

Chapter 1

Emra Corvine and her brother, Sherrick, trudged across the plains that led toward Hawk's Rest. The sun radiated on the cool land.

"I'm glad we're almost back to town," Sherrick said. The setting sun glossed his greasy, black hair with a shimmering sheen. "The East Woods is a fine place for game, but leaving for a week was longer than I anticipated—or enjoyed."

"It wasn't any fault of our own, for the most part," Emra said. Her angular eyebrows scrunched over her copper eyes in focus. She levitated a tin coin and spun it in front of her face. Emra's brown hair flowed in front of her shoulders, and her cloak billowed behind her. "We didn't see a stag for the first few days, and when we did, it wasn't close enough for me to bind it for an easy shot."

Emra watched Sherrick hunch and march next to her. His backpack weighed on him and shortened his small frame like age warps an old man. His hair hung in his face but was parted slightly in the middle and stopped above his browning cloth tunic. His stockings partially covered a russet birthmark on his left leg. Knives adorned his belt, and a small, clay, corked jar of salt swung on a tether from the bottom of his bag.

They walked and she continued to twirl the coin. It kept her mind and sorcerer skills sharp. She could levitate objects, clasp a score of arrows

together so they did not clatter in her quiver, and even momentarily hold down an animal. She could not move objects with velocity or very hard, but her grasp on objects was practiced and acute.

Emra held her posture well, but it helped that Sherrick carried all the meat from the kill sites to their town of Hawk's Rest. He had always said that if he did not, he would not earn his keep.

Emra's wooden bow clinked against a metal ring on the back of her pants and her empty quiver bounced hollowly against her side.

"I must say," Sherrick said with a chuckle, "perhaps your magic isn't making things float, rather turning unsuspecting deer into sitting ducks."

Emra walked another half mile beside Sherrick and approached the top of a hill. Hawk's Rest stood below the knoll. Hanging Man's Church towered over the town. The temple's central tower cast a long shadow across the city's short, thatch-roofed houses and pointed toward the Killing Field far in the distance.

The Hanging Man's religion birthed from the town's early history. Emra, along with the other citizens of the old, northern steading followed it devoutly.

In the center of the Killing Field's sea of long, gray grass, Hanging Man's Tree stood accompanied by a collection of new cadavers that swung from short ropes tied to its ancient and gnarled limbs.

Hanging Man's tree was the religion's most sacred site and where worshipers conducted the Final Rite.

Cold northern winds swept the top of its branches toward Emra, but even on still days, the holy tree's limbs moved with the subtlety of a sleeping child's chest.

"This is the best part of the trip," Emra said. "Nothing is better than this view."

Sherrick set down the sack of meat, sighed, stretched, and straightened his back.

"You're right," Sherrick said. "There's nothing better than seeing dead bodies swing with every breeze that sweeps down the mountains."

"Surely you don't jest about Hanging Man's sacred place?" Emra said. The coin dropped to the ground with a light *thud*.

"It isn't against the five taboos," Sherrick said. "What should you care?" Emra bit the inside of her lip.

"Our father served Hanging Man's Church. I'd think you should show a bit of respect."

"And then he left the priesthood."

"Only so he didn't break taboo," Emra added quickly.

Sherrick hoisted the meat bag back over his shoulder.

"Listen," Sherrick said. "I don't know where you think I'm in the wrong. Taboos give us clear lines not to cross, and to my knowledge, I haven't crossed any of them. So, unless you are the new Priest of Hanging Man—which *would* be a taboo, *sorceress*—I'll save my ears' next sermon for the temple."

Emra huffed.

Why does he always have to be so difficult? Emra thought.

“Gods love you, Sherrick,” Emra said. She squinted and studied the Killing Field’s low cobble wall that encircled the holy site. Though the barrier itself was only a few feet high, it encompassed a massive area. “I know I do.”

“I’m thankful for it,” Sherrick said. “We’re all we got anymore.”

“Don’t say it like that. We have Hawk’s Rest.”

Emra admired the village—their home.

“Neighbors are poor substitutes for parents,” Sherrick said. “They can have your back, but they’ll never share your blood.”

A sad truth, Emra thought.

“We should be getting back to town soon. I’m tired and we should trade before nightfall, or we’ll need to use more salt to preserve the game.”

Emra levitated the coin from the ground. The ellipsoid spun in the air and silty soil flaked from its surface.

The siblings walked down the slope and toward the small settlement of Hawk’s Rest. Wooden houses with thatched roofs, small windows, and low ceilings sat atop cobblestone foundations raised above the coarse dirt street. A single road cut through the town from the west and ended at the east edge of the settlement in high grass and greedy weeds.

An icy gust threw Emra’s long, untamed hair behind her. She buried her head into her furs and cloak and squinted her eyes until the whipping wind subsided.

“Every day those arctic blasts get more and more unbearable,” Emra said. She looked back up at her coin, still floating. “I hate it.”

“Do you forget winter approaches?” Sherrick asked. “The harvest season was short this year. We don’t usually get winds like that for another month.”

When northern breezes emanated from the Pantheon of Crag, they swept the long grasses and straw from rooftops and scattered them into the swaying plains. Those same icy blasts wriggled under doors and rattled them in their frames, shook windows, and whistled through slim, dim alleyways.

Emra and Sherrick marched through the bramble at the east end of the road. Down the street, a mob congregated in front of the church, at the town square.

Emra shot Sherrick a concerned glance. They hastened their pace.

They hurried past the cooper’s, the farrier’s, the fletcher’s and the mason’s houses and workshops until they reached the outside of the congregation.

The town square was the only place in town with cobbled ground. Green and gray mosses wedged between the white flagstones. The plaza had a well in the middle with a waist-high wall, and a small roof propped up by twinned posts wreathed in mountain ivy. The vines’ green hue had fled, and its white, wintry coloration seeped to the exterior of its frail leaves and thin stalk.

Hanging Man’s temple towered directly over the plaza on the northern side. The central spire stretched above the town and its shadow elongated to the east. A pentagon with a stained-glass depiction of the Killing Field

decorated the front of the white temple. The two dark, wooden doors were swung ajar, giving view into the dark abbey's vacant pews, lofted ceilings, and slender pathways.

Across from the parish, to the south of the square, the priest's house stood a hair taller than everyone else's. Yellow tinted its light, stone walls like an old bone, Nooses hung from exterior support beams.

The group of citizens huddled around the church entrance.

"Quiet, please quiet," Sir Windlock bellowed. The huge man stood head and shoulders above the townspeople. His red mutton chops covered his cheeks in thick bushes of hair. "This is no time for panic."

Emra snatched her coin. She weaseled through people at the exterior and in between her neighbors and left Sherrick and their game at the perimeter of the mob.

"There have been five people missing this week," a woman called from the crowd.

Emra pushed past citizens' shoulders and finally made it the center of the circle. Sir Windlock, Priest Callafox, and Keeper Senia stood in the middle of the gathering.

Priest Callafox was not old, but he was certainly aging. The priest's hair weaved into an intricate central braid, a single mole rested under his nose, cradled by his philtrum, and his ears were large and pointed at the top. Black vines and branch-like patterns were stitched into his white vestments that

donned his thin form. A loop of rope clung tightly to his neck and the residual flax hung past his long hair.

Keeper Senia acted as Priest Callafox's right hand. She was a few years older than Emra. Her holy garments were inverse in color of the priests and her black hair was styled the same, except her braid went past her waist. Her green eyes contrasted her tan skin. Emra thought it a shame that Keeper Senia was so harsh in demeanor. When she had seen the Keeper smile it was wide, bright, and genuine, but the holy woman seldom broke her stoic facade.

Sir Windlock looked down and gave a slight nod to Emra. He didn't have his normal, green regalia, but wore a thick, cloth tabard and a leather vest that clung to his barreled chest.

"We can't be certain of their whereabouts," Priest Callafox said shrilly. "We plan to set up a watch tonight, and make sure no one else goes missing."

"A watch?" Emra asked. "What's going on?"

"Emra you've returned," Keeper Senia said in surprise. "Five people have gone missing in the last few nights, and there are two new bodies that hang at Hanging Man's Tree."

"What's so suspicious about that?" Emra asked earnestly. "They probably had Hanging Man take them in the Killing Field."

Emra's recalled her father's oldest lesson.

The living can't leave the Killing Field. Only Hanging Man can transcend.

"Though suicide is well practiced here because of the Final Rite," Priest Callafox said, "Lloyd Hughs, Nera Selsby, Dalby Kess, Oris Remthral and

Murranna Kersh had much to live for. Their families all say they were fine and of good mind. Besides, there are only two bodies—not five.”

Five is a lot of people, Emra thought, and not many people besides me and Sherrick venture out of the town past harvest season.

“Priest Callafox, you of all people should know that only those of sound mind give themselves to Hanging Man,” Emra said.

“Emra, you can’t deny the curiosity in the events,” Sir Windlock said. His eyes were sad. “Even still, I’ll set up a night watch at the Killing Field to make sure. It can’t hurt. My job is to keep this town safe, and by the Five Gods of the Valley, I will see that through.”

Affirming murmurs consumed the crowd and the folk nodded.

“It is settled then,” Priest Callafox said, “I will also be awake at the temple until dawn. If there’s an emergency, you all know where to find me.”

The crowd dispersed. Most people broke into small groups and gossiped and theorized about the disappearances. Others returned to their shops or houses.

Sir Windlock, Priest Callafox, and Keeper Senia stayed near the well. Emra stepped forward.

“How was the hunting trip?” Sir Windlock asked.

Sir Windlock always asked about her family’s expeditions to the East Woods. Normally her father always answered the question, but the past few years since his death, Emra had answered Sir Windlock dozens of times.

“The trip was fine,” Emra responded, “but then we came to town.”

“It’s been troubling in the time you’ve been away.”

“It sounds like there’s a bunch of uproar for no reason.”

“How could you be so cold, Emra? People are missing.”

“I’m not being cold,” Emra said. “People have chosen Hanging Man to take them from this life to the next. Lloyd, Murranna, Nera, Dalby and Oris were fine people, and now I hold them in higher regard. Is this not how we’re taught?”

“Aye, it is,” Priest Callafox said, “but five missing doesn’t add up with two new corpses on the Tree. I worry something less benevolent than Hanging Man has a hand in this.”

“What thinks you?” Keeper Senia asked.

“If inconspicuous disappearances continue,” Priest Callafox said, “I might think some type of cult or subsect is brewing within the town.”

“Forgive my suggestion,” Keeper Senia said, “but perhaps it was murder?”

Ridiculous, Emra thought. Killing others is taboo. Only Hanging Man brings people from the living world to the realm of the dead.

“It could all well be true,” Sir Windlock answered, “but gossiping won’t do us any favors until we get more information. If anything, it will only stoke false fires.”

Emra nodded in unison with the clergy members.

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” Sir Windlock continued. “I must go to my house to don my armor and retrieve my horse before nightfall.”

The sun sank toward the edge of the world and its radiant warmth diminished.

Sir Windlock exited the group and headed toward his house behind the farrier's stables.

"I have to agree with Sir Windlock," Emra said to Priest Callafox and Keeper Senia. "Speculation does little in trying times. I'll see you tomorrow at service."

Chapter 2

Emra flipped open the leather cover and revealed the pure, vellum pages of Hanging Man's Texts.

The blaze in the fireplace illuminated the manuscript and warmed the Corvines' house. The doors leading to Emra's and Sherrick's bedchambers stood together on the right side of the living room. Furs draped over furniture, hung from walls, and decorated the stone floor. The fire crackled next to Emra and warmed the large room from its mantle to the front door. In veneration of their god, Hanging Man, nooses hung from beams in the corners.

Sherrick spooned some juices over the cut of meat and moved it with the silverware in the flat pan which hovered above the flame. The scent of fresh game basted in hot oil wafted in Emra's nose.

He sat down to count coins from the week's bounty at the table next to a slender lantern with a brass bottom, smokey glass, and a charred, burning wick.

"For someone who follows taboos so closely, you sure have no problem with reading," Sherrick said. He kept his head down and slid a copper coin across the wooden table's uneven grain. "You know you walk a thin line."

Emra kept her head down and studied the texts.

"The taboo says that a priest cannot have sorcerous blood," Emra said matter-of-factly. Her finger ran across the page written in her father's hand.

“Just because I can read Templar doesn’t make me a priest. Like you, I’ll save my ears’ next sermon for the temple.”

“But only priests can read Templar.”

“But there are more things to being a priest than reading Templar.”

The fatty oil crackled, and a tiny drop popped from the pan and fizzled on the ground.

“People in Hawk’s Rest could still misconstrue it,” Sherrick said. He rose from his chair, grabbed a meat fork, stabbed the venison, and flipped it to the other side. “I’m just worried about your safety. I feel that staying clear of the taboos is a good way to live.”

“*Your* way to live,” Emra said.

“They can be the same. I just think it’s a shame what Hanging Man’s taboos do to our town.”

“Is this about Mom and Dad?”

“No, but they’re just two of countless examples. They could still be alive and with us if not for our faith.”

“Their faith was important to them, Sherrick. It’s important to many.”

“They hanged themselves in the Killing Field because of it,” Sherrick said.

“And so do many others,” Emra said, “and eventually so will you and I.”

“Speak for yourself. I wouldn’t take my own life. It’s the best thing we ever get. Why cut it short?”

Emra put the volume down in her lap and stared at Sherrick. He basted fats and juices on the meat.

“Veneration is important. Following taboos isn’t just accepting death prematurely. It gives life too. We wouldn’t be alive if—”

“Yes,” Sherrick interrupted. “I know. If Dad hadn’t followed taboo, neither of us would be alive. He loved Mom. Mom had sorcerous blood. Dad stepped down as Keeper. I’ve heard it all before. I’m not saying they aren’t important. Some of them I just don’t agree with, and for someone like you, a misstep could get you in trouble.”

Emra sank in her seat. Mother had sorcerous blood, but she did not have any powers herself, whereas Emra had had the ability to levitate objects since she was young.

But power came with a price.

She could not become a Priest or a Keeper, despite her piety and ambitions. Father had to leave the priesthood, because of his love for Mother. Emra always felt like her parents paid a heavier price than she did.

Emra never thought of her father as truly happy and fulfilled as a hunter. He was decent at his trade, but his love concerned his family and their religion.

Sherrick took two wool potholders and hoisted the pan from over the fire. He brought it quickly over to a low counter in the corner of the room and set it on a cool stone slab.

He glanced back at Emra.

“Don’t be sad, Em,” Sherrick said. He tossed the potholders on the counter and walked behind Emra. He wrapped his arms around her. “I just don’t want something to happen to you.”

Emra wrapped her hand around his wrists and squeezed his arm reassuringly.

“I know,” Emra said. “You’ve always been that way.”

She rose from her chair and placed the book gently on the seat.

“All right, now that we got our sibling love out of the way, are you ready to eat?” he said. “A week’s worth of jerky and foraged roots and nuts has me famished for some actual food.”

Emra cut the meat in half and served Sherrick and herself on wooden plates. The two walked over to the dinner table and ate in a silence that only delicious food could create.

After they finished their dinner, Sherrick leaned back and held his stomach.

“That’s a meal that could put a man to sleep faster than a mother’s lullaby,” Sherrick said.

Emra yawned.

“I know what you mean,” Emra replied. “Are you going to bed soon?”

“If not to bed, then I’ll pass out here, but I wanted to pick your brain, first.”

Emra raised her brow.

“What do you make of this problem in the town?” Sherrick asked.

“I’m not troubled by it. All those people seemed like they’d carry out the Final Rite. And though they were fairly young, there’s not a certain age to perform the ritual. Some thought Mom and Dad were too early, but Hanging Man keeps them all the same. What about you?”

“Believe it or not,” Sherrick said, “but for once, you and I are thinking the same thing. I think those missing people decided their fate the same way Mom and Dad did.”

“I’m not worried about it,” Emra said. “I worry about patterns, not coincidences. Right now, it seems like a coincidence.”

“I agree.”

Sherrick set his hands on the table and pushed himself from his chair.

“Are you going to the temple’s service tomorrow?” Emra asked.

“If you want me to, I will” Sherrick said.

“I’d love it.”

“Okay. I’ll be there.”

Sherrick turned and lazily wandered into his room. The heavy door shut behind him and left Emra in the living room alone. She tended the fire and read slowly until the flames died. She picked the dying lantern from the table and walked to her room, but she paused outside her door.

It’s just a bunch of coincidences, Emra thought.

She reached for her own door. Her hair prickled at the back of her neck.

It’s fine, Emra assured herself. *It’s fine.*

Emra pushed the door to her room open and entered.

The chamber was half the size of the living room. Nooses hung in the corners. A few furs lined the walls and floors. Two small stands, which resembled stools more than side tables, flanked her bed which sat in the middle of the left wall. Her window was latched tight—the way she liked it.

Emra placed the lantern at her bedside, undressed into her undergarments, and slipped under the heavy wool blankets and furs that piled on her cot.

She extinguished the flame, closed her eyes, and entered the first sleep she had had away from the elements, vermin, and forest ground in a week.

Chapter 3

Emra woke with the rooster's crow and the whistle of songbirds outside her window. Her bed was warm, and though she roused, she laid unmoving, paralyzed by comfort.

After a few minutes of coziness under the wool blankets and heavy furs, she threw them off and braved her cold room. The frigid air washed over her like she had plunged into a winter lake. Bumps marked her skin and her hair stood.

She slipped into her stockings and pants; threw on a shirt, tunic, and a cloak; and fastened a belt around her waist.

She exited her room. The living room was dark, and the fireplace was dim. No aromatic scents of breakfast filled the air.

Emra frowned.

Sherrick always makes breakfast.

She glanced to the front door and saw her empty quiver lying against the wall, next to her boots and coin.

"Great," Emra whispered, "another errand."

She snagged some jerky from the prep area in the kitchen and walked to the exit. She slid her feet into the boots, grabbed the quiver, and slung it over her shoulder. She focused on the coin. It lifted above her, and she manipulated it, so it swung around her head in a tight circle.

“Sherrick,” Emra shouted, “I’m off to the fletcher’s. I’ll be back for breakfast.”

Emra opened the front door. Sherrick did not answer.

I can’t blame him for sleeping in a bit, Emra thought. I wish I was doing the same.

She stepped outside and a cold zephyr streamed across her face. Ghasthawks flapped elliptical wings and flew slowly against the strong air currents, looking for a few easy catches before winter.

The town’s houses clustered together. Alleys between homes were just a few feet wide, and in some of the older ones, neighbors could reach out and touch each other’s windowsills.

Villagers filed into the streets. Doors opened. Smoke billowed from chimneys. People conversed in the nearby plaza and on the sides of streets, but an anxiety bit at the town’s normal morning ritual. Mothers and fathers held their children close while conversing instead of letting them play in the frost-touched fields outside of town. People looked over their shoulders. While citizens of Hawk’s Rest were reserved, their hurried whispers replaced their traditional deliberate, low-volume speech.

People are on edge, Emra thought. It’s strange.

Emra walked down the street to the fletcher’s workshop. In the distance, a thatched awning shaded the storefront counter which doubled as a workbench. Shavings covered the floor, tools decorated the wall in an organized array, and a few rooster cages occupied the ground at the back wall. She

passed and smiled at her fellow townsfolk who returned slight grins. Another wind from the north blew past her, and she clutched her cloak tight to her body.

When she arrived at the storefront, Weller Frimt, the town fletcher, stood at his table and wound a piece of string around the sharp arrowhead. Weller was broad shouldered and slightly hunched. His bald head reflected morning rays and his thin, light eyebrows angled up at the ends.

“Good morning, Weller,” Emra said.

“Ms. Corvine, how do you do?” Weller responded. His quick fingers finished the tie on the arrow. He set it on the workbench in front of him. “I was expecting you earlier this week.”

“Sherrick and I didn’t get into town until yesterday afternoon.”

“That’s longer than usual. What caused you trouble? Don’t mind my saying, but I know it wasn’t my arrows. If they were that poor, I wouldn’t have sold ‘em to you.”

“Your arrows were fine, but they can’t fix bad aim,” Emra said. “No fletcher could mend a string of impatient marksmanship. Eventually we had to resort to more tried-and-true tactics.”

“Always seems to do the job,” Weller said and laughed. “What can I do for you today?”

“Just another score of arrows please.” Emra floated the coin toward Weller and held the jerky in front of her. “Coin or meat this time?”

“It would be the meat, like usual,” Weller said. He turned and grabbed a bundle of twenty arrows bounded by a piece of twine. “But your brother traded me the venison yesterday at the plaza.”

Weller held out the score and Emra levitated the arrows to her hand.

“What’d you think about that whole thing?” Emra asked. “Sherrick and I talked about it a bit last night, but we were out of town when these disappearances started.”

Weller leaned over the storefront’s counter.

“I don’t really know what to think for the most part. I saw Sir Windlock earlier today and he said another body appeared on the tree in the middle of the night, but he never saw anyone enter the Killing Field. That makes three, now.”

Emra grimaced.

“It’s morbid,” Emra said, “but I don’t think it’s anything Hawk’s Rest should be unaccustomed to.”

Weller shrugged and picked one of his knives and a piece of wood off the table.

“No matter what they think,” Weller said, “no one’s ready for death. We’ve practiced the final rite for centuries yet death surprises us all the same.”

Emra nodded, said goodbye, and walked back home. More people filled the street. Their conversations were more animated, yet still hushed.

“There’s another body on the Tree,” one man said in a gruff voice.

“Do we know who it is?” a woman asked.

“We can’t tell who any of them are,” the man replied, “but you know that’s the usual. The Killing Field is so big that it’s hard to make out anything besides Hanging Man’s Tree.”

Northern winds quickened from soft sweeps to blustery gales. Emra covered herself again. She focused the arrows from her hand into the quiver, so she could tuck her hands underneath her arms and keep her cloak tight.

Winter isn’t here, but harvest has passed, Emra thought. It only gets worse from here.

Emra arrived at her front door and opened it. The living room was as cold as outside. No fire flickered in the hearth, no food cooked over the flame, and the house was dim except for the sun that sneaked past Emra and leaked into the home.

Her stomach dropped and her teeth clenched. Emra’s coin fell and rattled noisily on the ground.

Something’s wrong, Emra thought.

She stepped into the house.

“Sherrick?” Emra said.

She closed the door and scanned the room.

“Sherrick,” she shouted.

She walked hastily to his chamber and wrapped her knuckles on the uneven wood’s facade.

No one answered.

“Sherrick!”

She jangled the handle and opened the door. She gazed at the tossed sheets. Furs hung from the bed and draped onto the floor. The wind whistled outside and rattled the ajar windowpane against the house's exterior.

Sherrick was gone.