

# TEN SILVER COINS

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*The  
Drylings  
of  
Acchora*  
*A Jill Strong Adventure*

TEN SILVER COINS:  
THE DRYLINGS OF ACCHORA

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## Chapter One

The dirt path Jill ran down was overgrown with weeds and thistles. Jill's breathing was laboured from the sprint. She was tired and felt she could run no longer, but was propelled down the path by her caretaker's words. They drew her down the path despite the fatigue that strained her limbs and made them feel like heavy weights. He spoke in the same tone he always used with her, but she could see in his eyes that he was worried, even frantic. *We're not safe Jill, you must run. Run for the Forest!*

*The Forest.* Jill shuddered. The Forest was the last place she would think of to find safety. The Council warned it was a wicked place. Anyone caught approaching it received harsh punishment, without exception. She would have argued with her caretaker, but his eyes told her to make no objection, told her how serious he was. Nothing made sense, she did not understand the danger, but it was clear, no matter what she thought before, the Forest was the only place safe enough for her to run.

Jill felt like she would explode. She felt like she was holding her breath in a tunnel under water, kicking, pulling, needing to do everything in her power to get to the tunnel's end so she could rush to the surface for air. She had not experienced fear like this in a long time, even in the nightmares that had recently plagued her. And Jill knew if she stopped, if she didn't make it to the end of the tunnel, she would never fill her lungs with a deep breath of fresh air again. She needed to run to the Forest before she could rest, think, breathe.

If she was seen on the road by the Watchmen, they would stop her, detain her, then take her to the mines, a place where she would likely never see her caretaker again, or anyone else willing to show the slightest act of kindness to her, a place where any hope of learning about her family, her history, would die. The path was dark; there were no lights or signs of life on it. Jill could make out the dark, looming presence of trees in the distance. Behind her was the outline of houses and buildings on the edge of the city of Vendor.

Jill could not look back, could not steal one look at the city until she was far within the boundaries of the Forest. Though she knew the city's skyline would soon be illuminated by a series of orange fires billowing in different neighbourhoods, she ran.

The Watchmen and their men, arsons and spies, would be busy setting fires, and their attention would be inside the city, at least for the moment. They were not fools to think someone would be desperate enough to run to the Forest. *That arrogance will be your salvation, Jill. And my consolation. I will lose all my worldly possessions tonight, maybe even my own life. But you will be safe. If I don't die, I and the book will disappear. We may not see each other again, at least, not for a very long time.*

Jill could still feel the warm kiss from her caretaker's lips on her cheek. It burrowed into her skin, into her blood, helped her along the path in the cool night. Her quiet, mysterious caretaker. Her brave, foolish caretaker! She knew so little about him. He was kind to her though he didn't have to be. Kind to her though he should not have been. She was not always sure he was good, but all this time he held her mother's book! Hid it away somehow, and from the Council. Jill could make no sense of it.

Jill was careful to keep her eye on the path, for it was narrow and uneven, with rocks and stones all about. The path cut through a large meadow. As a little girl, when her mother was still alive, before the Council had risen to power in the city of Vendor, Jill had played in the meadow and even walked along the path. She could remember staring up and making shapes of the white puffs of cloud in the sky. Even as she ran she could smell wildflowers and clover, and imagined hearing the distinct sound of honeybees between gusts of summer breeze from other times.

The closer Jill came to the Forest, the bigger it seemed. The trees on the outskirts of the wood looked bigger and older than the trees in Vendor. Jill slowed to a walk and tried to quiet her breathing. Vendor was now far behind her and she was starting to come upon the boundary of the Forest. Jill hated the thought of being alone at night in an unfamiliar environment, and of all places, the Forest.

When the moon broke through the clouds, Jill started to hesitate, to wonder if her caretaker might have exaggerated the danger of their situation. The trees before her looked metallic and alive. A thick veil of mist shrouded the bottom of the trees. Wisps of mist swirled about the ground like long white fingers, as though the Forest was inviting Jill to enter, if she dare.

Suddenly a siren sounded. Jill turned and looked in the direction of Vendor. Great yellow lights shone in the distance, swept the meadow and the path. Jill heard

shouts of *Alarm! Alarm! Someone is on the path!* then watched as one long beam of light slowly, like a giant flashlight, shone down the night sky, searching, seeking, moving toward her as the moon disappeared behind the clouds again. From under the leaves of a fern, Jill watched as the yellow searchlight reached the edge of the Forest and shone directly on the spot Jill, only seconds earlier, had been standing.

Without another thought, Jill had pushed through the low lying wall of mist and entered the Forest as the beam of light swept towards her, heeding her caretaker's words, hoping for safety. She sat motionless until the yellow lights of the Watchmen gave up their search for the lost citizen of Vendor who ran to the Forest. Tears swelled in Jill's eyes as she saw the first flames lash into the sky from one of the northern neighbourhoods. Within minutes other flames, followed by billowing smoke, ignited throughout the city. Jill shook her head in disbelief as she saw flames in the east, imagining her caretaker's home being consumed by the terrible orange fire.

Jill leaned against the trunk of a tree, and pulled her arms around her chest, thankful that Salma had given her the coat. Closing her eyes, she tried to imagine where her caretaker would hide, what means he would use to get there, forgetting, for a moment, her new and terrible surroundings and that when she stepped into the Forest she felt as though she was leaving one terrible world behind for another.