



1084

A.V. Arms





Chapter 10

August 5, 1084, Ravenshill

Faina was the first to find her father. The ten-year-old stood numbly beneath him, bombarded in that initial moment by her senses. The rope around her father's neck creaked. It whispered secrets as it scraped against the stone. His head was bent weirdly, his hands and arms limp. His face was gray, and his green eyes were staring, unseeing, at something she knew immediately was not of this world. It was an unmoving gaze. Faina was never allowed outside the keep's walls, and she knew nothing of death. But she saw a look of terror in his eyes, others dismissed as childish nonsense. When they found Faina, she stood silently, staring up at her father, and she could not help but wonder who did this thing.

The rumors that began that day had everything to do with who found her. Had it been Lainie, she would have scooped her up and dragged her protectively away. Most of the others of Ravenshill would have done the same, but not Annaliese. She liked to gossip and spread rumors, whether true or not. To see Faina standing emotionless, looking up at her father, she said it all came clear to her then. All that had been told about the girl became the truth in her head. She was convinced Faina had evil powers that suspended her father by a rope. Until she drew her last breath, she proclaimed Faina possessed evil powers.

They wanted to kill the child, to burn her. It was a sentiment that began to grow in scope outside the walls of Ravenshill. Hate that already existed grew for her, and fear of her powers. Every unfortunate event was blamed on her sorcery, a curse passed down from their mother.

No one wanted Harold to burn. He was the hope of the Kirkham clan, carrying the name, the last true Kirkham. Faina was the darkness of their birth, and Harold was the light. Since the day Faina looked up at her father for that last time, she was shunned while Harold's greatness grew. Within the walls of Ravenshill, she lived in some peace. But outside the walls, the people wanted her punished before she could continue her curses. People began to fear she would bring a plague to kill their children or a blight to destroy their crops.

Harold was taught to fight and left Ravenshill daily while she remained imprisoned. Harold recognized the unfairness of Faina's imprisonment and swore he would free her when he became lord of Ravenshill. But the rumors continued, and that promise had fled. Faina walked every day by where she saw her father hanging. In her mind, he was always there. Only it wasn't truly him, but a piece of him.

Harold, though young, was already a warrior with superior intelligence for the duties required of a baron whose keep remained embroiled in battle, fueled by hate and blood. Soon this, too, became Faina's curse. A woman so evil she brought death and pushed her brother toward war.

The booted foot landed on the stick Faina was reaching for. "Why did you scare Trevor away?" Harold asked. She looked up at her brother. He was tall for the age of ten, already growing muscle across his chest, his arms and legs thickening. He was a fighter born and bred, a warrior whose legend would be far greater than their father's. The boy was confident in this and walked Ravenshill as if he was a deity, always head up, boldly crossing through both shadow and light.

"Trevor was stupid," Faina replied. But the sun was at her brother's back, and she could not make out the features of his face.

"Trevor was my friend."

She pulled back from the small stick and contemplated the tower's construction. It was something the siblings once did together to pass the time. Harold brought the dried branches from outside the keep. They would break the sticks off and turn them this way and that, so they supported one another, and the structure began. The tallest they built on the wall walk was as tall as the bottom of the crenel gap in the curtain wall. Waist high on a grown man and nearly as tall as Faina at the time. She did not know how many towers they had built through the years. Then Harold declared he was no longer a child since he was a baron and a soldier. So, Faina was trapped in the keep doing needlework and roaming the walls.

With the servants turning on her, all she had was Harold, and she felt him distancing himself as the rumors grew. Faina would stand quietly and watch, wondering who wanted her to burn. Those servants who believed all the bad stories saw the quiet observations as a sign her evil mind was busy conjuring. The people saw her as the queen of darkness. Their evil judgment fell upon her.

"Answer me," Harold roared. Even at his age, his voice was deepening, and he was undeniably growing into a man. She feared what kind of man he would be. After all, the walls of Ravenshill were all she knew. It was always her protection. If Harold cast her out, surely, she would die. Faina refused to let his shout make her flinch, though it made every part of her tighten inside. Faina loved her brother. They had shared their mother's womb and the space inside the walls. But Harold was growing away from her. There was so much for him

and so little for her. It made her angry he was going to place a wedge between them over a friend Harold had many of.

Faina picked up a stick and threw it at Harold's shoe. "Do you think I cast a spell on him?" she yelled. Faina immediately clamped her lips tightly together. She had come to be vigilant of her actions, worrying over what would be considered magic. She hoped one day she could shed the reputation heaped on her due to ignorance. To do so, she could not yell because when she did that, it was seen as casting spells. She did not cry in front of anyone because it was believed her tears were not hers but the souls she held trapped inside. She did not laugh because it was heard as a diabolical sound that made others cringe and a room fall silent.

"I wonder," Harold said. Faina heard the meanness in his voice, and she knew it was out of angry spite, but it cut deep, nonetheless.

"Are you going to be one of Them too?" The lines were drawn early between Harold, Faina, and Them. Them was what they called all those who believed the words of fools. But now Harold was becoming a fool. She could feel the heat of his steely eyes and the anger falling like rain around her.

He said nothing but lifted his booted foot and slammed it down onto the tower. Sticks exploded. She heard them crunching under his boot. When he lifted it again, he used it to kick the debris at his sister. "Just stay away from my friends," he said, turning and walking away.

Faina waited until the sound of his footsteps disappeared as he descended from the wall. As soon as she knew she was alone, she burst into tears. Her sticks were gone, and she would have no more because Harold no longer brought them to her. She was confident she had scrounged every stick within Ravenshill's walls, and now they lay in pieces too small to build a tower. She knew he did not genuinely want an answer as to why Trevor decided he no longer wanted to be an apprentice at Ravenshill. She did not have to see it, but she could feel it. All the time she spent watching people, she learned she could feel the energy that came from them. Just by the atmosphere around them as they approached, she could tell if they were angry, happy, or indifferent by that aura surrounding them.

Faina would never tell Harold it was her fault Trevor fled Ravenshill. Perhaps no other servant but Trevor she could claim responsibility for. Trevor was not a nice boy. He spent two years in the barracks training to be a soldier. He was four years older than she and Harold. He wanted a position next to Baron Harold, and Faina knew he would do anything to get it.

She could not understand how people could see evil in her but not see it in her brother. She spent countless hours staring into a mirror, trying to see what others saw. She only saw a little girl with red hair and brown eyes. She saw no evil in the tilt of her eyes or the twist of her lips. But she saw evil in Trevor. She felt it. She could even smell it.

The previous night, she woke with him in her chamber. He was on top of her, a hand over her mouth, pressing her lips painfully into her teeth. She knew it was Trevor before he spoke because she could smell him and his bitterness. One knee pressed painfully into her abdomen, which was why his hand was over her mouth to keep her from echoing her pain. His other hand fought with the blanket to expose her nakedness. She struggled and writhed, trying to dislodge him. But he was already a big boy, a warrior, and she was merely a little girl locked away. When she felt his finger brush between her legs, she froze, and he did too. She could feel his dark eyes looking down at her. She used the only recourse she had, the only card she had to play. She licked the palm of his hand. He felt it, and the action was so unexpected that he snatched his hand away.

She watched him in the deep shadows lift his hand toward his face. "If you touch me again, it is guaranteed to melt your hand from your arm," Faina hissed. Immediately the boy was off her. She could feel something coming from him deeper than fear as he fled. By this morning, he was gone, off to another place. Faina wondered what another place would be like. Would it be just like Ravenshill, or would it be different, fresh?

She used her foot to scrape the little sticks into a pile. She picked them up and tossed them over the side of the wall. Not the side her father had hung from, for that would be like throwing the sticks in his face.

Faina climbed down from the wall and paused as she walked past the gate. There was a different world out there, and she watched the tranquility of it from inside Ravenshill walls. She wondered about the dark magic she was accused of. Was the world so full of magic outside the keep that there were different kinds—good and evil? She had yet to witness any magic. She knew her father's death had nothing to do with magic. Before, Faina could always count on Harold to tell her the truth of matters, but she wondered now because he did nothing to find out who hung their father. He often spoke against their father, declaring he would be a better baron than the older man. Faina never saw the man as weak, but she assumed Harold knew something she didn't. He knew so many things she didn't.

She wanted to step outside the gate. The world called her like an invisible hand reaching for hers. She backed away and moved toward the great hall. One day she hoped to leave here and see it. But this was not the day.



Chapter 2

“Faina?” Harold’s voice carried from the landing outside the solar room. She almost didn’t answer, but there was no door. And if there was, it still wouldn’t keep him out.

“Yes,” she called. She lay the doll she was sewing down. It wasn’t truly a doll. She wanted to one day have a husband and children to raise. But the best she could hope for was the doll she had been working on. She was a grotesque mess. The cloth face was not round but unevenly oval. The eyes, nose, and lips she tried to embroider were uneven and oddly out of place when she stuffed the doll into its head. Sadly, the body turned out even worse, with one arm shorter than the other. She was coming to the end of her creation, and she knew she would never play with it. It was too misshapen and disturbing to look at with her horrible stitching. Faina had plenty of time to perfect her skills but had no desire to. She slipped the doll beneath the cushion she sat on.

Harold rounded the wall, and not for the first time, she was surprised at what a handsome young man he was growing into. He took his father’s coloring with his sandy brown hair, blue eyes, and pale skin. Yet, while Harold was aging, growing, and progressing with his life laid out before him on a well-worn path, Faina remained a child, suspended in time, with no course to be seen.

Her brother, twin, and best friend stood in front of her, his head down, his hands resting on the pommel of his sword. It was as much a piece of his clothing as his boots and braies. Even when he did not wear it, Faina often saw him reach for it, resting his hand on its pommel. She waited for him to speak in the uncomfortable silence.

“I am sorry,” he finally said. His voice was quiet, sounding like a child’s. “I was just upset. It wasn’t even about Trevor.”

Faina waited. The best way to get Harold to talk was if she remained silent. She was used to being surrounded by silence, but Harold was not. Silence seemed to bother him to the point he always wanted to fill it. “My men do not respect me as they should.”

She wanted to be hurtful to him in retaliation for his actions earlier. Harold could get anything he wanted, but the most significant thing he wanted and was

having trouble getting was respect as a baron at such a young age. Faina had no sympathy for him. They did not have to respect him but fear him. But he did not care to listen to his sister on such matters of the keep. What irritated her was Harold found it necessary to dump his frustration on her. She wanted to tell him how unfair it was, but he was here apologizing, so he remembered how different their lives were.

“I have a surprise for you,” Harold said. His guilt slid from his face and in its place was a prideful smile.

She immediately felt like jumping for joy. Not much in her life surprised her. She knew every nook and cranny inside Ravenshill. She knew what this place smelled like in the spring, summer, fall, and winter. She knew it so well when she wanted to hide, no one could find her because no one knew this place as she did.

“I’m taking you to a secret place.”

She smirked at him, crossing her arms.

“Outside the walls,” he said, his brilliant smile growing broader.

Faina froze while the heart in her chest felt like it would explode, hammering fast.

“It is not far.”

Despite the magnitude of Harold’s offer Faina still hesitated. She grew up being told danger lay outside the walls. “Is it safe?”

“I will protect you,” Harold said. “As I said, it is not far. A five-minute walk.”

“Okay,” she said, but apprehension pressed heavily.

“Bring a cloak, something to cover your head with should we need to.”

Faina hesitated.

“It will be safe. I just want to be cautious. It is my job to protect you,” her brother assured her.

“Okay,” she said again.

She always thought when she passed through the walls of Ravenshill, she would pause and relish the moment. Feel how different the air was, how free she would feel released from her giant cage. But Harold hurried her through the gates, and she didn’t dare hesitate for fear he would change his mind.

Harold took her by the hand as they slipped through the gate and hurried her down the slight incline before entering a small copse of trees. He slowed from a run to a walk. The leaves crunched beneath her feet, and a twig snapped beneath her heel. She heard birds closer than she ever had before. She listened to the river they walked toward. She had seen it all before from atop the wall. But being in the forest, smelling the river so close, and hearing it was far different than she could ever imagine.

Harold veered from the direction of the river, and then they climbed a small incline. One spring, the rains came, and she watched the river below the keep swell until it engulfed its banks and was a twirling, twisting mass of brown water.

She could hear the roar from the solar on the third floor of the tower, and it was frightening the power that churned below.

Harold stopped at the top of the hill, and she finished the climb behind him until she stood on the precipice with him. Below them was a basin where two hills came together, and from both sides flowed two waterfalls, filling the bowl before it rushed toward the river. Faina knew her brother watched her face as she slowly took in her surroundings, committing it all to memory because she feared she would never see it again.

“Do you want me to teach you how to swim?” Harold asked.

Faina spun to him quickly. Her eyes scanned his face, and she knew without a doubt what he was offering would be fun. She nodded, her face feeling like it cracked open from her wide grin.

The experience was far more than she could have ever dreamed. Long after they grew exhausted playing together in the water, they collapsed onto the pebbly bank, lying next to each other, staring up at the sky.

“There is a wise woman in the village with great healing powers. There are speculations.”

Faina was surprised at the choice of conversation, but Harold spoke to Faina often of the conflicts he faced as a young lord.

“Do you think a person can conjure evil spirits?” Harold asked.

Faina rolled her head toward him and saw his eyes still looking at the blue sky. She redirected her attention to it. The children grew up with stories of their mother’s witchery. How she had been the one to create the war with the Elliots. It began with their mother’s wanton ways. Then expanded to encompass evil magic that cursed Ravenshill and the village of Kielder. When Faina was born, she immediately carried her mother’s skills of wanton evil.

“I don’t know if such things truly exist,” she admitted.

“There is evil aplenty outside your safe walls,” Harold said. “Evil so terrifying you have to believe there is something more powerful than man driving it. There must be because it is too frightening to think otherwise.”

“Do you think I could?” Faina asked. She couldn’t breathe, waiting for his answer.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

She expelled her breath. She worried that one day Harold would believe what others did. She feared he would look at her with the same wariness.

“Are there people like what they accuse me of being?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Well, I do not know if it is evil they conjure. They have said not, but I think they would not admit it if they practiced their magic for evil purposes. The woman, Bryn, swears she practices with charms, warding off illness, droughts, that sort of thing.”

Faina stared at the sky, feeling the smooth pebbles beneath her body. She wondered what other things he spoke of, the power of charms to ward off

droughts. “Magic can be so powerful to change the weather?” she asked. She worried she would sound too curious about magic, too guilty of what people thought they knew of her.

“Most certainly,” Harold said. “There is much magic can do. There are potions they create that help wounds heal. For example, they placed charms around the well during the drought last year, and the next morning the skies opened.”

Faina laughed. She could not help it. “How do you know the charms had anything to do with the rain.”

“I do not. But I also cannot say they were not the cause.”

Faina stared up at the sky, watching a cloud drift gently by.

“If mother had powers, would you?”

Her heart froze. She swallowed, then swallowed again. “I have no powers,” she said. “I would not know where to begin to test myself.”

“You would have to learn the basics of magic, I would imagine.”

Faina felt like a million wings beat at her head, drumming in her ears.

“I spoke with Bryn. She told me no one knows if they have the gift of magical powers until they learn first.”

“What must they learn?” she asked.

“I do not know.” Harold fell silent for only a moment. “Bryn said she would teach you.”

Faina’s head snapped toward her brother to find he was watching her. How long had he been watching her reactions to his words? “How would that be possible?”

“I would take you to her.”

She swallowed, studying his eyes, knowing he was genuine in the offer. “Why?” she asked.

“Just to see,” he assured her. “Are you not curious?”

Faina could not say she had ever been curious about magic or knowing the truth about their mother. Perhaps she was terrified because what if their mother was not innocent? What if Faina was not innocent? “I’m scared,” she admitted.

“Me too. But I feel we have to know.”

She studied his face and the truths in his eyes’ blue depths. “What if it’s true?”

“What if it is?” he asked, smirking slightly. “It will not change the past. But it might change our future.”

They stared at each other for a long time. “Okay,” she finally said in a voice she thought never sounded so small.

“Tell no one. If anyone knows of this, it will only confirm their suspicions.”



Chapter 3

November 24, 1087, Ravenshill

“War?” Her voice squeaked and sounded pathetic to her own ears.

“Not war. It is only a battle to stop the Elliots from raiding our lands. I am tired of it and aim to stop it.”

“But you could be killed.” Faina’s mind was close to panicking, and her heart was racing. She knew Harold trained to be a soldier, a great warrior that could match the legend of their father. But she was not prepared for the day he would go to battle. She would never have been ready for that day.

As soon as the household retired, she ran through the forest to Bryn’s. She burst into the hut. The hearth burned low, and she watched Bryn shoot up in the bed.

“It’s me,” Faina said, going to the lamp and lighting it. “I need a charm or something to bring Harold back from battle,” she said.

“Who does he go to battle against?” she asked, tossing the blankets off herself.

“The Elliots.”

“First, we must have a lock of your brother’s hair.”

“I do not have a lock of his hair,” she replied, feeling close to panic.

“It is okay,” Bryn reassured her. “All it will take is a potion for you to place his hair in and then a chant to ward off death, and he will return.”

She burst into tears of relief. Then, after mixing the potion and Bryn taught her the chant, she raced back to Ravenshill.

“Harold,” she whispered, kneeling next to his bed. She used a gentle hand to help shake him awake.

“Faina?” he asked groggily. His hand nearly slapped her as it came out to rest on her face. He touched it, feeling the structure in the darkness before he lay back down with a groan.

“Harold, I have something for you,” she whispered.

Another groan came from him, but shortly he moved, tossing his blankets off himself and rising. "What is it?" he asked. He stretched, followed by a chuckle at his twin's embarrassment that he stood in the middle of the room naked.

"Put something on," she snapped at him. "Then follow me." She had seen her brother naked countless times. His body had grown into a man's over the years. She imagined it was what Adonis would have looked like, and she did not like seeing him.

He threw a robe on and followed her onto the stairs leading to the family's garden. As soon as he planted his feet on the ground, she reached for him with her scissors. He drew back as if she meant to slay him. "I need a lock of your hair so I can cast a spell to ward off death."

"You can do that?" he asked. Again, she heard awe mixed with a bit of disbelief.

"I can," Faina said, but she did not know. Bryn told her sometimes magic didn't work, but sometimes it did just because people believed it would.

Harold bent his head and let her cut a lock of hair from him. He watched closely as she placed his hair in the potion, held the jar high above her head, and chanted the words that would keep death from touching him in the battle. When that was complete, she dipped the charm into the potion. She then placed it around his neck and tossed half the jar's contents over each of Harold's shoulders.

"It is done," she concluded, looking up at him with the empty jar in her hand.

"And it will work?"

"Trust me," she said. Harold had often looked at her and bid her trust him. However, this was the first time Harold turned his trust over to her.

"My trust in you will never falter," he said.

The following day, she bid her brother a safe journey and a victorious battle. Then, she hugged Harold, ensuring his charm hung around his neck before she could release him.

For three days, she paced the wall of Ravenshill. It did not matter the rain that came or the whipping, biting wind that felt like it would push her from the wall. She kept her vigil. She wanted to leave and go to Bryn, find out what other charms or spells she could use to bring her brother home safely. But she feared they would return or news would come if she left. Without her brother, the guards would drag her out to hand her over to the villagers. But their loyalty or fear of their baron kept her safe. It attested to her brother's power, but it did little to ease her worries for Harold and herself. She could not eat. Everything she placed in her stomach felt as if it curdled. Sleep was impossible. Each time she closed her eyes, she saw Harold dyeing.

By the third day, she no longer felt a part of herself. The world moved slowly while she felt like she was in a frenzy. When she looked at her reflection,

her face was pale, and her eyes were sunken and bruised from not sleep looked ghoulis.

“They’ve returned!” she screamed from the parapets as soon as she saw the Kirkham banner appear above the horizon far away. “Open the gates!”

She flew from her position as she heard the guard begin to open the gate. She was through it as soon as there was enough space for her body to go, and she ran. she could not see the procession that came with the banner, but she ran. Her feet beat the pebbled road, and her slippers began to slide from her feet, but she did not pause. As her arms pumped and her breath became labored, she felt them fly from her feet. Without their leather bottoms, the stones bit into her soles, but she ran. Somewhere she found more speed when the banner came into view again.

One horseman broke from the group and raced toward her. She recognized Harold’s horse as it ate up the ground to Faina. The horse had not come to a stop before Harold slid from his saddle, landing nimbly on the ground. A small cry escaped her as they slammed into each other’s arms. He seemed so much bigger and stronger than ever as he enveloped her. she clung to him as long as she could before the smell of his unwashed and sweaty body forced her away.

“You smell like a pig pen,” she declared, taking two steps from him.

“And you look like you have been to hell a couple times over.” His face softened, and he closed the gap. Then, he grabbed her and swung her wildly. Her feet flew out as he spun, and her hair, wild with neglect, wrapped around them.

He sat her on her feet, but his face had changed.

“What is it, Harold?” she asked.

“A lot of men died.”

“I’m sorry, Harold,” Faina said, but he was never one to care a great deal for his soldiers’ welfare. It only mattered when their numbers dwindled and threatened to weaken his forces.

“I think they were waiting. I cannot swear, but I think they knew we were coming.”

“Someone has betrayed you?”

“Yes, and I think I know who he is. I just have to find proof, or most of my men will turn against me.”

“Who?” Faina asked, fearing the answer.

“Livius.”

He had commanded Ravenshill’s army for as long as both children lived. He did not like the constant turmoil between the two families that Harold did not care to avoid. Livius believed Harold should declare war or leave the Elliots alone. Faina was not surprised but also sad because she liked Livius. He treated her kindly and never looked at her as if she were an oddity.



Chapter 4

October 14, 1088 Ravenshill

Aimée came into Faina's life on a bitter fall day. She felt the wind change that morning, heralding the cold of winter. Perhaps this was why she did not like her at first sight, because she brought the cold winds. On the other hand, maybe it was because Harold did like her. In her mind, she built a fairytale of a close family. Aimée would become a sister, and they would do sisterly things, whatever that would be. But that morning, as the wind lifted her hair and tickled its cold fingers down her neck, she knew it would not be that way.

Harold was taking a bride. Faina had stood to the side and listened to him talk of heirs and carrying on the Kirkham line. She admitted she was envious, not only of Harold but the women being considered. She knew there were no plans to marry her or ever would be. But, even if they found someone who did not know of the magic in her, they would learn of it soon enough.

Many women's names flowed through their uncle Edward's mouth. There were so many, not only in England but in France too. People Edward knew before coming with Duke William to become King William twenty-two years ago. Perhaps some of her did not like Aimée from the beginning because of the attributes that intrigued Harold. Edward's description of her mother's beauty made Harold sit up and listen intently. Faina had to wonder if Edward had a personal relationship with the girl's mother since he seemed so enamored of her. The girl was Comtesse Aimée Robillard Toussaint, from a long line of nobility in France and wealthy on top of that. But it was the girl's beauty Harold was anxious to see. He could not stop speculating about her eyes, hands, and breasts. Harold and his bride were scheduled to meet before the nuptials, but events kept her ship from sailing, and as the wedding arrived, they were still to meet.

When she stepped from the carriage in front of Faina and Harold. The girl's blue, frightened eyes cast over Faina before landing on Harold. she watched her swallow, her long thin neck working. She still looked like a child, not the fifteen

years she was purported to be. The sun reflected off her hair, sparking it with various yellows and golds. She did not seem to want to move.

“Welcome,” Harold said, stepping toward her. The girl visibly shrank from him. His head raised slightly when she looked up at him, so he towered over her more. He liked intimidating her.

“Comtesse Aimée,” Edward said affectionately, moving toward her. He bowed to her and kissed the back of her hand gallantly. “I knew your mother quite well. I see you have taken much after her.”

She gave a slight curtsy, her wide eyes bouncing from the siblings to surveil the courtyard and then back. When they turned from the carriage heading for the great hall, Harold walked with Aimée. Faina trailed behind, watching Harold casting glances at his soon-to-be wife. The noon meal proceeded excruciatingly slow. Faina always sat to Harold’s right, but her brother turned to his left now, toward Aimée. As usual, Edward sat on Faina’s right. He found it necessary to lean toward her, talking around her, breathing on her food and in her face. She ground her teeth against the frustration, and her appetite fled.

They went to the chapel, and Harold married Aimée. She hoped even as she witnessed the ceremony, Harold would change his mind, but it progressed and completed. That night Harold consummated the marriage. Hearing the sounds from the connecting chamber made her nearly pity the girl. But her arrival was already upturning her life, taking Harold from her. Ultimately, Faina smiled when she heard her sister-in-law’s teary voice pleading with Harold to stop whatever he was doing.

Faina had never touched herself, not in a way that created pleasure. But as she listened to Aimée’s cries, she lowered her hand between her thighs and discovered herself. The sensations her fingers created with a stroke, thrust, or squeeze were unlike any she had experienced. It was all-consuming freedom that tensed and relaxed her at the same time. It thrilled her and made her feel more human than she ever had. She laughed when she heard Harold’s voice raise, Aimée protest, and then a slap immediately silenced her. For a few minutes, there was silence, and then she heard Harold. His voice moaned with pleasure she had never heard come from him.

The sound ended abruptly, and she heard Aimée’s sobs begin again. She knew the instant her brother forced his way into his new wife. Her pain echoed in a voice that neared a scream. she heard him abusing her, the way he made her cry with his loud and powerful thrusts. She could feel Harold’s pleasure through the walls. Aimée’s sobs and mews of pain built into a frenzy. Faina picked up Harold’s rhythm. With her eyes closed, she could see him with her—his pleasure and her pain. She did not want his new wife to come between her and her brother at a time he was growing and she was stagnating.

She knew something magnificent was building. She could hear it in Harold’s rising groans and grunts and Aimée’s continuous sobbing. She knew

those sobs were less about pain now than fear. This was her life, and her magnificent brother would make it a nightmare. Faina's release of pleasure exploded inside her, and her voice rose with it. It echoed simultaneously with Harold's. Her hips thrust high off the mattress, and she milked her pleasure as Harold did his. Their voices danced and sang together in perfect harmony.

She floated back down to the sound of Aimée crying softly. She smiled, and she was suddenly happy Aimée was here. Was Harold going to hide his abusiveness in the darkness of his chamber? Or would his disrespect for the comtesse flow into the day? If it did, she wondered if he would let her play as they once did together.



Chapter 5

December 2, 1088

“Bryn!” Faina called from outside the woman’s hut. she stepped through the doorway. The summer sun took a moment to fade, and her eyes adjusted to the dim interior.

Bryn was not inside. Faina sat at the small table and looked at the pages scattered across the surface. They were the pages of herbs and foods for healing. Seeing nothing new here. She slid from her seat and crouched next to the cabinet.

The doors opened quietly. The numerous bound pages would surely yield something new. She began pulling them out, scanning their contents, but she had absorbed all this information quickly, hungrily. Then, finally, at the bottom of the cabinet, she found it. A thick bundle of pages was wrapped in a dark brown leather binding that was cracked and worn. She ran her hand over the leather, feeling the wrinkles of time beneath her fingertips. She slowly opened the cover, revealing the first page contained a curse. She quickly scanned, realizing it was a spell to stop the growth of crops. It was a curse meant to bring on famine.

“You’re welcome to study any others, but that remains in the bottom of the cabinet. You should not have opened it,” Bryn’s voice sounded angry and a little fearful.

Faina glanced down at the pages in her hand. Then, reluctantly she closed the book and placed it back in the bottom of the cabinet where she found it.

“Do you not wish to learn something?” Bryn asked as she placed the last bundle of papers on top of it.

“I need to go home before I am missed.” she got to her feet and left Bryn standing by the door. Her mind remained locked on the book’s pages, and she could not help but wonder what other magic lay inside.

At the last meal of the day, she sat with Harold on one side, the place to her right empty. Edward had returned to his own properties, and Faina had Harold back. In the days after Aimée arrived, he began to ignore his wife during the day except to cast the looks that made her tremble. It was the nighttime

Faina enjoyed when Harold abused, humiliated, and shamed Aimée to tears. Faina would creep to the doorway and brace herself against the frame. She didn't have to touch herself now to build her pleasure. Watching her brother's powerful back thrust his hips viciously forward, Aimée crying beneath, powerless, Faina always found her pleasure simultaneously with Harold.

Four months after her arrival, Aimée was pregnant. The abuse stopped as soon as Harold found out she carried his child. Ravenshill needed an heir, and Harold wanted a son. That was Aimée's only purpose, nothing more. Faina liked that. She was less than a broodmare, for horseflesh was worth far more than a woman's flesh. But the time wasn't right for Harold's baby. Faina wasn't done watching them, hearing Harold making Aimée cry or scream. For several nights Harold's chamber was silent, and Faina missed the girl's misery that gave her and her brother pleasure. Faina remembered Bryn could create a potion that would abort a fetus. But she could not pluck it from her memory, swirling with all the other potions and charms Bryn had taught her.

She was finally able to sneak away, and she went to Bryn's, seeking her help. She would claim the potion was for her. Perhaps she would say she was impregnated by the stableboy because no full-grown man would dare lay with her. Faina knew Bryn would never agree if she knew it was for someone else who didn't know it would jeopardize their fetus. Bryn was not there, so she let herself in. She looked through the pages on the table but did not find the potion she was looking for. She opened the cabinet and paused. She wanted to find the potion to abort Aimée's baby, but her eyes fell to the pages of curses. She snatched it, slammed the cabinet doors closed to hide her theft, and ran.

In the solar of Ravenshill, she opened the book by the dim glow of the hearth. The pages contained far more than she imagined.

She knew as soon as she opened the book and began to flip through the pages, she would become what her mother was accused of being. But she had no regrets. The spells and curses she discovered would make her and Harold powerful, perhaps even gods of the north. But why stop there, she wondered. With her help, her brother could be a king.



Chapter 6

February 28, 1089

“It’s okay,” she assured Aimée as she offered her the goblet. Last night she spent hours combing through the thick book, looking for the appropriate spell. she did not want to curse her womb or risk killing her. What she found was a potion that caused great turmoil to the bowels. It caused a victim to expel everything, flushing their body, and purging it, which could take weeks. Then they would grow weak and beg for death. The potion would not kill them, only make them wish it was so. But for a tiny fetus, it could work to starve it, weaken it, and kill it. “I have practiced all the healing herbs,” Faina assured her. She looked at the liquid warily. She could not blame Aimée, for this was the first time Faina had spoken to her. Faina made it clear daily that Aimée was beneath her and not even worthy of hearing her words. Aimée saw how much Faina despised her, so she kept her distance.

But now, those eyes were rimmed in fatigue. Aimée’s morning sickness could be enough to purge the child, but she did not want to risk the chance it would survive. “It will help ease the pains of your sickness,” she promised. Harold’s child was as abusive to the girl as he was. It tormented her day and night, constantly churning her stomach and making it difficult to keep food down. Faina had little doubt that the potion would be effective in her struggling state.

Aimée’s hands wrapped around the brass, and she slowly lifted it to her lips. She paused there, studying Faina, wondering if she could trust her. *Not even a little*, Faina thought. She offered her a reassuring smile and used the tips of her fingers on the bottom of the goblet to lift it slightly. Aimée drank, and all Faina had to do was wait.

As the day passed into night and the next morning, Faina worried she had no powers. It seemed as if the potion healed instead of hurt. Aimée ate hungrily at each meal, keeping it down. But as they sat at the table for this noon meal, she saw Harold’s head whip to his left. Faina turned in time to see Aimée trying

frantically to shove her chair back. She was barely on her feet before the food she had just put into her stomach exploded all over Harold.

Harold jumped to his feet. His face twisted in rage and disgust. Aimée wobbled unsteadily in front of him. Fear marked every line of her face. “You stupid cow!” he screamed, striking her in the face with his mighty fist.

Faina watched her head rock to the side as more vomit exploded from her. She landed on the floor with an expulsion of breath. Harold stepped over her and left the hall, and Faina watched her struggle up. Aimée’s eyes took a moment to focus. Panic entered them, and she tried to scramble to her feet, but she did not make it before she grabbed her stomach. A screech left her, and she watched an explosion of diarrhea land on the floor between her knees. She collapsed in it, drawing herself into a ball, sobbing. When her eyes opened, she sought Faina out. They landed on her, accusing her. Faina gave one nod and smiled at her. Her eyes closed, her face twisted, and the pains rolled through her again.

Faina’s magic was more powerful than she could have hoped for. Aimée suffered and withered before their eyes for two weeks, while Faina was a constant at Harold’s side. She thought he would need comfort since his wife and child could be dying, but Harold surprised her. He needed Faina’s ear to vent about the wife he was saddled with. How stupid the girl was. She could not even leave the table before spewing him with her vomit. The act had infuriated him, and he spoke of her illness as if it was Aimée’s fault. Faina did not try to shed light on the absurdity of this. With that belief, he began to swear he would issue a dire punishment to his wife if she let their baby die.

Faina was more enamored by her brother than ever. He was a real man. It seemed as if what he did to Aimée in the bedroom gave him confidence. Harold took the Ravenshill army to neighboring clans, claiming pieces of property, livestock, and people he had no right to. But he was destined to be a great man. A legend of all men. He was ruthless enough to climb all the way to the throne. When he came home after defeating his enemies, they would see him as weak if he left their homes standing and their children alive. Total carnage and destruction were the only way to keep the enemy away from their gates. As the word of Harold’s absolute control spread, people would fear him. They would lay down their weapons at the sight of him. One day, Faina would tell him this was his destiny and her crucial role. But the time was not yet.

Aimée’s spasms to cleanse her bowels of Faina’s potion finally ceased. She did not emerge from her bed for a week. When she did, her skin sunken, her eyes dark as a ghouls’, and her voice had grown weak. She approached the head table for the first meal, but one look from Harold sent her scurrying. Faina watched her go, a pleased smirk on her face she could not hide.

“I will bring her back to her chamber tonight,” Harold said, leaning toward Faina. Faina felt her innards jump in anticipation. Tonight would be fun, Aimée

was weak, not that she would ever be a match for Harold, and her cries promised to be pitiful. "Will you still watch me?"

She spun to look at Harold. He watched her intently and was pleased with the smile on her face. "I will," she promised.

Harold stood and placed a hand on her shoulder, leaning over her. His breath fanned across her ear, sending shivers racing down her spine. "It will be fun." she could feel her eyes sparkling at his words.

Of course, it did not disappoint. When Harold summoned Aimée, she had refused him, declaring herself not healed. But, of course, that did not stop the two men from dragging her to Harold's chamber. Faina heard the door slam behind Aimée.

"Please," Aimée pleaded in her scratchy voice. "I cannot accommodate you this night."

"You will come here," Harold ordered. Faina could tell by his voice that he lay in his bed, reclined with his kingly body stretched leisurely naked. His eyes would be filled with heat, eager for the game to begin.

"I won't," she sobbed. Faina heard the bed creak as the door opened. Her brother's steps ran across the room. Faina listened to the door slam just as Aimée cried out. Faina smiled. She had tried to escape Harold, but he had caught her. Now he would teach her a lesson. Her scream echoed for what seemed an eternity before it ended abruptly. She listened, barely breathing. Had he killed Aimée? No, she heard her quiet sobs muffled by his hand.

Faina heard them shuffling, and then they were back on the bed. Faina eased from her chamber and came face to face with the closed door. She stood looking at its wood, the solidness of it. Dare she open it? Harold would expect her to. He expected her to watch him, to see his glory in that most intimate moment between them.

The leather hinges whispered as she slowly opened the door. Aimée was on her knees at the foot of the bed. She faced the door Faina stood in but did not see her because she was bent tightly at the waist. Harold's strong arm held her down by the back of her neck, folding her and using her neck as leverage so each thrust would feel like it would break her neck.

Harold was on his knees behind his wife. His eyes were on Faina, giving her a smile and wink. Then his face transformed in the shadows, and it darkened. Faina recognized the evil written of in the leather book in her brother's eyes. He increased the viciousness of his thrusts, making a strangled sound muted by her position escape from Aimée. As Faina watched, she realized Harold did not thrust himself into her vagina but her anus. Faina could not imagine what such an act would feel like after what Aimée was recovering from. But she tried as her fingers reached for herself. She propped her shoulder against the doorframe, her hand sunk beneath the skirt of her nightgown.

Harold watched her, and then a slow smile spread across his face before releasing the back of Aimée's neck and fisting his hand in her hair. He yanked her head back, so she looked at Faina. At first, she did not see her in the doorway, but when her eyes widened, Aimée knew she had watched her. Harold had his head thrown back, and she wondered if his pleasure came from the sex or Aimée's sounds of pain and horror. Harold was buried in his own climax, not watching Faina. But Aimée watched Faina reach her own pleasure before she left them, returning to her bed.

Time passed. Twice more, she had to make the potion for Aimée for her to expel her baby. She did not fear she was keeping an heir from being born. Harold was a virile man, and he would father hundreds of children. Each time it happened to her, Aimée knew Faina was behind it. She tried to tell Harold, but of course, Harold would believe nothing a woman said who could not carry a child as every woman should.

"Harold!" Livien's voice echoed in the hall as the man's long legs carried him between tables and straight to the lord's, where Faina sat with Harold alone. No one at Ravenshill equaled them and could not dine at their table. Harold no longer let Aimée leave his chamber. She had to take her meals there, use a chamber pot, and fear every day that the door would slam open and her husband would fill it with his darkness. Faina watched Aimée's face changing, drawing tight across skin paling. She was not as beautiful as when she arrived at Ravenshill not so long ago. "Why do you make war with every clan?" Livian demanded, planting his feet a shoulder's width apart.

"Because that is how I do things," Harold said. His voice almost sounded insolent. she watched Livien's brows snap together.

"It is not wise for a man to have only enemies and no allies," Livien declared.

Harold laughed. "It is working well for me so far," Harold said, holding out his arms to take in the hall. It was apparent Ravenshill was growing in its wealth with more servants, more peasants gathered, with more soldiers and craftsmen among them. She smiled, pleased at her brother rising.

"You will bring destruction to Ravenshill."

"Do you dine with me, or do you wish to continue to fight a battle you will not win?" Harold asked. By Harold's tone, she knew her brother did not care. "I suggest you take the offer to dine."

Faina's eyes widened with her smile as her brother lay a threat at the great warrior's feet.

Livien hesitated another moment before giving a short nod and climbing the steps to sit next to Faina. She felt his eyes move across her, then Harold, to land on Aimée's empty chair. "Where is your wife, Harold?"

"She is feeling under the weather. She does not take her meals with us anymore." Harold's voice was casual, perhaps even holding a hint of concern.

“Her miscarriages have taken a toll on her,” Faina said, ladling in a bit of concern for her sister-in-law.

“I do hope I will get to see her before I leave,” Livien said.

She turned to him, “Where do you go?”

Livien gave a long sigh of a man long tired.

“I go to fight a war with the Percys that I cannot win.”

“I am sure it is best.”

“I am sure it is not. Your brother is a fool.”

Faina felt betrayed by this man sitting next to her. He was one of the men who raised her and Harold. What did it matter how Harold chose to run his property? It was his barony. Livien should not judge her brother now as he ensured the Kirkhams remained at Ravenshill and prospered. Livien’s eyes slid back to his plate, but she watched him swallow and look at her from the corner of his eye. When he saw her watching him, he pretended to eat.

Although he was probably in his middle forties, Livien was still a good-looking man. His hair had only taken on a small amount of gray, and his eyes were still bright and intelligent. Faina did not know why he had never married. She remembered watching him with one of the servants. She saw how he brought her pleasure. The servant voiced it loudly, unlike Harold and Aimée. She could very well imagine herself lying under him. Wouldn’t that be the true test of her powers, to marry? She already loved Livien, and he did not fear her. But as she watched him and tried to speak to him, she knew it was nothing he would consider.

She went to her chamber, retrieved the book, and found a potion to put into a man’s drink. It subdued them, said the description. It left them ready for and open to the wiles of a woman. She gathered the ingredients, chanting the phrase that would make the mixture powerful and true. It was easy to slip in his wine, and then she waited.

Not long after he drank only a small part of the potion, he staggered to his feet. Faina stood in the shadows by the door to the kitchens.

“You did not finish your wine,” Harold’s voice drew her attention back to him. He stood at Livien’s place at the table, the other man’s goblet in his hand. Harold lifted it and drank the entirety of its contents. She turned just in time to see Livien staggering toward the door.

She let him go, hurrying to Harold’s side. He drank three times the amount Livien had. She reached Harold’s side. “You have to come with me,” she told him, taking hold of his arm.

“I do not,” he said, offended. He was not the kind to be ordered by anyone, not even his beloved sister.

“You must,” she urged. “I put something in Livien’s wine.”

“What?” he asked, drawing back to look down at her.

“Come with me. I’ll explain.”

He appeared to want to argue, but his eyes shifted, and she watched the defiance flee. His feet readily followed her all the way to her chamber. He was unsteady when he reached her room and collapsed onto the bed. He looked huge in her small bed.

“What is happening to me?” he asked, his words slurring.

She went to him, raised his feet onto the bed for him, and began removing his boots. He reached for Faina as if his arm could extend that far. His fingers stroked the air as if he were touching her. “I am not sure what you will feel. It is a spell to make a man susceptible to a woman’s desires.”

Harold scoffed, which turned into a smile and then laughter. “You can do such a thing?” he asked, swirling his fingers in the air as if he traced with invisible ink.

“You have taken it. Can I convince you of anything?” she asked, setting his boots on the floor and taking a couple of steps away from him.

He studied her for a minute. “What do you desire?”

She arched a brow at him and smiled. “That is simple. For you to be king.”

He looked at her as if he had never considered such a thing, and indeed, he likely never had. “A king,” he said, dropping his arm heavily to the bed. He stared at her standing next to him, then he laughed again. “Do you know how foolish that sounds?”

She scowled, offended at his laughter. She moved back to the bed and reached for him. She ran her fingers down his cheek, neck, chest, and muscular abdomen. By the time she had trailed to his thighs, she saw his arousal pressing against his pants. “You will not call me foolish,” she said. She stroked her hand back up. He was growing hard with every stroke of her fingers. “I think you are seeing I can do such things as bend a man to my will. Make him do something he may not want to?” she trailed her fingers across his chest, and it seemed as if she scorched him through his shirt.

“What is going to happen to me?”

“I don’t know,” she said, bending down to whisper in his ear. “What is happening?”

“I can’t move,” he said. His eyes rose so he could stare up at her. “I cannot stop you from touching me. Though I know it is wrong, I cannot stop feeling like an untried youth under your caress. I feel a pulling toward you, your words, and your will.”

“And what of becoming a king,” she asked, trailing her fingers all the way down to his thigh again. She marveled at his response, his thick manhood pressing forcibly against the fabric.

“I do not know how to become a king.”

“I will make you a king,” she declared. She stepped back from him and quickly bared herself entirely to her brother. He watched her, and she watched his shame flood his eyes and pinken his cheeks. She slowly walked back to the

bed and ran her fingers lightly across the back of his hand. "Just like I can make you desire me even though you know it is not right." Faina swooped her head down and bit into his nipple through the fabric of his shirt. He expelled a sigh of pleasure far louder than Harold ever expressed with Aimée.

"Are you evil?" he asked her. She saw the heat burning in his eyes. She could see how powerful her magic was in the raw desire etched on his face as he looked upon her nakedness and accepted the stroking of her fingers.

"Do you wish to be king?" she asked, letting the palm of her hand flatten on his abdomen as she drew it down, pressing across his penis, feeling it thrust against her palm.

"Yes," his voice exploded.

"Then what does it matter?" she asked him.

"It does not. Just help me," he pleaded with her. "I feel I am going mad if I can do nothing but let you touch me."

She squatted next to her bed. Faina gently stroked the hair from Harold's forehead. "Shhh," she soothed him. "You are my brother, my very soul, but I save myself for another." Her mind went back to Livien, and she felt apprehension that his potion would wear off before she reached him. "But remember all you are feeling, and we will play with your wife," she promised him.

"Faina!" he pleaded for her to return as she left the room.

Livien had made it to the stable. She did not know if he was trying to leave with his horse or if he planned to sleep there. She crossed the bailey, her pale skin reflecting her nudity in the moonlight. She entered the dark stable, feeling an invisible string leading her to him. She reached the ladder to the loft and climbed, confident she would find him there. she was not disappointed.

He lay on his back, his arms extended from his sides, snoring. She went to him and lowered herself onto him. His body immediately responded, thrusting up between her spread thighs but restrained by his. His eyes fluttered open, and he stared up at her with a significant level of confusion. she ground herself down against him, feeling his desire despite the shock flooding his eyes.

"What are you doing?" he asked her.

"I am showing you what I have to offer as your wife."

"My wife?" he asked in a growl. She saw annoyance that he could not control that part of his body that was going to counter any words that would spew from his mouth.

"Yes," she whispered, leaning toward him and letting him feel her breath on his neck.

"Get off me," he said.

But she remained straddling him, stroking him.

"What have you done to me?"

"What needs to be done," she replied, reaching to release his cock.

He fought the potion admirably, straining to get his muscles to respond to him, but they were not being controlled by him but by her.

“This will not make you my wife,” he warned her as he sprang free. He was as marvelous as she remembered, and she throbbed for him.

“You will let your child be a bastard?” she asked.

She had him in her hand, rising, ready to make good on her promise. He moved then, lurched upward, and threw her off balance. He could not stand, so he rolled away from her. As he neared the ladder, he let out a feral, desperate sound. He tried to gain his feet. she advanced on him, and he turned to say something, but his lack of coordination threw him off balance, and he tumbled through the hole. She stared down at him. His neck was broken, twisted unnaturally to the side. Blood began to seep from between his lips. she slipped down the ladder and returned to her chamber.

Harold was still awake, and his eyes fell on her as she entered. He followed her across the floor to stand at his side. “Faina.” her name came out in a whisper, feathering across his lips.

“It’s okay, Harold,” she assured him. She crouched next to him and smoothed his hair from his forehead. “I have learned tonight my magic is powerful. You will be a powerful king. I promise you.”



Chapter 7

October 4, 1089

Faina's power allowed the magic of the spell to bend men to her will and bent Aimée as well. The night was fun. She watched from the bedside as Aimée's eyes rolled from Faina to her husband, horrified by their depravity. Faina told Harold after this night, she would cast a spell so that his next child would live and grow strong. Since her brother seemed to have no problem making his seed take hold of his wife's womb, it would be Faina's success. She was confident it would come to fruition if she just stopped killing the fetus.

The walls of Ravenshill grew to burst with the people who sought them for survival and protection. A second wall was going up of stone to replace the wooden palisade. Soon a great tower would be built with the same stone and would make the original wooden keep appear tiny in comparison. It would be a testament to Harold's growing power.

Her brother accepted her magic, finding a place in his heart for the darkness mirroring his own. She cast spells protecting him while casting curses on their enemies. She learned to sacrifice animals to make her magic more potent. It worked well, for no army could withstand Harold's. One day he would be powerful enough to march on the second King William? And take the crown of England. From there, he would take France and Spain, stretching far to become the greatest monarch the world would ever see.

"Why does he continue to defy me?" Harold seethed as he paced the war room. Her brother had set his eyes on land held by the Percy clan, but Donald Percy's men were not made up of only peasants. Percy had recruited formidable fighters, and Harold had gained no ground in the three months of fighting. She could feel his frustration.

As his commanders left the room, she turned to Harold. "I have found an incantation that will guarantee you victory and casts a curse on your enemy."

"Let us go perform it," he said.

She shook her head. "It has to be done moments before the battle. I must travel with you."

Harold spun to her. His face was filled with fear. "You cannot leave the protection of these walls."

She smiled at him. "Do you not see. My magic is powerful. I do not fear anyone."

Harold nodded at her. "Nor do I."

"Then tomorrow, let us go show the Percys our power."



She watched the wary glances at her and between themselves as she held her arms out. Her head was thrown to the sky. In front of her was a line of Percys. They were ready to churn the pristine ground between them into a battleground. All the men, even those on the other side, could hear her voice rising, casting her curse and offering a blessing. Carnage ensued, and victory was Harold's, sweeping the field and leaving the corpses of their enemies to rot. Their land and their dead bodies were lost to them and irretrievable by the surviving Percys.

Murmurings began, and they reached Harold's ears. Her magic was recognized as powerful after the defeat. Fear flowed across the land. They whispered of purging her from the earth by flames before her evil turned upon them.



"Are you laying siege to me?" Harold's incredulous voice carried down from the parapet to the men gathered at the gate.

"We came for Faina," one of the men called back.

Faina stepped forward and looked down at the men. They looked small below, as if they could be squashed as easily as ants. The men took a fearful step back at her appearance. Harold looked at her and smiled.

"You may not be aware, but Faina is my sister."

"She is evil. We have heard what she does when you go to battle. We know of her spells and curses, the sacrifices."

Harold laughed. "I do not know you men. Until we come to take your land, my sister is no concern of yours." Harold turned away to leave her and the other men on the wall.

"We will lay siege until you all starve," the man who seemed to be their leader said.

Harold spun around, and as he looked down on the men again, the wind picked up his hair, fluttering his cloak. He was a god upon his throne, Faina

thought with pride. “No,” Harold said, shaking his head. “You will try. And then you will die.”

“There is little you can do. If we die, more men will come. We must do this to protect ourselves, and if you were wise, you would give her over to us.”

Harold leaned toward her. “I think it is time for you to show them what you can truly do.”

She took a step closer to the edge. The stone wall pressed into her abdomen, and she lifted her arms, a charm in each hand. She began to chant her incantation. she rained a curse down on their heads, stealing their fortunes and taking away their loved ones. A gasp rose as she whipped the charms in her hands on the last word. Their liquid contents fell on the men below. She was the only one who knew it was water because a curse was one thing, but for something physical to touch them helped settle their deep fear.

Harold was watching her with an inscrutable expression. “What will that do?”

“It takes their fortunes and kills their children.”

“That does not take them from our walls,” Harold snapped at her. “You are supposed to make them fall where they stand. I do not wish to be held prisoner in my own home.”

She studied his face, thinking such a thing was survivable. she was proof of that. His words sparked something inside her, a small flame of resentment that had subsided as they played with Aimée and grew powerful. “Do you not trust me?” she asked him.

Harold scowled at her. “I thought you proclaimed yourself powerful enough to make me a king.”

She scoffed. “That does not happen overnight.”

His hand rose in a flash and struck her across the cheek. The blow staggered her, but the ringing in her ears was not from the impact but a thousand wings of Satan’s horde coming. she smiled at Harold. “If you strike me again, I will ensure your child dies in your wife’s womb along with any other child you try to plant.”

Harold drew back from her words, studying her. “Did Aimée tell the truth when she said you were behind her illnesses?”

She leered at him. “Did we not have fun?”

Harold’s face darkened before he turned abruptly and left the wall. He would come to see her way. She would ensure that. she turned back to look down on the men. They remained, and she smiled down at them, knowing their families were being destroyed as they stood.

She left the wall a few minutes later, growing bored watching the clueless men. She went in search of Harold. She only had to remind him what her power had gotten them so far. Perhaps remind him of the potions he liked to give Aimée so she would receive him with lust. He knew what to do at night, which brought

shame to Aimée's face the following day whenever someone looked at her. He would remember this, and all would be well.

Faina did not have a chance to speak to him before the day's final meal. The men outside the gates were swelling in number. Harold became infuriated when those men began to disassemble the wall he was expanding and used the timbers of the beginning tower to fuel their fires. He sent a barrage of arrows flying, but they did not reach the men. she thought Harold would charge his men from the walls and lay waste to them. But he did not open the gate, and she could not convince him to do so.

She entered the hall as the echo of the dinner bell fell silent. She moved forward, eyes following her to the head table. She sat, but the chair to her left remained empty. All looked to her. she could begin the meal, which might be acceptable to Harold, or he would see it as a show of disrespect his men would witness. She shook her head to keep the serving wenches in the kitchens. Time ticked slowly as the people began to grow restless. She thought she would call the food forward when the main door to the hall swung open. Harold entered, followed by several men. Harold moved forward, and she offered him a smile to erase the lines of strain darkening his face.

As the men drew closer and closer, she began to feel a level of confusion. Why were those men still in step with Harold? It was as if he led these men toward their table. Her eyes traveled over each of the men, but nothing about them made them stand out as worthy to sit at the head table. Then, something passed over one of the men's faces. It made her take a second look at those following. She understood when she saw some of the faces she had looked down on from the wall. Harold rounded the table, moving swiftly toward her. she shot to her feet, but Harold grabbed her roughly by the wrist. The pain of his biting fingers surprised her with its viciousness. she looked up at Harold's face and saw its rage. "They are right. You must be stopped."

"But I will make you king."

His hand shot out, and he grabbed her by her throat, his fingers biting into the tender flesh where her neck met her jaw. She sagged in his hand for a moment making the pressure intensify. "I do not need you to make me King. I am the power behind my victories, not you and your evil. You bring sieges and death to my children."

He shoved her with his hand, driving her backward. Hands closed on her arms. she fought like a mad woman, twisting, biting, kicking, spitting, and cursing them, but they swept her from the hall as quick as their cumulative feet could coordinate the steps. Dusk was lying heavy across the land as they pulled her through the bailey. she still fought, but they dragged her easily. Her voice rose in screams of rage. They had no right to come into the safety of the Ravenshill walls and pull her out. she was always safe here, protected. Her

uncles told her this time and again. But they weren't here now, and Harold had allowed the men in.

She nearly escaped them as they crossed through the gate. Her hand slipped from their grip, and she swung a fist at the other men, but she was immediately grabbed. Her knees were knocked from beneath her, and she crashed to the ground. Hands hauled her back to her feet, dragging her, not giving her a chance to get her feet beneath her. She felt her toes dragging across the dirt as they pulled her from Ravenshill.

Some of the timbers from the tower had been returned to them, to Harold. One such timber was embedded in the ground. Next to it were piles of kindling and the remaining timbers. She began fighting again, frantically. A fist cuffed her on the side of the head, and she felt her knees want to sag, but strong hands held her up. She felt the hands pulling her arms behind her, but she clenched her fist tight and tried to keep her arms pinned at her sides. But she was no match for this horde of men.

As she felt them lash her hands around the post, she knew the fight was over. A rope was wrapped around her waist and down to her legs, penning her securely so she could not move. Her eyes fell on Ravenshill. On the wall stood Harold, watching. He made no move to stop her death. She felt her heart shatter. The pieces fell at her feet, where the kindling pile reached her knees. A part of her thought surely Harold would stop this now. He could not let her die, not like this.

She heard the whoosh of the flames as the dry rushes were set, and the heat and smoke were almost immediate. From her memory, she plucked a curse she hurled at her brother. It cast darkness upon him and those Kirkhams that would come after. No generation would go unscathed until their family was wiped from Ravenshill and the Earth. Her voice rose, screaming the curse so he would hear it and fear what was coming. Then her voice cracked as the first flame touched her feet. The pain of her flesh melting broke Faina, and her voice exploded toward the sky. A long wail that rolled on and on. The smoke shifted, engulfing her, and she gasped at its thickness. Then the wind whipped it away, and she saw the wall where Harold had been standing was empty.

She felt the flames rise higher and higher. She tried to summon the smoke and her death, but the fire ate at her hungrily. The last thing she knew was the high-pitched screaming of her own voice and the feel of her flesh burning from her bones.



Chapter 8

Where had Harold gone? What was so important he could not watch what he had done. He should have watched every second of her death. She deserved that much. Faina felt herself in Ravenshill, but her feet did not touch the ground. Instead, she floated across the bailey, into the keep, and up the stairs. Harold drew her as he always did. He stood at the edge of the third-floor landing, his back to the stairs. Aimée stood in front of him. She looked larger suddenly, stronger than even Harold.

Her hands whipped out, and she shoved her brother. He staggered back, but his body, built for a battlefield and educated there, only took one step to steady himself. But nothing could stop the blow of Aimée's foot as she planted it with a mighty kick to his balls. Harold grabbed his crotch, beginning to fall to his knees. Then Aimée shoved him again.

As Harold tumbled from the landing, Faina reached for him. She tried to stop his fall. She wanted to call back her curse as she watched in slow motion as he struck each step. She heard each bone break and felt them as if they were her own. He was dead before his skull broke on the wooden floor below. She stared down at him and wanted to see him rise, but he did not.

She saw Bryn approaching. It had been months since she saw her, and she felt unease at her presence. She sprinkled something over Harold's body, and the words she heard her say would send him to the afterlife. Then her eyes fell on Faina, pinning her to the spot. Bryn spoke, and her words rang loudly. It was a binding spell.

Then something happened to Harold's body, drawing her eyes from Bryn. She watched a form rise from the body. It was not human. It was not smoke or anything she could ever put into words.

The form hovered a moment, then began to drift away. She followed, calling her brother's name, but it seemed to pick up speed. It crossed the bailey with her chasing. Finally, it paused at the gates closed tightly before it. She thought with satisfaction the barrier would stop it, but the figure passed through. She surged forward, but the gate stopped her. She tried to reach through, but it was not the gate keeping her but the spell Bryn had cast upon her spirit.

She screamed again and again. It sounded inhuman in her ears, screeching filled with loathing and torture. Harold was gone, her uncles were gone, and she would always remain in this prison bound by the walls she once thought offered protection from the wolves at the gate.