

BLACK WINGS

THE HUNTED

PRINCE

Miriam Yvette

Hello Lords and Ladies,

This is a sample of The Hunted Prince. Maps and quotes will not be provided until the publication date.

The preorder, however, is on sale until the publication date for January 5th, 2021.

PROLOGUE

King Zeyl, the Ihla elf ruler of Cestoria, didn't know how or why a dragon egg drifted to his shores. It had to have come from the Backwoods, a continent in Asylum that was blocked by clouds and rough seas. Once the egg was set in his study, the king should have sent it to the five islands, but he took his time. Having never seen or touched a dragon's egg, he remained enchanted.

When it hatched, the baby dragon gave him his first vision. It came to him like a nightmare and told him of the severe casualties for the Lunar War. When the inevitable war came and ended, the numbers that haunted King Zeyl's mind were accurate. No book or scroll in any library mentioned a dragon with such an ability. Now at his possession was a window to the future, one that had to remain a secret.

As the dragon grew, the magic users in Cestoria studied him. His body emitted Raw, a pure form of Stellar magic. Confident and cautious of his prize, nobody was supposed to be hurt in the process. Now the Queen of Mensi lay dead before his feet. Though he was enraged for getting no warning of this outcome, he reasoned. The queen was deserving.

Scoffing at her frozen body, he shared no remorse. "You only need to blame yourself for this." A whimper brought him to stare at his witness, who long became his prisoner. King Zeyl didn't know dragons could cry until one tear spilled for the queen.

EARLY COPY CHAPTERS

[Chapter 1 The Princes are Born](#)

[Chapter 2 Gravenspruce Forest](#)

[Chapter 3 Speakers](#)

[Chapter 4 The Lunar War](#)

[Chapter 5 Witch and Wizard](#)

CHAPTER 1

THE PRINCES ARE BORN

The laboring pains of a queen brought a day of celebration. Its citizens held parties in cities, towns, marketplaces, and rural villages. Many drank themselves merry, with feasts and ale. Others couldn't give a damn. It could be a donkey's foal for all they cared. Meanwhile, the laboring mother was accompanied by representatives from every branch of the royal family. Unable to lend a hand, they wait for the heir who will reign over his or her monarch lands.

But in Talon'arc, a kingdom north of the mainlands, you would find no cheer or hurrah. They were Denoni, but humans called them vampires. The name was commonly displaced 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 procreated. If their fangs came out, they were confronting a threat. Though they consumed food, blood could fill their bellies for the day. And if their skin was cold, their trust wasn't there.

Labor was a private matter for the royal 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 her teeth gritted against a slab of stone. The plate could shave the enamel and dentin of teeth but had to go between her jaws to give her fangs something to pierce. After another spasm, the plate broke, and the royal physician demanded a replacement.

Her helper was a human slave by the name of Bora. The twenty-five-year-old maiden whisked one from the handmaidens and offered the extra piece. 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 resorted to begging. She still needed to push.

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

"Your highness, the head is surfacing!" cried Bora. She held the white sheets while the handmaidens struggled to keep her knees apart.

Queen Sarita pushed, hoping for it to be true. Her wild sand-colored eyes started to glow red, a common feature among upset Denonis'. She growled when the muscles in her abdomen squeezed and spat a curse as the head emerged. The pain management proved itself useful. A pale and slippery body wiggled out. The royal physician handed the little prince to the midwife, who laid out a soft cloth to wipe him clean.

While he cried, no amount of rubbing assured the newborn, he was safe. His tiny index finger stretched, almost pointing at the birth canal. It was as if he wanted the attention elsewhere, not at him. Weeping and squirming like most babes, no motherly touch could soothe his cry.

The Queen wrinkled a smile when one of her ladies-in-waiting asked for permission to deliver the news to the king. "Tell him I finished," she panted. "My duty is complete." But her stomach muscles betrayed her. She arched her back against the pillow and howled at the wall.

The handmaidens shuddered and stepped back. The royal physician pushed the human slave towards the queen. Even he was too afraid to look. Bora leaned to the space between her thighs. She didn't have to say it. The urge to push returned.

"This is not possible," moaned the Queen.

Though ensnared by her own pain, she made a sober observation. Twins were undesired among Denoni. In poems or unknown discoveries, rare things were cherished and sold at a top price, but this was a bad omen. For there to be twins, it meant the Denoni soul of the prince divided itself after the zygote split. The same eukaryotic cell formed into an embryo

and produced identical twins. The greatest reassurance mothers had to such a phenomenon was a stillborn delivery.

The ladies-in-waiting whispered in horror. One prayed to the first queen of Talon'arc and asked for the second-born to come out dead. But if the first-born prince was alive, her prayers were not confident. She held her breath as the wiggly body slipped out.

A second cry filled the room.

The Queen's chamber fell into silence. Bora, who did not know their history, blinked her confusion. The infant cried in the hands of the stunned royal physician. He left the midwife alone and handed the boy to a handmaiden. She too trembled but quietly left the room.

History was repeating itself.

The last set of royal twins born from Talon'arc brought ten years of muddle and malice. It wasn't that the second-born princess wanted to be queen. She wanted to be treated as her sister's equal. But rejection eventually turned into hate. With a country divided by blood and violence, she invited the invasion from the Eight Tribes. Once peace was restored, the first-born queen mandated an iron fist law.

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



Talon'arc was the first and oldest kingdom in Asylum. And being the oldest made developing kingdoms envious. But no matter how resentful one could be, they could not meddle with a Dragon's blessing. Once given, one must receive it. When the first Denoni came to Asylum, a dragon 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 bestowed the blessing. Midnight did not just protect her lineage. It deemed her blood royal among the land.

Now the ruler of Talon'arc, King Yosul, waits in his throne room with tired optimism. Since his first love died in childbirth, one queen after another met the same fate, unable to provide an heir. This was why a Dragon's blessing could come as a curse. The gift of brute strength that runs through the king's veins and

now his sons come with a burden. Expecting mothers succumb to a royal fetus who takes Stellar from their bodies. Eventually, their organs weaken until their own heart fails.

A lady-in-waiting approached King Yosul with a bowed head and knelt before her ruler. Her lips haven't stopped quivering since she entered. "My lord," she uttered. "Queen Sarita has given birth to a son." Her forehead touched the floor, unable to look at his brown, almost rustic red hair. "One more...has come along the way."

King Yosul rose to his feet.

The growl from the pit of his stomach made the maiden wish she could grip her shaking arms. He stepped down with his fists clenched, aimed at her temple. His fangs replaced his canine teeth, ready to rip her throat, but he passed her.

The pillars of his gothic-style palace were built to touch the clouds. Other than its echoes, the high ceilings harbored silver bats. Their dark-cloaked ruler brushed his index finger. The sign steered them through the corner of the room. They clicked at the wall until a portal opened. Their task was to summon the nobles who resided outside of the capital.

The faint steps behind King Yosul were not strange to his ears. His right-hand woman, Hacela, followed him to the Slumbering Tomb, the resting place of the royal family. Hacela was already aware of the news. She guarded the Queen's chamber until she heard the second infant.

"Your highness, is there anything I can do?" Hacela worked for her King after her father died from the last Lunar War. She was always by his 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 enemy.

"Yes, my lord, but why are we delaying —"

"Silence," he scowled. "The mere sound of your voice irritates me. Leave me be."

Bowing, Hacela retreated.

The palace was built on a mountain, a mile away was the Slumbering Tomb. The path was shaped like a snake, stretching the view of the arctic ocean. As the waves scattered and collided against the sharpened rocks, King Yosul lost himself in his thoughts.

Just ahead, guided by cracked pillars, was a cave, sealed by a red enchantment. It almost looked like sheer drapes from how they swayed. Inside was the preserved body of the first queen, who remained ageless in her crystal coffin. Among her were her kin, buried in the wall. Exceptional jewelry covered the first queen in her best garments.

The valuable items never ceased to tempt thieves. Many were non-Denoni who were inexperienced or too stupid to not see the danger. They only realized it after they crossed the barrier. Once their skin peeled from their flesh, the way out was blocked.

King Yosul marveled at it, red reflected from his dark brown eyes. Visiting the tomb often gave him clarity. Sometimes he imagined himself lifeless, holding a Pale flower while his people carried him 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 enchanted brooch diffused and evaporated.

While remnants sparkled into the darkened sky, the men bowed before their King, cloaked by the same fur King Yosul carried on his back. They were worn to agitate the Vukvoy. They were large, hairy beasts on hind legs that lived south of the border.

King Yosul refused to guide his attention from the tomb. It was as if he was speaking to his ancestor. "Your Queen gave birth to my heir, but she bore another."

"This cannot be," sparked Lord Demlo, who oversaw the land by Gravenspruce Forest.

"Her majesty must be quick," said the oldest of the lords, Lord Esquel. He knew what fate awaited the second-born.

King Yosul could almost taste the bitter sensation on his tongue. The thought of having two sons caused it. "Could this terrible omen be predicting an upcoming war?" He already

feared the news would stir anxiety among his people. But worse was giving Lentri, their adversaries, an open door for vengeance.

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

But Lord Esquel’s tired eyes shifted to Lord Demlo. “Yet his majesty was not wrong to call it a terrible omen. Lentri would be quick to use the second born as a means to claim our lands.” The old man bowed to his King. “My lord, make haste.”

This time King Yosul used the voyage charm pinned on his fur cloak and did just that.

He appeared before his bedridden wife, who could not lift her head to welcome him. Having lost a wealth of blood, she was on her second glass of preserved tonics. He did not have to tell his wife what needed to be done. When he met her sand-colored eyes, she nodded at him. He could snap the infant’s neck and be rid of his troubles, but he could not rob the mother’s right to take the life she brought into the world.

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

“That is why you are my queen. Loyal and bounded to your duties as the mother of Talon’arc.” His adulation made his queen bring a faint smile. Before he left, the king memorized the face of every man and woman in the room.

Moments from closing the door, Queen Sarita ordered her ladies-in-waiting, royal physicians, handmaidens, and midwives to leave her room. Bora, however, had to stay.

She sat by the queen’s bedside and wiped the sweat drops from her forehead. After the last maiden left, Queen Sarita gripped Bora’s wrist and gave it a twist. The young woman covered her mouth to keep herself from screaming.

“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.”

“My-my Queen!”

“I can’t bear to look at him,” she spat. “The mere sight disgusts me. You will raise my royal dagger and slit his little throat like a hog who knew better than to cross our lands.” Queen Sarita knew better. She could not give the job to a

Denoni. They would lose respect for her, and worse, report her to the king.

A human, however, was disposable.

The grip turned until Bora reached her limit. She agreed, only to relieve the pull on her tendons. Once she released, the queen rested her head on the pillow.

“The second-born has embarrassed and humiliated me.” 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.” A low growl followed. “I am fit to be the queen of Talon’arc!” Her canine teeth grew into fangs, the human was still beside her, shaking like a dog. “Go!”

Bora sped for the queen’s chamber. The dagger was among her collection of weapons she earned during past campaigns. The queen was once a village girl, holding no title except that she defended the borderlands from the Vukvoy. It was there where she caught the King’s eyes, under a full moon when the beasts attacked the lands in hoards.

Queen Sarita was fit to carry. Her skill in storing Steller gave her no fear of dying of childbirth. Her rough upbringing under Lord Demor’s lands was difficult. He treated his people like cattle and sent them to defend invasions at any cost. Fearing she wouldn’t live to reach adulthood, her family trained her as soon as she could lift her own sword. Now she fought to keep her crown on her head, unwilling to give it to another maiden in line.



Bora gently carried the black dagger embezzled in gold jewels. She didn’t think her own hands would touch such a decorative weapon. The handmaidens had better rights. Who was she anyway to refuse the queen? Those who resisted them lived their years in torture until their hearts 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 silk. The handmaiden who took the second-born left him 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. The sensation led him to cry.

"I am so sorry," she whispered. She held her breath when the newborn clenched one of her fingers. "I'll make it quick. You won't feel a thing, I promise." Raising the royal dagger over the neck, she shut her eyes. A cold finger pressed against her wrist.

"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. But fear moved the dagger back to the newborn's neck, so Hacela pushed it a second time.

"Are you deaf?" she said, sniffing the air. "No, I smell it. You're afraid."

"Please, let me do my job." It was two against one. The second-born hadn't released his grip on Bora's finger. 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 the incision had yet to be made. 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?"

"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 steel. She was always in armor, ready to fight. "Talon'arc cannot afford another King Yosul. He lets the Lords treat my people no better than you slaves, and you are well acquainted with the Queen. She will raise the first-born like a villain. If we spare the second-born, perhaps our kingdom will not be ill-fated."

"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."

"What makes you think I would help after your people took me and raided my village!"

"The Eight Tribes would have claimed that land if we didn't take it, and you 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 waited for you after all these years?"

Bora's jaw weakened. The Denoni had ears in every wall, overhearing her tell the others how she ended up in Talon'arc. Unable to make a decision, the Queen's wrath kept the dagger on the second-born.

Hacela was assigned to take the boy. But she was tactful. No one in Asylum would give her shelter, not when they knew her as King Yosul's trusted warrior. It was a better option with the human. But if Bora were to kill the second-born, she would meet his fate.

Hacela 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. Finally, her hands steadied, 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."

"Excellent. I suggest you go through Gravenspruce Forest."

The name brought Bora's shoulder to shake. "You and I both know werewolves live there."

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

Bora answered by placing the shuddering infant between the layers of her dress. The palace was cold, so like all human slaves, she wore a heavy cloak with gold stitching around the hood. Hacela took the voyage charm she carried like a necklace and placed it on Bora's hand. The human stared at the one-of-a-

kind uses Denoni possessed. It could teleport them to any border surrounding Talon'arc.

“What about the lavenders?” she said.

Her sight turned hazy, not knowing the charm activated. It felt like many hands were tugging her clothes, pushing and pulling. Fearing she was possessed, she squealed, not knowing where the brush of wind came from. A flowery scent brought her to open her eyes, the voyage charm she carried spasmed until a gold light ate the device. A field of lavender separated Gravenspruce Forest from Talon'arc. Though it was not deadly, the aroma made their noses weak.

Bora tore heaps of purple flowers and stuffed them over the newborn's nakedness. He squirmed because they were prickly and irritated his nose. The moon was high, ready to guide her through the dark. She was unlucky. Denoni 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 den 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 milk.” It was unfortunate that human breasts could not satisfy the hunger of Denoni babes. But she kept the babe close against her chest, not minding the humidity of their closeness.

For many years, the werewolves claimed the woods and foothills of Gravenspruce Forest. Their desire to keep it made them hostile against trespassers. Bora lived on a peaceful island that no lord or lady claimed. The settlers were made of a combination of ruined townspeople and soldiers who 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, Bora watched the forest with pressed lips, unable to imagine an enchanting place with fairies and unicorns. She was a simple girl with no longing to leave her village. Born as the third daughter of her family. The then fifteen-year-old only wanted to be wedded off by the red-headed boy who cared for the cattle. Without warning, Talon’arc’s soldiers raided their home. Bora watched with uneasy eyes as cages befitting for an animal lined up.

They killed those who fought back, while many ran for their lives. When her father told them to escape, Bora couldn’t. Her sisters and mother left while she stayed behind, unable to leave her father’s side because he had a bad back. When he met the sword, they dragged her into one of the cages and locked her with the survivors.



Dawn broke through the dense trees and lighted the way for the frantic Bora. She didn't know what was ahead, but she hoped times have changed since her ten years 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. "You need not walk any further." Beside him stood four men with raised swords. They looked uneasy as if she was a skilled swordswoman. "Hacela must've kept you in the shadows so you would agree to her traitorous act. Voyage charms leave a trail."

Bora wasn't interested in having a chat. She bolted through the forest and struggled to draw her legs forward. The leader of the knights caught up, tugged her cloak, and flung her against the trunk of the tree. She braced herself and fell on her side and elbow. The newborn wept from the shock while lavender scattered against the ground. The knights covered their noses. Lavender was indeed a foul scent to Denonis.

"You will die where you lie," the leader said. "And that cursed child will return to be properly gutted by Queen Sarita." The knight had to enter the forest in heavy armor, and though Denoni loved a good chase, it tired him.

"Let's get this over with," a comrade said with a weary voice.

The locals of these wildlands could impale their armor. And they were right to be cautious. Five Denoni in Vukvoy 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.

The first growl lingered among the shadows that shared their dark color. The knights pressed their backs against each other. They didn't know how many beasts lurked among the trees. But their shadows shifted from the branches that had not yet been penetrated by light.

The first Vukvoy broke through the group, another leaped from 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 inched underneath one of their hind legs. The lavender in the newborn's skin deterred him from noticing the maiden crawling below.

The leader of the knights was ever so watchful. He pursued her until six-inch claws struck him. His armor tore but demonstrated its use because his skin barely grazed. If he was going to die, he at least wanted to take the woman and child with him. He ran after her until the same Vukvoy dragged him and separated from his companions. One with matted hair recently joined his pack but halted at Bora. His sharp teeth snarled, ready to snap at her trembling muscles.

"Nevermind her," barked another. "The leeches first."

Seeing they would spare her for a moment, Bora left them without a second thought. Behind, the clashing of armor and wild roars ensued. 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.

Having met one so up close, Bora couldn't believe Denoni and Vukvoy were once the same beings. But they both shared the same tough skin and had sensitive noses. Unlike werewolves, who wore no armor, Denoni armor could withstand more blows. As Bora wheezed through the light that sparkled and glittered among the branches. The howls in Gravenspruce Forest ate through the cries of the knights. They were outnumbered, soon their silence declared the victor.

The galloping of feet shot adrenaline sped through Bora's spine. Deep down, she knew she wouldn't last before midday. Looking over her shoulder, the werewolf that spared her was back. He masked himself on fours among the ferns, bearing his teeth while his blue eyes started to emit a vibrant light. Ahead was her twisted luck.

The end of the forest was a sprint away.

Bora ran through the open field and screamed for help. She looked for any creature to pity her from the mountainside, sky, and meadow. She didn't feel the strike against her back. Trampling into the ground, she secured the second-born and presented her spine where the claws tore her garments and carved her skin. The next slash would cut off her limbs, so she dug her face towards the infant and shut her eyes.

The werewolf still snarled.

The pain that throbbed on her back guaranteed Bora she was still alive. Fluttering her eyes open, a shadow blocked the rising sun from piercing her pupils. A cloaked man stood behind her.

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

"Hermits have no say on this matter. Let me have the girl."

"You have your rules in Gravenspruce, just like Talon'arc has theirs. This field is under my watch. 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 for a bite, but he wanted to instill fear. "Your leather will rip like the jelly man you are."

"Have it your way." The hermit unsnapped his cloak, unwilling to risk the beast using it against him. But the werewolf leaped before the cloak dropped. He stepped back and took the fragile bottle he kept for dire situations. Shifting his head back, he tossed it at the hairy black chest just as the claws missed his eyes.

Upon contact, the bottle shattered and engulfed the beast in flames that burned black. It was the Black flame, the same weakness vampires and werewolves shared. It was made from enchanting the Red flame with the dark element. But the trouble of obtaining such a flame inside a conventional bottle came at a high cost. Wizards and witches were forbidden from playing with dark elements, so enchantresses often charged a pretty price.

The hermit struck his sword against the beast's neck until his head fell at Bora's feet. But the werewolf was not dead. His jaw

opened at the trembling woman until the same sword fell through his skull.

“Damn things.”

Pressing his foot against the snout, the hermit peeled back his sword. He gripped the beast’s wild blend of black and grey hair and marched towards Gravenspruce. The Vukvoy 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 threw the head at their feet. Like their dead kin, they too recognized him as a Speaker.

They were commonly known by their symbol and cloak, worn half-covered over one shoulder. The exposed side revealed his straight sword, always ready for a fight. The hermit lived as their neighbor for the last three years, but he minded his own business. Should anything happen to him so close to Gravenspruce Forest, they would become the prime suspects by the Follow, the islanders’ who uphold Dragon law.

“Can you stand?” The hermit wiped his sword against the fur of the headless werewolf.

Bora trembled to her feet. “My back 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 see your wound after we made some distance. We are lucky the pack let us go. But I credit my position for having our lives spared.”

“What is a Speaker doing here?” she panted. “In the middle of nowhere?”

“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. “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 worked as a midwife for five years, the other five I was given to Queen Sarita when she became the queen of Talon’arc.”

The trees they entered belonged to Spiral Mountain, not Gravenspruce Forest. It was there when the Speaker used his cloak to tighten the slash against the maiden. “You are lucky he

grazed your skin and not your muscles.” But in doing so, he noticed the wiggling around her chest. “You’re carrying a Denoni 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, some ointment for this itch?”

“Perhaps, but we should introduce ourselves. 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 vampire of royal blood.”

Luron grew a smile. The woman was undoubtedly carrying an interesting story. “You will tell me 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, soothing 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 find him among the dead. She gulped, knowing she would never see him or her mother and sisters again. So she 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 three years in the comfort of the trees and stars. He left that afternoon to hunt for deer, not expecting to hear Bora's scream. It was a risk to go in between a werewolf and his prey, but he was inclined to respond, even at the risk of his own life.

Bora kept one hand close by the fire in his chimney and cradled the newborn with the other. Ryth tried to search for her nipples, but she reminded him she could not produce milk. Even if she could, it would make him sick. She learned this when she shadowed the midwives. Many of the women 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 sliced a chunk of meat he felt would nurture the little vampire.

"It's not mother's milk, but it's blood." Wrapping the dark meat in a cloth, he gave it to Bora.

The blood alerted the sleeping infant and brought him to cry. Once red sunk between his lips, it left a stream down his cheek. Bora wiped it away and looked at her hand without disgust. She saw worse things in Talon'arc. Young ones were taught to draw the blood of their prisoner. 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.

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

Luron dipped the pieces of diced meat in his iron pot and sprinkled dried herbs. The bread he stored was from the small town of Vistra was placed on the table. The cloth had cursive embroidery sowed by the baker’s daughter to make their business 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 forward to the delivery where she was threatened to kill her second-born.

“I’ve never heard or seen twin Denoni 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.”

“Will you 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-five, he looked around his late twenties. Unlike the men of Earth, the men of Asylum aged without a hurry. “I can present the boy to my comrades, for I can’t solely decide if he’s worth protecting. 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.”

Bora sought comfort in Ryth, who slept sound asleep. Luron wasn’t trying to deceive her. She knew the Denoni would not give up until the infant’s throat was slit open. She jumped when the Speaker placed a bowl of stew on the table. Hungry, she spent no time waiting for it to cool down. The savor of beef and boiled vegetables tasted so good under bad news. Luron let his

bowl cool and started packing. He didn't need much for the travel but hated that 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 off."

"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."

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.

But Luron shook his head to disagree, if only it was that easy. "I was doomed to help the moment I killed that Vukvoy." Now he could see why she was able to survive a harsh life among the Denoni. Though he found her emotions quick-witted, 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 Spiral 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 was relieved, for they had yet to make an encounter with such creatures. But he gripped the handle of his sword, just in case someone wanted to test his Swift Style. When he passed the trials of Darkmirk Forest, the straight sword was a gift from the Emperor of Doneley.

“Speaker, can you slow down?” Bora was no hiker or mountain woman. Her legs were still sore from the run through Gravenspruce Forest, and her back still pulsed from the werewolf’s claws. She frowned because the Speaker kept the same pace. “How will the others know where or when to meet us?”

“There’s a falcon that visits me every day. She will see I abandoned my home and find us.” Luron named his Peregrine falcon Mary. Before taking off, she would sit on the highest branches and watch him for an hour.

“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 one of the deserters of the last Lunar War. Because there were only four Speakers, he never met one.

“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 trade no one enjoyed. He hated war for the same outcome a foot soldier finds in his dreams, screams, and the empty expression of the dead.

There was no shortage of orphans in the Brimson Lands. Villages and towns were left to fend for themselves. Most Human Speakers signed up as parentless candidates. Elves like to select someone from a prestigious family. Some had to earn it, like the Dwarves.

Luron was five when his master Essi chose him from the crowd of candidates. Orphaned, he had little choice on that matter. It was live 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 cloth Luron used to store his bread. She imagined his brother dressed in fine silk, safe in the palace walls. At least the embroidery was fitting for the unwanted prince. A wrap was used to carry him against her back. He couldn't be in the front because he would bury his face through her chest in hopes he would find milk. To feed the infant and keep him silent, Luron resorted to hunting any bird or squirrel that passed them. But after each day, his hunger doubled.

"How much longer?" Bora panted from the downward slope. The skin of her shoes would not protect her from the sharp rocks.

"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. It surprised him that Bora said nothing when he said, "Eroga," but it told him of her age.

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

"It is King Yosul and Queen Sarita who fuel your fear. Your rights were stolen because of them, not the common Denoni."

"I have seen them feed their enemy to their five-year-olds."

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

Slaves in Talon'arc had limited choices when it came to food. Bora grew accustomed to supper being yams and chicken. The older slaves taught her how to make yam syrup for when they

got bread. The aroma of rye only filled the kitchen when King Yosul had a guest, be it dwarf or human.

She loved those days because it meant leftovers.

But sometimes the ovens remained shut, sometimes Talon'arc got no visitors.

Luron's viewpoint on Denoni was still on her mind. He must have met some that were trustworthy. She knew the vampire children in the market street were no different than the ones from her village. They ran and played a game of ball while some cried when they fell. Others argued when one of them was caught peeking on Dragon and seek.

Their mothers would linger by smiling at their game. Sometimes they would nod at her or another slave nearby. But since Bora 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

Spiral Mountain got its name from its sharp terrain and twisting rocks. Walking on them felt like piercing through protruding needles. Bora felt her feet had grown numb by it and couldn't reach another mile. The more she followed, the more she wondered why she hadn't left the Speaker. Every night they sat by the campfire, Luron would tell her it wasn't too late to leave and start a new life. Instead of taking his advice, she would press the prince to her chest and close her eyes.

By midday, the changing of altitude something bothered the young prince. He cried, no matter how much Bora rocked him. The troubled Luron insisted she keep him quiet. His sword was out, watching the dark corners of the forest. Just seeing the blade reminded her of the Denoni knights.

"Is there a certain creature that lives here?" she asked so she would be prepared, all while bouncing Ryth over her shoulder.

"I rather you keep the twig quiet."

"I can't."

"Then try, or you will find yourself confronting a Jersey devil." His piercing eyes told her he meant it.

Bora hushed the prince, but his cries already brought unwanted attention, Mountain goblins. They were under four feet, had grey skin, and a long nose that outstretched their hairy bodies.

The Speaker handed his dagger and told Bora to be ready. Shakingly gripping the weapon, she aimed it at the ones who approached them with a confident yellow teeth smile. Before

they attacked, one of them whispered and pointed at Luron. They acknowledged him as Speaker by a nod and attacked.

Ducking, Bora cried after the Speaker almost met an arrow to the head. Their sinister laugh made Ryth cry, inviting more to join their captured prey. They were about to be surrounded, and who knew when the archer would strike again?

“Stay close!” demanded Luron. Bora pressed her back against him. “Closer!” he shouted. “Cover the twig!”

She forced her weight against the Speaker while Ryth muffled under the fabric. The goblins didn’t talk. Instead, they crept closer, snickering with their black beady eyes. Bora trembled, surprised that she trusted Luron without knowing what the next step was.

Then she saw as a spark of light, gleaming from the goblin’s ebony eyes. A wave of flame emitted from the ground and engulfed them. The fire expanded, barely grazing her. Now she pressed hard against the Speaker just so she could keep her eyelashes from scorching.

To put the fire out, the goblins scattered and rolled on the ground. 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. If he ended the ones that howled from the fire, they would leave a trail for the others. Goblin blood carried a smell their kind could detect for hours.

Sprinting for a mile, the Speaker’s steps were sluggish. His heart was pounding, not just from the race, but from being fatigued seconds after casting fire. During his time in the mountains, he didn’t cultivate Stellar. To blind the goblins with his flame, he forced it at the expense of his stamina.

“What did you do?” Bora managed to say, her feet were finished. “My father said only sensitives 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 and practice that followed after. Then came the long hours he spent awake, cultivating. Despite his poor discipline, he was proven again and

again how useful it was. After using Stellar, he couldn't take another step without rest. Luckily, rest was the remedy.

The singing birds sang through the wilderness. It was a positive indicator that they were not followed. They continued downhill with minimal breaks until the sun went down.

First the Denoni, then the werewolves, and now the goblins laughter had become an echo in Bora's mind. She appreciated Luron's protection, but who knew what sort of danger would lie tomorrow? And she didn't want to find out. It was time to go. She didn't inform the Speaker of her departure, rather she waited until he and Ryth were sound asleep. She put the babe beside him, and in exchange, took his dagger from his belt. It surprised her how fast asleep he was not to notice his weapon was stolen. She expected more of Speakers.

Before she turned her back, she looked at the babe one more time, snuggled beside the dirty brown-haired man. Her heart wished the young prince the best. Gripping the dagger, she continued.

By morning, the end of Sprial Mountain was a strip of open land, where rotting wood and cracked stone scattered. As she traversed, there were marking only an ax could inflict on wood. Explorers who had passed by used it for fire and shelter. When the sun smeared the peak of Spiral Mountain, the Eroga widened as a vast open field. Bora looked back and imagined Luron waking up with Ryth on his chest, and finding her gone.

She rubbed her moist sleeve against her cheek. It wasn't the first time she had to smudge her eyes. For she had been crying the entire time.



Luron hushed the Denoni when he started to squirm. The prince didn't want to be held by him, and the Speaker didn't want to hold him. They called it truce when he fell asleep. But after he awoke from a nap, the scruffy-bearded man glaring down at him broke him into tears.

"You're crying at the wrong person," he told the babe. "That thing you're looking for, be it motherly or fatherly affection, is not something I can offer." Ryth wailed without a break, so Luron continued. With Bora gone, it didn't matter what he said

openly. “I had to fend for myself, and I didn’t complain. If I got hurt, there were no kisses on my bruises.”

He stopped, for he could talk no more. Not even the wailing child troubled him. Just ahead was a paralyzing sight of an abandoned fortress. The once bricked walls brought the shrills of his friends and foes. Luron continued downward, his breath quickened, at what he caught below. There, half-buried, was a 1,000-pound bronze instrument. A bell. The cursed bells that rang at every sundown and every sunrise. The medal clapper was covered, but he couldn’t forget how it sounded. The repetitive strike against the sound bow blared in his mind.

For twenty-nine days and thirty nights, he bathed himself in blood and watched those he wanted to protect succumb. Luron didn’t know who the fortress belonged to. It could have been from Talon’arc or one of the Trädal elves. As he walked down, he stared at the cracked stones the ogres inflicted to break the fortitude.

The prince had grown. He didn’t know why, but his eyes were ever so watchful of the dead silence. “Your father will one day built one of these,” he told the babe. “It’s the only thing that works against the waves of every beast in Asylum.”

Humans were among them, the rejected druids and enchantresses the kingdoms refused to accept.

Luron hadn’t forgotten the first time he saw the center. A platform made of white stone awaited. At the center was a cloaked knight, who brought their attackers to the mainlands. He would stand there, protected by an impenetrable force, and lead an army of every monster in Asylum.

The Speaker blinked out of the hole he dug in his mind. Below was the brunette and her black cloak with gold stitching. When she walked up to him, she showed him the blackberries she collected while waiting for him to come down. 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 can carry the berries.”

Luron made the trade and ate while they walked through the open fields. When she returned the dagger he let her steal, he

inspected it for damages. The least she could do was explain why she came back.

But she said not a word.



At night Luron prepared the fire with the pieces of wood they collected through Eroga. Like the stars that sparked their brilliance over their heads, for such a dark place, the fire squeezed enough light. Yet Bora was still wary of her surroundings and looked at every corner. Since Spiral Mountain became a fading dot, a new chill crawled on her shoulders.

When she learned of his age, she told Luron most of the men in her village were developing round bellies. But the Speaker was lean, his stomach was in, and his arms slightly bulge when he used his cloak for a blanket. The fire he set lightened his brown eyes, not a grey line covered his brown hair. She liked the way his sad eyes looked when he lost himself in the fire.

“I have never met elves or dwarves,” she told him, admitting she was excited to meet the other Speakers. “The elder in our village said you can tell them apart by their ears.”

“And what did he say?” said Luron. He wasn’t exactly interested. When she talked, she stopped straightening her spine every time a wolf howled.

“Ihla elves have wide oval-shaped ears with a 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 Ihla and Trädal elves,” 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. Wanting more, she asked Luron for anything else that made them unique.

“They are natural flame wielders and have a talent for infusing Stellar within their weapons.”

Luron’s Master Essi had such a talent. He called it Mending and used it to make his sallet helmet. The same one that kept his

face scarless. 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. 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 first 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 looked dazed at those old fortress walls."

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 was a fourteen-year-old apprentice who recently passed the trials at Darkmirk Forest. After he was given the official recognition of protégé, a future Speaker, the Lunar War began. Bora's feet align with themselves as he described the blankets of bodies that buried him.

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. His master told him his chances of surviving were lesser than a vampire and werewolf, embracing one another. Luron also 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 reveal the sign of the next Lunar War." She remembered her mother would use the name so she wouldn't stay up with Rythian. "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 reactions and swift arrows, many came from the Lunar War. The monsters punctured through his armor and leather like soft butter.

Only his face remained scarless, and he credited it to the helmet he held. 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, so he made one as a gift.

Luron couldn't look at it, but their campfire was a few feet from the stone platform. He had no choice but to make it their meeting point, no matter how much the sight invited the dead. He endured it by shutting his eyes and sought comfort in knowing there was no prediction of the next one. His heart still burned for the cloaked knight. The immortal being used moon magic, yet by the grace of the four wizards, only the moon itself could imprison such a horrid man.

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



As the sun started to rise, it revealed the ten great pillars no taller than the proud pine trees. It stood slanted, chipped by the collisions of weapons. Bora didn't know it was the place the cloaked knight made his appearance, protected by an unpenetrable wall. Though unliveable, Eroga got many travelers. Those who were traumatized by the war had blown it to pieces or chipped it away. But on every full moon, the damaged pillars would come back unscathed.

The moisture in the air dampened Bora's long brown locks, but she wasn't bothered by it. She woke Luron, for something else caught her eyes. Several cloaked shadows stood in the center of the platform. Their whispers stopped when they approached. Bora stayed behind, pressing Ryth under her cloak. She hoped the boy would remain in her warmth. For what may come next, she was afraid to find out.

Luron stepped on the platform and greeted every man and woman before him. Not far from them were three seven-year-olds huddling among each other for warmth. They sat on top of a pile of boulders and were instructed not to listen to their private conversations. Bora couldn't help but peek at the Speakers, eager to look at the races of Asylum 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. The Dwarven man was easier to spot with his copper hair and a braided beard. The others looked like cloaked men, but she couldn't tell. The woman in attendance made her step back. Her ears were almost human but had a slant at the tip, nestled between her curly black hair. Bora couldn't blink. She should have known a Denoni would join them.

"This is a trap," she panicked, stumbling back. She flinched, not knowing she stepped on what was left of the campfire.

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

The Denoni woman curled a smile at Bora, who was close to releasing any retainment of liquids. She brushed her curly hair from her dark skin and exposed her teeth, showing only canines and no fangs. Luron stepped down and held Bora's arm to keep her from shifting further back, but she wouldn't standstill. She wanted to flee.

"She will not kill the twig," 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 her Denoni ear. "But my allegiance is to Asylum before my country and kind." Her swift feet led her to stand behind the Bora, who jumped and pulled away.

Slamming her forehead against Luron's chest, she hoped 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 second-born."

Luron moved Bora off his chest so she could face him. "Give me the child."

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.

“No harm will come 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 loosened. She unwrapped Ryth from her carrier, swaddled by the cloth the Speaker used to keep his bread fresh. Her sore arms relaxed, free from the weight of the babe. But Luron didn’t keep Ryth for long. Instead, he gave the babe to Nao.

“How could you!” cried Bora, who rushed to get the infant back, but Luron laid out his arm and blocked her. He showed her enough patience and swore 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, unable to forget the betrayal. Her anger burned by the Speaker’s offense. Meanwhile, Nao observed the child, her eyes almost glowed as she sniffed his face. She undid her leather armor, ripped the fabric of her tunic, and pulled out her left breast. Ryth didn’t hesitate when her nipple, the color of black cherries, touched his lip.

He latched and suckled.

Finally.

Fresh milk.

“This is troubling news indeed,” said Nao, who walked up the platform. “If we want to avoid my King from causing trouble with the Order or the Follow, we must return him.”

“I thought so,” said Luron. “We would cause unwanted strain with the races under the second-born’s protection.”

Stev sat at the steps. The Ihla elf waved his hand to show he didn’t care about the decision. He 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 kill him now,” said Stev. “Talon’arc is into torturing, not killing their worse enemies.”

“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 discreetly walked up the platform while everyone agreed that Ryth had to be sent back. She charged, wishing to swipe the babe from Nao. Luron stopped her tactless action. He wrapped his arm around her neck and squeezed. Bora sank her teeth into his arm. He released, but not before she took his dagger.

Now the blade was raised at the Denoni Speaker. Nao raised her hand, sensing her apprentice, a girl with blonde hair jumped off the boulder. Upon seeing her master facing a blade, she was ready to take out her own.

"The boy is not your kin, and yet, you raise that dagger against me." Nao 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 a positive outcome were low. Though she contemplated her freedom, every time she glanced at the pale-faced babe with dark auburn hair, she couldn't abandon him. Reasoning found her quivering hands that barely held the dagger. She couldn't win against a Speaker, so she let the dagger drop. Saving Ryth was a noble desire, but she also valued her own life.

Luron looked at the babe in Nao's arms, happily suckling his prized milk. His return home would not be welcomed. And who knew how long his parents would let him breathe. Though it was now far away, he looked towards the way to Spiral Mountain. He remembered how quiet the prince was when they walked down the ruined fortress. It was better to die than bear a scar of memories, but perhaps the prince could endure it.

"If Ryth becomes my protégé, perhaps King Yosul will stop his pursuit."

"That would take years," answered Stev. "And that's on the chance that the boy reaches fourteen."

"Then I will hide my whereabouts until the boy is ready."

The five glanced at one another.

Neither had any motivation to agree. They have seen infants meet worse fates. Harboring the second heir from Talon'arc, was putting one of them on the line of fire.

"Hacela said Ryth's brother would be raised just like his father." Bora looked at every one of them, except for Stev, who often had his eyes on Nao. "Lord Esquel wants Ryth to survive."

"You naïve child," said Nao, she dropped head to look at Ryth. "You do not know what happened to Talon'arc the last time a twin was born." A frown followed. "Lord Esquel should know better."

"I know you see me as a simple commoner, a woman with no title or strength to display 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 Stev, who glimpsed at Luron. "But you are late in obtaining an apprentice. This little leech could be the one."

"I have ears," eyed Nao to Stev's insulting comment.

"I know, that's why I said it," he winked at her and heard her grumble as he predicted.

Except for Brolen, who was the oldest, Luron, Nao and Stev have known each other since they were seven years old. When they passed their trials, they fought through merciless assignments. No bond of brother or sister could be closer than their own.

Luron purposely avoided the responsibility of taking an apprentice. He hoped someone would take an extra student in case he died. It happened before. The Speakers of the past would think of everything to replace them.

"I will need your support and more falcons in case this goes downhill," he said, half admitting that he agreed with Bora. "What do my brothers and sisters say?"

Nao and Stev raised their hands at the same time. Brolen followed after. The quiet one was Ethan of the mountains of Whesofur. He was no Speaker but raised every falcon they 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 Nao. “Luron, I suggest you find solace near the ocean waters. The mainlands cannot protect you, and as the leader, I can only do so much.”

“So protective,” teased Stev.

“I would do the same for you,” said Nao, but she wished they didn’t underestimate her people. “King Yosul is patient, he will not make a fuss. But Queen Sarita, who knows what she will do to claim this boy.” The babe cried at the sound of his mother. She smiled and agreed the name was not popular in his homeland. “I will give you a month’s head start and cover your tracks to ensure you are not followed.”

“I can speak to the duke of Isil Dervan,” said Brolen. “Since its furthest from Talon’arc. I can persuade him for a spot among the Cyan Mountains.”

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

“You best be going,” said Brolen, who shuddered at the sigh of the pillars. Even he couldn’t look at them for long. “Don’t forget you have a target on your back.”

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

“And safe travels to you,” they responded.

The Speakers called on their apprentices, for the way back home would be a long one. Nao handed the full-bellied Ryth back to Bora, who took him with care.

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

“I will ask the duke to take her in,” replied Luron, who could not take the joke. After the bite mark, he wanted to keep her more than an arm’s length away.

Nao snickered and called on her apprentice, a girl named Melany. She was as pale as the white pillars, her eyes were soft blue, and her golden hair was tied back by two red ribbons.

When the group left, Luron walked down the platform to lead them south. They were going to depend not on the safe passages but on the roads and lands where laws didn’t matter. He warned Bora the road would be long and tiring.

“At this rate, and with no horse, it will take us more than a year, so don’t complain,” he demanded, adjusting his cloak. “Or

I will leave you the next time you decide to sneak away.” A tap on his shoulder made him turn around.

Without warning, Bora delivered a hard slap across his scarless cheek. “I trusted you.” Her anger forced tears from her eyes. “But you gave Ryth to that vampire.”

He frowned, rubbing his cheek until the anger inside him spewed out. “You are an impossible woman, you know that!” He marched west, hoping a town nearby would ease the cranky woman. *The sooner I get rid of you, the better*, he told himself. She was a first-rate reminder as to why he didn’t want an apprentice or company. Though Bora’s words swayed him to give the boy a chance. Now he told himself how annoying and unreasonable she had become. Opening his jaw, he rubbed the cheek she inflicted.

A horse.

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

CHAPTER 5

WITCH AND WIZARD

The Great Witch Olinda was proud of a few things. Having been considered the oldest living human in Asylum, she felt the title was unfair. She was not the oldest. Still, she smiled when she heard it, so she could appear flattered. She sat in her garden and watched her apprentice, a young witch with brown hair who started mixing two enchanted herbs. The girl's hair was turning a darker red by her consumption of Stellar Magic.

When Olinda was born, nobody questioned her sensitivity to Stellar. A head full of teal-colored hair grew out of her body. Most humans could not harness Stellar. Yet nobody knew why certain humans born in Asylum became sensitive. It

“Lady Olinda,” the apprenticed groaned. “Is the mixture supposed to turn grey?”

“You mixed Tea plant with what form of medicine?”

“Infused chamomile.”

“What color are healing potions?”

“Yellow.”

“Is grey, yellow?”

“No.”

“Try again,” smiled Olinda. She was used to mistakes like these, as she was once a student of the Order.

Olinda received the title five hundred years ago when she could no longer hear the horrors in her cottage, healing those who returned from the Lunar War. She never would have guessed how much she was needed.

When the first Stellar-sensitive humans proved they were capable of handling magic, they were hated for it. Witches and Wizards were persecuted. And it was no better than the ones from Earth. They were feared they would overpower kingdoms or use the dark element.

But that was long before Olinda was born. It took many years before the common magic-user could be respected. Sadly, it involved the Lunar War. It was thanks to the first Great Witch that witches and wizards could serve kingdoms, humans, and non-humans. They made a decent living, making potions, trinkets, and healing the sick.

A handmaiden walked in and bowed for interrupting Olinda's lesson. "My lady, you are summoned."

Olinda chuckled when she rose to her feet and left her upset student to her lesson. Her cobblestone home had many rooms, but she often spent it alone with one student to teach. When her witches in training were grown into women, she sent them off to pursue their promises to their families, their dreams, or lords they served. But none would leave without her warning. "One day, one of you will replace me." Many were humbled by the announcement. Others were intimidated. But Olinda said it for when she does find her successor, the witch wouldn't be surprised.

Olinda closed the door to her room. A fireplace was lighted that she and her maid did not prepare. She sat on the chair beside it and smiled at the bearded man who stared back. His face was warped by the movements of the flame.

"Kellan," she said. "I have wanted to get in contact with you."

"I'm here," said the old man. "But you didn't need to send a bolt of lightning to get my attention. You killed one of my chickens."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Olinda brushed aside her grey curls. "Nao came by a few days ago. Queen Sarita gave birth to two sons."

"Then it was no coincidence," said Kellan. "I saw one shooting star split into two over the north side of the mainland."

"Well, you are in for more than that. A human girl from Talon'arc escaped with the second-born. She and the prince are with Speaker Luron, heading to Isil Dervan."

“You can’t say.” Now Kellan brushed his beard. “This is going to cause some problems.”

“All Speakers voted to keep the babe in their care.” Olinda smiled. “It just so happens the maiden who was enslaved by Talon’arc pleaded for the little Denoni.”

When she first heard it, she felt a wave of pride, again one of the few things she felt. Humans doing great things for non-humans made her happy. She often saw equal treatment in Purveyi, the merchant city, but discrimination was not wiped clean. Just as there were those who disliked witches and wizards.

Kellan was least impressed. But he was glad his Speakers studied and obeyed one of their codes. Serve Asylum first, serve your King, second.

“Tell Nao to do what she can to protect the boy.” Kellan now rubbed one of his scruffy eyebrows. “If he went to Luron, he’s going to raise him to be an apprentice and test him at the trials.”

“And if King Yosul finds out?”

“We can only hope the boy will be a protégé before that,” said the Wizard. “But you and I know Talon’arc will not sit back and wait.” The old wizard shook his head. “Even if the boy passes the trials. Then there’s Brimson Lands. He will have to prove himself.”

“Do you think the Speakers did right?” said Olinda. “Saving the boy from his fate?”

“I’ll tell you this much,” said the wizard. “I’m eager to see what the boy will become.”

Congratulations!
You have finished Chapter 1 - 5 of

THE HUNTED PRINCE

To receive an early ARC copy for an honest review before the release date, join the team [here](#).

You can also do neither and just follow my [Amazon page](#), where you will receive updates on all my releases.

To join my newsletter and receive updates, sales, book giveaways with upcoming projects, click on the link below.

http://eepurl.com/g8_1gb

Safe travels to you.