



First Look Access

(Episode 3: Constance Roberts)

Sigil in Shadow

Constance Roberts

Chapter 1

Scorchwood

I peer over my shoulder when I feel a pair of eyes lock onto me. I'm pleased it is Lyle's gaze I catch at the back of the chapel. My plan is working.

His gray eyes brighten and flicker between me and the empty spot next to him. I nod at his signal and jump up when the priests have their backs to us.

"Where are you going?" My father whispers harshly.

"To sit with a friend." I tell him, and sneak away before he has time to protest. He wouldn't, if he knew what I was trying to do. Word was that the Skeir family was pushing their eldest son to marry, and if I could land a decent match like that, it would save Papa and I from ever having to live through a pitiful winter again. Lyle had found excuses to visit my stall in the market for the last three days, so I decided it was time to put a plan in motion.

Every day for morning prayers, he sits in the last pew in the corner of the chapel. I was sure to greet him on the way in and sit in his line of sight only a few rows ahead.

I'll admit. Lyle Skeir isn't most girls' first choice. He's not much to look at, with his pale hair and short stature, but his parents own a farm and he was born with claim to a bit of land. Sometimes his freckles can seem endearing in the right light, even if his personality does not.

With no name and what little dowry I had squandered away years ago by my father, I don't have much to offer a prospective husband except my virtue and what could be considered beauty by someone with an acquired taste. I am taller than most girls my age and as thin as a fence post. My skin is smooth and white as milk, but I'm

told men around here prefer women with more color. My dark garnet hair might be considered exotic, had I not cut it to the scalp months ago. Sometimes, out of the corner of my vision, I'll see a whisper of red when my eye wanders down. A ghost tendril I could swear brushed my shoulder. I'd felt like

I'd lost something that day when I sold my hair, until I felt the weight of my purse afterward. I have little doubt I will cut it again.

For now, I hide my short, jagged locks under a hood attached to my dress. Some of the more modest women in Scorchwood veil their hair as well, so no one has questioned the sudden change.

I ignore the snickers from Lyle's friends when I quickly slide in next to him. The priests don't seem to notice as they all drown on. Our heads are bowed while we recite the prayers, but I feel Lyle playfully kick me under my skirt. When I peek one eye open to glare at him, his eyes are reverently closed and completely ignoring my presence.

He kicks me again. I jab him back until our feet are in an all-out war under the pews. My heel finds his big toe and he unleashes a grunt, causing heads to turn our way and the priests to pause the ceremony.

We immediately return to prayer position, holding in our fit of giggles.

"Wanna get out of here? I can walk you to your stall." He whispers lowly. "Let's go," I say. With everyone's heads still bowed, we sneak out the back. Black flags loom over every corner as we pass through the silent streets. Since

the death of the heir prince, King Lorrion has commanded all citizens to gather in the chapels for early morning prayers until the queen gives birth to what everyone hopes to be the son forming in her royal belly.

"How far along is the queen now?" I ask Lyle, who is shuffling beside me.

"Not far enough," he says through droopy eyes.

These months of dawnlight vigils have taken their toll on everyone. Nearly half a

mile from the chapel and only now the sun wakes from under the horizon. Soon the day's work will begin and people will go about their business with no reminder of the tragedy at the castle, except the backdrop of dark shrouds embroidered with a three-tiered mountain under a crescent moon, the kingdom of Windcrest's sigil. After living in the city of

Scorchwood for six years, the dusk-colored banners had faded into the

background of my vision and I had hardly noticed them until they were replaced with these dark, ominous renditions.

“I heard she found out she was pregnant the day the Red Patrons invaded Westkirk..”

Lyle turns to me, a spark of intrigue in his tired eyes.

“The same day her son died at sea,” I hang my head beneath my hood. I doubt the rumor is true, but it’s still a heavy thought.

“So they say.” Lyle shrugs, taking my hand. “Let’s go and enjoy a moment alone before everyone catches up.” He veers us off course into a private garden widely known for being a place to hide from chaperones.

My heart flickers. I was nervous when he suggested we leave early, but I followed anyway, grateful my plan had worked out even better than I had intended.

I smile at Lyle and hope it conceals my nervousness. Spring has come, and with it a cool mist in the air that somehow burrows through your clothes and sticks to your skin. I feel it seep under my corset and I see droplets of it across the bridge of Lyle’s nose as he leans in close. I hope the extra half hour of bathing this morning was able to cleanse the scent of fresh dirt that always seems to cling to me.

Lyle tentatively lifts his finger and brushes my cheek. My breath catches in my chest. I have never been alone with a boy before. Never been this close. My hands search for something to do and instinctively clench my skirt.

“Those are pretty.” I watch Lyle’s expression shift from scheming to curious. He lightly taps one of the teardrop stones hanging from my earlobe.

I step back, averting his hand from getting too close to my hood.

“Thank you. They were my mother’s,” I explain proudly of the misty blue jewels resting in a crest of gold. “Her most prized possession.” These earrings, I will never sell.

“Let me take a better look at them.” Lyle comes forward, reaching for my hood.

A faint sound escapes my throat, but that is all. Before I can push him away, he's unveiled my shame.

I wait for his gasp, but his freckled face says it all. His cracked lips twist in horror and his eyes twitch with disgust. My face falls. I return the hood to its rightful place on my head and run off.

Lyle does not come after me.

I make it to my stall out of breath and with a streak of dried tears on my cheek. I wonder how long it will take before the whole town knows I bartered my hair, throwing my chances of finding a husband before the next long winter into the mud. Luckily, my hood keeps my red eyes hidden while I prepare my wares.

If I am known in Scorchwood for anything, it's for my tinctures to soothe cough and congestion. I only put my finest herbs in them and the rejects I grind up and sell in pouches for soups and stews. With the help of an old mentor, Fila, I have come across many different plants and learned their uses, so I'm able to have a bit of this and a bit of that in the form of tonics, tinctures, or balms.

My stock is running low due to the lack of optimal gardening conditions from frost. There's only so long a plant can keep and my winter herb stash is running down to dust. Even if I could have an ample supply, no one prospers in winter. Eggs are scarcer, bread is harder, and vegetables are extinct. No one has fresh food and no one has coin.

Along with my jars and pouches, I set up a meager display of seeds, hoping the damp air will inspire people to tend to their gardens. They attract a few onlookers and some pickpockets but no real customers. I am able to trade a skin balm for a jar of pickled onions, so I make that my lunch. By sundown, I'm packing up my wares and my hope when a shadow casts over my table.

"Ellary?" a female voice croaks. I don't recognize the woman as one of my usual customers, but she wears a style of dress I recognize is popular in Havendwell, the next town over.

"That would be me," I state. "What can I do for you?"

“Your cough cure,” she looks hastily over my almost empty table. “Do you still have some?”

“I have four jars left,” I say, revealing them from my pack. “Would you like one?”

“Yes, please!” The woman exclaims dramatically. She tries to cover her hack in the crook of her elbow. “It’s the only thing I’ve found that hinders the awful cold I get every spring.”

“I’m glad,” I say, feeling the flattery flush my cheeks. “How did you come about finding me? Assuming you’re not from Scorchwood.”

“No, Miss, you’re right. My husband’s a shopkeeper and he bought a case last year. Sold pretty quickly, once word got out that it eases the spring cold most people catch in Havendwell.”

“I think I remember him,” I say, recalling a merchant that had passed through last year.

“Indeed,” she smiles. “In fact, I was sent to buy another shipment.”

“Well,” I beam, trying not to sound too excited. “You can have the last four in my stock, but it will take me about a week to grow the ingredients I need to make more.” I think of my poor, shabby garden, just starting to wake from hibernation. I hope one week is enough.

“I understand,” she says through the disappointment in her eyes. No doubt she is thinking what a hassle it will be to make another trip. “Would a week be enough time to make five more cases?”

“Five cases!? Well, yes, but that would cost...” I try to calculate through my cloud of astonishment.

Before I can answer, the merchant’s wife slaps three polished silver coins in front of me.

My eyes almost can’t comprehend what I am looking at. Three shining silvers, like a beacon in a storm. Perhaps my luck is changing after all.



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