

GWEN DEMARCO



**THE GUTTER  
SHRIKE**

BIRDS OF ERISHUM BOOK 2

# THE GUTTER SHRIKE

KINGDOM OF ERISHUM TRILOGY

GWEN DEMARCO

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# CHAPTER 1





*The night before...*

The metallic cacophony of the prison door opening roused Vallen from a slumber as inhospitable as the stone that cushioned his rest. As he rose painstakingly from the unyielding, frigid floor, five Enumerii priests, silhouetted by the soft morning light, filtered into the prison.

As Vallen blearily looked around, one of the Enumerii approached his cell, offering some broth with a hunk of stale bread. Vallen, along with most of the other Tributes, turned their backs on the food. It was easy to do since Nyssa had snuck into the prison the night before and gifted each man a whole loaf of fresh bread. It had been more than most in those cells had eaten in quite a while.

After Vallen snubbed the broth, the white-faced priest offered him a cup of tea. He opened his mouth to turn it down, but the man interrupted, “The tea contains a drug that will numb your senses. Without it, you will be fully aware and awake when the monstrous hyvas begins to feast on you.”

The horror of that image forced Vallen’s hand, and he accepted the beverage. Despite the noxious bitter taste, he managed to drain every drop from the tin cup. As he sat, pressed against the bars of his cell, he noted that the other four tributes had done the same.

Vallen closed his eyes to give prayer to Enum when something hit him in the face. He startled, cupping his eye as dregs of tea dripped down his face. He didn’t even need to look to know who had thrown their cup at him. Looking over the other sacrifices, he immediately spotted the culprit. An

angry, gaunt man stared at him defiantly. Vallen didn't know the man's name, but he remembered his face. He'd arrested him last month for trying to steal food from the king's pantry.

When Vallen had first been tossed into his cell, the man had been quick to jeer and berate him. He didn't blame him for his anger. If Vallen had realized that the price for stealing some food was death, he would have let the man go. After all, letting someone go was how he had ended up in his current predicament. If given a chance to relive that moment, he would have still allowed Nyssa to escape.

Vallen wasn't truly upset about his circumstances, anyway. Not really. He didn't want to die, but if that was the price to save Nyssa from falling into the clutches of the shrikes and the Enumerii, it was one he'd gladly pay.

After only a few minutes, the prison began to wobble and sway, the edges of Vallen's vision dimming as though veiled by wavering shadows. His limbs felt heavy as if they were made of molten lead, while a pleasant warmth spread throughout his chest, and a certain lethargy claimed his senses.

Slowly, the world became fuzzy. Vallen let the sensation wash over him, riding out the feeling with an almost detached curiosity. He was not afraid, for even fear had been muted by the strange brew coursing through his veins.

Several shrikes, dressed in the blood-red uniform of King Jorek's guard, stalked into the prison. Two of them unlocked his cell and dragged Vallen to his unsteady feet. Holding him upright, the shrikes marched Vallen outside with the rest of the Tributes.

Harsh sunbeams reflected off the cobblestone road, making Vallen's already fuzzy vision white out. Blinded momentarily, he squinted before vague shapes started to come into focus.



King's Road unraveled before his feet, with dots of red sprinkled across the ground. At first, Vallen thought he was seeing pools of blood, but he quickly realized that it was red leaves scattered on the road.

He tried to look around the street and make sense of the scene before him. The chill in the air bit through his clothes and deep into his frame. The cold cut through some of the tea's haze. Before him was an ocean of somber black robes attached to ghostly white torsos. The red of the priests' scars looked like raw seeping wounds to Vallen's drugged gaze. The shrikes stood next to the Enumerii priests, their ceremonial uniforms a bitter reminder of what he once was. Lining the streets were the citizens of Erishum, the faces of the crowd blurring into an indistinguishable mass. They were as ephemeral as morning mist to Vallen's senses, an undulating sea of shadows and movement. Chaos swirled, gnawing at the edges of his perception – cries of the hawkers, whispers of the observers, the rustle of pages, the subdued murmurs of prayers. Yet through it all, Vallen stood tall, feeling like a lone ship set adrift on a wild ocean.

An unnatural hush fell over the crowd as the Grand Enumerox stepped forward; his stark white face, masked in ritualistic red scars, was severe in the morning light. He lifted his hands, skeletal fingers splayed wide and began to chant, his voice reverberating across the crowd in a monotone drone. Vallen's focus swung clumsily from the yellowed stare of Berossus to the intricate patterns inked on the priest's skin, attempting in vain to decipher the arcane words spilling from the priest's lips. Sedated by the bitter tea, Vallen's mind reeled, catching only echoes of the high priest's somber invocation. The prayer was long and winding, the words merging into a nonsensical buzz that made Vallen's ears itch. When he went

to scratch them, his guard grabbed his hand and forcefully shoved it back to his side.

The snap of his arm being jerked back down grated on Vallen's nerves, and through his drug-hazed mind, he remembered who was beside him. He turned his head, his narrowed eyes resting on the figure of Mardan. Mardan garbed in the shrike uniform that once draped over Vallen's own body, wore a smirk on his face. Vallen's hatred for him sparkled in his eyes and radiated off him in palpable waves. Mardan had always scorned Vallen for his poor background. And he had never missed a chance to undermine him, to emphasize his lowly origins, and to taunt Vallen with sly, underhanded insults.

Vallen now knew that Mardan had been tailing him when he'd let Nyssa escape. Like the little sniveling worm that he was, Mardan immediately ran back to their commander and ratted Vallen out. The commander, gleeful to have any excuse to excise him from their ranks, hadn't even asked Vallen for his side of the story. He had found himself inside a prison cell before the next morning's sunrise.

Only now did Vallen realize that it was all just a matter of time – eventually, the shrikes would have found a way to remove him from their ranks, no matter how careful he was or how perfectly he behaved.

The fury in Vallen's gaze intensified; the feeling of betrayal and contempt swamped him. With his gaze pinned on Mardan, vitriolic words danced on his tongue but never found their way out. Anything he said would be used as an excuse for further mistreatment.

Finally, the high priest's prayer tapered off, and he announced the start of the parade of Enum's Tributes.

When he was nudged roughly, Vallen realized that he'd lost focus and missed the beginning. He stepped onto the King's Road, trying not to stumble on suddenly wobbly feet. Rather than fight his intoxicated state, Vallen embraced the haze. All the years spent fighting to get out of the slums, to make something of his life. All that ambition for nothing; it had all ended here, in ruin. Only his death lay before him, so succumbing to the numbness seemed like a fine idea.

Vallen lost track of time. All he was aware of was the searing midmorning sunlight bathing the long, austere stretch of the King's Road where the procession took place. The sacrificial tributes, arrayed like a string of prayer beads, trudged along under the watchful eyes of the shrikes and Enumerii. Vallen was vaguely aware of the group stopping in the royal courtyard. Another long-winded speech was given, this time by King Jorek, before Mardan once again shoved him back into motion.

Their grim march was punctuated by the soft, monotonous murmurs of thanks from the crowd lining the cobblestoned route's edges. The commonfolk, bundled up against the growing seasonal chill, showered handfuls of red leaves down upon the condemned men's heads.

The surreal landscape blurred in Vallen's sight, warped and distorted. He imagined that Enum was weeping tears of blood onto his head, making him flinch. A shudder slithered down his spine, bouncing around inside the numb shell of his body.

Pulling at the elusive threads of reality, he tried futilely to reason with his disoriented senses. The leaves were not blood but simply tokens of gratitude, a symbol of Enum's divine mercy and the Dying Wild's ravenous hunger.

So Vallen embraced the haze and surrendered to the surreal whirlpool around him. He let his body sway with the rhythm of the march, his legs bearing his weight mechanically. The red leaves raining over his head stuck to his skin, soaking him in imagined blood. The sea of mournful faces surrounding him faded into obscurity. He even embraced the cold venom from Mardan's betrayal. Closing his eyes, he let the muddled darkness wipe away his every thought.

Lost to the undulating noise of the crowd, Vallen was pulled from his gauzy reverie when a strange discordant cry went up – a ripple of unrest and upheaval that nudged him from his oblivion. He looked around, trying to figure out what was happening, and was surprised that the procession was almost to the main gate already. Hours must've passed him by, and he hadn't even realized.

A woman broke away from the crowd and launched herself toward Vallen. Instinct had him catching her in his arms. She clutched Vallen with surprising strength, pressing her face against his chest. The collision almost knocked him off his feet, but he remained upright.

She was wailing – a piteous keen that bore into his hazy senses. He could feel her trembling, her frail body convulsing with intense sobs that tore out of her in gasping gulps. Her thin fingers clung to his tunic with palpable desperation, as if he were her tether to reality, the single thread preventing her from spiraling into an abyss of despair.

Vallen gazed down at the woman who cleaved fiercely to him, trying to gather his fog-riddled thoughts. A lavender scarf, vibrant against the bleak day, covered the crown of her head. As strands of her black hair peeked out from under the

scarf, her identity clicked into place in his foggy brain – Nyssa, the person he cared for most in the world.

He stared, his mind fumbling to process the reality of her, a fierce but fragile girl usually full of quiet kindness and warmth, wailing against his chest in the middle of King's Road. Her presence was so startling that Vallen wondered if he was hallucinating, if his desire to see her one last time had created an apparition that didn't exist.

Despair constricted itself around his heart like a viper as the realization of what Nyssa's attire implied slammed into him. She was shrouded in the gaudy, enticing garb of a prostitute. His stomach twisted and bile rushed up his throat. Pain far more potent than any bodily torment slashed through him – his Nyssa, forced into such a fate in his absence. What was happening? Nyssa was supposed to be in the happy yellow attire of a baker's apprentice, not the soft lavender of a prostitute.

Vallen knew, deep within, that this was wrong. Unforgivably so. All she'd ever wanted to do was be a baker.

Vallen rubbed Nyssa's back as she sobbed, trying to comfort her as best he could. He became aware of the crowd around them, fighting and surging into the street. It looked like the first stirrings of a riot. When Vallen felt Nyssa drop a package into his tunic, he looked back from the crowd and stared incredulously at her. Whatever the object was, it slid down the inside of this shirt, catching at the waist of his pants. He felt Nyssa adjust it, hiding it in a crease in his shirt. He assumed she was still pressed close to his chest to hide her actions.

Leaning back, Nyssa looked up and stared at Vallen. Her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed, but she had that familiar

stubborn tilt to her chin. He stared at her, memorizing her features, glad to have this last moment to see her. As she stared at him, she grasped both his hands, bringing them between their bodies.

He stared back, trying to formulate words. He realized that he needed to tell Nyssa how he really felt. This was his final chance; selfish though it was, he wanted her to know.

“Ny—” Vallen started to say her name, but before he could finish forming the words, Nyssa grabbed his cheeks and pulled his face to hers. He found himself with their lips pressed together, silencing him.

He had always hoped that she felt the same as him, but even if she was just saying goodbye, he decided not to question her motives. He pressed closer, needing to savor the moment. As they kissed amidst the mayhem, the crowd’s noise turned into a muted buzz.

Vallen was disappointed when Nyssa pulled away. She stepped up on her tiptoes and brought her mouth close to his ear.

“Vallen,” she murmured, her voice soft but filled with urgency. Before he could respond, she continued, “I’ve hidden a map and one of the priest’s amulets in your shirt. The amulet will keep you safe from the hyva. The map will guide you through the Dying Wilds. Curator Athura showed me that the kingdoms of Puzur and Hassuna still exist beyond the Dying Wilds’ borders. There is life and freedom beyond the boundaries of Erishum.”

Before he could speak, Nyssa pleaded, “Run, Vallen. Find freedom beyond the Dying Wilds, and don’t look back.”

She looked like she wanted to say more, but Nyssa pressed her forehead against his instead. Vallen could hardly process what was happening. A small part of him thought he'd conjured Nyssa from his imagination.

Deciding that it didn't matter if she was real, Vallen started to reply when Mardan finally noticed Nyssa's presence. With a shout and a grunt, he shoved them apart. "Get outta here, ya harlot. Be off with ya!"

Mardan, seething with aggression, took a purposeful step toward Nyssa with his fist raised. Vallen's heart hammered in his chest. Fear for Nyssa coursed through his veins like molten iron. Without a second thought, he lunged, driving his elbow deep into Mardan's ribcage. Shock converted into rage on Mardan's face, and he punched Vallen. The punishing thud reverberated as it connected with his jaw. The taste of blood seeped into his mouth, sharp and metallic, yet his eyes remained locked on Nyssa's.

Relief, sharp and raw, flooded Vallen as she slipped like a phantom, unnoticed into the surging crowd. Her silhouette, barely distinguishable amidst the thrum of angry voices and surging bodies, quickly disappeared around a corner. His gaze lingered for a heartbeat longer before being snapped back to reality.

"Get moving, ya sewer rat!" Mardan's guttural voice echoed in Vallen's ear. Vallen's feet were forced into motion once again with a yank. Their parade continued as a spectacle for the kingdom. Vallen could sense the gathered crowd's curiosity but also their fear and sorrow. These were not the wealthy and disdainful elite of Erishum's citizens; these were his fellow gutter rats – the poor, the lost, and the hungry. The

dying hope in the eyes of the crowd left a dull pang in Vallen's heart, a bitter reminder of his own past.

As the world spun around him, he stumbled, catching himself just in time to prevent a humiliating fall. He choked back the nausea that surged up his throat, his stomach churning in protest to the bitter brew he'd willingly consumed. The drugged tea gnawed at his senses, threatening to snatch away the little control he had over himself. Desperately, Vallen focused on the lump inside his shirt and the lingering feeling of Nyssa's kiss. If she had spoken true – and there was no reason why she wouldn't – then that meant Vallen had an amulet to protect him from the hyva and a map to lead him away from Erishum.

The packet in his tunic was a stark reminder of Nyssa's frantic whispers. He clung to that sliver of hope, infusing it into his soul against the encroaching haziness of the drug. His vision danced with shadowy specters, but the warmth of Nyssa's belief buoyed him. Nyssa was his lifeline.

The King's Road finally led Vallen to a space directly in front of a raised platform adorned with the kingdom's crest. Its grandeur could not mask its morbid purpose. Hosted on the platform were their monarchs, King Jorek, looking every bit the stern ruler. Queen Sasana sat by his side, looking like she'd rather be elsewhere. She was known for her love of parties and balls. Surrounding the royal couple was a silent ring of priests, their white bodies and black robes ablaze in the waning sun. At the foot of the stage, Vallen and the rest of the sacrifices were surrounded by the shrikes, their bright red surcoats standing out in a crowd of browns and grays.

Vallen suppressed a shudder as Mardan nudged him, trying to force him to dip his head respectfully as the king rose from



his throne. However, Mardan wouldn't risk drawing attention by causing a scene, so Vallen ignored him. What did he care about bowing before King Jorek? What were they going to do to him if he refused? The worst of the kingdom's punishments was already waiting for him.

The hard cobblestones beneath his feet were as rough as the future that awaited him. But now he had hope – all thanks to Nyssa. Vallen couldn't imagine how she could've gotten her hands on an amulet. They were as closely guarded as the richest of jewels.

As he stood, refusing to bow, he felt the eyes of the crowd, the priests, the shrikes, and the ruler himself bearing into him, but his days of bowing to anyone were over.

The Grand Enumerax Berossus, with his yellowed eyes and bleached visage, stepped forward, unruffled by Vallen's blatant defiance. In his hand was a grooved wooden staff, an orb of luminescent pink stone affixed at its top. His hands, white with large knobby knuckles, extended toward the heavens, casting a strange, gnarled shadow over the crowd. Vallen had heard this prayer, a plea for Enum to accept Erishum's human tributes for the Dying Wilds twice a year for his entire life, but he'd never had this perspective before as the object of the offering.

Vallen tuned out his words, not caring to hear them. As a shrike, he'd seen beneath Berossus' holy mask enough times to know that a monster lay beneath the white paint. Vallen's innocent blinders had been wiped away during his first week as a shrike. But by then, it'd been too late to escape. He had fought tooth and nail to become a member of the shrikes, and once he'd joined, there was no getting out.

Now his mind roiled with strategies and tactics, possibilities, and plots. He traced a shadowed path on his mental map, trying to find a spot along the route to the sacrificial mound where he could escape. Vallen quickly discarded that plan, deciding it would be better if no one knew he'd escaped. Otherwise, they would know to search for him.

Once the priests tied them to their sacrificial pillars, they would leave the tributes for dead. If he escaped then, no one would ever know that he didn't perish. No one would ever come looking for him. His imagination ran wild with the images of the Dying Wilds – dense undergrowth, fanged predators with a taste for human blood – all of it a deadly gauntlet he would soon have to dash through. At least he wouldn't have to worry about the hyvas; the amulet had the power to repel them.

As Berossus finished the prayer, the crowd chanted in practiced monotony, adding their automatic, practiced words of thanks to Enum.

“Thank you for your sacrifice. You will not be forgotten,” Berossus announced to the tributes, almost causing Vallen to snort in derision.

Vallen's resolve hardened. His disquiet transformed into determination. He would not meet his end on the sacrificial altar. He would not be yet another gutter rat left out in the Dying Wilds, culled by the merciless elites of Erishum.

As Berossus's invocation drew to a close, the king rose, an air of arrogance wafting around him like perfume over the lavender district.

An Enumerii priest stepped forward, bearing a basket brimming with blood-red leaves. With reverent care, he set it at King Jorek's feet. Jorek, his eyes bright and imperious,

extended his hands high above the basket. At his silent command, the leaves began to quake and shiver before levitating into the air, ethereal and light as a sigh. With a wave of his hand, he sent the leaves fluttering down upon the five men, dancing in the air before settling on their heads like crowns of scarlet.

“You show great courage, men of Erishum,” King Jorek’s voice sounded, a baritone rumble that resonated over the silent watchers. “Your contribution will not be forgotten in the hearts of our kingdom. Enum will honor your ultimate sacrifice.” He raised a hand, palm toward the sky, as if swearing a celestial oath, his eyes gleaming with solemn respect for the condemned.

The king stepped back away from the edge of the stage and stood next to Berossus. “Open the gates!” Jorek called out, his voice sounding imperious and solemn.

The barricade was lifted, and the towering iron gates shuddered and groaned as six shrikes pushed them open. As the gates cracked open, Vallen got his first view of the murky wilderness of the Dying Wilds. He stared, almost unseeingly but unable to look away, into the black wild tangle of the wicked forest highlighted in savage detail by the setting sun. It didn’t seem possible that he could survive in there with just a stolen amulet and a map.

Mardan grasped the back of Vallen’s neck. He ignored the purposefully caused pain and walked toward a podium that Mardan was steering him toward. The rest of the sacrifices stood in a short line ahead of him. Standing at the podium was a gaunt priest possessing a beak-like nose and a humorless gaze. Opened on the podium was a thick book bound in black leather.

One by one, the doomed stepped up to the podium. Each man gave his name to be scribbled into history. It was a pointless parade of the damned; no one ever read the names written in the book. Those people were purposely forgotten and ignored. Vallen wanted to roll his eyes at this charade of caring. After each name was documented, that man was then led out through the main gate and into the Dying Wilds.

Vallen waited, his gaze unwavering as he watched the sad procession. The primarily silent crowd seemed distant, barely more than shadows against the dying sunlight, their quiet prayer and words of thanks a murmur against the enormous cacophony of his racing heart. The clatter of the shrikes' armor, the murmurs of desperate whispers, and the occasional muffled sob of an observer all faded into insignificance as the world narrowed to the scratch of a quill on parchment.

Finally, all that was left was Vallen. The priest looked up from the tome and gave him an expectant look.

“Next,” the priest croaked, his voice as dry and desolate as the parchment beneath his quill. Vallen glanced out the gate at the retreating back of the sacrifice before him. A man whose name Vallen would never know. He had a moment's hesitation – the image of causing a ruckus, of screaming at the king and the priests about their hypocrisy and corruption, built a swirl of temptation in his gut. It would be but a temporary but sweet rebellion.

“Come on, gutter shrike,” Mardan taunted quietly in his ear, yanking Vallen out of his daydream. “It's your turn.”

The priest raised his quill as his bloodless gaze swept over Vallen. “Name?”

There was a pause, then a heart-stopping moment of grinding silence. Vallen stared at the man, his face devoid of

emotions.

“Gutter Shrike,” he declared.

The name echoed against the stone walls. The quill, frozen mid-air, dropped back onto the worn pages, staining them with a blot of startled ink. The priest glanced at Vallen, puzzlement creasing his forehead.

“No, your name. I need your name.”

“Gutter Shrike,” Vallen repeated. “That is the name I want in your book. It *is* my final request, after all.”


The priest got a bewildered, slightly guilty look before giving a slight shrug and writing the requested name on the page.

Turning away from the priest, Vallen stared out the opened gate doors. An icy wind funneled in through the opening, carrying in its breath the dread and death of the Dying Wilds. The march to his own sacrifice was about to begin. He’d made the long walk to the mound once before – as a shrike, not a sacrifice.

His every muscle coiled into a state of readiness, his senses heightened, adrenaline pumping. The packet hidden in his shirt felt like a beacon calling him forward. The Dying Wilds beckoned, and Vallen was far from deterred; he was prepared.

## CHAPTER 2





Though the sun was long gone, the two moons rising overhead and the long line of torches lit their way. The flames made grotesque shadows dance and warp around the procession.

The Dying Wilds crept near, reaching from the margins of the path with branches like skeletal fingers, clawing hungry holes into the night. Each gust of wind sent the trees shivering, the gnarled boughs rattling in the hushed darkness like dry whispers.

Vallen put one foot in front of the other, exhaustion battling against his purpose, the steady rhythm of each footfall swallowed by the chilled wind. The hazy mist of the drugs had begun to lift.

Reality slowly seeped back in, unmerciful and unchecked. He was now aware of the distant calls of night birds, the pungent smell of damp earth, and the periodic hiss of the torches battling gusts of wind. The taste of fear and desperation was bitter on his dry, split lips.

His arms hung limply by his sides, and his feet felt as if weights had been attached to them, each step pressing him deeper into the dredges of his fatigue. Even Mardan had lost his excitement and enjoyment of Vallen's predicament somewhere along the long slog through the night. The first half of the journey had been peppered with his simple-minded taunts, but the shrike had finally fallen silent, much to Vallen's relief.

He could hardly tell how long they marched as time seemed blunted, stretched thin and twisted in cruel loops. The

Dying Wilds seemed to leer at him from either side of the road, every rustle of the underbrush a promised threat of the hyvas. His hand wanted to reach for the amulet concealed beneath his clothes at each imagined beast, but he kept himself still. The packet resting against his waist was a small beacon of hope against the looming dread.

Vallen considered sprinting off into the wild, but he would not be able to consult his map in the dark and imagined that he would become quickly lost. Plus, with two shrikes at his sides and the drugs still lingering in his veins, Vallen didn't count his odds as good for an escape. He needed to bide his time. He had no intention of wasting the opportunity that Nyssa's cleverness and bravery had provided. His mind whirled, and his skin tingled; he was awake, alert and vigilant as he was led to the heart of the Dying Wilds to meet his twisted destiny.

As they navigated a curve, the path broadened, revealing the ominous sacrificial mound that loomed ahead of them. Bathed in the foul glow of encircling torches, the mound rose on the horizon like a monstrous ziggurat. Its terraced, uneven slopes ascended into the void of the night sky, crowned by five forlorn pillars flanking its peak. Each post was a testament to the sinister covenant Erishum had set with Enum and his hyvas. Beneath the ethereal glow of the twin moons, the sight sent a cold, tightening grip clamping Vallen's heart. He refused to believe Enum truly condoned and demanded his people be sacrificed and eaten alive.

A panicked, mournful wail rose from the throat of one of the other sacrifices, although Vallen could not tell which one. The drugs the priest promised would numb them had clearly worn off – proof of more betrayal by the Enumerii. Another tribute joined in, the lamentations becoming a chilling symphony of hopelessness and anger. Their cries echoed



through the cruel, unforgiving arms of the Dying Wilds. One of the men ahead began to flail and fight as the shrikes holding him tried to march him up the stairs carved into the side of the mound. The man's struggles were so great that one of the priests had to come back to help the shrikes carry and drag him up the steps.

The men's screams rose into the hushed night, breaking the mantle of silence that had veiled the procession until that moment. Some of the guards winced at the pitiful cries, their grim faces losing some of their trained composure momentarily as they lowered their gazes. Only Berossus remained unmoved, a stone sentinel amidst the sea of aching humanity.

Vallen blinked, staring at the scene before him, etching each detail into his memory. He would never forget the injustice. The sickly glow of the torches at the top of the mound twitched as the wind flirted with their flames, casting patches of ever-dancing shadows that only emphasized the loathsome spectacle before them. His heart pounded heavily, and true dread took up residence in his heart for the first time. He had been so busy planning and plotting that he hadn't given himself room for fear. But the thought of dying tied to one of the thick stone pillars was too awful to contemplate. Another one of the sacrifices began to yell and fight, adding his voice to the rising clamor. The discordant choir of sobs and the flickering torches around the sacrificial mound made Vallen's insides squirm with surreal horror.

The priest, who had been waiting patiently at the foot of the mound, motioned for them to start the climb. Squaring his shoulders, Vallen took the first step, his dignity rebelling against the idea of resisting and being dragged up the stairs.

Once he crested the final step, the whole of the Dying Wilds lay spread out below, dark and impenetrable looking, rolling out to the horizon. Before he could truly take in the view, Mardan shoved him toward the only empty pillar, grumbling under his breath about wanting to get it all over with and to escape the frigid weather.

The top of the sacrificial mound was a rough-hewn mesa barren of any foliage, covered only in packed dirt. The five towering pillars of ancient stone sat in measured distance from one another on the edge of the mound's circular rim.

A sudden memory washed over Vallen. It was the only time he had been assigned as a guard during a sacrifice. He remembered the captain's warning before the procession, stern eyes drilling into each of them. "Be ready," the old man had growled. "At least one of these sacrifices will try to bolt."

That prophecy had turned out to be chillingly accurate. Despite the multitude of priests and well-armed guards, a man had recklessly tried to fight his way out of his guard's grip when it had come time to tie him to his pillar – his terrified screams etched starkly into Vallen's memory. But they had been ready. Like a well-oiled machine, a few shrikes had sprung into action. The man was quickly and efficiently caught; his bold scramble was cut ruthlessly short.

The wall of hard men that ringed the mound, their faces etched with practiced indifference, their gleaming weapons promising a swift end to any attempts of escape deterred Vallen. His eyes flickered away from the wilderness's grasping darkness to assess his captors' steely determination.

As Mardan marched him past the other victims, Vallen watched as the men's hands were forcefully raised above their heads and wrapped with thick ropes, their faces stricken as

each was trussed up. The other men flailed and fought now that their senses had returned. Like birds snared in a trap, his fellow tributes began to writhe, their feet scrabbling for purchase on the unforgiving stone as the reality of their end drew near.

Mardan shouldered him over to the last unoccupied stone pillar. Vallen took a deep, calming breath as the brutish shrike raised his bound hands above his head. Mardan heaved the ropes, pulling Vallen taut until he rose onto the balls of his feet, teetering precariously on the edge of balance. A cruel smirk twisted Mardan's features.

Vallen hid a pained grimace as his limbs stretched awkwardly above him. He could already feel the strain in his legs and shoulders. A tenuous thread of panic and fear lingered like a phantom in the pit of his stomach. Flashes of the monstrous hyva filled his thoughts, the promise of their feral appearance now a horrifying, imminent reality.

Swallowing the knot of fear that threatened to strangle his courage, Vallen forced himself to focus.

He imagined that he was a shrike without wings – tethered and bound against the pillar, silenced and caged. But shrikes were intelligent, vicious little creatures.

An irrational tide of anger stormed through Vallen. As much as he knew chastising Mardan for his rough handling would be useless, part of him wished to lash out at the petty bully. But he held his tongue; he was the one tethered to a sacrificial post, not Mardan. He couldn't afford to waste any strength in a futile display of resentment.

Breathing heavily around the knot of fear in his throat, Vallen twisted slightly, testing his bonds. The monumental task of escaping seemed to grow more daunting when he

realized how well Mardan had bound him. But defeat was not an option.

Mardan stepped close, his breath sour and stale in Vallen's face. "Was it worth it? Giving up your life for one of your stupid, pathetic gutter rats? I hope you feel every moment of your death."

Vallen smirked but didn't answer. That seemed only further to enrage Mardan. Without warning, the angry shrike struck Vallen, hitting the same already-throbbing spot on his jaw. Adamir pulled Mardan away. "What are you doing? Don't hit him."

"He started it," Mardan retorted, drawing looks of disbelief from both Adamir and Vallen.

"It's not honorable," Adamir murmured.

Vallen scoffed, "What would Mardan know of honor? We've worked alongside him for years. We both know who he really is."

Mardan surged toward Vallen again with his fist raised, but Adamir managed to throw his arms around him, yanking him back with a muttered curse. "Stop it! He's baiting you, Mardan."

Mardan glared, his cheeks flushing with scarlet rage. He lobbed a wad of spit at Vallen's feet. "Enjoy your evening," he sneered.

With a tight grip, Adamir tugged Mardan toward the stairs. Mardan resisted for a moment before letting the other shrike pull him away. He walked slowly, his eyes boring holes into Vallen, who gave him a flat, unconcerned look.

Vallen turned his gaze toward the Dying Wilds. The two moons had risen high above, one large and silver, the other

smaller and yellow. Their pallid light washed over the land and melded with the sickly gray fog that seemed to weep from the very pores of the Dying Wilds, transforming the dark landscape into something eerily beautiful yet profoundly unsettling. The twisted tendrils of corrupted branches reached skyward, silhouetted like bony fingers clawing out of their earthen graves. Each grotesque limb bristled with gnarled branches and twisting vines. The quivering underbrush looked jagged and vicious, like the broken teeth of an ancient monster whose hunger had long since been replaced by an insidious rot.

Vallen stared unflinchingly into the twisted forest, searching for signs of the hyvas. It dawned on him that all of Erishum showed signs of decay – even men he'd called brothers had turned into something unrecognizable.

Standing in the center of the circle of pillars, the Grand Enumerax Berossus waited, silently observing. Once they finished tying the final sacrifice to his stone column, the high priest slowly strode around the circle, ensuring each man was secured. The black of his robes hanging from his hips melded with the darkness, so it almost appeared like his white, legless torso was floating above the ground.

Berossus paused before Vallen, carefully scrutinizing his bindings, and as Vallen met the high priest's feverish, yellowed gaze, a surge of hatred bubbled up inside him, festering in the pit of his stomach and clogging his throat.

Without another word, Berossus turned and called out to everyone that it was time to return home. One of the shrikes snuffed out the torches one by one, leaving the tributes illuminated solely by the glow of the moons.

As the shrieks and priests began to descend the stairs, Vallen could hear their voices, cheerful and unconcerned. He imagined that Adamir was not among the joyous ones, but he was sure he could hear Mardan's loud, boisterous laugh echoing in the air.

In the absence of a pious adoring crowd, Berossus's solemn air of spirituality had quickly flickered out, replaced with a briskness that sharply contrasted the pensive devout attitude that the high priest typically displayed. No long drawn-out prayers were given to the sacrifices, no words of wisdom or comfort – just cold indifference. Seeing Berossus without the armor of his pretense, watching his pious routine broken apart by an eagerness to retreat, Vallen felt like he was seeing the priest's true face, unmasked and stripped of all his sanctimonious charade.

Within moments, the five sacrifices found themselves alone and cold, waiting atop the mound for the arrival of the hyvas. They could just make out the distant line of priests and shrieks, their silhouettes highlighted against the retreating glow of torches, which were snuffed out one by one, leaving nothing but darkness behind.

# CHAPTER 3





**B**ased on the position of the two moons, Vallen knew that several hours had passed since they had been abandoned on the mound. Under the ghostly light, time wore thin, and exhausted delirium had begun to settle in, warping reality until Vallen wasn't sure what was real and what was his imagination.

The biting cold of the night had seeped its way through his inadequate clothing, sapping the warmth from his blood and suffusing in him an almost crippling cold. The masks and bravado of the condemned men had fallen away quickly, and soft whimpers and cries had filled the air until even those were finally silenced.

Struggling to maintain his dwindling focus, Vallen rubbed the coarse ropes against the pillar's rough stones. He'd discovered one of the stones had a sharp edge and was hoping he could use it to chew through his bindings. He was almost thankful his hands were numb since his wrists were now raw and bloody.

Hours of being suspended by his hands were making Vallen's head swim with exhaustion and a rising delirium, his mind spinning and unfocused. His only thought was to keep trying to slice through the rope.

Across from him, the ragged face of the man he had once arrested was sullen with accusing eyes and wet trails of angry, despairing tears drying on his cheeks. He stared at Vallen with an intense, bitter anger that rivaled the frigid air around them. And Vallen couldn't find fault in the man's fury; he knew he deserved it.



The deafening silence of the wilderness wrapped around the sacrifices as though mocking their anticipation. Each shuffle against their bindings, every strained breath that echoed in the obscurity, carried their united dread and uncertainty to the waiting forest. Vallen strained his senses, listening for the first rustle of leaves or clicking warble that signaled the arrival of the hyvas. He could hear almost nothing over the thudding of his own heart and his shallow breaths. Minute after minute, every sound – even the whispering of the wind – was amplified, teased, and distorted into ominous warnings of the horrors to come.

And yet, nothing. The night was as still and cold as death as if the once teeming Dying Wilds had held its breath.

Vallen allowed his eyes to wander, drawn like a moth to the warm beacon that was Erishum. He had been watching the kingdom for hours as he rubbed the rope against the rock. He'd stared as the line of torches lighting the path back home shortened and disappeared one by one as the priests returned home. However, he could still see Erishum on the distant horizon.

The kingdom glowed like a swarm of fireflies trapped under a glass dome, its lights twinkling with a gentle rhythm, glowing on the horizon like a buoy in the dark. Vallen could imagine the festival happening inside the border walls – people dancing, drinking, and filling the night with laughter and good cheer – purposefully pretending nothing was amiss. The light was a testament to the cruelty hiding inside Erishum, radiant in its solitude and monstrosity. The sight, both beautiful and heartrending, fueled his resolve to escape.

Swamped with exhaustion, Vallen hadn't even realized his eyes had slid closed until a bone-chilling noise roused him. At

first, he couldn't tell what he was hearing, but panic seized his throat in an unforgiving grip. The sound echoed through the silence, a scream as raw and ugly as a flayed hound. Involuntarily, Vallen's gaze flew toward the source of the noise, the man across from him.

The man unleashed a harrowing shriek, the sound so deformed by his pain that it didn't seem human. That scream was followed by the horrifying noise of bones cracking and crunching. Vallen found himself yelling to the man, calling for help he knew wouldn't come. The other sacrifices' voices joined his, some screaming in fear, some praying to Enum, and some crying brokenly.

Vallen's heart hammered inside his chest. He knew the amulet Nyssa had given him would protect him from the hyva, but it didn't lessen his fear. And the thought of watching the other sacrifices get torn to pieces while he helplessly watched made his stomach roil. He squinted through the darkness at the man silhouetted under the light of the twin moons. Kicking his legs, the man shook and flopped by his bound arms like a fish on a hook, but Vallen could not see the hyva attacking him.

Vallen could imagine the unseen monster feasting, its elongated maw crunching and cracking through bones to get to the marrow, tearing through the man's flesh with razor-sharp claws and fangs. His stomach churned at the thought, threatening to revolt.

Vallen strained his eyes, hoping the man's fate was not as gruesome as he had visualized, praying it was anything other than a man being eaten alive. Used to seeing the hyvas while on patrol atop the border walls, he had seen the creatures within the depths of the Dying Wilds many times. He'd noted

that they always gave a warbling, clicking call before pouncing on their prey.

Vallen had expected the warning call of a hyva to announce itself before it attacked. It somehow made the situation so much more horrifying if they didn't know the hyvas were there until they pounced. Perhaps the man was being attacked by a different, unknown creature since the warning cry had never come.

A soft shaft of pale moonlight slipped through the dense curtain of clouds, casting an ethereal gleam on the struggling man.

The scene it revealed made Vallen's blood run colder than any chill from the night air. Nothing was near the man – no predator was gnawing upon his flesh. He was all alone, kicking his feet and writhing against the column he was tied to. He was fighting nothing.

Vallen's breath hitched in his throat as he watched the once familiar face of his fellow sacrifice begin to twist into something terrible: half-man, half-monster – no trace of humanity lingering in his reshaping visage. The man's skin was darkening into blue-black patches, as if he was covered in deep bruises or splashed with fouled ink. His legs contracted with a sickening lurch, the muscles twisted and bunching under his skin, causing his body to jerk violently. A horrifying crack of snapping bone made Vallen blanch and shudder as instinctive revulsion gripped him. Vallen swallowed bile as the man's leg deformed, the knee joint bending backward, causing the limb to snap like a twig. The man's screams took on a distinct warbling note that shook Vallen to his core.

Vallen recoiled from the sight, scrambling and scraping his back against the stone column behind him. He couldn't look

away, hoping it was a cruel trick of the light. But the reality continued to unfold mercilessly before his eyes. The man's twisted silhouette was bathed in the liquid silver glow of the moons, each horrific transformation etched in stark relief.

Suddenly, the man's back arched violently, a snarling howl ripping through the air, snuffing out any remaining hope for his survival. Every shrill note of it echoed, reverberating with a primal force that called to a deep, hidden part of Vallen's baser animal instincts. Vallen recoiled instinctively.

A sudden howl coming from the pillar next to Vallen's pulled his attention away from the distorted man across from him. Heart pounding in his chest, he turned toward the wailing, met with the terrified face of the sacrifice shackled next to him. The man was close enough for Vallen to see the sweat glistening on his brow, his wide eyes full of the raw terror that reflected Vallen's own. The man's desperate, guttural screams oscillated between sounding gratingly human and frightfully bestial. It was happening again; the man was clawing at his ropes, desperately thrashing his body in wild spasms against the cold, unyielding stone that held him, as though trying to evade horrors that only he could perceive.

One by one, all the other men began to scream and flail, with only Vallen left unaffected, stuck watching the men writhe in unimaginable pain.

A guttural growl pulled Vallen's attention back to the man across from him. Where the man had previously been now stood a hyva. A creature that struck fear in even the bravest of hearts, a monster from children's nightmares, was staring at him from across the sacrificial mound.

Caught between the vertigo of horror and shock, Vallen raised his eyes to the monster that now towered before him,

the moonlight glinting off the creature's blue-black scales. It ripped off the lingering shreds of rope still clinging to its top two legs. Its thick, serpentine form reared up, stretching its long sinuous body, and rose onto its back legs. It dwarfed the sacrificial column. Dropping back onto all of its many legs, the creature coiled its bulk around the column it had been tied to. Its indigo-black scales shimmered with a bristling line of spines that ran along its back to the tip of its long, whip-like tail. The creature's head could have been plucked from the most fearsome snake's body, with a crown of sharp, curved spikes ringing its skull, the largest swept back over its head, curving down to frame a reptilian face filled with dagger-like fangs.

The monster stared at Vallen, giving one slow blink of its golden eyes. Six monstrous legs, thick as ancient tree trunks, supported its colossal weight, each ending in three-clawed feet, its talons like sickles – wickedly curved, promising pain and death.

Paralyzed by terror, Vallen was trapped in the hyva's golden gaze. He was unable to turn away even as the cacophony of human agony and animalistic warbling hit a crescendo around the circle. The hungry look in the hyva's eyes had Vallen unable to move, scared that he would trigger the monster to attack.

A clicking sound started to fill the air – *click click click*. Vallen recognized it immediately – the throaty warning of a hyva ready to attack. The growing cadence and speed of the ominous clicks heralded Vallen's death.

His gaze was riveted to the monster as its throat pouch distended grotesquely, ballooning to a size that any normal creature would find torturous. It pulsed rhythmically, keeping

time with the clicks, and within each pump of the boulder-sized pouch, the clicking heightened in frequency.

A viscous tension filled the air, electric and raw. The hyva coiled its muscles, gathering power within its monstrous form for what would inevitably be an explosive release of primal violence. It struck the final chilling note of its hunting song – a warbling roar.

Vallen wanted to close his eyes, wishing to protect himself from what was about to occur. However, he was hypnotized by the nightmare come to life. He saw his death reflected in the hyva's eyes.

Before Vallen could even gather a breath to scream, the creature sprang, propelled by monstrous muscle, its tail undulating behind it. Its razor-sharp claws were raised high, extended and ready to rend his flesh. Watching the claws aiming for him finally released Vallen's vocal cords.

He screamed, straining against his bindings, the rough ropes biting into his skin as his heart pounded a desperate rhythm. Vallen strained every muscle of his arms as he uselessly kicked out his legs, hoping to fight back.

Right as the monster's talons caught in the material of his tunic, its claw, mid-strike, distorted back into a human hand. The hyva screeched in rage and pain, falling away from Vallen. Its body shuddered, writhing and shrieking in a chorus of agony as it hunched over its hand.

“What in Enum's name...” Vallen wheezed.

The hyva screeched a guttural, primal scream right in Vallen's face, as if it blamed him for its predicament. Its monstrous body arched back in agony, the human hand contorting and twisting violently. Before Vallen's horrified

eyes, the malformed appendage started to harden and sharpen, once again becoming a black-scaled claw.

The hyva, with its infuriated golden gaze locked onto Vallen, took a step in his direction before abruptly jerking away. A guttural howl erupted from the monstrosity's throat, which echoed over the vast expanses of the Dying Wilds.

As it turned away, another hyva leaped onto the creature's back, tearing into its flesh. The two monsters rolled, clawing and screeching at each other. Vallen pulled himself up by his straining arms to avoid having his legs crushed by the battling monsters.

One of the fighting hyva's tail whipped overhead. With an uncontrolled, wild force, the spiked tail crashed into the stone column that held Vallen captive. The impact sent reverberations through the column, shaking its very foundation.

Vallen emitted a guttural roar as agony seared across his side. The hyva's tail, although unintentional, had hit him like an unyielding, colossal cudgel. The stone column, already weathered and ancient, was incapable of enduring the monstrous impact. It trembled and teetered, then with a bone-jarring crack, split from its base. The stacked stones of the column fell away, scattering down the side of the sacrificial mound.

Suddenly, Vallen found himself in free fall. The sacrificial mound, which rose above the surrounding area like a colossal monument, sloped away on all sides from the peak where the sacrificial ritual took place.

As Vallen hurtled over the edge, the world descended into chaos. Bewildering flashes of sky were followed by painful impacts against the ground while rocks rained down around

him. Twisted weeds and thorny grass scraped over his back, catching on his clothing. He grappled blindly for anything that might slow his descent, but all he could grasp were handfuls of crumbling soil. A biting wind rushed past him, stinging his eyes and threatening to snatch the air from his lungs. It stole his grunts and cries and tossed them away. Finally, Vallen rolled to a stop in a crumpled heap at the base of the mound.

Coughing harshly, he struggled to regain his breath, wheezing in the thin, cold air. He fought to rise, the discomfort in his chest forcing him back down. He had rolled to a halt at the foot of the mound, landing haphazardly amongst the undergrowth. His body was a collection of bruises and scrapes. He fought against the weariness threatening to tug him under, driven by the urgency to get out, to scramble away from the mound, to survive. He lay in the shadow of the ominous sacrificial monument, chest heaving with each aching intake of breath, his world reduced to a haze of pain and the ceaseless need to breathe. His every instinct screamed at him to escape, but first he needed air. He reminded himself that pain meant he was still alive. And it was certainly preferable compared to the pillar he had just escaped.

As Vallen lay there, exhausted, he stared at the larger of the two moons. He ignored the monstrous hyvas and allowed himself a moment of calm, simply lying there, staring up at the celestial body. He offered a prayer of thanks to Enum. For the moment, he was alive, his heart thudding a painful but certain rhythm in his chest. His quiet words were swept away on the wind.

Summoning every last bit of his flagging strength, Vallen gritted his teeth as he pushed himself up on an elbow, biting back the wave of nausea that threatened to overwhelm him. Every inch of his body throbbed with shock and pain. Using a



scraggly bush as a crutch, he tugged himself upright, utilizing a rough branch of the bush to steady himself as he stood on trembling legs. He stood swaying amidst shadows, struggling against the dizziness and urge to keel over. Above him, a symphony of rage and violence echoed from the still battling hyvas, their roars rattling the air.

Vallen checked himself over carefully, taking stock of his body. Sensation slowly began to return to Vallen's numbed hands, quickly growing into an excruciating burn. It was a bizarre combination of pain and relief. His fingers tingled, a slow crescendo of prickling pain that spread from fingertips to palms. His wrists throbbed, raw and chafed from the rough ropes that had kept him tethered to the sacrificial stake. The pain was persistent, gnawing searingly at his flesh. His shoulders ached from the strain, muscles and tendons stretched to the point of breaking from the hours spent tied. He gritted his teeth against the discomfort, slowly clenching and unclenching his stiff fingers, welcoming the torturous return of his strength with each fiery pulse of sensation.

Once the pain in his hands started to ebb, Vallen felt a line of fire running down his right shoulder. He explored the injury with cautious probing fingers and discovered a long, but thankfully superficial, laceration there. A sharp sting pierced him when his fingertips brushed against the wound, and he hissed through his teeth at the pain. His only other concerning injury was his left hip. Although there did not appear to be any visible wound, every time he put his full weight on the leg, it threatened to buckle under him. When he'd been thrown off the sacrificial mound, he remembered first landing heavily on that hip. Hopefully, it was only deep bruising and nothing worse.

Moving slowly, Vallen gingerly reached a hand inside his torn and stained tunic, feeling around for the object Nyssa had dropped there. Every jolt of pain was a harsh reminder of his situation, but he persevered, his fingertips brushing against the rough packet tucked against his waistband. With painstaking slowness, he extracted the small bundle. Unfurling the cloth, he revealed a small pink amulet, its delicate hue contrasting sharply with his marred, grimy hands.

With a shaking breath, Vallen slipped the dainty amulet over his head, the cool chain slithering against his skin. He made sure to leave the lustrous pink stone outside of his shirt where any roaming hyvas would see it immediately. It settled against his sternum, a silent guardian against the beasts of the Dying Wilds.

Stilled nestled in the cloth packet was a folded piece of parchment, the edges rough and curling. Drawing together his fraying threads of concentration, Vallen carefully unfolded the paper. It was a map, just as Nyssa had said.

Squinting against the faint, silver luminescence filtering in through the clouds overhead, Vallen strove to read the too-faint lines of the map. But it was too dark to properly read. He could easily see the familiar bends and curves of River Assur, but even with tilting the map this way and that, he could not make out enough of the image to be useful to him until the sun rose.

The sacrificial mound stood out in stark silhouette against the night, blocking the kingdom from sight. Vallen believed that Erishum was situated on the far side of the mound from where he stood. If he was correct, that meant that the River Assur was somewhere off to his left, but he couldn't begin to guess just how far. Vallen started making his slow way around

the base of the ziggurat. Every rustle and whisper of the wind set his heart pounding, even as his hands itched, wishing for a blade. Reaching the base of the stone steps that had led him to the summit of the mound mere hours before, Vallen pivoted and gazed down the length of the now-darkened path leading back to Erishum. Just over the top of the trees, he could make out a few twinkling golden lights in the distance. Those had to be the torches that lined the massive border wall.

Vallen paused at the foot of the mound, consumed by doubt and indecision. His pulse thrummed in his ears. A maddening war between fear and resolve rolled through his mind much like how the hyva battled above him at the top of the mound. Should he venture into the darkness, navigating unknown dangers to find the River Assur and follow its path out of the Dying Wilds, or remain where he was, waiting for the rise of the sun to light his way? With the sun's rise, he risked the possibility that one of the Enumerii might venture out early to the sacrificial mound. He knew that after each sacrifice, the priests would come out to 'sanctify' and 'purify' the mound from any of the tributes' lingering tainted souls. Now he wondered what their true purpose was – probably just making sure that everyone transformed like they were supposed to.

A sudden shower of pebbles clattered down the side of the sacrificial mound, each tiny skittering rock sounding a warning that ricocheted through Vallen's taut nerves. He whirled around, his gaze shooting upwards at the sound, his heart pounding with an intensifying dread.

One of the fearsome hyva was slinking down from the peak, its lithe body moving with a deadly, calculated grace. For one raw, breathless moment, its predatory eyes locked onto Vallen. He stiffened, expecting an imminent charge. It

seemed to consider him, a rumble in its throat spreading an icy dread through Vallen's veins. Then, spotting the pendant hanging from his neck, it bared its teeth in a hiss and veered away. With a graceful bound, it disappeared into the tangled wilderness of the Dying Wilds, leaving Vallen in stunned silence with the taste of fear thick in his mouth.

As the last flick of its tail vanished, a wave of relief washed over Vallen. He thanked the miracle Nyssa had bestowed upon him, the amulet that had just proven its worth. He was saved, yet his mind was racing. Vallen wondered which of the sacrifices the hyva had once been. He hadn't sensed any humanity left in the beast, only raw animal hunger and hate. The hyva had once been a human; a citizen of Erishum.

Vallen hadn't had a moment to truly process what he had just witnessed, but now in the quiet cold of the night, he understood with chilling clarity – the condemned weren't fed to the hyva, they were destined to become them. King Jorek didn't appease Enum and his dreaded beasts by feeding them his citizens. His sacrifices were treated to a far more sinister fate; he was providing them with new members. It was somehow worse than being eaten; to have your humanity forcefully and painfully ripped from your body without your consent or knowledge. Each of those men's last moments as humans had been filled with blinding terror, immense pain, and confusion.

Vallen lifted the amulet off his chest and stared at it; under the pale moonlight, the stone had lost its pink hue, washed out to a light gray. A soft breath gusted from his lips, trembling with the terrifying revelation that curled in his mind. There was a profound, indescribable sadness in the knowledge that the pendant did more than simply deflect the hyvas. The

unforgiving truth echoed in his heart: he was the only sacrifice that did not transform into a monster. He swallowed hard against the gnawing fear.

Looking down at the amulet that Nyssa had somehow miraculously obtained for him, Vallen was struck with another stark realization. He couldn't leave Nyssa behind, not in Erishum, not under King Jorek's reign with the twisted reality of the tributes' destinies. The thought of her ever ending up on the sacrificial mound, tied up, alone and terrified, her body transforming and twisting into a dreadful hyva, was unbearable. The very notion knotted his guts, wrapping around his heart with icy tendrils. No, he decided then, standing on the precipice of the murderous wilderness. Nyssa's possible fate echoing ominously in the silence. He must escape Erishum and the Dying Wilds, but not without his dearest friend.

He looked up from the pink stone, dropping it back on his chest, and stared at the few torchlights flickering like pinpricks in the distance.

Vallen's gut curdled with revulsion. He'd seen enough of the kingdom's corruption, even before he became a shrike. He always understood, with a street rat's instinct, that his world was built on secrets that soured the air and lies that slithered through the corridors of power like venomous serpents. But never had he imagined that moral decay was so deeply and darkly entrenched in their society. It was not just a layer of muck on an otherwise flawless diamond, but a rot seeping to the core, blackening the very heart of Erishum. The king, the priests, the shrikes, and possibly more – all were complicit in this injustice. The tributes weren't sacrificial lambs to appease a fearsome god, they were unwilling fodder.

Vallen grappled with the revelations of the night, his mind whirling in a tempest of confusion and sickening dread, as he failed to discern any conceivable purpose behind King Jorek's ghastly decisions – why damn innocent souls to become monstrous aberrations, a curse worse than death itself? What could that accomplish? The only thing Vallen could think of was something Nyssa said – that there were still kingdoms outside of the Dying Wilds' borders. Were those other people still a threat to Erishum? Is that how King Jorek justified such heinous acts?

A clicking warble rose into the air, tugging Vallen from his rambling thoughts. Shrugging off his unease and confusion, Vallen came to a decision. He was going back for Nyssa. He had no plan or supplies, but he was a gutter shrike – he'd figure it out.

Then, despite the throbbing of his leg, Vallen strode quickly back toward Erishum, following along the edge of the path.

# CHAPTER 4





Vallen managed to get to the border wall before dawn. He could hardly believe he'd made it. He'd reopened the gash on his shoulder when squeezing himself through the grate on the south portcullis, but he'd made it.

The sky was barely starting to lighten when Vallen finally slipped past a partially collapsed wall that cleverly hid the entrance to Nyssa's home. This had been his place before he showed it to Nyssa years earlier.

His boots, once shiny and proud, now scuffed and muddied, made a soft sound as he entered the house. More tired than he could ever remember being, he stopped just inside the entrance to her room. He knew that Nyssa would be at the bakery, so he could take the day to rest before searching her out – it wasn't like anyone would be looking for him.

He stooped low, ready to shimmy under a fallen beam that blocked the way into the main room, when he heard a soft noise. Vallen froze and held his breath, listening intently. It couldn't be Nyssa; she should be safely tucked away in her dormitory. Perhaps another gutter rat, or even an actual rodent, had already taken up residence in her absence.

He didn't want to risk getting seen by anyone except Nyssa, so he held still, even though the crouched position was agony on his left leg. Vallen shifted, trying to take some pressure off the injured limb, but he grimaced when the motion made a floorboard creak. A soft gasp issued from inside the room, almost too quiet to hear. A familiar feminine gasp.



Feeling more confident, Vallen straightened up, taking a single step into the space. He could see a pallet in the center of the room with a small figure wrapped in a ratty blanket facing away from him. Even hidden under the blanket, Vallen knew it was Nyssa. He would recognize her anywhere.

“Nyssa,” Vallen called quietly, not wanting to startle her awake.

Abruptly, she sat up, and her voice whispered back, “Vallen?”

He could tell by the incredulous tone of her voice that she’d never expected to see him again.

After a beat, Nyssa crawled out of her blanket and approached Vallen like one would a spooked dog. Before he could voice any reassurances, Nyssa threw herself into his arms.

Vallen ignored the burning in his shoulder and squeezed her in a tight hug. He gritted his teeth against the dull throbbing that pulsed in time with his heart, happy to endure the pain if it meant having Nyssa in his arms. His eyes flicked around the familiar room, taking in the bizarre assortment of objects littering every surface. There were even piles of strange items stacked up in every corner. What in the world?

Though his body was wracked with exhaustion, and his muscles yearned for rest, Vallen found himself invigorated by something far more compelling than the reprieve of sleep. He was filled with something resembling hope; hope for himself and for Nyssa. She was here with him, and together they would figure out a way to escape Erishum forever.

Suddenly Nyssa shoved herself out of his arms and stared at him. The look of happiness was replaced by shock and

confusion, then horror.

“Wait. Why are you here? You should be forging your way through the Dying Wilds right now. Coming back here is...” She choked on a breath. “It’s a death sentence, Vallen!”

He started to reassure Nyssa, but she continued before he could speak.

“You can’t show your face. Someone, anyone, could recognize you, and then...” Nyssa shook her head, her dark locks shivering around her shoulders.

She reached out tentatively, her fingers just brushing against the fabric of his sleeve as if she needed to make sure he was real.

“I know you’re strong, Vallen. I know how brave you are,” she said, tears filling her eyes. “But this... this is too reckless. Why didn’t you run like I told you to?”

Vallen stared down at Nyssa, taking in her sweet face. The fearful sheen in her eyes seared into him, breaking his heart. Without thought, he reached out and enveloped her hands inside his own. Her fingers were ice cold and tiny in his grasp. The events of the night before were still so raw that he felt like a boat set adrift in a storm, tossed around and battered.

“Nyssa... Everything we’ve been told; everything we’ve been taught...” He started slowly, his deep voice a rumble within the quiet room. “It’s a lie. All of it.”

Nyssa stared at him, an edge of disbelief sharpening her somber gaze. “Vallen, what are you saying? What do you mean?” she whispered, her thumbs rubbing against the tattered fabric of his sleeve.

Vallen glanced down, taking a long breath before he met her fearful eyes with a steady look. “On the sacrificial

mound,” he began, his voice hoarse from weariness and the yelling of the night before, “I was bound to a pillar with no hope of escape. I was nothing more than bait for the hyvas.”

Nyssa clung to Vallen’s hand for dear life. “But that’s why I got you the amulet,” she choked out, her voice no more than a whisper.

“You did. And you saved me from a terrible fate, but not the one we’ve been told,” Vallen said, squeezing her hand lightly. “After the Enumerii left, hours passed, and the silence was terrible. We were all stuck, waiting for our deaths. I’ve never been so scared. I was trying to cut through my bindings by rubbing my wrists against the rocks. Then, the man across from me started to thrash and scream. I thought I was about to witness him being eaten alive...”

Nyssa gulped thickly, her grip on his arm almost painful. Vallen raised a hand to calm her. “But the man wasn’t being eaten by a hyva; he was transforming into one.”

Nyssa’s eyes rounded, her lips parting slightly in shock. “What... what do you mean?”

Vallen took a deep breath. “I watched as that man changed. His body twisted and contorted in pain, his screams echoing, his flesh... changed and transformed. And when the transformation was complete... a hyva stood where he had been just moments before. And then the rest of the sacrifices did the same – transformed into hyvas,” he explained, his voice barely a whisper.

Nyssa paled. “But... that can’t be. The sacrifices... they’re meant... they’re meant to be...”

“Meals for the hyvas?” Vallen said, finishing her sentence with a bitter laugh. “That’s what we’ve been told, what we’ve

believed. Seems the truth is far worse. They're not feeding the hyvas, Nyssa; they're creating them."

Nyssa's tear-filled eyes reflected the horror of the revelation. "But that means that all the hyvas out there used to be... and you were..."

Vallen nodded, feeling the weight of what might have been sat heavy on his shoulders. "I was meant to be one of them. King Jorek must know about this. How could he not? I suspect that Berossus knows as well, but I have no proof of either. I think that also means that King Jerwan purposefully started all this. Think about it – everyone claims that when Jerwan created the Dying Wilds, which wiped out all the other kingdoms, but you said they still exist. So why did Jerwan create the hyvas in the Dying Wilds? To keep the other kingdoms away? But I also think that he created the Dying Wilds to keep us here, stuck. The hyvas aren't our protectors so much as our jailers. How many of our own people have been sent into the Dying Wilds, not as prey... but as fodder?"

His voice broke, and he pulled his hands away, running them through his hair in frustration and anger. When Nyssa reached for him again, he looked at her with desolation. "I was chosen to be a monster, Nyssa, not a sacrifice. The point of the ritual isn't to appease the beasts; it's to manufacture them. King Jorek doesn't just rule over the people of Erishum. He rules over the horde of the Dying Wilds as well. I refuse to believe this is Enum's will. If it was, why lie to us?"

Nyssa was silent. Vallen could see the gears of her mind turning as she worked to process his words. "If they are the people of Erishum, Vallen," she murmured, her voice a breathy shudder, "why go to such horrific lengths? Was it really just to keep Puzur and Hassuna away? I'm having a hard

time believing that all the other kingdoms were ‘evil’. There must be more to this. Curator Athura started to say why she thought King Jerwan would go to such ghastly measures but Berossus came and arrested her before she could finish.”

“Wait. What do you mean Curator Athura was arrested?” Vallen asked, a sharp edge to his tone. The high priest arresting a member of the royal family was more than audacious; it felt unbelievable. If Prince Dastur hadn’t died, Athura would’ve been queen. She was more than just a member of the royal family, she was a keeper of history and knowledge, a scholar. Maybe that was it. Athura was always advocating for education, for the sharing of knowledge with even the poorest of citizens – a dangerous ideal for a king who thrived on people’s ignorance.

Nyssa gulped, her eyes holding a haunted look. “The night I visited you in the jail...” she began. “I went to see the curator afterwards. A few days earlier, I had found a strange device in the mud. It was a musical instrument called a bugle. When Berossus saw the bugle, he took it. Once he left, Athura begged me to find more items. She said it was vital that I bring back whatever I could find. When I returned to the river, I saw a great beast tangled in the brush outside the border wall. I snuck out and grabbed some bags strapped to the dead animal. What I found was travel bags filled with letters. She said it was the proof she needed that Puzur and Hassuna still existed. She asked me to go on a quest to these other kingdoms and beg for help. I said no. She was so mad and disappointed in me, but she paid me for the bags. That was how I was able to afford my fee to become a baker. You saw me that night after I had left the curator – it’s why you got arrested.”

Nyssa stared down at her feet, ashamed.

“Listen, Nyssa, me getting arrested was not your fault,” Vallen said, his voice serious and intense. “I chose to let you go and would do the same a hundred times again. And you did nothing wrong when you turned Athura down. Her request was reckless and far too risky, even for a just cause. And she should have known better than to involve you in this. Also... if you think about it, if you’d left when she’d asked, you wouldn’t have been around to save me.” That seemed to perk Nyssa back up, so Vallen asked. “What happened next?”

“When I heard that you’d been arrested, I went to the museum after I visited you in the prison. I lied to the curator and told her I’d take up her quest. She gave me the amulet and the map to get me through the Dying Wilds. Once I had them, I was just about to leave when we heard a noise. And—” Nyssa swallowed.

“And then what happened?” Vallen asked, giving her an encouraging nod.

“Well, Athura had me hide. Then, suddenly, the doors to the museum were thrown open,” she continued, clutching her hands together nervously. “Berossus stormed in with some other priests and shrikes. He said he was arresting her because he found witnesses that saw the female mudlark who had gone out into the Dying Wilds ‘consorting’ with her. And he said that all the items she had hidden in her quarters was enough to arrest her for treason.”

Vallen glanced around, taking in the mounds of aged parchment, dusty books, and odd-looking artifacts cluttering Nyssa’s humble abode. His brows furrowed in confusion as he asked, “And what’s all this, Nyssa?”

She flinched slightly as if caught off guard, then straightened, squaring her shoulders. “It’s Athura’s collection.

At least, what I could save of it.”

“Save?” Vallen echoed, his hand reaching out to drag a finger along the spine of a particularly worn book. “What do you mean?”

Nyssa drew in a shuddering breath, her gaze anchoring on Vallen. Her bright eyes betrayed the storm of emotions roiling beneath her calm exterior.

Nyssa’s voice had faded till it was barely audible. “After the curator had been led away, Berossus announced they’d be back today to destroy all her things. So, once they’d left, I brought as much as possible to hide here. I don’t know why, but I couldn’t let them demolish it all.

“Berossus,” she sneered his name, shocking Vallen. He’d never heard her with such venom in her usually sweet voice. “He planned to confiscate and destroy the curator’s collection under the guise of purging treasonous ‘unclean’ objects. But now we know his real plan – silencing Athura forever, ridding of any evidence that could condemn Jerwan or Jorek.”

Vallen’s eyes widened as he scanned the sheer volume of the collection around him, his voice tinged with awe, “Nyssa, this... how did you manage to save so much?”

With a weary but proud smile, she admitted, “I spent nearly the whole night carrying it all, every piece from the museum to here.”

Vallen just stared at her for a moment, admiration warring with concern. Finally, he nodded. “Nyssa, I am impressed, truly. But I can’t help wondering if it was really worth the risk to your life. If you’d been caught saving all these relics, I can only imagine what would’ve happened to you.”

Nyssa shrugged unconcerned, glancing around at the teetering piles of jumbled objects with happy eyes. “We both took risks. I saved the curator’s things, and you came back.” She stopped talking and got a worried look on her face. “Speaking of that, what are you going to do now? You’ve warned me of the true nature of the hyvas, but what happens next? You can’t stay in Erishum, and I’m unsure if telling everyone the truth about the sacrifices will accomplish anything.”

“Nyssa,” Vallen started slowly, a lump in his throat, “I want you to leave with me. Come to one of the other kingdoms. We could complete the curator’s mission. Or we could just leave; start a new life together.”

She glanced away, taken aback by the sudden request, looking troubled and unsettled. Her gaze drifted slowly over her stolen treasures. “Come with you?” she repeated eventually.

“Yes, we could begin anew, far away from this corrupt place.”

She looked at him, confused and distressed. Vallen couldn’t understand why she was hesitating.

“Vallen,” she breathed out, stern yet shaky, “all I’ve ever wanted was to be a baker. I finally have everything I’ve ever yearned for – that I’ve worked so hard to achieve. And you want me to abandon all of that for an unknown future?”

Vallen hesitated, his intense gaze faltering. He watched Nyssa; her determination lay bare before him in the dim room.

“I want you to come with me, Nyssa,” he said, the plea evident in his voice. “We could leave this place.”



His words hung heavy in the room. Nyssa stared at him for a moment longer before voicing her own fears. “Vallen, what if those other kingdoms aren’t like what we imagine? What if they’re dangerous? What if they’re as evil as King Jorek says?”

Would they escape one danger only to plunge into another? Vallen didn’t know how to convince Nyssa to leave the safe and familiar behind. He was always so collected, but now he felt fragmented and lost. Too many awful things had happened so quickly that he didn’t know how to gather his tattered emotions and piece together the argument that would convince Nyssa. “It’s worth the risk. Staying here, trapped inside the border walls, while the population continues to grow, and supplies dwindle. It’s a slow death, Nyssa. It’s going to get worse. And think about this spring, when they march out five more people to sacrifice. Are you okay with watching that happen, knowing their true fates?”

Nyssa’s eyes flashed with anger, concealing embarrassment and fright. Vallen realized his mistake; shaming her wouldn’t help his cause, only push her away.

“Nyssa,” he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper, his hands trembling, “they’re scouring Erishum, every nook and cranny: the shrikes, the priests, probably even the local thugs. Berossus has sent them all hunting for a female mudlark. It will get even worse when the priests discover that someone stole stuff from the curator’s home.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing that I’m not a mudlark anymore,” Nyssa responded defiantly, her voice steady yet soft, mirroring Vallen’s.

There was a moment of silence hanging heavy and ominous between them. Vallen realized then that he couldn’t

keep pushing Nyssa. She needed to come with him on her own volition. He refused to bully her into joining him. That road led to resentment and bitterness.

Vallen looked at Nyssa; an understanding lingered there, raw, unspoken and tender. “I understand, Nyssa. It’s fine. I won’t force you. You deserve to have a wonderful life. I know how hard you’ve worked, and I’m proud of you.”

He moved closer, once again clasping her hands in his. “But promise me this. Think about coming with me – seriously think about it. Please don’t dismiss it because it seems dangerous or disrupts your planned future. The future never follows the path we believe it will. Think about the price we’re paying here in Erishum. Whatever choice you make, I will respect it.”

Her eyes, pooling with unshed tears, met his. She bit her lip, nodding as she mulled over his words. Tension lifted off her shoulders, a visible shift that revealed her relief, her gratitude. She murmured, “I need to be in the bakery early today. I had to take yesterday off. I should’ve been kneading dough by now.”

Vallen nodded. “And I need to prepare for my journey. To go into the unknown, into the heart of the Dying Wilds.”

Nyssa started to nod but then jolted. Letting go of Vallen’s hands, she strode over to a partially crumbled wall, rummaging around inside a hole for a moment before pulling out a heavy bag. She turned back to Vallen, holding out the sack. “Here,” she said, her voice soft but pleased, “Take this. Curator Athura packed this for me when she thought I was going on her quest to Puzur. She wrote some letters to the different kingdoms and packed travel rations. It... it might

help you.” She hesitated, then firmly pressed the bag into his hands.

They stood there, suspended in time, each looking like they had something they wanted to say. Then, with a sigh, Nyssa grabbed her old cloak.

“Take this, too.” Nyssa held it out, the worn material a testament to the countless days she’d spent surviving within the walls of Erishum.

“Nyssa, that’s your cloak...”

“Don’t be silly, Vallen.” Nyssa cut him off, folding his fingers over the tattered fabric. “It’s not much, but it might help hide your identity. How are you going to get any supplies? You don’t have any money, and I used up all my coins yesterday.”

“I’m not sure yet. I can’t risk going back to the barracks. And even if I did, I guarantee everything has been taken and redistributed among the shrikes already. I am a gutter rat, so I could probably just steal what I need.”

Nyssa looked over at the teetering piles of artifacts with a thoughtful look. “We could pick out a few items that aren’t important and sell them. I’m sure the curator wouldn’t mind, since it will help her quest.”

Vallen gave the piles a considering look before nodding his head.

“We can do that if I am unable to gather what I need. Meet me back here after your workday at the bakery, even if you decide to remain in Erishum. I want to say a proper goodbye.”

She nodded, giving him a small smile – a bitter, sweet thing filled with memories of shared laughter, patched-up

scrapes, hours spent combing through the mud, and unspoken dreams.

Before they left the house, Nyssa helped Vallen treat the wound on his shoulder. Thankfully, it looked like it would heal just fine.

Slipping out onto the street, they strolled casually down the primarily empty cobblestone roads. Vallen was wrapped in her borrowed cloak, carefully hiding his face.

# CHAPTER 5





Nyssa and Vallen found themselves at a juncture where their paths would diverge, one leading toward uncharted risks and the other to familiar comfort. To one side was the bustling market, already alive with peddlers, hagglers, and thieves. The other led toward the bakery, where Nyssa would toil under the watchful eyes of Mara Kayseri.

As they prepared to part ways, promising to see each other soon, their murmurs were interrupted by a rise in voices and a surge in the crowd, heralding that something interesting was approaching. Nyssa and Vallen scuttled back, making sure to stay unnoticed.

Catching a glimpse of the blood-red tunics of a few shrikes marching into the marketplace, Vallen understood Nyssa's panic. If any of his former 'friends' spotted him, he'd been thrown into the prison and under interrogation before he could even form a protest.

The three shrikes had someone in their custody. Vallen was about to turn away from the spectacle when Nyssa's sharp, distressed gasp made him try to get a better look. In the middle of the shrikes, Vallen recognized Tarric, an old friend and fellow mudlark, as he was marched past. Caught in the clutch of the imposing shrikes, Tarric looked terrified; his slumped shoulders and sunken eyes were like those of a cowed animal facing inevitable doom. An Enumerii priest, adorned in the dark robes of his order, followed in their wake, his skeletal figure casting a sinister shadow that seemed far larger than his meager frame.

Vallen's heart broke for Tarric because he knew better than almost anyone what awaited him in the priests' and shrikes' care. Nyssa made a sound like a wounded animal. She quickly turned to an older woman who had stopped her morning duties to gape at the procession. Her hair was as gray as a winter's frost, and her shoulders were stooped with age, but her eyes were as sharp and clear as a spring morning.

"What's happening?" Nyssa asked her, voice breathless and eyes wide with concern.

The woman gave the sign for Enum's protection, her wrinkled face etched with worry. "The shrikes... they're rounding up all the mudlarks," she replied, her words sending a shiver down Vallen's spine. "They've deemed mudlarking illegal. Enum knows what they'll do to those poor urchins. I can't imagine why they suddenly care about children combing through the mud."

Nyssa shared a tense look with Vallen. Berossus must've already found the state of the curator's emptied quarters and connected it to the mudlark that Athura was working with.

Before the last echoes of the shrikes' marching rhythm faded into the clamor of the marketplace, Vallen grasped Nyssa by her shoulder and swiftly tugged her into a narrow alley out of sight. They slipped past an old man sleeping in a doorway further into the labyrinth of Erishum's underbelly until the noise from the central marketplace was a mere whisper.

He halted in a shadowy alcove, where the morning sun barely permeated, dappling the cobbled stones with patches of light and shadows, and turned to Nyssa. His face was grave, deep wrinkles furrowed his brow in worry. He held her shoulders, making sure she met his gaze.

“Nyssa, the shrikes will find you even if you’re no longer a mudlark. It’s just a matter of time now,” he said, his voice a hoarse whisper. “If they have Tarric in their custody...” He hated to say this; he didn’t want her to think less of him. “Tarric... he knows about you. And given enough time, they *will* make him talk.”

Nyssa opened her mouth to protest, but Vallen silenced her with a solemn look.

“The shrikes and priests, they have ways, Nyssa,” he continued, trying to keep the memories from surging up and swamping him. “By the time they are done with him, he’ll tell them his darkest secrets. He will tell them anything they want to know.”

In the eerie silence that followed, punctuated only by the distant toll of the kingdom’s morning bell, Nyssa’s shoulders fell in defeat as the harsh reality dawned on her. Vallen’s heart clenched at the sight; this was affirmation that his warning had seeped through her stubborn belief in a better world.

“I-I am sorry, Nyssa,” he murmured. His rough hand, still resting lightly on her shoulder, tightened – it was an apology and an attempt at comfort. He watched helplessly as the light in her eyes, usually sparkling with dreams and hopes, extinguished. He felt as if he had personally reached in and pinched out the flame.

Overwhelmed, Nyssa’s façade cracked, and tears cascaded down her cheeks. Soft sobs escaped her lips as she repeated an agonizing mantra, words that wrapped like chains around Vallen’s heart. “I can’t stay...” she whispered, her voice broken and fragile. “I can’t stay here...”

He held her small frame as tightly as possible, enduring a heart-rending whimper. She reminded him of a tiny, trapped



bird.

“Is there anything we can do for Tarric?” Nyssa finally asked once her tears had started to subside. Vallen winced at the hopefulness threading through her words.

He took a deep breath, swallowing the lump in his throat . “Tarric is beyond our reach now, Nyssa. He’s probably deep in the sanctum, surrounded by dozens of shrikes and priests.” His voice was steeped in regret. Those words landed heavily, making Nyssa flinch. He wrestled with his guilt, feeling like he had failed their friend. “There’s nothing we could do for Tarric that wouldn’t endanger both of us.”


“But... what should we do?” Nyssa implored, trying to find solace, answers, anything.

“We prepare,” Vallen said grimly. “We need to gather a few supplies from the marketplace. Then we retreat to your home. And there we will plan our next move.”

The bitter taste of despair still lingered, but there was a new spark in Nyssa’s eyes. It was precisely that dogged spirit that had drawn him to her years ago in the muck-laden streets of their childhood; it was a spark that refused to die no matter the overwhelming darkness. Vallen reached out, wiping away her tears with a rough thumb. He made an unspoken vow to stand between Nyssa and the rapidly approaching storm.

# CHAPTER 6





**S**tealing through the narrow alleys of Erishum, Nyssa and Vallen moved like shadows in sync with one another, just like in old times. Thankfully, the throbbing in his hip had reduced to just a dull ache. Several hours had passed since their grave discussion, in which time the two had busied themselves gathering supplies for the journey ahead. The desperation had been edged out for a moment, replaced by the exhilaration of their former camaraderie. Stealing clothes, loaves of bread, jars of nuts, bags of dried meats, an extra skin for water – each acquisition was a dance between them. Nyssa’s soft-spoken demeanor was perfect for luring the attention of unsuspecting vendors, while Vallen’s nimble fingers took what they needed. Nyssa reverted to their old ways without complaint, although Vallen knew she’d always yearned for a life of honest earning. Her brave stoicism in the face of the massive change in her circumstances made Vallen’s heart twang; her resilience and indomitable spirit were a large part of what made her so special.

As they wove between half-ruined tenements and silent doorways, leaving the marketplace behind, their conversation turned to the matter still at hand. Vallen broke the silence, his voice dropping lower, concerned. “We’ve got just the one amulet, Nyssa. In the Dying Wilds... we can’t take the risk of hoping that one amulet will protect us both.”

Nyssa, her features shadowed under her hood, glanced at him, her eyes filled with determination and worry. “We can’t split it, can we?” she asked, pointing to where the charm was hidden under Vallen’s tunic.

He shook his head, his lips thinning at the corners. “It’s too risky. We don’t know how it works. We need one more. I don’t suppose the curator had another?”

Their footsteps echoed off the stone walls as they hurried back to Nyssa’s home. Vallen could feel her worry seeping into the chill around them. Without a word, he took her small hand in his, giving a reassuring squeeze.

“Then we have to find another amulet, Val,” she said, tightening her grip around his fingers. “It doesn’t matter how or where. We will find a way to survive the Dying Wilds and keep from becoming one of those creatures...” Her voice trailed into silence as the word ‘hyva’ refused to move past her lips, leaving an unspoken hint of revulsion hovering between them.

Vallen nodded, brushing an errant lock of hair from her forehead with his free hand. “Then one way or another, we’ll find one, Nyssa,” he murmured. “We will figure this out – together.”

Once inside, Nyssa lit a tiny nub of a candle. Bathed in the glow of feeble flickering light, they pulled out the map Nyssa had recovered from the dead beast she said was called a horse. It was strange to see the whole of the Dying Wilds depicted with no sign of Erishum in its center. Without it, it was difficult to guess how big the Dying Wilds were. Vallen huffed out a breath.

“The journey...” Nyssa pulled him from his chaotic, swirling thoughts. “How long do you think it will take, Vallen?”

His eyes turned from Nyssa’s apprehensive gaze to the map; his fingers traced the path of River Assur, hesitating at

where it bisected the road between Puzur and Hassuna labeled as the High Road. He paused, considering her question.

“It will be a long, tough walk,” he whispered. He clasped her hand tightly and added, “But not long enough to break us, Nyssa. We’ve survived the gutters and alleys of Erishum. We can survive the Dying Wilds.”

Vallen’s gaze traced the gently slithering route of the river, his fingers gliding over the parchment, trying to figure out the distance. Nyssa watched his every move; her eyebrows creased in worry.

“Let’s say it will take between one and two weeks. That’s my best guess. Either way, we need to hug the river so we don’t get lost. And it will provide us with water and food. Before we head out, I’ll steal some camping and fishing supplies.”

With trust in her eyes, Nyssa nodded slowly, determination replacing her anxiety. It made Vallen resolve to prove himself worthy of her faith.

Suddenly, Nyssa sprang to her feet. She had an air of abrupt excitement that starkly contrasted the bleak atmosphere. “Wait, Vallen. I thought of something that could help us!” She hurried toward a pile of the stolen bounty, quickly rummaging through the collection.

With a triumphant exclamation, Nyssa yanked free a slender, sheathed knife from the chaotic pile of stolen goods. Proudly, she presented it to Vallen, its surface gleaming, the handle intricately carved. “It was on the dead horse with everything else,” she declared.

He found himself grinning back at her. “It’s well-balanced, sharp, and light. Could be very useful on our journey,” Vallen

complimented.

He appraised the blade, spinning it thoughtfully. Nodding, he added into the bag Nyssa had given him earlier. A shrike knew the value of a well-forged blade, and he could tell from the ornate pommel that the dagger was valuable.

Nyssa began going through the heap of stolen goods again, her deft fingers swiftly sifting through items. She suggested, “Let’s see if there’s anything else among this loot that could help.”

Nodding, Vallen began looking through a pile as well. They were quiet as they searched, the only noise was the soft clink of metal or the rustle of books being shifted aside.

Inside his mind, Vallen maneuvered through a maze of worry as his hands mechanically sifted through the chaotic pile of goods. Books in various states, from pristine to moldering, sat next to piles of small boxes of trinkets. A few bits of jewelry of doubtful value clinked against pewter measuring devices, haphazardly covered in dozens of scrolls. His heart sank with each abandoned trinket that held no value beyond its brief sentimentality. Despite the sheer accumulation of items, not much would be of any help. Survival in the Dying Wilds demanded tools, warm clothes, weapons, and navigation tools; they had no room for lucky charms. His search for an elusive second amulet among the disorderly collection proved just as futile. It was a worrying and fruitless beginning for a journey.

“It still doesn’t solve the problem of the amulet,” Nyssa murmured.

He paced around the small space, trying to gather his scattered thoughts. Plans were formulated and quickly discarded.

Vallen's emotions welled with frustration. He traced a roughened finger over a scale, making the balanced cup sway back and forth. "The only places where an amulet can be found are the king's throne room and the Enumerii sanctum." His voice was a whisper, but Nyssa still flinched at the words.

"There's no way we can sneak into either of those places," she exclaimed.

"I know," Vallen conceded, his fingertips tapping rhythmically against the shelf's edge. "King Jorek's amulet is out of the question. The throne room is heavily guarded night and day. The sanctum is our only chance."

"We won't make it past the front entrance," Nyssa reasoned, her eyes filled with dread at the suggestion. "The sanctum is filled with priests and shrikes. Plus, we don't even know where they keep the amulets."

Vallen offered her a flicker of a grim smile. "Remember, I've been inside the sanctum a few times, Nyssa. I believe I know where they might store the amulets. They have a secret underground area that is closely guarded. I am almost certain that's where we will find them. If not, we can try Berossus's personal quarters."

Nyssa looked ready to pass out at the thought of sneaking into the Grand Enumerox's room. Not that Vallen could blame her. If they got caught, death would be a favor.

Nyssa inhaled sharply, before blowing out a slow breath. "There's no other way, is there?" she asked.

She looked resigned when Vallen shook his head.

"Alright, the sanctum it is," she decided, an affirming nod accompanying her words.

At Nyssa's bravery, Vallen's initial trepidation turned into the steel of determined resolve.

Nyssa gave him a mischievous grin. "Now, all we have to do is find a way to empty the sanctum of all its priests."

Vallen started to laugh at her joke but stopped suddenly, giving Nyssa a wide-eyed stare. "I have an idea..."



# CHAPTER 7





Vallen stood in the shadows, the uneven cobblestones of the alley digging into his booted feet. He watched as Nyssa turned toward the crumbling façade of a tiny clapboard house. Beads of sweat trickled down from his back, and one of his hands gripped the hilt of the dagger tied to his waist. The alley was dark; the sun hadn't yet begun to lighten the sky. His fingers tightened around the knife as he helplessly watched Nyssa knock on the door.

Finally, after an interminably long wait, the creaking sound of an opening door cut through the frigid morning air. A stooped figure appeared in the half-open doorway. The woman's round, craggy face was pinched in irritation as her eyes bore into Nyssa. Her lips moved rapidly, and though he could not hear the words from where he stood, he was confident it was a round of berating.

From his vantage point, Vallen watched as the woman's gnarled hands waved about in heated vexation. She seemed to run out of steam after a few minutes.

Pausing, Nyssa took a step closer to the crone, her hands clasped gently in front of her in a calming gesture, her body language pleading and persuasive. Vallen could almost see the warm glow of her charm working its magic. The old woman's features gradually softened, her hands falling to her sides, the harshness dulling at Nyssa's words.

Noticeably less furious, the woman retreated into the dank interior of the house, ending the confrontation. Moments later, a figure appeared in the doorway – a slip of a boy with messy raven-black hair and a face filled with such profound loss that

it could break one's heart. Even from a distance, Timi looked like a smaller replica of his older brother Tarric.

Nyssa stepped forward, crouching down to meet the child's eyes. Her voice was too soft for Vallen to hear, but he could well imagine what she was saying. The gentle, soothing, tender tone was a melody he knew all too well. From where he stood, concealed in the dark, Vallen felt a surge of affection for her.

Nyssa leaned in closer, talking quietly to the boy. Vallen wished that he could see her face. He watched as she rummaged inside her patched bag before leaning in closer to speak more privately toward Timi. The boy's pinched face scanned the surrounding area before focusing back on Nyssa, biting his bottom lip as if unsure about her proposition.

Nyssa smoothly uncurled her hand to reveal a gleaming object – a scale. He and Nyssa had picked this item out specifically for Timi because it would likely cause the most uproar with the Enumerii.

Timi seemed to hesitate before taking a deep breath and nodding. He carefully held out his hand to take the scale, handling it with a reverence that seemed too deliberate for his tender age. Nyssa held out an extra bag for Timi. He took the bag and gingerly placed the scale inside it. Even from a distance, Vallen could see his sadness morph into a newfound determination.

With an encouraging pat on the boy's shoulder, Nyssa stood up. The boy returned it hesitantly before turning on his bare heels and darting off into the cobbled streets, quickly disappearing in the dark.

Vallen had to admire Nyssa's knack for getting people – children and disinclined adults alike – to do what she wanted.

Not with subterfuge or guile, but just the right amount of caring persuasion. When they left Erishum behind, Nyssa would be taking the true heart of the kingdom with her.

As she returned to Vallen's hidden corner, her eyes danced with an accomplished satisfaction.

"Timi will assist us, Vallen. He went to go get into position," Nyssa whispered. The morning chill cascaded a shiver over her thin frame. The waning moons made Nyssa's skin look silver and luminescent in the dark of the alley, like an ethereal creature created from starlight.

Vallen turned to meet her gaze, his expression earnest and worried. "Does he understand to wait until daybreak?"

Nyssa nodded, her hand instinctively finding his. "I made sure that Timi grasped the importance of his role; he will not approach the sanctum until the sun starts to lighten the sky."

A sigh of relief slipped past Vallen's lips, softening the lines etched across his worn-out features. "Then we need to get moving."

Perched in the quiet alleyway under the watchful gaze of the waning moons, Nyssa gave him a chagrined look and a squeeze of her hand. "I promised him we'd look for Tarric," she confessed. "When we're inside the sanctum, while he distracts the Enumerii, I told him I would do my best to find his brother."

Vallen nodded, giving Nyssa a grin. "I think that's a great idea. Anything to cause more chaos for them, I think."

Nyssa tried to return his grin, but he could tell by the way her gaze kept shifting and scanning the darkened alley that she was worried. He gently squeezed her thin fingers in his, offering assurance.

“An hour. It all starts in an hour,” she murmured, her voice barely audible above the faint echoes of the slumbering city beyond their alcove. She studied his face, reading the anxious lines that furrowed his brow. “We can do this, Vallen. Let’s head to Marun Egmond’s house quickly.”

They had spent several hours the previous day hammering out their scheme while the sun had ridden high in the sky. Once the plan had been finalized, exhaustion had caught up to them both. Hidden in the sanctity of Nyssa’s home, the melody of laughter and street chatter outside their refuge played a lullaby to their worn-out bodies, ushering them into the arms of a much-needed sleep.

They had woken up in the wee hours of the night and set about enacting their plan under the elusive cover of the dark skies. With shadows for companions, they’d traversed through the winding alleys and streets of the kingdom, planting Curator Athura’s coveted artifacts throughout the shadow district, along the riverbank, and in an empty cart in the middle of the marketplace.

As they walked hand in hand, Vallen could feel a nervous tremble racking Nyssa’s whole body.

“Nyssa,” Vallen said after a moment of silence, his tone thick with resolve. “We have done everything within our power. Now, all we can do is trust in our plan.”

Vallen led the way through the winding, cobblestone streets leading to center town. As they walked, the homes transformed from broken shacks to opulent mansions the closer to the heart of Erishum they strode. Nyssa remained shrouded in the darkest patches of night, her cautious, swift movements reminding Vallen of a small bird. The homes near the palace contrasted starkly with those in the shadow district.

Tall structures of gleaming gray stone, intricate carvings, and expansive windows showcased the wealth and affluence contained within.

When they approached the street corner leading them to their destination, Nyssa tugged Vallen's arm, pulling them to a stop.

Vallen glanced between Nyssa and their target, a house encircled by blooming bushes resplendent in its beauty even in the dark of night. Nyssa bit her lower lip, her brow furrowed in thought. "Vallen..." Her voice barely rose above a mouse's whisper. "Are you certain we can trust Marun Egmond not to turn us over to the king?"

Vallen turned to her, his gaze calm and assuring. "Nyssa, Marun Egmond has been a thorn in King Jorek's side as long as I can remember. If anyone can take this news and put it to good use, it's him." That seemed to settle Nyssa's turmoil, and she nudged him to keep heading toward the enormous house.

"I overheard Marun Egmond telling someone that the harvest was poor this year, and there might not be enough food to get through winter," Nyssa whispered as they walked up the steps to the front door. "I hope he was just complaining like usual and that it's not as serious as he made it sound."

They walked up to a door far more majestic than most of its neighbors. It was made of polished wood, adorned with a silvery emblem he recognized as the Hurrian family crest. Vallen squared his shoulders, taking a deep breath before raising his hand and knocking on the massive door.

He was surprised when Marun Egmond answered instead of a servant. Egmond's sallow eyes, rimmed with suspicion, narrowed at the sight of Vallen standing there. The former

shrike stood straight, not cowering under the noble's scrutinizing stare.

"Why are you knocking on my door at this time of day? I'll not be giving out any alms," Egmond began, his tone biting, brimming with annoyance and suspicion.

Vallen reached into his pocket, bringing forth one of the letters Nyssa had found in the saddlebag from the dead horse. The light coming from inside Egmond's home revealed the official seal of wax, pressed with an unfamiliar emblem. A whisper of surprise curled on Egmond's lips as Vallen revealed the name inscribed on it: King Beithar of Hassuna.

"This is a letter from the ruler of Puzur addressed to the King of Hassuna," Vallen said, his voice steady. "This letter was recovered by a mudlark and given to Curator Athura, whom I'm sure you've heard has been arrested. We believe it was because of this letter. It's proof that the kingdoms of Puzur and Hassuna still exist beyond the Dying Wilds."

Egmond's eyes flicked between the letter and Vallen before snatching it from his hands. His suspicion hadn't completely receded, but it was replaced with a curiosity.

"A letter is nothing. This could easily be faked," Egmond replied, but the look on his face let Vallen know that he hoped it wasn't true.

"There's a ruined building," Vallen started as he stepped back, biting down a triumphant smirk. "A small, dilapidated one near the river's south portcullis. The fifth building on the left from Marun Kassite's smithy."

Egmond was silent, listening with his eyes furrowed, drinking in the words that Vallen poured out, his curiosity piqued.

“You find that building, and you find Curator Athura’s secret collection. Much of it was salvaged before the Grand Enumerox could get to it,” Vallen continued, confidence surging through him as Egmond’s surprise morphed into a keen interest.

Egmond fixed Vallen with an intense, scrutinizing stare. “And what do you suggest I do with this information?”

“Do what you will with it,” Vallen said. “However, I would advise waiting until the unrest quiets down.”

“Unrest?” Egmond asked. The word hung heavy in the silence that followed, and Vallen watched as Egmond’s eyes widened slightly, an obvious sign he’d caught him off guard.

Vallen leaned in closer, his grin practically splitting his face. “Just wait and see.”



# CHAPTER 8





The sky slowly changed from inky gray to dreamy streaks of pink and lavender. Vallen marveled at the beauty, feeling like it was a herald for success. The silent marketplace of Erishum, which would be buzzing and swarming with people soon, was just beginning to stir from its slumber. The vendors yawned and stretched their weary bones as they shuffled out of their homes. Vallen listened to the clinking sound of store keys being turned in rusty locks and awnings being unfurled. Fires began to be lit, and the pleasant aroma of meat sizzling over an open flame started to fill the air.

Vallen watched all the activity from beneath his borrowed hood. He leaned casually against a covered cart parked in the square's center, a perfect vantage point overlooking the market's heart. To everyone else, he must have appeared like a slow-moving merchant, in no hurry to display his wares. But beneath the apparent calm, a storm of apprehension and anticipation seethed within him as he watched for the first signs that their plan had been enacted.

He sent a prayer to Enum to watch over Nyssa. If everything was going according to plan, she would even now be stirring up the shadow district until they swarmed the river like a disturbed beehive.

The life around the marketplace was slowly blossoming; stall runners, with their weary but hopeful eyes, began to set out their wares. The murmur of voices bubbled as people started trickling in to make their daily purchases. The marketplace was punctuated by sporadic laughter and lively chatter, enveloping the square in a warming blanket of

vibrancy. Vallen's gaze kept flitting amidst the hustle and bustle; each flutter of movement, each stray word, held potential signs of the plan unfolding.

Every thud echoed as the beats of time slowly ticked away; the subtle progression from pre-dawn to dawn was soon mirrored in the marketplace around him. As the city of Erishum woke to what it assumed was a regular day, Vallen stood unblinking and unwavering, waiting for the sign that Timi had enacted the first step in their plan.

Vallen's heart nearly jumped out of his chest as two men in distinctive red shrikes' uniforms dashed through the middle of the marketplace square. All activity came to a stop as every eye watched their progress. Barely a heartbeat later, two breathless, pale figures garbed in the black vestments of the Enumerii priesthood came into view. Like birds spooked from their roosts, they dashed across the marketplace square toward the river, their robes flapping wildly, following in the wake of the shrikes. This confirmed that Timi had gone to the sanctum as instructed and given the priests the scale, telling them that more strange items were littered along the shore of the River Assur.

Vallen's watchful gaze trailed them, a hard swallow forced down his dry throat. A crisp dawn breeze blew across his face as he turned his gaze to the sky, trying to gauge how long until the morning bell would ring. Keeping his ears open for any sign of distant chaos, Vallen started counting the minutes.

Within a quarter of an hour, a chorus of armored footfalls rang out from the side streets, followed by some shouting, letting Vallen know that Nyssa had successfully stirred up unrest in the shadow district. Hopefully, she was already on her way to their meeting spot. Her job had been to tell as many

of the shadow district's citizens as possible that there was expensive treasure in the river's mud. She had planned to stand on the center bridge and scream in delight, pointing to the treasures peppered throughout the river below. The ensuing chaos was sure to summon many shrikes and priests, all compelled to restore peace and keep the 'unclean' objects out of as many hands as possible. Vallen grinned at the thought.

With the last of the shrikes and priests rushing past, the market stood at a confused standstill. Everyone present instinctively seemed to sense that something was afoot. The crowd stood, silent and wary, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Vallen offered a dazzling smile beneath his hood. With a flick of his wrist, he whipped the pre-strung lashing off the cart and gave it a massive shove. The uncovered cart tilted, hesitated briefly, agonizingly, and then toppled.

An avalanche of curiosities tumbled free – a good portion of Curator Athura's secret collection of fanciful gadgets, ancient books, and a few shimmering coins. It all scattered around in a messy sprawl, rolling, bouncing, and skidding over the cobblestones punctuated by the collective gasp of the crowd.

There was a momentary pause as if the air held its breath before a sudden clamor filled it. Dozens of shoppers and vendors descended on the pile of goods. The first fistfight broke out before Vallen could even take a full breath.

As Vallen casually strolled out of the marketplace, he could hear the beginnings of a riot break out behind him. He felt bad about throwing out the curator's things like that, but he and Nyssa agreed it was necessary. Plus, they'd saved the most important items for Egmond.

The cobblestones echoed against Vallen's worn leather boots as he hurried through the winding and narrow alleys of Erishum. His chest pounded in rhythm with the fast-paced steps he took, evading the crowd spilling in various directions. Through every turn and every glimpse of sunlight piercing through the tall buildings, he could see people running, some regular citizens, some priests, and some shrikes. Amidst the swirling chaos, a peculiar joy filled Vallen, reminiscent of bygone days he occasionally missed, yet found relief in leaving behind.

As he neared the royal courtyard, the grandeur of his surroundings started to become apparent. The noise from the city became distant, replaced by the crisp chirping of birds and the rustling sounds of the wind blowing through the impeccably tended royal gardens.

Vallen found Nyssa in their agreed meeting spot, leaning against the cool stone of the alley wall near the entrance to a famous seamstress's shop. She was partially hidden behind a large display containing rolls of fabric – a perfect vantage point from where she could watch both the sanctum's arched entrance and the royal palace's intimidating façade.

When she spotted Vallen approaching, she gave him a pleased, eager smile. Her cheeks were pink, and her grin radiant. Her triumphant joy felt contagious, pulling his lips into a smile in return. "It went well?" Vallen asked upon nearing her.

She nodded fervently. "People were battling the priests when I left the river. You should've seen it. How did your part go?"

"The marketplace is in chaos. Hopefully, it will be enough to pull them all out."

Just as they settled in to wait, two priests sprinted past them into the sanctum's entrance. Hardly a few minutes later, Nyssa made a delighted noise.

Half a dozen robed figures hurriedly emerged, moving with a sense of alarm that made Nyssa's grin wider, setting off toward the marketplace. Then, like a dark cloud, Berossus emerged, striding forth from the shadows of the sanctum's interior. His face was usually placid, never giving much away, but this time, he looked like he had swallowed a thunderstorm, the contours of his yellow-rimmed eyes were laden with fury and shock.

Without uttering a word to the bolting priests, Berossus blazed toward the castle past the front gate without even stopping to check with the guards and disappeared into the grand entrance. Heavy footsteps echoed in the air before Vallen and Nyssa had finished exchanging glances. They turned to see a cadre of shrikes, their armor clinking as they whisked past in the same direction as the priests.

Vallen and Nyssa let the resounding footfalls of the shrikes fade, their jingling armor becoming a distant whisper in the cool morning air. Each second felt like an eternity, but they waited. If anyone recognized Vallen, their plan was over. The shrikes would be the first to know his face. Nyssa pressed her back against the cold stone wall, her gaze fixed steadfastly on King's Road and her grip on her satchel tightening. "Wait," Vallen whispered, placing a reassuring hand on Nyssa's arm as the last shrike turned a corner, disappearing from sight.

Finally, they emerged from their hiding place. Their footsteps echoed less conspicuously as they moved steadily along King's Road. They crossed the royal courtyard, aiming straight for the Enumerii sanctum.

As they trudged along, Vallen leaned closer to Nyssa, his voice just above a whisper. “If any priests remain at the sanctum’s entrance, give them the bag,” he indicated her worn bag. Inside was an ornate relic snatched from the curator’s loot, its metallic surface etching intricate tales against her palm. “Tell them you found it by Marun Kassite’s forge. He’s cantankerous enough to fight them if they dare to try to search his property.”

The Enumerii sanctum was both imposing and enigmatic in its stark austerity. Over its entrance stretched a colossal archway. Hewn from massive blocks of unyielding grey stone, the monolithic building stood out starkly against the gaudy ornate palace from across the courtyard. Its solid walls were stripped bare of any adornment as if rejecting any association with wealth or beauty. It was said to represent the priest’s dedication to purity and modesty. The only permitted decorations on the building were twin carved stone figures flanking the door. Each statue was meant to represent Enum, who watched over the doorway stoically, a guardian of the sacred ground within.

The absence of priests standing guard at the front entrance surprised Vallen, as unexpected as the quiet that filled the plaza. He thought that they’d leave at least one guard, but there was no one. He exchanged a glance with Nyssa, her eyes mirroring his disbelief. He’d never quite believed the plan would work so well. Taking a deep breath, they stepped into the sanctum’s threshold.

The inside of the sanctum was a paradox to its austere exterior, a sanctuary filled with gleaming beauty. Sconces lined the walls, filled with expensive tapered candles that offered a soft, warm glow, casting dancing light onto the stone walls. The large foyer was adorned with intricate murals

displaying tales from the Enanhk, their holy book, and stories of past miracles performed by the Enumerii. An ornate tapestry displayed a detailed depiction of a hyva twined among a forest of dark green. The air was heavy with the scent of burning incense, and it was warm inside the building.

“Remember,” Vallen whispered, “walk with purpose, like you’re supposed to be here, Nyssa. Just in case anyone is still here. If a problem comes up, I’ll handle it. You just focus on keeping yourself safe.”

Nyssa nodded with trepidation. In awe-filled silence, she drank in the sight of the sanctum’s soaring, lofty foyer, her wide eyes reflecting the flickers of torchlight as they traced the stern countenance of Enum painted into the high stone ceiling.

When she returned her gaze to Vallen, he nodded toward the back of the building. Waving her to follow him, he placed his finger against his lip as a reminder to stay silent. Vallen watched as Nyssa marshaled her courage and nodded, following in his footsteps. Keeping only a step behind Vallen’s quickening pace, he watched as she mimicked his confident stance: shoulders pulled back, eyes set ahead.

They strode resolutely across the grand, echoing expanse of the sanctum’s main hall, heading to a quiet corner which concealed a hidden flight of stairs. Vallen led the way, silently slipping into the stairwell with Nyssa on his heels. As they descended into the gloom, the air turned chillier, a dampness rising from below and creeping up on their senses. In the gloom, Nyssa’s hand found its way to Vallen’s cloak, her fingers clinging to the fabric.

Vallen cast her a faint encouraging smile, which she returned, but it held a note of apprehension. He led her into the



descending gloom, each step resounding ominously through the hushed silence.

“The amulets,” he quietly reminded her, his whispered words swallowed by the gloom. “They keep them in a storeroom below. Conveniently close to the sanctum’s dungeons. If Tarric is still in the sanctum, that’s where we’ll find him.”

The staircase spiraled down, disappearing around a twist in the stone walls, the way ahead hidden in concealing darkness. When the last stair beneath their feet met the stone floor, Vallen held up a hand, signaling Nyssa to stay back. His brows furrowed in concentration as he slowly edged toward where the staircase spilled into the underground level. A heavy silence hung around them; the only sound was their quiet breaths. Peering out from their hiding spot, Vallen cautiously looked around the corridor, his sharp eyes scrutinizing every inch of the area. He held his breath, listening for any signs of life. The hall was as silent as a crypt, with no hint of the guards usually stationed there. Satisfied with his assessment, Vallen signaled Nyssa, motioning for her to come and join him.

Guiding her down the hallway through several bends and twists, Vallen brought them to the last turn that would get them to their destination. They reached a corridor’s end where a thick wooden door stood, fortified with iron braces. Vallen stepped forward, his hand grazing over the door’s rough texture. “This,” he said, his voice dropping to a murmur, “is where they keep the amulets when the priests aren’t using them.”

Nyssa studied the door, her fingertips touching the cool iron handle gingerly. “It’s locked,” she whispered, glancing at

Vallen with a faint, worried look.

He offered her a grin. “Yes. Thankfully, my old life was not so easily discarded.”

Vallen reached into his cloak’s inner pocket, withdrawing a frayed, worn leather roll. As he unfurled it, an array of metal tools glinted in the wan candlelight.

“I’ve never been so glad that I didn’t sell my old lock-picking kit,” Vallen said, his fingers lovingly tracing over the tools.

The night before had taken them near Vallen’s old, forsaken hideaway, as they had deposited Curator Athura’s treasure around the shadow district. He had been lucky that the hidden cache of his old gear had never been discovered. It would have gotten him ejected from the shrieks had they found the items in his possession. Rather than sell them, he’d hidden them away, just in case.

Nyssa watched silently as Vallen worked the lock. His hands moved with an adept precision, the muscle memory from his old life resurfacing, guiding him through the practiced motions. The old door soon yielded, its lock releasing with a soft click.

As the door swung open, revealing the room beyond, they exchanged a look of quiet triumph.

# CHAPTER 9





In the room was a single familiar podium standing proud amidst the silence. The remainder of the room was swallowed by dusky shadow, the feeble torchlight from the hall barely revealing the cluttered arrays of priestly vestments, stacks of Enanhks, their spines glinting with gold lettering, and other supplies.

Nyssa and Vallen hardly dared to breathe, urgently scanning the room for amulets. Upon the surface of the imposing podium was a familiar box. Vallen remembered that box from the sacrifice day where it had been filled with amulets that had been distributed to the shrikes and priests escorting him into the Dying Wilds. Adjacent to the box rested a colossal tome with the name Gutter Shrike inscribed somewhere inside it. It was the final name included in a century-long list of sacrifices. Vallen wanted to rip the book to shreds but controlled himself.

They approached the podium cautiously. Their soft footfalls brought an odd, surreal echo to the hushed room. When they got to the box, Vallen stopped and stared at the image of a hyva decorated on its lid. He reached his scarred hand out, his calloused fingers tracing the cover.

Taking a small breath, he lifted the lid. An array of at least a dozen amulets greeted them – each one attached to a leather thong, glinting faintly in the dim illumination of the room.

Vallen selected one, his fingertips brushing over the pink stone before passing it onto Nyssa. His own amulet, the one she'd given him, remained around his neck and hidden under his tunic.

Nyssa dropped the amulet over her neck and tucked it under her clothing. Together, they checked the room, leaving the scene as pristine as they found it, except for one less amulet. Vallen ensured the door was locked behind them.

“We don’t have much time,” Vallen said. “The priests could return at any moment.”

Nyssa nodded, scanning the hall as if she expected a priest to leap out at any moment.

“We need to find Tarric quickly. If we can’t, we’ll have to give up the search,” Vallen warned, an apology on his face.

Nyssa swallowed hard but nodded. She scrubbed at her cheeks as if reinvigorating herself. “Let’s do it then, Val. Let’s find him.”

With that, they slipped back into the maze-like hallways. Treading lightly, they moved through the underbelly of the sanctum, their progress halting as they paused frequently, their ears straining, their hearts lodged in their throats.

Vallen hadn’t seen much of the lower level of the sanctum in his years as a shrike. He’d only been to the storage room and the dungeons a few times. He had always hated this part of his job. He’d witnessed what the priests would do to their prisoners. ‘Cleansing’ was pure torture, paraded as sanctified religious rituals.

As they entered the corridor where the dungeon cells lined the walls, Vallen swallowed the heady wave of despair and regret that threatened to swamp him. He gathered his courage, pushing down the burden weighing on his heart, and led the way to the dank prison cells, where the Enumerii imprisoned the kingdom’s forsaken souls.

The entrance to the dungeon wing loomed before them, pungent with desolation that seemed to emanate from the very stones themselves.

At each cell they passed, Vallen stopped and glanced into the small slot in each door. He blocked the view into the cells – Nyssa didn't need to be scarred by anything she might see there. Thankfully, most were empty. No one lasted long in the tender mercy of the Enumerii. The dungeon air felt moist and heavy; the scent of mold, rusted metal, and human suffering seeped into their clothes.

Vallen was beginning to believe that Tarric must be held at the main prison as they got to the few remaining doors. However, he found Tarric in one of the last cells. Vallen almost didn't recognize the mudlark at first glance. He looked battered and bruised, his clothes dirty and torn. He was curled up on a thin pallet, appearing to be asleep.

“Tarric,” Vallen's hoarse whisper broke through the stillness. The boy stirred, his ragged breathing rasping against the hushed silence. Time stood still as Vallen held his breath, waiting for Tarric to respond.

Slowly, Tarric raised his head. The weak glimmers of torchlight traced the lines of suffering on his bruised face. His face was a swollen mask of blues, purples, and reds, the bruises glaring grotesquely against the pallor of his skin. His eyes were bleak and hollow but flickered with recognition. He blinked in befuddlement as he looked at Vallen. The confusion in his eyes deepened before being replaced with shock.

“Vallen...? Is—is that you?” Tarric's voice was ragged, like a stick broom grating against stone. “I... I don't understand... I thought you were sacrificed. They told me you were chosen as one of Enum's Tributes.”

Vallen's heart clenched. He exchanged a quick look with Nyssa. He didn't consider that he would have to burden his friend with the truth of the sacrifices. He would have stayed hidden and let Nyssa help Tarric if he had thought ahead. But it was too late now. He felt guilty that he was about to rip away the façades and expose the treacherous underbelly of the kingdom. Although, based on the state of Tarric's face, the boy was well aware of the rot inside the heart of Erishum.

“Don't worry, Tarric. Nyssa and I will get you out of here.”

At the mention of Nyssa's name, Tarric began to cry.

“Nyssa... I'm so sorry. I gave them your name. I... I was too weak,” Tarric stammered out between hiccupping tears.

Nyssa gently nudged Vallen away from the opening to talk to Tarric. When she caught sight of Tarric's face, a whimper of shock and horror escaped her lips, but she quickly recovered. “Tarric, there is no need for apologies. Vallen warned me that no one can keep silent when the Enumerii questions them, that their ways are too brutal and effective to resist. It's alright, truly. Please don't cry.”

Eyes wild with panic, Tarric grabbed the grating that separated him from Nyssa. Tears had left tracks in the grime smeared on his cheeks. “It's not just about the Enumerii's questions, Nyssa. Y-you're in grave danger now. The Enumerii will be coming for you. They'll hunt you down like dogs after a hare. You can't let them catch you.”

Nyssa's gaze turned steely and sure. “They won't find me. We're leaving Erishum, Tarric.”

“Leaving? What do you mean?”

Vallen told Tarric the truth of the Dying Wilds and the hyva as quickly as possible. If they had set the building on

fire, Tarric wouldn't have been more shocked. "Nyssa and I are leaving Erishum behind. I think we might head to the kingdom of Puzur. You should come with us. We can go grab another amulet for you."

Tarric shook his head. "I can't come with you. I must take care of Timi, and I won't risk him in the Dying Wilds. The Enumerii have already said that they will release me because I told them what I know."

"Tarric," Vallen began, his words measured. "You need to listen and listen closely. The Enumerii... they cannot know about me and Nyssa. Not a whisper, not a hint. Do you understand?"

Tarric nodded, his eyes filled with fervent understanding.

"Good," Vallen continued, his stern eyes boring into Tarric's. "And what's more, they cannot know that you know the truth about the hyva. Not a word, Tarric. Not one single word. If they even get a hint that you know, they'll put you to the blade before they risk that information getting out."

Tarric swallowed hard. His lips began to tremble as the direness of the situation became more evident.

Quickly, Vallen extended his arm and gave the hand Tarric still had gripped around the window slot's ledge a reassuring squeeze. He clasped his hand lightly as he lent his voice a calming tone. "Look. As far as the Enumerii are concerned, they either believe I'm a hyva or in one's belly. They won't be lookin' for me. You understand? So, they have no reason to question you about a ghost."

Vallen's eyes roamed over Tarric's face. After a few heartbeats, Tarric returned his glance, his features set in a grim mask of resolve, his tears now dry.



“Good... Good... You just need to keep your head low. Let them forget about you.”

“But... we can’t just let them get away with this,” Tarric protested.

Vallen huffed a small, almost amused breath. “When you get out of here, go see Marun Egmond. Do you know who that is?” When Tarric nodded, Vallen continued, “He’s going to be your most likely ally against the priests and the king. He should also be able to protect you if it comes down to it. But... be careful. There are very few you can truly trust in this kingdom. Remember that.”

When Tarric nodded again, Vallen exhaled, his body slumping with an unspoken relief. Their secret was safe for now. Once the kingdom and the Dying Wilds were far behind them, it wouldn’t matter if the truth of the hyvas was spilled.

Vallen gave Tarric a regretful look. “We must go now. We can’t risk getting caught.”

Tarric nodded. “May Enum protect you,” he murmured.

Nyssa stepped closer to the opening in the door, whispering encouraging words and a tear-filled goodbye to Tarric. Vallen knew that Nyssa had counted Tarric as a true friend and would miss him.

Finally, Vallen gently nudged her. “We must go.”

She nodded and, with a final goodbye to Tarric, turned and followed Vallen. Just before they exited the hall that housed the dungeon, Vallen looked back to see Tarric’s face pressed to the window slot in his cell door. Vallen raised a hand in goodbye, which Tarric returned.

# CHAPTER 10





Vallen and Nyssa moved quietly through the old passages, heading back the way they'd come. Vallen's thoughts were still with Tarric. He felt immense guilt for leaving the boy behind but understood why he had to do it. His sobs still echoed in Vallen's ears, a grim reminder of the fate they had left behind – not just of Tarric, but for all of Erishum.

Suddenly, footfalls echoed through the cold stone corridor. Vallen paused, his body tensing, his eyes flicking to Nyssa.

With a jerk of his head, he led her into an adjacent hallway where a massive tapestry woven with the faded symbols of Erishum hung on a wall. When he grabbed one edge to usher Nyssa behind it, he realized that the tapestry covered an arched alcove with a large wooden door hidden behind it. They both quickly hid. Holding his breath, Vallen gingerly peeked between the faded cloth and the cold stone wall, his gaze sweeping the deserted corridor for any sign of approaching intruders.

Nyssa's hand found his in the darkness. He turned back to look at her. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, his grip reassuring and steady as he placed a finger over his lips, signaling for silence.

The footsteps came closer, sounding rushed. Vallen stiffened, pressing himself and Nyssa further into the shadows. He peered through the minuscule gap between the tapestry and the unyielding stone wall, his keen eyes scanning the dimly lit corridor beyond their precarious hiding spot. Two ghostly figures materialized, robes of the high Enumerii order

swooshing against the cold stone floor. They huffed along in hurried strides, oblivious to the figures peering out from behind the tapestry.

“Hurry, Reen. Berossus is already enraged as it is. If we leave him waiting, he will string us up by our toes,” one of the priests whispered, his voice high and frantic.

“I’m coming. I can’t believe there is fighting in the streets. I never thought I’d see the day,” the other priest responded, his breath huffing with exertion as the two men rushed down the hall.

Their low mutterings faded as the priests turned a corner. The sounds began to recede, then vanished, much to Vallen’s relief.

Suddenly, he felt a slight tug at his sleeve. Nyssa was pointing to something behind them in the narrow space they were hiding in. His breath hitched, not from fear but from the puzzlement at what she was showing him.

Within the dim confines of their makeshift hideaway, a strange ethereal glow seeped from under the door behind them. It shimmered with an almost silvery, pulsating radiance reminding Vallen of moonlight.

The mystery made Vallen’s hand itch for the doorknob. But his mind knew that to linger here was an invitation to danger. His heart pounded a tumultuous rhythm in his chest; they couldn’t afford another risk, not when they were so close to freedom.

“What *is* that?” Nyssa whispered. “Have you been in there before?”

Vallen shook his head. “I had no idea this door was even here. I wish we had time to look, but we must go.”

Nyssa nodded but jiggled the doorknob anyway, finding it locked. With a sheepish shrug, she gave him a grin, which Vallen returned with a shake of his head.

Reluctantly, they peeled themselves away. As they emerged from the shelter of the tapestry, they stopped and ensured they were alone. The two exchanged a solemn look before hurrying back to the stairwell.

When they emerged from the sanctum, they found a kingdom embroiled in residual chaos.

Usually immersed in vibrant trade and bustling crowds, the city was in the process of being locked down. There were still spots where citizens were battling with shrikes, but most of the kingdom had sought the safety of home. It made their trek back to Nyssa's home incredibly difficult and dangerous. As they crept past the empty and silent marketplace, Nyssa stared at the smashed food and overturned stalls with shocked, guilty eyes. Shops had been left empty with doors still propped open. In the garment district, fabrics like silk and cotton still hung on their display racks, fluttering in the wind. Many stalls had been ravaged and left to ruin, their toppled frames a chilling reminder of the unrest echoing through the stone-paved streets.

Trudging through the desolate city, Vallen and Nyssa avoided the areas where there was fighting, deliberately seeking abandoned paths. Occasionally they saw one or two other people scurrying past, heads down and scared. They moved quickly, their worn and ragged garments fluttering in the wind. These poor souls flitted away hastily like frightened birds. All was silent, save for their ragged breaths and softly scuffling footsteps.

Shrikes and priests roamed the streets, their posture stiff and mouths in hostile grimaces. Avoiding the men patrolling

the kingdom had been a next-to-impossible task, as it seemed like every road had a contingent of shrikes stalking it. Every familiar turn and alley had become impassable. Several times, Nyssa and Vallen had to hide and backtrack their steps to avoid detection. When they finally arrived at the River Assur, the only barrier keeping them from temporary safety, they had to ford the river rather than risk taking one of the bridges. The slow-moving water had felt like a treacherous foe, its icy clutches threatening to capture them in its depths.

Vallen's heart was pounding when they finally slipped inside Nyssa's home. Never before had he been so glad to be back in the shadow district, in the very alleyways of his childhood where he had been scorned and ridiculed. For many years, the only thing he'd cared about in the shadow district had been Nyssa.

Finally, they collapsed onto the pallet together. Trying to slow his breath, Vallen rolled to check on Nyssa.

His hand fluttered over her, his roughened fingers lightly brushing her damp cheek. Her eyes flickered open, exhausted relief shining in their depths. "Are you alright?" he whispered. Ever since she'd seen what the Enumerii had done to Tarric, she'd seemed diminished and withdrawn – not that the circumstances in the streets didn't make the situation much worse.

She managed a nod, even as she tried to suppress a shudder. "I'm fine," she whispered back, trying to infuse her voice with a courage she probably didn't feel. "When can we leave here? I don't want to spend another minute in this Enum-forsaken kingdom."

What a difference a day made. Just that morning, she had been desperate to hold onto the life she'd been building. And

now, partially thanks to Vallen, that life had been completely wiped away.

His heart twinged, and Nyssa's drawn face reminded him of the lost souls they had passed through the streets. "I know," he reassured her, his gaze softening. "I'm sorry about all this, Nyssa."

"We should leave... at once," Nyssa urged, hands twisting anxiously in the tattered edges of her cloak. Her fearful face hardened into resolve. However, Vallen didn't miss the tremble in her voice, the apprehension clinging to her words like frost on a winter morning. Seeing what the Enumerii had done to Tarric had shaken her and made the threats against her all the more prevalent. He didn't blame her for wanting to run; he shared the sentiment. But there were other dangers to consider.

"We need to wait," Vallen suggested, looking up at the bits of sky he could see peeking through Nyssa's roof. "Tonight, under the cover of darkness, we'll sneak out through the river portcullis. After everything we've gone through today, we owe it to ourselves to take every precaution."

She nodded, "We'll wait for dark."

Vallen turned from contemplating the roof, his gaze finding hers once more. He extended a hand toward her, a silent invitation. "Nyssa," he said, his voice a soft echo in the small room. "You're trembling."

She looked down at her hands. A faint expression of surprise flitted across her features. "I... I didn't realize..."

"You've been so strong, Nyssa. Much stronger than anyone else in your shoes would've been. Your reaction is normal. I'm shaking too, although I suspect some of that was

from the river's frigid temperature." Vallen swallowed against the lump that had risen in his throat. "But even the strongest warriors need rest."

"I'm not a warrior, Vallen." Nyssa's laugh was dry, more bitter than humorous.

"Maybe not in the traditional sense," Vallen conceded. "But a person doesn't have to swing a sword to be a warrior. What you've been through is worse than many shrikes have ever faced. And you've done it with more honor and heart than any of them."

Nyssa blushed but didn't argue.

Vallen squeezed her hand softly, noting how her muscles gradually relaxed under his touch. He gave her a small, encouraging smile, letting his thumb brush against the back of her hand. "Good. Let's get some rest. I promise we'll be gone before the next sunrise. We'll get out of Erishum. Find a better place."

Nyssa's eyes filled with tears, and she nodded, giving his hand a final squeeze before letting go and turning to ready herself for sleep. She did not see Vallen's desperate look that followed her nor the silent plea he sent up to Enum as he prepared to watch over her, his mind filled with the worries of their uncertain future.

Vallen stepped out of the room as Nyssa changed into dry clothes, pulled from their travel packs. Vallen changed his garments as well. He positioned himself so that he was leaning back against the wall near the only entrance into the room. He had Nyssa take the pallet. He was trained to be able to go without sleep for long stretches, but with his healing injuries, he knew that they both needed to get some rest for the trek through the Dying Wilds. It would take every bit of their



strength, and he wanted them both well rested before they began. Vallen watched, his eyes lowered to bare slits as Nyssa rolled herself into an old ratty blanket. He was glad when her breathing evened out relatively quickly. She had to be completely exhausted after the previous few days. And things would probably get worse for them before they got better.

As she slept, Vallen noted the restless shift of Nyssa's body, the way her breathing occasionally lost its rhythm, the slight frowning of her brow. He knew she was fighting battles in her sleep.

Vallen walked softly to her, crouching so he could lay his cloak over Nyssa's sleeping form to help ward off the chill in the air. His heart thudded unevenly as he watched her sleep, her cheeks flushed with the biting cold. He wanted to offer comfort; to tuck a rogue strand of hair back behind her ear and tell her it would be alright. But the truth was, he wasn't sure. So, he merely stayed by her side, his presence a silent promise in the growing dark.

Returning to his spot by the entrance, Vallen forced himself to close his eyes and get some sleep. The heavy weight of fatigue quickly pulled him under.

Even in his sleep, his senses remained somewhat alert, tinged with the gutter-born instinct that had been honed into a fine point within the ranks of the shrikes. He had left the streets behind, but the grime had not left his veins, the essence of survival ingrained deep within.

# CHAPTER 11





The city sat cloaked in the eerie silence that only the pre-dawn hours could conjure. The skyline of Erishum rose defiantly against the backdrop of the dark night, seeming more austere in the dimness. The only light was from the moon and the occasional torch held by a patrolman.

Vallen and Nyssa silently trekked to River Assur's southern grate, each burdened with a stuffed travel pack and an amulet around their neck. Hugging the border wall where it met the river, Vallen looked around intently, tracing the streets of the city, scanning for the telltale glint of a shrike's armor or the pallid silhouette of an Enumerii priest. His heart thudded with both exhilaration and fear, a sensation he hadn't known since he was an orphan wandering these same streets. Together, they entered the river's frigid water. It was high tide, but if they stuck close to the edge of the portcullis nearest to the shore, they should be able to keep their footing. Vallen hissed a choked breath when the water met his skin.

"Be quick, Nyssa," he whispered, his voice barely rising over the sound of the river. Nyssa nodded, handing him her pack before turning to the wide timbers of the portcullis.

With the agility of a mudlark and the desperation of an escaped prisoner, Nyssa began to slide through the wide lattice. The eerie sounds of the night were punctuated by her quiet grunts of exertion and the occasional scrape as she forced herself through the opening.

When her feet finally hit the water on the other side, Vallen grinned at her proudly. She nodded to signal her relative

safety.

Vallen began passing their travel packs through the grate, his eyes never leaving the streets behind them from which a guard or priest could emerge at any moment. One by one, the packs found their way into Nyssa's waiting hands.

Finished with this task, he appraised the meager space left in the grate. Nyssa fit just fine, but he knew it would be a struggle for him. Anxious but determined, he took a final inhale of Erishum's air before beginning his painstaking shimmy through the grate. His physique, trained for the battle, strained against the compressive boundaries of the wooden grid.

His breath began to hitch, and his muscles screamed as he forced his way through inch by torturous inch. Vallen gritted his teeth, summoning his willpower to ignore the panic clawing at the edges of his conscience. To get stuck half in and half out of Erishum was too terrible a thought to contemplate.

And then, with one final, mighty heave, he tumbled out.

He landed heavily in the water, his knees and hands sinking deeply into the river's muddy bottom, fingers clenching around clumps of wet muck. Gasping for breath, he glanced back at the fortified wall of Erishum. Out here in the Dying Wilds, he knew the realities waiting for them were no less daunting. Yet, faced with the truth within Erishum's walls, there was no choice but to press forward.

With relief, Vallen stood up, swished the mud off his hands, and accepted his pack from Nyssa. The weight of it gave him an odd sense of comfort – it was familiar, tangible, and real in a world that seemed to be spiraling out of control. The river's icy tendrils sliced through their winter clothes like a sharp knife through butter. They needed to move, to reach

solid ground, before the frigid water leached away their strength, bit by numbing bit.

“Let’s go,” he murmured, and without more words, they started toward the river’s edge. The shore was a gnarled tangle of trees and vines, forming a knotted curtain to the wilderness beyond. Their progression was slow, hampered by the dull drag of the river’s current and the biting cold slowly creeping into their bones.

The water lapped against the roots and moss-covered rocks of the embankment. Nyssa moved deftly despite her chattering teeth, leading the way. Finding a break in the dense underbrush, she gestured for Vallen to follow her to the shore.

Each step through the water was a battle against the ceaseless cold and tiredness that clung to them. Despite their lingering exhaustion, they pressed on, scrambling over and around the tangle keeping them from solid ground. Vallen hissed in pain and irritation when a curving thorn almost the length of his pinky snagged his sleeve and dug a long, burning scratch down his arm. His only mercy was it was on the right arm, which until then had been uninjured.

Once they finally emerged from the river, the water cascading off their sodden clothes in rivulets, they both stood panting in the darkness at the foot of the imposing wilderness. Vallen glanced at Nyssa, her form dwarfed by the massive trees. She nodded back. He pulled his amulet from under his tunic and laid it on top of his shirt. Nyssa quickly followed suit. It felt best to make sure any hyva that wandered near saw the pink stone immediately.

They shouldered their packs and stepped together into the toothy jaws of the Dying Wilds. The leaves rustled ominously

overhead, reminding Vallen of the whispering of an angry crone.

Working together, Nyssa and Vallen navigated the snarled wilderness with a slow, careful tenacity. Gnarled tree roots surged from the earth like monstrous serpents, their slick, moss-ridden surfaces threatening to send them sprawling, while skeletal branches twisted overhead in a macabre display. They helped each other over each obstacle, Nyssa lending her subtle strength as Vallen hoisted her over the most formidable roots. In return, she navigated through the tangle, finding a path through the dense undergrowth.

With a grunt, Vallen pulled out his dagger to slice through the obstructive bushes and dense brush, carving a path through the thicket. Their progress was slow but steady until the ground beneath their mud-soaked boots began to turn solid. They both took a moment to catch their breath and drink some water. Vallen glanced back at Erishum, noticing a single torch shifting on the barrier wall, signaling a guard on patrol.

“We need to make sure we don’t stray far from the river,” Vallen pointed toward the water, the river as dark as ink against the landscape. “We should keep moving until we’re sure we’re out of sight from the border wall.”

Nyssa nodded, looking like a miserable half-drowned cat.

“We can’t go far like this,” Vallen waved a hand at their wet clothes. “We’ll find a spot to make camp, then we can make a fire.” Nyssa perked up at the mention of fire. Yet again, he found himself admiring her determination. Soft-spoken Nyssa. He’d always known that she had a bright defiant spark that was hidden inside her, shielded and nurtured by her docile exterior.

“A fire,” she echoed. “And dry clothing. We’ll catch our death if we don’t change out of our wet clothes soon.”

Vallen nodded, grinding his teeth to suppress their chattering. It sounded like heaven to him. He glanced down at his clothes, stained a muddy brown and clinging to his skin like a leech, and frowned.

“And rest,” she added, her voice so light it was almost carried away by the wind. Nyssa gave Vallen a sidelong glance, concern flickering in her eyes. “For both of us.”

“Rest,” he sighed, wanting nothing more than to fall into unconsciousness’s soft, tempting embrace. It felt like they’d been on the move for a fortnight even though not even an hour had passed.

They both trod silently on. The bleak forest hummed with a constant undercurrent of noise: the whispers of wind meandering through bony trees, the eerie clack-clack of gnarled branches grazing against each other, and the shrill far-off echo of a hyva. Each time one of the monsters shrieked in the distance, Nyssa would brush her hand against her amulet as if to reassure herself that it was still around her neck.

Beams of moonlight reached them through the branches overhead. The pink stones seemed to radiate in the light.

Vallen kept one hand on his dagger as they walked. Other than the hyva and the cold, he didn’t know what kind of danger lay within the dark embrace of the Dying Wilds. One hour bled into the next like ink on parchment. The task of navigating the dense undergrowth of the Dying Wilds was a relentless trial; each soggy footstep sinking into the mossy undergrowth, each snagging branch and thorny vine proving more treacherous than the snares of any human hunter. Vallen

pushed forward, keeping a watchful eye on Nyssa, who followed, unfaltering but undeniably weary.

After a while, the unending warped vegetation gave way to a rocky terrain, which required more climbing and maneuvering around clusters of boulders coated in shale. Their boots, still damp from the river, kept slipping on the loose scree, their pathway narrowing treacherously between two stern rises of rocky outcroppings.

When the path finally widened, Vallen spotted a rock face that rose from the earth like a behemoth. A convenient overhang was carved out by eons of wind and weather, providing an improvised shelter to protect them from the biting cold. When he tugged Nyssa to a stop and pointed to the alcove, she surveyed their newfound sanctuary with relief and gratitude.

With frozen, numb hands, they gathered dried branches from the vicinity, their bodies protesting the added exertion. Pawing through his pack, Vallen grabbed his flint and knelt to start the fire. The shower of sparks turned feeble twigs into a comforting blaze, its glow warming their faces and casting dancing shadows on the rock face.

Nyssa sat with an exhausted sigh, resting against the rock face, her posture sagging. Her deep brown eyes reflected the flickering flames, making them dance with amber light. After ensuring that the fire would not die down, Vallen retreated to a respectful distance, busying himself to gather more firewood. It also allowed Nyssa privacy to change out of her wet clothing. When she was done, Vallen returned to the fire, swapping his sodden garments for drier ones.

Vallen laid his wet clothing on a nearby flat rock, close enough to the fire to dry but far enough not to catch an ember.



He sat beside Nyssa, their bodies soaking up the heat from their makeshift hearth. They sat in harmonious silence, the chill slowly chased from their bones, their shared plight forging an unspoken bond between them under the indifferent gaze of the Dying Wilds.

Deciding to check the perimeter one last time before bed, Vallen walked their campsite's edges, ensuring nothing dangerous was nearby. Nyssa unfolded an old blanket over the ground near the fire, their only barrier against the unforgiving, cold ground of the Dying Wilds. He walked over to her, laying his cloak on top of her body. "It'll help with the cold. I will head to the river's edge to collect some reeds or vines to work on a fish trap."

She gave him a grateful look, snuggling under the material. She stared up at Vallen with luminous eyes, "I'll save a space for you when you return." She patted the ground in front of her, offering to share the sleeping pallet. Vallen gave her a grateful smile, finding himself unable to speak. He retreated to the thick undergrowth bordering the river's edge. The fire offered limited illumination but gave him enough light to identify and collect a selection of suitable reeds, vines, and some thin, straight sticks for his makeshift fish trap.

By the time he returned, the fire-painted silhouette of Nyssa was curled up, asleep under his cloak. Her slow, steady breathing filled Vallen with a rare tranquility. The moonlight caught in her hair, framing her sleeping face with an ethereal halo. A smile broke on Vallen's lips as he allowed himself this brief, quiet reprieve, watching her sleep peacefully.

# CHAPTER 12





When Vallen awoke, he was wrapped in the warmth of his cloak. The steady susurrus of the Dying Wilds was lit by the dawn.

For a moment, he was confused by his surroundings before he remembered everything. When he'd come to sleep the night before, he put himself at Nyssa's back so that she was closer to the fire, and he was between her and the Dying Wilds. Now, the space where Nyssa had slept was empty. It was filled only with cold air, making dread unfurl in his stomach. He sat up abruptly. A quick survey of their makeshift camp confirmed what he feared: Nyssa was nowhere in sight.

"Nyssa?" His voice was a hushed whisper against the vast expanse, though his heart was hammering in his chest. The dread deepened, clawing at his insides. He tried again, this time louder, attempting to keep the panic from echoing in his call. "Nyssa!"

Her sweet voice called back to him from somewhere near the river's edge. "Vallen, I'm at the river!"

Inhaling a deep breath of profound relief, Vallen moved in the direction of Nyssa's voice. Pushing aside branches and stepping over brambles, he found his way to the river.

Barefoot, with her trouser legs rolled up to her knees, Nyssa stood in the midst of the rippling water. The morning sunlight was caught in her dark hair, still tangled from sleep. In her hands was a long stick, sharply pointed with three prongs on the end. She was staring intently at the shallow water at her feet, her brow furrowed in concentration.

And then, with one swift, smooth motion, she thrust the stick into the muddy riverbed. Nyssa lifted the spear from the water, presenting Vallen with an eel writhing frantically on the prongs.

“Breakfast!” Nyssa exclaimed, holding her still wiggling prize aloft. A beaming smile stretched across her face. There was a streak of mud on her cheek, her eyes alive with delight and triumph.

Vallen felt a warmth course through him. He was immensely grateful to have her alongside him on this journey.

“Excellent catch! Since you caught it, how ‘bout I dress it and cook it?” Vallen offered.

Nyssa turned around from the river’s edge, her cheeks pink from the compliment, giving him an eager nod. She handed over her handmade spear with the still-writhing eel attached.

“You check the fish trap?” he queried, his eyes never leaving the eel. He’d finished the trap the night before and set it in a spot under a tree that he thought might get results.

She nodded, then gave him a slight shrug. “It was empty.”

Nyssa followed Vallen as he headed back to the camp. While he gutted the eel, she gathered more fuel.

Nyssa heaped dry, crackling leaves onto the remains of their fire. Then, she carefully fed delicate twigs into the rising flames, coaxing them back to life. She huddled close, hands outstretched, absorbing its warmth into her skin. She hadn’t complained, but Vallen could well imagine how cold the river’s water had left her.

As the sun chased away the last of the twilight, Vallen watched as the first glimpse of the Dying Wilds emerged from the lingering shadows. The vast wilderness, a tapestry of

gnarled, skeletal trees and unforgiving underbrush, seemed to writhe under the muted light. A chill wind rustled through desiccated leaves, making them clack and creak.

The Dying Wilds stretched out around them, dressed in somber gray and black hues, an expanse of wilderness that looked almost ethereal in the pale morning light, its jagged peaks and gnarled trees bathed in a somber glow that hinted at the untamed beauty and dangers lurking within. Patches of formerly vibrant vegetation had transformed into sickly festering mounds, leafless branches reaching out like spindly fingers clawing for the meager warmth of the sun.

The sight of it sent inexplicable tendrils of dread slithering down Vallen's spine. It was easy to see why tales of this forsaken place filled the people of Erishum with dread, even without the added horror of the hyvas.

The faint tendrils of dawn had scarcely illuminated the eerie gloom of their makeshift campsite when Nyssa, with a look of bright-eyed interest, began to explore the area surrounding their camp. Vallen kept an eye on her from the far edge, near their fire. His gaze tracked her with a lightness fluttering in his chest as he watched. Her warmth and good cheer were a stark contrast against the death-stilled backdrop of the Dying Wilds.

Her hand brushed against the gnarled bark of a tree that had once been lush and green but was now just another blackened husk. Despite its lifeless appearance, she carefully plucked a leaf, a gasp rising from her throat as the leaf emitted a satisfying rustling crackle.

There was a gleam in her large, brown eyes, akin to the first light coming alive in a dawn sky. Even amid the sinister

and desolate woods, Nyssa found something to marvel at, something to appreciate.

Vallen could not help the curling grin that began to light his face, warming his hardened features. It was a rare and precious thing – this lightness against the overwhelming darkness of their circumstances.

What a different morning it would have been without Nyssa's effervescence. She was his beacon.

Despite the decrepit forest around them, Vallen almost felt a sense of contentment as he threaded the eel on a stick and set it over the fire. Working companionably together with Nyssa reminded him of the simpler days of their childhood as they mudlarked along River Assur.

Against the backdrop of danger and uncertainty, sharing a quiet easy morning with Nyssa was everything Vallen had ever desired.

Once the eel finished – cooked to a crisp and imbued with a smokey flavor – Vallen and Nyssa passed the stick back and forth, trading bites. Vallen had never acquired the taste for eel, but he was never one to turn his nose up at food. He ate his half of the meal without complaint, ignoring the oily, fishy flavor. Nyssa, ever frugal, nibbled at her share, making the food last. Once the meal concluded, with only bones left as evidence of their breakfast, the pair doused the fire, making sure not to leave any embers still burning.

Standing and stretching his back, Vallen gathered their scant belongings, packing their now sun-dried clothes and bedding. The sun cast long, stretching shadows as it began its daily climb, painting the sky with pastel hues. With the air just starting to warm around them, they set off, forging a path through the Dying Wilds.

As Nyssa and Vallen cautiously trod through the undergrowth, their every footstep was made with calculated care. Each step seemed treacherous, whether it was slippery decaying leaves underfoot, or a root jutting up from the ground to trip them, or rocky shale that slid away under their boots.

Stately yet grotesque trees loomed over the pair, casting peculiar shadows that twisted and danced with their movement. The canopy above allowed only glimpses of the sky, the blotchy blues, and the fading purples masked by the interwoven branches. An unnatural oppression hung heavy on the air, stifling like a blanket dropped over a flame.

Nyssa's eyes would dart back and forth across their path as if continuously expecting an attack. Vallen knew how deep her fear of the hyvas ran. Luckily, the beasts seemed to stay far away. They occasionally heard a distant cry, but they never came close.

Despite that, Vallen stayed near at hand, ready to defend her if need be. His eyes also constantly scanned their surroundings.

Vallen watched over Nyssa like a hawk. He would never forgive himself if she got hurt on this journey. She'd never wanted to leave the safety of Erishum, and it was his fault that she had to leave her life behind. The least he could do was protect her.

Using every ounce of his training as a shrike and his survival instincts honed from a childhood spent in the slums, Vallen adjusted his senses to the Dying Wilds. He was alert to the faintest of signals, from the soft rustle of leaves to the far-off bird calls, even to the ebb and flow of the landscape surrounding them.

As the sun hit its zenith, Vallen and Nyssa took a quick lunch break before venturing a little deeper into the forest, the ground underneath their feet crunching and cracking as they continued their journey. The riverbank had become impassable for a while, forcing them further into the Dying Wilds. Although they could still hear the gentle gurgle of the river, they could no longer see it. It felt like the forest had swallowed them and were deep in the heart of the Dying Wilds, uncomfortably surrounded by twisted trees and their grasping, almost grotesque branches. Sunlight fought to get through the warped canopy, making the forest floor a mosaic of light and shadow. When Vallen took a deep breath, the air was hard and cold, as though starved for the nurturing warmth of sunlight.

A startling splash of vivid green halted Vallen and Nyssa in their tracks. Rising defiantly from the twisted embrace of a blackened bramble, a single vibrant emerald vine wove itself through the decay, fresh and verdant, thriving in stark contrast to the twisted gloomy forest surrounding it. The singular vine was spectacularly out of place, like a dazzling jewel laid conspicuously amid a palette of ash and mud, an anomaly so stark that at first Vallen thought it was a trick of his mind. The sight arrested Vallen. The audacious strip of green momentarily usurped the somber pallor of the Dying Wilds. Its radiance was a beacon that drew them both cautiously closer.

Vallen gently nudged Nyssa behind him and drew his dagger. After watching the plant for a minute, he extended the blade carefully toward the vine, nudging it gently at first. The vine reacted as any plant would – swaying slightly at the touch, showing no sign of sudden or strange motion. Encouraged by this, Vallen pressed the sharp blade into the flesh of the vine, slicing a narrow cut across it. Again, the vine behaved in an ordinary manner, with sap oozing from the



wound, painting the blade with a pale green sheen. The air filled with the fresh smell of grass and the sharp astringent scent of sap, a comforting aroma Vallen associated with the early mornings in Erishum's fields.

Nyssa peered at the vine, her brows furrowing in thought. "It's a quenti vine," she whispered, just loud enough for Vallen to hear. Surprise flickered in her eyes. "But that makes no sense. How is it growing here, in this supposedly corrupt place?" Her voice was filled with curiosity and awe.

Nyssa touched a finger to the trickle of sap dripping from the quenti vine, smearing it between her fingers. She pinned Vallen with a mischievous look. "Do you remember the time we almost got caught stealing berries from old Marun Tislain's fields?"

Vallen chuckled, nodding in remembrance. He gave a pretend shudder. "Pretty hard to forget."

Nyssa grinned. "We barely escaped the farmer's dog, remember? Ran right into a thicket of quenti vines to hide, didn't we?"

Vallen burst into laughter at the memory, the sound ringing in the quiet of the Dying Wilds. "That hound was nothing compared to the discovery that I was allergic to quenti sap," he said, rubbing his arm as if he could still feel the ghostly itch.

Nyssa dissolved into giggles, laughing so hard that tears pricked her eyes. "You looked like you had the pox for weeks!"

"Oh, that's rich," Vallen retorted, nudging her with a playful elbow. He glanced down at his arms as if he half expected to see them riddled with crusty clusters of tiny red welts. "I assure you, the itching was worse than how I

looked,” he muttered, the corners of his mouth twitching with a suppressed smile.

Nyssa’s giggles softened into a chuckle. The echo of laughter between them felt like stolen moments of respite, a welcome distraction from the foreboding doom that hung in the air like a sword waiting to fall.

They both stood there for a moment, marveling at the anomaly of the bright plant amid such gloom. No answer came, not that they were expecting one. They shared a lingering glance, and then with a shrug, they moved on, the dash of green becoming nothing more than a speck in the grey behind them.

As Vallen and Nyssa journeyed deeper into the twisting heart of the Dying Wilds, they stumbled upon more tiny pockets of vibrant greenery. To Vallen, it felt like a good portent, a testament to life’s tenacious pulse vibrating beneath the dead forest’s rotting veil.

They stumbled upon one such oasis, a lush garden of soft moss and verdant ferns nestled in a valley created by some broken boulders. Seeing such pockets of brightness was a welcome relief, like a cool breeze on a hot day; it gave Vallen hope that they could escape, even if momentarily, the eerie clutch of the Dying Wilds.

Another time, it was just a single green sapling in the middle of a pile of dead leaves. A single, lone meadowlark perched on the sapling, trilling an aria. Nyssa had lightly stepped forward, a delighted gasp escaping her as she admired the fledgling tree, her fingers lightly tracing the baby leaves.

The path alongside the river periodically succumbed to the thick undergrowth and wild tangles of the forest, forcing Vallen and Nyssa to veer deeper into the foreboding heart of

the Dying Wilds before they could navigate their way back to the river's edge.

As they strayed further away from the winding bends of the River Assur, they found more such lush glens or spots of bright greenery. Just beyond these pockets of beauty, the gnarled undergrowth and twisted brush crouched and pressed against the vegetation as if trying to swallow them.

With the curling tendrils of the evening mist beginning to settle around them, Vallen wrestled for a distraction – both for Nyssa, and his own fretful worry about the future, which had been spiraling toward darkness. Encased by the tall, wicked shadows of the trees surrounding them, he glanced at her. “Tell me about your week as a baker's apprentice, Nyssa,” Vallen suggested, the rumble of his voice cutting through the creeping silence of the Dying Wilds.

Nyssa blinked at him, momentarily startled from her thoughts. A soft, hesitant smile finally emerged on her face. “It was wonderful, Vallen,” she admitted, her voice warming.

She told tales of bustling kitchens steeped in the scent of fresh bread and early friendships formed over shared sacks of grain. “Mara Kayseri and Khinnis taught me how to knead dough, how different ingredients react with each other, and how to know when something is finished just by sight.”

Intrigued by her enthusiasm, Vallen asked about her favorite item to make. Nyssa's eyes sparkled, her face and hands animated as she described the process of making her favorite roll – a delicate craft that required hours of patient work and intricate knowledge of how to weave in cold chunks of butter between thin layers of dough.

“They are buttery, soft, and flaky, and when you pull them apart, you can see the layers. It's... it's just magical, you

know?" Nyssa explained, her voice low and even in a kind of reverent awe.

Vallen soaked in her words, his heart bittersweet with a surge of warmth that came with seeing her genuine glow of passion. He felt a sharp sting of guilt that Nyssa had to leave behind a life she had only just begun to find joy in. Her strength astounded him, as he silently pledged to ensure these sacrifices wouldn't be for naught. It made Vallen bury his growing fears while they ventured deeper into the unknown.

The sky began to seep into deep purples and inky blues, casting a peculiar light on the wilderness. Vallen's gaze kept drifting back to Nyssa. She had been quite the trooper, fighting her fear and exhaustion with determination. He admired her for that, just as he admired her pursuit of her dreams back in Erishum, and even more so how she risked that hard-won future to save him. She kept moving ever forward, just like the river they followed.

The decision to set up camp for the night came out of necessity. Nyssa's steps had gradually slowed, her slender frame drooping more and more as she silently tramped along the treacherous forest floor. Her face was pale under a layer of sweat and grime; dark circles underlined her usually bright eyes. And Vallen, himself, could feel the weariness gnawing at his bones, his muscles crying out for respite after hours of unforgiving hiking.

The chosen campsite was a small glen surrounded by towering trees, their gnarled branches forming an imperfect canopy above them. Dead leaves and fallen twigs crunched underfoot as Vallen cleared an area for them to lay down their weary bodies.

He spread his cloak on the ground, a makeshift bed, and gently guided Nyssa toward it.

“Rest, Nyssa. I’ll get the fire started.”

She fell onto the cloak with a grateful sigh, her dirt-smudged fingers gently tracing the soft material, an oddly peaceful expression replacing her initial grimace of exhaustion.

# CHAPTER 13





Vallen watched her in the faltering twilight. As her eyes immediately started to flutter closed, he chastised himself for his wistful thoughts. He reminded himself to devote his attention to starting the fire and focusing on his surroundings rather than spend all his time staring at Nyssa. He needed to remain dedicated to the present; to be vigilant against the constant danger posed by the wild creatures that filled these woods, especially the hyvas. It would be foolish to invest all his faith into the amulet and lower his defenses.

He felt the weight of his task – of getting Nyssa out of Erishum and providing a better life for her – press down on his shoulders with renewed pressure. With only his thoughts to keep him company, the silence made his ears ring. Vallen quickly got a fire started. He sat leaning against one of the bases of the trees. He should try to sleep, but, despite his exhaustion, his mind was too stirred up to allow him any rest.

He stared into the flames of the fire and let his mind spin. He often found it helpful to imagine the worst that could happen. Once he envisioned his fears, he could confront them and work through solutions and countermeasures.

Vallen's gaze hardened into the fire, sinking into a bone-deep contemplation of the worst possible outcomes that awaited him and Nyssa. His heart hammered in his chest as he allowed his mind to plumb the depths of his greatest fears; they made it to their destination, but instead of the welcoming, prosperous city they dreamt of, they find a place more corrupt than Erishum and without any opportunities to make a living. Instead of being welcomed, they were met with cold sneers

and damning glares, driven away from the city walls with threats and insults.

He envisaged them huddled together in some dirty alley, shivering in the cold unforgiving nights, rejected and alone. The fear of starvation surfaced, gnawing at his guts like a relentless beast, picturing Nyssa's once vibrant eyes losing their light, her body growing frail from hunger.

Clasping his hands into tight fists, Vallen recoiled from the imagined suffering. But rather than let the despair consume him, he bolstered himself, forcing his thoughts to improvise solutions to his terrifying projections. He would hone his skills of a shrike, offer it to anyone in need of protection. He would prove himself worthy, gain their trust, and slowly dispel any ill will held against them.

And if no employment was to be found, Vallen thought, he would lean on the resourcefulness that had kept him alive as a gutter rat before his life as a shrike. They would not starve; he would not allow it. He would fish, hunt, scavenge – do anything that would put food in their bellies. He would keep Nyssa warm, keep her safe, and above all else, keep her alive.

As the worst-case scenarios played out their dismal narratives in his mind, Vallen worked tirelessly to counter them, crafting strategies like a tactician preparing for an inevitable war.

Vallen found his gaze drawn to the flickering flames of the fire, the tendrils of light dancing in mesmerizing patterns against the inky gloom of the night. His mind, uncoiling from the tangles of anxiety, was captivated by the enticing motion. Vallen was tracing the shape of a flame as it wove through the air when a rustling sound sliced through the tranquil silence. It



was not a mere whisper of the wind or the innocent stirrings of a small nocturnal animal. His blood ran cold.

His hand instinctively slipped to the hilt of his knife resting by his thigh. The rustling amplified, coiling down from the thick network of leafy branches above. Not wanting to alert whatever was making that noise to his presence, Vallen froze, his ears and eyes straining in the dark. His pulse pounded in his temples, and his sharp gaze arrowed upwards seeking the source of the unnerving sound.

And then it appeared, slipping eerily from the shadowy veil of the tree canopy. A hyva descended, its serpentine body uncoiled like a nightmarish myth. The creature was a grotesque silhouette; hulking muscles woven into a pattern of lethal agility as it slithered onto the forest floor, its gaze locked onto Vallen with an intensity that made him hold his breath. A trickle of sweat rolled down his back as he stared at the monster.

The hyva stared back at him, its golden predatory eyes mirroring the rich ember hues of the fire. A disquieting sense of untamed wildness lurked within its fierce gaze. He had wondered if anything of the human was retained within the monsters, but as he stared into the hyva's eyes he didn't sense any humanity there. It watched him, not as mere prey, but with an unsettling, uncanny animal intelligence that seemed to bore into his very soul. The creature began to puff its throat pouch, a sure sign of impending attack. The spikes lining its spine bristled as it took a slow, deliberate step forward.

But as it moved, the firelight glinted off the amulet around Vallen's neck. The tiny carved hyva on its surface reflected the glow of the fire, pulsing as if awakened by the beast's threat.

For a heartbeat, both man and creature held their breath, locked in a silent tableau of tension.

Then the hyva hissed. It was a sound filled with hatred and fear, discordant against the quiet symphony of the wilderness. It recoiled from the pink stone as if in pain. And as quickly as it appeared, the hyva retreated into the darkness, leaving behind only a few footprints in the dirt.

Vallen remained on vigilant guard long after the chilling encounter with the hyva ended, his senses painfully alert for any threat that the obsidian gloom might harbor. Exhausted yet alert, he sat with his back pressed against a tree, near to Nyssa in case he needed to defend her, his vigilant eyes fixed on the deepening gloom of the Dying Wilds. As the night waned, the temperatures plummeted, and the silence of the wilderness was broken only by the whistling of the wind and the rhythm of his own heart. Finally, as the shadow of fear caused by the feral beast slowly faded into the realm of memory, Vallen allowed himself a sigh of relief. Insects began their nocturnal serenade, and starlight peeked down on him from between the trees' boughs.

Deciding that he needed rest – he would be no good to Nyssa tomorrow if his senses were dulled with exhaustion – he joined her in their makeshift bed. The fire burned low, leaving behind the last vestiges of its heat. Lying down next to the peacefully sleeping Nyssa, his body ached with the strain of the day's events; yet the rhythm of her breaths and the shared warmth provided a balm for his weary soul. The crown of shadows, along with his duties, receded momentarily, leaving room for the tired shrike to give in to the sweet surrender of sleep.

# CHAPTER 14





**O**n the third morning of their journey, Vallen woke to find the ground covered in frost. He had hoped to be in Puzur or Hassuna before the first fingers of winter settled over Erishum, but it looked like their luck had run out. It was a frost-kissed dawn in the Dying Wilds, coating the ground in a stark brilliance. Vallen shifted beneath their blanket, accidentally letting a chilly breeze into their cocoon. The icy gusts that swept across the barren land snuck beneath the blanket and seemed to cut through his clothing, piercing through his flesh and straight into his bones.

As he slowly rose from their makeshift bed of bundled cloaks and blankets, topped with leaves and underbrush to help hold in the heat, the numbing sting of the cold made Vallen toss a longing glance at the dying embers of the fire. It was going to be another harsh day, he suspected as he scraped a thick coating of frost off his travel pack.

A reluctant, slow-moving air enveloped the campsite that morning. Nyssa remained huddled, wrapped in her cloak, clinging to the warmth that lingered from their sleep. Her cheeks were red and chapped, and her breath fogged in the air. An icy wind blew around them, sinking its teeth into their weary bones. Building up the fire to an almost roaring size, they loitered at camp longer than usual, hoping to warm their spirits as much as their bodies.

Vallen's brow furrowed as he gazed into their supply satchel. Their meager rations seemed pitifully scarce against the hungry expanses of the Dying Wilds. If they were careful, he believed it should be enough to get them to the end of their journey, but Vallen didn't like the uncertainty.

Nyssa shuffled next to him. Without needing to say anything, they turned and ventured toward the edge of the river together where Vallen had placed the fish trap the night before.

The crunch of their footfalls seemed too loud in the eerie silence of the wilderness. But the promise of a warm meal made their steps more determined.

A trembling anticipation filled Vallen as he lifted the trap with numb fingers and a prayer on his lips. His mouth automatically lifted into a pleased smile when his gaze fell onto the silvery shimmer of a fish flopping within the trap.

Nyssa looked over at him, a relieved grin blooming on her face. They had food, a warm fire, and each other. It made the idea of another day of their arduous journey seem less daunting, even with the dropping temperatures.

Nyssa cleaned and prepared their catch as Vallen built up the fire and prepared for the day of travel ahead. The warmth emanating from the fire melted away the last of his frost-ridden stiffness, filling the air with the illusion of coziness.

The smell of wood smoke and roasting fish wafted through the clearing. It was an aroma that reminded Vallen of the bustling marketplace of Erishum, a fragrance of home nestling in the antagonistic wilderness. He had a moment's nostalgia for his old home as he realized that he would probably never see Erishum again. It was the only place he'd ever known, and the thought of having to find a new land to settle, where he would be an outsider, made anxiety swirl in his gut.

As they savored the hot meal, Nyssa had an introspective look on her face.

“What are you thinking about?” Vallen asked around a mouthful of fish.

Nyssa picked at her portion of fish, her eyes glowing faintly in the firelight. A soft sigh escaped her as she chewed thoughtfully. “I wonder what life’s like in Puzur and Hassuna,” she mused.

Vallen, who was engrossed in checking over their campsite, glanced at her. “I doubt it’s much different than Erishum. People work, they love, they hate, they have families, they hunt and grow food.”

He hoped that wherever they ended up needed guards, since it was the only real skill he had besides pickpocketing and lock-picking. He was certain that they’d need bakers – everyone wanted bread. If they didn’t want him as a guard, he’d find something else. Whatever it took to take care of Nyssa, he’d do.

“Curator Athura once told me that the other kingdoms are more advanced than us, and their technology’s way beyond our understanding,” Nyssa replied, her gaze lost in the dancing flames. “She said that she has seen bits of weaponry pulled from the river’s mud that made her believe they may have weapons able to defeat the hyva.”

This prompted Vallen to abandon his task and face Nyssa. He gave her a skeptical look. “If that’s the case, then why haven’t they done so already?”

Nyssa looked at Vallen and then stared back at the fire with a contemplative look on her face. “I think it’s because... if they go into the Dying Wilds to fight the hyva without an amulet and stay too long, they turn into one.”

She reflexively touched the stone hanging around her neck as if needing the comfort of ensuring it was where it was supposed to be.

Vallen gave her an impressed look. “That explanation makes more sense than anything else I can think of. We won’t know until we get there, anyways.”

Nyssa nodded, then got a worried look on her face. “Do you think that Puzur and Hassuna are evil like we’ve been told?”

Vallen sighed, running a hand through his hair. “No, I don’t. It’s like asking if all of Erishum is evil. It is filled with good people and plenty of bad ones. But I don’t think a whole kingdom can be evil, not really. But we can both agree that Erishum is doing terrible things – like sacrificing its own citizens and turning them into monsters.

“We do need to be careful though. We have no idea how they treat visitors. When we get close to our destination, we should be very cautious – watch them for a while to make sure it’s safe for us before we approach.” Nyssa nodded eagerly at his suggestion. Needing to distract her, Vallen stood up, dusting off his trousers. “Well, sitting here and speculating won’t get us any closer. We should get started.”

After quickly packing up, the duo set forth, venturing deeper into the belly of the wilderness. After three days of tramping through the Dying Wilds, Vallen’s fear of the twisted forest had dampened until all he felt was vague unease and watchfulness as they marched through its depths. They had seen hyvas several times now, but other than the night before – which Vallen had decided not to inform Nyssa of – the creatures never came close to them. They did seem to battle one another often, however. Their warbling screams and

screeches could be heard over the canopy of the Dying Wilds several times a day. Even Nyssa was no longer jumping and clutching onto Vallen's sleeve when the hyva roared in the distance. Not that Vallen wanted Nyssa scared, but he had been glad that she instinctively seemed to seek him out when frightened.

Deciding that the spot they were in was a good place for a small rest, he patted her shoulder, indicating a shady recess under a tree within sight of the river. Nyssa gave him a grateful nod, happy to get a respite from their relentless slog. They settled under the drooping canopy of what looked like a cobwebbed evergreen bush, its blue-black leaves whispering gently in the light breeze. Their scant meal of salted biscuit and dried fruit was chewed in a subdued atmosphere as they filled their parched mouths with the last sips of water from their flasks.

Nyssa ventured toward the river's edge nearby. Vallen slumped back against the knobby bark of the tree, keeping guard, his hand resting on the hilt of his blade. He watched Nyssa cross the thick, mossy riverbank, quick and nimble, to refill their water skins.

Suddenly, the eerie silence of the Dying Wilds was rent asunder by the voracious scream of a hyva. Vallen found himself on his feet almost before he'd registered the sound. The harsh, grating call resonated ominously, sounding much too close by. The first screech was immediately followed by an insidious series of clicks and low growls. Another shriek pierced the air – this one seemed to originate from a different direction. Vallen couldn't determine if this was a different hyva or if it was the same one that had moved.



Both Vallen and Nyssa tensed, frozen and listening intently. His heart hammered erratically against his ribcage. He pulled his dagger from its sheath and observed Nyssa doing the same. The terrifying hyva song echoed ever closer, surrounded by a symphony of clawing, gnashing, and breaking branches. As Vallen listened, he was able to determine that the noise was being created by at least two hyva locked in battle.

Wanting to make sure they were out of the path of the battling beasts, Vallen motioned to Nyssa to follow him. They hastily scrambled up a nearby boulder and peered out. Vallen's heart constricted at the sight of a blackened glen opening before them as they peered over the rock's edge. Wrapped in a twining, twisting ball, two hyvas snarled and clashed in a deadly battle.

Nyssa gasped at the two beasts' ferocity. The monstrous creatures gnashed, bit, and slashed each other, kicking up dirt and dead leaves. Their terrible sounds reverberated, the snarls and growls echoing over their heads.

"They're so... fierce," Nyssa stammered out, her wide eyes barely able to tear away from the battle that ensued down below. "How could these beasts... these hyva... have ever been human?"

Vallen's own gaze remained locked on the destructive fight, his lips pressed in a grim line. He didn't like how scared Nyssa was; she was acting like a prey animal. They needed to be strong and fearless if they were going to survive the Dying Wilds. After a tense moment, he finally spoke, his voice barely more than a low rumble.

"They may have been humans once," he acknowledged. "But look at them now... They're just wild beasts."

Nyssa's brows knitted together at his opinion, a thoughtful look crossing her face. "Do you think they remember?" she wondered out loud. "That they used to be... like us? That they know what's happened to them?"

A heavy sigh escaped Vallen, his gaze never wavering from the gruesome scene below. "I don't think so," he replied, his voice resolute yet sorrowful. "From what I've seen, I believe they're driven purely by animal instinct now. Survival. Hunger. Dominance. Traces of their past lives... I doubt those are even echoes in their minds anymore."

Nyssa hugged herself tighter. For hundreds of years, countless souls had been sacrificed to the Dying Wilds. It was eerily tragic that their existence had been whittled down to mere instinctual survival, lost forever to friends and families... and themselves. Their humanity stripped away, leaving them as nothing more than these wild, untamed beasts.

"Either way, I'm glad that the people of Puzur and Hassuna are not killing the hyvas," Nyssa replied after a moment. "Not now that we know that they used to be people."

In the clearing below, the battle at last reached a fearsome crescendo. One hyva, its hide scarred and bloodied, staggered to its feet, cowed by the power of its opponent. With a low growl of defeat, it turned tail, slinking beneath the skeletal trees with its wounds a raw testament to the violence of their clash. The victor, a hulking monstrosity of twisted muscle and scales, raised its grotesque snout toward the ashen sky in triumph. Filling its throat pouch with air, it gave voice to its victory. The roar was horrifyingly inhuman.

Squinting at the hyva, a wild, untamed hatred blazed within Vallen. These grotesque monstrosities, with their garish transformations in a cruel mockery of humanity, were the

impenetrable barriers that had shackled him to Erishum's grimy underbelly all his life. If it hadn't been for the hyvas, what could he have become? He wouldn't have been forced to toil in the mud or pledge himself to the brutal shrikes. Where could his feet have trodden? No matter their origins, the hyvas had forfeited their claim to their past, unretrievable humanity. If it had been up to Vallen, they would be purged from existence.


As the triumphant snarl of the hyva rang out one final time, it turned its ugly and formidable bulk away, slipping into the skeletal maze of the deadened trees. Even with the absence of the hyva, Vallen found a corrosive irritation gnawing at the pit of his stomach. His grip on the hilt of his knife tightened, his knuckles whitening, while his narrowed eyes remained focused on the warped meadow below.

"We should keep moving," Nyssa said.

"Aye," Vallen agreed, his tone curt. He felt a lingering irritation buzzing within his gut. He couldn't quite pinpoint what was bothering him, but it was like an unflagging itch he couldn't quite scratch.

# CHAPTER 15





**T**hrough the remainder of the day, they trudged cautiously on, weaving through the skeletal remains of the Dying Wilds. Vallen led the way, with Nyssa only a few steps behind him.

The path they walked soon narrowed into a gnarled, sinuous track that slithered over treacherous terrain, each turn a new trial of jagged rocks and slippery roots. The difficulty of the path added to Vallen's sour mood. When yet another barb-covered branch caught on Vallen's cloak, he growled and yanked the cloth from the thorn, leaving a tear in the fabric. He stared at the small rip like it was his mortal enemy. In a deep part of Vallen's brain, he knew that he was being unreasonable. Vallen rolled his shoulder, trying to subdue his mood. Behind him, Nyssa trailed silently, letting Vallen work through whatever was bothering him on his own.

Vallen's usually patient demeanor was frayed at the edges, replaced with an inexplicable irritation. He found himself snapping at the branches impeding their path, his jaw clenching and unclenching as he tried to smother his irritation. He was short-tempered, not just with the environment but with Nyssa as well. She'd stopped asking questions when his replies had started to get shorter and sharper. Even knowing that he was being unkind to the person he cared about most in the world, he couldn't seem to stop.

Vallen couldn't find the words to explain why he was so angry and irritated. Most of his agitation was turned on himself at this point. What was wrong with him? He was being a halfwit. His attitude was helping nothing and only making their journey painful and awkward.

Nyssa was doing her best to stay out of his way. But even the small sounds of her careful movements, the occasional huff of her breath, all seemed to grate on his nerves. Vallen could feel the distance Nyssa kept between them as they pushed through the dense undergrowth. It was more than just the necessary space to swing a blade or to avoid the thorny bushes, she was careful not to make any sudden movements, her entire being radiating caution. It grated on his already frayed nerves. The lingering silence between them, broken only by the occasional rustling of the foliage, engulfed him, feeding his unrelenting anxiety and annoyance.

Had he not shown himself to be a trustworthy friend for all the years they'd known one another? They had found themselves in and out of countless predicaments in the narrow alleys of Erishum. They'd faced endless threats as children on those dangerous streets, Vallen always at her side, her ever-vigilant protector. And now that he was having a single bad day – of short-temperedness – she tiptoed around him like she was worried that he couldn't hold his temper. It bit at his chest, a scorned wound reopening because he thought she knew him better. Was nothing he did good enough? Part of him wanted to reach out, to snap her out of this timid shell, but another part was outraged by her demeanor. He had sacrificed so much for her and this was how she repaid him? It stung, deep in his core, the taste of hurt buried beneath pent-up irritability.

A voice in his head was telling him that he was being petty and unjust. Guilt at his behavior and mood was a lump in his throat, a bitter taste that he wished he could spit out. But the harsh reality of the Dying Wilds, the memory of the hyvas' savage fight, and the reality of their bleak existence... it all was slowly unraveling him.

Without warning, his boot caught on an unseen root, causing him to stumble forward. The surprise, mixed with the relentless pique building up in him all afternoon, caused him to react with a chain of curses. His foot swung back, connecting with the offending root with a retributive kick. The raw aggression of the act made Nyssa flinch.

The sight of her fearful expression struck him with a force greater than that of a hammer blow. He remained immobile, taken aback by her fright and consumed with indignation that Nyssa could harbor fear toward him. After everything he'd done for her, she thought him a monster? Cowering away from him like he would ever cause her harm?

A rising tide of fury bubbled up from the pit of Vallen's stomach, raw and searing as the hot embers of a forge. It lacked the disciplined burn of his training, which had taught him to cage his wrath and channel it toward his target with the precision of a shrike's beak. It was an unfamiliar sensation, wild and untamed, sinking its claws into his consciousness and wrenching the reins away from his hands.

Fury consumed Vallen, burned him, and twisted him within its clawed grip.

A growl crawled its way up his throat, a sound as chilling as the wind, a primal rumble forged from every wrong ever done to him.

His hands curled into fists, the skin tightening over his flexing knuckles. His lips peeled back in an animalistic snarl, bearing his gritted teeth.

This rage was not his own. It felt alien. Foreign. It was darker than any anger he'd ever felt before and wilder than anything the reserved shrike he'd become had experienced. It was corrosive, consuming all his warmth and love, replacing

them with an intense anger too vast, too desolate to contain. He sensed himself sinking into the abyss of fury, surrendering his identity to its wild torrent, yet he found himself powerless to halt the descent.

A relentless, insatiable rage, growing and consuming, roared in terrifying delight... His vision swam with menacing red, his voice echoing with monstrous roars. The whisper of his humanity, the cry of his conscience... drowning and smothered in rage.

He tried to say Nyssa's name, but all that came out was a growl. The growl morphed into a pain-filled scream.

A black fury had seized him, directing the very fiber of his being toward a hunger he could not comprehend, a void that demanded to be filled. Mindlessly, he lifted a hand and held it aloft, staring at it with an animalistic fascination. The skin had begun to warp and shift, bulging obscenely as sinewy muscles distended and grew. His fingers elongated, bones cracking and reforming, while his skin began to darken, shifting into a mottled blue-black hue.

A surge of raw, wild energy rippled through him like a feral current. Each of his senses seemed to heighten: the color of the world turned into a startling monochrome, smells became pungently strong, and sounds began to register in nuanced frequencies. Instinctively, his throat vibrated, producing an eerie clicking sound that made Nyssa take a step back, gasping and holding her hands out defensively.

He turned his gaze toward the sound and saw a figure he vaguely registered as familiar. It stirred... a sense of hesitation. He tilted his head, searching his thoughts. It smelled like prey. All he saw was a creature, fear-soaked and



wide-eyed. There was no connection, no recognition. Only a heartbeat loudly thumping with delicious blood.

The creature shrank back from him slowly making small whimpering sounds that called to his instinct to pounce and rend.

The hunger gnawed inside him. He slowly surrendered to this foreign yet all-consuming rage, losing himself to the call of the hyva within.

“Val, what’s happening? Vallen!” The creature screamed.

The last spark of Vallen’s humanity flickered within him, casting a faint, pleading light in the encroaching darkness. Vallen dug deep and pushed out the word “Run!” to Nyssa. The word thundered out of his mouth, distorted into a roar, carrying his raw desperation. It echoed, bone-shaking and harsh, through the desolate expanse of the Dying Wilds.

But Nyssa didn’t run.

Instead, she lunged toward the beast that Vallen had become. He fell to his knees, becoming a twisted, writhing monster. She leaped at his chest with an unexpected boldness, her eyes shimmering with an inner fire. The surprise of her sudden audacity caught the hyva-possessed Vallen off-guard, his unnaturally sharp senses caught in the lingering echo of his command.

As Nyssa collided against him, she threw one arm around his shoulders, pulling him close. With the other hand, she pressed the amulet around her neck into his deformed chest. He could feel the pulse of the stone, thrumming with a simultaneously cooling and burning energy.

There was a moment of stark silence. Then, Vallen groaned, shuddering and shaking, falling onto his back. Nyssa

followed him to the leaf-covered ground, keeping the amulet pressed to his skin.

Slowly, the darkness within Vallen seemed to ebb, drawn out by the amulet. Just as gradually, the monstrous black scales softened back into human skin. The twisted and deformed limbs contracted and morphed back into human appendages. The curved, elongated claws retracted, and his flesh began to change from black back to pink, the blue-black skin retreating like the river tide. Vallen clutched Nyssa to his chest as he gasped and shuddered in a mix of agony and relief.

As he trembled and shook, Nyssa wrapped Vallen protectively in her arms. The transformation's aftermath was akin to burning. His skin screamed, and his nerves felt like they were on fire, randomly shooting and making his muscles jerk and quake.

The rage that had previously consumed Vallen drained out, flowing away as if a dam of restraint and sense had burst within him, leaving behind fright and sorrow. He was left with a humbling fragility, an overwhelming sensation of being laid bare and transparent. He felt a bone-deep revulsion and shock at his own transformation, at the prospect of becoming a hyva and losing his humanity.

The residual essence of the hyva still clawed at the edges of his awareness. The thought of just how quickly his own nature could turn against him made him quake and shiver uncontrollably. The creature within him had been banished, but not erased. It was a fresh terror, a stark, terrifying reminder of the price of the Dying Wilds.

Panting, Vallen remembered – in flashes and instinctual impressions – what it had felt like to become a hyva. It was a primitive, raw surge of animalistic rage, of insatiable hunger

that dominated every other feeling, an overwhelming absence of thought or mercy, simply the savage desire to survive and to consume. Without an amulet, it was only a matter of time until he lost control of his humanity and turned into a beast. There was also, intertwined with his terror, a wave of profound compassion for the creatures that were fated to live and die within that relentless hunger. He would carry both the fear and the pity in his heart, intertwined and inescapable for the rest of his life.

Vallen reached feebly to touch Nyssa's hand which was still firmly pressing her pendant into his chest.

"I don't understand," he croaked, his voice ridden with exhaustion. "I... I had it on, didn't I?"

Nyssa, seated on his lap, looking as scared as he felt. Her eyes searched his, as if needed to make sure he was there – that the monster was no longer inside him. Finally, she dropped his gaze as if satisfied by what she found. Then she looked down at the amulet still hanging from his neck.

"Yes, you did," she simply replied, knotting her brows in deep thought. Pulling off his necklace entirely, she held his amulet to the sunlight, scrutinizing the round pink stone. Her slender fingers traced the carved image of the hyva on its surface.

The heavy silence hung between them for a moment. Nyssa broke it, her voice soft but steady. "Here," she said, taking her amulet off and threading it over his head. "Wear this until we know that you won't turn."

"But Nyssa... You need to wear it to make sure you don't become a hyva," Vallen protested.

Nyssa shook her head, spearing him with an intense look. “I was moments from losing you forever. We can’t risk it. I think we will need to take turns wearing the amulet. You said that on the sacrifice night, that the other men didn’t start to transform for several hours.”

“Thank you,” he whispered, the gratitude profound in his voice. As he traced the amulet, Nyssa had given him with weary fingers, the twist of dread in his gut eased just a little. He began to understand the terrifying depth of friendship Nyssa offered him. Despite the dangers, she willingly lent him her protection. It filled him with a warmth amidst the cold strings of horror that still clung to him.

Nyssa gingerly held Vallen’s old amulet in the hollow of her palm, the sun casting shadows on the intricate engravings. “Vallen,” she murmured softly, “this feels lighter.”

Vallen cast her a quick, questioning glance. “Lighter? How is that possible?” he replied, exhausted. “They’re exactly the same.”

“Are they though?” Nyssa countered, unfazed. She lifted the amulet from his chest, cradling it in her free hand. Now she held an amulet in each open palm, akin to weights on a balance for comparison. “This one definitely feels lighter. Take a look for yourself.”

Reluctantly, Vallen extended his hand, and Nyssa dropping the amulets into his awaiting palm. They lay there, side by side, identical in appearance. Yet, as he lifted and tilted them, the skeptical frown on his features melted away. The amulet he had first worn was indeed lighter to the touch.

“Do you think that the king’s magic got used up?”

Vallen shrugged. He couldn't wrap his mind around the idea of magic having weight, but nothing else made sense.

Curious, he gave them both a slight shake. That's when he felt it – an almost imperceptible sloshing coming from the heavier amulet.

“You're right, Nyssa,” Vallen stated, a sense of wonder in his voice. He inhaled sharply, peering closely at the amulets in his hand. “This one is heavier, and it feels like there is something inside it.”

When Nyssa gently shook the amulet, she reared back and gave Vallen such a shocked look that it made him grin. He'd always loved her curious nature, and he was glad to see it was still there.

When Nyssa handed back the lighter amulet, Vallen scrutinized the metallic bit that attached the pretty pink stone to the necklace. His roughened fingers gingerly wiggled the silver setting that was nestled into the stone, expecting resistance. However, with a start, he realized that it moved.

“By Enum's name,” he breathed, his eyes wide with astonishment as he held the lighter amulet aloft. The metal wasn't embedded into the stone as he thought; it spun on a delicate axis, beginning to twist out of the gem beneath his touch.

Vallen lifted his gaze to Nyssa, his shock reflected in her wide brown eyes. He could see the wheels in her mind turning – the same curiosity and tenacity that had kept her alive on the harsh streets of Erishum and allowed her to survive the mud of River Assur now focused on the unexpected mystery unfolding in his hands.

Swallowing a sudden lump in his throat, Vallen gingerly gripped the amulet tighter and began to twist. The silver spiraled out of the stone like a stubborn cork leaving a well-aged wine bottle, revealing a tiny hidden hollow within the heart of the amulet.

Vallen allowed himself a heavy exhale, his heartbeat throbbing in his ears as he peered into the hollow.

The inner cavity of the gem glinted, reminiscent of the delicate inner curve of a river snail's shell. Gently, Vallen tilted the amulet toward Nyssa, offering her a glimpse. Her eyes widened at the sight and then turned toward the amulet around his neck with a speculative look.

With slow, careful movements, he returned the slender metal screw to its hidden compartment within the gem and set it to the side. Vallen then turned his attention to the pink stone resting against his sternum. Lifting it, he cautiously began to uncork his own amulet.

The metallic bit spiraled out of the stone again, revealing another hollow. Nyssa gasped. The cavity in his amulet was not empty.

Vallen stared at the interior of the stone. A glittering liquid filled the compartment not quite to halfway, winking from within its stone vessel with a luminosity that seemed unnatural. It had an iridescent quality, dancing with colors and glimmers that were vibrant and captivating, like oil spread across a puddle. The discovery was as alarming as it was mesmerizing, another piece of the unfolding mystery quite literally in Vallen's grasp.

# CHAPTER 16





Vallen tilted the amulet toward the lowering sun, entranced by the spectral sheen of colors. “Magic,” he murmured, more to himself than Nyssa.

“That, or we’ve been living on a diet of river mud for far too long,” Nyssa teased.

“I thought... I thought it was the stone that was magic or that King Jorek gave the stone magic. But I think it’s the liquid?” The shock turned into certainty.

The slightest hint of a frown creased Nyssa’s brow, her eyes narrowing skeptically. “But is it the liquid that’s magic, or just water imbued with magic?”

Vallen fell into thoughtful silence, his grip tightening around the amulet. “It doesn’t really matter. The problem is that either way, we can run out of it. It is a finite resource,” he said slowly.

Nyssa bit down on her lower lip, gnawing on it. “So,” she began quietly, the cogs turning in her mind, “how long do we have before we run out entirely?”

Vallen’s brow furrowed deeply as he considered Nyssa’s question. He cast his mind back to the sacrifice day when Nyssa had slipped him the amulet. From that moment until they had stolen the second amulet from the sanctum had been about two days. He hadn’t taken off the amulet in all that time.

His fingers unconsciously curled around the empty amulet. “About two days, though we don’t know how long Athura had it in her possession before she gave it to you. Perhaps it had been more used up than this one.” Vallen indicated the amulet



around his neck. “However, I think we need to work on the assumption that we have two days to get out of the Dying Wilds before we risk turning into hyvas.”

Nyssa looked like she wanted to cry. “What if it is the stone that holds the magic but needs liquid inside it to activate? Why don’t we try putting normal water in the other amulet? It’s not working anyways so what is the harm?” Nyssa suggested.

Vallen nodded, giving her an encouraging look. He didn’t think her plan would work but didn’t want to discourage her. “Worth a try, Nyssa,” he conceded, his hand unfurling to give the empty amulet to her. He watched as her thin fingers clutched the pink stone, her brow furrowed with steely determination.

She bit her bottom lip lightly, uncertainty flickering in her eyes for the briefest of moments before reaching for her water skin. The cool liquid sloshed around gently inside the skin, making Vallen realize how parched he was. Nyssa slowly and steadily let a tiny rivulet of clear water trickle into the amulet.

Their gazes locked onto the amulet, watching and waiting with raw, unspoken hope. Would the ordinary water be transformed by the magic of the stone?

A minute passed, but nothing happened. The small bit of water remained the same clear liquid as it had started as, a simple reflection of their shared disappointment. The water had the smallest of sheen to it, but it was obvious it was from the last dregs of the magical residue. The sigh that left Nyssa was heavy, the soft sound breaking Vallen’s heart a little.

He reached out, his large hand engulfing Nyssa’s in a reassuring squeeze. “Looks like it didn’t work, Nys,” he murmured apologetically. But his gaze, steadfast and ready,

was already looking past their little experiment. They had tarried long enough, and daylight was fading fast into the eerie twilight.

“But still... let’s leave the water in there, just in case,” he proposed, twisting the metal screw top back into the stone, making sure the attachment was tight and secure. “Perhaps it just needs more time.” Worry began to creep into his mind, urgency making his voice sharper than he meant to. “We need to press on, Nyssa.” Time was now their cruelest adversary.

Nyssa shifted to stand, and Vallen realized that she had been sitting in his lap the whole time. Feeling a tad flustered, he hoped that he wasn’t blushing. Clearing his throat awkwardly, Vallen helped Nyssa, making sure she had regained her balance before letting her go. Her cheeks bloomed with a soft blush under his steady touch.

Still sprawled on the ground, Vallen grinned when Nyssa offered her hand to help him up. Being careful not to tug on her too hard, he hauled himself up to his full height, relieved to feel entirely human again and without the hyva’s rage inside him souring his mood. Vallen exhaled with relief. He still had the water-filled amulet in his hand, so he threaded it over Nyssa’s neck.

He stared unseeingly at the pink stone now nestled against her heart. “It’s going to be difficult after this. We must push hard, but I believe that we can get through the Dying Wilds before we run out of magic,” he whispered. His gaze held hers. With a shaky nod, she mirrored his resolve. They engaged in a hasty inventory check, making sure they had the map, their knives, and their travel packs. Then, without another word, they plunged forward. The murmur of conversation and tentative laughter had evaporated, replaced by a shared,

heightened determination to survive. Their previous pace was a languid crawl in comparison to the swift, deliberate strides they took now.

# CHAPTER 17





Day bled into night, then back to day, as they marched relentlessly onward. They were quickly approaching the second full day since Vallen had experienced the haunting taste of turning into a hyva. Exhaustion was their constant companion, a relentless tormentor, pulling at Vallen's eyes and senses. To stop, to rest for too long was to give up hope, which Vallen refused to do. He had vowed to give Nyssa a better future and he was prepared to do whatever was necessary to fulfill that promise.

Over the last day and a half, through trial and error, they found that they could go about three to four hours without the amulet before they started to feel the insidious influence of the Dying Wilds. The rage-filled instincts of the hyva would begin to claw at their senses – a creeping hum of annoyance that would later explode into full-blown irritation and anger. It built into an incessant buzzing within their skulls that threatened their sanity. However, as soon as they put on the amulet, the chatter within their mind would cease immediately. And despite Nyssa's desperate hope, the water in the other amulet remained stubbornly ordinary, providing no protection against the pull of the Dying Wilds.

Marching on and on, they rested infrequently, even stumbling their way forward in the dark. They stopped only when they couldn't go any further to take short rests, brief interludes of respite eked out carefully, with one of them always keeping watch to make sure that not too much time would pass.

Their sleep-deprived state lent a surreal edge to their reality, making the thorny undergrowth and the omnipresent

threat of turning into a hyva seem like illusions crafted from an unhinged nightmare. The toll it took on their wearied bodies was evident, but every step they took was a testament to survival, a rebellion against the fate ancient King Jerwan had created for them.

Huffing, Vallen held up a hand, signally for a pause. Nyssa stumbled a little before halting, her brows furrowing in concern as she looked at him. He pushed away the desire to bend over his knees and just pant heavily. Instead, he reached for his waterskin and took a few desperate sips. The cool liquid soothed his parched throat but did little to quell his unfurling panic. He knew instinctively that they were running out of time.

He took one more small sip and then offered Nyssa the waterskin. He watched her drink, her eyes glazed and unfocused with dark circles underneath them, before turning his attention to the daunting path ahead of them. Swallowing hard, he slowly lifted the amulet that hung around his neck. Unscrewing the lid, being careful to make sure not even a drop was spilled, he peered inside to find only a pitiful puddle of the glimmering liquid left.

Taking off his travel pack and setting it on the frost-covered ground, Vallen pulled out their map. He unfolded it, and in the weak sunlight, he traced the path along the river that they'd taken with a trembling finger. They were in the middle of the fourth day of walking, and if he was tracking their path correctly, they had barely made it halfway through their journey. His eyes mapped the road untraveled, filled with trepidation. The journey would take at least three more grueling days, maybe more. The gloom of his dire predicament began to cloy, a sense of doom swallowing him whole. Based on how much of the magic liquid inside the amulet had been

used up in the last day and a half, he realized that they didn't have enough to get them through the rest of the day, much less the entirety of the Dying Wilds

A sinking sensation took hold, his heart hitting rock bottom as terror gripped him. Images of Nyssa transforming into a hyva flashed through his mind. His blood turned icy, dread clawing at him with a fervor that made him feel faint. His breath hitched in his chest, and he had to stagger back momentarily, the reality of their situation crashing down on him like a tidal wave. He had dared to hope that they could escape this fate. Remorse flooded him then, a hot, shameful sting. Nyssa's trusting eyes were burned into his mind, the guilt of leading her to a doom he should have endured alone twisted painfully in his gut.

Vallen stared at Nyssa, soaking in the sight of her until it hurt. The sunlight burnished her sharp cheekbones, her furrowed brows, and the determined set of her jaw. A rush of fondness snaked its way to his heart, mingling with a surge of sorrow strong enough to splinter his soul. A bitter smile stretched his lips. Even though it made him the worst person in the world, he was still glad to have her with him on this doomed journey.

"What's wrong, Vallen?" Her voice sliced through his quiet despair. Her glance mapped his face, examining him with concern etched in her beautiful features.

Vallen's breath stuttered, struggling to tell her that they were doomed. But whatever he had begun to confess hushed at the sight of the worry flickering in her eyes. "I—I'm sorry, Nyssa," he muttered instead. A grimace marred his features at the fact that he was still being a coward.

“Sorry?” Nyssa’s bewildered response echoed in the chilled wind. “You don’t have anything to apologize for.”

A pained chuckle slipped from Vallen. “But I do, Nyssa,” he spoke, his voice strangled in grief. “I thought joining the shrikes was my way to lift us out of squalor. They promised me gold, honor, and status. I dreamed of walking into the shadow district, proud and triumphant. Dreamed of... of taking you away from all the muck and misery. I had imagined that you’d see me in my uniform and think of me as more than just your childhood friend.”

His voice wavered, the words leaking out of him thick with remorse. “But I never even bothered to ask you first, Nyssa. I made this grand, foolish plan without a thought to what you wanted. I acted like I was doing it for you, but it was all about me. And now look where we are.” His hand gestured to the vast expanse of the Dying Wilds around them.

“But... you never said—”

He took a deep breath, steeling himself for his last confession. “And I am sorrier still for never having the courage, never finding the words...” he paused, swallowing thickly. “Never telling you just how much you meant to me, never revealing how I truly felt. I thought I needed to be worthy first, and I thought joining the shrikes was the way to make that happen.” Each word was punctuated with an ache that seeped from him, saturating the air with his regret.

Nyssa stared at Vallen in shock, her eyes swimming with unshed tears.

“Vallen, I—”

With two loud clicks as the only warning, a hyva burst from the undergrowth, an embodiment of unbridled rage and



hunger, its dark mottled scales sleekly menacing in the sunlight as it hurtled straight toward Nyssa, its wide-open jaw bristling with a serrated row of deadly teeth meant to tear and rip. Its warble sounded through the hush of the Dying Wilds, raising the hair on the back of Vallen's neck.

Before he could even process what was happening, Vallen threw himself between the charging hyva and Nyssa. Despite its colossal size, it swerved abruptly, instinctively recoiling away from the amulet around Vallen's neck.

The hyva tried to circle around Vallen, its glowing golden eyes fixed on Nyssa. A low growl rumbled deep within its massive chest, rippling through the air in waves of malicious promise. Vallen gripped the handle of his dagger. Every reshuffling step of the hyva was met with a deft counter-maneuver from Vallen, ensuring that at all times, he was a living shield between the monster and Nyssa.

The hyva backed up, and for a moment, Vallen thought it was retreating. However, it reared up as if to leap over him. Casting aside the bone-deep fear that screamed at him to flee, Vallen vaulted forward, intercepting the hyva's path. He collided brutally with the monster, the dagger looking pitifully small against the enormous body of the beast. The knife plunged, once, twice into the pale scales of its underbelly. The hyva fell back, emitting an enraged screech, a demonic crescendo that had Nyssa screaming Vallen's name.

Vallen barely had time to breathe, scrambling back, never taking his eyes off his adversary. His heart thudded erratically in his chest before he felt Nyssa pressed behind him. The fingers of the hand not holding the bloodied knife curled around Nyssa's wrist. "Run!" His command was hoarse, his

bellow mingled with a surge of adrenaline that coursed through his veins.

Turning on their heels, the pair dashed back into the overgrowth, the Dying Wilds closing in around them once more. Behind them, Vallen could hear the hyva screaming in rage and pain.

With a guttural roar, the hyva renewed its chase, its monstrous form breaking through the dense foliage in pursuit. Vallen and Nyssa darted through the thickets like frightened rabbits.

Off to the right, Vallen caught sight of an anomaly amidst the drab canvas of death and decay. A sliver of vivid green peeking out from the crevasse of two massive boulders. It was another spot of healthy plant growth. His heart pounded with a shard of hope as an idea presented itself. The hyva was larger and stronger than them, but in the narrow alley between the rockfaces, its size would be a disadvantage.

He steered Nyssa toward the rocky valley. "There!" he rasped out, pointing with his blade. The cacophony of their rapid flight almost swallowed his voice, the crackle of branches roughly shoved out of the way, the clatter of kicked twigs and stones, and the hyva's death knell following them like a feral hunting hound.

Nyssa swung toward the boulders without questioning him, her breaths rasping loud and terrified. Her dark hair flew wild around her as she sprinted toward their destination. She plunged blindly into the crevice with Vallen close at her heels.

The Dying Wilds seemed to hush for a moment as they passed the boulders, replaced by a soft rustle that sent a chill down their spines. Inside, the landscape changed unexpectedly. The gloom lightened, the decaying greys and

blacks giving way to shades of verdant green under the weak glow of the sun.

Vallen turned with his dagger raised and ready, waiting for the hyva to appear in the narrow corridor.

Moments later, it started to slither its way between the two boulders but hesitated when it realized it wouldn't fit. It gave Vallen a slow, predatory blink as if taking his measure.

Vallen watched as the hyva's eyes shifted, looking past him and seeking Nyssa. He twitched with surprise when the hyva made an almost pained-sounding whine before starting to back away. With a growl of unease, the beast recoiled and slowly began retreating from the crevasse's entrance. Its numerous feet scrambled and slipped in the loose rocks as it hastily backpedaled.

Vallen remained transfixed. He could see its predatory eyes glittering with frustrated fury, its glossy scales gleaming ominously as it started to pace in front of the gap. With a roar, the hyva backed up again and leaped onto the top of one of the boulders. Vallen scrambled back onto the green grass, ready to put himself between the hyva and Nyssa again.

When the hyva reached the top of the boulder, it recoiled again, hissing and screeching. It stared at the greenery in the valley and reared back from it like it caused discomfort. Its throat pouch vibrated with thwarted rage before it turned and leaped away.

A sigh tore from Vallen's throat. He licked his lips, tasting relief and the metallic tang of fading adrenaline.

Feeling a surge of dizziness swamp him, Vallen bent over, forcing himself to steady. He gasped for air and fought the

vertigo swirling at the edges of his vision, determined with every ragged breath not to lose consciousness.

He heard a sudden, harsh sound of scuffling feet and tumbling rocks, followed instantly by a sharp, distinctly feminine gasp that was cut off mid-note. Heart pounding again, he pivoted toward the sound, ready to fight whatever they now faced. Instead, Vallen discovered he was alone in the tiny glen, encircled by towering rock faces.

“Nyssa?” he called out, his voice ringing through the confusing, deceptive maze of rocks and shadows. But the lush green grotto offered no response save the whistle of the chilling wind. Desperation coursed through him, raw and turbulent, and he screamed her name again, his voice splitting the stagnant air. “Nyssa!”

# CHAPTER 18





Vallen whirled around wildly, staring around the odd patch of lively vegetation deep within the black heart of the Dying Wilds. His hand tightened on his dagger, his mind already spinning, plotting his next course of action.

Vallen strained his ears but could only hear his own heart thudding heavily. Suddenly he heard Nyssa's muffled voice, sounding as if it was coming from a distance, or as though she was calling him through a thick door.

"Vallen? I slipped and fell down a hole." The voice was indistinct and muted, but unmistakably Nyssa's. Relief flooded through Vallen as he hurried toward the source.

He found a small fissure at the base of a soaring rock wall almost hidden from sight behind a messy web of ferns and vines. He crouched low and peered into the darkness. "Nyssa! Are you down there?" His voice echoed ominously within the earthy bowels.

After an interlude that felt like centuries, Nyssa responded. Her voice sounded muffled and distant, as if it was floating up from the realm of dreams. "Vallen, I fell. I'm just scraped up a bit, nothing more." His gut clenched at the thought of her alone and frightened in the dark, but he swallowed down the panic like a bitter pill.

Then, an unexpected note of excitement seeped into Nyssa's voice, momentarily pushing aside the fear. "Vallen, you need to come down here," she called out. "There's something you need to see."

“I’ll be right down,” Vallen replied. “I just need to make sure we can get back out after.”

“Good idea. It’s not that deep down here, but it might be hard to climb back out.”

Vallen scooted back from the hole and opened his pack. Uncoiling a length of rope from inside it, he tied one end around a sturdy boulder and then dropped the rope down into the opening.

Before his mind could hesitate, Vallen started to slowly descend through the small opening. The rough, rocky edges of the hole bit into his fingers.

Soft hands helped guide him down and get him steady on his feet. The ground beneath him felt slick and uneven. Vallen glanced around the gloom, standing within the single sunbeam shining down from the hole in the ground above his head.

He squinted, his gaze catching the faintest shadow that seemed just a tad bit darker than the rest – Nyssa. His heart clenched with relief as he saw her whole and unharmed. He moved closer, scanning her just to make sure.

Pulling her into the sunbeam, Vallen found a few superficial scrapes but nothing serious. She was generously coated with the grit from her fall. He carefully squeezed her limbs, checking for breaks or sprains, but discovered none. Vallen released a relieved sigh.

Now that he knew she was unharmed, he surveyed his surroundings intently, his sharp eyes piercing the stygian darkness of the cave as he sought to identify any dangers. The cavern was a narrow rift that ran for an undetermined length, a hidden gash under the Dying Wilds. Grey-green stone walls, smooth as river rock, rose on either side of them. The slick

gray walls, glistening in the dim light, were etched with thick veins of pink. He was struck by a revelation that their amulets were made of the same material.

“Is this what you wanted me to see?” Vallen asked Nyssa.

She shook her head, pulling Vallen deeper along the narrow corridor, further into the heart of the cave. Vallen held her hand in his and let her lead the way. The floor of the cave curved downwards, leading into a pitch-black void where the phosphorescent veins seemed to take on a life of their own. After a few steps that felt further because of how quickly they lost most of the light, the rocky ground ended at a small pool of water.

“Look,” Nyssa said.

“What? Caves often have water.” His voice echoed in the quietude of the cavern.

“No... look closer. It’s not water,” Nyssa murmured. She knelt and cupped her hands, bringing up a handful of the liquid for him to see.

As she brought her cupped hands up for Vallen to examine, he watched with a deep-set furrow in his brow. Then the liquid caught the meager light and shimmered in her hands.

Nyssa gave Vallen a radiant grin. “It’s the same liquid that’s inside the amulet.”

Hope bloomed and burst inside Vallen’s chest.

He dipped his finger into the liquid cupped in Nyssa’s hand. Rubbing his fingertips together, he stared as the liquid shimmered on his skin. She was right. It was identical to the magical potion held in the hollow hearts of their amulets. He looked up, his eyes connecting with Nyssa’s in mutual understanding. Her eyes were brimming with the raw courage



and steadfast determination he had grown to admire. Her discovery meant that they would survive. The pool at their feet was a beacon that promised them a chance to make it through the Dying Wilds whole and unchanged.

With a whoop of delight, Vallen scooped Nyssa into his arms. Such a profound wave of relief washed over him that it felt, for a brief moment, as though he was floating in a dream, scarcely able to believe the respite the universe had granted them in the grim face of insurmountable odds.

“Do you know what this means?” Vallen exclaimed, a laugh exploding out of him as he wrapped Nyssa even tighter in his arms and buried his face in her hair. “It means we can do this, Nyssa. We’re going to get through this. I’ve been so worried...”

Nyssa gently patted his back, then rubbed soothing circles. “I know. It was looking bleak. But either way... I’m glad we’re together.” She paused and then snorted an amused sound. “Though I will be glad to never see another black, twisted tree for the rest of my life.”

With a laugh, Vallen set her back on her feet and stared at the pond of magical water. He looked around the narrow cavern with fresh eyes.

His gaze swept back to the underground pool, to the veined walls and shadows that danced on the cavern’s ceiling. He began to notice the subtle signs: the moisture clinging to the rock face, the way the pool sat at the low point of the undulating floor. The smoothness of the cavern walls carved by a persistent flow. He reached out, tracing the worn edges of a groove with a thoughtful look.

“I think this cave was once an active aquifer. However, instead of being filled with water, it was filled with magic-

infused liquid,” Vallen suggested.

Nyssa gave the dark ceiling above them a speculative look. “I wonder if this magic liquid being here is why it’s green right above us?”

“That would mean that each time we’ve seen a place of greenery, there’s been magic.”

A crease appeared between Vallen’s brows as a plan began to form in his mind. Clearing his throat, he turned to Nyssa. “The waterskins we carry... What if we emptied one of them and filled it with this?” His gaze flickered to the shimmering pond and back to Nyssa. “That way, we could ensure that we have enough to make it through the Dying Wilds and to Puzur or Hassuna.”

Their survival was suddenly not just an ethereal dream but a possible reality, and it anchored Vallen. The Dying Wilds wouldn’t claim them, not as long as there was still breath in Vallen’s body and strength coursing through his veins.

Nyssa slipped her amulet off her thin neck, her fingers quickly unscrewing the tiny lid. She bent toward the luminous pool, her hand trembling slightly just above the surface. The amulet kissed the water before it was gently submerged. Once she refilled it, she stood back upright and turned her gaze to Vallen, a wide grin of triumph replacing the serious set of her features. Her amulet now shone luminescent in the dim light. Quickly inserting the cap back into the stone, she threaded the necklace over her neck. The stone was bright against her pale skin.

Not sparing a moment, Vallen opened one of their waterskins, pouring out its contents onto the cave floor. He lowered the empty hide into the magic pond, the skin

expanding as liquid entered it. Filling it to capacity, Vallen stood up and sealed it, sharing Nyssa's triumphant grin.

Hope had replaced Vallen's earlier despair, renewing his determination. "We should get moving. We've still got a few hours of light left. But then we can make a real camp. Get a full night's sleep and enjoy a victory meal," Vallen suggested, already moving purposefully toward their exit.

# CHAPTER 19





*A*fter four more grueling days of Vallen and Nyssa battling through the Dying Wilds – where they carefully didn't address the confession that the hyva had interrupted – they finally emerged from the tangled, corrupted forest. Vallen had decided to ignore the conversation they needed to have in favor of focusing on survival. Each day had been a testament to their perseverance, the terrain a merciless enemy, swirling with chilling winds that cut through their threadbare clothes. They navigated their trail slowly, tracing an uncertain path through the thick undergrowth as shadows loomed ominously around them. Despite having the magic liquid, fear was still their constant companion, often curdled in their bellies with the distant growls of the unseen hyva. Several times, they'd had to cower in the hollows of trees or behind boulders while predatory eyes glowed in the shadows. But the amulets repelled the beasts. The gloom was oppressive, sucking at their hope, yet they pressed on. Vallen's resourcefulness and Nyssa's quiet courage kept them pushing them relentlessly forward.

The transformation from twisted, decayed gloom to a lush verdant forest happened suddenly. The wrathful display of decay, of only grays and blacks, the unruly deformity of twisted branches that only moments earlier had stretched as far as the eye could see, had disappeared. Vallen and Nyssa halted and stood on the cusp between the Dying Wilds and the regular world, squinting at the stark contrast, feeling stunned and disoriented. Vallen's senses were overwhelmed by the abrupt change. Even the air felt different, lighter somehow.

One step forward, and they had crossed an unseen boundary. Instead of warped black, every leaf was a vivid color – greens, reds, browns, and yellows, like vibrant jewels sparkling in the forest. Every tree towered straight toward a sapphire sky instead of being bent and deformed; even the River Assur seemed brighter, reflecting the vibrant hues of its surroundings. The air was filled with the intoxicating fragrance of blooming flowers, their sweet scent mingling with the gentle whisper of a crisp breeze. Vallen felt reborn and refreshed.

He stepped forward, ready to leave the Dying Wilds far behind them. It felt as if a weight had been removed from his shoulders.

He glanced back one final time at the lines of twisted trees fading into a dreary backdrop, at the shadows that clung to every gnarled, skeletal tree, while killer thorns, mean and uncaring, lay wait in the undergrowth. He had half expected to see a hyva there, watching them, but nothing was staring back at him. The Dying Wilds were a stark reminder of the price the land paid for the tyrannical reign of King Jerwan and the harsh law of the Enumerii. He grimaced at the sight.

“If I never see another black, twisted tree again, I’ll be a happy man,” he muttered to himself.

Vallen stepped forward, his eyes captivated by the untamed splendor of the forest, the varied hues of the autumn leaves shimmering with life, punctuated by the symphony of the River Assur, gurgling softly a few feet away. He found a grin sneaking onto his lips. He was leaving the Dying Wilds and Erishum behind, hopefully, forever. A part of him swelled with victory, like a bird soaring high above the clouds, untouchable and unconquered.

Vallen and Nyssa moved swiftly, their footfalls brushing quietly through the grass and moss underfoot. To Vallen, the sight of a berry bush was as exciting as a festival and as invigorating as a morning breeze. He pointed out the bush to Nyssa, who squealed in delight. They both stopped and plucked fat succulent berries to eat. As he bit down, a rush of tart, sugary sweetness filled his mouth. It was bright and refreshing on his tongue, reminding him momentarily of better, carefree times spent sneaking into the farmer's orchard with Nyssa in the sun-dappled groves of Erishum.

While she gathered more berries, Vallen pulled out the map that Nyssa had risked life and limb to smuggle to him. He stared at the map, trying to estimate how long it would take them to hike to the road that led to either Puzur or Hassuna. He thought that if they kept up a steady pace, they'd get to High Road sometime the next day.

Vallen stared at the small smudge marks he'd put on the map, each representing an area where greenery had stubbornly poked through the deadly shroud of the Dying Wilds.

Whenever they'd stumbled across a spot of greenery, they searched the area and even dug into the ground, looking for signs of magic. Only once did they find a tiny pocket of the liquid concealed amidst a copse of trees, burbling up in a tiny pool from the ground no bigger than a plate. The other sites were still marked as sites with potential. Vallen assumed those spots housed more underground aquifers, sealed away from them by a layer of dense rocks or compact sediment.

Vallen gently refolded the parchment, its edges getting worn and tattered from frequent handling, and carefully tucked it back into his weathered satchel. He gave Nyssa a happy smile as he plucked another handful of the juicy wild berries.

She grinned happily at Vallen, her lips stained red from the berries. Once they ate their fill, they picked berries to save for later.

“I think we’ll reach High Road by tomorrow,” he told her. Nyssa looked both excited and apprehensive.

“Nyssa,” Vallen began, watching her carefully, “when we get to the High Road, do you want to head for Puzur or Hassuna?”

The soft golden hue of the dying day bathed Nyssa in an ethereal glow. “Both hold their own appeal,” she admitted. “Puzur has that enormous body of water. It’d be interesting to see. It might provide us with a living, considering how we’ve worked on the water for most of our lives. It would be familiar.” Her gaze lingered on the horizon for a moment before she continued. “Now, Hassuna... it’s got mountains, which would be an entirely new experience. Interesting, I imagine.” Her dark eyes flickered toward Vallen. “Plus, it’s got a certain appeal in being further away from Erishum than Puzur. That could count for something.” The corners of her mouth quirked up slightly.

Vallen returned Nyssa’s grin. “I think you’re right.”

Stepping closer to Nyssa, Vallen extended a hand. She stared at it for a moment, then took it gently. His gaze met hers, her eyes bright in the waning sunlight. Taking in the sight of Nyssa’s sweet face, Vallen silently thanked Enum that she was with him and that they both made it to safety amidst the chaos and danger. She was a beacon of enduring strength in his turbulent life.

“I think we can get in another hour of walking before we need to camp. Let’s spend our walk and time of rest tonight to



think about what we want, then we can decide once we reach High Road,” he suggested.

“Yeah, I like that plan,” Nyssa agreed.

Vallen took the lead as they navigated through the forest, always keeping the river in sight. Free at last from the Dying Wilds, Vallen found the walk significantly easier with no more thorns to pick from his flesh, nor twisted trees with insidious, clinging vines to navigate; every step away from that cursed place was a relief.

The forest buzzed with an abundance of life that was non-existent in the Dying Wilds. Where the Dying Wilds had been a wasteland of silence, the forest was a choir of animated sounds. Birds dipped and darted among the emerald canopy, their chirps and whistles echoing through the air, their vibrant plumage a stunning contrast to the bleak greys and rusted reds of the Dying Wilds. Insects skittered on the ground and twirled in the air, their tiny bodies shimmering in the dappled sunlight as they danced among the blooming flowers. Squirrels scampered up the rough bark of ancient trees, their chitters sounding lively. The very air tingled with life; it vibrated against Vallen’s skin – humming, pulsing, thrumming– in ways the air of Dying Wilds never had. It was like stepping from a tomb into a celebration of life.

After almost an hour of walking, they found themselves facing an ancient crumbling building. Overgrown with creeping ivy and moss, the ruin was the first sign of civilization that they had seen since they had left Erishum. The ruin, half-buried in the underbrush and overgrown with vines, revealed itself near the bank of the winding river’s edge. It rose from the leafy sea of the forest, a lonesome mountain of decayed arches, crumbling walls, and stone columns, silently

bearing witness to the relentless passage of time. The stone walls, draped in green moss, stood stalwartly against time. The roof, however, had collapsed long ago. The evening sun bled across the sky, illuminating the ruin's forgotten grandeur under its dying light.

“We should rest here, Nyssa,” Vallen suggested. “These stone walls will help shelter us from the cold night winds. We still need to regain and conserve our strength.”

Nyssa looked at the ruins, with their lacework of vines and old stone walls. It wasn't the sort of place to offer comfort, but it was safer than sleeping in the open. Each night was more ruthless than the last. The cold seeped up from the ground and into their bodies no matter how close they crowded to the campfire and each other.

Before long, Vallen had gathered enough dried branches and leaves while Nyssa cleared an area in the center of the building. With practiced efforts, they worked together to build a small fireplace in the middle of weathered stone walls. The kindling crackled and popped as he carefully nursed the tiny spark into a thriving flame. The flickering orange glow warmed the stone, making it seem alive with an inner light.

Vallen settled back, watching as the flames grew stronger. Nyssa seemed entranced by the fire, her eyes reflecting its glow. It had been a while since the two of them had a moment of tranquility, away from the immediate threats of the Dying Wilds and their dire predicament. Firelight wreathed their silhouettes, making them appear as ethereal figures dancing within the amber glow.

“As a child, I wanted to be a falcon handler,” Vallen confessed, his voice filling the quiet ruins with its deep timbre, “I used to dream about flying with them above the city walls,

far away from everything.” He looked into Nyssa’s dark eyes that reflected the fire’s flames. “What about you, Nyssa? What did you dream about?”

She chuckled softly, her gaze drifting from the embers to stare into the darkening sky above them. “I... I used to dream of opening my own bakery. The kind that would be famous all over Erishum for having the best pastries. I always wanted to feed people – to make them happy.”

Vallen’s gaze found Nyssa’s once again, his voice heavy with longing, regret. “What if... what if I had never joined the shrikes, Nyssa? If I’d remained a gutter rat.” He stared hard into the flickering fire between them, his hands clasped together as if holding onto something intangible. “Joining the shrikes meant that it got too dangerous to be seen with me, so I couldn’t tell you how I felt.”

Nyssa was quiet for a long moment, her gaze dropped to her hands before finally meeting his. “There’s no use thinking about what might’ve happened, Vallen,” she murmured. “That world doesn’t exist. It’s a dream. We need to focus on the here and now. And on what we want for our futures.”

He looked at her, his chest tight with a hope he hadn’t allowed himself to feel in a long time. “Do... do I still have a chance, Nyssa?” His voice shook slightly, revealing the vulnerability he hid so well. “I mean, with you.”

His question hung in the air, merging with the night’s whispers, dampening the embers’ crackle. Nyssa hesitated, gnawing her lower lip as if searching for the right words. “I care about you, Vallen,” she finally said, her voice soft, “Deeply. But... when I thought you’d abandoned us – abandoned me – for the shrikes without warning or

explanation, the hurt –” She pressed her lips together. “It’s not so easily mended. It’s going to take time, Vallen.”

Vallen nodded, the raw honesty in his eyes burned brighter than any fire. “I’ll show you, Nyssa. That I’m worth your trust. I’ll earn it.”

She sucked in a steady breath, her fingers twisting into the fabric of her worn shirt. As she looked at Vallen, her expression softened. “I believe you. I... I do care for you, Vallen. So much,” she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper.

Their smiles were melancholic. Emboldened by the warmth and their shared memories, they found themselves talking into the deep hours of the night, their words ghosting out with the faint tendrils of smoke. The dreams they once had, the life they led on the grimy streets of Erishum, it all resurfaced.

The conversation finally waned, the day’s long trek catching up to them. Vallen, sensing the ebb of their energy, suggested, “We should sleep – we have a long journey to the High Road come tomorrow.”

He moved toward their makeshift bed, settling upon the pallet first. Vallen held open their blanket for Nyssa to join him. With a soft, hesitant shuffle, she approached. As she slipped under the blanket, she leaned over, pressing a delicate kiss to Vallen’s rough cheek. He froze, a surge of shocked happiness spreading through him. The ghost of her lips lingered, warm and soft, filling him with a hope greater than he had felt in many years. Vallen stilled before a low murmur of surprise escaped him. As Nyssa settled into the bedding, Vallen closed his eyes, allowing the soft crackling of the fire to

lull him into sleep's gentle embrace, his heart full to bursting with contentment and hope.

# CHAPTER 20





As they emerged from the protective walls of the ruin the next morning, Vallen savored the beauty of the new day. The sky above them was a vibrant shade of blue. The sun cast its warm golden rays upon the land, illuminating the profuse greenery that surrounded Vallen and Nyssa. The scent of moist, healthy soil and flowers filled the air, causing Vallen to take deep breath after deep breath. He closed his eyes, allowing the scent to rejuvenate his senses. It felt as though nature itself was rejoicing after they escaped from the treacherous Dying Wilds. Despite their lingering exhaustion, the rejuvenating effects of a good night's rest were evident on their faces.

With the river nearby, Vallen decided to take advantage of the crystal-clear water. While Nyssa stayed in their shelter, he shed his ruined attire, his body marred with bruises, scrapes, and scars – tangible proof of their survival through the Dying Wilds and his previous life as a shrike.

Gathering his courage, he plunged into the river. The cold sliced through him like a blade. He waded in deeper, gasping at the chill that sent shivers down his spine and made his teeth chatter. Yet, as the previous days' grit and grime were washed away, he felt a certain lightness. Their time in the Dying Wilds had drained him, both physically and mentally – only a few days previous, he'd believed his death inevitable – but the icy river's touch was a shocking confirmation of life.

Vallen gritted his teeth as he fully submerged himself beneath the surface of the freezing water. Within minutes, he adjusted to the temperature and the cold seemed almost bearable with the morning sun shining down on him. “A man

could get used to this,” he mumbled, running his hands across his face and through his ragged hair, the dark strands catching a gleam in the early light of day. Vallen reveled in the simple joy of being clean, scrubbing away the grime from his skin and feeling his muscles relax with each splash. After he had rinsed off, he waded back to the riverbank and sat on a smooth rock, basking in the warmth of the sun.

Vallen examined the state of his garments, worn and ripped in numerous places. The terrain of the Dying Wilds had been unforgiving. Sharp thorns had caught upon the fabric, snagging at threads relentlessly. His tunic had been reduced to a crude mockery of its former glory, torn and tattered. Every stumble, every narrowed escape, had woven a tale into the rips and tangles, transforming his clothes into little more than rags.

Now that he'd scrubbed the thick layer of dirt, sweat, and fear off his body, Vallen changed into one of his spare outfits. He pulled on a simple tunic from his travel pack, a silent concession to the loss of his shrike uniform. Slipping into the fresh set of clothes, the soft clinging fabric was a welcome reprieve.

Vallen felt a sense of comfort and readiness to face whatever challenges lay ahead. He switched with Nyssa, sheltering inside the ruins to give her a chance to bathe in private. He crowded as close as he dared to the campfire, trying to warm up. He chuckled to himself when he heard her loud, shocked gasp as she entered the water.

Once Nyssa had finished bathing, they shared a simple breakfast of fresh berries and the last of their dried meat, grateful for the provisions they had gathered the night before. The taste of the food was exquisite, amplified by the incredible surroundings.



Sitting close to the fire, Vallen and Nyssa shared stories and dreams, their laughter mingling with the sounds of nature.

Throughout the morning, as they prepared to leave, Vallen noticed that every interaction with Nyssa was now laced with a soft awareness that had never existed between them before. It seemed to hum in the air around them. Their eyes kept getting caught in the other's gaze, smiles breaking sheepishly across their faces as they quickly looked away. Yet, there was no awkwardness between them, no sudden strain. This sense of connection made Vallen's heart sing with jubilation.

As Nyssa rummaged through their scant supplies, she slipped Vallen a glance from beneath her dark lashes. An electric undercurrent in her gaze sparked a sense of excitement in Vallen as if he was standing on the edge of Erishum's border wall, staring down from a dizzying height.

The way their gazes met held an entirely new weight, charged and shimmering like a gossamer thread strung between them.

Every common gesture held a new significance. The lingering hesitation in Nyssa's touch, the way her voice quivered when she called his name, and how her cheeks bloomed when he smiled at her. A simple passing of a cup now felt oddly intimate; Vallen's fingers barely brushed Nyssa's.

Yet, amidst the newfound tension and complex assortment of fresh emotions, the feeling of familiarity remained.

With their bodies refreshed and their spirits uplifted, they packed their belongings and continued their journey. The path ahead was still uncertain, but Vallen felt a newfound strength and resilience within himself. He was ready to face whatever

lay ahead, fueled by the memory of a brief respite and the knowledge that they were one step closer to their goal.

With a final fond look at the crumbling building that had housed them overnight, Vallen followed Nyssa as she set off along the river's edge, leading the way.

Nyssa and Vallen trekked through the dense forest. The underbrush was thick and unyielding, and the shadows cast by the canopy overhead painted the forest floor in dark strokes. But after enduring the Dying Wilds for over a week, it seemed a simple adventure in comparison.

They shuffled through a carpet of fallen leaves. Birdsong echoed from treetops high above, and occasionally they would hear the rustle of unseen creatures in the undergrowth. The beauty in all of it was otherworldly, a tapestry of color and life. Watching Nyssa pluck a delicate flower from their path and tuck it gently behind her ear, Vallen's heart flooded with an affection so profound, it threatened to overflow his body, painting an unabashed smile on his face.

Their path had veered from the water, but after an hour or so, it wound its way back toward the river's edge. The potent current swirled and churned, moving faster than it did through Erishum, a rapid melody that was music to their ears amidst the forest's tranquility.

Nyssa's foot caught on something, and she let out a soft gasp, stumbling forward but managing to catch herself before she fell. Vallen rushed over to help, but when he approached, he saw that she was crouched down, examining the ground beneath her feet.

"Look at this," Nyssa exclaimed, pointing to something within the dirt and moss.

It was an old brick half-buried in the forest floor. When she brushed back the undergrowth, she discovered a narrow strip of stones that cut through the tall grass, marking a path along the river's edge.

The moss-covered path followed along the riverbank, sheathed in shadow by towering trees and their gnarly roots reaching for the water. Many of the stones had been displaced by errant roots and shifting soil, but if they paid attention, they could easily discern its direction.

Vallen halted in his tracks, knelt, and traced his hand over the stone outline of the path. The coolness of the bricks seeped into his fingertips. He was silent for a moment, then gathered his cloak as he stood, his gaze straying along the length of the path as it disappeared around a bend, mirroring the curve of the river.

“This path,” he murmured, his voice hushed and thoughtful. “I wonder... if this was once a road that ran from Puzur and Hassuna to Erishum? Maybe this road existed before the creation of the Dying Wilds – before King Jerwan severed Erishum from the rest of the world.”

Nyssa shifted on her feet, her eyes roaming the path, now hardly more than a worn rutted track slithering through the wilderness. She wrapped her arms around herself. “It’s a strange thought,” she admitted. “This path means that people used to come and go from Erishum, but because of King Jerwan, now no one can leave, and the rest of the world doesn’t even know we exist anymore. A whole kingdom just forgotten.”

“Yes,” Vallen agreed, giving Nyssa a pleased look, “but we got out.”

The path's existence brought a sense of comfort – a hint of humanity when they hadn't seen any signs of life until the night before with the abandoned building. The trail felt like a guiding hand.

Vallen unfolded the map with care, checking their progress, mindful of the delicate nature of the ink and brittle parchment. There, by the twisting curve of the River Assur, a sinuous blue line was replicated in the landscape at their feet.

“Closer than I hoped,” he murmured with a grin. When Nyssa glanced up at him, he explained, “I believe we're not far from High Road. We should come upon it soon.”

Nyssa returned his grin with a wide happy one of her own. “So... have you given any thought to which kingdom you want to—”

“Wait,” he interrupted, his voice bristling with sudden alarm, raising his hand. His grip tightened on the map unconsciously. He looked around, all his senses on high alert. “Do you smell that?”

The stench was one Vallen knew well. Nyssa took a long inhale. He could see the moment when the odor hit her nostrils. It was a smell he recognized readily – rotting flesh. An acidic taste swirled in the back of his throat as nausea welled up within him. The stench brought many terrible memories rushing into his mind. With effort, Vallen pushed away the recollections and focused on the present.

It was a vile, putrid stench wafting from the direction they'd been heading.

Vallen pulled out his dagger, the worn handle fitting snugly in his hand. His fingers traced over the grooves and nicks in the handle, a meditative calming act. With a serious nod

toward Nyssa, he took the lead, placing himself defensively between her and the potential threat. “Stay behind me,” he ordered.

Using his heightened senses honed from his years as a shrike, Vallen followed the stench up the path, his footsteps silent on the moss-covered bricks. The sun was bright and happy, a stark contrast to the now apprehensive energy in the air.

Approaching the river’s edge, his eyes fell on a clutch of reeds that rustled gently with the breeze, their shadows elongating over the water. The stench was stronger there. Among the muddy greens and dark grays, a dash of unnatural blue stood out starkly.

Caution seared every nerve ending as he motioned for Nyssa to stay put. With grace that belied his size, Vallen crept closer to the reeds, quietly parting them with his dagger. Nestled within, he found the body of a man garbed in a vibrant blue outfit floating in the water. The incongruity of the color against the man’s deathly pallor made for an eerie sight. Vallen was glad that he wasn’t face up, since what little skin was showing was bloated and unnatural looking.

A gasp sounded from behind Vallen, and he twisted instinctively, his hold tightening on the dagger as he shielded the gruesome sight from Nyssa. There was no fear in her eyes, only surprise. “Val,” she began, stepping hesitantly forward. “The color... his clothes match... they match the robe that was on the horse I found outside the border walls.”

“Nyssa,” Vallen began hesitantly, his gaze drawn back to the floating corpse. But she interrupted him, a thoughtful look in her eyes.

“When I brought the bags back from the horse, Curator Athura said that people rode on the backs of the animals when traveling,” she spoke rapidly, her fingers plucking anxiously at the worn fringe of her tunic. “When she went through the bags, she said that the bag had belonged to a messenger.”

Vallen nodded. “And the saddlebags you brought back? They had the royal seal of Puzur, right?”

When Nyssa nodded, Vallen gestured toward the marsh, where the corpse drifted grotesquely in the stagnant water. “So this must have been the missing messenger. I wonder what happened.”

# CHAPTER 21





Vallen checked over the corpse, just in case the man had carried something of importance, but there was nothing worth saving. The body had been in the water for well more than a week. The stench wafting through the crisp air with every gust of wind made Vallen's gorge rise. The skin, grotesquely bloated and discolored from the elements, clung loosely to the bones of the lifeless man.

With a last regretful glance back at the dead man's form – there was nothing they could do for him – Vallen and Nyssa turned their backs on him and continued down the path. They fell into a rhythm, their footsteps light as they navigated through the underbrush, Vallen in the lead, his keen eyes scanning ahead for potential threats.

The sun had descended past its peak by the time their path started to wind downwards into a narrow valley. The track they followed turned from the rough and uneven remnants of a forest trail into a clear, worn cobblestone road. Nyssa looked around, taking in the occasional ancient stone structures that rose on the far side of the path from the river, each one long abandoned. The encroaching forest greedily swallowed what was left of the stone structures, their silent surrender marked by creeping ivy and twisted roots claiming the ancient stones for their own.

“Nyssa!” Vallen exclaimed when he realized that they had finally reached the High Road.

They came upon a bridge, or at least what was left of one. It looked like the main arch had crumbled or been swept away. Only jagged bits of stone and cracked lengths of wood



stubbornly clung to the skeletal structure. Part of the stone arch had collapsed, leaving nothing but jagged remnants jutting out over the swirling water.

A sigh escaped Vallen as he peered at the wreckage, assessing the viability of what was left behind.

Nyssa surveyed the ruins of the bridge, her brows furrowed in contemplation. “Vallen,” she began, her voice barely audible above the roar of the turbulent river below, “could the messenger have fallen into the river here? Perhaps the bridge collapsed under him.”

Vallen nodded, his gaze lost in the swirling chaos of the water, which had changed dramatically as they neared the bridge, turning volatile and threatening. The water turned frothy around the footings of the bridge, so Vallen could imagine how a tumble into the water would’ve turned deadly. He turned to face Nyssa, his expression pensive. “It’s possible,” he conceded, “but who truly knows what fate befell him.”

After a moment of silence, both contemplating the possible grisly fate of the messenger, Vallen broke the quiet. “Regardless, I think the choice of which kingdom to head to has been made for us. We need to head to Puzur. Trying to ford the river to reach Hassuna seems dangerous and impractical.”

Nyssa stared at the water and shuddered. “Yes, I agree. Let’s go to Puzur.”

They finish walking the last bit of the old path until it ended at High Road. To their right was the destroyed bridge and Hassuna. To the left was a clear road beckoning them to Puzur.

Together, Vallen and Nyssa abandoned the old path and cautiously ventured onto a well-trampled road, heading off to their left. The hardened dirt, made darker by countless turning wagon wheels, marked a stark contrast from the leaf-littered forest path they had previously navigated. The trees that had previously congested their path had been cleared away from the road they now walked. If it had been a warmer day, Vallen would've mourned the loss of shade, but with the sharp autumnal breeze cutting down the road, he was glad for the sun warming his back. Nyssa walked beside him, placing her hand in his. He gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

Vallen slowed down, his gaze sweeping across the road in front of them, seemingly lost in thought.

“Nyssa, as we get closer to Puzur, we should be careful not to draw any unnecessary attention to ourselves. Not until we know what kind of place the kingdom really is. We need to hide the amulets and anything else that shows that we're from Erishum, at least for now.” He pulled off his necklace and hid it in a pocket.

She blinked and reflexively touched her own amulet. He could tell that she felt protective of the stone. The amulet had become their sole source of protection for such an extended period that Vallen could sense Nyssa's growing attachment to it, her desire to have it close at hand.

“But Vallen, it keeps us safe,” Nyssa argued, her fingers tightening around the cold stone.

“Yes, inside the Wilds,” Vallen asserted. “But here it's different, Nyssa. There's no hyva, no threat that these amulets can fend off.” He clasped her hand in his, his gaze softened. “I fear they might draw curiosity, even danger, considering where they came from.”

Nyssa bit her lower lip, her gaze cast downwards at the amulet in her grip. Anxiety flashed across her face, but it was swiftly replaced by a determined nod. “Alright, Val. We hide them.”

Vallen nodded back, relieved. His mind had been a whirlwind of worries and scenarios; they truly had no idea what they were walking into. They were safe now, at least from the dangers of the Dying Wilds and Erishum. As they continued their journey to Puzur, they would stay safe by blending into their surroundings as best as they could.

With a firm nod, Nyssa removed her amulet and tucked it into her travel pack.

After the journey through the Dying Wilds, the walk to Puzur felt like a leisurely stroll. As the miles fell under their feet, the thick forest flanking both sides of the road began to yield to vistas of rolling pastures. The quilt-like landscape was predominantly colored in late-season yellows and browns, yet some patches remained vibrantly green with life. The fields stretched out into the horizon, grazed by occasional herds of lowing cattle. The shift of scenery brought a sense of space and size that was shocking.

Vallen felt an unusual sensation prickling at the back of his mind. A bead of sweat trickled down his temple, and a crease formed on his forehead. It was too open, too unrestricted. It took a moment for him to identify the peculiarity of this sensation. All his life, boundaries had surrounded him, be it the grimy mud-brick walls of Erishum’s slums, or the fortifications of the shrike’s barracks, or even the border walls protecting Erishum from the deadly Dying Wilds. The only time he’d seen a distant horizon was when he’d been atop the kingdom’s walls, but that had made the scope of the world

seem far away and removed. But here, amidst the calming expanse of pastoral serenity, he was starkly struck by the absence of confinement. The horizon stretched out in an unending vista of green and gold, the sky a boundless dome of cobalt blue. If he didn't know any better, he might have believed the world went on forever in all directions. For the first time in his life, no walls were hindering his path. He found the new reality both thrilling and unsettling. A sense of insignificance gnawed at Vallen as he surveyed the expansive world surrounding him. It was mesmerizing, even terrifying in its grandeur.

Nyssa's eyes, glittering with exhilaration under the sun's bright light, stared at the world around them in unreserved wonder. When she caught sight of a cluster of low, stone buildings across the emerald expanse, she nudged Vallen to show him. Wisps of pale smoke curled leisurely from a single brick chimney – the first sign of human life they'd seen in over a week. The tendrils of chimney smoke evoked memories of frosty mornings in Erishum, when the misty morning fog would rise from the surface of River Assur, mingling with the billows from the blacksmith's forges and the baker's ovens, enveloping the air in a symphony of smoky fragrances.

They didn't linger but continued, but the warmth of humanity emanating from the homestead brought a sense of calm to the duo. Not because of its size nor its grandeur – it was a mere speck in the vast expanse of the pastures. No, it was the familiarity of hearth and home that filled their hearts with a surge of eager anticipation. They both instinctively knew, amidst silent glances and shared relief, they could carve a place for themselves here.

## CHAPTER 22





Vallen found himself standing on rough sand next to Nyssa, his feet sinking slightly with his weight. His cloak rustled in the brisk, salty wind, carrying a scent that tingled his senses in a way he'd never experienced. Before him lay a body of water so immense that it stretched beyond the horizon. In a world of stone and mud-brick walls and dusty streets, the sudden openness of it all left him breathless. If he'd thought the farmland was a shocking stretch of unending horizon, the ocean obliterated that notion.

He was exceedingly familiar with water; he'd made his living in the River Assur for most of his life. The river wasn't a trifle, but this... this was different. This wasn't the sedate, predictable rhythm of a river's flow. These roiling blue-green depths were a living thing, alive with a tempestuous spirit that resonated within his own. He found himself inexplicably drawn to it.

As each wave crashed to the shore, they sent frothy fingers sliding quickly across the wet sand to kiss their feet, then retreating again, back into the immensity of the sea, which was a seething battle between dappled blue-green and foamy white.

Looking over at Nyssa, he was caught by her expression of utter wonder and awe. Her mask of quiet, calm friendliness, which had been worn to combat the harshness of their lives in Erishum and keep people unguarded, had slipped away. She raised a hand, letting the fierce winds whip around her fingers, the gusts tugging playfully at her hair.

Vallen licked his lips, tasting the brine of the water. It was fresh, salty, and bracing; totally different from the stifling,

spice-filled air of Erishum.

“There’s so much of it,” Nyssa murmured, her voice barely audible over the crashing waves of the sea. The vastness of the world left them both feeling exceptionally small.

“It looks like it goes on forever,” Vallen echoed her thoughts, his tone hushed with reverence. His eyes shimmered under the waning sun’s pallid glow. He squeezed Nyssa’s shoulder in a comforting gesture, promising silently to share her wonder, her fear, and the unknown future that lay ahead. They stood on the brink of a world neither knew existed, bound by destiny, friendship, and a dark secret.

Nyssa paused; her gaze fixed on the distant horizon where the water met with the sky. “Look, Vallen,” she murmured. She pointed out across the water, her brow furrowed. “A boat.”

He squinted, the salt-laden sea breeze blowing into his eyes and tugging at his hair. The crew on the boat moved as tiny silhouettes, scurrying like small bugs. With a sense of fascination, Vallen realized that they were pulling enormous nets from the water. Meshes that glittered silver in the late afternoon sun, heavy with the bounty of the water. The world, Vallen realized, was far larger and more alive than the suffocating walls of Erishum had ever let him believe.

Vallen gave a heavy sigh, causing Nyssa to look away from the boat and stare at him. “We must push on if we hope to reach Puzur before dark,” Vallen said, turning his gaze back toward the road they’d wandered away from. When the pastureland had fallen away and left them with the sea on their right, Vallen and Nyssa’s feet had unthinkingly taken them off the path so they could get a better look at the water.

Nyssa, her gaze turning from Vallen and back to the vast expanse of the sea, drew a deep breath. Her shoulders sagged ever so slightly. He could tell that she didn't really want to leave the ocean behind; its grandeur and vastness had rendered her speechless. It was like nothing either of them had ever seen or even imagined.

Pulling her gaze away from the incredible vista, she nodded. "You're right."

Vallen helped her adjust the pack on her shoulders. He shifted the straps of his own bag into a better position, feeling the reassuring weight of the supplies within. "It would be a lovely change to sleep under a roof tonight, even if it is just a barn's hayloft."

Nyssa nodded, a faint smile gracing her lips at Vallen's dry humor. She gestured for him to take the lead. As he moved past her, he couldn't resist a backward glance at the infinite stretch of the sea, giving a silent farewell to its awe-inspiring beauty.

Together, they left the comfort of the coast, the waves rolling in a parting lullaby as they once again set foot on the road to Puzur.

The path they had been treading on had straightened out and broadened, acquiring a more permanent groove into the landscape. Now, scattered throughout the area were not only patches of forest and open fields but also occasional farmhouses, each with a bustling yard filled with fowl and flourishing vegetable gardens.

They passed by a handful of huts built on the sand, a few even raised high on poles. The structures towered over the sand like wading birds on stilt-like legs, their warm lights twinkling in the dusk. Small boats, painted in playful vibrant



colors, lay hauled up onto the white sands. It was all so very different from the imposing and crowded structures of Erishum. There were no high walls here that acted like barriers, no houses so close together that their walls were shared. There was space and quiet – the only sounds were the low calls of livestock underscored by the low constant rush of the sea. It made Vallen feel like he could stretch out and take a first deep breath, an openness that spread out wide and welcoming.

Vallen's gaze shifted from the surrounding farmland to the sight that had elicited a nudge from Nyssa. Down the lane, a hulking cart was moving toward them, its wheels squeaking rhythmically, while an unhurried team of magnificent beasts drew it forward. Both Vallen and Nyssa stared with wide eyes, awestruck by the sight of the creatures that would have towered over even the tallest man in Erishum. The first had a hide of white, speckled generously with shades of grey, while its companion, a creature the color of earthy chestnut with a mane of black. Both animals emanated a raw, powerful energy.

Nyssa leaned close to Vallen, whispering, "Those... are horses. The animal I found near the river... it looked so much like that brown one." Her voice was an awed whisper, her gaze never straying from the mighty beasts. As the cart creaked past, they stepped aside, allowing a generous berth, their gazes transfixed on the muscular animals. Spying the cart's driver, a burly man wearing a straw hat, they lifted their dust-covered hands in a shy, awkward greeting, still deeply affected by the beautiful spectacle.

Vallen and Nyssa stared after the cart until it rounded a bend in the road and disappeared from sight. Vallen gave her an excited, incredulous look before they turned and continued

their trek, the images of the horses permanently imprinted in his memory.

Slowly, the scattered farmhouses and huts grew closer together. Exhausted and dust-covered, Vallen and Nyssa finally found themselves on a busy walkway, standing in front of a quaint inn, a beacon of warmth cutting through the encroaching chill of the night. Built of interlocking timber and stained with a milky wash, it revealed signs of busy life within – silhouettes moving about, lively chatter and laughter, and the comforting smells of hearty food. It wasn't grand or imposing, but it emanated a sense of warmth that chased the last of the frigid Dying Wilds from Vallen's limbs.

"I've never seen so much wood," Nyssa murmured, her eyes wide with amazement and incredulity as she gestured to the clapboard buildings and carriages lining the street, the stacks of firewood piled beside hearths, even the planks beneath their feet. Wood was a scarcity within Erishum, and the scant timber forests within the border walls were vigilantly protected. The soft glow of lanterns tossed long shadows across the wood-grooved surfaces. Each timbered structure told a tale of abundance, of richness, of freedom the likes of which the mud-bricked, stone-laden streets of Erishum could never whisper. She reached out a hand as if compelled, brushing her fingers against the rough grain of the closest dwelling. "This... This doesn't seem real. This can't be real, can it?" she asked, her voice hushed and filled with quiet awe.

Vallen gave Nyssa's hand a reassuring squeeze. All the while, he watched the citizens of Puzur quietly, his eyes alert and calculating with an unending vigilance. His guard was up, but he kept his face placid and pleasant. His gaze flicked from one face to another, scrutinizing their attire, their postures, their actions. His ears perked to the rhythm of their speech,

their dialect, and the unique inflections in their voices. He noted the roughened vowels of the shopkeepers as they called out their wares, the soft-spoken elegance of the well-dressed ladies strolling along the boardwalk, and the slurred consonants of the drunken tavern-goers. Practicing beneath his breath, his own speech began to adopt the same rhythm. Gradually, his mimicry, a skill learned for survival on rough city streets, began to shadow the nuances of the people around them.

Indistinct chatter filled the air, melding with the rhythmic cacophony of the market. Vallen noticed that most of the people around them had lighter hair and skin than he and Nyssa. But another sweep of the crowd reassured him. He noted the smattering of coal-haired pedestrians amongst the sea of browns and blonds. The variance was enough for him to decide that perhaps they weren't so different after all, at least not enough to make them stand out from the population. Vallen even noted a man with hair the color of hot flame. In all his years, he had never laid eyes on a person like that.

A young boy skittered across their path, his face dirt-streaked but plump and healthy-looking. Vallen called to the child, who stopped and gave them a sly, curious look.

“Where is the guard station or the person in charge of policing here?” Vallen asked gently, giving the boy a reassuring smile.

The boy swallowed hard, his eyes darting between Vallen and Nyssa. He pointed with a grubby finger toward a stout stone edifice standing amidst rustic wooden constructions at the end of the main road. “The constable's office,” the boy offered, his voice timid. Then he ran off, yelling for another

child to wait for him before Vallen could say a proper thank you.

Vallen turned to Nyssa, who was staring at the constable building with a slightly worried frown. His eyes met hers, and her grimace faded into an encouraging look. But she said nothing. He was moved by her silence, by the trust it implied.

# CHAPTER 23





Standing before the austere façade of the constable's office, Vallen and Nyssa hesitated. The old building seemed to cast a cold, bone-chilling shadow over them. The stone edifice was made from an unfamiliar, tan stone. Vallen was used to all the buildings in Erishum being made from the same gray rock, so it seemed strange at first. Despite the different color, the building bore an almost uncanny resemblance to the shrike's barracks – a place all too familiar to Vallen and a recollection that left a bitter taste on his tongue.

Images flashed in his mind, of every uncharitable deed he'd witnessed in the barracks, and every past misstep that caused him shame. It was a reminder of a time that he was happy to leave far behind.

Nyssa, tight-lipped, glanced at him with her dark eyes filled with untold worry. She shifted uncomfortably on her feet, the grim stone building towering before them, its dark, narrow windows like the eyes of a brooding giant.

Vallen felt the tremor that ran through Nyssa's slender hand. He hated that she was scared. So, with a renewed sense of determination, he took a deep, steadying breath. Sternly shutting the door on the specter of his past, he gave Nyssa's hand a reassuring squeeze, a silent promise of strength and loyalty. She looked over at him and gave him a nod.

With heads held high, they stepped toward the open front door, disappearing into the heart of the constable's office, swallowed by its ominously gaping maw.

Inside the building, Vallen's eyes strained to adjust to the gloom. Despite the shadowy interior, the office emanated an almost cheerful warmth, a welcome reprieve from the cold breeze of the world outside. The office was lined with long, narrow windows that let in the late afternoon light, filling the room with shadows that danced devilishly on the walls in the sparse candlelight. Near the entrance sat a man with light brown hair, several years older than Vallen, with laugh lines feathering from his eyes. However, what really caught Vallen's attention was his uniform: a crisp blue garment that matched the outfit of the drowned messenger.

The man's gaze rose from a parchment-littered desk to meet Vallen's, his hazel eyes pinning them in their place. His voice was like a burr, rough yet commanding. "State your business."

Taking a moment to gather his scrambled thoughts, Vallen finally managed to force his tongue into service. He could feel his own pulse throbbing staccato in his ears as he began, but he made sure to keep his nerves from showing. Years in the shrike's service was good training for that. "We have traveled the High Road from Hassuna and discovered that the bridge spanning the River Assur is unpassable."

Something flickered in the man's eyes, a spark of interest or perhaps worry. He let out a bit of a sigh. "Yes, thank you for informing us, but we are aware of damage to the bridge." The man looked like he was about to turn his attention back to his paperwork, so Vallen found himself blurting out the remainder of their findings. "We also found the body of a Puzur messenger—" his voice faltered for a moment "—and his horse, both drowned in the river."

The man's eyes grew wide with shock, then darted to Nyssa, who nodded but remained silent. A tense silence descended, punctuated only by the scratch of quills from unseen scribes behind sturdy oak screens.

Vallen carefully unfastened the leather straps of his travel pack, pulling out the dagger Nyssa had retrieved and setting it on the man's desk. Earlier that day, Vallen had realized that the dagger might be a regulated item; much like his previous shrike-issued sword, and he had come to the decision that they couldn't hold onto it, in case someone recognized the weapon.

Next, he pulled out the leather bags Nyssa had rescued from the dead horse. His movements were slow and careful, treating the items with reverence. On one side, a Puzur emblem was stitched: a lion on a shield. He had given one of the letters that had been inside the bags to Marun Egmond but hoped no one would question one missing letter.

"We tried to save what we could," he explained, his eyes flicking over the offered items. There was a hollowness to his voice, a hint of the loss he felt for the life that had been cut so brutally short. "We... we had to leave the body... and horse behind."

As Vallen closed his travel pack, his eyes caught on the letters that Curator Athura had written to the rulers of Puzur and Hassuna. Nyssa said that the letters were pleas to the two kingdoms for help. Vallen had decided to hold off on giving anyone the missives and to leave them hidden for the time being. He wanted to hide them until he could determine the true nature of the kingdom.

The man looked up from the bag and knife, his face a mask of sadness. "Thank you for bringing this to us. I need to inform Constable Warrin."



He stood up from his chair and quickly strode away, disappearing into one of the open doors lining the far wall.

Vallen stood quietly, feeling the eyes of several people littered about the room, most behind desks, staring at them both curiously. A few heads peeked out of a couple of doors but didn't approach.

The office door at the far end of the room creaked open, revealing an older woman clad in a slightly more sophisticated variation of the blue uniform worn by the others. She followed the man over to Nyssa and Vallen. The woman gave them both a stern look. She had the swagger and stance of a trained warrior and a wide face that could have been chiseled from stone, making Vallen tense. Her hair was shockingly shorn close to her skull, only showing a bit of chestnut fuzz generously sprinkled with gray. Vallen had to assume that this woman was Constable Warrin. With effort, he managed to keep his shock from his expression. A woman warrior? Such a thing would never been allowed in Erishum. The shrikes had barely tolerated Vallen because of his poor background. He couldn't imagine what the constable's treatment would've been in the barracks.

"Nestor says you have news for me?" Her voice held the rasp of countless years of commanding, yet unwavering in its authoritative power.

"Ma'am," the man explained, his voice soft and mournful. "These two individuals said they found Cambrin's body in the river. They brought back his weapon and his saddlebags..."

His words hung heavy in the room, and Nyssa's hand reached out to loosely clasp Vallen's.

Constable Warrin stared at the knife and saddlebag for a long moment as if trying to process the information, then

heaved an exhausted sigh. Her watchful eyes turned sad and careworn as she stared at the knife and the water-worn saddlebag.

Rubbing a hand over her face, the constable then looked over Vallen and Nyssa as if noticing them for the first time. “I had worried when word reached us about the bridge getting swept out,” she revealed, her fingers brushing over the battered surface of the saddlebag. “Haven’t heard back from Cambrin since he left... I dreaded something like this might’ve happened.”

She gave the saddlebag one last caress before visibly pulling her emotions back and under control. The constable looked resolutely at Vallen and Nyssa in turn. “What’re your names, and how did you happen upon Cambrin’s body? I sent someone down to search the area, and they found no sign of him.” Her tone carried a grave undertone. “Let’s not talk here. Come into my office so we can discuss it in private. You need to tell me everything you saw, every little detail.”

Nyssa’s dark eyes widened. She stared at Vallen, her expression reflecting her rising worry. Vallen, sensing her emotions, returned her look with one of quiet encouragement.

“Yes, ma’am. We would be happy to tell you everything we know,” Vallen replied to Constable Warrin. He gently took Nyssa’s hand, giving it a squeeze. Nyssa shook off the fear and gave him a clear-eyed stare, nodding for him to proceed.

Vallen and Nyssa trailed behind the constable past a series of open doors, each one leading to an office. Finally, they reached the door she had emerged from. It opened, revealing a spartan office. The room was doused in the somber glow of the setting sun and was methodically clean, with not a single parchment or quill out of place. The sight made Vallen ache

for the glorious disarray of Nyssa's collection back in Erishum, an odd testament to their simple beginnings. This austere space reminded him too much of his bunk in the shrike's barracks.

The constable gestured for them to take seats across a hefty wooden desk that occupied much of the chamber. "Your names?" she demanded, her gaze bouncing between the two as if weighing their worth.

Returning her gaze, Vallen swallowed down the anxiety crawling up his throat. Drawing in a breath of steadying courage, he let the reassembled persona of an inconspicuous traveler spill out. "I am Vallen, and this—" he motioned toward Nyssa "—is Nyssa. We hail from Hassuna."

Nyssa sat by him in silence, her watchful eyes never leaving the constable. Warrin nodded slowly, scribbling something onto a parchment. Then she paused, laying down her quill to look at them both again.

"What brings you both to Puzur?" There was something unyielding about her tone.

An involuntary prick of guilt shot through Vallen's heart at the lie poised on his tongue, yet there was no alternative. "Our parents," he murmured, a wistful note creeping into his voice. "They did not approve of our union. We chose to leave, seeking our own fortune."

Vallen's gaze shifted towards Nyssa, a flicker of apprehension filling his gut. When she nodded, placing one of her hands on his sleeve and looking at him dotingly, seamlessly picking up the thread of his lie. The relief that flooded him was palpable, his breath escaped his lips in a slow, silent exhale.

The constable observed them, her eyes narrowed, as though scanning for any slip in their façade. Vallen held her gaze, the embers of resolve burning brightly in his eyes. Lies or truth, it mattered not as long as it safeguarded Nyssa.

“And how exactly did you stumble upon Cambrin’s corpse?” Constable Warrin asked, breaking into the tremulous silence.

Vallen leaned back in his chair, readying himself for another vulgar parade of lies. “We had to travel along the Assur River to locate a spot shallow enough to cross because the bridge was impassable. It brought us uncomfortably close to the Dying Wilds.”

Constable Warrin gave Vallen a confused look, raising an eyebrow. “The Dying Wilds? I’ve traversed most of Puzur in my years of duty, yet the name seems to escape my knowledge. Do you mean the Shadow Woods?”

Vallen scarcely missed a beat, giving the constable a self-deprecating grin as he hid his blunder. “It’s... a name Nyssa came up with when we were children. The tales of the ferocious beasts inside the Shadow Woods used to frighten her,” he explained.

The constable gave Nyssa a quick conspiratorial grin. “Well, no shame there. I’m an adult and the warblers still scare me.”

Though Vallen could see Constable Warrin’s skepticism wasn’t entirely eased, the small shy smile that Nyssa gave her seemed to thaw her almost completely. It was one of Nyssa’s gifts – to make everyone around her feel at ease. Inside, Vallen’s heart thudded heavily against his chest. One false move, one misstep, could cost them their future. Constable

Warrin returned Nyssa's smile then nodded for Vallen to continue his tale.

“What happened next?” Constable Warrin asked.

Vallen nodded. “Once we found a place to safely cross the river, we had to walk back toward the High Road. As we were hiking along a path next to the river, we noticed a bit of blue fabric caught in some reeds at the riverbank.” He didn't have to fake his shudder at the memory of the grisly sight of the drowned man's body.

“And you went to the water's edge and investigated?”

“We did,” Vallen affirmed. His voice seemed to tremble with a sorrow barely reined in. “We quickly realized that the blue fabric was a man and a horse, both long dead. There didn't seem to be any physical injuries, so I assumed they both drowned, but we could not be sure. We didn't want to touch them much.”

The constable's face fell into a grimace as she tried to digest the heavy words Vallen cast at her. “Go on,” she finally urged.

“We recognized the clothing and thought it might be a messenger from Puzur,” Vallen continued, his voice low and troubled. “We salvaged what we could – saddlebags and a knife.”

A silence hung heavy in the office as the constable stared at the surface of her desk sadly. “I'm going to need to send someone to find Cambrin. About how far down the path from High Road would you say his body was?”

Vallen turned to Nyssa. “About an hour's walk, wouldn't you say?”

Nyssa nodded. "A little more than an hour, I'd guess," Nyssa began quietly. "Where we found him... It was in a bend in the river, there was a large boulder that jutted a bit into the water, creating an almost protected area from the pull of the river's current. He was caught in the tall reeds there. We had to leave him." Her gaze fell, her hands clenching.

"Of course, you did. There's no shame in that. You couldn't have carried him, even if you wanted to. It will be fine; I will send someone with a cart to fetch his body if he's still there." Constable Warrin reached across the desk and patted Nyssa's shoulder comfortingly. Vallen didn't think that the constable was much of the comforting sort, but he appreciated her effort.

She gave them both a warm smile, her stony gaze softening in gratitude. "Thank you both...for bringing us the news," she said, her weather-worn face revealing years of hardship. She rose from her desk, stood in the opening of her office door, and hailed across the room. "Freddic!"

A man, middle-aged and clothed in the blue uniform, scuttled over, his eyes wide with confusion. He was tall and thick, with a great bushy mustache. At the sight of Vallen and Nyssa, his frown deepened further, but Warrin's stern expression and crooked finger beckoned him closer.

"Freddic," she began slowly, "Cambrin's been found. We think his body's down by the river bend, caught in the reeds by a boulder a little more than an hour's walk down the old road to Erishum."

Her gaze hardened as she stared up at Freddic, her voice dropping to a lower register. "You'll need a horse and a cart, and bring a cloth to cover his body," she commanded, looking around the room to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "But

listen here, this isn't something to be gossiped about town, not yet anyway. I need to speak to Cambrin's wife first before the town criers start singing. Is that understood?"

Freddic, rigid under the constable's stern gaze, managed a nod. Constable Warrin clapped his shoulder, a gesture of familiar camaraderie. Her voice softened slightly as she said, "Be quick, Freddic. I don't want you having to wade through the reeds and water in the dark. Be quick, but be safe."

And with that, the man was shooed off, disappearing as quickly as he had appeared, leaving Vallen and Nyssa alone with the constable once again. Warrin returned to her seat behind her desk, her fingers absently trailing over the stacked parchment before she finally looked up to address them. The firelight from the corner hearth flickered over the worn stone and wood, casting shadows across her face, crisscrossed with lines.

"Well, now that you've reached Puzur... what's your plan?" Warrin inquired, her gaze unwavering and keen as she gave the pair a considering look. Her voice held both curiosity and skepticism, perhaps lingering from her nature as a keeper of the law.

Vallen sat up a bit straighter, the flickering light catching the edges of his form and setting his features in stark relief. He glanced at Nyssa before he responded, "Well, Nyssa here has a talent for baking. She can make loaves of bread like you've never tasted."

Warrin's gaze softened on Nyssa for a moment, then shifted back to Vallen as he continued, "And me... I've trained as a soldier back in Hassuna. But I'm hoping for something... different. We're not afraid of hard work."

Warrin leaned back in her chair, arms folded across her chest. “I do not doubt that. If you walked all the way from Hassuna with nothing but your packs to accompany you... Well, it’s clear you’re not the idle sort,” she remarked, a tinge of respect coloring her words. “And where do you plan on staying? Have you sorted out a roof to lay your heads under?”

Vallen cast a glance at Nyssa and shrugged, a sheepish half-grin ghosting his features. “To be honest, we hadn’t planned that far ahead.”

Warrin shook her head fondly, her lips twitching with a wry smile. “Ah, to be young again...” she sighed.

After giving both Vallen and Nyssa a long stare that made him want to squirm, the constable nodded as if to herself. Pulling back in her chair, she opened a drawer on her desk, her weathered face furrowed in concentration. Opening a small box inside the drawer, her fingers emerged clutching a couple of coins, which she proceeded to deposit onto the worn wooden surface.

“For the return of Cambrin’s things,” she said, sliding the coins toward them. Vallen raised a brow and glanced at Nyssa but made no move to touch the coins. At Nyssa’s wary look, the constable explained, “It will buy you a few nights at the inn. I wouldn’t want you two spending the night on the streets. You seem like a nice couple, and the temperatures get dangerous at night this time of year.”

With a thankful nod, Vallen reached out and grabbed the coins, pocketing them. Warrin gave them a considering stare. “Look, we also have a cabin that’s been vacant for a couple of months,” she offered, though her tone suggested it wasn’t much of an offer at all.

Vallen frowned, intrigued despite himself.



Warrin grimaced, her fingers drumming a staccato rhythm on the desk. “Well, it’s at the edge of Puzur. Close to the Shadow Woods.” She gave them a pointed look. “No one wants it because the woods are dangerous. When people go in, they very rarely come back out.”

Vallen nodded. “We’re familiar with the Shadow Woods. How far away is the cabin from the woods?”

“It’s not so close as to put you in danger. I wouldn’t suggest it otherwise,” Warrin explained, her nostrils flaring in annoyance. “The trouble is that those blasted woods continue to creep closer to Puzur every year, nibbling away at our land, so people are abandoning their homes rather than risking proximity to the forest.

“But I reckon you two aren’t the sort to be cowed by some gnarled trees and eerie shadows. As long as you don’t enter the woods, you will be fine. The warblers never leave the protection of the dark trees. Besides,” she finished with a twist of her lips, “it’s a free roof over your heads. You’re not exactly in a position to refuse a good offer.”

The constable’s words elicited a low chuckle from Vallen, a sound that filled the room with unexpected mirth. “We are far from being frightened of the Dying Wilds – I mean, the Shadow Woods, Constable Warrin. We know that as long as we don’t venture into the trees, nothing can harm us,” responded Vallen, with the hint of a smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. Turning to Nyssa, he observed her for a moment, hoping she was as excited as he was, “A roof over our heads is more than we could have hoped for on our first night.”

Nyssa returned his smile with a brilliant one of her own. Seeing the joy in her eyes, a surge of warmth filled Vallen’s

chest, a flicker of hope igniting inside him. For the first time since his world turned upside down, he dared to believe that he might just be able to give Nyssa the life he had vowed to try to provide.

Constable Warrin gave them directions to the cabin, her permanent scowl deepening as she squinted at the parchment lying on her desktop. As they rose to leave, she called out, “Nyssa, you said that you’re a baker, yes? I would suggest that you stop by Mara Tylant’s patisserie in the morning. Tell her I sent you. She owes me a favor. She’ll be having you do all the thankless grunt work, but she’ll also give you a fair shake.” Warrin paused, her scrutinizing gaze shifting toward Vallen.

“And you, Vallen,” she began, her face set in an unreadable expression. “Would you consider working on a fishing boat? I should warn you that it is hard, backbreaking labor, no doubt, but the pay will keep you fed.”

Vallen nodded, his chin lifted in self-assured determination. “I’ve done some fishing before, Constable.”

“Good.” She gruffly murmured while nodding, seemingly satisfied. “Return here at first light. I’ll walk you down to the wharf and see if any of the skippers are short a deckhand.”

Leaving the confines of the constable’s office, Warrin gave them a firm nod, a semblance of a crooked smile crossing her weathered face. “Luck be with you, Vallen and Nyssa,” she grumbled, her voice softening just a bit.

They reciprocated her sentiments with heartfelt words of gratitude, both of their expressions a mirror of sincerity. “We owe you, Constable Warrin,” Vallen confessed, managing to offer her a genuine, hopeful smile. He saw the smallest of grins on Nyssa’s face too, her eyes shining with a strange blend of shock and exhilaration.

“Thank you, Constable,” Nyssa chimed in, wrapping her threadbare cloak tighter around her slender shoulders. “We won’t forget this.”

They embarked on their journey then, traversing through the long, wide streets of Puzur toward their given destination under Constable Warrin’s directions. By the time they reached their new refuge – a small, wooden cabin nestled on a hill with the ominous silhouette of the Dying Wilds looming in the distance – darkness had descended, wrapping every inch of the surroundings in its gloomy shadows.

Bracing against the chill seeping into his bones, Vallen pushed open the rickety door, revealing the humble interior of the one-room cabin. It was plain and crudely furnished but appeared to be functional. A ladder caught his attention, leading toward what appeared to be a loft. He climbed halfway up, and found a cozy, though sparse area with a straw mat on the wooden floor. When he came down, he found Nyssa trailing her fingertips along the edge of a dry sink, gaze darting around like she couldn’t believe her eyes.

Unable to gauge her mood, Vallen walked over and stopped in front of her. “What do you think?”

The brightest smile Vallen had ever seen bloomed across Nyssa’s face as she squealed in delight and bounced in place, the moonlight filtering in through a small window highlighted her joy. His heart clenched at her happiness. “A real house, just for us!”

Her euphoria was contagious, a spark that turned the warm ember in his chest into a blazing inferno. He laughed, sharing her glee and swinging her into his arms. Nyssa’s eyes twinkled as she met his gaze, a grin pulling at the corners of her lips.

“So,” she began, her voice laced with playful mischief, “I’m your wife, huh?”

Vallen gave her a sheepish look. “I couldn’t think of another lie to explain why we had left Hassuna with so little and all alone. I hope you don’t mind.”

With a light shake of her head, Nyssa assured him, “I’m not upset, Vallen. It was quick thinking on your part, really.”

The evening fell soft and quiet over the cabin like a comforting shroud, extinguishing the feeble light that remained. Wordlessly, Vallen created a bed out of a stack of old blankets. However, Nyssa tugged him toward the loft’s ladder.

“We’ve been sharing a pallet for over a week already. I’m not going to have you sleeping on the floor now that we have a real bed.”

As Vallen lay next to Nyssa, staring blindly at the roof above his head, he listened to the rustle of cloth as Nyssa settled to sleep. He felt the weight of the journey finally seep out of his muscles. The silence in the cabin was broken only by the soft creaking of the structure settling and the faint, comforting lullaby of the wind brushing against the old wood walls.

# CHAPTER 24





Vallen and Nyssa sat patiently on the worn bench outside the constable's office, their backs against the cool stonework. Dawn had yet to fully break. The sky was still a medley of dark blues and purples, with pinpricks of stars fading above them. Nyssa fidgeted, her fingers twisting into the fabric of her cloak.

Their attention snapped to the sound of heavy boots treading on the boardwalk, echoing down the empty street. Emerging from the murk was the formidable figure of Constable Warrin. A single street lantern illuminated her broad shoulders and her wide stride full of purpose.

“Good morning, you two. Good to see your faces so bright and early, Vallen, Nyssa,” Warrin greeted, her brow creased slightly in a warm smile. “I have to ask... What did you make of the cabin?”

Vallen glanced sideways at Nyssa, who immediately launched into an eager response. “It’s wonderful, Constable. Truly, we couldn’t have asked for better. It’s snug and warm, and I think there’s enough land to maybe one day have a vegetable garden... it’s more than anything we could have dreamed of. We’re so grateful, really.”

Warrin listened attentively, a slight pink hue rising in her weathered cheeks and her eyes crinkling. She distractedly smoothed an errant piece of lint from her uniform; the constable looked like she was trying to hide her elation.

“Well, come on, then,” the constable responded, her deep voice tendered with approval. “Let’s start the day properly. Mara Tylant should be stirring soon. I believe you are in luck

as she is short an assistant. We should catch her before making our way to the docks.”

With purposeful strides, Constable Warrin quick-stepped down the street, her tall form slicing through the cooler morning air with unwavering determination. Vallen and Nyssa trailed her, rushing their steps to keep pace.

They followed Warrin to a quaint, ivy-covered café at the corner of the bustling square, its rustic charm warmed by the golden rays of the dawn. A rail-thin woman, her steel-colored hair twisted into a severe bun, was just opening the front door. Her sun-lined face registered surprise at the constable’s arrival.

“Mara Tylant,” the constable greeted as she motioned toward Nyssa. “This is Nyssa, a baker who recently arrived from Hassuna. I thought she might be able to fill the gap in your team.”

Mara Tylant paused and studied Nyssa with a piercing look. After what seemed an eternity to Nyssa, Mara Tylant nodded, her lips thinning as she considered the proposal.

“Very well,” she conceded, “I’ll give her a trial week. It does seem like the winds favor me these days. My assistant, that little traitor, decided that marriage was more important than baking. Left me high and dry, she did.” She opened the door wider, inviting Nyssa to step inside.

Nyssa hesitated, her gaze turning to meet Vallen’s. In her tight-lipped expression and the strained set of her shoulders, Vallen could faintly see his own mirrored apprehension. His heart gave a sympathetic twinge.

“Hey, it’ll be alright,” he said, gently pulling Nyssa into a brief hug. Unspoken sentiments echoed through the silence that followed. Moments later, he eased away. Leaning in close,

whispering a quiet reassurance. “You are going to do wonderful, Nys.”

His gaze followed her as she moved, her uncertain steps leading her inside the bakery on Madam Tylant’s heels. The door closed behind them, the soft thud echoing a goodbye of sorts. Vallen’s heart thudded heavier, a storm of emotions churning within him. They hadn’t been parted since leaving Erishum, and he felt bereft without her calming presence.

Constable Warrin gave him a friendly nudge, her lips tugged upwards. “I see why you’d defy your family for her. She’s a sweet one,” she jested.

Vallen smiled faintly. “She really is,” he murmured with a sense of longing.

Warrin chuckled, a deep sound mingling with the cool morning air. “Lovesick fool,” she mumbled so quietly that Vallen almost missed her words. She motioned for him to follow her, still shaking her head at him. Biting his lip in amusement, Vallen trailed behind.

Before long, they found their way to the docks. Vallen’s feet shuffled to an abrupt halt. Accustomed to the humble rows of docks along the river in Erishum, Vallen found himself struck dumb by the sight of the bay bristling with gargantuan docks, each one boasting dozens of boats rocking quietly in their moorings. The wharf was lined with docks stretching out into the sea, lined with ships bobbing gently on the bright waters. The sounds of creaking wood, the flap of sails, and lapping waves mixed with the distant voices of workers forged a unique symphony.

It took a few steps before the constable realized she was suddenly walking alone. Stopping, she turned and looked



around in confusion. She found Vallen frozen in spot, staring in wonder at the kaleidoscopic chaos of the busy wharf.

Standing a few paces from him, she watched his stunned expression with a questioning tilt of her head. “What? Never seen the great shimmering beast of the sea, have you? Well, this is a new sight, then,” she asked, her tone laced with amusement.

Vallen turned and blinked at her before shaking his head sheepishly. “Hassuna is landlocked and surrounded by mountains,” he replied, trying to regain some semblance of his usual composure. “There are no grand bodies of water there. I’ve seen small boats and a few docks... but this...”

His wide-eyed look of wonder made the constable laugh outright, a booming sound that chased away a few white and gray seabirds that cried plaintive calls. “You should see your face,” she jabbed, her grin teasing. “One might think you’re staring at the face of Enum himself!”

Vallen responded with an abashed smile that swiftly faded into a contemplative expression as he turned to look back at the wharf with Constable Warrin by his side. They both stood rooted to the spot for a long moment, taking in the hustle and bustle, the unique rhythm of the wharf, and the sheer vibrancy of life on the docks that was so very different from what he was used to.

The constable seemed to shake herself out of whatever thoughts had held her captive. “Come!” she commanded. “I want to introduce you to Captain Falcrow. Need to make sure we catch him before he heads out for the day.”

Constable Warrin led Vallen through the raucous onslaught of clattering carts, cawing sea birds, and shouting dockhands. Carts rattled by stuffed full of strange sea creatures, salted fish,

and eels meant for the hungry markets further inland. Vallen watched as a thin black cat snuck up to an untended basket and stole a fish.

They edged their way down a long dock fringed with sun-worn wooden boats covered with layers of salt and grime next to gleaming boats boasting fresh paint and sparkling white sails. As they sidestepped past snarls of hemp ropes and stacks of oars, they finally halted before a mid-sized vessel. It towered over them with its crimson and yellow sails furled. Vallen watched as a dozen men swarmed over the boat, their sinewy arms glistening with sweat as they heaved ropes and adjusted sails, a bustling hive of activity preparing for departure from the dock. Each man aboard the vessel appeared toughened and sinewy, every wiry muscle in their arms straining as they worked, a testament to the demanding labor of life on a fishing boat.

“Captain Falcrow!” Warrin bellowed. Her voice cut through the din.

The flurry of activity on the sailboat halted as if trapped within a painting. Then, like the parting of a curtain, a man emerged from the load of nets strewn on the deck. Streaks of sun and salt on his angular face highlighted a man in his forties, but the twinkle in his eyes suggested he had a youthful spirit. Burly arms that could have wrestled down a hyva glistened with sweat while a lion’s mane of golden hair tumbled down onto a beard as thick and wild as the man himself.

The sailor lumbered over toward them. “Constable Warrin, what brings you down to my docks so early? Did another one of my lads fall into your drunk tank? I will not be bailing

anyone out; let ‘em stew in it for a day. They’ll be sorry when they lose a day’s wages and can’t afford more ale, I reckon.”

His laughter boomed across the dock, contagious and rich.

“Captain Falcrow, I am not here for any miscreant of yours. I have a potential new deckhand for you,” said Constable Warrin, swatting away a pesky flying bug with an annoyed flick of her hand. Gesturing for Vallen to step up next to her, she introduced, “This is Vallen. He did something good. Something which I believe warrants a reward. I lied and told him you’re the best captain in all Puzur, and he would be lucky to work for you.”

Captain Falcrow guffawed at the constable’s teasing before he turned his attention to Vallen and studied him with a sharp gaze. “Hmm, at least you look sturdy.” Suddenly, his eyes widened. “Wait, is this about Cambrin? Heard a rumor that they found his body yesterday.”

A frustrated sigh escaped Constable Warrin’s lips as her eyes rolled toward the still-dawning sky. “News flies faster in Puzur than seagulls before a storm,” she complained, rubbing the arched bridge of her nose with forefinger and thumb. “Yes, Cambrin was found, but that’s a tale for another time. We would’ve never found him if it wasn’t for Vallen and his wife.”

Vallen turned his gaze to meet Falcrow’s, letting the captain see his determination.

Captain Falcrow’s eyes flicked to Vallen, a shrewd twinkle in them. “Ever been on a fishing boat, lad?” he asked.

Vallen met his gaze earnestly, his shoulders squared and his grasp firm on his future. “No, sir. Can’t say I have,” he

admitted, maintaining eye contact. “But I learn fast and work hard.”

The grizzled captain grinned at the response, revealing an array of crooked teeth. “Well, I like the honesty, boy,” he said, laughter lines crinkling at the corners of his sea-weathered cheeks. The man had eyes so bright a green, they reminded Vallen of an apple fresh off the bough. “Tell you what. I’ll let you work for me for the day, see whether you’re worth your salt. Three jutes for the day. If you meet muster, we’ll negotiate a more permanent salary.”

Vallen’s gaze flicked instinctively to Constable Warrin. Even knowing her just a day, he trusted her judgment and opinion implicitly. The constable gave a subtle nod, a flicker of encouragement in her dark eyes.

Feeling reassured, Vallen returned his attention to the seafaring captain and accepted the offer. “Deal,” he said, his voice resolute with determination and hope. “I won’t let you down, Captain Falcrow.”

“I don’t think you will. Welcome to the *Silvan Gale*, the fastest fishing boat in Puzur.”

# CHAPTER 25




With the sun beaming down on him and hardly a cloud in the sky, the boat swayed, creaking and groaning under Vallen's feet. The roll of the waves slung beneath him, toying with his sense of balance. His hands, weathered and callused from years of wielding a blade, felt raw and scraped by an entirely new kind of labor – heaving heavy rope and tossing enormous nets over the bow with the other crew members.

The sense of unity aboard the boat was unexpected, even foreign to Vallen. Every task was a communal effort, from the hoist of the nets, weighed down heavily with the ocean's bounty, to gutting and descaling the fish, their iridescent scales jettisoning into the air. His eyes stung from the chilled salt spray, tingling on his skin, and the tang of it sat thick on his lips.

The blue-green sea stretched endlessly as if water was what made up the rest of the world. Occasionally, the vastness of the sea would catch Vallen unawares, the unending jeweled turquoise expanse causing him to pause in his tracks, his breath stilled in humble reverence.

Bizarre creatures unlike anything Vallen could have conjured from even his strangest dreams were found in their nets, twining and flipping side by side with the more familiar forms of fish. However, even the fish were strange – a mix of vibrant colors, some so large as to boggle his mind, and many with shapes that defied any aquatic creature he had ever laid eyes upon. He'd never even heard tales spun of such animals, and each time the net sluiced onto the deck and released its treasures, the thrill of discovery pulsed anew in his veins.

But it was the insatiable horizon that captivated him most, the demarcation between sea and sky almost impossible to discern, the water only a slightly different shade of blue than the sky. It was terrifyingly tranquil, the relentless expanse filling every crevasse of his peripheral vision.

The ceaseless rocking of the boat under his feet, at first an unwelcome dance partner, grew to be a rhythmic lullaby.

“Ready the nets!” Captain Falcrow bellowed. His voice, a rumbling force amid the ocean’s harmony, roused Vallen and the crew from their peaceful lull.

The men fanned out with practiced agility on the deck. Three of the crewmen manned the crank to pull the net out of the water, and another rotated the boom arm so that they could release the contents of the net onto the ship’s deck. Vallen stared at the full net, looking at the roiling mass of desperate, scaled captives inside it.

Another fisherman directed Vallen to help pull the net into position. He grabbed the rough fibers of the net, his muscles bunched and coiled like the rope itself as his team heaved it into position. The creak of straining ropes and the gasps and grunts of the crew as they pulled, their boots skidding and scraping on the deck, blended with otherworldly sounds of the creatures squirming in the confines of their prison. Their catch glinted silver and blue. For a moment, Vallen felt a thrill, the raw pulse of life under his hands, the echo of the world beneath the waves offered up to them in that shimmering, restless payload.

With the net in position, the captain roared, “Release the catch!” For one breathless moment, nothing happened, and then the line was cut loose. A wave of life crashed against the wooden deck as the net was opened, pouring forth a torrent of

the sea's bounty. The sleek bodies of the fish, their glistening scales reflecting the bright sun, tumbled onto the worn planks, flopping and gasping for life. Vallen backed away momentarily, his boots slipping on the wet surface, each step hindered by the cool, wriggling mass that surged around his feet. The sharp, tangy scent of the sea clung to the air, and the cries of gulls echoed the chaotic chorus of maritime symphony.

But amidst all this, he could not shake the image of his own body bound and tethered, offered up on the sacrificial mound to the beasts of the Dying Wilds. The memory of the oppressive fear still clung to him as the salty wind whipped through his hair. He understood the panic of the fish, trapped and doomed.

Gloved hands made quick work of the squirming mass. The wrenk, their sleek bodies silver with obsidian stripes, were scooped into one barrel. The robust fringefish, their cerulean scales shimmering like sapphires and with jagged dorsal frills sharp enough to pierce through Vallen's gloves, were gingerly handled and tossed into another vat. All others were discarded overboard, returned to the world from whence they came.

Amidst the haste and the spray, Vallen's hand closed around an oddity. A creature unlike any that he'd ever encountered before beckoned his curiosity. Its form was soft like tallow, slippery and squirmy. It had the texture of a garden snail but with eight serpentine arms that coiled and twisted, each lined with a double row of clinging, sucking circles. A pair of eerily intelligent eyes stared back at him; limpid orbs of ink black. As Vallen lifted the creature, it shimmered – iridescent in a way that reminded him of the magic liquid.



One of the elder crew members, Rasco, followed his gaze and chuckled when he encountered Vallen's mystified stare. "An octopus it is, lad. Mind you, it might seem soft with no bones or spines, but beware of its beak. Sharp as a hawk and strong enough to lop a finger clean off." His coarse laughter rose above the cacophony of creaking pulleys and splashing waves.

As the creature pulsed in his hands, Vallen felt the rub of suction cups sticking and releasing against his palm. Curious, he gently turned the octopus, watching the way it manipulated its wriggling arms, studying its responses to stimuli. The creature did not fight but seemed to yield to his touch. The moment stretched, where Vallen committed the creature to memory so he could tell Nyssa all about it, before he gently released it back into the ocean.

As the day drew to a close, Vallen had yet to settle his apprehensions about the path he'd chosen; but with the salt on his skin and the taste on his lips, there grew a quiet acceptance. Working for Captain Falcrow would allow him to provide a life for Nyssa.

# CHAPTER 26





Vallen rushed, his fingers scrubbing at his flesh with the harsh soap the captain had handed him earlier. He was in a small half-walled stall within the public bathhouse. When his shipmates had shown him how to turn on the cascading water, Vallen had stared, mouth agape at the steaming liquid – hot water, heated without fire, readily spilled from the pipe, a luxury he'd scarcely imagined in all his life in Erishum's rough streets.

The building was filled with the rest of the crew, and the air filled with a chorus of raucous laughter and jovial banter from his new crewmates. They were a merry lot, their spirits emboldened by the hard labor and the stench of sea life that clung to them. Their pockets were heavy with coins and their hearts were full. Yet he still felt like an outsider looking in.

“Make sure to scrub thoroughly, lad!” One of the older men bellowed, a smile tugging at his worn and weather-beaten features. “I reckon your wife won't even let you past the door, much less into the bed, if you're not thorough! Ask me how I know!” The bathhouse roared with laughter at the jest.

A rush of heat stole up Vallen's neck, staining his cheeks a red that rivaled the embers of a banked hearth. The other sailors picked up on his discomfort immediately, their laughter growing louder and the teasing more pronounced. It was good-natured ribbing, the type Vallen should have expected in such a group, yet it felt odd and foreign to him after his treatment at the hands of the shrikes. He had seen this kind of camaraderie amongst them, but he had never been included.

Once he was clean, Vallen quickly shrugged out of the steaming warmth of the bathhouse and dressed briskly in the shadows. He hastily slipped back into the clothes he had come in, thankful that the captain had been thoughtful enough to provide him a coverall. It had been rough and coarse against his skin, but it protected his outfit from the foulness of fish guts. He didn't have enough clothes to risk an outfit getting ruined after the Dying Wilds had already destroyed a set.

Vallen knew he didn't have much time before Nyssa would also be done with her work. He couldn't wait to see her and hear about her day. He quickly made his way toward the small office near the docks where Captain Falcrow kept a post. Even from a distance, the salty air, laced with the robust aroma of raw fish and seaweed, saturated his senses. As he neared the unassuming building, he couldn't help but admire the simplicity of its design – weather-beaten planks, a tiny window, and the general aura of hard work that it exuded.

Inside, the space was small and cluttered, every shelf and table covered with parchments, scattered tools, bits of rope, and wax seals. There he found Captain Falcrow, perched behind a large desk. He was dressed in a set of well-stained canvas overalls with a pair of tiny spectacles perched precariously on his nose, scrutinizing the ledger in front of him.

Vallen's entrance was met with a wide grin. One hand beckoned Vallen to an empty seat across from him while the other rifled through a drawer, producing several pieces of silver. The coins danced through the air as the captain tossed them across the desk toward Vallen. The melodic clink of the silver landing in Vallen's hand made his heart swell with excitement.

Falcrow leaned back in his chair, his green gaze still piercingly intense. “How are ye holdin’ up, lad?” he asked, his gruff voice rich with curiosity.

Vallen’s fingers traced the cool edges of the silver coins, his mind ticking with thoughts of what the future held, of the items he could purchase for Nyssa and their new home. He took a breath and then met the captain’s gaze straight on.

“Feeling good, Captain,” he responded with a nod, his voice holding a fatigued edge yet brimming with contentment. “Tired, but good.”

Falcrow smiled lightly, steepling his fingers under his chin. “Aye, an honest day’s work can wear a man down,” he agreed, nodding sagely. “But tell me, lad. What do ya make of the work? Think you could picture yourself as a fisherman?”

Vallen looked out of the front window, where he could see a slice of the wharf and the vast expanse of sea beyond it. It was a sight that filled him with a sense of awe – the vastness of the sea spread out before him in unending, undulating waves of perfect blue.

“The work’s tough,” he admitted with a grin, turning back to Falcrow. “But I like it. The sea... it’s magnificent.”

A momentary silence hung in the air, filled only by the rhythmic tapping of Falcrow’s finger against his ledger and the distant sound of sea birds. Then, Falcrow chuckled, a deep belly laugh that resonated in the otherwise quiet room. “Aye, lad,” he said, his eyes twinkling with a mix of approval and amusement. “You’ll do just fine here.”

Falcrow didn’t waste any time. “Ya did good today,” he rumbled, his eagle-eyed gaze studying Vallen intently. “Long

as ya want it, there's a place for ya here. Always room for a hard worker who doesn't shirk his duties."

A wave of palpable relief washed over Vallen at the captain's offer. With a grateful smile and a nod, he happily accepted the job and the promise of survival it brought.

The wooden door clicked softly shut behind Vallen as he exited Captain Falcrow's office. In the glow of the late afternoon sun, dockworkers and fishermen, tired from their day's toil, were seen rushing off toward either the welcoming warmth of their homes or the boisterous embrace of nearby taverns, while shopkeepers slowly began shutting their doors even as determined street hawkers continued to call out, their roughened voices peddling wares that glinted under the last remnants of the lowering sun.

Cradling the coins, Vallen wound his way through Puzur's lanes back toward the café, and Nyssa. As he approached, the scent of baking bread hung in the air, tickling his senses and awakening his belly. Stepping onto the boardwalk outside the café, Vallen glanced through the bakery's glass windows, glimpsing Nyssa, her apron dusted with flour. Her features were softened by the warm glow from the hearth, her cheeks pink in the warmth.

She was caught in a moment of focused labor, cutting a slice of cake for a waiting customer. The sight of Nyssa with her tongue poking out one side of her mouth in concentration ignited a sense of fondness and quiet longing within Vallen.

The bell above the door's tinkling alerted Nyssa to his presence, her face brightening with a smile. As his gaze settled on her, the faintest trace of flour streaking her pinkened cheek, Vallen could tell that she was happy and had had a good day. Mara Tylant looked up from where she was observing Nyssa

as she worked. Vallen waited off to the side as Nyssa finished serving the customer. Once she was done, Mara Tylant opened the till, pulled out a couple of coins, and handed them to Nyssa, pointing her toward Vallen. Nyssa gave the prim woman a sunny smile while waving goodbye. “Thank you, Mara Tylant, see you tomorrow!” she called.

Once they stepped out onto the street outside, Vallen’s arm snuck around her waist, pulling her into a hug, his face beaming. He felt her laughter bubble against his ear before she pushed away lightly. Vallen reached out, his calloused fingers delicately brushing away the faint smudge of flour dusting Nyssa’s flushed cheek. “It looked like you had a good day, Nyssa. I think we’ve earned a much-needed celebratory dinner. Besides, we are out of supplies, so we don’t have much choice.”

Nyssa giggled. “Sounds like a lovely plan. I am terribly sick of only fish and travel rations. A warm meal sounds wonderful.”

Hand in hand, Vallen and Nyssa made their way to the local inn they had discovered during their exploration of the city the previous day. Its wooden exterior and warm, inviting glow provided a comforting respite against the chilly evening air. It was cold in Puzur, but winter’s chilly fingers seemed to have less of a hold on the seaside kingdom than in either Erishum or the Dying Wilds, so it felt like a reprieve to Vallen.

The inn was warm and full of chatter. Patrons were scattered about the open space, their conversations melding into a low rumble. Vallen and Nyssa quickly found themselves a vacant corner table and settled in, their fingers still intertwined. Their smiles didn’t wane as a cheerful serving girl made her way over and took their orders. Nyssa, giving a

sheepish smile, ordered a fish stew while Vallen opted for a hearty roast.

Chuckling, Vallen teased Nyssa, “After all your talk about being fed up with fish, I’m surprised you ordered the stew.”

Slightly flushed, Nyssa defended herself. “I saw a bowl of it coming out from the kitchen.” Her eyes twinkled in the warm light. “It looked too scrumptious to resist.”

Vallen could only shake his head and laugh. The serving girl dropped off mugs of mead as they waited for their meal. Taking a slow sip of the drink, Vallen found the mead in Puzur was notably sweeter than what was served back home; he was used to the more bitter brew of his homeland. It took his palate a moment to welcome the difference in flavor.

Holding a small sack jangling with a couple of coins, Nyssa’s eyes gleamed with sheer delight. “Mara Tylant actually paid me for today’s work, Vallen!” she exclaimed.

He chuckled, watching as she poured out the coins onto the table, her fingers caressing them lightly. Her eager eyes, wide and shining, observed each coin – a tangible memento of her first successful day.

“Back in Erishum,” she murmured, her eyes clouding as she turned her thoughts inward, “I had to pay an apprentice fee.” Her fingers nimbly counted the coins, eyes narrowing at the memory. “I was required to live in the bakery, but then they would take room and board out of my salary, so there was little left.” Nyssa shook her head. “I barely got most of my own earnings; it all went to rent. And here...” She picked up a single coin, examining it in fascination. She swept her hand across the coins on the table, scooping the rest of them up and depositing them back in her bag, a contented sigh slipping past



her lips. "I never realized how different it could be. Away from home. Away from Erishum."

Once their food was delivered, they filled each other in on the events of their day as they ate.

Glancing up from her stew, Nyssa beamed at Vallen, her eyes vibrant with happiness and excitement. "I asked Mara Tylant about the town today. She is such a wealth of information!" Nyssa exclaimed, fidgeting with her spoon at the edges of the wooden bowl that cradled her meal.

Vallen grinned at her genuine enthusiasm, running a hand through his slightly tousled hair. "And? What did you find out?"

Nyssa bit her bottom lip, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. "She told me many things, a lot about the local lore, customs, and traditions. A little of the history of Puzur and its royal family." She held her breath for a moment before releasing it into a dreamy sigh.

"But what got me really excited," she said, her voice melting into a whisper, "is that Puzur has a museum. Can you believe it, Val? A real museum, just like from back home." Nyssa grinned, filled with anticipation at the idea of seeing a museum filled with the history of a land so different from their own.

Vallen chuckled at her effervescence, his heart swelling at her joy. "A museum, huh? That certainly sounds interesting."

"Do you think we could visit it soon?"

Vallen reached across the worn wooden surface of the table to gently squeeze her hands. "Of course, we can. That sounds like fun. And it will also help us get a little more familiar with

our new home. We'll visit that museum as soon as we get a chance. Promise," he said.

Nyssa's smile widened. Playing with a piece of her hair, she listened intently as Vallen described his day on the sea, including the sight of the octopus. Her eyes widened at his animated description of the creature, and they both laughed at a few of the local characters who worked with Vallen on the fishing boat.

"Oh, Nyssa, you should've seen it," Vallen said, his voice a low rumble etched with wonder. "Picture a shadow, giant and long, swimming directly beneath the vessel, as big as the ship, if not bigger. It was monstrous in size."

Nyssa's eyes widened as she eagerly leaned closer. "A shadow?"

He nodded; his gaze distant. "Its shape was like a fish but like nothing I've ever seen before. The crew told me it was called a whale. Enormous, Nyssa. I almost didn't notice it because it was completely silent in the water. I just happened to look down and see a giant dark shape. I startled so badly I almost fell overboard. Rasco said that it will occasionally breach the surface of the ocean and blow out a mighty stream of water in the air. He said it was to breathe, but I think he was pulling my leg – fish don't need to breathe. He also said the whale wasn't even the biggest one he'd ever seen. But this one could've easily swallowed a man whole."

Nyssa's mouth dropped open in shock, a flutter of fear washing over her face. "It swallows men whole?"

Vallen chuckled as he shook his head. "It's big enough that it could, yes. But the most astounding part, is that it won't eat people. Rasco said that the creature only feeds on tiny animals that are almost too small to see. Can you believe it?" His eyes

twinkled as they met hers, a warmth spreading through his tone.

Nyssa frowned, her brows furrowing in perplexed fascination. “Are... are you jesting, Vallen?”

He shook his head, his lips still lifted in a smile, picturing the whale in his mind. “I am not. This large beast filters these minuscule creatures straight from the water, consuming an unfathomable quantity to satisfy its vast appetite.”

A hush fell over the crowd in the pub, pulling Vallen and Nyssa away from their quiet conversation.

Looking around, Vallen noticed a man carrying a stringed instrument as he climbed onto a small stage in one corner of the inn. His vibrant robe, adorned with a flamboyant mix of colors, reflected the warm glow of the fire pit, casting dancing shadows around the room. A cheer rose from the motley crowd as he struck the first notes on his instrument, a sound both rich and resonant, filling the space with eager anticipation.

Vallen and Nyssa watched as the bard began his performance, their hands wrapped around their tankards, their eyes fixed on the entertainer. Under his spell, the inn fell into hushed silence, with only the crackling fire daring to make any noise. The night softened, wrapped in the enchanting air of music and shared camaraderie.

The bard immersed the crowd in an array of songs, each carrying a distinct flavor. Through his melodious voice and skilled strumming, he told tales of ancient heroes and long-forgotten wars, of true love and heartrending betrayal. Some of the songs were new to Vallen and Nyssa, their melodies unfamiliar, their tales untold in the streets of Erishum. But a few of the songs were ones they knew, although often with

altered lyrics, or a different tone, but still recognizable tunes that the duo had heard while growing up. The strains of music wrapped around them like whispered echoes from their past, filling their hearts with nostalgia.

After an array of melodies that painted vibrant images in their minds, the bard, with a grand flourish indicating the climax of his performance, announced his final number. “This last ditty, dear patrons,” he proclaimed in his mellifluous voice, “is the ballad of Mad King Jerwan!” A cheer went up among the crowd, a few patrons whistling at the bard. Vallen caught Nyssa’s anxious glance but gave her an assuring nod, his hand surreptitiously brushing against hers.

With a strum of his instrument, the bard began his tale, singing of a king driven mad by his fear and obsession. “*In the heart of Erishum,*” he crooned, “*ruled King Jerwan, renowned by all. Paranoid by nature, suspicious by heart, his grip on his mind began to fall...*”

As the song unfolded, Vallen felt a chill run down his spine. His eyes flicked to Nyssa, meeting her gaze. Shock rounded her eyes, reflections of his own emotions. The questioning look she shot him was one he couldn’t answer.

All their lives, they were taught that King Jerwan was the savior of Erishum. He was a man of great conviction, vision, and benevolence. A man of order, justice, and surety. Not this maniacal, mistrustful ruler described in the bard’s song. Was this how the outside world perceived the king? Vallen’s grip on his drink tightened as the bard made a jest about King Jerwan’s inside being as ugly as his outsides. He wasn’t even sure why he was offended.

The bard began to dabble in darker lyrics, his voice dropping to an eerie whisper as he sang of Jerwan’s descent

into corrupt, dark magic. *“To protect what he held dear, magic most rare, he invoked powers beyond compare. His mind twisted; his heart turned cold, uttering words foretold to unfold...”*

Conversations quieted and the room hushed, lending gravity to the bard’s words. The musician told how King Jerwan created spells using twisted magic, weaving protections so warped it changed the very fabric of Erishum, soaking into the ground beneath Jerwan’s feet. The more that Jerwan created dark spells, the worse his paranoia became, feeding further into the corrupt magic. The result of his corruption: the terrifying Shadow Woods and monstrous warblers. An icy dread gripped Vallen as the bard painted the horrifying image of the cursed kingdom, swallowed by darkness and warped creatures, eaten by foul magic and wiped off the face of the world.

As the bard finished the song, Nyssa slumped in her seat, her face pale in the room’s dim light. Vallen reached for her hand, squeezing it for reassurance; however, the sadness mirrored in her gaze echoed his own. What was the truth? Vallen was inclined to believe the bard’s version of Erishum’s history over what he’d been taught. He wondered if the current ruler of Erishum, King Jorek, was aware of the truth. He was quite certain that Jorek knew that the sacrifices transformed into hyvas, but did he know that his ancestor created the Dying Wilds just to make sure no one could steal his magic? A mad king. King Jerwan was bad enough, but King Jorek, if the song held truth, was far worse because he was sane but still perpetuating his deranged ancestor’s dark magic and lies.

Vallen leaned back in his chair, lost in thought as he stared sightlessly into the half-empty tankard before him. The meal in his stomach had soured, sitting like a lead ball in his gut.

# CHAPTER 27





The sun was high in the sky, casting a bright gleam over Puzur as Vallen and Nyssa made their way toward the museum. It had been a long, grueling week of hard work and getting their home livable. As a reward, they had spent a leisurely morning shopping for essentials, followed by a hearty breakfast at Nyssa's café.

As they walked along the main street that ran parallel to the ocean, the climb started to rise steeply. Soon the clamor of the town center started to die down, and the houses and buildings became more spread out. The majestic silhouette of the palace began to solidify, perched on a soaring cliff's edge in the distance. Seated like a crown atop the robust landscape, it loomed over the azure swell of the ocean below. A thick spire on each corner of the structure punctuated the sky, capturing slivers of sunlight and flinging them into a brilliant, reflective display. Vallen and Nyssa paused to admire its grandeur, momentarily invigorated by the breathtaking spectacle. The palace, bathed in the warm glow of the noon sun, stood as a sentinel, silent and resolute.

As they got closer to the royal palace, both Vallen and Nyssa stared, their steps slowing to a gentle saunter. The royal palace of Puzur was a stark contrast to their own King Jorek's grand and ostentatious mansion. It was far less regal, more reminiscent of a secure fortress to accommodate the royal family. Captain Falcrow had informed Vallen that in the late summer, incredible, fierce storms sometimes crashed against their shores, and many would weather the storms within the protection of the thick palace walls.

The palace, standing robust with its broad walls of stone and glass, was picturesque in its simplicity. It seemed so... practical, unadorned but elegant, lacking the towering spires and gilded balconies that King Jorek used to laud his wealth over his subjects.

Vallen and Nyssa halted upon reaching the edge of the towering cliff that overlooked the ocean. Their gazes rested on the endless expanse of water, gleaming gloriously under the high sun. The waves, tinted a brilliant blue, broke rhythmically against the base of the dark, unforgiving rocks below, foaming and sizzling, only to retreat and gather strength for another assault.

A cold breeze wafted over them, making them huddle closer together, bringing with it a tang of salt.

“So beautiful,” Nyssa whispered, her eyes wide and filled with marvel. “Back in Erishum, I could never have imagined anything like this. It’s... it’s a dream.”

Vallen turned to her, a tender regard in his gaze. “None of this would’ve been possible without you, Nyssa.”

Nyssa turned to him, throwing her arms around Vallen in a tight hug. She held onto him, their bodies close, the spray of the sea and the call of the gulls providing the gentle hum of background noise.

Once they parted, they lingered, arms held loosely around one another. Nyssa then stood on her tiptoes, reaching for Vallen’s face to tenderly brush a soft kiss against his mouth. It was a kiss filled with promises and unvoiced dreams.

Coming out of his initial surprise, Vallen responded to the kiss, his heart soaring in his chest. The rough tips of his fingers traced the contours of her face, anchoring himself in



the moment, in the reality of Nyssa's lips moving against his. His world seemed to shrink, and for that moment, it contained only the two of them. The exhilaration was so potent he felt almost lightheaded. Every whispered prayer, every secret yearning he'd hidden away locked in the depth of his guarded heart, ignited in the sweet exchange.

Nyssa gently withdrew from Vallen, her eyes intently scanning his features as though seeking affirmation for their shared kiss. In response, Vallen drew her into his embrace. His arms came around Nyssa, pulling her against the sturdy shelter of his body. He tucked her head beneath his chin, each breath he drew seemed to whisper assurances of his feelings.

Vallen had so many things he wanted to say to Nyssa but couldn't find his voice to express them.

After another long, lingering hug, Nyssa pulled away and tugged him toward Puzur's small museum, its charming wooden structure perched on the edge of the precipitous cliff, its windows reflecting the shimmering blue of the ocean beneath. As Vallen pushed open the door, ushering Nyssa inside, a bell tinkled, announcing their arrival. The strains of whispered conversation from a couple of families dotting the space guided their steps deeper.

From around a corner, a man with wild tufts of white hair appeared. He was clothed simply in a worn tunic and loose pants, his stature small and slight. Yet he had an aura of knowledge and kindness that drew Vallen and Nyssa closer.

"Welcome, welcome," he enthused, his voice warm like the last ray of the setting sun. "I'm Marun Uben, the custodian of this place."

"Good morning. I'm Vallen, and this is my wife Nyssa. We're new arrivals to Puzur," he started, his gaze steady on

Marun Uben and filled with conviction. “We thought to learn more about the history of our new home.”

Uben clapped his hands together in delight, a sparkle gleaming in his eyes. His excitement was contagious; his entire being was infused with sudden vibrancy. “Oh, indeed! There’s nothing like conversing with fresh minds eager to learn!” He gestured grandly around the room decked with relics from a time long ago. “I’m quite excited to get started,” he professed.

Uben absently adjusted his tunic as he gracefully wandered through the high, arched hallways. His voice echoed off the walls as he spun tales of Puzur’s storied past. “Centuries ago,” he started, pacing near a glass case holding an ancient sword, its blade chipped and scarred, “the Tunshak family came to power amidst a storm of conflict. Dreadful raiders from across the sea threatened our people, leaving them desperate and bereft.

“A young warrior stepped forward amidst the tumult and organized our people to lead a successful campaign to repel the marauders.” Marun Uben paused, his hand hovering over the weather-beaten blade. He touched the cold glass over the metal with reverence, pointing out the faded insignia at the hilt. “This belonged to Nitran Tunshak. He rallied the Puzurians, training them into a formidable army. It is said that his leadership was so awe-inspiring that Puzurians fought with new courage and defended their land against the raiders.”

Leading them into another room, Uben arrived at a massive fresco; its colors were faded, but the vivid battle scene was unmistakable. The determination and fear etched into the painted faces of the army was undeniably powerful and moving. “Here,” he declared, stretching his hand forth to

encompass the vast painting, “we see the culmination of the first Battle of Puzur. Nitran Tunshak, just a simple man, took the center of the battleground, wielding his sword along with the faith of a newly formed kingdom.”

“Nitran Tunshak,” Nyssa murmured, staring at the image of the brawny man leading the Puzurians in the fresco, “He sounds very brave and noble.”

Marun Uben nodded slowly at her words, his aged eyes glistening with the reflection of years faded into memory. “All accounts I have found about him say he was,” he agreed.

“And the current royal family is descended from him?” Nyssa queried further, curiosity lighting up her eyes.

“Indeed, the blood of Nitran Tunshak courses in the veins of our present monarchs,” Uben confirmed, a hint of smiling pride in his voice.

Nyssa regarded the historian thoughtfully for a moment before she finally asked, “Are they as brave and noble as Nitran was?”

Uben gave a shrug to that, his eyes flickering momentarily toward the ceiling as though considering the weight of the question hanging in the air. “Not every man can be a Nitran, I suppose,” he mused, “Like any other noble lineage, they are a patchwork of virtue and vice. They are no worse, and no better than any other royal family.”

Nyssa’s gaze slipped away from the elder, settling onto Vallen. She arched a dark eyebrow, the silent inquiry evident in the shared space between them. A mix of disappointment and resolve hardened in Vallen’s chest, washing away any hope he harbored of the royal family helping Erishum.

Marun Uben turned away from the painting, waving Nyssa and Vallen to follow him. His arms gesticulated with dramatic emphasis as he led them down a narrow corridor that was lined with a myriad of artifacts and ancient oddities. Uben chattered all the way, his voice echoing slightly off the walls. He moved with the passion of a child unveiling a long-held secret, pointing at various antiquities along the way, each with a tale to tell.

All the while Marun Uben pontificated, Vallen cast sidelong glances at Nyssa. Her eyes were wide and sparkling, reflecting the flickering light from the oil lamps. Her every breath was hitched, mirroring her excitement and thirst for knowledge. He found himself captivated less by the grand tales of Puzur's past and more by the woman next to him. He watched as her lips parted slightly in awe, a soft gasp escaping as her eyes traced over ancient historical objects.

Nyssa looked to Uben, her eyes brimming with curiosity. "Marun Uben..." Her voice was quiet, nearly a whisper. "Do you have any... any records of Erishum? I've always been curious about the lost kingdom. But we were never taught much about it."

Uben's face brightened at the question; an almost childlike glow reflected in the parchment-thin skin of his wrinkled face. "Ah, yes, I've always found the story of Erishum to be fascinating," he gushed, his gnarled hands waving in airy gestures. "Follow me, my dear. We have a room dedicated to just what you're asking."

Uben scuttled down a passageway. He was surprisingly agile as he maneuvered between precariously stacked piles of scrolls, maps, and faded artifacts.

He led them into a small room in the very back of the museum. The air here was dry and slightly musty, as if it was a space not often visited.

Nyssa's eyes widened as they fell on a large map filling one wall. Her breath hitched as a murmur of awe and surprise escaped her parted lips. "Erishum..."

Stepping close, she traced her hand over the map, making sure not to touch its surface. Light from a wall sconce fell over the details of their home, although even from a quick glance, Vallen could see that many features of the city had changed since this map had been long ago created. However, it was unquestionably of Erishum.

Nyssa's gaze flitted to Uben, her dark eyes brimming with curiosity and worry. "Is it true? That King Jerwan went mad and laid waste to his entire realm out of fear that someone would steal his magic?"

Marun Uben responded with a slow nod. "Oh, yes, all my research says that is what happened. Old letters, testimonies, and such – all suggest that Jerwan's paranoia was no mere myth."

"But why would he fear his magic being stolen? Can it actually be taken away? I thought that the king's magic was a part of him. I was told that he was made king specifically because he was born with magic in his veins."

Vallen feared for a moment that Nyssa was giving away how much knowledge she had of Erishum royalty. He didn't want them to be brought under scrutiny. However, Uben didn't seem to notice anything was amiss and enthusiastically responded to Nyssa's questions.

“Well, it would be more accurate to say that the king was born with the ability to manipulate the magic, not that it flowed through his veins,” Marun Uben explained. “You see, Jerwan’s familial line could wield the magic of the wellspring – healing, performing great wonders – but they weren’t the only ones. Anyone who could manipulate wellspring magic could do the same.”

Nyssa frowned, her brow furrowing in bewilderment. “Wellspring magic?” she echoed with curiosity clear in her tone. “What is that?”

“It was the source of all magic in Erishum. The wellspring emanated from the heart of the kingdom. Living, pure and powerful, it existed deep within the earth. There was a spring where the king could access the pure liquid magic. However, most of it flowed unseen, under the ground, infusing the very soil,” Marun Uben explained, his voice echoing slightly in the deserted chamber. “People with the ability to manipulate its energy were few, Nyssa, and they had a common trait: striking green eyes unlike those of normal folk.”

Marun Uben’s voice dipped lower as he carried on. “There were... some issues with individuals attempting to steal some of the wellspring liquid. Erishum was a prosperous kingdom, and the magic was coveted by many others. The magic in Jerwan’s land was a significant component of his wealth and success.” His fingers traced over the age-worn map, creating invisible pathways over the parchment. “The greed of others posed a threat to his kingdom and to the wellspring itself, but not enough to justify Jerwan’s actions.”

His eyes stared into the distance and clouded over. “King Jerwan sought to monopolize the magic, and his power. In doing so, he wove a spell of dark, grand magnitude. I believe

that he was trying to create a barrier designed to keep the thieves out. Maybe it was his growing paranoia, maybe it was the dark aspects of the magic he'd started to perform, or maybe he just made a mistake. Whatever the case, Jerwan created the Shadow Woods and the warblers as a result," Marun Uben said, his voice barely above a whisper now.

"But," he sighed deeply, "in creating darkness, he lost his light. The spell used a massive amount of magic. The result was catastrophic – where the wellspring magic once flowed beneath the ground, the Shadow Woods sprung up in its absence."

Uben paused, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. His finger moved on the map and stopped at a region that made Vallen's breath hitch. Swallowing hard, Marun Uben pointed at a spot in the center of Erishum.

"This was the heart of the wellspring. Its source," Uben said, and Vallen felt a chill of realization shiver down his spine.

His heart pounded like a drum in his chest, the thud sounding in his ears. The place that Uben was pointing to was the exact location where the sanctum of the Enumerii now stood. His gaze flickered in alarm to Nyssa, who looked as shocked as he felt. Vallen swallowed, the truth resting heavily on his tongue, the significance of it threatening to suffocate him.

The sudden, tinkling sound of the bell over the front door broke the heavy silence, prompting Uben to turn away from his contemplation of the map. He offered them both a brief, apologetic grimace.

"I need to greet whoever that is," he murmured, his gaze lingering a moment longer on the map before he turned his

attention back toward Nyssa and Vallen with a silent apology.

“Thank you, Marun Uben, for taking time out of your day to speak with us,” Nyssa offered sincerely.

“No, no, Nyssa,” Uben waved an arthritic hand at her. “There’s no need for thanks. It’s always a pleasure to meet someone who appreciates history as much as I do.”

The old man’s fingers delivered a gentle pat on her shoulder. Despite the frailty suggested by his trembling limbs, there was strength in his fingers that hinted at a past that belied his current form.

Nyssa watched for a long moment as the old man quickly shuffled away.

Once Marun Uben was out of earshot, Nyssa turned toward Vallen, her eyes wide with shock. “Did you see?” She pointed at the map. “The wellspring... did you see where it used to be?”

“I did. It was in the exact spot where the sanctum now sits,” Vallen responded, his own gaze distant. “Do you remember when we searched for Tarric under the sanctum, and we hid behind that tapestry?”

Nyssa was nodding excitedly even before Vallen had finished speaking. “Yes, that strange glow we could see in the space under the locked door. Do you think...” Nyssa looked around to ensure they were alone. “Do you think that was the wellspring?” she whispered.

“I believe it could have been,” he admitted solemnly. He thought about the hole Nyssa had tumbled into when they were running from the hyva. Based on the size of the cavern, he imagined that it was once filled with magic liquid rather than the small pool they’d discovered. “What if the magic of



the wellspring once filled the aquifers under the Dying Wilds?”

Nyssa stared at Vallen, a look of stark disbelief crossing her delicate features. “Does that mean that King Jerwan pulled all the magic out of the land when he created the Dying Wilds? Did he get rid of it or just pull it all to the spring under the sanctum?”

“I don’t know, Nyssa. It’s all just guesses,” Vallen admitted, his fingers tracing patterns on the time-worn map. “But at this point, I would believe that Jerwan was capable of anything.”

Vallen pointed back at the worn parchment map, his fingers tracing the faded lines and symbols. “You noticed something else?” he asked, dragging his gaze away from the map to look at Nyssa again. “Look, there’s no border wall enclosing Erishum. There was farmland, pastures, and forests where the Dying Wilds now exist.”

Her eyes flickered to the map, to the sketch of the city and surrounding lands. Nyssa’s brow wrinkled as she looked closer. The thick, impenetrable barrier wall that separated Erishum from the dreaded Dying Wilds was conspicuously absent from the ancient map. Nyssa traced a finger over a clearly marked road that trailed beside the River Assur, leading to High Road – the same overgrown path they’d discovered on their journey.

“So, this means the walls were erected after this map was made,” Nyssa murmured. “I wonder how old this map is.”

Vallen nodded, his gaze hardening with a sudden realization. “Nyssa, what if the walls weren’t built to keep us safe from the Dying Wilds? What if they were built to contain the wellspring?” Vallen brushed the worn parchment gently,

his eyes reflecting a strange mixture of dread and hope. “To keep the precious liquid within the kingdom. That would be why the aquifer we found was mostly empty – perhaps because the walls are blocking the magic from escaping.”

“At this point, I wouldn’t be surprised by anything they’ve done,” Nyssa said, her voice bristling with distaste. “But... if what you’re suggesting is true, why are there places in the Dying Wilds where the magic still exists?”

Vallen fell into a contemplative silence, pursing his lips as his gaze remained transfixed on the old map. “Perhaps,” he offered slowly, “the spell or the wall that keeps the magic confined within our city... Maybe it’s weakening?”

Nyssa shook her head. “We have no way to know.”

# CHAPTER 28





One morning, almost a month after their arrival in Puzur, Vallen woke up to find a frosting of snow on the ground outside their cabin. Fat, lazy snowflakes were drifting on the wind.

Vallen let Nyssa sleep for a few more minutes while he stared out at the white blanketing the world. He stared down the hill toward the edge of the Dying Wilds, the blackened trees almost softened by the white fluff covering them.

Captain Falcrow had warned him that the first snowfall signaled the beginning of the crabbing season. The snow ushered in the harsher season for all fishermen in Puzur, a time for dredging up crabs from the frigid depths of the sea. He'd explained, in a voice weathered by winds and waves, that from the start of the snows, their daily routines would drastically change.

The simple pleasure of sailing out with dawn to return before dusk would soon transform into a grueling, backbreaking gauntlet of setting crab traps. Once all the traps were deployed, they would return to the first one dropped and begin the long process of hauling each one back aboard to check its contents. The captain warned that the water turned deadly during the winter, and if Vallen fell overboard, the chances of retrieving him were slim. The work was hard and dangerous, but the pay made it worth the risk.

Vallen's gaze wandered. Their kitchen flickered in the warm, dancing glow from the hearth. They had turned the cabin from an empty, abandoned shell to a warm and well-stocked home – their first one ever. Outside, the world was

frozen under the first touch of winter's cruel grip, rendering the landscape into an icy wilderness, but inside, they were warm and safe. His stomach clenched as he thought of his friends still back in Erishum: the other gutter rats, the street orphans with their cutthroat existence, the mudlarks scouring riverbanks for anything of worth, even a couple of the shrikes who had not treated him like a pariah. What were they doing now? He thought about Adamir, a man who was always quick with a sword and quicker with a joke; Shamshi, who had been like a mother to all the other street children, and bold Tarric, with his ever-present cheer. He wondered how they were all doing in the frozen streets of Erishum. The winter would be hard for them, the icy streets offering meager opportunities for scavenging and the biting cold making every night a brutal test of endurance. The guilt gnawed at Vallen, gnashing inside of him like a relentless, hungry beast.

Over the last month, he and Nyssa had stumbled their slow, fumbling way into a life as a real husband and wife. Each morning, he got to wake with her in his arms and count himself the luckiest man in Puzur. It was all he ever wanted for himself – a home to call his own, a full belly, and Nyssa. He should be overwhelmed with happiness at the fulfillment of reaching the goals he'd always believed unattainable; however, guilt was never far out of reach. Shame and worry ate continuously at the edges of his contentment and joy. It made him feel unsettled in his skin as if he didn't deserve the fruits of his hard labor.

He found himself caught between the comforts of the present and the haunting specters of the past, and even as guilt threatened to devour him, he was rooted in his resolve – his only focus should be on providing Nyssa the life she deserved. She had risked everything to save him from the Dying Wilds.

Shaking himself out of his dark thoughts, Vallen climbed the ladder to the loft to wake Nyssa. As she opened her eyes and gave him a warm sleepy look, he was able to push away the regrets and worry, allowing himself to savor the moment of peace and love with her.

Soon their humble home was awash with the aroma of breakfast. With practiced ease, Vallen flipped a sizzling egg onto the waiting piece of fry-bread on Nyssa's plate – proficient from their countless mornings spent just as such. Across the small table, Nyssa was lost in her own reverie, her gaze continually returning to the snow outside. Vallen noticed a hint of worry on her face, and he thought it might be due to the unpredictable nature of his work schedule that the snow symbolized.

“Nyssa,” he started, his voice low and reassuring, “I wanted to remind you that I might not be coming home tonight.”

Nyssa was silent for a moment before nodding slowly. “I know, Vallen,” she said, her voice resolute. “You warned me that Captain Falcrow does not stop until the hold is filled with crabs.”

She rose from her seat, her hands unconsciously smoothing the fabric of her dress. “And don't worry about me, I can manage. Remember, I've spent a long time taking care of myself.”

Vallen gave a half-smile, hiding the wince that wanted to form on his face at her confession. “I spoke to Constable Warrin. If the catch goes late, she said she'll keep an eye on you. If you ever have any trouble, seek her out.”

Nyssa's nod was firm. “I understand,” she assured him, her voice gaining strength. “I can take care of myself. You need to

focus on your journey. Stay safe. Promise me that you will.”

Vallen’s eyes softened, his heart aching as he nodded his agreement. The temperature outside might be quickly dropping, but inside their little home, warmth and hope lingered. The memory of Nyssa’s courage and love would be his steady beacon while he worked the frigid tempestuous ocean.

Vallen stood and made quick work of their dishes with her help. Once the house was set to rights, he reached over the table to pick up Nyssa’s new cloak. He couldn’t stifle the pang of pride in his chest as he helped her into it, his fingertips tracing its new, unworn edges. It was the first cloak she’d ever owned that hadn’t been worn by someone else first. It was modest but made of a sturdy wool that would keep the cold at bay. Nyssa’s slender fingers played with the fastening. She gave him a thank-you kiss, her eyes glimmering up at Vallen.

Soon, they found themselves outside, the gray air of the frosty morning making Nyssa’s cheeks quickly turn pink. With their breakfast filling their stomachs, they walked side by side down the narrow lane that led to the heart of Puzur.

Flecks of snow continued to fall, coating the path in a blanket of pristine white. The soft glisten of the snowflakes danced in the weak morning light, making the world feel like a magical place. The crunching under their boots resounded satisfyingly in the murmur of the waking kingdom.

They walked in silence, the rhythm of their footsteps synchronizing, their breaths fogging in the air. Vallen grinned as he watched Nyssa blow long, foggy breaths into the air, looking much like the old men from Erishum used to with their smoke pipes. The sun rose behind them as they walked, the first streaks of the dawn casting long shadows ahead.

As they approached the bakery, Vallen pulled Nyssa to a stop, noting the warm radiance spilling from the building's tall, arched windows. Even in these early hours, there was bustling activity inside the bakery; many of the patrons were fellow fishermen stocking up for the long days ahead.

His hand found Nyssa's, a reassuring squeeze to her slight but rough fingers. With regret in his voice, Vallen whispered, "I must go. Take care, Nyssa. I'll be back as soon as I can. I'll miss you terribly."

"Be careful out there," Nyssa pleaded. "I don't want to lose you to the sea."

"You won't," he promised. His gaze lingered on her for a moment longer before he pulled her into a tight hug and goodbye kiss. He then released her and stepped back.

Standing erect, Vallen raised his hand in a wave to Mara Tylant when he noticed her watching them through the front window. She returned his wave before turning back to an oven and pulling out a tray of rolls.

Leaving Nyssa to the warmth of the bakery and Tylant's care, Vallen took off toward the docks, the scent of brine upon the wind guiding him. The innards of Puzur began to awaken as he made his way through the streets, the clatter of blacksmiths and the snorting of stable horses intermingling with the first cries of morning hawkers.

At the docks, Vallen watched with keen interest as the fishermen began to load slatted wooden crab traps onto the boats. The salty tang of the sea mixed with the damp air almost stole the breath from his lungs.

A loud call of his name pulled Vallen's attention away from the boat he'd been staring at, lost in thought. Captain



Falcrow was waving him over.

“Vallen! Quit gawking at them seagulls and get yer backside into your overalls!” Captain Falcrow’s gruff voice competed with the squawking gulls that circled above them. His weathered face was scrunched in exasperation.

Vallen, pulled abruptly from his contemplations, turned and shot a grin toward the Captain. “Yes, sir! I’ll be right there.” Vallen headed over to the storage locker and pulled out the overalls. They were heavy in his hands, the stench of fish and salt and hard labor clinging to them stubbornly, despite being washed after each use.

“Hop to it then, Vallen. These crabs ain’t gonna catch themselves,” the captain said, his half-hearted bark slipping through his thick beard. Vallen nodded, drawing the overalls up and over his clothes, bracing himself for the arduous work ahead.

With a firm grip, Vallen hoisted a hefty crab trap from the stack on the dock, its wiry metal and wooden cage creaking as he carried it up the gangplank. Once he dropped the crate on the *Silvan Gale*’s deck, his gaze drifted toward the sea, a vast canvas of stormy gray that seemed to mirror the brooding weather above. Choppy waves with frothy white crests rolled toward the shore. Vallen felt a knot of worry twist in his gut, realizing that the day ahead would be a relentless battle.

# CHAPTER 29





A rogue wave surged over the bow of the ship and crashed into Vallen, making him cling to the railing for safety. The cold, merciless spume lashed Vallen's face and numbed his chapped hands through his gloves. He fervently gripped the ship with one hand and the knotted rope of a crab trap with the other. It sent icicle-sharp darts pricking into his skin while he fought to maintain his footing on the slippery deck. The salt stung his open cuts and soaked the parts of his tunic not protected by the overalls, adding to the weight of his gear and his discomfort. But Vallen clenched his jaw and hauled, wrenching the crab trap from the ocean's deadly embrace hand over hand.

The chill of the sea, an icy smothering hand, clawed deeper into Vallen's marrow. An unrelenting cold gnawed at him, coursing through sinew and flesh, testing his resolve and willpower.

Captain Falcrow had told him that this might be their last run. The hold under the deck was close to being filled. Despite the numbing cold, a fire burned within him, flickering with a hopeful intensity. His muscles bunched and released with a now-familiar cadence as he hauled crab trap after trap over the ship's side with his crewmates.

When the next crab trap broke the ocean's surface, it swung on its rope, splashing water high as it was pulled from the depths. The rope he was pulling creaked under the weight of the full trap. After two days of relentless toil, Vallen had developed an intuition, a familiarity with the traps' weight, letting him recognize, even before the crate breached the surface of the water, whether it was brimming with

crustaceous life or disappointingly sparse. Triumph blazed from his heart as he took in the multitude of hardened shells crawling over one another. The animals, bigger than any expectation he'd had, were a sight to behold; alien in their brownish rust-red sheen, with intimidating claws that could easily remove the fingers of the careless, and an unholy number of legs. These unusual-looking animals set the citizens of Puzur's mouths to watering and filled the fishermen's pockets with coin.

An exuberant whoop built in his chest but remained unvoiced; the cold had leached the sound from his throat. They would be done soon, finished with the biting cold, the aching fatigue, and the ever-vigilant fear of the ocean's icy depths. His own heart echoed the sentiment in a steady thrum, enveloping him, affirming him – his only thought was to return to Nyssa.

Vallen gave a final heave that brought another full crab trap clear of the water. Rasco was at his side in an instant. The two men braced themselves against the biting wind, working together to pull the trap over to the deck.

When at last the trap was aboard, the deck tilted beneath them as the ship was rocked. Both men groaned with the strain of keeping themselves steady and making sure they weren't endangering their crewmates, who were doing the same with the traps they were hauling. The trap clattered and rattled as the crustaceans within it scuffled and snapped, their claws clicking against the hard bars of their wooden prison.

Working with practiced efficiency, Vallen unlatched the trap's door as Rasco stood ready with a wide-tined pitchfork. The deck instantly became a writhing, snapping sea of sharp claws and squirming legs. It was a chaotic dance by the

released crustaceans that skittered and scrambled in their desperation, their alien grace evoking a certain primeval beauty. But Vallen and Rasco didn't miss a beat.

With the calmness of two days' practice, they sorted through the frenzied crustaceans. Rasco pitched the females and undersized crabs back into the ocean with a speed that belied his hulking size. Each one tossed back was a promise of full traps in future seasons. Meanwhile, Vallen herded the larger, more valuable crabs toward the hold, his eyes scanning for the meatier males.

When the first trap had been opened, and the monstrous crustaceans had spilled out onto the deck, disbelief had seized him. He was accustomed to the tiny crabs that lived in the mud at the base of the reeds growing along the River Assur's banks – which were about the same size as his thumb. The first sight of these creatures, each as large as a dinner plate and bristling with thorny bumps on their hard shells, had been startling. The intimidating claws had clacked and waved in the air as they clambered and skittered over each other. It had shocked him so completely that he'd lost his footing on the slick deck, landing amidst the chaotic swarm of clicking, armored bodies. Vallen's crewmates had roared with laughter, gleeful at being the first-hand spectators of his wide-eyed introduction to the fearsome crabs.

Another hour of hauling traps passed before the sharp, sudden peal of the captain's bell echoed above the clamor, signaling the end of their arduous journey. The weary but triumphant cheer that followed was deafening, the resounding chorus of victory reverberating through the hull of the ship. A tidal wave of relief swept over the entire sea-weary crew, washing away the glistening sheen of exertion and worry from their salt-streaked faces.

Vallen found himself warmed by their camaraderie. He watched as they hugged and clapped each other on the backs. As Rasco wrapped him in a burly hug, Vallen's lips lifted in a delighted smile. His weariness didn't feel as heavy anymore, and he thought gratefully of the hearty meal, warm, dry clothes, and a solid night's sleep waiting for him back on dry land.

Sails billowed cheerfully over the crew's heads as the winds guided them smoothly back to the familiar shores of Puzur. Waves of camaraderie washed over them, their sweaty, salt-riddled bodies all working in tandem to get them back home as quickly as possible. They shared tales of the sea and toasted to another successful voyage, their hearts light and their spirits uncontainable.

Vallen, caught up in their infectious gaiety, found himself laughing along with his fellow sailors. The thrum of hearty laughter and snatches of ribald stories made for an enjoyable journey back home. His toughened muscles ached from hard work, and his heart tugged on him, pulling him toward Nyssa. In his mind's eye, he saw her waiting for him at the docks, silhouetted against the bright backdrop of Puzur. She was his motivation, his lighthouse amid treacherous darkness.

Puzur's bustling dockside was a blur of activity. Bins of newly caught crabs, their shells glinting in the late afternoon sun, jostled for space. He pitched in, making quick work of unloading the crustaceans, ready for the next day's market. Every crate was handled with care due to the crustaceans' value.

After the crabs were safely delivered and the raucous energy of the docks somewhat dissipated, Vallen made his way to the bathhouse. Walking felt peculiar, as though the hardened

ground was a fickle sea that swelled to meet his boot soles with each step. This unforeseen vertigo made him reel, turning his firm pace into the uncertain stagger of a drunkard caught in a gale. Finally making his way into the bathhouse, he stewed in the hot, comforting water, the grime and fatigue of the voyage melting off him like wax from a candle. A sense of tranquility enveloped him, a wealth far beyond the contents of any treasure chest.

Vallen's heart hummed with anticipation as he collected his wages from Captain Falcrow, the gruff seaman nodding approvingly. His weather-beaten face broke into a rare grin as he clapped a hand on Vallen's shoulder, uttering the words that were music to tired ears: "The whole crew is getting tomorrow off, lad. But I expect to see you first thing the day after."

As the sun began to retire, painting a streak of burning red across the sky, Vallen stood and turned to leave Captain Falcrow's office. "Oh, I almost forgot, lad; each crew member gets to pick out two crabs from the lot for dinner. They make for a fine feast."

Vallen looked at the Captain a bit sheepishly. "Um, what's the best way to cook them?"

"Never had crabs before, have you?" The old seaman cackled. "Well, it ain't hard. Ya just need a strong fire, and decently seasoned water to boil them in. And once it's done, twist and pull the legs, crack 'em open, pick out the flesh. Most people like to dip the meat in melted butter."

Falcrow reached into a wooden chest by the door, rummaging around before he pulled out a peculiar fork and a strange-looking pair of pliers. "Use the crab crackers to break the hard shells and the fork to pick out the meat," he explained, pushing them into Vallen's hands.

Vallen stuck the tools in his pocket awkwardly. With a final wave and a thank you, Vallen left Falcrow in his.

The vast spread of crabs glistened under the waning sun just a few feet away. Cautiously, he picked out two seemingly healthy crabs, their bodies squirming with subtle movement. He bundled them into a bag and left the dock, the thin layer of the snow and dirt crunching under his shoes.

Breezing through the buzzing streets, he made his way to the bakery. The thought of Nyssa, and the shared dinner they were about to have, lightened his steps until he was almost sprinting to get to her.

Vallen finally arrived before the bakery, sandwiched amongst a row of similar wooden-structured establishments. The mouth-watering smell of fresh bread churned his empty stomach and momentarily wiped his mind of all other thoughts. There had been plenty of hot foot and piping hot tea on the ship during their trip, but most had skipped it that day in the rush to finish the work and head home.

Vallen watched as Nyssa worked with effortless grace behind the glass-encased counter that was filled with all manner of delicious-looking treats. Her raven-black hair was tied back into a thick braid, showing off her dark eyes and sharp chin, making her look both striking and ethereal. The delicate curve of her cheek flushed under the heat of the ovens, matching her lips as they stretched into a smile for her customers.

Vallen leaned against a wooden wall and found himself smiling at the sight of her. It wasn't often that he got to see her like this, so perfectly in her element. The strength and warmth she radiated belied her tough past, and it made him fall more deeply for her.



Nyssa must've sensed Vallen's gaze because she abruptly halted her movements, raising her eyes to lock with his through the hazy, condensation-kissed glass of the bakery's front window. A flicker of surprise, followed quickly by joy, flashed across her face, a wide smile blooming on her mouth.

She spoke hurriedly to Mara Tylant, who was also behind the counter. The older woman's expression turned excited – Vallen assumed because Tylant's husband also worked on a fishing ship, and she assumed that he'd be home soon too. Her grin took on a mischievous edge as she shooed Nyssa toward the exit. "Off you go, girl!"

Nyssa, flustered but smiling, soon appeared before Vallen, her eyes sparkling with happiness under the setting sun. She crossed the small gap between them and wrapped her arms around his waist, burrowing into the warmth of his chest.

"I've missed this," she whispered, her voice a gentle hum against his sternum.

Vallen hugged her back tightly, his hands running soothingly down the length of her back. "So have I, Nyssa," he admitted quietly, reveling in the feel of her there in his arms. "So have I."

Pulling back, Nyssa looked up at him, a glint of joy within her vibrant eyes. "Mara Tylant said I could have the rest of the day off!" she announced, her smile radiant.

His own grin widened at her news. "That's wonderful, Nyssa. Captain Falcrow gave me tomorrow off," he said earnestly, his eyes crinkling at the corners with unfettered delight. Freeing one arm from around her, he gestured toward the snow-dusted streets of Puzur. "Shall we go home, then?"

Nyssa nodded, a soft blush gracing her cheeks. Yet she didn't hesitate to thread her fingers through his. "Let's," she agreed.

As they began to walk, Vallen glanced over at Nyssa, a playful glint to his eye. He felt a bubble of laughter rise within him as he revealed his surprise. "Captain Falcrow gave me some crabs today," he announced, nudging her gently with his shoulder. "I thought, perhaps, we could try them for dinner?"

Surprise flickered across Nyssa's face for a moment before laughter bubbled forth. "Crabs? I heard someone talking about them. It sounds like they're not like the ones we're used to. Those crabs would hardly make a meal."

He shrugged, feigning nonchalance despite his growing enthusiasm. "They're not quite like the ones we're used to," he said lightly, already imagining the face she would make when he showed her their dinner.

Vallen and Nyssa made their way toward their small sanctuary nestled on a hill just outside the Dying Wilds. The muffled crunching of their boots settling into the fresh white blanket was the only noise besides their breaths in the quietude of winter's clutch. Each flake that caressed their cheeks was lighter than a whisper.

Upon their arrival, Vallen delightfully revealed the prizes of his day's work, two hard-shelled crabs twined in a jute sack. Nyssa's gasp echoed in the tiny space, her expression animated with a blend of shock and a vague horror that tugged at Vallen's lips, making him burst into laughter.

"Honestly, Vallen," Nyssa sputtered, looking simultaneously fascinated and repulsed. "How in the world do you eat something like this? It comes with its own armor."

“Captain Falcrow gifted me some tools that should make quick work of their shells.”

Stooping low over their hearth, Vallen and Nyssa set to work to cook their meal, their shadows waltzing with the dance of the flames. As the aroma of steamed crab filled the space, Nyssa’s fear of the critters gradually lessened, replaced by awe and curiosity.

Under Vallen’s instructions, Nyssa mastered the art of cracking crab legs. Laughter erupted among them, filling their home with a sense of merry camaraderie as they clumsily stabbed, cracked, and eventually extracted the succulent meat. With each bite, Nyssa’s happy grin grew and Vallen was filled with a thrill of victory to provide her with something she enjoyed. Their meal was intermittently broken by fits of giggles as juices slipped down hands and crab shells scattered across their table. The joyous chaos and the savory deliciousness of the night resonated within Vallen, imprinting a warm memory on the canvas of his heart.

That night, Vallen fell asleep, still feeling as if the world was rocking slowly around him. His dreams started with memories of crashing waves, salt-laden breezes in his mind whispering tales of the sea, until they slowly morphed into visions of the hyvas slinking through the icy landscape outside their home.

# CHAPTER 30





Vallen decided to take advantage of his day off. After walking Nyssa to the bakery and reluctantly parting ways, he decided to return home and tend to some much-needed repairs he had been putting off. Their cabin, while cozy enough, had a few chinks in the wooden walls that were allowing winter's chilly fingers inside.

Vallen began rummaging around their living space, hunting for a small shovel. He needed to dig up some dirt from a patch outside that had the perfect clay-like texture ideal for making a sealant. With the right combination of dirt, water, and straw, Vallen could craft a homemade mortar to patch the drafts.

As Vallen dug around in a storage chest, his hand brushed against a familiar, ragged cloth bag tucked in one of the corners. He pulled it out, still ripped and unwashed from the trip through the Dying Wilds. When they had settled in their home, Vallen had tucked the evidence of their journey away and had avoided any reminder of their old life.

Upending the bag, Vallen watched as their old map, the two amulets, and a half-full waterskin tumbled out. The sight of the worn parchment sent a pensive twinge through him. Unfolding the map, he stared at the intricate lines that illustrated the dense and dangerous Dying Wilds, their journey still marked with sooty X's where he'd recorded the location of green areas. The memories of the harrowing trip flooded Vallen's mind.

Beside the map lay the waterskin still filled with the magical liquid, untouched since they'd escaped the Dying

Wilds. Vallen picked up the hide and uncapped it, staring at its incandescent contents. It had to be the wellspring magic that Marun Uben had told them about. If King Jerwan had built the border walls to contain the magic, then how did the wellspring make it past the confines of Erishum? If the walls, or some sort of a magical barrier, was created to keep the liquid contained, that must mean it was leaking through based on what they'd witnessed in the Dying Wilds.

He gripped the waterskin tighter, his mind already spinning with the potential implications.

Vallen straightened, filled with a sudden resolve. Without thought or understanding, he decided to venture out into the Dying Wilds, just for a little bit. He'd been so busy trying not to think about Erishum or the people they'd left behind that he hadn't given much thought to the Dying Wilds. However, seeing the evidence of their journey made him feel the need to confront the shadowed woods one final time. The need to head into the woods was an inexplicable pull – like a moth to candlelight. With his resolve firmly set, he would brave the wilderness, if only just to check the area near their cabin to make sure it was safe. Kneading his brow in thought, Vallen muttered a silent vow to himself. He would only venture so far and for so long – just enough to glean a bit more insight and return before the day turned into dusk. There were tasks at home waiting to be done.

Decision made, Vallen wasted no time. He quickly grabbed his cloak, wrapping it around his shoulders. Then he threaded one of the amulets over his neck, stuffed the map into his pocket, and attached the waterskin to his belt. He hastily packed some water, salted meats and dry bread, just enough to get him through the day.

Wrapped in his winter cloak, he stepped into the cold. His boots crunched in the snow as he made his way toward the foreboding canopy of the Dying Wilds, their skeletal branches reaching into the sky like pallid death's fingers. Drawing out the map, he traced an unexplored path with his gloved finger, took a steadying breath, and plunged onward into the untamed wilderness.

An uncanny weight oppressed the air, enhanced by a thickening gloom. With a silent sigh, the sweet, crisp morning light reluctantly withdrew, relinquishing its dominion to the entwining tendrils of a mist that laced through the branches overhead. It was as if the forest drew a somber cloak over its shoulders, blocking out the outside world, enclosing its secrets within its drab reach.

The sun was lost amid a smoky haze that wound through the leafless trees, staining the desolation with a bluish hue. The mist felt heavy and cruel, an unwelcoming band around Vallen's chest.

Snow fell silently amidst the hollowness, veiling the forest floor in a thick layer that clung to Vallen's boots as he walked. Each snowflake floated like a ghost, swirling down to cover the forgotten leaves beneath.

Complete stillness pervaded the wilderness. All familiar sounds of life were swallowed within the boundaries of the Dying Wilds. No creature stirred; no birds called; not even the sound of wind rustling through the branches broke the hush. A profound quiet hung in the air. The silence was so heavy, so literal, that the only things Vallen could hear were the slow crunch of his boots in the snow, his breath sawing in and out of his chest, and his pulse as it pounded in his ears.

After an interminable time in complete silence, a clicking, warbling cry split through the dense hush of the Dying Wilds. The sound was so near that it made him startle and duck down. Vallen's heart jackhammered against his ribs, his lungs seizing as he sucked in shocked gasps. He jerked, an involuntary motion that nearly toppled him over.

Around him, the eerie quietness of the Dying Wilds slowly returned, but the echo of the hyva's call reverberated within his skull. The guttural, gravelly chorus of clicks crept under his skin, making Vallen's muscles bunch and clench in readiness to flee. Every nerve screamed for him to escape, but he stood rooted in place, his hand instinctively reaching for the pink stone amulet around his neck. Its cool surface offered a minuscule shred of comfort amid the trepidation that gripped him.

The sound of a heavy slithering surged through the stillness, wrenching his attention toward the approaching predator. His breath hitched as a hyva slunk into view, its magnificent serpentine body glistening beneath the soft, muted light. The weather seemed inconsequential to the beast; not even the frozen snow dampened its menacing aura. Its golden eyes were fixed on Vallen, swallowing him in their predatory gaze.

An unbearable quiet that stretched into an eternity engulfed them. One heartbeat, two – a silent duel waged between man and beast. Vallen pressed the amulet closer to his chest, his knuckles white. His instinctual fears, a residual primordial imprint, battled against his knowledge that he was safe against the monster. How had he forgotten just how intimidating the beast's presence truly was?



As they stared at each other, frozen, the hyva blinked its golden eyes at Vallen. Suddenly, the hyva flared its throat pouch, ushering a bone-rattling roar that echoed through the bleak wilderness. The primal sound was a sucker punch to Vallen's senses, instinct screaming at him to turn and run. But he held his ground, swallowing waves of fear as the beast roared, showing its rows of razor-sharp teeth.

Then, just as abruptly as it had appeared, the hyva huffed and pivoted on its scaled heels. With an air of indifference, it slithered away until its hulking form merged with the shadows, leaving Vallen alone once more in the vast, chilling quiet of the Dying Wilds.

Once he was certain the hyva had truly left and was not lying in wait within the shadows, Vallen began to move. Despite the gnawing urge pulling at him to abandon his trek and return home, there was an inexplicable force that kept him pushing forward into the fierce wilderness of the Dying Wilds.

With a mix of urgency and caution, he walked for several hours. The scenery of the Dying Wilds remained disturbingly still. Speckled thorn trees stretched as far as the eye could see, casting long, skeletal shadows. The sky hung low, consumed by a blanket of heavy, ash-gray clouds.

Vallen marked his path, though the land seemed insistent on swallowing it. He scored three parallel lines into the bark of trees to indicate his trail. He also kept track of his route on the map.

Periodically, he would pause, sucking in the brittle, biting air, and strain his senses to listen for any noises lurking beyond the muffled sound of his own footfalls. He occasionally thought he heard the stealthy rustle of a lurking hyva, but when he stopped to listen, he was only met with

silence. Vallen soon realized that it was only his own vivid imagination conjuring spectral images of the monster in every leaf-rustle and shadow flicker.

Periodically, his hand would stray to the amulet. Its simplistic design, cool against the warmth of his skin, was reassuring.

Vallen kept an eye on the sun, tracking its trajectory across the harsh, azure sky, ensuring he would have ample time to return home and complete his necessary projects before Nyssa finished her workday.

His journey remained uninterrupted until he found a small cavern set into a jutting cliff face. It was a meager shelter against the elements, but even this sanctuary was more than Vallen had dared to hope for in the Dying Wilds. After a check of his surroundings, he slipped inside, his weary, burdened body grateful for shelter. He paused, listening to the quiet rhythm of his own breathing. Gradually, Vallen's eyes began to adjust to the gloom and discerned an undulating glimmer in the back of the cavern. In the half-light, the walls pulsed eerily, beckoning Vallen further into the cave.

The air had a dampness that clung to his skin and clothes, yet instead of making him feel colder, it somehow warmed him, as if from the inside. It almost felt nourishing, a stark contrast to the desiccated air of his earlier journey. Intrigued yet cautious, Vallen moved inward, drawn to the shimmering silver gleaming.

Vallen's senses tingled in the still quietness, feeling expectant and somehow lighter. The pulsing silver glimmer intensified as he stepped closer. Although he couldn't quite see it yet, he knew what he was about to discover.

He gingerly navigated toward the tapered end of the cavern, a small smile forming on his lips. There it was, nestled in a natural hollow of rock – a small, glistening pool of liquid, radiating an iridescence. It was wellspring magic, over a week’s journey away from its source in Erishum, and yet, here it lay in this unlikely place.

Vallen knelt, his tired knees gratefully accepting the cold stone. He extended a trembling hand toward the pool, fingers trailing through the water. It was like liquid moonlight, a gleaming radiance that clung to his calloused fingertips. He could feel the surge of magic, tingly and potent, like a fluttering promise of something more.

If the water could heal the corrupted land of the Dying Wilds, what else could it cure? After a thoughtful pause, he dipped a grazed knuckle into the enchanted pool. His pulse thrummed with anticipation; his gaze fixed intently on the small scrape.

Nothing changed. The cut, though small, remained as red and raw as before. His heart sank, the whispered stories seemed hollow now, devoid of truth. It was said that the magic could only be wielded by the royal family with their unusual green eyes. Or perhaps the magic required training to use, and Vallen just didn’t have the ability or knowledge.

Heaving a sigh, he shook the excess wellspring water off his hand. Realizing that he needed to head home if he wanted to finish his projects before Nyssa returned from work, Vallen stood up and dusted off his pants.



He stared at the shimmering pool for a moment before unscrewing the top on his amulet and dipping it into the liquid. Next, he uncorked his waterskin that contained the magic water and refilled that as well.

Vallen pulled out the map and made sure to mark exactly where the cave was within the Dying Wilds. Once he finished that, he turned and started to head out, needing to get home.

Striding out of the cavern, he stopped just inside the entrance and stole one last glance at the pool before departing. His footsteps rang hollowly against the rocky floor as he quickly left the cave behind and headed home.

# CHAPTER 31





It had been yet another three-day crabbing trip on the *Silvan Gale*. The sun had set hours earlier, and the moon rose high over the water, casting it in a silver glow. Vallen stood on the bow, watching the moonlight gild the waves silver, trying not to let exhaustion consume him. As the bitterness of winter had sunk its icy teeth deeper into the marrow of the world, the amount of time it took to fill the ship's hold with crabs seemed to take longer and longer. The once plentiful seabed had become stripped of crabs that they could keep. Captain Falcrow had explained that the females would start laying eggs with the first thaw, replenishing the sea of its hard-shelled inhabitants. However, that meant that trips took much longer.

A spray of frigid water washed over Vallen, making him grit against the shivers wanting to wrack his frame. The ocean breeze carried the sharp tang of sea salt, crusting Vallen's already grimy garments with a layer of white, briny residue. The hold beneath his feet was alive with the skittering of claws and the soft lapping of water. He stood on the bow of the ship, tasting the salty tang of the sea spray on his lips. The ship was packed full of crabs, their gleaming exoskeletons a testament to the three hard days spent hunting in the open sea. Three grueling days without a glimpse of land, three days besieged by constant, bone-chilling wind and furious waves. As the hazy silhouette of solid terrain blinked into view, Vallen's heart bloomed with a wave of stinging relief. He couldn't wait to get his feet back on solid ground and Nyssa in his arms. He closed his eyes, savoring the anticipation that coursed through his veins.

Everything ached, and weariness settled deep into his marrow. He glanced at his calloused hands, his knuckles chapped and reddened.

From behind him, the steady sound of heavy footsteps approached. Vallen didn't need to turn around to know who it was. Silently, he made space for Captain Falcrow as he joined him at the railing.

With a hearty clap that jolted him, Captain Falcrow grinned at Vallen. "Well, lad, as always, I'm happy the crabbing season is almost at its end. I bet you'll be glad to get back to the nets and leave the traps behind." His beard, frosted with briny dew, rustled in the wind as he spoke.

Vallen squinted back toward the land growing larger on the horizon. With a questioning glance at the captain, he queried, "Almost over?"

Falcrow laughed, a booming laugh that billowed out into the night. "Didn't you notice, lad, it wasn't as cold as usual?" His large, gnarled hand, the hands of a seasoned seafarer, gestured toward the churning frigid water breaking against the bow.

A wry smile twisted Vallen's lips as he raised an eyebrow at the captain, his gaze unwavering. "After a while, Captain, cold is just cold."

A hearty boom of laughter erupted from Falcrow at Vallen's words. He leaned over the rail laughing, then clapped Vallen on the shoulder, his grip surprisingly light for such a formidable man.

"You're not wrong there, lad. Cold is just cold when you've seen as many seasons as we have," he cackled, his eyes alight with a mirth Vallen found contagious.

As winter had settled mercilessly over Puzur, it turned the once verdant landscape into an ethereal vista of white. The temperatures had plummeted drastically, and each breath taken outdoors felt like a sharp icicle scraping and stabbing the lungs. A fierce northern wind howled along the coastline, cutting through the streets of the kingdom. Despite the relentless cold, the *Silvan Gale* remained diligent in its duty. Like clockwork, it set out on the ever-churning waters in search of crabs. At least twice a week, they would sail off into the sea with their traps, empty of their quarry, stacked high on the deck, patiently awaiting their deployment into the inky depths.

Life on board the ship was tedious, harsh, and numbingly repetitive. With his boisterous mates and an equally rowdy but gruff captain, the ship launched out into open seas over and over. The passage of time was marked only by labor-filled hours and brief, restless sleep under a starlit sky. Soon, Vallen was as tanned as his comrades, and his hands just as calloused. The icy ocean waves would batter against the hull of their ship, but the *Silvan Gale* held steadfast under the fury. With each trip, as the hold was gradually filled to the brim with crabs, Vallen would find himself yearning for the sight of land, for a break from the relentless drudgery of seaborne life.

Uncertainty would frequently sneak its way into Vallen's mind during these grueling tests of endurance, his determination wavering as he questioned the decision to pursue a career on the ocean. Yet, when his pay was deposited into his hands, it would all seem worth it. As he purchased items for Nyssa or watched their scant savings swell ever so slightly, the trials seemed worth the effort. The gratitude in Nyssa's eyes as she accepted his meager gifts, or even the simple satisfaction of knowing they were one coin further



from poverty, served as a balm against his fatigue and the fuel for his resolve.

As months passed, prosperity seemed to favor them. Their hidden stash of money grew, their meager meals became hearty, and their worn clothes were replaced with new ones. Life had lost its agonizing, gnawing hunger they had grown too familiar with. Yet, an unease had begun to grow inside Vallen, a discontent that gnawed at his insides each night as he lay awake, staring at the roof of their well-furnished room.

His life should've been bathed in contentment, warmed by the promise of prosperity. He should've exulted in the joy Nyssa's laughter brought, intoxicated by the love that shone in her eyes. However, his mind was tangled in a spiraling web of dissatisfaction he kept hidden from Nyssa. He joined in her laughter and kissed her with all the tenderness his heart held but couldn't chase away a creeping sorrow that lingered in the backdrop of his consciousness. He wasn't ungrateful for the comfort they now had, but something ate at him – a deep-seated instinct that pulled his thoughts relentlessly back toward Erishum.

He worried for the people they left behind. He imagined their struggles; their hunger while he was full, and their chilled shivers while he basked in the warmth of his well-protected home. Despite the silent whispers of this erratic discontent that brewed within him, Vallen continued to paint a façade of happiness, unwilling to cloud Nyssa's newfound contentment with the storm that loomed in his heart.

With each return from a successful crab trapping expedition, Captain Falcrow would reward Vallen and the crew with a day off, often two. He'd once explained to Vallen that if he overworked his employees, they would see more

casualties, and he wouldn't be able to retain a loyal and reliable staff. For the *Silvan Gale's* crew, those days off became well-prized treasures – moments of respite snatched from the jaws of rough seas and even tougher lives. On their days off, many of the crew could be found reveling at one of the many taverns that sprawled along the wharf, welcoming the weary with hearty ale and raucous camaraderie.

Unlike most of the crew, Vallen didn't feel drawn to the pubs.

Nyssa had attempted to take off days from the bakery when he was home. However, it quickly became evident that their schedules would seldom align since his days off were random. Vallen began offering his services to a local cabin maker. It was a task requiring brawn more than brains, and Vallen – with the muscle he'd formed from his days as a shrike and later earned as a fisherman – was more than equipped for it. The owner, an intimidating-looking but affable man named Old Crick, had once been a soldier in his youth, so he felt a sort of camaraderie with Vallen. He also didn't mind Vallen's unpredictable schedule and readily accepted him as a day laborer.


The work was demanding but satisfying. Vallen helped Old Crick with various tasks, from felling sturdy trees in nearby woods to sanding and shaping the lumber into functional pieces of furniture. The robust manual labor kept his troubled thoughts at bay, filling his mind instead with the pleasant calm of creating something tangible from nature's bounty. Amidst the wood chips and sawdust of Old Crick's workshop, Vallen found a quiet sanctuary from the gnawing worry that haunted him on Nyssa's working days. He found that spending time alone in their cabin led to only brooding and biting guilt. If he kept busy, he was less sullen, more centered. On the rare

occasion that their free times did align, Vallen and Nyssa explored their new kingdom together or often had lovely, peaceful days at home. And on those unexpected days of shared leisure, they relished each other's company, their bond strengthening amidst the quiet moments of shared laughter, the silent exchanges of knowing glances, and the simple pleasure of being in each other's presence. The threads of their connection wove together tighter in those moments, forming a tapestry of trust and profound intimacy that Vallen had only dreamed of.

There were numerous times Vallen had been on the brink of confiding his guilt and worry to Nyssa, moments when he'd almost spilled his secret discontent. His tongue would be poised on the threshold of revelation when the happy, earnest smile on her face would make him hold his tongue.

# CHAPTER 32





“The second moon will be rising in the next few weeks,” Captain Falcrow said to Vallen as they were sailing back to the docks. “The whole kingdom of Puzur celebrates. We host a lovely festival. Lots of food, song, and dance. Did you have something similar in Hassuna?”

Vallen startled, shocked to his core. He stared unseeingly at the silver waves splashing against the ship’s hull. The second moon. He’d managed to keep himself from thinking about it but now he was faced with the truth. Soon, it would wind its path into the sky, ushering in the Erriba Festival in Erishum. The celebration, named after King Jerwan’s wife, meant to distract Erishum’s populace from the grim fact that another set of innocents, dressed as guilty traitors, would be handed over to the merciless Dying Wilds by King Jorek and his priests. In just a few mere weeks, five people were going to be transformed into hyvas, stuck living the rest of their lives as a rage-filled, unthinking monster roving through a dead forest. For a moment, Vallen thought he was about to vomit over the side of the ship.

Captain Falcrow’s gaze drifted upwards where the lone moon gilded the waves silver, not noticing Vallen’s sudden change in mood. “Just you wait and see. Spring comes quickly here. Something to do, I wager, with the ocean breeze, blowing the winter clouds away.”

Falcrow’s hearty laughter echoed out into the quiet night once more, consumed by the capricious waves. Vallen tried to laugh with him but found his mood had turned dark.

That night, trudging along the narrow path that led him home, Vallen's weary form was a solitary silhouette, his shoulders hunched under the cold and lingering exhaustion. Vallen felt the oppressive burden of the imminent sacrifice in Erishum settle deep in his bones, a dread so profound that it nearly equaled his weariness.

Vallen glanced upwards, his gaze locking onto the radiant surface of the ever-watchful moon, its sister due to join its journey across the nightly sky soon. His thoughts churned as he wrestled internally with the captain's words. How was he supposed to go on with his life, enjoying good food and love, when he would be aware every minute during the new moon's rising of what was happening back in Erishum?

As he neared their home, a flicker of relief ignited within him at the sight of a single candlelight glimmering inside the cabin's solitary window. Nyssa. He had assumed that she would be asleep at this hour. The mere image of her conjured within his mind was a balm to his tormented soul. She was the lighthouse protecting him from his darkest thoughts and memories.

His feet quickened with a newfound urgency, almost running through the snow-covered path in his haste to return to her. He craved nothing more than the solace of her arms, and the soothing cadence of her voice. The door creaked open under his forceful push, the flickering luminance from the candle's flame throwing dancing shadows onto the interior of their home. "Nyssa," he called out, his tone a blend of exhaustion and relief. His eyes locked onto her.

Nyssa looked up from the dining table's surface and met Vallen's gaze with an inscrutable expression.

She extended her hand in a gesture for him to sit. The fact that she hadn't said anything yet set off alarm bells in his mind. Vallen looked at the table –the map of the Dying Wilds lay spread across its surface.

“Nyssa, what...” he began, his voice was nothing but a low murmur, barely covering the impassable stretch of silence growing between them.

Swallowing thickly, Nyssa averted her eyes from Vallen's confused gaze. “I've been sneaking into the Dying Wilds,” she admitted. Her words hung heavily in the tense air. “And I've been mapping the places where the wellspring magic shows up.”

Vallen stepped closer and stared down at the map, noting that it was much more marked up from the last time he'd seen it.

Vallen was silent for a moment before shaking his head in bewildered confusion and taking a seat next to Nyssa. “Why would you go into the woods? It's dangerous.”

Nyssa's gaze finally met his again, her dark eyes filled with a profound uncertainty she rarely showed. “Our friends back home... They're stuck in Erishum, and they don't know what's beyond the Dying Wilds. I mean... what if we could get them through the woods and bring them here? I can't live like this anymore – not knowing what we do about the hyvas and the wellspring magic.

“I've felt drawn to the Dying Wilds. I think it might have been guilt driving me – it's been eating at me, the thought of everyone we left behind that's still suffering in Erishum.” She winced, closing her eyes before she opened them again spearing him with her gaze. “But I didn't want to burden you with this, especially when you've been so happy.”

“Burden me?” Vallen gasped, shocked that he’d missed Nyssa’s unhappiness. Perhaps he’d only seen what he wanted. He took a deep breath, gathering his thoughts. He looked at Nyssa, her dark eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “Nyssa, I... I’m not as content as you seem to think.”

Nyssa blinked, taken aback. “Vallen, I’ve seen you smile more in recent months than in all the years before. Isn’t that —”

“Smiles aren’t everything, Nyssa,” Vallen interrupted. “I’m worried about our friends too... about all the people we left behind. I’m worried about you, about... about everything.”

“And the guilt, Nyssa,” he continued, clenching his fists at his side till his knuckles grew white. “It’s always there, gnawing at me. I feel it every moment that I’m not keeping busy. The only time it’s not eating at me is when I’m working. When I’m home alone, I find myself pacing this cabin over and over, stuck on the thought of what’s happening in Erishum.”

“I should’ve told you how I was feeling. Neither of us should feel like we need to bear this burden alone, Val,” Nyssa replied, her voice fervent. “We need to be partners in all things – to feel comfortable leaning on one another. We were street orphans together, we survived the tyrannical King Jorek together, we made it through the Dying Wilds because we had each other. We can face whatever comes next... but we must do it together.”

Vallen reached out, covering her clenched fist with his broad palm. “Nyssa, I... I thought I was protecting you, keeping you safe. But I should’ve known better.”

“We should’ve faced it together from the beginning, Vallen. I should’ve confided in you what I’ve been feeling. I



was hiding behind a mask, wanting to protect you as well,” Nyssa said in a final whisper.

In the quiet of the dimly lit room, Vallen tugged Nyssa up from her chair. He wrapped her in an embrace, caging her in his arms and blocking out the rest of the world. Vallen’s heart skipped a beat as he breathed in the familiar scent of her – a mingling of soap, sugar, and freshly baked pastries. Cradling her head against his chest, Vallen whispered his gratitude into her hair. “You never should’ve felt like you needed to go into the Dying Wilds alone. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you how I was feeling. I won’t do that again, I promise,” he vowed.

“Me too. I’m so sorry, Vallen.”

Time slowed between Vallen and Nyssa. They held onto one another, drawing resilience and comfort from the warmth and familiarity of their embrace. This was their haven – one of quiet understanding. His fingers traced the line of her spine, feeling the burden of his worries and deception lift from his shoulders.

Slowly, he untangled himself from Nyssa, holding her away to catch a glimpse of her eyes. The words stumbled uncertainly from his lips, tearing through the momentary harmony they’d created. “Captain Falcrow... he reminded me that the Erriba Festival is in just a few weeks.”

“The Erriba Festival?” she echoed. The light in her eyes flickered, uncertainty being replaced by a dawning realization. “No...” she breathed, taking a shaky step backward, her hand going to her mouth in horror. Her gaze met his, wide and haunted. “That means... the sacrifices. I’ve been trying not to think about it. I didn’t realize it was so soon.”

Vallen watched her as her eyes transformed from horror into something else. She broke from his grasp after a tense

moment and turned her gaze toward the waterskin perched on the nearby table, a faraway look in her eye. Her forehead furrowed deep in thought.

“We have to go back,” she declared, her voice imbued with steely determination. “We can save them.” The sadness in her eyes was quickly replaced by renewed hope, making Vallen’s heart thrum a gleeful rhythm against his ribcage.

“Go back?” Vallen repeated slowly.

Nyssa nodded, an almost manic gleam in her eyes. “Yes, we take the wellspring magic, and we sneak back to Erishum. When the priests leave the tributes on the sacrificial mound, we can free them. Send them here or to Hassuna. Show them how to get through the Dying Wilds and let them start over like we did.” Nyssa walked over to the table and rested one hand on a waterskin. “We can save them.”

“And we’ll get our friends as well. We’ll bring them *all* back.”

***TO BE CONTINUED...***

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Thank you so much for taking the time to read my book. Your interest and support are what keeps me going! I sincerely hope you've enjoyed the journey. The story will continue in the third and final installment, *The Dying Wilds*. Which will be out in the first quarter of 2024.

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If you enjoyed *The Gutter Shrike*, please leave a review – it really helps indie writers like me.

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Gwen DeMarco is an avid reader, wine & coffee drinker, gardener and a lover of all things nerdy. Gwen loves to write paranormal romance novels with a focus on the weird and wonderful.

Gwen is happily married to her high school sweetheart and has two teenage children. She can often be found with her nose in a book and a glass of wine or mug of coffee in her hand.

Sign up to her mailing list and receive a **free** copy of a novella of Mac's point of view from meeting Sophie from Sophie and The Odd Ones.

To learn more, please visit my website and sign up for my mailing list to receive updates at [www.GwenDeMarco.com](http://www.GwenDeMarco.com)



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