



KYRIE WANG

HEALER'S  
BLADE

ENEMY'S KEEPER BOOK ONE

*Healer's Blade (Enemy's Keeper Book 1)*

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England of Enemy's Keeper, 1075 AD

# PROLOGUE

IN THE AUTUMN OF AD 1066, the Duke of Normandy invaded England after his victory at the Battle of Hastings. He was crowned at Christmas as the third claimant to the English throne that year.

With this feat, the Duke of Normandy—previously William the Bastard—became known as William the Conqueror.

During his coronation in Westminster Abbey, William's guards mistook the crowd's cheering for an English assault. The guards set fire to the surrounding houses, and riots broke out. Inside the church, the congregation fled, and the terrified clergy barely completed the ceremony. So began William's reign in England—one marked in its earliest years by distrust, destruction, and violence.

Multiple English uprisings ensued, but William crushed them all. By AD 1075, he felt confident enough to leave the country and govern from a distance. However, his own earls joined forces and conspired against him. The Revolt of the Earls, as their rebellion would come to be known, would be the last serious threat to William's rule.

This is an alternative history story inspired by those tumultuous times.



# PART I

## THE LEDGE OF NO RETURN

The background of the page features a decorative illustration. On the left, a sword with a cross-guard is shown vertically. To the right and scattered across the top are several large, detailed flowers, possibly peonies, rendered in a light, sketchy style. The overall color palette is warm and golden.

# CHAPTER 1

AD 1075, nine years after the Norman invasion  
September 25

ALIWYN'S DESCENT INTO OUTLAWRY began the afternoon she welcomed a murdered knight's daughter.

She had been rinsing her fishing spear in a stream behind her watermill. Water trickled around her bare feet as she stood on smooth stones, and her chickens ruffled their feathers in hollow dirt baths nearby. A linen sheet she'd hung out to dry dripped in the sun's golden rays.

All was tranquil until the door of her mill creaked open on the other side. And shut again.

Aliwyn straightened, scowling as she wiped a wet hand on her apron. Ever since her mentor Miriam had died, she'd padlocked her door shut whenever she stepped out. No one had the key except her close friend, Aelfric, but he wasn't expected back until Christmas.

Had a thief just broken in?

Aliwyn gripped her fishing spear. Biting her lower lip, she stepped onto the muddy bank of the stream. Stories of theft had abounded since the latest rebellion against King William had begun, but the manorial village she belonged to had remained peaceful. The new lord of her manor had promised to send guards to her mill, but he never did. Aliwyn had lived by herself for months.

Whoever had opened her door made no other sound. Birds warbled from the woods nearby, and water roared from deep within the gorge



behind her. No one traversed the bridges crossing the ravine to her lord's castle, and the noisy peasants who came to grind grain had all left. Aliwyn's pulse quickened as she gazed at the distant rooftops of their homes. The throng earlier that day had made her feel suffocated, and she had taken refuge inside all morning. Now she wished a few had stayed so she wouldn't have to investigate her door alone.

The calmness persisted. Maybe she was imagining things. Aliwyn curled her cold toes over the rocks and longed for the stockings hanging by the hearth inside. She untied the knot holding up her ragged dress and stepped out of the stream that powered her mill's waterwheel. Her shadow stretched over fallen yellow leaves as she tiptoed along the building's stone walls. Holding her breath, she peered around the corner.

The grassy clearing before her home was empty. The rolling hills in the distance revealed no one, but the padlock hanging from her watermill's door latch was gone, and the door was still shut. Someone had removed her lock and entered her home.

Tendrils of dread crept up her spine.

How many bandits had just broken in? They might be armed with swords and daggers. She had better fetch the manor's bailiff across the bridge.

Aliwyn spun around to leave and kicked a hen who had followed her. She yelped, and the hen screeched and scampered over the rustling leaves.

The watermill's door cracked open.

"Aliwyn," came Aelfric's husky voice.

"Oh, it's you!" Her shoulders slumped with relief, but she scowled at his nasty trick. "Why did you sneak—"

"Shhh! Come quick."

Aliwyn blinked. Switching the spear to her less sweaty hand, she strode across the clearing.

Aelfric came out in a flash, grabbed her arm, and pulled her inside. The door closed again, quietly. Aliwyn's eyes widened in the dimness—only one of his eyes was visible, and the other was wrapped in bandages. "What happened to—"

Aelfric placed one hand over her mouth. "I'll tell you. Please calm down."

His hand smelled of metal and dirt, and Aliwyn swallowed. He chopped firewood daily in the manor he served; maybe flying splinters had injured his eyelid. Aelfric glanced around the mill, unoccupied save for the two of them, and continued. "I'm sorry for scaring you, but I wanted to get inside. Fast."

His chest was heaving, though his hand remained still and warm against her cheeks. They had rarely stood this close face-to-face. Aliwyn's heart fluttered, but the tension clouding his dark eye set a different mood. She twitched as he let go. He wore a woolen black tunic she didn't recognize, but now wasn't the time to ask where it had come from. His tall frame shifted toward a wheelbarrow laden with turnips by the door. It hadn't been there before.

"Marie," Aelfric said, "you can come out now."

Turnips fell from the wheelbarrow, revealing a moving blanket underneath. One corner flew up, and a girl about eight years old pushed to her elbows. Wavy brown hair fell to her shoulders, and dirt streaked her face.

"Marie, this is Aliwyn. Someone I trust." Aelfric took the child's hand and helped her step out. She came up to his elbow in height. The girl glanced at Aliwyn, who still gripped the fishing spear, and buried her face into Aelfric's tunic.

Aliwyn gawked. With a shaking hand, she slapped her spear against the door frame. She lifted a wooden plank and barred the door shut.

Aelfric hugged the girl's shoulders. "Don't be scared, Marie. We made it." He turned to Aliwyn and continued. "This is Marie Marcotte, Master Marcotte's youngest child. She needs a place to stay."

The Marcottes were a prosperous family of two Norman knight brothers, their wives, and their children. Aelfric served one brother as a foot soldier and sent home his income to help Miriam pay for medicinal herbs and honey. Miriam had been a healer, and most of her patients couldn't afford to pay for their remedies.

Ragged and thin, the child Aelfric had brought home didn't look like the daughter of a wealthy family.

Aliwyn stared at her. "What happened to her parents?"

"English rebels attacked Master Marcotte and his brother. Only two Marcotte girls and a few servants survived, including me. We've been hiding in churches."

Aliwyn stepped back, her stomach twisting into knots. Other peasants had chattered about distant battles for months, but the rebellion had affected no one she knew. Until now.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "And your eye...do you want me to look at it?"

"No. It doesn't bother me anymore. I lost it weeks ago."

She gasped. "You lost it? What happened?"

"Forget about my eye. The Marcottes have been dead for weeks, and that's why I'm here."

Heat rose to her face, followed by a surge of tears. She wanted to pull off his bandage and see how badly he had been scarred, but Aelfric's frown warned her this wasn't the time.

"Their murder was staged to look like an accident, a shipwreck," he said. "I tried to keep you out of this, Ali. I tried to get help for the Marcottes elsewhere. But this rebellion won't end. The roads are full of bandits. Bridges torn down. Ports burned."

He looked older, with a sunken eye and his black hair unusually wild. His solemn gaze told of horrors unspoken, and Aliwyn wrung her hands. She couldn't offer comfort when she couldn't pretend to understand. For years she had submitted to the Norman king in exchange for peace, and she hoped his army would restore order again.

"It's safe here, Aelfie. You're always welcome." She walked into his chest and embraced him. "Welcome home."

He was bonier than she remembered, and his arms hung by his sides. Where was the warm hug he gave whenever he came home? Her heart sank. Beside him, the girl he had brought back watched them with her lips pinched. Poor thing, she probably missed her loved ones.

Aliwyn released Aelfric and extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Marie. You're also welcome here."

Marie gazed back with a blank face and slid behind Aelfric's back. Aliwyn sighed. The girl's dark brown hair and brown eyes matched Aelfric's description of his best friend, Matthew Marcotte, who was Marie's cousin.

"Aelfric, what about Matthew? Did he..." she was afraid to finish.

"Matthew was training away with Lord Seville, so he wasn't on the ship. He's still alive, but the rebels just caught him. He's being held hostage. I must get him out."

"You?" She shook her head. "Why you? You just came back."

"I can't stay. I'm here to drop Marie off for safekeeping—if you're willing to watch her. The rebels have started scouring the churches for the last Marcotte children."

Aliwyn swallowed several times. She eyed the hilt of Aelfric's sword hanging from his belt and wanted to squeeze him and never let go. Five years ago, she had opposed his decision to enlist as a foot soldier out of fear he'd get hurt. Now, he had already lost an eye. What would he lose next?

"What about all the king's men? His barons, knights?" she asked. "They're not doing anything for Matthew?"

Aelfric scratched the inner corner of his eyebrow. "His Grace is out of the country. He appointed his bishops to control the rebellion."

"Oh, for goodness' sake." Heat rose to Aliwyn's face. Bishops were busy enough managing their dioceses, and since when did they march to battle?

"Ali, I can't...it's hard for me to explain what's been happening away from here. The rebels are perfect citizens by day, but they go torching the fields at night to destroy the Normans' food supply. Then they vanish. The Norman knights are busy hunting them down. Matthew is only one of their squires, and he's not a priority."

Aliwyn crossed her arms and gazed at her feet. In the last nine years, repeated rebellions had attempted to overthrow King William, a Norman duke who had seized the English throne. With each uprising came theft, kidnappings, and murders as criminals took advantage of the civil unrest. Peasants of each manor had to take justice into their own hands. The

neighboring manors could be hours away by foot, and the rebel army attacked messengers who sped away for help.

Marie left Aelfric's side and wandered toward a shelf of carved farm miniatures and clamshells on display. Aelfric had fashioned the miniatures for Aliwyn when she was young, and the iridescent clamshells had been his special gift. Without asking for permission, Marie picked up the animal toys and plopped down to play on the dirt floor. Aliwyn scowled, but she had other things to worry about.

"Did you ask Lord Yeaton for help?" she asked. "He's loyal to the Normans."

"I tried. He wasn't home. And his bailiff refused to see me." He ran his hand over his face.

Aliwyn paced the floor. She had never met Lord Yeaton, the lord of her manor who had just risen to power in mid-summer. She paid his taxes but had yet to receive the benefits of his protection.

"I don't want you to go, Aelfric. How can you possibly save Matthew by yourself?"

"I'm not by myself. I've spoken to one of the Vastian chiefs. Her tribe will help me."

"The Vastians?" She tensed all over. "You're going to work with the Vastians?"

The Vastians were tribal pagans who lived independently of Norman rule and inhabited the hillforts between the manors. They had fed King William's army that fateful day when he had slain the king of England. Maybe they had won his favor years ago, but it wouldn't last. King William was too greedy, and Aliwyn waited for him to crush those pagans the way he had conquered her own people.

"You can't work with Vastians," she said. "They have countless rituals we don't understand. You could insult one of their gods without knowing it, and they'd kill you."

"But we've lived on their territory for years, and they've never hurt us." Aelfric widened his stance. "They have a new chief named Reiya, and

she wants the rebels dead for trespassing. She offered to help me rescue Matthew. I don't have another group to help me."

He pulled out a slender whistle that hung beneath his tunic. It was a Vasfian whistle that the tribal warriors blew to communicate. Aliwyn gritted her teeth. Aelfric had become one of *them*. The Vasfians were hot-tempered, superstitious redheads who were quick to kill. If only her mill hadn't been built on their territory, and Aelfric hadn't become so bold around them. But the lord of her manor had to negotiate and build the mill on Vasfian territory because that was where the river flowed.

"They kill their own children." Aliwyn strode to Aelfric's side. "Even Miriam had noticed how they bury their little boys. It must be some child sacrifice—"

"Enough," Aelfric said with a flash of his teeth. "I've told you for years to stop repeating false rumors. We've seen nothing of the sort. You just don't like the way they look."

Aliwyn clenched her fists. No, she didn't like how the Vasfians looked, and neither did her villagers. Red hair sprouted from the scalps of crafty traitors, and despite five years of living on Vasfian territory, Aliwyn's mouth still soured upon seeing their freckled faces. The freckles resembled the rash that had struck her birth family seven years ago and killed her only sister. The agony of seeing that darling toddler die still haunted her; she had three brothers but never another sister.

Aliwyn glanced at Marie, who sat surrounded by the wooden toys, and her vision blurred. Aelfric's expression soon softened. He knew about Aliwyn's sister but never accepted her dread of the freckled redheads.

"I'm not here for you to approve my decisions," he said. "I brought Marie here so you can take care of her."

Aliwyn's nostrils flared. If Miriam had been there, she would've stopped her argument with Aelfric before it began.

The silence spoke louder than words. Aelfric looked around the spacious mill, and Aliwyn followed his gaze. Three empty stools huddled underneath their dining table, and a pair of battered shoes rested in the corner. A familiar apron hung on the kitchen wall over the stone slab where Aliwyn

prepared vegetables and fish. No one greeted them from the guardrail of the mill's second floor.

The sorrow on Aelfric's face washed away Aliwyn's anger. Miriam had died after his last visit. She had accepted Aliwyn and Aelfric as apprentices after the prior rebellion had left them both orphaned. Aelfric remained her apprentice in the manor records and returned to the mill for two months a year. He had always greeted Miriam with a kiss and a hug.

When he looked back at Aliwyn with a tearful eye, she trembled with chills.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here when Miriam passed," he said.

"You...you know? Who told you?"

"Reiya, the new Vastian chief. She told me on my way here. If you can't care for Marie alone, I'll ask the Vastians to watch her."

"Oh no. Don't do that to this little girl. I'll keep her."

"Thank you." He rubbed the bandage over his eye. "I have to go. Reiya and her tribe will protect our mill like they always have. Farewell, Ali."

He walked past Marie, who hummed to herself as she rolled Aliwyn's precious toys in a muddied area. Aelfric extended his hand, and she bid him goodbye.

Aliwyn struggled to swallow a still-racing heart. Beams of sunlight filtered through the vent holes on either side of the triangular thatched roof, and Aelfric passed through them and into the shadows. He was a soldier with responsibilities, and when he talked like this, nothing she said could stop him.

"Who exactly killed the Marcottes?" She approached him as he lifted the plank barring the door.

"A man named Ransley Boltan and his household. They wear black surcoats with a golden griffin, but you won't see them."

He hesitated before pulling out the padlock he had removed from the outside. Setting it on a barrel nearby, he said, "Keep Marie hidden, and the next time the bailiff comes to collect eggs, tell him Ransley Boltan's son has been riding to Myton. Something is happening there."

Aliwyn registered none of it. "W-when are you coming back?"

“Within a week. If I don’t, then...”

“You’ll be back within a week, Aelfie.” She gave a trembling smile. “And I’ll be here waiting for you.”

He didn’t look at her, as though he were in another world. Opening the door, he slipped out, and the garlic bulbs drying beside the doorframe wavered. The door shut again with a hollow thump. The home suddenly felt upside down. Both the delight and devastation of seeing Aelfric crystallized as an icy lump in Aliwyn’s throat. Every revolt called upon soldiers to protect the king’s reign. Aelfric was fulfilling his duty, but her chest still shook with sobs.

Aelfric’s footfalls echoed outside. He was running back, and Aliwyn swung the door open as he skidded to a stop.

She looked at him up and down. “Did you forget something?”

He threw his arms around her shoulders, and she gasped.

“This,” he whispered in her ear. Aliwyn grinned. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around him. They rocked side-to-side. When she had been younger, he’d pick her up and spin her in a circle. This was the Aelfric she knew and loved.

His chest vibrated against her cheek as he spoke. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here for you and Miriam all these years, and I must go again.”

“Don’t be sorry. You had to work.”

His tunic and cloak were warm with the smell of fresh hay and wood smoke. She loved that smell, loved the sound of his beating heart. She could have stayed there all day, but Aelfric pulled back and put his hands on her shoulders. “Pray for us, will you? That you and Marie will stay safe, and that I’ll get Matthew out.”

“I will.” She could hardly speak.

“And when I come back, take me to where Miriam is buried. We’ll spend time together. You, me, and her.”

His face flushed, and Aliwyn managed a nod as his image grew hazy between blinks.



Aelfric smiled and stroked her shoulder with his thumbs. “Thank you for all you’ve done for me. I know you’ll make something delicious out of those turnips.”

He backed away, still smiling. The afternoon sun gleamed on the golden clovers she had embroidered along the neckline of his brown cloak, one for each of his birthdays. Under this same sun, they’d once walked to the lord’s land to plow the wheat fields. His face would beam as he told her the silliest stories and made her laugh.

If only she could turn back time. Aliwyn’s chin quivered as Aelfric turned and ran along the outskirts of the forest, stretching into the grassy hills beyond. He had trained for years under the Norman knight he served. It was his duty to defend Norman authority. She couldn’t fight, but she could help him care for Marie.

Aliwyn held her breath when redheads appeared at the edge of the woods. Aelfric ran to meet them as the only one wearing black amongst the Vassians in their fur vests and red-and-green checkered tunics. They disappeared between the trees together. Aelfric must be desperate to save his friend, Matthew, but she had never met this Norman squire. Was he worth all this trouble?

Her numbed feet stepped back into the mill. Marie was on the floor, flicking a toy horse onto a stack of wooden miniatures and seashells to knock them down, and Aliwyn pressed her lips together. She had never been so rough with her toys, and she tiptoed to the girl’s side, intending to scold her. Marie flicked a second horse onto the stack and sent everything tumbling down. When she sat back with a giggle, Aliwyn bit back her words. The toys had been collecting dust for years. She might as well let this lonely child enjoy them.

But Aelfric had said that two Marcotte girls survived. Where was the other one?

“Marie, you have a sister, don’t you? I heard her name is Evelyn.”

The girl lowered her eyes. “Yea, I have an older sister. But Evie jumped off the ferry coming here and ran. Aelfric was mad, but the ferryman wouldn’t turn back for her. So I’m here by myself.”

Aliwyn retrieved her stockings and shoes from behind the glowing hearth. "Why did she jump off?"

"Evie wanted to help Aelfric save Matthew. Our papa taught her how to fight so she thinks she can do it." Marie crossed her arms. "My sister's really brave, and a bit stupid. I miss her..."

Evelyn and Marie's father did well in teaching his Norman daughter how to fight in this foreign land. Aliwyn wished she knew how to fight, too. She sat on a stool, pulled on her stockings, and wrapped them with linens to garter them in place.

"Evelyn will come back soon, Marie. Until then, I'll take care of you." Aliwyn put on her shoes and waited until Marie looked up. "Do you want a hot foot soak? I have clean stockings for you to change into. And I'll make you some egg pottage."

Marie smiled. "Oh, yes. Please."

The girl spoke perfect English. Many Norman children born since the conquest did because the servants who tended to them, like Aelfric, were English. It warmed Aliwyn inside to have this child for company.

She stepped outside again to fetch fresh eggs. Padlocking the door behind her, she turned to find Clover the brown hen trotting nearby.

Aliwyn picked her up and smoothed her feathers. "I'm so sorry for kicking you, dear. That was very careless of me."

Leaves rustled underfoot as she carried the chicken toward the coop, and her legs grew heavier with every step. Aelfric could be sitting by the hearth right now, comfortable and safe and in her company, and the rebellion could rage on elsewhere.

"Here, chick chick chick," Aliwyn called. Her chickens came scampering to her side and followed her toward their coop.

The golden sunlight heated her face. Crickets chirped near and far, and her footsteps lifted the earthly scent of leaves and autumn rain. Across the ravine, Lord Yeaton's manor house and courtyard stood beside his manorial farms. Flocks of sheep roamed the sloping fields, and smoke drifted from the peasant cabins scattered between vast strips of farmland. At around thirty households, Brocklesby was one of the largest settlements

for miles, and a gatehouse on either side of the bridge guarded its access in case of enemy attacks.

Aliwyn's mill stood closer to the manor house than most peasant cabins across the gorge. If outlaws came looting, she could dart across the stone bridge and into the protected courtyard without stopping. That was her hope, anyway. She prayed that day would never come.

But what if Ransley Boltan and his rebel troops tracked Marie to her watermill? Aliwyn could stab fish, but she had never stabbed or fought a person. She clutched Clover to her chest but refused to back out of her commitment to Aelfric. Marie was also an orphan who needed her help, and Aliwyn pushed aside the worries crowding her mind. Better focus on making that egg stew she had promised her guest.

Aliwyn stepped into the dusty chicken coop and released Clover. The hen trotted toward a ladder leaning against the back wall and flapped onto the second rung. Aliwyn rummaged through the nesting boxes, but her shaking hands couldn't grasp any eggs.

She should've pleaded for Aelfric to stay with her and the child. She should've continued their heated argument about the Vasfians until the fact that she loved him burst out of her mouth. Aelfric wasn't just her best friend; he was the man she wanted to marry. At eighteen and nineteen years old, they were both in their marrying years, but she had lacked the courage to confess her love.

Aliwyn leaned against the nesting boxes and wiped her hands on her apron. The next time Aelfric returned, she would tell him she loved him. Chills sprinkled down her scalp as she gathered her resolve.

But tonight, her beloved was gone again. Aliwyn was hiding a Norman girl the rebels wanted dead, and her lord of the manor didn't know. What had she just gotten herself into?

The background of the page features a decorative illustration. On the left, a sword is shown vertically, with its hilt at the top and its blade pointing downwards. To the right of the sword, there are several large, detailed flowers, possibly peonies, rendered in a light, sketchy style. The entire illustration is in a warm, golden-brown color palette.

## CHAPTER 2

SOMEONE BANGING ON THE watermill's door jolted Aliwyn awake. She struggled to open her eyes. The rapping on the wood echoed like thunder within the stone walls.

"Marie?" Aliwyn croaked as she sat up.

No answer. Next to her, Marie's straw mattress was empty in the ember's glow, and Aliwyn's stomach clenched. Fists continued to pound on the door downstairs. She was on the second-story loft, which only partially covered the floor below and granted her a view of the entryway. Aliwyn pushed to her bare feet and ran for the staircase, but what felt like a small boulder barreled into her chest. She gasped. It was Marie, who had been running up the stairs simultaneously. The girl grimaced from the collision and rubbed her nose.

"Is it Aelfric?" Aliwyn cried with a burst of hope. It had been four days since he had left. She began to hurry down the steps again in her ragged dress, but Marie grabbed her arm.

"It's not Aelfric," she murmured. "I looked through the cracks in the door. Th-they're soldiers with black surcoats."

Lord Yeaton's men didn't wear black surcoats. Were they Ransley Boltan's soldiers?

Aliwyn pushed Marie away. "Go hide, now!"

Where were those rotten VASFians who were supposed to guard her mill? Aelfric should never have trusted them.

As Marie scurried into the shadows, Aliwyn gripped the dagger hanging from her waist. Downstairs, the banging continued. The plank of wood bolting the door shut jumped within its supporting brackets. Muffled

shouting echoed from the other side, and it wasn't friendly. What did they want?

Aliwyn darted down the steps and crept along the closest wall. Her shadow trailed before her in the dim hearth's glow, and torchlight shined through the slit below the door. Above the deafening banging, a booming voice demanded a key. But what key? Her mind scrambled for a plan. The room she stood in was built of stone, and the wooden water wheel and its gears were in an adjacent chamber. If the men tossed torches on the mill's thatched roof, would Lord Yeaton have time to rush over and save his manor's watermill?

Regardless, the soldiers might break the door's hinges and crash in at any moment. She had to make sure Marie escaped.

Aliwyn raced back upstairs and found the girl squeezed in a crevice formed by a stack of crates and the wall. The child stared back from the shadows, her eyes wide with panic and her cheek pressed against the wall.

Days ago, Aliwyn had taught her how to escape in case something like today ever happened. Aliwyn fell to her knees beside a loose stone in the watermill's wall and pulled it out in jerks.

"Marie," she said, "remember this little hole I told you about? You need to slip out."

The displaced stone revealed a small opening leading to her chicken coop. Her hens clucked from within the darkness, but no soldier shouted from behind the mill. The girl still had time to run out the back, but Marie whimpered from her hiding place and didn't move. Aliwyn struggled to keep her voice calm.

"Don't be scared, sweetheart." She got up and took the girl's arm. "You know what to do. There's a ladder in the coop. Climb down and run for the woods. Don't look back."

"Come with me," Marie sobbed.

"I won't fit." Aliwyn drew the child out of the crevice and hugged her. "You've been lovely, Marie. Go and be brave."

Her arms shook as she let go. Marie turned to the gaping black hole of the mill's wall and took one step.

Downstairs, scuffling noises came from the kitchen. Both Aliwyn and Marie froze.

“I told you this would be easier,” said a man’s voice.

Pins sank into Aliwyn’s scalp. How did that man get in? She pulled Marie toward the escape hole and squeezed the girl’s hand, pleading with her eyes for the child to hurry. Marie’s chin trembled, but she fell on her hands and knees and extended a leg toward the gaping blackness.

More scuffling noises and grunting sounded from downstairs. Aliwyn crept to the second-floor railing and peered between the wooden planks. The kitchen wall had a rubbish hole she always sealed with a wooden block. Bushes hid its location from the outside, but a soldier with a black surcoat had discovered it. He had pushed the block aside and was crawling onto a stone slab used for gutting fish. Pushing to his feet, he stepped into the mill and looked left and right. Fish scales and apple peels clung to his conical helmet.

“Hello!” he called out. “Anyone here?”

Aliwyn’s mouth hung open. She tried to withdraw from the rail but smacked the back of her head against a wooden plank.

The soldier looked up, straight at where Aliwyn’s face protruded overhead. She froze, and so did he. The whites of his wide eyes gleamed in the hearth’s glow.

Aliwyn’s pulse roared in her ears. More grunting and shouting echoed outside the rubbish hole, signaling that other men were about to enter.

The soldier downstairs kept his stare on Aliwyn. “You must be the watermill’s keeper?”

He was probably a few years older and thinly built. The black sleeveless surcoat covering his other clothes featured a large golden griffin.

Aliwyn stared at the griffin, that ugly symbol of the Boltan’s household. Aelfric had told her she wouldn’t meet these vicious rebels who had slaughtered the Marcottes for being loyal to the king, but now they were in her mill.

When the soldier approached her staircase to ascend, Aliwyn jerked back her head and scrambled to her feet. Behind her, Marie lay on her belly with

two feet in the escape hole and tears drenching her face. She didn't move. Aliwyn tensed her jaw; this was no time to raise her voice. Squeezing her dagger handle, she stomped down the steps.

*Get out already, Marie!* She jumped before the foot of the stairs, squaring her shoulders.

The intruder took a step back. A sword handle peeked from the side of his dark cape, but he didn't reach for it.

"Does Miriam still live here?" he asked.

Aliwyn glared at the man. How did he know her mentor's name? Something stopped her from pulling out her dagger, but her chest seized when another man's pointy helmet burst through the hole. He grunted as he pulled himself through.

The first soldier grinned at his companion before turning to Aliwyn again. "My name is Toby. We're wondering if—"

"Bloody nails! Stop wasting time!" The second soldier hoisted himself into the room with heavy panting. He was older and bulkier than Toby.

Standing up, he turned to Aliwyn with a snarl. "Where is the key? For that bridge crossing the gorge?"

This man could only be talking about the stone bridge leading to the baron's manor house. A stone gatehouse guarded the bridge's entrance, and Aliwyn had never locked its double doors. Chills skittered down her back when a third soldier crawled through her rubbish hole.

"But the bridge isn't locked," she sputtered.

"Yes, it is!" the second soldier shouted. "Are you mocking me?"

His voice echoed within the stone walls as he pulled out his sword. Its iron blade swept upward in a half-circle, and Aliwyn stumbled back against the step. She yanked out her dagger and pointed it at his face, but the man advanced on her.

"Produce the key! And how dare you not open the door!"

A hand appeared from behind the man and pulled back his arm. It was Toby, the first soldier who had entered. "Ed, let her talk."

Aliwyn glanced at Toby, but she shouldn't have. A pair of brawny arms wrapped around her chest from behind and pulled her back. She slammed

against the man who had grabbed her and stiffened when a blade's edge pressed against her throat.

"Struggle and you'll die," came a menacing voice in her ear. It was the third man who had entered.

He had a massive chest, and his arm pinned down both of hers at the stomach level.

"We'll let you go." Toby stepped forward, his voice soft but hurried. "Just unlock the Brocklesby Bridge and let us pass. My men seek shelter with Lord Yeaton. It's urgent."

Aliwyn squirmed but couldn't break free. Was Marie outside yet? Edward, the second soldier who had entered, marched to her door and threw off the plank barring it shut. It bounced on the floor with a thunk, and the watermill's door creaked open. Soldiers flooded into the room. The amber light from their torches cast long shadows onto the ground.

Toby continued to speak, but she didn't register his words as she stared at the golden griffin embroidered onto his surcoat. These rebels wanted to see Lord Yeaton? All this time, her lord of the manor had been on the rebels' side. He had fooled everyone, including Aelfric. None of Yeaton's soldiers would be coming to her aid. What a wretched traitor!

Something touched her shoulder, and Aliwyn jolted.

"Did you hear me?" Toby tapped her again, a scowl shadowing his face. "Come with us and unlock the bridge's gates."

"I didn't even know the gates were locked!" she cried.

The knife prodded into her neck, and her breath hitched.

"Stop!"

At Toby's order, the man withdrew his blade. Aliwyn gasped for air. Her right hand grasped her dagger's handle, but she couldn't fight all these men.

"What do you mean, you didn't know?" Toby asked. "The bridge is locked from your side. Who else would lock it?"

"Scour this place!" Edward shouted. "Report every key you find!"

Men stomped for the perimeters of the room. They tore down herbs and dried fish hanging on the walls as they searched for a key she didn't



have. Baskets fell over. Crab apples and turnips thudded and rolled across the floor. Torches were everywhere, and it would only be a matter of time before they pounded upstairs and found the displaced stone with a suspicious hole. Either that, or Marie was still face-down on the second floor.

Aliwyn needed to get everyone out of her mill.

“Wait, I remember now,” she declared. “The key is outside, by the bridge.”

The soldiers hesitated, and Edward narrowed his eyes. “There is no key by the bridge.”

“Yes, there is,” Aliwyn lied. “I can show you.”

“She’s making fools out of us,” Edward said, turning to his men. “Keep searching!”

Aliwyn struggled to break free when men bypassed her and began tearing up the stairs.

“You’re wasting your time here!” she shouted. “The key is outside!”

Toby held up a fist, and all the soldiers halted. “She may be telling the truth. Take her to the Brocklesby Bridge.”

Aliwyn’s chest heaved. Even she wouldn’t have believed the key was by the bridge. And how did he know Aliwyn’s mentor, Miriam? She was afraid to know. When Toby turned back to her, she averted her eyes. At his command, another soldier wrenched the dagger from her hand.

They pushed her outside with two soldiers locking her bent arms behind her and a frigid night wind slicing through her clothes. In the clearing stood the soldiers’ many horse-drawn, covered wagons. Aliwyn turned the corner toward the back of her mill with her heart drumming in her ears. Overhead, barren tree branches stretched like black skeletons against the flickering torchlight. When one of the two men grabbed the back of her neck, she straightened but kept quiet.

There had to be a way out of this. She’d break loose and dash for the woods when the soldiers let their guards down.

A bird call echoed in the distance, but no bird was calling at this hour. It was a Vasfian whistle mimicking a bird’s tweeting, and Aelfric had worn

such a whistle around his neck. None of the soldiers seemed to react, but Aliwyn almost tripped.

Was Aelfric back with a band of redheads? He had to be—he wouldn't leave her like this. Aliwyn quivered, her hands pinned behind her and clawing at her back. But if Aelfric had returned, why didn't he and the Vafians attack?

The men forced her to walk parallel to the river powering the watermill. The stream flowed toward the ravine, where it would plummet as a narrow waterfall.

Behind the mill and several arm lengths from the waterfall, two bridges passed over the ravine. One was a decrepit rope bridge unfit for crossing, while the other was a broad stone bridge with heavy wooden doors barring its entrance—the Brocklesby Bridge.

The wind scattered Aliwyn's hair as she and the soldiers stopped before the stone bridge's gates. Heavy chains wrapped countless times around the twin doors' handles, and a large padlock fastened the two ends of the chains. Someone *else* had locked the bridge. Heat flushed her face. Which dirty numbskull had done this?

"Where are the keys?" came Edward's voice from behind.

"I had locked it," she stammered—another lie. "But someone else added those chains. I can't do anything about it."

She was buying time, and Aliwyn writhed and shivered.

"You simply refuse to let us pass!" Edward growled.

"Wait," Toby said. "She made me realize something. What if the Vafian tribe secured the gates after dark? Then they herded us right into this dead end."

The soldiers behind her grumbled among themselves.

With her arms and neck immobilized, Aliwyn's teeth chattered as Toby stepped into her field of view. The awful reek of fish from the rubbish hole wafted from his body. His face anxious in the torchlight, he reached for the lock and scrutinized it. Then he peered down into the deep gorge, where rocky rapids roared beneath the two long bridges.

“This is not a lock I can pick,” he said. “Maybe we can pry one of the chain’s links, or we can reroute—“

“Regardless, we’re not leaving witnesses.” Edward’s voice boomed behind Aliwyn.

Footsteps stomped toward her. Edward was coming, and she caught a flash of metal—the blade of a sword.

Toby lunged to his left. “Edward!”

At his shout, she squeezed her eyes shut. Her knees buckled, but the man gripping her pulled her back upright. The strike to kill her didn’t come. Footsteps scuffled around her, and Aliwyn opened her eyes again, her body racked with chills.

She wasn’t hurt, and Toby had shoved Edward backward. The older man regained his balance with his sword in hand and his teeth bared. A loud exchange and more shoving between the two soldiers followed. One of the two men holding her let go and stepped forth, probably to intervene, and Aliwyn saw her chance. She stomped on the other man’s foot.

He flinched with a surprised grunt. His grip loosened, and Aliwyn spun around and kneed the spot armor didn’t protect well—the groin. If the man howled, she didn’t hear it. She twirled around and bolted for the woods, the night air coursing through her lungs and sparks flying before her vision. Voices shouted after her, and pounding footsteps followed.

Aliwyn had reached a row of tall bushes when torches appeared as golden dots further ahead, along the edge of the woods behind her home. Firelight illuminated the red hair of a line of warriors as they rose forth from the shadows, each aiming a crossbow. Aliwyn’s heart gave a great leap. Somewhere in the darkness, a Vastian woman barked the command to fire. The whipping sound of released crossbows echoed across the clearing. Silvery arrow tips flew toward her and the soldiers behind.

Her hope lurched into terror at the barrage of arrows, darkening as they soared into the moonless night like a monstrous cloud.

Aliwyn ducked into the prickly bushes and covered her head with her arms. Behind her, men screamed and scattered. Arrows clanged off helmets and thwacked into the rustling leaves, and the neighs of panicked horses

pierced the air. With branches whipping her face, she pressed deeper into the tangled undergrowth.

Dear Lord, was Marie outside during all this, or was she still face-down in the mill? Aliwyn had to find her.

But the arrows kept falling, and another whizzed past her face when she dared to rise above the tangled bush. The acrid scent of blood wafted to her nose. Aliwyn prayed for the girl's safety. Time passed, and enough sunlight paled the sky to outline her dirty fingernails.

Arrows no longer fell like before. Aliwyn released her stiff muscles and pushed to her hands and knees. Her eyes rounded on the back of a doomed soldier as he twitched on the ground with an arrow protruding from his neck.

A Vasfian woman stomped by and clubbed him on the head. His limbs gave a final jolt. The redheaded warrior left as swiftly as she had come with a shield around one arm and her club swinging for the next enemy.

Aliwyn's head spun. Behind the fleeing rebels and the Vasfians pursuing them, her mill with its wooden wheel glistened in the pale morning light. She scrambled to her feet and bolted for the front of her mill, weaving between the men strewn on the ground. Other soldiers shoved past her and shouted about crossing a rope bridge, but no one grabbed her again.

Aliwyn turned the corner to the grassy clearing. A donkey and cart had parked in the shadows beside the mill. Who had driven it there?

There wasn't time to wonder. Two Vasfians guarded the door of her mill, one holding a crossbow and the other a club. Aliwyn ignored them and dashed through the doorway of her home. She spun around, slammed the door shut, and barred it with the plank. The thump of the door echoed through the mill. Her fingers ran over the knotted wood of the door as her arms slid down to her sides. Behind her, the hearth flickered as though nothing had happened.

Something was wrong. If Aelfric had arrived, he would've rushed to see her and wrapped her in his arms. If he wasn't here, then who was? She didn't recognize the cart and donkey outside.

"Marie?" she whispered.

No answer. Aliwyn shook with cold sweat as she turned and searched the railing above. The wooden planks cast wavering shadows on the walls and thatched roof, and nothing else moved. She had better check upstairs. Maybe the girl had dashed into the woods after all.

She picked up her dagger by the door and sheathed it. Her panting seared her throat as she stepped around scattered and broken pottery. Agonized cries from outside drifted into her home, interspersed with the voices of Vafians shouting in their language. The redheads had never hurt her, but they were ruthless with those they defeated. They would strike down all the scamps who had infiltrated her mill and threatened her.

Maybe she should've been relieved, but images of the dead and dying rebels outside flooded Aliwyn's mind and made her shudder. She had obeyed Norman rule since they had invaded to avoid witnessing bloodshed again, but what had been the use?

Aliwyn wiped her eyes and looked around her mill one more time. No one appeared. She had lifted one foot for the staircase when creaking sounded from above.

Aliwyn looked up. The shadowy figure of a man stood at the top of the stairs. She shrieked and yanked out her dagger.



## CHAPTER 3

“THAT’S ALIWYN!” A GIRL’S voice rang out from upstairs.

The man at the top of the steps scowled down at her with his sword gripped in one hand. His haircut was unmistakably Norman—left to grow in the front and on top of his head but shaved behind his ears. A black cape draped over his gray tunic, and he appeared formidably tall even from this distance. The leather straps cross-gartering his stockings seemed thick and expensive. Marie ran to his side with her tousled hair bouncing, and he held out his arm to stop her from going downstairs.

“Marie, I told you to stay hidden.”

“Marie!” Aliwyn cried with a smile. She sheathed her dagger.

“That’s Aliwyn, and she saved me!” The child threw aside the man’s arm and darted past him.

She hurried down the stairs and into Aliwyn’s arms. Aliwyn hugged her with the tightness released from her chest. Marie was safe and sound, thank Heaven. She closed her eyes and cherished the child’s warmth.

“Thank you, Ali,” Marie sniffled into Aliwyn’s dress. “But I wasn’t brave.”

“You’re not hurt. That’s the most important.”

Aliwyn held onto the crying child and tried not to shake as memories of all she had experienced flashed in her mind. None of it felt real.

Upstairs, the man cleared his throat.

“I’m Matthew Marcotte.” He sounded grim and tired. “I understand Aelfric hid my cousin Marie here.”

Matthew Marcotte. Aliwyn released the child and looked up. Here was the squire Aelfric said he had to rescue. Matthew was two years older and

had been away training for knighthood when his family died. So much for being Aelfric's best friend; he didn't look friendly at all.

"Where's Aelfric?" she asked.

Matthew averted his eyes. "I'll tell you later. Your mother, Miriam, is she home?"

Aliwyn frowned. Miriam was her mentor, not her mother, but it wasn't time to discuss details. "Miriam passed away months ago, in the spring."

The young man looked up with his eyebrows raised. "Aelfric didn't...he never told me that."

"He only found out when he dropped off Marie four days ago. I guess he didn't tell you yet."

"No, he..." Matthew sighed. "It was chaos. We had no time to talk."

"Where is he?"

A grimace flashed across Matthew's face. "I'll tell you soon. But right now, I need your help with an injured Vafian. He's outside."

Aliwyn's throat tightened. No, she needed to know where Aelfric was *now*. Before she could respond, another person darted from the opened door of her storage room. Aliwyn nearly pulled out her dagger again, but the newcomer was a young woman about her age with her brown hair tied back into a ponytail. Her face and tunic were filthy, but her features were delicate and her eyes a bright blue.

"Please," she said, "my friend is in the cart, and he's hurt. I know we're barging in, but—"

"This door should be wide enough for the cart to enter." Matthew slid his sword back into its sheath and marched down the steps toward Aliwyn.

He strode past and removed the wooden bar from the door without glancing at her. Aliwyn frowned at his every movement. So rude. He hadn't even thanked her for protecting his cousin. Shafts of morning light broke into the room when Matthew opened the door, and a swirl of brisk air carried inside the moaning of wounded men. Aliwyn locked her arms around her torso.

Miriam had trained her to be a healer, but it made no sense for her to help the enemy.

“Perfect timing,” said a man’s voice. “I didn’t know if I should knock or kick my way in.”

Before the opened door stood a balding man with a plump face and sagging eyes. He stank of old ale and sweat, and Aliwyn wrinkled her nose.

Matthew didn’t flinch. “Norman, have the Vafians secured the area?”

Norman, the newcomer, wore a lopsided grin. “Absolutely. But you must come see this—we’ve got one of Ransley Boltan’s sons.”

Capturing a Boltan heir was certainly a victory, but Aliwyn bristled as she peered from behind Matthew’s broad shoulders. It was as though she didn’t exist. Where was Aelfric?

Matthew glanced behind at where Aliwyn, Marie, and the other woman stood. “Evelyn, you stay here with Marie.”

Norman’s grin revealed several missing teeth. “The Vafians nailed them rebels good. Nothing to worry about.”

Matthew stepped out, his right hand always around the hilt of his sword. As he left, Aliwyn was confronted with the sight of the bodies outside the mill, stretching into the distance one after another. They covered the ground where she let her chickens run free. She staggered backward. The rays of dawn brightened the sky, and redheaded Vafian warriors dragged the bodies away by their feet. Aliwyn couldn’t watch, and she spun to the side.

“I never got to introduce myself,” said a soft voice beside her. “My name is Evelyn. I’m Matthew’s cousin and Marie’s sister. Thanks for taking care of Marie.”

Aliwyn looked up at the speaker, Evelyn Marcotte. Aelfric had spoken highly of her before—too highly. Aliwyn always had a smoldering worry that Aelfric was in love with Evelyn, even if he was only her father’s servant during times of peace. Aliwyn locked gazes with the woman’s round eyes, framed by feathery dark lashes, and swallowed the sourness flooding her mouth. This lady Marcotte must’ve been stunning back home, bedecked in sweeping robes and shimmering headdresses.

Marie hugged her sister around the waist, and Aliwyn scowled at the fraying hem of her stained dress. Even with the little she had, Aliwyn had



shared her clean stockings with Marie, and Aliwyn's dirty feet remained bare.

"You're welcome," she muttered. "You...the cart—"

"Yes, it's right outside. My friend is resting on it." Evelyn nudged Marie's arms off her and stepped toward the exit.

"Where's Aelfric?"

Evelyn's expression fell with sorrow, and she brushed aside her dark bangs. "Oh...you must not have heard—"

"No, I've heard nothing." Aliwyn clenched her jaw. "Aelfric told me to hide your sister because Matthew needed help. Days passed without a word, and then Ransley Boltan's soldiers showed up and almost killed—"

Aliwyn let out a shuddering breath. Her instincts warned her she was about to hear terrible news.

Evelyn shuffled her feet. "Ransley Boltan's men captured Matthew because he was the last male descendant of my family. Aelfric and I went to rescue Matthew from the Boltans' stronghold, but..." She hesitated before whispering, "When Matthew comes back, can we sit down and talk together?"

Aliwyn's eyes stung with tears. She knew.

A man's cry of pain pierced through the background of the voices in the clearing, and Aliwyn tensed. Evelyn looked toward the source of the cry, but the corner of the watermill hid it from view.

"Leave me here! Go! Go!"

It sounded like the first soldier who had entered her home, Toby. He seemed desperate, and his words became overwhelmed by what sounded like cheering from a crowd. Why were these noises difficult to endure? Aliwyn scowled in the cry's direction, and Marie scampered toward the donkey cart.

Evelyn hurried after her sister. "Marie! Don't run off like that!"

"Why? Didn't Norman just say we won? And poor donkey. He was so scared he wouldn't walk in the mill."

The child reached out to pet the donkey's head. Evelyn's expression relaxed when a young man with carrot-red hair sat up in the cart.

“Oh, he’s awake now. May I introduce you?”

Aliwyn stared at the redhead rubbing his eyes in the cart. Why a Norman lady would call a Vafian man her friend, she couldn’t guess.

But before she could speak, another cry of pain rang out from around the corner of the mill. Aliwyn winced; now she was certain that it was Toby. Had he not protected her from Edward, she’d be dead, and hearing him scream made her hair stand on end. Many voices soon shouted from the same direction as one garbled roar. What was still happening around her home?

Aliwyn felt drawn toward the cries. She pointed at her door. “You can go inside, Evelyn. Take what you need for your friend.”

She didn’t wait for the other woman’s reaction. Aliwyn rushed toward the commotion, careful not to stomp on the arrowheads underfoot. She tensed at the blood gleaming over blades of grass. Never had so much violence erupted around her mill, and what were the Vafians doing to Toby?



THE VOICES BEHIND HER mill became distinct as she grew closer. Matthew was among the ones yelling. A crowd of Vafians, both men and women, stood against the pale sky like a wall of rabbit’s fur vests and checkered tunics. They had gathered before the entrance to the narrow plank bridge, which was so decrepit that no one crossed it anymore. Yet, it must’ve been the only escape route for the Boltans’ soldiers during the ambush.

Two Vafian men on the crowd’s edge turned as she approached, staring at her from underneath their bushy red eyebrows. Their crossbows were loaded and held across their chests. Aliwyn shifted between them and eyed their freckled faces with her heart tapping in her throat. Miriam had forced

her to learn Vasfian for trading purposes, and the only redhead Aliwyn bartered with once a month was their former chief. But she wasn't in the group.

"What's that idiot saying?"

Aliwyn jumped when a hand landed on her shoulder. It was a Vasfian man who had asked the question.

"What—what idiot?" she asked, facing the speaker.

"You speak their language?" Matthew appeared at the front of the group, pushing through the crowd to approach Aliwyn. "Then ask them why they stopped shooting!"

"Shooting what?"

"That! This—" Matthew turned around and flung his arm toward the bridge.

Aliwyn stepped past the other warriors to see what Matthew had gestured at. One of the four ropes suspending the rope bridge had been cut, leaving the structure twisted and hanging by the remaining three cords. She walked closer to the edge of the ravine and looked down.

A lone figure hung upside-down from the middle of the bridge, and Aliwyn stiffened. Somehow, Toby's foot had become lodged between the planks of the bridge, and he dangled over the ravine with his dark brown cape flapping behind his head.

When Toby's gaze met hers, she inhaled sharply. His helmet was gone, and the wind tousled his blond hair. He clenched one ungloved hand against his stomach. Blood flowed down his leg from the foot that was caught, soaking the cross-gartered stockings that covered his shins. The wide-eyed terror on his face, upside down, made her throat swell.

"That is Ransley Boltan's son." Matthew crossed his arms. "The Vasfian warriors were shooting at his men, but they've suddenly stopped."

It made sense now, why Toby had been screaming for his men to abandon him. He was the son of a heinous murderer, and Aliwyn's mouth hung open.

"Tell the Vasfians to shoot him!" Matthew shouted. He shuffled his feet and lowered his voice. "Please. Just ask."

Aliwyn teetered away from the ravine. She spoke to a Vastian man nearby and translated their response for Matthew.

"They say they've already shot his hand to make him drop his sword. And it's better that he...that he hangs from the bridge to die, because he'll suffer more—"

Before she could finish, Matthew stooped, grabbed two fist-sized rocks, and hurled one after another at Toby. Ransley Boltan's son tried to protect himself, but one stone struck his forearm while the other smashed into his forehead. He cried out, his head thrown back and his body swaying on the bridge. Aliwyn's chest clenched.

"That's a great idea!" Matthew's deep voice rang out in the open. "You deserve this! For killing my father, my uncle, my entire family!"

When Matthew bent down for another stone, Aliwyn lunged and grabbed his arms with both hands. Matthew glowered at her. His snarl was so menacing that she almost let go.

"Don't you understand?" he yelled. "Because of him, Aelfric is dead!"

Aliwyn's hands slipped off Matthew's arm. Hadn't she suspected all along that Aelfric was dead? But her last bastion of hope hadn't crumbled until now.

"Are you sure?" she whispered. Such a useless question.

"Yes." Matthew's frown faded. "We buried his body in a shallow grave. It was all that we could do."

Aliwyn couldn't breathe. She stared back without seeing Matthew. Just a shallow grave. The image of her sweetheart, with his black hair and dark eyes forever closed, surfaced in her mind. She wanted to ask how he had died and where he was buried, but no words came. Aliwyn's legs melted beneath her.

Matthew dropped the rock he was holding. As Aliwyn fell, he gripped her arms and guided her to the ground. His deep brown eyes gazed into hers. Her eyes blurred until she saw nothing. Shaking her head, she wanted to talk but only tasted the salty tears streaming down her face.

She never got to tell Aelfric that she loved him.

“I’m sorry, Aliwyn,” Matthew said. “He fought for us until the end. I owe my life to him.”

He released her but remained kneeling with his gaze on the rocks. Aliwyn sat in a daze. Matthew stood and departed without throwing another stone, and other feet came and went. Someone wrapped something warm around her. Hands tried to lift her, but she wouldn’t budge. Miriam had hired Aliwyn and Aelfric as apprentices when they were both thirteen. He used to play the recorder while she sang and slapped her knees to the rhythm. One winter, he had sent her flying downhill on a sled he’d nailed together. Aelfie had been her only friend since she arrived in Brocklesby and the best friend she could’ve asked for.

But he would never come back.



SHE FELL ASLEEP ON the ground. The Brocklesby chapel bells rang to mark mid-morning, but she curled into a tighter ball and slept again. Finally, someone grabbed her by the shoulders and hoisted her up to sit as if she were a sack of wheat.

“Why is it always me that has to fix things like this?” came a low, raspy voice. Stale ale crept up her nostrils, and Aliwyn’s eyes blinked open to crooked teeth. She gasped and flailed her arms.

“Ha, I know I’m scary!” It was Norman, the one who had come to the watermill’s door earlier. “But at least I got you up.”

Aliwyn scowled at his wrinkled face as he stood. Someone had covered her with a rabbit’s fur cape, and she wrapped it back around her shoulders.

“Look.” Norman tapped his foot. “I know it’s been goin’ bad for you, but you’re alive and well, so act like it.”

She looked around her. How long had she been lying close to the cliff’s edge? The Vasfians and even Matthew had retreated. The morning sky was

bright yellow and pink, and the peasant cabins across the bridge fell under the shadows of the looming manor house that resembled a castle. Toby still hung from the bridge over the ravine, motionless like a butchered animal against the colorful sky. Aliwyn averted her eyes and shuddered.

During the last revolt, the Normans had caught the wealthier rebels and ransomed them back to their households for an easy profit. Toby wore a suit of padded armor and had led an army with horses and carts; he had to be rich. The Norman army should arrive soon to assess the situation and capture Toby alive.

But Aelfric was still dead. The truth crushed her once more, but she kept her posture straight and wiped strands of hair from her cheeks. The Vasfians and Matthew and all those other strangers had to be close by, even if she couldn't see them. She wanted to mourn alone.

"Where did everyone go?" she asked.

Norman scratched his bald spot. "Looking for some live captives to question. See, Boltan's son dangling there refuses to talk, so we're trying to find some talkers."

"Talk about what?"

"Ehh...we found some strange things in his wagons. Seen nothing like 'em before, and we don't know what they are."

A shrill scream rang out from behind Aliwyn. She looked up in alarm—it sounded like Marie, but how could it be? Norman's expression became grave, and he walked away.

The screams came again, shorter and now mixed with whimpering. It was a child. Aliwyn couldn't turn her head around enough to see. She pressed her hands on the uneven ground, forcing her stiff legs to stand.

To her amazement, the same child's voice screamed, "Toby! Help me!"