

CHAPTER ONE

A Pauper's Magic

"Dreams are the mutiny of the common man."

~~Verse Ten of The First Binding

IN PORT CARDICA, every streetwise orphan memorizes three rules to survive.

First, no thieving on Sundays. The Sisters bring free food, but if anyone steals, no one eats.

Second, don't cross the nobles. They want someone to blame for the city's unrest. It will be you.

Third, only a fool's prayer follows danger. If you plan on doing something stupid, pray first.

Tonight, Callam Quill was breaking all three.

He dangled from a seaside cliff, fingers straining to bear his weight. Stones cut into his palms. High above him stood his mark, a manor with the marble arches and spires favored by the port's elite. Winds scoured the length of the shoreline, battering him as he searched for better footing, and found none.

"Spit and steel," he swore, shoving his toes back into a crevice.

The height he could handle. The wind, though? He'd never grown used to it, no matter how many bluffs he'd scaled. It always chilled him to the bone, dragging up memories of smoke and stale bread, of long nights spent huddling against chimneys for warmth, and short days spent fishing out the soggy scraps bakers tossed to sea. Now it sapped his strength as he squinted left, then right, searching for an easier way up.

Nothing to see but rock, slick as seaglass.

He swore again. A month of planning for tonight. Of trading favors, spinning lies, and calling in debts, and it all came down to this.

To a notch the size of his thumb. Just the look of it made his hands cramp.

Better to fall than to fail.

Freedom lay atop this cliff, so he reached up with his right hand, trusting his left to anchor him to the wall. Pebbles gave way as he straightened his legs and locked his knees. His calves quivered, and...

Made it.

Exhaling in relief, he bore down on the hold.

All he had to do now was steal a spellbook before Binding Day. Failure meant more than a lifetime of illiteracy. It meant years shackled at the ankle as a Ruddite, his back bent, his body withering in the summer heat. It meant no magic.

It meant the younger orphans would starve.

Not happening. Stomach tight, Callam reached for the next handhold. *I'd die of blight first—*

A rogue gust howled its approach.

He had no time to adjust his hands, only to brace himself against the wall. Then the gale was on him, its scream so loud it drowned out the one building inside his chest. Icy fingers pulled at his clothes and bashed him against the stone. Pain shot through his shoulder. The world tilted sideways. Through it all, he managed to keep his purchase... until a *second* squall hit.

His grip flagged, then failed as he was wrenched from the cliff.

It is not written! he prayed as he fell. *It is not written!*

Fear clutched his chest. Images flashed before his eyes: little Orian, giving him a big hug that afternoon; Alice, in her patchwork dress, face snotty and tin empty as she begged for copper; Siela, his older sister, rescuing him from the ocean when he'd fallen in.

Rescuing him from a violent, *frigid* current.

He threw his hands out. Calluses tore as he traded skin for friction on the rock face. Something caught—all at once, fabric ripped, stone scraped against his abdomen, and the breath was forced from his lungs. He was left hanging like a rag doll, eyes shut tight against an avalanche of gravel now peppering him.

"B-by the prophet," he choked out once it passed. All of him hurt. Hurt, and trembled with relief. Hands shaking, he unhooked his tunic from the rock spur and clambered to a nearby perch. There, he sat and used his sleeve to wipe the debris off his face. Dust coated his hair and lined his chin.

His eyes began to water. His body shivered.

Siela.

An old ache welled in his chest. He forced it down. Sadness would not serve him here, any more than it would on the streets. He had to stay focused, and that meant checking for injuries. A quick flex proved he hadn't broken any fingerbones, though a cough brought about that sting every kicked pauper knew. Soft prods confirmed his fear: a bruised rib, maybe broken. Beggars quick to ignore such damage would end up plagued by the stitcher's cough.

It was reason enough to give up.

Not that he would.

Wincing at the fire in his side, he reached for the wall. A straight path was visible from his perch, and Siela would've wanted him to see this through. She'd made him promise to stand tall where others faltered, knowing he'd *always* keep his word. Even if it meant he had to scale a bluff by moonlight.

Or risk hanging to steal a scripted grimoire.

The second hand spellbooks were the only way to ensure a safe binding, so he had to hurry if he hoped to steal one by morning. He knew what would happen if he didn't; for years, he'd watched orphans queue up to receive a tome at Binding Day, only to go from hopeful to horrified when the ink failed to take. So what if the elders claimed it was "painless?"

The following days rarely were.

Failed orphans would toil around the dock, their bruises black as tar. The *deadness* in their eyes from those first few weeks proved young Ruddites never lacked for work. There was always steady business in selling them to the patrons of the port.

It made him sick.

Forcing himself to breathe, he shook out each arm, then inched along a rock shelf, the cliff's edge now just a few spans away. Rumor had it the guards rotated at midnight; after that, the grounds would be secur—

"That which is written," called out a man's voice from above.

Callam flattened himself against the stone, pulse racing. Peeking upwards, he could just make out the glow of a torch atop the cliff. The watch was clearly changing now... and if he was caught here, he'd see the noose for sure.

"Is foretold and forbidden," someone else responded, completing the greeting. "Alright, alright. Enough formalities. All quiet on the seafront?"

“Quiet as it gets. Just sea, stone, and sand for miles. I’ve slept less during sermon.”

“Hah! Better this than the warplains or that blasted Tower, though, right? Two years later, and I can *still* taste the stench of those barrenbeasts.”

“Course you’d blame the beasts. That smell’s all...”

The wind swept away the rest of the jibes as the men paced farther down the perimeter.

Callam didn’t give them a chance to return.

With three quick movements, he cleared the lip and hauled himself up onto the headland, pain lancing through his ribs at the exertion. “Thank the Poet,” he wheezed once he’d confirmed he was all alone. His breath came in heavy pulls.

Yet he could not rest.

The manor loomed in the distance with windows glowing like watchful eyes. Sprawling gardens led to the entranceway, barely visible by the crescent moon. Shadows shifted with the cloud cover. He kept to them, feet squelching through the muddy grass, eyes peeled for the markers he’d memorized in preparation for this heist. A monument, a tower, an outdoor foyer, and a grand staircase. Together, they’d lead to his prize: magic, and a way out of this blasted city.

He soon reached a wide hedge bordering an open pavilion. Peering around it, he looked for any guards... and immediately pulled back. Two men stood by the far side of the alcove with their backs facing him—likely the ones he’d heard before. Fortunately, neither appeared particularly alert. The taller one coughed. “I’ve *business* at the Lace and Slip. Cover for me, aye?”

Despite Callam’s hammering heart, he smiled.

A lazy guard was a pleasant surprise. Such men made easy targets, and the orphans could use a fresh score.

He committed the sentry’s voice to memory.

Once he heard footsteps receding, he risked looking out again. The men were gone, leaving the area empty except for a speaker's lectern with a marble copy of the sermon’s book laid open upon it.

The first marker, left to weather outside in a blatant display of power and wealth.

This time he grinned for real. The chapel’s Sisters would have hated to see such an important relic tarnished, but him?

Well, what thief couldn't appreciate a flair for theatrics?

The second marker, a manned bartizan with sentries on the lookout, protruded from above a large archway at the end of a connecting courtyard. He approached it with caution, for these men actually stood vigilant in their watch. One leaned out the tower's window, his lamp held high against the darkness. The other cupped a hand over his brow to better see the grounds. Both wore breastplates, and neither had that haggard look common among the city's less-disciplined constables.

Slouching against a topiary, Callam waited.

Sneaking past these two wouldn't be easy. That, he knew. Yet he'd chosen today for a reason. It was Penance, and no mage worth their salt would spend the holiday working for another. Keen-eyed or not, these men would not be that magically *gifted*.

Moonlight flickered as more clouds rolled in. It began to drizzle, then rain. Droplets pattered on the stone. He shivered again. This was no summer downpour, and his body soon went numb. Feelings he'd avoided since his climb came roiling back.

Who would protect the chapelward if he failed here? Painful as his death would be, hangings were quick. Starvation was not so sudden. He'd seen it happen, watched how a child slowed after the first few days without food. Saw up close the way a face changed when rations were tight. The lips flaked and split. The belly swelled.

And still the older orphans refused to share.

A dry lump formed in his throat. The street kids had all become callous after Siela had passed. What was theirs, was theirs. He'd never understand that type of cruelty.

At last his chance to sneak in came when one guard turned to the other, and both leaned in to light a pipe. Seizing the opportunity, he dashed to the passageway and rounded the first turn. There, he crouched to listen. No one came running.

The only sounds were the blowing of leaves and the creaking of oil lanterns. Dozens hung from the colonnade's vaulted ceiling, casting halos on the marble columns across the way. The earthy scents of moss and soil filled the air, and he snuck toward them, hoping to find the outdoor foyer.

He'd made it less than ten paces when the wind held still.

A silence fell, the type all prey knew. Callam froze. Something... no, *someone* was watching. Waiting. Hiding among the shadows that stretched into limbs in a trick of the light. Skulking in those dark places home to those who leered, and stalked, and *cut*.

His heart beat.

The lanterns flickered.

His body moved. Shooting forward, he aimed for the plants lining the walkway.

Before he could reach them, the storm picked back up—quickly as it had come, the feeling of being watched passed. Yet even as his steps slowed, his mind refused to still. Thoughts raced. To placate them, he took cover among the foliage and waited for his terror to pass.

Street life had honed his instincts. It seemed it had left him skittish as well.

“‘Fear left to linger grows loud’,” he whispered to calm down. It was a sermon’s stanza—one of many shared by the chapel Sisters in lieu of lessons or love—and tonight it carried more weight with him than they could ever know.

Chapter Two: The Price of Dreams

“Take our wishes and our copper. We need neither.

But take our books? Rob of us of our stories?

That is how you rewrite culture.”

~~Azin, herald of the West Isles

As soon as Callam had regained his composure, he crawled through the manor’s shrubbery. Plants, laden with water, dripped onto his clothes, and he was well and truly soaked by the time he trudged into an open-air nursery at the end of the undergrowth.

Coming to his feet, he navigated through a maze of wooden planters, a quick glance over his shoulder ensuring he wasn’t being followed. White night flowers hung overhead. Their bulbs shone like lamps in the darkness, illuminating red fruits ripe enough to make the mouth water. An aroma similar to that of amberling plums lingered in the air.

Callam’s stomach growled.

Those were a long time favorite and going a day without a meal was never easy, but he wasn’t about to risk everything by eating something unknown tonight. Instead, he darted down the paving stones leading to the third marker—an outdoor foyer with carved benches and accompanying birdbath—slowing only when he approached the oak doors barring entry to the manor. Both gleamed

in a lantern's glow and were guarded by twin statues: the first a figure of the Poet, her hands clasping a tome, the second a sculpture of a wolf, two cracked moons in its maw.

A silent curse escaped his lips as he stepped onto the stoop. Barely audible buzzing thrummed from both doors. A sure sign as any that they were spellwarded.

"Crow's foot," he swore again.

Weeks spent begging favors and eavesdropping at taverns, yet he'd never once thought to ask about this type of ward. They were useless trinkets in the face of magic, deterrents kept by poor tinkerers and merchants. Never by nobles.

With their grimoires, they don't need them.

Callam's mouth soured. The docks were strung heavy with the bodies of thieves who'd tried to steal from the gentry. Heavier still, with the remains of Ruddites who'd displeased their masters. Wind or tide, they always stunk of rot.

With no intention of adding to the dead, he slipped away from the doors, hoping to find another way in.

He'd only made it a few paces when a low growl reached his ears. Stopping dead in his tracks, he turned his head, a jumble of panicked thoughts crossing his mind. This manor didn't keep hounds—that, at least, he'd asked the taverngoers about.

Another growl followed the first, deeper this time, the sound of two slabs of granite scraping together. Tensing reflexively, Callam waited for something to happen. Anything... yet nothing did. His quick scan of the foyer confirmed there were no dogs, just the one statue of a wolf, an errant beam of moonlight upon its snout.

A snout that wriggled alive as he watched.

Creases deepened around the canine's mouth and jets of steam escaped its nostrils. Flecks of paint flaked away. Callam instinctively took a step back, then another, his eyes locked on the statue. The wolf's whole body shook as more moonlight crept out from behind the storm clouds and further awoke it from its slumber.

With a snort, the stony muscles in its neck contracted.

Callam recoiled as he heard a scattering of broken marble hit the foyer's floor. He'd have seen the beast crunch down on the moons in its mouth too, had he not already turned and run.

Sprinting back to the nursery, he searched for somewhere to hide. The wolf was a moonheart construct—of this, he was certain. Everyone knew they tracked heat. They couldn't see well through the small rocks that passed for their eyes, and lacked any sense of smell. Evading one, therefore, required masking one's warmth.

A tree might work, if he climbed high enough.

No. I'll only strand myself. The nursery rooftop?

Couldn't reach it. And with its glass ceiling, it might not bear his weight. Sliding to a stop, he glanced around, and... "There!" he whispered, and sprinted toward a mound of dirt in the distance.

Only at the last moment did he realize what the pile really was: a waist-high flower bench. Mud smeared his clothes as he dove underneath it and covered himself with mulch—sodden and heavy, it leached his heat.

He hoped it was enough.

The wolf he could evade; it was the guards he worried about—there was no way they'd missed the statue's ear-splitting howls.

One... two...

Callam counted each second in his head, the waiting killing him. He fought not to move. Not even to shiver. Something small and wriggly had snuck inside his collar and had begun to squirm. Worse was the stench of the turned earth: it smelled like a graveyard. He hated graveyards.

They reminded him of *her*. And of everything he stood to lose.

Little Orian won't survive the span without me. The city watch had already taken the boy's finger. *They'll cut at the wrist, nex—.*

"What's it, girl?" Callam heard the woman's words before her footsteps, and his palms immediately began to sweat. Two short barks and a rumbling woof was the response. "Steady now. *Steady*. Sense something in the gardens?" the sentry asked.

Red and yellow blazed in a corner of the nursery—*weak torch magic*, Callam guessed. Twice the light passed overhead. Twice he mouthed the stanzas for luck.

Finally, he heard the woman say, "... must've been a false alarm."

The wolf whined. A thudding of steps, a branch snapping too close for comfort, and Callam's breath hitched.

"Anything at all?" The woman walked closer, the dark silhouette of her boots less than ten feet away.

Cold prickled Callam's back.

"Come, come," she said. "There's nothing here... let's get you back." The clip of boots on flagstone faded as she walked further away. A scraping of heavy paws followed shortly thereafter.

After a minute of silence where no one else shouted or peered about, Callam rolled out from under the flower bench. Tension drained from his limbs as he looked around. His plan had worked. Better yet, the torchlight had illuminated a path into the manor. Dark ivy trailed up the nursery's far wall, growing right next to a set of windows.

Windows he knew how to open.

Each was made of a dark, tinted glass and constructed from three panes. He was familiar with their style, as it was common around the docks—for reasons that would forever elude him, the port's pennypawners insisted on mimicking the fashions of the gentry. These windows were sure to be cut with greater precision and built from thicker wood, but he expected the same tricks would get him through.

The secret is in the latches.

Pieces of root fell when he tugged on the vines. These were not the thick growths that blanketed deserted mansions; this plant had been pruned back and would struggle to keep him up.

Still, they would have to do.

Leaning over, he picked up a pebble, then tossed it at a window. It bounced off soundlessly. "No surprises there..." he muttered as he climbed up to the nearest window. Shaded neverbreak glass *was* shatterproof, after all. It absorbed everything, even noise.

Now he just had to pop the pane open.

Positioning himself so that his feet balanced on a bottom sill while his hands gripped the thinner lip up top, Callam readied a kick. These windows would have been impenetrable, if not for a fatal flaw: they opened inwards to allow for a breeze on a hot day.

And, while the glass itself was unbreakable, the latches locking the windows shut were not.

His first kick sent a shock up his leg. Bracing himself, he struck again. He couldn't reach those internal latches, but didn't need to—with enough force, the window would do the work for him.

Or so he hoped.

When the pane held stubbornly firm, he tightened his grip on the top sill and pushed off the bottom one with both feet.

This better work, he thought mid-swing. Custom bolts could be cast to solve this vulnerability—but that took time, and all workmen knew nothing spoiled noble good-will more than delays.

Feet met glass and the window gave.

It opened with a *pop* as the pane's magic tried to dissipate the incoming force in all directions, including into the poorly made latches. They broke under the strain, allowing him to push his way inside and drop to the floor.

Landing in a crouch, he found himself in a dimly lit hallway decorated by paintings featuring an unknown family of six: a husband and wife, the lord's arm resting easily around the lady's stomach, and three young sons. All looked so happy with their easy smiles and shared affection. So perfect and...

Focus.

Tearing his eyes away, Callam snuck down the corridor, feeling more the intruder with every step. There was a quiet here that was different from that of the streets—a sense of safety that seeped from the walls. The lack of guards confirmed it. The manor's owners did not believe this place could be breached.

Callam envied that feeling of security. Wished to share in it.

He spotted the fourth marker—a carpeted staircase with polished banisters—under a chandelier and took the steps two at a time. At the top of the landing, drawn-back curtains revealed the largest private library in Port Cardica.

This time, when his chest tightened, it was not from ache.

A lifetime's worth of stories towered upward from floor to domed ceiling, the shelved books sorted by size and color. Everbright candles bobbed in the air and circled slowly as if lifted by a draft. By their light, he spotted the geometric patterns of the stained glass overhead, more intricate than any he'd ever slept under. Purple hardcovers filled the highest reaches of the room, the volumes accessible only by rolling ladders. Even at a distance, these books were intimidating—regal, with thick, gilded bindings, as if announcing they were too good for his patronage.

I'll steal one of those too, one day.

Stacked upon polished tables and within easy reach lay hundreds of red books with warm covers. They all but begged to be read. Almost unconsciously, Callam touched one of them—it was a reflexive action from years spent hoping and wanting. And it made no difference. Without a successful binding he'd stay illiterate forever, the words sliding off the pages of any book he opened.

He *wanted* to read, though. Desperately.

Everyone did, but dockside orphans more than most. They'd huddle by the piers and pinch together halfpennies to pay travelers for tales of far-off places, brave heroes, and outrageous villains—coins better spent on food. But stories cut the cold a little. Made the day's aches hurt less.

Over time, they'd learned that novels carried these adventures, and bought to life worlds the likes of which chapelward could only dream.

And those books aren't even grimoires. Novels do all that with just words.

Rustling drew Callam's attention upward in a panic, though it was only paperfowl nestling among the rafters. They cooed at each other. Made of parchment, the constructs sang melodies into the nooks and crannies of grand libraries—helped to make the spaces feel more warm and inviting. Paying them no more mind, he followed a set of carved balusters to a spiral staircase at the end of the library. Careful footwork ensured the steps made no sound as he climbed.

Upon reaching the top, his eyes went wide.

He raced down the vaulted loft without stopping to think, tearing past two doors and an armchair, before coming to a stop in front of a massive, mahogany wardrobe with tinted panels and ornate brass handles. Stored above it—about ten feet out of reach—were at least ten scripted grimoires, each a different color and each exuding a perceptible weight.

All shared the telltale signs: 'Air that shimmers like vapor. Stars and insignia embedded and bright.'

Turning around in a daze, Callam searched for a way to reach them. If he could just hold one, he'd become a mage here. No more fearing Binding Day. No more trials. His own magic.

There wasn't a ladder in sight.

He'd begun dragging the armchair over when his instincts screamed at him to hide. Ignoring the impulse, he slammed his makeshift step into position, so close to his prize. With one foot balanced on the cushion, he reached for the grimoires and...

Voices echoed through the library. Two of them. Coming closer. Getting louder.

He'd never bind in time. Adrenaline surging, Callam shoved the chair into the nearest corner and rushed for the wardrobe doors. "C'mon," he whispered, his fingers tugging on the smooth knobs. "C'mon." His breath came fast and shallow. Mages flogged unbound for the smallest of offenses.

And trespassing is no minor offense.

With a frantic yank, the airmore swung open, and he sheltered among some robes and coats. His heart hammered as he braced for the doors to squeak when he pulled them back in—but well-oiled hinges proved a godsend.