

TRUDI
CANAVAN
MAKER'S
CURSE

Book Four of Millennium's Rule

 hachette
AUSTRALIA



Published in Australia and New Zealand in 2020
by Hachette Australia
(an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited)
Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney NSW 2000
www.hachette.com.au

Published in Great Britain in 2020 by Orbit
an imprint of Little, Brown Book Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 0 7336 4368 2 (paperback)

Cover design and illustrations by Duncan Spilling, LBBG
Cover images courtesy Shutterstock
Typeset in Garamond Three by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



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PART ONE

RIELLE

CHAPTER 1

The arrival place was surrounded by three low walls, each a little higher than the last, as if they were seating around a performance area. A large slab of rock dominated the centre. As Rielle moved sideways within the place between worlds, so that her legs would not fuse with the slab when she arrived, she stared at the dark stain covering the top and tried not to imagine it was blood. When air surrounded her, she breathed in, and her heart sank at a familiar scent.

It *was* blood.

Shivering, she looked around. The land around her was flat, and divided into fields. The road leading to the arrival place – or was it a sacrificial altar now? – was empty of travellers, and weeds were encroaching on either side. The fields were occupied by workers, however. None had seen her yet. She did not recognise the crop, and the cool air held none of the scent of the plants she had helped harvest last time she had been in this world. Her senses told her that there was very little magic about. That did not worry her. She'd brought enough with her that becoming stranded was very unlikely.

She had not been to this world for five cycles – a cycle being the measurement of time similar to a year in most worlds. When she had left it, she'd forged a new path, but it was unlikely any trace would remain after so much time. The most reliable way to find her way back here had been to follow the traces of what had

once been well used as a route; then, on arrival, seek out the area she had lived in before.

Judging by the plant species, she'd arrived in a very different part of the world to the one she remembered.

She had learned that the sudden removal of power could have unpredictable effects on civilisations, with violence and chaos all too common. Without magic to call upon, the local sorcerers would be no threat to her. Nor would ordinary people. Yet she'd hesitated to return here, fearing that her brief visit might have changed this world for the worse, and that the inhabitants would blame her for those changes.

Because she *was* to blame.

She had been chasing Qall, the young man whose body was meant to hold the mind of the Raen, former ruler of all the worlds. The ruler's most loyal servant, Dahli, wanted to attempt another resurrection and had sent out his followers to find and abduct Qall. When one did, Qall had chosen to cooperate with his enemy in the hopes of finding a way to resolve the situation. To stop Rielle following and complicating the situation, he'd removed all the magic of a world in order to trap her there.

But the people of that world didn't know that. All they knew was that she had arrived at about the same time. The more sensitive of them might have felt the flood of magic she had created several days later, when she had given up agelessness in order to become a Maker again, so that she could generate the magic needed to escape this world. They'd have sensed someone take that magic, and the workers and managers of the clothing factory saw her fade out of sight straight after. It wouldn't have taken much for the local sorcerers to work out she'd had something to do with it.

Taking hold of the lozenge-shaped pendant that hung on a chain around her neck, she twirled it between her fingers. She'd had to replace the bristles of the brush concealed inside three times since she'd begun restoring worlds, wearing them out while painting

in order to generate magic. Thinking back to the image she'd made in the grime of the fumigation room at the factory, she sighed. She had depicted the workers living free and prosperous instead of held in near-slavery by sorcerers. Sympathy and anger had moved her to paint it, but she had regretted it every day since. If the workers had rebelled, it was likely that violence had followed. Though the sorcerers among them had no magic, they still had physical methods of persuasion and punishment. She looked down at the stained slab. It was unlikely they'd have given up their power without spilling blood.

Meddling in the affairs of worlds was dangerous. She and Tyen had learned that when they'd attempted to negotiate peace between the two worlds of Murai and Doum. They'd discovered their task had been designed to distract them as the leaders of Doum planned their invasion of Murai. They'd both decided never to become involved in the affairs of a world again.

And then she had, here, in the world she now knew was called Infae.

A shout brought her attention back to her surroundings. One of the workers had seen her, and was pointing in her direction. She sought his mind but found nothing. A certain amount of magic must imbue an area in order for minds within it to be accessible. She could release enough of it to be able to, but the closer she was to a person the less magic was required. So she moved to the edge of the circle, stepped over the stone walls, and started towards them.

The workers were gathering together. The way they hoisted their harvesting tools spoke of determination and defensiveness. At a signal from one, they began walking towards her, fanning out to surround her. She did not have to see their faces to know they meant to do her harm.

She stopped, let magic spill out and read their minds.

Her breath caught in her throat. They had decided she was a sorcerer by her strange clothing and because she had appeared

within the stone circle. Sorcerers were to be killed – sacrificed to the goddess Rel, who had stripped Infae of magic.

The goddess Rel?

The group were afraid as well as determined. They knew she could have arrived carrying magic. Sorcerers didn't submit to being sacrificed without a fight. She couldn't help admiring their bravery, even as she felt horror that this world had come to this. They knew if they failed, the priestesses and priests in the nearby city would deal with her. If not . . . they would be paid well when they brought this woman's head to them.

Rielle's stomach turned. She drew a deep breath, pushed out of the world and, as the first of the deadly harvesting scythes passed through the air she had occupied a moment before, skimmed away.

A sense of the direction the city lay in had been in their minds. She headed for it, moving herself higher so she could see the area better. The land was flat in all directions, except where outcrops of rock thrust up from the earth. Quite different to the landscape she had visited the last time she had entered Infae, five cycles ago. The local city was definitely not the one she had known, sprawling around a delta river system. Here, one particularly large outcrop dominated the plain, its surface covered in buildings and roads.

She increased her speed, deciding she would not emerge in the world to breathe before arriving in the city. Descending to the rooftops from above, she positioned herself over the top of an empty circular tower built of bricks so dark they were almost black.

The air that surrounded her was humid and tinged with smoke. As her feet touched the tower roof, a wave of dizziness told her she had spent longer out of the world than she had realised. No physical sensation could be felt in the airless place between worlds, so she could never tell how close she was to suffocating. Having given up the ability to pattern-shift – to heal her body with magic

– in order to become a Maker again, she could not survive there any longer than she could hold her breath.

A muffled sound of shouting drew her attention down to the streets. Nearby, smoke and flames were billowing from the half-collapsed roof of a large building. Where streets were visible she could see people carrying buckets of water up the hill in a seemingly futile effort to quench the fire. Bright orange lights caught her attention, and she glimpsed a group of twenty or more people carrying torches striding past an alley entrance, their manner full of satisfaction and threat. It sent a chill down her spine as she stretched forth her senses to look for the source.

She found nothing, of course. Though she could sense some magic here, it was too thinly spread. Some patches did exist that might be strong enough to allow thought reading, however.

Releasing magic while on the tower would draw attention to her, so she pushed a little way out of the world and skimmed down to the alley the torch-bearers had passed. It was within one of the areas of stronger magic. The crowd's stragglers were still passing. Seeking minds, she caught fragments of thoughts.

. . . know better than to hide sorcerers in their . . .

No more sorcerers! No more sorcerers!

. . . said there was nobody inside but I'm sure I heard . . .

. . . knew who would be next so they robbed them the night before, which was enough warning that they got away . . .

. . . hope they never work out that I can use magic, or I'm dead and all my family and . . .

When the marchers had passed, she peered out of the alley. Blackened ruins lay where three more houses had once stood. The street was eerily quiet. She caught sight of a few people looking through the curtained windows of their homes, and detected the minds of several within the closest houses, full of fear and relief that the Followers of Rel had not targeted them this time.

Rielle moved back into the deeper shadows of the alleyway.

They've turned me into a god that hates sorcerers. The irony of that

development would have been amusing, if not for the deadly consequences. *What can I do? Is there any way I can convince them I'm not a god? Or, failing that, persuade them not to kill in my name?*

She needed to know more. Pushing out of the world as far as she could while still being able to see enough of the city to navigate by, she skimmed over the rooftops, hoping nobody would look up and see her ghostly figure flying past. She needed to find a quiet place close to one of the patches of stronger magic from which she could observe more people. Inspecting the garbage within another alley told her it was a promising location. It was full of offcuts of cloth, wire and other materials. Where objects were made, magic would be generated, imbuing the area with it.

Descending into the alley, she was not surprised to see the local buildings housed carpenters, tailors and hatmakers. It was a busy area, making it likely someone would enter the alley and see her here. She'd noted that both men and women wore patterned knee-length wrap skirts over a loose, sleeveless top. Unwrapping her scarf from her head, she wrapped it around her waist, covering the bottom half of her shift dress.

There was magic here, but not as much as she needed. She let some of what she carried flow gently outwards. It slowly intensified the local patch of stronger magic, and soon she was able to detect the thoughts of people nearby.

What was that? came the thoughts of a woman, pausing in her work. The flow of magic had come from close by, but not within the building. The woman glanced around the room and saw that none of the other hatmakers had looked up from their stitching. Her son's back was stiff, however, and as she met his gaze she felt a wave of affection. *Toyr is more sensitive than most, she reminded herself. He may not be a Maker, but he can sense them working better than all the priestesses of Rel. If he finds a new one and nobody else has reported them, the reward might be enough to buy us a better workshop.*

"Go on," she told him. "But no further than two buildings from here."

The boy leapt up and ran out of the room, excited by the prospect of earning his family money.

There was no sense of menace in this search the woman had sent him on. Makers weren't hated as sorcerers were. They were considered to have a godlike skill, as Rel had created magic before she'd emptied Infae of it. Rielle had stopped releasing magic, so the boy would not detect her, but he might note her strange appearance. Rising, she continued reading his mind as she walked down the alley, travelling in the opposite direction as he was.

It's probably someone the priestesses already know about, Toyr was thinking. A new cloth-maker had moved in a couple of days ago and was looking to hire weavers. *Three streets away, though. Further than Mother said I could go.* He headed for the area anyway. *But she wouldn't mind if I found a Maker and we got the reward.*

A pang of envy followed the thought. To be one of the rare sorcerers who generated plentiful magic when creating would be wonderful. They were given anything they wanted, as long as they spent their days making things. They got to make whatever they desired to. His mother constantly told him he should be thankful that the priestesses had freed all the artisans of the city from bondage, and ensured they were paid a fair wage, but making hats was boring. If he were a Maker he would never have to make a hat again. What he'd make instead he had no idea, but he was sure he'd find something he liked doing.

The boy's thoughts were fading as he moved out of the magically enhanced area Rielle had created. She reached the end of the alley. Shops selling all manner of garments, shoes and hats faced the street beyond. Sensing another patch of stronger magic in the alley across it, she slipped out of the world and skimmed quickly across the street. Arriving again, she walked down the second alley to the end, from where she looked out upon a small open space ringed by food vendors. Letting more of her magic strengthen what was here, she sought the minds of three young men talking nearby.

. . . *ending slavery was a good thing, but this is going a bit too far*, one was thinking. “Do you think they’ll come here?” he asked his friends. “What if they decide to burn shops as well?”

“They won’t,” the taller of the youngsters replied. “We’ve always been family businesses. We paid people well.”

“I heard family workshops were burned in Defka city,” the third pointed out.

“Why?” the first young man asked.

“For making their children work, I heard.”

“But how’s a person going to have the skills they need by the time they’re grown if they don’t start young?”

“Teaching is all right,” the tall one said. “It’s making them work without pay that’s—”

“Who *are* you?”

The voice cut over the youth’s chatter, coming from closer behind her. She turned to see a young man a few steps away, his body tense as if he were ready to flee at any moment. Which he was, she read. He had come to find the source of the sudden surges of magic in the area, as he had been ordered to do by the Followers of Rel. He was a sorcerer, and the Followers had only let him live because he was a close friend of one of the priests, who had pointed out that Annad was a gentle scholar and healer, and had never employed even a servant, let alone used his magic to rule over others.

He was worried, now that he had found the source of the magic, that he would have to turn her over to the Followers. She was clearly a stranger, if not to this world then to this part of it. But if she was a Maker she might be safe . . .

He was thinking all this deliberately, using the Traveller language that his mentor had taught him, as it was known by sorcerers who moved between worlds, hoping she would see she was in danger and have time to flee.

“I am in no danger,” she assured him. “But I do not want to cause trouble. Is there somewhere we can talk?”

He considered. It was a risk. Probably too great a risk. But she

deserved an explanation. If she could get to his late mentor's rooms unseen . . .

She moved closer and held out a hand. He looked at it dubiously. As she began to withdraw it, curiosity overcame his fears, and he took it.

Pushing out of the world, she took them far enough into the space between worlds that the city almost disappeared. Enough details remained visible that she could navigate, skimming high over the city. Annad's eyes widened, but his surprise was quickly replaced by fascination. He knew about world travelling, she guessed, though perhaps not how to.

She took them back towards the world so they could see more of the city's streets and buildings.

"Where are your mentor's rooms?" she asked.

He pointed. "*The highest room of the tower with the five-panelled roof.*"

No other roof fitted that description. She skimmed down, through the roof and into a circular room. To her relief it was unoccupied. She did not want to make his situation any more complicated and dangerous.

As they arrived she let go of his hand. "I am Rielle," she told him.

"I am Annad," he replied.

"What happened in this world?"

He told her about the loss of magic. Foreign sorcerers had been blamed for it, and many of them murdered. After they had died or fled, the Followers of Rel had arrived, spreading their tales of a goddess who had taken all the magic of Infae, disgusted with the way sorcerers enslaved and exploited non-sorcerers. Now it was the local sorcerers who were murdered, and while he had survived so far, Annad did not like to think about his chances of living out the year if his friend lost influence among the Followers.

"But they do not kill Makers," he assured her. "You are a powerful Maker?"