



# MARK OF THE RAVEN

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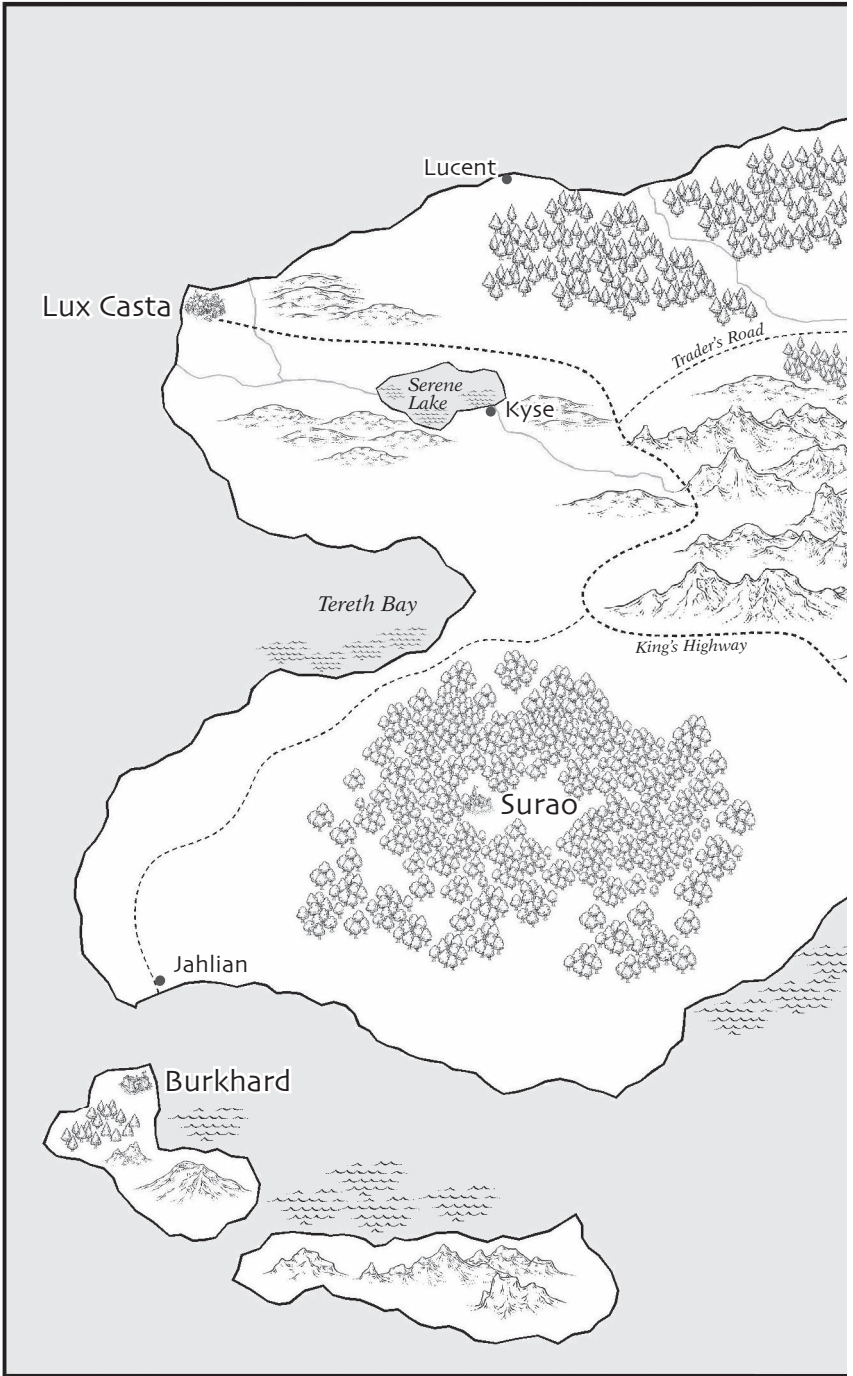
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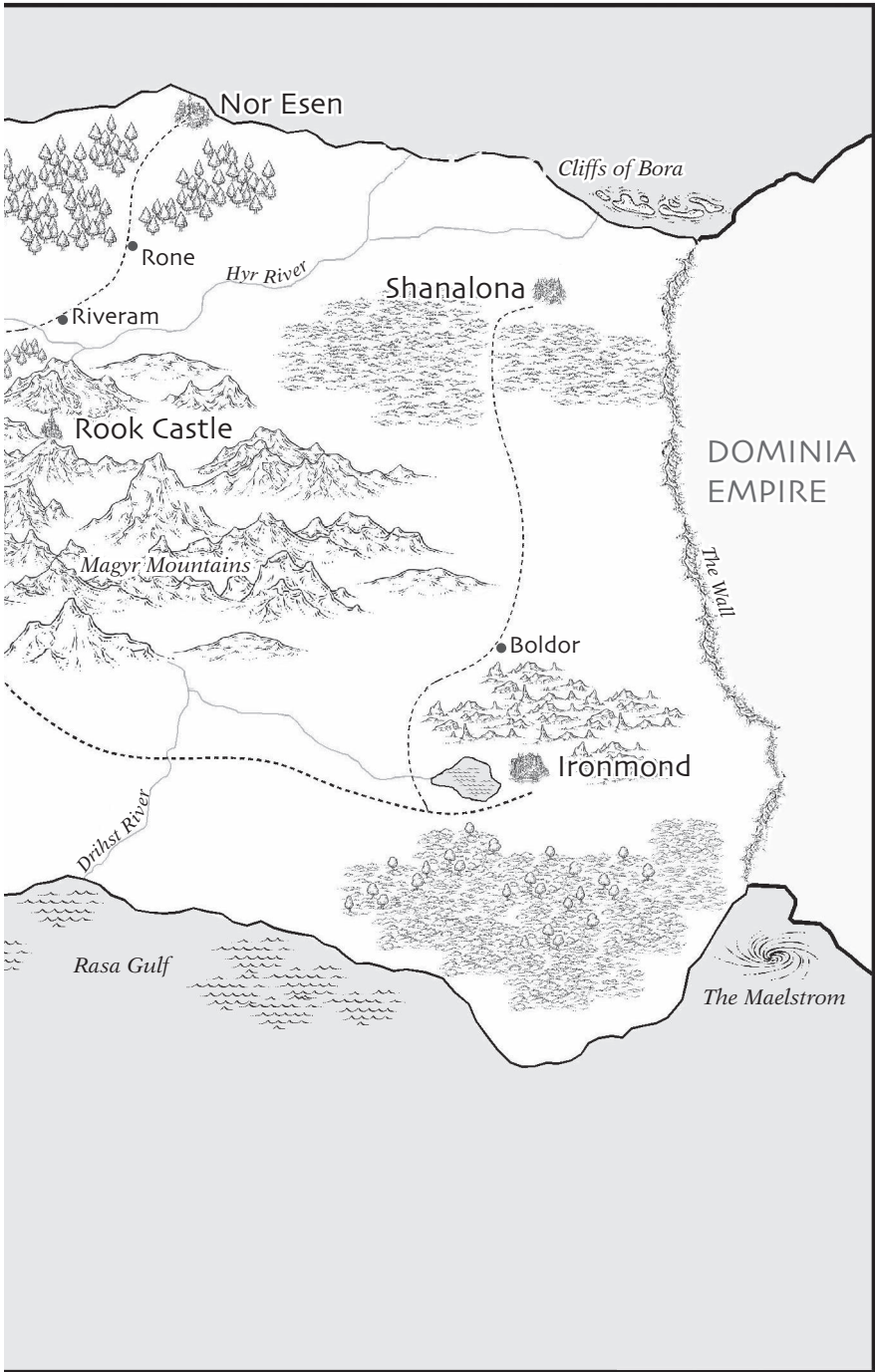
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To my son, Philip.  
May you discover who God made you to be.





# Character List

## **HOUSE RAVENWOOD**

*House of Dreamers*

Grand Lady Ragna

Caiaphas (consort)

Selene

Amara

Opheliana

## **HOUSE MARIS**

*House of Waters*

Grand Lord Damien

Grand Lord Remfrey (deceased)

Serawyn (consort, deceased)

Quinn (brother, deceased)

## **HOUSE FRIERE**

*House of Fire and Earth*

Grand Lord Ivulf

Raoul

**HOUSE VIVEK**

*House of Wisdom*

Grand Lord Rune (brother)

Grand Lady Runa (sister)

**HOUSE RAFEL**

*House of Healing*

Grand Lord Haruk

Ayaka

**HOUSE LUCERAS**

*House of Light*

Grand Lord Warin

Leo

Tyrn

Elric

Adalyn

**HOUSE MEREK**

*House of Courage*

Grand Lord Malrin (deceased)

Grand Lady Bryren

Reidin (consort)

Terric (cousin of Bryren)



Cold.

So cold.

Every breath came out like a faint wisp, a lingering spirit within the sanctuary, only to evaporate into the frozen air.

Selene pulled her fur-lined cloak tighter around her shoulders as she knelt before the priest inside the sacred halls.

Mother knelt on her left, her head bowed and covered with her dark cloak. Amara, Selene's sister, knelt to her right. Behind them knelt a dozen other disciples, all garbed in black with hoods pulled over their heads. Wrought-iron chandeliers hung along the lofty sculpted ceiling, their braziers empty of light. Pale wintry sunlight shone across the stone floor from the tall narrow windows on either side of the sanctuary.

The priest spoke in the old tongue as he walked before the disciples. His dark robes swished along the stone floor, his boots a bare whisper. Incense rose from the golden burner that swung from his gnarled hand.

Selene's knees grew numb as they pressed into the stone floor. The incense filled her nostrils, the priest's words her mind. She did not understand the old tongue, only a few of the words. For as



long as she could remember, the morning of every new moon was spent in the sanctuary, and prayers were raised to the Dark Lady.

The priest stopped in front of Selene.

She glanced up and blinked.

Pale, watery blue eyes stared down at her from sunken sockets rimmed in shadow. His head was covered with the mantle of his dark robes, but here and there tufts of woolly white hair stuck out. His nose was long and thin, with only slits for nostrils.

His eyes widened as he stared down at her in a trance. He began to speak fervently and swung the incense globe in front of Selene.

Heat rushed through her veins, burning away the chill inside her bones. She glanced at her mother, then her sister from the corners of her eyes. The priest had never done this before.

Her mother glanced back with the barest hint of surprise on her face. Amara appeared even more shocked under her otherwise cold veneer.

Selene glanced back at the priest. He suddenly stopped and went stiff. Slowly, he bent over and placed a finger on her forehead. His finger was like an icicle, and she suppressed the urge to shiver.

“The Dark Lady will be with you tonight,” he said, speaking plainly for the first time. Then he moved his finger across her skin in the shape of a *T*. A sensation like ice water spread from his finger, across her face, then down her back. Selene shivered this time, and her heart thudded inside her chest. She wanted to stand and run away, but fear kept her in place. She tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry.

His finger left her forehead, and his eyes returned to their normal watery appearance. He straightened up and started chanting again in the old tongue as he turned around and headed back to the platform at the front of the sanctuary, seemingly oblivious to his trance from moments before.

Selene clasped her fingers together. She could still feel his cold finger sliding across her skin, marking her with some invisible sign. Did Mother know what it meant? She seemed as surprised as Selene at the priest's sudden gesture and words.

What did the priest mean by the Dark Lady being with her tonight?

The moment the priest finished the benediction, Selene got to her feet. Amara stood as well. Mother continued to kneel with her head bowed. For a moment, Selene wondered if she should wait, but then she turned and left. If Mother wanted to talk, she would come. Selene walked down the long corridor and past the other disciples, ignoring the hooded glances sent her way. Amara followed her toward the back of the sanctuary. The smell of incense continued to hang heavily in the air, filling her head with its overly sweet scent.

The two sisters exited through the tall double doors and entered the corridor that led toward the main rooms of Rook Castle.

Every few seconds, Amara glanced at her from beneath her hood, waiting for her to say something, but Selene remained silent. At the end of the hall, Amara grabbed her arm. "Wait!"

Selene stopped, her lips pressed together.

"What happened back there?"

Selene turned and faced her sister.

Amara pulled her hood back, releasing a cascade of dark auburn hair along her shoulders. Though she was loath to show it, there was a hint of curiosity on her otherwise sullen face. "Do you think . . . do you think he was referring to the gifting?"

If Amara's words had a physical form, it would be fire. Selene could feel the heat of her sister's jealousy and the stinging hurt in her question. If the priest's words were an indication that Selene was about to undergo the gifting, it was another log on the raging inferno between them.

“I don’t know.” Even those words were hard to form. It was as if the priest had silenced her and her mouth had forgotten how to speak.

Amara’s face flushed and her hands clenched. “I will have my turn as well. I am also a Ravenwood. You’ll see.” She spun around and hurried to the left, disappearing around the far corner, leaving behind a wake of coldness.

Selene stood alone in the empty hallway, her throat tight, her gaze lingering where Amara had disappeared. She had always hoped they would serve House Ravenwood together as sisters when they came of age. If only the priest had marked Amara instead. If Amara received the gift first, perhaps it would have breached the chasm that existed between them.

Instead, a wall stood between them. Amara wanted more. She wanted power. She wanted the prestige of being a grand lady. She wanted what Selene had: the rights of the firstborn.

Instead, Selene had been born first. And . . . She lifted her hand and rubbed her shoulder. Only inches away, beneath her cloak, was the mark of the raven across her back. No other Ravenwood had borne such a distinct mark. Her mother saw it as a mark of power. To Selene, it was an eternal source of conflict between her and her sister.

Behind her, the muffled sound of voices and boots indicated the disciples were leaving the sanctuary.

Selene turned right and headed back toward Rook Castle. She had no desire to be a subject of the congregants’ curious appraisals.

The farther she drew away from those hallowed halls, the more her feet felt like lead. Amara was right. The priest’s cryptic words were a prophecy of her gifting. But never in the history of Ravenwood had a dark priest done such a thing. Why her? Her gift would come. It had come to every Ravenwood woman since before the

time of Rabanna Ravenwood. It was not a surprise. So why the mark on her forehead? Why the utterance?

What made her gifting different than previous Ravenwood women?

Selene shuddered and folded her arms across her middle. A feeling of foreboding descended upon her with each second. She knew very little of House Ravenwood's gift, other than that it involved dreams. But whatever it was, the income it provided helped keep their people fed and clothed when the mines dried up.

That was good, right? So why the sudden alarm?

Selene pressed two fingers against the side of her head. Perhaps it was the fact that not only was she specially marked, but the Dark Lady herself would oversee her coming into her legacy.

"Why me?" she whispered. Her words echoed along the silent hallway, bouncing off the stone walls. No answer came back.

She let out a long breath and continued on. In her mind, she felt like she was standing on the edge of a cliff, about to jump into the misty emptiness below. And if she didn't jump, someone or something would push her. No matter what, there was no choice. She never had a choice. Tonight the gift of Ravenwood would come upon her. Tonight she would inherit her destiny.

The first pinpricks of pain came at dinner. Selene held still as faint flickers of light flashed across her vision like stars across a night sky, followed by prickles along her scalp. She waited for the lights to disappear as her heart beat faster and the hairs along the back of her neck stood. Through the haze of light, she watched her father as he raised his goblet to his lips. His silver hair was slicked back and his beard was perfectly trimmed, as always.

As an outsider from a lesser house of Vivek, did Father know how the Ravenwood gift came? Had Mother ever told him? Or was it another secret kept by the women of Ravenwood?

The lights passed, and Selene lifted her shaky hands and broke off a piece of bread from the platter nearby. It felt like gravel in her mouth as she slowly chewed.

Candlelight twinkled from the chandelier above, leaving the perimeter of the ancient room in shadows. Mother sat at the other end of the table, her face obscured by the golden candleabra placed in the middle. Amara sat across from her, occasionally glancing up with cold stares. Captain Stanton stood beside the door along with another guard, his dark eyes always on the Ravenwood family.

Family dinners were never warm or jovial, but tonight's dinner felt even more oppressive. Selene glanced at Father again. Did he notice?

The lights started flashing across her vision once more, followed by pricks of pain along her forehead. Were these the warning signs of things to come? How long before the gifting took hold of her body?

Perhaps she should leave now before things became worse.

Selene placed the half-eaten chunk of bread on her plate. Her soup lay untouched nearby. "Father, I'm not feeling well. May I be excused?"

Father placed his goblet down and looked at her. A frown covered his face. "Selene, you look very pale. Do you need me to call for a healer?"

Amara glanced up.

Selene brushed her fingers along her temple. "No, it's simply a headache. I wish to lie down."

He gave her an inquisitive stare, then nodded. "You may go."

Selene didn't bother to look at her mother. All she wanted to do was escape to her room before another spell took hold of—

A burst of light spread across her mind, followed by intense pain throughout her head. She almost cried out but clenched her

teeth instead. She breathed through her nose. “Please excuse me,” she mumbled and stood up from the long dining table.

Amara’s eyes narrowed and her lips turned downward as recognition registered across her face. She had no idea how much Selene wished it was her at the moment.

Another burst of light flashed across Selene’s eyes, followed by light-headedness. She needed to get to her bedchambers before the onslaught ensued.

She turned and headed for the side door, passing one of the servants carrying a wooden tray of roasted meat. The smell, rather than enticing her, only made her stomach churn.

Out in the dark corridor, the flashing lights inside her head changed to swirling colors. Selene stumbled down the long hall with her hand placed along the stone wall for guidance. The flickering candles on either side provided her only light.

She hurried toward the west wing. At the staircase, she gathered her gown and flew up the stairs, then down another cold hall until she reached the door to her bedchamber. Quickly, she entered as another round of lights and colors started across her vision, like those small, colorful explosives House Vivek would let off during the New Year celebrations.

A strange prickling sensation began on the right side of her temple as she shut the door, followed by a tingling across her back, the same place her mark was.

Selene stumbled toward her bed and fell across the thick furs and feather mattress. The tingling on her back changed to a burning. She panted as she twisted around and stared up at the heavy curtains around her bed.

The burn across her back deepened, like fire licking across her skin and leaving behind a line of singed, pulsating tissue. Sweat dripped down the sides of her face and dampened her dress and bedspread. Another round of fire came, seizing her body until

it passed. Her head pounded with such intense throbs that she cried out.

The barest sliver of moon moved across the nearby window as night fell outside. The lights and colors across her vision were replaced by shadows.

Another convulsion ripped across her shoulders and mind. She curled up on her side and breathed her way through the pain. How long was this supposed to last? She tried to remember the last few months of training, but her thoughts were like moths dancing around a flame, unwilling to be caught. All she could remember was her mother saying the gifting would come with intensity, but never did she imagine it would feel like this.

Selene drifted in and out of consciousness, one moment completely submerged in darkness, the other watching the lives of those who lived here in Rook Castle unfold through muted color. All the while her body burned and an invisible ice pick was driven through her skull.

Minutes felt like hours, and hours felt like days. Sometimes she felt like she was walking through a deep mist, other times like she was watching from the outside of a window on a cold winter's night. On and on the images swirled by in the same way the courtyard looked when she danced around the spring pole on the day of the Festival of Flowers.

Slowly, the images were replaced by the softest of light. With that light, the raging pain inside her mind began to subside and every muscle in her body relaxed.

She heard a whisper inside her mind. Soft, yet powerful. Quiet, and yet like a shout for all to hear.

*A dreamer has been born.*

Then it was done.

Selene didn't know how long she lay in bed. She opened her eyes, half expecting to see the swirl of images again. But only the

heavy bed canopy greeted her vision. She turned her head on her pillow and looked to the left. The rays of dawn trickled in through the window at the east end of her bedchamber.

The burning and aching sensation faded from her body, freeing her. But she had no desire to move. Instead, she closed her eyes. She never wanted to wake again. It was as if everything inside of her had been put through a furnace and come out as hard as steel. Her mind felt different. Her body felt different.

She was different.

“Is she awake yet?” said a low alto voice, vaguely like Mother’s.  
“N-Not yet.” Another female voice. High-pitched and breathy.  
“Then alert me when she is. I want to see her right away.”  
“Y-Yes, m-my lady.”

There was movement, then the sound of a door shutting. Fatigue pulled Selene back under before she could open her eyes.

Full, bright sunlight filled Selene’s vision. She groaned and pried her eyelids open. There was a small squeak near her bed and the loud thud of a chair hitting the stone floor. She slowly turned and looked.

A young woman no older than sixteen stumbled to her feet. A red flush filled her otherwise pale face. “M-my lady! You’re a-awake!”

Selene let out a long breath and let her head sink back into the pillow. “Renata. What are you doing here?”

Renata wrung her hands in a nervous gesture and glanced at the door behind her. “L-Lady Ravenwood tasked me to watch you, and t-to let her know when you a-awoke.”

“I see. How long have I been asleep?”

Renata stilled her hands and stared down at Selene. Her black hair was pulled back in a long braid and the grey dress she wore hung like a burlap sack across her thin frame. “Three days.”



“Three days?” Selene sat up and instantly regretted it as stars popped across her eyes. For one moment, she feared the gifting was back, but the branding only happened once in a lifetime, and her gift was already imprinted inside of her.

“I-I must go and let Lady R-Ravenwood know you’re awake.”

Selene brought her mind back. “Yes, go ahead, Renata. You are dismissed.”

The maidservant gave her a small bow and quickly left.

Selene lay in bed, the furs pulled up across her lower half, and stared out the window. For as long as she could remember, her mother had drilled into her the responsibility she would have some day for the Ravenwood family, and the impending gift that would come. A gift that would allow her to enter the dreams of others. But no other details. Only hints that House Ravenwood and the mountain nation depended on that gift. Just training. Day in and day out.

*Don't trust anyone.*

*You can only count on yourself.*

*You must be prepared for anything.*

*We will never be wiped out again.*

Her mother’s mantra, spoken every morning during training. Mother drove her and Amara hard, teaching them their secret family history and training them the moment they could lift a sword.

*Someday when you have your gift, you will think you can rely solely on that. But you can't. You need to know how to protect yourself. Always. Because no one else will.*

But never a reason why. Never an answer to all the questions that Selene longed to ask. Nothing to ease the yoke that had been upon her since birth.

“Someday,” her mother would say. “When your gifting comes, I will reveal to you why. Until then, train. Train hard.”

“Well, Mother. I am your heir now. And I am ready for answers,” Selene whispered.

Almost in response, the door crashed open, and her mother flew in as if carried on wings. She came to the bedside and stared at Selene. Selene stared back. Her mother looked every inch like the matriarch of House Ravenwood. She possessed the thick dark hair of the Ravenwood women, along with high cheekbones and full lips. She was tall, but not too tall, elegant, and lean from years of secret training. She could move an assembly with her smooth alto voice and trap a man into doing anything for her. Sometimes Selene wondered if that was how Father came to marry her.

Her eyes bore fully into Selene and a glint entered those dark orbs. “Leave us,” she said to Renata without turning to address the quivering servant girl.

Renata did not need to be told twice. She fled without the customary bow, the door thudding shut behind her.

Mother did not seem to care. “My dear, dear daughter,” she said as she pulled the wooden chair to the side of the bed. “I had feared . . . but no. The Dark Lady has seen fit to bless our house with another dreamer.” She let out her breath. “At last.”

Her words felt like heavy stones placed upon Selene’s chest. There it was again, that word. *Dreamer*.

“We will start your training tonight. Your gifting could not have come at a better time. There are things in motion, things I cannot do alone.” Her mother’s eyes went out of focus for a moment. “But all will be right again.” She smiled and beamed down at Selene. “You will dreamwalk. Test out your gift. I’ll be sure to prepare the servant you will use.”

*Servant?* Selene blinked and clutched the furs between her fingers. What did a servant have to do with using her gift? Would she be walking inside the servant’s dream?

“If your birthmark is any indication, your gift is powerful,

Selene. A gift we need if House Ravenwood is to survive. And survive we will. We will never fail again. And you will make sure of that.”

Selene responded in the way she had been brought up. “Yes, Mother.” But her insides clenched. What exactly did they do in dreams?

Her mother stopped and studied her. The sunlight cast a brilliant light across her mother’s face, sharpening her features so that Selene could almost see the raven in her face. “There is no room for weakness. And you are not weak. You are my daughter and heir to House Ravenwood. Do you understand?”

An invisible hand clawed at Selene’s throat, but she was still able to push out the rote words. “Yes, Mother.”

“Good. You will be the one to elevate House Ravenwood back to its former glory. I believe you have the ability to surpass me. Perhaps even Rabanna herself.” She stood and pressed her skirt down. “I will send your maidservant back in. Proceed with your training and other duties today. And then tonight we will begin your real training.”