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Opening extract from  
**The Red Abbey Chronicles: Maresi**

Written by  
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M

Y NAME IS MARESI ENRESDAUGHTER and I write this in the nineteenth year of the reign of our thirty-second Mother. In the four years since I came to the Red Abbey I have read nearly all the ancient scriptures about its history. Sister O says that this story of mine will become a new addition to the archives. It seems strange. I am only a novice, not an abbess, not a learned sister. But Sister O says it is important that I am the one who writes down what happened. I was there. Second-hand stories are not to be trusted.


I am no storyteller. Not yet. But by the time I am and can tell the story as it should be told, I will have forgotten. So I am recording my memories now, while they are still fresh and sharp in my mind. Not much time has passed, only one spring. I can still vividly recall certain things I would rather forget. The smell of blood. The sound of crunching bones.

I do not want to bring it all up again. But I have to. It is difficult to write about death. But that is no excuse not to.

I am telling the story to make sure the Abbey never forgets. But also so that I can fully grasp what happened. Reading has always helped me to understand the world better. I hope the same applies to writing.

I am thinking about my words more than anything. Which ones will conjure up the right images without distorting or embellishing the truth? What is the weight of my words? I will do my best only to describe what is relevant to my story and leave out everything else, but Goddess forgive me if I do not always succeed in my task.

It is also difficult to know where a story begins and when it ends. I do not know where the ending is. It does not feel like it has come yet. But the beginning is easy. It all began when Jai came to the island.

 WAS HARVESTING MUSSELS DOWN ON THE beach on the spring morning when Jai arrived. When my basket was half full I sat down on a rock to rest for a moment. The sun had not climbed up over White Lady Mountain yet, the beach was in shade and my feet were cold from the seawater. The round pebbles beneath my feet rattled back and forth in rhythm with the motion of the sea. A red-billed koan bird hopped at the water's edge, also looking for mussels. The wading bird had just speared a shell with its long beak when a little boat appeared near the Teeth, the high, narrow rocks which protrude straight up out of the sea.

Fishing boats come by several times per moon, so I might have thought nothing of it had the ship not been arriving from such an unusual direction. The fishermen we trade with travel from the mainland in the North, or the rich fishing waters of the islands in

the East. Their boats are small, white-painted vessels, nothing like this ship heading towards the island. The fishermen's sails are blue and they have a crew of two or three men. The ones that come from the mainland bringing provisions, and sometimes new novices, are slow, round-bellied ships which often have a watchman to guard against pirates. When I came here in such a ship four years ago it was the first time I had ever seen the ocean.

I did not even know the name of the ship which I saw come sailing around the Teeth, heading straight for our harbour. I had only seen that kind of ship a handful of times. They come from far Western lands such as Emmel and Samitra, and other lands even farther away.

But even those ships usually come from the direction of the mainland, along the same route as the fishing boats. They sail along the coast and only venture out into this deep water at the last possible moment. Our island is very small and difficult to find if you do not follow the regular route. Sister Loeni says it is the First Mother who veils the island, but Sister O snorts and mutters something about incompetent sailors. I believe it is the island that hides itself. But this vessel still managed to find us somehow, despite

coming around the Teeth almost directly from the West. The boat's sail and slender hull were grey. Hard to spot on a grey sea. It was a ship that did not want to announce its arrival.

When I could see that the ship was heading for our little harbour I jumped up and ran towards it over the cobbled beach. I am ashamed to say I forgot my basket and mussels. That is the type of thing Sister Loeni is always telling me off for. You are too impulsive, Maresi, she says. Look at Mother. Would she abandon her duties like that?

I cannot imagine she would. Then again I also cannot picture Mother with rolled-up trousers and seaweed between her toes, bent over a basket of mussels. She must have done it once, when she was a young novice like me. But I cannot imagine Mother as a little girl. It simply does not make sense.

Sister Veerk and Sister Nummel were ready to meet the ship on the pier, gazing out at the grey sails. They did not see me. I snuck closer quietly and carefully so the pier's creaking planks would not give me away. I wondered what Sister Nummel was doing there. She is in charge of the junior novices, and Sister Veerk is the one who handles trade with fishermen.

“Is this what Mother foresaw?” asked Sister Nummel, shielding her eyes with her hand.

“Perhaps,” answered Sister Veerk. She will never speculate if she is not sure.

“I certainly hope not. Her words in the trance were difficult to decipher but the message was clear.” Sister Nummel adjusted her headscarf. “Danger. Great danger.”

A plank creaked under my foot. The sisters turned around. Sister Nummel frowned.

“Maresi. What are you doing here? You are supposed to be working at Hearth House today.”

“Yes.” I dragged out my answer. “I was harvesting mussels, but then I saw the ship.”

Sister Veerk pointed. “Look, they are hauling in the sails.”

We watched in silence as the crew manoeuvred the vessel into the harbour. It seemed odd how few people there were aboard. There was a bearded old man in a blue tunic at the capstan and I guessed he must be the captain. I could only see three other men, all with hard faces and stern expressions. The captain stepped off first and Sister Veerk went to speak with him. When I tried to sneak closer to hear what they were saying



Sister Nummel took me firmly by the arm. Soon Sister Veerk came back and whispered something to Sister Nummel, who immediately started to pull me away from the pier.

Even though I went with Sister Nummel without protest, I could not curb my curiosity. I wanted to be the one who brought the news back to the other novices. Twisting and turning my head, I caught a glimpse of the captain helping someone up from inside the ship. A slight figure with a cascade of fair, tangled hair over slender shoulders. She wore a straight brown sleeveless chemise over a shirt which might have been white once. Her clothes were worn and, although at first I thought her chemise was made of thick silk, when she moved I could see that in fact it was stiff with dirt. I could not see her face, she was staring at the ground as though she had to study every step she took. As though she were afraid to trust the ground beneath her feet. I did not know it at the time, but this was Jai.

I did not understand why Sister Nummel had been so anxious to get me away from the pier. Later that day Jai appeared in Novice House with the rest of us. Her long hair was still not clean, but it was combed and smooth and she was dressed like the rest of us in

brown trousers, white shirt and a white headscarf. If I had not seen her arrive, I would never have known she was any different from the rest of us.