

The Bound and The Broken Novella



THE ICE

RYAN CAHILL

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THE ICE



THE BOUND AND THE BROKEN
NOVELLA

RYAN CAHILL

*To all those who have loved.
To all those who have lost.
To all those who struggle.
You are not alone.*

ALSO BY RYAN CAHILL

The Bound and The Broken

Novels

[OF BLOOD AND FIRE](#)

[OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT](#)

[OF WAR AND RUIN](#)

Novellas

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[THE EXILE](#)

THE ICE

READING ORDER

The reading order for The Bound and The Broken series is a highly contested thing. So, keeping that in mind, I have decided to provide you with two suggested reading orders. Both are named after sword movements within the series.

If you prefer to jump headfirst into a world, letting the action and high stakes consume you, then the svidarya is the path for you.

If you are the kind of reader who prefers a slower burn, immersing yourself completely in a world, learning the intricacies and terminology as you go, then the fellensír is the correct course.

SVIDARYA

THE FALL
OF BLOOD AND FIRE
OF DARKNESS AND LIGHT
THE EXILE
OF WAR AND RUIN
THE ICE

FELLENSÍR

Of Blood and Fire
The Fall
Of Darkness and Light

The Exile
Of War and Ruin
The Ice

If you haven't read *The Fall* – the prequel novella to *The Bound and The Broken* – yet, I would very much encourage you to do so. It's not necessary, but it will greatly enhance your experience when reading *Of Darkness and Light*. You can grab a FREE digital copy by signing up to my mailing list at: <https://www.ryancahillauthor.com/signup>

WELCOME TO VALACIA

PART ONE

A NEW HOPE

CHAPTER 1

THE PLAN

Haftsfjord - Winter, Year 3079 After Doom

AESON STOOD BEFORE THE GLITTERING WATERS OF HAFTSFJORD, HIS BREATH misting before him, the warm sun hanging low in the eastern sky. The towering city of Belduar with its ringed walls stood at his back, nestled into the Lodhar Mountains, banners of purple and gold rippling in the wind.

He drew a slow breath, savouring the chill in the morning air as he ran his thumb over the smooth stone in his palm. A column of riders moved across the plains between the lake and the city, at least fifty. Arthur would be at their head.

“Father.”

Aeson turned back towards the lake at the sound of Erik’s voice, squinting at the sun’s reflection. He raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Can you show me again?” Erik held out his palm, a flat stone at its centre.

Aeson smiled, the weight that burdened his mind lifting at the sight of his son’s face.

“I told you,” Dahlen said, shrugging. “It’s in the wrist. Watch.”

Dahlen rolled back his shoulders, drew a long breath, then flicked his wrist. The stone skipped across the water, bouncing six times before sinking into the lake. A satisfied grin touched his lips.

“Ah yes, I see now.” Erik moved his wrist back and forth. “All I have to do is...” He rolled back his shoulder and launched a stone at Dahlen, who ducked in time to see it soar past his head.

“Oh, you’re gonna regret that.” Dahlen grabbed another stone from the ground and hurled it at Erik, but Aeson snatched it from the air mid-flight.

He gave both Dahlen and Erik a sharp look. “Stop acting like children, the both of you.”

“Yes, Father.” They both lifted their chins and straightened.

Aeson sighed. He’d never thought that, amongst all the death, war, and ruin he’d seen, raising two children alone in the world would be the most challenging thing he’d ever face. He let his gaze shift from Erik to Dahlen and back again. Erik had seen twenty summers, Dahlen twenty-two. Aeson had taught them to wield blades, to hunt and forage, to move silently and kill efficiently. They could sew clothes and stitch wounds, track a target for over a hundred miles, and survive in the harshest places. He had taught them so many things, and they had always exceeded his highest expectations. And yet, he had never taught them something as simple as skimming stones.

Why did that small fact fill him with such an immeasurable sense of failure? His fondest memories of his own father – so many lifetimes ago – were often of the simplest moments. He remembered the exact spot, at the edge of the Aonan Lake, where his father had taught him to skim stones. Would Erik and Dahlen ever look back on him with the same fondness with which he looked back on his own father?

I’m being what they need me to be. I’m teaching them to survive.

‘To survive, is not to live,’ he could hear Naia whispering in his mind.

But they must first survive to live, my love.

The weight of the world pressed down on him, and Aeson looked back over his shoulder, seeing the Belduaran riders approaching. He let his expression soften, looking at Erik. “Grab another stone, and do as I do. Your brother is right, it’s all in the wrist.”

As they stood, skimming stones over the surface of the enormous lake, the drumming of horse hooves and clinking of steel drew closer, accompanied by whinnies, snorts, and the shouting of commands.

“Aeson Virandr.”

King Arthur Bryne slid from his horse before the animal had come to a full stop, his purple cloak flapping behind him. A number of his Kingsguard spread out in a semi-circle behind him, their burnished steel plate glistening in the morning sun. Two other riders dismounted and followed after Arthur

as he approached Aeson and his sons: Baria Hawe, Lord-Captain of the Belduaran Kingsguard, and Lord Ihvon Arnell.

Arthur's fiftieth summer had come and gone, but he moved with the smooth gait of a far younger man.

"Your Majesty, thank you for agreeing to meet me." Aeson dropped to one knee, his sons following suit.

"Must we do this every time, Aeson?" Arthur reached down, wrapped his fingers around Aeson's forearm, and pulled him to his feet. Arthur held Aeson's gaze for half a moment, then pulled him into a tight embrace. "It's been too long."

"It's only been a year, Arthur." Aeson shook his head, but returned his friend's embrace.

Arthur pulled away and clasped his hands on Aeson's shoulders, staring into his eyes with wilful intensity. There had always been something about the way Arthur looked at people, something in the way he spoke and carried himself – he was a true leader like Alvira had been. "To you, a year might be short, old friend, but we are not all as well acquainted with time." Arthur flashed Aeson a weak smile. "Thank you for meeting by the lake. It's good for me to leave the city. It reminds me that there's more to the world than Belduar."

"Of course." Aeson nodded. Arthur had seen more than fifty summers, but Aeson had witnessed over four hundred. If Aeson's life wasn't snuffed out by the edge of a blade, he would likely live to see many more kings take Arthur's place – a thought that saddened him. That same thought caused him to glance at Erik and Dahlen. The ephemeral nature of life was something he tried not to dwell on, for it tended to lead him to dark places.

"Now, let me say hello to these sons of yours." The king moved past Aeson and greeted Erik and Dahlen with the same warmth he had shown their father.

"You're not dead yet then, old man?" Ihvon Arnell took Arthur's place before Aeson and pulled him into a bearhug, squeezing the air from his lungs.

"Not yet," Aeson answered, pulling away. He cast his gaze over the man standing before him. Ihvon Arnell was a gruff man. His head was hairless and polished like a stone, his nose was bent more ways than a crooked branch, and a dark beard covered the lower half of his face. Scars of battles long past decorated his skin, and a lump of twisted flesh marked where his

left ear had been ripped off by a Depth Stalker. But beneath it all, he had a good heart – a heart that had been blackened when his wife and son were torn from him. Aeson gestured towards a new scar that adorned Ihvon's forehead, the skin raw and pink. "You look even more handsome than the last time I saw you."

"Hmm." Ihvon touched his finger to the scar, frowning. "Some kerathlin drones attacked a mining group. Dirty bastards. We got lucky."

"You're both ugly as rats from where I'm standing," Baria Hawe chimed in, a wry smile curling her lips. She grasped Aeson's forearm, nodding. "Virandr."

"Baria."

The woman was a head taller than Aeson, with square shoulders and a grim expression. She'd been Lord-Captain of Arthur's Kingsguard for five years and would likely serve the same position when Daymon eventually took the throne.

"Where's Daymon?" Aeson asked, turning back to Arthur, who was chatting with Erik and Dahlen.

"He's with Tarmon Hoard, practicing weaponscraft." Arthur smiled, squeezing Erik's shoulder. "I'm hoping Tarmon can temper some of my son's impetuosity. Now, old friend, tell me this plan of yours."

Arthur, Ihvon, and Baria listened as Aeson laid out his plan. None of them interrupted, but he could see the doubt in their expressions.

"I knew you were a crazy bastard, Aeson. But this is suicide." Ihvon folded his arms and looked down at the grass, shaking his head. He let out a long sigh. "You know better than any of us that no expedition has ever returned from Valacia. The Lorian Empire alone has sent over a hundred ships across the Antigian Ocean."

"We have no choice, Ihvon." Aeson clenched his jaw and looked past Baria, his eyes fixing on the glittering waters of Haftsfjord. "We can't keep going on like this. Almost four hundred years I've been fighting." He bit his lip sharply enough to draw blood, then turned to meet Ihvon's eyes. "Four hundred years, and what do I have to show for it? Fields of corpses and cities burned to ash. Every time we stoke the fires of rebellion, every time someone fights back, the empire grinds them to dust. The Dragonguard are like gods killing children. You know what happened to Valtara – twice now. They burned thousands alive in Stormwatch. Hung Arkin and Ilya's broken bodies in the streets. Made their children watch. And I couldn't save them."

Valtara wasn't the first time that's happened, and it won't be the last. They are growing even stronger. It won't be long before they come for Belduar once more. I was fighting before your grandfather's grandfather was born. And I'm tired of losing."

"Sailing across the ocean to that frost-covered wasteland isn't winning, Virandr." Baria met Aeson's gaze, her eyes wrinkling with a touch of sadness.

"It's the only thing we haven't tried." Aeson looked to Arthur, who still hadn't spoken, then back to Baria. "If the legends of the Valacian dragons are true... If I can find an egg and bring it back... An egg that could hatch would change everything."

"There are more ifs in there than stars in the sky. We can't just—"

"What do you know?" Arthur cut across Ihvon. He was staring at Aeson, his head tilted. He may not have spoken until now, but Aeson could see a glimmer of understanding in his narrowed eyes. "What has changed to make you believe that Valacian dragon eggs might be hatching where ours aren't? Why are you willing to risk your life for it. You've never entertained these notions before."

"There've always been rumours, Arthur," Ihvon said. "But that's all they are."

"No." Arthur shook his head and stepped closer to Aeson, raising a finger. "He knows something. He's just not said it yet." The king straightened, raising his eyebrows and gesturing for Aeson to speak.

"You're right. I do know something. One of my contacts – whom Ihvon knows well – Belina Louna, found a woman drinking herself to death in a tavern in Antiquar."

"Hardly a rare sight," Ihvon said with a shrug.

Aeson ignored him. "The woman claims to be one of only three survivors from a Narvonan expedition to Valacia. She claims to have set foot on the ice and barely escaped with her life. She also claims she saw dragons as big as ships..." He stared into Arthur's eyes. "And as small as horses."

"I've made a lot of claims when I was piss drunk, Virandr. But even if she did see those things, what does it matter?" Baria opened her arms, shaking her head.

"If there are dragons that small, Baria, it means they're young. No dragon lives four hundred years only to be the size of a horse. They've

hatched recently. A year or so, maybe. The woman said she saw places that looked like eyries.”

“And if she’s just some drunk telling stories for gold?”

“She’s not.”

“And how can you be sure?”

“Because Belina said she’s not. The woman was scared shitless. Belina offered her gold to come with us to Valacia. She turned it down. I’m telling you, if Belina thinks she’s telling the truth, then so do I.”

Arthur nodded slowly. He pressed his fingers into his cheeks, scratching at the stubble that was breaking his usually clean-shaven skin. “You’re sure about this? About all of it? If this goes wrong, Aeson, you die. As do your sons, along with the last flicker of hope we have. The people of Epheria are tired. Without someone like you to keep the fires lit, they will stop fighting.”

Arthur’s words caused the air to catch in Aeson’s lungs. He looked to Dahlen and Erik, who had remained silent and stoic to his left. They stared back at him, their gazes unwavering; Dahlen even gave him a short nod as though trying to reassure him. Aeson had never wanted them to come on this expedition, but he would not do them the dishonour of demanding they stay behind. They had earned their places. His sons would follow him into the void, of that he had no doubt, but that was the last place he would ever allow them to follow.

“I’ll pay for the ships and crews to man them. I would send soldiers with you, but the Lorians have been posturing of late, and I dare not spare any. You have a list of those you wish to bring with you?”

“I do. People I trust. This needs to stay in a tight circle. If the empire find out, they could destroy everything.”

Arthur nodded again. “Reach out, and have them gather here. But I want that woman from Antiquar to go with you. Whatever you need to do to convince her, do it. Offer her more gold if needs be. If she truly has been there and returned, if she’s set eyes on Valacian dragons, she will be the difference in whether you return or not.”

“I’ll reach out to Belina and have it arranged.” Aeson stepped forwards and clasped his fingers around Arthur’s forearm, looking into his eyes. “Thank you.”

Arthur gave a weak smile and shook his head. “All I’m doing is handing you gold. Gold I’ve done nothing to earn or deserve. My family has always

stood beside you, Aeson. I will not be the one to change that. I just pray to Elyara you're right. Come, let's get you all fed."

Later that night, after the sun had set and most of the city was asleep, Aeson stood on the battlements of the Inner Circle of Belduar, looking out over the sprawling lantern-lit city below. He pulled the heavy fur cloak more tightly around his shoulders as the bitter wind nipped at the exposed skin of his face and neck. In the distance, the waters of Haftsfjord sparkled in silvery moonlight. It was a rare moment of calm amidst all the chaos.

"I thought I might find you here."

Aeson turned his head at the sound of Ihvon's voice. The man handed him a gold-enamelled cup with the sigil of Belduar emblazoned on its front. The deep, sweet smell of wine touched Aeson's nostrils as soon as his fingers brushed the stained wood and cold metal. He nodded his thanks.

Ihvon only smiled, then tapped the rim of his cup against Aeson's before taking a sip of his wine.

They stood in silence, looking out into the night. Lanterns flickered in the city below, along with the rumble of voices and footfalls echoing against the stone walls. It was a comfortable sort of silence, but Aeson knew there was something Ihvon wanted to say.

"It's madness, Aeson – traipsing across the ocean on some hunt for the egg of a mythical dragon. One that may or may not hatch." Ihvon looked at him as though Aeson were a delusional child speaking of imaginary friends. "Even if it's all true, the creature wouldn't be large enough to make a difference for years. And then it would be one against nine. It's not just suicide, it's downright fucking stupid."

Aeson sipped at his wine. "It's not the dragon, old friend. It's what the dragon would symbolise."

Ihvon furrowed his brow. "And what's that?"

"Hope."

"Bah!" Ihvon threw his hand out, wine sloshing in his cup. "All hope ever does is convince us to do things we know we shouldn't. It isn't worth dying for."

"It's one of the few things that is worth dying for, Ihvon."

"I know you're not afraid of death, but what of your sons? Would you throw their lives away for hope?"

"They risk their lives every day. Every time we draw a blade, we risk our lives."

“That’s different. I’d put my money on you in any fight, but if you step on that ship, your blade can’t help you. You’ll die and they’ll die. And all we’ll have is three fewer good men in the world.”

Aeson turned to meet Ihvon’s gaze. The man’s stare was hard and unyielding, but Aeson could see the pain in his eyes. “How are you holding up?”

“Fuck off, Aeson.” Ihvon shook his head and turned to look over the battlements. “This isn’t about me, it’s about you and your unwillingness to see that this expedition is nothing more than a death wish. We should be raising armies, not chasing ghosts.”

“If Alyana were here, you’d talk to her. Talk to me now.”

Ihvon spun, his jaw clenched, eyes wide. He pressed his cup into Aeson’s chest. “Don’t bring her into this.”

His voice was calm but burned with a fire.

Aeson didn’t react, he just continued to stare back at Ihvon. He could see the loss in his friend’s eyes, hear it in the tremble of his voice. “It’s all right. I know the pain. I know how it feels to carry emptiness where your heart should be – how even silence becomes different, hollow. How the air catches in your chest every time you remember they’re gone. You need to talk about it, or it will consume you from the inside out.”

Tears welled in Ihvon’s eyes, but the big man continued to shake his head. “Stop it.”

“Pain doesn’t make you weak, Ihvon. It makes you human. Sometimes the only thing that reminds me I’m still human is how much everything hurts.”

“I said, stop it!” Ihvon hurled his cup off the edge of the battlements. “Varyn damn you, Virandr.”

Ihvon stared into the dark sky, his chest heaving, his hands clasped behind his head. After a while, he let out a long sigh, then leaned against the rough stone. “I’m tired, Aeson. I’m sick of watching my people starve whenever we have a bad crop or the Lorians decide to erect a blockade. I’m sick of leaving bodies in the mountain tunnels when kerathlin tear us to shreds.” Ihvon lifted his head and looked to Aeson, his eyes wet and glistening. It felt strange to see the usually stoic man so vulnerable. “I don’t want hope. I just want the people I care for to stop dying.”

Aeson let out a soft sigh, then sipped his wine. He leaned against the battlements beside Ihvon. “Four hundred years ago, Fane Mortem and his

followers killed everyone and everything I loved. They tore my world apart – ripped it up, root and stem.” Aeson let out a short, anguish-filled laugh, a knot twisting in his throat. “Hundreds of thousands died in a matter of months. Millions across the years. They hunted the Jotnar to near-extinction. Slaughtered children and elderly. They burned King Erik Ubbein alive – his entire family died in Helios’s flames. All opposition was met with steel and fire. You’ve heard those things, in stories and songs, in books. But I saw them with my own eyes. I was there. What I’m trying to say, Ihvon, is that despite your years and all the hardship you’ve seen, you still don’t know the dark depths to which the empire is willing to sink – to which Fane Mortem and Eltoar are willing to sink. My brothers and sisters are few now, our soulkin sheared from the world. We’re in our death throes. Time is not our friend. Hope is all we have.”

A long moment passed with only the rumble of the city and whispering wind breaking the silence before Ihvon spoke. “I miss them. I miss the touch of Alyana’s hand and the sound of Khris’s laugh. Does it ever stop hurting?”

Aeson shook his head, his thoughts drifting to Naia and Lyara. His wife and his soulkin. His heart and his soul. Just the thought of them made him feel as though claws were slicing through his chest. “Not even when you’re sleeping.”

Ihvon’s hand trembled as he leaned on the stone. Aeson had wanted to lie to his old friend, tell him the pain would pass like a crashing wave. But that lie would only bring more pain; Aeson had seen enough years to know that truth.

“How do you do it?” Ihvon asked, staring down at the city below. “It’s only been a year, and I feel like the ground is crumbling beneath my feet. How have you kept fighting?”

“I found something worth fighting for.”

Ihvon nodded and again grew silent, contemplating.

“Come on. Let’s get inside and hope you didn’t kill someone down there with a cup to the head.”

CHAPTER 2

THE CREW

Four weeks later

Milltown - Earlywinter, Year 3080 After Doom

MILLTOWN'S DOCKS WERE SMALL AND QUAIN, WITH RUSTY, SOOT-CRUSTED braziers resting in sunken pits of sand. Three jetties protruded into the water, each with a handful of berths, half of which were occupied by small trading vessels. Away from the water, fishmongers and hawkers cried out, their voices barely rising above the din of activity as the village emerged from its nightly slumber.

"What are you looking at?" Dahlen asked, an eyebrow raised.

A soft smile touched Aeson's lips. He could remember when there had been no village here. No houses, no docks, no people. It had been nothing but coastline, fields, trees, and rocks. The land had belonged to the Jotnar then, before The Fall. The city of Jukara, with its tree-wrapped towers, would have been only a day's ride, and Ölmur only two days more. His smile faltered. The Lorians had burned both cities to the ground, along with half of Ölm Forest and every soul within a hundred miles. That was always their answer to opposition: burn it and grind it to dust.

"Nothing." Aeson pushed the thoughts of fire and death from his mind. "What's taking your brother so long? He should be back by now."

"You know what he's like. He wouldn't go for a piss without taking a detour. I'll fetch him."

Aeson nodded. "Ildur, Padrig, go with him. We're too close to let our guard down."

"As you wish, Lord Virandr." Padrig began to bow at the waist, but Ildur slapped him across the back of the head.

"Straighten your back," Ildur hissed. He lowered his voice to a whisper that Aeson only just managed to hear. "If you had half a brain, you'd be dangerous. He's no lord, and we're sellswords, nothing more, remember."

Padrig, who was only a few years Dahlen's senior, looked about ready to cut his captain in half, but instead he clenched his jaw and nodded. Ildur grunted at Aeson, then set off with Dahlen and Padrig to find Erik, who had been sent to gather the last of the supplies.

Once a member of the Arkalen Stormguard, Ildur was one of the toughest bastards Aeson had ever met. During the Arkalen and Drifaienin war almost thirty years past, the man had broken free after being captured, burned an entire war camp to the ground, then hiked for weeks on end with no shoes and a broken arm from White Run to Hirane. It was strange for Aeson to look upon him now. Ildur had seen only twenty summers when Aeson had first met him, and he was now drawing near his sixtieth. The life of those untouched by the Spark was so fragile and fleeting.

After leaving the Stormguard, Ildur became one of the primary commanders of the rebellion in the east. Padrig was one of many Ildur had taken with him from the Stormguard and one of four who joined him on this expedition. The others – Leesa, Circe, and Pol – stood to Aeson's left. All five had swapped their burnished armour for tattered cloaks and boiled leathers; warriors in fine plate would have drawn too much attention. Another forty men and women were scattered about the crowd. All of them were people Aeson had met over the years whose skills would be needed on the journey, people he could trust.

Trust was something Aeson held little of, but his options were few and far between. He would have asked the likes of Coren and Farwen to join him, perhaps Therin and Asius, but they were needed on the continent. A rebellion was like a fire; it required constant tending and unceasing fuel lest it wither and die.

"How much longer are we going to wait?" A woman in a long grey cloak emerged from the crowd at Aeson's side, drawing back her hood. Her features were soft and her skin pale, while her black hair was tied with dark ribbon. Verma Talissair had once been an Arcarian – an elite member of

The Order's Battlemages. She was one of only three Aeson knew to still be drawing breath and the only one of the three who called him friend. She would be key to any of the expedition's success. "And why in the gods do we have to leave from this grotty little town?"

"Belina will be here shortly," Aeson said, without turning his head. He ignored her second question. Verma had a habit of thinking out loud.

"Hmm." She raised an eyebrow at Aeson, a slight shake to her head. "I don't know why you place so much faith in that woman. She's not even Epherian, and she has as much discipline as a donkey with shit for brains."

"Coren's not Epherian either, not by blood. Do you hold the same opinion of her?"

"Coren is a Dralaid... or she was." A weak smile touched Verma's lips. "It's different and you know it. This rebellion is everything to Coren. She would die for it in a heartbeat. Belina Louna looks after nobody but herself."

"That's not true," came a familiar voice breaking through the din of the crowd. "There are plenty of women who can attest to my desire to take care of the needs of others."

Aeson pressed his fingers into his cheek and shook his head, looking up to see Belina Louna bounding from the deck of a ten-oared ship that was yet to cast its moorings. Two men stepped after her. One was lean and broad-shouldered, his hood drawn. The second was over a head taller, with a muscled, wiry frame, dark skin, and a head of thick, braided hair. A number of white ink tattoos decorated his face, as was common among the Narvonans of the Latrakian Kingdom.

Villagers and traders eyed Belina askance as she strode down the jetty, her long hair swinging side to side, arrogance oozing from every step she took.

Aeson gave an exasperated sigh. The woman made a point of being as theatrical as possible at every given opportunity. "Belina."

"Old man Virandr." Belina offered a mock bow, barely breaking stride. "Try not to sound so excited to see me." She swivelled on one foot, winking at Verma. "I can show you how much I care, Talissair. Just say the word. I've had one or two mages before."

"I would sooner lick a Jotnar's balls, but thank you for the offer."

"Oh Verma, ever the lady. Please, keep whispering sweet nothings in my ear."

As Belina and Verma exchanged witty remarks, the broad-shouldered man stepped closer to Aeson and grasped his forearm. “Apologies. She’s only getting worse with age.”

Dayne Ateres grunted as Belina elbowed him in the ribs without missing a beat of her conversation with Verma.

The man threw Belina a glare.

“It’s good to see you, Dayne. Everything’s ready?”

“It is. Two ships. Both Narvonan, as you asked, and headed by the captain you requested. On that note, may I introduce you to Akraf Obindi, Captain’s Sword of the *Bloodwater*.”

The tall man bowed at the waist, clenching his hands into fists and pressing them together. He spoke with a thick Narvonan accent. “Aeson Virandr. I have heard many tales of you. It honours me to hunt by your side.”

Aeson mimicked the gesture. It was one he had learned centuries ago during The Order’s dealings with the kingdoms of Narvona. “The honour is mine, Akraf. May our hunt be short and fruitful.”

Akraf nodded, his lips peeling back into a toothy smile. The man wore a polished leather jerkin, loose trousers, and thick-soled boots. A cut ruby adorned the pommel of the sword at his hip, and his arms were latticed with long-healed scars.

Aeson turned back to Dayne. “The crew?”

“Mostly Narvonan with a handful of Karvosi. No Epherians.”

“Our crew are the finest sailors to grace the oceans,” Akraf added without a trace of arrogance. “Of that, I assure you.”

“Good, we will need them. And the sellswords?”

Verma’s head turned at that. “Sellswords? Why do we need sellswords, and why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because we have no idea what we will face out there, and I’d rather have the steel and not need it than need and not have it. I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d have this reaction.”

“Of course I’d have this reaction. Sellswords cannot be trusted. They fight for gold and nothing more.”

“It’s a good thing we have gold then.” Aeson drew in a short breath, then let it out with a huff. “Look, I understand, but we need the bodies. They’ll take the gold, get the job done, and then be on their way. Dayne, how many?”

“Fifty Ardanians of the Broken Rock company.”

“Opinions?” If there was one man Aeson trusted to gauge the capabilities of a warrior, it was Dayne Ateres. Some warriors were born with the gift – or perhaps the curse – of knowing how to take a life. Others drilled ceaselessly, forming and sculpting their prowess. Dayne was both.

“They have big mouths and bigger egos. But they’ve earned them. More importantly, they’re hard. They’ll handle the ice with few complaints. We also picked up the others you’d asked for. Pylvír and his daughters, along with the dwarves.”

Aeson nodded.

“We got our hands on almost all the equipment you requested as well, including the Drifaienin ice axes and spiked boots. Though we couldn’t find any shoes like the ones you described.”

“Good, good. My sons have gone to collect the shoes from a local craftsman. I placed the commission a while back in case you couldn’t find a better price. The woman who Belina found, what’s she like?”

“Fragile,” Belina said before Dayne could answer, any levity draining from her voice. She turned away from Verma and stepped closer as the villagers flooded around them. “She’s not said much, Virandr. Whatever she saw out there shook her deep. I’ve not seen the likes of it before. It’s not too late, you can turn around. I’m all for bad decisions, but this seems like a really fucking bad decision.” She shrugged. “And it feels strange that I’m the one pointing it out.”

Aeson couldn’t hide his surprise. “I’ve never known you to fear for my safety, Belina. Gods know you’ve tried to kill me often enough.”

“You’re never going to let that go, are you?” A smile touched Belina’s lips, twisting with a hint of sadness. “It’s not your life I fear for. It’s whatever in the fuck drilled that kind of terror into that woman’s soul. Whatever you find over there, I don’t think it’s something you can just cut your way through.”

“So you’re sure you’re not coming with us then?” Aeson said with a weak laugh, trying to shift the tone of the conversation. He knew all too well that this expedition wasn’t going to be easy, but he’d scarcely done anything in his life that was. The last thing he needed to do was let fear creep into the minds of his companions.

“The only thing I want to do less is share your bed,” Belina said with a grimace, as though she’d caught a bad taste in her mouth. “Besides, there’re

a few other tasks you have in mind, are there not?"

Aeson stared at the woman. She was equal parts venom and steel, but for all her sharpness, there was good in her. He shifted the pack on his shoulder and produced a stack of envelopes, nodding. "The letter with the red seal is for you and Dayne. There are instructions inside."

Belina looked over the stack of letters, pursed her lips and then looked from Dayne to Aeson. "You say instructions, I say suggestions."

"Belina."

"Virandr?"

"Just read the letter, and do as it says."

"Say the word."

Dayne Ateres let out a heavy sigh. "*Belina.*"

Belina shrugged, then looked at Aeson. "Say it."

"Don't make him say it." Dayne rolled his eyes.

"Say it, or I'll use these letters to wipe my arse."

Aeson clenched his jaw, running his tongue along his front teeth. He took everything back – she was a pain. "Please."

"That wasn't too hard, was it?" Belina said with a wry smile, resting her hand on Aeson's shoulder. "I'll think about it. Come on, Dayne, there're some good inns in these villages, and I'm thirsty."

"Wait." Aeson reached out to grab Belina's arm, but she was already moving away. "The woman."

"Akraf will introduce you," Belina called back without turning. "I've got *instructions* to follow. Try not to die."

Dayne looked to Aeson and gave an exasperated sigh.

"Go," Aeson said, shaking his head.

Dayne reached out his hand and grasped Aeson's forearm. "May Neron and Achyron watch over you and your sons."

Aeson squeezed Dayne's forearm. "It's almost time, Dayne. I will get you home, I swear it."

Dayne's gaze flitted to the wood beneath his feet, then back to Aeson. He nodded.

The sadness in Dayne's eyes cut into Aeson. He knew that all Dayne wanted was to return home, to fight for his family. And it had been on Aeson's word that Dayne had agreed to wait. Aeson pulled Dayne closer, looking the man in the eyes. "I promise, by The Warrior and The Sailor, by

blade and by blood. You will go home. Valtara will be free, or the both of us will die in the trying.”

Dayne nodded again, sharper this time. “I will hold you to it. When the wyvern of House Ateres flies again, I expect you to be at its side.”

“I will.”

With that, Dayne turned and pushed through the crowd after Belina.

Akraf let out a short breath, his dark eyes watching Belina and Dayne as they left. “She has spent too long amongst your people.”

“We’re not taking responsibility for her.”

Akraf smiled. “Come, I will bring you to Captain Kayala. We can take twenty on the noaka.” He gestured towards the oar ship. “How many do you have?”

“There are nearly fifty of us.”

“We will take two trips.”

The *Tidebreaker* and the *Bloodwater* were anchored only an hour or so down the coast, nestled in nearer to the rock than Aeson would have thought sensible. They were both enormous, three-masted ships crafted from dark, almost black, Narvonan wood, their hulls scraped clean of any slime or barnacles. Both stretched about two hundred feet in length and looked to have four decks. Large crossbows, not dissimilar to the Belduaran Bolt Throwers, were built into both the bow and the stern.

What made Aeson laugh was the sigil of the black lion of Loria emblazoned across the main sails. Any vessel that got close enough could see the ship was of no Lorian design, but from afar it would cause many to keep their distance.

The deck of the *Bloodwater* was a hive of activity. Everywhere Aeson looked, men and women glided across the wood, moving like kats, preparing the ship to sail. Most were dark-skinned Narvonans, but as Dayne had said, there were also Karvosi mixed into their ranks.

As Ildur grabbed Aeson’s hand and hoisted him from the noaka – which was suspended by a pulley system – and onto the ship’s deck, three figures strode towards him. Elves. The elf in the middle stood a measure for Aeson in height, while the two flanking him were nearly six-and-half feet tall. The tips of bows protruded over their backs, strips of shimmering silver adorning the wood.

“Pylvír.” Aeson grasped the forearm of the middle elf. “Det er aldin til vëna dir, akar.”

It is good to see you, brother.

The elf reciprocated Aeson's gesture. "Ar La, dir." *And I, you.*

"We hear you need help hunting dragon eggs." The eldest of Pylvír's two daughters, Andira was broad-shouldered, thick-muscled, and cared little for pleasantries or small talk. He remembered when she was no higher than his knee. "We are honoured."

"You heard right," Aeson said with a broad smile. He turned to Andira's sister. "Lirel."

Lirel smiled, inclining her head. She was a few years younger than Andira, but there wasn't a soul on the mortal plane with keener senses or more sharpness with a bow. "We are honoured to answer your call."

"And I am honoured by your answer," Aeson said, clasping Lirel's shoulder." Aeson turned to Pylvír. "There are dragons, old friend. Young dragons. Dragons that have seen no more than a summer or two."

Pylvír stared into Aeson's eyes, searching. "We're with you."

"Du haryn myia vrai." Aeson grasped Pylvír's forearm, nodding. The elf was the first one, besides Dahlen and Erik, who hadn't questioned him or told him he was mad. "I'm glad to have you here. Durink and Shuk, have you seen them?"

"They are doing as dwarves do, hiding and eating."

"Ahem." Verma gave a mock cough, responding to Aeson's raised eyebrow with a nod to his left.

A lean woman approached with six leather-clad Narvonans at her side. She wore loose trousers of vibrant yellow and a sleeveless linen shirt of the deepest blue. Her skin was dark, her hair darker, and several brass rings hung from her ears and her nose. Two lines of white ink were tattooed over her lips and down her chin, with a dot beneath each of her eyes.

Akraf inclined his head towards the woman, pressing his two fists together. She repeated the gesture in kind as Akraf spoke. "My captain, it is my honour to introduce you to Aeson Virandr, Blade of the Moon, and his sons Erik and Dahlen Virandr."

The captain greeted Aeson, Erik, and Dahlen with the same gesture she had Akraf.

Akraf bowed to Aeson, then gestured to the captain. "Aeson Virandr, you are in the presence of Captain Kayala Latrak, Blood of the Water, Scourge of the Antigan Ocean, and fourth in line to the royal house of Latrak."

Despite already knowing of Kayala's lineage, Aeson had to fight the urge to drop to one knee. He'd lived over four hundred years, and the compulsion to kneel in the presence of royalty was ingrained as deep as ever. But Narvonans never knelt, and he didn't wish to insult her. "It is my honour and privilege to share the wind in your sails, Captain Latrak."

The woman smiled, her gaze never leaving Aeson's. Silence held between the two groups, only broken by the slapping of feet against wood around them. Eventually, Kayala Latrak inclined her head. "Your name has been spoken many times by my mother, and her mother before her. Generations of my kin know of your deeds, Aeson Virandr." She stepped a little closer, her leather-clad guards shifting as she did. "The man that time cannot kill. I am sorry for your curse."

"Curse?" Aeson heard Dahlen whisper to Erik.

Kayala glanced at Aeson's sons, giving them a heavy smile. She looked back to Aeson. "The gold?"

Aeson gestured to Ildur, who stood to his left, and at Ildur's word, Circe and Pol carried forth a chest and opened the lid. Gold glinted in the sunlight.

Kayala hunkered down, coins parting as she dipped her fingers into the chest.

"Half." Aeson said, resting his hand on the open chest lid. "You will be given the rest on our safe return."

"That doesn't seem fair." Kayala raised a curious eyebrow as she stood.

"No?"

She shook her head. "No. I will not have our bounty be dependent on your competence. If you die in those icelands, that is through no fault of mine or my crew."

"If we die in the icelands, there'll be bigger things to worry about."

"Not for me," Kayala said with a shrug. "Your name is legend, but your name does not put food in my belly or in the bellies of my crew. It does not put wind in my sails nor boots on my feet. Your cause is a noble one, but it is not mine and I am not Epherian."

"If we agree to payment regardless of my return, how can we trust you won't just drop us off and leave us there?"

"You don't trust me?" Kayala laughed. "That is fair."

"I will go with them." Akraf stepped forwards, bowing at the waist.

Kayala's face hardened, her demeanour spinning on a knife's edge. "No."

Aeson saw the opportunity and leapt on it. They didn't have time for this. "If he comes, I will send word that you are to be paid upon your return to these shores regardless of whether I am with you."

Kayala's eyes sharpened, and Aeson could see her teeth grinding. She truly must not have believed they stood much chance of surviving in Valacia.

The captain said something to Akraf in Narvonan. Aeson had only heard the language spoken on a handful of occasions. It was both fluid and nasally, almost guttural.

Akraf didn't flinch as the captain spoke, but the woman then turned to Aeson and gave a gruff nod. She slipped a knife from her pouch. As she did, Erik and Dahlen snapped forwards, blades sliding from their scabbards. The other warriors who had come with Aeson did the same, but none of the sailors even flinched.

The captain threw an irritated glare at Aeson and the others, then sliced her blade along the inside of her forearm, drawing a thin stream of blood. She handed the blade to Aeson, then moved the fingers of her left hand through the blood and spread it on her right palm.

Aeson mimicked Kayala's actions, the cold steel burning as it sliced into his skin.

Once he was done, Kayala reached out and wrapped her fingers around his forearm, her bloody palm resting atop his cut, his atop hers.

"The pact is sworn." Acidic irritation tinged Kayala's voice. In a matter of seconds, she turned and walked away. "Akraf will show you to your cots."

"The woman," Aeson called after her. "The one Belina brought aboard. I would speak to her."

Kayala stopped for a minute, then gestured to Akraf. "Take him to her." Kayala carried on, calling out to her sailors. "Prepare for open water!"

"She doesn't speak much," Akraf said as he and Aeson descended to the lower deck, pushing past Narvonan sailors as they moved.

Prisms in the ceiling and small rectangular windows provided the lower deck with sunlight that held the shadows at bay. Instinctively, Aeson reached for the Spark but stopped himself from touching it. He had never

enjoyed seafaring. He preferred solid ground beneath his feet, or no ground at all. The to and fro of ships gave him an uneasy feeling.

Pushing the thoughts to the side, Aeson studied Akraf's face in the warm light. The man's expression was grim, his eyes cold. Something about the way he bit at the corner of his lips made Aeson believe that Akraf held a great deal of pity for this woman who was to be their guide in Valacia.

"Her name?" Aeson was ashamed of not asking before. Belina had never told him. It hadn't been important at the time, but he should have asked.

"Malari." Akraf's throat tightened. "She is a warrior of the Royal House of Mohatine – an enemy to my people."

"I see. And yet you seem to care for her."

Akraf stopped at a door on the left. "She asked for this room. I will wait on the main deck. The commander of the Ardanian sellswords, Garahlin, has asked to speak with you."

"I'll be with him shortly."

The door creaked as Aeson pushed it open, a sliver of light slipping past him and carving into the dark-obscured room. The sharp scent of pickled fish and salted meat battered his senses, flooding his nostrils. Aeson pinched his nose and covered his mouth with a cupped palm.

When his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw the room was filled with banded barrels and storage crates. A dark sheet was draped over the rectangular window set into the hull, and there were no prisms in the ceiling.

Something shifted in the dark, to his right.

"Malari?"

No response came. Aeson took a step forward. A crumpled shape covered in a blanket was huddled in a hastily constructed cot in the corner.

"Malari, my name is Aeson Virandr. It was I who sent Belina for you."

The shape moved.

Aeson reached out his hand, resting it on what he thought was her shoulder. "Are you all right? Can I get you anything?"

"Don't touch me!" Malari screamed, whipping her hand around and slapping Aeson's arm. The woman's eyes gleamed in the light shining through the doorway behind Aeson. Shadows welled in the caverns of her cheeks as she pulled her lips back in a snarl. She looked almost rabid.

“Apologies.” Aeson pulled his hand back and settled his voice. He’d seen this kind of trauma before. The years after The Fall had carved scars into the souls of many.

“My name is Aeson Virandr.” He dropped to one knee so his eyes were level with Malari’s. The woman’s breaths were ragged, and her intense stare never left his, the whites of her eyes veined with red. Several tattoos of vibrant red marked her skin, and as the light grew in the room, he made out a number of thin scars on her cheeks and neck. Her lips were cracked and bleeding, old scabs visible. Her head was shaved, but from Aeson’s experience that was not uncommon among the Mohatine. “I’m told you have not spoken much since you’ve come aboard. I wished only to check on you. Akraf said you asked for this room. May I ask why?”

The intensity of Malari’s stare wavered at the question. The blanket slid from her shoulders as she pulled her hands free and wrapped her arms around herself. In that brief moment, Aeson noticed the skin on her hands was burnt and scarred. Malari’s head twitched, her stare refocusing on Aeson. The woman’s voice was raspy and tired. “The smell.”

“You *like* the smell in here?”

Malari shook her head, her eyes searching the room. “It covers the stench of death and blood.”

Aeson clenched his jaw. He tucked his leg beneath himself and sat. The calmer he was, the calmer Malari would be. “What did you see out there?”

The woman shifted in her cot, but she didn’t speak.

“Malari, please. We will be there in less than four weeks’ time. My sons are with me, and there are almost a hundred souls joining us. I need to know what’s waiting for us.”

Malari’s chest and arms shook, followed slowly by a rumbling laugh that bled into a cackle. Her lips twisted into a wicked grin, her eyes wild. Cold fingers ran down Aeson’s spine, the hairs on his forearms prickling.

“What’s waiting for you?” Malari choked, still cackling. She leaned forwards, so close her nose nearly touched Aeson’s, and the vomit-tinged warmth of her breath washed over his face. “Death.” Her voice cracked as she laughed and tilted her head to the side. “For you and your children and all those who step foot on the ice. They don’t want you, Aeson Virandr. They don’t want any of us. We’re all dead.”

The woman was mad. Of that, he was certain. “Who are *they*?”

Malari's grin grew so wide Aeson thought her cheeks might split. The sight of it froze his blood.

"Have you seen a man hold his own innards in his hands? I have." Malari's grin faded, her eyes glassy. "They like to skin their prey, hack off limbs and use them as warnings. They are ghosts. Demons of the ice."

Aeson tried to ignore her ramblings. Her mind was cracked and broken. "Please, Malari. I need you to focus. Belina told me you saw dragons. How large were they?"

Lucidity returned to Malari's face at the mention of the word 'dragons'. Her stare softened. "You can still turn back. It's not too late. You can save them all, save your sons... like I failed to save mine."

Aeson looked into Malari's eyes, and finally he understood what had broken her so. Erik and Dahlen's faces flashed in his mind, and his stomach churned. They were his world – every blade of grass, every drop of rain, and every breath of air. To watch them die would be... unthinkable. "Why go back? Why not just refuse?"

The wildness evaporated from Malari's eyes. For a breath, she returned to the scared, frail woman he had found when he'd entered the room. "Because my daughter is grown, and her children need food and shelter. You promised you would send the gold to my family whether we returned or not. Enough gold that they would never know hunger. You are a man of your word, are you not?"

Aeson nodded. The letter he had given Belina had instructed her to arrange for the gold to be sent to Malari's family in Narvona as soon as the ship set sail.

Malari nodded. "Belina said you were. Said she'd slit your throat if you weren't. I trust her, despite her Latrakian blood." The woman tweaked her neck to the left, eliciting a series of sharp cracks, then she lifted her gaze back to Aeson. "I shouldn't be alive. The things I did... At least now I can do something good. I can give my daughter a chance. That's worth dying for... isn't it? Yes, there are dragons in Valacia. They are bathed in white scales, and their fire strips flesh from bones."

Guilt bubbled in Aeson's stomach. He was forcing this woman to return to the place where her sons had been ripped from her. The thought cut into him like a honed blade. The pain in her eyes was a tangible thing, mirrored by a twisting in his chest. He wanted to tell her she could stay on the ship, that she would never have to set foot on the ice again, but he could not say

the words. He needed her. With what she'd already seen, perhaps they could avoid the fates of those who had come before. Without her, they would likely die in the icy wastes.

He leaned forwards. As he looked at Malari, he saw Naia, saw the grief, saw the pain of a mother losing her children. Everything in his heart told him to wrap his arms around her and tell her she would be all right. But he knew that would soothe no one but himself. "I promise you, Malari. I will do everything I can to bring you home to your daughter. I swear it."

CHAPTER 3

THE REASON

Three and a half weeks later

*Two hundred miles off the Valacian coast - Earlywinter, Year 3080 After
Doom*

AESON PRESSED HIS GLOVED HANDS INTO THE WOODEN RAIL ON THE SHIP'S port side, the frosty wind slicing at the exposed skin on his wrists. A heavy fur-lined cloak fell around his shoulders, draped over his leather armour which covered a linen tunic and two linen shirts. Similarly, he wore two pairs of linen trousers tucked into fleece-lined boots, with woollen leg wraps climbing up to his knees. The hood of his cloak was pulled tight, a wrap covering his mouth and nose. The air was as sharp as a Drifaienin winter – and they hadn't even reached Valacia. His instincts told him to draw on the Spark, to fill himself with its warmth, but there would be much worse to endure before the time for that came.

With a shiver, Aeson tucked his hands into his pockets and watched as the sinking sun painted the waves in a glittering wash of orange and red, the sails flapping overhead.

'That's worth dying for... isn't it?'

It had been over three weeks since the day Malari had spoken those words, and still they lingered in his mind. She'd strayed from her dark room a number of times since then, but she'd not said much more. One thing remained constant, though: she was certain they would all die in the icelands. And even at that, she was willing to sail for Valacia as long as

what was left of her family was cared for. That was something Aeson could understand in his core, which was why he prayed to Varyn and Heraya that she was wrong. He had to believe they could succeed in bringing back a dragon egg. For four hundred years he had fought and survived, he had clawed through dirt and blood, sparked rebellion after rebellion – he had sacrificed everything. And for four hundred years he had watched as the lords and nobles of Epheria ripped each other apart for scraps while the Lorian Empire grew stronger. But more than that, more than anything in the known world, he had to succeed because Dahlen and Erik were with him, and he could not fail them. He could not fail to do the one thing he had promised the fire of his heart.

He could not fail to protect his children.

Aeson had debated leaving Erik and Dahlen in Epheria; if this truly was a futile expedition, he would rather risk his own life than theirs. But they were men now, and they needed to make their own decisions. Protecting his sons meant more than just protecting their lives, it meant protecting their souls also. It meant never letting them become anything like him.

Have I risked too much bringing them here? The thought wasn't for himself, but for Naia. After The Fall, Aeson had lost all sense of right and wrong. He became nothing but vengeance and death. He was not proud of that man, of the things he'd done, but when Naia found him, she became his compass, his moon and stars. She had always known what to do. Or rather, the right thing to do.

Aeson drew a long breath, then turned towards the deck. Erik, Verma, three of Ildur's warriors – Leesa, Circe, and Padrig – and twelve of the Ardanian sellswords of the Broken Rock company, along with a number of the others sat about, red-faced and panting, watching as Dahlen moved through the sword forms of the svidarya. Sweat glistened on Dahlen's brow, steam wafting from his body, his breath pluming in the frigid air.

The first few days, Dahlen and Erik had practiced alone. Ildur's people had joined after that. The Ardanians had watched with curiosity, but as the days passed, they joined, too. Even then, the sellswords, who were each fine warriors in their own right, watched with intense stares as Dahlen flowed from form to form, continuing long after the others had grown weary. His movement was flawless, his feet sweeping across the deck like a dancer's, his blade glinting in the ebbing sunlight.

Erik had a natural talent with a blade, and he was gifted beyond a doubt, but he could never match Dahlen's single-minded determination. Aeson remembered a time when Dahlen had only seen thirteen summers. The boy had been practicing his forms for hours outside a hut near Orilon when the sky opened and rain poured like a waterfall. Dahlen had continued to move through the forms, his clothes saturated, hair matted to his face, boots and trousers covered in mud. When Aeson had run out to bring him inside, Dahlen had simply asked, "Why?"

"It's raining," Aeson had answered.

Dahlen had only looked at him curiously, as though Aeson had two heads, and then with a simple shrug had said, "I won't melt."

All Aeson had been able to do was laugh. He'd known grown men to abandon their post to seek shelter from heavy rain, and there was a boy of no more than thirteen scoffing at the notion of yielding to something as insignificant as the weather.

"No, I suppose you won't," Aeson had said, before pulling his sword from its scabbard and joining his son. Seeing them both, Erik had joined in not long after. That day in the rain would forever remain one of Aeson's most cherished memories. It had been the first time since Naia was taken from him that he'd felt true happiness.

As he looked at Dahlen and Erik now, Aeson was flushed with pride. Those boys had grown into two of the finest men he'd ever laid eyes on. They were everything he could have hoped for them to be. They were better than him, in their cores.

If only you could see them now, my heart. Everything good in them is you. Aeson touched his hand to his heart, his chest aching. I promise, I will make this world a place where their children never have to know the things they know – the death, the darkness, the bloodshed. I will make things right.

"You're doing it again."

Aeson turned to see Erik had made his way over and now leaned back against the rail beside him, his gaze fixed on Dahlen.

"Doing what?"

"You've got that same look in your eyes as the last time you told me and Dahlen we didn't have to come on this expedition. We're not children anymore, Father. This was our choice. We know the risks."

"I know." Aeson smiled weakly, looking from Erik to Dahlen and back again. He let out a long sigh. "I can still remember when you were small

enough to fit in one hand.”

Aeson pulled his gloved hand from his coat pocket. In his mind’s eye he could see the first time he ever held his son, see the creases and wrinkles in his skin, the tiny hands, fingernails no larger than a few grains of rice, and beautiful blue eyes, wide and curious.

“And now I take shits bigger than your hand.”

Aeson choked on his laugh, shaking his head. That sense of humour was something Erik had gotten from Naia. “I love you, son.”

“I know.” Erik folded his arms, lifting himself off the rail. He looked down for a moment, then met Aeson’s gaze. “We were born for this, Father.” He nodded at Dahlen, who was still moving through the forms. “What happens, happens. But the only regret we’d ever have is if we let you do this alone.” Erik rolled his shoulders and let out a long sigh. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to have to join Dahlen again, or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Aeson rested his hand on his son’s shoulder and squeezed, giving him a nod. For hundreds of years, he had not known fear’s touch. What had there been to be scared of? If he died, he died. Death would only bring him back to Lyara. But the first time he’d laid eyes on Naia, that had changed. And when his sons were born, the balance of the world shifted. Now he had everything to fear. The thought of losing them terrified him, and somehow the thought of leaving them alone scared him even more.

The moon slowly replaced the sun, its light sparkling silver across the ocean, while Aeson watched his sons practice. The smile never left his face, and his gaze never strayed from Erik and Dahlen. More of those he had brought with him – Lorak, the tracker from Varsund, and Hirki, the climber from Drifaien among them – wandered onto the deck, watching as Erik and Dahlen practiced. Even Pylvír and his daughters watched with more than a hint of approval on their faces.

After a while, when the night had fully fallen, the clip of boots against wood sounded to Aeson’s right. Captain Latrak was garbed similarly to Aeson, with multiple layers and a heavy fur-lined cloak, though her garments were laced with vibrant yellows and blues. The white tattoos that marked her face seemed to shine in the pale light. Two guards stood about ten feet behind her, one standing by the rail, the other leaning on some rigging.

“We will be within oars’ distance of the icelands in three days.” Kayala didn’t look at Aeson as she spoke. Instead, her gaze was fixed on Dahlen and Erik, who had finally stopped their practice and stood in saturated linen tunics. Steam drifted off them as Verma draped heavy cloaks over their shoulders.

“I will inform my companions. We’ll be ready on your word.”

Kayala nodded absently, her gaze remaining fixed on Aeson’s sons.

“Please, say what your mind thinks, Captain Latrak.”

Once more, Kayala Latrak’s gaze didn’t shift from Erik and Dahlen. “I was to have a son, long ago. I’d seen only twenty summers. The babe was born still. The man I loved left not long after. He tried, Akopa bless him, but I don’t think he ever stopped blaming me.”

“Losing a babe is as much your fault as a hurricane in Loria is the fault of a butterfly flapping their wings in Karvos.”

“Of that I am aware.” Kayala glanced towards Aeson, a smile flickering on her lips. “But the pain still aches in me regardless. In one fell swoop, the gods of the seas and stars robbed me of the two things I loved. And so, seeing you in the flesh, seeing anyone who can touch the Spark and has lived to see centuries pass, causes me to think. My pain was singular, and it haunts me still. A man like you, the things you’ve seen, the enormity of what you’ve lost.” She shook her head. “Life unending seems little more than watching everything you love die. Growing to care for people only to watch them fade and wither. It seems a cruel curse.” Kayala paused, her eyes widening as she looked at Aeson. “My apologies. I overstepped. My mother raised me on stories of you, of how you met my ancestors after the collapse of your order. She spoke of you as though you were a hero sent by Akopa himself. Seeing you now, I feel like I know you better than I do.”

“Your apologies are appreciated, but not needed. Your family has always been kind to me. It was your grandmother’s great grandmother who took me to safety after Lyara was killed.”

“Blood of the water, this is the way.” Kayala nodded. Silence filled the air for a few moments before she spoke again. “I would see you in the captain’s cabin. We have much to discuss before we see you off.”

Aeson nodded, and the woman turned and left, the two leather-clad guards moving at her side.

Moments later, another voice broke the night, and Aeson turned to see Erik standing before him, hands pulling the heavy cloak tighter under his

chin, sweat slicking his brow. He gestured towards the direction Captain Latrak had walked. "Everything all right?"

"It is. We are three days from Valacia." Aeson allowed a smile to touch his lips as he pressed his hand against Erik's cheek. Erik had Naia's eyes, not their colour, but their kindness.

Erik rested his hand atop Aeson's. "You're getting a bit sappy, Father. You must be hungry."

"Only when it comes to you and your brother." Aeson laughed and, much to Erik's protestation, knuckled the top of Erik's head as Dahlen approached with Verma at his side.

"I feel like I'm missing something?" Dahlen raised a curious eyebrow.

"No." Aeson shook his head. "Nothing you don't already know. You're still dropping your shoulder too much when moving into Blazing Light. It leaves you exposed."

"Yes, Father." Dahlen's back straightened, and he lowered his gaze.

"Dahlen."

"Yes?"

"Otherwise, you were flawless."

Dahlen nodded again, a momentary smile touching his lips.

Aeson never wanted to be hard on his sons, but the world was hard. He would rather hurt Dahlen's pride than have a Lorian sword slice through his son's shoulder. Protecting Erik and Dahlen was his reason for being, but he knew he could not always be there to do so. Ensuring they could protect themselves was the next best thing.

"I'm assuming our royal captain wasn't talking to you about the beauty of the sunset?" Verma asked, looking off in the direction Captain Latrak had walked.

"No," Aeson answered. "Would you mind signalling Ildur on the *Tidebreaker* and asking him to meet us aboard this ship in the captain's cabin?"

Verma grunted. "Don't get used to ordering me around like this, Virandr."

"I'll try not to," he called after her as she marched off, not hiding his smile. In the time of The Order, Verma had been his superior by some distance. He'd met her only two days after Lyara had hatched. It gave him no small amount of joy to give her orders.

He turned to his sons. “In three days’ time we will set foot on the ice. When we return to this ship, it will be with a dragon egg.”

PART TWO

BLOOD AND ICE

CHAPTER 4

LANDFALL

Valacia - Earlywinter, Year 3080 After Doom

“YOU HAVE TWO MOONS,” CAPTAIN LATRAK SAID AS SHE GRASPED AESON’S forearm. The deck of the ship was abuzz with activity as those travelling with Aeson finalised their preparations and boarded the Narvonan noaka oarships. Across the icy waters, he could see the other vessel, the *Tidebreaker*, making the same preparations. “Make no mistake, when the second full moon touches the sky, we will wait here for two days. No longer.”

“We’ll be here,” Aeson answered.

Captain Latrak pulled Aeson closer. “Keep him safe, Aeson Virandr. Whatever bond my family shares with you will die with him.”

Aeson didn’t need to ask to know she was talking of her second in command, Akraf, who was now boarding a noaka alongside Verma and Erik.

“What is he to you?” Aeson whispered, pulling back to look into Kayala’s eyes.

“The blood in my veins,” Kayala answered without missing a beat. “The wind in my sails.”

Aeson gave a soft nod. “I promise you, I will do everything I can to keep him safe.”

“See that you do. Your... *guide*.” Kayala spoke the word as though it tasted of dirt on her tongue. “She is already aboard? I would see her off my ship sooner rather than later.”

“I sent my son, Erik, to bring her from the lower decks.”

Kayala grunted. “If she doesn’t make it back alive, I won’t cry. In fact, you can keep a fifth of the gold you promised me.”

Aeson didn’t answer Kayala. Instead, he stared back at her. In truth, he had not known the hatred between the Mohatine and the Latrakians had deepened to such a degree. There had always been animosity between the four primary kingdoms of Narvona, but the wars had been interspersed with long periods of peace.

As Kayala stared back at Aeson, ensuring he knew she had meant what she’d said, he spotted Erik coming through the doors to the lower decks. Once Erik reached the top of the stairs, he turned back and offered his hand.

Malari squinted as she stepped onto the open deck, one hand grasped in Erik’s, the other held high to block the sun.

“Thank you,” Aeson said to Erik when they approached. “Dahlen is doing a final check on the supplies. Give him a hand. I’ll follow shortly.”

Erik nodded, but before leaving he turned back to Malari and rested his hand atop hers. He squeezed it gently. “I’ll not be far.”

The woman smiled back at him and nodded. In the weeks of sailing, the dark cloud over her had abated somewhat. Her skin looked healthier, the cracks in her lips had faded, and her eyes were less like sunken wells.

“You look well.”

“I have new paint on my hull,” Malari responded. “But the inside is still crumbling.”

“Do you always speak in ship metaphors?”

“When it’s appropriate.” A fleeting smile pinned dimples in her cheeks. This woman seemed a different creature than the one Aeson had first met only weeks before. She was still cracked, broken, but he could see a dim light shining through.

“Ahem.” Captain Latrak glared at Malari before looking to Aeson. “I wish you good fortunes, Aeson Virandr. Akopa guide you, and Tatora hasten your journey. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“You have my thanks for your help, Captain.”

“And your gold,” Kayala said with a half-hearted smile. “I will see you on the second moon.”

With one last glare in Malari’s direction, Kayala turned and left.

“It’s not too late,” Malari said as Kayala walked away. For a moment, the woman’s face returned to how it had looked the first time they’d met:

her eyes sunken, her cheeks drained of colour, her lip quivering. “You can still turn back.”

Aeson drew a long breath, then looked northeast over the rail of the ship. In the distance, a blanket of white stretched from right to left as far as the eye could see. Patches of coal-black stone pierced the shroud of snow and ice where jagged peaks ripped through banks of clouds, tearing at the sky. Chunks of ice floated across the water, some small as Aeson’s hand, others larger than the ship he stood on.

“There is no turning back. This is all we have left.”

“Then this is where we die.”

The swish of oars, the sliding of wood, and the heaving of misty breaths drifted over the silence of the Valacian waters as the expedition navigated through the field of floating ice towards the mainland. In total, they numbered just over a hundred souls spread between four noaka oarships and six rowing boats. Aeson prayed to Varyn that he wasn’t dragging all of them into Heraya’s embrace.

The frost-touched air burned as it filled his lungs and plumed upwards as he exhaled. It had taken hours to get close to the mainland, and the sun had only sat in the sky for half that time, giving way to the moon and bathing the world in an eerie twilight. There was something about the lack of sound that set Aeson on edge. From where he sat on the bench near the stern of the noaka, Valacia had a beauty to it like little he’d ever seen. But that beauty was a cruel one. Past the glittering ice, the snow-covered peaks, and the soft sound of swashing water, he could see the harshness of the jagged mountains, feel the ice in the air, and sense the death that permeated every crack and crevice. The beauty of these lands didn’t go far beneath the surface.

“The winter days are short here,” Akraf said in his thick Narvonan accent. Much like the others, the man wore a heavy, fur-lined coat along with multiple layers of shirts and trousers. “Sometimes as little as a few hours. In summer, the opposite is true – the sun barely hides.”

“You mean we’re doing all of this in the dark?” one of the Ardanian sellswords asked.

Akraf’s lips curled. “Darkness here is not like the darkness you know. The snow and ice hold the light. It is as though day and night battle for control. We will be able to see well enough when snow does not fill the air.”

“How do you know so much?” Verma asked. The woman’s wide eyes and rounded face gave her the look of someone who was soft and gentle, but Aeson knew different. When she needed to be, Verma Tallisair was one of the most lethal killers he’d ever laid eyes on, and her mind was sharp as a cutthroat’s blade. “I thought the reason we have her—” Verma nodded towards Malari, who sat at the bow of the ship behind two oarsmen, staring towards the land “—is because she’s the only one we know who made it out of this place alive?”

“She is,” Akraf said with a nod. “But I have sailed these waters many times. The patterns of the seasons do not stop at the waterline. From the ocean, the icelands shine like a jewel in the night.”

“What the fuck was that?” Baltam, a short Carvahonan man Aeson had brought for his skills in tracking and hunting, leaned against the edge of the noaka, his gaze moving across the water.

“What was what?” Aeson asked, shifting on the bench.

“I advise you sit back down,” Akraf said calmly, his stare never leaving Baltam. “And do it slowly. Seasnakes are quick as lightning and twice as deadly. Those that swim these waters are known to be among the most lethal.”

“Seasnakes?” Baltam moved away from the rail and lowered himself onto his seat, his eyes never leaving the water.

Drawing in a slow breath, Aeson reached out to the Spark, feeling Verma do the same. He could even feel Pylvír reaching out from one of the other oarships.

Aeson pulled in threads of Spirit and Water and pushed them outwards, feeling for every vibration and subtle shift in the water. He isolated the movements of the boats and the oars, letting them settle into the back of his mind. Then, after a few moments, he felt it.

“They’re everywhere,” Verma whispered as she leaned in close. “There must be hundreds.”

Aeson gave a sharp nod, doing his best not to draw the attention of the others; they would only panic. He could feel the seasnakes’ movements as they slithered through the gelid water. Though, judging by the quantities of water they displaced as they swam, ‘seasnake’ was a touch disingenuous; these things were wyrms. Perhaps a different species, but wyrms all the same. He had never seen so many gathered in one place.

He looked to Akraf, who gave a grim nod. They both understood that any wrong movements and the wyrms could – and would – tear them to shreds in a heartbeat. It was already beginning to make sense as to why so many expeditions had never returned.

“Slow and steady,” Aeson called out to the men and women who sat at the oar benches. “Slow and steady.”

The soft crunch of loose-packed snow sounded beneath Aeson’s feet. The air around him was calm but bitter cold, though he thanked the gods they hadn’t landed in a snowstorm.

To his right he could hear Akraf bellowing orders, the man’s voice echoing in the vast expanse of snow, ice, and rock. Once they’d found a safe place to make landfall, they’d carried the noaka and the rowboats for just short of an hour until they’d found a shallow cave Akraf had deemed acceptable for storage. They had two months to find an egg, and they couldn’t afford to return to find the ships damaged by frost and ice.

“Where do we go from here?” Ildur moved to Aeson’s side, a heavy cloak pulled tight, his long grey hair shifting in the gentle breeze. Leesa and Pol walked beside him, their eyes wide in wonder as they looked about. “We’re going to have to hunt sooner rather than later. It would be better to conserve our salted meat for when something eventually goes sideways.”

Aeson cast his gaze across the jagged landscape. It felt little different from the Burnt Lands, snow and ice replacing sand and rock. “Malari said her crew survived mostly on the meat of seals and birds. It will take Akraf an hour to secure the boats. Take twelve with you, including Baltam and Shuk.” Aeson gestured towards the Carvahonan man and the blonde dwarf who stood beside him. Shuk was a dwarf of the Marin Mountains and one of the finest hunters there was. “See what you can find. You have until Akraf’s done. After that, we’ll need to find shelter, and Malari will point us in the right direction. Don’t stray too far. If you need me, whistle. I’ll keep myself open to the Spark.”

Ildur nodded, signalling for Pol and Leesa to grab some of the others.

“Oh, and Ildur.”

The older man grunted, raising an eyebrow.

“Stay clear of the water.”

Ildur gave a short nod and grunted again, flatter this time, before moving to join the hunting party.

Aeson drew a long breath through his nostrils, the icy air burning as it filled his lungs. In the distance, he saw something move amidst the snow. He pulled threads of Spirit and Fire into his eyes, amplifying the light, sharpening his vision.

“Father.”

Erik’s voice distracted Aeson for only a second, but it was enough. Whatever he had seen was gone. He released his hold on the Spark. This place would come for them. It wasn’t a matter of if, but when. They needed to be ready.

With one last lingering look, Aeson turned to see Erik and Dahlen marching towards him with Malari, Verma, Pylvír, Andira, and Lirel in tow, heavy cloaks drifting behind them.

“Thank you, my sons,” Aeson said as they stopped before him. He ran his tongue across his teeth, allowing his gaze to linger on Malari. “The dragons, where did you see them?”

Malari stared back, her expression unchanging.

“Where, Malari?”

The woman flicked her head over Aeson’s left shoulder, then raised her hand and pointed. “Northwest. Past that peak – the one that looks like a trident with a broken prong.”

“How far is it?”

The woman shook her head, her gaze transfixed on the mountains in the distance. “Three weeks hard march, maybe.”

“Maybe?” More than a hint of irritation crept into Verma’s voice. She was not known for her cool temperament. “We’re going to need better than a maybe, Narvonan.”

“My crew did not land here.” Malari shifted her gaze from the mountain to Verma, her eyes sharpening. “Three weeks, maybe a little longer.”

“What path did you take?” Aeson asked.

Malari’s expression shifted from irritation, to curiosity, to understanding. “We stayed low, in the valleys. We figured the mountains would protect us from the high winds and the worst of the storms. We weren’t climbers. It seemed the safest path. We were wrong.”

Aeson nodded, drawing in a breath as he did. In the weeks sailing from Epheria, Malari had begun to speak more and more, but she had refused to utter a word about what had happened to her crew. Even the suggestion of

the topic had set her shivering in a corner or erupting like an enraged dragon.

“Malari, I need to know.”

The woman’s head twitched to the left at the change in Aeson’s tone, and she tucked her arms inside her cloak, wrapping them around herself.

“The lives of everyone here are at risk.” Aeson shifted his head to match her gaze, lowering his voice. “My sons...”

Malari’s gaze darted to Dahlen and Erik, her expression softening.

“I can’t protect them if I don’t know what I’m protecting them from.”

Malari ran her tongue over her lips, the muscles in her jaw twitching. She swallowed hard. “They came on the first night. We had only two guards on watch. Both were dead when we woke. After that, they let the ice take us slowly. The cold killed some, hunger took others. The seasnakes, the mokaríen, the ice bears... everything here hunts you. In Epheria, you are the predators. Here, you are the prey.”

“Mokaríen?”

“It’s in the Narvonan tongue,” Pylvír said, scratching at his chin. “Black... heart?”

Malari stared in the distance, a tremor setting into her shoulders. Her eyes were glazed, as though she was seeing something in her mind. She nodded. “It is the name we gave them. They are like frostkats but twice as large. Their fur is short and white as the snow we walk on, but their chests, necks, and backs are covered in sharp black scales, hard as steel. They move in packs, silent as ghosts.”

“When you said ‘they’ came on the first night. The mokaríen, the blackhearts?”

Malari shook her head.

“Then what?” Aeson moved closer to the woman, close enough to touch, but he didn’t place a hand on her. Impatience bubbled in his blood. “What are you so afraid of, Malari?”

“I do not know what they are!” Malari rounded on Aeson, that same wildness he’d seen on the ship returning to her eyes, anger bleeding into her voice. “They are demons, ghosts, wraiths of this godsforsaken place. They killed my crew. My friends, the people I had known my whole life. They took my sons from me, stripped the flesh from their bones, stained the snow with their blood. They are demons, and they do not want us here!”

Aeson pushed his tongue against the roof of his mouth. He could see the fear setting into Erik and Dahlen's eyes. He didn't blame them. Aeson had trained his sons to fight soldiers of the empire, not monsters that belonged in stories told to scare children.

He drew in a long breath, meeting Malari's gaze. "They may not want us here, but they have no choice in the matter. We are here. And if they come, we will send them to the void wishing they never laid eyes on us. When I am done with them, *they* will call *us* demons."

Malari responded with a short puff of air out her nostrils and a soft, brittle smile. "At least I will die in the same place as my sons."

CHAPTER 5

WARNINGS

AESON SAT NEAR THE CENTRE OF THE CAVE WITH HIS LEGS FOLDED AND HIS hands resting on his knees. Threads of Fire, Spirit, and Air carefully weaved together, formed a baldír at his feet bathing the icy rock in pale white light. Around him, most of the others were already asleep, huddled together and wrapped in heavy blankets for warmth. As it turned out, there wasn't much in the way of things to burn in the icelands. Verma had used the Spark to cook the hares and small birds Ildur and his hunting party had brought back, but there was nothing to keep a fire going for warmth, at least nothing they could find in the snowstorm. Aeson had a feeling that wasn't likely to change over the course of the expedition.

"These snowrabbits aren't half bad." Erik dropped down beside Aeson, ripping a hunk of meat off a hare leg as he did. "Not as dry as the rabbits back home."

"It's not rabbit. It's hare," Dahlen corrected as he sat across from Erik with a strip of salted pork in his hand.

Erik didn't respond. Instead he shook his head, pulled a mocking face, and continued to strip the meat from the leg.

Dahlen shrugged and ripped a hunk of pork with his teeth. "You, Verma, or Pylvír should go with the hunting parties from now on," he said to Aeson, still chewing. "Six hares and three birds don't go a long way between a hundred mouths. We'll be out of rations within three weeks. With the Spark, you'd catch a lot more."

Aeson nodded at Dahlen. His son hadn't even asked for any of the fresh meat; he'd just pulled the salted pork from his pack and said nothing. "Very true. Verma or I will accompany the hunters from now on." Aeson inclined

his head towards Malari, who sat alone on the other side of the cave with her knees pulled to her chest and a heavy blanket wrapped around her shoulders. In the dim baldírlight, shadows coalesced in the hollows of her cheeks and eyes. Her gaze hadn't left the ten guards posted at the mouth of the cave since she'd sat down. "How is she?"

Dahlen shrugged. "Quiet. Calm—" he frowned, as though pondering the word, then let out a sigh "—No, not calm. I'm not sure what I'd call her. She'd barely said a word until Erik and I volunteered to take first watch."

Aeson raised an eyebrow.

Dahlen twisted his lips. "She nearly leapt out of her skin. Made us promise not to take the watch. You were busy planning with Ildur, Pylvír, Verma, and Akraf. We had to promise just to calm her down."

Aeson leaned forwards, moving his gaze to Malari and found the woman staring back at him, an unnerving stillness in her eyes. She inclined her head and touched two fingers to her chin – the Narvonan gesture for acknowledging thanks.

Aeson held her gaze. What had he to be thankful for?

"She's just scared." Erik tossed the meatless rabbit leg on the ground and glanced over at Malari. "I would be too if I'd been through what she had. If I'd lost what she had..." His gaze moved from Aeson to Dahlen, steam rising from his lips as he let out a soft sigh. "She said those demons came on her first night here and killed the guards. I'm sure she's worried it will happen again."

"There are ten guards posted for first watch," Dahlen said, picking a sliver of pork from his teeth with his tongue. "Anything that comes for them will wake us all."

Aeson bit his lip, continuing to watch Malari as the woman returned her gaze to the cave mouth and the guards posted there. He followed her stare. Seven of the guards were Ardanian sellswords of the Broken Rock company. The eighth was Kuldar Harnwood, a Varsundi man Aeson had known for almost twenty years. The ninth was Shuk. And the last guard was Ildur's man, Pol.

What is she looking at?

"Father?"

Erik's voice held a timidity that sounded odd coming from him. Aeson drew a breath in through his nose, his gaze still shifting from Malari to those on guard. "Hmm?"

“Back on the ship. I heard what Captain Latrak said.” Erik’s teeth chattered as the cold prodded at him.

Aeson turned to look at his son, raising a curious eyebrow.

Erik shook his shoulders, pulling his heavy cloak about himself and staring into the heart of the baldír as though it were a crackling fire. For a moment, silence held sway between them, then Erik looked around to see if any of the others were awake or listening. Satisfied, he lifted his gaze to meet Aeson’s. “About how life seems little more than watching everything you love die.”

Aeson let out a short puff of air, allowing a mournful smile to touch his lips.

“When Mother died... I... I can’t remember her face.” Erik’s voice caught in his throat. Aeson had never before seen his son so open. It both broke his heart and filled him with hope. He had known too many men who’d allowed their hearts to bleed until it killed them from the inside out. “How many people have you watched die?”

Dahlen lifted his gaze to his brother, whose eyes glistened.

“Tens of thousands.” Honesty was something Aeson would always give his sons. He owed them that. “But I didn’t know most of their names. Your mother... there will never again be a soul like hers. She was different... special.” His throat tightened. “A shining light even amongst a sea of stars.”

“How do you do it?” Erik had been young when Naia died, only a child. Many years had passed since then, but Erik had taken her loss particularly hard. No matter how much he grew, how much he tried to harden himself, Erik would always have a sweetness to him, a kindness. It was a weakness that could be exploited, but it was also something Aeson would never change. It was only now that Aeson realised quite how deeply Naia’s death had affected their son. “How do you *keep* doing it?”

Aeson allowed himself a weak smile. He pulled a long icy breath into his lungs, releasing it slowly. “For a long time, I didn’t. I pulled away from everything and everyone. You can’t lose the things you love if you don’t love anything. At least, that’s what I told myself.”

“What changed?” Dahlen asked, leaning forwards.

“I met your mother.” For the first time since they had set foot on the ice, the smile that adorned Aeson’s lips was warm. “She taught me that without love there isn’t much point in anything. Nothing to fight for, nothing to live for.” Thinking too long about Naia often brought tears to Aeson’s eyes.

Usually he tried to hold them back, but he made a point of not doing so this time. He never wanted Erik or Dahlen to think their mother wasn't worth their tears. "It was a lesson I had needed to learn for a very long time."

Erik clenched his jaw. "Can you..." He swallowed hard. "Can you tell me about her?"

Aeson made to speak, but he wasn't sure what to say. It had been fifteen years since the consumption took Naia. Erik had only seen summer come five times. He had always asked about her, always missed her and longed for her, but in all that time he had never asked quite the way he had done right now. As they sat in that cave on the outskirts of the Valacian icelands, Aeson could see his son's heart bleeding on his sleeve.

"She always gave you more for breakfast." Dahlen's smile spread from ear to ear as he picked up a rough stone and ran his thumb across its surface. "No matter what it was, you got more. 'My little Erik', she called you."

Erik's expression softened, and Aeson couldn't help but smile. If he could have any wish come true, it would be that no matter what happened to him, his sons would always look after one another. On that account, he could never ask more of Dahlen. Dahlen had always taken his role as the elder brother to heart, which Aeson was sure had not always been easy after Naia died, but Dahlen had never once wavered.

"She was beautiful," Erik said, staring into the baldír as though he could see his mother's face within the light.

"More beautiful than the most vivid sunrise." Aeson leaned his head back and clenched his jaw, doing all he could to keep his heart from aching. A cave, thousands of miles from Epheria on a continent of ice and snow, was not the place he had expected to have a conversation like this with his sons. He closed his eyes and drew a long, slow breath through his nose. He could see her in his mind's eye, the crinkles of her nose, the light in her eyes. A fourth voice drew him back to the present.

"Your mother was the kindest person I ever had the pleasure of meeting."

Aeson opened his eyes to see Verma setting herself down beside him, her pale skin seeming to glow in the baldírlight. She wore a heavy, fur-lined coat over her grey cloak, and her dark hair fell loose over her shoulders. She gave Aeson a soft nod, her lips curling in an apologetic smile. "She and your father were like rock and water. He was immovable and stubborn, and

she just flowed around him, wearing down his armour, pushing her way in. I first met her before you were born,” she said, gesturing to Dahlen. “She was fierce, like she had fire burning in her chest, and she had a mind sharper than your father’s blades could ever hope to be. She ran circles around him.”

Both Dahlen and Erik looked at Verma with wide eyes, hanging on every word she spoke.

Verma ran her tongue across her lips, smiling in return. She nodded at Erik. “I doubt you remember, but when you had only seen four summers, I visited you in the house in Orilon – the one at the bottom of the hill, by the river.”

Erik shook his head, but Dahlen nodded. “I remember, I think... You wore blue. A long dress with white flowers, just short of your ankles.”

Verma nodded. “You have your mother’s memory. It’s certainly not your father’s. He’d forget his own name if nobody spoke it for long enough.”

Aeson narrowed his gaze at Verma, a hint of a smile slipping through his expression.

“Well, when I came to visit, your father had gone to Vaerleon, and it was only the two of you and your mother.” Verma lifted her gaze to meet Aeson’s, her expression softening. He’d known she’d visited Naia while he was away – he’d asked her to – but she hadn’t told any stories of that day. “Do you know where I found her when I arrived?”

Both Dahlen and Erik shook their heads.

“About halfway up a thirty-foot apple tree.”

Aeson’s sons stifled laughs, glancing over their shoulders at those sleeping around them. Shuk, the dwarf on guard at the cave mouth, turned towards them, her ashen grey skin catching the pale light of the baldír.

“What was she doing up there?” The wide smile on Dahlen’s face set a fluttering in Aeson’s chest, soon replaced by a wave of guilt. *I’m sorry I don’t talk about her enough. It just hurts.*

“What was she doing up there?” Verma leaned forwards, raising an eyebrow as her voice took on a sarcastic tone. “She was rescuing you.”

“Me?”

“You’d wanted her to bake an apple pie. She’d told you she didn’t have the time to gather the apples, that she needed to prepare the equipment for the next day. You decided, in your youthful wisdom, that you would save her time and gather the apples yourself. As it transpires, six-year-olds are

adept climbers. The problem, you see, is they're not very good at climbing back down. So, your mother had to climb up after you and carry you back down over her shoulder."

"I remember now," Dahlen said, looking up at the cave's ceiling. "We did have pie that day. I can almost smell it."

"Once you'd recovered from your traumatic experience, you proudly presented her with the two apples you had stuffed into your pockets. I don't think I have to explain that two apples were not enough for a pie."

Aeson leaned forwards. "You made your mother climb a tree to pick apples for a pie?"

"Actually," Verma said, raising a finger. "She didn't climb back up the tree. She sent him up while she waited at the bottom with an open sack. She wasn't letting him off that easy. I'd offered to pluck the apples with the Spark, but Naia declined. She said when it came to some things, how you got there was more important than the end result. She made quite the game of dodging the falling apples, much to the enjoyment of a certain four-year-old with an infectious laugh." Verma smiled at Erik. "I hadn't known what Naia meant at first, but as the day passed and we peeled the apples, made the dough, and built the fire, it began to make sense. But it wasn't until we sat, with the flames blazing in the hearth, and I saw the smiles on your tired little faces as you took your first bites, that I truly understood."

Aeson looked towards the ceiling, tears welling in his eyes. He would have given anything in the world to have a day like that now. To have Naia back. To have them all together. More than that, he remembered that day. They were preparing for an assault on an imperial convoy the next night. When he'd gotten back from Vaerleon, he'd been furious with Naia for not preparing the packs or marking the maps. She'd never tried to explain, she'd simply apologised and got to work.

I never deserved you.

Verma reached across and touched both Dahlen and Erik's knees. "All this is to say that your mother was a distinctly special person who put the both of you above all else. This world is less without her."

"So much less..." Aeson whispered. He let out a long breath and shook his head, then got to his feet. "Thank you, Verma."

Verma inclined her head. The woman was one of the few who had survived alongside him for all those years. She knew him through it all. She had seen his pain.

Aeson rested his hand on Dahlen's head, tussling his son's hair as he had done when Dahlen had been a child. "Both of you get some rest. I'll tell Shuk to wake us when she feels tired."

Aeson woke to screaming.

His heart kicked against his ribs like a frightened horse, and cold sweat slicked his brow. He had been dreaming, dark, twisted dreams. The world was a haze as he shook the grogginess from his mind and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. For a moment, he thought he'd imagined the scream, until a second shriek sliced through the cave.

He leapt to his feet, opening himself to the Spark as he reached for his swords that lay in their scabbards beside him. The first blade refused to budge, frozen in place. He placed his foot on the second scabbard and yanked the blade free with a grunt. Both Dahlen and Erik rose with him, steel glinting in the cold moonlight that drifted in through the cave mouth. About him, others jumped upright, grumbling as they did.

That was when he discovered the source of the screams: one of the Ardianians, a woman with orange hair and coppery skin, knelt at the cave mouth, shuddering, her wails echoing off the frozen rock.

Aeson pushed past those who stood staring at the woman wide-eyed and slack-jawed. When he reached the cave mouth and saw what she had seen, ice filled his veins, the hairs on his neck and arms prickling.

"What happened?" Ildur asked, the old Stormguard stepping up beside Aeson. He looked down at the woman. "Gods. For the love of fuck. Pol."

Pylvir's daughter, Lirel, pushed through the gathering crowd, looked down, and then retched, proceeding to empty the contents of her stomach.

"By the gods of the seas and the stars." Aeson hadn't noticed Akraf beside him. The Narvonan man pressed three fingers to his lips, then to his heart. "Akopa guide their souls on the river Trian."

Aeson forced himself to look away from Akraf and back down at the carnage that lay before him. A mess of severed limbs and ravaged bodies lay in the blood-stained snow. Feet hacked from legs, fingers torn free, arms broken and shattered. Of it all, what turned Aeson's stomach were the heads. Each had been peeled, eyes gouged, noses removed, and lips sewn shut.

There were ten heads. Shuk, Kuldar, Pol, and all seven of the Ardianian sellswords who had been set on first watch.

Dahlen took a step forward, raising a hand to his mouth, gagging. “How?”

Aeson didn't have an answer for his son's question. How in Varyn's name had all ten of the guards been mutilated this way without a single soul being woken. He had known Shuk and Kuldar for so many years and now he couldn't even recognise their faces.

The Ardanian captain, a man named Garahlin, dropped to his knees beside the mourning woman. He shook his head, then pulled her into an embrace. After a few moments, he rose and turned to Aeson. His eyes were red, but no tears had fallen. “Lir and Tokan were her family. Her sister and brother. The others were as good as kin. Her pain runs deep.”

Garahlin stared at Aeson, shook his head, then marched past him to the other sellswords.

“It's a warning.” Verma stepped past Aeson and dropped to one knee, her eyes scanning the mess of limbs and blood.

“This doesn't look like a warning,” Erik said, his hand pressed against his stomach.

“It looks like slaughter,” Padrig, one of Ildur's warriors, said as he and the others moved next to Ildur. The young man stared down at the savaged bodies. He clenched his jaw and turned his gaze away. “Pol deserved better than this.”

“They killed these guards without so much as a whisper.” Akraf lifted his hand and pressed his long fingers into his cheeks, letting out a sigh. “Butchered them like animals. They had the time to peel the skin from their faces and sew their lips.”

“We can fucking see what they did,” one of the sellswords, a woman called Ithaca growled, moving so she was only an inch or so from Akraf. The Ardanian was a head shorter than the Narvonan man, but she looked up at Akraf without a sliver of fear in her eyes. “We don't need you to describe it to us. Those are our friends, our family, not cows and pigs.”

Akraf stared back at the woman, unflinching. “If you do not step back, you will join them.”

The rasp of steel rang out as several Ardanians pulled their swords from their scabbards.

Akraf raised an amused eyebrow, then dropped his hand to the ruby pommel of his sword.

“Calm yourselves!” Aeson bellowed, his voice echoing through the cave. “There are enough things here trying to kill us. There’s little sense in helping them. Verma and Akraf are right, it is a warning. Whoever, or whatever, did this—” Aeson gestured towards the mutilated bodies “—did it without waking a single one of us. If they had wanted to kill us all in our sleep, they could have done so. But they didn’t.”

“They want you to turn back.” Heads turned at the sound of Malari’s voice. The woman was standing, her heavy cloak falling near her knees, the moonlight shining off the red ink on her dark skin. Her stare was fixed on the mess of limbs and blood. “They gave us the same warning. We did not heed it.”

Aeson turned to face Malari, moving closer, realisation setting in. “You knew...”

He pushed through those gathered, knocking an Ardanian out of the way before wrapping his fingers around the collar of Malari’s shirt. He shoved her against the cave wall, pressing the edge of his sword against her neck. His hands trembled and his jaw was clenched so tight it felt as though his teeth might crack. “You knew what would happen tonight. You knew that posting more guards would do nothing.”

With her neck extended backwards and her head pressed against the rock, Malari gave Aeson a short nod, her eyes locking with his. “I did.”

Those words ignited a hot rage in Aeson’s blood. “You let those warriors die. You... Why?”

“What would you have done? You would not have listened to me. You would not have turned back. You made that clear. If I had told you ten guards would not be enough, you would have posted twenty and twenty would be dead.” The woman leaned her head forwards and lowered her voice. “I did what I could. I spared your sons that fate.”

Aeson shook his head and narrowed his gaze, staring back at Malari. “What? What are you talking about?”

It took a few moments, but then he understood: earlier, before they had slept, when Malari had touched two fingers to her chin...

Aeson remembered what Dahlen had said. *‘She nearly leapt out of her skin. Made us promise not to take the watch.’*

Malari gave Aeson an almost imperceptible nod, as though she knew what he had just realised. If she hadn’t insisted that Dahlen and Erik not

take first watch, it would have been their bodies butchered in the snow, their skin peeled, their mouths sewn shut.

“The demons will not warn you again,” she said, swallowing as Aeson’s closed fist, gripping her collar, pressed against her neck. “This I can promise. Turn back now, or die. This is your last chance.”

“There is no turning back.” Aeson clenched his jaw, grinding his teeth. “We’ve come too far. There is only forwards.”

“Speak for yourself.” Aeson loosened his grip on Malari’s collar and turned his head to see the Ardanian captain, Garahlin, standing before him, the others gathered around. Garahlin had witnessed more summers than most sellswords could ever hope for – perhaps fifty or more. He was dense-muscled, with a heavy belly and a head of thick black-grey hair. The man stared at Aeson while gesturing towards the savaged bodies at the cave mouth. “This wasn’t what we signed up for. Your contact, Belina, said ‘some blood and a hard journey’. Not this.”

“You’re a sellsword, Garahlin. What does it matter as long as you’re getting paid? Last I heard the Broken Rock company didn’t shy away from hard work.”

“This isn’t sellsword work.” Garahlin’s voice rose, the muscles in his forearm tensing as his fingers twisted around the hilt of the sword at his hip. “Point us towards something we can kill, and we’ll kill it. But getting slaughtered in our sleep by... what? Demons? Ghosts? They peeled the skin off their faces for fuck’s sake. No. We’re turning back.”

“So you won’t last a single night here? What kind of reputation will that give you?”

“The one of a man who lives.”

Aeson let go of Malari and shifted to face Garahlin. He took a step towards the man. Tension filled the cave, creeping through the air. Aeson had seen situations like this before. If he wasn’t careful, he would lose everyone. “The ships won’t be back for two months. What are you going to do, wait here in this cave, hug each other for warmth, and play Karstadt? Do you think those things, whatever the fuck they are, will just leave you be? You’re not that stupid, Garahlin.”

“We head back,” one of the other sellswords said. “We’re only a day’s march from the coast. If this is a warning to go, surely they’ll leave us be if we try.”

“Aye.” Garahlin pursed his lips and nodded. “As good a plan as any.”

“Mmm,” Verma whispered, her mouth twisted into a sarcastic smile. “I’m sure the demons will give you the benefit of the doubt.” She let out a low sigh and gave Aeson a blunt stare. “*Sellswords.*”

Aeson looked around the cave, uncertain faces staring back at him. His gaze passed over his sons, Verma, Pylvír and his daughters, and Ildur along with his remaining people; they would stay no matter the odds. Many of the others were men, women, and dwarves Aeson had known for many years, souls who were committed to the rebellion. Most of them would stay, but even at that he knew some might not.

Aeson drew in a long breath, allowing it to swell his chest. He bit at his cheeks, then nodded. “Very well. If you wish to go back, I will sign a letter committing to half the coin you were promised. If you survive, take it to Belduar. It will be honoured.”

Garahlin’s expression softened, and Aeson could see surprise in the way the tension in the man’s shoulders faded. “You are an honourable man, Aeson Virandr. That is not an offer I expected.”

Aeson nodded, then turned about the cave, meeting as many stares as he could. “I understand this is a difficult choice, and I hold no ill will towards whoever wishes to leave. There is no shame in it. For those of you who press on, I will commit to the coin that was promised and double it. I won’t lie. I want – no – I *need* as many of you as possible. This journey will be perilous. We will go hungry, we will ache, and we will freeze. Some of you will die. I might die. These are things you need to know because there will be no turning back. I can only afford to take those who are committed.” He looked into the eyes of those who had come with him from Epheria. “What we are doing here *matters*. If we can bring back a dragon egg that will hatch – if we can give our people back that which was lost, we can give them a reason to fight, a reason to hope, and that is something I, for one, am willing to die for.”

The whistling of the wind outside the cave filled the cavernous space. For moments, nobody moved or spoke. Then, one by one, twenty-one of the forty-two remaining sellswords moved to stand behind Garahlin. They were joined by nine others, who had come with Aeson from Milltown. Each of them nodded to Aeson as they walked past, sombre looks on their faces. All nine had children younger than five to care for. He cursed them, but at the same time he could not blame them.

“I’m sorry, my friend,” Falka, a small woman with grey-streaked brown hair, said as she stopped before Aeson. Falka was a Lorian but had been fighting against the empire for almost twenty-five years. “You know I believe in the cause, but I was wrong to think I could do this. All the gold in the world isn’t worth dying out here and leaving my grandchildren to fend for themselves. They’ve already lost enough.”

Aeson leaned in and placed his hands on the sides of Falka’s head, bringing their foreheads together. “I understand.” He lowered his voice. “I will mark in your letter that the full amount is to be paid.”

“No,” she answered, shaking her head. “I don’t want anything more than I’ve earned.”

“You’ve earned far more than I could ever give. Jack and Vin gave their lives for the cause. Sara and Elise need their grandmother. Go with Garahlin to where Akraf stowed the boats. The area is sheltered, and with any luck, you can find good hunting. When the second moon comes, we’ll row to the ships together.”

The corners of Falka’s mouth turned down, and she gave Aeson a half-hearted nod. “I will pray to Elyara and Achyron to watch over you.”

“And I you.”

Aeson turned to Garahlin, and the man drew a deep breath through his nose then let it out slowly. He grasped Aeson’s forearm and pulled him closer. “Come with us, Virandr. I know we have not crossed paths before, but I know a cut of my own cloth when I see one. There are other ways to fight your rebellion.”

“No,” Aeson said. “There are not. Try to sleep. I’ll write your letters for Arthur, and in the morning, we will part ways. I will see you again on the second moon.”

“As you wish.”

“First, the Ardanian custom is to burn the dead, is it not?”

Garahlin nodded. “So that their ashes might feed the world anew.”

Aeson’s mouth formed a grim line. “Before we sleep, we will take care of the dead.”

As Garahlin went to speak with those who had decided to travel with him back to the coast, Aeson reassured the others of the journey ahead. Many of them hadn’t come for the gold. They had come because they believed in the rebellion, because they believed in him. Though he was

certain the extra gold wouldn't hurt their convictions, he needed to be sure they still had faith in him to lead the way.

The last person he spoke to was Malari. The woman, for the first time, stood tall, her shoulders rolled back, her chin raised. "I am sorry," she said, dipping her head. "I should have told you. It was not my place to choose who lived and who died." She lifted her gaze, meeting Aeson's. "The grief... sometimes it brings..."

"Apathy," Aeson said, understanding all too well.

Malari nodded.

"Your sons may have left the mortal plain, but your daughter and your grandchildren still need you. There are things coin cannot replace. The offer I gave to the others..." Aeson paused, weighing his words; once spoken they could not be taken back. "That extends to you, also. Your coin is already assured. Draw me a map, point me in the right direction, and tell me what I'm facing. Then go back and wait with the boats."

Malari looked into Aeson's eyes, unblinking, as though she thought his words were a test or some kind of ploy.

"You saved my sons."

To Aeson's surprise, the woman reached up and touched his cheek, her fingers surprisingly warm against his skin. A moment passed before she spoke. "You are a broken soul. I see that in you, as I feel it in me. But the pieces of you that are left are strong. I will go with you. I will help you find what you're looking for. All my life I've lived by my word. I am a warrior of the Mohatine. If I'm to die here, the least I can do is die the way I lived. Thank *you* for making me see that."

Before he could say anything, Malari had turned and walked towards the other side of the cave.

A hand touched Aeson's shoulder, and Verma appeared at his side, her dark hair tucked into a heavy hood. "I can burn the bodies. I didn't know Kuldar and Shuk as well as you did. I don't care what we've seen – that's not a pleasant sight."

Aeson shook his head. "We can do it together. I brought them to this place. I'm the reason they're dead. I can look upon what I caused. I owe them that much."

CHAPTER 6

PREY

AESON TRUDGED THROUGH THE SNOW. EACH STEP FELT AS THOUGH HIS LEGS were made from stone. The shoes he had commissioned in Milltown prevented him from sinking deeper into the white, but they were awkward to walk in and had turned his feet into blister-ridden wrecks within hours.

Despite himself, he couldn't help but cast frequent glances to his left and right to ensure Erik and Dahlen still marched with the others. Almost two weeks had passed since that first night. After Garahlin led the others back to the coast, the group that had followed Aeson inland had numbered sixty-three strong, including himself.

Now, there were only forty-eight.

'Everything here hunts you. In Epheria, you are predators. Here, you are prey.'

Malari's words had proven true. Each night, the group had split in two, taking shifts on guard, but the demons had not visited them again. Even still, not a day had passed where their numbers didn't dwindle. One of Ildur's warriors, Leesa, had been mauled by an ice bear in the night, while Baltam had been taken by a bird larger than a horse. Most of those they'd lost had simply vanished in the dark or the relentless blizzards. Sometimes there were signs – blood, torn leather, or fabric – but most of the time, there was nothing. One of the Ardanians had frozen to death after leaving the cave at night to relieve herself; she'd stumbled down a crevice and gotten trapped.

When he was younger, Aeson had been told tales of Valacia, of a wondrous land of ice and snow where Valacian dragons flew free, soaring between the frozen peaks of the mountains. Many expeditions had been sent

to the icelands, some to explore, others to conquer. None had returned. There had been rumours of stragglers here and there who had limped back, but that's all they were: rumours. The bards and storytellers had always had their answers and weaved their tales, but now Aeson was absolutely sure as to why the expeditions hadn't returned: this place had hunted them.

"She's found another one." Ildur leaned in close to Aeson, inclining his head towards Malari, who had stopped about forty feet ahead with Dahlen and Pylvír at her side.

Aeson grunted, hauling himself forwards. He allowed his gaze to linger on Ildur for a moment. The man had lost two of the four companions he had brought with him from Arkalen. Only Circe and Padrig remained. Aeson could see the loss carved into the lines on his face. But there was nothing Aeson could say to ease that pain. At least, nothing that was the truth. There would be more loss, more pain, more death. This was the way. And so, Aeson gave Ildur a short nod and carried on marching through the snow towards Malari.

The woman had stopped by a steel spike with a tattered red flag flapping at its end that had been driven into the ground near a vast lagoon that carved through the ice and connected to a number of small rivers.

"Another waypoint?" Aeson asked as he approached. The others gathered around, some listening keenly and looking to Malari, others dropping to the ice, their faces slick with sweat, their lungs heaving. Some had sustained injuries, a broken rib, a wounded thigh, a shattered hand. Verma had done what she could, but she wasn't a Healer, and tending so many wounds took its toll.

Dahlen turned, nodding in answer. Malari's previous expedition had left waypoint markers along their path so as to find their way back. Some had been lost, but many still remained.

"That is the pass," Malari said, barely loud enough to hear. She pulled back her hood, exposing the stubble that had formed on her previously clean-shaven head, and pointed towards a valley with enormous mountains of ice and rock rising either side. The jagged obsidian mountains loomed over the landscape like eldritch gods, their peaks obscured by thick clouds.

Even with the frigid wind, Malari didn't blink as she looked towards the valley. The woman's expression was unchanging, as though she were trapped in a memory. "It took about a week for us to traverse... Only half our number survived to see the other side."

As Malari spoke, murmurs rose, and Aeson could see the blend of fear and uncertainty that swept through those gathered. They were already exhausted and half frozen. “We will go higher, rise above the valley and take the cliff passes you spoke of.”

The slightest twitch of Malari’s lips betrayed an attempt at a smile that faded before forming. She nodded, then turned to look Aeson in the eyes. For a moment, he thought she would speak, but instead, she let out a soft sigh.

The wind rustled, sweeping snow across the plains of ice that stretched westward. Silence held, Malari’s words no doubt lingering in the minds of those strewn about. Aeson wanted to say something reassuring, but no words found their way to his tongue.

“First we eat,” Dahlen said, stepping forwards. He looked to Aeson, inclining his head sharply. “We won’t get far without food, and we’ve not stopped in hours.”

“Terrific idea, young Virandr.” The dwarf who spoke was Durink, whom Aeson had met smuggling Altweid blood into Valtara during the second rebellion. A more resourceful dwarf he’d never known. Durink slung his pack onto the ground, pulling at a long black moustache as he produced a multitude of semi-frozen cloth wraps, unfurling them to reveal large slabs of meat. “The bear is the oldest,” Durink said, frowning as he looked up at Dahlen. “In my experience, it tastes like kerathlin shit, but the cold will only keep it fresh for so much longer.”

“Wait.” Erik raised an eyebrow at Durink. “How do you know what kerathlin shit tastes like?”

Durink stared back at Erik and scrunched his lips but said nothing, allowing the silence to hang between them.

“It will have to do,” Dahlen said, letting out a sigh as he looked between Durink and Erik. “Father?”

Aeson responded with a nod, dropping to a knee beside the meat. As he reached for the Spark and drew in threads of Fire, Durink pulled some waterskins from his pack and gestured to several others to do the same.

“While you arrange the feast, I’ll fetch us some fresh water. We’ve not been lucky enough to find a source until now, and I’m sick of drinking the snow you mages melt. It tastes of nothing. Water should taste of the mountain and rock.”

Aeson weaved the threads of Fire through the meat, being careful to distribute the heat evenly. The last time he'd eaten bear meat he'd been bedridden for days.

His mind drifted, lingering on the images of the mutilated bodies that first night, in the cave. Shuk, Kuldar, Pol, and the sellswords. Aeson had seen so many corpses across the centuries he'd become numb to the sight of them, but for some reason that night had been different. The brutality of it had shaken something free in him. He had brought them there. He had walked them to their deaths. He had killed them.

"She would be proud of how you've raised them, or at least the men you've raised them to be."

Aeson turned to see Verma kneeling beside him, adding threads of Fire to his.

"I know she would." She glanced over to where Erik was sitting on the ice, tending the wounded hand of one of the sellswords, Kerril, showing Malari how to knit skin.

Behind them, Dahlen was talking with Akraf, Ildur, and Pylvír. Those men and elves were hardened warriors, and Dahlen spoke to them as equals, unfazed. Without Aeson's command, Dahlen had taken to arranging the guard postings whenever they stopped to eat or sleep. There hadn't even been a conversation, he'd just done it.

"I'm sorry I've been a ghost," Verma said, pulling Aeson back to his senses. She was staring down at the slow-thawing meat, an absent look in her eyes. "When the consumption took her... I just... I didn't know what to say. And then time passed and..."

"It's all right. We all work through things differently, Verma."

"I should have been there, Aeson. She was my friend."

"You're here now."

As Aeson made to speak again, a blood-chilling scream erupted to his left, and a realisation dawned on him. He leapt to his feet. "The water!"

More screams rose, and Aeson turned to see an enormous wurm extended from the edge of the lagoon. The white-scaled creature stretched at least ten feet out of the water, blood pouring from its maw as it loosened and clamped its jaws around Durink's flailing body. The dwarf howled and roared as the wurm thrashed its head side to side, tearing through the layers of leather, cloth, and flesh. The others who had gone to fetch water with Durink just stood there, dumbstruck.

The creature extended its body upwards, twisted its neck, and slammed Durink's body into the ice, splitting his skull like a melon, steam wafting from gore and brains. Then, with one last twist of its head, the wyrm hauled Durink back and dragged him into the water. The splash echoed, water spraying, and then Durink was gone.

Aeson's mouth had turned dry, his heart thumping. It had all happened so fast. Everyone was staring at the lagoon, expressions of disbelief painting their faces. Even the wind seemed to yield to the silence.

Of them all, it was Dahlen who stepped towards the others by the edge of the lagoon, both of his blades gripped in fists. "Step away from the water."

Aeson could see the hesitancy in the way Dahlen bit at his lip, but Dahlen took another step and pointed towards one of the sellsword, speaking slow and clear. "Tala, come away from the water."

Instinctively, Aeson took a step closer to his son. He looked to Verma and felt the woman open herself to the Spark, pulling on threads of Air, Water, and Spirit. Only a fraction of a second had passed before Verma's eyes widened.

As she turned and called out Dahlen's name, Aeson broke into a sprint, ripping his swords from his scabbards.

A piercing shriek rang out as the wyrm burst from the lagoon's edge and hurtled towards Dahlen, its long sinuous, scale-covered body twisting in the air. Aeson was still ten feet from his son when an arrow burst through the creature's eye and the wyrm crashed to the ground, slid across the ice, and came to a stop at Dahlen's feet.

Aeson's breath caught in his throat as a second wyrm erupted from the water, its enormous fangs glistening as it shrieked. The first arrow soared into its open maw, blood misting. The second caught the creature in the eye and it plunged back into the stream, staining the water red.

Aeson glanced over his shoulder to see Lirel nocking another arrow, Pylvír and Andira charging towards the stream.

"Aeson!" As Verma roared, Aeson could feel her drawing heavily from the Spark. "We need to run! Towards the valley!"

Before Aeson could argue, the ground shook with such force he stumbled. Wyrms poured from the water, their muscular bodies launching them forwards. Aeson watched as one of the creatures ripped a sellsword's arm from her body, then snapped her leg with a whip of its tail.

Before the beast could pounce on the man beside her, Akraf charged from the left, springing onto the wyrm's back and driving his blade down to the hilt through a gap in the scales. As the creature thrashed and writhed, Akraf held on by the sword, jabbing a knife down relentlessly.

Another shriek sounded to Aeson's left. He whipped around, pulling on threads of Fire and Water as a wyrm launched towards him. Without another thought, Aeson pushed the threads into the ice beneath the creature, melting and shifting it, forging a thick spike. He pulled the spike upwards, dragging it from the ice and punching it into the wyrm's pink underbelly, bursting through the scales on the other side in a plume of blood and bone.

He turned back to look for Dahlen and Erik amidst the chaos and found Verma standing between him and a hissing wyrm with a body as thick as a tree trunk. The creature was enormous, with fangs as long as Aeson's forearm; he'd never seen a wyrm like it. Verma and the creature stared at each other for a long moment, the wyrm's eyes white from edge-to-edge, and then it launched towards her.

The ripple of energy that swept outwards from Verma sent a shiver through Aeson's bones. Threads of Spirit, Air, and Earth flowed into her like rivers. It had been years since Aeson had felt the strength of an Arcarian.

As the wyrm ripped through the air towards her, Verma unleashed her threads. This wasn't a weaving of complex patterns. This was pure, unfettered power.

Aeson watched as the threads of Earth, Spirit, and Air ripped through the wyrm from head to tail, unravelling its flesh and snapping its bones. He watched as the creature split down the middle as though being cleaved by a god's blade. And he watched as the two halves dropped to the ice on either side of Verma, innards spilling out, steam rising.

As Verma stood there, threads whipping around her, energy pulsing from her in waves, Aeson spotted Erik and Dahlen working with Pylvír, Lirel, Andira, and a number of sellswords to carve through two wyrms.

To their left, Akraf dragged his blade from a dead wyrm, Malari standing behind him with blood dripping from the sword in her hand.

"They'll keep coming," Verma said, turning back to Aeson. Her voice was calm and measured, but the sheer power that radiated from her was unsettling.

"Unless?"

“Unless we give them a reason not to. Dragon’s Maw. Invert it and add Water. I’ll lead. The elf, can he lend his strength?”

Aeson looked to Pylvír with a shake of his head. “He was a Craftsmage.”

“Then draw what you can.”

Verma didn’t wait for Aeson to acknowledge. The air seemed to ripple around her as she pulled in threads of Fire, Air, Spirit, and Water. The sensation was like lightning in Aeson’s veins, igniting a yearning in his blood to draw from the Spark - so he did. He let the Spark flood him, burning through his body like a sweet fire.

About him, Aeson could see the others finishing the last of the wyrms that had launched themselves free of the water, but with the Spark crackling inside him, he could sense the hundreds more that were yet to surface. He couldn’t stop them alone; his connection to the Spark was nothing like what it had been when Lyara had been at his side. But with Verma, anything was possible.

He drew in the threads, weaving them around each other, fusing them together, then pushed them into Verma.

The ground beneath Aeson’s feet shook, shards of ice and flecks of snow drifting across the surface as cracks spread in all directions. Ahead, more wyrms burst from the water, hissing and shrieking, snapping their jaws.

“Now!” Verma roared.

Lightning swept over Aeson’s skin as he pushed every drop of strength he could spare into Verma.

The Dragon’s Maw movement was a technique used by The Order to combine the strength of mages in an imitation of dragonfire. But here, Verma pulled the heat from the air, dispersing it into the sky. To the eyes of someone who could not touch the Spark, the air seemed to sparkle and crystallise, but Aeson could see a symphony of threads weaving around each other, each amplifying the next, flooding forwards like a wave.

The threads swept across the ice, even the air seeming to freeze in their wake, until they crashed into the wyrms and washed over the lagoon. Six of the creatures were in the process of launching themselves free of the water when their bodies froze, ice sweeping over them.

One that had already been in the air dropped to the ground like a rock, shattering into a thousand pieces, shards of frozen blood and bone

spreading wide, a mosaic of death.

Aeson clenched his jaw as the drain set into his bones, sapping at his strength. The others stood about, watching in awe as the threads spread through the water, freezing every drop in place. And with the water, so too froze the wyrms, their bodies suspended in an icy tomb.

Then, with one last heave, Verma pulled hard on threads of Water and Air and clenched her fist. The remaining wyrms that were suspended from the lagoon exploded in a shockwave of pure energy. Crystallised shards of scale, blood, bone, and flesh soared in all directions.

With a gasp, Verma dropped to one knee, heaving, sweat dripping down her face.

Aeson stumbled forwards, his legs like reeds in the wind. It had been a long time since he'd drawn that heavily from the Spark. He'd almost forgotten what it felt like. He rested his palm on Verma's shoulder, drawing in a slow breath to ease the struggle in his lungs. "You age like oak, old friend. Stronger with every passing summer."

Verma turned to look up at him, sweat rolling down the bridge of her nose. "Four hundred years and you're still no better at speeches."

Aeson grunted as he laughed. "I've been busy."

"Father!"

"I'm fine," Aeson said, swatting away Erik's prying hand. He grabbed his son by the shoulders and looked him over. "Are you all right? Where's Dahlen?"

A thin line of blood flowed from a cut above Erik's eyebrow, but he seemed otherwise unharmed. Aeson let out a short puff of air, nodding to nobody but himself. Looking past Erik, he saw Dahlen approaching with Akraf and Malari, some of the others gathering behind them, all eyes fixed on Aeson and Verma.

After scanning Dahlen for wounds and finding none, a tension unwound in Aeson's chest.

Beside him, Verma rose. "How many did we lose?"

"This is what's left," Dahlen said, gesturing at the survivors, many of whom were bruised and bloody, some with wounds Aeson knew would carry them to Heraya's embrace. Dahlen scanned those gathered, then glanced over his shoulder, a sadness touching his eyes. "Thirty-eight. Ten lost."

Aeson took in the death and destruction around them. Mangled bodies and shards of shattered wyrms covered the ice. He clenched his jaw, pushing his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Looking past Dahlen, he saw Pylvír kneeling on the ground.

Aeson took a step closer. Pylvír's daughter, Andira, knelt beside the elf, her face and hair coated in blood, her shoulders convulsing.

A body lay still on the ice before them. Aeson's heart ached, coils of dread twisting in his stomach. He forced himself to look. His throat tightened, and the air fled his lungs as his gaze fell on Lirel's face.

The young elf's body was split from neck to navel, blood flowing freely.

She'd not yet seen her twentieth summer.

While Andira wept, Pylvír tucked his arms under Lirel's lifeless body, falling forward as he cradled her to his chest. The elf stumbled, dragging himself to his feet, tears streaming down his pale cheeks.

Aeson had been there when both Andira and Lirel had been born. He'd seen her draw her first breaths, and now he had led her to her last. He could barely look Pylvír in the eye as the elf took slow, heavy steps towards him, the others shifting to allow him past.

Pylvír stopped only a few feet before Aeson, silent tears still rolling down his cheeks as he cradled his daughter in his arms. "We will burn her and scatter her ashes in the wind," the elf said, his words broken by a subdued snuffle. "At least that way she will not rest in this place. Heraya will take her."

Aeson nodded, his voice catching in his throat. He'd seen so much death, but moments like this were different.

Pylvír took another step closer, and Aeson forced himself not to look away from Lirel's open chest.

"She died fighting for what she believed in. For a better future," Pylvír said with tears in his eyes. "Help me, old friend. Help me send her on her way."

Pylvír turned and walked back towards Andira, pulling his kneeling daughter's head against his leg. The way she sobbed broke a piece off Aeson's heart.

"We need to move towards the pass." Malari's voice was not the one Aeson had expected to hear. "We need to find shelter."

"Just give us a moment."

“The demons won’t wait.”

“Just give us a gods damned moment!” The fury that wracked Aeson surprised even him. His hands were shaking, his breathing laboured.

Malari simply inclined her head and took a step back.

“She’s not wrong,” Verma whispered, resting her hand on Aeson’s shoulder. “We can’t stay out here.”

“I know.” Aeson’s voice sounded weak even to himself.

“I have no idea how those wyrms or ‘seasnakes’ deal with ice. When the water thaws, they might yet live, and we aren’t strong enough to fight them off again. We need to make for the high pass. We can’t afford to rest until we’ve found higher ground, far from this water.”

“We burn the bodies first.” Aeson let out a long sigh, then turned to those who had survived, his gaze lingering on his sons. He raised his voice so all could hear. “We burn the bodies first, then we move. I will not let them rest here.”

CHAPTER 7

THE ICE, IT HUNGERS

THE GROUP MARCHED IN SILENCE AS THE SNOWFALL GREW HEAVIER AROUND them, obscuring their vision in a blanket of white. They moved in four groups, each person tethered by ropes to keep them together in the worsening blizzard. Aeson led one, Verma another, with Ildur and Pylvír taking charge of the last two. Pylvír slogged along beside Aeson, keeping their groups close, but Verma and Ildur were little more than silhouettes in the snow.

They had agreed to make their way to the valley Malari had been leading them towards before the wurm attack and to make camp once they'd put enough distance between themselves and the lagoon. That was before the snowstorm swept in, its winds crashing against them like waves, the snow obscuring anything more than fifty feet away in all directions. Aeson knew they couldn't carry on like this for much longer. They should have reached the foot of the mountain pass already. If the blizzard didn't let up soon, they would have no choice but to carve a shelter from the snow using the Spark and wait it out.

He drew a lungful of icy air, pulling at his heavy cloak. His body groaned with each laboured step, the lingering effects of the drain still sapping at him. He tucked his chin to his chest, trusting his feet to keep trudging forwards while he kept the bitter wind from his face. The smell of ash and char from the burning of the bodies still clung to his nostrils.

At the pull of the rope around his waist, Aeson glanced over his shoulder to look back at Erik and Dahlen, who marched behind him. Looking at his sons, he couldn't shake the image of Pylvír holding Lirel's lifeless body in his arms. He and Pylvír had known each other since before

The Fall. They'd been the same age when Aeson had been bound to Lyara. The pair had been through a lot together, but he'd never seen the elf weep until today. There was a subtle difference between weeping and crying. There were a thousand reasons to shed a tear, but weeping was born of grief and grief alone.

Aeson had always known the risks, known what could happen, but that didn't stop the worries. He grasped his gloved fingers around the rope at his waist, clenching them into a fist. *I will protect them, my love, whatever it costs.*

"It was Lirel who convinced me to come." Pylvír's voice broke the monotony of the blizzard winds as the elf drew in closer. He kept his head down, sheltering his face from the snow. "She had her mother's heart. When we got your letter, I wanted to turn you down. I wanted nothing more to do with this war. Just me, Elara, and the girls."

"Pylvír..."

"Don't, Aeson. Her blood is not on your hands. You should have heard her." A harsh laugh crept into Pylvír's voice. "She called me a coward, roared at me. She reminded me of all the tales I had told her about you. Tales of The Order, of the Draleid. She said 'If Aeson Virandr calls, we answer.' There was such pride in her eyes. 'The day we stop fighting is the day we die.' She overheard you saying that to me once. I should have been furious with her, but instead I was ready to follow her into the void." Pylvír grew quiet for a moment, tugging at his cloak. "She was right, I was being a coward. Both Lirel and Andira were born with a courage I never had. All I wanted to do was protect them."

"You're not a coward, Pylvír."

"Yes, Aeson. I am. I have been for a long time. I wasn't born a Battlemage, but I can fight, and I should have been fighting, not hiding."

"You were keeping your family safe."

"I was sheltering them from a poisonous world, instead of fighting to change that world for the better – instead of allowing them to fight for their own future." Aeson couldn't see Pylvír's face, but he could see the elf nodding. "I won't let her courage die with her. I won't."

A knot twisted in Aeson's throat. He could hear the anguish in Pylvír's voice, *feel* it.

"I won't," the elf said again.

They marched on in silence, the snowstorm growing stronger with each step until Aeson could barely see his outstretched fingers. Even looking over his shoulder he could no longer see his sons or any of the others who marched behind him; the rope tethered around his waist stretched back, vanishing into the snowfall.

Thump. Whoosh.

Aeson stopped, his chest tightening at the sound of the wingbeats. He looked up and saw nothing but ever-shifting white.

“What is it?” Pylvír called out somewhere to his left, the elf’s voice barely piercing the rushing winds.

Aeson opened himself to the Spark, pulling in threads of Fire and Spirit as his heart pounded against his ribs. He spun, the ice seeming to permeate his skin and flood his veins as another beat sounded.

Thump. Whoosh.

He scanned the blizzard, but no matter what threads he used to augment his vision, he couldn’t see through the all-devouring snowfall.

Thump. Whoosh.

Aeson snapped around once more as the wingbeats sounded behind him, spirals of wind whipping through the sheeting snow. Instinctively, he tugged on the rope that stretched from his waist back to his sons and the others to which they were tethered. He felt resistance but all he could see was the rope stretching off into a haze of white. How in the void had the storm come in so fast?

“Erik!” he roared. “Move closer!”

Thump. Whoosh.

The rope around Aeson’s waist tugged hard, then slackened. His heart stopped. He pulled on the rope to see its shorn end dropping into the snow, shredded and torn. *No. Please gods, no.* “Dahlen! Erik!”

Aeson charged back through the snow towards where his sons had been following him with Malari and several others in tow. Muffled shouts broke through the blizzard, but Aeson couldn’t make out the voices. *Where are they?*

The shouts turned to screams, echoing all around.

Aeson reached out for the Spark, allowing it to flood his veins. He snapped his teeth together and clenched his jaw as the drain sapped at him and burned an agony in his blood. He’d not yet recovered from the wyrms. Ignoring the pain, he pulled as hard as he could on threads of Fire and Air,

then, calling for his sons, unleashed a torrent of fire upwards, igniting the dark snow-filled sky.

In the newfound light, Aeson caught a glimpse of scales glittering like diamonds, then they were gone, swallowed by the blizzard as the flames flickered and faded.

He launched another river of fire, this time at an angle. The night shone, but all he could see was snow. For a few moments, all sounds capitulated to the rhythmic thump of Aeson's heart.

"Dahlen! Erik!" His throat scratched and burned as he roared. "Dahlen! Erik!"

A call answered, but Aeson couldn't make it out. The screams were all around him now.

He glimpsed something to his left. A flicker of black amongst the white. He drew his blade just before something crunched into his legs with the force of a battering ram.

The world spun, snow whipping past Aeson's face, and then a burst of pain split through his head as he slammed into a patch of tight-packed snow. Ignoring the ringing in his ears and the ache in his bones, Aeson flipped onto his back, his instincts taking over. He slung his blade across himself, bracing the flat with his palm as a heavy weight crashed down onto him.

Jaws snapped as the creature thrashed its head left and right, warm spittle spraying Aeson's face. His blade was the only thing keeping his flesh from being torn from his bones. The steel had lodged in a crevice between black scales on the beast's chest. He twisted and turned, trying to stop the beast from ripping his arms to pieces. For a moment, the creature stopped, a deep, rumbling growl emanating from its throat. It pushed against Aeson's blade, its open maw barely an inch from his face, its warm breath washing over him.

The black scales against which Aeson's blade pressed covered the entirety of the animal's chest and neck, flowing into short white fur that covered dense muscle. Two fangs, large as daggers and black as onyx, protruded from its upper jaw, set beside rows of steel-sharp teeth, dripping with saliva. It reminded Aeson of some kind of frostkat, though twice the size. Its skull was broad and arched at the brow, with a thick, flat-nosed snout. And there, staring back into Aeson's gaze were eyes of pure white, no pupil, no iris, just white. *The mokaríen. The blackhearts.*

The mokaríen stared back at him for a silent moment, its head no longer thrashing, jaws no longer snapping – just staring. Then as it pressed harder against Aeson’s blade, its jaws drawing closer to his face, Aeson pulled on threads of Fire, Water, and Air, the Spark searing through him. He only needed a sliver of power. He wove the threads through the air around him, melting the sheeting snow with Fire, forging it, then freezing it into a thin spike of ice.

The mokaríen howled and shrieked as Aeson pulled on his threads of Water and Air, skewering the creature through its hind leg. As the mokaríen reared, Aeson pulled his sword away from its chest and drove the blade into the animal’s unarmored jaw. Bright blood flowed down the steel as the blade pushed through the mokaríen’s jaw, into its mouth, and then burst through its skull on the other side. The animal went limp, its body held upright by Aeson’s strength alone.

With a grunt, Aeson twisted and heaved the creature to his left, a vibration jarring his arms as it thumped into the snow. In one motion, he pulled his blade free in a spurt of blood and dragged himself to his knees.

His chest shook as he drew in heaving breaths, the icy air slicing at his exposed skin. He lifted himself to his feet. The snow fell relentlessly around him, the wind snapping back and forth in bitter sweeps. “Dahlen! Erik!”

Screams echoed through the storm, coming from all around, then another flash of black as a second mokaríen launched itself at Aeson. The fear in his gut twisted and churned, but he set it aflame. *No, not today. Heraya will not take me today. Not until I know they’re safe.*

Aeson opened himself to the Spark once more, feeling it tug at his soul. He unleashed a pillar of fire from his palm, the mokaríen’s wails and shrieks fading as the flames consumed it.

A howl sounded behind him. Aeson spun as a third mokaríen leapt at him. He raised his blade, sliding its length between the creature’s open jaws. The beast snapped its onyx teeth around the steel, and its weight pushed Aeson back. He ripped his second blade from the scabbard on his back and drove it down through the creature’s white eye, crimson spraying into the air.

Aeson yanked both blades free, stumbling sideways as the mokaríen crashed down into the snow, its warm blood staining the perfect white.

Sweat slicked Aeson’s brow, and he heaved in a long breath as more forms took shape around him. Two, five, nine. The mokaríen stepped from

the blizzard, their heads lowered, their steps measured and cautious.

A shout rang out behind him and he turned to see Ildur and two of the Ardanian sellswords charging towards him through the snow. Two heartbeats later, a group of mokaríen crashed into them, and the storm swallowed them all. Screams and howls followed.

Aeson clenched his jaw and tightened his grip on his swords. The drain didn't sap at him anymore; it clawed the energy kicking and screaming from his body. His legs trembled, and the very blood in his veins felt as though it were boiling. He had drawn heavily from the Spark, and he no longer had the strength he once did.

"Heraya." Aeson rolled his shoulders back, stretching his muscles. He pushed the Spark away, feeling its warmth flee his muscles. "If you take me into your arms now, I will never forgive you."

He slowed his breathing, and a memory flashed through his mind, along with a familiar voice.

"The fellensír," Alvira had said as she stood in the training yard all those years ago. *"The lonely mountain. When your brothers and sisters are nowhere to be found, when you stand alone, you must make yourself a fortress. You must become both the immovable object and the unstoppable force. There are few who have ever truly mastered the fellensír. Join those ranks, and you will be one of the greatest swordsmen to have ever lived."*

As the mokaríen drew closer around him, deep growls resonating in their chests, Aeson took in a long breath, exhaling a plume of steam through his nostrils. He moved into Patient Wind. Alvira had been dead for nearly four centuries, but Aeson remembered every shred of what she had taught him. *I will not fail you, my Archon. I will not... Not again.*

The first beast leapt from Aeson's right, nothing more than a flash signalling in his periphery. He shifted his feet, adjusting to the awkwardness of the snowshoes. He leaned backwards, avoiding the slice of its claws, then flowed into Rising Dawn and swept his blade across the creature's soft underbelly, near its groin, where the scales gave way to fur. Blood sluiced, and the creature howled, thrashing as its intestines slopped into the snow.

Three of the mokaríen lunged together, each charging from different sides. Aeson twisted at the waist, allowing the first of the creatures to soar past him while slicing deep into the flesh of its hind leg. He moved into Waiting Mantis and switched his left blade into reverse grip, driving it backwards with his right fist pressed against the pommel. He felt the blade

sink into the skull of the mokaríen that had come from behind him, the click of steel against bone as he twisted the hilt.

With one blade still lodged in the creature's skull, he swung the other towards the third mokaríen that was soaring towards him. The vibration ran through the steel as the blade skittered off the scales that protected the mokaríen's neck. The creature hammered into Aeson's chest, ripping his hand from the hilt of the sword lodged in its dead kin's head and sending them both tumbling. Aeson rolled in the snow, swinging his remaining blade as he sprang to his knees. The steel sliced through flesh and bone, cleaving the mokaríen's right foreleg at the knee. As the creature howled, Aeson drove his blade into its open jaws, feeling a crunch as the blade shattered obsidian teeth and cracked into the skull.

Aeson heaved the blade free, letting the creature slump to the ground. He ripped his second blade from where it was lodged in the skull of the other mokaríen. Crouching as he swept around, he flourished his steel at the five remaining creatures.

They circled him, their black fangs and chests stark against the raging snow. He could see more clearly now. The blizzard was fading. He spun in a circle, tightening his grip on the hilts of his swords, shifting to watch each of the creatures as they drew closer, their eyes white as bone.

"Draleid n'aldryr," Aeson whispered. With one last deep breath, he readied himself and fell into Eye of The Storm. He let the warmth of the Spark flood his veins. The drain pulled at him instantly, burning, searing. He pushed the pain down; he had no need for it anymore. In the back of his mind, he thought he could hear Lyara's roar, defiant and proud. Broken or not, she would always be a part of him. "Rakina nai dauva."

All five of the creatures surged forwards, their black and white frames blending with the icy night.

Aeson closed his eyes and reached out with threads of Spirit and Air, permeating the world around him. He weaved threads of Earth into his skin and bones, hardening them. Then, with images of Erik and Dahlen in his mind, he let his body take over and drifted into the forms of the fellensír.

Steel collided with scales, carved through flesh, and crunched against bone. Each swing of Aeson's blade was as natural as breathing. He moved from Howling Wolf into Cold Moon, sweeping into Crouching Bear. Each twist and turn was effortless, born of repetition, of hours, of years, of centuries.

Blood sprayed as he hacked into a mokaríen's neck. He left the blade in place, spinning as he dropped into Striking Dragon, carving through another's jaw in a single swing, teeth snapping and bones breaking beneath the weight of his steel.

He pulled in threads of Earth and wrapped them around the body of a leaping mokaríen. With a clench of his fist, the beast wailed, and its body collapsed inwards, scales shattering and bones cracking, blood spraying into the air like a mist.

The drain of drawing so heavily from the Spark dropped him to one knee, but as he hit the snow, Aeson swivelled, wrapping both hands around the hilt of his sword and raising it above his head. Through his threads of Spirit, he'd sensed the mokaríen lunging behind him, and so he barely had a need to look as he drove his blade down. The steel plunged into the beast's head, into its open mouth, down through its jaws, and lodged into the ice, crimson flowing along its edge.

As he knelt there, dragging frosted air into his ragged lungs, sweat dripping down his face, more of the creatures appeared, shifting in and out of the snowfall like wraiths. They were endless.

The mokaríen circled him, their muscular bodies rippling through the white fur, deep growls resonating in their throats. He grasped the pommel of the sword still skewered into the ice through the mokaríen's head and clenched his jaw as he hauled himself to his feet. But as he did, he saw the silhouettes of four figures standing behind the mokaríen, their faces obscured by the snowfall. Two seemed as tall as Jotnar, while the others looked to be human.

The figures just stood there, as if waiting to see what he would do.

With his eyes fixed on the silhouettes, Aeson placed his foot on the dead mokaríen's head. He grunted, heaved the blade free, and wrapped his fingers firmly around the hilt. Now that he stood still, pain flared into existence along his legs and his back where the mokaríens' claws had sliced through to the layers of fabric and into flesh. Cold swept across his skin and seeped into his bones as his grip on the Spark slipped away. The drain pulled at him, and he knew even reaching for the Spark would burn what was left of his tattered soul.

A shout to Aeson's right pulled his attention from the silhouettes, and he looked to see shapes emerging from the waning storm.

"Father!"

Aeson's heart skipped a beat as Dahlen's face came into view, Erik following after. The tall, lithe shape of Akraf moved beside them, along with a number of others. They charged with Dahlen at their head, hacking through the mokaríen that lunged at them.

Many of the creatures that circled Aeson turned towards the new threat.

Arcs of blue lightning streaked through the air, shrieks and howls ringing out as mokaríen were ripped to shreds in flashes of light.

"Aeson!" Verma charged towards Aeson, her sword drawn, the power of the Spark pulsing from her in waves. Threads of Air swelled in her palm before she launched a shockwave that sent mokaríen spiralling. "To me!"

Feeling as though he was only ever a step away from his legs caving beneath him, Aeson ran. As he reached the others, Pylvír grabbed him and shoved him forwards.

"Fall back!" Dahlen called out.

"We're already at the foot of the pass!" The elf roared in Aeson's ear. "It was covered by the storm. It's clearer ahead. We can make our stand there."

Aeson nodded; he didn't have the air in his lungs to speak as he pushed himself forwards. His legs were numb except for the dull vibrations that shook through him with each step. About him, he scanned for familiar faces. His sons, Akraf, Malari, Pylvír, Andira, Verma. Padrig, Ildur, and Circe were there. He couldn't count the number of sellswords or those he had brought with him from Milltown, but more had survived than he'd dared hope.

With each passing moment, the blizzard grew weaker, pulling back as the mountains rose. Ahead, the pass stretched into the distance, rising ever upward. To the left, a sheer, craggy wall of ice and rock climbed into the clouds. To the right, a wide chasm split the pass in two, dropping endlessly into a dark abyss.

A scream echoed behind him, and he looked back to see two mokaríen ripping a sellsword to pieces, blood spraying over the snow as onyx fangs shredded flesh and snapped bones. The woman clawed and hacked at the creatures, thrashing like a wild animal.

Aeson turned to charge back, but a hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled.

"She's gone." Verma's expression was cold and hard. "You can't save her."

Aeson looked back; the woman lay limp, the two mokaríen tearing flesh from her dead bones. More of the creatures dashed past the pair – ten, twenty, thirty. Aeson stopped counting. Verma’s use of the Spark had allowed the group to put some distance between them and the mokaríen, but the creatures streaked across the icy ground with an unnatural speed. “We’ll never outrun them.”

“No.” Verma shook her head. “It’s been an honour.” She turned to the others, some of whom had stopped, while others were still running. “We make our stand here!”

As Verma called out, Pylvír marched towards them. The power of the Spark pulsed in waves from the elf, rippling in the air around him.

“What are you doing?” Aeson grabbed Pylvír’s shoulder, but the elf shrugged him off.

“Fighting,” he called back. “Be ready for those that slip through.”

“Those that slip through?”

Pylvír didn’t answer, his focus remaining on the charging mokaríen now less than twenty feet away. Threads of all five elemental strands swirled around the elf, coruscating with power. Pylvír had been a Craftsmage of The Order. He had not waged war or taken lives, he had built cities and created works of art that stole the air from lungs. Aeson had never seen him draw this kind of strength.

Pylvír pushed his threads into the ground and the mountain of ice and rock that towered over them. The ground shook, detritus and shards of ice vibrating along its surface.

“What’s he doing?” Pylvír’s surviving daughter, Andira, now stood beside Aeson, staring at her father. Every line of her face was marked with worry, her eyes wide and panicked. Her voice shook with fear. “Aeson, what is he doing?”

Energy pulsed from Pylvír as the elf weaved his threads through the mountainside. Thunderous snaps and cracks flooded the valley, drowning out all other sounds. Aeson stumbled backwards as the ground shifted. Smooth, hexagonal columns of ice and rock burst from the mountainside, crashing down onto the pass with the force of falling stars. Wherever a column connected with the ground, snow, ice, and rock plumed into the air, tremors shaking beneath Aeson’s feet.

He’s building.

A sense of wonder swept over Aeson as he realised Pylvír was building a wall from the mountain itself, and whatever mokaríen were caught beneath it were ground to blood, dust, and bone.

The powerful creatures weaved between the crashing columns with dizzying speed, their dense-muscled bodies rippling as they moved. But when the ice and rock finally stopped shifting, and the cloud of snow and blood hung in the air, only four remained. The surviving mokaríen swept across the ground towards Pylvír, their fur matted with blood and dirt. The elf had dropped to his knees from his exertion.

“Father!” Andira charged forwards, placing herself between the mokaríen and her father.

Despite his body’s complaints, Aeson followed after her. Glancing right, he saw that Dahlen, Circe, and two of the sellswords – Artik and Luren – moved with him.

“Get him to his feet!” Aeson roared at Erik, gesturing towards Pylvír.

As Dahlen and Luren dropped beside Pylvír, hauling him upright, the first of the mokaríen crashed into Andira, and they both went sprawling in a scramble of claw and steel. The second mokaríen tore out Artik’s throat with a swipe of its massive claws, then lunged at Circe.

The last two fixed their white eyes on Aeson and charged. Aeson twisted at the waist, narrowly avoiding his face being torn to ribbons as one of the beasts soared past him. He swept his blade upwards, slicing a gash along the creature’s underbelly. The second mokaríen slammed into his chest.

The air fled Aeson’s lungs as he hit the ground. He gasped, just managing to shift his head as the mokaríen’s jaws snapped shut. The creature’s claws raked along Aeson’s collarbone and pinned his left arm to the ground, his fingers still wrapped around the hilt of his sword. Aeson roared, pain searing him. But as he did, he thrust his right arm upwards and drove his blade to the hilt into the creature’s side where the black scales faded to white fur.

The mokaríen howled and lifted its leg to swipe a claw across Aeson’s face. Aeson twisted the blade, pushing all his strength through his right arm. The creature reared in pain as the steel sliced through its innards and scraped bone. With Aeson’s left arm free, he fought through the wound screaming in his shoulder and swung his second blade. The steel sliced into

the flesh of the mokaríen's exposed throat, blood pouring out over Aeson's face.

Aeson pushed with his right arm, leveraging the blade lodged in the beast's side, hauling himself upright as the creature dropped into the snow.

A scream sounded near the chasm's edge. Aeson looked to see the mokaríen that had soared past him collide with Lindera – a Drifaienin woman who had joined the rebellion nearly ten years past. Lindera's screams echoed against the icy mountain as she and the mokaríen careened over the edge of the chasm, dropping into its endless depths.

Aeson's heart sank into his stomach as he watched her fall. She had only seen fifteen summers when they had first met. *So young. They're all so young.*

The second scream dragged Aeson from his thoughts. One of the sellswords was hurtling towards the edge. The rope around his waist still tethered him to Lindera, and that rope joined five others.

Aeson broke into a sprint, but before his first step hit the ground, Erik had leapt forwards.

Erik dropped the blade in his left hand, then, with his second sword sliced through the rope that tethered the sellsword to the others. Aeson watched as his son tossed his second sword to the side, bounded to the edge of the chasm, and wrapped his hand around the shorn end of the rope only for it to slip through his fingers. The sellsword's screams joined Lindera's.

The clashing of scales and steel, mixed with roars and growls let Aeson know that Circe, Andira, and the others were still dealing with the last two mokaríen. But a large snapping sound sent a cold chill through his veins. Cracks spread through the icy ground around the chasm's edge where Erik now stood, Malari and a number of others by his side.

Aeson took a step forwards, his gaze meeting Erik's for only a moment before the edge fractured and collapsed.

He was sprinting before his mind had even begun to cycle through what was happening, his heart pounding like a drum in his ears.

Boom.

The howls and shouts were nothing but dull echoes as the edge of the cliff slipped away and Erik and the others fell.

Boom.

Aeson's breath caught in his chest. He sheathed his swords as he ran, reaching back and unclipping the ice-axe that had been strapped to his pack

unused since the first day.

Boom.

He leapt over the edge.

The frigid wind crashed against Aeson's face and whipped past his head, smothering all sound. His eyes watered as he fell, but he kept them open. He could see Erik tumbling through the air.

Aeson reached for the Spark, but it hovered just out of reach, denying him as it had done many times since Lyara's passing.

Not now. Please, Varyn, not now.

In his mind, Aeson saw the elemental strands weaving around each other, each pulsating with its own light. He let all else slip away into blackness.

Please, I just need a drop. Just enough to save him. Take my life for his. Take whatever you need, just not him.

Even reaching for the Spark set Aeson's blood aflame, pulling at his mutilated soul. Pain wracked his body, and yet he pushed harder. He let the red glow of Fire fade and allowed the pulsating blue strand of Water to slip from his reach. In his mind's eye, twisting and turning in the blackness, Aeson saw but three elemental strands: the soft white strand of Spirit, the muted green and brown of Earth, and the near-translucent Air.

Please. Varyn, Heraya, Neron, Achyron, Elyara. If any are listening, give me strength.

In a flash of warmth, the Spark flooded Aeson's body. The threads of Air wrapped around him, while Spirit and Earth hardened his skin and bones. What had felt like minutes in Aeson's mind, had only been fractions of a second. Before him, Erik fell, helpless and alone.

Aeson ignored the searing pain the Spark burned in his veins and wrapped Erik in threads of Air. Others fell about Erik, faces Aeson had known for years and, in some cases, decades. He didn't have the strength to save them all.

With the threads of Air wrapped around his son, Aeson pulled, slowing Erik's descent. He reached out, his fingers coming within a hair's breadth of his son's. The fear in Erik's eyes sent lightning through Aeson. With one last tug of Air, he pulled his son closer and grasped his wrist with a grip that even the gods themselves couldn't break.

"Hold on."

Filling both Erik and himself with threads of Earth and Spirit, Aeson hardened their skin and strengthened their bones even further. Then, with an almighty swing, he drove the ice-axe into the face of the chasm.

If Aeson had not been drawing from the Spark, the force of the axe hitting the ice would have torn his arm free of his body. Instead, he just about held on as the axe ripped through the chasm, shards of ice and rock spraying in all directions.

Just a little longer. The Spark burned as bright as dragonfire in Aeson's blood. They were slowing; he just needed to hold on. *Just a little longer...*

A loud crack resounded in Aeson's ear, and then they were falling faster. He looked up to see the head of the axe had snapped, bouncing off the icy crags. He let go of the steel shaft. Pulling on the last vestiges of his strength, he opened himself to the strand of Fire and channelled the threads of Earth and Spirit into his hand and arm. Without a second's hesitation, he dug his fingers into the ice and screamed.

Even with the threads of Fire softening the ice and the Earth and Spirit hardening his skin, the pain he felt held no comparison. The skin peeled away, his bones stretching, every fibre of his muscles howling in agony, until finally they came to a stop.

"Hold on!" he roared to Erik, clenching his jaw and closing his eyes. The words were as much for himself as they were for his son. He couldn't feel his hand or his arm. If it wasn't for the fact that they were no longer moving, he would have believed the limb had been torn from his body.

Aeson peeled open his eyes, grimacing at the pressure that threatened to rip his body in half. Relief flooded him when he saw Erik staring back, his hand wrapped around Aeson's forearm. Aeson grunted, feeling himself slip a little. He held his gaze on Erik. "Are you all right?"

His son nodded, visibly trembling. "We're all right."

"We're?" Aeson squinted. In the panic, he hadn't looked past his son, but now, his body shaking with the strain of the weight, he could see the Narvonan woman – Malari – held on, the rope around her waist still tethered to Erik.

How? How is she alive? With the fire of the Spark burning in his veins, he must have sheltered her with the threads of Earth, Air, and Spirit in the same way he had Erik. As he stared down at the woman, Aeson felt his fingers slip on the ice, his grip peeling away. A realisation set in: *I can't hold them both.*

“Father.” Erik’s breaths trembled, and Aeson felt his son’s grip tighten around his forearm. “What do we do?”

Aeson looked past Erik to Malari, who was now staring back at him. The woman’s gaze didn’t waver. He didn’t have a doubt in his mind that she had realised the same thing he had.

In the corner of his mind, Aeson could still feel the slightest touch of the Spark. Just a thin thread of Fire or Air and he could cut through the rope that tethered Malari to Erik.

Aeson’s stomach turned. He was disgusted with himself for even allowing the thought to slip into his head, but what else could he do? He couldn’t hold them both. He wouldn’t even be able to hold Erik for long, but every second mattered. Every second with his son. The thought caused his mind to slipped to Dahlen, who still stood at the top of the pass. *I’m sorry, my son.*

It was then that he saw Malari nod. It was the look in her eyes that spoke to him: do it.

Aeson let out a groan, once more feeling himself slip. The numbness in his arm and hand was fading, giving way to an excruciating, burning pain that tore from his fingers to his shoulder. He closed his eyes. His head told him to slice through the rope, to let her fall; it would buy Erik more time. But his heart screamed back at him, and for a brief second it was as though he could feel the touch of Lyara’s soul once more. When he had laid his soulkin into the ground, when he had built the hill around her, he had promised her that he would never stop. That he would never stop fighting, never stop pushing until the wrongs were righted, never stop being a Draleid.

Draleid didn’t let the helpless fall to their deaths. Aeson was not a Draleid anymore. He was Rakina.

But I won’t stop.

Aeson let out a scream as something popped in his hand. He looked at Erik, every muscle in his body tensing. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Erik shook his head. His grip loosened on Aeson’s arm.

“What are you doing?”

“You can’t hold us, Father. You can’t hold us, and Dahlen still needs you. I love you.”

With that, Erik let go and his wrist slipped through Aeson’s fingers.

Aeson wanted to scream, but no sound left his mouth. But then, as his world crumbled before his eyes, the strain in Aeson's arm evaporated. Threads of Air wrapped around him and pulled him upwards.

"Hold on!" a voice called down.

Verma.

"I've got you!"

Verma's words were nothing more than a dull echo in Aeson's head. He'd heard them, but the thumping of his heart drowned them out as he watched her threads lift not only him, but Erik and Malari.

Aeson's entire body trembled as Verma lifted them from the chasm, and he collapsed onto the ice and snow.

Hands grabbed at him, and voices droned. His hand and arm were nothing but agony. He looked down to see two of his fingers broken and snapped at odd angles, the skin shredded to the bone, blood everywhere.

Aeson pushed the prying hands away and heaved himself to his feet. He was trembling, his stomach threatened to empty, and his pulse pounded in his ears. He looked past those around him until he found Erik.

Aeson's son was doubled over with his hands on his knees, sucking deep breaths into his lungs.

"What were you thinking?" Aeson stumbled to the left as he roared, his legs almost giving way beneath him. He tripped over a rock, but Dahlen kept him upright.

Erik stood straight, still breathing heavily, a look of confusion on his face. "What?"

Aeson reached out with his right arm and grabbed a handful of Erik's coat, pulling his son closer. "Don't ever let go!"

"Father—"

"Don't ever let go!" Aeson roared, his hand shaking uncontrollably.

Hands wrapped around Aeson from the back, pulling him away, and he heard Dahlen's voice in his ears.

"I almost lost you!" Aeson released Erik's coat, stumbling backwards as Dahlen held him.

"I almost lost you..." he said, more softly.

Aeson slumped into his son's arms, the world fading around him.

That night, Aeson stood against the wall of a spark-carved cave that Pylvir had crafted for them and stared out at the cold snow-filled night. Even then, hours later, a knot still twisted his stomach. He had come so

close to losing Erik, so close to losing one of his sons. He could still see the look in Erik's eyes, hear the tremble in his voice as he said 'I love you' and let go.

It should have never come to that.

Aeson gritted his teeth as he shifted against the wall. Verma had tended to his wounds, but she had been weak. Most of her efforts had gone to saving his hand. At the thought, Aeson flexed the fingers of his left hand, spreading them and then curling them into a fist. The bones ground and popped, aching. Had she not been there, he would have lost the hand, and a lot more. As it stood, he would be left with nothing more than scars.

He drew in a long breath, holding it in his lungs, then exhaled, his breath rising before him. Two birds flew along the rock face on the opposite side of the chasm. He watched the creatures soar, then swoop upwards in a draft before plummeting out of his sight.

"Is it madness?" he whispered, staring up at the slice of night sky that was visible past the climbing mountain walls. "Have I let my heart blind me?"

At that moment, the question was meant not for him, but for Naia and Lyara, the best pieces of the man he had once been.

The thought of bringing dragons back into this world, dragons not controlled by the empire, had lit a fire in him. For that was one of The Order's greatest failings: they had allowed the dragons to suffer for their mistakes. Once, thousands of the magnificent creatures had called Epheria home. Now, only nine still drew breath, and the eggs were little more than beautiful rocks.

Yes, a dragon would give the people of Epheria something to rally behind. It would give them hope. But more than that, if what Malari said was true, if the Valacian dragons were hatching, then everything was not lost. The Order, in its hubris, had not driven the dragons to extinction. If there was even a sliver of a chance, Aeson owed it to Lyara to find out.

But that didn't free him of the guilt. He had led good men and women to their deaths in this frozen wasteland, thousands of miles from the people who loved them. At least when Naia and Lyara had died, they had done so in Aeson's arms. He had been able to lay them into the ground. The same could not be said for those who died here. The same could not have been said for Erik if Verma hadn't been there.

"You need to rest."

Aeson turned his head to see Dahlen approaching. His son rubbed the heel of his palm into his eyes, squinting.

“Sleep evades me.” Aeson gave his son a weak smile. “How is your brother?”

“Curled up like a babe.” Dahlen let a puff of air out his nose, suppressing a laugh. “He was able to find sleep just fine.”

“Good.” Aeson turned back to look out at the falling snow.

“We’re here because we want to be, Father.” Dahlen moved so he stood next to Aeson, folding his arms across his chest and tucking his chin. “We choose this fight every day. We know the risks.”

Aeson stared back at his son, taking in every freckle on his face, the darkness of his hair, the blue in his eyes. *Did I ever really give you a choice?*

He shook the thought from his mind. “Sleep a little longer. I’ll wake you when I’m weary.”

Dahlen nodded reluctantly, rested his palm gently on Aeson’s injured shoulder, then touched their foreheads together. “We’re with you.”

Aeson smiled softly as Dahlen walked back to where he had been sleeping. He had no intention of waking Dahlen. If the mokaríen or anything else from this gods-forsaken place came for their blood that night, they would find Aeson waiting.

He cast one last look over those who lay in the cave. The mokaríen had killed nineteen. Only seventeen remained.

Pylvír lay against the cave wall with his daughter, Andira, nestled beside him. Verma slept beside Erik, Dahlen, Akraf, and Malari.

Only six of the Ardanian sellswords remained. And only three Aeson knew by name: Torkel, Luren, and Ithaca.

Of those who had travelled with Aeson from Milltown, three had survived. Ildur, Padrig, and a young woman called Fearn. She was the youngest of those Aeson had brought with him, only a year older than Dahlen. But she had been smuggling since the age of twelve, and Aeson trusted her implicitly. She lay with her head resting on Padrig’s chest. The young man was the last of Ildur’s warriors; the mokaríen had torn Circe to shreds when Aeson had jumped after Erik.

By Malari’s measure, they were only a few days travel from where she had seen the dragons.

“Only a few more days,” Aeson whispered to himself.

CHAPTER 8

DEMONS

FRESH SNOW CRUNCHED BENEATH AESON'S BOOTS AS THE GROUP MADE their way along the pass. The sun had not yet risen, and his shoulder still throbbed and creaked, but he had some movement back in his hand. He lifted the waterskin Fearn had given him to his nose, recoiling at the harsh scent that wafted from within. On most other days, he wouldn't have contemplated taking a drink of whatever poisonous spirit lay within, but the cold was in his bones, and he needed any warmth he could find. He drew a long breath in through his nostrils then tipped the flask up, spilling its contents into his mouth. The regret was instant.

Aeson spluttered, yanking the waterskin from his lips. His mouth burned. His tongue burned. His throat burned. Everything burned. He grimaced, shaking his head, then gave Fearn an accusing look. "What in the gods is that? You've had this with you the whole time?"

"I thought it might be needed," she said, a smile gracing her lips.

"Give it here," Verma said, reaching out her hand.

Aeson shuddered as he passed the skin back to Verma, the burn of its noxious contents still lingering at the back of his throat.

"What is it?" she asked, wafting the skin across her nostrils.

"Elderfire." Fearn's eyes lit up at the question. From the first time he'd met her, smuggling Altweid blood to the sick in Aeling, Aeson had seen the joy on Fearn's face anytime she'd been given the chance to answer even the simplest of questions. He had never known one so young to have so much knowledge about almost everything. "It's made from fermented Narvonan harberries and left to age for ten summers in flamewood barrels. The Narvonans drink it when celebrating the lives of the lost. Right?"

Fearn looked to Malari as she asked the question.

The Narvonan gave Fearn a rare smile. She pressed three fingers to her lips, then to her heart. “You are correct, young one. I am honoured that you know so much of my culture. Akopa bless you.”

Fearn’s smile spread so wide Aeson thought it might touch her ears. It was the first smile he had seen in the three nights since they had lost so many to the wyrms and mokaríen. Those nights had passed without more death or blood, but they had still been cold, harsh, and laced with fear.

“May I?” The tall, lean frame of Akraf stretched past Aeson and gestured for Verma to pass him the skin.

She took one last whiff, recoiling and scrunching her nose before handing him the skin.

Akraf stopped walking, the wind flapping at his cloak as he looked down at the waterskin.

Aeson nodded to Verma, and they both halted, the others standing around them.

“In Narvona, there has been war for almost a thousand years. Ever since the death of High-Queen Tamakara, may her soul rest in the Eversea.” He looked up, finding Malari with his gaze. “The Kingdoms of Latrak and Mohatine have shed more blood than any others.”

Nobody else spoke as Akraf and Malari stared at each other. The look they shared wasn’t one of anger or hatred, but of understanding.

“My people believe that all life is sacred. We understand that death is a part of this world, but we mourn the stilling of hearts above all else. We believe that the soul cannot move on from what was lost without the cleansing of Elderfire. With the pain comes the knowledge that we are still here, that the blood lost lives on through us.” He looked to Aeson and his sons, then Pylvír and Andira, then to Fearn, Ildur, Padrig, and the sellswords. “Many hearts have been stilled in this land. Much blood lost. When we started this journey, we were strangers. Now, we are kin. And as your kin, I mourn your losses. May Akopa guide their souls on the river Trian, so that they may forever rest on the gentle waves of the Eversea. And may your gods, wherever they dwell, see fit to guide them also.”

“Le sangar mes vialor vitír à talers ul.” Akraf drew in a long breath, then touched the mouth of the waterskin to his lips. He didn’t so much as flinch. “The blood of the lost lives on through us.”

After holding Malari's gaze for a long moment, the man handed her the skin. She repeated the words, sipped from the skin, then passed it on. Each of the group did the same, until the skin was back in Aeson's hands.

"Le sangar mes vialor vitír à talers ul."

The blood of the lost lives on through us.

Hours later, as the sun crested the horizon, spraying light across the ice and snow, Malari stopped at the edge of a nearby cliff.

"There." The woman held out her hand and pointed at something in the distance, far below.

Stepping up beside her, Aeson looked down over the edge. A crevasse-cracked field of white spread from where the end of the pass met the mouth of the valley. It moved westward for three or four miles before meeting an enormous plain of obsidian-black rock that lay at the foot of a mountain that would put the peaks of Lodhar to shame.

"That is where my people split." As the words left her mouth, Malari visibly tensed. "That is where we saw the dragons." She waved her hand across the sky. "They flew together. Three, large as houses, four that looked no bigger than horses."

Even just hearing the words caused the hairs on Aeson's arms to prick. When a century had passed without a single egg hatching in Epheria, Aeson had lost hope. Like many of the other Draleid who had survived that long after The Fall, he believed that maybe the gods had punished them for their hubris. Chora Sarn had always taught him that Varyn had re-gifted the dragons' fire, believing that the bond with their soulkin would temper their fury and rage. Perhaps, after the desolation and ruin caused by The Fall, Varyn had seen fit to take the fire once more.

That moment, as Aeson stood at the edge of the cliff, looking out at the cloudless blue sky, was the most he had allowed himself to hope in centuries. "Then that is where we go."

As the others continued on the pass, Aeson grasped Malari's forearm.

The woman looked back at him curiously. When Aeson had first met her, Malari's head had been shaved smooth, but she now had almost an inch of jet-black hair. In the time they had spent fighting their way across the icelands, her hair had been the least of the changes about her. Somehow, despite everything they had seen, she had grown stronger. The woman was nothing like the wreck he had met on the *Bloodwater* almost two months

ago. Her skin was dried and cracked from the icy winds, but her cheeks were fuller, her step lighter.

“Thank you for guiding us here. Without you, we would have been long dead.”

“Do not thank me yet,” she said, lowering her gaze. “We have far to go still. This was where I left my people. I and ten others. Only three of us made it back to the coast.

“I will bring you home, Malari. I promise.”

At the words, Malari’s head jerked up. “Do not make promises you can’t keep, Aeson Virandr.” She leaned closer – close enough that he could feel the warmth of her breath. “Will you make a promise you *can* keep?”

Aeson stared back at her. “What?”

“Protect those two young men.” She nodded towards Erik and Dahlen, who were guiding the others towards the safest route downwards. “They are special, and losing them will break you.”

“I am already broken.”

Malari gave a soft, almost pitying smile. “You do not understand what it is to be broken while your sons still draw breath.”

“I would die for them,” Aeson said, allowing his gaze to linger on Erik and Dahlen.

“Kill for them,” Malari said without missing a beat. “Dying for them will do them no good. They still need you.”

As it had done since they first set foot on the ice, the sun had hung in the sky for no more than a few hours before it dipped beyond the horizon. And so, as Aeson finally reached the bottom of the mountain pass, he stopped, letting out a long, misty breath as he watched the retreating sunlight glitter and sparkle across the crevasse-covered field of snow before him. For all the death and horrors Valacia held, he couldn’t deny the sense of devastating beauty it captured.

He let his gaze drift across the broken field of ice and snow to where an open plain of black rock lay at the foot of the mountain a few miles to the west.

Voices and footsteps sounded behind him as the others descended.

“Aeson.” Verma moved past him, her head tilted to the right as she stared off at the gargantuan mountain. He could sense the Spark pulsing from her, threads of Spirit and Fire weaving through her eyes. “Those alcoves in the mountainside...”

“What about them?” Ildur asked, dropping to his haunches, letting out long deep breaths. He pulled off his gloves and ran his fingers through his greying hair.

Aeson took a few steps forwards, narrowing his eyes while drawing in threads of Spirit and Fire to sharpen his vision. A chill ran through him, his pulse quickening at what his eyes could now see. “Eyries...”

“Eyries?” Dahlen moved so he stood beside Verma. Aeson savoured the look of wonder in his son’s eyes; it was a rare thing. Ever since they were little, Dahlen and Erik had been fascinated with stories of The Order and the Draleid – Aeson was sure he had Therin to thank for that.

Dahlen turned to Malari, who stared at the mountain, lost in thought. “You did it,” he said, a broad smile stretching across his face. “I knew you could.”

The smile Malari gave Dahlen in return was as fragile as a pane of glass.

As a murmur spread through the group, Akraf moved to stand at Aeson’s left. He looked up at the full moon that sat, pale and cold, in the sky. “We must move quickly. No matter what we do or do not find, we must turn back within three nightfalls. Kayala will not wait more than two days from the second moon. She is a woman of her word.”

Aeson looked back at the man, nodding slowly. Not once had Akraf complained about being used like a bargaining chip between Aeson and the captain of the *Bloodwater*. Every other soul who had joined the expedition had done so by choice, whereas Akraf had little say in the matter. But the man had pushed himself as hard as any of the others, and had fought as though he were defending kin. Aeson respected that. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry for forcing this on you.”

Akraf shook his head, the red markings on his face catching the light of the setting sun. “The godwinds carry us on the journeys for which we were meant. Many times I have heard Kayala’s mother tell stories of Aeson Virandr, The Blade of the Moon. I had always thought them old wives’ tales. I was wrong.”

Aeson gave Akraf a short nod.

“So,” Verma said, turning back towards Aeson. “What’s the plan then?”

Aeson drew in a long breath, looking around at those who stood about him. They had started this expedition with almost a hundred souls; now they numbered seventeen. One of the sellswords, Ithaca, had rolled her

ankle during the descent, Pylvír was still recovering from bringing himself so close to the edge, and Padrig hadn't spoken since Circe had died. Aeson's own injuries still ached and groaned, his shoulder was stiff, and his hand cramped constantly. He let his gaze drift back to the monstrous peak of rock and ice. "I'm not sure."

"You're not sure?" Verma almost choked on her laugh. "So we just stroll across the ice, scale the mountain, snatch an egg and be on our way? I knew I shouldn't have trusted you with the plan. You've never been good with plans. I still remember what you did back in Khergan with those sheep. That was..."

Verma trailed off as Aeson laid his hands on her shoulders. He looked her in the eyes, and she calmed.

"How was I to make a plan when we didn't know what we would find? Our plan was to get here, find an egg, and get back. We're here. Now we need to find an egg. First, we cross the ice."

"And then what?"

"Then we expand the plan."

Verma narrowed her eyes.

"Do you have anything better?"

"No," she said bitterly.

Aeson did nothing to stop the smirk of satisfaction that crept across his face. But that satisfaction faded as he turned back to the others. There was no path where he didn't ask them to continue risking their lives.

He moved to where Luren and Torkel stood with the other sellswords. The woman who had rolled her ankle, Ithaca, sat on the snow, her hands planted behind her as she dragged in breath. "How is it?"

"It's seen better days," she said with a grimace as she twisted her foot.

"Can you run?"

"If I need to."

"You'll need to."

Aeson looked down at Ithaca's ankle. She'd not taken her boot off, but he'd felt the swelling earlier. She would be able to run, but not fast or for long. And out there on the crevasses, one misstep would send her to an icy death. When he moved his gaze back to meet hers, the look in her eye told him that she had already figured as much. "You have two choices – wait for us here, or come with us and take the risk on that ankle. But I need you to understand, if we need to move quickly and you slow us down—"

“You’ll leave me, I know.”

Aeson nodded.

“I would do the same. I’m just as likely to die here as I am crossing that ice, and I’d rather not die alone. Well, I’d rather not die at all, but if I had to choose...”

“Torah will give you strength,” Aeson said as he patted the side of Ithaca’s outstretched leg. He knew little of the Ardanian gods, but across the centuries he had picked up pieces here and there.

The woman smiled, grunting as she shifted and reached for Aeson to give her a hand to her feet.

“May the roots of Father Torah keep the ground beneath your feet, Aeson Virandr,” she said as she stood. “And by Yakira’s grace, we will find the egg you seek. The huntress watches us, I know it.”

“I hope you’re right,” he said, patting Ithaca on the shoulder. “We’ll need all the help we can get.”

Leaving the sellswords to ready themselves, Aeson moved to where Pylvír sat against a patch of obsidian-black rock, his elbows resting on his knees, Andira standing at his side.

“Don’t ask the question,” the elf said, grunting as he hauled himself to his feet. “We’re ready to move when you are. For Lirel.”

“Nur Lirel, myia’kar.” *For Lirel, my brother.*

Aeson turned to the others. “Stay tight together when we cross, and watch your footing. Falling down one of these crevasses will kill you as fast as any moka’rien or ice bear. Luren, Torkel, you and the Broken Rocks will take the rear with Verma.”

“It will be done,” Luren said, inclining her head.

“Akraf, Malari, Pylvír, Andira, and Fearn, stay together in the middle.”

Nods of acknowledgement answered.

“My sons and I will take the lead with Ildur and Padrig.”

Erik, Dahlen, and Ildur grunted their agreement, but Padrig stood at the edge of the ice field, staring at the mountain.

“Padrig?”

The young man turned as Aeson approached. He raised an eyebrow. “Sorry, I was just—”

“I need you here with me, Padrig.” Aeson clasped his hands either side of Padrig’s head and met his gaze. “Are you here?”

Padrig nodded, but the look in his eyes gave Aeson little confidence.

“They’re gone, Padrig. But you are not, and neither are we. You can’t lose yourself in the dead lest you lose the living as well. Take up the middle with Akraf and the others.”

“No.” Padrig shook his head, swallowing hard. “I can lead with you.”

“I need to know I can count on you.”

“You can.”

Aeson touched his forehead against Padrig’s, then pulled away, turning to the group. “We rest for a few moments. Eat what you can. Then we get what we came here for. We came to these icelands in search of hope, in search of a spark that could bring our people together. We are so close. We honour those we have lost by carrying on, by persevering. Some of us fight for our homes.” Aeson looked to Padrig. “Others, our families.” His gaze moved over Erik and Dahlen, over Malari, Pylvír, and Andira. “There are those who fight for legacy and glory, to be remembered. And there are those who fight because it is all we have left.”

Verma held Aeson’s gaze, giving him a solid nod.

“Whatever your reason for being here, what you seek lies in the eyries of that mountain.”

The others had settled to eat and rest before traversing the ice field when Verma approached Aeson.

“I have a question,” she said, stepping up beside him, her arms folded.

“Only one?”

The hint of a smile touched her lips, fading almost as soon as it appeared. “Where are the dragons?”

Aeson looked back at his old friend, letting out a long sigh.

“There’s a lot more going on here than we can see on the surface, Aeson. The wyrms, the mokaríen, they were too coordinated.”

“You saw the figures in the storm as well?”

Verma nodded. “Perhaps they are the demons Malari spoke of. But whatever they are, they’re protecting this place, and they know we’re coming.”

Aeson drew in a long breath. “Having second thoughts?”

“Bit late for that,” Verma said, snuffing out a laugh. “I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page. There are quite a few eyries up there, but I don’t see any dragons. Either Malari was hallucinating when she was here before, or we’re about to walk into a field of fire.”

“Which is the better option?”

As though the group had rung a bell, the blizzard came upon them only minutes after they set foot on the ice. The snow sheeted down, whipping back and forth in savage winds akin to those that ravaged the Lightning Coast. Aeson moved slowly, covering his face with his left arm, forcing his legs to keep carrying him forwards.

Dahlen marched alongside him, with Erik, Padrig, and Ildur holding tight to his back. They had decided against tethering with ropes after what had happened on the pass. The chance of a fall here was far greater, and the risks outweighed the benefits tenfold.

“Stay close and watch your footing,” he roared over the howling winds. It was an obvious statement, but the reminder would do no harm. With the reduced visibility and the storm buffeting them from all sides, it would not be difficult for someone to slip to their deaths.

Aeson stopped in his tracks as a tingle ran down his spine and he felt Verma reaching for the Spark. Within a moment, threads of Air were whipping around them, rolling over each other, weaving together. The relief from the storm’s fury was instant.

Aeson pulled his hand away from his face as the force of the winds dissipated, easing the strain on his body. He lifted his head to watch the blizzard crashing against the shield of air that flowed around them and stretched out in a circle, reaching across the crevasses on either side of the path upon which they stood. It was like watching an ocean crash over them. The few snowflakes that passed through drifted languidly to the ground.

He looked back to see Verma approaching, threads of Air weaving around her and into the shield.

“I can’t hold it in place for the whole journey,” she said, lines of concentration furrowing her brow. “There’s something... different about this storm. Something strange. But the shield will keep it at bay for now. We should move faster.”

“Agreed.” Aeson cast one last look about him, watching as the snow washed over the shield of Air. Verma’s threads may have held back the storm, but it did little more than muffle the wind’s howling. There was something unsettling about it, as though they sat in a bowl of glass with the weight of an ocean bearing down upon them, threatening to swallow them whole. “Forward,” he called out, starting off in the direction of the mountain. “We need to pick up the pace.”

With the storm blocking out the sky, Aeson had no way of telling how long they had been walking as they marched across the snow. An hour, perhaps, maybe longer. They couldn't be far from the plain of black stone that sat at the base of the mountain.

“Aeson!”

Aeson looked back to see Verma nodding towards something on their left. It took him a moment to realise what she had seen: silhouettes moving in the storm on the other side of the crevasse.

The sound of rasping steel battled the howling storm as swords were pulled from their scabbards.

As Aeson looked about him, he saw more silhouettes moving amidst the raging blizzard across the crevasse to the right. Twenty or so by his count, most looking as though they stood almost seven feet tall. It was difficult to make out through the snowfall, but by the way they moved, the smaller shapes looked to be *mokaríen*.

“The demons...” Aeson heard Malari hiss.

“Keep going!” Aeson roared, pushing his legs to carry him faster. He didn't reach for his swords, but he opened himself to the Spark, allowing the warmth of its touch to hover just beyond reach.

“Father.” Erik moved closer to Aeson, his gaze flitting from left to right as he watched the dark shapes move with them across the crevasses on either side. “What do we do?”

“Keep moving,” Aeson said, swallowing hard. If they could make it to the plain of black stone, they stood a better chance. He locked eyes with his son. “Whatever they are, as long as they bleed, we can kill them.”

“They're not attacking.” Ildur drew up to Aeson's right, his gaze focused on the shapes moving across the crevasse.

“They're waiting.” Dahlen had yet to pull his swords from his scabbards and was matching Aeson's stride.

Whoosh. Thump.

A chill rippled down Aeson's spine and along his arms, his skin prickling.

Whoosh. Thump.

Aeson looked to Dahlen and Erik, then over his shoulder to Verma. Their expressions told him that this time, they too had heard the wingbeats. Lastly, he caught Malari's gaze. The woman stared back at him as she moved, her eyes cold, her mouth a thin line.

A roar overhead pulled Aeson's attention from the Narvonan woman. For a few moments, the only sound he could hear was the thumping of his heart. He felt the snow crunch beneath his boots, the weariness burn in his legs, the aches creak in his bones, but his pounding pulse drowned out all else.

He raised a hand over his eyes as a blazing light ignited in the sky, scintillating through the snow. Fire crashed against Verma's shield, the threads of Air holding the flames at bay.

"I can't hold it!" Verma called, strain evident in her voice.

Aeson made to call back, but two more roars tore through the night. Then a second light erupted above the shield. The shield held for a moment, then a ripple of the Spark pulsed from Verma and a river of fire ripped through. The flames swept left and right, dissipating as a shape soared through the newly created gap in the threads of Air.

Aeson stared upwards as the dragon plummeted towards them. Dense muscle rippled beneath white scales. Large horns framed the creature's face, veins of obsidian running through white wings that spread outward like the sails of a ship. A pair of frills ran from the dragon's neck, down its back, and tapered into a spearpoint tail. It was one of the most magnificent creatures he had ever laid eyes on. But what truly caused Aeson's heart to stop, what truly caught the air in his lungs, was that the dragon was no more than thirty feet from head to tail.

Everything they had hoped for was true, every word Malari had said. There was no possible way that dragon had hatched more than four years past.

The eggs are hatching.

The thought sent shivers sweeping across Aeson's body. The dragons were not dying out. There was hope.

Another thunderous roar erupted as the dragon dropped and unleashed a river of fire over the tail end of the group. The flames crashed into the snow, the sheer force of the blast sending shards of ice soaring through the air. Screams rang out, and the storm swallowed them all, Verma's shield collapsing completely.

Aeson's heart waged a war against his mind. They needed to keep moving. They needed to make it to the open patch of stone, to the mountain. Verma could already be dead, likely was.

In Aeson's moment of hesitation, Dahlen's voice rang out.

“Hold on!” Dahlen roared as he charged back towards the others, Erik at his side.

Guilt flashed through Aeson’s mind. He had hesitated where his sons had not.

Ildur and Padrig looked to him.

“We need to get the survivors and make it to the mountain. We’re too vulnerable out here.”

The old stormguard nodded, and he, Padrig, and Aeson charged after Erik and Dahlen. Pylvír, Malari, Akraf and the others had already rushed back to help Verma and the sellswords.

Aeson ripped his swords from his scabbards at the sight of dark shapes vaulting across the crevasses ahead, through the haze of snow. How in the gods had they cleared that distance without the Spark?

“Dahlen, Erik! Stay together!” Aeson had no way of knowing if his sons had heard him through the raging wind. He could only see their outlines illuminated by the lingering flames that clung to the corpses in the snow.

“Padrig!” Ildur’s shout came too late as one of the dark shapes vaulted across the crevasse and crashed down to Padrig’s right, knocking the young man off his feet.

Up close, Aeson could see the creature was at least seven feet tall, its body covered by tight cloud-white skin stretched over thick bones and dense muscle. Its face was sharp and angular, nose flat, ears pointed and thick, eyes a glistening blue from corner to corner. It stood on two powerful double-hinged legs. Black scales armoured its chest, shoulders, arms, and legs. Long, thick fingers gripped a black spear that seemed to shimmer and glisten in the flickering flames. These were the demons Malari had spoken of.

Both Aeson and Ildur charged, but neither could do anything more than watch as the creature pulled back its arm and drove the spear down into Padrig’s chest.

Aeson’s heart twisted as the young man closed his hands around the spear shaft, blood spluttering over his lips. The demon lifted its right leg and slammed it down into Padrig’s stomach, ripping its spear free in the same motion. It turned and stabbed the weapon at Ildur, who dropped into a roll, sprang back up, and swung his blade at its right leg.

The demon twisted so that the steel bounced off the obsidian scales that ran from above its knee to its hip. It made to strike Ildur with a backswing

of its spear, but Aeson pulled in the Spark and sent the demon staggering backwards with a whip of Air to the chest.

As the creature recovered its footing, it swung its shimmering spear in a wide arc. Ildur leapt backwards to avoid having his head separated from his shoulders. Aeson however, drove forwards, swinging his right blade across to block the strike. The steel collided with the glass-like weapon with a resonating clang. As the spear bounced backwards, Aeson shifted his grip into reverse and used the momentum to drive the blade into the joint of the demon's knee. The blade plunged into the flesh between the scales on its upper leg and knee, green blood spraying over the snow as the steel burst through the other side.

The demon unleashed a guttural howl as Aeson twisted the blade in its knee. Throwing his weight forward, he drove his second sword into the creature's side where the scales gave way to flesh. Green blood flowed as the steel scraped bone, and the creature shrieked. Aeson shifted his grip and pulled, leveraging his blade to drag the creature down. At the same time, he ripped his first sword free, pulling it from the demon's knee and sweeping it across its throat. The demon dropped to its knees in the snow, the strange green blood flowing freely from its open throat.

The creature slumped to the ground as Aeson pulled his sword from its ribs, and in its place, he saw Erik, Dahlen, and the others rushing towards him. Relief flooded Aeson as he saw Verma half-running, half-hobbling with her arm around Fearn's shoulder. Ithaca, Luren, and two other sellswords looked to be the only other survivors of the dragonfire. The other sellswords, one being Torkel, had either been claimed by the flames or the demons.

"Give her to me!" Aeson called out as he approached Fearn. He slid his swords into his scabbards and scooped Verma into his arms. She groaned but didn't stop him. The woman wrapped an arm around his neck and curled close to his chest. He'd never seen her this vulnerable. Holding back the dragonfire had dragged the energy from her body, but more than that, blood flowed freely from a wound in her side.

"The demons," Pylvír said, nodding to Verma. "She sent eight of them to the void."

Aeson nodded, then shouted with as much strength as his lungs could muster, trying to raise his voice above the storm. "We'll make our stand at the mountain! Ildur, Luren, Ithaca – lead the way. Pylvír, we may need you

to hold back the dragonfire. Fearn, stay with me. You can take Verma if I need to fight. The rest of you, take the flanks in case more demons cross over.”

The faces that looked back at him were tired, weary, and afraid, but none complained. They had no choice. Even through the relentless snowfall, dark shapes flitted back and forth on the other side of the crevasses, and roars thundered across the sky.

The storm raged around them as they moved forwards, seeming to grow fiercer with each passing second. The wind howled and roared, the force of it threatening to send Aeson sprawling to the ground, sheets of snow whipping back and forth. Another roar sounded, close enough to send chills through Aeson. Then a second.

Whoosh. Thump.

The air shifted in spirals. Ahead, a bright orange glow shone through the haze of snow in the air, followed by a second.

“Pylvír!” Aeson roared so loud his voice cracked, and the taste of blood tickled his throat. He reached for the Spark, drawing as heavily as he dared, weaving threads of Air, Spirit, and Fire into a shield. He looked to Dahlen and Erik, roaring once more. “Get close!”

Aeson dropped to one knee. His heart beat once against his ribs, like a hammer blow to the chest, and then the twin rivers of dragonfire ripped through the raging storm and crashed over them like molten waterfalls.

The flames burned so bright that even with his eyes shut, Aeson could see nothing but white. Even as he leached the heat from the fire and pushed it out, into the snow and air, Aeson’s skin felt as though it were boiling, sweat streaming down his face.

He couldn’t hold it for much longer. He wasn’t strong enough, not anymore.

The crashing fire roared with the sound of a hundred forges, filling Aeson’s ears. His body shook, and he could feel the Spark clawing at him, burning in his veins, trying to drag the tattered remains of his soul from his body. He pulled Verma closer to his chest. “I need you,” he whispered to the woman. In his mind, all he could see was Dahlen and Erik. Children, boys, men. “I can’t save them without you.”

Verma didn’t answer, but Aeson felt her reach for the Spark. Her strength flowed through him with such force it was as though his blood had

caught fire. He drew deeper from her strength, weaving her power with his, pushing back the raging dragonfire.

“Hold on,” he whispered. As rapidly as Verma’s power had flooded him, he could feel it waning. She was weak. Her wounds were pulling her from the world. “Just hold on.”

Seconds passed like small slices of eternity as the dragonfire poured over them. And with each beat of Aeson’s heart he felt the energy evaporating from his old friend’s body. And then, just as the drain from the Spark threatened to pull them both to the void, the flames ceased, and Aeson fell forwards.

He cradled Verma close as his forearms slammed down onto the stone that had once been coated in snow. One word gave him strength.

“Father.”

Two thuds crashed down either side of him, and Aeson allowed the feeblest of smiles to adorn his face as he peeled his eyes open to see Erik and Dahlen beside him.

Allowing his heart to settle, his son’s voices drumming in his ears, Aeson turned his head to see Andira and Malari lifting Pylvír to his feet; the elf was drained but alive.

Fearn stood nearby, her eyes wide, tears streaming down her cheeks as she stared at the body of one of the sellswords who had been caught by the dragonfire. Flames still flickered on the charred and bubbling flesh that clung to the ruined body. A second charred corpse lay on the black stone, smouldering as Ildur and Luren pulled Ithaca to her feet.

“Aeson Virandr, we must keep moving.” Akraf’s lean frame came into view as the Narvonan man pushed past Erik and cupped his hands under Aeson’s armpits, hauling him upright. “They will not stop. We must reach the mountain.”

Aeson nodded, swallowing hard as he drew in a deep breath. He rolled his shoulders and shifted Verma in his arms. The blood from her wounds had soaked through her layers of clothes and now coated Aeson’s chest and arms. The only sign she was alive was the weak rise and fall of her chest. He looked back at Pylvír, who now stood without his daughter’s aid, and to Fearn, who was still shaking. To Ildur, Akraf, Ithaca, Luren, Malari, Andira, and his sons. He had brought them all here. He had led them to their deaths in this icy wasteland. But he would not abandon them. He would not yield.

While there was breath in his lungs, he would push forwards, as he had done for four hundred years. He would fight.

“We can’t be far,” Aeson called. “Everyone stay close.” His eyes fell on Ithaca, who was staring at the mutilated remains of her companions. “We will mourn the dead later, else we join them now.”

As they pushed deeper into the storm, the snowfall grew heavier until Aeson could barely see a foot in front of his face. The wind howled and roared, dragging at his blood-sodden clothes. If the demons fell upon them now, they would have no warning. And if the dragons descended, only the gods could save them.

Dahlen, Erik, and Ildur led the way, but they were moving too fast. With each second they pulled further away.

“Stay together!” Aeson called, but through the raging winds Ildur and his sons did not hear him. “Dahlen! Erik!”

He glanced back to see Malari and Akraf trudging behind him, their arms raised across their faces, the others tight at their sides. “Push harder!”

When Aeson turned to look forwards, a blinding light caused him to clamp his eyes shut. The thunderous roar of the storm dulled, and he stumbled as the resistance of the wind vanished in an instant. With Verma in his arms, he fell forwards, his knees slamming against a ground that was far too hard to be snow.

“Father, what do we do?”

Dahlen’s voice droned in Aeson’s ears as he peeled open his eyes and slowly adjusted to the light.

Above him, the sun burned in the sky, its light free from the haze of the storm and glistening off the obsidian rock that covered the ground. His sons and Ildur stood with their backs to him, their weapons drawn.

Aeson looked over his shoulder to see that behind him the storm raged as ferociously as ever. It was as though an invisible wall stood between him and the blustering winds, the snow falling thick and heavy. He lifted his gaze to see the storm wall stretching to the clouds and off into the distance in either direction. In all his years he had never seen anything of the like. What kind of power could command the weather itself?

As Aeson stared at the blizzard crashing against the unseen wall, Fearn, Malari, and Akraf staggered through, covering their eyes with their hands. Pylvír, Andira, Luren, and Ithaca followed.

“Father?” The worry in Dahlen’s voice pulled Aeson from his thoughts. Groaning, Aeson shifted his right leg and planted his foot before dragging himself to his feet, balancing Verma in his arms. It was only then he saw why Erik, Dahlen, and Ildur had drawn their weapons.

They had reached the open plain of obsidian rock that fronted the mountain where the dragons’ eyries lay. The mountain loomed over them like a god, its jagged peaks stretching towards the sky and tearing through clouds. But closer still, only about thirty feet away, at least sixty of the demons that had attacked them on the crevasses stood with glittering black spears gripped in their fists. Mokaříen prowled amidst them, heads lowered, white eyes watching, ready to charge.

“Stay tight,” Ildur called out, looking back to see who still stood with him. The man was as grizzled a warrior as Aeson knew. The Arkalen stormguard weren’t known for their hesitation. “Don’t wait for killing blows. Go for the legs first. Bring them down, then go for the neck.”

“Put me down,” Verma croaked, shifting in Aeson’s arms as the others drew their weapons and readied themselves to fight.

“You’re in no state to fight.” Aeson clenched his jaw as he looked at Verma, the colour drained from her face. At her fullest, Verma would have turned this into an even battle. But she was far from her fullest.

“If I’m going to die, I’ll do it on my feet. Put me down.”

Verma lurched forwards, forcing Aeson to set her on the stone. She wrapped one arm around his shoulder for support, pulled her sword from her scabbard, then held herself upright, fresh blood still seeping into her clothes.

“Det er en aldin går til dauv, véسانی.” Aeson rested his hand on Verma’s shoulder, inclining his head. *It is a good day to die, sister.*

“Elkin går nai din siel er en aldrin går til dauv.” Verma coughed, blood speckling her lips as they curled into a smile. *Any day by your side is a good day to die.*

Aeson couldn’t help but return the woman’s smile, shaking his head. She remained unchanged even when standing in death’s shadow. With that, both Aeson and Verma moved to stand between Erik and Dahlen, the others pulling close around them.

“I’m sorry,” Aeson said, glancing at his sons before pulling his swords from his scabbards and looking towards the demons and mokaříen that

stood about them, waiting. He went to speak again, but to his surprise, Dahlen started laughing, Erik joining in a moment later.

“What’s funny about this?”

Dahlen shook his head, still choking back a laugh. “I know none of this is funny, but in twenty-two years this is the first time you’ve apologised for anything.”

“Better late than never,” Erik chimed in.

“Almost forty years for me,” Ildur said, glancing from Aeson to Erik. “I’ve not heard those words leave his lips before.”

“Four hundred years.” Verma grimaced as a choking laugh left her throat.

“Me too,” Pylvír added, giving Aeson a weak smile.

“I’ve only known you a few months,” Akraf said. “but I get the feeling this is a pattern.”

Despite himself, Aeson couldn’t help but laugh. This was not the place he had expected to meet his end, after everything, but at least if he was to die today, he would do so standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his sons and people he respected. In the end, there wasn’t much more a man could ask for.

Aeson stepped forwards, allowing a deep, calming breath to swell in his chest. The demons and the mokaíen made no motion to move.

Aeson looked at those about him. “Well, what say you then? Do we wait for death to come for us, or do we charge towards it?”

“Never been one for waiting,” Verma said, touching her bloodied hand to a wound in her side. “Much longer and I won’t have any blood left.”

Aeson gave a slight nod, tightening his fists around the hilts of his swords. He looked to Erik and Dahlen. “Stay close to me. We can come out of this alive.”

As the words left his mouth, two monstrous roars ripped through the sky and sent chills down Aeson’s spine. He looked up to see the storm wall burst open, the hulking shape of a dragon crashing through it, white scales glistening in the sunlight. A second shape followed the first, and the two dragons soared through air, twisting and weaving around each other before landing amidst the demons and mokaíen.

The two dragons were close in size, one stretching thirty feet from head to tail, the other almost forty. Unobscured by the storm and the rage of

battle, Aeson could truly appreciate the devastating beauty in the white of their scales and the pale lavender of their eyes.

The larger of the two young dragons stepped forwards, the talons of its forelimbs clicking against the black stone. The creature tilted its head side to side, taking in those who stood before it, then lifted its neck and unleashed a roar that shook the air. In response, the demons slammed their shimmering spears against the stone, howling guttural war cries. But then something shifted in the air, and the demons stopped, their cries cutting short.

Aeson could hear the others speaking, but their voices were only a faded murmur. He knew what was coming. There wasn't a doubt in his mind.

He pulled in a long breath of icy air and, as his chest swelled, a series of roars erupted in the sky, so loud the stone beneath Aeson's feet vibrated. He lifted his head to watch as four enormous dragons descended from the clouds, each stretching over a hundred feet from snout to tail, dense muscles coated with glittering white scales. Each beat of their massive wings radiated power and grace. None were of a measure with Helios, but each would rival Karakes and would have been amongst the largest of all dragons in Epheria before The Fall.

The ground shook with a fury as the four gargantuan creatures alighted on the black stone.

"Father, what are you doing?"

Aeson turned his head at the sound of Dahlen's voice. It was only then he'd realised that he'd taken a step forwards.

He allowed his gaze to linger on his son's face for a moment before turning back towards the dragons that stood before them. He could *feel* them. Feel the beating of the hearts, the thrum of their souls.

Aeson slid his blades into the scabbards on his back and continued forwards, ignoring the shouts from behind.

As he walked across the black stone, silence swept through the demons and mokarién standing around the six dragons. The largest of the creatures moved forwards. Its jaws were as wide as Aeson was tall, the horns that framed its face longer than his legs. Its pale lavender eyes held a brightness as they watched him. Power and majesty permeated everything about the creature, and as Aeson moved to within a few strides' distance, its warm breath washed over him, the scent of smoke and embers filling his nostrils.

His heart galloped, his breaths trembled, and his hands shook. Every instinct told him to run, but there was something about this creature that gripped his soul. This dragon understood him in a way nothing else had since Lyara was ripped from the world. It was not the same, but there was something between them – Aeson could feel it. A shared sadness, a loss.

With shouts echoing in the back of his mind and the demons of the ice watching, Aeson stood and looked up as the great dragon lowered its white-scaled head until its lavender eyes were level with his.

Swallowing hard, Aeson pulled the gloves from his hands and let them fall to the stone. He extended his left hand, the dragon's breath pushing the cold from his fingers. The air fled his lungs with a shiver as his skin brushed against the rough scales of the dragon's snout. The instant his skin connected with the dragon, a wave of raw emotion swallowed him, causing his chest to tighten, his heart to clench, and tears to stream down his cheeks. In that moment, the five other dragons let out a series of heart-rending roars.

Without words or thoughts, Aeson knew that these creatures had felt the ache of what had happened in Epheria four centuries ago. They had felt the death of their kin, the breaking of the eggs, the sundering of the bonds. They knew his pain, they knew his anger, and they knew his loss. And as Aeson stood there with his hand resting on the snout of a creature that could end his life in a heartbeat, tears streaming down his cheeks, a man's voice broke through the haze.

“And so, the time has finally come. This is the path.”

CHAPTER 9

THE PATH

A LOW RUMBLE RESONATED IN THE DRAGON'S THROAT AS IT PRESSED ITS snout against Aeson's palm. The dragon let out a short puff of warm air before lifting its neck and turning to look at the man who had spoken.

An involuntary gasp left Aeson's lungs as the warm touch of the white scales pulled away from his skin, leaving him with a strange emptiness. It had been so long since he'd felt the warmth of dragon scales. So very long. He allowed himself a moment to gaze up at the magnificent creature, then let out a mournful sigh.

The man moved with a slow, deliberate gait, walking from behind the right forelimb of the dragon before Aeson. He wore long, brown hooded robes that obscured his face and fell around his ankles. Three others, garbed in a similar fashion, walked behind him. Where had they come from? Aeson was sure they had not been there when he'd emerged from the storm.

Aeson cast a glance around. The other five dragons stood amidst the demons and mokaríen, who held their positions, spread in a semicircle, watching. A look over his shoulder told him that his own companions were doing much the same. Erik, Dahlen, Pylvír, and Verma now stood at the front of the group, their weapons still gripped in their fists. The looks on his sons' faces told him they wanted to come to him. He shook his head, then turned to face the approaching hooded strangers, aware that the dragon still stood – almost protectively – over him.

“Who are you?” Aeson opened himself to the Spark as he spoke. Whoever these people were, he sincerely doubted they were friends.

“We are friends, Aeson Virandr.”

Aeson straightened, his jaw clenching.

The man raised a hand, holding his palm out flat. "Please, don't draw your sword." He lifted a finger as though a thought had come to him. "And for the love of your gods and mine, do not set me on fire again."

"Again...?"

"Four times," the man said with a sigh. He reached up and pulled back his hood to reveal a head of long grey hair with streaks of brown and a face worn by the rigours of time. At first glance, he looked to be nothing more than a frail old man, but Aeson was under no illusions. The way he held himself, the way he moved, the certainty in his voice. Here they were in the middle of the Valacian icelands, surrounded by dragons, demons, and mokaríen, and this man looked about as perturbed as a farmer in a field. No, whoever he was, he was no frail old man. "It would be best if you came with me, Aeson."

Aeson's throat tightened and he took a subconscious step forwards with his left foot, setting himself. He stared back at the man, his voice lowering. "How do you know who I am? What in the gods is happening here?"

"You told me, on a different path. Just come with me, and I will explain." The man turned and gestured to one of the other hooded figures over his left shoulder, who spun on their heels and strode off towards the mountain. "You want a dragon egg, yes?" The man's tone didn't so much as waver. He talked of a dragon egg as though it were a common trinket. "Come. There is much we must discuss."

Aeson narrowed his eyes, a thousand thoughts flooding his mind. None of this made any sense. He glanced back at Erik and Dahlen. "What about —"

"The others must stay," the man said, nodding towards Dahlen, Erik, and the others. It was as though he could read Aeson's mind. "The Dakar are a private people, and you have caused them enough hurt already. Your sons will not be harmed. You have my word."

"How do you... The Dakar?"

"The people whose land you have carved a bloody path through." The man gestured towards the seven-foot-tall creatures Aeson knew as the demons. Aeson tensed, looking about at the creatures who, even now, glared at him with their shimmering blue eyes, long fingers tightening around the shafts of their glass-like spears. The mokaríen prowled at their feet, low growls in their throats.

The man let out a sigh, shaking his head as though disappointed. “You have come a long way, waited a very long time, spilled as much blood as water in the ocean. Now, I am offering you what you seek. Negotiation is not a luxury you have. This is the path I was waiting for, but it is not the only path. You must come with me, and your companions must stay on the rock. Before you ask it, Yu’tukun—” he gestured towards one of the Dakar who stood to Aeson’s right “—has already sent for his finest healers to see to your Arcarian friend. He is not happy about it, but he has done it.”

Aeson wanted to ask how the man knew Verma was an Arcarian, but he held his tongue. He was asking too many unanswerable questions. Now was the time to listen. Whoever this man was, he had them by the throat. “If you harm even a hair on their heads—”

“You’ll take my head from my shoulders. I know. There are few nexus points with as many diverging paths as this one. And far too many of those paths end with my head separated from my body.” He licked his lips, nodding slowly. “But it’s important for you to know that you, and your sons, and everyone with you dies on every path but the one where you follow me.”

The man didn’t wait for Aeson to speak. He simply turned and set off across the black stone towards the mountain.

“What is your name?”

He stopped, still facing the mountain. “I have many names to many people. The Dakar call me Amatkai, so that is what you may call me.” Before continuing, Amatkai raised a hand and called to the two other hooded strangers who still stood only a few feet from Aeson. “Boud, Tamzin.”

Both nodded to Amatkai and moved to follow him, but one stopped, lifting her head just long enough for Aeson to see her eyes turn white as clouds. In that moment, the dragons around them stirred and lifted into the air.

The dragon who stood over Aeson was the last to move. It bent its neck down so that its lavender eyes were level with the woman’s. The dragon dipped its head, then turned to look at Aeson before sending a gust of air crashing over him as it cracked its wings and took flight.

Aeson watched the creature rise and soar through the sky, twisting and turning, weaving about the smaller dragons. The sight reminded him of before The Fall. Before Fane and Eltoar had burned the world.

As he dropped his gaze, he found himself staring into the woman's eyes, which had shifted from pure white to now show irises of rich brown. If he hadn't seen her eyes shift, he would never have known, but now he was certain. "You're a druid."

She raised an eyebrow, amused, a slight curl forming at the edge of her lips, then turned and walked towards the mountain.

Each step echoed through the long corridor of ice and rock as Aeson walked beside Amatkai and the Dakar he had called Yu'tukun. The Dakar stood over a foot taller than Aeson, the muscles on his double-hinged legs tensing with each step as skin pulled tight around thick bones. Aeson had never seen creatures quite like the Dakar before. They were almost as tall as Jotnar, their skin white as snow, and now that they weren't trying to kill him, Aeson could see the scales on Yu'tukun's body glistened and shimmered like black glass.

The two druids, Tamzin and Boud, walked behind them, flanked by four more Dakar guards gripping black spears.

The corridor was at least twenty feet high and over fifteen feet wide with a curving roof. The smoothness and precision of the craftsmanship could only have been achieved through the Spark. Carving a passage such as this through the heart of a mountain without the Spark would have been near impossible. Even the dwarves had sought the help of mages – and yet.

"Before you ask," Amatkai said, turning his head, "no, the Dakar cannot touch the Spark. Yes, they did carve the tunnels themselves. And yes, some do speak the Common Tongue. Taklicun."

"What..." Aeson looked at the man, a curiosity rising in him, melding with the simmering in his blood. Druids were infuriating. "Taklicun?"

"Oh, sorry. Sometimes I get ahead of myself. The armour on their bodies, it's not scales, it's taklicun. It roughly translates to 'heartglass'. It's the same black rock you have seen across the continent. They meld it with their bodies when they transition into adults. It is a rite of passage."

Aeson made to speak but found himself turning, his curiosity getting the better of him as he looked closer at the glimmering black scales on Yu'tukun's chest and arms only to see the Dakar glaring back at him. He shifted his gaze back to Amatkai. "I didn't ask about their scales."

"You were going to."

Aeson flicked his tongue against the teeth at the back of his mouth. "That's getting pretty irritating."

“So I’ve been told,” Amatkai said with a shrug. “But not as irritating as watching the same conversation unfold a hundred times with only subtle shifts and still having to repeat it.”

Aeson stopped dead, Yu’tukun and the others tensing as he did. Only Amatkai seemed unperturbed. “You’re a seerdruid.”

“Well done, my boy. That’s the quickest you’ve worked that out.” The man’s expression shifted, his brow furrowing, eyes narrowing. He stepped closer to Aeson, his stare cold. “If you tell a soul what I, Boud, or Tamzin are, I will personally pull the knife across your sons’ throats.”

The rage flowed over Aeson like a breaking dam. He grabbed fistfuls of Amatkai’s robes and slammed the man against the cold rock wall of the tunnel. “Say that again and you’ll choke on your own blood.”

Amatkai stared back at Aeson, unblinking. His words were slow and calm. “You have seen four hundred years come and go. You watched your order fall, your kin die. Your dragon was torn from you—”

“She was not *my* dragon!” Aeson roared, slamming the man harder against the wall, the sorrow and agony in his broken heart only serving to fuel his anger. “I did not own her. She was my soul!” He drew in ragged breaths, attempting to quench the fire in his veins. “Just because you have seen things does not mean you understand them, *druid*. Talk of Lyara again and I will feed the stone your blood.” Aeson leaned closer so that he could see his own reflection in the man’s eyes. He was more than aware of the obsidian spears levelled at his back by the Dakar. “Go on, look into the future. See if I’m lying.”

“I misspoke,” Amatkai said, looking down at Aeson’s fists pressed into his chest. “Those words were... ill chosen. Though I see the paths, sometimes the steps can change when the way remains the same. What you have endured is not a trivial thing.” He drew in a long breath. “If you release me, I will show you something that may ease your pain.”

Aeson stared back at the old druid, then, with his jaw still clenched, released his hold on Amatkai’s robes and stepped back. The sound of movement behind him let him know the Dakar had pulled back their spears.

Amatkai nodded. “Come. It is time.”

The corridor slowly rose into the mountain, stretching for hundreds of feet until they came to a giant circular doorway over thirty feet in diameter. The door itself looked to be made of the same black glass – heartglass – the Dakar used to form their armour and spears. It was black as coal, but

shimmered as the light of the corridor's lanterns touched it. Intricate etchings laced the door's surface, some seeming nothing more than twists and spirals, others looking more similar to runesets.

Amatkai turned to Yu'tukun, bowing at the waist as he spoke in a language that was surprisingly soft and gentle.

The Dakar reciprocated Amatkai's bow, then responded to him in the same unfamiliar language. He stepped past Amatkai and placed his hand on the surface of the black glass door. As soon as Yu'tukun's hand touched the glass, thin strands of purple light swept outwards, flowing through the etched patterns and spirals like water. Aeson watched in awe as the light spread through the door, reaching a series of etched circles at the centre. As Yu'tukun removed his hand, the glass began to change and shift, separating into segments and spinning in the patterns etched into its surface. Within moments, the door had receded into the walls of the corridor as though it had never been. The only marking of its existence was a solid black rim that ran along the length of the wall, glowing with a faint purple light.

As the door opened, a wall of sound swept over Aeson. Footsteps, chatter, shouts; the buzz of a thriving city.

Before them lay a sprawling cavern, so large it rivalled the city of Durakdur. The warm light of lanterns glowed from innumerable windows and doorways of homes that were carved into the columns of rock that stretched from the ceiling to the floor. Buildings hewn from dark stone spread across the length and breadth of the open space, while bridges traversed the many streams that flowed through the city's heart.

All about the cavern, pillars of crystal rose into the air, absorbing the light that sprayed in from crafted hexagonal openings in the rockface, acting as perpetual lanterns.

"You are a long way from home, Rakina." Amatkai inclined his head, a smile curling on his lips as he gestured for Aeson to step through the doorway after Yu'tukun.

Aeson did so without hesitation, too awestruck by the beauty of what he was seeing to respond. More of the city came into view: walkways, bridges, enormous plateaus packed with Dakar. But more than that, sweeping rows of green covered large swathes of the city, tumbling downwards over hundreds of terraces. Even from the distance, Aeson could see the many Dakar that worked the terraces, tending to whatever strange crops could survive in this frigid place.

“How is this possible?” Aeson allowed his gaze to drift over the city, from the crops to the glowing crystals, to the structures built into the enormous columns of rock that stretched from floor to ceiling.

“The Dakar may not wield weapons of steel or garb themselves in the finest silk, but that does not mean they do not hold the same understandings as we do. In many things, they know more than we ever will. They are one with this place,” Amatkai answered, stepping up beside Aeson and staring out over the city. “It is quite spectacular. The heartglass is part of them, intertwined with their very existence. They ask, and it answers. Come, we have a ways to walk yet.”

Amatkai led the group along the outer edge of the cavern, across ledges and walkways made entirely of heartglass that sparkled in the light that came through the hexagonal openings. As they walked, Aeson saw mokaríen and other creatures roaming the city as though they were tame as dogs, mingling with the Dakar.

“Why am I alive?” Aeson asked as they made their way along a wide walkway, passing over a collection of four streams that tumbled over a ledge. “Why are you showing me this? You’ve spent weeks trying to slaughter us and now you act as though I’m an expected guest.”

“You *are* an expected guest,” Amatkai said with a shrug. “We just weren’t sure when you would arrive. The paths are not always clear. If it were that simple, we wouldn’t be here at all. And until we were sure it was you, and that this was the correct path, you were nothing more than trespassers in these lands. Invaders, conquerors. There was once a time when the Dakar welcomed outsiders. Elves came to these lands shortly after the Doom at Haedr, during the Era of Expansion. Humans had not yet even fled Terroncian shores. At first, they spoke of peace and trade, but once the Dakar refused to trade in heartglass and dragon eggs, the elves turned to what they knew best – blood and steel. But the elves had not brought Draleid with them, and they had never before faced the fury of Valacian dragons. Still, the war that followed devastated Valacia, and the Dakar’s numbers have only recently recovered. Once they drove the elves from this place, they vowed to never again let outsiders threaten their way of life. In three thousand years they have kept that vow, allowing themselves to become nothing more than Epherian myth.”

Amatkai made his way through an arched opening in the rock and into a large corridor that led away from the city and rose ever upward.

“Every expedition here threatens that myth, threatens the safety of the Dakar and all they protect. Their warnings are brutal, and they only allow a small number to flee so as to ward off others, but this is their home, and they protect it as fiercely as you protect your sons.”

“And yet here you are, you and your druids.” Aeson glanced over his shoulder at Boud and Tamzin who walked silently behind them, flanked by Dakar guards.

“My people and the Dakar have an understanding. I have known Yu’tukan for many years. When humans fled Terroncia, they made land in many places. Epheria, Karvos, Narvona, Ardan, Tathos – Valacia. Though that tale on its own would take a long time to tell, far more time than you have.”

Aeson held his gaze on Amatkai, studying the man’s face, the brightness in his eyes, the steadiness of his gait, the marks of time in his skin. Now that he looked at the man more closely, he could have sworn he’d seen his face before. But that was four hundred years ago... “You speak of these things as though you saw them yourself.”

Amatkai gave Aeson a half smile, then stopped, gesturing towards another circular doorway of black glass set into the wall of the corridor on the right. “We’re here.”

Aeson made to step towards the door but stopped as a hand pressed against his chest. He looked up to see Yu’tukan staring back at him. The Dakar’s face was not unlike a human’s, but it was flatter, his features more angular, the bones visible through skin as though the flesh had been moulded and shaped around them. His eyes were oval and coloured a shimmering blue. It was only now, as Aeson met Yu’tukan’s gaze, that he saw that the Dakar’s eyes grew darker at the centre, not like a human’s, but more gradually, fading from bright blue to an almost black.

The Dakar stared at him, unblinking. When he spoke, the words were slow, and his voice was harsh. “This,” he said, gesturing around the corridor and towards the doorway of black glass, “my home. Respect, you show. Through this door, Cukulkan is... master. Respect.”

Aeson inclined his head. The massive Dakar had not spoken since they’d entered the mountain. Aeson had simply assumed Yu’tukan did not understand the Common Tongue. “You have my word.”

Yu’tukan nodded. “You do as I. Listen first, speak later.”

With that Yu'tukan walked to the doorway and placed his hand on the surface, opening it in the same way as he had the other. The purple light swept through the etched markings, and the glass receded on itself, the cold touch of roaring wind washing over Aeson.

The sky was the first thing Aeson saw as they stepped into the eyrie, cold and blue and streaked with white clouds. The eyrie was as large as even the greatest of those that rested in the mountains of Dracaldryr. The central atrium must have been four hundred feet from end to end, stretching two thirds of that distance across. The opening traversed the length of the far wall, coming just short of the ceiling, and was fronted by an enormous plateau of black heartglass. Even Helios would have been proud to call this eyrie home. There wasn't a doubt in Aeson's mind about which of the dragons laid claim here.

Several Dakar moved about the atrium. Some carried stacks of hay from an adjoining chamber, while others arranged baskets with a wide array of brushes and cloths beside a large pool that was nestled into the floor on the far right of the atrium. Aeson was about to say they were similar to the Dracardare of old, the dragon keepers, but he remembered what Yu'tukun had said and remained silent.

They stood, watching the Dakar dragon keepers go about their business, until finally Yu'tukun spoke. "My people spilled the blood of yours this moon. Joy, we do not take. Necessary. Protect our home."

Aeson's throat tightened. The faces of those who had died flashed across his mind. Pol, Lirel, Kuldar, Shuk, so many more. He wanted to push his rage on to Yu'tukun, but he knew in his heart the blame lay with himself and himself alone. This expedition had been his. He had known some of them would not return – many of them, even – and still, he had pressed onwards. He would see those faces, as he would so many others, until the day Heraya finally took him into her arms. He could bear that burden, so long as he left a better world for his sons. "You were protecting your home, protecting your people. I am sorry for the lives we took."

Yu'tukun inclined his head. "I see you. Part of us now, they are, and will return when ready." He placed his hand over his chest, then spoke in the same strange language he had earlier. "Ba'ax ku yenta k'a'ana'an dimil utia'al u páajtal u kuxtal juneten."

When he finished, Yu'tukan looked as though he was searching for the translation in his mind. He frowned – if frowning was the same thing for the

Dakar – then looked at Amatkai.

“He says ‘What lives must die so it can live once more.’ It is a core belief amidst the Dakar that your soul never truly leaves this world. That it is reborn when it is ready. They mourn their dead as we do, but consider it a new beginning rather than an end. Death feeds life in an endless circle.”

Yu’tukun turned so he faced Aeson, letting out a long breath. “You come to our land in search of druxiri egg?”

It wasn’t an accusation, simply a question.

“I do.”

“Why?”

Aeson stared back at Yu’tukun. Four hundred years of bloodshed, loss, war, and ruin. Four hundred years of darkness, emptiness, loneliness. Four hundred years of surviving, and now he was asked to sum it up in a single answer. He thought the words would have been harder to find, but to his surprise they formed in his mind almost immediately. “To protect my home from those who would tear it apart. To protect my people from those who would stand on their ashes.” He bit at his lip, coils of agony twisting in his chest. “To find a way to give back to the dragons what we took from them. No dragon has hatched in Epheria in four hundred years, not since the night we call ‘The Fall’. But the eggs here have, haven’t they? Some of the dragons I saw could not have seen more than two or three summers.”

Yu’tukun nodded, waiting for Aeson to continue.

“We don’t know why the eggs stopped hatching, but what I do know is that my kin and I... we failed them.” Aeson clenched his jaw as he felt tears welling in his eyes, images of Lyara filling his mind – her beautiful wings, her scales as blue as the deep ocean. She was his soul, and he failed her. He failed them all. “I come to you asking that you give me a chance to right that wrong, nothing more.”

Yu’tukun stared at Aeson for what felt like an eternity. The weight of the Dakar’s stare was a tangible thing. Aeson was a trespasser in these lands. He had spilled blood and brought death in his wake, and now he asked Yu’tukun for a gift that Aeson himself was not sure he would give if the situation were reversed.

When Yu’tukun finally spoke, his blue eyes softened. “Amatkai told of your coming many cycles ago. He told of pain. Your druxiri – *dragons*.” Yu’tukun pondered the word ‘dragon’, speaking it slowly and lingering on the vowels. “He told of their suffering. Our hearts bleed with yours.

Cukulkan feels the pain.” He pressed his hand against the centre of his chest. “Four hundred cycles ago his roar wake the mountain, make the taklicun sing. This day, under new sun, Cukulkan feel your pain again. You are his blood. That is why you are here. That is why he will give what you ask.”

Those words somehow pulled the air from Aeson’s lungs and sent a shiver down his spine and over his skin. Everything he had fought for seemed that little bit closer. “Thank you.”

Yu’tukun shook his head, turning to look at the sky through the opening on the other side of the atrium. “It is not me you thank.”

As though responding to Yu’tukun’s words, a roar erupted in the sky outside the eyrie, followed by another, and another. Without a thought, Aeson stepped further into the atrium, watching as the dragons flashed past the opening, tearing upwards, scales glimmering in the orange glow of the waning sunlight.

The Dakar who had been moving about the atrium stopped as Aeson approached the centre. They stared at him, stacks of hay and piles of glistening heartglass still in their arms, but he paid them no mind. Centuries had passed since he’d last watched dragons fly together without dread in his heart. He only wished Coren and the others could have been there to see it. It would have lit a fire in their hearts.

A roaring gust of wind sent Aeson back a few steps. As he caught himself, planting his feet, the wind swept around him, and the enormous dragon he’d seen at the foot of the mountain alighted on the plateau of shimmering black heartglass.

The entire eyrie shook, and the mountain itself seemed to groan under the great dragon’s weight. With the sun’s light washing down over him and the black heartglass glittering as though it were filled with stars, the enormous dragon seemed to glow.

The frills on Cukulkan’s neck pricked as he lowered his head through the opening in the atrium. A deep rumble resonated in the dragon’s throat, his lips pulling back to reveal rows of enormous alabaster teeth. His warm breath sent a tingle over Aeson’s skin.

Aeson took a step closer, staring into the dragon’s lavender eyes. He could *feel* him. Not like he had been able to with Lyara; nothing could ever come close to that. No, this was more subtle, like the whisperings of the

wind. Great sadness and loss clung to the dragon, but that was met with equal measures of pride and power.

Cukulkan stared back at Aeson until the rumbling in his throat dissipated, and he pressed the tip of his snout into Aeson's chest.

Both pride and power vanished, and all Aeson could feel was kinship and heartache. He placed his palms on the dragon's warm scales and rested his forehead against Cukulkan. "Du gryn haydria til myia elwyn, as haryn myia vrain, ydilír ayar."

You bring honour to my heart, and you have my thanks, ancient one.

Aeson wasn't sure if Cukulkan understood his words, but he had no doubt the dragon knew his intent.

"Cukulkan is the oldest of the dragons." Amatkai's voice echoed in the atrium, followed by footsteps. "He has seen over a thousand summers come and pass. But he is not long for this world, a century at most."

The footsteps stopped behind Aeson. Reluctantly, he pulled his forehead away from Cukulkan's snout, leaving one palm resting on the dragon's scales. That rough feeling beneath his fingertips – that warmth – felt like home. He turned to see Amatkai standing behind him, the two druids, Boud and Tamzin on his right, Yu'tukun and the Dakar dragon keepers to his left.

"I know you have many questions, but the answers are not ones I am willing to give. You must accept that. Though there are things..." Amatkai trailed off, looking to his left.

It took Aeson a few moments to see what the druid had seen, but then a dim white light, no larger than an apple, appeared, floating in the air like a baldír. The white light ripped down through the air in a straight line before spreading outwards in cracks as it reached the ground, continuing to spread until it looked as though it were a wound in the very fabric of the world. The centre of the light faded, revealing a cavern illuminated by lanternlight on the other side. Before he had the time to process what happened, four Dakar with long white robes draped over their shoulders stepped through from the other side into the atrium.

It's a gateway.

All four Dakar dropped to one knee, cupping both hands to their chest and speaking a greeting in Dakari.

The words faded in Aeson's ears. He pulled his fingers away from the warmth of Cukulkan's scales as he stepped towards the gateway that ripped through the world. Behind the kneeling Dakar, was a fifth. Purple robes

threaded with heartglass adorned their shoulders, and held close to their chest was a dragon egg with scales of pure white.

The egg was large, maybe a foot long and half as wide. Aeson couldn't keep the smile from his face as the light drifting through the opening in the wall washed white scales with an orange glow. The word 'beautiful' had held permanent residence in his mind since seeing the dragons outside, but this was something else entirely. There, in that Dakar's arms, was the future.

Hope.

As the purple-robed Dakar stepped into the atrium, the other four rose and stood in pairs on either side of the gateway. Finally, a sixth person stepped through the gateway. Aeson recognised her as the hooded figure he had seen outside the mountain; the one Amatkai had sent away. It was a woman with tanned skin and straw-blonde hair, her eyes cloud-white from edge to edge: another druid. The woman's eyes shifted to a deep blue as the gateway collapsed behind her, the tear in the world repairing itself as though it never was.

"Una is special, is she not? She is a weaver of the aether. Among the rarest of all gifts." Amatkai smiled at the druid, inclining his head. "Thank you, my child."

Una returned Amatkai's gesture, then remained behind the purple-robed Dakar.

Amatkai looked back at Aeson, though Aeson couldn't take his eyes off the egg.

"As I was saying. There are things you must know. I'm sure you have noticed the lack of Draleid here. Unlike Epherian dragons, the dragons of Valacia do not need the bond to hatch or to retain their fire – your god, Varyn, never took it from them. Their connection to the fabric of the world is something entirely unique, something I do not yet understand. With that, they are far fewer in number. Some eggs lie dormant for centuries, even millennia. Even now, no more than fifty dragons draw breath across Valacia."

Aeson felt as though a stone had dropped into his gut. In an instant his throat and lips were dry, the hope he had so foolishly allowed himself to feel torn from him. "A millennia?"

Amatkai nodded. "Possibly."

“Can you not see, on your *paths*?” Aeson’s pulse quickened. He couldn’t wait a thousand years. Erik and Dahlen couldn’t wait a thousand years. “You act as though you see everything and know every word I will say before I say it, yet you can’t tell me if that egg will hatch? You are either a liar, or you think me a fool.”

Amatkai ran his tongue across his lips, a hint of irritation evident in the flare of his nostrils. “I am no liar, and you may yet be a fool, but I do not think it of you. I *can* tell you this egg will hatch, but not when.” The druid stared so hard at Aeson, it was as though the man was trying to look into his soul. “This is a nexus point, a convergence of ways. From here, there are an infinite number of paths that lead forward. Every decision you make, every word you speak and step you take alters the path. The egg may hatch in a year, or a thousand. And on many of those paths, I see a Draleid. Is that not what you want, Rakina? Hope. Cukulkan is offering it to you. This egg has lain dormant within this mountain for over eight hundred years, its lineage traces back to the oldest druxiri to roam these lands. It is a treasure not only to the dragons, but to the Dakar. Cukulkan offers it to you in the hopes that it may bring his blood back to your land. He mourns his kin.” Amatkai gestured towards the purple-robed Dakar who still stood in place, hands clasped around the egg. “Even if you will not live to see it hatch, will you take it? Will you be its guardian and watch over it so long as you draw breath? Will you be the one to give the Epherian dragons another chance at life?”

Aeson took a step closer to the Dakar who held the egg. He studied the white scales, lingering where they faded to a deep black at the roots. He pulled his gaze from the egg to meet the stare of the great dragon who still leaned his white-scaled head through the opening of the atrium.

Aeson stared into the creature’s lavender eyes, almost losing himself, then dropped to one knee. “I may no longer be a Draleid. I may be broken. My soul may be half, but we are bonded still. I thank you for this gift of hope, this gift of life. And it is my solemn vow that I shall watch over this egg, that I shall be its guardian until my dying breath. And should it hatch in my lifetime, should a bond be formed, I will protect the hatchling and the Draleid with my life. They will be as blood to me. I swear this to you, ancient one, on the bond. Myia nithír til diar. Draleid n’aldryr, Rakina nai dauva. Du haryn myia vandair.”

My soul to yours. Dragonbound by fire, Broken by death. You have my oath.

A series of roars thundered outside the eyrie, and past the great dragon, plumes of fire ignited the sky.

The purple-robed Dakar took another step forwards and held the egg out for Aeson to take.

Aeson drew in a slow breath, steadying himself as he took the egg into his arms. The warmth of the armoured scales spread through his fingertips, and he pulled the egg close to his chest. Relief unlike any other flooded him. He closed his eyes for just a moment, as he cradled the egg.

I will protect you with my life.

Aeson stepped through the gateway, cold air sweeping over him, the wind howling, the black stone of the eyrie replaced by white snow.

“Come. Your people, safe,” Yu’tukun said as he followed Aeson through, the gateway collapsing behind him. The crunching of snow sounded as Yu’tukun walked forwards, but Aeson’s gaze was fixed firmly on the egg he cradled in his arms, the twilight glow sparkling over the white scales.

He stood in the snow, allowing himself a few moments alone. He still couldn’t believe it. For so long he had fought and searched and hoped until he had finally resigned himself to the thought that another dragon might never hatch. He drew a long breath through his nostrils, then let it out slowly, brushing his thumb across the coarse scales. “I will not fail you like I did her. I promise.”

Aeson lifted his gaze as he followed Yu’tukun. Ahead, a host of Dakar stood guard over his sons and their companions.

“Dahlen!” Erik shouted as Aeson approached. “It’s Father!”

Both Erik and Dahlen made to run towards Aeson, but the Dakar guards blocked their way. It was only when Aeson and Yu’tukun reached them that the guards finally parted at Yu’tukun’s command.

Dahlen and Erik rushed to him, their eyes widening as they realised what he cradled in his arms.

“Father,” Dahlen called. “Are you... Is that?”

“You bastard.” Verma hobbled to Dahlen’s side, giving a coughing laugh as she spoke. Her face was pale, her eyes were ringed with purple, and she grimaced with each step she took, but she was alive – and on her

feet. It looked as though Amatkai had been true to his word: the Dakar had sent healers to tend to her wounds. “You did it. You actually did it.”

“Al’il nāra un’il Enkara...” *By the light of the Enkara.* Pylvír approached Aeson with a look of reverence, Andira at his side.

“Not even a sack to carry it in?” Ildur said with a frown.

Fearn pushed past the old Stormguard, her mouth agape. She pressed her hand to her heart. “A dragon egg... A real dragon egg...”

“Here.” Malari shrugged her leather satchel from her back and held it out for Aeson. “You can use mine.”

Aeson nodded to Malari, then looked back down at the egg, admiring the shimmer of its scales. He let out a long sigh, relief flooding him, and lifted his gaze to look out over the group.

“Let’s go home.”

PART THREE

A LONG WAY FROM HOME

CHAPTER 10

A FRAGILE THING

Four weeks later

THE TWILIGHT GLOW OF THE ICELANDS ILLUMINATED THE BLACK SKY AS THE frigid wind scratched at Aeson's face. Above, soaring through the dark clouds, white scales glinted in the moonlight. Cukulkan and one of the smaller dragons had watched over them throughout the journey from the mountain to the coast. They never came too close, but their presence had kept all other predators at bay. Amatkai and Yu'tukun had provided Aeson and his group with a fresh supply of food and assured Aeson their journey back would be far safer than the journey the other way. He just hadn't quite expected that Cukulkan himself would provide their escort.

Part of Aeson would miss this place. Even in his own head that sounded insane. Valacia had been nothing but death and loss. Men, women, and dwarves he had known for decades were now nothing but frozen corpses and ash. Pylvír's daughter, Lirel. Every time Aeson thought on his friend's loss, his heart clenched into a ball. And the sight of the guards' mutilated bodies on the first night still made his skin crawl. No, the only thing Aeson would miss was watching the dragons soar through the sky; something about the sight lightened the weight on his shoulders.

Pulling his eyes from the dragons, he looked at Dahlen, who walked on Aeson's left with his elbow resting on the satchel that held the egg, his hand stroking the leather as though he was trying to soothe the egg inside. Aeson had been hesitant to let go of the egg at all, but Dahlen had been unrelenting in his offers to watch over it. Even when they'd slept, Dahlen had cradled it close to his chest, his fingers interlocked across the buckles.

Aeson still couldn't quite believe it. For the first time in a long time, 'hope' wasn't just a word he said so he could keep pushing forward. It was a tangible thing. The Valacian dragons were still hatching, and he had an egg. They had done it. It had come at great cost, but they had done it.

"We have made good time. The cave where we stowed the boats is not far." Akraf walked on Aeson's left, his eyes fixed on the full moon etched into the dark sky. "We can be on the water before the sun has risen. Kayala will be waiting for us."

"That's if she's not left us for dead." Acid laced Luren's voice. She and Ithaca had been like vipers since Aeson had emerged with the egg and they'd learned he'd struck a deal with the creatures who had mutilated their companions at the cave.

Aeson didn't blame them. Even he was at a loss as to what to think of the Dakar. On one hand, they had been the root of all the death since he and the others had made landfall in this desolate place. But on the other, he understood the ferocity with which they defended their home. If the empire knew there were truly viable dragon eggs in Valacia, Aeson had no doubt they would have a fleet ready in days.

"Hold your tongue, Ardanian." Akraf's voice dropped low, and he rested his hand on the hilt of a knife at his belt. "Or I will take it."

Luren made to stop, but Ithaca pushed her forwards.

"Garahlin and the others will be waiting for us with the boats," Ithaca said, pulling Luren close. "Just keep walking."

Luren grunted, glaring at Akraf before continuing on.

"We'll make for the water as soon as we've recovered the boats," Aeson said to Akraf, tilting his head so as to catch the Narvonan's eye.

Akraf stared at Luren's back, his tongue pressing against the inside of his lip. After a moment, he glanced at Aeson, then nodded.

"Good. We've lost enough already." Aeson looked around at the survivors who marched with them. Pylvír and his daughter walked beside Aeson and Erik, while Verma, Malari, Fearn, and Ildur led the group. They had started out with almost a hundred souls, and this was all that was left.

It wasn't long before Verma shouted from the front, her voice echoing in the night. "Virandr!"

Before Aeson could respond, a cry rang out, and he looked up to see Ithaca and Luren sprinting towards the cave where the boats had been left.

Dread crawled over his skin and gripped his throat. The agony in Luren's cry could only have meant one thing.

Aeson clenched his jaw and closed his eyes when he reached Verma. "Gods..."

"Is that Orm?" Erik's voice quivered as he stepped up beside Aeson.

Verma stood over the body of a Varsundi man by the name of Orm Lund whom Aeson had brought with him from Milltown. The man was frozen against a rock, his stomach ripped open, intestines spilled across the snow.

"It was the mokaríen," Malari said as Aeson knelt beside Orm.

Aeson's throat felt as though it had been wrapped in twine, pulling tighter the longer he looked at Orm's frozen body. He reached out, the cold seeping into his fingertips as he rested his hand on the man's shoulder. "You didn't deserve this."

Aeson looked up at Erik who was staring at Orm's frozen body. He and Dahlen had known Orm since they were children, and Orm himself had two little ones who had both seen less than five summers. He'd only come on the expedition because Aeson had asked him personally. *I should have just let you say no.*

Aeson ran his thumb over Orm's frost-covered cheek, then slowly pulled himself to his feet. He would have thought that after so many years, after so much death, that losing someone wouldn't have affected him like it once had. But the truth was it cut deeper than ever.

"Father..."

Aeson followed Dahlen's gaze to see several more bodies strewn about the snow. Some were half buried, some ravaged and broken.

His breath caught in his throat at the sight of Falka's frozen body, her hair and face marred with dried blood, splintered bone and torn flesh where her left arm should have been.

"They're dead!" The roar echoed through the still night, and Aeson ripped his gaze from Falka's corpse to see Luren storming from the cave, Ithaca behind her. Snow crunched beneath her boots, her cloak flapping in her wake. The sellsword's face was fury manifest, and her hand was already resting on the hilt of her sword.

"Say the word." Verma looked to Aeson, and he felt her open herself to the Spark. She had recovered some of her strength over the journey back, but she was still more than a little worse for wear.

Aeson shook his head. He raised an open palm to Luren. “Luren, look at me. Whatever you’re feeling, this is not the way.”

“Whatever I’m feeling?” she roared, veins bulging in her neck, her face reddening as she drew closer. “I’m feeling like you led us here to be slaughtered!”

“We all knew what this was, Luren. We all knew the risks. Your gold is waiting for you when we get back.”

“Gold? My brothers and sisters are lying in that cave, frozen to death! What good will gold do them?”

“It was their choice to turn around, not mine. What we did here matters. What we’ve lost was not for nothing.”

“What we’ve lost? What have *you* lost?”

Luren moved closer to Aeson, but Dahlen stepped between them, placing his hand on her chest and pushing her back. His tone was firm and level. “Take a breath, and step away.”

Luren scoffed, sneering at Dahlen. She looked from him to Aeson, an eerie smile spreading across her face. “Your precious sons.” Her eyes narrowed. “What have you lost?”

In a heartbeat, Luren slid a knife from her belt and pressed it to Dahlen’s throat, grasping the collar of his cloak with her free hand.

Aeson made to leap forward, but as he did, Malari came up behind Luren, wrapping one arm around the woman’s waist and holding a knife across Luren’s throat from behind.

“Think very carefully about what you do next, Ardanian.” Malari pulled the blade tighter to Luren’s throat, drawing a prick of blood at the tip of the steel.

Ithaca moved to take Malari from behind, but before she could, Erik had drawn his sword and pressed it against her chest.

Erik shook his head. “Careful now.”

Aeson took a step closer, but Luren yanked Dahlen towards herself as he did. He opened himself to the Spark, letting its warmth flood him. He wanted to snap the woman’s neck then and there, but if even the slightest thing went wrong, Dahlen would be taken from him.

Around him, he felt Pylvír and Verma pulling in threads of Air and Spirit, and the rasps of steel meant that Ildur and the others had drawn their swords. Aeson never pulled his gaze from Dahlen’s eyes.

Malari pulled her knife tighter against Luren's throat and the woman let out a gasp, the blood flowing faster.

"Is his life worth yours?" Malari said in Luren's ear. "Is this place where you want to die?"

A few tense moments passed where Aeson's body thrummed with the beat of his heart, and then Luren let go of Dahlen and pulled the blade from his throat.

Aeson grabbed his son and pulled him close, grasping his shoulder and running a hand along his neck where Luren's blade had left an almost imperceptible mark. He looked Dahlen in the eyes. "Are you all right?"

Dahlen nodded, rubbing at his throat. "I'm fine."

Aeson's hand shook as he brushed Dahlen's cheek with his thumb. He turned to Luren and Malari, his breaths shuddering.

Malari still held the sellsword from behind, the edge of her knife pressed into the soft flesh of Luren's throat, blood trickling. She stared at Aeson for a moment, and he held himself back.

"If I let you go, what will you do?" Malari asked, raising an eyebrow.

Luren clenched her jaw and glared at Aeson. Her eyes shone with a fury. She let out another sharp gasp as Malari pulled her in tighter.

"We're sellswords," Luren said through gritted teeth. "He brought us here to fight demons and nightmares. Now he makes a deal with the very creatures that butchered my brothers and sisters? And he thinks that's all right?"

"This is *their* land, Luren. They were trying to protect their home."

"And you brought us here!" Luren roared, pushing forward into Malari's blade, eyes widening and spittle flying.

Malari yanked Luren backwards, then lowered her voice. "Those creatures killed my sons." She swallowed hard, the muscles in her jaw twitching. "Butchered them."

"Then why are you the one holding me back?" Luren growled.

"Because what's done is done. And I know that if someone came for my home, for my children or grandchildren, I would butcher them too. They are allowing us to leave. No matter the hate in your heart, you would be a fool to let yourself die here when we are so close to freedom. Because, make no mistake, that is what will happen." Using her blade, Malari forced Luren to lift her head and look at Aeson. "That man carved a bloody path through the mokaríen. He killed demons like they were nothing. Even the great dragon

paid him respect. And you just threatened his son. I know what I would do if you had threatened mine. Think hard on that. Think of how short your life will be if you make the wrong choice here.”

Luren wriggled her neck, swallowing as the blade pressed into her skin. She looked at Aeson, then the rest of the group who stood watching. Even Fearn had a hand on the pommel of her knife.

After a few moments, Luren dropped her blade into the snow with a thump.

“Good choice.” Malari pulled her knife away and slid it into the sheath on her belt.

Aeson cleared the distance between himself and Luren in a single heartbeat. He grabbed the collar of her leather armour and pulled her close, his fingers twisting around the fabric of the many layers she wore. His hand trembled, a dragon’s rage burning in his blood. He leaned close enough to feel the warmth of her skin, staring into her cold eyes. “If you ever touch my sons again, if you even think of it, if you *dream* of it, I will tear your still-beating heart from your chest. Do you understand me?”

Luren sucked in her cheeks but nodded.

Aeson held her gaze, not allowing her to pull away. “I need to know you truly understand. I am not threatening you. I am telling you what will happen. Wherever you are in this world, I will find you, and I will end your life – slowly and painfully. Never threaten my family again.”

Aeson pushed Luren away, letting her stumble. To his left, Erik pulled his sword away from Ithaca, who moved to her companion’s side.

“Akraf, how long will it take to prepare the boats?”

“An hour or two, to be safe. We will only take the two noaka. The rowboats we can leave. The noaka are treated to protect against rot, but I would like to warm them and check for cracks. Any I find will need to be repaired. Once I’m happy, we can go.”

Aeson nodded. “Take Fearn, Pylvír, and Andira with you.” He turned to Ithaca and Luren. “We will burn the bodies of the dead before we go, as is your custom. Would you rather help with the boats or gathering the bodies?” Aeson bit at his lip. “I will not force you to do either, but the only way we can honour the dead now is in how we carry on.”

“We will help with the bodies,” Ithaca said, stepping forward, frowning as Luren glared at her. “We owe them that much.”

“So be it.” Aeson looked to Ildur. “I’m sorry to ask but—”

“Consider it done, Virandr.” The old Stormguard knelt beside Orm and began shovelling the snow away with his hands.

Malari moved to help him, but Aeson grabbed her arm and leaned in close. He whispered, “Thank you.”

The woman only nodded, a feeble smile curling her lips, then dropped beside Orm.

With everyone moving about their tasks, Aeson took a few steps away. He stared into the sky, where he could still see scales glittering amidst the clouds, and allowed the knots in his stomach to unwind. He let out a slow breath, watching as the steam rose into the night. It was all he could do to keep his hands from shaking, not from anger, but from fear. For the second time, he had come only a hair’s breadth from losing a son. Only the flick of a wrist.

He looked up at the stars, blurred by the welling tears in his eyes.

Mortal life was such a fragile thing, and moments like this only reminded him that no matter what, his children would die. Whether they were taken by steel or time itself, death would come for them. In a strange way, he hoped that he would be the one to lay them into the ground when they were old and frail, their hair thin as straw, their skin wrinkled from decades of life. Because if he were lucky enough to do that, it would mean he had protected them. It would mean he had given them a life worth living.

Even as he brushed the half-frozen tears from his face and turned, he remembered the night before Heraya took Naia into her arms.

“To survive, is not to live, Aeson,” Naia had said, placing her frail, black-marked hand atop his. “Promise me you’ll teach them how to live and how to love.”

He’d not been able to stop the tears then, and she’d just cupped her hand at the side of his neck, pulling him closer to look into his eyes. She was always stronger than he was.

“Promise me, Aeson. This fight will make them cold, don’t let that happen. You’re more than those swords, my love. You’re more than what this war has forced you to be. If you can teach those boys to love anything half as much as you’ve loved me, then you’ll be a better father than any I’ve known.”

Aeson had nodded, tears flowing free. Why were the gods so cruel, to take one so pure while he still drew breath?

“Aeson?”

“What is it, my heart?”

“Don’t let them forget me. Don’t let them forget how much I love them.”

“It would be easier to forget the stars.”

It took them a few hours to carry the boats to the shore, and the sun had begun to pour over the horizon by the time they found the *Bloodwater* and the *Tidebreaker* anchored a mile or so from a field of floating ice.

A sense of relief flooded Aeson as he stepped from the noaka onto the deck of the *Bloodwater*, the ship shifting beneath him.

Captain Kayala Latrak stood waiting, her loose-fitting garments of luminous blue and orange flapping in the breeze, four leather-clad guards on either side, the warm light of the sunrise spread across the horizon at her back.

She stepped forwards, casting her gaze over the surviving members of the expedition as they disembarked from the noaka. She nodded slowly, her expression flat, only a slight smile curling her lips as she looked at Akraf. She pressed her two fists together in the Narvonan greeting. “Aeson Virandr,” she said with a dip of her head. “You have returned to us. Many were lost, I see. Many souls for Akopa to guide along the river Trian.”

Aeson glanced at Pylvír and to the others, his shoulders sagging. “Many sacrifices were made.”

“Many were sacrificed.” Luren spoke in a whisper loud enough for all to hear.

Aeson straightened. He clenched the fingers of his left hand into a fist and glared at the sellsword, forcing her to meet his gaze. Neither she nor Ithaca had spoken after the burning of the bodies, but the air had hung thick around them. Luren in particular had allowed her anger to sit permanently etched into the lines of her face. In her arrogant naivety, the woman seemed to think she was alone in her loss. She stood talking of sacrifice in front of Pylvír, while his daughter’s ashes drifted on the frozen wind. Aeson would have loved nothing more than to cut her down then and there, but he stayed his hand. So long as she and Ithaca kept to themselves, took their gold, and returned to Ardan, they weren’t his problem. If they became his problem, he would follow through on his promise.

Aeson took a deep breath, then looked back to Captain Latrak. “The journey has not been easy. We have, each of us, suffered greatly. If you could put some warm food in our bellies and give us a place to sleep

without worrying that the cold might take us, I will answer all the questions you can conjure.”

Kayala took a moment, her gaze lingering on Luren, before nodding. “Blood of the water, this is the way.”

She raised a hand, signalling to two Narvonans who stood behind her before issuing commands in her mother tongue. “Aya and Koffi will show you to your cots. Breakfast will be ready soon – fish and fresh fruit from Karvos.”

She clapped her hands, and the two Narvonans, Aya and Koffi, gestured for the others to follow them. Aeson nodded for Dahlen and Erik to go; he would join them shortly.

As the others moved below deck, Kayala walked past Aeson and wrapped her arms around Akraf’s neck. She stared into his eyes, shaking her head. “I would stab you if I wasn’t so happy to see you, Wind in my Sails.”

“I would not blame you.” He pulled her closer, kissing her deeply before brushing his thumb across her cheek.

“Go,” she said, inclining her head towards the lower decks. “Eat, sleep, and for the love of the gods, wash. You smell like pig shit.”

Akraf gave her a mocking bow as he walked away, which earned him a slap on the shoulder.

With the others gone, Kayala Latrak turned back to Aeson. The smile that adorned her face grew thin. She approached him, her stare never leaving his. As she reached out her hand, the sunlight caught the fading scar that ran along her forearm.

He grasped her forearm, his palm resting over her scar, her hand resting over his.

“Our blood pact is fulfilled, Aeson Virandr.”

“It is.”

Kayala drew a short breath. “All of these sacrifices. Were they worth it? Did you get what you came for?”

“Were they worth it?” Aeson stared at the cracks in the wooden deck before lifting his gaze once more. “I’ll be asking myself that question for a long time. But yes, we got what we came for.”

In any other circumstance, he would have lied and told her the expedition was a failure. But this woman did not seem like the kind of person to lie to, and if Ithaca or Luren decided to double-cross him, he

would rather have Kayala on his side. He had known the descendants of the Latrakian line for many centuries. He had never met Kayala before boarding her ship, but he had known her mother, and he had trusted her.

“May I see it?”

Aeson hesitated. The egg sat in the satchel Malari had given him that now hung at his back. He shifted the satchel around so it sat against his hip, then slowly undid the iron buckles, peeling back the flap just enough for the captain to see the shimmering scales within.

The woman stared down at the egg in disbelief. “Akopa bless us. It is beautiful...” She glanced at Aeson, her eyes wide. “May I touch it?”

Aeson nodded.

Kayala let out a gasp as her fingers traced the scales of the egg. “It is so warm.”

“Dragons are the heart of fire.”

“I have never seen one.” She lifted her gaze from the egg. “There are a lot of people who would pay a king’s ransom in gold for this egg.”

Aeson stiffened, the hairs on his arms standing on end. In a heartbeat, the Spark floated at the edges of his mind. He would do what needed to be done.

Kayala shook her head. “Gold is good, Aeson Virandr. But it is not the only currency in which I trade. You are a friend to my family, and you have proven to be a man I can trust. I do not betray my friends. But what I said is true. There are a lot of people who would pay a king’s ransom for that egg, people who would spill rivers of blood. If you are in need of aid, call on me. My mother once told me something you said to her. ‘Our legacies are in the lives we change, the words we keep, the legends we create, and the people we create them with.’ I wish to leave a legacy, Aeson. I wish to leave a mark that remains long after my body fades.” She gave him a soft smile, then turned, her loose trousers billowing in the crosswind. “Raise the anchor! To Epheria!”

CHAPTER 11

BLOOD FOR BLOOD

Three Weeks Later

THE *BLOODWATER* CREAKED AND GROANED AS THE OCEAN WAVES BEAT against the hull, the sounds echoing through the ship's sleeping quarters. With each wave, each dip and pull of the ship, Aeson's hammock swung gently back and forth. The sensation somehow seemed to ease any sickness caused by the constant motion. In fact, he found it to be rather calming. And yet, sleep eluded him as it had for most of the journey.

For some, danger lay in the dark of night, in the heat of battle, or the fires of war. Those were places Aeson had learned to find his peace. Death didn't scare him. For Aeson, danger lay in isolation, in being left alone with his thoughts. Each night, as he sat in the hammock and the others slept, his mind drifted to those they'd lost in the icelands. Not simply their faces or the ways they died, but the ways he could have, or should have, saved them.

He should have been on guard that first night. Then maybe he could have stopped what had happened. Which, in turn, might have meant that Garahlin, Falka, Orm, and the others might not have left for the coast. If he'd been more aware, perhaps the wyrms wouldn't have killed so many. Perhaps Durink and Lirel would still be with them. If he'd not been so careless, the mokaríen would not have been able to split them apart so easily.

With each death, there was so much he could have done differently. And despite himself, he couldn't help but linger on Luren's words: "*You led us here to be slaughtered!*"

Every drop of blood was on his hands; every single drop. Over four hundred years, he could have filled an ocean with the blood he'd spilled. Part of him wished he could push all the guilt down and lock it away. But another part of him, the part Naia had reminded him was even there, never wanted him to become that man. And so he held the guilt close and let it claw at him, let it fuel his fire. He would not let all this death be for nothing.

Aeson leaned back, staring at a prism in the ceiling that allowed the soft moonlight to drift in from above deck. Letting out a sigh, he climbed from the hammock and pulled his heavy coat from the hook in the post. He paused for just a moment, watching Dahlen and Erik as they slept in the hammocks beside his. Watching his sons sleep always reminded him of when they were children. Whenever they got tired, their ears and noses would go bright red and they'd become irritated at just about anything. He'd once seen Erik throw a tantrum at the sound of his own belly aching. It was strange how not much had changed in that regard. His sons were bigger, taller. They didn't need him as much anymore. But their ears and noses still went red when they were tired. They were still children in his eyes. They always would be.

Even then, as Dahlen cradled the satchel with the egg close to his chest, his ears were cherry-red. A sadness-tinged smile touched Aeson's lips. Aeson knew how badly Dahlen wanted the egg to hatch for him. But he also knew how small that chance was.

"You would make the finest of Draleid," Aeson whispered as he watched his son's chest rise and fall. He looked at Erik. "You both would."

Pulling his coat tight, Aeson made his way to the main deck. He closed his eyes and let out a soft sigh as the cool sea air rolled over him, the sounds of the crashing waves clearer in his ears.

"Still not sleeping?"

Aeson opened his eyes and turned towards the voice to see Captain Kayala Latrak descending from one of the upper decks, her heavy boots clipping against the wood. She wore a long, dark coat, the white ink of her face tattoos gleaming in the moonlight.

"I haven't slept properly in many years. Nor you, it seems."

"I never sleep when we are near Epherian shores," she said with a shrug as she stepped onto the main deck. Kayala passed Aeson, moving towards the side of the ship. "May I ask a personal question, Aeson Virandr?"

Aeson took a position to Kayala's left, fixing his gaze on the undulating waves of sparkling silver. "That depends on the question."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a half-smile grace Kayala's lips. "Have you ever thought about leaving?"

"Leaving what?"

"Everything. Just taking your sons and going. Leaving this all behind."

Aeson folded his arms, drawing in a long breath. "Once or twice. Naia and I talked of it when Erik was born. There are parts of me that wish we had. Maybe she..." He shook his head, sighing. "Maybe things would be different."

"If you asked it of me, I would bring you wherever you wish." Kayala stuck out her bottom lip, gesturing to the ocean. "You could live out your days overlooking the vineyards of Western Narvona. There are many just south of Daris. My father would surely provide you with land. If not, perhaps a Karvosi island? Does a man like you, who has seen so much war, not deserve peace?"

Aeson's breath plumed before him as he laughed. "I couldn't find peace if I had a thousand lifetimes. I certainly won't find it on an island."

"What of your sons? Do you not wish them to live free of this chaos?"

"Every day."

"And yet you do not leave?"

"Some things are worth fighting for." He shook his head. "Epheria is my home. I will not stand by and watch it rot and fester. I could not."

Kayala nodded, warm air misting from her nostrils. "There is a saying in Narvona. In your tongue it translates as something like, 'Keep your legends at a distance, because up close they are full of holes.' In my life, I have found it to bear much truth. But I must say, you, Aeson Virandr, are not the disappointment I had thought you would be. Now, I must leave you to your contemplation while I do my rounds."

Aeson was about to ask her what she'd meant, but Kayala turned and made her way along the deck towards the ship's stern.

"Not the disappointment you thought I'd be?" Aeson whispered, laughing to himself. He took another moment to look out at the waves, then made his way up the steps Kayala had walked down only minutes before. He spent a while wandering decks, looking out at the ocean. In the distance he could see the peaks of Wolfpine Ridge illuminated by the cold

moonlight. Eventually, he found himself on the ship's bow where Malari stood with her hands resting on the wooden rail.

The two had not spoken much since they'd set sail for Epheria, at least not of anything important.

"This is a very different place to where I first found you, after I came aboard this ship," Aeson said, as he approached.

Malari glanced over her shoulder, casting a fragile smile towards Aeson. "It feels as though the world is an entirely different place now." She inhaled sharply, then let it out slow. "I have not said this, but I want to thank you, Aeson."

Aeson raised an eyebrow.

"Do not play stupid with me, we are beyond that. You could have let me go when we were hanging from that chasm. I wanted you to, and you could have – you *should* have. But you didn't."

"It wouldn't have made a difference."

Malari scoffed. "I would have let you go."

They both laughed, Aeson shaking his head. When the laughter finally subsided, Malari let out a long sigh. "When Belina first came to me, I was a shell. And when you found me on this ship, I was ready to die. If it meant my daughter and my grandchildren would survive, my life meant little."

"What changed?"

"Who said anything changed?" Malari looked out over the waves, her eyes glistening. In the months they'd been travelling, her hair now reached her ears, and she wore it in short braids. "I heard you, in the caves on the first night, talking to your sons of your wife. It was beautiful. More than that, you said she taught you that 'Without love, there isn't much point in anything. Nothing to fight for, nothing to live for'."

"She was a special soul."

"I have no doubt. Seeing how much you have lost, and yet you keep fighting, it showed me that I still have so much to fight for myself. There are still things I love, still things worth dying for – still things worth living for."

"What you did for Dahlen—"

"A mother protects. That is all."

Aeson nodded, a knot forming in his throat. A moment passed, and then bells rang out in the night, sharp and clear.

He barely had time to think when Akraf bounded up the stairs from the main deck, the moonlight glinting in the ruby set into the pommel of the sword at his hip. He inclined his head towards the portside rail. “Lorian ships.”

Aeson and Malari exchanged a glance, then ran to the rail, looking out to see four ships with white sails bearing the black lion of Loria.

Fuck.

He turned back to see some of Kayala’s sailors already scaling the rigging and pulling white flaps down over the Lorian insignia emblazoned on the *Bloodwater*’s sails. A quick look over his shoulder told him that the *Tidebreaker* was doing the same.

“They were obscured by the rocks,” Akraf said as Aeson and Malari stared at the ships. “They will be upon us in minutes. With any luck, they will just want some coin for passage. Our nations are not at war, but this is a common practice.”

“We’ll go back below deck.” Aeson pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth, sifting through the many scenarios that could unfold.

Akraf shook his head. “I said ‘with any luck’ they will just want coin. We have not been touched by luck of late. Kayala wishes you to stay above deck. If things go sideways, we will need more swords up here. We have hired Epherian mercenaries before, it is not a strange sight.”

“What about the others?”

“The bells will have woken them. Come.”

Only a few minutes had passed when one of the Lorian ships pulled alongside the *Bloodwater* and extended a makeshift bridge.

Aeson clenched and unclenched his left fist, stretching out his fingers as he stood on the second deck, looking down at the Lorian soldiers stepping from the bridge in pairs – fifty, at least. Verma’s healing had worked wonders, but the bones and muscles were still stiff and achy. He ground his teeth, his heart thumping. All he could think about was Dahlen, Erik, and the egg. He tensed as a man wearing the red cloak of the Inquisition crossed over, a second man in the black of the Battlemages at his side.

He and Verma could deal with two Spark wielders, but if there were more on the other ships, their odds would not be so good, particularly with Verma still being weak.

“They will be gone as soon as the captain gives them their toll.” The Narvonan who had shown them to their hammocks on the first day, Aya,

stood beside Aeson, a curved sword at her belt and several knives strapped across her chest. Her face was marked with the white tattoos of House Latrak, her hair tied in a single long braid. She shrugged, puffing out her bottom lip. “Once they have their coin, they always go.”

“Hmm.” The clouds began to spit, rain tickling the back of Aeson’s neck and drumming against the deck.

The Inquisitor and the Battlemage stopped before Kayala and Akraf, who stood at the centre of the main deck, exchanging greetings. Aeson couldn’t hear the conversation, nor did he dare draw on the Spark to channel the sound lest the mages sense his presence, but it seemed to be going as Akraf had said it would. After a few moments, Kayala reached into her coat pocket and produced what looked to be a bulging coin purse. No doubt she would ask Aeson to compensate her loss.

Right when Kayala produced a second purse, Aeson spotted a hooded figure emerging from a hatch on the far side of the ship.

He took a step forward, narrowing his eyes as he watched the figure exchange words with a Lorian soldier. The soldier straightened, and they stepped closer to the hooded figure, who turned their head just enough for the moonlight to illuminate their face. “No...”

“Who is it?” Malari asked, moving to Aeson’s side.

Aeson’s entire body tensed. He had only glimpsed her face, but there wasn’t a doubt in his mind it was Luren beneath the hood. “Luren. That damn sellsword. She’s selling us out.”

A hundred scenarios flitted through Aeson’s mind as he watched the soldier lead Luren towards the two mages who were talking to Kayla and Akraf. He needed to get to Erik, Dahlen, and the others. The Lorian ship blocked the noaka that hung suspended on the *Bloodwater*’s starboard side, but the second noaka on the portside was clear. That was their escape. *But I need to get to them.*

Luren and the soldier had reached the mages at the centre of the ship, and Aeson caught Kayala’s gaze as she glanced up towards him. She knew as well as he that this would end in bloodshed.

As the Inquisitor listened to Luren, something glinted intermittently in the moonlight: a coin. The coin dropped into the outstretched hand of the man in the black cloak, who flicked it up again. The air caught in Aeson’s lungs, and his pulse quickened.

Farda.

His fingers squeezed into fists.

“Aya,” Aeson whispered, turning to the Narvonan. “Take the left stairs, quietly gather anyone you pass. Your captain is going to need your blades.”

“But—”

“Do as I say, or we will all die. Once I attack, you follow.”

The woman nodded, then stalked away, sliding her curved blade from its scabbard.

“With me,” Aeson whispered to Malari as he moved towards the stairs to his right that led down to the main deck.

“What’s the plan?”

“Get as close as we can.”

A clamour rose from the main deck, and Aeson looked down to see the Inquisitor holding his outstretched blade against Kayala’s neck, while the tip of Akraf’s pressed against the Inquisitor’s chest. All around them, imperial soldiers and the *Bloodwater*’s crew had drawn their weapons and pulled close. The entire ship was a spark away from exploding.

“And then what?” Malari whispered.

“And then we kill our way out.” Aeson glanced at the three other Lorian ships that surrounded them. Two drifted behind the main ship, boxing in the *Tidebreaker*, while the third held position on the port side. “We get the others and take the noaka.” He nodded towards the noaka that hung suspended over the ship’s side. “If we cause enough chaos, we can slip away.”

Aeson pulled one of his blades from its scabbard on his back and held it low by his side, moving as quietly as he could, the rain splattering down over him as he descended the stairs. Malari did the same. On the starboard side, he could see Aya and a number of the crew crouching low and moving forwards.

“It appears you have not been telling us the whole truth, Captain Latrak.” The Inquisitor kept his blade levelled against Kayala’s throat as he spoke, a touch of amusement in his voice. Aeson felt the man draw in threads of air and bind them around Akraf.

Akraf let out a howl as his fingers twisted and snapped, his blade clattering against the deck.

Kayala screamed and made to lunge forwards as Akraf dropped to his knees.

“Ah, ah, ah,” the Inquisitor said, lifting Kayala’s chin with the flat of his blade. “Let’s not lose our heads. Figuratively, or literally. I have to say, I like your lap dog far more without his teeth.” He looked at the Lorian soldiers around him. “Search the ship! If there is a dragon egg aboard, fifty gold marks to the man or woman who brings it to me.” The inquisitor turned to Luren. “If there is not, I will break a lot more than your fingers.”

More Lorian soldiers flooded over the bridge from the other ship as they began searching, some sweeping across the top of the ship and others disappearing below deck.

A clutch of soldiers approached Aeson and Malari just as Kayala tilted her head and glanced at him.

The Inquisitor followed her gaze, his eyes narrowing as he spotted Aeson and Malari.

“Stay close,” Aeson whispered. He settled his mind with a single deep breath, then opened himself to the Spark and charged. He sent a thin whip of air forwards, weaving through the soldiers that were now running towards him and snapping the Inquisitor’s blade from his hands.

As the first soldier swung, Aeson caught the steel with his right blade, directed the swing downwards, flicked his wrist, and carved through the man’s jaw and nose in a single swipe. The soldier screamed, staggering backwards as he dropped his sword and clasped his hands to his face.

The ship erupted in chaos, the crew descending on the soldiers from all sides, rain hammering down, steel crashing against steel.

Aeson drove his blade into a soldier’s gut, wrenching it free in a plume of blood to deflect a strike from his right. He threw his left shoulder forward and plunged his second blade into his attacker’s throat, blood sluicing as he tore it free.

An arrow soared past his head, slamming into the wood of the ship’s rail.

He pivoted, spinning on his left foot. “Malari, down!”

Aeson twisted both his blades into reverse grip, then drove them into the chest of the hulking soldier that had been charging towards Malari. The man staggered back a step and roared, blood sprinkling from his lips. Aeson released the handle of his right sword and snatched a knife from where it sat on the soldier’s belt, driving it up through the man’s chin, scraping bone and slicing through flesh. The soldier’s eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he collapsed onto Aeson.

Aeson grabbed hold of the neck loop in the man's leather armour and used it to drag him sideways into the swing of another soldier's blade. The steel hacked into leather and bone, lodging there. Reacting, Aeson stomped into the inside of the soldier's knee, hearing audible snaps and cracks as the bone shattered and they fell backwards.

"We need to get to the others!" Aeson roared at Malari, hefting the bloodied corpse onto his shoulder. He felt two *thunks* as arrows sank into his makeshift shield.

Malari nodded, pulling her sword from a Lorian belly.

Pushing from his back foot, Aeson tossed the soldier's body into a group of charging Lorians. He swept forwards, ripping his two blades free from the corpse as he moved, splitting a soldier open across the navel in the same motion. Ahead, Kayala, Akraf, and several of the Narvonan crew were fighting tooth and nail against the Lorians, the skies above rumbling.

The rain fell in sheets, thick in the air as Aeson sliced a bloody path through the Lorian soldiers. He leapt forwards onto a bolted wooden crate, pushing off his left foot and swinging his right into the chin of a woman who had fallen to her knees. Blood sprayed as her mouth snapped shut, and she collapsed backwards.

Ahead, Farda hacked Narvonans to pieces, his blade glinting as blood sprayed in its wake. Just the sight of the man sent lightning crackling through Aeson, boiling his blood. He slid his right blade into its scabbard and dropped low, grasping the shaft of a dropped spear.

He drew a lungful of air, threw his shoulder back, and swung himself forwards. At the last moment, as Farda turned, the rain splattering against his cloak, Aeson caught sight of the Inquisitor lunging towards Kayala. The captain's back was turned, her focus on the three soldiers before her.

He twisted and released.

The spear sliced through the sheeting rain, past a falling soldier, and missed the side of Farda's head by a hair's breadth. Instead, it slammed into the chest of a soldier who had stepped across its path, taking the brunt of the blow meant for the Inquisitor. The man careened backwards from the force, slamming into the Inquisitor and sending him sprawling.

Farda turned, rain rolling down his face, his hair matted to his head. His gaze met Aeson's for only a fraction of a second before a pulse of the Spark rippled from the entrance to the lower decks, and the door and walls erupted outwards in a shockwave of Air.

Aeson pulled on threads of Air, swirling them into a shield as wood snapped and splintered, slicing flesh like daggers. Everyone within ten feet of the blast was sent sprawling to the deck. Groans and cries rang out as soldiers and sailors alike tried to haul themselves back to their feet.

A roar pulled Aeson's gaze to where a stream of Narvonans were charging through the gaping hole that had been the door to the lower decks only moments before. Among them, Ildur swept forwards, taking a rising soldier's head from her shoulders with a swing of his blade. Behind the old Stormguard charged Pylvír, Andira, and Fearn.

Aeson's heart fluttered, his breath holding in his chest. Relief flooded him when Dahlen and Erik emerged from the opening, Ithaca behind them, Verma at her side. The power of the Spark pulsed from Verma in waves.

He glanced over his shoulder to see Malari rising from a crouch, then pulled himself to his feet and broke into a sprint.

His boots slapped into puddles of blood and water, the storm raging. He surged forwards, wrapped his free hand around Ithaca's neck, and slammed her against the remains of the wooden wall.

"Did you know?" he roared, the blade in his left hand pressed against her belly.

"Know what?" Ithaca squirmed in Aeson's grip, pressing herself against the wood so as to avoid the tip of his blade. The sword in her hand didn't move.

"That Luren betrayed us."

"She what?" Ithaca choked out the words, surprise painting her voice, her eyes widening, jaw slackening.

He knew by the shock in her eyes that she hadn't known.

Aeson released his grip on throat, and she fell forwards, gasping. He turned to Erik and Dahlen, not wasting another moment on the woman.

"Are you—"

"We're fine," they both said.

"The egg?"

"Safe." Erik pulled at the strap that ran over his right shoulder.

Aeson nodded, allowing his gaze to linger on his sons for just a second longer. "We need to get to the noaka. We..."

Another pulse of the Spark rippled outwards. Aeson looked over the deck to see Ildur, Pylvír, and the others fighting alongside the *Bloodwater's* crew, more and more Lorian pouring over the bridge. Then he saw the

Inquisitor rising to his feet, threads of Fire, Spirit, and Air swirling around him.

“Easier to let you all burn!” the man howled. Farda grabbed him by the shoulder, but the Inquisitor shrugged him away. “The egg can rot at the bottom of the ocean for all I care.”

The Inquisitor extended his hand, and a plume of fire spewed forth. Within seconds, the sails were ablaze, followed by the rigging. He twisted threads of Air around the threads of Fire and swept his hand across the deck, tearing through the wood with a column of raging flames. The ship groaned and creaked, thunder cracking overhead, the rain pummeling down as the flames swept across the *Bloodwater*.

“Now! To the noaka!” Aeson roared, grabbing Erik by the shoulders and shoving him towards the noaka on the port side. Luckily, flames had not yet caught hold of the pulley that suspended the oarship. “Verma, Ildur, Pylvír!”

Aeson gestured towards the noaka as he moved, the others gathering in his wake. He caught sight of Kayala, grabbing her arm. “We need to go, now.”

“I will not abandon my ship and my crew.”

The others passed Aeson and boarded the noaka.

“Your ship is already ash. Anyone who stays dies.”

“Then I will die.”

“Erik!” Aeson turned at the sound of Dahlen’s voice to see Erik sprinting through the flames towards Malari who was clawing herself upright, Lorian soldiers surrounding her. Aeson’s heart dropped into the pit of his stomach. He had sworn Malari was behind him. He hadn’t seen her fall.

Erik drove his blade down into the neck of a soldier who was grabbing at Malari, then ripped it free, slicing through the jaw of a second man in a spray of blood. He grabbed Malari by the collar and hauled her to her feet, flames swirling around them, rain pouring down.

Claps of thunder boomed in Aeson’s mind as he ran to Erik, his heart pounding. A Lorian lunged with a spear towards Erik’s back, but Malari twisted and slammed her blade against the haft. She stopped, grabbed the soldier by the chin, lifted his head, and drove her sword up through his neck. As she turned to run once more, Aeson sensed a surge of the Spark and a whip of air burst from the flames, knocking both her and Erik from their feet.

Erik slammed against the deck, his sword skittering away and the satchel flying loose. Aeson watched as the flap came open and the white egg rolled across the wood, its scales glistening in the incandescent firelight that was consuming the ship. Through the flames, he saw Farda on the other side. The man's eyes were fixed on the egg. Farda glanced at Erik and Malari, then pulled on threads of Fire and unleashed a torrent of flames.

Without thought, Aeson opened himself to the Spark and pulled as hard as he dared. He dragged in threads of Fire, Air, and Spirit, slicing at Farda's threads and swirling a shield before Erik and Malari. Through the flames and deluge he could barely see Farda's face, but the man pushed back with fire and fury.

Aeson grimaced, bracing himself, the Spark burning in his blood as he held back Farda's flames. Dahlen raced past him and hauled Erik upright. He snatched the egg and stuffed it into the satchel, swinging the strap over his shoulder.

"You're not taking all the glory, Virandr." Verma stepped up beside Aeson and launched a shockwave of Air at Farda, shards of broken wood and steel soaring as the man was knocked off his feet and sent sprawling.

Erik and Dahlen sprinted towards Aeson, but Malari turned and dragged her blade across a soldier who was charging towards Erik. She brought the sword back across the man's throat, then plunged it into his chest and turned to run.

An arrow punched through her calf, and she dropped to one knee, howling. Malari made to rise, but a second arrow burst through her chest. Blood splattered over her lip as her gaze met Aeson's. She gave him a short nod, coughing more blood, then touched two fingers to her chin and rose to face the Lorians charging through the flames.

"No!" Erik roared and turned back, only for Dahlen to grab him by the shoulders and drag him towards the noaka. "Father! Help her!"

Aeson clenched his jaw as a third arrow slammed into Malari's side. His gut twisted as a sword hacked into her ribs, and she fell forwards into the flames. "Gods damn it..."

He turned and roared at Dahlen. "Get your brother onto the noaka!"

Erik was still wide-eyed, staring where Malari had fallen, but he staggered backwards and onto the oarship.

Kayala and Akraf still stood at Aeson's side, both following Erik's gaze. "Get on the oarship."

“I will not—”

“No – *I* will not! I will not let anyone else die!” He made to grab Kayala’s shoulder and push her towards the ship, but Akraf caught his wrist. Aeson held his breath and pushed his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Get on the ship and live. Don’t give them your life, give them your wrath. Make them pay in blood.”

Akraf and Kayala looked at each other, then the captain nodded towards the noaka and called out to the crew nearby. “Abandon ship!”

Kayala took one last look across the blazing deck of the *Bloodwater*, then stepped onto the noaka with Aeson and Akraf following her. She held Aeson’s gaze. “I want my blood, Aeson Virandr.”

“You will have it.”

She nodded, then gestured to two of the sailors who slashed the ropes suspending the oarship. A weightlessness filled Aeson’s stomach, and he felt Verma brace the ship with threads of Air as it slammed into the water below.

The Narvonans hauled the oars free, slotted them into the locks, then pulled.

Thunder clapped overhead, powerful waves lifting the noaka forwards. With luck, the storm, the night’s veil, and the chaos aboard the ships would hinder any Lorian chase.

Aeson looked down at Erik, who sat on the base of the ship, cradling the egg and the satchel. He rested his hand on his son’s head, then looked towards Kayala, whose gaze was fixed on the raging inferno that was the *Bloodwater*, the *Tidebreaker* and one of the Lorian ships blazing in the distance.

CHAPTER 12

A SPARK TO LIGHT THE FLAMES

GULLS SQUAWKED OVERHEAD, AND THE WATER GLISTENED IN THE SUN'S light as the oars slowed and the noaka drifted into the Milltown docks.

With practiced efficiency, the Narvonan sailors steered the noaka towards the leftmost of the three jetties, smoothly shipping their oars and bringing the noaka into the nearest open berth, though not one of them moved to cast moorings – they wouldn't be there long.

The sounds of the Milltown markets drifted on the breeze while merchants and traders went about their business, loading and unloading cargo onto their dainty vessels. A few gave those on the noaka strange looks but didn't pay them any heed; Narvonan ships were commonplace on the western Epherian shores. Though Aeson was more than well aware that the noaka was packed to the brim, and every soul aboard looked as though they had been dragged through the void and back. Those who had manned the oars were still clawing breath into their lungs.

“Here,” Verma said, handing Aeson a damp rag.

He took it from her with a perplexed look, raising an eyebrow.

“You've blood and dirt all over your face and hands.”

He gave her a weak smile before scrubbing his face and hands with the rag and passing it to Erik.

“Are you sure about this?” Verma tilted her head to catch Aeson's wandering gaze.

“I am. There are too many of us to go unnoticed here. The old Stormguard fort at Land's End is as good a place as any for you to rest. I'll send a hawk once I reach Belduar and I know our next steps. With any luck we lost the Lorians in the storm.”

“Hmm.” Verma drew a long breath through her nostrils and scrunched her lips. “All right.” She leaned in closer. “That was Farda Kyrana on that ship.”

“It was.”

“Aeson, this isn’t a time for honour and strength. I should go with you. If he—”

“I’ll deal with him. I need you to go with Ildur and the others. There’s strength in Arkalen that we will need. We must be ready when the egg hatches.”

Verma pulled Aeson into a tight embrace, claspings the back of his head. “Indil vir anarai andin, akar. Paspå varno.”

Until we meet again, brother. Stay safe.

“Ar du, vesani.”

And you, sister.

Aeson looked to Fearn, who sat beside Ildur. “Ildur has stores of Altweid blood in Land’s End that Coren needs in the North. I’m relying on you.”

“She’ll get it,” Fearn said, nodding.

“Good. Ildur, I’ll need you to split your numbers between aiding Verma and escorting Fearn’s shipments.”

Ildur grimaced as he hauled himself to his feet, looking down at Fearn and then over at Verma. “It will be done, Aeson.” He grabbed Aeson’s shoulder, meeting his gaze. “We did it. I may not live to see the empire fall, but I’m honoured to say I was a part of this. You’ll never stand alone, old friend.”

“Nor you,” Aeson stared back into Ildur’s grey eyes. The man had suffered greatly at the Lorian Empire’s hands. Aeson would love nothing more than to give him a torch so he could watch Al’Nasla burn. “I’ll send word to Arem once I get to Camylin.”

With that, Aeson said his last goodbye – the hardest one. Pylvír had been silent since even before the Lorian attack on the ship, as had Andira. Lirel’s loss still hung over them.

But before Aeson could even speak, Pylvír stood and grasped Aeson’s forearm. “Don’t tell me how sorry you are.” Tears were already budding in the elf’s eyes. “We’ve both seen enough death to know that Lirel was but one among millions.” He shook his head. “I’m not hiding anymore, Aeson.”

Aeson nodded at his old friend. “Even amongst millions, one still matters. No death is made insignificant by more death. Talk to Elara. Don’t make choices yet. You’ve given enough.”

“My mother will understand,” Andira cut across, her tone flat. “We will not hide any longer. My sister always wanted us to fight, she always wanted us to want more. I give her honour in her death by carrying her in my life. When you call, Nadíl, I will answer.”

Nadíl – Uncle. Aeson had never known Andira and Lirel thought of him that way. Somehow, if it was possible, the word cut deeper into his heart than a blade ever could. He cupped Andira’s cheeks and placed a kiss on her forehead. “La’uva nahal, sond’ayar. Nur temen vie’ryn valana, vi nien. Nur temen vol kitar, vi makri.”

I will call, dear one. For those we have lost, we mourn. For those who live, we fight.

Aeson’s breaths trembled as Andira pulled away and took her seat next to her father, a fire in her eyes. He looked to Erik and Dahlen. “Ready?”

Before they disembarked, Aeson looked to Kayala and Akraf, touching his two fists together. “I’m sorry for what you’ve lost, but I promise you will have your blood. I swear it.”

“To live is to lose, Aeson Virandr,” Kayala said. “You know that more than anyone. But the Lorian imperials will learn it comes at a price. Too long have they preyed on our ships and taken whatever they wanted, holding their dragons over us like gods. We will wait for your call and prepare. They will learn that even gods can bleed.”

“Blood of the water, this is the way.” Akraf grasped Aeson’s forearm. “Stay safe.”

The noaka’s oars were already pulling through the water by the time Aeson, Erik, and Dahlen had reached the end of the jetty.

“What now?” Dahlen asked, tugging at the satchel around his shoulder.

“First, we get some new clothes. Ones with fewer blood stains.” Aeson pushed through the bustling crowd and away from the docks.

“And then what?”

“We wash, eat, and wait. Darda Vastion has arranged for a horse and cart to be set for us at The Two Barges. But he has to see a shipment of weapons north to Coren first.”

Aeson twisted to avoid a young man who moved awkwardly around a merchant’s stand. He looked thin as a reed, with a shock of dark hair and an

utter unawareness of the world around him. His eyes were fixed on a stack of books that sat atop the merchant's table.

"You've a good eye," the merchant said, his voice fading as Aeson moved further away.

Something about the young man had felt strange, something in the air around him, but Aeson couldn't put his finger on it. He shook his head and moved forward. They didn't have time to dawdle. There was a chance they'd lost Farda and the soldiers in the storm, but they couldn't count on it. As soon as the cart was ready, they needed to leave.

He looked at the satchel that hung from Dahlen's shoulder.

That egg would be the spark. And when Aeson was done, the empire would be nothing more than ash and dust.

The End of The Ice

THANK YOU! PLEASE READ!

wipes sweat from brow

This past year has been a bit of a hectic one for me. I released the massive tome that is *Of War and Ruin*, planned a wedding, got married, wrote this book, and started on book four – *Of Empires and Dust*. Not to mention there's a few secret projects going on in the background (all *The Bound and The Broken* related. I won't go starting something new until this is finished). Honestly, I've not really come up for air. But this series just means so much to me, and this book in particular holds a special place in my heart.

So, once again, I want to say thank you for everything you have done. Thank you for your time, thank you for your passion, and thank you for your support. It has been something truly unique to walk with you all on this journey, as the world grows, and the characters find their paths. This wouldn't be what it is if we weren't doing it together.

Where *Of War and Ruin* was the 'Mid-Season Finale' of the series, *The Ice* is the moment we look at Aeson's soul. This is where we explore the heart of a character who never gave up, the one who never lay down. This is where we see how it all began.

If you enjoyed *The Ice*, please consider rating and reviewing it on Amazon and Goodreads. The reviews left for the rest of the series were pivotal in creating everything we have today. They allowed *The Bound and The Broken* to rise above an ocean of other books, and gave me the ability to turn my passion into a career. There is nothing I love doing more than writing these stories for you. Without you, I would have no reason to write, because stories are born to be told, and without readers, they serve no

purpose. It would mean the world to me, if you could help me continue on this dream by leaving a review for *The Ice*.

Like with every book, novel or novella, I have pushed myself to places in *The Ice* that I never have before. I have explored things that have only been previously been brushed upon. It is my hope that the pages of this novella add depth and richness to the world of *The Bound and The Broken*, and even further delve into a sense of wonder for you.

I promise you, I will never stop learning, writing, and improving. It's only upwards from here.

Your biggest fan,
Ryan Cahill

MAILING LIST

If you want to keep up to date with my releases and make sure you don't miss anything, you can just sign up to my mailing list at: <https://www.ryancahillauthor.com/signup>

I only mail out once a month, so you won't get flooded with emails. You will also get a free ecopy of The Fall when you sign up!

AFTERWORD

Once again, I think it's important to be clear about this – *Of War and Ruin* and *The Ice* are not the last book in *The Bound and The Broken* series.

This series is expected to be five books long, with a four novellas thrown into the mix (and perhaps some short stories).

The Pre-order for Book 4 is not yet live, but the title has been revealed

Of Empires and Dust

I have already started work on *Of Empires and Dust* and a pre-order will be available in the not-too-distant future.

GLOSSARY

The Seasons

The beginning of a new year in Epheria is marked by the passing of the Winter Solstice. There are five seasons that divide the year: earlywinter, spring, summer, autumn, winter.

Characters

Aeson Virandr (Ay-son VIR-an-DUR): Father of Dahlen and Erik Virandr. Former Draleid. Core member of the Epherian Rebellion.

Naia (NYE-ah): Aeson's deceased wife. Mother of Dahlen and Erik.

Lyara (LYE-are-AH): The dragon to which Aeson was bonded. Killed by Sylvan Anura and Aramel.

Dahlen Virandr (DAH-lin VIR-an-DUR): Son of Aeson, brother of Erik.

Erik Virandr (AIR-ICK VIR-an-DUR): Son of Aeson, brother of Dahlen.

Arthur Bryne (Are-THUR BRINE): Father of Daymon. King of Belduar.

Daymon Bryne (DAY-MON BRINE): Son of Arthur, prince of Belduar.

Ihvon Arnell (EYE-VON ARE-nell): Close friend and advisor to Arthur. Belduaran Lord.

Baria Hawe (BAH-ree-ah HAW): Lord-Captain of the Belduaran Kingsguard.

Verma Talissair (VER-mah tal-IS-air): Arcarian and former member of The Order's Battlemages.

Belina Louna (BELL-eena lau-NAH): Friend of Aeson's. Former Hand assassin.

Dayne Ateres (DAIN AH-Teer-eece): Son of Arkin and Ilya Ateres, brother of Alina, Baren, and Owain. Exiled heir to the head of House Ateres.

Pylvír (Tha-lah-nil): Friend of Aeson's. Former Craftsmage of The Order .

Andira (FAY-lin): Pylvír's daughter. Lirel's sister.

Lirel (GAY-ler-on): Pylvír's daughter. Andira's sister.

Akraf Obindi (ACK-raf OH-bin-dee): Second in command of the *Bloodwater*.

Kayala Latrak (KAY-ah-lah LAH-track): Captain of the *Bloodwater*. Fifth in line to the royal house of Latrak.

Malari (MAH-lar-ee): Narvonan woman who apparently escaped Valacia.

Garahlin (GAR-ah-lin): Captain of the Ardanian sellswords who accompany Aeson on the journey to Valacia.

Farda Kyrana (Far-DAH Kie-RAH-nah): Justicar of the Lorian empire and Exarch of the Imperial Battlemages. Former Draleid and member of The Order.

Fane Mortem (FAIN MORE-tem): Emperor of Loria.

Epherian Gods

Achyron (Ack-er-on): The warrior God, or simply The Warrior. The protector against the shadow.

Elyara (El-eee-ARE-AH): The Maiden. The wisest of all the gods, creator of consciousness and free thought.

Varyn (Var-in): The Father. The protector of all things and the provider of the sun.

Heraya (HER-eye-AH): The Mother. The giver of life and receiver of the dead.

Hafaesir (Hah-FYE-SEER): The Smith. The Patron god of the dwarves. Builder of the world.

Neron (NEH-ron): The Sailor. Creator of the seas and provider of safe travel.

Efialtír (Ef-EE-ahl-TIER): The Traitor God. Efialtír betrayed the other six gods at the dawn of creation. He turned his back on their ways, claiming his power through offerings of blood.

Narvonan Gods

Akopa (AH-kop-ah): The overseer of the living and the dead. Guardian of the gods. Guides souls along the river Trian and judges if they are worthy of the Eversea.

Tatora (TAH-tor-ah): The goddess of wisdom and journeys.

Ardanian Gods

Torah (TOR-ah): Ardanian god of the earth and life.

Yakira (YAH-keer-ah): Ardanian god of the hunt.

Places

Epheria (EH-fear-EE-ah): The continent of Epheria is one of the largest continents in the known world.

Karvos (CAR-VOHS): One of the five main continents in the known world. Home to the Karvosi. Karvos is a continent mostly consumed by rainforest. A number of wars have been fought between the Epherians and the Karvosi across the ages.

Ardan (ARE-DAN): One of the five main continents in the known world. Home to the Ardanians. The Ardanians are a powerful seafaring nation.

Narvona (NAR-VOH-NAH): One of the five main continents in the known world. Home to the Narvonans. Narvona's climate is far hotter than Epheria's, and it is home to many mineral deposits and precious stones. Due to the wealth provided by these natural resources, the Narvonans are a wealthy and powerful people. There has been conflict between Epheria and Narvona but for the most part the relations between the two continents have been amicable. Due to this amicable relationship, it is not uncommon to see Narvonans who have made their home in Epheria.

Valacia (VAH-lay-see-AH): Meaning Icelands in the Old Tongue. One of the five main continents in the known world. A mostly unexplored wasteland of ice and snow. The dragons of Valacia are widely considered to be things of legend.

Tathos (TAH-thoh-s): A land further east of Karvos. Largely unexplored by Epherians.

Loria (Lor-EE-AH): The province of Loria dominates northern Epheria. It is in this province that the Lorian Empire hold their seat of power, in the capital city of Al'Nasla.

Illyanara (ILLY-ah-NAH-ra): One of the six provinces of southern Epheria, ruled over by High Lord Castor Kai.

Carvahon (Car-VAH-hon): One of the six provinces of southern Epheria, ruled over by High Lord Talia Kar.

Varsund (VAR-SUND): One of the six provinces of southern Epheria, ruled over by High Lord Korim Garrin.

Arkalen (ARE-KAY-LIN): One of the six provinces of southern Epheria, ruled over by High Lord Syrene Linas.

Drifaen (Drif-AY-IN): One of the six provinces of southern Epheria, ruled over by High Lord Lothal Helmund.

Valtara (Val-TAHR-AH): One of the six provinces of southern Epheria, ruled over by High Lord Loren Koraklon.

Belduar (BELL-DOO-are): The last “free city of men” in Epheria. Belduar is the only city of men that is not under the dominion of the Lorian Empire, and instead has its own king – Arthur Bryne.

Ölm (Ohm): Ölm is a small village that is part of a collective of villages that sit at the base of Wolfpine Ridge. It shares its name with Ölm Forest. Both the village and the forest take their name from the ancient Jotnar city of Ölmur.

Durakdur (Duhr-ack-duhr): The dwarven kingdom of Durakdur is a member of the Dwarven Freehold. It is ruled over by Queen Kira.

Ozryn (Oz-RHIN): The dwarven kingdom of Ozryn is a member of the Dwarven Freehold. It is ruled over by Queen Elenya.

Volkur (Vol-KOOR): The dwarven kingdom of Volkur is a member of the Dwarven Freehold. It is ruled over by King Hoffnar.

Azmar (AZ-mar): The dwarven kingdom of Azmar is a member of the Dwarven Freehold. It is ruled over by Queen Pulroan.

Lynalion (LIN-ahl-EE-on): The woodland of Lynalion stretches for hundreds of miles in all directions. It sits at the base of Mar Dorul and is where a large portion of the elves retreated to after the fall of The Order.

Aravell (ARA-vell): Aravell is a hidden city that acts as the home to a faction of elves that have split from the elves of Lynalion.

The Old Tongue

The Old Tongue is a language passed down from the gods and creators known as the Enkara. Before the arrival of the humans to the continent in the year 306 After Doom, the Old Tongue was the prevalent language spoken amongst the Elves, and Jotnar. After the arrival of the humans, the Common tongue was developed from a blending of the languages spoken by dwarves and humans with the Old Tongue.

Here are a few common phrases that might be found throughout the books.

Draleid (Drah-laid): Dragonbound. Ancient warriors whose souls were bonded to the dragons that hatched for them.

Rakina (Rah-KEEN-ah): One who is broken, or in the elven dialect – ‘one who survived’. When a dragon or their Draleid dies, the other earns the title

of 'Rakina'.

Du gryr haydria til myia elwyn (DOO Greer HAY-dree-AH till MAYA EHL-win): You bring honour to my heart.

N'aldryr (Nahl-DREAR): By fire.

Valerys (Vah-lair-is): Ice.

Det være myia haydria (Deh-t VAY-air MAYA HAY-dree-AH): *It would be my honour.*

Du haryn myia vrai (Doo Hah-RIN MAYA VRAY): *You have my thanks.*

Myia elwyn er unira diar (MAYA EHL-win AIR OO-neer-AH Dee-ARE): My heart is always yours.

Din vrai é atuya sin'vala (DIN VRAY Eh AH-too-YAH Sin-VAH-LAH): *Your thanks are welcome here.*

Draleid n'aldryr, Rakina nai dauva (Drah-laid Nahl-DREAR, Rah-KEEN-ah Nay D-ow-VAH): *Dragonbound by fire, broken by death.*

Det er aldin na vëna du (Deh-t AIR Ahl-DIN Nah VAY-na DOO): *It is good to see you.*

Myia nithír til diar (MAYA NIH-theer TILL Dee-ARE): *My soul to yours.*

I denír við ar altinua (Eee Deh-Neer Vee-EL ARE Al-tin-OO-AH): *In this life and always.*

Vaen (VAY-en): *Truth.*

Drunir (DREW-Neer): *Companion.*

Aldryr (ALL-DREAR): *Fire.*

Níthral (Nee-TH-ral): *Soulblade.*

Svidar’Cia (Svih-DAR-see-AH): *Burnt Lands.*

Svidarya (Svih-DAR-eee-AH): *Burning Winds.*

Valacia (VAH-lay-see-AH): *Icelands.*

Nithír (NIH-Theer): *Soul.*

Din haydria er fyrir (DIN HAY-dree-AH AIR Fih-reer): *Your honour is forfeit.*

Bralgír (Brah-GEER): *Storyteller.*

Ayar Elwyn (Ay-ARE EHL-win): *One Heart.*

Galdrín (GAHL-DREEN): *Mage.*

Idyn vae (IH-din VAY): *Rest well.*

Dakari

Taklicun (TACK-lee-coon): *Heartglass.*

Druxiri (DRUX-eer-ee): *Dragon.*

Ba’ax ku yenta k’a’ana’an dimil utia’al u páajtal u kuxtal juneten (BAH-ax coo YEN-tah k-AH-ah-na-an DIH-mil UH-tee-yah-al OO PA-

ahj-tal u KUX-tal JEW-ne-tehn): What lives must die so it can live once more.

Narvonan

Le sangar mes vialor vitír à talers ul (LEH sang-ARE may vee-ah-LORE vih-TEER ah tah-LAIRS UL): The blood of the lost lives on through us.

Mockaríen (MOCK-ah-ree-en): Blackheart.

Races

Humans: Humans first arrived on the continent of Epheria in the year 306 After Doom, fleeing from an unknown cataclysm in their homeland of Terroncia.

Elves: Along with the Jotnar and the dwarves, the elves were one of the first races to inhabit Epheria. After the fall of the Order the elves fought valiantly against the newly formed Lorian Empire, but were eventually defeated and subsequently split into two major factions. One faction blamed the humans for the decimation of Epheria, and retreated into the enormous woodland known as Lynalion, withdrawing themselves from the rest of the continent. The other faction withdrew to the Darkwood, where they built the city of Aravell and continued on the fight in secret by turning the Darkwood into an impassable barrier between the North and South.

Dwarves: Before the fall of The Order, the dwarves occupied territories both above land and below. But after The Fall, the dwarves retreated back to their mountain kingdoms for safety.

Uraks (UH-raks): Creatures whose way of life revolves around bloodshed. Little is known of them outside of battle, other than they serve the traitor God – Efialtír.

Jotnar (Jot-Nar): The Jotnar, known to humans as ‘giants’, are a race of people who have inhabited Epheria since the dawn of time. They have an intrinsic connection to the Spark, have bluish-white skin, and stand over eight feet tall.

Angan (Ann-GAN): The Angan are a race of humanoid shapeshifters. It is not truly known when they arrived in Epheria, though it is thought that they are as old as the land itself. They are divided into five major factions, each devoted to one of the five Angan Gods: Dvalin, Bjorna, Vethnir, Fenryr, and Kaygan.

The Ice

Book One of The Bound and The Broken series

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