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Opening extract from

Clariel

Written by

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Map of Belisaere by Mike Schley

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This book is set approximately six hundred years before the birth of Sabriel.

Five Great Charters knit the land

Together linked, hand in hand

One in the people who wear the crown

Two in the folk who keep the Dead down

Three and Five became stone and mortar

Four sees all in frozen water.

Prologue

Old Marral the fisherman lived in one of the oddest parts of Belisaere, the ancient capital of the Old Kingdom. A proud city with high walls to defend against living foes, and rushing aqueducts to keep out the Dead, one tiny corner of the great metropolis lay outside the protection of both wall and water.

Known to all simply as the Islet, it was a rocky island just beyond the city's southeast sea tower. Joined to the mainland by a rough stone causeway save at the highest tides, the island was inhabited by the poorest of the poor, the fisher-folk who had lost their boats, or drank too much, or had suffered some calamity that kept them from the city's more prosperous fishing harbour further to the north.

No one knew what had caused Old Marral to come to the Islet. He had been there as long as anyone could remember, living in a shack made of driftwood and torn sailcloth, distinguished from the dozen or so other hovels on the Islet only by its doorway, in which a heavy curtain made of hundreds of shark teeth knotted onto a discarded fishing net served as a door.

Old Marral made his living, such as it was, as a beachcomber. He walked around the Islet every morning and, if the tide was out, also went out along the rocks that faced the eastern seawall of the city proper. This could be very dangerous, for the tides in the Sea of Saere came in fast and high. In the old days, when the city walls were kept in constant repair, Marral would have drowned many times. Now, with much of the smooth outer face of the wall eroded, there were hand- and footholds enough to climb up out of the rushing waters, even carrying a small sack of whatever flotsam the sea had carried in on its blue-green back.

One particular morning, the sack held a real treasure.

Marral had thought it was a fisherman's glass float at first, lost from a net. The morning sun flashed off something bobbing in the water, sending back a greenish glint. But when a wave brought it close enough to snatch, he found it was a squarish bottle of thick green glass, not a float. It was empty, but neither the bottle nor the contents it once might have held were of interest to Marral. What caught his eye was the stopper. Though tarnished with age and immersion, he knew it for silver, and even better, the stopper was secured to the neck with bright wires still yellow and warm, gold resisting all tarnish.

Marral almost cackled as he saw it, but stopped himself. The cackling was an act for the city folk, the few who thought he was some kind of small-time Free Magic sorcerer who could offer them an easier, and less equitable, path to whatever they wanted than the rigours of Charter Magic or

non-magical hard work. The shark-tooth curtain was part of this act, but it was only an act, which delivered a few silver deniers every now and then, from those foolish enough to think a Free Magic sorcerer could set up so close to Belisaere, even if outside the city's walls and wards.

Hugging his find close, Marral retraced his steps along the wet rocks below the seawall, climbing up and around the deeper pools where the sea swirled dangerously, quick to whisk away and suck under anyone who fell in.

Back in his hut, he thought about what to do with his find, as he cleaned the silver with spirits of hartshorn and turpentine. There were a number of junk merchants on Winter Street who Marral dealt with regularly, but the silver stopper was too good for them, he thought. They'd never give him a fair price, not for something so finely worked. There were delicate engravings in the metal, tiny symbols like the ones he'd seen in a book once, the one from the dead sailor's pocket. Marral had got a good price for the book, despite it being so heavily water-stained and encrusted with salt.

After a few seconds peering at the symbols on the silver, Marral looked away. They unnerved him, somehow, almost like they were moving. Twitching about. It was the cleaning fluid, no doubt. Fumes.

Marral did not have a baptismal Charter mark, and thus had no connection to the Charter. He could not see the actual Charter marks twisting and moving around the engravings. He could not feel the binding spell that kept the bottle closed, and had done so for almost nine hundred years. Nor could

he sense the entity trapped inside the bottle, though he did wonder a little why the glass continued to feel so cold, long after it had come out of the sea.

After he had been cleaning it for some time Marral thought perhaps it would be better to simply remove the stopper, and take it in to a goldsmith in the city. There was no need to take the whole bottle. After all, he'd seen dozens of solid square bottles like this one, and none had been worth more than a copper squid.

It felt like his own idea.

Very carefully, he prised off the first gold wire. His hands hurt as he unwound the gold, burning pains shooting through his fingers. It was the ague of age, he knew, though he'd rarely had it so bad. Marral thought of the goose grease which sometimes helped, but he had none of it, and anyway the pains lessened as the wire came off.

A stabbing pain struck his chest as he pulled the stopper out of the bottle. But he had had such pains before, and simply coughed, knowing it would pass in a moment. And it did, just as the stopper came out with a loud pop, as if the bottle was not empty at all, but contained the finest of the light sparkling wines from Orestery.

Marral held the heavy stopper in his hand, mentally calculating its worth as a lump of silver. It would pay for a new pot of goose grease, a keg of the dark ale he favoured and at least several chickens, a welcome change from a diet of fish and gathered crustaceans.

He was thinking of the chickens when he noticed there was

someone else in the hut, though he hadn't heard the shark-tooth curtain rattle, or even a single footstep on the rocky floor.

Marral's hand instinctively darted for the gutting knife at his belt, but faltered even as his fingers gripped the worn bone hilt.

The stranger who had appeared so silently, and now sat opposite on a wooden crate, looked strangely familiar, but it was a familiarity only slowly remembered from long ago.

'Greten? But you . . . you drowned . . . nigh on thirty year ago . . .'

The young woman smiled, a brilliant smile, her teeth white and bright even in the shadowed interior of the hovel. Marral couldn't help but smile back, and stretch out his arms to hug his long-lost favourite sister, even as some part of his mind protested that even if she had somehow escaped the sea, Greten couldn't possibly look exactly the same as she had three decades gone.

Tears flowed down Marral's cheeks as they embraced, cutting clear trails through the salt caked on his skin, trickling down to the corners of his mouth. He laughed in delight, at all the goodness in the world, which had brought him not only a valuable silver stopper but also his little sister back from the sea.

The laughter ceased as Marral's heart skipped a beat and then just . . . stopped.

But he had only a moment of fear and puzzlement, as Greten somehow continued to move deeper into his embrace, disappearing into his flesh.

The old man's eyes closed, and he slumped on his stool, and would have fallen, save that something moved inside him and kept him upright. Then his heart stuttered into action again, and began to beat more strongly. Colour flooded into Marral's skin, and his eyes cleared. The white flecks in his hair and the stubble on his chin retreated, giving way to a deep brown not seen for many a year.

'I feel . . .' muttered Marral. He stopped, his voice sounding odd to his own ears. It was stronger, and he could hear more clearly.

'I feel young!'

'Somewhat,' muttered a voice inside his head. Greten's voice. 'I cannot do too much, for we must be careful. But I need you to be strong.'

Marral laughed, a deep, bold laugh.

'Dear Greten!' he exclaimed. 'I will be strong! Tell me what you need.'

'First,' whispered Greten, in a voice he alone could hear, 'I need to know things. Who rules the Kingdom? How many years have passed since the second Dyran was on the throne? Do the Abhorsens still scour the land against the Dead and . . . others?'

chapter one

welcome to the city

The house was one of the best in Belisaere, high on the eastern slope of Beshill. It boasted five floors, each with a broad balcony facing east, and on top there was a pleasant roof garden which delivered a view over the lesser houses on the slope below, and past them across the red roofs of the buildings that clustered closely on the valley floor on either side of the Winter Road. Beyond the houses was the seven-tiered Great Eastern Aqueduct and its lesser companion, the city wall. The eastern wall had its feet almost in the water; beyond it lay the glittering expanse of the Sea of Saere, now dotted with those slower, straggling fishing boats that were coming late to Fish Harbour, hours after the rest of the fleet had returned to unload their catch with the dawn.

Clariel stood at the intricately carved marble railing on the edge of the roof garden, with the sun on her face and the cool sea breeze ruffling her shorn-at-the-neck jet-black hair, and wondered why she couldn't like the view, the house, or, indeed, the whole city of Belisaere.

She was seventeen years old, two months shy of being eighteen, and up until their arrival in the city three days before had lived her entire life in the much smaller town of Estwael in the far northwest of the Old Kingdom and, more importantly to her in recent years, in and about the Great Forest that surrounded Estwael.

But Estwael and the Great Forest had been left behind, despite Clariel's entreaties to her parents. She'd asked to remain, to become a Borderer, one of the wardens who patrolled the forests and woods of the Kingdom. But her parents refused, and anyway the Borderers did not recruit youths, as Sergeant Penreth in Estwael had told Clariel numerous times, though always with a matter-of-fact kindness, for they were long acquaintances, if not friends. Nor would her parents accept any of her various other reasons for being allowed to stay behind.

Typically, Clariel's mother, Jaciel, had simply ignored her daughter's request, refusing to even discuss the matter. Jaciel's mind was rarely focused on her family. A goldsmith of rare talent, all her attention was typically on whatever beautiful gold or silver object she was currently making, or on the one that was taking shape in her head.

Harven, Clariel's father and manager of all practical matters in their family life, had patiently explained to his daughter that besides being too young to join the Borderers it was very likely that in a year she would not want to anyway. He had then added insult to injury by telling Clariel the move to Belisaere was as much for her benefit as it was for

her mother's, who had been accorded the honour of being invited to join the High Guild of Goldsmiths in the capital.

There would be many more opportunities for her in Belisaere, Clariel had been told repeatedly. She could be apprenticed herself, straight into a High Guild or one of the Great Companies. There might be a business the family could buy for her. Or she might make an advantageous marriage.

But none of these 'opportunities' interested Clariel, and she knew they never would have left Estwael just for her benefit. Any advantage she might receive would be entirely incidental to her mother's desire for a much larger workshop, a greater variety of better metals, gems and other materials to work with, and an increased labour force, doubtlessly including at least half a dozen more pimply apprentices who would try to look down the front of Clariel's dress at dinner.

A meaningful cough behind her made Clariel turn around. Her father smiled at her, the weak smile that she knew was a harbinger of bad news. It had made a frequent appearance in the last few months, the smile. When people first met Harven they would think him strong, until his mouth turned up. He had a weak, giving-in smile. He was a goldsmith too, but was not particularly gifted in the actual craft. He was much better at managing the business of his wife's work.

'Have you come to tell me that by some stroke of good fortune I am to be allowed to go home?' asked Clariel.

'This is our home now,' said Harven.

'It doesn't feel like it,' said Clariel. She looked over the railing again, across all the white stone buildings with their

red-tiled roofs, and then back again at the ornamental shrubs in the terracotta boxes that made up their own roof garden, shrubs with pale bark and small, weak-looking yellow leaves. 'There is nothing green here. I haven't seen a single proper tree. Everything is ordered and tamed and put between walls. And there are too many people.'

'There are lots of big trees in the gardens on Palace Hill,' said Harven. 'We just can't see them from here.'

Clariel nodded glumly. A few trees too distant to be seen, across miles and miles of houses and workshops and other buildings, and thousands and thousands of people, rather proved her point, she thought.

'Did you come to tell me something?' she asked, knowing that he had, and she wasn't going to like whatever it was. His smile gave that away.

'Ah, your mother had a meeting with Guildmaster Kilp yestereve, and he made her aware of an opportunity for you that she . . . we desire you to take up.'

'An opportunity?' asked Clariel, her heart sinking. 'For me?'

'Yes, an opportunity,' continued her father, raising his hands and lifting his shoulders to emphasise what a good opportunity he was about to reveal. 'The Goldsmiths, the Merchant Venturers, the Spicers, the Northwestern Trading Company . . . all the High Guilds and most of the Great Companies, they send their children to the Belisaere Select Academy –'

'A school?' interrupted Clariel. 'I've been to school! And I'm not a child!'

Clariel had indeed attended school in Estwael, from the age of eight to fourteen, and had been taught how to calculate using an abacus; keep accounts; write formal letters; supervise servants; ride in the great hunt with hounds and hawks; fight with dagger, sword and bow; and play the psalter, zittern and reed pipe.

She had also been baptised with the forehead Charter mark shortly after her birth and taught the rudiments of Charter Magic, that highly organised and difficult sorcery that drew upon the endless array of symbols that collectively made up the magical Charter that described, contained and connected all things upon, below, above, within and beyond the world.

Indeed, it would have been very surprising if she had not been taught Charter Magic, given she was a granddaughter of the Abhorsen. The Abhorsen, chief of the family of the same name, both an office and a bloodline, descended from the remnants of the ancient powers who had made the Charter, codifying and ordering the Free Magic that had once been such a threat to all living things in its arbitrary and selfish nature.

The Abhorsens, like their cousins in the royal family and also the glacier-dwelling, future-gazing Clayr, were as deeply a part of the foundations and beginnings of the Charter as the more physical underpinnings: the Great Charter Stones beneath the royal Palace in Belisaere; the Wall that defined the borders of the Old Kingdom to the south; and the Great Rift to the north.

In addition to the dame school in the town, Clariel had

attended another, more informal educational institution, largely without her parents' knowledge. Since she'd turned twelve Clariel visited her aunt Lemmin whenever she had a day free. Lemmin was a herbalist who lived on the fringe of the Forest, in a comfortable house surrounded by her enormous, high-walled garden. Her parents assumed that Clariel stayed within those walls. But her visits to her relative rarely encompassed more than a hug and a greeting, for with her aunt's good-natured connivance, Clariel would go on out through the Forest door, out to follow the Borderers into the deeper woods, or to join the hunters from the lodge. From them all she had learned the habits of animals, the nature of trees, and how to track, and hunt, and snare, to forage, to gut and skin, and make and mend, and live in the wild.

The wild . . . that was where she should be, Clariel thought. Not imprisoned here behind a great maze of walls, roped in by the vast net of streets, caught up in the thrashings of the multitudes of people likewise trapped –

'It's not like your old school,' her father said, interrupting Clariel's thoughts. 'It is a new thing, that they call a polishing . . . no, I mean finishing . . . a finishing school. And it's not for children as such . . . it's for the young men and women of the senior Guildmembers. You'll meet the best people in the city and learn how to mix with them.'

'I don't want to meet the "best people" in the city!' protested Clariel. 'I don't particularly want to meet anyone. I'm quite happy by myself. Or at least, I was, back home. Besides, who is going to help you?'

Clariel had assisted her father for several days each week for a long time, working on all the aspects of being a goldsmith that Jaciel ignored, which included money-changing, some minor loans and financial dealings, and the administration of the workshop, particularly the detailed accounts of the raw materials bought, how they were used, what they were made into and how much profit they returned when sold. She had liked doing this, mostly because she was left alone, and it had been quiet and peaceful in Harven's old study, a high tower room with tall windows that gave a wonderful view of the forested hills that surrounded Estwael. It also only took her a dozen hours a week, leaving her plenty of time to wander in the green world beyond the town.

'The Guild is sending me a senior apprentice,' said Harven. 'One who is suited for the . . . less . . . ah . . . someone with the . . .'

'With an eye for numbers and good penmanship?' suggested Clariel. She knew that her father felt diminished by his lack of talent in the actual craft of goldsmithing, though he tried to hide it. He had not made anything himself for years, probably because he could not come even close to his wife's genius, though he always lamented how the business took up all of his time, leaving nothing for the craft.

'Yes,' said Harven. 'Though I expect I will still need your help, Clarrie, only not as much.'

'Or at all, from the sound of it,' said Clariel. 'How much time do I have to spend at this school?'

'Three days a week, until the Autumn Festival,' said Harven. 'And it's only mornings, from the ninth hour until noon.'

'I suppose I can survive that,' said Clariel. It was already several weeks past midsummer, though the days were still long and the nights warm. 'But what happens after the Autumn Festival? Can I go home then?'

Harven looked down at the sharp-pointed, gilded toes of his red leather shoes, fine footwear for the consort of the city's newest and probably most talented High Goldsmith. Along with the smile, looking at his shoes was a well-known telltale. He had a habit of shoe-gazing when he was about to lie to his daughter, or wanted to avoid directly answering a question.

'Let us see what paths appear,' he mumbled.

Clariel looked away from him, up at a lone silver gull flying towards Fish Harbour, going to join the flocks that endlessly circled and bickered there, mirroring the people below.

She knew what her father wasn't saying. Her parents were hoping she would find someone who wanted to marry her, or more likely, wanted to marry into the family of Jaciel High Goldsmith. An apprentice from a Guild family, or one of these 'best people' from the school. This would solve the problem of a daughter who didn't want to be a goldsmith herself, or take up any of the other crafts or businesses deemed suitable.

But Clariel didn't want to marry anyone. She had once or twice – no more – wondered if she was naturally a singleton, like the russet martens who only came together for the

briefest mating season and then went their own way. Or her own aunt Lemmin, for that matter, who chose to live entirely alone, though happily for Clariel could stand visitors provided they amused themselves.

They had talked about solitude and self-sufficiency once, Lemmin and her niece, soon after Clariel had first chosen to lie with a young man and had found herself quite separate from the experience, and not caring one way or another about repeating the act itself or the emotional dance that went with it.

'Perhaps I don't like men,' Clariel had said to her aunt, who was pulling garlic bulbs and delighting in her crop. 'Though I can't say I have those feelings for women, either.'

'You're young,' Lemmin had replied, sniffing a particularly grand clump of garlic. 'It's probably too early to tell, one way or another. The most important thing is to be true to yourself, however you feel, and not try to feel or behave differently because you think you should, or someone has told you how you must feel. But do think about it. Unexamined feelings lead to all kinds of trouble.'

Clariel examined her feelings once again, and found them unchanged. What she desperately wanted to do was get out of the city and, since the Borderers wouldn't let her join them, purchase a hunting lodge or forester's hut outside Estwael, to go hunting and fishing and just *live* in the quiet, cool, shaded world of the Forest valleys and the heather-clad hills that she loved. But that would require her parents' permission, and money, and she had neither of these things.

At least not until she worked out how to get them . . .

'There is one other matter,' said Harven cautiously. He was gazing over the railing now himself, which was a slight improvement from staring at his shoes, though he still wouldn't look her in the eye. 'Well, a few other matters.'

Clariel lost sight of the seagull, who had joined the flock and been absorbed by it, all individuality gone in an instant.

'Yes?'

'This school . . . uh, the Academy . . . it doesn't teach Charter Magic.'

'And this means?' asked Clariel, encouraging the bad news out. Her father's smile was spreading across his face again, so obviously there was more unpleasantness to come.

'Apparently it's not the fashion these days, or something,' muttered Harven. 'The best people don't practise Charter Magic, they hire people to do it for them, if absolutely necessary.'

'These "best people" sound rather lazy and stupid,' observed Clariel. 'Do they get awfully fat from not doing *anything* for themselves?'

She herself was slim and, up until relatively recently, could easily pass for a boy. She still could, with a bit of preparation and the right clothes. It was quite useful, and had made it easier to follow the truffle-hunting pigs, tickle trout in the Wael River, hunt the small puzzle deer, or do any of the things that she liked but weren't proper for a well-brought-up child of the merchant elite. She thought this potential

for deception might come in handy in Belisaere as well. Particularly for leaving the city.

'No, don't be silly,' said Harven. 'In any case, your mother wants you to further your Charter Magic studies –'

'Why?' asked Clariel. 'She never wanted me to before. Is it something to do with Grandfather?'

Her mother was a Charter Mage, and certainly used her magic in her goldsmithing, but she made no display of it outside her workshop. This was presumably because she was estranged from her family, the Abhorsens, and the Abhorsens were very much a living embodiment of some aspects of the Charter and tended to be powerful Charter Mages. In fact, Jaciel's father was the current Abhorsen, but Clariel had never met him, because of a never-spoken-about rift that had occurred when Jaciel was young.

'Possibly, possibly,' muttered Harven, which suggested to his knowing daughter that it probably *didn't* have anything to do with the Abhorsens. But he seized upon it as a possible explanation to her, adding, 'The Abhorsen or the Abhorsen-in-Waiting do come to Belisaere upon occasion, there are ceremonies and so on, so we might well have to meet either your grandfather or your aunt –'

'My aunt is the Abhorsen-in-Waiting?' asked Clariel. 'I didn't even know mother *had* a sister!'

Her parents never talked about Jaciel's family, so this was all interesting information. She hardly knew anything about the Abhorsens really, apart from the childhood rhyme everyone learned about the Charter:

Five Great Charters knit the land

Together linked, hand in hand

One in the people who wear the crown

Two in the folk who keep the Dead down

Three and Five became stone and mortar

Four sees all in frozen water.

The Abhorsens were the 'the folk who keep the Dead down', which as far as Clariel knew meant they hunted down necromancers, and banished Dead spirits that had somehow returned from Death to Life. The Abhorsens could walk in Death themselves and like necromancers used Free Magic bells to command and compel the Dead, though the Abhorsens' bells were somehow not Free Magic as such but bound to the Charter.

Not that the Abhorsens did much keeping the Dead down in the present era, as far as Clariel knew. She'd never heard of the Dead causing any trouble in her lifetime. Nor for that matter did the Clayr, the fourth of the Great Charter bloodlines, seem to see very much into the future. If they did, they kept it to themselves, just as they kept themselves remote in their glacier-sheltered fortress far to the north. Even the King, head of those 'who wear the crown' didn't do much ruling

any more, though Clariel had never really been interested in who ultimately was in charge of the various institutions that effectively managed the Kingdom.

Abhorsens, Clayr, the King: they all seemed to be relics of a bygone past, just as the 'stone and mortar' of the rhyme meant very little in the present day. This referred to the Wall in the south, to Clariel merely a curious landmark she'd heard about but never seen; and to the Great Charter Stones she knew only as they were depicted in a mummers' play: big grey man-size puppets painted with gold representations of Charter marks. In Estwael they had become part of a comic turn in the Midsummer Festival, tall rocks that crashed into each other, fell over, got up again, and then repeated the whole process numerous times to gales of laughter.

'Of course you knew about your mother's sister,' said Harven, as if they talked about Jaciel's family all the time, instead of never. 'Anyway, we may be seeing her or your grandfather, and then there's the King, who is your mother's second cousin after all, and they all are . . . well . . . you know, very big on Charter Magic.'

'I thought you said the "best people" don't do Charter Magic any more because it's too much like hard work or they'll get their fingers scorched black or something. Are the King and the Abhorsens not the best people?'

'Don't be silly,' said Harven. 'They're more . . . more kind of separate, particularly these days. Out of the way. Modern times, you know, and different ways and means, things change . . .'

'What *are* you talking about, Father?' asked Clariel.

'You are to have lessons in Charter Magic,' rallied Harven, getting back to the subject at hand. 'We have arranged for you to take afternoon lessons with a Magister Kargrin, whose house is on the hill below us. Possibly you can see it from here, I believe it is quite distinctive . . .'

Clariel looked over the railing. There were hundreds of houses on the western slope of Beshill, and many more beyond, all crowded together.

'Where?' she asked.

'Somewhere downhill,' replied Harven, waving vaguely. 'The house with the sign of the hedgepig on the street of the Cormorant . . . anyway, your guard will lead you there –'

'My guard?'

'I thought I told you about the guards already?'

'No you did not,' replied Clariel sternly. 'What guards?'

'The Guild has sent us some guards, for the house and the workshop, and also to . . . look after us. The family.'

'Why do we need guards?'

'I don't think we need them particularly,' said Harven, but he was looking at his shoes again. 'It's just something they do here. In any case, one will be guarding you. To and from the Academy, and so forth. His name is . . . um . . . well, it's slipped my mind for a moment. He's waiting to meet you downstairs. Also your mother wants Valannie to help you with your clothes.'

'What's wrong with my clothes?' asked Clariel. She was wearing what she wore most ordinary days in Estwael,

basically her own version of a Borderer's uniform: a short-sleeved doeskin jerkin over a knee-length woollen robe with long sleeves dyed a pale green with an inch of linen trim at the wrists and neck; woollen stockings; and knee-high boots of pig leather, made from the first boar Clariel had hunted and killed herself, when she was fourteen.

Admittedly, leather and wool was a little too heavy to be comfortable in Belisaere. The sun was hotter and the winds warmer here by the sea, compared to Estwael, which was situated in a high valley and surrounded by the wooded hills of the Great Forest. There was a term used disparagingly in other parts of the Kingdom, when it was unseasonably cold: they called such days an 'Estwael Summer'.

'Women wear different things here,' said Harven. 'Valannie will help you buy whatever you need.'

Valannie was Clariel's new maid. She had been waiting for them at the new house and, like it, had been provided by the Guild rather than being hired by the family. Jaciel didn't care about choosing her own servants, particularly since Valannie was immediately competent and useful. But Clariel had refused her help as much as possible so far. She was determined to do without a maid, since she could not have the help of her old nurse, Kraille, who had chosen to retire to her son's farm outside Estwael rather than brave the horrors of the city.

'So you need to come down,' said Harven.

Clariel nodded, without speaking.

'I'm sorry, Clarrie,' said her father. 'But it will all be for the best. You'll see.'

'I hope so,' said Clariel bleakly. 'You go, Father. I'll be down in a minute.'

Clariel's new guard was standing in the courtyard, near the front gate, watching two of Jaciel's workmen stacking sacks of charcoal. She was rather surprised to see he was both shorter and even thinner than she was, and much older, probably at least thirty, if not more. His eyes were hooded, and he did not look at all agreeable. As Clariel left the stairs and walked closer, she saw he had a Charter mark on his forehead, the baptismal symbol that was the visible sign of a connection to the Charter. So he was at least capable of wielding Charter Magic, though the forehead mark itself meant little without a lifetime devoted to learning and practice.

But the guard's forehead mark was mostly concealed by the red bandanna he wore, and would be totally hidden when he put on the open-faced helmet he held at his side. His surcoat showed the golden cup of the Guild, but it was done in a dyed yellow thread, not even a part gold alloy. The hauberk of gethre plates he wore under it was short, reaching only to mid-thigh, and did not meet his knee-high leather boots. A sword hung in its drab scabbard on the left side of his broad belt, and thrust through the belt on the right side was a narrow club of some dark, heavy wood.

He turned as Clariel approached, bowed his head and snapped to attention.

'Good morning, milady,' he said, without a flicker of

emotion in his eyes or face. 'My name is Roban. I have been assigned by the Guild to guard you when you go about the city.'

'Thank you,' said Clariel. 'Um, why do I need to be guarded? We got here without any guards.'

'Actually, we were with you from several leagues outside the High Gate, milady,' replied Roban. 'Incognito, being as the Lady Jaciel wasn't yet admitted to the guild.'

He didn't look at Clariel, but at a point somewhere above her right shoulder. It almost felt like he wasn't talking to her, but reporting to some invisible officer who was hovering above her head.

'Did you really follow us in?' asked Clariel. 'Why?'

'Orders, milady,' replied Roban, not actually answering the question.

Before Clariel could continue, she was interrupted by the bustling arrival of Valannie, who was always bustling, constantly on the move, busy doing something or organising other people to do things. She was probably only ten years older than Clariel, and certainly did not *look* prematurely aged, but there was something about her that made her seem much older than anyone else around. She reminded Clariel of her grandmother, her father's mother, who had been just such a managing person.

'Lady Clariel, I am so sorry to keep you waiting,' she declared, pausing only to insert her arm through the crook of Clariel's elbow. 'Everything is arranged. We will go to Parillin's first, for cloth, then to Mistress Emenor; she has by

far the best dress-cutters. Then Master Blydnen for shoes, or perhaps Kailin's, and I think Ilvercote for some scarves and suchlike. Oh, that reminds me. Take this for the time being. Don't worry, you'll soon have something more fetching.'

She held out a blue shawl of some shimmering cloth. Clariel looked at it, but didn't take it.

'What's this?'

'A silk scarf, milady!' exclaimed Valannie. 'To cover your head.'

'I have hair for that,' replied Clariel. 'And a perfectly good hat inside I can get if you think it's going to rain. It doesn't look like it to me.'

'No, no, no! Hats are for ordinary folk! You must wear a scarf, Lady Clariel!'

Clariel opened her mouth to say something about no one wearing scarfs on their heads in Estwael, but stopped as she saw her mother come out of the workshop door, trailed as always by apprentices and forge hands. She was not wearing her simple linen working clothes and leather apron, with its pockets full of files, hammers, pincers, rules and the like, but a kind of layered robe of blue and pale gold silks. She also wore a blue headscarf, though Jaciel's was embroidered with small golden coins that caught the sunshine and flashed it back, proof of real gold.

The lack of an apron was a bad sign, thought Clariel, because if Jaciel was not working, then she might take an interest in her daughter.

This proved to be the case. Jaciel stopped in mid-progress

towards the men who were unloading the charcoal and changed direction, coming straight at Clariel. As she approached, Roban stood even more stiffly to attention, and Valannie quickly put the scarf over Clariel's hair, pulled it down to cover the Charter mark on her forehead, and knotted the ends under her chin.

'Clariel. You have come down.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'No more tantrums then?'

'I wasn't having . . .' Clariel started hotly, before biting her lip. She never could seem to have a normal conversation with her mother. 'That is, I am quite reconciled to my fate, thank you.'

'Your fate?' asked Jaciel. 'Rather portentous, don't you think? In any case, I am pleased. I see you are about to go and purchase your new clothes. Make sure you pay attention to Valannie.'

She turned her imperious gaze to the maid and continued. 'Please see that Clariel has everything appropriate that she will need for the Academy and the house, Valannie. Do not let her pursue any . . . sartorial whimsy.'

'Yes, milady,' said Valannie, with a curtsy.

'And you are Roban?' Jaciel asked the guard. 'The senior of the detail assigned by the Guild?'

'Yes, milady!' snapped Roban.

'Formerly of the Royal Guard, I see,' said Jaciel. How she knew that, Clariel couldn't tell.

'Yes, milady.'

'Then I must presume you to be adequately trained,' continued Jaciel. She turned back to Clariel.

'In addition to your clothes, Clariel, you will need to purchase a small gift for the King. We have an audience in three days.'

For the first time, Clariel saw emotion on Roban's face, a flicker of surprise at this announcement. Valannie actually looked stunned, her eyes widening for a moment before she managed to school her face into its normal, attentive guise.

'We do?' asked Clariel. She didn't know much about King Orrikan, save that he was very old, and the gossips in Estwael said he had become a recluse since the death of his wife and the disappearance of his granddaughter and heir, Princess Tathiel. According to common wisdom, he saw no one and now played almost no part in the governance of the Kingdom. Which, Clariel had heard said, was an improvement from when he had taken an occasional interest. 'Why do I have to buy him something?'

'Because you are his youngest kinswoman,' said Jaciel. 'The kin-gift is a tradition, when you first call upon him.'

'But what can I get for the King?' asked Clariel. 'I mean he can have whatever he wants, can't he?'

'Something small and personal, as is befitting for a gift from a young lady,' replied Jaciel. 'I'm sure Valannie will advise you.'

Valannie looked surprised. Clearly some things were outside her otherwise vast sphere of competence.

'Uh, milady, I am well versed in the fashions of the

Governor's court, but the King, I really don't, I mean he's hardly even been seen these last five years –'

'I'm sure you will find something,' pronounced Jaciel. 'Now, where is that Allin?'

'Here, milady!' called one of the senior apprentices, quickly moving to the front of the small crowd that had been waiting a few paces behind Jaciel.

'I am going to look at your design for a long-handled spoon now, Allin,' said Jaciel. 'Come to my study. Rowain, Errilee, you will come too. Bring your workbooks and drawings. The rest of you, be about your duties.'

There was a sudden whirl of activity, with apprentices and workers moving quickly back to the huge, arched door of the workshop on the other side of the courtyard, and Jaciel and her chosen apprentices going to the smaller of the two doors on the house side that led directly to the chambers that Jaciel and Harven had taken for their private offices. Jaciel's, of course, was by far the larger room.

'Well, I suppose I had better go and find a gift for the King,' said Clariel. 'Where do you suggest we start, Valannie?'

Valannie frowned.

'I really don't know, milady,' she said. 'As I said to your mother, if it was a gift for the Governor, or one of the councillors, that would be a different matter. Who knows what small thing the King would like?'

'He likes fish,' said Roban. 'Or he used to like fish.'

'To eat?' asked Clariel. She liked fish too, particularly trout she had tickled herself from one of the creeks that ran into

the Estwael. Bled immediately, filleted and pan-fried with wild garlic and shallots on a campfire, fresh-caught trout was one of her favourite meals. Yet another thing she would miss now they lived in Belisaere.

'No, bright fish from far away,' said Roban. 'Alive. He has them swim inside huge glass orbs. He likes . . . or he liked . . . to watch them.'

'And you saw this when you were a Royal Guard?' asked Clariel.

'Yes, milady.'

'Why did you leave?' asked Clariel, before immediately regretting the question, as Roban's neck tilted back and he once again looked up and past her shoulder at his invisible officer. Perhaps he was dismissed, she thought, for drunkenness or some dereliction of duty. 'Oh, I'm sorry, that is a . . . a silly question.'

'I didn't leave as such, milady,' said Roban slowly. 'When the guilds took over our duties in the city and beyond, most of the Guard was disbanded, there only being a few score needed for the Palace alone. Quite a few of us joined up with one or other of the guild companies.'

'I didn't know about that,' said Clariel. 'I suppose I don't know much about the city and . . . everything. Uh, why did the guilds take over from the Guard?'

Neither Roban nor Valannie answered, but Clariel detected a kind of tension within them, as if both would like to speak. But Roban continued to stare at the sky, and Valannie reached up to make a quick and barely noticeable adjustment to Clariel's scarf.

'Well, it's useful to know about the fish, thank you,' said Clariel, into the silence. 'Do you know where I could buy one . . . or some . . . of these bright fish?'

'The fish market does sell live fish and unusual catches,' said Valannie, wrinkling her nose. She looked at Roban. 'Is it safe today?'

Roban nodded.

'Safe today?' asked Clariel. 'What do you mean? And no one has told me why I need a guard in the first place.'

'There is some unrest in the city, milady,' said Roban. 'Disaffected workers and the like. There have been some . . . minor disturbances . . . and the fish market is close to the Flat, where the day workers live.'

'Day workers?' asked Clariel.

'Those who do not belong to Guilds and are hired – or not – by the day,' explained Roban patiently.

'Nothing to do with *us* and nothing to worry about,' added Valannie brightly. 'The guilds look after their own. Oh dear, that scarf still isn't quite right. Please, allow me, milady.'

Clariel reluctantly lowered her head and let Valannie retie the scarf. It was clear to her there was a lot going on in the city that she didn't know about, and probably needed to know, but neither Valannie nor Roban were going to tell her about it.

Not that she intended staying in Belisaere for a moment longer than was necessary. Not once she had worked out how to get back to Estwael, and how she might be able to live with only limited support from her parents. Or perhaps no

support at all, for she was reluctantly coming to the conclusion that they would never countenance her ambitions. She would have to devise her own plans for the future.

'Very good,' proclaimed Valannie, interrupting Clariel's thoughts of independence with a last tiny tug on the corner of her scarf. 'By tomorrow, milady, with the right clothes, I believe you will be a credit to your family and the High Guild of Goldsmiths.'

'Good,' mumbled Clariel, just for something to say, since she didn't care about clothes or being a credit to anyone. 'I suppose we had better go and buy these clothes, then. But first, a bright fish for the King.'