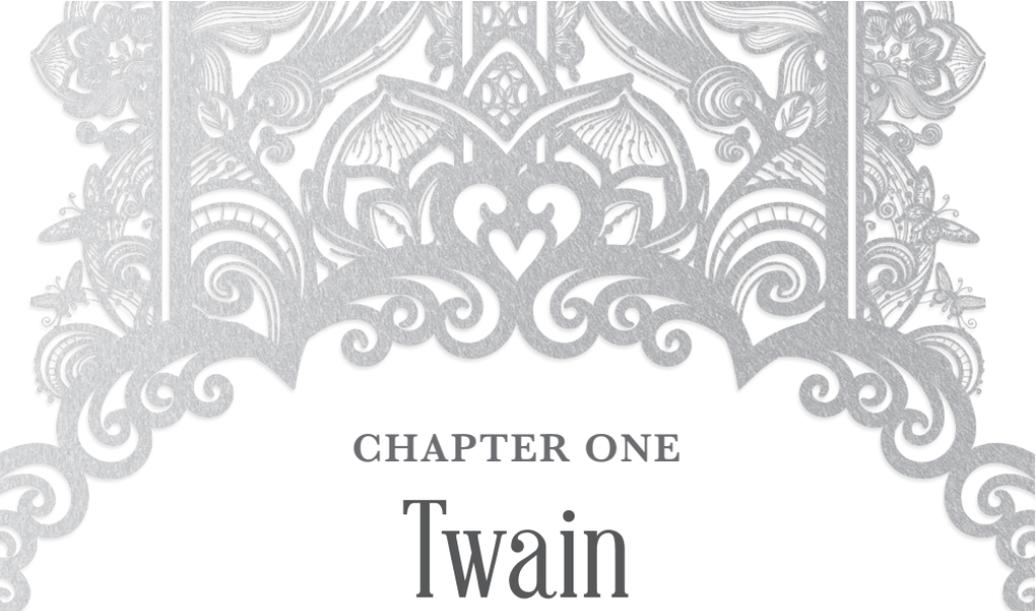


THE  
VERMILION  
EMPORIUM

JAMIE  
PACTON

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a light gray tone, framing the top and sides of the page.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Twain

It was a day for finding things.

Twain Vernier knew it in his bones. Not that he had time to dwell on the knowledge, since he was currently clinging to a cliff face, half a mile off the coast of Severon, looking much more like a spider than a seventeen-year-old boy. A brusque October wind whipped around him, smelling of salt, snow that would soon arrive, and bird droppings. Relentless, the wind pulled Twain's hair out of the cord he'd tied it back with and cut through his thin shirt.

It was well past midday, and there was fierce music on the air. It howled: *You shouldn't be here, foolish boy. Go back down now, before it's too late.*

Ignoring the wind, Twain jammed his light-brown fingers deeper into the crevice beside his head. His muscles burned from the climb up the tower of stone, and his hands no longer looked like the carefully tended ones of a musician. His knuckles were bruised, his

fingertips bloody. Good. Music was for a different time. A different Twain. He would break his fingers on this rock if that was what it took to reach the top and earn a way out of Severon.

*Go!*

With a shout, he lunged upward, snagging his fingers in a vertical crack a few inches to his right. His toes grazed a narrow ledge and he held himself there, legs trembling, breath catching in his throat, every muscle in his body straining to keep him on that cliff.

*That was close. Too close, maybe.*

*Keep moving.*

Twain willed himself not to look down. After three ragged inhales, he couldn't help it. He glanced past the slim shelf where his frozen toes curled around slick rock. Far below, waves pounded the stone tower. It had taken him most of the morning to row out to the rock; and now his rowboat bobbed in the dark water, held in place by an anchor. From where Twain clung to the cliff, the boat looked no bigger than a washbasin.

It was a long way down, and there were knife-sharp rocks beneath the foaming water.

Even this high up, icy spray splashed the edges of Twain's pants, stinging his bare feet. This late in the year, it was too cold to climb without shoes, but it was also impossible to make it to the razorbills' nests any other way. And Twain needed money more than he needed all his toes. If he moved fast enough, he might get to keep both.

Wrenching his eyes away from the gnashing teeth of the sea, Twain measured the distance to the razorbill colony on the ledge

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above his head. Piles of feathers littered the top of the stone tower. So close. But *close* wasn't there yet. He still had to scramble from below a horizontal shelf of rock and haul himself to the top. As he considered the rock face, the wind gusted, scattering some of the valuable feathers.

"No!" Twain shouted. He reached out to grab a feather as it floated past, but he missed. It was like watching gold fly into the sea.

*Get moving now, before the rest of the feathers are swept away.*

Ordinarily dull gray, razorbill feathers turned indigo when they dropped from the birds in the wild. None of Severon's Scientifica scholars knew why it happened, and the fierce raptors withered in captivity, their plumage never changing color. Scarce, beautiful, and deadly to retrieve, the indigo feathers were coveted by the richest women in Severon. For hats. Or the collars of velvet gowns. Or, in the rarest of cases, to make cloaks the color of nightshade.

It was said that the Casorina, the leader of Severon, had thirty such cloaks.

With this sort of demand, there used to be more climbers, but one by one they met their ends on the cliffs each season. Finally, only Twain and his younger brother, Zand, were left. Not that Zand was much of a climber—or that Zand was here anymore.

Twain swore as a knife of grief sliced through him. All he wanted was to forget that afternoon three months ago. He wanted to go back to who he was before Zand fell—a protective older brother and charming musician who played the violin in taverns, kissed girls who came to his shows, and climbed cliffs for feathers when he needed extra money. There was simplicity to those roles, and Twain

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knew how to fill them. He didn't know what do now that everything had changed.

*Forget about that life. Ignore it all and move on.*

Much as he wanted to, it was impossible to forget the way Zand's body had tumbled down this very rock pillar. Or the way the hungry waves pulled him under before Twain could reach him.

Twain closed his eyes, unable to silence Zand's scream in his head. That was the thing about someone you loved dying—you had to go on without them, even if you didn't want to. So you got out of bed every morning (on the mornings when you could). You put one foot in front of the other. And maybe someday, you'd wake up and it would hurt less. Or you wouldn't think you saw the person you'd lost all around town. Or you wouldn't hear their voice. Or their screams.

Twain let out a long, ragged inhale.

*Just hang on. Climb this rock. You can do it.*

In the months since Zand's death, Twain had made his way through their meager savings. He couldn't bring himself to play music anymore, and his tavern friends stopped asking about him. Today's desperate climb was his only chance of buying passage out of Severon.

*If you can get to the razorbill feathers, you can name your price.*

It was a bitter comfort and the only advantage of going out this late in the season.

Twain had failed to save his brother, but that didn't mean he intended to die on this rock. Shoving all thoughts of Zand away, Twain calmed his shaking hands. He shifted slightly, adjusting the canvas bag slung across his chest. Like an engineer, he examined the cracks in the pillar. Much to his scholar parents' chagrin, Twain

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had been climbing since before he could walk. This particular rock face was merely a puzzle. A labyrinth of lines and fissures for him to solve. The answer was here; he just had to find it.

The horizontal crevice above his head was outside his reach, but it would be quicker than trying to ease his way up the long vertical cleft to his right. It was likely certain death either way. But he'd woken up this morning with the sort of knowing that came to him sometimes: today was a day for finding things. And so, he would leap.

With a deep breath and a prayer to whatever gods or ghosts might be listening, Twain pushed off the cliff, lunging for the crevice. It was too far. Too much of a reach. Twain stretched to the end of his spine, fingers extending, grasping, slipping. Pebbles flew past Twain as he scrambled for a grip, a handhold, anything.

He missed.

His hands flailed, and his body slid down the cliff, stone shredding his shirt, ripping into his skin. There would be nothing of him left to find if he hit the rocks in the wrong place. But then a great gust of wind surged around him. It pinned him to the cliff for a moment, like a giant's hand holding him in place. Clambering, Twain caught himself in the slimmest of cracks. He shouted as pain surged across his shoulder. Then, his shout turned to a laugh. A great, high, golden sound of pure delight.

Twain lived for moments when he held life and death by his fingertips.

Hanging by one hand, halfway up a cliff, above a ravenous sea, he looked like a jewel dangling from a rich woman's ear. Spinning there for the world to admire. But there was no one to see. No one

to marvel at how Twain's broad shoulders bunched as he pulled himself up the last few feet and then flopped onto the ledge covered in razorbills' nests.

He'd done it. Barely.

Hauling air into his chest, Twain lay on his back among the feathers. Gulls wheeled above, but there was no sign of the razorbills. If his luck held, they'd stay out at sea until he was long gone.

Slowly, painfully, Twain sat up and stuffed as many feathers as he could into his bag. Adrenaline coursed through him and his hands were shredded from the climb, but he had solid stone beneath him. And that counted for something. Once all the feathers on the top of the rock were securely in his satchel, Twain pulled back the pieces of his shirt and examined his wounds. A few scratches crisscrossed his chest, and one long cut dripped blood down the planes of his stomach. Gingerly, he prodded his ribs. Not broken. And he'd had worse before.

Relief flooded him as he caught his breath. He'd made it. That was something at least. Taking a canteen from his bag, Twain relaxed for a moment.

It was beautiful up here. All around him the sun glittered off the sea. Ships dotted the horizon like ants marching toward Severon. A three-masted ship with red-and-blue striped sails caught Twain's eye, and he watched it glide into the city's main harbor. Perhaps it was full of foreign scholars, sailing into Severon to study the rare Arcana texts in the Great Library. Or perhaps it was stuffed with fur-clad traders from the northern kingdoms, here to see what technological marvels had been crafted in Severon's Scientifica

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workshops. Or perhaps it held ordinary people eager for a glimpse of Severon's legendary museums and galleries.

Farther down the docks sat *The Lady's Revenge*, a freighter with bright-green sails. Twain's heart surged to see it. Today was October first. The *Revenge* was set to leave Severon on the last day of the month, headed on a voyage of adventure and discovery around the world. Twain was determined to be on it.

Twain stretched, letting the sun warm his frozen toes. *If only my parents could see me now. Ready to strike out around the world and leave Severon behind.*

They wouldn't have been proud, but they would've been relieved he was no longer their problem. It was Zand who would have missed him.

*Now, no one will miss you.*

The thought delivered another dagger of heartache, this one jagged-edged and twisting. Twain doubled over, surprised again at all the ways sorrow snuck up on him. Every morning he thought he would be fine, but at some point every day, grief brought him to his knees, filling him with regret.

Fuck. He missed Zand. He missed the way his brother's eyes would light up when reading a new tidbit of magical history. He missed the way they would fight over silly things, like who ate the last heel of bread. He missed Zand's loud laugh and the way he brought home stray cats. Twain missed all the tiny nothing things that somehow added up to making a tremendous person.

If he could talk to Zand one more time he'd apologize. Tell him that—

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*Stop.*

*Such thoughts do no good. Especially when you're so very alone.*

Roughly, Twain swiped his bruised palm across his eyes. It came away wet.

*You're not here for feelings. You're here for feathers.*

To stop the grief, he would do what his mother taught him: observe, detach. *Scientifica scholars prize logic over emotion*, she would remind him time and time again.

"Too bad I never made it as a scholar," Twain muttered to the sky and sea. "Maybe then this wouldn't hurt so much."

*Observe, detach.*

It wasn't much by way of loving parental advice, but it was good enough to stop Twain from falling apart on a pillar of rock in the middle of the sea.

Observe.

Twain looked toward Severon, capital of Aix and the great jewel on the coast. From this height, the city looked like an artist's messy paint palate. That dash of yellow in the middle was the Orpiment palace—home of the Casorina. It gleamed in the afternoon sun, its roof winking with golden shingles. Filling the space beside the Orpiment were the dull browns of the university and Great Library. Ringing those buildings was a swath of bright blue marking the Lapis Loop. Aptly named, the museums, galleries, restaurants, and boutiques in Lapis had dazzling cerulean porticos, roofs, and columns. Along the bluffs above the sea stretched the Verdigris District. The oldest, most expensive mansions there were roofed in copper that had turned blue-green—verdigris—through the years.

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And then there were the crimson splashes of the Vermilion neighborhoods. Roofed in cheap red clay tiles, they filled in the gaps between Verdigris and Lapis, unfolding all the way to Severon's beaches. Once, there'd been talk of walling up Vermilion, as if that could keep the district from spreading somehow; but, such plans were quickly dismissed because too many rich people liked to slip into its dark lanes, cafés, bookstores, brothels, and shops.

Twain's house, a small shack at the fringe of the Vermilion neighborhoods, was tucked between a dozen other falling-down workers' cottages. From this far out at sea, he couldn't tell which one was his. Along the eastern horizon of Severon rose the mountains that walled off Aix from its larger, fiercer neighbors. When he was small, Twain had spent many nights being quizzed by his Arcana scholar father on how the protection of the mountains had helped Severon grow into the magnificent city it was today.

Not that Twain found much magnificence here now. The thought reminded him of why he was on the pillar of rock. *Time to get going.*

Twain looked around for any feathers he had missed. A large bunch of them were crammed into a crack in the rock, tucked among a pair of nests. Twain shoved his hand inside the opening, pulling out a handful. But that wasn't the only thing that emerged. Something silvery and sleek lay among the deep purple of the feathers.

"It can't be," Twain murmured.

Dropping the razorbill feathers into his bag, he carefully pulled at the silvery thread. It was strung with bits of seaweed, nest, and tiny fluffs.

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The silver filament glistened, sparkling like dew-soaked spider's silk. A soft, metallic song emanated from the thread. As Twain closed his eyes, listening to the melody, a series of images whispered with the music, singing to him of a dark-eyed girl, a circus under the stars, and a million wishes.

Gently, he turned the thread over in his hands.

It was starlight.

He had found a thread of starlight.

The thought nearly made him fall off the rock.

Starlight was more coveted than anything else in Severon—maybe more so than anything else in the world. Two centuries ago, the Salon, a small group of Severon's artists, painted with starlight and made lace from it. Twain's father used to tell him stories of magical lace that could shape the future and change the world.

According to the history books, only the Salon members knew where the starlight came from, and they took the secret to their graves. No one had found a sliver of starlight in a very long time, but here was Twain, coiling an entire thread of the stuff around his arm. It glowed there like a priceless bracelet, singing its melancholy song.

Twain let out a shout of triumph, startling a pair of gulls who'd landed on the cliff beside him. If he wasn't so far above the sea, he might dance.

Because the thread of starlight would get him more money than cartloads of razorbill feathers. With it, he'd be able to buy new clothes and passage out of Severon, and he could start a life—a good life—somewhere far across the sea.

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He stared over the water, his mind churning with possibilities. With the money from this thread of starlight, he could find the freedom he'd always longed for. He could reinvent himself and travel the world. He could buy a better violin (if he ever started playing again) or a home in Verdigris—something he and Zand had fantasized about on long, cold nights in their shack.

With this strand of starlight, he could do anything.

Well, almost anything.

He certainly couldn't use it to fly off this rock. Which was a more pressing problem than deciding how to spend his hypothetical riches.

Careful not to damage the starlight, Twain began the long trek back down the cliff, confident his life was about to change entirely.