

CHAPTER I

Queerwood

One day, when winter had almost run its course, a man reined in his horse outside a small cottage in the middle of the forest. A second horse trailed behind, and he let the lead rope fall as his own mount stopped. He looked around the dwelling. Everything was neat and well kept. To one side was a pen occupied by plump, scratching chickens and behind that was a sty, home to three pigs and a sow with a heavy belly. A garden bed, bare except for a few winter herbs and some eager shoots of green, lay on the other side of the house. Behind that was a barn and stable, both as well cared for as the cottage. The people who lived within took pride in their home and tended it lovingly.

Richard Antrobus dismounted. His long black cloak swirled round him as he swung from the saddle. For a man his age – he had weathered fifty-four winters – he moved gracefully. Whether the slight grimace that came to his face was from the long ride he had just endured, or because of what he was about to do, wasn't obvious.

Antrobus walked to the front of the cottage. From inside came the voices of two women, talking easily, the way that family who are also friends do. The door was open and he

stepped into the shadow of its frame. He took a deep breath, then spoke.

‘I have come for your daughter.’

They were the first words Jenny ever heard Richard Antrobus speak. His voice stilled their chatter; his shadow stretched into the cottage, over the rough floorboards and the wooden table covered in herbs, roots and flowers. When she looked across at him Jenny couldn’t make out any of his features. He was a large black shape, eclipsing the sun at his back.

She looked at her mother, and saw she was struck silent with grief and fear. She wanted her mother to say something, to make it all not true. But she knew there was nothing that could change what would be. So, she went to the alcove and put her few articles of clothing into a rough cloth sack. She kissed her mother’s wet cheek and felt her arms close around her. Jenny smelled the lavender on her skin and the gardenia in her hair, and felt the reassuring texture of the russet shift that covered the trembling woman’s body. She wanted to stay as she was, folded in those slim, light brown arms. But she forced herself away, walked past the figure filling the door frame, and left the cottage. The smell of bay and burdock followed her into the sunlight.

Jenny knew she would never see her mother again. It pained her to leave without saying goodbye to her father. She had lived in this forest her entire life. All she loved was within these woods and all that loved her lived in the cottage she was leaving.

She walked to the horses, hearing his footsteps behind her. He pointed to the horse he had been leading and she

swung into the saddle. She kicked her mount into a walk and headed it along the path away from the cottage. Jenny promised herself that she wouldn't cry, nor would she look back. Even when she heard the wailing of her mother, her name called over and over, she kept her promise. She turned her heart into a rock of anger against the man who rode beside her.

Jenny was not even fifteen. Yet she rode through Queerwood, the ancient forest of Vale, by the side of a man she had never met.



His horse was jet black except for the white stocking on its right foreleg and a small white blaze between its eyes. Dark and strong-willed, it was a fitting horse for the most renowned alchemist in Vale; indeed, perhaps the greatest in any city. Hers was a docile dun gelding that seemed to sleep as it walked. That, too, seemed fitting for her. She was condemned, against her wishes, to an apprenticeship she hadn't sought or wanted. Like her mount, she, too, had to be obedient. If she ran from her new master during her term, she would no longer be considered a citizen of Vale; she would be stripped of the right to work, and forced into poverty or to seek a life elsewhere. If she ran in the first year, her parents would share that fate with her. She couldn't let that happen. She would serve her apprenticeship; but she would never be more than an unwilling apprentice, a reluctant drudge. So, she rode on.

Though the end of winter was still a fortnight away, the weather belied the season and the forest was busy reviving itself. Insects and birds played hide-and-seek among trees thick with leaves. Animals, lean after winter rations, grew fat on the new vegetation, or on each other. As Jenny and Antrobus rode through the forest, all around them was abundant life and the promise of bright days ahead.

It was half a day's ride to Vale and they would arrive with the evening. The two rode in silence through the noisy forest. Queerwood seemed endless, an untamed forest covering valleys, meadowland and hills. Its few roads, muddy with the thaw, were rough and narrow. He seemed content with her silence, making no attempt to draw her into conversation. Indeed, he seemed to welcome it so he could take in the life of the forest. His eyes darted here and there, observing everything around him.

Those curious eyes missed the man behind the gnarled chestnut at the edge of the road. As the riders neared, the man stepped on to the road. In a quick, practised movement, almost too fast to follow, he drew the bow in his hands. Before either of them could react, he let the arrow fly. It pierced Antrobus's shoulder, jolting his body as if he had been hit with a club. His grip on the reins loosened and he felt himself falling from his horse. Through the shock he saw the man putting another arrow to his bow. He tried to kick his horse into a gallop but his strength had left him.

'Run ...' he gasped.

The archer drew his bow. He was slower, more deliberate this time. His second shaft would find his quarry's heart.

From out of the forest flashed a long wooden staff. It struck the bowman, a hard blow that crunched into his head just above his ear. The bow jerked upwards and the arrow flew high into the treetops as the archer fell to his knees.

A man stepped from the trees. He was dressed in a simple jerkin and leggings, dark green like the leaves of the forest. He moved quickly towards the fallen bowman, but before he could cover the ground between them, the bowman lurched to his feet and staggered into the trees.

'Father!' Jenny cried. She kicked her feet free of the stirrups and slid from her saddle. Antrobus tried to dismount but his legs gave way and he fell to the muddy road. Jenny rushed to him. Quickly, she pulled aside Antrobus's cloak. Her father hesitated; he cast a glance at the trees where the bowman had gone, then turned and ran to help his daughter.

'The arrow's missed the bone. The head has come out the other side. He'll bleed to death,' she said.

If he dies, maybe I can go home, she thought, and for an instant she hesitated. But she knew she wouldn't leave him to die. There are some things you do no matter what the cost.

She looked in the small leather bag at her waist, then scanned the forest. 'I don't have in my pouch all that I need. I've some poppy juice for the pain, but nothing to heal the wound. Can you see what you can find? Masterwort would be best, but gypsywort or goosefoot will do. I need water. And your knife.'

Her father nodded. He handed his daughter his waterskin and his long-bladed knife. He fetched his staff

from where it lay by the side of the road and went into the forest.

Jenny unstoppered a small bottle. Gently, she tilted Antrobus's head back. He opened his mouth and she poured half a dozen brownish drops onto his tongue. He made a face, but swallowed the undiluted poppy juice, then took a drink from the waterskin.

She would have to remove his cloak, tunic and shirt to treat the wound. She managed to untie the cloak but she had to cut the left sleeve off the tunic; Antrobus would have to take it to a tailor to be re sewn, if he could remove the blood stains. His shirt, though, proved more difficult and Jenny had to cut it from his body. He remained conscious but his face was pale and shone with sweat. While she was cutting the shirt around the arrow he gasped in pain and vomited on the road.

Her father returned, dropping to his knees beside her. 'Masterwort,' he said, handing her a small clean root. 'It was growing near the stream. It's washed.'

'Good. Your cup.' She held out her hand. Her father took a battered tin cup from his pack and handed it to his daughter. She sliced the root into the cup and mashed it with the handle of the knife, then added water to make a thick paste. 'You should remember where you found it. Mother's always looking for masterwort.'

He watched as his daughter worked. He was proud of her skill. She would have been a great healer, he thought. Even more skilled than her mother.

'I'll hold him. Slice the head from the arrow, then draw

it quickly and evenly,' she said.

Her father smiled grimly. 'This isn't the first arrow I've drawn. Ready?'

Jenny took a deep breath, then nodded. With his knife, her father scored the shaft deeply just behind the arrowhead. He held the shaft steady with one hand, then snapped off the head. Antrobus groaned and twitched and Jenny felt his fingers dig into her arm.

Almost in the same motion, her father drew the arrow from his shoulder. This time, he cried out and pain-sweat soaked him. Antrobus's fingers dug deeper into her arm.

Her father picked up the arrowhead. 'Small barbs. A soldier's arrow,' he said, frowning. 'It's a good thing he used a bow and not a pistol or musket.'

She prised Antrobus's fingers from her arm. Using pads of cloth from his torn shirt, she made two poultices from the paste and covered the two wounds, then bound them tight with what remained of his shirt.

'Linen. Shame to cut it,' said her father as he held the poultices in place while she bound the shoulder.

'I'm sure he has others,' she said. Jenny couldn't disguise the bitterness in her voice. 'We'll let him rest for a few minutes, then I'll take him to Vale. Can you stay with him while I go to the stream and wash the blood from my hands?'

When she returned, Antrobus was propped against a tree drinking from his own waterskin. Her father was tethering the two horses. She squatted next to the wounded man.

'We have to get you to Vale as soon as possible. I've done

what I can but the physician there will be able to tend the wound properly. You were lucky the arrow missed your bone,' said Jenny.

'What you started, you'll finish. You can look at it again in Vale,' Antrobus said curtly. He looked at her father. 'Am I lucky, Swift? Did you just happen by or were you following us?'

Ewan Swift gave him a cold look. 'It wasn't fortune, Antrobus. I was following you. I wasn't going to let you take Jenny without saying goodbye to her. The law gave you the right to choose her as your apprentice, and there is nothing we can do to change that, but she is my *daughter*.'

'Well, thank you, Ewan. Now, say your farewells and be done with it.' Antrobus rose to his feet slowly. The blood fled from his face again and he leaned against the tree. 'We haven't got all day,' he said, and walked on unsteady legs to his horse.

Antrobus's tone irritated Ewan. 'Wait!' he snapped. 'Who attacked you? Were they enemy or outlaw? What if they try again? I'm not letting Jenny –'

'It is not up to you to allow anything!' Antrobus snapped back. 'She is now my apprentice and for the next seven years she is mine. You of all people should know that – and know the penalty for obstructing me, or should she run away.' He pointed to where the bow lay by the road. 'There will be no more danger, Ewan. Whoever attacked me, they'll have a hard time without their bow. It looks like a good bow. Take it.' He pushed away from the tree. 'Now, help me get on my horse and say goodbye,' he said.

‘Antrobus,’ said Ewan, ‘I am grateful for your patience. You could have taken Jenny nearly a year ago. But I ask you, please, just another six months. Lucy ... her mother ... will not last beyond that.’

‘I’m sorry, Ewan, I cannot. I convinced the guild lords to let Jenny learn from her mother for another year when I heard Lucy was dying. But they have refused me more time. If I don’t take her, I will lose her. She will lose *me*. She will remain here, a half-trained rustic healer. Or, worse, she will be claimed by a seamstress or a mercer, or some such. You know what a waste that would be, Ewan. You know she’s talented. But you don’t know just how unique she is.’

Ewan’s shoulders drooped. It was useless to argue. Antrobus was right. It was best for Jenny.

It was best for Vale.

Antrobus sighed. ‘Now, we must go. No more talk. I’m weary. Say your goodbyes, Swift.’

Ewan helped him on to his horse. Considerately, Antrobus trotted the horse a short distance down the road to let Jenny say goodbye to her father.

Tears rolled down Jenny’s cheeks. ‘I will never see Mama again, will I?’ It wasn’t a question. She knew the answer, but the child in her hoped her father would tell her it would all be OK and that the answer she knew was false.

Ewan fought back his own tears. ‘This will be her last summer.’ He brushed a tear from Jenny’s cheek. ‘I loved watching the two of you in summer. The bright, clear days made you both seem so alive.’ Ewan smiled at his daughter. ‘But I was always grateful for the winter, when the warm

hearth and the cosiness of the cottage made us seem closer.’ He sighed. ‘There is no good season for one you love to die. And now I lose you, too.’

‘You will get word to me when she dies, won’t you? And you will visit me some time?’ Jenny asked.

‘I will let you know. And I will visit.’ Ewan hesitated. ‘Jenny, you have a difficult time ahead. Maybe your mother and I were wrong to live such an isolated life and to protect you from the scorn of others. And being the daughter of a wood-ward, you have led a solitary life, meeting only a few. You are different from those around you, as your mother is. That can be a hardship.’

Jenny smiled through her tears. ‘Not quite as different as Mama.’

Ewan tried to return her smile but in his daughter’s face he saw the face of his wife. And the life in Jenny’s eyes reminded him of the loss he would have to bear.

‘Now you will be confronted by the opinions and prejudices of others. Remember,’ he said gruffly, ‘understand the faults of others but accept none. Have patience –’

‘Have patience with everyone’s failings except your own,’ Jenny finished for him. ‘You have told me so more than once,’ she teased. She loved her father too much not to make light of what was happening.

‘Now go, Jenny. Better not keep him waiting.’

Jenny’s eyes stung with unshed tears. ‘I left without telling Mother,’ she said. ‘I have done the motherwort for the midwife. The laurel is for Master Gumm but I have picked extra for the larder – I know you like it in your stew.’

Mistress Hamley will come for the burdock this afternoon. She said Abraham's humours are rising and he needs flushing.'

Ewan smiled. 'I'll tell her,' he said.

Jenny threw her arms around her father. He held her, feeling her reluctant tears on his cheek. Then he felt her arms slip from his neck and his daughter was gone.



Jenny and Antrobus continued through Queerwood in silence as before. It took all of Antrobus's concentration just to stay on his horse. After an hour, he signalled to Jenny that he had to rest. They stopped and Jenny helped him from his horse and guided him to the trunk of a fallen tree.

'My pack and waterskin,' said Antrobus when he was seated on the log.

Jenny brought his things to him.

'There's food in the pack if you're hungry,' he told her after he had drunk some water. Jenny opened the pack. Inside were discs of dried oats and barley and a few apples. She nibbled one of the cakes and was surprised at how delicious it tasted. Her surprise must have shown on her face.

'Did you think His Grace wouldn't have good cooks? Or perhaps that I make my own food?' he asked with an amused half-smile.

'I'd never thought about it,' Jenny admitted. 'Oats, barley, honey, ginger and a sprinkling of cloves. They taste better than they look.'

‘That makes them rare, at least at the palace. There, most things look better than they are,’ he said wryly. Antrobus watched her eat for some minutes before he spoke again.

‘You’re angry with me because I’ve taken you from your parents. You think that I’ve forced this upon you, and them. You’re right. I did. But you’ve never asked why I chose you, even last year when your parents first told you.’

Jenny looked directly at him, her face defiant but her eyes resigned. ‘If no reason is good enough, then why ask for any? Nothing you could say, no reason you could give, would make me feel better.’ She dropped her eyes. ‘Besides, nothing I could say would mean anything. You have decided, and so it is done.’

‘You are in your fifteenth year, Jenny – a year late to start your learning.’

‘I have been learning all my life,’ Jenny replied bitterly. ‘I chose long ago and have learned every day since. I chose to be a healer, like my mother. Why couldn’t I stay as a healer? Why do I have to go to court and become something else? What choice has been given me?’

‘More than you know. You will still be a healer but you will be much more as well. My son finished his learning three years ago. The Decrees said I had two years to find someone to take his place as my apprentice. I didn’t need two years to choose. I knew even then it would be you,’ said Antrobus.

‘Your son was an apprentice?’ said Jenny, startled. ‘I would’ve thought he would have gone to the university. You have the position and money.’

‘He was an articulated apprentice,’ said Antrobus. ‘One who has a degree from a university but chooses to complete his learning with a master rather than through more study.’

‘Your son was lucky,’ said Jenny. She didn’t try to hide her resentment. ‘At least he got to learn from his parent.’

Antrobus was becoming impatient and irritable. ‘I gave you all the time possible, Jenny!’ he snapped. ‘I waited these past twelve months so you had more time with your mother!’

‘You didn’t have to choose me at all! Most girls are not chosen for the learning – only boys. There are many boys who would be glad to be your apprentice. Why couldn’t you let me be?’ She glared at Antrobus, determined not to cry.

Antrobus regretted his tone and he softened his voice. ‘Jenny, do you really think that even if your mother were not dying, if she was to live, that you would have been allowed to choose your learning with her?’

‘Why not? She is the best healer in the land!’

‘Do you think that matters? Grow up! Your mother is an outsider. She is not Vale-born. And worse, with her brown skin and oval eyes she doesn’t look like us. How many people come to her? Only a few from small villages around Queerwood. Because she is different.’

‘Then why did they let her stay?’ said Jenny hotly.

‘Because of your father’s position as a wood-ward. He could take her into Queerwood and keep her away from others. They didn’t see her, so they ceased to care. But they never forgot, Jenny. Believe that.’

‘I have my mother’s skin and her eyes. Why will they

accept me?’

‘Most won’t. But no one can deny the rights given to you through your father. And you are not so brown-skinned and your eyes are not quite the same as your mother’s. You are not as different. Nonetheless, it won’t be easy.’

‘So, I have another reason to hate you. If making me into something I don’t want to be, and taking me from my mother when she is dying are not enough, you expose me to the ridicule of others.’

Antrobus winced in pain. He looked at Jenny without sympathy.

‘Everyone faces the ridicule of others for some reason or other, especially at the palace. When you lack merit, the only way to gain merit is to deny it to others. And if you are unlucky enough to have real merit, the ridicule is all the greater,’ he said.

‘My father would never have put me in that position,’ sulked Jenny.

‘Probably not. But I always thought your father was too protective,’ said Antrobus.

Jenny was startled. ‘How could you have known what my father was like. He’s a wood-ward. You live at the palace.’

Antrobus studied her for a minute. ‘There is much you haven’t been told, I think.’ He winced. ‘I could rest another moment while I tell you.’

‘Our Duke, Emeric, was only ten when his father, Albert, died. Despite his youth, Emeric was given the court under guardianship of his aunt, Bernice. Charles, Emeric’s uncle, resented the Duke, for he thought he would make a

better ruler. After many bitter words and threats of rebellion, Charles left the court and the country. From time to time, word came that Charles was working to overthrow Emeric, but no rebellion came. For more than a dozen years, there has been no word of Charles.

‘Emeric had a second uncle, David. This uncle had no interest in the politics of court. He could have stayed as an idle member of the court, with no responsibilities and a life free from worry. David, though, loved travel and learning. Not long after his brother Charles had left, David determined to travel. He had heard of a traveller from Venice who, many, many years ago, had travelled as far east as it is possible to journey and had come across a people of great learning and antiquity. And so David announced he was going to seek this country and bring back what knowledge he could.

‘Your father, Ewan, was David’s clerk. Did you know that he was once a clerk?’

Jenny was startled. ‘But my father is a wood-ward. His learning must have been as a wood-ward. He couldn’t have been a clerk.’

Antrobus raised his hand to stop her. ‘So, you didn’t know. It doesn’t matter. Let me tell the rest.

‘David set out with a small retinue, including your father. They were gone for nearly five years. They went very far to the east, all the way to Seres, the land the Venetian had found. Your father became ill; your mother, a local woman, nursed him and he fell in love with her. She must have fallen in love with him, too, because when David and your father

returned, your mother came with them. Many of your father's companions disapproved of him bringing a foreigner back. Especially when they realised that your father intended to marry her.

'Some say that your father saved David's life during their travels and in gratitude David allowed him to turn his back on his learning and become a wood-ward. I think that being a wood-ward is what your father wanted from the beginning and his learning was ill-chosen. Whatever the reason, Ewan became the ward of Queerwood. In this forest he could live peacefully with your mother, away from the gossip and disapproval of others.

'Lucy is not your mother's real name. If it matters, you'll have to ask your father for it one day. I cannot remember her name, if ever I did know.'

Jenny gazed at the treetops, deep in thought. At last she said, 'That explains some of the herbs and plants my mother knows and that grow nowhere else in Queerwood.'

Antrobus nodded. 'Yes, much was brought back. Not just by your mother. David brought back many things known in your mother's land. We have reason to be grateful for his restless feet and love of learning.'

'My mother must have been a healer there. She didn't learn all she knew after she came here,' said Jenny. 'How much of what she knows will be lost because she was an outsider? I haven't had time to learn half of what she could have taught me.'

'True,' said Antrobus. 'But how much more would you have learned in the short time she has left?'

Jenny didn't reply. All she knew was that something had been stolen from her which she could never recover.

'Tomorrow, I will explain why I chose you. Now is not the time. Come, I have rested long enough. We'd best continue or we won't make Vale before night,' said Antrobus. He got to his feet, wincing with the pain once more. 'I have never been wounded before. Not something I would like to try again.'

The last part of their ride into Vale was like the first, in silence and with a gulf between them.