PROLOGUE

THE SUN WAS RISING, AND THE SERPENTS HAD BEEN SCREAMing all night.

The girl had lain awake listening to them, unable to sleep, just like every other citizen of Addersport. She'd pushed her dormitory bed right up against the windowsill, so she could hear them especially clearly; their voices were high and eerie, a sound like a wet finger dragged across glass. Addersport sat next to and within the sea; waterways invaded the city like veins through a leaf, and the smaller sea serpents had swum up these convenient thoroughfares until every canal glinted with scales of blue, green, yellow, and black. To cross a bridge in Addersport these days was to run the risk of feeling a set of serrated jaws close around your ankle. The footpaths that ran along each waterway were positively lethal. The city was under siege.

That morning over breakfast, the orphanage was rife with the rumour that the city officials had brought in an actual magpie to deal with these rogue monsters—a mage, dedicated

to one of the twelve gods, able to ask a boon and banish the serpents. The girl looked into her bowl of porridge and considered: which god? The Hooded Crow, perhaps. The god of death could turn all the serpents into so much seagull chow with a wink. Or the Pack, the god of the chase. They could bless the city's whaling ships with the ability to hunt the beasts.

Outside, the screaming continued.

In the afternoon, while the children were packed into the dusty school room for their lessons, a group of men in city guard uniforms arrived, their faces closed and grim. Sitting at her desk by the door, the girl couldn't hear what passed between the guards and the bursar of the orphanage, but she caught a glimpse of a small bag being handed over. It looked heavy, and it clinked when the bursar put it in his pocket.When the guards left and the bursar turned away from the front door, he glanced up and caught sight of the girl. To her surprise, his normally sallow face flushed crimson, and he quickly moved out of sight. The girl, staring at the dusty floor where he'd been standing, felt a cold tremor move through her. Something was happening, and it wasn't good.

So when they came for her, she wasn't particularly surprised. It was the middle of the afternoon by then, and the orphans were busy at work, darning clothes for pennies. A boy and a young woman came into their work room and stood for a moment, surveying the children. The pair were so richly dressed that, as one, the orphans fell silent. They rarely saw visitors at all, let alone ones in burgundy silk and golden thread. The boy was perhaps only thirteen or fourteen years old, and he was handsome in a cold sort of way, with black hair pulled back from his face in a braid. His eyes were hazel, almost tawny coloured,

and they seemed to hungrily consume everything they looked at. The woman looked nearer twenty years old, with brown skin and hair hidden under a swatch of embroidered cloth. In the centre of their chests they both wore a solid gold pin in the shape of a lion; rubies spilled from its claws like blood.

The girl, who at twelve summers was the oldest in the room, stood up from her pile of cloth. Her heart was beating too fast and the air felt thick with danger. *Meet it head on,* she thought.

'Who are you?' she asked. There were no staff present. The bursar had made himself curiously absent. 'What do you want?'

'Impertinence,' said the woman, although without any heat. If anything she looked bored. 'Can't you see who you're talking to?'

'Acolytes of the Bloody Claw,' the girl said, her eyes drawn to the lion pin. She could feel the other children staring at her. She cleared her throat. 'That's my guess. But what does the Bloody Claw want with orphans?'

'She's clever, this one,' said the boy. He half turned to the young woman. 'You know Mother likes it best when they are clever, Dalesh.'

The girl blinked. Could these two be brother and sister?

The woman grunted. *'W'hat use is a sacrifice if you're not really losing anything?'* The words had the tone of something she had spoken many times before. 'Our lord likes His food to plead eloquently as well as squeal deliciously.' Dalesh sighed. 'But she told us to look them *all* over. Mother has entrusted us with an important task.'

'Ah, it's fine.' The boy waved his hand, swatting away the woman's concerns like flies. 'I've got a feeling about it. And you know that Mother trusts my feelings.'

The woman grimaced. 'Fine.'

'It's decided then.' The boy smiled-a sharp, brittle thing with no warmth in it at all-and gestured impatiently at the girl. 'Come along, you.We don't have all day.You're coming with us.'

The girl took a step backwards. Around her, the other orphans had all drawn back, as though afraid that they might catch her fate from being too close.

'I'm not going anywhere with you.' She balled her hands into fists. 'The bursar can't just sell children. This isn't some backwater village where you can wander in and do what you want. This is Addersport.' She took a breath. 'You'll have to drag me out.'

The boy sighed.

'If you insist.'