

THE CONJURER FELLSTONE BOOK ONE

DREAMMALLOW  
THIEF

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MARJORY KAPTANOGLU

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For Mom & Pops

*Life is a sea of vibrant color. Jump in.*

- A.D. Posey

## TESSA



Today, my fifth time as a russet sparrow, I felt as if I'd been flying all my life. I left caution behind, soaring over the town square, catching a beakful of rancid smoke rising from the shops and ramshackle homes. My wings flapped according to instinct and carried me toward Sorrenwood's outer edge, over rows of broken shelters. I continued across a field dotted with bent farmhands, past a thicket of trees that gave way to the swimming hole.

I flew lower to watch the three bare-chested boys who approached the water. I'd seen them before but they were younger than me and I could not remember their names. The dark one swung out on the rope and when he reached the highest point, he released with a shout and a splash. His friends followed in rapid succession, nearly landing on him. Their joy was infectious. I sailed up higher and dove down, letting myself fall until—an inch above the water's surface—I pulled up. The pale boy saw me and looked puzzled. He had probably never seen a bird play before.

I rose higher for my second dive. But as I shifted downward, a huge silhouette appeared above me... *a hawk*, its wings spread wide, a monstrous beast to sparrow-me. Shaking, I dodged

left and then right and then back again, hoping to confuse it with my odd movements. I followed an erratic course and didn't realize until it was too late, that I'd crossed over the outer wall and now flew above the Cursed Wood. Gray mist seeped upwards like steam from a giant cauldron. The tips of black tangled branches reached toward me, but I knew better than to land on any of its foul trees.

The air whooshed as the hawk dove for me, and I felt a stinging sensation as it clipped off a wad of my feathers. I beat my wings in a panic, angling toward Fellstone Castle. It was a dreary, forbidding fortress but the only place I might find refuge. A shadow formed over me as the hawk prepared to dive again. My confidence shaken, I swore at myself for having so little practice flying. Whether to flap my wings or coast on the wind—I had no idea which would get me to the castle quicker. And so I flapped and coasted and flapped again, aiming to reach the nearest tower. The hawk's breath grazed my back as I flew over the moat, ducked under the edge of the roof, and hurled myself into a tight corner, where I crouched, trembling and desperately wondering what defense I could use if my attacker crawled in after me.

The hawk didn't come. Yet I feared it might still be out there, perched on the roof, waiting with uncanny stillness for me to emerge. That didn't sound like normal hawk behavior, but I knew so little about them. By now I should've been an expert on any animal that wished to make me its supper. I'd grown careless, caught up in the novelty and excitement of flying. My first time out, I only hopped across the yard and took a short flight up into the nearest tree, growing accustomed to the odd sensation of seeing things behind me. With each day I flew, I grew bolder. I'd half-believed, half-hoped the magic lent me a kind of protective shield, keeping

other animals from perceiving me. I knew better now. In future, I would watch for shadows, and feel for subtle shifts in the air that flowed around me.

Movement below caught my eye. Down on the castle lawn, six armed boarmen huddled together, speaking amongst themselves in snorts and grunts. Their pig heads with sharpened tusks were disturbing enough at the best of times, combined with the bodies of herculean men, broadened by thick padding covered in chain mail. Here, alone and unprotected at the castle, I shivered in dread, and shrank further into my corner. Their leader glanced upwards, revealing heavy scars across his eyes and snout. Even from this distance, or maybe because I knew the way they always looked at you, I felt the chill of his cold, black piggish eyes, devoid of feeling. Of course he wasn't looking at me, a little bird under the roof, but at an open window below me. Seconds later, a man extended his arm out the window and lowered it in signal.

The scarred boarman bellowed at another whose ear had been partly chewed off. The group opened up, revealing a frail man on his knees at their center, his hands tied behind his back. Pale and filthy with his clothing torn into strips, he looked as if they'd dragged him from the dungeon only moments earlier. Two of the boarmen lifted him to his feet and shoved him in the direction of the forest. His poor legs appeared weak and spindly from long disuse, but still he loped toward the trees, driven by a final, desperate hope that defied all logic. *If only I could help him.* But even if I flew down to lend him my wings, by the time I changed back, and before I could show the man what to do, the boarmen would surely have murdered us both.

*Run,* I silently urged. *Run as if the world were on fire beneath your feet.*

The boarmen salivated and raised their spears on their leader's command. The man stumbled just before reaching the trees, clawing his way up, fighting his way forward. *Faster!*

*Don't give up!* The leader signaled for the boarmen to unleash their blood lust, and they pummeled each other to be first to their prey. They thundered across the field, hunched over and pig-like despite having the bodies of men. Their high-pitched squeals formed a grating war cry as they crashed through the bramble into the woods. Seconds later came a heartrending shriek that froze my blood. The trees shook during the killing frenzy that must have followed.

I couldn't bear to watch any longer. I set out from my refuge, meaning to fly directly home, but instead, curiosity drew me to the window below. I had to see with my own eyes the devil who had ordered that brutal execution. Landing on the sill in the corner, I told myself there was no danger because I looked like nothing but a harmless little bird. At worst he might swish me away, and I would fly off before his hand could touch me.

The man was Lord Fellstone himself. Stripped to the waist, he sprawled in a chair by the window, his feet propped on a low table, and his hands overloaded with jeweled rings. He looked as he had when I last saw him at the Midsummer celebration, with a mane of auburn hair that, considering his age, ought to be showing some grey. His nose was sharp, his eyes shrewd, his manner bored.

But it was the tall young woman beside him who drew my eye with her extraordinary appearance. She was dressed like a man, in close-fitting apparel sewn of dark green leather. She wore a cloth cowl of the same color round her head and neck, hiding her hair. A thin leather mask covered her forehead, cheeks, and the top of her nose, leaving open her mouth and chin. This woman hunched over Lord Fellstone, holding a sturdy, intricately carved wand of black wood. Its tip caught a beam of sunlight from the window and diffused it into a wide circle over a

pustulent boil on Lord Fellstone's shoulder. The infection gradually cleared until it was gone.

She moved the wand over a second boil that sprawled in a circle of virulent red near his waist.

His lordship raised his head and gave me such a piercing look, it caused the contents of my stomach to flip. His eyes widened in astonishment, until a loud, "Ha!" burst from him.

The woman paused. "My lord?" She followed his gaze to sparrow-me. I tried to leap into the air and fly away, but somehow I couldn't get my claws to let go of the sill. I didn't know if I was frozen in panic or rooted in place by a silent spell Lord Fellstone cast on me.

"Oh, I do love sparrows," he said. He leaned forward, his face growing animated. "You know, this one would make a splendid appetizer for my supper tonight."

"Boiled or roasted?" said the woman.

"Cooked over an open flame on a skewer, I should say. Fetch me my sword."

I couldn't believe my ears. No sensible person would ever eat a sparrow. For two tiny bites of stringy meat, it would not be worth all the trouble of plucking. *Is his lordship mad?* I strained to pull my feet away, while they stubbornly clung to the sill.

The woman lay down the wand and retrieved a sword with jewels encrusted on its handle.

"There won't be anything left of it after we spear it with that," Lord Fellstone said, making me wonder if he'd been playing with me all along. "Why is this bird still here anyway?" His lips curled into a smile that was ripe with evil intent.

My claws released and I shot up into the sky. I raced across the Cursed Wood and over the castle wall with one goal driving me: *get home*. Once during the flight, a shadow moved over me, but it was only a crow. As I reached the house and swooped down toward my window, the crow circled above and turned back the way we'd come. *Did the bird follow me?* I dismissed the



thought as quickly as it occurred. My nerves were frayed; soon I'd be imagining eyes peering out of every tree.

The instant I touched my bedroom floor, I scraped three times with my claw. The familiar tingling sensation shot through me as I changed back into myself, Tessa Skye, sixteen years old, wearing a plain wool gown that laced up the front over my white shift. My key pouch hung from a belt that cinched my waist. It was odd how anything I wore or held onto when I changed into a bird would still be with me when I changed back, but magic was a powerful force beyond my understanding, and sometimes one had to simply accept what was, without being able to explain it.

I remained frozen for a moment, struck by the memory of that terrible hunt on the castle grounds. The shrill cry of the wretched man echoed still inside my head.

“Tessa.”

I jumped and spun around at the sound of Papa's voice. He stood just behind me, framed by the doorway.

“Papa?” I said, giving him a blank look, masking my fear of what he might have seen.

His form seemed more gaunt than usual, his features stern and angular, his cheeks darkened with the stubble of three days' growth. His eyes fixed on the sparrow amulet that hung from my neck. Normally I tucked it out of sight under my gown, but I hadn't had time.

“Where did you get that?” he said.

I felt my face flush red, but I rallied, affecting a light tone. “I thought you'd gone out.”

“The windrider,” he said. “Tell me where it came from.”

“The what?”

“Your amulet.”

I hesitated before answering. “I found it.”

“Where?”

“I don’t recall.”

“Don’t tell me a falsehood. I know it was your mother’s.”

I wanted to bolt but he filled the doorway and I would never make it past him. “I remember now. She gave it to me,” I said.

“No, she didn’t,” he said.

“How do you know?” A tinge of defiance crept into my voice.

“You were only four when she went away.”

The old feelings of hurt and abandon rose. “I suppose she didn’t love me enough to give me anything.”

Papa scowled. “Don’t talk nonsense. Tell me the truth. How did you get it?”

“I found it on her bedroom floor, the day she left,” I said at last. “Was it so awful to take something that reminded me of her?”

“It’s not a memento, it’s a rare item of powerful magic. Give it to me.”

I shrank back from him and clutched my throat. “No, Papa!” He had no idea what he was asking.

“You heard me. Magic is dangerous. Only the conjurers are allowed to use it. If it were up to me, it would be banished altogether.”

“But you don’t know... you’ve never felt... there’s nothing else like it. Flying is pure and it makes me feel free, and.... How could anything be wrong with it?”

“You can be sure there’s a price to be paid in using that magic. Not knowing what that price is makes it all the more troubling.” He reached out his hand. “You’re young yet. Be patient and good things will come, but not this way.”

My eyes filled with tears as I lifted the necklace over my head and handed it to Papa. “I meant no harm.”

He softened at the sight of my tears and clasped me to him. “Of course not. You didn’t know the danger. Now you do. We’ll speak no more of it.” He held me for a moment. “Have you been to the Kettlemore’s yet? We can’t afford to scorn paid work.”

I forced my gaze from the hand that clutched my sparrow. “Yes, Papa.”

He had called it a windrider. The name suited my amulet; I would use it from now on. I would not despair of flying again, as I had my ways of bending Papa to my will over time. He simply didn’t understand and I must find a way to convince him of the benefits. Perhaps he could be made to grasp its value by trying it himself. He would not want to, of course. And the truth was... I didn’t want to let him use it. *It’s mine and I should not have to share it.*

## CALDER



Calder Osric was seated on a stone wall in the middle of the town square, pretending to push a metal straw into his nose and then pull it out of his ear. A small boy no older than six, with ginger hair and freckles on the bridge of his nose, watched in amazement.

His mother... not so amazed. "You said you were going to tell his fortune," she said.

"I'm getting to that," said Calder. "It's an art, you know. And all good art needs preparation. Let me see your palm, young man."

The boy held out his hand and Calder began to trace a line with his straw. The boy jerked his hand back. "Ew!" he said. "That was in your nose."

Calder looked at it. "Was it?" He tossed it aside and held up his finger. "I'm sure this has never been in there."

The boy seemed dubious, but nevertheless he allowed Calder to touch his palm.

"I see a long life full of adventure. Do you like pirates?" Calder said.

“Pirates?” the boy’s mother said.

Calder squeezed his one good eye shut, the remnants of the other being covered by a brown leather eye patch. “I see swashbuckling. I hear the clanging of swords, the thump of a wooden leg.” He paused to glance at the boy. “Not yours, of course. You’ll keep your legs, and hands too. I see them reaching into a treasure chest filled with gold coins.”

The boy brightened with excitement. “Were you a pirate once?” he said, pointing at Calder’s eye patch.

“This is all nonsense,” said his mother. “He’s going to be a farmer just like his papa. When will he get married?”

Calder switched to another line on the boy’s palm. “Women will throw themselves at him. They always do with pirates. But he’ll be too busy commandeering ships to give much time to the ladies.” Calder knew he should try harder to please the boy’s mother. She had already paid his small fee, but if he gave the boy the future she wanted for him, her satisfaction might increase her generosity. At the very least, she could be inspired to recommend his services to her friends. But when he looked at the boy, who reminded him of so many of the other children growing up in miserable towns like Sorrenwood... he couldn’t help himself. The child’s eyes still shone with excitement, his soul had not yet been crushed and beaten down into dull acceptance of a lifetime of drudgery. *Let them have hope*, a voice inside him whispered. *Teach them to dream of wondrous lands and fascinating adventures.*

“Oh for goodness sake.” The mother took her son’s hand and tried to pull him away.

“Wait, Mama!” the lad said.

Calder, who was ever-vigilant, spied a stout constable flanked by two boarmen crossing the road towards him. Accusations of fraud were all too common within the fortunetelling community, forcing Calder to keep a constant lookout for law enforcement brigades and vigilante squads. He patted the boy. “Trick or retreat?” he said.

“Retreat!” the boy shouted without hesitation.

*A child after my own heart*, thought Calder. “I could tell you were a sharp one,” he said, jumping up and tossing his leather bag over his shoulder. “WRAITHS!” he bellowed.

It had the intended effect. Faces transformed into expressions of dread. Women screamed and darted towards shelter, dragging their children. Men ducked behind buildings, reaching for weapons.

Calder bolted away and slipped into the nearest alley.

The constable shouted, “Stop, fortuneteller!” He sent the boarmen after him, their progress impeded by the panic that had enveloped the townsfolk.

Calder raced down the narrow way. A mastiff jumped in front of him and Calder stopped hard. Saliva dripped from the mastiff’s jaw as it snarled and bared its teeth.

“Good doggie. Nice doggie.” Calder turned sideways, held himself still, and averted his eyes. In fact, he was becoming far too accustomed to people setting their dogs on him. He knew from experience that running was fruitless; only a climbable tree within arm’s reach offered any hope of escape from an attack animal.

The mastiff barked in a deep, intimidating tone, ready to pounce. Calder checked behind him to find the boarmen drawing nearer. Turning back to the mastiff, he discovered it had shifted its focus to them. “Smart doggie,” he said, creeping past the animal, which maintained its

aggressive stance against the boarmen. Just ahead Calder found a hole in the fence that the dog had most likely used. He dove for it and squeezed through, confident the bulky boarmen would never fit.

A whimper from the dog made Calder pause and turn back. The shorter and stouter of the two boarmen had raised his spear toward the mastiff.

“Leave him!” Calder shouted.

The boarman thrust his weapon but stopped just short of cutting the animal. He kept its deadly point pressed against the poor dog, now cowering at his feet.

“Wait!” Calder said, silently cursing himself. *Was there ever a scamp as pathetic as me?* It was just a dog, and not even a terribly nice one, and yet he couldn’t bear to be the death of it. He was an idiot, a thorough blockhead, he told himself as he climbed back through the hole. The stout boarman released the mastiff with a kick, and the animal shot to safety with a yowl, but seemed undamaged for the most part. The taller boarman grabbed Calder with a giant hand that nearly crushed his shoulder.

To compound his defeat and humiliation, the boarmen carried Calder between them as if he were a rabbit snared for the slaughter, and brought him to the pillory where a wooden stand had to be placed beneath his feet, as he was somewhat below the average height. Under the constable’s directions, they locked his head and hands into the stocks.

“What is the accusation against me?” Calder said.

“Inciting a married woman to adultery,” the constable said.

“That’s absurd. Do you even know who I am?”

“You’re the fortuneteller.”

“What, is there only one in this godforsaken place?”

“You're the only one with an eye patch.” The constable started to turn away.

“So I'm being persecuted for my disability?” Calder said. “I would not have thought this was that sort of town. Who is my accuser?”

“Mr. Glenn. His wife ran away with the apothecary because you told her she would find romance with a man of science.”

“Did she have black hair? I think I know who you mean. She told me she was a widow. I would never have predicted romance for her if I knew she was married.”

“Then you admit you make these fortunes up.”

“Certainly not,” Calder said. “Though it may be a stretch to term the apothecary a man of science. Sir, you're blaming the messenger. I had nothing to do with it.”

The constable gestured for the boarmen to follow him.

“When will you let me out?” Calder said.

The constable left without answering. A tomato flew through the air and landed on Calder's forehead. Red juice dripped down over his face, set into lines of misery.





## TESSA



The familiar sound of wood clacking against wood met me as I approached the rear of the carpentry workshop where Ryland was apprenticed. His master took long naps every afternoon, allowing Ryland to sneak off and practice his fencing behind the building, using a sword of white oak he'd crafted himself. This time I found him paired against Ash Kemp, the sexton's son, an odd sort of boy who stole away whenever I showed up, never looking me in the eyes. Ryland glanced my way before leaping forward and going on the offensive. Ash seemed unable to put up much of a defense, to Ryland's annoyance as he did like to show off in front of me.

I didn't care for sword fighting—certainly not for watching it—but I indulged Ryland by leaning against the building and smiling my encouragement. He stepped up his attack, backing his poor opponent against a tree. Ash made a brief recovery before Ryland knocked his weapon out of his hand, leapt on him, and pressed his sword to his chest.

“I surrender,” Ash said. He accepted a hand up from Ryland and retrieved his wooden sword, tucking it into his belt. His gaze shifted to the ground and he gave me a curt nod before scurrying away.

Ash wasn't bad to look at—tall and slender, with his light brown hair often tied into a neat ponytail—but he suffered by comparison to his friend. Ryland was broad-shouldered and narrow-hipped, with a fine sculpted face like that of a nobleman. People often asked if he was highborn, when in fact his father had been a potter before the disease that had crippled his hands. All told, Ryland was impossibly handsome, with hair that shone like gold in the sunlight, and a single dimple that was far more charming than if he'd had two. Among seventeen-year-old males, he might not be the sharpest, but he was hard-working, loyal, and rarely argued with me... everything a girl could wish for in a boy.

Ryland lowered his sword with a flourish and drew me into his arms. I sometimes asked myself why he'd picked me. I didn't think of myself as a beauty, though I supposed I looked well enough. Some people made fun of me for being more like a boy than a girl, but I saw no reason why a girl who spent little time fretting over her appearance and who worked as an apprentice and who loved adventure... why a girl like that must be considered more like a boy. Even Ryland often told me how he loved that I wasn't a “typical” girl, but I rejected the notion that girls were all of a type instead of each being unique.

Ryland led me to the bench. When I sat, he knelt before me. “What are you doing?” I said.

“What do you think?”

“Getting your knees dirty.”

“Tessa Skye, will you marry me?” Ryland said.

“Don’t joke about such things.” He had proposed in jest before; I assumed this was more of the same.

“I mean it this time.”

“Of course I’m going to marry you,” I said. “In a few years.”

“We should marry now. My brother and his wife just bought their own home... they’ll be moving out from my parents’ house soon. That will leave the spare room for us.”

“We’re to live with your family?” In addition to his parents, Ryland had three sisters at home, and I was not at all fond of two of them. I was used to a quiet house, just Papa and me, and I liked it that way.

“I thought you’d be pleased,” he said.

I was pleased, and flattered as well. I fully intended to marry him someday; we only differed in our opinions on when the wedding should take place. If we married right away and moved in with his parents, no doubt they would expect me to give up my apprenticeship and join his mother in the kitchen. There we would prepare meals for the seven of us, or nine when his brother and sister-in-law came to dine. They would most likely begin to have children immediately, and then we would also have the little ones to feed and watch over. I’d been saving my money to avoid just this eventuality. If Ryland was doing the same, we could possibly afford a place of our own in two years.

“I’m only sixteen,” I said. “Papa won’t approve.”

“Lots of girls marry at sixteen.”

“Papa will say it’s too young.”

Ryland rose and turned away from me, annoyed.

Mr. Rees, the carpenter, stuck his head out the workshop door. “Why haven’t you finished the table?” he shouted.

“It’s my fault,” I said before Ryland could speak. “I came to ask for his advice on repairing our door.”

Mr. Rees grumbled what sounded like a curse before drawing back inside.

“Please just ask your father,” Ryland said. He brushed his lips against mine, leaving me wishing he would linger for a longer kiss.

“If you wish,” I said, though I knew what my father’s answer would be. But at least then it would be Papa and not me who stood in the way of what Ryland wanted.

He returned to work, and I hurried to reach the Kettlemore’s house before they hired someone else. I set a rapid pace across the town square, paying little attention to the activities of others around me, until a woman bumped me in passing. When I glanced up, I noticed a man languishing in the pillory. He was a stranger to me, a smallish fellow with an eye patch who looked near forty years of age. His skin was the color of acorns, and he was rather handsome, or would be if he wasn’t splattered with mud and rotten food. Dead rats lay at the man’s feet. Whatever his crimes, he didn’t deserve this sort of treatment.

I would’ve moved on, but his leather wristband caught my eye. A cat’s head made of pewter was set into it, but more importantly, its style bore a striking resemblance to a band owned by my mother, except hers was a fox. She’d been wearing it when she disappeared from our house. It was the only day I could recall her in every detail, down to the clothes and jewelry she wore, and the way her face was framed by several soft strands of hair that had fallen loose

from her braid. My other memories of her floated like wispy clouds through my mind, often taking on new forms, so that I could never be sure what was true, and what imagined.

When I stopped to ask the man where he'd gotten the wristband, he stared down at me with a curious look in his one good eye. After a pause, he answered in a thick voice, his throat hoarse, no doubt, from the pressure of the stocks. "I don't know. I've had it a long time. Why?"

"My mother had a fox bracelet just like it."

His gaze sharpened. "Had? Did she lose it?"

"No, she... never mind. I'm sorry to bother you."

"Wait." He exploded into a fit of coughing and I waited for it to subside. "Does it look like I have better things to do than speak with you?" he said.

"No, but I'm in a hurry."

"What's your mother's name? Maybe she came from my village."

"Gillian Skye."

"I haven't heard of her. Where is she now? I'd like to speak with her."

"She... she isn't here."

A boy of about twelve leapt onto the raised platform and kicked the box out from under the man's feet, and since he was not very tall, he was left dangling from the pillory. Other boys laughed from the square as the man gagged and choked.

"I'll tell your mothers on you!" I shouted, and the boys dispersed, racing away to find some other victim to torment, no doubt. Seeing no one else coming to the man's aid, I pulled myself up onto the platform and slid the box back under his feet.

"Thank you... thank you so much," he croaked. "I'm Calder Osric."

“Why did they put you here?” I said.

“Fortunetelling is a dangerous business... if things don't come out as you predicted... sometimes more so when they do.”

I glanced around to confirm no one was watching. Then I whisked out the ring of skeleton keys from my pouch and began to try them on the padlock that held the pillory together. It was a warded lock, which was not likely to require my picks or shims.

“Thank you, but I’m quite sure that isn’t going to—” Calder said.

The fourth key turned and caused the latch to spring open.

“I’m Tessa Skye, the locksmith's daughter,” I said. “Wait till I'm gone before you let yourself out.”

“I owe you a palm reading, and I have a feeling your future will be bright.”

I glanced back once as I hurried away, to see Calder lifting the top half of the pillory and slipping out of it. With surprising speed and agility, he jumped down from the platform, retrieved a bag at the bottom of it, and sprinted away.