

All Things Impossible

D. Dalton



Stone & Bone

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Prologue

His lips crested the edge of the golden chalice. The ampulla was shaped to mimic a slender rose with a curving stem. The liquid kissed the petals curling inside the cup.

“He’s discovered the legend of stone and bone.” His low voice danced through the darkness; it was black like the deep of a cave, or the depths of the sea, or the darkness found in a broken heart where hope has long decayed.

A long moment passed and the aphotic hall seemed to settle back down into a state of slumber. A female voice, full of honey and bite, broke the stillness. “It’s just an ancient myth for us. It’s an ancient myth even for the elves!”

“And myths are replacements of forgotten history, dressed up in epics, heroes, gods, and of course, demons.” He paused to sniff the bouquet from the rose vessel. Most people vomited at its sickly sweet stench. “But that doesn’t mean that they’re wrong. One of bone, one of stone.”

“They’re not bones, master! They’re just ancient pieces of rot!”

“You trust your sight?”

“But he’s insane! What he’s doing is insane!”

“It will only be insane if he fails. Should our great false king succeed, he shall be deemed inspired. Take the Blackhound, for instance, for killing the Empire he became a genius of destruction. Nothing could withstand or hold him back, and the only choice left was to flee, if only such a distance existed. Just as the human tribes did to this continent when the Blackhound overthrew Midan. Do you remember when these lands were ours?”

The female growled. “I remember us being chased across that damn ocean long before that!”

The speaker ignored her. “However, I digressed. Now that a small child has slain the Blackhound, his grandeur has diminished. And hers has risen.”

He sipped again in the following silence. The feminine voice huffed an angry sigh. “You can stop him. You can remove him.”

“You know me better than that, little temptress. It has been beneficial for me to let him believe he has no, ah, *competition*. But now that he has the bones, he has become... hard to steer. My boat has ventured into the rapids. However, I know better than he. One cannot manipulate the rules of the legend, only its players.”

“One of bone. One of stone,” the female sang in mockery. “Where one goes, the other shall follow.”

“Such a simple truth. *Crystal* truth, one might say.” The voice’s snicker dwindled into the all-consuming darkness. “If someone uses a piece of bone, the stone shall be drawn to it. If someone

finds the stone, someone will find pieces of bone. If our leader knows that, he thinks that the stone and bone can be brought together for an even greater power. He is wrong. The brothers were enemies.” The voice savored another sip. “Of course, it will be historically unique to see what comes of the final part of the legend, life renewed. So interesting given the players this time!”

A rumbling somewhere nearby caused the liquid in the chalice to tremble and slosh over the petals. The voice exhaled. “And we need to stop all these damn earth events. Just a fortnight ago, a herd of those auroch creatures in Staghorn turned inside out in the field. Quite untidy.”

“They’re getting more severe, master.” After a moment in the overwhelming darkness, the female voice persisted, “Why are you telling me this? You trust no one, so why tell me an ancient secret? Is this all a lie so that you may manipulate me?”

The voice snickered again. Icicles had warmer laughs. “You expect an answer?”

“Would I waste words asking if I didn’t?”

“Either way, you’re inescapably wrong.”

“I, I... no, master.”

The voice inhaled the bouquet from his golden ampulla one final time. “Because, dear child, you do not dare disobey me, and you’re too weak to understand that you never will. Furthermore, time is against me. The shadow of the midnight sun is nigh upon us. Alas, I think he’s figured out what that means.” The voice sighed. “I don’t want this world ruined, I’ve just about got it how I want it.”

The female let her long, thick hair slip over her shoulders as she hunched. Its weight pressed down on her shoulders, bowing her head to her master. “What shall I do?”

“Fetch me the stone.”

Chapter One

Return to Riversbridge

Tom shoved Der's shoulder. "Back off, I'm on the offensive!"

"No, *you* are offensive!" She jerked her back to him in order to shield her right arm, still useless in its sling. She narrowed her eyes of mixed green and brown hues.

He slapped his hands over his mouth in feigned surprise. "You made a joke that was almost funny!"

Meanwhile, Thistle, Thalon, Jakkobb, Alluvius and Chloe swung their heads between the dueling duo accordingly. Spike, the disguised unicorn, plodded on down the dirt road, rolling his equine eyes. He was as unconcerned as the chubby gold dragon napping on his saddle. The only party member who wasn't watching or snoring was Coda, the pale yellow Staghorn retriever. His pink tongue hung over his teeth and he panted in time with his trotting paws.

"Oh, bite me," Der challenged.

The vampire's eyes, as green as an emerald's reflection, widened behind the darkened lenses of his spectacles. "A paladin's blood? Why don't you drink some arsenic along with me? We'll have a toast!"

"If it'll put you out of *my* misery." She tried to cross her arms, a tricky maneuver, considering the sling. She gave up and scowled. "Wait. Would my blood actually harm you?"

"No idea." Tom snorted. "And I really, really don't care to find out. But please feel free to drink the arsenic anyway."

Fresh out of new insults, she looked away and tried to move her pinky finger. No luck yet. But, thanks to several of Jakkobb's blood transfusions, she *had* a new little finger, as well as a hand, forearm, humerus and elbow.

In her boots, she wiggled her toes. They had grown back far faster than her arm. She hadn't even realized until three days after Horizon had fallen out of the sky that frostbite had claimed them. Of course, she had other things haunting her thoughts then, just like she did now.

It wasn't that she'd broken the world's most daunting citadel or that she had slain history's worst villain. It was that she was going home without her best friend.

Thunder rolled nearby in the wind, and she blinked back to the present. Summer was growing back into the world.

She sighed. "Tom, those spectacles look stupid. Everyone's going to laugh at you."

He scowled behind his shaded glasses that darkened his vision and hid his eyes from the world. “I don’t care. If I’m lucky, they won’t even look at me.” At least it looked like rain, and that could excuse the hood he was also wearing.

“Yes, they will. ‘Cause you’re wearing stained-glass spectacles. Everyone’s going to look at the stranger with weird—”

He jerked his gloved fingers up into a warding sign. “Get back, holy creature of the light.” A crackle of black lightning earthed itself on her eyebrow.

“Ouch!” Der crossed her eyes in surprise. Then again, they weren’t good friends; they were good enemies at best.

Both of them narrowed their eyes at the other before suddenly whipping their faces away. “Hmph!” they both snapped.

Der stuck out her chin. “I guess *some* people just can’t be saved.”

Tom rapped his knuckles against her spine, sending her tumbling forward.

“And in this case,” Thistle murmured, “Der can’t be saved.”

The paladin recovered her balance, but her focus instantly wandered. She looked around at the thickening herd of people, generally drifting in the same direction.

Spike pawed the ground. *I don’t remember there being a road here.* His nose bobbed above the smoothed ground.

Derora Saxen paused in memory lane. “There wasn’t even a track, really. Why is there a road here?” She glanced around again. “And so many people. I’ve never seen this—”

“Yes!” Thistle cut in. “We’ve heard about the traffic for the last five miles. Before you were arguing with Tom. Again.”

“They look so happy!” Chloe chimed. The young girl spun in a circle, smiling at everyone around them. Her blue skirt fanned out in response to her movements. “Of course, we’re going to a festival!”

Der dropped her chin to her chest. “It’s not a celebration. It’s a funeral.”

And that last thought dropped like a boulder. Her best friend. Her triumph over the Blackhound had been too late. She’d never see Kelin’s smile again.

Beside her thigh, Coda’s whine escalated up to her ears. She glanced down and then in the direction the dog was cocking his ears. As soon as her gaze had shifted, the retriever padded off the dirt road and sat down in the field, ears still tilted out.

The rest of the party looked behind to see a bubble-shaped carriage bouncing down the road directly at them.

“Out of the way! Out of the way! Royal prerogative!” A man standing on the footboard shouted

ahead of the galloping horses. Next to him, the driver cracked the reins. Behind them, four mounted knights in armor kept pace. They held up lances bearing the flag of the Thealith royal coat of arms.

Der squared her shoulders as the carriage grew rapidly larger in her field of vision. "We were on the road first."

Tom rolled his eyes as the others shuffled out of the carriage's path. He said, "I don't think your pride is enough to stop four horses and the coach, but feel free to try." He placed his hands on Chloe's shoulders.

Der planted her left hand akimbo. "I will."

Jakkobb sighed and snatched her right arm and yanked.

The carriage galloped by.

"Hey!" she yelled.

Alluvius shook his head. "You are so strange."

Chloe's face glowed in the sunlight. "Is there really royalty in that coach? Truly?"

Jakkobb shrugged. "Probably a king's cousin or something."

Thalon poked his friend on the shoulder. "Why not? You already look like a princess." Chloe tried not to giggle. The boy continued, "And how much did you make Dad spend on that dress anyway?"

Thistle rolled his orange orbs. "Oh? And you didn't beg for the most expensive knives in the entire kingdom last time we visited the dwarves?"

The boy rubbed the hilts of his long knives. "But, but, you always said they had to be superior blades!"

"Ree..." Goldie lazily bobbed his head up. "I heard a roar. Was it a dragon?" He stretched out his front paws in the sunlight.

Spike whuffed. *No, little one, just a carriage and not another dragon this time. Thankfully.*

"You are a liar, Derora Saxen," Tom's voice drifted over her shoulder from behind.

She snorted and tried to cross her arms again, grumbling as her left arm collided with the sling. She was sure she knew not to do that after these months, at least when Tom wasn't around anyway. It didn't hurt though; she didn't have *any* sensations in her new arm. She growled, "Well, I suppose that's a compliment, coming from you."

"You said you came from a village named after a river that didn't have a name itself." He stabbed a finger ahead of them. "That is a city."

Der stared. Buildings sprouted haphazardly outside of Riversbridge's wooden walls. Most of them had been painted in bright colors, and the hundreds of people wandering through the newly paved streets boasted colorful clothes to match.

She couldn't even see the river from here!

Chloe clapped her hands together. "It's so beautiful!"

Der gulped. Spike nudged her in the back with his nose. In sort of a daze, she let the others guide her to a guarded checkpoint ahead of the city.

"Halt!" a sergeant-at-arms blocked their path with his halberd. Immediately, Thistle and Thalon ducked their faces to hide their orange chemmen eyes. Tom put his hands on Chloe's shoulders and glared behind his shaded spectacles.

Der's brow furrowed. "Hey! You're letting everyone else through!" She waved her hand at other parties just passing by.

The sergeant sighed. "*They* are not armed."

She pointed at the royal carriage and knights, now entering the town's gates. "You didn't stop them either."

An edge glistened somewhere in the sergeant's voice now. "That's because we know who they are."

"But this is my hometown!"

The soldier leaned forward and squinted through his noseguard. "...Der?"

She leaned toward him and also squinted. "Donley?"

"Finally," Jakkobb exhaled. "Wait, I remember you. Hold that halberd straight."

But Donley let go of the polearm entirely and jumped at Der. Jakkobb extended his hand to catch the falling shaft because it was disrespectful to do that to a perfectly good weapon (as long as it was held by an ally).

Der managed to swing her good shoulder into the brunt of Donley's hug. She patted him on the back of his armor with her left hand. "Good to see you too."

"We heard. We heard about Kelin. And the Blackhound. By the gods, was it real? Was it truly him?"

She nodded, suddenly blinking away tears.

He squeezed her again and let go. "I'm sorry about stopping you, Der. But you know, you're supposed to arrive with fanfare or an army or something. I'm pretty sure you're not just supposed to walk into town."

Der glanced around at her party, and then down at her boots, and back up. "Why not?"

Alluvius leaned over and pointed in the direction of the royal carriage. "Like that, Der."

"I don't have a carriage," she replied.

"You have a ship," Jakkobb said. "*The Maelstrom Fury.*"

She rolled her eyes. "That would be impressive. Showing up in a landlocked village in a warship?"

Was I supposed to mount it on wheels?"

"Yes," Tom snipped. "Because that's what people *expect*. I doubt your little guard friend could possibly have done anything other than run away to keep all his toes, steel boots or not."

"But what if it got stuck in the mud?" Thalon piped up. "Then it would look really stupid."

"Shut it!" Der slapped her left hand over one ear to block out their voices. "That's it. I'm going to see my parents." She ducked ahead into the pile of people on the road.

"I'll come by too!" Donley called after her. "And I'll send word to Avice!"

Jakkobb offered an apologetic nod as he handed the halberd back to the sergeant. Spike also nodded to Donley, who jumped at the disguised unicorn's pinpoint stare.

Tom stretched his covered arms and whistled a snatch of a tune as the party descended into the river valley.

Der stopped and spun around. She and the vampire ended up nose to nose. She gasped and started to lean away, but then stubbornness kicked in and neither of them backed down. She accused, "You whistled."

"Yes." He whistled again.

She narrowed her eyes. "I've never heard you whistle."

He scowled at her. "And I've never heard you shut up."

"Uncle." Chloe tugged on Tom's cloak. "Don't be mean."

"She started it!" Tom shoved Der's good shoulder.

"I did not!" She shoved him back.

"Uncle! Der!" Chloe, almost nine years old, patiently put her hands on her hips. "You ought to behave better in the city. Please!"

Not with the reputation Der has in this town, Spike added.

Thalon pointed at a newly built stone structure. "Hey! That's the Silver Dawn symbol. Oh, another bank."

The Silver Dawn flag, a gray semi-circle rising over a strip of land, did hang over the new stone building. People were already crowding in the door.

"Strival should be around here somewhere," Jakkobb murmured.

We should still probably avoid him, the unicorn said. *He still blames us for breaking Horizon.*

"How did they build it so fast?" Alluvius asked.

Der, still glaring at Tom, shrugged.

Thalon frowned. "And if I put money in it here, how do they know I have that money if I go to Duelingar next? How does that work?" He nudged Der. "You were a dragoon before you got booted

out, how does it work?"

"Not a banker," she replied, turning her glare away from the vampire.

The knight-captain shook his head. "We're magical elves, Thalon, does that suit you?"

The boy shook his head. "No. I'm supposed to actually *learn*." Above him, his father nodded in satisfaction.

"Yes, but no one tries to rob them," Tom said. And it was true, when the world's most organized banking system paid for the world's elite army, not too many desperadoes took their chances.

Der's boots dragged a circle in the dirt at her feet as she spun around. She didn't recognize any of this. This city had swallowed her village. She walked deeper into this new chaos, looking for something familiar. The Pallens sword banged awkwardly against her right leg. She would never get used to it being on the wrong side. It had taken her three days to find it in the rubble outside of Horizon after she'd been able to walk again.

A hopeful smile dashed across her face when she saw the brown water slowly slipping along. The bridge! It was ancient and stone and would always be—

She stopped when she rounded the last building.

Riversbridge had a new bridge.

Elegant arches dipped into the water to support the weight of a wide avenue, like stems of wine glasses. Stained glass shone inside white railings on either side of the bridge. In the very center, a statue of Kelin Miller riding a rearing horse and holding his sword high, commanded the gaze of everyone crossing the river.

Tears bubbled up from where Der had buried them. Beside her, Tom's habitual glare softened. Chloe hugged her waist and wiped her own tears on Der's sleeve. The dog, Coda, sat down in front of the women and put his paw on Der's knee, wagging his silky tail hopefully.

She reached down and rubbed the dog's fur. The tears passed. At least Kelin would be remembered as a warrior, despite the fact that he had never truly wanted to be one.

Der's throat started suddenly to burn, and it wasn't her emotion. She swallowed and pushed away this new, surging hatred and lust for violence. Her left hand dipped toward the Pallens sword. She didn't want to let go of Kelin, but this new feeling demanded attention.

She wasn't sure if she'd ever get used to feeling other people's emotions. It was usually hard to pinpoint the exact person or people in a crowd, but not when it blazed like this.

Spike gently bumped her with his nose, noticing her stiffness.

"Der?" Alluvius prompted.

Her gaze swept across the bridge, passing over Kelin's shadow, to the other side. A man, dressed

in rough leathers, swaggered in front of a party of similar looking thugs. He spat when he saw her watching him.

The others in Der's party didn't need to feel their emotions to see their blood was boiling. If they were cats, their tails would've been twitching,

Goldie perked up in Spike's saddle. "No more meanies!" He snorted, and a cloud of black smoke rose up from his snout.

Jakkobb, watching the ruffians, reached out and pinched off the fire starting to burn on the saddle's pommel.

Der took her own turn to spit, trying to flush out whatever she'd tasted from that party. "They're here for trouble."

"Let your local guard friends handle it, Der." The knight-captain shook his head.

She rubbed the goose-bumps along her neck. "Ugh."

"Der." Tom nudged her good shoulder, "It's not you, remember?"

"Where are we going?" Thistle asked. "It may help us to arrive there, especially if we can break eye contact with these fools. They might take staring the wrong way."

Thalon prodded Der. "Which way to your folks' house?"

She blinked a few times. Everyone she turned, buildings she didn't know blocked her view. "Oh. I don't know. Jakkobb, can you go ask directions?"

The knight replied, "Why? I didn't grow up here."

"Neither did I!" She dug into her belt purse with her left hand, and eventually pulled out a beaten compass. She frowned and struggled to get it open with one hand. The lid finally popped up and her scowl deepened. It always pointed east, right?

She glanced up at the sun. No, it always pointed north. She gestured with her hand, compass still in it. "Well, it should be that way. Provided the bridge is in the same place."

The brigand-looking outfit on the other side of the bridge had melted back into the crowds. Tom gently pushed Der's elbow forward. "Let's get you home. Maybe a bath with some warm water."

She dug her heels further into the ground. "Alright. You're not the vampire I know."

Thalon turned his small face up to Tom. "Dad says that when you act nice that you're actually up to something tricky."

"Not true!" Chloe burst. "He's always nice."

"Always up to something," Alluvius countered.

Der shook off whatever remnants of the alien emotion had stuck. She poked Tom's chest. "And I've never seen you when you're not staring into every shadow."

The vampire folded his arms and glared from beneath his deep hood. "Because it's daylight. There are no shadows of significance."

"She has a point," the chemman said quietly. "I also have never seen you not tensed to run or fight." He put a hand on his black sword while eyeing Tom carefully.

The vampire placed his hand on top of Chloe's fair hair. "Oh, I don't know, maybe because my girl isn't in peril and no one's looking at me."

"What about your heart?" Der persisted. "I thought you'd be worried you'd be hunted for that."

Tom glared, that old, fiery hate-filled scowl she'd come to cherish.

Jakkobb coughed into his hand. "I thought you got rid of that thing! A stone heart of a *demon*. That was your plan, wasn't it? Or did you lie about that as well?"

"That was my plan." He laid his other hand on his chest, which entombed the stone heart. "But my plans keep failing since you people invaded my existence."

"You kidnapped *me*," Der said.

"A mistake I have regretted every night."

"There's an easy escape to that," Thistle said. "Keep your promise."

"No!" Chloe barked. "We're a family!"

Tom dropped his chin. He had promised to leave the mortal world, including his adopted girl, including the infuriating Derora Saxen. But, when he tried, they just wound up in trouble and needed him to rescue them. Yes, that's exactly what happened every time he tried to keep that promise.

And now Der had killed the Blackhound. He had helped. That, in turn, had made them all the glory of bards in every corner of this blasted continent. People knew his name and knew what he was. That damned girl had brought him his worst nightmare. He craved not to be noticed, and he *needed* secrecy to survive.

And now he was famous.

"You know that Thomas Delauncey isn't my actual name," he blurted.

Der froze, and so did everyone else.

"My name isn't Tom," he plunged on ahead, "And you trapped me with it! I can't toss this one over my shoulder like so many others before! All because of you, Der! Because you made me famous!"

"I...I..." she petered out and shrugged. Chloe sniffed, shaking her head slowly.

Thistle whispered, "At least no one here knows who we are."

Tom hopped back a step and raised an accusing gloved finger at all of them. "None of you actually know me. You do understand that, right?" He glanced over his shoulder at all the crowds.

"Uncle," Chloe pleaded.

He seemed to exhale. "I suppose I am tense after all." He straightened his shirt. "But the chemman has a point. No one here knows who or what we are."

"Hey, vampire!" a gravelly voice from the crowd called. "We know who you are!"

Tom's emerald eyes bulged. "Not me," he whispered, "They don't know me."

Another voice carried, "Yeah, gotta be him with those weird spectacles!"

Tom bolted, but Der wrapped her good arm around one of his, and he dragged her bouncing down the road for several feet. When the sounds of pursuit didn't happen, he stopped, and Der bounded along to a halt. Slowly, he checked over his shoulder in horrified fascination.

A group of tradesmen and farmers, with one leading a fat cow, waved at him from near the bridge. They jogged up to the couple. Chloe squeezed between them, standing in front of her uncle with her jaw set.

A burly blacksmith smiled widely at Der. "Derora Saxen, welcome home."

She tried to smile, but shook her head. "I don't know you, sorry."

He shrugged. "No matter, got here with the first caravan after you'd left. You'd be amazed at how many people have shown up here in just a few months. More than ten times the population of last summer, can you believe it?"

She looked around the city. She could believe it. Then she pointed at his chest. "The Dawn Sword. You're wearing the Dawn Sword. I thought I was the only one."

His grin broke even wider. "Well, maybe you started it again. Lots of folk askin' for 'em now. Made a few meself, too."

He dusted his hands while the farmer with the cow stepped up and offered the lead rope to Tom. The farmer said, "And when you're done, let us know 'cause this beauty is for the feast tonight."

Tom hadn't moved. He couldn't even manage to blink.

The farmer pushed the lead rope into Tom's unmoving hand, and it fell to the ground when the vampire failed to grip it. The cow stared at him impassively.

"Thank you!" Chloe chirped brightly.

Finally, a few words slipped between Tom's frozen fangs. "But...Uh...You know what I am?"

The farmer nodded, lifting up the lead rope and extending it again. "Yes, sir," he said, "And that's why we're giving you a cow and not my daughter. Although, come to think of it, wife's a bit of a cow too."

Rough laughter echoed through the men. Der scowled ever so slightly, but was too busy trying not to laugh herself, not at the joke, but at the entire situation.

Then that hatred and bloodlust she'd felt earlier drowned all laughter in her mind. She whirled, left

hand going for her sword. The men's mirth cut off.

"Well, well." The fellow in front of the pack of ruffians from the bridge chuckled to himself. Now, that they were closer, Der could see that carried wooden stakes next to their daggers on their belts. They wore no swords. The leader continued, "This is our easiest find yet. In daylight, too. Tsk, tsk."

Der gritted her teeth against the blood boiling rage this group couldn't wait to unleash. Their hatred, aimed at Tom like a lance, grated across her mind.

The vampire stepped back and snarled, pushing Chloe behind him. Jakkobb and Thistle moved quietly out to the sides of the new party, while Spike casually brought up a front hoof to kicking height. The cow continued to stare impassively, as cows do.

The tradesmen and farmers coalesced into a line between the apparent slayers and the vampire. The blacksmith leaned over to a small boy, "You, get the mayor."

"He's under the stage looking for his oxen with a needle," someone else called.

"So," Jakkobb murmured under his breath, "That egg finally cracked."

The caller continued, "Go find Lord Saxen, he's in charge of the town now anyway."

"What are you doing?" the slayer demanded. He drew a steel dagger. The blacksmith crossed his arms, his muscles clenching and bulging with the movement. The hunter pointed. "You know what that thing is!"

"Yeah, and he's welcome here," the farmer replied steely. "Ye ain't."

"What!"

The blacksmith nodded at the vampire. "We know the stories. He's a hero. Ye lads want to kill a hero?"

The slayer looked ready to scream.

Tom did. He dropped his jaw and let all the rage and frustration of centuries out. His eyes swirled to blood red and the stone heart in his chest began to pump.

Everyone stared at him. Thistle pulled Chloe back by her shoulder to stand next to Thalon. The scream continued.

He dropped his head and raised his upper lip at Der, looking like a predator in a way that no human could match. The townsfolk scampered away, tripping over their own feet in haste. The slayers tensed and started to spread out amongst the crowd, surrounding the vampire and paladin.

Tom didn't notice. He snarled at Der, "I am not a hero. I am undead. I am everything these killers will tell you that I am. You don't know me. You don't know me! None of you do! It's all an act! All I am is an act!" He snatched Der's good arm and she felt his ring underneath his glove pinching her skin as he squeezed. He leaned his face toward hers. "This is not how the world works, Der! This is all *your*

fault!”

She opened her mouth to retort, but he broke off into a string of cussing in elvish. Jakkobb’s eyebrows shot right up. Der’s did too, for a moment, but then she relaxed, suddenly pensive.

Trumpets shouted in the distance. Tom squeezed Der all the harder. “Oh great, more royalty!”

A girl, around Chloe and Thalon’s age, ran up to the group, stumbling over her skirt and panting. She seemed oblivious to the moment, and yelled to everyone present, “I heard! I just heard! It’s an elvish prince and some elvish baroness of Ell-oh-something! They’re here, *e/ves* are actually here!”

Absolute panic darted across Tom’s pale face.

Der pushed back his unresisting hand and ripped off his glove. He instinctively turned his exposed skin into shadow. She tugged at his platinum ring, with its picture of a castle etched inside the gem itself.

She gasped. Her face lit up like a moonrise. “I know who you are!”

Chapter Two

Family

*...“green eyes”...“never did find out what happened to him”...
...“Tom’s half elven”...“but that parent is still probably alive!” Edillon shot back...
...the beautiful platinum ring...picture of the castle...Moonrise Castle...
...“in Elloan!” Tom looked away...“yes, that’s a real place”...
...Evelyn’s eyes unfocused...“wish you could’ve met my son...”*

Tom rammed his hand over Der’s mouth just as she exclaimed, “Yur rr miffngh fun!” His skin, exposed in the sunlight over her face, began to blister and smolder. His ring glowed brightly in the light. Inside the jewel, the picture of Moonrise Castle truly shone for the first time.

He jerked Der toward him and his eyes bored into her. “Forget everything you know about me!” He yanked his burning hand back into shadow.

She shivered underneath his grip, but her gaze hardened against his. “Your vampire hypnotism doesn’t work on me! Oww...” She grabbed her forehead. “That’s always a headache! But I know you are Ev—”

“Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare, Der!”

She bit off her next words upon seeing the mask of horror splayed across his normally blank countenance. Absolute terror. She didn’t need to sense his emotions; this was the first time they were plainly written on his face.

Behind them, Chloe lunged forward but Thistle caught her shoulder. She wailed, “Stop it! Stop it! We’re a family!”

Thistle glanced over at Jakkobb. “I got three silver marks that this time his head actually explodes.”

The knight blinked, never looking away. “Thistle, was that a joke?”

“Maybe,” the chemman deadpanned.

Alluvius jumped forward. “We have to help her!”

Jakkobb stuck out an arm into his path. “No, it’s best to just let them work it out. Things get ugly when extra parties get involved.”

The part human grabbed at the knight’s heavy hand. “But he’s going to kill her!”

“He says that a lot,” Thistle murmured. “Got an imagination as to how, too.”

Tom wrapped his arms around Der’s waist and shot into the sky. As their heads punched through a

low lying cloud, Der finally burst, “Lady Evelyn even told me that she had a missing son! Everyone just assumed you were dead!”

“*I am dead!*” He squeezed.

“We have to tell her! She’s here, now!”

“No, NO!” He started to shake her. “This is impossible!”

“Why does everyone say that around me?” Der asked. She stared at Tom’s pale and mortified visage. “We have to tell her!”

Tom’s jaw hung open, but nothing came out. Finally, Der felt his entire body was trembling, pressed against hers. His head rolled forward onto her left shoulder. He gulped.

“Do you know what grief does to an elf?”

“I do,” she whispered. “I’ve seen it.”

“Then you know it’s if best she knows that I’m peacefully dead.”

“Maybe for you, but Tom, she’s your mother.”

He shook her shoulders, but wearily. Their boots kissed the bottoms of some of the passing clouds. The sun heated the back of his clothing to what felt like volcanic temperatures, but the special cloth still shielded him.

Beneath his shaded hood, he moaned, “Do you think she’ll be happy to know that her son didn’t stay dead? Elves revere life, you know this! This is worse than death to them, and you know how they can’t handle even that!”

She squeezed him back, but gently.

“You don’t know me, Derora, you only know the face I’ve given you.”

“What?”

“I don’t want you in my existence, but I’m trapped. You bring back all these emotions that I wish I never had. That’s why I hate being around you. You make me act like I’m alive again, and I’m not. You think I’m a liar? You’re the one making me live this lie.”

“This isn’t a lie,” she protested.

“No— Yes, it is! It probably is! I have spent the last two millennia perfecting myself! Delicate, painstaking work and sacrifice, and blood, too much blood. You had *no idea* what I’ve been through. And, you, you’ve ruined me in less than two years. You don’t even know! Not even appreciating the art or beauty or all the *effort*.”

“But you said all this act over the last two years was a lie!” Der ripped back.

“It was just a lie *to you!* I am not your friend. I’m not even a person! Get that through the heroic songs that must always be playing in your ears! You know I have to be secret to survive and you’ve

made me famous! You've ruined me!"

Der peered into the shadows underneath his hood. She reached up with her left hand and brushed his cheek. "Are you crying?"

"No." He glanced away and then down to the city below and they descended. He pushed her away ten feet above the ground.

Der rolled as she crashed against the dirt. She looked up, but the vampire had already disappeared.

"Der! Der!" Thalon called as the party jogged up. Coda reached her first and thrust his nose into her chest.

"Are you alright?" Jakkobb asked. "That's quite a fall when you're already injured."

She shook her head as he helped her stand. "I'm fine, sir. He's... He's just upset that I'm not as stupid as he would like me to be."

The captain raised his eyebrows.

Spike was watching the sky, but there was no extra shadow against the clouds.

Alluvius, holding the sleeping gold dragon, was also looking up. "I don't know why you keep antagonizing him."

Der sniffed. "I don't mean to."

Chloe rubbed her eyes, trying to hide her tears. "But we're supposed to be a family!"

Thistle said, "Families are hard upkeep."

Thalon nudged the girl. "Hey, isn't your grandfather supposed to be here too?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I hope so."

Thistle nodded to Jakkobb, and said, "Yes, let's go find him. Right now and away from here."

"I'm still by your side," Alluvius chuckled to Der as the chemman and children vanished into the thickening crowd. "I'm sure you'll feel better when you see your family."

"I wonder if Chloe is right," Der mused. "You've got your *family* family, but then you build your own."

The part human shrugged.

Jakkobb patted Spike's neck. "Well, we should probably visit the bank. We're also going—"

To avoid the baroness again? Spike cut in.

"Excuse me?" Jakkobb snapped.

"Yeah," Der said, "You seem to be old friends, but you're always avoiding her."

The knight-captain squirmed beneath his armor. "It's a long story." Even that short sentence

seemed dragged from a great distance.

Alluvius said, "It's a long walk to Der's parents, sir."

Jakkobb started to tense up, and then really tensed up at the sight of an armed guard running at them. His hand shot for his axe.

Donley jerked off his helmet. "Sir dragoon!" He skidded to a stop in front of them. "I'm sorry, but you're the only elf I know! Look, there's the prince of Arborn—"

"Alsalon?" Der interrupted. "Edillon's younger brother?"

"I think so!" Don threw out a hand. "I don't know them! Well, he's with this other elvish noble lady, and she just collapsed coming out of her carriage, fell back inside, and nobody—"

"Where?" Jakkobb thundered.

Donley pointed. "Just across the bridge, sir."

The knight took off into a sprint. The sergeant took off a few steps behind.

"Hey! Hey!" Der called. "I thought you were avoiding her!" She dusted her trousers with her good hand. "Honestly, he makes no sense at times."

"Let's go!" Alluvius said as they started to run.

Spike moved across their path. *No.*

"Why not?" the part human asked, bewildered.

The unicorn passed his gaze over to Der. *I heard everything. Lady Evelyn is psychic, and who knows what she'll learn from you?*

Der clenched her jaw.

"She can read minds?" Alluvius gasped.

Nothing so precise, but when someone is concentrating all their thoughts on not concentrating all their thoughts, then yes, she can perceive glimpses, I believe. I also believe her grief stopped her from seeking out someone's fate. Spike flipped his mane. I agree with both you and Tom, Derora, but this is not a decision to be made in haste.

Alluvius asked, "Der, what do you know?"

She swallowed, her face twisted in indecision.

Spike bobbed his head toward the direction of the bridge. *Der, you go home. I'll see to the elves. Alluvius, you're mostly elven, so you're coming with me.*

Der hung back, sagging against the building as the two walked away.

The red knight sprinted over the bridge to the carriage resting crosswise in the street. The horses stamped their feet impatiently. He looked it over. It wasn't a simple carriage, it just had a glamour

spell over it to make it look plain. But the spell was wavering and the vehicle shimmered between a simple wooden coach and a white-barked extravaganza.

It was her magic, Jakkobb knew, and if it was wavering...

He ran faster. Behind him, Donley gave up trying to match pace.

He ripped open the door. Inside, Prince Alsalon jumped, his gold eyes going wide. "Sir Jakkobb!" He started pointing. "It's the lady, she just wailed and collapsed." The young elf bobbed out of the way when Jakkobb launched himself inside the carriage.

The door slammed shut and the noise of the world dimmed.

Lying on the floor, the most elegant baroness moaned under her breath. Even her moan was a song of the first birds of spring.

Jakkobb reached out and suddenly retracted his hands. "What happened?"

Alsalon held up his hands. "I don't know. She was fine, just fine, and then she cried aloud and collapsed. I don't know!"

Lady Evelyn's eyelids flickered, and she opened her gem-faceted eyes, blue like a sapphire's reflection. Alsalon offered her a hand to sit up.

"Jakkobb," she whispered in a voice of diamond dust. "When did you..." She closed her eyes and breathed. The knight suddenly saw tears hiding in her bejeweled eyes.

"I felt him." She rubbed a hand over her forehead. "My son. I felt my son, but he's been passed away for so long, like his father."

The knight dropped his eyes. "I wish I had been there, for both of them." Suddenly, he felt weighted down by all of those years. Why had he survived?

"Shields. Someone's using psychic shields here."

"Could an enemy be here?" Alsalon asked, as he helped the lady back onto her seat. "Attempting to deceive us?"

The lady frowned. "Not shields like those."

Jakkobb rocked back on his heels. His muscled bulk didn't fit comfortably inside this carriage, not when he was trying to avoid the lady's personal space.

He thought back over the last hour. What had been happening? Well, he'd been paying attention to Der and Tom, and they were arguing. But that was usual. He was more worried about the times when they weren't – that meant things were *really* about to get messy.

The lady smiled at Jakkobb. "At least it's done some good, and you're here."

Important things were happening and she'd been sent home. Der paused to kick at the dirt in the

road. She glanced over her shoulder and debated following Spike anyway.

How much did the lady know just by being here? Did she already know by now? Had she, Derora, actually wounded Tom in an area other than his pride?

It'd take an awfully long sword to poke through that depth, she thought sourly.

She looked up at the hill where her parents' cabin rested, pulling herself from her thoughts.

It was gone. There was no longer a cabin. She felt uneasiness swell up from her stomach.

But the barn was still there. It looked the same. Further up the hill stood a newly constructed manor house.

Uncertain, she started to climb the hill. As she walked, several large geese hissed at her. She skirted wide of them, knowing they were the new fashionable home defense, and that they could break a person's leg.

Coda shied away from the geese as well, tail between his legs. He was interested, but ready to run. Der reached down and let her fingers run through his shiny fur. It was as silky as it was soft. And it brought back those questions.

Why had the Blackhound kept such an adoring, gentle soul underneath him? It didn't fit. Especially since the dog obviously had not been beaten and was never shy around people. He was always underfoot, ready to receive and give love. He was scared of thunder, too. Was this really the pet of the worst villain in history?

Was this really her parents' house?

Yes, it was, she realized. The yellow and black shield of Saxen had been carved and painted on the door. She inched closer while Coda trotted on ahead and sat down in front of the door. He looked back at her, patiently waiting.

Der reached up with her left hand and tapped on the door. She stepped back.

After a moment, a boy jerked the door open and glared at her. He could have been barely twelve, but glared at her with the practiced gaze of an embittered forty-year-old. "Well?"

"Who are you?"

"Who are you?" His voice snapped back at her like a whip.

"Um." She frowned. "This is my parents' house. I think."

The page rolled his eyes and leaned forward out of the door. "Right, and that would make you Derora Saxen. You're not tall enough. And if you are, where's your entourage?"

She glared. "Is there a rule that I have to have one?"

The boy didn't flinch, or even glance at her sword. "Very well. I will fetch a member of the family." He slammed the door.

Coda jumped at the sound. Der reached down with her functional arm and rubbed his head. “Twerp.”

The dog’s ears cocked at the door just before it opened to reveal the page and a burly, bearded man whom Der had never seen before.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Who are you?” The man immediately shook his head and closed the door again, but not before Der saw the page thrusting his tongue out at her.

She reached down and scratched the dog’s head again. “We’re not that badly dressed, are we?” She looked back up at the manor house. “Damn. I don’t even know what window to throw rocks at.”

There were footsteps on the other side of the door again and it opened. Der sagged in relief, and then bolted straight up at the elf who’d opened it.

The Scholar, her teacher for a year at Horizon, grinned. “I thought that was your voice! How’s the arm, child?”

She shrugged. “Still no feeling. What are you doing here, sir?”

He stepped aside to allow her space to enter. The dog trotted ahead. Behind the Scholar, the page stood frozen in terror.

The elf smiled. “I’m interviewing your family, of course. I find them fascinating and I’m wondering if you weren’t adopted.”

“What? My family? Why?”

“Because of you, Derora.” The Scholar held up a small mountain of paperwork. “Also, I wanted to drop off some historical scrolls on paladins, so that you could study them while your arm is healing here at home. You may even find it fascinating that you’re friends with a vampire because—”

“We’re not friends!” she shouted, faster than she’d intended. She felt her face starting to heat up.

“Derry!”

She looked up to see Emil charging at her. Behind him was everyone else, Chera, Rhoesia and Riodan. Her family.

Her brother swept her up in a hug. Soon, she was drowning between her siblings and her parents. She laughed, “Mother! Dad!”

The burly man and the page stood behind the family, blinking in surprise. Chera, with tears shining in her eyes, stepped back. “Oh, Derry, you’ve never met my husband. Marcus, this is Der.”

Marcus at least blushed, but he didn’t drop his gaze. Der grudgingly awarded him a point for it. She swung a smile back to her sister. “You got married? When did this happen?”

Chera shrugged and buried a shoulder into her husband’s chest. “When you were gone, silly.”

Riodan knelt and Coda pushed his head into the man's warm and open hands. He chuckled. "And when did you have time to care for a dog, young lady?"

The warrior shrugged. "Well, I was hoping he'd be your dog. His name's Coda, and he needs a home."

"Then he is welcome here," Rhoesia said. She glanced over to the Scholar. "I suppose you'll have to add him to your notes too, sir."

The elf shrugged.

"He even recorded the color of our dining plates," Emil said. "How did you get a dog, Derry?"

She licked her lips. "Well, I, um, killed his previous master. But he saved my life! If it wasn't for the dog, I would've frozen out there on the battlefield!"

Riodan paused, and Coda immediately patted his hand with a paw. Her father repeated, "Killed his previous master?"

Der nodded. She felt the temperature in the room lowering.

Marcus asked into the cooling silence, "What happened to your arm?"

She looked down at the sling. "The Blackhound cut it off."

Her family gasped.

She tried to lift up her arm from her shoulder, and that worked at least. "But see? I'm growing it back! The elves have a lot that they can teach us about medicine."

"So, it's true?" her mother whispered. "It's all true?"

Der glanced imploringly at the Scholar, who said, "I have educated them to the particulars of the events. However, I omitted your injuries because I didn't want to needlessly alarm them since you are in fair health."

"Did Horizon really fall out of the sky?" Emil asked.

Der winced. "Well, it wasn't that high up, otherwise we'd all be dead."

"It doesn't matter." Her mother reached out and grabbed her younger daughter in another hug. "You're home now and—"

Trumpets exploded outside the door. The page darted forward with his hands over his ears. The family turned to watch him throw open the door and duck into a bow before even looking at the visitors.

Der peeked through the opening and tensed at the sight of armed and armored knights. Her left hand crawled across her belt for the Pallens sword.

Someone in red and yellow silks and tights stepped into the doorway. He cleared his throat and seemed to speak into the air, never looking at anyone inside the house. "Announcing his Royal

Majesty, Prince Cornealith the Third of Thealith, arriving at the House of Saxen.”

The Scholar poked Der in the ribs and whispered, “That’s how you were expected to arrive.”

“I don’t even know where to hire musicians,” she whipped back.

The elf pinched his nose and sighed. “You don’t understand, do you? You’re supposed to have merry men and armed guards—”

“I don’t need armed guards! I can beat people up all by myself!”

“His Majesty begs entrance to your home!” the announcer raised his voice even more, glaring at the paladin and Scholar.

“Of course! Of course!” Rhoesia stumbled forward, bowing at the same time. Everyone bowed except for Der, who wanted to meet the prince with a direct look into his eyes, and the Scholar, because elves tended not to care about human rankings.

She tried to remember her own kingdom’s royalty. He was eighth in line to the throne, if she remembered right, which she wasn’t sure of at all.

Prince Cornealith smiled at Der, and he quickly dropped his gaze to the Pallens sword. He looked back up. He was richly dressed, and that matched his rich, dark eyes. But his clothes also had the creases of use to them, and a fold where a swordbelt would normally lie. He was unarmed now.

Der cocked her head at him while Coda wandered over, wagging his fluffy tail at the newcomer. The prince smiled and held out his hand to the dog. “Well met, furry fellow.” The dog leaned against the prince’s leg.

He looked back up. “Please, rise.” His gaze slid back over to Der. “I know who you are. May I welcome you home to your kingdom?” He held out his hand.

“Yes, sir— Your Highness.” She stuck out her left hand.

He kissed it, and she resisted the urge to curl her hand into a fist. No one had ever tried that with her before! The disciplined training at Horizon paid off in that moment and she didn’t break the prince’s nose.

Completely unaware of how closely he avoided a collision with her fist, he said, “I can’t believe that such a beautiful young woman is such a powerful warrior.”

Der’s face bunched up in confusion and she withdrew her hand. “Uh, thanks?” Behind her, the Scholar rolled his eyes.

The prince continued to smile. “You’re most welcome, my lady. Are the stories true? Are you a paladin?”

She nodded. “Although I’m still learning what that means.”

His smile widened. “Of course. Please let me know if you wish access to the libraries in Second

Acron. Perhaps there are clues in our history.”

“Um. Thank you?”

Cornealith turned to her father. “I have news. This area of Thealith is no longer just a territory, but our kingdom’s newest barony. On behalf of my mother and father, our king and queen, I officially restore the Saxen crest into our noble ranks – which was never in question. Now, my Lord and Lady Saxen, you are the new baron and baroness of this corner of the kingdom, Rivers Valley. I will make a formal announcement during the festivities tomorrow, and you will be presented with your shield there.”

Rhoesia gasped, bringing her hands to her mouth. Riodan bowed his head. “I am most surprised. But, of course, we accept. Thank you, Majesty.”

“From what I’ve heard, it’s only making official what’s been happening all along these past two years.”

Der frowned and looked at the Scholar. “Now I have to keep track of two baronesses. I’ll get confused.”

Chera and Marcus stood stock still, not even daring to breathe.

“Congratulations,” the Scholar said through tight lips, glaring at Der. He muttered in elvish, “Confused? Only if you’re doing it intentionally.”

She rolled her eyes.

The prince coughed into his hand to regain attention. He hadn’t taken his rich eyes off Der. “Now, will you please escort me around your fair city?”

Der shrugged. “Don’t ask me, I don’t even know where the outhouse is around here.”

The prince blinked in polite surprise. Emil pinched his nose and sighed. “Some things don’t change.”

“But it’s an important building!” the paladin protested.

Rhoesia’s smile had gone glassy. “Of course, my prince, our *entire* family would be delighted to escort you and welcome you to the festival.”

“Not a festival,” Der corrected. “It’s Kelin’s funeral.”

“That’s not until later,” Riodan said smoothly. “For now, let’s enjoy our company. Surely you’ve got some friends to introduce to us in town.” He opened his hand to the door, where they could see bonfires already aglow down the hill. The sounds of music and laughter and the scent of roasting meat drifted in through the door.

Coda’s nose twitched in the breeze. He trotted out of the door, muzzle leading. He stopped, turned to the people and wagged his tail hopefully.

“Oh, alright,” Der sighed. “Can’t argue with the dog. To the festival.”

Tom sat in the middle of a rose garden while the songs and sounds of the festivities deadened around him. He sat unmoving with his back to the city, glaring ahead into the forest.

“I knew I could find him!” Chloe’s voice chirped.

He whirled. His girl, Thalon, Thistle and a couple of the townsfolk crunched through the small dirt path in the garden. Tom exhaled and looked back into the woods beyond the town.

Chloe hugged his shoulder. “I knew I could find you. I just had to find out where the roses were.”

“What, child?” His emerald gaze finally shifted to her, and then up the two townsfolk. One of them was twisting a hat in his hand. “Well?” Tom prompted.

“Er, well, me and the lads was discussin’, and, well, would it make you feel better if we pretended to chase you out of town?”

The vampire’s eyes barely widened. “No. Please leave.”

The two men didn’t waste much time hustling away from him. Tom snarled, “I swear there is some sort of Derora Saxon fever. Because people don’t act like this! They only do if she’s around!” He gasped. “I’m infected with it!”

Thalon lifted up a finger. “Peyna, the royal physician, would probably recognize that for you.”

“I don’t want to meet him again,” the vampire muttered. “Please, children, I want to be alone for the moment.”

“But, Uncle...” Chloe petered out.

“I’m not your uncle, Chloe.” He dropped his hand into his pocket and fingered the gold necklace. He’d been waiting to give it to her for a while now...

“Yes, you are!” She hit his shoulder. “You always have been.”

He shook his head, not even acknowledging the strike. “And you’re not in danger anymore. I also know that Lady Evelyn,” he flinched, “is watching over you. You’ve outgrown this vampire’s help.”

Inside his pocket, the snowflake necklace slithered across his palm. It was probably time.

She shoved his shoulder this time. “You’re always so stubborn, Uncle. It’s a festival!”

“I just want you to be safe, child, and I’m not always safe to be around.” He shook his shoulder free and offered a small, toothless smile. “You’re right, though, this is a festival. So, go play, eat lots of cakes. Have fun and don’t worry about this old corpse tonight.” His fingers slipped free from the necklace and he withdrew an empty hand from his pocket.

“Chloe.” Thistle held up his hand back to the bonfires and laughter.

Thalon tugged at her hand. “Come on!”

“Uncle,” she protested one last time.

He kept up his wan smile. “Just go, Chloe, please. I don’t want to sour your mood.”

“Alright.” She sighed and started to turn away. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

Tom nodded. His gaze settled back into the darkness. He didn’t move for a long time.

After a while, the texture of the air changed, and a sweet perfume drifted across the roses.

He turned to see a woman with fiery red hair down to her waist walking barefoot through the garden. A single layer of maroon silk wrapped around her curves in place of a proper dress, but she still wore a thin cloak and hood over her shoulders. But she also wore a belt of sais, a foreign style of weapons from the human continent of Shin far on the other side of the world. Properly too, he noted, in a set of three. Two to fight with and an extra one for throwing or in case of a disarming.

Her honeyed contralto rolled out of the veil of night, “I know who you are.”

Tom threw up his hands. “Of course you do! Everyone does!”

She paused in her steps. “I’ll try this again.” She smiled that special vampire smile.

“Aw shit,” Tom groaned. He rose fluidly to his feet, steeling his emerald eyes. He brought up his fists.

The woman held out her gloved hands openly and away from her weapons. She chuckled. “Look at you, death mark on your pretty little face and now you’re famous!”

Tom lifted his own upper lip to show his canines. “Who are you?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not here for the bounty on your fangs. Our Kingdom’s eyes are elsewhere for the moment.” She paused, watching him, waiting for his reaction. When he didn’t appear to have one, she continued, “I’m not sure about your name though, you don’t look like a Tom.” She smoothed her short dress. “You can call me Amelia.” Her already brownish-red eyes burned brightly and her gaze bored into his, “And now you will obey me, fall into my voice.” Tom’s eyes widened and glazed over. His fingers slackened at his side. She ordered, “You will come with me and do as I bid, sirrah.”

Chapter Three

Vanishing

Prince Cornealith the Third strode down the new avenues of Riversbridge with his head high. The new baron and baroness followed immediately behind him, then his entourage and the rest of the family after that. Der, of course, walked next to the prince. At least she'd gotten out of that awkward arm escorting thing by offering the arm that was in the sling.

They passed into the crowds, who parted and bowed before the royalty and nobility. Der felt her face heating up under all those awestruck faces. A hush saturated the air around them, and her face burned even brighter.

Then a song rose into the air from around a corner leading into an alley. It was a child, but Der couldn't tell if it was a boy or girl. "One of stone. One of bone."

The paladin froze.

Beside her, Cornealith leaned over. "Are you well, my lady?"

She jerked up a hand for silence nearly knocking him in the ear. The child's voice carried the simple tune, "Chasin' each other to the shadow of the midnight sun, that's when the world will be undone."

Der leapt for the alley, dashing around the people who reacted so incredibly slowly to her senses. But she didn't care, just as she didn't care about the prince shouting after her either.

She rounded the corner. A boy, no older than five, yelped and dropped his mug of warm milk. The liquid splashed up against his trousers.

"Where did you learn that?"

The boy pressed his back against the wall, ignoring his dampened clothes. "Some lady sings it to me, but only when I'm sleeping."

"What?"

The boy's face bunched up. "I don't like it though, 'cause the demons kill everyone at the end of the song."

Der exhaled and tried to smile. "Well, it's just a song, ain't it? What do you mean, 'only when you're sleeping'?"

"Derora Saxon!"

She whirled and the boy took off running down the alley.

Riodan set his jaw and pointedly stared at her. He glanced purposefully at the prince, who was

halfway through the crowd, his face contorted in absolute confusion.

“What?” Der held up her good hand. She looked back to the people on the ground, trying to shuffle out of the prince’s way without looking up. The tension was as taut as a bowstring. She could taste their terror, and wondered why they were so frightened. They weren’t among enemies here, not at all.

Then someone broke the silence with a guffaw. Heads swung to find an elf in gold armor, chased with red, laughing and slowly clapping. The Scholar also darted to the new elf’s side. Behind him, Irma, one of Der’s training companions at Silver Dawn, clutched a large green ledger to her chest.

“Strival!” Der broke into a grin and started to approach the dragoon commander. “And, Irma, you’re a banker...?”

That old nightmare of failed dragoon soldiers becoming bankers surged anew in Der’s mind. “So it is true.”

“Der, you knew I was good with sums,” Irma said through a smile.

The paladin pointed at the Scholar. “So that’s why he’s actually here, to make sure the bank’s books can be catapulted properly.”

“Surely you mean categorized,” the Scholar said weakly.

Still grinning, she shook her head. Behind him, Irma giggled.

“Then you should’ve studied your trigonometry more.” The Scholar folded his arms glared.

Strival stepped past both of them and bowed to the prince of Thealith. “Well met, Your Majesty. I see by the look on your face that this is the first time you’ve met our heroine.”

“What does that mean?” Der demanded, and then added, “Sir.”

Cornealith nudged Der. “To whom am I being introduced?”

“Oh. This is, wait, does it go ‘may I present’ instead? Um. Anyway, this is knight-general Strival, commander of Silver Dawn.” She rolled her eyes innocently. “Who is still probably angry at me.”

“Well met, noble warrior,” the prince started, but faltered because Strival wasn’t looking at him.

“Because you destroyed my citadel?” the commander prompted. “Yes, I am, but there is the slight mitigation that you stopped the Blackhound from ruling it. *Slight.*”

Behind them, Riodan whistled a long, low note. “I still can’t fathom it.”

“Yes,” Strival affirmed. “I believe you saw my Horizon before your daughter wrecked it.”

“How does one woman break a citadel?” the prince asked, confused.

“Haven’t you heard?” the commander drawled. “She dropped it out of the sky.”

“That was Chloe and Tom,” Der corrected. “I just put it up in the sky where it could fall from.”

“Surely those stories were exaggerated,” the prince protested.

“Yes,” Strival replied, looking at Der directly, “And you apparently failed to previously educate me

on your friendship with a vampire. Honestly? A paladin and a vampire? Only *you*, Derora Saxen.”

She glanced around. “Speaking of, has anyone seen him lately?”

“There really *is* a vampire,” Cornealith squeaked. “And he’s *here*?”

Der waved her head. “Yeah, but he’s harmless.” She listened for an angry retort from the shadows. Nothing. Her frown deepened.

“Oh.” Waves of relief saturated the prince’s voice. “I understand. He must have some binding spell or something on him which prevents him from harming humans.”

“Yes,” Strival said flatly. “You are most perceptive, Majesty. Now, before Der can say anything else,” he paused to glare at her, mouth already open to spill out a correction, “I must ask her where my good captain is.”

“Jakkobb?” The paladin looked around. “He and Spike took off when they’d heard the baroness had taken a turn.”

“Me?” Her mother called from behind, pressing a hand over her chest in surprise.

“No, the other baroness. Evelyn of Elloan.”

Strival’s eyebrows shot up. “Der?”

Cornealith suddenly smiled. “My lord Strival, may I present the new baron and baroness of this region to be officially named Rivers Valley at tomorrow’s ceremony, Lord and Lady Saxen.”

Riodan bowed and Rhoesia curtsied. Strival bowed in return. “I would elevate them just for succeeding to raise their daughter without their home burning down.”

Der suddenly studied the clouds, while her parents watched the back of her head. She finally burst, “It was a long time ago!”

Cornealith finally jerked his eyes away from the paladin. He straightened his tunic. “However, if there is other visiting nobility, I would like to greet her properly. Especially those from mysterious Arborn.”

Together, they strolled through the sparkling new avenues toward the bridge. Der didn’t mistake the carriage, but Spike, Alluvius, Donley and a woman holding a tiny toddler standing outside of it were also a telling hint. The woman was staring at Spike’s saddle where Goldie was chewing on his own tail with gusto.

“Der!” the woman called as they party approached.

Der blinked. The woman was standing next to Donley, so... “Avice!” She stopped walking, and looked between the couple and toddler.

Avice reached out and hugged Der when she was close enough. “I’m so sorry about Kelin! He never came home.”

“He did now,” Der managed after a moment.

“Is that a dragon?” the prince of Thealith asked from behind her, staring at Goldie on Spike’s saddle, still industriously chewing his tail.

“Yeah.” Der clicked her tongue. “Are you *that* hungry, little one?”

“I’m grooming!” He continued to nibble.

Cornealith looked absolutely lost. “I thought, I thought he was bigger.” He ran a finger around the collar of his tunic.

The paladin settled for shrugging.

“Der!” a voice bubbled out of the carriage. She whirled to catch the lithe form snatching her up in a hug. She caught a blur of auburn hair in her vision. She didn’t even know who was embracing her so vigorously.

When the young elf pulled back, he was grinning.

“Prince Alsalon!” she gasped, but at least remembered to use the elvish language. She’d only remembered actually meeting him once before. “What are you doing here?”

“Had to beg my brother, but I wanted to see the world!” Then the lad’s attention had already moved on. He was staring at Avice’s child. He looked back at Der. “I’ve never seen one of those things.”

“It’s a child. You can ask her to play with it— her.”

Alsalon tossed her a pitying look. “I don’t know Common.”

Avice had put a hand on her child’s head and was watching the elf warily. Beside her, Alluvius whispered, “You’re fine. He’s just curious.” The toddler burped at the golden-eyed elf.

“I thought I heard a child’s joy.” Evelyn of Elloan graced the world outside of the carriage. Jakkobb helped her to step down. She didn’t seem to even notice that there was mud underneath her simple, elegant shoes or that it could be brushing against her velvet and silk gown. She smiled at the toddler, who laughed and immediately reached out toward the baroness.

“My lady!” Cornealith threw himself into a bow at the sight of grace incarnate.

But Lady Evelyn’s bejeweled eyes unfocused toward the sky.

“Eve?” Jakkobb prompted.

“Get them inside!” She grabbed her forehead with both hands.

“What?”

“Everyone! Get them inside!”

Jakkobb glanced around at everyone staring. “There are over a thousand people here.”

Prince Alsalon held up his hands. Sparks were crackling between his fingernails. He gulped. “Earth event.”

Spike tiptoed closer to Jakkobb. *Oh no...*

Cornealith shakily pulled himself upright. He looked at Der, who was gripping her left hand around her sword and glaring at the sky. He snatched her elbow and pulled. "What's going on?"

A thick arm of lightning exploded across the bridge in front of them. Stained glass burst into white-hot shrapnel. He tried to shout in surprise, but he was suddenly inhaling cloud. Thunder consumed the world and it vibrated the ground like an earthquake. The prince could feel his boots buzzing.

All around the tiny river valley, the thunderstorm coalesced on the ground.

Alluvius ducked as fingers of lightning clawed through the clouds surrounding him. He pressed his hands to his ears as he squatted. He couldn't hear the screams around the city over the thunder.

A golden peace suddenly hummed through the air as quickly as the thunderstorm had ripped through it.

Lady Evelyn stood with arms were raised toward the sky while her fragile dress flapped in the winds. A golden sphere of light hummed between her upraised hands. Her ringlets glowed golden and red in the lightning's glow.

Der squinted. She could see an image of Riversbridge, all the buildings and the bridge inside the globe. She glanced up to the golden dome overhead. The lightning attacked it like a demonic invasion.

She winced at the strain on the baroness' face. How long could the lady last?

"My lady!" Jakkobb yelled beside her.

Evelyn cried, "There are so many!"

Cornealith, Der's family, and almost everyone remained on the ground with their hands glued to their ears. Der eased herself onto a knee and then pushed herself to her feet.

She patted her sword, remembering that time she had stuck it into Tallor's dragon's mouth just as it spit a chain of lightning at her. Her sword had absorbed all that power.

Prince Alsalon bunched his shaking hands into fists. "No, no, no!" He lunged for the lady, throwing his arms around her waist. "Save me!"

Der was already sprinting for Kelin's statue as Alsalon barreled into Lady Eve. The orb flickered between the baroness' hands as the young prince continued to shake her.

The paladin leapt onto the cast bronze, throwing herself up toward Kelin's head. Her hand, feet and knees squealed against the metal made slick by the storm. The bronze squealed underneath her skin. She jerked the Pallens sword free just as she wedged her sling into the space between Kelin's raised arm and ear.

Evelyn's sphere popped like a soap bubble. The electric cloud spread out instantly again.

Der thrust the sword high over the statue. The lightning, from all over the city, raced to the nexus point. It arced across the ground, rising into the sky, charging at the sword from all directions at once.

The electricity dove into the blade and she strained to hold up the sword high inside the heart of the thunderclap. The hair along her arms and skull rose up, some of it even burning away, but she only felt a cool tickle along her skin.

Suddenly, the storm vanished. Just like it had come. Such were the nature of the earth events.

Der sagged against Kelin's bronze head. Blood seeped out of her ears. The sword, still overhead, glowed as if lit by internal starlight. A blue-gold halo shimmered around the blade.

Away from the bridge, Evelyn risked a smile. Jakkobb suddenly backed away from her, desperately looking anywhere but the lady.

Der tried to dislodge her sling by tugging at it with her left hand, still holding the glowing sword in it.

No one moved to help her. Cornealith backed away, overawed. Her family and friends stared with the same helpless, literally thunderstruck expression.

Eventually, Der jerked herself free and then just kind of fell off the statue. She rolled up into a kneeling position on the bridge, and waited for her personal world to stop spinning.

Jakkobb stood over her and planted his hands on his armored hips. "Der, you already have enough of a reputation around here. I suppose you can't hear me."

"What?" she yelled. "I can't hear you."

"What would you do without us elves? That's right, be one-armed and deaf."

"What?"

"Let me heal you." Evelyn stepped up alongside the knight and raised her slender fingers over Der's ears. "I shan't do anything more for your arm though. It is repairing on its own."

The paladin looked at that beautiful face and those bejeweled eyes, the picture of perfection, and suddenly all she could think about was Tom.

Thankfully, behind them, Alsalon exploded, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't know what to do!"

Around him, people stared quizzically as the young prince rambled on in elvish, unable to understand. Eve withdrew her hands, pausing a little too long on the paladin's face for Der to be comfortable.

Strival shook his head in disgust. "These events are growing in frequency and severity. Just two months ago I heard of a whole field of cows near Staghorn turning inside out."

"How— how can you just brush this off?" Cornealith stuttered. Beside him, Der shrugged. He pointed at her. "You nearly lost your head."

She shrugged again and nodded at the two knights, trying to listen. Strival glanced at the human

prince. "What was that, Highness? Was this your first event? I thought they were everywhere now."

The royal raised his hands. "Uh...Um. Excuse me!" He turned and ran down the avenue toward the city's gates. The members of his entourage picked up their skirts and pointed shoes and turned to race after him.

Jakkobb swallowed. "But the only other time in history..." He and the commander's eyes met.

Strival nodded. "Once was enough."

"What's going on?" Alsalon asked in elvish.

"Battle of the Bridge," Alluvius replied. "Right before the gates of hell were open to the world."

"I've sent investigators, the *place* is undisturbed," the general continued.

Jakkobb stood at attention. "We need to find the origin of these events, sir."

"And the dragoons will, but not you, captain. You're on holiday."

"What was that, sir?" Jakkobb rubbed his pointed ear. "I think I may have been deafened too."

"You and Der *broke* my citadel. It will be another century before we can fully repair it. However, that does give us time to improve the moat."

"Horizon doesn't have a moat," the captain protested through a dry throat.

"Exactly." Strival sighed. "But mostly, captain, you're ordered on holiday because I've got yet another letter from your mother."

The northern elf drew up himself up to his complete height, towering over his commander. "I am the most senior captain you have. I've fought at the gates of hell with you, sir. And you're sending me home to my mother?"

The general didn't even blink. "She writes a very persuasive letter."

Jakkobb's jaw unhinged.

Strival's gaze passed right by him. "And as for you others..."

Suddenly, Der wanted to squeeze up right behind the red knight and be invisible. Hadn't Tom tried to teach her that trick? Yes, but she'd been too busy making fun of his boots or something.

The general's gaze landed on Goldie, still preening himself on Spike's saddle. "You, dragon!"

Goldie squeaked and burped a ball of swamp-smelling fire. His claws scrabbled for purchase on the saddle, scratching the leather. "I didn't do nothing!"

"You need to spend more time with dragons."

"I did last year!" The golden creature jerked its long neck back and forth, never quite moving his triangular head. "Don't wanna. Wanna stay with Der. She's my human."

"Then do you want to talk about how you keep chewing through my haversack?" Der asked.

Spike twisted his head around to face the shiny dragon. *It's very important for you to be a dragon*

because you can't be anything else. To all other watching eyes, it looked as if the horse was just observing the golden creature.

Alluvius raised a finger. "I want to get back to the part about Jakkobb having a mother." His voice pitched up at the end as if it were a question.

The captain sounded off, "I wasn't just born at this age!"

"Oh," Der said. "I'd always assumed that you just popped into life, with the armor on."

Strival barked a laugh. "Oh ho ho, I should tell you stories of when this lad was near about your age. You think you've gotten into trouble— well, you have..." He recovered, "But he was just as crazy as you."

"I'll go with you," Alluvius chimed in. "Always wanted to see Staghorn, sir."

"No, you won't," Strival said, pointing at the part human. "Because you, young man, are going to start dragoon knight training."

"What? But you booted me out with Der." He jerked his thumb over to the paladin.

"Yes, but everyone who's hearing all these wonderful stories already believes you are a dragoon, and it'd only hurt our reputation if you weren't. I don't think you'll disobey my orders or take over Horizon again."

"He can't," Der said. "Because it's broken."

Ignoring her, Alluvius couldn't fight a smile. He saluted. "Yes, sir!"

Across the city of Riversbridge, a solitary bell's gong spread over the town, sounding its one note slowly over and over.

"Am I too late?" another elven voice graced the group. They turned to see Fienan standing there, slightly out of breath as if he'd just been running. His dark hair was damp with sweat but his silver eyes were as bright as ever.

Der blinked and stared. She hadn't seen him since their escape from Darkreign.

"You look older," he said to her. "I wish I had seen Kelin older too."

All around them, people began to slowly step toward the southern edge of the city.

The burly blacksmith, who had been with the men who offered Tom the cow, joined the crowd of people heading south toward the newly constructed amphitheater. He'd never imagined that the dwarves could build so quickly, or that the theater would ever have a use out here in the country.

But it wasn't the country anymore, he reminded himself, it was a new city.

Lost in his thoughts, he stepped on the boot heel of the person in front of him. "Oh, pardon me!"

The walker whirled around and scowled at him from underneath his hood.

“That was mighty wicked with that thunderstorm...” the blacksmith petered out, staring at the orange eyes glaring at him. He broke into a smile. “You must be Thistle! I already met Tom, and I must say that—”

The stiletto knife broke skin right beneath his ribs. Two chemmen swiftly ducked their shoulders under his arms and walked the stunned and dying man over to an alley before melting back into the crowd.

Der hesitated when she saw the amphitheater. This wasn't home. This wasn't even the meadow anymore. They'd destroyed it and built this. She watched the crowds folding together into an audience. She looked at her family, her friends, Strival and then looked ahead to the front rows to find Kelin's parents, Calindra and Gaius, and his siblings. Even old Sigard, Kelin's mentor, sat forlornly, looking at the wooden box in center stage. She looked away from it. Kelin had brought them all together, not her.

We'll bury him here, she thought, but he never made it back. He left with me that morning, but he never saw home again.

“Lady Eve!” Chloe exploded from behind the party. She dashed forward and wrapped her arms around the baroness' gown.

The lady managed a smile at her small apprentice. “Stand straight, young lady, we are in public.”

“Oh. Right.” Chloe bounced to the lady's side and smoothed out her skirt.

“Where's Tom?” Thalon piped up. “Not like him to miss a funeral.”

Der suddenly started humming madly, looking everywhere but the lady.

Jakkobb nudged her good shoulder. “What is wrong with you?”

“Uh.” She squirmed.

He exhaled. “I had to go through my best friend's funeral, too. Eve's husband, and we never even knew how he died. She knew he had though. She knew.”

“How can she not divine what happened to him, or,” Der gulped, “Or her son?”

The knight shook his head. “I don't know. I think a part of her doesn't want to know.” He paused, and then cocked an eyebrow at Der. “And how do you know of her son?”

She looked up, blank-faced, and told the truth, “Because you told me. Because she told me.” Just not all of the truth.

“Oh. Right.”

“Wonderful,” Thistle muttered behind them. “Seats on the front row. Care to take a wager on how many knives I'll have in my back?”

“I don’t know, Thistle,” Jakkobb replied, “If they welcomed Tom, they might not mind a chemman.” Thistle scowled. “I’d rather not find out.”

Fienan bowed briefly to the party as they took their seats. “I was asked to be here on behalf of King Edillon.” He walked to the center of the stage and paused, whispering to the flower-laden coffin. Then he turned and watched the city of Riversbridge assembling before him.

The elf bowed his head and waited for a stillness to pervade the stage around him. He looked up and saw a thousand faces staring at him. Not many had been scared away from the earth event – the blasted things were all over the place these past few seasons. No one was unfamiliar with them, although not too many had experienced them this closely.

He opened his hands. “My friends, we are all here today, and many lives saved, including some of our very own, because of this man. He died well. He died a hero. He died against the force that killed Pallens before him, and in this death, there is only victory.”

Then he raised his voice in song.

Der heard Kelin’s laughter. She slapped her hands over her ears. They all heard Kelin’s laughter. That’s how the elves did it. They shared their memories at a funeral, or vanishing ceremony, or whatever they called it.

A gasp stiffened throughout the crowds behind her. They had no idea. But it was hard to be scared of the image of the laughing, smiling man.

In her mind, Kelin hadn’t shaved in days, as usual, and he pushed his dark curls out of his face. He smacked his belly and sauntered across the meadow that used to be right where this amphitheater was now.

Der jerked upright as she felt the song sift through her own memories and offered them up to everyone in the crowd.

With everyone, Der watched Kelin laughing as he ripped the slaver’s sword outside of Malfax. They all listened to him crying over Morana’s body. They all felt his body heat as Der dragged him out of the chemmen’s broken castle in the Wild Lands.

The song released her, and suddenly she saw toddler Kelin banging a hammer against the walls of his parents’ house.

Der couldn’t fight the tide of tears anymore, and started to sob, all the while staring at the sealed, wooden box. But he was alive, in this song, he was alive! In this moment, he could never die.

She didn’t need to feel anyone else’s emotions in this moment. They were all already shared. It was just a solid wave, of grief and joy, as real and inevitable as the ocean.

When the song faded, the sun looked like it had jumped across the sky. It must’ve been over an

hour later, but it felt like only an instant.

Only a few stoic faces remained dry. Der watched dully as Strival marched to the center of the amphitheater next. He unfolded his hand to reveal two golden rings. Their jewels were set in an endless knot, like the Pallens style, but instead of melted gems these were cut gems, only mimicking the fashion. Pallens had taken the secret of how to melt gems to her grave.

The knight-general lifted up his gaze to the audience. "These rings are made as close as we possibly could to the identifying signets of yore. There has been no Pallens nor emperor who can legally bestow these honors, but in the spirit of the Empire, I give these to Kelin Miller and Derora Saxen." He raised his hand to showcase the rings. "I, Strival, commander of Silver Dawn, declare them knights of Pallens!"

The crowd, so tearful and silent, suddenly roared into life. Der sat there, stunned and open mouthed. She barely felt Alluvius pushing her shoulder to receive her ring. The clapping and stomping and yelling eclipsed all other senses in the world as she stumbled onto the stage, crying and shocked.

Strival smirked as he laid both rings in the palm of her hand. He nodded to the coffin. "Go on. He deserves it."

Silence stretched across her world as Der stepped toward the casket, even though the crowd kept cheering. She couldn't hear it. All she could focus on was that coffin.

She hadn't sought out his body after he'd been killed; hated to say that she'd been too busy, or had she been too afraid?

Her shoulders quaked, and she wasn't even trying to hold back her sobs anymore. She gulped for air. "I miss you, brother. You saved me, too. And I'm sor—"

That wasn't right. She wasn't sorry. She had no reason to be. She couldn't have saved him, and the gods knew she'd tried, but she didn't make it in time. Could have never made it in time.

She held one of the rings between her fingers over the coffin. She choked out the words, "I miss you! But I'm grateful for the time I had with you, my friend. I love you. And now look at you, knight of Pallens. Yes, I suppose that's my fault too."

She blinked furiously at her tears. The coffin looked blurry. She could hardly believe he was in there.

"He's not dead!"

The ring thudded down on the sealed lid. Der whirled. "What?"

A hag with missing teeth and matted hair that looked like it could house snakes, or a colony of spiders in the very least, pranced forward and away from her. "You didn't kill him."

The crone hurled a ring of her own at Kelin's coffin. Der reflexively caught it. She didn't even see Jakkobb and Alluvius and many others rising from their seats.

Der stared at the new ring. A wolf's head on a snake's body. Whoever wore this served the Blackhound. She froze in memory. And the memory was freezing. She'd lost body parts to frostbite!

She had watched him as he'd stared in confusion and then horror at his own sword sticking out of his gut. And they'd both collapsed!

It was a mortal wound, and no one could've survived that blizzard alone in the best of health!

Her head snapped up and she leapt forward. Strival suddenly blocked her path. He never took his eyes away from the old woman. "We will take care of this. You are on holiday. Do you understand?"

Chapter Four

The Way Home

“Is it real?” Prince Alsalon quavered, staring between Jakkobb, Der and Spike as they crowded together in front of the stage. “Did the Blackhound survive?” Behind him, Thistle stood over the children, checking over his shoulder. Lady Evelyn had mysteriously vanished back to her carriage.

“I’ll find out.” Der shoved her good shoulder into Spike’s leg as he moved to block her path. The massive unicorn didn’t budge.

Jakkobb frowned. “The old, er, *woman* really didn’t look that, ah, stable to me.”

“But she had the ring!” Der growled.

Plenty of them littered around Horizon, Spike whuffed, turning to look at the human still trying to push his colossal frame, digging furrows in the ground with her boots. *Plenty of dead men wearing them. I’m sure some of them wound up on the black market.*

“Der!” Jakkobb snapped, cracking a small smile. “Alright, let’s say that the Blackhound did live. Do you think he’s stupid enough to let some cracked bi—” He paused, glancing at the children.

“Bitch,” Der prompted.

“Some crazy *person*,” he said, not looking at Chloe. “Anyway, he’s not going to let an old hag toss that snake out of the bag just yet. And it doesn’t matter, Strival ordered us on holiday.”

Thistle pointed. “She no longer takes orders from him. If I recall, that’s exactly why she’s not a dragoon.”

Jakkobb pointed right back. “And Strival doesn’t have to share any information or prisoners with her.”

Der frowned thoughtfully. “But she was arrested here, and I bet that prince of Thealith would grant me access.”

“No,” the knight chuckled. “Good try though. But since the Blackhound was invoked, and he’s a follower of Sennha, that falls to dragoon authority. Strival took her. Who is going to argue with him?”

Thistle pointed at Der again.

“Who is going to *win* an argument with him?”

Der looked at Thistle, who lowered his hand. The chemman almost smiled and put that hand on the top of Thalon’s head. “We’ll be returning to Elloan, safe as can be from these earth events.”

Chloe piped up, “And the lady is teaching me my power! And she’s letting my grandfather come home with us!” Her glowing face suddenly saddened. “But where is my uncle?”

Der suddenly started humming.

Spike tossed his head. *Oh, he's fine. He's the only one of you who doesn't need constant attention not to walk off a cliff.*

Jakkobb and Thistle both quirked eyebrows at Der. Her hum drowned away in the back of her throat. "What? Why are you all looking at me? I have no idea who— where he is."

Thistle's look was as flat as the prairie.

He did promise to leave the mortal world, Spike said.

Der waved her hand. "Yeah, but he lies about everything so he was obviously lying about that."

Jakkobb sighed. "What did you do to the poor vampire this time?"

Der looked up, innocence radiating from her face. "Nothing."

"But he's a vampire," Alsalon protested. "He's undead!"

She shrugged. "He's still his own person."

"Right. As you say." The prince dropped his eyes. "I must be going to meet my guards and go home." He sighed and slouched further. "While the rest of you get to have another adventure."

"You didn't get enough three years ago?" Thistle asked.

"Not like you." He sighed again. "Please come visit me in Arborn."

"We're leaving with the lady!" Chloe chimed. "We'll be there soon too!"

Der sensed someone's longing, but it wasn't for adventure. She turned to find the source of the emotion and found the expectant eyes of her family. Emil, Chera, Riodan, Rhoesia were all there.

Coda's tail thumped against the ground and he trotted over to her. She reached down and rubbed his shoulders. "Gonna miss you, furry buddy." It certainly wasn't as complicated as a human's emotion, but she felt the dog's joy at receiving some attention flash through her mind.

Rhoesia also reached down to pet the dog. "Derry, do you have to leave so soon?"

Der sighed.

Jakkobb answered, "Yes, Strival's request."

"I was hoping you would stay at least until your arm healed," her mother said. "But I want you to know that I am proud of you."

Der's jaw dropped. All of those childhood memories marred by her mother's scowl suddenly gave up. Her mother was proud of her! Tears launched a new attack on her eyes. She tried to blink them back, and looked at her family. All of them – Emil, Chera and her husband, and her parents.

They were proud of her!

Riodan massaged her good shoulder. "We'll keep the torches lit until next time, so you can find your way home."

“Now I really don’t want to leave!”

Riodan’s smile became worn. “Der, you were never meant to be here. We know that now. But you’re still our daughter and we have always and will always love you.” He held out an arm, and she rolled into a one-shouldered embrace. Her entire family joined around them.

Der felt another tear sting her eyes as her family stepped back. “I love you!” she blurted.

“Of course,” her mother replied. “We love you too.”

Next to her, Fienan and Alluvius approached. Der wiped her eyes. “Fienan, I haven’t seen you in so long. I don’t want to say farewell so soon. And Alluvius, well, you’ve earned your dream back.”

“Thanks to you,” Alluvius said, “Of course, it was because of you I lost it, but I’ll release that regret to the stream.”

Der grinned and shrugged.

Fienan bowed. “Derora, you have truly grown since the young lady who so foolishly charged into Darkreign, but I don’t think you’ve actually changed.”

Smiling helplessly, she shrugged again. “It did my heart good to see you. Thank you for coming.”

“I wouldn’t miss saying farewell to a friend, and Kelin was a wonderful friend.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” She glanced over her shoulder to see all of her family, including the dog, waving his tail so hard that his entire back was shaking with the motion. A smile danced across every one of their faces.

“Ree!”

Der spun to see a golden blur charging her ankles. She knelt, and Goldie rubbed against her legs.

He squatted. “I don’t wanna go!”

She glanced up at the sounds of someone jogging in armor and saw a dragoon chasing after the dragon with his hands open as if to catch a ball. She looked at the insignia on his arm. Steel Eagle, not Silver Dawn. Then again, Steel Eagle dealt with dragons far more than the order in which she had trained.

The dragon whirled around and snorted, black smoke curled out from his nostrils. “Don’t wanna!” He brought up front claws up like a cat’s.

The Steel Eagle dragoon skidded to a halt. “I’ve got orders.”

Der cradled the dragon in the crook of her good arm. “Don’t you want to be a dragon?”

“Yes! Ree!” His nostrils flared again, and this time, flames peaked out.

“Then you should be with dragons for a while,” she said. “I’ll be fine, and we’ll see each other very soon.”

“Promise?”

“Aye.” She offered a lopsided grin and raised him up to the dragoon. “Farewell, Goldie. Soon, I promise.”

The Steel Eagle soldier nodded gratefully to her and gently raised up the dragon into his hands. Goldie whined as they started to walk away, staring with his huge eyes over the dragoon’s shoulder.

Our turn to leave, Spike whispered. Meanwhile, Der twisted her head around to see her family one last time. They smiled and leaned into each other.

Jakkobb sighed. “We’ll have to get supplies in Staghorn then, but that shouldn’t be a problem.” He lifted an armored foot into the stirrup and swung himself on to the saddle fluidly.

Der tried to cross her arms, shoveling her left arm underneath the sling. “I’m staying.” She glanced back to her family.

“Der...” Jakkobb groaned.

“Strival can’t order me around anymore.” She stuck her feet into a wider, more balanced stance. “Going to finish what I started and make certain the Blackhound is dead.”

“Der, that’s exactly why Strival ordered us on holiday.”

“But only my sword can hurt him!”

“You can’t even use it right now,” the knight replied.

“I can too!”

Spike and Jakkobb sighed at the same time. The unicorn snorted, lowered his head and gripped the back of Der’s swordbelt in his teeth.

“What! No!”

But Spike tugged her up off of the ground. Der kicked at the air. “Spike, put me down!”

Jakkobb flicked his visor down to hide his satisfied smirk.

The unicorn raised his tail and his head and calmly trotted out of town, carrying the spitting and cursing warrior, and the whole of Riversbridge gaped at them.

Well into the forest and away from the roads, Spike unhooked his jaw from Der’s belt. The unicorn rolled his tongue around his mouth. *When was the last time you laundered that leather, child?*

Der pushed herself off the ground, dusting her shirt off with one hand. “I don’t know, when was the last time you were nice?”

Spike flattened his ears.

“I didn’t even get to say farewell to Thalon and Chloe, or Prince Alsalon, or Lady Evelyn.”

Yes, I wonder if that was by design. The unicorn let his gaze wander over to Jakkobb.

“We were under orders.” The knight sighed. “I don’t want to do this.”

Spike bumped his shoulder with his nose. *Are you still afraid of your family? After all this time?*

They both paused, waiting for Der's inevitable interrogation. She was looking over her shoulder.

"How far is it back to town?"

Spike nosed her in the back. "You can go home soon enough. Strival will handle it."

She jerked up straight and gasped. "You don't think the Blackhound would come *here*, would he?"

"You can ask his ghost," Jakkobb replied. "Der, if Strival thinks there is any danger present, he won't leave the town unprotected. You know that."

"I suppose."

Spike snickered. *And in the meantime, you'll get to see the tundra and the elven cities there. Northern cooking is, ah, a bit different than the rest of Solquin.*

"And there's tree paths nearby," she continued. "We can come back if there is an emergency, right?"

"Yes," Jakkobb sighed.

"I still don't really want to."

"You think you're the only one? I don't honestly want to go home either."

Spike stamped a hoof. *Do I have four thousand miles of pity party to put up?*

The other two exhaled and looked away. They continued their walk deeper through the forest.

"Why don't you want to go home, sir?" Der asked. "Let's see, I know that you didn't grow up with your family."

"That's right. I didn't. But they sure want to pretend I did."

Your brother's got to be almost ready for the Tollrian Strengths.

"Brother?" Der blinked.

"I've only ever met him once," Jakkobb quipped.

"Brother?" Der repeated.

Oh yes, Spike said, He's got an older sister, too. And parents. And grandparents.

"What?" She stopped walking and blinked. "You mean he wasn't grown out of the earth by sowing dragon's teeth like in the legend?"

"No!" Jakkobb snapped.

Smells like it sometimes.

"Oh, and you're the scent of honey and roses!" The knight slapped both of his hands against his helmet. "I'd better not have four thousand miles of this to bear either."

"Hallo! Hallo the party!" A voice shouted in elvish from behind a tree.

"What now?" Jakkobb muttered. He raised his voice, "Yes, who the hell is it?"

An auburn head poked out from behind an oak. Golden eyes blinked at them. In unison, Der, Jakkobb and Spike's jaws slipped open.

"Prince Alsalon!" the knight stuttered. "What in the four corners of hell are you doing here?"

The elf slouched against the tree. "I want a holiday too."

Jakkobb shouted, "They've got to be already searching for you! I know the king sent some discreet guards with you!"

Alsalon shook his auburn head. "I climbed out the window." His golden eyes lit up like the sun. "It was so exciting!"

Climbing out a window was thrilling? Spike shook his head. *Oh dear.*

"I have to make up for what I did in town, and I want to see the world!"

Jakkobb pointed over the young elf's shoulder. "Right, and you can see the world between here and Riversbridge. Let's go."

"Please no!" The prince backed up to the tree and grabbed it with both hands. "I want an adventure – you all have them!"

"First, going home *will be* an adventure if you don't cooperate. And second, you can't– you know what? I'm on holiday. Der, you figure this out." Jakkobb shook his head and turned around to face Spike.

"Uh, yes, sir." Der shrugged and looked at the prince. "Alright, you can come with us."

Once again, Jakkobb's jaw fell open. The prince ran forward, grinning. "Thank you!"

Spike whinnied and narrowed his eyes at the young warrior. *Der, try it again.*

"Well," she replied, "I always wanted adventure too."

Jakkobb snapped his mouth shut, glaring ahead.

He can't come with us, Spike started to explain. If anything happens to one auburn lock, we'll be in too much trouble...and that doesn't mean a damn thing to you, Saxen. The unicorn dropped his head and pawed the ground. *Fine, he said at last, He can come with us to Staghorn and then we are calling on Arborn and telling them he followed us through the tree path and we didn't know until we were already through. No farther.*

"Yes!" Alsalon punched the air.

Jakkobb growled, "Then let's move, there won't be a tree path until well after nightfall. I think this is a terrible idea."

"Bad idea," the knight muttered for at least the thirteenth time. That was all he'd said over the last several miles as they marched through the woods. The crowds of Riversbridge hadn't ventured far

from the roads and new city, and it felt as if they were already in the heart of the Wild Lands. They'd walked in mostly silence in the hours from the afternoon, through the storm readers' light of dusk, and now into the ancient hours of the night.

Jakkobb hadn't stopped. They were going to get there tonight. At least the waxing moon provided enough light. The prince hadn't spoken, and instead kept eyeing the knight and knotting his fingers.

Der, ignoring to the mood, shook her hand so quickly it blurred.

What are you doing? Spike demanded, breaking the silence.

"Trying to get it off." Shake, shake, shake. She leaned forward and gripped the Pallens-style ring in her teeth.

Jakkobb finally shook his head and offered a slight chuckle. "Knight of Pallens. Only you, because it's impossible."

Der looked up with her hand still in her mouth. "It's not real."

"I don't think anyone will dispute it," Alsalon said. "My brother and I could also recognize it."

The knight's eyes unfocused. "Back in town, when you were saying farewell to Goldie, you looked for a moment like this knight of Pallens I ran into during the Battle of the Bridge. Huh."

Der frowned at him.

"She died pretty horribly. Saw one of those white demons snatch her up and then well, she and it were gone down off the bridge into whatever abyss was beneath us. She had a Pallens sword as well, but back then, those weren't too unusual."

Der finished pulling the ring off with her teeth. She spat it into her palm. "I didn't think anyone from Pallens was in that battle."

"Yeah, that was strange too. It was Silver Dawn all the way, but it's not like I had time to ask. Lot of things didn't make sense there. Especially the sky. Especially the sky."

"What was the sky like?" Alsalon asked politely.

"Fractured."

Der threw up a hand. "Quiet!"

Spike swished his tail. *I didn't hear—*

The paladin glared at the unicorn. "There's something out there. I can sense menace. Oh no, I think it's those slayers. It feels the same. I think they're out here."

"They won't bother us, right?" Alsalon quivered. "We're alive."

"So is their pride," Jakkobb murmured, remembering how the townsfolk had embarrassed them.

Spike softly whuffed. *If she can sense them from far away, it means they must be really concentrating. Like hunting.*

Der closed her eyes and breathed slowly and deeply. She tried to relax her mind, spread it out over the forest.

She grabbed her forehead in her good hand and collapsed onto her knees. Her breath hissed between her teeth. After a moment, she rolled to a sitting position and shook her head. "I don't think I'll ever get used to this. I don't know what's out there, but it felt wicked. Hell, even felt like the chemmen. And the slayers, maybe, and well, something like those were-bears a couple years ago."

Jakkobb scowled at the darkness. "But it ain't unicorns and puppies."

Excuse me? Spike stamped a hoof, breaking a stick like a bone.

"There's too much... but I do know this one..." Der pushed herself up to her feet using only her legs. She stood out to the empty darkness. "Tom! I know you're nearby somewhere! Tom!"

"Don't yell!" Jakkobb ordered. "Not if there really are slayers out there."

"You are an idiot," Tom's voice scythed through the air. He was suddenly standing there, arms crossed and watching them through the narrow slits of his emerald eyes.

"Where have you been?" Der demanded.

"And when were you ever my caretaker?" He eyed her, much like a fox looking over a rabbit who was glaring right back. "I really have you fooled, don't I?"

"What?" she said. Behind her, Spike's ears perked up.

"Who are you?" Tom swung his gaze over to Alsalon, who squeaked and pushed his back up against the massive unicorn. But the vampire lifted his gaze to Spike. "I have always hated that horse."

Spike looked ready to speak, but then flattened his ears and just glared. Jakkobb frowned.

Tom rubbed his sleeve furiously, brushing off some dirt. "But the cursed paladin's right. There is something out there. Something more than me." He turned back to the darkness, raised his hand and beckoned.

A figure appeared, blurry at first, but then a vision in crimson silk came into focus. A woman with fiery hair and pale skin stepped out of the night. She wore a belt with three sais over a thin, curving dress.

Tom glared at the ground. He bunched his fist and his entire body tensed. "Amelia is... an old friend."

She walked soundlessly through the grass, barefoot. She stepped up behind Tom, arching her chest against his back, fingers crawling up his sleeve. In a sultry voice that matched the silk, she whispered, "I didn't want to come. But they're out there, and Tom said..." She dropped her gaze.

Alsalon ducked underneath Spike, bumping his head against the unicorn's belly as he crouched.

“No! Can’t stay here!” he squealed in his native language.

Tom’s nostrils flared and he said in Common, “She’s an old friend who needs help. Der helped me when I needed it.”

“That’s because you kidnapped me,” the paladin fired back.

“Go away!” the prince yelled in elvish.

Tom seemed not to notice the woman pressing against his back. He muttered, “Couldn’t have expected more from you breathers.” He cast a look over to Jakkobb.

The knight held up his hands. “I’m on holiday.”

Alsalon couldn’t hide the shaking in his knees. Spike hadn’t moved. The elf slurred, “You-you cannot stay!”

Der still glared at Amelia, especially at the way she was drooping all over Tom. The paladin tried to feel out the newcomer’s emotions, but she felt slimy, and Der’s focus couldn’t latch on. Damn vampires.

Amelia cast her reddish eyes over to her and jealousy reared its claws. Ah, Der thought as she felt heat surge across her face. Funny, because the vampire’s face stayed the same pale complexion while her own heated up. No one else’s emotions had ever evoked such a physical stimulation on her before.

“Too much to ask anyway,” Amelia whispered faintly. She started to turn away, bringing Tom around by pulling and keeping their bodies pressed together.

“No!” Der yelled, faster than she’d meant to.

Tom smirked, his lip lifting to curl around a fang. “Aw, do you– Der?”

She grabbed her head in one good hand and froze in the middle of her next breath.

He tensed as if to shake off the other vampire but froze as Amelia’s eyes flared red. In response, his own eyes briefly glowed the color of blood. Instead, he drawled, “Is something wrong, little paladin?”

Der staggered around, trying to regain her balance. Her head bobbed up. “Hunting!” Like arrows of the darkness, the feeling of rage and the intention of bloodlust assailed her. She gritted her teeth, imagining that she was on a rock in the river – just like the elves had said to do – and shove all the emotions that weren’t hers into the water.

She inhaled deeply. “Now!”

“Slayers!” Amelia screeched. “I knew it! They’re hunting us!”

Der shook her head. Her right elbow banged uselessly against her ribs.

Jakkobb, pulling his axe free, ran beside Spike. The unicorn whispered only to his mind, *Protect*

the prince, I know.

“Run!” the knight bellowed. He shoved the prince toward the forest. Together, they charged through the trees.

Der gritted her teeth as they shadows seemed to grow darker and deeper. She bounced and skidded against the leaves and twigs. She sensed it; the curl of something’s smirk as they ran headlong. “Trap!”

But it was too late. Fire popped at their feet and smoke, as thick as the veil of a moonless night, exploded into their world.

Alsalon wailed. Jakkobb grabbed the boy’s shoulder and slammed to a stop. He slapped his hand over his own mouth, coughing out the thick smoke.

Der thrust her hand out and tried to find Jakkobb or Spike. Coughs exploded from deep in her chest.

Unseen, Amelia’s eyes glowed cherry red. She caressed Tom’s shoulder. “Slayers! We must flee!”

Tom’s eyes flashed red in response to hers. He bowed his chin. “Yes.”

“Jakkobb! Tom!” Der hollered. She drew the Pallens sword. Both vampires hissed and turned their backs to the weapon. Der didn’t notice.

Her sword banged against an opponent’s as he materialized out of the smoke. She riposted instinctively. Someone parried and the fight was joined.

The wind picked up around them, and she was able to make out an outline of her enemy. And the flash of an orange eye.

She nearly fumbled her sword. “Chemmen!”

Chapter Five

Triple Ambush

“Chemmen!” Der hollered. She re-gripped her sword in her left hand, and its tip danced wildly. It felt excessively heavy in this hand! She put extra weight on her right leg – how strange the sword felt in her left hand, like her entire body was off-balance. She brought up a slow-arcing parry barely in time to counter the nearest storm-reader’s weapon.

“What!” Amelia shrieked.

Der gasped under the sudden weight of the vampire’s surprise. Well, she certainly wasn’t faking that one. The paladin shook off the alien sensation, and tried to count the figures through the twin veils of smoke and night. Twelve, she thought, but she wouldn’t be surprised to be off.

Tom growled, “They’re only human.” He shook his fingers loose and batted aside an errant thrust with his empty hand.

“We are chemmen!” another one roared, while charging and raising her sword. Man, woman, they all had the same haircut.

“Ah,” Tom replied mildly. “You do speak Common.” He swatted her sword cleanly out to the side with his palm again. But another sword was already aiming for his heart. He slid smoothly out of its path.

“Too many! There’s too many!” Alsalon wailed, bouncing his skull off of the underside of Spike’s belly.

Jakkobb gritted his teeth against the five charging toward him and Spike. This wasn’t like the chemmen at all. They didn’t attack without victory already in hand, and they certainly were never first in line, not if they had stooges and beasts to throw in the way. He scanned the trees above for traps as his first assailant closed in on him.

They must be after the prince! Spike screamed to the knight’s mind.

“I know!” He sidestepped the nearest chemman’s lunge and brought his massive axe down toward the storm-reader’s head. The chemman bobbed back out of reach.

“Damn and blast!” Amelia snarled beside Tom. “We need to go!” She blocked a chemman strike by holding one of her sais flat against her forearm and letting the sword crash against it. Sparks erupted from the clash of metals. She stabbed the chemman in the gut with her other sai and wrenched it sideways through his belly. One down.

She hopped into the air. “Tom!” Her voice cracked like a whip.

A chemman blade scraped along the other vampire's leg as his entire body jerked, trapped halfway between jumping into the sky and going for the storm reader's throat.

"Tom!" Amelia snapped her fingers. His eyes unfocused and flashed red in response.

"Yes," he droned.

Der batted away two swords in one sweep, but didn't have the strength to stop her momentum with her left arm. Her sword kept going an inch farther than she'd meant. The nearest chemman blade punched through, raking her ribs above her mail. The metal squealed in protest. She hissed in pain, she might not have an open wound, but she'd certainly had a massive bruise. She stumbled, off-balance with the sword in her wrong hand.

Tom turned away from the paladin.

Der gasped as she fought from tumbling hard. She tried to shove out her right arm for balance, and pushed the sling out as far as it could go. She managed another parry, this time with a half-hearted riposte.

She smashed the chemman blade away again. Now she was finally feeling the heat burn along her ribs. She fought entirely on instinct as another wave of dread surged through her heart.

"Calvar!" she tried to yell, referring to one of the chemmen race's pet beasts. She sensed the ravishing hunger of the monsters approaching.

"Now, Thomas!" Amelia barked.

Tom curled his fingers into his fists, seething as he remained stock still on the ground.

Then something huge and pale tackled Amelia out of the air, smashing her into the mud. The beast dug its claws into her pale face.

Der stared.

That thing was no calvar. It was human shaped, but too tall and far too thin. Bones pressed against its skin from the inside, each rib and vertebrae clearly visible. And it was naked – but in the same way a wolf was naked. No shame about it.

Its head snapped up, and it pulled its lips back to reveal not just the two fangs that Der had come to know, but rows of sharpened teeth. It dipped its face back down and bit heavily into Amelia's chest. The female vampire shrieked aloud.

Der gulped and shared a terrified glance with the chemman beside her. His orange eyes were just as wide as hers.

Spike froze with his hoof above the head of one of the chemmen, while Alsalon clung to one of the unicorn's rear legs.

Jakkobb immediately brought his axe on guard in front of his chest. The three chemmen in front of

him stopped fighting.

They all held their breath as they watched more of the pale creatures drop onto the ground surrounding all of them. The creatures twisted their heads toward the fighting parties, watching them like eagles who had found a nest of snakes, only they were the ones hissing instead. Several of them pawed around on all fours.

Tom, his eyes their usual emerald, yanked on Der's sling and pulled her away from her chemman opponent. "Vampires!"

"Thought you said it was slayers in the forest!" she protested.

He kept one hand on her sling but brought his other fist on guard. "I'd tell you to run, but you won't make it." He seemed to shrink. "Should've stayed away. From all of you." Suddenly, his head jerked back up and his eyes glazed.

"Help me, you bastard!" Amelia shrieked, finding her voice beneath the malformed vampire. She had buried both elbows in the dirt and was trying to keep her attacker away with the pointed length of her sais.

It didn't react to being stabbed, and grabbed her head with both of its clawed hands. Tom started to stiffly march toward her, as if he were being pulled ahead by a cord.

"Tom!" Der reached out. She hesitated, seeing the holy Pallens blade in the hand she was extending at him. She couldn't touch him with that – not unless she was mad at him.

He flashed one emerald eye at Der and slowly, stiffly shook his head.

"You will help me!" the female vampire snarled.

Tom started to lean over. The vampire creature feeding on Amelia jerked its face up to Tom, licking its bloody lips. It tilted its face, like a cat watching a lizard right before...

One of the chemmen bolted.

Two of the surrounding vampires pounced. Meanwhile, Tom kicked the one watching him right between the eyes. The crack of his boot echoed like thunder.

Amelia shoved her sais up from below at the same time. She slid backward against the ground away from her assailant.

The running chemman sprinted ahead, kicking up leaves and barreling toward the trees. He was only two feet away when one of the vampires bit into its leg, tearing it off below the knee in one messy snap of its jaws. The second one yanked the screaming man's arms up and launched into the air. The first one chased them up into the sky.

The storm reader was instantly dismembered.

Blood rained down on the parties below. The other vampire beasts charged underneath the small

waterfall, lapping it up.

The rest of the chemmen fled. Der tensed to follow, but Tom tapped her wrist behind his back and ever so slightly shook his head. Amelia was watching the running chemmen instead.

The vampires immediately chased.

Spike shifted closer to Jakkobb and remained standing over the elvish prince. Alsalon's knees trembled, and he had to grip the unicorn's bellyband in order not to collapse.

The knight raised his gaze to meet Spike's. "Never seen this before."

I'm sure I could take down one, maybe two. But after that... The unicorn shook his head. He glanced back in time to see the vampires shredding the chemmen's backs. Their screams were cut off early and immediately replaced with the stench of blood.

"Run the other way!" Alsalon suddenly yelped. The young prince charged.

"No!" Jakkobb thundered, spinning around. In the corner of his vision, he saw the pale flesh of the vampires blurring, chasing their new prey. He and Spike both pumped their legs, but not even the unicorn was faster than these things. The world around them seemed to slow.

Alsalon bolted ahead, eyes nailed to the shelter of the trees. He never even saw what was behind him.

Spike raised a front hoof and slammed it down into the spine of a passing vampire. The creature howled as the unicorn didn't stop running and dragged the squirming body off into the grass on his hoof.

Jakkobb slashed another one in its head with his axe. The back of its skull slid away. The lightweight corpse bounced off the double-headed blade. Jakkobb batted it aside and chased after the two remaining ones.

Those two vampires after the prince pulled away from Spike and Jakkobb, moving faster than the duo.

He wasn't going to make it! The knight hurled his axe.

The weapon missed its target by a matter of inches, slicing through the air behind its head.

And there was nothing between the vampires and Alsalon.

The prince started to check behind his shoulder. He wouldn't even have time to gasp.

The nearest one's jaws popped as they opened wider than any human's mouth could. Alsalon's eyes just barely started to widen with the slowness of the rising sun. He stared into the rows of fangs, dripping with oozing salvia, racing toward him.

Amelia's sai slammed through the vampire's tongue and out through the bottom of its jaw. It screamed and started to thrash around like captured fish. She had to let go of the weapon.

“Get back, fool!” she snarled. She pulled the third sai from her belt to replace the lost one.

“What?” Alsalon yelled in elvish.

Spike, charging up from behind, brought his hoof down on the nearest one, which had turned to watch Amelia’s sudden movements, smashing through its leg. He brought down his teeth into the back of its skull.

“That is not a normal horse,” Amelia muttered.

“Elvish horse,” Tom whispered, suddenly at her side. He eyed the remaining vampires at the small distance.

Unseen behind them, a surviving chemman limped away into the night.

Jakkobb snatched up his fallen axe as he finished his charge. Two more of the beasts were closing fast in on the knot of fighters. The knight turned and raised the weapon.

A vampire whipped its head around, and the knight heard its ribs snap apart as the thing buried its fangs into his forearm. It had intentionally broken its bones to be able to make that turn to bite Jakkobb. The teeth punctured through his thick platemail, and he could feel the metal crumpling slowly beneath the jaws. Its body swung around finally and he could see its ribs shifting back into place underneath its skin.

He brought the axe down into its spine with a fast, tight arc. The undead beast’s body bent like a snake beneath the axe, but he felt it strike the bone. Chips of spine flew free. Immediately, new pieces of vertebrae began to weave themselves inside the creature’s body the moment he withdrew the weapon.

It started to chew on his forearm, and his armor began to peel away like a shell. Jakkobb yanked at the axe, but his other arm didn’t respond. In fact, it felt like it was floating several inches above where it was, and that it was stuffed with candy clouds. The very idea that he was fighting anything evaporated like the morning fog in the sun.

In front of his rapidly unfocusing gaze, the vampire faded from existence.

Der watched Jakkobb just stare at the beast in front of him, with a dazed but oddly happy expression.

She leapt and slapped the Pallens sword against the naked vampire’s back. The move was nothing so precise as a thrust. The muscles in her left arm already burned from the weight of holding up the blade.

Smoke sizzled from the creature’s white skin. It spat out the knight and pieces of red armor from its mouth and then screamed in a shrill pitch no human could match.

Der twisted the sword for a slice, but the vampire instantly backpedaled out of her reach.

All of the attacking creatures drew away from the group. They hung back, snarling and spitting at the holy sword.

Alsalon ducked beneath Spike's belly again. The unicorn ignored the little elf, and bumped Jakkobb with his nose. He pawed the ground at the knight's feet.

The captain just stared off into nothing.

Der kicked him in the knee. He just kept staring. She yelled, "Sir! Jakkobb!" She waved the sword in his general direction.

Tom and Amelia ducked their faces and turned away from the Pallens weapon.

"Vampire bite, Der," Tom roared. "You *know* what it does!" He jerked his hood up in her direction. Standing near that holy sword was like having a bonfire inches away from his back. A sheet of cloth wasn't enough!

That blade had never felt this powerful before! He staggered forward, one knee dipping toward the ground. The weight of holiness felt like a mountain, slowing rolling forward over him.

One of the surrounding vampires lunged for him, claws outstretched. It snapped its mouth, catching his long sleeve and barely missing his flesh. Its breath smelled like rotting flesh.

Tom grunted, punched it in the jaw and slid back into the small ring of holy power where the beasts wouldn't enter.

Amelia grunted beside him, also slouching forward. A moan escaped her lips. She looked at him. At least they had a choice of which painful death to pick.

"What are we gonna do? What are we gonna do?" Alsalon whimpered beneath Spike. Tears had carved out chasms through the dirt on his face.

Jakkobb swayed a little, eyes wide and empty. Spike stood beside the knight, pawing the ground and snorting.

A rock ricocheted off his flank.

Der ducked another stone missile. The vampires hooted as all of them started to hurl rocks. She parried two more out of the air. "What's going on?"

"Your sword, stupid!" Tom snarled. Part of him was wishing they would succeed and make her drop the blessed thing. He grabbed his chest and reeled forward again.

It felt like he was suffocating. Of course, he didn't need to breathe, but that sword applied the same crushing pressure against his chest. If he let his guard down, would he burn up instantly? How did she not know she was killing him? He glared at her through his hair that had strayed across his face. She was watching the other vampires. Maybe she knew that the Pallens sword was the only thing keeping all of them from becoming a meal.

His vision started to blur and waver. Amelia collapsed onto his shoulder. With her body balancing on his, he started to tip over.

Tom's knees trembled against the invisible weight. He tried to look back at Der, but she was just a shape. She had never been this powerful before! Someday, if not in this very moment, he realized that she would be the undeath of him.

Just as he started to collapse, the stone heart began to beat. He would never be used to this sensation.

The heart's crimson fire began to flare across his knuckles. It didn't hurt. In fact, the flame felt like cool water over a burn. It spread across his body and his clothes, blanketing him.

He stood back up. The fire left his body and spread out around him like a wind. Pure, unholy fire. Amelia dropped to the ground beside him, and stared up in honest surprise.

Spike neighed and reared, kicking the air with his hooves. His ears were flat against his skull. His alicorn spiraled in and out of existence.

Der jerked her head toward Tom, just in time to see the naked vampires lunging at them. They could move like flying snakes in the unholy sphere.

She jumped to attack, but bounced off of what felt like an invisible wall. "Tom!"

And then it exploded. The air between the crimson fire and the aura from the Pallens sword exploded.

Fire lunged. Thunder roared. The blast hurled everyone into the air and then onto the ground. Der landed on her rear. Spike shielded Alsalon. Jakkobb just fell over. The howling, attacking vampires bounced off the ground and into the sky, hooting and watching for the next attack.

Spike rolled his head to the side and shook it. Alsalon remained on the ground, crying, with his hands over the back of his head. Parts of his velvet shirt smoked.

Der squashed out a small fire on her own trousers, and hopped back to her feet to watch the floating creatures. "Damn you, Tom! Why did you do that?"

"Me?" he snarled. "Wouldn't have happened if you hadn't brought out that blessed sword! I hate you, Derora Saxen!"

"I hated you first!"

"Your fault!"

At Tom's feet, Amelia groaned and blinked open her reddish eyes. Tom suddenly stiffened at her attention, and the fiery expression across his face instantly cooled. She stood up.

The flying vampires stopped hooting. They circled closer. Fangs gleamed in the moonlight.

Der held up her sword. It felt too heavy in her left hand. It also failed to shine. She shook the blade.

Nothing. It was dead in her hands.

A few feet away, Tom brought up his fists. The heart's crimson fire failed to burn. He shook his fists. Nothing. The heart wasn't beating.

Amelia slowly lifted up her heels and then her toes, hovering an inch off the ground. "We can fly faster. Probably. Come, Tom."

The other vampire gritted his fangs and smashed his boots against the ground. "No."

"What!" Her eyes instantly boiled red. His started to change color in response.

"Tom!" Der yelled next to his ear, but sounded miles away in the moment.

"Must go," he intoned. He let his toes sag forward as his feet left the ground.

"You won't make it!" Der jumped after him.

A shadow darkened across her arm, and she barely started to turn her head when claws raked across her back. Pieces of the elvish mail sparkled like diamonds as they erupted into the air.

But they protected her enough, she realized as she rolled forward, even if only once.

She looked around. The howling vampires came crashing down out of the sky at her. She wondered if she'd have enough time to raise her sword. One floated over her, its eyes and mouth were wider than any human's.

The sword barely reflected any dull moonlight as she tried to twist it to face the pouncing vampire. It stretched its claws out to her.

And then a net, with weights tied to its edges, ripped through the night and slammed into the creature. It fell, missing her by inches. The beast writhed and screamed and rolled itself tighter into the fabric.

More nets came crashing out of the darkness, knocking down the vampires. The ones who weren't captured scattered out of immediate range, hovering and hollering.

Der rocked to her feet, looking around wildly. The net around the seething creature was covered with holy and binding sigils carved into the metal weights. She poked it with her foot. They didn't appear to affect her.

Which turned out to be fortunate as another net collapsed over her. Der turned toward its origin. "Hey!"

She struggled against it, and the Pallens sword, bumping against the holy symbols, regained its normal blue-gold sheen.

"It's still standing!"

Der started to vigorously saw at the net.

Alsalon barely lifted his head behind Spike, but ducked when he saw a brigand-looking outfit

swagger into view. The moonlight highlighted the weapons in their hands.

"It's not a vampire! They don't have arms in slings, dumbass!" A well-muscled man in front of the group called. "*She's* just under their hypnosis."

Der tore off the net like a pack of snakes. She raised her sword. It was getting even heavier to lift in her left arm, and the tip was beginning to tremble. She scowled. "Who are you?" But she'd already recognized them. "Oh no, you're those slayers, aren't you?"

She saw the sigil of Carenth tattooed on the muscled man's cheek. Not the Dawn Sword, but the god's standard symbol that had taken place of the Dawn Sword since Pallens' fall. These were different slayers than they'd seen in town. How many of them were in the area then?

And she realized how grateful she was for them. Maybe these were different... She shuddered as their own bloodlust rushed into her head. No, these were very much the same emotions as the other party. So much hate. She couldn't fathom why.

One of the naked vampires sprang at them. A woman from the back of the group hurled a thin clay pot at him. She moved as fast as it did.

Der blinked. So, somehow, these humans weren't just humans. Or they had some sort of help.

The pot shattered against the creature's flesh, and a liquid along with clay shrapnel covered the vampire's body. It screamed. The liquid began to sear holes in its flesh.

"Holy water?" Der managed.

"No!" The muscled man laughed darkly. "Holy oil!" He struck a spark with a knife against a flint device on his leg while his other hand held a rag, dripping with oil, to catch aflame. The man quickly wrapped it into a rock and heaved the burning rag at the vampire creature.

The fire latched on. The creature screamed and started to tear off its own skin in an effort to get rid of the fire and oil.

Der, despite everything else she'd seen, was impressed.

"And we'll kill them all!" The man laughed again. "*All.*"

Tom slithered up beside Alsalon, but didn't acknowledge him. The prince worked to pull a net off of Spike's head. Jakkobb was still prone on the ground.

Amelia backed up to Tom and snarled, "Well, you were right about there being slayers out here. Do you think they'll go for your paladin bait that you worked so hard to convince me was a good idea?"

Tom shrugged. "She'll confound them, certainly."

The muscled man lobbed a throwing stake at them. Nothing meant for the kill, just to slow and maim. They both ducked. The slayer called, "You run, dead man! You run! Everyone is hunting you,

Thomas Delauncey! We will cut your dead heart out from your chest while you're watching! The stories haven't fooled us!"

Tom looked ready to snarl something in reply, but he just ducked his head and glared at the ground instead.

Der lifted the Pallens sword between Tom and the slayers. "Hey! He's not your problem!" She pointed at them with her weapon.

The remaining vampires had regrouped and charged at their biggest threat. As she turned away, she saw one rip apart the throat of one of the slayers. He barely had his stake up past his waist as he died.

The vampire creatures seemed wholly absorbed in this newest threat. Der sprinted and skidded over to Spike.

"What do we do?" Alsalon screamed. "What do we do?"

I have an idea! Spike screamed inside Der and Alsalon's minds. *Run!*

"But—" Der dropped her sword and tugged at Jakkobb's supine body with her single working arm.

"Go!" Tom picked up and threw the armored knight across Spike's saddle. He never stopped moving, and never paused to wait for Der or Alsalon to start running.

Chapter Six

Pieces of a Man

“We can’t stay here.” Der eyed the darkness beyond the trees. She briefly tried to imagine what the vampires could see through the veil of night.

She couldn’t sense anything out there though, nothing close anyway. At this point, she wasn’t sure if it was slayers or chemmen or vampires after them, or her own imagination.

She lingered in front of the sentinels of trees and continued glaring into the darkness, daring it to come after her. She glanced over her shoulder. Prince Alsalon was still quivering on the far side of the Spike. Jakkobb was passed out in the saddle. Tom was staring at the ground in Amelia’s shadow.

Der tried, but his emotions were just blank at the moment. And that worried her more than anything that might come crashing out of the forest for their blood. Where was his anger? Where was his fire?

Amelia cut off her gaze by daintily drifting between Der and Tom. Der didn’t drop her even stare.

“Is there something you wanted?” The female vampire flipped her hair over her shoulder and turned away.

“Yeah. How did the slayers move like that? Humans aren’t that fast.”

The female vampire arched an eyebrow. “You are, but you have help.” She let her hand wave in the direction of her sword. “Take that off and see how weak you are.”

“Alright.” Der moved as if to take off her belt, but Alsalon grabbed her arm.

“Um,” Alsalon quavered in elvish, as he spoke directly into Spike’s flank, “Um. Jakkobb’s arm is still bleeding badly.”

“What was that?” Amelia snarled in Common.

Der didn’t look away from her. “The captain’s still bleeding. I know how a vampire’s bite works. It won’t clot, unless one of you fixes it.”

Tom finally stirred. He tiptoed around Spike, who flattened his ears and swished his tail. The vampire grasped the last piece of the torn and edged metal encasing Jakkobb’s forearm and yanked. It popped free from the rest of the armor.

The elf’s forearm was just as red as his mail, and blood drained from the bite marks. Tom quickly licked his fingers and ran them around the lacerations. Immediately, the bleeding slowed.

Then Tom dropped his face and moved to stand in Amelia’s shadow again.

All without saying a word.

Amelia scowled at Spike the whole time. She suddenly whipped her fiery gaze at Der. “Some help

you were against the slayers. I guess he managed to lie to me or severely overestimates you.”

“Yeah.” Der rolled her eyes. “Because we were expecting to fight chemmen and vampire monsters too! Lucky we’re alive.”

“We’re not.” Amelia pushed her hair behind her shoulders and shook her head. “Come, Thomas, they weren’t of help after all. Not that I expected they would be.”

Alsalon’s voice came trembling up from near Spike’s belly, in elvish, “Make them go away, please.”

Der looked at the prince, then back to the passed out Jakkobb, Tom, and then finally back to Alsalon. “Come on, we’ll get you to Staghorn tonight; I think that’s safer than trying to walk back to Riversbridge.”

“I don’t speak Common, Derora,” he replied.

“Oh right.” She switched languages and repeated what she’d said.

“Staghorn?” Amelia snorted. “That’s over fifteen hundred leagues away. That’s months for you breathers.”

“Tree—”

Spike suddenly whinnied.

“Tree—”

The unicorn stamped one of his front hooves against an oak’s trunk, precisely at Der’s head height. *She doesn’t know!*

Der opened her mouth.

And pretend I’m not talking!

Amelia appeared in Der’s face, nose to nose. “You know something. Some sort of elven magic to escape north. Oh, yes, I know there’s elves up there too. They’d have a way.”

Der didn’t back away. “Yes, I do. No, I’m not telling you.” She tried to catch a glimpse of Tom in her peripheral vision, but she damned well wasn’t going to break eye contact.

She could sense the vampire’s anger rising, like lava in a volcano. Casually, she dropped her left hand to her sword belt.

Amelia said coolly, “This forest is full of slayers and enemy vampires tonight. Don’t think I’m going to let—”

Der interrupted, “I didn’t realize that you were so frightened.”

“How dare you—”

Tom gently pulled Amelia back by her shoulders, and then didn’t let go. He stared at the ground. “Both of you do realize that we’re all going to be slain out here if we don’t escape. Staghorn’s as good as a place as any. And no, Amelia, Der won’t teach you how, she’ll just do it.”

Der blinked. Staghorn! She'd felt the female vampire's flash of excitement at the word.

Amelia's seething instantly relaxed. It was just gone, in the briefest of seconds. She put her weight into Tom's hands, and a smirk slowly crawled across her face. "I'm sorry, Derora, truly. I let my fear of the slayers overrule my manners."

Der just cocked an eyebrow and shook her head. She curled her working hand into a fist.

"I don't like you," Amelia continued, "I loathe the idea of working with a holy *thing*, but I want to last the night."

"You want to go to Staghorn," Der replied evenly, and then smirked at the other's surprise and anger heat up. She kept her fist balled.

Jakkobb groaned from across Spike's saddle. He raised his head. "Damn and blast." He pushed himself free of the saddle and slithered onto the ground. He blinked and held his head.

Spike kicked him in the ribs, his front hoof bouncing off the knight's armor. *Wake up.*

Alsalon curled up beside Jakkobb, and lay there, shaking. "You said they were all gone! They were all supposed to be in Darkreign! Why? Why are the chemmen here?"

Jakkobb managed to frown. His eyes weren't focused yet though.

The prince continued to ramble, "They've gotta be back at Long Range. They've already killed my brother!"

Der stepped toward the prince, casting a final warning glare at Amelia, who she sensed was very frustrated at the language barrier.

The paladin knelt down. "Alsalon. Believe me, the elves aren't going to let their guard down at the palace so soon. Edillon is fine." She looked up to Jakkobb. "Sir, we need to move. We're still being hunted by everything except the squirrels."

"Right." Jakkobb grunted.

Der frowned, feeling his rising confusion. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he damn well wasn't going to show that.

"What are you saying?" Amelia demanded in Common.

Jakkobb shrugged at Der, raising his hand in a your-call gesture.

Der dusted her knees. "The chemmen. There shouldn't be any chemmen in the world except one. Obviously, there were more."

Spike bobbed his nose to the west. Der nodded, ever so slightly. "We can talk while we walk. We'll be in Staghorn before dawn." She paused, "Provided we don't get ambushed again."

"But why chemmen?" Amelia hissed. "Of all the things out there, chemmen." Beside her, Tom stood stoically.

“Haven’t you heard the stories?” Der rolled her eyes as they started walking. “Why *not* them? I’d rather know why we were ambushed by vampires. Those things didn’t look like any vampires I’ve ever seen.”

Tom finally snapped into motion. “And how many vampires have you seen?”

“Well, you.”

“Exactly, you don’t know anything about us.”

“But why would the vampires attack the chemmen?” she persisted. “At least the slayers I understand.”

Tom and Amelia stared at her, unblinking. After a moment, the female vampire tilted her face to the side. She said, “Alright. Let’s make a deal. I’ll do my best to explain the vampires if you tell me about the chemmen.”

Der opened her mouth, but Jakkobb was faster, and his voice sounded better focused, “It’s because we hurt them. They are vengeance incarnate, and we harmed them. It’s that simple.”

“You mean when we locked them up in Darkreign to starve?” Der added.

The knight barely grimaced. “Yes, Der, why don’t you go into every detail of that mission while your mouth is open? At least we gave them a chance to survive; even a slim one was more than they were giving us.”

“But why did those vampires look more like animals than human?” Der asked.

“We can change our physical features,” Amelia said. “What? You didn’t know that?”

“You can physically change your face?”

Now, the redhead smirked. “Give me a fortnight; you wouldn’t even know you’d ever met me. Hair, eyes, nose, height, cheekbones, weight, skin, everything. As for those that attacked us, many of our breed are chosen to be the beasts of burden. No human form left, intelligence filed away, completely under their sire’s heel. They only feed and fight.”

Her smugness faded the moment Der said, “Then someone ordered them to kill you.” But the paladin didn’t have long to savor her moment over Amelia. She blurted, “In Riversbridge! What if that had happened in Riversbridge? How many people could’ve died?”

“More than the earth event?” Amelia snapped. “There’s a reason why you’ve never seen those servants before.”

Der’s breath caught in her throat. “You know who sent them, don’t you?”

Amelia narrowed her eyes. “How many questions are you going to not receive answers to?” She sighed loudly and rolled her face toward Tom. “Is she always like this?”

“You don’t understand the depth of that question,” he replied softly.

They all glared at each other for a moment.

Amelia scowled. "Thomas and I can't stay in Staghorn. It's a slayer festival."

Beside her, Tom dropped his emerald gaze and bobbed his head sheepishly.

The female vampire continued rapidly, "We need to leave now, Thomas. The sooner we're farther away from here, the sooner you can help me with my troubles."

Der grabbed Tom's arm. "We can't leave now. What's going on?"

Tom brushed off her hand. "Please. You're the one who can't survive without me."

Der thrust her hand toward Amelia. "How do you even know her?"

"She's an old friend," Tom droned.

"She could be lying."

Amelia folded her arms. "I could rip your tongue and eyes out, right now. You aren't even a challenge, *human*, not even if you had both arms!"

Der raised her eyebrows, unimpressed. "Where in the world did you get this idea that I'm supposed to be afraid of you?"

"Wha— Because that's the way the world works, breather."

"No, it isn't."

"Yes, it is! You can't deny this!"

"I just did!"

Amelia flicked her gaze at Spike and Jakkobb for just a fraction of a moment and then bored her gaze into Der's brown-green eyes. The vampire's eyes glowed cherry. "You will not argue with me!"

Der grabbed her forehead. She staggered to stand upright against Amelia's wave of hypnotism, it was so much stronger than Tom's ever had been! The wave was rocking her to sleep in a warm ocean.

The sight of Amelia's face and eyes blurred. Tom hadn't moved, not a half step in her direction, not even half a glance.

Der felt like she was in a dream. So, in that dream-like warmth, she curled her fist and launched it at Amelia's nose.

The crackling of cartilage brought Der fully back to herself. And, unlike the last time she punched a vampire's nose, she didn't break her hand. Her powers were much stronger now.

Amelia coughed and squealed in surprise. She reeled forward and accidentally smashed her face against Der's tunic, smearing it with blood.

Der didn't notice. She slapped her forehead with her hand again. The ability to not break her knuckles on a vampire's face did nothing for the headache from resisting Amelia's power. The

pounding felt like Spike was dancing on it.

Amelia yelped, mostly in surprise, but with overtones of pain. Tom quickly placed a protective hand on her shoulder. She lunged forward against his considerable grip, spreading her fingernails out like claws. "I'll show you a true vampire's strength!"

Der brought her lone fist up on guard. "Tom, get away from her!"

"Der!" Jakkobb barked.

Tom's face remained blank and downcast, but he gripped Amelia's shoulder tighter. The other vampire snarled and lunged. He dug down his heels. She whirled on him, but he slowly shook his head.

She flipped her hair over her shoulders and then shoved off his hand. Next, she glared at Jakkobb, then Spike and finally back at Der.

The warrior stamped her feet against the muddy ground and held her forehead in her good hand. "And that's always such a headache! Gaaaah!"

"Paladin," Tom murmured.

"Ah." Amelia cocked her head at Der. "I had no idea that she such an ability. No one has resisted my Voice before."

Der stabbed at finger at Tom. "Didn't work when he did it either!" She brought her lone fist up, ready to fight again.

"But I am closer to the blood than he," Amelia snapped.

"What does that even mean?" She looked up, but both of the vampires' faces remained entirely blank.

"I wonder what other powers you may have..." the redhead trailed off.

"They're nothing fun," Tom grunted before Der could speak. "However, they're nothing impressive. Just enough to catch the unsuspecting off-guard. Once."

Amelia leaned away from Der. She folded her arms and snorted.

"Nothing to do but keep moving," Tom whispered. "The longer we stay, the more we are in peril."

"But where do we go?" Amelia snapped as they started to walk.

Tom's head suddenly snapped up. "Definitely away from the chemmen, slayers and other vampires." Amelia scowled at him and he dropped his face immediately.

Jakkobb exhaled loudly. "I thought as much. But damn, why are the chemmen revealing themselves now?" His eyes drifted over to the prince.

Tom lifted his face again. "You remember when we raided Darkreign?" He forced a small, strangled whisper that could've been a laugh. "And Der was complaining the whole time. At least the

chemmen kept clean cells for their—”

“But—” Der’s face bunched up.

“Yes,” Jakkobb cut in, “And, Der, I remember how you wouldn’t *shut your mouth* even then.”

“Oh.” She sagged. Amelia frowned.

Tom rapidly added, “Or when we were all training together at Horizon, and they didn’t know what I was. I had to pretend to be in the infirmary for a week after calling for help.”

Jakkobb tried not to stiffen.

“What are they saying?” Alsalon pleaded. “You know I don’t speak Common!”

“Just arguing,” Jakkobb replied calmly in elvish. He looked directly at Der. “Does she speak elvish?”

Der fought against wrinkling her nose. “Uh,” she said in elvish. “Bears,” she managed for want of something to say.

Amelia fired her gaze at Tom. “I know you know.”

Tom stared at the forest of needles at his feet. “He was asking if you spoke elvish.”

“Tom!” Der yelled, horrified. He dropped his gaze.

“And here I was hoping we could be friends.” Amelia spat at Jakkobb’s feet. “Or at least, not enemies.”

The knight’s expression remained blank.

“You’re not as clever as you think. None of you.”

“And I do believe that you’re underestimating us,” Der said quietly.

“You?” Amelia barked a laugh. “With one arm? You might be the first paladin in two thousand years, but I remember those before you. I remember what they did to us. You think the chemmen are bad?”

“What who did?”

Amelia sneered. “Perhaps you need to look up your own history, o holy warrior. And leave ours alone.” She slipped her fingers around Tom’s elbow and pulled.

Der snatched his other arm and yanked. “Tom, wake up! This isn’t you!”

“Derora, don’t!” Alsalon wailed behind her.

Spike’s voice careened through Jakkobb’s mind, *That bitch is going to find out if she can fly with a missing spine.*

Jakkobb shook his head. “No. Der talked her way into this one, we’ll see if she can talk her way out first.”

Amelia curled her fists and then her upper lip to reveal her fangs. Der watched, occasionally

blinking in feigned disinterest.

Tom slid in between the women. He still stared at his boots.

Der continued to glare at Amelia. "Tom, why are you being hunted?"

"Well, the slayers know of me because you made me famous."

She shook her head. "No, why are the vampires after you?"

He just glared.

Amelia shook her red mane and thrust up her chin. She arched an eyebrow. "Every vampire has a moral duty to slay him."

"So why aren't you?" Der snarled.

Tom lifted a hand. "She's an old friend. Will you shut it?"

"But you told me that vampires don't have friends, *and* never to trust a vampire."

He threw up his hands. "You caught me, I'm a liar."

"Then you admit you were lying when you said that I couldn't trust you."

He sighed. "Don't try to outwit someone who is smarter than you."

"What if I'm just trying to make you mad?" she flashed.

He snarled, "It's not working!" He unclenched his jaw and slouched. "Der, you're only showing that you're still just a child." A little flicker of his usual frown faded into existence.

Der could feel Jakkobb and Spike leaning forward behind her. She asked, "So why are you being hunted by your own race?"

Tom stiffened. Beside him, Amelia gave a disinterested shrug. Tom swallowed. "I killed my sire."

"He has no master," Amelia whispered.

"And?" Der asked, looking between the two vampires.

"Every vampire has to have a master," Amelia replied sharply. "Except for the king."

"The missing king," Tom said.

"Not missing! Pilgrimage!" Amelia howled. "Which is why he bred and left a strong heir in command, by rights of his lore."

"Who is also missing," Tom replied simply.

Amelia gasped and slapped him. "That is blasphemy against the sire of sires!"

Tom didn't react to her slap except for the briefest flash of his normal angry self. "Right, and are they going to put a bounty on my fangs for it? And torture me for decades? Oh wait!"

"Yes, but it's against the lore to speak such things!"

"Lore that the sire of sires created for himself. Everyone knows it."

Der raised a hand. "Excuse me, what's going on?"

“Like we’re going to tell a paladin,” Amelia snarled. “You were the ones who—”

Tom cut in, “The present king, for lack of a better term, isn’t the sire of sires or his son. It’s the eldest vampire turned by the king, known currently as Avamar Frohein.”

“Further back,” Der said. “You said bred. I didn’t think that vampires could have children. How is this heir born a vampire?”

“The royal family can. They’re the only ones,” Tom replied. “The rest of us, ah, can acquire new vampires another way.”

Amelia dropped her chin to her chest. “Avamar wants to be the king of our entire race, the sire of sires, but that is against the true sire of sire’s lore. None of us can defy him.” Her gaze passed over to Tom. “Except maybe one.”

Tom shook his head stiffly.

“Why can’t you defy him if you wanted to?” Der inquired. “You vampires break the rules all the time.”

“You don’t understand, Der,” Tom whispered. “You can’t defy your master.” He squirmed in place. “You physically cannot deny our Voice. You remembered when I tried my power to command you in the tavern? Like that, only, we’re made so that we physically cannot disobey our masters or those who are closer to the blood than our sires. It’s a caste system.”

“Some are made to be more like people,” Amelia said, “Others to be beasts of burden like you saw. Someone’s pets.”

Der gulped. “You mean those things used to be people?”

“I’d like to find out who ordered them after you,” Jakkobb muttered. “Or rather, I’d like you to take your problems away from the young man.” He barely glanced down at Alsalon, walking along, oblivious to the conversation.

“I know, I know, elves and their precious children,” Amelia muttered darkly. “Hell, he’s almost a man. Why can’t he take care of himself?”

“Because he hasn’t been thrust into the fire to see if he’ll burn hard or just burn up,” Tom quipped. “He’s never had to survive.”

“Speaking of survival, you’re risking all of our lives just by being here,” the knight remarked.

Amelia shrugged. “You, elf, have no idea what I’m risking by finding him.” He jerked her thumb at Tom. “We have a rule, do what you will, but don’t get caught, or you will be punished to the extent of the lore by hypocrites who do the same things. Everyone knows it. No one has the power to change it.” She stopped walking and looked directly at Tom. “You must’ve known the Kingdom would find you.”

He let his chin fall to his chest. "I know."

"But you still tried. You made it further than anyone else."

Tom shook his head. "But that's just it. You can't trust what we hear. They only let us hear the information they want us to. You know this."

"Your story got out when they couldn't immediately destroy you. The bounty. Otherwise, no one would have ever known."

"Bounty?" Der echoed, unheard.

Amelia grasped his hands in her own. "You can defy the sires! Your master made you powerful and he let you keep your own mind."

Tom batted her hands away. "Only because he used to love to torture me with it, knowing everything, unable to do anything about it."

"But he gave you true powers!"

"Yeah, so I could rob Silver Dawn banks for him," Tom snarled sarcastically. He stepped back. "No one can defy the blood."

"But you did..." Der petered out. "Apparently."

He shrugged. "I took a chance. Out of rage. And it worked, whereas I thought I was going to be the one who perished, and I didn't care. So I ran away before another powerful vampire could claim me. Been hiding alone ever since."

"You could've run to..."

Tom shook, his face looked near tears. "Where, Derora? The Kingdom is everywhere. I've done my best hiding. When I said secrecy was necessary to my survival, I didn't mean just from the world of the living. And now you've made me famous."

His grief and fear swallowed her in that instant. In a world, all alone, consumed by these leaden, emotional weights. She gasped and heaved forward.

Tom grabbed her shoulders and shook. "Don't you dare feel sorry for me! Don't you dare! I'm stronger, smarter and faster than you! I don't want a weakling's pity!" His voice dripped with disgust.

"It's not *my* emotions I'm feeling," Der spat back. And then she felt his fear surge anew. She *felt* him trying very hard not to glance back at Amelia.

Tom whirled away from her on his heel. He shook his head. "The Kingdom has never put effort into hunting me before. Certainly no one so close to the blood as Avamar. Just individuals for the bounty and the rest of my sire's brood. Why now?"

Der caught his emerald gaze. "The heart."

Chapter Seven

Stranger of the North

The rain slithered silently along the needles and branches of the evergreens before falling onto the travelers' necks. Der gasped and shivered as the water ran its icy claws against her skin. It was summer! And they'd just come from an oven! She whirled around to see the sacred tree, standing on its roots as if up on its tiptoes. She shaded her eyes against the cloudy sunlight, blinking as her eyes adjusted from the darkness that was in Rivers Valley.

Jakkobb was the next one to push his way through the tree path. The cold rain instantly formed droplets his armor.

"I thought you said it was summer!" Alsalon whined, pressed up against Spike's coat for warmth.

This is summer, Spike replied.

The prince tried shaking some of the clinging water off his sleeve. "Well, it'll stop raining soon right?" He rubbed his arms together. "It's cold!"

"It's a rainforest," Jakkobb sighed.

"No, it isn't." Der shook her head. "I studied at Horizon. Rainforests are all hot with huge tree canopies. And siege engines are pretty much useless." It had been a war academy, after all.

The knight leveled a weary glare at her. "No, they aren't. Good try, though." He let loose another exasperated sigh. "It's measured by the amount of rain, not temperature. We'll be stuck in it until we get farther inland and on the other side of the mountains. If we had time, I'd say we should visit the cliffs to the south of the city. Great view of the sea."

Der had only registered half of what he said. She was watching the tree, waiting for the vampires not to follow.

She gulped. Was that the last time she'd ever see Tom? No! She had so much more grief to give him! She licked her lips nervously.

Amelia burst free from the tree at a sprint. She spun around, scratching her arms, pulling twigs out of her hair as if they were snakes. "Wood," she snarled.

Tom quietly followed, eyes downcast. Der sagged in relief.

Amelia whirled on Jakkobb. "Can they follow us?" Behind them, the sacred tree twirled and the earth swallowed its roots back into her soil.

Jakkobb silently shook his head.

Der pointed out, "Well, they know how to work the trees, too."

The knight grunted, "They don't know which one we've gone to. They've got a couple hundred to choose from, if there's life left in that many."

Der pointed at Amelia. "Well, she didn't know. I thought she was lying about that."

"You're not even supposed to know, Der. But I'm starting to notice that secrets seem to just melt around you."

"You have no idea," Tom muttered to the mud.

Amelia cracked a toothless smile. She smothered a laugh behind her hand. She sniffed the pine-scented air. "We're here! So much closer!" Chuckling, she curved a wicked smirk at Der. "Guess you were useful for something after all."

She stepped back, pressing her buttocks against Tom's body. The rain, made sticky by mixing with the sap from the trees, curled the dress up against her curves. The paper-thin silk seemed to shrink in the moisture, riding up her skin, outlining her body.

Der glared at the silk, exposing most of her porcelain white thighs, and then wondered why she was glaring.

It didn't appear to affect Jakkobb. He rolled his eyes and jerked his thumb at the sacred tree. "Let's go."

The pine behind the prince shuddered when the elf slammed his own back against the trunk. Alsalon thrust out his hands. "No!"

Jakkobb growled. Branches crunched underneath his armored boot as he marched forward. "The tree path is right there. No excuses, your little highness!"

"No!" the prince protested. "I can't go back, not before I know my brother's alright!"

He ignored Alsalon. "Spike! Has it been long enough yet?"

"I can banish you from Arborn!" the younger elf shrieked.

Jakkobb sighed. "And I'm certain your brother will un-banish me. I'm not having you out here in the world with chemmen chasing you."

Alsalon barely shook his head. "No. I can't go back! The storm-readers killed my parents, and I will *not* go back to where they've killed my brother, too!" Tears bubbled out from his eyes.

The angry redness across the knight's face eased. "I'm sure King Edillon is safe."

"You don't know that! You don't *know* that!"

"I'm fairly sure I do."

Behind the captain, Spike pawed the ground with a front hoof. He cocked one ear behind him. Der was standing between the two vampires, and glaring surreptitiously at Amelia, or at least Der's idea of surreptitious. Amelia ignored her and watched the elves instead, while Tom just hung around

lifelessly, unfocused eyes staring at the ground.

Jakkobb closed his armored fingers on Alsalon's thin shoulder, and could only fit two and a half fingers on his shoulder before he ran out of space. "Right now."

"No!" the prince screamed.

The knight frogged marched the boy between two of the sentinel trees encircling the guiding tree.

Spike pretended not to notice the altercation. He nibbled on some of the leaves, flipping his tail around like a horse. Amelia narrowed her eyes at him, so Spike turned around, backed his rump up to the vampire, lifted his tail and graced the world with his own brand of freshness.

"Oh gods!" Der slapped her working hand over her mouth. She fought from gagging. "I thought you didn't eat any meat! That smells decayed!" She stumbled away from the infected area, gagging and holding her breath.

Amelia and Tom both stood motionless. They didn't have to breathe. But, after a moment, even their faces started to twitch. The smell drifted up into their sensitive noses and they couldn't stop it.

They followed the paladin stiffly away.

Der coughed into her hand a few times. Meanwhile, Spike lowered his tail and snorted suspiciously like a snicker. He resumed munching on the forest's scant grass.

Between the trees, Jakkobb stiffened.

Alsalon looked around. "What's happening? What's happening? Oh no!" He dove behind Jakkobb as the sacred tree began to twist and rise.

"Hide!" The knight waved everyone further back into the trees.

"The tree— Who is it?" Der asked, unmoving.

"Hide!" Jakkobb roared again.

Der turned and followed them into the soaked underbrush of the northern rainforest. The pine needles felt slimy with rain and pricked her skin. She squelched down onto her belly. Tom plodded after Amelia, emerald eyes downcast the entire time.

Amelia eyed Spike as the massive warhorse also laid down behind them. "That's the best trained horse I've ever seen."

"Not around elven horses much, I see," Jakkobb said. "I really didn't think I'd have to tell a vampire to be quiet."

Amelia hissed and jerked her face away. Der tried to smother her laughter with her good hand. The vampire unleashed a glare of murderous fury at the paladin, who only snickered harder at that.

Tom slipped a gentle hand on Amelia's back. He mouthed, "She's too stupid to understand."

Amelia still looked ready to claw Der's face, but branches snapped ahead at the sacred tree portal.

Jakkobb winced at the first woman out of the tree broke off some of the thinner branches for balance as she shoved her way back into this world. She was followed by a man with the same height and haircut.

A curse formed on the knight's lips.

Der tapped his on his armored shoulder. "Storm-readers?" she mouthed.

He nodded.

Five more chemmen exited before the tree replanted its roots. Alsalon willed his shoulders into the earth. They were here to finish them off!

The chemmen unfolded a large canvas tarp and hastily started setting up a large lean-to. Next, one of them pulled some dry tinder and kindling from another pack and set to work on a fire.

Jakkobb didn't move. "We withdraw. One at a time."

Der belly-crawled against the uneven ground, littered with sticks and tufts of grass. Her sling dragged uselessly against the ground. It felt like she'd waited for hours! Alsalon had sounded like an army all to himself when he'd moved. Ahead of her somewhere near, she heard a gentle hoof stamp.

She lifted her head. She was the last. Pushing herself up on her knees, and then to her feet, she nodded.

Jakkobb pointed deeper into the forest. "Quietly."

The female vampire bit her lip and scowled. She glared at Der, who met her gaze evenly. Then she whirled on her toes and started to walk. Tom mutely fell in behind her.

The knight picked up the smaller elf and set him on Spike's back. He motioned for Der to get walking ahead of them.

"Jakkobb," Der whispered, "Why don't we just ambush them here and take Alsalon back?"

The knight just shook his head.

Tom said, "Because then they'll know we came this way. It's better to just vanish."

"But—"

"Der," Jakkobb cut in, "He's right. How many people in Riversbridge heard we were coming here? Maybe by not being found here, they'll think we went somewhere else after their ambush. We can follow them and see where they're going."

"We're not following them," Der pointed out, "We're running away." She paused. "But we still need to get the, uh, boy to safety, I know." She'd barely caught herself from saying prince.

"Right. Maybe you are growing up," Jakkobb acknowledged.

Tom silently shook his head.

Der lifted her face up to the clouds. She squinted. Off to the east was a hint of brighter clouds, but they didn't promise to be dryer.

"Let's keep moving." Jakkobb pointed northeast. Spike fell into an even pace behind him.

The paladin loosened her holy sword in its sheath and started to tiptoe after the vampires. The only sound was the rain, and even that was muted by the trees.

There was no road, just a soaking weald. They meandered like a river around the thickly clustered trees, with their feet slipping on the slick, sharp stones. The clouds barely began to brighten overhead.

After a while, Alsalon grabbed his stomach. It gurgled.

Jakkobb silently shook his head and kept walking.

Der forced a smile. "At least we won't have to fight any more crazy, naked vampire monsters here."

"Don't remind me," Tom grumbled from beneath his hood.

"As long as we're ready for them next time." She tapped him on his shoulder. "Hey! I've got a better idea! Why don't we just kill the vampire who sent them after you in the first place?"

Tom managed a weak glare before dropping his eyes. Der hardly noticed, she was too overwhelmed by Amelia's surging bafflement.

The female vampire stopped walking and blinked. "You mean... You would dare... You *would*." She licked her fingertips and smoothed her dress. "But we don't know who is after us."

Der rammed her left arm under her sling in an attempt to fold her arms. She raised an eyebrow. "Is that what you needed Tom's help for? To figure out who is after you."

Amelia didn't even blink. "Yes. They're after me."

And it was a perfect lie, as smooth as lacquered wood, but Der sensed that emotion of denial beneath Amelia's open and honest expression. The paladin said, "Do I have to break your nose again?"

The vampire suddenly snarled and growled.

Der balled a fist.

Tom shuffled between the two of them. "Stop. Der, they're after me. The heart. Amelia told me the truth."

Der leaned out to the side and glared at the other vampire around Tom's back. This time, Amelia's emotions seemed to be behind a wall.

"They're after the heart," Tom repeated.

"No one should even know about the heartstone," Amelia snarled.

Der rolled her eyes. "Well, if Tallor figured it out, why couldn't have someone else? You said the

thing was dangerous, Tom!”

“I know!”

They stomped ahead into the glowing gloom in silence. Eventually, they stumbled upon some logs hammered into the ground, creating a crude corduroy road. Now, only every other step squelched in the mud. Fireweed was halfway into its bloom, halfway to marking four to six weeks until the first snows.

The forest grew brighter, but the clouds released no tangible sunlight. A chilly breeze from behind pushed the party onward.

Soon, the road gave way to a narrow wooden bridge, spanning a gray river, all the way down.

Alsalon and Der peeked over the slippery edge, careful to not stray too close. The river was gray, not brown or murky green, but cloud gray, with hints of glacier blue beneath.

When they had stepped away from the precipice, Spike nudged Der from behind. *Staghorn’s only half an hour walk from here. But the bridge is slick.*

“I noticed.”

Der pulled her hood up, ducked her head and pressed one boot toe onto the wood. It creaked, but not ominously. As long as they tiptoed down its center, she didn’t think to worry.

As promised, half an hour later, they stood on a cliff overlooking the Kilvanian Sea. Ahead of them, the city of Staghorn rested on the deceptively small shelf between the bay and the huge mountains behind it. No two buildings appeared to be built of the same height, and the city backed up partway onto the mountain’s slope. A gray river fed the bay, after falling down the slope of another mountain near the town.

An iceberg bobbed up and down in the bay, but dozens of ships overcrowded the docks. Workers were already scrambling to build another dock above the icy water, and two small ships were already moored at the uncompleted structure.

“Busier than I recall,” Jakkobb murmured as they plodded down toward the city. He frowned. “Of course, this is the only port on the Occidental Ocean that didn’t get their royalty and nobility mostly butchered last winter. I suppose icebergs seem preferable to the current fights for power all up and down the coast.”

Der piped up, “The Scholar said it’d be decades before Alscane could recover.”

“Most likely.” He sighed. “Let’s get to the inn. We all could use some rest, but,” he switched to elvish, “We are sending word out about the prince’s whereabouts and the chemmen.”

Dragoon priority? Spike asked mentally.

Jakkobb nodded, not looking at Amelia.

The vampire wasn't paying attention. She pulled her hood up over her eyes. The clouds were bright, but there was no direct sun. "It usually rains here, but alas the days are just too long in the summer."

"What does that mean?" Der asked immediately.

"You'll see," Jakkobb answered. "It's probably the middle of the night back in Riversbridge still."

Amelia slowed her pace as they neared the first of the outbuildings. "And Staghorn is a boiling pot for hunters. And there's elves."

"We know," Jakkobb said.

"Northern elves, I mean."

Der sized up Jakkobb. "Did you think he was a southern one?"

Amelia glared.

Beside her, Tom silently slipped on his darkened glasses. Der squinted at him. "I can't even see where you're looking."

He barely smirked. "I know."

Amelia batted them off of his face to the ground where Spike nearly trod them with one hoof. "They're too obvious. You think you're the first to try that?"

"I'll wear 'em!" Der grinned and planted the spectacles on her face. "Whoa." She stuck out her good hand and blundered into the wall of the nearest building. "Ow."

Amelia blinked. She blinked again. "And this is the great warrior who killed the Blackhound?"

"Yes," Tom said weakly, as if he didn't want to admit it.

After a moment, Amelia said, "Must have been an imposter, and not the real Blackhound. He was human anyway, they fade quickly."

Alsalon yawned and pitched forward in Spike's overly large saddle. He rubbed his eyes and yawned again.

"That's why I said inn first." Jakkobb nodded to himself. "I'll send a runner to the bank."

"Which inn?" Der asked.

"There's only one." He paused, "Unless they've built another one. Hell, I don't know."

Everyone who passed through Staghorn bought a pint at the Chiming Crystal Tavern, if not a room.

Der eyed the tavern's sign, its words outlined in quartz on a wooden background. "Strange name."

"The Crystal Forest is on our road, we'll see it as we head out to Cedar Vale," Jakkobb said.

“Cedar Vale, that’s the Common name for the northern elf city, right?”

“Yes.”

Tom and Amelia paused at the tavern’s threshold. He said, “We won’t be going in there. We know what isn’t safe in this town.”

“Tom, no—” Der began, before a shout interrupted her from behind. When she looked back to the door, the two had disappeared.

“Hey! Newcomers!” a voice shouted. She turned to see a man in a fur-lined sleeveless vest. He called, “Any news of earth events down south?”

She nodded. “Yeah. The Riversbridge funeral and celebration was—”

“Riversbridge?” A scrawny sailor lifted his mug. “Well, ye look like Derora Saxen and Sir Jakkobb. Haha! Dressing like your heroes?”

Der looked quizzically up at the knight, while Alsalon was hiding behind him. Spike was still waiting outside, probably urinating on the hitching post by now knowing him. It was really just a railing. Not too many people brought their horses on ships, and hardly anyone traveled overland to get here.

“No,” Jakkobb replied smoothly. “But you’re the second person to tell me that today. I was wearing red armor well before him.” He absently rubbed the bandage on his unarmored forearm.

“You *look* like a dragoon,” the scrawny man said, this time with a soupçon of suspicion. Meanwhile, the rest of the common room had quieted to watch them.

“I am,” he replied evenly. “But, *I* didn’t drop a citadel out of the sky.”

Laughter quickly echoed around the room, and people dropped their attention. Der left her hand on her swordbelt, not reaching for it, but there if necessary. She eyed everyone in the Chiming Crystal in one glance. Their mixed emotions swept over her like a tidal wave. Amongst the normal emotions, there was a flavoring of the same ugliness that she’d felt from the hunters in Riversbridge, but awash in alcoholic drowsiness.

Her attention also caught their attention; a close-knit band of warriors set down their mugs in unison and stood up, eyeing her just the same.

Jakkobb had wandered deeper inside to find the innkeeper with Alsalon tripping over his heels.

Der walked directly at the band, keeping eye contact the whole time. “You think you know me?”

“You think you know us?” The biggest fighter of the group crossed his arms, squaring his muscles.

One of the other men wiggled his fingers. “Ooh, lookit the girl carrying a sword.”

The big black-haired one snarled and downed his tankard in one gulp. “Think you can fight with the men, sweetheart?”

Der matched his stare easily. “Well, I was hoping you could direct me to these men, ‘cause all I see

here is talking spit.” She cocked her one working arm against her hip.

Four towering thugs crowded around her, blocking out the light and glaring down at the young woman. Der glanced around. She could hear horses neighing through the very thin wall. It must lead to the stables.

“You got a mighty fine looking piece there, little girl.” The muscled man poked at her sword.

“You can’t pick it up,” Der replied flatly.

“Fetch a nice price,” he murmured pensively. “Provided it’s real.”

“It’s King Midan’s sword.”

He laughed. “Oh, ha ha! Right, *Derora Saxen*,” his voice saturated with sarcasm.

“It has a holy aura,” the smallest one in the group said softly. He held up a small pendant, glowing blue. “Might be useful.” He met her eyes with an even brown stare. “You might actually be Derora Saxen. Leader Bo might—”

Before she could reply, the muscle-man shoved her bad shoulder, and she rebounded off the wall.

He said, “Well, if you *are*, then surely the champion who killed the Blackhound could fend off a friendly match from a couple of drunken tavern dwellers.”

Der cocked an eyebrow. “We both know you’re more than that.”

“And we don’t think you are who you’re pretending to be.”

The quiet one looked ready to speak, but the black-haired man moved faster.

She blocked his first punch, but his second took her right in the gut. She couldn’t get her working arm down in time. They were faster than she expected. Maybe he was a slayer after all.

His next blow took her right through the wall. Wood cracked like thunder all around her, but at least the wall was thin and she landed in some hay. Rough laughter chased her through the hole and into the stable, and the laughter faded as the troupe tromped away, apparently satisfied for the moment.

Der pulled some hay from her hair as she rolled back up to her feet. “Alright. I am going to give those bastards a righteous kick—”

She paused. There was something. She sensed *something*. Agitation from the horses, and her empathic sense was muddied by everyone in the tavern through the wall, but there was something *here*. Some scrabbling sounds echoed around the stable.

“Whoa, whoa!”

Der whirled around. Wind cascaded over her, caused by someone crashing down out of the rafters.

She looked down at her feet to see a pair of gloved hands pushing up a skinny man to a seated position. His head jerked up, revealing jet black hair and eyes against a very pale face. He scooted

back away from her. "Please don't kill me!"

He jumped up and spun around to crash nose-first into a stall wall. "Ow!" He rebounded and collapsed to the floor again with his back facing her.

Der blinked. She started to reach out with her good hand but pulled it back. "Um."

The man threw his arms up to protect the back of his neck. "I know you're a paladin and I'm a vampire, but don't kill me, please! I'm sorry, so sorry!"

He started to slide sideways across the floor, still staring ahead at the stall wall.

"You know who I am." Der matched his movements, step for slide.

His head bobbed rapidly. After nothing happened, he slowly twisted an ear around, and then carefully, cautiously peeked at her with black on black eyes. It was impossible to see his pupils. His faced was scrunched with permanent worry lines across his forehead.

She remained motionless.

He eyed the Pallens sword on her belt and visibly winced. He whipped his face back toward the wall. "You're holy. I can smell it." He threw up his hands. "I am so, so very sorry that I disturbed you. I don't need to speak with you at all!"

Der reached out toward him again, but hesitated. Tom's voice rang in her mind, *you can't trust a vampire*. She stepped back and tried to sense this stranger's emotions. He really was frightened, just like the horses, but it was like hearing across a room with everyone shouting because of the tavern across the wall. She really had to concentrate, but it got through.

"Look," she said, "If you know who I am then you probably know about Tom."

The skinny vampire's shoulders drooped even further down.

She said, "And I've ever only tried to slay him once in earnest. We've been frien— We haven't been enemies in quite some time." She tapped her tongue against the roof of her mouth for want of something to say. "Um, listen, I don't try to slay vampires because they're vampires."

"It's a good enough reason," he spat. "You don't know what we're like. They'll slay me if they ever found out I even *looked* at the paladin." But he turned to look at her over his shoulder. He stared at her for a moment, and then finally twisted his body around slowly stood up.

He was easily taller than Der, but slouched at the knees and shoulders so deeply that he was on par with her height. He leaned back away from her and dropped his eyes. "Um. I. Um. I'm Dominic." He tried to puff out his chest. "It means master and lord. *Dominus*, Palls, you know." He offered a sheepish grin, which was completely spoiled by his fangs. His shoulders slipped back into their perpetual sag.

Der stepped back and looked him over. His clothes were nice, but worn and patched.

Dominic suddenly rambled, "Tom is under Amelia's Voice. You don't see it?"

Der, for once at a loss for words, shook her head dumbly. How did this vampire even know about them?

"I think she's allowing him enough leash, enough truth so that you don't suspect. But *you've* got to, because you're you. But she wouldn't realize that there is another way."

"Another way to what?" Der asked, trying to keep up.

"Control him. Control people."

"What?"

"But she's being cautious around you." Abruptly, he shrank and froze. "And you're here! Oh no! You're not with him! She might steal him away when you're not there. It might already be too late!"

"Too late? Too late for what?" Der glanced back toward the hole in the wall, trying to catch a glimpse in the crowd.

"He can't go back to the Kingdom. He'll be killed! And worse, what's important, Avamar cannot have the stone! Don't you see? Amelia is under Avamar's command!"

"What? What are you talking about?"

Dominic suddenly met her gaze. "I need your help to save the Kingdom."

Chapter Eight

The Worst Laid Plans

Prince Alsalon poked the tavern stew with his spoon. He tentatively licked a carrot. He felt like he hadn't eaten in days, but the long boiled smell was too strong for his pampered nose.

Beside him, Jakkobb downed his second ale in one gulp.

Someone plunked down another mug beside him and pulled up a stool. "There was a suspicious death in Riversbridge, a blacksmith."

The knight blinked. "Thistle!"

The chemman offered a brief imitation of a toothless smile beneath his hood. "Oh, and everyone is panicking about the missing prince, but I suspect that you've surmised that."

"There are more storm-readers out there," Jakkobb murmured, careful to not look at him. "They attacked us."

"Oh, I know."

Alsalon peered at Thistle. "How did you get past the chemman at the tree path? You must've come that way."

Thistle deadpanned, "I batted my pretty eyes at them." He sighed. "Said I'd been searching for other survivors from Gladioli Fields, glad to have found them and whatever."

Jakkobb snorted into his newest drink. "Then how'd you get leave to go into town?"

"I just walked off. They still haven't figured out not to trust me, although I know one day soon they will. They know my story, they just don't know *me*." He shrugged.

"How did you find us?" Alsalon gasped.

Thistle didn't blink. "Jakkobb was ordered to go home. In public. This is the road home."

"Damn it," Jakkobb muttered. "I was afraid of that. Do the others know?"

"Oh yes. The storm-readers are obviously hunting the prince. There's panic in Arborn and Riversbridge, but I want to be here, finding the cause of it. The children will be safe with the Lady of Elloan."

"I need to go home!" the prince wailed. "But my brother! Do you have any news of my brother? Please tell me he's still alive."

"He's more than alive, he's furious," Thistle replied mildly. "I'm surprised Arborn's knights aren't tearing this town completely apart yet, but I don't think they put it together that the prince came with you."

Jakkobb said, "We tried to return but the chemmen were faster at the tree. The Blue Farers have a courier station here. King Edillon can know soon enough."

"Are you willing to risk that?" Thistle asked softly. "The Blue Farer dragoons are fine, righteous warriors and sailors, but do you truly trust a massive network not to have one knot where the wrong information could leak out into the waters? Most of them are not elves."

Jakkobb scowled into his drink.

"You must've been thinking this. Why else would you have stopped for stew first?"

"Boy was hungry."

"And it gave you time to digest your own thoughts, yes?"

The knight-captain glared at the scarred bar counter.

"Also, how many dragoon soldiers are up here?" The chemman leaned forward. "Couriers and bankers and maybe a score of soldiers? Too few if word of the boy's presence erupted."

"I know."

Thistle continued, "Oh, and make mention to Der, when you find a moment where she's not running for her life, that the woman who claimed the Blackhound was alive died shortly after her arrest. She had some sort of brain injury. Didn't even know her own name."

Alsalon risked a spoonful. "Where is Der?"

Jakkobb glanced over at the new hole in the distant wall. "For your safety, Highness, she's drawing attention away from us."

"Where is that sin of a paladin?" Amelia stared deeply into the shadows on the lonely street. Even in the height of summer, the chill was heavy on the wind.

Tom didn't respond, staring distantly out at the sea. She stamped her feet. Behind him, that knight's blasted horse was trying to chew on the wooden corner of a building. Stupid beast!

Amelia whirled on Tom. "You actually like her, don't you?"

He shook his head. "No. I've got her fooled. Got them all fooled."

Her eyes sizzled as they bored into him. "Remember, you must rejoin the Kingdom."

"I must rejoin the Kingdom," he droned.

Spike started to squeeze into the alley. Amelia whipped her fiery gaze at the horse that surprisingly made eye contact with her and then appeared to wink. It winked! Horses don't wink!

"We go now, Thomas. We've spent too long with these breathers. You are under my Voice. You obey me."

Thistle sipped his own drink. "What's the plan, sir dragoon?"

Jakkobb shrugged. "I suppose it's not a dragoon matter. It's an elvish and chemmen one." He slammed his tankard down on the bar. "Fine. We'll go north to Cedar Vale and meet up with my people there."

Alsalon shook his head. "But I've always heard that the northern elves don't like Arborn."

"They're still elves, alright?"

Thistle said, "Then I suggest we begin that journey tonight, when the prince has finished his stew."

"I think I'm done." Alsalon pushed the mostly full bowl away from him.

"The Crystal Forest?" Jakkobb raised an eyebrow. "No matter how short the nights are up here, you know the only times to move there are dawn and dusk. Or a full moon, maybe a cloudy day. But you know."

"We can stop at its edge," Thistle remarked. He checked around the tavern. "Where are Tom and Der? Didn't they come here with you?"

"Der is around here somewhere," Jakkobb replied. "Tom can take care of himself."

Amelia pushed her sharp chin into Tom's shoulder and pressed her chest against his back. "You're strong. Stronger than you should be to resist me so much. Must be the heartstone."

He murmured something, too distant to make out.

"Now," she kissed his neck, "To that last little flame of rebellion, cross me, and I will kill your precious little paladin."

Tom's face receded into its usual frown. "I'll let you try."

"What!" Amelia jerked back, hands out at her side, suddenly ready to fight.

Tom turned to face her. "Who knows what powers the gods have buried in that girl? She terrifies me. And she has hardly a notion of what—"

"Be quiet, I command you!"

Tom hesitated, baring his fangs against an invisible force. "No..." He grabbed his forehead in his pale hands. "Argh! That girl was right! Resisting is such a headache." He snapped upright. "Oh no. I learned something from Derora Saxen. The horror."

Amelia stared as if he were dancing in the sunlight. Behind her, Spike was sniggering and pawing the ground as if he couldn't control his laughter.

The female vampire could only shake her head. "You've been deceiving me this whole time? About my control?" She pointed at his chest. "The heart. It's the only—" She slowly bent forward, as if she'd been punched in the gut. When she looked back up at him, tears blossomed in her eyes. She sniffed.

“I didn’t mean it! It’s the only way I knew how to get you to come.”

Tom folded his arms and rested a shoulder against the building’s wall. He shook his head in disgust. “Try a little harder, please.”

She sobbed and sank against the muddy street. “You have to come to the Kingdom. Avamar is going to destroy our race with his machinations, and then the sire of sires and his son will slay us all for following a false king! But you know Avamar can command us with his Voice.”

Tom didn’t even blink in his disinterest.

“You’re the only one! You escaped! I get it now; I can be honest with you.” She jerked her head up and pushed herself to her feet. Tears still sprung from her eyes. “It– It was the only way I knew how. I’m sorry! But you truly are a hero. I’ve heard the stories. I’ve seen the plays!”

At that, Tom grimaced. “I really wish you hadn’t. I’m not like that.”

Amelia sniffed again. “I just want to be free. Like you.”

“Free? Free!” Tom snorted. “Always hiding, from the living and the Kingdom. Always fighting, always running. Not free to be who I wanted to be.”

She reached one long, slender hand up toward his face, her own tears still bright on her cheeks.

He slapped her hand away. “Who are you? I do know that you’re much closer to the blood than any vampire I’ve ever met. It might be dangerous for me to ignore you. But, then again, you threatened me and mine.”

Amelia shook her head rapidly. “No. That wasn’t me. I’m being true with you now. I wouldn’t have harmed her. Just an empty threat. It’s the only way I knew how. I’ve never even fought a paladin, not since the war back in Pallens. I remember how wicked they were.”

Tom replied with a look as flat as the sea behind them. “Of course, I haven’t seen her in a quarter of an hour.” He glanced in the direction of the Chiming Crystal. “But it’s not on fire, so maybe she isn’t getting into trouble.”

“What do you mean, save the Kingdom?” Der demanded quietly, slowly, wanting to get the question right.

“Whoa.” Dominic bobbed for balance as he accidentally kicked a pitchfork over, sweeping out dung across the floor. He strayed too close to Der, and almost bumped his elbow against the Pallens sword. He squeaked and rebounded against the stall wall. After he pushed himself upright, he offered another sheepish, fanged smile. “Sorry.”

“The Kingdom,” Der prompted.

“Oh, right.” His black eyes opened wide. “You have to save the Kingdom!”

"The vampire kingdom?" She quirked an eyebrow.

"Oh, and all the humans, elves and others in this realm," he added as an afterthought. "And I know, you're a paladin, and I know we're ancient enemies."

She shook her head. "I didn't know that."

"Oh," he said for a third time. "Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it. Um. Um." He shifted his weight between his feet several times.

They both paused.

Der said, "I'm not stupid. I see what's happening, but I don't know what to do. How do I break Amelia's control on Tom?"

"Uh," the vampire rolled his eyes up into his head. "You could slay him? Sorry, that's the only way I know how. Look, I never said what I was asking was easy, or even possible. But you must keep him away from the Kingdom."

"So then was it someone in the Kingdom who sent those naked drones after him in Rivers Valley?"

Dominic gasped. "Avamar! Then he already knows!"

"He's the one who sent them?"

"Of course! And Amelia is under his thrall too!"

"Wait, wait, wait. She was attacked along with us."

"Don't you get it? What better way to sell loyalty? She's under Avamar's orders too! Orders to bring him to the Kingdom. To Avamar!"

Der frowned. "And how do you know this?"

Dominic puffed out his skinny chest. "I'm the librarian."

"Er."

He held up his hands in a helpless shrug. "Someone's got to take history's notes. I know everything."

"But you're not powerful enough to do anything with it," Der remarked.

"I'm here, aren't I?" He looked bruised. "Please listen. I'm not a warrior, and I wasn't made to be. I was always a bit, um, scared of fighting. Hell, I vomited at the sight of blood before, um." He looked up, his dark eyes shining and hopeful. "But I know everything."

"Everything," Der repeated. "So is any of it true? Did Tom really slay his sire?"

Dominic hesitated. "Yes, he did. He's the most wanted vampire who isn't slain or being tortured yet. He never told you?"

"No!"

"But that's hardly important now! Civil war is on the night's horizon for us because of what Avamar

wants. He wants to be the sire of sires, but he isn't part of the royal house. He isn't the blood. There are only two members of the true blood left, and they're both gone on pilgrimage."

"And none of you find that suspicious?"

"Of course we do!" Dominic cried. "But, but, it's heresy to say otherwise or act otherwise. Alright, heresy isn't the right word. Apostasy? No. Treason isn't serious enough. Interesting. Common doesn't have one. But listen, for all we know, they could be testing our loyalty by committing Avamar to a charade against his own desires. Oh, how I wish we knew where they were."

"Or they both could be slain." Der blinked a couple times. She wasn't sure if she understood all of what he'd said, or if she could trust him, but she was certain that she was happy not to be a vampire.

"Unlikely," Dominic responded. "You have no idea how impossible that would be."

"About as impossible as the Blackhound stealing the chemmen secret of immortality and trying to rebuild Pallens in his image?"

The vampire shook his head and gave her a flat look. "You're not as clever as you think you are."

"Clever enough not to trust a strange vampire."

Dominic dropped his gaze. "Yes. But you cannot trust Amelia either. Shouldn't trust your Tom either, but I can't warn you there. I saw the play."

"What play?"

"Augusto's."

"Well, I haven't!"

He couldn't meet her gaze. "May not be an ill tiding there."

Der sighed and prompted, "Amelia mentioned some sort of bounty."

"No! It's worse than that. He's got the heartstone, doesn't he?"

"Heartstone?" she echoed.

"The heart of stone."

"How do you know about that?" she demanded.

He waved a dismissive hand. "A hunch. A conclusion drawn by other circumstances I've witnessed. I could be wrong."

"What circumstances?"

"The magic of Horizon being cancelled for one. That could only have been the heart's power given that there were no known wizards at the battle."

"How do you know this?"

He ignored her and plunged on, "So I went to the monastery, for historical purposes I was able to say, and saw it was disturbed. You know what I'm talking about?"

She shrugged helplessly.

“The monastery in the pool’s reflection? Hiding the stone heart of a demon? Said to be guarded by monks who were forbidden from ever seeking out knowledge of what they guarded.”

“Er...”

“Warded by holy traps so that no unholy being like other demons or vampires could pursue it.”

“About those...”

“The legend of stone and bone, Saxen! Why you absolutely cannot let Tom near the Kingdom’s claws!”

Der threw up her good hand. “I don’t even know what that is! Nobody I’ve ever asked knows!”

His jaw hung loosely. “You don’t know? You don’t *know*?”

“You don’t know anything, do you?” Amelia slumped against the wall and hung her head.

Meanwhile, Tom watched her blandly. Spike chewed on some fireweed poking up in a nearby ditch.

“You have to come to the Kingdom,” she purred, leaning forward, letting her breasts fall into Tom’s full view. “It’s so close.”

“Oh? So those pet freaks can flay my skin in view of their sire?”

She said, “Are you afraid of that? I’m trying to help you restore what little honor you can imagine. You’re the stooge between the two of us. You’re helping the enemy.”

“That’s my choice.” He lifted his lip to reveal a fang. “You can’t guilt me into going with you, so please, stop. Unless you wish to continue making a fool of yourself.”

“Her kind was at war to kill us,” she hissed. “You know this!”

“She wasn’t even alive back then.”

“She is just a child, isn’t she?”

“Leave her alone.” Tom snarled, mentally cursing this liability. He spread out his fingers, holding them like claws. “She’s not part of this.”

“But she is, dear,” Amelia sang. “And that’s your fault.”

Tom swung first, tearing his stronger-than-human fingernails up her thigh. Silk shredded and the stench of blood blossomed into the air.

She froze and then slowly smiled. She ran her fingers down the shreds of her dress, revealing the slender curve of her buttocks as her wounds instantly sealed. “Oh, sweetheart, I am much closer to the blood than you—”

He raked his claws across her face this time. She leaned back a fraction of a moment too late, and he scored his nails across her cheek.

She snarled, all sweetness evaporated. "You're nothing without the heart!"

This time, she blocked his attacks, but she had no opening for her own claws. He kicked her in the gut, slamming her into the wooden wall behind them, leaving instant bruises. She clawed at his face, scoring several lines of blood.

He dodged her next attack and clapped his hands together. Crimson fire erupted around his body into a protective shell. The force of it tossed Amelia down the street.

She chuckled as she leaned against the wall for balance. A bloody smile lit her face. "You aren't weak. Physically. But, as you just showed, you are so weak elsewhere."

Der held out her good hand between herself and Dominic. "But I don't know you. I can't trust you."

"I know, I know," Dominic groaned. "But we need your help! Most of us just try to survive, well, get by. Again, Common doesn't have the right words. Anyway, the other races won't stand for us to band together. We're not hunted as a race if most people forget that we're a threat. If we're not a real fear. But Avamar is going to make us a real fear."

"By doing what?"

"By stepping out of the night. By claiming to be the sire of sires and reveal the Kingdom to the northlands, publicly!"

Der gasped and then shook her head. "But I can't just go with you."

He looked at her straight, his dark eyes shining. "No! All you have to do is keep Tom away from the Kingdom. Please!" That sad hope, it reminded her of the sad eyes of a tiny gold dragon who'd lost a fight to a barn cat.

Dominic checked over his shoulder. "They'll know I'm missing soon. And they can make me tell the truth by the Voice. Can also make me lie." He wrenched himself, as if fighting an internal battle. He gasped; he still had to breathe in order to vibrate his vocal cords. "This is the truth. Avamar wants the stone and bone together."

Der raised her hand in confusion.

"Vampire history, although most of it is a secret from our own race, is intact. Since the beginning. Even more than the elves. I know about the greatest nightmare before history began."

"Stone and bone," Der managed.

"Holy and unholy united, it's part of the legend. And staryo'krish. The heartstone."

Der shook her head. "I'm sorry. I don't know."

"I'll tell you. I will. First, you must swear that you can't let anyone know that we've spoken. Tom is under Amelia's Voice. My undeath is in the fire here too. No one. Please!"

She nodded.

“When the world was an infant, there were two demons brothers sent to destroy it.”

“I knew that part. It’s a creation myth.”

“The most critical part is what they left behind in the world—”

The door to the stables exploded inward from the street. Der whirled. Tom sagged in the doorway. He held out his hand toward her. “She’s not here, is she?”

Der looked around. Dominic was gone like a whisper. She turned back. “Tom! Uh, not that I know of.”

He beckoned. “Then we’ve got to go. Now.”

Chapter Nine

Why Jakkobb Drinks

Derora picked up a fish on a string and nodded to its seller. She leaned over toward the red knight and asked from the corner of her mouth, "If we're in such a rush to skedaddle, why are we shopping?" She set the fish back on its line.

Jakkobb exhaled. "Because I'd rather the chemmen kill us than the wilderness." He slapped at the mosquitos attacking his unarmored forearm.

She nodded in reply, while staring into the shadows for clumsy vampires, or silk-wearing half-naked vampires. Or those completely nak— She bit off that thought right there.

The humans were shorter and stockier up here, she noticed, and even the few elves they'd seen had looked more like Jakkobb. They had larger chests and bigger builds than their lithe cousins in Arborn. She wondered how many smaller elven settlements were around the continents.

Alsalon whispered from next to Spike's shoulder, "Why can't we just take the tree path north?"

"If there were enough trees," Jakkobb muttered. But the prince couldn't hear the comment over the barking and pleading of the dogs in a nearby stall.

Der inched up next to the knight. "I've never seen a dog market before."

"Humans don't survive up here without dogs," he replied. "Especially in the winter."

She cocked an eyebrow.

"They know how to get around, Der. They can hunt and sense perils up here far greater than any humans. They know the dangers under the snow and ice. They'll fight predators, and that's meat for both of you."

"So, we're buying dogs?"

He shook his head. "It's summer. We'll be alright since we're not going far." He swiped a small bottle off of the nearest stall and dropped some coins. "However, I am not going without this."

She sniffed, smelling lavender and peppermint and something else. "What's that, sir?"

"Makes the mosquitos avoid you."

"Oh. I'll take two!"

The female vendor chuckled and produced two more vials. Jakkobb sighed and plunked down some more coins. The old woman's grin split her face. "Good luck finding Cedar Vale." Der had never heard such a different, nasal accent until this morning.

Der turned to Jakkobb. "Are we expecting to get lost?"

Both the knight and vendor chuckled. Jakkobb said, "Hopefully not. You'll see."

"And what does that mean?"

But she was already being ignored as the knight wandered further down the stalls. Behind them, Thistle and Tom made no noise as they approached.

Der and Jakkobb both checked behind the two.

"Tom," Jakkobb said slowly, "You're not being followed?"

"Not now," he answered simply. He tugged his hood up against the sun. "Don't forget all the slayers up here. And, of course, Amelia's corpse might come back seeking vengeance."

"Oh? So she is chemmen," Der joked.

Thistle frowned.

Tom stood behind her back. "And you, little girl, managed to anger her, so you'd better stay beside me—"

"What's that?" Der immediately wandered off. She smiled at another merchant and picked up the small tube. She wagged it between her fingers. "What is it?"

The short, blond merchant grinned and took it from her fingers. "Fire piston. You stuff some tinder into the end, and then this!" He shoved the piston head down, and then tipped the tube over, pouring out smoldering tinder.

"The air heats as it is compressed—"

"How much?" she asked, and then added, "And in what currencies? This being a port town and all."

The merchant eyed the Pallens sword and her sling. "Three silver spades."

"Spades?" She dug her fingers into her belt purse. "How about uh, Tenmarian marks? Or Thealith's silver dime, or, what the hell is that? A button?"

"Four silver spades," Tom drawled, dropping the coins in front of the vendor. He kept his gloved hand in shadow the entire time.

The vendor looked between his pale face, glove and hood. He offered a quick smile and stepped away from the stall counter. When they had meandered away from his stall, he tugged a cord hanging on the wall. It didn't ring a bell. At least, not here.

Tom squeezed Der's good arm. "Time to go. Now."

"Why?" Jakkobb asked. "What did Der do this time?"

"It wasn't me," she said.

Thistle smirked. "I think I know. This town is wary about Tom."

"What does that mean?" Alsalon quavered.

“Vampires,” the chemman replied. “The thing about all of them is that they’re quite charming and educated and make you feel much at ease, until they suddenly eat you.”

The prince cringed.

Tom growled, “Just because it’s true in the overwhelming majority of instances doesn’t mean you have to scare the lad. Besides, do you know what they say about chemmen?”

This time, Thistle’s glare heated up.

Tom seemed to shake himself free of something. “I have to go before the wretched, elusive Bo releases his killing badgers on me. I’ll meet you by the theater nearest the south gate.”

And he was gone.

“Who is Bo—” Der started. “Wait, wait, wait! Damn.”

After a moment, Thistle whispered, “Some sort of slayer king. Staghorn is the heart of the vampire slayers. I think our merchant friend signaled them. And Tom knew it.” He nodded slightly toward a band of warriors jogging up the street from the direction of the harbor warehouses.

“So that band of brigands are slayers, huh?” Der mused. “Well, let’s see how they deal with a Pallens sword.”

“Der!” Jakkobb barked.

“What?” She turned an innocent gaze up at him. “I’m not going to kill them. Not unless they start it.”

“Der.” This time, his voice creaked like old wood, ready to give way underfoot.

“Right,” Thistle said. “People who are used to battling inhuman warriors and you with only your off-hand—”

Jakkobb snatched her bad shoulder as she started to march. He hung on, not wanting to admit that a woman almost two feet shorter than he was dragging him forward. He swore he heard Spike sniggering.

He dug his heels down into the dirt of the street. Was she really this stubborn? And he knew, just knew, that she, the holy paladin, would try to explain why hunting unholy creatures was a bad idea and then this whole situation would explode. And quite possibly the city too. She’d burnt down at least one town that he knew of.

Suddenly, she sagged. “Well, Tom’s safe. We’ve got to keep Alsalon safe. Maybe it’s alright to just walk away.”

Spike, Jakkobb and Thistle all exchanged a confused glance.

“Just this one time.” She watched as the hunters made eye contact with the merchant, who shook his head slightly but gestured at their party.

“I saw that!” she snapped at him.

“We’re done shopping,” Jakkobb said in elvish.

“They’ll follow us,” Thistle remarked as they turned down the street.

A grin pounced on Der’s face. “No, they won’t!” She maintained her all-too-cheerful smile as she stomped back to the merchant. She slammed her sword, sheath and all across his counter.

“This is a Pallens sword,” she chirped. “The only one left in the entire world. You don’t want to know where I found it. I have to ask, does this mean anything to you?” She leaned forward over the sword.

The merchant gulped and offered a silent nod.

“Say it,” she sang.

“That— That my lady is a paladin warrior. Answers only and directly to the gods.”

“Exactly.” She winked and her grin bordered on maddening euphoria. “And you’ve just interrupted a very intricate plan that I’ve spent months luring a certain *something* into a trap. Now, it’s not unsalvageable, but you’ll have to call your dogs to heel. If not, well, I wouldn’t want you to receive the blame for any mishaps from *any* authorities.”

The merchant sweated like a waterfall and eyed the sky. Behind her overly cheerful smile, she felt his fear surging like a tidal wave. Jakkobb, Thistle and even Spike watched with their jaws open and catching mosquitos.

“Call them off, please,” she said through that grin. It was starting to strain the muscles on her face.

The vendor gulped and clambered over his counter, and then stumbled down the street toward the slayers.

Alsalon risked a hopeful smile.

Der turned around to her party and her self-satisfied smirk became a mask of shock. She slapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh my gods, I acted like Tom. The horror.” She started chewing her fingernails.

Jakkobb stared. “On that note, I need a drink.”

“I would like one too,” Thistle agreed.

Spike dropped his head. *I need a bucket.*

Half an hour later, Spike slurped his bucket of beer outside the tavern. He always imagined what looks Jakkobb got when ordering his drink. The elf usually complained about it.

Inside, Der kept trying to sneak glances at all the patrons, trying to catch a glimpse of the mysterious Dominic. Or maybe she should watch for the barrels accidentally collapsing. But there was nothing.

She frowned into her own ale. There had been nothing of Amelia either and she didn't know what to do or think about that. But, she knew in her gut, that the vampire was still prowling out there.

She surfaced from her thoughts to hear Alsalon ask, "Why don't we just eat on the road? We have provisions."

"Food's not always easy to come by here so we eat first." Jakkobb sighed into his own tankard. "And I was supposed to be on holiday."

"I don't see why we should wait to leave," Thistle said.

"Because you don't want to be rude." They looked up as Tom slipped into the booth beside Der. "Or, maybe you do, I don't know." He folded his hands and offered a toothless smile. "This is certainly not the theater. You were to meet me there. You're not there."

"Yeah, but you're here," Der replied.

Alsalon rapped his fingers on Jakkobb's armor. "We have money. Why are we at this cheap tavern? Surely there is a proper restaurant somewhere."

"Because the fights are better here," the knight replied into his drink. "Also, I know this place. I don't know the others."

Der picked up a small pastry and waved it. "Damned fine crummbread though."

"It's damned?" Tom said brightly. "Unholy or just unlucky?"

She threw the bread at his nose. He caught it, faster than any normal human could, and threw it back. She caught it at the same speed, and then bit into it.

While masticating, she commented, "Glad to see you're back to yourself. What happened?"

He smiled serenely. "What answer would you like to hear?"

Jakkobb laid a hand on the table. "The one where you tell us what happened to your silk-clad friend."

Tom snarled with true anger in his voice, "She was never my friend."

Der took another bite and asked, "So you were just pretending to be under her Voice? Hypnosis? Whatever you call it."

"How do we know you're not under that control now?" Thistle asked softly.

Tom's folded knuckles tightened to absolute white under his already pale skin. "Because I never was. I had to act the part to learn what she wanted from me."

"You never were under her influence?" Der pressed.

"No," he hissed. "Never."

"And you are a professional liar."

"No, I'm not," he lied smoothly.

While they glared daggers at each other, Thistle leaned back and whispered, "Three copper marks he breaks her nose this time."

Jakkobb's gaze hardened. He took another drink. "One."

Thistle shook his head as he rose up from the table. "One isn't worth it."

"Exactly," the elf replied.

The chemman shrugged. "I am going to scout our route out of town. I'm sure my former brothers and sisters are watching the gates. We would do well not to forget them."

"It's easy to," Der snorted, "Between vampires, slayers and a runaway prince."

"I'm sorry!" Alsalon wailed. Thistle shrugged and turned away from the table.

"Damn." Tom scowled. He pulled a dainty gold snowflake necklace from his pocket. "I forgot to give this to Chloe. You'll have to do it." He pushed it into Der's hand.

She pushed it back. "No, you can do it."

He sighed and tucked it back into his pocket. "I'll just bother you about it later." His gaze lingered on her stained tunic, especially the spot where Amelia had smeared her broken nose against the cloth. He pointed at it. "One of the lesser known abilities of a vampire is that we can get stains out of anything."

"What?" Der asked. "I don't get it."

He pointed at the stain. "Try thinking about it, genius."

After a moment, she grumbled, "That's not funny."

"Then why am I laughing? Oh well, do you want help or for me to buy you yet another new blouse?"

She frowned and looked away from him.

Alsalon knocked on Jakkobb's armor. "How long are we supposed to wait?"

"Not too long," Der said, nodding toward the door.

Several warriors swaggered through into the tavern. She said, "Notice the lack of longer swords and only thin armor. But, they've got all sorts of toys hanging off their belts. No outward sign of stakes though."

Tom's eyebrows shot up. "How do you know to look for all that?"

"I just do." She shrugged.

"The boy is right. Time to hustle," Jakkobb whispered.

Outside, they ducked their faces against the sun and shuffled down the street. No one appeared to be following them.

Alsalon laughed and pointed, running ahead toward a crowd. "Look! Look!" He darted forward, and for the first time, a smile crossed his face. "It's your play!"

"What?" Der said.

The party drifted over to the edge of a large amphitheater built in the ancient Pallens style, the same design used in Riversbridge, so that a whisper on the stage could be heard three hundred feet away.

A single actor walked to the center of the theater. He suddenly looked up at the audience. "This is the Sword of Pallens, by Augusto. For the first time today!"

Der yawned and shaded her eyes. "I have no idea how early it actually is since the sun doesn't seem to want to quit up here."

Tom crossed his arms and ducked his head. "I *know*."

The actor enunciated, "This is the adventure of one woman, courageous and brave!"

"Bull-headed and stupid," Tom muttered.

"Who smote the Blackhound, the agent of an ancient evil!"

"By dumb luck," the vampire finished.

Der kicked him in the shin. "Was that dumb luck too?"

Tom hopped on one leg briefly. "Yes!"

The stage was in motion. Clouds literally rolled into the background on squeaking wheels. A paper sun on a pulley rose above them, defeating every bit of atmospheric information they'd learned so far in their lives about how the sun moved. A small scale wooden platform painted like Silver Dawn's Horizon was pushed into view.

Somewhere offstage, someone must've been rattling a sheet of metal to create tinny thunder.

"I don't remember a thunderstorm," Der said.

The actor hadn't moved. He proclaimed, "This is a time of portents and omens!"

A wobbly moon, painted black, was pulled up in front of the sun.

"I don't remember an eclipse either," Der remarked.

Spike snorted. *We might catch one up here. I think.* He was carrying the bucket of beer in his mouth and stooped his neck down to leave it at his feet.

"Oh no. No, no, no." Tom buried his face in his hands. "I'm not here. I'm not listening. I am not seeing *that!*"

"What? Oh." Der broke off into giggles at the next actor to walk on. He was white. He must've bathed himself in flour to be that white. "Tom" very overtly inspected all areas from the stage.

"At last," he announced, "Safe! No one knows that this vampire is here seeking to protect a mortal

child. Why? I'll never tell. But for now, I am safe and alone!"

"Thomas Delauncey!" an actress suddenly declared from the height of the wooden Horizon. She had dark hair, much longer than Der's had ever been. She wore embroidered flowers along her new clothes.

Jakkobb coughed into his hand. "Ha! They got that part right at least."

"Der," Alsalon pointed, "Look, it's you!"

Both Der and Tom stared open-mouthed and helpless.

The actor portraying the vampire strode to the base of Horizon. He proclaimed, "Derora Saxen, from now on I shall call you Tara."

The actress replied, "And I shall call you Mendelin."

Behind them, a canvas copy of the tower of Mendelin at Long Range Palace rose, hoisted up by pulleys and ropes.

"It doesn't look like that," Jakkobb muttered.

A chorus suddenly stormed the stage, singing the song of Mendelin and his mortal lover, but everyone in the audience already knew the story. The elvish prince and his Tara, who died and how he chose to follow rather than live without her.

A new star hung over the stage, Mendelin's star, since the gods turned the prince into one after his death, according to the song.

Meanwhile, Der and Tom both stared, speechless and red-faced.

Actor Tom continued, "I shall always play you Mendelin's song, older it is than I, as old as the birth of this world under the shadow of the midnight sun. I wish that I could see your smile in sunlight, for as beautiful as it is under Mendelin's star, I long to know how brightly it glows in the day."

"Excuse *me*?" the real vampire growled.

Actress Derora held open her hand. "And I wish for such as well, but we cannot dwell on fancies tonight. I sense such a terrible wave of darkness approaching."

"After all we've faced!" Actor Tom cried. "We saved Urael and Thealith from their evil spellcaster!"

"And who was such a man's master? I fear we shall soon know."

Jakkobb whispered, "This is certainly more terrifying than the actual events."

Actor Tom stuck his foot into a rope sling and sailed to the top of the tower, flying up, hoisted by men and ropes behind stage. He leapt onto the tower with the actress and grabbed her around the waist. "Then let us steal tonight. For if everything I feel for you is a lie, then let us lie together tonight!"

"Hey, they're gonna kiss," Alsalon giggled.

Jakkobb was watching the real Tom and Der. "No, I don't think they are."

Horizon rolled offstage. The vampire and paladin stared, thunderstruck. They didn't even see Alscane's prop city being pushed onto the other side of the stage.

Tom shook himself like a dog.

Der cracked a laugh. "Ha!" Her voice took on a note of a sob, "I don't know why I'm laughing. Or maybe I'm crying? I don't know!"

The vampire whirled on her, nose-to-nose. "Do you see me kissing you? No! And you never will!" In the following silence, Alsalon said, "That's because you close your eyes."

Tom sneered and turned his back to Der. "But at least it shows *your* ridiculous obsession with *me*. I have begged you to leave me alone. For years."

Der quirked an eyebrow. "But you're the one who keeps finding me."

He whirled back around. "I do not!" He folded his arms. "I've never been humiliated like this! Never! Now I know why people are out to kill me. Because they've seen this play!" He snarled, revealing his fangs. "Der, I *do not* love you."

"I didn't love you first," she snapped back immediately.

Tom cursed under his breath. "Maybe I would've been better off with Amelia."

Spike's ears perked up in the dead silence that followed. Jakkobb and Alsalon inched away, leaving Der behind in a widening circle around Tom.

She scowled. "Then maybe you should go find her."

This time, Tom's jaw dropped open. He tried to get it to hinge close and moved his mouth as if to speak.

Der turned her back on him.

"And we're leaving," Jakkobb whispered, suddenly eyeing the bucket of beer at Spike's feet longingly. He jerked his thumb toward the stage. "Before that short bastard in red cardboard armor says *anything*."

Thistle leaned nonchalantly against the wall, watching who was watching the south gate. There was much more traffic than he'd expected. But it made sense. Even this far north, Staghorn wasn't economically devastated or now involved in a civil war caused by a power vacuum. The Blackhound had done his work well, at least as far as his reputation of destroying kingdoms and empires.

He relaxed. Sure, he was scouting for killers, but he didn't have a vampire, a runaway prince, or a Derora to spare an eye on.

A drunk bounced off the wall next to him and Thistle stepped smartly out of his way before he careened into the chemman.

Two other men slunk around the corner behind Thistle, while the seemingly drunk man stood straight and jerked off his hood to reveal brightly orange eyes. The new storm-reader snarled, "Traitor." There was no hesitation in his voice as he snapped out the formerly unthinkable word with ease. "You won't fool us like those at the tree path." He turned up his nose. "You smell like an elf."

Chapter Ten

The Thickening Mist

Thistle eyed at least seven blades aimed at his chest. They seemed dull in the mostly cloudy light. The mist rising up from the bay and also rolling off the mountain behind them pulled a veil between them and the sun. Almost gray, almost the storm-readers' light, but not quite. He glanced up. Overhead, the clouds were quickly overtaking the sun.

Between the runaway prince and whatever vampire troubles were going on, Thistle was almost relieved to have chemmen weapons pointed his way.

And he wouldn't tell them where the prince they were hunting was. Because at this point, he was sure he didn't know. Jakkobb wasn't stupid enough to wait if he didn't return.

He looked down, a boy, couldn't have been older than seven raised a dagger up to his thigh. The boy's orange eyes were shining, but his hair was dark, unlike Thalon's. He never understood how his son couldn't have had dark hair since all of his people's were nearly black, but his boy's wasn't. If he ever prayed, he would have said a prayer of thanks for it.

A chemman woman stepped forward. An older woman. In fact, she must have been old when she drank the water of life all those centuries ago. But it had restored youth for all the others who had consumed it. Why not her? Had she preferred this form?

She ignored his questioning glances, and held up what look like a mortar and pestle with a compass built into the base of the bowl.

Thistle sneered. "You'd cut out my water of life? You'd cut chemmen flesh?"

She finally looked up at him. The blades of the others had drooped slightly at his words.

"You betrayed us," the crone finally replied. Her voice trembled with age.

"No, I didn't. I just walked away. I'd never even seen Darkreign until your last little war."

The crone held up the mortar toward his throat. "You cut chemmen flesh in the forests of Rivers Valley."

Thistle raised his chin. "That was not us and you know it. We don't dismember people like wet paper."

Again, he witnessed a murmur of confusion pass through the storm-readers. He glanced down at the boy, who face was now encircled with fear. To his own surprise, he said, "I think I can help you adapt to this world."

The crone scowled, but she was the only one.

"We're not staying," the old chemman mumbled. She swept the mortar toward his stomach.

"I saw Darkreign, surely as you did. It's dead beneath your feet. You know this."

"It's our home," another one replied. The point of his sword was even lower now.

"How many of you are left?" Thistle persisted. "You'll all die if you try to open a door that cannot be opened. Neither I, nor my own water of life, can do that for you."

"We saw the shape of the key when last we tried. We need the water of life of the knight, Sir Amthros."

Thistle snorted. "Bad luck. He's dead."

"You knew him in life. Your water is a marker on the map to his. All we need is *your* water to call his to us, traitor."

"Ah." Thistle nodded. Of course they were the same bastards they always had been. Not even taking them to the edge of extinction was enough to change them, apparently. And to think, he'd been one of them until he'd met Laurel.

His head snapped up. "Tell me, have you been here long enough to learn a different style of combat?"

He batted the mortar and pestle from the crone's crooked fingers and then kicked her in the face with an elvish-style front hopping kick. Woman or man didn't matter, she was a chemman.

He ducked and two swords clashed above him. But slower than they should have. He guessed they still couldn't strike out against his orange eyes without feeling a bit of a traitor themselves.

And then he was face to face with the boy. The lad closed his eyes and stuck out his dagger. Thistle clocked him on the ear and pushed him to the side.

He somersaulted through the hole created by the child and sprinted down the alley toward the wharfs.

Mentally, he cursed himself. What could ever make them change?

"What am I doing?" Tom snarled. His hood slid further back on his head, but the sun was hiding behind the clouds. A few raindrops scouted ahead of the oncoming deluge.

Der didn't notice the rain. She just stared with her mouth open.

Behind them, Spike and Jakkobb herded Alsalon to a respectful distance, and pretended not to know them. However, the unicorn's ears remained cocked in their direction.

"What am I doing?" he repeated, grabbing his own forehead.

She raised a hand toward him, but he reeled away. Below, the play continued on, but none of them heard anything, too ensnared by real drama.

“No, *why* am I here? What am I doing with you Der? Is this all so that I can be embarrassed by an actor?”

“I’m embarrassed too.” She shrugged weakly, holding out her hands.

“Why am I believing in this stupid dream of yours? How did I almost miss that’s what I was doing? I am not this, this *stupid*. I’m smarter than you! I know what fires are on your horizon and I refuse—”

Der kicked at the paving stone in front of him. “What are you saying? Is this all because of some stupid play?”

“No!” He whirled his back to her. “I just remembered that I am not alive. How could I ever forget that? I will not burn because of you, Saxen.”

Der tried to gulp, but couldn’t. His rage singed her mind. From what hidden well had all this anger risen? She suddenly realized that she didn’t know him as well as she thought.

He barked a mirthless laugh, and then just walked away. He never looked back. The rain opened its valve and he disappeared into the curtain of water.

Der watched, her hand helpless at her side. She tried to push away the rain between them with that hand, but there was always more rain. He was gone.

Behind her, Alsalon sagged against Spike’s flank. Even Spike and Jakkobb exhaled.

“I sensed that!” Der snapped her fingers and pointed at them.

They splashed through the forming puddles to her. Jakkobb put a hand on her shoulder. “We need to go. The rain will cover us.” He glanced back at the stage, to see how the actors handled the deluge, only to find that the rain was too thick to see all the way. Theater-goers bumped into him as they fled their seats for shelter.

“What about Thistle?” Alsalon tugged on the knight’s arm. “He should’ve been back by now.”

“He knows where we’re going,” Jakkobb replied, sans conviction. “Look, he knows how to handle himself. I’m most worried about you, Your Highness.” He inhaled, “Der, the three of us are walking out the south gate and Spike will fly us around the mountain to the north road. You stay here and watch our backs as best you can in this rain.”

“But—”

“This is the best chance we have to leave. We have to take it.” He exhaled. “I’m sorry for plotting like a critical bastard, but the prince is...”

“Important,” Der finished. “I understand, but I’ll be on my own.”

The knight grinned, “As if that will bother you. You set out alone, didn’t you?”

She dropped her gaze. “No. Kelin was with me.” Her head snapped up. “What about Thistle and Tom? I don’t care if this is the best opportunity!”

"It's not them I'm worried for." His grin suddenly froze in the cold rain. "Der, I know you can do this. Of all the warriors I know, I trust you the most. There, I said it. You're a hero. Just, please, don't pick any extra fights with slayers or vampires. That's not your battle."

"Yes, sir," she muttered.

He forced another smile. "Hey. He'll find us again. He always does."

She sighed. "Yes, sir." But she sensed that his doubt matched her own.

Half an hour later, Der squelched down on a stool at the Chiming Crystal's bar. Her head was still spinning and she hadn't even started drinking yet. The dragoon and prince had no prying eyes follow them out of the south gate.

She banged on the counter with her one good hand. At least Jakkobb had left her some of the local coins. The barkeep plunked down a mug and swept up the money without a word.

She swallowed the bitter ale. Why had he just left so suddenly? Why did it bother her so much? She'd never sensed that intensity of anger in him before, but it felt like it had been there all along. *He* had felt like someone she'd never met in those last few moments.

What now? Just wait for him? The ale in her stomach did a twist. She stared into her mug, watching the patterns on the surface of the foam. Eventually, she finished the ale and then sat and stared at the bar.

A white hand pushed a drink in front of her.

She blinked and held her breath. It was like when she first met him! She whirled.

It wasn't him.

But it was a vampire. Dominic stood there, gripping his own tankard proudly, albeit awkwardly, as if he'd just learned to sit up straight on a horse.

He offered a tight, toothless smile. "This stuff smells like a cat's liver."

Der slouched. "And how would you know that?"

He slipped onto the stool next to hers. "I do dissections sometimes. I'm trying to learn the similarities between the undead and the living."

She paused with her new mug halfway to her mouth. "Living dissections?"

"Do you eat a cow while it's alive? No." He still held his mug to his chest, neither moving it up or down.

"So, in effect, you're studying two corpses."

He shrugged, finally setting his tankard on the bar. "It's the best I can do. No, it's the best I *will* do. But there are differences, even post mortem. What's intriguing is..." he petered out. "Er, well. Um."

“Right,” Der replied.

Dominic frowned and glanced around the common room. “Where are all your friends? I can’t be seen by Tom or otherwise they’ll find out and we’ll all die.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Um. Are they returning soon? I don’t like the idea of him being alone right now.”

Der nearly inhaled a long sip. She dropped the tankard onto the bar. “Well, that’s not my trouble anymore. He left.”

“He *what?!?*”

“He doesn’t need me.”

Dominic grabbed her shoulder and she was surprised at his strength. Yes, he was one of them, and well, she supposed moving books all the time could build up muscle, but she was still surprised to be shaken off her stool.

“You don’t understand, Derora! You’re the only one who can protect him!” He released his grip and she sat back down on her seat. With her one functioning arm, she took another sip of her new drink.

The tavern around them was silent. Everyone was watching them.

Der whispered into her mug, “I’d take a drink if I were you, Dominic.”

He pressed his ale to his chest. “I’ll, I’ll get sick.”

“You’ll get dead if you don’t.” She didn’t need to look. She could sense predatory intent, and the heat was growing like a fire at her back.

He gulped first, and then raised the mug to his face, splashing some against his closed lips. Then he slumped down at the bar, seeming to melt onto the stool.

Der didn’t turn around, but she felt the eyes leaving them. She said, “A vampire yelling at a human in a town full of slayers was probably not your best idea.”

“No, it was my best idea,” he moaned. “I have no idea what I’m doing. I thought that if I just told you, you would take care of all of it for me. Tom wasn’t supposed to leave. That wasn’t part of my idea.”

Der felt like spikes were being driven into her back. Someone or something’s eyes were still on them. Slayers? Chemmen? Vampires? Something else? She didn’t know.

She set down her ale. “We should go.”

As they walked past the tables, Der tried to sense the feeling of anything following them. Of course, she looked with her eyes too, but no one appeared to glance at them as they passed by. That itself was a sign.

But, outside, she felt no more prying eyes driving nails in between her shoulder blades. She

stretched her shoulders. Nothing prickled.

Dominic still held the tankard against his chest.

Der exhaled. "Why is this town so full of hunters? It's summer, there's hardly any night this far north."

"It is often overcast." He paused, gazing at the ground. "Because. You cannot repeat this. Because it's close to the Kingdom's physical camp. They suspect, but they don't know. You cannot, *cannot* tell anyone I told you that."

"I won't," she sighed. The road sloped downhill toward the docks with a few twists and turns to take the edge off the city's rise up the mountain behind them.

"He needs you, you know."

Der paused and then exhaled. "We had another fight, alright?"

"Then you find him and apologize. I don't care if you mean it. You have to keep him safe or he'll die and Avamar will have the heartstone!"

"He can keep himself safer without me. He's proven that."

"Not against the blood, Derora! I know you don't understand this, but that's why he needs you. You are our enemy, but you aren't his. That's the key!"

"Your enemy?" She cocked an eyebrow.

"The war! Paladins had so many powers, especially against us. But that particular check on our power hasn't existed in centuries, and Avamar is using that. The old sire of sires was far more cautious, studying his own private pursuit. Hell, he even bred and left a son on the throne so he wouldn't be bothered by ruling."

"Dominic," Der interrupted. "You're rambling."

"Again?" He offered his sheepish, fanged smile. "Sorry. Anyway, paladins. During the war, we know that not one was turned to our side. Not one."

"Stop, please. Did you forget how fractured human history is? I didn't even know there was a war."

"Centum Wars? The Skyfire Revolution? You didn't know about that one?"

She shook her head. "Most of the history of the Centum Wars was lost when Pallens fell. I learned a lot from the elves and dragoons, but no one ever mentioned vampires."

He frowned. "Well, that's a good thing for us, I suppose. Uh, in summation, upon summer solstice marking the new year, a princess of the kingdom of Demar, long disappeared these days of course—"

"Summation?" Der repeated.

"Paladins and vampires were ancient foes back when Pallens was around. They drove us to Solquin long ago," he finished hastily.

“And this ties in with the legend of stone and bone, how?”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t. No one was that stupid back then. Or,” he corrected, watching Der’s glare, “People were more educated as to how dangerous the myth is. Actually, in truth, I doubt any of them knew much of the legend. Even then.”

She tossed up her hand.

He continued, “I thought that our ancient enemy, resurrected in you, would cause Avamar to hesitate. Perhaps even surrender his pursuit of the bones and heartstone. Where one goes the other shall follow. This is why you have to protect Tom.”

Der dropped her chin to her chest. “I wish I could, but I don’t think he’d let a one-armed paladin stand next to him. He knows how to take care of himself – more so than I ever thought, especially with a bounty on his head from your Kingdom.”

“He has the heart now. It’s not the same. That thing will fracture his mind. That’s why he’s probably getting erratic. Perhaps seeming like someone whom you’ve never met.”

Der scowled. “How did you know that?”

“I know the legend.”

They walked in silence down the slope toward the sea. Finally, Dominic added, “You are Mendelin and Tara, I see. You’re stars, shining. But you both are going to burn out quickly enough. Everyone can see that.”

“Not him,” she whispered. “He’s lasted this long.”

“He’s never shone until now. Until you.” He stopped walking. “The midnight sun is drawing nigh. Holy and unholy astride was and shall be again the downfall of the legend. You need to know this. I can show you everything.”

Der held her breath for a moment. “At what cost?”

His dark eyes met hers. “Probably your life and Tom’s.”

Tom sat on the wooden roof of a lamp and candle shop, deep in its shadow. In the window, an early spring rose bloomed into flame. The maker must have had a mold, because Tom had seen a dozen of the candles piled underneath the table. However, the seller had sprinkled fresh shavings around the lone candle’s base, to show customers that he’d been up all night carving it.

The scent of it drifted up and over the roof. At least it smelled like a rose.

Nothing masked the blood. He sat with his ancient knife against his wrist and sliced again. The blood slid down his skin, as smoothly as silk, before his wound crackled with the heart’s crimson fire and kissed itself closed again. He watched it patter onto the metal roof and spread. The pattern

opened up to look like the petals of a rose.

A rose. The symbol of secrecy back in old Pallens. He hadn't existed to be made to serve in the Skyfire Revolution, but now he'd been under the heel of the first paladin in this age of history.

He cut again. He barely even felt his own knife anymore. It healed.

"I hate that girl. Has to be a lie." He dipped his knife below his skin again. "Because it can't be real. Impossible. But, oh wait, paladins aren't real either. Therefore, she is a lie." He sighed as the fire sizzled against his white wrist. "Everything's a lie. How did I *ever* forget that?"

A shadow draped over him, and he looked up to see a woman sitting cross-legged on a chimney.

Amelia smiled. "Easy to find you with that scent over half the port by now." She nodded to his wrist.

The knife disappeared about his person and Tom glared up at the other vampire. Even in the gray daylight and with her head covered with a hood, he could see her face.

"You changed your hair."

She dragged a lock in front of her nose, inhaling its scent. "I thought darker would be better up here." She slipped silently down the chimney to sit next to him, bumping his arm with hers and showing no regard to personal space.

"Your nose, too."

She rolled her eyes, which were no longer red. "Yes."

"And your cheekbones are higher."

She shrugged. "It's as far as I could get in such a short time. I didn't want your friends recognizing me."

"They are not my friends."

"I know. Glad you do too."

Tom shrugged.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "I do want to be free. That wasn't a lie. I'm sorry I tried to control you. I'd forgotten that there was another way."

He jerked his shoulder up, dislodging her. "Just go away."

"No." She walked her fingers up his sleeve. "You have to return to the Kingdom. Whether you go or be dragged, that's sort of a choice. You knew your run was only a temporary sprint. Maybe to smell the unchained air, but that was all you got. You did know that, right?"

"I did until recently," he replied softly.

She tugged him closer to her. "Come with me. You can at least save the Kingdom from a false sire before you perish."

He shook his head. "I'm not a hero."

“The name Thomas Delauncey certainly is. You’ll need a new name now.”

Chapter Eleven

Legend

Tom rubbed his healed wrist and then scratched it open again with a fingernail. The wound instantly sealed, but not before a few more drops fell to the metal roof like rain. He leaned his head back against the chimney and let his gaze drift down toward the bay. He didn't even look at Amelia.

"I refuse to return to the Kingdom."

"You can't refuse."

"I just did. And obviously, you're not strong enough to make me."

She twirled her hair underneath her hood playfully. "Oh, just wait long enough. Who knows? Perhaps you will survive. You made it farther than anyone has before."

"That we know about." He groaned and banged the back of his head against the brick.

"And now you're famous. But, ah, not quite a *living* legend." She snickered and pushed her nose back against her face. When she removed her hand, it was just barely wider than it had been before.

"Your hair, your nose," Tom snarled. "You're trying to look like Der. I'm not stupid."

Amelia shrugged. "That's as obvious as this cute little nose on my face. And why shouldn't I? You listen to her."

"I do not."

She twittered. "Oh, you're such a good liar. You can even lie to yourself!" She wrinkled her new nose and flared her nostrils. "So, are you ready to give up on that fantasy and come home?"

Tom curled his hand into a fist. "I know that you're closer to the blood than I. But I know more about the powers of this heart than anyone ever has. I'm sure of it." He pulled himself to his feet, fists ready at his sides. "You want to say that one *final* time?"

Amelia smirked.

Tom growled and pushed himself up. He didn't even bother to look at her while he hopped over the alley between rooftops.

The wind picked up her scornful laugh. "You'll choose me in the end. We both know it! But you'd better run, between the chemmen warriors, vampires and slayers in this town, how long do you think she'll last with one arm?"

"How long until you can use that arm?" Dominic reached out as if to touch her sling, but jerked his hand back. "Sorry."

Der shrugged. "I don't know." Instead of watching him as earnestly as he stared at her, she let her gaze stretch deep into the fog rolling over the docks. Hers were the only footfalls on the stout wood.

"Why not just heal it?" he asked.

"I am," she replied. "It's a much slower process for us mortals."

"No, no, no. You really don't know, do you?" He took a turn down another wharf, twisting near the mountainside, where the sea suddenly stopped and the earth reached up to the sky.

Der frowned, realizing that she was following him. It was a subtle lead, disguised in conversation, but he was picking the route. She glanced down at the dock – she probably couldn't pry up a chunk of wood if she needed to.

She knew what he was. There were hundreds of sailors nearby on the docks, but in this fog, she felt alone, and he appeared much taller away from a crowd. And that was the thing about vampires, they were winsome and witty until they suddenly weren't.

Dominic tripped over an abandoned mooring line, smashing face-first into the wooden dock.

"Ow." He nursed his broken cheek, which was already blossoming into an impressive purple shade. "It'll heal. It'll heal. Just give me a..."

Crack! He snapped the bone back into place. He looked up at her, with that hopeless, sheepish little smile.

Der sighed, and hesitated a little, but offered her good arm down to help him stand.

He took her hand and bounced back to his feet. "You know you can heal like that too! Or, at least, that's the way other paladins did it back in the war. Or so I was told," he added immediately.

"I, er, what?"

"You can heal like that. It's a divine gift."

Der dropped his hand. "If it is, it's one I didn't get."

"Well, have you ever asked for it?"

She blinked. "What?"

"Asked your gods for it. Not now, please! I don't want to be... you know," he dropped his voice to a whisper, "In the light."

"You are a very strange person," she drawled dully.

His face shone like a full moon. He barked a laugh. "You're the enemy and you called me a person! Haha! I'm not the one who is strange!" He grabbed her arm and pulled. "Come on! It's low tide, so we have to go now."

"What? Go where?" She banged her heels against the dock. "Oh no!" She jerked her hand free and bounced to a stop. "The clouds are moving too fast! Look!"

Dominic whirled out to face the sea. “What?” He spun back around, tugging his cowl farther over his face as the clouds overhead rapidly evaporated.

Der smiled as the sun’s warmth spilled across her face. She hadn’t felt it this warm since they’d come north.

“Damn earth events,” Dominic groaned, ducking to his knees.

“Earth event?” The solar warmth heated up her face even more. Der shaded her eyes as they suddenly widened. “Look at that!”

Three suns beamed their light across Staghorn. Searing white washed away all color from everything. Der found herself squinting and then just closing her eyes against the brightness. Steam instantly rose of the glacial fed sound. Distantly, she heard wooden cracking and pops as the ships and docks, bathed in freezing water, were being warmed by three suns.

Dominic rolled into a ball on the dock and moaned. “This...is the worst...yet.”

She felt his fear and pain, and reeled away from it. She wished she could only imagine how he burned.

She tried to force her eyes to open. A loose piece of wood from the pier was curling and her cloak was far too warm, but she wanted to keep it as a shield. Steam was rising off the black-faced mountain now, and rocks were starting to tumble down its slopes. She shifted her own feet, the wood feeling far too hot through her boots.

Her clothes already laden with her sweat and she gasped for air, even glancing down into the supposedly ice-cold waters below. Out in the bay, the small iceberg popped and shattered, exploding into thousands of floating fragments.

“If this keeps up, the glaciers are going to—” he bit off his sentence in a sob of agony. Steam, or possibly smoke, was rising up from underneath his heavy cloak.

Der remembered the glacier melting a year ago, high up in the mountains. Those mountains were now some of the deepest lakes in the world, having been turned inside out by another earth event.

“But why?” she asked, yelling out to the world. “Why?”

She tried to look, and slowly, the outlines of ships became visible. Not because her eyes were adjusting, but the two extra suns were shrinking.

Dominic rolled on the dock, whimpering like a kicked puppy as the excess lights faded. The clouds reformed overhead, but the vampire kept whining.

“How strong are you not to burn up from that?” she asked before the thought had even fully formed in her mind.

He tugged at his cloak with his gloved hand. He gasped, “Shielded. I’m fine. I’m just the

librarian.”

And then he fainted. After a moment, Der nudged him with her boot.

Thistle hung by his fingertips on the outside of the city wall. At least the stone here was stout, volcanic rock, and not some thin limestone he could punch through with his fist. Then again, it was also very slick with the near constant rain. He stuck out his boot, trying to find a hold.

Hanging on the outside of wall hadn't been part of his plan. He'd given his countrymen this: they still knew how to think like him. Alternately, he still thought like they did when under pressure. He cursed under his breath.

Boots shook the wall just enough that it vibrated under his hands. The storm-readers were that close. He imagined they'd killed whatever poor souls had been watching the wall by now.

At least it was dark and foggy, and the stones were black and gray, so they could easily miss his gloved fingertips.

He needed them to, or else this was going to be a twenty foot drop onto what was most likely hard rock below.

Smoke was rising from somewhere. He sniffed. What fire was burning?

The stone beneath his fingers began to spike in warmth as the world became seared into shades of white and black. This wasn't the storm-readers' light. This was somehow worse.

Thistle flexed his fingers. The leather on his gloves was starting to heat up. What had happened to the clouds? He tried to crane his neck up, but it was suddenly too bright.

He thrust out his foot, trying to find a thin ledge to place his weight. Something. Anything.

Footsteps echoed above. Someone was sprinting down the wall and cussing. Thistle slowed his breath and ceased all movement. He swore he could hear his gloves sizzling on the hot stone.

“Thistle?” Tom's voice called. “I know it's you. I can smell you.”

The chemman didn't dare raise his head. “The others?”

“No one here! I'm stuck in the shadow by the watchtower near some recently deceased guards. What the blazes is happening?”

Thistle didn't waste breath replying. Already it was too bright to see, and getting too hot to hold on.

“Where's Der?” Tom demanded.

The chemman resumed trying to find a foothold. He grunted. “Don't know. Probably with Jakkobb on the road. They had the prince, you know they had to go.”

“Good.” After a moment, he said, “I can't open my eyes, man.”

Thistle glanced below. It was a twenty foot drop onto rocks, but at least... He dared a peek; the

ground was no longer in shadow. Steam rose like smoke from the black rocks below, and it hissed like a viper pit.

He could feel blisters bubbling up from where his gloves were starting to burn through. His fingers felt like they were melting, and it was getting slick with sweat.

He could no longer force his eyes open and instead remained hugging the wall in shadow. Beads of sweat coalesced and dripped down onto his boots from underneath his tunic and cloak. The extra weight made him sag against the wall.

His body lurched as a thumb gave way. The stone was too slick and he was too exhausted to take any more weight. He didn't dare try to re-grip the precipice, lest all of his fingers slide free.

Slip! His index finger of the same hand gave way, and like pebbles before a rockslide, he felt both hands helplessly sliding toward the edge.

Overhead, the glow began to fade from the skies, but he was too focused to see it. Again, he kicked in vain to find a foothold.

He fell free from the wall.

His body jerked to a stop, one foot over the edge.

Tom didn't grin or even grunt, but held the chemman's arm with determination. He said, "We can't stay here."

Thistle nodded as Tom lifted him to safety. He scowled. "Thank you."

Tom shrugged.

"We'll be safer in the Crystal Forest."

This time, the vampire looked wary. "I wouldn't wager on that."

Dominic's black-on-black eyes bounced open. He was still on the dock, but Der had rigged up her cloak as a lean-to strung over him. There certainly was enough extra rope around.

She was throwing a knife into a nearby pole, retrieving it and throwing it again.

He coughed, and few flecks of ash scattered out of his mouth. He gulped. "S-Sorry."

She shrugged, pulling the knife free from the pole one last time.

"Should take down cloak. Slayers. They notice."

She shrugged again. "Are you alright?"

He nodded.

"I always thought these earth events were because of the Blackhound. He showed up right when they started."

Dominic shook his head. "Blackhound's not important enough. This is the legend of stone and

bone. The earth remembers. This happened before the Battle of the Bridge, and I'd heard a rumor that was about the crystal demon's skull."

"I see. What is the legend?"

He frowned. "Not even speaking the words is safe. But I can show you." He pulled himself to his knees and wobbled for balance. "Is it still low tide?"

Der, who had never even seen an ocean until last year, shrugged. "Um. The boats are still low against the docks. You weren't out too long."

He groaned as he jerked himself to his feet. "Good. Come on." He plodded down the dock, his boots thumping heavily against the wood. "We won't be safe, but I hear that's your profession," he said, with a spark of his educated enlightenment again.

"Safe as in sneaking off with a vampire?" She slowed, surprised at her own words, but that was often the case; her mouth never consulted her mind. "Sorry."

"No, you're right." He tossed her a wan smile. "How about this? *Both* are dangerous." He slowed to a halt. "Decision is yours."

"I don't." She sighed. "I don't even know much about your ilk. Tom's not very loose lipped."

Now his smile turned sympathetic. "Those that are, they don't last." He started walking again, but slowly. "What do you want to know?"

And faced with the opportunity of having the answers to the hundreds of questions that had plagued her ever since the night Tom had kidnapped her, she promptly said, "Um."

He supplied, "We can starve to death. Starvation leads to decomposition and if too far gone, then it's over." He shrugged. "Also, something that destroys the entire body can destroy us, like, um, say complete incineration. And I mean complete, not just a burnt husk. Or digestion by a magical creature – not easy, but I've seen, well, *read* of our kind being eaten by dragons never to rise again. I mean, we could heal if we had access to blood. Probably."

"You can heal better if you have blood?"

He nodded.

Der frowned thoughtfully. "So, feeding isn't some insane hunger driven by a curse?"

"No." Dominic scowled. "The only thing that changes is that blood is the single food that can sustain us. We're forced to cannibalize and kill just to survive, and well, survive is only a word in the Common tongue. It's not the same thing as your survival."

"I know. I get it."

"We're dead. Undead. We have no water of life."

"I get it!"

They neared the edge of the dock, and the shadow of the sheer, black mountain loomed over them. Dominic hopped down off the edge.

Der waited for the splash, but there wasn't one. She looked down. He was standing on the surface of the water. "I can't fly," she said.

"What?" He looked down at his boots. "Neither can I. I mean I can hover a little. Get the scrolls up high, but that's it." He stamped his feet, sending up little splashes. "Low tide, there are rocks on this side, that's why no ships dock here." He held up his hand. "It's a bit of a drop. But, ah, last chance to walk away."

Der sat down on the edge of the dock and swung her legs off. She splashed down onto a thin chain of rocks just below the water's surface. She wobbled as one heel sunk lower than the other and stuck her left arm out for balance.

"Whoa!"

Dominic's hand flashed out to steady her.

"Thanks," she said.

"We have to hurry." He didn't let go of her arm and tugged her across the rocks.

Der's danced on her toes to keep her balance while he dragged her faster than she would've moved on her own. Icy water splashed up onto her legs, and clung to her trousers.

"You're fast," he commented.

"And you're very well balanced," she gasped, staring hard at the rocks. The blue-green glacial water skewed their depth underneath the surface, making it impossible to guess exactly where her foot was going to land.

"What?" His left knee knocked into his right leg and he bobbed. "You made me lose my concentration. I was doing so well too." He offered yet another weak, sheepish grin. He cleared his throat as they continued on, but slower.

He pointed to a small stone cliff jutting straight up out of the sea. Water splashed tirelessly against its base and the fog was returning to cling to the rocks. Pine trees sprouted up from its top.

He jumped from the last of the rocks to the cliff and turned and offered his hand. "Almost there."

Ignoring his hand, Der made the tenuous hop from the water to the cliff. She reached out and pulled herself up. She dug her knees and her toes into the rocks and started to climb with her good arm. Her sling banged uselessly against the stone.

Dominic rose like a spider. He knelt at the top and waited for her. "I hope this information serves you well, and sooner than you'd think."

A small warning bell started sounding in her mind. She paused, three quarters of the way up the

natural wall. She raised an eyebrow. "Why? Where are we going?"

He held up his hands. "It's too late to turn back now. I have to show you the legend."

"Right," she grunted, hauling herself up the rest of the way. "Because your regent wants to be this sire of sires."

Dominic's head bobbed up and down. "And if he gets both the stone and bone, he might be powerful enough to do it."

Der circled around him, putting the forest to her back and he and the cliff in front of her. "Are you here on someone's orders? Are you truly acting on your own?"

He raised his hands. "I already told you, it's too late—"

"Maybe for you, but not for me. Look, I know I can't trust you, but—"

"Yes! Yes! I am not doing this for Tom and certainly not for you, but," he gulped, "I care about my people. We're wicked, damned and lost souls, who don't even have free will most of the time, but we still strive to survive in some fashion. Isn't that worth something? Maybe not even to the gods, but it's worth something to me. Isn't that enough to be a person?"

"I..."

He pointed at her chest. "You gave *him* a chance."

Der clenched her jaw and started to tap her foot. "But like Amelia, you're trapped in a world where your superiors can literally command your body and mouth."

"But not always our minds." Dominic met her gaze and this time, he didn't flinch. "Which is why I have to preserve the Kingdom as it is. Avamar cannot utter his false claim to be the sire of sires. We have order, a hierarchy, and it will be chaos and death for all the peoples of this land if that breaks." He lowered his hands and gestured to the thick pines. "To do this, he will even resurrect the greatest nightmare before history began, and that will destroy everything, living and dead, perhaps make it so our world never existed. He doesn't understand the power of the legend."

"So our world never existed?" Der echoed.

Dominic bit his lower lip, dropped his eyes and nodded. "It can undo what has been done. And Tom is the person the world revolves around now. He can't become a meal for Avamar."

Der dumbly shook her head, still trying to swallow the idea of undoing the past, not to mention the present world.

He pushed aside some of the thinner pine branches, trying to touch as little of the wood as possible. Droplets soaked his sleeve. "And you can't trust anyone. Not even people you know."

"I don't think your little vampire hypnosis can work around Sp— some of us," she finished with a shrug.

Dominic replied, "I hope so. We're all psychic, it comes with dying. Some are much, much more than others." Again, he stared at the ground. "I can't even command a cow to eat grass."

He pushed through a final curtain of pine to reveal a small pool cupped in a large shelf of basalt. No more trees sprouted up onto the rock. He knelt at the edge of the water and waited.

Der gasped as she put a foot on the rock. She felt as if every piece of exposed skin had been stung, and burning poison was spreading rapidly throughout her entire body.

She tipped forward, waiting for her clothes to catch fire.

Dominic didn't move.

She gulped and groaned, but forced every cubic inch of muscle up into a seated position in front of the pool. It was like glaring at the bonfire from a foot way, it was too intense. And this was water, not fire!

She concentrated on breathing. In and out. She thought hard on the rhythm, and after a moment, was able to slow herself.

Bowing her head, she waited, watching sweat run down her nose and fall onto the stone.

Dominic stared into the water. "Before I show you, you must agree to keep Thomas from the Kingdom and its claws. At *any* cost."

"Any cost?" Der repeated.

"Even if you have to slay him yourself."

She closed her eyes. "I'm not sure if I can promise that."

"You don't understand!" His black eyes widened, and for the first time, he snarled. "If you fail, we may all never have been born. Everyone, everything, everywhere. And you value a corpse over all of this?"

"Hey! You just said back there you were doing this for your people!"

"People, yes. Person, no." He exhaled and glared into the water. "I'm sorry. I didn't. I think it's this thing's influence. You must feel it too."

She nodded.

"Holy and unholy must be kept apart because even though they are the only thing that can destroy the legend; they are the only thing that could truly awaken it as well."

Der scowled, trying very hard not to remember the heart beating in Tom's hand in that hidden chamber in the monastery. What did they awaken?

"That's why we must be enemies." He shook his head. "It's starting, see? This is a history that all races share, even if they have forgotten." He looked back at her. "Those who hid the bone, they scattered, venturing to unknown lands in order to bury tiny fragments all over the world and

underneath oceans. Many of them died or took their own lives far away so that they could tell no one where they'd hidden their piece.

"I don't know how Avamar knew the legend. He wasn't old enough and he didn't study. But he knew they were power, and so he searched in vain. For centuries, I believe. He did it in secret, so I don't know how long. Then, suddenly, one night, a few years ago, a fragment of bone was found. Out of the wild. It was in the Crystal Forest." The vampire laughed mournfully, "Ha. Crystal in crystal."

Der frowned. Crystal in crystal. That sounded familiar. She knew she'd heard that before somewhere.

She snapped her fingers. "The bones were crystal! What kind of demon has crystal bones?"

Dominic waved his hand over the pool. Landscapes and oceans rose up and formed a tactile map on the surface. Der waved her hand over a mountain range, inching up over the valleys below it.

She also glanced at her and Dominic's reflections in the map. His face was so sad that she looked away.

He, instead, looked directly at her.

"Nature is about balance. You know this. Where there is a poison, there is a natural antidote. Where there is abundance, there is famine. Where there is life, there is death. When a world comes into being, there is a power to cease that world's existence. There is nothing. Such were these things, born at the same moment as the world."

Two massive creatures reared out of nothing. One was slouched and gray, like a rolling boulder. The other, though, looked like a man caught halfway into transforming into a dragon. It had wings, it had claws, but it had a face. An outraged face, ready to tear the sun out of the sky, ready to burn the kingdoms and forests off the world and boil the oceans away.

"Two demon brothers," Der breathed. "One of bone."

"One of stone. Where one goes, the other shall follow."

The two creatures marched across the watery world, and where they walked, the images collapsed back into regular water. Where they walked, the new world faded into nothing.

"They could command every demon. Such was the force of their will for destruction that they attempted to destroy each other. Destruction was all they knew." Dominic bowed his head. "They weakened each other in battle, and somehow, that was enough. The crystal demon slew his brother, but fell dormant in his injured state because he was so weakened. Clutching its brother's heart, apparently.

"It was enough to unite the world, even holy and unholy creatures alike, and to destroy the crystal demon. They gave it a name, Soschen. They broke its bones into thousands of fragments and threw

them to the corners of the world. They gave the heart to a secret cabal of monks so the two would never unite again. Bone fragments and a stone heart, that's what they left behind. Those are the keys."

Der leaned her weight back on her heels. "And Avamar wants Soschen's power. That's why he's collecting the bone fragments."

"Yes, but I'm not sure it's only Soschen's power he'll get. I'm afraid that the demon might be resurrected again, and continue on trying to destroy the world and claim its brother's heart."

"Tom," Der whispered. "But no, he *needs* it to—"

"You're the only one who can save Tom's heart. The more your friend uses it, the more the bones will call to it. And, that kind of power, it's too much, even for a vampire. It'll fracture his mind, and he'll become something like those demons. This is why you might have to slay him."

Der shook her head. "No, I won't."

"You say it so certainly now."

"But he can't take it out. He'll die!"

Dominic shook his head. "He's already dead. Besides, the vampire, ahem, the *man* you knew will have already long faded before the shadow of the midnight sun."

Der turned her face away, trying to push a sudden attack of tears back into her eyes. "What?" She felt herself pressing against her helplessness, trying to mold it into anger. "It's the sun. It doesn't have a shadow and it doesn't rise at midnight!"

"You're going to Cedar Vale, aren't you?" he asked softly, still staring at the water. "You'll see the midnight sun." He waved his hand, and the world collapsed back into the pool. He pointed. "Look."

Der held her breath and hung her face over the water. She squinted through the few tears still trying to escape to the bottom of the pool. A sliver of something brown rested in the center.

"Avamar doesn't know about this one."

She gulped. "That's... That doesn't look like crystal at all."

Dominic shook his head. "Not when they're dormant." He stood, but kept his chin bowed to his chest. "There is no check on our power without the paladins. There is no check on Avamar with the king and prince away on pilgrimage. There's only *you*, and you're not enough to stand against the Kingdom. I'm sorry, Derora Saxen, but you are not enough to defeat the blood. But you are enough to scare Avamar, and that might be enough to buy Tom the time he'll need."

Chapter Twelve

Breakdown

Prince Alsalon jerked his hood further over his face, splattering icy rain across his hand. "This shouldn't be called the Crystal Forest. It should be the Rainy Forest." Over his head, water slipped through the pine needles and onto his already soaked cloak.

Jakkobb paused rubbing down Spike's massive shoulder. "Maybe you're right about that." He rolled his eyes. "Then again, this whole forest is bigger than most of the human kingdoms on Solquin."

Spike raised his nose and sniffed, glancing down at the road, obscured by most of the trees and their vantage point.

"And is it usually this bright up here?" the prince continued. "I thought Staghorn was on fire."

Spike and Jakkobb exchanged a glance. "Probably an earth event," the knight said.

I hope Strival has some leads by now. The unicorn pawed the ground with a hoof.

Alsalon dinged his bear bell with his fingernail.

"Ahem." A voice from behind them cracked. "I think we might be safer with the bears."

They whirled to see Thistle leaning a shoulder against a pine. Tom stood behind him, glaring as usual.

"Where's Der?" the vampire snapped.

"She was supposed to meet us here." Jakkobb shrugged.

Tom's face remained entirely blank, but the knuckles on one hand cracked as he bunched a tight fist.

Why are you worried? Spike drawled. *If that girl couldn't fight, she'd been in several graves by now.*

Tom exploded, "Because I'm pretty sure the vampires are hunting her to find me, and she can't stop pissing off the slayers! And it's all her fault!"

"Don't forget the chemmen," Thistle added mildly.

Tom crunched his jaws together. Branches broke and mud splattered as he stomped down toward the road.

Jakkobb exhaled. "This is why I don't take holidays."

They had left the bone in the pool. Der kept her eyes on the corners and shadows as she and

Dominic sidled off the docks and into town. She felt like part of a conspiracy. She never had been in one of those before. Well, not as one of the insiders. She had always been on the outside of the plan, kicking down its walls and letting the sun shine on it.

She shook her head and brought herself to the present moment. Her eyes wandered around the streets between the warehouses, marking how all the people dressed and what weapons they carried.

Dominic smirked. "You'll never see them."

"Watching for chemmen, actually," she whispered.

His surprise blossomed in her mind. He blinked. "Chemmen? Here? I don't be—"

The warehouse they were walking past exploded.

Der heard the wood cracking as it shredded and then it was so loud that she heard nothing at all except a ringing in her ears.

An invisible wall of force blasted her into the air and sent her sprawling down the hill toward the docks. She tucked and rolled with it, helpless to stand up against the explosion. The brisance ripped apart the warehouse, and cracked the paving stones underfoot. Fiery debris crashed down onto her back and shoulders.

As soon as she was able to stop, she rocked to her heels and jumped up. She smeared sweat, blood and smoking debris together across her forehead. She shook her head, trying to dislodge whatever cotton was locked her in ears.

"Dominic!" She couldn't hear her own voice, but her throat felt raw. "Dominic!"

She saw him, splayed out where the warehouse wall had been. His clothes were on fire and his eyes were closed. He looked dead, *was* dead. A large chunk of wooden debris stuck up from his chest, right over where his heart should be.

"Dominic!" she screamed a third time.

A tall, sturdily-built man walked out of the fire. Der squinted at him while her vision tilted and blurred. She couldn't trust it, because no one comes ambulating out of an explosion dressed for the opera.

His velvet cloak sloped down his shoulders and long, dark hair seeped out of his covered hood. His boots made no sound as he stepped over the burning wreckage.

Der staggered toward him, still squinting, trying to see under the stranger's shadowed hood. She pointed as his gaze settled on her.

"Chemman!" she breathed, seeing his orange eyes.

"You are correct," he said.

She took a step back, left hand going to her swordbelt. She saw that one of his gloves wasn't complete, it had burned away and so had the skin underneath it. Two bones were visible, a knuckle and one of the bones connecting the hand to the wrist. He also wore a sword with no sheath on his belt. The blade was made of sharpened, blackened wood.

He took a step at her. "Although I haven't been a chemman in quite some time." His eyes flashed red. He clapped his gloved hands once. "Where is my stone? The whore seems to have failed."

Whore? Der thought. Who could—

"Ah. Amelia is the name she used with you. I had no idea what one she might pick." The vampire frowned. "I'm disturbed my servant gave such an important mission to something so apparently weak."

How did he know that? She stumbled back another step and remembered what Dominic had said. They were all psychic.

"Well surmised," the chemman vampire smirked. "Who is this Dominic?"

Is this him? she wondered. Is this Avamar?

"That is my current name, yes." She watched as he removed a long needle from a pocket. "I was always afraid the gods might resurrect your breed. I am never without. Although this is certainly overkill, it's good to have fun before the end, hm?"

He uncurled his fingers from the needle and let it fall toward the ground.

It stuck in the joint between two paving stones. An opaque bubble of darkness encased it now, making it impossible to see. The smooth rocks all along the street began to shake as though they were in a small earthquake. The stones hissed as steam erupted between its cracks.

In the opposite of a flash, the darkness expanded.

Der stuck out her hand. This wasn't night; this was like the blackness of a cave. Her eyes could never adjust. There was no sound either. She reached out with her empathic sense, trying to find the vampire as she danced backward on a street that was rapidly disintegrating beneath her.

And her sense was thrown right back at her. She reeled away from an invisible slap as her power failed.

There was always one thing she could rely on. She drew the Pallens sword. Her heel scraped the pavement as she inched back a step. She didn't know where to turn her blade.

Her foot shifted again in a small lurch. She sniffed. Nothing, no sense of smell either.

This time, both her feet lurched. She picked up a boot, it felt heavier, as if she'd been walking through mud.

The street beneath tangibly sank several feet. She felt that, just as she could feel her heart trying

to explode out of her chest. And this vampire lord could strike at any time, and she'd never see, hear, smell it coming.

Her heart started beating faster and her breath slowed. She felt something stirring, glowing within. She closed her eyes and remembered the faces of the gods. She felt them with her, within her, shining like the sun in this moment of total darkness.

Der felt their powers rising within; she had to release it or explode. She threw up her arm, sword held high, and yelled.

A globe of light surrounded her and chased away the darkness. Both vanished with her shout. The ruined street lay several feet lower than the surrounding avenues.

She brought the sword on guard. The chemman vampire hadn't moved. He sneered. Half of his face was burnt, with red and black flesh hanging off his cheek. And it wasn't instantly healing.

She smirked. Then she almost turned her eyes away from him. Amelia stood behind him, lost in the crowd, but Der knew it was her. She could recognize her emotions like a dog recognizes the smells of people. In her peripheral vision, Der could've sworn she'd glanced at a pale mirror.

The chemman vampire moved too fast. He drew a whip from his belt and it cracked. It curled around one of Der's ankles, and he yanked her off her feet with ease.

She cursed as she landed on her back. Pain echoed through her shoulder blades. She pushed herself up on her left arm's elbow, still clutching her sword.

Avamar's shadow fell across her.

He put his boot against her left arm, pinning it to the ground. "How about no arms, hm?" He eased his weight onto it, warning that the pressure could increase until her flesh was putty on the pavement.

Der raised her heel and stamped her foot against his shin. At least, she meant to, but he was fast enough to lift his foot, kick her leg out of the way and slam her arm back down the ground before she could move it.

Slayers, she thought, this town was a well of them, surely they'd come running.

"I do not care for flies. Now, show me where the heart is and I'll make it quick." He tilted his head to the side. "Oh, so you aren't afraid of torture." His head flitted the other way. "Make that, most torture."

Like the elvish song in Riversbridge, she felt her memories being opened up and read through like a book. But unlike before, this was uninvited and yanked her thoughts out by the root.

"But you do fear acid. Easy to make in these volcanic highlands."

And you are a chemman, she groaned internally, trying to smash down on that memory. It seemed like ages ago, surely she'd be over that fear by now? After all she'd been through!

She sensed another vampire's approach. Oh great, the bastard had more friends. She tried to peer

around Avamar.

But the vampire lord consumed her field of vision. “Little holy bug, show me where the heart is.”

She tried to focus. “Behind you.”

The vampire paused. Der blinked and stared past him, willing herself to be surprised. But he always did have a habit of just showing up. Who knew how long he’d been watching?

The undead chemman placed a hand over the burnt half of his face before turning around.

Tom snarled, revealing one fang.

“The lone soldier,” Avamar said, still covering his face. His visible eye suddenly flared red. “Submit.”

Tom growled and closed his eyes, standing firm, trembling against an unseen force. Finally, he reopened his emerald orbs and tapped his chest. “With this, you can’t command me.” He still slouched forward and sagged in a moment of exhaustion.

He held up his pale hand and removed the glove. Keeping his hand in the overcast shadow, crimson flames licked up his fingernails, not burning him. The fires strove higher and took the form of claws. Long, sharp, burning claws. The fire was thick enough to have tangible weight.

Der heaved herself up. “No, Tom, don’t! Don’t use the—”

The vampire lord’s whip flashed again, striking Der across her good shoulder and stealing her balance again. She crashed back down in a yelp of pain. She had felt her skin snap open to a large laceration.

Tom didn’t move his gaze from Avamar, who chuckled deep inside his throat. “This is promising.” He raised his own gloved hand. First, a black spiral started to spin above his hand. Then, above that, a golden, fiery glow popped into life. It was miniature, but unmistakable.

Der’s jaw dropped. A vampire wielding sunlight? She stopped halfway into taking the first step to charge Avamar’s back.

Tom shook his head at her.

The magic sun expanded in volume, but Avamar was protected from its light by the black, opaque film. She could feel its heat from here.

Tom moved his fiery, clawed hand out of shadow, readying for the strike. His hand started to smoke, even in the cloudy light of day. Maybe the old myth about burning up was true. No one who survived in their underworld had been stupid enough to fully test it.

Avamar hurled the sun at the other vampire.

Tom’s hand flashed. His claws diced the oncoming fire and instantly turned them to glass. The pieces clinked against the street at his feet as they landed. The yellow glow faded.

He brought his clawed hand in front of his face. “You can’t win this with magic, not against the heart.”

“So be it.” The vampire lord straightened his cloak. He brought the whip out to his side. “I am far closer to the blood – I am about to be the blood – you can’t win this with strength.”

“We’re finished talking!” Tom threw himself at Avamar, striking with his extended claws.

The other vampire stood stock still and lowered his hand from his face. New blood and cuts erupted from his other cheek. But, before Tom could get away, he landed a bone-shattering punch against his attacker’s ribs.

Tom hopped back, holding his bones until they could realign. Avamar glared at him, cuts burning with crimson flame. Both sides of his face were ruined. Fiery cuts on one, and burnt flesh falling off his skull on the other.

The chemman vampire raised his whip again and snapped it forward. Only half of the leather snaked out, striking the ground feet in front of Tom; the back half of the whip had been neatly severed. He glared over his shoulder to see Der and her sword, charging at him.

He sidestepped her attack, putting his back to the destroyed warehouse and facing both of them. They stood side by side, facing him. He tilted his head to the side. “Unholy and holy united?”

He kicked up a lump of smoldering board. Der managed to bring up her one arm between it and her face, but the impact tossed her off her feet. How could it be possible to kick something that hard? She groaned, too dizzy to push herself up, no matter how hard she tried in the moment.

When she could see straight again, mostly, the chemman vampire had vanished. No surprise there.

Tom closed his eyes and exhaled into the silence. The flames and claws faded from his hand. Silence pervaded the street. He slid his hand back into his glove.

When he looked, people stared around corners at him. They gasped and trembled in place, too scared to run, too scared to remain.

He smirked. “As it should be.” Anger completely overrode the terror about people seeing him, knowing what he was or whom he had just challenged.

He reached down and dragged Der up by her ear. He started to drag her down the street by her aural organ. She jerked around one last time, trying to find Dominic’s body or see what happened to Avamar, but Tom was unrelenting.

“Ow! Ow! Ow!” She hopped along, clawing at his steely grip with her own fingernails.

“He’s knows he can’t do this quickly anymore – not in daylight and in town. We got lucky.”

He stopped, turned and glared at Amelia. She’d been hiding in the crowd, but his gaze went

directly to her. He narrowed his eyes further and shook his head. Heels clicking on the pavement, he still pulled the paladin along by her ear.

He kept dragging her down the street. The people of Staghorn flattened themselves against walls to get out of his way, in some cases even just turning their backs in order not to look at them.

She didn't have to be an empath to feel his rage, boiling up from some deep dark well of a volcano.

He kept marching down the road toward the northern gate, pulling her by her ear. "Avamar himself! I don't believe you! I am trying to imagine you not in trouble!"

"Don't you mean remember?"

"No! Imagine!"

Tom ignored the crowds as he continued his march. "I don't believe you can surprise me anymore. Not after this! There's a limit, and you just hit it."

Der tried to press her heels into the paving stones, but she just ended up slipping. He held her up by her ear.

"I thought I taught you to be discreet!"

"Like you are now?" she yelled back, watching the scores of people staring at this two-man parade.

"You gave me a heart attack – and I have a stone heart that doesn't beat! Did you know that was possible? Because I didn't!"

They turned the last corner and started toward the northern gate. Tom roared, "I have never been so furious with you!"

"I didn't pick that fight!" she hollered.

"Yes, you did! Probably months before, but *they* take their time! I can't believe you! Actually challenging someone so close to the blood! Maybe I was safer with Amelia than you!"

Der tried to twist his wrist with her left hand. "Then why didn't you run off with your undead princess?"

He whirled on her, yanking her ear so they were nose to nose. "Because that bitch was using me, for her own gain or someone else's. I'm not stupid enough to fall for that. But I won't stay here. I can't."

"Then why did you come back in the first place?"

"Because she doesn't decide for me! Unlike the rest of them, I can make stupid decisions *on my own*." He spun on his heel and thundered down toward the gate, still dragging her. Der tried not to wince in pain – she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction!

Two guards scrambled to stand in their way.

"Don't!" Tom snapped, his eyes red for the moment. Instantly, both guards bowed their heads and

shuffled to the side.

Der yelled at him as she was being pulled past the guards, "Why can't you use your mind-bending trick on Amelia?" The world just outside the gates smelled instantly of pine sap and rain.

"Will you stop asking questions?" He didn't pause as they marched out of the city onto the corduroy road toward the forest. He huffed. "Fine. Because she is closer to the blood than I am."

"You mean you can't. It won't work on her."

"Doesn't work on a lot of people." He glared ahead.

"Then I'll deal with her," Der snorted. They kept marching as the city grew smaller behind them.

Tom scoffed. He released her ear as if he were tossing away an old, dirty rag.

"I will." Der thrust out her chin. "You stay away. You're the one she's after, not me."

He rolled his emerald eyes. "It could all be a ruse to get to you, paladin. You are the older enemy."

Dominic's worried face flashed through her mind. "No, don't think so."

Tom crossed his arms. "And how are you going to stop her? How are you going to stop *me* from doing anything I want?"

Der kicked up some mud at him. "I know more about you than I think you'd want me to say."

He barked a laugh. "Blackmail? You'll actually try to blackmail me?"

"Yes!"

"Do you even know what blackmail is? It's not like you've ever been ashamed of *anything*."

She stamped down her heels. "Maybe I learned it from you!"

Tom instantly appeared bored. "You know I can rip off your tongue before you can say anything."

"You'll be missing a few fingers for trying."

He lifted his upper lip into a snarl. "I was in control of my existence before you. Marked for death, but I'm already dead. I was in control of it all. And in just a few short years, you've ruined it! Ruined me! Do you know what a year means to me? A day to you!" He snapped his fingers. "You ran me through with the paladin king's sword, got me involved with the Blackhound, and you brought my mother into this!"

Der shrugged helplessly. "I'm a paladin, Tom. I bring change."

He leaned into her face. "I don't want to be changed!" Then he turned his back to her and crossed his arms. "If you want change, look at yourself. You're not the daydreaming brat I once abducted."

He suddenly sat down in the ditch alongside the road. Pink fireweed teased up his normally perfect hair, but he didn't notice. He pulled his knees to his chest and glared out at the forest around them.

Der hesitated in reaching out for him. She reeled back, light-headed, wondering if the explosion had messed up her psychic sense as much as her physical ones.

It felt like he was going to cry.

Tom sat as still as death, appearing to be his usual, taciturn self.

Der inched down beside him, kneeling.

He buried his face against his arms. "I wasn't happy, Der, but I wasn't sad either. I was balanced." He paused for a moment. "Now that you've given me a sliver of joy, and helped me save Chloe, that means now I will have to endure so much pain as the price for that joy. I don't want that."

She clicked her jaw closed, eyes wide, unsure to even breathe. She watched the ever-present clouds overhead. She scanned the forest, feeling out the land and the animals in it for signs of pursuit.

Tom didn't move. Didn't even breathe.

She tried to swallow. He suddenly said, "My mother wasn't there. She was off at Long Range or the Plateau *as usual*. She was never there to warn me. I was traveling overland like always, kind of an Arborn liaison to the human lands. Since I could *relate*," he spat, his eyes narrowing. "They begged me. They *begged* me to save them from what they thought was a wizard. The bastards."

"Who? Where?"

He shook his head and settled back into silence.

She dropped a hand to her pocket and fumbled around inside. She pulled out the ancient brass compass. Jakkobb had gifted her with this on her first day at Horizon, he had said it had belonged to his best friend.

She pushed it out toward Tom. "Here. This belonged to your dad."

He didn't raise his head. "Keep it. I never knew my father. Killed before I was born."

"By whom?"

He shrugged, still keeping his head down. "Unknown. He was involved with—"

"With what?" she prompted after a moment.

"I don't want to tell you. Then you'll know how old I am."

"Your father went missing in the fall of Pallens. That means you were born in the first year of the new age."

He jerked up his head and stared at her in amazement. His gaze dropped to the compass. "And how did you come into possession of that anyhow?"

"He was a good friend of Jakkobb, apparently."

Tom seemed to melt and sink into the earth. "Jakkobb...the red knight! He was the red knight! I only saw him a couple of times, but..." He stabbed a finger at her. "He doesn't know, does he?"

She shook her head.

“Keep it that way.” The menace faded from his voice. His gloved hand pulled her fingers back over the compass. “Keep that too.”

“But he was your father.”

“And I never had to live in his shadow. It’s fine, Der.”

She curled the device back into her pocket. “I don’t know what I would do if someone killed my father.”

“And you never will, not unless it happens.”

They sat in silence for as long as Der could manage. The wind teased the pines and lifted the ever-present dew into the air and blew them at their faces.

She said, “I’ve been to your old home, Moonrise Castle, during the war.”

“I know,” he replied simply.

They rested in the silence of the forest, watching the fog gather and slip downhill.

“How about the garden?” he asked into the tide of gloom. “Is it always spring in the garden? Even when there’s snow topping the walls?”

Der tried to remember in order to give an honest and correct answer. But then she saw how unfocused his eyes were. She haltingly offered what she thought was the truth. “Yes.”

“And the scent of nutmeg and cinnamon always wafting from the kitchen, and the hearth always glowed such a cheerful orange.”

She nodded dumbly. Her memories of the kitchen had been cold, dark and deserted. Maybe a few blood splatters from those wounded in the battle, but certainly no wafting with nutmeg. “Um, yeah.” He didn’t even seem to be paying attention to her.

He gulped, but forced his tongue to rise. “She had such a smile, even when you were spitting bile out of your nose, that smile would cause it all just to steam off, like the heat off of her cakes.”

Der leaned back. “She was the most beautiful woman I’ve ever imagined. And she was the only one who listened to our story when Duke Farallon just wanted to execute—”

“Wait! You’ve *spoken* to her?”

She nodded. “She saved our lives – Kelin, me and Thistle.”

He stared ahead. “Farallon,” he finally echoed. “I remember him. When we would visit Long Range for court. Not me, not being a full elf, I had to wait outside. Never did see the hall of the king and queen.”

“Me neither,” Der said. Of course, other things had always seemed more important to her than architecture, especially then.

“I used to call him Faraloon when I was a youngling,” Tom whispered, with a ghost of a laugh. “I’d

forgotten that.”

Der smirked. “I like it.”

Tom suddenly froze and leaned away from her. “This, this right now is why I almost wish I had never met you.”

“What?”

“Almost.” He turned away. “Maybe some night soon I will wish that.”

Chapter Thirteen

The Crystal Road

The corduroy road had faded into a dirt road, which was actually a mud road, and then even that had narrowed into a trail. A few discarded soup bones and campfires were the only proof of other people along the way. Bright fireweed lighted the path with a splash of color as the odd flower bloomed from the bottom up.

Der turned her face against the wind and lowered her head. She watched the ground lift when they started another slick hill.

“We’re getting away from the coast,” Jakkobb supplied. “It’ll be less rainy after these hills.”

Prince Alsalon huffed and forced his feet, heavier with mud, to push uphill. Spike slipped and snorted against the slick climb. Tom and Thistle both silently took up the rearguard.

To the east, the Bercance Mountains held aloft the skies of the world, according to the local mythology. They certainly looked like they could. They stretched away into the horizon, beyond sight and possibly imagination. Snow and glaciers mixed with the grayness of the perennial clouds sifting through the peaks.

Spike bobbed his nose at the heights. *Tallest peaks in the world that way, including Silver’s Spike. That range also connects to several other ranges which lead into the Riverfall Mountains. You remember them, Der?*

She nodded. “I do. But we’re so far away from there.” She closed her eyes and tried to bring up maps that she’d learned at the dragoon school. “The Crystal Forest, bigger than Thealith, Urael and Tenmar combined.”

Alsalon grunted. “This is no Crystal Forest. This is the Mud Forest.”

Jakkobb paused at the summit of the hill. “No, *that’s* the Crystal Forest.”

It was crystal. Huge, sequoia-thick columns of crystal stretched from the base of the hill and disappeared into the mists of the horizons. The columns and their fragments were so large that Jakkobb would not be able to wrap his arms around them, and while others were as large as a house!

Alsalon and Der stared, jaws ajar. Even Thistle’s eyes widened.

Der bit her lip, trying to find the trick. These could have been the pillars that could hold up the skies. Many had fallen over or had grown horizontally, but many more remained erect.

Jakkobb started his slide down the hill. “They formed deep underground. I have no idea what geologic or magical catastrophe could have turned the earth inside out for them to get on the

surface.”

“Earth event?” Alsalon asked.

“If it was, it was one that happened long before I can remember.”

Der suggested, “Like the events preceding the Battle of the Bridge?”

The knight shrugged. “Of that, I am unaware. But I do know that they grow miles underground naturally and are generally... Sorry, my old friend was a rockhound.”

“Who married Lady Evelyn.” Der fired a look at Tom.

Not even a muscle twitched. His face was as blank as snow. But she sensed him jerk, far underneath his skin.

“Yes,” Jakkobb said, not turning around to see. “I still don’t know how he managed that.”

Der shaded her eyes with her hand. Even underneath the clouds, the glow of reflection expanded in her vision. Her eyes were already watering. Beside her, Thistle silently pulled his hood further over his face.

Do not stray from the trail, Spike said. Nothing lives in the Crystal Forest.

“Ha,” Jakkobb snorted. “Last time we saw a bear without a head. It was fishing in a stream and a crystal must have snapped off and crushed its head.”

The wind, whistling through the quartz columns, sounded a mournful note as they neared.

“Nothing to really build a shelter from, is there?” Der asked. The wind pushed them faster toward the first behemoth column. On the level, the wind also brushed thousands of fragments of crystal against each other, tinkling like laughing bells.

She squinted further. It was bright! Any light was magnified here. She whirled to face Tom, who was smirking beneath his hood, his darkened spectacles covering his eyes.

“You’re not laughing at me now,” he sang.

She shook her head, while a thoughtful frown weighed her features.

Tom stopped. He stuck up his hand. “Stop. You are not stealing these.”

“Oh come on, you’ll heal instantly! My eyes will be throbbing for days!”

“No!”

Jakkobb stuck an arm between them. “It’s actually best to sleep during the day here and cross at night.”

“But it’s day all day up here!” Alsalon whined. “There’s no night.”

“Not this time of year, no,” Jakkobb answered. “And two of these non-nights are going to be spent here. It’s the narrowest path through.”

“There are a couple hours of twilight,” Der pointed out.

“Not as we keep going north,” Jakkobb remarked.

“Two hours of storm-readers’ light,” Thistle said. “With them chasing us.”

“And vampires,” Der added, passing along a look to Tom.

“Right,” the knight agreed. “We’ll risk the daylight.”

“Easier for you,” the vampire snapped.

“Oh shut up, Tom,” Jakkobb sighed. “You’re up with us almost every day. And you’re going north, to the City of the Midnight Sun!”

Der froze. “Midnight sun?”

“What? You’ve never heard Cedar Vale called that before? It’s got a lot of pub-names, like City of the Midnight Sun, the Ephemeral City—”

“Shadow of the Midnight Sun?”

Jakkobb shook his head. “Haven’t heard that one.”

But Tom was already staring at her. “I thought you didn’t know the legend!”

She blinked. “You do? I thought you always refused to tell me because you didn’t know!”

“Of course I do, and I destroyed the only document containing the legend on the continent! On purpose, so that do-gooders like you, Der, couldn’t find it. And yet you *still* interfere with everything I—”

She slapped him, open-handed, stinging and the small thunderclap echoed around the forest between the constant chimes in the wind.

He rolled his face back around. His spectacles off-kilter, and it took a moment to straighten them. “It was for my own protection.” He held his cheek, paler fingermarks outlined on his already white skin. “Slapping a vampire, are you crazy?”

“I was hitting *you*, whatever your name is.” She took a step back and a wicked grin crawled across her face. She never looked away from Tom. “Hey, Jakkobb, what was the name of—”

Tom slammed one hand over her mouth and another over her throat and shoved her backward into a massive crystal. Her boots left a trail over four feet long in the dirt.

Alsalon started to hop forward, but Spike caught his shirt in his teeth. *Just don’t, little one.*

Jakkobb frowned. “I don’t know what clue she thinks I would know.”

Thistle shrugged and held out an open palm.

The knight sighed and dropped a silver coin into the chemman’s hand.

Tom continued pressing Der up against the massive crystal. “Fine. You win. We’ll talk about it.”

She shoved him back. “Good. Victory is mine.”

Jakkobb held open his hand; Thistle returned his coin and added another.

Tom sneered. “But revenge is mine.”

“Then I’ll get revenge.”

“You can’t get revenge for revenge!” He pushed her back toward the column.

She shoved him back. “Yes, you can. It’s called a feud!” She pushed him again and then thrust her hand into one of his pockets. “And just so you don’t back out, I’m taking Chloe’s necklace.”

After a moment, he smirked. “Do you like having your hand in my pocket?”

She glared. “No, I can’t stand my fingers freezing.” She yanked out an item. “Hey! This is mine!” She turned over Rowan’s ancient compass.

He folded his arms and raised his eyebrows. “Of course if you’re going to rob me, it’s going to be your own stuff.”

She huffed. “You’re right. I was wrong for acting like you. I’ll just be me.” She kicked him in the knee as hard as possible.

Tom bounced away on one foot, holding his knee. “Der! Do that again and I will bite your nose off!”

She launched a fist at him. He dodged, being ready this time, and she slammed her knuckles against the solid quartz column behind him. A CRACK echoed into the Crystal Forest.

Tom fell on his arse. His eyes were bulging, his breath would have been stuck in his throat if he’d been breathing. He stared. He stuttered, “Y-You splintered the crystal!”

Der pulled back her bleeding hand. “Ow! Rock splinters! Rock splinters!” Her knuckles were bloody but whole, unlike the crystal. Since her other arm was still in its sling, she reached down with her teeth to try to ease the largest of the crystal fragments from her skin.

Behind her, the massive column bore a fist-sized hole and a crack running almost its entire circumference. The tree sized column slowly twisted along the crack, groaning and sending showering rainbows across the lighted landscape.

Tom leaped away from the quartz. “You’re not supposed to be that strong!” He danced in front of the crystal, gaping in horror. “Will you stop being you and just be human for a day?”

She stuck out her hand. “Get them out.”

“No! Because you were trying to hit *me* with that!”

“Please?”

“No!”

Behind them, Alsalon trembled as he stared. Jakkobb placed a hand on his shoulder, but like last time, he was so much bigger than his last two fingers didn’t fit on the smaller elf. He said, “It’s alright. It’s when they start to cooperate that we’re all in danger. This is usual.”

“Punching through solid crystal is not usual,” Thistle commented.

“It’s Der, are you actually surprised?”

“A little, yes.”

The prince started to quake even more, like a sapling in a terrible wind. Spike lowered his head and looked the young man in the face. *Shall we go for a walk?*

“Off trail?” Jakkobb asked. “Here?”

We'll follow the stream, not far.

“Oh, alright.” The knight nodded and leaned back to use another fallen column as a backrest as the argument roared behind them. “We'll probably be here awhile.”

Alsalon splashed in the stream with his trousers rolled up to his knees. The water was icy, coming off the glaciers in the mountains, but the young elf just curled his toes and watched the orange fish as they darted past.

Mind your feet, Highness, Spike called, watching by the blue water's edge. *There are bound to be crystal fragments in there.*

Around them, millions of natural bells tinkled in the wind. Spike shivered and glanced behind his back.

The prince turned his face up and smiled. “This place is beautiful! Little bright though.”

At least the clouds are here, otherwise we'd be blind.

Alsalon's gaze trailed another fish, streaking through the icy stream. He paused, looking up from the orange scales to the bank of the stream and a fallen white column. Some dark brown-orange splashes had dried on the crystal.

He inched closer, crouching as he waddled in the stream. He chipped some of the dried substance off with his fingernail. “What's this?”

Blood, most likely, Spike said impassively and twitched his tail.

“Yeek!” Alsalon plunged his hand into the water. “Get it off! Get it off!”

This isn't a safe place, Highness, the unicorn continued. He walked over and lowered his head on the other side of the crystal. There were a few moschate saddlebags, stiff with disuse. There also were a few other scatterings of blood. No body though.

Plants don't root well here, and the animals that are here, well, you'll be fine if you stay close to me.

The prince looked up from scrubbing his finger. “What animals?”

Frightening ones. Spike suddenly went cross-eyed as a stellar jay landed on his forehead. The bird stretched and whistled. The unicorn shook his head and the blue bird took flight.

Frightening ones, he repeated to the beautiful plumage.

Alsalon grinned, the blood forgotten. "Very!" He hopped out the stream. "Come back, bird, you're the only color here!"

Prince Alsalon, no! You'll cut your feet!

But the lad was off and running after the jay. He hopped onto a column and launched himself onto another. It was the first time he'd truly smiled since Riversbridge.

Child, stop! Spike trotted into the air, above the fallen crystals. Below, Alsalon jumped from one fallen column, ran down it, and onto another. The bird chirped from above and circled higher.

Alsalon's ankle twisted and the boy yelped as he tilted over the side of a column. He closed his eyes as his body crashed down. He hit softness and started to bounce back up, but something sticky tugged at his clothes and hair.

He blinked and tried to turn his head. He was trapped in a giant, golden-silk spider web as big as a barn. The strands were nearly as thick as his forearm, and he really couldn't see an end to the massive web.

Spike hovered over him. *That's why I said stop.* He scanned the web for the approaching spider. He opened his throat and let out a whinny. His horn spiraled into life and blue electricity flashed around his hooves.

Alsalon tried to raise his hand, but it was stuck tight. "What is this?"

Nephila, the golden orb-weavers. I think they mostly catch birds and the like here, but obviously, other prey if they can. They're interesting creatures, certainly. This breed will weave themselves coats in the winters.

"Spike, I don't care! Just get me down!"

I'd rather make sure you're not eaten, little one. He kept his gaze forward, waiting for the rushing spider. It would be as big as the prince, but he didn't mention that to his Highness.

Spike whinnied again, loudly enough to be heard back on the road.

No Nephila came rushing from the corners of the web. The unicorn's nostrils flared, he certainly wouldn't snort at a chance to get crazy on a giant spider. Besides, the silks alone sold for his weight in platinum.

Alsalon jerked in the web, trying to yank his body free. He only succeeded in exposing more of his hair, skin and clothes to the web.

Don't move. You need to be cut from there.

"I don't want to get eaten!" Tears ringed his gold eyes and he thrashed harder.

Above him, Spike exhaled audibly as only an equine can. *Listen, child, listen! It should've been here by now. Something's wrong. Just stay here. Scream if you see it.*

Walking on air, the unicorn trotted over the shimmering, golden strands. He rounded a couple of columns and hovered over a maze of webs. There must've been hundreds of square feet covered.

And that meant more than a single Nephila.

The web was bouncing beneath his hooves. Spike blew out another sigh, if that boy kept struggling he was going to bring the entire colony. He glanced down. The web was bouncing from ahead of him, not behind where he'd left the elf.

He trotted forward. It wasn't the prince's tremors shaking it. It was a little girl, several years the royal's junior.

Her mouth had been covered with web, as were her right arm and legs – but something had interrupted the spider.

He couldn't see what. He coasted lower over the girl – she couldn't have been here long at all.

Her dark brown hair had been cut short like a boy's, and she was screaming. Her mouth was just glued shut.

Spike dipped low enough to slice through some of the web his with hooves. He couldn't finesse the weave like fingers could, but he could at least cut her off from the rest of the web so she wouldn't alert all the others.

He sniffed. Blood was on the air. Beneath her, the corpse of a man and the golden, shining body of a Nephila lay together.

The unicorn turned away, slicing through the sticky bonds with his razor sharp hooves. At the last strands, she crashed three feet down onto the ground.

The girl rolled to her back when she landed. She looked up at him with tears staining her eyes. Her bright, orange eyes.

“Alsalon! Spike!” Der called, crunching crystal underneath her boots as she stamped further away from the trail. Jakkobb and Thistle both waved her into silence, while Tom just glared as he followed behind.

The vampire stopped and stiffened. “There's blood.” He lightly hopped onto a column and took off running.

“Hey! Wait!” Der yelled, as she heaved herself up onto the same one and gave chase. She gained ground on him much easier than she imagined. He must have not been going too quickly, she decided as she crossed the stream in one, long jump.

He stopped and she crashed into him from behind, unable for her boots to find a grip on the smooth crystal. Tom tightened his jaw and tilted his head toward her as if to say something, but

instead, he looked back down at the prince.

“How did this happen?” he demanded.

“Get me down!” Alsalon screamed, still trying to roll in place.

Der started to draw the Pallens sword. Tom cringed and wheezed at the sensation of fire crawling up his back. “Stop, Der. I’ve got this.” He pulled out his ancient hunting knife, and exhaled in relief as she sheathed the blasted holy sword.

“You’ll fall, but it’s two feet.” He sliced through the sticky bonds with the amazingly sharp blade.

“Where are your boots?” Der asked.

“By the rivER!” Alsalon yelped as he landed sharply on his rear. “Ow...” He tried to rub his rump, but the webs still stuck to his arm fastened the limb to his shirt. “Erg.”

“Where’s Spike?” Jakkobb called, jogging up the crystal behind them.

Here! the unicorn shouted as he cantered through the air above the web. A girl kicked and bucked, but he held her clothes firmly in his teeth. He dropped her, still covered with golden webs, onto the crystal column at their feet. *By the way, it’s time to run.*

Der jumped in place, shading her eyes. “I can’t see anything.” Behind her, Alsalon rolled over next to the girl in exaggerated, jerky movements.

Tom grabbed Der’s waist. “We need to leave!”

She pushed against his grip. “Why?”

“That’s why.” Jakkobb nodded. From around the curve, dozens of massive Nephilae charged, running across the sticky webs like dancers dressed in their silks.

“They don’t leave their webs though,” the knight mused.

“Chasing fresh meat?” Thistle hauled up Alsalon and the girl in each hand. “Go. We’ll sort you children out later.” He pushed the girl over his shoulder.

Jakkobb hopped onto the ground, running as soon as his feet touched. “Get across the stream.”

Tom pushed Der ahead of him. She sidestepped him and pivoted gracefully on the ball of her foot so that she could continue to watch the charging spiders.

The vampire growled, “This from the girl who just crashed into my back?”

“Move!” Jakkobb shouted, already well ahead of them.

She fingered the Pallens sword with her left hand.

“Don’t you dare!” Tom hollered. He’d had enough. He grabbed the paladin around her waist again and jumped.

“Hey!” They soared over the heads of the others, just starting to splash across the stream, and their feet crunched against the fallen crystal shards as they landed on the other side.

Der turned around to face the oncoming colony again.

“Don’t stop!” Jakkobb commanded.

Alsalon squeaked and his knees buckled as he checked over his shoulders. Thousands of massive eyes sparkled in the ever-present glow of the forest as they spiders charged.

“Not now,” Thistle breathed, grabbing the prince’s shirt and dragging him into the frigid water.

“Don’t stop!” Jakkobb thundered again, emerging from the stream.

A line of golden, sticky thread landed beside Der’s foot. She leapt to the side, colliding against Tom.

“Hey!” she yelled. “Did it just shoot that at me? I thought it came out of their—”

“It’s an attack too!” the knight hollered back, still running away from the stream.

Der remained in place. So did the Nephilae on the other side of the water. Thistle pulled the child and prince out of the stream.

Another spider launched a small web. It landed in the middle height of one of the upright columns, well over the paladin’s head. The Nephila crawled up onto its end of the web and started to swing.

“This will be messy.” Der drew her sword, holding it in her left hand between herself and the oncoming half ton of spider.

Halfway through its swing, Tom’s heels crashed on its back from above. He opened his palm and spread his fingers. Crimson fire erupted in the space between his fingers and he slammed it against the spider.

The fire ate down into the body causing its skin to blister and curl up before the Nephila vanished into dust. It had screamed for just a moment, its legs kicking wildly.

Der hadn’t even imagined the things could scream. She staggered backward, slipping off the column away from the unholy crimson fire. She rolled her back against another one for balance.

“Go, stupid!” Tom ordered, still standing on air. “Get the idea of fresh food out of their heads!”

She nodded. With one final look at the rest of the spiders, she turned and ran after the others.

Jakkobb and Thistle turned their heads to the direction of the stream. Der scrambled up from behind while Alsalon hugged a thinner crystal. Spike, however, loomed over the girl, who could have been no older than six. She tugged at the sticky silk against her body and clothes.

Thistle said, “Prisoners are always inadvisable on the road, especially this road.”

“No,” Jakkobb growled.

“I wasn’t suggesting *that*. Just pointing it out.”

The chemman child squirmed, still trying to loosen the threads.

A roar like wildfire rushed on the wind. Der collapsed down to her knees, gasping. The breath just wouldn't come! Her fingers crawled across her stomach to the Pallens sword – she needed it as a shield against the surge of unholy might.

Could that have been from...? No, he wasn't like that!

Alsalon pressed his weight into Spike's leg. Both Jakkobb and Thistle also unconsciously crowded up next to the unicorn, both listening and watching.

"Der?" Jakkobb asked.

She gasped and coughed, but nodded.

The chemman child suddenly lunged at Jakkobb, stabbing at him with a small knife that had been obscured by the web. "Steal it from you!"

"What!" He barely stopped his hand, already swinging in muscle memory, from striking her head. Her blade scraped against the armor on his thighs, not even scratching its finish. "Stop that!"

Thistle snagged her ankles between one of his feet from behind. The knife flew free from her hand as she crashed down. He kicked the knife away.

She met Der's eyes. And all Der did was stare. Sure, she'd been attacking her friend and mentor but she was just a little girl! Then the paladin remembered the story of Darii, how the chemmen children killed so many, and how haunted Amthros had been by what he'd done to survive.

The girl screamed and started to cry, beating her fists against the ground.

Tom trotted up from between the crystal columns. "Those that are left are still hesitating. Der, why are you on the ground? Don't tell me a child knocked you down."

She gulped. "No, you did. What did you do?"

"I scared them," he said, more patiently than he'd in weeks. "But the river won't hold them back for much longer. Let's go." He ignored the wailing child.

Thistle reached down and pulled the girl up by her arm, but not too roughly. "We're saving your life too, child!" He looked up to the rest of the party. "The survivors don't want to kill us, well, any more than usual. They just want to return to Darkreign."

"It's not about me?" Alsalon licked his lips. He ran after Spike's trot.

"I don't think so," the chemman replied. "They just—"

"Need to steal the red knight's water!" the girl screamed. "Or Derora Saxen's! Or anyone who was there at Moonrise Castle! Any water will work to trace down the traitor's!"

Thistle quirked an eyebrow. "Do you even know how to harvest? Are they teaching children now?"

"N-Yes!"

"But Amthros' water has been recycled back into the world," Der said.

"I can find it! I want to go home!" the child thundered.

"I need her to shut it," Tom said, somewhat politely. "Noise is never a friend, as my kind says."

"It's all we need to go home, that's what the elders say! So let me go!" The child lunged for the knife on Alsalon's belt. The older boy scrambled away from her.

"Really need her to be silent," Tom strained.

The girl filled the forest with her sobs. "Any one of you! I just want to go home!"

Behind them, crackling started to emanate in the normally quiescent Crystal Forest.

Tom rolled his eyes and stuck out his arm. "Here, take mine." He offered a dazzling, toothless smirk of a professional liar.

The girl froze, as did everyone else, and stared at him. Slowly, she stretched her fingers toward his sleeve.

The vampire withdrew his arm. "However, you don't speak unless asked a direct question. Deal?"

"But," Der began. She hunched up under Tom's glare.

"But," the child started. She watched, but entirely failed to see Tom teasing a drop of water that had splashed up from the stream onto his clothes down to his forearm. She did see him dig down into his blood with a fingernail and saw the blood and then a single drop of water.

She pulled a tiny vial, almost what a doll would carry, and swiped the drop inside with a crystal shard. She looked up at Tom and narrowed her orange eyes. "You'll die in a couple of hours."

"I'm already dead inside." He started to march down the road. "And you will be quiet."

Chapter Fourteen

Empty Plain

Spike's head drooped as he plodded down the track. Prince Alsalon napped, slung forward over the unicorn's high pommel. Behind them, Thistle dragged the chemmen girl, who was still leaking quiet tears. Tom and Der walked on, occasionally pausing to glower at each other.

Jakkobb exhaled as they left the last of the crystal columns behind them. Ahead of them was nothing but a vast, endless plain of short grass. It rolled like the sea when the breeze drifted across it.

Tom passively glared ahead. "The Tollrian Shield." He pulled his hood lower over his face. "No shade and sunlight all day *and* night." He cursed under his breath. "Where is this city? Roofs are my friend tonight."

The chemmen girl held up her tiny vial. "He should be dead. He's got no water of life."

Thistle pulled her in front of the group. "At least you're right about that, girl."

She sniffled and broke down crying again. "My name's Trista, you traitor! My elders told me about you!"

The older storm-reader's eyes widened.

"What is it?" Jakkobb prompted.

Thistle frowned. "The fact that they're admitting there is a traitor."

"We just want to go home!" Trista wailed.

Jakkobb pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm wondering if that's all you know how to say in Common."

Spike whuffed. *Perhaps taking them to defeat was what they needed.*

Thistle blinked. He blinked again, and then knelt in front of the child. "Trista, you need the water from Amthros, the elvish traitor, to open up the gates to Darkreign. But it's gone back into the cycle."

"But all we need is the water of someone who knew him! It's a trace! That's what they told me!"

"How does that work?" Der interjected.

Thistle ignored her. "You can't go home, Trista, but I can help you stay here."

"Thistle," Jakkobb sang in elvish. "What the hell are you doing?"

He rose fluidly. "She's a child. I saw how wrong my people were as an adult when I was sent among other races. She's been living amongst other races. She has to be questioning."

"No, she doesn't," Tom supplied sharply. "I believe you are the outcast here, Thistle."

Der planted her left hand on her hip and stared at him. "So says the vampire with the bounty on his

head!”

“Bounty? What?” Jakkobb straightened.

She jerked her thumb at the vampire. “Yeah, somehow he managed to slay his—”

“That is *enough!*” Tom roared. “Why don’t you just blurt out *all* my secrets?”

“Well, alright.” She squared her shoulders. “He is also—”

Tom shoved a handful of mud into her face.

Der spit out what she could, because her mouth had been open. “TOM!” She kicked him in the knee with a satisfying cra-a-ack of splitting bone.

Grinning, he hopped back on one leg, out of her reach. “You can’t catch me, little girl.”

Thistle silently passed Jakkobb two coins.

Trista pointed as Der chased after him. “That’s how I know they’re not real heroes.”

Jakkobb pointed to the northeast. “Cedar Vale should be that way. Let’s go. It’ll be awhile before this one gets sorted.” He had to raise his voice above, “I am going to smash that stone heart up and make you eat it!”

Alsalon rocked back and forth in the saddle as Spike walked. He’d woken up into nothing but endless grass. Distantly, a herd of mammoths grazed. The party had walked wide around them. Fog lined all the horizons.

“How do you know where we’re going?” the prince asked. “The sun just seems to be going in a circle.”

Jakkobb shrugged. “Northern elf secret?”

He doesn’t know, Spike snickered. However, I do.

Behind them, Thistle kept a tight grip on Trista, who was falling asleep on her feet. Der marched out ahead, chin high and Tom skulked in the rear, nursing his limp.

“Should be healed by now,” he occasionally muttered. “Should be *dark* by now, but oh no, I let my corpse be dragged— No, wait, I dragged them up here.”

We’re not far, the unicorn said. He lifted his hoof and clanged the knight’s calf. And you always have that expression.

“Like we ever visit your family, Spike, oh wait, we can’t—”

“Why don’t you want to go home?” Alsalon asked suddenly, sensing Spike tensing up underneath him.

Jakkobb glared over his shoulder for a moment. “Because I make enemies. I don’t want my family to be at risk, nor do I want to risk a sound military decision in case an enemy ever knew.”

The prince's eyes widened in hero worship.

"Bullshit," Thistle said.

"Says someone else who never went home," Jakkobb said.

"You destroyed my home, Pallens Front War, remember?" Now it was Trista's turn to stare up at him with eyes aglow.

Thistle dusted off his sleeve. "Actually, that's not true. I'd deserted before the Banishment anyway." He raised his hands. "No ill will here. They got less than they deserved."

Trista squealed, trying to pull away from her captor. "You're not allowed to say that!"

Thistle rolled his eyes. "I just did."

"Der, stop!" Tom stopped walking and sniffed. Then he darted ahead, his limp completely disappeared in the urgency of the moment.

She kept walking, jaw set.

"Stop!" He flew past Jakkobb and snatched her around the shoulders. He sniffed again.

"Something foul ahead."

Spike stepped up beside them, nose bobbing in the air.

"What is it?" Der glared at the vampire.

"Stop talking." He cocked his ear into the wind.

After a moment, Jakkobb stirred. "Well?"

"I don't hear anything."

"It is quiet up here," Alsalon agreed.

"No, you half-wit," Tom said. "There's no noise. That means there's no city."

"Are we just too far out?" Der pressed. She shrugged.

The vampire shook his head. "No. I hear a river, but that's all."

Spike took off in a canter up the small slope in front of them. The others hurried to catch up to him. They stared down across the plain.

Cedar Vale wasn't there. There was a hollow where a city could stand and a massive ring of flattened grass. A totem of a bear with wings rose like an oak tree in the center of the circle. Several supine bodies lay beneath it. Some musk oxen meandered around the grass, munching on whatever had been left behind.

Der squinted. "Are those?"

"Dead." Tom sniffed and took a step forward, still holding onto Der's shoulders.

"And the city isn't here," Thistle murmured.

"It's supposed to be here," Jakkobb said. "It's trading season!" He started to march down the hill.

“What’s going on?”

“How does a city go missing?” Alsalon quavered from Spike’s back.

Spike replied, *The elves move their city, depending on when and where they need to be.*

“No, we don’t!”

You, small prince, are not a northern elf.

“I know, but...”

Jakkobb sped faster down the small incline. “Very wrong.”

They jogged through the field and onto the flattened grass. Der found herself staring down, looking for hints of red amongst the yellowing field. Nothing significant had happened here, at least.

Tom ran ahead and stood over the five bodies around the totem, eyeing them carefully. He waited for the others. “Human.”

“Oh my gods!” Alsalon whirled around and vomited. Spike hopped to the side. *Mind my hair!*

The stench rose like a swamp, and none of the bodies were in two pieces, or even three. They’d been shredded.

Der met Tom’s eyes and he nodded slightly. “The same,” he said.

She fought against a shiver. She’d rather fight Avamar than those mindless, naked drones again. She swallowed.

Jakkobb said, “Recent too.”

“Cedar Vale moved on before they arrived,” Thistle proposed.

“Looks that way,” Tom said.

“But this is trading season.” Jakkobb frowned. “They should be here.”

Der licked her lips. “How hard would it be to follow a city? Does it leave tracks, like?” She shouldered the passing glares from the party and shuffled around to the other side of the totem.

Prince Alsalon snorted. “Humans? In an elf city?”

Jakkobb scowled. “It’s how they do things up here.”

“Hey.” Der knelt down on the other side and pulled up a bloody sai by its pommel. “These weapons are from another continent, so there’s probably not more than one being—”

“Shut it, Der,” Tom snapped.

“She knew we were coming this way.”

“And so do the chemmen,” he shot back.

“Maybe it’s a good thing the city has moved,” Alsalon whispered. “I want to go home! You promised me when we were around elves again, I would go home!”

Jakkobb said sternly, “And we’re not around elves again now, are we?”

Tom pulled Der away by her elbow from the wailing argument.

"I want to go home!" Trista suddenly wailed in Common. She jerked on Thistle's sleeve. "We just want to go home! This world has too much color!"

Thistle's jaw tightened. "Child, you will never return to Darkreign. I hope you understand that soon."

"But our elders said we were going to!"

"They lied, child," Thistle replied dryly.

Der's feet splashed across the icy gray stream. Even though her boots were waterproof, she felt the shock of the chill all the way up her legs. The chuckling water completely overtook the others' voices by the totem.

She looked down. The water was gray, not brown, not green, but cloud gray. She wasn't sure if she would ever get used to that. She looked up, and the sky looked ready to rain again too.

"Why are they here?" She slipped her left arm underneath her sling. "Why would Amelia leave a clue?"

"Maybe those things really are after her. She's being manipulated." Tom turned his shoulder toward her. "I don't think what she's doing is even of her own will." He growled and kicked the ground. "Drones are Avamar's too, they've been working together all along. That's probably why they didn't kill her at that first ambush. She fooled us there, too."

Der frowned. "I don't think either of us knows her that well."

He scowled and shook his head. "And you! You're not the girl I know!" He stepped sideways away from her. "You challenged Avamar Frohein, and you didn't perish. You used some powers that I've never seen!"

"I didn't even know—" She stopped. "You're afraid of me?"

He wrenched his cloak tighter around his shoulder. "And that empathy!"

"Afraid of me?" This time she felt the world spinning in her own moment of vertigo. "But, but, *you* could never use the power like the heart before, not like against those spiders!"

"Yeah, and we're all alive for it!"

"But the more you use its power, the more it will eat you up!"

Tom snarled. "I know what I'm doing. Besides, what do you know about the legend of stone and bone? Oh my, I believe it was *nothing*."

"That Avamar has found the bones." She reached up and let her fingertips hover above his shoulder.

"How would you know that?" Tom shivered. He shook his head. "I don't believe you. Not in this

game.”

“You saw his hand. You don’t trust me?”

He stared straight ahead. His voice sounded distant and hollow. “I can’t trust anyone. Only Chloe, as an infant, but now, who knows when she’ll turn on me? And you, you’re a paladin. You’re my enemy.”

“You’re the only enemy I’d die to protect.”

He shoved her hand away from his shoulder. “That’s not funny, Der.”

She marched to stand in front of him and glared up at his pale face. She shoved him in the chest. “Quit crying. We’ve all got our troubles, but we’ve got each other.”

Jakkobb and Thistle watched Der and Tom, still standing in the stream. When Tom turned his back, Thistle handed Jakkobb two silver coins. Behind them, Alsalon was still throwing up and Trista was dowsing the bodies with a tiny glass wand, practicing to find their waters of life.

“Pack up,” the knight called over to Spike. “No sense in staying here.”

“Not even going to try to burn the bodies?” Thistle posed.

Jakkobb frowned. “There’s not enough here to burn them with. Best to let nature do her work.”

The prince wiped his mouth as he staggered toward them. “But we can’t leave! We don’t know which way to go or where those, those *things* are.” He straightened his tunic.

“Who says they’re after the city?” Thistle said softly, eyes on the vampire.

“I heard that!” Tom snapped across the distance. “Things are not as straightforward as they appear.” He and Der closed the space between them.

“No,” the chemman said, “But is it safe with you in this party?”

“Safer. I know how to avoid those drones now that I know they’re here.”

Beside him, Der cocked her head. “But where’s Cedar Vale?”

Jakkobb raised a hand toward the totem. “He’s facing north, and all of his totems always face the last direction of the city.”

Together, they set out across the empty plains and the fogs of the Tollrian Shield.

Chapter Fifteen

The Ephemeral City

Spike dug down with his front hoof until the ice crystals sparkled up from underneath the first layer of soil. He whuffed. *This is worse than the Expanse.*

Tom folded his arms. "No, it's not. The horrible weather is more constant." Only his breath didn't show in the chilly air.

Jakkobb turned away from them and watched the endless curves of the plain and its grasses. There was snow in the distance across the ground, and fog lurking in every horizon. The corners of his mouth briefly turned up.

"You always do that," Der observed. "Admire the view."

He shrugged. "Got to appreciate it when you can."

"Surely you've seen better," Alsalon said.

"Of course, but there's something unique about each one." There was no arguing with the moment of serenity on his face. "Besides, this is probably the last moment of peace."

He pointed. Through the fog, they could dimly make out the outlines of wooden structures. A herd of goats grazed outside the shelter of the walls, and other animals moved around deeper in the fog.

Der leaned forward, shading her eyes. "Is that it? Did we find Cedar Vale?"

Jakkobb nodded. "And now we wait, in sight, for someone to come get us."

Thistle pointed at Alsalon "Isn't it an emergency to return the young prince?"

"Hey!" Alsalon barked.

Jakkobb ignored the outburst. "Because it's damned odd that Cedar Vale is here, and I don't want to get stuck like a pig if they're defending themselves from something. We'll wait. Shouldn't take too long."

Tom stepped back away from the party. "And I'll find you inside, or outside, later. I don't think I'd be welcomed."

Jakkobb nodded. "You're right."

"But..." Der sighed. "Sorry."

He rolled his emerald eyes at her. "Yeah, right."

And he was gone.

Trista stared sullenly ahead. She tugged at Thistle's sleeve and pointed at the city, but the older chemman just shook his head.

Der watched the clouds overhead, counting under her breath. She was up to five hundred before Alsalon bumped into her and shredded her concentration.

“There.” Jakkobb pointed. Spike, dozing, blinked and looked up. Everyone else either rubbed their eyes or yawned. The knight breathed out. “Oh no.”

Spike chuckled. *How lucky we are.*

Der watched the two approaching figures; it was never easy to guess age with the elves. But the taller of the two looked more like a long-haired human teenager than the usual agelessness she’d come to know. Still, he was probably older than she was. Then again, so was Alsalon, but he certainly didn’t act like it.

The other elf raised his walking staff. “Jakkobb! It’s about time, your mother has been restless.”

“Mother?” Der echoed.

Jakkobb’s chin dropped to his armored chest. “Yes. May I please present my father, Shillian-maros, and my brother, Ameris.” He didn’t look up at them.

“Maros?” Der asked. “I don’t know that elvish word, sir.”

“It’s a northern elf suffix.”

She took her turn looking over the newcomers. Both looked like Jakkobb with the same blond hair and blue eyes, but his brother had a lopsided grin she’d never seen on the knight before.

Shillian bowed his head. “It is a pleasure.” He cast a glance at Spike. “You’re still here with this man?”

Spike hopped off his front feet, his short of shrug.

“He’s not a man, Father-maros,” Ameris blurted. “He hasn’t earned it yet.”

Even Thistle stared at that.

Shillian slapped Ameris on the back of his head. “Say that again and I’ll order you to challenge him.”

The ephebe held the back of his head and glared at his father. “You won’t be able to order me around in a few weeks! I’m gonna take the Strengths and earn my own maros title!”

“Then I suppose you’ll just have to get your arse beaten.” He turned back to his older son and the creases around his eyes softened. “I’m glad you are well. We’ve heard the stories from Arborn and beyond.”

“Right.” Jakkobb wasn’t even acknowledging his brother’s existence. “Speaking of those stories, we need to contact Arborn. It’s an emergency.”

“It always is with you.” But Shillian slightly grinned. “What happened this time?”

Jakkobb's lips were pressed too tightly to open properly.

Der stepped forward. "We aided in the disappearance of Prince Alsalon here." She jerked a thumb at the smallest elf. "And now we want to give him back."

"You what?" Shillian-maró erupted.

She shrugged. "He kidnapped himself. We just helped."

Jakkobb pulled her back by her shoulder. "That's enough, Der. After that, we were ambushed by vampires and chemmen alike. I'm serious."

His father sighed. "Even before you were stolen from us, all those years ago, you never could stay out of trouble."

Thistle tapped Spike on the shoulder and leaned toward the unicorn's ear. "Sounds familiar, doesn't it?"

Shillian sighed. "Well, you'd best come in." He pointed at Thistle. "And I know who you are, but you'd best keep your eyes covered." He paused at Trista. "I thought your child was a male."

Thistle replied, "My son is safe elsewhere for the moment."

Jakkobb's father paused, not a hesitation, but a pause while he thought. "Very well. Be welcome in Cedar Vale."

As they neared, the city became visible through the fog. Wooden buildings sprouted up from the nothing of the plain. On their roofs were thick gardens, planted in beds of soil. Shining flowers, vegetables and greens slowly shifted in circles overhead to face the sun. They had entire days of light up here.

Jakkobb asked, "Why are you so far north? This is trading season."

"The eclipse, son," Shillian replied. "This is the best view for it."

"Oh."

"You've been down in the world too long, you don't hear of everything happening back home. But we're glad that you could make it for your brother's Strengths." They wound through the narrow, curving streets.

"Right," Jakkobb gritted.

Shillian stopped in front of a door. He nodded toward it. "I'll send a message to Arbórn. In the meantime, all of you, are welcome in our home."

"Thank you, sir," Der said as the older elf turned away.

Ameris ducked through the door. The rest of the party waited for Jakkobb, who stood stock-still staring ahead. Spike nudged him in the back.

Der, hungry and smelling food, pushed her way past the knight. She yelped and hopped back

when her hand touched the doorframe.

“What?” Thistle pressed forward.

She reached out and poked the wood. “It’s warm, almost hot even.”

“This is too!” Trista called, pushing a small hand against a nearby wall. Thistle immediately yanked her back to his side.

Warmwood, Spike said. *It’s a tree, well, bush really. Produces heat as a defense up here. Also, very spicy chillies.* The unicorn reached up and starting munching on the leaves overhanging the roof.

Der pushed past the mount’s mighty rump and shoved her way past the heated wood. She blinked. Inside, a high slanted ceiling and thin wooden supports gave the illusion of space.

Ameris was sitting at a table, and two female elves stared at her in surprise. Both had blue eyes, but one of them bore bright red-hair.

“Well met,” Der said in elvish.

Jakkobb finally entered, and the others behind him. “It’s good to see you again, Mother-maró – Vethelga-maró,” he nodded to his friends, “And my sister, Cinnmara-maró.” He lifted his hand to the red-head.

“Brother!” Cinnmara broke into a smile. She rushed forward to hug the knight.

Vethelga smiled too. “Well, the whole family and just in time. There’s an eclipse coming.”

“How?” Alsalon asked. “There’s hardly any night up here.”

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” the elf chuckled. She turned to her older son. “Now, who are your friends? I thought you were done dragging humans along.” Her eyes rested on Der.

“No,” Jakkobb said, “This one was crazy enough to volunteer.”

Der raised her left hand. “Derora Saxen.”

Ameris’ eyes widened. “I knew that,” he yelled immediately. “Is it true about the gold dragon?”

She nodded.

“And she wields King Midan’s sword,” Thistle added.

“Don’t forget how she charged into Darkreign,” Alsalon said.

And killed the dark paladin somewhere in there too, Spike snickered from the doorway.

“We’ve heard!” Ameris exclaimed. He turned his suddenly brighter smile onto her.

Vethelga folded her hands and looked at Jakkobb. “Why don’t you ever get credit in these tales?”

“He does,” Der said immediately. “What? I saw the fellow in red cardboard armor—”

“Shut it,” Jakkobb growled. “At least I get paid for it.”

She looked at his mother. “True, he does get a salary from Silver Dawn. I’m stuck, well, bumming off of him most of the time.” She grinned up at the knight.

“You could sell your ship,” Thistle said quietly.

“Is that part true too? That you own the Blackhound’s vessel?” Ameris rose from the table and sidled over to her. He radiated a winning smile and leaned in.

She shrank away. “Yes.”

He shuffled a little closer with a slightly aloof smile. “I am going to be a warrior too. After my Strengths, I am going to train with the best of the northern nation. I’m sure I could show you around.”

“Uh, alright.” Der signaled Jakkobb for help with the fingers of her good hand. The knight was too busy staring in shock.

Vethelga placed a hand on her older son. “You know, you could always join our corps, I’m sure your experience with the dragoons would more than make up—”

“I *like* the dragoons, Mother-marro,” he said crisply.

“Yes, I know, but—”

Ameris screamed. He’d taken the moment to slide closer to Der and rest his chin on her shoulder while sneaking an arm around her back.

His scream cut off as she slammed her knee into his trachea. He had no idea how he’d wound up on his back, but it had certainly hurt getting there. In fact, it had expelled all the wind from him, and now her knee was denying him more. His blue eyes bulged.

Der rose. “Sorry. Just a reflex.”

Ameris gasped and rolled away from her like a wounded rabbit. Der offered down her hand.

Jakkobb’s booming laughs shook the walls. He had to take a seat in the nearest chair, still laughing, from which he promptly fell off, spilling onto the warmwood floor.

“Saw that happening,” Thistle said simply. Trista and Alsalon crowded around behind him.

Ameris curled into a ball on the floor, tears blooming in his eyes. Jakkobb’s laughter still roared.

Der stood over him with nothing but concern on her face. “Are you hurt?”

“No!” he gasped, turning his brilliantly red face to the wall.

“Can she take the Strengths?” Jakkobb asked through his own tears of hilarity. “She can beat them with only one arm, I promise!”

“No, she can’t!” Ameris thundered at the wall. He pulled himself to his feet by gripping the warmwood and tripped against the edge of the table as he ran into the house’s back rooms.

Der jumped to follow. “Wait!”

Thistle smirked. “Now I see why only Tom survives you.”

She whirled around. “He grabbed my back! What did I do wrong?”

Cinnmara wiped her hands clean against the tablecloth. Her blue eyes sparkled. “Nothing, dear.

You just injured a young man's pride."

"Ah, yes," Vethelga smiled as her gaze detached from the present. "Remember, Jakkobb, when you were such a proud little boy and you stole your father's saddle?"

"No," he said, all the laughter in his voice drying up. "I was equivalent to the human age of four when I was stolen by slavers in Arinon. I don't remember much of anything before that."

"It's like I don't remember how to just *be* before she destroyed my existence," Tom muttered to himself. He stirred the dirt with his boot tip. Then he kicked the ground until it dented to his satisfaction.

His upper lip curled. He couldn't act like this, not when the hunt was on, and on *him*. It was all her fault.

The weather came in hard, icy rain and winds and the only shelter in this freezing desert was where he couldn't go.

Here he was, out in the cold rain again. He glared at the city. He couldn't see her through the wooden walls, of course, but he just knew. He knew that she and the others were inside their warmwood walls, laughing around a table.

And here he was in the rain so cold it stung.

His hand dropped to a small flask he always carried. He shook it – it was starting to feel light. His gaze shifted over to the goats roaming outside the walls. They probably didn't even bother to guard their herds up here.

He tensed. He felt it. Something was watching him.

He didn't move. The only sound was the rain, pattering against his clothing before being absorbed.

The goats starting bleating – all of them simultaneously.

The tundra beneath them erupted into a rainbow of opening flowers. Flowers that didn't even grow here. A tidal wave of every color surged across the almost monochrome land.

Most of the goats took off sprinting into Cedar Vale, while a few stayed behind and plunged their faces into the sudden feast.

Tom pulled his hood lower, not wanting to witness the beauty. Who knew of an earth event that wasn't destructive? Why did he get to witness it? He'd be fine with the ground churning open and burying him.

His traitorous fingers found the necklace he'd meant to give Chloe in his pocket. He didn't need to see its sparkle; he knew by feel.

The sea of flowers started to wither as rapidly as they'd blossomed. They shriveled into yellows

and grays.

Like Der soon. Like Chloe. He'd always had decades to plan any decisions before, but decades weren't going to be enough. Especially if Der kept being herself. He dropped his chin.

I just should've let the girl die, he thought. If he'd never rescued Chloe as an infant, it would've been easier for all of them now.

He had banished his honor, his hopes and dreams so long ago – they'd *died* so long ago! And somehow, they'd all come rushing back the night he heard a baby screaming in terror.

His internal flame of hatred for himself burned hotter for rescuing her. It would have burned even brighter if he hadn't. He wished he'd never heard her squall. He'd done the right thing! He saved the child, gifted her to a caregiver and walked away.

Then, like an idiot, he'd walked right back. And that had led him to Derora.

He ground his back teeth. The worst part of it was that she apparently wasn't drowning in this same misery as he was, and that wasn't fair. Why was it always only him who suffered?

Something was behind him! He'd been too distracted by the earth event!

Damn and blast! He wasn't paying attention! He rolled forward then sideways and shot up into the low-hanging clouds.

He smelled vampire.

But those drones that had killed the traders wouldn't dare come near the elves! No, he corrected himself, their master wouldn't dare be that stupid. They would do as they were bid.

Why was he being that stupid?

No time now.

He surveyed the field of dead flowers. Nothing. He dropped to the ground, filling his mind with the scents. It was faint. Almost nothing. Easily dismissed. But centuries or more of being on the lam had taught him not to ignore his instincts.

He carved a wide circle of a path, following a cone of scent like a dog, never venturing in a straight line.

A figure lay prone on the ground, rolling its shoulders forward and inching toward Cedar Vale like a worm.

Tom snarled and stalked up to the figure. He breezed right past subtle and finesse and straight into strong-arm as he yanked her dark hair back.

Amelia hissed in pain.

He nearly lost his grip. The female vampire was Der. A very pale but perfect imitation. She was much thinner than the paladin and she wasn't leaving much skin to the imagination. Her breasts

curved up underneath her low cut blouse, soaked to see-through in the rain.

The water slipped off her skin and clothing. She somehow appeared vulnerable in a way that Der never had, not even if she were starving like Amelia's interpretation of her body led one to believe.

Amelia smiled slowly, revealing her fangs, as she curled her body into his chest. She tugged her hair against his grasp. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

He released his fingers and stepped back. "No."

Amelia batted her now green and brown eyes. She bit her lower lip and then pushed it out into a pout. "Tell me, is she that good in bed?"

"I have never touched her."

"Ah." Amelia leaned back, resulting in pushing her chest forward and up. "If you did, would you snap out of this poor boy act?"

Tom glared.

She giggled and ran a hand across her own stomach. "What? Is it that you don't like girls?"

He continued glaring.

"Don't I look like her?" she crooned. "Is that real enough? We can be real together."

He felt his mouth dry and he tried not to show it. "What do you want?"

She squared her shoulders and stood up straight. "Your help." She dropped her gaze and bunched her fists. "I, I had a chance. I ran away from the blood like you did. I don't know how to survive all alone."

Chapter Sixteen

Home-Seeking

Tom stared at Amelia. He shook his head. “No, you couldn’t have run. Not if your sire is still walking.”

She grabbed his hands, pleading. “She’s long slain, but my new master, he doesn’t even acknowledge me.”

He pulled away as quickly as if she was on fire. “No.”

“I didn’t have to come to you! But you made it alone! Defied the impossible!”

He backed away again, helpless against noticing how her chest bounced underneath her rain soaked shirt. She looked like Der! He slammed his eyes closed and growled, “No! You were the one telling me how futile running was. Don’t think I don’t see how you changed tact.”

“Not this time!” She collapsed onto her knees on the cold, wet grass. “Not this time. I’m here near the elves like you – no vampire in the Kingdom would dare!” She choked back a sob. “Yes, I had orders! But I don’t want to be controlled anymore! I want to be free!” She shriveled into a tighter ball.

Tom eyed the cloudy sky. She didn’t even have a cloak. She was helpless if the clouds dried out.

“You’re free, free and known.”

He thought back to the farmers’ gift of a cow in Riversbridge. Had that only been a dream? More like a waking nightmare.

“That’s why they want you dead now. Nothing to do with the heart.” She clutched her hands over her own heart and whispered, “You convinced me.” The rain mingled with her tears on her cheek.

Tom stared. After a long moment, he started clapping. “Bravo! Well done. I’d ask for an encore, but I think I’d throw up.”

Amelia hurled a handful of mud at him. “I’m being sincere, you bastard!” She yanked her blouse up tighter to cover the plunge of her cleavage. “I’m out here alone in the rain because I followed you! Don’t you dare leave me!”

He rolled his eyes.

She whirled toward the town and spat. She spun back around and tried to slap Tom. He ducked back out of the way and remained there, watching her like a snake.

Amelia gathered her arms together. “Why does it have to be *her*? You and I, we wouldn’t be a lie.”

And Tom froze. “A lie?” The stone heart lurched in his chest and then seemed to shrivel inside. He took off for Cedar Vale, never once looking back at the other vampire.

Trista tapped Jakkobb on his armor and then jumped back a couple of feet.

“Yes?” he turned, eyes widened in surprised at the temerity of the chemman. He looked up to Thistle, who was just as astonished.

“Elders said that all you elves sing about how you defeated us and that’s all you do.”

“Um, no.”

“But you’re an elf. You don’t play an instrument?”

“Uh.” He tapped out a quick rhythm on his double-headed axe’s sheath. “An instrument of death.”

Der and Jakkobb’s sister both groaned. Alsalon stared in incomprehension of the Common language.

Trista giggled.

Jakkobb offered a tentative grin. “I used to play the ocarina, but,” he pulled the axe free, “It met with an axe-indent.”

Der, Cinnmara and Thistle all groaned again. But Trista laughed again.

“Why is the chemman smiling?” Alsalon asked, in Arbourn’s elvish.

Der shrugged. “Maybe there’s hope for them yet.”

Cinnmara sighed. “I wish there were.”

Der tried to follow along. Northern elvish had a few suffixes and words that she wasn’t familiar with, and the accent was entirely different. Still, she could get by. She might have to mime the word for a beer though.

Cinnmara folded her hands. “I think that we should take you to the market. Some new clothes perhaps?” She nodded to Alsalon and Trista. “It looks like you two walked through a maze of spider-webs. And you, poor Derora, I’ve seen beggars in Staghorn wearing better rags.”

Der glanced down at her travel-stained and, well, blood-stained clothes. There was even that spot where Amelia’s bloody nose had run, Der noticed with a touch of a smirk. “That would be nice, but I’m rather broke at the moment. So maybe next time.”

“Nonsense. We’ll just get my brother here to pay for it.”

“Watch it,” Jakkobb growled.

“Oh come on, little brother.” Cinnmara winked and patted his arm. “You work for the wealthiest organization in the world. You can buy us some new clothes.”

The door opened and Shillian stepped inside. He stiffly nodded to everyone waiting in the room. “Fortunate news. We are contacting Arbourn immediately.” He looked at Jakkobb. “I’m thankful you decided to trust only elves with this one.”

The knight nodded in reply. Thistle allowed himself a smug smile.

Shillian faced Alsalon and bowed. "It's time then. Let's go."

Jakkobb arose. "Indeed. Let's."

Vethelga reached up and placed a strong hand on her son's shoulder. "Not you, son. I have other plans."

"What?" Jakkobb managed to turn the accusation into a question. "Sorry, Mother-maro, but I have to ensure his safety. I think we're probably already in enough trouble for not marching him immediately back to Riversbridge."

"And whose fault is that I wonder?" Thistle muttered.

"We wouldn't have made it back," Der pointed out. "We were already within the jaws of the trap."

"So we all have to see this through." Jakkobb looked his mother in her eyes.

His mother shook her head. "It's safe here."

"I'll go." Der raised her good arm.

"See?" Vethelga smiled. "No trouble."

Shillian nodded. "I'll send Ameris, too."

Der shook her head. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

The older elf frowned. "Do you always question authority?"

"Yes," she immediately replied. Behind her, Jakkobb and Thistle nodded in unison. Cinnmara had to cover her mouth with her hand.

"Please?" The prince touched Der's shoulder. "Can we go now? I've had enough of chemmen and v—"

"Yes, let's go now!" Der thundered brightly, interrupting him.

Jakkobb's mother smiled radiantly. She clasped her hands above her heart. "And what a surprise I have for you, son!"

Wonder what new hell he's got this time, Spike said as he shouldered his way around another corner. The streets of Cedar Vale never widened. All the roofs still sprouted deep gardens, making the buildings considerably taller and hard to see around the city.

Der and Alsalon walked ahead of him. Ameris skulked in the rear, occasionally rebounding off the walls as he let his shoulders collide with them.

"What do you mean?" Der stopped and turned around. "Also, where are we going?"

Ameris pointed ahead around a curving avenue. "Just keep going straight." He huffed and went back to ignoring them.

Der raised her eyebrows at the unicorn. "What did you mean?"

I don't know what I meant. That's why I was wondering aloud.

"Oh."

Let's just say that he's better suited for fighting the Blackhound at Horizon than here.

"I don't see what his problem is," Ameris grunted from behind. "I mean, he's all Mother-maro ever talks about when he's gone. And believe me, he's *never* here. Did you know that this is only the second time I've even met my brother?"

Der felt the curiosity bubble up. "What happened?"

Ameris shrugged and avoided her eye. "I don't know. He was like just barely over being a toddler, wandered off in one of the human towns we used to trade with up here, and he was gone. So I've been told. Our parents and Cinnmara didn't know what happened for centuries. Apparently, he grew up as a child gladiator or something. I don't know. He never talks about it. And I'm his brother!"

Der looked up to Spike for confirmation. The unicorn nodded. *He's only ever told me those stories when he's desperately drunk.*

Ameris wailed, "And he never even told us what really happened! And it was all on Dosmar, so we never found him here on Solquin, *obviously*. It was Silver Dawn's Strival that made him come home after Pallens had fallen – and under guard too! I wasn't born then, but Mother-maro has told the story so many times that I remember it."

Alsalon and Der walked on silently, eyeing the clouds and the walls.

"He barely even spoke his own language," Ameris went on. "And then it was the broken Pallens dialect anyway. Wouldn't even use his own name, insisted on his new one."

Der immediately thought of Tom. "Lot of people do that."

"No, they don't! It's only you outcasts!"

She whirled toward him, only to find a ton of muscled unicorn standing between her and the young man. He glared, his pale blue eyes as hard as ice. And she saw him for what he was. An angry boy, if he were human, maybe a year or two younger than she.

She cleared her throat. "Ameris, where are we going?"

He snorted and pointed. "See the beaded curtain ahead? That one."

"Thank you. Go back home. Please."

"What?"

She ignored Alsalon's questioning glare and said, "We've got it from here. Thank you."

"You can't order me around."

"No, but I can beat you up."

Spike twisted his head around. *This is sensitive information in regard to the kingdom of Arborn. I don't believe you've been granted the appropriate permissions. I'm sure after your Strengths you will.*

To Der's mind only, he continued, *I can block this avenue with my hindquarters. Get the prince ahead.*

She nodded and pushed Alsalon's shoulder forward. Spike turned sideways in the narrow street. Ameris tried to duck underneath his belly and the unicorn started to relieve himself with the volume of a massive horse.

The young elf howled and backpedaled, kicking up dirt in the street.

Spike snickered. *I can do this all day.*

"That is disgusting!" Alsalon started, walking backward toward the beaded tent.

"It's nothing that doesn't wash off." Der frowned. Everything else here was a wooden structure, but this was a tent. She pushed through the beads, waiting for Alsalon to enter.

"Der! Brother!"

She gasped as she nearly walked into King Edillon.

Thistle drummed his fingers on the table. The only tavern that was open to non-residents of Cedar Vale was amazing with all shades of brown and no windows. It was a polished, elegant brown, but all the tables, walls and chairs were brown. Artwork of the tundra at least splashed color against the walls.

Thistle pulled his hood lower. He and Trista were passing for human, and there were perhaps only two other humans in the place. He didn't dare look up when he said, "It is unfortunate we could not have remained at your domicile."

Jakkobb snorted. "It's not my house."

"No, but you made us come with you. Don't forget, the other chemmen will be searching for her."

Trista looked up from her milk. "Then can we go home? To where the colors aren't there? Please?"

Thistle shrugged. "Most likely not."

Jakkobb placed his palm on the table. His left hand and arm were still without armor from their fight with the vampire drones. "Let's just say that I'd rather have two chemmen than what I suspect my mother is up to. We may yet have to fight."

Thistle raised his eyebrows.

"Those vampire monsters?" Trista inquired.

"No," the older storm-reader replied.

Tom kicked open the tavern door.

“Well, one of them,” Thistle said, not missing a beat.

Jakkobb cursed. “Is this better or worse?”

The newcomer engendered strange looks from the regulars, but he crossed over to Jakkobb’s party and immediately slammed onto a chair, dispelling most of the curious stares.

His forehead bounced off the table. “Where’s Der?”

“She’ll be here—”

“Now!”

Jakkobb bunched his fist and looked at the tempting target of the back of the vampire’s head. “We don’t know.”

“Not good enough!”

“Did you eat the root of the purple flower? No, that wouldn’t affect you.”

Tom snapped up straight. “I can find her!”

“Have you gone stupid?” Thistle asked bluntly. “You want to stir up an elvish city? A *northern* elvish city at that?”

“Oh right, not all girly gowns and prancing.” Tom rubbed his face and moaned. “I could burn it down, flush all you meaty, screaming animals out.” Then he laughed under his breath. He started to pound his forehead on the wooden table.

Trista pulled on Thistle’s sleeve. “Is he drunk?”

The chemman blinked. “I didn’t think that was possible.” A note of doubt saturated his voice.

“This is great. Just perfect,” Jakkobb murmured. “He can’t stay here. We need to go before—”

“Son!” Vethelga trilled from across the tavern. She beamed and waved. Beside her stood a tall, svelte woman with brown hair down to her knees. “I want you to meet someone!”

Der pushed out her hand. It passed through King Edillon’s chest as if he were smoke. She felt nothing but the warmth of light.

“Older brother!” Alsalon chirped.

Edillon couldn’t hide a wide smile. “I am so very thankful that you are safe, little brother.” He looked at Der. “What happened?”

She started to circle the ghost image of the king. “Am I appearing like this to you?”

“Yes. So, what happened?”

“Why are you blaming me?”

He sighed, his glorious face dimming. “I’m not. Yet. I’m asking.”

“It’s my fault!” Alsalon jumped up and down in place. “I’m so sorry! Der and Sir Jakkobb kept me

alive!”

“What happened?” the king repeated.

Der said, “He tracked us outside of Riversbridge, and then we were ambushed by chemmen.”

The king’s eyebrows shot up.

“And vampires.” Alsalon hugged his arms.

“And vampire slayers,” Der finished. “It was messy. But, as you can see, your brother’s whole. Terrified, but he’s braver than I gave him credit for.”

Edillon looked as if he checked behind him for somewhere to sit down. His ghostly image faded paler.

“We’re safe,” Der said. “Here in Cedar Vale.” She cocked her ear, hearing the scuffling of hooves and the stomping of boots outside the tent.

Ameris wrenched aside the beads and marched inside. His eyes widened as he gasped and collapsed to the ground in shock of whom he had nearly walked through.

“Who is this?” the king asked, albeit politely.

Der stood over the elf. “Jakkobb’s younger brother.”

“Oh. Looks like him.”

Der hauled the mute Ameris up with one arm. “Allow us to excuse ourselves while you and the prince make plans.”

Edillon nodded curtly. “Of course. And, Der, thank you.”

“Always, my friend.” She nodded in reply and shoved Ameris back outside. The elf collapsed in a coughing fit.

Spike loomed over him. *I told him not to enter.*

“I’m in trouble! I’m in trouble! I saw who that was! *Why* are you talking with the king of Arborn?” Ameris looked around, jerking and twitching all directions, waiting for the sky to collapse. “I saw his face!” He moaned into his hands.

Der rolled her eyes and hauled him to his feet for the second time. “How about being rock bottom drunk when the black masks come to seize you?” She looked around. “Where can we get a drink?”

Spike bobbed his nose to the south. *I shall await the prince here.*

“Thanks,” she replied, supporting the weight of Ameris on one shoulder. His knees moved like waves in the sea.

Jakkobb stared. He’d stared down demons at the gates of hell. He’d been so frightened at that battle that *nothing* had truly scared him enough to lock his knees ever again.

Until now.

He forced his stiff legs into motion to cross the tavern floor. The long-haired woman was beautiful, with both pointy ears and nose. Her turquoise eyes were bright and smiling.

Vethelga waved him on quicker. She put her hands on the long-haired elf's shoulders. "This is my son I told you all about." She looked at Jakkobb. "This is—"

"Call me Wolf." The woman blushed. "It's what I'm used to."

His mother held up some pinewood tea and its minty scent was enough to overpower even the normal ale smell of the tavern. They both sat. He avoided her gaze, and instantly remembered how dropping one's gaze from the face when speaking with a woman wasn't a great idea. At least not when one's own mother was half a foot away!

He growled back in his throat. He never had problems with talking with women when his mother wasn't around! To which, he looked up pointedly at her, but she apparently had every intention of being a hovering hummingbird.

Wolf cupped her hands around her tea, trying not to glance up at Vethelga. She offered a tight smile. "Silver Dawn, huh? After last winter's catastrophe?"

Jakkobb shrugged stiffly.

"Holding out in that citadel in a losing battle?"

"But it wasn't a losing battle!" Vethelga trilled. "It was a famous victory. And you never got credit for saving the world from that human monster."

His face flushed as red as his armor. "Because I didn't tackle him over the side of the citadel!"

Wolf sipped her tea. "So, you, uh, often take the company of mortals?" She glanced nervously over at Thistle and Trista, and of course, Tom who was still face first against the tabletop, groaning.

"Yes," he said crisply. "They are part of Silver Dawn. Just like they're part of the world."

"Oh." She paused. "So, Jakkobb-maró, that's not an elvish name."

He shook his head. "No title for me. I never took the Tollrian Strengths."

"Oh."

They sat in silence.

Vethelga forced a chirpy smile. "Of course, Commander Strival is also an elf, who commands the world's most elite *mixed-race* army and the banking system, of course. My son here is his captain."

"Only a captain?" Wolf asked.

Jakkobb dropped his eyes. "The dragoon orders don't have a rank higher than captain except for the three commanders ever since the Centum Wars. Remember, during the Wars, anyone with a higher rank was prey for the Kalamarden assassins."

“Oh. Good for you.” She sipped her tea. “So, you must have a lot of property then.”

Jakkobb shook his head. “Only what I take on the road.”

“Oh.”

They sat for another moment.

Vethelga offered another cheerful smile. “Of course—”

“Excuse me.” Wolf started to rise. “I, I have some. Something.”

“Just go.” Jakkobb exhaled as she left.

His mother slunk down in Wolf’s still warm seat. “You could always take the Strengths with your brother. You would be the only adult, of course.”

“No. I’ve already proven myself, thank you very much.”

“That you bring humans here is bad enough. No woman up here wants a man without the title.”

“Mother-marol!” He slapped the table. “You assume I’m looking.”

“Everyone’s always looking.” She paused, watching his still-erubescence face closely. “Unless they’ve already found someone.”

He tightened his jaw.

Der suddenly kicked the door open, and stepped inside. She supported most of Ameris’ weight on her good shoulder. He looked like he’d had a near strike of lightning.

“You know,” Ameris slightly slurred, “In the stories, it sounds like you’re his younger sibling and not me. And Father-marol sent him the city’s sacred axe—”

Der tuned him out. She stared. What was Tom doing inside the city?

“What happened to him?” Jakkobb asked.

Der watched at the facedown vampire.

The knight waved his hand in front of her face. “Der! What did you do to my brother?”

She blinked. Jakkobb was standing in front of her. Vethelga was glaring at them. The elven woman turned away as the rest of them approached Thistle and Tom’s table.

The vampire jerked upright. Der came into focus away from the luminescent glow of the door, *with another man’s arms around her shoulders!* He snapped off a large chunk of the wooden table without noticing.

Then again, the newcomer did have that electrified look that people often get around her and it didn’t look like he could stand on his own... But still!

Trista pointed at the vampire. “He’s growling.”

Tom didn’t notice.

The knight eased his brother’s weight off of Der’s shoulder. “What happened?”

She still watched Tom, who immediately slunk back in the chair like a lazy cat when Ameris was detached. She said, "Oh, I think he's already paid for his crime." She stepped forward, glaring at the vampire. "What are you doing here?"

He rolled his shoulders into a languid shrug and tipped up his metal flask. "What? Can't a man get a drink in a tavern?"

"The only stiff drink you're going to have is an alcoholic."

After a moment of mental digestion, Jakkobb pulled his brother a little farther away.

"Who's this?" the younger elf asked.

No one had to answer. They could all see the stories rolling across his vision. He tensed and paled, and then he finally managed a squeak.

Der slapped him on the shoulder. "Buck up, man. You're going for your Strengths, right? A little vamp—"

"I am not little!" Tom thundered in a muted roar. He knocked his chair over as he rose.

"A little stiff, I sense." She smirked.

Tom grabbed her bad shoulder and frog-marched her out the door.

Ameris lunged to follow, but Jakkobb stuck a foot in his path. He shook his head. "Why does everyone try to interfere?" He sighed, reached down and slid two coins across the table to Thistle.

"Thank you," the chemman replied, sweeping up the money.

"We need to talk," Tom said, rounding the corner into one of the many, nearly identical streets of Cedar Vale. He seemed to have immediately shaken whatever pretense of anger that had gripped him inside.

Der couldn't sense anything but a trembling suspicion of foreboding. She concentrated on it, and realized just how buried that emotion was. It was starting to bloom now, like a rose unfolding its first pedal.

She scuffed her feet in the dirt, stopping. "Tom?"

"Not here." He pointed to the rooftop gardens.

Instead of just grabbing her, he cupped his hands to offer her a foot up. She accepted and gripped the edge of the tall roof after a little hop. Clinging by one hand, she started swinging her feet until she could grip the edge with one foot.

She rolled into the dark, thick mud.

Tom, already standing on air over the roof, offered her a hand up.

She stared at the leafy thing in front of her nose. A sprout? Or was some kind of tuber growing

down there?

“Oh my.” She stared across the roofs of Cedar Vale. It was like a greenhouse, with light all hours of the day. Tall, short and many colorful flowers and foods blossomed all across the city.

They stepped out on a small walkway, one of several dividing the rooftop garden.

Tom smothered a laugh, and the sense of foreboding faded from Der’s senses. “You should’ve been there. Jakkobb’s mother tried to introduce him!”

“To whom?”

“A woman, in fact! Jakkobb, courting!”

Der tilted her head. “I’m kind of glad I didn’t see that.”

Tom sat down on the center of the roof, where all the wooden walkways and support beams joined. “And you never will because he’ll never pursue the one he loves.”

The cold wind stung as she squatted down beside him. “I didn’t even know he was in love. And that’s not like him. If he wants something, he’s not the kind to say no.”

Tom quirked an eyebrow. “You don’t see it, do you? Because the woman he loves had already married his best friend.”

Der creased her brow for a moment. Then she gasped. “You’re wrong! There is no way that he is in love with Lady Evelyn!”

“Courtly love.” Tom started out with a chuckle in his voice, but it rapidly faded. “But he’ll never say anything because he still respects Rowan too much.”

“He would be your step-father.” Der swallowed.

Tom shook his head. “I have no family, Der.” All joy had ebbed from his voice. The foreboding sensation surged again. “You know what it’s like to want someone you can never have.”

“No, I don’t.”

He stared directly into her eyes, his face as impassive as ever. “Oh. I’m mistaken.”

She rubbed her arms, looking anywhere but him. Even though her own face was heating up, the wind was fast cooling it off. “It’s freezing up here. Aren’t you cold?”

He barked one of his icy laughs. “What am I supposed to do? Pile on more clothes to preserve body heat that I don’t have?”

“You don’t feel this?”

“No, I feel it more than you do. But what’s going to happen to me? I can’t freeze to death. Pah. Most pains become bearable when you know you can’t die from them.”

“Oh. Right.”

The foreboding was a tsunami now. Der felt like crying, feeling the raw knot in the back of her

throat, unsure of it was her emotions or his.

He met her eyes. "I'm leaving. And it's not like it was before. This time, I am not coming back."

Chapter Seventeen

Promise Kept

The wind must have frozen her. She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Der could only stare ahead, waiting for her heart to start beating again.

"I'm leaving," Tom repeated. "I can't stay here with you." His hand dropped first to his flask and then inside his pocket to Chloe's necklace. "I don't want to exist with this lie anymore."

"What lie?" she choked out. "It's not a lie." She found herself falling into her own emotions. Or were these a mix of both of theirs? She didn't know. She just wanted to cry.

Her head snapped up. "What about Chloe?"

Tom grabbed the golden necklace inside his pocket. "In my world, if a relationship isn't used for power then it's used as a knife to your neck."

"Your world?"

"That's why I swore never to be in love."

"You left them! You left that world! You're a loner."

"And I would very much like to keep it that way, thank you," he snapped. "Don't think I'm doing this for your sake."

The wind blew away the unspoken words between them.

"You leave and I tell your mother and Jakkobb everything."

His upper lip curled. "That's not fair. Do you know what grief will do to her? Do you know how betrayed Jakkobb will feel *about you*?"

She squared her hand on her hip. "I'll feel better about not keeping this a secret."

"This isn't fair *to me*." He scowled. "And why are you being vindictive?"

"Because this is her work, isn't it? Amelia got to you. I'm trying to get you back."

"No!" His voice lashed out like a whip. "This is *my* decision. She just reminded me. Der, stop. I've known this since I first held Chloe as an infant. This is a decision I made years before I even met you. You're not that special."

The floor dropped out from her world. She tried to sense his emotions, to see if he was just trying to sting her, but the symphony of his emotions were washed away by her own sudden tears. All she could think was *how*? How could he say that?

"This confusion over the last couple years, my fame and all of the horrible things that have happened to me are your fault. All of this is your fault." His emerald eyes were as hard as the cut

gem. "I can't forgive you. You ruined what I am."

Der stared off into the horizon, wishing for a sunset. Wishing this moment would end.

"The heart," she croaked. "Is this what it's doing to you?"

He slowly shook his head. "No. I am in complete control of the artifact." He stared off into a different horizon. "I wish I knew what happens when we're slain. Am I judged? Is this unholy curse shed from me? I don't know."

She scrubbed her eyes. "And I thought you knew everything about life and death."

"Ha." He shook his head. "Just because we're the top of the food chain doesn't mean we're omniscient."

"Top?" She sniffed.

"Do you know of anything that regularly eats us? No."

"Only because eating things that have been dead for a long time isn't healthy," she retorted with a ghost of her usual self.

Tom paused, and his voice was heavier than usual, "This isn't the time."

"And this isn't the time for you to go back to the Kingdom."

He scoffed. "You know nothing of it."

They sat in silence for another moment.

Der curled a fist. "You know I'll fight them for you."

"You can't challenge the blood, Der," he replied in a low voice. "This isn't anything like the chemmen and Darkreign. You'd lose. And they have special hells created just for paladins. I don't think many of them have forgotten."

"They are the blood. What does that even mean?"

He winced. "It just means they are the blood, alright? Do you want every single vampire in the world to be ordered to slay you, an order, by the way, that they physically cannot disobey. You've seen our Voice. At least the chemmen stop torturing you when you die."

"I'm not afraid."

"You would be if you were smarter." He curled his lip, revealing his fang. "In fact, you should just go home and make babies."

She shot him an angry look. "I know you said that just to get to me, Tom. And no, I'm not running away, not with all those innocent people are up here. I know the Kingdom is close."

He stared at her blankly.

"The humans, Staghorn, the elves, you'll truly abandon everyone to a mad vampire lord who already has some of the bones?"

“You don’t know that. You couldn’t possibly know that.”

“I saw his fist. I fought him. It’s already too late for me too. You can’t challenge them alone.”

Tom shook his head. “This isn’t the Blackhound, Der, with battles and history on the sword’s edge. Vampires stay out of history. We avoid battles and move in secret. The stone and bone chase may just be a distraction for a larger ploy, who knows?”

“What could be larger than the legend?”

“Not anything I know of. Or maybe one of the most powerful vampire lords bringing the stone and bone together?”

Der frowned. “I thought the stone and bone couldn’t work together. They were enemies, like.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Where did you hear that?”

“Uh..uh...” She couldn’t lie to him. She could try, but he’d see right through it. Why in the world was she even considering lying to him? Dominic was slain after all. He wasn’t in peril anymore.

He waved a hand. “I don’t care enough to ask.”

Another pause.

“So, this is really it?” she asked.

He nodded. Then he reached out and sheered the head off a flower. “But I’m done playing their games, by their rules, where only they can win.”

Der hesitated, not sure whether to speak or not.

“Let them have their little queens and kings, they don’t matter. There’s only one sire of sires. One true royal house.”

“Sire of sires?”

“The first one of our ilk. Or possibly just the oldest and he’s slain all others before him. It doesn’t matter. He’s the root of our family tree.”

“You’re all descended from this one sire?”

He nodded. “Yes. He who has all the powers any of us could possibly have, and when he chooses his little kings and queens, he chose which powers they have, and they in turn, pass along only some of those to their new minions.”

She persisted in poking the leaf of a tuber. “But he’s missing, isn’t he? On this pilgrimage or whatever? And Avamar has stepped into his boots?”

Tom waved a hand. “They’re all just too terrified to face undeath without the true king. He made them all, clipped all their wings and can control them all with a thought. He’s a very angry, personal, powerful god to them. They never considered, and will never consider, existence without him.”

“Until now, until Avamar who wants to be the sire of sires.”

"And what happens when the true sire returns? He'll have no troubles killing every last one of us and starting anew. Even killed a dozen of his own born children if you believe the stories."

"Right," she said, "Because he created you all, or those that created you. You know what I mean."

"No, Der, his *born* children. Those born as vampires. The ability to procreate like a human is restricted to him and those mates he picks and gives it to them, probably very temporarily."

"How does he do that?"

"Most likely by slaying the mother after the child is born."

"You mentioned it before but..." She shook her head. "There are children who are born vampires, and what? They just grow up?"

"Something like that. But they are far more powerful, able to command everyone but the sire of sires. Although, if you believe the rumors, he can't wipe out their innate powers. They are born with them. Maybe that's why he killed all but one."

"And then there's me," he continued, bitterness overflowing in his voice. "Damned. Under control by some little king. Took an opportunity with a chair leg in the one second he was distracted. *It* was distracted." He paused, staring off into the distant fog. "Never heard of anyone murdering their sire before, but I'm far from the first to ever entertain the thought. You've never known hatred so pinpointed, so focused. So consuming of all your attention. Like an angry, starving dog, but beaten for disobedience. And then to have him laugh at you, reveling in the glory of your impotent hatred."

Der stared hard at her own boots. She tried to peek under his carefully constructed lid of emotions.

"Don't bother. You've weakened me so much that it's just another burn scar of a memory."

"I never changed you," she said. "You took Chloe in years before you ever met me."

He fingered the golden necklace again. "I should've let the girl die."

Der gasped.

"Saved her from being hunted. From the hells that are in this world."

"Tom," she said in a low, steady voice, "I know that you are a liar. But if you say that again, I will rip your tongue out and you can wait to grow a new one."

"You're right. It was a lie. Or was it?" He laughed softly. "Which one is the lie? I don't know!"

"Then which lie do you want, stupid?" She scowled, glaring down at the garden at her feet. "I'm not sure you know who or what you are underneath all your masks."

"If that's true, then you have no idea what I am. Besides, what is true for you isn't true for me. What makes things real? Because you believe it? Because another person can verify it?"

"What are you talking about?"

He finally looked at her with those eyes, as green as an emerald's reflection. "I am not like you."

You only know the faces I've allowed you to know."

"But—"

"Human hearts heal; rock hearts just break into smaller pieces. I wasn't happy, but I wasn't sad either."

"But those are part of life."

"I'm not alive. How many times do I have to say it?"

Der's jaw hung helplessly open. "But you're still in this world."

"You and Chloe will be fine in the end. I won't be. I can't be." His fingers gripped the necklace so tightly that he bent the pendant. He closed his eyes and turned his face away.

When he opened his eyes again, Der was holding out his father's compass. "What is your real name? You know I can find out, but I want to hear it from you."

His gaze hovered over the compass. His fingers over the necklace. His mouth dried. "It's Tom now. Because that's who I have been in the last few years. Because that's who you made me."

"I made you?" she echoed.

"I was over it. I didn't care about life any more. I wasn't jealous. I wasn't bitter. And then you walked into my death. I wish you never had! You really are some sort of shining star, but I never *wanted* that. I knew I'd regret this ever since Chloe found me, but not how much!"

And there it was. His voice cracked. His eyes widened. His heart gave one lurch.

"I can't do this anymore. I have to keep my promise."

Der swallowed, fighting back another surge of tears.

He ducked his gaze. "At least if Amelia cuts my heart out, she'll have the decency to kill me while she does it."

Der could see the horizon. She could see the fog gathering, obscuring it, swallowing it whole. And it was gone. The moment was over. In these past years, she'd always been so proud of the fact that he couldn't control her. She never imagined how helpless he must've felt until this very moment.

Dominic's demands to keep him from the Kingdom be damned; she couldn't stop him from leaving even if she tried.

He stood up and straightened his clothing. Without saying anything, he walked down the sloping side of the roof toward its edge.

"I love you," Der said.

She didn't look up. He didn't turn around. "Ever since learning how much fun hating you could be. I wish I had said it when it would have mattered."

He paused at the edge. "What did I say? I am a bastard." He dropped out of sight and he was

gone.

Der sensed his numbness fading. Either he'd learned some sort of psychic shielding or she was too afraid. She buried her face in her hands and stared down hard at the roof. The rain started again. She sat there, shivering.

She didn't know how long she'd been that way when something snickered on a roof across the avenue. She jerked her head up and saw herself. A pale, mirror version of herself.

Amelia smirked and waved. She was naked underneath her gray cloak, as if taunting the clouds to part. She stretched out her legs, arched her back and fingered her own breast with one hand, all the while moaning in pleasure.

She licked her lips at Der. "Do you think he'll be too busy tonight to notice?" Then she raised her other hand, holding up one of her sharpened sais from behind her back where a lover would never see it.

"Or should I enjoy him until next week? Next month? Oh, it's already too late for you to know. Poor little paladin."

Der's fatigue vanished as her heart started pounding. A surge of heat radiated down her arms and legs, she could almost feel herself steam against the cold rain. Her gaze flickered to where Tom had disappeared and then Amelia was gone when she glanced back.

She didn't know which to chase.

"Tom!" she yelled. "It's a trap!" Her feet skidded down the side of the roof where he had vanished. She muttered under her breath as her feet thundered down the street, "But you know that, don't you?"

Chapter Eighteen

Desperate Deafening

"I'm going home!" Alsalon grinned and clapped his hands. Jakkobb's family and everyone else sat around their dinner table looked up at the sudden, elative announcement.

"I want to go home!" Trista wailed after a quick translation by Thistle.

"We know this," the older chemman said curtly, switching languages. "Complaining about it doesn't help."

"But..." her lower lip trembled. Thistle raised an eyebrow. She dropped her gaze.

He returned to peeling the skin off of a thin, bright purple pepper. He sniffed it and held it away from his nose. "I did not expect peppers to grow here."

"Warmwood peppers," Cinnmara said. "Everyone needs a little extra heat up here."

Jakkobb chuckled. "They –we," he corrected after a glare from his mother, "Sometimes build baths out of the snow and everyone piles into the freezing water, eating these peppers. It's kind of a dare."

"Sounds painful." Thistle set his pepper back onto his plate.

"Speaking of dare," Shillian said, "Where is your friend?"

Thistle shrugged.

Jakkobb's brow creased in worry. "I don't know."

"What?" Alsalon asked.

The dragoon sighed and repeated the conversation in elvish.

"She'd better get back soon," Alsalon said. "I want to go home and you're the only guards my brother trusts up here." He ducked his eyes from Shillian. "Sorry, sir."

The older elf leaned back. "I wouldn't say 'only'."

Thistle nodded his head at the young prince. "I think he means the only ones *he* trusts. I'd give the king a bit more credit."

Alsalon's pointed ears burned red.

"However, we must also discuss young Trista's fate as well," Thistle continued in Common. "The prince is not the only youngling here."

"Yes!" The girl straightened. "How do I get home?"

Jakkobb tried to smile. "It's more like picking your new home. Making sure you're safe and that everyone else is too."

"She can't stay here or in any of the Vales," Vethelga said. "I'm not sure if we would trust either of

you storm-readers if it weren't for my son."

"You have two sons, Mother-marro," Ameris reminded.

Jakkobb glanced between his mother and younger sibling, leaning back into the chair as it creaked warningly against his weight. He didn't make eye contact with either of them.

The door to the house cracked like a whip as Der threw it back so hard it collided with the wall behind it. She was panting and red-faced. Her voice was hoarse. "Where's Spike?"

Jakkobb straightened at her intrusion. "We saved you a plate. Why are you looking for Spike?"

She scampered around the dining table to the small alcove where their haversacks had been stashed. "Got to find the slayers in Staghorn," she said, already buckling a strap over her good shoulder.

"What?"

"No!" Alsalon leaped up, spilling his peppers and other vegetables across the table and into Ameris' lap. "No! You're helping me home!"

Der paused in mid-step. "You're fine."

"No!"

"There are chemmen hunting all of us in Staghorn, too," Thistle reminded her.

"Don't care." She sprinted out the still open door, leaving it ajar behind her.

The stunned silence that normally followed in her wake washed over Jakkobb's family. Meanwhile, the knight and Thistle exchanged a glance and then both of them knocked their chairs over simultaneously and clambered for the door.

"Spike! Please!" Der pleaded. She was already hopping atop a rain barrel to get a better height to mount.

The massive unicorn, who was on one of his rare days without the blasted saddle, actually backed away from the one-armed girl. *Patience, child. I'm—*

"Patience can wait! You can make it in a quarter of the time!"

Jakkobb and Thistle rounded the corner.

Der jumped onto Spike's bare back, and the unicorn didn't flinch. "I have to go. Tom's dead!"

"So he keeps reminding us," Thistle pointed out.

Der, Spike began.

"Spike!" she yelled. "This is greater than Tom and I. It's the legend of stone and bone! I wish I hadn't been so focused on my own damn self. Look, do you want everyone up here to die or not?"

Is that your real reason?

“One of them, yes.”

Alright then. He started to turn in the narrow street.

“No!” Jakkobb yelled. “We’ll all go together.”

But Spike was already trotting and breaking into a canter. His hooves buzzed with electricity as they pushed away from the ground and he was off, galloping into the sky.

The knight stared at the fading image in the sky. “Damn and blast! This is why I hate holidays.”

Der gazed down as the Tollrian Shield slipped away until the clouds grayed it out. It was also freezing and the wind was worse than she’d thought. Of course, she hadn’t thought about the wind at all before this moment. Now her teeth were chattering. All she could feel was the unicorn’s motion in the thickening clouds. She’d lost all sense of direction. They could be upside down for all she knew!

They finally broke through the grayness and into the sun.

The burst of warmth on her skin was short lived, stolen by the wind. She shifted her weight, but did not complain. She shaded her eyes with a hand and looked up at the sun, imagining it growing warmer and bigger.

What she saw was the moon drifting perilously close the sun. They looked to be about the same size.

It’s nearly midnight! You’ll never know this far north though!

“I know!”

I think there will be an eclipse in a day or two, or what counts for a day up here. That will be something to see, an eclipse against–

“–The midnight sun,” Der finished distantly. She sang, “In the shadow of the midnight sun, that’s when the world will be undone.” She thought back to the new Riversbridge, and of the boy singing it an alley. What had he meant that she only sings it to me when I’m sleeping? Was he psychic? Or had it been Amelia’s game all along?

Spike made it to Staghorn through the freezing, windy, soaking air in half a day. Der never complained.

The unicorn’s electric hooves hovered off the ground. Der rubbed the sleep from her eyes. They were back on the mountain shelves of the northern port. A few icebergs, bearing brown and blue stripes, bobbed in the bay.

Spike remained standing on air. Der wasn’t going to wait. She swung her legs over to one side. He still didn’t lower himself, even though it was at least a ten foot drop.

Wait. Just get whatever information and wait for the rest of us.

“I can’t make that promise. Not if the time is right.” She slid off his back and rolled when she hit the paving stones.

Der, Spike said seriously, You and I are more of Jakkobb’s family than his parents and siblings. Please don’t forget that.

She forced a smile. “I won’t.”

Then gods-speed. He raised his head, shook his mane and cantered off into the sky, leaving a small trail of sparkling electricity that lasted for a few seconds.

Der watched the unicorn vanish back into the clouds. She turned and sprinted down the sloping avenues of the city, looking for a market or any one of those sly bell-pulls that she’d seen the shopkeeper use.

After half an hour stuck elbow to elbow in one of the crowded markets, furious with activity after the fall of the eastern seaboard last year, Der had had enough. There was no time to dawdle!

She pushed her way through the people and animals, over the dogs’ baying, and marched determinedly toward the one place where she knew she could be heard the loudest.

Augusto’s play was happening again. Was it bright and early, or was it still at night? She didn’t care. There was a crowd. There were bound to be ears, and hopefully the correct spies amongst the audience. Of course, there was a significant chance to the wrong ears being here too, not to mention the chemmen, but Der didn’t care. They could see her coming and just try to stop her.

She drifted between the aisles into the heart of the amphitheater toward the stage. The actor in red cardboard armor took center stage. He leaned far toward the crowd, as if he were peering a great distance from a great height. The cardboard battlements at the edge of the stage, conveniently hiding some lights, obviously indicated that this entire stage was Horizon.

“What hellish might do I see marching across the plain? Is it he? The Blackhound? But he has retreated with the remnants of his force to Alscane! Or so we were made to believe. And all we have here is a handful of wounded and a fistful of soldiers; everyone else has...” the actor petered out as Der started her one-handed climb over the battlements of the stage. He rallied, “Everyone else has gone to war. *What are you doing?*”

Der accidentally tore the painted battlement. She looked up at the actor. “Jakkobb doesn’t talk like that.” She turned, facing the entire audience. They hadn’t quite figured what to make of her – and she certainly did look the part of Derora Saxen, but she wasn’t the same actress from a few minutes ago, and certainly in a far worse costume.

The actor’s jaw drooped. He glanced to the wings for support from his fellow thespians.

Der ignored him. She cupped one hand around her mouth. "Sorry for the interruption, but I am Derora Saxen of Riversbridge."

The audience shuffled, confused.

"No, the actual one." She fumbled with an awkward, offhand draw of the Pallens sword. "I'll make it quick so you can watch that crane back there drop the canvas castle on the stage in the finale." She cleared her throat. "I'm looking for the slayers. I will be at the Chiming Crystal for two hours. I have some vampires I need very much to kill, and believe me, the sooner the better. Send word to your Leader Bo, I think his name was." She started to step off the stage when the weight of the stunned stares pushed her back. "And, uh, thank you?"

She sheathed the Pallens sword and looked back at the actor. "Alright, your turn again." With that, she hopped off the stage and started back up the hill to the most famous tavern in the north.

Apparently, rumors walked faster than she could. Two burly men parted rapidly in the doorway as she stepped up to the Chiming Crystal. They eyed her and quickly darted down the street.

A clinking of coins overrode the sound of her footsteps as everyone inside the taproom threw down their payments and evaporated from the room.

Der took a seat at a booth with her back to the wall and a view of both doors, one to the outside and one to the kitchen. Of course, from her last experience here, she knew the wall between the tavern and stable wasn't thick at all. She bumped her shoulder blades against it; this one felt more solid though.

A barmaid, barely into her teens, trembled so much that she sloshed the beer over the sides of the mug.

Der patted her pockets and then fumbled for her belt purse. "Um." She looked up apologetically. "I left all my money in Cedar Vale."

The barmaid screeched, tossed down the tankard and took off running for the kitchen.

Der, meanwhile, blinked in confusion at the spectacle. "I can get a loan from Silver Dawn! In a couple of hours!" She leaned back in the booth, wondering if it would be uncouth to go ahead and drink the beer. It wasn't like it was stealing, was it? And she was pretty sure Strival had not black-marked her name for getting a loan from his banking empire, even after she'd broken his nose.

She decided and reached out for whatever was left that hadn't spilled. She worried the chemmen – surely they'd heard – would try something especially since she was alone here, but the half-mug of alcohol was her only friend for two hours.

Der was debating whether or not to leave and just strike out for her planned destination on her own

when they came. Eight of them from the front door and eight from the back simultaneously. They were grim-faced, silent, tall and all of them missing something essential from their bodies. One-eyed and one-eared scarred men glowered at her, limping in on wooden legs and crutches.

She didn't move and kept her left hand on the table in view. She frowned, wondering how any of them could hope to fight a vampire, not with their mutilations. She swallowed, realizing that these were just the slayers who were known to be slayers, who had already paid the price. Who weren't afraid to reveal their craft. They were, in fact, the public face of the slayer community.

They fanned out in the room, dropping Der's sinister and heavy glares. Four of them blocked both doors. The two guarding the kitchen briefly parted to allow a small nun of Ahtome to pass before they flowed back into their space.

She wore the white habit, obscuring all her body except her fingers and left only a small square for her face. Der's eyes widened and her breath caught in her throat. The tiny nun approached and took the seat opposite of her.

Der looked at the gorgeous face, ruined by a handful of old claw-marks down one side. Her brown eyes were as hard as the mountains surrounding Staghorn.

The two women looked each other over – the nun in her immaculate habit and Der in her torn tunic and trousers. As an afterthought, she pulled out the Dawn Sword medallion from her shirt and into view.

She tried to think, was the nun real or it was it just a disguise? She'd never heard of fighting nuns before, but looking at the steel in this woman's eyes, she didn't rule out the idea.

"I am Sister Bo," the woman said evenly, staring deep into Der's gaze.

Der coughed. "Bo? You're Bo?" She laughed suddenly. "I would have never guessed."

Sister Bo's tone was as hard as her eyes. "You have embarrassed us. Started rumors about a good vampire, and you do not seem to be dedicated to eradicating the world of unholiness with such actions."

"The Blackhound wasn't enough?" Der asked bluntly.

Bo folded her fingers together calmly. "There are many of us who doubt it was the true Blackhound. Someone who had just stolen the name from history."

Der shrugged.

"If it wasn't truly him, then your rank of paladin is ill-earned."

Der remembered the garden of the gods. She shrugged again. "Believe whatever you want. I know what's real to me."

"And what is that, pray?" Bo's voice was sweet, like a berry bush full of hidden thorns. "A lover's life

with one of the beasts? We've all seen the play."

Minor key laughter echoed around the room. Der fought against contracting her shoulders. Her face burned. But the embarrassment quickly faded on its own. She was alone in this room, surrounded by powerful warriors who she had publicly shamed, apparently.

Der flattened her hand on the table. "Yes or no for your help?"

Bo replied evenly, "No. But leave the sword. We could use a Pallens relic far better than you. You killed the alleged Blackhound, you don't need it anymore." She paused in her thoughts. "Maybe it was truly him for you to have found such an ancient and powerful weapon."

Der scowled.

"You have no working arm left to wield it."

"And you are not the heroes you think you are," the paladin replied, disgust dripping in her voice. "My answer is no. Now, thank you for your time, Sister Bo, but I'll be on my way to invade the Kingdom." She started to slide off the booth's bench. Sixteen tall men stood between her and any exit. Of course, none of them would be able to lift the holy sword, but could Bo? If she really was a nun?

"Alone?" The sister's laugh was as warm as the north's winters. Der bunched a fist, but didn't move. "You know where it is?"

"Don't you?"

"We suspect," Bo said delicately, "Underground." She paused, looking over Der's face. "How much can we trust you, I wonder? If you worked with one of our enemy for so long, according to the stories."

"My only goal here is to slay two vampires. Will you object to that?"

Bo's smile slithered across the square of her visible face. "How deep can you swim?"

"The sea? You think it's under the Kilvanian Sea?"

"Nowhere else it could be. We know they're here, and they'll need darkness for these summer months. It's too bright for even us in the Crystal Forest and we've scoured the mountain peaks, routed those in the city, but somehow, they're still here. Always lurking."

Der felt the tendrils of doubt creeping into her plan. "Well, you do have far more experience than I do. And no, no one has told me. It's still my hunch."

"You speak to the gods too, don't you?"

She nodded. "I do, but I have never asked them for such information." She wasn't sure if they would even tell her, and even if they would, it felt like cheating. But right now, cheating seemed fair against her opponents, considering they must've created every law of cheating in history.

Der breathed. "I just need help finding one vampire. Find her and I can unravel the whole web."

Sister Bo smiled. "That, I think we can do. Once you find her though, we want to chop up all the pieces that fall out when you shake this tree. You'd better not disappoint us with too few fruit."

Der wondered if other, well, innocent certainly wasn't the right word, but other vampires not involved in this particular intrigue would be caught in the battle. She frowned. She had to save Tom, and in doing so, possibly all of Solquin's north. She met Bo's gaze. "Shoot straight then."

"Good. How may we help you track this beast?"

Der sighed. "I don't know how. That's why I came to you."

"Called us to you, you mean."

"Do you know how else I could've found you?"

"Fair point," Bo replied. "What do you know about her?"

"She went by the name Amelia."

Bo waved her hand. "Useless."

"I know. At first, she looked like a thin redhead, but then she changed her features to look like me."

The slayers collectively gasped. Bo's gaze never left Der's face. "She must hate you indeed." She chuckled. "Of course, paladins and vampires, the legend reborn! To think we've only been playing with your predecessors' shadows for centuries. And here you are, perhaps to finish the war against them that Pallens never could."

Der shook her head. "Not when there's only one paladin in the world." She frowned, lost in the thought that she was going to invade the Kingdom, something the ancient paladins never did, and all by herself too.

"Why this one?" Bo asked.

"Because she angered me. But mostly, because once I've slain her, Avamar Frohein will come after me."

The slayers stopped breathing. Their eyes widened.

Bo leaned forward. "Ah. Now I understand. Exploiting what little dissension in their ranks that exists. Intelligent. I'm sorry I assumed that you were protecting that one like you cared. We shouldn't take such romantic playwrights seriously." She laughed again while Der just stared, trying to mimic Tom's impassiveness.

Bo's laughter receded. "Avamar Frohein. The sire of sires. And you with only one arm."

"He's not such a sire yet, and he never will be. Because he'll be ashes come the shadow of the midnight sun."

"Does a paladin truly have the ability to accomplish that?" The nun eyed the sling. "Is that a ruse?"

You certainly have us convinced. Of course, the paladins of yore could heal their bodies and others.”

“I know,” Der replied stiffly. “I’m not ready to tell you what I can and cannot do.” She added to herself, mostly because I don’t know, but Tom’s lessons were stronger now, and she found she could slide along the barrier between honesty and half-truths. She dropped her face, thinking of him. “But it’s all for naught if I can’t find her. I know I can’t find him.”

“Do you have an object or something that belonged to this target?” Bo asked. “The more personal the better.”

Der racked her mind. No, no clothes, she barely wore any. No, Der didn’t have the lost sai at the first Cedar Vale totem. She dropped her head and then the laughter bubbled up. She plucked at her stained shirt. “Yes, yes, I do.”

She fingered the bloodstain left behind from that satisfying moment where she’d smashed the vampire’s nose.

Bo nodded. “I hope you can find the Kingdom. We’ll surround it and choke it off, we’ll even pay for all the mercenaries in this world to keep them locked in their darkness.”

Not unlike what the elves did to the chemmen in Darkreign, Der thought. “Surround them? Why not join the fight?”

Bo shook her head. “You’re immune, according to the ancient stories. We aren’t, if we’re trapped.”

Der hesitated and realized what she meant.

“Of course, they’re out of practice with dealing with you paladins, but I believe they will murder you easily enough. Or uneasily enough, given their preferences. So I’ll let you in on a secret, the motto of we slayers: *mortui mordent*.”

“The dead bite,” Der translated. The light bounced off of her Dawn Sword necklace into their eyes, as if assuming authority. “I know what I have to do.”

Chapter Nineteen

Guiding Compass

Sister Bo hid Der in a secret shelter, and advised her to wait there before locking the door from the outside. The only wood with enough give to eventually break through was on the ceiling. The rest of the walls were as solid as rock. She must be underground, Der decided. The air felt damp, too. She poked the ceiling with the Pallens sword, pondering escape, but sheathed the weapon and sat down on the cold floor. She had asked for the slayers' help, after all.

The only tool she had to gauge time by was a stack of candles. She cut notches in the wax at what she thought were hour intervals. She'd gone through two candles before a small, skittish boy arrived with food and simple, but clean clothes for her.

She smiled as she took the bowl of stew. "Thank you."

The child's eyes widened at that. He stammered, "W-welcome." Then he risked a grin and darted out of the room. After several more candles, he brought her a book of priest's holy spells and sneaked her some blueberry crummbread.

Der was flipping through the tome in the low light of yet another candle when someone unlocked and slammed the door open. A slayer she had never seen before swaggered through the door. He was tall, dark-haired and had a torso like a barrel. She immediately nicknamed him Brawn. He also boasted a network of scars, showing up like veins all over his body.

"Who are you?"

"No names," he quipped.

Brawn it is, she thought.

He stalked in, eyeing her like a rabbit for dinner. Der raised an eyebrow and marked her place in the shield spell she was reading.

He took a seat several feet away from her on the floor. "Sister has asked me to teach you some of our fighting methods."

"Could be useful." So was sparring with a vampire regularly, she thought, but kept that one to herself.

His dark eyes blazed while he glared at her.

A soft knock, the whisper of a knock really, came on the door and the serving boy tiptoed inside. He ducked his head at Brawn and raced over to lift the chamber pot.

"You were not given permission to enter!"

The child dropped the pot from his trembling fingers, and didn't seem to notice the splash. His whole body quaked.

Der threw an unlit candle at Brawn, end over end, like a knife. It struck his open mouth and lodged in the back of his throat. He doubled forward, suddenly choking.

The boy squealed.

"He's fine," Der said through a casual smile just as Brawn ripped the length of candle out of his mouth. "How are you?" she pressed the boy.

"F-fine, my lady!" He dropped to his knees, trying to wipe up the filth with the straw from the floor.

"Let's find a rag instead. I'll help."

Brawn roared, but Der just kept smiling pleasantly at the serving boy. She offered, "Why don't you run away and find something to clean with? Change your clothes first though, please."

The lad blanched at Brawn and scampered out of the room as fast as he could. Der picked up another candle and held it like a dagger. "If you offer that boy a threat, I will remove that threat."

"He's only another orphan," the slayer snarled and spat. "Only one we were able to save from the orphan train. He'll grow to be one of us – we've all suffered some sort of that same tragedy, that's why we're here. He can afford no weaknesses."

"To become a hunter?"

Brawn cocked his head, seeming to realize that the thing in her hand was not a blade. He opened his mouth to bark a laugh, but his gaze flinched over to the first candle she had thrown. He exhaled and relaxed back into a seat position.

Der blinked, surprised at his ability to control his obvious temper. Of course, he was a slayer after all.

"You did it backward," he said, his voice strained but no longer roaring.

"Excuse me?"

"You were supposed to be one of us. Supposed to train and meditate and fight to demonstrate your worth. Show the gods what you've already sacrificed for the cause. Sounds to me like you just jumped off a cliff to see if you could fly."

"What are you talking about?" Her gaze dropped down to the priestly spellbook, written in the holy language, and it could never be read by anyone except those the shining gods deemed worthy.

Brawn continued, "We know that there were paladin-vampire battles, and you think that we haven't shown the gods that we can take on their mantle!"

"Oh. I see. The Skyfire Revolution."

"And I'm not sure if you are a real paladin, otherwise you'd have use of both arms. I don't think that

a ruse against our enemy, as Sister suggests.”

“It isn’t. I know I’ve heard stories of those who could heal, but I’ve never done it myself.”

“And you’re just going to dance into the Kingdom alone!” He laughed. “You are insane. You’re not a gods-send, you’re just insane.”

“I have to do this now, or someone— many lives will be lost. Don’t think that I prefer this.”

After that, she just let him rant. In her mind, she felt the pull. It felt as if she were floating, hearing music, laughter and tinkling chimes on the wind just beyond the realm of her ears. She eased into a smile.

She blinked, still floating in her mind. “What was that?”

“You’ll never defeat them if you can’t stop me!” He raised his fists and launched himself across the small room.

Der held up her good hand. A web of electric light exploded into existence as Brawn leaped. He rebounded off the web, crashing into the back wall.

The light faded, but Der’s eyes remained glowing.

Brawn stared. He coughed, grabbing at his chest. “But, but you didn’t chant the incantation! You just did it!”

“I read over it once,” she said. Her tongue took on the floating quality and said, “Words are a learning tool, like wands, or reading the notes of music. When you know the song, you can just play it. The notes are already at your fingertips.”

The floating sensation faded and Der settled back down to earth. Brawn crawled forward. “But you’ve never trained!”

“And other people are musical prodigies. There’s more to being a paladin than violence and sacrifice.”

Brawn pressed his forehead against the floor. He breathed in and out. “Sister had sent me to teach you, but she also warned me to be humble. I never believed you until this moment.”

Der blinked, unsure of how to react to him now. “Um. On with the lessons?”

“You never learn!” Jakkobb said.

Prince Alsalon didn’t dare look up at the red knight. He looked down at the twisted reins in his hand. His horse’s mouth was already swollen.

“I’m sorry!”

Ameris leaned over from his own saddle and took Alsalon’s reins over the horse’s head. “Don’t worry, he’s always cranky.” Beside him, Spike rolled his massive eyes.

Jakkobb fired a glare at his younger brother. "All I've been saying is that he shouldn't have come. He should've stayed in Cedar Vale to await whatever troops Arborn is sending through the tree path."

"I'm sorry," the prince squeaked again.

"The only reason that I didn't march your sorry arse back to Cedar Vale is because I have to catch up to Der before she gets herself killed in a horribly intriguing fashion."

Trista looked up at Thistle and then pointed to the people across the streets of Staghorn. All the people wore hats or hoods over their faces and no one walked, they either jogged or rapidly shuffled along. Gone were the smiles of the sailors and the calls of the merchants.

"Something's wrong," Ameris murmured. "Something happened here."

"No," Thistle corrected, "Someone happened here." He looked at Jakkobb. "This is why she's not allowed to go out on her own. She terrorizes the villagers."

Jakkobb scowled and shrugged stiffly, noting that Spike was smirking too.

Thistle continued, "This was the one economy on the eastern coast that she didn't destroy last winter. I suppose she felt she had to make it up."

"That wasn't... *mostly* was not our doing." He threw up his one unarmored hand. "It's a lot better off than it would have been!"

Ameris pursed his lips. "This is why Mother-marro says you need to stay at home and avoid all these troubles."

Thistle choked off a sound that was dangerously close to a snicker, while Spike just start pawing the ground and coughing. Jakkobb's face glowed as red as his armor. "Sure, draw attention to yourselves. I'm sure the chemmen won't miss that!"

Brawn returned and tossed Der a deeply blue cloak. "Hide your face and sling. It's time."

She nodded without a word and fumbled to hang the cloth about her shoulders with her left hand.

"And you're going to do this? With one arm?" He turned to follow her as she walked up the twisting stairs. "You can't expect to win!"

"No," she answered, thinking back to what Dominic had said. "I'm doing this to show a friend that he can win. I know that I can't."

"But..."

Der frowned. "Also, I need to make a certain bitch regret the day she died." She pushed out of a door and into a small library. Brawn took the lead and opened a glass door disguised as a window. Based on the worn floor, many slayers took this back entrance out of the mansion.

They walked quickly through the streets of Staghorn. Der felt her face redden as she glared at the

ground. No one shouted at her though. But she felt the buzz of the crowd, some extra electricity in the air. A woman dropped a pot of flowers; crockery exploded across the avenue. Most people gasped and jumped before scurrying away. Everyone was tense.

She probably shouldn't have announced the thing about vampires in such a public venue.

Brawn led up her the polished stone steps of the temple of Staghorn. The statue in front was of Kreighton, the sea deity, pointing his trident out to the Kilvanian Sea.

Inside, their heels echoed on the stone floors and Der looked up to see marble and chryselephantine statues of all the major gods, and even some gods she didn't know, local to the tribes of the north.

Sister Bo was kneeling before the likeness of Ahtome. Der looked up at the other monks and nuns and wondered about their hierarchy, and wondered about how much the slayers mirrored the vampires. But here, Bo looked at home. With her bowed head and hunched shoulders, Der couldn't imagine anyone guessing her as the slayers' coordinator.

Or any vampires prying their eyes into this sacred space. Well played, Bo, she thought.

Brawn had gone. Der eased her way toward the scarred nun, but paused when she heard the rhythms of prayer from Bo.

After a moment, Der knelt down beside her and waited.

The nun's fingers worked their way down the rosary. Bo raised her head, but instead of the final words of the prayer she said, "Mortui mordent." She still stared up at the goddess. "Our own ending, of course."

Der nodded. Bo fastened the rosary to her cloth belt. She offered a half-smirk. "It also acts as a short whip."

"With wooden beads," Der observed. "Nice."

"And it's always good for a prayer." She folded the rosary back into her rope belt. "I do hope that you will lead me to my nameless adversary."

The paladin frowned. "I thought Avamar had a name? Uh, Avamar."

The nun barely shrugged. "I doubt that's the first name he's used, and I'm not so sure if he is the vampire I've been tracking all these years. Still, I suppose it's possible." She slid several items out from underneath her prayer pillow. She held up Der's compass. "This will lead you to her. Once you are within twenty yards of her, the spell will dissipate."

"Excellent." Der wrapped her fingers around the guiding device.

Bo still watched the statue. "It looks ancient. Pallens?"

"Or one of the other fallen kingdoms of that time." She turned it over in her hand and watched the

light shine a little brighter against the brass. She had no idea what Rowan was like, but she figured that he probably wouldn't mind her using his compass to save his son, even in Tom's current form. If she survived, she told herself she would ask Lady Evelyn about her husband.

"Thank you." Der opened the compass and watched the needle spin, but not north. A grin stole over her face as she pocketed the device.

She was right! She knew where the Kingdom was!

Bo's serious tone stole any elation. "You'll have to be fast and smart. She knows you're coming and she knows you, and after your announcement, she knows you sought our help."

"Yes, but now there is no one standing between us. We can trade our wraths openly."

"Then don't hold back."

"I'm thankful that I don't have to this time."

Bo rose from her kneeling pillow, keeping her hands folded across her chest. "Come meet my army. We shall send you off."

"Why can't we send them home?" Ameris asked his brother while watching the bounce of Trista's dark, short curls in a brief moment of sunny sky. Alsalon and Spike walked alongside them silently.

Jakkobb exhaled. "Apparently, they have to kill one of us to get Sir Amthros' water."

Thistle nodded in confirmation. "Even I didn't know that much about how it works."

Trista glared up him. "But you're chemmen, you have to know!"

He shrugged. "Trista, do you know where your cohorts were lodging?"

Jakkobb jerked his eyes over to Alsalon. "We are not investigating with him here."

"Ah yes, and the knights from Arborn are meeting us at the appointed place?" Thistle asked.

"Obviously, Trista and I will await you at the Chiming Crystal."

"Right." Jakkobb leaned his heavy fingers on his brother's shoulder. "You go with them, alright? Spike and I will—"

"No!" Ameris shoved off Jakkobb's hand. "I'm going to take the Strengths in a few weeks. I'm a man!"

Thistle frowned, but didn't say anything. Spike bobbed his head and snickered.

Jakkobb scowled. "Not until after the Strengths, younger brother."

Ameris jumped back and threw his arms out wide. "Oh? Oh! So says you, but you haven't passed the Strengths yourself! You're not a man either!" Surrounding strangers with their faces perpetually ducked started to glance up at the screaming young man. He ranted on, "It doesn't take a wizard to figure out that you're going to either the Silver Dawn bank or the Blue Farers' courier station! Because

you're a dragoon, that's how you think!"

He kicked at the base of a wooden hitching post and kept kicking at it until the wood started to crack. Tears flew free from his face as he whipped his head back to Jakkobb. "And you can just stay in the south! We don't want you any more than you don't want us!"

The boy spun on his heel and sprinted out of sight down an alley.

Jakkobb cursed. "*This* is why I despise holidays. Too many crises." He glanced between the prince and the alley and then back again. He even looked at Thistle, but couldn't imagine asking the chemman for a favor.

Ameris backed out of the alley, one foot slowly behind the other with his hands raised. His eyes were crossed in concentration at the sword tip pointing at them.

Around the party, a score or more of armed storm-readers closed in.

Trista suddenly smiled and darted forward away from Thistle. "Elder one!"

The old chemman woman ignored the child and focused instead on Jakkobb and Thistle. She gestured to the blades at Ameris' throat and at their own backs. Another storm-reader stepped forward and poked his sword against Alsalon's thin chest.

"Stay your blades!" The elder stuck out her palm. In her other hand, she held the mortar and pestle with its embedded compass. "If you yield, we will not harm them ourselves."

Thistle and Jakkobb exchanged uneasy glances.

"If you do not, we will act."

"They will." Thistle started to unbuckle his sword belt, with its midnight black sword that he'd taken from the chemman king Dis. It was sacred to his people, and their traitor had walked off with it.

Jakkobb's axe and sword also thudded to the ground. Behind him, Spike slowly lowered a hoof and flattened his ears.

Trista jumped up and down in front of the crone. "They didn't kill me like you said they would! They didn't kill me! They fed me!" The small child struggled for words to convey a meaning that she couldn't define.

"You've been corrupted, child." The elder finally looked down at the girl. "Quiet that tail of a tongue." She lifted a fiery glare at Thistle. "And who better to know how to corrupt a chemman than a former one?"

Thistle raised his eyebrows, having been apparently disqualified from his own race. "Yes, I am sincerely sorry to have missed out on starving to death in Darkreign."

"Do not speak, traitor! You are the reason we lost our great leaders in this last war. The ones who led us to salvation after the unholy Banishment." The elder kicked up dirt at the sword. "You killed

them with our holy sword.” She waved two more storm-readers forward at him.

Thistle dived for the weapon with no thoughts of correcting her on their leaders’ bloody end.

Ameris and Alsalon both shrank in fear, but their captors’ eyes were on the motion of the traitor.

He scooped up the jet black sword and brought it on guard, all sound around it magically silenced.

From behind, a third chemman plunged a sword into his back, nicking his spine.

“No!” Trista screamed.

Thistle dropped his own weapon and jerked sideways as his attacker twisted the sword.

Jakkobb gritted his teeth and kicked up his great axe with his feet. Spike whinnied and crushed Thistle’s attacker’s skull with a hoof before the chemman realized that anyone was behind him.

The knight managed to cut two more attackers down with one sweep of the axe.

Ameris jumped back out of range of his captor’s sword and charged at the chemman in front of Alsalon. Another chemman tangled the northern elf’s leg in a whip, collapsing him.

A storm-reader hurled a chain at Jakkobb’s axe, wrenching the arcing blade free from the knight’s hand.

Two more chemmen picked up Ameris and marched he and Alsalon forward.

The crone’s mouth curved up in a vicious smile as she stepped in front of the dragoon. “You knew the elvish traitor, did you not?”

“I dare you,” Jakkobb spat.

“The promise not to harm them ourselves was only if you yielded. But we chemmen are forgiving. One last chance, will you yield?”

He hesitated. Every ounce of training and survival instincts he’d learned since the day he’d been kidnapped as a small child screamed at him to crush this woman’s skull with his bare hands. He could do it too. He’d probably pay for it with his life, but with Spike behind him, he’d be willing to take the chance.

But then he looked up at his brother’s wide and terrified eyes with a sword at the back of his chest.

That hesitation was long enough for the old chemman to slip forward with her mortar and pestle with its compass in hand and a tiny blade. She swept the knife across his unarmored forearm, scoring a thin red line. The compass’s needle swung in circles and a drop of water slid down into the mortar.

Jakkobb’s vision suddenly tunneled and the world felt like it had frozen over. His knees couldn’t support his weight and he collapsed, gasping for air that his armor’s weight wouldn’t allow.

His fingers crawled forward for his axe. He grasped its handle, but it was too heavy to hold. The white tunnel in his vision grew brighter with every gasp he tried to take.

Chapter Twenty

Praying with Power

Der stumbled. She grabbed her right forearm, buried underneath the sling. Pain and confusion tumbled through her mind. She sprinted down the street, trying to locate where this sensation was originating.

Sister Bo signaled her disciples to follow. The slayers, strolling down the street in bunches of four or five quickened their paces. With the pretense of hiding now unnecessary, and fifty battle hardened slayers coalesced into a platoon, perfectly in step, as they ran.

Der didn't notice. She skidded around a corner, her feet kicking up the mud on the paving stones. She flew down the street and ducked around another corner just in time to see the chemman crone thrust up the palm of her hand.

"Success!" the wizened storm-reader shrieked.

Jakkobb was down. Thistle was down. Spike had two swords at his neck.

Chemmen!

Der never stopped running. She tugged the Pallens sword free with her left hand.

A twist of silver and blue lights appeared above the old sage's hand. The lights squeezed out a single drop of water onto her waiting palm.

The nearest storm-reader, enraptured by the sight of the water of life appearing, heard Der coming but didn't turn until he caught the reflection from her sword. It was too late.

He collapsed in a silent scream, dead before he hit the ground. He had been holding Thistle's sword, which also crashed to the ground, briefly destroying the sound of its fall with its magic.

The anger in Der's eyes outshone her sword, at least the unstained parts of her sword anyway.

Spike reared, knocking the two swords away from his neck with his hooves. He slammed a hoof down through the nearest chemman's head. His golden and silver alicorn spiraled into life.

The second storm-reader thrust at him, slicing across the unicorn's forelegs. Spike kicked at the sword, knocking it free with his front hooves. He lowered his forehead and thrust, nailing his horn through the chest of his assailant.

Der barely even watched him. She stared at Jakkobb, then at Thistle, with blood drying on the back of his cloak. She didn't even hear the slayers fanning out around the chemmen all around her.

The old chemman held Amthros' drop of life aloft with her left hand. She lowered her right hand and pointed at Der. "You are not necessary."

A black tunnel churned across her palm. It was about the size of an apple and growing and spinning faster. Tendrils of black lightning stabbed outward from the tunnel. Its depth seemed to defy its size.

“I have both their waters my hand!” she screeched at Der.

The paladin dropped her eyes to Jakkobb. Her gut tightened. She saw exactly what the crone had done. Her mentor and one of her dearest friends was doomed to a painful death over the next couple hours.

The crone’s cackles echoed like old paper crinkling.

Sister Bo held up a hand, staying the slayers’ assault. The chemman turned their swords outward.

The tunnel to whatever abyss it led to stretched wider across the old storm-reader’s hand. The lightning tendrils popped with their own thunder peals.

The ancient chemman jerked both her hands up to the sky. “We are chemmen!” She hurled the tunnel at Der. “We are vengeance!”

Der charged the expanding darkness. She hurled the Pallens sword into the face of a younger chemman woman and brought her working hand between her and the lightning tunnel.

She shouted, no words, just a primal yell and the shield spell that she’d so easily recalled against Brawn manifested. Pure, sizzling white light coalesced into a gird and the black tunnel snapped and cackled against it, unable to advance.

On instinct, not even operating on a conscious level, Der closed her fist. The grid’s edges folded down toward the sage. She yelled and her light reversed the tunnel right back at the elderly chemman.

The sound of the chemman’s scream fractured as her body started to disintegrate. Der didn’t hesitate. She dashed over, and jerked her weapon free from the fallen chemman’s skull. The sage’s body shrank as the tunnel pull started to it in.

Der leaped, sword leading.

She sliced off the chemman’s hand just as the crone’s body disappeared into the void.

Slayers, onlookers and chemmen alike gaped at the young paladin.

Der dropped her sword and caught the dismembered hand in the air. Two drops of water remained apart but perfectly centered.

“Jakkobb,” she breathed. “Thistle!”

Slowly, the chemmen released their weapons down to the street as the circle of slayers closed in on them. They raised their hands.

Trista dropped to her knees and patted Thistle’s shoulder. “Are you still here?”

Der gulped and inched toward Jakkobb's unmoving body. His chest rose and fell ever so slightly. She looked back down in at the severed hand. "Which drop is it? Can you even put them back?" She jerked up her head. "Spike! Where's Alsalon?"

The unicorn shook his head. *Ameris and Alsalon were captured. They were already gone before you arrived.*

Her attention snapped over to the slayer checking over Thistle. Brawn looked up at her. "He's breathing, but..." He shook his head.

Spike laid down on the street next to Jakkobb and put his nose on the knight's chest. His nudged the unconscious knight. Der sat helplessly on the other side.

Sister Bo, hands folded across her chest, approached. Her white habit glowed, unstained on the killing field, as she walked. She smiled beatifically down at Der. "Pray with me."

Der gulped. "I don't..." But she did. Bo lifted her voice in a chant and Der knew to sing along. She knew the words. She scraped one of the drops into her fingernail – she just *knew* which one now. She pried Jakkobb's eyelid open with her pinky and dragged her nail backward across his iris, releasing the drop.

She and Bo both sang, their voices breaking and joining like the braids in the river. She closed her eyes and let herself be washed downstream.

When she opened them, she had no idea how long it had been. Someone had brought Bo a chair from the Chiming Crystal to sit upon.

Her fingers scrambled forward and she checked Jakkobb's breathing and pulse. She whirled around to see that Thistle's breath was much stronger as well.

She looked back at Spike, who was still lying in the street next to the knight. The unicorn stretched out his long neck and planted a giant, sloppy kiss across half her face.

Thank you.

Der, her throat aching, only nodded.

She'd learned to heal! On an impulse, she tried to wiggle her right arm. No response. Then again, she hadn't thought of her own injuries when she'd prayed, not once.

Bo cleared her throat. "Derora, you have the most experience with chemmen. What are your suggestions?"

Der turned, the chemmen were on their knees with slayers above them, weapons ready to bite. Just waiting for the nod.

The anger of what they had done to her companions surged against her already scratched throat. They tried to kill Jakkobb and Thistle! They'd stolen Ameris and Alsalon!

Trista looked up at her from the center of the huddle, her orange eyes quivering in fear.

“Not me, Bo.” Der shook her head. She pointed at Thistle. “He knows them better than I.”

The nun frowned. “But he is of storm-reader origin. He might have a dangerous sympathy.”

“That’s exactly what I’m hoping for.”

Bo shook her head, staring down her nose. “Tsk. You know better than any of us the horrors they are capable of visiting upon a living soul. Who knows where you sent that old crone?”

“Then why didn’t you just order them slain?” Der snapped, louder than she’d intended. “Because you’re not sure either! Hence, we’ll leave it to Thistle.” She picked up the crone’s severed hand, still with its precious drop and set it down next to Thistle’s head.

Der sighed. “Where did they take Ameris and Alsalon? Oh, the king is going to have my head on a pike. Anyway, the chemmen must have a plan.”

Bo and Der eyed each other for a while. Der wasn’t sure what to think, sometimes she was certainly an ally, but other times, she couldn’t be sure where the nun stood. She had been willing to help Der rescue Tom in exchange for the location of the Kingdom but that was for the chance to slay as many vampires as possible. But what would the fighting nun care for two elves?

Der froze halfway through her gulp. Save Tom or Alsalon and Ameris?

The young prince stumbled, knocking the hood that had been dragged over his head against someone in front of him. He thought it was Jakkobb’s brother, but he wasn’t entirely sure. He couldn’t even see his feet to see where he was stepping. The ground squished underneath like mud.

He struggled against the ropes binding his hands. His fingers were already red and hot with the reduced circulation. It sounded like they’d moved away from the noise of the city, or had the hood just muted enough of it when they’d ducked into the alleys?

The storm-reader behind him shoved him forward again. Alsalon bit his tongue trying not to cry. Thistle was down. Jakkobb was done for. Where was Der? Why hadn’t Spike stopped them?

He and Ameris were next too! He just knew it!

The prince tripped again and couldn’t clamp down on his cry. He collapsed to the ground and felt what had caused his fall. A log, half buried in wood. He thought back to those corduroy roads. So they were outside the city.

He could hear the wind blowing through the trees now that he thought about it. A chemman captor yanked him back to his feet by his shirt and pushed him down the mud-sucking road.

Suddenly the party stopped. Alsalon couldn’t hear anything new. He licked his lips. “Ameris?”

“Yeah?” His voice was muffled.

“Quiet!” Alsalon staggered forward under the blow to the back of his head. Judging by Ameris’ yelp, he’d received one too.

“As requested, the two whelps,” a female chemman’s voice said, obviously to someone else. Alsalon turned his head; he couldn’t hear anyone new.

Silence lasted for a moment.

“Very well,” a winsome, melodious voice replied, penetrating the darkness of Alsalon’s hood. “Here is the spell, but you’ll need that water of life you discussed to activate it.”

The female storm-reader’s voice surged with smugness. “That is already done.”

“You are an industrious lot.”

Who is this? Alsalon wondered. He clenched his entire body. Could this be Avamar? Why would he and Ameris be requested? He swallowed, trying to hold his knees together to stop their quaking.

The voice stiffened, “You should be well gone from Staghorn before the shadow tonight.”

“Of course.” The female chemman’s voice sounded to come from around Alsalon’s waist, as if she were bowing.

“Spike!” Der stamped her boot against the ground.

I am not leaving him! The unicorn laid next to Jakkobb, still unconscious, on the ground. His breathing was steady and his face was full of color. Spike, with his bloody horn still visible, let his towering glare fall on the surrounding slayers.

Der tried to shove the massive steed’s shoulder. “He’s fine! I need you and Thistle to save Alsalon and Ameris!”

Thistle slowly shook his head. “I cannot, Der. I’m not sure I have the strength to stand at the moment.” He still sat in the middle of the street, and his voice was low enough that the onlookers wouldn’t hear it.

Der’s jaw dropped. “But!”

He shook his head again.

She turned her eyes to Bo and the slayers. Surely they wouldn’t give chase. They had no reason to care about the elves and chemmen. They’d probably remind her in no uncertain terms that she’d promised them their own prey.

And Tom would be Amelia’s prey. He already was her prey, she just hoped she could stop him from being dinner.

But what would Edillon do if she let his brother die?

Could she live with herself if Avamar gained the legend of stone and bone? How could she go on if

she let Amelia have Tom?

She reasoned that she had a slightly better shot to save Ameris and Alsalon. She was far more familiar with the chemmen than the vampires. She also knew she couldn't win against Avamar. She hoped, no, she made herself believe Tom could win if he'd just admit it to himself.

"I have to save Tom," she whispered. Her head snapped up. "Because he can save all of us." Her eyes sought out the scarred nun. "Sister, please save our friends if you can. Trust me when I say that you will have Arborn's debt."

"Arborn?" Bo's eyebrows shot up. "Such magical wealth, *if* the stories are true."

"If we survive," Der countered. She tugged the compass out of her pocket and double checked the direction of the arrow.

Saxen, Spike began. He swished his tail as he pushed himself onto his knees and then his hooves. He towered over the paladin.

She forced a smile. "Tonight's the shadow of the midnight sun. You'll know come morning." This time, her smile came naturally. She started to walk past the slayers and their captive chemmen.

"I want to be like that!"

Der spun to see Trista beaming up at her. Another chemman immediately slammed his fist on the top of her head. "Storm-readers shall speak no blasphemies!"

None of the slayers moved to stop him from beating one of his own, tensed as they were to halt any escape.

Der smiled at the girl. "I speak such blasphemies all the time, and I'm supposedly holy."

Trista managed a weak smile, but mostly watched the others around her for another slap. The rest of the pack glared at Der with the power of boiling acid.

She realized that she wasn't scared of them any longer. Imagine that, she thought as she turned to run down the street.

Ahead, one of the slayers held out the reins of a horse. Der mounted without question. She held up the compass in her hand, steering with her knees, but then she put the device away. She knew where she was going.

Ameris felt something brush past his leg, but he wasn't sure what it was. It had felt like the gentle glide of a tail.

Whoever they had been left with snapped his fingers. The "something" shuffled along, and the elf could hear it squishing its paws in the mud as it padded away.

He shook his head, trying to loosen the head bag. How long had they been standing out here?

They obviously weren't unguarded. Behind him, Alsalon was singing to himself under his breath.

"Go ahead."

Ameris snapped his spine straight.

"Go ahead," the voice repeated, this time with a snicker embedded in it. "Allow me."

The speaker tugged part of his hood free, allowing Ameris to view his boots for the first time in hours. Mud had crawled up almost to his knees.

The elf lifted his bound hands to pull off the hood when the creature crawled past his legs again. It turned its humanoid face at him and hissed, revealing rows of fangs. It was naked and arching its back at an impossible angle to crawl on its hands and feet.

Ameris yelped and jumped backward, crashing over Alsalon. The speaker's harmonious, icy laughter rang out over them.

The northern elf jerked his narrowed vision to see the speaker's flawless boots, with no mud or even creases of use in them. The speaker knelt at the knees and set a shining, beautiful chalice on the ground with a gloved hand.

Ameris gulped, staring at the ampulla. It truly was a work of art. It was in the shape of a rose, with petals inside the cup, curling around its bright red liquid, and Ameris knew what had captured them.

He suddenly realized that he was quite willing to leave the hood on.

Chapter Twenty One

Lady of the Kingdom

The water splashed as the horse stumbled halfway across the shallow esker. Der gasped when the freezing water stung her legs through her clothes.

She dropped the reins and allowed the horse to pick its own path across the gray river. She hoped it would have better sense than she. Even though the esker was shallow, it could be hiding deep holes.

Up ahead she could see the regular pines and the white crystal columns beyond. She fumbled for the compass with her working hand. Perhaps opting for the shortest route to the dangerous forest wasn't the quickest route after all.

She glanced up, who knew what time it actually was? The sun wasn't even truly dipping below the horizon either, just hiding behind the tops of the trees.

But it was getting darker, and she didn't want to do this in the dark.

The horse heaved up as it finally crossed the esker and whinnied with the harder ground under hoof again. Der slid from the saddle onto unsteady feet.

She jumped up and grabbed onto a pine branch, snapping it off with her weight. She set the length against the trunk and slammed down against it with her heel, intending to break it in half.

Wood cracked as it shattered. Her boot drove deep into the trunk behind the snapped branch. The paladin nearly overbalanced, and would've fallen over if her foot hadn't been trapped inside the tree.

The horse flinched and backed away from her.

She tugged. Her heel was deeply lodged.

Der reached down with her left hand and jerked at her trouser leg. After a few moments of cursing and pulling, she wrenched herself free. She bounced back on one leg.

A chunk of wood had sliced deep into the heel of her boot, barely missing her own heel. She yanked at it, but it was stuck firmer than she had been in the tree.

Exhaling, she dropped her foot back to the ground; she could still walk with it. Next, she quickly carved the two pieces of the original branch into rudimentary stakes, by holding the knife in her hand and wedging the proto-stake in the sling of her other arm.

When she had the sticks sharpened and as smoothed as she cared, she tucked one in her boot and the other in the sling.

Standing up, she turned to face the Crystal Forest. Thousands of miles of massive crystals lay

before her. The glow from the columns was already causing her eyes to water. She squinted and checked Rowan's compass again.

The horse shied away as she approached. Der sighed again. This time, she pulled out her dagger and cut the horse's cinch and bellyband, and hauled the saddle off with her hand. She did the same for the bridle.

"Now, get. Before you become something's dinner." She smacked its rump, and the horse whinnied and took off galloping back to the esker.

She eyed the forest again. Not even a single bird chirped. The only sound was the sucking water of the esker.

The water even dimmed as she crossed the thin, empty boundary between the pines and the crystals. There seemed to be no other sounds, except the crunching of glass where she walked.

She skirted around a pointed head of a crystal column, long fallen, but still pinning an elk's skeleton to the ground. Nothing had come by to eat the bones.

The compass flashed out again. Der turned her body to line up with the arrow. Was Amelia just leading Der out here in a trap, or had she truly believed she'd already won?

Der struggled to pull herself up on a sideways column with one hand, but at least she didn't have much equipment to weigh her passage this time. She started to jog. At the end of its length, another column had fallen sideways across it. She climbed on that one next, and ran down its slope.

She dropped back to the ground and ducked under several slanted ones, propped up against their taller cousins. She hissed as she cut her palm against a crystal's edge.

The compass's needle twitched again. She turned to follow and glanced up to see both the moon and sun together in the sky, and this far north, they were doing some sort of spiral dance toward each other.

Her eyes started to sting and water against the persistent glow of the Crystal Forest. She tried to focus on a single column through the millions of prisms the crystals created. This place was too bright!

But that was the beauty of it, wasn't it? They'd built their home in a place where their weakness was everyone's weakness.

There also wasn't a natural supply of wood here, either.

She checked the compass again. The arrow had turned around. She hopped a few steps back, and the arrow twitched again, in a slightly different direction. The compass lid snapped closed. Amelia was here.

Der stared around at the empty quartz columns. She stamped her foot on the ground.

She circled to the nearest upright column and ran her fingers over it. There were no switches to open a door that she could find. She leaned her back against it and fought back the yell surging up from her stomach.

How she wanted to scream! She wanted to kick all these crystals to pieces and just tear open the earth to get into their lairs!

But she couldn't even scream. She couldn't reveal that she was here.

She frowned, weighing the thought that she may have tripped some sort of magical trigger already and Amelia was somewhere nearby, laughing at her.

The vampire might be here, but the hidden entrance could be miles away!

Der sank to the ground; fuming but at the same time trying to clear her overcrowded mind of any thoughts. She needed to concentrate!

She banged the back of her head against the crystal pillar. Then she spun and kicked the giant pillar.

It cracked and toppled backward, thundering as it crashed against two other columns on its way down.

She squinted up at the clouds. "Should I have gone after Alsalon instead?"

No chimes or songs of laughter answered her. It was she who made her own decisions, not the gods.

Der gulped. Where would she hide a door to an underground realm? And if she ever did manage to find it, how many could she fight off before she fell anyway? Would Tom ever know she tried?

The only reason that she probably hadn't been attacked already was that they didn't want to confirm the Kingdom's headquarters. Of course, it was easy enough to make one person disappear. Then again, they wouldn't know who she had told in Staghorn, and they might hope she'd report that she'd found nothing.

She rested against the pillar, eyes closed against the harshness of the light. She steeled her jaw and tried to think.

"...Chasing each other to the shadow of the midnight sun..."

Der stiffened against the tree, not entirely sure that she wasn't dreaming. She listened, trying to find the singer.

"...That's when the world will be undone."

Gently, she eased the Pallens sword into her left hand while simultaneously pushing herself back into a standing position against the crystal.

She inched around the massive column, and found the singer sitting peacefully against another column. He was a slender, mousy haired human wearing a grin. He turned a wistful smile on her as she stared at him. A wand poked up from one of his closed fists.

His emotions matched that expression of light-headed cloudy peace. His smile only widened. "My master bade me to show you the way, and then to forget you to say nothing more."

Der's eyes narrowed to slits. "Who?" She sheathed her sword.

"Our librarian." The smile stayed, but Der noticed that his eyes weren't focused anywhere near her.

"But Dominic didn't have hypnotic powers!" She slapped a hand over her mouth. She didn't *know* that, he'd only *told* her that.

"Who is Dominic? Ah, he always chooses the best names." Once again, the smile didn't flounder. "Hypnotic powers? No, no, he must only ask."

He probably did, Der thought, staring into the blank, smiling face. How much abuse could a mind take before it cracked like an eggshell?

"But he has been missing for many nights. I fear for him."

She shrugged. "Avamar slew him. I saw it."

"Oh." The corners of the smile dipped for a moment. "This way." He started to walk between the columns, still holding onto his slender crystal rod and smiling all the while. "He also bade me to tell you that you were right, Amelia chose to lure this renegade apart from the others. That's why you're still alive now."

He stopped and tapped on a giant horizontal column with his wand. The connecting crystals chimed together and a wave of light, all colors of the prism, seeped throughout the column. A mouth formed to reveal a small staircase disappearing into darkness below.

He pointed with the slender crystal. "For those of us without the night sight, there is a braille guide along the wall."

Wonderful, she thought through a frown. "And now you'll run off to tell your other masters, won't you? This is all some trap, isn't it?"

The slave's smile never faltered. "This is what you wanted, isn't it? Free entry into the Kingdom? That's what he said."

"Dominic said that?"

It was his turn to shrug. "What's a name? Just something to wear and take off, like clothing?"

"So what's your name?"

He smiled. "It was...It was..." He blinked. "It wasn't important." He gestured with his free hand toward the door. "Please go."

Her foot hovered over the first step. "I can't just leave you here." She chewed her lip. The slayers would probably kill him for their protection and call it mercy. But that wasn't who she was! But she could she leave this peril at her back as much as she could she leave someone so helpless and abused.

The slave's smile remained bright. "Please. My master bade me to forget you and so I shall." The smile never flickered as he stabbed himself in the throat with the slender crystal key.

"No! Don't!"

She reached out to him with her hand, but pulled it back before she ever touched him. It was too late.

She swallowed, staring down at the thrashing but still smiling slave. Some part of his body remembered its ancient survival instincts, if not the mind.

She whispered, "Dominic, you wouldn't..." She turned away from the dying man, wondering if it was a mercy after all. If it even was Dominic's orders. She couldn't help but to wonder what other players were in this game.

Her foot touched down on the first step, and all the horrors her imagination could conjure were suddenly below. She took the second step down and reached out, her fingers finding the pattern carved into the wall. Of course, she remembered a light spell from the book, but she might not want to reveal that yet.

She sighed, sensing for emotions, especially ones that felt like an eagle before it swooped. Nothing. Just dead stillness.

"I have never been one for subtly, and I doubt they ever anticipated *me*." Nevertheless, she was walking alone into the heart of the vampire kingdom.

Amelia twisted, staring hard at the curve of her breasts in the mirror. The room was lightless, but not opaque to her. She could see as well as anything in the darkness.

She pushed her bosom up and together and licked her lips at the reflection. It was finally her turn to have some fun messing with the traitor's mind and body before dumping him at her master's feet. He deserved some old fashioned mental torture after all the trouble he'd caused her! It should have just been so easy back in Riversbridge, but no, the heartstone had defied her power, and then the bastard had *friends*.

Friends! Vampires didn't have friends! Apart from those inconceivable relationships, especially with that vile paladin, he'd seemed such an able vampire.

Her smirk darkened and she chuckled deep in her throat. Oh, she deserved this! To tear out the

stone at the most pleasurable moment. Most pleasurable for her anyway. Her reflection in the mirror faded into nonexistence when she decided that she no longer needed to see herself.

She whirled away from the mirror and stopped. The scent of flesh assaulted her nostrils. She tried to back away from the smell. Cocking her ear, she heard the soft footfalls.

Amelia staggered around the small, stone chamber. She leaned on the wall for support. The vampire opened her mouth to scream in protest, but bit back down, slicing through lower lip with both her fangs.

She heard the fingers dragging along the slaves' braille. The vampire spun around and shattered the mirror. Hundreds of glass shards tinkled like bells as they rained down to the floor.

Impossible!

That demon bitch had to have had help to find this place! But who would have dared defy her master? Dared to defy her!

She froze halfway through the door. Or had her gods told her? Well – Amelia curled her claws – her own masters would prove just as ineffective as their champion.

The paladin had probably heard the mirror. The vampire stepped forward so that her back pressed against the wall right next to the door. She wondered if this was instead some horrible practical joke by her master. That would make the most sense. But he'd never even smiled before, not unless something was being disemboweled noisily.

The footfalls paused, just around the corner of the door.

Amelia's upper lip curled, just waiting for the enemy to stick her head in the entry. Neither moved.

"Think I can't smell you?" the vampire growled. "Think I can't hear your shirt rustle with every heartbeat?"

"You think I can't sense your rage from within a mile?" Der countered. "You're shining like the full moon down here. How do you think I found you?"

Amelia scratched inch deep claw marks into the wall and a growl lunged up through her throat. And to think they were back to back! If it weren't for this wall! She suddenly smiled.

"You know," Der continued conversationally, "I've been thinking about that, your super senses. It's not as if you feel the pain is any less – I'm guessing you feel it far more acutely – but since you can heal instantly, you can accept it much more readily. I thought of this when Tom was talking about being in the cold."

"So?" Amelia paused, her foot halfway up to punch through the stone wall.

"I'm betting this is going to be worse for you than me."

The loudest, shrillest wolf whistle pierced the air around Amelia at the same time holy light flared

into life.

The sound! The light! Amelia tripped forward and ricocheted off the wall. She fumbled to plug her ears and curled up against the infernal, *burning* light.

Der kicked through the wall, knocking Amelia back, right where the vampire was going to have attacked.

The paladin kicked again and grabbed Amelia's neck, making her stand up against the side wall. The vampire tried to crack her eyes open against the light. She kicked and clawed and suddenly sagged.

She dropped her chin to see her blood pouring out over a wooden stake, centered through her chest, straight through her bones and into the wall. She stared. "Missed my heart."

"I thought you didn't have one," Der remarked.

Amelia grimaced as the paladin rammed the stake deeper with a palm strike. A trickle of blood escaped the vampire's lips.

"No," Der said, "You're leading me to Tom. I can't sense him."

"Already slain!" she gasped. "Tore out his heart!"

"No, you didn't. You still look exactly like me, and I bet you just can't wait to tear my face off."

The vampire held eye contact. "How right you are." Amelia swung out her hand, claws curled directly at Der's pretty eyes.

The paladin ducked and drove her shoulder into the chest stake while at the same time, producing another stake from her sling. She jabbed that one through Amelia's striking hand and shoved it into the wall also, breaking into firm rock like dried mud.

Amelia sagged and stared. The pain shot molten lead throughout her body, but all she could do was stare at Der. This wasn't the woman she thought she had studied. This was the enemy of old. "You paladins are really like blood, you just stain whatever you touch, don't you?"

Der's face remained blank.

Amelia tried to push forward, but she couldn't. This was impossible! She was staked against the wall and helpless, just waiting for the slayers of Staghorn to sweep through her sacred homeland. All because of this wretched woman. Was this child truly as dangerous as her master had alleged when he'd ordered her after the heartstone?

How had any of this happened? Amelia tried to compose a coherent thought. Is this what the Blackhound had thought right before he perished at her hand? That he held every advantage and yet he was defeated?

No! She wouldn't be cowed by some irreverent child who didn't know the world's hierarchy! She

jerked forward against the stakes.

Der hopped back, having no choice but to give room. Amelia ripped herself forward, pulling her body through the stakes and leaving them behind on the wall. The vampire didn't even stop in between escaping and attacking. She hurled out her clawed hand and swiped at Der.

Her other hand drew a sai, and it flashed by Der's cheek, drawing a scratch.

The paladin danced back, drawing the Pallens sword. She parried Amelia's next strike.

The enemies each took a step back, eyeing the other with respect and unveiled hatred.

The vampire snapped her fingers and barked a word in a language Der didn't know. The wooden stakes, still bloody and pinned deep in the wall, ignited. The ash streaked down in the wall after the fast combustion.

Amelia's smile curved around her lips. "You think we'd allow wood down here? Protections are built into this place!" She tipped a sai at Der's throat. "And you've no more stakes."

"I doubt you can do the same against this." The Pallens blade seemed to glow brighter in response. Amelia growled and retreated. Der said, "You've fooled Tom. An accomplished feat."

"It was easy." The vampire narrowed her eyes, and drew a second sai. "After I discovered what makes him melt. It was you, actually. His own terrors about you." She pressed her hand against her chest and smiled, and it was Der's own smile. Amelia had stolen that along with the rest of her looks.

The real Der fainted and thrust, but Amelia blocked easily with one sai and stabbed with the other. The paladin yanked down a parry. She growled – she'd never fought weapons like these before, and it forced her on the defensive in the moment, especially since she was still missing the confidence of her dominant hand.

Amelia charged with her momentary advantage, sweeping Der's sword aside with one sai and thrusting with the other.

The paladin twisted aside and tucked in her stomach. The sai still nicked her skin, but only scored a thin line of blood.

She dropped her sword-point and went in for a low thrust, hoping to land a strike before Amelia could hit high where she couldn't defend.

Success! A streak of red opened up on the vampire's thigh, glowing brightly in holy white light.

Amelia hissed and scrambled back several steps. Der pressed the quick advantage, not giving the vampire any quarter. The temptress parried by laying the sai flat against the length of her forearm and then flipped the blade around her thumb into an immediate slash.

Der gasped internally. She'd never seen anything like that before! She gave up a step in retreat

before pressing her attack again.

“Where’s Tom?” she yelled over the metallic shrieks. She thrust for the head.

“Not here yet!” Amelia blocked Der’s strike by crossing her sais and catching the Pallens sword between them. Der’s reaction to the counter was to kick the vampire in the kneecap.

The bone-snapping crack echoed around the tiny chamber. Amelia hopped into the air, suddenly unable to put weight on her leg. At least the holes from the stakes had finally stopped bleeding as she weighed her injuries.

Der scored another slash across the vampire’s midsection as Amelia floated, unsteady for half a second.

But then the vampire flipped a sai around, holding it by the shaft and snatched Der’s wrist in its prongs and yanked the paladin forward.

Der tried to duck but couldn’t slow her sudden momentum. She met the pommel of the vampire’s other sai in the center of her forehead. She collapsed.

When Der came to, seconds later, Amelia had straddled her like a lover. She ran the tip of one her sais down Der’s neck. The paladin’s fingertips just brushed the pommel of the Pallens sword, her arm stuck between the blade and the vampire’s thigh.

“This is sweeter with you here, actually.” Amelia caressed a wound. “Your face.” She dragged the hand across Der’s cheek. “Your body.” She thrust with her hips. She bent forward and dug her fingernails into Der’s stomach cut, drawing more blood. “Your warmth.”

Der grunted and bucked. Amelia didn’t fall. She brought her fingernails up to her eyes, watching her skin sizzle and bubble as if she’d had contact with acid.

She sighed casually as new pink skin began to form underneath the burnt layers. “Oh how I hate paladins’ blood. It’s worse than useless to us, you know?” She leaned in near her adversary’s face. “Tell me, does your kind have some style of Voice like we do? Some holy power?”

“What?” Der turned her face away.

“You have a power over him. Is it like our Voice?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Of course you do!” Amelia laughed icily. “Why else would a vampire help *you*?”

“Because Tom knows me!” Der jerked her sword, so that the pommel touched the underside of Amelia’s thigh.

The vampire yelped and shot back across the chamber, trailed by the scent of burning flesh.

Der rolled up to a sitting position, bringing the Pallens sword between them. She blinked, but her vision still see-sawed, and her head ached like someone had split a boulder on it.

“Curse your sword!” Amelia lunged forward with both sais.

But Der had found her balance. She parried most of Amelia’s strikes, while shrugging off the smaller ones that glanced across her skin. She used her foot for offense, kicking at Amelia’s wounded knee.

Enraged, the vampire threw her weight behind her sai thrusts, coming as fast as she could. She took another sharp blow to her previously broken kneecap for her haste. She hopped back and Der kicked her hand, knocking the sai clear out into the corridor.

Amelia snarled and drew her third sai from her belt, still having one in each hand.

Der didn’t hesitate. She launched an attack with the Pallens sword and scored a long red line along the vampire’s forearm. She jerked the blade back, ripping another sai out of Amelia’s fingers.

She lunged again. Amelia parried wildly with her remaining weapon. Her heels back up against the wall behind the furious attack. She jumped on her good leg, flying to the ceiling and landed. She screamed and lunged.

Der had enough time to stick the Pallens sword into Amelia’s path. The vampire twisted away, stumbling as she tried to walk on her broken knee. Blood still seeped freely from her wounds.

The paladin grinned. “Your wounds don’t heal from this blade.”

The vampire spat at the sword. “You’re nothing without it.” She drew herself up, twisting her body sideway to reveal as little target area as possible. “I bet you can’t even move as quickly as I can if you dropped it.”

Der wiped the sweat from her throbbing forehead with her forearm. Sweat was stinging her eyes. “You can believe that if you want to.”

Then she threw the sword. It caught the hilt of Amelia’s remaining sai, knocking both weapons away from them.

Amelia stared, her mouth dropping open. Der stepped in and hammered her across the jaw with her fist, disconnecting the lower half from the vampire’s skull entirely. She followed that move up with another kick to Amelia’s shattered kneecap.

“But I’m glad to know that you are scared of a one-armed human.”

The vampire screeched and launched forward. She snatched Der’s arm and opposite shoulder in her claws and yanked the paladin forward. She brought up her good knee, and smashed it into Der’s oncoming thigh.

Der groaned as she felt her femur crack. But she didn’t have to struggle for balance – Amelia provided that for her.

The vampire, seeming to react purely on instinct, jerked Der forward and drove her fangs into her

neck.

The warrior winced but slapped aside the oncoming dreamy daze. She growled and tried to twist her left elbow to break Amelia's hold.

Before she could, the vampire screamed and threw Der away. She covered her mouth with her hands and vomited. She pawed at her mouth, trying to physically remove the blood. But Der had seen enough. Wherever there was the paladin's blood, Amelia's skin blistered as if it had been splashed with scalding water.

Der managed to balance her weight on one leg. The other was definitely broken.

Amelia slapped her hands across the wall and Der watched as the muscles underneath her arms shredded as she pulled handfuls of rock free. But those muscles also instantly healed. That's their strength, Der realized, whereas most humans could only access that in life or death moments.

She immediately ducked the missile, but the second one clipped her hip, sending her spiraling toward the floor. She rolled upon landing, just missing a crashing foot. She tried to pull herself back up, but had to dodge before she could rise again.

Her boot scraped along the floor as she backpedaled, and Der wanted to stare at it. Something sounded funny.

Dodge! She pushed herself into the corner on one arm and one working leg, barely avoiding another flying stone. The rock shattered as it struck the wall behind her. This time, she definitely heard something scrape across the floor when she moved.

The wood! She'd accidentally broken off wood into her boot! Der nearly laughed as she locked her shoulders into the corner and heaved herself up on one leg.

Amelia's fist came flying. Der dropped back down low enough to reach her boot. The vampire's second fist landed on the back of her head, but Der still laughed. She rolled with the momentum of the blow and used it to yank the wood out of her boot.

She turned to face her foe. Each of them balanced on only one leg. Each looked identical, only with different wounds to show. Only Der heaved for air.

They exchanged blow for blow, each too tired and wounded to even attempt to block. Der dragged the wood down Amelia's arm, causing the vampire to shudder. Blood sprayed up from the new wound.

She jumped forward, driving her shoulder into Amelia's frame and pushing her against the wall. Der rammed the wooden wedge into her eye.

The vampire shrieked and tried to kick. Der leaned her weight against her. "I will bring holy hell down throughout this entire kingdom if you don't show me where he is *now!*"

“Should’ve been here by now!” Amelia gasped through her broken jaw. She slammed her elbow into Der’s gut and stumbled forward out of the other’s hold. “And *you* should’ve never come! You can’t challenge the blood!”

“I’m just here for him!” Der threw all of her remaining strength into her blow. She slammed her palm over Amelia’s chest, driving the wedge of wood both into her own hand and the vampire’s breast. She pressed deeper, feeling the wood slid into Amelia’s body. Her cold blood leaked out over Der’s hot hand. The vampire’s skin instantly blistered as it came into contact with the paladin’s blood.

Amelia coughed up some blood from her own mouth. Dazed, she reached out and with the last of her own strength, and punched Der’s stomach. She broke through the skin and yanked out whatever she could grab.

For a moment, all they could do was gasp at the other. They collapsed together.

Chapter Twenty Two

A Kingdom Alone

Jakkobb rubbed his eye again. He looked at Spike. "But she *can't* do things like that."

Sister Bo smiled and kept her clasped hands to her chest.

Spike snorted and shrugged by hopping on his front two hooves.

"I'm afraid you do not know her as well as you think," the nun remarked.

"Oh no." The knight shook his head, still rubbing his eye where Der had returned his water of life.

"I've known her far longer than you. Der can't heal magically."

Thistle, watching the others carefully, patted his back. His fingers found the tear in his clothing, but no wound.

The party sat in the living room of a mansion, sipping tea. The boy that had brought Der the spellbook had even set out a large saucer of tea for Spike. The unicorn had barely fit through the door. Two Silver Dawn soldiers had arrived from the bank and stood guard outside the mansion.

Bo tapped a map of the city and region, painted on top of a table that ran the length of the couches on either side of it. "My scouts have reported seeing two storm-readers enter the city by the southern gate. We have no doubt that they will return that way when they cannot find their counterparts whom we have captured."

"Southern gate? You think that's where they took Alsalon and Ameris?" Jakkobb asked.

"Most likely." She frowned. "I would have preferred to send my warriors with the paladin. She may have already entered the Kingdom, and we have not confirmed its location. I do not hope for her survival."

Jakkobb winced.

Bo snapped, "I mean to say that I do not expect her to survive, sir."

"She went inland." Thistle tapped the map. "Toward the Crystal Forest."

Bo nodded. "Yes, but perhaps her quarry did not return to the Kingdom after all. Our best leads point to it being under the sea." She straightened her habit. "No matter. I have offered to aid you in routing the storm-readers and rescuing your friends. And that is only because Der had asked." She stared down into her tea. "It must be time to turn this mantle over to another. I fear I've weakened myself by aiding you instead of taking our chance at the Kingdom."

"Alsalon's brother will be most generous if he survives," Thistle said. "You will certainly have your treasure to fund your chance at the Kingdom soon if you save him."

Bo sipped her tea. "I fear that I may have raised the stakes too high by engaging another enemy at such a perilous time, and letting Derora Saxen go alone to the Kingdom."

She may not be alone. Spike swished his tail. *A specific he has a way of finding her.*

Tom's fingers traced the slaves' braille along the wall. How long had it been? He shook his head, trying to dislodge the memories.

He was back in this hell. At least he was walking of his own accord, and his mind clear of any master's commands. He tapped the braille again. We should all have to touch this as we move, he mused. We're all slaves.

So he pulled his hand away.

He hadn't even wanted to walk down these halls – even in an empty section, and that alone raised suspicion – but Amelia had left a door open. He'd really just come here to settle the score he told himself, and show that he wasn't her toy.

If he was just going to walk away from everything again, why had he come here at all? He could have just left Solquin altogether. He growled at himself; he was here to make certain that he wasn't being manipulated!

The heart thumped once. It sounded like thunder down here. Why was this thrice cursed thing acting up now? It had been the same at the entrance.

He stopped. He clamped his hands over his nose, squeezing his nostrils shut.

Blood.

He shook his head but the scent had already taken hold. Blood. This was the Kingdom, and it certainly wasn't unfamiliar here, but in an unused area...

There was no sound of anything left alive, but the scent was hot and fresh.

He slowly released his fingers from his face. "...Der?"

Impossible! She couldn't be here! For a thousand reasons!

He sniffed again. It was her. He reeled forward, leaning against the wall for support. But the only reason she could be here was if Amelia had brought her here, to tout her victory.

No! It couldn't be too late! But he knew his people all too well. There was no sound, just the scent.

He bolted down the corridors. Another sanguine scent bloomed. Two distinct scents, one Der's and another one definitely from a vampire. What the hell had happened?

Der wouldn't dare to try fight– He sped up before he could finish that thought. Of course she would. The scents grew explosively in his nose.

He spun around a blind corner, down a short hall, to a tiny chamber with a shattered mirror and

bloodstained walls. Three sais and the Pallens sword on the floor under the debris.

Two identical Deroras had collapsed on the floor, both with a broken leg and maimed torsos. Amelia had a wooden wedge protruding from her chest and the real Der still had her arm in a sling. Neither moved, or even seemed to breathe.

Tom fell to his knees in front of Der. He pressed an ear to her chest, and heard it, a very faint heartbeat. He kept his eyes closed though. He couldn't make himself look at her stomach.

He gripped her hand in his. His jaw trembled rapidly. "I don't, I can't." His emerald eyes slammed closed as they started their trek toward her stomach wound. But he could smell it. He knew very well what a mortal wound smelled like.

"This was my decision, not yours, you selfish fool!" He tightened his squeeze on her hand. "You can't challenge the blood! What the hell were you thinking?"

Only a faint, unconscious wheeze answered him.

"You only had one arm to start with, you idiot." Her fingers had gone white from his pressure. "My idiot."

Behind him, Amelia stirred. It was nothing more than a sibilant sound from her lips.

Tom gently set down Der's hand and rose. He turned and moved to stand over Amelia.

She opened one eye – the other had been wrenched out of her skull by the look of it. But it was the same color as Der's, and it focused on him.

"I told you to stay away from her, and that wasn't to protect her from you."

"He-help me," Amelia quavered.

He nodded. "Of course."

Amelia slumped back.

Tom raised his foot and pushed the wooden wedge in her chest all the way into her heart. She gasped and jerked her eye wide in surprise, but it was already over. She slumped back again, this time into eternal stillness.

He spun around and inched back toward Der. He jerked his gaze away from her wound again. But no, he had to look. Amelia had done her work well. She must have just reached inside, grabbed the cords of intestines and tried to yank them all out.

He squatted down and his face hovered over hers, already so pale. He reached down and brushed an eyelash off her cheek, just like a tear. "Why did you have to be so stubborn? Why couldn't you just have let me go?" He pressed his forehead against hers.

She didn't respond. He knew she wouldn't, not with that wound.

He slid his arms underneath her shoulders and legs. "You won't die in this everlasting darkness."

He hissed as wherever her blood touched him, burning right through his clothes and sizzling against his skin.

Tom held her as he stepped into the corridor, watching and listening for the sounds of a trap. Or had Der sprung whatever trap had been set for him?

He moved as quickly as he dared, his skin burning against her blood. He scowl grew deeper furrows into his face the further he ran. "How dare you make me watch this! How dare you! You're supposed to have all these fancy powers now, aren't you? Well, why don't you be selfish for once and demand your own damn miracle? You can't just die! I wasn't supposed to know. I didn't want to know. *I don't want to remember you this way!*"

He flew up to a different entrance than the one Der had used, fifteen feet above the floor, and rose into the Crystal Forest. Overhead, the moon chased the sun on its arc through the sky. Tom immediately squinted – there was no other way to see in this glowing landscape.

He glared up in the general direction of the sun. Mendelin's star was shining brightly tonight – the only star visible in the moon's shadow. He held Der to his chest. Is this what the ancient prince had felt? Holding her as she slowly faded?

But the moon and sun were up at the same time – they could exist together!

His arm suddenly fell limp and he nearly dropped her. Her blood had boiled too much against his skin and it wasn't healing quickly.

He laid her out as gently as he could on the crunching crystals that blanketed the ground. She was as pale as the quartz around them.

"I left you; you weren't meant to leave me."

He rocked back on his heels. What she said when he'd left blazed across his mind, and the answer he'd given her. He dropped his chin to her face.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" His chest gave into sobs. "I am a bastard. So sorry."

Der couldn't hear him.

His head snapped up. He'd saved Chloe with the heart's power when she was dying! He thrust his hand out over her chest. Crimson fire flamed between his fingers. He spread them out over Der's stomach wound.

The unholy flames sputtered and vanished. His hand stung as if he'd been struck with a whip.

Der hadn't woken. Her breath was so faint now.

"No! Why wouldn't it?" He stuck out his hand again. It was cancelled by her own holiness a second time.

Her warmth started to fade beneath his fingers. So did her breath.

“No!” He grabbed her shoulders and shook.

Tom gulped for air. He hesitated but plunged his lips against her and passed the air into her lungs. Her lips were already so cold.

“No, Der!”

He breathed for her again. Then he pulled her up against his chest. “But why?” He turned his face up to the sun and the moon. “Hey, you bastards! *Why?* Why don’t you save her? After all she’s done for you! Aren’t you her gods? Aren’t you powerful enough? So this is it, you’ll just let her die? You are disgusting! You are not good enough for her!”

Overhead, a thunderstorm swirled into existence, twenty feet across and circling.

“Ha!” Tom laughed, cradling Der’s head in his arms. “Go ahead! What could you possibly do to harm me?”

Thunder boomed so loudly that it vibrated all the way to his heels. He was so terrified that his heart started to beat.

Lightning stabbed out from the cloud.

“No!” Tom screamed. He threw his body forward to cover her, but a gust of wind as strong as concrete wall shoved him out of the way. The lightning moved slowly to his heightened senses; it descended from the cloud and struck Der in the stomach.

The heart wrapped the vampire in its protective crimson fire. “Der!” The power of the bolt threw him back away from her.

He clawed his way back to his knees. “Don’t take her!”

The lightning and storm dissipated as quickly as it had appeared. The sun, moon and even Mendelin’s star glowed overhead once again.

“Der!” Tom crawled forward. “No!” He pulled her head into his lap. Her color had returned and she inhaled. Her wounds had vanished with the thunder.

“Der!”

She opened her eyes and blinked. “Tom?” She stiffened and tried to push up. “Where’s Amelia?”

Tom, his emerald eyes made blurry by tears, could only shake his head. He held her to his chest.

Der squirmed immediately. “Help me get this thing off!” She grabbed at the sling with her left arm.

“Amelia is—”

“Der!” Tom gasped, holding her tighter.

She stuck an elbow between her and his chest and managed to tear off the sling and flexed her right arm for the first time in half a year. She tested her digits. Then she looked at Tom. At least, she tried too; he was too close for her to see much beyond his chin. “I had to fight her. She was going to

kill you for the heart.”

He nodded slowly. “I know. I just had a score to settle with her and then I was going to disappear.”

“It was a trap.”

“I know, stupid.” He pressed his nose into her thick hair. “I know.”

Der squirmed again, but Tom’s grip was like being wrapped in a mountain. She forced a smile. “I could get used to this slayer outfit. I could do it in my free time, kind of a hobby.”

“No.” Tom squeezed her tighter, almost a warning. “Learn an instrument instead.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you learning how to hurt me any more than you already know.”

She frowned. “You selfish bastard.”

“Damn right.” He selfishly tightened his grip.

Der wheezed for air.

“Why?” He put his chin on top of her head. “Der, did you forget what I am?”

“I’m trying not to forget who you are. Tom, I can’t breathe!”

“Yes, you can,” he replied. “Otherwise you wouldn’t be talking.” He loosened his grip anyway.

After a moment, Der asked, “Did you love her?”

“What? No. I thought—” He shook his hood lower over his eyes. “It was an easy lie with her, and I knew everything she was to be a lie.” He closed his emerald eyes. “Better for me than the woman I do love.”

He was stealing her warmth, holding her this close. It felt like he was stealing something else from her also. Her strength was that warmth, and who was he to hold onto that? When that warmth faded, he would be left with an even more pronounced coldness. How many short years before it became too cold?

“We’re not this stupid,” she said.

“Apparently we are.”

She jerked in his arms. “Where are the others?”

“You would know better than I,” he growled, abruptly annoyed. “But I’m most concerned with *you* and *me*. Not anyone else.”

She pulled herself free against Tom’s suddenly slack grip. “Alsalon and Ameris were kidnapped by storm-readers, and Jakkobb and Thistle were hurt!” She jumped to her feet and toppled forward in a surge of dizziness. She hadn’t felt this whole in months!

Tom caught her and steadied her. “Will you stop being yourself for an hour? You were dying, again! You don’t need to be, well, *yourself* so quickly! Can’t we have a moment? I’m trying to say—”

“I need my sword!” She whirled around, looking for the entrance to the Kingdom. “It’s still down there!”

“Der, you’re not going to find– Godsdamnit, listen to me!”

She kicked at the ground, stamping at it as if to put out a fire. She stumbled across the hole Tom had made. She vanished below.

He folded his arms and regained his usual glare. “Oh, why do I even say these things?”

“Ow...” echoed up from the Kingdom’s hallway below. “That’s a drop.”

Tom drifted down to see Der clutching her ankle in the narrow circle of light. His tears had completely faded to his customary frown. “I’m going to laugh if you just broke it.”

She scowled and rolled her foot in a circle. “It’s fine.”

He offered his hand. “Since you can’t see... *Don’t do that!*” He recoiled from her light spell, dragging his cloak between himself and her. “Where did you learn to do that?”

Der shrugged. “Slayers.” She turned in a circle, not sure which way to go.

“That’s why I don’t want you associating with them. They’re a good influence on you.” He pointed down the hall, still hiding his face.

She started trotting down the corridor. “I wouldn’t say they’re exactly good, maybe from their point of view, but not necessarily mine.”

He nodded. They walked in silence until Der’s feet slowed. “I have to know, why the shadow of the midnight sun?” she asked. “What’s that about?”

“I thought you knew the legend,” he answered after a moment.

“Not this part.”

He grunted but kept walking.

“Please.” She reached out and touched his shoulder. In that moment, she felt his entire body slacken.

He dropped his chin. “It’s the shadow that protects the stone and the bone. The brothers were enemies, so they can only be joined together under the shadow of the midnight sun. I don’t know what would happen if someone tried to use both outside of the shadow.”

“But why the shadow?”

He shrugged. “That’s when the crystal brother killed the stone demon and the curse began.”

She shivered. “I can’t believe Avamar would try to bring back those demons. Or that he could control them.”

Tom shook his head. “United doesn’t mean reborn. He just wants the relics’ power like what I have with the heart. Only, he wants pieces of both demons.” He pressed his lips together tightly, signaling

the end of the conversation.

A few minutes later, they stood hand-in-hand in the door over Amelia's corpse. Her legs and arms were already disintegrating into ash, leaving not even bones behind.

Der had muted the light as much as she could, and had to squint to see anything. Beside her, Tom shook his head. "And you did this with only your off-hand?" He shuddered, and she felt the tremor riding up her arm. "I not certain I could've beaten her, with both hands."

Der frowned. "You're being honest. You hesitated when you spoke, so you're being honest."

He nodded slowly. "She didn't choose this existence."

"No, but she chose what to do in it." Der knelt and lifted the Pallens sword.

"Perhaps, but probably not. But I did what she bade me; I freed her from her master." His shoulders sloped down. "She was right though."

"What? No! Whatever you're going to say, you're wrong."

He shook his head. "I should've walked away so many years ago. Should've never met you or gotten you mired in my mess."

"She tricked you."

"She tricked me with the truth." He met her gaze, his eyes magnified by the swelling moisture in them. "There's no going back. They want the heart. I won't have you marked for death too."

"So we fight."

He shook his head. "You don't know how powerful an enemy."

"As if I've never heard that before." She reached up and pressed a palm against his cheek. He leaned into it. She continued, "You're the only enemy I have that I'd die to protect."

He smiled with his lips only, but it was a real smile. "We challenge the blood. Holy and unholy united."

"I suppose we are the legend."

"Oh, we'll be legendary for certain." A smirk danced across his face. "How do you feel about diving in from above?"

Opaque glass, as thick as one of the crystal columns surrounding it, crashed down into the Kingdom's sanctuary below. The glass, dark only in sunlight, had been disguised as a permanent mirage.

But that hadn't stopped Tom from smashing it with crimson fire claws. Daylight, possibly for the first time ever, dove into the heart of the Kingdom. The light revealed a vast hall filled with ornate scrollwork on arching columns.

Two figures, one carrying the other, dropped down, landing in front of a glass throne filled with blood. Der and Tom stood back to back on the dais. Der brandished the Pallens sword and Tom readied his crimson claws.

But the throne room was bereft of anyone.

Nothing stirred in the darkness.

Finally, Der shifted her weight toward Tom. "Er."

"It's a trick, idiot. They're watching us."

After another moment, she said, "I don't sense *any* emotions here. Other than ours. It's dead, Tom, not undead."

"It's a trick. They knew, somehow they knew!"

Der shook her head. "We just decided this. Suddenly, like. I don't think they could know. Well, you have a plan, right?"

"No-o, but I'm thinking really quickly. What could pull them from this place?"

Together, they raised their heads to look up through the skylight. The moon was starting to close in on the midnight sun.

Chapter Twenty Three

The Sun's Shadow

The vampire drones butted heads and clawed at each other while they herded Prince Alsalon and Ameris. The boys stumbled on the stones beneath their feet, hustling along, afraid to listen behind them. Ameris still had part of his hood undone and caught flashes of stones and muddy ground as he stumbled along. He didn't dare slow, not with those beasts behind him.

The scent of the sea slid up between the folds of his hood, and the sound of surf was distant but persistent. He recognized exactly where they were. The cliffs beyond Staghorn. He suddenly slowed, and one of those things nudged the back of his knee.

Ameris hopped forward reflexively. He didn't know how far the cliffs were! They could be inches in front of him.

Alsalon gasped beside him. "No...No!" Then he started to groan. His fingernails started to crackle with sparks.

"What? What?"

The prince collapsed to his knees. "The earth!"

Ameris stared down. Snow was growing like grass at his feet. Little blades of snow erupted from the rock with no obvious root systems.

Melodic laughter, as icy as the blossoming snow at their feet, erupted around them. It was so out of place. A harmonious male voice chuckled, "Dear Mother Earth, rumble all you want, you can't stop the shadow of the midnight sun."

The voice ducked into Ameris' face, only an inch away. "Say anything now and I'll kill you instantly."

The presence of the voice disappeared.

A second voice boomed with a power that Ameris had never imagined. The elf bit down on a squeak. The voice thundered, "Why are you bothering with captives? Useless."

The original speaker's voice was bright and helpful. "To keep the slayers distracted."

"From what?"

"Mostly from finding out what I've sold to the chemmen. We can't have either group interrupting your great work, o mighty master."

"You're so very wrong. The slayers are arriving – they of course, are powerless. But you were wrong, whelp."

“I apologize for my foolishness, sire Avamar. But they will bear witness to their defeat – crushing their souls and uplifting our history at once.”

Avamar’s voice grunted. “It will be history tonight. I will no longer be someone else’s toy, ever again. Now, where is the wench who was supposed to bring me the heartstone?”

“The stone shall be arriving immediately. I have seen to that, sire.”

“The shadow of the midnight sun is almost upon us, sirrah. It must be here. Must! I shall become the sire of sires and the legend of stone and bone incarnate.”

“Yes, master.”

“At my lead, we shall take our place in the world. No more hiding my Kingdom! Look here and see us on this field tonight!”

“A wonderful glory, o lord.”

“I need my stone, sirrah.”

The voice sounded low, as if it were bowing. “It shall be arriving immediately. Amelia has succeeded in her part to play in this undertaking. Why did you order such an apparent weakling? To seduce the heartstone here instead of forcing it? Should have gone yourself!”

“You are of course, correct,” the original voice said around waist level.

The speaker with the commanding voice must have departed because now there was only silence, but Ameris hadn’t heard any footsteps.

The first voice mused casually, “Why didn’t you go yourself, I wonder. Are you afraid of the stone’s current vessel?”

Beside the northern elf, Alsalon groaned in elvish, “We’re gonna die.”

Ameris gulped. “I think so.”

Alsalon started to rock and cry beside him. Ameris looked down at his boots and pushed aside a broken tree root. “We gotta... We can do something.” He hoped like hell their captor didn’t understand their language. He wasn’t going to die somebody’s captive, nor was he going to be enslaved like his brother.

The voice gave no indication that he’d even heard them, or that he even acknowledged they were still there.

“Can’t you do something?” Ameris nudged the prince with an elbow. He cocked his head, trying to listen for the drones.

“Like what?” Alsalon quavered.

“Like a spell or something!”

“But, but...” the prince stammered. “Yes. I can bl—”

“Well, don’t say it!” Ameris rolled his foot over the dried out root. “Just do it.”

“When? What’s our signal?”

“Um...go?”

The invisible voice suddenly chimed, “Silence. I don’t want to think that you’re scheming in your own tongue, do I?”

“No!” Ameris screamed. Alsalon stood dumbly, not understanding the Common tongue. In elvish, Jakkobb’s brother shouted, “Now, Alsalon, now!”

Their immediate world flared into light as bright as a star on the surface of the world. Alsalon held up his hands, his fingernails sparking and crackling with the energy of his spell.

Meanwhile, Ameris dropped straight down, thankful for the hood’s protection from the light. He scrambled around, feeling for the broken root. It wasn’t even particularly sharp, but it was a hope. His fingers latched onto it and he launched himself up.

He crashed into their captor’s knees. He could see those perfect boots in the gap at the bottom of his hood. Falling, they knocked over the golden rose chalice, sitting on the ground beside him when Ameris crashed both of them against the rock.

The elf was on top. He stabbed down with the root, felt it stick into flesh and their captor groaned in agony.

He didn’t waste time. He jumped back to his feet, blundered into Alsalon and charged away from the place. He jerked off his hood. They were heading straight for the pine trees that bordered the rocky field in front of the cliffs. If they could make the trees, they could hide!

Alsalon yelped and stumbled, throwing out his arms to recover his balance. Ameris yanked off Alsalon’s hood and grabbed the prince’s collar and carried him along, not even noticing the other’s weight. Neither of them dared to look back.

They neared the trees, their feet thundering against the ground. Ameris risked a smile.

Two of the vampire drones sprinted out ahead of them and spun around. Without looking back, he just knew that there were more of them behind them. He and Alsalon drifted closer so that the prince’s shoulder touched Ameris’ arm.

“So close,” Alsalon whispered.

One of the creatures in front started to paw the ground like a bull readying to charge. The other one just leaped, claws stretched out at their chests.

A wooden arrow exploded through its chest. Ameris barely saw the shaft as the beast crashed to the ground howling and pawing at its chest. There was no arrowhead, just a sharpened wooden point.

More arrows emerged from the trees.

“Go!” Ameris yelled, dragging the smaller elf along. They jumped between the two drones, scrabbling on the rock with more arrows protruding from their backs.

All that mattered was getting to the trees. He broke into another grin as he saw the massive bulk of red armor that housed his brother. Slayers with bows surrounded him, shooting out from behind the trees.

“Duck!” Jakkobb roared.

Ameris and Alsalon didn’t hesitate. They threw themselves forward, somersaulting across the last bit of stone and between the first trees.

Jakkobb heaved his axe. It shot straight out over the tumbling boys and into the chest of the drone rising up behind them. The creature screamed as it was knocked aside. A dozen slayer arrows greeted it on the ground.

Ameris tried to shake the dizziness off as he rolled upright. He reached out for Alsalon. The prince had to be safe after all that! It wouldn’t be fair otherwise!

Alsalon sat upright beside him and looked straight up at Thistle. “We did it! I did a spell and Ameris got him!”

Ameris shrugged. “Well, I stabbed him, but I don’t know if it took.”

“Stabbed whom?” the chemman asked.

“Something terrible is going to happen!” Alsalon scrambled to his feet. “But I didn’t understand the language.”

Thistle and Jakkobb looked at Ameris, who suddenly frowned. “Beats me why they were speaking in Common, it’s like he wanted us to hear something about a heartstone.”

“Tom.” Thistle looked directly at the knight.

The last of the immediate drones ran on all fours toward the safety of the cliffs. Several more lay motionlessly in expanding pools of their own blood.

Jakkobb nodded ahead. “Let’s find out.”

The boys followed directly behind the two seasoned fighters, so closely they were knocking against the warriors’ heels. Jakkobb didn’t even stop walking as he ripped his magical axe out of the vampire drone’s chest. Behind him, a slayer moved to stand over the creature and shot an arrow down into its chest.

Ameris pointed to where they had just run from.

There was a slain vampire with the tree root lodged in his chest. His long golden hair lay spilled across the ground like the rose chalice. The blood from the ampulla had also less than metaphorically spilled across the body, staining his clothes and face. The vampire’s fingertips were already graying

into ash.

This was the first time they'd seen their captor.

"We did it!" Alsalon gasped. He broke into a grin. "We did it!"

Ameris frowned. It was the right cup and the boots were the same, but he hadn't been sure where he'd thrust the root. Still, it was all here, perfectly laid out.

Jakkobb grabbed his brother's shoulder and squeezed. "Good job."

Ameris was helpless to fight the smile. All doubts vanished. "Yeah, thanks! I mean we did it!"

His brother's face suddenly darkened. "But you got lucky. Don't count on it twice."

"Sometimes, one only needs to be lucky once." The party spun to find Sister Bo, hands tucked as if in prayer, standing on the battlefield. Blood stained her white habit. She was surrounded by ten of the roughest looking slayers, bows half drawn but pointing down.

She nodded to the corpse. "Our congratulations." She turned to one of her bodyguards. "Prepare the purple flare. It's time for us to retreat."

"Retreat?" Jakkobb repeated. "No."

Bo's voice remained as serene as a mountain spring. "We do not have the upper hand, and I fear our enemy may be hiding theirs."

"No." Jakkobb shook his head.

"This is no dragoon fight, sir. We will fight when we know the battle is ours."

"There won't be a next battle, Sister," Ameris piped up. He crossed his eyes, trying to see down to his own mouth in surprise at his words. He continued, "Not if this evil lord has his way. He said something about taking the Kingdom out into the world, starting here with the shadow of the sun." He threw up his hand, to where the moon was arcing across the sun's path. Already the world was growing dimmer.

"We're losing the advantage of daylight," one of the other slayers muttered. "We can't stay here."

Sister Bo paused in her view of the eclipse. As the shadow started to expand across the land, she saw more vampires, those that could pass for human and their drone pets, appearing on the cliff face. They must have been there all along. The slayers, spread out in small squads, brought up their bows against their enemies' claws.

"Well played, my nameless adversary," Bo whispered.

"Is that him?" Ameris lifted his hand to a figure hovering over the unorganized battlefield.

The figure high above raised up his chin, surveying the field. One hand rested lightly on the length of a wooden sword. Something about the hand looked wrong, even from the distance, as if the hand wasn't wholly formed.

Above, Avamar eyed the entire scene, as if searching for something.

Bo's eyes never left this new target. "I surely hope so." She held out her hand, and one of her guards passed her his bow. "Perhaps we can end this battle right now."

"Sister! Sister!" Brawn called as he charged in. Spike cantered beside him, still pretending to be a normal horse.

Bo drew her bead with the arrow. "Yes?"

Brawn wheezed, falling forward to catch himself on his knees. "The chem— the chemmen!" He pointed. "Two of the undead bastards broke our hold on them!" He pointed back toward Staghorn.

Across the field, the chemmen marched forward. They'd recovered their weapons and were charging into the spread out knots of slayers. The vampire hunters didn't have a chance; their weapons were made for special targets. Wooden stakes bounced off of chemmen steel and holy water was as useful as a brief shower. Moving steadily, the storm-readers advanced on another squad of slayers.

"We'll never regroup in time!" Brawn shouted.

"We won't have to." Bo drew back the arrow even further.

Jakkobb, Thistle and the others jumped at a sudden wind, coming at them from all directions.

Bo's holy spell captured the arrow. It started to hum and vibrate in her hands. Its tip glowed fiery orange.

Overhead, the eclipse was almost full. It was dark enough for the northern lights to catch the sky in green fire.

They heard Avamar's voice, raining down from the sky like a god's, "Where is my stone? It will be too late!"

Bo held steady her aim, waiting for the perfect moment. "Never too late." She kept her arrow trained on the figure outlined in the blue-green sky-fire.

The northern lights danced overhead in the expanding darkness of the eclipse. "We're not too late, are we?" Der looked down as she and Tom descended out of the lights. The players of the battle looked so small from above!

Tom hissed, pulling his hood up tighter around his face. The eclipse helped, but the solar ring of fire was still visible.

"Down!" the vampire whispered. Der looked over his shoulder to see another vampire hanging in the air, watching the battle below.

"Did he see us?" She kept her eyes trained as they plummeted onto the top of the cliff.

“Is he moving?”

“No.”

“Then no, he didn’t.”

They looked around. Vampires, slayers and even a few chemmen grappled with each other. Drones charged the nearest slayer squad and there was nothing that Der could do but watch as they pounced like tigers. She jumped forward.

Tom caught her wrist. “You can’t!”

“The hell I can’t!”

“No! We have to finish Avamar. It’s the only way to end this and save Jakkobb and the others! Der, please.” He pulled her back to his chest, watching for the first drone to attack them, or slayer or chemman for that matter.

“Challenge the blood, I know. It’s the only way neither of us will be hunted.”

Tom smirked, but it soon faded. “Neither of us is strong enough to challenge the blood, but holy and unholy, we are the legend. I hope the legend is stronger.”

She strained to see the resulting slaughter of drones and slayers. One of the drones sensed her watching and turned, a human arm falling out of its many-fanged mouth.

Tom stared off into the middle distance. Memories of his laughing mother swept across his mind. Of Chloe, and of dear, maddening Der. Above him, almost overhead now, drifted the alleged sire of sires. And here he was, not under the hierarchy’s heel.

He was free! Finally free! No more running, no more hiding, no more raging against orders he couldn’t disobey!

He flinched with the sudden realization that he had to be free *now*. This moment wouldn’t last. If he didn’t act with this freedom, he would lose it.

Tom smiled, perhaps his only real smile that Der had ever seen. “I’m just me.”

“What?” she said, still watching the drone which was starting to circle them at a distance. She drew the Pallens sword. More of the slayer groups had shredded, some quite literally, than had either the vampires or the chemmen. She nudged Tom with an elbow. “You’re not going to do something stupid, are you?”

His grin only spread. He popped his knuckles. “No more than you’ve done.” He grabbed her shoulders and spun her around, ignoring the approaching perils. He dug a hand into his pocket and yanked out the snowflake necklace. “Give this to Chloe.” He jerked off his glove and removed his family ring and closed her fingers around both of them. “Give this and the compass to Lady Evelyn. Tell her what happened to me, everything that you know, and tell her to take care of Chloe.”

Der tried to shove the jewelry back into his hand. “No!”

But his emerald eyes were brighter. She’d never seen them so bright, even twinkling in the eclipse’s fiery light. She licked her lips. “What are you...?”

“I’m going to give him exactly what we wants.”

“No!” Der kicked him in the shin. “That will—”

“Probably.” His smile outshined his eyes. “But it’s alright. I’m just me.”

He kissed her. He pulled her inside his arms and it felt like the world would end at that moment. He wouldn’t care if it did. Together, they shared her warmth and all their years of pretending. Those years seemed so wasted now.

This is what a miracle feels like, he thought.

It was real. The moment happened. It wasn’t a lie and no one could deny it.

A growl penetrated their hearing. They opened their eyes to see one of the naked drones just feet away, but circling, unsure of what to do around the vampire.

Tom looked down at Der’s face and wanted nothing more in the world than to kiss her again.

The drone leapt.

Tom whirled and sliced the creature down with his crimson fire claws. It fell into pieces in a sloppy pile. Tom kicked at the chunks of meat. “It’ll be back up, but...” He turned his face to the sky.

Avamar had turned to them like a lodestone to steel. The eclipse behind his head looked like a fiery halo.

Across the battlefield, Bo released her arrow.

The vampire lord didn’t seem to notice the arrow, pulsing with holy light, racing through the sky toward his back.

On the ground, Der glanced at several more drones, half-jumping, half-flying toward them.

Tom and Avamar locked gazes. At the last possible half second, the chemman vampire turned, drawing the wooden sword and cutting Bo’s arrow out of its flight in one motion. The shaft exploded into a shower of holy fireworks.

Avamar held up his cloak against the sparks.

Der nodded to Tom, and looked up at the sire. “Let’s go.”

He offered a small smile and waved his fingers, floating up over her head. “Not this time, my love. You’re not the only one who gets to be the hero!”

“Tom! No!” She jumped, but her outstretched hand fell several feet short of his boots. “*Tom!*”

Avamar lowered his malformed hand toward the origin of the arrow. “Be undone.”

On the ground, Spike started to whinny and shake his head. His alicorn didn’t spiral into life. He

shook his head against and hopped into the air, but came stubbornly back down. He roared.

Around him, Jakkobb held up his hands. Pieces of his armor were starting to evaporate, rising up in pieces and then drifting into the air like steam. It didn't hurt. He saw the same thing happening to Thistle. He held up a hand, its skin was starting to rise up and vanish, even a few flecks of blood.

Bo dropped to her knees, hands folded in prayer. Bits of her habit and face were also rising up into the air. White light shimmered around her, but if light could be pushed by a breeze, it was shoved away. She coughed and lurched forward, collapsing on the ground.

"Is this it?" Thistle shouted beside Jakkobb, but his voice came across as barely a whisper.

The knight tried to yell something back, but it was lost in the colorful steam. He tried to stagger away, but his legs didn't seem to be there. They felt as if they were floating several feet away from his body.

Then the moment was over. They all sank to the ground, drained of energy. Patches of their skin and clothing were missing. Blood oozed out of the missing areas of their flesh.

Overhead, Tom balanced a ball of blue light, swirling with reds and yellows in its core. He glared at Avamar, and the crimson fire leapt into his eyes. "Was this your spell? Have it back!" He hurled the energy.

The vampire lord held out his hand, and the bones glowed in the fissures of his skin. He slapped it aside, and the spell exploded.

Avamar and Tom ignored the resulting aerial fire.

"I see that you're here instead," the lord snarled.

"I killed your messenger. Next time, send someone with a little class." Tom held up his fists.

Avamar growled and then laughed. "You dare challenge me? I am the blood." His orange chemmen eyes flipped to red. "Fall out of the sky."

It was Tom's turn to laugh. "Got any new tricks, you ancient mosquito? You are not the blood."

The lord froze, unable to comprehend Tom's disobedience. "The heartstone..." He held out his gloved hand, the one without the bones. "Give it."

Tom drifted away from him, holding his hands out wide, his claws glowing in the shadow of the eclipse. "You'll have to take it."

Avamar leveled the wooden sword at him. It was so weathered that it looked like bone, bleached out in the sun. The handle wasn't wood though, it could've been ivory but it was so worn that it could've been anything.

Tom parried the first strike of the sword with his palm. He took a cut from the amazingly sharpened edge, but it was certainly minor. A swelling bruise from the wood rapidly colored in the rest of his

palm.

He dodged the next thrust, not wanting to touch the obviously magical blade again. Magic. He knew how to handle that. The heart lurched in response.

Crimson claws sprouted higher from his nails. Avamar landed a kick on the top of his shoulder, shattering the bones from his neck to his elbow.

Tom started to fall out of the air from the impact. The crimson fire sputtered. When had he ever known such pain? His consciousness flickered like the heart's flame.

Avamar charged after him.

Tom's emerald eyes snapped open. He jerked his body around, pivoting like a hawk and striking. He flew up past Avamar's body and bit deep into the diving lord's ankle. Blood sweetened his mouth, heightened all his senses. He felt his shoulder instantly repairing as he gained such strength from the powerful vampire!

Avamar gritted his teeth, twisted his arm and thrust up with the wooden sword. Tom jerked back out of reach, taking most of the other's ankle in his mouth.

The lord lunged again, still upside down in the air. Tom parried with the crimson fire claws. They couldn't cut through the blade. He slashed at Avamar's leg with his other hand.

Down below, Der sliced through another drone with the Pallens sword. It felt so good to be back in her dominant hand. She glared at the next one, growling at her like an attack dog.

It leapt. She held her sword like a bat and cut it in half. Meaty chunks crashed to the ground, twitching. She didn't know if these creatures could recover from the holy weapon or not, but there was no time to worry.

Two more lined up behind their fallen brother. She growled right back at them, sparing a few glances up. Tom and Avamar's fight drifted out toward the sea.

Der sprinted to the edge of the cliff, ignoring the charging monsters behind her, angling for some way to get into this match. It wasn't going to end without her!

Under the eclipse's shadow, Avamar righted himself, parrying all the way against Tom's slashing attacks. He shook his foot, hanging on by only a few tendons. He leaned forward and smiled.

He opened his fingers and released the sword. It clattered somewhere below against the cliff. Slowly, he turned his hand so its back faced Tom. The bones seemed to swell and pulse between the cracks in his skin. They flared with a purple aura.

"They must be joined!" He jumped forward, clawing with that hand.

Tom bolted straight up. "You forget the legend! They were enemies!" He dodged a sweeping attack at his feet. He launched himself downward with a strike of his own. "But I don't care about your rotting mythology!"

Avamar's next blow sent Tom spiraling out over the violent surf below. He narrowed his erubescant eyes. "Then the legend is mine!" He raised his hand, flaring with a violet aura, and smacked Tom faster than the other vampire could block again.

Tom shook, helpless in a seizure resulting from the power of the bones. They glowed brighter as Avamar floated toward him. His hood vibrated off his face, and he hissed and rolled over, trying to protect his skin from the sunlight. Smoke rose from his instant burns.

The older vampire jerked his face up at the sky. The moon was moving on, and already a quarter of the sun was showing again. He growled and stretched out his arms toward Tom's chest.

But Tom had enough time to anticipate and dodge. He kicked Avamar in the face, smashing in his cheek, and flew up. He pulled his hood low over his face again. Already it was getting nearly too bright to see well.

Avamar's hand raked his rib cage, tearing through his clothes and skin down to the bone. Tom slashed at his face again and kicked him in the gut. He rolled away, one hand clutching his bloody side. The pain flashed along his veins, and his wounds glowed with the crimson fire.

He tried to fly away again, but the vampire lord caught his thigh, shattering the bones from his hip to his knee in one blow.

"Now!" Avamar clawed toward Tom's chest. "I need it now!" Overhead, the shadow slipped away from the world a little more.

Tom couldn't shake his grasp. He clawed and kicked and bit but hit nothing but the air. He felt Avamar's hands sliding across his clothes toward his heart.

He bit through his lip and psychically reached for the heart's power down to a depth he'd never dared before. Avamar pulled up one of his ribs and jerked it out.

Tom hardly felt it. His emerald eyes flashed red and then crimson and then started to simmer. Somehow, he managed to bring up his knee into Avamar's groin and dislodged the sire.

He rolled away, feeling the heart starting to beat through his open chest, underneath his exposed ribs. A rhythm that shook his bones and his fingers. His thigh and chest began to heal, alighting with fire as they pulled themselves back into place, or in the case of his missing ribs, a fiery outline glowed in place of his bones. He held his arms out wide as his entire body started to burn, glowing with a fire that wasn't harming him. On his back, through his clothes, he could feel the heat of the sun growing.

But the skin beneath his chest, visible through his shredded shirt, began to part. It opened up to

reveal the heart, just in the way that skin would not grow over Avamar's bones.

He roared and smashed his fist down against Avamar – he'd meant to strike the face, but Avamar dodged. Tom did manage to snap an arm nearly off as the other vampire twisted to the side.

He took a knee to the face for it, and Avamar immediately followed up with several shredding attacks all over Tom's body.

He kicked away, floundering to stay aloft. He blocked the next strike by crossing his arms over his chest, and saw that the lord's arm that he'd damaged was rapidly healing.

He lashed out with his claws, but took three more punches to the gut for it.

With his leg useless, and struggling to remain airborne, Tom realized that he couldn't win this fight. He was outmatched. Hadn't Der said the same thing about the Blackhound? He'd disarmed her, so she'd tackled them both over the side of Horizon. She'd been helpless, but had found a way.

He swooped low, dipping near the sea and sliding out of range of another furious kick.

Tom spared a heartbeat to look back out toward land. There was Jakkobb, Thistle, Spike and some others in a circle, surrounded by vampires and chemmen. He searched for Der, and saw her, toes dangling over the edge of a thousand foot drop at the edge, waving at him.

He couldn't look away.

"The stone!" Avamar raked his fingernails down Tom's leg, severing his nerves and muscles. "Give me the stone *now!*" His words seemed to shred in his fangs, and he was howling more like a wolf.

Tom floundered and turned his head back to the cliff, trying to see her again. All he saw in his now blurry vision was a fading shadow.

"Take it if you can!" He rocketed upward, hovering at the edge of the eclipse's shadow. Half of his body was in sunlight, and those parts not protected by his clothes started to blister and burn. Smoke emanated from his skin and parts of ash soon began to peel off.

Avamar extended his hand up as far as he could, flying high toward Tom. The purple aura smashed through Tom's protective flames and his fingers closed around the beating stone heart.

Tom gasped, he'd never felt so cold in his entire existence. He jerked forward, then hung limply in the air.

Avamar shouted in wicked triumph. His fingers gripped the heart, twisting it, breaking it free from the other vampire's body.

Tom suddenly lashed out and gripped Avamar's outstretched arm at the wrist with both hands. He coughed and gave a cross between a snarl and a smile. Then, with the very last of his strength, he heaved them both upward, out of the protective shadow of the eclipse and into the sunlight. He mashed Avamar's hand against the heartstone, bringing the bones to touch it.

Away from the shadow, Tom felt the heart throb and crack into thousands of pieces inside his chest. Then their world exploded.

Outlined by the fading northern lights, the explosion unfolded like a blossoming rose overhead. The emerging sun highlighted its blackened smoke edges. The force shook the entire cliff-face. Rocks rolled free, falling hundreds of feet down into the sea below.

The battlefield paused to watch the fire in the sky.

“No!” Der screamed, her entire protest consumed by the thunder of the blast.

Across the field, Jakkobb and Bo gasped at what they saw. The explosion tossed out a body toward the cliff, trailing ash. It was blackened, and missing most of its mass. The skeleton creature crashed down in front of them. Most of the skull was visible and without a face, but its fangs were still white and bright.

Jakkobb even backed up a step. “That can’t be.”

The skeleton rolled over and started to sit up. Its fleshy heart sat motionlessly in its mostly exposed rib cage.

Bo jumped forward. She plunged the butt of her wooden bow at the creature’s heart. A skeletal arm batted her weapon out wide.

The nun spun with the motion and delivered a roundhouse kick to the vampire’s skull. It stumbled to the side and then floated up to its feet, rising from the top of its skull first and then putting weight on its skeletal toes.

Bo smashed the top of the bow against its skull. The creature reeled backward. She then thrust the bow into the motionless heart.

The corpse slumped forward, suddenly motionless.

Jakkobb and Thistle exchanged a glance. “Hadn’t seen that one before,” Thistle remarked.

The knight was silent, turning his face back to the sky to watch. “Where’s Der? Where’s...” he trailed off and dropped his gaze.

Alsalon pointed. “Look! They’re disappearing!”

Ameris spun in circles, trying to see everything.

Around them, the battle disintegrated. The vampires vanished back into the shadows, quicker than the slayers could follow. The slayers then turned their attention to the remaining chemmen, who were easily outnumbered now.

Bo smiled at both Ameris and Alsalon. “We’ve won the day. We should always win the day, and now we have two more slayers to add to our rolls!”

“What?” Ameris said.

The nun smiled. “Well, you don’t have to stay here with us, but you two are vampire slayers!”

Der shaded her eyes as shadow faded from the land. The moon was on the far side of the sun. No shadow was left. She swung her leg over the edge of the cliff and slid it down until she found a tiny foothold. She gripped the edge of the cliff with sweaty fingers. Maybe she had been the only one who had seen the second charred body fall out to sea.

Her fingers slipped and she leaned dangerously away from the cliff. Her other hand maintained its grip and she breathed out. Then she immediately lowered her foot again, feeling out for another hold.

She pressed her body close against the cliff. The surf, shaking the cliffs even up here, promised to vibrate her off if she continued her downward climb. She felt out, trying to find a good handhold.

The wind threw her against the stone in a gust. She groaned and tried to peek back out across the Kilvanian. She could see most of a body floating in a circle of ash. It was sinking fast into the icy waters. Every surge of the sea pulled apart the circle, elongating it, disintegrating it. The fear that she was chasing the wrong one caused her heart to speed up.

She looked down, and could only imagine how slick the cliff would get as she approached the surf. Never mind figuring out how she could clear the whitewater to get out to sea and the circle of floating ash.

A shadow suddenly darkened the rocks around her. She craned her neck, half expecting to find an enemy vampire.

“Spike!”

The unicorn drifted closer. *What are you doing?*

“Tom fell this way!” She reached out with a hand and grabbed his mane. “Come on!”

Spike drifted closer to allow her to mount. *Do you sense him?*

“What?”

You can sense his presence. Do you feel him out there anywhere?

She rolled forward, knocking her forehead against his neck. She swallowed. “I...I can’t.” She sniffed and tried to push back the sudden tears. “But maybe it’s just because he’s unconscious.” She bit her lip, refusing to be helpless. She looked back out. The ash circle was gone, swallowed by the sea.

Spike heaved a sigh. *Come on. Let’s look.*

The chemmen had grouped together and the slayers surrounded the few who remained. Many

storm-readers and slayers had fallen in the battle.

Thistle, easy to recognize because of his elvish style clothes, held up his hands.

“Your orders, Bo said.” Brawn shrugged. “Finish them now?”

Thistle started to nod. He stopped, staring at Trista. She was squeezed in between two of her older countrymen, with barely half her face and only one eye showing.

He shook his head. “Let them go back to Darkreign.”

“What?” Brawn pulled back on his bow, ready to let the arrow fly.

“Let them go.” He looked directly at Trista. “I will counsel with Arborn and they won’t ever leave Darkreign again.” He raised his eyebrows at the nearest storm-reader. “Agreed?”

The chemman on the spot gulped and nodded. “Agreed.”

Brawn, his face etched with disgust, gestured the other slayers to lead them away to wherever they could perform their ceremony. They still had the key and the portal spell. He turned to Thistle. “Why?”

Thistle shrugged and held up his hands. “I think they’re finally changing.”

Closer to the cliff, Ameris grinned as he strode beside his older brother. He thumped his chest. “They’re giving us some secret slayer honor, Bo said!”

“Which won’t be secret any longer then,” Jakkobb murmured.

Ameris stopped walking. “Um, brother, I’ve decided that I’m not going to take the Strengths. I’m going to be like you.”

Jakkobb paused for a moment and then offered a small smile. “No, go ahead. Your life will be much easier up here if you do. You don’t have to prove it to me. You already did that today.”

His grin blossomed. “Thanks, brother. After today, I know I’ve already earned it.” He spat in his hands and smoothed back his hair. He directed his pin-point stare to where Der was just dismounting Spike by the cliff. She had her face out to sea and was leaning heavily on the unicorn, as if she couldn’t walk.

Ameris flashed his brother a curved grin and started to swagger in her direction.

“Whoa.” Jakkobb grabbed his brother’s long hair and pulled him back a step. “Incredible how much you have left to learn.”

Epilogue

Der banged her heels against the stone as she sat on its cliff's edge. The surf looked like white squiggles from up here. Distantly, she could hear the roar of the party in Staghorn, carried on the wind. Alsalon and Ameris had been paraded through the streets on chairs the last time she'd seen them, but she'd chosen to wait for the real hero out here by the sea.

How much of history was wrong like this? she wondered. How much went unrecorded or missing half the facts? She certainly knew that Bo and her slayers would refuse to write down who actually handled Avamar. But what they wrote would become real for future generations.

She sighed and looked back out at the horizon, all sea and mountains. Mendelin's star was dark this sunlit evening. It had been for the last two days.

Footsteps crunched across the stones behind her. She didn't look, but she felt someone with a very potent aura a few feet away. He wasn't big in stature, but he blazed with power.

She looked. "Dominic!"

The black-haired vampire nodded.

"I'd suspected you weren't really slain." She frowned. "Or did you just steal his face?"

He said, "I didn't have to keep a face you'd recognize. Also, the third bone remains undisturbed in its pool."

Der still quirked an eyebrow at him. That information was something that only Dominic and her shared.

She looked him up and down. He wasn't scrawny anymore. He felt cold, calculating, like a god watching the world from a mountaintop might look.

"You're waiting for him," he stated.

She gulped but nodded.

"It's useless." He sat down beside her, stretching his legs out over the edge.

She turned her gaze back down to the sea.

"You should be grateful that he perished."

"What?" She flinched, and suddenly felt dizzy and then remembered how high up she was perched.

"For touching the mythology of the stone and the bone that was a very small price to pay."

She blinked back a sudden barrage of tears. "A small price?"

"Very small. Don't you know the story? Where one goes the other shall follow, and it always leads to destruction."

“Well, it’s destroyed! And so is he!” She hurled a stone out to sea.

“Yes. The legend should remain dead.”

She swallowed, shaking her head. “Tom never wanted it. It was too powerful. He said he’d be hunted for it, and he was right. But what I can’t figure out is why *you* wanted the heart, Dominic.”

He tilted his head and cast her an appraising look. After a moment, he said, “To conquer Avamar. Haven’t you guessed that by now? I also sent the chemmen to capture Alsalon and Ameris for me, but I see the boys have been more than compensated for that. They think they actually killed me.”

Der eventually nodded. “Why?”

“To keep the slayers from following you and confirming the location of the Kingdom.” The vampire rolled his head over to look directly at her. “Of course, now you know it.”

“I am not necessarily a friend of Bo and her gang.”

“Her? My, my.”

Der bit down on a curse. She hadn’t meant to give that away!

Dominic waved his hand. “I’m not worried. This affair is done. Give them Avamar’s stronghold.”

She hesitated. “But I won’t find the Kingdom.”

He shook his head. “No. Just an empty fortress now that he’s gone, so let it be hollow like her victory when she claims it. Please, gain Sister Bo’s favor with my blessing.”

“I never said Bo was a nun.”

He tossed her a smirk.

Der glowered, and she didn’t know if he had just guessed she was a nun in the moment or he had known all along and was just taunting her now. Then again, he now seemed to have known *everything* all along. She gasped. “You! You sent Amelia after the heart, not Avamar!”

Dominic’s eyebrows shot up. “Yes, that was me.”

Der shook her head in disbelief. “So it was all an act on her part?”

He shook his head. “Oh no, her hatred for you was quite real. I gave her the order to bring the heartstone to the Kingdom at all costs, and you the order to keep it away at all costs.”

“What?”

“Oh yes, I ordered her to fetch the stone about the time you arrived in Riversbridge, and then I informed Avamar of her task and he approved. But I never mentioned your task.” He pulled out a rose chalice from the folds of his cloak. “I’m so thankful that I was able to recover this one. I do so enjoy it.”

She stared at him, trying to process what she’d just heard. “But why?”

“I needed one of you to kill the other.” He shrugged. “Didn’t matter who. Tom would’ve been enraged or desperate enough to make the decision to challenge the blood regardless. He would’ve

slayed her if you hadn't."

"He did slay her. I'd only wounded her."

His voice sounded like dry wine. "How fortunate she was to fight you with only one arm and nascent abilities. As for Tom, in order to end his running from the Kingdom, he would turn to challenge the blood, whom he thought was Avamar."

Der shook her head. "But you couldn't have predicted Tom like that."

He issued a soft, wicked chuckle. "I did, in fact. He played his role to perfection, and died in his moment of triumph. I knew he loved you and hated himself for it. But that you loved him – that I hadn't appreciated until I saw you here. Truth, I suspected that you were using him to find the Kingdom."

He leaned back and casually cupped his hands around one knee raised to his chest. "Of course, you were using all of your muscles except the one that could've saved his sorry life, for want of a better word."

Der froze.

Dominic chuckled and pointed at her forehead. "That one. If you had waited until after the eclipse, Avamar could have never achieved his goal. You and Tom could've planned your assault in your own time. Of course, your friends on the battlefield would have been forfeit." He shrugged. "Alas, that's not what fate conspires for those who touch the legend."

She sat there, helpless.

"He died free. I don't think he could have had a better end."

She looked down at her lap. "But we never... Could never..."

Dominic snorted. "You think you're the only one who's ever lost someone you shouldn't have loved?"

"You?" Der's jaw dropped. "Ah, yes, you would've been human once."

"I have never known humanity from the inside."

She breathed in and held her breath. "The prince. You're the missing prince! The one that's supposed to be on pilgrimage!"

Dominic raised both his eyebrows. "You impress me, young paladin."

"You're the prince! If you're supposed to be ruling the Kingdom, why would you have let Avamar have any power at all?"

"I had my reasons." His gaze never flinched from hers. "Alas, my puppet king tried to be an actual king with ideas that I did not enjoy. It's why I needed Tom to defeat him."

Der bit back on a growl. "But why didn't *you* do it?"

"Because I didn't invoke the legend of stone and bone, unlike Tom and Avamar. I just used the

destined conflict for my own gain.”

“But why hide behind a false king at all?”

His heavy gaze lingered on her burgeoning tears for a moment. He sighed. “I was forestalling a civil war. It will be the first among our kind because I will not bend to my sire’s will and I, unlike the others, have learned to resist his commands with no power like the heartstone. Now that I must take the throne, the sand begins its journey through the hourglass because now my sire – the true sire of sires – can find me.”

Der stared, open mouthed and wide eyed.

“Never fear, you will never know of this war. Perhaps the slayers won’t be needed too much longer.”

“So the king, the true sire, is still out there? Why wasn’t he just in power all along?”

“My father was vanquished, but alas, we undead just can’t seem to remain as dead as some of us would prefer.”

“Vanquished?”

“Yes, but the bastard just won’t quit.” A small smile crawled across his face. “Of course, his defeat is a truth that only you and I know now. And possibly another, if she still exists.” He let his gaze slide out to the sea’s horizon.

Her empathic abilities tingled for the first time since his arrival. As he stared, she sensed his longing and deep, deep regret, as wide as a canyon splitting the desert. She gasped as the sensation cut off as if it had been sliced with a knife.

She looked back to see him glaring at her. “Sorry,” she said.

He bunched his jaw and looked back out to sea. “I don’t care what destiny demands. I will change it myself if it gets in my way of bringing her home.”

She pointed out to the horizon, where a certain star should be shining. “Mendelin and Tara, over and over.”

Dominic offered the briefest snort, almost a ghost of a melancholy laugh. He pulled his feet up from the ledge and stood up. “I suggest you get back to town. Enjoy your own feast.”

“I’ll wait here.”

He offered a thoughtful frown and then shook his head. “Not even we can heal from that.” He turned around and raised his foot to walk. He set the foot back down. “There is a final part of the legend. Life renewed.”

Der raised her head.

“Some say it brings the victors back from the dead, others said it granted the survivors immortality,

possibly even the origins of elvish immortality. Don't ask me how that could possibly affect the undead, or even if that part of the legend wasn't added much later to give those who died a happy ending that never actually happened. But perhaps, just perhaps, there is a splinter of hope." He lifted his palm toward the faint noise of Staghorn. "I wouldn't wait though."

Der turned her gaze back down to the surf. She heard Dominic walk away, and knew he was making noise only because he wanted her to hear it. She listened until his steps had melted away. The sea continued its everlasting assault against the cliff.

Down below, past the frothing water, lower than the waves churning just underneath the surface, down deep where the light started to fail, a tiny sliver of stone rolled against the current. It joined up with another fragment and they instantly melted together. The larger piece continued its journey across the sandy floor. Around it, thousands of other stone fragments raced to the center of an unseen circle.

Find more of the adventure at www.allthingsimpossible.com