Cook seemed strangely agitated.

Maggie shifted her feet and licked her lips uncomfortably, feeling that she had missed something important.

"This is Old Dan." She felt like a child saying the name, which was not really much of a name at all. "He's a friend."

"We know each other," Mrs. Cook said stiffly.

Maggie's eyebrows raised a good half-inch. "You do?" she asked incredulously.

"Evie and I are old friends," Old Dan said weakly, with a tinge of humour in his voice.

Mrs. Cook stood abruptly and started up the stairs. She turned when she was halfway up.

"I don't want him going up and down stairs in his condition," she said. "We'll fix up the guest room."

Maggie nodded. Silently, she picked up the bucket of coal that lay beside the fire and took a box of matches from the mantle. She felt Old Dan's eyes watching her, but she couldn't bring herself to say anything. Mrs. Cook had seemed almost angry.

She took the coal and matches to a small, cold room just off of the living room. It had a fireplace of its own, and she knelt down to prepare the room for its new occupant. Soon she had a fire blazing, and the lonely little room seemed cheered. Starched white curtains hung by its

windows, overlooking a single bed. Mrs. Cook entered the room and started to make the bed with flannel sheets and a large feather blanket and pillows. A tiny bedside table held a gas lamp and an old book with gold writing on its cover. It had been years, Maggie thought, since the room had been occupied. She didn't recognize the book—perhaps a friend of Pat's had left it.

Before long, the room had been transformed. The lonely chill gave way before the warmth of the fire and the glow of the oil lamp that spilled onto the deep green blankets. Mrs. Cook stood with her hands on her hips and looked the room over with a satisfied nod. Maggie slipped out the door to get Old Dan.

He was sitting totally still except for the slight shaking of his hands. His eyes were open and he was staring into the fire, seemingly lost in thought. He didn't hear Maggie's approach.

She reached out a hand and laid it on his arm. He jumped slightly, then reached up his own gnarled hand and covered hers.

"I'm sorry," Maggie said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

He patted her hand. "No harm done, m'dear."

"Your room's ready," she explained, and took his arm to help him up. He stood with a struggle, and leaned on her as they walked to the room.

"It's not much," Maggie said.

Old Dan chuckled, and the effort made him fight to catch his breath again before speaking. "Don't forget I'm an old alley-dweller," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "The emperor's palace couldn't be any nicer."

He started to laugh again and set off a fit of coughing. Maggie lowered him onto the bed. She cast a concerned look at Mrs. Cook, who had a man's nightshirt draped over her arm.

"He'll be all right," Mrs. Cook said. "Go off to bed, Maggie. I'll watch after our guest. Get!"

Maggie left the room reluctantly. As she climbed the stairs to her own room, a flood of weariness washed over her. She had forgotten how tired she was.

* * *

The voices drifted up the stairs, rising and falling through the cracks in the floor into Maggie's room. She turned over in her sleep, pulling her quilt closer to her ears.

The voices sharpened, and Maggie awoke. For a moment she thought she had been dreaming, but then she heard them again. The conversation downstairs had grown heated.

She knew it was none of her business, but curiosity got the better of her groggy mind. She swung her feet out of bed, feeling the shock of cold when they touched the hardwood floor. The floorboards creaked as she lit the lamp beside her bed and pulled a robe on over her nightgown. Picking up the lamp, she stepped out into the hall. The voices had quieted.

Maggie stepped lightly down the stairs and through the living room to the spare room. The light was on, leaking through the slight crack where the door was not quite shut.

Maggie peered in through the crack. Mrs. Cook had moved her rocking chair to the bedside. Maggie could see her each time she rocked forward. Her eyes were swollen.

"You shouldn't have come here, Daniel," Mrs. Cook said, a hardness in her voice that Maggie had never heard before.

"I'm sorry, Evie," Old Dan's voice answered. "Perhaps you're right." He coughed painfully. "Truth is, I was afraid out there. I've never been so cold. I've never been afraid to die, before, but now... Well, I didn't think ye would turn me away."

Mrs. Cook's voice sounded as though she might lose control and start crying again. "No,

Daniel, don't talk nonsense. Of course it was better that you come here than stay out there with such a—such a sickness." Her voice lowered, but Maggie still caught the words. "If only Maggie didn't know you."

"I didn't know she was here," Old Dan said.

The rocking chair leaned forward with a forceful creak. "Promise me you won't talk to her about anything more than the weather, Daniel Seaton. No talk of the old days. I don't want Maggie tangled up with the council."

"There is no council," Daniel's voice said. "Or have you forgotten? There's naught left now but you and me and the others, all scattered and hiding—and dead, some of us. The council is finished."

"And may it stay that way," Mrs. Cook said. There was silence for a moment, and then Daniel spoke again.

"Have you forgotten, Evie? Have you forgotten the way it was, in the old days? Surely you canna hate its memory so much."

"It was all a game back then," Mrs. Cook said. "We were children playing with fire."

There was a heavy sigh from the bed. "'Twas a glorious fire," Old Dan said. "But dangerous, yes."

"I want Maggie kept far away from it," Mrs. Cook said. "It was bad enough that she was there when Mary—"

"I know," Old Dan said. "Evie, there's somethin' I need to be tellin' ye."

There was an expectant silence, and Old Dan spoke again. His voice was barely a whisper this time, and Maggie was not sure if she had heard him right.

"I saw her," he said.

The rocking chair leaned forward, and Maggie could see Mrs. Cook's face. It had drained of colour. Maggie felt suddenly cold—the cold came from within, as though childhood fears had passed over her. She had half a mind to turn and go back to bed, but she knew the fear would only follow her. She stayed where she was.

"Evelyn?" Mrs. Cook asked, her voice suddenly as weak as Daniel's.

"Aye," Old Dan said.

"Did she know you?" Mrs. Cook asked.

"I didna think so," Old Dan said. "But then this sickness... it makes me very afraid, Evie."

Mrs. Cook let out a noise like an angry sob. "How long will she hound us? Was she not content to destroy us with her lies?"

"It wasn't as though she came after me," the old man said. "We stumbled across each other, quite by accident."

"And John and Mary?" Mrs. Cook said. "Was that an accident? How many more of us will die before she's content to leave us alone?"

Maggie closed her eyes as the shock of what she was hearing sunk in. For a moment she forgot herself and leaned against the door. It swung open and Maggie stumbled into the room. Mrs. Cook jumped half out of her chair, and then sank back into it with a moan. Maggie heard a sigh from the bed. No one spoke.

"I heard you talking," Maggie said. "I don't understand."

"Go back to bed," Mrs. Cook said gently.

Maggie shook her head. "No. John and Mary—you said a woman killed them."

Maggie took a step nearer the rocking chair, almost menacing in her approach. She was trembling. "John and Mary's death was an accident. Wasn't it?"

Mrs. Cook seemed supremely unhappy. She began to answer, bit her lip, and finally nodded. "Yes, Maggie. It was an accident."

"You don't believe that."

"I don't know anything to the contrary."

"But you don't *believe* it. You think this woman killed them. You think they were—" she faltered. "Murdered."

Mrs. Cook reached a weary hand to a strand of grey hair that had worked itself loose from her bun. She brushed it back and regarded the young woman standing before her, eyes pleading.

"Sit down, Maggie," Mrs. Cook said. Maggie obeyed, sinking into the deep green feather blanket on Old Dan's bed.

"No," Mrs. Cook said wearily. "I don't believe the fire was an accident."

Maggie leaned forward. "Then what—?"

Mrs. Cook leaned back in the rocking chair and listened to the pop of the firewood in the hearth. "When we were very young," she said slowly, "we were part of a council. John Davies, and Mary, and Daniel and I. We were studying old legends and phenomena. Things that couldn't be explained naturally."

Daniel spoke up, and his voice seemed stronger than before. "It was glorious," he said.

Mrs. Cook ignored him. "It was dangerous," she said. "There are powers in this world, Maggie—or outside of it, as it may be—that are best left alone."

"Who was the woman?" Maggie couldn't remember the name they had mentioned.

"Evelyn?" Mrs. Cook asked. Her voice suddenly grew more tired. "She was nearly one of us. She would have become one of the council, if we had voted her in. Mary stopped that from happening." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Thank heavens."

"She were an evil one," Old Dan suddenly added. "Swore she'd kill Mary for opposing her."

Mrs. Cook shot Daniel a scathing look. Maggie felt that Mrs. Cook had planned to leave that part out.

"We didn't think she meant it," Mrs. Cook said. "We didn't think there was any real danger. Not until the fire."

"Do you have any proof?" Maggie asked.

Mrs. Cook shook her head. "Only the warning bells that went off in my own heart, and the memory of her black face all twisted and laughing."

"Laughing," Maggie whispered.

Mrs. Cook looked at the young woman and suddenly burst into tears. "Oh, Maggie," she cried, reaching for the girl who once more looked so orphaned. She rose from her rocking chair and enfolded Maggie in her embrace.

For a long time they remained together, Mrs. Cook holding onto Maggie as though her tight embrace could stop the sorrow from coming. When at long last Maggie lifted a hollow-eyed face, Old Dan was watching them with a rolled up piece of parchment in his hands.

"What is that?" Mrs. Cook asked. She did not sound as though she wanted an answer.

"It was Evelyn's," Old Dan said quite simply. "I took it from her."

Mrs. Cook paled. "When?"

"Not two weeks ago," he said. "When I saw her. She was in Galce, in an inn. I snuck into her room and this was there, and I thought it was important. So I took it."

"Why?" Mrs. Cook asked.

"It's important," Old Dan repeated. "It means something. I've been up to see the laird with it." A flush of anger rose in Eva Cook's cheeks. "You mean you'd still speak to that—"

Old Dan shrugged. "I don't suppose he's any friend of hers, not after all this time. It was his council she ripped to pieces."

"Why did you come back here?" Mrs. Cook asked.

"The laird wouldn't see me," he said. "So I was takin' the scroll to Pravik. Maybe Jarin Huss can read it." He held up the parchment, and his hand began to shake violently. In a moment his body was racked with the terrible cough, and Maggie saw blood on his hand where he covered his mouth.

"Trouble is," he rasped when he had regained control of his body, "I'm not sure I'll make it to Pravik."

Mrs. Cook walked slowly to Old Dan's side. She laid her hand on his forehead. "You're burning up," she said. "Daniel—what happened to you in Galce?"

"She looked at me," Old Dan said. "I didn't think she recognized me. At least not at the time. But her eyes met mine."

His bony frame sunk back farther into the bed. "All that night I dreamed about her eyes. The coughing fits woke me up. It's been getting worse ever since."

As though to illustrate his words, Old Dan began to cough again. This time, blood ran from his mouth down his chin and onto the sheets and blankets. Mrs. Cook ran from the room for water and rags to clean the blood. Maggie could only stare at the helpless old man, while her own blood ran cold. She knew what they were thinking—somehow, she knew it was true. This was no natural illness, but a living evil that was slowly murdering a frail old man.

When the coughing fit had at last ended, Old Dan gasped for air. Every breath racked his body with pain, and he shivered uncontrollably. Mrs. Cook sat at his side, holding one gnarled hand in her own, whispering words of comfort.

The fire was dying out. Maggie went in search of more coal. In truth, she could think of nothing but escaping from that room.

From the deep recesses of her memory, laughter followed her out.

An hour had passed before Maggie entered again. The room resounded with silence. The fire had nearly gone out. Mrs. Cook was still clutching Old Dan's hand, stroking it. He opened his eyes and Maggie wanted to cry when she saw how much worse he looked. His skin was horribly pale, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He struggled to sit up when he saw her. She hurried to sit down on the bed so that he would not waste his energy.

He slumped back onto the pillows and his fingers reached for the parchment that was laying next to him.

"Evie," he said in a voice that was barely a whisper. "How will it get to Pravik? To Huss... it's important."

The energy to speak seemed to drain out of him onto the pillows. Maggie picked up the parchment in one hand and took the fingers of the old man who had once brought her toys at the Orphan House.

"I'll take it," Maggie said. Mrs. Cook's eyes snapped up to look at Maggie's face, her own full of horror.

Maggie only leaned closer to Old Dan, who had closed his eyes again. "Do you hear me?" she whispered. "I'll take it to Pravik."

He nodded, ever so slightly, and a smile tried to struggle free from his face.

He did not move again that night.

As Maggie left the room to trudge back to her bed, she turned to see tears running down Mrs. Cook's face.

* * *

Daniel Seaton died the next morning. If he had other friends in Londren, Mrs. Cook did not know of them. Maggie was sent after the undertaker, and the austere little man arrived before noon. A coffin was available that would do the chore, and the body of Old Dan was taken to an old graveyard and buried before the sun had set on the day of his death.

Maggie and Mrs. Cook watched as the black box was lowered into the ground by men who did not care, while dry autumn leaves blew through the maze of tombstones. A bell was rung in the little stone building that watched over the graveyard, and Maggie held tightly to Mrs. Cook's arm as they leaned on each other.

"Farewell, Daniel Seaton," Eva Cook whispered as the bell pealed its melancholy song.

It was over quickly. The two women climbed into a waiting carriage and began the slow ride back home. The red brick of the Orphan House glared down at them as the horses clopped past, and Maggie turned her face from it. Tucked inside her coat, the parchment scroll burned an awareness of itself into her.

She had decided to leave for Pravik the next day.

* * *

Chapter 2 **Run, Boy, Run**

"Last call to board the *Crosswind*!" The deep-voiced call rose up over the noise of the crowds and brought tears to Mrs. Cook's eyes.

"Are you sure you won't reconsider, Maggie?" she asked.

"I need to do this," Maggie said. She smiled as she looked into Mrs. Cook's eyes. "It will be all right," she said. "You'll see. I'll come back soon, and I'll write you the minute I get to Pravik."

"Why did you ever make a promise to that Dan Seaton?" Mrs. Cook asked, shaking her head.

"It's not just the promise," Maggie said. "There are questions in my head that need answering, and somehow I think I'll find the answers in Pravik. I'll be all right, Mrs. Cook, truly. There; now I've made *you* a promise."

She set her ragged little trunk down on the dock and reached for the old woman who had given her so much. They clung tightly to each other, and Maggie felt Mrs. Cook's body stiffen in a gallant effort to keep from sobbing. Maggie pulled away from the embrace and looked up at the sails of the *Crosswind* that would soon catch the sea breeze and head away from the island she had always called home: away to the continent—land of history, home of the empire, great dark place of adventure. She picked up her trunk and squared her shoulders, willing herself to look her dearest friend in the face one more time. More than anything she feared the sight of Mrs. Cook's tears. They were the only thing with the power to drain her of all resolve and return her to Londren, even now.

Their eyes met, and Maggie's vision of Mrs. Cook's stout form standing tall and brave misted

over, as tears sprang to her own eyes.

“Good-bye,” Maggie croaked. She forced herself to turn away and walk to the ship that creaked impatiently as it bobbed on the water of the harbour.

The sailors had begun to haul the gangplank up into the ship as Maggie ran up, calling out for them to wait. They frowned at her, and one of the men spit over the side and muttered something under his breath. Maggie called up her thanks as they lowered the plank once more.

When she and her battered trunk were safely aboard the ship, Maggie found a spot at the rail and looked into the crowd for one more glimpse of Mrs. Cook. All she could see was a mass of coats and hats and moving bodies, and though she tried to make sense of the bewildering view, she could not find her old friend. Perhaps it was best.

It was a clear, sunny day, and the sails filled with wind as the boat moved swiftly over the water of the Salt Channel, away from the island of Bryllan. The cries of the gulls in the harbour changed to the sounds of water and wind, the feel of salt spray and the warmth of the sun. The chill of the last few days had given way to warmth, belying the coming winter, although the spray made Maggie glad of her old brown coat.

After a while Maggie grew tired of standing. She propped her trunk up under the rail and leaned against it, sliding down to the deck. Drowsiness, the effect of far too many conflicting emotions, settled over her. She pulled her cap down to shade her eyes and fell asleep.

* * *

Maggie woke up to the bustle and noise of the crew as the *Crosswind* moved into port in the Galcic town of Calai. The sun had gone into the regression of early evening, and the air had grown colder. Maggie got to her feet unsteadily and reached for her trunk.

Calai was bewildering. The port was full of fishing boats, and the smell of salt and fish mingled in the air, making Maggie’s stomach queasy. Fishermen, housemaids, vendors hawking their wares, and children playing tag formed a crushing mass of people. Maggie held tightly to her trunk as she descended the plank.

Suddenly very aware that she wasn’t sure what to do next, Maggie allowed herself to be carried by the flow of the crowd. She soon found herself on the outskirts of the harbour, looking into the town. Darkness was settling fast, and street lanterns came on like fireflies as the lamplighters went about their business.

Laughter spilled out from a nearby pub where men from the docks were gathered after a hard day’s work. Maggie stopped a big man on his way to the rough-looking place.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” she said, trying not to notice what a grim face he had, “but I—I need to find an inn, and I’m not sure...”

She looked up at him for a moment, and the gentleness in his eyes caught her by surprise.

“There’s a good one not far from here,” the man said. He pointed her down the street and gave her directions which twisted through the town in labyrinthine fashion. Maggie tried hard not to let the string of lefts, rights, and “on the corner of’s” blur together.

The man tipped his hat. “Good evening to you,” he said, and Maggie set off in the direction he had indicated.

It didn’t take long for Maggie to realize that something was wrong, either with the directions or with her recollection of them. She kept going, uneasily, as the town grew darker and less friendly.

She stopped abruptly, and whirled around at the sound of footsteps behind her. She could see

nothing in the shadows, but her fingers tightened their grip on her trunk all the same. She knew better than to trust the darkness.

When the street remained still and no more menacing noises found their way to her ears, Maggie turned slowly and began to search out her way once more. A moment later they were there again—footsteps. She picked up her pace.

She had not walked more than a block when she came to a dead end: a high brick wall crumbling with age. She reached out her hand to touch it, willing it to disappear and become the well-lit window of an inn.

Behind her, she heard the sound of a match flaring to life.

“Out a little late, ain’t you?” a voice asked. Maggie turned to see two men, the burning light of a small oil lamp illuminating unshaven faces. One of them played with a knife, twirling it in his fingers.

The other man grinned at his fellow, then looked at Maggie again.

“Didn’t nobody tell you this ain’t a good neighbourhood?” he asked. “It’s crawling with rabble.”

The man with the knife laughed.

“So, what you got in there?” the speaker asked. He gestured toward the trunk.

“Nothing,” Maggie said, finding her voice. “Only some clothes.” She thought of what would happen if they got to the money hidden in the bottom of the trunk. She would be stranded here in Galce without a way to get back home, much less reach Pravik.

“Oh, come now,” the speaker said again. He moved forward menacingly. “It don’t take much to make us happy.”

Maggie started to move in front of the trunk, when she gasped in fear. A huge black shadow was moving up behind the men. Glowing eyes announced that the shadow was alive.

A lilting voice, from somewhere behind the shadow, drew the men’s attention to the threat behind them.

“Picking fights with women, boys? What would your mothers say?”

The men whirled around, falling back before the black shadow. The first man dropped the lamp as his partner looked for an opening to run. The glass of the lamp cracked in pieces, but a faint light kept burning.

“Don’t tell me you give up already?” the voice said. The wiry figure of a young man stepped out from behind the big shadow. “We haven’t even come to blows yet.”

“We didn’t mean nothing,” the man with the knife said. “We was just having some fun.”

“So am I,” the young man said. “Isn’t this fun?”

The shadow growled and opened a mouth full of gleaming teeth. The man with the knife dropped to his knees on the pavement. “Let us go,” he begged.

The young man sighed, then stepped aside and slapped the shadow on the rump. “All right, Bear,” he said. “Move aside.”

The shadow moved obligingly, opening the way down the street. The men scrambled to their feet and raced for the safety of the alleys.

Maggie had sunk down to the ground, her back against the crumbling brick wall. The young man watched the ruffians go with his arms crossed over his chest, then turned back to Maggie with a grin. The grin faded fast at the look on her face. He stepped closer to her and offered his hand, pulling her to her feet.

For the first time Maggie got a good look at her rescuer. He was young, as his voice indicated—probably no more than eighteen or nineteen. He was lanky and none too tall. He wore

a brown vest over a billowy white shirt, and his trousers were checkered brown, green, and white. His curly black hair seemed a little overdue for a cut, and a bright gold earring glimmered in one ear. His feet were bare.

"I—" Maggie stammered, unsure of what to say. "Thank you."

The young man smiled, a wide grin that showed off straight white teeth and made his eyes dance. "My pleasure," he said, and dropped into a sweeping bow. "Nicolas Fisher, at your service."

He stepped back and placed a hand on the furry black shadow beside him. "And this is Bear."

"Nice to meet you. Both of you." Maggie couldn't help but laugh. "Bear? Doesn't he have a name?"

Nicolas shrugged. "I suppose he does. But he's never told it to me, so I won't insult him by making one up. I call him Bear, and he calls me Boy, and that works quite well since that's what we are."

"Do you do this often?" Maggie asked. "Rescue people, I mean."

"Is that what we did?" Nicolas asked. He seemed amused. "Can't say we've done much of it before, but after this we might have to make a habit of it. More fun than I've had in a while. But I suppose you're not wandering around at night for the lark of it. What did you come here for?"

"I was looking for an inn," Maggie said weakly. "I'm afraid I got lost."

"I'm afraid you did," Nicolas said with a frown. "There's an inn not far from here I can take you to. It's not exactly a high class establishment, but it's a place to sleep—and eat, if you're hungry."

"That sounds good," Maggie said. She reached for her trunk but Nicolas beat her to it. He picked it up and offered Maggie his arm, and she took it with a tentative smile. For all she knew this strange young man could be after the same thing as the alley-dwelling ruffians. Still, she couldn't help liking him—and trusting him.

Nicolas and Bear took Maggie to a dilapidated, two-story establishment with a sign that proclaimed it "The House of Dreams." Light poured into the street from the wide windows. Inside, the dining room was filled with happy chaos. Bear waited outside while Nicolas led Maggie in.

The brightness of the room hurt her eyes. The walls were painted with brightly coloured murals, showing fantastic, dream-like scenes. Shouting, singing, laughing people packed the room. Gaiety men with small pots of ale and Gypsies in brilliantly stitched and coloured clothing sat at round tables, eyeing one another suspiciously while they drank and ate a rich smelling stew. Pipe smoke and noise mingled together and rose to the bright red ceiling.

Lost in observation, Maggie hardly noticed that Nicolas was talking to a gaudy woman wearing huge earrings and a green dress. The din of the room was overwhelming, and it took a moment for her to recognize Nicolas's voice shouting over the cacophony.

"There's a room upstairs for you!" Nicolas said. "Follow me!"

Nicolas and the woman weaved through the crowd. Maggie followed after them, feeling out of place with her drab brown coat and cap and battered trunk, shyly moving through a world filled with colour and laughter and reeking with the pungent smell of ale and cheap wine.

They entered a stairwell on the other side of the room. Inside, the noise instantly died down, as though someone had thrown a blanket over it. The stairs creaked underfoot and their white paint was peeling badly, but Maggie welcomed the quiet.

At the top of the stairs, the woman led Maggie and Nicolas down a long thin hall to the third door on the right. She pulled out a heavy key ring and unlocked the door, opening a small room

with a tiny bed in one corner and a large window without curtains that looked out onto the street. "It's a nice little room," the woman said. "You will like it. And if there is a problem, you just ask for Madame."

Maggie nodded, and Madame turned to leave. She stopped to pat Nicolas on the cheek and exclaim remorsefully, "And Nicolas! You will not be staying with us? We have missed you."

Nicolas shook his head. "You're too kind," he said with a grin. "But Bear would never forgive me if I left him on the street all night. I promised him we'd be out of Calai before sunrise."

"You're not in trouble?" Madame asked. Nicolas shook his head.

"No, of course no," Madame said. "Just always the wanderer. Someday you come and settle down here. In Calai. It would not be so bad!"

Nicolas only smiled, and Madame heaved a sigh. "Ah well," she said, wiping away a supposed tear. "Someday you will listen."

She turned and swept out of the room, leaving Maggie and Nicolas alone for the moment.

"You're leaving, then?" Maggie asked.

He nodded. "The forest is calling me. Bear's antsy to get away. You'll be all right?"

Maggie nodded. "Thank you. For everything."

Nicolas shrugged, seeming almost embarrassed. Somewhere in the three sentences that had passed between them, he had lost his cocksure attitude.

"Glad I could help," he said, and abruptly left the room. Maggie watched him go with a puzzled frown and wondered why she was so reluctant to let him leave. With a sigh she stretched out on the bed, blew out the oil lamp beside it, and stared out at the chimneys of Calai until her eyes closed of their own accord and she fell asleep.

* * *

Nicolas Fisher could not shut her face out of his mind. He walked along the edge of the gutter and whistled as he tried to conjure up images of the forest he longed for. But each time he tried, another image rose up unbidden: a timid face that didn't know it was soot-streaked, green eyes and auburn hair that was half-hidden under an old cap.

It was a nameless face, and he could kick himself for forgetting to ask her name. Bear grunted as he rambled alongside his master, and Nicolas reached out to bury his hand in Bear's stiff black fur.

"We'll be out soon, old friend," Nicolas said. "Can you smell the trees?" Even as the words left his mouth, the urge to turn back nearly overwhelmed him.

It was not unfamiliar, this feeling, this pull that threatened to carry him all the way back to the House of Dreams. He had felt this way when he first saw Bear, cowering in a cage underneath a circus tent. He hadn't been able to leave then either; not until he had freed the cub and gone dashing off into the night with him. The circus had hunted for them for nearly a week, but had given up at last.

A wind kicked up, swirling the leaves in the street, and the skin on the back of Nicolas's neck prickled. The wind carried voices with it, faraway voices...

The scroll leaves a heavy scent. The hound will have no trouble.

Ugly beast.

Be careful!

He heard sniffing, the deep, dangerous sniffing of a bloodhound catching a scent.

Go!

A long howl filled the air with mournful dread.

It was going for her. For the girl at the House of Dreams. Nicolas was sure of it, as sure as he was that there was not a minute to spare.

He turned and ran for the inn.

* * *

Maggie awoke to the feeling that something was horribly wrong. She tried to sit up and found that dread was pressing her down like a weight. She could hardly move. She thought she would suffocate, and panic began to well up inside of her.

The door to her room banged open and Nicolas rushed in, slamming the door behind him. He turned, grabbed Maggie's trunk, and began frantically shaking her.

"Get up!" he rasped in a hoarse whisper. "Get up! You've got to get out of here, now!"

The pressure broke, and Maggie sat up, light-headed and breathing hard. She slipped down to the floor and began hunting for her shoes.

Nicolas joined her on the floor, snatching one of the shoes from under the bed.

"Hurry!" he said.

"What's going on?" Maggie asked.

"There's something after you." He stopped abruptly as a strange sound welled up from somewhere below, out in the street. It started low and rose till it drowned out the pounding of his heart in his ears.

Howling.

Maggie felt as though her heart had stopped. For a moment both she and Nicolas sat in frozen silence on the floor, and then the panic returned. Maggie pulled her shoes on. Nicolas had moved to the window.

She moved questioningly to his side. He put a finger to his lips in warning. His eyes were fixed on something in the street. She leaned closer to the window, and saw it too. Something huge and black was moving below. It seemed to melt into the night shadows, rendering it nearly invisible. Maggie heard it sniffing, drawing deep breaths and then letting them out again. Tendrils of greenish smoke became visible in the shadows.

It leaped suddenly toward the inn, and Nicolas and Maggie heard a crashing noise underneath their feet. It had broken through the door.

They looked at each other. For a long moment they stood frozen in each other's eyes.

Another howl rose, filling the empty spaces of the inn like water in the swamped hold of a ship. Someone in the inn screamed, even as heavy footfalls tore at the stairs.

It was coming.

Nicolas dropped Maggie's trunk and threw it open, searching through it until he had found the bag of money at the bottom. He thrust it at her and propped the trunk against the door. He moved to the bed and started to push it, but abandoned the effort as the sound of heavy breathing drew near. He ran for the window and yanked it open. Before Maggie realized what he was doing, he had thrown himself out.

She leaned over the sill. Behind her the door shuddered. She threw a desperate glance over her shoulder. Green smoke was curling its way under the door. Her lungs started to constrict again.

She turned back to see Nicolas picking himself up off the street, apparently unharmed.

"Jump!" he called. "I'll catch you!"

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