

# OUTCASTE

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BOOK SIX IN THE CHRONICLES OF ALSEA

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*For those who seek to fly.*



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## DREAMS

On her tenth birth anniversary, her parents said she was old enough to work in the family shop. She had been waiting forever for this magical moment. Much of her life had been spent running in and out of the shop, her parents' calls of "Rahel! Slow down!" trailing behind her, but that was when she was a child. Now she was halfway to her Rite of Ascension, and that meant she was half grown up.

Her gleeful excitement lasted less than one nineday. In that time, she had dusted every piece of art in all three rooms. No one had warned her that working would be so dull.

Her brother laughed when she complained. "I could have told you," he said. "But you didn't ask."

She hated it when he was such a know-everything.

For five moons, she came home from school, waved the duster around while making up war stories and adventures in her head, and ran out the back door as if her feet were on fire the moment her hantick was up. Growing up, it seemed, meant boredom and disappointment.

At the beginning of the sixth moon, she arrived to find her father unpacking a crate. By now she understood that their shop carried the work of many different crafters in the region, people who did not sell their wares on their own and so paid her father to do it for them. He had started out by selling her mother's metalwork, but the shop had grown

since then. Her brother said theirs was the biggest shop this side of Whitesun.

Unpacking crates meant discovering new and sometimes interesting things. She hung on the front counter, resting her chin on its edge while bouncing the toe of her shoe off the wooden base, until her father fixed her with a glare. She held herself still and focused on the crate, which contained several long, slender objects swaddled in cloth.

“They’re from a woodworker south of Redmoon,” her father said as he lifted one out. “She’s becoming very well known for these. We’re lucky she wants to sell them with us.”

Carefully, he unwrapped the cloth and held the object aloft.

She sucked in her breath. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

A sword, shining with the richness of polished wood. The blade was nearly silver, while the cross guard and grip were gleaming black. Colorful carved-wood shapes flashed against the dark background like jewels.

“Look at this,” her father said, tapping his finger on the blade.

She hoisted herself up so her chest leaned over the top of the tall counter and she could see better.

“See the scrollwork on the blade?” he asked. “That’s inlaid cinnoralis wood. Meticulous, gorgeous crafting. If your brother can learn to craft half this well, he’ll be able to support a family.”

She knew her brother was learning woodworking, but all he ever showed her were boring boxes. Never anything like this. She pushed herself closer to the sword, staring at it while her father pointed at the various woods and explained what they were. Molwyn for the black wood, tintinatalus for the silver, and trees she had never even heard of for the colored bits that looked like jewels.

Her father wouldn’t let her help unpack, despite her feverish offers, but he did let her watch. As she gazed at the six swords that soon lined their front counter, she realized that she would be dusting these. Every day.

Suddenly, dusting didn’t seem quite so bad.



For her eleventh birth anniversary, she asked for one of the wooden

swords. Her parents laughed and told her not to expect it, but she knew they were just trying to fool her so she would be surprised.

She vowed to act very surprised when she opened her gifts and found her sword.

When her parents brought in three gifts, none of which were large enough, she thought they must be hiding the sword and saving it for last. Of course they couldn't bring it out right away; she would know what it was by the size alone.

After tearing open her third gift—a bead calculator from her father, who told her proudly that she had a head for numbers and would someday take over the store from him—she looked around with a bright smile, waiting. Her little sister began playing with the bead calculator, her brother carried dishes to the kitchen, and her parents sat there expectantly, waiting for her reaction to this last gift. And to her father's announcement, she realized. He had just told her she would join the merchant caste.

There was no sword.

She thanked her parents, left the bead counter in her sister's pudgy hands, and ran upstairs to her room.

That night, she cried herself to sleep.



By her twelfth birth anniversary, she knew enough about sale prices and revenue versus expenses to realize that her parents were never going to give her one of those glorious wooden swords. Their sale price was five digits, more than anything else in the shop. They represented a more “upscale line,” her father said, and were the first in what he hoped would eventually be an entire room of the shop devoted to more expensive crafts. He kept them mounted on the walls in the small back room, each spotlighted by a light in the ceiling, and she had to use the short ladder to reach them.

Every day, she came home from school, dusted the shop in a whirlwind of efficiency, and saved the swords for last. Those she would dust slowly, carefully, and with the reverence of a worshipper, dragging the ladder from one to the next. They became familiar friends to her, each with its own personality, and she made up stories about who had owned



them and what sorts of adventures they had seen. This one had been owned by the Wandering King when he discovered Blacksun Basin, that one was used in the murder of the Mad Queen, and the one next to it was lost at sea during a shipwreck, only to wash ashore a hundred cycles later.

Each time a sword sold, she mourned the loss of a friend. The tragedy was only leavened by the eventual arrival of a replacement, a new sword she could dust and get to know and weave a story for.

“It surely is beautiful crafting,” her brother said one day, staring with open envy at a sword they had just unpacked. “See how perfectly cut the inlays are? They look like they grew there. I have to use my magnifiers to see the seams. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to do that.”

She thought he was missing the point. The magic of the swords wasn’t the wood they were made of. It was the stories they contained. They were the swords of warriors.

Her brother laughed when she told him that. “These aren’t real swords, Rahel. Warriors have swords made of metal.”

“Then why doesn’t Mother make those?” Their mother was a renowned metalworker. If she could make something like these, Rahel did not understand why she wasn’t doing it.

He shrugged. “Crafting comes from inside. You have to want to make what you’re making, or it won’t be any good. I guess Mother doesn’t want to make swords.”

That was unfathomable.

For her thirteenth birth anniversary, she asked her mother to make her a real sword.

The night of her celebration, there was no long box waiting for her. And though she was two cycles older now and much too grown to cry, her pillow was wet that night.



When her little sister celebrated her tenth birth anniversary, she took over the dusting duties. Rahel was now expected to work more closely with her father on accounting, ordering, sales, and crafter relations, while her brother was released to work full-time on his craft. After all, he was only two cycles away from his Rite of Ascension and needed to establish his name. In celebration of his entrance into a new phase of life, he was offi-

cially inscribed into the crafter caste rolls, a family event for which they all went to Whitesun.

Rahel was dazzled by the vast city and its gleaming buildings, less so by her father's insistence on touring her around the merchant caste house while her mother, brother, and sister went to the crafter caste house. She would rather have been with them, watching her brother's inscription. Or better yet, across the park at the warrior caste house, with its dark red roof. She wondered if the warriors had real swords hung on their walls.

"This will be your home, in any town or city you travel to," her father told her when they ended the tour in the soaring lobby. "These people will be your family."

She was almost fourteen cycles. Old enough to stand up for herself.

"I don't want to be a merchant," she said.

"Nonsense. You're perfect for it. You're doing mathematics now that I didn't understand until I was sixteen. You already have a good grasp of the ordering system, and I watched you sell a wooden sword to a customer who didn't know he wanted one until you made him believe it. You're a born merchant."

She hadn't meant to sell the sword. She had only been sharing her love of them with the customer, because he seemed to understand and no one else in her family did.

"I don't like selling things," she said.

He rested a hand on her shoulder. "You'll learn to enjoy it. There's a thrill of accomplishment, like when you get a good grade in school. And there's pleasure in helping someone find something that makes them happy. Didn't you feel it when you sold the sword?"

No, she had felt betrayed, as if the customer had stolen something right out of her hand. It had taken her a nineday to realize that she could be happy for the sword, because it was in a good home with someone who truly loved it. Not all of them were so fortunate.

Not knowing how to explain, she shook her head.

Her father sighed. "Rahel, you are not a crafter. Your brother is, your sister will be . . . but you've never shown any talent in that area."

"I know."

"Then you know the merchant caste is your only other option."

"No, it's not." Her heart pounded as she took her dream in both hands. "I can challenge another caste."

He withdrew his hand, its weight sliding away. “What? What else is there? You’re not a producer, your only interest in building was knocking your sister’s blocks down—”

“I want to be a warrior.”

He seemed to deflate before her eyes. “Oh, Rahel.”

“Why can’t I?”

A group of merchants wearing ceremonial capes of deep purple strolled by, glancing at them idly as they passed. Her father kept silent until they had moved on.

“Those books you read,” he said quietly, “and the stories you make up . . . those are childish things. But you’re growing up. It’s time to put those behind you.”

She pointed out the nearest window at the gleam of red visible across the park. “The warrior caste house is full of grown-ups who live those stories. They haven’t put anything behind them.”

“And most of them trained from a very early age. You’re already at the age when many warriors are in formal training units.”

“If I challenge now, I can make up the time.” She knew how to do that. Last cycle, she had skipped a whole grade of math by proving to her teachers that it was too simple for her.

“It’s not like school. Their requirements are very strict. If you want to challenge a caste, why not the scholars?”

“Because I want to be a warrior.” Why couldn’t he understand?

He gripped her shoulders. “You are a *merchant*. You’re my daughter, and my caste is already inside you. You’re too young to see it now, but you will.”

“But—”

“Time for the caste talk?” One of the merchants from the group with the ceremonial capes had returned and was now standing next to her father. Her cape was still in motion, liquid purple swinging gently around her legs. “I didn’t want to be a merchant, either. I wanted to be a crafter and play music all day long.”

“Why didn’t you?” Rahel asked.

The woman was older than her mother, her hair shining white, but her smile put Rahel at ease. “Because I wasn’t good enough,” she said. “Not to support myself or a family. But now I have a family, and my children have children, and best of all, I still play music. Almost every day.

## *Outcaste*

You don't have to give up your dreams, child. Sometimes you just need to . . . rearrange them."

Rahel thought about that. "So I could learn to fight? And use a sword?"

The woman glanced at her father, whose red face did not bode well for anyone. "Oh," she said softly. "Perhaps I could speak with your father for a moment?"

Rahel stepped away and stared through a window at the warrior caste house while her father and the woman in purple argued. Her father's embarrassment was hot on her senses, the anger even hotter, and she could only hope he would be calm again before they left. The older woman had less of an emotional presence, but what was there felt cool and peaceful, though with an edge of warning.

"You risk losing . . ." she heard the woman say before her voice quieted again. Her father growled something in response, and Rahel tuned him out, not wanting to hear any more.

Too soon, his thudding tread came up behind her. "Smug, interfering . . ." He grabbed Rahel by the upper arm and yanked her toward the exit. "We're leaving."

His grip hurt, but she would not admit it. She barely kept up as they went through the arched doorway, and nearly stumbled when her father hurried them down the stone steps. Not until they were on the path that led to the crafter caste house did he let go.

"You are a merchant," he said. "That's the end of it."

His anger was still too frightening for her to say anything.

But he was wrong. This was not the end of it.

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**FOURTEEN, ALMOST**

**E**ven after her father calmed, he would not hear of fighting lessons. Rahel found a training house on the other side of town that offered them in the late afternoons and evenings, and presented the idea along with her promise that it would not interfere with school or her work in the shop.

“It’s too expensive,” her father said shortly.

“I can work it off.”

“When? During the school day? You don’t have time. I need you in the shop.”

“Father—”

“Enough,” he growled.

She asked her mother next. That was more promising, until her father found out she had gone around him. His anger was so hot that she cringed and turned away, afraid for the first time in her life that he might strike her. When he told her to get out, she went.

All the way across town.

For the better part of the afternoon, she stood outside the training house with her nose pressed to the large front window, watching luckier girls and boys do what she yearned to do. They were dressed in some kind of uniform—dark blue fitted pants and sleeveless shirts with white

geometric designs—and ranged from a little older than her age to younger than her sister. She imagined herself wearing those clothes, listening to the instructor, learning how to use her body . . .

“Would you like to come in?” asked a male voice behind her. Curiosity and kindness wafted onto her senses, one mildly spicy and the other softly comforting. She turned to find a very large man behind her, standing at ease but looking as if he could lift a four-seater skimmer with one hand.

“I can’t,” she said.

He tilted his head to one side. “Your legs don’t work?”

“No. I mean yes. I mean, my father won’t let me.” Cursing her stumbling tongue, she added, “He says it’s too expensive.”

“Ah. But going inside is free.”

She could find no fault in that logic, and when he held up a hand, she met it in a palm touch. The strand of kindness became a thick blanket, accompanied by the sort of mental stillness that she had previously sensed only from her mother when she was immersed in her metalwork.

“My name is Brasdo,” he said. “I teach here.”

“Rahel.”

“An honorable name. Do you know what it means?”

She shook her head and stuffed her hands in her trouser pockets.

“It means *explorer*. And here you are, exploring.” He walked to the door, opened it, and stood aside.

She looked up at him, gauging his sincerity, because it made no sense that a grown-up would be so kind to a girl who couldn’t pay. But he stood patiently, emanating that mental stillness, and she moved past him to stand in a wood-floored corridor.

A woman’s voice filled the space. “Step. Twist. Elbows up! Stop. Are your upper arms level with the floor?”

The air was warm and scented. She had expected stuffiness and the smell of sweat, but instead there was a faint hint of . . .

“Is that *cinnoralis*?” she whispered as the woman continued her instruction.

“Yes. We use different scents to evoke different mental states. *Cinnoralis* helps in relaxation. *Winterbloom* helps focus the mind.”

He cited a few more, but she was thinking of her swords and the

beautiful golden wood that was used for the scrolling on the blades. Cinnoralis.

Surely it was a sign.

He led her into the large room she had been watching, taking her past the group of uniformed children to stand near the back wall. A bench ran the length of it, with shoes of all types tucked beneath. Most were sandals, like hers. A row of hooks above the bench was festooned with packs and bags, some gaping open with hastily stuffed clothing spilling out.

“This is a beginning class,” he murmured. “They’re learning the forms.”

She watched, mesmerized by this new view and the children’s synchronized movements. “When do they fight? The class before this one, they were fighting.”

“Is that what you think we teach?”

The question meant she had somehow gotten it wrong. She shrugged.

“We teach students to understand their bodies,” he said. “To learn how to channel their mental energy. Later, we teach the dance of combat, but it’s not fighting. Fighting is about anger. It usually involves a loss of control. That is not what we want.”

She remembered her father’s anger, and the way he had growled at her to get out. No, that was not what she wanted. She wanted to be calm and tranquil, like Brasdo. Like her mother when she was lost inside her craft. Like the woman at the front of the room, radiating stillness as she led fifteen children with nothing more than her voice.

Brasdo touched her sleeve and brought her through a door in the back wall. Now speaking in a normal tone, he showed her the changing room, the showers, the office, and an airy, well-lit room with no furnishings other than enormous potted plants. It was called the centering room, she learned. He pulled a rolled-up mat from a grid of cubbyholes built into one wall, laid it on the floor beneath a plant with broad leaves as long as her leg, and showed her several different positions used to center mind and body.

“When your mind is a still pool, you can see beneath its surface,” he said.

None of this was what she had expected when she watched the earlier class. She didn’t understand all of it, but she liked the way Brasdo made

her feel. She liked this space, and the calm drone of the woman teaching in the front room.

“We sometimes give scholarships,” Brasdo said when they stood once more in the doorway between the training room and the corridor. “They’re worth a cycle of classes.”

The class had ended, and the children were noisily gathering their packs and filing through to the changing room. Their shoes remained behind, still tucked beneath the bench.

Rahel imagined herself among them, laughing and chattering as she changed her clothes.

“How do I qualify?”

“You already did.”

“I did?” She had missed something important.

“You listen. You pay attention. You ask thoughtful questions. That’s what we want in our students.” He pulled a reader card from the pouch at his belt, tapped it open, and offered it. “Fill out your name and address here. Do you have a com code yet?”

She nearly fumbled it, unable to believe he was just handing over her dream. “No, but I can give you the code for our shop.”

“That will do.”

He rolled up the reader card when she finished and fixed her with a serious look. “We need one more thing before you can start. Permission from your parents.”

Her heart sank, but before she could respond, he bent closer to her and said softly, “It’s free. If your father’s only objection was the expense, then we’ve just taken care of that.”

Was it his only objection? Or was it just the first?

When she returned home, her father berated her for being absent from the shop. Her comment that she had only done what he wanted was not well received, but something had changed while she’d toured the training house. The anger that had frightened her earlier held no power now.

Once his lecture ran out, he pushed a duster in her hand and ordered her to clean all three rooms.

Dusting was a child’s job. It was a punishment intended to shame, but she refused to allow that. Instead, she lost herself in the mindless activity, imagining her mind as a still pool, just as Brasdo had said.



As always, she left her beloved wooden swords for last. They had recently been joined by a pair of ceremonial daggers made by the same artist, but she didn't think the daggers held the same majesty as the swords.

"Someday," she whispered to the last sword.

---

**FIFTEEN**

**H**aving learned from her earlier mistake, Rahel went to her mother first and emphasized the class's focus on mental training.

"Will it interfere with your schoolwork?" her mother asked.

"No."

"Shop work?"

"No."

"Then I see no reason why you shouldn't go."

She threw herself into her mother's arms. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

Her mother squeezed tightly, then pulled back and brushed Rahel's hair away from her face. "Remember your place," she said. "It's good to try new things, but you must always remember your place."

"I will." She didn't understand, but she would have promised anything.

The next half cycle was the best of her life. The training house became her second home, its students her friends, its instructors her second set of parents. In the deep, dark, secretive part of her heart, she thought she loved Brasdo more than her real father. He was unfailingly kind, even when she made mistakes, and never insisted that she give up her dreams. He taught her to understand her body in a way she had never even considered. She reveled in the power that came from controlling both it

and her mind, and spent as much time as she could in the centering room. Her home held five people, including a noisy younger sister, and the shop was never a place where she could be still. Here, on a mat beneath the spreading leaves of a tropical plant, she found comfort and a sense of peace that became addictive.

She read every book on warriors, strategy, behavioral manipulation, and the Truth and the Path that she could get her hands on. The books showed many ways a warrior could live besides serving in the Guards, and the role that captured her attention above all others was that of explorer. It was her name, after all. She had not realized that Whitesun, the big harbor city west of her village, was the embarkation point for all of Asea's most famous voyages of exploration.

Fantasies of swinging a sword in combat shifted to fantasies of standing on the deck of a pitching ship, riding the waves and mapping the coastlines of the two continents. Instead of an impractical sword, her imaginary self now wore a pair of daggers sheathed at her belt. She would use them to sever tangled knots of rigging and save a Mariner from drowning, or drive one into the top of a sail and use it to slow her descent all the way to the deck while fighting off pirates.

Following this new line of study, she learned that warriors were still exploring, though the coastlines had long since been mapped and pirates were mostly a thing of the past. Now, the explorers mapped the ocean floor, dived the depths in ever more dangerous feats of daring, found new fishing grounds, and helped catalogue the strange animals that inhabited the islands scattered across Asea's vast ocean. They acted as guides and protectors for the scholars who also pursued exploration but lacked the ability to save themselves when things turned bad.

She envisioned herself using a dagger to hold off one of the aggressive island predators she had read about, saving a scholar who looked at her with admiring eyes afterward. She would be both explorer and protector.

The next time her father wasn't looking, she went into the shop's back room and examined the current set of inlaid wooden daggers with newly appreciative eyes. The swords were still her greatest love, so majestic and beautiful, but these daggers had a different sort of beauty. She tucked one into her waistband and felt the length of it along her skin. Yes, this was what she would have on her ship. Easy to pack, easy to carry, and much easier to learn to use. The best sword-masters began

their training when they were younger than her sister. She was already too old.

When she went upstairs at the end of the work shift, her father stood in her bedroom doorway with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Did you forget about the shop vidcams?” he asked.

Her stomach turned to stone. She had only worried about him catching her in person.

“Those daggers are worth almost as much as the swords. And you shove them in your pants like they’re toys?” He uncrossed his arms and took a step forward. “Your obsession is getting out of hand. You need to remember who you are. Since you seem to be having a hard time with that, I’ve helped you by getting rid of those books.”

Horrified, she pushed him into her room and found empty space where her exploration books had been. “Those came from the library!”

“Then you’d better work harder so you can pay the library back.”

“Why?” she shouted. “Why is it only my dreams you have to crush? Why do you hate me that much?”

His brief flicker of sorrow stung her senses, but was quickly swallowed by the too-familiar anger. “I would eagerly support your dreams if you would get your head out of the clouds and be *realistic*. There are dreams, and then there are fantasies. Children get them confused, but you’re old enough to know better.” As he walked away, he threw one parting order over his shoulder. “Grow up!”

“I *am* growing up,” she whispered.

And he had not denied her accusation.

She threw herself on the bed and wept in a storm of despair, remembering a time when she had never doubted her father’s love. It had been a constant warmth to her senses, accompanied by his smiles and his quiet lessons in the shop, but that had been before. Before she had dreams he didn’t agree with. Before she stopped being the perfect child. Before she developed a mind of her own.

Brasdo liked her the way she was. He didn’t expect her to be different, didn’t put a price tag on his affection. Even when she wasn’t perfect, he didn’t shout at her. He would never throw away her library books and tell her to pay for them.

“Why can’t he be my father?” she cried into her pillow.

Home was never the same after that. She felt like a stranger in the

family. Her brother thought she was being ridiculous, and her sister didn't understand any of it. Sometimes Rahel envied her—she had shown a talent for fine metalwork at an early age, and was already producing wares that her father proudly sold. Everyone knew what they wanted to be; everyone was doing what they were meant to.

Everyone but her.

The training house became her true home, and she spent as much time there as she dared. She even volunteered to sweep the floors and clean the mats, just to have an excuse to stay longer. But she was careful to never impinge on her duties in the shop. She was determined to do exactly what her father asked of her, so he would have no excuse not to continue her classes when her scholarship ran out. The shop was doing well, and the classes weren't that expensive. To make it certain, she told her mother that she wanted only one thing for her fifteenth birth anniversary. Just one thing.

On the night of her celebration, she opened the last gift and found a purple half cape instead of the class vouchers she had expected.

"It's for your inscription," her father said. "We're going to Whitesun next moon."

All skill at controlling her mind slipped away as if the past cycle had never been. "Why didn't you give me what I asked for? All I wanted was to keep going!"

"I'm sorry, Rahel," her mother said. "But you did the one thing we were most afraid of. You forgot your place."

"I did not!"

"Which caste do you want to be in?" her father asked.

She knew the answer they wanted, but she could not give it.

He nodded. "That's what we thought."

She sat stunned, staring at the strangers who had been her parents. They were going to inscribe her in the merchant caste at the age of fifteen, three cycles earlier than her brother's inscription as a crafter. It was a cruel trap, snapping shut on her leg and holding her in place forevermore. Castes could not easily be changed. An appeal required parental support, and her parents would not support it. Once she was inscribed, she could never be anything else.

Without another word, she shoved back her chair, fled upstairs, and slammed her bedroom door shut.

## *Outcaste*

No one came to comfort her, not even her mother.

That night, two hanticks before dawn, she crept out of her room with a packed bag and noiselessly descended the stairs to the shop. Though the door to the outside was always locked when the shop was closed, the door from the inside rooms was not. She let herself in, walked behind the front counter, and emptied out the cashbox. The amount would have been much greater had she been able to access it at the end of the day, before they'd done their accounting and taken the day's profit upstairs, but that was not an option. It was still a good number. The shop was carrying more expensive items these days, and their opening cash reserve was higher than it used to be.

She replaced the empty box and walked into the back room. The shop's night lighting was more than enough to illuminate the swords and daggers mounted on the walls. Her hand hovered over her favorite sword, but then she turned and took the pair of ceremonial daggers instead. They had arrived two moons ago, and she had created a wonderful story for them. These daggers had been given by the First Lancer as a prize for the one warrior who could complete a set of impossible challenges. Thereafter, any warrior who held them would be imbued with the courage, strength, and cunning of their original owner.

She lifted her head, facing the vidcam in the corner, and deliberately shoved both daggers into her waistband. Then she raised two fingers in a rude salute, held it for several pipticks, and waved good-bye.