

KENLEY DAVIDSON

The book cover features a man and a woman in a dark, misty forest. The man, on the right, has long, straight, silver hair and is wearing a dark, sleeveless vest over a white long-sleeved shirt. He has a sword tucked into his belt and is looking directly at the viewer with a serious expression. The woman, on the left, has long, dark, wavy hair and is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt under a long, flowing, reddish-brown dress. She is looking slightly away from the camera. The background is a dark forest with bare trees and a full moon in the sky. The overall color palette is dark with blue and green tones, accented by the woman's dress and some falling orange leaves.

IN
DARKNESS
FORGED

NIGHT ELVES OF ABREIA

BOOK

I

IN DARKNESS FORGED

NIGHT ELVES OF ABREIA - BOOK 1



KENLEY DAVIDSON

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To my beautiful daughters...

*May you chase your dreams with courage and may your hearts
always be fueled by hope.*

PROLOGUE



“*I*t hurts, Tal.”

Lani’s pained whimper seemed to pierce directly to his soul.

“I know, and I’m so sorry.” Talyn’s arms tightened reflexively around his sister’s sweating, shivering form. Her silver skin was pale, and her white hair hung in damp tendrils around her face—testament to the agony she’d endured over the past few hours.

This was only her third time to shift fully to her wolf, and each time the pain seemed to grow worse. Each time she seemed more frightened, more disoriented than the last.

They needed help. Needed someone who understood what was happening to her body, and that person could not be him.

Nor could it be anyone else in the far southern reaches of the Eastwatch. Everyone they’d known for the past twelve years was of the day—elves of Sion Dairach—while he and Lani... They had always been of the night.

Even though he would never have the hunting form of his night elf kin, the night called to Tal like a song only his soul could hear. It was music, safety, beauty, and home, in ways that his Dairen grandmother had never been able to understand.

“I don’t know what to do,” Lani whispered, her body still trembling with the aftermath of the shift. “I can’t stop it from coming, but when I’m the wolf, I can’t remember where I am, and everything is too loud.”

She was crying now, and his beautiful sister never cried. She was brave and curious and full of joy, and Tal could not bear to see her in pain.

“We will find someone who can help you, I swear it,” he told her, smoothing her damp hair away from her forehead. “I will take you back. Beg if I have to.”

Even the thought of it was like a knife between his ribs, but for Lani, he would do anything. They were all each other had left, now that Grandmother was gone.

“Tal, you know we can’t do that,” Lani protested, her blue eyes flaring wide with alarm. “They won’t listen to a wilding. They might kill us before we can tell them what we need.”

“They can try,” Tal said, smiling a little for Lani’s benefit. “They won’t win.”

Lani’s eyes rolled dramatically. “Yes, the best way to find help is definitely to start a war.” She smacked his chest with a hand that seemed at least marginally steadier than it had a moment before.

“Father never said they kill wildings, just that they don’t trust them,” Tal reminded her.

Lani’s lips turned down, and her gaze dropped to her hands. “If that’s true, and if they might be willing to help, would you ever think about...” She seemed to hesitate, as if unsure of his reaction. “Would it be so bad if we just asked them to accept us? Made a real effort to fit in with Father’s kin?” She bit her lip and held her breath as she looked up at him, and Tal’s heart clenched painfully.

His baby sister was not made for exile. She needed people—thrived when she was surrounded by love. Their family had been enough, until their parents were killed in a wyvern ambush, and then it had only been him and Lani.

Grandmother had loved them too, for all that she was fully of the day, but she was gone now. There was nothing left for them in Sion Dairach but misunderstanding and mistrust.

“I don’t know,” Tal said, unwilling to share with her the bitterness he still harbored towards the night elves of

Dunmaren. For treating his half-elf mother as if she might be a spy, for the hostility that had driven his parents to live as wildings, and for not caring when he and Lani were orphaned... He wasn't certain he could forgive them enough to live among them, submitting to the same traditions that had doomed his parents. And he was doubly reluctant to bear the weight of their derision towards anyone who lacked the ability to shift.

For Lani, though?

For her, he would do that much and more.

“We can only try,” he said, tightening his arms around his sister in one last hug before setting her on her feet. “There’s nothing here for us now, anyway. If you’re ready, I’ll prepare our travel kit. Say your goodbyes tonight, and we’ll set out at sunset tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Tal!” Lani flung her arms around his neck. “You’re the very best of brothers.”

And he would do anything in the world for her to keep on believing that. Even return to his father’s homeland, where he would be forced to accept that he would never truly belong anywhere, never be able to fully trust anyone to have his back.

Anyone but Lani. His sister was the light of his world, and he would give his life to ensure that she would always have a place to shine.

CHAPTER 1



Aislin sat back on her heels and gave a single satisfied nod as she looked around the newly cleaned attic.

The patina of dirt had been scoured from the floor, and the cobwebs swept from the rafters. She'd even searched the darkest corners and ruthlessly eliminated the small army of spiders that typically lurked there, a service for which the innkeeper was particularly thankful. For such a large man, he could produce a surprisingly high-pitched scream when surprised with a spiderweb across the face.

For most of the year, the inn's attic was silent and dark, filled with little more than dust and whatever articles were too valuable to discard but had no immediate purpose. But every summer, a trickle of visiting nobles would arrive to pay their respects to Lord Dreichel, each bringing their own entourage and frequently needing space to house their guards.

Their presence was a sorely needed source of extra income for the village, and Aislin was determined to take advantage of it in whatever ways she could. Today, for instance, she'd been cleaning and organizing at the inn since sunup. Much as he hated to admit it, Brannic's wooden leg made it difficult for him to manage the narrow, rickety attic stairs, and he was more than happy to pay Aislin to see to the task.

"Aislin? You finished yet, lass?"

Brannic's gruff voice echoed up from the second floor of the inn, so Aislin rose to her feet and called back down the stairwell.

“Just a few last things to tidy up, but I’ll be down in a few moments.”

Her gaze flicked around the bare space beneath the high-peaked roof, ensuring that every basket, crate, and barrel was neatly stacked and tucked as far out of the way as possible to make room for the rows of pallets that would soon take their place.

That done, Aislin glanced guiltily down the stairs before creeping into the darkest corner of the attic and opening the trunk that lived there in the shadows—a trunk full of memories, and for Aislin, a treasure chest full of dreams.

There were bits and pieces of armor, riddled with scars and stains. A horseshoe, a sword belt, and leather traveling pouches, the closures stiff with disuse. Three daggers of varying shapes and lengths, a jar filled with arrowheads, and a pot overflowing with coins from the other Thrones and beyond. Inside one pouch was a piece of parchment with a sailing ship painted on it. Inside another was a bottle filled with golden sand.

It was a record, of sorts, of Brannic’s previous life. The former mercenary had once wielded his enormous battle axe from one end of Abreia to the other, but after losing a leg to a battle with night elf raiders, had chosen innkeeping as his new profession.

Why Brannic kept those particular mementos, Aislin had never asked, but he didn’t seem to mind her sorting wistfully through the trunk’s contents, dreaming of places and people she had never seen.

Brannic, at least, seemed happy enough in his new life. Many visitors were initially taken aback by his scars and his looming bulk but were soon won over by clean sheets, warm fires, and a gift for cooking that could be little other than magic.

But Aislin? She couldn’t help dreaming of a far-off future where she would have her own memories of adventures rather than relying on the ghosts of someone else’s. Of a time and

place where she would be free to leave the village behind in search of... something.

A commotion from downstairs announced the arrival of visitors, so Aislin closed the trunk with a sigh and wiped her hands on her dusty skirt before descending the stairs, each step wringing creaks and groans from the boards beneath her feet. Her muscles echoed the complaint, but it had been a good day's work, even if it wasn't exactly thrilling.

Aislin was honest enough to acknowledge that adventure was unlikely to find her here, in a tiny village on the backside of nowhere. And even if it came... Well, whenever the exciting future she longed for might be, it wasn't now. She had too many responsibilities.

At the foot of the stairs, she took a sharp right and slipped silently to the end of the hall. There, she took another narrow staircase that ended in the kitchen, where Brannic himself stood at the table in the center of the room, slicing his legendary bacon while throwing orders at the cook and two maids who helped keep the inn running.

All four looked up when Aislin entered the room, and while Brannic smiled and Ilsa offered her a pleasant nod, the other two looked away with pity written across their faces.

She should be used to that reaction by now. Should have long ago accepted that she could do nothing to convince them she had no need of their pity. But somehow, even their silent condolences could still sting.

No one believed her when she said her father was still alive—that he would come home someday. No one listened when she said she would know if he were dead.

Brannic, at least, had never offered her pity or unwanted charity—only work when he had it to spare. Perhaps he did so because of his friendship with her father, but his willingness to employ her had ensured her family's survival for the past two years, and Aislin would always be grateful.

“You've been a great help to me, Miss Aislin,” Brannic said in his low rumbling voice, a pleased smile creasing his

face beneath his graying beard. “I don’t know that I’d have dealt with that mess in time without you, and there’s no knowing when the guests will be arriving.”

“Well, I’m thankful for the work,” Aislin returned quietly. “Is there anything else I can do?”

The back door of the inn suddenly blew open as if it had been struck by a gale, and in a sense, it had been.

The tiny human whirlwind that was Marinda stood in the doorway, her hands on her hips.

“Brannic, you great oaf, when are you sending someone over for the supplies you ordered?”

The sole shopkeeper in their little village, Marinda had come from faraway Katal, around the time Aislin was born. Her bronzed skin and curly, dark brown hair may have seemed out of place once, but now she was simply one of them. She was a treasure trove of stories about the world beyond their small mountain valley, and Aislin would miss her greatly if she ever decided to return to the land of her birth.

Brannic, Aislin thought, might miss her even more, but he’d never said anything, and it certainly wasn’t Aislin’s place to point out how he blushed whenever the shopkeeper blew in through his door with her bright eyes and her bustling vitality.

“As soon as I have someone to send, harpy,” Brannic returned, neither of them bristling at the name-calling. It was as close as the two of them ever came to acknowledging their affection.

“Well, you’d best be about it,” Marinda grumbled. “The travelers have passed the crossroads and are making excellent time for a bunch of soft city-dwellers laden with useless frippery.”

No one asked how she knew. The villagers of Brightvale were well acquainted by now with Marinda’s sources, and even Aislin had seen her stand silently in the forest, cheek to wing with wild birds, both large and small.

There were many in the village with such gifts. Old Man Eben, whose teas and tinctures worked better than anyone

else's. Ilsa, who could boil water with a touch. Brannic himself, whose bread always rose perfectly, no matter the weather or the season. To his credit, Lord Dreichel had always valued those with magic and insisted that they use their gifts for the betterment of the entire community.

Aislin was grateful that none of her neighbors were viewed askance for their magic, but there were also times she wished such powers could remain more private and personal, rather than a matter of service and expectation. Her own life, under such circumstances, might have been quite different.

But there was no time to dwell on that which she could not change. "If you've no further need of me, I should be about my day," she said to Brannic with a grateful nod. "I'm sure you've preparing to do, and I need to be getting over to Old Man Eben's before I head home."

"Aye, I suppose you're right." Brannic reached under the table and brought out a burlap bag that bulged rather more than Aislin had anticipated. "Your wages, then."

He always paid her in food, as if he knew what she needed most. Most days, she was gone from home too long to cook, and neither her mother nor her grandmother could manage such tasks in her absence.

Brannic always gave her too much, but if she argued, he would only glare at her fiercely from under lowered gray eyebrows and remind her that he was her employer and could pay her whatever he wished. After the first few times, Aislin always just said thank you and went away quietly, reminding herself that it was not charity if she worked for it.

And yet somehow, it still felt a little like shame—this knowing that she might not have been able to provide for her family without his generosity.

Such thoughts, at least, were easier to put out of her mind on a day like today, as she made her way toward the hollow north of the village and allowed her imagination to dwell on the visitors that would soon arrive.

At least several times a year, noble families from far-flung areas of the kingdom would come to pay their respects to Lord Dreichel. They always passed through the village on their way—armor gleaming with polished perfection, beautifully matched carriage horses moving in step, and curtained carriage windows sparkling in the light of the setting sun. Or at least that's how it always looked in Aislin's mind. They would make their way to the enormous stone manor that stood proudly on the hill above Brightvale, where they would grace Lord Dreichel's halls with their dress and speech and news of far-off Arandar.

Each time they arrived, Aislin longed for the opportunity to watch, to listen, and to remind herself that there was a world beyond her tiny village. A world that changed and grew and moved on without really altering the quiet lives of everyone she knew.

For today, however, it seemed likely that Aislin's small part in that larger world was at an end, so as she approached Old Man Eben's cottage, it was with a stern admonishment not to taunt herself with such things. She didn't need any more reminders of the adventures that remained just out of reach. Her life was here, caring for her mother and grandmother and continuing to cling to the belief that her father would someday return.

The healer didn't answer her tentative knock, but he'd left a packet of willow bark powder on the front stoop. After a quick glance through the tiny window, Aislin scooped it up and headed back the way she'd come, hoping all was well with her old friend. He was likely away on an errand, and it wasn't as if he needed payment—the two of them had come to a mutually beneficial agreement years ago. Aislin foraged for herbs that were difficult for him to find, while he provided her mother and grandmother with whatever remedies they required free of charge.

With no justifiable reason to dawdle in order to catch a glimpse of the manor's guests, Aislin elected to cut through the woods between Eben's hollow and her home. Getting back this early would allow her to chop more wood before it was

time to brew her grandmother's tea, and hopefully permit her to cook a hot meal for once.

Her family's cottage stood in a small clearing on the rocky hillside just outside the village proper. Backed by an ancient stand of firs and close to a burbling spring, it was far enough from Brightvale to provide both silence and solitude. Once, the isolation had been necessary for her mother's work, but now Aislin frequently cursed the added distance when she was forced to make the trek several times per day.

If only she could move her mother and grandmother down to the village, their lives would be so much easier. They could have company during the day while she was working or foraging. And she would be able to check in on them more often. But their family had called that cottage home for generations, and Aislin could not bring herself to be the cause of one more loss.

As she forced her aching muscles up the steep path towards home, Aislin suddenly became aware of raised voices where there should have been only silence. Instead of her footsteps and the wind in the trees, the hillside echoed with an unwelcome cacophony of pleading, arguing, and splintering wood.

Breaking into a run, Aislin rounded the final turn and found the small clearing in front of her house filled with men—a half dozen or more, all large and grim-looking. Half of her family's furniture already lay outside. Her grandmother still sat in her chair, eyes snapping angrily, though that chair now rested in the yard instead of in front of the fire. Aislin's mother stood in the doorway, her gaze as intent as her expression was grim and resigned.

"We're trying," her mother said, her pale face bearing a small splotch of color high on each cheekbone. "Please give us a little time, and we will make a payment as soon as we can."

"What is happening?" Aislin demanded, striding onto the scene and gazing at the gathered men with dumbfounded anger. "What could you possibly hope to gain by tormenting

two helpless women in their own home? We have nothing worth stealing.”

“It’s you that’s stealing,” one of the men supplied in a ruthless tone. “Lord Dreichel has been patient enough, so if you can neither contribute nor pay rent, you’ll have to find elsewhere to live.”

Aislin felt a familiar stab of shame, accompanied this time by a swell of helpless fury. Lord Dreichel knew their situation perfectly well, and had for years. Why did he only now decide to demand immediate restitution?

“And could he not have given us a warning? Told us what we owe and set a time by which it must be paid?”

“Well now, seems to me you’ve had at least ten years to know what you owe,” the man returned, his gaze sweeping up and down Aislin’s body as if weighing her worth. And perhaps he was. Weighing what they believed she’d stolen. What they’d spent the last ten years waiting for her to give back.

Ten years since she’d become a woman. Ten years since her gift had not manifested. Ten years of disappointment, and of reckoning with the bitter truth that after more than a century, the line of seers in her family had finally come to an end.

Every first daughter for five generations had borne the gift, and each woman subsequently lost her power when her own first daughter was born. Some mourned the loss, but it was not a comfortable magic, and they could rest easy knowing that the daughter would carry on the line when she came of age.

For the past hundred years, the Dreichels had relied on the foresight provided by the seers in Aislin’s family. They had used it to build their power and become prosperous, and were well on their way to becoming permanent fixtures at court.

Until Aislin.

“I would ask for the opportunity to speak to Lord Dreichel myself,” she said, finally finding her voice. “To ask what is owed and request terms of repayment. Until then, please consider granting us a few days of mercy.” She gestured to her

grandmother. “As you can see, we cannot simply move on, and even if we could, we have nowhere to go.”

Somehow, her mother still stood in the doorway, making a show of defiant strength she did not have. Aislin was thankful for the support, though she knew they would pay a heavy price once the situation was resolved. As frustrating as the villagers’ pitying glances might be, her mother’s poor health was an even heavier burden, and one neither Aislin nor Old Man Eben could find a remedy to.

“His lordship won’t be happy if we have to come back,” the man warned. “So you’d best have an offer in mind that will cover the debt.”

An offer? What did she have to offer? Even if she had the smallest idea what debt his lordship would propose, they owned nothing of value. Aislin had few skills beyond those required to keep them warm and fed—she could chop wood, raise a garden, cook, clean, haul water, and mend clothing. But what good were any of those to a lord?

“I will,” she promised aloud, with no clue how to keep that promise but no choice other than to try. After all, there was no one else she could rely on.

Her grandmother could barely walk, and while the old woman’s temper was still fierce, her mind often wandered, and she rarely remembered to eat unless reminded. Aislin’s mother, Charys, remained abed most days, with barely enough energy to care for herself, though she did everything she could within the limits of her meager strength.

It was Aislin who provided their day-to-day necessities. Aislin who tried desperately to keep their spirits up and look for new reasons to hope for the future.

So this, too, was up to her, and she tried to project cool confidence as the men finally turned and retreated, leaving only silent judgment in their wake.

Aislin lifted her chin bravely and smiled at her mother, hoping her fear did not show in her eyes.

“I need only put him off a little longer,” she said. “Just until Father comes home.”

But her mother only leaned more heavily against the doorframe, her lips thinned in evident frustration. “Aislin, you must stop this,” she murmured sadly. “Your father is not coming home. You know it as well as I do. It’s been over two years. If he is not dead, then he has simply left us, and it does no good to believe otherwise.”

So many times, they’d argued over her father’s absence, but Aislin refused to accept such defeat. Her bold, laughing, affectionate father could not be dead, and he would never abandon them. Never. But her mother’s illness had sapped not only her strength but her hope, so Aislin must hope for the both of them. She simply could not resign herself to a world in which there was nothing to look forward to but this endless scrabbling for the basic necessities from day to day.

“He will return,” she said doggedly. “I know he is still out there somewhere. We only have to hold on until he finds his way back.”

The only answer she received was a sad smile, so Aislin crossed the yard and wrapped her mother in a firm embrace. She was so thin and frail... Aislin’s confidence faltered yet again, but her mother pulled back and cupped her cheek for a moment, her eyes warm and regretful.

“I wish I could do more, Little One. I wish I had not...” Her voice trailed away.

Aislin covered her mother’s fine-boned hand with her own. “We’ll be all right, Mother. I’ll make sure of it.”

“I know you will,” her mother said softly. “You are so much stronger than anyone knows. I only wish you did not have to work so hard. I wish you were not so alone.”

“But I’m not,” Aislin assured her with as much false cheer as she could muster. “I have you and Grandmother. I have friends. And I won’t let us lose our home.”

Her mother’s eyes closed as if she heard the lie, but she nodded once before turning and making her way back inside

the house.

Aislin's claim had once been true. She'd had numerous friends in the village—other children her age to share laughter and confidences and dreams of the future. She and Ilsa and Trent had spent their childhoods closer than siblings, but now those two were grown and married, and Aislin had no time for anything but ensuring that her little family had what they needed to make it through each winter. No time for play, and certainly no time to dream of the future she'd once imagined she would have.

When Aislin's father first left to find work as a mercenary, her dreams had always been of his return. He would one day come running up the hill and sweep them into his arms while her mother laughed with joy. He would tell them he'd made enough money on this last job to support them for the entire year, and the grim lines would vanish from her mother's face. Her grandmother would smile, and they would be happy—a family once again.

But when his visits had grown fewer and hope had shrunk to nearly nothing, Aislin's dreams had grown smaller too. Now she often envisioned her mother as she had been when Aislin was very young—well and whole and thriving. Cheeks pink, with a loving smile each time she looked over her shoulder. On a day like this one, she would have brewed a kettle of hot, comforting tea, sat down with Aislin to discuss a solution, and then walked beside her up that hill to confront Lord Dreichel.

But whether it was illness, lost hope, or some heartbreaking combination of the two, Charys had begun to fade when Aislin was still a child, and her health had only worsened over the past ten years. Ever since Aislin's magic failed to appear. Ever since it became clear that their family could no longer count on the income from a seer's visions.

Charys blamed herself for the loss, and for her husband's absence. Once the man she loved had disappeared, she'd grown even weaker, and Aislin feared she might one day not even be able to rise from her bed.

So it was Aislin whose determination kept them afloat, even when she no longer had time for her friends or for anything else beyond thoughts of their survival. Her efforts were all that kept them fed. Her optimism was the only thing that buoyed them up and kept their little family from sinking.

So far, it had been enough. And for the foreseeable future, it would have to be.

With renewed determination, Aislin somehow dragged each piece of still-unbroken furniture back inside. She supported her grandmother as she shuffled back to her place in front of the fire, made tea, sliced bread and cheese, and ensured that everything was in order before she braided her dark hair, changed her clothes, and started grimly up the hill.

Perhaps Lord Dreichel would not even agree to see her, but she had no choice except to try.

CHAPTER 2



For weeks, Aislin had been hoping she might catch a glimpse of Lord Dreichel's noble visitors. Dreaming of a chance to linger in their vicinity, listen to their stories, and imagine herself somewhere far away.

But not like this. Not amid the chaos of their arrival, while small groups of beautiful, well-dressed people mingled and gathered in the courtyard of the great house, and Aislin was forced to make her way between them in her best but still ragged clothing, patched together from her mother's once impressive wardrobe. Not when she came as a supplicant, forced to grovel in front of strangers for the right to remain in her home.

She would do it—she would do far worse for her family—but it promised to be humiliating, and Aislin could cheerfully have wished herself anywhere else. Anywhere at all.

And yet, if she could catch Lord Dreichel while he was distracted, perhaps he would be more likely to be lenient.

But as she dodged grooms and porters and footmen and horses, Aislin began to grow doubtful that she would ever find the man in the midst of so much chaos.

“Are you lost, pretty girl?”

Aislin's gaze caught on the smiling blue-eyed face of an indecently attractive young man standing just around the corner of the house from all the activity, his shoulder resting against the stone, one booted foot propped up as if in a surfeit of boredom.

“How exactly could I be lost in front of the largest house in the village?” she retorted, worry causing her to snap in irritation.

“Then I must suppose you came specifically looking for me.” And then he winked.

Winked at *her*, with the dirt under her fingernails, her braided hair, and her patched skirt, and for just one breathless moment, Aislin’s heart gave a tiny lurch of longing.

It had been some time since any man had called her pretty. To be sure, there was a shortage of men of marriageable age in the village. Or perhaps simply a shortage of men willing to overlook Aislin’s poverty long enough to offer even that small token of admiration. But there had on occasion been guests at Brannic’s inn whose pointed attentions had at least reassured her that she was not quite repulsive.

This man, however, was of a completely different class. A few years her senior, with golden hair, embroidered blue velvet waistcoat, white silk shirt, gleaming boots, and a signet ring on his finger...

Belated recognition of the crest dropped Aislin into an instinctive curtsy, her chin falling to her chest and her eyes shutting briefly with chagrin.

She hadn’t seen him in years, but if she hadn’t been distracted, she would have known in a moment who her insincere admirer was. The village girls had been sighing over young Lord Sandric since he was barely old enough to shave.

“No, my lord, not for you,” she said, with all the polite deference she could muster under the circumstances. “I’ve come to petition your father, but I meant no disrespect.”

Well, maybe a little disrespect. Sandric’s reputation for scandal was as well-known as his father’s unpredictable temper.

He seemed determined to live up to that reputation as he straightened and moved closer, his flirtatious gaze roaming from her head to her feet and back again. “I might be convinced to take you to him, for a price.”

Aislin held herself very, very still. She must not snap at him again. Nor could she risk receiving advances she would be forced to rebuff.

“I am here to make an offer of rent payment to your father, Lord Sandric. I’m afraid my purse cannot stretch beyond that.”

“Not that kind of price.” Those blue eyes gleamed, and a smirk creased the corner of his lips.

Temptation shook her to the core. She wanted so badly to lead him on, right until the moment she knocked him flat on his heels. To tell him exactly where he could stick his insulting offer. Hopefully teach him to view women as more than objects to be admired and used until he was bored of them.

But her very life, and that of her mother and grandmother, depended on her finding the lord’s favor. Which meant she must manage this spoiled young lordling with tact and diplomacy.

So she took a deliberate step back and was surprised to hear a sigh from in front of her.

“I supposed that means you’re determined to ruin my fun, eh?”

Aislin looked up, startled to hear amused resignation instead of anger.

“It wouldn’t have been *that* bad, you know,” Sandric informed her. “One harmless kiss in front of all these guests, and we could have caused enough consternation to throw off this entire negotiation. One lingering embrace would have served to horrify my voracious bride-to-be, offend her upstart father, and send these pretentious toads packing before the papers can be signed.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Lord Sandric tilted his golden head in the direction of the visitors, and his tone grew more bitter than amused. “They’ve come to celebrate my betrothal. The union of two noble houses for the betterment of everyone, except perhaps those sacrificed upon the altar of unwilling matrimony.”

“Oh?” That was all the response Aislin could manage in the face of so much blunt confession.

“But my father would have my head for dallying with someone from the village, so I suppose it’s just as well.” He shot her a wicked grin. “Though I suspect he’d have to stand in line. You look as if you’d be perfectly happy to take my head off for yourself.”

“I’m sure I was thinking no such thing,” Aislin said, trying to maintain her distance and reserve despite his hitting rather too near the mark.

“Do you have a name, pretty girl?”

“Aislin, daughter of Charys.” She answered without thinking and was rewarded with a cynical laugh.

“Then I suppose it’s doubly fortunate I did not kiss you. If you hadn’t gutted me for taking liberties, my father would have blamed me for every piece of ill luck our family suffered for the next twenty years.”

Fortunate he had not kissed her... Aislin was somehow torn between irritation and hurt at his words. Sandric was clearly a self-centered cad, but who could have started the ridiculous rumor that she was somehow a bearer of ill luck? It wasn’t as if her lack of magic could possibly be her fault.

“So you’ve... heard of me?”

“My dear Aislin, of course I’ve heard of you,” Sandric drawled. “My father regularly curses the loss of his seer, so you’d best pray he’s in a good mood before you present your petition.” His eyes narrowed suddenly. “And yet, if not...”

Without warning, he reached down and grabbed her wrist. “I am suddenly overcome with the desire to help you, little Aislin. Come with me.”

Before she could fully grasp his intentions, Aislin was being towed relentlessly through the crowd in Sandric’s wake. Even the silk and velvet-clad visitors parted to let them pass, staring after the unlikely pair in shock or irritation as they burst through the doors of the manor and entered almost immediately into the great hall.

The enormous, high-ceilinged room somehow managed to be crowded, between well-dressed guests standing about and the bustle of servants carrying bags, trunks, and trays in every direction. And on one end of that room, Lord Dreichel himself held court beneath a wall that was little more than a shrine to his family's greatness.

Aislin had seen the impressive display once before, when she was very small. From floor to ceiling, the wall was crowded with artifacts that boasted of the family's consequence—from tapestries and portraits of their noble ancestors, to shields, weapons, and heraldry. And in the exact center, directly behind Lord Dreichel's enormous oaken chair, was the shield.

Guardian of the Dreichels' home and their magic, or so the legend claimed, the Shield of Evernight was made of dark, featureless metal, as hard and unforgiving as the night itself. But set in the center was a stone—round and smooth and unassuming—that glowed with a soft, white radiance, like a star in the depths of that wrought metal night.

It had been glowing since the day the Dreichels acquired it some eighty years before, and the stories (or Lord Dreichel's hopeful imagination) claimed that the family would thrive for as long as the stone continued to shine on their ancestral lands.

Or some such rot. Aislin thought that perhaps an emphasis on respect for one's neighbors and responsibility for one's actions might be more to the point, but what did she know?

Sandric paused for a moment in the midst of the hall, as if trying to determine how best to approach his father. Aislin took advantage of his distraction to remove her hand from his grip, and not a moment too soon. Lord Dreichel spotted his son, his face lit up with an uncomfortable approximation of joy, and he held out his hand.

“My son, we were just speaking of you! Come and join us.”

Too late, Sandric seemed to become aware of who already stood next to his father—an elaborately dressed older couple and a young woman about Aislin's age. She was cool and pale

and golden-haired, and while her gaze seemed fixed on Sandric, her face remained smoothly expressionless, leaving no hint of whether she shared his misgivings over these proceedings.

Lord Dreichel's heir froze for the space of a few breaths, his face turning to a cynical mask before his feet seemed to carry him forward of their own accord to join his father. For a single brief moment, Aislin almost felt sorry for him.

"Yes, Father?" Sandric's drawl sounded dangerously lazy, even to Aislin, but Lord Dreichel seemed not to notice.

The master of Glenclyffe Manor was a stocky man of average height with graying hair, a close-clipped beard, and icy gray eyes. He typically wore dark clothing and a stern expression, though that expression could change in the space of a moment. Despite his mercurial temper, he had never been a particularly terrifying sight to Aislin... until today.

Until she'd realized he held the power to render her homeless with a word. She'd known he owned their cottage but had never dreamed he would bother to throw them out. Had not realized the depths of his anger at being deprived of a seer's magic. Perhaps she should have, but she'd been too busy simply surviving.

"I believe you must remember Lady Eileen," Lord Dreichel said, all but pushing his son towards the young woman at his side.

"How could I forget?" Sandric replied through clenched teeth.

"Indeed." His father shot him a dangerous look. "Given the length of your acquaintance, we were just discussing the idea of moving up your wedding date and joining our families by the end of the fortnight. Travel being what it is, this seems an excellent opportunity, and I see no reason to delay."

Aislin saw Lady Eileen jerk slightly, as if she were just as surprised by this announcement as Sandric.

But it was Sandric whose blue eyes blazed with sudden anger as he regarded his father, bitter animosity radiating from

every line of his body.

“*You* saw no reason to delay?”

Lord Dreichel stiffened, and Aislin winced as she realized Sandric had utterly ruined her chances of approaching his father tonight. Indeed, a debacle of this magnitude might have destroyed her hopes entirely.

“Surely you do not intend to disrespect either Lady Eileen or Lord Nevenhall,” the elder Dreichel said, ice dripping from his tone.

“No, surely I would never *dare*,” Sandric snarled, all pretense of politeness vanished. “Just as I have never dared reach for anything I truly wanted. Never dared step outside your plans for my life. After all, why would I not be thrilled to sacrifice myself for your ambitions? For your hunger for alliances that will cement your power at court? How could I not be *ecstatic* to be married to a woman I barely know, for no reason other than our parents’ scheming?”

Suddenly, Aislin wanted very much to be elsewhere. But when she tried to back away, a wall of onlookers seemed to have solidified behind her, and there was nowhere for her to go.

“You will show respect for our guests,” Lord Dreichel demanded harshly, “or you will remove yourself from the room until you can offer sufficient apology for your failures in basic courtesy.”

“Respect?” Sandric’s smile grew mocking. “Do you mean the kind of respect and consideration you have granted your own son in the matter of his future happiness? Yes, Father. I will show our guests *exactly* that much respect.”

He turned to Lord Nevenhall and tilted his head, eyes glittering with animosity. “I apologize for making my sentiments clear at this late date, but I confess that I do not care what plans you may have made or what designs you may have on my family’s name and reputation. I have no desire for this marriage, and I do not intend to go through with it.”

The visiting lord seemed to gather himself and began to project offended dignity. “Promises have been made, Lord Sandric, and we have taken the great risk and expense of traveling here with certain expectations. You cannot simply say you will not marry my daughter without making restitution for both the expense and the offense.”

“Oh, can’t I?” Sandric sneered. “When you have just betrayed your true intentions by demanding money instead of my name? Then here!” He turned, reached up, and lifted the Shield of Evernight from where it hung on the wall. “Have this instead. It’s worth far more than I am, anyway. It represents the sum total of my family’s name and reputation. The repository of my father’s unfounded hopes and the source of his ambition. A chunk of metal and a rock, which he has always treated with more care and concern than he has shown towards any living member of his family. Take this in my place, and may it bring you as much joy and good fortune as it has brought me.”

And with that, he hurled the shield to the ground, no doubt intending it to land at Lord Nevenhall’s feet.

But Sandric misjudged his own strength. The shield bounced, tumbled across the floor, and slid for several paces before coming to a stop.

A single soft gasp could be heard in the echoing silence that followed, and even Sandric gaped and blanched as he saw the result of his outburst.

The shield itself remained whole and unblemished, the metal as unyielding as it had always been. But its darkness was now also unbroken by the presence of any light.

After eighty years, the beautiful white stone that had stood guardian over the Dreichel family’s fortune and power had broken free of its mounting. As the shield held everyone’s gaze, the stone continued to tumble end over end until it came to rest, and if Aislin was the only one who noticed it, the crowd could hardly be blamed.

Because its light had finally been extinguished, and what remained was simply a rock—a smooth but otherwise

unremarkable orb lying like a forgotten pebble at Aislin's feet.

Silence invaded the hall like a living being, freezing the breath in every chest and daring even one finger to move, until...

"What have you done?" Lord Dreichel's anger echoed from the high ceiling and reverberated around the room. Anger and... Was that fear in his gray eyes?

After that first stunned moment, Sandric's horror had already turned back to bitterness. "Something I should have done years ago," he said mockingly. "Set us free from an elaborate lie meant only to impress others. Or do you truly believe a rock could have anything to do with our prosperity?"

"A *rock*?" His father's face grew dangerously red. "You think that is simply a *rock*? You cannot possibly comprehend the damage you have done!"

"A magical rock can be replaced. Unlike your family!"

"And you *will* replace it," Lord Dreichel snarled. "If it takes your entire life, you will find a way to restore what you have destroyed with your ungrateful and self-indulgent behavior!"

Sandric looked back at his father defiantly. "Or?"

"Or what?"

"What if I choose not to attempt something so ridiculous? What if I refuse to embark on a quest doomed to failure before it begins?"

Lord Dreichel appeared to be choking on his own anger and disbelief.

And Aislin...

The idea came to her in a flash, and on an ordinary day, she would have scoffed and discarded it.

But this was no ordinary day. Her family's very lives were at stake. If they were driven from their home, they had nowhere to go. No one in the village would take them in—not if they risked bringing the lord's anger on their family in the

process. Oh, Brannic would try, but Aislin could not pay him, and she refused to be a burden to anyone.

They would be forced to leave Brightvale, but her mother and grandmother would not last a week on the road, on foot, with no money and no protection. Aislin would have no way to feed them, no way to shelter them from the elements...

She saw one slender strand of hope and didn't stop to think. Didn't stop to plan, didn't take a moment to tell herself how preposterous it was. She only knew that she could not let her father down. Could not let her family fall apart in his absence.

"I'll do it."

At first, no one seemed to hear her, so Aislin repeated herself, a little louder this time. "I'll do it!"

Finally, her words seemed to penetrate the silence, and Lord Dreichel turned to see who had spoken.

"I'll find a way to restore the stone," Aislin said. She suddenly felt the weight of every eye in the room and hoped her voice did not quaver.

The lord's gaze raked her from head to toe, and she saw the grimace when he finally dismissed her as beneath his notice.

"What is that woman doing here?" He seemed to be speaking to the empty air, as if she weren't even worth being addressed directly.

But it was too late to lose her nerve.

"I came to petition you, my lord. To find a way to settle my family's debt."

"Then come back later." Lord Dreichel started to turn away, but Aislin could not afford to give up so easily.

"I can find someone to fix your stone!" she cried out desperately. "And I swear I will do it, in exchange for forgiveness of our debt. For my family being allowed to stay in their home."

The lord's face hardened. "Who are you?"

Perhaps she ought to apologize for her presence. Bend her knee and beg for him to be lenient. But that far, she would not go. Her name was nothing to be ashamed of.

"I am Aislin," she said quietly. "Daughter of Charys."

And then he knew.

"You."

His hatred slammed into her like a blow. In his mind, she was the one who had cost him his seer. The foretellings that had brought him prosperity had ended with her birth, and they would never come again.

The crowd seemed to draw away from her, as if afraid of being tainted by proximity. No doubt Lord Dreichel intended to bring the full weight of his judgment to bear on the ragged woman in their midst, and no one wanted to be caught in the backlash. Not with a man whose moods fluctuated like the weather.

"Yes," Aislin said simply, lifting her chin as she faced the man who held her future in his hands. "I have come because my mother and grandmother are about to be thrown from the only home they have ever known. I acknowledge your right to demand payment, but in honor of my family's past service, I ask that I be allowed to cover our debt in this way. I have no money, but I have hands and feet and a willingness to attempt the impossible in order to save them."

She expected him to sneer, to throw her out, or simply say no.

She did not expect him to laugh. And it was not merely a brief chuckle—he laughed loud and long, clapping his hands together as if applauding the ridiculousness of the situation.

And still, no one in the room dared do more than breathe, as if sensing the danger hiding behind that unhinged laughter.

Which ended abruptly as Lord Dreichel favored her with a coldly mocking smile. "Do you even know what you are asking?"

“For the chance to save my family,” Aislin said firmly. “We wish to remain in our home. That is all.”

Enchanters were not that rare among mages, so surely it could not be too difficult to find one who could renew the stone’s magic. And even if it was a costly enchantment, she could likely find some other way to repay them besides money. She was strong and capable, and she was not afraid of hard work.

“Done,” Lord Dreichel said suddenly, his face turned to an expressionless mask. “While I deal with my miserable excuse for a son, you will repair my stone.”

Aislin nearly fainted with the shock. He’d agreed? She actually had a chance?

“But before you grow too giddy with satisfaction, I suppose I should tell you...”

Whatever it was, she could do it. *Would* do it. Failure was not an option.

“No human mage has the ability to enchant such a thing.”

Surely he was wrong.

“My great-grandfather purchased that stone from the Marlord of Revenfell. It cost him nearly half his fortune, but they swore it contained the secret to their power, and there is no bargaining with their kind—not when their magic gives them every advantage. And now”—Lord Dreichel’s face twisted—“there is no way to reach them at all. Not when they’ve retreated to the heart of their lands, only to raid our borders and disappear into the darkness.”

Shock and dismay sent the blood from Aislin’s head straight to her toes, leaving her dizzy and faint. “You mean...”

Dear gods, what had she done? That stone had come not from the hands of a human mage, but from...

“Don’t even think about going back on your word, Daughter of Charys.” Lord Dreichel’s expression remained unyielding as granite. “That stone’s magic has ensured the

prosperity of these lands for generations, so it is worth far more than your life.”

More than your life, Daughter of Charys. He had named her mother for a reason. His stone was worth far more than the life of the woman who had stolen his seer by the very fact of her existence.

How could he hate her so much for something she could not help?

And what would happen to her mother and grandmother if she died on this absurd quest?

“My family...” Aislin began to say, but Lord Dreichel was in no mood to listen.

“Perhaps you should have asked more questions before you made promises, but now you are bound. Bound to go wherever this task requires.”

“And will anyone go with me?” Somehow, her voice did not waver.

“You will go alone.” Lord Dreichel’s tone was implacable. “This is not a prize that can be won by strength of arms—any show of force and my men would be slaughtered where they stood.”

So it was better to send a woman with no weapons at all?

“No,” Lord Dreichel continued, “I will risk no one else. Not for a cause that may already be lost. I will grant you the remainder of the season to restore the stone. Then and only then will I forgive your family for their failures. Do not”—his tone held the chill certainty of a threat—“appear in front of me again until you have accomplished this task.”

What he was asking was preposterous. Unthinkable.

“And if they kill me the moment I cross the border?”

“Then you will be dead, and I? I will have lost nothing.” His head tilted, and his gaze grew pointed. “Perhaps I even stand to gain. After all, your mother’s magic vanished with your birth. Who’s to say it cannot come back again?”

And with that, Lord Dreichel turned his back on her, leaving Aislin somehow alone in a room full of people. Nearly gasping from the impact of that final blow.

Did he truly believe that? Even worse, did anyone *else* believe it? Did her mother...

No. Aislin refused to consider it. Refused to allow that thought a foothold. Her mother loved her, with or without magic. And the matrilineal magic in their family had always worked the same way—from mother to daughter, never in reverse. No matter what anyone believed, Aislin could not give back a magic she'd never possessed.

For an instant, she caught the stricken gaze of Sandric, who seemed to have finally recognized the consequences of his actions.

But it was too late for him to take them back. And why should he, when he must endure nothing but his father's anger? He would remain here, safe in his own home, while Aislin...

She must attempt the impossible. Cross the Dredwall River. Go alone and unaided into a land of magic and nightmare, with nothing but the common gray stone at her feet.

A stone that owed its power to the shapeshifting warriors beyond the river—the hostile and terrifying night elves.

There was nothing and no one in the world who could help her now.

CHAPTER 3



Aislin did not return home right away, but wandered for a time on leaden feet, stone clenched tight in nerveless fingers. Her thoughts churned helplessly, wondering whether her rashness had sealed her family's fate or merely hastened the inevitable. If she could go back, would she make the same decisions? Or would she wait and hope for another opportunity to speak to Lord Dreichel, where she could plead with him for mercy instead of attempting the impossible?

The truth was, she still had no other means by which to repay him—no money, no magic, no skill of value. And the man was not exactly known to be merciful, so perhaps this was the only way.

By the time she reached this conclusion, it was late, and everyone was already in bed, but Aislin knew she could not put off explaining what was about to happen. Her family needed to know so they could be prepared.

With cold, stiff fingers, she picked up the lantern her mother always left burning when Aislin was out and crept into the tiny room her parents had once shared. But when she gazed down at the thin form huddled beneath the bedclothes, she almost lost her nerve.

How could she tell her mother that Lord Dreichel might be sending her to her death?

“Mother, something's happened.”

Her mother rolled over and sat up, her face pale and thin in the lantern light, anxiety glittering in her eyes.

“It’s good news,” Aislin said, keeping her tone light and her expression neutral. She would not lie, but there was no reason for her mother to know how much danger she would truly be in. “I have a task I must complete for Lord Dreichel.”

“Then... he will give us a chance to pay our debt?” Her mother’s hoarse whisper was laden with hope.

“Yes.” Aislin swallowed the deluge of words that tried to spill out in the wake of that yes. So many things she wanted to tell her mother, but couldn’t—all of her fears and uncertainties, all of her questions. But her mother needed nothing so much as hope, and if she knew the truth...

“That is such a relief.” Charys sank back into her pillow with a sigh and closed her eyes. “I was so afraid...”

Aislin slipped the stone into her pocket, took her mother’s hand, and squeezed it gently. “I will save our home, Mother, I swear it. But I will have to leave right away. Lord Dreichel has given me only until the end of the season.”

“No!” Her mother shot upright, and her grip on Aislin’s hand grew fierce. “No, Aislin, you must not leave. I will not allow it! We will ask him for a different task—something that does not require you to leave this valley.”

Her hand trembled from more than weakness, and Aislin knew she was afraid. Terrified of losing her daughter to the same unknown dangers that she believed had claimed her husband.

But Aislin had no choice. Lord Dreichel had given her none, so she smiled encouragingly and told the most appalling lie of her entire life. “It will be fine, Mother. I’ll be perfectly safe, and I’m sure it won’t seem like very long. While I’m gone, please do your best to just rest and look after Grandmother. I’ll be sending someone up to look in on you, but in the meantime, there is food in the larder, and I’ll be chopping enough wood to last you for a while.”

Her mother’s hand still shook, and Aislin read in her eyes that she *knew*—knew there was something her daughter

couldn't or wouldn't tell her. Knew somehow that this was the only way.

"There's nothing I can do, is there?" she whispered.

Aislin shook her head slowly, and her mother lay back against the pillow, her face grim and starkly drawn in the light of the lantern. "I wish..." But whatever she'd been about to say, she could not even utter the words.

So Aislin set down the lantern and leaned down to hug her mother briefly before straightening and pulling up the covers, hoping to hide the shine of tears in her eyes. "It's going to be fine. Rest now, and I'll be back before you know it."

Her mother's eyes closed, and she nodded. "Do not waste your energy worrying about us," she whispered fiercely. "I can do more. I know I can. Just please... Please come home to me safely."

Aislin squeezed her mother's hand one last time. "I promise," she said, and then left her to her sleep.



Once she retreated to the main room of their cottage, it grew more difficult to hold back the tears. What could she do but pray that her words would not prove to be a lie? That she *would* be safe, and could find some way to keep her promise. That somehow, this entire absurd situation would end well, and her mother would not be robbed of yet another person that she loved.

Scrubbing her cheeks with her sleeves, Aislin looked around and forced herself to think practically. To take stock of what must be done. Wonder what she should take with her. Plan for what she would tell Brannic and Marinda. She would have to chop more wood, fill the cistern, fix the door latch that had been sticking for the past few weeks...

But the distraction was not enough. All the practicality in the world could not hide the truth of what she was about to do, and suddenly the danger became all too frighteningly real.

She was about to leave her home. Go alone into an unknown and hostile wilderness, searching for something so elusive she had no name for it.

Aislin dropped into the chair in front of the barely flickering fire. Put her face in her hands and searched for even the tiniest flicker of hope as her fears swirled and her panic grew.

What had she been thinking? How could she do this? And why was there not even one single person she could talk to, pour out her fears, and hope to receive comfort or advice in return?

How at twenty-two years old, in the place she'd called home for the whole of her life, could she feel so utterly *alone*?

Tremors shook her shoulders, while her breathing grew harsh, and her heart pounded uncomfortably. There was no possible way to do what Lord Dreichel required. The wilderness would eat her alive. She was already worn down by the weight of her responsibilities, and this was just one more burden, one more voice crying out that she was not good enough, that she could never truly care for her family in her father's absence.

And yet... she was still standing. She'd managed so far, if only by refusing to quit. She'd learned the skills she needed to look after her mother and grandmother. Carried the weight of their day-to-day survival for five years now. And she was not entirely without friends. The people of the village would help her as best they could, even if they dared not risk Lord Dreichel's anger.

Bit by bit, she clawed her way back to focus and purpose. Reminded herself that she was strong and stubborn and determined. That she had too much to fight for. She'd never once given up just because her situation appeared hopeless, and she wasn't about to start now. She'd been looking after her family alone since she was seventeen. And she had Brannic and Marinda, who had encouraged her without fail since her father left.

She could do this. How, she had no idea. But Lord Dreichel had given her no options. Go and do the impossible, or...

Or what? His grim threats had not been particularly specific, but Aislin could not doubt his meaning.

Succeed or die.

And even Lord Dreichel seemed to believe that her chances of bargaining successfully with the night elves were slim.

Night elves. Why did it have to be night elves?

Aislin knew little of that reclusive people other than what was repeated in fireside tales, which had likely been embellished past the point of recognition.

Terrifying shape-shifters who raided Farhall's borders and then disappeared into the night, they were said to appear as shadows with glowing eyes, often wielding magic along with their blades.

Many years ago, they had occasionally traded with humans, and while relations had never been exactly warm, they had at least not been overtly hostile until relatively recently. Now, even the sight of a night elf was considered little more than a harbinger of death, although Aislin had never heard of them raiding the lands around Brightvale.

Perhaps the stories were exaggerated. Surely they did not actually kill humans on sight. And really, how much of a threat could one woman be? They might laugh at her and refuse her request—after all, she had no way to pay whatever ruinous price they might ask—but they were people, not monsters. No one meted out death as the penalty for a question, did they?

Whether they did or not, it wasn't as if any amount of planning could help her. She had no choice but to pay whatever they asked, so her greatest concern must be preparing her family for her absence. There was so much to arrange—favors to beg for, promises to be made, and plans to put in motion. She had only a single night, and might be gone for as much as an entire season.

So with a deep, fortifying breath, Aislin rose from the chair, firmed her jaw, and set about doing what she could. And by the time morning came, she was as ready as she was going to get. Her tiny pack rested by the door, the stone was safe in a drawstring pouch around her neck, and the main room of their little cottage was as clean as she could make it. She'd also left all of the food Brannic had given her, hauled a week's worth of water in the dark, and chopped enough wood to see them through ten days or more if they were careful.

As she wove her black hair into a tight braid and tied the end with a leather cord, Aislin gazed around, looking for any task she may have forgotten. When she saw nothing, she pulled on one of her father's old leather jerkins over her patched dress and petticoat and tied the laces. Beneath the skirt, she donned a pair of woolen leggings and sturdy boots, hoping grimly that the night elves were not easily influenced by wealth and status. No matter how strong her determination might be, there was certainly nothing impressive about her appearance.

Just before dawn, Aislin donned her cloak, stoked the fire, and prepared three cups of weak tea with three slices of toasted bread. When her grandmother shuffled out of the tiny bedroom and took her seat before the fire, Aislin decided she could put off this final conversation no longer.

"Grandmama, I have to go away for a little while."

Her grandmother sipped her tea and regarded her with strangely bright eyes. These days, she was often confused, but Aislin had to hope that she understood what was said. That her irrepressible grandmother was still in there somewhere.

"I may be gone for some time, but I'll be sending someone up later to look in on you."

Brannic had not yet agreed, but he had always tried to give more than Aislin had been able to accept. Much as she hated to ask, she knew he would not hesitate to help her once he heard her story.

"Please stay warm. You and Mother look after each other, and I'll see you soon, all right?"

She had given up on hearing any words of farewell when her grandmother suddenly reached out and gripped Aislin's wrist in one wrinkled hand.

Lifting fierce gray eyes to Aislin's face, she clenched her fingers tighter as if in warning.

"Your magic," she said firmly. "You must find your magic, child!"

Aislin's heart shrank, but she set one hand over her grandmother's and squeezed back, smiling and nodding as if she understood.

Her grandmother had never quite accepted that Aislin would never have magic. The gift their family had borne for five generations was gone, and it wasn't coming back.

All Aislin had now was stubbornness, a strong back, and the fear that her family would starve if she could not accomplish the task Lord Dreichel had set her.

Those would have to be enough.

"Thank you, Grandmama. I'm sure I will."

She tried to pull away, but her grandmother did not let go.

"You don't believe me," she said, a knowing glint in her eye, "but you will find it. In a dark place, where you least expect it... that's where it waits for you."

Her grip relaxed as the light in her eyes seemed to fade. "And do come home soon. We will miss you while you're away."

Aislin fought back tears. "I'll try, I promise." She pulled her hand from her grandmother's and patted her shoulder gently. "But I have to go now. I'll be back before you know it."

And with one last glance around the inside of the cottage, she slipped out the door into the early morning gloom.



It was a cold, lonely journey to the village, and each footstep on the steep, rocky path seemed to echo in the pre-dawn silence. Each step... Aislin knew them by heart. Even in the dark, she never stumbled, and the very familiarity of it reminded her that she was about to leave behind everything she had ever known. About to travel beyond the small, unchanging world of Brightvale for the first time.

Distracted by her anxiety, she was far too unaware of her surroundings, and nearly cried out in alarm when a voice rang out from the shadows beside the trail.

“Wait!”

Aislin had no weapon, but she turned to face the threat with her hands raised, as if more than willing to punch the stranger in the throat. Not that she had ever done such a thing, but it couldn't be that hard, could it?

But when he emerged onto the path beside her, he was no stranger.

“*Sandric?*”

The light was dim, but somehow his golden hair still seemed to glow. Close up, he was even taller than she remembered, broader of shoulder, and his stricken expression seemed to reveal far more sympathy than she would have expected.

“Aislin.”

“Yes, my lord?” Aislin managed a rough curtsy before folding her arms across her chest, wondering numbly what he might want with her that he'd waited out here alone in the cold. It wasn't as if he actually cared whether she paid for his fit of temper with her life. “Why are you here?”

But he surprised her with an expression as sober as her own. “I just wanted you to know that I'm... I'm sorry. Sorry for what my father has done to you.”

“For your *father?*” she snapped without thinking. “What about you? How about an apology for not stopping to consider that your actions have consequences for people besides yourself?”

Egad, she was too tired. She could not afford such an outburst, not with the lord's son, but he merely scowled at her effrontery.

"Then why did you make such a ridiculous offer?" he demanded. "And when he told you the truth, why did you give in to his bullying? All you had to do was refuse. Everyone in the room knew that what he's asked of you is impossible."

"Did you hear nothing?" Aislin returned incredulously. "How was I to refuse? He all but said he would have me executed if I didn't fulfill his demands. And how can you speak so blithely of refusing when it took you until yesterday to reject his plans for your marriage?"

To his credit, Sandric actually winced.

"And what choice do you think I had?" Aislin continued. "I made the offer in the first place because if I do not do this, the people I love will have no home. Your father owns the land and all of our homes, so none of our friends will dare take us in for fear of suffering the same fate. We will be thrown out in the cold to live or die, and I can assure you, my mother and grandmother will die."

Sandric seemed to have nothing to say to that. Perhaps, in the end, neither of them had a choice.

"No," Aislin said, "what's done is done. I would tell you to go on this fool's errand yourself, but then your father would make good on his threats, and my family would have no way to pay our debt. And anyway, your father would never risk your life."

Sandric shook his beautiful golden head, a bitter twist to his lips. "No, he wouldn't. Not because he cares, but because he is relying on this marital alliance to give him more influence in the south. He's hoping to be chosen as one of the king's advisors, and if this doesn't go through..."

So that was the real reason behind Lord Dreichel's fury. Not the loss of his stone so much as the lost opportunity. He had land, a family, safety, and respect, but it wasn't enough. Nothing was ever enough.

“Look, I thank you for your apologies, but they’re meaningless,” Aislin said bluntly. “And now I have places to be.”

“If there’s anything I can do to help...”

He almost sounded sincere, and Aislin wished she could believe in his offer. Wished she were in a position to wonder whether he’d come out here in the cold because he cared whether she lived or died. Even when she was about to leave on this impossible quest, one more person who cared would seem like a tremendous gift.

“You *can* help,” she said simply. “If your words are not just meaningless platitudes, you can ensure that my mother and grandmother are looked after in my absence. I was going to ask someone in the village, but they are burdened enough. Unless,” she added, “you know of some way I can accomplish this task without crossing the Dredwall.”

Sandric’s beautiful face seemed to blanch. “I do not.” His gaze dropped to the ground as he folded his arms tightly across his chest. “But I will do what I can to ensure your family’s welfare.”

Aislin nodded, feeling as if there was nothing left to say.

“Be safe?” the lord’s son said hesitantly.

Because he didn’t want her to die? Or because he didn’t want to feel guilty for having been the cause? Aislin wanted to ask, but she wasn’t sure she would like the answer.

So she simply nodded again. As if her own safety were somehow within her power to grant. It was most assuredly not, but she didn’t have the energy to consider other possibilities—she would need every bit of it for the task ahead.



The village was only just beginning to stir when Aislin moved quietly down the main street and entered Brannic’s inn through the rear door.

He was, of course, wide awake and busy in the kitchen, surrounded by the smells of baking bread and frying bacon.

The moment he looked up and caught sight of her, Aislin knew he'd already heard at least part of the story from somewhere. How much and how true she had no way of knowing, but the innkeeper's brows lowered and his mouth set in a stubborn line as he took in her traveling garb and the small pack slung over her shoulder.

“And where exactly do you think you're going?”

She tried to smile reassuringly. “To pay my rent?” That part, at least, he should be able to understand.

Brannic's scowl only grew. “That he would ask it of you is bad enough, but to send you alone...”

Aislin shook her head. “I volunteered.”

The innkeeper's mouth dropped open in dismay. “You did what now?”

She shrugged, reluctant to explain her part in the previous evening's humiliation, even to Brannic. “Yesterday, Lord Dreichel sent men to evict us from our home. Said we owed rent for all the years since my gift failed to manifest. I had no way to pay him. We would have been thrown out, so I had to do something.”

“But Aislin, lass, why didn't you come to me? You know I'd have helped you.”

How could she tell him that was exactly why she hadn't come? “I know, Brannic, and you've been the best of friends to us since Father left. But you've no more ability to pay off ten years of rent than I do.”

His sigh told her she'd hit the mark.

“And you cannot afford to feed and house three helpless women. Not when it would draw Lord Dreichel's ire. I saw a way to solve the problem, and I took it. I just...” She let out a long breath. “To be fair, I had no idea what I was volunteering for. I thought I would only need to find a mage to fix the

wretched thing. I miscalculated, and I never imagined Lord Dreichel would... But I'll be all right."

"You've always been too stubborn for your own good, and that's the truth," Brannic growled. "But you'll not be going alone, that much is for certain. You'll need someone skilled with a blade. Someone who knows the roads and can stay alive in the wilds." He shot her a determined look. "If you can give me but a day, I can find someone to look after the inn and do it my own self."

Aislin couldn't help but be warmed by his offer, but she knew it was only his desperation talking. Brannic could not go—not with his leg and his limp and his inn. He was the lifeblood of the village, and everyone knew it. And how could she drag him across that wretched river when he'd lost his leg to the night elves in the first place?

"I'll be fine, Brannic." She did her best to project casual confidence. "I only need to go far enough to find someone who can fix the stone. All night elves have magic, do they not? And surely they won't murder me on sight. I'm just one pathetic human woman—killing me for no reason would be like kicking a puppy."

Brannic's glower deepened, though whether his ire was aimed at Lord Dreichel or the night elves, she couldn't be sure.

"You are likely right, but then again..." Brannic turned to face her and folded his arms across his broad chest.

"If you won't be talked out of it, you should know that many of our tales are codswallop, but not all. Night elves *are* deadly. You won't truly understand until they stand in front of you, but they are larger, stronger, faster, and possess magic beyond our ken, even more than their thrice-blasted shapeshifting. But"—his expression grew thoughtful—"they're no monsters, no matter what the stories might say. They are principled and honorable, and they protect the weakest of their kin, even if they do not always respect them. Perhaps you've the right of it, and they won't harm you when they see you're no kind of threat."

No kind of threat... Aislin knew Brannic meant no offense, but she hated that his words were true of her. She was strong enough in body and mind, but she had no skill with weapons and no magic. She was a danger to no one but herself.

“Thank you,” she said soberly. “I appreciate it more than you know. But in truth, I’ve only come to ask if you would find someone to look in on my mother and grandmother.” She hated to ask, but she didn’t fully trust Sandric, and there was no one else. “I’ve left them enough food and firewood for a few days, and filled the cistern, so with luck, you won’t need to do much for a few days. And I swear I’ll repay you for everything.”

She paused for a moment, but decided to tell him of Sandric’s offer. “And the young lord from the manor has promised to look in on them as well, so they’ll likely have no need of anything but a bit of company.”

“Sandric, is it?” Brannic’s eyes sharpened under his lowered brows. “Seems out of character for that one.”

“Feeling a bit of guilt, I suppose,” Aislin said lightly. She could tell Brannic was desperately curious to know how Sandric was involved, but that was not her story to tell. And if the gossip didn’t reach his ears by the end of the day anyway, she would be very much surprised.

“I really should be going,” she said instead. “Would you...”

“Are ye daft?” Brannic growled. “Of course I’ll look after your family. And you’ll not be paying me for it either.” Then he picked up a cloth-wrapped package from the table and shoved it in her direction. “This here is enough food for five days if you’re careful. Plus a few other odds and ends you may find useful. And you’ll be taking one of my horses.”

“Brannic, no,” Aislin said firmly. “I won’t risk your stock across the river.”

“You’ll do it, and no argument,” he said mulishly. “At least so far as the bridge. You’ll make better time, and then you can

send it home if you wish.”

“Very well.” She offered Brannic a wan smile. “Only as far as the bridge. Though I’ll never be able to truly thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

“’Tis only proper neighborly kindness,” he insisted, turning and limping towards the back door on his way to the stables. “And do be careful of...”

Brannic continued with a stream of advice in a low voice as they descended the steps and made their way past the rubbish heap. Aislin followed, trying to pay attention but anxious to slip away before any more of the villagers awakened to ask questions or stare or make clear with their silence that they never expected her to return.

But both she and Brannic were brought up short by the sight of Marinda striding briskly through the early morning mist, the light of battle in her eyes.

“And when were you planning to tell me of last night’s goings-on?” she demanded of Aislin. “After you’d gone and gotten yourself killed for the sake of yon lord’s pride?” She jerked her head in the direction of the manor, nostrils flared with anger. Clearly, the gossip moved faster than even Aislin had anticipated.

“I offered to make fair payment for a debt,” Aislin said wearily, not wanting to belabor the point any longer. “’Tis a truth that we’ve lived rent-free on his lordship’s land and forbearance for ten years. We’ve no claim on his kindness, and he is within his rights to demand payment.”

“In blood?” Marinda snapped. “What manner of lord accepts such an offer? Or makes such a demand?”

“Please.” Aislin gripped the end of her braid in one hand and tried to remind herself that both Brannic and Marinda spoke out of love. They had no idea that their protests only made her task more difficult. She was already worried enough without their fussing. “Can’t you see I’ve no choice but to try? You know as well as I that it would require some extraordinary price to win us the right to stay in our home. I had no way to

pay, so when I saw a chance, I grasped it. And now, whatever the cost, I must see it through, or..." She found that she could not even speak her fears aloud.

Marinda's mouth snapped shut as if recognizing that words were no longer enough. But then she took Aislin's hand, opened her fingers, and pressed something firmly into her palm before stepping back. "A compass," she said briefly, when Aislin peered at what proved to be a tiny wooden box. "But it's been enchanted to always show you the way home—in case you lose your way in that accursed forest."

"Thank you." Aislin nodded gratefully, tucking the compass safely into her pack. She treasured the gift for the thought that accompanied it, but it brought her little comfort. Not when it was her very home that she was trying to save. If she was lost, then she would have failed, and she would have no home to return to.

"And Alaric will accompany you to the bridge."

Who?

Marinda jerked her chin towards the sky, and Aislin looked up just in time to see a large, feathered shadow swoop down to perch on the peak of the stable's roof.

"He'll warn you of any danger along your way," Marinda promised. "Crested hawks have sharp eyes, and he'll spot any wyverns or other predators long before human senses become aware of them."

Aislin reached out and pulled the older woman into an impulsive hug. "Thank you," she whispered. "For everything."

"You know I'd go with you if I could," Marinda murmured.

Aislin did know. And was grateful she need not bear the burden of dragging anyone with her on this fool's errand she'd earned for herself.

"I'll be fine," she promised with a bright smile. "As Brannic said, the night elves are not monsters. I believe most of the stories are exaggerations. And even if not"—she

somehow held back the tremor of tears in her voice—“what do I have to lose?”

And then it seemed there was nothing more to say. Brannic’s groom emerged from the stable, leading a gentle bay mare who stood steady as a rock while Aislin struggled into the saddle. When her feet were set in the stirrups, she waved one last time to Brannic and Marinda, then tapped the mare’s sides with her heels, refusing to look back as her mount stepped away from the inn and made her slow, steady way down the street.

They passed Marinda’s shop, the blacksmith, the tanner, and a handful of stone cottages, and then the village was at an end. But the road kept on, and as Aislin passed that final house, she felt a strange shiver that had nothing to do with her underlying worries.

She was leaving. Not simply wandering into the forest in search of herbs, but leaving her village behind for the first time.

She’d pictured this moment so many times—longed for it even—and now it felt as if her dreams had been stolen from her by the weight of Lord Dreichel’s demands. By the fear of what she would find. This was not at all the sort of adventure she’d planned for herself, but then... was adventure ever as glorious as it seemed when you were safe behind the walls of home?

Aislin urged her mare forward, following the steep, rocky track that led away from the village. They traveled up the side of the valley to where the road crossed the ridge to the east, and as they crested that ridge, Aislin suddenly pulled her mount to a stop, staring out at a world she’d only imagined before today.

The sun had not yet broken over the horizon, but its approach tinted the landscape with the slightest hint of pink. Trees lay in an uneven blanket before her, punctuated by cliffs, ridges, and peaks, some draped in a shroud of ghostly mist. And somewhere hidden in the midst of all that wild, unclaimed land...

The Dredwall River.

The eastern border of Farhall was rough and mountainous, which should have kept invaders at bay. But just past that border lay a hidden world of mystery and danger—the dark, unexplored kingdom of the night elves. Those lands were separated from Farhall only by the churning depths of the Dredwall, a wild torrent that cut its way down a steep, rocky canyon and could not be crossed this far north without a bridge.

There were not many bridges over the river. Farhall maintained and guarded a few, but only because some of the shapeshifting night elves could fly, and they did not want to be without a way to answer should the enemy invade.

The bridge nearest to Brightvale was narrow and crumbling and too far north to be much of a threat, so it had never been guarded. Or so Brannic had told her. It was true that their village had never been raided, despite the troubles occurring along other stretches of the border, so perhaps he was correct.

It could not be far to the crossing, she told herself. If she followed this road to the east and took the northern way where the road divided, she should reach it in a single day's ride.

But gazing out across that untamed landscape in the brightening light of dawn, Aislin could only shiver at the prospect.

Even if her only task had been to find a human mage, she would have been utterly unprepared for what she now faced. She'd never even left the valley. She had no idea what was out there, or what dangers awaited her along the way.

The moment she crossed over the ridge, she entered an unknown world that might simply swallow her whole.

But this was the easy part, she reminded herself before panic could take hold in her chest. There was no reason for bandits to lurk on such a rarely used road, and few predators would care to tackle a traveler on horseback.

With those comforting thoughts, Aislin urged her mare forward into a teeth-rattling trot, hoping to put as many miles as possible between herself and the village before she lost her nerve.

CHAPTER 4



The mare was not fast, so it was worryingly near dark when the sound of wildly rushing water finally became a roar in Aislin's ears.

The moment she'd been dreading had arrived, and there was no turning back.

What had Brannic told her in those last few moments before she left?

Wyverns haunt the river on occasion, and there are storm cats in the forest. Be cautious, and keep to the road if you can. You'll be found by scouts soon enough, so your best chance lies in the appearance of innocence. Hide nothing.

Aislin clenched her jaw and dismounted, reluctant to lose her sole companion, but anxious to be moving on. After all, Lord Dreichel's patience would only last until the end of the season.

When her feet hit the ground, she winced as every muscle in her body informed her in chorus that she was unused to riding. Thankfully the mare remained sedate as ever as Aislin clung to her for a moment while her knees steadied. Once she'd untied her pack and secured her meager belongings, she removed the mare's bridle, stowed it in an empty saddlebag, and turned her mount loose.

"Go," she urged, waving her arms in the general direction of home. "Go home. Back to your warm stable, where you'll be safe. You really don't want to come with me."

It didn't require much urging. The animal merely tossed her head once before turning and trotting back the way they'd come. Before she was even out of sight, she'd broken into a canter that was considerably more energetic than any gait she'd been willing to maintain for Aislin. It was only a few moments before the sound of hoofbeats disappeared entirely beneath the roar of the river, churning in its rocky bed.

Aislin closed her eyes to the road and turned towards the sound, knowing she must not stop to think. Dwelling on the possibilities would only allow her fear more room to grow. She had to keep moving. Had to find her way forward. There was no going back until she gained what she sought, so with her jaw set and her eyes narrowed, she turned away from the false promise of home and safety and began to run.

One booted foot in front of the other, as quickly as she could traverse the winding path.

There, just ahead. A narrow stone bridge spanned the raging rapids below, but Aislin did not pause to gaze on its evident age nor at the torrent of water that divided the life she knew from everything that lay ahead. She simply plunged forward, eyes fixed on the path beneath her feet until the bridge was little more than an indistinct memory. The trees grew close together all the way to the canyon's edge, so after only a few minutes of running down the narrow track on the other side, the sound of water was once again only a murmur in her ears.

Only when it had disappeared altogether did Aislin slow to a walk and then stop in the middle of the road. Her breath sawed in and out of her chest as she bent over, placed her hands on her knees, and acknowledged what she'd done.

She'd crossed the border. She was no longer in Farhall, but in the mysterious kingdom of the night elves. She now walked where warriors feared to tread, in a land of magic and mystery that somehow held her only hope for the future.

Now all she had to do was find an actual night elf, convince them not to kill her, then beg them for help and answers they had no reason to give.

From far overhead, she heard the wild, lonely cry of a crested hawk, and knew that Alaric, too, was leaving her, his duty done.

And she was finally, truly, alone.

She'd been envisioning this moment all day. And she wanted to be brave—to stride forward with courage and face her errand with her head held high. But as night fell over that unfamiliar forest, Aislin's courage began to crack.

How had she ever imagined she could do this?

Oh, right. Because she had never been outside her own tiny village before. She'd had no concept of how dark and lonely and terrifying it was to be on her own, lost in a forest that seemed worlds away from the friendly hollows and hills of the woods near her home.

With each bend in the road, Aislin found herself flinching at the sounds of wind in the trees or small creatures as they scampered through the brush. She felt ridiculous jumping at nothing, and considered making camp, but the thought of moving off the path and into the dark woods gave her no comfort. It would be better to continue on while the moon was high and bright and gave her enough light to see the road in front of her.

Eventually, though, lack of sleep spilled over from her fogged mind to drag at her aching limbs, and she grew too exhausted to do much more than plod forward. The moon began to sink behind the trees, and that was when the first howl echoed eerily through the night.

Aislin told herself it was probably just an actual wolf and would leave her in peace, but then the rustling began in earnest—no indeterminate scurrying this time, but footfalls, soft and measured. Matching her progress, stride for stride.

She stopped, a sick tremor of fear seizing her lungs and making it difficult to breathe.

Her feet, too, seemed mired in mud, and her back ached with the anticipation of an attack. Where would it come from? The front? Or behind?

Why had she not made camp when she could? Then she would at least have a fire to anchor her defense. Now she had nothing but the open road, which left nowhere to hide.

Running would only make it worse, she knew, but if it had not been for her exhaustion and the leaden sense of dread weighing down her feet, she likely would have fled, relying only on the panicked instincts of a creature who knew it was prey.

If it was night elves who stalked her in the dark, would they take pity on her and listen to her questions? Or would they kill her outright for the audacity of trespassing on their lands?

Surely they would talk first. Surely...

It was difficult not to wish that her grandmother had been right—that she had some hidden magic that would come to life in a dark moment. But no sudden sparks of power leaped to her fingertips, no arcane knowledge blossomed in her mind. This was real—neither a story nor a dream—and she could not hide from it, no matter how frightening it might be.

She'd known she would have to confront a night elf eventually, so her best chance was to present herself openly and make her request honestly. To appear soft and weak, incapable of posing a threat.

Soft, weak, and delicious, her brain insisted, frantically urging her to flee as the wolf howled again, much closer. So close.

So very, very close...

And then she was no longer alone. One moment the moonlit path stretched away in front of her, empty but for rocks, tree roots, and the encroaching shadows of the forest. Now, the road simply seemed to end at the feet of an unnaturally large black wolf. It did not snarl or crouch—it merely stood there, blocking the way, regarding her silently out of glowing green eyes.

Wolf? Or night elf?

The latter, she decided, when the creature made no move to attack, but its stillness did not lessen her fear.

Should she pretend she hadn't seen it? Stop and shiver in her tracks and let it see her as prey? Or walk up, pat it on the head, and say 'nice doggy'?

She was still considering her next move when she realized that the wolf's true function had not been to block or to threaten, but to distract her. While she'd remained motionless, staring at its dark, dangerous bulk, new figures had slipped silently from the trees to surround her.

Human figures... but not.

A quick, shivery glance over her shoulder revealed one, two... five in all. Tall and silvery-pale, they blended into the moonlit landscape and shared the same athletic builds, long white hair, and elegantly pointed ears. Two appeared to be female, but they bore the same weapons and exuded the same simmering hostility as the males.

"What is it?" one of them asked, her words accented but clearly understandable. Disdain oozed from every clipped syllable.

"Short, dirty, tiny ears—I think it's a human," one of the males replied, his voice deep and mocking.

Aislin swallowed her retort, despite the anger that somehow managed to compete with her fear. She did not dare antagonize them, even if it was entirely unfair to call her *dirty*. She wasn't all that short, either, until compared to their own towering height.

One of the five strolled casually in a circle until he stood directly in front of her. Then he drew his sword and began to toss it into the air like a toy, catching the hilt each time without even looking.

"Do we kill it?" he asked, holding her gaze and letting a wicked smirk pull at the corner of his lips. "Or play with it?"

"How about both?" One of the others shrugged off his weapons harness and dropped it on the ground. Before Aislin could even blink, he disappeared, only to be replaced by...

Dear gods, it was a storm cat. She'd known the night elves were shapeshifters—the wolf was proof enough of that—but to see it happen so quickly, and right in front of her, stole the breath right out of her lungs.

The creature was nearly as tall as Aislin, and its paws were larger than her head. It could probably swallow her whole without even blinking, and the part of her mind that knew she was being hunted began to wail silently in terror. But she refused to give proof of her fear, remaining frozen in place as those enormous paws carried it forward, nearer and nearer, until its face was only inches from Aislin's own.

She still couldn't breathe. Despite her resolution to remain stalwart, her eyes were wide, and her heart hammered so quickly it sounded like a whole herd of galloping horses. And the creature knew, too, she realized, as the cat's mouth opened in a grin, revealing fangs longer than her fingers.

At the sight, Aislin took an involuntary step backward, as if her body had decided to run without her conscious permission. But she never had the chance. One enormous paw lashed out, quicker than the eye could follow, and batted her to the ground.

No claws, she realized, as she found herself tumbled in an undignified heap, breathless from the impact. It was, in fact, playing with her, and her anger suddenly rose up to eclipse her fear and loosen her tongue.

"I'm not a *toy*," she snapped, clambering to her feet and glaring at the feline monstrosity.

It opened its mouth in unmistakable laughter and padded closer, crouching low as if stalking prey. When it was only an arm's length away, it lifted one paw again, and Aislin...

Slapped it full in the face.

Right on the cheek.

She hadn't meant to, but she was so *angry*, and her hand seemed to move of its own accord.

The cat recoiled and snarled, a harsh, tearing sound that ripped through the silence of the forest. The other night elves

appeared startled, but one burst out laughing.

“The mouse has teeth,” he observed in between chuckles.

Aislin seized what little courage her anger afforded and reminded herself that night elves were not monsters. They were people, like her. Though that might be easier to believe if they weren't inhumanly gorgeous and looking at her as though perhaps *she* were not a person, but actually the mouse they'd named her.

“I don't intend to bite anyone,” she said. “I couldn't hurt any of you even if I wanted to.”

“If you are wise enough to know it, then why are you here, human?” One of the females stalked closer and bent down to peer at Aislin as if perplexed by her existence. “Humans fear us. No one wanders across the border by accident, nor do they drop by for a friendly chat. So what is it that you want?”

“I have a request,” Aislin said, feeling her resolve begin to shrink under the weight of what she must ask. Why would they bother to answer her? Why would they care about the troubles of people they had never met?

“Typical human,” one of the males sneered. “We are the enemy until we have something they want.”

“You are not my enemy.” Aislin began to shiver, probably a delayed response to exhaustion and shock. “And I had no choice but to come here. My family's lives are at stake.”

The night elves exchanged glances. One let out a quiet huff of laughter.

“At least it has the virtue of being original.”

“So, do we kill it here or take it back for someone else to decide?”

The female reached out and patted Aislin on the head. As if she were a child or a pet. “It's almost cute. Let's not kill it yet. Perhaps it will prove even more entertaining in the future.”

The storm cat let out a growl before it was once more a tall, imposing night elf warrior wearing a disgruntled

expression.

“When you’re all done being entertained, it’s mine,” he said, glaring at Aislin.

“Enough, Mal.” The female spoke again, with the clear assumption that she would be obeyed. Perhaps she was of higher rank. “Blindfold her and bind her hands. It is unlikely one of her stature and abilities would be trusted as a spy, but that is no reason to abandon caution. We will take her to the settlement, turn her over to the regent, then return to our patrol.”

Settlement? Regent? Aislin opened her mouth to explain her errand, but almost before she could draw a deep enough breath to speak, her eyes were being roughly bound in a dark cloth. Her mouth was covered next, then her hands were drawn together in front of her and tied at the wrist. Once she’d been rendered helpless, she was unceremoniously picked up by none-too-gentle hands and slung over someone’s shoulder.

Hopefully not the vengeful Mal. This was uncomfortable enough without fearing that he intended to return to cat form and eat her when the others weren’t looking.

But then the night elf carrying her began to run, and Aislin reconsidered everything she’d ever said about discomfort. A firmly-muscled shoulder dug into her midsection, bruising her ribs and making her very glad indeed that she’d eaten little that day. Before they’d gone much farther, her head began to ache, pounding furiously with each stride her captor took.

She could only pray that this settlement they spoke of was close and could be reached before she was completely shaken to pieces.



Sadly, Aislin did not lose consciousness and so felt every step of the run from the border, up until the moment she was casually dumped on the cold ground some time later. Her head hit a bit harder than was comfortable, her mouth was dry, and

she thought there might be blood on her face from where she'd accidentally bitten her tongue during the journey.

But she was alive, and from the sounds she could make out, she was inside a building of some sort—entirely surrounded by night elves. From every direction, she could hear the flowing syllables of an unfamiliar language spoken by many different voices.

Lifting her bound hands carefully, she used them to wriggle to a seated position, wincing as her sore ribs and stomach protested even the slightest movement. No doubt those would hurt even more by the morrow.

Amid the cacophony of voices, Aislin finally made out a set of footsteps, heavy and sure, coming nearer and nearer her position. As they approached, all other sounds died away, and she wondered whether the newcomer was someone important. Perhaps even this regent her captors spoke of?

“Uncover her face.” The voice was cool and male, and its command of human language was nearly perfect. “I wish to see what kind of spy the humans have sent us this time.”

The cloth covering Aislin's mouth was removed, and her blindfold suddenly wrenched off. She found herself instantly grateful that the night elves seemed partial to low light, as she could almost immediately make out her surroundings—not that the sight was encouraging.

She sat on the floor near the center of a round, open room with a high ceiling. It was built of dark wood and largely unadorned, but for the benches that lined the walls. At one point, the circle was broken by a single chair.

No one sat on either the benches or the chair, however. The night elves she'd heard conversing in low tones were standing about, arms folded, looking quite pointedly in her direction. And none of them appeared very happy. Particularly not the one closest to her, who wore a dark cloak and carried what Aislin judged to be a ceremonial staff of some sort.

“The humans are desperate indeed if they sent this creature here on purpose.”

A few chuckles could be heard in response to those dismissive words.

“No one sent me,” Aislin said. “I came of my own free will.” More or less, anyway.

“Then the humans have grown foolish, if they have not taught their children to fear the wilds of Dunmaren.”

Not afraid?

“Of course I’m afraid,” Aislin snapped. “But I didn’t really have a choice. I know very well that you’re stronger and faster and can take the shape of predators whenever you like! That you could eat me if you wish, and there’s nothing I can do about it. But my family’s lives depend on me, and this is the only place I could go for help.”

The night elf in front of her raised one eyebrow curiously. He appeared to be around her mother’s age, with only minimal lines around his eyes and mouth but the weight of years and experience in his gray gaze. His silver-white hair—a few shades lighter than his skin—was bound back in a tail, and his clothing appeared well made.

Aislin had never seen a night elf before, so she found herself staring in spite of her best intentions. This one seemed more statesman than warrior, at least judging by appearances. He wore more jewelry than she would have expected of a human male—cuffs around both wrists and a silver earring—and his clothing was more elaborate. The loose trousers tucked into his knee-high leather boots bore silver embroidery down the seams, and his flowing shirt was so bright a white it nearly seemed to glow. Over the shirt, he wore a sleeveless vest of tooled leather and a belt worked with silver.

“Are you the lord here?” she blurted out, and was rewarded with a frown.

“I am not,” he replied. “Though at present, I bear the Marlord’s responsibilities. What is it that you want, human? What could have driven you to abandon all sense and cross the border alone?”

Aislin suddenly found herself reluctant to speak of her errand, now that she was surrounded by night elves, quailing beneath the weight of their disapproving stares. She felt shabby and ridiculous, and if it were not for her family's plight, she likely would never have mustered the courage to open her mouth. But the memory of her grandmother's fading eyes drove her onward, along with the thought of her mother's willingness to trust her, and the tiny but tenacious hope of her father's return. If her courage deserted her now, they would lose their home, and she could not allow that. Could not let her father find his way home only to realize that she'd failed.

Struggling to her feet, Aislin stood in the center of that circle and tried not to feel small and silly. Tried not to compare herself to the night elves around her or wonder what they saw when they looked at her.

Short, dirty, tiny ears... No. She would not apologize for being human. Nor would she beg forgiveness for doing everything she could to survive or for protecting those she loved with her very life. Even if the night elves could not understand, those were nothing to be ashamed of.

"My village is not far across the river from here," she began, hoping she sounded confident. Earnest. Trustworthy. "We owe fealty to a lord who provides our homes and livelihoods, but"—she swallowed a renewed surge of shame—"my father is gone, and my family can no longer pay their rent."

Somehow she could not bring herself to admit the reason. Whether it was embarrassment or caution, she did not care to admit to her lack of magic in front of these night elves, who exuded power with every breath they took.

"Our landlord has demanded that we pay or be evicted from our home, but my grandmother is old and her mind is not strong, and my mother is ill. They would not survive being thrown out, and our village is poor and cannot take us in."

The imposing night elf before her shot her a disdainful and somewhat disbelieving stare. "And what manner of pity do

you expect from us, if your own people will not aid you? Why not go to other humans with your tale of woe?"

Aislin could cheerfully have disappeared into the floor, but she had to see this through.

"Because my lord has given me a task that will pay my debt if I can accomplish it."

This raised the night elf's eyebrows and provoked a strange undertone of muttering from around the room.

"You're saying your lord sent you here *on purpose*?"

Aislin nodded reluctantly. Then she removed the pouch from around her neck, pried it open clumsily, and allowed the stone to spill into one of her bound hands.

This was going to sound ridiculous. It was just a rock. But she'd come this far, and she would not give up now.

"This stone was purchased from your people by my lord's great-grandfather. It is said that he traded half his fortune to possess it, as it contained some sort of magic that ensured prosperity and protected our lands. That magic caused it to glow with power for the past eighty years, until..."

Had that been only yesterday? Was it morning or night? And why did it matter?

"Only a short time ago," Aislin continued, "the magic died. My lord now fears for the future and has tasked me with finding a way to renew the enchantment."

The silence that fell was stunned and absolute.

"Allow me to see if I understand you," the cloaked one said, his face studiously blank. "You came here, risking your own life and limb, because your liege lord wanted his *magic rock back*?"

His tone could only be called derisive, but Aislin nodded, her hands clenching around the stone until her knuckles turned white.

Laughter suddenly surrounded her, loud and prolonged, and when it finally died, the cloaked one addressed her once

again. “Supposing we were to agree to help you with this absurd quest. How, exactly, were you planning to compensate us for our aid?”

Aislin looked him full in the eye. “I had no way of knowing what would be required. I could only ask. And that is what I am here to do—ask of you what you would demand in order to restore this stone to what it once was. You can see that I have no money. No way to pay except...” She held out her bound hands in front of her. “These. I have my own two hands, a strong back, and a willing heart. Ask of me what you will, and I will attempt it, to the very limits of my strength and abilities.”

She expected more laughter, but it was silence that greeted her pronouncement. The night elf in front of her wore a frown, as if he were perplexed by her words.

“Why?” was his eventual question. He folded his arms and regarded her from his superior height with a curious tilt to his head. “Why you? I know little of humans, but enough to be aware that you would hardly be considered a warrior among them. Why would your lord entrust such a task to you?”

What did she have to lose by telling the truth?

“Because my liege was not willing to risk anyone else,” she said bluntly. “I have no skills that matter, and no magic that can aid him in his ambitions. As he said before I departed—if I die, then he has lost nothing.” It hurt to admit, but she needed them to know the limits of what they might ask of her. If it required magic, she would have no hope at all.

And yet, the tall night elf before her still did not laugh—instead, his eyes narrowed as if in deep consideration.

“And you say you are willing to do anything?” Rather than give her hope, his words chilled her, accompanied as they were by a look of... Well, she might have called it desperation.

What could make a night elf—with all his power and magic and ability to shapeshift—so desperate as to consider bargaining with a human?

“I am,” she said, despite her misgivings. Her path had not changed just because it may have acquired a few unexpected turns. This was still the only way. She could not go home until she succeeded.

The night elf nodded slowly, then more firmly, as if he’d come to a decision.

“Then, human, I do have a task for you.”

Aislin froze, half in terror, half in hope. “You do?”

The other night elves around her seemed as confused as she felt—all of them watching the exchange with tense fascination.

“Our Marlord—the ruler of this territory—lies ill and draws nearer to death with every sunset.”

So this must be the regent the other night elves spoke of.

“There is but one thing that may save him, and we have been unable to procure it. After the first two lives were lost in the attempt, our lord demanded that we leave him to die rather than sacrifice any more.”

They wanted her to perform a task that had killed their own? What chance could she possibly have?

“What is it you need?” Somehow, her voice remained steady.

“Wild arantha venom.” At this heavy pronouncement, half the room let out a gasp.

“Er, what?” Apparently, she should be terrified, but she had no idea of what. Venom did sound bad, but what was an arantha?

“There is a nest beneath the mountains, only two nights’ journey from here. If you can go, procure the venom, and return it to us before the Marlord breathes his last, we will grant you a single request.”

They did not want money. Relief pierced her suddenly—she had not dared to dream that she could meet their demands so easily. Even if Sandric failed in his promise, she knew

Brannic would not allow her family to starve. And if she could accomplish this task quickly, she would not need to worry about the growing debt between them. Instead, she could focus on moving forward and accepting this opportunity she'd been offered.

“And do I need magic in order to accomplish this task?” she asked warily, almost unwilling to believe it could be so straightforward. “As I said before, I have none.”

The night elf shook his head. “Magic would do little to aid you in this case.”

“Then I agree,” she said firmly, squaring her shoulders and holding out her hands. “If you will remove these bindings, I will be on my way.”

The night elf blinked at her incredulously. “On your way? I have not yet told you where it is. You have no gear. No weapons.”

Aislin shrugged. “You must want me to succeed, or you would never have asked me to do it in the first place. So I assume you will provide what is needed for me to make the attempt.”

He shook his head. “Are all humans so foolhardy as you?”

“From where I stand, foolhardiness is just another word for desperation.” She could not let him intimidate her now. “Either I accept the task that you've offered me, or I accept that my family will die. Who is the fool, the one who gives up when the road looks impossible, or the one who walks on, hoping for a miracle?”

The night elf eyed her for another moment before beckoning one of his guards.

“The human is right,” he said, an odd expression pulling at his lips. “We ought to give her the best possible chance at success.” He turned to look at the guard. “She should have a guide.”

The guard bowed his head briefly.

“Respectfully, Lord Vanadar, we cannot spare anyone at this time. And the Marlord himself...”

The older night elf interrupted with an icy glare. “Consider yourself fortunate that I am *not* the Marlord. Anyone less forgiving than I would have flayed you for sharing his name with an outsider without permission. Bring the prisoner.”

The guard’s face went momentarily slack. “The... the prisoner? Are you certain? The risk is...”

“Bring him.”

The guard retreated, just as a new voice interjected from behind Aislin.

“You hazard a great deal, Vanadar.” It was the female night elf who had captured her. “And I venture you do so against the Marlord’s wishes.”

The one named Vanadar faced the speaker without flinching. “Even the human is willing to risk death to save her family. Would you have me do less rather than more?”

“It is not merely *risk*, Vanadar. It is madness!” This from another male, perhaps the oldest in the room.

“It is only madness if it fails,” Vanadar replied wryly. “And no one has offered a better solution.”

Crossing the short distance between himself and Aislin, he drew a wickedly curved dagger, grasped her wrists, and sliced through the cloth that bound them.

It was a quick, easy motion that nonetheless slipped at the last moment. Her bonds fell away, but the dagger’s razor edge turned sideways and sliced deeply into the base of Vanadar’s thumb.

He jerked, eyes wide, and dropped the dagger, pressing his other hand to the wound as blood welled up, shockingly red against the silver-gray of his skin.

“Nerves, Vanadar?” The female night elf strode forward and pressed a cloth into his hands. “I have not seen you so clumsy with a blade since we were children.”

Odd. It seemed this Vanadar was as apprehensive as Aislin. But what cause could such a powerful, respected night elf have for fear?

Aislin waited with growing trepidation as the blood dripped, and the room remained frozen. The silent tension told her something was coming, but what, or... who?

When the doors crashed open, she knew.

The guard had returned, but not alone—behind him was a man in chains, with a hood covering his head.

He was no taller than the other night elves and was clearly meant to be helpless, but his presence somehow filled up every bit of space and stole the very breath from Aislin's chest.

Tension sparked from person to person, along with a sense of anticipation so thick Aislin could nearly taste it in the air.

Who *was* this? And what was he doing here?

“Remove the hood,” Vanadar ordered through clenched teeth, and the guard, visibly reluctant, complied, whipping it off and taking a long step back.

Aislin wasn't exactly sure what she'd expected. Something monstrous, perhaps—some visible reason for the reactions of those around her.

But the removal of the hood revealed only another night elf.

Well, not *only*.

Because the longer she stared at him, the more clear it became that he was far from *only* anything.

White hair, silver skin, pointed ears—in those respects, his kinship with the other night elves was evident. But his eyes... Those were burnished amber, and they sparked with a fury that nearly drove Aislin back a step just from being in the same room.

He was not merely a predator—he was a *presence*, and even Aislin could feel the power that raged within him, somehow contained by that seemingly ordinary form.

No, not ordinary there, either. Even though the prisoner's white hair hung lank and dirty and his clothing neither fit nor flattered, the leashed power in his physical form was clearly on display. A torn shirt outlined broad, muscular shoulders and offered a glimpse of the perfectly molded chest and stomach beneath. His waist and hips were narrow, but the trousers that ended just below the knee revealed powerful legs and bare feet that somehow afforded him *more* dignity rather than less.

And that face...

Aislin swallowed and realized her throat had gone utterly dry. The hair that hung across his forehead threw part of his face into shadow, but she caught a brief glimpse of full lips, a straight nose, and a sharply cut jawline.

He was just *standing* there, and yet she was still terrified.

"Thank you for coming." Vanadar finally broke the silence, sounding at once bitter and resigned. "Would you care to listen to my proposal?"

Those amber eyes raked across the room, pausing for a moment on Aislin. She somehow resisted the urge to hide.

"Unless you stop my ears, I don't perceive that I have a choice."

His voice was deep and hoarse, as though it had gone unused for some time. How long had he been a prisoner?

"I have decided to grant you the opportunity to win what you most desire," Vanadar said coolly.

"Last I heard, you lack the power to grant it, *regent*." Despite his chains, the prisoner's voice was mocking.

"Perhaps you are not quite as well informed as you think you are."

The prisoner's head cocked, and dark amusement creased his lips. "What's changed?"

"Nothing has changed," Vanadar returned flatly. "I have only discovered a potential means of expiation for your crimes, should you find yourself interested."

The amber eyes darkened for a moment before a rusty chuckle rumbled from the prisoner's chest. "The Marlord is dying, isn't he? Have you only now realized what you risk should a puling coward inherit this territory?"

"Do you wish to hear my offer or not?" Vanadar snapped.

"Tell me."

"The Marlord's survival is indeed in question," the regent admitted. "The sole remaining remedy we have not tried contains one final ingredient that eludes us. You will go with a companion and, between the two of you, obtain this ingredient. Should you be successful, and should the Marlord live, I will convince him to grant you what you seek."

The prisoner smiled again, a bitter, twisted expression. "You'd never send me if you could get it for yourselves, but..." He shrugged as much as his bonds allowed. "Better to die out there than rot in here. Why a companion? I travel alone."

Aislin's very breath froze in her lungs.

"Another petitioner," Vanadar said offhandedly, pointedly avoiding Aislin's gaze. "Perhaps if one fails, the other may complete the task."

"Who is this illustrious *petitioner*"—the prisoner infused the word with unmistakable mockery—"and what are we to obtain?"

Vanadar indicated Aislin with a jerk of his head.

"This human."

For the first time, shock crossed the prisoner's face.

"And you must bring back wild arantha venom."

The prisoner burst out laughing.

CHAPTER 5



*H*e was going to say yes.

Vanadar had known what his answer would be from the moment he spun that ridiculous offer—known his prisoner would have no choice. Not when that prize was dangled in front of him like raw meat before a starving wolf.

Talyn was dead the moment he took the bait. There was no doubt in his mind, but what else could he do?

Lani was gone. Paendreth had killed her, as surely as if he'd plunged the blade into her heart with his own hands, and yet the bastard lived—secure behind his father's name, his guards, and his reputation.

Tal alone could settle that debt. But there was no one who would recognize his right to do so. To win that chance, he would have to brave a wild arantha nest, subdue one of their cunning and deadly queens, and harvest her venom.

Perhaps with a small army of night elves, the task would be manageable.

He had a single human.

One soft, tiny, unarmed human, who seemed likely to either scream or faint at any moment. At least she would be easy to get rid of. In the space of a breath, he could disappear into the forests of Dunmaren, and she would never find him again.

She would never find her way out, either, but that was not his concern. Whatever quest had brought her here was

assuredly even more foolish than his own and would lead her to a similar end.

So why would Vanadar send either of them?

“The Marlord forbade you to go after it yourselves, didn’t he?”

The regent stubbornly refused to answer, but his silence was answer enough.

Tal did not bother to hide the sneer that tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I’m a better chance than no chance at all, but if I die, you’ll only breathe a sigh of relief.”

He heard a quick indrawn breath from the human but ignored it. If she was so easily shocked, this lesson could not come too soon.

“I answer to my lord,” Vanadar said finally, coldly. “Not to you. I must balance the demands of duty, loyalty, and honor, though I do not expect you to understand what any of those entail, *wilding*.”

He meant the term to sting. And perhaps for those who had home, community, and traditions to lose, it might have. But Tal had never had those, so why should their absence cause him pain?

“Return my property,” he said harshly. “And I will get you your venom.”

Vanadar regarded him for a few moments, searching his face as if looking for signs of treachery or deceit. He must have been satisfied, because he gestured for the guards to remove the chains.

“We will provide supplies and a vial for the venom.” The regent sounded as if he were granting some tremendous boon. “And perhaps a weapon for the human?”

Putting sharpened steel in the hands of the human seemed like a quick way to be rid of her, if Tal were any judge. But what did he care? He would be leaving her behind soon enough.

“Do as you will,” he replied, his eyes fastened on the hands that even now unlocked his chains.

Freedom. It was almost his. And once he was released, if he were truly as honorless as they implied, he could choose to forget what he’d promised, forget what he owed Lani, forget everything but laying waste to this convocation hall in payment for their cruelty.

Cruelty... or blind, willful ignorance. Much of the time, those seemed to amount to the same thing.

Finally—*finally*—the chains fell to the floor, and for the first few moments, Tal simply rubbed his wrists, noting the scars left by the manacles. Reminders, never to trust again.

Then he brought his hands up to his face, staring at his palms, at the lines of grime and filth and the cracked and broken nails. His fists clenched almost without thought, and the three night elves closest to him took a step back.

Tal smiled. “What are you waiting for?” he said in a soft, menacing tone. “My gear, and quickly.”

“We were unable to catch your *mount*,” Vanadar said, with an expression of distaste. “But I’m sure your own feet will serve you just as well, considering that the human is... similarly afflicted.”

Now that the chains were gone, Tal found that such barbs seemed too small even to respond to. He was nearly free. The forest beckoned. He could ignore them for as long as it took.

From nearby, he caught brief snatches of a mocking conversation in elvish, calculating the odds of his success and deriding the pathetically weak figure of the human female. They might call him a wilding—devoid of loyalty, honor, and tradition—but at least he would never dream of such crass rudeness as insulting a guest in a language she could not understand. All night elves were fluent in the language of Abreian humans, so it wasn’t as if they had any excuse beyond their own cowardice.

With nothing better to do as he waited, Tal allowed his gaze to rest on the human for a moment. What could have

driven her to come alone into the territory of a deadly and hostile people on the verge of war with her own?

He might have understood if she were a merchant or a mercenary. But her patched and tattered rags and lack of visible weaponry suggested she had come for some other purpose. Or perhaps it was the look in her eye—the look of one in whom desperation has finally outweighed fear. Something beyond these borders terrified her more than whatever might lurk in the forests of Dunmaren.

The thought curled his lip in a sudden surge of contempt. For all that they walked on two legs and laid claim to civilization, humans could be far more beastly than any forest creature. Someone had sent this soft and helpless child into a land of monsters...

Her gaze suddenly snapped to his and froze there, her thoughts written on her face as clearly as if penned in ink.

She knew him for the predator he was. Her entire body seemed poised for flight, though fear rooted her feet to the ground. But in her wide blue eyes, he read only the strength of her determination. Her pale skin—the color of an uncooked trout—was lightly flushed across her cheekbones, which in humans, indicated either embarrassment or exertion. But those cheeks were slightly sunken, and her form was slight, as if food were scarce wherever she came from...

But no. He did not care. Whatever had befallen the human was her own affair.

He could at least appreciate that she did not cower—she had that much pride, even if the state of her clothing clearly displayed her poverty. Her tremulous courage, along with that long thick braid of hair falling over her shoulder... It reminded him of Lani, even if the human's hair was black instead of white.

The thought clenched around his heart, and Tal shoved it away, mentally rebuilding the icy walls that kept both rage and grief at bay. He would not think of his sister—not if he wanted to leave this place without losing control of his anger. There

was now a chance to avenge her, and he intended to make the most of it.

Some nameless lackey entered the hall, arms full of a familiar jumble of items, and dropped the entire lot at Tal's feet.

Despite their disdain, it appeared they had not thrown anything away. His elf-woven tunic, boots, traveling kit, and spelled steel blades—all of it was there. And most of it was far cleaner than he was.

But he would bathe later, Tal decided, hiding a wince as he donned the tunic over his filthy shirt. For now, he wanted nothing more than to be gone from this accursed place.

Gathering up the last of his gear, along with the pack he surmised held the promised supplies, Tal shot Vanadar one last contemptuous glance.

“Until I return, Regent. Perhaps you should grant Paendreth a warning. When my blade is at his throat, I would not have him whining that he is unprepared to die.”

Tal allowed his gaze to rake the hall, taking pleasure in every flinch, every eye that widened in momentary panic.

Then he turned on his heel and strode out. The night and the forest were calling. Almost as if they truly had a voice...

“...wait!”

No, that strident tone was actually the human. Chasing after him, like a yapping puppy after its mother.

Tal quickened his stride. In the space of only a few minutes, he would reach the outskirts of the settlement, and then he could simply outrun her. Her kind had no place in the night forests of Dunmaren. Even had the last of his patience not been burned to ash during the long months of his captivity, he refused to waste his time protecting yet another fragile creature that would only die the moment his back was turned. He'd spent years protecting Lani from the dangers of the world, and for what? If he'd allowed her to protect herself, perhaps her death would not now lie at his door.

Bursting through the doors of the convocation hall and into the night, he could have fallen to his knees and wept for the sweetness of it. Moonlight on his face, the breeze in his hair...

His lank, disgusting hair, filled with the dirt and smells of the prison.

He was not yet free, Tal reminded himself grimly. He was still bound, this time to a deadly task that had likely already claimed too many lives—one that might yet claim his own life in the end.

Wild aranthas were as lethal as their domesticated counterparts were harmless. They built their nests wherever darkness and food were plentiful, which meant caves, cliffs, or the oldest, thickest parts of the forest. A queen, however, would need space for a large colony, hidden from predators, which meant...

The Darkspring Caves. Lying east and north, with multiple entrances and a vast maze of tunnels, the caves had long represented both a haven and a source of danger. Many night elves had been lost to its depths over the centuries, while many others had made it their home, particularly when humans had first come to Abreia.

But to make the journey to the caves, Tal would first have to hope that Cuan had not abandoned him. Vanadar had said they were unable to catch him, which meant they'd tried. Hopefully, he was still out here. Still waiting.

Slinging the pack and traveling kit over his shoulders, Tal glanced up at the moon and thought back to the rhythms of life in the Marlord's prison. It had been only a few hours since the midnight meal, so there should be three to four hours of darkness remaining. Enough to put a significant distance between himself and the settlement. When he reached deep enough woods, he could try calling for Cuan, then sleep for the day and resume his journey.

As he broke into a run, he heard a cry of "Stop!" from behind him but did not slacken his pace. The human could thank him later. She had no idea what she faced, so leaving her

behind now was probably the kindest thing he could do for her.

But before he'd taken too many strides, he knew the journey would not be as simple as he'd hoped. Despite the effort he'd dedicated to maintaining his fitness, there was only so much he could do in the narrow confines of a prison cell. After only an hour of steady running, Tal was forced to drop to a walk, while sweat drenched his chest and his breath came faster than it should.

For the moment, he would simply have to keep to the road to make better time, and ignore the siren call of the ravenleaf trees. The darkness beneath their branches beckoned, begging him to lose himself in the shadows. Seducing him with visions of a quiet pool where he could wash away the stench of his captivity.

But for now, he simply breathed the night air and let the tension seep from his bones and sinew. Let himself revel in the dim glow of the emberwood trees that lit from within as he passed.

There were no emberwoods in Sion Dairach. No beds of shimmering mushrooms, no sinuous bloodwing vines. And while that land had given him all that he needed to survive to adulthood, it would never be home. Only his grandmother had ever accepted him completely—his grandmother, and Cuan...

A far-off howl echoed through the night, and Tal stiffened as he stopped to listen.

Could it be?

Throwing his head back, he cried out in kind, letting his longing and pain echo into the darkness. If only he could join that chorus in truth. If only that part of his ancestral magic had not been denied him.

But then, he would never have met Cuan, and his life would be poorer for the lack.

Deliberately slowing his pace, Tal waited and hoped. Imagined Cuan's long, liquid stride eating up the miles between them.

In truth, his friend might not be in Dunmaren at all. When Tal did not return, he may have given up and returned to Sion Dairach, to his own kind and his own homeland. Tal would not blame him.

He walked on as the moon sank, hope growing gradually dimmer until he paused for a moment to listen to the forest.

It had gone suspiciously silent. No nightbirds, no quiet rustling from opalescent glowmice or the nearly invisible fisher cats—only an ominous, lurking presence not far off the road ahead. It could be a night elf scout in hunting form, or a storm cat hoping for a quick meal.

But it wasn't.

With barely a sound to betray his passage, an impossibly large wolf burst out of the brush only a few strides away. Before Tal could dodge to the side, he was knocked violently to the ground. A moment later, he found himself staring up into huge yellow eyes, cringing away as drool trailed from a mouth full of fangs that could have ripped his head off without a second thought.

Any other night elf might have fainted in terror. Even their wolf hunting forms were nowhere near that large.

But Tal had no time for anything but a sigh of relief before his face was being quite thoroughly washed by a slobbering pink tongue that stank of fish.

“Cuan!”

The dreadwolf whined low and deep in his throat as he allowed Tal to scramble to his feet and wrap both arms around his neck in a fierce embrace. Gods, how he'd missed this. Burying his face in thick, black fur, Tal took a moment to simply lean on Cuan's horse-sized bulk and feel... joy. Relief. And a renewed sense of determination.

Suddenly, he felt as if he might just have a chance. Not much of one, but better than none at all. Riding would be difficult with no harness, but he could manage.

Whining again, Cuan nudged him with his cold nose and cocked his head in the direction of the settlement.

Dreadwolves were far more intelligent than horses and had been used as mounts by the elves of Sion Dairach for centuries. They were fierce warriors in their own right and made deeply loyal companions for those who took the time to befriend them.

So when Cuan tried to warn him of something, Tal knew better than to ignore it.

“What is it?” he murmured.

He did not expect the wolf to simply twitch his ears and race off down the trail, retracing Tal’s steps and disappearing before he could be recalled.

Whatever it was, the wolf would deal with it. And he would return. He’d waited this long for Tal to be freed, and that sort of loyalty could be neither bought nor broken. If only those of Tal’s own kind had the same steadfastness of heart...

Turning back towards the mountains, Tal went on his way, secure in the knowledge that he was no longer alone and would sleep both soundly and safe when daybreak came.

On the morrow, he could turn his attention to the task ahead and determine how he might somehow survive to claim his vengeance.

CHAPTER 6



Aislin hadn't really even stopped to think. When the terrifying prisoner strode out of the hall, Vanadar raised one eyebrow at her as if to say, "This is your only chance," and she'd simply run after him.

No pack, no preparation—she'd just run, with none of her possessions but her worn and threadbare cloak. Because if she lost her "guide," she faced this task on her own, and the night elves' reactions told her it was likely to be a fool's errand. Whatever an arantha might be, it terrified an entire crowd of deadly, shapeshifting warriors, which meant Aislin had no hope at all.

No hope unless she could catch up to the man who'd glared at her as if personally infuriated by her existence. He was clearly angry, dangerous, filthy, and somehow still undeniably compelling. As frightened as she'd been, she could barely stop staring, caught by the aura of power and menace he radiated even while bound. Whoever he was, he scared the other night elves spitless, which was... a good thing? Maybe. If she could catch him. If she could convince him to work *with* her.

So she ran, because just as before, it was the only path she could see to take. And even if that path seemed to lead ever deeper into danger, what did that matter? She could not go back to Lord Dreichel empty-handed. His threats made it perfectly clear that she may as well die here as face him with nothing but excuses.

But before she could even reach the edge of the night elves' village, the former prisoner had disappeared into the night. All Aislin knew for sure was the road he'd taken, so she followed it. Past the last of the gray, wooden houses that seemed to spring out of the ground itself and flow naturally beneath the eaves of the forest. Past the last of the paths that led away from the main road, their depths illuminated only by dancing golden sparks and beds of glowing purple lichen.

It was beautiful and magical, and at any other time, she would have stopped to gawk at the wonder of it all, but now she dared not stop. She ran as she had never run before, knowing she had no chance to keep up with the long, tireless stride of her night elf quarry, yet given no choice but to do her best.

Her skirts were heavy, and her boots unsuited for running, but still she kept on as the road curved with the land, dipping into hollows and climbing over a low ridge before plunging into a deeper valley. Eventually, she was forced to stop, stumbling with weariness and gasping for breath, but even then, she only paused long enough to draw fresh air into her lungs. The road kept going, and so would she.

One step, and then another, until her knees gave way, and she tripped, falling headlong and catching herself with her hands on the rough ground. The impact scraped her palms and drew a cry of pain, but she shut her eyes and recalled her mother's hopeless gaze. Lord Dreichel's merciless stare. The sneer on the face of that man who'd looked her up and down as if suggesting she find some other way to pay her debts.

Against all odds, the night elves had offered her a path that did not involve money, so she must go on. Must follow this road as long as she could.

Aislin pushed to her feet, opened her eyes... and froze.

Inches from her face, a mouthful of glistening fangs leered in a silent snarl. Drool dripped down black fur to land on the dusty road, while golden eyes the size of apples glared down at her with intent to rend and rip and tear.

This road, it seemed, was about to come to an end—with her in the belly of a wolf the size of a dray horse.

The creature was far larger than the shapeshifting night elves. Never in all her nightmares could she have conjured such a terrifying beast, and her mind insisted furiously that she run while her body stayed stubbornly rooted to the spot.

She had no weapon. Even words failed her. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, and her breath froze as she waited for those teeth to pierce her skin, tear her flesh and break her bones...

But instead of teeth, an enormous, ice-cold nose ruffled her hair, sniffing as if in curiosity. One gargantuan paw lifted and tapped her on the shoulder, sending her rolling across the ground like a child's toy.

Oh gods, it was playing with her before it ate her. Aislin closed her eyes again, breathed a few silent words of apology to her family, and then screamed involuntarily as she felt hot breath on the back of her neck.

Teeth the length of her hand pricked her skin, released her, then fastened resolutely on the stout leather jerkin beneath her cloak. She shrieked again when her body left the ground, rose effortlessly into the air, and began to move.

The wolf was *carrying her*. Like a parent with a wayward pup, it trotted off down the trail with Aislin in its jaws...

Sweet mother of all Abreia, was it taking her home for its pups to feed on?!?

Aislin began to struggle, but the wolf shook its head briefly as if to say, "Stop that!"

So she stopped. Hung there limply and just concentrated on breathing. She was still breathing. There had been no rending or tearing yet, which meant the road had not ended. She was alive. She might still find a way out of this.

Aislin waited and watched, but the passing of the road beneath her made her dizzy, so she closed her eyes and wondered—what kind of wolf followed the road? What kind of wolf did not kill its prey but captured it alive instead?

Even the most terrifying legends about night elves had included nothing like this creature. She'd thought the wolf she'd seen before was large, but this one made it seem almost laughably small. Was it a creation of magic? Something unique unto itself? Or a monster even night elves feared, much like the prisoner she sought?

If she lived, she was going to have so many bruises. First from being slung over a shoulder, and now this. Was this why Brannic sometimes hesitated to speak of his adventures? Because they were cold and painful and terrifying, and he wanted only to remember that he was now warm and safe in his inn?

Suddenly the wolf began to whine and broke into a run. Wherever they were going, they were almost there, and Aislin opened her eyes just as the wolf slid to a halt and dropped her right into the middle of the road.

Her cheek struck the path, drawing an involuntary whimper, but the pain did not stop her from rolling away as quickly as her icy limbs would allow. She came to a crouch and prepared to run, fight, or whatever the situation demanded.

The wolf, however, looked neither vicious nor hungry. It merely sat on its haunches, grinning and panting like a dog that had fetched a stick.

And standing beside it, wearing a disbelieving scowl, was the very night elf she'd been chasing.

So the wolf was... a pet? He'd brought her exactly where she needed to be and seemed deeply proud of himself.

His master, however, seemed very much less than pleased. And he was no less terrifying out here in the lonely wilds, with his hair half bound, a sword on his back, and the moon glinting off those sharply defined cheekbones.

"This again!" he growled, turning to the beast with his hands on his hips. "Cuan, why did you bring this here? We can't even eat it."

Aislin nearly collapsed in relief. It seemed she was not to be dinner after all.

“You can’t keep it,” the night elf told the wolf through clenched teeth. “And I certainly don’t want it, so you can put it back where you found it.”

The wolf seemed to be laughing at him.

The night elf let out a growl of wordless frustration, threw a glare at Aislin, and strode off into the forest.

“Wait!” She jerked to her feet, forgetting how cold she was, and promptly fell over. “Please don’t run away! I just need to talk to you.”

There was no reply, so she jumped up again and followed him into the trees.

“I’m not asking you for anything you don’t already intend to do,” she called after him. “But they said *I* had to get the venom to keep my end of our bargain. Just let me do this *with* you.”

Silence.

“My name is Aislin,” she said into the darkness beneath the forest canopy. “What did they say yours was? Wilding?”

Suddenly he was there, looming in front of her with empty hands, but radiating pain and loathing as he glared down out of luminous amber eyes.

“*Never* call me that, human,” he snarled furiously.

If he were planning to kill her, he would have simply let the wolf eat her. At least, that’s what Aislin told herself as she met his fiery gaze and refused to look away. “Why not?”

But he was walking away again.

She was getting very tired of chasing him. For one thing, her heart was about to stop on account of the sheer overwhelming terror she’d already experienced that night. For another, this situation was more than a little embarrassing.

But she’d be hanged before she gave up.

A sudden burst of frustration lent her speed, and she raced around him to plant herself firmly in his way. “Why won’t you just *stop*?”

Instead of sweeping her out of his path, the night elf paused for a moment. His chin dropped, and his fingers flexed before he finally answered.

“Tell me, human. How anxious are you to die?”

A question or a threat? Aislin chose to believe it was the former.

“I don’t want to die today,” she said firmly. “There are things I must do. A home I must return to.”

“Then why”—his voice was soft and menacing—“are you *here*? Did the other humans not tell you what horrors lurk in the forests of Dunmaren?”

“I knew the dangers,” she replied, unable to completely hide the tremor in her words. “But I have a family to save, and this is what I was commanded to do.”

She’d startled him. His amber eyes did not glow less, but his fury seemed to abate a fraction.

“Someone wants you dead,” he said flatly.

“They consider me expendable,” she corrected, swallowing that pain and forging ahead before he could disappear into the forest again. “And I agreed to the price before I knew what it would entail.”

“And once you knew?” Scorn now accompanied his fury. “You tripped blithely onward towards your own death, like the witless human sheep that you are?”

“My family will *die* if I fail!” Aislin all but shouted the words, anger eclipsing her fear. “I love them, and they will die. Is that motivation enough for you?”

The night elf’s expression did not change. As if human suffering was not a thing to care about one way or another.

“I don’t care if you understand,” she continued, “but I didn’t have a choice. Should I have hidden in my house and pretended that nothing bad would happen as long as I pulled the covers over my head? Should I have waited until my lord evicted us and threw my grandmother out into the cold without mercy?”

She hadn't meant to keep going, but the words kept pouring out. "There is no one else to fight for us! Only me. And I am no warrior. I have no skills, no money, and no magic. All I have to give is my own life, so why should I not risk that if it will save them? Why should I not..."

Her mouth slammed shut, horror sealing her lips. She'd almost revealed her deepest fear. Almost admitted that her death might be what Lord Dreichel was hoping for. That he'd actively considered whether her mother's magic would return if Aislin were gone.

At least the night elf now seemed to be considering her with something besides anger. More like calculation, or possibly confusion, but either was an improvement.

"What exactly do they expect you to do for them? How are you meant to save them by coming *here*?" He infused the word with mockery, but Aislin ignored it.

"Our liege lord has tasked me with acquiring something from the night elves. If I succeed, he will forgive my family's debt and allow us to stay in our home. If not..." She lifted her eyes to meet his gaze defiantly. "We will be thrown out. No one in my village can afford to risk defying our lord by taking us in. We would have nowhere to go, and my mother and grandmother are not strong enough for travel."

One eyebrow rose, and a sneer curled the corner of the night elf's mouth. "Then you'd best start making other plans, human. Whatever this lord of yours wants from the night elves of Dunmaren, you've no chance of convincing them to part with it."

Aislin folded her arms stubbornly across her chest. "Well, you're wrong, because I already bargained with Vanadar. He said he would give me what I asked for if I can acquire this... arantha venom."

The night elf's whole body seemed to grow still as he regarded her, his full attention now focused on her face.

"And what exactly did you ask for?" he demanded.

She swallowed. “My lord owns something called the Shield of Evernight, but it broke, and... it’s complicated.” She wasn’t sure if she should tell him. What if the stone was valuable? What if he tried to steal it and leave her behind?

“And Vanadar made this promise in front of witnesses?”

“Yes.”

The night elf let out a low, bitter laugh before his expression hardened once more. “Go home, human,” he said flatly. “There is nothing for you here but death.”

Her chin lifted. “No.”

“If Cuan does not eat you, eventually, something else will.”

Aislin shook her head. “Maybe it doesn’t matter to you. Maybe it looks hopeless. But I am all my family has, and this is the only road open to me, so I will not stop, I will not give up, and I will not go home.”

“Then you’re a fool.”

“Perhaps I am,” she snapped. “But am I any less a fool than you?”

His harsh, glowing gaze snapped up to meet hers.

“They don’t think you’re going to survive this either,” she reminded him fiercely. “Whatever we’ve been sent to do, it’s meant to be all but impossible, even for...” Even for you, she wanted to say. Even for someone who appeared to have spent his whole life preparing to personify Death. “So why are *you* here? Because it sounded to me like this is about revenge, and at the moment, I can’t think of a stupider reason to die.”

She didn’t even see him move.

But suddenly, he was mere inches away, one hand curled around her upper arm while the other clenched into a trembling fist. Fury and anguish seemed to emanate from his entire body, and yet, his grip caused no pain, even to her already bruised arm.

“I owe you *nothing*, human.” He bit out the words as if barely holding back the full weight of his rage. “Not my aid, not my cooperation, and most certainly not answers.”

It took a moment to find her voice with him glaring down at her like that, while the power and menace of his presence pressed into her like the heat of a forge fire. “I don’t really need your answers,” she said, swallowing the urge to run once more. “But I do need your help. And I won’t stop trying until I’m dead, so either kill me now or be prepared to look over your shoulder forever.”

In reality, it would be mere hours. She had no water, no food, and was near to breaking from pain and exhaustion. It was mostly pride holding her up at this point, but he didn’t need to know that.

The night elf released her as if she burned him, and his hand fell to his side. When he finally spoke, his anger was gone, along with all other inflection or feeling. “I’ve had more than enough of soft, helpless creatures dying in front of me,” he said coldly. “So I won’t be goaded, by you or by Vanadar. And I won’t need to kill you. The forests of Dunmaren will do that long before you ever come near me again.”

And then he was just... gone.

Aislin turned to call after him, but it was as if her feet refused to obey her. That final plea had depleted the last of her resources, and her body had no more to give.

Her lips parted, but there was not enough air in her lungs. The shadows of the forest deepened, then went altogether dark as she folded silently to the ground, wondering whether anyone would ever find her body.

CHAPTER 7



The human was nothing like Lani.

Lani had been brave, yes, but never so confoundedly stubborn.

Foolish, too, but at least she'd not gone knowingly to her death.

That had been Paendreth's doing. He'd toyed with an innocent child for his own amusement, abandoned her on a whim, and made no apologies for his actions. He felt no shame and accepted no debt.

Who, Tal wondered, would bear the shame and the debt when this human died alone in the forest?

The question nagged him, an insistent whisper in the back of his mind as he slipped between the trees, following the sounds of water.

He wanted no more deaths on his conscience. But was it already too late?

Behind him, Cuan whined plaintively and flopped to the ground, the very image of lupine suffering.

"Enough," Tal growled over his shoulder. "We have a task to complete. One that is impossible enough without adding the responsibility for something soft and easily damaged."

The wolf whined again. For all that he walked on four paws and wore fur, at times, he could be disconcertingly perceptive.

“If you think to delay us enough for her to catch up, I advise against it. We could be here until the mountains crumble.”

Come to think of it, even his own sharp ears had caught no hint of movement in the forest. The human should be blundering about in the dark, making more noise than a herd of stampeding goats. Had she given up at last?

Doubtful. That one didn't know the first thing about quitting.

So why the silence? Had some predator already found her?

Swearing under his breath, Tal glared at Cuan. “We don't have time for this.”

But blast it, he could already feel the gnawing ache of worry. He refused to care what became of the human, but he could tell that the question of her fate was going to haunt him until he knew. Already, his mind had begun to flay him with visions of another lifeless form, torn by teeth and claws, left lying in a forest clearing like so much refuse.

Shaking off the grim memories, he turned back towards the distant sounds of water falling into a pool, more than ready to throw himself into its welcome embrace and remove the filth of his captivity.

Cuan let out a short, sharp bark.

Curse it all. Tal had been sure that part of him was long dead, but it clung to life like the sapleech vine, wrapping itself around his heart while gradually stealing away his sanity. The memory of his own pain refused to let him walk away. He would be imagining the human's death forever in spite of his determination not to care, and he could not afford such a distraction.

Muttering a vicious oath, he reversed direction and made his way back towards where he'd left the human staring blindly into the darkness.

He'd covered perhaps half the distance when new sounds crowded into the corners of his awareness—still distant and faint, but growing clearer.

Claws in the dirt. Snuffling and skulking. Sibilant hisses of possessive warning...

Renders.

Pale and hairless, with long, slender, claw-tipped limbs, the lynx-sized predators made their homes in the trees and hunted in darkness. They were rarely seen this close to settlements, preferring to haunt the deeper woods nearer the mountains, but when hungry, they occasionally risked the dangers of closer contact with night elf scouts.

Once seen, they were hunted down with single-minded determination. Renders killed anything that moved, leaving nothing behind but blood and bones. They were not fast, thankfully, but they hunted in groups, and could easily take down a human walking unaware through the forest at night.

Tal broke into a run, drawing his weapons as he did so, ears keenly attuned to every shift of the breeze, every creature that went on its way beneath the forest canopy. Where in all of that was the spark of life that represented the endlessly irritating human? He'd heard no screams, so the renders had not found her... yet.

But the sounds of claws scraping on bark were growing nearer, leaping from tree to tree ahead of him. It was a race with no prize at the end—only the heat and blood of battle—and Tal bared his teeth in anticipation.

The night ahead suddenly erupted with snarls, and he realized grimly that it might be too late. If the human were alive, she would no doubt be splitting his ears with screams.

Sure enough, three renders were crouched over a limp form on the forest floor, with more descending from the trees even as he erupted into their midst like a steel-tipped whirlwind.

The pack turned as one when they recognized the threat and seemed to agree that their meal could wait. All nine launched themselves in his direction, and Tal felt only grim satisfaction as the first predator died on his blade. Perhaps he

couldn't save the human, but he could certainly rid the world of a few renders.

It had been months since he wielded a sword, but after a lifetime of practice, the rhythm was as natural as breathing. The dance and thrust of sharpened steel through heart and sinew... it was like a lungful of air after nearly drowning. Once he'd felt ashamed of the way battle called to his soul, but his grandmother had only wrapped his hand more firmly around the hilt of his sword and cupped his cheek with her other hand.

"Never be ashamed of your abilities," she'd said, holding his gaze with fierce conviction. "Only of choosing to use them in service to the wrong master."

With two renders dead, the remaining seven formed a circle around him, red eyes glowing with focused hatred, preparing to attack as a single unit.

As if stretching muscles long unused, Tal pushed a tiny corner of his awareness into the silver chased along the edge of his blades, imbuing it with a small fraction of the magic that was his grandmother's legacy. The silver began to glow with an icy white light, brightening the shadows and drawing snarls from the renders around him.

"Try me," he whispered. "I beg you. Let me be your death."

Like a whispered yes, they hissed as they attacked in a flurry of pale limbs and flashing claws.

They were no match for elf-made steel, or for the wild tide of magic that surged up as they clashed against Tal's blade.

From behind him, Cuan burst out of the trees and buried his teeth in a render's neck. It snarled and died before the wolf moved on to the next, and in a matter of moments, they were surrounded by pale, unmoving bodies splashed with blood.

Cuan shook himself, coughed once as if protesting the taste, then moved to the human's body to nudge it with his nose.

"Leave it," Tal said wearily. "We were too late."

But Cuan only whined and nudged the human again.

Was it possible? With another, brighter burst of magic, Tal cleaned his sword of render blood and returned it to its sheath. His dagger he wiped on his already filthy trousers before cleansing it in the same way, then crossed the short distance to where the dreadwolf waited, watching him expectantly.

Kneeling beside the human's body, Tal laid one hand on her neck and turned her head gently to each side, looking for wounds. He found none, and there was no blood on her clothing.

If they had come in time, why had she not screamed or defended herself? If she had merely fainted, she should have roused by now. But somehow, beneath his fingers... her heart still beat. Her chest rose and fell. And while her eyes remained closed, marked by dark circles of exhaustion, her lashes seemed to flutter occasionally in response to his touch on her skin.

She was not dead, and Tal could not decide whether he was more relieved or disappointed. Especially not when he realized he could not simply leave her here again—not when she was clearly unable to look after herself. She'd brought no pack, no supplies, no weapons. And by the look of things, she'd reached the limits of her endurance.

Muttering incoherently at her stupidity—and his own—Tal made the mistake of looking at Cuan, who merely grinned happily as if to say, “You saved its life. Now you are responsible for it!”

Fine. Tal would wait until she regained consciousness, provide her with food and water, and then send her back to the settlement. But he'd be hanged before he missed bathing just because this ridiculous human lacked the sense to stay home where she belonged.

“Bring her,” he said to Cuan, feeling reluctant to touch her any more than necessary. The last thing he needed was her waking up and becoming convinced that he'd changed his mind.



Day was fast approaching by the time they returned to his chosen campsite, so Tal spared only a few moments to make the human comfortable. He lay her near the trunk of an ancient ravenleaf with a root for a pillow, while Cuan curled up nearby as if to keep watch.

Then he tore off his filthy shirt, laid his boots to the side, and made his way to the edge of the deep forest pool that was just beginning to steam gently as the first glimmers of dawn touched its surface.

On one end, a tiny waterfall cascaded over a ledge of rock to pour cheerfully into the pool. The rock face was decorated with boneleaf ferns, shimmering golden lichen, and deep purple moss with tiny starlike flowers that were only now folding in on themselves ahead of the brilliant morning light.

After the harsh chill of the prison and the bloody thrill of battle, the beauty of the scene jarred Tal's senses with an almost surreal sense of peace. It was tempting to let down his guard completely, but as he lowered himself into the cold waters of the pool, he could not help remaining alert for anything that might pose a threat. The pool itself held nothing but a few startled trout, but the forest...

Nothing large moved within a wide radius, so Tal decided to trust Cuan's nose to warn them of danger. He filled his lungs with air and submerged himself completely beneath the surface, letting his hair float free as the icy purity of the water penetrated his bones and chased away the taint of his captivity.

He was free, and he would never again submit to such chains. Instead, he would achieve the impossible—acquire the arantha venom and return to claim his prize. Paendreth would be forced to accept his challenge, and when he did... The young lord would learn what it meant to be afraid, and then he would die. Just as Lani had.

After several minutes beneath the water, Tal's lungs began to burn, so he surfaced with a groan of reluctance, brushing his

hair back and squeezing the water from it along with the dirt. Perhaps he had no soap, but he already felt cleaner, and...

Suddenly, he felt the pressure of eyes, heard a quick gasp of shock, and glanced up to see the human on her knees, only a few paces from the edge of the water.

So she'd finally awakened. But from the look of things, she was only a few moments shy of fainting yet again.

Surprise or fear, Tal decided—one of the two had frozen her in place where she crouched on the bank of the pool. But now that her ice-blue eyes were open once more, it was difficult to see her as quite so vulnerable or helpless. Those eyes burned somehow, with either courage or conviction, and Tal felt his lighter mood slide right back towards frustration.

He was going to have to leave her behind somehow, but every time he told her no, every time he turned his back, he would be thinking of the last time he'd seen Lani. She'd always been too sheltered—too willing to believe the best of everyone—and it had killed her in the end.

“Hoping I would drown?” he said, and the words seemed to jolt the human out of her shock. “So dreadfully sorry to disappoint you.”

“You weren't coming back up,” she stammered, settling back onto her heels as her cheeks turned color again in that odd way humans had. One side of her face was merely pink, but the other bore the dark purple of an angry bruise. “The... wolf-thing”—she waved towards Cuan—“didn't seem worried, but I was afraid...” Her words broke off, and her shoulders slumped. “I'm glad you're okay,” she murmured. “And thank you for not leaving me behind.”

“Don't get the wrong idea, human,” Tal growled as he strode out of the water and up the bank. “I have no intention of taking you with me. The moment you're slightly less than half-dead, you're going right back to the settlement where you belong.”

Strangely, her answer was not an argument but a smile, as sad as it was beautiful—somehow both twisted and resigned.

She turned her bruised cheek away from him as she murmured, “I do not *belong* there, night-elf. But I do have a task and a purpose here, and I will not abandon it.”

“Is your purpose to die?” he asked harshly. “Because that is the only fate that awaits you.”

She shrugged. “And if it is? At least I will have died doing everything I could to survive. At least I will have tried instead of sitting and waiting for things to change. Waiting for my father to come home, waiting for my mother to be well, waiting to be accepted for who I am instead of who they wish me to be. Now that I have a way to save my family, I beg of you—don’t take that away from me.”

Tal’s hands clenched into fists as he contemplated the side of her bent head, the dark hair that escaped her braid, and the hollow curve of her cheek. The human was as hopeless as he was. They would both die in pursuit of this thing, but if she wanted it so badly, who was he to deny her?

“I won’t need to take anything,” he said curtly. “If you follow me any farther, human, this forest will require everything you have... and more.”

CHAPTER 8



*I*f.

Aislin's head snapped up at that word.

If was not the same as *no*.

She kept her gaze fixed firmly on those blazing amber eyes, because if she let her focus wander even an inch...

She'd awakened to find herself in a different part of the forest than she recalled, and only the enormous, furry bulk of Cuan had quieted her initial sense of panic. But then she'd made the mistake of looking around her and spotted...

She really needed to learn his name instead of continuing to think of him as simply "night elf." A former prisoner. Her fellow traveler. Whoever he was, he was not *simply* anything. And she genuinely wished he had not chosen to bathe right there in the middle of the forest, because once she'd laid eyes on his unclothed torso, every single coherent thought fled.

It wasn't as if she'd never seen a shirtless male before. The guards at the manor often practiced their swordplay without shirts, and the village boys doffed theirs as frequently as possible during the summer heat. But no man—not even the unquestionably gorgeous Sandric—had ever dried out her mouth and left her so completely incapable of speech.

Aislin had tried to look away once she realized what she was seeing—truly she had—but then the night elf had vanished beneath the surface of the water and stayed there, and she'd panicked. It was somewhat humiliating now to consider that she'd ever feared he might drown.

He'd emerged from the water like some terrifying forest deity, water streaming from his shimmering white hair and the silvery skin of his shoulders. Then he'd tilted his head and glared at her with those amber eyes, and she'd nearly passed out again.

Thankfully he'd still been wearing his trousers, or she probably would have died of embarrassment right on the spot.

From broad shoulders to a trim waist and narrow hips, he could have been some ancient god of the hunt—sculpted by a fierce but loving hand. Muscles draped his form, not merely for show but molded by the rigors of survival. His chest and stomach appeared capable of stopping a blade without the need for armor, and his arms... Corded and strong, they might have been shaped from steel by a master smith.

Seeing him like this, Aislin had no doubt of why the other night elves feared him. He would be death with a blade, and even without one... She wasn't sure disarming him would help. Some form of power lay leashed and quiescent behind his eyes—magic, most likely—perhaps an even greater threat than edged steel.

Swallowing her sudden attack of nerves, Aislin tried to project courage and determination as she wobbled to her feet and faced the dripping wet night elf.

“Following you is exactly what I'm going to do,” she said. “So you might as well let me help. Even if all I'm good for is bait, surely two are better than one.”

His forbidding expression barely shifted as he regarded her, seemingly unbothered by his wet and shirtless state. “Do you even know what you're suggesting, human?”

“My name,” she responded fiercely, “is Aislin. What's yours?”

He didn't answer, only turned and stalked off toward where he'd left his pack. His silence continued as he donned a clean-ish shirt and combed the tangles from his hair, twisting half of it into a knot at the back of his head before turning to the next task.

He'd already begun to lay a fire when he looked up abruptly, a frustrated scowl twisting his lips. "Do you even know what an arantha is?"

Aislin shrugged. "I assumed it must be some kind of snake."

The night elf began to chuckle, but it was not a pleasant sound. "And yet you still offer to be bait." He shook his head. "I knew humans were fools, but surely you would win some sort of prize even among the most foolish of your kind. Answer me this, human. Why should I say yes? What do you offer that might justify asking me to feed, shelter, and defend your helpless person from here to the mountains?"

"I'm not helpless," she snapped, feeling the sting of his brutal assessment. "I might not have magic, but I can build a fire, kill and dress a chicken, mend clothing, chop wood, and carry water. I can cook when necessary, I know one herb from another, and I'm considered quite strong for my size."

He only raised one eyebrow in mockery of her claimed skills. "And what good are those in a battle? There are no chickens where we are going—only a nest full of wild aranthas who will be trying their utmost to kill us and feed us to their clan."

"I don't know," Aislin admitted uncomfortably. "But at least I'm willing to try, which is more than I can say for any of Vanadar's people."

"So, to sum up, you can kill chickens, chop wood, and you *probably* won't poison us with your cooking?" His eyes bored into her. "What this mission requires is an entire band of experienced hunters with keen night vision. Trained and seasoned in battle. Skilled, silent, and deadly, with nerves that cannot be shaken. As comfortable beneath the ground as beneath the trees. Perhaps then... *perhaps* we would have a chance."

"Then you are no different than me," Aislin argued. "If you don't have a chance either, why are you so offended by my insistence on helping?"

“Because you give me less of a chance, not more,” was his flat reply. “And I will not risk being forced to turn aside at a critical moment in order to save something soft and breakable from a fate it likely deserves.”

“Why won’t you at least give me an opportunity to prove myself?”

His raised eyebrow reminded her that she’d already fainted once, but he seemed to decide not to mention it. Instead, he rummaged in his pack and withdrew what proved to be a hatchet. Short handled, but with a wickedly sharp blade once he removed its sheath.

“Very well,” he said, and flipped the hatchet into the air, end over end. Aislin sternly forced herself not to move as the weapon buried itself in the ground before her feet. “Go and prove that you are at least capable of chopping wood as you claim.”

With a glare that was probably more murderous than she intended, Aislin yanked the hatchet out of the ground and stalked off into the forest.

She wasn’t sure which image would remain with her the longest—his disdainful frown or his perfect physique, streaming water onto the forest floor as he stepped out of that pool. There was something about him that was different than other night elves, even if she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. His attitude, though... That seemed very much the same.

At least she knew what she was about when it came to chopping wood. She was not very many steps away from camp when she came upon a fallen tree that appeared to have died long enough ago to yield decent firewood. Wielding the hatchet cautiously at first, she sliced away some of the smaller branches, cut them into shorter pieces for kindling, then started on the larger ones. The trunk was too big for anything but a saw, but the branches nearest the base of the tree should be sufficient to keep their fire going through the night...

No, the day. Night elves slept during the day. And for her own part, Aislin was exhausted enough to sleep now, even

though dawn was beginning to brighten the sky with faint color.

Within a few minutes, she had chopped as much wood as she could carry and had just crouched down to gather an armload when a low hiss met her ears.

The sound was barely more than a whisper, but Aislin stood anyway, gripping the hatchet firmly in her right hand as she glanced around for the source of the disturbance.

A brief rustle from the tree directly overhead was her only warning. It gave her just enough time to jerk slightly to the side before a pale, hairless creature came plummeting down nearly on top of her. As it flashed past, its long, razor-sharp claws sliced through her sleeve and dug a furrow along the top of her arm, drawing a yelp of pain.

Like a cat, the creature hit the ground on its feet, then sprang again, this time for her face, squalling with hunger and rage.

Aislin only had time for a brief impression of long limbs, red eyes, and too many teeth before it was on her, knocking her off her feet despite weighing no more than a small child. She heard a bark from Cuan, but had no chance to cry out. Instead of remaining flat on her back, she twisted to the side and rolled, pinning the pale, sinewy body beneath her knee.

Fangs flashed as its mouth opened in a snarl, and it clawed at the dirt with far more strength than its slender limbs would suggest.

The creature was going to get free if she didn't do something, and Aislin suddenly recalled the night elf's condescending response to her claimed skills.

Maybe there were no chickens in these woods, but one creature's head was attached pretty much the same as another's.

She lifted the hatchet and brought it down with every bit of strength she had left, then fell to the side, trying not to retch as blood sprayed and the hairless body went limp beneath her knee.

It was really nothing like a chicken.

A moment later, Cuan burst into view, teeth bared as he charged towards her. When she rolled away, he grabbed the bloody corpse and shook it, seemingly unaware that it was already dead.

And right behind the wolf? One very angry night elf with a naked sword in his hand.

Aislin staggered to her feet as he strode towards her with murder in his gaze.

“Three minutes,” he snarled furiously. “I leave you unprotected for three minutes, and you are already covered in blood!”

She was really very near the end of her strength, but she had enough for this. Bending down, Aislin clenched her teeth around the urge to throw up, grasped the creature’s head by the tip of one long, pointed ear...

And threw it right at his face.

There was nothing wrong with his reflexes—he snatched it out of the air and somehow did not drop it when he realized what he held. He turned over the gruesome artifact, eyed the clean, sharp cut, then shifted his gaze to Aislin.

She hefted the bloody hatchet.

“Just because it doesn’t have feathers doesn’t mean I can’t kill it,” she said coolly.

And then spoiled the whole thing by fainting again.



Aislin was vaguely conscious after that of the crackling of a fire and the warmth of fur, but she did not wake again until the day was nearly gone.

Her head was pillowed on something soft that moved when she did, and when she opened her eyes, she encountered the steady regard of a curious, lupine gaze. The scrutiny did not

last for long—Cuan watched her thoughtfully for only a few moments before subjecting her to an enthusiastic but slobbery greeting.

Aislin was too weak to do much more than lay there, shut her eyes as tightly as possible, and submit to being thoroughly washed.

“Here.”

The voice was close, so Aislin’s eyes jerked open, leaving her blinking and sputtering from the significant amount of drool coating her face.

“Hold still.”

A soft cloth that smelled at least marginally better than the wolf’s tongue swiped across her face, removing the worst of the damage and passing more gently over the bruises on her right cheek.

When Aislin could see properly again, she discovered the night elf crouched in front of her, a cup in his hand and an unreadable expression on his face.

“Drink,” he said.

A thousand thoughts flitted through her mind, but Aislin took the cup and sipped tentatively at the contents. Some sort of tea or broth, she decided. It was not a taste she would typically have found pleasant, but after the past few days, the concoction seemed almost unimaginably delicious.

She drained the cup and handed it back. “Thank you,” she croaked.

“Food?” There was still a strange lack of expression on her companion’s face.

“Yes.” If needed, she could match him, monosyllable for monosyllable.

He rose to his feet and returned to the small fire burning nearby.

Sitting up slowly and carefully, Aislin waited for the world to stop spinning before turning to Cuan.

“Thank you,” she said again, laying one careful hand on his foreleg. “After sleeping for so long, I feel much better.” He huffed at her, shook his head, and lay back down.

Aislin didn’t think she was quite ready to stand, so she waited as the night elf returned, bearing a wide, sturdy leaf with a small portion of some flaky, white meat on it.

“Go slow,” he ordered brusquely.

She nodded and accepted the leaf, trying not to eye the meat too closely. Had he gone hunting while she was unconscious? Or worse, had he...

“This isn’t...” She blurted out the words before she could stop herself. It probably sounded horribly ungrateful, but she really didn’t think she could eat... whatever that thing was.

His answer seemed to mock her. “Did you think it would be chicken?”

Aislin’s gaze flew to the chunks of meat in front of her. Was this a test? Some twisted way of proving that she wasn’t tough enough to accompany him on this quest?

Swallowing every instinct that insisted she couldn’t possibly put that in her mouth, Aislin picked up a piece and stubbornly bit down. If he could do it, so could she.

As the taste flooded her tongue, and she prepared herself to be revolted, the night elf casually added, “It’s fish.”

She nearly choked.

And on the corner of that grim mouth, she saw the very faintest hint of a smile.

CHAPTER 9



The human did not lack for nerve.

But it was not enough, and Tal knew he shouldn't even consider wavering. If he allowed her to accompany him and something terrible should happen, he would bear the weight of another pointless death on his shoulders. And yet, if he continued to deny her, she would only persist in following him, and death would be all but certain.

Yes, she'd defeated a single render, but that one had likely been the hungry, desperate remnant of the pack he'd destroyed. He could try to convince her of the folly of her course, but she wouldn't listen. He knew, because... he'd done the same. He'd been warned not to seek his revenge on Paendreth, and look where his stubbornness had landed him.

But Lani had been all he had left. He would have done anything to spare her pain, but instead, he'd delivered her straight to her death.

His trusting, beautiful sister had never wanted to believe that the night elves would reject them for their Dairen blood. Had never understood why their heritage should make any difference, and in the end, she'd paid the price for Tal's reluctance to destroy her innocent optimism.

He never should have agreed to return. Should have looked for help elsewhere, but who in all the world might have understood the struggles of a half-elf shapeshifter?

And considering the human's tale, perhaps it was no better anywhere. Perhaps all people feared what was different and

sought to destroy one another to lessen that fear.

“Thank you,” the human said, interrupting his thoughts with her quiet words. “The fish was delicious.” She set down the leaf she’d used as a plate and folded her arms tightly across her chest. The moment her hand touched her right arm, however, she hissed in surprise and pain.

Rising from his crouch by the fire, Tal approached her and knelt down to grasp her arm, ignoring her quiet protest that she was fine.

“Render claws can cause infection,” he said coolly. “We must clean it. That is if you intend to keep this arm.”

Her glance was cautious and questioning. “Why did you change your mind about helping me?”

“Cuan likes you,” Tal responded brusquely, and was surprised by her quiet laugh.

“How long have the two of you been friends?”

He cocked his head, curiosity roused in spite of his determination to rebuff her. Most outside of Sion Dairach failed to understand the bonds many elves shared with their dreadwolf mounts. “You assume we travel together out of friendship?”

“He hasn’t eaten you yet, so yes, I assume you must be friends.” Her dry tone left no doubt that she intended to needle him.

“We bonded over ten years ago.” He wasn’t sure why he told her even that much.

“Are wolves of his size common here?”

She was trying very hard not to show any fear of his answer, and for some reason, that made him want to needle her in return.

“Only the males are that size,” he replied, straight-faced. “The females are larger, and this time of year, they are desperate for meat to feed their cubs.”

As if he understood every word, Cuan turned to yawn at him, showing every glistening fang in the process.

“I see.”

The human turned her attention to rolling up her sleeve, baring the deep, bloody scratch left behind by the render’s claw. Thankfully, it shouldn’t require stitches—just washing and binding.

“Do you have any way for me to boil water?” Her firm tone made it clear that she intended to deal with the entire task herself.

Tal watched as she rose carefully from the ground. Not so he could help her, he reminded himself. He needed to know how resilient she was if he were to consider allowing...

But he was not considering it.

Back at the fire, he observed—and most definitely did *not* hover—as she cleaned the sole cooking pot, filled it with water from the stream, and set it to heating. She seemed to know her way around the camp, at least. And she did not find it necessary to fill the silence with endless chatter.

Eventually, Cuan rose from the ground, stretched, yawned again, and loped off into the forest.

“Looking for meat to feed his cubs?” the human inquired dryly.

Tal shrugged, unrepentant. “If we are lucky, he will help feed us. In Sion Dairach, dreadwolves have served as companions and mounts for centuries, but they are very much their own creatures.”

“What is Sion Dairach?”

Tal stiffened. How could he have forgotten that the elves had little to no contact with humans? Not since the wraith incursion over a hundred years ago. That war had not really affected his life in the far southeastern corner of the elves’ lands, but only because his grandmother had lived remotely, in a small community far from the majority of her kin.

“It is nothing worth spending your curiosity on,” he replied tersely.

Once the water was hot, the human carefully bathed her wound, clearing it of blood and debris before turning to Tal.

“May I borrow a dagger?” When he hesitated, she added, “I promise not to plunge it into your dark heart and make you into an unwilling sacrifice. I just need a bandage.”

Tal handed it over, along with the small jar of salve his grandmother had given him before one of his last hunting trips.

“What’s this?” The human removed the lid and sniffed the pungent green paste. He half expected her to turn up her nose, but she only looked thoughtful. “Yarrow, comfrey, and... marigold?”

“I’m no herbalist, human. Use it if you wish to prevent infection.”

She shot him a half-hearted glare, but she did spread a small amount of the salve on her wound before wrapping it well in strips cut from an underlayer of her skirt.

“Thank you,” she said, for probably the third time in an hour, before settling to the ground beside the fire and glancing at him across the dancing flames. “I don’t mean to be a burden, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you what happens now. Night is falling, and I know you’ll be moving on soon. Have you decided whether to allow me to accompany you?”

“Do you have even the slightest idea what Vanadar asked for?” Tal asked abruptly, feeling a stir of anger that did not seem to be directed at her for a change. “Do you understand where I am going and what I intend to do?”

“Only what was said in my hearing.” The human shrugged. “But the size of the task does not affect my determination to see it through.”

“At the base of the nearby mountains lies a system of caves that has never been fully mapped. It is known only as the Darkspring. There are many entrances, and the tunnels

within have claimed more than a few night elves who entered seeking shelter, only to lose their way and die in the darkness.”

The human did not flinch.

“Within the depths of that darkness lies a horror you cannot possibly imagine. A colony of wild aranthas lurks in the shadows, feeding on bats, snakes, and any other unwary thing that comes creeping too near their lair. They can grow nearly as large as Cuan, they see perfectly in the dark, and their bite carries a poison that can lull a fully grown night elf into a dark sleep. And this colony of hundreds lives for only one purpose—to protect their queen and provide for her children.”

Her blue eyes were wide and unblinking now, fixed on his with fierce intensity.

“And of all these, the queen is the largest and deadliest. She is likely old and slow, but her fangs bear a venom with strange and mysterious properties. To those who are filled with life, it brings death, and to those near death, it can bring life. But to take that venom, one must fight through the entire colony and make his way to the heart of her kingdom. He must elude countless traps and evade unknown numbers of scouts to even gain sight of the queen. And then, with whatever luck he has left, he must kill the queen’s final guards before taking the fight to her—without being poisoned himself.”

The human blinked and swallowed.

“Only if he can kill the queen, take her venom, and then fight his way out through hundreds of enraged aranthas can he possibly hope to return with the prize he seeks.”

Tal settled back on his heels, rather impressed by his own description. All true, more or less, but stated in the most intimidating way possible. The human would now find some deeply pressing reason to be elsewhere and leave him to complete this errand alone.

“Well, that settles it.” The human rose to her feet, no doubt preparing to march off into the woods on the quickest possible road back to civilization and survival. But instead of the

woods, she marched over to *him* and glared, complete with an impressive scowl.

“You cannot possibly manage this task alone,” she said firmly. “You need me. Maybe you don’t know it yet, but you do. If I die, you can feel free to say you told me so, but I am coming with you. I will walk, run, crawl, or grow wings and learn how to fly, but I am coming. And you might be bigger than I am, but I’ve been arguing with people bigger than me for years, and they could tell you I don’t have the slightest idea how to quit.”

Tal knew he probably looked gobsmacked, but what other options did he have? She was so tiny and fierce and... so pathetically out of her depth. So foolishly determined. A huff of frustrated laughter threatened to break free, but he held it back. What in all the sunlit world was he to do now?

He didn’t need her. He didn’t need anyone, and he’d be hanged before he adopted yet another soft, fragile creature who needed his protection. But it would take precious time to return her to the settlement and ensure she couldn’t follow him. Besides, Vanadar had already sent her out here to die once. He might just set her loose again, and the thought of it curled Tal’s lip with anger.

The human’s mulish look only deepened. “You know, I might end up being useful.”

“How can you say that when you can’t even stand upright for longer than a minute?” he scoffed.

The dark form of Cuan suddenly burst into their camp, his ears flattened as he approached Tal and whined.

Something was coming. Something even the dreadwolf wasn’t confident he could defeat.

“Time to go.” Tossing the remaining hot water onto the flames, Tal stowed the salve and the pot back in his pack, kicked the smoldering remains of the fire apart, and donned his weapons harness. His sword and dagger went back into their sheaths, but just before he stowed the hatchet, he looked over at the human and considered.

He couldn't leave her. Not here and now—not when he didn't know what was coming. But neither could he afford to go back. As greatly as it irritated him, he was stuck with the human for now, and if she was going to travel with him, she should at least travel armed.

“Here.” He held out the hatchet and frowned at her widening eyes. “Cuan is trying to warn us. Something approaches, so you'll have to travel with us for now, and you should not travel unarmed.”

She accepted it carefully and tucked it into the belt that secured her oversized leather jerkin—a man's by the look of it. By the time she looked up, Tal had already leaped onto Cuan's back, shifted the pack to his front, and was staring down at her, waiting.

“By all means, take your time.”

“I don't...” Those eyes were wide again, and looked slightly startled. “What am I supposed to do, exactly?”

“Do you want to live?” Tal asked impatiently. “If so, you'll need to ride with me until we are away from the danger.”

Cuan turned his head, pricked his ears at the human, and whined urgently.

She eyed his back dubiously, then stepped up, set her hands on the wolf's flank, and paused. “How do I get up?”

“God of Shadows,” Tal muttered. “How are you still alive?” He reached down, grasped the front of her jerkin, and pulled, and with a startled yelp, she scrambled up to land behind him. “Cuan, go!”

The wolf shot forward, and as he did so, the human let out another sound of surprise before scrabbling for a grip. But Cuan's fur was short and soft, and he wore no riding harness. Tal felt her grip falter and sensed her balance slipping, so with a growl of irritation, he reached back, grabbed her wrist, and wrapped her arm around his waist.

“Hold on if you have no wish to die.”

Clearly, she did not, because her other arm wrapped around him with surprising strength. He thought he heard her mutter about overbearing idiots, then his ears caught a brief whimper as her injured cheek came in contact with the hard surface of his sheathed sword. But after that, he was too busy to listen—too focused on staying seated as Cuan raced away, making for the road where there would be no need to dodge trees.

Yet even then, there was no escaping the strange sensation of her arms around him, her whole body pressed against his back. He could feel her warmth, feel the trembling of her muscles, feel the way she tensed each time he shifted position on Cuan's back.

In truth, keeping his seat was more difficult than he'd hoped. He'd ridden without a saddle many times, but not under duress, and never through a forest. In the wilds of Sion Dairach, it had been possible to run freely for miles across the broad, treeless moors. But here, there was too much unpredictable terrain—too much dodging and ducking. Even without the added weight of a passenger, he would have had to work at remaining mounted, and with her clinging like a limpet, it was that much harder.

He should have left her for the renders.

He should have ignored her pleas and listened to the voice of his past.

No good could come of letting her worm her way into his conscience. Of allowing himself to remember the desperation in her blue eyes. Of wondering whether Vanadar intended for her to die, or whether those she left behind would mourn her death.

The last thing he needed was another burden. Another scar on his soul. Another loss that would haunt him with questions of what he should have done differently.

At least this human was likely to get them *both* killed, and there would be no need to live with the guilt.

CHAPTER 10



*A*islin kept her arms locked and her eyes shut and tried not to think about where she was sitting and who she was holding on to. Of all her improbable dreams about escaping her village and having adventures, she had never dared imagine anything this utterly far-fetched.

And yet here she was, fleeing through the night on the back of a giant wolf, with her arms around the waist of the most frustrating, stubborn, arrogant, and dismissive man she'd ever met.

The fact that he was an intimidatingly gorgeous night elf didn't exactly help.

She could feel the irritation radiating from his entire being, and reminded herself firmly that he hadn't left her. He'd wanted to—had been angry with himself for his weakness—but in the end, he'd taken her with him. Saved her life. She didn't know what he intended to do with her now, but as long as she was alive, there was hope.

And if she somehow did not either die of embarrassment or fall off the wolf's back and dash her brains out against a tree, there was also hope that he would agree to convey her all the way to those caves, where their quarry lurked in the dark, surrounded by traps and guards.

None of it sounded encouraging, though she suspected he'd deliberately embellished his description in order to frighten her. She simply refused to think about it. Lord

Dreichel was waiting, and her family was counting on her to see this through.

Aislin tried to remain focused on that goal, because the moment she allowed her attention to slip, she fell back into an uncomfortably acute awareness of just how tightly she was pressed against her nameless night-elf rescuer. She could feel the play of his back muscles against her chest, and even the strain in his thighs as he fought to remain seated on Cuan's back.

When her mind flashed back to the moment he'd emerged from the pool, she nearly let go in horrified embarrassment. But her fear of whatever followed them proved greater than her humiliation, so she hung on and hoped she'd still be able to look him in the eye when this was over.

"Wait," the night elf said suddenly, and Cuan slid to a stop. Had Aislin been riding alone, she would have flown straight over the wolf's head.

She almost asked what they were running from, but both Cuan and his rider appeared to be listening—testing the night air for scents or sounds of any pursuit.

Cuan's ears flattened once again, and he whined just as the night elf's head swiveled to stare back the way they'd come, eyes bright in the darkness.

"Truld," he growled. "We will take the road."

They moved off at a much slower pace, so Aislin relaxed her hold ever so slightly before asking, "What is a truld?"

The night elf seized her wrist so suddenly, she jumped and jerked backward, nearly losing her seat. "Do not lower your guard," he reminded her coldly. "A truld is a vicious, human-like predator. They are twice the height of a man, as broad as a man is tall, more intelligent than a wolf or a storm cat, and they prefer meat that goes on two legs."

Aislin couldn't help a brief shudder. First the render, now a truld. And then there were the aranthas he had described in vague but terrifying terms. Was there anything in this land that would *not* attempt to eat her?

“It is not too late to go home, human,” the night elf reminded her, as if he could hear her thoughts. Perhaps, like other predators, he could sense fear and hoped to exploit it to get rid of her.

“My name,” she said firmly, “is Aislin. And I am not going home until I have what I came for.”

He was silent for several of the wolf’s long strides. When he spoke again, she thought he sounded at least as curious as he was irritated. “And if you never go home at all? How does your family benefit from this madness? Would they not rather take their chances on the road than send you to certain death?”

And then it was Aislin’s turn for silence because... she didn’t really know the answer to that. Despite her best efforts, Lord Dreichel’s words still haunted her. Was it possible her mother’s magic would return with Aislin’s death? And was he not the only one who’d wondered? Had her whole village breathed a sigh of relief when they found out where she’d gone?

Surely not Brannic and Marinda. They had always defended her, despite her lack of magic. But would they genuinely miss her if she never returned? Or would they wallow in their guilt for a time before moving on to more pressing concerns? Would Sandric care for her mother and grandmother out of obligation only until Aislin failed to return?

And would her family have agreed to a different plan if she’d dared tell the truth about her destination?

“I don’t know.” Her mother had been terrified of her leaving. But she had acquiesced in the end, because this was the only way for them to stay in their home. If she’d known where Aislin was going, she might have tried harder to stop her, but Aislin loved her family too much to ask them to make that choice.

“But it is not my family’s fault,” she admitted quietly. “I made the bargain with our landlord, so I’m as much to blame as anyone. I think a part of me *wanted* to do this, so I could prove that I’m not what they say.”

“And what do *they* say?”

“That I’m useless,” she replied bluntly. Lord Dreichel had made that part of his opinion quite clear. “That I stole my mother’s magic. She can no longer see the future, and it’s my fault. But if I can do this impossible thing, maybe they would see that I don’t need magic to be useful. That I can contribute without it if they would give me a chance.”

The night elf let out a soft huff of humorless laughter. “You chose to risk death to prove that you deserve to live? Humans are truly incomprehensible.”

“Then what of you?” Aislin snapped, feeling the sting of his dismissive judgment. “How is your reason for being here any less foolish?”

“It isn’t.” He sounded oddly matter-of-fact.

“Then it’s true that you seek revenge?”

“Revenge or justice... it all depends on your perspective.” He was silent for long enough that Aislin believed he did not intend to enlighten her further. It wasn’t as if he’d given her any reason to expect answers in the first place. But eventually, he spoke again, his deep voice rumbling against her ear where she’d rested it against his back.

“My sister and I were what the night elves term ‘wildings,’ which is not a compliment. We lived apart from any of the settlements or family structures, and did not rely on a Marlord or his guards to protect us. But in a land such as this one, safety is typically found in numbers. Civilization itself is a deterrent to many of the creatures that hunt these forests, so night elves have learned to mistrust anything that does not fall within the bounds of the order that civilization has established.”

A strangely familiar story, for all that the characters in it were not human.

“Around two years ago, I sought aid for my sister from the Marlord of Revenfell. He agreed, but in the process, my sister fell in love with his son, Paendreth.

“I knew a Marlord’s son would never be permitted to bond with a wilding, so I believed the lesser danger was to leave and seek help elsewhere. But Paendreth followed us. He begged Lani to return to the settlement with him, and she... trusted him. She had always dreamed of being accepted by a larger community, so she left without telling me and followed him home.”

Aislin’s mind flashed back to the handsome face and broad shoulders of Sandric. The man every girl in the village admired but knew better than to fall in love with. Had it been the same for this night elf girl? Had she trusted in the pretty words of a man who had no idea of the consequences of his own foolishness?

Aislin could guess the rest of this story. Such things probably never ended any differently for night elves than they did for humans.

“Paendreth had left home alone and did not have the experience to be roaming the woods without the protection of numbers. And Lani... She had not yet learned to control her shift.” His voice was so tightly controlled, Aislin could almost hear the effort it took not to break as he recounted the tale. “They must have happened upon a pack of renders. Whether they tried to fight them off, I cannot say for certain. All I know is that I found what was left of my sister lying alone on the forest floor.”

Something did break then, and she heard a quiet hitch in his breathing as he fought to regain control. His sister’s death had clearly ravaged him, and even now, he could not escape the memories.

“There was no sign of the coward who had lured her away from safety,” he continued finally, “and when I reached the settlement, I was not allowed to see him. The Marlord would acknowledge no responsibility for her death, so when I attempted to challenge Paendreth as tradition allows, I was imprisoned for making such an accusation without proof. I was only released because they have nothing to lose—should I die, they will only breathe a sigh of relief that they need not consider whether my demands are just.”

After an initial rush of pain and sympathy, all Aislin could think at that moment was how strange—how ridiculously unlikely that she should feel more kinship with this angry, impossibly powerful night elf than with any of her own people.

“Then we are here for the same reason,” she blurted out. “To prove that our lives are worth more than our deaths. In the end, we are not so different.”

Not that he would agree with her. The very idea was likely to offend him deeply. But the realization breathed life into the fragile remnants of her hope. Perhaps they *could* find a way to work together. Perhaps he would eventually understand her enough to see why she *must* do this. Why she would never choose to quit. Never walk away.

His reply was not encouraging.

“We could not possibly be more different,” he responded harshly. “You are a moth, attempting to prove yourself to the flame. Perhaps you are in the right, but the flame does not care. It will consume you without thought, and your family will still die.”

His disdain battered her determined optimism and left a surge of empty humiliation in its wake. Perhaps it was not so much that he didn’t understand her as that he *couldn’t*. He’d experienced injustice, yes, and great loss, but even in the midst of his losses, he had never been truly powerless. Now that he was free, he had an immense well of magic and skill to rely on. A terrifying wolf companion who would never leave him.

And revenge was a far colder motivation than fear.

So it was not with any hope of an answer that she whispered one final question.

“Perhaps I am no better than a moth, but is it not better to risk the flame than remain in darkness forever?”

His back seemed to stiffen at her words, but perhaps that was only a coincidence. As her whisper died away into silence, they finally emerged from the trees onto a narrow ribbon of road that gleamed faintly in the moonlight. The night

elf took a deep breath of the cool night air as the wolf turned his head towards the east—towards their ultimate goal, or their deaths.

“Go,” the night elf murmured, and the wolf leaped ahead into a joyous, ground-devouring run.

It was nothing like riding a horse. Nothing like anything Aislin had ever experienced. Both easier and impossibly more difficult, it was at once exhilarating and utterly terrifying to fly through the night at such speeds. With no saddle beneath her, she could feel the wolf’s muscles bunch and lengthen with every stride. Could feel the tension in the night elf who bent lower over the wolf’s neck and clung to his back as if they were not two creatures but one.

Aislin began to feel like something of an interloper—a clinging nuisance who ruined what might have been a moment of pure poetry. She was the off-key note in an otherwise perfect harmony between the night, the forest, and these two who moved through the darkness, both a part of it and yet somehow distinct.

But she was alive and on her way to where she needed to go. The road was still open, and she would take it. Even if no one else thought she should be here.



It did not take long for wonder to be replaced by pain. Aislin was unaccustomed to riding for long hours, the wound in her arm was jostled with each step, and even her face had begun to ache despite the liquid smoothness of the wolf’s stride. Not to mention, it was night, and even though she’d slept all day, the darkness continually sang to her of sleep.

But even after what felt like hours of travel, her companions showed no signs of tiring. They occasionally slowed to a walk or a jog, but soon returned to that ground-devouring lope that brought them ever closer to the mountains looming ominously up ahead.

Two nights' travel, Vanadar had said, which even on her stumpy human legs was not so very far. Perhaps he had actually meant at night elves' speed, but even so, he could not have predicted Cuan. They had to be drawing close to their destination.

"How far to the caves?" she asked, in a voice that came out small and wobbly and pathetic sounding.

The wolf slowed, almost as if he'd heard the plea behind her query.

"The entrance is not far," the night elf said brusquely. "We'll make camp soon and enter the cave at next nightfall."

Aislin was exhausted enough to agree with whatever he said. "Fine," she murmured, her head falling forward until her forehead rested on the night elf's back. "Wake me up when we stop."

Miraculously, she almost fell asleep then, and drifted through the very edge of dreams as the wolf moved on. She dreamed that the moon sank and the night was suddenly filled with color. Glowing purple lichen, vines that dripped with deep red flowers, golden sparks that swirled together beneath the trees...

And she dreamed that where her arms were wrapped loosely around the waist of a grimly gorgeous night elf, a strong, warm hand held her wrists in a gentle grip. Holding her close. Keeping her safe.

It was a lovely dream. One that was suddenly shattered when Aislin found herself flying through the air to land on her knees in the dirt.

Her eyes jerked open.

She knelt in a forest clearing, Cuan behind her, ears flattened to his skull and fangs bared.

A hint of dawn lightened the sky, revealing the taut, angry lines of her companion's face where he stood in front of her, sword in hand, facing the trees with his pack flung to the ground at his feet.

“Hiding won’t save you,” he growled menacingly, and from where she crouched, Aislin could see the hint of a fiery smolder in his amber eyes.

“Oh, but I don’t feel in the least need of saving,” a deep voice drawled from the shadows. “Though I don’t imagine your pet human feels the same at this moment.”

Aislin came to her feet with her hand on the hatchet in her belt, and thought she heard softly mocking laughter from her right.

But there was no further sound as a night elf emerged from the trees in front of her, followed by another from the left, then the right. In the space of a breath, she and her companion found themselves surrounded by menacing figures that seemed quite different from the scouts who had first discovered her near the border.

No two were dressed or armored the same—they wore a strange, patched-together combination of leather and steel, some carrying bows, one an axe, yet another a pair of long curving swords. Three were shifted into their animal forms—a wolf, a lynx, and a gryphon that snapped its beak as it regarded her with golden-eyed intensity.

“An unusual trio,” the one directly in front of them remarked, sounding as casual as if they were meeting in a tavern over mugs of ale. “What might you be doing in such a dangerous part of the forest?”

“I answer to no one,” Aislin’s night elf replied icily. “Much like you. So do not presume to stop me as if you have some right to these lands.”

Then these night elves were also wildings?

“What right do I need when no one claims them? We hunt here for the present, and”—the one confronting them suddenly smiled, and the expression seemed wickedly amused—“I don’t feel like sharing.”

While the newcomer was clearly a night elf with his silver-gray skin and white hair, he was also unlike any night elf Aislin had seen yet. He was dressed to blend into the forest—

his clothing a strange assembly that nevertheless gave him a rakish air. That impression was only heightened by the rings that glittered in one ear and the cloth that was bound around his head, covering one eye. Dark scars marked the side of his face, or perhaps those were tattoos—it was difficult to tell in the near-darkness.

He appeared utterly relaxed, almost slouching where he stood, a bow slung over one shoulder while a sword and numerous knives decorated his belt.

“I ask no one’s permission to hunt,” Aislin’s companion said, as if the number of enemies made no difference to him. And perhaps it didn’t. “But if you feel you have something to prove in front of your pack, by all means, challenge me.”

“We’re wildings,” the other night elf replied, a grin curving the corner of his mouth. “What makes you think we care about challenges?”

And then he simply attacked.

The wolf and the gryphon launched themselves at Cuan while four night elves converged on Aislin’s guardian.

For a single frozen moment, she felt almost invisible despite standing in the midst of a raging battle. The fight surrounded her completely and yet seemed not to touch her.

But that might not last forever, particularly if either of her companions fell. Drawing the hatchet from her belt, Aislin removed the sheath and threw it to the side, then glanced around her feet to ensure that nothing would trip her if she needed to move quickly. Not that it would help her much if any of their enemies decided she was a threat, but it felt better to do something than nothing.

And yet, when she looked up again, her mouth seemed to drop open of its own accord as she realized that neither her night elf nor his wolf appeared to have any need of aid.

Her companion’s weapons had simply appeared in his hands as if they were a part of him, and as she watched, the blades themselves came to life with an icy white radiance that snapped and sparked with fury.

And when he moved... He sprang so swiftly she could not have sworn she'd seen him do it, yet he was suddenly across the clearing, leaving two of his opponents groaning on the ground.

Whatever time he'd spent as a prisoner, it had clearly not slowed him down. He moved as if the fight were a dance, his opponents his partners, and the sound of the blades the only music he required. The other night elves tried—Aislin would give them that. But they were so utterly overmatched that it felt like watching children at play.

Beside her, the gryphon let out a scream as Cuan's teeth snapped together inches from its throat. The smaller wolf leaped into the air, trying for the back of the dreadwolf's neck, but Cuan twisted with a snarl and snagged its front leg between his jaws.

He could have bitten down and left his opponent with only three legs to stand on, but for some reason, he simply flung the other wolf to the side before dodging the gryphon's claws.

Perhaps Aislin was mistaken, but... A glance at her night elf companion proved that he, too, was avoiding deadly force. Twice, she saw him strike an opponent with the flat rather than the edge of his blade. If he'd been fighting in deadly earnest, every one of his enemies would already be bleeding out on the forest floor.

Aislin heard exultant laughter from one of his four attackers, as if he were actually *enjoying* the experience of being quite thoroughly thrashed.

With a sigh, she lowered her hatchet, wondering whether this was simply a typical night elf way of saying hello, or more like the exuberant fisticuffs engaged in by village boys when attempting to prove themselves.

And that's when something hit her in the chest, knocking her backwards and driving every bit of breath from her lungs.

For a moment, she couldn't draw a breath, even to squeak in fear or warning. She tried to lift her hatchet, only to realize it had flown out of her hand when she fell. And anyway, the

thing sitting on her chest was far too close for such a weapon to be of any use.

The lynx. She'd lost sight of the lynx, and it had used her distraction to sneak close enough to pounce.

Glowing green eyes and a mouthful of fangs filled her vision. The beast was heavy—this lynx was the size of a full-grown sheep—and she couldn't move without its claws sinking deeper into her skin.

Had this been the whole point? Distract her companions so they could kill the human? But to what end?

Suddenly her lungs opened, and Aislin was able to draw in a single gasping breath. Her muscles once more obeyed her commands, so she clenched her right hand into a fist and punched the lynx right in its tufted ear. When it winced in pain, she fastened her fingers around its furry throat.

The beast squalled in fury, or tried, and then its eyes changed. Bent no longer on hunting, its intent suddenly turned to murder, and Aislin let out a single, unintentional yelp of fear.

The weight on her chest vanished. Cuan held the struggling lynx by the skin on the back of its neck, like a misbehaving pup. He shook it once, but then she could no longer see him because her vision was filled with the looming bulk of a *very* angry night elf.

“*Mother of Shadows,*” he snarled as she struggled to a sitting position, “can you not stay alive for a single minute?”

He had just dropped to one knee beside her when Aislin saw the shadow behind him.

“Look out!” she yelped, and threw herself forward, knocking him sideways just as a dagger sliced through the air to bury itself in the dirt, inches from where she'd just lain.

She only thought he'd been angry before.

Those furious amber eyes went molten hot, and a wave of power erupted outward to slam into every other occupant of that little clearing.

Even Cuan flattened his ears and whined as it rippled over him, but the others were thrown off their feet—battered and tumbled to the edge of the trees by the force of the blow.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Cuan shook himself like a wet dog, and the other night elves regained their feet. But no one made any move to attack.

“Are we done here?” Aislin’s companion said, and it was less a question than a statement of absolute certainty.

If they attacked again, he would end them.

Aislin didn’t know what she expected, but it wasn’t for the leader of their assailants to burst out laughing and sheath his weapons with the jaunty air of a man who’d just enjoyed a night of drinking with his friends at the local tavern.

“I have to admit, I didn’t expect that,” he said, the curve of his grin clearly visible in the growing light of dawn. “But we haven’t had that much fun in months, so I must thank you for the exercise.”

Aislin’s jaw dropped without her permission.

“I’m Rhone,” he continued, striding forward until he regarded them from only a few paces away. “My friends and I hunt these woods to eliminate threats before they grow too large for the settlements to ignore.”

Aislin’s companion rose to his feet and almost absently offered his hand to assist her. She took it, only to be shoved slightly behind his back as soon as she gained her feet.

“I’ve never heard of wildings choosing to hunt together,” he said coldly.

“We may not fit with others of our kind, but their rejection does not determine our fate,” the other night elf said mildly. “Do you have a name you would choose to share?”

For a moment, Aislin was sure her companion would not answer. But the glow in his eyes dimmed slightly as he regarded Rhone, and then he uttered it, almost grudgingly.

“Danael.”

Something about that sounded oddly wrong to Aislin, but Rhone simply nodded.

“Then, Danael, what causes such a strange trio to brave the forest so near the Darkspring?”

The answering silence proclaimed it none of their business more clearly than words ever could, but something about the quality of that silence seemed to speak volumes to Rhone.

“The caves?” he said incredulously. “You intend to take a human into the caves?”

“If the human chooses to be a fool, then who am I to stop her?”

“I suppose I should tell you,” Rhone continued casually, “that we, too, intend to plumb the depths of the Darkspring.”

Aislin could see her companion was startled by the news. “And you call me strange?”

Rhone shrugged. “The reward offered seemed worth the risk.”

“And what reward do you deem worthy?”

“A home,” Rhone said soberly. “Revenfell’s regent has promised us a territory of our own, where wildings can choose to carve out a life beyond this endless wandering.”

For once, Aislin’s night elf did not stiffen with disgust or frustration. His expression grew thoughtful, almost somber, as he considered Rhone’s words.

“As worthy as that may be, I will not abandon my path,” he said. “The dead deserve justice.”

“And I will not try to stop you,” Rhone returned, inclining his head with something like respect. “But”—his roguish grin returned—“neither will we give up. Whichever of us is first to reach the nest will have fairly earned his prize.”

Aislin’s heart sank. This band of night elves pursued the same goal and fought for a cause as meaningful as her own. What chance did she and her companions have?

But her night elf simply shrugged and sheathed his weapons in casual dismissal. “I should have thrown you harder, and then perhaps you’d have come to your senses. But your deaths will mean nothing to me. So long as you do not come between me and my goal, there will be no enmity between us.”

Rhone nodded as if in agreement. “And the woman? Would you be open to a trade, or is she intended as bait? She’s pretty enough, for a human. Seems a pity to make her nothing more than arantha fodder.”

Aislin almost laughed, despite her shock. The men of her village might not appreciate her, but this night elf thought her pretty enough, for a human. Pretty enough for what purpose exactly? She wasn’t sure she wanted to find out, but at least he wasn’t calling her short and dirty.

“You go too far,” her companion growled. “We do not trade in living beings, as you well know, wilding. Do not attempt to provoke me again.”

Rhone only grinned and turned his feral, one-eyed gaze on Aislin. “Do you wish to be free, little one? Your protector is quite fierce, but I would risk another battle if you are held against your will.”

It was her companion’s turn to laugh, this time with actual amusement. “Her? Held against her will? More like attached herself to me like a sapleech and refuses to let go.”

But Rhone continued to hold Aislin’s gaze, and despite that roguish grin, there was something steely and quite serious in his green eye.

“Human?”

She smiled and stepped out from behind her companion. “Thank you, but I am well. It is indeed by my own choice that we are on this road together.”

“Then we will take our leave,” Rhone said, offering a peculiarly dignified bow. “Though perhaps not for long, eh?” His lips quirked up again, and in the blink of an eye, both he and his companions had vanished into the trees.

CHAPTER 11



Tal remained motionless for a handful of breaths after the other wildings left the clearing, making every effort to cool his anger, bank his curiosity, and collect what few coherent thoughts he had left.

The human, too, remained silent and still, whether out of caution or shock he could not quite tell.

It was Cuan who broke the silence, whining once before crossing the clearing to butt his head against Tal's chest.

"Don't be pathetic, old friend," he murmured, stroking the wolf's ears. "We both know you were only toying with them."

Cuan laughed with his eyes and turned to the human, sniffing her as if to determine whether or not she was injured.

"I'm fine," she said, somehow correctly interpreting the dreadwolf's concern. "I don't think it meant to hurt me. They were all playing some sort of ridiculous game."

Except for the dagger. That final strike had been too close for comfort—nearly aimed at his back before the human intervened. Had she been trying to push him out of the way?

Tal turned to glower down at her. "Why did you practically throw yourself in front of that dagger? If you cannot manage even the smallest degree of self-preservation, don't expect me to waste my efforts in a useless attempt to save you."

But the human seemed unintimidated by his disapproval and merely glowered back. "You're welcome. Remind me

never to help you again. And while we're asking questions, why did *you* lie about your name?"

Tal was hard-pressed to contain his surprise. "What makes you think that was a lie?"

"It sounded wrong." The human's scowl only grew. "What is your real name, night elf? I'm tired of not knowing what to call you in my head, and if I'm to be surrounded by more than one night elf, I can't keep calling you that, can I?"

He didn't even decide to tell her. The word escaped his lips before he could call it back. "Talyn." Just like the story of Lani's death, it simply burst out of him in spite of his determination to keep his distance.

At least she didn't know what that gesture would have meant to another night elf. A human could not possibly understand why his people guarded their names and only gave them to those they respected.

The human's lips parted slightly as if in surprise, then her eyes softened as she looked up at him. "Talyn," she repeated. "Thank you. Do you think... Could you maybe call me Aislin, instead of 'human?'"

"Why?" he countered coolly. "There is only one of you, so it isn't as if you can be confused with another. And is it a common practice among humans to name the creatures they know are only fated to die?" It was cruel, and he knew it, but what was he to do when she looked at him with those soft eyes that reminded him so much of Lani?

"Yes!" The human nearly shouted the word, her expression mired somewhere between hurt and frustration. "It is! And I don't mean just cows or chickens. We all have names, Talyn. And every one of us will die, some sooner rather than later. But that doesn't stop us from living, or from choosing to care about those who may be taken from us."

As ridiculous as she was fierce. Despite his frustration, Tal could not quite smother a strange surge of... Was it memory? Longing? It was a ghost of some other time and place that left

him feeling bereft. Wishing for... what? His sister? His grandmother? Someone who cared whether he lived or died?

Was that why he'd told her his story? Given her his name? For fear that no other living creature would remember it if he died in the depths of the Darkspring?

Whatever his reasons, it was an empty and meaningless gesture. If he died, the human would die with him, and such sentimentality would be pointless.

If he died, then she would die with him... Why did that thought fill him with such discomfort and unease?

"We should go," he said brusquely.

The human turned away, throwing up her hands and muttering under her breath, softly enough that she probably believed he could not hear her.

"...most unreasonable, pigheaded, impossible..."

Her words were angry, but her tone was pure disappointment.



They made camp under the first blinding rays of the sun, in a hollow barely hidden beneath a rocky bluff. A narrow creek made its cheerful, burbling way past, forming a tiny, shallow pool not far from where Tal dropped his pack. As their camp took shape around her, the human sat near the pool's edge, arms wrapped around her knees, silently gazing into the crystal-clear water.

Humans were of the day, so of course she would be struggling to adapt to an entirely new rhythm of sleeping and waking. And yet, adapt she must, or she would be sleepy and sluggish when the worst predators came looking for a meal.

Once they entered the caves, she would need to be doubly alert, even if it was unlikely to prolong her life longer than a few moments.

Wait... When had he decided to take the human into the caves with him? Before meeting Rhone, Tal had simply been postponing the inevitable—waiting for the most opportune moment to send her back.

He could even have sent her with Rhone. The strange wilding had all but threatened to steal her, and he'd seemed honorable enough, despite his habit of wandering the forest attacking strangers for sport.

So why had Tal's first instinct been to protect the human rather than ridding himself of her presence as quickly as possible?

For that matter, why had he been so angered by her attempt to save him?

It was unlikely that she'd realized what was happening when Rhone and his pack attacked, unless humans, too, made a habit of testing themselves against the razor edge of another's steel. So perhaps Tal had simply been annoyed that she'd nearly gotten in the way of a blade meant only to test his reflexes.

Unless... Unless he wasn't angry with her at all. But that was absurd. What other feelings could he possibly have for a human who had come crashing into his life without warning, bringing nothing but danger and memories Tal wanted to forget?

So he threw himself into readying for the day, building up the fire and cooking the young peccora that Cuan dropped at his feet after a successful hunt.

The human returned to the fire in silence and ate after offering a nod of gratitude. Then she wrapped herself in her threadbare cloak before curling up and pretending to sleep.

Tal knew she was pretending because her breathing did not change, except to include a few tiny, hiccuping sounds he suspected might involve tears.

But he refused to feel any regret over those tears. He could not possibly have tried any harder to convince her not to come. And even if he'd felt remorse, he could not imagine a worse

brand of comfort than whatever he might be able to offer. Even Lani had laughed when he tried. Told him he was better off spending his energies scowling and killing things. But still, his attempts had made her laugh instead of cry, which meant that in some strange way, he'd been successful. Or perhaps she'd merely been pretending in order to make *him* feel better...

“What is that?”

Tal turned at the sound of alarm in the human's voice. She was sitting up and staring at him with a slightly angry expression.

“Your back.”

Tal flexed his shoulders and felt the sting of what was probably a slice from one of the wildings' blades. Nothing serious, but likely messy. Somehow he hadn't even noticed the wet trickle of blood down his spine.

“It's nothing,” he said shortly, with a surge of irritation at the need to wash and mend his shirt.

“It is most certainly *not* nothing,” the human shot back, throwing off her cloak and approaching him with a dark scowl that failed to conceal the redness of her eyes and nose. “Turn around.”

When he didn't move, she grabbed his arms, and Tal was so startled that he actually turned when she pushed him.

And then all he could feel was her small, cold hands on his back, peeling away the fabric of his shirt and pressing her fingertips gently against the edges of his wound.

It hurt. So much more than he'd imagined it could hurt. Not simply because she was pulling at torn muscle and skin... No, her touch was gentle but firm and somehow confident. Not meant to injure or make him feel small.

No one had touched him like that since Lani died.

He froze under her fingers, and then she froze too, as if she'd suddenly realized what she'd done. He heard a deep, shuddering breath.

“You need stitches.”

“I have survived far worse without them,” he said coolly. “And while I have many skills, I cannot turn my arms backward. Tend to your own worries, human, and allow me to tend to mine.”

“Damned if I will,” she snapped, and her tone whipped him around to look at her sharply in the brightening morning light.

Her blue eyes were snapping with anger. “I might be weak and useless in a fight, but you’re as big a fool as I am if you won’t let me help you with something I’m actually good at.”

Tal felt his eyebrows rise slowly. “You’ve actually stitched a wound before?”

“Yes!”

He had no idea why he should be so surprised. He knew nothing of humans—perhaps they fought one another constantly, and this was simply a normal part of human education.

“Very well.” He hadn’t meant to agree, but... He knew the feeling of helplessness. Knew what it was to feel incapable of changing the misery around him. And it was such a small thing—one that might even help him heal faster. Assuming she didn’t simply wish to stab him with the needle the moment his back was turned.

Tal dug into his pack until his fingers closed around a soft little bundle of cloth and thread and two tiny bone needles. Lani’s sewing kit.

No, just a sewing kit. He could not continue to torture himself with such memories.

“Here.” He dropped the bundle into the human’s hands, then pulled his ruined shirt off and seated himself on a nearby rock. “Might as well get it over with.”

“Do you want to die?” the human said, glaring at him with what looked startlingly like contempt. “We have to clean the wound first. I’m not stitching you up like that.”

Somewhat bemused by her sudden air of command, Tal helped build the fire high enough to boil water, then watched as she cut yet another strip off her skirt and folded it into a pad.

“This will hurt,” she said coolly, then proceeded to clean his cut so meticulously, he could have sworn she scraped bone.

Tal bore the procedure, teeth gritted, wondering whether he should tell her that night elves did not usually bother with such things. Perhaps they healed faster than humans or did not succumb to infections so easily. Most had access to healers who used magic to hasten their work. But whatever the case, he still said nothing as she worked, her fingers cool against the angry flesh around the wound.

“I don’t have enough knowledge to make a living,” she said as she worked, “but I’ve spent a fair bit of time with the healer in our village. He taught me to forage for herbs, make poultices and tisanes, and to deal with basic injuries.”

Shadows help him, she was trying to make *conversation*.

“I don’t need a distraction,” he muttered.

“Well, maybe I do,” she said sharply, after which he heard the swift hiss of an indrawn breath. “Oh, just forget I said that.”

“Exactly how many people have you stitched up?” Tal asked, despite his reluctance to engage in pointless pleasantries.

“Including you?” She paused for the space of a few breaths. “Two.”

His shoulder jerked in reaction, and he felt a brief stab as the needle went awry.

“Hold still,” the human commanded sharply. “I might not be a healer, but this is still better than nothing. And I’ve sewn up a great many holes in clothing, so it isn’t as if I don’t know what to do with a needle.”

After another pause, she added, “The only other person I’ve done this for... was my father.”

And that, he supposed, was his cue to ask polite questions, but he'd never been much good at that. Lani had chattered enough for the both of them. In this situation, she probably would have said something like...

"How did he die?" Tal almost winced as those words escaped. Lani would definitely not have said any such thing. But once the human mentioned her father, he'd wondered. Surely if the man were still alive, he would have come here himself instead of sending his daughter.

"He's *not dead*," she said, with a fierce denial that told him she'd fought long and hard to cling to that belief. "He's... Oh, it's complicated."

Tal bristled for no reason he could quite fathom. "You've said those words before, human. Do you consider all night elves to be uneducated barbarians, lacking the capacity to understand anything more complicated than bloodlust?" What was he doing, encouraging her to keep talking? It wasn't as if he wanted to know anything more about her. The less he knew, the less likely he would be to experience pain or compassion when the inevitable moment of her death came.

"That's not why!" The human's fingers stilled for a moment. "It's just... a long story."

Tal breathed a sigh of relief at his narrow escape, but then she seemed to decide it wasn't so long after all.

"My mother was a seer." Her grim tone gave those words a weight that seemed out of proportion to their simplicity. "I don't know if there are those among night elves who can see the future, but that gift ran in our family for five generations, handed down from mother to daughter. Over the years, our liege lord came to rely on my grandmother's and then my mother's predictions in order to ensure his prosperity. When I was born, as is usual among seers, my mother lost her ability, and everyone waited for me to develop the gift."

He couldn't even see her face, but he could feel her fingers tremble, hear the pain in her soft voice.

“Except I never did.” She paused for a moment and completed another stitch before continuing. “And then my mother fell ill, my grandmother was unable to care for herself, and with no more money from my mother’s foretellings, my father took up the sword and hired himself out as a mercenary.”

“It was not his original profession?” Tal asked, despite his intention to remain aloof.

“No, he was a traveling musician. He came to our village to play for Lord Dreichel, fell in love with my mother, and decided to stay. But Lord Dreichel was so angry to have lost his seer, he would neither hire nor pay him, and ensured that no one else within a day’s ride would do so either.”

Her liege lord had ruined an entire family over a twist of fate—despicable even by human standards.

“My father is no warrior,” she went on, “but he still managed to find work, and for a few years, everything was good. He came home every few months, and I learned to take care of things in his absence. But I could tell it was weighing on him. He had always been so full of love and laughter, and he never wanted to kill. But he did it for us, because there was no other way.”

And then he’d stopped coming home. She didn’t need to say the words for Tal to know what was coming, and he found he had enough compassion to spare her the pain.

“How long?”

“It’s been a little over two years.”

Too long, Tal thought. There were too many misfortunes that could befall one who lived by the blade.

“My mother and grandmother believe he’s never coming back, but I can’t accept that. I *won’t*.” Her tone was uncompromising, but Tal could hear the tears she was trying to hide. “He might have been hurt. Unable to travel. Gotten a job that took him too far away. But I would know if he’d died, and he would never abandon us.”

Three women alone, with no way to support themselves. Surely, even among humans, that would be cause for leniency. “And there is no one in your village willing to aid you?”

The human was quiet for a few moments. “I have friends, yes,” she said finally, but that pause told its own story. “And a few did offer to help. But they all have their own struggles, and I cannot hold their fears against them. We’re all at the mercy of our lord’s caprice, and life is difficult enough without wondering whether you might bring hardship upon yourself through a simple act of charity.”

Rage surged through him then, clear and cold. Because he understood all too well what she implied—understood it with the deep, visceral pain of one who’d lived with rejection and isolation since he was old enough to understand what those words meant.

Neither of the night nor the day. Unwelcome amongst both. Feared because of the unknown power he’d inherited—a power that, in the end, had proven useless. What good was power when it could not even protect the ones he loved?

The human had been isolated by her *lack* of magic, but the end result was the same. They feared the consequences of being close to her, and she’d paid the price for their cowardice.

Tal knew he could not permit this revelation to change how he saw her. Could not allow himself a moment’s weakness in which to...

“Finished,” she said, in a curt tone that suggested she might regret the story she’d shared.

Tal stood and swung his arm. He felt the pull of the stitches but no new pain.

“If you’re going to do that, you can forget healing without a scar,” the human warned. “Stop trying to undo everything all at once. You don’t have enough thread for me to fix all of the stupid things you’re likely to do to yourself.”

He turned and glowered down at her. The light was growing brighter, and he was tired, but not too tired to see her hesitation. Not too distracted to notice the way she bit her lip

and looked down, hoping for something he could not, would not give her.

But he was not entirely a monster.

“Thank you,” he said gruffly, dipping his chin in a nearly imperceptible nod.

Her eyes sought his, still waiting, and when he said nothing more, she straightened and turned back to her spot nearer the fire. Wrapped her cloak around her and curled up on the ground, her back to Tal.

Who was left with the unaccountable feeling that he had somehow failed.



Many hours later, Tal awakened from unpleasant dreams. He pulled his hood away from his face just as the last purple shades of dusk were fading from the sky, giving way to the endless dark. Beneath the trees, the colors of night were just winking into existence—purple lichen peeking out from beneath the moss, the dark red veins of a bloodwing vine, and the bright golden sparks of shadowsprites, flitting here and there with careless abandon.

Cuan lay beside the shallow pool with his chin on his paws, ears twitching as those tiny sprites occasionally darted too near his head. Around the edges of the pool, darklilies were just beginning to open, releasing a delicate perfume along with a pearlescent light, while tiny white fish darted through the clear water. Night-blooming flowers studded the moss around the water's margins, even as the stars seemed to bloom in answer overhead.

And in the midst of that oddly peaceful scene, the human bathed her feet, with her skirts tied above her knees and her dark hair falling unbound past her shoulders. She even smiled a little, in defiance of the darkness around her and in spite of the dangers she faced. Somehow, she could still find joy in that simple moment of peace.

Tal blinked, and for a moment, the woman in the pool seemed to have long white hair, and her delighted laugh rang out across the water as she tried to splash him...

He slammed his eyes shut.

“Talyn?” The human sounded concerned. As if she’d somehow seen his pain through that one simple response.

But he refused to be pitied by anyone, and especially not by a human. He could not afford to let her see the untreated wound that still lurked just out of reach. The agony that would continue to haunt him until he’d finally avenged his sister’s death.

“Did you stop to think of what might be lurking in that pool before you decided to go wading?” Tal demanded.

He opened his eyes again to find the human staring at him with what he assumed was frustration.

“I can see the bottom,” she said coolly, “and the water doesn’t even come up to my knees. I’m not sure why you sound so angry about it, considering how many times you’ve assured me that *something* is going to kill me.”

Their eyes locked, and hers seemed to flash fire, even though Tal knew perfectly well that human eyes could not glow with magic. Apparently, he’d completely lost the ability to intimidate her.

“Then perhaps I was merely hoping you would save your death for the caves,” he growled, “when it might do some actual good.”

Even *he* knew that those words had gone too far.

Cuan swiveled his head and flattened his ears in response, and the human looked as if he’d slapped her.

“I understand that you despise me,” she said quietly. “But why must you be cruel? What do you gain by it?”

He gained nothing. Those words were simply another self-inflicted wound—a way of ensuring that the original gaping hole in his heart would never heal. He could never allow himself to forget what happened when he cared too much.

But however dark those places in his own heart might be, what right did he have to carve similar wounds for another?

With a scream like an injured child, a pale, ghostly creature suddenly exploded out of the darkness, its wide white wings beating wildly at the air.

The human screamed, flailed, and fell backwards with a splash.

Tal immediately forgot that the water was only knee-deep and that there was nothing in it that could hurt her. He moved without thought, snatching her out of the pool as Cuan snarled at the harmless croaker bird.

The human shivered in his arms, dripping water all over both of them, her eyes wide and her face as white as the bird's wings.

"It will not harm you," Tal said. "They are territorial, so it was trying to frighten you."

"It succeeded." Her teeth were chattering with fright as much as with cold. "But I'm all right now. You can put me down."

But he didn't. His arms tightened for a moment before he forced himself to relax his jaw and look at her.

"Aislin," he said, and she instantly went still in his arms. "I am... sorry."

CHAPTER 12



*A*islin froze, literally and figuratively. Thoughts swirled and mingled behind her eyes, then died away unsaid as she stared at Talyn, whose amber eyes were much too close to hers.

She was wet and freezing and bedraggled, but he was touching her with something that wasn't quite disdain, which meant that she was also hotter than a blacksmith's forge.

Memories of that morning assailed her, with a vision of the moment he'd stripped off his shirt without warning. She'd nearly lost her nerve when confronted by his extremely unclothed torso.

But it had been her only chance. Her one opportunity to show him that she was more than useless baggage who constantly needed protecting and then fell apart in pointless tears the moment a battle was over.

So she'd somehow kept her tone cool and her touch light and had not stopped to stare at all those muscles that lay right there under her fingertips—warm and smooth and firm beneath that silver skin.

The blade had cut across the back of Talyn's shoulder, nearly to his spine, but fortunately, had not sliced deep enough to damage anything vital. At least, so she hoped. Old Man Eben had taught her to stitch minor wounds, but she really had no knowledge of what, exactly, lay beneath the skin.

The surface typically told stories enough, but Talyn's told her nothing. All she could read was the fury that drove him—a

fury anchored by the unhealed wound of his sister's death and the unyielding desire for revenge.

He did not look furious now. Only perplexed. A furrow creased the space between his brows as he looked down at her... waiting.

Oh, yes. He'd apologized.

Apologized.

Right after he said her name, and it was those two simple syllables that seemed to have driven every rational thought from her head.

"I... You..."

One of his eyebrows lifted quizzically.

If she didn't manage to respond soon, he was probably going to throw her back into the pond.

"Thank you," she murmured, her lips barely moving.

He was looking at her so oddly. As if he had no idea what to say or do next, let alone how he'd ended up with her in his arms, dripping pond water all over both of them.

Cuan huffed and flopped back down on the moss, breaking the tension.

Talyn turned and strode towards the remains of the fire without setting her down.

"I'm not hurt," she said tentatively.

"But you will be if you don't dry off." His customary glower seemed to be returning.

"We're both wet," she pointed out. "And we don't have time for a delay. Not if there are others after the same prize."

"And how are we to outmaneuver them with you sneezing so loudly that everything from here to the border can hear you?" he demanded.

When she didn't answer, he set her down. The motion was quick and businesslike, but Aislin thought she felt one hand remain beneath her elbow until she was steady on her feet.

Had he actually meant that apology? And would he continue to use her name, or would he revert to calling her “human” the moment he was annoyed with her?

Holding one hand out towards the smoldering ashes, Talyn tilted his head slightly and glowered just a little bit harder. Flames leaped up an instant later, their warmth reaching Aislin’s face almost immediately.

So much magic. She’d never met any human mage who could do such a thing, but perhaps that sort of power was common among night elves.

Aislin found that she wasn’t quite brave enough to ask any questions about the apology, so she moved as close to the fire as she dared before voicing the next most pressing query on her mind.

“How far to the caves?”

Talyn shrugged. “We have only to find an entrance. The Darkspring runs deep beneath this entire area, so it is likely below us even now.”

Well, that wasn’t unsettling or anything. But Aislin could hardly lose her nerve at the idea of a cave full of monsters beneath her when she was trying to convince him to take her *into* it.

Turning her back to the fire so the wettest part of her skirt could dry, Aislin gazed into the forest and admitted to herself that despite her fear and the dread of her errand, this land was truly beautiful—monsters aside. Dark and mysterious and filled with creatures she had never imagined could exist... but beautiful all the same.

“It’s lovely,” she murmured aloud, as the golden sparks twinkled and luminescent lichen lit the scene with a mesmerizing purple glow.

“Perhaps.” Talyn’s reply seemed stiff and uncomfortable.

“When it isn’t trying to kill me,” Aislin allowed. “But it is so different from anything I’ve seen before. I did not expect the night to be so beautiful.”

“It is not always beautiful,” Talyn pointed out. “Sometimes, it is merely cold and uncaring. Do not envy the night simply because it is different.”

“I can appreciate it without envying those who possess it,” she replied, not turning around. “Though that is not always true, sadly.”

The pause was long before he asked, “And who do you envy?”

Aislin took a moment to consider the question. She had never really envied those who lived in the great house on the hill. Fine clothes and fancy food were all very well, but they had no hold on her desires.

“I think I most envy those who need not fight for everything they have,” she admitted. “Those who have never questioned whether their basic necessities will be met. It is difficult to hold onto hope or even consider the possibility of joy when you are scrabbling simply to survive.”

“And what good is hope?” Talyn responded, a little bitterly. “An illusion, more often than not, formed of wishes and dreams that turn to vapor when you cling to them too closely.”

“When you don’t have hope, you die,” Aislin returned softly. “At least on the inside.”

“Yes.”

Such a bleak word.

His next words were so quiet, she wasn’t sure he meant for her to hear them. “But at least then, nothing can hurt you.”

“And do you envy anyone?” Aislin was half afraid that he would growl at her for the impertinence of daring to ask such a personal question, but he seemed not to care.

“Perhaps one day I will feel such things again.” His tone told her what his words did not—he did not expect that day to ever come. “But I have felt next to nothing since my sister’s death—nothing but the need to avenge her. There is no one else to bear that burden. No one else to care that her existence

was so brutally cut short. When my entire life is bent on death, what need have I of any other feelings?”

Aislin almost couldn't bear the thought of such a desolate existence. Of knowing that even if you failed, no one awaited word of your failure. Of standing alone, staring death in the face, simply because you were too driven to stop. At least she had her family to return to, and the hope of a better future if she managed to survive.

What did Talyn have to hope for?

There seemed to be nothing to say after that. Once their clothes were dry, they broke camp in silence, Aislin sliding the hatchet into her belt and waiting while Talyn smothered the flames and retrieved his pack.

“I intended to seek out the main entrance to the cave,” he said, not looking at her as he spoke. “But given that we are not the only ones hunting for the arantha nest, I suspect that would be unwise.”

“Rhone did not seem like the sort to delay us unfairly,” Aislin noted.

“Rhone is a wilding,” Talyn said grimly. “And he has been offered something nearly unheard of among night elves. His desire to succeed is likely as great as ours, and I doubt he will hesitate to remove us from contention if he can.”

Talyn leaped gracefully onto Cuan's back and reached out his hand to Aislin. “We will stay close to the mountains and search for evidence of an unmapped entrance.”

Aislin put her hand in his and held her breath as he pulled her up to ride behind him once again. Somehow it was actually more awkward, not less, to find herself pressed so tightly against him after the confidences they'd shared.

“I'm sorry,” she murmured, trying to maintain at least some distance between them. “I do not want to disturb your wound.”

“I will be considerably more disturbed if you fall off and end up lost in the dark,” Talyn said, his voice gruff but curiously devoid of actual annoyance. “Hold on.”

So she did. As Cuan moved off at a trot, she wrapped her arms around Talyn's waist and tried to limit herself to the comfort of simply being close to another person. Of not feeling utterly alone.

It was not as easy as it should have been. It was almost too tempting to long for someone who would embrace her in return. To imagine a companion who welcomed her closeness instead of tolerating it as a necessary evil.

But allowing such dreams to take root would be unfair to both of them, so she focused instead on the sore muscles that insisted they couldn't bear another night of riding. On the feeling of Cuan's fur beneath her. And on the looming threat of the mountains breaking through the dark sea of forest. Did the moon make things appear bigger or smaller than they actually were? And did the size of the mountains matter when their true destination lay beneath those intimidating peaks?

They seemed to be traversing the shore of that strange sea, at the line where the trees broke against the mountains' flank. Every so often, they would pause while Cuan sniffed the air. Talyn, too, would close his eyes, clearly searching for something.

It was during one of these pauses that his eyes suddenly snapped open with a fierce, amber glow behind them.

"Truld," he murmured, followed by a word that Aislin didn't recognize but was clearly an oath judging by the tone in which it was uttered.

What had he said about the truld?

Her memory helpfully supplied the information that they were large, intelligent predators, and that they preferred to eat people.

"Is it close?" She hoped her voice wasn't shaking.

"The scent is fresh, so it was here recently. Perhaps it has already moved on..."

The trees to their left exploded with motion.

Cuan jerked beneath her, leaping agilely out of the way and almost unseating Aislin in the process. Only her grip around Talyn's waist saved her from flying off into the bushes.

But suddenly, Talyn was no longer in front of her. He was on the ground, crouched before the creature that had emerged from the woods, blades in hand and teeth bared as he stared up at his opponent.

Aislin took one look at the thing he faced and nearly threw up.

Like the trolls from a human bedtime story, it was man-shaped, with two arms, two legs, and a head, and it walked upright. But there the resemblance ended.

The truld towered over Talyn, probably at least twice his height, and slabbed with muscle. Its hide was pale and sprouted dark, coarse hair along its neck, back, and legs. And its face...

The monster's gaze shifted to focus on Aislin, and she instinctively recoiled. Eerily human, and yet not, it had a flat, wrinkled muzzle and a mouth so wide it could probably have bitten off her head without straining itself. The eyes... Those eyes were the worst. Something like intelligence stared back at her, but with a singular, focused intent. It was hungry, and she was the food it craved most.

Teeth suddenly fastened on the back of her clothing, lifting her up and dropping her on the ground. Cuan. He shoved her briefly with his muzzle, and then he leaped, at the exact moment that Talyn darted forward.

The truld let out an inhuman howl as they converged. It swiped viciously at the wolf with six-fingered hands bearing long, wickedly curved claws, but Cuan only darted away before circling around to snap at the back of the creature's neck. Despite its bulk, the truld twisted with surprising speed and threw the wolf off.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Talyn ducked under one swinging arm and sliced at the monster's chest. His attack

left a gaping wound, and the resulting bellow of rage probably deafened everything in a mile radius.

Blood poured down the truld's side, but its movements did not seem to slow. It merely shook its head, bared its hideous teeth, and charged, bearing down on Talyn like a bloodthirsty avalanche.

What could Aislin possibly do? She hated standing there useless and afraid, but this foe was entirely beyond her and her pitiful hatchet.

Talyn suddenly shot her a fierce look and cried, "Go!"

He was commanding her to *leave*? The thought pierced her with horror, but Aislin was not a fool. If she could do nothing to help, the best course of action was to make herself less of a target, no matter how much it frightened her to be alone in the dark.

So she went, racing away from the trees and up the side of the mountain as quickly as her aching muscles could carry her. Her breath came in labored gasps, only in part from exertion. The choking pressure of fear also weighed on her chest as she wondered whether it was the last time she would see Cuan or Talyn. Whether they faced an opponent beyond even their combined strength.

The truld was everything humans imagined when they spoke of this land in hushed, frightened tones—a creature of darkness, hunger, and teeth. It was the very stuff of nightmares, and it *would* eat her without the slightest hesitation.

So she did not stop. She did not even pause except to search for handholds as she scrambled up the rocky incline like a goat, ignoring everything except the need to reach safety. Her hands tore and bled, but she could not rest—not until her breath gave out, and she looked behind her and realized she could no longer hear the sounds of battle.

She almost called out for Talyn, but... what if he'd lost the fight? A jolt of pure terror shot through her at the thought. If

Talyn was dead, the truld would come after her, and any sound would only alert the monster to her position.

If Talyn was dead, she was alone. If Talyn was dead, he would never growl at her again. Never ride Cuan through the forest like they were one creature instead of two. Never achieve his revenge so he could finally live free of its weight. Never...

Aislin slammed the door on those thoughts. Surely he could not die so easily. He was powerful and deadly, with magic beyond her comprehension. And he had Cuan. But the thing they faced had been enormous, with strength and cunning far beyond the usual predator.

What if it had killed him? What if she'd left him to his death by running away to save herself?

No, she'd done the right thing. She knew that. Staying would only have made things worse. Talyn would have been forced to worry about protecting her instead of focusing on the battle. But what now?

Perhaps the battle was over. Perhaps the truld was already dead, and Talyn was even now following her up the mountainside. But there was no sign of pursuit, no glow from the wolf's golden eyes. The night remained empty and still, and Aislin felt a swell of panic at the silence. If something had happened to them, how could she go on?

Wavering with indecision, she took a step to the side, and her foot met only empty air. One moment she was searching the moonlit landscape, hoping for any sign of white hair or glowing amber eyes, and the next, she was plummeting sideways into darkness.

Something struck her as she fell, driving the air from her lungs. Aislin shut her eyes and curled her arms around her head just before her whole body jolted against a hard surface. A cry of agony escaped her as she slid down some steep and rocky slope, farther and farther, until she finally came to a stop against what felt like a stone wall.

For the first few moments, she struggled to breathe. From the pain in her chest, it seemed likely her ribs had been broken by the fall.

But after a few more shallow, panting breaths, the pain eased somewhat, so she tried to move.

Even the tiniest motion hurt. Aislin opened her eyes cautiously, wondering whether she'd fallen off an unseen cliff, but... there was nothing to see.

The world had gone utterly dark. Feeling around frantically, Aislin encountered only stone beneath her hands—rough, unbroken stone and unrelenting darkness.

A fresh surge of panic rose in her chest, choking her with its intensity. Had she been blinded by a blow to her head?

But no. There was something there—a light, high above her. It was only a faint glow, like moonlight breaking through a tiny tear in the darkness, but it made her situation grimly clear.

She'd fallen through an unseen hole into an entirely different world—one made of darkness and stone. Somehow, she'd accidentally found a way into the Darkspring Caves.

But now she was alone, with no magic, no light, no food or water, and no companions. And unless she could find a way to climb up to that tiny sliver of moonlight, she also had no way out.

She would simply have to find one.

Filled with the urgency of her need to escape, Aislin sat up. Or at least, she tried, but there was not enough room. Her head met stone, and the crack it made against her skull was the last thing she remembered before succumbing to the darkness.

CHAPTER 13



Tal's first odd thought was one of gratitude. The human hadn't questioned him, hadn't stopped to complain that she could be helpful. When he told her to go, she ran, as if she knew her presence would be more of a distraction than a help.

His second thought was to wonder why she would be a distraction for *him*. If she'd stayed, the truld would have focused on her as easy meat and made his own job simpler.

And his third thought was composed chiefly of swearing, as the truld caught him with the edge of a backhand swing. He'd sent the human away, yet he was *still* not focused on the fight.

Even for Tal, a truld was worthy of respect. Thankfully, they were solitary creatures, but night elves still typically confronted them in groups of five or more. Their incredible strength made them difficult to bring down, and their hides were tough enough that even the sharpest blades required a great deal of force to punch through to the vital organs beneath.

But not Tal's. He had only to focus and rely on Cuan to keep the creature at bay.

As he had done with the renders, Tal opened his mind until he could sense the silver inlays along his blades. This time, however, he flooded them with power, sending his magic pulsing along their edges until they grew bright enough to make him wince.

Shadows fled. The truld howled and flung up an arm to shield its eyes. Cuan leaped and fastened his jaws around the truld's throat, while Tal darted behind it, his glowing blades slicing deep across the back of his opponent's legs.

The truld bellowed and crumpled to the ground, unable to stand with the tendons behind its knees sliced through. Cuan released it and darted away as Tal planted one foot and leaped up, his second foot landing in the center of the truld's spine. One more step, and then he buried his blades in the back of his opponent's neck, severing its spine and nearly separating its head from its shoulders. The creature crashed to the ground, face down, limbs twitching, and Tal took a moment to embrace the fierce exultation of victory.

This was always where he felt most alive—this moment when power and practice converged in harmony and made him feel whole.

Every bit of his magic—both of the night and the day—had somehow been dedicated to the dance of battle. He could not shift, but the razor edge between life and death still sang to him, and for years, he had believed himself all but invulnerable. No one had beaten him with a blade since he was seven years old, when he had first learned what his magic could do. It guided his hands, directed his steps, and even whispered in his ears of what his opponent would do next.

But then, even with all of his power and magic, Lani had been taken away in a single instant. There was no armor, no skill, no magical gift that could have protected his heart from that kind of blow.

And yet, the blades still sang, and the lure of battle still called. He could no more have denied it than he could have denied his love for his sister, even though, for the rest of his life, he knew that any victory would have a bitter edge.

He would never win a fight without remembering that single loss.

Loss...

He needed to find Aislin. He'd told her to run, and she'd obeyed, but God of Shadows only knew where she'd gotten to, or what other monsters might happen upon her while she waited alone in the dark.

"Cuan." The wolf tilted his head, golden eyes intent. "Find her."

The dreadwolf did not hesitate. He turned to the moonlit mountainside, scented the air, and took off.

Tal hesitated only for as long as it took to clean his blades and retrieve his pack from the ground where he'd flung it. Then he was off, running up the slope in Cuan's wake.

She wouldn't have gone far. The battle had been swift, and wherever she'd gotten to, she couldn't hide from Cuan's nose.

But Tal had been running for only a few short minutes when he saw Cuan up ahead, sniffing the ground and going in circles, his ears flattened in confusion. When he spotted Tal, the dreadwolf whined and sat down as if to say, "Your turn."

Had she come this far only for something to drag her off?

Tal studiously ignored the fear that mounted as he searched the ground for any sign of a struggle. Nothing was disturbed, and there was no blood...

Except for a few dark smears on a rock. They were small, as if from a minor injury—something she could easily have sustained just by climbing the hill. It didn't mean she was mortally wounded.

Cuan yelped, a sharp, worried sound, but Tal refused to acknowledge it. The human was here somewhere. He would have heard her screams if something had hurt her.

But in spite of his resolve not to believe the worst, his breath still caught in his lungs. His pulse began to race, and a half-remembered pain seemed to cut him from the inside out.

No. He would not allow himself to suffer that way again. He did not care enough about what happened to the human to feel that kind of pain, so he would look until he found her, and then they would go on their way.

But she simply wasn't there. Tal made a circle around where Cuan stopped, and there was no indication she'd gone further up the mountain, either willingly or unwillingly. If something had taken her, Cuan would have been able to follow its trail.

As he surveyed the mountainside yet again, worry took root in Tal's chest, a sickening ache that he could not seem to quell with mere reason or by telling it he didn't care.

Suddenly Cuan's ears pricked, and his head turned to the side. He leaped up and buried his nose in the dirt behind a rocky outcropping, whining frantically and scrabbling with his paws.

Tal raced to his side and looked down, finally spotting a narrow crack in the ground that gave way to dark, empty air.

It was a fissure leading deep beneath the mountain. An entrance to the Darkspring, perhaps? Had Aislin entered it in an attempt to hide? Or worse, had she fallen?

There was no way to know just how deep that fissure ran.

Tal looked around until he found a gnarled bush, hacked off a stout limb, and trimmed the leaves. His magic was depleted, but not so much that he couldn't set the branch on fire with a moment's thought. When it burned bright and hot, Tal leaned over the opening and dropped it in, tracing the light as it fell, bounced off something in the dark, and then rolled. So far down. The bright spark of light grew tinier and tinier until it finally rolled out of sight or went out.

If she had fallen in...

Cuan seemed convinced that Aislin was down there somewhere. He barked, and the sound reverberated into the crevice, echoing back without an answer. She would have heard him if she were conscious. If she'd survived the fall.

Tal couldn't afford to involve himself any further. He'd warned her of the danger, and she'd chosen to accompany him anyway. He still had a goal—a prize that would not wait—and the human had been nothing but a distraction.

And yet... and yet...

Just as it had with the renders, the wall around his heart cracked and taunted him with a reminder that it was not yet fully extinguished. Not yet composed solely of ice and stone. Lani's ghost still haunted him, and she refused to let him walk away.

Except this time, it wasn't Lani's torn and broken form his mind showed him. Instead of white hair and silver skin, the hair was dark, and the torn flesh was lightly tanned. The shreds of clothing were of human make, and a hatchet lay beside her limp hand...

Cursing his weakness, Tal straightened and took his bearings. He needed to find another way into that cave. If Aislin had fallen, she would likely be unable to move. Unable to protect herself. Tal could not fit through that crack, and even if he could, the unpredictable drop might leave him in no better shape than she was.

Of the entrances he was familiar with, only one was unlikely to be used by anyone else seeking the aranthas' nest. It was farther away from his eventual goal, but it might leave him closer to where Aislin had fallen. And afterward...

He would deal with the consequences of his own foolishness after he'd found her. After he knew she was safe.

Cuan seemed just as anxious as Tal, and once he was mounted, they raced across the mountainside at a pace that should probably have terrified him. Their path took them over a ridge and back beneath the trees, which slowed their pace to a trot. Tal's heart pounded insistently with every delay, reminding him that the human might already be dead.

But if she was not, she would be injured and alone in the dark, with no food, no water, and no way of knowing which way to go. She probably believed he would leave her and go on. It was what he *should* have done. But one thought of her in terror and pain left him almost breathless, and then annoyed with himself for his own weakness.

It was nearly day when they reached the hole in the mountain—a small patch of darkness at the base of a cliff. It was shaded by trees that grew all the way up to the foot of the

overhanging stone, and the air that came out of it was slightly warm compared to the morning chill.

Tal dismounted and paused only to take Cuan's face between his hands, pressing his forehead to the spot between the dreadwolf's eyes. "I will do everything in my power to come back," he said softly. "Never doubt that, my friend. But if I do not, you must go. Live. Return home if you can."

Cuan growled and pressed closer. His lupine way of saying, "No." Dreadwolves did not break bonds easily, and after he'd already waited so long, Tal knew it would take a great deal for him to abandon his post now.

No, Cuan would likely stay until he died. For all that he was a wolf, his heart did not acknowledge the boundaries of time, and it was a weight Tal knew he would carry with him into the cave.

But Cuan could care for himself for now, and Aislin...

Shouldering his pack, Tal strode grimly forward and plunged into the eternal night of the Darkspring.



Thanks to his father's heritage, Tal could see just enough to make his way through the darkness unimpeded, though it did not make his path an easy one. Enough others had passed this way that there was a bit of a trail to follow, but it was rough underfoot, and the ceiling occasionally lowered to the point that he was forced to bend double in order to keep moving forward.

The mosses and ferns near the cave entrance soon gave way to bare rock, occasionally split by the gnarled roots of a tree that had burrowed deep beneath the ground in search of water.

From time to time, light dappled the floor from some small opening in the rock far above. Water, too, was relatively plentiful, trickling through cracks in the rock to create a home

for tiny creatures that coated the walls with an eerie purple light.

Other things lived in different parts of the cave. Larger, hungrier things. There were bats and salamanders and fish that swam in the underground lakes, and then there were the creatures that fed on them. Cave serpents occasionally hunted in daylight before dragging their kills underground to devour them. Wyverns nested in the upper levels and protected their eggs with fierce vigilance. And the wild cave aranthas outnumbered them all, living and hunting and multiplying in darkness, with very few predators who dared confront them.

On occasion, there were also night elf wildings who sought shelter in the caves and lived their lives far from any contact with their kin. Tal preferred not to encounter any if he could help it—they were usually strange and unpredictable, and might not respond well to a human in their territory.

Once he found her...

He dared make no plans. If Aislin was hurt, he would have to carry her out, and if she was not, they would simply find a new path to the aranthas' nest.

But how? He'd not thought that through with much specificity, and now that he was within the caves, the many difficulties of their errand presented themselves with grim clarity.

In his urgency to rescue Aislin, he'd acquired no additional reserves of food beyond what Vanadar had provided. Wrapped tightly in oilcloth, the unappetizing squares of nuts, berries, and dried meat would last for several days, but after that...

Water, at least, would not be a problem. There were sufficient sources within the cave that they would not die of thirst, but Tal doubted the human would be willing to live on bats for the duration of their sojourn. And a human would not be able to see as he did. If only Vanadar had bothered to equip them properly, he might have given them a moonstone, but it was far too late to wish for such a thing.

So instead, Tal turned his attention to the magic within him. It had always been there—a brilliant ocean of power waiting for his command—but only recently had he begun to wonder whether it might be used for anything other than death.

He'd learned early that he was gifted with weapons and devoted himself to that gift with single-minded intensity. When he was young, all he cared about was proving himself before his peers—showing them that he was as good or better than they were and did not deserve their derision. Later, he'd used his gift to protect himself and Lani and ensure their survival in the wilds. Brute force had always been enough, up until that day when no amount of power could turn back time or wash away his guilt and grief.

The truth was, he'd been lazy, and rarely bothered to use his magic for anything more finicky than lighting campfires or purifying water. He had, on occasion, used it to find game, or search for enemies in the forest, but he'd never bothered to practice—secure in his conviction that he could deal with whatever he might encounter.

Now all he could do was try—experiment with his magic until he discovered some way it could be used to find Aislin.

Shutting his eyes, Tal cast outward with his mind, letting a soft wave of power wash over the cave walls as he searched for a path. It worked, to a point. He could sense where the magic rebounded from the stone and where it continued into the darkness, suggesting tunnels that led off in several directions. Without much more to go on, he chose the tunnel that seemed most likely to head towards the place where Aislin had fallen.

But once he was on the right path, would he be able to identify the bright spark of Aislin's life in contrast to any other living things nearby? In the forest, one spark of life looked much the same as another. But here beneath the ground, surrounded by barren rock, would it be simpler?

Releasing another surge of power, Tal allowed his senses to linger on the walls of the tunnel he had chosen. If he focused, he could sense the thin green filaments of tree roots

and hazy blobs of energy where the glowing purple algae clung to the walls, but his ability to discern anything else quickly faded as the magic receded into the distance.

Perhaps when he was closer. For now, he would simply have to keep moving in what he hoped was the right direction.

Twice, he was forced to turn around and take a new tunnel when the path shifted or was blocked. He made one harrowing climb down a nearly vertical wall, fell twenty feet or more when the ground gave way beneath him, and scraped through spaces that looked barely wide enough for a child. All this while outside the cave, the day wore on, and fatigue pulled at him like a weight dragging at his limbs.

He knew he had to be getting close. Even if he was in the wrong tunnel, his sense of direction told him he was in the correct general area.

Tal was about to send out yet another wave of magic when some undefined sense alerted him. Whether it was a barely discernible movement of air or the tiniest whisper of something brushing against the rock of the tunnel, it stood the hairs on his neck on end and triggered a reflex that ended with his blades in his hands.

“Is someone there?” A quavering voice called out of the darkness, first in the common human tongue used by traders, then in elvish.

Tal knew that other night elves occasionally made their home in the cave, but this was far beyond the entrance—too isolated and dangerous an area for anyone to frequent. What would another night elf be doing this deep? Unless, like Aislin, they had fallen and could not find their way out.

“Yes.” Tal answered in the human language but did not lower his blades. “I’ve come seeking a lost companion. What brings you here?”

He heard a low moan of pain or grief.

“I’ve lost my way.” The voice sounded old, weak, and female. “Came in search of mushrooms and twisted my ankle. Now I cannot find my way out again. Will you help me?”

A scowl twisted Tal's lips. He could not afford delays, but however urgent his errand might be, he was not a complete monster. "I have my companion to find, but you are welcome to accompany me." He tried to disguise his impatience as he moved towards the sound of the voice.

Just ahead, at the narrowest part of the tunnel, he saw her—a miserable bundle of rags, huddled against the wall, mouth drawn as if in pain.

She was indeed old... perhaps even ancient. Her silver hair fell in braids past her waist, and her skin bore the dark patina that only appeared in the last year or two of life. And her eyes... Those were solid white and stared sightlessly past him, listening for his approach.

How had she come to be here, lost and alone so deep in the Darkspring? Had she no family to care for her? Or was she a wilding like him?

"Here." Tal stowed his blades, knelt by her side, and took her slender wrist in a gentle grip. "Try to stand."

"Oh, you are a good boy," the old night elf said, lifting her face towards him in the dark. "Such a pretty boy, too." Her other hand lifted towards his face and stroked his cheek with an odd possessiveness. Her skin was calloused, her nails cracked and dirty. "Oh, so pretty. And so full of *magic*."

Feeling the first stirrings of alarm, Tal released her wrist and tried to rise, but the old woman reached out and snared him in a talon-like grip.

"So much shiny magic, and I am *so* hungry," she crooned. "Alone for so long, and now there is so much meat..."

Tal panicked.

He had not experienced such terror since he was a small boy, so when the impulse to flee took him, he reached for his magic to protect himself. But the moment he did so, the old woman pounced, sinking invisible claws into the bright swell of his power. He tried to free himself, but it was too late. His magic was already flowing out of him in a rush, robbing him of words, alertness, and even of light. He felt his knees hit the

uneven rocks of the path, saw two brightly glowing orbs before him, and then everything went dark.

CHAPTER 14



When Aislin finally awakened, it was to a number of unpleasant surprises.

First, she remembered the truld. Racing up the mountainside. Falling. Hitting her head in the dark...

She did not remember having her hands bound or being taken away from that dark, empty tunnel, but clearly, both had happened at some point.

At least, she thought with relief, she could see. She was still within the cave—in some small, isolated cavern—but the stone glistened with moisture, reflecting a softly pulsing purple glow from moss or fungus that clung to the walls.

After a few moments of blinking and straining, Aislin's eyes adjusted enough for her to realize that she was not in merely a "cavern." The small room in the rock looked as if it had been made into someone's home.

Bottles and baskets lined the walls in a somewhat haphazard fashion, while bundles of netting were hung from above, using rope that almost seemed to glow softly in the dim light. Off to one side of the room, a wooden chair sat beside a crude table made of stone, which held a knife and what appeared to be a pile of chopped roots or mushrooms. And when Aislin sat up, wincing at the pain in her head, she spotted a pile of blankets and bracken that was probably a bed.

Apparently, someone had rescued her. And yet, rescue might be the wrong word, considering that her hands were tightly bound and there was still dried blood on her hands and

face. It seemed that whoever had discovered her had simply dumped her here in whatever state they'd found her.

When she shifted to her knees, Aislin very quickly became aware that *everything* hurt. Her head, her ribs, her hip, both knees... That fall had done her no favors.

Was she a prisoner? If so, there was no use waiting on someone else to save her. Even if Talyn wanted to—which seemed unlikely—there was no possible way for him to know where she'd gone, let alone track her through miles of twisting cave tunnels. She was going to have to do this on her own.

Turning her attention to her bonds, Aislin lifted her wrists to her mouth and began to worry the knots with her teeth. The fabric was filthy and tasted foul beyond belief, but she had a strange feeling that it was a small price to pay for being free and well away before whoever owned this cavern returned.

Unfortunately, the knots were well tied, and she had only just begun to loosen them when she became aware of scuffling noises outside the cave.

Footsteps. Her captor might be returning...

But there was another sound, as of something large and heavy being dragged along the rough surface of the cave floor.

“Just a wee bit farther now. That's right.”

The voice startled Aislin, even though she'd known *someone* had to have brought her here. The newcomer sounded old and female, and she continued muttering for a few moments in what sounded like another language. Then Aislin heard a dull thud.

“That's it. Right there.” A sound like a blade ripping through cloth. Then something else—a sinister whisper unlike anything Aislin had ever heard. “A bit more, then. Nice and tidy. Safe. That's good.”

After a few moments of silence, those footsteps began moving towards the cave entrance.

Aislin tugged frantically at the knot around her wrists and felt the cloth begin to give just before someone entered the

cavern.

She froze. She did not want her captor to know she was awake. Not until she could determine whether they were a threat, or whether the feeling of dread weighing on her chest was simply her overactive imagination.

The first shape through the door was stooped with age. Long silver braids hung nearly to the floor as the old woman shuffled across the uneven stone to the table where the knife waited. A night elf, Aislin thought, though a very old one. Probably harmless. Perhaps she had only bound Aislin's hands out of caution.

The woman dropped something by the table—a bundle that landed with a strangely familiar clanking sound. “Ah, but that was the best meal we've had in years, Crow. So bright and delicious. So full of power. He'll last us for months, that one will.”

Aislin stopped breathing.

“Aye, don't worry, lovey. I'll be giving you the little one later. No magic on her. Just blood. I could smell it spilling on the stone where she fell. You'll eat, and soon enough.”

Who was the old woman talking to?

A second shape moved silently into the cave, at first only a murky shadow in the dim light. It was as tall as the old woman, but huge and velvety dark, gliding forward on... it couldn't be. Nothing that big could have that many legs.

Aislin blinked and begged her eyes to change what they were telling her, but they did not lie. Horror swelled as she absorbed the sight of a bulbous, swollen body suspended between eight arching appendages, each one tapping the floor as they folded themselves closer to fit in the tiny cavern.

The instinctive urge to scream sucked air into her lungs, but terror swallowed the sound.

She was dreaming. She'd never awakened after the fall, and none of this was real.

That thing... It was a spider. And it followed on the night elf's heels like a dog. It even wore... Was that a *harness*?

The dragging sound. They'd been speaking of a meal, probably some other poor lost soul they'd found in the cave and dragged home.

Just like they'd dragged her.

For one sickening moment, Aislin's imagination showed her bumping along the cave floor, wrapped in sticky white rope, towed by the monstrosity the old woman called Crow. It had probably touched her with those legs.

Somehow, she did not vomit. Not even when the old woman's words caught up with her, and she realized she was likely the "little one." The one with no magic. The one intended to feed her pet.

And the other prisoner who would last for months? He was meant to feed the old woman. "Full of power," she'd said...

The old night elf ate magic.

A shudder rippled down Aislin's spine. She refused to die like that, no better than a fly in a web. And yet, how could she escape? Once she left this cave, it would be utterly dark.

Perhaps if she could free the other prisoner. If it was a night elf, he could likely see well enough to find their way out.

If only Talyn... But no. She dared not waste time or energy wishing that he would find her. Even if he was the sort of person to come after her, there was no reason for him to stumble across this particular cavern by chance. And now that she was gone, he would doubtless continue on his solitary way, in relentless pursuit of the revenge he'd been promised.

And she wouldn't even blame him, except... She'd almost thought he was beginning to hate her less. He'd apologized. Even used her name. As if he finally saw her as a person.

But wishing and regret would only weigh her down. She had to save her strength to plan.

The only thing she'd had on her when she fell was her hatchet, and oddly enough, she could feel the wooden handle

beneath her hip. Why had the old woman not taken her weapon? Trying to remain mostly still, Aislin turned her head slowly and watched as the night elf moved about the cavern, fetching jars, preparing ingredients, and filling baskets while the... while her pet waited.

There was something odd about the way she moved, feeling each jar and touching the edges of the table as she went. Finally, she turned just *so*, and Aislin saw the dim purple light reflecting off blank white irises.

The old woman was blind. But she could smell blood, and no doubt could hear keenly as well, so escaping while she was still in the room was out of the question. Aislin would have to wait for her chance and hope that one presented itself before the monster could no longer wait for its meal.



It was cold, lying on that stone floor—cold and painful. Aislin had been lying as still as one dead for hours when the old woman finally seemed to finish her tasks. She turned to her pet and stroked the dark mass of its body as if it were simply an enormous dog.

“Off to gather bloodwing, my lovely. Come be my eyes, and when we return, you’ll feast.”

She picked up a bag, slung it over her shoulder, and shuffled out of the cavern. Aislin breathed a sigh of relief as “Crow” followed, folding himself tightly to fit through the narrow entrance before moving out of sight as silently as a shadow.

Aislin tried to swallow her instinctive terror at the sight of those many-jointed legs, but even when the creature was gone, she did not make her bid for freedom right away. The old woman’s hearing was likely to be quite acute, and if she were anywhere nearby, she would know the moment Aislin moved. So she waited, and as the minutes ticked by, she realized that fear held her even tighter than caution. If she made any sound, they might come back, and she could not face that again...

But she might not get another chance. Gritting her teeth, Aislin sat up and focused almost fiercely on the cloth wrapped around her arms. The knot was loose now, so it took only a few tugs before her hands were finally free. After rubbing them together briskly to restore warmth, she pushed herself into a crouch and bit back a scream at the pain from her injured ribs. They might even be broken, but it wasn't as if she could do anything about it. If she didn't move fast, that pain would be the least of her worries.

Staggering to her feet, Aislin steadied herself on the stone table until the cavern stopped spinning around her. Her head still pounded, and when she put her fingers to her temple, there was a lump covered in crusted blood. But that was another problem for later.

For now, what she needed was light. She could find no hearth or fireplace, but when she searched the walls for the source of that purple glow, she quickly determined that it was, in fact, alive and growing. Feeding off whatever nutrients were provided by the water trickling through the cracks.

Perhaps if she could carry it with her... Scraping with her fingernails produced a handful of a slightly spongy substance that oozed purple but still glowed fitfully between her fingers.

It would have to be enough. Scraping off another handful, then another, Aislin tossed them into a nearby basket, hugged it to her chest, and tiptoed out of the cavern.

Once beyond the confines of that small room, her makeshift lantern could only brighten the tiniest circle around her. Running was out of the question, but if she could get a sense of her surroundings...

Holding up the light, Aislin peered into the shadows in search of an exit, but the first thing she saw was piles of debris heaped up against the walls of a tunnel. The piles were composed of irregular white shapes, some long, some short, some large with rounded ends, and some nearly spherical...

Oh dear gods. If she'd eaten, her stomach would have revolted right then and there.

The edges of that tunnel were lined with bones. So many bones. Big and small, some human, some animal, they were a grisly, jumbled mountain range of death, mingled with one another as if they'd been discarded without thought or purpose.

How long had the old woman lurked here, snatching the unwary and feeding them to her pet?

Aislin would have fled in a blind panic, but she couldn't see well enough to risk it. She would simply blunder into some other dark corner, encounter some other arcane horror, and never find her way out. She needed a guide, which meant finding the prisoner the old night elf and her "Crow" had stowed nearby.

Clutching her basket with shaking fingers, Aislin peered into the shadows, past the piles of bones, into every crevice, until she finally found one corner that was different. A narrow opening in the stone had been blocked by numerous strands of shimmering white rope...

No, not rope—spider silk.

Drawing her hatchet from her belt, Aislin picked a cautious path between the bones, taking care to make no noise. Her light was already growing dimmer, so perhaps whatever it was could only maintain its glow while alive and growing. She had to work fast.

Setting down the basket, she removed the hatchet's sheath and sliced at the silken ropes, then barely swallowed a curse as the blade rebounded from the shimmering strands.

She was not going to cut through them with this blade. But she'd cleared enough spiderwebs from Brannic's attic to know that those strands would stretch. Perhaps she could find an opening...

There, near the bottom. Flattening herself to the cave floor, Aislin lifted the bottommost strand and stuck her head through. It was a tight fit, but she was determined and soon managed to wriggle her shoulders underneath. The thought of what had strung those silken ropes drove her onward, even

when the rocky floor tore at her dress and wrung new agony from her bruised ribs. She swallowed a few curses and stripped the skin from her elbows in the process, but before too long, she was through.

The light was dimmer in the tiny cavern beyond—only a few small patches of purple decorated the walls—but it was enough to see the body lying motionless on the floor, face down, wrapped in even more of that wretched silk thread.

It was definitely a night elf. His long white hair was half bound back, and she could see a sword still in its scabbard. Was he already dead? Aislin prayed not. After all, why bind him if he were dead?

With trembling hands, she grasped the night elf's sleeve and pulled, rolling him over until he landed on his back with a groan that echoed far too loudly in that tiny chamber.

“Shhh!” Without thinking, she placed a finger over the unconscious night elf's lips. She was still staring at his face in dumbfounded recognition when his amber eyes flashed open and locked with hers.

“Talyn.”

Shock, then relief, flooded those familiar eyes, followed by pain.

“Quiet,” she whispered hastily. “If they hear us, we're dead. She had me tied up so she could feed me to her pet!”

Pain became fury as Talyn attempted to move and realized he was bound. Slender strands of silk wrapped around his upper body, binding his arms to his torso, while several more encircled his lower legs.

“My dagger,” he said in a low voice.

“Steel won't cut it,” Aislin murmured. “It's... I know this sounds crazy, but this rope is spider silk!”

“Not spider—arantha,” he said with a quick shrug. “And my blade will suffice.”

For the space of a single breath, Aislin's brain slithered to a halt.

Arantha.

Spider.

Their task... to acquire wild *arantha* venom.

As if he could see inside her head, Talyn cursed and tried to sit up. “Dagger,” he said more urgently, and Aislin drew it from his belt without thought, mouth still open in shock. “Hilt in my hand,” he murmured.

The moment it touched his palm, it began to glow with a dim white light.

“Damnation.” He shook his head, eyes closed. “The witch drained me of nearly everything. But this will have to be enough. Take the blade.”

Aislin curled her fingers gingerly around the hilt.

“The magic will slice through the silk, but it will also slice through me,” Talyn cautioned her. “Be careful.”

Moving almost mechanically, Aislin grasped one of the sticky silken loops, slid the tip of the dagger beneath it, and pulled.

It parted without a sound, almost without effort, and a tiny seed of hope took root in Aislin’s heart. Two more strands, and then Talyn sat up, eyes glowing dimly, jaw clenched. His shoulders flexed, and the remaining loops of spider silk fell away.

Plucking the dagger from her fingers, he made quick work of the bindings around his legs and lurched to his feet, steadying himself for a moment against the wall.

Like Aislin, he still wore his weapons, but his pack was nowhere to be seen. Which meant they had no food. No way to cook, no salve for their numerous injuries...

Wait. The bundle the old woman had dropped...

“I think I know where your pack is,” she hissed.

Talyn nodded and moved towards the opening of the cavern, slicing through the imprisoning strands with one quick

motion. He peered into the corridor, muttering a quiet curse as he saw the bones.

Aislin followed, trying not to look at the grisly evidence, and gestured with her head toward the place where she'd first awakened. "On the floor near the table."

Talyn had just taken a cautious step through the doorway when Aislin heard something that nearly stopped her heart—the sound of shuffling footsteps in the dark.

"You were right, my Crow," a creaky old voice hissed. "The food is awake. Yours and mine. We must make haste!"

Talyn snatched his pack from the floor and darted back out into the corridor. "This way," he muttered, reaching out and grabbing Aislin's hand.

His fingers wrapped around hers, almost shockingly warm after the chill of the cave, and then he was pulling her after him into the dark.

It was too fast. They were careening down the passageway, and all Aislin could do was run and hope that her feet landed in a safe place. Her ribs ached, and her head pounded, but at least she was not alone.

Talyn had found her. Or maybe she had found him, but what did it matter?

The horror of what might have been choked her for a moment, but she swallowed it and continued on.

A few steps later, a stone turned under her foot, and she bit back a cry of pain.

"What is it?"

"I'm fine," Aislin gasped. "Just don't stop."

They didn't, and yet, she felt eyes on her back. Sensed a malevolent presence growing nearer.

"Talyn, I think—"

She tripped. Something snared her ankle, but Talyn still gripped her hand, and for a moment, it was as if she were being torn in two.

Aislin reached down to free herself and felt a silken rope. Looked behind her and up, up...into a forest of gleaming red eyes.

She couldn't even scream. Screaming required breath, and all of hers had been driven out of her by the fall and by sheer, unnatural terror.

Talyn let go of her hand, and for the merest instant, she thought he meant to abandon her. But then his sword swung up, glowing weakly in the darkness, and in the dim light, she saw his face.

He'd turned to confront the creature that had snared her, his lips drawn back in a silent snarl. Amber eyes narrowed with rage as he attacked, leaping past her to slice at those many jointed legs.

The creature sprang backwards, and Talyn followed, aiming his blade at the cluster of eyes. One of them winked out, and Aislin heard a hiss just before the sword's glow began to dim and then winked out entirely.

Her heart hammered in her throat as she heard scuffling in the dark, then a hand seized her arm.

"We have to run." It was Talyn, but his voice sounded off. Shaky, with fear or exhaustion. "My magic is all but gone, and I cannot hold that thing at bay for long with steel alone."

"And I can't see to run," Aislin said, her honesty leaving the acrid taste of fear on her tongue. "If you leave me, you'll have a better chance."

But the offer only seemed to enrage him.

"Do not test me, human!" Talyn snarled. "I will carry you if I have to." And he did. Swept her off her feet and continued to run.

In long ago daydreams, she'd imagined being swept off her feet just so, and saved from some enemy by a kind and handsome suitor.

This was *not* that dream. There was no relief, no safety, no admiring of his strength or courage. There was only the

unyielding surface of his chest beneath her injured ribs, the iron grip of his arms, and the harsh sound of his breathing. Only the sick certainty of danger that stalked them, and the bleak recognition that both of them were near the end of their strength.

And then, a few moments later, Talyn simply stopped, and Aislin felt him wavering in the dark before he set her down.

“Dead end,” he said, to her unspoken question, his voice grim as death.

When she quieted the harsh sounds of her own breathing and the hammering of her heart, Aislin could hear it—the rush of water far below them. They’d reached an underground river.

“Can we cross?”

“I don’t know. It is too wide to jump.”

Something hit her out of the dark, and then she saw Talyn’s sword again, glowing faintly, his jaw clenched with the effort.

Crow had caught up once more, and there was nowhere for them to go.

Aislin drew her hatchet from her belt and wondered whether it might be better to jump. Of all the ways she’d ever imagined dying, this had never been on the list. But then a flailing leg knocked her to the ground, and she jumped up to swing her hatchet with a desperation born of both terror and fury.

She didn’t want to die here. She didn’t want to be a meal for a monster, or have her bones added to that grisly collection far from the touch of sunlight.

So she swung with every bit of strength in her body, aiming straight for the place where that hideous leg joined its body.

It was almost easier than beheading a chicken. As the blade cleaved through the leg and left it hanging by a gruesome string of connecting tissue, Aislin reminded herself that spiders, no matter how big, did not have bones.

The monster seemed to pause for a moment to regard her as it curled in against the pain of her strike. And then, in the midst of its distraction, Talyn's sword bit deep, and yet another of its eyes went dark.

A horrible, burbling screech echoed through the cave, and Talyn turned to Aislin, his face barely visible in the waning glow of his blade.

"I'm done," he said hoarsely. "We will have to jump."

"We *what?*"

"Can you swim?"

"A little..." she started to say, but he'd already grabbed her around the waist, clamped her tightly to his body, and thrown them both into the dark waters below.

CHAPTER 15



The drop was not long, but the waters were icy, and the impact drove the breath from Tal's lungs.

But it also awakened the last of his senses from the sluggish uncertainty left behind by whatever the old woman had done to him.

He was still weak—weaker than he could ever remember being. Where the vast well of his power usually lay was now nothing more than a dark, hollow well of pain and frustration.

She'd stolen his magic. Lured him in and then somehow drained him of nearly every drop. All of the strength he took for granted—gone in an instant, leaving him at the mercy of a bent old woman who could barely walk.

It was Aislin who'd saved them both. His tenacious, impossible human, whose lack of magic probably meant the old woman had left her unguarded. Unnoticed. Because she had not considered her a threat.

It was a humbling revelation, but Tal could not stop to consider it while they were still fighting for survival. The current tugged and swirled, making it a struggle just to keep his head above water and maintain an iron grip on the back of Aislin's jerkin. He dared not relax his hold even for an instant—not when she could be so easily snatched away by the river and crushed against the rocks.

Searching the opposite side from where they'd jumped, he could see only a smooth, dark wall where the river had cut its way through the cave over centuries.

“There is no way out,” he called over the sounds of the water. “We will have to follow the river.”

“Just don’t lose me,” Aislin pleaded, and he could hear her teeth chattering with cold. “It’s so dark.” She probably felt helpless without her eyes, much as he did without his magic.

“I won’t,” Tal said grimly, just as the walls narrowed and the current became a swiftly rushing torrent that carried them inexorably along.

There had to be a bank somewhere—even the tiniest ledge that would allow him to pull them both out. But he could see nothing that promised safety, and the sound of the river only grew louder in his ears.

“Talyn?” Aislin sounded terrified. “What can you see?”

The roar intensified, and when he peered deeper into the darkness, he sensed only... the river’s end. The rushing waters simply dropped out of sight and disappeared.

“It’s a waterfall.”

Aislin’s cry of fear was swallowed by the roar of the water. He felt her fingers scrabbling for a hold on his arm and tried to pull her closer, but they were tossed by an unpredictable current that seemed bent on tearing them apart.

“Hold on!” he cried, and then they were airborne. Falling into nothing. The cave walls flashed by, and Aislin was wrenched from his grip.

Tal hit the water and went under. The current grabbed him and shoved him deeper, but he fought his way up. Looked around for any sign of a bedraggled human, then dove beneath the surface and looked again. There was nothing, and he did not get another chance to search before the river carried him off again, tossing him into a rock and sending him careening downstream.

He had to find her. With no way to tell which way was up, she could get caught beneath the surface and never find her way out.

The thought clutched at his heart with a sickening sense of dread, even beyond what he'd experienced when he'd awakened without his magic. That loss was only temporary. He'd overextended himself before, and his power would return with time.

But he dared not lose this human. Not now that he'd committed himself to protecting her. Once, perhaps, he could have looked on her death with equanimity and walked away, but it was far too late for that now. Far too late to remind himself that he did not want to care about any more fragile creatures who would only break and then break him with their dying.

When had it happened? When had his detachment failed so utterly? He'd been determined to hold her at arm's length, but she'd somehow slipped inside his walls anyway. And when he looked back...

It was already too late the moment she'd thrown that render's head in his face. It was too late when she hugged Cuan and treated him like a person, when she'd tended Tal's wound with gentle fingers, and when she'd fastened her arms around his waist with a trust he'd never earned. When she'd refused to back down in spite of his rejection, when she'd punched the lynx shifter in the face, and then again when she'd attacked the arantha with all of the fierce courage in her tiny body—he had seen the brilliance and tenacity of her spirit and known that she was far more than just a nuisance or an unwanted responsibility.

But it was the moment he'd looked into her eyes and said her name that his fate had truly been sealed. She'd gotten under his skin like a burr or a thorn, and she would haunt him if he failed to save her.

Diving under the surface, Tal searched the murky water for any sign of life, but there was only rock. He popped up again just as the channel narrowed. The cave overhead grew lower, and then he was entirely submerged, shooting through a tunnel with no air at the surface.

Tal held his breath, kicking fiercely as the water carried him onward until it finally shot out of the tunnel. The current died, and he surfaced, gasping for air in the midst of a broad, subterranean lake.

The lake rippled and then grew still, the water turning to a deep green before it ended on a broad, flat shore. Tiny plants grew all the way down to the water, flourishing in the light that filtered through a network of cracks overhead.

The peaceful scene promised safety at last, but where was Aislin?

No dark head broke the waters, no limbs flailed in panic. The vast cavern was silent but for the rush of the underground river.

A grim sort of certainty settled deep into Tal's bones, but he dived anyway, hoping for any sign that she'd made it through the tunnel. Once she hit the lake, she would inevitably sink like a stone, weighed down by sodden skirts.

He searched to the farthest limit of his breath, deep into the murky waters of the lake, and found nothing.

Perhaps the waterfall...

Don't lose me, she'd said. It's so dark.

And he'd promised.

He'd been under for so long his lungs began to protest, but once he surfaced, he would have to admit that he'd failed yet again.

So instead, he drifted vaguely upward, lost in a haze of pain and growing fury. He'd known better. This fresh agony was his own fault, for letting dark eyes and fierce courage sway his judgment.

Tal moved slowly towards shore, weary beyond belief in body and spirit. He should be happy that he no longer had to protect anyone, but he was not.

Then his head finally broke the surface, and he heard the sound of choking.

There... In the shallow water near the shore, a bundle of sopping wet fabric lay half in, half out of the water.

Tal had never swum so fast. He reached the shallows, then ran, tripped, and landed in knee-deep waters, grasping Aislin's shoulders before she could collapse back into the lake.

She screamed and tried to fight his hold, but he did not let go.

"Aislin, it's all right. You are safe."

She turned to stare at him, body trembling with cold and probably with shock. "You... alive..." Her body spasmed and began to spew up lake water.

How had she survived? Barely able to swim, weighed down by her clothing, alone in the dark...

Tal snatched her out of the water, lifted her, and carried her to shore, arms shaking with more than the cold. Suddenly he was staggeringly angry, though he couldn't have said with whom.

"*Why?*" he demanded hoarsely, clenching her more tightly with every word. "Why did you come here? Why must you continue on this quest that will mean your death no matter how hard I try to keep you alive? Why are you so unendingly stubborn when even a child can see that what you seek is impossible?" His anger burned so fiercely that his voice fled, and he could only end in a whisper. "And why... why did you find *me?*"

Aislin stared back at him, eyes wide and stark, her skin marked by bruises that could have come from anywhere. She was too fragile for this land—too breakable to last for long.

But in his mind's eye, he saw again the moment when she flung the render's head in his face. When she attacked the witch's pet with nothing but fury and a hatchet.

"I'm sorry," she said. Her eyes closed, her lips quivered, and tears leaked out to join the lake water still dripping from her hair. "I don't know how else to be. I'm just..."

Tal's knees suddenly folded. They'd escaped—perhaps not unscathed, but whole—and his limbs began to shake as the urgency of their flight and his fear of failure drained away, leaving exhaustion behind. For the next few moments, he could do nothing but shut his eyes and hold Aislin tightly to his chest. He would not lose her again.

“Talyn?” Her voice sounded lost. Confused.

“I couldn't find you.” The words burst out without thought. “After the battle with the truld. I searched, and you were gone.” And he'd been terrified, but he couldn't let her know. Hadn't even acknowledged it himself until that very moment. “I did not think you would survive the fall, and even if you did, you would be broken and alone in the dark.”

As cold as he was, the trembling hand that rested on his face seemed to burn his skin. “I'm all right. We both survived.”

And they would not have done so without her. If Tal had come alone, he would still be bound and helpless in that nightmare cavern, waiting for the witch to drain his magic once again.

The truth should fill him with relief. She was not useless, this human, and her stubbornness had served her better than any magic could have done.

So why did he feel so confused instead?

He released her suddenly, setting her on the ground and rising to his feet. They would need a fire—some way to warm up and dry their clothes. But there was nothing in a cave that would burn.. except the roots.

They were close to the surface here, and he could see numerous places where tree roots had grown thick and deep in search of the lake's water.

But the hatchet had been in Aislin's hand when they jumped. It would be lost forever to the water...

“Here.” A very wet hatchet appeared directly under his nose.

Again, he'd underestimated her. She'd somehow had the presence of mind to stow her weapon back in her belt after they hit the water.

Tal climbed as high as he could and attacked the roots with every bit of the nameless frustration coursing through his veins. The ropy strands were tough and green, but not tough enough, and he soon had a pile that he moved to an open place near the shore of the lake.

Aislin, meanwhile, had taken his pack and laid out the sodden contents where the sun trickling through from above could reach them. Then she found her own patch of light, turned her face to the sun, and closed her eyes.

Tal tried not to look at her as he stacked the roots for a fire. He was still struggling with a tangled coil of feelings he could not quite name, but that confusion warred with the impulse to keep her close so she could never be hurt or lost again.

His magic was returning in a trickle—far too slowly—but hopefully enough for this. Setting a hand atop the pile of fuel, he reached for that shallow pool of his magic, gathered a shimmering thread of power, and forced it into the gnarled, stringy fibers. The roots were wet, and as his magic flooded them, they began to steam hotter and hotter. His magic protested, but he refused to let go, clawing for the last drops until, at last, the pile burst into flame. And none too soon—he was drained again, but at least they would not freeze.

At least he had not failed in this as well.

Aislin left her puddle of sunlight and moved closer, her teeth audibly chattering as she huddled nearer the heat.

“You’ll never dry that way,” Tal said tersely. “Human clothing has too many layers.”

Her eyes went wide.

“I swear I will not look, but you must remove enough to dry them properly.”

Aislin choked back something that almost sounded like a laugh. “All right then.”

True to his word, Tal turned his back to the fire, removing his own wet shirt as he turned, but he could still hear as she tore at the laces of her jerkin, swearing softly when they resisted her efforts. He heard when the wet fabric of her skirt hit the ground, and when she hissed in pain as she removed her bodice.

She had to be injured. It was a miracle she'd survived that initial fall, only to endure whatever the river had done to her afterwards. When she'd first rescued him, there had been blood on her face and in her hair, yet she'd not complained once.

"You can turn around," she said after a time, her voice oddly tight. "I'm as decent as I'm going to get."

Tal turned, slowly, and pain punched him in the chest. Aislin's boots and leggings lay on the ground beside two different skirts and the leather jerkin. All that remained was a sleeveless white garment that reached barely below her knees and a pouch on a leather thong around her neck, so there was no longer any hiding that she was hurt.

Bruises mottled her arms, alongside the still healing wound left by the render. The water probably hadn't done it any favors. There were scratches and dark patches on her legs, while the bruise on her face seemed to be steadily growing darker. One arm was clamped to her side as if to hold her ribs, which suggested they were at the least bruised and possibly broken.

"When were you going to tell me how bad it was?" he asked brusquely.

Aislin met his gaze, unflinching. "Probably never."

At that, *he* was the one who flinched. "Why? Did you think I would take advantage of you in some way?"

She actually laughed, only to break off with a hiss of pain. "Talyn, most of the time, you can barely stand to look at me. You think I'm weak and helpless, and you spent most of the last few days threatening to leave me behind. There is no way

in all of Abreia that I would admit to you how much it hurts, because then you might really walk away.”

She stopped and drew in a shuddering breath. “And I couldn’t bear it if you left me in here.”

That awful feeling punched him again—akin to anger, and yet not quite the same. Something inside felt tight and raw as he answered.

“I will not leave you.” It was little more than a growl. And then, as if the words were being torn out by the roots, “And I was wrong.”

Aislin blinked and stared at him, lips slightly parted in surprise.

“You are far from weak or helpless. You’ve survived everything the Darkspring has done to you and saved us both from an ugly death.”

“I...” Her mouth hung open, and Tal could have sworn she was about to start crying again. Her shoulders slumped in what appeared to be intense relief, and yet her eyes were still wary.

“Thank you,” she said finally. “I was so afraid... I wasn’t sure you would come, and then once you did, I was terrified that you might leave me alone again in the dark.”

He might have, once. After losing Lani, while his heart remained coated in ice. But this stubborn human kept chiseling away at that frozen armor, and there was no going back now. No returning to that wintry solitude where nothing could hurt him again.

And it *did* hurt. It hurt to see her in pain. Hurt to know that he could do nothing to ease it. Even worse was the pain of realizing that she had not believed he would come for her, because he’d given her no reason to assume otherwise.

All that pain kept battering at the fortress he’d built around his heart, at walls he dared not lower completely, and yet... He could no longer deny that he wanted to.

Tal spun around, setting his back to the fire as a sound of frustration escaped him, low and deep and wild.

“Talyn?” The uncertainty in Aislin’s voice tugged at his heart, made him want to reach out. “If you’re not upset that you had to rescue me, then... why are you so angry?”

He had no answer for that. Could say nothing as he heard her footsteps moving nearer. He was strung so tight, it felt as if a single move could unravel him.

“Are you... afraid?” Aislin whispered, and the truth echoed in his mind, reverberating through his very soul as the words tore from his lips.

“I am terrified.” He hadn’t meant to say it. Hadn’t meant for her to know. But it was as if the words poured out from that breach in the wall around his heart, and he could not seem to stop them. “When I thought I had lost you, I envisioned you lying broken and afraid in the dark, and it nearly broke me in turn.”

“Your sister,” Aislin murmured softly. “You must have been remembering how you found her. Talyn, I’m so sorry.”

“No.” He couldn’t lie to himself any longer. His eyes shut as the words clawed their way to freedom. “It was not Lani I imagined dying alone, and it was not for Lani that I entered the Darkspring with more desperation than planning.”

“But I am all right.” She stood right behind him, so close they were almost touching. “Everything will heal.”

No. Some things never healed. Some wounds festered in secret and could not be mended until whatever caused them was laid to rest. But even as he stood alone and cold in that dark moment of truth, the human confounded him yet again.

She stepped up behind him, slid her slender arms around his waist, and *hugged* him.

For a stunned and silent moment, Tal could not move. Could not even breathe. The human shook with cold, but she clung with a strength that astounded him, even after all that she’d survived.

He’d done everything he could to push her away, and she only pushed back. Held on. As if determined to remind him that he was not alone.

Turning abruptly within the circle of her arms, Tal stared down at Aislin as if seeing her for the first time. And perhaps, in a way, he was.

When they'd first met, he'd seen only a helpless child, far beyond her depth. Frightened enough to run but held captive by a fear of something greater. He'd seen the ghost of his sister and not bothered to look beyond his memories.

But Aislin was not Lani. She was, he acknowledged freely, far more determined than his sister had ever been. Strong, level-headed, pragmatic, and stubborn beyond belief.

She was not of his people, yet something about her still pulled at him like a lodestone. Perhaps her dark hair and blue eyes reminded him of Sion Dairach, but that was not the heart of it either.

She... surprised him. Constantly. Tal had frequently found himself watching her face to see what emotions would show in her wide, hopeful eyes, or waiting to see color brighten her pale cheeks.

"When we first met, you were afraid of me," he noted, his curiosity somehow outweighing every other emotion. Aislin's hands still rested loosely on the bare skin at his waist, which meant she was close enough that he could almost see the thoughts flitting across her face.

At his words, those blue eyes widened slightly, and a hint of pink brushed across her cheekbones. "I was. To be fair, you're really quite terrifying when you're angry."

"But you are obviously not frightened anymore," he continued.

Her blush intensified.

"Why not?"

"I..." Her hands fell away, and she took a hasty step back as if she'd only just remembered she was touching him. Thoughts and emotions flickered in her eyes and tugged at her lips until she finally looked up at him, appearing as perplexed as he felt.

“Because I trust you,” she said simply.

CHAPTER 16



She trusted him.

Utterly and completely. And she wasn't even certain she could explain why.

Yes, Talyn was powerful. When she'd first seen him, he'd stunned her with the sheer magnitude of his magic. He'd seemed invulnerable—an indomitable warrior even the other night elves feared.

And when he'd risen from that forest pool, she'd seen him also as a man—yet one who was gorgeous and remote, as untouchable as the forest god he'd resembled.

But it was the man standing before her now that she trusted. This Talyn was just as beautiful and equally powerful, but with all of his scars on full display.

The sunlight filtering through the cave revealed at least some part of the price he'd paid for coming after her. The flesh of his back was raw and ragged, his stitches torn. He'd been dragged across the cave floor while helpless and unconscious. Lost his magic, battled a giant spider, and then thrown himself off a cliff into a raging underground river.

But the worst of his injuries lay far beneath the skin. Talyn was clearly still haunted by grief and failure. And the desperation in his eyes when he'd snatched her out of the water told her that his heart remained fragile, despite all his efforts to shield it from the world.

The Aislin of only a few days ago would never have dared approach him to offer comfort. But she would never be that

woman again. She had no idea who might come out of these caves—if she came out at all—but for today, she found the same courage that had brought her this far, stepped forward, and wrapped her arms around Talyn’s waist once more.

He did not pull away, but he stiffened at her touch. “You should not trust me,” he said hoarsely. “I cannot protect you forever. The only thing I truly want before I die is revenge, and I will take it, no matter the cost.”

He sounded angry, but he did not push her away, and she did not let go. Grief and fear could feel a lot like anger. And even if all she could do was help him feel less alone in a cold, dark world that had taken everyone he loved... That would have to be enough.

Maybe she was wrong, and this was not what he needed, but...

Suddenly, Talyn did jerk away from her, his hands gripping her arms, his amber gaze fixed on hers, burning through her and setting her whole body ablaze with its intensity.

“Don’t do this,” he said fiercely. “Don’t need me. It will bring neither of us anything but pain.”

Aislin didn’t move, didn’t flinch, only took a deep, shuddering breath and looked back at him steadily.

“No matter what we do or where we go,” she said quietly, “pain is a part of living. I know no one who has gone untouched by heartache, disaster, or betrayal. But I do know those who have gone on living with open hearts, and they still find joy.”

Brannic had lost his leg, his livelihood, and every one of his companions, yet he’d refused to give up until he found a new life that he loved. Marinda had been forced to flee everything she knew to settle in a new kingdom, far from everything that was familiar, and yet she fought for those around her with a warm and generous heart.

“I’ve decided that is what I want for myself,” Aislin said softly. “And for my family. I won’t stop fighting until I’ve found it, and I won’t stop fighting for you, either.”

Talyn's grip on her arms tightened almost to the point of pain. His jaw clenched, his wild-eyed gaze darkened, and then something in him seemed to break. His shoulders fell, he let out a groan—almost of resignation—and pulled her towards him.

Almost before she realized what was happening, Aislin collided with his bare chest, and then his arms were around her, warm and solid and utterly immovable.

Her cheek rested in the hollow of his shoulder, and she felt his sigh just before his chin came to rest on her hair.

It was shocking. Overwhelming. And yet it was also coming home, but to a home unlike any she'd ever experienced. His embrace was warmth. Comfort. Acceptance. It asked for nothing, but only gave. Somehow it was both beautiful and heartbreaking to recognize what she'd always been missing, even as she acknowledged that it was not hers to keep.

She dared not believe that Talyn felt anything more for her than protectiveness, even if her own heart pounded and the butterflies of attraction were rioting in her chest. It was enough that he'd allowed her to come this close. He'd permitted her to comfort him, and that in itself was a form of trust she'd never imagined possible.

For just a moment, Aislin's eyes closed as she allowed herself to revel in the warmth—to sink into that illusion of safety. She was not alone in the dark anymore. Talyn would fight for her, and he'd proven it by coming after her instead of pursuing his vengeance.

But after a few more heartbeats, Aislin suddenly awakened to the fact that her face rested against Talyn's *bare* chest. Lord Dreichel's stone was a cold, hard knot against her sternum, and she was clad in next to nothing. Suddenly what had begun as a moment of mutual comfort became strangely awkward.

Behind her, the fire collapsed with a crash and a shower of sparks, and the sound startled her into leaping away.

Talyn let her go, though his arms remained suspended in the air for a moment before falling to his sides.

Unable to look him in the eye or find words to explain her sudden attack of shyness, Aislin tucked her hair behind her ear and all but scurried back to the fire. As she crouched by the flames, she could feel her face burning with a strange heat that matched the heat deep within her chest—a sensation as unfamiliar as it was unsettling.

Something had changed, something vital, and the strength of her feelings unnerved her. She had not wanted to let him go.

For a few taut moments, the fire crackled and the water lapped at the shore in relative silence. But then Talyn moved forward, seated himself near the flames, and turned his attention to removing his boots—not without a grunt of effort.

“Do you have any idea where we are?” Aislin hoped she sounded calm, but she felt oddly desperate to break this strange, new tension between them.

“I do not.” Talyn’s voice was deep and quiet, utterly devoid of the anger and frustration she’d come to expect from him. “But if we can find a way out, I should be able to determine the location of the nest without much difficulty.”

If...

There were so many ifs.

“Perhaps we should wait,” Aislin suggested. “At least until your magic returns and your wounds heal.”

One eyebrow raised in her direction. “And if Rhone and his pack are able to obtain what we seek before that happens?”

Aislin winced but did not waver. “They can try.” Her memory suddenly tossed up the recollection of Vanadar’s words, and she brightened. “But as I recall, Vanadar did not say we had to return first—only that we had to return with the venom before the Marlord breathes his last. Even if Rhone achieves the objective sooner, Vanadar cannot deny us what he promised without breaking his word.”

Talyn looked startled.

“Words are important,” Aislin pointed out with a grin.

“So they are.” His expression lightened for a moment before sobering anew. “But as it happens, you are correct. We should go nowhere until we have determined the severity of your own injuries.”

Aislin sucked in a quick breath, and a stab of pain from her ribs reminded her of her fall. Talyn was right—she was not in any condition to tackle more of those giant spiders anytime soon.

But her family...

“And you were also correct,” she admitted ruefully. “We cannot wait too long. My lord will only give us till the end of the season, and if I have not returned by then...”

Talyn shook his head. “Does your face hurt?” he asked brusquely.

Aislin blinked and remembered the blood on her cheek. Raising her fingers to the side of her head, she encountered a large knot and winced as she probed at the wound—a small gash in her scalp, running from her temple up into her hair.

Her fingers came away tipped with blood.

When Talyn saw it, he cursed and crossed to her side of the fire, crouching beside her to brush back her hair with surprisingly gentle fingers. “You are fortunate,” he said darkly. “Had this blow struck even a hairsbreadth lower, you might never have awakened.”

He rose to his feet, retrieved the small tin of salve from where Aislin had spread the contents of his pack, and returned to kneel at her side. “Hold still,” he commanded, tucking her hair behind her ear and parting the strands with a care and caution she would never have expected. Then again, perhaps he’d done something similar for his sister.

Aislin felt the heat begin to rise, from her neck to her face and even her ears, as Talyn bent low to brush salve over the gash on her temple.

“I cannot bandage it,” he murmured, his breath warm on her cheek. “But this should prevent infection.”

“Thank you.” She couldn’t seem to look anywhere but at the ground.

“What of your ribs?”

Startled, she jerked her head around to stare at him. “My... ribs?”

“I can tell you favor them. Are they broken?”

She clamped her arm to her side. There was no way in all of Abreia she was letting him see *that*.

“Bruised,” she said hastily. “I’m sure they’re just bruised.”

He was clearly not convinced but seemed content to return the salve to his pack and resettle himself by the fire.

“Your back...” she began to say, but he shook his head.

“Night elves heal quickly.” His tone was matter-of-fact. “It is painful, but the damage is superficial. I would prefer to save what little supplies we have for more significant injuries.”

“What of your magic?” she asked then. “Will it heal as well? Or did the old woman steal it for... for good?”

She realized too late that the question might be painful, but Talyn only shook his head.

“It is similar to overextending my abilities or reaching the end of my physical strength. It will return over time.”

“That’s why she was going to keep you,” Aislin realized, her voice hollow with the renewed horror of that memory. “She said you would last for months. She intended to do that over and over again.”

All those bones... How many had the ancient night elf lured in and trapped, only to steal their power and give them over to her pet when she was finished?

“She is behind us,” Talyn said firmly. “But the Darkspring is never safe. We must be more vigilant the deeper we go.”

Suddenly, Aislin couldn't stop wondering how the old woman had captured him in the first place. With his magic intact, Talyn would have been more than a match for Crow, and neither the arantha nor his mistress could have touched Talyn without his permission.

"You stopped to help her, didn't you?" she blurted out.

Talyn glowered and jumped to his feet. "I'm going to search for a way out."

Aislin almost smiled as she watched him stride away from the fire. So much for that cold, forbidding exterior. Her companion was clearly hiding a far softer heart than he would ever care to admit.



She tried her best to sleep as the remainder of the day wore on, but sleeping on rocks proved to be just as impossible as it sounded. Talyn, on the other hand, fell asleep sitting up and awakened just as the last bit of daylight faded from the cracks in the rock overhead.

When she saw him stirring, Aislin stopped pretending to rest and sat up, stifling a startled yelp of pain as every muscle in her body protested the action. Everything hurt. Her face, her feet, and even her pinkie fingers seemed determined to join in the chorus of pain.

"I've found a tunnel that leads out of the cave," Talyn announced, feeding a few more roots to the fire. "Aranthas typically leave themselves an exit close enough to the surface that they can hunt larger game and drag it back to their nest. Once outside, we may have a better chance of locating that exit."

"Good." Aislin nodded with what she hoped was brisk agreement. If he had any idea how much she hurt, he would probably insist they remain here longer, and she'd decided she most emphatically did not want to delay. Another night here was another night underground. Another night pretending to sleep on rocks. Even longer before she could breathe fresh air

and feel the night breezes on her skin or the warmth of the sun on her face.

And a delay would also mean more time for her terror to grow. Even thinking about the “nest” was enough to...

“When were you going to tell me what aranthas are?”

Talyn paused in the process of unwrapping the tiny bricks Vanadar had given them in the name of “food.” They were almost impossible to chew, but at least they were still dry and did not quite taste like rocks. To Aislin’s mind, that was the best that could be said of them.

“I did my best to discourage you from coming by painting them in the most horrific light possible. Would you have returned home sooner if I told you exactly what they are?”

“Maybe,” she muttered. She’d never been all that frightened of normal spiders—she’d spent too much time cleaning Brannic’s attic to care—but these things were not normal. There was something intensely wrong about a spider the size of Cuan.

“Then I apologize,” Talyn said dryly, handing over her breakfast. Dinner? Did it even matter when they were in a cave? “Where we are going, there are hundreds of spiders the size of wolves, with far better hearing and the ability to sense your position the moment you move. They spin webs you cannot cut through with an axe, and they are constantly waiting for prey to trip into those webs and provide them with fresh meat. Would you like to return to the settlement now?”

Aislin glared as she gnawed on her breakfast. “I’m not going back, and you’re not funny.”

“That was not an attempt at humor,” Talyn pointed out. “It was simply the truth.”

“Do they all... bite?” she asked hesitantly, trying not to betray the full depths of her fear.

“The males feed by biting to subdue their prey and then draining it of blood.” To Aislin’s mind, Talyn did not seem nearly disturbed enough by this information. “But their venom

is not deadly unless given in large doses. It is only the queen that produces the type of venom sought by Vanadar.”

“And how will we procure it?”

“By capturing her and collecting the venom that drips from her fangs when she attempts to kill us.”

Aislin blinked a few times and stopped chewing. “And... do you have any idea how this might be accomplished?”

“No.” Talyn just sat there, still eating, without a trace of worry or any other emotion on his face.

She gnawed off another bite while considering his impassive demeanor.

“One more thing...” She almost hesitated to mention it, but it wasn’t as if ignoring it would make it go away. “I... is there any way to make me a torch of some kind? Once we leave this cavern, I won’t be able to see, and I hate stumbling around in the dark.”

She half expected him to say that she shouldn’t have left home if she wasn’t prepared, but he responded with the same even tone he’d been using since she woke up. “Once my magic reserves have returned I can do so, but until then, I must save what strength I have to protect us in case of attack.” His mouth drew downward in a frustrated scowl. “Vanadar ought to have given you a moonstone, considering what he has asked of you.”

“What is a moonstone?”

Talyn shrugged. “A common night elf enchantment. They use it to light their homes, so they need not destroy their forests.”

“Could you perhaps... *make* such a thing?” Aislin asked hopefully.

He shook his head. “Most night elves could, but I am not one of them.” There was no mistaking the bitterness in his tone.

Disappointment struck her for a moment before it was suddenly eclipsed by shame. How could she be disappointed

in him for this magic he did not have, when she had suffered that same resentment herself and knew how poisonous it could be?

“Why can’t you?” she asked instead, curious now instead of regretful.

For a moment, she did not think he would answer, and when he did, his tone was cool and remote. “My grandmother was of Sion Dairach.” As if that should explain everything. When she just looked puzzled, he added: “She was of the day.”

“She was an *elf*?” Aislin squeaked, unable to hide her surprise.

“Yes.” Talyn shot her an odd look.

“We thought they were long dead. No one in Farhall has seen an elf for over a hundred years.”

Her companion began to appear uncomfortable with this turn in the conversation. “There are reasons for that. But I lived with them for much of my adolescence. A great deal of my magic has its roots in the traditions of my grandmother’s people, which is why my blades glow the way they do. It is also why I do not fit in amongst other night elves.”

The thought roused Aislin’s fury on his behalf. “They reject you because of your grandmother?”

“Because my magic is not only strong, it is *other*,” he amended. “They do not understand it. And I cannot shift, so there are many traditions I will never partake in or understand.”

Then he was truly alone. Caught between two worlds, neither of which fully accepted him.

“I’m sorry,” she said, with a sudden, fierce surge of anger on his behalf. They were all fools, these night elves, if they could not see how incredible he was.

“I am not.” Talyn indicated his indifference with a slight shrug. “Not really. Not anymore. My grandmother taught me to never be ashamed that my gifts are different. And if I were not partially of the day, I would never have met Cuan.”

Cuan... “Will he be all right, out there on his own?” Aislin asked anxiously.

Talyn actually chuckled. “He’s safer on his own than with me. Very little can catch him, and those creatures who can know better than to try.”

Aislin stood up, brushed off her hands, and choked down the last bite of her breakfast. “We should go,” she said firmly. “The faster we do this, the faster we can get out of this cave for good.”

“You will have to rely on my eyes for now,” Talyn warned her. “I will attempt to guide you well, but it will not be easy.”

She met his eyes with renewed resolve. “Nothing worth doing is easy,” she said firmly. “And like I said, I trust you, Talyn.”

He seemed to be acting entirely on impulse when he blurted out, “I wish you would call me Tal.”

CHAPTER 17



She was going to be the death of him, Tal decided, looking down into her fierce blue eyes.

But that didn't seem to bother him nearly as much as it should have.

She kept asking questions, and like a fool, he answered them. Exposed pieces of his past he'd been determined to hide. None of them made her flinch or shy away from him. She simply shrugged and came back with more questions.

Now, she was trusting him to lead her out of this cavern into the darkness beyond.

And in response? He'd offered her his most personal name—the one only Lani had used. The one he'd heard on no one's lips since she died. How would it feel to hear it on Aislin's?

"Tal," she said, in a soft tone that almost sounded shy. As if she knew instinctively what that offer signified. "May I borrow your dagger?" He was distracted enough by the sound of his name that he simply handed it to her without asking what it was for.

Something was very wrong with him. He did not typically hand over his weapons to someone who didn't understand them, especially when they stood close enough to plunge them into his heart.

But Aislin took it and turned to her clothing, a crease between her brows and a frown turning down her lips. He heard a ripping sound, and before he realized what was happening, she'd cut both her chemise and her dress in two.

She'd already donned leggings, to which she added her bodice, her boots, and the leather jerkin, which was still somewhat damp but would at least protect her from the rock if they had to crawl through any tunnels. Her voluminous skirts lay discarded on the ground, and she placed her hands on her hips as she regarded them with evident relief.

"I really thought they would be the death of me when we fell in the water," she explained, handing back his dagger before rolling the skirts into a tight ball that she stowed in his pack. "This way, if it happens again, I'll be less likely to drown."

Fiercely practical, his human.

No, not *his*... God of Shadows, what was wrong with him?

Turning to the fire, Tal kicked it apart and stomped on the coals until they went out. Not that there was anything else in the cavern that could burn, but the smoke might leave a trail if the old woman decided to hunt for them.

"This way," Tal said, his voice nearly a growl, and turned to go, remembering only then that with the fire out, Aislin could not see him. Could not see anything.

He retraced his steps until he stood mere inches from her shoulder. Curiously, she did not look afraid, only resolute. Waiting confidently for him to lead her into the darkness.

What could possibly be the source of that kind of faith? He had already lost her twice. First when she fell into the cave, and then again at the waterfall.

He reached out and took her hand, and she wrapped her fingers around his without hesitation.

"Why do you trust me?" he demanded suddenly. "You have every reason not to. I could leave you behind in the blink of an eye or kill you without a second thought, and I have made no secret of it. How do you set that aside so easily and place your life in my hands?"

It frustrated him that he did not understand. That she seemed so calm in the face of such uncertainty.

But even though she was lost in a world full of monsters, Aislin's lips curved in a smile—somehow sad yet still hopeful.

“Tal, I've lived most of the past few years at the end of my strength. Fighting for my family's survival. Unable to find my way out of the hole we're in. It's not a cave, but it feels like one. And all I can tell you for sure is this: when you're lost and cannot save yourself, that is when you realize that faith is your only answer.”

Her fingers tightened around his hand.

“I've trusted people at home to look after my family. Some of them, I can't even swear are that trustworthy, yet they were all I had. But you?” She actually laughed as if her observations were comically obvious. “You have had so many opportunities to leave me behind or hurt me. And yet, every time, the first thing you've done is make sure that I'm safe. Your heart is bigger than you realize, and I don't think you know the first thing about actually being cruel.”

She was wrong. He was not the saint she wanted to believe him, and he *did* know the meaning of cruelty. And whatever size his heart might be, he'd hidden it so deeply she should not have been able to find it.

“At first,” she admitted, “I trusted you because blind faith was all I had. Now? I trust you because I know that I can.”

The damnable part of it was, she wasn't wrong. Tal wasn't sure when it had happened, but she *had* found his heart—and now he could no more hurt her than cut off his own arm.

“And if you're hurt anyway?” he demanded. “Because you will be. I cannot imagine what else I might say to convince you that this is going to kill us both. I cannot save you from what we're about to do.”

He felt her shrug. “Perhaps not. But ever since my father left, I've been trying to do the impossible alone. If I've had just one wish, it was for someone to share my fears. Someone to stand shoulder to shoulder with me and face down the monsters of not knowing where our next meal is coming from, wondering whether my grandmother will fall or wander off

while I'm gone, or just trying to decide whether I have enough wood to keep us from freezing during the winter. I know you won't always be able to save me. And I'm not asking you to save me from what's coming. Perhaps it makes me selfish, but... I'm just beyond relieved that I'm not doing it alone."

All she wanted was not to be alone. Such a small thing, and yet, he of all people knew how fragile the illusion of such security could be.

They could be ripped apart in an instant. Separated by violence or by chance. But even if he knew he could not save her in the end, he could do this one thing—commit himself to remaining by her side until it was beyond his power and ability to do so. He'd failed at so much and expected he would fail at this as well, but his heart... It would not allow him to walk away without trying.

"Then stay close," he murmured, and moved off into the dark, Aislin's hand in his.

The contact was necessary, he knew, both so that he could guide her and so she would not be afraid. But her hand was warm and trusting, and Tal discovered that he did not dislike the feeling of her fingers wrapped around his. Her touch settled some part of him that needed to know she could not be snatched away without him realizing it. And yet, that very sense of need disturbed him greatly. When had he begun needing anything from her?

The moment his magic reserves were sufficiently restored, he would use his dagger as a torch so he could not grow too accustomed to her warmth. So that he would not continue to wonder at the growing strength of his desire to keep her close. Such thoughts were distracting, and he needed to focus the whole of his attention on finding their way.



The remainder of that night did not aid him in his resolve to detach himself from the human. The tunnel was rough and narrow in places, and Aislin could only follow him blindly,

trying to step where he stepped, ducking around obstacles, and occasionally crawling where the ceiling would not allow them to stand upright.

Tal knew she was exhausted. That her ribs were in agony. Her hands were cut, and her knees were bruised. But still she followed him into the dark, and her hands burned where they touched him. When he grasped her arms to lift her or shift her position, he felt her muscles tremble, and yet she did not waver.

They finally reached a place where the tunnel widened and the way grew smoother, and Tal failed to warn her of a place where the rock became rough underfoot.

Aislin stumbled, and Tal cursed softly before he turned and swept her into his arms.

“I’m all right,” she protested.

“No, you are not.” He hated that she still felt the need to pretend. “And before you attempt such a ridiculous lie again, remember that I can see the blood on your hands. I can feel you wince with every step and hear how your breath catches when you forget your injuries and breathe too deeply.”

“Fine,” she admitted, “it hurts. But I won’t quit on you, Tal.”

As if that was ever in question. He wasn’t convinced she knew how. But each time she winced, it stabbed him with a different kind of pain, and he could not go on while she suffered in such determined silence.

“Your courage is not in doubt,” he said, gentling his tone. “But you will need your strength before the night is over, so allow me to spare you while I can.”

She went silent and stiff in his arms, but after a moment, her tension fled on a quiet sigh. “Thank you,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

Tal moved off into the darkness, and after only a few steps, her head fell to rest on his shoulder. She curled in closer, her eyes closed, her breathing evened out, and to his complete and utter surprise... she fell asleep.

In the darkness beneath the mountains, surrounded by the unknown dangers of the Darkspring, Aislin slept in his arms, and Tal could have wept at the depths of her unmerited trust in him. But he did not wish to wake her, so he only swore silently at her foolishness, and his own. Because no matter how unfounded her confidence, some part of him reached for it like a starving man begging for bread.

He even considered stopping to allow her to rest, but they were drawing nearer to the surface. He could smell the difference in the air, feel the slightest of currents stirring. And there was something else, some other smell not nearly so fresh that drifted on those currents—a metallic taint he could not quite place.

Whatever it was, it made him uneasy. He wanted to be free of the Darkspring before they stopped again, so he continued on at a steady pace until the burden grew too heavy for his arms, and he was forced to pause.

“Aislin.”

She blinked and stirred, lifting her head and peering around.

“We must stop for a moment. I cannot continue on without a rest.”

Even in the dark, the depth of her embarrassment was evident.

“I’m so sorry,” she muttered, and tried to pull away from him.

He set her feet on the ground, and she took a hasty step back, scrubbing her cheeks and brushing at her clothes.

“I did not mean to fall asleep.”

“It was as well you did,” Tal told her honestly. “We are nearer the surface now, and more predators lurk in these parts of the cave.” He reached for his magic and decided it would have to be enough. Drawing his dagger from his belt, he pushed a tendril of power into the blade until the silver tracings ignited with a soft glow. “This is intended for other purposes, but for now, it will have to serve as a lantern.”

Aislin accepted it, the soft glow lighting up the planes and angles of her face, highlighting the dark smudges under her eyes and the tired but pleased smile on her lips. “Thank you.”

“It is even more deadly with magic in the blade, so use caution,” he warned. “If you trip, you could find yourself missing a finger or an eye.”

She shot him a sideways glance that very clearly indicated her annoyance at being treated like a child. “I have watched you use these to great effect, so I promise I will do my utmost not to cut myself.”

They continued on, and the strange, metallic taint in the air grew stronger, to the point that even the human wrinkled her nose.

“What is that smell?” she asked curiously. “Bats? Or something else?”

“I do not know.” Tal did not believe it was bats. This smelled more like... blood.

There, on the floor beneath his feet—a wet, dark smear splashed across the rocks, leaving bits of flesh caught in the rough surface.

Tal crouched to sniff at the stain and confirmed his suspicion.

“Something died here,” he said shortly, drawing his sword. “And the blood has not yet dried.”

Aislin drew in a quick breath and gripped the dagger until her knuckles whitened. “Was it... a person?”

“No. The blood is different.”

In what seemed an unconscious need for reassurance, she pressed closer as they rounded the next corner, where they were forced to scramble down a short incline. The other side was too steep, so Tal sheathed his weapon and climbed up first, lifting Aislin up after him. She shut her eyes and pressed her lips together as the strain pulled on her injured ribs. When her feet were under her once more, she stumbled, and ended

up leaning on Tal for a moment, her forehead resting against his shoulder.

His hand was halfway to stroking her hair in an unconscious gesture of comfort when she lifted her head and grimaced.

“Sorry,” she muttered, stepping away and offering him an apologetic grimace. “I don’t mean to be a burden. Everything will heal eventually.”

Tal smothered a curse and dropped his hand, drawing his sword again before leading the way forward through the tunnel. His body and mind kept falling further into this wretched conflict. He knew better than to allow any deeper attachment than they’d already formed, but his heart had other ideas, and his arms were happier when she was in them.

Of all the ridiculous things, for him to become obsessed with a *human*...

And that was when they found the first body.

“Mother of all Abreia,” Aislin swore softly. “What could have done this?”

The shattered remains of an arantha lay spread out before them—legs, thorax, and the swollen sac of its body laying in pieces. Ichor dripped from the rocks, filling the air with that now-familiar metallic stench.

“A blade, I believe,” Tal said tersely, crouching as he eyed the remains.

“Rhone?”

“Quite possibly. But if his pack has already come this way, the aranthas will be both awake and angry, and we will have a much more difficult time sneaking past their outer sentries.”

He could see her considering this. Horror flitted across her face, likely at the idea of dark tunnels filled with angry aranthas. It didn’t exactly bring him much joy, either.

“Nothing we can do now,” Aislin said finally, squaring her shoulders and peering down the tunnel ahead of them.

“Nothing but hope Rhone and his friends have cleared the way.”

They moved on, weapons held ready, Tal preparing grimly for an ambush.

But nothing moved besides the two of them. There was no more blood or other signs of battle, though Tal spotted the remains of arantha silk hanging from both sides of the tunnel in several places.

Just when he had begun to think he was wrong about the dead arantha, the tunnel widened, opening into a larger cavern with numerous exits.

And numerous bodies.

The remains of a dozen or more aranthas lay strewn across the cavern floor, in some cases nearly intact and in others torn limb from limb. Silken threads hung slashed and torn, and ichor dripped from the rocks.

There had been a battle, and the aranthas had not won.

“Shapeshifters,” Tal said briefly, trying not to linger too long near the most gruesome of the kills.

He’d intended to leave the cave and allow them both time to recover. But perhaps they would do better to follow the trail of dead aranthas to see where Rhone and his followers were headed. They may have already taken the queen, and this quest would all have been for nothing. But then again, perhaps it was only together that they could survive.

“Do you wish to...”

“We should follow them,” Aislin said firmly. “Wherever they’re going is where we need to be. That is, if your magic is sufficiently recovered.”

Tal regarded her thoughtfully. “And if they were overwhelmed by the aranthas? What if this leads us straight into a death trap?”

“Would it be more of a trap than we’d have walked into all on our own?” Aislin asked dryly. “We are close, and delay earns us nothing. We cannot wait for my wounds to heal.”

He could see the wisdom in her choice, and yet...

He did not want to lead her down that path. Now that they'd reached the inevitable moment of greatest danger, he could no longer face it without fear. If he went alone, whether he could achieve his objective or not, Tal was likely to survive. His magic would grant him that much protection. But Aislin had no such assurance.

"Which way?" she said, holding up the glowing blade of his dagger to peer into the shadows.

"Out is that way"—he inclined his head towards the passage leading to the surface—"but further in..."

He could only point, because the words seemed to stick in his throat. Only one of the tunnels bore evidence of spider silk having once covered the entrance.

Without even a moment's hesitation, Aislin headed for the tunnel. She had to step over the remains of a dead arantha and nearly slipped on its blood, but she still did not stop to reconsider. Not even when she had to duck beneath a curtain of arantha silk the size of ropes.

Tal took two steps within the new tunnel and stopped, seizing her arm and spinning her to face him, jaw rigid and set.

"I can't," he said grimly.

"Can't what?"

"I cannot take you any farther."

Aislin regarded him impatiently, brows drawn low over her blue eyes. "We've discussed this. I don't expect you to protect me. We're both here for the same thing, and we'll both do our best to survive."

"You don't understand." Admitting it was like ripping out another piece of his already wounded heart, but Tal could no longer deny the truth. "Aislin, I cannot simply stand aside and watch you die."

CHAPTER 18



Tal's face was grim and set, his amber eyes stark against the gray pallor of his face.

"What do you mean?" Aislin's fingers twitched as she stifled the urge to reach out. He would likely not welcome any attempt at comfort.

"I cannot let you die," he repeated.

"I knew this was dangerous before we started," she reminded him. "Whatever happens, it will not be your fault. You tried to warn me."

"That doesn't matter anymore."

Aislin took a single step towards him, needing to be nearer, as if that might help her understand the warring impulses that drove him. Where he had once been cold and hard as the winter wind, he now seemed caught between fear and pain, pushing her away with one breath and pulling her closer the next.

And oh, how she wanted to be closer. With every moment she stood ensnared by that intense amber gaze, her pulse only raged faster, making it far more difficult to deny the attraction coursing through her with every quickening beat. It was like standing beside a raging bonfire, yearning to be warmed by the flames but knowing it would only get her burned.

Tal had not grown less beautiful with closer acquaintance, nor with her deepening awareness of the scars and burdens he carried. If anything, the pull he seemed to exert on every fiber of her being had only grown stronger. And with every touch

over the past few days, she'd come closer and closer to forgetting the vast gulf that lay between them.

An impossibly gorgeous night elf warrior bent on revenge could have nothing to do with a bedraggled human woman who could barely survive on her own.

He'd been kind in his own way—patient and protective—and she trusted him not to abandon her. But this other feeling—the one that made her chest ache and her stomach feel hollow and caused flutters of anticipation in every nerve she possessed... Even now, when she looked at him for too long, her mouth went dry, and she forgot how to speak.

It was easier in the dark. Easier when she thought of them as chance-met companions with no choice but to rely on one another. Harder when she fell too far into those amber eyes and remembered that she was a woman and he was everything she had never dared to imagine wanting.

“I don't understand it.” Tal sounded angry again, and that anger seemed to be directed solely at himself. “But I cannot seem to change what I feel. I only know that I am not content unless you are close. I am furious at the thought of you being hurt, and if someone tried to kill you, I would end them without remorse.”

Aislin's breath caught as she replayed those words. They begged for a response, but what could she say in answer to such a declaration? Especially when she wasn't remotely certain what he meant by it. Did he see her as some sort of pet he was fond of and would be sad when she died?

“What would you have me change, Tal?” she asked softly. “We are here, and this is a path we must both walk.”

“Or I could take you out of here. You would be safe with Cuan, until I can do what is necessary.”

She shook her head. “No. I won't let you attempt this alone. You already told me that you would be unlikely to succeed.”

His eyes blazed up with furious amber light. “Then we walk away.”

“We...” She stopped and stared at him. “What do you mean? You want to give up?”

“I want you *alive*,” he growled. “That is what matters. Not my revenge. Not some petty lordling’s demands.”

“This isn’t petty, Tal,” Aislin snapped. “Have you forgotten? This is about whether or not my family has a home. Whether they will survive the winter.”

“And how will they survive the winter if you die here?” He was still only inches away, staring down at her, hands flexed and stiff at his sides.

“Is that really what’s bothering you?” Aislin demanded, eyes narrowed. “Or is this some ploy to get rid of me? Why should you care if my family survives?”

“I don’t,” he raged. “But believe me when I say that they will not thank you for throwing your life away.”

Oh.

“Tal, your sister...”

“*Not* my sister.” His head fell back, and his eyes closed with frustration. “This is not about her. Not anymore.”

“Then what?”

He moved, so swiftly that a cry of surprise escaped Aislin’s lips. His palm suddenly rested on the side of her neck, his fingers threaded through her hair, his thumb brushing her cheek. His body did not touch her, but he was so close she felt the heat of him all the way to her toes.

His eyes burned, and that same fire seemed to blaze up in the center of her chest, drawing her in and scorching away whatever doubts or dismissals her mind could supply.

“I don’t know,” Tal whispered, his face only inches from hers.

Aislin was caught, helpless, and she did not care. Nothing mattered aside from the rasp of his calloused fingers against her skin and the focused heat of his gaze searching hers. Whatever he was looking for...

Motion caught her eye, just behind him, hidden in the shadows.

“Tal,” she said urgently, “behind you!”

Her warning was almost too late. The darkness surrounding them erupted, vomiting legs and eyes and a horror Aislin could never have dreamed or imagined.

Their enemy had found them.

Somehow, she'd expected they would face the giant spiders as individuals, but there was no time to kick herself for being wrong. No time to do anything but take an instinctive step back as the tidal wave surged forward, the aranthas holding nothing back in defense of their home.

Dozens of them crowded the depths of the tunnel, some as large as Crow, some no bigger than a dog. They scuttled down the walls and hung from the ceiling, and as Tal whirled to place her at his back, Aislin raised the dagger in her hand and almost quailed at how inadequate it seemed.

There was no way to counter such an attack. No way to survive the onslaught. Except that her companion seemed not to realize that they were outmatched.

Tal lifted his empty hand and shoved, palm out. The nearest aranthas were flung backward, tangled balls of legs flying back down the tunnel, carrying many of their companions with them. It was no more than a momentary setback, but as they returned to their feet and gathered themselves for another attempt, Tal's sword began to glow brighter, hotter, until the oncoming horde cringed back from the light.

“Just stay behind me,” he said, but Aislin could not answer, because now that her back was set to his, she could see what was approaching from the opposite direction, entering their tunnel from the cavern outside.

It was another arantha, but the largest one she'd seen yet. Taller than she was, with visible scars on its thick hide and one leg that dragged on the ground, it filled the entire passageway, fangs glistening in the light. As it took another slow step

forward, Aislin's horrified gaze fixed on the glow of the creature's eyes, and she froze in terror—her body's instinctual reaction to realizing that she was prey.

But she had to move. Had to fight. And she faced only one, where Tal now confronted dozens, perhaps even more.

She could do this—she *would* do this. With the dagger in her left hand and her hatchet in her right, Aislin straightened her shoulders and took a step towards the monster that stalked her, looking desperately for a weakness she might exploit. That dragging leg, perhaps...

It lunged, deceptively fast, and Aislin barely dodged in time, swiping belatedly at the trailing leg with her hatchet. The swing missed, and Aislin had only a moment to collect herself before the creature turned to face her again. Holding both weapons in front of her, she wished futilely that she'd had some sort of training.

But in the end, it was just a spider. She'd battled hundreds of spiders, and they had never escaped her. This time was no different. The longer you hesitated, the greater the chance for them to run, so in the absence of a better plan, she simply lifted her weapons and charged.

She must have startled her opponent, because it reared up, and then she was running underneath, its bulbous body looming overhead while its legs formed a cage around her.

But not for long. Telling herself it was just like chopping a tree branch, Aislin swung the hatchet with strength and precision. She aimed directly for the joining of leg to body, then dashed out behind her opponent, emerging from the tunnel into the larger cavern.

The arantha turned, one leg at a time, but one fewer than before, in a staccato motion that indicated it was far faster than it looked. But now it was angry, and its eyes glowed a brighter red as it headed towards her, fangs clicking together ominously.

Again Aislin dodged to the side, but this time, her enemy anticipated her. Instead of ending up beneath it, she found

herself directly in front, with fangs the size of her face looming less than an arm's length away.

She screamed and struck at the closest part of the beast, again and again, and on her third try, the blade struck one of the fangs and cracked it end to end.

The arantha let out a screech that echoed through the cavern—a piercing keen of anguish—before backing away, nearly tripping over its own legs as it went. It scuttled into one of the other tunnels and disappeared, so Aislin let it go. Her hands were shaking—in reality, her entire body was shaking—so there was little chance of her pursuing the creature on her own.

She turned back towards the sound of battle and drew in a shaky lungful of air. Tal needed her. There was no time for panicking or falling to pieces in the midst of a fight.

Aislin took three determined strides forward before something struck her from behind.

An involuntary cry erupted from her throat as she hit the ground. Before she could even catch her breath, she rolled to her back and realized her enemy had been faking. The moment she turned away, it had crept back into the cavern and pounced, and now it loomed over her, fangs poised to pierce whatever softness they could find.

She was going to die. Right here on the floor of this cave. Or perhaps the monster would simply paralyze her before dragging her somewhere else to feed, but her death was staring her in the face, and all she could think of was Tal. He would blame himself, but it wasn't his fault. This had been her choice—her decision to come here and take such a terrible risk.

And the truth was, she would do it again. She did not regret choosing to try. Did not regret doing everything she could to save her family. And most of all, she did not regret meeting Tal.

As if her thoughts had summoned him from out of the darkness, Tal suddenly appeared beside her. His shirt was torn and bloody, his face was battered, and his teeth were bared in

defiance as his sword tore the arantha in half, cleaving straight through its body to leave smoking pieces on either side.

Without a moment's pause, he pulled her to her feet and swung back towards his own battle. But it was far too late. Both of them froze as a flood of aranthas poured from the tunnel to fill the cavern. The tide of scuttling horrors spread to the walls until it surrounded Aislin and Tal where they stood on the floor, and even then, it did not abate.

Aislin lifted her chin and tried to pretend that she could meet death unafraid. She wanted to live up to her own fearless declarations, and yet, she could not seem to stop her hands from trembling. Could not hold back one brief, quiet whimper of horror at the thought of what awaited them both. Her knees tried to fold, but Tal caught her, his arm bleeding but still strong. His grip held her up, pulled her closer, and forced her to look at him.

"I won't let you die," he said, eyes still bright with the light of battle. "Do you hear me, Aislin? I will not let them have you!"

He was lying. There was nothing he could do, but he was trying to contain her fear, so she nodded.

Tal drew her nearer, curling his arm around her waist until she was pressed against his side, their faces mere inches apart. "Whatever happens, do not linger for me," he commanded. "When this is finished, you must go. Take Cuan, and live."

For a single moment, their foreheads touched, and then he released her. Took his dagger from her hand with ominously gentle fingers.

"Stay close," he said. "It will be over soon."

Turning his back to Aislin, Tal held the sword and dagger before him, blades crossed near the hilts. His eyes closed, his head tilted back, and suddenly the cavern was filled with light.

At first, it was only a soft, white glow—warm and unthreatening.

The tidal wave of aranthas paused. They seemed temporarily unnerved by the light, but Tal was not done.

“More,” he murmured, and the glow intensified. The veins stood out on his neck, and his lips curled back in a rictus of pain, but he did not stop.

Pressure began to build, until Aislin could feel it prickling along her skin and pressing against her ears, and was forced to close her eyes against the brilliance.

This... This must be why the other night elves regarded Talyn with horrified awe. Even wounded and at the end of his strength, he possessed the kind of power that could halt an entire army in its tracks. And yet, Aislin could not imagine being afraid of him. Even now, all of her terror was *for* him. Surely he could not hold so many enemies at bay forever, but there was nothing she could do to help him. She could only fall to her knees, listen, and pray as Tal let out a wild cry of triumph and released his magic at last.

The cavern exploded with light. Aislin quailed and hid her head beneath her arms, but even behind her eyelids, it was searingly bright. Something buffeted her, like a strong wind, but one that swirled around her with teeth and claws that did not quite mark her skin.

The ground shook, a roaring sounded in her ears, and then the wind died, leaving the cavern in silence once more.

For a handful of panting, shivering breaths, Aislin could not force herself to move. But when she heard nothing, not even a single footfall, she finally dropped her arms, opened her eyes, and blinked a few times into the relative darkness.

There was still a dim illumination rising from somewhere, enough to see that the cavern was now utterly empty of aranthas. There was no glow of eyes, nor even any remains to mark their destruction. The entire horde was simply... gone. Dissolved into nothingness by the magic still emanating gently from Tal’s sword and dagger where they lay, fallen to the cavern floor beside him.

“Tal!” Aislin staggered across the short distance only to drop to her knees at his side. She rolled him to his back and a sob caught in her throat.

His eyes were closed, his features slack. His torso was covered in blood, and when she pulled back the tattered remains of his shirt, she found dozens of wounds. Slashes, abrasions, and... punctures.

He'd been bitten. Multiple times. Together with blood loss and the draining of his magic...

"Tal, *no.*" His name came out as a breathless plea. A sob of anguish. He could not be dead. Pressing her fingers against his neck, Aislin lowered her ear to his chest and waited for some sign—*any* sign that he still lived.

A faint flutter beneath her fingertips—that was all. What had Tal said about the aranthas' venom? It subdued their prey and was only deadly in large doses...

Aislin began to count where he'd been bitten and left off after five. It was too many—far too many—and now his magic was gone. He'd used every last drop of it to destroy the aranthas and save her life.

He'd promised he wouldn't let her die, and he'd kept that promise, but at a cost Aislin would never have willingly paid.

Dropping her forehead to his scarred and bleeding chest, Aislin shut her eyes and let the hot, scalding tears flow unchecked. If he were awake, she would never dare come so close, never dream of revealing her heart, but now it seemed the worst of betrayals not to simply admit that he was far more to her than a companion. He was everything, and she'd barely even realized how much she needed him before she lost him.

Unless she could save him somehow. But what could she do? She had no medicines, no knowledge of the aranthas' poison. Only... Tal's words suddenly returned with startling clarity.

...The queen is the largest and deadliest. She is likely old and slow, but her fangs bear a venom with strange and mysterious properties. To those who are filled with life, it brings death, and to those near death, it can bring life...

The queen's venom—that was what she needed to save Tal.

It was impossible. It was ridiculous. It was *hopeless*. And she was going to do it anyway.

Moving like one caught in a dream she could not escape, Aislin took Tal's pack, removed the rolled-up mass of her skirts, and placed them beneath his head. Then she shouldered the remaining gear, picked up the still faintly glowing dagger, and turned to face the tunnel they'd attempted only a short time before.

She would have to hope that the queen had expended all of her guards in a single attempt to repel them. That Rhone and his wildings had not beaten her to the queen's lair and taken the prize for themselves.

And if they had... Well, she would be no worse off than she was now. She only knew that she could not live with herself after that moment if she did not try.

Talyn had sacrificed himself for her—for a helpless human—and she would not simply leave him to die.

"I'm not leaving you," she said softly, brushing the tears from her cheeks and taking a deep breath. "I'm going to get what we need, and then I'll come back. I'll save you. And then we'll leave here together."

With a firm nod that was mostly for herself, she turned and strode off down the tunnel.

CHAPTER 19



It occurred to Aislin as she took her first steps down that dark hole in the mountain that she should still be terrified. But terror seemed little more than a blurred and distant memory beside the urgency of her errand.

With the faintly glowing dagger held low in front of her, she took one grim step after another, past the evidence of Tal's initial victories and into the unknown territory beyond. She had no idea how far it might be to the queen's lair, or even if this was the right tunnel, only that she had no time to waste. Tal's life might even now be slipping away, and the residual magic in the dagger would eventually subside, leaving her in darkness.

So she pressed on, stumbling over the uneven floor, peering into the shadows ahead, hoping not to see movement. Praying that there were no more guards for her to encounter.

The tunnel delved deeper and deeper until she was no longer certain how long she'd been walking. Possibly mere minutes, perhaps for days. It was like moving through a waking nightmare, where nothing seemed quite real and only the next step forward mattered.

She was so focused on that next step that she almost didn't realize when she stumbled out of the tunnel and into a cavern so vast that her light could not reach the other side.

The moment her chin lifted, she saw the walls. Watched as they seemed to ripple in the reflected light from the dagger—as if they were not made of rock, but...

Aislin tried to deny her own eyes, but it was impossible. The cavern walls were entirely shrouded in ghostly silken strands that vibrated gently with the disturbance of her entry. Every surface she could see, stretching out far beyond her into the darkness, shone dimly with an almost imperceptible radiance.

She had stepped right into a trap—a vast web made of millions of threads, all woven together to create a shimmering cocoon. Or, more accurately, a nest.

After nearly dying so many times, after believing her quest was all but impossible, she'd actually found the aranthas' hiding place. And at first glance, it seemed abandoned. No chitinous legs scurried out of the corners, no eyes reflected the glow of her blade.

Was she too late? There was no sign of battle, no blood or remnants of mangled arantha corpses.

So she took another step, and her foot sank slightly into the elastic threads of the vast web. It jerked beneath her weight, and something in the darkness in front of her began to move.

An immense, dark shape unfolded from where it rested in the center of that silken cocoon. It spread out its legs with graceful deliberation, rising from them to a height several times Aislin's own before turning toward the source of the disturbance.

Aislin choked, her hand shaking so hard she nearly dropped the dagger, her breath turned to lead in her lungs.

It was coming. Gliding forward effortlessly across the slender strands of silk covering the floor.

And as it loomed over her, Aislin could only stare, dumbfounded, at a creature she could not have conjured even in her darkest imaginings.

It was a spider, and yet it was not. The dark, swollen body and eight jointed legs were much the same, yes. But rising out of that body was a torso that looked for all the world like a human woman.

From the waist up, it was covered in dusky gray skin, and its claw-fingered arms were dusted with fine dark hairs. A long, graceful neck supported a shapely head with wildly tangled dark hair and an eerily human face, out of which two golden eyes regarded her with a pitiless stare.

She had found the Arantha Queen.

Aislin could no more have killed her than she could have flown across the sea.

The Queen's wide, fanged mouth opened, but she did not bite.

She spoke.

"You have come far only to seek your death."

Whatever language it might be, Aislin did not know the words, but the meaning echoed inside her head and tasted of magic.

"I did not come here to die," she responded, and if her voice shook, there was no one to hear her but the Queen.

"To die or to kill, those are the only reasons," the Queen replied. *"And you, little one, are not a killer."*

How could she know? How was this even happening? Had Aislin, too, been bitten, and was she now lying in a dreaming sleep, awaiting her own death?

But even if it was a dream, what did she have to lose?

"I came not to take a life, but to save one," she said, tilting up her chin to look the Arantha Queen in her eerie golden eyes. "My companion has saved my life many times over, and now he lies near death. I had heard..."

It struck her suddenly that telling the Queen she'd come to steal her venom might be unwise.

"You heard that my venom might save him."

Aislin nodded. There was probably no point in trying to hide it now.

“And you thought you would walk in here alone and take it?”

“I truly did not know what I would do. Only that I had to try,” Aislin replied. At this point, honesty cost her nothing.

“Tell me, little one, why are you creeping about beneath my mountain?”

Well, that was a bit awkward to explain. “It’s a long story,” Aislin hedged, but the Queen chuckled, and the sound was an eerie rasp that sent shivers down Aislin’s spine.

“And that matters why? Are you in some great hurry for me to kill you?”

“It is a tale of human problems,” Aislin replied. “Of my own, small, pitiful worries. What would you want with a story such as that?”

“You refuse me your story?” The Queen’s tone was cool and disapproving. *“Fool of a human. Have you learned nothing in your years beneath the sun? In times of great trial, a story may well be your only hope.”*

Then Aislin would tell it. Once more, she would share the shameful details of her life and hope that someone might understand her—understand why she refused to quit, why she attempted the impossible, and why she had to keep going, even when no one else thought she should.

“I live in a human village,” she began, “where we all owe service to the lord who owns our lands.”

“You are bound to bring him food and protect his nest?” the Queen asked.

“Yes.” More or less. Too late, Aislin wondered whether the Arantha Queen might not identify more with Lord Dreichel than with her own part in this tale.

“My family has always paid what we owed through magic, until my mother’s magic was lost, and I had none to replace it. So the lord demanded that I pay my debt by procuring a great treasure from the night elves. If I failed, he would evict us

from our home, and my mother and grandmother would have nowhere to go.”

“*Does not the parent care for the young amongst humans?*” The Queen sounded perplexed, and two of her legs began to tap with what appeared to be irritation.

“Usually,” Aislin told her. “But my father is gone, my mother is ill, and my grandmother’s mind wanders. There is no one but me.”

“*Your colony must provide care for those who require it,*” the Queen insisted, arms folded across her chest. “*Or why would not everyone exist as individuals? Why gather and build a nest? Why subject themselves to the rule of a queen?*”

Aislin opened her mouth and then closed it again. There was nothing to say that would not reflect poorly on humans.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “But humans in general are afraid most of the time. We are afraid of death, of sickness, or of not being able to control what happens to us. We are even afraid of other humans. So we try to make ourselves safe, and sometimes we do it by being cruel to other humans.”

“*And they regard my kind as monsters.*”

“We didn’t know you were...” No matter what Aislin said, it would not be enough.

“I’m sorry,” she said instead. “We came here thinking of you as something to be used for our own needs. I could claim ignorance, but... in truth, I did not even ask. I was desperate, and I thought only of myself.”

The Queen regarded her solemnly out of wide, unblinking eyes.

“*You are truthful,*” she said at last. “*It has been some time since I last tasted someone who told the truth.*”

So that was it, then. Aislin lifted her head to look around at the scene of her death, and realized with a shudder that as she’d spoken to the Queen, the cavern had silently filled to the brim with a seething tide of aranthas. They clung to the webs all around her, a tightly packed mass of dark bodies, waiting

and watching for the outcome of this confrontation. She ought to feel horrified, and yet, that emotion seemed to mean little after all that she'd faced.

"Tell me, human, what did you intend to do after you left this place? Once you slaughtered my guards and took what you wanted?"

Why would she ask that?

"My intentions have changed in the past few hours," Aislin confessed. "I came to the Darkspring to protect my family. I hoped only to return to the night elves with the venom they requested. But now, my first desire is to save my companion's life. After that... I suppose I will go home and attempt to save my family another way."

The Queen regarded her sternly. *"For the sake of your companion, you would throw away the very thing you risked your life to seek?"*

"I would." She didn't even need to think about it. Tal had given his life for hers, and she would do anything to save him.

"Why?"

"Because I lo—"

No. That couldn't be. She could not love him, because he was as far beyond her as the castle at Arandar was beyond her own pitiful little cottage. If Sandric was out of her reach, what did that make Tal?

But Aislin's heart, apparently, did not care. She'd left most of it in that dark cavern with Tal's body, and if he died, she would never get it back.

"I love him," she said quietly.

The Queen laughed again, and the sound was echoed by a low hiss from the aranthas that surrounded them.

"Such an interesting thing, love. It twists us in directions we did not think to go."

A profound truth from the lips of a creature Aislin had once assumed was no more than a monster.

“Perhaps since you know what it is to love, you will understand that I, too, love my children.” The Queen gestured to the aranthas around them. *“They are not exactly as I am. They cannot speak or think for themselves, but they love me, and I care for them. And over the centuries, I have grown weary of sending them out to be hunted.”*

Aislin winced. She wondered if the Queen knew how many of her “children” Tal had killed.

“I propose a bargain, human.”

Aislin’s heart began to thud with a strange and terrible hope. Was she not to die after all?

“I will give you what you seek. My children will allow you to leave here alive so that you may save your companion, but then you must do as I ask.”

“What would you ask of me?” Aislin asked quietly, trying to disguise the trembling of her hands and the quickening of her heart.

“Your vow, human, that you will treat with the night elves on our behalf.”

“And for collateral?”

“Enough of my venom to satisfy their demands.”

“What am I to bargain for?”

“We ask only to be allowed to live in peace,” the Queen said. *“My children harm no one unless they are attacked. They hunt quietly and live in holes where no one else goes. The night elves must respect our territory, or one day I will grow weary and teach them that respect over the bodies of their dead.”*

Time—and Aislin’s heart—seemed to freeze. There was no going back from this decision. Vanadar had promised to grant her only a single request, so instead of using the venom to purchase her family’s future, she must use it to convince the night elves to consider the Queen’s demands.

She had come here, willing to risk death for the chance to save her family, and she would leave no closer to her goal.

But Tal would leave with her, and he... Whether he knew it or not, he was now a part of her family too. He and Cuan.

“I will do everything I can,” Aislin promised. “I would be lying if I promised you the night elves will listen, because I am weak and human, and they do not respect me either. But I will swear to bargain for you and to give them your message.”

The Queen regarded her in silence for five beats of Aislin’s heart, and then she nodded regally.

“We have an accord. Have you a way to carry my gift?”

Aislin removed her pack and scabbled in the bottom of it with trembling fingers until they finally closed around the small glass vial. She held it out, and somehow did not flinch when the Queen’s claw-tipped fingers took it from her palm.

The Queen turned away, hiding her face, and a moment later, it was done. She held out the vial again, this time with a bead of shimmering, golden liquid in the bottom.

“A single drop is sufficient for your purposes, human,” the Queen warned. *“There are two, so do not waste them.”*

Aislin clenched the precious vial in her fist and fought to keep tears from flowing down her cheeks. “Thank you,” she said hoarsely. “I assure you that I do not take this gift lightly.”

The Queen inclined her head. *“I believe you do not. Now go. My children are hungry, and even I cannot prevent them from feeding forever.”*

Aislin turned and fled.



When recalling it later, Aislin always felt that her return to where she’d left Tal was the most terrifying portion of her entire journey.

The magic in the dagger waned, leaving barely enough light to see her hands in front of her. The dark tunnel yawned behind her, and the Queen’s warning echoed in her ears—the

aranthas might come after her at any moment, and any left in these tunnels would not hesitate to attack.

Despite the chill of the cave, sweat beaded on Aislin's neck and chest, trickling uncomfortably down her spine. The sick ache of apprehension in her stomach warred with the fluttering thrill of hope, and together they made her feel like vomiting, but she hadn't eaten in... who even knew how long?

She could not let Tal die. Even if he walked away from her the moment their quest was finished. Even if he was angry with her for bargaining away everything they'd come for.

Hopefully, Vanadar would still grant Tal what he'd promised. After all, he'd made separate bargains with the both of them.

But why waste her worry on the future when she didn't even know whether Tal was alive?

By the time she stumbled back into the cavern where she'd left him, only the faintest glow remained in the delicate silver tracery on the dagger's blade. She'd fallen so many times, her trousers were ripped and stained with blood from the shredded skin of her knees.

But still, she staggered forward, mingled hope and fear making her light-headed as she finally caught sight of Tal's prone form, lying motionless on the cold cavern floor just as she'd left him.

He'd not been carried off as a meal for some faceless monster.

Aislin knelt beside him, trembling so violently she could hear her teeth chattering and could barely peel her fingers back where they clenched around the precious vial. She was shaking too hard to even feel for a pulse, and if he was breathing, it was too shallow for her to detect.

Fear swallowed her like a live thing, its razor teeth shredding the tattered remains of her heart as it gulped her down. But she refused to let it win.

Binding her terror with ruthless strength of will, she steadied her hands, unstoppered the vial, and held it over Tal's

lips. With one hand, she cupped the back of his head and lifted, and when his mouth fell slack, she tipped a single shimmering golden drop past his lips before lowering his head to the floor.

His face did not change. Aislin restoppered the vial and stowed it deep in the pack for safekeeping, and still, he did not move. His chest did not rise and fall, and his eyes did not open. She placed her fingers on his neck and felt only the icy smoothness of his skin—no flutter of blood beneath the surface, no warmth to indicate life.

And then the last of the magic in the dagger finally died, plunging the entire cavern into darkness and extinguishing the last fitful embers of Aislin's hope.

She'd gone on for so long, dragging herself forward on the strength of her desperation, but it had taken her as far as it could go. She was exhausted, bleeding from wounds of both the body and the heart, having driven herself beyond all limitations of her endurance. And now, after surviving such unimaginable horrors, she'd failed at what mattered most.

Whatever version of her eventually left this cave, it would be a broken and defeated one. Yes, she would go on, because it would feel like a betrayal to give up when she was this close. The surface was not far, and she could probably find her way out of the cave in time. Might even be able to find a road and make her way back to the settlement.

But she would leave here knowing that Tal was dead because of her.

Had she not come on this mad quest, he might yet be languishing in the night elves' dungeon, but at least he would be alive. At least there would be hope.

But with Tal lying still as death on the cave floor, all of her efforts felt like the bitterest failure, and in her weariness and grief, Aislin could no longer hold the tears at bay.

Sobs rose up, cutting like knives as they forced their way out, and when she could no longer choke them back, she lowered her head to Tal's chest and let them take her.

In the silent darkness of the cavern, she mourned for them both—for the pain of Tal’s losses that had never healed, for his final sacrifice, and for the innocent determination she’d carried into the darkness like a torch, only to leave it behind forever.

“Why did you do it?” she whispered, to herself as much as Tal. “Why did you risk so much?”

But there would never be an answer.

With her eyes burning and her throat raw from crying, Aislin knew it was time to go on. She could not dishonor his sacrifice so completely as to stay.

Clenching her teeth against the pain, she pushed to her knees and reached into the pack for the last bit of light that remained.

That one tiny drop of venom gave off the faintest golden glow, but in the ultimate darkness of the cave, it was enough.

She left Tal’s sword at his side, but kept the dagger. Brushing a strand of hair away from his face, she bent down and pressed trembling lips to his forehead.

“You will never be forgotten,” she murmured. “And I will do everything I can to save Cuan.” And then, because she could no longer justify clinging to any remaining shreds of cowardice, she went on. “Even though it is far too late and I should have told you so much sooner, I believe you’re the most honorable, decent man I’ve ever known.”

He’d tried so hard to hide behind that grim, unyielding exterior, but he could not hide his heart. Not when his actions said everything his lips could not.

“You saved me,” she said simply. “And you sacrificed yourself in ways no one else even considered. Whether you knew it or not, that kind of sacrifice is really just a form of love, and”—her voice dropped to a whisper—“I think I love you too. I’m sorry I couldn’t save you in return.”

Her lips trembled, and her eyes pressed shut to stop the tears.

“I hope,” she whispered, “that you are finally at peace.”

And then she walked away.



At first, Aislin followed the faint hint of a breeze, placing one foot in front of the other in a mindless trudge out of the depths and into the first tantalizing glimmers of light. When it grew bright enough, she tucked the vial back into her pack and kept on, eyes glazed with weariness, her entire body throbbing with pain.

When she finally took those last few steps out of the cave, she almost did not believe it.

The outside world seemed bizarrely unchanged. Only a few paces beyond the eternal night of the Darkspring, she stumbled into an unremarkable forest clearing just as the pink and purple light of sunset bathed the treetops. It was serene... peaceful even, and suddenly Aislin could go no further.

She dropped her pack, fell to the ground, and stared up at the sky, unable to even move as night fell and the stars appeared. Tears leaked unheeded from the corners of her eyes, trailing down her neck to dampen her hair and soak into the dirt beneath her.

She had to move—she knew that. Needed to eat and drink and find shelter for the night. But every step away from where she'd left Tal still felt like a betrayal.

Moving as if in a dreamlike stupor, she pushed up on her elbows and found the food in the pack, still wrapped in oilskin, still as unappetizing as ever. She tried to eat it, but could swallow no more than a few bites. A sip from what was left in the waterskin dampened her parched throat, but could not ease the pain from all the tears she'd shed.

So she lay back again and stared at the stars, while sleep threatened to drag her into oblivion.

If she slept, she would be vulnerable to any creature who wandered by, but she was simply too tired...



Aislin was awakened abruptly by the strangely familiar feeling of having her face washed by a compost heap.

A hot, wet tongue swiped across her cheek, followed by a plaintive whine, and she opened her eyes to the soft glow of moonlight and the huge, dark shape of Cuan lying beside her.

How he'd found her, she could not even begin to guess, but Aislin rolled over, sat up, and threw herself at his shaggy neck, wrapping her arms around him and clinging to his fur as if he could somehow block out the memories of the past few days.

He whined again, clearly aware that something was wrong.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into his fur. "I'm so sorry. I lost him. He isn't coming back, and it's my fault."

She half expected the dreadwolf to snarl and pull away, but he had an uncomplicated heart and seemed to sense her distress. Another whine, and then he rested his chin on her shoulder, and for a moment, they simply comforted one another.

But then the wolf did pull back with a snarl, though it was not directed at her. Instead, he rose to his feet and placed his furry bulk between Aislin and the forest, hackles raised and eyes glowing dimly in the moonlight.

"I must say," a familiar voice drawled out of the darkness, "I'm quite surprised to find you still alive."

Aislin stiffened as the shadows beneath the trees began to stir, eventually resolving into the familiar form of... Rhone.

He sauntered towards her, pausing a half dozen strides away and regarding her out of one curious, dimly luminescent green eye. A slight smirk tugged at his mouth, and while he appeared relaxed, Aislin was not fooled by his casual stance.

"What do you want?" she growled, and was shocked by the harsh rasp of her voice. She sounded like an old woman

who hadn't spoken in twenty years.

Rhone shrugged. "Merely to know how a fragile creature like you survived when my companions and I were forced to retreat. The aranthas' numbers proved too great for our abilities, so I cannot help but wonder what miracle enabled you to escape unscathed."

Aislin's eyes closed in fresh grief. "There is no miracle," she said flatly. "My companion sacrificed himself so that I could escape."

"Then you failed in your errand?" Rhone asked, and suddenly Aislin became aware of the calculating gleam in his eye. "Or did you succeed, and that is why your companion *sacrificed* himself?"

"Whether we did or not," she returned icily, "what is that to you? Did you not say that whoever succeeded would have fairly earned their victory?"

Rhone's hand lifted to rest casually on the hilt of his blade. "Perhaps I did," he said. "But perhaps I also find your survival to be a curious anomaly. Your protector was the strongest opponent I have ever faced, and I cannot quite imagine how he is dead and you... are not."

Aislin's mouth dropped open. "You think... you think I *killed him*?" She all but snarled the words.

Rhone's single visible eyebrow lifted faintly. "Well, did you?"

In that moment, Aislin felt nothing but rage—pure and blinding. Tal's dagger was in her hand before she thought to reach for it, and then she was at Rhone's throat, one hand fisted in his tunic and the dagger resting against his neck.

"I am *not* a killer," she spat. "If these past days have taught me nothing else, I know that I will never be able to easily take the life of any creature, but I might choose to make an exception for you."

Somehow, the night elf did not appear threatened, only gazed at her with a sort of calm watchfulness.

“He *saved* me,” Aislin bit out, fury barely holding her sorrow at bay. “And I will always regret that I put him in a position where he thought he had to throw himself away for me. He deserved so much more. He deserved to live in peace and to find joy again. But now he never will, and I have to go on without him.” Her voice broke. “I’ll never hear him call me a ‘foolish human’ again. And I won’t get a chance to tell him...”

“Tell him what?” Rhone asked softly, just before he was violently ripped away from her and thrown across the clearing.

For a moment, Aislin thought it was Cuan coming to her defense. But it was not the dreadwolf who loomed over the prone—and now *laughing*—form of Rhone.

The newcomer was a night elf—his clothing torn and bloodstained, the tattered remains of his shirt hanging loose around his torso. He appeared barely able to stand, but the sword at Rhone’s throat was steady as the roots of the mountains themselves.

And it was *glowing*.

Cuan let out a bark of pure joy.

Aislin simply stared.

She was hallucinating. She had to be. Tal was *dead*. He’d had no pulse, and his lungs had been still.

But there was no mistaking that looming, muscled form. No one else exuded that much power, and no one else could glare with that menacing intensity.

“I’m not sure why you’re waving that sword at *me*,” Rhone pointed out, “when your human was the one doing all the threatening.”

“Touch her again, and I will drive this blade through your ribs without remorse.”

It was Tal’s voice—rough, hoarse, and full of pain, but unmistakable—and Aislin nearly cried at the sound she’d never thought to hear again.

Rhone just looked up at Tal and grinned before rolling away and coming to his feet. “It’s a delight to see that the rumors of your death were in error,” he said. “And now that I see no assistance is required, I will take my leave. However...”

He paused, and his head tilted to the side. “Should either of you ever find yourselves without a home, know that my family and I welcome any wildings in need. If”—his grin grew sharp and feral—“they can find us.”

With a final nod of farewell, he simply melted into the shadows and was gone.

Tal turned to look at Aislin out of fiery amber eyes. “Are you...” They were the only words he could manage before his knees gave out and he collapsed.

Aislin darted forward and tried to catch him, but his weight was too much, and they fell to the ground together.

CHAPTER 20



Tal twisted in the air as he fell, somehow managing not to crush Aislin beneath him. She fell too, but immediately rolled to her side to stare at him as though she were seeing a ghost.

Then her trembling fingers touched his face, tracing from his forehead to his chin before cupping his cheek in her palm while her tears fell unheeded.

Her eyes were wide, and the moonlight left dark circles beneath them. She was filthy, bloody, and had clearly reached the end of her endurance, but she was *alive*.

They were both alive, and in the surge of triumph that followed that realization, Tal forgot everything except a sudden, fierce need to touch her. To hold her—to know that his human was real and safe. Without thought for his injuries, he pushed up on one hand, wrapped his free arm around her, and pulled her against his chest as tightly as his wretchedly weak body would allow.

She stiffened and drew in a single breath, frozen in either shock or dismay. Tal would have let her go had she not then flung her arms around his neck with equal fervor, clinging to him as though she needed the contact as much as he did.

He could feel her tears falling hot on his skin. Tremors shook her slender frame, and Tal could not stop himself from murmuring soft words in her ear.

“It’s all right, Aislin. I am alive. You are safe.”

His arms grew weak, but he did not want to let her go, so he simply fell back onto the grass and pulled her with him, allowing a strange, placid warmth to settle over him as he did so.

Warmth, peace, contentment... Such feelings could only arise from magic, but Aislin had none, and he could sense no enemies or disturbances in the nearby forest.

Tal decided he did not care. Cuan would warn him if there was danger, and he was too busy feeling relieved to bother with fear. Relieved, and possibly even... happy? It was a strange thought, but with Aislin beside him, her head on his shoulder and her arm wrapped around his chest, he could not think of another word that fit.

“Tal?” Her voice was small and hesitant.

“Hmm?”

“I didn’t mean to leave you for dead.” She paused for a moment. “I thought you *were* dead.”

“As did I,” he admitted slowly. “I was bitten... too many times to count.”

Aislin released him, rose to one elbow, and looked down at him, her expression adorably fierce. “You should not have thrown your life away trying to save mine. There is nothing about me worth that kind of sacrifice.”

Tal felt a hint of anger brush across the surface of his contentment. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“You said it yourself,” she pointed out, a little wryly. “I’m soft and helpless—a witless human sheep.”

Tal winced. He *had* said that, hadn’t he?

“I have no power, no influence, no special abilities, and no magic,” Aislin continued. “Why would you even *think* about dying to save someone like me?”

“No magic?” A rusty laugh erupted from his throat, causing Aislin’s eyes to widen in response. “You have far greater magic than I could ever dream of possessing.”

With torn and bloodstained fingers, he swept her hair away from her face and tucked it gently behind her ear. “Whether you know it or not, your courage and determination are a form of magic all their own. Without them, I would still be languishing in Vanadar’s dungeon, bitter and alone. Without your stubborn refusal to quit, we would both have died in that cave. Do not undervalue yourself simply because your magic is not easily seen. Your life,” he told Aislin fiercely, “is worth every possible sacrifice.”

He’d stunned her past words. Her wide blue eyes turned luminous in the moonlight, while her lips parted softly in surprise. An errant breeze stirred her dark hair, framing her face with its wild tendrils, and somehow the picture became a blade of longing that pierced through his armor, between his ribs, and all the way to his heart.

He wanted this. Wanted *her*. For now, for always. She was the joy to his melancholy, the light to his shadow, the star to his grim night sky. He’d walled her out, but she’d simply found another way in, past all his defenses, to the part of him that was desperately alone. Aislin *saw* him—every broken and grieving part of him—and refused to run away.

But even if she was everything to him, she had a world of her own to return to. A family and a home. The humans did not welcome night elves among them, so what place could he possibly have in her life?

Especially now that they’d failed in their quest. She had no way to pay Vanadar’s price, and therefore no chance of fulfilling the demands of her human lord.

“And do not worry for the future,” he said softly. “We will find a way to gain what you need.”

Her face changed suddenly, and she pulled away. “About that...” Her eyes fell, and she clenched her fingers around her knees before getting to her feet and retrieving his pack from where it lay on the ground nearby.

Sitting cross-legged a few feet away, she reached into the pack and withdrew... the vial. The glass vial Vanadar had given them.

Which now contained a single drop of glowing golden liquid.

The whole world seemed to shudder to a halt as Tal stared at what she held. She'd gotten the venom. While he lay near death, she'd gone on and finished the quest.

But *how*?

And... why? The number of ways she could have died was staggering. Between darkness and danger and the threat of everything from falling to starvation, her survival was no less than a miracle.

"You..." Torn between rage and relief, he could not find the words to go on. He'd given everything he had to save her, and she'd gone deeper into the cave rather than leaving.

"You were dying," Aislin said quietly, a ragged edge to her voice. "I saw where they'd bitten you, and I knew you would not survive. I also knew that you wanted me to leave, but... I couldn't." Her eyes finally lifted from her hands, piercing his as if trying to tell him something important. "Tal, I need you to understand—I *couldn't*. Not because of my errand, and not for Vanadar, but because I couldn't let you die. Not after you'd saved me so many times. So even if it makes me a fool, even if you're angry, I don't care because that was not a part of myself I was willing to give up."

He wanted to be furious. Echoes of terror for what she must have endured still shook him. But he could not be angry with a warrior for her courage. Could not deny her the right to decide her own path. As much as his heart cried out that she must be safe, the very spirit and determination that he admired was too much a part of her, and to take those away would be to break her. To make her less than who she was, and he could never do that, because he loved her.

Loved her.

The words echoed in the sudden, shocked emptiness of Tal's mind.

Undeniable. Inescapable.

He loved his tiny, fierce human with all her boundless courage and willingness to embrace the darkness for those she cared about.

“Are you angry with me?” Her voice was soft and uncertain. Waiting for his reply.

Angry? No. He wanted to crush her to his chest again, to know that she was well and whole and remind himself that whatever hardships she had endured, she had also survived. He wanted to tell her the staggering truth he’d just discovered, but there was still anxiety in her eyes, and his bone-deep certainty would only frighten her.

“I am not,” he said, sitting up slowly and painfully to rest his elbows on his knees. “But I feel you have much yet to tell me. Such as”—his gaze pierced hers—“why I am still alive.”

Aislin looked back, her chin lifting defiantly. “I bargained with the Arantha Queen for two drops of her venom. One was for you.”

Tal’s mind spun, half amazement, half stunned horror. She’d *bargained*? With the *queen*?

“She was not what I expected,” Aislin admitted. “I don’t know how much you know about their queens, but they are...” She shook her head. “Powerful, intelligent, cunning, and undeniably magical. She could speak inside my head. She asked what I wanted, and I told her. In exchange for the venom, she asked only for my promise to negotiate with Vanadar for a sovereign territory for herself and her children. So I agreed.”

The full import of her words finally struck him. Aislin had bargained and accepted the queen’s terms. Had agreed to ask Vanadar to grant the queen’s request. The regent had offered each of them only a single boon, which meant Aislin intended to exchange the queen’s petition for her own. She had, in essence, sacrificed her own desperate need in order to save his life.

“Why?” he demanded suddenly, shifting forward to stare at her intently. “Why did you waste such a gift on me? I was near

enough to death that you could not tell the difference. You could have saved both drops of venom. Fulfilled your promise to the queen as well as gained what you needed. Instead, you risked everything on the chance that I might survive.”

He was still not angry, but there was a strange, tight feeling in his chest—some unnamed anxiety, and a need that would not be quieted.

“I told you,” Aislin said simply. “I couldn’t let you die.”

“That is not the full truth, is it?” Tal shifted nearer, his entire body taut with urgency as he awaited her answer. “Aislin, I heard what you said to Rhone. What was it that you believed you would never get a chance to tell me?”

She hesitated. Bit her lip. Looked at the ground.

And that was when Cuan finally got tired of waiting. With a low growl, he pounced, knocking Tal backwards and shoving his furry head right into Tal’s face before taking a vigorous swipe with his slobbery tongue.

Rolling out of the way, Tal got to his feet and allowed himself a moment to lean on his oldest friend, arms around his neck, face buried in his thick fur.

“Thank you,” he murmured, and Cuan answered with a brief anxious whine.

The wolf was right. They should not stay here. The cave’s mouth still yawned behind them, and the night was yet young. Predators would be roaming these woods, and they would be safer if they were on the move.

“We should make our way toward the settlement,” he said, turning to Aislin with an assessing gaze. “That is if you feel strong enough to go on for a few more hours. We can find a safer place to make camp for the day and assess our injuries there.”

He could see her bone-deep weariness in the hollows of her face and the droop of her shoulders, but she nodded anyway as she rose shakily to her feet. “Against all odds and expectations, we’re alive,” she said simply. “We should make every effort to stay that way. At some point, I will probably

collapse, but for now, my relief is enough to carry me on for a few more hours.”

Pushing past the pain of wounds he dared not even stop to enumerate, Tal picked up his pack, vaulted onto Cuan’s back, and held out his hand. And this time, Aislin did not hesitate. She placed her hand willingly in his, and he lifted her up to sit not behind him, but in front. Surprised, she looked over her shoulder in weary confusion.

“If you fall asleep, I can ensure that you do not slide off,” he murmured in her ear, and she seemed to accept it without complaint as his arms encircled her waist.

Then Cuan broke into a run, and they were once more racing through the moonlit forest.

It was the same and yet different from every other time.

The same because he was again one with his dreadwolf, and the forest was as beautiful as it had always been.

And also different because *he* was different. Because of the woman in his arms. Because of the strange warmth that had replaced the ice around his heart. The anger and resentment that had sustained him for so long had somehow melted away. Perhaps they would return when he saw Paendreth’s face, but for now, there was nothing in the dark, churning place where they had once rested. Nothing but a sense of deep contentment and... peace.

An utterly unnerving thought.

“I suppose,” Aislin said, her voice already beginning to sound drowsy, “I should prepare to ask Vanadar for another task I can undertake.”

Tal supposed he should disabuse her of the notion that he would stand aside and watch as she did anything so nonsensical. But they were both tired, and he did not want to argue. He simply wanted to revel in the knowledge that she was close and safe. Later—after they’d both slept—would be soon enough to discuss his intentions.

“How great is this favor you requested that he would send you on such a dangerous errand?” he inquired mildly. “You

mentioned a broken shield. I cannot imagine that being such a difficult thing to fix.”

Aislin let out a long sigh and relaxed against him, and for a moment, Tal could barely breathe. Her head rested on his shoulder, and she seemed utterly content in his arms.

Even after all his failures, she trusted him with her safety.

“It is not the shield,” she explained tiredly. “It is the stone. It was enchanted, and the enchantment was broken. If I do not fix it, I cannot go home. And I must go home so that I can take care of everything until Father returns.”

Her father. “And if your father does not return?”

Perhaps if she’d been fully awake, she might not have answered, but in her exhaustion, she did not hesitate.

“He will,” she murmured, turning her head so that her cheek was pillowed on his chest. “My mother is afraid he simply can’t bear to come home. That he cannot face his own failures to protect us. But he’s not gone. Something has prevented him from coming. I just need to hold on a little longer...”

Tal’s arms tightened in an almost unconscious response to her story. And as Aislin yawned and nestled a little closer, his heart threatened to crack in two.

He was angry again, but it was not the same corrosive, bitter feeling he’d lived with for so long after Lani’s death. This was a pure, clean sort of anger—linked to his desire to protect Aislin from the cruel lord whose demands had nearly sent her to her death. Perhaps even to hunt down the father who had likely abandoned her.

Even if he could do neither of those things in the end, he could ensure that she would not be evicted from her home. She had not asked him for help—and likely would not—but he could promise himself that much.

Aislin had been carrying the full weight of the safety and well-being of her family for so long, it might not occur to her that someone would be willing to fight for her. She might even

argue if he tried, so he would keep his intentions to himself for a little while longer.

At least until they stood in front of Vanadar once more.

That conversation was going to go very differently than the last one.

CHAPTER 21



Aislin remembered very little about that ride. She recalled her exhaustion, leaning back against Tal's chest, exchanging a few quiet words, and then... nothing.

She did not awaken until daylight was fading and a gentle grip on her arm interrupted her dreams.

"Aislin."

It was too soon, but she cracked her eyelids open just a sliver, wincing as the light of evening pried its way in. "Go away," she muttered. What could it hurt if she slept for just one more hour?

"We must not delay our return to the settlement," a quiet voice insisted. "If we ride now, we will likely arrive before daylight. Your business with Vanadar can be concluded, and you can be on your way home."

Vanadar.

The venom.

Talyn.

Aislin's eyes shot open to see him crouched beside her, a slight crease cutting across his forehead. He'd replaced his torn shirt and appeared to have washed at least some of the blood from his skin. But something even more than that... something was different.

She sat up, trying to remember anything at all about how she'd gotten here—to a bed beneath the trees with the sound of water nearby.

“I did not wish to wake you,” Tal explained. “You have been asleep since last night, and I judged that perhaps it was best to allow you to remain so.”

He must have carried her. Set up camp alone and watched over her while she slept. A flush crept up Aislin’s cheeks as she regarded the night elf beside her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I did not mean to leave everything to you. I’m sure you’re as tired as I am.”

To her utter shock and amazement, his lips curved, and he *smiled*. The expression was somehow neither bitter nor mocking, and Aislin wondered dizzily whether she would ever fully recover from its impact. That smile, tiny as it was, transformed the remote, untouchable night elf into a person of humor and warmth, so dizzily gorgeous that she nearly stopped breathing.

“I slept already, thanks to the aranthas,” he said.

Aislin blinked several times in astonishment because apparently Tal was capable of making a joke, and she’d had no idea.

“I would have allowed you to rest longer,” he went on, “however, I thought you might prefer to have time to decide how you will confront Vanadar.”

Vanadar. She still had to convince the regent to accept the bargain she’d made with the Arantha Queen. Looking down at her scarred, blood-stained hands and torn trousers, Aislin could only shrug. She was filthy, and her hair was a tangled mess. Her clothing stank, but she had nothing else to wear.

“There’s no making me other than what I am,” she said. “Even if I wash the blood from these hands, I will still be a human. Vanadar is unlikely to respect me more just because I am clean.”

Tal reached out and took her hands in his, holding them palm up in a gentle grip. “If he were wise, he would respect you no matter how you appear, for the simple fact that you survived what has claimed the lives of many night elves in the

past. He would see your wounds and know that he is in the presence of a warrior.”

She shook her head. “Not a warrior, Tal. Just a woman.”

“You are far more than ‘just’ anything.”

He spoke the words with conviction, and Aislin had to reclaim her hands before her blush became painfully evident.

“But you are right that we should make haste. If the Marlord dies before we return, there will be no bargaining for either of us.”

Every inch of her body protested as she rose from the ground and made her way on shaking legs to the tiny stream not far from camp. She dared not attempt to take stock of all her injuries, but was able to soak the broken skin on her knees and cleanse most of the blood from her hands. Her ribs stabbed at her when she twisted or bent too far, and whenever she moved her right arm, her back twinged as if it were a purple mass of bruises.

But she could walk, and she could ride, and that meant she could make it home. Old Man Eben could help her heal, and then... And then...

It was too much to consider right at that moment. She would deal with her plans for the future when the time came. She could not face those questions now, not when any thoughts beyond tonight meant reckoning with the possibility of returning home alone, without the stone she'd sworn to fix. Without any way to repay Lord Dreichel, and without...

Without Tal.

The remaining hours she would spend in his company now seemed terrifyingly short. When they returned to the settlement, he would claim his challenge, and there was always a chance Paendreth might kill him.

Win or lose, however, their paths diverged, and the thought drove an unexpected spear of pain deep into her chest. After tomorrow, there was no reason for them to remain together. After tomorrow, she would never hear his voice again, never

laugh at his endearing scowl, never have her face washed by a dreadwolf's disgusting tongue.

The pain took her breath away, but it was her own fault. She'd left her heart unguarded, and it had run straight into the arms of a man it could never have.

It was clear enough that Tal no longer disliked her, and perhaps even had some affection for her. At the very least, her life mattered deeply to him. But he had said no words that Aislin could interpret as more than his long-denied protective instincts finding a new home.

If she could have nothing else, she would take his friendship, but it would make no difference to her heart in the end. When he left, it would be irretrievably broken, and Aislin acknowledged that inevitable anguish even as she resolved not to waste a single moment of whatever time they might be granted.



Their ride was long and grueling, even more so than Aislin's first time traveling by dreadwolf. They stopped only to drink, keeping to the road and outrunning whatever predators dared consider them a target.

Aislin clung to Tal as they ran, fixing those moments in her memory. She wondered whether with each passing year they would come to seem more like a dream—the beauty of the night forest, the powerful stride of the dreadwolf beneath her, and the warm, unyielding strength of Tal, who never wavered throughout that long night.

When they finally reached the edges of the night elf settlement, Cuan came to a stop, his entire body drooping with weariness. Tal helped Aislin dismount, then steadied her against his side for a moment until she could stand.

“We will approach on foot,” he said quietly, as Aislin tried to find her balance despite the galloping of the earth underfoot. “I would not expose Cuan to their hostility or

misunderstandings. Some night elves view his size as a challenge for their hunting form.”

Aislin took a moment to give the dreadwolf a long hug and let him wash her face one last time. Who even knew how and when she would be leaving here? Whether she would ever see him again?

Then she looked up at Tal with a grim nod. “I’m ready,” she said, and they strode on into the settlement together.

It was near dawn, when most night elves would be home and preparing to sleep for the day. Only a few residents were out and about, but Tal and Aislin were quickly confronted by an armed guard who eyed them with an understandable blend of hostility and curiosity.

“We seek Vanadar,” Tal said, ignoring the blade pointed at his chest and addressing his challenger with an air of weary boredom.

The guard sneered as best he could while having to look *up* at a trespasser. “The regent does not grant an audience to every beggar who passes through Revenfell. Be on your way, unless you would prefer to visit the inside of a cell.”

“I have already spent all the time I intend to on the inside of the Marlord’s dungeons,” Tal returned, his eyes taking on a sinister glow. “Either you can take us to the regent, or we will find him for ourselves.”

The guard laughed, and his blade moved to rest against the side of Tal’s neck. “I fear no wilding, let alone a human,” he scoffed. “And you have been sufficiently warned. Leave, or accept the consequences.”

“Very well,” Tal said. “I accept them.”

Somehow, he’d been hiding the extent of his power. Or perhaps the guard had simply not been paying attention. But a moment later, Tal was no longer merely a ragged night elf in travel-worn clothing.

Power erupted from his body in a terrifying wave. It knocked the guard back a pace and shimmered, almost visibly, in the early morning air, leaving no doubt of either Tal’s

willingness or his ability to destroy anything or anyone in his path.

For a single moment, he was once again that otherworldly creature of the forest, a force of nature and an inescapable tower of menace.

And then all of that power simply folded away again, leaving him staring at the visibly stunned guard, having moved not a muscle in his own defense.

“Take us to Vanadar,” Tal said in icy tones, and the guard did not hesitate again.

They moved through the settlement at a brisk walk, Aislin looking about her curiously at a place she knew she’d seen before but had not really noticed at the time. She’d been too busy running for her life, chasing down the night elf who now walked beside her with a long, confident stride.

It was beautiful, she decided, if strange to her human eyes. There was no stonework to be seen, only homes built of some silky gray wood. The smooth dirt paths were laid out as if they’d simply grown there in harmony with the existing forest, lit either by glowing stones or by the trees themselves, which seemed to flare brightly as the three of them passed by.

After a handful of minutes at a brisk walk, they finally drew near the center of the settlement. Aislin immediately recognized the place where her journey had begun—in the round, peak-roofed building ahead.

They entered close at the guard’s heels, and Aislin took a step nearer to Tal as they were met with the pressure of alarmed gazes and shocked stares from every side. The round room was full, despite the late hour, and the mood was somber.

For a handful of moments, no one spoke. But in the midst of that awkward silence, the guard bowed his head, and the crowd parted to reveal the familiar form of the Marlord’s regent.

Vanadar appeared to have aged in the few days since they’d seen him. His dark cloak and long white shirt were wrinkled, and his staff of office seemed to be missing.

“Do not waste my time describing your failure,” he said icily, regarding them with ill-concealed impatience. “I cannot imagine how you dare show your faces here again, but count yourselves lucky that my time is too valuable to be bothered with locking you up. Go now, and I will endeavor to forget that I ever laid eyes on you.” He turned away as if in dismissal, but the crowd did not move. Unlike Vanadar, they seemed wise enough not to turn their backs on the predator in their midst.

Tal removed his pack and handed it to Aislin, his eyes never leaving the regent. “I suspect the only failure that truly disappoints you is my failure to die,” he returned coolly. “You once said I lacked honor, but now you would turn me away when I come only to fulfill the terms of our bargain?”

Vanadar whirled, and the look in his eyes nearly sent Aislin staggering backwards. His face was white, his eyes burned, and in them was something terribly like hope.

“You *what?*” he whispered, and the words echoed in the silence of the hall. “Do not toy with me, wilding. Did you acquire what was needed?”

“No.”

Vanadar’s brow lowered thunderously, rage clenching his jaw.

“*She* did.” And with that, Tal stepped slightly back.

Aislin’s eyes flew wide with shock, but at Tal’s confident nod, she reached into the pack and then held out her clenched fist. When she opened her fingers, the vial with its single drop of golden venom lay shimmering in her palm.

For the next few breaths, no one moved, as if they were afraid the vision before them might shatter.

Then Vanadar strode forward, eyes wild with urgency, his own hand outstretched as if to take the prize.

But Aislin’s fingers closed.

“Not yet,” she said firmly, holding her ground as she looked up at the looming night elf regent. “I must ask you to

consider changing the terms of our bargain.”

A snarl creased Vanadar’s features. “So you would hold us hostage to our desperation,” he growled. “What else should I expect from an honorless human?”

Aislin shook her head. “I am only keeping the promise I made to the one who gave me this venom,” she returned calmly. Her words raised Vanadar’s eyebrows and drew shocked murmurs from the others in the hall. “I could never have gained what you sought through battle, and the Queen was kind enough to spare me only because I swore to negotiate on her behalf.”

“You are suggesting that you *spoke* with an arantha?”

“If you doubt me, feel free to personally validate the truth of my story,” Aislin said dryly. “But yes. The Queen possesses some strange magic that permitted her to converse with me. And she has tasked me with trading this venom for her clan’s right to dwell in the Darkspring without fear of hostility or attack. They want only to live in peace and for their territory to be respected.”

Vanadar considered her, his head tilted slightly to the side. “And how do I know that you speak the truth? This ‘venom’ could well be fake.”

“I did not take you for a fool,” Aislin replied acerbically. “If I were attempting to pass off a fake, why would I beg a favor for anyone other than myself?”

The regent was silent for another handful of moments before he nodded sharply. “Agreed. Let it be noted that the Darkspring and its environs are now the territory of the wild aranthas, and those who trespass do so at the risk of their own lives. We will guard its borders and notify all settlements of this agreement. Will that satisfy the demands of your honor?”

Aislin nodded.

“The venom?”

She opened her hand, and Vanadar plucked the vial from her palm, turning almost immediately to a younger night elf standing nearby.

“Go,” he said urgently, and the other left the hall at a run as Vanadar turned back to Aislin. “And now we can only wait.”

Aislin turned her head and sought out Tal, but he remained still and watchful, with no sign that he was anxious to claim his own prize.

Those around her exchanged glances, but none dared speak until Vanadar broke the silence, his arms folded tightly across his chest.

“What then was your part in this, Talyn ven Danael?”

“I owe you no explanation, Regent. The deed is done.”

Vanadar’s eyes grew harder. “Understand that you are owed nothing unless the Marlord lives.”

Tal regarded him impassively. “I have no reason to doubt the efficacy of the cure. Unless your lord is dead already.”

The moments ticked past, and Aislin began to look longingly at the benches around the periphery of the room. There was no way to know how long this might take. In Tal’s case...

She did not want to remember. Did not want to recall that she had given up too soon and left him for dead.

The room around them gradually filled still further, the number of onlookers growing as rumors spread that their Marlord’s life may yet be spared.

Aislin began to feel uneasy at the press of hostile strangers, but Tal... The other night elves still gave him a wide berth. No matter how ragged his appearance, there was no mistaking his power, even when it was cloaked behind his formidable strength of will.

At length, the night elf who had taken the venom returned, his eyes wide and his mouth slack with awe. “The Marlord is awake!”

They had done it.

The tension broke. Awed voices and cries of jubilation rose and fell around the room. Aislin released her breath in a long sigh and turned to Tal. “You’ve won,” she murmured, but he showed no sign of triumph, and his eyes did not leave Vanadar.

The regent’s shoulders slumped with a relief so profound, Aislin was surprised he did not collapse altogether.

“It is well,” he murmured, his eyes closing as his arms fell to his sides. “All will be well.”

“Will it?” Tal had finally broken his silence, and Aislin winced at the menace in his tone. “Tell me, Vanadar. Where is Paendreth?”

The regent’s eyes opened, and he regarded Tal with his lips pressed together in a flat line. “Do you still wish to throw away your miraculous survival on a useless challenge?”

“It is my life to throw away,” Tal said flatly. “And you promised to convince the Marlord to grant me my desire.”

Vanadar raised his voice to be heard over the sounds of exultation.

“Send for Paendreth.”

Someone left, and the air of celebration left with him, only to be replaced by renewed tension and a low hum that signaled anticipation of violence.

Death rode the air, and everyone knew it.

Paendreth’s entrance occurred with remarkably little fanfare. Though Aislin had never seen him before, it would have been difficult to miss the moment when every eye fixed on a man standing on the periphery of the room, near a small door on the opposite side from where she and Tal waited.

He was tall—perhaps taller than Tal—but slender, like a sapling beside a mature oak. His white hair was gathered at the nape of his neck, and his hands were bare. Aislin noted curiously that he was also conspicuously lacking in weapons and wore no cloak or jacket that could have concealed them.

His face was not unhandsome, but it bore a slight sneer that pulled unpleasantly at his mouth. And when Aislin

focused on his hands, she could see that his fingers clenched and unclenched, twitching continually despite the deceptive stillness of his features.

When Tal caught sight of the newcomer, his posture changed in the span of a single heartbeat—from watchful waiting to lurking predator. His control fell away, and the vast swell of his power filled the room, prickling against Aislin’s skin like thousands of tiny needles, raising the hair on her arms and begging her to be afraid.

Tal’s boots made no sound as he stepped forward, moving towards Paendreth with long liquid strides until he stood a mere arm’s length from the one he’d waited so long to confront. Aislin did not even see him move, but suddenly Tal’s dagger was in his hand, its point resting at the other night elf’s throat.

“Do you wish to say anything before you die?” he murmured softly, the sense of menace no less for the lack of emotion in his tone.

“Die?” Paendreth returned silkily. “You cannot kill me here. Not without a challenge. Not unless you intend to perish with me. And you should know by now that my father will never grant you that honor, no matter how long you wait.”

“Why would he not?” Tal sounded almost curious. “Is his confidence so low? Does he not believe his treasured only son can win against one who... how did he put it again? Oh yes, he believes I ‘lack the honor and discipline required to live within the constraints of community.’”

“You cannot goad a Marlord, *wilding*,” Paendreth sneered. “And you most certainly cannot convince a man who lies near death to sacrifice his son’s life. My father will likely never wake, and therefore cannot give you his permission.” His lips stretched in a mocking smile. “And without his permission, you will rot forever in your hatred and your desire for revenge, but you will never have satisfaction.”

“I would not,” Vanadar interjected, almost idly, “be so certain, were I in your shoes.”

“Certain of what?” Paendreth snapped contemptuously. “You, Regent, have only what power my father has granted you, and soon you will have none because I will remove you myself.”

“The healer”—Vanadar appeared to be studying his fingertips—“has just administered a draught containing wild arantha venom. We expect that your father may return to us at any moment.”

The night elf princeling turned deathly pale.

“I didn’t kill her,” he spat, turning back to Tal with his eyes narrowed in hatred. “This pathetic upstart cannot take his revenge on me.”

“You are wrong,” Tal returned harshly. “Perhaps your hand did not wield the blade, but it was *you* who left my sister to die. You were unprepared, and you ran from battle, leaving her alone and unarmed to face a pack of renders.”

“That was *her* fault...” Paendreth snarled, but then Tal’s hand was wrapped around his throat, and he could say no more.

Aislin could do nothing but watch, her fists clenched at her sides as the tension mounted. She almost couldn’t breathe from the weight of so much anger, so much hurt...

Paendreth was goading Tal on purpose. He was all but begging his accuser to attack instead of issuing a challenge, and Aislin prayed that Tal would hold firm. Pleaded with him silently to wait.

“Do it!” Paendreth taunted as his face began to turn purple. “Or do I need to remind you again of what you found in that clearing beside the river?”

Vanadar made a small, helpless motion in his direction, but no one was close enough to stop Tal.

He would have his revenge, and then he would pay the terrible price...

“Vanadar,” Tal said, still with an iron grip on Paendreth’s throat.

“Yes, Talyn ven Danael?” The regent sounded oddly formal.

“Will you bargain with me once more?”

The regent did not even twitch. “I am listening.”

“I wish to relinquish my claim on this creature’s life,” Tal said, and one could have heard a feather fall to the floor, so complete was the silence. “It would be beneath my honor to take up weapons against one such as this. And now that I have arrived at this moment, I find there is something I desire more than my revenge.”

Something about that phrase “beneath my honor” seemed to horrify everyone in the room.

“What prize would you ask of Revenfell?” Vanadar asked, still as calm as if they were discussing the weather.

Tal opened his hand and dropped the man responsible for his sister’s death.

Paendreth fell to the floor, gasping, his fingers clenching on nothing.

Tal turned his back and returned to where Aislin stood.

She wasn’t sure what to make of the look in his eyes. Wasn’t even sure she remembered how to breathe.

“I would ask that you grant Aislin’s request in the place of mine,” he said simply.

CHAPTER 22



For a moment, Vanadar let his control slip, and Tal could see the regent's shock and dismay.

"Are you certain?" he asked, wincing in what looked very much like pain and chagrin.

"Tal, no." Aislin reached out and grabbed his arm, spinning him to face her with surprising strength. "I'm glad you don't want to kill him, but don't surrender your prize for me!"

"Why should I not?" His heart felt strangely light.

"You have needs of your own, and I was the one who made that agreement with the queen. It's my responsibility. I always knew I would have to find another way to save my family."

Tal looked around the hall and almost smiled. "This place has nothing that I want," he said, and was surprised to realize that it was true. "After today, I would like to think that Paendreth's own people will see what they risk if they allow him to become Marlord."

"Indeed," a gravelly voice rasped. "Though you must not expect me to thank you for it."

Every head turned as the Marlord of Revenfell was carried into the room in a chair.

The old night elf's eyes were sunken, and his hair hung lank, but he was awake and aware, and Tal wondered briefly whether the Marlord intended to allow him to leave unchained.

Not that he had any intention of allowing himself to be imprisoned again.

Paendreth scrambled to his feet, eyes darting from his father to the door and back again. "Father, I..."

"You swore to me that you had nothing to do with that girl's death," the Marlord rumbled. "Said she was nothing to you. That you were never in the forest that day. So how, then, do you explain your words? How do you know what the scene of her death looked like if you were *never there*?"

The young night elf froze for a moment, then straightened, brushed off his clothing, and folded his arms, a mocking smile on his lips. "Perhaps I was there. But that changes nothing. I am your heir. You cannot disinherit me, or your line will fail. And we both know you value your legacy more than anything else in this world."

Some old bitterness tainted his tone, some long-held grudge that Tal was not privy to.

"A legacy," the Marlord said with grim finality, "that you are no longer a part of."

All emotion drained from Paendreth's face.

"You have proven yourself arrogant, honorless, and unrestrained. You cannot be trusted with the power of Marlord, and I would rather my line die in obscurity than taint it with your crimes. Go, now. You are banished to the wilds, to live or die according to the balance of your skills and your sins."

No one moved.

No one but the Marlord's guards, whose hands settled on the hilts of their blades as if preparing for Paendreth to challenge his father's decree.

But Tal could have told them he would not. The coward who had left Lani to die would never strike when he knew himself outnumbered, and indeed, he did not even try.

Instead, his body flashed and changed, and the gray wolf of his hunting form snarled in defiance as he fled the

Convocation Hall, bitter, silent, and alone.

The Marlord's chin fell. The weight of his grief was visible on his face, and Tal could almost—*almost*—feel pity for his loss. But his son was alive, as Lani never would be again, which meant there was still some degree of hope—for growth, for change, and for reconciliation. Perhaps it was unlikely, but it was not impossible.

For now, however, Paendreth was gone, and in a sense, Tal had gained his revenge. That chapter of his life was over, and he was still contemplating the curious feeling of loss when Vanadar approached Aislin and held out his hand.

“Quickly,” he said in a quiet voice, as the Marlord's attendants bore his chair away once more. “The stone. I have other duties that will soon take precedence, and I would have the two of you on your way before anyone thinks to question your part in these proceedings.”

Tal watched as Aislin pulled out the pouch that had hung around her neck since he met her. She loosened the strings with careful fingers and dropped the contents into Vanadar's hand, and as Tal saw what the other night elf held, his whole world ground to a halt.

His vision went white with rage, and his hands shook as he reached out, twisted his fingers into the front of the regent's tunic, and dragged him up until they were nose to nose.

They were almost immediately surrounded by guards with drawn blades, but Tal ignored them. Ignored everything but the monster he held before him, booted feet barely touching the ground.

“You honorless son of a *truld*,” he snarled. “You sent her to the Darkspring to die for a *moonstone*?”

Tal's magic poured out of him in a dark tide, swirling and crackling with the strength of his fury. The timbers of the convocation hall began to shake, but he barely noticed, even as the onlookers fled and cries of alarm rang out.

“Tal.” At the sound of that quiet voice, some of his rage stilled, and his head turned. Aislin stood beside him, looking

confused but unafraid. “I don’t understand. Why are you so angry?”

“Do you recall what I told you about how night elves light their homes?” he asked grimly. At her nod, he continued. “That is what you held. A moonstone. A simple enchantment any night elf could have performed in a moment. And yet he led you to believe it was some powerful and priceless object you could not obtain without risking your very life!”

For a moment, her beautiful blue eyes widened. Her mouth opened. She blinked in shock, then dropped her face into her hands and began to *laugh*. The sound rang out over the silent hall, echoing over the heads of the few night elves who remained and piercing the haze of fury clouding Tal’s mind.

It seemed no amount of rage could survive that laughter. Perplexed, Tal lowered Vanadar to the ground. The dark swell of his magic receded, and the guards around him withdrew their blades.

“Aislin?” Tal placed a hand on her arm, beginning to grow worried. “Why are you laughing?”

Aislin lifted her head, tears running down her cheeks. “Because of the irony,” she said helplessly. “Lord Dreichel has spent his entire life valuing this stone above all other possessions. His great-grandfather gave half his fortune for it, and for the past eighty years, his entire family has believed it grants them protection and good fortune.”

She was still laughing, but now Tal could hear the heartbreak behind it. “He destroyed his relationship with his own son over this stone, and then sent me here to replace it at the value of ten years’ rent. I wonder what he would say if I told him it’s nothing more than a cheap magic lantern?”

Vanadar huffed and brushed at his clothing. “You will not tell him,” he said crisply. “Just as I did not tell you. Because both of us will do whatever is necessary to save those closest to us.”

“You dare compare yourself to her?” Tal asked icily. “You are nothing alike.”

“No?” Vanadar raised an eyebrow. “The two of you risked one another to protect what you valued most. Her family”—he nodded towards Aislin—” and your revenge. I was willing to risk the both of you in order to protect the lives of everyone in this territory, so do not pretend you are somehow more virtuous in your calculations.”

“You were protecting the life of one old man,” Tal growled.

“And that man is like a brother to me,” the regent replied harshly. “He entrusted me with the care of his people, and should he have died, this territory would have fallen to Paendreth. You know as well as I that I could not allow him to gain power, but neither could I simply allow you to challenge him and have done with it. Because you would have killed him, and I could not have faced my closest friend with the knowledge that I allowed his son to die. Not when he has never seen the truth of that son’s character. I needed the father to live, and I needed the son to prove his perfidy.”

When he considered the scope of the regent’s plot, Tal could admit it had been a masterful plan. With so many risks, it took his breath away, but in the end, Vanadar had won.

“Do you expect me to congratulate you on a favorable outcome?” Tal fixed Vanadar with a contemptuous stare. “Yes, you gained everything and lost nothing, and tonight you will sleep soundly with the knowledge of your victory. But”—he took one threatening step closer—“perhaps you will agree that you ought never again dare to accuse *wildings* of lacking honor.”

Vanadar’s face hardened, his resolve clear in the firm line of his jaw. “I saw but one possible path, and I took it. I will not apologize for performing the duties of my office.”

He remained face to face with Tal, their eyes locked, neither willing to give, until Aislin spoke up.

“Please,” she said wearily. “I don’t care about your schemes or your politics. I don’t even care that you used me. I just want to go home.”

Vanadar nodded sharply. “I think that would be for the best. Although”—he cocked his head—“I believe if you were ever to return, human, you would find yourself welcome among us.”

Aislin blinked and turned a quizzical gaze on Tal, to which he could only shrug.

“You are brave, honorable, and resourceful,” Vanadar went on. “And as it happens”—he shot a glance at Tal—I am willing to acknowledge that we are in your debt. I would beg that you call on us whenever you have determined what we owe.”

“You owe me no debt.” Aislin’s confusion was evident. “We made a bargain, and both of us have kept it.”

“As humans reckon, perhaps,” Vanadar returned, unperturbed by her response. “But the debt exists whether or not you choose to acknowledge it at this time. I do not, perhaps, recommend coming here unaccompanied in the future, but know that a haven awaits should you find yourself in need.”

She nodded uncomfortably, and Vanadar finally turned his attention to the stone in his hand. He turned it over, clenched his fingers around it, and focused intently, his face growing slack as he poured his magic into the small gray orb.

A moment later, the thing was done. The round, gray stone took on a soft white glow, and Vanadar handed it back. “I will warn you,” he said, sounding somewhat weary, “that this enchantment will not last for anything like eighty years. Whoever might have had that capability, they were an enchanter beyond my skill or that of anyone yet living, so your lord will have to content himself with a lesser time span.”

“How long?” Aislin asked.

Vanadar shrugged. “I gave it a great deal of my power, so perhaps a year, perhaps more.”

Aislin nodded. “I thank you for the warning.” Then she looked up at Tal. “I don’t want to wait,” she said softly. “Can we go now?”

“There is no reason to stay,” he answered. Taking her hand, he turned his back, not only on Vanadar, but on all of his own bitter memories of that room. With Aislin beside him, he finally left behind his pain and anger and desire for vengeance and made his way out into the cleansing light of early morning.



When they finally stood outside, Aislin appeared drained of everything except disbelief. She'd accomplished the impossible and won her prize, and all that remained was for her to return home and claim it.

And as for Tal? He was finally free. Free to go or to stay, free to find whatever path he chose. But his choice now depended on the tiny human beside him, and whether she would allow him to remain in her life. Whether such a thing was even possible.

Aislin's head was already turning from side to side, down the path in one direction, then the other. Her hand was still in his, almost as if she had not yet realized he was holding it.

“I suppose,” she said plaintively, “I'm going to need to ask for directions. I was blindfolded when they brought me here, so I have no idea which way is home.”

“West,” Tal said, and tugged her after him as he headed off through the winding paths of the settlement. The sun was growing brighter, and he longed for the darkness of the forest. But even more than that, he did not wish to give her a chance to leave him behind. Not yet.

They passed by groves of emberwoods, now dull and gray by the pitiless light of the sun, and crossed a narrow bridge over a sparkling stream. The path diverged, and Tal took the northernmost route, as it seemed likely to leave the settlement the soonest. Already the houses were fewer and set deep beneath the trees, so they were likely close to the edge of where civilization held sway.

He was considering how long he must wait to call for Cuan when Aislin shrieked and jumped behind him.

“They followed us!” she cried, sounding utterly horrified. “Tal, we have to warn Vanadar!”

Warn him of what?

Drawing his dagger, Tal searched the path warily, but there was nothing in sight except...

“It’s just an arantha,” he said calmly, relaxing as he caught sight of the small, dark-furred creature.

“Just a...” Aislin looked as if he’d lost possession of his senses.

“If you look closely, you can see that it has purple eyes rather than red,” he pointed out. “That means it is domesticated. Night elves have kept them as pets and producers of silk for centuries. This one is probably just loose from its colony and will be rounded up sooner or later.”

Aislin’s cheeks flushed red, and she glared at him, probably with more embarrassment than anger. “And you never thought to tell me this before?”

“No.” And even if he should have done so, he was now rather glad that he had not. She was beautiful when she was flustered, and he loved watching the color spread across her face. Loved to see how her expression changed, her eyes danced, and her lips pressed together before curving up again with amusement.

“Tal,” she said firmly, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring, those beautiful eyes nearly throwing sparks.

“Yes?”

“I would like very much to go home. Right now.”

“If that is your wish.” Hiding the beginnings of a smile, Tal threw back his head and gave voice to a wild cry—a long, searching howl that echoed into the trees. And a moment later, an answering cry came from somewhere to the east.

Cuan had heard him and was on his way.

“He will likely meet us along the main road,” Tal told Aislin. “That should be slightly to the north of here, and once we find it, the way should be clear.”

“But it is day,” she reminded him.

“And?” Perhaps she did not yet understand that he meant to stay with her. That whatever was required of him, he intended to do. “You have spent this entire journey awake each night and sleeping during the day—adapting yourself to this world without a word of complaint. Why should I not do the same?”

At her brief sound of protest, he shook his head. “Recall if you will that I was raised by my grandmother, who was of the day. I am more at home in the night, but I do not require it.”

Aislin shot him a stubborn look that said the conversation wasn’t over, but continued on down their path, which wound its way deeper into the forest where the morning light could only enter in brief patches. The woods were quiet except for the song of an occasional bird and the rustling of diurnal creatures going about their lives.

Tal did not mind the silence. It allowed him space to consider how to approach Aislin with his request. How to ask his question so that she could no longer deny him an answer.

The trail they followed crossed through the center of a glade, where grass grew thick, and tiny blue flowers winked up through the blades. Aislin stopped to gaze around in wonder, then stepped off the path to lean down and pick one of the blossoms. She rolled it between her fingers before turning her face to the sun and closing her eyes.

“It’s beautiful during the day, too,” she murmured.

“Yes, it is.” Tal was not referring to the forest or the flowers, and somehow Aislin heard the difference in his tone.

Her eyes flew open. She looked up at him, uncertain but somehow hopeful, and that hope gave him enough courage to try again.

“Aislin, please tell me. What was it that you feared you would never have a chance to say?”

She instantly went pink, and her chin dropped to her chest. “I wish you hadn’t heard that,” she muttered.

“I did hear it,” he returned, “and I know you are not afraid of me, so why do you fear telling me the truth?”

She sighed and looked at the flower between her fingers. “Because I don’t want to lose you,” she murmured softly. “I know you can’t stay with me forever, but selfishly, I want to keep you for as long as I can.”

“And you believe if you tell me this truth, I will leave? Why would you think that?”

“Tal”—Aislin’s tone grew pleading—“you’re going to leave eventually no matter what I say. We both know you cannot follow me across the river. You have your own life, and the human world would be a dangerous, lonely place.”

She thought he was going to leave her. Believed that there was no place for him in her world.

And yet, she’d also said...

“If you don’t want to lose me, then why are you trying so hard to drive me away?” he demanded. “Did I not promise to keep you from harm? Did you not hear me when I said that your life was worth every possible sacrifice?”

“Yes,” she said cautiously, “but I’m not sure I know what that means to you. You’ve said you want to protect me, but as *what?* I might be no more than a pet you cannot bear to part with.”

“A pet?” Tal growled dangerously. “You think I see you as a *pet?*”

Her eyes widened, as bright and blue as the flowers beneath their feet. “You don’t? Then why...”

He did not give her a chance to finish that question. It was suddenly imperative that he show her *exactly* why.

So he clasped her wrist, and as the flower fell to the ground, unheeded, he pulled her closer until there was no space left between them. No space for fear, no space for doubt.

Aislin's breath caught, and her lips parted as they collided. With a featherlight touch, Tal tilted her face towards his, leaving her mouth tantalizingly close. Her next breath was an indrawn whisper of surprise, and at the end of that breath, he kissed her.

He kept his hold gentle, his kiss undemanding, in case he had read her entirely wrong. He never wanted her to be frightened—not of anything, and least of all him. But she did not pull away.

At first, her lips were soft and hesitant. But as Tal threaded his fingers through her hair, cradled her head, and pulled her closer still, she answered with a passionate intensity that stunned him.

Her arms went around his neck, and she drew him down to meet her, kissing him back with her hands in his hair and salty tears of joy on her cheeks.

“Tal,” she murmured, pressing her forehead to his and cupping his face with trembling fingers. “Does this mean I’m more than a pet?”

His only answer was to kiss her again as fierce exultation swept through him, hotter than the fires of his magic, stronger than the bones of the mountains themselves. As the last of the walls around his heart cracked and began to fall, Tal swore never again to hold himself back from her.

The woman in his arms was a gift beyond price, and he would dare anything, fight anyone, to keep her by his side.

CHAPTER 23



“*D*efinitely not a pet,” was Aislin’s first exultant thought, and then there was no room for anything in her world except kissing Tal.

It was, she decided, the only thing she wanted to do for the rest of her life. His arms were unyielding, his skin a scorching fire, and his heartbeat a steady rhythm that echoed through her own chest as they became more one than two. His lips were on her cheek, her jaw, her neck, then back to her mouth with an urgency she echoed back sevenfold.

Was this real? Or had she finally succumbed to exhaustion, and this was no more than a dream? A fevered wish that her brain now replayed in excruciating detail?

“Wait!” she cried, and broke away to stare at him, heart galloping faster than Cuan at a dead run.

“Did I hurt you?” Tal appeared horrified at the very thought.

“No, I just...” She bit her lip and stared into his familiar amber gaze. “I wanted to make sure this is real. That *you’re* real. That I haven’t somehow lost my mind and invented a future that I want so badly, my imagination conjured it from too many sleepless nights.”

“I assure you,” Tal said dryly, “I am very real.” He caught one of her hands and brought it to his lips, his eyes never leaving hers. “Does this not feel real to you?”

As his lips touched her palm, his amber eyes ignited, and the flutter in Aislin’s chest erupted into a horde of butterflies.

He was stunning—a primeval spirit of the forest made warm and living flesh—and somehow, he was hers.

It made no sense, and a part of her insisted that she would never be allowed to keep him, but in that moment, she did not care. She wanted him too badly—this wounded, relentless, honorable, prickly, protective man—and for the moment, that was enough.

Rising on her toes, Aislin dared to press her own gentle kiss to his lips, and it was as if the fire between them only flared hotter. His strong, scarred hands cupped her jaw, and he reclaimed her mouth with a gentleness that nonetheless scorched her to the core. His power was only leashed, his desire no less for being restrained, and she felt it echoing through every fiber of her being.

When she finally broke the kiss with a gasp, her pulse racing and her hands trembling, it was only to bury her face in Tal's broad chest and listen to his heart, galloping along in time with her own.

His arms settled around her shoulders, and he gave a sigh, deep as the roots of the Darkspring. Whatever might come later, this precise moment—the two of them together—seemed profoundly *right*.

If only it could last.

“We should go,” Aislin murmured into his shirt.

“Yes.” But his arms only seemed to tighten.

“I need to finish my quest.”

“Your family is waiting,” he agreed.

“Tal.” She pulled back reluctantly, only to take his hand and hold it between her palms. “There’s nothing in the world I want so much as to take you home with me. But I can’t promise you’ll be safe.”

“I never asked for that promise.” Tal’s expression remained unperturbed. “If you wish for me to come, I will come.”

Could she truly do this? Would her people accept this dangerous, other-worldly night elf? Or would this only end up being counted as one more rejection in his life?

“It might go badly,” she warned him. “They might hurt you, and you might end up regretting it.”

It was an echo of their first meeting, but this time, it was their hearts on the line.

“As you told me once before,” Tal reminded her, “there is but one road forward. I do not need your people’s approval, only yours. And if you allow me to stay, I will not stop, I will not give up, and I will not go home. Not until you tell me there is no more hope.”

Aislin swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. “Yes,” she whispered. “Come with me. Please. I don’t want to do this without you.”

And he nodded, as if it were the easiest thing in the world.

“Then I will,” he said.



Cuan found them only a short distance down the path, and Aislin rejoiced as she reflected that it was not so terrifying a journey when traveling by wolf. No sentries tried to stop them, no calamities or predators interrupted their peace. It seemed almost too short a time before they stood staring at that slender stone span across the churning waters of the Dredwall.

Aislin nearly held her breath once more as she took her first step onto the bridge, but it was a different sort of anxiety—more anticipation than fear. And this time, she was not alone.

What had been a day’s ride on a slow horse took only the space of an afternoon at Cuan’s steady lope. Thus, it was just before nightfall when they reached the top of the ridge, and Aislin looked down into the hollow where her village lay quiet in the dusk, a light haze of smoke from hearth fires trailing into the air.

How long had she been gone? Not many days, she realized, but it felt as if nothing would ever be the same. No part of her had gone unchanged, while her village and those she left behind would remain exactly as she'd left them.

“Tal,” she said quietly, hesitantly, “would you be willing to wait? Just for a short time? I don’t know how anyone will react to my return, and the people here are... Well, they’re terrified of night elves. They’ve heard so many stories embellished by drunken mercenaries that they don’t know fact from fiction. Our innkeeper once lost his leg to a night elf, and I just don’t want...”

Tal remained silent, and she feared she’d wounded him.

“I don’t want you hurt,” she finished helplessly.

“Why do you imagine I would allow them to hurt me?” he asked. The cool evening breeze ruffled his hair as he stood beside her, tall and seemingly invulnerable.

But Aislin knew better. Had seen him near death too many times, and she trembled at the thought of enduring that again.

“There are many of them and only one of you,” she reminded him. “And even if they cannot hurt you, they can try, and then you would have to defend yourself. If anyone comes to harm, I don’t know how I can bring them to accept you, and... I want this to be your home.”

Tal’s eyes glowed slightly, and when he looked down at her, his expression was implacable. “I will not hide from them forever, Aislin.”

“And I would not ask you to,” she assured him. “Only until I have finished my quest and spoken to my friends. Perhaps I can smooth your way.” She could not help a tiny smile as she looked at Tal and Cuan. Tal was one thing, but no matter what she said, no one could possibly be prepared for the dreadwolf.

“You once told me you wished for someone to bear burdens alongside you,” Tal said after a moment’s silence. “So that is the only right I ask for. I would make your way easier rather than harder. And if remaining out of sight is what will cause you the least anxiety, I will not challenge your wisdom.

However”—his tone grew stubbornly final—“neither will I watch you walk into danger alone and unguarded.”

“You can’t exactly follow me right through the middle of the village and expect no one will notice,” Aislin pointed out.

“It is night,” Tal returned dryly. “And humans do not seek out the dark. Do you truly think I cannot remain unseen if I wish?”

He wasn’t going to budge. And even if Aislin worried for his safety, she couldn’t help but feel a little warmer knowing that he would be out there watching over her, whether she could see him or not.

“Thank you, Tal.” She rose on tiptoe and pressed a quick, shy kiss to his cheek, hoping her blushes weren’t wildly evident in the dark. “It should be simple enough to track me through the village. Once I reach the manor, you can wait outside until it’s over. I only need to hand over the stone, and then we can go and meet my family.”



Despite her exhaustion, Aislin’s steps were quick as she traversed the remaining distance to Brightvale, entering the village just as the last light died. She wasn’t exactly sure what day it was or how long she’d been gone. It had been too long since she’d slept or eaten properly, and her body begged for rest.

But she was also riding a wave of urgency that insisted she could not stop until the matter of her debt was laid to rest. Not until she had returned the stone to Lord Dreichel and seen for herself that her mother and grandmother were well.

Her path led her past the trail to the hollow where Old Man Eben was probably taking his evening meal, then past the inn, where she could see lights and bustle and hear Brannic’s booming laughter through the open door. But she did not falter, or even cast a single glance up the rocky trail that led to her home. She did not pause to comb her hair or brush off her clothes or wonder whether the blood and filth would be

welcome at the manor. She continued to climb the hill until she stood once more in the courtyard of the great house, bathed in the shadows from newly lit torches, wondering whether they would even allow her past the door.

If they did not, she would simply find a way through them. She could feel Tal's presence out there in the darkness, watching over her and waiting to be reunited, and the thought gave her courage. After all that they'd survived, how could something so ridiculous as dirt stand in her way?

But when she finally reached the doors of the manor, the uniformed footman who guarded them looked down his nose at her, sweeping a glance over her tattered and bloody clothing before directing his gaze somewhere over her left shoulder.

"Lord Dreichel has no time for beggars," he said stiffly. "He is, at present, entertaining guests. You may return when he is accepting petitions."

Aislin could remember a time when she would have quailed at his dismissal. Meekly submitted to being turned away because she feared the consequences of defiance. But the woman she used to be had disappeared somewhere beneath the Darkspring, laid to rest in some unmarked grave.

The woman who had emerged cared nothing for petty snobbery. Her ribs ached, her limbs trembled with weariness, and every bruise was making itself felt. She had endured a lifetime's worth of terror, grief, and uncertainty, and no one was going to stop her this close to the end of her quest.

Removing the pouch from around her neck, Aislin opened it, dropped the gently glowing moonstone into her scarred palm, and held it up before the footman's astonished gaze.

"Do you still want to stop me?" she inquired.

"I... n-n-no!" He could not open the door fast enough.

She followed him through, and passed into the great hall, where it seemed Lord Dreichel and his dozen or so guests were mingling before a formal dinner. An ocean of candles illuminated the enormous room, some hanging from the beams overhead, some displayed in candelabras set near the

windows. A handful of ladies in elaborate gowns and glittering jewelry hung on the arms of their impeccably dressed gentlemen escorts, and all of them turned to stare when Aislin entered the hall.

And then, like a glittering sea, they parted, leaving her a path straight to the man who had sent her to do the impossible. He had known she was likely to die, and had shrugged as if her life, and those of her mother and grandmother, meant nothing to him. Perhaps they did not. But this man no longer held those lives in his hands.

“What is this?” Lord Dreichel demanded, distaste arching his brows and pinching his mouth unpleasantly. “Who allowed this creature to enter my hall?”

“This *creature*,” Aislin said coldly, “has a name. I am Aislin, daughter of Charys, and I have only done as you required of me. I have crossed the Dredwall. Spoken to the night elves of Revenfell. And I have restored your stone, just as you commanded.”

For the barest instant, Lord Dreichel’s face registered overwhelming shock. He had not recognized her, Aislin realized. In part, perhaps, because she could not possibly have been more filthy or bedraggled. But also because a part of him had never expected her to return.

“Where is it?” His tone was harsh and commanding, but a gleam of hungry anticipation lit his eyes. “I must have proof that you are not attempting to deceive me.”

How had she ever been intimidated by this pitiful, small-minded tyrant? Caught between anger and disgust, Aislin tossed his treasure across the room in a soaring arc, with all the flippancy she might have shown in throwing a common pebble.

Lord Dreichel’s face went white as he snatched it out of the air. For an instant, his glare was hot and poisonous, but then he was too busy gazing rapturously into the stone’s soft white glow.

“It is done,” he whispered, caressing it with reverent fingers. “My fortunes are restored, and the future rests secure.”

Someone burst through the crowd to appear at Aislin’s elbow, eyes wide, tunic slightly crooked, hair disheveled.

Sandric. He was not as handsome as she remembered. Or perhaps now she was better able to identify the bitterness and regret that lurked at the back of all those flirtatious glances. He looked at Aislin, then at his father, and as he surveyed Lord Dreichel’s gloating expression, his entire body seemed to sag with disappointment.

“You survived,” he murmured to Aislin. “I am glad.”

“As did you.” She offered him a polite nod. “Are my mother and grandmother well?”

“I kept my promise,” he said tightly. “They are well.”

“And the engagement?”

“That,” he returned, “remains to be seen. There have been a few changes since you left...”

“You have done what you came for,” Lord Dreichel interrupted coolly. “Now remove yourself from my house. Your stench is disturbing my guests.”

Some things, Aislin reflected, had not changed at all.

“Before I go,” she said boldly, “there are two things you should know. First and perhaps most importantly, that stone you hold in your hand is no more an object of good fortune than I am.”

Lord Dreichel stiffened and raised an imperious hand to beckon one of his guards—preparing, no doubt, to have her removed. But she would not be silenced this time.

“It is a moonstone, as common as any pebble from the river. The enchantment, too, is a simple one, and among night elves, these stones are used merely to light their homes.”

It was as if her words had taken Lord Dreichel by the throat. His face turned gradually purple, while his mouth opened, but no sound emerged.

“Also, the enchantment is unlikely to last for long. No night elf currently living can imbue them with enough magic to last more than a few years, so do not be surprised if it goes dark again in a year or two.”

Then she smiled and curtsied. It was beyond awkward, as she wore trousers rather than a skirt, but Aislin did not care. “I believe that’s all, my lord. I’ll be on my way now and return tomorrow for a receipt to show that our debt has been paid, as promised.”

“Your *debt*?” Lord Dreichel finally burst out. “Your debt is beyond payment, and I will never forgive it! First, you ruined my seer, and now you have ruined my stone. You corrupted my son’s mind and humiliated me in front of my guests, and now you dare... you *dare* to stand in front of me and pretend as if you have any power here? You have *none*!”

Spittle flew from his lips as rage turned his face a deep and angry red. With a snarled oath, he strode towards her, stone clenched in one hand, ignoring the shock in the eyes of his guests, throwing off every hand that tried to restrain him.

He was, Aislin realized, past being reasoned with. She had seen his mercurial temper before now, even sensed the edge of madness lurking in his eyes, but it seemed he’d finally strayed beyond that boundary.

And Aislin... She, too, was beyond anger. Beyond fear. Beyond anything but pity and contempt. There were no other emotions she could summon for the wretched man before her.

Sandric, his face white and his lips bloodless, moved to stand between them. “Father, her family’s debt is...”

Lord Dreichel shoved him aside. Sandric staggered and fell, shock on his handsome face.

And then there was a hand around Aislin’s throat. In hindsight, perhaps she had been too hasty when she assured Tal she would be safe.

“You have made a mockery of me in my own hall,” Lord Dreichel said, his tone soft, steady, and emotionless. “You

should know better than to believe I would allow you to live after that.”

“In the name of all Abreia, sir, take her to the dungeons if you must,” one of the visitors interjected. “You cannot simply kill someone in the middle of a crowded room.”

“Why not?” Lord Dreichel returned smoothly. “Her life belongs to me. The lives of all my people belong to me. They serve me, and I protect them, but if they do not serve me, they are mine to do with as I see fit.”

“No.”

Lord Dreichel looked around in irritation for the owner of that deep, implacable voice, and Aislin froze, right in the middle of preparing to kick her liege lord in a place he was unlikely to forget anytime soon.

She knew whose voice that was and was instantly torn between fear and relief.

Relief, because she knew she was safe. Lord Dreichel could no more harm her now than he could turn her into a goat.

And fear, because while her own life was no longer in danger, the safety of every other person in the hall was now in question.

Tal had followed her. She should have known he would not allow her to confront Dreichel alone, but how had he managed to bypass the guards? How could he possibly have walked right into the middle of Lord Dreichel’s great hall without being seen by a single soul?

Whether by magic or by stealth, he had done it, and every person in that hall suddenly seemed to shrink and pale beside the terrifying vision he presented.

Tal was broader and taller than any of them, a predator dressed in blood-stained clothing. His eyes were bright with anger, and his white hair flowed about his shoulders as he cut through the crowd, his blade held loosely in one powerful hand. That burning amber gaze fixed on Lord Dreichel as if

the others were beneath even his notice, his aura of menace so utterly overwhelming that no one dared remain in his path.

And rushing along in time with his passage, a cold wind seemed to sweep through the hall, ruffling hair, rustling skirts, and causing the candles to flicker.

Only Sandric moved, scrambling to his feet and patting his belt as if searching for a blade that wasn't there.

“Aislin is not yours,” Tal said, each word an icy shard that pierced the heavy silence. “No one belongs to another but by choice.”

He took two more steps, and then the razor edge of his sword came to rest against Lord Dreichel's wrist, a few inches from Aislin's face.

“Remove your hand,” he said softly, “or I will do it for you.”

He must, Aislin reflected in a curiously detached way, be exercising a great deal of restraint. Much like the first time she met him, Tal was barely holding back a tidal wave of pure magic. His leashed power shone from his eyes and filled the very room with a spine-tingling presence of its own.

But unlike the night elves, Lord Dreichel seemed not to know when to be afraid.

“Guards!” he cried, releasing Aislin's neck and taking two steps back as his hand fell to the dagger at his waist.

Aislin doubled over, drew in a deep breath, and coughed several times.

“How did you get in here?” she gasped out. “Did you forget to mention you can turn yourself invisible?”

“No,” Tal said flatly, his air of menace not abating as she finally stood upright and managed to breathe normally. “But humans are quite adept at refusing to see things that cannot possibly exist.”

Like night elves and dreadwolves, Aislin thought ruefully.

“Thank you for coming for me,” she said quietly. “I know you’re angry, and so am I, but please... These people are not your enemy. You can’t just kill them all.”

Tal looked down at her, one eyebrow quirked. “I could,” he corrected thoughtfully. “But I will not. So long as they do not attempt to prevent you from leaving.”

“Then let’s just go...”

But it was already too late. Guards began to pour into the room—ten, fifteen, twenty... It was not too many for Tal, but in this case, even one was too many because Aislin *knew* them. Knew their names and their families.

“Take them,” Lord Dreichel growled.

“Don’t do this,” Aislin cried out desperately. “Please, just let us leave in peace. We will go, and no one will get hurt.”

But no one else understood her fear. They assumed she was trying to save herself and pressed forward, unaware of their own danger.

Only Tal seemed to hear the desperation in her voice. He glanced at the guards, then took her hand and motioned with his head towards the end of the room. “Side door,” he murmured, and pulled her after him, but suddenly there were guards in that direction as well.

The guests panicked. Several of the ladies screamed, and one fainted, to be carried from the room by her escort. As the nobility retreated with more haste than dignity, the guards closed in, pressing Aislin and Tal back against the wall, weapons at the ready, forming a semicircle around their quarry at the edge of the great hall.

There was no longer any way out that Aislin could see. Not without death. Not without ruining Tal’s chances to be a part of her life here, and Aislin mourned that future even as she acknowledged it had never been very likely.

“I’m sorry,” she said regretfully as the guards closed ranks around them. “This is my fault. I should have known he would do this. Should have guessed he would never forgive me for proving him wrong.” But she’d been so weary. So anxious to

have this finished and be free. “Please just don’t let them hurt you.”

In the space of a breath, one powerful arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her into Tal’s side as he stared down at her fiercely. “Let them hurt me?” he echoed. “The only way they could have done so was by causing you pain. When that hand was around your throat, it cut me far deeper than any blade ever could.”

Aislin had no answer for that. She could feel nothing now except the growing pressure of his magic, the heat of his arm around her waist, and the blazing power of his amber gaze as it burned against hers. “Whatever happens,” she whispered, “I regret nothing but not having more time.”

“As I said before,” Tal replied calmly, “I will not let you die.”

Then he released her. Expressionless now, he drew both blades. Stepped away from her and beckoned the guards with a jerk of his chin.

“Come then. Take my weapons if you can.”

CHAPTER 24



These humans likely had no idea how close they'd come to death. Until Aislin had drawn that first shuddering breath, Tal had been prepared to lay waste to the entire hall in payment for their staggering hubris.

And yet, he knew Aislin would not thank him for it. There was but one enemy here, and that one was all too ready to hide behind the lives of others, using them and discarding them as he saw fit. Tal had long suspected that the man who sent Aislin to die would not scruple to take her life in payment for his disappointment, and the human had wasted no time in proving him right.

So as greatly as Tal longed to vent his anger in battle against the human lord's guards, he could not. Humans were such fragile, easily damaged creatures, and any injuries to these particular humans would injure Aislin in turn. They were her friends and neighbors—people she had likely known all her life—so he could not simply destroy them with his power as he had the aranthas.

Instead of brute force, this battle required skill. And even though it had been many years since he last called on the full power of his grandmother's legacy, today it might well be the only thing that saved him.

Pushing magic into his blades, Tal sauntered forward, letting tendrils of his power wind silently through the air before he lifted his sword and attacked.

He had not fought so many since he was perhaps sixteen, but those lessons had not faded. As each sinuous coil of magic sought its target, his opponents snapped into place in his mind with razor-sharp clarity. Each one slowed, their attacks suddenly as clear as if the fight were following a script.

And as they followed that script, he flowed among them, thankful they were slow and poorly trained—easily disarmed, tripped, or knocked unconscious. One nearly stumbled right into the edge of Tal’s blade, and only a swift reaction by Tal prevented the unfortunate guard from gaining a deep cut along his ribs.

It was a dance that could easily have led to death had Tal wished it. In the grip of his peculiar power, their lives were little more than candles waiting for him to snuff them out.

But Aislin was right. They were pawns, and none of them understood what they faced. Even if they understood, they could not have refused the fight, and so he left them groaning and weaponless but alive.

When the last of the guards lay on the floor, he turned back to Aislin and raised one eyebrow, barely suppressing a smirk at her shocked expression.

“Were you worried?” he asked.

Her shock became relief, and she smiled as she stepped towards him, joy brightening her face until he would have sworn the stars themselves had appeared in the midst of the hall. “Of course I was,” she scolded him, but without any heat or anger. “I just wasn’t certain who I should be most worried for—you or...”

Her eyes widened, joy turning to horror as she reached for his arm. “Tal, look out!”

He pivoted, faster than the eye could follow, placing Aislin at his back and raising his blade just as a thrown dagger flashed past his face and sank deep into the wood-paneled wall behind them.

Had Aislin not warned him, that would have been his back, and it required no deductions to determine who had thrown it.

The treacherous lord stood only a few feet away, advancing on Tal with a sword in his hand and naked hatred on his face.

Determined to carry this fight to its bitter end.

Tal heard a pained cry from somewhere else in the room—the lord’s son perhaps—but he could spare no part of his attention from his opponent. The human’s face held neither calculation nor any hint of surrender. He had just seen his entire contingent of guards destroyed, and in his rage, he was too bent on murder to consider the likely outcome.

So Tal sheathed his blades and let him try.

Back and forth across the hall, always just out of reach, till the human was all but screaming in his frustration. Then Tal darted behind a branching candelabra, and for a moment, the two men regarded each other through the dancing flames.

“We can choose to end it here,” Tal said coolly. “You cannot kill me, and I prefer not to kill you. Walk away, and there need be no more enmity between us.”

It was a far more generous offer than he wished to make, and it was only for Aislin that he would make it. Only to prevent this place she called home from being stained with blood.

“Father, please.” The young blond lordling stood behind his father, watching the scene with anguish in his gaze. “You don’t have to do this. Not over a stone or a wedding. Our family makes its own fortune—we always have! So long as we are alive, we can always rebuild.”

But those words only seemed to enrage his father more. His teeth bared in a vicious snarl, the older man swept away the candelabra in a violent lunge.

Burning candles flew through the air, narrowly missing Tal and landing beneath the draperies along the wall. In an instant, the fabric blazed up, flames crawling across the velvet and brightening as they found purchase on the wood panel beneath.

But no recognition of danger brightened the human’s eyes. Even as the fire grew, he seemed immune to fear, too

consumed by hatred to be aware of his own deadly peril.

So as he continued to advance, caught in the grip of his own thwarted rage, it was the lord's son who lurched into motion. The younger man helped the guards to their feet and urged them to leave the hall, calling out for anyone within earshot to warn others of the fire.

Tal also heard shouts from other parts of the house as word of the danger spread. But still, the human stalked him, nearly blind now in his lust for Tal's death.

"This must end," Tal demanded. "Go and save your people."

"Please!" From behind him, Aislin added her own desperate entreaty. "Lord Dreichel, your family and your guests are in danger. Your servants are below stairs! But there is still time to save them. If we hurry, we can put out this fire before it spreads!"

Smoke had begun to fill the air as the flames crawled higher. Behind them, the blond man finally seemed to give up, shaking his head and gazing at his father with empty eyes. "I'm going to get them out, even if you won't," he muttered. Lifting the collar of his jacket to shield himself from the smoke, he raced off deeper into the house.

His father did not even turn to watch him go.

Aislin, her throat likely still raw from nearly being strangled, began to cough.

Lord Dreichel's head swiveled as if he had only just remembered her existence, and Tal could see when the target of his hatred shifted. His hand jerked, and he darted towards her, sword raised with unmistakable intent.

Tal's willingness to negotiate suffered a swift and brutal death. A cold fury burned through the last dregs of his patience, and his outflung blade sliced cleanly through the tendons at the back of the human's knee.

The man screamed as he fell, then staggered back up on one leg for a moment before falling again.

Aislin darted around him to slip her hand beneath Tal's arm, her lips bloodless and her eyes haunted. "We need to go now," she said. "Before it is too late to warn the rest of the household."

One last time, Tal turned his gaze on the man who lay on the floor, spitting epithets, his home ablaze and his people long gone.

"If you ask me," he said quietly, "I will carry you out of here. There is no need for this to end in death."

"Come any closer, and I will bury my blade in that witch's treacherous heart," the human snarled, and this time it was Aislin who responded.

Her face was white, and tears shimmered on her cheeks, but she stood tall and shook her head with grave finality. "There is nothing more we can do for him. We must save our efforts for putting out the fire and saving those we can."

Tal looked down into her beautiful eyes and nodded. "As you wish," he said, sheathing his blade.

Aislin took his hand, and without a single backward look, she led him out of the great hall and into the chaos beyond.



Despite their efforts, the fire spread, and no matter how quickly they worked to draw water from the manor's well, there was no number of buckets that could douse the leaping flames. While the stone walls would stand, the furnishings, the doors, the wood paneling, and all of the draperies were soon ablaze.

Fortunately, all lives appeared to have been spared—Tal himself had carried several frightened humans to safety before young Lord Sandric declared all were accounted for.

While Aislin helped assess the injured, Tal joined the efforts to move all of the manor's animals to safety—dogs, cows, horses, and even a litter of kittens in a large basket. At least, he surmised, it should prove rather difficult for the

humans to go on fearing someone who rescued kittens, night elf or no. In the midst of so much urgency and chaos, no one had the time to pause and be terrified by his size or his appearance. They simply handed him a bucket or a lead rope and accepted him as a part of this desperate attempt to save lives.

It was a long night, and he was already weary, but there was always a need for more hands. So he stumbled on hour after hour, side by side with humans of all shapes and sizes, until they had saved all that they could. Then, at last, they could only wait as the flames died down, the embers smoldered, and the sounds of weeping could be heard from those who had lost everything.

The manor had not simply been a home—it represented the livelihoods of an entire community, and the impact of its destruction would be felt by many. But as Tal looked out across the assorted humans gathered there, he also saw signs of hope.

A man in a torn, silken waistcoat carried a young boy in the clothing of a servant, not seeming to notice the blood seeping into his white shirt from the child's wounds. A woman wearing an apron had her arm around a lady clad in jewels and a velvet gown, and they leaned on one another as they both cried.

Perhaps, Tal reflected, there was something to be said for beginning again on a new foundation. Perhaps, in the end, it was only through fire that darkness could be cleansed.

“There you are.”

Aislin stumbled out of the shadows to stand beside him, turning to gaze out on the flames with a troubled look on her weary face. “I never wanted this to happen,” she said quietly. “I knew Lord Dreichel was a hard, self-centered man, but I never dreamed he would do something like this. I should have...”

“No.” Tal lifted a hand to press one finger to her lips. She stilled, her shoulders slumped, and then he moved behind her,

wrapping his arms around her waist and resting his chin on her hair. “None of the blame for this lies on your shoulders.”

With a heavy sigh, she leaned back against him and rested her head on his chest.

“I know,” she said. “And yet, how can I not wonder what I might have done differently? How did I not see that his hatred and his obsession ran this deep?”

“Because neither of those things are in your nature,” Tal replied. “You value life and have compassion even for those you do not understand. Dreichel valued only his own legacy. He had no regard for your life when this began, and so considered it entirely expendable when you had no more to give him.”

“Is that why you followed me inside? Because you knew?”

“I guessed,” he admitted. “Though I intended to do no more than watch from a distance until he threatened you.”

Aislin was silent for a moment before her hands rose to clasp his where they rested on her waist. “Thank you,” she murmured. “But I wish that you had not been forced to save me again. It seems that’s all you’ve done since we met. And I didn’t want these people to see you as a threat, but... It all went wrong, didn’t it?”

Tal tightened his hold, hearing despair and wishing his magic could banish that enemy as easily as it brightened the darkness. “Aislin, I cannot fathom how you can only see the times that I have saved *you*. Do you not realize how often you have saved me, as well?”

“Anyone would have done that,” Aislin protested. “And it was only the once.”

“You are wrong,” he said firmly. “It was you who saved us in the cave, every time. Even when all logic suggested we should have been able to rely on my power, it was your courage and tenacity that pulled us through. Without you, I would be lying dead in the Darkspring.”

She made a small, dismissive sound. “But it was you who fought off the aranthas. And I thought, at the very least, I

would not need you to save me here, among my own people.”

“Again,” Tal reminded her, “it was you who warned me of the dagger before it was planted in my back. But what I also do not understand is why you view this as a problem. Why should I not save you, no matter where you are?”

“If I always need saving, someday you’re going to get tired of it,” she burst out. “Tired of me being weak and helpless.”

Tal released her. “Aislin, please. Look at me.”

She turned, and whether from exhaustion or frustration or sadness, there were tears trailing through the dirt and soot on her cheeks.

He cupped her chin in his fingers and marveled that she had somehow grown more beautiful since the last time he saw her face.

“I will always save you,” he said softly. “Not because you are weak and helpless, but because I love you.”

Her lips parted in surprise. Tal brushed his thumb across their softness, wondering why he had waited so long to say those words.

“You... you do?”

He nodded. “And for as long as you allow me to stay beside you, I suspect you will have ample opportunities to save me as well. Whether it is from hungry aranthas, human busybodies, or litters of kittens, you will save me.”

Her lips curved beneath his thumb, her smile as brilliant as the moon. “Because I love you.”

Tal nodded as triumph rushed through him, heady as battle and twice as sweet. “And that is what love is. To both give and receive care without any need for accounting.”

“This won’t be easy,” she told him. “I don’t know whether any of them will be able to accept you.”

He shrugged. “Whether they do or not, I will stay until you tell me to go. Because there is nowhere else in this world I care to be.”

Aislin's eyes shone, her tears reflecting the moonlight as she reached up to place her small, warm hand on his face. "I'll never tell you to go, Tal. I won't give up. Even if we have to take my family to some other village or make our way alone, I won't stop fighting for you."

She'd already found her way past his defenses, but with those final words, his walls crumbled completely, and suddenly he was clinging to her as if she were the only thing holding him together.

Perhaps she was.

Her arms were around his neck, her face buried in his shoulder, her tears wetting his skin, but this time they were tears of happiness.

"We should go and find Mother," she murmured into his shoulder. "I want her to know that I'm back and our home is safe."

"Perhaps we should wait at least until dawn?" Tal suggested. "Morning seems soon enough for you to terrify your family with my unexpected presence."

Aislin drew back and grinned up at him, her eyes crinkling with mischief and amusement. "Are you nervous?"

"Should I not be?"

"I promise not to let my grandmother hurt you. My mother will love you no matter what, but you can earn her devotion forever if you promise to chop firewood so I don't have to."

Tal laughed and took her hand, but before they could melt away into the darkness, someone approached from the direction of the manor. He was tall and had once been well-dressed, but all other distinguishing features seemed erased by a layer of dirt and soot.

"Sandric," Aislin blurted out, before amending it to "My lord," and adding a belated curtsy.

The man scrubbed a weary hand over his face and grimaced. "Enough of that. I don't want to see any bowing or scraping ever again. Not after this. Not after what he did."

Aislin's fingers rose towards her throat with that reminder, but she quickly lowered them to her sides, each hand curled into a fist. "I do not blame you," she said firmly. "You tried to stop him. But is... is he..."

"Dead." Sandric's tone was flat and empty. "He chose for himself what he valued, and I had to do the same. I had to save the others from his folly. And in the end, there was no time. When I found him, it was already too late."

"What will you do?" Aislin asked quietly.

"Rebuild, I hope." There was little of that hope in the way he stood, swaying on his feet, eyes grim and perhaps a little lost. "But differently. I would not choose to begin again on the foundation my father laid."

"I'm glad." Aislin offered him a firm nod. "And I think you'll find that the people of Brightvale will support you, provided you never forget the value of the loyalty they offer. Never take them for granted or treat them like possessions to be discarded on a whim."

Sandric nodded. "I will not forget," he said soberly. "But before I go, I wanted you to know that my father's word will not stand. Your debt is forgiven, and the house your family calls home will be deeded to your name as soon as I can draw up the appropriate papers."

Aislin reached out impulsively and clasped the young lord's hand. "Thank you," she whispered. "My mother and grandmother thank you as well. Know that we will help with rebuilding in whatever ways we can." She dropped his hand and looked chagrined. "Not that there is much I can do, but..."

"I accept," Sandric blurted out, shooting a brief glance at Tal. "Perhaps now is not the time to speak of it, but given your experience, I would like you to consider acting as my representative among the night elves in the future. To ensure a lasting peace along our stretch of the border."

Aislin's mouth fell open. "You want me to..."

"We will consider your request," Tal interrupted, beginning to grow impatient with the young lord's apparently

inexhaustible supply of words. “But we have not slept or eaten in far too long, and there are many who await your orders.”

The new Lord of Brightvale straightened and looked Tal in the eye before bowing deeply. “I am grateful to you both,” he said. “This day’s evils could have been far worse, and I will not forget the lives saved by your restraint. If I can ever aid you in any way, do not hesitate to ask.”

And then he finally turned on his heel and walked away, leaving Aislin to gape after him and Tal to sigh in relief that they were finally alone.

“I think,” Aislin managed to say, “that I have had all the surprises I can manage for one day. And if I do not lie down soon, I will simply fall asleep on my feet, and you will have no choice but to carry me.”

“Is that supposed to frighten me?” Tal asked, snatching her off the ground before she could protest.

“No, it was meant to encourage you,” she admitted with a tiny smile. “Did it work?”

His only answer was to hold her closer and stride away into the darkness, until they were far from the fire and the crowd and the worries of tomorrow. Like shadows in the night, they made their way beneath the trees to a hollow not far away, where Cuan waited.

There, they made a simple camp for perhaps the last time, bedding down with a dreadwolf for a pillow. But unlike every previous night, Tal lay next to Aislin and opened his arms. Without even a moment’s hesitation, she nestled into them, brushing her lips across his jaw in a gentle kiss before falling asleep—her head on his shoulder, her breath soft on his skin, her legs tangled with his.

Finally safe, finally at peace.

It might not last. Her family might hesitate to accept him, and he had yet to be properly introduced to her friends. There could still be panic and suspicion awaiting him, and Cuan would have to be convinced to behave himself among the humans’ livestock.

So many concerns remained, but whatever the morrow might bring, this was still the only place he wanted to be.

The wilding had found a home at last, and no power in existence could make him let it go again.

EPILOGUE



The softer shades of twilight were just settling over the village when Aislin left Old Man Eben's, humming to herself as she reviewed the recipes she'd learned that day. Her official apprenticeship had only begun a few months ago, but already she felt as if her brain were full to bursting. There was so much to learn, and at her age, she was already behind.

For so long, she'd believed she would never have a place—never truly belong among the people of Brightvale. But now that the new Lord Dreichel had begun to make changes...

Something shoved her from behind, and Aislin nearly dropped her basket of herbs as she whirled to face her attacker.

"There are gentler ways to say hello," she admonished, hands on her hips as she glared into unrepentant golden eyes. Cuan laughed at her with his lolling tongue and mouthful of terrifying fangs before butting her again with his head.

"Were you lonely today?" Aislin gave the dreadwolf a quick hug before turning and continuing along the path at a brisk walk. "Come with me, then. I'm sure he'll be finishing up soon."

It was late enough in spring that the snow had melted, but the paths were still quite muddy, so Aislin was paying more attention to her feet than to Cuan when they entered the village.

The sound of children screaming was her only warning before two small wild-eyed hellions came racing towards

them.

“Wait, don’t touch...” But Aislin’s warning came far too late. Before the words were even uttered, Cuan was wearing a clinging two-year-old child around each extremely muddy front leg.

Ilsa was going to *murder* her. The twins were difficult enough to manage, and now their clothes were as filthy as the faces that turned upwards towards Cuan, wide smiles showing clearly through the dirt.

“Doggy!” Little Petra’s eyes closed in rapture as she pressed her cheek against the dreadwolf’s enormous foreleg.

“Woof,” her brother corrected importantly, grasping Cuan’s fur and yanking in imperious demand.

Cuan looked at Aislin, and she could have sworn he rolled his eyes before collapsing onto his side in the middle of the village square. The twins proceeded to clamber up onto his back with squeals of delight, ready for a ride on their favorite “horsey.”

While Tal and Cuan had both met with their share of suspicion, it had been the children who bridged that initial gap with their curiosity and uncomplicated glee at Cuan’s size. Aislin had been concerned for their safety at first, but Cuan had shown an almost uncanny ability to know what was needed and done nothing that could be interpreted as a threat. He almost seemed to enjoy his new role as a babysitter, and treated the village children as his particular responsibility.

“You know, there was a time when Cuan was considered a dread warrior and a fearless companion in battle.”

Aislin whirled, with a surge of joy that never seemed to diminish or grow old.

Tal stood behind her, watching the scene with a resigned expression that tugged the corner of his mouth into a near smile. “I believe you’ve finally destroyed what little dignity that miscreant had left.”

“Dignity is highly overrated,” Aislin returned with a grin. “And he seems happy.”

Her husband strolled forward to curl an arm around her shoulders and pull her in for a hug.

“How was your day?” she murmured softly, reveling in the feeling of warmth and security she always found in his arms.

“Dull,” he admitted. “Everyone says they’re improving, but at this rate, I won’t be able to expect a challenge until I’m too old to lift my sword.”

As Sandric had begun to rebuild in the aftermath of the fire, he’d asked Tal to take charge of training and restructuring his guard. Apparently, the spectacle of them being overwhelmed and disarmed by a single opponent had driven the new Lord Dreichel to reconsider whether they were capable of ensuring Brightvale’s safety. And to his mind, who better to train them than the one who’d soundly defeated them in the first place?

It was a sore trial for Tal, who struggled to explain to others what he’d always been able to do without much thought or effort. But he tried, and while he would never exactly be popular, he’d found his own place in the village as an object of mingled awe and pride in his extraordinary abilities.

Aislin hugged him back, thankful beyond words for his steady patience. She wished she could give him more. Still dreamed on occasion of the adventures she’d longed for in the past. But while her mother had improved somewhat—thanks to better food and a renewed sense of hope—Aislin’s family still needed her, so for now, this would have to be enough.

“Are you happy?” she asked, looking up at Tal in the twilight, wishing he had not had to sacrifice so much on her behalf.

Tal’s face softened as he pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I am content,” he told her. “Though perhaps someday I would not mind if...”

“Aislin!” A peremptory voice called out from across the square. A small figure was moving towards them, waving something small and white.

Make that two figures. One small and one very large, with a wooden leg. And the two were holding hands.

Brannic and Marinda had finally admitted to their mutual attraction, and while their relationship seemed to be proceeding at the pace of a glacier moving down a mountainside, Aislin could not possibly be happier for them.

“This is for you,” Marinda called as she bustled forward, thrusting a piece of much-folded paper under Aislin’s nose. “It came through one of my suppliers. From the look of things, I suspect it has been passing from hand to hand for some time.”

Aislin’s heart began to trip faster as she eyed the object in her hands—a letter with her name scrawled on the outside in faded ink. She knew that handwriting.

“How long?” she demanded breathlessly. “How long has it been? And where did your supplier get it?”

She was almost afraid to open it. Afraid to find out that her carefully guarded confidence had been for nothing.

“The trader is from the land of my birth,” Marinda said quietly. “From Katal.”

So far away...

Aislin could wait no longer. She tore at the letter with shaking fingers, unfolding it and scanning the achingly familiar writing.

“My dearest girl,

I hardly even know how to write this. It has been so long, you must think I am dead or that I have chosen to betray you all. But that is the one thing I could never do. All these many months, I have longed for nothing more than to come home.

Some time ago—I hardly know when—my crew took a job that led us across nearly all of Abreia, to the Throne of Katal. I was injured in a battle there and taken captive. At first, I was held for ransom, but when it became clear that my captain had no interest in paying, I was turned over to the royal guard. Through some strange twist of fate, my talent for music was discovered, and I have been engaged as a court musician for the Queen of Katal.

It is not the worst life, little Aislin, but I am still a prisoner. The job that led me here was meant to result in the assassination of one of the queen's own family, and while we failed, my life has been judged the repayment for that debt.

So in case I never see you again on this side of death, know that I love you. That I love your mother, and that I never meant to abandon you. I pray only that you are well and that in my absence, you have found the strength to carry on. If I

*am ever able, know that my path will
lead straight to you and to your
Mother, should she be willing to see
me again.*

*Your loving and eternally regretful,
Father*

“*Father*,” Aislin breathed. The emotions coursing through her weakened her knees and quickened her heart, but Tal was holding her and would never let her fall. “He’s alive,” she choked out. “He’s a prisoner, but he’s alive!”

“Where?” Brannic demanded, eyes narrowed as he stroked his beard in furious thought.

“Katal. He’s being held captive by the queen, in payment of a life debt.”

Brannic nodded slowly. “She may be willing to negotiate or accept payment of some kind. Her price will not be small, though. The Katali are proud and honorable warriors, but they take life very seriously.”

“Then you think we can free him?” Aislin asked eagerly.

“I think,” Brannic said carefully, with a glance at Marinda, “that there is a chance.”

Marinda nodded, her face grim, her eyes bright with emotion. “I think you must try,” she said. “If you did not, you would probably always wonder. Always ask yourself what might have been.”

“Do not worry for your mother and grandmother,” Brannic added. “You know we will look after them well until you return.”

Aislin tipped up her chin to meet Tal’s gaze.

“Yes,” he said simply. That was all. He needed no explanation, no promises. His answer was always yes.

“It’ll be a long journey,” she warned. “To places I’ve never experienced. I don’t know how we’ll be received. And when we get there, we’ll probably have to go on some other foolish quest.”

A smile tugged at Tal’s lips. “I find that I rather miss going on foolish quests with you.”

Cuan barked once, a bright, happy sound of excitement.

“Foolish quest it is,” Aislin said softly, while her heart leaped with joy, anticipation, and... hope.

Once again, she was setting out along a road filled with unimaginable obstacles. But this time, she was not weaponless and alone. She would go armed with her friends’ unwavering support, with Cuan’s comforting presence, and with Tal’s stubborn, unyielding strength.

It was not at all the life she’d imagined when she’d once dreamed of having adventures. Nor was Tal anything like the man she’d envisioned at her side.

He was so much more.

Perhaps their road had not been easy. They’d walked the path of sacrifice, darkness, and pain, through grief and tragedy far beyond their years. But they had found each other along that road, and in the process, forged a love that death itself could not defeat.

Whatever the future might bring, Aislin could imagine no greater joy than facing it at Tal’s side, where home was his hand in hers, and even the night was made beautiful because she no longer faced it alone.



Ready for more night elves? Curious about what the future holds for Rhone and his crew of dangerous misfits? Book 2 (Rhone’s story) is coming soon, so

[sign up for my newsletter to be notified about new releases and upcoming projects.](#)

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Looking for more in the world of Abreia? *Legends of Abreia* is a fantasy romance series that begins with spies and assassins in *The Faceless Mage*. [Start reading today](#) if you love adventure, mystery, and slow burn enemies-to-lovers romance!

THANK YOU

Thank you so much for reading *In Darkness Forged*. It's a privilege and a joy to share my stories with you, and I hope you enjoyed the journey! If you loved Aislin and Tal, I hope you'll consider leaving a [review](#). It's a great way to share books with other readers and help them find new stories and worlds to explore!



LOOKING FOR MORE?

A complete list of my books, social media links, and more information can be found on my website:

kenleydavidson.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

2022 was a very strange year for me. I'd been pushing myself hard since early 2020, and all the signs indicated that I needed a bit of a break. The way my family/life schedule worked out, I only published one book last year, but I wanted to keep writing, so I decided to work on a standalone novel. It will be easier, I thought. Lighter, and more fun. A break from the heavy emotions that are coming in the conclusion to *Legends of Abreia*...

(Hysterical laughter)

Then, of course, I discovered the tragic backstory of my hero, the desperate plight of my heroine, and ended up with them stuck in a cave, attacked by giant spiders. Because apparently that's what happens when I try to give my brain a break.

So a huge thank you goes out to everyone on my team for sticking with me through this "break" book and cheering for these characters as I tortured them on the way to their happily ever after! I would especially like to thank...

My beta readers—Tiffany, Chloe, Vin, Sarah, Theresa, and Jeff.

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the best, and I'm so grateful to get the chance to share my stories with you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenley Davidson is a fantasy and science fiction author who loves to write clean romance, complex characters, and surprising plot twists. Her worlds (both real and imagined) are largely fueled by coffee, more coffee, and books (plus the occasional cup of tea). She currently resides in Oklahoma with her husband, two kids, and two dogs, and believes everything is better with dragons.

Kenley is the author of *Legends of Abreia* and *Night Elves of Abreia* (fantasy romance), *The Andari Chronicles* (fairy tale retellings), and *Conclave Worlds* (clean sci-fi romance).

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