

Chapter One

There was nothing I could have done. Or least that's what I keep telling myself. For a second before I saw the cause of the cries, I turned towards them and tensed my body against the urge to flee. But there was nothing I could have done.

Not really.

"Raiders!" Tembien's throat looked like it was going to burst as he bellowed out across the crowds. Then he hurled himself head first into the fray like a desperate man from the top of a tower. I swear I didn't take even the smallest step back, but what with the others surging forward, it made it seem as if I did. From where they left me standing it didn't look like they had much of a chance against the swift, slashing blows making waves across the Great Hall; against the glinting weapons hacking a path through the revellers. Like the Agri-men down in the fields at harvest time.

And there I was watching, just watching. Because I've never seen a raiding party before. Only heard the sounds of one from tucked up in the dormitories and that was a while ago before they'd even told us much about the roles of men. Raiders shouldn't really be bothered with us Callows. Too busy with treasures and food. Or that's what the rules say. But I suppose rules go out the window when it's a real life raid.

At first I reckon some people thought it was an act. As if they were all just performing a history especially for our birthday celebrations, like on Pageant Day. Here come the warriors from beyond the campus gates, but look they are thwarted by the heroic Highfield citizens.

Except it wasn't a play.

Too loud to be a play.

Screams catapulted towards me in thick arcs. The smell of sourness and dark, damp earth right up my nose. Like the pigsty, with the same brutish grunting. I looked hard through the chaos to find Tem. He's always been twice my size, with shoulders as broad as a barn door. But I couldn't see him. Instead I saw strange faces with weird features. Wide mouths twisted into brutal grins. Eyes, clear and focused. And what else could I do? I ran. My legs gave in to it. There was nothing else I could have done.

They've always seemed to know where they're running, my legs, without me even having to tell them where to go. They've just got used to finding the best way of getting me away from where I don't want to be. Sometimes I try to convince them to stay, but mostly I just follow them wherever they go.

I couldn't even make them stay to help the girl.

The girl... I can't remember her name. Maybe she was already beyond helping. Lying broken on the floor, her hair spread around her like night, her deep eyes darkening.

Enna, that's her name.

Blood pooled into the folds of her dress. The others in matching gowns crowded round. I keep thinking one of them might have been my bride. I ran past Callows and Primaries crumpled side-by-side, equalled by death. I should probably be dead too, but I ran.

My footsteps echoed out of time with the desperate clanging of the alarm bell high above in the bell tower. Behind me the din of the attack dissolved into the darkness. I hauled open the heavy wooden door at the end of the passageway and had to lean all my weight against it to push it closed. Doors and windows stretched along opposite sides of the corridor in both directions. Glass cabinets, carved wooden chairs with brightly decorated seats and heavily framed portraits of men who weren't the Minister lined the walls in between. I've never seen a picture of any other men before. I've never heard of the glories of any other men.

The windows filled the space between the floor and the high, high ceiling and they were draped on either side by huge swathes of thick dark material that seemed to absorb the light from all the wall lamps, more wall lamps than we had in the whole of the dormitory. I peered out into the gloom of the cloudy night-time, straining to find a familiar landmark beyond the reflection of my own pale face. But there were only flames and moving shadows. Shadows moving so fast and so strangely, that I was glad they were only shadows.

I stumbled from door to door, hovering near each handle before doubting my choice and moving on to the next one. How was I meant to know which way to go? I only recognised the door I had just come out of when I heard their booming steps come crashing towards me.

And what did I do? I gave thanks to the Minister that I didn't have to run any more. A feeling of calm flooded through my veins. If there is one thing I'm good at it's hiding, so I chose my place and tried not to breathe.

The door smashed open.

"We've got something here," one of them shouted.

I imagined myself tiny and invisible.

Nothing they would be interested in.

Nothing at all.

The soft woollen covering on the floor silenced their steps as they poured into the corridor.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" another broader voice sounded.

I held the air in my lungs.

"Load it all up," his strange foreign drawl as thick as the wooden sides of my trunk.