

# PROLOGUE

“I won’t do it, Father. I won’t.”

Kurt Bruckton, the heir to house Bruckton, paced back and forth across the large bedroom. It was the picture of frivolous abundance—fine wood accented the walls, and large windows were adorned with velvet drapes of deep forest green. Lush bouquets of springtime blooms burst from the vases that had been arranged around the room in an attempt to liven their dour situation. Kurt’s father, addled with disease, wasted away under his ivory sheets.

“There isn’t much time,” Lord Bruckton wheezed, eyes bloodshot and swollen. His russet beard paled under a ray of dawning sun creeping through the window. “I’ll be damned if our house falls because my son is a coward.”

Kurt stopped in his tracks, hurt. “Isn’t there another way? There has to be...” The stale stench of long-held power enveloped him, inescapable.

“This has been the reality in Friese for thousands of years,” Lord Bruckton whispered through his chapped lips.. “If you don’t do this, we will fall. Our house will crumble, and be absorbed by the likes of the Exleys.” His final word was punctuated with a ragged cough, spraying flecks of blood over the bed.

Kurt ran a shaking hand through his rust-colored hair and imagined the power that would come to him if he complied. He’d be admitted

into the elite circle of nobles in Friese who held the wrath of the wind in their hands. The *Skylords*. The notion nearly made him smile in excitement, despite the morbid atmosphere in the room. Steeling himself, Kurt walked over to his father's bed on unsteady legs.

“Do it now. If you wait any longer, our windblade will go to the atmosphere. We can't afford... to lose it.” Lord Bruckton's voice cracked from the effort.

Kurt leaned over his father's head and kissed his thin, withering hair. “I'm sorry it has to be this way, Father.” He barely managed to speak as rough sobs threatened to overtake him.

“Now.” The old man was urgent—the light was leaving his pale eyes.

Kurt locked his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut. Hot tears ran down his cheeks, splattering onto the blankets. He thought of all of his allies who were *Skylords*—were they all such monsters? Surely, there must be redemption for such a grisly deed?

Kurt drew a dagger from his belt with weak, clammy hands. He gripped the handle and tried to forcefully ease the tightness that had woven its way around his chest. “Goodbye,” he whispered as he drew back and plunged it into his father's heart.

# CHAPTER ONE

# THE ORPHAN



*I wish you were here to help me. Nobody told me how difficult caring for a baby is.*

*-Unsent Letter from Elie Roale*

**G**radient shades of blue and purple stretched over the dawn-ing sky as I made my way out of the abandoned bell tower I lived in. It was a ramshackle old place whose convenient location and unoccupied status redeemed its innumerable deteriorations. Despite the seclusion and ostensible loneliness of such a living arrangement, through the years, I'd found it to be the ideal place to find some peace.

Birds sang their dawn songs as I began my daily walk from the edge of the Exley property and into the port slums of Friese. Our kingdom had a vibrant trade market and had shipments of industrial and agricultural goods constantly coming in and out. Friese's major

sectors of industry were controlled by the Skylords—the nobility who wielded windblades. Despite the undeniable raw power granted to the ruling class by their windblades, they exploited more conventional means to control the populace. Their unopposed monopolies of trade and industry had nurtured their greed for generations, fostering an ever-increasing disparity between commoners and the Friesian elite. As it stood, there was very little middle ground between the nobles and the slum-dwellers.

Despite the port of Friese being highly utilized, its economic success did nothing for the average citizen. Many of the dock workers worked for fourteen hours straight, and came home to run-down houses and dirty streets. In the slums, the air smelled of dead fish, diseases spread like wildfire, and food was scarce. The discontentment among the population was a bitter, but ultimately impotent, thing. The idea of demanding change by threat of force was nothing but a daydream to the overworked, exhausted, and sick. Even if they tried, no number of angry men could stand against united Skylords. They would be torn to shreds.

Though my position at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy afforded me very few reasons to appreciate my kingdom, I resolved myself to one day be an instrument of positive change. Not only for myself, but for everyone wasting away in the slums.

I gleaned much of my inspiration from the two women who saved my life. Francie Hanover and her aunt, Crysta, ran the only inn in the slums that would feed the hungry when they had no other options. They were the closest thing to a true family that I could ask for; always making sure I was healthy and fed.

Since I'd been able, I'd done my best to repay their kindness by running errands, collecting donations, and removing the occasional hostile patron. Their generosity to desperate families rendered them

unable to support me as an employee, but they fed and cared for me, which was more than I could ask for.

Crysta Hanover, the owner and manager of the inn, had treated me like a son since I was just ten years old. She'd patched up my various injuries, given me shelter in the many Friesian storms, and shared her sage wisdom when I felt lost in the tides of life. I knew I could never fully repay her for the kindness she'd shown me over the years.

Then there was Crysta's niece, Francesca—or Francie—Hanover. Though she was only two years older than me, there were many childhood years I'd assumed she knew everything. However, as we'd grown together through the tumultuous stages of late childhood, our friendship dynamic had shifted in a way. Not in the way I'd desired, but I kept that to myself.

As I neared the center of the slums, a warm breeze brought the scent of dead fish and low tide wafting through my senses, ruffling my brown hair. Even with all of its faults, our kingdom held an understated charm. It was nestled along the bay like a glistening sapphire—water lapping up around it like a dear friend, desperate to nurture it. Only during our strongest summer storms did the sea attempt to claim Friese to its depths like a jealous lover.

From the west, forested hills gave way to breathtaking views of that glistening, fickle Broad Sea, best viewed from the sea cliffs in the north. The mild seasons made winters comfortably livable and summers beautiful and pleasant. As the summer settled over Friese, the warm, salty winds blew in and refreshed the weary slum-dwellers.

I turned down a cobbled lane and the sounds of the docks grew louder. I slowed down and closed my eyes for a moment, letting my senses overtake me. Seagulls called back and forth to each other as they circled overhead, desperate to spot any abandoned fish laying amongst the emptied nets. Flags whipped and rippled atop thick wooden masts.

Workers shouted back and forth, coordinating the various tasks of loading and unloading from the massive trade ships. I began quietly humming a familiar Friesian pub song as I soaked up the feeling of the sun on my face.

“Lev!”

A feminine voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Levick, hey!”

A small smile formed on my face. “Good morning, Francie.”

As I opened my eyes, I saw a beautiful woman jogging up to me. Her flaxen hair fluttered in the sea breeze, and her eyes reflected the perfect blue of the sky. Her pert nose came to a slight point at the end, and sat above a set of pink, heart-shaped lips. Slightly taller than most women, Francie was naturally athletic and moved almost with a dancer’s grace, unknowingly attracting stares wherever she went.

“I was on my way, you know. You didn’t have to chase me down,” I said with only a hint of smugness.

She grinned back at me, her cheeks pink with vitality. “It’s not my fault you move so slow. What’s gotten into you this morning? You’re half an hour late.”

“That’s one of the few perks of being an unpaid employee. I never worry about getting laid off,” I replied with a sidelong grin as we began walking together. An uncomfortably extended silence was the only response I got, which was unusual for Francie. Her demeanor was usually one of lighthearted questions and quips.

“Everything okay?” I asked, glancing her way as we walked.

She shook her head and let out a small sound of frustration. “Our supply is low today. I’m not sure we’ll have enough food to be giving any away at dinner. I’m going hunting again soon, but I doubt I’ll bring in enough for our usual crowd.” Her voice got quiet as she stared

down the road. She brushed away a strand of flaxen hair that had fallen over her face.

Francie held dear the inn's ability to provide food to people who'd fallen upon difficult times. We often received donations from generous local farms and shops, but sometimes it wasn't enough—especially with the increased accidents at the port rendering more men unemployable. Friese's imports had shot up dramatically over the last decade, putting more strain on the dockworkers and making their jobs more dangerous than it already was. Most of those the inn fed for free were women and children whose fathers or husbands had been killed or maimed working the docks and shipyards. In recent years, Francie had made a habit of hunting small game in the neighboring forests. There was nothing she hated more than sending hungry families away with nothing.

I bit at my lip as we walked. I knew she was only confiding in me, but I immediately began racking my brain for ways to help. There was only one solution that could work by dinnertime. A pit formed in my stomach as I realized what I would have to do. "I'm sure something will turn up, Francie. Maybe I'll ask Arturian," I began casually. "Maybe he'll finally get his father to care about people like us." I tried to keep my expression neutral; Francie always had a way of knowing when I was planning something. Thankfully, her situation kept her from noticing.

She nearly rolled her large, expressive eyes. "You know how stingy Augustus is, and Arturian can't ask him without giving away that he has slum-dwelling friends." She fidgeted with her hair as we approached the old doors of the inn. She placed her hand on the dark wood, but paused. "I just hate letting them down. They need us." She looked at her feet and sighed deeply, eyes darting back and forth as she searched her mind for an answer.

“Something will turn up. I know it,” I said with a soft smile as I reached past her to open the door. She looked up at me and returned the smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

Francie walked through the doors, taking a deep breath. “Yeah, you’re right. We’ll make something work.” When she noticed I hadn’t followed her inside, she turned and gave me a questioning look.

“I have some stuff I have to get done. I’ll come check in later.”

She raised an eyebrow at me. “Lev—”

“It’s not a big deal—don’t worry about it. I’ll be back later!” I called back, letting the door close before she could question me.



After a cautionary glance over my shoulder to ensure I was out of sight, I pulled my tan neck scarf up and over my mouth. I ducked down a nearby alley, leapt up onto an old barrel, and boosted myself up and onto a roof. That familiar salty breeze tousled my hair as I stood up straight.

After a couple of quick stretches, I took in a deep breath and burst into a run. The sloped clay tiles were slick under my feet, but I didn’t trip. Unbridled euphoria coursed through my veins as I approached the first ledge, and without hesitation, I *leapt* into the open air.

I began losing altitude. It was too far.

But I didn’t worry. A powerful gust of wind pushed from below, keeping me aloft as I shot through the sky. My feet struck the tiles of the neighboring building, and I kept running.

It wasn’t long after I became an orphan that I noticed my unusual ability. I possessed a talent for surviving leaps from trees, buildings,

and other high surfaces that would surely kill most people. But no matter the situation, I always landed gently on my feet.

At first, I had speculated that I must've inherited some kind of relative to the windblade—but far less potent in its capability. But over the years, I heard tales of old Friesian generals who could manipulate large gusts of wind—*windwalkers*. When I was young and still discovering my abilities, I asked Crysta about the windwalkers, and if any still existed.

“There hasn’t been one in centuries. Not since the days of the windwalker generals—the *Caelators*,” she’d replied over her shoulder while scrubbing a dirty pot. “The Skylords’ windblade is all that remains now, and it holds absolute supremacy.”

She sat down with me and explained that the windwalkers were extinct, and even if they returned, the Skylords would hunt them down. Shaking her head, she quoted the High Skylords’ Quorum decree, saying, “Only our oldest families can be trusted with Echna’s blessing.”

She told me a story of a young boy who’d walked away unscathed from a ten-foot fall from a roof. Witnesses had called him lucky, but the Quorum of the High Skylords decided that no natural person was *that* lucky. He disappeared three days after the accident, never to be heard from again. “The Skylords don’t relish sharing their control of the wind,” Crysta finished, returning to her work. That story was incentive enough for me to keep my mouth shut about it, and only use my gift subtly.

The world flew around me in a blur as I ran, jumped and floated across the rooftops. Guilt tugged at me as my thoughts turned to my friends, and how much I wished I could tell them about my gift.

*You can’t. It’s too risky.*

Knowledge of any kind of wind control outside of the noble circles could be deadly.

*The Skylords would hunt me down, along with anyone who knew about me. It's not like it's a very exciting gift, anyway. It's of no use to anyone but myself.*

At my speed, it didn't take me long to reach the edge of town and spot the familiar forest trail that led to the Exley family's property. I leapt from the last roof—cushioning my fall with an updraft—and began down the trail.

# CHAPTER TWO

# CLAY TILES



“R emind me what you do all day other than gallivant across glistening fields on prize race horses?” I called from the entrance of the stable.

“Hilarious, Levick,” a voice echoed from one of the stalls. “If you’re going to loiter on my property, at least help me out and pick up a shovel.” A tall, distinguished young man with long, dark hair unlatched the stall across from me and walked out. He was wearing fine riding gear emblazoned with the red Exley house crest—a shield with an ornate “E” centered inside, surrounded by vines of thorns.

“Don’t pretend like you’ve ever shoveled shit, lordling,” I said as he approached. Arturian chuckled as we clasped forearms in greeting.

“How’s my bell tower holding up?” Arturian asked in his lilting high-society accent as we both began walking out of the barn and

toward the woods. The grass still had dew on it, crunching under our feet and wetting the hems of our trousers.

“Falling apart a little, but just as cozy as always.” My home, a derelict bell tower, was situated at the northernmost part of the Exley estate. I’d lived there for years with no one noticing—except Arturian. “I finished that book you lent me. I’ll have to get it back to you soon.”

“What did you think?” Arturian asked, glancing over with curious dark blue eyes.

I shrugged. “It was a lot of poetry, and not much action,” I said, strategically avoiding having to admit that it bored me to sleep. “Your taste in literature is admirable, but hard to imitate.”

“I suppose it is,” Arturian replied, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

“How was your trip up north?” I asked as I stepped around a formidable looking ant mound.

“You know how my father is. It wasn’t fun, but it could’ve been worse.” He ran his hand through his long black hair as he walked. “Trenica is beautiful, though,” he finished as he stepped over a log.

I simply nodded in reply. I knew better than to linger on the subject. We walked in comfortable silence for a while until we reached our usual meeting spot. Arturian’s father, Augustus, was the Skylord of House Exley. He wielded the Exley heritage windblade, Asgora, and rumors claimed he was unparalleled in its use. He also had a reputation for being as cold-hearted as he was wealthy. Unfortunately, Arturian’s mother had died when he was only three years old, so his father was the only family he had left.

As the forest grew denser, we found a slight break in a thick copse of trees and crept through it. We emerged into a small cleared area right on the fence line, complete with tree stumps for chairs, and a fire pit in the center. A large oak tree grew from the other side of the fence,

extending thick branches out and over us. Arturian settled into his usual spot—on the ground, with his back against a carved-out stump. I took some time to strike up the fire, then settled against my own stump.

“I might need some help with something,” I said as I stared into the small flames, preparing myself for the inevitable tension.

Arturian looked up at me, his dark hair hanging by his eyes. “It’s about Francie, isn’t it?”

I sat in silence. While I knew Francie had to be mentioned, she’d recently become a delicate subject between us.

Arturian looked into the fire, a knowing smile on the corner of his lips. “You’d never ask if it was only for you.”

I took a deep breath, knowing my friend saw right through me. “It’s the inn. They don’t have enough for dinner tonight...” I leaned forward, bracing myself on my knees. “You know I wouldn’t have come to you, but there are a lot of families that will go hungry if we don’t find something soon.”

A long silence sat between us like a brick wall. Arturian and I had been dancing around the subject for months... maybe years.

“Levick... I understand where you’re coming from. It means a lot to Francie, and you don’t want to let her down. But you *know* why I don’t contribute there. Why I can’t,” Arturian said slowly, and I didn’t miss the guilt flash across his features. I knew that was going to be his answer, but my conscience demanded I tried asking Arturian first, in case there had been some miraculous change.

“Those people will be okay for one night. Francie won’t think any less of you if there’s nothing you can do.” Arturian paused for a while, measuring his words carefully. He continued, “I know she’s special to you; she’s special to me, too. If I knew of any way to help without exposing our friendship to my father, I would do it.”

I chewed on the edge of my tongue. I wasn't dense—I'd noticed how Arturian behaved around Francie. I'd seen how he looked at her—it was the same way I looked at her. The only difference was that one of us was the heir to the most powerful house in Fries—barring the queen's own—and the other was a penniless orphan who lived in an abandoned bell tower. However, Arturian had no control over who he married. Someday, Augustus would name the woman and the date, and Arturian would be there. In a moment of sympathy, I wondered how Arturian Exley, heir to the distinguished Exley estate and the windblade *Asgora*, had less control and agency over his life than an orphan did.

I looked through the flames at my best friend. "I guess it was worth a shot. I'll need to be looking elsewhere, though." I stood, brushed my clothes off, and turned to leave. "I'll see you around, Arturian," I said before I finally crept out of the trees and back toward the city.



Over a bridge.

Up onto a roof.

From ledge to ledge, I ran and jumped. I had resolved myself on my mission, no matter how much it tore at my conscience.

*I will not let her down.*

I made my way into the market district, where throngs of people weaved around vendors selling food items. It was a buzz of life—a vibrant tapestry of sounds, colors, tastes, and smells. Merchants shouted and children laughed. The smell of freshly baked bread wafted over me, making my stomach growl. Eventually, I landed in an alley across from a busy vegetable stand.

There were small crowds of customers standing under the mid-summer sun, waiting to browse the selections—a perfect place to blend in. I casually fell in with them, feigning interest in varied shop wares until approaching a vegetable stand. I began picking up some small potatoes, squeezing them and pretending to check for freshness. In a blur of quick hands, I'd stashed five of them in my shirt before someone noticed.

“Hey, this guy is stealing!” Someone shouted from a few feet away.

*Dammit. Not as sneaky as I thought I was...*

The crowds quickly turned on me as I darted into the cobbled street, adrenaline pumping through my veins.

“Where are the Crownies?” A woman called out for the police.

As I hustled through the crowds, I bumped against a cart of blooming roses, nearly upending it and earning a curse from the elderly woman attending it. “Sorry!” I called backwards, but the weathered woman simply shook her head.

“Someone arrest him!” Someone else called out as I sprinted down the street, heading south.

Whistles started blaring, causing even more commotion. I scrambled up the side of a Temple of Echna, gripping the stones as I climbed past the blue and green stained-glass windows. Faint sounds of worship came from inside; praises sung to the Friesian Goddess of the Wind. The eerie song rang through my ears as I grabbed onto a window overhang. I dared a backwards glance and saw three Crown Police officers racing toward me, their glinting steel short swords at the ready. Thankfully, disappearing into the city was one of my talents.

With the wind on my side, I pulled myself onto the temple’s roof and ran toward the edge. Noises of footsteps against clay roof tiles echoed behind me—the Crownies had followed me up. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw a tall, muscled officer racing at me at an alarming

pace. His officer's insignia glinted in the sunlight as I moved, legs pounding against the roof.

*He's about to close the gap.*

I leapt onto the neighboring roof, but the officer followed, still hot on my heels. The roof tiles clicked under my feet as I ran for my life—every step forcing my heart to beat faster. I could barely hear the shouting and whistling above the pounding in my ears.

*This guy can really move. I can't outrun him.*

An idea hit me, making me wheel around. I scanned the rooftops, looking for the largest gap between the roofs. It was a risky prospect, but I had very few options, and getting arrested certainly wasn't one of them.

My eyes landed on a distant roof—nearly five horse-lengths of open air between them.

*There.*

I swerved, my legs aching as my feet pounded against the rooftop, and leapt off the edge. I closed my eyes in mid-air, feeling the wind swirl around my face and through my hair. Warm, salty air rushed into my lungs while my clothes billowed around me. Five *long* horse-lengths of open sky later, my feet made contact with the next roof. I rolled to my feet and swiveled around, breathing a sigh of relief when I noticed the officer hesitate on the ledge. We locked eyes; a gulf yawned between us. If looks could kill, I would have died many times over.

I never relished being on the wrong side of the law. As much as I hated the Crownies and their increasingly selective prosecution, breaking the law was not a habit I was eager to fall into. Impoverished young men with no connections rarely got a fair shake in Friese's sham of a justice system. After confirming I hadn't been followed, I went

down to the streets and headed back to the inn. I felt guilty, but relief overshadowed it. I would be able to help Francie. To do *something*.

“Lev? Where have you been?” A mature woman’s voice greeted me as I entered the front door.

“Crysta!” I choked out as the tall woman squeezed me tight.

“I’ve found things that might help this evening.”

While reaching into my shirt for the potatoes, Francie entered from the hallway and gazed at me with narrowed eyes filled with curiosity.

“Here. It’s not a large amount, but it should be enough for one or two people...” I said, trailing off upon realizing that five potatoes were inadequate for the usual crowd.

“Oh dear, any amount is helpful! Thank you so much,” Crysta said as she carried the potatoes off to the kitchen, leaving Francie and I alone in the dining area. She shifted from foot to foot anxiously, fumbling with her beige apron.

Just before I could approach her, the bell chimed, signaling the arrival of two men through the front entrance. Francie and Crysta seldom expected visitors so early in the evening. One man was tan and weathered—his face cut deep with wrinkles, and his hair was gray and thinning. The other man stood straighter and bore a youthful countenance.

“Hello, afternoon,” the younger man said in the thick coastal accent some people had in Friese. “I figured you wouldn’t be serving dinner just yet, but we decided to come and check... just in case.”

“It’ll be potato soup, but we won’t have much. I’d try to get here early if I were you,” Francie said politely.

The older man had been watching her intently since he came in. He began muttering and taking small steps towards her, prompting me to edge closer to her.

“You, I know you...” he said.

“Father—you don’t know this girl. Come, let’s go,” the younger man said, looking embarrassed as he attempted to turn his father toward the exit.

“You worked in the country house! I knew you! Must’ve been twenty years ago,” the old man called out as his son dragged him away.

“Sir, I’m sorry, but you must’ve mistaken me for someone else. I’m only eighteen years old! I hope to see you again at dinner though,” Francie said, her voice soft and a warm smile gracing her pink lips. The old man mumbled incoherently, and let his son pull him away.

“I’m so sorry, you have a pleasant afternoon!” the son said, looking embarrassed before closing the door behind them, leaving us alone once again.

Mental illness was commonplace in the slums, so the encounter rolled off Francie like water off a duck’s back. Throughout the unusual exchange, she’d been staring at me with poorly disguised suspicion, not saying a word. She furrowed her light brows together as she stared holes through my head.

I stared back. “Everything alright?”

“I think I know how you got those potatoes.” She cut me off as I tried to cut in. “Don’t deny it. I’m going to let this go today, because it’s too late now. But Levick... I swear. If I ever suspect this of happening again, I’ll tell Crysta.” Her voice shook a bit. “We need you here, and you know what they do to thieves in Fries.”

Everyone knew. The fingers that committed the crime paid the price. Fries boasted its fair share of fingerless beggars.

“I know... it was a mistake.” I walked over to the window, looking out into the street. I couldn’t bear her disappointed stare any longer. “My presence is rarely useful, and I wanted to change that. I’m sorry.”

“You *know* that’s not true.” I felt a hand on my shoulder. “I know you wanted to help. While I really appreciate that, it wasn’t worth you

risking your life," she said in a softer tone. "I'm going back out to hunt in the morning, so don't worry. We'll scrape by today, and we'll have more for dinner tomorrow." She was so close; speaking right over my shoulder.

I turned to look at her, half expecting her to back away. But to my surprise, she stood firm and met my gaze, causing me to turn away to hide my embarrassment. My heart raced, and blood rushed to my cheeks.

*Get it together.*

"It won't happen again." I'd disappeared through the front door before Francie could respond.

# CHAPTER THREE

## THE GIRL WITH BURLAP HAIR



I ran through my usual checklist of hunting gear as I walked out of Friese's port slums and toward the woods. My game hunting provided for much of the meat the inn served when donations ran low, so three or four times a week, I ventured out into the woods to bring back some protein. That night's dinner would be whatever edible game animal I saw first.

Filled with purpose, I walked through the stench-filled streets. Smells of rotten fish and old garbage wafted through the air, driving my desire to escape the cramped alleyways for the serenity of the forest. I fielded cat-calls, rabid dogs, and small flocks of escaped chickens before I made it out of the city. As soon as the fresh forest air hit my lungs, I drew in a deep breath.

*Finally, back again.*

It was a salve on my wearied soul to be outside and weaving through the trees. The pressures of operating and maintaining the inn had

gotten the best of me; not to mention the risks Levick had been taking. I worried that one day he wouldn't be fast enough to escape the consequences of his actions.

Towering trees of dark wood and bright green moss-draped leaves lined the worn, familiar trail. Dense underbrush grew between the tree trunks, limiting my visibility except for the cleared path I walked on. My black boots padded on the dirt of the trail as I walked in a crouch, head on a swivel as I waited for signs of life in the forest. Soon, I would climb a tree and wait for any unfortunate wildlife to walk beneath me. In a moment of light panic, I felt around my pockets and the pack I carried. Relief washed over me when I felt the rectangular shape of my book in my pack. I'd forgotten to bring a book on a hunt once, and I'd thought I might die of boredom; sitting in a tree for hours, nothing to do except wait. Rustling leaves drew my mind away, and my trained eyes scanned the trees for the source of the disturbance. Branches cracked as a scrawny brown squirrel leapt from the dirt and into a tree. I sighed.

*Too bony. Nothing to eat.*

I let the hungry squirrel continue on his journey and resumed my pace through the brush. A spring breeze rustled through the leaves of the large trees, and I turned my head up. Closing my eyes, I breathed deeply and calmed my mind. As the wind died down, I heard a crack from the shrubs. Then another.

*Swish, thump.*

*Swish, thump.*

A rabbit. Crouching and passing my bow to my left hand, I scanned the brush for my target. I stood stone-still, hoping my deep green dress camouflaged me, and waited patiently for movement.

A soft brown head emerged from behind the underbrush. The rabbit's ears were long and pointed, confirming that he was full grown and ready to eat.

*There you are.*

In a swift, directed movement, I flung my right hand forward, as if I was throwing a knife. A slice of wind as sharp and deadly as a razorblade raced through the air, silent as death. A squelching noise emanated from the brush, signaling that I hit my mark. I paused for a moment, relieved at the instant kill. My aim hadn't always been so accurate, and there were many occasions where an unlucky animal lost a limb or two before its misery ended. Shaking my braid over my shoulder, I stood from my crouch and made sure to bloody one of my arrows before re-sheathing it. The rabbit's fur was warm and soft against my fingers as I lifted it up and secured it to my vest.

For most of my life, I'd considered my windblade a curse. The Skylords would execute me if they discovered it, so I'd been determined never to use it. It took years of hunger, and witnessing others suffer, to decide to hunt with it. It was very useful in keeping the inn stocked with protein for malnourished families, though I hated keeping it a secret from Levick.

*He risked his life and stole for you, and you won't tell him about your windblade? How can you call yourself a friend?*

Distracted by my guilty thoughts, I wandered further into the forest. It wasn't long before I encountered a very familiar oak tree rooted across an intricate iron fence. The tree's trunk was thick and old, and its branches were strong. One of those sturdy branches jutted out over the fence, hanging over the neighboring property. Smiling to myself, I climbed the tree with pure muscle memory, and stood upright on that thick, jutting branch. Then I began walking until I was nearly over

the fence. However, someone interrupted my mission before I could finish it.

“Trespassing is illegal, you know.” A level voice spoke through the thicket on the other side of the fence. Arturian Exley stepped out from behind a tree and approached me. His long, dark hair and tailored black attire accentuated his sharp jawline and high cheekbones, making him the subject of admiration among Friesian women since adulthood.

I resumed my walk along the branch until I was on the other side of the fence and sat down to hang my legs off of the overhanging limb. “Technically, I’m not on your property. This tree’s trunk is on the other side of the fence,” I smiled, kicking my legs in taunt as I played with my long, dark blonde braid hanging over my shoulder. “If you think you can reach me, I’d like to see you try. You might get your shiny boots dirty, though.”

Arturian walked closer to the fence and stopped under my feet as they dangled above him. “If I were only a bit taller, I could just pull you down,” his voice was smooth as velvet as he reached one hand up to try to touch my boot. “But I suppose if you fell, neither of us would walk away unscathed...”

He began pacing back and forth beneath me, scratching his chin and feigning deep thought. “I could toss a rope around you and pull you down, but I’d have to walk back to the stable to find one, and you’d have run off by then. Difficult, difficult...”

My grin grew wider as he put on his little performance for me. He looked markedly out of place in a forest—his clothing was immaculate and his hair well-kept. His confidence and magnetism were undeniable, even to a girl who’d known him since childhood. I suppressed my distracting thoughts before they ran away with me. He was from a completely different world.

Finally, he stopped pacing and looked up at me. “Why don’t you save me from sallying my boots in my attempts to pull you from that tree? Jump down, I’ll catch you.” He looked up at me, a smile on the edge of his mouth. “I have tea at the stable.”

I sighed—tea sounded *very* relaxing. “I wish I could, but I should get back to hunting. Levick was able to help a little yesterday, but we’re still running low at the inn,” I said, noticing a flash of disappointment on his face before his composed Exley visage took over once again.

A strained silence sat between us. I knew Arturian wanted to help me with our problems at the inn, but he couldn’t risk his father finding out. The Exleys dealt only through a line of credit, so his father could easily trace and discover anything he bought. If he did, it would end our friendships and could put us in danger. Augustus Exley didn’t tolerate any level of mingling amongst the classes, and I was as far from nobility as a Friesian citizen could get. The risk of exposure was too great, so I understood why he couldn’t contribute.

Once, years ago, Arturian snuck a bushel of apples out of the mansion’s pantry and gave it to the inn. Its absence was noticed, resulting in a kitchen staff member being accused of theft and disciplined. After that, he’d sworn to never do it again. I suspected he still felt guilt over it.

I finally broke the silence.

“Arturian, you don’t need to feel guilty. I know you’d help if you could, but there’s nothing you can do,” I said as I leaned over the side of the branch.

More silence ensued as Arturian continued to stare at the blooming trees across the fence. I wished I knew what he was thinking. Eventually, he looked up at me, his mouth twitching at the corner. “Thanks for saying that, Francie. I don’t think Levick believes it, though.”

Brows furrowed, I cocked my head. I'd assumed they were always on good terms—they saw each other more often than they saw me. "He thinks of you as a brother, Arturian... I'm sure he understands. He goes to you for advice *far* more often than he comes to me."

I was uncomfortable with the idea of any division between them. Levick was the constant in our friendship. He was like the *glue* that kept us all together.

Arturian's eyes shot to mine, as if my statement surprised him. However, he straightened his jacket and gave me a small, knowing smile. "I doubt that. But thank you, Francie." He turned as if to walk back home, but stopped short. He pivoted back, stormy blue eyes locking on mine. "I'll see you next week, for my birthday?" he asked.

For a few years in a row, Levick and I had taken Arturian out to a port-side pub for his birthday. It was risky, and he had to disguise himself, but it was worth it.

He tilted his head as he waited for my answer. I couldn't stop the heat from rising in my cheeks as he looked at me.

*Has he always looked at me like that?*

After composing myself, I stood up on the branch, prompting Arturian to visibly cringe in concern.

"I wouldn't miss it."

With that, I began walking back over the fence, my dress brushing around my calves. "Goodbye," I called out behind me.

I barely heard his response. "Until then."



"I'm back!" I called as I walked through the old wooden door to the inn. It creaked with effort as I stepped over the threshold, brushing my

boots against the doormat on the floor. Receiving only silence for an answer, I assumed Crysta and Levick were out.

With no customers yet, the morning provided a tranquil work setting. I brought my three rabbits through the hallway and into the inn's large kitchen and placed them in a deep basin. A small window illuminated the room, walled with dark wooden boards and bare of decoration. A small bunch of blue wildflowers sat in a glass of water on the kitchen windowsill, bringing a smile to my face. I always loved when Levick put flowers in the kitchen. Faint footsteps could be heard coming from upstairs as a guest paced back and forth. I found solace in the familiar kitchen tasks—it was a place to quiet my mind and focus on the work before me.

Using a knife, I skinned the rabbits, then put the blade down. I glanced over my shoulder, making sure no curious eyes watched me. Once I was sure I was alone, I used my windblade to make rough cuts to prep the rabbits for cooking. I severed their legs from their bodies, attempting to cut along the joints as closely as possible. I usually avoided using my windblade indoors, but I found that the practice had helped hone my skills and control. It was difficult to control the velocity of a windblade—it always seemed to want to *shoot* through the air at impossible speeds. I'd been challenging myself to slow down and attempt to *wield* it rather than throw it. It was difficult, but I was making progress.

I was removing the rabbits' entrails when Levick walked in. I waved at him with a fist full of intestines, unintentionally sending drops of blood flying.

He laughed through a comically disgusted expression, his freckled cheeks pulling up to expose a handsome, dimpled smile. "Successful hunt?" he asked as he walked over to see my work.

“Not bad at all.” I gestured to the various cuts of meat in the basin. “Three—and they’re pretty fat, too. Looks delicious, right?” I pinched one of the rabbits’ legs between my bloodied fingers and brought it up to eye level. I teased him by inching the raw meat closer to Levick’s face, but he stood completely still, wearing his best cool expression.

“You’re pretty confident today, Lev.” I brought it closer until it was mere inches from his face.

He didn’t even flinch—a daring look danced in his eyes. “You wouldn’t,” his voice was firm with confidence.

I raised my eyebrows in challenge. I was about to test his resolve when he said, “There’s no way you’d risk dropping that perfectly good meat by smashing it into my face.”

We stood and stared for a few long moments, searching for weakness in each other’s eyes. A gloating smile tugged at the corner of Levick’s mouth as he watched me weigh the risks. His dark green eyes shone with self-assurance.

*He’s right. This is a great leg.*

I groaned in mock frustration. “I know when I’m beaten. You know me too well, Levick.” I returned to dressing the rabbits.

He scooted closer as he leaned against the counter. “It’s funny you should say that, Francie, because lately I feel like I don’t know you well enough.”

I froze, my heart in my throat.

*What was that tone?*

*Did he see me use the blade?*

“What do you mean?” I asked casually, despite my racing heart.

He leaned in over my shoulder. “Well, according to a very reliable-seeming older fellow, you worked at some nobleman’s country estate twenty years ago. Living a double life, are we?”

I glanced up at him, and to my infinite relief, he was smiling mockingly at me.

*Oh, thank Echna. He doesn't know.*

I breathed a subtle sigh of relief and laughed. "You caught me! Yes, I remember working there before I was born." An awkward laugh escaped my lips.

He sighed, watching me finish my work in the basin and wash my hands. I could tell he was observing me... studying me.

Drying my hands off, I addressed him directly and hoped I wouldn't regret it. "What's wrong, Lev? I can tell something is bothering you."

He stood for a moment, thoughtfully looking at his shoes. Finally, he met my eyes. "We should go see Arturian soon. He seemed a little down the last time I saw him."

I had a feeling that wasn't what he had just been thinking about, but I let it go.

"I saw him today while I was hunting and he seemed alright. Although, I suppose he was in want of company," I settled against the counter next to Levick.

"What makes you think that?" he asked, stiffening a bit.

"He invited me to tea in the stables," I replied, only just noticing the peculiarity of the invitation. It was rare for Arturian and me to spend time together without Levick. He was always there. I never thought too much of it, but it was consistent enough that it became normal for us.

"Did he?" Levick began grabbing blades of grass from his pocket and pulling them apart. His messy brown hair hung by his sun-kissed face, partially obscuring his eyes.

He was retreating into himself. "It's his birthday next week. We'll see him then. Arturian's birthday is *always* a riot."

Levick looked up at me, an excited smile forming on his face. It was true. Arturian's birthday was consistently the most fun of all of ours. "Yeah, that's true."

I patted his arm. "Come on, let's get to work. I have three rooms I need to clean out, and I could use some help," I said as I slipped off my apron.

"Whatever you desire, Queen of the Inn," Levick joked from behind me as we made our way to the rooms. I smiled to myself, and counted myself lucky to have friends like mine.