

Chapter 1

Theft did not come naturally to Danatha, but she'd made a pretty good job of it all the same. The result of her wickedness sat before her now, but she wasn't sure she dared turn the first page. Not yet.

Her tower-top bedchamber had become a thieves' den, the black-covered book her hard won prize. She'd planned her heist for a week, stealing into her aunt's husband's study, and hiding it within the folds of her dress. It couldn't be so bad, could it? It was just a book. She'd always been told that reading was an important pursuit for a young lady.

She'd been so sure she would be caught. Her blood had throbbed in her ears the whole time, certain that the flush of her cheeks would give her away. But nobody had noticed. In fact, like most things she did, nobody seemed to have paid very much attention at all. So now she had it.

Stelia and Idana: The Forbidden.

Her mother encouraged her skills with languages, but this, she had been told in no uncertain terms, was not for her. A coarse romance, tawdry poetry for an uneducated audience. Hardly the classic literature, hardly holy verse suitable for a woman of her standing. Her tutors would not have approved. Her priestess would not have approved. Her old nurse, who still seemed to think that Danatha needed a nurse, would most definitely not have approved. She very much doubted that her aunt's husband was supposed to have a copy into the castle at all, but she'd found that the same rules seldom applied to men, even when the image on the cover showed two women's faces in profile, eyes locked together.

She'd heard the servants whispering about the book. Like nothing she'd ever dared to read before. Danatha's fingers shook as she reached for the cover. Opening it, even to read the first scandalous lines, seemed to be breaking too many rules. She didn't break rules. She wasn't that kind of girl.

Was she?

The door to the bedroom flew open and Aunt Darra appeared, breathing hard. Danatha's eyes flew wide with terror but there was no time to hide the treacherous script or declaim her innocence as the lady of Castle Athueine stormed across the plush carpet, a fury of pale skirts, seized her by the wrist and dragged her from the room.

"I don't know how it got there," Danatha exclaimed as she took steps three at a time. Not a believable claim, but the best she could come up with.

"Say nothing," Aunt Darra hissed. There was something on Aunt Darra's hand, the skin to skin contact sticky as she marched down the hall. Danatha was dragged along, down corridors where painted ancestors scowled down in oils and up from marble pedestals.

"I didn't mean to take it," Danatha said, but her aunt wasn't listening.

Somewhere in the castle, somebody screamed. Aunt Darra pushed Danatha back against the wall, pressed a hand over her mouth.

"Be silent. May the First Fallen see us with mercy, be silent and do as you're bid."

Danatha had lived in the Castle Athueine all of her life, but her aunt pushed her into a passage that she had never thought to enter. It led to the kitchens, where even at this late hour, cooks and maids were busy preparing food for the next day. They dropped to curtsy or bow as the lady of the castle swept past them, turning their eyes from Danatha, indecent in her nightgown. Oh, the shame of it! Then they stepped out of a servant's entrance and onto the back driveway.

The gravel was coarse beneath Danatha's bed-slippers, hard stones digging into her soles as her aunt marched her along the drive and all but hurled her through the open door of a waiting carriage. None of it made any sense, but everything was moving too fast for her to understand. From the castle, another scream. Was that the sound of swords meeting? If it was, it was only brief. Danatha gripped her arms, tremors threatening to unseat her.

A broad man piled in after them, dark eyes in a weathered face, grey beard hanging in a dozen braids beneath the blue tattoos under his eyes. Landin, House Athueine's druihn and one of Aunt Darra's paramours. He gave her a short nod as her aunt piled in beside her. Aunt Darra had barely closed the door before she banged twice on the roof, and the creaked and rattled away down the road. The driver lashed the horses

"It was just a poem," Danatha protested. Her aunt had always been fierce; she was the lady of the House of Athueine, businesswoman, warrior. Her enemies had named her Hardwind, and she'd taken the name for her own, embraced it. She'd never had cause to punish Danatha before. Not for years. She'd learned her place.

"If you speak again, I shall strike you," Aunt Darra said, her voice low and cold. Her eyes that said not to test her promise. Danatha tried to swallow the lump in her throat. Those screams she'd heard – the romance book probably wasn't to blame for this situation. But the castle was receding into the darkness behind them. Why would they abandon it? Their *home*.

She looked down at the dark, sticky smudges colouring her wrist. There was no light in the carriage, and little from the night outside. Danatha sniffed at the stuff. Her stomach curled back on herself and she stopped sniffing. The nausea filled her gut, choked off any further words.

Aunt Darra stayed silent. The tall knight said less, communicating with Aunt Darra in short looks and curt nods. He wore a sword, mail beneath his cloak. He had always made Danatha nervous, but then, most warriors did. Tonight, doubly so. They rolled through the open country, through dark woods and along merchant roads. Then on, into Eiros, the city, the sprawl of stone and timber and humanity that governed and blighted the nation. The uneven streets set the carriage to bouncing as it ploughed on at pace. Nothing was said.

The carriage had barely drawn to a stop before the countess threw open the door and dragged her niece into the night.

"Aunt Darra!" Danatha cried, stumbling as her slippers hit the uneven cobbles. Her patience had grown with her fear, but it was swept away now in the growing unease. "Please, tell me where we're going!"

"Hush, child," Darra said, her voice hard in the dark. "Say nothing. Do only what I tell you. Obey me." She took Danatha by the shoulders and turned her to look her directly in the eye. "Do you have your vanity?"

It was not a rude, nor philosophical question. A woman's vanity was the seven-inch stiletto blade that every woman of House Athueine wore on her left arm, even abed. Danatha nodded. It was a

rule she had always heeded, because she always heeded the rules. Except tonight, and now look what had happened.

“Keep it to hand,” Aunt Darra said. The hilt of her own protruded from the sleeve of her evening gown. A sleeve stained the same dark shade as Danatha’s wrist.

The street was narrow, barely wide enough for the finely adorned carriage to squeeze through. Crooked city-houses leered over the street, black timbers and whitewash hiding the rolling clouds. Cold wind drove along the alleyway, catching the hem of Danatha’s nightdress. She clutched it down, horrified at the indecency of standing barely clothed in the street. She’d never been to this part of Eiros before, streets that belonged to tinkers, pawnbrokers and moneylenders. There was rubbish in the gutters, and a stray dog watched silently from the street’s end.

Aunt Darra spoke quickly to the carriage driver, her voice hushed. He snapped the reins and pulled away into the night.

“Please, Aunt Darra,” Danatha pleaded, “this isn’t fair. Why did you drag me out of bed?”

“Events have overtaken us. A black wind blows from the east,” Aunt Darra said, and for the first time, Danatha realised that she was not the only one who was afraid. Her aunt was just hiding it better. “We have to move quickly. It’s best we don’t talk. Come. Don’t drag your feet.”

“It may be watching the roads,” Landin said. He was a serious man, his voice soft, cultured, but hard as pattern-forged steel.

“If it gets ahead of us, we’re done anyway,” Aunt Darra said. “We’ll cut through the low town.” She held her head high, chin steady, her pale gown splaying out to the knees over her fashionable, knee-high boots. Was that *blood* on her skirts? Aunt Darra rummaged in a mink-fur purse, took out a small jewellery box, dark wood wrapped in delicate silver wire, tucked it into a pocket and dropped the purse among the rubbish. Danatha stared at the purse. It was worth over a thousand marks, but her aunt disposed of it like it was made of paper. Cautious, frugal Aunt Darra, who never let even a strip of silk go to waste, tossed it like an old pie crust. She took Danatha by the hand and drew her along.

“I won’t go anywhere,” Danatha declared. She clenched her jaw, folded her arms. “Not until you tell me where we’re going and why.”

“You will be silent, child,” Aunt Darra said. “You don’t need to understand. You just need to follow. First Fallen save me, you’ll do as you’re told.”

Landin led the way. He held his scabbarded sword in his hands, glancing nervously left and right before they exited the alley. He prowled, catlike, and Danatha saw him in a way she never had before. Landin was witty, charming at parties, a playful smile never far from his lips, but now he stalked like a tiger. Fluid movements, clipped and without waste. He’d never seemed like a dangerous man, but now, Danatha knew differently as he flowed ahead of them in the moonlight. He was Druihn, and all Druihn were supposed to be dangerous, but this was new.

A light rhythm began to tap in her mind as it often did around Landin. A slow, steady beat she had never understood. She knew it was the result of him being Druihn, but her questions had never earned her an answer. She wished she’d asked more questions now.

Across gas-lit streets and through into alleyways, the trio squeezed between houses better suited to rats than people. Something vile and half-gone to liquid squelched beneath her slippers and glass

crunched as she trod on a broken bottle, discarded among the mulch. A shard of glass dug into her foot and Danatha squealed.

“Silence!” Aunt Darra hissed at her.

“But my foot . . .” Danatha said, hopping and wincing.

“It’s just a little blood and pain,” Aunt Darra said coldly. “You’re a daughter of the House of Athueine. You are above such things. Enough foolishness.”

Danatha bit down on her lip, but it was her aunt’s tone that shocked her more than the stabbing pain in her foot. Her aunt seldom spoke to her: she had only ever been interested in Danatha’s cousins, her own sons. At least, them and going to war against the godless foreigners.

Landin didn’t comment or even look around. He stuck his head out of the alley, scanned left and right, then beckoned them to follow. They hurried on, Danatha limping, trying not to cry. She was not used to pain. She was not used to this city, or used to scurrying through the night. It had just been a normal day. The estate had gone about its business normally, servants slaughtering cattle out in the yard, maids polishing the tiled floors, Aunt Darra greeting merchants and clerks from the city.

She recalled that scream in the castle. Someone had been hurt. Maybe, she thought, not wanting it to be true, someone had been killed.

A man moved along the street ahead of them, drawing a hand-cart. A night-worker hauling coal. They stayed in the shadows of the alley, making no sound. Landin beckoned them out when he was gone.

“We have to cross the bridge to reach the island,” the Ajanai said. He looked down at the sheathed sword in his hands, then to Aunt Darra. He shook his head. “If it’s waiting for us there, we’re done.”

“It’s a risk we have to take,” Aunt Darra said curtly. “You know what I’ll ask of you. If it’s there.”

“If what is?” Danatha asked, the fear crawling into her voice. No answer was forthcoming. Her foot hurt. She could feel the blood in her slipper, the slice in her skin stinging. Her slippers were ruined.

“If it’s there, I do not know what I can do,” Landin said. He drew his sword just enough to reveal an inch of steel, the blade clicking as it loosened in the scabbard. He shivered. “Let us pray it is not.” But there was no time for prayers.

The sprawling mess that was Eiros looked out to sea, tall-masted ships sheltering along the quays and docks. Lying out from the shore, there lay a small island. A holy place, the place where by legend, Belphius had first fallen to earth. The sea was calm within the bay, but a low-lying mist clutched the small island. A white stone bridge, as old as the legends that surrounded the isle shone in the starlight, glistening with salt and spray. It was only wide enough to walk single file.

“Come, child,” Aunt Darra said. Her voice was deeper than usual, heavy, unspoken knowledge lying behind her words. “It is to this place that we must go now.”

“What are we running from?” Danatha demanded, but the sea wind swept in and swallowed her words. A wave, larger and more furious than the others, crashed against the bridge to send droplets cresting through the air. Fear of what lay behind, fear of what lay ahead, Danatha was shaking as her aunt led her to the steps that led up onto the bridge. Wind whipped at her nightgown, the sea spat up at her, and her feet said no. No further. Not out onto a narrow, wet bridge in the middle of the

night. A fall into the night-cold ocean would be deadly. What was her aunt thinking? Was she even thinking at all?

"Come, child. It will be well," Aunt Darra said. She tried to raise a smile on her taut-skinned face, but it looked as strange there as it ever had. Danatha swallowed hard.

Had it been anyone other than Aunt Darra, head of the House, ordering her around, she would have refused to go another painful step. But it was Aunt Darra, Lady of House Athueine, and so she stepped.

The bridge spanned out before them across the black swells of the sea. Beyond it, the island sat dark and silent, rocky cliffs and storm-tossed trees. It was madness to venture there in the dead of night. Madness, and desperate.

"It's here," Landin said. He pointed to a gutter. Danatha recoiled as rats boiled from the old sewer, squealing, rolling over each other as they poured away down the streets. Landin hung his head, closed his eyes and put his hand to his sword's hilt. "Go," he said.

Aunt Darra snarled, then took Landin in her arms. She kissed him, passionately and without shame. Desperately, angrily, her fingers clawed in his hair. When she broke away from him there were tears on her cheeks. There were tears on his. The rats were all fled, but Danatha saw now that the streets glistened with silver frost where before there had been none. A slow and silent cold approached them. It caught the light of stars and turned them to points of spite against the cobbles.

"I'm so sorry," Aunt Darra said to Landin. She pressed a hand to his cheek. "You were my favourite. I could not have asked for greater duty, or love, from a knight."

He nodded sadly. His jaw was tense. He drew his sword, a great long length of mirror-bright steel worked with the holy sigils.

"I'll hold it here," he said. He shared one last look with Darra, tears in his eyes, then turned back to face the cold.

"Come, Danatha," Aunt Darra said. Danatha just stared at the frost as it crept across streets, whitening the thatching of the houses. "Move now, child. Do not look back," Aunt Darra barked and jerked her by the arm, up onto the bridge. Danatha cried out at the pain, limping and running at the same time, tears stinging her eyes. The waves around them fell lower, sluggish as the air grew colder.

Danatha placed her feet carefully, rapidly, but she defied her aunt. She looked back.

Landin had walked out onto the bridge a short way, filling it with his tall frame. He had his back to her, staring back towards the city. Along one of the streets, a dark figure walked, casually. Long hair, long robe, lithe and tall. Just the black silhouette of a man walking, softly, slowly, but Danatha saw the cracking of the frost beneath its feet, saw the weather veins turning away as it passed. Landin took a fighting stance, his great knightly sword held in both hands. Waiting for it.

The tapping in Danatha's mind intensified, steady but urgent. The night quivered with it.

"We have little time," Aunt Darra said, taking her by the arm. She ran on, pulling Danatha behind her. Danatha forgot the pain in her foot, sending it to some later place where it was of no concern. She concentrated on the bridge, on keeping her footing, on getting across the quarter mile of pale white stone alive. The wind tore at her, billowing skirts, icy sea spray pelted her bare legs, but Aunt Darra's grip was hard and firm.

Dry land. From behind, Danatha heard the unmistakable sound of blades clashing against one another. Once, twice, and then someone screamed.

The rhythm in her mind died away.

Aunt Darra screeched, a hard sound from the back of her throat, catlike and flushed with pain and rage. Tears fell freely now. She stalked on with bared teeth.

“Who was that?” Danatha said as they strode up a path between the trees. “Why haven’t we roused the guards? Why are we on this island?” Her voice was a terrified squeal in the night.

“Guards are of no use to us here. We can only run.” Aunt Darra said the words hard, without feeling. With so much feeling buried. “I cannot tell you what that thing is. I do not know. But my husband is dead. Your cousins are dead. Whatever that black shade is, it has been raised to destroy the House of Athueine.”

“No!” Danatha gasped. “How can it? What about our footmen?”

“Dead,” Aunt Darra said. “It came upon your cousins in the forest. It killed them, and every man with them. It is a creature of the forgotten world. Steel is no defence against it.”

“But why?”

They stepped from the path into the clearing at the island’s summit. A circle of stones had been erected, carved with sigils and runes around a wide, flat grey stone. Within it lay the imprint of a man’s body, winged and sprawled. They said that this was the place that Belphius had struck the earth when he fell from the sky. It was a holy place, the god-stone. Were they here for its protection? Because just then, Danatha could have done with some protection.

“I do not know,” Aunt Darra said. She went on past the stone and into the trees that covered the shallow cliff leading down to the island’s northern western face. There was nothing there. Only the sea, black and foaming as it crashed against a narrow spur of black rock leading out further into the waves, uneven stacks of dark stone covered with podded seaweed. “There are things in this world beyond my understanding, niece. They are dark, and they are terrible. But I will not lose today. Not everything.”

“No!” Danatha cried as Aunt Darra began dragging her out onto the rock. But Darra was stronger than she looked, a warrior’s muscle beneath her once fine, bloodstained, seaspray wet dress. Danatha’s slippers skittered, found no purchase on the smooth black rock. She lurched forward and hopped onto the next stone as a wave came in and swept over her feet, soaking her calves. Mist coiled and rose around her, serpent tentacles wrapping gently around her limbs, wraiths of wet sea air.

“Lady of Mists!” Aunt Darra cried as they reached the end of the rock. She flung her arms open wide. “Lady of Mists, hear me, here on your holy stone. Hear me and come! Take my offering.”

Aunt Darra released Danatha and drew her vanity. She dashed the blade against her palm and then held it out, palm down over the sea, feeding her blood to the water. Another wave, bolder, heavier, struck Danatha’s legs and nearly took her over with it. This was madness. There was no way forward from here, only back! But then the birds that roosted on the island all suddenly launched into a cacophonous flight.

"Lady of Mists! Hear me!" Aunt Darra screamed into the sea wind, cold and relentless as it bore down on them. Danatha drew her own knife. Small use it would be. She didn't want to die. She was too young. She was much too young.

"You've killed us both!" she said angrily, turning back to Aunt Darra. She wouldn't look at that black silhouette when it came for them. She wouldn't watch a demon come for her. But Aunt Darra just flexed her hand, droplets of her blood falling black in the night, staring out through the island mists.

A light appeared, out on the water.

Danatha sensed the sudden cold from behind her. Not just the ocean wind, not just the sea as it swirled over the rocks and around her ankles. A bone-deep, grave-born cold that rose in the absence of all things living. It rolled over the holy place behind her, stilling the air, slowing the sea. But the light drifted slowly towards them, a small boat appearing, a carved dragon at its prow cutting through the mist. A woman stood within.

The boat slowed, then bumped gently against the black rock

"Lady Darra of House Athueine," the woman in the boat said. Her voice was marble and distance. The lower part of her face, the part that Darra could see, seemed young, but strands of coarse grey hair fell from beneath her hood. "You have called, and I am here." The woman's head shifted beneath her hood. "There is great evil here. An Akil comes."

"Lady of the Mists, I thank you. I come to offer this girl to you, and to the Isle," Darra said, dropping to her knees on the black stone. The waves had slowed now, no longer rising up. Sluggish, thick with cold, they struggled to rise, to fall. The boat barely moved at all, the woman in it far too calm to have just sailed in from the sea.

"What payment have you brought for her passage?" the woman in the boat asked.

"You know the payment I bring," Darra snapped. "Now take her and let it be done, while I can still give it!"

"It is poorly done, but done it is," the woman in the boat said. "Danatha of House Athueine. Join me." She reached out her hand.

"Go on, child," Darra said. "Go, and remember us when the day of vengeance comes."

"I don't understand," Danatha said. She looked back. The sea behind her had begun to freeze, panes of ice forming on the waves. And there, descending the path, the figure of darkness. Casual, slowly walking towards them. Only now she saw the dark sword in its hand, a deeper black against the night.

"Get in the boat," Darra snapped. "That's an order. Do as you're told, for once in your life!"

With a cry, Danatha took the offered hand, and stepped into the boat. The fingers that touched hers were as cold and translucent as icicles, but the wind no longer touched her. The boat didn't so much as rock beneath her feet. She did not so much as stumble. She turned back to Aunt Darra, expecting her aunt to join her.

"The price must be paid before her passage to the Isle is secured," the boat woman said.

"I know," Darra said. And then she looked at Danatha one final time. "Do your duty. Avenge us."

The vanity dagger plunged inwards, into Darra's chest. Her mouth opened, her legs buckled and she went to her knees. The dark figure stepped up onto the rocks, frost spreading before it.

"No!" Danatha screamed. Blood ran across the stone. Her aunt met her eye, then slumped forward onto the rock. Her eyes stayed on the boat as it slowly moved away, into the mist, but she wasn't watching any more.

"The price is paid," the boat keeper said.

The dark thing stood on the promontory over Darra's body. It looked down, and then Danatha knew that it had turned its eyes upon her. Something hissed towards her, around her, a crackling in the air, but it prickled against her skin and then, was done. Gone.

The mist swallowed the boat, turning everything to white.