

Written To Endure
Lindsay Klug

Chapter One

All it took was one small act of rebellion.

Marise had read about it time and again in the Underground. Many feared to go there; discovery meant anything from flogging to public execution. But Marise craved knowledge. It was a thirst the daily prayers could not satisfy.

Hurrying down the alleyway, she pulled her cloak tighter against the cold chill. The meeting was to be held in a small hut near the docks tonight. Perhaps it would be the night she could convince the people to begin learning.

If they would only listen, she could start a change that would be like a boulder rolling downhill.

Marise banished the thoughts as she came to the end of the alley. The night was quiet – too quiet for this area. No roaming bands of gangs appeared, no noises of swords clashing. The silence was eerie. A chill climbed up her back.

Moving even more quickly, she crossed the street towards the next alleyway. Marise had learned to listen for rebel gatherings, slipping into the sessions unnoticed. She would ply a few ears, try to instill some ideas into the masses, but she had to remain hidden.

Some didn't like librarians. They felt a librarian was a threat to their existence. Most did not know she was one, only two people she had told. They were long gone, dead or exiled with a book in their hands.

Since their deaths, she told no one. Her work as a scribe went by quietly. She was normally tasked to merchants for record keeping. It paid the bills and provided a cover to do what she must.

The hut's door was ajar, light spilling into the street. Inside, the room was packed wall to wall. Marise pulled her hood down and merged into the crowd silently. A man was speaking up front, voice ringing with fervor.

"They hold us down, brothers and sisters! They keep us in the dark. I tell you I have seen the light, and it is beautiful."

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A voice from the crowd piped up. "They'll kill us if we're caught reading!"

"They can't kill everyone," the man up front said. "Some will die, yes. That is the price of revolution."

The room erupted in whispers and quiet conversation. Marise moved closer to one group. "...get us all killed, I tell you."

Not that one. The next group was much the same, and the third, but the last was different. "I have a great-grandmother who used to read all the time. She talks about it every time I see her."

Another leaned closer. "What are books like?"

Marise held her smile back. "Books are like adventures in your mind," she said softly. Heads turned towards her.

"How would you know?" A woman stared at her, the question pointed.

"I have heard tales from other places," Marise replied carefully. "Many stories are told from what is read."

"And do you know how to read?" The question came from behind her. Turning, she found the man who had been speaking standing close. Candlelight flickered across his face, magnifying the intensity in his eyes.

Marise considered him. Everything in him was focused on her. He made her nervous. She shifted on her feet before replying. "I know enough."

He grabbed her arm firmly, pulling her aside. "You should not speak so freely," he said softly. "Some of these ears do not belong here."

"I heard them," she replied in the same soft tone. "Fear does not vanish because we wish it gone, sir."

"No," he murmured, "but it drives action."

She frowned. "Action without understanding will create a spark for the fire."

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He gripped her arm tighter. “And understanding without action is obedience dressed as patience.”

That struck a little too close for Marise’s liking.

“You think that by learning to read, we can shake our chains,” he continued. “That by gaining knowledge we will be free.” He scoffed. “If that were true, there would already have been uprisings.”

Cheeks heating, she said, “Writings last longer than bodies.”

Several faces were turned to them now, watching.

“A belief,” he said coolly, “held by those who think they will survive long enough to finish reading.”

She yanked her arm from the man and turned on a heel, stalking out of the room. Anger boiled within her. How dare he! She was the one on the streets, helping the children in whispers. She was the one who gave hope to many who knew her face.

Yet...she was not revered. People did not whisper about the librarian. No, her work was hidden, as she should remain. Tonight, she had come too far out of the shadows.

Kicking a rock ahead of her, she walked towards the docks.

The silence followed her, echoing footsteps the only sound. Walking out along a pier, she stopped near the edge and took a deep breath of the salted air. Closing her eyes, she let her head fall back to bathe her face in the moonlight.

Cold steel pressed to her throat as a body pressed against her back. An arm circled her shoulders, cinching her close. Marise barely dared to breathe for the fear coursing through her. Her knees wobbled, threatening to give way. She clutched at the arm wrapping her.

“Late to be wandering, lady,” a man whispered in her ear. Gooseflesh rose along her arms, making the hairs stand on end. “Tis the hour of the dead.” His grip on her loosened.

This was not a robbery, she thought, for he asks for nothing. “Tis past time for me to be home, I know,” she whispered, “but I could not sleep and I needed a divergence.”

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“Run,” the man murmured. Releasing her, he vanished before she could turn around. Marise hesitated just a heartbeat before sprinting off the docks and up the hill towards the street. Reaching the first of the huts, she slowed a little and looked back.

In the moonlight shining down, figures moved, swords shining in the soft light, glistening with rage.

Marise turned and began sprinting again. If she could just get home before anything started –

An arrow whistled past her ear. Yelping, she ducked into an alleyway and took off running, cloak billowing behind her. Running to the end, she slid as she tried to stop suddenly. Warriors lined the walls across from her.

The air was bristling. Marise covered her head and ran back into the alleyway, but stopped short when a man came into view. He was tall, with broad shoulders, a sword hilt sticking over one. She stopped, feet sliding on the cobblestones. Half turning, she ran back towards the arrows.

A crouching person appeared, weapon aimed towards her. Marise froze, her head swiveling between the two people. Trapped! She was trapped, no escape in sight.

Her heart pounded in her chest, every beat loud in her ears. The swordsman began to walk slowly towards her. “You did not run fast enough, lady.”

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Chapter Two

Blood pounded through her veins, heartbeat echoing in her ear. *Who is this man? What does he want from me?*

He stopped a few paces away, hands coming up as though to soothe her. "I will not harm you," he said softly. "You need not fear me."

Marise opened and closed her mouth a few times, words refusing to come out. Her mind whirled with thoughts, she couldn't catch one to say. Instead, she blurted out, "Who are you?"

"I am no one, lady."

"You have to be someone," she replied flatly. Frustration flared. She just wanted to go home and hide from all the chaos unfolding around her. Sounds of war drifted to her ears, screams and swords clashing. People were dying while she was standing there talking to a stranger.

The corners of his lips lifted in a smile. Behind him, outside the alley, a group of warriors ran past, carrying torches. Marise shivered. "I am called Nyom," he said, his voice quiet. "Some call me death, some call me Lord, but most know me as the War Lord from Frenkia."

A War Lord from Frenkia! What was he doing in Daile? Frenkia was a land of feuding tribes, forever at war. How had he gathered enough to come to Daile? She nearly stumbled back a step as fear lanced through her. What did a War Lord want with her?

His face hardened, shadows lengthening. "You have heard of me."

"No, but I have heard of Frenkia."

Brow furrowing, he stepped closer. "You fear me but you know not of me?"

"I fear War Lords," she said. "You bring death and chaos, and these are my enemies."

Pushing off the wall, Marise found her legs to be stronger than before. He had not harmed her yet. Perhaps he would not. "If it please you, I will make my way home."

"It does not please me," he replied, folding his arms over his chest. "You have not told me anything of yourself. Why are you out so late?"

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“I could not sleep,” she told him again. “Sometimes when I cannot sleep, I walk to the docks.” That part was true, at least.

“You were not at the docks because you could not sleep, lady.”

Dread pooled in her belly. *What does he know?* “I cannot say where I was because I was nowhere.” Her voice was faint to her ears.

“Lady, do not tease me. I know you were at a meeting with rebels. I was there.”

He was there. Her head went woozy, heartbeat slamming painfully against her ribs. “Yes,” she said softly. “I was there.”

“You are a librarian.” It was not an accusation, but a statement of fact.

Marise did not reply. To confirm was to potentially get herself killed, or worse – captured. So she did all she could, and held her tongue, swallowing back her response.

“I see.” He was matter of fact. “You do not trust in me. That is fine.” He stepped back, finally granting her some space. “Go, for tonight, lady. But stay close. I will seek you out tomorrow.”

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Chapter Three

Marise huddled in the back of her hut, crouched behind her bed. She was furthest from the door, so if someone broke in, she could drive the knife she held straight into her heart.

She would not be used, paraded around like a dog on a chain. Knowledge was important, yes, never if it was hoarded by the powerful. She was to work for the people, not the High Ones, nor any War Lords. It was tenet from the Underground.

He would not take her easily. No, she was not meant to go out that way. She did not think she was meant to die on her own blade, either, but better that than be a pawn.

Dawn broke beyond her curtains, pale light flooding into the room. There had been no sounds of war for quite some time, but still she remained. Her body would not obey if she wished it to.

“You are a librarian.”

The words rung in her head. She did not call herself that, for doing so would surely bring death. But the War Lord had let her go.

Nyom. His name brought a shiver to her spine. A War Lord from Frenkia. The lands where tribal feuds reigned, she would not have expected a War Lord from there to come to Daile. Frenkia had its own chaos to deal with...unless things had changed.

She had not been Underground for some time. Things could have changed and she would be none the wiser.

By the time she stood, the sun was halfway to its peak. She cracked her door open, listening. Silence echoed, nothing moving. Opening the door further, she peered out.

To either side of her hut stood guards, five total, with one standing directly in front of her door. She blinked, head rearing back inside so she could shut the door. Guards! No, she could not believe it.

Opening the door again, she stepped outside. “Excuse me, why are you in front of my house?”

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“I am to guard this house, lady, that none shall enter save for yourself or my lord.”

“May I leave and return as I will?”

“Aye.” He said. “But I will follow.”

So much for the Underground. She cursed her luck, going back inside to get her bag. Moving outside, she shut the door firmly and walked around the warrior. “Come, then,” she said, “for I have things to do.”

With her bag over her shoulder, and a warrior at her heels, Marise set out to find survivors.

It did not take long. Around the first corner, she encountered a cluster of young children huddled together. Frightened eyes turned up to her, though some few showed recognition. She smiled at them. “Be easy, children, the worst is over now. Do you have homes to go to?”

Most nodded, but some shook their heads. “Take with you any who do not, and go home. Stay there until you are told otherwise, yes?”

One boy, older than the rest stood up. “We will do this, Marise.”

“Good, Fletcher. Thank you.”

She watched the children move away, some few splitting off but most staying together. War had found them far too young. She turned to the warrior shadowing her. “Do you see what war brings?”

“I have seen many battles, lady.”

She huffed, turning and walking again. She encountered several more groups of children in alleyways and at street corners. She sent them all home.

Marise rounded a corner and stopped. Ahead, a group of warriors stood listening to a tall man. He wore dark pants, with a linen shirt tucked in. A sword was strapped to his back, the tip glistening with some jewel in the hilt.

The man turned, as though he could feel her gaze. She recognized him from the alley, for though it had been dark, he had a face to remember. He lifted one hand, gesturing her to come

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closer, then turned back to his men and released them. They ran in pairs, in different directions. Marise approached carefully, unsure of him.

“They seek the survivors,” he said. “We must now restore order, then bring a new way to these lands. Would you agree, lady?”

Marise turned her eyes to him. “I would agree, but it depends on what way is being put in place.”

“Yes, that is the sticking point.” He paused, eyeing her. “Did you sleep?”

“No. How was I to sleep with threats hanging over my head?”

“Who threatens you?”

She balked, stunned. He did not know he threatened her? “Tis the war that threatens me, lord.”

“You have a gentle spirit,” he replied. When she glanced up at him, he was looking towards the city, where the High Ones dwelled. Marise could see the gate from here. It was torn down, wood burning to one side. “They resisted,” he added.

“How many were lost?”

“On my side? Some few, but loyal men all. I grieve their loss. On Daile’s side, more died than survived. They fought hard.” He sounded impressed.

“The people love this city, for all its faults.”

“I see this. Tis almost inspiring.” He began walking. “Come, see what the inner city holds with me.”

Marise had to nearly run to keep up with his stride. Her warrior tail fell in behind them. “You have not visited yet?”

“I have been learning of the small folk and their struggles,” he said. “I would make a fairer place for them.”

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For the small folk? Her eyes narrowed as she glanced at him. What was in this man's head? "How so?"

"I will open the archives to all, for one. That will remove some of the inequality they face."

"The small folk cannot read," she said. "Most of them, anyway."

"Then we shall rely on the ones who can to tell the stories. A verbal history is almost as good as a written one."

The street began to curve upwards. Marise struggled to keep up with him, breathing hard. "Tis," she agreed. "But the laws here are woven deeply into the people. If you ask who can read, it is likely they will not reply."

"Why?"

"They will be shunned. Knowledge is only for the High Ones, you see, the ones ordained by God to have the power." She stopped, teeth clicking as she shut her mouth.

"A farce," Nyom said.

Marise looked down, unsure if he was teasing or not. "Some might say it so, lord."

"I say it so. Knowledge is a strange thing to keep close."

"An educated people will rise, lord."

His head turned towards her. "Wise words," he said. "Exactly how a librarian would respond."

She fell silent again, refusing to acknowledge the title. He would not fool her into giving herself away.

"Still no response?" He hummed. "Perhaps you need to see more of what I will do. Come, let us see what the inner city has to offer."