

# Prologue

Browyn glanced down at the shadow cast by the fish-oil street lamps and bit back a curse. The wavering, elongated figure was more distinct than it should have been. She was getting careless, and one slip now would mean the death of her. The death of them all. She pressed herself against the damp stone wall of the last house, closed her eyes, took a few deep breaths to settle her nerves, and concentrated on her glamour. On not *being* there.

The shadow vanished.

Just in time. The rattle of lacquered iron armour preceded the low voices and heavy footfalls of two guards coming down the cobbled street.

*Krulu's own luck.*

It was well past curfew. They would have hauled her off to the old fort where—Krulu forbid—there was sometimes a Seer in residence. A Seer meant Karavos—and Karavos meant a fetter for the likes of her. She would rather cut her own throat than wear a fetter. Wasn't that why they were doing this? Freedom for all...

She shivered, pulled her nearly invisible grey cloak tighter, crossed the street, and slipped into the mist drifting off the lake.

The Segueway Bridge was quiet, the two guards having turned back to the flickering warmth of their night fire, and Browyn's indistinct figure quickly crossed the dark, slow-moving river before turning into the muddy posting-yard of the Vale Stop Inn.

Only when she had slipped through and closed the door of the inn behind her did she relax and let her glamour fade. She scanned the room, checking to see whether anyone had noticed her fading back into reality, becoming more real—more there—but there were few patrons, and these were bent over their cups and bowls of stew. Old Morris behind the bar would have taken note—he never missed a beat despite being constantly engrossed in drying mugs or polishing his counter—but he

already knew all their secrets. Old Morris and his bulbous nose for trouble had saved them more than once.

She ignored the innkeeper's muttered 'You're late', headed straight through the kitchen, and out into the small, walled, moon-washed courtyard behind the inn.

The raised well in the centre of the yard looked different from the rest of the building. The stones were darker and more weathered, and a strange mosaic pattern spiralled around the base. It looked much older than anything else in Vale Town.

Browyn lifted the wooden trapdoor, which covered the top of the well, hitched up her robe, and—with a quick prayer to Krulu—swung a long, shapely leg over the lip and onto the rusted iron ladder leading into the shadows below.

Old Morris claimed that the Cisterna was built long before the first Hoom settlers had driven the Elves from the shores of Lake Vance, trading their ponies for fishing skips and their tents for mouldy cabins. Before—if the innkeeper were to be believed—the Elves had crossed the Wester Sea to Mercia, and that diaspora happened millennia past. Browyn cared little for the history of the labyrinthine complex of tunnels and chambers criss-crossing beneath the town's foundations, only that they were perfect for nefarious cloak-and-dagger assemblies.

*Nefarious?* she thought, stepping carefully from the ladder onto the damp, flagstone floor, straightening her cloak and checking her dagger. *We will be remembered, perhaps not as heroes, but...* Well, why not? They were on the right side of history after all...

There was very little moonlight shining down the well, but she knew the way and didn't conjure an orb. She put her hand to the wall which curved overhead and hurried down into the gloom of the passage. First left, second right, one hundred paces, and then she could see the torch glow and hear the subdued murmur of the gathering.

They were waiting for her.

She stopped, pressed her back to the cold, brick wall, and closed her eyes to settle her nerves.

This uncertainty was new to her. She had presided over scores of such clandestine meetings, savouring the thrill of discovery, the excitement of risking everything for their cause, and certain that their cause was worth it. She was willing to die for what they were doing. This was different. This challenge came from within and was aimed at her directly—personally. The bitch from the Bleak Lands would strip away her robe, her ring, and steal her title. Trinkets and titles. She knew that they shouldn't matter, not in the face of what they were trying to achieve, but they did. They mattered to her. She had poured so much of her passion, of her dreams—lying awake and weaving fantasies until sleep took her—into these supposedly arbitrary things that without them... she might as well wear a fetter.

She was the High Priest of Memnon. She wore the red robe and the ruby ring. And she would be damned if she let some stunted creature from up north take what was hers.

She reached within herself and brushed the febrile ball of Aether buzzing in her breast. The concentrated power surged at her touch and static sparked over her skin and stung her lips. The magic was her secret, but she would reveal it if she had to. She would use it to keep what was hers—even if it meant killing.

She consciously relaxed her hand, which had clenched on the hilt of her dagger, and reached into her pocket for a little bag of shredded weed which she pressed under her lip next to her gum. The mild drug took effect almost immediately and, shrugging off her cloak to reveal the scarlet robe of her office, she stepped forward to take control of her church.

The interloper waited in the centre of the six Mystagogues standing in a semi-circle before the lectern. The woman's audacity, the absolute lack of decorum, was stunning, and once again Browyn had to forcibly calm herself, clenching her jaw and gripping the sides of the wooden stand with white-knuckled fists.

The weed pouch in her cheek wasn't helping much.

*She looks like a child,* the High Priest thought, her grey eyes narrowing on the

diminutive figure before her. But there was nothing child-like about the creature standing next to the newcomer. He was tall and long-limbed, like some giant stick insect draped in funerary linen. Black eyes, made darker by his powder-white skin, gazed up at her from a hairless head swaying atop his long, thin neck.

'You bring him before us uncovered?' Browyn asked, pointing at the man, the ruby ring on her finger glinting in the torchlight.

She had asked the woman, but the man answered with a soft, gravelly voice: 'Apologies, your Worship. We are newly come to your cell and unaware of your customs. Elsewhere, it is... different.'

'I have not given you leave to speak,' Browyn hissed. *My Cell?* How easily he reduced their church and everything that they were. Everything they had accomplished.

The man nodded and smiled, his blue tongue dabbing at thin blue lips before running over teeth that had been filed to sharp points. His small companion remained silent beneath the green cowl of her cloak.

'By Memnon, we stand before Krulu.' Browyn spread her hands and opened the assembly.

'Praise be to Krulu,' intoned the hooded faithful gathered in the shadows behind the Mystagogues. 'It is through Memnon that we shall be free.'

'Amen...' the High Priest was about to conclude, but the interloper stepped forward, interrupting her with a voice that was rich and resonant, incongruous with the petite figure. 'Krulu? Or Crelu?'

'Blasphemy!' hissed one of the Mystagogues, and an uneasy murmur rippled through the gathering.

'Is it blasphemous to question those who rename their god? Does ownership of a name grant ownership of the thing? Can one own a god? Aesop used to think so.'

'The name Krulu reflects the gentler aspect of...' Browyn began, before deciding that she'd had enough of this audacious upstart. 'What do you want, Mystagogue Gorm? Why have you come here?'

'Mystagogue?' The woman shrugged, then lowered her cowl to reveal features as child-like as her height suggested. Wild, flame-red hair haloed round, freckle-dusted cheeks, a button nose, and a red pout of a mouth. She looked like a doll, the caricature of a waif, but for that sonorous voice. And the eyes. The ancient, emerald eyes set into that porcelain visage, poisoned and petrified by the turning of endless seasons. 'You will address me as Your Worship, as befits a High Priest of Crelu.'

Browyn gaped in astonishment before managing to stammer, 'There is but one High Priest of Krulu.'

'Make of that what you will,' Mystagogue Gorm answered with a laugh.

The woman was clearly insane, and Browyn was about to order her ejected from the chamber when she saw the geas. Layers of bruise-coloured fog hung low over the floor like evening mist rising from a swamp, tendrils swirling around the feet and climbing the legs of the Mystagogues and the faithful, seeking ingress through nose and mouth. The High Priest recoiled, the Aether within her contracting in a powerful spasm.

The pale insect man looked right through her and smiled, his teeth bloody from where they had cut his tongue.

*Wilder!* Browyn's rising unease had grown into a panic which now threatened to spill over into blind terror. *The traitorous bitch brought a wizard!*

No matter, she too was brimming with a secret power. It was time to end this. Wilder on wilder, wizard against wizard, and his magic was concentrated on that corrupting geas. She looked at him with more than her eyes, and there, in the hollow of his breast, shone his connection to the Aether. A core of glowing power—so much brighter than hers! If he hadn't spread his influence across the room...

*End it now.* It was time to kill.

Her Word was whispered; her attack sudden and invisible. She connected to his core and poured all of herself into it—a surge of power to burst his heart and scramble his mind.

Nothing happened.

The purple geas thickened and swirled.

Browyn scrambled to find her connection to the Aether, to gather her power, but... nothing. It was as if she had been severed from creation. *Or drained of it.*

The stick man smiled again, his ragged teeth now dark with blood which stained his blue lips.

'...has grown lax, complacent,' Mystagogue Gorm continued addressing the church. *Her church.* 'Huddled in tunnels like frightened rabbits while the revolution spreads like wildfire above. Seeking change but being too frightened to change anything. Perhaps it is indeed time for a change. What say you, Acolyte Browyn?'

'High Priest... ' Browyn began, but her protest faded. There was something very wrong in the chamber. The gathering was silent, motionless, the three of them may as well have been alone.

'They seem to agree with me,' Mystagogue Gorm suggested, gesturing at the frozen faithful with a small, childlike hand.

'How?'

*You attack my First Servant,* the woman answered in her mind, those green snake-eyes becoming two blazing orbs, mesmerising her until she could not look away. *Hoping to, what? Burst his heart? Burn away his mind? All the while ignoring me. See me now.* She spread her arms, and within her belly pulsed a core of power—a throbbing purple and black aberration which turned Browyn's stomach and chilled her blood. This was not of the Aether; not the power of creation; not even Hoom, but something alien and terrible, and from it dripped the insidious geas which filled the room.

'What...'

'Reduced to a blithering idiot simply by opening her eyes and seeing what is,' the creature said with an ingenuous smile.

'You won't get away with this,' Browyn hissed. 'They will not follow you. This... this is the very thing we are fighting against.'

'A vote then? Is that not how it is done in this... this *democracy* you are spreading in the name of Crelu?'

*A vote under duress is meaningless,* Browyn tried to protest, but her mouth seemed suddenly full of cotton wool.

The Gorm creature turned to the gathering and declared: 'It is time for a change, and I, Gwyn Gorm, am the agent of that change. What we start here tonight, in these tunnels, will ignite across the Seghul Lands, from Hellville to the Western Desert, over the Aravon and into Persha beyond. I will spread the Church of Memnon across the Aerwold, even if it means the death of you all—which it probably will. All of you will be free.'

'We will be free,' the faithful intoned as one.

'Remarkable, isn't he?' Gwyn asked the naked woman strapped to the heavy wooden chair in the centre of the small circular chamber somewhere deep within the Cisterna beneath Vale Town. 'The way he can simply cut you off, seal you away from something you've been touching all of your life. It makes of him a very effective mage-killer.'

The former High Priest of the Church of Memnon struggled against the leather thongs binding her wrists and ankles to no avail. She cursed the demon—for surely something this malign must have crawled from deep within the Shade—but the rag in her mouth allowed only a stifled grunt. She desperately tried to touch the Aether, to gather her power, but that had been as effectively gagged as her voice. It was there, tantalisingly close, but out of reach.

The little fire-headed demon reached out and affectionately stroked the arm of the monstrous man standing beside her. 'It's why I kept him alive when I found him all those years ago. That, and the fact that we share certain... proclivities. Not so, Prolix?'

Prolix nodded and treated Browyn to a shark-toothed smile.

'Speaking of which...' Gwyn reached beneath her evergreen robe and drew a long, silver-bladed dagger which she held up like a crucifix before her. The gem in its onyx hilt glowed with sanguine light and something dark and oily moved within the

stone. 'Alon Gar, my old friend. I sometimes wonder which of us is wielding the other.

'Are you hungry, Prolix?'

The First Servant ran his tongue over the points of his teeth.

'Time to feed,' Gwyn said sweetly, stepping forward with her knife.

Browyn could do nothing but scream through her gag.

# The Wilder

Saera knew it was night outside because the glass orb in the wire cage on the ceiling had dimmed. It never went completely dark; it only softened enough for her to fall asleep on the thin, straw mattress in the corner. There wasn't much else in her cell: a three-legged wooden stool, a clay water jug, a waste bucket, and a greasy tin plate awaiting collection.

Dinner had been the usual tasteless stew of unidentified fowl and unrecognisable lumps of vegetables, eaten with her hands and mopped up with a hunk of dry bread. She savoured the bland food. It was warm and nutritious, and the horrors of her deprivation under the Seghul still haunted her. At least her current jailers wanted her hale and hearty—fattened up—but whether that was a good thing remained to be seen.

She used a little of her water to rinse her hands, wiped them dry on her soiled, grey cotton shift, and lay down on her rough woollen blanket to wait.

At first, the waiting had been the hardest part. Waiting for them to bring her two meals a day—oat porridge and stew, always the same; waiting for the old woman to change her waste bucket and refill her water; waiting for the prisoner in the cell beside hers to stop sobbing long enough for her to drift away and dream of something else, anything else. They never spoke to her, never looked at her or acknowledged her in any way. Even the unfortunate in the cell beside her would do nothing but sob if she tried to reach out.

She had tried to reach the Vault of Ahm—that dream-like library she had discovered whilst chained to the back of the Seghul death-wagon—but it was as though it had never existed at all. As if it had been nothing more than a dream she had slipped into to survive. That whole journey had become a fevered nightmare—the starvation, the beatings, the death of the old man she had tried to save—against which this bare cell felt almost like a haven.

The ceiling light dimmed. The sobbing in the cell next door ceased. Her belly was full of warm grey stew. But now Saera no longer waited for sleep. She lay back and watched the ceiling. There! Her figment had returned.

*Not a figment*, said the shadow, darkening with annoyance. *Vixl*.

'I created you,' Saera insisted, relieved that enough of her sanity remained for her to know she was hallucinating, yet unsettled by this new development. Her imaginary friend had started arguing with her. 'You are mine to name. Mine to dismiss.'

She closed her eyes and tried just that.

*Vixl*, repeated the shadow, sliding across the ceiling and down the wall. *Not yours. Hers...*

The amorphous, shadowy creation of her fevered mind had appeared during one of the interminable cycles of dim and less dim, as she was drifting in and out of shallow sleep. At first it was just a curiosity, an anomaly of the light that moved independently over the grey stone of her cell, something to watch in a world where nothing ever changed. Something almost playful. Then it became something she spoke to—if only to hear the sound of her own voice—and now it was a companion, answering back with whispers caressing her mind.

'If I had something to read, I wouldn't need you,' she said, folding her arms across her chest and feigning a cross glare.

*Vixl's shadow pulsed with excitement. Something to read?*

'I can read. Write too. No need to look so surprised. Ma taught me back in...'

Back in Wenn at the little oak table by the open window in their cosy kitchen—reading from the story book Much the Miller had given her mother, and practising letters on her board with stubs of chalk. Back before the tall, red-cloaked soldier had crossed the river and changed their lives forever.

'I can even...'

she began, but in a blink *Vixl* was gone.

'I didn't mean it!' she yelled in sudden panic, eliciting a squeal from the prisoner next door. *Vixl* wasn't much, but it was all the friend she had in this world of

dimming light. 'Come back!'

Vixl reappeared on the wall beside her, pulsing powerfully enough that its shadow seemed to lift off the bricks and take shape like an ink blot lifting from parchment, becoming an almost physical manifestation. Saera didn't notice. She was staring dumbstruck at the slender, cloth-covered book in her lap.

Something changed.

The orb on the ceiling flared bright, flooding her cell with harsh white light. Saera sat up, blinking stupidly, as the iron bolts of the heavy wooden door rasped back. She barely had time to slip her newly acquired book—her only and treasured possession—under the mattress before the door swung open and a man stepped in.

What he lacked in physical presence, he more than made up for in garb and accoutrements. A voluminous white robe, embroidered in gold thread with arcane-looking symbols, fell to his white suede boots. A wide belt of woven gold cord cinched his waist and from it hung a thick leather tome on a chain. His long, wavy hair and thick beard—once blonde but now streaked with grey—brushed his shoulders and chest. Pale blue eyes, not unkindly, studied her from behind round, wire-rimmed spectacles.

Faced with this gaudy apparition, Saera felt suddenly self-conscious. It had been a week since the old woman had last taken her to the little cubicle down the passage to wash herself, and she was filthy. Her dark hair was tangled and matted, her olive skin grey with grime, and her threadbare shift stained and stiff with grease, sweat, and Mara-knew what else. She was briefly amazed at what one could become accustomed to—until the room filled with stark brilliance and an immaculately coifed creature appeared, carrying a polished ebony cane and wrinkling his nose with disapproval.

The man spoke. His baritone voice seemed carefully tailored to his appearance, but she did not understand the language.

Saera shrugged.

He tried again. A different inflection. Same result.

And again, this time the words were staccato and clipped.

She shook her head.

She had heard his fourth variation before—it was the rolling brogue of her Seghul captors. She recognised the tongue but not the words and again shook her head.

‘Perhaps you are deaf,’ he said with a sigh, stroking his beard with a soft hand. ‘That will make things... difficult.’

‘Aelfic,’ she said, looking up at him, dark green eyes wide with surprise. ‘You are speaking Aelfic, sort of...’

‘Aelfic?’ It was his turn to shrug. ‘No, this is kitchen Tacit, my home tongue.’ He paused. ‘Where are you from, child?’

‘The village of Wenn. At least I was. Before the Nard burned it. They burned Territh too, they burned everything.’

‘I’ve never heard of the Nard. Is Wenn north of Bree? Somewhere in the Bleak Lands?’

‘No, it is... it was in Lewellyn.’

‘Territh... Lewellyn...’ the man muttered, a frown creasing his broad forehead, before he straightened and stammered with excitement. ‘By Crelu, girl, you are from the Maerwold! A Wild One! An honest-to-god wilder. How, by Koth’s cursed luck, did you end up here?’

Saera shrugged. ‘I don’t even know where here is.’

‘You are in Karavos, Mercia—the literal other side of the world.’

‘Can you send me home?’

‘No, child, such a feat is far beyond my abilities, and I wouldn’t even if I could.’

‘My name is Saera. I haven’t been a child for a very long time. Can you help me get out of this...’ she gestured at her tiny cell, ‘this prison?’

‘Again, no,’ he answered with a chuckle. ‘The Underhold is precisely where you belong. More so now that I know where you come from. We can’t have true wilders

wandering around unfettered. What would become of us?

'I am Blaine. Magician, third class, David Blaine to be precise, but you may call me sir, or Mage Blaine if you must.'

Saera's silence suggested she would rather not call him anything at all. If he wasn't here to help then she placed him in the same category as the old woman who changed her filth bucket. Someone to be tolerated because she had no choice.

He sighed once more and turned for the door. 'But we can make you much more comfortable, get you cleaned up and moved to a higher level. If you agree to wearing the fetter, that is.'

'And if I don't?'

He looked around her squalid cell and grimaced with distaste. 'Then here you will stay.'

'Until I die?'

Again he chuckled. 'Yes, but we aren't savages. We will keep you alive for a very long time.'

'It will not do, David.'

*She will not do, Chancellor, Mage Blaine thought, but dared not voice it. The force of Chancellor Alcyone's presence overwhelmed anyone unlucky enough to be trapped within her orbit—so much so that she became the main character of any interaction. He hated that about her. He also hated it when she called him 'David' in that patronising, overly familiar way. But most of all he hated that he was terrified of her. Filthy purus thinks she is better than the rest...*

She turned abruptly and a sudden panic chilled his old bones—could she be reading my mind? *Of course not, she has no magic... How is she using the scrying pool then? There must be a mage nearby, one I don't know about... What if?*

'It is filthy, David, and brown!' She stabbed at the scrying pool with one long, manicured finger. 'I'd be the laughing stock of the council. How can you have even considered such a thing?'

*Just a girl, even if a wilder. Not a thing.* He cleared his mind, resolving to be more prudent with his thoughts. 'We can clean it—her—up. And it's more of an olive colour. Clearly she has island blood...'

'Don't be stupid, David. Get rid of it.'

'Get rid of it? Surely you don't mean—'

'No, of course not. Sell it to Albecht. Leave it to rot for all I care. I'm bored with this. Do better.'

With a dismissive wave, Chancellor Deivon Alcyone turned and stalked from the chamber, her well-honed thigh muscles rippling beneath the tight elastic fabric of her skirt in a carefully orchestrated manner.

A display wasted on Mage Blaine, who had become fixated on the shimmering surface of the scrying pool. The water still showed the filthy girl lying on her stained mattress, but now an inexplicable anomaly had his jaw gaping with astonishment—she was reading a book!

'Where did you get it?'

She glared at him, her wasted muscles bunched and her lips pulled back from her gums in a snarl. She looked like one of the starving, feral street cats, ready to spring at him, and he almost stepped back through the door of her cell.

*Come now, steel yourself—she can't weigh more than ninety pounds,* he silently reprimanded himself. Still, a big cat if she decided to bite and spit...

'I won't take it away from you,' he said, lifting both hands in a conciliatory gesture, before pulling her three-legged stool closer, wiping it down with a handkerchief from his sleeve, and sitting gingerly. 'In fact I can help you hide it. And you will need my help. They...' He glanced nervously at the ceiling. 'They are watching.'

'Why?' she asked, her head cocked, though her muscles still trembled with tension. 'Earlier you said you weren't going to help me. You said I was where I belonged. What's changed?'

'Everything has changed,' he said quietly, staring at her as if intensity alone could divine her secrets. 'I was hoping to sell... no, that's not quite the right word... I was hoping to broker your transfer to Chancellor Alcyone. Wilders are worth a fortune...'

'You are no better than the Seghul slavers,' she hissed, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

'Slaves?' Mage Blaine sat bolt upright, his eyes round as his spectacles, and waved his hands in protest. 'No, no, no. There are no slaves in Persha, certainly not in Karavos!'

'What do you call keeping someone who doesn't want to be kept? What do you mean by selling, or "brokering" someone?'

'You are a wilder,' he answered with a shrug, as if this explained everything. 'You cannot be allowed to simply exist. That would erode the very foundations of civilised society. You wouldn't want that now, would you?'

'Mara-damn you and your civilised society.' It was her turn to shrug. 'I don't even know what a wilder is.'

'A non-Pershan magic user, of course. Surely you can see why we can't have you running rampant across Mercia. Can I see it?'

She looked at him quizzically and he explained, 'Your book—can I see it?'

'Will you help me hide it?'

When he nodded, she reached beneath her mattress and handed him the slim volume.

On the cover was a picture of a yellow-haired boy standing on a little moon surrounded by childlike drawings of stars and planets. Mage Blaine handled the book as if it were a priceless artefact and reverently turned the pages.

'Can you read this text?'

'Yes,' she nodded. 'Even though it is not Aelfic or Nard Glyph. Or anything I have ever seen before.'

'Then how?'

'I was touched by a god,' she explained, feeling silly and expecting his derision.

That night at the dolmen she and Gwyn had both been touched by the goddess Mara, but that terrifying event was so far removed from her current reality—which is the real reality?—that it may as well have been another life on another world.

‘Remarkable,’ was all the answer he gave before closing the book and pointing at the title. ‘What does this say?’

‘The Little Prince.’