

From The Air Above

Chapter One

Here Be Mourrows

The thought that had preoccupied Atlas Wick most of the morning was how to get rid of Cousin Emory. Emory couldn't have overstayed his welcome because he'd never been invited – he had just appeared one day outside the manor, descending from the carriage in his short, green velvet cape and feathered hat, his embroidered breeches glistening in the sun. Atlas felt he had extended his cousin great patience over the past fortnight, showing him the many rooms of the manor, the lay of the land, the valley and its string of villages. He had listened to Emory compare all things to the capital and its golden wonders: why is your manor so small? Why aren't the walls of your estate mended? Why can't we go outside them? Where are the rest of your servants? Is this really all there is to your House?

To all this, Atlas had kept silent, the blush creeping up past his shirt collar. There were some things he couldn't explain to capital-born cousins.

Emory was lying flat on the grassy top of the wall, eyes pressed into his binoculars. From this perch, he and Atlas could see the villages north of the manor, the steep valley where the land dropped into a river and the houses clustered along the terraced edges. Atlas and Emory were exactly eight minutes' hard ride from the manor, and it was four o'clock in the afternoon. Atlas threw a handful of grass over the wall to watch it drift away on the wind. 'Haven't I entertained you enough, Emory?'

'Entertained?' Emory didn't take his eyes from the binoculars. 'This is

not Sindrin, little cousin, and cannot entirely divert me. The wild flowers are pretty enough, but there are no people here.’

Sindrin, the Glorious City of Bast, the haze of green-shingled houses and white granite streets, the interlocking grid of narrow canals and thin steam punts; the thrice-ringed capital where rice paddies glimmered in the heat of late summer and goat paths broadened into gravel roads of oxcarts and morning markets. Atlas had heard its praises often enough. He scowled, but Emory didn’t notice.

Emory was taller than Atlas remembered him. When had they last met? Atlas had never seen much of him during his visits to the capital. Emory had been there somewhere in the periphery, a flounce of golden curls quickly pulled away from view by friends or cousins. It had been his seventeenth birthday last month – Atlas knew this not out of interest, but because Emory had told him everything about the party, and how everyone had been invited (‘Everyone!’ Emory had thrown his arms out at this), and there was cake and tea and mountains of presents, among these a hawk for hunting, and a bow and quiver from the royal bowmaker Master Archer Endra Kite. That quiver was strapped diagonally across Emory’s back now, the ashwood bow in his lap, the delicate gold detailing around the grip glinting in the light. There was only a year between them, but Emory made it out to be a vast gulf of time, as if he’d graduated to things Atlas couldn’t possibly understand.

‘I was told to expect mourrows,’ said Emory, ‘and all I’ve seen is miles of grass.’

‘Perhaps you’d rather go home to nurse your disappointment.’

Emory almost made a face, but seemed to remember his manners in time.

A train whistle called from the valley below, high and faint in the wind. It was a varnish, an old passenger train from the capital converted to carrying freight. It stopped in Dellarboor, the village below the manor, and Atlas had watched it unloaded many times before, the barrels of aromatic teas, the crates of sugar and spices and dyes distributed among the merchants in exchange for Dellarboor’s fine silks and skeins of thread – all reverently wrapped in paper and packed away for the tastemakers of the capital. The village markets would be brimming with peppercorn and cinnamon, thick

roots of sweet nisma, fragrant saffron, gunny sacks of nutmeg and cumin and ginger, glass bottles of ground edla and allroot.

‘Everyone’s heard the stories,’ said Emory, watching the white smoke puff from the train.

‘What stories?’

‘Oh, you know, the fables. Mother’s old servant used to put out saucers of sweet tea for the house nims. Said they moved her slippers.’ Emory pulled an arrow from his quiver and inspected the tip. ‘I’m not even sure I believe them anymore.’

Not believe in mourrows? Is that what they said in the capital? Atlas stared out at the stretch of dark pine forest to the north-east, where the crows winged from limb to limb and toads hunkered in their hollows. There were no stories, only mourrows of teeth and claws and hair, things that burned of hunger, ate without reason, hated without cause.

Emory took his bow and nocked the arrow, gingerly testing the string. It was a specialised hunting bow, much more complicated than anything Atlas had used before. Emory had been whinging about a proper hunt, with hounds and beaters and—

Atlas stopped. There was a deer in the meadow to the left of the wall, a spotted doe, her russet coat speckled with white crescents. She was a moon deer, a sign of good fortune, much smaller than the reindeer of the northern moors. She saw Atlas and stopped mid-motion, one slim leg raised, her ears switching nervously. She considered him with her large, dewy eyes. What was she doing so close to the manor? Her kind were timorous, without master. They disliked the open meadows and hedgerows of the valley, preferring the dark woods, the lichen stonefields, the cold becks that gurgled under thick moss and heavy fern.

Where had she come from? Was she alone?

Atlas stood up slowly and prayed he wouldn’t startle her. He could see the rest of the deer now on the other side of the wall in the meadow below, twelve in all. But Emory had noticed too. ‘Deer!’ he breathed and grabbed his bow, pulling back before Atlas could stop him.

‘No!’ Atlas hit out, and the arrow flew wide and harmless in the field. He snatched the bow and whipped it across his cousin’s knee, and Emory was up like a shot, staggering toward the edge of the wall. With a shout he

toppled over, falling into the bristle bushes on the other side. The thorns tore at his velvet jacket, the embroidered peacock feathers on its front, and Atlas leaned out to see him struggle. 'We can't hunt deer within the walls,' he said. 'The Wick estate and all its villages have sworn an oath: *Within the walls, sanctuary. Without them, the mourrows.* We can't undo the old ways because you want to show me your poor marksmanship.'

Emory stared up at him, a red scratch across his cheek. 'Have you lost your mind?'

Atlas weighed the bow in his hand for a moment before tossing it into the field. The deer had watched all this with a quiet patience, but they tensed, troubled by some other noise. They lifted their heads toward the eastern wood and sniffed the air. A flock of crows burst from the forest, their black wings beating the air. They circled the trees once, twice, then flew south-west toward the manor. The deer lunged in the same instant, and leapt up and over the wall, only paces from Atlas, and went bounding down towards the valley.

Emory pulled himself free from the bush, picking a bristle from his breeches. He was not pleased. 'You owe me a hunt.'

Atlas stood staring at the spot where the crows had torn through the canopy, feeling his stomach tighten at the word. A hunt meant eyes in the dark. One dagger. One bow. Too little, too far from the manor. But to Emory he said only, 'The deer are gone. We have to get back to the manor.' He whistled for Nightwatch, and his horse came trotting up the hill. 'It's late.'

'It's not even dusk.'

'To hunt we'd have to go outside the walls of the estate,' said Atlas, and jumped down from the wall.

'You disarmed me of my bow,' said Emory. 'Fetch it.'

'Fetch it yourself.'

Emory started to say something, but the gatehorn sounded, a deep, throaty bellow across the valley. It surprised him, and when he turned at the sound, Atlas grabbed the reins of his horse and swung himself up on Nightwatch's back. They leapt forward down the hill, and Nightwatch was eager to run, beating like a heart beneath him. She was a very sensible horse. She didn't like Emory much either. Who would? Atlas almost wished his

cousin would take a tumble on the way back and come staggering through the manor gate in tears.

The sun broke from the grey clouds, its light catching something silver in the west: a black coach and a team of six white horses were coming up the hill from Dellarboor, taking the curved road from the train station to the manor. Atlas and Nightwatch stopped to watch a less impressive carriage crest the hill behind the first one, luggage strapped to its top. What in the name of the Benevolent Sister was that?

Nightwatch whinnied, and Atlas turned in his saddle. Emory was behind him, his glossy red mare stretched out in a mad dash toward the manor. Atlas kicked Nightwatch in the side, and she too flattened into a gallop. He wasn't going to let Emory take the lead.

The manor, the manor, the house on the hill.

Nightwatch was fast, and *faster, faster* Atlas willed her. He glanced over his shoulder. Emory held steady behind them, riding lightly in the saddle, his horse eating the ground in leaps, closer, closer. The distance between them was shrinking. Emory pulled up and they were neck and neck, shoulder to shoulder, so close Atlas could see his set jaw, his torn sleeve.

They were nearly there, the wall of the manor in the distance, the towers, the trees. With a last push, Emory cut in front, and Nightwatch reared, pulling back so abruptly Atlas lost his grip and rolled off, hitting the ground with a hard thud. Emory didn't look back. He was already far ahead, turning onto the road behind the two carriages.

Atlas sat up, letting out a slow hiss of pain. Everything hurt.

Nightwatch sauntered up and gave her master a reprimanding shove for the careless ride. She was warm, her dappled grey sides flecked with foam, and she wanted to go home to her stall and her bag of oats. Atlas took hold of one of her stirrups and pulled himself up, unfolding slowly. A white pain was spreading from his elbow.

This was Emory's fault.

There was only silence now, and voices drifted up from the outer court of the manor, the air humming like a bee's wing. Atlas brushed himself off. Stupid horse. Stupid cousin. His only consolation was that Emory hadn't seen his miserable dismount. Why had Emory come at all? Certainly not to spend days locked in polite silence with his cousin, a strategy Atlas had used

to admittedly greater effect in the capital. It was harder to 'be still' and 'have patience' when there was no one else to distract Emory from his questions.

Nightwatch buffeted him again, and Atlas walked stiffly to the gate. There, at the end of the gravel road of the outer court, stood the coaches, and milling about them were grey temra, servants born of the capital, pulling bags and packages from the top of the carriages, unloading long, wooden boxes and baskets, carting leather luggage between them to the manor.

A man was stepping down from the white carriage, and Atlas knew him. It was Lord Star, his uncle, Emory's father, third son and fifth child of the House of Wick. And he had come north.