

SAVAGE

DRAGONRIDER LEGACY
Book 1

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE DRAGONRIDER CHRONICLES

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Month9Books

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*To William H. and Ethan I.
A few dragonriders in training.*

ONE



The jungle was quiet. Every fern frond, leaf, and flower petal dripped with cold dew. The first rays of morning sunlight bled through the canopy overhead, turning everything a surreal shade of green and sparkling through the clouds of mist that drifted between the tree trunks. The thick air smelled of rich, damp soil and the faintly sweet fragrance of the vividly colored flowers.

My bare feet squished on the damp moss as I crept along the tree limbs. I squeezed my bow tightly in my fist. My heartbeat throbbed in my ears and my palms were already slick with sweat. I clenched my teeth to stop them from chattering. Now was not the time to lose my nerve.

Out of nowhere, a brightly-colored parrot burst from the foliage and fluttered across my path. I slipped, losing my

footing and rocking back on my heels as I flailed to get away. My stomach lurched. I opened my mouth to yell.

Someone grabbed my belt from behind.

Enyo dragged me down into a squat, hiding amidst the leaves. Together we watched the bird disappear into the distance while I struggled to catch my breath. So much for being stealthy.

Enyo's eyes sparkled like aquamarines in the dim light and the brightly painted beads woven into her dark hair clattered as she turned and shot me a hard look. I scowled back at her. It wasn't *my* fault. That stupid bird had come out of nowhere.

I wrenched out of her grip and slung my bow over my shoulder, crawling down a steep turn in the limb and leaping over into the next tree. That was how you moved in Luntharda—scurrying from tree to tree like a squirrel. The ground wasn't impassable, but it was extremely difficult terrain. Not to mention it was practically writhing with things that would have been happy to make breakfast out of a pair of novice scouts.

Technically, we weren't supposed to be this far away from the city without a senior scout to escort us. But today was different—today I had a mission. And it didn't include falling to my death from fifty feet in the air.

"This isn't going to work, you know," Enyo muttered as we scaled a network of thick vines that snaked up a tree trunk.

I ignored her, but couldn't outrun her. Even if I was taller, she was much faster. Together, we ran along the boughs, leaping, dodging, and climbing until I knew we had to be within earshot. I stopped first, and Enyo skidded to a halt beside me with a broad grin on her lips.

I glanced around for the perfect spot right above the narrow, well-beaten trail that zigzagged through the underbrush below. Faundra left those trails when they moved between their favorite grazing spots. My father had spent years teaching me how to track them, hunt them, and kill them. I could do this—by myself.

I smirked when I found it; the ideal spot where an overgrowth of giant lichen made a great place to hide and watch the trail below. I slipped my bow off my shoulder and took out an arrow, making sure to check the fletching and the shaft for damage before setting it in the string.

“Say you do actually kill one this time. Say we even manage to field dress it and get it back to the city. Do you really think Kiran is going to be okay with you running off without him?” Enyo whispered as she tucked herself into the lichen beside me. I could feel the heat off her skin when her arm brushed mine.

“Well obviously, if I did it without him, then I don’t need him in the first place, right? I’m not a kid anymore,” I growled under my breath. “He’s holding me back on purpose.”

Okay, so that was debatable. Gray elves went through puberty around fifteen. Their hair turned from black to as white as frost and their bodies matured to look more adult. After that, they were considered adults and could choose a profession, get married, and basically do whatever they wanted. I was sixteen. I *should* have been treated like an adult, too.

There was just one problem—I wasn’t a gray elf.

To make matters worse, my adoptive father, Kiran, didn’t want me trying to make my first kill yet. He didn’t want me

going anywhere without his permission. He still treated me like a little kid.

“Maybe because you never listen,” Enyo muttered under her breath.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Just shut up. Why did you even come?”

She glared back. “Well if you die, someone should at least be able to explain what happened.”

“Pfft” I snorted and looked away. “Just keep out of my way.”

Enyo pushed some of her long, coal-black hair behind one of her pointed ears. “And stay here—I know, I know.”

A twig snapped.

We both fell silent. My heart raced, making my fingers throb and my body flush. This was it, the chance I’d been waiting for.

One-by-one they emerged from the morning mist. The herd of faundra traveled quickly with their littlest fawns grouped in the center to shield them from predators. The does were as big as horses, some even seven feet tall, with their white pelts flecked with soft gray markings. They had long, powerful legs and one kick to the face would crush your skull like an egg. But they weren’t the ones you really had to watch out for.

The stags were even bigger. Their shaggy pelts had stark black swirls and a blaze right down the front of their snout. Their heads were crowned with sweeping white antlers with ten razor sharp points. You definitely did not want to be on the wrong end of those.

“Beautiful,” Enyo whispered faintly.

I smirked.

Then I saw him—the alpha male. He stepped from the shadows, an impressive beast much larger than the other members of his herd by far. He had a single black stripe that ran from the end of his snout, down his back, and all the way to his tail. He was older, so his pelt was thicker around his neck like a mane, and all the other black marks along his hide had faded away. His horns sloped back to almost touch ends with four extra points on each side.

My stomach fluttered and swirled with excitement. I could barely breathe. When I drew my bow back, my hands shook. It made my arrow point bounce all over the place.

Enyo placed one of her palms on my back.

I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to remember everything Kiran had taught me. I took a deep breath. I listened to the jungle. Then, slowly, I opened my eyes again and took aim straight for the alpha male's heart. My hand was steady and my bowstring taut.

All I had to do was let go.

Something caught my eye. It was fast, like a flickering shadow darting through the underbrush.

I hesitated. My eyes searched, tracking through the underbrush for more movement. A snagwolf? Or maybe a wild shrike?

A sinking sensation rose in the pit of my stomach. It made all the tiny hairs on my arms and neck stand on end.

Oh no. Not this—not now.

Clenching my teeth, I tried to ignore it, to push it out of my mind, to fight it.

A cold chill hit me suddenly, making my body jerk beyond my control. The bowstring slipped, and my arrow went flying. It zipped through the moist air, grazing leaves and lodging deep into the side of a doe. She bucked and bleated, sending the rest of the herd into a frenzy. They bolted in every direction, disappearing like ghosts into the jungle.

But the doe I'd shot was badly wounded. She couldn't run far. Without thinking, I ran for the trunk of the tree and started my descent, jumping down from branch-to-branch.

"Reigh! Stop!" Enyo screamed.

No. There was no stopping now. When my feet finally struck the forest floor, I went to the spot where I'd shot her. There was blood on the ground and more droplets speckling the leaves and ferns, leading away into the undergrowth. She wouldn't last long. Running would make her bleed out faster.

Enyo seized my wrist suddenly. Her face was pale and her eyes as round as two moons. "We can't be down here. It's too dangerous." Her voice trembled.

"I can't just leave a kill lying out there. Stag or not it's still a—"

"Reigh! Don't be stupid. Something will have heard them," she pleaded and pulled on my arm. "Something will smell the blood!"

"Go back to the tree and wait for me, then." I snatched away from her and pointed. "I'm finishing this, with or without you."

Her expression faltered. She looked back at the tree, then to me, with her eyebrows crinkled and her mouth mashed into a desperate line.

"I said go!" I yelled.

Startled, Enyo backed away a few steps. She blinked at me, lips parted as she took in a few quick breaths. Then she turned and ran.



I tried not to think about all the rules I was breaking as I dove into the foliage, alone, to track down my kill.

Leaving the city without telling Kiran—that’s one. Going into the jungle unsupervised was another. Taking Enyo with me was worth at least two more because we hadn’t told her parents about it, either. And then there was the whole “hunting alone before I’d been officially marked a scout” thing. So yeah—basically, Kiran was going to be furious.

My only salvation was finding this doe. At least then, when I returned, he wouldn’t be able to argue that I wasn’t ready. The stag would have been much more impressive, but a kill was a kill. This was proof I could handle myself. I deserved to get my scout’s mark.

The blood trail wasn’t hard to find even among all the towering fronds and enormous leaves of the plants. I’d never stood on the jungle floor alone like this before. I felt insignificant, like a tiny insect, as I looked up at the giant trees. Everything seemed bigger now that I was this close to it. The air seemed cooler, too. The canopy was so far away, like a distant sky of

endless green leaves. It gave me chills.

Or maybe that was just my *problem* acting up again.

I crept through the undergrowth, traveling fast and trying to stay out of sight as I followed the blood trail. The drops were getting bigger and closer together. She was slowing down. It wouldn't be long.

And then I saw her.

The doe was lying in the middle of a small clearing between two big ferns. She was motionless, but I could see her side rising and falling with the shaft of my arrow sticking straight out. She was still alive.

I quickly shouldered my bow and drew my hunting knife. As I got close to the edge of the clearing, I paused. I did a quick glance around, waiting to see if anything or anyone else was nearby. Enyo was right—the smell of blood might draw the attention of other predators.

Everything was quiet and still.

The doe bleated loudly when she saw me. Her legs kicked, eyes looking around with wild anxiety. Standing over her, I could feel my hand begin to shake again. I had to kill her, end her suffering—preferably before she gave away my position to every dangerous creature in a five-mile radius.

I put my knee over her snout to hold her head still. She was too weak from blood loss to fight me off. Her milky brown eyes stared straight ahead as I drew back, ready to plunge my dagger into her heart.

A deep, heavy snort broke the silence.

I froze, slowly raising my gaze just in time to see him stride

free of the underbrush, his white horns gleaming in the morning light. The alpha male had come back for her.

Our eyes locked. His ears flicked back and he stamped a hoof. I tightened my grip on my knife, and tried to think of what to do—any fragment of a lesson Kiran had given that would help me right now.

There wasn't one.

The stag lowered his head, pointing those deadly horns straight at me, and charged.

I scrambled to my feet and ran for the nearest tree. His thundering hooves on the ground got closer and closer. I wasn't going to make it. I was fast, but he was faster.

The second before I could grab onto the lowest handhold, I heard a bowstring snap. The alpha bellowed. I dared to look back, just in time to see him fall and begin rolling. An arrow was sticking out of his haunches. He tumbled toward me, rolling like a giant furry boulder.

The massive stag smashed right into me.

The impact knocked the wind out of my lungs. Something popped and one of my arms went numb. Not good.

When everything stopped, I realized I couldn't move at all. Was I ... dead? Dying? No—I was pinned. Crushed between a tree and a very angry faundra stag, I couldn't escape. Something sharp, probably one of the stag's horns, sliced right across my face. Warm blood began running down my face.

"Reigh!" Enyo's voice was calling my name, but I couldn't see her.

The stag staggered back to his feet, shifting his weight off

me. I sucked in a desperate, wheezing breath as I crumpled to the forest floor in a daze.

“Don’t just sit there! Climb!” Enyo yelled again.

What?

I looked up, my vision still spotting, to see the stag charging straight for her.

Even with the arrow sticking out of his flank, he galloped at full speed. She clumsily drew back another, eyes stuck on the shaggy monster thundering straight for her. Her whole body trembled with terror. She was hesitating, trying to decide if she should fire or flee.

She wasn’t going to make it either way.

Something inside me burst, like the last raindrop before the dam broke.

I screamed her name at the top of my lungs. The chill came over me again, a coldness that rushed through every vein, making my body jerk and my eyes tear up. This time I didn’t fight it. I clenched my fists and let it take me.

Time seemed to slow down and stop altogether. My pulse got slower. My skin went cold. I could see my own breaths turning to white fog in the air. Before me, darkness pooled, amassing into one dark, inky puddle on the ground. It rose like a flickering column of black flames, and took the form of *him* ...

The black wolf I called Noh.

He looked at me with a smiling canine mouth and red, wavering bog fire eyes.

“Kill it,” I commanded.

“*With pleasure,*” his hissing voice replied.

TWO



I couldn't remember a time in my life when Noh hadn't been there. Ever since I was a little kid, he'd always been hiding in the back of my mind, like a memory from a former life that refused to fade. Almost as soon as I'd noticed his presence, Noh had absolutely terrified me.

Nothing about that had changed.

It wasn't that he'd ever tried to hurt me. Somehow, I didn't think he could even if he wanted to. But I could feel his presence just as clearly as I could sense his intentions—and they weren't good. He thrived on my anger, sadness, and confusion. Whenever Kiran and I had an argument, he would start creeping around the corners of the room, slipping soundlessly from shadow to shadow, almost like he was waiting for me to finally lose it.

I didn't know what he would do. Frankly, I didn't want to

know. Kiran had warned me over and over that I had to keep myself under control, and make sure not to go too far. The repercussions could be severe. Noh might hurt someone, and it would be my fault. I was the only one who could see and hear Noh, and the only person he listened to. I could control him—for now. But who knew how long that would last. There was always a chance that one day, when I let him off the chain, I might not be able to get control of him again.

Then no one would be able to stop him from doing whatever he wanted.

The worst part was knowing that eventually it was going to happen. Somehow, someday, I was going to mess up. I always did. That's me—Reigh—Luntharda's number one screw up.

I couldn't move. Lying on my back with my arms and legs spread wide, my whole body was numb except for the cold pinpricks on my skin. The dull, constant sound of my heartbeat droned in my ears. Maybe that meant I wasn't dead.

Suddenly, there was a voice. Someone was shouting above me. "Reigh? Reigh!"

A strong hand smacked my face.

My eyes popped open. I bolted upright and choked, sucking in a deep breath.

"It's all right. Breathe. You'll be fine." Kiran knelt next to me, studying me with a concerned furrow in his brow.

"E-Enyo ..." I tried to speak, but I was barely able to catch my breath. My head wouldn't stop spinning.

"She's fine." Kiran put a hand on the back of my head and leaned in close, poking experimentally at the open wound on

my face. Pain shot through my nose, making my eyes water.

"You'll need stitches," he decided aloud. "One of the stag's horns had blood on it. I feared the worst."

That's right. The stag had nicked me.

I looked past Kiran to the place where the doe should have been lying, but she was gone. There was no trace of her or the stag anywhere. Across the clearing, a few other gray elf scouts were checking Enyo. She was unconscious, but her cheeks were still flushed with color. She was alive.

My body sagged with relief. I met Kiran's knowing gaze. The hard lines in the corners of his mouth grew deeper as he frowned.

"Is he still here?" he asked quietly so that no one would hear.

I glanced around. There were no dark shapes or creeping shadows anywhere that I could see. Noh was gone, for now.

I shook my head slightly and winced. My arm—no, my whole shoulder—felt like it was on fire. I couldn't even stand to move it.

"Good. Now get up." He patted the top of my head; a gesture that passed as his gruff, awkward effort at parental affection.

I struggled to stand, and Kiran had to help me to my feet. He dusted the leaves, moss, and twigs off my clothes and picked up my bow. Across the clearing, one of the other scouts picked up Enyo and carried her back with the others toward the nearest tree-path.

I followed with Kiran walking right behind me. I could feel his gaze burning at my back. Anyone else would have thought he was just lurking back there to make sure I didn't stumble and

fall to my death because of my injured arm. I guess that could have been part of the reason, but that wasn't all of it. He was worried about Noh showing up again. I was worried about that, too. Worried—and confused about what had happened to the doe and the stag.

Kiran managed to keep his temper in check as we made our way back into the city. We split off from the group when we reached the first market square. I craned my neck, watching them carry Enyo off toward her house. She still wasn't awake yet. My stomach soured and guilt squeezed at my chest like a cold fist around my heart.

I wanted to know she'd be okay.

With Kiran still right on my heels, I made my way back to the small medical clinic where we lived and worked. Kiran was a healer by trade—something he'd also been teaching me since I was a little kid. He ran the best Healing House in the whole city, caring for the sick and wounded while I served as his apprentice.

The clinic wasn't a fancy place by any stretch. Kiran wasn't big on decorating. But it was home—where I'd spent my entire life. The house stood at the end of a street lined with other shops, on crest of a small hill. It was a narrow, plain looking building with three levels—most of which were rooms for patients. A general clinic room where Kiran treated minor illnesses and injuries took up most of the first floor. There was also a kitchen and a living room with a fire pit that was just for us. The rooftop garden was where Kiran grew the herbs and plants he used to make medicines, and where Enyo and I sometimes practiced sparring.

My heart was hammering as we climbed the steps to the

front door. Not even the familiar smell of the drying herbs comforted me. This was going to be bad. Like an angry specter, Kiran haunted my steps as I went inside.

Then he let me have it.



“Have I taught you nothing? Did you ever hear a single word I said?” Kiran stared me down, expecting an answer.

I couldn’t decide what was more terrifying, that he was about to pop my dislocated arm back into its socket or that he was using the human language to scold me. He only did that when he didn’t want anyone to overhear what we were saying—usually when we were talking about Noh.

Kiran hadn’t said much while he cleaned the wound on my nose. The gash was deep, and it took fifteen stitches to close it. I was going to have a brutal looking scar from one cheek to the other, right across the bridge of my nose. Painful? You bet. And I had a feeling Kiran had intentionally taken longer than usual to close it. That was part one of my punishment.

Now it was time for part two.

I swallowed, my entire body tense as his fingers probed my shoulder. Whenever he poked too hard, my vision swam and a whimper tore past my clenched teeth.

“And this time you took Enyo with you,” he went on. “You

risked her life, as well. She is not yet fifteen, Reigh. A *child*!”

I looked away. “I told her to go back. She didn’t listen.”

He gave my shoulder a sudden, violent jerk. It snapped, and I screamed. But the tingling numbness in my joints was gone. I could move my arm again.

“You do not listen, either. You are a reckless, thoughtless boy,” he growled as he began to rotate my arm, testing to see if it was set properly. Then he sternly wrapped my whole shoulder in a bandage. “Everything you do, every decision you make, has consequences. Why don’t you understand this? You only think of yourself. And that is exactly why I do not let you take your place as a scout.”

I glared at the woven grass mats on the floor. “So, is that why you’re ashamed of me? Or is it because I’m human?”

Kiran stopped. “I am not ashamed of you.”

“Then it’s because I’m a monster?”

“You aren’t a monster, Reigh.”

I raised my burning gaze up to him. “Then what am I? Do you know anyone else who can feel when someone is dying? Who else has a bad spirit living in their head? Noh killed the faundra didn’t he?”

When I started to shout, Kiran raised a hand. I closed my mouth and glowered back down at the floor. Right. I wasn’t supposed to get angry. We wouldn’t want my dark friend showing up again.

“Is that why you won’t let me call you ‘father?’” I asked.

He didn’t answer. He never did. We’d had this argument before—lots of times already. And that was where it always stopped.

Kiran wasn't my father—not my biological one, anyway. He was a full-blooded gray elf who had taken me in when I was a baby. According to him, I'd been abandoned, left lying on a rock just inside the boundary of the jungle, alone and vulnerable. Luckily, he heard me crying before a hungry tigrex or snagwolf could make an easy meal of me. Kiran took me in and raised me like a son, although I wasn't sure why. Clearly parenting wasn't his thing. He avoided people like others avoided the plague. And while he did try to be warm to me sometimes, it was like he didn't know what to say, so instead, he didn't say much at all.

And never once allowed me to call him father.

He was plenty old enough to be my father. He'd earned his scars almost forty years ago, fighting in the Gray War. Of course, he never talked about any of that. He was strange, even by gray elf standards. He'd never married, never had any biological children of his own, and he didn't have many friends. Not that he wasn't well thought of in our community—his reputation from the war made him a local legend. He was regarded as a hero. But that didn't seem to matter much. He seldom smiled, rarely laughed, and he never talked about his past.

But sometimes I overheard others telling stories during the great feast. They talked about how he'd ridden on the back of a dragon, fought to end the war, and stood alongside the King of Maldobar. Some said he'd even called the lapiloque by name.

I didn't know if any of that was true, although sometimes Kiran would sit for hours in front of the fire pit, completely silent, watching the flames slowly die. Those were the nights when I saw the darkness in his eyes.

And sometimes, when he didn't think I was paying attention, I would catch him staring at me that way, too.

"Drink this," he muttered, pushing a cup of strong smelling tea into my hands. It was an herbal remedy to treat swelling and pain, and it tasted so bitter I could barely swallow it. But every awful sip made the soreness in my shoulder subside.

"Enyo's okay, isn't she?" I dared ask once his back was turned. "I didn't hurt her, too, did I?"

Kiran paused. He let his hands rest on top of the chest where he stored all of our medicines. When he turned around, his expression was wrinkled with a sour frown. "She was unharmed," he replied. "But her mother will break her bow for this. She will have to start her training over to earn another one."

My head sagged toward my chest. Great. She was alive, but she was going to hate my guts from now on.

"Did she see what I did?" I couldn't make my chin stop trembling so I bowed my head lower, hoping Kiran wouldn't see. "It's just, you know, I don't have a lot of friends and Enyo is the only one who ..." I couldn't finish.

"No. I don't think she knows what happened."

A snuffle escaped before I could choke it back in. With a sigh, Kiran sat down next to me and put his arm around my shoulders, pulling me over to lean against him. "I found you before the others did. You were right. Noh did kill the doe and stag. But I disposed of the carcasses. No one will find them. No one will know what happened. You'll be fine, but this *cannot* happen again. We were very fortunate."

I nodded shakily. Yeah, we'd been insanely lucky. Noh had

never killed before. I'd always been able to stop him. "I just couldn't control it. I just—I didn't know what else to do. I had to save her."

He patted my head. "I understand."

"It's getting stronger. I see him almost every day. He won't leave me alone."

Kiran didn't answer.

"What's wrong with me?" I asked quietly. "What am I?"

His answer was barely a whisper. "I don't know."



It was close to midnight when I gave up trying to sleep.

My mind spun over the memories of what had happened in the jungle. I couldn't stop thinking about the faundra, the feeling of letting Noh go, and how the wound on my face was making my whole face throb. Kiran had smeared it with a thick salve that would keep it from getting infected, but it still made my eyes tear up if I touched it.

Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore. Between my aching face and overwhelmed brain, sleep was not going to happen. I got up and peeled the bandage off my shoulder to stretch and flex my arm. It hurt, too, but the herbal remedy helped a lot. By tomorrow it would be as good as new.

Pulling on a long, silk tunic with baggy sleeves, I buckled

my belt and dagger around my waist. I carried my sandals downstairs, careful to hold my breath when I crept past Kiran's room. He had ears like a fox, and I shuddered to think of what he'd do if he caught me sneaking out again.

I grabbed my bow and quiver off the hook and slipped out the door of the clinic. Above me, hung a wooden sign with the words HEALING HOUSE painted in green elven letters. It was a little faded, and if I wasn't careful it would rattle when I shut the door and wake Kiran up.

Outside, the market square was dark and quiet. Up and down the street, all the shops were closed and the streets were empty. From where I stood on our doorstep, I could see a long way because of where our clinic was perched on the crest of that small hill. All around the lights of the city twinkled in the night. Oil lamps flickered against colored glass windows and towering buildings made of cool alabaster stone. It was a sight I knew well.

Mau Kakuri was the largest gray elf city rebuilt after the war. Some called it the "City of Mist" because it stood against a steep mountainside where a curtain of waterfalls poured down into a shallow river that ran through the middle of the garden district. The falls provided a constant haze of cool, crisp mist that hung in the air, trapped beneath the dense jungle canopy. Sometimes, if the sunlight broke through the trees just right, it made dozens of shimmering rainbows. And on nights like tonight, when the moon was full and bright, its silver light managed to bleed through the canopy and make the mist shine like a floating sea of diamonds.

With a deep breath, I started down the steps and out into the street. Nothing and no one stirred this late at night. The streets, arched bridges, tall stone buildings, and elegantly spiraling palace towers were all built atop the mossy boulders surrounding the plummeting water. The water from the falls made canals, pools, and streams that filled the air with the sound of running water. It also divided the city into districts along the canals—the market district where craftsmen ran their shops, the garden district where the orchards and vegetable gardens were kept for public use, and a few residential districts where most everyone lived. Kiran and I were one of a few exceptions because being the prominent city healer meant sometimes he had late night emergencies. It made more sense for us to live where we could be on call all the time.

Mau Kakuri was where the royal family had chosen to live, where the ancient archives were kept in caverns behind the falls, and where I had lived my entire life. I was one of only two humans living there, and we were so far from the boundary of Luntharda and Maldobar, so deep within the dense jungle, that odds were I'd never see another human ... ever. Not that the gray elves were hostile to them, but making the journey through the dangerous jungle to reach it wasn't for the faint of heart. According to Kiran, humans didn't spend much time learning to climb and walk along the tree paths. This jungle—our world—terrified them.

I took the quiet back road to the edge of the city. I wasn't sure she'd be there. After all, Enyo was probably furious with me. She might never want to speak to me again. But I was willing to

take that chance.

At the end of a long, narrow path that zigzagged treacherously up the side of the cliff face behind a few of the falls, I found her. She was sitting in our usual spot, her bare feet dangling over the edge of the mossy rocks. The water poured over the edge before her, a constant veil from the city below.

It was tricky to get to her. The boulders were slick and the edge was steep. But I'd come this way so many times I could have done it with my eyes closed.

"Did you come here to apologize?" Enyo wouldn't look at me as I sat down beside her.

"Would it help?" I hesitated and studied her profile. She didn't look thrilled to see me.

"No. And I'm not sure I would believe it, anyway."

I chewed on my lip.

"Your nose looks awful."

I poked at the fresh stitches gingerly. "Hurts, too."

"Good."

We sat in uncomfortable silence for what seemed like hours. Then, I took my bow off my back and placed it gently on her lap.

She stared and ran her fingers over it, then slowly raised her eyes to meet my gaze. "You're giving it to me?"

I nodded.

"But you'll lose your place to become a warrior and scout. You'll have to start all your training over."

"Yeah, well, I'll probably have to do that anyway." I shrugged. "Kiran doesn't think I'm ready. He thinks I'm selfish and probably stupid, too."

Enyo smirked and nudged me playfully with her elbow. "I kind of agree."

"As long as you don't hate me, that's all I care about." I sighed and sat back, resting my weight on my hands. "But I am sorry, you know. I shouldn't have brought you along."

She snorted sarcastically. "I saved your life! You'd be dead without me."

"As if."

"You're such an idiot, Reigh." She socked me in my sore shoulder.

I whimpered and rubbed my arm.

After a few seconds of sitting there, watching the falls and listening to the constant rumbling of the water, she looked my way again. She was still rubbing her hand along the bow I'd given her as though she were anxious about something.

"Do you remember what happened? After the stag charged for me?" she asked at last.

I tried to avoid her probing stare. "Do you?"

"No," she said quietly. "Everything got hazy. I was so afraid I must have fainted. I just remember feeling so cold. When I woke up, I was home. No one would tell me where you were. I thought you were dead, Reigh."

I swallowed hard.

"Was Kiran angry with you?"

"No more than usual."

She nibbled on her bottom lip. "My mother was furious. She said that we both should have died. It doesn't make any sense, does it? Why would the stag just decide to let us go? And

what happened to the doe?”

I didn't want to answer any of her questions. Lying had never been one of my finer skills.

“My mother said it was a miracle,” she said softly, like it was some kind of secret. “The spirit of the lapiloque saved us.”

I stared at her. Seriously? I couldn't help it. I laughed out loud. “You think the ghost of some dead god saved us?”

Enyo pursed her lips, her cheeks flushed and her eyes narrowed. “Don't say it like that. He's real.”

“Right.” I rolled my eyes.

“He's not dead, Reigh. I know it.”

“How? How can you possibly know that?”

Her expression became dreamy, like she was lost in her own private fantasy. “I can't explain it. I just do.”

“That's ridiculous, even by your standards.”

She glared at me. “Haven't you ever just believed in something, Reigh? Even though you couldn't see it or touch it?”

I thought about Noh and my body instantly got chilled.

“He's not just a myth. He *is* real.” She spoke with such conviction; I almost wanted to believe her. “And he's coming back, just like he promised.”

I cleared my throat. Maybe it wasn't such a bad thing to let lapiloque take the credit this time. After all, I didn't want Enyo to find out about Noh. “Right. Well, be sure to thank him when you meet him.”

She socked me again. “You better thank him, too! We both should have died. My parents were furious. Father won't even speak to me.”

"You think it would help if I apologized to them?"

"No." Her shoulders sagged some and she looked back down at my bow resting in her palms. "Besides, I ... I'm not even sure I want to be a scout anymore."

My jaw dropped. "What? Because of today?"

Some of her wavy black hair fell from where she'd tucked it behind her pointed ear, blocking my view of her face. "That's not the reason. I've been thinking about it for a while now. I know Mother will be upset. She's spent a lot of time training me. But there's something else—something I've wanted to try for a long time."

I leaned in closer, a little afraid she wouldn't tell me. Enyo hadn't hit the gray elf version of puberty yet, so by their standards she was still a child. Even so, I could tell she was starting to change. Things were different. Growing up, she'd always told me what she thought about everything. Now she was keeping secrets, even from me. I tried not to let it faze me. It was bound to happen, sooner or later.

Still, I didn't like feeling like I was losing her trust.

Enyo turned a thin, forced smile back at me. "It's not a big deal. I haven't made up my mind yet, anyway."

"Don't lie. You're just trying to make me feel better," I grumbled and crossed my arms.

"No I'm not!" She giggled and tugged playfully at the rounded top part of my ear. "If I wanted to do that, then I'd say something like 'having a big scar on your nose will look so good!'"

I scowled. "Maybe it will."

That only made her laugh harder.

THREE



Things were quiet for a while and life got back to its normal rhythm for Kiran and me. I kept a low profile, following his orders to stay in the city and out of trouble. He didn't want me out of his sight. This was part three of my punishment, I guess. Part four was when he took the stitches out of my nose.

I spent long days working the clinic with him, tending to patients, washing linens, making medicines, and treating some of the minor injuries. It was easy work that kept me indoors and my mind occupied. But at the same time, it was smothering. Being trapped behind the walls of the clinic day in and day out was beginning to drive me crazy. I was safer, and yet I was aching for something more.

It didn't help that our little mishap had the city buzzing. Rumors swirled through the crowded markets and bustling

public baths about how Enyo and I had miraculously escaped being mauled to death by a faundra stag. Some of our local friends even came by the clinic to ask me about it and check out my battle scar, although Kiran forbade me to tell them any details. Most people agreed with Enyo's theory that the spirit of the lapiloque had somehow intervened and protected us.

Only Kiran and I knew differently, and that was how it had to stay.

But Kiran didn't act like anything had happened. He went on running the clinic, treating patients for snake bites, broken bones, cuts, and all the usual daily ailments. He must have sensed my restlessness because he doubled my load of chores—probably to make sure I didn't have any spare time to do anything else stupid. After that, I didn't even have time to visit Enyo.

Early in the mornings, I ran errands on foot through the city squares, buying ingredients so I could spend the evenings grinding herbs and making medicines. Then I changed bed sheets, washed bandages, scrubbed Kiran's surgical tools, and helped him make the delivery kits for the midwives. Kiran was the best healer in the city, so his schedule was always packed and there was rarely a day when we didn't have a line of patients going out the door. We worked till sundown, ate our last meal of the day in awkward silence, and then I dragged myself upstairs to collapse into bed. That was it—my life in a nutshell.

On rare occasions, before the sun rose, Kiran left me in charge while he went out with the other warriors to lead scouting parties that kept a close watch on the city's outer perimeter. Every able-bodied warrior had to take a turn doing that. Well,

everyone except for me.

For extra money, Kiran tutored some of the younger warriors, too. He taught them to fight and to shoot a bow, throw a dagger, or wield a scimitar with deadly accuracy. And all I got to do was watch him leave from the clinic doorway.

Being left at the clinic was beyond unfair. Before the incident, he'd at least let me be a sparring partner. I was his best student with a blade. But without a bow, I was going to have to wait until he decided I was trustworthy enough to be trained again.

Never, basically.

"Everyone else my age has already gone on their first hunt or done a patrol. They've brought down graulers, battled tigrex, and I'm just sitting here," I moaned.

Kiran was ignoring me, crouched at our fire pit stoking the coals so he could cook our dinner of roasted fish and potatoes.

"It's embarrassing. They're making fun of me, you know. All those warriors you're training call me names sometimes."

"I'll ask them to stop," he answered calmly.

"Right. Because getting my father to tell them off is really going to make them not treat me like a little kid," I scoffed.

Then I realized what I'd said.

Kiran pointed a harrowing glare in my direction. "I am *not* your father."

I cringed and bowed my head slightly. "I know."

My jaw clenched and I swallowed against the hard knot in my throat. Didn't he know how that made me feel? Or did he even care? Sure, I knew the gray elf culture and traditions. Bloodlines were traced through the mothers, so being a father

was considered an immense honor and privilege. It's not a word they used lightly. It was basically the pinnacle of any man's entire life to earn that title.

But Kiran refused it—even if I had no one else to call father.

He went on working quietly, almost as though he were trying to ignore me. At last, he got up to shove a few small silver coins into my hand. “Go and buy bread. No wandering. Come straight back.”

I managed to keep it together until I got outside.

As soon as I was a safe distance from the door, I kicked the crap out of the first small tree I came across. I wailed at it hard, breaking the trunk and stomping it into the ground over and over until I was out of breath.

When I stopped, my face was flushed and my heart was racing. I raked my long, dark red hair out of my eyes and sat down a step to cool off. I squeezed the coins in my fist and thought about all the things I could do with them instead of buying bread.

Maybe I could pay a seer to tell me who I really was. But as enticing as that seemed, I was terrified of what a mystic might see if they looked at me too closely. Nothing good, that's for sure. Good people didn't have bad spirits following them around.

Besides, Kiran didn't have to say it. I already knew why he didn't want me calling him father. I was the kid no one wanted. My own parents had left me to die—probably because someone had tipped them off about the monster I was destined to become. It was bad enough Kiran was stuck with me now, if he claimed me as his son, then every stupid, horrible thing I ever

did would reflect badly on him. He didn't want a monster as his only progeny.

"A spider is only a monster to a fly," a familiar, whispering voice echoed through my mind. It sent shivers over my skin.

"Go away, Noh," I muttered. "Leave me alone."

I saw his red, glowing eyes smoldering in the shadows nearby. He materialized from the gloom and began to approach me, the edges of his pitch-black body wavering like licking black flames. He always appeared as a wolf-like creature with tall pointed ears and a long bushy tail, but I knew Noh wasn't an animal at all. He was something else entirely.

"I cannot leave." He padded over to lurk cautiously nearby.

"Why not?"

"Because we are one, you and I."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

His toothy maw curled into a menacing smile, before he vanished into a puff of black mist without answering.

"Reigh?"

I looked up and saw Enyo climbing the steps toward me. She had a confused frown on her face.

"Who are you talking to?"

I shook my head and grumbled, "Myself."

Her expression became sympathetic. "You had another fight with Kiran?" she guessed.

I nodded.

Enyo stood over me, tapping my foot with hers. "Come on. I want to show you something." There was an excited edge to her voice I couldn't resist.

I got to my feet, cramming Kiran's coins into my pocket, and followed Enyo into the sleeping city. Moonlight broke the canopy, casting eerie shadows over our path as we ran along the narrow passes between buildings, scaling garden walls, darting over bridges, and climbing terraces to get to the rooftops. Enyo was light on her feet, springing the gaps from one roof to another like a cat. It was fun, and I couldn't keep from grinning as I landed and kicked into a roll, leaping immediately to my feet to keep running.

For an instant, I truly felt free.

Enyo darted ahead, her legs pumping faster and faster until she sprang, arms up to grasp a low hanging limb. She whirled over, using the branch like an acrobat to flip herself over and land on top of it. My attempt at the same trick wasn't as graceful and she giggled as I flailed to get my balance again.

"You're still so clumsy," she laughed as she crouched next to me. "Maybe that's why Kiran won't make you a scout."

I pretended to sulk—right up until she grabbed one of my ears to pull me in closer so she could plant a kiss on my cheek.

"Aw, Reigh, don't pull that face. You know I'm just teasing."

I blushed, unable to come up with a good comeback.

We lingered there for a minute or two, watching the moonlit mist sparkling like a swirling shower of diamonds over the city. Well, that's what she was looking at. I was looking at her. I wondered what she'd be like after she went through that gray elf change. Her hair would turn white and she'd look more mature, sure. But would she still like going running with me? Would she even want me around?

Before I could come up with the nerve to ask, Enyo took off again. I sprang down to chase after her, gulping in deep breaths of the cool, earthy jungle air. We dodged through the nearly empty market district. A few merchants were still closing down their shops. The blacksmith's forge still glowed in the gloom, his hammer making a rhythmic *clang-ping-clang-ping* sound and sending up a spray of sparks as he worked. A few shepherds shouted us as we startled the flock of faundra yearlings they were carefully herding through the street. Oops.

I followed Enyo up the side of another building, through someone's rooftop courtyard. Happy sounds of laughing and lively conversation came from inside the house—along with the smell of something delicious. The farther we ran, the brighter the air seemed. Skidding to a halt at the edge of the last residential rooftop, the palace loomed before us with its slender spires bathed in silver light. Behind it, the waterfalls made a constant roaring sound.

Enyo sat down and began taking off her sandals.

“What are you doing?” I squatted down next to her.

“Shh! We have to be quiet. Now hurry and take yours off, too,” she whispered.



I left my shoes next to hers and followed as she started climbing

down the side of the building. There was a high, white stone wall separating the palace from the rest of the city. It only had one gate, and I didn't think we were going to just go waltzing through it.

Enyo had found her own way inside.

Between two young trees was a place where the roots had cracked the stone, breaking it just enough for a small person to slip through. She'd obviously been here before, because she'd taken the time to dig out the ground around the hole so I might be able to squeeze through.

"You first," she whispered, grinning from one pointed ear to the other, as the moonlight shimmered brightly in her multicolored eyes.

Okay; I had a bad feeling about this.

As I wriggled and squirmed my way through the hole, I prayed to whatever god might be listening that I wouldn't get stuck.

My body came to a screeching halt.

Yep. Definitely stuck. The gods hated me.

I tried to turn and flail, but it wasn't any good. My shoulders were wedged in tight. I could imagine the look on Kiran's face as he dragged me out by the ankles. I'd never hold another bow as long as I lived. Behind me, I could feel Enyo trying to help. She was pushing on my rear as hard as she could. This was a new low.

Suddenly, with one great push from behind, my shoulders popped free and I launched out of the hole and onto the soft grass right on my face.

I sat up sputtering and brushing my hair out of my eyes. Then I got a good look around. I was sitting in what appeared to be a garden. Before me was a small pond surrounded by willow trees. Through the wavering fronds, I could see stone archways and open hallways leading away into the palace. There were statues everywhere carved into the shapes of different animals, and beautiful flowering water plants grew in the still water.

Voices echoed from across the pond. I saw a fluttering of white fabric. And then Enyo grabbed me from behind, dragging me into a hiding place behind one of the statues. She pressed a finger to my mouth as a warning. We had to stay quiet.

“She is so fragile, Jace. We must do something. She won’t survive on her own,” an old woman’s voice pleaded. “If we take her to the temple, perhaps he will hear our prayers. I can’t just sit back and do nothing.”

“Araxie ... I’m just as worried about her as you are,” a man’s deep voice answered. “But it’s been so long. Nothing has changed. I think we need to look to our own medicines and methods—the things your people have relied on all these years. Or perhaps Kiran learned something about this when he studied in Maldobar.”

“You don’t believe, then?” The woman stepped into view, her long white gown billowing around her, a golden crown nestled in her snowy white hair. Her features were crinkled with age, and yet she stood with her shoulders back and her head held high.

The man moved in closer and took her hand. He wore dark green and silver robes with a circlet of silver on his head. He was

an older man, too—but he was no gray elf. His features were rugged and his ears were like mine ... round and undeniably human.

I sucked in a sharp breath.

I'd never seen the king and queen this close before. They didn't make many public appearances and were much older than I expected. The king had a stubborn looking cut to his jaw as he considered his wife. Age hadn't bent him or made him frail, probably because he'd been a dragonrider before leaving the human kingdom of Maldobar. At least, that's what everyone said whenever they told the old stories.

With a square-cut white beard and long hair that was salt-and-pepper colored, he walked like a warrior as he moved to put his arms around the queen. The way his eyes sagged at the corners made him look exhausted, though.

"I can't lose another one. She is my only grandchild, Jace. The last of our bloodline. I can't bear it." The queen's voice weakened. She started to cry as the king held her close at his side, slowly walking with her back into the palace.

Once they were gone, Enyo and I exchanged a glance.

"Is that what this was all about? Eavesdropping on the royal family?" I whispered.

Enyo scowled. "Of course not. I want to show you something." She grabbed my wrist and dragged me out of our hiding place.

Across the garden, on the other side of the pond, stood a large, flat stone tablet made of bone white marble. It had been polished until it was completely smooth and engraved with an

intricate picture. It was a scene depicting a young man in strange armor holding a round object in the air over his head. I'd never seen him before, but I immediately knew who he was.

I'd heard the stories, after all. Everyone had. With his distinctly-human stature and pointed ears, wearing a carved pendant around his neck and the cloak of a dragonrider—it could only be one person.

Jaevd Broadfeather. The lapiloque.

The rest of the scene carved into the stone was just as detailed. There was an elven maiden on one side of him, and a human king on the other. Both were kneeling in great respect while their armies placed their weapons on the ground.

"It's from the end of the Gray War. When the lapiloque took up the god stone and destroyed it so it could never fall into evil hands again." Enyo was smiling again, her expression that of dreamy-eyed wonder. "You see? He was real."

"Just because someone carved it on a piece of rock doesn't make it true."

"And just because you don't believe in him doesn't mean it's not," she countered.

I pursed my lips. "What is it with girls and falling for these hero types, anyway?"

Enyo's cheeks turned as red as ripe apples. "I never said I liked him like *that*!"

"You didn't have to," I teased. "Just look at those rippling arms he's got, eh? I bet you dream about him."

"I do not!" She started after me with her fists tight.

I backed up and laughed, darting out of the way as she took

a swing at my face. "I bet you can't stop thinking about what it would be like to get whisked away on the back of his dragon."

Enyo dove at me again, rearing back and trying to land a punch wherever she could. Then suddenly, she stopped short. I saw her face go pale and her eyes grew wide, focusing on something—or someone—behind me.

I felt the chill a second too late. My breath turned to white fog in the air. Slowly, I began to turn around.

Noh was standing right behind me, his red eyes smoldering like coals against the night. Only, this time he didn't look like a wolf. He looked like a human teenager with long, unruly hair, a squared jaw, thin frowning mouth, and the same long scar across the bridge of his nose that I now had.

He looked *exactly* like me.

Only, instead of dark, muddy red hair his was black. His skin was a strange ashen gray color, and his eyes had no center—just bottomless pools of vivid red light.

For an instant, I was captivated. I stood there marveling at the sight of him, totally unafraid. Why did he look like me? Was this something he'd always been able to do? I resisted the urge to reach out and offer him my hand, just to see what he would do.

Then I saw his attention shift. He stared at Enyo, and I could sense the change in his mood before a wicked smirk curled across his features. He licked his lips hungrily.

"No," I shouted and stumbled away from him. "You can't have her. Leave now!"

Noh tilted his head to the side slightly. He studied Enyo for a second longer and then looked back to me. His smile widened,

showing slightly pointed canine teeth.

"I mean it! *Leave!*" I shouted louder, throwing my arms out as I planted myself between him and Enyo. "I won't let you touch her. You don't get to hurt anyone unless I say so!"

"*As you wish, my master.*" He chuckled, his whispering voice sending chills over my skin. With a flourish of his hands, he bowed at the waist and swiftly began to dissolve, vanishing into fine black mist.

The sound of his laugh was still hanging in the air even after he was gone. I tried forcing myself to calm down, but I was angry and panicked. I couldn't think straight. Enyo had seen him. No one else had *ever* been able to see him before—not even Kiran.

The situation was changing from my private problem with one random bad spirit to something I didn't even have a name for.

"R-Reigh?" Enyo's voice trembled.

"It's fine! It's nothing!"

"Nothing? Are you insane?"

I bit down hard on the inside of my cheek.

"Reigh, who was that?" She grabbed onto my arm so I would look at her. "What's going on?"

I jerked away and started for the hole in the garden wall. "Nothing! You didn't see anything! Just forget it ever happened!"

Enyo darted in front of me, planting her hands on my shoulders and forcing me to stop. "No! Tell me what's going on!"

I wanted to. I really did. But as often as we argued, there was

one thing Kiran and I both agreed on: no one could ever know about the things I could do. I was dangerous. And while he called me master, Noh was becoming more and more difficult to control.

I couldn't risk it—I couldn't let him hurt Enyo. I'd let this thing, whatever it was, tear me apart before I ever let anything happen to her.

"No," I growled at her fiercely. "Get away from me. Never come near me again."

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened, but no sound came out. Slowly, she took her hands off me. "You don't mean that. I know you, Reigh. You're my best friend. Please, just talk to me. You can trust—"

I shoved her out of my way hard enough she fell back onto the grass. "You're wrong. You don't know anything about me. I'm not your friend. You're annoying and ... a waste of my time. I can't even stand the sight of you. Stay away from me, Enyo. I mean it."

When she didn't answer, I started running.

I dove for the hole in the wall and crammed myself back through it as fast as I could. I staggered to my feet on the other side and began sprinting through the city streets, past the empty market squares with gurgling fountains and down dark alleys crowded with wooden crates. I didn't bother going back for my shoes.

I ran for home.

FOUR



He knew.

As soon as I burst through the door, barefooted and without any bread, Kiran knew something bad had happened. In an instant, he was on his feet and racing to shut and bolt the front door to our clinic. He grabbed the collar of my shirt, dragging me into the living room before he went around dousing all the lamps in the house. The glow from the embers smoldering in the fire pit gave off just enough light that I could see him blur around me, his expression grim as he shut all the windows and closed the drapes.

Our home became as dark as a tomb. Long shadows climbed the walls, taunting my frazzled nerves as I stood, wringing the hem of my tunic between my sweaty fingers. I was too afraid to look at them closely—afraid they might begin to move or take

the shape of *him* again. My heart drummed in my ears and my whole body was numb. Whether it was because of Noh or just pure terror, I wasn't sure.

"Tell me what happened," Kiran commanded in a quiet, eerily calm voice. He was standing in front of me, holding my shoulders so I couldn't turn away.

I tried. But when I opened my mouth, nothing would come out. Questions whirled through my brain. Was I losing control? What if I couldn't get Noh to leave? What if he hurt someone? Would Kiran abandon me, too? Where would I go? What would I do? Would I ever find a home again?

My throat grew tight. I squeezed my eyes shut and bowed my head, trying to silence the whispering doubts.

Suddenly, Kiran pulled me in and wrapped his arms around me tightly, holding me like I was a small child.

"It's all right, Reigh," he said. "Whatever happened, I'll fix it. You're going to be okay."

I buried my face against his shoulder. Regardless of what he said, he couldn't fix it—not this time. And when I told him what had happened, I think he began to realize that, too.

Whatever I was becoming, I wouldn't be able to hide it for much longer. Noh was getting stronger, and for better or worse, he and I were bound somehow. I didn't know how or why, but he was here because of me. I couldn't get rid of him.

Kiran sat across the hearth from me, quiet despair creeping into his features as he stared at the flames. For a few minutes, he didn't say a word. We sat in heavy silence, watching the flames hiss and dance in the darkness. Dinner was finished and while it

smelled good, neither of us had touched it.

A sound echoed through the house.

Knock, knock, knock.

Someone was at the door. My stomach did a frantic backflip and my heart hit the back of my throat. Kiran jumped up and snatched his scimitar off the hook by the door. I started to get up, too, but he snapped his fingers and gestured for me to stay put. I did—at least, until I heard him open the front door. Then I crept to the doorway. It was a long way down the hall, past the examination room to the front door, but sound bounced off the stone walls of our home like a cave.

“W-we apologize for the late hour, master. We bring word, an urgent request from Her Majesty the Queen,” a young man’s voice stammered with nervousness as he addressed Kiran.

My stomach did another backflip. Had Enyo been caught on the castle grounds?

“What is it?” Kiran demanded.

There was a rattling commotion and the sound of the door shutting. Whoever it was, Kiran had let them inside.

“News from the border. Maldobar is under siege. Northwatch burns and a company of human soldiers has retreated into the jungle. They are headed this way, but they travel with many wounded and no supplies. It is doubtful they will survive to reach the city,” the young man reported. “Her Majesty would like you to lead a rescue mission to intercept them with supplies and guide them safely here. Your knowledge of the human language and customs would be essential.”

“Leaving when? I have responsibilities to my patients here,”

Kiran spoke sharply.

“Immediately. The errand is most urgent. It’s believed that one of these men is a member of Maldobar’s royal family.”

There was a tense silence. I waited, holding my breath, until at last I heard Kiran let out a growling, frustrated sigh.

“Very well. I’ll need some time to arrange for my boy to stay with someone. Bring shrikes. We leave at dawn,” he answered.

There were a few mutterings of gratitude and the retreating sound of footsteps. The front door snapped shut and I heard Kiran coming back down the hall. Quickly, I slipped away, up the stairs, and into my bedroom. I left the door cracked and flopped down onto my bed, jerking the blankets up to my chin.

I pretended to be asleep when I heard Kiran push the door open in a bit further. He sighed again, whispering something under his breath that I couldn’t make out. Then he pulled the door closed and I heard his footsteps fading away down the hallway toward his own room.

Minutes passed and I waited until the house was quiet. Kiran hadn’t come back out of his room. I figured he was either busy packing or stealing a few hours of sleep before he had to leave.

I got up and opened my closet, digging through my stuff until I unearthed a backpack made from soft, tanned leather. It was stocked with a few basic supplies, two days’ worth of rations, and something else—something Kiran didn’t know I had.

I pulled the long, curved blades out of the bag and held them firmly in my hands. The soft leather grips felt at home there, as though they’d been made especially for me. They hadn’t, of

course. These blades were a lot older than I was. Each pommel was plated with silver and set with chips of mica to make the shape of a snarling snagwolf's head.

The gray elves called these weapons "kafki," and only the finest fighters for the royal family had wielded them. Each blade was twelve inches long and curved, like a pair of small shotels or scythes. But that wasn't what made them unique.

The blades weren't made of metal. They were made of wood that was as white as bone and harder than iron—wood from the most dangerous predator in all Luntharda. Greevwood trees were legendary, even among the gray elves. They were subtle monsters, not something you'd think twice about until one had its roots around your neck and was slowly digesting you.

Gruesome? Oh yeah. But their wood was as prized as it was hard to gather. Once you cut away the bark and exposed the white meat of the tree beneath, you only had a short time to cut and mold it. After that, it became harder than iron. The elves liked making knives, swords, and scimitars from it because they couldn't be broken and they never went dull.

I'd come across these purely by chance, and Kiran didn't know anything about them. I was afraid that if he ever saw them, he'd take them from me and insist on giving them back to their rightful owner—whoever that was.

I'd found them during one of my many outings with Enyo, several years ago. After all, that encounter with the stag wasn't the first time we'd been out in the jungle alone. That day, we'd ventured farther than either of us had ever been before, out to one of the burial groves. That was where gray elves traditionally

buried their dead and planted a new tree atop the gravesite—something else they'd begun doing in honor of the lapiloque. We were exploring when I'd gotten one of those familiar, harrowing chills. Only, this one hadn't involved Noh. As soon as I stopped to look back ... I saw these. They were lying in a clear area between two of the trees, placed carefully on a patch of green moss like someone had left them there especially for me.

Only, there was no one else in sight.

Enyo thought they were a gift from the lapiloque or maybe even the foundling spirits. Whoever left them there, I wasn't about to turn down a free pair of Greevewood blades. All I had to do was keep them out of sight until I became an official scout—then it wouldn't matter where they came from.

It wasn't that weapons were forbidden to me. After all, Kiran had given me my first bow and taught me everything I knew about how to handle a blade. He'd trained me to wield a spear, a scimitar, fire a bow, how to throw daggers with lethal proficiency, and even how to fight with a human-styled sword. But I doubted if even he had any experience with *kafki*. They were considered an ancient weapon, used more for decoration now than anything else.

Maybe I'd bring them back into style.

I dug through my wardrobe for my scouting clothes—the best thing for traveling in Luntharda when you didn't want to be spotted. Since I wasn't a scout, I'd never worn them before, so they were still new and creased. They'd been waiting for me at the bottom of the drawer for a year.

Quickly and quietly, I took off my casual clothes and put

on the black undergarments. I tucked the sleeveless black silk shirt into the matching long black pants, and bound each of my legs from my ankle to my knee with a strip of thick, black canvas, making sure to tuck my pants down into it snugly. It was padding for running, skidding, rolling, leaping, and climbing through the trees. Then I did the same with my arms, binding from my wrists to my elbows with several layers.

The outer tunic was made of something thicker, and it was midnight blue with a silver border stitched into the elbow-length sleeves and around the base. It came down to my knees and was split up the sides so I could move easily. Over it, I buckled a light, black leather jerkin and a belt with sheaths for the two Greevwood kafki. I laced up my nicest pair of sandals, the ones with soles made especially for gripping even the slickest of tree limbs, and threw my pack over my shoulders.

The night air rushed in when I opened my bedroom window. Cool, sweet, humid, and delicious—I breathed it in deeply and climbed out onto the ledge.

A twinge of pain pinched in my chest. Crouched on the windowsill, I looked behind me at my childhood bedroom.

I had two choices.

Kiran was going to leave at dawn. He was going to strike out into the jungle, leading a group of warriors to help those human soldiers. And once again, I was going to get left behind. No way he'd take me with him, especially after what happened with Noh today. So, either I could stay here, hiding in the clinic like a coward and trying to keep my dark companion at bay while pretending there wasn't something seriously wrong with me.

Or I could do what Kiran didn't have the guts to do:
I could kick myself out.

He was probably hoping this would all blow over, that I'd regain control of Noh, or that he might even leave altogether and I'd get to finish out my life as a normal person. But deep down, the truth wasn't something either of us could change. Noh had killed once. He would do it again, and whether I liked it or not—whether it was fair or not—I would be the one to blame.

No one here would be safe from Noh unless I was gone.

Clenching my teeth, I looked out across the sleeping city of Mau Kakuri and knew I couldn't stay here anymore.

It was time to break free.



This was my only chance. I had a few hours to get a head start before Kiran figured out I was gone. He wouldn't be able to look for me, not right away. He'd gotten orders from the Queen, so he was obligated. I had to be long gone by the time he wrestled with his better sense and decided to ignore it and come looking for me.

First challenge—leaving the city. At least that was one I knew I could pull off. Enyo and I had done it dozens of times already. Despite having fairly tight security protecting the city

perimeter, I was confident I could slip out without having to work too hard. The scouts on the ground rode on trained faundra, patrolling every five minutes to make sure no ground-based predators wandered in. The scouts navigating the tree paths above came by less frequently. After all, it wasn't as though no one could leave the city if they wanted to. But the fact that I was, you know, still known as a *kid* might give them reason to stop me to figure out where I was going at this hour.

I moved hastily down the stone paved streets to the edge of the city, slipping from shadow to shadow until I got to the boundary. There, the jungle rose before me like a swelling tidal wave, ready to drag me under. Dense, dark, deep, and dangerous, you had to be a special kind of stupid to go out there alone at night.

No one had ever accused me of being all that smart.

I waited, hiding behind a cluster of ferns, until I saw a scout pass by, riding in the saddle of a large faundra doe. As soon as she was gone, I raced for the nearest trunk and started to climb, scaling the side of the giant tree and clambering onto the first low limb almost twenty feet off the jungle floor. My pulse raced and my senses were honed, listening for the faint footsteps of man or beast.

There was nothing—just the eerie, humming songs of the frogs and insects. I took a deep breath, my insides buzzing with a panicked sort of excitement as I got moving again. My breathing hitched as I crossed the border into the wild, leaving the city behind me. There were no scouts anywhere in sight. I was free. Wherever I wanted to go, whatever I wanted to do—

no one could stop me now. I was my own man.

I ran for the trees and struck out toward Maldobar. That's where I had to go. I wanted to see it for myself, the land where I was born. A kingdom filled with people with round ears like mine, and where dragons ruled the wide, open skies. It would take days to get to the boundary line, and that was if I didn't stop or get eaten by something first.

It sounded good at the time.

I kept up a fierce pace, sprinting along the tree-paths until my lungs burned and there were miles between Mau Kakuri and me. The rising sun was just beginning to break through the cracks in the canopy overhead, casting long beams of ethereal golden light all the way to the ground below. Fresh dew dripped off every petal and leaf. Colorful little birds squabbled and chased one another through the limbs.

And right about now, Kiran would be figuring out that I was gone.

Clenching my teeth, I pushed those thoughts from my mind and listened to the jungle instead. I couldn't hear the rumble of the falls or smell their moisture in the air anymore. Instead, I heard the ambient sounds of life all around me—the dripping of dewdrops pattering from the leaves, the rustle of bird wings, the chattering of insects, and the distant calls of sarbien monkeys. I spooked a young shrike that was napping in a sunny spot out on an open branch, warming his translucent wings. He hissed at me as I darted by, but didn't give chase.

Finally, I stopped to catch my breath and check my bearings. The jungle was a tangled mass of dense greenery and entwined

tree branches. Getting lost would have been easy, but the first thing Kiran had ever taught me was how to navigate. It's the first thing all gray elves learned because if you couldn't find your way back home, you were guaranteed to get eaten by something.

The elves had their own system of roadways along the broad limbs of the trees, far above the jungle floor. They marked them with symbols engraved into certain places on the trees. A circle meant a road leading north. A circle with a horizontal line through it meant east, one with a vertical line meant west, and one with a single dot in the center meant south. Easy, right?

But those were just the main pathways that led between major cities. There were plenty of other destinations in the jungle like temples, mineral springs, hunting grounds, burial sites, and things like that. There were also warnings of things to avoid—like a grove of Greevwood trees that had sprung up too close to a city or village.

Novice warriors and scouts weren't supposed to leave those marked paths. But if you ever found yourself lost in an unknown part of the jungle, far from a city where someone might not hear you calling for help, there was always *the* tree.

Kiran told me that the humans navigated using the stars. Because of the dense jungle canopy, we didn't get to see the stars often. Or the moon, either, for that matter. However, if you climbed high enough to peek out of the canopy, you could see the tree from almost anywhere. Day or night, winter or summer, the tree was there. It never changed—never dropped its leaves in fall or grew an inch in springtime.

Paligno had planted that tree when the lapiloque had died—

or at least, that's what everyone believed. They said it had just sprung up, willed to being by the ancient god of life to cover the lapiloque's burial place and guard the entrance to his tomb. That was the reason the gray elves had adopted the custom of planting trees over the gravesites of their own loved ones. Regardless of how it had gotten there, the lapiloque's tree had grown to a size that towered over all the others in Luntharda. It loomed over the canopy, and could be seen for miles and miles. It was a fixed point, which is all you needed to navigate.

I'd only seen the tree once. When I was ten, Kiran had taught me how to climb up to the very top of the canopy and hoist myself through the barrier of leaves and brambles. Up there, the air blew freely, the sky was endless, and the sun was like a warm caress on my skin. I could see the tree from Mau Kakuri. It wasn't that far away, though it was closer to the boundary line with Maldobar than the city. Kiran said few people went to see it now. It was out of great respect for lapiloque that they let him sleep in peace, leaving the temple grounds untouched and the area around it free of civilization. They believed sincerely that one day he would rise again.

A load of crap, really. If there was one thing I knew for certain, it's that dead people stayed dead.

FIVE



After two days, I was exhausted. I ran until my feet were so sore and blistered from my shoes I could barely stand to take them off. I didn't dare stop for more than a few minutes; just long enough to eat, drink, and catch my breath. I knew every second that passed meant Kiran was gaining on me.

I wasn't going to make it easy on him. I doubled back on my own steps occasionally, avoided leaving as much trace evidence as possible, but I knew Kiran was a keen hunter—arguably one of the best in Mau Kakuri. He would find my trail and he would be relentless in following it. My only chance was to get to the boundary first.

I stood out in Luntharda. My red hair, thicker human build, height, even my voice was a dead giveaway that I wasn't one of

them. But if I could cross over into Maldobar, I could vanish into the tapestry of other humans without a trace. He'd never be able to find me.

At least, that's what I was hoping.

I limped along a narrow branch, surveying the ground, searching for a good, secluded place to hide and rest. The rushing roar of water drowned out the other jungle sounds. I could smell it close by like a crisp sweetness in the air.

Generally, this wouldn't be a good place to stop and make camp. Water meant lots of foot traffic—both from elves and from prey animals. Prey meant predators, which was something I didn't particularly want to contend with when I didn't have a bow.

But my water skin was empty. I was parched, my feet were aching, and I was far enough from any village or city that I felt confident I wouldn't see anyone else who might be able to tell my very angry parental guardian which direction I'd gone.

I began the steep climb down out of the trees. Either I was going to die or get something to drink, it was as simple as that. Slowly, step-by-step, I made my way across the damp soil to the edge of the water. I gave one last long look around and then cupped my hands into the water.

I drank until I could feel my stomach sloshing, and then I slung my bag off my shoulders. I refilled my water skin and slipped it back into my bag before I started taking off my shoes. I had angry blisters between my toes and my heels were bruised. Soaking them made it a little better, though.

After catching a few small fish by hand, I packed up my

things and retreated to the safety of the trees. I chose a dark place on a smaller, narrower limb to curl up and eat my dinner—raw. Gross, but I couldn't risk lighting a fire. Fire drew curious creatures from the depth of the jungle and that was exactly the kind of attention I was trying to avoid.

With my back against the trunk and my knees pulled to my chest, I gazed up at the interwoven branches of the trees overhead. It wasn't exactly comfortable. I was cold and sore. Sitting that way made my neck cramp. I couldn't help but think about how, miles from here, there was a soft, warm bed in a safe house where I could have been sleeping. Kiran wasn't a great cook, but at least whatever he made for us wasn't raw. I wondered where he was. For all I knew, he could be just a few feet away, watching me right this second, waiting to see if I would give up and go back home.

I sort of hoped he was.

I thought about Enyo, too. I hadn't even said goodbye. Our last words hadn't been nice ones. I'd said horrible things just so she would stay away from me. Kiran was right; she was just a child, too naïve to see that nothing good would ever come from being close to me.

Sure, I had gotten her into trouble plenty of times over the years. But this situation wasn't anything like those. This wasn't some prank, and I'd never set out to intentionally hurt her. If I let her get close to me now, knowing what Noh might do, I was intentionally putting her life at risk. And that wasn't so different from murder. Not in my mind, anyway.

For her sake, I hoped she would just forget about me.

I started nodding off as I listened to the sound of the water and imagined myself being carried away on it, weightless in the cool current.

I wondered if that's what it felt like to fly.



There were voices in the dark.

Someone was shouting.

I bolted to my feet out of a sound sleep, my mind hazy and my hands immediately going to my weapons. I looked around in a daze. But I was alone—nothing but the sound of the rushing water below.

At first, I thought it had been a dream. Or maybe Noh was playing tricks on me. He did that sometimes, the jerk.

Then I heard it again—the voices of men shouting echoed through the trees. My pulse raced. I squeezed my blades tighter.

Kiran? No. I knew he wouldn't be that stupid. Making that kind of noise in the wild at night was essentially a death wish.

Besides the voices sounded foreign. I couldn't understand them, at first, but then I recognized their language.

They were speaking the human tongue.

The noise carried through the darkness, making it hard to pinpoint where it was coming from. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flicker of light. Fire winked in the gloom.

Fire *and* noise? Seriously, how stupid could they be?

I crept closer, stalking carefully through the shadows along the overhanging limbs. A high-pitched yipping and guttural snarling made me freeze in place.

There they were—a company of men crowded together with torches and swords raised, pinned at the edge of the river by a snarling pack of snagwolves. The men wore thick armor made of metal and long cloaks of red and blue. Their hair was cut short and their ears were rounded. They were human—just like me.

Two of them were badly wounded and bound to makeshift stretchers made from limbs and vines. Their comrades gathered around them to stand guard against their attackers. Meanwhile, the snagwolves circled, their noses twitching at the smell of blood and fresh meat.

Suddenly, two of the men stepped off into the water. They tried to swim for the opposite bank, but the current was swift and their heavy metal armor weighed them down. They sank like stones, disappearing beneath the depths. There was nothing anyone could do.

The snagwolves closed in, their bright green eyes shining wickedly under the orange glow of the torches. They were spooked by the fire, although not enough to be discouraged. They hunted as a unit, and were as cautious as they were cunning. Their gnarled, green-tinted pelts mimicked the texture of roots and plants so they blended in perfectly with the jungle. They could hide in plain sight, and their powerful jaws could crush your bones to splinters. Once one got his teeth into you, there was little chance you'd ever be able to pry him off.

It was bad news for the soldiers.

The men tried to muster. One of them kept shouting over all the noise, calling to the others. He wore a different cloak than the rest, more intricate with a golden eagle embroidered onto the back.

The sight of that emblem struck a chord in my brain. That was the mark of Maldobar's king—so these had to be the men Kiran had been asked to find.

It was a miracle they'd made it this far. But at the rate things were going, they were all going to die long before Kiran or anyone else found them.

That is, unless *someone* was willing to get their hands dirty.

A snagwolf lunged at the leader of the soldiers, locking its powerful jaws around his calf. The man shouted and raised his sword to strike. Suddenly, a second snagwolf got a mouthful of his cloak and dragged him to the ground. His comrades stepped in to help, and were immediately attacked by the rest of the pack.

It was total chaos.

I clenched my teeth and coiled my legs beneath me; gripping my blades so tightly my fingers went numb. I took a breath and leapt out of the tree, hurling myself into the air with my arms spread wide. As soon as I felt my feet touch the ground, I kicked into a roll to ease the impact. It still knocked the wind out of me, and I was seeing stars when I sprang to my feet again.

But there was no time to recover. The fight was on.

I plunged both of my blades into the side of the nearest snagwolf. The creature shrieked in pain, drawing the attention

of the rest of the pack. Their wicked green eyes turned to me, recognizing me as the greatest threat to their dinner plans.

Ripping my kaski free of the dead snagwolf, I sank into a crouch as the pack converged, attacking me in waves of snapping vice grip jaws and razor-sharp teeth. I whirled my weapons, spinning through maneuvers and slicing through the monsters one after another. I could hear Kiran's voice in my head, chiseling his training methods into my brain. *Don't think. Feel the rhythm of your enemy. Good. Now, react. Counter. Faster. Move with him. Never drop your arms. Watch your footing. Keep your breathing steady. Good.*

I kicked one snagwolf square across the snout, sending it rolling while I rammed my weapon through another's chest. My white blades were stained pink with blood. I was more focused than I'd ever been. My blood ran hot through my veins. I ducked as a snagwolf leapt at me, kicking into a roll and thrusting both kaski upwards into the belly of the animal as it sailed past me.

Out of nowhere, my shoulder exploded with pain. I yelled. One of the snagwolves had jumped me from behind. Now I was in its grip. Its jaws clamped down on my collarbone with crushing force, threatening to snap it in half.

I flailed, tried to writhe free, but the more I fought, the harder the animal squeezed. My arm started to go numb. I felt my weapon slip out of my hand. Not good.

Suddenly, the snagwolf let me go.

I dropped to the earth, reeling from the pain and the sensation of my own hot blood soaking through my clothes. When I looked back, I saw the leader of the human soldiers

standing over me. He had rammed his sword up to the hilt through the snagwolf's neck. One wrenching flip of his wrist twisted the blade and cut the monster's head clean off.

He looked down at me, breathless and pasty with terror. He asked me something in the human language, but I was too delirious to understand.

Then I saw it. Another one of the creatures stalking him from behind, green eyes winking in the dark, shoulders pumping in preparation for the attack.

I didn't think. There wasn't time. I still had one blade in my hand when I sprang up, shoved the human leader out of the way, and met the snagwolf in mid-air. I howled like a maniac and swung, jamming my kaski into the open mouth of the beast.

We fell together. The snagwolf landed on top of me, my blade still lodged in its open mouth—rammed straight through to the back of its head. The full weight of the beast bore down on me, crushing my lungs so I couldn't get a good breath until I managed to wrench myself out from under it.

I didn't have either of my weapons anymore when I staggered to my feet. My head was swimming with pain. Blood ran down my back. My vision started to spot and tunnel and I had to clench my teeth and flex my legs to force blood back up into my head.

Then I saw them—four angry snagwolves prowling toward me from all sides.

I was going to die.

I bent down to snatch up the nearest object I could use for a weapon: a big rock.

I raised the rock and shouted at the snagwolves, daring them to come at me.

The monsters recoiled, hesitating. They winced, tucked their tails, and bolted away from me. I stood in stunned silence, watching as the rest of the snagwolves retreated into the jungle, yelping and shrieking in panic like they couldn't get away fast enough.

A cold blast of breath tickled the back of my neck. I dropped the rock and slowly turned around.

Noh was lurking behind me, his form boiling like a menacing black cloud. He looked like a large, shadowy wolf again, which was kind of a relief. But that didn't mean I was happy to see him—even if he had saved my life.

His red eyes glowed in the dark and his mouth was twisted into a smug, wolfish grin. *"Death. Blood. Carnage. Slaughter. Such a glorious smell!"*

I frowned. "I won't thank you."

"You don't need to. I am eager to serve you, my master."

My gaze followed the trail the snagwolves had taken back into the jungle. "Go, then," I said at last. "Make sure they don't return."

"Yes, as you command." Noh's outline shimmered with enthusiasm and he vanished without a sound or trace.

When I turned around again, I was met with a crowd of bloodied, wide-eyed human soldiers. They were gathering around me cautiously, and I could sense the tension in the air as they looked me over. I was a strange sight for them, a human dressed like a gray elf accompanied by a weird-black-misty-

demon-thing. Not something you come across every day, even in Luntharda. They were eyeing me up as though they weren't sure whose side I was on.

Unfortunately, I didn't get a chance to argue my case. I smiled, managed a small wave of greeting ... and passed out cold.

END OF SAMPLE