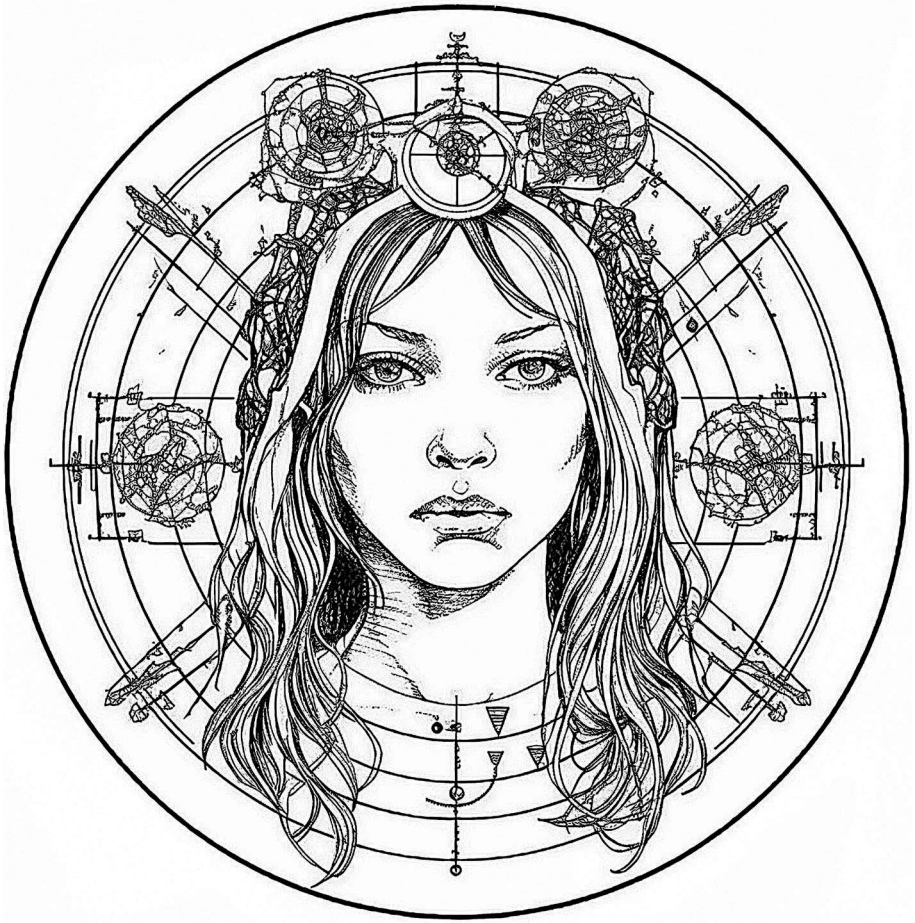


THE ANTLANDS SERIES / BOOK 3

FARLANDS



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ANTLANDS.COM

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CHAPTER ONE

I'd killed my Aunt Jane, so my dad was the only family I had left in the world. Dad was away at sea. Being a sailor, he usually was. My mom was... gone. Run off. The only other kin I'd ever had besides Mom and Dad was my aunt, who I'd just left laying on the floor with her face all gray and her mouth hanging open. I didn't kill her on purpose, although I admit I pretty much hit her as hard as I could, and I swear that deep inside me I was sorry she was dead. But Aunt Jane'd always said I was selfish, and I guess she was right, because all I could think about now was myself and the fix I was in.

The only way out of it I could see was to put on boy's clothes and run away to sea. I'd been wanting to do that for years anyway. I'd knocked Aunt Jane backwards into a door that, being rotten like the rest of the house, gave way and took her down with it, and by the time I landed the jab, we'd been trading punches for a while. Aunt Jane always gave as good as she got, and both my eyes were blacked and I had too many bruises generally to look like a good candidate for a ship's boy. I needed to lie low awhile and get my face right before I tried to get on a ship.

So I run away and spent the rest of the night in a stable. I'd slept there before. It was dirty, but warm from the horses. Men would come there early to get their animals, so I left before daybreak, and after that I wandered the

streets, trying not to be seen. Early is a good time for stealing food, when the shopkeepers are getting ready to open. I was helping myself to bread when I remembered a place that might do for a temporary hideout. I'd found it by accident a few years ago—on a school outing, if you can believe I ever went to school—a little room at the top of a secret staircase in the town library.

I didn't figure I could stay there long. The room didn't look like it was used much, but it was kept nice, so somebody must be coming by it from time to time. I didn't know—or care—whose room it was, but it had a bed in it. My head ached and one of my eyes was so swole up I couldn't see out of it. Any place with a bed seemed like a piece of paradise to me.

Also, it was getting light. I wouldn't say the town authorities was ever real enthusiastic about chasing murderers, but they'd get after me eventually—especially when they heard I was only a girl and not known to be armed. I needed to get off the street. I snuck up to the town library's back door and let myself in, and then crept up to the little hidden room. A fur blanket on the bed warmed me up the minute I crawled under it. I must have been hurt worse than I'd thought, because I slept most of the day.

I slept most of the next day, too, only getting up when the library was closed to go downstairs for water and to empty my slops. The next day was the same, except I brought a couple books back up with me. You wouldn't guess it if you knew me, but I liked to read. When I was awake, I laid plans for getting away—where I could steal the right clothes, mainly, and get a proper sea chest—and I thought about Aunt Jane. I was sorry for what I'd done to her, but not enough to wish her back again.

I'd lived with my aunt since I was nine. She beat me regular, but I probably deserved it. Now and then she let one of my "uncles" beat me though, and I didn't like that. Auntie made me call any long-time man she had "Uncle" (six months was a long time for Auntie), and said uncles had beating rights over me, same as aunts. I didn't agree. She took away most of what I got begging or stealing—mostly stealing now, since I wasn't young and pathetic enough to beg—but she almost always left me enough to eat on, so that was all right. She sold my clothes off my back if she came up short on the rent, or to save the

trouble of washing them, and she hired out my bed from under me if someone else wanted it for a night, or a week. I honestly didn't blame Aunt Jane for any of that, though. At least, I didn't blame her enough to kill her over it.

But when she took my mother's ring, she went too far. Not because it was my mother's. I ain't sentimental about my mother. Not at all. But the ring was the only thing I had that was all mine, and I loved it for that. Everything else I had I'd stole from somebody or was only mine to use, like the dirty couch in the upstairs hallway at Aunt Jane's that I was only allowed to sleep on if nobody else wanted it. By rights, the couch was Auntie's. The house I lived in was Auntie's. The food I ate was Auntie's. Everything was Auntie's. She never let me forget that. But the ring was mine.

Curled down tight in the bed at the library, I decided I wouldn't have killed Aunt Jane on purpose even for taking my ring. She hit me, and I hit her back. Fights was a normal thing with us. But I'd never wanted to hit her so hard she'd go down and not get back up. Ring or no, I would never have done a thing like that intentional. Even with a fur blanket over me, I shivered when I remembered how she'd lain still in a way nobody alive is ever still and wished—almost wished—it had been her that killed me, instead of the other way.

Since I had to hide—and murderers was hung in Fortress City, so I definitely had to hide—the little room in the library was the best hiding place I could have asked for. Aside from the bad dreams I had, I was comfortable there. I was too comfortable. I was so comfortable I stayed on for five days; reading and sleeping and eating what I could scavenge, as much at ease as a baby before it's born.

Until the day I heard a key slip into the lock. As I sat up, very fast, the door opened and a woman walked in.

She wasn't young. She wasn't bent over, I don't mean, but her piled-up hair was gray. She must have thought she could take care of herself, because instead of backing off when she saw me, she came the rest of the way in and shut the door behind her. She never took her eyes off my face. "Well, well. What have we here?"

I wasn't dressed, but I jumped for the door anyway.

She was quick for an old person. Before I got halfway there, she'd pulled a chair in front of herself to block me.

"That's far enough," she said, not turning a hair. "Get back in the bed. No, get under the blanket again. What are you doing here? Besides reading, I mean."

When I just stared at her, she moved the chair to behind her, and sat in it.

"All right," she said, "here's an easier question. What's your name?"

"Mary."

"Lies bore me. Tell the truth. What's your name?"

I sized her up. She was taller than me, but as I said before, she wasn't young. Even without a weapon, I could have taken her, easy. She didn't seem to understand that.

"Let's not play games," the woman said meantime. "I could have you arrested for trespassing. If you answer my questions, I might not. What's your name, and what are you doing here? I'm guessing you're a runaway."

"I'm not a kid." I stuck my jaw forward. "I can go where I want. No one owns me."

"Then you have no reason not to tell me your name."

She'd find out soon enough anyway. I said, "It's Claire. No—that's the truth! It's Claire!"

"Claire what? Who are your parents?"

"What do you care?"

Her voice got sharper. "Answer me. Where do you live?"

"Here."

"Don't be tedious. Who did you live with before you came here? Come on: You must have lived somewhere."

The only answer I could think of was the true one, which, as I said, she'd find out soon enough anyway. "With my Aunt Jane."

The woman thought this over for a minute. "Jane Joyce?"

This surprised me, kind of. My aunt wasn't the only Jane in town. "Yeah. Her. The dead lady. And I'm the one killed her." I crossed my arms, hoping I looked tough that way.

The woman's answer was different from the one I expected.

She raised her eyebrows but not her voice. “Really? When?”

“Huh?”

“When did you kill her? Today?”

I started to say something—I’m not sure what—but the woman interrupted me. “My name is Sarah, Claire. I saw Jane Joyce alive in the market a few hours ago, so either you’ve been very busy this morning, or you didn’t kill her. I haven’t heard of any other recent murders, and you don’t look like you’ve been out, so I’m going to assume for now you didn’t kill anyone.”

“I did!”

The woman—Sarah—laughed. “How long have you been staying in this room? For that matter, how did you know it was here? Few people do.”

I answered her with just noises, not being able to get out any actual words. I was sure I’d killed Auntie. After I knocked her down—not entirely meaning to, as I said before—I’d stared at her for five minutes at least. She never moved or breathed that I saw.

“I did,” I mumbled.

Sarah sighed. “Look, I don’t know what happened between you and your aunt, but whatever it was, it wasn’t as bad as you imagined. In fact, when I saw her, she looked better than you do. If you want to go home and patch things up with her—”

“No!”

I didn’t know I was going to say that, but once it was out, I knew I meant it.

“You don’t want to go back?”

“I’ll *never* go back! She took—” I didn’t want to talk about my ring. “Everything.”

I was glad—I mean it—that Auntie wasn’t dead, but she still took my ring and give me a beating in its place. If nobody was hunting me, I could go where I wanted, and where I wanted to go was anywhere but Aunt Jane’s.

For no reason I could see, Sarah’s smile got bigger. “Well, you can’t stay here.” She got up from her chair. “My husband died in that bed. I’m sure you’ll understand when I say that makes it a special place for me.”

I can tell you, I never left anyplace quicker than I left that bed. Somebody

had *died* there? Ten thousand gods! “You washed the sheets after, right?” I shuddered and looked around quick for any sign of a ghost.

Sarah said she had. “But now they’ll have to be washed again. As will you. When did you last have a bath?”

“Don’t remember.”

“I’m not surprised. Besides your aunt, who else hits you?”

She was staring at my back. I put my clothes on faster. “Nobody. Fell down some stairs.”

“Well, bundle your things to take with you, but leave *my* things on the table.” Her eyes bored into me like a second Aunt Jane. “*All* of my things.”

Damn her. I’d found a lot of nice stuff in the drawer of the table that stood on one side of the room, and I’d helped myself to most of it. I unloaded my pockets slowly, hoping she wouldn’t notice if I kept a few things back, and tried to distract her. A stack of handwritten papers were on the desk; hundreds of sheets tied up in bundles. I pointed. “What’s them?”

“A book.”

“They don’t look like a book.”

“I should have said, they’re the manuscript of what would someday have been a book. A dictionary.”

“A dictionary? What language?” To be honest, I didn’t actually care what language the papers was in. I just wanted the woman to understand that just because I was dirty and a thief didn’t mean I didn’t know what a dictionary was.

“Farlandish. Where’s the knife?”

I’d sold it.

“There wasn’t one,” I lied.

“There certainly was. Where is it? Did you sell it?”

“By the gods, lady, there wasn’t no—”

“Get it back. Do whatever you have to and get it back. How old are you?”

I named the age I wished I was. “Sixteen.”

“What year were you born? No, don’t bother to answer me. You hesitated. That’s all the answer I need. If you’re going to lie about your age, you need to

figure out what your birth year should be and memorize it. You look...twelve.”

“Fifteen!” I was fourteen.

“Fifteen still means you should go to school. We’ll discuss that later. For now, bring your things and the sheets.”

“Where we going?”

“To another room I have. One you *can* stay in. It’s nicer than this one and warmer.”

“Why?” I pulled the sheets off the bed careful enough (I hoped) for a ghost not to mind.

“Why am I letting you have the room?” Sarah looked at me like she was wondering that herself. “Well, why not? The room’s empty anyway, and I don’t want you on the streets. Also, I don’t like your Aunt Jane any better than you do.”

I couldn’t keep from grinning when she said that. Since I wasn’t Aunt Jane’s murderer after all, I figured I had a right to grin at bad things people said about her.

After thinking it over, I decided I had a right to wait until winter was over and I had the sea chest I wanted before I went to sea, too. Winters at sea was brutal, my dad always said.

Sarah opened the door for me and locked it behind us when we were out.

Downstairs, there were people in the library. They stared at me.

I tried not to notice. “Where’s ‘Farlands?’ I never heard of it before.”

“It’s a long way from here. All the way across an ocean.”

“There’s places across the ocean?”

“Whole worlds of places.”

“And the people talk different in them?”

“Very differently, yes.”

“I want to go there.”

“So did I, once,” Sarah sighed.

She looked like she might cry, so I dropped the subject.