

Chapter 1

Run, run, run!

The word took over my mind as my body burst into action. My feet hit the cobblestones as I ran down Merchant's Hill. Behind me, I could hear the screeches of the middle-aged woman who had caught my hand in her coin purse.

"Thief!" She yelled, over and over until the word lost its meaning and became nothing but noise. No one ran to her aide, something that was common in the hills south of the inner wall. Unless there was a mage guard in the area, no one would bat an eye to her cries. However, the neighborhood's apathy didn't mean I was in the clear yet. I thought I had spied a group of grey uniforms just down Merchant's Lane, but wasn't sure if they were Mage Guards or not.

If they *were* after me, stopping on the main road would leave me a dead woman.

I danced along the stones, weaving back and forth between people as to not bump into them. The incline was so steep that one off-step would send me careening down the hill.

Thankfully, I was used to running up and down the hills of Ashirel City. My legs, though wiry, were mostly muscle and my feet were calloused from growing up on stone streets.

Faces flashed around me, only looking up to make sure I wasn't a threat. Couriers sprinting down hills were commonplace, and no one was going to find a skinny girl of 17 a threat.

I glanced up for a second, trying to find my bearings in all the confusion. The water from the bay gleamed back at me. Boats dotted the bay, their sails drifting calmly in the spring wind. Large oaken vessels drifted off to trade wares with the Greater World. Although it was a lovely view, I couldn't sit and gaze on for long, but I had enough information to know how I would find my way back home.

I turned quickly, hopping over some wooden boxes filled with herbs. The merchant who was stacking the crates threw up his hands, letting his product fall to the ground.

"Eh, feckin 'ore!" He yelled, but I didn't mind him. I was used to being called worse in the slums that surrounded the workhouse. The slim alley I entered immediately turned into stairs. Suddenly I had a different challenge at hand an uphill climb. I looked behind me to make sure that I wasn't being pursued before I slowed down. There was no sight of guard patrols on the main street and the woman's voice had faded into the everyday sounds of the city. Finally, I breathed a sigh of relief.

I stepped up the long staircase, lined with doors to the merchant's homes. Most men who worked there were small-time, only able to afford two room hovels for their families. Children ran down the steps next to me, screaming and laughing as they played a game of chase. It reminded me of when I was a young one, only I had been covered in dirt and grime.

When I finally reached the top of the stairs, I stopped for a second to catch my breath. My cheeks were red from both the exercise and from embarrassment.

How was I detected so easily?

It was a rookie mistake. Usually, I was able to distract a target to the point that they didn't notice a stolen coin until it was too late, but this time was different.

My hand reached into the pocket I had sewn into my worn jacket. I was due for new clothing, but money had been scarce for months. I could feel the coins in the bottom of the pocket, two silvers and a fourth-piece of gold was all I was able to snatch after a day's work.

I bit the side of my cheek as I deposited the money onto my palm. Once I was certain that no one nearby could see, I opened my hand. With all my room and board debts, the coins would be gone as soon as I stepped into the workhouse.

Lifting it to my lips, I bit into the quarter of gold, marking it easily. It was fairly new, with no nicks in the edges of the metal other than where it had been cut for change. Had the city mint been making new coinage? That seemed odd with how difficult it had been to find work in the last year. My hands were trembling as I held the coins. The reaction was probably from the stress of being caught, but it was uncommon for me to turn into a frightened mouse after one botched job.

I placed the coins back into my clothing and glanced down the stairs before turning onto the street. The gold coin felt like it was burning a hole in my breast pocket. Something about the object bothered me, but I couldn't place where my anxiety stemmed from. It wasn't rare to find gold pieces in the purses on Merchant's Hill, but this one was newly made and gave off a sickly feeling. I'd felt the same when falling off of a tree branch as a young girl.

I shook my head, as if that would clear the worry from it. There'd be time to fret when I returned to the workhouse.

When I walked into the street I tried to blend in with the crowd. My head turned down so the few townspeople that were walking home didn't notice me. The only stares I would get in that part of town were from older men, who'd whistle at me as I passed. It was a common occurrence in the south city and more annoying than worrisome.

Luckily, most people were going about their own business. I knew that if I kept to the side streets, I'd easily get home within the hour. I'd be late for dinner, but Leyla and Bolle would always save their scraps for me.

"Excuse me ma'am," The official voice almost made me jump. A few yards away, a group of men had stopped another woman walking alone with a basket of produce and bread.

There were three men, all were well-kept, with shaven faces and cropped hair. Their uniforms were dark grey and silver, the colors of the Mage Guard. Two men had the common coloring of the sister cities, dark hair and tanned skin. The third was slightly darker, hinting at an ancestry from west of the smoking lakes. They were all beautiful, as most mages were, with an air of authority and elegance in the way they held themselves.

My hands clenched into tight fists as I tried to figure out what to do. The next alley I could slip away to was well past the group, and turning around after noticing them would only draw their attention. I listened with growing interest, slowing down my steps as I tried to make up my mind.

"Have you noticed any suspicious people on your street?"

"Theft has been rising lately on Merchant's Hill"

"Where were you in the last half-hour?"

Were they questioning her about my pickpocketing work? When I glanced up at her, she fit my description almost to a tee. Dirty blonde hair, medium height, with large eyes and a slight build. The only difference were that my eyes were grey-green and hers were dark. If they set eyes on me, it was almost certain they would stop me.

I couldn't have that.

Trying to act in a casual manner, I crossed the street, feigning interest in a small cheesemaker's shop next to the alley. The man behind the counter glared at me when I walked closer, but I scanned the items in the window with hands behind my back. In the window's reflection, I had a view of the mages. They had already moved on from the woman, heading down the street like a pack of dogs on the prowl.

"Shoo!" The shop owner opened his door and waved his hand at me. "Don't be blockin' the window if ye aren't buyin!"

I blinked a few times, my attention being torn away from the reflection. I raised my hands to the cheesemaker and backed up, not wanting him to bring unwanted attention to the shop. He grumbled and closed the door before I slipped quietly into the nearby alley.

“Orianne, you have to stop doing this,” I told myself below my breath. I pressed my back against the rough stone wall in the alley. All I wanted was to curl up in a ball and rest. The adrenaline that pumped through my veins was growing tiresome, making my chest rise and fall a little too quickly.

I was still, waiting for the mages to come upon me and take me away. Mage judgement, even for common theft, was a heavy sentence. Since I was close to coming of age, I would be treated more harshly than a young street rat. The best case scenario, I’d lose a finger. Worst case, they’d tamper with my mind and send me off to Eldurr in a slave ship.

For my entire life, I’d been warned to steer clear of the Mages and had been free of their attention for 17 years. Back when there were more courier jobs, I didn’t have to worry about being caught. As of late, since I was forced into pickpocketing, close calls were all too common.

At least it isn’t the red light district, I told myself. I had seen the consequences of that line of work alive in my bunkmate, Leyla. I’d rather be kicked out of the workhouse and beg for scraps than lose my soul to the types who whistled at me on the streets.

Standing up straight, I thanked the Gods for my streak of luck.

“Please just send me work,” I pleaded, looking up at the line of blue above the alleyway. I turned on my heel to continue my way down the street. As I walked into the sunlight and looked behind me to make sure the threat had passed, I ran into a tall man standing in the street.

“Pardon me-” I said, trying to fake politeness. However, as I realized who was blocking my way, my blood turned cold.

A Mage Guard. The man standing over me was a Mage Guard.

My luck had run dry.