

SKYBORN

IN THE HEARTS OF

IGNITE



HANNAH PARKER

Ignite

Skyborn, volume 1

Hannah Parker

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Chapter One

I remember the screaming like it was yesterday...

Panic had engulfed the village, people running in circles, horses busting through barn doors and trampling children. I stood there, watching the flames grow higher and higher, ensnaring buildings one by one and consuming them in seconds. My mother told me to stay put, that I'd be safest by the well, and if the flames got too close, to jump in. I knew how to swim, and pretty good for my age, so I nodded my head and stood still.

They came running over, taking buckets and bottles of water, drenching the stables and the storehouses, trying to fight back the fire with every bit of strength they could muster. I saw my father let the pigs out of the barn, and the cattle from the pen. He was the first to ensure the animals were safe and set free, he could tend to the people after.

I can still hear the sound of wings swooping down overhead, the shriek that ruptured the air and only brought upon more cinders as it circled around and back again until there was nothing left. If not for Mara's family, would I have drowned in that well?

I remember the sound of arrows, each one snapping from a string as they hurled through the air at their target. They were relentless, hurling wave after wave of arrows and magic at that beast until it faded into the darkness. Their ears could hear everything, from the crackling wood beneath fallen houses to my little legs kicking in the water.

She plucked me from the well with one hand, staring at me for a moment, "My name is Yefilda, and I'm going to take care of you," she said sweetly.

I must've fallen asleep as she carried me on her back and into a village. I didn't know if I'd slept for a day or a week when I awoke but I was safe, and I knew that.

"The flames never reached her," I heard a voice say from outside.

"Or they never hurt her," another voice replied.

I didn't know what they meant back then but every time I smelled fire or saw flames, I shuddered, and my body would shut down. I wouldn't light one, nor sit

near one. Fire was evil. Fire took my home, my family. It took everything from me...

“Shh,” Mara whispered as she approached the door, “we’ve gotta be in and out, got it, Alina?”

I nodded; hands placed nearly on her back as we snuck inside. We’d waited for the cover of nightfall, the quiet of sleep, before we made our move. Bryden the Blacksmith, had promised arrow-tips for Mara’s new arrows but, it’d been more than three weeks, and the tips had yet to be delivered.

I snuck around the dimly lit room, Mara going one way, and I, the other. The flicker of light from the forge still burned embers, slowly, lightly, like twinkling starlight against a swarm of clouds. I dreaded getting near it but, my eyes weren’t nearly as good as Mara’s in the dark, she was an Elf after all, and I needed light to see.

I heard her tip-toe around, searching for her prize and whispering an insult here and there about keeping an organized workshop, and how no one could work in such a cluttered heap. The clatter of chains from above dinged like chimes, while I could hear her shift tools around tables, and moving mounds of cloth as she looked high and low.

I tried to give my eyes time to adapt but, I didn’t dare to move and smash into or over anything and ruin Mara’s hunt. I kept getting closer and closer to the fire, taking small steps. Beyond the light, something called to me, as if to come closer, much closer, to the embers. My mind screamed with memories; of the flame swallowing my village, and the smoke in my lungs, yet my body kept moving, growing ever nearer to the fire that barely lit its own form.

A strange glint caught my eye, something was sitting just before the coals, something that shouldn’t be. I took a moment to look around, who would toss something so beautiful into a fire, or leave it near enough to melt? Perhaps Bryden had forgotten, too tired from the day’s work to remember to move it. I stretched out my hand, reaching for the strange glittering object as the embers began to heat my hand. My mind screamed at me to stop but, I couldn’t. Something was calling to me, and I had to answer.

I plucked the strange stone from the fire as if finding a shell on the shoreline,

rolling it into my palm and staring down at its beauty. The orange hue began to fade but still, the gem shimmered with flecks of crimson and gold streaming through its rounded form like a storm brewing on the horizon.

“What are you doing?” Mara whispered, her voice pulling me back into the world around us.

I clutched the stone in my hand, “find your arrow tips?” I asked.

Mara nodded; her eyes moving toward my hand and then to the forge, “you stuck your hand in there and didn’t even budge. Have you gone mad?”

I shook my head, “something, this thing,” I showed her the stone, “it called to me.”

Mara looked at the strange, small stone in my hand as I held it out to her gaze, forgetting how great her eyesight was for a brief moment. She briefly gazed over it but, it clearly didn’t enrapture her the way it had me.

“Do you recognize it?” I piped up.

“No,” Mara replied, “nothing I’ve ever seen before. Though, I can’t say I know much about stones that make Mortals thrust their hands into hot coals.”

I frowned.

“Aren’t you afraid of fire?” she said, teasing.

I closed my hand again, giving her a brief shove with my shoulder. I barely reached her chest, her height at six feet, while mine was just over five and a half inches.

She laughed, plucking a bag off the ground beside her, “c’mon, let’s go before we’re discovered.”

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Chapter Two

Birds cooed softly, echoing against the sounds of bullfrogs that sat in the shallows of the lake. Occasionally the songs would break, pausing as Mara fired another arrow, and waiting for it to strike a nearby tree before it started up again.

“Maybe it’s a jewel from some princess’ necklace,” I riddled off, flipping the stone through my fingers.

“No Princess would wear a single jewel that small,” Mara replied, pulling another arrow from her quiver and taking aim with her bow.

I flipped the stone again, tapping my feet against the sandy banks beneath the lake’s surface. Whatever it was, it kept my attention, so much so, that I’d barely slept after taking it.

“It’s likely just some false gem, one that Witches offer up as ‘enchanted’ to those looking for love, or wealth, or any of that nonsense,” Mara laughed.

“Hey!” a voice cried out. “Get to work you two, before the sun’s gone!”

I popped the gem into the pocket of my trousers, still doing my best to make sure no one other than Mara would see it. I wondered if Bryden had looked for it at all. Did he even know it was missing? Or maybe he wanted it to melt away in the first place.

“We’re coming!” I shouted back, pulling my feet from the water and kicking them dry. I pulled my cloth boots on, lacing up the seams with a few awkward knots and turns around my calves. They were nothing fancy, and definitely worn out, but they still functioned.

Mara had moved beside me, nearly catching me off guard as I began my strides. How I’d missed the length of her tall shadow tower over me was a shock. But, then again, I had been staring at that strange gem all morning.

“It’s so smooth,” I whispered, fiddling with the gem as we walked the mountain path toward the camp.

“Likely from you handling it all night and day,” Mara snickered. “It’s a wonder you can reach it at all, always hiding beneath all those layers!”

“Hey!” I said, giving her a swipe with my free hand.

“See? You would’ve hit me if you could move faster.” Mara took off, her long legs carrying her quickly and gracefully up the last hill and through the gates of the encampment.

She wasn’t wrong; I did wear a lot, and it was getting late into spring where the heat would start making me uncomfortable. I shook the thought from my head. How would I hold myself? I was so skinny and shapeless compared to the other girls, I wouldn’t even know how to stand without looking like some sort of gangly goblin or bog hag.

“There’s nothing wrong with my layers,” I sneered.

Every fastener had to be precise; if I missed a single buckle or a rivet, the whole thing could fall apart in the air and I’d be in a whole mess of trouble.

Sun beamed through the open windows, the smell of leather filling my nose so fiercely I’d almost forgotten about my tea that sat right next to me. Outside there were the sounds of hammering, sawing, and constant movement, broken once in a while by someone shouting, and a roar to its reply. It usually meant someone, or rather, a Dragon wasn’t cooperating.

I’d been making harnesses for Dragons, and their riders, for a year now, and I’d become rather good at it. I had started fiddling with a broken one while I waited for Mara one afternoon, taking out my own little repair kit from one of my many cloaks and repairing it on the spot. It was good enough for the Commander and great enough to get me a job. It was decent work; I’d make enough to buy food and clothes, and I even had enough left save. I had always wanted a horse but, even if I found one, there likely wouldn’t be a chance it was for sale, no matter how much coin I’d saved.

“One more stitch,” I muttered to myself as I pulled the needle through the thick brown leather. If I finished early enough, I’d have time for myself long before dinner. Perhaps I could visit the market, and find out if anyone knew anything about rare stones. I pushed the harness aside, throwing back my tea with a gulp and getting my things ready before heading to the door.

“Alina!” a voice called out; it was the commander just outside my shop.

A loud thud hit against the side of the hut, and I felt my body droop down in response.

“Two more for repair!” He announced before I even had a chance to answer. I

could hear his footsteps take off again, though I hadn't heard him approach, I was too caught up in finishing my work.

The sky was beginning to darken with the purple fade of the night waiting along the horizon. I'd been sewing for hours, and hammering even longer. The only thing keeping me from nodding off were the few roars that filled the air every now and again.

I had always wondered what it was like, to ride one. Dragons were more common around these parts than Horses. I dreamed for so long about having my own one day and the two of us flying off toward the sun. We'd explore the highest mountains, sleep in forgotten caves, and eat the most exotic foods. We'd share so many adventures, fight off hordes of Goblins and Ghouls, and maybe even save an entire town.

That's all they were though, just dreams; only Arcanon could tame them, and even fewer could ride them. Tales told of the High Elves and their Eternia Dragons that fought to return the sun to the sky. But few tales told of any Mortals or Humans who'd accomplished similar feats.

Elves were born with magic, so many became Arcanon simply by tradition. Few Humans ever developed enough magic, even throughout their entire life, to become one; to ride alongside the Elves, and fight with their own Dragon companion. Maybe I'd learn magic one day. Maybe Mara would teach me. Then I could become a Rider too.

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Chapter Three

I awoke to the sound of loud bangs outside, and several men yelling. Night had set in, and my little workshop had quickly grown dark.

I fumbled around for the lantern, trying to remember where I'd placed it. How long had I been out for? Did I really just doze off like that?

I patted down the layers of my heavy cloak, remembering I'd put matches in a pocket somewhere. I felt the stone again but, I was too flustered to even pay it any mind.

Light began to fill the room, growing brighter and brighter until there was enough for me to catch my bearings easily. The sound of hooves beating passed, accompanied by the torchlight that not only illuminated my space but, the entire camp. Horses were rare, so anyone who had arrived here had to be from far away, and they clearly wanted our attention.

And then screaming; the sound of people panicking broke my curiosity and flooded my mind with fear. I moved away from the window, fearing I'd be seen but, still drawn to the happenings outside.

Torches were stuck to rooftops, tossed into sheds and used to chase villagers. I began to make out their forms more clearly, their heavy plated armour clanking together as they ran after my people on horseback. What was happening? Who were these men? Why were they doing this?

My mind began to race, flooded with the images of my own village as it burned around me. I must've been no older than 8 as a band of Marauders had set fire to my home on their hunt for some strange Magical object. They killed my family, torched our barns, and even slew our animals after we'd told them we had nothing of interest. I had been paralyzed by fear, watching the slaughter while flames began to lick at my flesh. If not for Mara's family, I'd have died there too.

The heat of flames began to grow but, my eyes were wide with terror and my heart consumed with emotions. It was all happening again, 10 years later, and somehow, I knew it was because of what I had hiding in my pocket.

"Alina!" Mara cried out, bursting through the door, her bow already in hand.

She turned from me for a moment, drawing her weapon and pulling an arrow from her quiver in one swift movement. A quick scream, and then silence, as she took her shot; a man fell from his steed on the doorstep, “We need to go... now!”

My trance was broken as she took hold of my hand, leading me from the hut with no more than the clothes on our backs and her bow at her side. I hadn’t even noticed that my workshop was on fire, the flames spouting from the dry grass roof with haste. Once again, I had someone to thank to pull me away from my fears but, this time we couldn’t flee so easily.

Clanging swords and beating hooves echoed through the night, all while our little camp burned. Smoke rose through the air into the star-filled sky, casting an eerie shadow over our once peaceful lands. Mara and I had ducked behind one of the storehouses, trying to remain as silent as possible as we began to move from barrels to shrubs, sheds to stables in an effort to remain unseen.

“If we can get to the dens, we’ll have a good chance at escape,” Mara whispered, peaking around a barrel.

Five men stood between us and the gates to the Dens, their masses huddled together, as if in a meeting.

“It’s not here,” one of the men stated.

“It has to be, not even a dull Blacksmith would risk their entire village on a lie,” another man hissed back.

“Then that gem is here somewhere. Find it!” a third man snapped.

“Burn the place to the ground. We’ll find it one way or another,” a fourth whispered, briefly scanning the area. “We’ll dig through bone and ash if we have to.”

“And the village below?” the first man asked.

“Burn it,” replied the fourth, “Burn it all...”

I couldn’t bear it, the weight of knowing I’d brought this upon my people. I bolted from my hiding spot, sprinting down the hill toward the village. I could hear Mara yell after me but, I couldn’t stop. If I just gave them this gem would they leave us be?

Sticks and sharp branches picked and tore at my cheeks as I ran through the brush. We were too far from the trail but, I knew the land well enough to avoid

tripping over an exposed root or broken stones in my haste.

The cry of a donkey stopped me in my tracks, just as I emerged from the edge of the trees. It whined, running past me with a wagon attached to its back, flames exploding on every turn. I was too late. The village was already ablaze, filled with dense black smoke that settled against the ground like swamp mist.

I ran in, my mind not once considering my own safety. I could hear their cries for help, I could feel their pain, and their confusion. My eyes could barely see through the smoke, shadows moving before me through it like lightning, darting one way and then the other. The burning embers were like lanterns in the fog, barely glowing against blackness, and providing little guidance for escape. I could hear water splashing hopelessly against houses, children crying for their mothers, and another voice, much closer.

“Help! Help!” They cried. I turned around in the darkness, desperately trying to find the source of the voice.

“Help me, please!” they cried again.

This time I caught it, toward my right. I ran through the dark, coming to a small house that tore through the heavy cloud of smoke like a beacon as it was consumed by flames. I had to help them, they were afraid, and I couldn’t leave them there to die.

I pushed past the smoke, forcing myself toward the flames no matter how much my heart screamed at me to run away. Just one foot on the doorstep and my body froze. I heard the screaming again, and I felt their panic. A shudder crawled its way down my spine, leaving me paralyzed where I stood. Suddenly I felt a hand tug at my back. One yank was all it took, and I was pulled back, just as the doorway collapsed before me.

“Are you nuts?!” a familiar voice called out at my back.

It was Kiyne, one of the Dragon Welders. He had been creating armour for dragons and their riders for some time, forming every inch of plate mail and iron to fit with perfection. Some would call him a smithy but, he had earned the more glamorous title because he took more focus in intricate work over the necessities of common life. He worked only for Arcanon and their mounts.

“We’ve gotta get somewhere safe!” he said.

“What about the village? The people!” I argued.

“They’ll be fine, we need to go!” he persisted, pulling me back toward the mountain.

“No!” I cried out, trying to pull away. “It’s on fire too!”

“I know,” Kiyne sighed. “But, we’ve gotta help *them* too!”

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Chapter Four

I struggled against Kiyne's grip as he hauled me back up the mountain, his rough hand clasped around my arm like a shackle; tight enough to hold but, not tight enough to hurt me.

"Dragons can fend for themselves," I hissed.

"Not chained up or caged they can't," he snapped back. "If you wanna help the village or get some kind of revenge, we've gotta make it through the night, okay?"

I didn't like his tone, but his words rung through my ears like howling winds; he was right. We were of no help to anyone dead. If we wanted to avenge our people, we had to live.

We pushed through the narrow shrubs and carefully navigated narrow ledges that lead around the mountain pass. We couldn't risk the path, or the main gate, we'd be seen for certain, and then what? We'd be dead, or worse.

Kiyne had finally let go of my arm, both of us realizing we couldn't navigate the sorry excuse for a passageway side by side. I'd calmed down, following his footsteps with caution. He led the way to a strange opening, a cave mouth where a small stream trickled out and over the ledge.

"In here," Kiyne whispered, motioning toward the darkness before us.

"What is this place?" I asked quietly, following his lead.

"It's an old supply route, from back when the Dens were a castle."

"That was centuries ago."

"I know. Some of the passages never got sealed up. Once the mountain broke away during the wars, they were just kind of forgotten."

The dampness enveloped us as we walked deeper and deeper into the cave. I followed his voice and footsteps as best I could, all the while frowning over my now water-logged boots.

"Shh," Kiyne hushed, motioning me forward as a small patch of light filtered in ahead.

I pressed myself against his back, leaning over to peer outside, and feeling his warmth nearly overwhelm me. I could see the Dens, many of their cage doors open or broken, and the rush of Elves, trying to gather the younglings in a hurry.

“Mara,” I whispered, watching as she fired another arrow at one of the armored men on the stone ridges above. Her shot was remarkable, striking the man at the gap between his armour by his arm and chest. He fell to the ground with a thud; one less threat to worry about.

“Go. Go. Go!” She shouted, providing cover to those clutching dragon eggs and hatchlings as they fled.

We darted up the stairs, making sure the coast was clear before we emerged from the shadows to join the fight.

“Mara!” I cried out, relieved she was still alive.

Mara ran over, “Where the hell have you been?” she said, her words directed at Kiyne.

“Stopping fools,” he laughed, looking over his shoulder at me.

I snorted in defiance.

“We’ve gotta get the rest of them freed, or they’ll be killed,” Mara commanded.

“What about the younglings?” Kiyne questioned.

“They’re all gone, it’s just the new mounts that are left.”

Once more the sound of hooves filled the air and we turned to see the men enter through the main gates. Mara raises her bow without hesitation but, she pauses, hearing the sound of strings draw at our backs. Kiyne unsheathes the sword on his back, hands coiled tightly around its hilt but, he too stops at the sound of our enemies as their steel sings at being drawn.

We were surrounded, on all sides, both around us and above. One wrong move and we were all done for.

I gritted my teeth in frustration; I may not have a weapon but I sure as hell would use my fists if I had to. I could see the impatience on Kiyne’s face, his deep brown eyes flickering against the torch light with rage. Mara, too, stood at the ready; eyes narrowed and her hand still pulling back an arrow. I swore they

were both holding their breath as not a single flinch, or twitch, shuddered through their bodies as they waited for movement.

Slowly, the sound of iron-clad hooves approached us, separating the opposition by his mere presence. I could see the horns above the others as he moved in, noting their size, shape, and wear. He was a large man, bigger than any of the other armoured men that had been chasing us down. Layers of bone meshed into iron that held deep gashes and dents. There was no doubting this man and his reputation. He was a Marauder, a Dragon slayer, and the young Dragon skull he wore as a helmet was more than enough proof of that.

“The Gem,” he said coldly. His voice was deep, emotionless, and slightly muffled beneath his helm. Despite the open face to his headpiece, I could not make out a face, or even eyes, but I still felt them staring down upon me. Burning into me as he waited for an answer.

None of us spoke.

He sighed, moving from his horse, the sound of his iron boots hitting the dirt paining our ears as they clanged. He stepped closer, closing the gap we’d kept between us, and them, to ensure our safety.

“I won’t ask again. The Gem. Where is it?”

I took in our surroundings, noting the man’s enormous horse as it padded the ground with its fierce hooves. It was just as armoured as he was, and I swore its eyes had a yellow glow to them. A large hammer was strapped at its side, waiting for its master to return, to unleash its wrath upon us.

Slowly I could see Mara’s eyes turn toward me, flicking to the last gate just behind us that was stuck half-open. Two Dragons stirred within, their scales glittering in the dim light as they watched us, waiting for the right moment.

The man paced before us, examining each one of us carefully, waiting for the perfect time to pin us down. One weakness, that’s all he needed, for one of us to break under the pressure of his unrelenting gaze.

“There’s nothing here for you,” Mara snarled.

The man turned his attention to her, drawing it from the rest of us. That was my opening, the time to act, and Mara was giving me only a few seconds to react.

I bolted for the gate, listening as the hail of arrows fell from above. Some managed to hit one another, bouncing off to be deflected elsewhere, while others hit the ground around me, yet I never stopped running. This was our only chance, and I couldn't blow it.

I could hear the man retreat to his horse, his steps slow and calculated as if annoyed yet, unsurprised. I turned briefly to see both Mara and Kiyne fending off our attackers, Mara twisting her form below the air, her movements perfectly coordinated to fire off arrows as Kiyne's blade swung overhead. That moment, that one stupid turn, and I felt a searing pain shoot through my shoulder.

I slid beneath the half-open gate, fearing not the threat of Dragons at my feet. I had no time to recover, leaning over and kicking the lever at my side, moving it completely into the upward position and restarting the gate.

Sharp claws and heavy bodies jumped over me, nearly crushing me as I rolled to the side and out of their way. Flames shot from their nostrils as their enormous wings beat against the sky, forcing arrows to fall, and flames to be snuffed out. Their roars ruptured the ground, quaking it beneath my feet as I slowly got up.

Arrows were once more released, flying down against their massive bodies but were no match for their hardened scales. One swipe from their tails and the Archers on the ridge were flung into the air, rendered useless. Kiyne and Mara continued their assault below, carefully moving between Dragon claws, tail swipes, and wing gusts to defend themselves.

The adrenaline began to fade from me, and I finally looked over to see the arrow deeply embedded in my shoulder. Blood began to stain my cloak, darkening the fabric as I felt myself become dizzy. I tried to maintain my composure, stumbling from the den to rejoin my friends.

"Alina, no!" a voice called but, my mind was a blur, ears ringing with pain.

My vision grew hazy but, I was sure I'd seen Mara climb atop one of the beasts, no harness, no saddle, and no bond. She reached down, grabbing Kiyne's arm and helping him to hop up behind her.

My legs were jelly as I fumbled around, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. Suddenly, I felt the swirl of something closing in around me, blackness enveloping my eyes as I looked down too quickly. I reached out, feeling the scales against my palm as they slid away.

“Get on,” Mara’s voice cried out, barely audible.

I try to clutch at something, anything, but my hands find no stability. I could feel my consciousness fading, just as something began to wreath around my waist.

I could still hear the arrows, splitting the air at our backs but, they fall short. Were we flying? Were we on Dragons? That wasn’t possible.

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Chapter Five

The sound of gulls filled the air, carrying with them the scent of saltwater upon the warm breeze. My eyes fluttered, struggling to open beneath the weight of a good, long rest.

“Hey, she’s awake,” a familiar voice chirped.

“Ugh, Just hold still a little longer,” yet another, familiar, but deeper, voice muttered.

I felt an odd sensation against my back, like the constant drip of water, or any overly itchy spot in a sweater you couldn’t resist scratching at. Gradually the sensation became more annoying, and then, more painful.

“Ow,” I groaned, my face buried deep against a bundle of clothing.

“Stay still,” the male voice said again, “or I’ll sew up your mouth next.”

It was Kiyne, and from his words, it sounded like he was sewing up the wound left on me by that archer. I moved my arm out from beneath me, reaching back in an attempt to feel the stitches he was pulling through my flesh.

“Stop,” Kiyne demanded, swatting my hand away, and tugging on the wound one more time. “There. All done.”

I winced, feeling the tug back on my skin as he cut the thread. When did he get so good at cleaning and fixing wounds? Tending to injuries, or ailments was something more common to Elves but, I guess with how busy they were with the Arcanon, he’d taken a few notes.

I sat up, feeling the soreness in my body as I tried to take in our new surroundings. I felt the warmth of the wind on my skin, bringing me to the realization that I was no longer as layered as I’d preferred. I fumbled with the sleeve of my shirt, finding it moved down, likely from where Kiyne had to work and tried to push it back over my shoulder. I felt the sting again as I moved too quickly but I felt too exposed, and my cheeks began to flush in response.

Kiyne stared at me in confusion as I fussed with my things, desperately searching for my other clothes.

“Relax,” a strange voice called after me, its tone soft but its sound fierce.

“Where is my cloak?” I shouted, frazzled.

“You’re going to reopen that wound,” the voice added.

“I’m not worried about my wound. Where are my things!?”

“Who are you talking to?” Kiyne interrupted.

“You! Weren’t you-” I stood, dumbfounded, reflecting the same look to Kiyne as he did to me. If it wasn’t his voice, then who was it?

Waves crashed against a rocky shoreline, my eyes slowly but surely taking in the new sights around us as I put on another, larger, shirt. Sun beamed down from clear blue skies; above, birds flapped their wings, gliding along the sea breeze. Where fire had been, there were piles of rock and sand, odd mounds of sand.

I approached a dune along the shore, its size large and awkward against the cool white shoreline, and much greater than any outcropping as far as the eye could see. As I stretched out my hand, sand rushed against my face, the sound of movement just beyond my grasp. I spit the sand from my mouth and scrubbed my eyes of the grit.

Before me, a large, black Dragon stood, its wings unfurling and blotting out the light of day like a storm cloud. Deep ruby eyes stared down a pointed snout, and I wondered for a great while whether it was going to eat me, or simply toss me into the sea.

“Relax,” the voice called out again. “I’m not going to eat you.”

That voice, that strange, deep, ferocious voice; it was the Dragon’s. But, how was it speaking to me? And how did it know what I was thinking? Kiyne hadn’t heard its voice earlier, only I did. Did that mean-

“Yes,” I said in a hush, cutting off my train of thought. “We seem to have a connection, you and I.”

“I thought only Arcanon and their mounts could have a connection?” I said curiously.

“That’s the rumor,” it replied. “My name is Graven, and I am a Delve Dragon from the North. You, are Alina, a Human Mortal from the East, and you carry a great burden with you.”

He motioned forward, pointing a large talon and pointing at my pocket.

I blinked for a moment before my brain jostled, “the gem!”

“Precisely,” he replied. “Those Marauders were after just that, believing, beyond all else, it can give them the victory they seek.”

I placed my hand in my pocket, pulling the gem out and rolling it into my palm once more. What could this little rock possibly do that would gain them victory?

Graven purred in response to my thoughts, “stories are told, even in my kind, about the command that gem holds over the beasts of this world. If it were to fall into the hands of men like them, we would all be doomed to a terrible fate.”

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Chapter Six

I'd taken a seat along the shore, perching myself on a small rock, listening to Graven tell me tales of his homeland, and the journeys he'd taken before arriving at the Dens.

"My home is the Lasting Lands; a place where mountains reach higher than clouds, and caves dig deep into blackness beyond which Dwarves can see. I came here, on behalf of the Ethereal when aid was needed long ago, and my kind would answer."

"So why didn't you return?" I asked curiously.

"My aid is still needed it seems," Graven replied. "I took up aid in the North lands, where I would now hail from but, what was done must now be undone and so I remain."

I didn't know what that meant, and it didn't seem like Graven would answer even if I asked so I pondered over it for a bit. What was done must be undone... what did that even mean?

Mara emerged from the woods; a few hares tied to her belt. Behind her, Kiyne followed, a pile of firewood in his arms.

"Feeling better?" Mara asked, dropping the hares from her belt on a flat rock, and placing her quiver and bow close beside.

I turned on my small seat, rising up with a smile as I made my way over, "need a hand?"

"I'll take that as a yes," she said with a laugh, "but I've got this. Kiyne could use a hand with the fire though." She winked at me, beginning to tend to her catch, our obvious dinner for the evening.

I hadn't realized how late in the day it had gotten. I'd really just been sitting and listening to Dragon stories all afternoon while my friends worked. I felt like a mooch.

Kiyne was already piling wood, his hands grasping a hatchet as he split large logs with minor effort. He seemed to have gathered quite a bit, enough that he had removed his upper layers to move more freely, and likely stop sweating so much. I felt my cheeks flush as I approached, trying to keep my head down so he

wouldn't see.

"Mara said you could use a hand," I stuttered out.

He paused for a moment, turning to face me, "yeah," he smiled. His chest heaved beneath deep breaths, "I've got some small tinder there with some stones. Could you build the fire?"

I nodded quickly, fighting to keep my eyes on the ground but catching myself glancing up now and again. He wasn't much older than I was, maybe a year or two, and I knew him well enough from when I came to the village ten years ago. He was nice to me, much kinder than the others who only saw me as a strange outsider. He never accused me of burning down my village or getting everyone killed, and he was the only one to take time out of his own chores to teach me about fishing, roping, and Dragons.

As we grew up, I quickly began to realize why I was being scowled at more and more. Girls fawned over Kiyne, nearly climbing over one another just for a chance to see him chopping logs, or working with Bryden at the forge. I'd never realized how close we were, and it was that, which made the other girls jealous. He wouldn't like short hair or a boyish figure, what was I doing hanging out with him they teased.

We snuck out one night, a few years back. We wanted to catch torch bugs near the lake, and of course, we'd forgotten a lantern. I slipped in through the reeds while chasing one down, soaking myself from head to toe. He pulled me out, lifting me with one arm and barely using any strength. It was late in the fall, and the water had gotten cold fast. I shivered in my wet clothes but he didn't even pause, removing his cloak and wrapping it around me for warmth. He pulled me in close, his arms running up and down my own as he tried to warm me on our way back home. We paused outside my hut, and I always think back on what I'd do again if it were to happen all over.

I was so stupid, so lost in my own little world I didn't even think to notice how he looked at me, taking a moment to linger before I said goodnight and hurried in. I was so cold, and wet, and I didn't even stop to think about giving him his own cloak back, or inviting him in, or even giving him a kiss.

Such a dumb girl.

I fumbled along, putting pieces of tinder together in a small mound to allow

airflow. I'd placed some stones in a small circle to keep the fire contained, having done my best in finding a patch of grass that wasn't too dry.

"He said it commands all Beasts," I sputtered, trying to make conversation between Kiyne's log splitting and my rebuilding of a tinder pile that kept collapsing every time I took a breath.

"Who said?" Kiyne asked, cutting through another log and tossing it in the pile.

"Graven," I replied, "the black dragon."

"He spoke to you?"

"Well...kind of."

"What do you mean, kind of?"

"I can hear him, in my mind. Sometimes I talk aloud, and other times I just think it but, he hears me."

"Like an Arcanon?" he paused, turning to face me.

"I guess," I shrugged in response. "I'm not really sure."

Kiyne grabbed a few of the large chunks of wood he'd split, bringing them over and stacking them neatly beside me. Without a word he grabs two stones, bringing them together, and hitting them off one another to create sparks.

"Arcanon are more than just Dragon riders, Alina. They can speak with their mount, communicate without talking or moving."

He grabbed a bit of dried grass, tossing it beneath the little stack of tinder I'd made and started with the rocks again.

Slowly, smoke began to filter through the gaps in tinder, and a small flame erupted from below. Kiyne got close, blowing gently on the small bit of fire, trying to give it more air to grow. I watched him intently slowly moving back from the fire as it swelled, my eyes taking in his size, his skill. I was still surprised by his tranquility, even in the heat of battle, he would try to remain calm.

"Good timing," Mara chimed, approaching with the newly cleaned hares, split, and ready to cook.

My stomach rumbled at the sight of them, and I'd forgotten how long it had been since my last meal.

"So, you're an Arcanon?" she commented between bites.

"That's what Kiyne says," I replied, swallowing my own bite.

As the darkness crept in, the Dragons began to emerge from their hiding places in the sand, joining in our little gathering and admiring the small fire we'd created.

"Oh? And where have you been?" I commented, seeing the emerald eyes of the other dragon flicker in the firelight.

"Hunting for herself," Graven replied. "She doesn't have the taste for fish like I do."

I smiled, chomping down my last few bites, my appetite satisfied with the roasted hare for the time being. I gazed through the flames, realizing how much smaller the other dragon was in comparison to Graven. Were all females that small?

"Just her kind," Graven commented. "She's a Fern Dragon, known to live in small forests with Fae Folk and the like. I'd say she's rather big for her size actually."

I took in the look from those emerald eyes again as they peered at us from the woods taking a moment to admire her silence, as well as her help. It then reminded me of the village. What had happened to everyone? Were they okay?

"We should return home," I muttered, staring into the flames.

"We're a long way from home, Alina," Kiyne replied. "And it's safer here."

"What about our people?"

"They're smart. They would've fled to the foothills for safety."

"And what about the other Dragons?!" I had begun to grow furious, Kiyne's calm that I'd once admired beginning to grind on my nerves.

Kiyne could sense my impatience, letting out a deep sigh and moving from his seat across the fire to sit next to me. He turned my shoulder to face him, his hands gentle against my back but, still rough and weathered in their touch.

“Let’s have a look,” he said.

I gulped; my anger being pushed down but the sensation of his hands upon me soothing my core. I bit my tongue, pushing my cloak down to give him a better look. I felt his fingers graze over my wound but, the pain was no longer there. My cheeks flushed, feeling his hands against my bare flesh, moving across me, gently, as if caressing me.

“It’ll be healed up in no time,” he whispered.

I pulled my cloak back up quickly, covering my slender form from view. I waited for Kiyne to leave but, as I turned back toward the fire, he never left. My body tensed the heat from both the fire and his body warming me into great comfort. I wanted him to move, to go back across the fire, yet I wanted him to stay.

We spent the rest of the night planning; what we would do with the gem. Where we could hide it, or possibly destroy it. We could throw it into the ocean, and let the tide carry it away. Or feed it to a starving gull, and let them fly off with it to some unknown island somewhere.

“You’re set on it, aren’t you?” Graven interrupted.

Everyone had nodded off but my eyes were fixated on the flames. I could still hear their screams, their cries for help. I could smell the smoke, and see the flames licking at our small village just as they had done to mine. I sat up from beside the fire, staring into the darkness, the ruby eyes glowing back at me.

“Will you take me there?”

Branches shifted as a mass rose amongst them, their leaves and twigs cracking and tumbling to the ground. I waited for the others to awaken but, they never stirred. I’d been up for hours, and who knew how long they’d stayed awake, just looking after me.

“I will take you home,” Graven answered.

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Chapter Seven

Riding a Dragon wasn't nearly as difficult as it seemed. You had to hold on tight, predict shifts in the wind, and always prepare yourself for a sudden dive but, I got the hang of it. Even without the harness, or saddle, or armour, it was still doable, and I felt rather proud of myself as we flew.

Graven took his time, being sure I held tight as we lifted off the ground and rose to the clouds. We soared through the skies, his wings beating against the wisps beneath as we moved across the starlight. It was freeing, and wild; everything I'd hoped for.

Night helped to conceal our landing but, Graven was no disruption himself. For even a majestic and massive creature such as himself, he could be nearly silent when necessary. His wings curled as we found a small clearing in the glades around my village, his claws gently grasping the cool ground beneath us.

"I'll be right here," he whispered.

I nodded, curling my cloak around my body and lifting the velvet black hood over my head. I kept to the tree line, making sure no Marauders or Scavengers were nearby to deter my drive. I needed to know what happened. Where did everyone go?

Small plumes still rose from smoldering piles of ash and dust. What was a quaint little village, my village, was all gone. Wiped out overnight by the greed of Men. Where a Temple stood, only a stone foundation remained. The storehouses had collapsed on one another, and even the well had dried up from villagers desperate to quench the flames.

I spotted a ball nearby, its stitching worn and its leather surface scratches from wear and tear. As I approached, I heard the creaking of burned wood and looked up to see a fallen log ahead, stained by an unknown substance. I stared for a moment, longer than I should have, glancing away only briefly to see the ball again. It couldn't be but, my curiosity wouldn't be satisfied if I didn't find out.

I climbed over the rubble, careful not to disturb the hot bed of embers that still burned beneath the piles of despair. I could see a strip of cloth, a small cloak. I swallowed hard, my hand brushing against the log.

A voice rang out behind me, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

It was Bryden's voice; he took down the hood of his cloak, his face battered and bruised but, he was alive, and as well as anyone could be after surviving such a tragedy.

"I thought you were dead," I cried out, recoiling from the heap of fallen wood and debris.

"We thought you were dead!" he retorted. "Where have you been? Mara. Kiyne. Did you all escape?"

We wandered through the remnants of our fallen home; looking through a few barrels for scraps, and anything else that survived the fire. We stopped at his stall, or rather, where it had been. All that was left now was the stone slab he'd used as a workbench.

"I heard them coming, a few miles down. What they were after... I couldn't find it. I told everyone to run. Take what they could carry on their backs and flee," Bryden went on. "Those men are dangerous. Riders from the South. Born and bred from Giants they say, meant for slaying Dragons and taking down Kings."

I remembered the armor, the heavy plating on their horses, and the way they all rode in. I hadn't bothered to notice but, looking back now, they were much larger than most men. At least the ones around here.

"They were after something called the Heart; an oddly colored gemstone said to hold terrible power. I'd found it in some firewood we got brought in from over the mountains."

I gulped. He did know about the stone, and what it was capable of.

"We didn't need any trouble so I figured I'd hand it over and be rid of the thing."

"Who told you about it?" I questioned quietly, trying to look startled.

"One of the Elven from the Tower, uh, Vrayth, I think. I showed it to him but, he pushed it back in my hand and told me to get rid of it. Something about power and a terrible cost." Bryden leaned against his table, holding his head in his hands. "He said some Mercenaries had been hunting it down for centuries. I figured if I could just hand it off... but I couldn't find it. It wasn't there!"

I watched the tears well up in his eyes, my heart swelling at the sight of one of the strongest men I had known, in shambles. I pulled the gem from my pocket; if I just gave it back, we could end this. No more fires. Our village could be rebuilt. We could have a home again. We'd be safe.

"I-" a loud shriek ruptured my ears, forcing me to curl my hands over them and crouch down in pain.

"Alina?" Bryden screamed, concerned at my form, but I couldn't hear him.

"STOP!" Graven's voice boomed.

"What!?" I shouted back.

Bryden looked around in confusion, looking around for who or what I was talking to.

A strong wind swept past us, the ash of the village swirling like a blackened sandstorm. Graven landed over the well, his wings spanning over the broken village and covering it in a blanket of shadow.

"We leave, now!"

I didn't understand. I just wanted to hand off the gem, put everything back to the way it was. Bryden could find the Marauders again, and this would be over. I tried to run but, Graven's tail was too quick, wrapping around me and pulling me back by my waist. I tried to toss the gem to Bryden but something forced me to pull back, returning the strange ring into my palm.

"Alina!" Bryden cried out again, giving chase through the blackness and trying desperately to find me.

"I'm sorry, Bryden!" I cried out. "I'm sorry... everyone."

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Chapter Eight

What's wrong with you!?" I screamed. We landed back along the shores; the sun already high in the morning sky.

Kiyne and Mara had clearly been awake for some time, the fire roaring once more, and Mara working away at yet another meal. Kiyne was practicing with his sword on the shore when we landed, stopping instantly to come running over.

"Where the hell have you been?" Mara screamed, her beautiful eyes narrowed and filled with rage. "We looked everywhere! You, that Dragon, you were both nowhere to be seen!"

I was still fuming, Graven had pulled me away, "I could've fixed this! All of this!" I screamed back. "That Dragon!" I whirled around, but Graven had slinked away, hiding himself, just like before. He would play no part in my anger.

"We woke up and you were both gone!" Mara exclaimed.

"Bryden said all they wanted was this stupid stone!" I shouted, fighting back tears. I pulled the gem from my pocket, throwing it as far away as my injured shoulder would let me.

"You went back to the village?" Kiyne added.

"I had to! I had to know...if...if they were okay!"

Mara sighed, shoulders slumping in disappointment, "it isn't safe. You could've been caught, or killed!"

"I wasn't! I found Bryden," my breath became ragged as I fought with my own emotions. "They took to the foothills. The other villages. Just like Kiyne said."

"Of course, they did!" Mara shouted once more. "You're the only one foolish enough to think otherwise!"

I stepped forward, my palm curling into a fist. I'd had enough of Mara's harshness. Her words cut through me like knives, over and over. How could she be so callous? So careless? As I raised my fist, I felt arms wrap around me, they were warm, strong...Kiyne's.

"Let me go!" I said, squirming in his grasp.

“Not until you calm down,” he said in that familiar cool tone of his. I kicked and fought, but my squirming did nothing against his grip.

“You don’t even care!” I screamed at Mara. “We’re just Humans to you! Mortal filth! We’re nothing to you!”

Mara’s expression changed, her eyes falling from anger to hurt. I’d struck a nerve, and a deep one at that, and now, I could feel regret boiling in my gut.

I squirmed once more, trying to fight Kiyne off of me but he was too strong. I kicked and twisted again and again, but he persisted. He let loose for a second, grabbing my shoulders, and turning me around, pulling me into his chest, just like he’d done the night I fell into the lake. I couldn’t help it anymore, and I broke down in his arms. Tears streamed down my cheeks like raindrops, and I sobbed against him.

“You need to apologize,” he whispered, the heat of his breath a comfort against my hair. “Once you’ve both calmed down.”

I took a deep breath, wiping my tears with the sleeve of my cloak as Kiyne’s grasp loosened. I looked up, seeing his deep brown eyes staring back at me.

“Good?” He smiled.

“Y-yeah,” I stammered.

He let go of me, hesitating just a moment before he turned to the fire, picking up another log and tossing it on like nothing had happened. I couldn’t deny I liked the moment, his arms around me. I felt safe with him, warm, and comforted, kind of like being at home. He cared about me, for me, and all I ever did was burden him.

Mara had wandered off into the forest. I knew she needed the time to cool off. I did too. I’d talk to her when she re-emerged and I’d collected myself. After all, chasing down an Elf in a Forest was like trying to find a needle in a haystack. If she didn’t want to be found, we’d only end up lost while searching for her.

“Can you use a bow?” Kiyne called from the shore. He’d begun kicking over some rocks, looking for crabs and other creatures for a meal. It had become obvious that he didn’t like leaving all the hunting to Mara, and with her out of the picture, we were kind of on our own.

“Nope!” I replied, piling more wood by the fire.

“A sword?” He asked.

“Nope.”

“Anything?”

I paused to think, looking down at the hatchet beside our little woodpile, “I’ve used this before!” I plucked the hatchet from its place embedded in a log and raised it into the air.

“Good enough,” he laughed.

He took his stance, standing a few feet from me as we listened to wave after wave crash against the rocks. He held out his sword, poised and ready to fight.

“Watch your footwork,” he said, slowly beginning to pace around me.

I watched him move, matching his every step with my own, feet lacing over one another and being careful of the ground below. He said practicing on the sand was best, it would allow me to quickly get used to shifting landscapes and uneven ground.

“But always watch your opponent,” he added. He moved to me; his sword pointed right at me.

I looked bewildered, dashing to the side and barely escaping his attack.

“Good,” he said, “but a little delayed.”

We’d been practicing for a few hours, and even I had to willingly remove a few layers just to stop sweating. The sun beat down on us relentlessly, giving no shade behind an open sky, and offering no relief with a breeze. I’d managed to dodge, slide, and defend but I wasn’t much for attack. Every time I went to chop, or slice, with the little axe, Kiyne would trip me, grab my hand, or toss me aside.

He had turned away for a second, looking at something on the shore. I took the moment to attack, he wouldn’t expect me to take him on without his command. I had the advantage here, and I had to use it.

I lunged forward, keeping my feet close to the ground to remain quiet. I raised my axe, ready to strike down but once again, he turned, just in the nick of time, to kick out my legs from beneath me.

I hit the ground, hard, the wind knocked from my back as sand was kicked up around me. I let a breath escape my lips, dropping the axe from my hand.

“Alina!” Kiyne yelled, dropping down to help me.

I grinned, pushing him over with my legs until I was sitting on top of him. His trust was his downfall, and I’d used it to push him off balance which, I may add, was a lot easier than I had originally expected. I picked up my axe, now pointed it at his throat, a clever grin creeping across my face.

He held up his hands in surrender, a surprised look on his face, “you win!” he said with a laugh.

I smiled, victorious in my little move, “swear it,” I commanded.

“I swear,” he laughed again. He let down his hands, placing them against my thighs as I straddled him.

I could see the red begin to flush his cheeks, my own beginning to heat in response. I glanced down at him, realizing our positioning seemed more than a little awkward. I scrambled off, turning toward the water and hoping a breeze would pick up to clear the embarrassment from me.

Kiyne took a moment longer before getting up from the sand, dusting himself off and sheathing the sword on his back.

“Uh,” he stammered, rubbing the back of his head. “We’ll try again tomorrow.”

I’d never seen him so flustered or stuck for words. I turned, barely pulling my face away from the horizon, “y-yeah,” I responded, just as awkwardly. “T-thanks.”

Kiyne cleared his throat, moving off the shore and toward our little bonfire.

Mara emerged from the trees, her bag filled with an array of odd berries and strange mushrooms. Her face had relaxed, and it was clear she had calmed down from the day before. She sat her things by the fire, making quick work of her gatherings in some odd wooden bowl she must’ve carved out the day we got here.

She looked up at Kiyne, the two exchanging words I couldn’t quite hear before she erupted in a laugh.

I approached with caution, my feet taking small steps to get closer, “Mara... I-”

“How’d your little sparring session go?” She said, looking up at me with a wide grin across her face.

The red that I’d convinced to fade from my face began to rise again, much fiercer, taking over more than my cheeks this time.

“Kiyne said you had some clever tricks up your sleeve,” she snickered. “Or perhaps up your shirt entirely.”

“Shh!” I hissed, my body threatening to falter and flail at the mere thought of Kiyne and I being intimate.

Mara laughed, the sound of her voice bringing joy back into my body but, still not relieving me of the embarrassment that now whirled around my head.

“I think I know someone who can help us,” she added, calming her laughter. “Someone who can tell us what that gem of yours can really do.”

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Chapter Nine

Mara unrolled a large silken map covered in land and etchings I'd never seen before. Large trees were drawn in like their own land masses, and narrow seas gouged between massive continents. The language seemed vaguely familiar yet I couldn't read a single word.

The three of us hovered over it, Kiyne and myself looking on with awe as Mara read through each location with pride. We soon discovered the language was old, very old, giving struggle to even her as she riddled off the instructions written on the tattered edge.

"It's a map of the Ethereal," Graven voiced, "the spirit land that dwells beneath your own."

I glanced at Mara, her hand rolling across her chin as she was deep in thought, "Graven says it's the Ethereal realm," I stated calmly.

It was as if I'd flipped a lever, and Mara's eyes lit up with excitement, "that's it!" she exclaimed.

She snapped her fingers, beginning to chant an assortment of words in her native tongue. As she did so she panned her hands across the map, just above its surface, a strange mist of bright green forming from the air around us and abiding by her every whim.

The map began to shimmer, strange texts becoming more and more prominent than the others previously read. Continents began to split, oceans opening wide between them while the large trees faded beyond our sight. I began to recognize the map, the landmasses, the vast rivers and mountains that stretched across it. This map was our map, the one of our world.

Mara stopped her practice, leaving the map to glisten with the two worlds combined, "we live on this plane," she began, "but my people, are born on this one." She pointed at where the large trees had been, and where the sparse markings of the larger landmasses remained.

"Its name is Algundar, the Bright City, and its where I was born long ago," Mara said.

Kiyne and I were both mesmerized. We knew of the Elven coming from the

beyond but, we never thought it meant another plane of existence entirely. We were told stories by the bonfire, from our elders, about the first Elven that came to our world to aid us, protect us, and nurture us. We thought that meant across the sea, not across the realms.

“Few have journeyed from this world into the Ethereal, and even fewer Humans so we’ll have to be on our guard,” Mara explained. “I know someone there who will give us the answers that we seek.”

I gathered up my things, the few I’d salvaged from my burned village, and the ones we’d gathered. Some food, a bedroll, and the hatchet that had now been named my weapon of choice. We did our best to hide what remained of our time on shore, and moved the fire pit apart, tossing rocks back onto the sand and kicking away the ashes. If anyone stumbled upon our little camp, now they’d assume we were just passing thieves or travelers, and nothing more.

The Fern dragon had chosen to stay with us for the time being. She’d chosen to tell Graven of her intentions, and have him share them with me so we could all be on the same page when it was time to move on.

Her name was Pendas, and she would join us as far as Algundar, where there, she would stay. It was close to her own kind, her home and she wanted to rejoin them. She’d mistakenly come to our world while following youngling cries. The sounds pained her, and when she broke through the veil between worlds she arrived at the Dens. They deemed her a new mount but, she cared for few riders and would recoil from their offerings with a glare. From there, she remained for a few months, until our meeting with the Marauders.

I climbed onto Graven, finally used to the sequence; knowing which scales to hold, and which leg to boost myself from. I was a bit wobbly in my steps, second-guessing my position more than once but, I was confident in my success. Kiyne had waited until I was settled to hop up himself. Graven didn’t seem to mind the extra weight at all, not even saying a word, as we made sure everything was secure.

I took hold of the larger spikes that sprouted from his back, feeling hands slowly slide against my sides to do the same. I looked down, feeling Kiyne’s warmth against me as his hands came to rest by my own.

“Ready?” he said.

I gulped, “mmhmm,” was all I managed to reply.

We took to the skies, the small clouds blocking nothing from our view. We rose, higher and higher, flying with gulls and sparrows, looking down to see the ocean waving at us far below. From the first flight to the next, there was no feeling quite like soaring freely through the air.

The sun was setting, dusk quickly rising to greet us as we moved forward. Mara and Pendas had kept ahead for most of the time but, soon they dropped back to fly at our side.

“Get ready to hold on,” Mara instructed, yelling against the wind. “When the sun sets, we have less than a minute to get into the Ethereal, or we’ll miss our chance and get thrown who knows where.”

Kiyne and I nodded, ready to follow Mara’s lead but unsure of her words exactly. How were we going to get into the Ethereal by pursuing the setting sun?

The sun drooped, leaving the sky as a painting of blues and purples, calling the stars to its surface. Mara and Pendas moved just ahead of us once again, keeping a small gap but, making sure we were still close behind.

A small flash crossed across the horizon before our eyes, and we caught the sight of Mara and Pendas, diving downward in a rolling motion. I clutched Graven’s spikes, holding on tightly as I felt my stomach drop while he followed Pendas’ guide. I closed my eyes, I wouldn’t watch, I couldn’t. What if we crashed? What if we flipped over and drowned? We were upside down. I could feel it.

I opened my eyes at the last second, Kiyne’s shouts of excitement pulling my curiosity. We hit the water, churning below the surface of the waves until before my eyes we were no longer upside down, but rather, above the water and soaring through the air again. We’d made no impact, yet we had clearly run through something. I looked down, seeing the dark water below us; I looked up and saw the star-filled sky.

“Are we?”

“Dead? Nah,” Kiyne replied. “We made it Alina! We’re in the Ethereal!”

Chapter Ten

Silence dominated the remainder of our flight, the new sights and sounds overwhelming our senses. Graven glided over the water lowly, no longer feeling the need for cloud cover or the ease of ascending to escape. We could see a mysterious white glow growing against the sea, its form whimsical and captivating. As we got closer, we could see large trees with an amber aura, rocks with a blue hue, and the land a deep translucent green.

“Welcome to the Ethereal,” Graven said warmly.

We landed on the beach, my body hesitant to touch the sand but, the sight of Mara landing eased my tension. I waited for some strange glow to encompass me, just as it did everything else, but it never rose to consume me.

Kiyne leapt down first, offering a hand to help me but I didn't accept. I took note of the sand and carefully jumped down, bending my knees at the right moment so I wouldn't stumble or hurt myself. We adjusted ourselves, looking around to determine a trail.

“Into the abyss,” Mara joked, moving onto the lush grass at our center, both Dragons close behind.

Graven and Pendas wandered freely, exploring the forest, each of them uttering strange sounds reminiscent of laughter. I felt an overwhelming sense of joy, and I watched as Pendas began to radiate her own aura, just like our surroundings.

“Where will they go?” I asked.

“To find the others,” Mara replied. “There are many Fern Dragons in these Forests, and no doubt they already know she's here.”

I was satisfied with that answer. It meant she wasn't alone, and that she would be happy here. Graven, I wondered, would he join them?

“C'mon,” Mara broke, “we should reach the city soon.”

Her pace had picked up, no glow to surround her but, an extra spring that was noticeable in her strides. I kept a quick pace, not wanting to get lost or left behind. Kiyne took up the rear, his eyes wandering onto every strange bird or insect that floated by our path.

Large ivory pillars greeted us, shaped and standing like the trees that grew all around us. Mara ran forward, excitement clearly taking over her. I paused, breathless as the city opened itself to me. Row after row of beautiful architecture spanned the landscape, crafted from stone and tree to become one and the same. Staircases climbed this way and that, leading to large atriums, towers, and temples. Statues stood at almost every alcove, their visage one of grace and warmth, never causing fear or sorrow. Waterfalls streamed down a vast mountainside of trees, flowing through the city naturally before disappearing into the woods. It felt peaceful here, quiet yet lively all the same.

“Welcome to Algundar,” Mara said, turning to me as I wandered in, “the birthplace of Elves.”

We were greeted by a few bodies, each one bowing silently, and offering to take our things. I watched Mara for instruction and guidance. She handed off her bag and even her bow before they let her be. They came to Kiyne and it took several minutes before they convinced him to give up his sword.

“There is no malevolence here,” Mara said, looking at Kiyne. “It will be kept safe.”

Kiyne grumbled, a grouchy look covering his face as he folded his arms over his chest in protest. They’d even taken his cloak and satchel, leaving him with only his tunic and trousers.

I felt anxious, knowing they’d take my things. I could give up my bag, and the hatchet but, my cloak? And what about the gem? Would they take that too?

“Welcome, Lady Alina,” a soothing voice rang out. A small Elven girl stood a few feet from me, seeming to appear from behind the others in the blink of an eye, “let us carry your burden.”

I handed over my things, waiting, hoping they’d let me keep my cloak, at least for now. She handed my things away but, she didn’t leave, “there is no judgment here,” she pressed. Her hands were held out, waiting for something. Why couldn’t they leave it? Did I give them my cloak or the gem? Would they be satisfied with just one or the other?

I shrugged off my cloak, folding it up before reluctantly passing it to her. I knew I couldn’t give up the gem, not yet. And what would they have done with it anyway? She smiled in response, pulling the cloak into her chest. “Please,

enjoy yourself here. Lady Mena will see you shortly.”

I felt relieved as she walked away, the gem still safe at my hip but, I still felt slightly naked without my heavy cloak to conceal me. It hid me, protected me, and kept the world’s prying eyes from falling upon my existence.

Mara came to my side, a hand on my shoulder, “relax,” she said. “You’ll get your cloak back soon enough.”

We were led through the vast city that swelled with glowing portraits carved over thousands of years. Battles, accomplishments, and even small celebrations were all immortalized in stained glass, and marble stone. The more we wandered, the more relaxed I became, feeling my body and spirit fill with serenity and the desire to hide away being pulled from my senses.

Enchanting songs drifted through from some unseen songstress; their words undecipherable to my ears but the sound still more beautiful than anything I’d ever heard. Strange, natural lanterns dangled high above from tree branches; tiny, clear leaves forming bulb-like orbs and filled with the glow of hundreds of tiny torch bugs.

Mara paused, two, young Elven standing in front of us, twins, I assumed, from their appearance; it was often difficult to determine even male and female Elven apart, however, due to their beauty and similarity.

“This is Vali, and Lily,” Mara said, the pair of youths both bowing at their introduction.

“We’ve come to lead you to your rooms,” Lily said with a smile.

“Follow me,” Vali said, blue eyes locked on Kiyne.

Kiyne shrugged, following his Elven guide away from us with nothing more than a small wave that meant he’d see us sooner rather than later.

Lily began to part in the opposite direction, Mara following close behind.

I kept my eyes on her, her pale complexion and nearly white hair not unfamiliar but, still awe-inspiring. Intricate braids weaved with long golden tassels as they descended from crown to backside on her head. I always wondered how they maintained it all; the thought of long hair in the summer, or during work, just irritated me. It was too much of an inconvenience.

We were led up a large set of stone stairs to a single dwelling, a heavy

wooden door looking down on us. It opened with the slightest breeze to reveal a dream-like setting; two large, fluffy beds, a table with two chairs where tea and several food items awaited us, and a small nook filled with a stack of books. The food was still steaming, and I rubbed my eyes in disbelief, Mara's laughter telling me it was all too real.

"The pools are just beyond the portrait of Algun. Please wash up before dinner," Lily said, tending to a few minor things in the room before departing and closing the door behind her.

"T-this is for us?" I stammered.

"Absolutely," Mara replied.

I sprinted, leaping onto one of the beds and burying my face in a pillow. I felt the comfort envelop me and I could've nodded off right then and there if not for our obligations to the people of Algundar.

"Hey," Mara giggled, "let's get cleaned up first and head to dinner before you nod off again."

She was right. We hadn't had a proper bath in days and there was no doubt in my mind we still smelled of ash and dirt.

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Chapter Eleven

“I’m impressed,” I whispered, navigating the narrow path with a caution unmatched by Mara’s elegant steps.

“By what?” she replied.

“Well...everything really. But I meant you.”

“Me? Why?” she seemed startled.

“You still remember this place, after all these years...how...how long have you been away?”

“Time is...different, here, for us. What seems like years for you is only a few weeks or months in this place. It’s all still familiar to me; it’s still home.”

I could almost feel a bit of sorrow in Mara’s words. Did she truly miss it here? Was our world just a temporary trip? Was it work? I didn’t want to pry but, I felt almost bad for her.

“I’m sorry,” I uttered carefully.

“For what?” Mara replied hesitantly.

“Well, I don’t know. That you can’t be here, all the time. That you can’t be home.”

We came upon the pools before Mara could respond. The path split into several directions, some leading into the surrounding forest, and others to more pools. The steam that rose from them danced into the night air like fairies disappearing in a whirl as they curled upward into the blackness.

Mara remained silent as she tossed off her boots and clothes without a single care. Long, golden hair that had been carefully braided was unravelled, swaying down to her hips as her naked form glided into the warm waters. A few moments passed before she rose up, a look of relief reflected in her grey eyes.

“Well? Coming in?” she smiled.

I wasn’t like Mara. I cared about who looked at my small frame, naked or not. She was tall, fit, and beautiful. I was a little goblin disguised as a Human, or so I liked to believe.

“Oh, c’mon. It’ll help with that wound on your back,” she called, splashing water in my direction.

I scowled falsely, taking off my mud-covered boots and throwing them in a heap. I took a few steps down, feet greeting the hot waters with a whimper.

“It’s too hot,” I protested.

“Liar,” she teased.

I sighed, glancing around to make sure no one else was around. I was quick to remove both my shirt and trousers; giving no second thought to removing the gem from my pocket as I hurled myself into the depths to remain unseen.

I could hear Mara’s laughter below the water just as I resurfaced, the splash I’d made with my entry soaking our pile of clothing off on the side.

“Shoot,” I grumbled, staying partially submerged to my chin.

My reflection stared at me as the water settled, green eyes filled with so many questions; about home, about our people, about myself.

“A Human Arcanon,” Mara went on, “never thought I’d meet one in my lifetime.”

“How do we know for sure?” I pressed, finally peeking out of the water to my shoulders. I found a seat near the edge, deeper on the opposite side of the pool’s entrance.

“I guess we don’t,” she replied. “But we can do a few tests. See if you’re truly worthy.”

I was puzzled by her words. What kind of tests did I have to endure? Flying? Fighting? Magic? A strange tingle along my back broke my thoughts, seeping into my muscles and my bones. My soreness was beginning to fade, and I felt almost rejuvenated like I’d slept for two whole days without interruption.

“They’re called Purification Pools,” Mara said, seeing the confusion crossing my face, “they’re meant to cleanse and heal, both physically, and spiritually.”

I prodded the spot on my back where Kiyne had stitched me up. He wasn’t here to slap my hand away this time. There was no more pain and only a strange bump beneath my fingers as I moved them along. It was a pleasant surprise for once.

“Like I was saying,” Mara continued, “We can do a few tests. Not everyone can speak to Dragons, firstly, but learning a bit of magic wouldn’t hurt either.”

“You’ll teach me?” I cried out, unable to hide my excitement.

“Who else would deal with someone as stubborn as you are?” Mara grinned, ducking her body beneath the waters once more.

I followed her lead, dipping back beneath the warm waters and letting their power surround me. I messed with my hair, scrubbing the dirt from beneath my nails. I rubbed my face, the warm water whisking away the grime. It felt good, and it was definitely needed more than we’d even considered.

When I came up, Mara was already dressing, a long, pale blue robe hugging her every curve as it flowed across her shoulders and down. The sleeves billowed just like the base; silver stitching was skillfully woven through the light fabric in complex patterns.

“Here,” she said, tossing one at me, “better get it on or we’ll be late.”

I jumped up, pulling the robe into my arms, daring not to get it drenched like our own clothing, “where’s our stuff?”

Mara shrugged, “must’ve taken it to get cleaned. I bet it smelled awful. Stunk up the whole city.”

“No shoes?” I had looked down, finding Mara barefoot on the stone.

“Not in the city,” she remarked. “Everyone’s just more comfortable this way.”

We laughed. I felt uneasy putting the robe on and wandering barefoot, the garment was perfectly fitted, capable of sticking to every bit of shape I had, no matter how small. I didn’t want to insult anyone though, and I wasn’t about to walk around naked.

Lily appeared at the head of the path as we left the warm springs behind us. She smiled at the sight of us dressed in our new attire, a streak of pride scrawled across her face. Had she made them for us? She looked so young but, I remembered Mara’s words; time was different for them, and for this place.

“Dinner will be ready shortly,” she announced. “Please follow me.”

The table was enormous; a long stretch of smoothed wood with rounded edges sitting at the center. Flicks of silver and red swam its surface like small

creeks while every chair at its side sat the same, just as refined as the table, and awaiting its guests.

Several Elven had already gathered, speaking in small circles, some in hushed whispers, and others with boisterous laughter. They all stopped on our arrival; each step into the courtyard felt pressured like I was walking on eggshells. One wrong motion and they'd be on me like vultures, howling insults and laughing at my faults.

"Don't worry about them," Mara whispered, linking her arm around mine. They're not fond of any outsiders in general."

"Please be seated," a male voice commanded from atop the stairs.

We took a brisk few steps forward, my body following Mara in one fluid motion as she pulled me to the right seat. It was just in time too, as Kiyne appeared to rejoin us; he too wearing a pale robe, his an olive tone as he took the seat next to mine.

"Don't you look nice," he whispered with a wink.

I snarled, taking a seat and giving him a small kick beneath the table. My cheeks flushed pink at his comment, and I hoped the boot to his leg would distract him in time for them to recover.

Small talk ceased, and food suddenly appeared on all sides, brought out by a number of Elven in waves. My cup was placed and filled, my plate stacked and put before me as utensils materialized as if by magic. They were ridiculously organized, and I could see both Mara and Kiyne already drooling over the food from my peripherals. Suddenly, the sound of chairs scraping disrupted our desires, and we stood as if by second nature, to greet our long-awaited company.

Her hair was like starlight; its silver strands glittering behind her every step like stars shooting across the evening sky. Grey eyes scanned the crowd, looking for a specific someone. I'd seen those eyes before, their mysterious gaze floating over me without hesitation.

"Mara, my girl," the woman said, opening her arms.

Mara was quick to run over, hugging the woman like a child who'd just found her parents after a storm.

"You're as beautiful as ever," she said, brimming with joy.

“And you still haven’t aged a day,” Mara replied, burying her face against the woman’s shoulder.

The two shared one last embrace before Mara returned to her seat, a new aura of bliss radiating from her.

The woman stood, once more scanning us as she clutched her chair. Her dress was an off-white, glittering with an array of sparkling jewels that nearly blinded with every small movement.

“Please sit,” she said with a smile. “We have guests at our table this evening.”

I felt her eyes upon me, and I looked away, fearful of her gaze.

“They have brought with us, a great gift,” she continued.

Gift? Gift? The gem! Of course! I’d forgotten about it when I went into the water. It must still be in my pocket! What if she wanted to see it? I didn’t know where they’d taken our items. They could’ve been tossed in a fire for all I knew. I didn’t even have a rock to pass off at this point.

The woman took a seat, hands folding gently on the table. She put down a stone at her center and I felt a wave of relief wash over me. It was the gem. Whoever had taken our things had likely rummaged through the pockets before discarding them or doing whatever with them and handed the gem off to her when they found it.

Voices began to speak, quietly but with great concern.

“This is the Heart, as I’m sure many of you are familiar; the one gem that remains of the five.”

The voices grew louder, some speaking their concerns rather boldly.

A man stood, fear evident in his voice, “Lady Mena, that gem is a curse. Why bring it here?”

“It is a curse in the wrong hands,” the woman replied.

“It should have been destroyed like the others!” another voice chimed in.

The woman, Lady Mena as I’d figured out, watched and listened for a few moments as the table stirred and its guests voiced their concerns. Finally, she held her hands up, a silence falling to the table once again without any objections.

“Maybe we should explain this supposed ‘curse’ to our new guests before we frighten them off,” Mena offered.

The lantern lights from the torch bugs above us dimmed and strange orange wisps began to sweep over the table before us. Figures began to form, Elven, all gathered around what looked to be a forge. They began to hammer and work away, each one taking on a specific duty to aid the others in their endeavor.

“Long ago, our world was formed from the spits of the Greater Beings. Where darkness lurked in the universe, they saw light, breathing life into the stars to and giving birth to our realm and its people. We lived peacefully, grateful for our existence, always offering praise and prayer for all that we discovered.

But our existence was not enough. The other Greater Beings felt the need to create life as well, bearing upon us Dragons, Fairies, and other creatures. We learned to co-exist with these creatures, working with one another to maintain peace and unity. However, we were easily undone by another presence...

The Ethereal was the sacred land, a place without conflict. That held no interest for the Greater beings who wished for us to entertain and amuse them.

Thus, they created the Hulknaut; your world. The life of Mortals, Animals, and Beasts that would fight for dominance and victory, caring not for what they destroyed in their conquest.

The war of your world threatened our own, and we sent many of our people, and our beings, to curbe the bloodshed and restore peace to our worlds. We formed the Arcanon; riders with great magical influence who would work with Dragons to quickly end the fighting. As the ages continued, our kings intertwined, birthing a new breed of Arcanon, Mortals with magic who could bring reason to the world of Men with their bloodline and relation.

As the war dwindled, we vowed to hold all beings to the same level; one of quality as we do ourselves. We created the Facet Gems, stones like feathers and small in form from the blood, ash and, tears of a war-torn land. There were five in all; the Body, the Mind, the Spirit, the World, and the Heart. Each one ruled an aspect of life, and each one could command that aspect in turn.

For years our worlds lived silently, peacefully, meshing as if to be one where all life could thrive amongst each other. Without fear. Without hatred. But, the greed of Mortals grew strong, and the line of Mortal Arcanon faded from

memory. Jealousy grew for the beings beyond the horizon. Gems were sought out, killed for, and used to command armies of fearsome power.

We could no longer risk the lives of our people, of the harmony that had been restored for so long. With the existence of the stones, there would be no peace. They were ordered to be destroyed by Algun himself, the founder of our city. We managed to retrieve all but one, at the cost of many lives, and they were destroyed in the same forge from whence they came.”

The wisps of Elven forgers had changed, each one throwing in some strange, small object, a flicker of flame reflecting its fate.

“But one gem still remained, hidden by the Dragons of the Ethereal, and kept safe from all that would use its power, whether for good, or misdeed; the Heart.”

I stared at the stone at her front, the image of pain I’d seen reenacted by those magical wisps still fresh in my mind. Were we really just pawns for someone else’s amusement?

The table remained silent, food and drinks still untouched. The wisps faded, leaving the torch bugs to brighten the area once again. The aura of despair began to dissipate, the Elven beginning to dig into their meals like all had somehow been renewed or forgotten.

I shuddered; a feeling of dead latching onto my body and refusing to let go.

“Please. Eat,” Mena said, looking down the table at my friends and I. “We shall deal with the stone’s fate once your energy has been restored.”

We were all a bit reluctant but the deep grumbling that echoed from the pit of our stomachs reminded us how famished we truly were. Serving dishes of root vegetables were spaced apart by trays of various meats. I could identify a few, the deer, and the rabbit but the others I was unsure of. Soups were coloured in bright yellows, and vibrant greens, and you could see the steam from their piping hot contents wither into the air as conversations started again. Anything I could’ve imagined, from amber ales to exotic fruits were somewhere spread out on the table before us, ready to be devoured by whoever got their hands on them. Why we’d gone so long without another meal again I couldn’t say but, despite my emotions, I still went through a plate and more of everything presented to us, like I was a pack of wild dogs feasting on a deer.

Chapter Twelve

Dinner had ended, the table's guests departing with waves and farewells. The glares I'd endured earlier had softened, now resembling pity rather than contempt. I'd spoken very little after dinner, my stomach full and afraid that if I spoke, I would burst. My friends felt similarly, the three of us wanting rest now more than ever. At least here we could sleep soundly, without fear of Marauders or bandits making us take turns keeping watch during the night.

I warmed at the thought of sleep, curling up in the soft bed and drifting away. Perhaps I'd dream of flying again, or the amazing food I'd just consumed. Both images filled me with contentment.

"Alina," a voice called after me as I began to leave the courtyard; Lady Mena's voice. "A word if I could."

Mara and Kiyne stopped but, I waved them on. There was no sense in them sticking around and falling asleep at the table waiting on me. They needed the rest, just as badly as I wanted it.

I turned to face Lady Mena, my bare feet spinning all too easily on the stone stairs. It seemed everyone here was more comfortable barefoot, and though I felt a little off without my boots, it did feel rather pleasant in a strange, free-spirited kind of way.

We walked some more forgotten pathways, weaving through over-grown trees and cracked statues along the way. We traversed a mix of dirt and moss, stone steps long-buried or removed. A large stream flowed to our right, the sound of trickling water breaking through a symphony of insect song as it barreled over small dams in its length.

"Long passed were the days of the Mortal Arcanon, and yet, one is thought to stand here beside me," she began.

She opened her palm, once more revealing the gemstone and turning to me, "I believe this is yours."

I shook my head, "keep it. It'll be safer here, to be destroyed."

She smiled, curling the gem back into her grasp and continuing back down the path.

“I don’t believe you’re Arcanon, Alina,” she continued. “I believe you’re something more.”

We broke through the narrow passage to an opening. Leaves had fallen from the trees surrounding us despite their spring-like state. A strange, stone monument seemed to sit at the center of the clearing, lonely and forgotten. Broken pieces of stone were strewn about, and I could tell quite quickly that this place was much older than both Lady Mena, and myself.

She approached the odd pedestal, circling it once and whispering a few Elvish words beyond my basic comprehension. When she ceased, a cool wind swept through, giving me a shiver. Strange green symbols engulfed the pedestal, glowing brightly in an odd and rhythmic pattern, much like the sound of a heartbeat. They slinked downward, spreading across the stone beneath our feet. The wind cleared much of the space, and I could see a faint red glow begin to brighten at the top of the pedestal. This was no monument or sacrificial placeholder; this was a forge!

“This is where it all began,” Lady Mena said. “And where it should have ended.” She took the gem from her hand and tossed it into the forge without another thought.

We stood, silent for some time as the flames grew brighter and brighter in the veil of night.

“But it seems things are not as final as we would like to believe.” Her eyes fell upon me, motioning for me to join her at the forge.

I stepped lightly, approaching with both caution and bravery. This thing was ancient and other-worldly, who knew what or when this thing would split and explode.

“See there?” she asked, looking into the flames and hoping I would do the same.

I peaked in, still keeping a distance but, trying not to show my fear. There sat the gem, radiating with the same orange gleam just like the day I’d found it.

“Why hasn’t the forge melted it?” I asked, bewildered.

“I have the same question,” Lady Mena replied. “Take it.”

I moved back, looking over to her with a baffled expression.

“You’ve done this before, no?”

How did she know? Did she know too, then, that I’d stolen it from Bryden?

“I can’t,” I said. “The flames...they’re too hot. I-I’m afraid.”

“I don’t think these flames will hurt you,” she offered. “Give it a try.”

I was puzzled, she knew so much but revealed to me so little. Was this some sort of test like Mara had been telling me? I could feel her eyes still watching, waiting for me to act.

I closed my eyes, stretching out my hand to the flames as they flared into the night. I waved my hand around, feeling something but not the heat or pain I had anticipated.

I opened one eye, peering at the sight; my hand was held in the flames, their light prancing around my fingers lightly, like butterflies more than fire. I reached into the depths of the forge, plucking the gem and holding it out on my palm once again. As I pulled my hand away, the gem began to dull, cooling in the air and returning to the crimson-gold I’d been so enraptured by.

“Just as I thought,” Mena said with glee, “you’re Skyborn.”

“A what?” I asked, stunned.

“A being capable of joining with the gem you clutch in your hand.”

We sat for some time, as Mena explained the Skyborns and their purpose to me. First, I was an Arcanon, and now Skyborn? No, I was Alina, an orphaned girl afraid of fire, and a seeker of adventure; nothing more.

“The gems were kept by Skyborns, those who embodied the gem in both body and mind. When the others were destroyed, so were their keepers, a sacrifice they knew had to be fulfilled. The heart was kept by an Arcanon named Odaer; he was able to speak with not only his Dragon companion but others as well. He commanded legions of wild horses, bears, and even the mightiest Dragons but, he never asked them for their obedience, only their aid.

When his daughter was born, he had found she had the same traits, and in his age, his skill and ability had been passed onto her. This was unheard of, especially for Mortals, and had never been conceived by the minds of our Forgemasters. The time came to sacrifice the gems and the lives of their keepers but, Odaer knew it was not his life that would be taken; it would be hers. He

could not bear to see his only child killed, even for the sake of the worlds and our peace so, he sent the gem away with his Dragon to the Lasting Lands where it could be hidden, and safe. Many tried to recover the gem, and failed, unable to conquer the harsh and wild terrain where only Dragons roamed; thus, it was never destroyed.”

I was still puzzled, “but, Odaer...his daughter would’ve been gone by now, so the gem should’ve been destroyed when you tossed it into the fire.”

“Oh?” she said, looking at me inquisitively. “Odaer passed on his legacy to her. Do you not believe she could have done the same?”

Centuries of lineage passing down the ability to talk to animals and endure fire? Impossible! Folk tales were Folk tales, even if told by the Elves. Yet, I had the nagging feeling I knew the answer to her question, and I felt it in both my gut and my heart. It sat on the tip of my tongue, bubbling up from my throat and begging to be spoken.

“What was her name?” I asked with hesitation.

“Do you really want to know?” Mena countered.

I took a deep breath, swallowing the fear that had mounted in my throat. I knew the answer but, I needed to hear it, I needed someone else to confirm the truth I felt in my very bones.

“Signy of Hearthmound, daughter of Odaer, and the wife of Tarben the Blackhood.”

Tears welled in my eyes, falling without warning and drenching my cheeks in streaks of warm memories. My mother’s name but, that would mean she was far older than I’d ever known, ever thought of. Did no one know? Did she hide it away for all this time?

“The fire took her,” I whispered through sobs, “how...how could it...”

“She had already passed on her gifts, to you, Alina. She feared this outcome greatly, which is why she hid for centuries, denying herself a life of love and family for so long.”

I felt arms wrap around me, pulling me close. I sobbed for what seemed like an eternity. I’d barely known my parents, and only now was I learning their story when they were already long gone.

“Your father was quite the man,” she said softly. “He had to be to tame such a heart as hers. And I see that same heart, now, in you.”

I sniffled, composing myself in the beat of the forge’s radiance and Lady Mena’s gentle aura. Only days ago, I was some simple labourer, and now, not only did I speak to Dragons, I was Skyborn; a legend reborn in the here and now. I didn’t know what to do with myself, or how to move forward. Was I to continue normally, or was I to become some great and powerful warrior? Did I run away and hide like my mother? Could I really abandon my friends? Everything seemed unfathomable at this point.

“Now, now,” she said, wiping the remaining tears from my eyes. “It’s a lot to take in. Go get yourself some rest. I believe Mara expects to teach you some magic in the morning.”

I agreed, rest seemed like the best option, even if my mind was now a flurry of thoughts and memories. I returned to my room, Lady Mena guiding me before wandering off to her own chambers for the evening, a tune on her lips. Mara was already fast asleep, and even with my footsteps, she didn’t stir. I was exhausted, more than ever now, and I assumed she had passed out as soon as she hit the pillow. I planned to do the same.

I didn’t bother to look for a change of clothes or another robe. I flipped onto the soft sheets, letting the comfort below encase me as it did earlier but, this time, I had nowhere else to be. Now, there would only be rest.

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Chapter Thirteen

Birds chirped, signaling the rise of a new day. Sunlight filtered in through the curtains; narrow beams twirling bits of dust in the air like spiders on thin strands of web.

I had cocooned myself in the layers of blankets overnight, completely wrapped in fluffy, white warmth. I rolled over, looking to Mara for whether I could steal another few winks or not but, she was gone. Her bed was made, and all that remained was her robe on the bedside. I sighed; that meant it was well past dawn and I knew she'd come drag me out if I took too much longer.

I nearly threw myself out of the bed. I was excited about the magic lessons but, I also wanted to stay tucked under those plush blankets for however long anyone would let me.

“Oh?” I said aloud. I spotted a pile of clothing on the table we'd seen the night before. Were they for me?

I picked up the pair of trousers; they looked like mine but they felt new. All the patches, scrapes, rips, and tears had disappeared as if they'd never been. I swapped out the new items for my robe without giving it much thought. It had worked well enough but, I still felt more comfortable in a shirt and bottoms than I did in any sort of gown. I slipped on a pair of leather boots, much more suited for the adventuring than my old cloth ones. They didn't bind or cut into my calves as I laced them up at the sides; it was as if they were already worn in for me. Still, there was no sign of my cloak.

“There you are,” Mara called from down the stairs.

I'd barely made my way out but, her eyes still locked on me like a predator stalking its prey. Kiyne sat beside her, sharpening the blade of his sword; he too had been fitted with new clothes.

“Like the gifts?” Mara asked as I joined them.

“Yeah. Where did they come from?” I asked, looking at them both, and then myself again.

“My grandmother, err, Lady Mena. She thought our attire was rather shabby,” Mara said with a smirk.

“They’re perfect, how did she-”

Mara tapped a finger to her temple, “magic, remember?”

I rolled my eyes, of course. Elves were always quick to analyze and go to work. I shouldn’t have been surprised they’d get something together for all of us so quickly.

“C’mon,” Mara instructed, “let’s get you some food and get to work!”

“What about you, Kiyne?” I said curiously.

“We’ve been awake for a while,” he laughed. “It’s just you that decided to sleep until noon.”

“It is not *noon!*” I stomped.

“Ha, I know,” he teased. “I’ve got my own training to do. Mara convinced the Archers here to show me a thing or two.”

That sounded amazing. I’d always admired how skillful bow users were. They could shoot more than just arrows, and from high atop the cliffs and lookout towers. Enemies couldn’t even see them before they were struck down. Their eyesight, and hand-eye coordination, had to be perfect. Even breathing wrong could jeopardize their aim. Mara was like a statue, even in the heat of battle. She’d take her aim, point, and shoot. I’d never seen her miss a target; not once.

“Someone has to hunt when I’m away,” Mara snickered as she led us away.

I was eager to learn but, my stomach was more eager to eat. Even after everything I’d consumed the night before, I still had room for more it seemed.

She led us into a small room down another beaten walkway, tables lining either side and filled with pastries, fruits, and an array of meats and cheeses. She slid a few apples into her pouch, and I grabbed a few goodies too before we headed along. I munched as we walked, taking in the sights and sounds that day brought to the forest city. Before I even had the chance to ask, Mara answered.

“We’re going to the Emerald Isle,” she said, her eyes never straying from our path. “It’s a place that holds magic and aids in its focus. It’ll help you to realize your abilities, hopefully, a bit quicker than if we just practiced in the woods.”

I continued to eat, careful not to fall behind as I tried to walk, admire the

forest, and eat all at the same time. I swore I could hear Mara laughing at me but, she never turned around to admit it.

We came to a clearing, similar to the old forge's that I'd been at the night before. However, this one wasn't quite as weathered. Large wooden sculptures surrounded us as we stepped into the circular clearing, an image carved below our feet hidden by bits of moss but, still easy enough to make out. There were five elemental symbols, most common knowledge to even an untrained eye but, another was more difficult to perceive. Each had, what I assumed to be, their keeper, commanding them.

The Body was visualized by water droplets flowing into the palm. The Spirit was presented by a whirl of wind being pushed away from the chest by an outspread arm. The World was presented as expected, vines and trees encroaching upon the shoulders of a prayer-bound servant. The Heart was shown by flames sparking from snapped fingers but, the Mind was a bit more complex.

The Mind was centered by the other elements, an eye open on the center of the forehead of its keeper, and following whoever seemed to stare at its image. It was eerie and enticing.

"Mara," I shouted. "What does this mean?" I pointed to the image below our feet.

"The Mind," she said without delay. "We command our body with it, tame our spirit with it, overrule our heart with it, and navigate the world with it. It is the center of our being. Many believe the Spirit to hold command over our existence but, without the mind to translate it, we would have no clarity; no purpose. The eye sees, learns, watches, and waits. It is what will give you the focus you seek if you are willing to open it."

I've heard all manner of stories; from the Cadunes of the South and their belief that a strong body can conquer all. To the Enegrians of the East who believed the Heart would guide them through dark times. I'd never heard of the mind utilizing it all. Of course, it made perfect sense but, everyone always looked to their spirit or soul in our village. Why had the Elven never mentioned anything otherwise?

"We're free to believe whatever we like," Mara continued. "That's why we never imposed our views on anyone else. We just hoped they would be as understanding to us, as we are to them."

I'd just barely finished my last bite of bread and already I was learning far more about magic and its birth than I'd ever known before.

"So, it's meant to guide us, not serve us?" I questioned.

"Exactly," Mara replied.

She set down her gear, removing the pouch from her hip, her bow, and quiver from her back. She was going to take this quite seriously, and that meant I would have to be on my best behaviour.

"We'll see if you're as natural to this as grandmother believes," Mara voiced. "Now, close your eyes."

I was surprised at the quickness of her orders but I tossed my bag aside and obeyed. Mara was my friend, and now my teacher, and the last thing I wanted was to disappoint her. I closed my eyes, waiting for further instruction.

"Clear your mind of any desires and interference...that means food too."

I giggled; she knew me too well but, I did as she asked. Void my thoughts. Clear the mind. Listen.

"Now, think of the gemstone in your pocket. How you obtained it. What does it smell like? How does it feel?"

The gemstone? Was it really in my pocket? I didn't remember putting it there. Did I sleepwalk? Did I absent-mindedly put it there when I woke up? No, no. Clear the mind. I put it there, for a reason. That had to be it. Even if I didn't remember.

"It's smooth," I replied, my hands still at my sides. "It smells like hot iron... and ashes. Like fire."

"Good," Mara said. "Now open your eyes."

My eyes fluttered open, widening in the surprise at what burned before me. A small flame, right before my eyes. It was dull and small but still, it flickered in the sunlight, as if waiting for a command.

Mara smiled, "I thought so," she said with pride.

"Did I?"

"Yep," she answered quickly. "Now let's see if you can use it."

That thought blind-sided me; use fire? Not a chance. The flame before me sputtered at my hesitation, my body beginning to shut down like before. I was becoming paralyzed again, fearful of the consequence that waited at the end of what came from that little torch light. I'd done as Mena asked, pulling all my strength to take that gem from the fire. Perhaps I was delirious from over-eating then but now, I was wide awake, and terrified.

"Alina! Focus!" Mara shouted, pulling me from my nightmares like usual. "I know you're afraid but, you can do this. You were *born* to do this."

I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the image of burning houses, and frightened animals. I had to focus, if not for me, then for Mara.

"I don't want to burn anything," I stumbled. "Or anyone."

"That's not what you're going to do," Mara said warmly. "Fire can't hurt you so use it that way. It deters you, makes you afraid. It makes you rethink your actions, your direction, your plans. That's what you want to do with it. That's how you want to use it."

I was stumped by her words. How could I use fire without it hurting anyone or anything? It didn't hurt me but, I was different. I was born to its light and life, no one else was. Unless...

I stretched out my hand, curling it around the little flame and forcing it into a ball. It floated in my hand, but no heat warmed me, and no flame tickled my fingertips. Did that mean...

"Mara," I said softly, "give me your hand."

Mara tilted her head for a moment with curiosity before she stepped toward me. She stretched out her hand at my request, her face stern, and without question.

"It won't hurt. I promise... At least I hope it won't," I said nervously.

"I trust you," she replied confidently.

I gently placed the little flame on her hand, waiting for her to drop it, be burned by it, or extinguish it by reaction but, she didn't budge.

"See?" she said, "use it as a means to control, to take hold the same way it would you."

“It doesn’t hurt?”

“No,” she smiled. “It’s... different.” She whirled the little orb of fire between her hands before tossing it back to me.

I caught it, not as gracefully as I’d hoped but it still lived. I stared down at it, proud of my small accomplishment. Not only was I holding fire in my own two hands, but I had also created it, breathed life into it and made it so it would do no harm.

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Chapter Fourteen

We trekked through the shroud of tree cover, startling a few critters on our path but still trying to stay quiet. We'd spent much of the day with magic, and though my body still moved without drag, my mind was exhausted.

It took more effort and more practice than I'd originally thought. Clear the mind but focus it at the same time. Then think of what you want to happen, and how, and make it happen. Poof! Just like that.

Mara and Mena had said I was a natural, but after creating fireballs, fire weapons, and so on, I was as burned out as any of my snuffed out creations.

Proud of my efforts, Mara had agreed to spend the rest of the afternoon watching the Archers practice along the cliffsides. We didn't anticipate we'd be joining in a hunt.

Kiyne's back was facing us but I could still see his eyes, his face locked in a serious expression. His hair was pulled back from his face, braided and knotted back in a small bun. When did that happen? Small strands still rebelled, resting at the back of his neck and along his forehead; the new style suited him, quite well, I thought.

He held a long bow in his grasp, the wooden curve etched with images I couldn't quite make out from the distance. He held an arrow at the ready, his shoulders aligned, his breath pausing. In one swift moment, he let go of the string, arrow flying through the air at some unseen target. Then, a cheer erupted.

"Nice shot," I said quietly as Kiyne smiled victoriously. He must've heard me because I saw his head turn.

"You didn't even see if I hit anything," he remarked.

"I heard the cheering," I replied.

"Maybe they were mocking me," he joked.

"They don't seem the type," I pointed out.

We both shared a laugh.

Our evening was much more comfortable than the first. This time we sat with the locals, the Archers, and the hunters. Even Vali and Lily were seated only a

few spots down at the same long table. They were a friendlier bunch, curious to our stories as much as we were to theirs. There was singing, dancing, and a lot of drinking. The Wine seemed to refill itself, and I struggled to find something other than ale or mead to enjoy.

I shuffled toward an overflowing table of jugs and flasks, pulling the corks and taking a sniff before I finally found, at the very least, some water to enjoy. Everyone seemed relaxed, happy, and carefree. It reminded me of our harvest celebrations back home. Home...

“How’d your magic training go?” a voice called through the crowd.

I looked through the sea of dancers slowly seeing Kiyne’s height break through. He was tall even by Elvish standards.

“Exhausting,” I replied.

He squeezed in next to me, turning to watch the dancers from our little spot at the table. He still donned his new gear, as I did mine. No robes were needed this time, no stolen clothes, or accessories required for presentation purposes.

“Congratulations on a successful hunt,” I said.

He leaned over, making sure to hear me clearly, his body close to mine.

“They made it rather easy,” he laughed. “Hard not to find a Deer when they see and hear for miles.”

I blushed lightly but, his eyes still looked on the dancers before us.

A small girl came over, approaching Kiyne with kindness on her face. She rose to her toes, whispering something in his ear as he leaned forward to hear. He shook his head, settling back down, a regretful look on his face. She frowned, her eyes darting to me for a second before she ran off.

“What was that all about,” I said, rather puzzled.

“She asked me to dance,” he replied.

“Why didn’t you?”

“I’m not really in the mood,” he said lowly.

“That’s the third girl tonight,” I scoffed, “and you love to dance.”

“I do but, I don’t want to dance with them.” He shifted uncomfortably, “I

want to dance with you.”

I knew his eyes were on me and I couldn't help but look up at him. It was sweet, too sweet, and I knew my cheeks would give me away, no matter how I tried to deny it.

“Careful there red,” he joked, poking at my reddened cheeks. “Only if you want to.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves, and my heart. I swore it was going to leap from my chest. Kiyne and I always danced, Mara too, but I never thought anything of it. It was fun, and I don't think we were any good at all but we always had a good time.

His eyes didn't move from me; he was waiting for an answer. I didn't want to embarrass either of us in front of the Elven but, I also didn't want to embarrass Kiyne, or push him away like I'd done all those years ago.

“Okay,” I squeaked out.

“You sure?” He said, surprised.

“Yeah...why not?” I faked a grin.

He took my hand, leading me onto the dance floor. Elves swirled around us, the upbeat melody hypnotizing their bodies to move. They cheered for us briefly, hands patting our shoulders and backs. I placed a hand on Kiyne's shoulder, the other locking onto his. Slowly I felt his other hand slide onto my hip, and I tried to hide my gulp. We moved freely, easily to the music. It was new, but the movements were similar. He'd spin me around, and I'd snap back into his arms. We kicked our feet and clapped our hands, finding the rhythm rather quickly. The fear began to leave me, and I found myself smiling, genuinely enjoying the dance, and Kiyne's company.

I guess we were having too much fun to notice we were the only pair left on the dance floor. Our pace slowed, and his eyes locked on mine. We stood there, silent, for what felt like an eternity. I felt his breath against my cheeks, his hand pulling me against him. I had to fight my every instinct to run away, just like before. My mind, and my heart demanded I stay put. I closed my eyes, feeling his cheek press against my own. I wouldn't flee, not this time. I felt his lips against mine and I couldn't help but return the gesture. It was perfect, just like the stories told, sweet but not too strong. Gentle, yet empowering.

“Get a room you two,” Mara’s voice rang out.

We pulled away, both of us now flushed and looking away.

Mara laughed, the music settling into quiet before us. Before Kiyne and I had a chance to let go, Mara wrapped her arms around us and squeezed.

“What do you say you two?” she said with a grin. “Shall we head home in the morning?”

I took hold of Mara’s arm, squeezing back just as tightly. Home... I’d nearly forgotten like time had escaped us here. But it had only been a couple of days, hadn’t it?

Mara’s eyes locked on mine, expecting an answer, any answer.

I nodded, smiling and pulling her close, “let’s go home.”

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Chapter Fifteen

Home...I'd been far too caught up in my own journey to remember our village, our people. They'd lose it all, and here I was learning how to fight and how to use magic.

I didn't get much rest before dawn began to rise. The stars twinkled one last time, fading against the amber skyline as it swelled before me. We raced down the pathway, saying our farewells and clutching what few things we could carry.

"Alina!" a voice called after me.

Lily had been quick on our heels, something wrapped tightly in her arms.

I stopped, worried we'd miss our departure but I couldn't simply ignore her.

"Here!" she said, pushing the small bundle into my arms. "Now go!"

I smiled, hugging the package before pivoting around and darting off again.

I arrived on the shoreline, heart beating loudly, and fighting to catch my breath. A familiar roar rang out behind us and Graven emerged from the tree line once more, coasting over the shallows before landing on the sand.

"I thought you'd left us," I said playfully.

"Now why would I do that?" he replied.

Two more roars echoed from beyond the trees, a pair of dragons soon appearing, gliding over the water like dual winds before they settled at Graven's side.

"I brought some friends," he announced. "This is Keldi and Ove."

I shouldn't have been surprised when our previous companion didn't show. She wasn't bound for our world, and all she ever wanted was to be home again, to be free. Now, before us, stood two more beasts of legend, one standing much larger, and more brutish than even Graven.

Ove, as he was named, was sturdy and rigid. His body was covered in iron like scales, similar to the plating that Kiyne had crafted back at the Dens. It armoured his size from head to tail, sections splitting to reveal row after row of jagged spikes. His eyes were an icy blue, staring down at us from above. Two

horns protruded from either side of his head, twisting and curved like daggers away from the steel-like scales that covered his head from snout to neck. Smoke misted from his nostrils constantly, claws like swords pulling up sand and filtering it like a plough through the fields. I didn't even know if he could be mounted, he stood too tall for even Mara to leap onto.

Keldi was small but still sizable when compared to Graven. Her scales reflected the land and sea, each one shifting to adjust in the breeze. At one moment we could see her, and the next she was gone; camouflaged in the environment by a quick shift in the wind. Her eyes were deep and purple, like late-blooming tulips in spring; they held power, but also kindness. A single row of fins and barbs descended down her back, fluttering gently in the wind like whiskers on a cat. Her horns were small, three on either side, gently curling back toward her head. Her form showed she was sly and speedy; she could disappear at the flick of the tongue and dip into the trees unseen. She reminded me more of a large cat than a dragon but I'd never tell her that.

"Hurry now," Graven instructed, "we have little time to beat the horizon this time."

We all agreed, securing our things for the journey onward. I had adjusted my bag but I still held the bundle from Lily. What could possibly have been so important that she'd chase after me just to deliver it?

I undid the bit of twine that held it together, tossing it aside as my curiosity took hold of me. It was a black piece of clothing, soft, and durable. I flipped it outward, trying to display its entirety; it was a cloak. My cloak! It smelled like cedar and felt like that plush bed, the one I'd miss so much when we finally left Algundar. It had a strange weight to it, feather-light, not like the wet burlap I'd weighed on me before.

"Try it on!" Mara called out.

I tossed the cloak over my body, feeling almost renewed as I was once more layered, concealed from the world. I pulled down the hood, doing a quick twirl for amusement. It fit perfectly.

Slow claps broke my dream state, reminding me we were on a strict timeline.

"Let's go!" Kiyne shouted. He had latched onto Ove almost instinctively, his hands finding the right spots to grab on and hoist himself up with. He sat on his

back, looking all too fitting atop the armoured behemoth.

Mara had already taken a seat on Keldi, the two seeming to share a few unspoken thoughts through the meet of their gaze. I often wondered if Mara was an Arcanon but, in the years of our friendship, I'd never thought to ask.

Graven arched his tail, allowing me to climb on with ease. I took a seat at the base of his neck, ready to hold on this time.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," I replied confidently.

We raced through the air, Mara and Keldi moving like a bolt of lightning against the rising sun. Graven and I were close behind, watching as Keldi and Mara spun downward and disappeared into the horizon with a blink. We followed the same path, spinning down before we once more coasted against the surface of the water. I'd only briefly seen Kiyne and Ove at our backs, their flight much slower, but still timely. We'd all made it through safely but, this time there was no stopping on the shoreline. This time we headed for home.

Wings beat against the morning sky, the sun rising behind us as if we were pulling it ourselves. We flew over familiar lakes and small farmsteads, the wind from our flight shaking the trees as we moved overhead. It was a new sight for many of us, and I couldn't help but admire the world from afar.

"Look over there," Kiyne called from our backs.

We leaned right, our eyes turning back to see he and Ove shift their flight pattern. We could see a plume of smoke rising from a small glen, and the reality began to sink into me again.

We couldn't dive any closer, the trees too tightly bunched for us to find a good spot to land. I looked to Mara, she and Keldi able to get the closest. Her face was painted with sadness, her head shaking.

Another one.

We picked up speed, flying forward again on our route. Random plumes began to appear as we got close to the mountain. Farmsteads were destroyed, cattle sprawling across acreage without a master. An inn had collapsed, barrels of ale and mead bled dry at its front step. The closer we came to our own home the more carnage began to appear. Was this all the Marauders' doing?

Silence held our landing, the place where our village had once stood. Now it was a clear path to stop upon. The smoldering embers had ceased here, and all that remained were heaps of settled ash.

I sighed, hardening myself for what I knew came next. We had to confront our people, I had to confront them. I'd brought this upon all of us, and now I was going to end it.

Mara had placed her hand to the soil, her ears twitching below her golden braids, listening, tracking carefully. "They're westward," she said. "Seems most, if not all of them, took to the Mist Lands for shelter."

We situated our gear, beginning our journey on foot. The Mist Lands were only a few hours from our village but Dragons couldn't land there easily. Rocky outcrops were hidden by a valley of near-constant mist that rolled in from the mountains. It concealed the village both from attack as well as sight entirely.

We'd all taken the trip many times, knowing each twist and turn to take. And how many steps between rocks were needed before another turn on the path was taken. Even in the mist, we could manage our way, and we knew even the Marauders couldn't find guidance to this place.

"So, what's the plan?" Mara asked, leading the way as usual. "Sell your soul and let them flay you?"

"I thought I'd let them stone me first," I snorted.

"Right, better to be tenderized first," Kiyne commented.

We snickered, but deep down we all feared what awaited us. Would they be relieved? Confused? Angry? Could we tell them about the Ethereal? Had Bryden told them about Graven? What if they thought I was eaten?

Bursts of fire snapped me from my thoughts. We were getting close, and the fire spouts meant Dragons roamed nearby.

"Seems the Arcanon made the trip safely as well," Mara remarked. "I thought they'd take to the mountains."

"They must know something's off," Kiyne added.

"They're likely here for protection," Mara corrected.

Protection from what? From us? No... they meant the Marauders.

Voices began to fill the air, mist clearing from our path as we entered the small village of Unadine, home of the once-proud Horsemen of the Hills. Huts spanned far as the eye could see, most tucked beneath the shadows of a rock, where others merely chose to remain small, easily mistaken for ruins rather than dwellings.

We were nearly unnoticed until the Arcanon spotted us. A voice called out, causing Mara to turn on her heels and glare. She shouted back, something snide, and most definitely crude from her tone.

“What’d he say?” I asked.

“The deserters live,” she began, “come, explain your treachery,” she hissed under her breath.

Kiyne had snuck up behind us, his body close as if to guard us from any further remarks or potential attacks.

“Alina!” a familiar voice rang out.

“Bryden!” I said, spotting the blacksmith as he ran forward.

“Kiyne... Mara too?” Bryden said, pausing before pulling us all in for a tight hug.

We laughed, both relieved, yet uncomfortable. His words had brought attention to us. And now the whole town seemed to stare at us with hurt in their eyes.

I desperately wanted to pull up my hood but, Bryden was quick to defend us before any words were even cast against us.

“These young folks saved the Dens!” he shouted, arms spread out to demand the attention on him. “They freed the last of our mounts. Preserved the Arcanon!”

“They brought darkness upon us!” another voice rang out.

“They took those mounts and ran!” another chimed in.

Soon a barrage of voices shouted at us, hurling insults and misunderstanding. It was all such a mess; people fighting to be heard, whether by us or the town, we couldn’t tell.

Slowly, Dragons began to crawl in from the mist, their riders in tow.

“Enough!” another voice, from beyond the mist, commanded.

“Father...” Mara said in a hush.

“Let them defend themselves,” he stated quite firmly.

Blond hair was tucked behind his ears, a crown of wild thorns atop his head. His armour was dark, iron, and intricately crafted to display his lineage and his victories. His deep blue eyes had paused on Mara, despite his words being meant for all of us.

“Lord Arden,” Bryden whispered, moving aside.

Mara stepped forward, prepared to fight for all of us, as always. She was always there to cover us when we got caught, whether an adventure or a mishap. I was too hot-headed, too brash. But I wouldn't let her take the fall for it. Not this time.

I stepped beside her, grabbing her hand and staring deep into her grey eyes. I took a deep breath, her hand sliding from mine as she withdrew from her platform.

“We are not deserters!” I boomed, pulling every bit of confidence I could from within. “We brought down fire and ash but... we... I never meant to. Kiyne... Mara... they did nothing wrong!” I nearly choked on my own words. “They saved me... when they probably shouldn't have.”

The people seemed unphased but Mara and Kiyne were both stunned by my confession.

“I held something these Marauders wanted, but I didn't know. Not until it was too late. I wanted to give it to them, to stop this, all of this but, I've seen what they've done, to us, to others. I don't think they'll ever stop, no matter what we give them.”

Voices began to rumble, first in whispers amongst one another, and then growing louder.

“I will face them. I will put an end to this hatred. This attack on our lands, and homes. I have seen their trail of destruction, and I will stop them in their tracks, I swear it!”

A powerful choir of roars erupted from by back, Graven flying overhead and breaking through the mist with Ove and Keldi at his side. The Arcanon looked

upward, spotting the beasts with surprise as they landed on a large gathering of rocks.

I smiled, taking note of my back-up now for all to see.

“We will finish what they started. I promise you...”

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Chapter Sixteen

We hadn't gained any real allies but, our list of enemies certainly thinned out by the afternoon. We were no longer considered to be 'deserters', and both Mara and Kiyne had managed to earn back the respect of their peers after a long conversation. However, I was still the outcast.

I didn't mind much, it left me with more time to plan my attack than have to explain my return again. I rolled the gemstone around in my pocket, thinking, plotting, and aching.

I'd mapped out their attacks, the places they'd already burned, like our own. Their trail was odd, it didn't seem to travel in any specific direction. Heading South was easiest, all downhill, but they'd hit the eastern villages, and moved north, then continued around, like a whirlpool. Were they following someone?

"You seem flustered," Mara interrupted, taking a seat beside me in the small inn. I'd thrown the map over the table, marking spots with charcoal as I looked at it over and over again.

"Any leads on where they'll strike next?" She asked.

I shook my head, defeated, pushing my hands through my short hair. I was completely stumped.

"It looks like a swirl," Mara commented, tracing a line from our village with a bit of magic from her fingertip and dragging it along each torched location.

I pulled the gem out of my pocket, placing it at the center of the map. The pattern was the same; the swirl on the gem moved counter-clockwise from the center, outward, just like the Marauders' warpath.

"It's the same!" I shouted, returning my attention to the map.

I followed the swirl again, mentally noting the route as Mara had done with her magic. I stepped back, swallowing hard when I figured out their next target.

"It's here," I whispered. "They're coming here."

We hurried across the small town to where the Arcanon had taken up residence. Kiyne had rejoined them, fixing their armour as best he could with the few resources at his use.

“They’re coming to Unadine,” I stated, marching through the crowd of armoured Elven and straight to Kiyne’s makeshift workbench.

I threw down the map in front of him, watching as a few other eyes began to pan over. I placed my finger on the town.

“Three days they’ve traveled, from one location to the next. They hit here... tonight!”

Kiyne stepped away from his work, looking down at the map and hearing my warning loud and clear, “how? How do they know where to look?”

“Unadine has been shielded for centuries by the mists of the mountain. No one is coming here,” An Elven man piped up.

“I don’t know. Look at the targets. Not all of them were towns. Some were just farms or Inns. Someone amongst them knows these lands, our people,” I retorted.

Lord Arden joined us, having heard my warning and the onslaught of denial. He stared down at the map, and for once, I could hear Mara gulp in fear.

“Prepare our forces,” he said sternly. “We’ll have to keep watch on all sides.”

I was somewhat relieved; someone had believed me, and that someone was willing to offer us aid, even if his men found it to be more of a nuisance.

We rounded the townspeople into the hills, just up the mountainside, still veiled by the mists. Only those who wished to fight would remain in the village. We wouldn’t let this one fall; it wouldn’t burn like the others and I promised that.

Night fell quickly as we rushed to prepare. Through the thick of the mist I could only see red eyes peering back at me. That was all I needed to give me the confidence to stand at the ready, waiting for the attack.

I clutched the small axe in my hand; I hadn’t gotten much practice but, I’d watched Kiyne more than enough times to know how to dodge and evade, or when to swipe and attack. He stood beside me, his sword on his back, and a bow in his hand to start. Mara was to my left, high on a rock ledge, and concealed by the dark and mist. I couldn’t see her but, I felt her presence, knowing she already an arrow on hand, prepared to strike.

The sound of hooves and the whine of horses broke the silence of our wait.

Rain began to fall from the sky, just in time to add to our lack of visibility. I took a few deep breaths, cursing at my nerves to stay strong.

Their pace changed, and we felt every horse as it slammed its hooves against the ground, speeding toward us. There would be no reasoning this time; no negotiations. They only wished to slaughter us in their search for the gem. But here it was, and here I stood. I was not about to let them have their victory; not tonight.

“Archers!” Lord Arden called out from the blackness. “Fire!”

A storm of arrows flew over our heads, raining down on our enemies as they approached. Wall after wall of arrows came down taking out horses and slowing their advance but few fell.

“Light the trenches!” another voice called out. Those same words echoing back in the dark.

Fire erupted at our backs, lining the village like a flaming fence to keep them out. I felt the heat on my backside but I wasn’t willing to flee. I wouldn’t let it make me afraid, not here, not now.

Kiyne took aim, carefully awaiting one man to grow closer. I grew nervous watching him, the enemy nearly on him. He winked, the arrow firing off and hitting the man in a gap between his chin and neck. It was a small slot, no larger than the crack in a doorframe but he’d hit. The novelty quickly wore off, and Kiyne unsheathed his sword, ready for close combat.

I moved inward, my back pressing against his, “ready?” he asked.

I nodded quickly, “ready.”

Steel crashed around us, the world seemingly slowing as I tore through shields and armour with my small weapon. I was unexpected, and unassuming, leaving me open to attack whomever I wished. I wasn’t a worthy opponent in their eyes but that gave me the advantage.

I felt a wind at my front and arrow split my hair, striking a man in the face of his helm as he had barreled toward me from the night. I looked back to see Mara’s silhouette in the dark, and I swore she was grinning. She drew another arrow before disappearing into the mist.

The Arcanon fought swiftly, their experience in battle a welcome contribution

to our efforts. They'd sworn not to involve the Dragons, not when they were so vital to our way of life; one that dwindled with our own survival. This was our fight, my fight, and I would keep it that way.

The battle raged, and slowly I could feel ourselves becoming surrounded; backs against a wall of fire and enemies on either side. That's when he appeared again, rolling through the darkness like a giant, his horned helmet like the shadow of a Demon against the flame.

He drew his hammer, stepping through the slaughter without worry. A man dove to attack but was quickly batted away like a fly from the force of his weapon. A sickening thud broke from the impact and I felt my stomach turn.

"You need to run," Kiyne said through gritted teeth. "Round up the others and fall back."

I looked at Kiyne in disbelief, "I'm not leaving you!"

"We don't have a choice, Alina," he stated. "I can distract him long enough but, you need to go now!"

Mara arrived, rushing in on enemy horseback. It was quite the entrance. "Alina, your fire! Cover the others!"

Right! My power! I'd forgotten all about it in the chaos. I closed my eyes, tucking my axe away and trying to free up my mind to think only of what I wanted to accomplish. I wanted to save everyone but, I wanted to stop Kiyne. I couldn't choose both. I could only pick one.

I opened my eyes, flames bursting from my palms. I spun my hands around to grow the flames, I'd caught the leader's attention and I felt his target shift from the battle to me.

Kiyne intervened as he marched toward me, his sword hammering down with ferocity but, our opponent was quick to defend. His hammer raised to counter Kiyne's blade. I had my clearing, and I wouldn't let his distraction go to waste. I thought of a wall, a tower of pure flame far greater than the one lit at our backs. It would force them back, and give us the time we needed to withdraw into the town.

"Kiyne, hurry!" I shouted, flames beginning to grow at my feet and spread on the ground.

Kiyne was pushed back, away from my shield, my wall. The Marauder Leader kept hammering down on him with powerful blows, forcing Kiyne to defend. He was crouched and I could see his strength fading as he took hit after hit to his body; his sword his only defense.

“Alina! Now!” Mara cried out.

I felt tears in my eyes but I forced the flames around us, pushing the enemy back from us. Large flames thrust into the mist, higher than the rocky outcrops spanning the land and splitting the enemy from our people.

I could see Kiyne through the wall of flame, and I wanted desperately to reach out and pull him to safety. He wound up from his crouch, a last-ditch effort to attack but the leader was far too quick. He dropped his elbow down when Kiyne opened to attack, his armour striking Kiyne in the side of the head. I could see his movement stop, his body dropping down to his knees.

I screamed in terror, rushing forward.

Mara pivoted around me, holding me back from running through the flames to his aid.

The Marauder leader took Kiyne by his hair, dangling him in his grasp like bait at my wall of flames.

“Please,” I sobbed, “don’t...”

He took his helmet, removing it to show his face. Emerald eyes stared back at me, filling me with fear. I knew those eyes, the ferocity of that stare down. It was just like my mother’s...

“It cannot be,” I heard Arden whisper as he came to our aid, his eyes wide with shock. “Odaer...”

“Kiyne!” I cried out.

The fire grew in response to my emotions, my sight beyond the flames disappearing as it grew in intensity. I heard the sound of a body hitting the ground and my heart sank. Hot tears streamed down my cheeks and a scream of pure terror erupted from the pit of my stomach in utter despair.

Kiyne was gone.

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