

# CHAPTER ONE

I couldn't think. My chest hurt from running, and I wasn't even sure I was in the right place. Tegen had given me directions to a tavern on the river — was this where he'd told me to go, if things went wrong?

It didn't matter. I had to get off the streets. Behind me, the Oss splashed moonlight over a row of riverside storefronts, bright enough for me to make out the sign of a blue wine bottle and the short flight of stairs down into the alley. Down was shadows and safety. I took it.

*You'll know the place*, he'd said — and there, under my fingers as I felt for the door latch, sparked a tiny, wavering star, carved into the wood so faintly it was nearly invisible. Its odd smoky light faded when I moved my hand away. I tumbled the lock (Tegen had the keys) but had to bang the door open with my hip. I left a smear of blood on the frame as I wrestled it shut again.

Breathing heavily, I took stock. Shelves, barrels, damp stone floor. It was dank and musty, as if the river crept in on rainy days. All good, for me. Must and stuck doors meant neglect, and neglect meant nobody was likely to find me here, no matter how busy the tavern got. The only door was the one I came in. A single window at street side, too low for moonlight. Except for the occasional passing light of a boat overhead, it should stay dark here all night. Still, I kept to the shadows. Eyes could look into windows as well as out.

*How long should I wait?* At least until Tegen came — or Hass showed up with our pay.

Or until the Greenmen got here.

I choked back that thought, my throat tight. I leaned against one of the barrels and peeled back my sleeve, hissing as the cloth pulled away from dried blood. Not as bad as it felt — the point had just grazed my skin. And if I hadn't blocked that blow, I probably would have lost an eye.

Or worse. I took a shaky breath. Bandages. A safe house for thieves should have bandages, right?

The safe house was very much wine cellar and much less hideout, but a bench under the window held spare clothes, at least. I dug out a rumpled green gown like nobs wear, a doxie's split silk knickers, and a screaming-pink doublet and trunk hose. The hidden mark I'd found on the door meant this place had refuged Sarists during the war, but now it looked more like a hangout for bawds and their bucks. No bandages.

I sacrificed the knickers. Using my teeth, I tore them into ragged strips and tried to concentrate on the work and calm my hammering heartbeat. I uncorked a bottle of wine and went to pour some over the wound, but my hands were jouncing so badly I dumped half the contents on my skirts, dousing the strips of cloth. Cursing every god I knew, I mopped up as much blood as I could, pinning the wet cloth in the crook of my arm to hold it there.

*What happened?* I couldn't slow the images spinning in my mind enough to make sense of them. We'd finished the job; we should have been safe. Tegen had thrown an arm around me and kissed me. I had laughed, the blood rushing in my veins. Hass's client would have the letters, I'd have fifteen crowns, and Tegen would have me. Everything had gone perfectly.

Until the men in green slammed through the street-side doors and wrenched Tegen off me, a flashing silver blade easing the separation. A bloom of red sprang up on Tegen's knife — the guard's blood — a burst of blackness blinded me, and for a moment I couldn't breathe. And then, cutting through the chaos, Tegen's voice: *Digger, run!*

And I ran. Like I'd never run in my life, crossing what felt like half the city. All the way here, I'd heard their pounding footsteps behind me, but didn't dare look back. At least one of the Greenmen had to have gotten a good look at me — the one who'd cracked my skull against the wall. Or the one who'd grabbed Tegen.

Panic seized my belly and I fought back nausea. *You got away. You got away.* I repeated the words silently until I no longer felt like gagging.

Bruises would heal. But Tegen . . . I swallowed back another wave of panic.

*Get hold of yourself if you want to live through the night.*

Where was he? He must have gone to Hass first, to deliver the letters. He'd shake the Greenmen, drop the cargo and get our pay, then circle back here when things were safe. It might take a while. That was why he'd sent me here, to wait for him. I closed my eyes for a moment, but I still saw Tegen, bloody knife in hand, kicking and slashing as I ran away.

I checked the window, although there wasn't much to be seen from down here. My knee almost buckled under me when I slid off the barrel, but I couldn't sit still. The grille on the window made the room feel like a cell, and the smell of my own blood was starting to make me light-headed.

Food. I needed food, and sleep, and a plan. I probably also needed medical attention, but it wasn't like I ever had access to that. Food could wait; I'd spent more than one night hungry — though not lately — another wouldn't kill me. Dry clothes, however . . .

The guards were looking for a girl in black wool. As a boy I'd be less conspicuous — but *not* in that ridiculous pink costume. The green then, wrinkled as it was. It was safest, anyway. Guards were less likely to stop someone in green to check papers. I clawed the pins from my hair with one hand and twisted my laces free with the other, but as the kirtle loosened, I felt the crinkle of paper between the wool and my corset.

Everything in me sank again. Tegen must have slipped Chavel's letters into my bodice when he kissed me. The pins scattered to the floor as I dipped a hand into my dress to pull the packet of letters free.

They were spotted with blood.

Tegen wasn't coming.

I stood there, half undone, staring at the folded papers in my trembling fingers. I hadn't let myself believe he wouldn't get away. He was *Tegen*. But my bruised knee, my cracked skull, and my bloody arm told the truth. If Tegen hadn't stabbed that guard — stupid, reckless, deadly

thing to do — the Greenmen would just have arrested two thieves. Searched us, branded us, maybe even let us go, if Hass coughed up our bounty. But instead they got one heretic: It was a sin to strike the servants of the Goddess, even her pox-ridden temple guards. And heresy was the only crime those men in green really cared about.

I wanted to charge straight back there and drag him away, but at the thought of those hands on him — on *me* again — I sank to the floor. I knew what every thief knew, what every citizen of Gerse knew, these days: Nobody gets away from Greenmen.

I sat there all night, even as my leg stiffened up, even as I knew I had to get out of there and move. A safe house was temporary; someone was bound to come down here eventually, and I had the evidence of my crime all over me.

I should get rid of the letters. I should get them to Hass, get paid for them.

But Hass hadn't been there. He hadn't seen the men in green melt out of the woodwork and seize Tegen —

A sickening idea stopped that thought cold. *Had he set us up?*

I didn't know what to do next. This was Tegen's job, and Hass was Tegen's contact; I'd just been along to make sure we lifted the right documents. Tegen didn't read — he couldn't tell one language from another, couldn't distinguish a symbol that might be charmed from something commonplace. I possessed that unique skill, and it had made me a valuable partner. *Valuable enough to trust with the prize?* I turned the letters over, rubbed their folded edges, but stopped short of opening them. They were written in Corles, a language I could recognize but not read. Hass had given specific instructions about what to look for — the language, the mark of the king's private secretary. There was nothing . . . special about these papers. They lay cold and dead and ordinary in my hands.

The smart thing would be to toss them into a hearth or the river. But I didn't have anything else. If they were worth Tegen's life, then they were worth a damn sight more than fifteen crowns. There was no reason

to carry a full purse on a job; whatever money I had was safely stashed away in my rooms, which was the last place I could go right now. If I couldn't go home, and I couldn't get to Hass to get rid of the letters and get paid, that didn't leave a lot of options open.

City, royal, and temple guards patrolled the streets at all hours of the day, and they spread news among each other like a plague. An injured Greenman would have the whole lot of them on the hunt for the attacker's accomplice. There wasn't anybody I trusted enough not to give me up for that kind of crime. I had to get out of Gerse.

Finally, a pale, uneven light filtered through the narrow window. Night was fading, and with it, the last of my cover.

I hauled my sore body up from the floor and tested my leg. It would hold me, without limping, but wasn't any too happy about it. I could creep upstairs and help myself to something from the tavern kitchen, or the tavern strongbox, or the tavern patrons . . . but a sudden jostle of voices from the river walk quenched that notion. I had to get moving.

I had to get *dressed*. I tucked the letters into my corset and pulled on the green dress, doing my best with the inconveniently placed laces and my inconveniently placed wound, then hoisted myself onto one of the barrels and watched through the ironwork. Richly shod feet passed by, inches from my nose. I was nothing more than a mouse in the corner, a pigeon on a windowsill.

When the walk was clear, I eased off the barrel and shook myself tidy. There wasn't so much blood — only a smear on the inside of my sleeve and a few drops on my skirt, not that noticeable on the dark silk. I bundled my black dress around a loose brick I found on the floor, strode out onto the wharf as if I belonged there, and pitched the clothes into the water, for the mudlarks to find at low tide.

I needed a lady's maid, a snub-nosed little dog, a *basket*, for gods' sake! I was too exposed out here alone. I kept wanting to slink back into the shadows, but shadows were scarce in the morning on the river. Oss Harborway was bustling this late in the season, the river walk busy with fishermen, merchants, and Nob Circle servants stocking up on the

morning's provisions. I cast about for where to turn next, but it was nothing but tall white houses to my left, and clear gray water to my right. Boats crowded the harbor, a tangle of hulls and masts and the sleek black bodies of swift little river cruisers.

The river was my best hope, but how was I going to sneak onto a boat looking like a lost nob?

I swept my skirts out in a wide arc, giving me room in all that fabric to move along at a pretty good clip, up out of the tavern's neighborhood, toward the busier section of the city. It wasn't much past dawn, and sunlight bounced off the green-tiled roof of the Celystra, making the temple complex glitter in the morning like a field of emeralds. It was only the roof; the temple and its guards were safely behind a wall three streets away, but my gut clenched as I hurried past, ready to get as far as possible from the goddess Celys and her dogs.

"Hey, greensleeves!"

I didn't hear him at first. I was looking over a merchant trader, trying to decide if I could get hired on as a boy-of-all-work. I'd have to waylay a *real* boy, and shake him down for his clothes, of course —

"Milady! You there — greensleeves."

This time my attention snapped to the bank, as I realized that comment was directed at me. I hammered down the jolt in my throat and forced myself to look down calmly.

A long, gaily painted pleasure skiff had drawn up beside me, and a young nob in an absurd hat was leaning over the side, waving at me. The amber of his ring sparked like a flame in the sunlight. I took an involuntary half step backward, but he didn't *look* like a Greenman. . . .

"Milady greensleeves, pray tell us, do you know how much farther to the city gates? I promised my companion here that I'd get him out of Gerse. There'll be a copper in it for you."

I hesitated, glanced across the riverway. How could anyone not know where the gates were? I straightened my shoulders and kept walking.

"All right, a silver." The nob dipped his oar into the water, pushing the boat a few yards forward — following me. This time I stopped and looked

his way. He wasn't alone; there were two girls and another young man in the boat with him. They reeked of money, but looked like they'd all slept in their clothes. Or hadn't slept at all, maybe.

The young nob fished inside his slops and withdrew a coin, which he held out to me, like baiting a shy dog. My frown deepened. The longer I stood here in the sun, the better the chances somebody would see me.

"Take me aboard and I'll show you," I said.

A grin spread across the young nob's face. "Ah, a counteroffer! But democracy reigns in this boat; we'll have to take a vote. What say you all?" He turned to his companions with a wave of his arm.

I didn't have time for this. I shrugged and started down the pier again.

"No, milady, wait — you have a deal." He rose up with exaggerated grace and offered me his hand, the silver coin still glinting in his palm. Suddenly suspicious, I drew back and glared at him.

"I'm not a prostitute."

"Of course you're not," Absurd Hat said with a soothing smile. "Still, I thought you might be able to cheer my friend up." He gestured toward the other young man, who sat hunched and sour-faced, as if he'd spent a hard night.

"He looks like he's had plenty of good spirits already," I retorted. The girl beside Absurd Hat, a thin beauty with the requisite vast green eyes and light brown hair, gave an unbecoming snort. The other girl, a plump brunette crammed into her high-waisted velvet gown, watched me with worried eyes.

"Leave her alone, Raffin," she said.

"Shut up, Merista," said Beautiful. "You — what's your name?" Her voice fairly dripped with snobbery. Nobs.

"Don't be scared," Raffin said. "You can tell us. What are you doing on the docks all alone, in that *stunning* gown?"

Beautiful snickered.

"Flown your fetters, have you?" he continued. "Well, us too. I'm Raffin Taradyce — you may have heard of me — and my companions are the

Lady Phandre Séthe, Durrel of Decath, and the very proper Merista Nemair.”

My empty belly tightened. Taradyce — of course I’d heard of him. I’d done work for his father, but I’d never met the son. Sons. I racked my brain, trying to remember — was this the heir? No, he couldn’t be. Not gadding about on the river all night with a son of Decath and two noble girls.

“Where are you going?” I said, not sure how to pitch my voice. Who did they take me for? Who *might* they take me for?

“Nowhere,” said Durrel, the first word he’d spoken. “Raff, would you turn the damn boat around? The sun’s in my eyes.”

“Oh, the gratitude!” cried Raffin. “After all I’ve done for you! And look, I’ve practically plucked you the finest fruit this side of Gerse town. The least you could do is be a bit welcoming. We’re Dur’s bachelor party,” he added confidently to me.

“You’re his what?”

Raffin threw an extravagant arm around his friend, who looked like he’d punch him if he could only summon the energy. “Milord Durrel has just had the exquisite good fortune of meeting his betrothed. So we had to cheer him up.”

“You seem to have done a fine job,” I said, and immediately cursed my loose tongue. *Careful, Digger, careful. You are not their class; you can’t just speak to them like that.*

“That’s why we need you,” Raffin said, climbing out of the boat. I forced myself to hold my ground. I had a knife in my boot — I could use it, if I had to. Although stabbing a son of Taradyce in broad daylight in Nob Circle . . . not the way to go undetected. “To round out the numbers,” he continued.

“Hey!” Lady Phandre squawked. “How does five round anything out?”

“Fetch your mind from the gutter, milady — Meri’s his sister! Or near enough. What say you, Lady? Join our little party?”

“Where are you going?” I asked again, glancing toward the shoreline.

“Anywhere! Downriver, certainly. It’s a day’s sail to Favom Court — Decath lands. Dur has a whole day and a night to decide just how far he wants to run.”

At least a day outside the city, a whole day to decide what to do with myself. A day away from Greenmen — but a day between me and my pay. I pinched my finger. Better to just abandon the dream of those fifteen crowns; fat good they’d do me in the dungeons. The sharply angled sunlight was softening to dawn now, the moons fading from the sky, all but Tiboran, ever visible day and night, both constant and inconstant. Was this boatful of drunken strangers the fickle god’s idea of a gift? An apology?

Half a moon now: even chances. I fingered the silk of my skirts, trying to think. And the sun rose higher, and the Greenmen would be changing shifts . . .

*Don’t trust anybody.*

“Why me?”

“You’re pretty,” I heard Raffin say, just as Phandre said, “He’s bored.”

That I believed. I wasn’t that pretty: A year ago, I’d still been able to pass as a boy.

The merchant trader had hauled anchor, and was pushing away from the docks.

I looked around carefully. Still no sign of Greenmen. Yet.

“Do you have any food?”