

Rathbones

Folio Prize

MENTORSHIPS

in association with FIRST STORY

Excerpt from *The Blood Children*,
by Maria Clark

Mentored by Adam Foulds

Cold Silver

Gwenevere Brynne hoped the man in the hooded cloak had cleaned the blade of silver, before pressing it against her throat, but she suspected otherwise.

She shivered slightly, but held her ground.

“I’m waiting,” she said, folding her arms. The man in the hooded cloak, his eyes gleaming from the hole of darkness, pushed the cool metal further against her skin; she was sure blood was probably welling up around the pressure, but she didn’t mind. She’d had far worse injuries before – falling over the pigsty gate and knocking herself out, for one – but this was the first time she had been threatened by a dagger, although she wasn’t the intended target. She just hoped it wasn’t covered in another person’s blood.

“Move aside.” His voice reverberated around the silent square, a low growl clashing against the water splashing from the pump. Gwennie could feel her heart straining against her chest – as if it would break through her skin and inhale the air – and swallowed, willing herself to remain calm. The man only had one chance to use his knife, after all – he wouldn’t waste it on her.

“Why?” she said, attempting to keep her voice steady. “What has this poor woman done to you?” Gwennie couldn’t look behind her, but she knew the figure was still standing there, trembling in fear. She didn’t know who she was, but it didn’t matter. The moment she’d seen the man with the knife she knew she would have to act.

Gwennie, aged sixteen winters, and a determined, if filthy, girl, was in the middle of her ninth day being disguised as a boy. Dressed in a dirty tunic, splattered with horse manure, and baggy trousers, she had been passing through the streets of Elinmylly to fetch more water from the pump, when she had spotted the man. He had certainly looked out of place in the crowd; it was market day in the city, and the narrow pathway leading up to the main castle was obscured by stalls with folk selling their goods, yet he was unmoving against the tide of people.

Elinmylly almost looked like someone had built a town after one too many ales and couldn’t be bothered to correct it. The houses were crammed side by side, chimneys poking out of the roofs, and the pale grey towers of the castle glowed softly in the morning sunlight. The air was thick with the sounds of chatter and bartering, with the smells of roasted meat mingling amongst the fabrics and embroidery for sale. The man had been lurking by a stall that sold handkerchiefs, his pale blue cloak draped across his powerful frame and obscuring his features; Gwennie had thought nothing of it when she had passed him the first time, swinging the bucket from her arm, but when she

was waiting in the queue for the pump, a tingling sensation within her warned her something was wrong. Why would a man – standing at a stall selling handkerchiefs, no less – wear a hooded cloak on a warm spring day? Everyone else had discarded their cloaks and were proudly displaying their new dresses, made during the winter, having waited for a day like this to remove them from their chests. Gwennie had been in Elinmylly, the capital of Ethua, the kingdom, for less than a fortnight and she was still amazed at the friendliness and the sense of community that surrounded the lower town. Joyful greetings echoed around the castle walls as villagers from the surrounding towns entered the city to barter with the merchants, and even in her present state – spattered with wet hay and manure – Gwennie still received smiles and nods of courtesy from those she passed.

She had been sent there by her ailing guardian, Mrs Brynne, to seek work in the city, to send money home to their little village; having never ventured beyond the borders of her village her entire life, the week-long journey to Elinmylly had been a daunting prospect for Gwennie, and she still couldn't quite believe she had done it. Not only that, but she had secured a job in the stables (granted, that had been accidental and she had to pretend she was a boy), and was now being threatened at knife-point. Village life was tame compared to this!

On her first day in the city, she had marvelled at the silken triangles fluttering between the beams of the houses, and the cheerful bustle of the townsfolk as they went about their daily business, before she was shoved aside by a crowd of boys, all dressed similarly to her.

“Job’s that way.” A rough hand grabbed her shoulder before she fell over, the boy greeting her with a toothy grin.

“What job?” Gwennie was sure he had mistaken her for another boy, but still felt compelled to ask. The boy extended a dirty hand towards her, and after a moment’s hesitation, she took it, following him to the entrance of the stables.