

SCARS
OF
SALT
AND
SILVER

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Prologue and Chapter One Preview

SCARS OF SALT AND SILVER

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PROLOGUE

They came in the middle of the night, silent as raindrops sliding down a windowpane. Their wet black boots and billowing cloaks shrouded them in greasy shadows. Their cutlasses caught the moonlight – the only sign of them prowling the streets. They ignored the first houses, the ones built beside the shore. There was no money in those houses, no strength to challenge a fight. The occupants weren't worth their time.

Up the streets they went, passing by the keeps and the smiths' stations, creeping their way to the borders of the canal, where the great sandstone pillars showcased the Palace on the other side. Then the bloodshed began.

She never really knew why they came. She only knew what was left once they fled....

The noise had started softly, just a hum on the horizon. But it had built quickly; the sound of metal clashing, of blades sliding off one another, of feet running and people screaming. It grew and grew, edging closer and bolder until it infiltrated her dreams.

She sat upright in her bed, panting.

Her room was as it always was; small and scarcely decorated. The plaster cracks in the pale walls were patched with crude paintings set in mismatched frames. Portraits of faerie princesses and vibrant mermaid tails, of prancing winged horses and all the other shining creatures from her favorite fairy tales. She could make out the lumpy shadows of her dresser set against the far wall, and the dark stain of a rug adorning the creaky wooden floor.

There was a soft glow in the air, a warmth like sunrise. But

SCARS OF SALT AND SILVER

the moon still hung high in the midnight sky. It shone through the panes of her lead window, illuminating the bedsheets that tangled around her. She pushed them back. The sheets clung to the skin of her thighs and calves – had she been dreaming? Sweat married the skin of her temple with the soft fluff of her hair.

She rubbed her eyes with her fists, blinking away the heaviness of sleep. Quietly, on the tips of her toes, she slipped out of bed and padded to the window. The chill of the glass cooled the air around her face, and she leaned into it. Shadows danced in the streets below, and strange clangs rang through the night. Beyond the rooftops of the neighboring buildings, red-gold flickered. Flickered, and then grew. Wildfires on the horizon. She gazed at them, mesmerized by the growing glowing embers. They seemed to dance along the rooftops, catching the wind and engulfing the shadows. Against the starkness of the night, they were so...

A scream curdled in the street below.

She gasped, stepping back from the window. When the shock of the noise had eased, she dared to peer into the street again. A lantern had fallen, the spilled oil now burning a fiery slash across the cobblestones. Dark figures tore through the streets, whirling and leaping and flashing long silver sticks. People came to their windows, to their doors, curious to see what the commotion was. The dark figures strode towards them. Shrieks erupted as the silver sticks lashed out, striking at the onlookers. Cutting them down.

She backed away from the window, eyes wide and brimming as she tried to process the sights below. The midnight shadows couldn't hide the splashes of gore.

Chaos. It was chaos down there.

There was a crash in the entranceway downstairs.

She stood – stood absolutely still in her nightgown by the window. She was suddenly cold, although the air was muggy. Her heart pounded in her ears, blood rushing behind her eyes. What was out there?

Another crash from her father's study, followed by silence. Whatever it was – whoever it was – hadn't come upstairs yet.

SCARS OF SALT AND SILVER

Breaking from her position, as though her body was set in clay, she dashed across the hall and into the adjacent room.

A sigh of relief tumbled from her chest as she watched her parents stir from their bed. Her mother fondled for a candle on the bedside table, her father groggily swinging his legs off the bed. Their wary eyes met hers as she pushed through the doorway.

“What is that racket?” Her father’s voice creaked with the remnants of sleep. His fair hair was ruffled on one side of his head, and he smoothed the moustache above his lips.

The girl didn’t answer, was too scared to speak. Instead, her lower lip wobbled.

“Come here, darling,” her mother crooned, reaching for her daughter. The girl nuzzled into her mother’s waist.

Thuds echoed from the stairwell. No, not thuds – footsteps.

Her father tugged on his robe, the cuffs of his pajamas peeking out from beneath the sleeves. He felt for his spectacles on the nightstand. His face crinkled as he peered into the light of the hall.

At first, it had just been a black figure filling the mass of the doorway. The soft light from the hall leaked in from behind. But as the girl’s weeping eyes adjusted, she saw the colour. Brown boots, pulled up to the knee over dark green pants. A vibrant red sash at the waist, oddly attractive. Red staining a white blouse that billowed from beneath a dark, greasy coat. The silver rings knotted into the lengths of wiry black hair that fell across broad shoulders.

The man smiled nefariously. His wrists were decorated with dazzling gold and silver bands, and a cutlass was gripped lazily in one hand. It was broad and curved and gleaming, like the grin of a crook.

The girl’s father backed away; hands raised in submission. “Please,” he breathed. “Take whatever you want. Just leave my family alone.”

The bearded man’s eyes raked over the girl and her mother. The look was cold and uncompassionate, as though it made no difference that he was looking at a crying woman and her small

child. His eyes slid back to her father.

“You people are so weak,” the man growled. His voice was coarse and curled with accents from lands far away. “I stand before a man and his family, and the man does not even offer to fight for their lives. Instead, he begs like a spineless dog.”

At the unconfirmed threat, the girl’s father stumbled back to his nightstand. The loose bedding caught his toe, and he crashed against the small set of drawers. No time to catch himself, he ripped open the top draw and grasped for something inside.

“I won’t let you hurt them,” he declared, whirling on the stranger. His hand shook. In it, he gripped a silver blade. Sharp, but small. It had not a single blemish of rust or blood to mar the metal. Unlike the wicked man’s cutlass...

The stranger grinned – properly grinned – at the feeble stance the girl’s father had taken in front of them. “What a gallant effort,” he applauded, amusement glistening in his dark, charcoal-lined eyes. “But you do not truly expect to fight me with a butter knife, do you?”

Her father shuffled his feet, squaring his shoulders. “I will do what I have to do to protect them.”

The stranger moved in a blur, striking out with his cutlass faster than the girl’s eye could follow. His dark cloak billowed as he danced forward. Then he was behind her father, the cutlass snaking about his ankle like some living, slithering thing.

A fowl scream ripped through the room. Her father arched his back and then crumpled forward. The small knife flung from his grasp.

Her mother cried out, a harrowing sound that the girl had never heard before. Her senses screamed at her that this was bad, that this man was bad. But she didn’t know what to do, didn’t know how to help. For a moment she couldn’t remember how to breathe.

Her father writhed on the floor, quaking hands wrapping around a fresh wound on the back of his leg. Blood spilled from between his long fingers.

With her father out of the way, the tyrant turned to the girl and her mother.

SCARS OF SALT AND SILVER

Her mother was wailing, knees buckling and then stiffening as she fought to maintain her strength. Her fingers bit into the girl's shoulders, holding her close as she backed into the corner of the bedroom.

"Tell me, woman," the tyrant leered. "Do you know the history of this city?"

The girl's mother begged him – begged him not to hurt them, not to kill them. The man did not care.

"I – I know this city," her father blurted out.

The tyrant slowly, lazily, turned his head in her father's direction. "Do you, now?" he murmured. A small smile made the curls of his moustache twitch. "But does your woman?"

"I'm a cartographer," the girl's father hurried to explain. "My wife works with me in the workshop. She knows the city well, but I know it better. I – I can take you wherever you want to go."

No! the girl wanted to cry. But she couldn't speak, couldn't scream...couldn't move.

The tyrant pondered for a minute, the tip of his cutlass digging notches into the hardwood floor as he twirled the blade by its hilt. "The history," he hissed. "The ancient secrets and myths. Do you know them?"

The girl's father swallowed. "I know...enough."

"I am a man of transactions," drawled the tyrant. "So, if I get what I want, what is it you ask for in return?"

Her father was too quick to answer. "My family...left alone and unharmed."

An ugly, insincere pout. "I cannot do that."

"Please!" her father wailed. "You will get what you're after, I promise! Just leave them alone."

The tyrant turned back to the girl and her mother. He stepped closer, blocking out all the light. He was large – oh, so large – and the girl felt herself becoming lost in his shadow. He reached out and grabbed her mother's arm.

The girl took her mother's place against the wall, tucked into the embrace of the shadow.

Her mother screamed as the man dragged her away. He

SCARS OF SALT AND SILVER

pushed her to her knees on the floorboards.

Her father scrambled towards his wife, taking her hands between his own bloody palms. His face when he looked up at the crook was full of anguish. He begged for mercy.

The tyrant looked god-like. His hand came to rest on top of her mother's head, her light blonde hair shifting under his fingers. He tilted her head back as he said, "I accept your services, sir. But to ensure you make good on your offer, I want to demonstrate the consequences should you fail."

Then he dragged the cutlass across her mother's throat.

An awful gurgling sound came from her mother.

Her father released a broken rasp.

The girl clapped her hands over her ears. When she closed her eyes, that vibrant flicker of fire set among the rooftops burned against the dark of her eyelids. Fire, she thought, was better than blood. She heard, rather than saw, her mother's body fall to the ground. Heard her father howl. She wanted to howl, too, but her throat felt full of ashes. There was a breeze in the air near her cheeks. She opened her eyes. The tyrant was kneeling before her.

"You leave her be!" her father screamed. But he couldn't move to protect her, couldn't stand, or seem to let go of her mother's limp hands.

The girl dropped her eyes to the tyrant's blade, where blood dropped off its pointed end. She didn't care for the man's face, for his leathery skin or wiry black hair, or his cold, dark eyes. She cared about the blade, and what he planned to do with it.

The man followed her gaze. He ran a finger down the blade, sweeping up a thick dribble of crimson.

The girl didn't dare move as he reached towards her. Didn't dare whimper as he dragged his finger across her forehead. Once. Twice. She could feel the calluses of his skin under the slick of the blood. This close to her, he smelled like smoke and metal and salt.

His dark moustache lifted in one corner as he smiled dearly. "X marks the spot."

CHAPTER ONE

Ten years later

Freya took a steadying breath before ducking into the dark alcove of a seemingly ordinary house. It was a particularly muggy night, the air damp with salty sea breeze trapped between the townhouses crowding narrow cobblestone streets. The cloak hanging off her shoulders imprisoned her body heat. She wished that she didn't have to wear the damned thing. Her fingers brushed against the rough wood of a door. She cast a quick glance around the street. It was empty, aside from a lazy smog made ghoulish by stray window candlelight. Her knuckles rapt: once, twice, three times.

A minute later, a shaft of bronze light appeared from a grate in the door, illuminating her face. She blinked from beneath her hood.

A man squinted through the bars, his beady eyes sweeping Freya up and down from beneath bushy white brows.

"Miss Willowray?" He adjusted the spectacles bridging his nose. "Is that you?"

Freya offered a weak smile. She felt sick. "Good evening, Mr Tomlin."

The wooden door swung open, and Mr Tomlin's wiry figure filled the frame. He gave Freya a dubious once-over and pressed his lips together. "You're here for the wake."

It wasn't a question. Nor was a wake being held in this house. The Risers only ever referred to their meetings publicly as wakes,

SCARS OF SALT AND SILVER

in order to deter eavesdroppers or passers-by. No one wanted to find themselves among a room full of lamenting friends and family, grieving someone they had never met. She supposed the Risers were mourning – not a person but a way of life.

After the city was left a cinderling, splintered mess from the raids, and many of its citizens had been slaughtered in the streets, the Risers had formed to rebuild the city. Back then it had only been a rag-tag team of able-bodied men and women who wanted to ensure something like the raids never happened again. So that children like Freya would never again be ripped from their homes and families. Now, they were an exclusive society. A mixture of businessmen and women combined with a secret dabbling of nobility.

Freya had never truly been a part of them, not in spirit. Her allegiance to them was forged from a different interest. A sense of self-preservation. She had joined the Risers when she was nine years old, half-starved, bloodied and bruised. An old woman had found her as she sifted through the ash and cinders, crying her father's name. That woman had asked something of Freya that night. Offered her a deal. That had been the beginning of it all, of the game Freya had spent the last ten years playing. A game where information was a currency, and knowledge was power. A way to survive in an otherwise callous and exploitative world.

Freya forced a steely resolve into place and tried to ignore the flutter of nerves in her belly. "Yes. Please accept my deepest condolences."

Satisfied, Mr Tomlin stepped aside enough to let Freya into the cramped entryway. He scanned the street and hurried to shut the door. A heavy steel bolt screeched into place, barricading them inside. It was far too heavy for any ordinary residence.

Mr Tomlin turned to Freya, eyeing her unabashedly. "You've aged."

Freya choked on a bitter laugh. "So have you."

The man had always reminded her of a rat, his movements quick and jerky despite his age. He had the misfortune of possessing a rather narrow face with a large, pointy nose. But he

had always been one of the kinder men she'd known.

"We were just about to start." He scurried out of the entryway and into another softly lit room. Freya hesitated to follow.

"Move your feet, girl," Mr Tomlin called. "We aren't waiting for you."

Freya stepped into a blandly furnished living room. Twin settees were upholstered in old floral thread, centered around a bare table and worn-out rug. The duck-egg blue curtains were drawn over lead windows, and an old woman sat on one of the chairs, stirring sugar into a cup of steaming tea. She smiled as Freya passed through the room, no trace of alarm in her milky eyes. The perfect neighbor.

Mr Tomlin ducked around another corner. Freya hurried after him, finding herself wandering down a short hall. A door to the right opened to a set of stairs. The wooden steps creaked and bowed as Freya carefully chased the old man down the stairwell.

At the bottom was another door, which Freya presumed lead to a cellar. Mr Tomlin brushed through, holding it open for Freya. The room on the other side was welcomingly cool, the brick walls lit with candelabras. The floor was made of cracked stone tiles and the walls were lined with cluttered wooden shelves boasting jars of grain and pickled vegetables. A large table took up the center of the room, and at least two dozen people crowded around it. As Freya entered, several members turned to covet suspicious glances.

Freya's pulse jumped. She was taking a risk by being here. Exposing herself to so many people – people who might learn her face or name. She had stopped attending the meetings three years ago, and only traded her stolen secrets with a select few confidants. She operated on the edges, making herself less dependable, less likely to be missed when the day came for her to leave the city. By now, all the Risers would have likely forgotten about her. Exactly as she wanted them to. All except Mr Tomlin, of course. And one particular person who would never let her go.

SCARS OF SALT AND SILVER

Kila. She was the woman who had found Freya that night after the Raids. She was the woman at the heart of the revolution, the driving force behind the revolt. She would bring change to Orlenea.

Kila stood at the head of the table, holding the room like the commander she was. She had a handsome face, drawn with age and yet timeless all at once. Her thin lips were painted with a dark crimson stain – a striking contrast to her white-silver hair and cold grey eyes. Ten years ago, Kila’s face had been soft and curious, the lamplight casting a warm glow over her cheeks. She had smiled the first time Freya met her, wide and welcoming. It hadn’t taken Freya long to learn that warmth had been a pretense. It was from this crone that Freya had learned her best facades.

Kila barely acknowledged Freya before she turned to address the room. Her eagle-headed cane, one that Freya had spent years covering from, cracked against the tile floor. The room fell silent.

Freya took up a spot against the rear wall, more comfortable being able to watch without being watched. She leaned against the wall with one shoulder, crossing her arms, trying to appear as calm and indignant as possible. With her hands tucked out of sight, she wiped the sweat from her palms.

“Now that we have gathered,” Kila announced, voice as ancient and smooth as graphite, “we shall begin this meeting.”

Mr Tomlin weaved through the crowd to stand by her side, a bunch of papers clutched between his hands. He adjusted his spectacles and cleared his throat before peering at the first document he held.

“The agenda tonight,” he called out, “is to address any new issues before discussing ideas on how to safeguard the city over the peak trading season.”

Someone’s hand shot up, and Mr Tomlin nodded for them to speak. The room’s attention swung to a woman in a plain linen dress and stained apron. Her greying hair was pulled into a knot at the back of her head. She flushed as everyone looked at her.

"I was wantin' to bring up the increase in merchant rates," she said somewhat nervously. "It's the third increase we've 'ad this year and each time I 'ave to put my prices up. My customers ain't happy. It'll be a miracle if I'm still baking come winter."

There were murmurs of agreement from some of the other attendees. Emboldened by their response, the woman cocked an arm on her hip. "We're being bloody robbed. This can't go on. If no one's baking the bread, how does everyone expect to eat?"

Another woman spoke from the crowd. "It's not just the merchants who have been slammed with increased taxes."

Freya peered among the faces. She knew that voice.

The second woman detached herself from the crowd as she moved forward. She was much more lavishly dressed than the first, with a fox skin shawl draped over her shoulders and a netted floral fixture in her hair. A perfect grey-blond ringlet hung down the back of her neck and bounced over one shoulder.

Madam Faswanne was *not* someone Freya had expected to see here tonight. She hid her glare as best as she could while the Madam graciously stepped forward, looking pleased at the attention she had drawn.

"Last week I received an issue from the Palace demanding a five percent increase in taxes from my business. I run a safe and respectable house, and the services my girls provide offer a great release for many of the customers." The Madam feigned a look of regret. "The tax must come from somewhere, and the only safe option is for it to come from my girls' wages. The Palace has put me in a dreadful position. I can't have my rates increasing and run the risk of men not being able to afford their pleasures. What happens when they can't get what they need at my house? Who will they take it from instead?"

Concerned whispers ran through the room, and Freya had to hold back a disgusted scoff. The Madam was paying *her* taxes from her *girls'* incomes. As if she hadn't already taken enough from them.

Freya's best friend, Hetty, was one of those girls. Freya had watched Hetty get sucked into the Madam's clutches as an

orphan after the raids. Watched her be groomed and trained in the art of seduction; use her body for money, lead men up the stairs and quietly close the door behind them. Freya had watched Hetty come out beaten and broken and ready to do it all over again. And for what? Because on paper, the Madam had bought her life. Hetty had been given shelter when she had no home, but the debt of that small kindness had been her life, her honor, and her virtue.

“How do you propose we challenge this newest increase?” Mr Tomlin asked. He scanned the room for proposals, but no one answered.

Kila answered. “We must find a way to appeal to Princess Naryla. She is coming of age, and she will soon be coronated. If we can find someone among us who is worthy of her marriage, then we will have an ally in court. Someone who can make a difference. Someone who can one day overrule the king and queen.”

“Why don’t we just take the princess hostage?” a man called from the crowd.

Surprisingly, the people seemed to like this idea.

Kila struck her cane against the floor, silencing the growing cheers. “This is a delicate situation. An abduction will only serve to increase the hate between the people and the Palace. We want to be comfortable in this city. Safe and treated without contempt or prejudice. Our best chance stands in infiltrating the Palace with people who recognize our needs.”

Reluctantly, the crowd agreed. Like lambs before a wolf.

“How do we know we can trust someone powerful enough to marry a princess?” another person asked. The question was innocent enough, but Freya didn’t miss the thin press of Kila’s lips. Her plan was smart. Uniting the Palace with the people through Princess Naryla’s marriage would undoubtedly make change. But that change could also take years.

“All the nobles are pompous pricks,” one woman jeered. “The moment they’re welcomed into that palace, they’ll forget any sympathy they had for us.”

Kila waved a wand over the crowd, hushing them. “We have

built strong alliances with several noble families. The only challenge will be ensuring that, when the time comes, the right person is chosen.”

“And what good does that do us in the meantime? It’s been ten years since the raids, and all we’ve got to show for our efforts are increased taxes and a bunch of armored thugs that would sooner beat their own brothers and sisters than protect them from danger.”

Madam Faswanne and several others nodded.

It was no secret that the Desert Guard were as disassociated from the common folk as the King and Queen themselves. They were a collection of egotistical cock-fighting brutes, which meant that if a threat came to Orlenea, the guards would be the first to jump into the battle. Whether they would be able to win the battle was another story. Half of them had likely never fought anything scarier than a bread-thieving peasant. And the other half spent their days getting fat and drunk off the money they bullied out of the commoners.

Freya adjusted her feet, preparing for the room’s attention to swing her way. “We need real fighters. People among us who can not only hold a sword, but use it, too. We can’t rely on the Palace to protect us if pirates return to Orlenea’s shores. We should assemble our own force, our own line of defense.”

Heads swung her way, trying to identify who had spoken. Freya drew a shallow breath as her heart quickened.

One man spoke from the front of the crowd, nodding his bald head. “I’ve got three sons who want to join the Guard. But I’d sooner have them train to defend my people than be recruited to defend that inbred Palace.”

Other people began to agree, volunteering themselves or able-bodied relatives who could train to fight.

The Madam, who still stood at the front of the crowd, cooled herself with a lace-trimmed fan. “I could lend some of my girls to the cause, but their safety would be my greatest concern.”

Safety. Freya laughed harshly. The Madam didn’t care about their safety. All she cared about was pretending to have something worthwhile to contribute. Freya had no doubt that if

the sword hit the sand, the Madam would waste no time offering her girls to the pirates if it meant saving the skin of her own neck.

The Madam swung her cool gaze to Freya, eyes narrowed. “Is something about this amusing, girl?” she hissed.

Freya unfolded her arms. “I was simply admiring the love and loyalty you have for your employees.”

The Madam raised her chin. “Perhaps you are too naive to be involved with these gatherings. You are young, sheltered. You preach in this meeting but contribute nothing to our cause.”

Freya cocked her head, pushing off the wall. The Madam had *no idea* what Freya contributed. Freya had helped the Risers more times than she could count, snatching whispers and gossip that aided them in their quests. She wasn’t a powerhouse, and she certainly didn’t have the resource of spies that some people had. But Freya listened and probed, pulling any tiny threads of information she could until the whole truth unraveled. And then she took what had been undone and sold it to someone who could put it back together again. She was a word thief, an assassin of secrets. And in a game where knowledge was power, she could be dangerous. She knew all about Madam Faswanne’s affiliation for swindling the attention of married men. She also knew the Madam profited from the ‘accidental’ conception of her two daughters, the fathers of which were willing to pay generous sums to keep them...estranged. The hag was as corrupt as any pirate.

“And what is it, exactly, that *you* contribute?” Freya challenged, anger fueling her bravado. “Other than whores, of which you use to take credit for distracting vile and wayward men from turning their attention on other innocent people.”

She was breaking so many rules. Letting her emotions get the better of her. Letting her words rise like a fist ready for a fight. She should have stayed quiet, should have remained another face in the crowd. Now, all eyes were on her. It was too late to back down.

The Madam blinked as though she couldn’t understand Freya’s question. Her lips flapped like a fish out of water.

Freya counted all the times that she had found Hetty with bleeding noses or bruises on her neck and wrists. The Madam knowingly allowed violent men to visit the girls, given they paid an additional fee to cover the ‘temporary damages’. Madam Faswanne’s only concern was that her girls would remain fit to work so she could maintain a healthy profit.

“You *think* you contribute to the safety and wellbeing of Orlenea’s citizens. But you use your girls’ wages, and not the profits you turn, to pay for the King’s taxes. You let the poor and vulnerable remain dependent on you by stripping them of their dignity and liberty, while your income and power remains untouched. The truth is *you* are part of the rot that this city needs rid of.”

The Madam gasped, but it was not her breath alone that sucked on the shocked silence. In the aftermath of Freya’s words, people began to whisper.

Freya finally dared to look at Kila. The woman’s face was frosty, her eyes flashing with barely bridled fury.

Freya squared her shoulders, forcing herself not to recoil like she used to do as a child. Kila would never back her on this, would never dare to acknowledge that, for seven years, she had raised Freya.

All Freya could do was pray that later, once the meeting was finished, Kila would let this little misdemeanor slide.

“If we are done with making enemies of one another,” Kila growled, her voice slicing through the growing tension. The hand that gripped the head of her cane was white-knuckled. “We will get back to the matter at hand. Is there anyone here who can contribute something *useful* to our marriage proposal for Princess Naryla?”

Mr Tomlin glanced between Kila and Freya, eager to ease the tension that had built. Shrugging, he said, “I have a friend in court who helps arrange the formal events. I could see if he would be of any use.”

Kila smiled, pleased, though Freya could still detect a strain in her voice. “Good. The arrangements for the Summer Solstice Ball will be underway. See if your friend can do something about

SCARS OF SALT AND SILVER

getting our charming noble sons close to the Princess.”

Freya shook her head in disbelief. How much money would be required to ensure the prestige families remained loyal *if* one of their sons were chosen to wed the princess? How much money would be wasted, that could have otherwise been spent on building and strengthening an army of their own people? The Risers were buying blue-blooded loyalty while the rest of them could barely afford rent or food.

Feeling aggrieved, Freya left before the meeting was over.

She knew it would only be a matter of time before Kila sought her out. She had shown more truths of herself than she ought to tonight. She had shown Kila that her loyalty to the Risers was not undying. And that would come with a price to pay. Because in Kila's mind, Freya belonged to her, like Hetty belonged to Madam Faswanne.

