

# Chapter One

Death.

The air was heavy with the scent of it and the smell made my eyes water. Breathing through my mouth, I ducked my face away from the stench that wafted off the pile of bodies just a few yards away and lowered my eyes to watch my leather covered toes as I scurried through the village. Lifting the deep green wool hood of my cloak up over my head, I glanced behind me for any observing eyes. My size had often made it difficult to remain unnoticed; my long legs and wide shoulders were not easily concealed amongst the typical small statures of the northern folk of Noorde Point, and I curled myself inwards in fear of being caught as I made my way to the boundary.

I had grown up here in the tight walls of the village, never venturing far past the tall wooden barrier that surrounded the lowly community. Instead, I had become rather fond of the way the giant line of trunks cast its shadow across the small worn-down sheds and houses in the afternoons, and truly, the line of bark was the only thing in the village that ever really made me feel small. Even now I had to lift my head while I rose on my toes to scan for the sharpened tips of timber that pointed to the sky. I was still a few strides away, and with one last glance at the pile of corpses that were covered in a thin white sheet, I lumbered my way through the narrow back street that led to the opening I had made at the bottom of the wooden wall.

Finding the hole easily, I tucked my long fingers into the soft, worn leather gloves I had stolen from the tavern and dropped to my knees in front of the thick wooden barrier. I winced at the icy sludge that now soaked through my breeches, and my hands grasped at my pack before shoving it through the opening. Certain it was sitting safely on the other side, I slid my way through the hole on my stomach, doing my best to shuffle my massive length under with whatever grace I could muster.

Belly crawling the last few feet, I immediately regretted not bringing more clothing with me as I tried to keep as much of my torso out of the mud. I had been in too much of a hurry to pack accordingly, trying to make a swift escape while my parents had been distracted with the small remnants of the fall harvest. It had been a dry summer and a worse autumn, the cold roaring in faster than it ever had, and no one had been

prepared for the onslaught of frost and frigid temperatures. Least of all my family. Our crops would not last us through this winter, though now it was the least of our concerns.

What had brought our village to its knees was the fever that had torn its way through the community. It shook us to the core; it was unlike anything we had ever seen. Most infants succumbed to it overnight, and the elders had not managed any better. The councilmen said that it had come from a travelling ship that had docked south in Port Gordian, that the strangers from the west had brought it, and from there it had spread across Elrin before finally reaching us in the north.

Noorde Point and our neighbouring villages had been greatly affected and received little help from the immortals of Wahstand, who were unchanged by the disease. In fact, when we had written to them in desperation, we had received only a single letter back from the capital. It had been full of empty well wishes and a retelling of a similar fever that had swept through Elrin hundreds of years ago, just before the war. Perhaps it was a cautionary tale, or maybe a harsh reminder that humans did not fare well when a sickness overtook the lands. Either way, it was obvious that they would not send aid for a community of lowly mortals.

For weeks we had gone without any remedy until gossip had begun to spread of a witch in the west end of the Swallows, a legendary marsh that was hidden away in the trees. It was said that she was a Healer's halfling and had the ability to craft a tonic to fight the fever. Of course, I had initially mocked the whispers, but as the fever spread through the townspeople, I grew more desperate, willing the quiet chatter to be true. I had discussed my idea with Elizabeth, who had originally argued with my rashness, but as more and more of us perished she was forced to agree. We were willing to try anything at this point, and so, I found myself leaving my home in search of a cure.

Now kneeling, I took out the long wool scarf Elizabeth had made me in preparation for this journey. She had been insistent to help me in any way she could, and with the gusts of wind blowing into me, I was grateful for her thoughtfulness. The landscape this far north was unforgiving, with more wilderness than settlements, though it was beautiful. Northern Elrin was filled with dense forests and high hills and cliffs. In the summer some may even call it paradise, but now, as I pulled myself to my feet ankle deep in mud and old leaves, it felt like a wasteland. A wasteland I had decided to journey across based on the gossip circling behind closed doors.

Trudging through the darkening woods, I shivered from the icy wind and eerie silence as I set a strong pace. The air was oddly still, and the only noises heard were my footfalls and heartbeat that rang in my ears. Tugging my hood closer, I tried to pretend that the light of the day was not disappearing between the thick branches of the cedars that towered above me, ignoring the way the limbs of green reached for the last glow as if they were desperate for any taste of sunlight.

Pausing in the darkening woods, I pulled my compass from my cloak and remained still while I waited for the needle to point me towards my destination. But my eyes narrowed as the dainty piece of metal in the centre of the glass just spun and spun, so quickly I couldn't tell the ends apart.

Tipping my chin, I searched around me for any sign that I was heading in the right direction, but everything looked the same. I could have been walking in circles and I would have had no way to tell. I balled my fists and my eyes filled with tears of frustration. I had no idea how long I had been walking; the shortage of sunlight had thrown me off and now I was disoriented. I tucked the compass away, my fingers sliding across my leather belt until they found purchase on the cold handle of my dagger. I grasped it in my fist tightly before pulling it from its sheath and continuing on.

*"Skylahr."*

My name was whispered through the trees as if a nymph spirit was taunting me from afar, slurring my name through drunken, lustful lips. It was a quiet voice, full of wanting, and it sent shivers down my spine, making my stomach drop in panic.

Lowering my hood to give myself better vision of the area surrounding me, I hurried my pace, but the change of speed and adrenaline made my feet unsteady, and I had taken only half a dozen strides before I was slipping on ice and tumbling to the ground. Lifting my hands to catch myself, I forgot the cold steel clasped in my palm, and the sharp edge of metal clipped my right wrist, making a clean, narrow slice through my sleeve and into my skin.

"Shit!" I hissed and lifted my arm to inspect the wound, the harsh sting too distracting to ignore. Blood oozed sluggishly, the crimson bright against the pale skin that surrounded it. However, it was not deep enough to seriously harm me, and I sighed with relief.

“Thank you, Jester,” I murmured to the God of luck. An inch over and I would have cut through the prominent blue vein. Pulling my sleeve back up, I sat back on my heels and took in my surroundings. There was still no sound or sign of another living creature, and it soon became obvious that I was ill prepared for this excursion. I would be very lucky if this spill was my only one while I crossed the icy forest floor, and I was close to venturing past the point of no return. And though I had not located the Swallows, I knew I needed to go back home and figure out a better way to make the journey. Next time I would have to bring more supplies with me and apparently find a new compass. I made a mental list as I turned to follow the footsteps, I had made in the damp soil, but as I searched the ground, three were all I counted. Apart from those prints, there was no other sign I had been in the forest. It was as if someone or something had come in behind me and swept away my trail, and the thought had the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

Cursing angrily, I sheathed my dagger as a precaution before I pulled my hood up and began to run. My long legs covered the ground swiftly, however, I was not fast enough. The years spent hunting with my father had taught me to follow my instincts and if they were right, whatever whispered my name had found me and I was no longer the hunter but rather the prey.

Darting rapidly to the side, I found the closest trunk that would manage to hide the bulk of my size and ducked behind it, kneeling to make myself less visible. Holding my breath, I leaned against the bark while listening to the air around me and closed my eyes to focus. To my right, I could just make out the sound of wet, frozen soil squishing beneath a heavy weight.

*Four even steps,* I thought to myself.

So not human then, but a beast, and a beast of considerable size—something small wouldn’t be so noticeable. Bent low to the ground, I waited and waited for the animal to make an appearance, but I was still alone. Whatever it was had left, or it was observing me, and I couldn’t be sure which. Anxiety punched through my chest while I tried to come up with a strategy. I could run and pray to the Gods I would make it, or I could sit and wait it out, which could inadvertently make me an easy catch.

I remained still for two more heartbeats before I took my chance.

Bolting left, I twisted and turned as I attempted to dodge whatever attack was coming, not taking the gamble to look back, even when my lungs burned from exhaustion. Instead, I ran faster, pumping my arms

while I willed my legs to carry me. I ran for what felt to be miles but found no light, no clearing, and the trees never seemed to end.

Even when my hair matted against my sweat-slicked forehead and my chest ached, I was still in the cover of darkness. If anything, it felt as if I was running deeper into the woods, like the world had turned on its side and everything was backwards.

Skidding to a stop, I doubled over and braced my hands on my knees while I gulped in the cold air. The frost burned the back of my throat while my legs wobbled, knees knocking in the effort to hold my weight. My cheeks were damp from the tears that had escaped, and I wiped them away roughly before pausing. For a moment I heard nothing, but then the four dull thuds were inching closer and closer.

Consumed by my panic, I hadn't even noticed the unfamiliar warm tingle that had started in the base of my spine until it had grown into a flame of heat that burned through my veins. Gasping in pain, I cried out as the inferno crashed through me, certain that this was what it felt like to die.

"Huntress, protect me," I prayed to the dead Goddess, and then my world went black.

## Chapter Two

Pain was the first thing I was aware of when I awoke. A deep throbbing ache echoed through my head, like my heartbeat had been given occupancy of my skull and began to pound away in there. Squinting my eyes open, I turned to my side and retched onto the floor. My throat burned as I emptied my stomach, heaving and spluttering until I had nothing left to give. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand as I pulled myself up, taking deep breaths before looking around me.

I had been prepared to find myself in the middle of those damn dark woods, ready to try to patch my skin together and accept my fate. But none of those things came to pass. Instead, I found myself perched on the edge of my bed back home in Noorde Point.

“How in the hell?” I whispered as I peered down at myself. I still wore the same breeches and tunic I had on the day before, though they were filthy. Glancing down at my feet, I noticed my boots too were covered in dried mud, ending the trail of dirt that was scattered across the floor from the doorway. Closing my eyes, I pressed my palms against the lids to soothe the hammering in my skull while wondering if it all had been a nightmare.

But as I cradled my face, I remembered my fall and I tensed, waiting to feel the inevitable stinging pinch from the scratch on my forearm, and yet, no pain came. Lowering my arms, I winced at the morning light before tugging my sleeve down. There was indeed a rip right through the rough material, but the skin underneath was smooth, not even so much as a scratch blemishing the skin. However, the relief of being uninjured only added to my confusion. If I had indeed dreamt the entire thing, why was there so much evidence to the contrary? Had I reached the point of exhaustion that I had been delusional? Was that even possible? Or was it the fever? Maybe I had finally fallen victim to its clutches.

My head spun and the feeling of acid bubbling up my throat came back to me in heavy waves. Swallowing the bitterness down, I stood on weak legs and stumbled blindly to the wash basin that was perched on the dresser. Holding the edges of the wood in my hands, I took a deep breath before wringing out the cloth that was folded next to it. I wiped the sweat and grit from my face before tearing my tunic off over my

shoulders. My breeches and boots came next, piling onto the floor in a heap, and I made myself as presentable as I could, watching my reflection move in the dusty mirror that hung in front of me. My round face was pale, and the only normal colour left was the splash of freckles over my nose. My eyes had deep blue shadows under them, making my appearance even more unappealing than it usually was. My wide shoulders were hunched, and I looked sickly with my bronze waves in disarray.

Perhaps I had caught the fever after all and it was all an illusion, even last night.

Pulling new clothes on quickly, I searched for an alternate pair of boots and cleaned the sickness from the floor before throwing my door open. Racing forward, I had managed only two long strides before colliding with a slightly smaller body in the hallway. The other person was sent sprawling to the ground in a tangle of long, thin limbs. I blinked down at them only to realize it was Liam Roy, the blacksmith's son. His mop of mousey-brown hair was a tangled mess as it blocked his plain dark eyes from me. Awkwardly, he pulled himself up, his head coming just to my brow bone before he looked sheepishly at my face.

"Skylahr!" he greeted cheerfully but his voice cracked, causing crimson to fill his cheeks.

"How are you? Are you alright?" Liam paused, looking over my shoulder into my room before prattling on. "What happened last night? You were acting so strangely, I wanted to be sure you were well." He stuffed his hands into his pockets while he shifted from one foot to the other nervously, talking so quickly I was unable to respond.

Recently, I had even less patience for Liam than normal. He had spent the majority of last winter chasing me around the village, insistent that we should marry. His only reasoning being that it would give me security that most women desired at my age, and it would help me avoid the scrutiny I was often on the receiving end of. Little did he know; however, I was fully aware that his father was longing to get a hold of our lands, and a union between us was the easiest way to secure them. I had refused to be a bargaining chip then and now I refused purely out of spite. I had too much pride to give in.

"What are you going on about?" I asked, finally focusing enough on his words that I was able to register them. What could he possibly mean? Had I said something about my travels in the forest? Would I be reprimanded for sneaking out through the wall?

“You don’t remember?” he asked with a tilt of his head, eyes lingering on my chest too long for my liking before he glanced away shyly. “I had called on you earlier, but your parents didn’t know where you had gone, and Elizabeth would not tell me either, so I waited for you.”

Ignoring the shiver that ran down my spine at the thought of Liam lurking around my house, I let him continue. “Then when you finally appeared, filthy and covered in mud, I called out for you, but it was as if you couldn’t even hear me.”

I stood in front of him for only a moment longer before pushing my way past and out the front door. Given that the entire night felt like a fantasy my mind had conjured, I had imagined that the outside world would have been different in some way. However, standing in the entrance of our home, I realized everything seemed as it should be. The smells wafted from the market two roads over, and the sound of the blacksmiths shoeing echoed in the air. The only things that were unusual were the glances and stares thrown my way. I had grown used to the looks of those who disapproved of my wardrobe or looked at my height and build with aversion, but these were neither. The people who I caught glancing at me turned away in what could only be described as fear, and some of the villagers went as far as to turn their heads towards each other and whisper quietly before scurrying away. Liam was right; I had obviously made a spectacle of myself even if I couldn’t remember doing so.

Sighing angrily, I dropped my chin down, my shoulders caving in on themselves in an attempt to make myself smaller before I began a brisk pace with Liam close on my heels. Pausing at the chicken coop, I heard the voices of my parents arguing in the barn, and I waited until I was certain I would not be seen before I hurried up the hill towards Elizabeth’s.

Watching my feet until I reached the top, I was seemingly unaware of the person approaching Liam and me until she was too close to avoid. I recognized her as the baker’s daughter, though I could not place her name. Was it Millie? Maybe Molly? We had only one formal introduction at the summer festival earlier in the year, and her cold eyes and twisted grimace at my large appearance had been all the information I needed.

She tugged up her skirts as she quickened her steps to reach us, and when she was an arm’s length away, I noticed her eyes had not been set on my face but rather Liam’s. She reached a hand out to rest on his elbow before smiling sweetly at him.



“Liam! Hello!” She waited for his answering grin before narrowing her brown eyes at me, and I lifted one brow while glaring back. Seeing her as my opportunity to make my escape, I turned to Liam and attempted to excuse myself. However, he was pushy as ever and tried to pull his arm away from Millie-Molly in order to follow me. The girl huffed in irritation before setting her attention back on me. I watched as her face went from hostile to puzzled, her eyes holding my own, looking from my left to right, studying them closely.

“What?” I snapped angrily, growing impatient with her gawking.

“Your eyes...” She paused, now looking more nervous rather than confused. “They’re hazel.”

I slid my gaze from her over to Liam and back, waiting for either of them to elaborate, but in Liam’s defense he looked just as perplexed as I was. My hazel eyes had always been the only feature of my face that was worth taking notice of. They were not just a light brown with a mix of grey, but rather a combination of emerald greens, golden hues, and flecks of what could only be called silver. They stood out from my awkward plain face and were difficult to miss.

“Yes.” I nodded dumbly, confirming what I already knew.

“But yesterday they were...blue.” She whispered so quietly I could barely make out the words over the cold wind that blew around us. Liam took a step closer to her in what seemed to be concern, his brows pinching.

“Mabel, what are you talking about?” Oh, Mabel. Right.

“Liam, I saw her come through the gates last night.” She paused before throwing a suspicious glare back at me. “And her eyes were blue. A striking ice blue.”

Liam and I looked at each other, neither of us saying anything. Perhaps she had been too far into her wine? Or had the fever taken her too and these were the early symptoms?

Liam was far more concerned than I, and as he studied her carefully, I saw another opportunity. Using his worry as an opening, I firmly excused myself again, watching as Liam cupped her elbow to spin her back towards her father’s bakery with a reassuring hand on her back. When they had disappeared from sight, I continued on my way, though my mind was spinning at her odd reaction. Although I could not recall the night before, there was no possible explanation for what she had dreamt up. She was obviously mistaken.

The familiar narrow path that led to Elizabeth's modest house was a comfort. I knew my friend would be able to aid me in my confusion; she had that way about her. Always logical and full of reason. She would most definitely have an answer for my missing memory, or at least a theory of some sort.

Lifting the latch on the solid wooden door, I entered. The home was warm, the fire burning hotly in the far side of the small kitchen, and I could hear her humming in the back room where the spices and flour were kept. I crept around the corner and waited patiently, listening to her light footsteps pad their way closer until I had the perfect time to jump from behind the wall. Her shriek echoed around us loudly before she threw the cup of wine she was holding in her hand at me.

"You asshole!" she swore at me while her pale, delicate face regained its pretty colour. Elizabeth's deep brown eyes narrowed up at me as she tipped her head back to study my face carefully, her gazing taking in the blue shadows that hung tiredly under my lower lashes.

"What happened?" she asked while ushering me to take a seat at the feeble wooden table, glaring at me when I tried to refuse. Elizabeth was small but mighty; she barely came to my shoulder, but on a bad day even I was afraid of her. Unwilling to argue any further, I dropped into the chair while she observed me carefully.

"I don't know. That's why I'm here. I have no recollection of last night, and I was hoping you would have some insight." I shrugged.

"Nothing whatsoever?" Her forehead wrinkled in concern.

"This morning I woke up in bed, covered in mud, and the final memory I have from last night is getting lost looking for the Swallows. Something had been following me and I had run as far as I could and then—" I paused, searching for some way to explain what came next. "And then nothing."

"Nothing," she repeated, frowning at me.

"That's it. Just black nothingness."

Unfortunately, Elizabeth had never mastered the skill of concealing her feelings and her disappointment was evident. I knew she had hoped that I would return with answers or even better—a remedy. The last thing we had anticipated was an entire night forgotten and nothing to show for the trouble of my journey.

The fire burned and cracked behind us while we sat in silence, neither of us certain what to say next, and I sighed as I trained my eyes on the glass window that looked out into the street. The roads had been less crowded with the fever spreading, but it seemed even more empty than usual today, and the vacancy only echoed my failure while the feeling of hopelessness filled the room. Now that the fever was rampant, we would all succumb to it eventually, that was for certain.

My chest filled with grief, and as I sat there beside the fire, I bowed my head and prayed, silently begging for someone or something to hear me. But the Gods were silent, as silent as they had been for the last five hundred years, and the familiar pressure of desperation fell on my chest again.

My voice broke the quiet.

“Tomorrow.” I swallowed; decision made. “Tomorrow I go back.”



Avoiding my parents had been easier than anticipated that afternoon when I returned. I knew that they had to have learned about my sneaking off, but they did not speak of it. In fact, the only thing my mother mentioned was the mud I had trudged through the house. If only I had been so lucky with the rest of the town. Try as I might, I could not avoid the whispers that echoed behind me on the winds when I passed through the streets leaving Elizabeth's. Peering eyes and judgement followed me wherever I ventured for the rest of the day, only confirming my bold entrance through the gates the night before had drawn more attention to myself than normal. So much so, that the tales of my whereabouts that night had grown as the day wore on, some theories surprising even me.

It was said that I had a lover, tucked away past the village limits. Though the more believable rumours said I was scouting beyond the walls to find my family new land in hopes of escaping the fever, only to be shunned by the creatures of the forest. Or perhaps I had lost my mind to the disease and had gotten lost in the delusions. That particular rumour had struck a chord, leaving a sick feeling in my gut. After all, had I not come to that same conclusion? Pushing the whispers from my head, I waited until my parents turned in for the night before heading back to Elizabeth's.

In the cover of darkness, I slipped into her home carefully, and we sat ourselves in front of the fire again, devising a strategy while we slurped on watery broth and tea. When the details were finalized, Elizabeth had taken my empty pack and filled it with all that she could spare before hugging me tightly and sending me off into the night. We knew waiting until the dawn of the following morning was not an option any longer; I needed a time where I would not be seen. And now that people had a reason to observe me more carefully, daylight would no longer be practical. Not to mention the guards that had been stationed at the gate.

Although we were not prisoners in our homes, we were expected to report our travels, and I was sure busting through the wooden entrance in the middle of the night would not bode well for me. Nor would escaping through the secret jagged hole in the wall for a second time. Additional chances were not freely given by us people of the north. It was not what we were taught.

So, although I was thankful for the darkness that kept me hidden from prying eyes, I couldn't help but long for the warmth of the sun as I crawled my way through the opening. When I had finally made it clear through the border, I jogged into the cover of the forest before pulling Elizabeth's compass out of my pocket. This time I wanted to make certain that the needle did in fact sit and settle one way before I entered farther into the looming woods.

Having a clear indication west, I tucked the compass back safely under my cloak. The forest was nearly black, and I tried my best to keep my breaths steady. Panic would not be a friend to me tonight if things did turn badly again, and I needed to keep my wits about me if I wanted to have a chance of making it to the Swallows. Luckily, once I was through the threshold, the trees were not as intimidating this time around, and I wondered if it was because something had changed or if I was more prepared for them. Moving quickly through the dense forest, I willed myself to look back only once, making sure that the light from the village behind me was gone before I was truly surrounded by blackness once again.

I had managed to walk a distance before my shoulder began to burn and tingle where the strap of my sack hung, its heavy weight swinging back and forth with every stride, and I was cautious of the strong movement. The added bulk could easily tip me over if I lost my footing, resulting in a worse injury than a minor cut to the wrist. Mindful of that, I switched shoulders and observed the woods. They were still just as silent as they had been, but the sour taste of fear was absent from my tongue. Feeling more at ease, I walked

with purpose, this time sure of the direction. However, in case my compass had steered me wrong, I made sure I would be able to turn on my heel and walk straight back. At one point I had thought to leave clues or a trail, but I could only imagine what could be lurking in this place, and I could not risk the chance of leading anything back home. If I were to die, I could take comfort in knowing my family's safety would not be jeopardized by my poor judgement.

Continuing my straight path, I realized all sense of time disappeared as my surroundings grew darker, and had it not been for the burning in my legs, I would have thought I was a mere few yards from the village. My thighs were strong from farm work and labour but covering this amount of distance at such a strong pace for so long made them ache to my bones. Finally, when I could no longer ignore the cramping, I searched for a dry clearing where I could rest.

The air came through my dry lips in little bursts, the steam swirling around my eyes, and I tucked my cloak tightly around me before kneeling on the small patch of dry ground that I had found. I would rest for a moment and then continue, I promised myself as my pack slid from my shoulder onto the soft soil, giving my body immediate relief. Pulling it across my lap, I struggled to open it with my cold stiff fingers.

"Shit," I cursed under my breath while my fingers slipped over the freezing metal buckle half a dozen times before I brought a gloved hand to my mouth. Pinching a leather fingertip between my slightly crooked front teeth, I tugged the material off. Exposed to the air, my fingers flinched before finally getting the buckle open and they grasped at the stale bread and the wool scarf before taking both out. I wrapped the wool up and around my hair to protect my ears from the cold, then quietly snacked on the crust of the bread while I regained my strength. Swallowing loudly, I finished the crust before closing the buckle tightly and swinging my bag up over my shoulder once again. When I was sure-footed, I tucked the wool tightly against my chin before readying myself to continue.

Falling into a steady pace, I again took in the seclusion of the forest. Though tonight the quietness and isolation were a relief. The attention I had received the previous day had been unwelcomed and the gossip ate at my nerves. I had always been different, never fluttering my lashes at the men or gossiping with the girls my age. My physical appearance was not one of beauty, and I was often found to be too intimidating to welcome the attention of my peers. In fact, I was regarded as unpleasant looking; my shoulders were wide set, arms

heavy with muscle, my hips were awkwardly placed, and I stood at least a head taller than the men. But being in the forest now, I finally felt small compared to the trees around me. They dwarfed me completely and I was strangely giddy with the feeling. Being in the wilderness of the north had always brought me peace and I was pleased that tonight was no different. It was so unlike the day before.

Losing track of the distance I had covered, I noticed that the woods had begun to thin. The cover was no longer the thick darkness it had once been, and I realized dawn was near as the golden hues of sunlight peeked through the branches. I wished I knew how close I was to the Swallows. There was no definite path; the legends of the magic marsh had been passed through the northern villages for years. But no one had any actual idea if the place existed, and as I walked on under the bright morning sun, I felt defeat sink in my stomach like a rock.

Basking in the warmth of the light, I stopped in my tracks and closed my eyes. I had been walking for hours and there was nothing to show for it. In fact, I couldn't help but feel that this had been a fool's errand. There was no known evidence of this witch's existence besides idle gossip, and I wished I had found another option. Especially now that I had travelled an entire night only to find nothing. There was no sign of any marsh, be it magic or not.

And now it was time to turn back.

Spinning on my heel, I motioned forward only to stop mid-step as something caught my eye to the right of me. There tucked behind two ancient oak trees sat a small house. It was made of stone and clay with wild bushes covering the front, and up along the sides, vines twisted like some sort of growth. Initially I thought perhaps it had been abandoned, but on the back, corner sat a chimney with clouds of smoking slithering out of it.

I grabbed at my dagger and approached the house, taking each step cautiously while I waited for some sign of life. But as I was about to reach the entrance, the door slowly cracked open with a loud groan. Examining the opening, I could just make out one single cloudy eye peering at me from around the wood, its brown colour diluted by a film of grey, and I swallowed before stepping back and raising my dagger in front of me.

Holding my position, I waited as a husky chuckle came from behind the wood and the cold sound of it sent shivers down my spine. Slowly the door swung wide, and the motion stopped my heart as I took in her appearance. Before me stood what I thought was to be a woman—she was small and terribly thin. Silver hair hung limply past her shoulders and her face was pale, almost grey, with a purple tinge to her lips. I had seen features like this only once before, the same colour of skin belonging to a woman who had tumbled into the sea only to be pulled out a day later. She too had brown eyes with a fog painted over them, staring blankly into space. But this creature in front of me appeared to be very much alive.

*“Skylahr Reed.”* Her mouth had barely opened but my name was loud and clear, her voice a terrifying hiss that churned my stomach.

Narrowing my eyes at her, I braced my weight in my knees. If she were to approach, I had to be ready. Her murky eyes watched me carefully, and she smiled, noting my defensive stance, but did not come any closer.

“I have come from Noorde Point. I need your help.” My voice shook as she laughed at me, her lips curling over blackened teeth.

*“You come asking for my service and yet hold that knife as if I am some pig to slaughter?”*

I exhaled loudly before lowering my arm. I knew I could not trust her, but I dropped my hand anyway. I had come all this way and to turn back now would be an act of cowardice.

“Please. I’ve been told you could help me. A fever has spread like fire through my village and people are dying.” I lowered my chin in hopes to appear smaller, to appease her in some way. “Please, I need your help. I will do anything.”

She studied me closely, and it seemed that my change in posture and my pleading had been all the action needed as she glided towards me, her dirty skirts swirling around her feet. Watching her warily, I clenched my jaw shut and closed my eyes, bracing myself for contact as she lifted her pale, thin fingers towards my face.

But just as I felt her freezing touch graze my skin, a deafening roar shook the earth I stood on. The noise was so loud it forced my lashes to flutter open just in time to see her sneer as she glared over my shoulder.

*“You brought a friend.”* It took seconds for her words to register and then I too peered backwards.

There, within arm’s reach, stood a massive beast—a wolf larger than any horse I had ever seen. He had black fur that shimmered in the sunlight, and I watched as he moved his paws shoulder width apart. Bracing himself on his forehand, he lowered his head in a snarl, his black lips pulling over massive white fangs as his growl rumbled from his chest.

Keeping my eyes on his muzzle, I grabbed at the hilt of my dagger with shaking fingers and turned my back to the witch, blocking her from the monster.

*“What a surprise,”* she mocked over my shoulder. *“She thinks you are here for her.”*

I shot a glance behind me before sliding my eyes back to the wolf, but his own cool silver orbs were solely focused on the woman, not even blinking my way.

*“Behold, a gift from our mighty God the Protector.”*



## Chapter Three

*The Protector.*

Did I hear her correctly? This massive beast was a gift from the God of old? My eyes flickered back to the witch; my face drawn down in confusion before another snarl burst from the beast's teeth. The sound was nothing short of vicious as he crept closer.

He ignored me while he held the witch's stare, and I watched in fascination as his body stalked closer, moving silently until he was so near that I could feel the heat of his breath against my face. His snout moved slowly, bringing his wet nose to graze against my cheek before sliding it over my shoulder, and I stared straight ahead, not daring to look into his mouth as it opened in a growl. Spittle sprayed from his jaws and landed against my cold skin, forcing my pulse to quicken, and I became acutely aware of just how close those teeth were to my jugular. Teeth that were twice the length of my middle finger.

With one last deafening roar that made my ears ring, he sat back on his haunches, his eyes never leaving the witch, and the message was clear. He was not leaving.

No one moved while his cold silver eyes shifted to mine and I realized they were more human than beast. Holding his gaze for a long moment, I blinked at him stupidly before turning to the witch as her voice gurgled out from her throat.

*"I heard you, you great beast. I will not harm her,"* she snarked at him before raising her eyes to mine.

"You can communicate with him?" I asked, eyes wide, baffled. Her answer was a sharp grin before she jutted her chin out at the wolf.

*"Well enough. He is worried I may take advantage of the lost lone trespasser. Rest assured you will leave my home alive."*

Immediately I noticed she did not say unharmed, only alive, and my nerves grew when she opened her front door wide and gestured for me to follow her in. With one last glance at the black monster, I ducked through the doorway.

Folding myself into the chair she had kicked in my direction, I took in the dark room around me. The little house was filled with cobwebs and dust, and bits of rotting food lay on the floor, leaving the stench of the room so strong I felt the bread in my stomach turn. There were a dozen shelves hung on the wall, each one holding glass vials filled with brightly coloured tonics and concoctions and I prayed to the Gods that one of them was to be my remedy.

*“I am the Lady of the Swallows. You will address me correctly.”* Her voice was cold as her eyes held my own, and I nodded my head silently before dropping my gaze. Watching her slippered feet peek out from beneath her skirts, I noticed she moved around me with grace that could not be human, and I waited as she wandered back and forth across the room until finally her toes stopped just inches from my own booted feet. Lifting my eyes, I looked up into her grey face, waiting for some sort of instruction.

Her eyes were narrowed, her head nodding down, and I followed her gaze to her hand that was outstretched. Not understanding, I sat stock-still until she grew impatient, and her fingers motioned for me to lift my own. I slipped my rough, warm hand into hers, and she twisted it so my palm faced up and then ran a finger across the callouses that coated the flesh. She gazed into my face, and her mouth opened in a horrifying smile before she yanked my limb in front of her eyes, her cold breath tickling my palm. I had been entirely enthralled by the way her clouded brown eyes followed across the skin that it left me distracted and totally unprepared for the yelp that came from my throat when her teeth sank into my flesh.

The pain was sharp, and as I tugged my hand away, she growled at me before biting down with more force. Blood seeped down my arm, running to my elbow and onto the floor, and outside I could hear the roar of the wolf. Surely he had heard my cry of pain, but could he smell my blood? Did he know she would do this? Finally, she lifted her mouth from my palm, her black teeth now maroon in colour and her purple lips shining with my blood as she smiled at me.

*“Delicious. It has been many years since I have tasted the blood of a maid so untouched,”* she purred at me, licking her lips slowly as if to emphasize her delight. Holding my hand to my chest, I ignored the blood that now was seeping into my tunic as my heart raced. Turning away, she grabbed a piece of cloth and held it out for me to take. My fingers hovered over the fabric uncertainly for an instant before I carefully snatched it from her grasp and wrapped the wound.

“You just—why?” My words stumbled out of me as I leaned back against my chair, creating as much space as possible between her teeth and my flesh.

*“You came for a remedy, did you not?”* Her voice was wet and clogged, her throat coated with my blood.

“Yes, my lady,” I answered in a whisper, my injured hand curling in on itself while I watched her carefully.

*“I had to be sure the trade would be worth it.”* She selected a large glass bottle filled with what looked like melted silver from a shelf and my eyes widened in surprise. The witch remained silent as she tipped it towards me, but just as I lifted my hand for it, she snatched the bottle away with a dark, taunting laugh. *“I still need the rest of your payment, child.”*

Her skirts swirled as she strode to the mantel of the fireplace, her fingers tracing the dusty surface until she reached the middle of the ledge. There sat a dark wooden box, which she opened, pulling out a clean silver blade that gleamed in the glow of the fire. Spinning it around in her fingers gracefully, she then stood before me, her hand reaching for my own once again.

When my jaw went slack, she flashed me a predatory smile. *“You look like a rabbit caught in a snare. I don’t want all of it. Just another taste.”*

Unwrapping my hand, I gave her my silent agreement and watched while she dragged the blade across her teeth marks, widening the wound. I bit my lip to keep from gasping in pain, and I instantly knew I had been right about the smell of my blood when I heard another snarl come from the other side of the stone walls. Choosing to ignore the imposing threat of the beast, I trained my eyes on the blood that slowly trickled past the glass rim. The smell of rust and salt was strong and filled the space around us, and as soon as the jar was filled halfway, she pushed my hand back to my chest, obviously deeming the amount enough. Grabbing at the forgotten fabric, I rewrapped the palm and then watched as she slid the tonic towards me before pointing to the door.

Taking the cue to leave, I stood quickly, feeling light-headed but unwilling to stay a moment longer. However, just as my fingers touched the steel of the lock, I heard the witch come closer. Her cold fingers grasped the fabric on my shoulder as she hauled herself an inch away from my ear.

*“A warning, child. I see crimson banners covering the hills and violet eyes that search for you. And with her hatred comes destruction and death. Those of half-blood will finally perish. There is no stopping the Seductress. May the Gods protect you.”*

A shiver ran down my spine as she released my tunic, and I dared not look back at her as I pushed the door open. Squinting at the light that flooded my senses, I blinked to recover my sight before gasping when the wolf stood in greeting. His size once again forced my heart to stutter in my chest as he took a cautious step towards me. His black muzzle lowered, the wet nose snuffling at my arm until it pressed against my wrapped hand. Fearful that the smell of blood might invoke something in him, I shielded it against my chest before stepping out of his way.

The witch had called him a gift from the Protector. She had spoken as if the God of old had summoned this creature. But looking at him now from the corner of my eye, I was certain he was just a wolf. A beast who held magic I was sure, but a beast all the same.

The legends of the Gods had depicted the Protector in many ways. Some spoke of a great being with strength, others said he was humble and cunning. But one similarity they shared was that of his fierce protectiveness and loyalty and his love for the Goddess the Huntress. However, not one mentioned that he would have the power to call on monsters to do his bidding I had never heard a tale such as this.

Walking slowly, I held my breath as my back turned to him. If he was going to kill me, it would be the perfect opportunity to do so now, and I waited for him to seize the chance. However, he chose instead to stroll quietly behind me, keeping a small distance away as if not to frighten me. I managed to wait until we were in the cover of the deepest parts of the forest before I stopped and turned to him. His silver eyes met mine as he tipped his head to the side, ears flickering in question.

“Are you going to hurt me?” I asked out loud. If he could understand the witch, perhaps he could communicate somehow with me as well. Holding my stare, he dropped his head low and to the side and I waited for any other indication. When none came, I took that for my answer and decided to carry on. Keeping a safe distance from his long snout, I rubbed at my wounded hand.

*A warning, child. I see crimson banners covering the hills and violet eyes that search for you.*

The witch's words filled my mind as I put one foot in front of the other. The Seductress was once said to be the Goddess of love and truth and at one time she had fancied herself in love with the Protector. However, the God had turned her away for the Huntress and that had been the beginning of the end.

The Seductress's insane jealousy and rage over the Protector's mate had resulted in the War of the Gods, and it was said that she went mad with power, resulting in the creation of the Crimson army. The scriptures alleged that she had gifted her soldiers with immortality for their alliance and servitude, and they would be her defense against the Protector and his own immortal army, the Lupines.

She was the villain in our stories, and thus her name was rarely spoken. So why would the witch speak her name now? And what did she think the Seductress would want with me?

Deciding it was just a tale to frighten me, I pushed all thought of the Goddess to the back of my mind and peered over my shoulder to glance back at the wolf. His eyes were still watching me thoughtfully, and I wondered if he would follow me to the village. Would he be a threat there? I decided that if he did turn, I would slide the tonic through the gate and meet my end fighting. My fingers moved of their own accord as they felt under my cloak for my dagger. It wouldn't do much but if I aimed precisely, I could wound him enough to slow him down.

Completely focused on creating a plan in my mind, I had not noticed that the smell of the village had filled the air, and I squinted my eyes to see the smoke above the tree line. Blinking in confusion, I realized that the time it took to get out of the woods was a mere fraction of the journey I had going into them, and I knew then it must be magic. I wondered if it was the wolf's presence, but when I turned to face him, I was met with an empty forest. His massive black body had disappeared in the space behind me, and my confusion twisted into relief as I bowed my head in prayer.

"Thank you, Huntress," I whispered before lifting my face and searching out the route to the wooden barrier. I confirmed I still had the tonic, and refusing to linger a second longer, I crawled through the hole before creeping my way to Elizabeth's, never pausing until I slid through the back door.

"I know you did not bring your mud into my house." My heart jumped before I turned around on my heel, my eyes wide as I blinked at my friend. Elizabeth was leaning casually against the wall, an apple in her hand while she watched me with a smug grin, her perfectly straight teeth gleaming in mischief.

“Ass,” I hissed at her before sinking onto the bench next to me. She smiled before coming to perch at my side. Biting into her apple loudly, she waited for me to say something but instead I opened my cloak and handed her the glass bottle filled with silver. Her brown eyes widened at the sight of it before she took it from my hand. Studying it carefully, she turned to me.

“You found the swamp witch?” Her voice was filled with wonder as she ran a finger over the smooth, cool surface of the glass.

“I did, though there was very little swamp.”

“And you lived. Colour me surprised,” she joked, all while watching the silver liquid swish in its bottle.

Elbowing her sharply in the ribs, I sighed in exhaustion before tipping my head back and closing my eyes. I could tell she had a thousand more questions on the tip of her tongue, but I was too overwhelmed by the whole ordeal to answer any. Instead, I kept my eyes closed, not even noticing that she had stopped fiddling with the tonic to stare at me.

It wasn't until I felt her small hand touch the palm covered in blood that my eyes fluttered open. Gazing down at my hand, I took in the bare skin and realized the rag was missing from its place. Puzzled, I turned my hand over in her fingers, wiping the dried brown crust away. But there in the pale grasp of Elizabeth lay my own uninjured skin. The teeth marks were gone, the wound closed, and I was left with only a small pink line.

“How the hell?” I whispered before scanning the room for the piece of cloth that would be coated in my blood. When there was no sign of it, I rushed from the house and traced my steps back, ignoring Elizabeth as she called my name in worry.

Reaching the wooden wall, I crawled through the hole and marched back to the forest. I needed some proof that I had in fact been wounded. I did not want to wake tomorrow and question the events I knew to be true today. Not again. I could not handle it for a second time. And so, as my eyes searched frantically for the piece of cloth, I retraced my steps as best as I could.

When I had just barely entered the forest, I noticed something blowing in the wind. There, in the threshold of the trees, hung the fabric tied in a neat bow. Knowing there was no possible way the breeze could

have done that; I checked my surroundings first before walking to the branch and gingerly untying the deep red cotton from the bark. Bringing it closer to inspect it, I knew it was in fact the same one, and I slid my gaze around the trees as if I was waiting for something unknown. But the forest was as quiet as it always was, and I stood stubbornly in place, refusing to move in hopes that some magic being would once again make an appearance.

Minutes passed slowly with no sign of another creature, but when I turned for home, I realized something moved behind the shield of branches and I lifted my head. Examining the green, my hazel eyes clashed with those glittering silver orbs again. But this time they were not sitting on either side of a long back snout. No, instead standing before me in the shelter of the bush was a man.

He was striking, not only impressive in height and build, but unworldly beautiful. And as I gazed at him, I knew there was no possible way he could be of this earth.

His torso was naked, the tan golden skin left bare for my eyes to trace, and they moved over his extraordinary chest to his thick arms and back up to his face. His chin was lifted in confidence, and I followed the sharp line of his jaw to his high cheekbones, then over a straight nose, not stopping until I circled back to the piercing silver eyes.

He watched me carefully, his own stare roaming over my form before he lifted a hand in greeting, and when the air left my lungs, he smiled, his perfect white teeth blinding against his full mouth. I remained rooted in my spot, and a horrid squeak pushed past my lips as I watched him take two long strides towards me. His head was held high as he closed the distance only to stop when a sudden howl echoed around us. Swinging his attention towards the sound, his brow furrowed, he looked back at me for an instant before disappearing suddenly into the dark.

I stood in a daze, my mind spinning as my desperation for answers grew. And as the feeling gnawed at me, the forgotten red cloth blew from my hand and tumbled in the wind.