

Prologue

Before Adelaide loved her sister, she resented her. It wasn't Emma's fault. She was as sweet as the apple pie their mother would scrape together for festivals. But that only made being around her more difficult. Adelaide felt she could never measure up to her kind, gentle older sister, and shame pierced her whenever Emma helped someone before she could. Or before she even thought of helping.

One day, when Adelaide was thirteen winters old, her sister fourteen, in frustration she had asked Emma, "How are you not exhausted all the time?"

"What do you mean?" Emma's golden braid dangled over her shoulder as she pulled up wild onions growing alongside the burbling Lentasa River. "Ooh." Her eyes landed on a patch of velvety violet irises. "Mom will love these. Help me pick some."

"That's what I mean," Adelaide said as she pulled up an iris. "Thinking of others all the time."

"I don't think of others all the time."

"Well, you do more than me."

Emma looked up at Adelaide, her eyes the same color as the spring sky above them. "It's not a competition, Ade. You're good at other things."

"Like what?"

"Like thinking of ways to use ingredients creatively." She held up her basket of onions. "And you wish to help everyone in a more lasting way than just chopping their food or feeding their chickens."

Adelaide remembered the day before, when one of Lord Lambert's knights from the nearby town of Alesfirth had thrown their neighbor, Giles, onto the ground. Giles hadn't bowed fast enough at the knight's arrival to collect his money for the spring tax.

Only Emma's arm had kept Adelaide from trying to drag the knight off, saving her from a lashing or worse.

And then there had been reports that some knights from the country to the north of Klinhun—Gyndilad—had been spotted riding near Alesfirth. Gyndilad was a country of thieves, greed, and darkness. Or so the stories went.

Gyndilians had fought skirmishes at the northern borders of Klinhun before, but not in Adelaide's lifetime. When they invaded, they were ruthless and hardly ever left survivors. Alesfirth was now the closest town to the Gyndilian border, so if the country decided to invade, their town would be the first and hardest hit.

Her parents hoped King Ganelon would send more knights to protect them, but there was no sign of them yet. Adelaide doubted it would happen. King Ganelon and his son only showed interest in them when they didn't pay their taxes fast enough.

She ripped up another iris, taking the roots with it. "Not that I can do anything for our people."

Emma placed a hand on her arm. "Not yet. But mayhap when you're older. Look." She pointed at a white lily surrounded by a patch of mud. "It's lovely."

Adelaide knew her sister wouldn't venture through the mud, even for such a beautiful flower, so Adelaide slopped her way through, trying to hold her dress out of the muck. She plucked the lily out. Pretending to be a nobleman, she bowed to her sister and offered her the flower. "For you, fair lady," she said in a deep voice.

Emma laughed, curtsied almost as gracefully as a noblewoman, and inhaled the flower's honey-sweet scent. "And you said you didn't do things for others."

"Not often." Adelaide surveyed the muddy ground, thinking of their younger brother. "Let's get something for Odo too." She dug a hand into the cool, sticky mud.

"Gross. What are you going to do with that?"

"Put it in Odo's boots."

To her surprise, instead of trying to dissuade her, Emma laughed and grabbed her clean hand. "Come on."

The next morning, when Odo shrieked and sputtered, his ears turning red at the icky gloop in his boot, Adelaide and Emma's eyes met over his head. A friendship, an alliance, had formed between them.

From then on, Adelaide saw Emma more as a sister than a rival. Thinking of ways to prank Odo turned into walks by the river, chatting and teasing about boys, and searching for fireflies.

The day Adelaide found an injured hawk in the woods deepened the sisters' friendship even further.

Adelaide had walked into the summer-cloaked trees looking for a missing chicken. It had probably been eaten by a coyote or taken by a starving neighbor—which could have been anyone since they were all starving. But Emma loved the chickens as if they were her children, so Adelaide wandered through the woods, hoping Lord Lambert's knights weren't out hunting with his hounds. If they saw her, they'd accuse her of hunting on his lands and mark her with the brand of a thief.

While passing the base of an oak that she'd snuck out to climb a few times with Emma and their friends, Gunter and Conrad, Adelaide heard some rustling in a bush peppered with red berries. She stalked toward it.

Peering in, Adelaide made out a flapping shape. Instead of dirty-white plumage, the bird had soft, downy feathers—just a fledgling. Adelaide recognized it as a small version of the hawks that often soared overhead or those Lord Lambert used to hunt when tired of his hounds.

The hawk squeaked feebly, melting Adelaide's heart. Its amber eyes, when turned on her, seemed to see inside her soul. Did it belong to Lord Lambert? If so, what was it doing out here all by itself?

As Adelaide leaned toward the bird, she noticed one of its wings was bent at an awkward angle. Carefully, she scooped the fledgling up and cradled it in her dress. The bird tried to flutter away, its wings beating weakly against her chest.

"Shh. It's okay," Adelaide murmured, walking back to the cottage.

When she entered the house's smoky room, Emma glanced up from pounding dough beside their mother. "Did you find Snow?"

"No, but I found this." Adelaide gently placed the bird on the straw bed they all shared.

Emma gasped. "He's beautiful."

"I think his wing's broken." Part of Adelaide, the part that still sometimes resented her sister, didn't want to ask Emma for help. But she couldn't heal the bird without her sister's knowledge of healing. "Can you fix his wing?"

Emma frowned at the bird which stared back. "I'll try."

"Use oak saplings for the splint and powdered Glorph's wort for the pain," their mother advised as Emma left the cottage.

That night, after everyone had fallen asleep but Emma and Adelaide, they watched the hawk's white-feathered chest rise and fall as it slept in Adelaide's lap. Emma had crafted a splint for its wing and received several cuts on her hand from its beak in gratitude.

Adelaide squeezed her sister's uninjured hand. "Thanks, Em."

"I hope it works. What are you going to name him?"

Adelaide glanced up at her sister, surprised. Emma was the one who loved animals, and she'd healed his wing after all.

Emma must have noticed Adelaide's puzzlement, for she said, "You're the one who found him. You should be the one to raise him. Besides, I've always thought of you like a hawk."

"Truly? Why?"

"You're fierce and brave, not afraid of anything."

Adelaide shook her head. "I'm scared of plenty of things."

“Like what?”

Adelaide’s thoughts wandered to the fresh rumors of a Gyndilian garrison being built not far from their town. There was no news of extra knights on their way from the King’s City of Dhalion to protect them, so if the Gyndilians struck, as they had struck northern towns before, Adelaide’s family and the entire town could be destroyed. She shuddered. “I’m afraid of losing my family.”

Emma squeezed her arm. “That’s a worthy thing to fear. But I’m not going anywhere.”

Adelaide released her breath. She gazed down at the hawk, which didn’t look so brave and fierce now with his bedraggled feathers and splinted wing, but hopefully would one day. “I’ll call him Cyr.”

Chapter One

Two years later

Cyr screeched overhead, urging Adelaide and Emma faster over the dirt path leading to the bedraggled town of Alesfirth.

When they reached the top of the hill cluttered with stone houses and shops, Emma raised her arms. Her summer-sky eyes lit with victory. “I won! Now you must do my chores for a fortnight.”

“A fortnight?” Adelaide tugged her sister’s flaxen braid. “No way. That’s too long for a simple race.”

“Then...” Emma watched a bent-backed woman push a cart bulging with glossy red apples through the rickety wooden gate toward the covered food stalls. She faced Adelaide again. “You get to see how much the leather costs for father’s shoes.”

Adelaide’s face fell at the thought of wading into the cloud of rancid stink surrounding the tanner’s hides. The smell of the sharp animal urine he used for treating the leather always made her want to vomit. “That’s unfair, Em.”

“No, it’s not. You lost, and one of us has to go there anyway. I’ll go next time.” Emma placed a few silver klins in Adelaide’s hand, then darted to the food booths which smelled of baked bread, fresh cheese, and golden harvests: much more tantalizing than the tanner’s booth.

Muttering words she’d never let Odo hear, Adelaide swerved around threadbare dogs nosing for scraps, skeletal children scurrying about, and carts piled high with firewood. She passed the lord’s cedar hall where buttery and azure flags embellished with a black buck—the symbol of Alesfirth—hung. Red-faced men, probably colored so from drinking too much wine, could be seen guffawing through the hall’s open windows.

As she passed the raised stone dais in the middle of town, an orange-capped boy almost knocked her over.

“Sorry, Miss,” he called back at her.

Adelaide waved at him then followed the ripe stench of urine past the dais toward the tanner’s booth. She nodded to him and told him what she wanted.

As the tanner picked up hides and rattled off prices, screams sharp with fright pierced the normal chatter of the market.

Adelaide whirled around. Knights on horseback galloped down the road, their upheld swords flickering with cold sunlight. Black and silver tunics peeked from beneath their chain mail, marking them as Gyndilians. Adelaide shivered.

A Gyndilian’s sword cut down into the orange-capped boy she’d seen earlier. He collapsed like hacked wheat, blood pouring from his chest.

Adelaide jerked back, her heart stuttering.

Another knight, this one cloaked in the blue and gold colors of Klinhun, stepped out of the tavern, a mug of ale in his hand. He stared at the mounted Gyndilian who was now attacking an older man, then darted away, his sword swaying uselessly from his girdle.

Adelaide longed to scream at the knight, beg him to return and help the boy, even if it was too late. There were plenty of others falling around her that he could protect—was bound to protect.

But Adelaide had to find Emma. She plunged under horses' legs, leapt over prone, wailing people, trying to block out their desperate cries, and wove past Gyndilians striking anyone in sight. Smoke now clogged the air, and Adelaide, coughing, squinted through the thick haze.

A horde of Klinian knights darted in the same direction as she toward the town's gate. As she hopped over a too-still young man, Adelaide slipped in a pool of blood and tumbled to her knees.

Something whooshed by her head. She rolled over just in time to dodge an arrow. It struck a bag of oats on the ground behind her. They cascaded to the ground in a tawny waterfall.

Not wanting to give the Gyndilian another clear shot, Adelaide dove under a table, knocking over a basket of turnips. She'd finally made it back to the food market at the front of town. Now she just had to find her sister.

"Emma? Emma, where are you?" Her voice was hoarse from smoke and heaving breaths. She crawled under tables through sticky blood and spilled fruits and vegetables.

From the sound of swords ringing out above, the Klinian knights must be fighting back. But too few and too late to save those already dead.

Adelaide coughed. "Emma?"

Nothing but the clashing of swords and frantic shouts. She called out louder, "Emma! Answer me."

Panic clung to her skin, stickier than the blood covering her hands. Where was her sister?

She continued crawling until she saw a familiar golden braid. Emma lay in a pool of crimson—*it's not hers, it can't be hers*, she told herself fiercely—next to the motionless form of the bent-backed woman she'd seen pushing the apple cart.

"Em," Adelaide murmured, reaching for her sister. She pulled her into her lap and gave her a slight shake. "Come on, Em. We have to go."

Emma's cloudless blue eyes fixed somewhere above Adelaide. She didn't move, didn't laugh, didn't turn and tell Adelaide she was only teasing her.

The horrifying truth dropped into Adelaide's heart, panic exploding into grief and rage that tore her apart.

The grief and rage never let go over the next few months. The only thing that kept the emotions from ripping Adelaide apart completely was the resolve hardening into iron that she must do something, *anything*, to stop this from happening again. Not just for Emma, but also for the orange-capped boy, the bent-backed woman, and the dozen others who had died because King Ganelon and his son had failed to protect them.

Well, Adelaide would protect them—one way or another. The time to help her people had come.