

The Dragon's Tear

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For my parents

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Chapter One

Kaleb sets down the girl's body, making a total of three bodies in the room.

"Is it me, or do all these lords live the same?" Lonn asks. "There's something about the rooms, the halls, I can't quite place it. A familiarity in each corner," He knocks some parchment off the desk.

"It's because we have to keep seeing them," Kaleb responds. "It's easy to lose count how many times we have to visit trouble. Move the candles over here."

Lonn pushes the lit candle closer to the edge of the desk, illuminating Kaleb's view. The light gives Kaleb the clarity he needs to move the bodies. Two men and one maiden, a hasty decision. Three is a good number, enough for lord Arkarean to interpret correctly.

"Well, that should be unsettling," Lonn moves the other candle and pushes the door, leaving it slightly open.

Kaleb moves the girl onto her side and pushes her against the wall. "I hope it will have a more marked effect than unsettle him. Lord Arkarean is a bastard and coward. This will ensure he stops talking to those he needn't talk to."

"You sure that will keep his mouth shut?"

"I think finding some dead bodies in his home will be perfectly fine. If you want, you're free to chop them up and strew the room with their limbs. Really send him a message."

Lonn rests against the desk. "That's macabre. May as well throw the cat in the lot of them. I don't think I want to get into that kind of mess right now."

With a grunt, Kaleb jams a man under the desk. "Neither do I. Let's regroup with Phelan and Trigg. Once we deal with the livestock, we can get back to the road. The sooner we can return to the capital, the better."

"Do we have any idea what he's been divulging and to whom? The information can't be of too high a priority or we'd be putting him underneath his own desk."

"Some Ravens are working on that," Kaleb says. "I'm sure it'll be just a matter of time before we're back."

The two of them go about with the last of the preparation. They lead the trail of bodies throughout the room, so that the lord will know no place is hidden from them. The girl's body is the last to go, and will be the first by the door. As they stretch her out, Kaleb feels a pat from Lonn.

"Do you hear that? There are others coming this way."

Kaleb gently lowers the woman and reaches over to the candles on the desk, pinching them with his index finger and thumb. He stops and listens. In the dark he can hear running steps from the hallway. Kaleb places his hand on his blade.

He waits by the sliver of the open door to see who it is. The runner passes them by and rushes into the adjacent room. It's a wide blur: lord Arkarean. Another sound of running and a slimmer blur follows. Kaleb listens to what's taking place in the next room.

"Where did it go?" A deep voice calls out, moving around the room, pushing away objects as what sounds like papers hit the floor. "Damn it."

"Master Arkarean, please calm down," a timid voice squeaks through the walls.

"This can't be happening. This can't be happening to me, of all people. How can it be gone?"

"S-Sir, we already sent some men to look for him, but nothing has turned up yet. Just give it some—"

"Unacceptable. I don't have the luxury of time. If we don't find him . . ."

The sound of creaking footsteps is heard faintly in the distance. Lonn sneaks next to Kaleb and whispers into his ear, "It appears we don't need the Ravens to get our information."

Kaleb signals Lonn to quiet down. It's not the ramblings of lord Arkarean he's concentrating on, he's listening for movement. Heavy metal steps are approaching the hallways. Each subsequent step becomes louder. As the creaks come closer, each noise becomes more distinct. Kaleb and Lonn hug against the wall. Clearly it's not a single set of footsteps; it's several.

They're louder than any he's ever heard. They must belong to a beast of a man. Another set of steps are almost disguised within them. Light and soft, moving at the same rhythm.

Moving forward, Kaleb risks visibility to catch a glimpse of the new guests as they come down the hall. A sheet of metal crosses past. It's one of the biggest men he's ever seen. Kaleb nearly missed seeing that it was a man instead of a gigantic stature come to life. The tabard over his chestpiece causes Kaleb's heart to seize.

Before he can motion to Lonn, a woman walks in front of the knight. She is pale with flowing golden hair.

The servant's voice in the other room comes as a whisper, barely reaching to Kaleb's ear, "Sir, should I alert the guards?"

There is no answer.

The door swings open unassisted; she never even touched it. The woman in her white robe walks into the room. The knight follows behind her. He is so tall Kaleb barely makes out his features, seeing only all the scars that mark his flesh. His giant hands clasp a great sword in front of him and place it in the middle of the door, blocking the lord and his servant inside.

Kaleb feels Lonn move next to him, "The fuck is going on in there?" He motions him to silence. The air is cold, much colder than the climate outside and dropping fast.

"My lady," lord Arkarean gasps, "I have every one of my men searching for him. It will be brought back and there will be no delay—"

He's cut short as the knight brings his sword to the ground again. Kaleb can see a small section of the woman. She doesn't show any emotion at this plea. And then it's what he feared: her eyes blaze up with such a bright light and the sound of rushing wind flows through the rooms.

There's no mistaking what he hears next, the sound so of bones breaking.

"Please. Please," lord Arkarean howls. "I'll get it back. I'll have it back soon. I swear it. I swear on my land, my family, my word. I pledge my word I'll have it back," he screams out.

"You are to be judged accordingly," the Woman in White says. "You made a promise, and it was broken tonight. Your words are the reason blood will have to be spilled. It is only fair that yours will be no different," Her eyes become suffused with light. And tearing commences.

Lonn whispers to Kaleb, "The fuck is going on in there?"

"We need to get out of here," he responds. "Right now. Don't stop until we reach the others and are sitting on our horses."

Kaleb pulls the door open and Lonn turns the corner and runs out. As Kaleb does the same, the knight reacts swiftly by swinging his blade to him. The sword hits behind him, less than a second too slow. Kaleb puts as much power as possible into his legs so that the knight won't get a second chance.

He bounds the hallway and starts to turn to take the next corridor when he catches a glimpse of what he left behind. The Woman in White stands there, eyes blazing so bright that they cut through the darkness. His mind turns blank, all he can think is turn, turn as fast as possible.

A ripping gust comes right at him, pieces of wood and stone miss him as he narrowly dodges its hail. He falls to the floor and looks to the wall caved in, punctured with debris. He blocks the grisly thought out and picks himself up. The two of them are still where they were, and it is impossible for a man in that much armor to catch up. He has to get to the horses.

Kaleb runs through the manor. He knows the entire layout of this place. His mental map allows him to maneuver in the darkness without fear of tripping or being lost. The entrance isn't far now. When he arrives at the front doors, he sees Lonn and Trigg killing men.

Trigg finishes slitting the last man's throat and kicks the body away. "More than twenty hired blades that I could see, possibly more. Hurry, Phelan is keeping watch over the horses and waiting for us."

All three of them rush out of the manor. Several bodies lie on the ground, Kaleb assumes Trigg's handiwork. Faraway shapes are approaching and yelling is heard from each side. How did so many get here so fast? Kaleb can't focus on the question. The horses are tied up in the forest.

Kaleb hears hoofbeats behind him. Taking a quick glance, he sees two armed men yelling and giving chase. He turns back to see an arrow rise from the woods, followed by the sounds of a rider's horse screaming and crashing into the dirt. Another arrow flies out and Kaleb turns and watches it plant itself in the last pursuer's chest.

They reach the hobbled horses and begin to untie and mount as quickly as possible. As Kaleb gets on top of his horse, he sees Phelan drop from the tree. Phelan swings his bow over his shoulder and jumps on his horse.

The woods are impenetrable at night, a feature Kaleb trusts will allow them the lead. His horse takes point, navigating through the trees and along the paths. They speed through the brush, one behind the other. Kaleb takes a turn over a hill, knowing a creek is nearby.

The horses' hooves hit the water. The creek won't completely hide their trail, but it will make it more difficult for their pursuers to track, and allow them more time to broaden the gap. They travel for several minutes at a swift pace.

Kaleb raises his arm, signaling to a halt.

"What transpired in the manor? One moment we're out in the dead of night, the next we're running for our lives."

"There was a witch and her knight."

"Fuck it," Lonnn says. "Lord Arkarean was dealing with The Magi. That's what he was weasling around for, telling secrets, giving funds, I don't know but that we should have killed him ourselves."

"We can't know that."

"Why else is there a witch and her small personal army in the country? That place is being massacred, because some mistakes were made. We should alert the Ravens so they can send messages to several wardens and have the soldiers deal with her."

"There was something else taking place in there, something . . ." Kaleb shakes his head. "How much parchment do we have for a letter?"

"Barely any. We've used most of it over the past few months. The Ravens will have to be a little creative in interpreting it, but I can send a short note."

Kaleb ponders.

"Our issue is what we send."

"I imagine a witch from the Magi and her warriors who are raiding around the country are a cause for concern."

"No, they're a symptom. Lonnn and I heard them speak inside the manor, they're here for something special. Whatever it is they're looking for . . ." Kaleb hesitates. "That's what we should be worried about."

"Given that these men are on their way and want to kill us, what is your order right now?"

"Phelan, write the message that they are looking for something and send it out. I don't know what it is, but it's enough of a concern that they are here. Keep to the creek to conceal your tracks. Lonnn, Trigg, we're going to take to the plains and let them chase us for as long as possible. Put some distance and time between them and their goal. Once we run them dry, we'll regroup and travel together to let the Ravens know, if they haven't alerted anyone until then. If by chance this works out, we'll have what they want, and they'll be stranded in the center of the country."

"Who are they going to get to go? All Wolves are out on the prowl. It's wishful thinking that anyone is back in Bramol yet."

"I know exactly who they'll send."

Chapter Two

Tyyr looks up to the sky. Today should be pleasing, it has all the makings of a good day, but something is wrong. The large trees are finally beginning to show their colors. The bright green leaves scatter reds across the forest. Summer's twilight days are here to bask in for their short duration. All these things account for what should be a brilliant day, yet Tyyr cannot enjoy any part of it. Other matters occupy her mind and refuse to let her have this moment.

She lies on the grass letting the warming glow of the sun wash over her. *Perhaps a little sunshine will make me feel better*, she thinks.

Her hand shakes the heat away from her hair. The long straight strands contrast on top of the green grass, silver on green. It's been so long she's forgotten what it used to look like before it changed. At twenty-four, the transformation is complete. Any trace of what she was born with is gone and the signs of age have made haste. As long as her bones don't begin to creak and break then this is a change she won't pay any mind to.

Closing her eyes creates a yellow haze against the darkness. She controls her breathing to a comfortable and steady pace. *Why can't I just lie here for a few more days?* Tyyr sits up and stares at the lake before her. The lake's surface is a perfect reflection of the sky. Its appearance is like an island of bright and glistening blue, surrounded by a sea of green; a serene image. *I can wait. No need to rush out yet.*

Her assignment was to watch several arbitrated villages and outposts in the west. That meant no long travels, no bad food, and no bloodshed. Only days spent in a sparsely populated forest. How was she supposed to believe that was the truth? There's no respite wherever they send her. The truth is, she was starting to feel at home here. These long days have etched sentimentality into her thoughts. *Sooner or later they'll chop down every last tree and pull out the roots to build stone cities. It's all a matter of time.*

Tyyr stands up and dusts the grass from her linen shirt. Grass stains have worked their way on her clothes. They'll need to be washed out before she leaves. The walk from the lake to her small settlement takes her through the towering trees. Her house is dwarfed in comparison to their size; from seedlings to giants, they must have seen so much over their life.

The small house is of old Elerian design. Walls of light gray with windows shining ruby-red when the light hits them in the morning. Twisting patterns adorn the frames of the doors' ornamental patterns. Tyyr used to ponder what wonders this art used to hold; what was their meaning in history? Instead of studying them, students claim these designs of art hold nothing anymore. Empty displays of artists who hold themselves to self-made esteem. She pushes the door open to a spacious room scattered with furniture.

On the eve of her departure, she speculates that maybe there is something to this architecture. Today, gone are open connecting rooms with glittering designs. There are no flourishes of owners' particulars. Valsair has adopted a new architect of the age. Walls are replaced with steel. Radiance is thrown out and replaced with sterile sleekness. Natural wonders are gone throughout the land as this technological stalemate with Valsair and Eleria continues on.

The tracks don't go out this far yet, and perhaps they never will. She'll need to pack her belongings and get on a carriage to get out of here. Tyyr reclines on the bed in the center of the room. The roof's inward point offers a twisting circular design to admire. It's almost a puzzle to find the center. Tyyr's eyes move with the formation of the lines of the ceiling. She puts her finger up and traces the lines as they twist and curve and intersect one another, and follows their trail until they eventually arrive at the inner point.

"Everything was going fine," she says. The sound of her own voice makes her uncomfortable. "I just need more time."

Tyrr reaches under her pillow and pulls out a large pointed dagger. She rests her fingers on the hilt and moves them slowly across the surface of the blade. Upon reaching the point, she pinches it between her thumb and index finger. Balancing the blade she brings it up as high as her arms can reach. Her fingers release and dart down, catching it by the hilt before it reaches her face.

She takes a deep breath and stops dragging out the time. As she exhales she stands up and walks over to a letter lying on the ground. The cause of her mental anguish this morning, the message that sent her out to throw herself on the grass. A small and finely folded letter made of parchment. On the bottom hangs a wax seal. A figure of a raven presses out of the insignia.

“They want me to kill somebody?” She sighs. “I hate assassinations.”

Chapter Three

After four days of traveling, Tyyr watches as her colorful forest slowly breaks away piece by piece, yielding to empty green fields.

Four days stuck in the small compartment is exhausting. *The boy charges a high price for the trip. At least he is quiet and doesn't try to start up a conversation. The last thing I need is a driver chattering about the inconsequential gossip of the day.*

Looking around the interior, Tyyr accepts that it is nice enough to warrant the cost. Strange, the seats are of black leather. She is not sure if the color is from a dye of sorts, or if this is an unnatural occurrence resulting from use. *It could always be worse.*

Leaving the forest didn't require much packing. Her station, her assignment, was to listen in on Elerian whisperings about Valsair and its capital, Bramol. Little chatter on either subject has left her unsure whether the lack is to be taken as a good or bad sign. More time would have been needed to draw a more confident conclusion. The House of Ravens will want a more robust report on the situation, but just now that possibility is not available.

She needed only two bags for travel and both lie near her feet. On one side is a small dark-green satchel, packed with supplies for the task at hand. A few blades, poisons, and defensive weapons in case of any unexpected surprises. The larger brown bag lies on the other side of the green one, almost wholly covering it over. The pack contains different articles of clothing and the funds necessary for whatever will be required. If the situation calls for it, she will have to look as faceless and unrecognizable as possible. Her move to that outpost was light, and she is surprised nothing has changed now that she left. The few valuables she did collect she left behind, promising to pick them up one day but knowing that was a lie.

The beat of the horses' feet on the ground and the grinding of the carriage wheels are enough to concentrate on. *Da dum, da dum*, is all that repeats in Tyyr's head. Falling in line as the sound travels from the horses' feet to her ears. Soon she is absorbed in the hypnotic effect, the repetition becoming a form of meditation.

"Almost there," yells the carriage boy.

So much for concentration. Tyyr gives no response. She has not talked to him for the full four days of travel and this attempt will not change it. *I can see out the window just fine.*

The view of Danermen is a small pinpoint across the fields, but the town takes shape as the horses round the bend. Details of buildings appear, windows and doorways become enlarged, and before long she can see the fine materials of the walls. The town contrasts with the desolate fields surrounding it, almost as if the whole place has been plucked from another land and dropped into these wilds.

The carriage stops near the Inn. Tyyr feels the momentum slow down and puts the green bag inside the other and throws it over her shoulder. She steps out and silently walks past the boy into the building, leaving him to tend to the horses.

She enters a small hallway with a desk between two opposite hallways. The owner, a bearded man in blue garb, sits behind the counter and watches with a blank face as Tyyr approaches him.

"Lovely lady, is there any service I may help you with?" he asks.

"Thank you, but I'm looking for a Chanim Welsin. He has a room here."

It takes a second for the words to enter the owner's mind, and his eyes light up as they register. Giving a quick up-and-down glance at Tyyr before responding, "That guest is up the stairs. I haven't seen him come

in and go out today, so I think he's still up there. He's paid for the next few days. Just go to your right and up. It will be the second door down."

Tyrr forces a smile and nods as she leaves.

The innkeeper calls, "There's fresh ale in the pub."

The past years have changed the interior of inns, and she still isn't comfortable. They have become bigger with more separate rooms to pay for. Who would need this space? It's not as if any nobility would be traveling this far out in the country. It reminds her of the change in steel and how all of these changes come from somewhere else. Tyrr finds the room and knocks on the door, pauses, and gives another two quick taps.

"It's about damn time."

A middle-aged man, dressed in simple black clothes, opens the door. A single silver earring on his left ear.

"If I'm not mistaken, you were supposed to be here yesterday."

"The carriage boy was slow," she says. Tyrr pushes past him into the room and throws her bag onto the bed. She sits at a small table. "Chanim Welsin still?"

"I have the face of a Chanim," he says playfully as his hand passes with tender care through his dark hair to his beard.

"I've never met even a single person named Chanim."

"Well, you haven't been out much. Don't worry, that's just because you're a young'un," He closes and locks the door. He moves over to the table and sits across from Tyrr. "Mind if I continue sipping? I actually had two resting here yesterday when I predicted you'd arrive. It was in my favor that I was incorrect. I didn't think I could treat myself one day after the other."

"It's fine. You have a tough job. Investigating pubs is certainly difficult work, an assignment only you can handle. All those years of training coming to fruition." She pauses. "At least it breaks the routine of disposing of lords and eliminating dissidents of the crown."

"Well, if the original lords could contain their people and silence their own rebels, they wouldn't be replaced with a noble who knows how to quiet his servants. The king appreciates a populace in his favor, not against. I will admit drinking is certainly lighter work."

"At least the nobles are the slowest. I'm sure you can sneak in a drink," she says.

"But their knights can be a problem. I'd need both hands."

"Only if you don't prefer to be a knife in the darkness," Tyrr smiles. "Slipping the right ingredient into their wine is much easier. I would ease up on the ale myself with that knowledge."

"How have you been?"

"Fine."

"No, Tyrr," His smile fades and his voice grows concerned. "How have you *really* been?"

Tyrr's eyes don't meet his. She doesn't want to go through with this right now. "Balén, everything has been fine," She sighs and shrugs. Her eyes look back into his. "It's been wearisome. That's all. I'm tired."

Balén nods in quiet agreement. "I know the feeling all too well. It should be a relief to know that this assignment won't be too demanding. Slightly more difficult than mine, but not by much."

Tyrr's eyes turn away. "Speaking of that, why is this an issue for the Ravens? This sounds like something for the House of Wolves."

Balén lets out an exhausted breath. "This is something from them, but we're stretched too thin right now. Your transfer keeps us in good standing in more ways than you know. Right now both Houses are busy running around at the beck and call of royalty."

"Is our boy-king making you fetch his chalices?" she asks.

"Hah. I can't say much right now, but that boy may just bring ruin to everyone and everything. If it's not one thing it's another. Constantly arguing with other nobles, and disregarding his advisers, all in the clash against the Elerian kingdom. Every day it seems like Valsair might be at war. If it wasn't for us, we may damn well be."

Balen stands up and paces his small imaginary line. "We weren't given much to go on, but what we know so far is the Arkarean family has been moving resources around. We're not sure who or what for, but whatever it means, it is not in the interest of the crown. Following this lead has shown us that some object of high value is being traded," He gives a small laugh. "And it seems to have been stolen right from under them."

Tyrr inches up closer to the table. "During my travel I thought this was about something important. Well, what is this *thing*?"

"Don't know. This is the situation right now. We have a small lead that's barely been pieced together by other Ravens. It seems that our thief is just a cleaning boy. He worked in their manor has and taken off and run away with it. He's causing quite the uproar about it. At the same time, Lord Arkarean and some of his servants are missing."

"Let me get this straight," Tyrr says. "A cleaning boy went into a Lord's house. He took an important object of some value to the crown, and you need me to retrieve it?"

"We're still not quite sure what it is or even if it is much of a threat, but it holds value of some kind," Balen says. "We do know it has importance, and that is why I need you to get it."

She shifts her weight into the back of the chair and balances on its back legs. The letter she received is making more sense now. "I just find whatever hole this idiot is hiding himself in and bring it back?"

Balen crosses his hands on his chest and balances his chair the same way. "That is it. You shouldn't have worried so much. Our contact, Rek, lives near the town. He'll tell you where to find him."

"Why didn't this Rek just tell you what we need to know?" Tyrr asked.

"You've got me there," Dropping his chair on all four legs, Balen stands up and walks to the bed. His hand reaches for a bag underneath and pulls out an ornate glass bottle containing a light yellow liquid. "He wants to be paid for his information and it turns out only this brew would do."

"So, I now run your errands?" she asks.

"Don't give me that attitude. It's a small chore at best. You'll be back before you know it. All you have to do is talk to him and go where he points. I mean, how much easier can it get than this?"

Tyrr looks directly at Balen. "Why are you so worried about me? First you send word to bring me here, then you ask me how I'm doing, and now you're giving me the assignment of fetching; hardly an objective."

"Tyrra, we've all been—"

She glares at him. He ignores her.

"Tyrr, we've all been working hard as the Houses reconstruct their ranks," he says. "It is why you have been transferred between Houses, from a Wolf to a Raven, and have been taking more assignments. Your rests have become shorter, because of it. I've been with the Houses longer than you, and I know what happens when you stand still for so long; the mind catches up. How has your sleep been?"

"Fine."

"No, you said you were tired earlier. You haven't slept well lately, and that is exactly what I'm talking about. That condition is dangerous and will cloud your judgment when you are out there. Those are the kinds of decisions that cost lives. Lives that don't have to be involved or spent."

"Balen, you are as engaged as I am. I don't see you breaking apart where you sit."

"I'm experienced, more than you, so learn how to heed some advice. Because I can fucking deal with the weight of King Pieter and the country of Valsair hanging on my neck. I'm a Wolf ready at the king's side; as a Raven perched on his shoulder, you have to hone your senses for him, and for yourself. Kaleb is worried about you, and so am I."

"And Kaleb?" Tyrr asks.

"Who do you think tipped us off on what's happening? He's doing fine. Hell, even more so now he's been put in a command of his own. He's been safe. Don't you worry about him. Will you take care of yourself, if not for me, for him?"

"You said Lord Arkarean and some servants are missing, is the boy a threat or is he with others?"

"Alone. To my understanding that is everything about the situation."

“All right, Balen," she says. “I’ll be careful on this one.”

“Will you catch up on your sleep?”

“Of course.”

Chapter Four

Several days of travel pass as they draw closer to the town of Gradan. Tyyr isn't sure if the distance is shorter or if this driver is faster than the last, but the trip seems to go swiftly.

Kaleb actually has his own command. The thought repeats over and over in her head. She imagines the responsibility he's burdened with now that others depend on him. If she was never traded to the House of Ravens, would she be placed with him or given a command of her own? Something about being accountable for others doesn't sit right with her. The structure allows for too unstable a command; too temperamental. She can't be two people at once, and she can only account for her own actions. Maybe it's best to be unaccompanied. It does settle her that Kaleb has others around to watch out for his well-being. He should be safe.

The carriage boy calls out, "This is about it, ma'am," Her thoughts shatter at the utterance.

She feels them stop. Tyyr steps out and sees they are quite some distance away from the town; they are still in the forest. "All I see are trees," She says. "We should be at his residence."

The boy, perhaps fifteen years of age, points, "He lives near the town. Just outside of it, but he is in the forest, so my horse can't get over there."

"Fine, then," Tyyr looks in the direction of his hand, "Just this way?"

"Yes, that's right, ma'am. There is a small clearing where the house is. It can't be missed. Everything is gone inside of there."

Not wanting to keep this conversation going, Tyyr picks up her bags and walks into the forest. Thick trees and brush create obstacles, but she avoids the hazardous roots that clutter the path. The trees are a dark green and the grass is patchy with shallow dirt. *Much more dense here than at home. No place for comfort. I can see now why the horse would have a hard time coming through here.*

Each step draws her deeper into the labyrinth. In every direction the landscape is the same. She doesn't understand what the boy meant by saying it is all gone when there is still so much of it. There appears to be light coming from the distance, but the sheer number of plants obscure it. She is careful where she treads and hurries over. Walking farther, she sees the light in the distance grow into an incandescent glow. The sun illuminates an extensive clearing.

The expanse is circular, and the boy was right, it's all gone. Tyyr stands in amazement, knowing that a hundred trees had to be cut to get a space this wide. In the middle stands a wooden house as a marker of the disappearance.

At least I don't have to worry about tripping. As Tyyr approaches, details come into view. A fence keeps out the wildlife. Wind chimes make slight musical harmonies as they swing back and forth in the breeze. The house looks like a pleasant place to settle down.

As she makes her way to the door an even smaller detail catches Tyyr's attention. Around the frame of the doorway is a slight relief. She lightly runs her fingers over the relief in circular motions.

Elerian.

The thought is interrupted as her heart leaps by a sharp crash. Tyyr's eyes dilate, everything she sees pulses. Dropping her bag, she throws her back to the wall and grabs the hilt of her knife.

What was that? It was too loud. I can't tell where it came from.

Her eyes scan her field of vision but find only the clearing and trees. Her grip on the knife is ironclad. Her muscles ache to run or attack a would-be assailant, but no threat appears.

Another blast rings out again. Perhaps it is from concentrating on the silence, but Tyyr's heart beats harder than before. She pinpoints the direction it is originating from.

The back of the house.

She plans a cautious advance. Tyrr inches along until she arrives at a small garden patch. A small man with a metallic object in his hands.

“Damn, did you see that,” the man’s voice comes out with glee.

“I didn’t need to see it, I heard it,” a woman’s voice comes out exhausted.

“I’m pretty sure with this I can hit a deer as it finds a spot to take a shit,” the short man says.

“Rek, dear, I’ve told you I don’t like that sort of language,” the woman lectures.

Guess I’ve found him.

Tyrr releases the hold on her knife and makes her way through the garden. “I take it you’re Rek?”

Turning to see her, Rek fixes his arm with the silver-barreled object. “That is correct. Occurs to me that I don’t know who you are or what business you bear.”

Tyrr’s eyebrow rises. “The business you were expecting.”

“Well, maybe I expect a lot of business,” he says.

“The business, with the boy and the Arkarean family,” she pauses. “The one you’ve been expecting.”

Rek bursts out in laughter. “Why didn’t you say so? Have to scare a guy by sneaking up on him. Come right inside.”

The inside of the house feels settled. The furniture is old, broken in. The wooden tables and stands are without sheen from years of use. In the living room, the bookshelf is crammed with volumes in every possible way. Many of them are layered with dust, while others appear recently disturbed.

Tyrr sits and observes her host. Rek is an older man. His short brown hair descends to a finely kept beard. He gives a small hop as he sits down on a faded cherry chair. He places the silver object on the stand nearby.

“What is that?” Tyrr asks.

“This thing? A prototype cannon the military wants to use. It packs a mean punch and is loud to boot,” His hands split a hinge, causing two brass cartridges to fall out.

Tyrr looks directly at him, “How did someone like you get hold of something from the military?”

Rek smiles and laughs, “Well once you’ve served as long as I have, there are little bonuses you can get along the way.”

“I put your bag by the front door. It was a little heavy,” The light voice comes from behind Tyrr. A tall, slender woman. Her blond shoulder-length hair floats on her blue dress. Her smile is warm and her voice soothing. “I’ll be in the other room if you need me.”

A big smile crosses over Rek as she leaves. He turns his attention back to Tyrr. “So, girl, what do you need?”

“I’m looking for the whereabouts of a cleaning boy from town. It would also help to know what exactly he has stolen.”

Rek gazes up to the corner of the room as if he is trying to find his thoughts in the ceiling. “I can’t help you with the object. Jarek has a terrible stutter, much worse considering the state he’s in. Local murmuring ranges from a necklace to a rock. He was here for a day or two, but he ran himself off into the mountains.”

“The mountains?” Tyrr says, “You wouldn’t happen to be able to tell me where in these mountains?”

“Sorry, can’t help you there either. I know he lives in one of the nearby villages and has the reputation of a half-witted troublemaker. Don’t worry, though. He’s not much in a fight, or any good at anything for that matter. He’s a walking disaster wherever he goes. So someone like you should have no problem with someone like him.”

Tyrr nods. “So is there anywhere in particular I can go find out more about him?”

Rek takes a moment to think. “The Bear Den. It’s the tavern inside town that he used to visit regularly. That strikes me as the best place to go first. He knew a lot of people, but most importantly, he pissed off a lot of people, too.”

“Lord Arkarean and some servants went missing around the time Jarek stole the item. Any connection?”

“Jarek? No. He’s minor trouble, gets caught stealing extra bread, things like that. His eyes can get too greedy. I have heard some muttering that the roads in the country have gone unsafe lately from bandit attacks. Either there is a large group out there, or the jails have been emptied lately. Lord Arkarean may be separated from his carriage, as well as his clothes. I wouldn’t think anything of him.”

“I appreciate all the help you have given.”

“I give my best work to the Houses. Now for my payment?”

Going to her bag, Tyrr pulls out the fine glass bottle and hands it to Rek. “As agreed.”

“Rivamos wine. Very valuable,” He holds it up for closer inspection. “I was a much younger man when I could drink this. Will add nicely to the rest. I’m sure Ferra will yell at me once she sees this.”

Tyrr watches as Rek rambles away. “My wife, that’s her name. Commonly I receive a different look. It’s not an association people generally see.”

Tyrr smiles.

Chapter Five

“Hurry this up. I have other matters to attend.”

The fires from the forge are hot this day, it feels more so than usual. Elmond is tempering the iron on an axe. He watches as the colors bleed and swim around. Elmond understands when to draw it out.

Damn he's really working me hard today. Noticing the axe turning golden, Elmond pulls it out and dumps it into a bucket of water. *It's so hard to concentrate in this heat.*

“Were you not paying attention to that axe, boy?” the blacksmith says. “If I catch you with a blank stare on your face again, I'm going to beat you senseless. You're not here to take a damn nap.”

“Sorry sir, it won't happen again. It's just the heat,” Elmond says. *He's more of a grumpy old bastard than usual today.*

The blacksmith roars, “It's hot like this every day. What makes today so damn special? Are your womanlike sensibilities getting hurt while working?”

“No, sir, it's just—”

“I know what you were thinking about. You were thinking about joining with those groups of loud fucks passing through. Go running off for some sort of renown,” He chuckles to himself, “I know you too well. Think smart, understand what a living truly is.”

“What is to stop me?”

The blacksmith prepares the tempering of the sword he had been working on. He treats the sword to a hammer. “You still have the wrong conception of what a blade is, and what going out into the world really means. It's not a tool to have by your side and show off at any tavern to get some throwaway whore. It is the master and *you* are the tool,” He flips over the sword and starts working on the other side. “It is the one with all the power, not you. You are the means by which the blade gets to where it wants to go. That generally being some poor sap who couldn't well wield his own cock.”

“I've practiced plenty,” Elmond says. “I know how to use a blade well enough. I'm not going to go and cut off my ear.”

The blacksmith delivers the last blow to the blade and immerses it in the water. It hisses. “Believe me, Elmond, I know you're a strong boy. But just saying that shows me you are not ready. The world is a different place than you like to imagine. No amount of swiping at trees or dueling with sticks will make it change. Since you've finally become a man it's time to realize ramifications and significance of who you are.”

“Don't you see? That is exactly why I have to get out of here. I'm not going to learn anything by sticking around here. I need go out and *do* something.”

“You can make a name for yourself right here,” the blacksmith bellows, “A warrior can't fend off an attack with his bare hands. He needs a weapon. A strong and sturdy weapon that can change the outcome. This work is what allows wars to be won and a home to be protected.”

The blacksmith pulls the sword out and hands it to Elmond. “Put this with the others. After that, clean up and call it a day. The missus wants me in early tonight, so we'll work extra tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir. You can count on me. I'll have this place in top shape,” Elmond thinks of saluting as the blacksmith strolls toward the door. *Finally it will just be me.*

“Make sure to lock everything up.”

With the weight of the smith's overbearing presence off his shoulders, Elmond puts away the materials, but chooses to leave a sharpening stone sitting out on the anvil. He checks and locks the door. There is still work to be done today.

"Where did I put that now?" He rummages through the assortment of weapons piled up in the corner of the room. Elmond finds the large blade he searched for. "There you are. Almost figured you to be thrown out."

The sword in all aspects is average, aside from the family crest, a deer with large protruding antlers etched on the hilt. Over the past months, the forge has witnessed Elmond's tireless work at creating a weapon of his own. An iron sword.

He sits on a small stool near the light and points the sword's tip to the ground. He makes sure the blade is fully supported on the floor. The sharpening stone is put to the metal. The years of working with the blacksmith etched their memories into his muscles. A rhythm is applied to each stroke.

He watches the blade hone to a glistening cutting edge. "It's almost there. It'll finally be finished and that old man can't tell me what to do anymore. I'll have a sword of my own."

His hands want to quicken their pace, but training has taught them to take their time. *Patience with time creates a proper weapon; nothing is crafted well without time.* He remembers from when he began his apprenticeship. Elmond switches the stone between hands until the work is almost complete. "Almost there," Each swipe glides off the edge, working from the top all the way to the bottom, ensuring not a single spot is missed. He reaches the tip of the blade. Elmond's excitement almost boils over. With his last swipe, he applies extra force to commemorate the ordeal. "Finished."

Elmond brings the blade close to his eyes and marvels at his handiwork. The blade is shorter than most, but balanced for action. A few swipes are thrown to the air to test out the handling. "Have to see . . ."

Across the room stands a chipped wooden table. All around lay cuts and gashes from the many blade scrapes over the year.

He walks up and fixes the sword between his hands. In a second he brings it to his side and swipes at his target, lodging the blade into the wood. He howl' out, "Perfect!"

With a grunt and a bit of force, Elmond yanks the sword back out. He holds it close to his face, enamored with every aspect of it. "Wait a second," He looks around and finds a dirty brown scabbard. He slides the blade in. "A little too loose at the hilt," Elmond says, "it will just have to do for now. Time to celebrate."

Elmond struts toward the tavern. "I'm going to have a ton of ale. Today I deserve it," The Bear Den comes into view as a haggard-looking man stumbles out of the door and staggers toward him.

"Elmond. What'cha doin here?"

"Jonah. I'm here to get in the same sorry state as you."

Jonah shambles over toward him. *If he didn't already look like the town drunk,* Elmond thinks, *he certainly smells like it.* Jonah hugs him.

"Aint'cha supposed to be hitting the metals right now?"

He pushes Jonah away. "Damn, Jonah, you smell truly awful today, and that is saying something, since we all know you sleep with pigs."

"Thatesh one time. The bitch wouldn't let me in the house," he slurs even more.

"Well who can blame her?" Elmond pats the old man on the shoulder. "I'm going inside. It's been a good day for me."

A grin comes across Jonah's face. "Let me gives you a heads . . . advice. There ish a pretty girl in theres today," His eyes turn a bit more mischievous. "Impressh her with some stories an' tell her you own a forge. Take her over and give her a good *tempering*," His drunken wink comes out more of a blink.

"You are a rotten scoundrel today," Elmond laughs. "What does your wife see in you?"

"I'll letsh you know when I know," Jonah guffaws and staggers into the street. "I'll shee you around. Have to go see my prized beauty."

Elmond enters the tavern. The regular patrons are all here, some getting off working in the shops or the fields to get a relaxing drink, and others having been around since the morning.

Elmond's eyes look straight to the bar. *Sara's here today. I really do need to rest my eyes on those beaving beauties.* With a newfound stride he walks over.

He sits down and tries his best to impress. "How do I get some good ale here?"

Sara rolls her eyes. "Really? I thought you would try something a little better than that."

Elmond feigns pain. "That one cut me. Straight through to the heart. I would never do something like that."

"You're right. I figured you'd sit down and use your pipsqueak voice to order beer. Looks like you're starting to finally grow up," She reaches towards him but stops short. She pretends to pinch his cheeks.

"Stop it," waving his hand in front of her, "am I getting that drink or what?"

"Wait a minute, won't ya?" Sara grabs a mug from behind the counter. She fills it all the way to the brim with a brown and unappetizing-looking brew. "Well, drink up now that you made me do it."

Elmond brings it to his mouth, spilling the ale all over the counter; the overfilled mug is unmanageable. Closing his eyes he takes a gulp. This is far bitterer than he expected. The worst part is trying to drink hearty, just to impress Sara.

Sara bursts out laughing. She wipes away her red hair from her freckled face to see him. "That's what you get."

"Hey I'm fine," Elmond coughs. "Just swallowed a little too soon. Maybe even a bug in that one."

Sara reaches out over the counter and ruffles his long, sandy blond hair. "You're just the cutest thing. My dog might have some competition."

Elmond pulls back still attempting to cover his coughing. "Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up. Just wait until I'm known over the lands. Then you're going to feel sorry you teased me," He looks around. "Where are the usuals? Normally they're all over here trying to sweet-talk you."

Sara gives a huff. "I know, right? Seems I have some competition over there."

She points to a table. All the regulars are huddled around a table. All of their attention is focused on one woman, but Elmond can't quite see her. *Might that be who Jonah was talking about?*

"So what's someone like that doing around here? Especially around some of these drunks?"

Sara nods at his comment. "Not sure and don't think I care. I just heard her asking about Jarek."

Elmond spits out his next sip of ale. "Jarek. Now that's someone who's neck I'd like to wrap my hands around."

Sara smirks and rests her arms on the counter. "Then it seems she's the person you want to talk with. She might have a few places to wrap your hands."

Elmond gulps some ale and stands up. "Today might be a little better than I thought it would be," He approaches the group. He picks out familiar faces and can hear what they are discussing.

"He's always been a headache," mentions one.

"He's no one you should think about," replies another.

His interest is piqued. These guys are trying their hardest to get this girl's attention. Elmond walks around the table until he can see her.

She is a few years older than he, but the drunks are right for crowding around; she really is something to look at. She is smiling at everyone who is talking to her, but something strikes him as strange. The expression on her face is cheerful, but has a vacant nature behind it, as if the smile and nods are a reaction, but nothing the drunks are saying holds her interest.

Elmond blinks a few times. He squints. *I know it's a bit dark here, but her hair seems incredibly light. Almost as if it were silver.*

"It's been very nice hearing all of your stories, but does anyone actually *know* where Jarek is?" she says. "It would help me greatly if I knew where to find him."

A bearded drunk puts down his mug with a snort. "The last time he was here the little quivering rat left without paying for his beers. Most likely up in the damn mountains trying to avoid a whipping."

"Sundim," Elmond says.

The table falls silent. The woman turns to him. Her dark eyes cause Elmond's stomach to flutter.

"Why Sundim?" she asks. He has her full attention.

Shit, why did I think opening up my big mouth was a good idea? “Yes,” he clears his throat. “I remember him saying his family has a house there. It’s right across from the mountains, so that would be the first place I’d look.”

The woman gives him a soft smile. “Thank you. I’ll be sure to check there,” She starts to get up from her seat.

“I’ll go with you,” Elmond blurts out.

Now he can really feel all the eyes around the table digging into his skin. The knot in his stomach twists even more. He isn’t sure quite why he is continuing to speak.

She gives him a glance over. “I don’t think he’ll give me any trouble. I’ll be fine.”

“It’s not that,” Elmond says, “It’s just that I work with the blacksmith in town. Jarek took an order some time back and hasn’t ever been back to pay. I’d like to go and get back some form of payment, if not just break his nose in.”

The woman looks at him coldly. She turns head away as if she is contemplating his response. After a few moments she shrugs and turns her head back. “As long as you can keep up. I’ll want to be leaving soon.”

“Perfect. I just need to get something, but I’ll be right along,” Elmond hurries out the tavern door.

His feet run across the ground as fast as they can go. Upon reaching the forge Elmond runs in and grabs his newly made blade. “I’ll finally show them this is what I’m meant for. This may not be my greatest idea, but at least I’m doing something.”

After locking the door, he runs back to the tavern where the woman is waiting. Together they head out of the village and wander over to the great mountains nearby.