



WAY
OF THE
WOLF

JONATHAN YANEZ

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WAY OF THE WOLF

BOOK ONE

JONATHAN YANEZ

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STAY INFORMED



This is your personal invitation to join the community we call our Pack. Below are two ways to stay in touch via email or Facebook. Either way we'd love for you to be a part of our family.

For updates about new releases, as well as exclusive promotions, visit our website and sign up for the VIP mailing list. Head there now to receive some free stories. [CLICK HERE](#)

We also created a special Facebook group called "Jonathan Yanez' Reading Wolves" specifically for readers, where I show new cover art, do giveaways, and run contests. Please check it out and join whenever you get the chance! [JOIN HERE](#)

ONE



AARETH

“Bartend, I’ll take another. Make this one a double.”

The man behind the bar looked his customer up and down, practically forcing himself to speak. “No—no disrespect, sir, but are you going to be able to pay for your tab? I—I mean, it’s not even noon. At this rate, you’ll drink my entire bar dry by dinner.”

Aareth pulled a lock of long, dark hair from his face. He reached inside his black trench coat. The bartender took a nervous step back.

Aareth ignored the man’s uneasy movement. Instead, he brought out a large purse of coins and dropped it on the counter. “Forget the double shot. I’ll just take the bottle.”

“Why, yes, sir. Right away, sir.” The bartender’s eyes were as large as full moons as he wrung his hands. “Excuse me for asking about the money, it’s just that, well, times aren’t what they used to be. Please stay as long as you like.”

Still ignoring eye contact, Aareth stared into his empty glass. “The bottle.”

“Oh yes.” The bar owner moved quickly for a man of his girth. He had a jug of whiskey by Aareth’s side in seconds.

Aareth poured himself another shot from the dirty decanter. He took it down like a true professional. All he wanted was to be left alone, but the bartender wasn’t the only one who had seen him expose his purse of coins.

“Excuse me, is this seat taken?”

Aareth ignored the woman to his right and instead poured himself another drink.

“Mmmm... The strong, silent type. What’s wrong, handsome? You’re much too young to have had anything *that* tragic happen to you.”

Aareth turned his head ever so slightly in the woman’s direction. She was attractive, a slim physique, showing far too much skin, a pile of curly black locks that fell down the side of her face like a waterfall. Most men would jump at the opportunity to make conversation with such an attractive woman, Aareth wasn’t most men.

“You don’t know anything about me. Whatever it is that you’re selling, I don’t want any.”

She reached out to gently touch his strong jaw, turning his unshaven face toward hers. “Oh, darling, you have no idea what I’m selling.”

Aareth squinted through troubled blue eyes. He removed her hand with his own. “Darling, go bother someone else. I’m not interested.”

The woman drew back as if she had been struck. She opened her mouth in a big O. Clearly, she was used to getting what she wanted. Before she could gather herself and mouth a comeback, there was a loud commotion at the entrance to the bar. Booted feet slapped against the wood floor in unison.

Aareth turned back to his whiskey. This time, he ignored the glass, instead taking the bottle straight to his mouth. The noise grew louder as the sound of marching entered the bar. The heavy staccato stopped behind him.

“Aareth Emerson, we are here on Queen Eckert’s behalf to ask you to the palace for an audience with Her Majesty,” a gruff voice addressed the alcoholic’s back.

He didn’t flinch. Aareth raised the whiskey bottle to his lips again, enjoying the way the fiery liquid caressed his throat, instantly dulling inhibitions. The whiskey was only half finished and he intended to see the bottom of the bottle before he left.

At the mention of Aareth's name, the bartender took another step back. The woman, who had just regained her composure, was thrown yet again with the mention of his name. "You're—you're Aareth Emerson? THE Aareth Emerson?"

He nodded, still looking at his bottle. "Yep, pleasure to meet you."

The woman looked at Aareth, then at the group of soldiers behind him. Slowly, like a rabbit caught between a wolf and a hunter, she got out of her seat and backed away. That seemed to be the general feeling throughout the bar as patrons made for the exits or stood from their seats, retreating to what they deemed a safe distance.

But no distance was safe. Aareth understood that better than most.

"Did you hear me? Our orders are to bring you in," the voice behind him demanded.

Aareth continued to ignore the soldier. Instead of reacting, he took another swig from his bottle.

This act of disrespect was too much for the soldier to bear. A rough hand grabbed Aareth's left shoulder, swinging him around. The action made Aareth stand up from his stool.

The entire room gasped as Aareth and the soldier stood face to face. Aareth pursed his lips as he reached behind him and set the whiskey bottle down on the bar. Aareth looked the soldier up and down. His eyes rested on the badge identifying the soldier in front of him as a sergeant in the Queen's army. "You're not going to leave me alone, no matter how politely I ask, are you, Sergeant?"

The sergeant was a stout man with a barrel chest and a thick mustache. "Oh, did that just become clear to you, boy? Listen, what the Queen wants with you is her business, but I've heard the rumors about you. I know what you are. I know how you turned your back on duty, on Queen and crown. Believe me, there's nothing in this world I would like more than to end you here and now, but it seems you're worth more

to her alive than dead. So what's it going to be? The easy way or the fun way?"

"That's kind of insulting." Aareth looked past the grinning sergeant and the four men behind him. "And completely unfair."

"What is?"

"That you thought you could bring me in with only yourself and four men."

Before the sergeant could react, Aareth's right fist shot up from his side, cracking the underside of his jaw. The blow snapped the soldier's head back at an awkward angle. The force of the punch sent him crashing to the ground into unconsciousness.

The four soldiers that remained charged forward, using their long rifles as clubs. In such a tight space, the rifles were more of a hindrance than help. When the soldiers hesitated with wide swings, trying to avoid hitting one another, Aareth met them with nose-shattering blows and jaw-breaking punches.

The first soldier swung high. Aareth easily ducked under the blow, landing a kidney punch, bringing his attacker to his knees. The next soldier brought his rifle over his head in a downward motion that Aareth easily caught in his right hand. The crown of Aareth's head met the soldier's nose at sickening speed, and there was a stomach-turning crunch as the soldier's nose broke and blood gushed.

Aareth's last two opponents practically took out one another. One of the soldiers swung hard across his body, missed Aareth, the butt of his own gun landing square across the jaw of his comrade. The soldier, wide-eyed, was too slow to avoid the fist aimed at his temple. He hit the floor like a sack of flour.

Just like that, it was all over. Soldiers lay unconscious and moaning on the ground. Aareth turned back to his whiskey. Bottle halfway to his lips, he was stopped in the act by a familiar male voice behind him. "I tried to warn them. They

should let me talk to you first, but you know soldiers—stubborn.”

“And you think you could do any better?” Aareth turned. For the first time, something other than torment and fury touched his eyes. He hadn’t seen this man in years.

The elderly man walked over the soldiers strewn across the ground. He stood next to Aareth with a winning smile. “I know I can.”

“Really? And how’s that?”

“Because I know no matter how much you hide behind your pain and your alcohol,” the old man’s wrinkled face broadened into an even bigger smile, “there’s still that same man I once knew underneath.”

“And what if that man no longer exists?”

“That man will always exist, Aareth. Whether you choose to be that person or not is entirely your choice. But I’m not here to conduct a lecture. I’m here to ask you come back with me to the palace. Just hear what Queen Eckert has to say. As a personal favor to me. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Aareth took in a deep breath. He eyed the man he would still call a friend, and at one time, even a mentor. “Are you still tinkering around in the armory?”

“I’ll have you know that I now oversee the entire armory along with the production of the latest and newest weapons. We even started a separate division devoted to developing only the most cutting-edge advances in magical ingenuity. We call it ‘Advanced Machine Making and Observation,’ or A.M.M.O. for short.”

“A.M.M.O., huh? Doesn’t sound like you’re bragging at all.”

“I’d never brag. I’m just informing you that I’m kind of a big deal now.”

“Ahhh, what’s the worst that could happen?” Aareth chuckled and put down the bottle. “Okay, one meeting with the Queen. But only as a personal favor to you, Edison.”

TWO



SLOAN

“I’d run behind that tight specimen of female biology any day.”

He was mouthing off again. He didn’t think she could hear him, but her hearing was better than most. He would have to be broken today in a very open and public way.

That was the problem with being a female officer in the Queen’s royal army. This problem was only magnified by the fact that she was the captain of the Queen’s personal guard. There were so many soldiers with egos bigger than the palace itself. What’s more, nearly all of them were gunning for her position.

Sloan was in command of a dozen of the most skilled and deadly warriors New Hope had to offer. She had earned all of their respect by defeating them in one-on-one combat. She would trust any one of them with her life. They wouldn’t hesitate to do the same. The problem wasn’t with her own men. The problem lay with the rest of the palace guards, especially those new to the grounds.

All the officers and soldiers trained in the same outside facility. Whenever there were new faces at the palace, the same thing was bound to happen. Like clockwork, it had become something of a tradition. It was inevitable that a soldier would step out of line. Sloan was always more than capable of putting them right back where they belonged, even adding a broken bone or two, or three or four for good measure.

Today, Sloan was leading her men in combat and conditioning drills. The outside training ground was ideal, with a track around the perimeter and every piece of exercise equipment anyone could want. It was while on a run around the track, with the sun at its peak, that things finally came to a head.

Sloan was in the lead, sweat pouring from her forehead and down her toned, athletic back. It was the eighth lap around the track. She was proud her men were keeping pace. Her group was passing another large regiment of palace guards on the same track when it happened.

Sloan was focused, looking only ahead, when she heard yet another comment from the same soldier. He had used varying degrees of inappropriate and vulgar sayings before, but it was this one that stopped Sloan in her tracks.

Sloan stopped and looked at the soldier. He was running in formation with the group parallel to her and her men.

“What did you say?”

“Oh, you heard me?” The large man and his friends chuckled as they came to a stop. “I was just admiring the view as you passed.”

More than one of her warriors took a step forward. Sloan raised a hand, stopping them in their tracks. She looked the man up and down. He was tall and large. Clearly, this individual was victim to growth hormones and illegal muscle enhancers. It was obvious this gave him a false sense of security, that he was somehow better than everyone else and could say whatever he wanted without repercussions. Sloan knew his type too well.

“Why don’t you say it a little louder?”

The soldier looked confused, with a raised eyebrow and stupid grin.

“Come on. You didn’t seem shy just a second ago.” Sloan raised her hands and yelled across the training grounds. “I’m sorry to disturb your routines, but I need everyone here now.”

Within seconds, every soldier recognized who was talking. They immediately ran to obey.

Sloan turned to the hulking man. “You and your little friends must be new here. I’ll break this down for you and try to use small words so you can keep up. I don’t want to ever hear you talking to me or any other soldier like that again. If I get wind of you harassing anyone else, I’ll make sure you spend the next few months drinking out of a straw. Do you understand?”

The man’s face transitioned to a picture of anger and humiliation. It was clear he wasn’t used to being spoken to so harshly, by anyone, much less someone he outweighed by over a hundred pounds.

“Soldier, I asked you a question. If you have something to say, say it now—not later to your friends or as I run by.”

There were stifled laughs by other soldiers. That only infuriated the giant of a man more. “You’re obviously an officer here. I’d be a fool to say anything else, but that I understand.”

Sloan nodded. “Well, you’re not as much of an idiot as I thought you were. But with that said, I think we can use this opportunity to instruct the men in a little hand-to-hand combat. Would you mind volunteering for a sparring session?”

The crowd cheered as the bulky man accepted and stepped forward. Sloan caught sight of his PT fatigues, his ranking, and name. “Thank you, Sergeant Harrison. You must be new to the palace. Straight from the city guard?”

Sergeant Harrison walked toward her with his wide chest puffed out. He looked down at her and grinned. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Well, I’m sure that everyone’s eager to see what combat techniques are currently being used in the city guard. Shall we?” Sloan asked all of this with a grin. To all those unfamiliar with her, her smile seemed nothing but genuine.

Sergeant Harrison chuckled. He rolled up the sleeves on his black PT shirt, revealing even more of his enormous arms.

There was a cheer from his friends and shouts egging him on from the gathered crowd.

“One minute. I give him one minute.”

“No, look at the size of him.”

“You remember what she did to the last one?”

Sloan ignored the clamor. She readjusted her ponytail, which was holding the honey-blonde hair out of her face.

“Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, I’d hate to bruise such a pretty face.” Sergeant Harrison rolled his neck from side to side.

“Enough talking.” Sloan stepped in, arms up. “Let’s see how all those genetically engineered muscles do in an actual fight.”

The two combatants stepped forward. The sergeant, both in height and size, dwarfed Sloan. He stood half a foot taller and easily outweighed her, but none of this seemed to faze the captain of the Queen’s guard.

The crowd cheered as the gladiators circled one another. Sergeant Harrison still smiled. “Listen, I think it’s cute you want to assert authority, and I get it, but—”

She was so fast, no one saw it coming, least of all her opponent. Sloan launched herself in the air, right arm cocked back. With all of her weight channeled into her fist, she punched forward as she collided with the sergeant’s nose. Blood flew through the air, splattering Sloan. Crimson droplets sprinkled the ground around her.

Sergeant Harrison staggered back, eyes stinging. The crowd roared. Sloan was on Harrison before he could recover, with shots to his jaw and temple. Harrison did his best to shield the blows, his vision limited through the blood squirting from his nose. Then, as soon as the fight started, it was ended.

Harrison managed to gather himself enough to launch an offensive attack. Huge arms swung wildly toward her. Sloan sidestepped the clumsy barrage and turned her hips, sending her right-hand palm open into Sergeant Harrison’s waiting

Adam's apple. There was an audible crunch like someone stepping on a dried leaf. The giant man went down hard.

The roar from the men gathered was deafening. Harrison was on the ground gasping for air. In panic-laced pain, he clutched at his throat.

"Get him to the infirmary." Sloan motioned to Harrison's friends, who stood, open-mouthed. "Unless any of you have some cute comment to make."

Fear touched their eyes. "Oh, no, ma'am, no, not us."

Sloan ignored them as she walked back to her men, standing ready to congratulate their leader.

A young palace messenger pushed through the crowd and saluted. He didn't ask what was going on, but curious eyes implored an answer.

"Yes, what is it?" Sloan asked, not bothering to explain the current temperature of things.

"The Queen requests your attendance, ma'am."

"What for?"

"I'm not sure, but she asked you come as soon as you can."

Sloan nodded as she walked through the gathered crowd. Not one of the soldiers in New Hope's military looked her in the eyes.

THREE



JACK

“We should have charged them more,” Jack raised an eyebrow to his father, “a lot more.”

“They can’t afford more,” his father whispered back with an identical eyebrow raised.

Father and son crouched behind an ancient tree trunk. Patiently, they waited to ambush their prey, a band of shadow spirits ravaging the surrounding territory in the Outland. The spirits had desolated the region, tormenting the locals wherever they went. What was worse, these spirits didn’t discriminate; they slaughtered whatever they pleased: men, women, even children.

Jack and his father, Marcus, were asked to come to the area to track and dispatch the spirits, to do whatever they could to stop the bloodshed. The poor farming community banded together, offering Jack’s father all they had to be rid of the creatures. Jack wouldn’t have given the offer a second thought. His father, on the other hand, refused all compensation, only accepting food and shelter as payment.

That was the thing Jack most respected, and at times was most frustrated with. His father possessed the ability to always make the right decision. Where his father saw only black and white, Jack saw varying shades of gray.

Now, after days of hunting the shadow spirits free of charge, the father/son tracking team discovered their lair. It was nestled into the side of a hill ten miles from the nearest farm. The spirits were smart. They had chosen a homebase

close enough to conduct their raids but not too close as to lead the farmers to their doorstep.

Even if the farmers were skilled enough to hunt the spirits, killing them was another matter. Most farmers could defend themselves from roaming wolves or coyotes, things that bled, things that died. Shadow spirits did neither of these things.

Jack held his breath as he looked over the fallen tree. He counted in silence. There were twenty of the wraith-like creatures. Most were human size, floating in ghostly indifference this way and that. The shadow spirits had two options when deciding their appearance: they were able to either take on the form they had just before their death or transform into horrifying macabre images. It seemed this group was split down the middle. Half looked almost human, the only hint as to their true nature the ethereal white light emanating from their bodies in their translucent state.

The other half were a ragtag group of grotesque skeletons in varying degrees of decay. One stood out from the rest. She was a tall, gaunt spirit with her lower jaw hanging from her mouth, the flesh around her neck raw and blistered. The other spirits gave her a wide berth.

“What do you think?” Jack’s father asked in a whisper.

“I think that this is crazy. Risking our souls for a group of farmers that are going to pay us in corn and beans.”

“Try again.”

“But...” Jack continued, “since it’s the right thing to do, I say we surprise them. Kill their leader first then take out as many as we can before they know what’s happening. With any luck, they’ll break and run. If not, we can finish them one at a time. Worst case scenario, they rush us, then we kill them all anyway.”

Marcus’ dark brown eyes twinkled. “I agree. Jack, I remember when you were no bigger than my two hands. Now look at you. Eighteen years old, strong as an ox, and the second-best tracking sorcerer in the Outland.”

“Second best?”

“Well, you know. Your old man can still hold his own.”

“I count twenty spirits. Best tracking sorcerer title goes to whoever dispatches the most?”

Jack’s father gave him a wink, then, in one quick motion, stood up, breaking his cover. His hands danced with the flames of green magical energy.

Jack’s eyes went as wide as the spirits’, and for a split second, time stopped. Spirits processed this new threat. Jack processed the fact that his father had just cheated, a thought that surprised him and made him laugh at once.

Then time caught up to the moment and seemed to speed forward. Jack stood, drawing from the vast inner resource of his own magical power. His father began sending blasts of emerald green magic at their targets. The slack-jawed female spirit, as well as the spirit closest to the father and son team, fell to the forest floor screaming in surprise and hate. One moment they were howling their frustration to the sky, the next they evaporated in a wisp of green smoke.

Jack fired and hit his mark between yellow eyes, but he knew he was already behind. Father and son quickly and efficiently made the best of the spirits’ confused state. Shadow spirits scattered into the woods in every direction, screaming in shock and hatred.

In a matter of seconds, both sorcerers found themselves alone in the woods.

“I don’t think they’re going to run.”

“I agree. Be ready for close quarters combat. They’re surrounding us as we speak.”

With a quick look, Jack knew what his father said was true. The spirits recovered quickly despite the loss of their leader. Rustling could be heard in every direction as Marcus and Jack stood back-to-back.

“I think I’m winning, by the way. Two to one? Not to mention I got the leader. She should count twice.”

Jack bit back a comment as he caught sight of white light, headed in his direction. His right arm snapped out in his attacker's route. Jack discharged a bolt of green magic as soon as his arm straightened enough to track his target. The spirit fell. But Jack knew the time for long-range attacks would soon be over.

He heard two more sharp cracks of magic leave his father's hands, but now their assailants were all coming together. As one, the remaining shadow spirits converged on their location.

Jack reached for the weapons that set both himself and his father apart from all other sorcerers in the Outland. Firm wood met his fingertips as he crossed his arms to reach over each shoulder and drew the two halves of his staff. They slid like swords from sheaths. With a practiced motion, he connected the two halves into a staff six feet long. All the time for thinking was gone; it was time to react.

Jack ran toward the gnashing teeth of his attackers. He called forth the white-hot energy of magic that lived deep inside of him. His eyes blazed green with magical fire. His staff exploded with the same force. Every blow from Jack's staff hit its mark. With each strike that landed, a sharp crack echoed into the surrounding woods. Green sparks flew through the air like light sprinkling rain as Jack and his father went to work. Spirit after snarling spirit fell, but there was no denying the grasping hands were getting closer.

The last two shadow spirits on Jack's side lunged at him simultaneously. The impact of the first spirit made Jack's teeth rattle. It took him to the ground. Jack's left forearm screamed in pain as it was pinned to the ground by the manic creature. The spirit grinned rotted teeth at him. Jack felt a chill originate where the spirit held him and quickly spread through his body. If it weren't for his extensive training and the magical barriers set in place, Jack would be losing his soul in the most excruciating way.

The pressure in his arm and now in his right foot as he felt the attack of the second spirit made him wince. Realizing his soul was not so easy to drain, the spirits shrieked and sank their fingers and teeth deeper into the folds of Jack's cloak.

Violently, they began the work of ripping Jack's limbs from his body.

Steady, Jack, you got this. What would Dad do? Remember: quickly and efficiently, no time to panic. Just breathe.

Staff thrown to the side, Jack made his right hand into a fist. He channeled the magic to a point and brought the crackling green blade up with his right hand and across the throat of the shadow spirit on his arm. There was another loud snap and scream as the spirit fell. Jack did a hard sit-up, bringing his magical knife in a wide downward arc and into the skull of his last assailant.

"Jack, are you hurt?" Marcus was at his side before he even had a chance to get to his feet.

Jack stood and examined his arm and foot. The spirits had failed to penetrate either his jacket or boot, but he knew he would have bruises to remember the battle. "I'm fine; are you okay?"

"Yes, looks like we got them all." Marcus examined the woods around them, where tiny spirals of smoke still wafted upward.

"I know you wish there was another way to release them," Jack reached down to pick up his staff, "but we did the right thing. The farmers and their families are safe now. Oh, I got nine."

"Eleven." Marcus gave Jack a rueful grin. "Twelve if we count the lead shadow spirit twice."

"No, we're not counting her twice." Jack chuckled at his father's comment. "That was never in the deal, and besides, you cheated by starting early. I wasn't rea—"

There was movement in the bushes around them. Jack crouched with his staff already blazing green. Marcus lifted his right hand toward the sound, ready to channel and discharge a magical beam.

"Not spirits, humans," Jack said without taking his eyes off the surrounding forest.

“And a lot of them,” Marcus agreed. “They have us surrounded.”

In seconds, men materialized from the woods, soldiers bearing the emblem of the city of New Hope, two steel-gray swords crossed behind an ebony black bat. There were too many to count. Each soldier wore a black uniform outlined by gray thread and buttons. Steel helmets accompanied dark metal gauntlets, forearm guards, shin guards, and black goggles. Every soldier carried a backpack and a long rifle, all of which were pointed in Jack and Marcus’ direction.

Jack had only seen soldiers from New Hope a handful of times. They never looked twice in his direction. Now all the soldiers seemed eager, even happy to have the two men in their line of sight.

There was a tense moment where nothing happened. Then the soldiers parted ranks to allow someone through.

From the badges on his chest and arms, Jack knew him to be an officer. “Please excuse us. We don’t mean you harm. And if you’re willing, we can all lower our weapons.”

Jack looked at his father, who nodded. In unison, they lowered both staff and hand. The officer looked pleased. He turned, motioning to his own men to lower their rifles.

“I’m sorry for the abrupt meeting. My name is Lieutenant Doyle Baker. My men and I have been searching these woods for days looking for you. You are Marcus Walker, the famous tracker sorcerer. This is your son, Jack Walker?”

“Yes, we are.” Jack’s father ran a hand through his thick brown hair. “And what, may I ask, is the occasion? Soldiers from New Hope this deep into the Outland isn’t a very common sight.”

“I’ve been asked by the Queen herself to seek you out and invite you to New Hope for an audience. I don’t know much, but I know whatever the reason, it must be important.”

Jack licked his lips as excitement caught in his chest. New Hope was the largest and by far the most prosperous city in the entire known world. Every latest invention or breakthrough in

magic came from the city. He heard stories of impossible machines, buildings that touched the sky, and even rumors of creations that sounded beyond reason. Jack had always wanted to visit the famed city, but work had never brought them even remotely close to the city's walls.

Marcus looked at his son with a half smile, practically reading his thoughts. Before his father even opened his mouth, Jack knew what he was going to say. His father was a man loyal to his country, a true patriot. If the Queen needed to speak with him, then his father would go no matter what the cost.

“We'll accompany you to New Hope, but we've just finished a job for the local farmers. We need to let them know that they can rest easy. The threat is gone.”

Lieutenant Baker nodded approval as he surveyed the battleground and the burning smell that came with the wafting smoke. “I've seen battlefields with less char. The stories of you and your son must be true. Please allow me to send one of my own messengers to the farmers. Queen Eckert was insistent that we get you back as soon as possible and without delay.”

Marcus nodded to Lieutenant Baker and looked at his son. “Well, partner, looks like your prayers have been answered. We're going to New Hope.”

FOUR



JACK

Jack and his father traveled with the regiment of soldiers by horseback. An aggressive pace was set, and within a few days, familiar mountains and forests gave way to open deserts and small towns. Whenever they rode through a town, dark scowls and nervous glances were directed their way. It was clear the inhabitants of the land outside New Hope had no great love for the Queen or her men.

It was something Jack had always known, but now he was lumped in as “one of them.” It was a chilling feeling to be looked on with such disgust.

“Different, isn’t it?”

Jack almost fell out of his saddle as he turned to look at Lieutenant Baker, riding beside him. “What is?”

“Being regarded with such disdain without even so much as a chance to prove otherwise. They look at you and think just because you wear a uniform, they know you.”

“Why do they distrust you so much?”

“Because we’re from the last great city of men. They think we hide behind our walls, hoard riches for ourselves, when the truth is so much closer to them than they realize.”

“What truth?”

“Until recently, we were no better off inside the city than they are.” The lieutenant looked at Jack, flashing his clean white teeth. “We were barely scraping by. Our political structure was deteriorating, crime was rising, there was so

much corruption within the city's police force, it made it impossible for any real good to be done. We were rotting from the inside out. Truth be told, people were probably better off in the Outland than in New Hope."

"What changed?" Jack found himself beginning to like the lieutenant and his honest, easy manner of speaking.

"She did. When the Queen came to power ten years ago, she was the savior New Hope needed. She pulled us back from the brink. She saved us from ourselves. It was slow going at first. People resisted the change, but one street at a time, one crooked police officer or soldier fired, one positive and moral political representative elected at a time, the city started to change. We've clawed our way back from oblivion. Now New Hope is a place its people can be proud to call home."

Jack bit his lip as he thought on the lieutenant's words. The picture that was painted of New Hope's history was one new to him. He always heard the city talked about with an air of scorn. It was as though the population of the Outland hated the city and its inhabitants for all the wrong reasons.

"So while the Outland was blaming New Hope for not helping, New Hope was actually fighting its own battle of survival?"

"That's exactly right, Jack. But now New Hope is stronger. We're making advancements in every area, especially in the fields of magic and paranormal study. We may soon be in a position to offer the cities in the Outland a helping hand. But I fear something dark approaches. Something that could set us back into an age of darkness."

"What is it?" Jack asked.

"I've said too much," the lieutenant answered. "The Queen will tell you more."

FIVE



JACK

That night, Jack and his father made camp beside the regiment of soldiers underneath the many stars of the Outland. Jack's curiosity was running in a dozen different directions. He finally decided to voice his thoughts. "Dad?"

"Yes, son?" Marcus looked up from the whetstone he was using to sharpen his knives.

"Why do you think the Queen called for us?"

"I can't be sure of the exact reason," Marcus took a deep breath and pursed his lips. "But I'm guessing it has something to do with the skill set we possess."

"You mean the Queen wants us to use our ability over magic for her?"

"Maybe. More than likely, the Queen wants something tracked in the Outland. She wouldn't call us all the way to New Hope if it was a city matter."

Jack finished setting out the bedrolls and squinted into the darkness. He looked past the soldiers' campfires, past all the sand in the seemingly never-ending desert, and imagined a city in the distance.

"We'll be there soon enough, son. It's been a very long time since I've been to New Hope, but with the pace we've followed, we should see the city tomorrow afternoon."

"Do you ever wish you had stayed? I mean, do you ever regret leaving the city?"

“No. It wasn’t a place to raise a family, and when I left, things were only getting worse.”

Something in his father’s tone made Jack hesitate. “Are you worried about what might be waiting for us when we get to the city?”

“Not worried, son, just cautious.” Marcus looked up at his son with a smile. “It’s not every day the Queen sends a detachment deep into the Outland to summon a pair of tracking sorcerers, no matter how good we are at what we do. Something big is happening, but there’s no point speculating on what it could be. I’m sure we’ll find out tomorrow.”

That night, Jack fell asleep with thoughts of tall walls and large sprawling cities. His imagination ran wild in his dreams, free to conjure images of large brick structures and new magical instruments.

The next day was a blur as the soldiers and sorcerers ate a quick breakfast while on horseback. The city was close. It seemed even the most hardened soldier was eager to reach the safety of its walls. Jack had lived in the Outland his entire life, but he could sympathize with the soldiers. The world outside the walls of New Hope could be scary to those who only ventured out when they were given the order.

Even the soldiers’ horses seemed eager to return to the city. Unlike Jack’s and his father’s steeds, who were used to long rides and the Outland’s challenging terrain, the armies’ horses were unaccustomed to traveling more than a few miles outside the city walls. This was beginning to show as their pace slowed. Jack noticed the other horses’ mouths begin to foam.

Jack patted the neck of his black horse and leaned down to whisper in her ear, “You’re doing great, Cherub. We’ll be there soon.”

The horse nickered as if she understood and shook her mane.

A few hours later, Jack was debating whether to ask his father how much further they had to go, when he caught a

shimmer in the distance.

Jack squinted, craning his neck forward, trying to see if his eyes were playing tricks on him or if there really was something there. Soon, waving black shadows turned into tiny figures of men, and as they closed the distance, hammering filled the air.

Lieutenant Baker and his men seemed as though they expected the sight. To Jack, it was as mysterious as if he had seen a ghost cross their path and wave a greeting. Jack looked at his father, who shrugged.

They soon rode up to the men, who shouted hellos to the soldiers. As Jack got a better look at what was taking place, he realized there were dozens of men laying metal track across the desert floor.

Wide-shouldered workers sweated and grunted, wearing dark overalls and heavy leather work gloves as they laid thick planks in a straight row. Heavy steel bars were then laid across the wooden planks. Everything was hammered in place.

A short, muscular man walked toward the group and waved a welcome to Lieutenant Baker. Jack and his father were close enough to the front of the caravan to hear the conversation.

“Well, hello, Lieutenant. Didn’t expect to see you back so soon.”

“Me either.” Lieutenant Baker slowed his horse beside the man and leaned down to shake hands. “Things went as smooth as I could have hoped. How’s the track coming, Christopher?”

“Well, you know, having the title of ‘Foreman’ means that you carry all the pressure of hitting goals and deadlines. It’s hot, but the boys have been working hard and we’re ahead of the Queen’s schedule.”

“Very good. This undertaking will open a new page in history. People will be talking about this for years to come.”

“Well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves yet,” the foreman returned with a smile. “We’re keeping a brutal pace with crews

of men working around the clock. Let's see what happens as we get deeper into the Outland and closer to their cities."

"Agreed, but we have to stay positive. Keep up the good work, Christopher. I'm sure I'll be seeing you soon."

"When you do, we'll be miles ahead of this spot." The foreman smiled and waved as Lieutenant Baker nudged his horse forward. The caravan started again.

Jack wanted to ask the lieutenant a dozen questions about what kind of track was being laid and for what purpose, but he bit his barrage of inquiries back.

The caravan pushed hard for the rest of the day. Their midday meal was again spent in their saddles. As noon came and went and the sun began to set, Jack found himself once again debating whether or not to ask how much further the city might be. At that moment, Jack's eyes made out the outline of New Hope's walls on the horizon.

For the walls to be this high from so far away, Jack understood just how colossal they had to be up close. A huge wall formed a perfect circle around the city of New Hope. As they got closer, Jack could make out towers and spires inside the city that dwarfed even the wall for height.

So far, the road they journeyed on had only brought them past the occasional traveler. Now as they approached the city, the road was bustling with people coming from and going to New Hope. Merchants, farmers, teachers, and everyone else between gave the soldiers and trackers nods as they passed.

The whole way to the city gates, the same wooden beams and iron bars they encountered men laying earlier that morning followed on their right. The track sat a few yards off the road. The steel rails on wooden beams seemed new to even the locals. Jack saw more than a few people stop and point. They smiled and talked as though they had done the laying of the track themselves.

"They must be moving like the devil to have laid this much track in such a short time." A chubby businessman nodded to

his female companion. “Why, I thought they had just started this morning!”

“Yes, I heard the Queen has men working on it day and night, using only the most advanced tools.”

“Oh, you don’t say?”

“Oh, but I do!”

Jack rode past out of earshot as the two broke into obnoxious laughter. He was left wondering what kind of tools would allow a crew of men to travel so quickly and make so much progress in such a short course of time.

Their party was soon stopped at the entrance of New Hope as Lieutenant Baker conversed with the guards on duty. This time, Jack didn’t try and listen in; compared to the sights that were meeting his eyes, words were meaningless.

Jack was sitting on his horse right underneath the city wall, a wall that he could now do a fair job of measuring. He squinted against the dying sun’s harsh rays.

“What do you think, Jack?” His father pointed to the top of the wall. “Eighty, ninety, a hundred feet high?”

“At least a hundred feet high.” Jack raised a gloved hand to his brow as he shook his head in disbelief. “With the gates closed, I can see how someone would get the impression they’re not wanted inside.”

“I know what you mean. But if you think their walls are impressive, wait ‘til you see what it’s guarding.”

SIX



JACK

Jack tore his gaze from the city wall. He looked at his father, expecting him to explain.

“Here we go.” Marcus ignored his son’s questioning eyes. “They’re letting us through. Try not to fall off your saddle.”

Sure enough, the guards at the gate were motioning them forward. Jack let Cherub fall in line with the rest of the horses at a steady trot. Passing through the gates, Jack wasn’t ready to take in the city of New Hope. Every cobble-paved street led to a new sight. With every turn deeper into the heart of the city, something else made Jack’s jaw drop.

Jack was used to small cities in the Outland—cities made from wood and hard red clay burned solid by the sun’s strong rays—but he had never seen a city fashioned from brick and metal. Tall structures rose on every side of the packed streets. Red, blue, green, and yellow smoke lifted into the air from a dozen factories. Whistles blew and machines clanked along inside stores, creating whatever goods their masters sold.

Factories hummed under the constant supervision of their owners. The noise level was shocking compared to the silence of the Outland. People yelled to one another, carriages led by teams of horses clopped along the stone pavement, and vendors shouted their wares.

It was nothing like the Outland, and so much more than Jack could have imagined. He smiled as he was introduced to new sight after newer sight. He strained to pick up individual voices beyond the clamor.

“Extra! Extra! Read all about how the Queen has cleaned up New Hope!”

“Shadow spirits terrorizing villages! Buy your tried and tested Shadow Repellent here before becoming a member of the roaming dead!”

“Need a pair of goggles before venturing past the city walls? Be prepared for a sandstorm in the Outland!”

Jack could have spent days wandering around the city and still been content to wander longer. In his eighteen years of life, nothing else compared. He knew he should be startled, maybe even scared by the loud noises and the foreign magic-powered machines working in every window, but he wasn't. He wanted to see more. He wanted to get a better look inside the factories and at the machines that made the city run.

It was then that he made himself a promise. When their business was done with the Crown, he would get his father to stay in New Hope; maybe not forever, but for a while.

It was while he was thinking about how to overcome his father's rebuttals to his new idea that the group turned a corner. Jack's brown eyebrows shot to his hairline. His jaw dropped for what seemed the hundredth time since entering the city.

The royal palace looked like it could be a city in and of itself. Domed roofs reached for the heavens, towers loomed overhead, and dozens of servants and soldiers ran across the courtyard. There was a heavy iron fence surrounding the black and grey structure. Once again, they were halted for security clearance.

“We'll be walking from here.” Lieutenant Baker jumped off his horse and gave orders for his men to disperse. “It's not far now.”

Jack and his father followed his example. After so much riding, Jack was grateful for the break. They walked with the lieutenant through the iron gate and across the extravagant courtyard. The courtyard was massive, boasting a fountain in the center spilling forth water from a sculpted bat. The statue

was tall and ominous, its wings extended as if caught mid-flight. The way the sun glimmered off the water gave the liquid a dull amber glow.

Jack wasn't the most educated person when it came to art, but he could guess what the sculpture embodied. The fountain practically radiated strength and intimidation.

Flags flapped on the tops of every building carrying the same royal sigil of crossed swords behind a black bat that was also on every soldier's uniform. The color chosen for the flag itself was a crimson red. The sigil stood for power, advancement, and prosperity.

Jack and his father followed the lieutenant up the long flight of stairs and to the main palace entrance. Guards saluted as they recognized Lieutenant Baker and opened both large doors for the trio to enter.

Dark wood floors draped by thick carpets swallowed their boots as they entered. The wide halls were covered with portraits of New Hope and New Hope's past leaders. The ceiling was twice as high as any Jack had ever seen, but despite all of this, it was how the area was illuminated that stopped Jack and his father mid-step.

Villages and cities in the Outland relied on torches, candles, and lamps for light. The inside of the Queen's palace was devoid of any of these things and yet light still shone through the darkness. Jack stared at tiny bulbs placed along the walls and ceilings of the palace. The bulbs varied in dimension from the size of his fist to no more than the width of two of his fingers.

The bulbs themselves were no more than a thin glass holding what looked like nothing but pure white light. No visible source of fuel burned, but the light of a hundred candles emitted.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Lieutenant Baker smiled at his two guests. "I had a similar reaction when I first witnessed them."

"What—what is it?" Marcus asked.

“It was accidentally developed by our weapons and armory specialist. It’s called mage light. Power enough to brighten even the darkest room.”

“This will be a turning point for mankind,” Marcus breathed.

The three men stood in the hall, each evaluating Marcus’ last comment.

“I know how beautiful it is, and trust me, I could stand here and talk about the Queen’s advancements for hours, but she is waiting.”

Jack and Marcus tore their eyes from the lights and looked at one another. They remained speechless as they continued to follow the lieutenant down the twisting halls of the palace.

A few moments later, they heard panicked wheezing and booted feet against the floor. Lieutenant Baker stopped in his tracks, a gloved hand on the hilt of his sword. He relaxed his grip as a group of four soldiers appeared and made their way down the hall supporting a large man who gasped and coughed with every step.

The soldiers supporting their injured comrade tried to do a half salute but stopped midway as another fit of coughs came from their wounded counterpart. As they passed, Jack could see the large man’s injuries better. He was grabbing at his swollen neck.

“Private Pia, a word?”

A female soldier trusted the weight she carried to the other three soldiers, who hurried down the hall. She saluted smartly. “Yes, Lieutenant Baker?”

“Who is that man and where exactly are you taking him?”

“It was Captain Sloan, sir.” Private Pia bit her lip, trying to hide a smile. “Ummm—this man volunteered to, uh—he volunteered for a sparring session.”

“I see.” Lieutenant Baker nodded, his eyes twinkling with understanding. “But why are you taking him through the

palace halls? The medic office is on the other side of the stronghold.”

“Oh yes, sir. We tried going to the medic first, but they already have their hands full with soldiers involved in a bar fight earlier today. So we have to take him to the infirmary.”

“Bar fight?”

“Yes, sir. Not what you would think. They were on an assignment following orders. It seems they were in over their head. I’m sorry, but I don’t know more.”

“Thank you, Private. You are dismissed.” Lieutenant Baker and Private Pia saluted one another and she took off down the hall with a curious look at Marcus. Her eyes played across Jack’s shoulders and chest for a moment too long before she realized he was looking at her. She blushed and hurried off.

“I apologize for the scene. Usually, we don’t have injured soldiers being carried down the palace halls.”

“It happens.” Marcus shrugged.

As the three men continued their journey into the belly of the palace, Lieutenant Baker’s strides quickened. “Okay, gentlemen, the Queen’s conference room is just ahead. I’ll have to ask you to remove any weapons you may have. I’ll take them and have them waiting for you in your rooms for the night.”

“Rooms?” Jack repeated as he removed both pieces of his staff. “We’re staying here?”

“Of course. You are honored guests of the Queen. You will be invited to stay the night.”

Jack and his father handed over the staffs slung on their backs. Jack thought about how much had changed in the last few days.

One day you’re sleeping on the forest floor, thinking about where your next meal’s coming from, and now you’re in the Queen’s palace with mage light glowing from glass.

Jack shook his head and let air come from his lips in a low whistle. Soon Lieutenant Baker and the sorcerers stood in

front of another door guarded by two large men wearing the Queen's emblem and colors.

The lieutenant talked in a low voice with the men before he turned to address his guests. "Well, it looks as though our time has come to an end. I'll make sure your weapons are in your rooms waiting for you. The Queen is expecting you."

"Thank you," Jack and his father said at the same time.

Lieutenant Baker smiled then retreated down the hall. The two guards in front of them opened the doors and ushered them inside without a word.

SEVEN



SLOAN

The room was large and circular with a narrow carpet on a marble floor that led to a raised seating area. A high-backed chair with wings coming out of the top of both sides was set in the middle of the room. A familiar female face anticipated her arrival. What was most impressive about the room wasn't its size or even the noble woman waiting. It was the giant chandelier filled with tiny white mage lights that bathed the room in a soft glow.

Sloan felt a sense of comfort as she marched toward the Queen. Eleanor Eckert had been like a mother to her since she joined the palace guard. Her quick rise through the ranks she had accomplished on her own, but she knew the Queen was supporting her from day one.

Sloan crossed the large room quickly. She fell on one knee in front of the Queen's throne, her eyes down, right hand on the hilt of her sword that swung by her hips.

"Please, Captain, stand." The Queen's voice was feminine without sacrificing strength. "I hate that you still have to get down on your knees every time I need to speak with you."

"You have nothing to be sorry about, my Queen." Sloan rose to her feet quickly. "It's my duty as your captain as well as a tradition that must be followed."

It was easy to forget exactly how old the Queen had become. Her grey hair was wrapped around her head. Wrinkles pulled at the corner of her eyes and mouth. Her white

gown hid most of her body well, but Sloan imagined there was more skin and bones than muscle under the fabric.

Sloan leaned in, catching the paleness of her skin for the first time. It wasn't her imagination Queen Eleanor Eckert's pigmentation was a shade whiter than it had been before.

“Are you well, my Queen? Have you been ill—”

Sloan's words were cut off as the doors to the room opened again. Two magicians entered. One older, strong but worn from the years of travel; the other looked so similar to him, it had to be his son. He was handsome with wild brown hair. Sloan found herself intrigued by the pair; magicians were not commonly found in the city. Their mastery of the mystical arts were better suited for a life apart from the everyday hustle and bustle of New Hope.

“Right on time.” The Queen motioned the two visitors forward. When they too fell on their knees, the Queen smiled faintly. “Please rise; we have much to discuss.”

“Yes, Your Majesty, thank you,” the older magician answered.

“You're very welcome, and thank you both for coming so quickly. I'll be able to explain everything in detail soon. We are waiting for one other to join our party. In the meantime, I'd like to introduce you to the captain of my personal guard, Sloan.” The Queen turned to address Sloan. “Sloan, these are the very best magical trackers in the Outland, Marcus Walker and his son, Jack.”

Sloan exchanged short bows with the two magicians. Without thinking, her instincts told her these two men could be trusted. Something about their eyes was genuine, kind even.

Before any further words could be exchanged between the parties, the doors to the room opened once more.

“Ahhh, and here are the final members of our council,” the Queen said.

Sloan felt disdain grow in the pit of her stomach. The first person to walk through the door was the Queen's treasurer, Fenrick Trillion. He was a weasel of a man that could never

look her in the eye. To this day, Sloan was uncertain why the Queen had kept him as part of her staff as long as she had.

“How are you?” Fenrick ignored Sloan completely, which was more than fine with her. “You must be Marcus and Jack Walker, the famed trackers. Please let me introduce myself. My name is Fenrick Trillion, treasurer and advisor to the Crown.”

Jack and his father shook the man’s hand. Sloan’s attention landed on the last two men to enter. One she knew, the other looked like he belonged in a bar instead of the palace.

“Quick introductions once again. This is Captain Charlotte Sloan.” The Queen introduced her captain as if she were a proud parent. “And Marcus and Jack Walker, our tracking magicians. Oh, and Edison, it looks like you found the young man you were looking for.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The elderly man stepped forward and bowed to the Queen. He also made time to catch Sloan’s eye and give her a smile. “We have arrived.”

“Marcus, Jack,” the Queen continued, presenting the man she had just addressed. “This is Edison Reeves, the person responsible for our magical and technological advancements.”

Edison gripped Jack’s hand firmly and gave him a grin. After he had done the same to Marcus, he turned to the Queen and motioned for the last man to approach.

“And this, Your Majesty, is Aareth Emerson.”

Aareth walked forward but neither bowed nor knelt. His blue eyes looked the Queen up and down as he pushed long dark locks from his face.

“It is appropriate to bow to your Queen.” Sloan’s voice came out loud and clear. Her distaste for the man quickly turned to dislike. “Appropriate and demanded.”

“My Queen?” Aareth looked at her and smiled. “I didn’t vote for her.”

In one quick motion, Sloan found the hilt of the sword that hung from her hip. Years of training had it aimed at Aareth’s

throat in the blink of an eye. Her blade tickled the hair at his throat.

“You’re talking like any of this is an option.” Sloan leaned in, making sure her blade touched his skin. “You’re mistaken.”

“Peace, Captain,” the Queen said softly. “He’s still our guest.”

Sloan lowered her weapon slowly, but there was no doubt that if it weren’t for the Queen’s interference, she would have loved to teach Aareth a lesson in respect.

There was an awkward silence as the Queen studied Aareth. “I’m sorry. I wish things could have started on a better note. But I want to thank you all for coming. Fenrick and Edison are only here in an advisory capacity. You four—Sloan, Aareth, Marcus, and Jack—are the ones that were chosen.”

“Chosen for what, Your Highness?” Sloan asked as she sheathed her saber and shot Aareth a look that said, “Just you wait.”

“As you all know,” the Queen began with a deep breath, “the city of New Hope has struggled forward in the last decade. We have clawed and fought our way from the brink of collapse to be the most prosperous and technologically advanced city in the known world. Now we have the opportunity and resources to not only support ourselves, but also those in the Outland.

“I’m not referring to conquest or trying to claim each outlying city for the Crown.” Queen Eckert caught sight of Aareth’s dark look and shook her head. “I’m talking about strengthening bonds with our neighbors one day at a time. I know what the Outlanders think of us. I don’t blame them. I understand gaining their trust will be a slow process, but it is a process that must be started.”

“We have the resources now in every way,” Edison added with a proud smile. “Our army has never been better trained, our advancements in magic never further advanced, and our leaders never stronger.”

“New Hope’s economy and treasury are at their peaks as well,” Fenrick added with a smile that reminded Sloan of a predator’s grin.

“They will have to be small steps and even smaller acts of kindness,” the Queen took time to look each member in attendance in the eye, “but we have to start somewhere. That leads us to why you have all been called. We have received reports and requests for aid from a small Outland city called Burrow Den.”

Sloan furrowed her brow, trying to remember all she knew about the city. It was a small town, no more than a few hundred people from what she had remembered from the report. But that had been a few months ago. A lot could happen in a small town in a few months.

“Reports of what manner, Your Highness?” Marcus asked.

“Over the last few months, a string of brutal murders has occurred. Eyewitnesses have said there’s a wild animal on the loose that does not resemble anything they have ever seen before. Reports vary; however, whatever it is has eluded the local town authorities as well as anyone who has gone to help. In the meantime, the attacks and deaths have continued. It’s not every day a request for help comes our way, but it has. This is the perfect opportunity to make an ally. I am asking the four of you to go to Burrow Den, find out what is causing these attacks, and handle the situation in the name of the Crown.”

“You know my sword now and forever belongs to you, my Queen. You need only tell me where to direct it.” Sloan fell to a knee once more, her eyes lowered in reverence.

“Both my son and I are at your disposal, Your Highness,” Marcus said with another bow. “Where you command, we will follow.”

Everyone in the chamber turned to Aareth. He was scratching the scruff that formed across his face but stopped as every eye turned his way. “Listen, I don’t think you have the right man for the job. I mean, it sounds adventurous and romantic and all, but I’m not the guy you’re looking for.”

“If it’s money you are worried about, trust me, the Crown has more than enough to compensate you for your time.” The Queen frowned. “Or if it is something other than wealth you desire?”

“No, I’m sure you have enough money and I’m not looking for power. Your plan just sounds dangerously close to schemes tyrants have tried in the past.”

“Explain yourself.” The Queen squinted and tilted her head to the side.

“I’m not accusing you of anything but having the noblest of intentions. However, there’s a fine line between bringing unity and peace to the Outland and making every city outside of New Hope your own.”

Sloan couldn’t believe what she was hearing. If Aareth thought he was going to get away with addressing the Queen in such a disrespectful way, he had another think coming. Sloan rose to her feet, her hand on the hilt of her saber once more.

When the Queen spoke next, there was an edge to her voice Sloan didn’t expect.

“Well, Aareth Emerson, thank you for your time and honesty. You are obviously not the right man for the job. You are dismissed, then. Please don’t let me keep you from the bar we found you in and the alcohol you were drowning yourself with.”

Aareth made a move to speak.

Sloan couldn’t help but pull her sword an inch from her sheath. She took a step toward him.

Aareth’s lip curled into a sneer. Instead of words, he walked out of the room.

“Please, Your Majesty, I know he’s rough around the edges. Still, he’s the best chance we have.” Edison looked at the Queen with desperation. “Let me go after him.”

“He’s strong and cautious. If you think he’s the one we need...” The Queen thought for a moment before continuing.

“...then go and get him if you can. Over the course of the last ten years, you have never failed me. I don't expect you'll start making bad decisions now.”

Edison bowed, his long grey cloak swishing behind him as he half walked, half ran to catch up to Aareth.

“Your Majesty is gracious as ever,” Fenrick added in a sly whisper everyone could hear. “I would have had his tongue or thrown him into the dungeon and whipped at the very least for speaking that way.”

“Yes, well, sometimes faith in our friends and their choices is required. Please, Fenrick, will you show Sloan and our guests where all the material on the attacks is held?”

Fenrick bowed deeply.

“Thank you, all of you, for your willingness to help. The road will be dangerous. We will be sure to send you well-prepared. Fenrick will show you all the information we have gathered from the murders and the reports from eyewitnesses. It's best that we begin as soon as possible to avoid more deaths.”

“We will, Your Highness.” Sloan bowed once more. “We can start first thing tomorrow morning. We'll take the locomotive as far as the tracks will let us and then travel by horse from there.”

The Queen nodded.

“What's a locomotive?” All eyes turned to Jack, who looked as though he was even surprised he had asked the question. “I mean, if I may ask?”

“You're in a for a treat, Jack,” The Queen smiled at the young tracker.

EIGHT



AARETH

Did they think he was stupid? He knew where even the best of intentions led. With this much power, there would be no stopping the Queen if she decided to rule the Outland cities as opposed to “helping” them. With the magical technology New Hope now held, it would be a war of swords against sticks.

Aareth was already in the courtyard when he heard the running footsteps behind him. The warm air and the setting sun touched him at the same time Edison reached his side.

“My God, boy, slow down. I’m not as agile as I once was.”

“Listen, I know you’re trying to help, but this isn’t my thing.” Aareth reduced his pace but continued to move forward toward the exit. “It starts with one town, with one city; we lend a helping hand, and then we want favors in return. Favors turn into allegiances, handouts turn into debts, and debt is just another word for control.”

“You’re exactly right, and that’s why I chose you. You’ve seen it all happen before. You’ve seen the corruption firsthand. You’ve been in the middle of it. That’s why it’s so important that you be the one to go.”

Aareth reached the front gates. The fact that Edison wasn’t arguing with him was enough for him to stop.

“You don’t disagree? So you don’t think the Queen can be trusted?”

“I didn’t say that.” Edison put both gloved hands up in a sign of surrender.” The Queen is doing this for all the right reasons; however, there are those in the palace who would

rather see cities in the Outland pay taxes and tribute rather than become friends and allies.”

“That’s why you need me to be the one that goes.” Aareth crossed his muscular arms and took a deep breath. “I can’t believe I’m letting you talk me into this.”

“Aareth, the time you spent as an inspector cleaning up the corruption in this city will be an invaluable tool. You were the best undercover detective we ever had at the precinct.”

Aareth stood quiet, torn between what he knew was the right thing to do and the direction every muscle in his body was telling him to go. Two sides of Aareth were locked in a battle; the man he once was and the man he was now.

Edison saw everything. He recognized what the pause in conversation meant, the agitated look on Aareth’s face, even the furrowed brow.

“If you can’t do it for yourself, Aareth, do it for the city; and if you can’t do it for the city, do it for her.”

Aareth was ripped from his internal battle at the mention of his dead wife. A year ago, he would have beat anyone that dared mention her memory. A year ago, mention of his dead wife would have been enough for Aareth to end a man’s life. Today, he knew the anger would only reopen old wounds. Instead, he accepted the memory and embraced the pain.

“She was better than I was.”

“No, Aareth.” Edison’s face softened as he put a gloved hand on his wounded friend’s shoulder. “She was better than all of us. She just brought out the best in you. Go on this mission and keep a watchful eye. Something big is about to happen. I have a feeling whatever it is, it’s going to start with this journey.”

NINE



FENRICK

“Oh, just in here, if you please.” Fenrick showed the three members of the Queen’s chosen group into an open room with a round table and chairs near a crackling fire. On top of the table were a pile of folders and files full of paperwork and pictures.

“Dinner will be brought to you shortly. In the meantime, feel free to start reading the gathered material.”

The father and son team nodded and walked into the room, followed by the Queen’s captain. Sloan stood by Fenrick’s side before she entered. Without even looking at him, she whispered, “There’s a nasty little rumor among the men that a certain treasurer was seen gambling in the city last night.”

“Captain,” Fenrick swallowed hard but gathered himself just as quickly, “if you are insinuating that I’m gambling with the Queen’s money, I would think twice about the accusation you’re making.”

“And why’s that?” Sloan turned her piercing green eyes on Fenrick. “Choose your next words wisely.”

“Because,” Fenrick licked his lips and leaned in to whisper in her ear, “I don’t gamble, but even if I did, I would choose to keep that a secret. You know I’m not the only one with secrets—don’t you, Captain? You know what I’m referring to, of course—a certain *less than* distinguished upbringing.”

“Be careful who you threaten, Treasurer. Some of us are quicker with the sword than the tongue and would go to great

lengths to protect certain secrets.” Sloan walked into the room and shut the door in Fenrick’s face.

Fenrick let his fake smile fade and curled a lip at the closed door.

Children playing at things they don’t understand, Fenrick thought to himself. But events are going better than expected. Aareth has left before the journey has even started. In a game where the players can choose their own pieces, it seems the Queen has chosen poorly: a drunk who already walked out, two simple-minded sorcerers, and a captain with a dark secret.

Fenrick shook his head as he walked through the palace to the rear of the building. The sun had just set. Only a few servants and guards traveled along the palace’s extensive garden grounds. Queen Eleanor had a soft spot for plants and flowers of all kinds. The garden was alive with statues and fountains all designed with bats, pools, and various symbols of strength. All of that was still outshined by the level of foliage in the garden.

Fenrick dismissed all the plants and flowers he had seen a thousand times before. Instead, he spent his time looking over his shoulder, ensuring he was not being followed.

After a few turns in the labyrinth of the palace’s garden, Fenrick was content he was alone. He stopped walking and stood next to a tall hedge. Looking through the leaves and small branches of the wall-like plant, he saw the back of a hooded figure sitting on a stone bench on the other side.

“You’re late,” the dark figure spoke in a deep voice.

“Well, that’s not my fault,” Fenrick snarled. “You need to kill the captain. She suspects something. We need to kill her now.”

“Quiet your voice, snake, before someone hears and you ruin everything. They will all be dealt with in time when my master deems it appropriate. What of the team the Queen has assembled to travel to the Outland?”

“Mercenary,” Fenrick’s voice heightened at being talked to in such a way, by someone he deemed lower than himself,

“you will speak to me with respect. I don’t care who your master is. I will have soldiers here—”

The cloaked man turned with inhuman speed. He shot a large arm through the thin hedge between them. Fenrick felt ice-cold fingers close around his throat. A second later, he was lifted from the ground.

“I will not ask you again to be quiet, snake.” The hooded figure held Fenrick as if he weighed no more than a handful of sand. “I would kill you here and now, but it seems you are more useful to The Order alive. Why, I have no clue.”

Fenrick clawed at the arm holding him suspended above the dirt, but there was no use. He stared into the deep hood. The man’s facial features were bathed in shadows, but Fenrick could still make out the long, gruesome scar across his pale face. Fenrick nodded as best he could. The hold around his throat was released. He fell to the ground, gasping for air.

“Now tell me all you know about the ones chosen for the journey to the Outland. I want everything, when they’re leaving, and what route they’re taking.”

TEN



SLOAN

Sloan sat at a table along with Marcus and Jack. They all opened folders and examined the information provided about the attacks in the Outland. There were news clippings, firsthand reports, and interviews from witnesses. What concerned Sloan the most was the quantity of attacks over such a brief period.

The first attack was dated two months prior. In that short time, more than two dozen assaults were reported. File after file told similar stories of torn bodies, violent confrontations, and a wild creature no one had ever seen before. The eyewitness reports varied from descriptions of a huge dog-like animal to a large wolf. The things consistent in all the reports were that whatever the mysterious creature was, it was massive and struck quickly. It was covered in dark hair and traveled on four paws. The noise it made while it attacked were loud howls and there was a lingering odor it left behind.

“Well.” Marcus placed worn spectacles on the bridge of his nose as he accepted a piece of paper from his son. “That’s impossible, isn’t it?”

Jack nodded.

“What is?” Sloan asked from across the table as she put down a folder. “Did you find something?”

“It’s an artist’s rendering of a life-size paw print left by the animal.” Marcus handed her the picture of the paw print that nearly covered the entire page.

Sloan looked down at the paper, at a loss. Sure it looked like a massive paw in dire need of a pedicure, but other than that, she had no idea what she was looking at. Rather than pretend to be in the loop, Sloan decided to admit her ignorance.

“Put me in a fight or a political debate, and I can hold my own.” Sloan bit her lip as she examined the giant animal print. “I have no idea what I’m looking at here, sorcerer. It looks like an enormous canine imprint. I would say a dog, but there are no dogs that large, not in that part of the Outland, not anywhere.”

“Well, you’re not that far off, Captain.” Marcus removed his glasses, leaning back in his chair. “It is a paw print of a canine, just not a dog. That’s a wolf print.”

“A wolf? That’s impossible. They get to no more than sixty, maybe seventy pounds.” Sloan shook her head, looking at the picture again. “Whatever made this print had to have weighed hundreds of pounds.”

“Well, that’s the impossible part, isn’t it?” Marcus touched the tips of his fingers together, deep into his own thoughts.

Sloan looked closer at the print.

“The print is one we’ve seen a hundred times before, but...” Jack pointed to the sketch of the paw design once more, “this one is four times as large as any we’ve come across.”

“So we’re ruling out wolves. What else could it be?” The voice came from the doorway. All three members at the table jumped and turned. Sloan’s hand tightened on her saber hilt once again.

“We’re really going to have to work on that, Captain.” Aareth grinned from the doorway. “Every time I talk, you don’t need to draw steel.”

“Well, you haven’t given me much of a reason not to, have you? What’re you doing back? You walked out on your Queen and on your city.”

“I had a change of heart.” Aareth sauntered toward the group. He shrugged off his long black jacket, placing it on an empty chair, and took a seat.

The room was silent as Sloan examined their new ally with a raised eyebrow. Marcus nodded a greeting toward Aareth. The room was quiet.

“Well, we’re glad to have you.” Jack cleared his throat. “At least I am.”

“Thanks. I heard you talking about the possibility of wolves. The canine animals that’re no larger than the size of large dogs?”

“My father and I have tracked our fair share,” Jack continued as he got the fourth member of their team up to speed, “but they’re not naturally aggressive animals. The largest we’ve ever seen couldn’t have been more than seventy pounds.”

“So we have nothing?” Aareth asked.

“It seems like we’re tracking an animal of unknown origin that has been able to elude, well, everyone.” Sloan ignored Aareth and looked only to the sorcerers. “Marcus, Jack, what do you think? Can you find it?”

Father and son smiled as Jack repeated what had become their catch phrase. “If it leaves tracks, we can find it.”

The answer was satisfactory. Even if it was a giant breed of wolf, Sloan felt confident in her own abilities to kill the animal once the magicians had found it.

As she mulled over the details, well-dressed servants brought in large platters covered with silver covers.

“And, mercenary?” Sloan decided to test Aareth. “When we do find this beast, do you think you can kill it?”

“I’m not a mercenary anymore, Captain.” Aareth pushed back a curtain of his long black hair. “But to answer your question, yes. I’ve never met an animal, man... or soldier, I couldn’t beat.”

The jab wasn't lost on Sloan. Instead of allowing her anger dominance, she was surprised to find a smile tug at her lips.

The rest of the night was spent over a feast. It was a common enough meal for Sloan, but she wasn't ignorant of the wide eyes on both the magicians. Even Aareth stared at the food as if he hadn't been invited to a proper meal in months.

The night's dinner consisted of roasted duck, grilled chicken, skewered salmon, salad, vegetables, rolls with butter, pitchers of wine and beer, and every kind of dessert imaginable.

Sloan unfolded her pristine linen napkin in preparation for the meal. As she reached for her utensils, she noticed she was the only one. Aareth was already serving himself mounds of food on his plate. Marcus and Jack were better behaved, but their confusion as to which fork to use showed their lack of etiquette.

Sloan, and especially Aareth, helped themselves to the wine, while Jack and his father stuck to water. After a mostly quiet meal, Sloan pushed her plate away. "If we're going to spend the next few weeks together, I'd like us to be honest with each other. I'm not trying to be your best friend, but the most successful teams I've ever worked with in the past have had a mutual respect and trust in one another."

Sloan looked at each one of them in turn. She allowed the silence to build before she began again.

"I'll go first. As captain of the Queen's guard, I'm used to leading. That doesn't mean I'm not a team player. With that said, in this mission, I want to make it clear that I am the leader. I'll do all I can to make this a quick journey. We'll go into the town—Jack and Marcus, you'll find the animal. Aareth and I will kill it and we can all go home."

"My son and I have been sorcerers of the paranormal for years." Marcus smiled with pride at Jack. "We've tracked everything from shadow spirits to shape shifters. I'm honored to be able to help the Queen and the city of New Hope. We'll find whatever this thing is."

“I, uhhh, I’ve been practicing the magical arts and tracking ever since I can remember.” Jack stumbled under Sloan’s stern gaze. “My father and I have never failed a job we’ve been hired to complete. This one’s not going to be any different.”

All eyes turned to Aareth, who was wiping his hands and mouth clean of sticky meat juices.

“I’ve been working—freelance—in the Outland for the last three years. I’m here now and plan on seeing this thing through to the end.”

Sloan cocked her head to the side. There was something like sadness, maybe regret in Aareth’s bright blue eyes. As he remembered the last few years, it was clear he was troubled. Instead of continuing down the line of thought, Sloan reminded herself why she was there.

“We’ll leave early tomorrow, so be ready. We’ll make a quick stop at the armory, gathering any supplies we may need for the journey, and then we’ll be off.” Sloan rose from her chair and looked at the three men sitting at the table. “Rest well. If I’m right, it’ll be the last time we can close our eyes without worry for a long time.”

ELEVEN



JACK

Jack and his father were shown to a large room with two beds, and to Jack's delight, mage lights. Their weapons were waiting for them in their room just as Lieutenant Baker promised.

Jack sat in his bed, switching the mage light on and off. The lamp was on a nightstand next to his bed. The switch to turn the light off and on was so simple to navigate, it was almost comical.

He couldn't help but notice his father assemble his staff and place it next to his bed. "Expecting trouble tonight?"

"Not particularly." Marcus ran his hand over the staff and the ancient runes of their order carved deep in the wood. "But it's better to be safe than sorry, right?"

"Yeah, but I can tell that's not it, is it? There's something else bothering you, isn't there?"

"As perceptive as your mother." Marcus let out a long sigh. "You know me too well. It's our traveling partner that makes me uneasy."

"Sloan?" Jack stopped playing with the light and gave his father his full attention. "Or Aareth?"

"It's Aareth. I have a feeling I've seen him before. And I don't mean passing through a town. There's something off about him, son."

"Well, who do you think he is?"

"I'm not sure, but there's something in his eyes. If I had to guess, he's a hit man, an assassin."

Jack's jaw dropped. He heard about assassins while traveling through the Outland. They were professional killers for hire to the highest bidder. As Jack thought about it, he'd heard stories of an assassin with long black hair and piercing blue eyes. Stories of a killer more ghost than man.

"Are you sure, Dad? I mean, why would the Queen allow a person like that to come on this mission? Aareth isn't going to exactly win the award for personality of the year, but—"

"I'm sure, son. As to why the Queen has allowed him to come with us is another story. We have to trust that the Crown has their reasons. But in the meantime..." Marcus patted his staff gently. "It's never a bad idea to be cautious. Have you said your prayers?"

"Dad, we've talked about this." Jack rolled his eyes. "I'm eighteen years old. You don't need to remind me of that stuff or tuck me in or kiss me on the cheek at night."

"You just turned eighteen, and in my defense, I have done a great job on the no tucking in and kissing thing. You'll understand one day when you have kids of your own. Goodnight, son. I love you."

Jack gritted his teeth, but he knew he would regret it if he didn't say it. "Love you too, Dad."

Jack's mind was still reeling with the real identity of their traveling partner that night as he fell asleep. There was a real live assassin going on a journey with them. Jack was equal parts excited and fearful of the trip to come and what the next days would bring. The last thing he remembered as he fell asleep was a lullaby his mother would sing to him as a baby.

If Jack had known what the next day held in store for him, he wouldn't have slept so soundly.

TWELVE



SLOAN

“Marcus, Jack?” It was Sloan knocking on their bedroom door. “Be ready to visit the armory in fifteen minutes. A servant will come and get you.”

“We’ll be ready, Captain,” Marcus’ voice penetrated the door. “See you soon.”

Sloan took off down the hall in the direction of the armory. The palace was a labyrinth of twisting halls and massive rooms. It had taken Sloan a solid month before she was confident in traversing the palace alone.

Morning light streamed through massive windows. Sloan’s black boots sank into the rich red carpet. Soldiers saluted her as she passed halls decorated with statues and paintings.

Today, she walked with purpose. It was important for her to set the tone as the leader, and in all honesty, she was excited to see what Edison Reeves had ready for them in the armory.

Eventually, Sloan arrived at the designated meeting point, the entrance to the armory marked by two gigantic black doors. She dusted off her black pants and straightened her black and grey uniform while she waited.

“You didn’t strike me as the kind to care what she looks like.” Aareth’s voice met her from down the hall. “But I guess as long as you’re not trying to kill me, that’s an improvement.”

“And you obviously don’t care what you look like.” Sloan looked Aareth up and down. “Did you sleep in your clothes?”

Before Aareth could answer, Marcus and Jack rounded the corner. The servants that guided the men to the armory bowed their way back down the hall.

“What? Do I have something on my face?” Aareth looked at Jack as he rubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin. “Why are you looking at me like that, kid? You’re kinda weirding me out.”

“Oh no.” Jack’s eyes darted to the door. “I mean, I—just that now that I know who you—ummm—”

“Please, boys, can this wait?” Sloan banged on the massive double doors. “We have an armory to pillage and a mission to begin.”

The black doors were twenty feet high and at least ten feet across. What first seemed like decorations in the wood were magical symbols of all shapes and sizes. Now as the doors opened, the symbols began to shine. One after the other, they lit up in a bright display of red light until the entire door was covered in the magical illumination.

Noise, like a hundred bats in flight, shot forth from the opposite side of the door. Edison’s familiar head popped out. He was sporting goggles over a smeared coal black face. He motioned them forward wearing a heavy set of leather work gloves. “Please come in and welcome to A.M.M.O. ‘Advanced Machine Making and Observation,’ I’ve been waiting for you.”

THIRTEEN



JACK

Jack had seen the city. He witnessed the power of magic to produce light. Still, he wasn't ready for the sight welcoming his eyes on the other side of the door. The palace armory was one gigantic room filled with gnomes, machines, smoke, and leaping fires. Steam and whistles filled the air as the group entered.

The gnomes wore facemasks and goggles. They labored on various projects in different stages of development. Edison led the group around the armory like a proud father, introducing them to invention after invention.

“This is only a prototype, but we're hoping by the time it's done, we'll be able to carry mage light with us from place to place. Imagine that? Being able to carry light with you and illuminate even the darkest corners with the flick of a switch. Granted, I know a sorcerer could do this at any time, but to the everyday man, it will be groundbreaking.”

“Even for us, it would be useful.” Marcus looked at the prototype that was nothing more than a tube with a bulb at the end. “Lighting a path is easy enough, but it takes energy and power. Having a mage light means we can save our strength.”

Edison was pointing to a large square box sparking blue light as short-statured gnomes tried connecting it to large cables. Jack couldn't help but smile at the older man's enthusiasm for science and technology. He was ripped from these thoughts as a small explosion erupted a few yards away.

Gnomes ran on squat legs carrying buckets of water and heavy towels.

“Should we have masks on or at least goggles?” Sloan pointed to where a small blaze had broken out. “I think that gnome over there is on fire.”

“Oh no, he’s fine. He’s fine really. He’ll walk it off. You’re safe.” Edison shook his head with reassurance. “That’s a regular occurrence here. That project has been in the works for months now. He’ll be reborn again. We just have to find a way for him not to burst into flames.”

“What is it?” Jack said, craning his neck to try and get a glimpse.

“We’ve codenamed it Project Phoenix. It’s the first step in creating a potion that will bring someone back from the dead.”

A bearded gnome with a squished nose and large ears came up to Edison. He pulled on the inventor’s sleeve until Edison leaned down. With excited chatter, the little employee whispered in Edison’s ear.

“He’s here now?” Edison looked around the warehouse floor.

The gnome nodded furiously.

“Well, please show him in. Have him meet us by the weapons display.”

The gnome ran off. Edison turned to his group and led them to the back of the large room. “It seems we have an unexpected visitor.”

Jack noticed a well-dressed middle-aged man approaching the group. He was wearing an expensive suit complete with gold-rimmed glasses and a gold pocket watch; the chain hung from inside his vest.

“Well, hello, Edison,” the stranger said, taking in the rest of the group with a smile. “I’m sorry, is this a bad time?”

“No, of course not.” Edison grinned and shook the man’s hand vigorously. “Not for the person who’s been so generous

to the Crown. Please let me introduce you. You're already familiar with the captain, I think. This is Jack, Marcus, and Aareth."

Sloan crossed her arms with a frown that said she was anything but happy to see the mystery man.

"Gentlemen," Edison continued as though he didn't notice. "This is Dr. Oliver Livingston. He owns the largest magic and technology manufacturing company in the city. He's also a great supporter of the Crown. In fact, many of the projects you see here today are being developed side by side with his team."

The doctor extended a greeting to each of them and exchanged warm handshakes.

"And, Captain," Dr. Livingston turned to Sloan with a pleasant smile, "always a pleasure to see you as well."

Sloan didn't say a word, but Jack could tell she was biting back a few choice words of her own. He half expected to see Sloan reach for her sword.

The doctor didn't seem to notice or care and instead turned back to Edison. "Well, it looks as though you're on a tour, so I'll be brief. The progress on the locomotive track is going well above the planned schedule. I have crews working on it around the clock. With the latest tools we've developed for the project, we'll be able to reach the first Outland city tonight."

"That's wonderful news." Edison smiled from ear to ear. "I know the Queen will be pleased."

"The other project is still being worked on." The doctor noticeably lowered his voice for this piece of information. "We ran into a few... hiccups."

Jack leaned in toward the two men, trying to catch more of their conversation as their voices continued to lower. At that moment, there was a shrill steam blast escaping a large stack of pipes, making it impossible for Jack to hear anything but the last few words from Dr. Livingston's mouth. "...enhanced soldiers."

“Well, thank you for the information. I’ll be contacting you later today to go over your report in better detail,” Edison said with a nervous glance at his guests.

“Of course. It was a pleasure meeting you all, and Sloan, you look beautiful as ever.” With that, Dr. Livingston turned and walked away.

“Well, he seems nice.” Aareth lifted his eyebrows at a scowling Sloan. “And he definitely has a thing for you.”

“Not another word.” Sloan looked at Aareth with murder in her eyes. “Not one more word from you or I swear to every gnome in here, I’ll shove my sword so far up your—”

“Well, let’s be on our way.” Edison licked dry lips, trying to defuse the situation. “I know how eager you all are to begin your journey.”

He led the group a few more yards to the rear of the building. There was an area where a makeshift practice ground was erected.

“Ahhh. Here we are.” Edison turned to a table behind him and opened a small metal box. Inside was a black steel rod, thick as Jack’s staff but not much longer than a pencil.

Edison lifted it into the air for Jack and his father to examine. “Since staffs seem to be your weapon of choice, I thought I should show you one of our latest inventions. Until now, every staff either needs to be held in one cumbersome piece or in two like your own. We’ve managed to condense the original staff into something much more user friendly. The metal is durable, but you will still be able to carve your own desired runes on the material if you deem it necessary.”

Jack could feel a smile cross his lips. Edison handed him the steel wand. He motioned for him to step inside the training area. The piece of metal did feel heavy but not any heftier than his own staff.

“There’s a button on the side by your thumb that will extend the staff,” Edison informed him. “Once you press the button, the staff will spread quickly, so do be cautious. Perhaps a demonstration?”

Jack stepped inside the training area. There were three dummies set in a circle around him. He held the metal bar out in front of him. His thumb contacted the cold button. At once, two steel shafts extended from the bar. Jack wasted no time as he called forth the inner fire of magic raging inside of him. The steel rod came alive with green flame. Jake made quick work of the dummies, destroying two with strikes from the staff, the last with a green flame that shot from the end of the pole.

As soon as the demonstration started, it ended. Jack shut off the magical power feeding the staff with energy. He hit the button by his thumb again. The green flames disappeared. As if it were a dream, all that remained was a black metal wand.

“What do you think?” Edison clapped in glee, seeing one of his most prized inventions in the hands of a professional sorcerer. “It’s perfect isn’t it?”

“Does it come in brown?” Jack gave the inventor a rueful grin.

Edison offered a similar wand to Marcus, who politely refused, rubbing a fond thumb across the handle of his staff. “Thank you, but I think I’ll stick with my own set. They haven’t failed me yet.”

“There’s already one waiting for you on the locomotive.” Edison took the wand from Jack, placing it back in the box. “Be sure to read the instructions. There’s a lot of useful information in the instruction booklet. But I have more to show you before you go. Wait here.”

Jack again heard the name “locomotive,” but before he could ask what a locomotive was, Edison disappeared behind a wall of dark boxes.

“We should really get going soon if we’re to make it to Burrow Den anytime soon.” Aareth crossed large arms over his chest. “At this rate, the entire city’s going to be slaughtered before we arrive.”

“For the first time, I agree with you,” Sloan frowned, looking at the watch on her wrist. “Where did Edison run off

to?”

“They must have already loaded the other two pieces of equipment I had for you and Aareth on the locomotive, Captain.” Edison appeared from behind a pile of boxes emblazoned with the royal insignia. “I apologize.”

“It’s quite all right, Edison. We really must be going now anyway. Thank you.”

Jack, Marcus, and Sloan shook hands with Edison. Jack couldn’t help but notice that Aareth stayed behind a second longer, exchanging a few words with the elderly inventor before he caught up with the rest of the group.

Sloan gave Aareth a sideways glance as they walked through the palace.

“What?” Aareth asked. “The old man says to read the directions before we play with our toys.”

“I’m sure.”

The group headed through the palace and outside to the east wing. Soon Jack found himself in a tunnel-like room that sloped gradually down. It was clear this portion of the palace was much newer than the rest. The smell of drying mortar was still fresh on the walls, and the ebony floor practically glistened.

The tunnel soon opened into a large room with human soldiers and gnome technicians hustling about. Smoke filled the chamber, much like the workshop, as a dull, thumping noise permeated the air.

On the far side of the room on the same tracks that Jack had seen being laid in the Outland was a gigantic black machine. Smoke poured out of a large chimney set in the front of the monster as steam shot out from wheels and levers underneath.

Sloan was the only one out of the group not fazed by the machine.

“Is she ready to go?” Sloan asked a passing gnome covered in grease.

“Yes, ma’am. We’re just waiting for you to board now.”

The machine picked up in volume as the behemoth came to life. It looked like it was made up of several different sections connected to each other. There were five carts all together, all painted black and brown. Two large flags wielding the city’s sigil were mounted at the front half hidden by the amount of smoke and steam erupting from the monster of a machine.

Sloan waved them aboard. “Come on, boys, let’s go. We have a city to save.”

FOURTEEN



JACK

Not in Jack's wildest dreams could he have imagined something like this. The four emissaries to the Queen boarded the machine. To Jack's surprise, the inside of the carts were spacious, even comfortable.

They boarded the second cart with the help of a small step ladder attached to the side. The section of the machine they entered was directly behind what Jack had imagined was the engine. Inside was a carpeted room that didn't look much different from the inside of the palace.

"We'll be underway soon." Sloan walked to a small table with a map of the Outland spread out on top. "The locomotive will take us as far as it can. We'll stop right before the tracks run out and take horses from there. With any luck, we'll be in Burrow Den in a week."

"A week?" Jack looked toward the rear of the car they boarded, eager to see what was in the next cart. "That fast?"

"We're not on vacation, Jack. We'll ride hard." Sloan noticed his gaze. "Wondering what else is back there?"

Jack turned his large brown eyes to a smiling Sloan and nodded.

"This is the meeting or lounging cart. The one ahead of us is where all the power comes from, the mage engine. The three behind us are sleeping quarters, the lavatory, the supply room, and the kitchen."

"This thing has a kitchen and a bathroom in it?" Aareth was quietly examining the interior of the machine, but he

spoke up at mention of the facilities. “What’s next, a flying ship?”

“I wouldn’t doubt it.” Sloan shrugged. “I mean, the way Edison and Dr. Livingston are headed in the name of magic.”

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot about the doctor. What is he anyway? Your boyfriend?”

“He is not my boyfriend.” Sloan’s fair skin turned red. Her green eyes burned with fire. “And if you ever talk to me like that again, so help me God, I’ll—”

At that moment, there was a shrill whistle cutting off the rest of Sloan’s threat. The locomotive slowly began to move.

Although Jack couldn’t hear what Sloan said, the chopping motion she made with her hand was clear enough.

Jack took a seat near a window in a thickly cushioned armchair. He could hear his father, Sloan, and Aareth looking over the map of the Outland. They were already preparing a plan. As the locomotive gained speed and started forward, all Jack could think about was giving his full attention to the steam-powered machine that would no doubt change history.

At first, the locomotive moved only inches forward; however, as whistles blew and smoke spewed from the dark stacks, the machine gained speed. Within minutes, inches turned into feet and feet turned into yards.

Soon the steam-powered engine was rocketing forward. How the others weren’t as excited as he was, was beyond Jack. The locomotive pulled them along at a steady pace, making short work of the tunnel running under the palace. For a brief second, all was dark as they left the station room under the palace behind them and entered the dark tunnel that led to the city above.

The darkness in the passageway was short-lived. Within a few seconds, the locomotive broke forward, reaching the surface and entering the very heart of New Hope. Tracks had already been set up inside the city and barriers guarded both sides of the rails, ensuring pedestrians were nowhere close to the ton of hurtling steel.

Men, women, and children all stopped what they were doing and stared wide-eyed at the beast of a machine. Children smiled and waved as they ran along the locomotive's side. Jack couldn't help himself as he waved back to the strangers, who seemed so happy to witness man's latest and greatest invention.

The sun was already high overhead as the locomotive snaked its way through the city and toward the Outland. Once again, Jack was struck by the immensity of the city and what it had to offer. He could feel the desire to explore the city build inside him. He knew he was sadder at leaving than he should be.

Don't worry, you'll be back, Jack told himself, and somehow he knew it was the truth.

Tall buildings passed on both sides of the tracks as the locomotive moved forward at a steady pace, leaving a trail of smoke in its wake. Jake tried guessing how fast they were going. He decided that they were traveling at the same pace his horse would at a quick trot.

This, however, was a much more comfortable ride than sitting in a saddle. There was no jerking side to side or bouncing up and down. On the contrary, the engine made for a smooth ride, far surpassing any horse or carriage Jack ever used to travel.

Soon the mage engine was breaking through an entrance in the city's outer wall. New Hope was behind them. The desert spread out in front of them in all directions, the steady chugging heartbeats of the mage engine caressing the air.

"Hey, Jack." Jack almost jumped from his chair at the mention of his name. He turned from his seat and saw Aareth looking down at him. "Didn't mean to scare you. Want to go get our presents Edison left us? They're in the last cart in the back."

Jack smiled at the thought of getting his hands on the metal staff again, then hesitated at who he was going with. If his father was correct, and he usually was, Aareth was a dangerous man.

“I’ll go with you two.” Sloan stood up from a seat she had taken behind Jack. “I think Edison said there was something for me as well.”

Jack, Aareth, and Sloan made their way past a lounging Marcus, who thanked them for the offer to tag along but reassured them he was very comfortable where he was. The trio passed through a small hall that connected each cart.

The first cart they entered was the kitchen, decorated in copper and steel. The second was the sleeping quarters, with bunk beds situated into the sides of the walls, and the last was a small lavatory and the supply closet.

The supply room was cramped, and shelves bursting with their contents lined every spare wall. Items like water, cooking supplies, cleaners, towels, and tools filled the racks. It was clear which items were meant for them. Smack in the center of the floor were three long black boxes stamped with a marker that read “A.M.M.O.”

Jack and Sloan stood admiring the boxes as Aareth eased himself past the two. He opened the first container. Jack was surprised to see the large man squat down with child-like glee. He went to work with all the enthusiasm a youngster would on a special birthday. That was when Jack began to wonder how old his traveling companions were.

If he had to guess, both Aareth and Sloan were in their late thirties.

“Here, this one’s yours, Jack.” Aareth handed him the first shorter black box. Jack accepted the container and opened its hard, shell-like exterior. Inside, the box held the modified staff, a black belt with a holster for the weapon, and a thick book of directions.

Jack wasted no time in strapping on the belt over his own. The metal rod rested low on his right hip.

“Wow,” Aareth said as he handed the next box to Sloan. “Christmas has come early for the captain of the guard.”

Sloan raised her eyebrow, not sure how to take the comment, yet still accepting the chest handed to her. Jack saw

her open the case. Her eyes immediately doubled in size. Sloan reached inside and pulled out a saber the likes of which Jack had never seen.

The sword was average in length, but that was about all that was average about it. The handle was thick and reinforced with copper plating. Coming up from the handle and midway up the blade were two thin copper pipes. There was a temperature gauge on the handle as well as a small lever near where the wielder's thumb would rest.

“What does it do?” Jack asked more to himself than his two companions. “Is it powered by magic?”

“I'm not sure,” Sloan shook her head, “but the weight feels amazing.”

“Well, let's see.” Aareth looked up from his kneeling position. “Flip the switch.”

“No way. You saw the explosion in the armory this morning. I'm going to read the directions twice before I point this thing somewhere and it does who knows what.”

Aareth shrugged, clearly not understanding the logic, and opened his own box. The last case was a little smaller than the other two. Inside were two grey steel gauntlets that resembled the ones Jack had seen in pictures of warriors in suits of armor.

Of course, these were no ordinary gauntlets. They had wires running to each knuckle from a small crank that was placed on the underside of both gloves, near the wrists. As Aareth turned the gloves over, Jack also saw one small button on the inside of each palm. Aareth wasted no time in placing the gauntlets on his hands.

“You should really wait and read the directions,” Sloan said as she took a step back. “You're just asking for trouble.”

“No way. These things are a perfect fit. Let's see what these babies can do.”

Jack took Sloan's lead and took a step back as a grinning Aareth stood up, flexing his fingers.

“Look, see? Nothing to it. I wonder what the buttons on the palms are for.”

Aareth opened his hands, palms to the ceiling, and touched each button with the tips of his middle fingers. There was a crackling noise as the gloves began to glow. Thin lines of blue magic disappeared and reappeared just as quickly.

Jack didn't know what to think. Never in his life had he seen anything remotely similar.

“Aareth, you should really—” Sloan took another step back.

“Captain, please. I know you're in charge, but I'm not a child. I can think—” As Aareth said the word “think,” his right arm came up and his pointer finger touched the side of his temple.

There was a loud snap followed by Aareth's entire body being thrown into the side of the cart. His large frame collided with the rack of supplies. He fell to the ground, motionless.

Jack and Sloan looked at one another, taking a moment to try and process what just happened.

“Is he—is he dead?” Jack took a cautious step forward.

“No.” Sloan shook her head as she joined him. “His chest is still moving. But my gosh, did you see that?”

“How could I miss it? He must weigh over two hundred pounds and he was thrown across the room like a rag doll.”

As they bent down over Aareth's body, the bright blue currents over his gauntleted hands dissipated.

Jack reached out with a tentative foot to prod Aareth. Before he could roll Aareth over on his back, the large man sat up with a scream more suited more for a small child than a grown man.

“Ahhhhh!”

Jack and Sloan fell backwards as Aareth teetered in a sitting position. His hair was standing in all different directions. A line of spit fell down the left side of his lip. A

piece of toilet paper from the rack he had fallen against wrapped itself around his head like a turban.

“What—what just happened?”

“I think you just knocked yourself out.” Jack raised a hand to stifle his laughter.

“I told you to read the directions.” Sloan coughed, trying to hide her own smile.

Aareth wobbled to his feet as he slowly took off the gloves.

“You have a piece of toilet pa—”

“What Jack’s trying to tell you,” Sloan interrupted with a wink, “is that it’s time for some food before you decide to give yourself another concussion.”

FIFTEEN



SLOAN

With the kitchen area raided, the emissaries to Queen Eleanor sat in the lounging cart sharing a meal. Sloan was so caught up with the day's events, she had neglected breakfast. Now as the afternoon approached, her stomach reminded her of how hungry she really was.

Lunch was a much simpler affair than dinner the night before; still, it seemed like a feast to Sloan. There were croissant sandwiches filled with meat and cheese, fruit, and water and beer to wash it all down.

Aareth had brushed his hand through his hair and found the rogue strand of toilet paper, giving Sloan a raised eyebrow.

“What?” she asked. “I thought it was an improvement.”

Over lunch, Sloan, Jack, and even Aareth opened the directions Edison provided with their new weapons. Sloan inspected her sword inside and out. On the butt of the weapon was a small indentation imprinting the initials “A.M.M.O.” Both Aareth and Jack found similar markings on their weapons.

Sloan took a moment to look up from her reading. Aareth was slouched in a chair, nose deep in his own weapon's manual. “Someone decided to come around and take the advice of a female captain, I see.”

“It's powered by mage technology.” Aareth looked up from his thick manual, ignoring the remark. “At least that's what I'm getting from this brick of a book. Something about stored mage energy that you get by turning these cranks on the wrists. The energy is released when I press the buttons on the

palms. It's only good for a few seconds at a time. It's the equivalent of being struck by a bolt of lightning."

"Are you trying to tell us you're Zeus?" Marcus sat in his chair, amused.

"Well, I didn't think of it that way, but yeah, I guess I am."

"How about you, Jack?" Marcus chuckled and looked at his son. "Any other surprises with your extending wand?"

"It seems in its condensed form, the wand will help channel and direct my magic." Jack drew the steel wand from his holster. At once, it glowed a bright green. A bolt of magic fire formed at the tip, ready to be released. "I'll have to test it out and see if it's more effective in long-range use, rather than simply shooting the magic from my hands."

There were impressed looks around the room as all eyes turned to Sloan and her peculiar sword.

"Well, I read the directions front to back twice. It's a heated saber. The handle carries a small amount of renewable mage technology. With the flick of this switch by my thumb, the blade is supposed to heat to an unnatural degree, giving it the ability to slice through almost any object."

"Mage gloves, heated sabers, and wands that can extend to staffs. What will surprise us next?" Marcus asked.

As if on cue, the locomotive began to slow.

"Did we already reach the end of the track?" Jack looked at Sloan, worry written across his young face.

"No, I don't think that's it." Sloan answered peering through the windows and the terrain beyond. "We should have had enough track to get us to the first city or close to it. My guess was that we would arrive after the sun set. Something's wrong."

SIXTEEN



SLOAN

Sloan walked to the front of the cart. She pounded a gloved fist on the door leading to the engine. The door immediately opened. A short man with white hair and a white mustache peered out.

“Nemo, why are we slowing down? Have we arrived?”

“Oh, no, ma’am.” The small man blinked through spectacles that magnified his eyes to an unnatural degree. “There’s something you ought to see.”

Sloan followed the short conductor to the front with the rest of her party close behind.

The locomotive was nearly at a standstill when they entered the inside of the mage engine. It was a small room with a seat for Nemo and windows that opened in every direction. Black was the primary color decorating the interior with a few brown handles and whistles.

Sloan caught sight of a huge furnace with a lever nearby that opened a container suspended above the fire. The large container held a mass of swirling red magic.

“See, ma’am? I didn’t want to run them over. They haven’t said anything yet and, well, what are they riding?”

Sloan stopped, examining the inside of the mage engine. She craned her neck to see what Nemo was talking about. Just thirty yards from where the locomotive stopped, there were a dozen or more figures dressed in black.

Each figure was sitting on top of what looked like a large bicycle. The thing that separated the machines the strangers sat on from any Sloan had ever seen were the red plumes of smoke coming from large pipes under the contraptions. The machines grunted and hummed with dangerous intentions.

They were too far away to make out any distinguishable traits about the men who sat in their path. Still, Sloan had a feeling this wasn't meant to be a friendly encounter.

“Run them over,” Aareth said through clenched teeth. “Kill them, now.”

“What?” Marcus gave Aareth a disapproving stare. “You don't even know who they are or what they want.”

“Old man, they're not here for social hour. You can trust me on that.”

“You do know who they are.” Jack let his hand drop to the wand at his side. “Don't you, Aareth?”

“While I was working in the Outland, I passed through villages that had been destroyed. Decimated towns whose survivors told stories of men on steel horses. I've never seen them myself, but what else could they be? Keep going and don't stop this locomotive, no matter what.”

“Let me at least talk to them.” Marcus wasn't ready to give in to violence just yet. “We owe them that much before we try to run them over. I mean—”

Sloan heard the shot and saw the glass shatter at the same moment. She hit the ground hard as small shards rained around the room. More bullets followed and pelted the engine like steel raindrops.

Aareth was the only one who hadn't ducked for cover when the shooting started. He stood tall and straight, winding the gears on his gauntlets. “With all due respect, sorcerer, you were wrong.”

“Nemo.” Sloan shot to her feet and flipped the switch on her sword with her thumb. “Full ahead and don't stop, no matter what. Your one and only job is to keep this machine moving forward. Understood?”

The little man gave her a half salute and jumped in his chair, pulling brown handles and pushing large levers. The locomotive began to slowly move forward again.

Adrenaline flowed freely through Sloan's body as she witnessed their attackers charge.

Bullets shattered the stillness as loud cracks marked their exits from smoking guns. Bullet after bullet buried itself into the metal casing, protecting the mage-powered engine.

The men on the iron bikes were swarming around the locomotive. Sloan stuck a head out to see a handful of the men jump from their mage bikes onto the train itself. The dark figures pulled themselves on top of the roof and out of sight.

"Sloan!" Jack searched for the captain. "We have a problem."

"I see them," Sloan shouted over the noise in the engine room. "Jack, Aareth, get them off the roof. Marcus and I will stay here and keep them from destroying the engine."

Jack moved to follow Aareth.

"Careful, son." Marcus caught the underside of his arm before Jack left. "This isn't going to be like killing shadow spirits."

Jack nodded and his father released his arm. Aareth was already gone. Jack holstered his wand and prepared to ascend.

SEVENTEEN



JACK

The locomotive picked up momentum. It was now moving at the pace of a sprinting horse. Jack felt air rush around his body at treacherous speeds. He gripped the metal exterior of the locomotive's lead cart with all his might. His fingerless brown gloves pressed against the cold steel. Slowly, Jack placed one hand in front of the other.

Easy, you can do this. One foot at a time. Slow and steady, this isn't a race.

It was while Jack was giving himself this internal pep talk that he neglected to remember the mage-powered bicycles roaring around him. A bullet buried itself in steel a few inches from his head. Jack lost his footing and hung from the small ledge by his fingertips. Jack knew he had only seconds before he fell. It was funny actually, the things you think about before you're going to die.

This is it. You're going to fall and probably get run over by this huge piece of magical technology. You didn't even get to use your new wand.

Jack's fingers slipped. As he began to fall toward the rotating wheels, he felt a strong hand grab his own. The next second, he was vaulting up through the air. He landed next to Aareth on top of the locomotive.

"Easy there, Jack." Aareth's voice was calm. "This fight's just getting started. Can't have you falling to your death just yet."

Jack tried to nod, but his whole body was shaking. He looked up to see four figures running at them from the opposite side of the locomotive. More men were jumping from their mage-powered bicycles onto the moving locomotive. As the first wave of attackers came closer, Jack was able to get a better look at his adversaries.

They were all tall men and women dressed from head to toe in black. Long trench coats streamed behind them while ebony masks covered their faces from the ridge of their noses down. Steel flashed in all of their gloved hands. They carried sabers that looked alarmingly similar to the one Sloan used to threaten Aareth in front of the Queen.

They charged forward. Before Jack could get his balance and stand on the moving locomotive, Aareth sprinted to meet the danger. His hands were blazing with the blue lines of magical matter that coursed over his gloves.

The first saber came down on Aareth in a high arc. Aareth caught the blade easily in his right gauntleted hand. There was a loud snap and the man carrying the sword was thrown off the top of the train with the force equivalent of a lightning strike.

The remaining three attackers paused for a moment as they rethought their plan of attack. Every muscle in their body told them to strike, but after seeing what happened to their friend, they were taking a moment to gain their bearings.

Aareth didn't need a moment. With each fist landed, there was another loud cracking noise and figures dressed in black flew off the moving machine at alarming speeds.

All four assailants were dealt with within the space of a few seconds. Aareth looked back at Jack with a devilish grin. Jack heard shots ring out from somewhere inside the carts underneath him. Fear for his father's safety made him glance down. An unfamiliar voice made him look up just as quickly.

A new enemy made himself known. He had climbed on top of the locomotive from somewhere inside a cart. He now stood between Jack and Aareth. "Interesting gloves. What do you do when the mage charge runs out?"

Jack looked at Aareth's hands, and sure enough, the stored power had dissolved.

The stranger held a large gun the likes of which Jack had never seen. He quickly threw it to the side and off the locomotive.

"I don't think I'll be needing this for Ghost and a kid. Let's make this interesting, shall we?"

Jack drew his wand. He pointed it at the man's back. He had never killed an actual person before and there was an internal struggle now about the moral issue of shooting a man in the back. Not to mention a man that was unarmed.

"Jack, blast him!" Aareth yelled from two carts down. "Don't hesitate. Kill him!"

"I have no weapons." The stranger turned. He pulled the hood on his jacket over his head before removing his mask. He raised his hands to prove his statement. "I think you know the right thing to do, son."

"Kill him, Jack!" Aareth yelled again. From behind the man, Jack could see Aareth crouched, winding the gears that stored the mage power in his gloves. "Kill him now!"

The man was only a few feet from Jack. He was as muscular as Aareth and nearly as tall. A scar ran down the right side of his pale face from temple to cheekbone.

"That's an honorable boy." He grinned, showing off pearly white teeth, his upper canines too long to be passed off as normal. "But you should have listened to Ghost. This isn't going to go well for you."

Before Jack could react, the scarred man sent out a wide left kick that knocked the wand from his hand. The pain in his palm sent a tingling shock all the way up his arm. The man turned in a complete circle and struck out with his opposite foot. The power that collided with Jack's chest was bone-breaking. Jack flew through the air and landed on his back with a heavy crash. Before he could gain his feet, the man was on top of him with a heavy boot at his throat.

"You really should have shot me, kid. Ghost was right."

Jack pushed with both hands on the man's boot. Air was coming in short gasps as every ounce of his strength went to pushing the man off. Jack knew he would have died there and then if it hadn't been for Aareth.

The man with the scar quickly turned as the sound of running feet met both their ears. Aareth's gloved hands were alive with the crackling magic. Aareth swung powerful arms just as before, but this time, every punch missed.

The pale man was faster than anything Jack had ever seen, human or animal. The man was even grinning as he ducked and weaved around Aareth's punches.

"You should never have left New Hope," the man said as he caught both of Aareth's forearms just under the gloves.

"I think I'll keep what little soul I have left," Aareth grunted as he was forced to his knees.

The man bent the magical gloves toward Aareth. Inch by inch, he forced Aareth's hands closer to his own face.

Jack watched all of this happen as he regained his breath and stood. He had never killed a man before and he didn't know if he wanted to start now, but he also knew he couldn't let Aareth die.

Wand gone, he willed the magic inside him to take physical form in his hands. It took an extreme amount of energy and concentration to create the blades he held now. Twin knives, four inches long dancing with the green flames of magic.

Whether it was the wind, Jack's ability to stalk quietly, or luck, the scarred man didn't hear him coming. Green knives gripped tightly in both hands, Jack launched himself through the air. He landed on the man's back, planting both knives deep into his flesh just under his shoulder blades.

The man screamed in pain with a noise that would have made even a dying animal sound pleasant. The attacker loosened his grip on Aareth's arms. Aareth seized the opportunity to plant both gauntlets on the man's chest.

First, Jack felt a burning pain as the electric current ran through all three men. Then he felt nothing but blackness as he was rocketed into the air, off the locomotive, and down to the harsh desert floor below.

EIGHTEEN



SLOAN

Sloan saw more and more of the dark-cloaked riders jump from what looked like mage-powered bicycles to the moving locomotive. “Lock the door behind us, Nemo, and don’t let anyone in unless it’s me.”

The tiny locomotive operator nodded, trying to hide the fear that plainly showed on his face.

“Marcus, we have to clear out the inside of the carts. I know you’re used to using magic to track and kill the paranormal, but can you fight?”

“I can if...” Marcus’ eyes narrowed. “...if I have to.”

“Well, then, follow me. I think you’re going to find yourself in a situation that qualifies as you having to very soon.”

Sloan gripped her new sword tightly in her left hand. She walked to the back of the lead cart and opened the door cautiously. Men were pouring into the interior of the locomotive through broken windows. Sloan counted seven all together. They were all carrying military issued rifles and sabers at their sides.

“There are seven of them,” Sloan whispered as she peeked through the crack in the door. “I’ll make them miss and then we have to be on top of them before they have a chance to reload.”

“You can count on me, Captain, but how do you plan on getting all of them to fire at you and miss?”

Sloan smiled to herself as she opened the door wide.

“In the name of the Queen,” Sloan commanded in a strong voice, “surrender your arms!”

Just as quickly as the words left her lips, seven rifles were pointed in her direction and fired. Sloan slammed the door shut. The bullets collided with the dark steel door.

“Like that. Let’s go.”

Sloan opened the door and ran forward in a crouched position. Her left thumb flicked the small switch on her saber’s handle. She felt a slight vibration as her blade began to hum.

The small quarters would work to her advantage and there were only seven. She had faced worse odds before. She was on top of the attackers in seconds as they first fumbled to reload their rifles, then reached for their swords.

Sloan’s blade cut through her opponents’ steel like a wire through cheese. With a left, right, and forward slash, three men were already down. Sloan almost felt sorry for them as the remaining four pointed their weapons in her direction, trying to figure out how her sword managed to slice through solid steel.

One of the men in the rear raised a pistol he had hidden in his black coat. In the aisle-like passage of the cart, there was nowhere for Sloan to turn. He grinned through his mask and aimed, but the shot never came. Instead, a bolt of green magic struck him in the face. He fell howling in pain, clawing at his burning skin.

Sloan chanced a look behind her. She saw Marcus with his staff ablaze in green light.

The remaining three would-be attackers were shifting nervously. They had obviously been confident in their superior numbers. Now whittled down to three in a matter of seconds, the game had changed.

“Surrender now,” Sloan took another step forward, “and you will be tried at a court in New Hope. You don’t have to die today.”

Two of the men looked toward one, clearly asking their leader for direction. Sloan eased closer, brushing a long blonde strand from her cheek.

The leader gave a slight shake of his head, and Sloan knew the fight would be finished here. All three men charged at once. Sloan cut through the first man's sword and jugular in one quick motion, but the next man was smarter. At the last possible moment, he dropped his sword and used both hands to grab the handle of her mage sword.

They struggled together for a second. The man's larger weight pushing her back. Out of the corner of her eye, Sloan saw the last man charge Marcus.

Sloan learned from an early age that her size wasn't a disadvantage. She became a master at going with force and redirecting the action. It was a skill that saved her in a fight more times than she cared to remember.

As the large man muscled her backwards, she dropped to the floor with her left foot in the man's stomach. Her attacker went sailing over her head and straight through the window.

Sloan recovered in a crouch. The fight was over. The last man who charged Marcus was on the ground in a puddle of his own blood, a smoking hole where his chest used to be.

"Sorcerer, are you injured?"

"I'm as well as can be expected." Marcus looked down at the corpse. "I just ended two men's lives."

"Two men who would have ended yours if you did nothing."

Marcus was about to respond, when they felt the locomotive shake and wobble. Before the fight began, Sloan ordered Nemo to go faster and not to stop under any circumstances. Sloan glanced out one of the broken windows. The terrain outside was flying past at a speed Sloan couldn't comprehend. She got to her feet, running past Marcus, and tried the handle of the steel door that led to the engine cart. It was locked from the inside.

“Nemo! Nemo!” Sloan pounded on the steel. “It’s Sloan! Slow down! Open the door!”

A few tense seconds passed. The only response to Sloan’s shouts were another shudder as the locomotive continued to gain speed.

“Nemo! Open the door!”

Still nothing.

Sloan set her jaw and raised the sword in both hands. With a grunt, she slammed the sword, blade first, into the portion of the door where the bolt was located.

Slowly, her blade sank through the hard metal. Muscles tensing, Sloan grunted as she pushed in an upward motion, cutting the bolt that held the door closed. The metal door banged open.

Inside, Nemo was slumped at the controls. A rogue bullet had found its mark in the back of the conductor’s head.

Marcus ran forward, cradling the small man. He was already gone.

Sloan looked out of the front of the mage engine in sheer horror. Less than a mile away was the camp of workers continuing to lay track. Tiny figures pointed and shouted at the mage engine to stop. They waved their hands in the air and ran in every direction.

“Marcus, let him go. He’s gone. We have bigger problems to worry about.”

“The brakes.” Marcus looked out the window and grasped their situation in a heartbeat. “There has to be a lever here somewhere to stop this thing.”

Sloan looked at the steel conductor’s panel full of brown knobs and levers. It would take much more time than they had to figure out what exactly each handle did.

“Screw it.” Sloan reached for every handle and every lever she could find.

Her hands flew over the instrument panel, twisting, turning, and pulling every knob, lever, or switch she could get her hands around. It was as she pulled down on one particularly large lever that they felt the locomotive shudder and squeal as it slowed in pace ever so slightly.

“That one!” Marcus yelled. “That’s the brake!”

The locomotive was practically shaking off the track. Sloan guessed they were going twice as fast as any sprinting horse. The tent-like area in front of them was now yards away.

Men still flailed their arms, shouting for them to stop and running to get clear of the hurtling steel monster.

Sloan placed both hands on the lever pulling down with all her might. Throwing her back into the effort made the force she put into the pull twice as harsh. A shrill squeal filled the air. Smoke and steam from the overworked locomotive filled the inside of the mage cart. Sloan pressed the lever down further. Sparks filled the air outside as the locomotive began to slow.

“It’s working!” Marcus yelled.

Sloan smiled to herself and gave the lever another harsh push. The brown lever gave under the pressure.

Sloan fell backwards, the broken lever in her hand as the locomotive lurched forward and continued to gain speed. She regained her feet just in time to see the end of the track and say one last thing to Marcus.

“Oooooops.”

The locomotive blew through the workers’ camp, sending track equipment, wood, and metal bars flying in a hundred different directions. The hurtling ton of steel, man’s greatest invention to date, flew off the track and into the desert at mind-numbing speed. The carts twisted and contorted like a withering snake and finally came to a rest.

NINETEEN



JACK

Jack was listening to the lullaby again. He could hear her voice so clearly. He couldn't see her; still, her voice was enough. The soothing way she spoke made him want to dream forever.

“Jack! Jack, are you all right?”

Jack was ripped from his happy memory and brought back to his harsh reality. There was sand everywhere: in his mouth, in his hair, even in his boots and gloves. He blinked as he struggled to sit up. The sun beat down on him with no sympathy. He squinted as he saw Aareth beside him.

“Rough landing, but it could have been a lot worse, right?”

Jack nodded, getting a good look at their surroundings. Desert greeted him in every direction. The locomotive tracks were to his left and stretched out in front of him in both directions as far as he could see. “At this rate, I think we've done as much damage to ourselves as to the bad guys.”

Aareth offered Jack his right hand, which still wore the gauntlet.

Jack reached out and hesitated at the last minute.

“Don't worry, they're powered off. I'm starting to get used to them. I'll get better with the gauntlets. I just need more practice. Are you all right? Anything broken?”

Aareth helped him to his feet. Jack looked down at himself and stretched. His head hurt and there was a ringing in his ears. Aside from a few bruises and scratches, he was fine. “I

feel like I've been fried and thrown from a mage-powered machine traveling at a ridiculous speed. Other than that, I think I'm going to make it."

"Good. And look at this; our luck is already changing. I found this in the sand while I was searching for you." Aareth reached behind him and pulled out Jack's new wand from his belt.

"How about our friend?" Jack accepted the wand. "Did we—did we kill him?"

"I haven't seen his body yet." Aareth shook his jacket, eliciting a shower of sand. "I don't expect to."

"Listen," Jack said, brushing sand from his hair. "You just zapped me and got us both thrown off a locomotive, and that's all right, I can handle that. What I can't handle is being lied to. I know you're not telling me everything."

Jack was reminded that if his father was correct, he was talking to an assassin. He didn't care anymore. He needed to get to the truth.

"All right." Aareth shook out his own long black hair before wrapping it in a ponytail behind him. "Let's walk back and see if any of those mage-powered bicycles are working. I'll tell you whatever you want."

Jack fell in step with Aareth. The two followed the tracks backwards in search of a means of transportation.

"So what do you want to know?"

Jack had so many questions, he wasn't sure where to begin.

"Why did that man call you 'Ghost'? You knew him, didn't you? And how did he move so fast? Why were you really chosen to come on this trip? Are you—are you an assassin?"

"That's a lot of ground to cover." Aareth took a deep breath and looked deep into Jack's eyes. "I'll tell you, but you have to promise that this stays between you and me. I trust you

and your father. There's something about the captain that just doesn't add up."

"You think Sloan's on the other side of all this? That she had the locomotive hijacked?"

"No." Aareth shook his head as he studied the horizon in front of them. "I don't think that she was part of the attack that took place just now. I do think she's hiding something."

Jack took a minute to think about Aareth's words. *I thought we were just going to track a bloodthirsty animal for the Queen. Who knows what we've gotten ourselves into.*

"Twelve years ago, I joined New Hope's department of justice. I had a respectable job and I was good at it. I even got married."

Aareth paused and Jack could tell he was choosing his words. It seemed Aareth hadn't spoken to anyone about this in a very long time. He wasn't even sure how much he wanted to say.

"I showed so much promise as an officer that I was promoted to the level of inspector. This was when the Queen was really cracking down on the corruption inside the city. I was given an assignment to go undercover and infiltrate one of the toughest gangs in New Hope. Well, long story short, I succeeded, but in the process, they found out who I really was, beat me within an inch of my life, and killed my wife. It's ironic really—they didn't kill my body, but I still died that day. The best part of me died that day."

Jack didn't know what to say. Half of him wanted to console Aareth. He just didn't know how. Even if he did, he wasn't sure if Aareth even wanted to be consoled.

"I know that it's not the same," Jack avoided making eye contact, "but I lost my mom when I was still a baby. I was born in New Hope. My father doesn't talk about it much. There was a break-in, my father wasn't home. They robbed us and shot my mother."

Both men avoided making eye contact now. Instead, they continued to walk in the direction the locomotive had traveled,

toward New Hope.

“Now I’m reminded why I don’t talk about this kind of stuff.” Aareth sighed. “Anyway, I went off the deep end. For these last three years, I have been an assassin for hire to the richest men and women in the Outland. The man who attacked us on the train is another assassin I’ve run into in the past. I don’t know his real name, but he’s known as Scar.”

“Creative.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And you’re Ghost?”

“Not a nickname I would have chosen for myself. But when I do go on assignments, I prefer to do things quickly and quietly.”

Jack nodded. He knew he should be scared that he was in the presence of a trained killer, but he wasn’t. Maybe it was the way Aareth talked about his past, about the wife he once loved. Whatever it was, Jack could tell that Aareth wasn’t past saving.

“Why did the Queen choose you to come with us?” Jack asked.

“It was Edison.” Aareth smiled at the thought of the inventor. “He was my boss when I worked for the justice department in New Hope. I guess he still saw something in me. He’s always believed in me even when I didn’t believe in myself. When he offered me this chance to get my life back on track, I took it.”

“So you’re done being an assassin?”

“For years, I’ve tried to fill the hole she left when they killed her. I’ve ended more men’s lives than I can count and drank more bottles than I can remember. But the hole only gets wider, Jack. Killing, drinking; they’re just temporary fixes. I’m hoping that something changes while I’m on this mission. That there still might be some hope for me. Honestly, I don’t know. Maybe it’s too late.”

Jack struggled with the right words to say. He was surprised Aareth had revealed so much. But something told him deep down Aareth wanted to talk to someone, that this conversation was as beneficial for Jack as it was to him.

“My father says that, every day, we decide what interpretations of ourselves to be. That there are many types of people we can be in the future, and every day, we take steps toward who we are going to become.”

“Is that why you didn’t kill Scar when he was coming at you?”

Jack bit his lip as he remembered the man charging him on top of the locomotive. “I—I’ve never killed a man before.”

“How old are you, Jack?”

“Just turned eighteen.”

“I’m thirty-four, killed my first man when I was your age. There will come a time when killing one man will save either your life or the lives of the ones you care about. When that time comes, you don’t hesitate.”

Jack didn’t have anything to say. He knew Aareth was right; however, the way he was raised was completely different. His father was a peaceful man, and even when it came to tracking, he preferred to run off paranormal creatures or even relocate them when he could.

Jack still had questions for Aareth about their attackers and who he thought they were, but it seemed like the time for questions was over.

“Do you see what I see?” Aareth raised a finger and pointed toward the setting sun.

Jack squinted. His eyes fought through the sun’s bright orange rays. Then he saw them, two bulky mage-powered bicycles sticking up from the sandy floor.

TWENTY



SLOAN

It was the shouting that woke her. Men were yelling and running outside of her steel coffin. Sloan opened her eyes slowly, wincing at the horrible pain shooting through her right arm and head.

She was lying against the cold steel of the mage engine cart. The cart was lying on its right side. Sloan looked up through the opening on the left side at the darkening sky outside.

“Hello? Hello? Is anyone in there?”

“I’m here!” Sloan shouted as she fought to stand. A wave of dizziness attacked her. She wobbled on her feet. Sloan steadied herself and took a long, deep breath. She looked around the dark interior of the steam engine. Marcus was nowhere to be seen.

A head she recognized popped over the edge of the cart door. The foreman that was hired for the job of laying the track looked at Sloan with an open mouth.

“Captain Sloan! Don’t worry, ma’am, we’ll get you out of there in no time. Are you hurt?”

Sloan looked at her bloody right arm and hand. She gently touched her left temple with the fingers on her left hand. Her fingers came back sticky with thick crimson red. “I’ll live, Christopher. I can climb out.”

“We’re bringing a rope now, ma’am. Maybe you should wa—”

Sloan was already searching for foot and handholds in the steel structure. In another minute, she was up and waved away the helping hand Christopher offered. Standing next to him on the toppled mage engine, she had a better view of what damage the runaway locomotive caused.

The machine had obliterated everything in its path. All five carts were strewn across the desert floor in a zigzag pattern. The locomotive's final resting place was a few yards from where the track came to an end.

"There were three men with me, two with brown hair and one with long black hair. Have they been found? How long have I lain unconscious?"

"Not long, Captain Sloan, maybe a few minutes. My men are searching for survivors. What—what happened to the locomotive?"

"We were attacked."

"Attacked?" The foreman looked up at her, wide-eyed and worried. "By who?"

"I don't know. There will be plenty of time to figure things out later. What's most important is that we search for survivors."

"Yes, ma'am." Christopher bobbed his bald head. He took in Sloan's cuts and bruises with wide eyes. "We should really get those wounds taken care of, though."

"Later, I'm fine. I've had worse." Sloan cocked her head and narrowed her eyes as she heard shouts. Two men ran toward the locomotive with a figure supported between them. Sloan jumped from the locomotive and sprinted to meet them.

Marcus was slumped between the two workers, his body limp, his face covered in blood. The workers tried to do half salutes still carrying their load as Sloan approached.

"Is he all right?" Sloan voiced the question she knew she had to ask. She wasn't sure she wanted the answer.

"Unconscious, ma'am, and he's lost a lot of blood," one of the workers said.

“Take him inside a tent. Have the medic tend to him right away.”

The men nodded and were off again toward the encampment’s tents. Sloan put Marcus and his well-being out of her mind. There was nothing she could do for him now.

She wiped the blood coming down from her head on the back of her sleeve. Sloan began searching the other carts for Jack and Aareth.

After an hour of searching with Christopher and his crew members, all they found were the bodies of their attackers and the locomotive’s driver. Six bodies were laid out together and positioned under a sheet. Nemo’s limp corpse was counted separately. Out of respect, his body was separated from the others.

Sloan bit her lip in thought. She walked toward the medic tent to see how Marcus was faring with the foreman at her side.

“What should we do first, Captain? I mean, do we continue with the track?” Christopher was rattling off questions so fast, it came out like one long sentence. “Get the locomotive salvaged and restored? Send a messenger to inform the Queen?”

“Things are getting a bit complicated, Christopher. Something much larger is at play here. It bothers me that it’s happening now. Is there someone here you would trust with your life to take a message to Queen Eleanor?”

Christopher thought for a moment and nodded.

“Are we in any danger, Captain?”

“I think we are all in a very great deal of danger, Foreman. Send a messenger. Instruct him that he is to talk to the Queen and only the Queen. He is to tell her what happened here. Tell her that I have gone on to Burrow Den, on my recommendation, ask that a regiment of soldiers under Lieutenant Baker be sent to guard the track while it is being laid.”

A wide-eyed Christopher saluted then turned to fulfill his orders.

“Oh, and Christopher, in the meantime, right the locomotive. Get it back on the steel rails, keep laying the track. Whoever this is, we aren’t going to let them intimidate us. If they want a fight, then we’ll give them a fight.”

Christopher nodded then left. Sloan entered the traveling city of tents that followed the working men as they laid the track. All the tents were brown, and most of them were deserted. All but a few of the men still searched for bodies among the wreckage of the locomotive.

One of the tall brown tents sported a crimson red cross. Sloan ducked as she entered. It was dark. Inside, candles were lit to fight back the night. A doctor sat by a conscious Marcus. Both men looked at Sloan as she walked in.

“You’re awake, sorcerer. That’s a good sign.”

“I would have to agree.” Marcus gave Sloan a tired smile. The doctor finished wrapping his head with a white bandage. “Just a scrape and a minor concussion. Have you found Jack and Aareth?”

“Not yet, but we will. They probably saw what was going to happen and jumped off the locomotive in time. There are men out searching for them now. I just wanted to come in and check on you before I go out myself to help with the search effort.”

“I’m going with you.” Marcus pointed to the dried blood on her head and the fresh blood that still ran down her right arm and fingers. “Before we go, you need to get looked at.”

“I’m fine; there’s no time.”

Marcus looked over his shoulder at the elderly doctor who still sat by the bed. “Doc, may we have a moment, please?”

The doctor stood up and left the tent with a bow.

“Sloan, you need medical attention. Stop acting like you’re invincible. It’ll only take a few minutes for the doctor to stop the bleeding and disinfect your wounds.”

“I told you, I’m fine.” Sloan wasn’t used to being questioned. The only thing holding her tongue back now was the degree of genuine concern she saw in Marcus’ eyes. “Your son and Aareth are still out there. Let’s go find them.”

Sloan turned to go, her blonde hair flying behind her. After a few steps, she realized Marcus wasn’t following.

“You don’t have to prove anything to anyone, Sloan. All the men respect you. You know you’re tougher than any one of them.”

Sloan spun around, her left hand resting on the hilt of the mage sword that lay in the sheath around her hips. “Sorcerer, I —”

“I grew up in the Outland, just like you.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“That chip you carry on your shoulder. I had one just like it when I was your age, when I first moved to New Hope. I wanted to prove to everyone I was just as good, even better than they were. I grew up poor in the Outland, where I had to fight and claw for everything I had. I even went so far as to keep my upbringing a secret. I was ashamed of it, in a way. I know exactly what you’re going through.”

“Not exactly, even if we do share the same origin. You aren’t a woman or captain of the Queen’s personal guard.”

“You know what? You’re right.” Marcus took a brief moment to think. “I’m neither of those things. But I do know that true strength lies within and isn’t dependent on whether it’s proven or not. Your strength and determination is your own. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone. You should be proud of where you come from and how far you’ve progressed.”

Sloan’s first response was anger, but she held it back. Marcus was looking at her like she had seen him look at Jack.

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-six.”

“That’s even more impressive than I thought, Sloan.” Marcus’ eyes widened. “What you must have had to endure and accomplish to be in the position you are in, in such a short time.”

“Okay, okay. All right.” Sloan’s walls she had built around herself were beginning to crumble as this father-like figure continued to talk. She didn’t like the feeling.

Marcus stopped as he was about to open his mouth again.

“I’ll see the doctor for ten minutes, but then we’re gone. Just stop making so much sense.”

TWENTY-ONE



JACK

“Are you sure these things are safe?” Jack wasted no time in righting his machine. He took a position on the soft leather seat.

“We can’t be sure of anything, but the guys who attacked us rode them. They can’t be that dangerous.” Aareth looked over at his traveling partner as he wheeled the mage-powered bicycle over beside Jack.

Jack already liked the feeling of sitting on the machine. He had a sneaking suspicion he was going to like riding the apparatus even more. Aareth mounted his machine, while Jack looked for some way to start the engine.

The contraptions closely resembled bicycles with a few notable exceptions. They were wider, with thicker tires for support and low handlebars. Mostly black with dark brown seats and handle covers, the machines also sported front lights similar to those he had seen in New Hope. Three steel pipes pointed up from under the machines on each side of the bicycle. A panel of switches and dials were set directly in front of the driver.

“How do we know which buttons and switches do what?” Jack inquired over his shoulder.

“You’re asking the wrong person when it comes to technology, remember?” Aareth shrugged. “I just blasted both of us off a speeding locomotive.”

“Good point. Well, I guess there’s only one way to figure it out.”

Jack clenched his teeth. He started to flip switches and turn knobs. The first switch he turned made a bright light shoot from the front of the bike. It pierced through the gloom the nearly set sun left in its wake.

Jack turned the next knob. He felt the machine underneath him rumble and shake to life. A low vibration made his body tingle. Red steam shot up through the pipes on either side of the machine.

“Now how do we move forward and stop?” Aareth leaned over from his seat to see what buttons Jack was pushing. He did the same to his bike.

Jack looked down and bit his lip. There were gauges galore, but none that he recognized. The rest of the switches he turned didn't seem to affect the machine. Jack guessed they were for mechanical upkeep rather than operation.

On both the handlebars, Jack realized there was a lever that could be pulled. When he clenched the device, he felt the machine under him tighten. “I think the lever on the handlebars stops the machine!” Jack shouted to Aareth over the noise of the running engines.

“Okay, but how do we go?” Aareth said.

Jack turned his attention away from the panel and handlebars to the rest of the machine. Nothing else on the bike seemed like it would move. Then he saw a silver plate the size of half of his shoe sprouting from the pedal where his foot rested.

“Hey, there's a pedal I think you can push by your right foot. It looks like—”

Jack was nearly thrown out of the seat as the machine roared to life. He shot forward over the desert floor.

The sun had completely set. It was only by the beam of the mage bike's headlight that he could see where he was going. Jack crouched down in the seat, heartbeat quickening as the machine wobbled side-to-side.

Soon the initial shock was over. Jack was gently tapping the pedal by his right foot to move forward.

“Looks like you did it, Jack! This is amazing!” Aareth appeared beside him with a huge smile across his face. His black hair was flapping wildly behind him.

Jack only trusted himself to take his eyes off the path in front of him for a brief second, but when he did, he got a look at what he imagined Aareth was like before: a fun-loving man who smiled easily and genuinely enjoyed life.

Jack made himself look forward as the mage bicycle wobbled.

“Hey, the camp can’t be far now. Race you there?” Jack shouted.

“Loser has to explain to Captain Tight Pants what happened,” Aareth answered.

TWENTY-TWO



SLOAN

“Captain—Captain Sloan! Come quickly!”

Sloan was readjusting the brown sheath around her waist and examining the stitching on her right arm after the doctor had finished. She ran from the tent to see men scrambling in every direction. “What’s going on?”

“Lights!” The foreman sprinted to her with Marcus at his side. “Moving lights approaching from New Hope along the tracks.”

“How many of them?” Sloan asked as she started running toward the distant sound of rumbling motors.

“At least two, maybe more. Are the men that attacked the locomotive back?” Christopher asked.

“I don’t know, but get your workers ready for a fight. Marcus, with me.”

Marcus ran beside her as Christopher headed out to order his men in position.

Soon Sloan could see the two lights for herself. They were heading to the tented city fast. Sloan drew her sword and flipped on the switch that made it hum to life. Sloan caught action out of the corner of her eye as Marcus reluctantly drew the ends of his staff from the sheath on his back and connected the two pieces.

Christopher and his men weren’t suited for battle, but they formed a line behind Sloan with whatever they could use as an

improvised weapon: shovels, picks, wooden planks, and steel bars.

The two roaring machines were mere yards away. Marcus lowered his staff as he realized who was headed their way. The two apparatuses stopped. A smiling Jack and Aareth hopped off the mage-powered bicycles.

“Wow, we surrender, Captain,” Aareth raised both hands in mock submission.

“Are you all right, son?” Marcus ran to Jack’s side.

“More than all right. We saw what happened to the locomotive while we were riding up—I thought you were—”

“I’m fine, son. We both are.”

“Wait ‘til you ride one of these things.” Jack let a deep sigh escape before a grin crept over his lips.

There was a collective exhalation in the camp as the men realized they wouldn’t be fighting for their lives.

Sloan gave Jack and Aareth a stern look before sheathing her sword. Jack readied himself for the tongue-lashing, or at least the stern talking-to he was sure would follow. To his surprise, Sloan smiled. “I’m glad you two are back safe.”

Jack and Aareth exchanged shocked expressions. Marcus smirked like he was privy to a secret.

“Ummm... thanks?” Aareth said.

“Now let’s see who’s responsible for attacking the locomotive and derailing the Queen’s greatest achievement, shall we?” Sloan motioned for one of the men standing near the crowd to hand her the lantern he carried. The worker obediently complied.

“How do we do that?” Jack cocked his head to the side.

Sloan walked over to the two mage-powered machines and slowly moved the lantern around the bicycles’ exterior.

The group of men who gathered to ward off what they thought was a threat were beginning to disperse. Some made their way back to the tents while others hung around, waiting

to get a chance to examine the pair of strange machines themselves.

“What are you looking for?” Jack asked.

“These mechanisms are on par with what the military in New Hope is developing.” Sloan was bending over, examining the leather saddle on one of the strange machines. “Most manufacturers leave a brand or stamp on their products. There has to be one on this—here!”

The three men ran to her side and leaned down, eyes squinting at the back of the dark brown saddle on the steam-powered machine. Sloan was pointing to an almost invisible emblem branded into the seat. It was a picture of a tiny “L” and “I” that looked like smokestacks with steam wafting from them in a circle that resembled a gear.

“What—what does “LI” mean?” Jack asked.

“It stands for Livingston Industries,” Sloan answered.

TWENTY-THREE



SLOAN

“Wait, the same Dr. Oliver Livingston we met during the tour with Edison?” Jack asked.

“The same one,” Sloan replied.

All four members stood quietly for a moment, considering what the connection could mean.

“We need to warn Edison and the Queen.” Sloan swung the lantern, turning to walk to the camp.

“We need more proof before we start making accusations,” Aareth cautioned the captain. “I know what this looks like, but it’s possible these machines were stolen.”

“I agree,” Marcus chimed in.

“And how do you gentlemen suggest we get more proof?” Sloan asked.

“The bodies,” Jack said in a low voice as if he were talking to himself. “Has anyone looked at the bodies of the men who attacked us?”

“Follow me.” Sloan took the lead, lantern still swinging in her left hand.

Jack, Marcus, and Aareth walked with her through the tent city, where men were standing in small groups talking about the events of the day and what it could mean. More than one wary eye or frown was directed at the group.

As they broke through the ring of tents, Sloan made a beeline for a spot where a large blanket was thrown down

covering six lumps.

Death was something that Sloan had learned to deal with through the years. Without hesitation, she grabbed a corner of the sheet and threw back the cover. Six dead men glared at the sky through unseeing eyes.

As expected, Marcus and Jack were the only ones that showed shock. Aareth's cold blue eyes were as indifferent as her own.

Aareth knelt by the first figure. He removed the man's mask. The man looked like he was in his mid-forties, with a bald head and twisted nose.

"Jack," Sloan motioned for him to come over, "take the light."

Sloan handed him the lantern. She knelt, examining the sword the dead man still carried in a clenched hand. "This is military issued to the soldiers of New Hope. I—I have one just like it."

"He's definitely a soldier." Aareth moved on to the next body. "They all were."

"How can you tell?" Marcus asked as he, too, knelt in the cold sand.

"Worn boots, like Sloan said, military-issued weapons, and we can know for sure if..." Aareth rolled up the right sleeve of the man he was examining to reveal a tattoo of New Hope's banner, two crossed swords behind a black bat.

"Sloan, do—do you recognize any of them?" Jack asked.

"No, but I think Aareth is right." Sloan stood and shook her head.

"So who attacked us?" Jack's voice broke with uncertainty. "Doctor Livingston? The Queen? Both of them?"

"I don't know, Jack." Marcus' eyes fixed on the corpses. "But I think we can all agree that whoever it is doesn't want us to make it to Burrow Den."

“Well, I say that’s exactly where we go and get some answers.” Aareth stood from his position next to the dead bodies. “We won’t find anything more here. Their pockets are empty—all we have to go on is their weapons and tattoos.”

“I can’t wrap my mind around Queen Eleanor being involved in this.” Sloan pushed a rogue hair from her line of sight. “But either way, we need to get to Burrow Den quickly. After the locomotive crashed, I sent a rider to the Queen to inform her of the attack. If she is involved, then we have to get to Burrow Den and figure out what’s going on before the Queen or whoever it is that attacked us has a chance to react.”

“The mage bicycles will get us there twice as fast as any horse and we’ll be able to travel during the night.” Aareth motioned to the steel machines.

“I’ll have the foreman look at the machines and make sure they’re ready to travel first thing tomorrow morning,” Sloan instructed. “Let’s try to get a few hours sleep and reach Burrow Den before another attempt is made on our lives.”

TWENTY-FOUR



JACK

That night, Jack was shown to a small tent he would share with his father. Any thought of food made his stomach queasy as he remembered the broken bodies and twisted faces Aareth rummaged through like junk in an old room.

“Are you all right, son?” Marcus asked as he prepared his cot for the night.

“I’m fine, just tired. So much is happening. Who do you think is behind it all?”

“There are quite a few different possibilities, so it’s hard to say. What I do know for certain is that Sloan has nothing to do with this. She’s rough around the edges, but when it comes down to it, we can trust her.”

“I think we can trust Aareth too. He’s been through a lot, but he saved me on the train.”

“Well, whoever our enemies are, at least we know they are not among our allies.”

“I guess that’s a first step. Good night, Dad.”

“Good night, son.”

Jack threw himself onto his cot. He tried to go to sleep, but every time he closed his eyes, he could hear Aareth yelling at him to shoot, to kill the man that was racing toward him.

His dreams were no different. He was on the train again as it sped through the darkness at mind-numbing rate. He held the steel wand in his hand. Someone was screaming at him to shoot. It wasn’t Aareth’s voice this time; it was a female voice,

coming from someone who he missed very much. Something was running toward him. All Jack could see in the darkness was the shape of a large bat.

His arm holding the wand rose as the figure approached. He couldn't fire. The imploring female voice yelled for him to take action, but it was too late. The last thing Jack remembered before he woke was being tackled by a gigantic bat with red eyes and a mouth full of sharp teeth.

TWENTY-FIVE



JACK

Jack sat straight up in his cot as the memories of his dream drifted into oblivion. He tried to recall what woke him. There was little time for him to remember as he saw his father's cot empty beside him. Light already replaced the darkness outside the tent.

Jack slipped on his boots. He grabbed his weapon and long jacket before he exited the tent. The sun was just rising, but already the tent's inhabitants were awake and busy with work.

Jack spotted Aareth, Sloan, his father, and the foreman he had seen Lieutenant Baker talking to when they rode into New Hope. The group was standing around the two mage bicycles.

"Really impressive machines, actually," the foreman was explaining to the group. "All that is needed to run them is the same magical energy we use to power the locomotive." The foreman pointed a stubby finger to a twist-off cap on the rear of the mage-powered bicycle. "After the machine has cooled down, you unscrew this cap and fill it with the mage fuel. The mechanism heats the fuel and uses it as a sustainable source of power to propel the bicycle forward. I don't understand it all, but I've filled both tanks for now. How long they'll last, I can't be sure. Oh, and you may need these if you're traveling through the desert in an open vehicle." Christopher passed out brown and black goggles to the group.

"Thank you, Christopher." Sloan adjusted her sword in preparation of mounting the machine.

“There he is. We’re eating breakfast on the road. Ready to roll?” Aareth tossed Jack a pair of goggles along with a green apple.

“Yeah, how fast do you think we can make it to Burrow Den?”

“If we ride hard and these machines can keep up, no more than two days.”

The group exchanged good-byes with Christopher, who headed back toward the tent city with a wave.

“Okay, who’s riding with me?” Aareth asked.

Jack was already mounting one of the machines. His apple nearly devoured, he smiled as his father handed him a biscuit. Marcus was positioning himself behind his son.

“I don’t think so, Aareth.” Sloan scowled, her toned arms crossed in front of her military-style shirt. “You’re in the back. I’m operating.”

There was an awkward pause as Aareth’s and Sloan’s eyes locked. An immovable object met an uncompromising force.

“Ummm... Yeah, about that. No.” Aareth grinned, clearly enjoying the captain’s dilemma.

“If you think that just because you’re—”

“Why are you always so hostile? This has nothing to do with anything I think,” Aareth stopped her. “Let me take the first shift. I’ll show you what I’ve learned. You can watch me drive it and then it’s all yours.”

“Oh... Well, I guess that makes sense.”

Jack let a small smile play across his lips before Sloan turned in his direction and he immediately faked a cough with a gloved hand to hide his mouth. Jack noticed his father lock eyes with Sloan and raise his eyebrows, giving her an “I told you so” kind of look.

Sloan positioned herself behind Aareth but refused to wrap her arms around his chest or waist. Instead, she gripped the frame of the bike on either side of her seat.

Jack ignited the engine and the machine roared to life. Red steam shot from both sides of the bike.

“Don’t worry, Dad. I’ve got this all under control.” Jack could practically feel how nervous his father was behind him.

“Well, if I have to go, I guess riding a steel rocket with my son at the wheel is as good as any.”

Jack laughed out loud and pressed his right foot down on the pedal. The machine shot forward and soon they were flying across the desert toward Burrow Den.

Throughout the day, Jack and Aareth took turns in the lead. At lunch, Sloan took over, while Marcus politely refused the operating duties. Jack was more than content with his father’s apprehension to operate the machine. Jack loved the way the mage-powered bicycle moved. The way the wind rushed all around him and the power he felt at being able to make the machine go in any direction he deemed fit was intoxicating.

The four members of the Queen’s emissary were able to make amazing time. The machines allowed them to make a beeline for Burrow Den instead of having to stick to roads. This also ensured they wouldn’t pass anyone on the way, thus avoiding any kind of confrontation or ambushes waiting for them. The machines also more than doubled the pace they would have been able to keep if they had ridden horses.

The sun was beginning to set on the vast desert, when Jack noticed two things. The first was that he could see a line of mountains approaching on the horizon, marking the end of the wasteland. The second was the wind was picking up in intensity. Sand was beginning to swirl in every direction.

Jack trusted the operation of the bike to one hand as he placed the goggles Christopher provided over his eyes.

Sloan was riding opposite Jack. She swerved close enough to shout. What she was saying, Jack couldn’t pick up. The rushing sound of the wind and the amount of sand that was now in the air made it near impossible to communicate. The sand created a kind of rainy fog as they continued forward.

“What? What are you saying?” Jack shouted and looked at Sloan for as long as he dared. “I can’t hear you!”

Sloan swerved closer, and this time, Aareth shouted something pointing behind him. The only word Jack caught was enough for him to understand. “Sandstorm!”

TWENTY-SIX



JACK

Jack could feel his father tapping him on his back. He chanced a quick look over his shoulder, and at the same moment, wished he hadn't. There was a wall of sand over a hundred feet high rushing toward them. It was still more than a quarter mile away, but Jack knew how quickly a sandstorm was capable of moving.

Marcus' arm shot forward on Jack's left side. His father's finger pointed to the ridge of trees marking the edge of the desert and the beginning of the mountainous forest region beyond.

"Can—we—make it?" his father shouted into his ear.

Jack set his jaw and nodded. Sloan and Aareth must have noticed Marcus' instructions. Sloan stayed close. They both gunned the engines.

Sand swirled around them at hazardous speeds as they raced toward the safety of the tree line. Jack jammed his lips shut as he squinted through the goggles and tried to ignore the uncomfortable feeling of tiny granules making their way inside his ears and nostrils.

Fear began to pump through his veins like poison as he lowered his head and thought about the possibility of not reaching the tree line in time. If they didn't make it to the safety of the trees, Jack knew they had a very small chance of survival. They would be enveloped and buried by the wall of sand behind them. These thoughts made Jack do the worst thing possible. He looked behind him again.

The wall of sand was gaining on them despite the breakneck speed the mage-powered machines were traveling. The wall of sand was at least as tall as New Hope's city walls. Jack tried to focus on anything except the stories he heard about men trapped in sandstorms and buried alive. It didn't work.

The tree line was approaching quickly. Thirty yards away from the safety of the trees, Jack could make out the detail of the hedge of pines before them. He aimed the machine for a spot between two large trees and prayed they would make it.

Twenty yards away from safety, the sandstorm overtook them. Jack felt the machine nearly lift from the ground. His father's strong arms wrapped around his chest, tight and firm. Jack knew his father was trying to shield him as best as he could.

Ten yards from the tree line, the limited visibility they had turned to none at all. Jack set his jaw and tried to remember where he had seen the opening in the line of trees. *Was it here? Was it a little to the left? Am I going left now or is this straight?*

The sand was so thick in the air, Jack couldn't even see the control panel right under his eyes, much less what was in front of them. Out of nowhere, tree limbs appeared. At the rate Jack and his father were traveling, the tree branches struck the machine with wood-splintering force. Jack slammed on the brakes too hard. Jack and his father were thrown off the bike and catapulted through the air.

TWENTY-SEVEN



AARETH

Aareth knew they weren't going to make the tree line, and sacrificing the fact that his mouth would be filled with sand, yelled into Sloan's ear, "We won't—make it! Slow down!"

There was the tiniest nod from Sloan as her ponytail whipped across Aareth's face for the hundredth time. He grabbed on to her waist even tighter as the mage-powered machine wobbled and came to a sputtering stop.

Chancing a tongue-lashing about her status as a captain or whatever she was so uptight about, Aareth grabbed Sloan around her waist and lifted her off the machine. They were close to the tree line, if they could only make it a few more yards.

To Aareth's surprise, Sloan didn't struggle or say a word. Instead, she leaned into him, and together, step by step, they walked through the sandstorm. The storm swirled and rushed around them, trying to force them to their knees or at least bring them to a standstill, but together, Aareth and Sloan refused to give in.

Soon large shadows loomed out of the sand like fog, and within a few minutes, the two had made it a few yards into the forest's interior. They sat huddled together behind a large boulder.

Sloan pushed herself away from Aareth with an awkward cough and removed her goggles. "Oh sorry, I—"

"Why don't you go by your real name?"

"What?"

“You heard me.” Aareth shook sand from his long hair for the second time in as many days.

“Sloan is my real name.”

“You know what I mean. When the Queen introduced you to us when we all first met, she called you ‘Captain Charlotte Sloan.’ What do you have against the name Charlotte?”

“Not that it’s any of your business,” Sloan picked sand out of her ears and spat out a few granules that worked their way into her mouth, “but Charlotte sounds too soft.”

“Oh, and we can’t have that, can we? Captain Sloan has to be feared and respected.”

Sloan gave Aareth a look that said she would murder him on the spot and dance on his grave.

“Sorry.” Aareth lifted both hands in a sign of surrender. “But seriously, Charlotte’s a good name and anyone who has been named captain of the Queen’s personal guard doesn’t have any more to prove in my book.”

“Well,” Sloan’s demeanor lightened as she changed the subject, “I’m glad my name has your approval, Inspector Aareth Emerson—or should I call you Ghost?”

“Ah, so you know.”

“Of course I know. I didn’t get to where I am just because I have a pretty first name.”

“I didn’t say it was pretty.”

“You said you liked it.”

“I do.” Aareth shrugged. “But I didn’t use the word ‘pretty’; that was all you.”

“Whatever. So are you a part of this mission because you’re done with your life as an assassin or are you working some other angle?”

“What do you think, Charlotte?”

“First, don’t call me that. Second, I see you as a man capable of a lot of good and a lot of bad. You served as one of

the best inspectors in New Hope for years, and after your wife died, you did a lot of killing. So which version are you today?"

Aareth was stunned by her bluntness. He gathered himself as he was reminded of who he was talking to. "You want the truth?"

"Of course."

"I am trying very hard to be the version of myself I was before. I just don't know if that man exists anymore."

Although Aareth expected Sloan to be hesitant or continue to question his intentions after such a grey response, she didn't. It seemed like what Aareth said about trying to be the better version of himself resonated with the captain on a much deeper level.

Instead of continuing the conversation, Sloan peeked a head out from behind the boulder. "Storm's calming down already."

"Crazy how they can come and go so quickly, right?"

Sloan nodded.

"So what's first? Go and dig up our steam machine or find Jack and Marcus? They were riding right next to us when the storm hit. They can't be far."

"We find the sorcerers first." Sloan stood from her spot. "Without them, this mission can't succeed."

TWENTY-EIGHT



JACK

Jack felt like he was going to throw up. His head was swimming. He had no idea where he was. He struggled to stand, but his head was hammering like a blacksmith was using his skull as an anvil. Jack reached a shaky hand to the right side of his head and it came back bloody.

As he was wondering how badly he was hurt, the events of the past few hours came back to him at once: the locomotive attack, the sandstorm, he and his father being thrown from the steam bicycle. His father!

Jack turned in every direction, searching the forest floor for his dad. His eyes found a slumped body under a mass of broken branches. Jack ran to his father's side and gently rolled him over. His father's chest was still moving. Jack gently shook him. The bandage around Marcus' head was intact; no sign of blood soaked through the dressing.

He's okay. He's breathing. He didn't land on his head, Jack reassured himself.

"Dad, Dad, can you hear me?"

"Okay, next time, I'm operating the machine." Marcus' eyes fluttered open.

Jack let out a huge sigh, slowly helping his father to his feet.

"Are you okay? Anything broken?"

"No, no, I think the old man is going to make it this time around." Marcus looked down at himself as he dusted off the

layers of sand. “You? You’re bleeding.”

“I know, it’s nothing. We have to find Sloan and Aareth and make sure our transportation is still working.”

Before Marcus could protest, there was rustling in the dark forest to their left. Jack drew his wand in one smooth motion. Marcus lifted the two parts of his staff from his back. He snapped them together in the space of a breath.

“Wow, take it easy, killers.” Aareth walked into the clearing with arms raised. “It’s just Sloan and me.”

“Glad to see you two made it.” Jack gave Aareth a sly grin. “I thought Sloan might use the sandstorm for cover, you know, finally take you out of the picture for good.”

“It was tempting.” The corner of Sloan’s mouth twitched in an awkward attempt at a smile.

“So what’s our next move, Captain?” Jack asked.

“Well, you need to stop spraying blood everywhere. Then we find the machines, make sure they’re still working, and make camp for the night. It’s too dark to travel now. Tomorrow, we’ll find the road, and if I’m anywhere near right, we should be in Burrow Den in time for dinner.”

Jack’s wound was nothing more than a shallow two-inch laceration across his scalp. His father had him patched up in no time. Sloan and Aareth wheeled in both of the mage-powered machines.

The one Jack and Marcus had ridden was dented in a few spots and the front headlight was cracked, but still in running condition. Sloan and Aareth’s was in better shape; still, sand leaked from the machine out of every nook and cranny.

Camp was made in the same small clearing Jack found his father lying in. Dinner was a simple meal of cheese, dried meat, and biscuits. Jack ate like a starving man. To him, the meal was just as satisfying as the feast he was treated to in the Queen’s palace.

It was as the four unlikely members of the Queen’s emissary were preparing for sleep Jack voiced the question

that was on all their minds. “So what are we expecting tomorrow when we reach Burrow Den? Do they know we’re coming?”

“The Queen sent a messenger to tell them aid was on the way.” Sloan stared into the fire, voicing the words with no real weight behind them.

“Can we be sure the messenger made it all the way to Burrow Den after our little encounter on the locomotive?” Aareth sat beside the captain, toying with his gauntlets. “Could Burrow Den be an ambush?”

“No. I don’t think so, but who knows,” Marcus chimed in as he threw another log on the fire and settled into a seated sleeping position. “There’s no point speculating on what could be or may happen. We just need to be prepared for anything.”

There was a mutter of agreement as Sloan and Aareth took solace in the sorcerer’s words and settled in for the night.

Jack turned onto his back; however, sleep was anywhere but close that night. The forest was dark. Shadows twisted and morphed into sinister beings against the forest background.

Jack would have been scared if he hadn’t grown up as a tracking sorcerer his entire life. He heard noises deep inside the forest’s interior, but each noise he could place: birds rustling, owls hooting, rabbits galloping down paths. He couldn’t be sure when he drifted to sleep, but it wasn’t long before he was awakened by an unfamiliar sound, a noise that didn’t belong to the forest at all.

He was lying on his side facing the fire that was now reduced to a pile of smoking embers and ash. Morning wasn’t far off. For now, the moon remained fixed in the sky. A cool dew touched the soft grass. As Jack was waking from his sleep, wondering what the noise had been, he heard it again.

There was something large moving in the forest. He couldn’t pinpoint the exact area, but he knew it was big and it was trying to move quietly. Jack’s eyes were wide. He slowly reached down to his side and gripped the cold steel wand. Sloan and Aareth were both motionless, eyes closed, oblivious

to the danger around them. His father's eyes were as wide as his own.

Jack saw his father looking at him, and without moving his head, motioned with his eyes from Jack to a section of the forest where a large bush swayed. Normally, a bush swaying could easily be written off as the wind, except tonight, there was no wind.

Jack looked back to his father and tilted his head half an inch. Marcus' hand was on his staff, tensed and ready. Everything was still except for Jack's heart. He could feel it racing faster than either the locomotive or the mage-powered bicycles. He forced himself to take slow breaths. His eyes remained glued on the bush that rustled and swayed.

TWENTY-NINE



JACK

There was nothing that triggered the moment when the creature charged, nothing that set off the beast. Jack jumped to his feet, his right hand brandishing the wand. A moment later, he called forth the magic inside, harnessing it with his will and bending the energy to do his bidding. His wand danced with green magical energy. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw his father stand with his staff ablaze in green fire.

Sloan and Aareth began to wake, but all of Jack's attention was on the mutant animal charging at them with a blood-curdling screech that befit a bird of prey more than a land mammal. Aareth was in a position with his back turned toward the beast, Jack was standing below him and Marcus across.

Jack let a fiery ball of magic fly. He knew it struck the animal, but the beast wasn't slowing down. It was yards away from Aareth and closing fast. Two more cracks shattered the early morning silence as Marcus fired at the beast.

The animal stumbled but still moved forward. The brute was now only a few feet from a drowsy Aareth, who turned to face the animal. Jack knew he was Aareth's last hope before the beast crashed into him with bone-crunching jaws and dagger-like claws.

The animal was dark in color with strange shaggy hair and a rounded head. Jack took a deep breath and released another bolt from the end of his wand. The magical beam sailed within inches of Aareth's black hair. It landed dead center into the animal's throat.

The beast crashed to the forest floor, skidding the last few feet to rest at Aareth's worn boots.

Everyone took a few deep breaths before Aareth turned and looked at a shocked Jack. "Thanks, I owe you one."

"Is it dead?" Sloan was wide awake now. She held her steam sword in hand. Her weapon was already turning a dull red as the blade heated.

Marcus stepped forward to stand next to Aareth. Jack and Sloan followed to get a better look at their would-be killer. The animal was no doubt a unicorn, but a unicorn the likes of which Jack had never seen. The animal was larger than the forest's typical white unicorn. The dagger-like teeth and sharp claws instead of hooves were all wrong as well.

Native unicorns to this forest would be smaller, with flat teeth made for chewing grass and sturdy hooves to run. Not only did the physical features of the unicorn cause Jack to wonder at its origin, but the screech it made as it attacked was also disconcerting.

The animal was down, there was no doubt about that, but its giant chest still heaved in and out. A dark primal eye full of pain and anger followed them as they moved closer.

"I'm sorry, friend." Marcus raised his staff and aimed it at the animal's head.

The beam entered the mutated creature's skull and penetrated brain matter, allowing the beast to finally find rest. Its chest quivered, then ultimately ceased to move. Jack looked at his father, who he knew hated to kill such an amazing animal.

"Do you think this is the creature that's been attacking Burrow Den?" Aareth wondered out loud. "I mean, we're only a day or two journey from the city now."

"The descriptions we read of the animal responsible for the killings in Burrow Den and the paw prints that were recorded weren't from a mutated unicorn." Jack took a long look at the unicorn's paws, comparing them to the sketch he remembered seeing at the palace.

“Jack, take a look at this.” Marcus crouched, examining the unicorn further.

Jack maneuvered around a still shocked Aareth and knelt by his father, who was examining the unicorn’s paws. Each paw had six toes, and even more disconcerting was the long white hair covering the animal. As Jack got closer, he saw the unicorn’s coat very closely resembled feathers.

“What does it mean?” Jack asked as his mind struggled to find an answer to the unnatural riddle in front of him.

“I don’t know,” Marcus clenched his jaw, “but this is not what nature intended.”

“What are you saying?” Sloan asked, examining the unicorn’s body over Jack’s shoulder.

“I’m saying,” Marcus stood up with a look in his eyes that Jack had never seen before, “that we need to get to Burrow Den now and stop whatever’s happening there.”

THIRTY



JACK

Like most meals, breakfast was rushed. The mage-powered machines were topped off with spare fuel canisters Christopher had strapped to the sides of the machines. Soon the four travelers were on the move again. It was slow going at first. Jack took the lead and maneuvered through the thick forest at a careful speed. The machine hummed underneath him at a much different rate than he used while traversing the desert floor.

Marcus rode behind him, his posture straight and rigid, searching their new terrain. Soon they found the main road that would lead them to Burrow Den. Both Jack and Sloan pressed down hard on the pedals, urging the machines forward.

Whenever they passed travelers, either walking or on horseback, the looks they received were the same. First, the response was fear and wonder, then distrust and anger. Jack could only guess what they looked like to the passersby.

Magic-fueled machines moving forward under their own power with steam rising in the air behind them wasn't something that was seen every day, let alone in these parts of the Outland.

Burrow Den was one of the most remote cities in the Outland. This wasn't only because of its distance from New Hope, but due to the land that had to be traversed to arrive at the town.

Even after passing through the desert, the city was another two to three days' journey by horse through the forests and the rolling mountains. It was only due to the steam bicycles and Jack and his father's extensive knowledge of the territory that they made such great time.

A midday meal was eaten while traveling. Jack was able to show off how much he already learned about steering the machine as he rested one hand on the handlebars and casually supported a sandwich in his free hand.

"If your mother could see you now, she'd be so proud, Jack."

"Thanks, Dad. Sure you don't want to give it a try?" Jack turned his head slightly and smiled through a mouthful of meat and bread.

"No, I think I'm just fine here." Marcus looked down on the bumpy dirt lane that led to Burrow Den and the forest and mountains on either side that greeted him if he fell off the path.

"Did you hear that unicorn when it attacked? It didn't neigh, it shrieked—like a bird, and the hair it was more like—like—"

"It looked more like feathers than hair, and the hooves..." Marcus took a long pause and Jack imagined what his face looked like. His brow would be furrowed, lips pursed, an expression Jack had grown accustomed to when he misbehaved as a child.

"Jack, it's important that when we do reach the town, we're prepared. Remember, our instincts and intuition are the best tools we have. Mage-powered machines and weapons can only do so much. We have to stay on point."

Jack nodded as he gulped another bite. The going was made easy by the machines. As the sun flirted with the tops of the mountains on its descent, the road sloped up and opened into Burrow Den's main road.

Burrow Den was a city of only a few hundred inhabitants. Most people there were friendly when Jack and his father

passed through before. The main source of work was farming and livestock.

The city couldn't have been more different than New Hope. Instead of steel structures and iron towers climbing to the heavens, simple one-story houses and buildings made of wood were scattered throughout the city.

Where New Hope was bustling with activity and noises rang out in every corner, Burrow Den was quiet and still.

“Let's park these machines just outside town, Jack,” his father advised. “There's no need bringing more attention to us and what we're doing than we have to. At least until we introduce ourselves.”

Jack knew exactly what his father meant. They had no idea what they were in for. The last thing they needed was to be looked at with fear and distrust.

Jack parked the machine just outside the city in a grove of tall, bright green trees. Sloan pulled up next to him. Aareth jumped off the bike and grimaced as he stretched. “Boy, you'd think after riding a horse for so many years, I'd be used to it, but my butt is as numb as—”

“Good idea parking the machines outside the city,” Sloan interrupted, giving Aareth an amused roll of her eyes. “We need to gain the town's trust, not scare them off with inventions they don't understand. When we get into the city, let me do the talking.”

The three men followed Sloan as she walked out of the grove of trees into the city. Not much had changed since Jack had last seen Burrow Den. The houses still looked the same. The one wide road that led to the heart of the small city was still intact and well kept. The only thing Jack noticed that was different was the lack of people.

Jack's father caught on to the subtle clue as well. His staff was already in his hand. No magic coursing over the wood just yet. To everyone else, it would look like Marcus was just an older man using a staff to assist his stride, but Jack knew

better. He could tell when his father's hand was a quick second away from drawing magic.

“Well, I guess that answers our question about whether the messenger the Queen sent made it here or not. Not a very warm welcome for people who are sent by the Crown to help,” Aareth mused out loud.

It was eerily quiet as Jack and his three companions made their way through the city.

“If I remember right, the town hall, church, and sheriff station are all down the next block,” Jack instructed the group. “Maybe we'll find someone there.”

Empty porches were passed, and boarded-up houses with locked doors and barred windows seemed to come every few feet.

Jack was starting to get the feeling that he was being watched. The hairs on the back of his neck began to prickle. A wave of goosebumps slowly washed over his entire body.

His eyes were constantly darting back and forth as he walked down the middle of town. He knew someone was watching him, yet there was no one around. A young female voice stopped him dead in his tracks.

“Strangers to the experiment ground? But are they safe or are they like the ones before?”

Jack turned to his left, his right hand already on the hilt of his wand. The voice came from a girl who stood on a porch he had just seen empty a second before. She was slender with bright red hair. A sad smile played across her chapped lips.

“We're here in the name of Queen Eleanor Eckert. We're here to help.” Sloan stepped forward.

Sloan must have seen the porch empty only a moment before as well. The captain was tense, ready to pounce like a predator in the wild.

“Oh, no. No, they're not like the ones before.” The girl cocked her head to the side like she was listening to someone.

“No, silly, look at them. How do I know? Shhhhhh... they’ll hear you.”

Jack was about to ask who she was and where all the people of Burrow Den had gone, but he thought better of interrupting the girl. The strange child continued to carry on a conversation with herself.

“They said they’re from New Hope, but the evil men came from New Hope too.”

“Excuse me,” Aareth spoke, unable to hold his tongue any longer. “Who are you? Where is everyone?”

“You’re tall and handsome.” The girl looked at him as if she was seeing him for the first time. A shy smile crossed her face as she straightened out her dirty grey jacket and shifted in her boots.

“Ummm... thanks.”

“My name’s Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth, where is everyone?” Sloan took another step toward the girl. This time, her hand was off the hilt of her sword.

“They are here. They are there.” Elizabeth tore her eyes away from Aareth. She looked Sloan up and down.

“Elizabeth, that’s not very helpful. Where has everyone gone?”

Jack could tell Sloan wasn’t used to having to exercise patience as her gloved hands crossed over her chest.

“Oh, Captain, my Captain. Be serious, no more fun time. You’re not a very nice soldier lady.” Elizabeth crossed her own arms and stuck out her chest.

Sloan’s eyes widened at the audacity of the girl. Jack thought she might reach for her sword again, so he stepped forward with a smile. “Hi, Elizabeth. I’m Jack, this is Sloan, Aareth, and Marcus. We’re here to help. We need to find where all the people are. Can you please help us?”

“Yes.” Elizabeth turned and fixed Jack with a penetrating stare. “He’s handsome too, but in a different way. In an innocent way. Yes, Jack, we’ll help you. But before you follow me, the captain has to be disciplined for being so rude.”

The girl, who had to be a few years younger than Jack, walked down the wooden steps from her porch and stood directly in front of Sloan with a scornful look. She was shorter than Sloan, but she didn’t let that intimidate her as she addressed the captain. “Give me your hand.”

“What?” Sloan didn’t move her hands from the sides of her body.

“Give me your hand; you have to be disciplined. You’re so rude. Not everyone is out to get you, you know. There are friends everywhere if you would just let them be.”

Jack didn’t see any weapons on the redheaded girl. Regardless, he kept his hand on his wand. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his father readjust his staff. Sloan was tense, but she slowly extended her left hand.

“Bad Sloan, bad.” Elizabeth gently took it in her right hand and softly slapped the back of Sloan’s wrist with her own left hand. “You have to be nicer to strangers. Or how are you going to make any friends? I know about your past. How you were raised with nothing. But don’t let that define who you are today.”

Jack’s eyes widened as he witnessed the toughest soldier he had ever known literally get her wrist slapped.

Aareth stifled a chuckle as Sloan withdrew her hand and turned her head, giving him a murderous stare.

“What?” Aareth shrugged. “She has a point.”

Elizabeth seemed content that Sloan had learned her lesson. She turned and skipped along the dirt road deeper into the town.

“Well, hurry up.” Elizabeth looked over her shoulder as her red hair swung in line behind her. “Before the puppy comes. He’s always so hungry for blood. We can’t wait forever.”

THIRTY-ONE



JACK

Jack exchanged looks with the rest of the group as they followed the girl into Burrow Den. Jack didn't think that Elizabeth was dangerous; still, he kept a wary eye on every building they passed. Soon Elizabeth led them to the center of the city that opened up into a large circular space with a fountain placed dead center. Water splashed from the top of the fountain shaped like a spitting fish.

Elizabeth stopped and pointed to a large building with a sloping roof. Jack could tell that the building was a church by the bell tower and crucifix that jutted from the top of the structure.

"Most everyone's inside. Town meeting, you know, a lot of blah, blah, blah, and thinking deep thoughts." Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Why do adults think they have everything figured out just because they're adults?"

"Thank you for your help, Elizabeth," Jack said.

"Of course, Jack, sure. Just don't believe what he says. He's a liar."

Jack was about to ask her who she was talking about, but Elizabeth turned and ran away.

"What a weirdo." Sloan dusted off her military jacket that showed the Queen's emblem.

"I don't know." Aareth winked at Jack. "I kind of liked her. She was a good disciplinarian."

This time, Marcus stifled a chuckle.

“If the city is gathered for a council meeting,” Sloan ignored them both and walked up the church’s wooden steps, “then this is as good a time as any to make our presence known. We need to formally offer our services on the Queen’s and the city of New Hope’s behalf.”

Fearless as ever, Sloan grabbed one of the wooden handles to the double doors and swung it open, stepping inside. Jack followed close behind.

The first thing that Jack noticed as they stepped into the large room and slid in near the back was the amount of people in attendance. The gigantic one-room building looked large from the outside, but the sheer number of people packed inside dwarfed the size of the structure.

Long wooden pews were set up for attendees, and from what Jack could see, every seat was filled. It was standing room only and it seemed like even a few inches of space for one’s feet to rest was high-demand real estate.

Shoulder to shoulder, people craned their necks forward or tilted their heads to the front of the room, trying to catch what was being said. With a large portion of the town in attendance, Jack was certain they would be spotted as outsiders. To his surprise, besides a few confused looks, everyone was too busy trying to hear the debate taking place at the front of the building.

Jack stood on his tiptoes, finding a spot where he could see through black and brown coats and tall hats and goggles. There was a lanky man speaking at a podium on a raised platform in the front of the room. Jack couldn’t make out specific details, but the man was fair-skinned with thinning hair. He seemed like he was trying to calm the gathered people.

“Yes, elections for the new mayor and sheriff will take place soon, but in the meantime, I have taken it upon myself to act as the lead shepherd during this dark time of crisis. My position as a preacher has given me training on how to deal with serious situations in times of distress.”

“This is more than a time of crisis, Elijah!” a timid voice said from somewhere from the front of the room. There was a murmur of agreement as the man continued. “We’ve lost over three dozen members of our community to these attacks. This is an extermination!”

“Please, brothers and sisters.” The tall man called Elijah stretched out his long arms. He waited until the crowd was silent. “Have reassurance that everything happens for a reason. We have to keep faith that there is an ultimate plan in place for us. The attacks, although still occurring, have decreased in the past few days. Perhaps whatever it is, is moving on.”

“But how can we be sure?” the same man said. “I—We fear for our families, for our children. What we need to do is leave this cursed place.”

Louder murmurs escaped the crowd as Jack listened in and caught what the people nearest to him were saying.

“Leave Burrow Den? Should we?”

“This is all we’ve known. Where would we go?”

“Better alive and gone than buried here.”

“Peace, peace,” Elijah crooned in a comforting voice. “There is no need to go anywhere. We have sent word to the Queen for assistance—”

The man who was arguing with Elijah stepped onto the raised dais. He turned to address the crowd. He was short compared to Elijah, with a rounded belly and bald head.

“The Queen? Please, the Queen of New Hope sits in her royal palace counting her treasure and sipping her wine. No help from the Queen is coming. They don’t care about us poor Outliers. We have only ourselves to rely on.”

“That’s not true!”

All eyes turned to Sloan as she returned each and every stare. A small opening was made for her, Jack, Aareth, and Marcus as everyone tried to remember seeing them walk into the room.

“Queen Eleanor Eckert of New Hope has not abandoned her neighbors and friends. My companions and I have traveled hard and far to come to your assistance at her direct request.”

Everyone stood stunned, trying to decide if they approved or disapproved of the strangers in their council meeting. Jack forced himself to stand by Sloan’s side and not shrink back. He could practically feel the eyes on him, looking him up and down, deciding his worth.

“You were sent from New Hope?” The short man next to Elijah was first to find his voice. “From the Queen?”

“That is correct. My name is Captain Sloan. I am head of the Queen’s personal guard. With me are the best sorcerers and trackers in the Outland. We’re here to help.”

THIRTY-TWO



SLOAN

People started to smile and clap as they looked on optimistically. Sloan could practically see hope in their eyes as the city population examined their saviors. The room erupted in talk and speculation. Sloan even received a few handshakes and claps on the back.

“Order! Please, order!” Elijah yelled from the podium. The crowd quieted and looked to their leader. “It seems as though our prayers have been answered. Let us not forget who we have to thank for this blessing.”

Heads nodded as the citizens of Burrow Den again turned to Sloan and her companions. More hands were shaken and smiles exchanged as people thanked her for coming. In seconds, Elijah was standing in front of the group himself. He was as tall as Aareth but not nearly as muscular. Distance had deceived Sloan. Elijah was much older than she originally thought.

Elijah was clean-shaven with a warm smile and thinning hair. Sloan guessed that he had to be just as old, perhaps older than Marcus. His hand was strong as he introduced himself above the din of the crowd.

“My name is Elijah Ahab. I’m the pastor of this community. Perhaps we can talk somewhere where there’s more room and less noise?”

Sloan and the others nodded as they followed Elijah through the front door and outside. The crowd trailed after

them, eager to catch any news of New Hope or plans the strangers had for aiding them.

Elijah led the group past the town center, fountain and down a dirt path. There was still a large group of excited citizens following as Elijah stopped at a single-story white house. He turned to address the crowd.

“Friends, I know how eager you are to converse with our guests and how hopeful you feel to see them in our city. But please give me some time to talk with them and let them rest. I’m sure they’ll be here for a few days and everyone will get a chance to interact with them.”

Some members in the crowd nodded and said farewell to the strangers; others scowled at Elijah for being dismissed like small children.

“I’m sorry.” Elijah turned to his visitors. “I’m afraid they are a bit over eager about your arrival. Please come inside where we can talk.”

Sloan led the way, following Elijah inside his small house. Clean wood floors and furniture gave the space a warm, inviting look. Elijah motioned them to all sit at a table as he lit candles and lamps in the light of the setting sun.

“Thank you for your hospitality.” Sloan was the first to speak when they were all seated. “I’m Captain Sloan. This is Aareth, Marcus, and Jack.”

Elijah swallowed hard, fidgeting with his hands.

“No disrespect, Pastor Ahab, but is there a mayor or sheriff available we can speak with?”

“I’m afraid not, Captain.” Ahab lowered his eyes to the floor. He shook his head slowly. “They’re both dead. Fallen victims of the animal that has ravaged our city.”

“So you’ve assumed control?” Sloan raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“I had no choice.” Elijah looked up, shocked at Sloan’s tone. “The town needed someone to turn to. Who better than the man who can fortify them with faith?”

“Of course,” Sloan responded.

Sloan let the silence build before she was willing to speak again. There was something about the way the man fidgeted that reminded her of Fenrick Trillion.

“Well,” Sloan began again, “we’re here now. What can you tell us about the animal and the attacks?”

Elijah opened his mouth but stopped himself short. “Wouldn’t you like to rest or have something to eat before we jump right into business? I’m sure you all have had a long journey.”

“If it’s all the same to you, Preacher,” Marcus spoke up for the first time, “we’d like to get started as soon as we can.”

“Of course. Well, the attacks started just over two months ago.” Elijah took time to look them all in the eyes as he spoke. “Since then, dozens of men and women have been killed. I haven’t seen the creature myself, but there are some eyewitnesses I can refer you to.”

Sloan wasn’t sure what information she expected from the preacher. Still, she expected more than what was offered in the brief few sentences provided. For someone whose town was under attack, Elijah seemed rather comfortable with the fact.

“What do you think is causing the attacks, Pastor Ahab?” Jack leaned forward, awaiting the answer.

Elijah looked at Jack with a startled expression as if he hadn’t expected the young man to speak.

“I’m not sure, Jack. I know that the reports are of an animal, and of that I have no doubt, but—” Elijah looked down as he chose his next words carefully. “Something inside is begging the question of what if this animal was sent by the Divine as a persecution for our sins?”

“Explain,” Sloan insisted.

“I mean,” Elijah wet his thin lips, “no one has been able to stop the beast. Before the attacks began, Burrow Den was heading into a morally dark place. I’m not saying I think the attacks are justified in any way, but the way the creature turns

up and disappears has to be answered. In the last few months, the church has seen its best days as more and more people realize what's important in life and turn to the Divine One for hope.”

Sloan was going back and forth in her mind, asking herself if she trusted the preacher or if the man was a few sandwiches short of a picnic. She was forced to shelve the question, when the door to the small house opened. In walked a young girl somewhere around Jack's age. She was slender with thick dark hair and a quick smile that accentuated her pearl-white teeth.

A loud crash echoed in the room as Jack fell backward on the wood floor. Everyone, including the girl, looked at him with a mixture of mirth and concern.

Jack immediately regained his feet and righted his chair. His face brightened to a shade of dull red.

“Are you all right?” the angel in the doorway asked, hiding a smile.

“Ummm—I—uhhh...” Jack sputtered as if he'd forgotten how to speak.

Sloan kicked Jack hard under the table. Not only was he being a poor representative for the Crown, but he was embarrassing them all in the process.

The pain from the strike brought Jack's vocabulary back from the Stone Age in a rush. “I'm Jack—I mean, I'm fine, thanks.”

“This is my daughter, Abigail.” Elijah gave Jack a skeptical look as he rose from his seat and introduced the stranger. “Abigail, these are travelers from New Hope who have been sent by the Queen herself to offer assistance.”

“It's a pleasure to meet you.” Abigail smiled at them all, inviting another fall from Jack. “I'm sure my father is answering all of your questions. If there's anything I can do to help, please just ask.”

“She's cute, right?” Aareth nudged Jack in the ribs. “I mean, too young for me, but perfect for you.”

“Actually, you can both help us.” Sloan turned the conversation away from Abigail with a searing stare at Aareth and Jack. “I’ll need a list of victims and the places the attacks took place as well as interviews set up with eyewitnesses. With any luck, we can start tracking the beast tomorrow.”

“Yes, of course.” Elijah’s eyes were locked on Sloan’s as he nodded like he was in a daze. “I can do that tonight. Right away.”

Elijah grabbed a coat off a hook that stood fixed next to the door. As if it was an afterthought, he looked back at his daughter. “Abigail, can you show our guests where they can sleep for the night, and prepare a meal? I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Abigail was opening her mouth to say something, when her father pivoted on his heel. He headed out of the house, closing the door behind him.

“Sorry.” Abigail turned toward the table of guests and cringed. “My father’s a bit—”

“It’s okay.” Marcus waved her apology away. “No explanation needed.”

“The house next door is vacant. It’ll be a great place for you to live as long as you need. I would invite you to stay here, of course, but there wouldn’t be enough room. I wouldn’t want any of you to sleep on the floor.”

“Thank you, Abigail.” Sloan took a step toward the door. “Shall we?”

“Of course.”

Abigail motioned for the group to follow her as they exited the small, simple house. As one, they walked next door to a much larger, more extravagant building. Sloan was surprised she hadn’t noticed the gigantic house when they were walking to Elijah’s home. By comparison, the estate they were being shown to was a mansion.

Abigail opened a small fence for them. The group walked past a lush garden and followed grey stone steps to the large oak door.

“No one lives here?” Aareth asked, looking up into the dark windows covering the second story of the building.

“No.” Abigail opened the door leading them inside. “This house used to belong to our mayor. When he was attacked and passed away, no one moved in.”

“We’re staying in a dead guy’s house?” Jack asked.

“Yeah.” Abigail looked at him and frowned. “I guess when you put it that way, it isn’t really that nice.”

“Oh, no.” Jack fumbled again. “I mean, it is really nice, I just wasn’t expecting that answer.”

“The rooms are located upstairs. Let me know if you need anything. I’ll be right next-door preparing dinner. When you’re done settling in, just come over and we can eat.”

Aareth was already lost, wandering the house.

“Thank you, Abigail,” Sloan said to the young girl. “This house will be fine.”

Abigail took her leave, allowing the travelers to settle in. As soon as she was gone, Sloan watched as Marcus turned to say something to his son.

“Don’t say a word,” Jack scolded his father.

“What? I wasn’t going to say anything... besides, you should be more careful about falling out of chairs. We haven’t even started tracking the animal yet.”

Sloan had her own warning for Jack, but it could wait. For now, she busied herself in exploring their new quarters.

The house was extravagant. What immediately struck Sloan was how expensive creating a house like this must have been. From the hand-carved statues that were placed carefully around the home to the stone fireplace and library, Sloan could tell the Mayor of Burrow Den had been doing very well for himself before his untimely demise.

Sloan made her way up to the second floor that consisted mostly of bedrooms and washrooms. She chose her own room, a small, simple space that reminded her of the many foster

homes she had lived in growing up. No, “lived in” wasn’t right, more like passed through.

Aareth chose a similar space, leaving the master bedroom and one other that faced the Ahab property.

Sloan wasn’t surprised in the least when Jack chose the room overlooking Abigail’s house. Sure, he might have left the master bedroom for his father out of respect, but it didn’t seem like he minded.

“I had a feeling you’d take this room.” Sloan stepped into the doorway.

Jack jumped and whirled around.

“Listen,” Sloan said, hating the way she sounded in her own ears. The last thing she wanted to do was come across like a scolding sister. “I know you’re an adult, so I’m going to treat you like one. We’re emissaries of the Queen and here to do a job. That’s it. No fraternizing with the locals or flirting with the town girls.”

“I wasn’t going to do anything like that.” Jack’s face turned red for the second time that day.

“I didn’t think you would. I’m just making sure, Romeo.”

“Charlotte,” Aareth’s voice could be heard from somewhere down the hall, “leave the kid alone. Come on, let’s go eat dinner.”

Sloan bristled at the mention of her first name. “I’m going to kill him before this is all over.”

THIRTY-THREE



JACK

Dinner was a simple affair of mixed vegetables, warm biscuits, and honey-glazed chicken. Elijah was still absent from the house, but this didn't seem to bother Abigail as she entertained her guests.

Jack admired how comfortable she was talking to them as strangers and how she took it upon herself to make sure they were cared for. The way her eyes twinkled when she smiled and the soft layer of freckles around her cheeks just added to her overall charm.

“I hope you all are comfortable staying next door. If there's anything that's not in the house, just let me know. I'm sure I can get it for you.”

“Thank you, Abigail, that's very nice of you. I think we're fine at the moment. If we do need anything, we'll be sure to let you know.” Sloan dabbed at the corner of her lips with her napkin.

“How is it that no one has moved into the mayor's house?” Marcus asked as he finished his plate. “It seems like it's one of the largest homes in the town.”

“It's, well,” Abigail looked down at her plate. She took a long breath, “complicated.”

“How so?”

“When the mayor and other people started being attacked, the entire city was looking for an answer. Citizens of Burrow Den were beginning to blame each other. Things were reaching a boiling point. My father calmed them by

introducing the idea that maybe the animal was sent to confront those who held worldly possessions in too high a regard.”

“You sound like a politician.” Sloan’s aggressive tone caught everyone off guard. “You’re saying your father told everyone a god sent an animal to attack the rich?”

Abigail cleared her throat uncomfortably. Jack knew he had to step in before Sloan tore her apart.

“Maybe we should ask Elijah ourselves,” Jack said.

Sloan didn’t say a word.

Jack caught Abigail looking at him. The small smile she gave him was all the thanks he needed.

THIRTY-FOUR



JACK

That night as Jack got ready for bed in the deceased mayor's house, he couldn't help thinking about Abigail and what she had said. Her explanation about how her father handled the attacks seemed forced. Jack could tell she wanted to steer clear from the subject, but she hadn't.

Jack tossed and turned in his bed as the moon rose high in the night sky. Minutes turned into hours; still sleep evaded him like a hand trying in vain to grasp mist. His body was exhausted, but his mind wouldn't turn off. There was something strange going on in the town of Burrow Den. Something that went far beyond simple animal attacks.

It was while Jack was considering the possibility of Sloan actually killing Aareth for calling her by her first name that he heard the first yell.

It wasn't loud, but he knew to hear it through his closed window, it had to be a yell.

Jack turned onto his stomach and pushed aside the curtains that half concealed his view outside. It was a clear night. He had a perfect angle of the town of Burrow Den below. The house he was staying in was one of only a few that stood two stories tall. He didn't have to search far for the noise. It was coming from Abigail's house.

Jack listened intently, holding his breath as he heard more shouts. He could tell they were yells coming from an argument and not cries of help by the tones used. Abigail was yelling something and Elijah was shouting back. After a few minutes,

Abigail stormed out of the back of the house. She slammed the door behind her. A few seconds later, Elijah's tall frame appeared, leaving out the front door. Jack watched until the tall man's fleeting shadow was lost in the darkness.

The younger Ahab stood in her backyard, clenching her hands, practically shaking. Jack was sure he hadn't seen anyone that angry in a very long time, even Sloan. He watched as Abigail put her hands on top of her head. She paced back and forth.

Jack realized he had no business interfering. He knew Sloan had warned him about meddling with locals; still, he couldn't help himself. More than he knew, he already cared about Abigail. If there was anything he could do to show her kindness, he was going to do it.

Quietly, he made his way from his room, down the staircase, and out the front door. It was warm, so he didn't bother with his jacket. He took his wand belt, just in case.

There was a small path that ran between the two houses with a white picket fence separating the properties. Jack could see Abigail on the other side. Her arms were wrapped around herself as she stared into the darkness opposite Jack.

Jack kicked himself for not already knowing what to say. He was standing ten yards away from her, but nothing resembling a smooth icebreaker was coming to mind. Right now he was just a creeper staring at the back of a young woman.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Oh, Jack." Abigail turned around quickly, wiping her eyes on her white blouse. "You scared me."

"Sorry."

"No, it's fine. Are you okay? Did you need anything?"

Jack was taken aback by her again. She was clearly upset to the point of tears; still, when she saw him, she was asking if there was anything *he* needed.

"I'm okay. What's wrong?"

“Nothing, it’s silly.” Abigail cleared her throat. “I’m sorry if I woke you.”

“No, I was already out for a walk,” Jack lied. “Tell me what’s bothering you.”

“Do you ever feel like—like you’re being torn in two different directions?” Abigail took a long breath and stared into Jack’s brown eyes. “Like two versions of you are fighting inside?”

“You mean there’s this person that people want or expect you to be and then there’s another voice in your head telling you there’s another way?” Jack knew exactly what she meant.

“Yes.” Abigail stood quiet for a second staring at Jack.

“My father’s a great man. I love him, but he sees the world so black and white.” Jack looked up into the clear night sky. “He always makes the right decision, no matter what the consequences. I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Your father’s a kind man, Jack. You’re lucky. I can tell how much he loves you just by the way he looks at you. My father... is a bit different.”

Jack hesitated, not wanting to push her into a conversation that made her uncomfortable. Instead, he took a few steps forward allowing his hands rest on the white picket fence that stood between them. Abigail relaxed. She also took a few steps toward him, closing the distance.

“My father has nothing but the purest intentions, but he sometimes lacks common sense,” Abigail went on to explain. “When my mother left us, my sister and I were only kids. I can’t blame my father much, but he didn’t have the slightest idea how to care for two girls. I’ve grown up providing for both of them, in a way.”

“That sounds like a lot of work. I can’t imagine being thrust into a situation like that.”

“It has its up and downs. It’s just that everything has become more complicated now with the attacks on the town.”

“What do you mean?”

Abigail stopped herself. She looked deep into Jack's eyes. She stared at him, on the verge of opening her mouth, revealing a secret. Jack could tell by her expression how badly she wanted to say something. Instead, she cleared her throat and lowered her head.

"I'm sorry, it's late. I should really be going to bed."

"Okay, if you ever need someone to talk to, I'm a good listener."

"Thanks, Jack." Abigail gave him a knowing look that said she had an idea what he was up to. "I'm glad you were randomly out for a stroll at two o'clock in the morning and stopped to talk to me."

THIRTY-FIVE



JACK

The next morning Jack, Marcus, Sloan, and Aareth walked over to the Ahab house to find a note on the door that read:

Dear Guests,

I'm sorry I can't personally be here to welcome you this morning. I need to go take care of my sister. Food is ready for you on the table as well as a list my father compiled of who the creature has attacked, people who have seen the beast, and where the last attack took place.

Be safe,

Abigail

Aareth opened the door slowly, almost as if he expected an ambush. When he didn't see anything, he walked inside and took a seat at the table. "Does anyone else get a weird feeling from this family?"

"Most definitely." Sloan voiced what they were all thinking. "Today, we'll find out what."

Breakfast was a modest meal of eggs, bacon, and fruit. Abigail had already set the table for them neatly with folded napkins at each place setting and an arrangement of flowers as the centerpiece.

Jack brought himself back to reality as his mind drifted to Abigail and the conversation he'd had with her the previous night.

"Jack, are you listening?"

“Ummm... yeah, Dad, sorry. What—what did you say?”

“Why don’t we let Sloan and Aareth talk to the eyewitnesses and check out the last murder scene. You and I can take a walk in the woods surrounding the town and see what we can find. Sound like a plan?”

Jack nodded, once more aware of his surroundings. Sloan hunched over the list Elijah compiled, Aareth turned the combination of gears on his electric gauntlets, and Marcus was just finishing his meal.

“Okay, Marcus, Jack. I know I don’t have to tell you to be careful, but I feel like I still need to tell you to be careful.” Sloan looked up from the paper. “We’ll meet back here for dinner, six o’clock. Keep your eyes open. There’s a long list of deceased city members here. We can be sure of one thing already; this thing knows how to kill.”

THIRTY-SIX



SLOAN

“Can I see that list?”

“Sure.” Sloan handed the list of names to Aareth.

Aareth took the paper as the two continued to walk down the town’s main dirt road. There were thirty-two names on the list of deceased town folk and only three on the side that had been compiled of eyewitnesses.

Sloan waved to a few of the town’s people who passed at varying intervals and smiled back. The sun was warm. Sloan was eager to get to the bottom of the killings and complete her mission. She had a good feeling about the day but couldn’t help but notice the frown on Aareth’s face.

“What is it? Did you find something?”

“There are so many attacks in the given timeframe. We need so much more information than this piece of paper is going to tell us. Who knows if this list is even accurate.”

“You think the preacher is lying, don’t you?” Sloan asked, slowing her pace.

“Maybe not exactly lying, but—maybe withholding information.”

“I got the same feeling.”

“We need to go someplace where we can get the truth, someplace where we know they’ll talk to us without a filter.”

“Where’s that?”

“A bar.”

“We’re here to work.” Sloan scowled. “Not to get drunk.”

“Excuse me, sir.” Aareth was already ignoring her as he flagged down an older gentleman who pushed a wheelbarrow. “Where can we get a drink around here?”

“A little early to be drinking, son,” The man cocked his head to the side looking up at Aareth. “Even if there was someplace to get a drink at nowadays.”

“You mean there’s no bar or saloon in the entire city?”

“Used to be.” The man lowered the wheelbarrow, wiping sweat from his forehead. “We used to have quite a few, but they got shut down when their owners and operators died.”

“*All* of them died?” Sloan asked. “From the animal attacks?”

“That they did.” The man rocked back and forth on his feet as he nodded. “Well, I guess if you’re hurting for a drink that bad, you still might be able to find one inside The Corner Saloon. That was the last bar to close. It just closed its doors last week. It’s down this road another block and to the left. Don’t let Preacher Ahab find you there. He’s not a big supporter of the drinking business.”

“We won’t.” Aareth extended a hand. “Thanks for the information.”

“No problem; anything I can do to help.” The man shook Aareth’s hand in return.

Sloan and Aareth turned from the wheelbarrow-rolling citizen and headed in the direction he pointed out.

“What are the odds that all the bars were targeted by this creature?” Sloan asked as her boots kicked up miniature dirt clouds.

“Not to mention the mayor, the sheriff and the deputies,” Aareth continued her thought.

“This is starting to look less and less random. It sounds like coordinated attacks.”

“How’s the animal able to target certain people and not others?”

“I don’t know, Inspector Emerson. You tell me.”

Aareth took a deep breath. “This is getting more confusing by the minute.”

“Agreed. Looks like we’re here.” Sloan pointed to a single-story wooden building. The wood structure sported a large sign that read The Corner Saloon above its swinging double doors.

“Ladies first.”

“Such a gentleman.” Sloan stepped onto a creaky wooden porch and entered the dark building. The saloon was one large room with tables and chairs thrown every which way like a tornado touched down inside the building. Near the back of the room was a long bar.

Behind and on top of the bar, broken glass was scattered everywhere. The stench of spilled alcohol and blood filled Sloan’s nostrils. It made her cough. Gore marks and spatters could still be seen around the floor, walls, and even ceiling.

“Wow.” Aareth gagged past the smell. “Wheelbarrow guy didn’t tell us we’d be walking into a war ground.”

Sloan forced herself to move into the room making her way to the bar. They were alone besides the stench of the building that met them at every turn.

“Well, so much for finding someone willing to talk to us.” Sloan fixated on a particularly large red mark on the back wall.

Sloan was still looking around the room, when they both heard something crash behind the bar. Sloan jumped back. In one quick motion, drew her sword. Without even thinking, she flipped the switch that heated the blade.

Aareth stood on her left, both hands slipping into the mage-powered gauntlets dangling from his belt.

THIRTY-SEVEN



JACK

“So what do you think about all of this?” Jack asked his father.

“I don’t know, son. I think that we’re still very far from finding the truth.”

The two sorcerers had left the preacher’s house right after Sloan and Aareth. Together they headed straight for the woods. The city was surrounded on all sides by thick, forested terrain and rolling hills. A large mountain range rose to the sky a few miles behind the city.

Jack was already feeling at home. He was accustomed to the noises and smells of the forest landscape. Where most people would give themselves whiplash from twisting their heads at every snapping twig or grunting animal, Jack knew exactly what the sounds meant and where they came from.

This was the first hint that something was wrong. This particular forest near Burrow Den was unusual in that not as many animals inhabited the area. Jack was used to seeing a dozen or more different animals by now, including unicorns, rabbits, squirrels, birds, and others. So far, he had caught sounds of just a handful of these creatures.

“They’re scared of something,” Jack said, more to himself than his father. “It’s too quiet out here.”

“More than that, Jack. They’re terrified. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

The tone in his father’s voice made him turn his head. Jack gave his father his full attention. Marcus was staring into the distance, like he could see through the trees themselves.

“We need to pick up this thing’s trail. Everything else, all of the answers to our other questions, will follow.”

Jack obeyed, turning his attention to the forest floor. Jack often compared his job as a tracker to that of an inspector or detective. Everything around him was his crime scene. It was up to him to find the clues.

Jack and Marcus traveled deeper into the forest. They examined any and all game trails and small outlets that led ever deeper into the forest. It had been hours; still, there was no sign of an animal that would be big enough to kill a human being.

The younger sorcerer brushed back his thick brown hair as his mind wandered from the trail back to Abigail. Jack had never had a real girlfriend before, and at his age, he thought that was pitiful. Not only was he extremely clumsy when it came to talking to the opposite sex, but his father always moved. For sorcerers, with their skill set, tracking and hunting jobs took Jack and Marcus all over the Outland. They were never in one place more than a few weeks, maybe a month, before it was time to move again.

Perhaps this time, things could be different. There was a strength in Abigail that Jack admired. If this job took more than a week or two, that would give him a chance to really get to know her.

Jack was so wrapped up in thought, he missed the huge print right in front of him. He stepped in it instead. The section of the path he traveled ran close to a small stream. The bank was muddy and soft, allowing impressions to be easily formed. What made Jack look down in the first place was the suction of his boot to the muddy terrain.

“Ummm... Dad?” Eyes wide, he looked at the size of the print he stepped in. He saw two more gigantic prints before they were lost in the water. “You should see this.”

Marcus followed parallel to his son, further from the stream. The older sorcerer was there in a minute, wearing a vexed expression Jack wasn’t used to seeing.

There was a moment of silence as Marcus squatted down, placing his hand a few inches over the large print. The print dwarfed the sorcerer's palm by more than double. Just like the drawing Jack had seen in New Hope, he was amazed by the similarities the paw print shared with the average wolf's.

This track, however, was far bigger than any wolf print he had ever seen. It was even larger than the drawing in New Hope.

"It's huge," Jack breathed, trying to conjure up an image of how large the animal would have to be to fit paws of that size.

"It's larger than a bear and definitely bigger than the drawing we saw of the paw in New Hope."

"You think there's more than one?"

"Either that," Marcus stood and scratched the underside of his jaw, "or whatever this is—it's growing."

Jack's mind went a hundred different directions trying to find an answer to this mystery. Both men heard a loud female laugh behind them.

Jack wheeled around, wand in hand. Elizabeth stood a few yards away, her fiery red hair surrounding her like a cape.

"Wait," she said with a smile, placing both hands in the air. "I surrender, and I thank you, Jack."

Jack felt his heart beating like a war drum deep in his chest. Adrenaline was beginning to ebb. He lowered his wand.

"Elizabeth." Jack holstered his wand. "You have to be careful. You can't sneak up on us like that. You could have gotten hurt. And thank me for what?"

"Because I saw you last night out late talking to my sister." Elizabeth ignored everything Jack said except his last question. "You were so nice to her. You should have definitely tried to kiss her. I think she likes you."

Jack stood stunned, not daring to move a muscle. His eyes darted first to his father to see what his reaction would be. Next, his mind processed the new information that Abigail and Elizabeth were sisters, if he chose to believe Elizabeth.

“Late night chats, huh?” Marcus drew a finger across his throat. “Better not let the captain find out.”

Jack cringed at his father. He was about to apologize before Elizabeth interrupted again, walking up to the two men. She was wearing a dark brown leather skirt and top with tall black boots.

“What are you guys out here looking for? Are you looking for the laboratory?”

“What laboratory?” Marcus asked.

Elizabeth gave Marcus a look that said he should know exactly what she was talking about and was disappointed in him because he didn't.

“Get out.” Elizabeth pointed behind her with an outstretched finger. “I mean it for your own safety.”

“Excuse me?”

“Get out. If you don't know about the laboratory, then you shouldn't even be in the woods, 'cause they're gonna get you good.”

Jack was still caught up on the fact that Elizabeth and Abigail were sisters. Elizabeth's cryptic words went right over his head.

“Wait a minute, Elizabeth, let me get this right. Abigail's your sister and Elijah's your father?”

“Yep.” Elizabeth gave Marcus another disappointed look before she turned to Jack. “Weird, right?”

Jack examined Elizabeth closer. Maybe it was just because he knew now, but he could see a resemblance. Their hair color was, of course, off, but skin tone and even the freckles were similar.

“Elizabeth?” Marcus drew the young girl's attention back to the subject at hand. “Can you show us this laboratory?”

“Okay.” Elizabeth placed a finger on her chin, deep in thought. “But first, it's time to pay the payer guy.”

Marcus looked at her with a blank stare and Jack had to stifle a laugh despite their circumstances.

“Okay, and how do I do that, Elizabeth?”

“You and Jack owe me one. I’ll collect later. Come on, you two.” Elizabeth turned and started heading deeper into the woods. Without even looking back, she called out, “Wait ‘til you get a load of this. It’s going to make you poop your pants.”

THIRTY-EIGHT



SLOAN

“Who’s back there?” Sloan yelled over the dark wooden bar. “Get up now with your hands in the air.”

There was a tense moment of only silence. Sloan debated vaulting over the counter and confronting whatever it was head on. Then two hands were slowly lifted. The man that had argued with Elijah the day before at the town meeting stood up.

“I’m—I’m sorry.” He was shaking, clearly terrified as he stuttered. “I heard you coming. I panicked.”

Sloan lowered her sword but still eyed the short man with distrust. He was older with a bald head and a groomed white beard. A grey vest covered his black shirt. From the waist down, he was hidden by the bar.

Sloan looked at Aareth, who shrugged then lowered his fisted gauntlets.

“Okay, come on out,” she ordered. “Slow and easy.”

The man eyed them suspiciously as he stumbled from behind the counter, his arms still in the air. Sloan did her best not to smile as the man wobbled in front of them like a monkey. In a minute, he stood before them, eyes wide in fear.

“You can put your arms down now. What’s your name? Why were you hiding behind the bar?”

“My name is Benjamin Clive.” The little man gulped visibly as he lowered his arms. “I live in town. I have a shoe repair shop where I work, right out of my home. I’m, uh—I’m

here because—Well, I might as well tell you. I'm dead anyway. I came here looking for a drink. I need a safe place to hide from the monster that the Divine has sent to terrorize our town."

"Just when we thought this couldn't get any more confusing." Aareth made a beeline behind the bar, looking for unbroken glasses and liquor.

"You think some kind of god has sent this creature?" Sloan ignored Aareth's comment; instead, she directed her attention to the man in front of her.

"How else do you explain the attacks and the people targeted? Oh, I shouldn't have spoken out against the preacher during last night's meeting. Now I'm afraid I've doomed myself."

Aareth found three mugs that seemed to have escaped the mayhem surrounding them. One by one, he placed them on the bar. He looked pleased with himself as he poured generous amounts of whiskey in each mug. "Well, if you're going to die anyway, might as well have a drink."

Benjamin Clive looked at Sloan first. When she didn't stop him, he wasted no time in righting a fallen stool and taking the mug in both hands. Sloan raised her eyebrows as the man took long, burning draughts of the fierce liquid.

Aareth motioned for Sloan to come and take a cup.

"I think I'll pass. I'm not much of a drinker at nine in the morning, while I'm supposed to be working."

"Oh well." Aareth shook his head like that was the craziest thing anyone ever told him. He clinked mugs with Benjamin Clive. "More for us."

"Benjamin." Sloan walked over and stood next to Benjamin Clive. She pulled the list Elijah made them with names of all the deceased as well as the eyewitnesses. "This is a list we compiled with all the names of people who have died at the hands of the creature along with those who have seen it. How accurate is it?"

“It looks correct. My god. When you see the people you used to know written down like this—I mean, they’re all dead now. They’re just names on a list.”

“Benjamin,” Aareth poured both of them another glass of the dark whiskey, “can you tell us what all these people did for a living? You said that people were being targeted?”

Benjamin reached into his vest, pulling out a small pen. The man went to work over the paper, writing occupations next to all of the names.

“That’s right. When the attacks happened, people didn’t know what to think. Every possibility has been explored by now. From completely random attacks by a bear, all the way to killings from a wolf pack. But it makes the most sense to think the beast was sent as a curse to this town from the Divine.”

“Benjamin,” Sloan let the man finish but couldn’t hold her tongue, “I’m pretty sure God doesn’t single out small towns and terrorize them by sending demon creatures to kill people for fun.”

“Well, how do you explain this list?” Benjamin shrugged and handed the parchment back to Sloan. “Everyone that’s dead was either involved with alcohol, drugs, or was corrupted by money or power.”

Sloan gave Benjamin a sideways look before she examined the paper. Benjamin made a dash mark by each name then commented on their occupation before they died. The list was full of comments like “*bar owner*,” “*drug distributor*,” and “*prostitute*.”

“So,” Aareth leaned over the bar and cocked his head to the side to read along with Sloan, “if we buy in to the idea that God—I mean, the Divine—has sent some kind of animal to kill certain people, then how do you explain the death of the mayor, sheriff, and every police officer that worked in Burrow Den?”

“Everyone is so hush-hush about this.” Benjamin took a large breath before he took another drink from his mug. “Our mayor wasn’t the man everyone thought he was. He was

corrupt from the inside out. He held the police and sheriff in his pocket. The reason it's so overlooked is because he was a fair and likable man. But when Dr. Oliver Livingston came from New Hope with all that money—”

“Dr. Livingston was here?” Sloan slammed the paper on the bar locking Benjamin with a crazy look in her eyes.

“Ummm... yes. He came about a year ago to meet with the mayor. Only stayed for a day. When we asked the mayor what the meeting was about, he said the doctor wanted to keep lines of communication between New Hope and Burrow Den open as a sign of friendship and good faith. That's one of the reasons why we reached out to New Hope when the attacks spiraled out of control.”

Sloan was still trying to process the new information, when Aareth asked, “So what does this have to do with the mayor being corrupt?”

“After the doctor left, the mayor suddenly had more money than King Midas. He built himself that huge home. When Pastor Elijah started asking questions, he had the sheriff and deputies keep him in check.”

Sloan was trying to think back to the previous year, if she had known of Dr. Livingston making any prolonged trips outside of New Hope. Was it possible the doctor made the long journey to Burrow Den? But why would he have bothered? What was he planning with the mayor?

“Crazy, right?” Benjamin asked more to his glass of whiskey than his bar companions.

Aareth was staring into his glass, swishing around the mind-numbing liquid, when Sloan spoke again. “So we have what looks like a hit list on the not-so-honorable members of the community, and a meeting between Doctor Livingston and the Mayor of Burrow Den. What do you think, Aareth?”

“I think we have a lot of new information. It's time to start talking to people who have actually seen whatever it is that's causing all of these deaths.”

“Benjamin,” Sloan glanced at the short list of witnesses who had seen the animal and lived to talk about it, “there are only three names on the list of people who have encountered the animal and lived. Who do you think would be the most helpful to us?”

“Well, I wouldn’t rely on any of these people.” Benjamin took the paper again. He sucked at his bottom lip as he thought. “Old Man Shepherd is blind as a bat. These other two are as reliable as a dull knife. They’re probably just saying they’ve seen the beast for the attention. But maybe I can help.”

“You’ve seen this creature?” Warning signals went off in Sloan’s head. “Why isn’t your name on the list?”

“Oh, I’ve seen it all right. By the Divine One, I’ve seen it. I didn’t tell anyone about it because I thought they would laugh. Then, as the attacks happened more and more often, well, I got scared. Anyone who claimed to have seen the monster was killed a few days later by the beast itself. Then when the other so-called witnesses came forward with conflicting accounts of the animal, I decided to just stay out of it altogether.”

Benjamin raised a shaking mug to his mouth. Sloan and Aareth shared another sideways glance.

“Tell us what happened, Benjamin.” Aareth swirled the whiskey in his glass. “We’ll believe you.”

Benjamin reluctantly put the mug down starting a story that was too strange to be fiction.

THIRTY-NINE



JACK

“Are we almost there, Elizabeth?” Jack asked.

“Patience, tiny dancer,” Elizabeth said over her shoulder.

Jack, his father and their guide had been traveling for what seemed like hours. They were off any kind of path, heading deeper and deeper into the woods. Jack could see the side of the mountain that stood as a border to the known land approaching quickly.

The sun was high in the sky, signaling it was just past midday. The pace that Elizabeth kept was steady but slow. The young girl almost danced through the forest. She was a sight to watch, her wild hair flowing behind her, her head swaying to the voices that only she could hear.

Jack began to wonder how Abigail was able to cope with not only the loss of her mother but the fact that she had inherited the responsibility of caring for a sister like Elizabeth.

“We’re here!”

Jack examined the area. They were in a small clearing with trees on three sides and the looming slope of the mountain in front. There was no sign of a building, much less a laboratory.

“Elizabeth, did you take us all the way out here to show us the mountain?” Marcus asked in a gentle tone. “Do you think that mountain is a laboratory?”

“Ummm... No, Jack’s Dad, that would be crazy.” Elizabeth struck Marcus with a look that said he was an idiot.

“The laboratory is obviously inside the mountain. Looky here.”

Elizabeth walked to the side of the mountain that rose in front of them like the walls of New Hope. She placed a palm on the side of the rough rock surface and pushed. Nothing happened.

Jack glanced at his father with disapproval written across his face. He was about to open his mouth to ask Elizabeth why she had lied, when Elizabeth’s hand pulled some kind of trigger on the mountainside. There was a light puff of steam followed by the low, methodical sound of gears turning.

A door slowly slid from right to left, revealing a cave entrance.

“Elizabeth, how did you find this?” Jack asked, not believing what his eyes told him was very real.

“Oh, you know. I’m a smart cookie. Saw some strange men in the woods one day. I followed them here. Crazy, right? Wait until you see all the fancy stuff inside.”

“Elizabeth, wait.” Marcus moved to stand next to her and cautiously peered into the darkness. “We don’t know what’s in there—let Jack and me go first.”

“Are you okay? First, you think a mountain’s a laboratory, now you’re worried about an empty place? The men left weeks ago.” Elizabeth looked over at Jack, pointing to Marcus. “You’re a saint to have to deal with this guy.”

Jack shared a worried look with his father.

“Well, come on, guys; we have a lot to see.” Elizabeth skipped into the cave’s inky darkness.

“Well, what do you think?” Jack drew his wand, letting a green flame dance on its tip. “Into the belly of the beast?”

“Son, we are on the verge of something much bigger than either one of us. Mysterious laboratories in cave walls don’t just happen. Very powerful people are spending a lot of money to make this possible. We have to be ready for anything while remaining unwavering in our values, no matter what happens.”

“I know, Dad. Money, machines, weapons, and technology are useless and even dangerous without the right people to wield them.”

“Glad we’re on the same page.” Marcus’s staff also came alive with a green flame sprouting from the top of the stick. “Well, as you said, ‘Into the belly of the beast’.”

Jack took a step inside and then another. Very soon, he was swallowed by the darkness.

FORTY



SLOAN

“It was a few months ago, right before the first attacks started.” Benjamin told the story as if he were reliving the event itself. “It was just turning dark. I was working in my shop. Mrs. Jansen was having me fix a pair of her husband’s favorite shoes. The heels were worn through. Ahhh, that man loved to dance with his children. Anyway, I heard a thick snapping sound coming from the trees behind my house. Curious as to what could be making such a loud noise, I walked from my shop, out to the woods directly behind my home.

“Like I said, it was getting dark, so I had to squint into the light of the fading sun. Through the trees, I could see something large moving. At first, I thought it was unicorn. They are the largest animals in these parts of the woods, but it didn’t move like any unicorn I had ever seen. I’m no hero. I won’t pretend to be, even as I’m telling you this story. I was scared. Still, for some reason, my curiosity outweighed my fear. I stayed rooted to that same spot, trying to get a better look at whatever it was that was slowly making its way through the forest.

“There was a patch of ground the creature traveled through that was free from any tree or bush blocking my view. The light shone down at a perfect angle. I was finally able to get a clean look.”

Benjamin stopped his story to take another long drink from his mug. Sloan was beginning to wonder how coherent their storyteller was as he closed his eyes and steadied himself on

his stool. Wiping his mouth with the back of his left sleeve, he picked up the story again. “Listen, I know that there are no dogs or wolves or bears in the forest. What I saw looked like a kind of large canine. It was as big as a bear but long and slender like a wolf. The strangest thing wasn’t just that. It was so unnatural-looking. I mean, it looked like a—a creature more made than born. It had a huge upper body and a much smaller lower body. Its mouth was gigantic. Its dark, short hair made it blend into the forest, almost like camouflage. I was even close enough to see thick muscles ripple beneath the creature’s fur.

“Everything I’m telling you now I saw in a few seconds before the creature moved on into the forest. I’m not sure if it didn’t see me, or maybe it did, and for whatever reason wasn’t interested in me. Whatever the case, it disappeared. I was so shaken trying to figure out what I saw that I kept the information to myself that night. I was going to tell everyone in the morning, but that night’s when the first attack happened. I was afraid if I came with information after the murder had taken place, I would be blamed for not saying anything sooner or labeled a lunatic. I mean, after all, what was it that I saw anyway?”

Neither Sloan nor Aareth could answer Benjamin’s question.

“The largest canines that roam this part of the Outland are wolves and they’re no more than sixty to seventy pounds at the largest,” Aareth mused.

“That’s the answer I explored,” Benjamin agreed after another long drink. “But this thing was gigantic. I’ve seen wolves before—they’re not much larger than a big dog. This thing was massive. Easily four to five times the size of a wolf and the way it was shaped—I’ve never seen that much muscle on an animal, not to mention the size of its jaws or the way it was colored to blend right into the forest.”

“It’s like it was born to hunt,” Sloan said under her breath. “An apex predator; hard to see, built to kill.”

Benjamin and Aareth looked at Sloan for a further explanation.

“I don’t know,” she said to their questioning glances. “I don’t know if we’re dealing with a new species or something much darker than that. With any luck, Jack and Marcus will have found something that can help.”

“And if they haven’t?” Aareth asked.

“Either way, this thing needs to be killed,” Sloan said. “I’ve never met an enemy, human or animal, that can’t be dealt with by cold, hard steel.”

Benjamin mumbled something to himself as he stared out the bar window.

“What was that?” Sloan asked.

“Oh nothing. I’m sorry. I think I’ve had a bit too much to drink. I agree with your plan and comment about blades being able to kill, but what if it’s not of this earth?”

Sloan’s rational mind refused to believe that the animal was either a demon or spirit; still, the possibility was there. “Then God help us all.”

FORTY-ONE



JACK

The cave was unlike any Jack had ever seen before. Living the life of a tracking sorcerer, he had been inside his fair share of caves and dens. There was no denying that this one was different. The cave walls had been smoothed on all sides. It was like a machine had come boring a hall right through the mountain. Jack's right hand caressed the wall as he walked deeper and deeper into the abyss. His left hand held the handle of his wand that illuminated the dark passage with emerald light.

Even when his eyes did adjust to the darkness, the visibility was slim at best. *Come on, don't be a baby*, Jack said to himself. *Elizabeth already went in before you and she doesn't even have a weapon.*

Jack continued down the path for a few dozen yards, the light from his wand feeling smaller and smaller by the second. Then his hand hit something metallic. He stopped in his tracks. Marcus nearly ran into him.

“What is it, Jack? Do you see something?”

“There—there's something here,” Jack said, examining the smooth rock wall, able to make out a square box with a lever in place. Jack gripped the handle and flipped the switch. There was a spark, then bright light flooded the cave.

Jack threw his arms over his eyes as the inhuman light blinded him. Not knowing what to expect, Jack blinked as fast as he could, willing his eyes to adjust and examine the scene in front of him.

Disbelief seized at his heart. The hall they were in opened into a large room. There were mage lights everywhere; strung up on hanging stalactites, mounted on holders and even strung up along the walls like Jack had seen in the Queen's palace.

Jack had only a moment to appreciate the mage light. The chamber the cave opened up into was far more interesting. The room reminded Jack of Edison's lab in New Hope. This one, however, was set up with beakers and tubes of all shapes and sizes.

"See, I told you guys. Cool, right?"

Jack saw Elizabeth lounging on top of one of the tables, twirling her hair.

"It's very cool, Elizabeth. Good job. We wouldn't have found this place without you."

"Thanks, Jack." Elizabeth's face turned red, then a huge smile split her lips. "You can probably imagine with everyone thinking I'm crazy, I don't receive words of affirmation often."

"Are you saying you're not crazy?" Jack stopped in his tracks and looked at Elizabeth.

"No, I'm definitely loony, but it's nice to hear praise from someone other than my sister."

Jack walked down a few steps into the large room to his right. It was a scene straight out of any mad scientist book Jack had ever read. Ninety percent of the equipment in the room Jack had never seen; others, he had only heard about. Scales, burners, magnifying glasses—they were all there—and as Jack traveled deeper and deeper into the room, something else was becoming clear.

Whoever had been in the lab and whatever had been happening didn't end well. Broken glass began to show up, and blood spattering on the floor and walls begged a dozen questions at once.

"Dad, are you seeing this?"

"Yes. It looks like whoever was here took off in a hurry, leaving almost everything behind. Jack, take a look at this."

Jack walked to the opposite side of the room, where his father was examining a large cage and two tables with straps. The table was covered in gore. The cage looked like it had been bent from the inside out. Memories of the strange unicorn they came across as well as the superhuman assassin they encountered on the mage locomotive forced themselves to the front of Jack's mind.

"Do you think—do you think they were doing experiments here?"

"I don't know." Marcus took a deep breath then let it out slowly. "What we can tell from all the blood is that whatever happened here did not go as intended."

Marcus crouched on the floor, reaching a hand to a blood spattering. "It's dry. Between the color of the blood and the thin layer of dust on everything, I'm guessing the place was abandoned a few months ago."

"A few months ago is when the attacks started," Jack added.

"Hey, you guys, look at this."

Jack and Marcus turned and headed over to Elizabeth, who stood staring at a huge pile of books.

What once had been a bookcase full of volumes of scientific research was now a splintered mass of paper and wood.

"Maybe your answers are in there?" Elizabeth pointed to the pile.

"Well," Marcus said with as little enthusiasm as Jack ever heard in his voice. "There's only one way to find out. Dig in."

For the next few hours, the unlikely trio of explorers examined book after book. It seemed improbable to Jack that they would find anything. However, other than the condition of the room, the books were the only thing to go on.

Volume after volume was nothing more than textbooks or generic manuals on scientific studies, such as genetic engineering and human anatomy. Jack hated complaining, but

he felt like he needed to voice his opinion as he tossed yet another book to the side.

“So what exactly are we looking for? We know this is a laboratory. They were obviously doing some kind of secret testing here.”

“A journal, some kind of record of their findings.” Marcus tossed another book to the side. “There should be something here to tell us what they were doing. Something to put all of these puzzle pieces together.”

“This is like looking for a needle in a haystack of needles,” Jack said.

“Wait! Look at this. Is this something?” Elizabeth lifted a book into the air.

The book she held in her hand was worn and brown. At first, Jack thought it was dirty, but as he got closer, he could see it too was covered in dried blood.

“Looks like a journal.” Elizabeth handed the book to Jack. “Or a diary if it was a girl. That’s funny, right? How, if it’s a boy’s book, it’s a journal, but if it belongs to a member of the opposite sex, it’s a diary. Why can’t they just have one word for both?”

“Fair point, Elizabeth.” Jack accepted the offered book. “Let’s see what’s inside.”

Marcus continued to rummage over the rest of the books while Jack flipped through the blood-crusting pages of the journal. Jack couldn’t believe his eyes. It looked like a day-by-day account that a scientist made during his stay at the cave laboratory. Jack flipped to the last page, which was almost entirely covered by dark, dried blood. The entry’s date was covered by the bloodstain, but the few sentences that Jack could make out read:

Subject A21 has shown impressive resilience to the treatment. The specimen is both larger than those before and has shown a level of aggression not noted in previous subjects. However,

we have been ordered to shut down the cave laboratory and head back to New Hope. It seems like what little progress we have made has been too late.

Our plan is to exterminate any current test subjects in this facility. Whatever our sister laboratory in New Hope has been working on must have been accomplished—that is the only way our assignment would be shut down. This will be our last entry, as today we take A21 out of its holding container and...

That was it. The rest of the page was impossible to read. Jack was dumbfounded while at the same time shuffling to the front of the book to start from the beginning.

“Son, I think we found out who’s behind all of this.”

Jack looked up at his father, who held a particularly large glass beaker. His father turned it upside down and pointed to a small emblem nearly invisible to the naked eye.

Jack squinted then looked at his father, wide-eyed. Stamped into the glass was the same emblem found on the mage-powered bicycles, a small gear surrounding an “LI” in the shape of smokestacks, Dr. Oliver Livingston’s crest.

FORTY-TWO



SLOAN

“So, demon sent from the Divine, wild canine creature on the loose, or none of the above?” Aareth stared without really seeing anything, too deep in thought.

Sloan and Aareth had thanked Benjamin for his information and left the bar.

They were now walking back to the mayor’s house, hoping to find Jack and Marcus and compare notes.

“I wish I knew. Whatever it is, I think Benjamin was telling the truth. He seemed too scared to be lying.”

“I agree. Whether he has accurate information or not, I feel like he was telling us what he believed the truth was. I think the key to this is finding out who would want those people killed. If it is coordinated attacks, who has the most to gain from having those people out of the picture?”

Sloan shook her head as images of Elijah came to mind. While they walked the town’s main road, people passed with nods and friendly smiles. Sloan was beginning to feel a burden, a burden that rested on her shoulders with each passing hour. These people were looking to her to help them. They were looking to her to save them from whatever this monster was. Even with the information from Benjamin, they were no closer to discovering the truth.

“Oh, there you are.” Sloan was interrupted from her thoughts by Elijah Ahab’s familiar voice. “I saw you two enter the bar and thought that it would be best to let you finish indulging yourselves. Besides, as a man of the Divine, I

wouldn't set foot inside of that establishment. Was Benjamin a helpful interview for you?"

"How did you know we were speaking with Benjamin?" Sloan asked, ignoring the other comments the preacher made.

"Oh, I noticed him walk out, so I imagined you had a chat with him."

"Yes, it was great," Aareth chimed in. "Thanks for the list you left for us. We missed you at dinner last night and breakfast today. Out trying to help track down the beast as well, huh?"

"Not at all." Elijah was one of the few men who matched Aareth for height. Right now, he used that ability to look Aareth directly in the eyes. "That creature has been a holy angel from the Divine, cleaning up our town and disposing of the evils of men. I have been out caring for the worried and fearful. You can imagine without a mayor or sheriff, the town needs someone to turn to."

"Oh, I can imagine, all right," Sloan said.

A stressed moment passed between the three before Elijah found his voice again.

"Well, I must be off. We're having a special meeting at the church this afternoon to pray. You're more than welcome to join if you'd like."

"Thank you for the offer," Sloan said. "But we still have a killer on the loose."

Elijah nodded a goodbye and walked past them. Sloan and Aareth continued on their path back to the recently deceased mayor's house.

Aareth bit his bottom lip while sucking in air. It made a low whistling noise. "It seems like he has motive, but does he have the ability? He doesn't strike me as a person capable of unleashing the dogs of hell on someone. And all the reports have been of an animal, not a man."

Sloan was about to offer an alternate hypothesis, when the two rounded a corner. A horse and rider waited at the steps to

the mayor's house. Even from this distance, Sloan could see the Queen's colors worn by the soldier.

Sloan quickened her pace, with Aareth right behind her. When the soldier saw the two approaching, he stood with a respectful salute. "Ma'am, messenger from New Hope directly from the Queen."

"At ease, Sergeant." Sloan returned the salute. "What's this all about?"

The sergeant was young and fit, but from the long ride, Sloan could tell he was spent. He was dirty from the top of his head to the bottom of his boots.

"I have a note, ma'am, from Queen Eckert. I was instructed to ride here as fast as I could and deliver this note only to you."

Sloan took the offered envelope from the soldier and broke the seal shaped in the royal sigil. Her eyes flew over the words as worry slowly inked its way through her veins like a spreading disease.

Sloan,

I'm writing you now, not to worry you but to warn you. The events in Burrow Den are connected far closer to New Hope than either one of us thought. There are rumors spreading of a revolt among the soldiers and the city's population is uneasy. There has been an attempt made to assassinate me, but at great cost to your own men's lives, they have kept me safe.

Everything started as soon as you left. It is like someone's hand is being forced with your presence in that city. Be wary, Sloan, and trust no one. Find out what is going on in Burrow Den. Strengthen our bond with the people. We may find ourselves short of allies very soon.

Eleanor

FORTY-THREE



JACK

Under the setting sun, Jack led his father and Elizabeth back through the cave tunnel and the forest surrounding Burrow Den. With the finding of the cave and the journal, Jack had forgotten his own hunger at missing lunch. The journal was tucked into his long brown leather jacket. He would give anything to sit down and read the book; however, he knew they had to make it back to the city.

They needed to tell Sloan and Aareth what they found as soon as possible. They needed to warn them something that went beyond the borders of Burrow Den was afoot.

Even with Elizabeth giving directions and the intense speed they traveled, it was still a few hours before the trio saw the first building marking the outline of the city. The sun was all but lost behind the mountains, small lights in the sky marking stars and constellations.

Jack wasn't sure what he planned to do first as he wiped perspiration from his sun-bronzed forehead. He wanted to read the book, tell Sloan and Aareth what they found, and eat all at the same time.

His decision was made for him as they walked through the deceased mayor's door. Sloan and Aareth were both hunched over two pieces of paper, an untouched meal between them.

"Oh, she's mean." Elizabeth caught sight of Sloan and turned to go. "I have to get back anyway. Abigail will be looking for me. She worries a lot. You know, since I'm crazy and everything."

“Elizabeth,” Jack’s words stopped the fiery beauty in her tracks, “I just wanted to say thank you. If it wasn’t for you, we would have never found the laboratory or journal.”

Elizabeth brightened and gave an awkward half bow, half curtsy before she ran next door to her own house.

“There you two are.” Sloan looked up from the papers in front of her. “Did you find anything?”

“Tracks that made no sense.” Marcus removed his jacket and sat at the large wooden table. “Tracks belonging to an animal much bigger than has the right to exist, and a secret laboratory in the side of a mountain.”

Sloan and Aareth exchanged bewildered glances and then looked back at Marcus and Jack.

“Why don’t we eat and we can each tell one another what we found?” Marcus suggested as he served himself from the piping hot containers on the table. “And we should probably pay Abigail something for feeding us every day.”

Jack devoured both food and information. Dinner was one of the best he could ever remember. It was a twist on shepherd’s pie with mashed potatoes, gravy, and vegetables. Abigail even provided a pumpkin tart for dessert.

The information Sloan and Aareth shared was just as tantalizing as the food in front of them. There were moments in the conversation Jack robotically moved fork from plate to mouth without even looking down. Aareth told them about Benjamin Clive while Sloan related the details of the Queen’s note.

Sloan and Aareth were just as mesmerized when Jack and Marcus told them of the tracks and secret laboratory. It was over a second piece of pumpkin tart that Jack started to slow down. His appetite demanded more, while his stomach screamed for a break.

“So,” Sloan said, leaning from the table and looking up at the ceiling, “I think we should ask the inspector what he makes of all of this.”

“There is so much information that we’ve found today, it’s almost impossible to sift through it all in a reasonable amount of time,” Aareth said, wrapping his long black hair behind him in a ponytail. “What we need to do is make a list of what we know for certain, and Jack—I’d like to spend the night reading that journal to see if there’s anything in there that might help us or give us a definitive answer on exactly what the scientists in the secret mountain laboratory were doing.”

Jack readily handed over the leather-bound journal. Marcus stood and walked over to a cabinet that held pen and paper. He returned to the group, producing a small pair of glasses he perched on his nose. “Okay, let’s see what we have.”

“We know from the Queen’s note someone is worried about what we’ll find here, someone powerful enough to make an attempt on her life.” Aareth started the conversation with a balled fist and raised a finger every time he spoke. “We have to assume the laboratory was set in place to perform experiments of some kind. Benjamin Clive saw the beast in the woods right before the attacks started. If we draw a rough timeline, that’s after the last entry in this journal.”

“The mage-powered bicycles were stamped with Doctor Oliver Livingston’s emblem and so were the beakers and equipment in the mountain laboratory.” Sloan rocked forward in her seat as a light bulb clicked in her head. “Benjamin said he saw Doctor Livingston come to the town just for a day to meet with the mayor, and after that, the mayor hit the jackpot. He built this house and started controlling the law enforcement in the city.”

Marcus was bent over his paper, writing like a madman to keep up with the information that was being related. He stopped now as he looked into the eyes of his son and the two other members of the party. “If Benjamin was telling the truth, then all roads lead to Livingston. He would have the financial backing and power to create a laboratory, and he’s one of only a few that has access to mage lights. The cave we found was full of them.”

“So,” Jack picked up the proverbial pause in conversation, “Livingston came to the city, bought the mayor’s secrecy, and set up a lab to do experiments?” Jack paused as he thought back to the battle on the steam locomotive and the man with the scarred face that moved faster than any human could. The man that was so strong he could bend Aareth’s large arms in on himself. Jack also was reminded of the mutated unicorn they found the first night after escaping the desert storm. “Could Livingston have been doing experiments on animals and people?”

The room was silent.

“It certainly seems like all the evidence points to Doctor Livingston, but before we bring a case against the most powerful man in New Hope, we’ll need solid proof. Not to mention we still have a bloodthirsty monster on the loose.” Aareth sighed. “Playing devil’s advocate, whoever was running the experiments could have simply bought Livingston equipment.”

“Captain? Where do you want us to start?” Marcus asked, setting down his pen.

“Aareth will look into the journal to see if there’s anything useful to our cause. We rest tonight, start early tomorrow morning. All four of us will go. We need to track down and end this animal before any more loss of life occurs. We’ll spilt up tomorrow. I’ll go with Jack and Aareth with Marcus. The Queen sent us here to do a job. Heaven help the man or animal that gets in our way.”

FORTY-FOUR



JACK

It was still early, but Jack's body was reminding him he'd been traveling hard and far all day. It was times like these when Jack was tired beyond all reason that he wondered how his father was able to keep up. His father was in excellent shape for a man his age. Still, he endured the harsh pace all day without so much as a complaint. Jack smiled as he thought of his father being chided by Elizabeth earlier.

The young girl was obviously out of her mind, but there were glimpses of intelligence, maybe even genius somewhere deep underneath.

As Jack lay in bed, he stared at the ceiling, replaying the events of the day and all the information they discovered. Was Doctor Livingston the responsible party? Was he the head of the snake or just a pawn in this game? A game? Was this all it was to someone? A game where people's lives were spent like currency and the playing pieces were advanced killing machines and assassins?

Jack tossed and turned as his body tried to find the sleep his mind wouldn't allow. It was while in the middle of a dream Jack would later forget that he heard the first tick.

At first, he thought it was part of his dream, but it came again, and this time, louder. It was a sharp slapping noise coming from his window. Jack squinted in the dark, throwing off his thick blanket.

He stood in the dark, making sure he wasn't hearing things. It came again. Someone was throwing pebbles at his

window. Jack's heart caught in his throat, not in fear, but at the hope of who it might be. Slowly, Jack opened his curtains peering into the night.

Just as he had anticipated, Abigail was there with a look on her face somewhere between a cross of happiness to see him and fear that they would be seen. She put a slender finger to her full lips and motioned for him to come down.

Jack gave her a quick nod. He turned and grabbed his boots and jacket. Slowly turning the handle to his room door, Jack gently stepped over the wood floors and down the winding staircase. The room was dark save a single candle blazing near the front door entrance.

Jack tiptoed through the room, praying with each step taken a wooden squeal wouldn't give him away. His luck held. Jack exited the large manor, escaping into the cool night.

He rounded the house and made his way along the white picket fence separating the Ahab residence from the house where he and his companions now made their headquarters.

Abigail was there waiting for him. She was wearing a tight-fitting copper dress with long sleeves that opened at the bottom. Her dark hair fell beside her face. The moon was high in the sky and every curve of her body was accentuated by shadow.

"There he is. I thought you were going to sleep right through my requests for an audience with the famous sorcerer from New Hope."

"I wish I was from New Hope," Jack admitted, searching her face for any sign of strain. "Are you okay? Is everything all right?"

"I just wanted to thank you for being so kind to my sister." Abigail took a step closer to Jack. "You and your father were all she could talk about when she got home today."

Jack bit back his first question. Did Abigail know about the secret laboratory? Jack didn't think she was involved. Had Elizabeth told her? For her own safety, it was best she knew as

little as possible. Jack decided to leave the secret cave laboratory alone and instead simply accept the gratitude.

“Of course. Your sister was a huge help to us today. I didn’t know that you two were related.”

“Yeah, I love my sister, but she’s not the first person I usually mention when I meet strangers. She’s—” Abigail opened her mouth, but no words came out as she struggled to find the right terminology.

“She’s special. I can tell that deep down she’s actually really smart.”

“She is, isn’t she? Most of the time, she’s off talking about secret caves and biological animals, and other times, I think she understands me better than anyone else.”

Jack did an awkward half nod as he fought not to say anything.

“Jack, you seem like great guy. Not just because you’re so kind to my sister, but because of the way you’ve been raised. Can I ask you a question? You have to promise not to read too deep into what I say?”

“Sure.”

“If I knew something that would help your search for the animal causing these attacks, but it would put someone very dear to me in a harm’s way—what should I do?”

“My father would say that if you have the opportunity to do something to help others, then you are morally obligated to do it.” Jack took a deep breath peering into Abigail’s large, dark eyes. “That’s why he and I are here in the first place. The Queen asked for our help. He volunteered without a second’s hesitation. My dad has this weird superpower of always being able to do the right thing.”

“You have no idea how lucky you are to have a father who cares for you so much, Jack.” Abigail lowered her head, unwilling to maintain eye contact. “Is it strange that when I talk to you, I feel—safe?”

Jack was so far out of his comfort zone while talking to the opposite sex, he wasn't even on the same planet. He'd managed to do a good job disguising his awkward tendencies toward Abigail so far. Now Abigail's last question was too much for him to handle. "I—ummm—I mean, no?"

"I wish I had the same courage you and your father do. To do the right thing no matter what position it puts you in. I'm not sure when the time comes I'll be able to make the decision I know is right."

"When the time comes for you to do the right thing, I know you will." Jack could feel his heart racing a mile a minute as his feet took on a mind of their own. He stepped closer. Before he knew what he was doing, he was brushing a strand of dark hair away from Abigail's cheek. "And I'll be there to help you."

The look Abigail gave him made Jack feel like he could take on an entire army. He could feel the blood rush to his face like a bright sun shining down on him, and then, as their lips gravitated toward one another, a blood-curdling, inhuman scream tore through their perfect moment.

FORTY-FIVE



JACK

The noise sounded like it was coming from somewhere in town. Jack looked at Abigail, who stood pale, watching him for direction. Jack reached for the weapons that he had left inside. “Go inside your house. Lock the door.”

“But there’s something I have to tell you about my fa—”

More screams split the sky, but now there was another sound. It was a howl of a creature Jack had never heard in all his years of tracking. “Please, Abigail, go inside. You’ll be safe.”

Without waiting for a reply, Jack took off at a run. As he rounded the mayor’s house, the door burst open with Sloan in the lead, followed by Aareth and Marcus.

Sloan ignored Jack as she bolted toward the sounds of chaos at a dead sprint. Sword already drawn in her left hand, she was the picture of a Valkyrie incarnate.

“Let’s go, Romeo. You’re going to miss all the action.” Aareth sprinted past next, his gauntlets on his hands.

“Come on, Jack. Eyes open, wand ready.” Marcus skidded up to Jack, handing him his belt, the wand still secured in the holster.

Jack followed Sloan, who, in another lifetime, could have been a professional athlete. Even Aareth’s large legs were no match for hers as she practically flew over the dirt road through the center of town. Candles and lanterns were lit in all the windows. Even the bravest townsfolk were only willing to

peek out the occasional head or part the blinds to see what was going on.

The first thought that came to mind when Jack saw the general unwillingness to help displayed by the people of Burrow Den was “cowards.” But he had to remind himself how much the town endured over the past few months.

The cries of human anguish were gone, soaked up by the cool night. The only noise was the sound of the creature’s snarls. The closest thing Jack could relate the noise to was a cross between a wolf howling at the moon and the arcane guttural noise a lion makes, deep down in the far recesses of its chest.

As the group got closer, the sound became louder. It was coming from a medium-size building near the edge of town with a large sign that read *Shoe Repair*.

Seconds before the four emissaries to the Queen arrived at the building, the animal noises stopped. Jack half expected Sloan to slow down and wait for the rest of the group. Maybe he thought she would come up with a plan for surrounding the building. Not Sloan. Jack looked on in shock as the captain of the Queen’s personal guard jump-kicked the wooden door, sending it flying inward with a shower of splinters.

Jack, Aareth, and Marcus all arrived at the same time. Jack had his wand out, alive with dark green flames as they entered. The interior of the shop was a mess. Shoes, small nails, hammers, rolls of leather and cloth were strewn in every direction. Bottles lay broken on the floor along with chairs and so much blood, Jack would have thought an entire family had been slaughtered.

A body so mangled by claw and bite marks it didn’t resemble a human being at all lay in the corner of the room.

“It’s—it’s not here.” Sloan appeared from somewhere deeper in the house out of breath.

“It’s Benjamin Clive.” Aareth knelt next to the bloodied body and shook his head.

Jack looked at his father, who was already recalling the green magic from his staff. Something on the floor had caught the tracker's attention. Jack followed his gaze. There were the same large footprints they had seen in the forest. The tracks were imprinted in blood throughout the house.

"How are you two at tracking at night?" Sloan sheathed her sword and skewered both Jack and his father with a wildly determined look.

"We're good," Marcus said with a nod.

"He's being modest," Jack chimed in. "He's the best."

"Then let's find and kill this thing," Sloan said.

"We'll cover more ground if we split up." Sloan led the way out of Benjamin Clive's house as she spoke over her shoulder. "Jack with me and Aareth with Marcus. We'll take the—"

Sloan stopped mid-sentence as they walked outside. Jack knew whatever had halted Sloan in her tracks couldn't be good, and as he exited the building, he was right.

It seemed like the entire population of Burrow Den, who cowered in their houses just minutes before, were now surrounding Benjamin Clive's home. Torches added light to the night, with the occasional pitchfork and club mixed in. The expressions on the faces of the townspeople were ones of fear, curiosity, and anger all rolled into one—a mixture Jack had seen before and knew was as deadly as a powder keg.

"Did you kill the beast?" Elijah Ahab walked through the crowd. He stopped at the front, facing the group of emissaries. He wore a long black coat that had seen too many years of service. His balding head glimmered in the light of the torches around him.

"No," Sloan said slowly.

"But the monster has struck again?" Elijah shouted. His face twisted from honest and polite to something else entirely.

"Benjamin Clive is dead. We're on our way now to track the animal we wi—"

“Another dead? Isn’t that why you’re here? To stop this? If the Queen’s own best from New Hope can’t stop this plague, maybe it’s not of this world. Maybe it’s not meant to be stopped until it has finished what it has been sent for. Just like the angel of the Divine One came down to earth, so too this creature was sent to punish us for our sins!”

There was a murmur among the crowd as heads nodded and whispers of agreement were shared.

“We’ve only been here for a few days. It’s not as though the creature has eluded our grasp for weeks or months on end. Angel of the Divine or not, we will find it and we will stop it.”

“How dare you speak of killing the Divine’s creature in such a way?” Elijah took a step back from Sloan’s words like he had been stung by a wasp. “As if you could stop it. What do you know of heavenly creatures and words of scripture? You are just a woman; a girl, really.”

Jack braced himself for the tirade of anger he was sure Sloan would unleash on her target. No such rebuttal came. Instead, she stood firm and took a deep breath.

“My being a woman or not, if I was a captain of the Queen’s guard or not, has no bearing on what needs to be done. I wouldn’t stand by and let this happen to you or the town under any circumstances. We will find and kill it because it is the right thing to do, regardless of where we have come from or who we are.”

Elijah let out a loud laugh.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw Aareth take a step forward. A hand pulled him gently back as Marcus moved to stand next to Sloan. Elijah opened his mouth again but didn’t get a chance to speak.

“Proverbs twenty-eight, one.”

Elijah turned his viper-like eyes from Sloan and looked at Marcus as if he were an unwanted dinner guest.

“You wanted scripture, Preacher? There you go. Proverbs twenty-eight, one, ‘The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous will walk as bold as lions.’ It’s interesting that

you run or hide when you hear the creature and we run to meet it. We are the lions, Preacher Ahab, and you can believe that. Now let us go and do what lions do best. When we bring back the creature, we can all decide together if it's an angel of the Divine or not."

Everyone stood stunned at the boldness Marcus showed, none more than Jack. His father was generally a quiet man. This was a whole new side to his father Jack had never seen, a side that made him proud. Even now he could feel respect growing in his chest.

Elijah was practically boring holes in the group from where he stood. The intense stare in Sloan's eyes only infuriated him further. Clearly, he had expected her to back down.

"We'll see, how this goes." Elijah glared at Sloan. "We'll see."

With that, the preacher turned on his heels and disappeared in the mob. The crowd seemed to relax at the preacher's absence and began dispersing themselves or peeking into the house of the deceased Benjamin Clive.

The four hunters huddled. Jack caught a look of gratitude pass from Sloan to Marcus before she started to speak.

"Thanks to Elijah, we're further behind whatever this thing is now. Let's go and get this animal." Sloan looked at Marcus with a sly smile. "What was the last part of that verse? 'As bold as lions'?"

"As bold as lions," Marcus repeated.

FORTY-SIX



JACK

Wand ready in his hand, Jack concentrated on the ground in front of him. The group started together, but as expected, they lost the creature's path. Jack and Sloan headed deeper into the forest, while Marcus and Aareth doubled back.

The cold steel in Jack's hand comforted him. He had never been afraid while on a hunt and he wasn't now, but he couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched.

Sloan must have felt it as well. Jack noticed her glance over her shoulder every few minutes.

The forest was dark and the earth moist as a light mist spread over the ground. Tracking would have been impossible for the average hunter, but Jack was anything but average. Everything in the forest spoke to him and meant something. A broken twig here, a crunched leaf there were all signs pointing to their prey.

"Have you found the trail again?" Sloan asked.

"I've found *a* trail. Something large has moved this way within the last hour, but I can't be sure it's our beast. It's so strange. It's like it knows it's being tracked. There aren't any prints. It's chosen to stick to rockier or harder paths."

"That's not normal, is it? I mean, it shouldn't know not to leave prints, right?"

"Not at all."

Sloan sighed and Jack looked behind him. Sloan wore her normal uniform: boots, tight pants, and a long coat. Her hair

was braided, but a few strands stuck to her forehead. “What?”

“Nothing.” Jack turned back to sweeping the forest for any signs of their prey. “I just thought for sure you were going to blast Elijah when he started talking to you like that.”

Jack waited for a reply for what seemed like a full minute.

“Yeah, I guess I kind of surprised myself too. I’m just done proving myself to anyone anymore.”

Jack was about to speak again, when the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. He came to a stop. He had tracked enough animals to know when the tables were turned.

“Jack, what is it?”

“It’s watching us.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

Sloan drew her sword, placing her back against Jack’s. There was a rustle in a large bush twenty yards to their right. Jack pointed his wand in the direction, ready to release magic in a heartbeat.

A low whistle that didn’t sound like anything Jack ever heard filled the air around them. It didn’t sound human or machine made. It was like a low purr, barely audible. The bush stopped shaking and the noise evaporated into the night air, making Jack wonder if he had actually heard anything at all.

Tense moments passed, but still nothing showed. Sloan made the first move. Slowly, she headed for the bush.

Jack followed close behind, but when they arrived, not even a track remained of whatever pushed the bush to the side. Jack and Sloan looked at each other in disbelief.

They searched for the rest of the night to no avail. Whatever they were tracking was the smartest creature Jack had ever come across. It skirted them like a person would, maybe even smarter than a person.

The sun had already risen before Sloan’s persistent nature allowed them to give up. It was another few hours and the sun

had reached a high point in the sky before they made it back to town. Jack was exhausted. Between the lack of sleep and energy exerted, he was ready to fall into bed and never wake up again. As they approached the house, they saw a figure exiting.

The tall man looked in both directions, still not noticing Jack and Sloan approach. As they got closer, they could see it was Elijah Ahab. When he finally did see them coming, he took off at a run.

FORTY-SEVEN



MARCUS

“Nice use of the gospel back there, Marcus. I didn’t know you were a man of the Word.”

“Well, I guess we both have things we haven’t shared with one another, right?”

“I guess so.” Aareth addressed Marcus’ back. The two had doubled back when they lost the tracks of the elusive creature.

Marcus lost the animal’s paw prints when the forest’s soft earth changed to hard-packed dirt and rocky terrain. It was the middle of the night and Marcus was nowhere near ready to give up, but he knew they would have a hard go of picking up the creature again. It was dark in the forest, and with no sun for hours to come, their chances were looking bleaker by the moment.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, what’s on your mind?” Marcus slowed his pace so Aareth could walk next to him.

“I was wondering how you do it.”

“How I do what?”

“How you manage to always make the right decision?”

“Oh, I think you’re giving me too much credit, Aareth.” Marcus brushed a rogue strand of brown hair from his forehead.

“No I’m not. And you’re doing it again,” Aareth answered, wearing a worried expression.

“Doing what again?” Marcus asked.

“You’re being modest. Which would be the right thing to do when someone gives you a compliment.”

“There’s something on your mind, Inspector. What is it?”

“I used to be like you, Marcus. I used to be a good, upstanding citizen of the Crown. When my wife was murdered, a switch flipped. I’ve—I’ve done things now that I can never take back. Do you think there’s hope of being the man I once was? The man you are now?”

“There’s always hope, Aareth.” Marcus took his eyes from the surrounding to give Aareth his full attention. “I lost my wife when Jack was just a baby. I can still hear the lullabies she used to sing for Jack. It’s not easy. I won’t lie to you. It’s a battle that you have to choose to fight every day. It’s a battle that if you choose not to fight, you’ve already lost. We all have our own burdens to bear in this life. Some of us choose not to bear our burden, so it weighs us down, eventually crushing us.”

Marcus paused for his words to sink in.

“I already know my burdens are alcohol and violence.” Aareth was nodding along as the words resonated with his own life.

“Knowing that is a big step in the right direction, Aareth. There are multiple interpretations of ourselves in all of us, fighting for dominance. The question is which version of yourself are you going to choose to be? Decisions we make every day take us further down paths that lead to who we are and who we will become.”

“I think you missed your calling in life. You should have been a preacher. I can think of at least one town that would be better off with you at the pulpit.” Aareth let out a huge breath.

Marcus knew Aareth was done with the conversation. He needed time to think, but Marcus could read people like he could read tracks. He understood there was plenty of good still left in Aareth. It would be up to the inspector if he let the light shine through the cracks.

“Sun’s rising,” Aareth remarked, raising his right hand to shield his bright blue eyes.

“We should search a bit further,” Marcus said. “If I know our captain, she won’t head back to town until every last option is explored.”

The two men spent the next few hours scouring the area. But no matter how hard they looked, once the prints from the back of Benjamin Clive’s house had vanished into the forest, they were gone.

Finally content they had done all they physically could, Marcus called a halt and the two men tracked back to Burrow Den. As they entered the city, people greeted them with cold eyes. It seemed like the friendly townsfolk who welcomed them with open arms just a few days ago were now replaced with an army of skeptics.

A figure darted through the middle of town and ran up the church stairs. Before Marcus or Aareth could say anything to Elijah Ahab, he retreated into the church, slamming the door behind him.

“Looks like someone was late for confession,” Aareth said under his breath.

FORTY-EIGHT



JACK

“Why do you think he ran when he saw us?” Jack asked as he entered the house with Sloan.

“Who knows? That guy is beyond crazy. Let’s make sure he didn’t take anything.”

Jack made his way through the large front room and up the winding staircase. Everything in his room was how he had left it. The bed welcomed him and Jack was debating whether or not he could afford a nap before his father and Aareth arrived.

The question was answered by the sound of the front door opening and his father’s voice. “Anyone home?”

Jack made a mental note to visit his bed very soon and walked back down the stairs. Sloan was already there briefing the men on the peculiar noise they heard in the forest and the lack of tracks to follow.

“It was the same with us. I mean, minus the weird whistling sound. When we lost the tracks just outside Benjamin Clive’s house, we couldn’t find them again,” Marcus said.

“We need to find answers. This is getting ridiculous.” Sloan balled her fist in anger and slammed it against a wooden wall. “That preacher is going to get the entire town to turn on us soon.”

“Speaking of crazy preachers, why was Elijah running from the mansion?” Aareth asked as he lounged in a chair, helping himself to leftovers from the previous night’s dinner.

“You got us,” Jack said joining Aareth at the table.

Soon Marcus and Sloan were munching along with them. Each one of the four members was beyond exhausted. Jack was forcing his brain to form some kind of explanation, but it just wasn't there.

“Do you think that them not bringing us any more food is a sign?” Aareth asked as he fought to keep his eyes open.

“Who knows? Maybe,” Sloan said.

“No, I don't think so,” Jack mumbled before he could stop himself. “Abigail wouldn't do that.”

“Oh, Abigail, huh?” Sloan's eyebrow rose in disapproval. “Weren't you already outside last night when we heard the screams? A little late-night visit with Abigail, maybe?”

Jack turned beet red as he felt his face warm.

“Shouldn't we be concentrating on how to get this thing?” Marcus asked with a wink to his son.

“I agree,” Aareth said, “but we aren't going to do any good without rest. Running through the forest all night has worn on all of us. Charlotte, what do you think?”

“I think if I wasn't so tired, I'd take you outside and decapitate you for using my first name.” Sloan shook her head, all her attention taken off Jack and his midnight visits and directed at Aareth.

“But before I take off your head, we do need rest. Have you made any headway into the journal Jack found?”

“I planned on waking up early and going through it this morning.” Aareth stifled a yawn. “With the midnight massacre, we all know how that turned out.”

“We need to get through that book.” Sloan eyed the blood-spattered journal on the table. “There might be something in there. A way to track it, or maybe an explanation of what it is exactly.”

“If you don't mind, Sloan, I'd like to read through it before I lie down.” Marcus pushed himself to his feet. “I'm not that

tired. The sooner we get to the bottom of this, the better.”

The three members of the table all younger than Marcus sat humbled in silence. They were all beyond exhausted. They knew Marcus was too. Despite this, he was offering to be the one to stay up and do the research.

“Thank you, Marcus.” Sloan rubbed at her red eyes. “The rest of us, let’s get some sleep and be ready for tonight. I have a feeling that we’re getting closer to finding the truth and eventually killing this thing.”

To say the bed felt good to Jack would be a huge understatement. The soft mattress underneath him was amazing. Jack didn’t even bother with washing up or changing; he just took off his boots, jacket, and wand belt, and fell into bed. It was one of those sleeps where his head barely hit the pillow before he was out cold.

“Jack. Jack, time to wake up, son.”

Jack opened his eyes to darkness. The sun was high overhead when they arrived back at the mansion. Now a moon took its place in the sky. He rubbed the sleep away as he yawned and sat up in bed. His father gained his full attention when Jack saw a wild look in his eye.

“Dad, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Marcus’ eyes were bloodshot. He looked as tired as Jack could ever remember seeing him. “I’ve read the whole journal, and Jack—son—I’m sorry for dragging you into this. I was wrong to come.”

“What are you talking about? It’s okay; you don’t have to apologize. I made the decision too. I’m not a little kid anymore.”

“No, you are definitely not a child anymore.” Marcus placed a hand on his son’s shoulder. “You’re a man your mother would be proud of. A man I am proud to have by my side.”

Jack wasn’t sure what to say or how to respond. A moment passed while Jack looked into his father’s eyes, a moment that told him nothing would ever be the same after this night.

“Let’s go downstairs,” Marcus said. “It’s better if I tell you all at once. Sloan and Aareth are already awake.”

Jack grabbed his boots, jacket, and wand belt. Jack followed his father downstairs past the wooden hall of rooms and down the spiral staircase. The large front room spread out before them, bathed in candle and lantern light.

Aareth sat in a high-backed leather chair, adjusting the cold steel of the gauntlets that gave him the power of Zeus. Sloan paced back and forth across the carpeted wood floor. Arms crossed, she looked worried.

“All right, sorcerer, what did you find?” Sloan asked as she looked up at Marcus and stopped pacing.

Jack took a seat at the empty table. Aareth stopped tinkering with his gloves and gave Marcus his undivided attention.

Marcus took a deep breath. Jack wondered again what could cause his father to change from the optimistic man he had known his entire life to someone so nervous and paranoid. Jack didn’t have to wait long. The light played around the room in dancing and swirling shadows as Marcus told a story Jack would have passed off as fiction if it were to come from anyone besides his own father.

“The journal was written by the lead scientist in the cave laboratory. His name was Aaron Jebson. He and a group of researchers and scientists were hired by some kind of secret order. Their contact was Dr. Oliver Livingston. They were tasked with performing a specific set of experiments. These experiments were to be executed on humans and animals alike.”

Marcus paused and took a deep breath. “There were countless failed experiments on both humans and animals, resulting in deformed genetic mutations. I won’t go into detail, but the accounts of these experiments are the most disturbing things I’ve ever read. Most of the failed experiments they scrapped, but a few animals were released back into the wild. There’s a list here of unicorns, rabbits, foxes, frogs, etcetera that were abandoned projects.”

Marcus took a deep breath and prepared himself for what he was about to say next. Once again, Jack was struck by his father's vexed disposition. "There's a section here I'd like to read straight from the book about two specific humans that were experimented on.

Subject R-19, code named "Banshee," actually discovered us in the forest. She was wandering about when our security crew found her. We took her, and alongside R-10, code named "Night Walker," started performing the Vampire experiment using the latest tools and resources at our disposal. They both took to the procedure extremely well but in completely different ways. Where subject R-10 showed massive improvements in speed, strength, and an insatiable taste for blood, subject R-19 took to the procedure in an unprecedented manner. She has shown an intellectual capability further than that of any of our staff. Her brain activity even borders on the telepathic level.

I am not so proud to even say that her brainpower now far surpasses that of my own. We are all eager to see in what other ways her newfound power manifests itself.

"The last portion of the journal mentions another laboratory in New Hope showing huge success in the same 'Vampire' experiments. It ends with a new test subject called 'A-21' showing rapid development within its cage and then nothing."

Jack sat stunned, trying to process all the new information. *A secret order working in New Hope? Dr. Livingston is connected, there is no doubt about that now, but is he the head of this order? Who were the two human test subjects?*

Jack could have gone on and on with the list of questions that needed to be answered, but Sloan's commanding voice cut in instead. "Benjamin Clive's story is true. Dr. Livingston did come to Burrow Den. He bought off the mayor in exchange for his secrecy and a secure location to perform his experiments in the mountain laboratory."

“And whatever this animal is, it’s not an angel of death sent from a divine being. It’s a genetically engineered animal. A killing machine,” Aareth added.

“We know who the male test subject was.” Jack nodded, staring into the past and remembering the battle on the steam locomotive. “It had to be our attacker on the traveling steam engine. Who’s the girl?”

No one had a chance to speak further as the doors to the mayor’s mansion crashed open. A hysterical Abigail raced into the room.

“It’s him—you have to stop him. He’s controlling the animal. He killed all those people.”

“Wow, wow—slow down,” Marcus said.

“It’s okay.” Jack stood up, motioning Abigail to sit in his chair. “Just sit down. Tell us what’s going on. We can help.”

Jack’s heart melted in his chest as he witnessed Abigail trembling. He put a hand on her shoulder and knelt by her seat. “Abigail, it’s okay. I’m not going to let anything happen to you, I promise.”

“No, Jack.” Abigail turned her large teary eyes on Jack and slowly shook her head. “You don’t understand. It’s not me that I’m worried about. It’s you.”

FORTY-NINE



JACK

“Me?” Jack asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Damn it, woman!” Sloan stalked forward, looking Abigail straight in the eyes. “Control yourself and tell us what’s going on.”

“I’m sorry.” Abigail took a long breath and let it out slowly between her quivering lips. “My father is controlling the beast that’s going around the town killing everyone.”

The room was quiet; even Sloan looked to her traveling companions for direction.

“Abigail...” Marcus bent a knee and gave the young girl a comforting smile. “Are you sure? How do you know this?”

“I knew something was going on for a while now. He’s changed, he’s different. I just never thought he could be capable of killing anyone.”

“How, Abigail?” Sloan asked, taking a hard tone. “How do you know this?”

“I’m sorry, Jack.” Abigail took another deep breath. She looked at Jack with tear-filled eyes. “I should have told you when I first talked with you. I knew something was going on, but you have to believe me—if I thought you were in any danger from him, I would have said something.”

“I know you would have. I believe you.” Jack did his best to give Abigail a genuine smile as he cupped her hand in his.

“Thank you.” Abigail took a quivering breath.

“Aaaahhhhem.” Sloan reminded the two she was still in the room. “How do you know this, Abigail?”

“My father’s been going out at night more and more. At first, I wrote this off as church business, but tonight, I followed him. Earlier today, I saw him sneak into this house, and as soon as he heard you coming back from the hunt, he ran. I saw him carrying something but couldn’t be sure what it was. Tonight, he was out late again, so I went to the church. The door was locked. I looked through a window. I saw him sitting there with some kind of large scarf in his hand and—”

Abigail stopped talking as she looked beyond the group to the far wall. Her eyes saw something that only her imagination told her was there.

“Go on, it’s okay.” Aareth recognized the symptom of shock.

“I saw a monster. It looked like a large dog. My father—my father was stroking its back. It—it was smelling the scarf in his hand.”

It was clear whatever Abigail was telling them was the truth. The girl was so shaken by what she witnessed, there was no denying her honesty.

“Well, looks like all the puzzle pieces are fitting together,” Sloan thought out loud. “The preacher has somehow been able to control a failed project from the cave laboratory. An experiment started by Dr. Oliver Livingston and this secret order.”

Jack saw his father tense and stand. His head cocked to the side. His hand reached for his staff. Jack knew the look and action like it was his own. His father heard something.

“Let’s go kill this thing and end its bloody rampage.” Sloan looked to her comrades for consent.

“We won’t have to go anywhere,” Marcus’ voice was low as he wrapped his hands around his brown staff so tightly, the wood groaned.

“Why?” Sloan asked.

“Because it’s come to us.”

FIFTY



JACK

Jack stood gripping his wand. He stepped between Abigail and the open door. A soft, consistent patter met their ears. It sounded like a horse, but Jack knew the sound of paws on the ground compared to hooves.

The only way Jack could describe what happened next was sheer and utter chaos. One of the large windows to their left exploded inward, sending shards of sharp glass raining down on the group inside.

Jack pulled Abigail out of her seat, shoving her toward the open door. Sloan drew her sword. Red mage mist shot from the hilt as steel heated. Aareth clicked both buttons on his gauntlets. Blue veins of magic crackled over his fists.

Time seemed to pause as Jack got his first look at the animal. It was gigantic, easily three to four hundred pounds of predatory muscle. It resembled a wolf in form and appearance. Its upper body was hugely exaggerated, its jaws were twice the size of a man's head. The thing that surprised Jack the most wasn't its short fur or the yellow slitted eyes that spoke murder; it was the color of the animal. It was a brownish-green tint that was so unnatural—it was clearly manmade. The creature was colored to perfectly blend into the forest.

The animal growled. It sniffed the air for a split second before it made its choice, bounding toward Marcus. Marcus blasted a ball of green magic from the end of his staff. It hit the monster square in the chest, but it wasn't enough to stop the charging killer. The beast didn't even stumble. Jack

witnessed huge paws ripping into his father's sternum, even as he fired his own magic attack at the animal.

Jack fired again and again, each of his burning balls of magic fire exploding on his target. Still, the beast tore at his father. Sloan ran at the fiend and jumped, aiming her sword, pointed end down. The animal saw her at the last moment and kicked like a donkey with its back hind legs. The creature's powerful hind paws hit Sloan in the stomach with a solid crunch. She flew across the room, slamming into a tall bookcase. The wooden bookcase collapsed on her and covered her completely.

Aareth was next as he took the opportunity to lay hands on the animal. The aroma of burnt fur and smoky flesh filled the air as the animal howled in pain. Aareth held on to the back of the animal's neck with gritted teeth. It lost interest in Marcus as it twisted and shook to be free.

All Jack could think of was his father. He knew somewhere deep down he should be worried about ending the animal once and for all. He knew he should extend his wand into a staff and press the attack, but none of that mattered anymore. All Jack could focus on was his father's limp body covered in dark red blood.

Jack ran to his father's side. He could see the animal wrestle free of Aareth's grip. Jack thought the animal would attack again; instead, there was a low, shrill whistle. The animal hesitated for a moment. Smoke from burnt flesh and hair rose from the animal. Blood dropped from the wounds in its chest and abdomen.

The whistle came back louder now. With one turn and leap, it was out the broken window, enveloped by the night's darkness.

Jack witnessed all of this, and in that moment, didn't care. He had made it to his father's side. Jack gently rolled his father onto his back. His heart caught in his throat. His father's torso was a bloody mess of bones and organs.

“That—that bad, huh?”

Jack's eyes filled with tears as he held his father in his arms. No words came to him; all he could do was shake his head.

Aareth, Sloan, and Abigail ran over to Jack and Marcus.

"I—I can get some bandages from next door." Abigail's eyes were streaming water.

"I'll get a doctor." Sloan pressed one arm to her own ribs.

"No," Aareth and Marcus said at the same time.

"My time has come." Marcus coughed. The bleeding was getting worse. With each breath, more and more blood filled his chest. "Aareth, Sloan, remember what we talked about."

Aareth nodded slowly. Sloan hung her head.

"Abigail."

"Yes? I'm here." Abigail took a step forward and knelt next to Marcus.

"Take care of my son."

"I will, I promise."

Jack and Abigail looked at one another. There were no words for the moment.

"Jack?"

"I'm here, Dad, I'm here." Jack took his father's bloodstained hand in his own, gazing into the eyes of the man he'd loved his entire life. His father was the man who not only had his respect because they were related, but the man who had earned his respect time and time again.

"Jack, I am so very proud of the person you have grown to become. I know your mother would feel the same way. You've become a man I would be proud to follow."

Tears streaked down Jack's face like comets falling from the heavens.

"You be the man we both know you are." Marcus took a long, shallow breath. "Choose the right path no matter how hard it seems."

“But I’m—I’m not as strong as you are.”

“You’re stronger, Jack. You are stronger than you know. I’ll always be with you, son. I love you.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

“She wants me to tell you she’s so very proud of you, Jack. We both are.” Marcus gave Jack one last smile and let a deep breath escape.

That was it. Marcus’ chest ceased to struggle. His eyes glazed over. Jack didn’t know what to do next. He just knelt there holding his father. Abigail knelt beside Jack, throwing both her slender arms around his chest.

Jack was in a daze. He knew what happened; he just didn’t have a response. He felt numb, shocked and confused all at once. A deep hole of sorrow grew in his stomach. He felt sick and angry at once. Lucky for him, there was an assassin in the room who was all too familiar with the feeling of pain and loss.

“I’m going to kill this thing. Sloan, Jack. Let’s go.” Aareth’s voice took on a dark tone Jack never heard before. “There will be plenty of time to mourn later, trust me. Now we finish this.”

Jack looked up from the darkness that was clouding his mind. Aareth was already recharging his gauntlets. The look in Aareth’s eyes was enough to put the fear of God in anyone. Jack imagined that he spent the entire journey seeing Aareth the inspector. Now Aareth the assassin had shown himself.

FIFTY-ONE



JACK

“Up, Jack! Get up!” Aareth yelled.

“He’s right.” Sloan was back doing her best to hide the tears she shed. “We couldn’t track the animal before, but now —” Sloan pointed a gloved hand at a trail of unnaturally bright red blood leading outside to the main city street.

Jack got to his feet, wobbling as his eyes refused to leave the limp figure of his father.

“He’d want me to finish the assignment the Queen gave us,” Jack said, more to himself than anyone in the room.

Jack ripped his eyes from his father and walked out the door with Aareth and Sloan. He felt numb. Aareth walked beside him on his right, his jaw set and violence in his dangerous eyes. Sloan walked on Jack’s left, her eyes determined, the mage sword dragging in the dirt behind her.

Just like the night before, the town had heard the commotion. Lanterns and candles were lit inside windows. Heads poked out when they saw the three members of the Queen’s emissary walking down the road.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“Was there another attack?”

“Is—is that blood on your clothes? Are you all right?”

These questions and more slid off Jack as if he were deaf. He was beyond conversation now. All he could see was the trail of blood that led to the city church.

The blood was more proof the creature wasn't born, but rather created. The blood was a bright red tint Jack had never seen before. In the light of the many lanterns and candles, it was easy to follow.

The three surviving members of the hunting team the Queen sent to Burrow Den reached the church. The blood spattering led right to the front double doors.

Aareth didn't hesitate as he walked up the white steps. Holy sanctuary or not, he kicked in the doors with a heavy boot. Jack walked inside, wand at the ready.

The church was just like Jack remembered; large, one room with an army of pews that reached to the opposite side of the building. On a raised dais sat Elijah Ahab, and beside him, lying like a dog, was the animal that had killed his father.

"I see you have placed all the pieces of the puzzle correctly." Elijah gave the hunters a thin smile.

"You killed an emissary of the Queen of New Hope. Elijah Ahab, you are charged with—"

"Please, Captain, we can skip the reading of my charges? I know what I have done and I am absolved of my sins in the eyes of the Divine." Elijah cackled with glee.

The animal at Elijah's side squatted nervously. Jack could see the creature was ready to leap into action at a moment's notice.

"How did you find the animal? How do you control it?" Jack needed to know.

"Oh, that's actually the simplest part," Elijah finally rose from his seat. "I take a piece of clothing from my next victim. The animal smells it and that's it." Elijah reached into the top of his high-colored shirt and brought out a small whistle on a chain. "If I need him back, all I have to do is blow. I know this animal was a gift from the Divine One because the animal found me."

"What are you talking about?" Sloan asked.

“I was praying for a sign one night a few months ago. I had seen the corruption eating the city from the inside out. I had no way to stop it. Then I heard a scratching at the back door. The animal was no bigger than a small wolf at the time; still, I knew it was a sign. I nursed it and it grew to this unnatural size. It grew into a weapon to be used against the enemies of the kingdom.”

“And my father? He was a corrupt enemy of the kingdom that needed to be killed?” Jack choked out the words with disgust.

“Your father was among the most dangerous of enemies.” Elijah smoothed down his long black cloak and stretched. “He was a man of morals and unrelenting determination. He had to be disposed of for the greater good. Much like all of you.”

For a moment, all that could be heard was the switch of Sloan’s mage sword being flicked on. Aareth shrugged off his dark coat. It slipped to the floor, already forgotten.

The church was lit by dozens of candles, both along the walls and high overhead on hanging chandlers. Jack found it ironic the very place that brought peace and comfort to so many was about to become a battleground.

“The Divine One is on my side tonight. You sinners will be cast into the abyss where you belong.” Elijah stepped off the raised podium. He reached inside his cloak and drew out a long knife. The creature rose on all fours to stand by his side.

“Enough words, you lunatic.” Aareth took a step forward. “I’m going to rip your tongue out of your mouth.”

Elijah gave the slightest flick of his wrist. The mutated wolf ran forward, its eyes fixed on Aareth.

Sloan charged, slashing at Elijah, but the preacher was faster than he looked. Dodging the attack, Elijah struck back with a jab of his own. Sloan batted the attempt away and the two combatants circled one another.

Jack witnessed Sloan and Elijah clash. He had to make a split-second decision on who to help. Just as quickly as the question came, he knew he had to assist Aareth. Sloan could

handle the preacher on her own, but ending the genetically engineered killing machine would be a herculean task.

Jack aimed his wand at the charging monster. His eyes narrowed as he chose his shot and fired. Previously, when the creature attacked his father, Jack fired his shots in a hurry. They hit the beast but in places that were not necessarily life threatening.

Now, as the monster and the assassin ran toward one another, Jack took his time to aim. Magic flew through the air as Jack chose his targets with care. Green fiery blasts found their marks. Magic tore through ligaments and flesh.

The creature howled in pain as magical strikes connected with its jaw, nose, and forearms. Jack chose the forearms of the animal to slow down its unearthly force before it collided with Aareth. The nose was chosen because it would blur the animal's vision, blood spraying into its eyes. Jack chose the jaw as a target because that was the animal's greatest weapon. If Jack could break a jawbone, the animal wouldn't be able to bite down on Aareth.

In the matter of only a few seconds, Jack's energy was spent. Monster and assassin met in the middle of the church in a head-on collision. Aareth's mage gauntlets found the creature's throat. Both combatants fell sideways as blue crackling magic filled the interior of the church.

The soft candlelight flames were greeted with blue smoke and steam rising from the creature's skin and fur.

With Aareth and the monster locked in combat, firing more magic would be too dangerous. Jack clicked the button on his wand. In a second, the ends elongated, and a black staff was in his hands.

Screaming in pain, the creature's large jaws found one of the gauntlets protecting Aareth's hand and forearm. Huge teeth crunched on the hard metal and tore at the steel. While Jack had succeeded in injuring the beast's jaw, it seemed it was not broken. With a violent shake of its head, the animal managed to tear off one of Aareth's steel gauntlets.

As the two wrestled and rolled, the monster found a dominating position on top of Aareth. Now with one gauntlet gone and the other out of electric charge, Aareth was in trouble.

Jack ran forward, his staff ablaze with dancing jade magic. With every blow landed, a loud crack filled the room. The creature's hide was crossed with multiple burn marks from Jack's attack. It wasn't enough to deter the beast. The animal bled from a dozen different wounds, but still it ignored Jack and grabbed Aareth's unprotected arm in a vise-like grip. Aareth screamed in pain as he beat the creature's face with his free arm.

Jack was exhausted. The green magical energy across his staff was mirroring how he felt as it faded. He wasn't sure what to do next. *Think, Jack! Think! You've already lost your father; now you're going to lose Aareth too.*

Jack was interrupted from his thoughts of doubt and worry by someone yelling his name. Jack turned and saw Sloan and Elijah, both bloody messes. Sloan was standing on her feet, with Elijah on one knee, gathering himself for another attack.

"Jack, catch!"

Sloan tossed her mage sword through the air across the six yards separating them. Jack raised his right arm and caught the heated sword hilt first. The monster was shaking Aareth by his right arm like a rag doll. Jack raised the sword high overhead with both hands on the hilt. With all the force he could summon, Jack brought the sword down on the monster's neck.

"Rawwww!" Jack screamed, channeling his anger and pain at losing his father into a single blow. Everything he was he put into that downward slash.

Edison's invention did him proud. Jack cleaved through bone and flesh as he separated the creature's head from the rest of its body.

The beast's jaws immediately opened. It released Aareth's arm, and the rest of the creature's body fell spasming to the floor.

A scream so intense and full of pain filled the room that Jack thought for sure Sloan was dead.

FIFTY-TWO



JACK

Seeing that his enemy was without a weapon, Elijah pushed the attack and managed to sink his blade hilt deep into Sloan's left thigh. Even as she fell and screamed, Jack was already on the move.

He knew with Aareth out and Sloan down, it was up to him. Mage sword in hand, he vaulted over church pews. Elijah had his back toward him. All Jack could see was a hand holding a bloody knife raised over Sloan's body.

Jack launched himself the last few feet. From the top of a pew, he flew through the air, colliding with Elijah hard enough to take both men to the floor.

A new emotion was forcing its way to the surface from deep within Jack's being. Until now, he had felt mostly numb, almost defeated at the loss of his father. Now, as the only hope for their survival rested on his shoulders, as he collided with the man responsible for his father's death, anger boiled inside.

Sorcerer and preacher rolled and tumbled over each other. Jack was young and lean, but the preacher was lanky and managed to twist his body to the side and land on top of Jack. Both sword and knife were shaken free on point of impact, but that didn't seem to bother Elijah.

Fists rained down on Jack as he tried to shield his face. He twisted and did his best to roll, but Elijah was consumed with a wrath and determination Jack hadn't seen before. Blood ran into Jack's eyes from multiple cuts opened across his face.

Then the blows stopped and Elijah grabbed Jack around the throat with thin strong fingers, literally squeezing the life out of him. Jack gasped for air, trying to fight the grip on his throat.

“Shhhhhh... go back to the fold, little sheep. Your time in this world has come to an end. Embrace the darkness that waits for you now.”

Jack’s vision was blurring. Elijah’s face twisted into a wicked grin, saliva dripping down his lips. As Jack was giving in to the darkness that clawed at his vision in all directions, he heard a voice, a voice that belonged to his father.

Get up, Jack. This is not how you go. You still have a lot of good to do in this world. Get up, Jack. Get up, son.

Jack heard the voice as clear as day. He heard the voice of his dead father like he was right there next to him. A father that had been murdered by the order of the man that was now ending his own life. Anger swelled in his chest. Pain, not from his wounds, but at the loss of his only surviving parent drove him back to consciousness.

“Nooooooooo!” Eyes flicking open, Jack screamed into Elijah’s face.

Elijah was taken aback for a brief second. He was so sure of victory, Jack’s sudden outburst was the last thing he expected.

Jack channeled what magic he had left into his hands. He clawed at the fingers around his throat. Getting a grip on one of Elijah’s middle fingers, he twisted it back past its intended range of motion. The bone snapped with a loud crack.

Elijah howled in pain. Seizing at his chance of escape, Jack turned his body and rolled over on top of the man responsible for taking his father’s life. Jack was enraged. A force consumed him, the likes of which he had never felt. Anger, pain, retribution, and vengeance all held him close as he hammered away at Elijah’s horror-filled face.

Jack wasn’t sure how many times he hit Elijah, but by the time he was done, Elijah was struggling to breathe through

broken teeth and a twisted nose. Jack's chest heaved in and out, taking in breath as fast as he could.

Elijah moaned in pain. Jack looked around the room in a daze.

“Kill him, Jack.” Aareth struggled to his feet, one arm dangling uselessly by his side. He made his way to Sloan's still body. “Kill him for what he did to your father.”

Jack looked down at Elijah and slowly took the metal chain the preacher wore around his neck in his bloody hands. Jack gripped the whistle used to call the now deceased beast and twisted the chain tight.

“Kill him, Jack!”

Elijah struggled to fight off Jack's grip. Jack pinned the man's arms to his sides and sat on top of his chest. The steel chain twisted hard in his hands as Elijah's heart rate slowed. The chain dug into the pale flesh around his Adam's Apple.

Elijah's eyes rolled to the back of his head. His heavy gasps for breath began to dull.

Jack twisted the chain so hard, it cut into the skin of his hand as well as the skin of Elijah's neckline. Vengeance drove him; it told him to end Elijah's life there and now, but his father's voice was still too fresh in his mind.

He deserves to die. For what he did to the town of Burrow Den and for what he did to my dad. But is this what Dad would do? Jack's mind was torn from what he desired to do and what he knew his father would want.

Hands trembling with frustration, Jack released the death hold on Elijah's chain. The preacher came to with deep gulps as he coughed and choked in oxygen.

Jack stood up, still staring at Elijah.

“Jack, what are you doing? Kill him! He deserves to die!” Aareth yelled from Sloan's side.

“Maybe,” Jack looked down at Elijah's bloody face, “but it's not what my father would have wanted. It's not what he would have done.”

“Thank—thank you,” Elijah gasped, still lying on the wood floor.

“Don’t thank me. Thank the man you murdered. His memory is the only reason you’re still alive.”

Jack found himself disgusted with Elijah’s grateful expression and turned his back. Aareth was helping Sloan as the captain came to.

Jack’s eye caught motion in the doorway. Abigail walked toward him. Her face was pale, but she walked with purpose. In her right hand, she held an ancient powder-lock pistol. She held it pointed in Jack’s direction.

There was no time for words as the pistol shot rang out. Smoke slowly rose from the weapon in Abigail’s left hand as tears spilled down her gentle face. The expression Abigail wore was one of sheer remorse even as she walked into the room.

Jack only had a split second to understand what his eyes told him. There was no time to process what he saw, no time to duck or hide. There was only time for his jaw to drop. Even as he searched his chest, Jack felt like an idiot.

He had trusted Abigail and now she had repaid his kindness with death. Jack looked down, expecting to find blood gushing from his torso. Instead, he heard a gasp behind him. Jack turned to see Elijah looming feet behind him, knife in hand. The shot had stopped him cold. Blood from the bullet wound leaked down his shirt.

“I had to.” Abigail’s voice finally broke the silence. “He was going to stab you in the back. I—I promised your father I’d take care of you.”

Elijah fell to his knees, and with a gurgle, landed face first onto the hard floor.

Jack stood dumbfounded. Abigail ran to his side. She stared at her father’s limp form. Jack wanted to thank her. He wanted to tell her that she had done the right thing. He wanted to hold her, to kiss her, but the world was spinning around him. Blood still dripped from the cuts on his face and a deep

gash in his head. Before Jack could say anything, the darkness came for him.

FIFTY-THREE



JACK

Someone was humming. It was soft and sweet. The melody was one Jack had never heard before, but he knew he was safe. Opening his eyes, he found himself in the bed he slept in the past few nights in the mayor's mansion. Light streamed through the open window. His body felt like he was hit by a mage-powered locomotive. Wincing, he reached a hand to his head, where most of the throbbing originated.

“Careful; Abigail took a long time cleaning you up and dressing your wounds.”

Jack looked at the foot of the bed, where Elizabeth sat slowly rocking herself in a chair.

“Elizabeth, what—what happened?”

“After Abigail killed our father, you passed out.”

“Elizabeth, I'm so sorry about your father. I—”

“He was a bad man, Jack. Of course I'm sad, but the end of his life meant that other innocent people would be spared. Hopefully, with the mental abilities I have from the experiments done on me in the laboratory, I can do some good to right his wrongs.”

“You're the subject that they wrote about in the journal?” He looked at the fiery-haired girl in disbelief. “The girl they found?”

“Yeah, it's hazy and comes and goes, but it would mean a lot if we can keep this between us for now. There are a lot of

crazy people out there. Who knows what they would do if they knew.”

“Sure.” Jack’s head pounded now not only from the injury sustained but with the realization of who and what Elizabeth really was. “Aareth and Sloan— are they?”

“They’re in as bad a shape as you, but they’re alive.” Elizabeth rose from her chair. “Come on now, let’s not be lazy. Get out of bed and get ready. I’m sure my sister would like to see you.”

Elizabeth left the room. Jack gingerly got out of bed and maneuvered into his clothes. His garments were clean and folded for him at the edge of the bed. With every step, his body ached. With time, Jack managed to dress and head downstairs. Aareth was waiting for him. The tall man wore a sling around his shoulder and right arm. Multiple bruises and cuts ran across his smiling face as he saw Jack come down the stairs.

“Glad to see you walking.”

“Glad to be able to walk. How’s the arm?”

“Don’t know. The town doctor said he’s never seen a bite like this. It came with a raging fever for the first few hours. I thought I was going to burn from the inside out, but now it’s healing strangely fast.”

“Sloan, is she—”

“Sloan’s already out meeting with the town and appointing new officials to get the city back on track. You would think a knife wound in her thigh, one deep enough to put her in crutches, would stop that woman. She’s still at it. She wants to leave for New Hope tomorrow, crutches and all.”

Jack nodded, immediately regretting the action as the throbbing in his head worsened.

“Jack,” Aareth said in a low tone. “I wanted to say that you did the right thing when you let Elijah live. That’s something I wouldn’t have been strong enough to do. Your father was a great man and I know he’s proud.”

“Thanks, Aareth. It wasn’t easy.”

Aareth was about to open his mouth, when the door opened and Abigail let Sloan inside. The captain was wearing her uniform with a wrapped left leg and a nasty bruise on her right temple.

“Jack, good to see you’re up and ready. We’re leaving tomorrow bright and early. The sooner we get to New Hope, the better. I have a feeling the events here are the beginning of something much larger.”

“How are you feeling?” Abigail made her way to Jack’s side. “Your head doesn’t hurt too much, does it?”

“Oh, he’s fine,” Elizabeth chimed in as she walked down the spiral staircase with a suitcase in hand. “Are we ready? I packed Aareth’s and Sloan’s stuff.”

“You what?” Aareth asked, surprised.

“Well, Elizabeth, we’re not leaving until tomorrow.” Sloan noticed Jack’s bewildered expression. “I should probably let you know, Jack, that Abigail and Elizabeth are coming with us to New Hope.”

Jack was about to ask how that had come to pass, when Sloan addressed the inspector. “Come on, Aareth, I can use your help getting the town back to running properly. We have a lot of work still to do this afternoon. We have to make sure Burrow Den is in the hands of the right people.”

“Come on, Red.” Aareth massaged his shoulder with a wince. “Let’s leave these two alone. You can help us talk crazy to some people.”

“My name is not ‘red’ and I’m not crazy. I’m eccentric.” Even with the exchange between the two, Elizabeth dropped the bags. She skipped out of the room, following Sloan and Aareth.

The door closed behind them. Jack and Abigail were left alone.

“Thank you.” Jack turned to Abigail, searching for the right thing to say. “I’m sure there are better words to fit the

moment. All I have is thank you. Thank you for saving me at the cost to your own family.”

“I cried all last night and even some this morning.” Abigail swallowed hard. “I know the hurting will be there, but I have a peace that I did the right thing. Of course, I have some wonderful memories with my father, but over the last few years and especially the last few months, he hasn’t been the same man I knew and loved. I’m not sure if that makes any sense at all.”

“It does make sense.” Jack placed a hand on her slender shoulder. “I’m going to have to come to grips with my own father’s death soon. I still half expect him to walk through the front door or call me from upstairs. It still doesn’t seem real. In the next few days, weeks, and months, I’m sure it will.”

“Well, we’ll have each other now.” Abigail took Jack by surprise as she stepped forward and nestled against his chest.

Jack let himself relax in her embrace as he rested a cheek on the top of her head. Her hair smelt like vanilla and spice.

“How did you manage to talk Sloan into you coming with us anyway?” Jack couldn’t help but ask. “I mean, not that I’m anything but happy to hear the news. Sloan isn’t the easiest person to befriend.”

Abigail pulled away from Jack’s embrace. She gave him a smile, warming him from the inside out. “I think the captain has a heart in there somewhere. After everything that has happened here, I talked her into taking me and my sister to New Hope. I told her we could help during the travel process—with the three of you barely standing and all.”

“Smart. Playing the helpful card.”

“I can’t wait to go, Jack, to see the world outside of Burrow Den, to leave all of this behind.”

“Ahhheemm.” Jack coughed.

“And to be able to go with you, of course,” Abigail said, rolling her eyes.

“I’m glad you’re coming. Maybe dealing with our fathers’ deaths will be easier with someone to talk to, who can relate.”

“I know it will, Jack. Besides, I made a promise to your father that I plan on keeping.”

FIFTY-FOUR



JACK

That night, Jack couldn't sleep. Somewhere between tears and questions of what the future would bring in New Hope, slumber escaped him. Deciding against spending the next few hours in bed searching for rest, Jack threw on his shirt and walked downstairs. Candles were lit in the large entry room.

The disaster the creature made the previous night was cleared away, the broken window boarded, the glass shards swept. Marcus' body was cleaned and wrapped and prepared for transport to New Hope, where Sloan assured him he would receive a hero's burial.

"Can't sleep either, huh?" Aareth coughed from Sloan's side as they looked down at an open book together.

"No, too much has happened over the past few days. My mind won't stop thinking."

"I know what you mean, Jack." Sloan glanced up from the table where the journal that was found in the cave laboratory lay open. "This log isn't making things any easier."

"There's more?" Jack stood next to Sloan and Aareth. "More than we already know?"

"Not necessarily." Sloan stretched with a grimace. "Just more questions about who this order that Dr. Livingston belongs to is and why they would be performing these experiments."

"And what experiments were successful in New Hope to have shut the cave laboratory down. I feel like this is all connected with the assassination attempt on the Queen's life."

Aareth coughed into his fist. "I'm fine; just something in my throat."

Jack thought back to Elizabeth's confession about being the girl mentioned in the journal but decided to keep her secret. Instead, he asked what they were wondering. "What do you think is waiting for us back in New Hope?"

"I don't know," Aareth frowned, "but there's a real possibility Burrow Den is just the start to all of this."

"The crisis in Burrow Den is over," Sloan agreed. "But I'm afraid the battle for New Hope is just beginning."

FIFTY-FIVE



JACK

It just didn't seem right; none of it seemed right. Through a haze of pain and sorrow, Jack looked out through the locomotive's window at the city's cheering population. Bands played uplifting tunes from the time they'd reached the outer walls of the city of New Hope. The music hit Jack and washed over him, doing nothing to affect his mood.

His eyes were grim, as were those of his companions. Jack witnessed Sloan smile and wave from her seat, trying to appear grateful. He couldn't hold it against her. She was the captain of the Queen's personal guard. It was her duty to act the conquering hero, returned from a great adventure.

A swarm of soldiers on either side of the locomotive jogged at a steady pace, accompanying them to their destination. Jack, Sloan, Aareth, Abigail, and Elizabeth all sat in the passenger car directly behind the lead steam engine.

If his father's lifeless body wasn't lying in a box in the last car of the locomotive, Jack would have had a different attitude. Anything but a deep, hollow feeling was difficult for him to conjure. He hated the emptiness he felt, but he was powerless to do anything against it.

"A few more minutes and this will be over." Sloan stood next to Jack. She stared out his window. "Once the Queen greets us at the palace, I'll make sure Marcus receives the hero's burial he deserves."

"Thank you." Jack failed at a smile. "I know you will."

Jack was saved from having to voice any more thoughts as a shrill blast cut through the noise of the cheering crowd. Under a fog of smoke, the locomotive slowly came to a halt.

Sloan was the first to open the door. She exited, followed by Aareth. The once-city-inspector-turned-assassin, and now something in between, looked at Jack with solemnness in his eyes. “Give me the word, and I’ll walk the other way with you. I know you’re hurting right now. Being greeted with a bunch of smiles and laughter is the last thing you want. We’ll blend into the crowd, maybe go grab a drink ... or twenty.”

“Tempting.” Jack shook his head. “But my father would want me to see this all the way through.”

“I understand.” Aareth massaged the miraculously healed arm that had, days ago, been mangled by the Burrow Den Beast. Without another word, the large man followed Sloan outside.

Elizabeth and Abigail came next, the first giving Jack a warm smile before leaving the car, the latter extending a hand. “Together?”

Jack took a deep breath then reached for her palm. Her warm embrace gave him strength. “Together,” he agreed.

The smell of the acrid smoke still fuming from the many pipes on the locomotive made Jack wrinkle his nose. The roar of the crowd was even louder outside the car. The band launched themselves into yet another volley of instrumentals. Confetti fell like rain on their heads and shoulders. The group walked up a long street bordered by yet more soldiers.

The men-at-arms in the Queen’s army wore black uniforms outlined by grey thread. Each soldier carried a shiny brown rifle and stood at perfect attention. The trip to the palace steps seemed to take an eternity. Jack reminded himself over and over again who he was doing this for.

Finally, the band music died. A hush came over those in attendance. Sloan entered the tall archway that provided an entrance into the gated citadel. She paused and knelt at the first step leading to the large palace doors. The Queen stood,

ready to greet them at the top of the stairway, dressed in a long, light blue gown.

Aareth, Jack, and the Ahab sisters followed Sloan's example. One by one, they fell to a knee, lowering their heads in respect.

"Rise, champions of New Hope," Queen Eleanor said in a strong voice, "and approach."

Murmurs ran up and down the lines of gathered citizens as they craned their necks. Everyone was standing on their tiptoes to witness what would come next.

Jack fell into a line with Sloan and Aareth, while Abigail and Elizabeth took up spots at the base of the steps. On any other occasion, Jack's nerves would be making his heart drum, his hands clammy. Now, all he could think of as he stood in front of the Queen of New Hope was the plain wooden coffin still inside the locomotive. The coffin that held his father's body that would need to be buried.

"The city of New Hope, along with the village of Burrow Den, owe you all a debt of gratitude," the Queen said, loudly enough for everyone to hear. She motioned to someone beside her, who approached with long strides.

Jack recognized the reedy face of Fenrick Trillion, New Hope's treasurer. The man had a plastic smile plastered across his face as he came to stand next to the Queen. He held a purple pillow out in front of him. Four medallions stamped with New Hope's sigil of two steel swords crossed behind a black bat hung on red fabric.

"On behalf of the city of New Hope, I bestow on you the highest honor we possess, the medal of courage. For your willingness to put yourself in harm's way for the betterment of those who could not protect themselves." The Queen placed the first medal around Sloan's neck.

"For rising above yourself and becoming the person you were needed to be, to save those in danger." She placed the second medal over Aareth's long, dark hair.

“And for those who lost their lives in service to others, they will never be forgotten, but instead will live on throughout time as heroes, always and forever remembered.”

The Queen turned and lifted the third medal off the pillow Fenrick held. Jack’s eyes were watering as emotions waged an unwinnable war inside of him. His father should have been there standing next to him, but he wasn’t, and he would never be again.

Queen Eleanor Eckert gave Jack a look that said she knew, on a personal level, everything he was going through. She motioned with her head for Jack to lower his own. A bright light reflected off of the medal passing across Jack’s eyes, momentarily blinding him.

Shocked, the young magician looked up and behind his left shoulder to see what had caused his temporary blindness. A figure almost too small to see stood on a rooftop no more than a block away. The person was garbed in black. He held a rifle to his shoulder.

Without thinking, Jack launched himself at the Queen.

CRACK!

Jack took the Queen off her feet as gently as he could manage, while screams ripped through the air. Guards were running all around, shouting orders. The Queen felt so small in his arms. He rolled from on top of her. Gaining his feet, Jack looked the Queen up and down for injury.

As far as he could see, she wasn’t hurt. Confused, maybe stunned, but the hitman had missed his mark. Jack searched through the mass of churning soldiers to the rooftop where the would-be assassin had taken his shot. He was just in time to see the dark figure turn and disappear.

Sloan was there, yelling orders, hovering over the Queen with her mage sword ready. Jack fought to his feet, scanning the crowd for Abigail and Elizabeth, who were still by the steps. Abigail held an unfazed Elizabeth.

“Do celebrations always take such a violent turn in New Hope?” Elizabeth asked her sister.

Aareth was already down the stairs and charging through the stampeding crowd of onlookers. There was no doubt Aareth had seen what Jack had, only moments before; he was tearing toward the building where the assassin had been seconds ago.

Jack raced down the steps, pushing past alarmed guards as he did. Adrenaline raced through his veins with every stride he took. Questions came to his mind just as fast as he could push them to the side and concentrate on not losing Aareth in the crowd. *Who was the assassin? They were trying to kill the Queen and not him, weren't they? Did it have any connection with the previous assassination attempt the Queen had informed them of while they were in Burrow Den?*

Within seconds, Jack had maneuvered his way through the terrified crowd and reached Aareth's side. The sling Aareth wore around his right arm inhibited his speed.

"You decided to join the party." Aareth tore the sling from his shoulder with his good arm. "Stay close."

Jack swallowed hard as he saw the perfect shape of Aareth's right arm; he could see the impressive muscle definition, even under the shirt Aareth wore. Memories of the wolf attack, the horrific wound, and the miraculous recovery tried to rip Jack from the moment.

"I saw the shooter duck behind this building here." Aareth pointed to a tall structure. "He'll come out of a back door or side alley."

"You sound so sure." Jack gulped in large breaths of air as they rounded a corner. "How could you know that?"

"Because"—Aareth headed into the alley—"that's what I would have done."

FIFTY-SIX



JACK

Unlike most alleys, this was one of the cleanest Jack had ever seen. No refuse littered the ground, no odor made him cringe. He was reminded again of the level of care New Hope had attained compared to every other city in the Outland.

“Here.” Aareth skidded to a stop beside a large wooden door with a sign overhead that read: *Lovegood’s Fine Leathers and Hides*.

Jack took one last look around the deserted backstreet to ensure they were still the hunters and not the hunted. As he turned his eyes back to the door, Aareth flew backwards under an onslaught of wooden shards. The door had imploded under the pressure of the assassin in black.

Aareth was thrown to the opposite alley wall, where his head hit the brick with a painful crack.

Jack was reaching for the wand given to him by Edison Reeves, the director of the Queen’s armory, when the assassin came for him.

Jack had time to realize two things in the second before the attack. First, the hitman wasn’t a man at all. By the curve of her breasts and hips, and the slenderness of her stature, it was obvious a woman was attacking him. The second was the lack of face. Under the black cowl was a gunmetal mask hiding any of the assassin’s features. Two large circles covered in dark glass and a lined vent for breathing made up the unearthly helmet.

Before Jack could even draw his weapon, she was finishing Aareth with a strike to his temple and an elbow to the base of his skull. Aareth staggered but refused to fall.

As Jack aimed for his target, she was on him. Batting aside the hand that held his wand, she sent a strike to his throat and a kick to his stomach. At once, Jack was left gasping as he fell to his knees, both hands clutching his stomach. His wand clattered to the stone floor, useless. Eyes watering, he fought to regain his footing. He looked down the alley to see the masked figure disappear into the street. The road teemed with citizens still fleeing from the initial gunshot.

Aareth appeared next to Jack. The large man offered Jack a hand. A moment of silence passed as their minds processed the recent events.

“I need to find out what’s going on with me.” Aareth massaged the back of his head where the assassin’s elbow had connected. “Her blows should have been enough to knock me out. Instead, the pain’s already gone.”

“You saw that too, right?” Jack ignored Aareth’s words. “Our assassin is a masked woman.”

“I saw it.” A shadow of confusion crossed over Aareth’s face. “There was something familiar about her. I know I couldn’t see her face, but still. On her wrist, there was a ... No, no, never mind. We have to get back to Sloan and let her know what just happened.”

Jack decided not to push the subject. He trusted Aareth would tell him if he could put his finger on any new information. Time would prove this theory wrong.

FIFTY-SEVEN



JACK

An hour later, Jack found himself cleaned and briefing Sloan and the Queen in a large meeting room. The palace was home to dozens of different quarters, each seeming more grandiose than the next. This room was large enough to accommodate the entire locomotive they had used to return to New Hope.

Jack stood next to Aareth as the two men relayed the events after the attempt on the Queen's life.

"And then she took off sprinting down the alley," Aareth finished.

Jack was about to open his mouth, reminding Aareth of what he had said about the woman seeming somehow familiar. He stopped himself just in time. If Aareth had omitted that piece of the story, he had done so on purpose.

"Well," the Queen said with a firm gaze. If she was rattled about having her life almost snuffed out, she didn't show it. "Captain Sloan has briefed me on the events taking place in Burrow Den; the cave laboratory, the experiments done on both humans and animals, and, of course, the journal that was found. I dare say these actions are one of a much larger scheme. I am aware much of the evidence—the mage-powered bikes and the equipment found in the secret laboratory—points to Dr. Oliver Livingston. As he's one of the most influential men in New Hope, we need to gather more information before making an accusation. Dr. Livingston has been nothing but helpful to the Crown.

“Captain Sloan and I are bound to see this through to the end. Aareth Emerson and Jack Walker, I can never thank you enough.” The Queen hesitated, looking at both Jack and Aareth with an intensity foreign to her age. Her eyes looked sad as if she were reliving a memory from her past. “And you, Jack, I seem to owe you twice as much for saving my life. Both of you have risked and lost enough.”

Jack couldn't believe his ears. If the Queen thought this was where their paths ended, she was wrong. His feelings were so strong on the issue, they surprised even him. Aareth spoke before Jack had the opportunity. “With all due respect, I'm not going anywhere. I plan on seeing Edison about whatever it is that's healed my arm so quickly and ... there's a hitwoman on the loose I intend on finding.”

“I'd like to stay as well.” Jack looked from Sloan to the Queen. “My father died as part of someone's sick game. I won't be able to live with myself until whoever's in charge is found and pays.”

The Queen inclined her head, then looked to Sloan for consensus.

“I could use them,” Sloan agreed, “as well as the two Ahab girls. They may have more information about the proceedings in Burrow Den. The journal makes a strong case that the younger girl, Elizabeth, may have been experimented on as well.”

“I agree.” The Queen looked from Sloan, to Aareth and Jack. “Thank you for your willingness to assist New Hope. There is much to discuss, and leads to follow, but for now, a hero has waited long enough to rest.”

Jack felt a lump grow in his throat. It refused to dissolve no matter how many times he swallowed. Words were lost to him as he looked into the eyes of the Queen. All he could do was nod.

FIFTY-EIGHT



JACK

A private cemetery was set apart from the rest. It was specifically reserved for those heroes who'd died in service to the city. Open with a long, grassy plain and thick trees, it stood as different from the rest of the city, as night from day.

He would have liked this, Jack told himself as he stood with city officials and soldiers he didn't recognize. Out of respect, hundreds were in attendance, but how many had actually known the man his father had been?

Jack stood, Aareth on his left, Abigail and Elizabeth on his right. His father's body was moved from the plain, wooden box used to transport it, to an elegantly carved coffin befitting a king. In his heart, Jack knew what remained of his father's body was only an empty shell, a husk. His father's soul was gone; it would be waiting for him with his mother. He would see them both again one day.

"Marcus Walker was a hero in every sense of the word." The Queen's voice broke Jack from his thoughts as the coffin touched the rich soil at the bottom of the grave. "He was a true patriot. He came when his city needed him and laid down his life in order to protect others. I only had the privilege of meeting the man once. However, there is someone here who was fortunate enough to spend time with him. She has asked to speak to you today."

Jack glanced around, stunned. He hadn't expected anyone to speak on behalf of his father. He had almost thought he should, but what would he say, even if he could choke out the words?

Sloan walked to the front of the assembled group. She wore her uniform of grey-and-black adorned with a host of medals that spoke volumes to her decorated career in the army without saying a word. Her saber hung at her side, her blonde hair was actually styled instead of being pulled back in a ponytail.

“Marcus Walker was a man who came from humble beginnings. He shared a part of his story with me on our journey. Although he had a normal beginning, there was nothing ordinary about the man. Even in my short time with him, he has impacted me in a way I will never forget. I think those people, like Marcus, who we are lucky to cross paths with in life, never truly die. I know I’ll always carry his words with me. He encouraged me to be at peace with my past. He showed me that true self-worth comes from within, and it doesn’t matter where you were raised or what others think of you.”

Sloan blinked back a few tears.

“Marcus Walker was, is, and forever will be, with us.” She looked directly at Jack. “He’ll be the best part of us, and I swear to God, he will be avenged.”

Jack found himself grateful beyond words for Sloan’s speech. It was perfect in every sense of the word. There were salutes from the army, gunshots fired on a bugle’s cue; all of the actions Jack could imagine when a hero met his final resting place. The sun was setting on a long day that had seen him through an arrival, an assassination attempt, and now a burial.

One by one, mourners began to pass by his father’s grave. Each one grabbed a handful of dark soil and let it fall through their fingers to rest on Marcus’ casket.

“I’ll go with you.” Abigail wiped tears from her freckled cheeks.

Jack felt selfish for not thinking of how Abigail or Elizabeth felt. Their father had met his death on the same night as Marcus. Even though he had been the villain in the story, Jack could imagine that, in a way, it had been almost harder

for them. Abigail had saved Jack's life by killing her father, Elijah Ahab. There had been no ceremony for him.

"Together." Jack reached out with his right hand and clasped her palm in his own, just as she had done for him that morning. They moved together toward the open pit. Jack reached down with his free hand and felt the cool, moist soil conform to his grip.

He looked down on the open square of earth where his father had found his final resting place. The soft dirt fell through his fingers as he said his final goodbye: *I love you, Dad. I'll always love you. I'll find out who was responsible and they'll pay. I promise.*

FIFTY-NINE



JACK

“I secured bedrooms for you in the palace on the same level,” Sloan explained as she showed Jack, Aareth, Abigail, and Elizabeth to three side-by-side rooms. “I hope you don’t mind. I imagined you’d want to share with your sister.”

“No, that’s fine. Thank you, Captain Sloan,” Abigail said.

“Of course, dinner will be served in the hall. You are free to come and go as you please.” Sloan held Jack’s and Aareth’s gazes for a moment longer. “Sleep well. I have to ensure the guard is doubled for the Queen. We’ll start our investigation tomorrow morning.”

Jack held his tongue. He wanted to start now. He knew sleep would be far from him this night; he wanted to begin searching for his father’s murderer immediately, but he held these feelings in check, remembering Sloan’s words at the funeral.

Aareth’s face told Jack his mind was a hundred miles away. He gave Sloan a grunt of agreement before disappearing into his room in a very unlike-Aareth way.

“If you need anything”—Sloan began to walk down the hall—“just ask a servant or guard. They’ve been instructed to assist you.”

“Thank you,” Jack and Abigail said together.

A second later, Sloan was gone.

“I’m sorry,” Elizabeth said. “I mean, about what happened to your dad.” She had been so quiet over the course of the day;

Jack had wondered how she was coping with all of the events. “I know what it’s like to lose a father. You were lucky to have had him in your life. From what I saw, he was a great example of what a father should be.”

“He was.” Jack stared down at the red carpet lining the hall. “Thank you, Elizabeth.”

“Are they going to experiment on me again?” she asked, changing the topic as if she were asking about his thoughts on the weather.

“What?” Jack’s neck lifted so fast, it almost gave him whiplash.

“Yeah, I wanted to ask before, but it seemed selfish.” Elizabeth moved a long cord of thick, red hair from her eyes to behind her ear. “So what’s it going to be? Did you bring me to New Hope because I’m a freak?”

“Um ...” Abigail motioned with her chin to a servant who had appeared down the hall. “Perhaps we should have this conversation in private.”

Jack looked bewildered, but nodded along with her suggestion. The trio entered the girls’ room, and Abigail closed the door behind them. The floor plan was a single, large square. A window opened up to the rear garden, and two large beds stood side by side with a nightstand between. A pair of dressers and a door leading to the lavatory rounded out the room.

Elizabeth wasted no time, running to a bed and throwing herself atop the fluffy cushions. She rolled onto her stomach, both hands supporting her chin.

Abigail was more reserved as she stood next to her sister, her arms folded across her chest. A look of apprehension touched her eyes as Jack took turns staring at them both, wondering who was going to speak first.

The journal they had found in the cave laboratory, the one written by the scientist named Aaron Jebson. He had referred to two experiments. Was Elizabeth one of them? Jack wondered as he waited for someone to break the silence.

“When the memories first started coming back to her,” Abigail said, her voice shaking, “we thought they were dreams or something else. I mean, how could she not remember?”

“The memories are like nightmares,” Elizabeth said, echoing her sister’s words. “I’ve always been a bit off, but ... but it’s been getting worse. I think they found me in the woods one day. I think they experimented on me.”

“Who?” Jack tried wrapping his mind around the idea of anyone experimenting on another person. “Who would do something like that to a young girl? How long were you gone?”

“They were men in long, white coats.” Elizabeth shivered as she spoke. “I don’t remember much, but I remember the cave laboratory and ... I remember being in pain.”

Elizabeth paused as her skin paled. Her eyes were huge as if she were reliving the horrible events of the cave that very moment.

“They would have had to capture her, do their experiments, and erase her memory each day.” Abigail swallowed hard. “She was never missing. We lived in Burrow Den. It was the quietest city in the Outland before ... before the attacks started.”

“In the journal we found,” Jack started, deciding to tell the sisters what he knew, “there was mention of two successful experiments outside of the beast. They were codenamed ‘R-10 Banshee’ and ‘R-19 Night Walker.’”

SIXTY



SLOAN

“Shouldn’t you be in bed?” Sloan’s eyebrow arched. It was almost midnight. After her check-in with the bodyguards watching the Queen and a walk-through of the palace grounds, Sloan was exhausted. She was making her way to her quarters when she found Aareth headed for the armory. “You should be resting that arm of yours.”

“Arm’s fine.” Aareth glared at her through bloodshot eyes. A look of borderline panic had replaced his usual easygoing demeanor. “Can’t sleep.”

“Is there something I should be made aware of?” Sloan caught her rough tone and decided to ease off a bit. “Are you okay, Aareth?”

“It’s nothing.” Aareth swallowed hard, averting his gaze. “An impossible coincidence, that’s all.”

“Well, where are you going?” Sloan decided not to push the subject. “The palace armory is the only thing down this hall.”

“I have a meeting with Edison.” Aareth coughed so hard, it almost sounded like a bark. He massaged his miraculously healed arm. “He said he can do some tests to explain this.”

“How is it?” Sloan felt pity for the man, and just as soon, hid the emotion. Aareth didn’t need, neither would he want, someone feeling sorry for him. “The pain’s gone. Physically, I feel stronger than I ever have. It’s just that—” Aareth shifted his gaze from Sloan to the vaulted ceiling of the palace. It wasn’t that he was trying to break eye contact with her; he was

just searching for the words. “Something’s going on that I can’t explain. I’m having dreams that I’ve had a hundred times before, but they’re ending different. I feel like something inside of me has woken and it’s pissed off.”

“I’m not going to pretend that I know what you’re going through.” Sloan looked down at her own mending leg that still caused her to limp. Memories of the knife wound from Elijah Ahab were fresh in her mind. “My injuries are a bit more normal. If anyone has an answer as to what’s happened to you, Edison will.”

“Why don’t you come with?” Aareth motioned with his head for her to follow as he continued his journey down the hall. “We can both see what madness Edison has been up to since our last visit.”

Sloan fell in step with Aareth. She was far from considering him a friend, but after their experience in Burrow Den, she knew she could trust him. He had his demons like everyone else, but deep down, he was loyal.

“Where’re the gloves Edison made for you?” Sloan remembered the mage-powered gauntlets with a smile. “Decided to take a break from electrocuting yourself?”

“Left them on the locomotive. Didn’t think I would need them in New Hope.” Aareth gave Sloan a sideways grin. It was good to see him smile again. “I know, couldn’t have been more wrong. I spoke with Edison at the funeral. He said he would collect them, design some tests to run on my arm. I was to meet him in the armory at midnight.”

The two slowed their strides as they came to the end of the hall where a set of looming double doors stood guarding the armory. Carved on each door was an intricate design of magical symbols and runes. Each line etched into the door shone with a dull, red light.

Aareth reached up with a tentative fist. He knocked on the door so gently, Sloan wasn’t sure his knuckles made contact with the door at all. Despite this fact, the doors glowed even brighter, then swung open.

The smell of grease and smoke was thick in the air as the captain and the former city inspector entered the workshop.

Minus the bustling activity of a hundred gnomes hard at work, the room was just like Sloan remembered on her last visit. The chamber was massive with an army of machines she recognized, and even more she didn't. Bright mage lamps were strung up overhead.

“Are you sure he told you to visit him at midnight?” Sloan's eyes searched the area for any threat. A feeling like they were being watched crawled across her skin.

“That's what he said,” Aareth answered.

Then a noise came from somewhere close—a deep hacking, like someone was either choking or had been caught in the middle of diabolical laughter. On instinct, Sloan went for her blade. The pommel in her grip felt familiar, comforting.

She felt, more than saw, Aareth tense beside her. The lights blinked, suddenly plunging them into inky blackness. Still, the noise came. It was more distinct now. Was someone vomiting? In the pitch-black, what would have been a curious sound now seemed laced with danger.

With her inability to see anything, Sloan's remaining senses were on overdrive. Fear sought to rattle her, but courage made her stand. In one smooth motion, she pulled her mage sword free of its sheath. She switched the small button by her thumb, activating the sword's ability. With a hiss, her blade began to warm, until it glowed a faint red.

“Whatever this is, you stay behind me.” Sloan could barely make out Aareth's face by the dull crimson light wafting from her saber. Before he could utter a response, she anticipated his return. “There's clearly something out of the ordinary going on with you. It makes more sense for me to make the first attempt while you circle behind.”

“Right,” Aareth growled. “You're the captain.”

As the noise grew louder, heavy stomps were added. It sounded like someone or something was dragging a dead leg

in its wake. Whatever the monster was, it was something out of a child's nightmare; a specter of a memory nervously ignored as adults.

All at once, the lights to the workshop shone bright. Sloan winced under the pain of the illumination. She ignored anything else and gaped at the impossible man standing in front of her. There was no denying it was Edison Reeves, but a man only half his age. He held an empty vial in one hand, a shoe in the other. He let out another horrific cough before leaning down and placing his shoe on his foot.

“Right, so there are the lights. You'd think the gnomes would make sure they're always working, but hey, you get what you pay for. Am I right, or am I right?” Edison looked at his guests for the first time. A smile, then realization of the horror they must have felt at his approach in the dark crossed his face. “Oh, I must have made you wet your shorts.”

Edison grimaced, taking in Sloan's drawn sword with a single glance.

“That must have been horrifying in the dark and all. I overloaded the circuit working on a project, but who hasn't?” Edison put down the beaker, taking in their stares. “Okay, I know why you're staring at me, and the answer is yes. I have, in fact, lost weight. I tell you, cut out those carbs and, wow, what a difference.”

“Edison—” Aareth leaned in closer to take a look at his friend's face. “It's you, but you're younger and ... and energetically annoying.”

“Oh, right, yes, thanks for the compliment.” Edison ignored the slight with a grand gesture of his hand. “This is the culmination of many years of work between Advanced Machine Making and Observation, and Livingston Industries. The Phoenix Serum that allows me to regain the days of my youth was actually discovered by accident. We were hard at work on the Vampire Project when I discovered this little baby.”

“Back up.” Sloan switched off her mage sword, still in shock. Edison Reeves had been a grey-haired, soft-spoken

man in his fifties. The version of him now with thick, black hair and a mustache was near impossible for her to comprehend. What was even more shocking was the term he had just used. “Did you say Vampire Project?”

“Yes, yes, it’s all going to be unveiled at the celebration ball, but you two are trustworthy, so I thought I’d let it slip.” Edison began looking around his massive workspace as if he had misplaced something important. “Now where did I put that...”

“First, I need to know about this Phoenix Serum and then the celebration ball.” Aareth looked over to Sloan and mouthed the words, *Vampire Project?*

Sloan shook her head. As much as she wanted to believe Edison was innocent, they just couldn’t take any chances. She needed to find out as much as she could about this Vampire Project and gather hard evidence before any other moves could be made. If Edison was in fact a part of this, then the less he knew of her investigation the better.

“Ahhh ... here you are.” Edison reached into a steel container no larger than a shoebox. He pulled out a chubby gnome who rubbed tiny fists at tired eyes. “No sleeping on the job, Elwood. There is work to be done, iced lattes to be drunk, and progress to be made.”

Edison set the gnome down. The tiny worker only reached his knee. It yawned again before saying something unintelligible. The gnome’s native language sounded like high-pitched gibberish.

“No, it’s fine to swim after you eat. That whole waiting an hour thing is just a lie.” Edison arched an eyebrow at his tiny helper. “Why are you asking me about this right now? Are you planning another vacation?”

“Edison.” Aareth took a step forward in a very unlike-Aareth way and violently grabbed the inventor. “Focus. What about the serum?”

Elwood ran forward to help his employer. A stern look came over his eyes, and his tiny lungs already shouting high-

pitched orders to Aareth.

Edison waved his helper away.

“It only has temporary effect. Discovered by accident. I’m working on another batch now to try to keep the result permanent.” Edison leaned in so close to Aareth, the two were almost touching foreheads. “Are you okay? Your eyes look crazy.”

“And we were supposed to have a ball, celebrating our victory in Burrow Den. It’s all political. I asked the Queen to postpone the event for a day so Jack could have time.” Sloan stepped forward, placing a hand on one of Aareth’s quivering arms. “Edison—you mentioned something else? You discovered the Phoenix Serum while researching what exactly?”

“Yes, yes, you’ve gotten a taste for the future and want more. I can understand that.” Edison wriggled his way out of Aareth’s grip. If he was perturbed at the rough handling, he didn’t show it. “Think of the lives that will be spared, the resources we will save.”

“Start from the beginning. What is this Vampire Project you’ve been referencing?” Sloan finally felt comfortable enough to sheathe her blade. “Don’t leave anything out.”

“We’re so close.” Edison motioned to Elwood. “The plans, Elwood, the plans.”

The gnome reached an empty hand behind his back. He pulled out a massive rolled-up scroll that couldn’t have been shoved down his pants.

“Thank you.” Edison accepted the plans, spreading open the document on a steel table. He waved away their confused looks with an open hand. “Elwood’s a mage gnome. He can produce small to midsize objects. The perfect assistant for an inventor.”

“He can conjure objects out of thin air?” Sloan fixed the gnome with a raised eyebrow. “I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“Yes. Of course, there’s a limit to his ability, but anything he’s able to handle he can bring forth. Watch this.” Edison looked down at Elwood, barking out items. “Espresso, screwdriver, brick, glasses, can.”

As quickly as Edison could shout the object, Elwood was reaching behind his back, conjuring the items. A second later, he stood with his arms full of the desired objects. The espresso was balanced atop his full arms, teetering dangerously.

“Well done.” Edison took the screwdriver, the brick, the glasses, and the can and put them on the four corners of his rolled-out schematic. The espresso, he drank in one large gulp. His face lit up like a Christmas tree. “That’s what I needed! There it is!”

“I don’t think you needed that at all.” Sloan looked over at Aareth, who had gotten over whatever fit of anger had come over him. “You ready for this?”

“Do we have a choice?” Aareth asked, joining them at the table. They looked down at the drawing. “Okay, tell us what this is.”

“All right, coming at you, fast and furious.” Edison pointed to the map below them. It was the outline of a man lying on his back, notes and arrows all over the paper, pointing out enhancements and changes. “The Vampire Project is our run at creating the perfect soldier. We’ve been able to increase strength, speed, even the length of their lives. The only drawback is that they’re a bit blood-lusty. But we’re so very close to having a perfect model. Doctor Livingston says he’s had a breakthrough that will solve the blood thing, but I just don’t understand how.”

“Blood-lusty?” Aareth joined the two looking over the schematic. He reached out with a hand and pointed to fangs sprouting from the outline man’s mouth. “What’s this?”

“It’s an animal thing. Their fangs protrude when they’re preparing to fight. Think of Sloan pulling her saber from her sheath.” Edison crossed his arms. Deep in thought, he shook his head while he spoke. “Their bloodlust makes them too eager for combat. We’ve created warriors too eager to fight.”

“You experimented on these people.” All Sloan could think about was the journal found in the cave laboratory that detailed experiments done on animals and human beings alike. “Why? Why would you do this?”

“They were all willing. Each one of them understood what we were seeking to accomplish here.” For the first time, Edison looked hurt. “I promise you, there was nothing but complete transparency. No one was hurt while we did our testing. As to why we would do this, imagine the lives we could save if the good guys are ten times faster than the bad guys, ten times stronger and possess a fighting courage that makes them smile in the face of battle.”

Edison’s genuinely ignorant demeanor disturbed Sloan. He was a good man she had known for years. It was hard for her to imagine a scenario where he was involved in any of the experiments going on in Burrow Den. The way he talked sounded like he didn’t have a clue. He was either the best liar she had ever met, or he was being used as a piece in a much larger game.

Edison motioned the group over to a chalkboard with white notes covering nearly every inch of the surface.

“By no means is it perfection. For some reason, the vampires are sensitive to light, and we already talked about the bloodlust thing.” Edison stared at the board as if he were in a trance. “If we could fix that and somehow increase their healing factor, we’d have the perfect soldier.”

“Why are they called vampires?” Sloan asked as she studied the board. “Like the vampire bat?”

Edison’s eyes were slowly beginning to close. It seemed the espresso had worn off. Elwood tugged at his pant leg, jolting the inventor back to the waking world.

“Oh, yes, sorry.” Edison shook his head, rubbing at tired eyes. “I didn’t name the project, but I assume you’re right. The bat with the thirst for blood.”

For a moment, the three humans and the gnome stood quiet. Sloan wasn’t sure what was going on in the heads of her

companions, but she couldn't stop thinking of the story Aareth and Jack had told them about fighting their attacker atop the locomotive on their way to Burrow Den. He fit all of the physical characteristics Edison had explained.

SIXTY-ONE



SLOAN

“But I forget myself.” Edison took their silence for awe instead of concern. “You’ve come for answers to Aareth’s arm. I’ve prepared some tests to help us understand what’s happening.”

Sloan heard Edison talking with Elwood. Out of her peripheral vision, she even saw him setting up a strange-looking chair, but for the moment, her attention was elsewhere: on the Vampire Project bringing super soldiers to life. Enhanced humans already completed and ready to be rolled out to the city guard. It was too much for her to comprehend. Most of all, the Queen’s silence on the matter disturbed her.

“Ahhh, here we are.” Edison patted the seat of a brown leather chair that looked like it belonged at a barber’s shop. “Take a seat, Mr. Aareth Emerson, and we’ll see what we can find.”

Sloan watched as Aareth took off his shirt. Her mind went from worrying about the vampire threat to reminding herself not to stare. Aareth’s muscular body was enough to make anyone gawk. Not only was he the perfect male specimen, but the area on his shoulder Sloan had seen ravaged by the Burrow Den wolf creature was also completely healed. A new patch of light brown skin covered his arm. If anything, Aareth looked even better than he had before.

“Wow, what a body.” Edison scratched the underside of his chin as Elwood whistled. “What’s your secret? Yoga,

meditation, good old weightlifting? Wait, don't tell me—a strict diet?”

Edison turned to Elwood with an open hand. His eyes never left Aareth's shoulder.

“Vegetables, Elwood, on the double. I really need to clean up my diet.” Edison accepted a beet from Elwood's outstretched hand. He took a bite, immediately spitting out the contents. “Ugh, I'm reminded of why I don't eat healthier. Why do vegetables have to taste like a punishment?”

“Can we start looking at my arm?” Aareth fidgeted in his seat. “I have a feeling it's going to be a long night.”

“Right you are. Elwood, glasses, and write the rest of this down.” Edison accepted a pair of glasses with microscopic lenses at the ends. “We'll do an exterior exam first, then move into blood samples, x-rays, and mage testing. You know, all the fun stuff.”

Elwood conjured a tiny pencil and notepad from behind his back. He stuck out a pink tongue from the side of his mouth as he jotted down notes.

“It looks like you're in—good hands.” Sloan began to make her way from the room. “I'm going to get some rest.”

“You're going to leave me alone with this maniac?” Aareth teased from his spot on the chair.

“Elwood will keep him in check.” Sloan exchanged winks with the gnome before he went back to his furious scribbling.

Edison was too intent on his work, Aareth was too focused on Edison's poking and Elwood was much too busy jotting down notes to notice Sloan take the Vampire Project schematic with her.

SIXTY-TWO



JACK

That night, Jack's dreams were overridden by memories of a mother he had never known. All he had to hold on to was a soothing voice that sang to him when he was a baby. Emptiness accompanied the memory. A void, like he was the hollowed-out portion of a pumpkin.

Jack woke just as tired as he had been before going to sleep. He forced the awful feeling from his mind by busying himself with the events of the day. First and foremost, he needed answers.

A knock on the door distracted him from his thoughts.

"Yes?" Jack grabbed his holster and wand. "Who is it?"

"Sir," an unfamiliar male voice spoke from the other side of the door, "my name is Sergeant Harrison. I'm here to accompany you to breakfast."

Jack moved toward the door. He opened it to find a huge man with bulging muscles in a New Hope uniform. Jack was sure he had seen the soldier somewhere before, but the exact memory was out of grasp.

"Good morning, sir." The sergeant gave Jack a sharp salute. "Captain Sloan asked that I come and gather you. The palace can be a large place. Easy to get lost, if you're not familiar with the grounds."

"Thanks." Jack joined the sergeant, and the two men headed down the hall. He couldn't help noticing the sergeant massage his throat. At once, Jack remembered his first trip to

the palace. The wailing man he had seen supported by his comrades through the halls.

“It’s a sparring injury. Almost healed now, but it’ll be another month or so before I’m fully recovered,” Sergeant Harrison said, clearing his throat. “That’s not exactly the truth. It’s an injury from a lesson I needed.”

“Oh, right.” Jack wanted answers, but he didn’t think now was the time. “We all need lessons to grow.”

The sergeant motioned to an open door where voices rang from within.

“Have a good breakfast, sir,” Harrison said with another crisp salute.

“Yes, I will, thanks.” Jack wasn’t sure if he should salute back or not. He gave a half nod, half raised his hand, then thought better of it and ran it through his hair.

If the sergeant noticed, he didn’t draw attention to Jack’s awkwardness.

Jack walked into the room, astonished again by what seemed a recurring experience at the palace. At a circular table sat Sloan, Aareth, Abigail and Elizabeth, with a feast of breakfast foods laid out before them. Along one side of the room, a buffet had been set up with servants standing behind the tables, ready to attend.

“Grab a plate.” Aareth shoveled another fork-load of meat into his mouth. “Food’s great.”

“Yeah, I will.” Jack ignored Aareth’s bloodshot eyes, writing it off to lack of sleep.

Eggs, bacon, waffles, and fruit were all piled high on Jack’s ornate plate as he took a brief moment to be thankful for the food. When he joined the group, Sloan was outlining the plan for the day.

“I spoke with the Queen this morning. She agrees that you all should stay on until all of the questions we have from Burrow Den are answered.”

“Even us?” Elizabeth skewered a strawberry with her fork as if she were spearing a fish.

“Yes,” Sloan said, reaching into her breast pocket and offering black leather pocketbooks to each member at the table. “Aareth will resume a temporary roll as a city inspector, while the three of you will serve as advisors to the Crown.”

Jack flipped his pocketbook open to see what the dark material contained. A bronze badge bearing the sigil of the city of New Hope, along with a title underneath it in clear block printing that read: *Advisor to the Crown*.

Jack exchanged wide-eyed looks with Abigail and Elizabeth. Aareth was the only one who didn't seem fazed by this turn of events.

“The servants and guards have also been notified of your stay at the palace,” Sloan said, wiping her mouth with a white napkin stitched with golden bats. “They've been instructed to provide you with whatever you may need during your stay.”

“Thank you.” Elizabeth grinned as she studied her badge. “I've never been an advisor before.”

“Yes, thank you,” Jack and Abigail repeated.

“Don't thank me too quickly.” Sloan impaled each of them with a hard stare. “Your titles come with expectations to obey my commands without hesitation. There's no doubt we're immersing ourselves into a thick web of manipulation and lies. It's going to be dangerous, but we'll make it through this, if you listen to me and we work as a unit.”

Nothing but agreement met the captain's cold stare.

“Good.” Sloan twisted in her chair, now addressing the staff. “Thank you for your service this morning. Your presence is no longer required.”

The staff bowed their way out of the room, closing the door behind them.

“Now,” Sloan said, reaching into her cloak's breast pocket producing the journal found in the cave laboratory, “down to business. I think the obvious leads will be to follow up with

the clues we found in the journal. Aareth will visit the writer of the journal, a scientist named Aaron Jebson who works here in the city. Jack and I will stop by Livingston Industries for a long overdue visit and see what we can find.”

“Wait a minute.” Elizabeth looked to her sister for support. “What about us?”

“Elizabeth, after what you told me this morning at breakfast about—” Sloan cleared her voice in a very unlike-Sloan fashion, actually trying to be kind. “About your possible interaction with the laboratory, I think it’s best you stay here until we can understand the repercussions of whatever they’d done to you.”

Jack sat in his chair, surprised the girls had decided to tell Sloan everything they suspected. He admired them, especially Elizabeth, who, despite her age, was choosing honesty above all else.

“Are ... are you going to do experiments on me again?” Elizabeth asked, a hint of fear in her voice.

“No, never,” Sloan reassured her with a smile. “But the worst thing we can do is to put you in more harm in the meantime. I’ll have the Queen’s personal physician come to talk with you. She’ll know for sure whether or not there’s anything to be concerned about.”

Elizabeth gave off a sigh of relief, content with the answer.

“I want to go,” Abigail said as though waking from a very serious train of thought.

“Excuse me?” Sloan asked.

“I want to help.” Abigail sat straighter in her chair as if the action solidified her resolve. “I can’t sit here and do nothing. Not after what happened ... what I did to my father. He was caught up in this conspiracy. I think we all know he wasn’t a good man, but he was my father. Now, my sister is part of this. I have to do something. Please let me help.”

Jack could understand what Abigail was feeling. He’d go crazy if he was forced to sit on the sidelines and wait.

“Your lack of training—” Sloan began.

“I’m a quick learner,” Abigail interrupted before Sloan could continue. “I can be an extra pair of eyes. I can take notes. I can—”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t be responsible for your safety.” Sloan shook her head with a heavy sigh. “I wish there was another way.”

“She can come with me.”

All eyes turned to Aareth.

“You heard me.” Aareth pushed away the empty plate in front of him. “I’ll be responsible for her. I know what it’s like to try to do the right thing. I know how hard and scary it is.”

“All right.” Sloan looked from Abigail to Aareth, shaking her head. “Be careful. If something happens, you summon the city guards. Don’t try anything dangerous.”

“Of course not.” Aareth grinned. “You know me.”

SIXTY-THREE



SLOAN

“Aareth, can I speak with you a moment?” Sloan asked after the rest of the group had finished breakfast and left the room. “It’ll be quick.”

“Before you start, Edison didn’t find anything yet.” Aareth slouched in his chair. “There was a lot of *ooing* and *awwing*, even more ‘Elwood get me this’ and ‘Elwood get me that,’ but no answers.”

“I’m sorry.” Sloan stood, trying to figure out a way to comfort Aareth. Far from the hugging type, Sloan went to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I understand you’re going through something unprecedented.”

“Edison did tests until just a few hours ago. He took enough blood samples to fill a small tub.” Aareth leaned over, looking at his hands. “Whatever it is that healed me wants something in return. I can feel a part of me I never knew before, and it’s angry. It wants to get out of its cage.”

Before she could second or third guess herself, Sloan knelt down beside Aareth. She took his defeated face in her hands. The stubble on his cheeks pricked at her palms.

“Edison will find out what’s going on with you.” Sloan looked deep into Aareth’s eyes. “You’re—we’re going to get through this.”

Aareth held her gaze. Their lips inched toward one another as if magnets were drawing them together.

When their lips finally met, a floating sensation filled Sloan’s head. As fast as the kiss had begun, Aareth broke it

off, while the dozens of reasons she couldn't be kissing him shouted in her mind. Her rank as an officer, his past as an assassin, and his present condition were all reasons for her to stay away.

"I'm sorry." Aareth shook his head of dark hair. "This, this isn't the best time."

"Don't be too sorry." Sloan stood from her kneeling position and headed for the door. Her heart was beating like a war drum. "But you're right, we'll revisit this once things have settled."

If Sloan had known what the future held, she would have never left that kiss.

SIXTY-FOUR



JACK

An hour later, Jack found himself walking down the streets of New Hope with Captain Sloan and a dozen armed soldiers. Passersby nodded hellos to the group. The citizens of New Hope even smiled at them as they passed.

Jack would never have thought the sighting of New Hope guards would bring smiles to civilian faces. Within their own walls, the soldiers of New Hope were loved. In the Outland, the city of New Hope and all of those inside were viewed as elitists, too good to be bothered with the rest of the world.

Jack walked down the street, peering inside shop windows boasting sales of expensive furniture, the latest fashion trends, and more. One shop stood out from the rest. A bright red-and-gold banner hovered over the door. It sported a sign reading: *Weatherby Eyewear*.

On the other side of the giant glass window, a multitude of eye patches, glasses, and goggles beckoned to onlookers.

Jack had to remind himself to focus. With difficulty, he tore his eyes from the beckoning call of the store. Another few blocks down, Sloan stopped. Jack recognized the alley he had run into with Aareth the day before. He felt the bruises where the would-be assassin had struck him during her escape.

“I thought we were going to visit Doctor Livingston.” Jack gave Sloan a sideways glance. “What are we doing here?”

“We are.” Sloan scrunched her brow as she looked at the red-bricked store with a sign that read: *Lovegood’s Fine Leathers and Hides*. “I want to take a look at the spot where

the assassin took her shot. I was given a report this morning. It just so happens that she left her weapon behind as well.”

“Do you think that will help?”

“Maybe.” Sloan shrugged. “I don’t believe in coincidences. Somehow the assassin has to be involved with the events in Burrow Den.”

A well-dressed man interrupted Jack and Sloan from any further conversation. He wore a gold monocle and an ebony top hat. He approached the pair with a determined stride, fury written across his aged face.

“Captain Sloan.” He ignored Jack for the moment. “If you will kindly tell me when my store will be able to reopen? Daylight is a commodity I cannot spare to waste. Every minute that passes is a minute I’m not making money.”

“I understand, Mr. Lovegood.” Sloan crossed her arms over her chest. “But your business was the scene of a crime, and not just any crime; an attempt on the Queen’s life. I’ll be sure to tell my men to expedite the process, but even so, your store will be closed for a few days, at the minimum.”

“Oh, very well.” Mr. Lovegood bit his lip so hard, Jack thought it would bleed. Choosing not to contend with the captain, he vented his frustration. “Arguing with the Crown is pointless. It seems their only interest these days is sending our funds to the Outland and assisting communities far beneath us.”

Before Sloan could form a rebuttal, Mr. Lovegood was off with a swoosh of his long traveling cloak. A harsh scent of soap lingered in his wake.

“People really have no idea what’s going on outside these walls, do they?” Jack asked.

“There’s an elitist faction that would rather count their piles of gold than to even think of offering assistance to their own family.” Sloan curled her lip in disgust. “Come on, there’s Lieutenant Baker.”

Jack followed Sloan as she crossed the temporary barricades marking the business as a crime scene. She

exchanged quick salutes with the soldiers on duty.

“Any more news on our assassin?” Sloan addressed the sharply dressed lieutenant. “Tell me we have something to go on.”

Lieutenant Baker saluted Sloan and smiled at Jack. The last time Jack had seen the lieutenant, he had been escorting him and his father to New Hope for an audience with the Queen.

“Hello, Jack.” Lieutenant Baker offered a gloved hand. “I’m sorry to hear about your father. He was a hero.”

“Thank you.” Jack accepted the handshake. “He is.”

“Besides the weapon and the eyewitness accounts,” Lieutenant Baker said, clearing his throat, “we haven’t much else to go on.”

“Did you trace the weapon’s origin?” Sloan drummed her fingers on the hilt of her mage sword.

“Yes. It wasn’t made or bought in New Hope, as far as we can tell.” The lieutenant reached into his uniform pocket and brought out an aged leather notebook, flipping to a heavily marked page. He read on, “It’s primitive, probably purchased in the Outland years ago, and changed hands a dozen times since. Would you like to see it?”

“Yes,” Sloan said.

Jack and Sloan followed Lieutenant Baker into the building that smelled of fresh leather and tanning chemicals. The first floor was a spotless storefront with rows of leather—gloves, cloaks, hats, and clothes for any occasion. The lieutenant gave them a tour as they headed for the stairs.

“As you can see, the first level is open to the public. The next levels are where workshops that manufacture the products are located.”

“Was the store open when the assassin broke in?” Jack wondered aloud as they entered through a door in the back corner of the room that provided a spiral stairwell to the roof.

“No, Mr. Lovegood closed the store for an hour during the ceremony. The assassin entered the store through a first-story window.” The lieutenant jogged up the stairs, with Sloan and Jack following close behind. “Whoever she is, she’s an expert. The window she’d entered through wasn’t broken or even damaged. She picked the lock.”

The trio climbed the remaining stairs, lost to their own thoughts. They passed door after door of work levels until they arrived at the top. Jack was still thinking of the assassin, if she had any connection to the other inhuman hitman he had met during their locomotive journey to Burrow Den.

Two more soldiers saluted them as they entered the roof. Sloan and the lieutenant returned the motions. There wasn’t much to the roof at all. A few vents allowed curling steam and smoke to escape during work hours, and a waist-high ledge bordered the square space.

Jack walked to the edge and looked out into the city. New Hope was a bustling hive of activity. Thousands of people walked to and from stores and houses; large buildings poured smoke into the air. The noise accompanying the scene was a mix of white sound.

“She took her shot from right here.” The lieutenant’s voice drew Jack back to the reason for their visit. He was pointing to a section of the roof where a long rifle lay on the ground. “She must have seen Jack and Aareth spot her. That’s the only reason I can assume she left her weapon. The city inspectors have already come and gone. They’re checking leads as we speak.”

“Curious.” Sloan walked over to the rifle. She lifted the weapon from its resting spot. “That a professional would leave her weapon behind, even if she was in a hurry.”

Sloan examined the weapon from all angles before handing it off to Jack.

Jack accepted the long instrument of death. His dealings as a mage sorcerer in the Outland had brought him across dozens of rifles. The one he held in his hands now was a model he was familiar with. It had undergone a few enhancements.

“It’s a 1/14 Reaper.” Jack paused as he let his hands play across the smooth, wooden stock and up to the black scope resting on top of the long barrel. “But it’s been modified. This rifle usually comes with a shorter barrel, and this scope is something I’ve never seen before.”

“Upgraded to shoot farther and more precisely,” Sloan mused as she raised an eyebrow and took another look from their vantage point to the palace steps. “Someone knew exactly what she was doing, so how did she miss?”

Jack searched the rifle up and down. Besides what he had already pointed out, there wasn’t much else unique about the rifle. He handed the weapon back to the lieutenant, who accepted it with care.

Jack followed Sloan’s gaze and wondered if he was thinking the same thing she was. *The shot from the rooftop to the palace steps was a long distance, but not impossible. For someone with this kind of weapon and training, it would have been hard to miss. Did she mean to miss?*

“And the mask?” Sloan asked the lieutenant. “Has anything like that been manufactured in the city?”

“The inspectors are running that lead down as well.” Lieutenant Baker let out a heavy sigh. “But it’s a big city. Helmets like that aren’t common, but anyone with a shop and access to metal could have made one.”

SIXTY-FIVE



AARETH

Impossible. It was an impossible coincidence. Either that or he was seeing things; his mind showing him what he wanted to witness rather than what was really there.

This foreign rage he felt inside and his kiss with Sloan didn't help bring clarity to his current situation either. An already stressed problem was threatening to break him mentally.

Aareth Emerson, temporarily appointed city inspector, was traversing the wide streets of New Hope in long strides. People who passed him were faceless objects he had to avoid to get to his destination.

She's dead, gone. I held the body. Aareth wasn't sure if he was annoyed or grateful for Abigail's voice breaking his train of thought.

"Is there anything you want me to do when we get there? I want to help in any way I can. And thank you for taking me along." Abigail ran to keep up with his fast pace and long strides. "I know you didn't have to take me along."

"It's all right." Aareth shortened his strides to give Abigail a chance to catch her breath. "An extra pair of eyes and ears isn't a bad thing when you're looking for clues."

"I can't fight like you and Sloan and Jack, but I can take notes, or cover an exit, or I could—"

"You don't have to prove your worth." Aareth turned down a street, taking them from the hustle and bustle of the main section of New Hope to a darker, seedier piece of the city. "As

far as I'm concerned, you'd proved everything when you pulled the trigger that saved Jack's life."

At once, Aareth knew he had said too much. Abigail looked down at the street in silence.

"You did the right thing, kid." Aareth turned to address Abigail for the first time in their conversation. "Don't ever think there was another way, or regret your decision. Things happened as they were always meant to happen."

"It's not that." Abigail turned dry eyes to meet Aareth's stare. "I loved my father, but the man who set the wolf on Burrow Den and killed so many people, the man who killed Marcus and was about to kill Jack, that man was not my father."

The final events in Burrow Den come back to Aareth in a flash. Elijah Ahab, Abigail and Elizabeth's father, ready to stab Jack in the back, Abigail lifting the pistol, taking the shot that would save Jack and kill her father.

Aareth pushed the events from his mind. He knew firsthand that dwelling too long on memories would kill a man. He directed his eyes now to the terrain and how much the landscape had changed.

Twisting out of the center of the city was a labyrinth of commercial housing projects. The address Sloan had provided to locate Aaron Jebson was taking them deep into a poor housing development. Men and women lingered on street corners; couples and trios of shady characters examined Aareth and Abigail up and down.

Aareth met their gazes to let them know he wasn't intimidated, then turned back to his path, also letting them know he didn't want trouble. He stretched his right arm and worked it in a circle. A part of him recently awakened welcomed a fight.

"Here." Aareth ignored the urge for conflict. Instead, he pulled out a piece of paper from the inside of his black coat. The writing on the parchment matched the home they stood outside of: 114 Roshni.

Aareth shoved the paper back into his pocket and walked up the short flight of stairs to the front door. The home was small with a black wooden door and gray cement walls. Before he could extract any other clues from the residence, wood shards on the doorstep grabbed his attention.

Splinters lay sprinkled on the ground just under the broken lock. Someone had beaten them to their destination.

“Abigail.” Aareth removed his jacket to ensure his movement wasn’t hindered.

“Yes,” Abigail answered in a steady voice that told him she was ready to enter if he asked.

“You stay put, no matter what you hear inside.” Aareth fought off a wave of heat that burned from somewhere deep in his body. “Do you understand?”

“I understand. I’ll stay here.” Abigail re-steadied her voice. “Be careful.”

Somehow, Aareth knew she was lying. Staying and waiting wasn’t in the Ahab girl’s wheelhouse.

Aareth slowly pushed the door open. The broken lock gave him no trouble; the door swung inward without a squeak.

Inside, the house opened into a living room, a kitchen to his right, and a half-open door in the rear. The window blinds were drawn, bathing the interior in darkness. The space was dusty and dank. The odor of ancient food caught in Aareth’s nose. At the same time, echoes of labored breathing grabbed his attention.

The sound was coming from the room in the back. Aareth crossed through the apartment and placed a hand on the door. The noise of someone or something struggling for oxygen steadily grew. Slowly, Aareth opened the door. It creaked open with a groan.

A body lay on the floor, quaking. A middle-aged man clutched at his neck with both hands. Blood ran from a slit across his throat. In vain, he struggled to stem the tide.

Glass had been shattered all around the room, telling Aareth everything he needed to know. He had missed the attack by a minute, maybe less. He passed the man's body, leaning out the window to see if they were safe. Nothing. No sign of even a fleeing figure.

Rage readying itself for a fight still flowed heavy in his veins. He knelt beside the dying man as Abigail walked into the room. Her eyes were huge.

Aareth had seen death enough to know the man had seconds left. There was no saving him now. All Aaron Jebson could do in his last moments was help Aareth in giving him the answer he so desperately sought.

"Who did this to you?" Aareth knelt close to the man. "Tell us! Was it a woman?"

"Not human... A pale man..." the dying scientist rasped as his eyes rolled into the back of his head. "A scar..."

"Were you in Burrow Den?" Aareth pushed, fearing he would lose the man before he had his answers. "Tell me."

"Yes." The answer was already fading as it exited his lips.

"Who did you work for? Was it Doctor Livingston?"

The man gurgled something unintelligible. A new wave of blood seeped from his mouth. The last thing Aareth caught before the man's eyes went lifeless were two words: "The Order."

"I need more answers," Aareth raged as he grabbed the dead man by the shoulders. "Did you ever see a woman? Did she have a tattoo on her wrist?"

There was no answer from the corpse.

"I need to know, I need to know!" Reason left Aareth as frustration took over. "Tell me!"

His wrath was all-consuming. So much so, he barely felt the gentle hand on his shoulder.

"He's gone," Abigail said.

Aareth released the body, letting it fall to the floor like a marionette with broken strings. He calmed himself, breathing in heavy draughts of air. He needed to focus. Blind rage would get him nowhere. He knew that firsthand.

“Who are you looking for?” Abigail removed her hand from his shoulder. “A woman with a tattoo?”

“It’s stupid, but I have to be sure. I saw her body after she died. If there’s even the slightest chance she could still be alive, then I have to find out.”

“Who?” Abigail asked.

Aareth gave the girl a sideways glance. It was information he hadn’t shared with Sloan or Jack. Something deep within him said Abigail could be trusted. “My wife.”

SIXTY-SIX



AARETH

THE WORST DAY IN AARETH'S LIFE

The burning in his lungs that should have brought him to a standstill was manageable. The multiple knife and gun wounds that ravaged his body should have put him in a hospital. Right now, physical pain was acceptable. Aareth Emerson, inspector to the city of New Hope, raced down its cobbled streets in a manic state.

His current case had led him to infiltrate the largest and most dangerous gang in New Hope, the Bloodstone family. They were suspected of having their hands in everything from drugs to prostitution. There were even whispers of something darker at work, something spoken of only at night or in the shadows, something called The Order.

Aareth had worked for months infiltrating their ranks until he had been admitted to a meeting with the head of the family, Don Bosque. The meeting had taken place only minutes before. The events that led to Aareth running down the streets of New Hope now played back in his mind.

“Don Bosque Bloodstone,” Aareth had said, lowering his head as was customary. The head of the Bloodstone crime syndicate demanded every courtesy. “It’s an honor.”

“Please.” The rotund man behind the oak desk opened his arms in welcome. “One such as you, who has already done so much for the family in such little time, may address me as ‘friend’.”

Aareth lifted his eyes. He took in every detail around him. The room lined with books and maps, the expensive liquor on

the desk, the pair of armed men behind him. His mission was almost complete. He had entered the Bloodstone mansion. All that was left was to find the family ledger listing their illegal contributions to the city. Aareth probably wouldn't get his hands on it today, but he was well on his way.

“My men tell me, a few months back, you were a common street thug looking for work. Now here you stand, after completing job after job for the family. I applaud your ambition, Inspector Emerson.”

Aareth's blood turned to ice in his veins. His heart attacked his rib cage in a sharp staccato rhythm. His cover was blown.

“I'm sorry, Don.” Aareth tried to recover from his shock. “I don't know what you're talking about. My name is Daniel Hunt, I'm—”

“We can cut the dramatics to save us both time.” Don Bosque waved his enormous hand as if he were shooing away a fly. He rapped three times on his oak table. The loud booms acted like a signal. The doors into his office opened. Two more men entered.

Aareth looked over his shoulder at the hired muscle. They were all large human beings. Aareth counted a pistol, a knife, and two clubs amongst the group.

“If you already know who I am”—Aareth slowed his breathing—“then you should have known to bring more men.”

Don Bosque's grin went from one of evil mirth to uncertainty.

Aareth didn't wait for them to make the initial move. He turned and rushed the first man, bringing his elbow up in a vicious uppercut to the underside of his jaw. The man crumpled. A gunshot rang out. Pain followed a millisecond behind the roar. The bullet lodged in Aareth's left shoulder.

Ignoring the pain, Aareth dodged a strike from his next attacker's knife. The razor carved a shallow cut across his left cheek. A well-placed punch to his enemy's throat left the thug on his knees, gasping for breath against a shattered Adam's Apple.

There were still two left. One was desperately trying to reload his pistol, while the other was already swinging a club at Aareth's skull.

Aareth caught the poor excuse for a swing in both hands. He broke the man's wrist, taking his weapon from him. Next, Aareth slammed the club against his adversary's temple before turning to the slow pistol loader.

"If you're going to choose a pistol as your main weapon, you should really work on your reload time," Aareth said before taking the man down with a strike from the club.

Another shot rang out. Red-hot pain erupted in Aareth's left leg. He was lucky. Instead of the bullet burying itself in his flesh, it grazed his leg, going on to find a final resting place in the Don's bookcase.

A bloodstain was already seeping through Aareth's pant leg. Aareth looked past the smoking barrel of the Don's pistol and into the pudgy man's beady eyes. Fear was present in the Don's face, but there was something else there as well. Something Aareth didn't like.

"You're under arrest for crimes against the city of New Hope," Aareth started.

"And you should really get to that pretty wife of yours," the Don said, lowering his pistol. He glanced at a clock on his desk. "I sent a group of men to take care of her at the same time this meeting was taking place. It was insurance. You learn about insurance when you get to be a Don in New Hope."

"You're bluffing." Aareth took a few angry limps toward the Don. "You're a liar."

"I never bluff, Inspector Emerson." The Don smiled over his double chin. "And I am a liar, but not this time."

More than anything, Aareth wanted to write off the Don's words as the act of a desperate man. But he couldn't take the risk. Panic was sending another surge of adrenaline through his body. Aareth limped forward and hit the Don in the jaw with his club. The large man fell to the floor as though he'd suddenly forgotten how to stand.

Now, Aareth was ignoring the pain and pushing his limits as he pounded down the city streets to his apartment. Each step brought tremor of pain that had to be ignored. Rounding the corner to his house confirmed the worst. The windows to his ground-level flat were shattered on the street. A group of onlookers were already surrounding the scene.

“Brenda!” Aareth screamed. He ran toward his ravaged home. Ignoring the closed door, Aareth jumped through the windows, cutting himself on the jagged glass. Every one of his senses became numb when he saw her body. Her perfect frame lay on the floor in a pool of blood.

“No, no, no!” Tears streamed down his face. He ran to her, sliding on her blood. Aareth fell to his knees to cradling her limp form. “Brenda, Brenda!”

Aareth choked out sobs as he searched for the pulse he knew he would not find. The only thing on her neck was angry red marks, telling him she had been strangled.

The blood wasn't hers; it must have belonged to her attackers. A testament to her will to live. Screaming met Aareth's ears as he held her close to his chest. Later, Aareth was told he'd been the one screaming. The yelling soon turned into howling. Roars of anger and rage continued from some primal part of him that had just been recently awoken.

Aareth jolted awake from his nightmare. It was just a nightmare, a memory that had visited him through the years. Except this time, the ending had been different. This time, there had been howling and the feeling of something furious inside clawing to get out.

SIXTY-SEVEN



JACK

Livingston Industries was a massive collection of buildings occupying an entire block within the city. Smokestacks rose to the heavens, permeating the air with fumes. Workers walked in and out of a gated security checkpoint leading into the facility grounds.

“This place looks as big as the palace,” Jack breathed as he matched strides with Sloan. “And with enough security to match.”

“You’re probably not far from the truth, Jack.” Sloan motioned with a clenched hand for the company of city soldiers around her to halt. She walked to a security booth where a pair of armed guards stood carrying heavy barreled weapons. They wore dark brown uniforms stamped with the Livingston Industries sigil of an “L” and “I” producing fumes like smokestacks, the two letters surrounded by a gear.

“Captain Sloan here to see Doctor Livingston,” Sloan spoke without the slightest hint of patience. “Open your gates.”

The guards looked from one to another for a consensus.

“Are you expected, Captain?” one of them finally asked, breaking the growing silence. “We don’t have you on the visiting manifest.”

“I don’t have to be expected.” Sloan leaned into their booth. “I’m on the Queen’s business. Now open your gates.”

The conflict at the entrance to the grounds was drawing attention. Two more security guards walked over from the left,

a woman Jack had never seen before from the right.

She was tall with an athletic build like Sloan. She also wore a brown uniform, but hers was different. Insignias and a gold lining designated her rank. Her black boots crossed the pavement. In a few seconds, she ordered the gates open, then stood in front of Jack and Sloan.

“Captain, you are of course welcomed inside.” She offered a gloved hand. “My name is Commander Ashley Brookhaven. I’m the head of Doctor Livingston’s security force.”

“I’ve never seen you before.” Sloan accepted the offered hand. “Are you new?”

“I’ve been in Doctor Livingston’s employment for some time. Only recently have I been given the authority to oversee his security team.” The commander turned to look at Jack. “And you must be Jack Walker. It’s an honor. Your father was a great man.”

Jack exchanged a handshake with the commander. Her grip was surprisingly strong, and not because she was a woman. Her hand felt like a steel trap crushing his palm. An intensity burned in her eyes like a wild animal hunting prey. Just as quickly as the glance appeared, it was gone.

“Thank you.” Jack shook free of her grip. His fingers felt numb. He studied the commander, noticing the hilt of a weapon poking over her right shoulder. A sword, much like Sloan’s, was sheathed in a brown covering.

“I’ll take you to Doctor Livingston myself.” The commander looked from Sloan to her company of Queen’s soldiers. “It may not be advantageous to show you around in such a large group. We aren’t exactly set up to give guided tours, with all of the workers rushing in and out and the level of dangerous material we work with here at the facility.”

“All right.” Sloan turned to address the group of New Hope soldiers. “Private Pia?”

“Yes, ma’am?” A dark-haired girl gave Sloan a tight salute.

“Wait here with your company,” Sloan ordered. “We’ll be back shortly.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the private said.

“This way.” The commander motioned with an outstretched arm. As the trio began walking through the facility grounds, Commander Brookhaven set her eyes forward. It was obvious this would be a quiet trip.

The commander’s silence was fine with Jack. There was more than enough to see. Inside the main gates, the buildings were guarded like fortresses. Jack counted twenty security guards before he stopped keeping track. They were stationed on the rooftops, at every entrance, and patrolled the grounds like watchdogs.

Apparently, Commander Brookhaven demanded respect wherever she went. Security guards walked straighter when they noticed her approach. Some offered head nods or salutes. She ignored them all.

The group headed for the largest building on the grounds—a stronghold made of crimson red brick. On the very top of the structure were a large “L” and “I” spitting vapors into the air.

Inside, the lobby was busy, with construction crews working on large boxes connected with cables and gears.

“What are those?” Jack asked without taking his eyes off the contraptions.

“Our newest project.” The commander led them to a wide staircase on the other side of the construction zone. “When it’s completed, stairs will be an afterthought. They’re called elevators.”

Jack’s imagination ran away with him as he looked over his shoulder at the boxes. He could only guess at how they would work. The commander wasn’t offering any further information.

As they jogged up the stairs, it was Sloan’s turn to break the silence. “That’s a nice weapon you have there, Commander. May I see it?”

They breached the last stair that opened up onto a long, flat level with a set of oak double doors at the end. A pair of guards stood sentry.

“Certainly.” The commander spoke slowly as if still deciding on an answer before it came to her lips. In one smooth motion, she unsheathed her blade and passed it to Sloan.

If there was any question whether or not the sword was a mage-powered weapon like Sloan’s, the mystery was soon solved. The main difference between the two weapons was the actual blades themselves.

Sloan’s sword was a saber with a thick guard on the pommel to protect her hand when fighting.

Commander Brookhaven’s weapon was a thick, two-handed blade more befitting of a knight than a normal, everyday security officer.

Jack watched as Sloan flicked the switch on the sword’s pommel with her thumb. On command, the weapon hissed to life. A tiny shot of steam escaped as the blade turned a dull blue.

“Hmmm...” Sloan tested the weapon for balance. “And I thought I was the only one—whoops!”

The sword fell, escaping from Sloan’s sure grip. Much too quickly, and much faster than Jack had ever been or could ever be, the commander’s hand shot forward grabbing the hilt before it hit the ground.

A moment of awkward silence passed as the commander turned off her weapon. Jack knew Sloan was thinking the same thing.

“Nice reflexes.” Sloan held the commander’s gaze without a smile. “I’m sure those come in handy from time to time.”

“This way.” The commander met Sloan’s stare with a cold stare of her own. She sheathed her sword.

Jack and Sloan followed the commander to the end of the level. The two security guards at the door stood at attention as

the commander knocked.

“Yes?” Doctor Livingston’s voice penetrated the barrier. “Come in.”

Jack felt a wave of awe wash over him. The room was spotless, with almost everything made from or outlined with gold. The floor was made of dark wood with sparkling gold specks; the desk and chairs were cushioned and outlined with gold. The man standing behind the desk even wore gold-framed glasses.

“Sloan, Jack.” He used their names as if they were longtime friends. Standing, he met them halfway across the room with warm handshakes. “I’ve told you you’re always welcome to visit, Captain. I’m glad you finally took me up on my offer. And, Jack, I’m sorry to hear about your father. Anything you need at all, you only have to name.”

“Thank you.” Jack stood shocked by the warm reception. He had only ever met Dr. Livingston once in passing as they were ready to depart for Burrow Den.

“Please”—the doctor motioned them forward to two seats in front of his desk—“sit.”

“Would you like me to stay, sir?” The commander’s cold tone contrasted Doctor Livingston’s warm nature.

“No, thank you, Commander Brookhaven. That will be all.”

The commander gave a stiff bow. She walked out of the room, closing the doors behind her.

“Since when do you have a bodyguard?” Sloan crossed her legs in her chair. “She seems ... well-trained.”

“Who? Commander Brookhaven?” The doctor sat in his high-backed chair. Through an enormous window behind him, there was a perfect view of the city. “She’s been with me for a long time. Only recently has she shown promise, thus promoted to her current rank. But let’s not talk about her. Tell me what I can do for you, Charlotte.”

Jack could practically feel all of the joy sucked from the room. Sloan bristled at the mention of a first name.

Sloan cleared her throat, buying herself time to calm her temper.

“We found some interesting clues while we were in Burrow Den,” Jack jumped in. “We thought you might be able to help.”

“Really?” The doctor leaned forward in his chair. He looked from Jack to Sloan. “What kind of clues?”

“We were attacked by a group of outlaws led by an assassin named Scar. They were riding some kind of mage-powered bicycles stamped with your emblem,” Sloan said, cutting straight to the point. “And he wasn’t exactly human.”

Jack winced at her abruptness. Regardless of Sloan’s tactic, he waited eagerly to see what the doctor’s reaction would be.

If the doctor was guilty of such a crime or knowledge of one, he showed no sign. His eyebrows rose past the frame of his glasses in shock. “My sigil was stamped on these contraptions, you say?”

“That’s right.” Sloan’s tone was free from any emotion.

“Well, I’m sure I don’t know of—wait, wait just a moment.” Doctor Livingston opened a drawer in his desk. He pulled out a large folder. “You can imagine with an operation as large as my own, I don’t see every project through from inception to completion. At any given time, there are dozens of inventions underway. I do, however, remember seeing a report about some stolen product from one of my warehouses.”

Jack watched as the doctor flipped through a stack of papers, selecting one in particular. He turned the page upside down so both Sloan and Jack could see. It was a long list of missing products including beakers, tables, tools, ingredients Jack couldn’t even pronounce, and something marked at the end as “Project Mage Cycle.”

“So”—Sloan picked up the paper for closer inspection —“you’re saying that all of these things were stolen from you, despite the army of a security force you have and that ice queen commander of yours?”

“Well, no.” The doctor leaned back in his chair once more. “I increased my security because of the stolen goods. I’m happy to say that since I made the changes, nothing more has been taken or marked as missing.”

Jack found himself wanting to believe the man. If he was in fact lying, he had chosen a means in which his story was foolproof. How could they prove either way if the items had been stolen or used by Doctor Livingston?

“What about a scientist you have in your employment, one named Aaron Jebson?” Sloan placed the report back on the desk. “He was working on a project in Burrow Den.”

“You’ve seen the grounds and the number of workers I employ.” Doctor Livingston swiveled in his chair to look outside. “I can’t say for sure that I’ve never met him, but the name doesn’t ring a bell. Why do you ask?”

“He was found with a very disturbing journal.” Sloan used the pointer finger on her right hand to tap the list of missing products. “He was also working on a project that was aided by your tools. Tools that seem to be on the list you have there.”

“Well, I don’t know anything about the goings-on in Burrow Den, besides what the city paper tells me. However, I’d be more than happy to do a full investigation into the matter.” Doctor Livingston produced a gold pen and a clean white piece of paper from another drawer. He began writing a note. “Aaron Jebson, you said? I’ll get my people right on it.”

“I’m sure you will.” Sloan’s words dripped with sarcasm.

“Sloan,” the doctor said, feigning indignation, “I’ve been nothing but helpful to the Crown. If it weren’t for your stubbornness, we could even be more than acquaintances.”

Jack felt color creep into his face at the revelation. Not only was the doctor being incredibly forward, he also didn’t seem to care Jack was sitting in the room.

“We’ve been through that.” Sloan rose. “I’ll expect whatever information you have on Aaron Jebson by the end of the day.”

SIXTY-EIGHT



JACK

The two parties exchanged notes over lunch. Jack listened, wide-eyed, as Aareth and Abigail retold the events of their morning. At times, he forgot to chew the food in his mouth; he paused as if frozen as he caught and clung to every word.

While the information was being exchanged, Jack noticed Sloan and Aareth acting awkward around each other. Neither one of them made eye contact, their words brief.

Sloan's eyes drifted to inspect the ceiling. Aareth concentrated on the plate in front of him. Abigail, for her part, sat quietly in her chair, picking at her peas.

"The Order," Sloan finally said. "We should dig in there, find whatever is to be found about this mysterious group. Aaron Jebson was a dead end. We can be sure Doctor Livingston's report on Aaron Jebson will be fruitless."

Aareth finally looked up. "You think he's lying? All I need is a few undisturbed minutes with the good doctor. I'll get the truth out of him."

"I wish." Sloan chuckled. "I do think he's hiding something. It's hard for me to believe he's the mastermind behind all of this, but who else is there? All signs point to Livingston and Edison working on the Vampire Project. Where this was sanctioned by the Crown, it seems Livingston is taking things a step further on his own."

"The ball tonight will be a great opportunity to find out who the city's elite are." Abigail poked at the food on her

plate. “In Burrow Den, gossip was always a large part of any city event. I imagine it’s going to be the same here.”

“Good point.” Sloan pushed her chair away from the table. “We should all keep our eyes and ears open.”

“I’ve never been great at parties.” Aareth stood. “I’m going to hit the streets. If anyone has information about this Order, I’ll find it.”

Aareth was already heading for the door, when Jack stopped him. “You’ll need someone to go with you. I’ll just grab my stuff and—”

“No,” Aareth said so loudly, he’d almost shouted the word. “I work better on my own.”

“Remember who you represent,” Sloan reminded him as he reached the door. “You’re an upstanding inspector in the Queen’s city.”

“I’ve been the upstanding inspector already.” Aareth didn’t turn around. “It didn’t work out too well for me the first time.”

Before anyone could say anything else, Aareth was gone.

Jack exchanged looks with Sloan and Abigail, the latter avoiding his questioning stare. Just by the way she ducked his gaze, Jack knew there was more to Abigail and Aareth’s day than what had been shared.

Jack made a mental note to ask Abigail later, but he wouldn’t have to wait. Sloan had seen the same look on Abigail’s face. She was less willing to let go of whatever it was that bothered Aareth.

“So what’s got Aareth all riled up?” Sloan eyed Abigail with a disapproving stare. “Spill it.”

“What?” Abigail shrugged. “What makes you think I would know anything?”

“Oh, let’s see...” Sloan raised a gloved hand and lifted fingers as she listed off the reasons. “You haven’t made eye contact with anyone, you’ve only played with your food, you let Aareth tell the story of what happened to you two today... Should I go on?”

“I do know more. I promised Aareth I wouldn’t say.” Abigail licked her lips. As if deciding for herself what she was going to say, she eyed Jack, then moved to Sloan. “You should hear it from him. It’s not my story to tell.”

The room was quiet. The two women stared into one another’s eyes as if the first one to look away was the loser. The tension built to the point where Jack was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

“Why don’t we just ask Aareth today when he gets back?” Jack raised both hands in the sign of peace. Why? He didn’t know. It just seemed someone should be surrendering at this point. “There’s no reason for things to get ugly.”

“All right.” Sloan finally broke her gaze. “I have to prepare for the ball tonight. The Queen’s security has to be better than airtight.”

“Thank you,” Abigail said.

“You’re welcome, Abigail.” Sloan stood from the table. She walked out the door. As if in afterthought, she looked back. “If you are going to be keeping secrets, you should have some kind of training. We’ll set aside some time to familiarize you with a sword.”

“Really?” Abigail’s green eyes brightened with excitement. “Thank you, Sloan.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Sloan said, leaving the room.

Jack and Abigail sat at the table alone. Jack could see the joy in Abigail’s face at the thought of training with Sloan. He wanted to be happy for her, but something in the back of his mind just wouldn’t allow the emotion. He knew that with training, Abigail would be put in danger. She’d be by Sloan’s side now, out in New Hope, tracking down clues.

“Don’t give me that look,” Abigail told Jack with a raised eyebrow. “I know that look.”

“What?” Jack twisted the muscles in his face to relax. “What look?”

“Like you’re the only one who’s allowed to fight and put his life in danger. I’m as much a part of this as you are now.”

“I get that. I do. But that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“I can live with that. But I made your father a promise about looking after you, and I’m going to keep that promise,” Abigail said, glancing out the window. Something like foreboding crossed her face, a look that said she had put off the inevitable long enough.

“What’s wrong?” Jack asked.

“It’s time. Elizabeth has her meeting with the psychologist the Queen had called for.” Abigail rubbed her eyes. “It’s silly, really. I don’t know if any news at this point would be good news. Whatever they find, it’s going to change everything for her, for us.”

Jack stood up, walked over to Abigail, and embraced her. It wasn’t a romantic hug. It was what she needed now, just someone to be there and hold her. She allowed him to pull her into his chest. They stood quiet for a moment, both breathing as one.

“I’ll go with you.” Jack rested his chin on top of her head, trying to think of something to say to make her laugh. “We’re a team, and I’d rather be on your good side now that you’re going to learn how to fight.”

SIXTY-NINE



JACK

Elizabeth sat on her stool in the observation room as if she hadn't a care in the world. The little girl pushed herself from the table in front of her and sent her seat spinning, over and over again.

Jack and Abigail stood on the other side of the see-through glass with Fenrick Trillion and Lieutenant Baker, who had returned to the palace. With Sloan securing the grounds for the ball, the lieutenant was the officer she trusted the most. As the Queen's advisor and treasurer, Fenrick had been asked to be there in place of the Queen.

The room Elizabeth sat in was plain, with two steel chairs and a steel table. The only other piece of furniture was a large machine with wires and buttons Jack didn't recognize.

"The psychologist should be here any moment," Fenrick wheezed as he produced a gold timepiece from his black vest pocket. A glance at the pocket watch told him he was correct. "She's usually early."

"I'm sure your sister will be fine," Lieutenant Baker reassured Abigail, who stood with her arms crossed, rocking back and forth from her toes to her heels. "She has the best care in New Hope."

Abigail managed a smile.

Jack was about to say something to agree with the lieutenant, when the door to Elizabeth's room opened. A middle-aged woman stepped into the room and closed the door

behind her. She wore a white lab coat and carried a clipboard in her right hand.

“Hello, Elizabeth,” the woman said, “my name is Leah Noble. I’m a doctor here on staff with the palace.”

“Hello,” Elizabeth said, bringing her spinning to a stop. She wobbled a bit on her seat while she regained her balance.

“I’ve been told you are very smart for your age, so I’m going to treat you like an adult. There’s nothing worse than being talked down to.” Leah sat at the table across from Elizabeth. “I’m going to go over the information I have on my clipboard, just to confirm I have accurate material.”

“I can live with that.” Elizabeth drummed her fingers on the table. “I can probably save us both some time just by answering everything you have on the sheet. At least, I can guess at it.”

“Great idea.” The doctor lifted the clipboard off the table so Elizabeth couldn’t see what was written on the paper. “Go ahead, when you’re ready.”

“My name is Elizabeth Rose Ahab. I’m ten years old. My mother left me before I can remember. I have one sister. My father was a troubled man. He became the monster he feared and was killed.” Elizabeth rattled off the information as if she were reading things from a list of someone else’s life. “We’re here because I was abducted for days, maybe weeks, and my memory was wiped. During this time, experiments that I can’t remember were done on me, and as a result, my brain power is far greater than it should be.”

“Impressive.” Leah’s eyebrows rose. She was clearly surprised, but recovered well as she checked off boxes on her clipboard and made notes. “Well, you did a great job answering my questions before I even asked them. We can start with a few simple tests just to assess your brainpower. If you can’t complete these tests, don’t worry. They are designed to be impossible. We gage how far you get along the process.”

“Okay.” Elizabeth rolled up her sleeve. “How much blood do you need?”

“Blood? What?” Leah shook her head with a confused smile on her full lips. “No, it’s not that kind of exam.”

“Oh, I thought for sure your mind was on the subject of blood.”

“Here’s the first test.” Doctor Noble ignored Elizabeth’s words. She walked to the desk in the room and rummaged through the contents to produce a hand-sized ball with multicolored sides. She handed the object to Elizabeth. “This is called a rubix sphere. The idea is—”

“To get all the sides of the same color together.” Elizabeth examined the ball from all directions. “I can do it.”

“Okay.” Doctor Noble reached into her pocket. She produced a square watch she placed on the table. “Begin.”

Elizabeth started working on the ball in silence.

Jack took the opportunity to look at Abigail to see how she was holding up with the testing.

“She seems to be doing well so far.” Jack placed a hand on Abigail’s shoulder. “She’s going to be fine.”

“Yeah.” Abigail managed a smile. “She’s not the shy type. I actually think she might—”

“Great wheel in the sky,” Fenrick whispered as he brought his face so close to the glass, his words painted steam on the panel. “She did it.”

Jack and Abigail turned to see what had caught Fenrick’s attention. Elizabeth was holding up the multicolored sphere, having successfully placed each color together on its designated side.

“That ... that’s remarkable, Elizabeth.” Leah Noble, who had so far managed to keep her composure, was fumbling for words. “You accomplished the impossible in mere seconds.”

Elizabeth shrugged as if she had expected nothing less. She passed the item to the doctor, who accepted it with awe.

“Wait.” The doctor flipped papers on her clipboard until she came across a series of images. The first was a black

butterfly. The drawing faced the doctor and the four silent partners on the other side of the glass. There was no way Elizabeth could have seen the picture. “I can’t believe I’m asking you this, but can you read—”

“It’s a butterfly.” Elizabeth propped her head up on her hand. “An inky black one.”

“How ... how could you tell?” Leah Noble asked in wonder. “You can read my thoughts, can’t you?”

“Don’t be mad at me. I didn’t want to tell you because I knew you’d worry.” Elizabeth looked at the glass and directly at Abigail. “But yes, I can read people’s thoughts.”

Tears were welling in Abigail’s eyes. The three men in the room looked at her with worry, concern, and intrigue.

“It’s going to be all right.” Jack tried reassuring her. “They’re going to take care of her here. She’s safe.”

“Is she? Is she, Jack? Anything that can be used as a weapon, will be used as a weapon. You saw what happened to the wolf in Burrow Den.” Abigail skewered Fenrick and the lieutenant with a hard stare. “Will you guarantee me her safety?”

“She’ll be safe,” Lieutenant Baker reassured her. “She’s only a girl. The Queen would never think of using her in any kind of way.”

Fenrick licked his lips and looked away.

SEVENTY



AARETH

“Last I heard, you were roaming the Outland, out for hire to the highest bidder. Then your name pops up with this Burrow Den nonsense. There were even rumors you died. Well, what is it now? Hero working for the Crown?”

“What do you think, Gunny?” Aareth brought the mug of beer to his lips and took a long gulp. “Do I strike you as the savior type?”

“You strike me as the dangerous type, Aareth.” Gunny stared at Aareth. “Say, what’s wrong with your eyes?”

“Would you believe me if I told you I was bitten by a genetically enhanced wolf, and now something I can’t even begin to explain is happening to me?” Aareth asked, scanning the room for anyone that might be trying to eavesdrop on their conversation. The Vixen Tavern was a seedy bar where the ale was cold and the customers even colder-hearted. Aareth had been searching for hours. A tip told him a local muscle named Gunny had information on this “Order.” Luckily for Aareth, he and Gunny went way back.

“Genetically engineered wolf, huh?” Gunny repeated, spitting up beer into his massive beard. A laugh escaped his lips. “You always were a strange one, Aareth. Drop off the face of the planet, and now you’re back out of the blue, years later, talking about enhanced wolves.”

Aareth scanned the room again while Gunny spoke. They were sitting at a table in the far corner of the bar. It was quiet.

The locals were just now getting off work. Only a few of the most dedicated to their craft lined the barstools.

“I need some information.” Aareth directed his attention back to Gunny. “Word on the street is you may have access to a group calling themselves The Order.”

“Nope, sorry, friend, can’t help you there.” The words were already coming out of Gunny’s mouth before Aareth finished. “You’ve heard wrong.”

“You’re a horrible liar.” Aareth reached into his pocket. His fist came back, holding a brown leather bag of coins. “I can make it worth your while.”

Gunny was now scanning the room to make sure no one else had heard the words come out of Aareth’s mouth. The man was a mountain of muscle, though in that moment, he looked like a terrified child.

“I don’t want your money.” Gunny placed his beer on the table. He stood to leave. “I have to be going.”

“I need your help here, Gunny.” Aareth caught the man’s thick wrist as he prepared to leave. “You’re a friend. I’d rather not have to insist on this, but I’m prepared to do whatever I have to do to get answers. What I’m after, it’s ... it’s about Brenda.”

The mention of her ate at Aareth’s heart. He hadn’t spoken her name in years. He had pushed her memory as far from his mind as possible during his waking hours. It was only in his dreams where he relived the events of her death that he was haunted by her.

Gunny hesitated. The two men had come up together through the New Hope police ranks to reach the level of city inspector. Eventually, Aareth had gone his own way, as had Gunny.

The mad look in Aareth’s eyes must have been enough. Gunny heaved a sigh. He shook off Aareth’s hold on his wrist and retook his seat.

“Brenda, huh?” Gunny glanced nervously at the door of the bar and its other occupants. “She’s gone, Aareth. You need

to let her go.”

“I know, I know that.” Aareth felt his pulse quicken in frustration. “It’s complicated. But if I can put her memory to rest for good, I need to know what you know about The Order. Who are they? A street gang?”

“Nothing like a street gang.” Gunny grabbed his beer mug. In one giant gulp, he drained the contents. A loud belch ensued. “Listen, I don’t know much, but I know enough not to get caught up with these guys. They’re dangerous, Aareth. They’re dangerous, like you and I, maybe worse.”

“I need to find them, Gunny.” Aareth leaned forward. His long, black hair fell from his ponytail to cover part of his face. “I need to know for sure.”

“You saw her body.” Gunny lowered his gaze. “We all did.”

“I saw her body,” Aareth agreed, pushing the hair from his line of sight. “More recently, I saw something that I can’t explain.”

Gunny looked solemnly at Aareth.

“Okay, I don’t know much, but I’ll tell you anyway. The name started drifting around about two years ago. Nobody really knew what The Order was back then. It was talked about in whispers. It almost became a joke. When someone went missing, we’d say, ‘The Order must have grabbed them.’ It was funny, until one day it wasn’t.”

Gunny took a break to lean back in his chair. A moment of silence passed before he shook his head free from whatever sense of dread had given him pause.

Aareth knew Gunny well. He had been fearless during their time together as inspectors. Whatever it was that now made him afraid was something to be taken seriously.

“Urban legend became something real. Our nightmares grew legs and started walking among us. These people in masks started showing up. Metal masks. Most people who saw them didn’t live to talk about it. Word is, they’re a sect bent on

taking over New Hope from the inside, but who really knows?”

“Where have they been sighted?” Aareth spoke so fast, his sentence sounded like one word. He was finally getting the answers he so desperately needed. “Any gang or sect needs manpower. Where do they recruit?”

“I would try to talk you out of it, if I thought there was any point to it.” Gunny ran a scarred hand over his bald head. “Rumors are, they hang out in the old manufacturing district. I heard they might be meeting tonight.”

SEVENTY-ONE



JACK

The events of the day were blurring together as Jack took a shower and ate dinner in his room. The ball was approaching quickly. Jack was expected to make an appearance as the savior of Burrow Den.

A suit had been prepared for him. It hung off his bathroom door, ready to make its debut. Jack dressed robotically, his mind on Abigail and Elizabeth. After the tests were complete, Abigail just wanted some alone time with her sister. Jack couldn't blame her. If Elizabeth could really read minds, what kind of life would she be able to live?

Jack's fingers fumbled with the clasp of his slacks and his tie. He was used to summoning magic and hunting the paranormal, not this. A mirror showed him exactly how feeble his attempts really were. The clothing fit well, but his bow tie looked like a noose. His hair wasn't much better.

Jack grimaced at the burning pain he felt in his scalp as he combed his hair into place. The bow tie was beyond saving. Coattails trailing behind him, Jack exited his room. A glance to his left told him Aareth wasn't back yet. A silver platter holding dinner was still on the carpet in front of his locked door.

Looking the other direction, Jack knew something was wrong. Two guards stood in front of Abigail and Elizabeth's room. One he recognized as Sergeant Harrison.

"Hello, Sergeant." Jack did his best to act unconcerned. "What's with the armed escort?"

Sergeant Harrison shifted uncomfortably as if he wished he could do anything now except answer Jack's question. The guard beside him did the same.

"Hello, sir," the sergeant said with a nod. "We're under orders to accompany the girls ... wherever they travel."

"Under whose orders?" Jack pressed.

"Fenrick Trillion gave us the commands," Sergeant Harrison answered. "They aren't in any kind of trouble, if that's what you think. We're only here to accompany them. They're free to move about and attend the ball."

At that moment, the door to the room opened. Abigail stepped out, looking like a recently bloomed flower. Her dress was sleeveless, ornate, and flared out at the waist. Once again, Jack felt like the bumbling idiot who'd fallen over backwards in his chair the first time he saw her.

"I see you've met our new *friends*." Abigail rolled her eyes, completely ignoring the guards. "I feel like I'm being babysat."

"I have." Jack tore his gaze from her red ball dress and matching earrings, but not before he noticed a scratch mark on her slender neck. "Don't worry, we'll figure this out. Is Elizabeth coming?"

"I'm here!" the younger Ahab sister shouted as she ran from the room. Her dress was the same style as her sister's, but blue instead of red. Her fiery crimson hair was curled and fell behind her back like a waterfall. She looked at Abigail. "Jack thinks you look really, really nice, by the way. But he didn't use the word 'nice'."

Jack felt heat rise to his face. "We need to go over ground rules now that we know what you can do."

The three began to walk down the hall, followed by Sergeant Harrison and his clone.

"Actually, we don't know where the ball is being held." Abigail addressed their shadows for the first time. "Would you mind showing us the way?"

The guards complied, leading the group down the palace halls.

“The less people who know about Elizabeth, the better,” Abigail whispered.

“I understand.” Jack lowered his voice. “What happened to your neck?”

“And hands.” Abigail extended her palms, showing Jack her knuckles on both hands. Angry red scratches told a story all their own. “If I’m going to be able to protect Elizabeth, I have to learn how to fight. Sloan and I had our first lesson this afternoon.”

Elizabeth skipped next to the pair, oblivious to their conversation.

“Protect her?” Jack repeated the words. “She’s safe here in the palace. The Queen won’t let anything happen to her.”

“Jack, I know you want to believe the Queen has nothing but the best intentions at heart, and maybe she does, but not everyone will see Elizabeth’s abilities as a gift. They’ll want to use her. Look at what’s already happening,” Abigail said, motioning to the backs of the two soldiers. “We’re already being monitored.”

“They won’t try anything,” Jack reassured her. “Nothing is going to happen to Elizabeth; we won’t let it. Sloan and Aareth will be on our side, too. And the Queen, she wouldn’t allow it.”

“I hope you’re right.” Abigail straightened her back as the group rounded a corner. “For all of our sakes.”

The low hum of dozens of muffled voices talking at once could be heard. A set of double doors were opened for them by palace guards as they approached.

Jack thought he was past being impressed by the city of New Hope and the palace. He was wrong. The ballroom was something out of a fairytale. The ceiling in the room was so high, Jack imagined Doctor Livingston’s entire building could fit comfortably in the chamber.

Everywhere Jack turned, there were guests, soldiers, and the wait staff walking around with silver platters of sparkling drinks. Although Jack didn't recognize anyone in the group, the whole room seemed to know who he was.

"There he is." An elderly man sporting a cane approached Jack as if they were long-time friends finally reunited. "Berry Lovegood," he said, extending a white-gloved hand. "We met briefly this morning."

"Oh, right." Jack shook the man's hand as recognition struck. The owner of the store the assassination attempt had originated from had completely ignored him earlier that day. Jack wasn't sure why he was being so polite to him now. A moment later, he understood perfectly.

A gaggle of middle-aged men and women approached. They all seemed to be dressed to outdo one another. The women wore obnoxiously vivid colors, their gowns ranging from bright copper bronze to deep purple. The men wore suits of black, gray, or brown.

Jack looked for an escape route from the oncoming conversations he had no desire to partake in.

"Good luck." Abigail gave his hand a quick squeeze. "I think I'd rather face another mutated wolf than this group."

"You're going to leave me here?" Jack whispered out of the corner of his mouth. The gathering of city elites grew around him, chattering away like that annoying bird squawking outside your window in the mornings.

"I want no part of this bloodbath." Elizabeth began backing away slowly. "Good luck."

"I have to go watch her." Abigail feigned a wince as if she were actually sorry to go. "Courage, Jack."

The next few minutes felt like hours. Jack recounted the story of what was now being called *The Burrow Den Beast*. The men and women looked on in awe. When the story was finished, there was no shortage of comments.

"What a ghastly tale," Berry Lovegood practically shouted. "It's a shame we don't have one of those monsters here to

clean up our city.”

“Oh, Berry, you don’t mean that,” stated an elderly woman with enough jewelry to make even the Queen jealous. The proximity with which she stood next to Berry Lovegood and the familiar rebuke in her voice told Jack she was his wife. He was right.

“My dear Daisy, you must agree, this city has been in a rut since the creation of that horrid locomotive. The need to expand past our own walls to assist the rabble in the Outland has been our downfall,” Berry Lovegood said as if it were a matter of fact rather than opinion. He looked around the group for support. “You all know it’s true. Tax the rich to feed the poor and all that nonsense.”

“Hear, hear!” a few men in the group agreed.

Before Jack could open his mouth and disagree with the statement, Doctor Livingston appeared, accompanied by his bodyguard, Commander Brookhaven. The doctor was dressed as smartly as ever. The thing that caught Jack’s eye was the transformation the commander had undergone. Vanished was the rough exterior of the battle-hardened soldier. She still wore her uniform with her mage sword’s hilt poking over her shoulder, but her hair was down. A lethal beauty haunted her features.

“Now, now, ladies and gentlemen,” Doctor Livingston soothed the groups with a playful reprimand on his tongue, “let’s not immerse young Jack in our city politics just yet.”

The group was all smiles when it came to the doctor. It was clear to see they respected the man on a deep level.

“I was wondering if I might steal the sorcerer away from you for just a moment,” Doctor Livingston told them more than asked. “I have some news for him.”

“Of course,” Berry Lovegood answered with a quick smile. “Come now, Daisy, friends, let’s leave the good doctor and Jack to their conversation.”

Like magic, the groups were gone, lost in the crowd.

“That’s better.” The doctor smiled. “I hope they weren’t too harsh with you. They can talk politics until one turns to stone, if you let them. Their views can be rather extreme.”

“It’s okay.” Jack shrugged off the comment. “Everyone is entitled to their opinion. What do you think about the Queen extending the locomotive to the Outland?”

The doctor remained quiet for a moment. He studied Jack behind his gold-rimmed glasses. The intensity of the doctor’s stare told Jack he was in a debate with himself on how much to say.

“I think that we have a solid economy and a city full of hardworking, good people.” The doctor spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully. “It would be a shame to see such dedication spoiled by giving handouts to those less willing to apply themselves.”

“But what if they need help?” Images of the many dilapidated small villages outside the city of New Hope came to Jack’s mind. “What if they’re trying? What if they just need that nudge to set them on the right path?”

“We can’t protect or provide for the entire Outland.” The doctor motioned to the silent Commander Brookhaven with an open hand. “But this is not what I wanted to speak with you about.”

The commander reached a hand into her breast pocket and withdrew a folded piece of paper. She handed it to the doctor, looking at Jack with a blank stare.

“I did some digging into the scientist you and Charlotte came looking for earlier today.” Doctor Livingston accepted the paper from his bodyguard and handed it to Jack. “We did, in fact, employ an Aaron Jebson a few years back. His methods, however, were not on par with Livingston Industries’ ethical standards. He was relieved of his duties some time ago. The paperwork is stamped with dates and signatures of his hire, then eventual termination.”

Jack opened the paperwork, examining the contents as he listened to the doctor’s explanation. Everything seemed in

order. Once again, the doctor had a solid excuse as to why he had no part in the laboratory in Burrow Den.

A grunt from beside him drew Jack's attention from the paper to the commander. She was grimacing. A gloved hand was pressed to her right temple as if she were trying to relieve the pain from an invisible attacker.

"Are you all right?" the doctor asked.

"I'm sorry, sir. Yes, I'm fine." Commander Brookhaven opened her jaw wide, then closed it several times. "Just another headache."

"Ladies and gentlemen." The Queen's familiar voice broke through the chatter of the crowd. "If I might have your attention for just a moment."

Jack turned to a raised platform where the Queen stood addressing the room. Beside her, both Sloan and a much younger version of Edison Reeves stood by an intimidating man and woman. They were a pair of pale-skinned soldiers wearing the Queen's uniform of black and grey.

Jack had to remind himself not to gawk as he took in Edison Reeves' new appearance. He seemed to be the only one in shock as everyone waited to hear the Queen's next words.

"Today is a special day as we celebrate our success in Burrow Den, marking yet another step toward uniting the Outland." The Queen paused as the room broke into polite applause. Jack couldn't help noticing Berry Lovegood and many of his cohorts refuse to clap. "We gather today to celebrate another advancement as well. To better explain the project, I will turn to Edison Reeves, the head of Advanced Machine Making and Observation."

The Queen took a step back as another volley of applause followed. Edison was smiling wildly. He wore a black suit with long coattails and a top hat.

"Thank you, Queen Eleanor." Edison rocked on his feet, heels to toes. He smiled so wide, his lips showed off nearly all of his teeth. "Before I start, I see a few shocked expressions. It's called Phoenix Serum, makes me a few years younger. It's

not on the market yet, before you ask. All right, now that that's out of the way, I am utterly, totally, most definitely beside myself to be bringing to you the future of our great city. In collaboration with Livingston Industries, allow me to introduce to you the results of the Vampire Project.”

Edison's voice rose as he spoke. He threw his hands toward the pair of pale soldiers. One of them, a female with long blonde hair and sharp features, stepped forward, and with a smirk, she ran to the opposite side of the ballroom faster than most eyes could track. Despite all of his training, Jack even had a hard time keeping sight of her.

In the space of a heartbeat, she was standing next to the entrance doors, sipping on a glass of champagne. Astonished “ooohs” and “ahhhs” filled the air as attendees broke into a round of applause.

Jack felt someone nudge his arm. Abigail and Elizabeth had returned after their mutiny to stand beside him. He wanted to say something funny to Abigail about her running off, but his attention was rapt.

All eyes were directed on the man still standing next to the podium. He was muscular, with shoulders like boulders, his neck disappeared in his collared uniform. One of the servants brought him a steel rod. The metal bar was at least an inch thick. The soldier accepted it with another smile. He waved to the crowd before bending the metal as if it were a pair of shorts he needed to fold to fit into a drawer.

Excited chatter ripped through the room, immediately followed by another loud round of applause.

“Privates Scarlet and Hunter are demonstrating for you the new levels of speed and strength our vampire soldiers are able to reach,” Edison explained as Scarlet returned to the podium and Hunter pulled the metal bar back into the shape of a rod. “Our vampire soldiers are five times faster and stronger than any street thug or threat to our great city. With these advancements, our soldiers will be better prepared and better equipped to watch over our fair city of New Hope and its citizens.”

Fanatic applause descended on the room. Jack couldn't help noticing the Lovegoods and their friends all clapping wildly at the unveiling of the vampire soldiers.

Edison continued to talk about the details of the super soldiers, but his voice was only background noise to the whispers in Jack's head.

An army of these things created to protect the city. Protect it from what?

"This isn't good." Elizabeth poked him in the ribs with a bony finger. "I agree with your thoughts I'm not supposed to be reading. Bad news bears."

"Come on, ground rules," Abigail reminded her sister. "It's not polite to go into someone's head."

"I know." Elizabeth frowned. "It's just now that you guys know, I can be myself. I don't have to hide it anymore."

"It's okay." Jack battled the nagging idea that something very bad was about to happen. "I agree with Elizabeth. This is bad news bears. We're building an advanced army of super soldiers for a war that doesn't exist."

SEVENTY-TWO



JACK

That night, Jack was in his room, taking off the soft clothes that felt so foreign to him, when there was a knock on his door. Jack didn't carry a watch, but the nearly full moon that shone through his bedroom window told him it was late in the night.

"Who is it?" Jack asked through the door. "Elizabeth, if this is you again, I told you, you can't borrow my toothbrush. Ask one of the guards. I'm sure they'll get you one."

"I don't know what you're talking about. It's Aareth. Open up. We don't have much time."

Jack complied, unlocking his door. It swung open for the city inspector. Aareth rushed into the room. He quickly closed the door behind him. Aareth was a mess, with wild, red eyes and long, unkempt black hair.

"I need your help," he said, licking his lips like a wild man. "Get your gear. We're going on a trip."

"A trip?" Jack leaned in to get a better look at his friend. "Aareth, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'll explain on the way. Bring your wand. We're going to need it."

"Does Sloan know about this?" Jack buckled on his belt with the holster that carried his wand. "Where are we going?"

"I can't tell her." Aareth went to the door. He pressed his ear against it and waited. "I can't risk anything. I don't know who's involved or how far this goes. There's a meeting tonight

in the warehouse district. The Order's looking for new followers."

Jack shoved his feet into his boots, pausing with the leather straps to fully digest Aareth's words.

"You found them? You found The Order?" Jack asked with more excitement for the discovery than he realized he had. In his mind, the mutated wolf controlled by Elijah Ahab had killed his father, but The Order had been responsible for it all.

"Yes, I need someone I can trust." Aareth moved away from the door, satisfied no one was listening in on the other side. "You've lost as much as I have to this city. Tonight, we get answers, and make them pay in blood."

Jack trusted Aareth despite Aareth's manic state. Still, he knew every plan needed a backup. *Elizabeth, I know you can read my thoughts. I hope you've been listening in next door. If Aareth and I aren't back by sunrise, tell Abigail and Sloan everything you've heard.*

That was the best Jack would be able to do. Aareth was eyeing him, already licking his chops, thirsty for blood.

SEVENTY-THREE



JACK

Sneaking out of the palace was easier than Jack thought. The security force was built to watch for those making their way in, not the other way around. Those guards who did see them simply gave the two familiar men a salute.

Jack and Aareth were out of the palace and trotting down the streets of New Hope within the hour. New Hope was in the process of converting their kerosene-powered streetlamps for those made from mage light.

The light warped shadows as the chill of the night convinced Jack to pull his brown jacket close. The cold soon left Jack, however, as he was pressed to keep up with Aareth's long, quick strides.

As much as Jack wanted to give Aareth his space, he also wanted answers. It was clear Aareth was eager to find The Order and those responsible for the events of Burrow Den, but something else was driving the man. Jack needed to know what he was getting himself into.

"You know I'm with you, right?" Jack had to jog to keep up with Aareth. "No matter what."

"Of course." Aareth's fast pace halted for the briefest second before he continued. He looked at Jack as if he had forgotten the young tracker was beside him altogether. "That's why I came to you tonight."

"Then you know, no matter what's going on with you, I won't stop having your back. Now, what's going on?" Jack's words disappeared in puffs of steam as they escaped his lips.

“I’ll be better prepared to help you if you tell me what we’re about to get ourselves into.”

“I—” Aareth paused. Their pace had led them to the heart of New Hope, through the residential district and to an abandoned warehouse block filled with large steel buildings. “I know this sounds crazy, but the wife I thought was murdered is alive. She’s the hitman ... or I guess, hitwoman we’ve been chasing.”

“But you said she was dead.” Jack felt his mind run a dozen different directions at once. Of all the things Aareth could have said to Jack, his current explanation was not one Jack was prepared to hear. “Why do you think she was the assassin who tried to kill the Queen?”

Aareth stopped at a corner where the streetlight had died. A giant dilapidated structure, more rust than metal, stood to their left. There was no one in sight.

“When she slammed through the door after taking her shot at the Queen, I caught a glimpse of a tattoo on her wrist. Not just any tattoo.” Aareth pulled down his jacket and shirt to reveal a tattoo of his own. The placement was over his heart. “This tattoo.”

The ink had faded, and Jack had to squint to get a better look. It was an image of the distressed face of an angry wolf with the words “Send Me” underneath.

“Brenda, my dead wife, and I got these tattoos together.” Aareth’s eyes glazed over as he repeated words he hadn’t uttered in years. “Brenda loved all animals but wolves the most. Her favorite poem had the reoccurring line of ‘send me’. When things were hard, when no one else would go, when others gave up, send me. I’ve never seen another tattoo like it. I don’t know how, but she’s alive, and now she’s this woman we’re hunting.”

Jack wanted to believe Aareth. The look on his friend’s face was more than desperate. Whether he knew it or not, Aareth needed someone to agree with him. He needed validation that he wasn’t losing his mind, someone to tell him

he wasn't going crazy, that his wife was, in fact, somehow, still alive.

"And you think she's involved in this Order?" Jack did his best to hide the skepticism he felt. "How can you be so sure?"

"Listen, I think The Order's tied to it all. It could give us both answers, but don't do me any favors if you don't want to come—"

"I didn't say that." Jack shook his head. "I meant it when I said I was with you until the end. Now that my dad's gone, you, Sloan, Abigail, and Elizabeth are the closest things I have to family. I just don't want you to be disappointed if we find out that it's not your wife behind that metal mask."

"I don't know how," Aareth started wiping sweat from his brow, "how it's her. I saw her body. She was dead. But I'm telling you, our assassin is my wife."

Jack had a dozen different questions to ask about the events surrounding Brenda's death, but this wasn't the time. He could only go back to the palace or move on with his friend. It was clear whatever his decision, Aareth was planning to go on without him.

"We should talk more after tonight. I have so many questions." Jack cleared his throat. "But I'm with you. If your wife's alive, I'll help you find her. Let's go."

Aareth didn't thank him. In fact, he didn't say a word. The look of relief on his face was enough for Jack.

The two men turned the corner and approached the largest building on the street—a decrepit steel refinery with pipes and rods weaving in and out at sporadic angles.

"This is one of the last pockets of New Hope that hasn't been restored," Aareth whispered as they approached the behemoth of rust. "Let me do the talking, but be ready for anything."

"You got it." Jack flexed his right hand. The holster carrying his wand rode low on his right hip. In a heartbeat, Jack could grab his weapon and have a bolt of green magic racing toward his target.

Aareth stopped beside a door that looked as though it would fall from its hinges with the next knock. Aareth pounded on the door three times, then two, then three more times.

Silence, then the door swung inward. The room was so dark, it took Jack a moment to realize a man in an iron mask, covered in a dark robe, was beckoning them in. If the man wasn't eerie enough, he was wearing the same helmet as the hitwoman when they met her in the alley. The same contract killer that, if Aareth was right, was his dead wife.

"You may enter." The masked man's voice was emotionless as he made room for them to come in.

Jack followed Aareth inside a small room. A single candle lit the dark entrance. A closed door led deeper into the structure. What looked like a bar tabletop separated the room. Another mask-wearing cloaked figure stood behind the bar.

"Weapons," said the man behind the counter, in the same flat tone as his clone.

Jack looked to Aareth for consent. He had more than a few reasons why he'd rather hold on to his wand.

Aareth, however, tilted his head forward, removing a short, double-barreled shotgun from his cloak, along with a large bowie knife. He placed the items on the bar top. All eyes turned to Jack.

Jack's fingers itched. It went against every fiber in his being, but he had no choice. If he wanted to gain entrance to whatever this was, surrendering his weapon was the only way. Reluctantly, Jack removed the belt holding his wand.

It was a small comfort that Jack had the ability to channel magic without using an object. The only drawback to using this method was the level of fatigue that came with performing magic in such a way.

Jack placed the items along with Aareth's on the counter. The lifeless eyes behind the man's mask looked them up and down. He gathered the offered weapons, storing them somewhere behind the booth. "You'll get your items back after

the meeting. However, you'll still need to be searched. Don't argue over such a trivial act. The Order awaits just beyond these doors."

As promised, the man who had opened the door for them motioned first Jack, then to Aareth to open their arms wide before he patted them down. Jack was clean. Aareth, on the other hand, gave his searcher pause when the man's hands came into contact with something metal under Aareth's left arm. "Must have forgotten about that," Aareth told the masked man. He reached into his shirt and brought out a sheath filled with three throwing knives. "Just slipped my memory."

The man searching Aareth accepted the weapons. He finished patting down Aareth without finding anything else. Once done, the masked man turned to his counterpart behind the bar. "They're clean, do it."

In turn, the man in the steel mask behind the countertop reached under the ledge.

Jack noticed the motion and was ready to act. His heartbeat quickened. Heat that preceded his conjuring of magic warmed his right hand. Jack's fears would be unwarranted. Instead of a firearm in his hand, the man behind the bar stood holding two black robes and a pair of steel helmets.

SEVENTY-FOUR



JACK

The robe itched the back of his neck. The helmet was heavy and hot. After donning the awkward pieces of clothing, Aareth and Jack were ushered through the door on the other side of the room. The only instructions they were given were: “Follow the hall until it ends. The meeting is about to begin.”

Now, as Jack matched steps with Aareth down the abandoned corridor, he wondered if it had been a good idea to give away their weapons. Jack would kill for the comforting feeling of his wand resting at his side.

The hall was better lit than the room. Torchlight quivered against the dark. Jack looked at his companion, but it was useless; the cloak covered every part of a person the mask didn't. For all Jack knew, a stranger could be underneath the costume in place of his friend.

“If things go bad,” Aareth said, his voice came out distorted behind the shield of his iron mask; it sounded alien, almost echoing, “we head back for this hall. There are only two men between us and our weapons.”

“Sounds good to me.” Jack heard his own voice reverberate in his helmet.

There was no more time for talk as the sorcerer and inspector reached yet another door. The door itself was unremarkable. But it wasn't the door that stood out to Jack; it was the noise that came from the opposite side. A rumbling like a thousand people talking in low voices penetrated the barrier.

Without pause, Aareth opened the door. A large room filled with people dressed in black cloaks and iron masks met Jack's eyes. There had to be hundreds of them. The room was shaped in an oval with stadium seating. It looked like a hybrid between a courtroom and a coliseum. At the head of the room, a raised platform stood with an empty podium. A group of mask-wearing individuals sat apart from the rest of the crowd behind the podium.

Jack followed Aareth to a seat with robotic-like strides. For the first time, Jack was grateful for the mask; it hid an open mouth well. Aareth chose the closest available bench to the door leading back to the hall. If anything did go bad, they were only a few yards from their exit.

The room was too large to be lit with torches; instead, giant braziers housed flames licking skyward. Jack studied the occupants sitting beside him. He could only guess as to their gender. The ebony cloaks consumed each and every one's physical appearance as if tailored for them specifically. The helmets were all exact replicas of one another—two large, dark eyeglasses and an iron grate for breathing.

Jack tapped into his other senses. If his eyes weren't able to distinguish anything unique, perhaps his ears could. Most of the attendees around them were silent, the few voices he could pick up past their excited whispers weren't familiar. Jack leaned forward toward a pair of robes who sat in front of him, and listened in.

"This is exactly what this city needs," a large figure with a barely discernible male voice said to his companion. "Someone to bring us out of this benevolent slump we've been caught in."

"I couldn't agree more," said a clear, high-pitched female voice beside him. It seemed that even the helmet had its limits when masking tones. "What the Queen is doing, sending all of our hard-earned money to help these animals in the Outland cities, is horrendous. Survival of the fittest, I say. Leave the peons to care for themselves. Those who do survive were meant to. Natural selection, my good man. What happened to natural selection?"

Jack had to physically bite his tongue as he listened in on the conversation. Pain kept his mind busy as he reminded himself a misspoken word here could mean death. As much as Jack would have loved to give the two in front of him a piece of his mind when it came to the survival of the fittest, he had to remain quiet. They wouldn't last more than a few days in the Outland, left to their own devices.

Jack was grateful for the pause in conversation. But it wasn't only their conversation that quieted; it was the entire room.

Jack followed the angle the other helmets were directed. A figure had risen from the seats behind the podium to take the stand. A black cloak just like everyone else's fell down its body, but instead of a steel gray helmet, a gilded mask was in its place. The helmet was the same in design but shone with a bright gold plating against the flames of the braziers.

"Friends, brothers, sisters." The figure lifted white gloved hands in welcome. Jack could tell the voice was male. Past that, only a sense of familiarity with the syntax could aid him in identifying the figure. "Thank you for taking an interest in saving our city."

A cheer erupted from the stands. To avoid suspicion, Jack clapped along with everyone else.

"Please," the man said through his mask, "you should be applauding yourselves. It is us together who will reclaim our homes. We must stand as one united front."

The cheers continued until the speaker motioned them to quiet.

"I have lived in this city my entire life. I am a son of New Hope and I love it with all my heart. However, events have begun to unfold that would hinder our progress. Recently, our elected officials have chosen to expand our borders, not in conquest, but in a plan that would empty our banks and distribute our wealth."

Angry shouts, crude gestures, and boos permeated the air.

“I know, my friends. I feel the same way.” The man began to pound the podium, adding strength to his words. “The Order was founded to combat the decline of our city. We have worked diligently these last years to build our ranks. Our time will come very soon. A time when you will be asked to take a stand against the Crown. Will you answer that call?”

The sound was deafening as hundreds of masked voices roared with consent.

“It makes my heart glad to hear it,” The Order’s leader boomed. “But before our meeting can continue, I’d like to draw your attention to a pair of special guests we have with us tonight.”

Jack’s heart caught in his throat. He couldn’t mean them. There was no way they were distinguishable from anyone else in the room.

Jack’s mouth went as dry as the desert Outland as the man in the golden mask pointed to Aareth and himself. All heads turned in their direction. It was like a nightmare as Jack swallowed hard and stared back into the dark eyes of his accusers.

Aareth was already on the move, grabbing Jack by the arm and rushing for the door that would lead them back into the hall.

“Stop them!” The shout reached Jack’s ears. “At all costs, they cannot be allowed to escape.”

Ranks upon ranks of Order members met them. They rose from their seats en masse, blocking the door. Jack ran beside Aareth into the army of ebony cloaks. With their weapons, they might have stood a chance. Outnumbered by a hundred to one was too much of a handicap to overcome. Jack knew this as he collided with the first line of Order members, but what choice did he have? If he was captured and killed, he would do so fighting every inch of the way.

To his credit, Aareth felt the same way. With more strength than any one man should possess, Aareth tore through the line

of cloaked members. Bodies gave way under his powers as Aareth took the lead, more animal than man.

Jack's approach had to be more methodical than the battering ram beside him. He sidestepped, batted fists away, and focused on knees and finishing blows.

Hope seemed to be within their grasp, mostly due to Aareth's unnaturally lethal onslaught. Aareth was mowing down their enemies, while Jack followed close behind and protected his back.

Just as soon as the idea of escape became a viable option, it was ripped from their grasp. Aareth was beginning to tire. A group of Order members saw their chance and pounced on Aareth and Jack at once. There was nowhere to run; there were too many of them.

Jack felt blows land on his face and stomach; at the same time, hands grabbed at his arms and legs. His helmet was ripped from his face, as was the cloak. Half-conscious, he was dragged down to the floor in front of the podium.

Through a curtain of blood, Jack looked on as his hands were bound behind him with a thick cord of rope. Jack took steady, deep breaths. The first step was to regain awareness. His head was still buzzing from the blows he received. As soon as his vision cleared, he would look for an opening to use his magic. He'd only get one chance at it. As soon as they realized he could conjure magic without the use of a tool, they would kill him.

"That one," the man in the gold mask said. "The big one. Yes. Secure him with a double steel chain. That should hold whatever he is."

The metallic taste of blood was filling Jack's mouth from a cut on his lip. He spit out the crimson liquid as he searched for the best course of action out of his current predicament. Numb pain, if such a combination could exist, traveled from his head to his knees.

Aareth was lying on the floor beside him, unconscious. Blood mixed with his long, black hair.

They were surrounded by what looked like the entire congregation of The Order. The man in the gold mask was looking down at them from behind his pulpit, shaking his head.

“Wake him up.” He pointed to Aareth. “I want him coherent for this.”

Aareth was shaken, then slapped across his face. A yearning woke deep inside Jack to protect his friend. Stronger was the urge to see both of them escape alive. Jack twisted his wrists against the ropes that bit deep into his skin. His hands were going numb from the lack of blood to his fingers. Still, Jack restrained his magic. His father would have been proud of him.

Marcus Walker had always reminded Jack to be patient, to examine every part of the scenario before making his move.

Another sadistic slap across Aareth’s face woke him from his unconscious state. Aareth’s blue eyes snapped open.

“Good, good.” The man in the golden mask sounded happy. Redirecting his attention to the flustered throng, he addressed The Order. “This is a perfect teaching opportunity. That, brothers and sisters, there are those who will seek to prevent us from saving our city. Whatever their reason for trying to dissuade us from our goal, it is irrelevant. The only thing that matters is that they would stand against us rather than with us. Most would simply slit their throats now and be done with them.”

The crowd roared its approval, hands clapping. Some even extended fists with their thumbs pointed to the ground as if the room were an ancient Roman coliseum.

“But we are not animals.” The man in the golden mask shook his head. “We are patriots of New Hope.”

The crowd hushed, mid-applause. Apparently, they were under the impression they were acting in accordance with their leader’s wishes.

“We believe in the survival of the fittest, do we not?” The leader of The Order didn’t wait for a response. “Of course we

do. As such, these spies will receive a fighting chance.”

A quick motion of the speaker’s hand brought two masked members standing in front of Aareth and Jack.

Still wearing their masks and cloaks, it was impossible to tell who they were. One was as large as Aareth. The other was slender. Despite her cloak and mask, Jack was sure he had seen this exact individual before. It was the same woman who had defeated them both in the alley after the attempt on the Queen’s life.

Jack looked over to Aareth to see if he had also figured out who the woman was. Aareth’s face was pale. Through long, black strands of his hair and the blood that dripped into his eyes, his focus was on the woman alone.

“The rules are simple,” the man behind the pulpit went on. “If you two kill the two members of The Order, you are free to go.”

Jack and Aareth were roughly pulled to their feet, their bonds removed. Even some of their weapons were returned to them. Aareth’s bowie knife was dropped in front of him.

Hitting the hard-packed sand floor in front of Jack was the case of three throwing knives Aareth had tried to sneak in. Apparently, The Order wasn’t keen on offering a magician back his wand. Little did they know Jack was capable of using the magic without it.

“We don’t use firearms here,” the golden-masked man said. “It’s uncivilized.”

“We aren’t doing this,” Jack said, loudly enough for everyone to hear. Secretly, he hoped Aareth would have some kind of plan and take the lead. Another look at the inspector told Jack he was on his own for the time being. Aareth was still staring at the woman, squinting, trying to wrap his mind around the impossible.

“Yes, you are,” The Order’s leader answered. “Because if you choose not to defend yourselves, you will die where you stand. Let the contest begin!”

A cheer rose again from those seated around them. The man in the golden mask returned to his seat on the raised podium. The guards surrounding the four combatants retreated past the flaming braziers.

Jack reached down and picked up the case of throwing knives.

Aareth made no move for the hilt of his knife resting at his feet. He was, however, whispering something over and over again: "Brenda? Brenda, how?"

Their two adversaries began circling them. From deep within the folds of her ebony robe, the woman pulled out a blue mage sword from a harness on her back. The blade fought against the darkness, adding its unique color to the arena floor.

At once, lines were drawn inside Jack's mind. He had seen that sword before. It was the weapon Commander Brookhaven had shown Sloan earlier that same day. Jack wished he had more time to think through all of the repercussions of this new development, but there was no time. While the woman circled toward Aareth, the large man moved to intercept Jack. Aareth's attacker preferred to wait for an opening, but the man attacking Jack was more than willing to rush in.

"Well, hello, Jack. I was hoping we would run into each other again." The man removed his helmet, showing a pale face with a long scar. "I still owe you a fair amount of pain for the train incident."

Jack's heart stopped in his chest. The man standing in front of him was the assassin leading the attack on the locomotive days before. The Scar, named so for the long mark across his face, smirked down at him. The same man code-named Night Walker who had undergone superhuman enhancements in the same cave laboratory where Elizabeth had been taken.

"The cave laboratory." Jack removed the throwing knives, still waiting to reveal the magic at his disposal. "It was you who was experimented on. You were part of the Vampire Project from the beginning. Specimen R-10."

“Well, aren’t you a bright one.” Scar smiled, showing off a set of pointed canines. A wet, pink tongue caressed his teeth. “Did you figure that out all by yourself?”

“We can help you. I don’t know what was done to you in that cave, but the Queen—”

“Ohhhh...” Scar laughed as confusion faded to understanding. “You think I was kidnapped? I volunteered for the program. And it worked. I’m stronger, faster, immune to pain, and the idea of blood really turns me on. I’m the perfect weapon now. I don’t need your help.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack could see Aareth dodging sword strikes from his attacker while he tried pleading with her. The jeers and cheers from the seated mob were so loud, Jack couldn’t catch anything Aareth was saying, but Jack could make a guess he was trying to reason with the woman he was so sure was his dead wife.

As much as Jack wanted to help Aareth, he had his own problems. The superhuman assassin was advancing. Jack took in a deep breath, pushing his earlier defeat at the assassin’s hands from his mind.

Focus. You can beat him. He doesn’t feel pain, but that doesn’t mean he’s immortal. And he has no idea what you’re capable of.

“Don’t think I don’t know about your magic, boy. I’m just not worried about it. By the way, it’s a shame that crazy preacher’s wolf killed your dad.” Scar sneered. “I wanted to test myself against the famous Outland magician. Wish I could have killed him myself.”

Without another word, the assassin charged.

SEVENTY-FIVE



SLOAN

“Are you sure that’s what you heard?” Sloan ran to her dresser, where her uniform sat in a crumpled pile. “Tell me everything.”

“That’s all there is to tell.” Elizabeth stood in Sloan’s doorway, tapping her chin in thought. “Jack and Aareth are off hunting down The Order by themselves. I searched Aareth’s mind and found out where they were going. Uhhh ... are you really going to change right in front of me?”

“Why? Does it make you feel uncomfortable?” Sloan dropped her shorts and pulled on her uniform pants. “Feel free to look the other way if you want.”

“I’m not weirded out.” Elizabeth crossed her arms but looked at the ceiling instead of Sloan. “I just thought you’d be more modest.”

“Yeah, well, growing up in the system then joining the army doesn’t really allow for modesty.” Sloan buttoned her black cloak. She buckled on her mage sword as she exited her room. “Let’s get you back to Abigail.”

Sloan closed the door to her room. Well aware of the escort that was supposed to follow Elizabeth without exception, she expected to see at least a pair of guards down the hall. There was no one in sight.

A horrible thought gripped Sloan’s stomach. As much as she hated to even think of the possibility, she had to know.

“Elizabeth, what did you do to the guards who are supposed to be following you?” Sloan knelt down to bring

herself eye level with the young girl. “You didn’t—”

“No, I didn’t kill them.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “They’re safe, sleeping right outside my door. I just ... encouraged them to sleep.”

“You ‘encouraged’ them to what?” Sloan stood with a heavy sigh. She had read the report on Elizabeth done by Doctor Leah Noble. “You and I are going to have to have a long talk when I get back. I have nothing but the best intentions for you, but some things are just off-limits. I want you to read my mind so you know I’m telling the truth and that I mean business.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth looked into Sloan’s eyes while she read her mind. A sharp inhale escaped her lips. “You shouldn’t use language like that around me. I’m still a kid.”

“Thank you for warning me about Jack and Aareth.” Sloan was already moving down the hall. “Go back to your sister now.”

“But I can help.” Elizabeth’s voice followed Sloan down the hall.

“I know you can.” Sloan turned a corner, losing the small girl to sight. “But what’s going to happen tonight is no place for a kid.”

Sloan half-expected Elizabeth to chase her down, arguing with her why she should be allowed to go. When the girl didn’t, Sloan said a silent prayer of thanks. Quickly, Sloan traveled down the palace halls to where the officers were quartered. She rapped on the door of one of the few officers she knew could be trusted.

When no answer came from the other side, Sloan balled her hand into a fist and pounded on the door.

“What? What time is it? Did I miss Reveille? I’m coming.” A bleary-eyed Lieutenant Baker opened the door, then snapped to attention when he saw who was visiting him. “Captain Sloan, I’m sorry, I didn’t know it was you.”

Lieutenant Baker was dressed in nothing but a short pair of boxer briefs decorated with pink unicorns.

“I need you to marshal the first regiment. Have them ready in twenty minutes, full riot gear.” Sloan looked the lieutenant up and down with a raised eyebrow before turning to walk away. “And for God’s sake, don’t ever let anyone see you in those shorts.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The lieutenant placed both hands over his crotch. His face visibly reddened. “I mean, yes to both orders.”

SEVENTY-SIX



SLOAN

The cold caught her breath and formed puffs of steam. She stood in front of a full regiment of soldiers led by a now fully dressed Lieutenant Baker.

Besides knowing where Aareth and Jack had gone, her intelligence was painfully lacking. She wasn't going to let these soldiers walk into a trap. They stood tired and shivering in front of her, but well-trained and ready. As instructed, they wore the normal city uniform with full riot gear: armor, batons, shields, helmets etc.

“We're going to the warehouse district.” Sloan walked up and down the line of soldiers, looking at as many of them in the eye as she could without stopping to pause. “There's a group called The Order were going to be questioning. I don't want this to turn into a front-page headline, but we have to be prepared for anything. I'll go ahead to scout. You'll follow Lieutenant Baker a few minutes behind me. Keep your eyes open and move quietly. Remember your training, look out for the soldier next to you, and everything will be fine.”

One of the many things Sloan had learned in the years of being an officer was that soldiers would perform better under the command of a determined leader. Sloan gave the group one last determined stare before trotting down the palace's pavement.

Lost in her own thoughts, she jogged past the iron gates and out into the city. Her senses took in every detail of her surroundings despite her mind focusing on other things, like her last kiss.

It didn't mean anything. Sloan held her sheathed sword in her left hand as she ran to prevent it from slapping against her thigh. *He even broke it off. This isn't the time or the place for this. You know that.*

Still, how long had it been since she'd been kissed? And although he did end the kiss sooner than Sloan would have liked, Aareth was going through something they still didn't understand. Since his bite by the mutated wolf in Burrow Den and his run-in with the assassin who tried to kill the Queen, he had been... different.

Focus. Sloan pushed herself to a faster run, hoping the physical exertion would shake away the memories of the kiss that haunted her.

Both due to the hour and the weather, only a few New Hope citizens still walked the streets. Most didn't even see her pass. She made no noise as her boots hit the pavement; her steps were quick and soft as she studied the surrounding area.

Her journey took her into one of the rougher parts of the city. It was one of the last pockets of New Hope not to be touched by the advance and change of the new era. Tall warehouses rusting from the inside out covered a square mile of the city. Most of these buildings were abandoned, a few still used for storage.

Sloan stopped two blocks from her destination, her ears picking up on something that rode on the cold wind. Cheering of some kind was coming from one of the largest warehouses on the block. For Sloan to be able to hear the applause and roars this far away, a large body of people had to be involved.

Sloan's chest rose and fell under the labor of her run. She was so focused on the faint uproar, she nearly missed the punch aimed at her face. Just in time, Sloan sidestepped. She felt knuckles brush past her cheek in slow motion.

Two black-cloaked figures emerged from the shadows, both wearing matching steel masks. One held a machete in his hand, the other a steel pipe. Sloan took a step back, her right hand on her sword. They circled her, one in front the other, directly behind her.

“I’m going to give you one opportunity to surrender.” Sloan drew her sword and flicked on the mage power. It hummed in hungry anticipation. A dull red glow emanated from the blade itself. “In the name of the Queen, I order you to stand down.”

As one, the two attackers fell on her, Sloan charged forward, slicing clean through the first assailant’s machete and severing his head. In one smooth motion, Sloan turned to meet the second threat.

He came at her with the pipe raised over his head. Before he had a chance to bring it down, Sloan skewered him through the heart with her blade. Her sword burned a hole into his body without the slightest pause. The black robes the man wore lit on fire at the prolonged touch of the mage sword.

Sloan withdrew her weapon. The burning dead man fell to the ground in a ball of flame. Both through the machete, and bone and flesh, the sword had never hesitated. For all of the resistance she met, Sloan might as well have been slicing through paper.

Heavy footsteps made Sloan turn to address a new threat. There was no need. Lieutenant Baker had arrived with the regiment’s vanguard. Mouths were open, eyes wide as they took in the decapitated figure along with the other burning corpse.

“We’re in the right place,” Sloan switched off her mage sword. “Buckle up, I don’t think The Order is in a talking mood tonight.”

SEVENTY-SEVEN



JACK

Anger at the mention of his father sought to unsteady Jack. The fact that Scar remembered he was able to channel magic further rattled his resolve.

Jack rolled out of the way from the first attack. His move was barely made in time. Scar was just as fast as the soldier in the Queen's presentation earlier that day.

The young magician recovered from his roll, throwing a knife at the assassin's back. Much faster than any human had a right to be, the assassin turned and dodged the blade.

Jack's stomach twisted into a knot. Before Scar could mount another attack or fear take hold of his heart, Jack rushed into action. He sent the last two knives spiraling through the air, followed by another two magical blasts of green energy. Scar was fast enough to dodge one, but could he dodge four projectiles at once?

Jack's gamble paid off. The assassin ducked the first knife, but the next three projectiles hit their marks. The last blade lodged in Scar's left forearm. The two green blasts of magic struck him in the torso and right thigh. The scent of burned flesh filled the area with its putrid smell.

Jack felt heat radiate from his body. Both of his hands were alive with dancing green magic. Already he could feel the draw of energy begin to sap his strength.

The three wounds Jack inflicted would have been enough to bring down any man. Jack's heart caught in his throat as he

watched the assassin remove the blade as if it were a splinter. Scar ignored the magical burn marks on his body altogether.

“Nice little trick.” The man code-named Night Walker ripped the cloak from his body, throwing it to the side. His body was a mess of crisscrossing scars over a canvas of pale skin. Smoke still came from the wound on his torso. The gaping crater of cooked meat didn’t seem to faze Scar in the least. The members of The Order, who were momentarily stunned by Jack’s show of magic, roared their approval. They watched on with hungry eyes as Scar advanced yet again.

Jack clenched his teeth, now more frustrated than afraid. He could clearly see where his attacks had landed. The pain and loss of blood, however, did nothing to hinder the advance of the assassin.

The flames from the braziers danced around the dark room as Jack circled his opponent. The noise of the crowd was gone. All that mattered was the next few seconds of combat, the next few seconds that could mark the end for Jack.

Scar leaned down to pick up one of the fallen throwing knives.

The one and only thing in Jack’s mind was to control the weapon in his attacker’s hand. If he could disarm the assassin, Jack knew his chances of survival would rise tenfold.

When Scar attacked, he went for a punch with his non-weapon hand to Jack’s ribcage. Pain lanced through Jack’s sternum as if something was broken. He forced his mind to focus past it. He only had eyes now for the assassin’s right hand holding the throwing knife.

As the blade arced down toward his skull, Jack called on his magic. A bright green knife grew from his closed right fist and came to a sharp point. Jack pushed his own magical knife skyward, impaling Scar’s hand from the edge of his palm, up through his thumb.

The shock was enough for Scar to lose his grip on the knife. Jack pulled back his blade, pleased with the result. The feeling of victory was short-lived as his assailant recovered

with inhuman speed and caught him with an uppercut that made Jack lose concentration. His green knife dissipated. Jack saw spots of black. Pain exploded in his head. He fell to his knees.

Jack's mouth was filled with the metallic taste of blood. He spit out the crimson substance without thinking.

The Scar pressed the attack, the sight of blood bringing on an almost manic state as he charged once again. A crazed fire burned in his eyes.

Jack's mind fought to stay conscious. He struggled to his feet, ignoring the pain. He felt as if his ribs and jaw were broken.

It seemed Scar was done talking. His right hand was a charred mess. He was limping. A mix of dark blood and smoke rose from the wounds across his body. Still, he came forward.

Jack did his best to channel the full force of his magic once more. Without the use of his wand, his efforts at producing a powerful attack were fruitless. He was exhausted and half delirious. He needed a moment to think and gather himself. Green light sparked across his fists, despite his weakened state. Jack landed strikes to the assassin's neck and throat, his attempts feeble at best.

Scar wrapped his good hand around Jack's throat.

Jack felt his feet lift off the ground. He tore at the grip around his neck, but it was useless. Scar wasn't a man at all. Jack had been fighting him as if he were still hindered by the same limitations as a mortal. Jack gasped, air coming in short, shallow gulps. His heart pounded in his ears like the slowing beat of a drum as he died.

SEVENTY-EIGHT



JACK

Jack heard the commotion at the same time he felt the grip on his oxygen supply slacken. Gunshots permeated the air. Jack was thrown against one of the lit braziers, sending a shower of sparks across his body.

Jack's oxygen-deprived mind tried to make sense of the scene developing in front of him. There was screaming and shouting from every direction. Scanning the benches in the stands, he tried desperately to bring some order to the chaos. Everywhere, black cloaks were either fighting or fleeing from New Hope soldiers.

To his right, Aareth was bent over double. He was pleading with the woman who stood above him, her sword raised and ready to strike.

"It's you. I know it's you," Aareth was shouting, tearing at his shirt to reveal the tattoo over his heart. "You have the same one on your wrist. Remember, Brenda, remember! Remember who you are. You have to fight this."

Jack struggled to his knees.

Aareth was pointing from his tattoo to the mark on his executioner's wrist. Jack was too far away to see if she shared the same mark, but he could see dark lines etched into her skin.

Whatever Aareth was saying to her wasn't enough to convince the woman. With a violent strike, she slashed sideways across Aareth's neck. The heated weapon ate through

Aareth's dark hair and came to rest less than an inch from his throat.

Sloan appeared from the chaos, bringing her weapon down just in time to halt the deathblow. Sparks exploded into the air like fireworks at a major celebration. A shower of white hot embers fell across Aareth's face. If the cinders burned him, the man showed no hint of pain. All sanity had left Aareth.

"Sloan, don't hurt her," Aareth yelled. "Brenda, you have to stop this!"

As fast as the assassin who grappled with Jack, the woman Aareth so desperately believed was his wife attacked Sloan. Their blades moved through the air so wildly, they became blurs of red and blue light. Over and over again, the swords clashed, sending explosions of sparks into the night air.

Jack made it to his feet, his head buzzing from a combination of pain and the sounds of chaos. He didn't know what he was going to do to help, but he had to try.

A hand grabbed him by the shoulder and heaved him to his feet. Jack jerked his arm back before he realized who had come to his aid.

"Take it easy. It's me." Abigail looked around with wild eyes. "Elizabeth read your thoughts when you left with Aareth. She told Sloan and me what was going on."

"Well, I guess having your mind read isn't always a bad thing," Jack rasped through his swollen throat. "But it's too dangerous for you to be here. You should—"

The look on Abigail's face was one that would turn flesh to stone. Jack stopped halfway through his sentence.

"If you say I should have stayed home instead of coming to help you, I'm going to kick you in the groin." Abigail stared at Jack, leaving no room for argument. "Do you know how hard it was staying hidden while I trailed Sloan and her regiment? I'm not going to sit around while you three risk your lives. Besides, who's the one who needs help right now?"

Jack couldn't argue with her. Abigail had placed one of his arms around her shoulders and was half-supporting his weight.

“Okay, but...” Jack’s voice trailed off. His eyes moved from Abigail and caught up with the mayhem around them. Whatever Order members had decided to fight instead of run from the Queen’s army were rethinking their strategy. In every direction, black robes and steel helmets were being tackled to the ground by the better trained soldiers.

“Sloan, no, don’t!”

Aareth’s scream brought Jack’s attention to the two women still battling with mage swords. Casting all sanity aside, Aareth stood between Sloan and the masked woman he so desperately believed was his dead wife.

“Get back, you idiot.” Sloan bent her knees. She brought her sword high with both hands, ready to attack again. “She’ll kill you.”

As if to punctuate her words, the masked woman lunged at Aareth. Once again, Sloan was barely in time to push Aareth to the side and parry her strike.

Aareth fell into the woman, knocking the steel mask from her face. Abigail and Jack were still yards away, the former helping the latter walk. Jack was close enough to see the familiar face of Commander Brookhaven.

“Brenda! Brenda!” Aareth screamed like a man possessed. “It’s me. It’s Aareth. It’s me!”

For a brief moment, something like recognition passed over Commander Brookhaven’s face, but like a vapor against wind, it was gone.

“There! There, help the captain.”

Now that most of the members of The Order had been detained, soldiers were coming to aid Sloan.

A wild gleam crossed over the commander’s face. Jack had seen the same look a hundred times before while tracking in the Outland. It was the same mad expression that came over a cornered animal’s.

The commander took off at a run for one of the fiery braziers.

“Stop her!” Sloan screamed as she gave chase. “Cut her off!”

Jack and Aareth were in no condition to race after the escaping commander. Despite his weakened state, Aareth stumbled after his wife.

“No, no, don’t leave me again!” Aareth fell to his hands and knees. “Brenda! Don’t leave me again!”

Abigail, still supporting Jack, was useless to lend aid as well. It wouldn’t matter. In a few seconds, the commander reached the brazier, striking it with her blue mage sword. One of the metal legs supporting the large bowl of fire was severed in two.

Red-hot fire spilled forward, creating a flaming wall between the commander and Sloan. All of the exits were guarded, but that meant little to the escaping commander. Two soldiers standing sentry at a side exit abandoned their batons and reached for their sidearms. Two shots rang through the air as the escaping commander raced toward them.

Jack couldn’t believe his eyes. The gleaming blue sword actually deflected the bullets. Two quick strikes decapitated one soldier and impaled the other. Even before their bodies fell to the floor, she was gone.

SEVENTY-NINE



AARETH

He was going mad. He knew that. Not only was he seeing his dead wife, but an animal rage was also building inside of him, clouding his better judgment and transforming him into something terrifying. But if he knew he was going crazy, didn't that mean he was still sane? Crazy people didn't realize they were crazy ... did they?

Aareth remained on his knees as he watched the woman he loved, and lost, and found again, escape. He knew he should be happy she'd made it out alive. He just couldn't lose her again. The woman he had fallen so desperately and totally in love with was still in there, somewhere. Whatever had happened to her, he would find the truth and a way to reverse what had been done.

Rough hands violently shaking him finally brought him out of his daze.

"Aareth, Aareth, are you all right?" Sloan looked him up and down for injuries. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," Aareth lied. He was bruised in a dozen different places, bleeding from his left temple and lip. His long, black hair still smoked from where it was cut by Brenda's mage sword.

"You were going to get yourself killed," Sloan started in on him, now sure he was physically fine. "What good is that going to do anyone else?"

"She's my wife, Sloan." Aareth grimaced as he regained his feet. "Somehow she's alive. I have to find her." Aareth

understood the second's hesitation in Sloan's eyes. The kiss they shared wasn't something he had forgotten or would be able to ever forget. In a different place and time, maybe things could have worked out. But Sloan deserved to know the truth about Brenda.

"Well, your wife's the commander of Doctor Oliver Livingston's personal security team. She won't be hard to find, now that we know who she is." Sloan cleared her throat. She refused to make eye contact with Aareth. "We'll send out a notice to the city police. She'll be in custody soon."

Aareth nodded dumbly as Sloan turned to her men to give orders and sort out the prisoner transfers.

Jack and Abigail made their way to Aareth's side. Lack of sleep and food made him slow to notice their approach.

"You going to make it?" Jack rasped through his swollen throat. "I'm sorry we couldn't stop your wife."

Aareth didn't respond. He knew he owed more to Jack, the person who stood by his side through the events of the night. Right now, he just didn't have anything else to give.

"So your wife's alive." Abigail tried to find a glimmer of hope in their dire situation. "That's good, right? We'll help you find her, Aareth. We'll figure out what happened to her."

Aareth's mind was a million miles away. Something was nagging at his thoughts. It was a legitimate concern he would have picked up on in an instant under any other circumstance. Like a lightning bolt, it hit him.

Aareth snapped out of his trance like someone woken from a nightmare. "We have to find her before the city police or soldiers do. She won't be taken alive. You saw her fight today."

"Then we'll do what we do in the Outland when we're tracking a target." Jack offered Aareth a hand. "We set a trap."

EIGHTY



SLOAN

He was definitely a fool, maybe even a bit of an idiot, but he was her friend, and for a moment, there had been the possibility of something more.

Sleep wasn't even an option that night. After ensuring the captured members of The Order had been secured and transported for interrogation, Sloan turned the scene over to the city inspectors.

Now, in the early hours of the morning, she was sitting with Aareth in the palace. Together they waited for the Queen. Just looking at him, Sloan knew he was in no mental state to even be awake. Aareth refused medical treatment, insisting they speak with the Queen immediately. Sloan had only consented because she, too, needed a conference with the Queen before making a move on the most powerful man in New Hope.

Sloan retreated into herself. It was time to be the leader both men and women respected. Fantasies of love, a life with someone who cared for her, were shattered like they always would be.

“Whatever your plan is, you need rest and food.” Sloan studied Aareth with a raised eyebrow. “I could take you now with one hand tied behind my back. If Commander Brookhaven’s your wife, like you say she is, she’s a force to be reckoned with. She’s good with a sword; maybe even better than good. She was prepared to kill you tonight. Whether you want to believe that or not, it’s the truth.”

“Sloan, I don’t know what’s happening to me, but the moment we shared—” Aareth struggled for the next words. “You and I—”

“Save it.” Sloan crossed her arms over her chest. “What matters now is that we get answers from Edison about what’s happening to you, and we find your wife.”

“It’s not her.” Aareth slowly shook his head. “Whatever was done ... has changed her. She was never even a fighter.”

“Well, she is now. She’s an assassin.” Sloan thought back to the quick, decisive killing strokes her adversary had tried using against her. The way the woman had fought, there was no room for quarter, no sympathy in her moves. “And she won’t hesitate to kill.”

“She needs to be taken alive,” Aareth pleaded. Even past the exhaustion, his voice was firm and clear. “Please, Sloan, she needs to be taken alive. This isn’t her. She’s being controlled somehow. You’d like her if you knew her.”

“I’m sure I would have.” Sloan stopped herself before she said something hurtful. Aareth was in no state for idle words. “I’m going to do everything in my power to bring her in alive, but not at the cost of the lives of my men.”

Before Aareth could form a rebuttal, the doors to the room opened. The Queen entered, dressed in a white robe and slippers, followed by Fenrick Trillion.

Immediately, Sloan bristled at the sight of the man. Fenrick was a snake looking out only for his own interests. Sloan had a deeper suspicion he was involved in more than he let on. Her own five senses wouldn’t be able to pick up the danger signs Fenrick carried; however, over the years, Sloan had developed a sixth sense that told her who could be trusted and who should be kept at arm’s length.

For whatever reasons, the Queen was choosing to employ Fenrick. He had joined her during the early years of her rule. He had been there before Sloan could counsel the Queen.

“Captain, Inspector,” Queen Eleanor addressed the two before she took a seat in a high-backed chair by the window.

She took a moment to look outside at the early morning hour before she continued. "It's almost time for the full moon."

The three other party members looked at one another for direction. Even Fenrick seemed to be at a loss with the Queen's comment. Bags lined his eyes, and he looked as though he were annoyed to be conscious at such an hour.

"My Queen." Sloan rose to bow. "We have urgent business that request your attention."

Aareth remained motionless.

"Of course, forgive an old woman for not staying on course." The Queen sat straight in her chair. Her eyes moved from the window to address the room. "I've been briefed by the messenger you sent, Captain. I'm glad to see you both safe, and many members of this Order in custody."

"Thank you." Sloan cleared her throat, preparing herself for what she was about to say next. "I'm afraid this is only the beginning of a very tangled web. It seems as though one of the members of The Order is Aareth's wife. She was presumed dead years ago. If that wasn't enough, this woman is also Doctor Oliver Livingston's employee and bodyguard, Commander Brookhaven."

"This is preposterous." Fenrick Trillion started with a jolt. "Are you inferring that one of the most well-established and loyal friends to the Crown is involved in ... in whatever this Order is?"

"I'm not inferring anything." Sloan clenched her jaw in an effort to keep her temper in check. She skewered the weasel-like man with a death stare. "I'm stating facts."

"And there's no room for error in this?" the Queen asked, ignoring the tension between her treasurer and captain. "You are absolutely sure this woman is both the commander and Aareth's wife?"

"I saw her with my own eyes," Aareth spoke for the first time. "It was her. I don't know how, but it was her."

"I was going to order an arrest warrant for her right away," Sloan continued. "However, I thought it prudent to check with

you. Since the commander is so deeply involved with this, I'd also like to bring in Doctor Livingston for questioning."

"Your Majesty." Fenrick took a stance next to the Queen. He began gesturing wildly with his hands. "You can't. Livingston Industries has always been our ally. Edison Reeves has worked side by side with him on numerous projects over the years, including the Vampire Project."

"I am well aware of our history with Livingston Industries, Fenrick." The Queen's eyebrow rose. Her gray eyes narrowed in thought. "You have my permission to bring in this Commander Brookhaven; however, detaining the doctor may not prove advantageous for our cause. Just because one of his staff was involved in the night's escapades does not prove him guilty of the same crimes."

The look of victory on Fenrick's face made Sloan want to tear out his throat and beat him with it. At times, keeping the rage living deep inside of her at bay was easy. This was not one of those times. Right now, she sapped more energy than normal to check her temper.

"As you command, my Queen," Sloan said with a bow, "so it will be done."

"I want to help bring her in alive." Aareth stood, reminding everyone just how wild and unkempt he looked. He hadn't changed in days, half of his hair was shorter than the rest, and his face showed every hour of sleep he had missed. "I know her. Maybe she'll listen to me."

Sloan was on record pace for biting her tongue. What made Aareth think his wife would listen to him now, when she'd tried to kill him hours before, was beyond Sloan. Still, she couldn't bring herself to voice her opinion. If she did so, she would ruin Aareth's chances. Something like sympathy for Aareth's position touched her conscience. Just as soon as it surfaced, Sloan dismissed the idea.

"Capturing her alive will be our main priority," the Queen reassured Aareth. "I want answers as much as you do."

"Thank you." Aareth bowed his head.

“Captain.” The Queen stood to take her leave. “Although I refuse to arrest Doctor Livingston, you may visit him for questioning. Remember, he is innocent until proven guilty.”

Fenrick looked as though he was about to open his mouth to protest. The expression he received from the Queen was more than enough for him to remain silent. Sloan realized it was a petty victory over the man, yet she found herself hard pressed not to smile.

EIGHTY-ONE



SLOAN

It was so early in the morning, the sun was only just beginning to fight back the dark's hold over the city. Already Sloan had ordered the capture of Commander Brookhaven. All around the city, word was being passed that she was to be detained on sight. Extreme caution was ordered upon her arrest. Even with these instructions, a sick feeling sat in the pit of Sloan's stomach, whispering to her that many lives would be lost in the process of her capture.

As Sloan crossed the city streets only just beginning to welcome the everyday hustle and bustle of its citizens, she scanned the case document on loan to her from the city police. The second thing she had done after ordering the warrant for Commander Brookhaven was to request the death certificate and file of Brenda Emerson.

Sloan read the document slowly, ensuring she missed nothing. The report was clear. There was no emotion from whoever had penned the report. Only facts about Aareth's dead wife covered the page.

Brenda Emerson was pronounced dead on August 29, 1880 at 8:40 am. The cause of death was due to strangulation. She is survived by her husband, Inspector Aareth Emerson.

The indifference of the note drastically contrasted Aareth's emotion; the page of paper declaring his wife dead was cold

and unfeeling. Aareth's wrath and drive to find the truth was like a roaring furnace ready to consume.

Sloan carefully folded the report and placed it gently into her pocket. She knew it was silly, but it was her way of showing respect to Aareth and the woman he had lost.

In a few minutes, Sloan found herself once again in front of the wrought-iron gates of Livingston Industries. Just like before, guards met her at the entrance. Unlike before, they waved her in without pause.

"Doctor Livingston has been expecting you, Captain." A barrel-chested guard waved Sloan inside the compound. "He said to let you in without question."

Sloan's sixth sense was working on overdrive. The chances that she was walking into a trap was building rapidly. The only way Oliver Livingston would know she was coming to see him was if he had had word from an inside source. Worse, if Commander Brookhaven had told him herself after her escape the night before.

Sloan walked across the grounds, her right hand resting lightly on the hilt of her mage sword. Her eyes moved on instinct, scanning every inch of her surroundings. If she was being surrounded or watched, there was no sign. Most of the guards and workers arriving for their day at the factory were pleasant enough. She was never stopped.

Regardless, Sloan readied herself for a fight. Her preparation would prove ill-conceived. She entered the building where the doctor's office was found, with still not so much as a dirty look. She passed the construction area and continued on.

As she began walking up the stairs, her ears picked up heavy footfalls. There were at least four separate pairs of feet, maybe more. They were coming quickly, and the sound of the heavy boots meant they were guards. Loud voices fought for precedence over their footfalls. Sloan readied herself for the conflict. One practiced move brought her sword from its sheath. A flick of her thumb produced a hiss of steam from her blade as it glowed to life.

Heat reached her hand from the weapon as it hummed ever-so-gently. The warmth emanating from her sword comforted her in a way she couldn't describe. Sloan would give them a warning. Bloodlust was not one of the sins from which she suffered, but neither was cowardice. If they refused to move aside, she would cut them down with indifference.

The sound built in cadence until they appeared in front of her. To Sloan's surprise, they weren't guards at all. Four men dressed in overalls and carrying tools stopped dead in their tracks when they saw her. Their eyes widened and their mouths opened in fear. One man took a step back, another dropped the bag of tools he was carrying.

"I'm ... I'm sorry, I know we should use the front entrance like everyone else, but the back entrance was faster, I—please don't hurt us." The man had gone ashen. "I'm too young to die."

"Please, don't let me keep you from your work." Sloan let out an exhale, chiding herself for being so tightly wound. A second move of her thumb powered down her sword. She lowered the weapon, then moved to stand aside. "And there's no such thing as too young to die. Death doesn't play favorites."

"Of course." The man who had spoken gulped. "Thank you."

The other men picked up their dropped tools, hurrying down the stairs. Every single one of them refused to make eye contact with her.

Sloan was about to apologize, but the urgency for her visit reminded her that haste was paramount. Instead of trying to engage the frightened group of workers in a conversation, Sloan sheathed her sword and continued up the stairs. The blade slid into its sheath like a hand into a perfectly fitting glove. Warmth from the blade heated her side. When Edison had made her the sheath, he had warned her that the blade needed a few seconds to cool before it was placed in its home. Although the sheath was created from the same steel as her

sword, the blade would still melt it like butter if it was placed inside when still activated.

The massive oak doors leading into the doctor's office appeared in front of her as she crested the final step. The idea that this could still be some elaborate trap was still at the forefront of her mind.

Sloan raised a gloved hand and firmly knocked on the door. The noise reverberated inward.

"Captain," the doctor's voice answered from the opposite side. "Please enter. We have much to discuss."

Sloan steeled herself for what might come when she entered the room. As if her hand had a mind of its own, it strayed to her sword hilt once more. Slowly, Sloan pushed the door inward. Ready for anything, she entered the office.

Everything was how she remembered seeing it the day before, except for the doctor himself. Oliver Livingston sat behind his desk, tired and worried. Ever since she could remember, he had an air of enthusiasm around him. He was always optimistic and cheerful, but not today.

"Why are you here?" he asked, eyeing Sloan's blade. "Are you here to kill me?"

"Should I be?" Sloan walked into the room. With every step, she studied her surroundings.

"Contrary to what you believe, I am not your enemy, Charlotte Sloan." The doctor raised both hands in surrender. "The true enemy we share is knocking at the gates of our city."

Finally, convinced they were alone and she was in no immediate danger, Sloan relaxed her stance. She moved to the side of the desk where the doctor sat, giving her a view of Oliver Livingston and the open doors to her left. Sloan learned a long time ago that an exposed back was an easy target for an enemy lacking morals.

"Did you know about Commander Brookhaven?" Sloan's question was brief and straight to the point. Like her personality, Sloan gave no merit to witty banter or verbal sparring. "Are you involved with The Order?"

“Charlotte, you need to give me a chance to explain. I—”

“Don’t call me Charlotte. Answers, now. No more games. Did you know about Commander Brookhaven’s involvement with The Order. Do you know who she really is?”

“Yes, to both of your questions. But there is so much more. Please, hear me out. Give me an opportunity to explain.”

Sloan felt anger’s familiar touch. For years, Oliver Livingston had declared himself a friend to the Crown. For years, he had lied to Sloan, as well as the Queen. He had betrayed the city she loved and made her a fool.

“Get on your feet,” Sloan said through gritted teeth. “You’re under arrest for conspiracy to the Crown.”

“I am not the man you think I am.” The doctor rose, his hands still in plain sight. “There are few allies left to us, while our real enemies grow in strength. Please, if you care about this city at all, give me just a few minutes of your time. I beg of you, Sloan.”

There were a multitude of reasons Sloan should refuse his offer and take him into custody, there and now. She owed him nothing, and neither was she curious to find out what he had to say. Still, something in his eyes made her hesitate. It was a look of sincerity. A tone in his voice told her he couldn’t care less about what happened to him but more about what was in store for her and the city of New Hope.

“You have two minutes,” Sloan agreed against her better judgment. “Make them count.”

“Thank you. Thank you, Sloan. The fate of our city, maybe the entire Outland, could be decided in the next few minutes. The hour is late and the wolves knock at our door.”

“Now you have a minute and a half.” Sloan glared at him with indifference. “Start talking.”

“It all began when Livingston Industries was just beginning to take shape. The knowledge I have gained since then has been staggering. A woman came to me and told me a story that I couldn’t believe. She told me the Queen and her witch had brought her back from the dead. She told me she

had no memory of her life before, but that death was coming, and with it, the end of the world as we know it.”

Of all the things Sloan thought the doctor would tell her, lies of a Queen and her witch were not among them. Sloan was trying now to discern whether or not the doctor was actually crazy, or if he was well aware he was lying.

“I know this is hard to believe.” Apparently, Doctor Livingston mistook her silence for interest. With vigor, he continued his story. “I didn’t think it possible myself, but I have seen things with my own eyes, Sloan, things that belong in books. Things I cannot begin to explain. The Queen you serve is not who you think she is. She is bent on destruction of not only our city, but also of the world as we know it. Everything you believe is a well-placed lie.”

“You would tell me anything to be free.” Sloan spoke aloud, even as she thought the words. “It’s easy to speak excuses, but providing evidence is another matter altogether. I’m assuming you have proof for everything you’re saying?”

“As much as I can gather,” the doctor sputtered. His face was a wreck of frustration, not at Sloan, but at his own predicament. “Tell me, how I can prove this to you? If you give me to her now, everything will be lost. There are only a handful who know the truth. How? How can I convince you of this?”

Sloan raised an eyebrow. The doctor’s story was so unbelievable, it almost made her think it was true. But the Queen? Her Queen? Queen Eleanor Eckert of New Hope, the Queen she had served for years? The same woman who had taken New Hope from the gutters of depravity and raised it to the now-greatest city in the Outland, an evil dictator? It was impossible.

“I can’t take this as truth.” Sloan shook her head. “It’s time to go.”

“Please, ask yourself.” Doctor Livingston backpedaled, his hands out in front of him. “You can’t accept this, or won’t?”

“Choose one. Now, I can either bring you in quietly, or this can be as hard as you’d like to make it.” Sloan edged forward. “Choose wisely.”

“Don’t you see?” the doctor said, taking a step back. “This has all been a carefully laid plan since Queen Eleanor’s rise to the crown.”

“Unless you have evidence to back your accusations, we’re done here.” Sloan took another step forward. “Last chance to make this easy on yourself—”

The doors to the office flew open with a bang. Sloan pivoted in time to see Commander Brookhaven rush into the room, her sword already glowing with blue intensity.

“You’re not arresting anyone, Captain.”

EIGHTY-TWO



SLOAN

Sloan mentally kicked herself for not seeing the trap. Of course she was being lured into the office to be ambushed. Doctor Livingston was just buying time with his twisted tales of witches and corruption.

These thoughts were running through her mind as she turned to meet the attack. The commander was dirty from a night on the run. Her hair was a mess of tangles, but her eyes were as trained and deadly as ever.

Sloan heard motion behind her. Now fearing a rear attack from the doctor, Sloan instinctively sidestepped and crouched. She drew her sword at the same time, flipping the switch on her weapon. Sloan was ready to deflect a blow from either the doctor or the commander.

Her actions would prove unnecessary.

“Stop! Stop this madness, both of you.” The doctor rushed past Sloan. He placed himself between the two warriors, much like Aareth had the night before. “If you two are so desperate to kill someone, then kill me.”

Commander Brookhaven lowered her blade. Looking over the doctor’s shoulder, she gave Sloan a hard stare.

“I know you’re a good woman. I know you love this city as much as I do.” The doctor turned to look at Sloan. “Just hear her story. And now that she’s here, you can have the proof you desire.”

“What proof?” Sloan repeated the word as if she were hearing it for the first time. Once again, she was drawn to the

earnestness in the doctor's voice. Unlike the commander, she held her sword ready. A quick slice, and the doctor would be down. Another second would allow her to hurdle over his body, and she would be in combat with the commander.

"Listen," the doctor pleaded, "listen to her heart. If she's lying, if she had not been resurrected from the dead, she would have a heartbeat, like you and me. She has none."

Before Sloan could even think of what to say, the doctor continued. "I know this sounds impossible, but you owe your city this opportunity if there is even the slightest chance this could be true. I didn't know what to think when she came to me, but heartbeats don't lie, Captain Sloan."

Sloan debated the idea for a moment. This was insane. But the doctor was right. She had sworn to protect the city from enemies both foreign and domestic. If there was even a slight chance this could be true, she had to put aside her anger and provide a chance for the truth to be uncovered.

"Drop your weapon, and I'll hear your story, Commander." Sloan never took her eyes off Commander Brookhaven.

The commander sneered. "You'll have a better chance of besting me in a fight, Captain. I'm not stupid enough to trust you at your word."

"Ashley." The doctor pivoted to face his commander. He was sure to stay between the two women, but from her view of the back of his head, Sloan could imagine what the doctor's face looked like—frustrated, angry, maybe even disappointed. "We stand on the brink of losing everything we have worked so hard to attain these last five years. Both of you women are stubborn beyond comprehension. Tell her, Ashley. Tell her the truth. Captain Sloan is our last chance. She's a good woman, maybe even a great woman. I've seen her lead. Let yourself believe that we still have a chance."

Sloan hid the shock Doctor Livingston's words sent through her. She had no idea he'd been monitoring her so closely, much less that he believed in her abilities to this extent. Most of their encounters led to the doctor asking out

her on a date. Was he ever only asking her out on a date, or trying to get closer to information?

Sloan didn't have time to pursue this line of thought. The clatter of the commander's sword being thrown to the side brought her back to the present moment.

"Well, I guess I have nothing else to lose at the moment," Ashley said with disgust. "I'm already dead inside anyway. If you kill me now, you'll only be sending me back to the ground that's claimed me once."

"Explain your story to the captain." The doctor finally moved to the side, allowing the women to see eye to eye. "From the beginning."

EIGHTY-THREE



ASHLEY BROOKHAVEN A.K.A.
BRENDA EMERSON

She didn't know who she was or what had happened to her. She felt cold, like a thousand ice picks were being driven beneath her skin from the inside out. She blinked desperately in an attempt to see through the darkness. The gloom was so deep, the existence of light was a foreign idea.

She tried to remember how she had come to be in this place, but every time she thought back, the memory escaped her like vapor she tried to grab.

When she moved her hands to her face, she discovered she was bound—both wrists and each of her ankles chained to some kind of table. Whether it was minutes or hours she'd lain on her back in the room, she would never know.

“Hello? Hello?” Calling out for someone seemed pointless, but she tried anyway. “Can anyone hear me?”

Her own voice rang alien in her ears. Her throat was hoarse, and even the few words she had spoken into the inky darkness scratched with pain.

Later rather than sooner, a door opened. Someone carrying a torch entered the room lighting large, steel braziers.

“Hello?” she tried again. “Where am I?”

“You are safe, and all of your questions will be answered in a moment, Ashley,” the woman's calm voice replied just above a whisper.

Soon, light filled the room. The woman came to stand beside her and began releasing her from her bonds. “You are a

very special woman, Ashley. You have been chosen to lead our Legion when the time comes. It is not just anyone who is brought back.”

Ashley, so that was her name? She struggled to understand what the woman was saying. Some voice in the back of her head told her that wasn't her name at all, that she should be worried, even scared. It told her to flee, but above this voice was a sense of cold indifference, as though fear and panic were feelings dead to her now.

“My name is Leah Noble,” the woman said, offering Ashley her hand, “and we have much to do in preparation for the Legion.”

Ashley didn't trust the woman. There was a coldness to her eyes, a hint in her voice that promised violence, but what choice did she have?

Over the next few years, Ashley's education would be twofold. First, she was trained in the art of war. Every kind of weapon was given to her, until she was an expert in everything from swords to firearms. Second, she was instructed in the art of magic that had brought her back from the dead.

Her mentor, Leah Noble, explained only as much as Ashley needed to know, only when she needed to know it. “You must live in this place below the palace until our time is ready,” Leah Noble would remind her. She phrased it as a fact, but Ashley could tell it was a command. “You will be the Legion's greatest champion when it is our time to overtake this world. Great things are meant for you, Ashley. Be patient and prepare.”

Whenever Ashley would inquire of her past or how she came to be with Leah, the answer was always the same: “You were given a second chance by the powers of our side. You owe your life now to the magic that has called you to be its champion. Anything else is a waste of thought.”

And Ashley accepted this truth. She was treated well enough. A fully furnished room was given to her below the palace. Servants brought her anything she desired, and after a few years, when Leah deemed her resolve to the cause

unwavering, she was even allowed to walk the palace and the city.

She was only permitted out at night, and even then, only with a chaperone. But for Ashley, it was enough. She was introduced to Leah Noble's sister, Queen Eleanor Eckert. The Queen welcomed her with open arms, and much like Leah, spoke of the great days to come in which Ashley would play a significant role as their champion. "You are a treasure, Ashley," she remembered the Queen saying during one conversation. "Grow strong and continue to prepare your body and mind. The day will soon be at hand where the Legion will rise. We will claim both city and world for the cause."

And life went on. Day after day, Ashley trained, and night after night, she was allowed to roam the palace and the city. She grew to love the city of New Hope, and before long, she knew the city streets like the back of her hand. All was well, until one day, it wasn't.

She was walking the streets in the early hours of the morning. Although she was forbidden to interact with any of the city's citizens, she would linger outside bars and saloons, the only things open at that time. She would watch people laugh and stumble out with their friends. It was the closest she was allowed to experiencing life outside the palace, but she was happy with that.

One night, Ashley found herself at her favorite spot. She sat on a rooftop of a two-story building overlooking a line of seedy bars. Her legs dangled over the edge. The two New Hope guards chaperoning her that night stood at attention ten yards behind her.

Doors to a bar called The Vixen Tavern slammed open. A man was thrown out into the street. He was large with long, wild dark hair and a beard to match. Three other rough-looking men followed him out into the night. Without exchanging words, they began beating him like a dog.

Before Ashley could remind herself that she could not be involved in any kind of altercation, let alone be seen, she rose

to her feet. Even as she prepared to jump off the ledge and down to the street below, she realized there would be no need.

By the way the man with the dark hair struggled to regain his feet, it was clear to Ashley he was drunk. Despite his intoxicated state, he was more than a match for his assailants. The confrontation was over just as quickly as it had started. The outnumbered stranger was a brutal fighter, using his very teeth to bite the ear off one of the men.

Something deep inside Ashley began stirring—a memory? Something warm spread through her cold body for the first time since she woke in the lab under the palace.

The bodies of the three unlucky men lay broken and bleeding in the gutter. The few onlookers who had stumbled out of the bar to see the outcome of the fight jeered and made their way back inside.

The dark-haired victor stumbled to a lamppost. For the first time, Ashley was able to see an unobstructed view of his face.

The light from the candles inside the lamppost flickered, but for the briefest moment, Ashley caught a glance of the man's features. He was handsome, with a sorrow in his bright blue eyes that somehow she understood. Something inside of her struggling to remember told her that she, too, shared in his sadness. Just as memories were beginning to surface, a pain unlike anything she had ever experienced tore through her skull.

The intensity was stunning, like a poker heated by a roaring fire. Ashley fell to her knees, nearly tumbling from the rooftop ledge. At once, her guards escorted her back to the palace underground.

But Ashley would never be the same again. Over the next few years, something other than obedience to the Queen and Leah Noble was beginning to grow. It was a sense that what she was involved in was wrong.

Every night, she went out to look for the stranger with the sad blue eyes. She never found him. What she did find were

questions about the cause she was being trained to defend. Soon, questions turned into discontentment, and discontentment turned into rebellion.

EIGHTY-FOUR



SLOAN

Sloan stood quiet, listening to Ashley's tale. Envy bubbled to the surface before she could push it back. If this was Aareth's wife and her story was true, then they would be reunited and there would be no chance of anything in the future for Aareth and Sloan. Sloan hated herself for even thinking the thought. She bottled her personal feelings, burying them deep. There were more important things to deal with now.

"And then what?" Part of Sloan couldn't believe she was accepting the story. To her other part, it seemed to make perfect sense. "Leah Noble and the Queen just let you go when you decided you didn't want a part in what they had planned?"

"I could tell they were growing concerned about me questioning the Legion." Ashley looked past Sloan, remembering the final act of her imprisonment. "They brought me a woman with red hair. They told me she was a spy working to undo our cause. I was ordered to kill her. And I did. The woman didn't even try to fight back. All she asked for was her daughters be spared. I knew it was wrong. I still struck her down, because I'm a monster. I'm a monster created, not even born.

"They told me to stay the course." Ashley paused, furrowing her brow. If it had been anyone else, Sloan would have guessed they might cry. Ashley's expression was rage, not sadness. "They said soon our enemies, like this woman, would see the end of our blade. They said the day of the Legion was at hand.

“I escaped that night. Ditching the escorts following me around the city was easier than I thought. I had all the tools to do so at my disposal. The Legion had taught me everything I needed to know about survival. I wandered the streets for days, hiding from the Queen and her sister. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do. I only knew I needed to stop them. I understood not a single citizen was aware of the danger they were in. I knew if I did nothing, more women and men, more mothers and fathers, would be put to the blade.”

Ashley’s words infuriated Sloan for the simple fact that she believed them. In the wake of her current conversation, Sloan’s world was about to change forever. At the very least, she believed Ashley thought she was telling the truth.

“I’ll need time.” Sloan still had a hard time believing her own words. “I’ll need time to check out your story.”

“Thank you, Captain, thank you.” Doctor Livingston gave an audible sigh of relief. “I know this is hard to believe—”

“Hard to believe?” Sloan stopped Doctor Livingston mid-sentence. “This is as close to impossible as one can get.”

“You can start believing and building your case against the Queen and her sister now.” Ashley stepped forward, pointing to the area of her chest over her heart. “Whatever magic was used to resurrect me, it left me without a heartbeat.”

Curiosity more than anything else made Sloan tilt her head and press her ear against Ashley’s chest. Her hand was still on her sword, ready to be used in the blink of an eye if the need arose. Any sense of awkwardness was dismissed with promises of the impossible. Sloan pressed her ear against Ashley’s leather shirt. The room was completely silent.

Sloan waited with anticipation. Everything she knew about human anatomy told her she should be hearing the steady rhythmic beat of a healthy heart. She even willed herself to hear something, anything. If there was a heartbeat, she might still be able to convince herself that Ashley and the doctor were insane. But there was nothing besides silence. Ashley’s chest was as still as a tomb.

EIGHTY-FIVE



JACK

Jack woke in his bed sometime during the late morning. He ached from head to toe. His insides felt as though they had been smashed into jelly, scraped up, then shoved back into his body.

A grunt escaped his lips as he rose from his bed. The Order was real, there was no doubt about that. Not only were they real, but they were also large and recruiting more to their cause.

Sloan would have her hands full. At once, memories of Aareth and his wild state resurfaced and pushed their way to the front of his mind. The man was haunted with the possibility of a wife he thought dead, now somehow alive. Jack's first priority that morning had to be checking on his friend.

Jack opened the door to see Private Pia's familiar face.

"Good morning, Jack." The private smiled. "I hope you rested well. I heard about the raid last night."

"It was definitely an experience." Jack winced as another ache coursed through his body. "I'm just glad Sloan and Abigail arrived with the cavalry when they did. Have you seen either of them, or Aareth?"

"Sorry, I haven't seen Aareth at all." The private shrugged. "Captain Sloan left early this morning. I did see Abigail training outside, however. I can take you to her, if you'd like."

"That would be great, thanks." Jack decided to test a growing suspicion that had begun to nag at him, since he

realized the private had been waiting for him outside of his door. “Actually, I know the way to the training grounds. I can go myself.”

“Sorry, I know it seems like you’re under guard, but you, along with the Ahab sisters, have been given escorts around the palace.” Private Pia grimaced, showing all of her teeth. “I even think someone’s supposed to be with Aareth, but that’s been a tough assignment.”

“It’s okay,” Jack lied. “I understand.”

As the pair made their way through the palace, it was clear Private Pia still felt like she owed him an apology.

“It’s not like the Queen doesn’t trust you, but it’s better this way.” Pia walked beside Jack, talking with her hands as much as with her mouth. “If you need anything, or get lost, you’ll have someone to help you. Think of us as your personal assistants.”

“Seriously,” Jack said placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, “it’s okay. I know you’re just following orders. There’s a lot going on right now, both in the city and outside of it. I understand.”

The space between the magician and the private grew silent as they traversed the many halls and rooms of the palace. Jack took the opportunity to study his surroundings. There was a definite increase in security.

Pairs of soldiers dressed in dark uniforms paced the halls. Others stood sentry by closed doors, their rifles resting against their shoulders or by their sides.

This didn’t come as too much of a shock to Jack. An attempt had been made on the Queen’s life, after all.

“Have you heard, the tracks for the locomotive have nearly been completed?”

“What?” Jack broke his concentration on the emblem all the soldiers wore—the black bat with steel swords crossed behind it. “It’d only just begun before our trip to Burrow Den. How is that possible?”

“I guess the plan the Queen has is working.” Pia beamed with pride. “She’s uniting the known world. Most of the cities in the Outland have begun building their own railways toward New Hope. The tracks will meet soon as the work forces build toward one other.”

How the Queen managed to convince the cities in the Outland to undertake such a task was beyond him. As a magician tracking the paranormal, Jack had lived with his father, traveling from city to city. There was no great love for the Queen or New Hope. He could even think of a few cities like Azra and Term that outright detested New Hope.

“What’s wrong?” Pia asked, slowing her strides. “Isn’t that good?”

“Yes, I mean, uniting the cities to offer aid and support is great. I’m just surprised it’s happening so soon. I thought our goodwill mission to Burrow Den would go a long way in showing the Outland cities that New Hope was their ally. I just didn’t expect it to move this fast.”

“It’s a testament to how great our Queen really is.” Pia transitioned back to her optimistic personality and wide smile. “Soon, we’ll be a united land. We’ll be able to trade with cities as far out as Burrow Den. We’ll help each other reach new heights. Who knows? One day, we might even be able to travel outside of our known lands.”

Jack and Pia reached the outside training grounds a few seconds later. The area was built like a large oval with a dirt track along the perimeter. Inside, the dirt was a grassy area full of machines and exercise equipment, as well as sparring mats.

The training ground was filled to capacity. Every way Jack looked, soldiers were running, executing drills, sparring, or just good old-fashioned weight-lifting.

“There. There she is.” Pia pointed to the center of the training grounds, where a man and a woman circled one another with wooden swords.

Both combatants were heavily padded and wore mesh masks. The man dwarfed the woman, but his size did nothing

to stem her courage. As Jack and Pia approached, Jack got a better look at Abigail's progress.

She carried two wooden swords against her opponent's one. Both individuals had been at the practice for quite a while, judging by the sweat stains on their pads. As Abigail ran forward to engage her rival, Jack did a double take. The amount of progress Abigail had made in just a few days was astounding. Her strikes were swift, her aim accurate.

It was all her opponent could do to defend against the fury of her onslaught. Abigail pushed the man back so far, he tripped as he stumbled off the mat. The fall signaled the end of the round. Abigail was helping the man to his feet, when Jack and Pia caught up to them.

"That was amazing." Jack shook his head in wonder.

"Jack, I didn't know you'd be up yet." Abigail turned, lifting the mesh mask from her face. "Are you all right? Should you be walking around after last night?"

"I'm fine." Jack gave her a mischievous grin. "And maybe it's a good thing I see what you're capable of. It'll remind me not to mess with you in the future."

"That would be a wise choice." Sergeant Harrison lifted himself up off the floor. He removed his mask, revealing his familiar face. "Are you sure you're not a descendent from some kind of warrior line?"

Abigail laughed and shrugged off the question. To anyone else, it would have seemed like an appropriate response. Jack knew better. He understood Abigail was deflecting the question of a mother she never knew and a father she had killed.

"I just thought if you were going to follow me for the day, we could do something productive." Abigail grinned at the sergeant. "Do you mind if Jack and I have a moment?"

Sergeant Harrison and Pia both nodded. They walked a few feet away, already talking about their new assignments inside the city.

“Seriously, though.” Abigail exchanged her pair of wooden swords and her mask for a towel and a bottle of water. “How are you feeling after last night?”

“I feel a lot like I’d imagine Sergeant Harrison will after sparring with you.” Jack eyed the notches in the wooden training swords. “I’ll be fine.”

“Good.” Abigail glanced at the place the sun had chosen in the sky.

Jack was reminded for the hundredth time of how beautiful he found her. As he got to know her on a deeper level, it wasn’t just how her smile captivated him, or the way her eyes captured the light and sparkled. Attraction had evolved past any outward desire. One of the main reasons he was falling in love with her was because of how strong Abigail was inside. It was her determination and strength that made her so much more than just “pretty” to him now.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Abigail used the towel to make a second pass around her cheeks and forehead. “Do I have blood on my face or something?”

“No.” Jack searched in vain for an answer he couldn’t find. “It’s just, the more I get to know you ... the more I—”

Jack couldn’t get the words out before the white noise of physical exertion around them silenced. Jack and Abigail looked up to see the harbinger of quiet. Doctor Leah Noble glided toward them. Soldiers stood at attention.

“There you are.” Leah motioned to Abigail. “I was just about to begin the next series of examinations on your sister. I thought you would like to be present.”

“Yes, thank you.” Abigail began rapidly removing training pads from her body.

Jack found himself staring into the dark eyes of Leah Noble as they waited for Abigail. The woman was tall and slender. Her suit was black, with silver buttons that reminded Jack of half-moons.

“You are, of course, welcome to accompany us, Jack.” Leah let a tongue glide across her lips as she looked him up

and down. “I know how close you have become to both Abigail and Elizabeth during your time in Burrow Den.”

“Uh—thank you.” Jack looked at Abigail to see if she had caught the awkward exchange. It was obvious she hadn’t, too busy removing her gear. “I think I will come, if it’s okay with you, Abigail.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Abigail took one last long gulp of water. “Let’s go.”

“Good.” Leah looked over to where Sergeant Harrison and Private Pia stood. Her voice transformed from pleasant to commanding. “You’ll no longer be needed to escort our two visitors. They’ll be safe with me.”

EIGHTY-SIX



JACK

Jack and Abigail followed Leah Noble back into the palace, weaving their way through the gigantic building. Jack had no idea the palace had a lower level, but when Leah came to a door that swung open to reveal a spiral staircase leading down, there wasn't a chance to ask questions.

“Wow, how big is the palace?” Abigail’s eyes roved around the interior of the lower level. “Why is my sister down here?”

“The palace has a long history of being the oldest structure in New Hope.” Leah looked back from her lead position. “It was built long ago by those who came before us. You can imagine lower levels in any structure come in handy for storage and extra space. Elizabeth is being entertained here because the equipment needed in her sessions is located down here. You can imagine we don't use these tools every day. Your sister is quite special, Abigail.”

Jack listened to Abigail and Leah’s conversation as he studied his new surroundings. The halls were brightly lit, decorated with the grey and black colors of New Hope. It was ornate and designed to be warm and inviting. Visually, everything looked in place. Despite this, Jack couldn't help feeling they were being led into some kind of dungeon.

“Have you been able to find anything else out about her condition?” Abigail asked in a rush of words. “Will it get better or worse? Is this just something she'll have to live with for the rest of her life?”

“Have to?” Leah repeated her words with a raised eyebrow. “Your sister is gifted, Abigail. Elizabeth is destined to play a great role in the history of New Hope.”

Just as Jack made to ask for further explanation, Leah stopped in front of a door. It was already ajar, the noise of someone talking emanating from within.

Jack and Abigail were ushered inside. The room was expansive in every sense of the word. Instead of torches or candles, mage lights were strung up on the inside of the room, giving it the appearance of day.

For the hundredth time, Jack marveled at the tiny glass bulbs that were able to produce so much illumination. Two pale guards Jack didn't recognize were standing near the door. They snapped to attention at the sight of Leah Noble.

Elizabeth sat on the floor on a large brown rug. She hummed quietly to herself as she colored the inside of a book.

“Please make yourselves at home while I ready the machine.” Leah left them with Elizabeth as she crossed the room to a large contraption connected to a padded reclining seat.

Jack and Abigail obeyed Leah's request. They knelt next to Elizabeth on the stone floor. The younger Ahab sister smiled at them as she continued to color.

“Don't give anything away, but I think something's wrong,” Elizabeth whispered. Her eyes remained pointed down.

Immediately, Jack began searching the room for danger.

“I just told you not to look,” Elizabeth growled through a wide smile. She pushed a lock of red hair from her face. “You're a horrible listener, Jack.”

“What's wrong, Elizabeth?” Abigail failed to hide the concern in her voice. “Did they hurt you?”

“No, nothing like that.” Elizabeth scraped a red crayon over and over the page she was coloring. “But something's off. I just can't explain it. It's like someone farted in a room

packed with people. You know, it smells bad, but you can't tell who did it."

"Nothing specific, just something off?" Jack's eyes wandered to Leah. "I can't argue with you there."

"Yeah," Elizabeth said biting her lip, "and one more thing. I can't read Leah's mind."

"Well, you probably shouldn't be going through people's minds anyway." Abigail crossed her arms. She her younger sister a disapproving look. "I thought we talked about that."

"I know, I know." Elizabeth sighed, finally giving up her drawing and looking into her sister's eyes. "But I had to. She seems ... she seems off somehow. She's the only one whose mind I can't look into. Every time I do, all I see is blackness, nothing. Maybe she's the one who farted."

"Well," Abigail answered, placing the rogue strands of Elizabeth's hair behind her sister's small ears, "maybe this is the beginning of your abilities leaving. Maybe this was temporary. Leah's only trying to help us understand all of this."

Elizabeth directed her eyes to Jack for support. As much as he wanted to, it wasn't his place to get between the Ahab sisters.

"I think you're both right." Jack did his best to stay neutral. "Let's give Leah a chance to figure all of this out, but that doesn't mean we can't be watchful of our surroundings."

Both sisters nodded.

"Well, if you're ready, Elizabeth," Leah said approaching the group, "we can begin."

Elizabeth rose, following Leah. Abigail followed next, and finally, Jack. Chance, more than anything, brought his vision down to catch the open coloring book Elizabeth had been working on. She had done a horrible job coloring side by side pictures of what looked like horses.

A closer glance brought Jack to realize that what he was looking at wasn't a failed attempt at coloring at all. Instead, a

detailed map of the Outland ran across both pages, showing the city of New Hope and each smaller city depicted by name. In the picture, a red wave was running outward from New Hope in all directions, consuming the rest of the Outland.

On instinct, Jack reached down and collected the book, folding it into the inner pocket of his vest. He wasn't sure why he did it, but something deep inside, something like his father's voice, told him it would be important.

A humming vibration that shook the very floor he was standing on awoke Jack from his trance-like state. The feeling was coming from the machine Leah had started. Bright green and blue lights blinked off and on at sporadic pulses from the machine's control panel.

Elizabeth sat in the raised chair. Its back was reclined, giving Elizabeth the illusion of being comfortable. Jack had a feeling that the young girl was anything but.

"This won't hurt at all," Leah reassured her as she lifted a steel-domed cap connected to an array of wires. "All this machine will do is distinguish how powerful the electric waves coming from your brain are."

"It's okay." Abigail moved to stand beside her sister. "I'm here."

Elizabeth nodded, trying to hide the fear that had crept across her eyes.

A sense of urgency gripped Jack. Again the voice inside him whispered there was something wrong. The thought of stopping the process altogether darted across his mind. Before he could decide whether or not to act on the feeling, Leah Noble flipped a large switch on the machine.

The humming that had been reverberating through the room intensified. Jack's eyes darted to Elizabeth. The girl, although clearly frightened, didn't seem to be in any kind of pain.

"You're doing wonderful," Leah said, almost to herself. "This is exactly what we had hoped for."

“Are you all right?” Abigail looked on with concern. She still held Elizabeth’s hand. “Do you need it to stop?”

“No, no, I’m okay.” Elizabeth shook her head. “It doesn’t hurt.”

Just as soon as the machine had begun its savage humming, it stopped. Leah Noble wore a wild grin as she removed the apparatus from Elizabeth’s head. “You did an outstanding job, young lady. You’re going to be such a special girl in the days to come.”

“What did you find?” Jack ignored Leah’s cryptic words. “Is Elizabeth going to be all right?”

“She’s better than all right.” Leah assisted Elizabeth from the chair. “Her power has the potential to be something this world has never seen. She’s too important now to be let out of our sight.”

Jack should have realized it was a trap all along. If he had been a second faster, he might have been able to save them.

The nod from Leah to the two unnaturally pale guards at the door was almost too soft to notice. Jack reached for his wand at the same time one of the guards slammed the door shut and the other rammed into him so hard, there was no question that these were a pair of the new vampire soldiers.

Jack’s body slammed into the far stone wall. His skull cracked against the wall, sending a shower of bright red into his vision. Pain lanced through his entire body. A concussion made it nearly impossible for him to stumble to his feet.

“Jack!” Abigail screamed. She fought the other assailant like a woman possessed, but against someone with super strength and speed, she was doomed from the start.

One of the guards grabbed Elizabeth, the other Abigail.

Jack finally regained his feet. The mage power inside him flickered as he forced himself to concentrate. Dark green magic swirled at his fist. He looked up to send a bolt of the magical energy against one of the guards.

Leah Noble appeared out of the shadows. She grabbed Jake's fist in her hand. Immediately, the flickering flame of green magic disappeared. Before Jack could comprehend the witch's power, she forced him to his knees.

Pain like the weight of a thousand pounds pressed on his shoulders drove Jack to his knees. Purple magic swirled around Leah noble's hand and her eyes.

"I'm sorry it has to be this way, Jack," Although Leah's words were soft, there was nothing but evil dripping from her tone. "But Elizabeth is much too important to us to leave any loose ends. Don't worry, I'm not going to kill you. You and Abigail will be the perfect motivators to spur Elizabeth on with her work."

The weight from Jack's shoulders traveled to his chest. Every breath came slower and more labored. Within seconds, the blackness of unconsciousness came for Jack.

EIGHTY-SEVEN



AARETH

Sloan had left without him. What did he really expect? Sloan had a job to do. He could respect that. But that didn't mean it was going to stop him. He would search for his wife on his own. Even now, the thought of her haunted him. It was her, without a doubt in his mind.

Along with the images of her face came pain for whatever they had done to her. Something very deep, very dark had touched her, erased all memory of him from her mind.

The pain Aareth endured from the night before was nonexistent. No bruising from the many strikes of The Order showed on his face or his ribs. If anything, Aareth felt better than before. Mentally, he was struggling to hold on to his sanity; physically, he was in peak condition.

Aareth took the Queen's advice, allowing himself a few hours of sleep and whatever food he could shove into his mouth before he left the palace once again.

A soldier had tried to follow him under the pretense of being his designated "escort." Aareth had lost the man somewhere in the city streets. He had no time to be bothered, and even less patience.

When Elwood approached him out of the teeming mass of New Hope citizens, Aareth almost walked right over him.

The gnome was wearing a blue shirt and red pants. He pulled on Aareth's pant leg urgently. High-pitched gibberish followed this motion.

“I don’t know what you’re saying.” Aareth shook his pant leg in hopes of freeing himself from the gnome. “Let me go, little man. You’re causing a scene.”

Elwood gripped tighter, his knuckles turning white under the pressure.

People were, in fact, beginning to take notice. Gnomes weren’t that out of the ordinary in New Hope; they were, however, a minority and usually stayed in their own section of the city.

“I’m busy.” Aareth glared at the gnome. “If you don’t let go of my leg, I’m going to punt you down this block.”

Elwood chattered again. This time, he reached behind his back with his free hand. When it came forward, it held a letter.

Aareth accepted the folded piece of paper. It was thick, white parchment with a red wax seal. Stamped into the wax was a symbol of a bird: a phoenix.

Without delay, Aareth ripped open the letter.

My friend Aareth,

If you’re reading this letter, it means Elwood has found you. Furthermore, it means that you have no idea what he is trying to tell you and hopefully you didn’t punt him down the city block.

Aside from that, I have news for you concerning your condition. We need to meet, post-haste, away from the palace. If the Queen knows what I know about you now, you may not be permitted to leave.

Meet me at the Dogwood corner café. I’ll be sipping an espresso outside on the patio. Elwood can show you the way if you haven’t squished him yet. Come quickly, Aareth, the news I have for you is terrifying.

Your best friend in the world,

Edison Reeves the Younger

It wasn't finding his wife, but if Edison finally had answers to what had happened to him in Burrow Den, Aareth couldn't pass the opportunity by.

"Okay, lead the way, little man." Aareth squatted down to look the gnome in the face. "Sorry about being so aggressive with you. It's been a hard few days for me."

Elwood reached up and gently patted Aareth's stubbly face. More gibberish escaped his lips, but his tone was comforting.

Elwood turned his back, motioning Aareth to follow. The gnome and inspector traveled toward the cafe, staying on the sidewalk to avoid the bulk of the day's traffic.

Horses pulled carriages, vendors shouted their wares, which ranged anywhere from fruit to shoes, and still Aareth's thoughts wandered back to Brenda. Even in the face of finding answers as to what he was becoming, the image of his wife couldn't be shaken.

Luckily for Aareth, The Dogwood Café was only a few blocks from their current location. Elwood directed him to a brightly painted outside patio. A handful of tables and chairs made up the outside section of the café.

Aareth searched the faces of the patrons seated at the tables, without finding the familiar face of his friend.

Before he could ask Elwood, the gnome directed him to a table at the far end in the corner. Shade from the building's roof draped the area in shadow.

Aareth found himself sitting across from a woman in a light pink dress and a huge bonnet that covered her face. Two empty espresso cups sat on the table in front of her.

"Don't make a scene." Edison's voice came from somewhere deep within the bonnet. "We're just two girls out for a morning espresso, or three."

"Edison, is that you?" Aareth leaned in to try to get a glimpse inside the bonnet. What he saw was horrifying.

Edison Reeves had shaved his face and applied thick layers of makeup. Powder accented his cheekbones, bright red lipstick framed his mouth, and blue eye shadow rounded out his new look. A scarf was wrapped around his Adam's apple.

"Yeah, great disguise, right?" Edison leaned down to Elwood. "Good job, Elwood. Mirror, if you please."

A moment later, Elwood conjured a mirror from behind his back.

Edison accepted it, checking his image from all sides.

"We're being watched. Two meatheads by the alley across the street." Edison handed the mirror back to Elwood. "Don't look now. We'll deal with them when we leave."

"Answers, Edison." Aareth felt frustration build inside like a dam about to break. "You said you have answers."

"I do. How to say this gently..." Edison winced. "You're screwed. Your biology is changing. The bite from the wolf has transformed you into something inhuman. The changes are already in effect; hence, your accelerated healing and the anger you feel. For some reason, the full change is still being held at bay, like it's waiting for some trigger or signal to fully consume you."

Aareth sat, stunned. In all honesty, he had expected to be told something along these exact lines. It was just different now that he knew.

Elwood shook his head in Edison's direction.

"What? I thought that was pretty gentle." Edison shrugged. "He needs to know the truth."

"What about a cure?" Aareth asked.

"Not that I can see, but this is all new to me. It's not entirely out of the question."

"You said it was waiting inside me for something like a signal to be released?"

"That's right." Edison breathed a heavy sigh. "I know that's not helpful at all, since I can't tell you what the trigger

will be. I do know that whatever this bite changed you into is more animal than man. Until we figure this out, I think you should avoid the palace. The Queen has ears everywhere. I trust her, but if she knew what you were, she'd want to hold you for observation."

"Thank you, Edison." Aareth pulled himself back from being lost in his own thoughts. "I owe you one."

"That's what friends are for." Edison glanced at the two men watching them from the alley. "Elwood and I will distract our friends. I know things are rough, but on the bright side, the weather's great, and it's even supposed to be a full moon tonight."

EIGHTY-EIGHT



SLOAN

Everything Sloan held dear: her morals, her mentors, her life—it was all lies. What do you do when your entire world crashes down around you?

A numb emptiness filled Sloan from the soles of her feet to the crown of her head. Anger was definitely present as well, but by far, she felt hollow inside. She walked from Livingston Industries with no particular path in mind.

The midday sun shone down on her as it had thousands of times before, but this day was unlike any other. Everything was different.

Sloan knew she should have taken both Doctor Livingston and Commander Brookhaven into custody. She hadn't, because honestly, she didn't even know what side she was on anymore.

Within minutes of wandering, Sloan found herself outside of a restaurant sporting signs of grease-infused foods and salty calories. She walked into the establishment like a zombie.

“Hello,” called an overly friendly hostess from behind her reception booth. She wore a bright red apron and tall, black heels. “Party of one?”

Sloan nodded. She couldn't even get a handle on her own feelings, much less summon the energy to deal with the wide-eyed hostess.

“Follow me.”

Sloan trailed in the wake of the worker, to a booth in the corner. She removed her sword before she sat down.

“In the Queen’s army, huh?” The girl passed her a menu. “Thank you for your service. The things the Queen has done for New Hope have been amazing.”

“Yep.” Sloan had finally found her voice. She accepted the menu, looking and wanting every single item on the list. “That’s one way to put it.”

“Well, your server will be right with you. Can I start you off with something to drink?”

Sloan flipped through the pages, scanning the brightly designed menu interior until her eyes landed on what she was searching for.

“I need this.” Sloan pointed to a picture of a massive chocolate shake, complete with whipped cream and a cherry.

“Oh ... oh, okay.” The waitress nodded. “Been one of those days, huh?”

“I need two of them, actually.” Sloan handed the waitress back the menu. “And the biggest basket of fries you have.”

“Well, I usually just get the drinks. Your server will...”

The girl’s words withered into oblivion under Sloan’s stare.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said as she turned to go.

“Thank you.” Sloan drummed her fingers on the clean, granite tabletop.

Her calories ordered, Sloan was already forming a plan. She wouldn’t be missed from the palace; her rank assured she answered to no one but the Queen. Still, she had a day at most before the Queen would request an audience to find out what she had discovered at Livingston Industries. What had she discovered? A zombie woman with an incredible story?

Was Sloan going to throw everything away, just like that? Maybe she should talk to the Queen, give her a chance to

explain. Maybe she shouldn't do anything until she had collected more information.

"Here you go." A young man with a name tag reading "Michael" stopped by her table with two massive chocolate shakes and a basket full of fries. He placed them down, looking sideways at Sloan. "Do you need utensils, or—"

Sloan answered his question by grabbing a handful of the salt-laden fries, dipping them into her chocolate shake, then shoving them into her mouth.

The flavor of salt-and-sweet exploded against her tastebuds like fireworks. For the briefest moment, Sloan was happy. She closed her eyes, enjoying the flavors, totally forgetting the young man was still at her table.

"Okay, well, you enjoy. Let me know if you need anything else." Michael began to back away slowly as if any sudden movement would disturb Sloan.

"I need a burger," Sloan said, shoving another handful of chocolate-laden goodness into her mouth. "Make it to-go."

EIGHTY-NINE



SLOAN

Sloan's stomach felt like it was going to burst as she turned the last corner that would lead to her destination. The top button to her pants had been loosened, the burger she'd ordered to-go still uneaten in a bag she held in her left hand.

She had spent so long in the restaurant, the sun was setting. A full moon was slowly drifting upward.

A pair of soldiers Sloan didn't recognize passed on the opposite side of the street. They exchanged confused looks, but still offered her crisp salutes.

In turn, Sloan only stared at them until they looked away. The aroma from her childhood overwhelmed the smell of the cold burger in her bag. A bakery stood on the corner, its owner closing up for the night. A dry cleaner on the opposite end did the same.

The scent of the two establishments combined to make one of the best odors Sloan had ever smelt. In a way, it was the best part of her childhood. Bouncing around from orphanage to foster home to orphanage hadn't been easy.

As a child, she had never known her parents, much less what a family was. The idea of people being related and caring for one another was as foreign to her as flying to a fish.

In a way, the army had been the closest thing to a family Sloan had ever known, the Queen the most similar thing to a parent. Sloan stopped in front of a massive house with peeling white paint. She leaned against the ill-kept gate. Weeds

dominated the yard. Lights that would have shone in every window a few years before were now dark.

The orphanage sign was long gone, leaving a building abandoned to only the memory of what it had once represented. Sloan's grip on the paper bag tightened as she was transported back in time to relive her childhood, like some kind of punishment.

"Excuse me, mum."

A young girl's voice broke Sloan out of her trance-like state. Sloan wasn't sure how long she had been standing in front of the empty building—minutes, maybe; surely not an hour—but the sky was dark. The moon was full, huge and bright.

"Yes?" Sloan looked the girl up and down. She couldn't have been older than eight or nine. Her clothes were worn, but she was clean. "What is it?"

"Did you live there?" The girl pointed to the dark orphanage. "I lived there for a time before it was shut down, and I was moved to the Albright Orphanage down on Thirty-second Street."

"I did live there." Sloan knelt down next to the girl. "That makes you and I sisters in a way."

"Oh, really?" The young girl's face lit up. She smiled, showing two rows of crooked teeth. "My name's Cherish."

"Cap—" Sloan caught herself. Was she still prepared to be a captain in the Queen's army after the events of the day? "My name's Sloan."

"Sloan." Cherish repeated the word with reverence. "You're in the Queen's army, then? You must be so brave. I don't think I could ever do that. Everyone says I'm not worth anything."

Sloan wasn't the motherly type, but something much like motherly instinct caused her to reach forward and place a hand on Cherish's shoulder. The young girl flinched under her touch.

“You decide how much you’re worth, Cherish.” Sloan looked deep into the girl’s dark brown eyes. “Not your friends, not your enemies. Every day, you teach people how to treat you. People want to tell you what you can and can’t do, because that’s what they’ve told themselves in the mirror every morning. It’s easier to write something off as impossible, than to actually apply yourself day after day to accomplish that goal.”

“You’re saying I can be like one of those heroes who rescued Burrow Den from the beast?” The girl’s eyes lit up as bright as the moon. “I heard one of them was the Queen’s own guard. She fights like a goddess incarnate. Fire shoots from her sword, and no one knows her true name.”

“Yes.” Sloan gave the girl’s arm a gentle squeeze before letting go. “I’m saying you can be just like her. You can be better than her. You should be getting along now, it’s late. Do you like burgers?”

Cherish accepted the bag, gave Sloan a quick awkward hug, then ran down the street.

Sloan was left alone for a moment. But just as thoughts that things might be all right had entered her mind, the screaming started.

NINETY



SLOAN

As the bloodcurdling noise continued, it became less of a scream and more of a howl. It was coming from somewhere close.

Bad day to binge eat and feel like a balloon, Sloan thought as she buckled her pants. Time to let some of this frustration out.

Sloan ran down the cobblestone street. She made two rights around a large building that looked like some kind of clothing store. Her path brought her into a wide alley.

There, her mind processed the events unfolding in front of her as fast as it raced to come up with a solution. The manic yells were coming from Aareth, hunched over double on her side of the alley. On the opposite end, a group of darkly dressed figures advanced.

“Aareth! Aareth, what’s happening to you?” Sloan couldn’t even glance at her friend; the group of strangers were coming at them too fast. “Are you hurt?”

Screams—no, howls—of pain ripped from Aareth’s throat. His body heaved on all fours as if he were being torn from the inside out.

“He’s the first of his kind.” The lead figure drew back his hood, revealing a pale face with a long scar on the right side. “Just like I was the first of mine.”

Sloan drew her saber. “What are you talking about?” She flipped the switch to begin heating the weapon’s blade. She gripped the pommel so tight, her hand shook. The light from

the full moon gave her enough illumination to count her enemies. There were seven of them, wrapped in dark clothing. The shadows cast by the buildings to either side of the wide alley clung to the figures, as if darkness itself welcomed them. “I know who you are. You’re the assassin, Scar. You work for Doctor Livingston.”

“I did work for the doctor, but he has grown useless to my true master. He’s a pawn in this game, much like you. I, however, am something different.” The man spread his arms wide, calling a halt to the advancing figures to either side. Without so much as a look in his direction, they stopped in their tracks. “Now, thanks to the experiments done on me, I am something so much more.”

Sloan slowed her breathing. She steadied the grip on her blade. It was shaking before, not because she was frightened, but from the flow of adrenaline that proceeded every battle.

Aareth pounded on the pavement, still screaming his rage. The thuds of his fists making contact with the ground soon came with an accompanying splash.

“Go ahead, look,” the man in front of her said. “We won’t kill you yet. To miss the transformation of such a wondrous beast would be a shame.”

A mix of concern for her friend and pure horrific intrigue made Sloan look at Aareth. What she saw chilled her to the bone.

The knuckles on both of Aareth’s hands were bloody. Ripped flesh hung off in red ribbons. And this wasn’t even the worst part. The irises of his eyes had gone yellow.

Sloan’s heart seized as she witnessed the impossible.

In front of her eyes, dark fur rippled across his body, while hands and feet transformed into paws. A snout sprouted from his mouth. Salivating teeth snapped an angry staccato.

In seconds, Aareth was gone. In front of her was a half-man, half-wolf creature. It swung its head to Sloan, then to the robed men, and back again. There was no sign of recollection in its hungry eyes, only madness. It shifted its weight onto its

muscular hind legs, ready to spring. At whom was anyone's guess.

"Truly exceptional," Scar breathed. He took a step closer. The moon caught his eyes, briefly showing blood-red irises. "Both born from experiments; both similar, yet so different. Well, that's enough admiration. Kill them both."

Sloan took a step away from the monster Aareth had become to focus on the immediate threat. Two of the six figures streaked toward Sloan, moving so fast, she could only see one thing against their dark clothing: wide-open mouths with long, knife-like fangs.

Aareth was a wild card now. It was up to her and the steel she wielded to see this encounter through to the end. Her saber hummed with heat. The sound gave her courage. Never the shy type, Sloan charged forward to meet the attack.

They were blurs of black robes and fangs. Scar seemed content to let these two members of his group attack Sloan. He moved with the rest, toward the beast Aareth had become.

Sloan slashed out with her sword, but they danced around her, laughing and sneering at her. Every time they came in for an attack, Sloan was a second too late to block or counter. They landed strikes with their knives or with their punches.

In a matter of seconds, Sloan bled from a cut above her eye and her lip. She was brought to her knees with a shot to her kidneys and another to her left temple. Her sword clattered to the ground beside her.

Somewhere in the background, the fight of the century was taking place between Aareth and the remaining members of the Vampire Project. In Sloan's mind, that was what they had to be. The Queen must have sent them to collect Aareth, when Sloan had stumbled upon the group.

Two more strikes landed across Sloan's face. Pain exploded all over her body.

"Look at her." One of the vampires removed his hood. He was the same man who had been part of the exhibit in the palace when the Vampire Project was unveiled. "Captain

Charlotte Sloan, too slow and too old to keep up with the new recruits.”

“Stop talking to her, Hunter.” The other cloaked figure also removed her hood, showing her identity—the woman who had exhibited her speed for the crowd in the ballroom. “Leave her be; you know she’s the Queen’s pet.”

“I don’t think that’s going to save her this time.” Hunter squatted down beside Sloan. He grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled up so hard, Sloan thought the roots would be ripped from her head. “I think this time, she’s killed in the confusion.”

A crack so brutal came from the conflict between Aareth and the rest of the vampires. Both Hunter and Sloan turned to look.

Blood painted the pavement and both sides of the alley in grisly fashion. The five vampires trying to subdue Aareth were having a difficult time. Aareth was shaking one of the vampires in his jaws from side to side like a rag doll, the cracking noise coming from the body as he broke ribs.

“Bring him down!” Scar screamed, rushing in with the remaining four members of his group. Much as Sloan’s own attacker had done to her, they jumped in and out, slashing with knives and hammering Aareth’s body with fists and kicks.

Aareth bled from a dozen wounds. His dark fur was matted with both his own blood and that of his enemies. It was Scar who landed the final blow to the underside of Aareth’s jaw. Aareth dropped the body from his jaws and stumbled back, stunned. At once, the remaining vampires dogpiled on him—two controlling his head, while the other two bound his legs with iron bracers they drew from within their cloaks.

Sloan focused past the haze that had come with so many blows landed to her skull. She had to make the most of her enemy’s temporary lapse in attention.

Sloan grabbed on to Hunter’s throat with her left hand, and with every ounce of strength in her body, she squeezed.

It wasn't enough to make her pale-skinned attacker gasp, but it was enough to make him release his hold on her hair.

“What are you trying to do?” Hunter grinned, showing off his elongated canines. “You have no chance against us. Did you think grabbing me around the throat would do anything besides piss me off?”

He grabbed Sloan's wrist so hard, she thought for sure he would break her bones. With the other hand, he grabbed Sloan's own throat.

“I wasn't trying to piss you off,” Sloan gasped. “I just wanted you to let go of my hair so I could grab my sword.”

Hunter's expression went from one of smug pleasure, to confusion, to terror, as he realized what Sloan was implying. He looked down just in time to see the blade turn red.

With all the strength she could muster, Sloan shoved her blade into the underside of Hunter's jaw, through his open mouth and skull, and out the top of his head. The mage sword hummed with a hungry glee as it traveled through the vampire's body.

“No!” The vampire woman with Hunter ran forward, slamming into Sloan so hard, Sloan flew across the alley to crash against the brick wall.

Sloan's vision exploded with bright lights. She landed on her hands and knees, trying to wrestle her consciousness from the fingers of oblivion. Somewhere, she could hear Aareth being dragged off, still thrashing under his bonds.

“You did extremely well.” Scar came to stand beside Sloan. He lifted her up by her neck. Her feet dangled off the ground. “I'm impressed, Captain. It's too bad you weren't selected for the Vampire Project. I have a feeling you would have made one killer vampire.”

Sloan didn't even see the knife in Scar's free hand while a piercing pain unlike anything she had ever experienced took her breath away. All of her other injuries paled in light of this new sensation. Breathing became difficult as warm blood

spread over her uniform. The knife slid cleanly out from between her ribs.

Scar dropped Sloan to the ground without a second thought.

“You’ll have a few minutes to live before you bleed out.” Scar cleaned the blade on his tongue. “More, if you try to staunch the flow. But there’s no hope for you. Your wound is life-ending. I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page. I have a wolf to skin back at the palace. Have a nice afterlife.”

Sloan watched Scar retreat as he directed his remaining vampires to drag Aareth down the alley. Darkness came for her soon after.

NINETY-ONE



SLOAN

“Wake up, wake up.”

Sloan opened her eyes, ready to see what life after death looked like. To her wonder, it looked exactly like the life she just left.

“We have to get you to a doctor.”

Sloan focused on the voice. It was Cherish, the young girl she had met before the fight.

“I saw everything.” Cherish pushed an empty paper bag against Sloan’s wound. “Come on, we have to get you help.”

“I’m past help.” Sloan didn’t try to regain her feet. She knew what a wound like hers meant. “There’s not a doctor in New Hope who could save me now.”

“So what, you’re just going to give up?” Anger filled Cherish’s voice. “What about all that motivating stuff you told me? Was that all lies? Do you want to live, or do you want to die? You decide that, no one else.”

A light bulb went off in Sloan’s mind. The chances of it working were minimal, but at this point, she didn’t have a whole lot to lose.

“Help me up.” Sloan motioned to Cherish. “Is that—is that the hamburger bag you’re using to stop the bleeding?”

“Yep.” Cherish herself nearly fell helping Sloan to her feet.

The pain upon standing was the worst Sloan had ever felt. Her breathing came in short, wheezing gasps. Every second

was accompanied by not only numbing agony, but also a force that worked against her trying to drag her back into the blackness.

“The palace.” Sloan winced, trying not to put too much of her weight on the girl. “Do you know how to get there? I mean, the back entrance through the garden.”

“I do.” Cherish leaned down to gather Sloan’s sword. “We can stick to the shadows. Let’s go.”

Sloan and Cherish made their way down the blood-soaked alley. Although the street on which the battle had taken place was located in the business district, a handful of people still dared to look out their windows, a few even brave enough to peek around a corner. No one besides Cherish had offered assistance.

The next few miles were ones Sloan didn’t remember, having faded in and out of a conscious state. The only thing on her mind was putting one foot in front of the other. She knew if she could do that enough times, she had a chance of making it to the palace.

“You’ll be all right. You’ll be all right,” Cherish repeated like a mantra. “We can get you to the palace.”

Sloan didn’t say a word. It wasn’t that she didn’t agree with Cherish; she just couldn’t spare the extra effort without either falling over or passing out altogether.

Time proved Cherish right. Staying in the shadows, they somehow managed to avoid running into any patrolling soldiers. Likewise, the citizens they did come across were either too busy talking to one another or wrote Sloan off as a drunk being aided home by a younger sibling.

Soon, the back of the palace was in front of them. A black wrought-iron gate guarded the Queen’s garden before opening up to the palace itself. The same moon that had witnessed the fight earlier still shone bright, unhindered by the few clouds roaming the night sky. “You saved me tonight.” Sloan pushed herself off Cherish. She wobbled on her feet under the

pressure of the pain pouring over her body from her right side. “Cherish, thank you. I owe you my life.”

“I can go with you,” Cherish said, trying to take Sloan’s arm again. “I can help you.”

Sloan’s eyes wandered to the two soldiers standing guard by the gate entrance. It was impossible for Sloan to tell what they had been ordered to do once they came in contact with Sloan, if anything at all. Was it simply Scar and his vampires who had been eager to kill Sloan in the process of capturing Aareth, or was there a standing order to kill Sloan on sight?

Either way, there was only one way to know for sure.

“You’ve done more than your part tonight.” Sloan winked at Cherish. “But I may call on you soon. Will you be ready?”

“I will.” Cherish’s eyes widened in wonder. “Anything you need.”

“Perfect. Go now. I’ll come find you when this is all over.”

“Do you promise?”

“You have my word, Cherish.”

“All right, then.” Cherish turned to go. “And thanks again for the burger.”

Cherish vanished into the night, back down the path they had taken to reach the palace. A trail of blood marked the way.

Sloan tried not to think of how much blood she had lost in the process. One thing was certain, she felt weak and cold. If the guards on duty did not welcome her, she was out of luck.

As she limped closer to the two guards, familiar voices drifted to her on the wind.

“And then I told him that if he didn’t move out of his mother’s house, I was going to leave him.” Private Pia breathed a heavy sigh. “I mean, we’re not kids anymore. Is it too much to ask? I can’t support us both on a private’s salary.”

“Hey, you’re preaching to the choir over here, girlfriend.” Sergeant Harrison shrugged his massive shoulders. “I’ve only just begun to get my life together. You can’t let people pull

you down. It's hard ending relationships, but you can't save them if they don't want to save themselves, am I right?"

"You're not wrong." Pia shook her head. "I hate adulting. Can we just go back to being kids?"

Sergeant Harrison had his back turned to Sloan. Sloan saw Pia peek over his shoulder as she caught sight of something moving in the dark.

"Halt! Who—Captain Sloan?" Pia dropped her rifle. She moved past Sergeant Harrison to Sloan's side. "What happened?"

The concern in Pia's voice told Sloan all she needed to know. There was no hunt for her. Scar and his vampires had decided to kill her because she was there, not because the Queen had ordered her death.

"Help me." Sloan slumped against Pia's shoulder. Once again, she felt lightheaded. "Take me to the armory."

"The armory?" Sergeant Harrison took her other arm and wrapped it around his shoulder. "You need a doctor. We should take you to the infirmary."

"You have to trust me." Sloan sagged between the private and the sergeant, wondering how she had ever walked without their help. "I need to see Edison at the armory as fast as you can take me there."

"All right." Sergeant Harrison exchanged a nod with Pia. "The armory, it is. What happened to you?"

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Sloan knew she had been asked a question. The loss of blood had addled her thoughts to the extent it was difficult to concentrate on much of anything.

Sloan's head sagged. She was being half-carried, half dragged. Her right arm was over Pia's neck, her left wrapped around Sergeant Harrison's. The scene around her changed from the outside dark to bright mage lights inside the palace.

For whatever reason, Sloan could only think about the sergeant's throat and what she had done to him on the training

ground.

“I’m sorry,” Sloan mumbled. Blood poured out of her mouth.

“What?” Pia asked.

“His throat.” The words came out of Sloan’s lips like she was drunk. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“I’ll be fine.” The sergeant grabbed Sloan tighter as the trio hurried forward like some kind of six-legged amoeba. “I deserved it. In a strange way, it was a wakeup call for me.”

Sloan wanted to say more, but she was fading quickly.

NINETY-TWO



SLOAN

“Get her on the table.” Edison’s voice brought Sloan out of her haze-like state. “What happened?”

“I don’t know.” Pia’s voice was on the verge of panic. “She stumbled up to the back gate. She said she only wanted to see you.”

“I’m a gifted albeit award-winning and humble inventor-slash-scientist, not a doctor.” Edison looked at the wound with a grimace. “That looks painful.”

Sitting up on the steel table where she had been placed was out of the question. Instead, Sloan gathered herself. She opened her eyes, taking in the scene around her. On her left, Pia and Sergeant Harrison looked on, worried. On her right, Edison and Elwood did the same.

“Sloan, are you awake?” Edison leaned toward her. “Are you alive, Sloan?”

Sloan grabbed Edison by his shirt collar and drew him in close.

“The Phoenix Serum ... I’m past anything a doctor can do.” Sloan’s words were broken and twisted. Her heart rate slowed to a dangerous pace. “Vampires. The Vampire Project.”

Sloan’s grip on Edison released.

“She’s dying!” Pia yelled. “You have to do something!”

“Okay, all right, okay.” Edison ran to a worktable, one of many in the massive warehouse-like room. “I have an idea, but

it hasn't been tested. I can't promise anything, Sloan. I'll need your consent."

Edison ran back to her side with two long needles. One was filled with amber liquid, the other with blue. Edison jumped on top of the table, looking down at Sloan. He shook his head, wearing a grimace.

"Sloan, I'm going to inject you with Phoenix Serum and the elixir we used to create the vampires." Edison swallowed hard. "It's the only thing I can think of. We have a chance, if the healing properties of both liquids act together to repair your body."

"Do it," Sloan managed.

"I should warn you that I, in no way, can be held responsible for the outcome." Edison shook his head again. "This is beyond my—"

Elwood barked something in high-pitched gibberish.

"There's no need for that kind of language, Elwood." Edison took a deep breath. "My God, man! Do you kiss your gnome mother with that mouth?"

Edison leaned over Sloan. Both needles hovered over her still frame.

"Okay. One, two..." Edison paused.

"She's dying!" Sergeant Harrison's panicked voice filled the room. "She doesn't need a countdown."

"I was doing it for me." Edison plunged both needles into Sloan's heart. Without hesitation, he pushed the plungers down with his thumbs.

It felt like being stricken by lightning and having her blood replaced by liquid caffeine. Her past flashed through her mind in the blink of an eye. Sloan saw herself as a small, sickly, lonely girl, to her time in the Queen's army and now as the wounded dying warrior.

A fire burned deep inside of her chest that told her this wasn't the end. Like a phoenix rising from the freaking ashes, Sloan roared in a voice that boomed through the armory.

“Ahhhh!” Sloan sat bolt upright on the table, throwing Edison from his squatting position above her.

Every part of Sloan’s body vibrated with energy. She now knew how her mage sword must feel as it hummed with power. Breathing that had once come in short, painful gasps was now easy, quick, plentiful. The searing agony that had coursed over her head and torso was replaced with a sense of calm.

Elwood was the first to break the spell of silence. He pointed a chubby finger at Sloan’s side, and something unintelligible came from his mouth.

Sloan followed his gaze to the slash in her uniform. The black fabric was soaked in with her blood. Without hesitation, Sloan removed her top. Somehow, she already knew what she would find.

The white tank top she wore under her uniform was painted in crimson red. A section of cloth that had been sliced open by Scar’s knife showed new pale, pinkish skin underneath.

Sloan looked up into the wide eyes of Private Pia and Sergeant Harrison. Edison picked himself up from the spot where he had landed.

“Well, no one rush to see if I’m all right. I’m fine.” Edison dusted himself off and walked over to Sloan. “We definitely need to do some tests to see how the Phoenix Serum in combination with our vampire super-soldier elixir is going to affect your body.”

A howl echoed through the room from somewhere outside. Edison and Sloan exchanged a quick look.

“You know?” Edison cocked his head to the side. “Because I know. But I was the one who ran the test. How do you know? Is it ... is it Aareth?”

Thus far, Sloan hadn’t said a word. Her mind had been racing to keep up with the changes her body had undergone. Hearing Aareth’s name wrestled her into action.

“I don’t have time to explain any of this.” Sloan jumped off the table. She caught sight of her sword in Sergeant Harrison’s meaty hand. “Edison, you have to destroy the rest of the vampire elixir. When you’re done, get Doctor Livingston and Commander Brookhaven. Meet me in three days, in Term. If I’m not there by then, disappear.”

“What are you talking about?” Edison’s eyebrows shot up. “It’s possible the combination of serum and elixir could have caused you to hallucinate. Are you high?”

“I’m fine, just trust me.” Sloan accepted her sword from Sergeant Harrison. “I need you two to find Jack and the Ahab sisters. Tell them the same thing—Term, three days.”

The massive armory doors opened in tandem. The Queen walked in, followed by Scar and his remaining four vampire super soldiers.

The room fell quiet. Everyone except Sloan kneeled in the Queen’s presence. It was so ingrained in her nature to show respect to her Queen, Sloan nearly knelt as well.

The Queen wore a simple white dress, her hair pulled back into a ponytail. Her face was as Sloan remembered: kind, sincere, and above all, trustworthy.

“You may all rise,” the Queen began. Although she spoke to everyone else, her eyes never left Sloan’s. “Captain, I understand you’re confused right now. When you didn’t return after your meeting with Doctor Livingston, I feared he had twisted your mind.”

“Tell me it’s not true.” Sloan found a part of herself hoping the Queen could somehow make sense of everything for her. She wanted her to say that Doctor Livingston was a liar. “Tell me it’s a lie, and then tell me why you’re working with an assassin who tried to kill me.”

“I never told them to kill you, Sloan. I only told them to bring back Aareth.” The Queen gave Scar a hard stare. “Killing you was an order they decided on their own. Trust me, there will be brutal consequences.”

“I apologize, Your Majesty.” Scar finally met the Queen’s stare. “But as you can see, your captain is resilient. I would be interested in finding out exactly how she survived.”

“Doctor Livingston told me Leah Noble is your sister.” Sloan ignored Scar and instead flipped the switch on her weapon. “He told me how you’d used magic to bring Aareth’s wife back from the dead.”

“Well, the good doctor has told you a lot, hasn’t he?” The Queen pursed her lips, deep in concentration. “Okay, Sloan, I’ll tell you everything. Leah Noble is my sister. For decades, we’ve worked to clean up the streets of New Hope. Now, it’s time to do the same for the rest of the Outland. Under our rule, we’ll prosper, we’ll have order, and we’ll thrive together as one people.”

“You mean you’ll conquer the Outland and they’ll live under your rule.”

“If you choose to see it that way, then yes. My sister and I understand the manpower it would take to convince the Outland to join us. Where our army isn’t large enough to wage a campaign, enhanced soldiers could fill that gap.” The Queen motioned to the armory. “Edison, along with Doctor Livingston, has done an outstanding job. Of course, I always knew the good doctor was working against me. I didn’t know until now that Commander Brookhaven was our escaped Ashley.”

“You knew Doctor Livingston was heading up The Order, and you didn’t do anything?”

“One thing you realize when you get to be Queen is that it’s more beneficial to keep one’s enemies close. At any given time, you know exactly what they’re doing, as opposed to leaving them to their own devices.”

“I don’t know how I’ve been so stupid.” Sloan spat the words as if they’d come with a vile taste. “You’ve only ever had your eyes set on conquest. Everything that’s come up to this point is only a means furthering this end.”

“Don’t do this, Sloan.” The Queen opened her arms. “I love you like a daughter. I know I should have told you that sooner, but I’ve failed you in that way. Join me as the leader of my army. Together we can usher in an era full of peace and prosperity for the entire known world.”

Sloan said a silent prayer that those who had helped her so far were still on her side. If they weren’t, then her plan had already failed.

“Edison, Elwood, you know what to do.” Sloan took a step forward, positioning herself between the vampires and her friends. “Pia, Harrison, I can buy you a few minutes.”

“What makes you think you can even compete with us, after what we’d done to you in the alley?” laughed one of the vampires Sloan didn’t recognize. “You’re out of your league.”

“You!” Sloan roared, pointing her sword at the vampire super soldier. “You die first.”

NINETY-THREE



SLOAN

If the vampires had known about the transformation Sloan had undergone, they would have been less willing to meet her attack. They relied on what they thought was their superior sense of speed.

Sloan moved like fury incarnate. Unaware of how strong or fast she was now, she pushed her new abilities to their limits. Energy like she had never known aided her movements as she cut through the Queen's vampires.

Before they could comprehend that Sloan was moving just as fast, if not faster, than they were, two vampires lay on the floor, dead—one decapitated, the other completely cleaved in two from a combination of Sloan's strength and her mage sword.

Out of her peripheral vision, Sloan saw Pia and Harrison sprint through the open armory door. Edison was grabbing beakers and breaking them across the table. Elwood lit the spilled liquid on fire with a match he had summoned from his back.

"Stop them!" the Queen ordered. For the first time, something other than calm had been added to her tone.

The last two vampires beside Scar moved to do the Queen's bidding. Sloan cleaved through the first like her sword was passing through air. The second vampire was a bit smarter, but not by much.

He raised his knife to block Sloan's sword. Either he wasn't paying attention to the power Sloan's weapon held, or

he already knew he was dead.

Sloan's blade cut through the vampire's knife as easily as it cut through bone and flesh. The vampire fell to the floor, never to rise again.

Sloan positioned herself so her back was to the open door of the armory. Edison and Elwood, both carrying cases, ran through the exit.

"It's over," Sloan said from across her blade. She ignored Scar, looking at the Queen instead. "Give up."

"Oh, my dear, sweet Sloan." The Queen shook her head like a disappointed mother. "This story is only beginning."

Scar lunged at Sloan, dodging her blade and getting close enough to strike her across the jaw. The blow brought a minimal amount of pain, causing Sloan to turn her head to the side. Sloan looked back at her attacker with a smile.

"What are you?" Scar said, hesitating a moment too long.

Sloan struck him across the face with the pommel of her sword. Every ounce of strength she could channel went into her next kick. She hit Scar in the chest with her right foot, sending him flying across the warehouse room. His body crashed against the far wall and was lost to sight.

"How long until someone raises the alarm?" the Queen asked with a sigh. "How far do you think you'll get?"

"I'll get far enough." Sloan lowered her weapon. She had already asked and answered the question. She wasn't prepared to kill the Queen. "I'll make you see that what you're doing is not the next step in peace. It's conquest."

"Well, history is written by the victor." The Queen moved past her, toward the door. "I'm going to send the men who come after you with strict orders to bring you back alive. I'm not giving up on you, Sloan."

"And I'll send them back to you in bags." Sloan turned to watch the back of the Queen as she made her way down the hall. "I'm not giving up on you either."

“Maybe that’s one of the reasons I like you, because we’re so much alike.” The Queen disappeared around the corner. “You have minutes before the alarm sounds.”

NINETY-FOUR



SLOAN

Sloan sprinted down the hall toward the howls and the whimpering. Since the second battle with the vampires began, the noise had been in the background. Aareth was being held somewhere close. Sloan's speed was astonishing. Even more amazing, her body had accepted her new ability with ease. Sloan rushed past servants and guards in a blur.

She couldn't blame them for jumping or gawking. Not only was she moving at superhuman speed, she was also a sight to behold. The sheath to her sword was long lost. She held the weapon in her right fist, the blade still humming and glowing a faint red. Her clothes were a mess of her own blood and that of the slaughtered vampires.

The white undershirt was stained crimson. A huge slit was cut on the right side where Scar had nearly killed her. Her hair was a disaster, and she suspected her face still had caked-on blood from the wounds she had received prior to becoming whatever she was now.

Sloan pounded down the halls toward the sound of yelps and cries. The noise was coming from the general direction of the front courtyard. It made sense; Sloan hadn't seen Aareth during her journey from the back gate, through the garden, and to the palace.

Sloan barreled into a side door leading out into the courtyard harder than she had meant to. The door blew off its hinges, exploding in a shower of wood splinters. Sloan came face to face with a dozen armed soldiers standing around a massive iron cage. Aareth was bound, still in his wolf form.

His howls were so loud this close, they made her insides vibrate.

No one made a move. The soldiers all stared at her, trying to make sense of the seemingly self-imploding door and her ragged, bloodied state.

Sloan searched the soldiers for a familiar face. She caught the eye of Lieutenant Baker. His expression was worth a thousand words as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

“I need you and your soldiers to stand down, Lieutenant.” Sloan switched off her mage sword and lowered her weapon. “I’m taking the wolf.”

Lieutenant Baker didn’t speak. Instead, he looked back and forth from Sloan to the cage, still trying to decide what to do. His breath made steaming puffs in the cold night air. The torches and flaming braziers stationed around the courtyard played with the shadows in sinister fashion.

“Yes, of course.” The lieutenant moved to the side. “Captain, are you injured? What happened to you?”

Sloan forced herself into a fast walk instead of a run to the cage. If she could get away with this without violence, it would be the best option for everyone involved. These soldiers were only following orders. They had no idea of the plans the Queen had at play.

“I’m fine.” Sloan approached the cage. It was at least ten feet tall, with thick, black reinforced iron bars. “Do you have the key?”

“Here.” Lieutenant Baker handed her the cold, steel instrument. “Captain, are you sure you don’t need medical attention? You’re bleeding.”

The lieutenant wasn’t the only one to catch on that something wasn’t right. All around Sloan, soldiers were whispering to one another.

Easy, just breathe, Sloan told herself as she inserted the key and unlocked the cage. *You’re their superior. They don’t*

know what's going on. All you have to do is free Aareth and escape the city.

Sloan ignored the lieutenant as she stepped inside the cage. Her skin prickled with goosebumps, not from the cold, but from the monstrosity Aareth had turned into.

Heavy panting came from the wolf beast. Calling it a true wolf wasn't exactly accurate. Now that Sloan had a chance to see what Aareth had become and not worry about super soldier vampires trying to kill her, she was taken aback by his transformation.

His body was covered in thick, black fur that did nothing to hide the musculature of his frame. Wounds from the fight with the vampires still crisscrossed his skin. His hind feet were that of a wolf's, but his torso looked more like a man's, with arms, hands, and fingers. His head was all canine, from sharp, pointed ears, to his muzzle, which steamed with hot, panicked breaths.

He stopped howling once Sloan entered the courtyard, but low, almost inaudible cries still escaped his lungs. The only thing that truly remained of Aareth was the intensity in his eyes. The same eyes that had joked and laughed with her before studied her now. It was impossible for Sloan to tell if he recognized her or not, but the fact that he wasn't straining against his bonds to attack her was a good sign.

"I don't know how much of you is left in there," Sloan whispered to Aareth. "But your wife is alive. I've spoken with her. If you want to see her and get out of this cage, you have to listen to me."

Aareth stopped whining. Besides the heavy lift of his chest when he breathed, he lay still. Sloan examined his bonds. He was lying on his left side with a pair of steel braces connecting his hind paws to one another and anchoring them to the ground. He had another pair around his wrists. Finally, a steel collar fit tightly around his neck. It was also chained to the ground.

"Easy, I'm going to get you out of here." Sloan's heart raced. Every beat became too loud as she heard it in her head

and ears. “If you bite me, I’m going to be so pissed.”

Sloan was aware of soldiers on all sides of the cage murmuring to one another and retreating to what they deemed a safe distance.

“Captain, Captain Sloan.” Lieutenant Baker was the only one brave enough to question her now. “Are you sure you should be doing this?”

Like before, Sloan ignored him. She was too busy praying that the same key that unlocked the cage would also release Aareth from his bonds.

Hindquarters first, Sloan inserted the key. With a loud click, the bonds fell away.

Sloan let out a huge breath she didn’t know she was holding. Aareth still didn’t move, besides his rising and lowering chest.

Sloan moved to the second set of restraints on his front paws. The key did its magic. Once again, the shackles opened and released Aareth from their grasp.

“This is going to work,” Sloan whispered to him as she gathered her courage to release the collar from his neck. “We’re going to be okay.”

Alarms signaling a complete palace and city lockdown split the night air in a cacophony so loud, it could have woken the dead. Aareth jolted in surprise. On instinct, his jaws opened, and he bit into Sloan’s right arm.

NINETY-FIVE



SLOAN

As soon as Aareth bit her, two things happened at once. The feeling of a dozen knives clamping down on either side of her arm, and for a split second, the pain was held at bay by the pure shock of the moment. Sloan screamed in agony once that half-second passed.

The second thing that happened was a group of guards who ran from the palace, all shouting things, trying to be heard over the loud sirens.

Sloan had bigger problems on her hands than trying to catch what the soldiers were saying, but she caught enough to understand. There was plenty of pointing and hand waving in her direction, along with the broken, “Stop the captain,” and “Get her.”

With Sloan’s right arm still in Aareth’s mouth, Sloan was left with only one choice. She pulled back her left fist that still held her sword and struck Aareth in the nose with all her might. The hilt made contact with the soft part of Aareth’s snout. Blood flew into the air, but brought the desired result. Aareth released his grip. Eyes watering, he shook his head from side to side.

Sloan didn’t have time to think. Soldiers from all around the cage were running at her. There were precious few seconds to react.

Sloan ignored her bleeding arm and the pain that accompanied the wound. She flipped on the switch to her

mage sword, bringing the blade down on the last restraint around Aareth's neck.

"Don't kill anybody," Sloan yelled at Aareth as she exited the cage. "Follow me."

That was all she could do. Hands were already reaching to tackle her to the ground. Rifles were pointed her way. The siren continued, followed by so much shouting, Sloan wondered how even the soldiers could hear one another.

Sloan did her absolute best not to seriously injure any of the soldiers trying to grab her. But the fact was she was still getting used to her own strength. Sloan bulldozed past the first few soldiers. When a hand did grab her, Sloan ripped free, thanks to her newfound speed.

When Sloan did strike, she aimed for a stomach or a kick to a leg. She turned off her mage sword, worried she would actually kill one of the soldiers trying to grab her. As she bulldozed her way to the palace exit, the wrought-iron gates began to swing closed.

Gunshots filled the air, flying past her head or striking the cobblestone steps, sending up broken pieces of stone.

Breathing was easy as she sprinted. Even the pain in her arm was beginning to dull. Sloan chanced a look behind her. Whether he understood what she'd said, or he was as eager as she was to escape from the cage and the bullets, Aareth ran with her.

Sloan's feet barely touched the ground before they lifted again. Still, by the time she had reached the front gates, they had just swung closed.

Oh come on, Sloan thought. I've already been punched, stabbed, and bitten tonight.

Sloan slammed into the iron fence at a full sprint. Her teeth rattled as she made contact with the unforgiving frame. It sagged, bent for a moment, and Sloan thought she might have broken the gate off its hinges. But it held. Sloan stumbled back, stunned, before Aareth slammed into her from behind, sending both of them crashing into the gate.

A rending metallic tear added to the sounds of the night. Side by side, Sloan and Aareth sprinted down the street toward the city's main gates.

NINETY-SIX



SLOAN

Even with their inhuman gift of speed, Sloan knew there was no way they were going to make it through the city and reach New Hope's main entrance ahead of the alarms. Already she could imagine the massive doors being swung shut.

All around them, people screamed or dove out of their way. Horses bucked at the sight of Sloan and Aareth pounding down the middle of the streets.

Sloan found herself with a free moment to worry about how Pia, Harrison, Edison, and Elwood had done. Not only that, but the idea had also entered her mind that she had made an unconscious choice to send them to gather the others while she saved Aareth. Very easily, she could have chosen to go and warn Jack and the Ahab sisters, or Doctor Livingston and Commander Brookhaven.

Had she made the right choice? What if none of the others made it out at all? But she had made the only correct choice there was, hadn't she? She was the only one who could have saved Aareth, right?

The cold air that should have chilled her lungs felt refreshing on her run. Fatigue was only a memory while the burning her muscles should have experienced was nonexistent. The pain in her arm where Aareth had bitten her was not only gone, but it also felt better than normal.

Sloan glanced down to see what had become of her wound. Just like the mortal knife she had taken to the ribs, her injury had healed. The exact science as to her new healing factor

would have to wait to be explained, if it ever could be. Right now, Sloan had bigger problems to deal with.

Sloan and Aareth ran down a slight hill in the road. When they came to the other side, it was a straight shot to New Hope's city gates. Sloan's worst fears were realized. The sirens had given the soldiers enough warning to not only swing the gates shut, but to also form a firing line at the front.

No less than ten rifles were pointed in her direction.

A plan came to mind, a plan so insane, Sloan knew she was already changing from the Queen's captain of the guard to some kind of rebel leader willing to take risks.

"Aareth, don't kill them." Sloan was surprised she was able to speak loud and clear, despite her lungs working overtime to support her speed. "You owe me one for saving you. Plus, I'll bite *you* if you kill them. I need you to hold them off for a few seconds. I can get us through the gate."

The nod from the massive wolf-creature that bounded next to her on all fours might have been Sloan's imagination, but Aareth did look at her when she spoke.

There was no time left to plan. Sloan took a position in front of Aareth as the gunfire from the rifles exploded into the air. Whether the soldiers were terrified or Sloan was simply moving too fast, only two bullets found their mark—one in her left thigh, and the other in her right shoulder.

Sloan felt the pain, but it seemed to have even less of an effect than Aareth's bite. Sloan ran the last few yards to the soldiers, who were half-terrified, half-concentrating on lowering their rifles to unsheathe their swords.

To Sloan, they moved in slow motion as she vaulted over their line. In her hand, her mage sword came to glowing red life as she swung the blade hilt deep into the massive wooden door that denied them escape.

Gritting her teeth, Sloan maneuvered her mage sword around in a huge circle. Slower than she would have liked, the heated metal ate through the wood, carving a path to freedom.

Sloan could hear Aareth more than she could see him as he barked and roared at the soldiers. Out of Sloan's peripheral vision, she could see uniformed figures flying through the air, only to come crashing down yards from their previous spots.

Sweat formed on Sloan's brow as she carved the blade through the wood. A dozen questions and doubts attacked her as her body strained against the task, but her mind was free to wander.

What was she becoming? Who would make it to Term in three days? She really should have been more specific in telling them exactly where to meet.

Sloan finished her rough circle that looked like a two-year-old had attempted to draw a sphere. With the same kick she used to dispatch Scar, Sloan slammed her foot into the makeshift door. It flew out the other side of the gate without pause.

"Aareth." Sloan turned to see how her accomplice was faring. "We're home fr—"

The words died in her mouth. Soldiers who were stupid enough to stay to fight had been scattered around the scene like empty beer bottles at a party. Aareth was sitting down, looking at her, a severed arm in his mouth, his tail wagging furiously. One soldier moaned beside him, holding the fresh wound.

"Are you kidding me?" Sloan marched over to Aareth, taking the arm from his mouth with a scowl. "What happened to not permanently hurting them?"

Sloan moved to the groaning soldier. She took off his belt and wrapped it around the wound, then placed his arm beside him.

"Hang in there. I can already hear help on the way. They'll be here in seconds. Your arm isn't lost. Tell them to ice it and they'll be able to reattach it. I'm sorry about Aareth; he's still getting used to the whole wolf thing."

The soldier's face was pale from lack of blood, but he nodded along with Sloan's explanation. "Thank you?"

Sloan nodded, getting back to her feet. She glared at Aareth, who lowered his head in shame.

“Come on.” Sloan jumped through the hole in New Hope’s gate. “We have an appointment in Term to make, and a war to plan.”



EPILOGUE

“When can I see my sister? And Jack; you said I could see them.”

“And you will. You know the deal. You master this first step in your journey and you’ll be allowed to visit them,” Leah Noble stood with her arms crossed over her chest. “I promise you, they are safe and close by. Now focus.”

Beads of sweat fell down Elizabeth’s brow as she concentrated on her open palms. More than anything, she wanted to conjure the magical force to not only see her sister but to be done with Leah Noble at least until their next session.

“Breathe slowly,” Leah coached from the other side of Elizabeth’s new room. “Empty everything in your head and feel the power that courses through you. Don’t think you can, know you can.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. Frustration at not being able to bring the magic to her palms enraged her. Why couldn’t she do it? It seemed simple enough. There was no doubt she was special, so why couldn’t she touch the mage power like Jack and Leah could?

“Your sister thinks there’s something wrong with you,” Leah’s voice penetrated Elizabeth’s concentration. “She thinks you can be fixed from what you are.”

Elizabeth knew Leah was trying to poison her mind, and she knew her sister was only trying to look out for her, but there was a part of her that agreed with Leah. Since Abigail discovered that Elizabeth had been experimented on in the

secret laboratory in Burrow Den, she had been adamant about finding a cure. The truth was, Elizabeth liked being different. It was who she was now.

“I say there is nothing wrong with you,” Leah coaxed on. “I say you’re as complete as you ever could be. Now, child, find the flame within yourself and become what you were always meant to be.”

Elizabeth gritted her teeth. She felt hot. Her hands started to shake. Something was happening, like a piece of her that was locked away was now suddenly free.

“Open your eyes,” Leah instructed.

Elizabeth obeyed. What she saw scared and amazed her at the same time.

Both her hands were alive with dancing flames of yellow magic. Not only that, but every piece of furniture in her luxurious new room hovered two feet above the ground. From her king-sized bed to the brush on her nightstand, everything floated in the air.

“This is what you are.” Leah gave her a sly smile. “And this is only the beginning.”

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