



MIRIAM YVETTE

UNOFFICIAL

TEASER

BOOK COVER

BLACK WINGS

THE BOOK ONE

HUNTED

PRINCE

BLACK WINGS
THE
HUNTED
PRINCE

Miriam Yvette

Warning, this is still a pre-early copy of **The Hunted Prince**. Be wary of typos and grammar errors. The name of the places mentioned may be subject to change.

(As of August 2020, I have added more content and updated the name of my species and forest names)

This PDF copy has Chapters 1 -3

I will release a total of 5 chapters before the pre-order date.

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CHAPTER 1

THE PRINCES ARE BORN

The laboring pains of queens from every royal family was a day of celebration. Its people held parties in cities, marketplaces, and rural villages. Many would drink themselves merry, some didn't care if it was a donkey's foal, they all participated with feasts and ale. Meanwhile, the laboring mother was accompanied by representatives from every branch of the royal family. None of them offered a lending hand. Instead, they wait for the arrival of the heir who will have sovereignty over their monarch lands. But in Talon'arc, a kingdom north of the mainlands, there was no cheer or hurrah. They called themselves Denoni, but humans, by default, called them vampires. It stuck with them after the humans from Earth inspired them with their fictional influence. Sharp fangs, their consumption of blood, and their icy skin. Though they shared the common characteristics of one. Denoni were not the undead, and they certainly didn't bite helpless humans to make more, they had sex. If their fangs came out against their will, it was because they were confronting a threat. Though they consumed food, blood could fill their bellies for the day. And if their skin was cold, it was because they didn't trust the person who touched them.

Labor was a private matter for the Denoni. They reserved it only for those in the palace and the hallways that echoed the moans of Queen Sarita. Her ladies-in-waiting watched from a safe distance while she gritted her teeth against a slab of stone. The plate could shave the enamel and dentin of teeth, but they had to go between her mouth to give her fangs something to pierce. When she felt another spasm, the plates broke, and the royal physician demanded another. Her helper was a human slave by the name of Bora. The twenty-five-year-old maiden swiftly

whisked one from the handmaidens and offered the extra plate. Once it went between her lips, Queen Sarita could not endure another moment. She spat the plate and moaned, solely losing herself in her pain. The royal physician had to resort to begging because she still needed to push.

The Queen cursed in Denoni tongue. "Ask me one more time, and I'll snap your neck!"

"My lady, the head is surfacing!" cried Bora, who held the white sheets above while the handmaidens kept her knees apart.

Queen Sarita pushed, hoping for it to be true. Her wild sand-colored eyes glowed, allowing her muscles to constrict. The head emerged, followed by her painful groans until a pale and slippery body wiggled out. The royal physician took the crying child. No amount of rubbing against the soft cloth reassured the newborn he was safe. Instead, he wept uncontrollably. His index finger stretched, almost pointing at the birth canal. He squirmed like most babes do when their mother is away, but no motherly touch could soothe his cry.

"I finished," panted the Queen. "My duty is complete." She wrinkled a smile when one of her ladies-in-waiting asked for permission to deliver the news to the king.

The heir to Talon'arc.

The royal physician passed the little prince to the midwife who was ready to clean him and clothe him. But her stomach muscles betrayed Queen Sarita. She arched her back against the pillow and howled at the wall. The handmaidens shuddered and stepped back. But Bora leaned to the space between her thighs to have a look. She didn't have to say it, the urge to push returned.

"This is not possible!" she shrieked. "I should not be having another!"

The Queen, though ensnared by her own pain, made a sober observation. Twins were a rarity among the Denoni. In poems or in unknown discoveries, rare things were cherished and sold at a top price, but the birth of twins was a bad omen in Talon'arc. For there to be twins, it meant the Denoni soul of the prince divided itself after the zygote split. The same eukaryotic cell then formed into an embryo and now produced identical twins. The greatest reassurance mothers had to such a phenomenon was that twins were always stillborn. The ladies-in-waiting whispered in horror. One prayed to the first queen of Talon'arc, asking for the second-

born to come out dead. But if the first-born prince was alive, her prayers were not confident.

“One more time, my lady!” said the royal physician. “Push!”

The wiggly body slipped out, and a second cry filled the room.

The Queen’s chamber fell into silence. While the infant cried, Bora, who did not know their history, stood by in confusion. Instead of the boy going to the midwife who returned, they handed him over to the handmaiden who quietly left the room.

It was as if history was repeating itself.

The last set of twins born from royal blood brought ten years of malice. It wasn’t that the second-born wanted to be queen, but that she saw herself as an equal to her twin sister. But it eventually turned into hate. She broke the country in blood and violence and invited the invasion from the Eight Tribes. It took many years and much death before peace was restored, but as a consequence, it formed an iron fist law.

Should another royal twin be born, the second-born born must die.

Talon’arc was the first and oldest kingdom in Asylum. And being the oldest made many kings envious. But no matter how resentful one could be, they could not meddle with a Dragon’s blessings. Once it was given, one must receive it. When the first Denoni came to Asylum, they honored her with a royal title and land on the north. Following her blessing was Midnight, a broad sword flared at the tip in black steel. Ingrained on the two-handed handle sparked the scale of the dragon that offered the blessing. Midnight did not just protect her lineage. It deemed her blood royal among the land. Now the current king of Talon’arc, King Yosul, waited in his throne for the news of his heir.

A lady-in-waiting approached him and knelt before her ruler. Her lips haven’t stopped quivering since she entered his long halls.

“My lord,” she uttered. “Queen Sarita has given birth to a son.” Her head bowed to the floor, unable to look at his brown, almost rustic red hair. “One more...has also come along the way.”

King Yosul rose to his feet. The growl coming from the pit of his stomach made the maiden wish she could grip her shaking

arms. He stepped down with his fists clenched, aiming them at the maiden. His fangs replaced his canine teeth, ready to rip her throat, but he passed her, sparing her for the time being.

The pillars of his halls were high and mighty, and could almost touch the clouds. Other than its echoes, it harbored silver bats. They saw the dark-cloaked King flick his pressed fingers at them. They knew exactly what to do. They flew to the portals in the ceilings to alert the nobles outside of the capital.

The faint steps behind King Yosul were not strange to his ears. His right-hand woman, Hacela, was following him to the Slumbering Tomb, the resting place of the Kings and Queens who once ruled Talon'arc. Hacela was already aware of the news. She guarded the Queen's chamber until she heard a second infant.

"My Lord Yosul, is there anything I can do?" Hacela worked for her King after her father died during the last Lunar War. She was always by her father's side during every campaign, learning every skill of her blade and tactic against the Eight Tribes. Like everyone expected, Hacela received the honor of serving the king, but no trust existed between them, for King Yosul trusted no one.

"You know what the law dictates." He gripped his robe, made of the fur of his sworn enemy.

"Yes, my lord, but when will you do it — and who?"

"Silence," he scowled. "The mere sound of your voice is irritating me, leave me be."

Hacela bowed and retreated. The road to the Slumbering Tomb was a long road from his stone palace. It ran for half a mile until he stopped at a cave blocked by a red enchantment. It preserved the body of the first queen, who remained ageless in her red crystal coffin. Among her were her kin, held against the wall by the cavity of the cave. Exceptional jewelry covered them in their best garments. It tempted thieves in the past, many were non-Denoni, unaware of what would happen if they entered. They only realized it when it was too late. When they crossed the barrier, their skin melted.

King Yosul marveled at it, reflecting his dark brown eyes. Visiting the tomb often gave him clarity for troubling days. Sometimes he imagined himself dead, holding a Pale flower while his people carried him from his palace and to his resting place.

Not half an hour had passed before the three nobles who guarded the borders of Talon'arc arrived. Each one carried the

Voyage charms that allowed them to travel for miles. Once they were used, the enchantment and beads diffused and evaporated. The men bowed before their King, cloaked by the same fur King Yosul carried on his back. They wore it to agitate the Vukvoy. They were large, hairy beasts on hind legs that lived outside the border. It was an advantageous double-edged sword because it infuriated the elf and human kingdoms who long wanted Vukvoy and Denoni to stop their long-term quarrels.

King Yosul drew his attention from the tomb to look at his men. “Your Queen gave birth to a future King, but she also bore another.”

“Twins?” sparked Lord Demlo, who oversaw the land by Gravenspruce Forest. “That must mean —”

“The Queen must kill the second-born,” said the oldest of the lords, Lord Esquel. “The first-born is heir and future king by birthright. We must eliminate the second.”

“I called you here because you are all both powerful and studious of our lands and law.” King Yosul could almost taste the bitter sensation on his tongue. The thought of having two sons caused it. “Tell me, is this terrible omen predicting an upcoming war?” The consequences of twin princes would stir anxiety among the people. And their adversaries from the south still hungered for revenge and would use it for calamity.

“I have not read or heard through my ears of such a thing,” said Lord Demlo. “No suspicious activity has come across the southern kingdom.”

But Lord Esquel eyed Demlo. “Our King was not wrong to call it an omen, a terrible one. Lentri would love to use the second born to claim our lands.” The old man bowed to his King. “My lord, make haste.”

King Yosul did just that.

He returned to his bedridden wife, who could not lift her head to welcome him. She lost more blood than she did on the battlefield and was on her second glass of preserved tonics. King Yosul did not have to tell his wife what needed to be done. She nodded at him when his eyes met her sand-colored eyes.

“Give me an hour’s rest, for I cannot lift a pinky,” she panted. “But fear not. I am not afraid to smite the second one.”

“That is why you are my queen. Loyal and bounded to your duties as the mother of Talon’arc.” He could snap the infant’s

neck and be rid of his troubles, but he could not rob the mother of her right to take the life she brought into the world.

His adulation made his queen bring a faint smile. She shut her eyes and exhaled. King Yosul eyed every woman in her chamber who bowed when he left. A moment after the door closed, Queen Sarita ordered her ladies-in-waiting, royal physicians, handmaidens, and midwives to leave her room.

But she ordered Bora to stay.

The human slave stayed by her bedside and wiped the sweat drops from her forehead. After the last maidens left, Queen Sarita gripped Bora's wrist and twisted it. The human covered her mouth to keep herself from shrieking.

"You will kill the cursed child," she growled, calling her "*sino onen*," which meant lame lamb in Denoni. "And don't even think of telling another soul you did it."

"My-my Queen!"

"I can't bear to look at him," she spat. "The mere sight disgusts me. You will pierce my royal dagger and slit his little throat like a hog who knew better than to cross our lands." Queen Sarita could not give the job to a Denoni, they would not only lose respect for her, but they could use her disgust against her.

A human, however, was disposable.

The grip on Bora's hand turned more until she reached her limit. The human woman agreed only to relieve the pull on her tendons. Queen Sarita released and rested her head on the pillow.

"I am embarrassed and humiliated." She brushed the sweat off her forehead. "By the grace of the King, if I do not do his bidding, he will dethrone me like the others," she growled. "I am fit to be the queen of Talon'arc!" Her canine teeth grew into fangs seeing the human was still beside her, shaking like a dog. "Go!"

Bora sped for the queen's chamber. The dagger was among the Queen's collection of weapons she earned during her battles with the neighboring countries. The queen was once a village girl, holding no title except that she defended the borderlands from the Vukvoy. She caught the King's eye under a full moon when the beasts attacked the lands in hoards. His previous wives could not bear him a child. If they carried, they fell ill and died. This was why a blessing can come as a curse. The dragon's gift to the royal family was brute strength. As a result, it became a heavy burden for expecting mothers. The royal fetus behaved like

leeches, taking more than they could until the expecting mother could no longer beat her own heart.

But Queen Sarita was fit.

Her rough upbringing under Lord Demor's lands was unmerciful. He treated his people no differently than slaves and sent them to defend any invasion at any cost. Queen Sarita's family prepared her as soon as she could lift her own sword to ensure she would survive their Lord's demands. Now she fought to keep her crown on her head, unwilling to pass it to another maiden in waiting.

Bora gently carried the black dagger embezzled in gold jewels. She didn't think her hand would touch such a heavy weapon. The handmaidens who were low in status had better rights, and she was just a slave girl in Talon'arc. Many were born into the kingdom, while they captured others from raids and war. They sent those who resisted them to live out their years in torture until their heart gave out. That fear led Bora back to the Queen's bed, where she presented the dagger.

"Do not bring me the body when you finish," sighed the queen. "The blood of the blade alone will do."

Bora bowed and walked out of the chamber. She sped down the hall to a private room used for washing delicate silks. The handmaiden who carried the second-born left the unwanted babe on a wooden table, unwashed and with no blanket to cover his shivering body. Even they knew he deserved no accommodation. But to Bora's surprise, the second-born did not cry. He laid there, with his tiny eyes open, staring at the ceiling. She couldn't help but brush his forehead, but her touch, the sensation of another, led him to cry.

"I am so sorry," she whispered. She held her breath when the newborn found one of her fingers. His clench was tight. "I'll make it quick. You won't feel a thing, I promise." She raised the royal dagger over the neck and shut her eyes. But she opened them when a cold finger stopped her.

"How very human of you," said Hacela. Her blue eyes met Boras. "To carry compassion against your enemy."

"What are you doing here?"

“If you take him, I’ll help you escape.”

Bora almost choked for lacking no response. For the King’s second-hand woman to say this was a death sentence. She moved the dagger back to the newborn’s neck, causing Hacela to push it away a second time.

“Are you deaf?” she said, sniffing the air. “No, I smell it. You’re afraid.”

“Please, let me do my job.” The second-born hadn’t released his grip on Bora’s fingers. “I’m not stupid. I cannot leave Talon’arc,” she whispered. Once again, she moved the queen’s dagger and aligned the sharp end back on the soft, frail neck.

“Very well,” said Hacela, stepping away. “Do it.”

“I will.” But she had not yet made the incision. She didn’t want to kill an innocent child, and the thought of freedom blurred her thoughts. Perhaps it wouldn’t hurt to ask. “Why are you betraying your King? You’re his trusted warrior.”

“Funny. I’m giving you all your wishes on a plate, and you’re prying into my business.” Hacela crossed her arms and pressed her fingers against her silver plate. She was always in armor, ready to fight. “Talon’arc will not last if we raise the next ruler to become another King Yosul. You have seen how brutal he is to my people. He treats them no better than you slaves, and you are well acquainted with the Queen. She will raise the first-born like a villain. If we save the second-born, perhaps our kingdom will not be ill-fatted.”

“You’re asking for war.”

“If that will lead to resolution, so be it.” Hacela eyed the door, wondering how much time they had. “I serve and love my King, but I was raised in Lord Esquel’s lands. It is he who sent me here.”

“This is not my kingdom. Your people took me and raided my village!”

“The Eight Tribe would have claimed it if we didn’t take it and would not be a slave among those horned beasts.” Hacela grinned. “Wouldn’t you want to return home? To see if your family survived or if your beloved crush waited for you after all these years?”

Bora almost dropped her jaw. The Denoni had her ear in every wall, overhearing her tell the other slaves how she ended up

in Talon'arc. But the Queen's wrath made her keep the dagger on the second-born who squirmed.

Hacela was supposed to take the boy herself. But no one in Asylum would give her shelter, not when they knew her as King Yosul's right-hand woman. She saw a better option with the human slave. She insisted Bora to reconsider, but she kept from her from knowing that she would be slaughtered if she killed the second-born. The warrior could not risk loose lips.

The absence of warmth on the wooden table made the newborn whimper. With no nipple to feed him, he started suckling his thumb. Bora watched while she felt like taffy, stretched in all the wrong ways. She steadied her hands and took in a deep breath. Just one cut was enough, one poke to draw the blood out.

"I can't," she exhaled, setting the dagger aside. "I'm not the Queen, I don't lack a heart to hurt him."

"Will you accept my request?"

"Where will I go? You tempted me by telling me of my village, but we both know I can't go there."

"I suggest you go through Gravenspruce Forest."

"You and I both know werewolves live there."

"Hence, your only chance of survival. You are not a Denoni, your scent will not agitate them. And we can hide the second-born's scent with lavender. King Yosul's subjects and those beasts would be repelled at the same time. Will you do it?"

Bora answered when she carried the shuddering infant and placed him between the layers of her dress. The palace was cold, so like all the human slaves, she wore a heavy cloak with gold stitching. Hacela pressed the Voyage charm she carried around her neck and put them in Bora's hand. They were enchanted and were one-of-a-kind uses of Stellar magic that Denoni possessed. They could teleport to any border surrounding Talon'arc.

"What about the lavenders?" urged Bora. Her sight turned hazy, not knowing the beads had activated. It felt like many hands were tugging her clothes. She closed her eyes and squealed as the wind brushed her face. A flowery scent brought her to open them, the voyage charm she carried spasmed until a gold light made it vanish. She stood among a field of lavender that separated Gravenspruce Forest from Talon'arc. Though it was not deadly, the smell made their noses weak.

Bora tore heaps of the light purple flowers and stuffed them over the newborn. He squirmed because they were prickly, it irritated his nose and made him sneeze. The forest was just steps ahead. The moon was high, ready to guide her through the dark. Bora adjusted the newborn in her chest and slowly walked towards it. She felt unlucky. Denedi were born at night, and worse, Vukvoys, often called werewolves by humans, were most active under the moonlight.

“A vampire prince pressed against my bosom,” she whispered to the black forest. “The home of werewolves ahead.”

CHAPTER 2

GRAVENSPRUCE FOREST

Bora hushed the second-born.

“We won’t make it out alive if all you think about is food.” But the long hours through the forest made the newborn hungry. It was unfortunate that human breasts could not satisfy the hunger of Denoni babes. But she kept him close against her chest, not minding the humidity of their closeness.

The werewolves claimed the woods and foothills of Gravenspruce forest, and their desire to keep it made them hostile against trespassers. Bora used to live on a peaceful island that no lord or lady claimed. The settlers were made of a combination of ruined townspeople and soldiers who left and sought shelter from the Lunar War. They crossed the waters and respected the werewolves’ territory by never setting foot, now Bora stomped on their marked lands.

When she was a little girl, she watched the forest with pressed lips, unable to imagine it as an enchanting place with fairies and unicorns. She was a simple girl with no longing to leave her village. Having been born the third daughter of her family, all she wanted was to be wedded off by the red-headed boy who cared for the cattle. But without warning, Talon’arc’s soldiers raided their home. Bora watched with uneasy eyes as cages that should befit an animal lined up. They killed those who fought back, while many ran for their lives. Her sisters and mother were not around. When her father told them to escape, Bora couldn’t. She stayed behind, unable to leave her father’s side because he had a bad back. When he met the sword, she was dragged into one of the cages and locked with the survivors. She hoped they had escaped, but what she found strange was that they allowed some to stay. It was as if the Denoni knew they were here all these years.

Dawn broke through some parts of the dense trees and lighted the way for the frantic woman. She didn't know what was ahead, but she hoped times have changed over the last ten years in her life as a slave. She hoped to find at the end of the forest, a hut, a village, or a resting spot the elves built for weary travelers.

A crunch of leaves she did not make made her stop, and her spine straightened with a chill. Fluttering over her head was a familiar screech. She often heard them when she left her work area to deliver supplies. They spied on her, and it wasn't just any flying bat, it came from the palace.

"*Sinu onen*," a man hollered. "That is enough. Don't you know Voyage charms leave a trail?" He brought four men with him, each gripped their weapon trained at her, as if she was a skilled swordswoman. "Hacela knew you would be followed and still was a fool to attempt such trickery on King Yosul."

Bora didn't care to know what new words would follow. She bolted through the forests and panted to draw her legs forward. But the speed of the knight caught up to her worn legs. He tugged her cloak and flung her against the trunk of the tree. She braced herself and fell on her side and elbows. The newborn wept from the shock while the lavender she stuffed in her chest scattered against the ground. The knight and his guards covered their noses. Lavender was indeed a foul and irritating scent.

"You will die where you lie," the leader resumed. "And that cursed child will return to be properly gutted by Queen Sarita." He stood before her in full armor, tired of chasing the bead's aura through the forest.

"Let's get this over with," one of them said with a weary voice.

He knew the locals of these wildlands could impale their armor. And they were right to be cautious. Though they were only a handful, their numbers were too much. Five Denoni in werewolf lands were enough to fume the forest like an unwanted odor. But the knights were not as careful as Bora. They didn't trace their bodies with lavender when they entered. A growl lingered among the shadows, causing the knights to press their back against each other. They didn't know how many beasts lurked among the trees. But their shadows shifted with the branches unable to be penetrated by light.

The first Vukvoy broke through the group, another leaped through the side. The third one howled and called for his pack.

The Denoni swung their swords against the ones who snarled at their armor. Bora crawled underneath one of the beast's hind legs. The scent of lavender that was in the newborn's skin averted him from noticing her.

But the leader of the knights did not. He tried to chase after her until six-inch claws struck him. It broke his armor and barely grazed his skin. But he screamed in horror as he was dragged and separated from his companions. A Vukvoy with matted hair recently joined the group and halted at Bora. His sharp teeth snarled, ready to snap at her trembling muscles.

"Nevermind her," said another. "We can chase her after we break through these blood-sucking leeches."

Seeing they will spare her for a moment, Bora bolted without a second thought. The fight ensued with clashing armor and wild roars. She licked her dry lips, the roof of her tongue felt like paste for thickening soup. Her legs wobbled, but the threat behind her fueled her with vigor.

Up the rugged terrain.

Down the vined hills.

And through the misty ferns.

Denoni and Vukvoy were once the same beings. They both shared the same tough skin and had sensitive noses. But unlike werewolves, who wore no armor, Denoni armor helped them withstand more injuries. As Bora wheezed through the light that sparkled and glittered among the branches. The howls around Gravenspruce Forest resonated against the knights. But they were outnumbered, and their silence declared the victor.

A new shot of adrenaline sped through Bora's spine when she heard the galloping of feet. Deep down, she knew she wouldn't last before midday. She turned for a brief moment. The werewolf that momentarily spared her returned. He crouched among the ferns, glowing his blue eyes at her. Ahead was her twisted luck. The end of the forest was a sprint away. She ran through the open field and screamed for help. She prayed for any creature to pity her from the mountainside, sky, and meadow. One strike against her back tore her garments and carved her skin. She trampled to the ground, holding secure the second-born she left to protect. The next slash would cut off her limbs, so she dug her face towards the infant and shut her eyes.

But the werewolf was still snarling.

Bora opened her eyelids, a shadow was cast over her, blocking the rising sun from piercing her eyes. She looked behind. A cloaked man stood behind her.

His sword was raised against the beast. "I told you not to cross my fields," he said, shifting his eyes to Bora and back to the werewolf. "Yet here you both are, stepping on my daisies."

"Hermits have no say on this matter. Move back and let me have the girl."

"You have your rules in Gravenspruce, just like Talon'arc has theirs. This field is mine. Make your killing here, and I will slice you like I slice my bread."

"You talk too much, Speaker." The werewolf hunched on his fours, ready to leap and gnaw. "You may have the merits to cross our lands, but you are only one man and a human on that matter." He growled, eager to shut up and bite, but he wanted to instill fear in the jelly skinned man. "Your leather will be easy to rip through."

"Have it your way." The hermit unsnapped his cloak, unwilling to risk the beast using it against him. But he didn't expect the werewolf would leap before the cloak dropped. He stepped back and took the fragile bottle he kept for occasions like this. He tossed it at the hairy black chest just before the claws stroke him. Upon contact, the bottle shattered and engulfed the beast in flames that burned black. It was the same weakness vampires and werewolves shared, the Black flame. It was made from enchanting the Red flame with the dark element that could only be kept inside a conventional bottle. But the trouble of obtaining such a flame was a high cost. Wizards and witches didn't like to play with dark elements, so enchantresses often charged a pretty price.

The sword the hermit held against the beast struck his neck until his entire head fell in front of Bora's feet. But the werewolf was not dead. He opened his jaw at the trembling woman until the same sword fell through his head.

"Damn things."

The hermit pressed his foot against his nose and peeled back his sword. He gripped his wild hair and walked towards Gravenspruce. The werewolves that watched the beheading would have taken the man down, but they didn't support their lost one's decision to fight him. The hermit swung the head at their feet. Like their dead kin, they too recognized him as a Speaker. They

were commonly known by their cloak, worn half-covered over one shoulder. The exposed side revealed their weapon of choice, always ready for a fight. He lived nearby for the last three years, minding his own business. Should anything happen to him so close to Gravenspruce Forest, they would become the prime suspects by the Follow, the dragon people who police Asylum.

“Can you stand?” The hermit wiped his sword against the fur of the headless werewolf. “We take our leave now.”

Bora trembled to her feet. “I’m bleeding, and it stings.”

“Well, I doubt werewolves are known for keeping their nails clean, I mean claws.” The hermit took her arm and helped her walk to the other end of the meadow. “I’ll check on the wound after we made some distance. We are lucky the pack left us alone, and I credit my position for having our lives momentarily spared.”

“Are you truly a Speaker?”

“That is correct. I am the Speaker of the Brimson lands. I owe my allegiance to the child emperor of Doneley.”

“But you live so far...”

“Speakers live where they want or must. We are ambassadors unless they call us to serve.” Luron couldn’t share that his stay so high in the mountains served another purpose. He was gathering intel for King Afarus, a Trädal elf who ruled Mensi. “But enough about me. The gold stitching on your cloak can only come from one type of silk. You came from Talon’arc.”

“I am...no, I was a slave. I served Queen Sarita for five years, the other five I worked in the fields.”

“I am sorry.” The trees they entered belonged to the mountain, not Gravenspruce Forest. It was there when the Speaker used his cloak to tighten the slash Bora received. “You are lucky he grazed your skin and not your muscles.” But in doing so, he noticed the wiggling around her chest. “Now I see why you crossed a horrid forest no human would dare step in. You’re carrying a vampire and doused him with lavender flakes.”

“I can explain,” panted Bora. The fabric that pressed against her wound was not enough, it still stung. “Do you have a place I might rest, perhaps some ointment for this itch?”

“Very well, but perhaps we should introduce each other. I am Luron, and you are...?”

“Call me, Bora.”

“And this little twig. What do you call him?”

“His mother never named him. I don’t believe it’s befitting for a human to give a name to a child of royal blood.”

Luron grew a smile. The woman was undoubtedly carrying an interesting story. “You will tell me all about it over a bowl of stew, but you really must name him.”

“A name...” whispered Bora.

The newborn had grown quiet. Perhaps he realized that no amount of crying would lead him to his much-desired milk. Bora’s fingers trembled as they soothed his soft forehead. The only name on her mind belonged to the red-headed boy who promised to call her his wife. He wasn’t among the captured, and she didn’t see him lying among the dead. She gulped, knowing she would never see him again. So she set aside her desire and planted her memory of him on the infant.

“I shall call him Ryth,” she said, smiling at the babe. “That’s short for Rythian.”

CHAPTER 3

SPEAKERS

Luron's tiny cabin had a garden of potatoes and carrots, it was all he needed, apart from a collection of herbs to make his stew. He lived there for the past five years in the comfort of the trees and stars. That morning he left to hunt for the deer that roamed by, not knowing he would hear Bora's scream. He felt inclined to respond, as was his duty as a Speaker, but he also knew it was a risk to go in between a werewolf and his prey. But her cries bounded him to help, even at the risk of his own life.

Bora kept her hands close by the fire in his chimney, where she cradled the newborn near her bosom. Ryth tried to drink from her nipples, but she reminded him she could not produce milk. Even if she could, she would make him sick. She learned this the year she was shadowing the midwives. Many of the women who were servants, but some like Bora, took important roles like midwifery. When Luron returned, she jumped at the sight of the deer he caught. He had sliced a chunk of meat he felt would nurture the little vampire.

"It is not a mother's milk, but it's blood." He wrapped the dark meat in a cloth and gave it to Bora.

The infant who slept more to avoid another hour of hunger started to cry as the blood of the deer alerted his senses. Once it sunk between his lips, the red drops of blood left a stream down his cheek. Bora wiped it away and looked at her hand without disgust. She has seen worse things in Talon'arc. They taught child Denonis to draw the blood of their prisoner at the age of five. Consuming blood from different races and beasts led them to have more sensitivity to their enemy. One advantage was the ability to memorize and detect their scent a quarter of a mile away.

“What will become of him?” she said to Luron, who studied the boy. “I am but a simple woman, I cannot care for him.”

“What I want to know is how you escaped with the prince of Talon’arc.”

Luron dipped the pieces of diced meat in his kettle and sprinkled his dried herbs. The bread he stored was from his last trip to the small town of Vistra. The cloth had cursive embroidery that the baker’s daughter sowed to make their businesses unique. She also gave the Speaker an extra loaf after he spent the night with her. Bora began with the queen’s coronation, her pregnancy, and forwards to the delivery where she was threatened to kill her second-born.

“I’ve never heard of twin vampires before.” Luron gave his soup a taste. “And that Hacela, I never would have imagined her to conspire against her king. But she knew I would be here. That is why she sent you to me.”

“Are you going to help Ryth?”

“I don’t see why that woman thought I would open my home to this twig. Besides, it won’t be long before they find him.”

“But I can’t keep him!” sprang Bora. “I agreed to bring him out of Talon’arc so I can have my freedom. Now I just need to leave this boy with you.”

“I’m not the one who named him.” His focus still had not left the stew. “What’s the saying? Once you name something, you get attached?”

“You made me!”

“Now, now, I was only teasing.” Luron felt old when he said it. Though he was forty, he was lucky he did not age like the men of Earth. He looked around his late twenties. “But I can’t bring the boy to my comrades, and I can’t decide if he’s worth protecting. But if we are unable to offer protection, we may have to return him to his parents.”

“You cannot do that — Queen Sarita will kill him!”

“Then you are asking them to kill me or anyone who is under the twigs care, yourself included.”

Ryth was asleep when Bora looked at him. Everything Luron said was not to deceive her. The Denoni would not give up until the infant’s throat was slit open. Luron placed a bowl of stew for her. She spent no time waiting for it to cool down and ate. She did not imagine food would taste so good under bad news. Luron let

his bowl cool and started packing. He didn't need much for the travel but hated that now he needed to build a new home.

"Where are you going?" she chewed.

"Nowhere I haven't told you." He shook the last bottle of black fire. It collected dust over the years, but he was glad he didn't need the use of it until recently. He also packed something he kept stored for years. It was a steel helmet, old chainmail, and a pair of steel gloves. Though they were the heaviest, Luron would not part with them. "I'm going to meet my colleagues."

"So soon?"

"Not soon enough. King Yosul will find my home and burn it by tonight. You should consider where you want to start your new life, and with a new name at that."

"I can't come with you?"

"If you wish to follow me so I may protect you, you have fooled yourself. I am not your bodyguard."

"I'm not that senseless, I'm going for the boy!"

"So, you are attached to him."

Bora didn't finish her meal. Fueled by her anger, she abandoned her bowl and thanked him for his hospitality. She winced when her spine bent to pick Ryth up, but she steadied him and glared at Luron.

"Just tell me where I can find the other Speakers." The boy whimpered by her movement and raised voice, but she patted his back to reassure him. "You don't need to forsake your home."

Luron shook his head to disagree, if only it was that easy. "I was doomed to help the moment I killed that werewolf." Now he could see why she was able to survive a harsh life among the Denoni. Though he found her emotions to be quick-witted and annoying, she was strong-willed.

Because Bora was only a simple village girl, and once a slave, she had no experience as an adventurer. Luckily, the Speaker helped her choose what was essential for hiking down the mountain. Everything else that couldn't hang on their backs had to stay for scavengers and Denoni knights.

Half a day walk down the mountain, Luron started to miss his life of solitude. But he carried on, circling the resting spots on the

map he marked free of Mountain goblins, bandits, and worse things he decided to keep Bora from knowing. He felt lucky they had yet to make an encounter with such creatures. There was no one for him to use his swift style with his blade. The straight sword was a gift from the Emperor of Doneley when he passed the trials of Darkmirk Forest.

“Speaker, can you slow down?” Bora was no hiker or mountain woman. Her legs were still sore from the run of Gravenspruce Forest, and her back still pulsed from the werewolf’s claws. She frowned because the Speaker did not slow his steps. “How will the others know where or when to meet us?”

“There’s a falcon that stops by to visit me every day. She will see I abandoned my home and find us. I will deliver a message then when she finds me.” Luron named his Peregrine falcon Mary. She would sit on the highest branches and watch him for an hour before taking off.

“You Speakers,” Bora said. “My father once said they are one for each race.”

“Aye,” said Luron. “One Human Speaker, One elf Speaker, one Dwarf Speaker, and one Denoni Speaker.”

“And you serve every human king?” Bora’s father was once of the deserters of the last Lunar War and had only heard of Speakers like anyone in Asylum but had not seen one himself.

“Aye, but we hold a stronger allegiance with our birthplace.” Luron stopped momentarily, there was a rocky steep. “That is why I am the Speaker of the Brimson Lands.” He went down first and told her to wait while he scouted for anything lurking among the trees. Seeing they were safe, he grabbed her hand and helped steady her steps.

“Brimson Lands,” Bora grunted as she balanced her weight on the rocks. “It sounds lovely.”

“It’s a hell hole,” answered Luron.

The Brimson lands rarely saw peace, but he felt more at ease that he received no message detailing the political strain between King Ponilo and Queen Filroa. As a Speaker, Luron had to partake in these conflicts. It was the kind of trade no one enjoyed. He often took the role of a general and commanded 50,000 men against the neighboring kingdoms. He hated war for the same aftermath a foot soldier cannot avert the screams from

his dreams. Villages and towns suffered the most, leaving many to fend for themselves.

There was no shortage of orphans in the Brimson Lands. That is why many Speakers who came from that land were once themselves parentless. Others came from prestigious families, like the Elves. Others had to earn it, like the Dwarves. To become a Seeker, a student who wished to be a Speaker, they had to be chosen. Luron was five years old when his master Essi chose him from the crowd of candidates. But orphaned humans like Luron had little choice on that matter. It was live a normal life and starve like a commoner or bear the weight of a Speaker and eat among the great halls of many Kingdoms.

In the Brimson Lands, an empty stomach always chose the latter

Bora swaddled Ryth with the baker's cloth because she found the embroidery fit for the unwanted prince. Surrounding her torso was a wrap to carry him against her back. She didn't like the front because he would bury his face through her chest in hopes milk would come out. Luron resorted to hunting any bird or squirrel that passed them to feed the infant and keep him silent. But after each day, it seemed as though the infant's hunger doubled.

"How much longer?" Bora panted as they walked up a slope. The skin of her shoes would not protect her from these sharp rocks any longer.

"We haven't gone down the mountainside yet. And we are half a day away from reaching the death fields of Eroga." Luron hated the land, but nothing could keep him from coming back. He was surprised Bora said nothing when he said, "Eroga," but it told him of her age. "Should everything run smoothly, there will be no Denoni knights on our backs."

"Why would you live so close to those dreadful werewolves? And those vampires, those awful, awful monsters."

"It is King Yosul and his rule that feeds your fear. Your rights were stolen because of him, not the common vampire."

"I have seen them feed anyone to their five-year-old."

"You're asking why a werewolf doesn't curtsy. Vampires are not humans, so don't confuse their way of living with your moral compass. One day that boy you hilding and still haven't abandoned will disappoint you. He would sink his teeth into your house pet before he learns to walk."

Throughout Bora's years in Talon'arc, she grew accustomed to the food they fed her, yams, and chicken. She was lucky if they got any bread. She only smelled the aroma of rye when King Yosul had a guest, be it dwarf or human. She loved those days because she could eat their leftovers. But sometimes there wasn't enough to spare, sometimes Talon'arc got no visitors. She spent all of her days serving Queen Sarita's whims that she often missed out because it was laundry day.

If there was anything she could relate was close to humans were the vampire children she watched in the market street. They ran and played a game of ball while some cried when they fell. They fought when one of them was caught cheating on a game of Dragon and seek. The smiles of their mothers would linger, sometimes they would nod at her or another slave nearby. But since she started working under Queen Sarita, the same women changed their attitude. It was like she was worse than a slave. Worse than the Eight Tribe, and the Vukvoy.

She was scum.

CHAPTER 4:

THE LUNAR WAR

The walk down the mountain and sharp terrain were like walking on protruding needles. Bora couldn't reach another mile. The more she followed, the more she wondered why she was following the Speaker. Every night Luron reminded her it wasn't too late to leave and start a new life. When the young prince cried all day, his voice brought the unwanted attention of mountain goblins. They were under four feet, their skin was grey, and had a long nose that always outstretched their hairy bodies.

She had to duck for cover with the dagger Luron gave her while he took down the ones that came their way. Because goblins were short, they needed bows and spears against their tall adversaries.

"We should run!" Bora cried after the Speaker barely grazed the goblin that lunged at him. The babe cried as more kept coming.

"Stay close!" he demanded. Bora pressed her back against his. "Closer!" he shouted. "Cover the twig!"

The woman forced her weight against the Speaker while Ryth's cries were muffled under the fabric. The goblins didn't talk to them. Instead, they crept closer, snickering their confidence. She didn't know what was going on but was surprised at how easily she trusted him. Then she saw as a spark of light, gleaming from the goblin's marbled eyes. A wave of flame engulfed them and barely grazed her. She pressed hard against the Speaker to keep her eyelashes from burning.

The goblins scattered and rolled on the ground to put the fire out. At that moment, Luron grabbed her arm and led her through the burning bodies. An everyday encounter would have forced him to kill every Mountain goblin, but with company, it was a risk.

Goblin blood carried a smell their kind could detect for hours, even days. If he killed the ones that howled from the fire, they would have left a trail.

When they rested, they were near the end of the mountain. The calm sounds of the birds indicated that they were not followed.

“What did you do?” Bora said, wiping the residue of smoke off her cheek. “My father used to say only Witches and Wizards could fully harness Stellar magic. I have never seen a human with plain hair as yours create so much fire.”

“My master made me study Stellar, quite harshly if I remember correctly.” Luron hated it. The cost was tiring to the brain and eyes from the countless books he had to read. The long hours he spent awake, trying to cultivate it. But he was proven again and again how useful it was. After using Stellar, he couldn’t take another step without rest. Before the sun went down, he made camp.

Bora appreciated Luron’s protection, but like the werewolves and Denoni, the goblins laughter haunted her. Who knows what sort of danger would lie tomorrow? It was time to go. She didn’t notify the Speaker of her departure, rather she waited until he and Ryth were sound asleep. She put the babe beside him, and in return, took his dagger from his belt. It surprised her how fast asleep he was to not notice his weapon was stolen. She expected more of Speakers.

Before she left, she looked at the babe once more, snuggled under the blond-haired man. Though she didn’t tell him goodbye, her heart wished the young prince the best. When she walked out of the forest, she reached the base of the mountain. A vast open field robbed of life spread ahead, and before her was a disorder of rotting wood and stone.

They were once part of an old fortress that surpassed the tallest trees around. Bora continued downhill. A piece of the wall survived its use but was starting to decay. Travelers who passed by chipped it for fire or for shelter. When she reached the plane, the sun illuminated the peak of the mountains.

It was at this time that she found the courage to look back at the mountain. She imagined Luron waking up, with Ryth on his chest, and finding her gone. She rubbed her sleeve against her cheek once more.

She had been crying since she left the infant.

* * *

Luron hushed the Denoni prince when he squirmed. He didn't want to be held by him, and he didn't want to hold him. They called it truce when Ryth fell asleep. When he awoke, the scruffy-bearded man glaring down at him made him break into tears.

"You're crying at the wrong person," he told the babe. "That thing you're looking for motherly or fatherly affection is not my expertise." Ryth continued to wail, so Luron continued his speech. With Bora gone, it didn't matter what he said openly. "Get used to it. I had to fend for myself, and I didn't complain. If I got hurt, there were no kisses on my bruises."

He stopped momentarily, for he could talk no more, and the wailing child no longer bothered him. The fortress that was built for the Lunar War was still standing. The sight brought the shrills of his enemy, the bells that rang at every sundown and every sunrise. It made him clench the babe and stagger.

For twenty-nine days and thirty nights, he lost and saw more horror than in any story a war veteran could share for his entire life. As he walked down, he kept his eyes at the stone that was flung by the ogres. Hiding among the blur and waves of every beast were necromancers and enchantresses.

At the center, protected by an unpenetrable force of magic was the cloaked knight. He was a man in full armor. No one had seen or recorded his features in history books. He had never been challenged, never had to step off his protection to take care of business. It was he who made a religious comeback. The immortal used moon magic, yet by the grace of the four wizards, only the moon itself could imprison such a horrid man.

The Speaker blinked out of the hole he dug in his mind. He felt he was being watched. Below was the brunette in her black cloak with gold stitching. When he came down the hill, she showed him the blackberries she collected while she waited for him. Some were overripe, and its juices stained her grey dress.

"Hungry?" she said while grabbing one for her own. "They're sweet." Her eyes then moved to the Denoni he held with one arm. "I'll carry him, and you carry the berries."

Luron made the trade and ate some while they walked through the open fields. When she returned dagger he let her steal, he inspected it for damages. The least she could do was explain why she came back but said not a word.

* * *

At night Bora was still wary of her surroundings. The fire they made was enough light, but she still looked at every corner. She didn't know if it was the previous goblin attack, or the chill she felt when the mountains became a fading dot.

When she learned Luron was forty-five, she told him in her village, most of the men his age were developing round bellies. But Luron was lean, his stomach was in, and his arms slightly bulge when he used his cloak for a blanket. The fire he set up lightened his brown eyes, not a grey line covered his blond hair. The Speaker had seen twice the amount of things than she had all her life. But she liked the way his sad eyes looked when he lost himself in the fire.

"I have never met Elves, or Dwarves before," she told him, admitting she was excited to meet the speakers. "But the oddest folk in our village told us the biggest distinction was the ears."

"And what did he say?" said Luron. He wasn't exactly interested. But she looked more relaxed when she was talking and not straightening her spine every time a wolf was heard howling.

"Ihla elves have wide oval-shaped ears gentle curve at the tip. Trädal elves have different shades of dark skin but have long and narrow pointy ears."

"And what of Ardii elves?" he asked.

"Ardii?" she said, confused.

"They're the mixed breed of both an Ihla and Trädal," he said. Since she didn't know they existed, he added his footnote. "Their ears have no sharper tip than the two."

Bora found the Dwarves were the most interesting because of their height. Few men barely reached above five feet, and women didn't go past four and a half. She asked Luron for anything else that made them unique.

"They are natural flame wielders and have a talent for infusing Stellar inside weapons."

Luron's Master Essi had such a talent. He called it Mending, and it was because he made his sallet helmet that survived the Lunar War. He opened his bag and took it out. It remained polished and even reflected the stars. The back had a length that protected his neck. Now it was too big for him to wear, but it became a memento of his master's craftsmanship.

"These lands," said Bora while rubbing her arms. "Nothing lives among them but rocks and stone."

"This is the outer part of Eroga," Luron said from his trance on the helmet. "They say it was once vibrant, but lost it's beauty when the Lunar War began."

"Are you saying it happened right here!" Eroga didn't sound familiar to her, but she would be a dolt if she didn't know what the Lunar War was. Even the blind would have heard its name, and the mute would have felt the mainlands shake from it. Though she wasn't born when the last one began, the aftermath created her village. "No wonder you were lost at those old fortress walls," she said. "May I ask...what was it like?"

Luron looked at her and back at his helmet. The last one was a blur, but his first was as clear as the river's water. He described the blankets of bodies that almost buried him. He was a fourteen-year-old Seeker who recently passed the trials at Darkmirk Forest. It was the official recognition that a Seeker was their training in one day become a Speaker. Bora's feet align with themselves as she listened to him explain how he survived two Lunar Wars.

His master, Essi, was a half-human and half-dwarf. Aside from teaching him all he learned about craftsmanship and swords. He was a man of lessons. He remembered his Master telling him his chances of survival were lesser than a vampire and werewolf, embracing one another. Luron, too believed he wouldn't last, but Essi protected him when a swarm of Abundant Ones came after him.

"Abundant Ones," repeated Bora. "Those are the corpse eaters that predict the next Lunar War." She remembered her mother would use the name so she wouldn't stay up with Rythian, the boy she wanted to marry. "How did you survive such a massacre?"

Luron pressed his hands over his chest. Underneath his garments, he bore more scars than a man should in his lifetime. Though he got a few through careless responses, many came from

the Lunar War. The monsters punctured through his armor and leather-like it was soft butter.

The only body part that remained scarless was his face. It was thanks to the helmet Essi made for him. After the war, Luron saved all of his wages to have a full armor made by his Master, but Luron didn't need to make such a payment. He impressed Essi by surviving the Lunar War, so he made one as a gift.

"It's bad luck to talk about such awful times on these lands," Luron leaned his back against the rock. "Let's get some rest."

* * *

Ten great pillars no taller than the proud pine trees stood slanted, chipped by the collisions of weapons. It was the place the cloaked knight made his appearance, protected by an unpenetrable wall that every witch and wizard confirmed came from moon magic. Every time Luron came back, he finds the pillar free from ruin. Though those who were traumatized had blown it to pieces. On every full moon, the damaged pillar would come back unscathed. Plants would have cracked through, and vines would have blanketed the pillars, but nothing lived in Eroga.

Luron set their campfire a few feet from the platform. He couldn't look at it, or the memory of the dead would return, but because this was their meeting point, he had to endure it.

When the fire started to die, the sun made its return. The moisture in the air dampened Bora's long brown locks, but she wasn't bothered by it. She woke Luron and tells him several shadows were standing in the center of the platform. Their whispers stopped when they approached them. Bora stayed behind, pressed Ryth under her cloak, and hoped the boy will remain in her warmth. For what may come next, she was afraid to find out.

Luron stepped on the aged platform and greeted every man and woman before him. Not far from them were three seven-year-old boys huddling on top of a pile of boulders. They were told to stay far and not listen to their private conversations. Bora couldn't help but examine them. She was looking at the races of Asylum that she only heard by word of mouth.

The Speakers with wavy chestnut hair was an Ihla elf. Bora would have mistaken him for a girl if it wasn't for his thick

eyebrows and Adam's apple. A dwarven man was easier to spot with his copper hair and a braided beard. The others looked like a cloaked man, but she couldn't tell. But one, in particular, made her step back. The ears were almost human but had a slant at the tip, and was nestled between her curly black hair. She didn't need to ask to know a Denoni joined them.

"This is a trap!" Bora cried, stumbling back. She winced, not knowing she was stepping on what was left of the fire pit.

"Calm down," said Luron, who glanced at the Denoni Speaker, who represented the northern lands and Talon'arc. "Nao will not hurt you."

Like Steivo the elf, the Denoni retained her youth for vampires, and elves lived the longest. Nao curled a smile at Bora, who was close to releasing any retainment of liquids from fright. She brushed her curly hair from her dark skin and exposed her teeth, showing only white teeth and no fangs. Luron had to step down and hold Bora's arm to keep her from stepping further, but she wouldn't standstill.

She wanted to flee.

"Nao will not take him," he promised.

Nao was getting a thrill of Bora's fear. Though she was the leader, she was also the mischievous one in the group. Bora once again wrestled, hoping to pull off Luron's hold.

"I am a speaker," answered Nao. She twinkled another smile and braided her hair to the side, showing a clear view of the Denoni ear's Bora noticed. "My allegiance is to Assylum before my kind." Her swift feet brought her to stand behind the woman, who jumped and pulled away.

She slammed her forehead against Luron's chest, hoping he would protect her. Ryth shuffled from the altercation and began to cry.

"You shouldn't have brought her here, Luron." Nao circled them. "They are searching ever so closely for her and the child."

"That is why I came." Luron moved her off his chest so she could face him. "Give me the child."

But Bora resisted. Though her legs haven't stopped shaking, her hold of Ryth remained strong and secure. Her absentmindedness brought Luron to almost touch noses with her.

“I will not bring any harm to him. I trust everyone in this group with my life.” Luron was not easy to warm up to, but he was honest in his words, so much that he didn’t play with them.

Bora’s hold on the muffling boy loosened. She unwrapped Ryth from her carrier, swaddled by the cloth Luron used to keep his bread fresh. Her sore arms relaxed, free from the weight of the babe. Luron didn’t keep Ryth for long. Instead, he gave the baby to Nao.

“How could you!” she cried, wanting to get the infant back, but Luron laid out his arm to block her. He had shown her enough patience and now insisted that she keep her mouth shut.

“You’re stupid to think you can do anything about it,” he added. “Nao will kill you if you try.”

Bora clamped her mouth shut, feeling betrayed and angered by his offense. Noa observed the child, her eyes almost glowed as she sniffs his face like an animal. She opened her leather tunic and pulls out her left breast. Ryth didn’t hesitate when her nipple, the color of black cherries, touched his lip.

He suckled.

Finally.

Fresh milk.

“This is troubling news indeed,” said Noa, who walked back up the platform. “If we want to avoid my King from discovering we have the second-born in our hands, we have to return him.”

“I thought so,” said Luron. “Protecting him will cause a strain and lead to conflict with the lord and lady we serve.”

Steevio sat at the steps, he waves his hand to show he didn’t care about the decision. The Ihla elf knew the infant’s fate was doomed when his falcon gave him Luron’s message. Brolen, the dwarf from the Kingdom of Odisen, didn’t like sending an innocent life to death. But he couldn’t deny keeping the second-born, and the discovery of it could lead to a declaration of war.

“We could just kill him now,” said Steevio. “I heard vampires do not kill their worse enemies. They torture.”

“It’s out of our hands.”

“We can’t protect the child.”

“This was a waste of time.”

“It’s not like I had a choice.”

Their words made Bora’s head spin. She walked up the steps of the platform, all while everyone agreed that Ryth had to be sent

back. She then charged ahead to swipe Ryth from Nao. Unfortunately for her, Luron got to her. He wrapped his arm around her and put her in a chokehold. Bora sank her teeth into his arm and reached for the dagger she returned. Luron released as she hoped.

Now the blade was raised at the Denoni speaker. Nao raised her hand, sensing her pupil, a girl with blonde hair jumped off the rock upon seeing her master facing a blade.

“The boy is not even your kin, and yet, you raise that dagger against me.” Noa was not threatened. She found the danger exciting. “You have grown attached to him like a mother. King Yosul marked you and the boy as our enemy. If you want to live, you will leave right now.”

Bora looked at Luron in hopes he would defend her. But he gave her a cold stare and massaged the bite mark she left. He warned her, the odds of there being a positive outcome were low. Though she contemplated her freedom, every time she glanced at the pale-faced infant who had a tiny blend of dark auburn hair, she couldn't. A lump grew on her throat. She looked at her shaking wrists, realizing she was trying to go against a Speaker and dropped the dagger. She wanted to save Ryth, but she also valued her own life.

“I could keep him,” sighed Luron. “King Yosul can't blame our nations if Ryth were to become a pupil.”

“That would take years,” answered Steevio. “And that's on the chance that the boy passes Darkmirk Forest.”

“In the meantime, I was hoping you five could hide my whereabouts until the boy is ready.”

The five glanced at one another.

Neither had any motivation to do so, not even Bora's attempt to take them from the Denoni. They have seen infants meet worse fates. Harboring the second heir from a tyrant King would not be enough.

“Hacela, King Yosul's right-hand warrior, said Ryth's brother would be raised just like his father.” Bora looked at every one of them, except for Stevo, who often had his eyes on Nao. “She mentioned Lord Esquel, the lord of the border, wanted Ryth to survive.”

“You do not know what happened to Talon’arc the last time a twin was born,” said Nao. “Lord Esquel may want a better replacement, but good intentions will lead to the worst outcomes.”

“I know you see me as a simple commoner, a woman with no title or strength to offer any merits and win your trust, but Ryth doesn’t deserve this.” Bora opened the palms of her hands. “It is not his fault he was born to King Yosul and Queen Sarita. Give him a chance to protect himself. Let him convince you that he is worth shielding.”

“I disagree with the woman,” said Steevio, who glanced at Luron. “But you are late in obtaining a pupil. This little leech could be the one.”

“I have ears,” eyed Noa to Steevio’s insulting comment.

“I know, that’s why I said it,” he winked at her and heard her grumble like he predicted.

The four speakers have known each other since they were seven years old, chosen for the trials by their masters. When they passed, they fought alongside through merciless tasks. No bond of brother or sister could be closer than their own.

“I suppose it couldn’t be more perfect,” sighed Luron, who purposely avoided the responsibility of taking a pupil. He hoped someone would take an extra student in case he died. It happened before. The Speakers of the past thought of everything to replace them. “I will need your support and more falcons in case this all goes downhill. What do my brothers and sisters say?”

Noa and Stevio raised their hands at the same time. Brolen followed after. Horar gave in. The quiet one among the rest was Ethan of the mountains of Whesofur. He was no Speaker but was the one who raised every falcon the Speakers depended on. He didn’t care for politics. Seeing the majority vote, he raised his hand. Luron raised his own as the final vote.

“I last heard they were going to scout the western mountains before I left,” said Noa. “Luron, I suggest you find solace near the ocean waters. The mainlands cannot protect you.”

“You sound so protective of him,” teased Steevio.

“I would do the same for you,” said Nao, but he was underestimating her people. “I will give you a month’s head start and follow your trail to ensure you are not followed.”

“I can speak to Lord Dervan of Isil Dervan,” said Brolen. “It is furthest from Talon’arc. Perhaps I can try to secure a spot for you among the Cyan Mountains.”

“Very well,” said Luron. “We can make further arrangements by Falcon.”

“You best be going now,” said Brolen. “Right now, you have a target on your back.”

“Well said,” said Luron. “Safe travels to you all.”

The Speakers called on their pupils, for their travel back to their homes would be a long one. Noa handed the full-bellied Ryth back to Bora, who took him back with care.

“What of the woman?” said Nao with a smile. “Will she be your mistress?”

“I will ask the dwarf Lord to take her in,” replied Luron, who was in no mood for jokes. After the bite mark, he wanted to keep her more than an arm’s length away.

Noa snickered as a result and called on her pupil, a girl named Melany. She was as pale as Ryth, but her golden hair was tied back by two red ribbons.

When the group left, Luron walked down the steps to lead Bora and Ryth south. They were going to depend not on the safe passages but on the roads that nobody took. It included rural towns where laws were lost. But he warned Bora the road would be long and tiring.

“With a woman, a child, and at this rate with no horse, it will take us more than a year, so don’t complain,” he demanded. “Or I will leave you the next time you sneak away.” A tap on his shoulder naturally made him turn around.

Bora delivered a hard slap across his scar-less cheek. “I trusted you with Ryth!” Her anger forced tears from her eyes. “But you gave him to that vampire.”

“She fed him,” he said, rubbing his cheek. “You are an impossible woman. You know that?”

He marched west, hoping the town nearby will ease the cranky woman. *The sooner I get rid of you, the better*, he told himself. She was an excellent reminder as to why he didn’t want a pupil or company. Since he volunteered to keep the prince, who knew what kind of boy would come out, but he believed Bora’s words. Now he told himself how annoying and unreasonable the woman was.

A horse.

That was the first thing he would look for. In his anger, he looked back to make sure the violent woman followed him. But Bora was not ready. She left her cloak on the floor and nestled Ryth at her chest first. Luron didn't care if she didn't make it to Isil Dervan. But before she swung her cloak back, he couldn't help but glance at her hips.

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THE HUNTED PRINCE

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