

# Prologue

He traced the curved of my blood-flecked face with the point of his eroded knife, letting me feel exactly how poisonous he could be. The fraying ropes only bit further into my wrists as I tried to get them loose, reminding me just how fucked I really was. The chair was fastened to the floor, the only door was guarded and blocked, no windows. Only one vent was visible and it was barely big enough for the vermin to get through. Even the stone that fabricated this cell looked uncompromising.

No escape.

In summary, everything was really just going splendidly.

“Peregrine,” he sang, “Just tell me what I want to know and maybe, just maybe, I won’t carve your body to bits and feed you to my dogs.” He punctuated his final words with rhythmic raps of his knife on my nose. Like a puppy getting scolded after eating scraps from the table.

His murky eyes bore into mine as he spoke, the sigil of his soul’s emptiness proudly worn. His acrid sweat filled my nostrils as he loomed over me, the woven fabric of his shirt nearly brushing my chest. I spit as hard as I could into his face, the blood from my mouth now splattered over his grimy features. It was truly unfortunate he stayed out of head butting range, I know I could make his nose a bit more crooked with the proper chance.

“Rot. In. Hell.” I pushed through my teeth, baring them as my lips curled back, cracking them more than they already were. The heat accumulating in this room was almost as suffocating as my survival chances. A sinister smile split his face as he slowly brought his hand to wipe it clean without breaking his stare. He began throwing his knife end over end in his hand, smug in his accuracy. He eyed me a moment more, scrutinizing my form, taking his handiwork in. Sadistic ass.

Cassius abruptly plunged his blade into my left thigh, skillfully missing anything vital. I swear I felt the tip of the knife gouge the chair beneath me. He slid the knife from my thigh and I thanked the deities above it wasn't serrated.

Unlike last time.

Violence seemed to be his natural state of being, at odds with his nimble movements. My scream bounced off the stone walls of my holding cell, layering over itself and reverberating back again as my body bowed away from the chair. Even the bloodthirsty rats scattered, no longer waiting in line for a bite. Hot tears marked my dirty face but I refused to sob, gritting my teeth until they felt like they would crack. My wrists instinctively strained at the unforgiving rope, damn near dislocating my shoulders from their sockets. He lowered himself, his mouth now at my ear, the new growth of his beard catching strands of my hair. I kept my jaw locked despite its protest, desperate to keep myself grounded.

*Breathe.*

"I have have no qualms leaving you here to change your mind. I have all the time in the world. Do you?." He taunted me, lips grazing the curve of my ear as if we were lovers instead of enemies. As if we were wrapped in silk sheets as opposed to in a dank prison, playing surgeon. I felt the hot blood seep down my leg in rivulets, soaking my pant leg and pooling in the bottom of the chair. He turned away, black cloak billowing out behind him as he moved towards the door. He paused at the threshold and looked back at me, his face nearly drown in the shadows.

"Do not disappoint the next time we speak, or it will be the last you speak to anyone." He grinned, dragging the blade across his cheeks, leaving a bloody smile in its wake. The metallic shift of the bolt the final sound of his departure.

Only then did I let myself shatter. Heaving over, my body tried to rid itself of food I didn't hold. The rats began to gain confidence and skittered out of the shadows once more, likely smelling the blood I was quickly losing. I kept my eyes on the stones beneath my feet, trying to get a grip. My pants were threadbare as it was, but now with the gaping hole, there was no chance they would protect me in the wilderness outside.

*Think. Think. Think.*

I took deep breath after deep breath, begging my heart rate to slow. Whether this was good or bad, I couldn't decide. There was no noise in the room other than rodent feet hitting mildewed

rock. The pitter-patter stealing the last of my sanity. The rats took my stillness as a chance to feast and a bold one began to climb up my shoe, wriggling its body into my pant leg. I screamed and shook my leg as much as possible with my ankle strapped to the chair. The hot searing pain tearing my thigh apart. I felt its teeth sink into my calf as my vision started going black. It scampered out of my pant leg and I know it wouldn't be long before another took its place.

“Cassius!” I called gathering my remaining strength. Maybe I could give him just enough information to earn my freedom. If I died here, he would succeed anyway.

“Cassius, please...” my voice was shredded as I hung my head. The edges of my vision was closing in still, threatening my consciousness. It would be fates' cruel joke to have me bleed out here, after everything I have survived. I felt the essence of his name on my tongue once more but no sound formed.

I heard the door creak just as the darkness took my mind.

ZOIE FETZER 2025

# Chapter One

When you begin a life of corruption, no one tells you how different the most familiar things will feel. There is no peace, no reprieve from the paranoia. You feel watched, hunted, unclean. The shops you once frequented carelessly feel akin to a rat walking into a trap for a miserable piece of cheese. The irony is not lost on me. The more wary you are, the more suspicious you seem, a living, breathing ouroboros. Yet here I stand, in Vreyerian's shop, looking around his overflowing displays for a specific moonstone to ward off unwanted eyes. The validity of moonstone's effects have been debated by philosophers and commoners alike, but I need every shred of protection I can get.

I picked a deep green stone off of the cluttered wooden shelf in front of me, feeling its dense weight in my palm. Its size no indication of its mass. Curiouser and curiouser objects remained on the shelf, seemingly untouched for many years considering the thick layer of dust surrounding where the moonstone was moments ago. Hooves of cows said to enhance fertility, the ears of badgers purported to increase ferocity when consumed, various vials containing strands of hair from virtuous women to guard your soul at night.

In the dim lighting of the crowded shop, I slipped the stone into the interior pocket of my coat, as practiced as any thief worth their salt. I forced my gaze to stay on the objects in front of me, feigning interest in a lock of brown hair. As if I had a soul to protect. The walkways on either side of me stayed clear, most townspeople keeping a safe distance from me even if they didn't see my face. As if my energy was as repelling as my history.

If I had turned my head a bit to the right, gazing past my hood, I would have seen Vreyerian's burning eyes peering at me through a gap in shelving. Forever vigilant, and as he should be knowing I was patroning his shop. I just hadn't expected him to play his hand so early.

It made the metallic purple moonstone I had tucked in my boot minutes ago feel lighter already. I bluffed a sigh of disappointment and retrieved the decoy stone from my coat pocket, returning it to its spot on the grubby shelf. I could hear him bustle past the stools and staffs that crowded the walkways, squeezing around various telescopes and orbs that were proclaimed to tell the future, cursing me the whole time not quite low enough to be under his breath. Intentionally of course.

“And when I said to stay the hell out of my shop Peregrine Fallax, what exactly did you hear?” he thundered.

I turned on my heels to see his robust figure before me, just as round as I remembered him, though his tawny eyes and slim mouth had a few more lines around them. His apron was the same dingy cream color from my memory, trousers the worn-in brown burlap that my mother mended countless times. I studied his face a moment more. I did not think our paths were to ever cross again.

“A loving joke perhaps?” I replied, smiling as innocently as the fates allowed. His features just dimmed further. He reached out his hand of chubby calloused fingers and tilted my chin up, allowing the light to touch my face.

Just like that, from agitated to crestfallen he shifted. I knew the faces of my family were flicking through his mind’s eye, my lovely mother, my proud father, my playfully mischievous sisters. All of us so alike in appearance with our warm brown eyes and auburn hair, but where we diverge is in heart. How far I had fallen from their grace. I pulled my chin from his hand, allowing shadows to shroud my face once more. His hand fell back to his side slowly, as though buying him time to decide to help me once more or banish me into the forest beyond his doors. If I were him, I would have already kicked my ass to the next town over.

“Grine, I’m sorry. I have tried to help, but I can only allow myself to be fooled so many times,” he shook his head, trying to clear the memories of my past betrayals I am sure. “I-I need you to leave. I will tell your folks I saw you, and in one piece at that. But I need to see you walk into the tree line and keep walking.”

If only I felt a shred of the sadness that framed him. Weighing on his shoulders, gnawing at his heart, wetting his eyes. All I felt was indifference, not even a flutter of strain in my chest. I knew how this was going to go, after all I planned it meticulously. All I needed was the moonstone, not a savior.

“I understand,” I shrugged, putting on a small display of dejection for his benefit. I lifted my hand to pat his arm. “It is good to see you Vreyerian, you look well”.

This only amplified his grief. His lips turned down at the corners and he seemed to fold into himself despite my superficial attempt of comfort. Someone who seemed larger than life my whole upbringing, crumbling under my fingertips. Just as I needed him to. Just as I expected him to. I let my silent presence speak for me, whittling down his defenses, acting the part of misguided child as everyone thought me to be. I even toed the floor with my shoe a little, laying it on thick.

“Well, how about this?” He posed, now folding his hands decidedly over his belly. “You share a hot meal with me and then I give you the boot. After all, I owe it to your parents.” A limp smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, staying strong for the little girl he once knew as opposed to the woman standing in front of him. I wonder if he would guess that these hands had taken life? If he knew I would just as soon burn his store and livelihood to the ground should it make my life easier?

I forced a sheepish smile onto my face, “I would like that. Just like old times, eh Vrey?”

He grumbled something about being a fool and turned, walking towards his room that branched off the far west side of the shop. Where I am sure he has a pot of stew going for his nightly meal as he has for the last twenty years of my memory.

I thought I would have things to miss when I left Furum Vallis, with *left* being a generous term. Though it seemed the only thing I pine for is the predictable targets and easily manipulated kin. Like clay in my hands, my family and friends bent to my will, herded onto the path I set for them, only seeing the sides of me that served my purpose.

I have been called many names.

Peregrine. Grine. Manipulator. Thief. Traitor. Liar.

But never mindless.

I am Peregrine Fallax, and I always have a plan.

That was until Cassius Ignotus put his blade at my throat.

Damn useless moonstone.

ZOIE FETZER 2026

# Chapter Two

With one flick of his wrist, Cassius pulled the hood from my head, the metallic edge of his blade now warming at my throat.

“Miss me?” he whispered, his breath washed over me. I resisted the urge to pull away, aware that the knife was less preferable than his proximity.

Vreyerian took a few more steps before realizing his ward was no longer in tow. Shuffling his imposing frame, he turned to face the scene before him, fear lighting his eyes. This must be the most eventful day his shop has seen in ages.

“Ah ah ah, do not make me spill her blood on the floor of your wonderful little shop Vreyerian, my business does not lie with you,” Cassius *tsked*, pulling my hair away from my face with one hand, his blade never wavering in the other. His self-assurance made me nauseous. Insufferable prick.

Vrey was searching my face, heated and puffing. Powerless is not something he felt very often.

“It is okay Vreyerian, just an old friend, you know how it is?” I grimaced as the metal chafed my throat with each word.

Vreyerian just shook his head, “When will you ever learn Grine?”

Ironic *he* is asking me that, a man I have betrayed time and time again who was just about to lead me into his house. I opened my mouth to respond to him when Cassius lowered his knife from my throat to my abdomen, concealing the knife in the folds of my cloak. With the tip of a blade lightly biting into the skin above my navel, I took that as our cue to leave. It was by sheer dumb luck that Vrey’s cramped shelving and displays hid us from any passers by, but the sounds of conversation were getting closer, echoing off of the vaulted ceiling of the shop.

“I will be taking Peregrine out of your shop discreetly Vreyerian, I would appreciate it if you did not make a fuss. In fact, I will even save you some coin.” I could hear the smile in his voice, no visual required.

*Do not even think-*

Cassius leaned down, temporarily relieving me of the threat of impalement, and fished the

moonstone from my boot.

“I believe this is-” his voice cut off with a gratifying crunch as I took this brief window of presented opportunity and elbowed him right in his smug face.

Safest bet seemed to be to sprint in the opposite direction of Vrey. Sounding out from behind me were a string of expletives from Cassius, each one seemed to be gaining on me. I pushed past townsfolk, cloaks of earthy green and vibrant purple blurred at the edge of my vision. The sound of unhappy shouts and loud crashes filled the air as I pulled shelves down behind me to cover my tracks. The maze of the shop was to my benefit in this moment, knowing Cassius would not be able to follow quite as nimbly. I took sharp turns and backtracked around narrow passages to get him off my tail, pushing all the power in my legs through the balls of my feet. I could hear his boots thudding against the polished floor behind me, apologies leaving his lips to those same townsfolk I trampled over.

“Peregrine!” Vrey thundered from behind the makeshift barrier I had built. A necessary bridge to burn in order to live.

I could see sunlight dappled on the uneven meadow straight ahead, I had a better chance in the forest. The heat from the sun kissed my cheeks just as the butt of Cassius’ knife struck my temple. Cunning bastard beat me to the exit.

My legs crumpled underneath me as bursts of light danced at the edge of my vision. The ground was even less soft than it looked as my knees and hands collided, pebbles and sticks embedding themselves in my palms. One solid kick from Cassius against my side and I was looking up at his form towering over me, grass tickling my profile. I attempted to blink my hair from my eyes as it began to weigh down against my skull, courtesy of the blood that had begun to dribble from my fresh wound.

Cassius planted his hands on his hips, the knife still tightly held in his right hand as his chest heaved. Apparently my kidnapper has not been taking his exercise very seriously. He looked even taller at this angle, almost menacing.

Almost.

“This could have been so much easier Peregrine, why do you have to make everything so damn hard?” he demanded, still trying to catch his breath. His voice was hindered by the swelling in his nose which is already substantial. The blood smeared across his face gives me a glimmer of pride.

My eyes drifted past his worn leather boots to the growing congregation of people, craning their neck to get a glimpse at the action. Like I said, this is the most excitement this shop has seen in a long time. Well, since last I was here I suppose.

“We might want to have this conversation elsewhere Cass, that fuss you were trying to avoid is starting to gather a crowd,” I grunted, dragging my hand up to my temple. I gingerly touched the edge of the gash, sucking in a breath through my teeth.

“You cretin, has no one ever told you to use your words? I am going to need stitches,” I chided,

holding my bloodied fingers up as testimony.

He leaned down and grasped both of my wrists harder than needed, binding them together with a strap of leather he pulled from his pocket. Grabbing the center of the provisional handcuffs, he hauled me to my feet, the crown of my head coming to his chin. I could feel successive drops of blood hitting my shoulder, and with each one the fog shrouding my brain became more dense. He has a good arm, I will give him that.

“Shut up for once in your life Peregrine,” he grumbled, shoving me forward towards the edge of the shop. My feet caught the edge of my cloak, almost taking us both down. He pulled me upright with a grunt of effort and continued to push me around the building. I could only focus on the compacted dirt path under our shoes and my breathing, even that becoming a task.

The rivulet of blood began to run off my shoulder and down the chest of my cloak. My earlier quip about stitches was becoming more and more real. I lifted my pounding head slightly to see Cassius leading us to a horse, the beautiful creature stood as tall as two of me. His rust colored hide shone in the sun, distinguishing him from the dull clay wall of the shop behind him. As soon as we got close, he reared his head back and chuffed, pulling hard against his lead tied to a nearby tree, baring his teeth for all to see.

“Shocking, another one of the gods creations cannot stand you,” Cassius griped as he began to soothe the horse. “Easy Solstice, I know, she agitates me as well.”

He continued to speak quietly to his steed, slowly moving me towards the saddle. He pulled an additional strap of leather from his pocket and lifted my hands to a loop on the flap, securing me to this horse that absolutely detests me. Yes, I foresee this going marvelously.

The pounding in my head has dulled to a low thud and by the feeling of the blood running down my body, that is slowing as well. It may be I will live after all, just in time to be drug across Furum Vallis with this goddamn bounty hunter.

Once he was done securing me, he mounted the saddle and began to dig through the leather bag attached to it, I assume for another weapon to threaten me with. He instead produced a water skin then a rag, wetting it and scrubbing the drying blood from his face as he urging Solstice to begin to walk. I tried my hardest to dig both heels into the dirt and refuse to be pulled along side the equine, but alas, I was unsurprisingly weaker than the horse.

Then began my parade of imprisonment. The horse took larger strides than I, forcing me to a walk unnaturally fast in order to keep my arms secured to my body. We rounded the corner to the front of the shop once more, the crowd of townsfolk was bigger than before, with Vreyerian standing point. His arms were crossed over his bulging belly once more, his face flashing anger and dejection rather than the soft disappointment of earlier.

I wonder if it was because of the moonstone or rather the fact that I destroyed his shop in the process of getting apprehended by a suspicious man?

The greater loss I feel here is the deprivation of promised stew. I could have really used a meal before whatever ungodly trek we were embarking on. I studied the crowd, familiar faces were peppered into the fray, all with disapproving looks. My reputation continues to proceed me their eyes tell. I am sure my parents will have a full report within the hour, exaggeration not required. My childhood here was not unpleasant for me, but I believe it may have been unpleasant to others. I knew what I wanted, and I found a way to get it. Ethics are a fool's barrier. Manipulation is a tool that most are afraid to outright claim, but in honesty, everyone is a manipulator. Lies accumulate behind closed doors in the name of kindness and gentility, puffed up chests ready with justification.

I turn from the crowd to face the small village of Furum Vallis laid out before me, each step bringing us closer and closer. A wide street, the main thoroughfare dividing the town, is capped with forest at either side. With a trained eye you can see the cottages and cabins where the population resides nestled between trees. The shops and gathering places melt into the scene, mossy roofs, dirt paths, wildflowers growing unchecked in the spaces between each establishment.

I suppose it was beautiful, I had certainly seen more disagreeable places, though I felt as if I was looking at a picture. There was no tie holding me to this place, no fond emotion to conjure up, no disappointment in departure. Just observation. The bookshop in need of a new door, the bakery owner who looks too fondly at the wedded healer, the young couple who sneaks between the trees to find seclusion. Secrets, secrets, secrets. My preferred form of currency.

The gossiping faded behind us, crowd dispersing now that the main event has come and gone. We continued to parade through town, earning me additional stares from townsfolk, eager to know why I was bound to this strange man's saddle. Or possibly why half my head was coated in blood.

I knew I had almost no chance in hand-to-hand combat with Cassius, I had tried previously. Running might be an option, though he was faster than I gave him credit for, his height allowing him the privilege.

"Cassius, dear, may I inquire who hired your services this time?" I asked, craning my neck to look at his face, cataloguing his reactions.

"No." His face remained impassive, not even granting me eye contact.

"How far is our journey?"

Silence.

"Will I be walking the whole way?"

The only noise came from our surroundings, his lips tightly sealed.

He knew me well enough not to divulge anything, not even a crumb of information. Too bad for him, I know how to break his resolve. I looked forward once more. The shops were getting getting further apart, foliage becoming thicker.

"Is this about the book?" I asked, disinterest coating my tongue as I schooled my feature into boredom. Just as I anticipated, his figure went rigid in the saddle.

Bullseye.

There is a reason I never let him negotiate. Too easily bated.

I could see the anger building in his eyes, turbulence of gold swirled in the brown. They rather complimented the purple of the fresh bruises blossoming under his eyes. His tan cheeks began to pink, his emotions barely leashed. I must have hit a nerve.

Perfect.

“All this trouble over leather bound paper of incomprehensible scratch? Really Cassius? Business is that slow this season?” I taunted. Just a few more jabs and the entire story behind his teeth will come tumbling out.

We were now passed the main juncture of Furum Vallis and into the grove that lays at the feet of Animah Forest. This is where he dismounted his horse, barely letting the creature and I get to a stop before he grabbed my face in his hand, the true depth of his anger in full effect. I could feel the heat rolling off of him, see his nostril flare, hear his teeth grind. Though he masked it, leaning into the fury, I could sense his fear as well, interwoven and inextricable.

“You have no idea what you have done Peregrine. None. Now I am stuck cleaning up your mess as usual,” he spit living, breathing fire. I pulled my face from his hands, unable to hit his already broken nose due to my restraints. Solstice began to stamp the ground, sensing his rider’s unrest.

“Do not act so high and mighty with me Cassius, I have seen your underbelly and it is not as pure as you like to pretend now,” I lifted my chin as I spoke, looking down my nose at him. He shook his head and scoffed, though he had enough sense not to retort. He pushed his hair back from his face, the black strands more blue in the sunlight, and took deep breaths through his mouth.

“Are you going to tell me why this damn book has your hackles risen or is the requestor formidable enough to have you this hysterical?” I cocked my head and watched the wheel in his mind turn and turn.

He suddenly began to scan the forest around us, the fear beginning to overwhelm the anger. As if I reminded him who sent him here to retrieve me.

“We need to be moving, it will be dark in a few hours.” He stated, retreating to controlled once more. Cassius circled Solstice and mounted him from the other side of the saddle, narrowly missing my face with his boot as he swung his leg over. That would be the finishing touch, a new head wound to mirror my other side. He adjusted a few straps on the saddle and patted Solstice’s neck before taking a swig from his water skin.

“Is there going to be a chance to clean the blood from my head or is that asking too much from my captor?” I questioned. The matting in my hair is only adding to my dull headache, and depending how long he wants to travel, I still have quite the hike before me.

Cassius sighed and grumbled something to the canopy above us before grabbing a clean rag from his satchel and wetting it as he had done for himself outside of Vrey’s shop. When he replaced the water skin,

he grabbed a knife and dismounted once more, huffing as his feet hit the ground. I imagine his nose is giving him one hell of a headache as well.

“You are an exceptionally needy prisoner Peregrine and it is already getting on my nerves. Try to keep it to a minimum, huh?” he muttered. Evidently, he was not as spry as he used to be. One heated conversation and he was already subdued.

“We will see, depends on what you plan to use that knife for.” I reared back as far as the leather bounds allowed as he stood in front of me, placing the rag between his teeth and gesturing me to turn around. A beat passed, neither of us moving. He gestured once more and I turned with a huff. If he wanted to kill me, he had many more opportunities than this. I felt him gather my hair and place his knife at the base of my neck, blunt edge brushing my skin. With one deft motion, he pulled his knife through my hair, severing it at half its original length.

“You could have at least warned me,” I said, adjusting my wrist in the leather bounds.

“I never knew you to be a vain woman Grine,” he commented as pulled me to face him with his knife secured in his belt. He held my chin and dabbed at my wound with the wet rag as one would cleaning a child covered in dirt. I gritted my teeth, unwilling to complain.

“You have not called me that in a long while Cass, brings me to our alliance days,” I said, attempting to catch his eyes. There was no change in his expression, keeping his attention on the rag. Unsurprising. I imagine I remember them more... Fondly than he does. He seems to be trying to walk in the light these days.

Cassius spent about a minute more removing the blood from my scalp and hair before stepping back from me, searching for something in my eyes. He either found what he was looking for or he did not, the sadness in his eyes shone the same. Wordless, he walked around the now grazing Solstice and mounted him once more, only taking a second to place his knife in his pack.

“My mistake,” he said. The he urged his horse to begin once more, taking us deeper into the forest. The birds singing in the trees and animals rustling in the brush were the only sounds for a long while.