

THE DIVISION  
BOOK ONE

# EMBER'S QUEST



KEVIN M. PENELERICK

# THE DIVISION: EMBER'S QUEST

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*To my kids, Austin & Ashton who inspired my creativity to tell this story and  
put more magic into the world!*

# CONTENTS

## Map of the Division

### I. A Meeting In The Woods

#### 1. Knight In Peril

### II. The Festival Of The Three Kingdoms

#### 1. The Festival

#### 2. Responsibilities And Commitments

#### 3. The Reception

#### 4. Preparations For A Feast

#### 5. The Recital

### III. The King's Deceit

#### 1. Aftermath

#### 2. The King's Descent

#### 3. Atop The Tallest Tower

#### 4. Storms Have Come

#### 5. Rabbit Hunting

#### 6. Who To Trust?

#### 7. Friends Don't Lie

#### 8. A Note To A Friend

#### 9. The Sword Of Raneban

#### 10. The Family Evergard

### IV. A Boy In A Box

#### 1. Prisoner

#### 2. Phats And Kats

#### 3. Not So Alone In The Woods

#### 4. Company

#### 5. The Boy In The Box

#### 6. Phats Attacks

#### 7. Catching Up

#### 8. The Amulet

#### 9. Katerra

#### 10. Escape Plan

### V. Meeting Madera

#### 1. The One That Got Away

2. Surrounded
3. Free But Not Forgotten
4. Madera Tells A Lie
5. The White One
6. Of Dreams And Nightmares
7. Along The Trail To Traskein

VI. Traskein

1. A Girl
2. Marie?
3. The Terror of Trask
4. The Uncle's Inn
5. The Streets of Traskein
6. The Dark on the Docks
7. Captain Wynn
8. Goodnight

VII. Journey

1. Into the Valley
2. "A Little"
3. Ethan's Challenge
4. Kat's Tale
5. The Badlands
6. The Lair of the Beast
7. Ray-Rays
8. Husk
9. Dealing with the Past
10. The Temple
11. The Fall of Shillish Vane

VIII. The Voo

1. Watch
2. A Splitting of Ways
3. Mourning Departed
4. One Cold Morning
5. Tight Spot
6. On the Run
7. A Stand in the Clearing
8. Asher

IX. Terra Cree

1. Sunburn
2. The Shack
3. The Cavern
4. Revelations

5. [Family Values](#)
6. [Madera's Story](#)
7. [Slipping Away](#)

[Character Art](#)

[Ember Raneban](#)

[Katerra The White](#)

[Madera Lynch](#)

[Talyn Rae](#)

[Phats](#)

[The Division Book 2](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Kevin M. Penelerick](#)



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*The Map of the Division*

# PART I

# A MEETING IN THE WOODS



## KNIGHT IN PERIL

Tyson Evergard, Knight of the Kingdom of Raneban, crouched low, sword in hand. From his vantage on the rise, he gazed into the clearing below and observed the small group gathered around a fire. The words drifting up with the tendrils of smoke turned his knuckles white as his grip tightened.

"Destroy..."

"Kill..."

"Victory..."

He peered over the stump of the fallen tree before him and found the face of the man he had spent two sleepless nights tracking, King Markoon Lynch. The king's scarred countenance grimaced in the flickering light.

It hadn't been that they were hard to find; a caravan of their size stood out. It was the fact that they weren't where they were expected. Now that Tyson had found them, he hoped to complete his mission and return before the festival began.

This would be King Markoon's first attendance of the festival in two decades. The first time since the war that any delegation from the Kingdom of Lynch had attended, in fact. At first, Tyson had seen little that raised his suspicions. Now, the whispers between the king and a man he couldn't see clearly, changed his view of the king's intentions. He strained to hear more, cocking his head, but couldn't make out the words. He crept down the slope, using what cover he could find until he was near enough to hear them and saw the other man. His face bore the appearance of having his nose broken so many times it no longer knew which way it was supposed to grow. Tyson

muffled a curse as he recognized the mashed-faced man as a known assassin named Brecks.

Markoon spoke again. "She has a recital during the festival. It will take place on the great lawn outside the castle. There will be large crowds you can blend in with."

"Why not just kill King Raneban then?" the assassin asked.

Markoon's lips parted into a smile that drew the long scar on his right cheek into an upside-down cross. "His fate will have been dealt, but I want to make sure he suffers, knowing his precious daughter is dead."

"My lord, if we have dealt him by then, how can he suffer further?"

The smile disappeared, replaced by a sneer. "Don't worry about that. Do your part."

"Yes, m'lord. Straight away." He smiled at his king, displaying a row of broken teeth, and bowed.

The assassin spun, disappearing from Tyson's view into the woods. "Treacherous leech," Tyson muttered, glaring at Markoon. He clenched the hilt of his sword. One thought thundered through his mind. *I must warn the king.* He took a step up the hill, but stopped when Markoon's voice rang out from the clearing.

"Fetch my son, they will be here soon."

*Who are "they"?* Tyson paused, crouching again and brushing his dark, sweat-soaked hair from his face. *What else does he have planned?* He studied one of the king's aides as the man and a guard headed toward the circled caravan in the distance.

Before the guards were out of sight, the temperature dropped. Tyson pulled his own cloak tighter, faint traces of his breath lingering in front of him. From the left side of the clearing strode two Illyarri (Pronounced ill-E-arr-E) soldiers, deep blue flesh covered in thick coats of icy armor. They stepped to the sides of the path, holding long hooked spears, and stood at attention. Tendrils of fog floated from their ice-shrouded bodies.

*Illyarri!* Tyson's mouth fell open and his grip tightened on his sword. *Here? With them? The people of Lynch have long been rumored to be worshippers of the Fire Elementals, the Ellyassi (Pronounced ell-E-oss-E).* His brow furrowed. *So why are they meeting with the Illyarri?* He relaxed his hand from his weapon and waited.

A cloaked shape entered the clearing, stopping just in front of the two Illyarri soldiers. The form stood a full foot shorter than the soldiers flanking him.

"It is good to see you again, Talyn Rae," the King of Lynch said to the newcomer with a smile.

Fog billowed from under the hood as the cloaked figure answered, his voice a hollow echo. "Where is the boy?"

King Markoon's smile widened. "He is being brought from our camp."

"Good," the hood bobbed. "You are a man of your word, Markoon Lynch."

"Thank you, Talyn Rae," he said with a slight nod in return.

Tyson felt the temperature in the air rising and he scanned the clearing.

"I sense...", the cloaked figure spoke and retreated to stand directly between his two guards, "the other nears."

In the center of the clearing, the campfire flared to the height of a man, white rolled from its tips. A wave of heat spread out as a shape formed. A man's silhouette, bathed in flames of deep orange, yellow, and red. He stepped onto the earth and the fire covering him changed to cloth of the same rich colors. Smoke and small flickers of fire drifted from his bronzed skin. He looked much like any other man now, except for the hue of his flesh and his long, pointed ears.

"Lord Judith," the King of Lynch exclaimed, bowing to the fire elemental, before rising and nodding to the cloaked form of Talyn Rae. "I assume no introductions are necessary?"

"None." The smoldering figure growled and shifted to face the Illyarri mystic. "Let's get to business."

Markoon motioned to two of his men with a snap of his fingers. They brought forth an ornate wooden chest which they set between the pair of elemental figures before opening the lid and setting aside the yellow lemons and red sun berries it had held.

Talyn Rae stepped forward and knelt in front of the wood box, whispering words that Tyson could not hear. A frail blue hand appeared from within the dark robes, clutching a glass vial of cobalt liquid. Mist rose from the exposed fingers, just as it did from the armor of the soldiers beside him.

He poured the liquid into the chest and a fog rushed out with a hiss. The creature lowered his hood, exposing a thin black-blue face with wisps of white hair, long pointed ears, and cold black pupils. The ice elemental stuck his head into the vapor until the small cloud enveloped him, then drew in a slow, deep breath, pulling the mist into himself. A large, squared block of ice filled the center of the chest.

The fire elemental, who Markoon had called Lord Judith, walked forward. The flames that covered his body dimmed and a trail of smoke followed in his wake. He too knelt at the box, placing himself across from the blue-skinned Talyn Rae and snarled, exposing a fanged tooth as the steam emanating from his skin grew thicker. Above the pair, a small smoggy haze formed until specks of dirt and ash drifted down.

The burning creature pulled forth a vial of an orange-colored solution and held it above the chest. He swirled it in his hand, chanting. "Res oh, res oh." When he stopped, the liquid continued to churn. It was no longer orange, but clear with something at its center.

An eye.

Someone gasped behind Lord Judith and all eyes spun to bear down on a dark-haired boy who stood at the far edge of the clearing. Tyson felt a jolt in his stomach, realizing he had been so caught up in the ritual that he'd completely missed the boy's approach.

"Silence, boy!" Markoon barked at the newcomer, his face twisting into a sneer.

The boy cowered from the harsh words, but found escape impossible. The man who had escorted him from the caravan blocked any exit he might have taken.

Lord Judith observed the adolescent a moment longer, then studied Markoon's expression before turning back to the vial. He opened it and poured its contents onto the block of ice. The two reacted like water in a hot pan, with the eye sizzling and crackling like an egg being fried. A cloud of steam rose until the eye mixed with the melting water and sank into the frozen mass.

The eye darted around inside the block, peering out from different angles to look at those assembled, then stopped in the middle of the mass, closing with an unseen eyelid, and vanished.

Talyn Rae leaned in, blowing an azure fog from his mouth across the top of the slab. What had been melted froze anew. Their gazes on each other, the two elementals stood up and moved away from the chest.

With a nod from Markoon, the men who had brought the wooden box stepped forward. They repacked the discarded fruits around the ice, sealed the lid, and carried it back in the caravan's direction.

Lord Judith watched them walk away, then shifted his attention to Markoon. "Do as you have committed, and the Division is yours."

"I will, my lord," Markoon said, his voice coming out in a breathless rush. "How long should it take?"

"It will move quickly. How long it will take is unknown. There is powerful magic protecting the Earth Guardian. It may require some time for our magicks to finish the job, but they will." Lord Judith stepped into the crackling fire, the clothing he wore burning away. With a sneer, he focused on Talyn Rae. "Soon, our battle will resume."

"With pleasure," came the other's reply, colder than the ice of his guards' armor.

The form in the flames turned hazy and disappeared.

As the smoke dissipated, a sense of urgency overcame Tyson, but as he prepared to sneak away, Talyn Rae's voice stopped the knight where he hid.

"That leaves us with one more piece of business, Markoon." He stepped closer as a wide grin spread across his face. "The boy."

Markoon nodded over his shoulder. "Madera, come here. You go with them."

"What?" The boy's eyes darted around, his body tense as he again looked for escape, but the guard behind him grabbed his arm and shoved him forward. "What do you mean, father? What is this about?"

"Silence! It has been decided."

"But... father...?" The boy struggled but could not break loose from the man's tight grasp. A lone tear ran down his cheek.

Without warning, Tyson's head was jerked back, a cold blade held to his throat and a strong arm encircling him. Foul breath reached his nostrils as his captor whispered in his ear. "To the clearing, Raneban scum. Any sudden moves and your blood will flow."

The man half-pushed, half-dragged him forward through the brush, the knife nicking his skin as they moved. All faces in the clearing glared

towards the sound of the disruption, the guards drawing their swords. Tyson found himself thrown to the ground at their feet. "I've caught us a spy," his captor said with glee.

Tyson rolled to his back and found himself looking up at the rotted smile of Brecks.

## PART II

THE FESTIVAL OF THE THREE  
KINGDOMS





## THE FESTIVAL

The gardens surrounding the castle had not been so full of activity for years. They drew people from every corner of the remaining three kingdoms of the Division and even the free people who lived in villages and small communities throughout the land. For a citizen of the capital of Raneban who did not travel, it appeared every person from the Division had come to mingle under the mid-day heat of Father Sun. The crowds and tents seemed endless, stretching along the main street from the castle gates to the edge of the city, and even into the side roads and alleys. Scattered stages filled the space not taken by the tents. On each, entertainers acted out a piece of the ages old tale of how life on the Division began.

Two teen girls pushed their way out of a tent, giggling and scanning the faces of those around them as they headed into the throngs of people. "There they are," the dark-haired girl on the right pointed to a pair of their friends standing at a nearby platform. Her pony tail bounced as she tried to help the other girl see where they had to go.

The shorter girl glanced up at her friend with a scowl, her cheeks glowing a reddish-orange that matched her hair. "All I see are shoulder blades, Cami. Lead the way."

They darted off toward their friends and a pair of adults stepped from the tent, close on their heels. One was male, short and stocky in nondescript clothes, the other female, dressed the same, but taller, with long, braided brown hair. "Here we go again," the man said to his partner with a grin as they trotted off into the crowd. They tried to keep up, but unlike the youths, found their movements hindered by their size in the mass of people.

The girls dashed and darted through the revelers, Cami dragging her friend by the hand. "Come on, Ember, don't get lost."

"I'm not going to get lost," the short redhead snapped. "Just don't let go, 'kay?"

When the girls reached their friends, they greeted each other with quick hugs and joined them to watch the rest of a performance. On the stage, a magician tossed balls of light into the air above him, like small fireworks, as he told his part of the tale. "...and three hundred and twelve years ago today," his voice boomed across the gathering, "when the forces of the Ellyassi met the Illyarri above the great city of Shillish Vane at the heart of the Division, life here changed forever. After the barriers fell, the resulting battle destroyed the city and everything beyond the plains of Trask for hundreds of miles."

The balls of blue and orange light moved at his command, colliding in a flash, sending fiery crystals falling to the stage. A haze drifted above the magician and rubble smoked at his feet. He raised his arms and flicked a pinch of silvery dust from his fingers, making two bright rectangles of energy appear. "But the barriers were restored before all of the Division was lost. Rumors spread of a man, the Earth Guardian, an earth elemental perhaps, with the power to keep the warring armies at bay. An unknown man who lives among us in secrecy. Maybe it is even one of you." He looked out over the crowd, inspecting individuals, smiling as if he knew they might be that person.

"The battle ended," he continued, "leaving only the scarred and deadly Badlands and our Three Kingdoms. Raneban, Vonodora & Lynch. Together we celebrate this gift and our re-formed unity." He raised his robed arms to the sky and a shower of sparks leapt from his palms, raining on the startled onlookers. He bowed to the applause following his finale and disappeared from the stage.

Ember had found her attention wandering early in the show. The lights were pretty, but she knew the story by heart. Instead, she watched the people walking by. People fascinated her, and there were many new faces and characters to observe, with the festival being larger than it had ever been in her fifteen years. Then again, for as long as she could remember, only two of the three kingdoms had attended.

That changed this year, with the unexpected emissary from the Kingdom of Lynch, offering to put aside the kings' differences to restore unity to the Division—an act most found improbable at best. But here they were. The king was to arrive soon and there would be a big ceremony at which she was going to sing. She glanced around for an indication of the time, when a man dressed in black, leaning against a flag pole a few dozen feet away, caught her eye.

She shivered. *Why is he staring at me?* The man smiled, giving a glimpse of jagged, broken teeth as he licked his sallow lips. A shadow fell over her from behind.

"Ember!" a strong voice barked, making her jump. She looked up to see Neko, one of the guards who had followed her from the tent, panting and exasperated. "How many times do we have to do this?" He scowled down at her, his silence berating her more than his words.

She lowered her gaze to stare at the dirt and answered under her breath. "Sorry, Neko. We were just having some fun."

"Fun can get you killed, Princess."

She ignored him, just like the last time he had said that. "Who is that?" She pointed to the man in black.

"Who?" Neko swung his head around to look.

The man was gone.

"No one, I guess. He looked like a crystal junkie. There's lots of new faces around this year."

"I wouldn't expect to see many of their kind here, but all the more reason to be safe and not run off without..."

"Ember!" A jubilant voice cried out behind her seconds before she was lifted off the ground in a giant bear hug. She squealed and laughed as the hands holding her up tickled her sides. As she squirmed out of the embrace, the sun glinted off Neko's sword, which he'd pulled an inch out of the scabbard.

"Down boy!" she snapped at her guard and spun around. "Rone!" She smiled at the big beast of a young man in front of her and threw her arms around him. "It's been so long!"

"Yes, it has," he said. "Sorry I have not been to see you sooner; things have been very active in the Frostdale mountains."

Stepping back, Ember studied him, eyebrows raised. "The Illyarri?"

"No. At least, not for certain. Strange things, like those from the Badlands, more and more it seems, though their frequency has calmed of late. Thus," he spread his arms, "I am here."

Ember laughed again. "All that time in the cold has made you grow your own fur coat." She tugged on the thick hairs running from his exposed bicep down to the tops of his hands.

"And yours?" Rone retorted. "What happened to your yellow locks? When did your hair turn as orange as fire?"

Cami chimed in, "I say it's her temper's fault. It keeps getting redder every time she gets mad. One of these days she may just burst into flames."

They all laughed, even Ember, whose cheeks reddened at the mention of her legendary temper.

"So, nothing much has changed then?" Rone asked with a wry smile. "Come." He wrapped an arm around Ember and another around Cami, "Show me what is new in the Kingdom of Raneban."

Cami waved goodbye to their other friends over her shoulder as the trio wandered off, followed by Neko and his partner Nena. After wandering through the festival tents exchanging stories, hunger guided them to the rows of food tents. In unspoken agreement, they went straight for their favorite: meat on a stick. Hot cooked sausage for Ember and Rone, something milder for Cami. They ended up just behind two dark-haired boys about their own age.

Rone bent low, putting an arm on each of the girls' shoulders, and whispered, "Is that who I think it is?" They nodded, matching mischievous grins on their faces. Rone released them, pulling a strand of fishing wire from his pocket as he knelt behind the boys.

The dark-haired pair were deep in a discussion about which sausages to get and did not notice as Rone looped a length of the wire around their inner ankles and tied a knot. He stood up silently, waiting for the line to move forward, then, just as they prepared to take a step, he leapt behind them and roared into their ears, "Rone want meat!"

The two boys jumped, trying to turn, but with their legs bound together they could only flail and so they fell to the ground with a smack and tangle of limbs. Rone let out a boom of laughter as they scrambled to get free from one another. The older and taller of them glared up at Rone while his

brother glanced at Cami's laughing face. He lowered his gaze to the grass, cheeks burning.

"Brothers Evergard," Rone grinned at them. "Greetings!" He stretched out his arms, offering a hand to the younger of the two, who was closest. "Evan, let me help you."

Evan shook his head as he laughed, "You, I should have known." He reached for Rone's offered assistance, then stopped as his older brother's movement caught his eye.

Ethan pulled out a small blade and deftly cut the line that bound them. The sleeve on his shirt slid up, revealing a tattoo of twin swords behind an emblazoned shield, the crest of Raneban.

"You've earned your mark, I see. I look forward to hearing the tale." Rone offered his arm to Ethan, but Ethan slipped his knife away and rose from the dirt on his own, stomping his feet as he did so. Evan accepted the help and stood, dusting himself off.

"Well, Princess," Rone faced Ember, "I'm concerned for your safety. If it only takes meat on a stick to distract these two future defenders of your kingdom, all may be lost."

Ethan's cheeks burned red and he cocked his fist, glaring at Rone, before he noticed the shocked faces of Ember and Cami. He let his hand fall to his side and turned away. "That wasn't funny, Rone."

"I'm sorry, Ethan," Ember said, stepping forward. "We got carried away."

A loud gong rang, preventing Ethan from replying.

Ember's face went ashen as she spun to Cami. "The Lords of Lynch have arrived! I'm supposed to be at the reception. My father's going to kill me."



## RESPONSIBILITIES AND COMMITMENTS

The king looked at Lord Artemus, buttoning his tunic. "They're here?"

"Yes, sire. Their caravan is rolling through the lowlands. They should arrive soon." The elder, who also dressed in the elegant robes of his office, bent to pick up an ornately carved wooden staff. Laden with multi-colored gems and gold detailing, the staff's weight challenged the man. Once he succeeded in lifting it, he rested it against his shoulder and looked to his king. "Will the wizard be joining us?"

"No, Elwyn will not. He chooses not to partake in the carnival tricks and parlor games of the festival. He considers the magicks performed to be an abomination to his art." A maid offered him his coat—a deep blue blazer with buttons and stitching of gold.

"It sounds like our Elwyn won't come out of his tower for anything these days, unless he's looking for that phantom cat of his. Seems it's been months since he paid a social visit outside the castle, ever since he sent away his apprentices—all but the woman, Katerra."

"Yes," the king acknowledged. He scanned the room as he rubbed his disfigured right hand with his left. "He has been in a funk since the theft of his..." His gaze fell on the maid. "Where is Ember? She should be here."

The maid glanced around as if she expected to find the princess there. "I do not know, sire. Shall I send someone to fetch her?" Her eye's flicked up, catching his stern gaze, and darted back to the floor.

As if on cue, the tent flap opened and Ember, dirty and breathless, stumbled in, flanked by the wearied Neko and Nena.

"Where have you been?" the king asked, raising his hand and pointing his finger into the air. "Have you no idea what time it is? You have responsibilities, young lady. Commitments you must honor."

Ember's eyes focused on the fist shaking towards the ceiling, but her ears tuned her father out. The scars on his hand fascinated her. He'd never explained where they came from. She knew something had happened around the time of her birth only because of the paintings hanging in the castle. The one of him and her pregnant mother in the king's chamber showed them holding hands. While others in the castle pictured him holding her as a baby, his hand was always conspicuously absent.

When the king noticed the glazed-over expression on his daughter's face and how she followed his moving hand, he ceased shouting, lowered his arm, and stared at her until she realized he had quit speaking.

"Ember?"

She swallowed audibly. "Yes...?"

"You haven't been listening, have you?"

"Well, I..."

"Well, you what? You'd rather be off playing with your friends than performing your responsibilities as princess of this kingdom?"

Ember's contrition vanished. "No, I've just heard this same lecture a dozen times already, Dad! Can't you come up with a new speech?"

"Ember, you are heir to this kingdom and..." His hand rose again.

"I never asked to be!"

The King stiffened as if he'd been struck, his cheeks filling with color as a fire burned within him. He bit his lip, averting his eyes from Ember's to those of the maid. The maid placed her hand on Ember's shoulder, pulling the girl away.

"Take her to get ready," the king ordered.

Ember teared up as the maid spun her around and led her from the king's tent. She had disappointed him again. Even worse, this time she had taken out her guilt on him. "I feel like such a jerk," she said to the maid.

The woman smiled at her and offered a towel to blot the tears. "Now, now Ember, dear, we all lose our tempers sometime."

Ember took the cloth, wiped away her self-pity, and took a deep breath.

"Now, let's get you looking like a princess. I hear the king of Lynch has a son about your age."



## THE RECEPTION

Ember stared at the crowd which packed the reception tent. There were a few familiar faces, but also many outlanders she did not recognize. She waited at her father's side, dressed in her royal garb—'princess frills', Cami called them. *Where is she anyway?*

She scanned the entrance for the fourth time, but did not see her friends. They were late. Her father and Lord Artemus stood a couple of feet away, in deep discussion with Rone's father, King Sero of Vonodora. She pinched the sides of her robes for something to do, wishing she'd been able to bring her knitting to keep herself busy. As she waited, her mind drifted to breakfast that morning with her father.

"It's a historic day," her father had lectured. "You must look like a princess, stand tall, regal. The world needs to know my successor will be a strong ruler."

"Knock it off, Dad. I won't have to worry about that for a long time."

"Probably not, Em. Especially after today. Repairing the strained relations between Lynch and Raneban will go a long way to bringing peace to the Division but I still want you in your royal robes, by my side." He had drawn in a deep breath as he looked his daughter up and down, tears forming. "You are as breath-taking as your mother was."

Ember had blushed and turned away, whispering, "Thank you."

She regained focus as the atmosphere in the tent changed, a hush falling. King Markoon and his court had arrived. A tall, handsome man with dark-tanned skin and short black hair strode into the space. He wore robes of rich, deep red, emblazoned with yellow flames, buttoned up to the neck.

The man's gaze locked with her father's as he advanced. A small crowd followed a pace behind Markoon. Ember felt her father straighten rigidly at the other's approach. They were equal in height and appeared about the same age. Directly behind King Lynch, two men carried a large wooden crate. As the king drew nearer, a scar on his right cheek caught Ember's attention. A scar she had been told her father gave him when they were younger. It stood out like a large fissure on his tanned skin, turning his otherwise handsome face into an unnerving sight, from which she had to avert her eyes.

A voice rang out as the kings came face to face. "Lord Warren Raneban, ruler of the Kingdom of Raneban and the southern provinces under the Dragon's Teeth Mountain Range, King Sero, ruler of Vonodora and the western provinces along the great ocean, presenting, King Markoon Lynch, Lord of the Kingdom of Lynch and keeper of the western boundary along the great desert."

The men reached out, grasping hands as every eye in the silent tent studied them. "Markoon," her father said, "it has been a long time. We welcome you and your people to the Festival of the Three Kingdoms."

"My thanks for the welcome, Warren," Markoon's deep voice resonated throughout the space.

"Let me introduce my chief advisor, Lord Artemus."

Markoon shook the elderly man's hand for the briefest of moments.

"And," King Raneban gestured to his right, "my daughter, Princess Ember."

Ember hoped her movement of wiping the sweat from her hand had been surreptitious as she offered it to King Markoon. The king hesitated. His eyes met hers and expressions of recognition, longing, and disgust flashed across his face in quick succession, causing his scar to deepen. When he forced an artificial smile at her, the scar formed an upside-down cross with the line of his cheek.

"I am sorry to say my son came down with a slight cold and cannot attend. He will be unhappy to have missed meeting a beauty such as you."

"You're too kind," she said as she curtsied, her cheeks bright. She glanced away and tried to tug her hand back but he held her tight, bringing his other hand up to encompass hers completely.

"I had no idea you resembled your mother so."

Her stomach sank. She wanted to speak, to ask something, but her mouth and throat had gone dry. *How did he know my mother?*

King Lynch loosened his grip on her and spun away, facing those gathered. "Thank you for extending your hospitality to us. We are here to usher in a new era of unity for the Division." Cheers rang out from the crowd as he twisted back to King Raneban and King Sero. "I present you with this gift." The men behind him carried forth the crate and rested it on the ground with a soft thud.

The sound echoed in Ember's ears like a body hitting the floor. Dark images from unremembered nightmares crept into her thought as they raised the lid. The king's words had disturbed her, and now horrific visions of the world burning poured through her mind, unbidden and unstoppable.

A haze of mist hovered over the crate for a moment before dissipating. It revealed lemons and sun berries stacked atop a block of ice. A gasp of excitement rose, followed by whispers and excited gesturing as everyone jostled for a glimpse.

"A special treat to top off the festival's feast!" King Markoon smiled and observed the joyful expressions of those gathered.

Cheers burst forth. Ember felt dizzy. The room spun. She grasped to the left and touched her father's arm—warm and safe—and clutched on to it.



## PREPARATIONS FOR A FEAST

Pots and pans clanged in the kitchen below the great hall, louder than a battle underway.

"Bring it over here," a cook shouted at two men carrying a boiling pot from the fires. Sweat dripping from their brows, they shifted direction towards him. "Hurry, hurry!" The cook reached into a pair of open canisters behind him, grabbed a handful of spices from each, and threw them in the pots. "Now, to Bartholomew, quickly!" The men searched for their destination. "Over there!" The man stabbed his finger across the room to where another chef with an apron stained with assorted colors stood, tasting a dish.

Above the kitchen, the kings sat at the head of three long rows of tables that connected in a curve. Members of their courts and other dignitaries from the lands were scattered amongst them. Idle chattering filled the air as the assembled mass awaited the start of the feast.

Back in the kitchens, young Thomas, the son of a chambermaid, opened the large wooden chest that had been brought by the Kingdom of Lynch and gasped at the sight.

"Mikel," he whispered to another boy who was stacking vats of honey in the corner. "Look at this!"

Mikel gasped as loud as Thomas. "Crikey! Lemons and lots of 'em! There's enough to make lemonade for the whole kingdom. Have you ever seen such a thing?"

"Never," Thomas said, his mouth hanging open.

"How'd you get so lucky to be on juice duty?"

"I don't..."

A dark shadow fell across the boys. "Thomas!" his mother barked.

"Yes, mum?" He swallowed.

"Stop messing around! Empty the lemons and berries and get to chipping that ice before it melts."

"Yes, mum." Thomas blushed as he directed his focus on the task at hand.



WITH THE LEMONS stacked in smaller crates on a table and now being juiced by others, Thomas hefted an ice pick, marveling at the large frozen slab. The chill emanating from it pierced him to the bone as he rushed to fill a stack of trays with the broken shards.

"Hurry, boy," a juicer shouted at him. "The kings' beverages are to be served soon."

Deep in the center of the block, a presence awoke and a single eye opened. The eye shot around the block, peering out at its surroundings. It saw the ice pick hammering down, sending pieces flying, and moved in the pick's direction.

Young Thomas chipped away at the brick of ice, breaking off chunks and bits ferociously, but had only filled half a tray. A shiver ran through him as he searched the room for his mother; it felt as if she were watching him. He noticed something strange then, as he broke off the next piece of ice, almost as if something had shifted in the surface of the glistening block. He took the shard and examined it. Nothing special, beyond the fact that it was ice, such a rare treat. The piece melted in his fingers and he tossed it onto the small pile, licking the cool water left behind on his hands.

On the tray, the eye reappeared. It jumped from one frozen chunk to the next. Each broken fragment hosted it for a moment, melting a bit, before it continued on.

Thomas completed filling the first tray. Someone came along and moved it to a table where pitchers of freshly-made lemonade sat next to three large goblets. The drinking glasses, each adorned with the crests of their respective kingdoms, rested atop a silver platter. Both the tray and the platter were transported away by two servants. In the ice, the eye jumped from piece to piece as it sought to identify the goblets the servant carried.

They brought the trays from the noisy kitchen, up the silent stairs, where only the sound of footfalls on stone mixed with the tinkling of ice on the tray could be heard. At the top of the stairwell, the servants opened the door to a roar from the boisterous great hall. Voices rang out a cheer at the sight of the incoming treasures.

King Lynch stood at the sight of their drinks. "I believe it is time we put the past to rest. It is time to restore unity to the three kingdoms."

"Hear, hear," King Sero added, "and just in time for a toast."

The kings smiled at the approaching staff. The servants beamed back as they set the platter and tray in front of the royals.

"Thank you," King Raneban said as a maiden began filling the goblets with ice.



THE EYE BLINKED ONCE, spying the crest of Raneban upon the center goblet. It watched the tongs as they lifted pieces away to fill the cups. When King Raneban's cup was half-full, the eye made its move, jumping to the chunk of ice in the tongs. It closed as they carried it through the air, a single drop of water falling and splashing on to the table. The droplet landed with a hiss that went unheard among the noises of the great hall.

With a clink, the chunk with the entity in it dropped into King Raneban's goblet. The eye reopened and multiplied, spreading to each piece in the glass; a dozen eyes now stared at each other. An instant later the fresh lemonade filled the cup, the sweet-sour liquid blending with the chill of the ice. Light flashed in the bottom of the dark goblet as all eyes reconverged into a single shard which melted instantly and mixed with the lemonade.

The kings raised their goblets in a toast.



## THE RECITAL

"Your dress is beautiful, Ember." Cami smiled.

"Ugh," Ember replied.

"You don't think it's pretty?"

"No." She clutched at the white lace, rolling the gold trim between her fingers. "Yes, it's just... I'm nervous."

"You've been practicing for weeks. You'll do fine."

"It's not that. Well, a little. It's more King Lynch. The way he looked at me during the reception, it made my skin crawl. Did you see his scar- wait, where were you, Cami? I never even saw you come in."

Cami stared at the wall by the door to Ember's room, avoiding her gaze.

"Cami?"

"I was with Evan and Ethan. After Ethan calmed down, I convinced him they should get Rone back for his little joke."

"*Oh, no.*"

Cami giggled.

"What did you *do*?"

Cami could only laugh, bending over as her face flushed. "We stitched his britches together."

"You *what*?" Ember smiled as she imagined the scene.

"We snuck into his room while everyone was at the reception, took his fishing line, and used it to tighten up his pants." She burst out laughing.

Ember grinned, shaking her head. "You're lucky he isn't a girl."

"Ah, Em, he'll look cute with a tight tush, if he can get them on that far."

Ember lay back onto the bed giggling and Cami fell to her knees in front of her. Together, they sounded like a pair of wild animals cackling out of control. A knock on the door brought their hilarity to an end.

"Five minutes, girls!"



EMBER TOOK A DEEP BREATH, stood, and studied her reflection in the full-length mirror next to her armoire. She grinned and twirled, sending the edges of the dress aloft flashing the skin of her knees. "Wow! This dress is amazing! I look pretty good...for a girl." Her expression sagged.

Beside her, Cami gazed in the mirror. "You're beautiful Em, and I'm sorry I missed the reception, but I will be with you for the recital. Just don't forget about my competition tomorrow."

"I won't, Cam. I never miss a chance to see you best the boys and take first place. I wish I was half as skilled as you."

"I'm not that good," Cami said, cheeks reddening.

"Please." Ember looked over her nose at her friend. "Is there a weapon you don't know how to use? You've been slinging bows since you were born."

"Ok, ok, you've got me there." She straightened up and absently adjusted the dagger on her belt. "It's not my fault I'm the only child of the kingdom's blacksmith and weapons maker, but there will be competitors from all three kingdoms this year."

Ember studied her friend with a soft smile, her face relaxing, but not erasing the lines of worry around her eyes. "Sometimes, I wonder what life would be like had we been born as farmers instead of part of the royal circus."

Both girls swung to face the door as another knock sounded. This time, it swung open and Ember's father beamed in at her. "Ready?"



EMBER CLUTCHED at the sides of her dress as she peered out at the crowd on the great lawn. She felt safe amongst the actors waiting next to the stage along the outside wall of the castle, but she'd never performed in front of such a large gathering. The thundering of her heart felt as if it must be audible to those around her.

A mild roar rose from the mass of onlookers. On stage, two royal guards in full Raneban regalia retired to each rear corner, having finished their complex demonstration of swordsmanship. In a moment, her father would be up there introducing her. Ember's thoughts raced until a loud rumbling from Cami's stomach made her laugh.

"What was that? I could almost feel it."

"Sorry," Cami blushed. "I'm hungry. Can't stop thinking about meat on a stick."

Ember giggled. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"For taking my mind off this for a few seconds." She nodded at the stage.

Her father appeared at her side, touched her arm, smiled, and kissed her forehead. He strode on and paused for a moment at the base of the gangway, placing a hand on his stomach and grimacing. The momentary discomfort passed and the crowd fell silent as he mounted the stairs. A proud grin spread across his face as he looked out upon . "People of the Division, of the three kingdoms. Please welcome my daughter, Princess Ember Raneban, to the stage!"

With a resounding gulp and a squeeze of Cami's hand, which had made its way into hers, she followed the steps her father had taken. They shared a quick smile as they passed, his hand caressing her shoulder; she swallowed hard and stared out over the crowd. Her feet faltered, and she stumbled on the top stair, moving forward unsteadily. The gathering felt immense from the stage. *I wonder if everyone from the three kingdoms is here?*

Looking out over the first row, she saw familiar faces, Ethan and Evan standing with Rone as well as townsfolk and others she knew. But as her eyes roamed, they found King Lynch sitting atop a raised platform to her left, surrounded by his so-called Lords of Lynch. *More like thugs*, she thought. His own eyes bored into hers and she turned away as the hair on the back of her neck stood.

She noticed the silence of the crowd; they were waiting for her. *How long have I been standing up here?* A quick glance at Cami showed a worried expression on her face. From below, Ethan sought her attention, pointing at Rone. Ember looked up instead and drew in a deep calming breath, before her temper flared. The skies were clear but darkening with nightfall's descent. She hummed in her throat until she found her note. Her voice came out soft at first, then climbed as her confidence and training kicked in. The words flowed, her arms moved, and she danced upon the stage, swaying back and forth as if walking in the air.

Applause built, warming her, allowing her the courage to once again look out over the faces. Whatever Ethan wanted, he hadn't given up. He kept pointing at Rone every time she looked in their direction. She stood on spread legs, one in front, the other behind, and faced out to the center. From this angle, it was clear what they had done; a pair of white feather angel wings were affixed to Rone's shoulders. *How could the big man not have noticed?* Ember choked back a laugh, coughing, which made her falter mid-note. *Ooh! I'm gonna kill them!*

She breathed in as her eyes once again fell upon King Lynch. For the first time since she'd taken the stage, he didn't appear to be staring a hole through her. He scanned the assembled masses. *Did he just nod at someone?* She followed his gaze, but she couldn't see anything. Then her breath caught. There was the man she'd seen earlier, still dressed in black. *What is he doing?*

Winded from singing and the sudden cough caused by Rone's humorous appearance, she slipped backward, her knees giving out. The audience gasped as she hit the mat covering the stage with a thump. There was a thundering of feet on the stairs, followed by a thud as one of the knights who had been standing behind her collapsed.

Neko knelt beside her. "Princess, look at me. Are you hurt?"

"No," she choked through tight lungs. "Just out of-"

Nena interrupted from next to the fallen guard. "He's dead. Poison dart—get her out of here!"

"Wha-?" Ember asked.

Her question went unheard in the uproar as Nena yelled to those standing off stage, "Code Dragon Fire, secure the king!"

Pandemonium broke out as the king's guards surrounded him. Neko picked Ember up and tossed a gray ball from his hand. It exploded in a cloud of smoke, obscuring their exit as he sprinted from the platform with the princess in his arms, flanked by Nena with her sword drawn.

"That little present from Elwyn finally came in handy," she said.

"Remind me," Neko said, through panted breaths, "to ask him for more of them."

## PART III

# THE KING'S DECEIT



## AFTERMATH

A blanket of silence covered the Kingdom of Raneban in the aftermath of the princess's recital. Where the day before vast crowds had wandered, today only a handful of cleaners worked. Randell, an elderly man from the village outside the castle, stood with a rake in his hand; he looked out at the mass of empty tents and debris. "A fine mess this is."

"Let's be glad no one else has gotten sick," said his wife, Milly.

"You're right there; but to see the festival end so abruptly, everyone leaving when it had only just begun..." He shook his head.

"What'd you expect? The attempt on the princess's life, right here on the castle grounds, the young kitchen boy, Thomas, dying of Fire Sickness. There's even rumors that King Warren has come down with fever."

Randell nodded, leaning on his rake. "And did you see how quickly King Lynch got out of here?"

"On his horse and away he was, wasn't he?" Scorn filled her voice as she swept her broom with such force that a few wooden bristles broke off.

"If ye ask me, the people of Lynch have been tolerated too long, what with their worshipping of the vile Ellyassi. Surely if it is Fire Sickness that claimed young Thomas, then it came from there. Only they would dance with the demons of fire." He spat on the ground and looked at her.

"It's a curse all right," Milly nodded, bowing down and placing a hand on the dirt. "May the Earth Guardian protect us all."

"It's a poison, I say. Their mystics have long been in collusion with the Ellyassi and their elemental secrets," Randell said.

"They say anyone who drank the lemonade is to be quarantined. For once, I am glad that our status didn't allow us the luxuries of royalty."

"Aye." Randell raked the trash around him and turned, letting his face fall into shadow.



## THE KING'S DESCENT

Ember walked past the two guards and entered the king's bed-chamber. The room smelled of medicines and herbs, covering the scent of musk she normally associated with her father. She found the aged Lord Artemus pacing the floor by the balcony, as he had done since the king had fallen ill. *Less than twenty-four hours ago my biggest worry was my recital. Now...* She sighed.

"Good morning, Ember," he greeted, his voice hoarse as if he had not spoken for hours.

"How is he?" Asking the question was enough to make the lump in her stomach tighten worse than at any time during her night of tossing and turning.

Lord Artemus gazed into her raw eyes, his face drawn with worry and sleeplessness. "He's burning with fever, mostly unresponsive. The healers have done what they can. They have decided it is magical in nature."

"What does that *mean*?" Ember looked over to her father lying in his bed. Her racing heart skipped a beat as she waited.

"It means, it's left to Elwyn to find a cure. He performed an examination in the middle of the night, but he's been holed up in his tower ever since, doing lords know what."

She turned to her father's bed, stopping a moment to study the painting of her parents that hung above the fireplace. In it, they were both smiling. He stood behind her mother, arms wrapped tight with his hands intertwined, embracing her pregnant belly. It was the last portrait done before her mother's death. The image usually made her smile, even though it always

left her with questions she was too afraid to ask. This time, she felt a moment's peace. Seeing her father healthy and happy, even for a moment, calmed the storm within.

Ember continued to her father's bedside, damming the river of tears behind her lids. In his scarred hand, he clutched something she had only seen a handful of times before—an amulet given to him by her mother. Forged in crystal, it held the shape of a flame. The amulet's orange translucent color glowed in the light of all the candles surrounding the bed. She sat next to him and took his other hand in hers, rubbing it against her tear-stained cheeks. "Father. Hear me, please," she whispered. "I need you."

She focused her thoughts on a happy memory, smiling as she remembered a time from a few years back, when she rode one of the kingdom's rare horses in the countryside with her father. They travelled along the Dragon's Blood River, which flowed from the impassible Dragon's Teeth mountain range that marked the southern border of the kingdom and the known lands of the Division. She remembered they'd had a picnic that day. They had talked, laughed, eaten, and laughed some more. For once, it had been just the two of them, without the guards, servants, or advisors. For once, they were father and daughter, not king and heir.

Ember's smile widened, even as fresh pain swelled at the edges of her eyes. She squeezed his limp hand, absorbing the warmth she found there. Her tears mixed with the thin sheen of sweat on his skin, leaving a pool where their flesh connected. "Oh father..."

Minutes passed in silence, with only the gentle tread of Lord Artemus's feet echoing around the cool stone room.



INSIDE THE KING'S MIND, the fever burned, images flashed, and memories played. He could see the whole of the Division from above, with growing blackness along its borders. Upon each horizon was a growing mass of dark clouds, bulging at the seams, preparing to burst forth like a tidal wave and wash away the Division. Yet he stood, arms upraised, willing it all to stay in place. Ember's voice floated in the king's mind and plunged him from the darkness into his memories.

*Faces swirled, the world trembled, and he found himself sitting on a log next to an early morning campfire. Across from him, three older men rested, hot mugs of tea in their hands and empty breakfast plates at their feet. Laughter from his left brought his attention away before he could register recognition.*

*A young, scar-free Markoon Lynch sat beside him, hand on his belly, bent over laughing.*

*"And then," Markoon interrupted himself with a laugh, "and then, Warren let the arrow fly. It missed by a mile."*

*"Sounds like someone needs to spend more time on the practice range," one of the older men added.*

*"You're right there, Shef, either that or I need to make him some better arrows."*

*"Hey now, wait a minute," Warren spoke. "Give me a chance to tell my side of things!"*

*"No time." Markoon stood, grabbing his pack and bow. "We've got dust bunnies to hunt."*

*"Dust bunnies?" Captain Sheffield asked, sipping his tea.*

*"Yeah, you know those little brown and white rabbits on the plains? They're everywhere up there, jumping from hole to hole. We should be able to bag a dozen or more with our bows."*

*"At least the two of you will stay out of trouble up there, right?" Captain Sheffield looked back and forth between them.*

*"Of course," Warren said as he stood. "It's the plains. The only place more boring is sitting in on the royal council. Besides, this will give me an opportunity to redeem my prowess with the bow."*

*Markoon chuckled beside him, while adjusting the strap of his quiver.*

*"What?"*

*"Let's have a little contest. Whoever gets the most rabbits, we'll name King of the Voo for a day."*

*"The Voo?" A fit of coughs tore through Warren and his eyes popped open.*



A COUGH from her father brought Ember from her own memories. She jumped up and saw his eyes fluttering. "Artemus!" she shouted. "He's waking."

Lord Artemus leapt in surprise. "I will alert Elwyn, he will want to speak to the king."

The old man hurried from the room, his feet scraping the cold stone floor as he shuffled.



## ATOP THE TALLEST TOWER

A book covered in worn leather, its pages brittle, lay open on the desk before Elwyn Carkandy, the High Wizard of Raneban. Having found the section he had been searching for, he read the passage in front of him.

“ Their presence is marked by night sweats, strange dreams, and often voices heard at all times as if one's own. In certain cases, a physical mark laying across the skin like a striped bruise or a tattoo will appear. Their intent is to slowly take over the possessed, to weaken their willpower until they are no longer able to fight and will give in to the voice's commands.

The only process known by which one can be removed is by burning it

out or causing it great pain via the host's body. They will flee either.

Unfortunately, this usually claims the life of the host as well.

Approaching footsteps echoed from the stairwell that led to Elwyn's rooms atop the castle's highest tower. He brought both halves of the tome

together and set it to rest on the edge of his desk. The title, 'Demonic Possessions and Their Cures', lay obscured with the cover facing down. He pushed his glasses up from the tip of his long, weathered nose, glaring at the book as if he wanted to spit on it, then said with a bitter, sarcastic sigh, "Well, that explains a lot."

He stepped away from the desk, pulling the sleeves of his grey shimmering cloak down and his hood up. When Lord Artemus entered, he found Elwyn standing before his desk, covered in the cloak with only his face and long white hair showing, his arms folded, hands clasped together within the robes.

Lord Artemus stood panting at the top of the stairs, with one arm resting against the cool stone wall. He studied the only visible part of the man across from him, wondering when Elwyn had gotten so old. *Aren't I supposed to be the eldest? The wizard appears much older than I remember. Well, magic will do that to you...* Short of breath, Lord Artemus spoke, "Have you found a cure?"

"No," Elwyn replied, his voice as strong and commanding as ever despite his aged countenance. "What news have you?"

"The king is awake and talking to Ember."

"What?" Elwyn's widened eyes flashed with surprise.



## STORMS HAVE COME

**K**ing Warren Raneban opened his eyes for the first time in many hours and saw his daughter beside the bed. He gave her a slight smile and whispered in a soft, cracking voice, "Em, are we alone?"

"Yes," she responded, her words coming out in a rush. "Are you better? How do you feel?"

"For a moment, I think. But not... look Em, I know I haven't always been a good father, without your mother—"

"Stop, father. Save your energy. Lord Artemus is fetching Elwyn; he will help you get back to health." Ember placed her hand on her father's shoulder, trying to comfort him.

"No!" His voice carried a command, silencing her. "There isn't time. It's just me and you..." he rasped, struggling for breath. "You are the future, Em."

"Father, stop. I don't want to hear this." The candlelight danced around them, emphasizing the creases and shadows on their faces as they stared at each other.

"Ember. Listen. You must go, now. Tell no one. There is a traitor among us."

"Go where, father? What can I do? I'm only a girl." Her voice choked on these last words as her throat tightened.

He mustered a laugh at this. "Ember, you are so much more than you label yourself. You have your mother's heart, her fiery determination, and," he smiled, "her temper. You're a young woman, a princess, a leader."

"But, father—" She brushed a mass of red curls from her face.

"Hush, Em. My time is short and there are things you must know; dark storms are on the horizon. They bring a blackness that will envelop all of the Division."

"There has to be a cure, a way to help you," she pleaded, gulping down the rising fear.

A familiar look came across his face, one which said he'd made a decision and would not be dissuaded. "Ember, you must travel to the Voo. At the top of the valley—" He coughed a wet, phlegm-filled cough. Specks of warm blood coated his lips.

"Father!" Ember cried.

"There you will find, Terra Cree." His voice grew weaker with each word. "There you will find help."

"What is it, father? Is it a cure? Will it make you well again?" Her mind raced with more questions than she could express. *How can I do this on my own? I've never even heard of Terra Cree.*

His mouth opened to respond, but his gaze drifted away. Noise came from the corridor outside, footsteps approaching. His eyes widened. He lifted his scarred hand and the amulet it held. "Yes. Take this." He put the crystal talisman into her palm. "It will help protect you."

His eyes closed and his breathing slowed, "If you don't stop it, it'll be worse than the fall of Shillish Vane... Ember. The Division will be lost." The door to the king's chambers swung open as he fell back into the darkness of his mind.



## RABBIT HUNTING

**T**he boys walked from their encampment above the valley out onto the Plains of Trask. The brown and dry grass crunched like twigs snapping underneath their feet.

"What do you think is in that old shack on the mountain?" Markoon said, looking over his shoulder at the planks of mismatched wood that someone had strung together, off in the distance.

"I don't know. Captain Shef told me once that a crazy mountaineer lived in it, but no one's seen him in years."

"Maybe we should take a peek on the way back?" Markoon gave Warren a sly grin. "It could be my castle after I'm crowned King of the Voo."

"Your castle? Do you have any idea how many more dust bunnies than you I'm going to bag today?"

Markoon laughed, then broke into a run. "Not if I get them first," he yelled over his shoulder.



*THE DUO PULLED out their bows and scanned the terrain. They stood atop a small rise and surveyed the prairie filled with rabbit holes.*

*"This looks good," Markoon said.*

*"I count about forty burrows out there. Where are they all?"*

*"There's one." Markoon motioned with his bow as he drew an arrow.*

*Beside the nearest of the holes, almost indiscernible against the dirt aside from the white of its ears, a brown rabbit twitched its nose and stared at them.*

*Twip!*

*Markoon let his arrow fly. It smacked the dirt an inch behind the animal, which leapt forward and bounded across the dirt.*

*Warren tracked it, moving his bow a foot ahead of the vaulting bunny. He fired, impaling the rabbit with his arrow just as it dove for a hole. It stuck through the its mid-section, causing the creature to seesaw half in and half out of the hole.*

*"Whoa, did you see that?" Warren stood taller, looking on as the rabbit's body swung on the arrow's shaft.*

*"Nice shot." Markoon glanced at his own arrow resting in the dirt and trudged down the hill to retrieve it.*

*"Nice shot? I caught him right as he was diving for cover."*

*"Yeah, yeah," Markoon said. "Just luck. I'll show you how to shoot when the next one pops its head out of a hole."*



## WHO TO TRUST?

Elwyn burst into the king's chambers and hurried to the bedside. The king slept again. Startled but sullen, Ember looked up at Elwyn from beside her father.

"What did he say?" Elwyn commanded.

Ember squinted her tired-eyes, focusing on the wizard, his interruption breaking the relentless string of worry about her father's orders. *How can I possibly do what he's asked? I've never even left the kingdom! I'm still a child...* "Have you found a cure?" she demanded, hoping maybe she wouldn't have to do what had been asked of her.

"What did he say, Ember? It could be important." His voice was softer now, less demanding, more like the wizard she knew.

She rose slowly, her body tired from the restless night of worry. Her head only reached the wizard's chest so she had to crane her neck to look up at him. "He said storms are coming and I have to stop them."

"What else did he say?" Elwyn nudged her chin to meet his gaze and peered into her eyes.

Ember's cheeks reddened as she struggled through the fog of grief and despair, not sure how to respond or who to trust. *I can't do this alone, Elwyn is a friend.* Finally, she gave up her struggle and answered. "He told me to go to the Voo, to seek something or someone called Terra Cree. That they could help me; but to do it by myself. There are traitors here."

Elwyn took a deep breath, blinked his eyes, and spoke. "He is right, Ember. A storm is coming; the type of storm that has come before, like the

one that destroyed the great city of Shillish Vane and left the world as it is today."

"But what can we do? How do we stop it? What about the barriers, don't they protect us?" Ember clenched her fists at her sides. The shadows on her father's bed felt like the darkness closing in on her.

"Yes, they protect us, but there are powerful forces at work. Not even the Earth Guardian can hold them off forever. The barriers may fall and the ancient war between the Ellyassi and the Illyarri will resume. Already they slip through in small numbers."

"I thought the Earth Guardian was just a legend they taught kids in fairy tales." Ember's face crumpled. "What does this have to do with us?"

"The Earth Guardian is very real, but grows weaker with time. What your father told you to seek, I believe holds the answers and the ability to heal him." Elwyn gazed at the king, rested his hand on the man he had served for the last fifteen years, and lied to the princess. "You must bring what you find back here, to me. Together, we can cure your father and what ails the Division."

Ember nodded at Elwyn's words. "Is what I seek the Earth Guardian itself?"

"No. At least, not anymore. That much I know for certain."

She glanced over at her father's pale, sweat-covered face; he had aged overnight. Elwyn's voice stopped her as she headed towards the door.

"Just one thing, Ember."

She turned, looking at the mage expectantly. "What is it?"

"Tell no one. Go alone, as your father instructed. It will be dangerous for any that accompany you. Make sure your friends stay behind. I will send someone that can aid you."

She smiled, feeling a bit of the terrible weight lifted from her shoulders. "Thank you, Elwyn. You are a true friend to our kingdom."

He nodded as she left the room.



IN THE HALL OUTSIDE, Ember found Lord Artemus, still pacing, talking with one of the King's matrons. He spun on his feet quicker than a man of his age should be capable, his expression one of both hope and concern. "How is the king?"

"Gone again, sleeping," she said, charging past, head down, lost in her own concerns.

Lord Artemus's shoulders slumped and his eyes trailed after her. "Ember, where are you off to in such a hurry?"

She turned, combing a hand through her hair and focusing on the ground. "I just need a break. I'm retiring to my rooms to clear my head." She shook her head, rueful and distracted, to show how full it was.

"Be safe, young one." He stared after her, face tightening, then looked back at the closed door to the king's chamber with Elwyn still inside. There was something she was not saying, but he could not pressure her to tell him. Not now. His brow furrowed and he spoke to the matron quietly. "Send someone to keep an eye on her."



## FRIENDS DON'T LIE

**A**t the entrance to her rooms, Ember found her best friend waiting. Cami leaned against the wall near the closed door, tossing a small dagger by the blade and catching it by the handle. One of her nervous habits. Cami rushed forward, wrapping her in a tight hug. "I've been so worried about you!"

Ember felt relief in the embrace, then her mind shifted to worry. *I can't tell her anything! She'll insist on coming if I do and I can't put her in danger. This is my responsibility.* Ember's heart pounded in her chest and she broke away. They entered the room in silence, Cami trailing Ember as the latter walked to a pile of garments in the corner and removed a leather knapsack.

Cami raised an eyebrow as she watched her friend's movements. "How is he?"

Ember bit her lip and glanced around, anywhere but at her friend. She stood frozen, wanting to answer Cami's question, but fearing she would reveal too much.

Cami studied her a moment then walked over, placing a hand on the other girl's shoulder and looking into her eyes. "Honey, talk to me?"

Ember slipped from her gentle grip, walking across the room to pick up an outfit. "He's the same; he woke for a minute, but sleeps again now."

"Did he speak?"

"Yes." Ember stuffed the clothes in her pack. "A little."

The creases on Cami's forehead deepened. "I'm sorry, Ember, and I don't mean to pry. I know this is hard for you."

"Yah, that's okay, don't..." Grimacing, she dug through a drawer.

"Ember, what are you doing?" Camilaya tilted her head down to catch Ember's eye.

The princess didn't answer, but her friends question weighed on her mind as she again spun in an opposite direction. *Stop talking. Stop asking me questions. I can't do this on my own!*

"Why are you packing a bag?"

Again, no response.

Cami crossed her arms over her chest and glared as the redhead continued her chaotic packing and avoidance.

In conspicuous silence, Ember walked to her large wardrobe in the corner. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror next to it, so different from yesterday when she and Cami had admired her dress. Pushing these thoughts from her head, she opened the wardrobe's doors and found a small dagger hanging from the strap of its scabbard. She took it down and ran a finger across the crest of Raneban engraved into the hilt. With a deep breath, she slid it onto her belt and closed the buckle.

"Ember!" Cami's shout came from closer than expected, her migration across the room having gone unnoticed.

The princess whirled in shock. As she faced her friend, her shoulders sagged and tears poured from her eyes before she could blink them away. Cami stepped forward and wrapped Ember tight in her arms. Feeling the last of her resolve melting away, Ember collapsed against the taller girl, the stress, fear, and uncertainty of the last day finally coming to head and overwhelming her. Holding each other close, the two girls dropped to the floor sobbing.

When the tempest had passed, Cami wiped the wet hair from Ember's face and stared into her friend's eyes searching for answers. "What's going on?"

"I..." Ember started, her whole body trembling and choking off her voice. "I have to go away." Relief and then fear flowed through Ember as she let out a huge breath than strained to refill her lungs in panic. *I need her, but I can't tell her where I'm going.*

Cami nodded. "Okay. Where are we heading?" She gave a half smile, trying to brighten her friend's mood.

"No, I have to do it alone." Ember stiffened, pulling back.

"What? Where are you supposed to go?" Cami's face soured. "And alone? You're the princess. You don't go anywhere outside the castle without armed guards."

"The Voo. "

"The Valley of Orange?" Cami asked, brow furrowed as her mind filled with questions and her gut with frustration. "What for? This is ludicrous. Is your dad ordering you to the valley to keep you safe? Why not to Rone and King Sero in Vonodora? Is the kingdom going to be attacked like the rumors are saying? Is it Lynch?"

Ember gritted her teeth. *She's going to think I'm nuts and as much as I want her to come with me, I can't put her in danger like that.* "I don't know about any of that. I have to find a cure for my father. He said to find some person or thing or, I don't know, *something* that can help, but I have to go alone."

"You can't go alone, Ember! I'm coming with you." Cami straightened, sure that she was winning. "Besides, how many times have you been outside of the castle on your own?"

Ember shook her head; they both knew the answer to that. Never. "I can't ask this of you." *And I won't allow it either.*

Cami swung her long, black hair over her shoulder. "You didn't." She hugged Ember, stood, and helped her to her feet. "Wait here, I'll pack my stuff and come back. Then we can go."

Ember nodded at her friend, looking into her grey eyes, and hoped that she wouldn't hear the lie in her voice. "Ok. I'll wait for you."

After watching the door close behind Cami, Ember rushed to fill her knapsack. Within a few minutes, she had gathered everything she could think of and slung it over her shoulder. Looking into the mirror, she glimpsed herself: her red hair was a mess, her cheeks and eyes puffy from crying, and the simple leather tunic she'd worn all day looked as much a shamble as she felt.

"How can I do this?" she said to her reflection. "How can I do what he asks of me?"

She considered waiting for Cami, then caught sight of the amulet her father had given her, strung loose around her neck. She gripped it, feeling its warmth, feeling her father's warmth. With a deep breath as she squeezed

the crystal, her determination set in. She grabbed her black cloak from within the wardrobe and threw it over her shoulders.

After checking herself in the mirror again, she saw her red locks sticking out from under the hood. *That won't do. I'll have to figure something out about this hair; people mustn't recognize me.* On the bed she spied the small satchel containing her knitting supplies. She grabbed it and added a ball of dark yarn and a pair of large wooden needles. *This will keep me busy on the trip. Maybe I can make a hat, to cover my hair.* She smiled, tying the bag to the right side of her belt, opposite the dagger. With a final glance around the room, she nodded to herself and slipped out the door.

After a quick stop in the kitchen for rations, she disappeared into the black night of the Division.



## A NOTE TO A FRIEND

**B**ack atop the highest tower, Elwyn leaned over his desk, quill in hand, crafting a message onto a thick piece of parchment.

-Ember has left the castle in search of Terra Cree. She goes north into the Voo. Find her.-

E. C.

He blew on the note to dry the ink and let his gaze wander to the book, once again open on his desk. He blinked his eyes as he re-read the words before walking to the window. His hands folded and bent the parchment, turning here, folding there. When he finished, a small paper dove rested in his palm.

He opened the shutters and chanted, "Om rah, Mokatell." Then tossed his creation aloft. The breeze caught it as wings sprouted, tail feathers blossomed, and a beak and head appeared. With a flutter, the bird took flight and disappeared into the cloudy night sky.



## THE SWORD OF RANEBAN

Cami rushed from her room, loaded with weapons, and ran straight into her father.

"Where are you going?" He looked more amused than serious, but concern grew in his eyes as he examined her. She opened her mouth without stopping, still heading toward the door, but could not seem to force the words out.

"What's this about, Cami?"

She paused by the exit and took a deep breath as she turned back to face him, her hand on the knob. "Ember is going to the Voo. The king sent her there, alone. I..."

"Yes. You are going with her," he nodded, then muttered as he strode across the room. "Damn stubborn Warren." He stood at the fireplace and looked up at the great sword mounted there. With a firm decisiveness in his voice, he pronounced, "and you're taking this."

Cami's jaw dropped open as he reached up and plucked the weapon from its perch. She knew little about the Sword of Raneban, only that he had made it at Elwyn's request, back when he was still an apprentice weapons maker and a knight in the king's army. Elwyn, it was said, had cast a spell on it, granting it special power, a power used to protect the king during his travels in the Voo as a youth. Cami could not recall the last time she had even seen her father handle it.

A quick swipe with a cloth from the big man's pocket removed a thin coating of dust to reveal its bright metal and the symbols etched on the blade. The etching scrolled like words, but in a language she did not know.

On the hilt, the Raneban Crest. When he handed her the weapon in silence, Cami saw moisture glistening in her father's eyes. She expected the sword to be warm coming from its place above the fire, but found it cool, almost cold, to the touch.

"This sword will help to protect you," he paused for the briefest of moments, "and Ember from the creatures of the Voo, of which there are many. Some friendly, most not."

"Father?"

"Camilaya, you're not only her friend, but you're her protector now. Be safe."

With a clank of metal, he pulled her close in a tight yet short embrace.

"Thank you," she whispered into his shoulder.

And so she left their house, carrying every weapon she could strap to her body. With one long sword and a short axe strapped to her back, two daggers hooked to her belt, plus the pack full of smaller weapons, she wore more steel than most households owned. And that was before considering the most precious item she bore—her father's sword, the Sword of Raneban.



LADEN WITH WEAPONS and out of breath, but filled with adventure and the spirit that came with her father's blessing, Cami arrived at Ember's door. It lay open, items scattered in disarray, but her friend was not there.

"Ember," she muttered and shook her head. *If she didn't think she needed help, grr..., I'm not letting her get killed just because she's so damn stubborn.* Cami spun, stomping back down the stairs.



OUTSIDE THE CASTLE, rain fell in sheets and the streets stood dark and deserted. Cami flipped her cloak's hood up and made her way to a large building near her own home. Standing in the downpour, she knocked on the one door where she might find help.



## THE FAMILY EVERGARD

The wooden door swung open, revealing a burly man cast in shadow by the crystal lights glowing behind him. Most people would have shied away at his presence; Camilaya smiled.

"Cami!" the man bellowed. "Come in. Get out of the rain, you crazy girl!"

Cami ducked under his arm, shaking her cloak off and removing her hood. The man scanned outside, searching, and then turned to Cami as he closed the door. "Where's your cohort in crime?"

"That's why I'm here, Commander Shef. Ember's gone."

"What?" Commander Sheffield Evergard said, eyes raised, taking a step backward as the rain pounded even harder upon the roof. "Where has she gone? Was she kidnapped?"

Over the commander's shoulder Cami saw three forms rise from their chairs and move nearer. She recognized them immediately as Ethan, Evan, and their mother.

"What's happened?" Mrs. Evergard asked, her soft voice strained.

As Cami struggled to catch her breath, Evan threw more questions at her, "Cam, why are you carrying so many weapons? And..." he studied her closer, "is that the Sword of Raneban on your belt?"

"Slow down!" she panted. "Yes, it is. No, she hasn't been kidnapped. I'm going..." she gulped, "after her." She took another long inhale as the four Evergards peppered her with more questions.

"Stop!" she snapped, then looked to the commander. "She left the castle on her own. The king sent her on some quest. She was supposed to wait for

me," her voice grew hard. "But when I got back to her room, she had already gone." Cami let out a long sigh. "I'm scared for her."

"You did the right thing coming here," Commander Sheffield said. He bent, picking up a cloak and a piece of his armor from beside the door.

His wife's voice rang out. "No, Shef! You mustn't."

The bear of a man paused, one leg in his padded leather leggings.

"You have to stay here, to lead the armies in case of an attack. With the king ill, Ember leaving, plus Tyson missing..." she glanced away, her round face red and swollen. Her weeping filled the air.

The commander cursed and crossed the room dragging his pants from one leg to embrace his wife. "Cami, do you know where Ember may have gone?"

"Yes, he told her to go to the Voo, to find a man there, that he would have a cure."

"The Valley..." Commander Shef said, turning thoughtful as his wife clutched his arm.

"Do you have any idea why the king would have sent her there alone?" Cami asked.

He remained silent a moment, studying the sword at her side. "Perhaps. Long ago..." He shook his head and glanced away from the weapon to her face. "There were things that happened there, but what they have to do with today I don't know and it's no place for children alone." He squeezed his wife's hand then studied his sons, both of whom stood waiting in silence.

"Ethan, run to the barracks, fetch Neko and Nena. Have them get packed and come back here. Keep quiet the reason."

"Yes, father," Ethan said, nodding and bolting out the door.

"When you return, you and they will accompany Cami, find Ember, protect her and make sure she returns safely."

"What about me, father?" Evan asked from behind. All faces turned to look at him. "Should I get ready?"

"No!" his mother exclaimed, crumpling against her husband.

Commander Shef lowered his wife to her chair, then twisted to face his youngest son. "Your mother's right, son. With Ty having not returned from his scouting mission, I dare not send you both into danger. It would break your mother's heart."

"But dad," Evan's eyes darted to Cami, his cheeks flushing, "I'm almost 16. I deserve a chance to prove myself."

"You will get a chance," his father nodded, "but this is not it."

Evan's face reddened and his lips pulled into a tight line. He stared from face to face, looking for support. Finding none, he turned and stormed from the room. The sound of his feet thundering up the stairs echoed through the silence.



EVAN EVERGARD WATCHED from his rain-splattered window as the small party left the front step, walking toward the town's west gate. He wiped tears from his face as the group disappeared from view. Having made up his mind, he pulled his pack from underneath the bed and started to stuff it full of clothes.

## PART IV

A BOY IN A BOX



## PRISONER

**W**arren tossed the rabbit carcass into a canvas sack and waited for Markoon to join him. The other youth walked over with his head down and his long, dark hair shadowing his features.

"Think we scared them off?" Warren asked.

"Nah." Markoon looked up, eyes focusing on something in the distance. "Did you hear that?"

Warren turned to the rise they had come down, cocking his head to hear. There was a series of clicks amongst the snapping of dry grass. Nothing he'd ever heard before. He glanced at Markoon, nodded, and patted his hand palm down in the air. They bent low and crept up the hill.

They peered over the crest, spying four dark shapes with a flash of red making their way across the plains towards them. A young girl caught their attention first, her fiery, flowing hair the only color among the cloaked group. They saw the two large figures flanking her and the robe-clad leader, who was a full foot shorter than the other two shrouded forms, before they realized that the girl's hands were bound.

"What do you think is going on?" Markoon whispered.

"Slavers, maybe. They're heading toward the Badlands. Maybe taking her to the crystal farms?"

They shared a look, neither pleasant.

"Three against two? Should be easy." Markoon grinned.

"They're not rabbits. Those ones look like they shoot back if you miss."

Markoon scowled at Warren. "I won't miss." He notched an arrow in his bow. "Besides, doesn't look like they have bows, only those big swords on

*their backs."*

*"Take the pair holding the girl first?"*

*Markoon nodded.*

*"On three." Warren counted down as the foursome moved closer to their position.*

*Thwip! Thwip!*

*The arrows flew, both striking their targets. Warren's struck the robed form in the back of the group in the left shoulder. Markoon's sunk into the chest of the creature in front of the girl. Both large forms dropped to the ground, taking her with them. Her screams echoed across the plains.*

*The boys each grabbed new arrows, notching them in their bows.*

*"Whoever lands the best shot gets the girl?" Markoon jested, jumping into a shooting stance before Warren could respond.*

*"You're on," Warren answered, but as he scrambled to his feet, Markoon let loose his bowstring.*

*The third man spun to face the boys as his comrades fell and, seeing Markoon's arrow approaching, raised his arm. A flash of blue light blasted from his sleeve. The air before him froze into a circle forming a shield of ice. The arrow smashed into the ward, snapping in two.*

*Warren took his shot. The man twitched his hand, sending out another bolt of blue light that connected with the shaft. It stopped in mid-air, encased in ice, and fell to the dirt.*

*Warren and Markoon exchanged glances as they each notched new arrows. Warren tilted his head to the left and Markoon nodded. They separated, stalking the small figure who now stood over the red-haired beauty. The young woman struggled at the bonds that attached her to the fallen men.*

*The robed form tracked Warren's movement while keeping his arm raised in Markoon's direction. His other arm slipped from within his robes, a thin silver blade glinting in the sunlight. He grabbed the girl and put it to her throat.*

*"This doesn't concern you boys," the figure spoke. "Be gone from here."*

*"I don't think so, stranger," Warren shouted in response. "Let her go and we might let you walk away."*

*From the hood of the man's robe a laugh cackled, filling the air with its eerie pitch. "I believe, my dear," he squeezed the girl's throat tighter and*

*leaned in, pretending to whisper in her ear, "that your would-be saviors are in for a hard, cold lesson." He pushed the girl forward, tripping her and shooting a blue pulse at Markoon. Warren saw the man grab the exposed arm on one of the fallen men, followed by another flash.*

*Markoon dove into the dirt, the magical burst passing inches above him. He looked up to see a second blue bolt zip past.*

*Warren ran further left, stumbling across the uneven terrain, and fired his arrow, missing his target by inches. The robed form rose, facing him as he sprinted.*

*Markoon jumped up just as the two bodies tied to the woman clambered to their feet, plucking the arrows from their cloaks.*

*Warren ducked and rolled across the ground, dropping his bow in the process as the strange man blasted a stream of blue flashes from his hand. The tan dry grass at Warren's feet turned cyan as it froze solid.*

*"Give me the reins," the leader said to the reanimated soldiers. They untied the ropes from around their waists, handing them to the shorter man. "Now deal with our pesky friends."*

*As the two men each pivoted to face one of the boys, they shed their robes, exposing the iced-over flesh of Illyarri soldiers. Warren, on his knees, stared open mouthed. He had never seen creatures such as these on the Division. "What kind of devils are you?"*

*The small man's hood fell as the young woman tugged at her binds, revealing the pale blue skin and long-looped ear-ringed ears of an Illyarri Mage. "We are Illyarri, human, and we will feast on your remains." He commanded the soldiers next to him. "Kill them!"*

*"Yes, Talyn Rae." They nodded and separated, advancing on the boys, long swords drawn.*

*Markoon, who had prepared another arrow, fired. It struck the approaching soldier and bounced off the icy frame.*

*"That's not going to work." Markoon dropped his bow and pulled out his sword. "Any idea's here, Warren?"*

*Warren shook his head silently as he drew his own sword.*

*The mage yanked the girl by her ropes and continued northward, ignoring the combatants. She stared after Warren and Markoon before being jerked away by the Illyarri mystic.*



## PHATS AND KATS

On the icy shores of the Illyarri plane where the cold waters lapped against the frozen land, a dark, huddled mass lay in rest at the feet of Talyn Rae. The Illyarri Archmage whispered a spell of transformation and power in his native tongue. The lump glowed with bluish light, trembling as he worked the magic. Far on the other side of the glacial waters, barely visible, a glowing blue circle opened, a hole in the barrier that separated the elemental realm from the world of the Division.

"The girl is alone, traveling north," Talyn Rae spoke to the form before him. "She has the amulet. Find her, kill her, and return it to me. She must be stopped before she reaches him."

The spell completed, its mission decreed, the mass slid into the ocean to carry out its assignment. In the frigid water, it took shape, transforming from a gelatinous blob to a massive creature of the sea. A long body of silver-blue flesh, crystal fins of ice, savage frozen eyes, and row after row of dagger-like teeth lined its grinning mouth. With growing speed, it hurtled through the water, toward the opening in the barrier, which closed with a pop as soon as the creature passed through to the Division.

The Illyarri creature continued to mutate as it neared the coast. The warming water melted away the carapace of ice, revealing a tough, grey flesh. Its body grew thinner, the fins shrinking until they disappeared entirely a hundred yards from shore. Appendages emerged from its sides and its tail separated in two, feet appearing at its ends.

The feet touched wet sand, and the form stepped from the water. Clothes the likes of which had never been seen in this land appeared on its

body—a dark grey suit of thread so fine any seamstress on the Division would not know how it came into creation and a thick-grey overcoat lined with something that kept it rigid. A man's outline now stood at the shore, but the head remained that of the shark, low on the neck, jutting forward with a grin of razor-sharp teeth. His eyes were as black as night and set on the sides of his face. His nose, small slits that flared as he took in his first breath, smelling every animal, plant, and insect within a hundred yards.

As he reached the dry sand of the beach, he bent to pick up a gnarled stick that lay there. In a flash, it transformed from a plain knotted branch into a long blue staff of crystal that emanated a dark cyan light from the narrow end. The man-shark examined it, twirling it in his hands, stopping suddenly as movement caught his eye. A small white dove circled above him in the sky. He pointed the staff at the bird and a blast of bluish energy shot out, striking it. Captured in mid-flight, its wings froze extended; weighed down by a thickened-crust of glowing ice, the dove plummeted to the beach.

Phats, for that was what he had decided to call himself on this plane, spread his monstrous grin wider and reached inside the flap of his coat. He drew forth one of a seemingly limitless supply of small throwing knives and turned toward the forest. He tossed the blade in the palm of his hand, watching out of his left eye as the bird plunged from the sky. When it was twenty feet off the ground, Phats threw the weapon, striking the bird dead-center, shattering it. The blade fell to the sand amongst a shower of frozen chunks of bird. Paying it no further attention, the shark-man disappeared into the forest that lay beyond the beach.

As the sun rose and the waters of the eastern sea lapped against the shoreline, the bird and knife began to melt. In this early light of the morning, a medium-sized feline shape emerged from the forest line a few dozen yards down from where Phats had disappeared, its large seven-fingered paws leaving prints in the sand as it approached the liquifying remains. It examined the knife and the pieces of the bird with a sniff, and licked the red-stained water.

The cat mewed low, a sound that changed to a growl as it feasted on the remnants. When it had finished, it too trotted into the forest.



## NOT SO ALONE IN THE WOODS

Ember walked north in the forest along the edge of Lake Nivereth in the direction of the central trading city, Traskein. Her hands moved rhythmically, working a pair of wooden needles and strands of wool she drew from the bag tied to her belt. The early morning sun warmed her skin, but a cool breeze blew off the lake. She tugged her cloak tight, dropping a stitch in the process. *Grr.* She growled at herself as she paused her step to fix it. "It would be nice to get this done, as much to hide my hair color as to stay warm from that freezing wind," she said to the yarn.

She held her half-finished hair wrap up in the light and admired her work. "Not bad for three days of walking and knitting. Now if I could just stop talking to myself!" An indistinct shape moving on the lake caught her eye. *Is that a fishing boat?* She blinked, trying to make it out until her tummy growled. She'd eaten half of her rations in the three days since she'd left the castle. Sleeping in the cold with little more than her extra clothes to keep her warm had made her hungrier than she had expected. Having been in such a hurry to avoid Cami or anyone else, she had only grabbed what she could find quickly rather than chosen well for such a trip. *Oh, the castle has got to be in an uproar.* Thoughts of home brought images of her father lying sick in his bed and tears filled her eyes. She stuffed her knitting into its bag and fiddled with the amulet around her neck before resuming her trek.

A Belly-berry bush at the edge of the trail brought her to a stop again a moment later. It had very little fruit left, and Ember guessed the forest creatures had made short work of the luscious purple berries, given how

few other travelers she had seen since her departure. Still, she found a handful and ate them gratefully. *Better than salted meats and stale bread any day.* She had considered asking some of those she had seen walking the path for trade, but had instead avoided them by hiding, not wanting to be recognized.

Searching for more berries, she noticed many of the smaller plants were turning yellow. It seemed early for seasonal changes, but she shrugged. Maybe things were different out here compared to back home. Legends and tales abounded about the Division's twisted wildlife and poisoned earth closer to the Badlands.

There was even a multi-kingdom contingent of Border Guards, one of the few things that had stayed intact during the years of strained relations. They patrolled the borders to keep the Badland's mutated beasts from making their way onto the rest of the Division. Elwyn himself had been dispatched more than once to help deal with the monstrous creatures that had emerged from its depths. Many said they were the weakened forms of elemental beings trapped on the Division after the great battle.

*At least I won't be going that far. The Voo is well below the Badlands. Closer than I have ever been, perhaps, but I don't have to go all the way there.*

A snap of a twig brought her out of her reverie. She looked back and forth but did not see anyone approaching on the expanse of trail in her view. Ember shivered again, and it was not just from the breeze coming off the lake. Another snap came from the trees behind her. She twisted, peering into the dark branches and undergrowth. *It's probably just a squirrel or something.* A shadow fell across her and a flit of movement in the tree canopy made her whirl. A flash of white, looking much larger than a squirrel. *Maybe a bird?* she rationalized, forcing herself to remain calm. A soft thud sounded behind her as whatever it was jumped from the limbs above to the path.

Ember's heart raced as she spun, hand falling to the scabbard holding her dagger. At first, she didn't see anyone, then her breath caught in her throat as she started to laugh, the pressure releasing. "Aww," she cooed.

On the trail sat the most extraordinary Night Cat she had ever seen, licking at one of its large paws. The animal stretched to almost three feet

long and appeared over twenty pounds. Its long, shiny fur was pure white. As Ember gazed at it, she felt she recognized it from somewhere.

"What are you doing here?"

It paused at the sound of her voice before responding with a soft mew and returning to licking its paw. After watching it for a moment, Ember removed her pack and pulled out the salted meat. Unwrapping it and dropping to one knee, she offered a piece to the cat.

Night Cats were rare creatures. Known to have been plentiful before the fall of Shillish Vane, now there were few in existence. Their mischievous natures caused many to mistrust them, despite their well-known intelligence. They were also said to bring good luck to any that befriended them, a fact that led to the further rarity of the beautiful animals. Poachers in Traskein, the trading city atop Lake Nivereth, had taken to capturing the animals and chopping off their paws as charms to sell to the superstitious people of the three kingdoms.

"Here you go." Ember wiggled the meat in her fingers. The Night Cat's averted gaze seemed disinterested, but it sauntered forward to sniff. As it approached, she peered into the cat's eyes. One was green, the other blue. *How odd.* "How old are you, I wonder? Your eyes reveal a soul much older than any I have seen before, yet you look familiar." She scrunched her face as the cat nodded and licked at the piece of salted meat. Ember knew of only a few Night Cats in all of Raneban and none such as this one. "Are you someone's pet?"

The cat continued to lick the meat, nodding affirmatively, then stopped and shook its head an emphatic no. Ember raised her eyebrows in surprise.

With a tug, the feline took the food out of Ember's grasp and peered up at her as it chewed. Her hand free, the princess reached out tentatively, happy when the cat purred as she stroked its fur. "Well, where did you come from?"

Ember stared at it, and then something occurred to her. She realized what stood out was not the familiarity she felt earlier, but how it waited patiently. "Did..." she hesitated, stopping to phrase the question properly. "Did Elwyn send you?"

The cat's ears perked up at this and it dropped the meat to nod, purring louder.

Ember's forehead wrinkled as she studied the animal. "Why would he send you? Sure, I need all the luck I can get, but what kind of aid is a Night Cat?" She stared out at the lake again, trying to distract herself looking for the boat. A tug at her side brought her attention back. The cat played with a loose thread hanging from her knitting bag, pulling on it with its seven-fingered paw.

"Hey! Stop that!" She tucked the yarn in her pouch. "I've got enough problems without you yanking out my stitches. I'd heard you cats were as much trouble as you were luck. Keep that up and I may not share any more of my meat with you."

"Meow?"

"He-he. Ok, you win. You're too cute." Ember grinned as she rose and brushed dirt off her knees. "Well, my new companion, let's get going. I have a father to save. Guess I'll have to think of a name to call you. Are you a boy or a girl?"

The cat cocked its head at her. "Ah. Maybe I should stick with yes or no questions. So, are you a tomcat?"

The cat shook its head.

"Ok, female names then."

The animal nodded.

"Let's see, how about... Whitey?" Ember grimaced at the sound of it. Not deigning to answer, the cat lowered its head and walked away.

"Oh, come on," Ember called after her. "It was only my first try. I'll think up a better name." She hurried to catch up with her new friend, who now seemed to be leading the way.



## COMPANY

Ember opened her eyes, blinking away dreams of friends and family. She yawned and gazed around the small clearing in which she and the cat had made camp. It was a hundred yards off the main trail, far enough she would not be discovered by strangers passing. The cat had found it, quite insisted on it the night before actually. *Where is she anyway?* Ember scanned the area as she stretched her arms above her head, smiling. What a difference having a companion made on her attitude. She felt ready to take on the day. Sitting up, she saw the feline resting a few feet away, already awake and waiting.

"Up and at 'em early, huh?" She still did not have a name for the creature. The cat had disagreed with everything she proposed.

The cat nodded, running her tongue over her lips. Ember noticed the white fur surrounding her mouth was wet and tinged red.

"Eww, gross. At least I don't have to feed you, I guess. I don't really have much to share anyway."

After eating her own breakfast of bread and cheese, Ember wrapped her bedroll in canvas, packed it away, and took out her yarn and needles. She surveyed the area to make sure she had left nothing behind, then glanced at the cat. "Ready?"

Ember started back to the trail, but soon realized the cat wasn't following her. The stubborn animal was instead sitting on the other side of the clearing, prepared to head deeper into the woods. "No way," Ember said. "This trip is taking too long. I don't have time to go traipsing through the forest."

The cat met Ember's gaze, unmoving. They stared at each other a moment until Ember broke the silence.

"C'mon. If Elwyn really sent you to help me, you'll follow me where I need to go." To demonstrate her determination, she spun and strode toward the path, focusing her attention on her knitting.

The cat growled her discontent, but followed nonetheless.

"Good girl," Ember said, glancing at the cat walking a few feet behind her. "I'm sorry if I am being a snot. It's just, I have to do this quickly. My dad needs me."

As they reached the path, Ember cheered. "Aha!"

The cat looked up at the girl perplexed, tilting her head.

Ember held up her hands and moved her needles, exaggerating the final stitch and loop of yarn. With a smug smile, she knotted it tight, cut off and dropped the tail of the strand, and hoisted up her work, displaying the three-foot-long hair wrap. "It's done. How does it look?"

She showed it to the cat, who only mewed and glanced about.

"Hmph. Whatever," Ember uttered and stuffed the finished wrap into her pack. "Be that way."

She pulled out her flask and treaded to the water's edge to refill it before their day's trek. Her mouth fell open. The water carried an oily sheen and a red tint. On the rocky shoreline, the head of a fish lay torn from its body.

Ember narrowed her eyes, scrutinizing the cat waiting on all fours behind her. "Did you do this? Was this your breakfast? It's revolting. Is this why you didn't want to come this way? Didn't want me to see what you'd done?" She didn't know why she felt so angry. The cat was a cat after all. But this was such a bloody mess, so savage. Until this moment, she had perceived the feline as sweet and nice.

The cat looked down the trail, mewling louder, almost a whimper.

"Sorry," Ember said for the second time that morning, sighing. "Guess I woke up on the wrong side of the forest." She turned back to the water to find a clean spot to refill her bottle and her mouth widened. "Oh my gods!" Littering the rocky bank were a dozen fish heads and even the bony remains of some other creatures. Ember regarded the cat, brow furrowing. "What is this?"

The cat's distressed meow brought Ember's eyes from the horrific scene. She noticed the cat's left foot pawing at the ground. "What is it, honey?"

She knelt to examine the spot, discovering beneath the cat's paw a larger print pressed into the earth. Long and wide, it included an impression of six clawed toes. The prints travelled the trail in the direction they had come yesterday. *What kind of creature is this?*

A hiss from the cat caught Ember's attention. The feline stared down the path to the south, teeth bared, back arched.

"What is it?"

The cat looked to the lake, mewed, and then growled again.

"The creature that did that?"

The cat nodded.

"Is it coming back?"

Another nod.

Ember jumped up and spun to the northward trail. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

The cat shook her head and padded back toward where they'd camped, not looking to see if Ember followed. The girl remained in place for a moment, scowling as she watched the cat walk away, then stomped after her.

"Fine. We'll go your way," she muttered.



## THE BOY IN THE BOX

**D**eep in the woods, ever further from the main trail, Ember shadowed the stubborn animal.

"Ok, how about Rose?"

The cat kept walking.

"Tulip?"

Nothing.

"Hmph. Fine. You don't like flowers?"

The cat jumped over a small log without responding. Ember sighed, biting her lip. "You don't like any of my suggestions, do you?" The cat shrugged at her. Ember stopped and blew a curly strand of hair from in front of her eyes, glowering. "Whatever. I'm just gonna call you Cat!"

The animal paused to look at Ember, purring. The happy rumble continued as the cat ambled on.

Ember grimaced. "Darned ornery Cat."

Without her knitting to keep her focused, Ember traced the flame shape of the orange crystal with her fingers. *Why did he give this to me? Am I supposed to show it to the man he wants me to find? Is it a key? Urg!* She slipped the amulet underneath her shirt and pulled her new hair wrap from her bag. The air grew chilly this deep in the forest. She wrapped it around her head like a hood.

*What is Cami up to? I hope she's not too mad at me. I'll have to make it up to her when I return.* Ember caught sight of Cat crouching atop a fallen log at the rise they were about to crest, her tail pointing low. Following her lead, the princess knelt and crept up the small hill, hearing the sound of

movement below. Ember peered over the downed timber to discover a back trail running through the forest and a caravan consisting of two carts, one laden with supplies, the other carrying a large cage. Around the carts were six... *What are they?* She stared at the strange blue-skinned creatures.

The gasp that escaped Ember's mouth was not audible, but it was visible. Her hot breath mixed with the chilled air surrounding them and a light fog appeared. Ember slouched behind the log.

"Oh, no. This can't be real."

Cat joined her.

"What are they doing here?" Ember peered at Cat for answers. "I thought it wasn't possible for the Illyarri to travel on the Division, any more so than the Ellyassi. Does this mean the barriers have fallen? Wait," she chewed her thumbnail. "If they had, our world would be engulfed in a battle between thousands of their soldiers, right? Not a handful." She nodded to herself. "That's right. Elwyn said they are already slipping through in small numbers. But what are they doing?"

She climbed up, looking down on the stopped caravan. A wheel on the cage cart was stuck in a pool of mud. Frozen mud. The soldiers spoke in clicks, pointing at the wheel. A shape huddled at the bottom of the cage drew her attention. She squinted, trying to look closer. It stirred at the sounds of the speaking and the pale face of a boy appeared kneeling in the straw. He looked to be around the same age as Ember, but his eyes were ringed by dark circles as if he had not slept for days.

"They have a prisoner," she whispered. "We have to help him."

The Night Cat's mew turned to a low growl as she stared at Ember with her piercing eyes, her pointy ears twitching.

Ember drew back from the rise, slipping down their side of the hill and heading south, further along the route the caravan would follow. Behind her, the cat huffed, but followed.

As they got away from the Illyarri, the air grew warmer, and soon they came to the trail ahead but out of sight of the stuck caravan. Unsure what to do now, Ember pulled her dagger from its sheath and stood in the center of the path, facing northward.

"Meow?"

Ember glanced down and shrugged. "I've no idea what I'm doing."

"Meow." The cat lowered her ears.

Ember laughed under her breath, shaking her head. "Ok, this is crazy, you're right." She slid the weapon into its scabbard, but Cat spun toward the trees behind them, hissing. Twigs snapping and dry leaves crunching broke the silence as something large approached. Ember, shivering to her core, drew the dagger back out.



## PHATS ATTACKS

A massive shape sprang from the woods and onto the pathway in front of Ember. Its large grey-skinned fist slammed into the hissing Night Cat, sending her rolling. The beast shifted to Ember, pointing a staff of blue translucent crystal at her. She stumbled backward at the monstrous visage of teeth and savage fury before her. Unable to catch her footing, she staggered back until she came to rest against the hard bark of a tree.

A light flashed from the staff, and Ember felt a freezing sensation embrace the wrist holding the dagger, then another flash. She closed her eyes and cringed as her other hand stiffened with the same frigid chill. The beast let out a deep laugh. She opened her eyes to see both of her hands encased in ice and stuck to the tree.

A chuckle of clicks escaped the creature's mouth. It pushed its chest out, buttoning its coat, which hung open. "I thought you'd be more of a challenge, daughter of earth and fire. Instead, you were an easier catch than my breakfast."

The frozen bands prevented Ember from doing little more than shifting her weight, but her body warmed and sweat dripped from her brow as she struggled to get free. "What are you talking about? Who are you? And what do you want with me?"

The creature had turned away, momentarily looking toward the Night Cat's form, perhaps pondering a second breakfast. He swirled around to Ember, spinning the staff. "I am cold death sent from the Illyarri plane." He slammed the base of the staff at her feet and leaned his large grey nose close to hers, cocking his head to the right so his eye could see her. "They call me

Phats and I am here, young princess, to pave the way for the Illyarri victory over the Ellyassi, starting with this hunk of dirt you call the Division."

His breath stank like meat left sitting out to rot. Ember recoiled. "I have no fight with you." She felt both panic and her temper rising. "Why are you doing this to me?" A rivulet of water ran down the palm of her left hand.

Phats laughed. "You don't even know the simplest of rules, do you, girl?" He reached out, fingering the chain hanging from her neck. The touch of his skin on hers sent icy shivers through her body, but where the amulet lay on her chest, her flesh burned.

"Devour to survive, that's how it's always been, and I'm going to enjoy devouring one such as you." His teeth glinted as he opened his mouth and moved in closer.



## CATCHING UP

**A**t the edge of Lake Nivereth, the group of four sent after Ember Raneban huddled discussing what they had found: the end of Ember's prints and a massacre of fish.

"What could have done that?" Camilaya asked Ethan, who stood beside her.

"I don't know. There are many creatures in these woods that come to the lake to drink and feed." He gave the dark forest behind them a nervous glance.

"What about Ember? Why do her prints stop here? Do you think something came out of the forest and...?" She, too, looked into the darkness of the wilderness. "Or did she stumble across some sort of creature?"

"It's not likely," Nena spoke up from next to the remains. "There's no sign of struggle, just an end to her tracks."

"Like someone carried her away?" Cami's eyes widened.

"Quiet!" Neko ducked behind some foliage near the woods. "Something's coming."

"What, where?" Ethan paused in the middle of the trail while everyone else crouched and moved to the tree line.

"Down!" Neko motioned with his hand for the others to get low and follow him into the safety of cover. "Something's approaching from behind us."

They took up positions amongst the trees and waited, watching. Over the last days of their expedition, the group had made a point of greeting and questioning anyone they met along the way, to learn if they had seen

anyone else passing by. After what they had just found, however, Neko felt it best to let who or whatever this was pass.

As the individual approached, they could make out a cloaked form, with the hood up and face down.

"Maybe that's her?" Cami asked.

"Shh," the others whispered at her.

The figure kept its eyes down, either lost in thought, or studying the pathway before it. Upon reaching the spot they had just vacated, the person stopped, turning towards the lake to survey the fish heads, then knelt, examining the prints.

In the trees, Cami slipped a throwing star from her vest. Neko and Nena eyed each other, silently communicating their strategy. Nena indicated that she would go left. Neko agreed, nodding to the right. All four watched as the figure ran its fingers through the dirt, scooping something into its hand. He, for he appeared to be male, rose, holding what resembled a worm between his fingers. His hood dropped from his head as he analyzed it.

Cami's mouth fell open, and next to her Ethan's jaw tightened. Neko and Nena glanced at each other, baffled, and shrugged.

"Evan!" The voices of the younger pair rang out in unison.

The boy leapt in surprise, tripping over his own feet and falling on his butt in the dirt. When he looked up, he found the four surrounding him, Cami putting her throwing star away, Neko offering a hand.

"What are you doing here?" Ethan spat, his hand clenched around the hilt of his sword.

"Thank you," Evan said to Neko as he rose, then turned to his brother. "I've come to help find Ember."

"No. You were told to stay home. Father told you to." Ethan puffed out his chest, glaring at his little brother.

Evan gritted his teeth, returning the fiery gaze.

"You need to turn around and march home, now!"

"No." Evan jutted his chin out.

"It will worry Mother to death."

Evan's cheeks drained of color before turning a rosy hue. "I know, Ethan, but I have to do this." He glanced at Cami. "I can't sit at home while you're all out here. I have to help."

"I can't be responsible for you, too!"

"I'm responsible for myself!" Evan shook with frustration.

Cami came up beside him, indignation making her movements stiff and her voice harsh. "What do you mean, 'can't be responsible for him too'? I—"

Neko stepped between them, silencing the youths with a jerk of his hand. "Knock it off. You're going to alert the whole forest to our presence." The knight turned to Evan. "What is it you found in the dirt?"

Evan held up a strand of yarn. "It's a piece of wool from Ember's knitting." He reached into his pocket and drew forth another half dozen pieces.

"You've found these along the trail?" Nena appraised him thoughtfully, interjecting herself into the confrontation to help diffuse it.

"Yes."

Neko nodded at the boy. "Good eye, lad. I feel we could use a pair. What else have you seen?"

"Wait a—" Ethan said, stopping short as his brother pointed to the sky above the forest and spoke.

"That..."

All heads turned, seeing the haze of smoke rising from deep in the woods.



## THE AMULET

Ember twisted her head from the creature, straining at her bonds. His breath followed her as his presence loomed closer. Suddenly he was gone, carried away by a large white blur from behind. The amulet he had fingered fell against her chest, red hot. Ember yelped at the searing heat. Stories of her father returned to her, how it was said he wielded fire in the battle against Lynch's armies, how he defeated Markoon on the battlefield, bringing the war to an end. *Was this what he used?*

She pondered what she knew. There were many kinds of magical crystals on the Division, like those they had for heat, light, or to keep foods cool, but she had never seen one forged into something else entirely. And if this was what he had used, was it what had burned his hand?

Across from her, a large, white-furred panther bore down on the man-shark, growling and baring its fangs. The Illyarri beast used his staff to hold the cat at bay. *Where did that come from?* She gaped at them. The beasts snapped at each other, fangs and teeth glistening with saliva and fury. Ember watched as the two snarled, each trying to gain an advantage over the other. All the while, her body grew warmer, the heat from the amulet coursing through her chest and burning in her veins. Caught up in the mayhem around her, she hardly noticed her skin was covered in sweat.

Something caused the panther to look at Ember, away from Phats for a moment. Their eyes locked and Ember saw the same green/blue irises she'd seen before in her much smaller friend. The shark creature took advantage of the cat's distraction, slamming his knee into her belly then rolling to his

feet, bringing his staff to bear on the panther. Before he could cast, the animal lunged at him again.

The heat surged through Ember with a burst and her bonds broke in a rush of water and hiss of steam. She stumbled forward, struggling to stay upright.

Phats dodged the large cat's attack, knocking the panther aside with the staff, stunning her. Seizing the opportunity, he dropped the weapon and lunged, digging his rows of teeth into the cat's soft midsection. Red stained the pure white fur of the animal as he lifted her, shaking his massive jaws back and forth. The Illyarri shark spat the bleeding cat to the forest floor and turned on Ember as she screamed. "No!"

The man-shark's eyes widened when he saw she was free. They both moved, but he was quicker. His hand darted into his coat pulling forth two knives, which he flung at Ember with a flick of his wrist as he bent for his staff.

Ember had only one thought, one choice. She yanked the amulet from her chest, breaking the chain holding it around her neck and ignoring the intense heat in her hand. She thrust it forward as he threw the blades, shouting a single word that echoed in her mind. A word she did not know.

"Eckar!"

A giant ball of fire burst forth from the talisman, engulfing and instantly melting the knives. The inferno continued onward with enough power to slam into Phats, hurtling him backward and setting his suit of fine threads ablaze. He rolled through the brush, dousing most of the flames, then spun and glared at Ember. Surrounded by smoke drifting off him in small curls, he bared his teeth in a snarl and vanished into the dark woods.

Ember stumbled back, leaning against the tree, and dropped the amulet to the ground. It glowed like magma, as did her hand, but it had not burned or even blistered her. Her whole body seemed to thud with the beating of her heart as she panted for air. A part of her knew that if he had not run away, the man-shark would have overpowered her. Darkness closed in on her from all sides. She wanted to let go, to slip into oblivion and rest. Then she saw the white form lying in the dirt of the trail. On unsteady feet, she took a deep breath, scooped up the amulet, and limped towards her savior.



## K A T E R R A

**A**s she drew near, Ember gasped in surprise. What lay there was neither a panther nor a cat of any type. Instead, a young woman in a cream-colored, blood-stained dress, with white hair hanging to the middle of her back, lay motionless. The woman's hands clutched at the gaping wound on her mid-section, blood running through her fingers. Recognition dawned and Ember fell to her knees by the woman's side.

"My god, Kattera." Tears ran down Ember's cheeks. She knew this woman, not well, but she had spoken to her often in Elwyn's study or around the castle. At least, they had spoken until his other apprentices were sent away. After that, only Kattera had remained and the two mages were rarely spotted outside his tower. Ember tried to remember when she had last seen the other woman; it must have been a few weeks before the festival.

"Ember," Kattera spoke in a whisper.

"Kattera, how..."

"My magicks allow me to shape-shift into the form of feline creatures." Her voice trailed off as she grimaced in pain.

"Yes, but—" Ember had so many questions running through her head that she didn't even know where to start.

"Shh." The woman raised her fingers to Ember's lips, but missed as her strength waned. "There isn't time, you must go."

"No, I won't leave you here! You saved my life."

Sounds of someone approaching drifted over the rise in the trail, from the direction of the caravan.

"He will return, Ember. I won't be able to fight him; these injuries are magical, poison to one such as me."

Ember bit at her bottom lip, resolute in her decision but uncertain how to proceed. "No, we will find you help."

The sounds grew closer, the familiar sound of soldiers marching.

Katerra pointed to the rise behind them. "Start a fire. It will slow them."

Ember stood, just as the heads of two Illyarri soldiers with spears in their hands came into view. She pushed the amulet forward, again speaking the foreign word. "Eckar!" The remaining heat in her body rushed forward, pushing out from her palm into the crystal, and flames burst forth. The shrubs and dry needles at the top of the rise flashed into a roaring blaze, forcing the creatures to dive for cover. She shivered, feeling cold to her core, like the effort had taken all her body heat.

"C'mon," Ember said, slipping an arm under Katerra and helping the shapeshifter to her feet. Glancing around, she realized their only choice was to proceed south. Phats had gone northwest. The Illyarri lay to the East. If they headed south, they could cut across the trail and work their way up from there.

They had taken two steps when Katerra gripped Ember's arm. "Stop. I can't travel like this, too weak." Blood ran from the wound, pooling at their feet.

Ember started to declare, "I'm not—"

"I know." Katerra gave her a faint smile. "Since you insist, I can at least make it easy on you." She removed her hand from her injured side and, with effort, knelt. "Find some Hemmel leaf, hold it against my wound. Then head towards Traskein. We may locate someone there to help."

"But what are you doing?"

"I may not have the strength to transform back," she said, looking away. Her body shrank, the human shape folding into itself, fine fur covering her skin, legs contracting, and a tail springing forth. In front of Ember lay a small cat, smaller than before and much easier to carry.

Ember picked her up, cradling her friend in her arms. The wound was reduced now as well, and she covered it with a cloth from her pack before stuffing the amulet in her tunic pocket. She peered through the smoky haze and set off into the woods. Behind her, the fire continued to burn, keeping her pursuers at bay.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Ember was approaching the other side of the forest. The small feline huddled in her arms with her eyes closed, taking shallow breaths. The princess scoured the ground as she walked, avoiding twigs that might snap and searching for the tall leaves of the common Hemmel plant, her ears listening for any sound of pursuit. Finally, she caught sight of the plant and lay Katterra beside it. Tearing free two of the long fronds, she examined them, unsure what to do next.

She remembered how a nurse had once placed mashed Hemmel leaf on a cut on her leg, wrapping the poultice and her leg with an intact leaf. A few days later, it had been healed, much quicker than it would have been without the treatment. It might not do the same for Katterra's magical wound, but she hoped it would help.

She tore a leaf into strips. Realizing that probably wouldn't suffice to release the healing properties, Ember shoved the pieces into her mouth and chewed them to a pulp. Her face squished up as she crushed them with her teeth. *Nasty. I hope it isn't toxic.* She continued chomping on it, staring at a shape in the distance. The stationary object was strangely square for the wilderness. *A shack maybe?* She spat the paste into her palm and packed it into Katterra's wound, petting the cat as she did so, and finished the bandage with one final leaf wrapped around the injury, just as the palace nurse had done.

She tucked Katterra out of sight underneath a bush, and walked in the direction of the shape to investigate. Her head still clouded by the encounter with Phats and her use of the amulet, Ember hoped it might offer refuge or aid, but another thought ran through her mind. What if it was the cage she had spotted earlier? She blocked that out, knowing that if she admitted her growing apprehension was true, she would have to turn back. But as she drew near, her hidden suspicions were confirmed.

The Illyarri caravan sat empty, except for the young boy who was up and looking around from inside his cage, the midday sun shining on his simple leather tunic. The lone guard had left him unattended and was standing at the top of the hill, staring at the smoldering remains of the fire Ember had started. Without realizing it, she had gone in a circle and come closer than she'd intended to her starting point.

Ember glanced from the soldier to the boy before peering over her shoulder to where Katterra lay. She placed a hesitant foot on the path, biting

her lip, then pulled it back. *I can't do this.* Preparing to sneak away, she peeked up at the cage and found the boy staring at her, his whole body trembling. She jumped in surprise.

"Help me," he mouthed.



## ESCAPE PLAN

She did a quick scan of the area, confirming there was only the single guard on the hill, before approaching the enclosure. The boy stabbed his finger at the bottom of the bars, pointing to where the lock rested against the cart. It was made of blue and silver metal, and seemed sturdy.

"I don't know how to open it," she murmured. She shrugged her shoulders and held out her hands in silence.

"Smash it." His voice was barely a hiss. He motioned with his arms as if he wielded a hammer.

Ember glanced toward the guard, shaking her head. "He'll hear it."

"Please..."

Ember regarded the boy. Whatever the reason they restrained him, his journey had not been a pleasant one. It was obvious his pale, ashen face had once been tan, and he appeared not to have eaten in days. Sighing under her breath, she searched for a sign of a key, then stared at the guard's blue form. *What do I do? Any noise would attract his attention.* She met the boy's eyes, ready to say she was sorry and run back into the woods, when a clicking sound on the trail behind the caravan changed her mind.

Two of the soldiers had returned and already spotted her. She grabbed ahold of the cart wheel and pulled herself up, slipping her dagger from her belt. As soon as she was stable, she slammed the hilt against the lock.

CLANG!

The noise reverberated in the air like a church bell, calling all followers to service. The soldiers drew their swords and spread out, coming in from different angles.

## PART V

# MEETING MADERA



## THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

**T**he clang of swords connecting filled the air as Warren and Markoon engaged the soldiers. The much larger and stronger Illyarri struck with force, shaking the pair of boys to their toes as they tried to hold on to their weapons.

Warren ducked under the arm of the taller creature he was facing as it prepared to swing, and sprinted toward Markoon. "We can't take them on one-on-one."

The shorter soldier Markoon fought turned to look at Warren running at him. Markoon stepped out of the soldier's range and hesitated. The Illyarri brought his sword up, preparing to strike Warren as he approached. Behind Warren, the taller soldier pursued, lumbering on his ice-covered legs.

Warren stopped just shy of the frozen creature's reach and held his sword out level with his chest.

"Now what?" Markoon asked.

The soldier shifted its head to face Markoon.

Warren stepped in and swung. His weapon struck the Illyarri's ice-armored bicep and bounced free, taking only a small chunk of ice with it.

As the creature twisted back to Warren, Markoon had an opening to take his swing. The results were the same.

Warren cursed under his breath. "Well, that didn't work."

"We need a better plan here," Markoon said, parrying a blow.

"I—" Warren turned to see the second soldier closing in on him, then his mouth dropped open. He dove for the ground between the two ice soldiers as another shape appeared behind the approaching Illyarri.

*A large mace spun in the air, casting strange shadows on the grass. The spiked ball connected with the tall Illyarri's back, breaking through the ice and the soldier, sending shards showering over Warren.*

*Winded and shaking, the form of Gabriel Stonehammer watched the body fall. "Can't leave you two alone for five minutes!"*

*All eyes turned to the blacksmith of Raneban.*

*"What are you doing here?" Warren asked, not bothering to mask his relief.*

*"Saving your tails again, it looks like." The burly man shook his head, wiping spit from his beard.*

*"Hey, we had this under control," Markoon said and ducked as the shorter Illyarri soldier stepped in, grabbing his sword arm. Markoon's tanned skin turned pale with frost, then blue as chunks of ice took shape, creeping up the prince's forearm.*

*"Ahh!" Markoon cried out, dropping his sword and falling to the ground.*

*Gabriel swept his mace from the earth and swung it in the air. "Duck, Warren!"*

*Warren lowered his head as Gabriel let his weapon fly. It struck the Illyarri in the shoulders with a crunch and fell to the grass next to Warren's elbow. Across the icy armor, cracks spread and pieces broke off.*

*Warren rose to one knee and rammed his sword into the now exposed flesh of the creature's back. Blue-green blood ran the length of the blade in a rivulet that froze on the steel. The Illyarri lurched forward, then slumped to his knees, the tip of Warren's sword protruding from his chest, inches from Markoon's face.*

*Markoon reached down and pried the soldier's hand from his freezing arm. The frosted skin melted quickly, returning to the former tan color, but where the creature's fingers had been, three blue-blistered streaks remained. "Gods, that hurts."*

*"What is going on here?" Gabriel asked Warren.*

*"They had this girl and..."*

*"A girl? The Illyarri had a girl out here and you two decided to rescue her?"*

*"Well," Warren twisted to look at him cheeks reddening, "we didn't know they were Illyarri."*

*"And where's the girl now?"*

*The young men looked around.*

*"There was a third," Warren answered. "He took her away."*

*"Where?"*

*"That way." Warren pointed north over a hill where a small haze of smoke drifted into the sky.*

*Gabriel grabbed his mace. "C'mon then. Let's go finish what you started."*



## SURROUNDED

“**R**un!” shouted the boy in the cage, staring at the approaching soldiers. “It’s too late.” His face sagged, and he slumped to the floor of his prison.

Ember watched as the three guards drew nearer. *At least it isn’t all six of them*, she thought as she took a deep breath. The one to her left was closest; she spun to confront him, pulling the amulet from her pocket and holding it out in his direction.

The Illyarri stopped, looking at her with his head tilted.

“Eckar.” Her voice rang out strong.

The guard stepped back, watching, waiting. He smiled when nothing happened, and took another step forward.

Ember stared at the amulet, her eyes wide. Frantic, she thrust it in front of her. “Eckar!” Still nothing.

“Click, click.” The Illyarri soldiers chattered amongst themselves, then the one she held the amulet towards spoke to her. “Your stolen magicks fail you.”

*Why aren’t you working?* She blinked at it in disbelief. It was cool in her hand, not hot like before. Realizing it was not going to save her this time, she stuffed it into her pocket and grabbed for her dagger. She looked from soldier to soldier as they drew near. There was no escape.

Exhaling, she held the dagger to her breast, blade pointing outward, prepared to strike at whoever came closest. The air grew colder with each step they took toward her.

The nearest soldier stopped only a few feet away, distracted by something over Ember's shoulder. Two burning streaks struck him in the chest before he could move. The flaming arrows pierced his thin-leather armor, and he dropped to the ground. Had the Illyarri taken the time to activate their frozen armor, the human's weapons would have had little effect. The remaining guards shouted at each other, one ducking behind the second cart, the other advancing as more blazing missiles tore through the air. Before he was fully covered by the cart, an arrow hit the crouching Illyarri guard in the arm.

Ember glanced over her shoulder, straining to discern where the shots originated, but was unable to see past the cage or over the rise. She twisted back as the boy screamed at her. "Watch out!" The nearest soldier had used her distraction to get close and she turned just in time to see him swinging his sword. The wind of it passing over her head rustled her hair before it slammed into the metal bars of the cage with a clang. She dove between his spread legs, slashing at his ankle as she passed through before landing with a thud in the dirt behind him. Shouts filled the air.

"For Raneban!"

Ember's head shot up in amazement. Running down the hill, swords drawn, were Neko and Nena. Above them, Ethan and Evan stood with arrows notched which Camilaya was lighting from a torch.

The elemental soldier turned to face her as she scrambled to her feet. Neko and Nena reached the trail floor, engaging the soldier with the arrow in his arm. The guard she faced, however, was blocked by the cage; Ethan and Evan's arrows would be of no help.

Ember held her dagger ready as the guard smiled. He used the cart to steady himself before lunging at her. "Easy prey—" His words were choked off as a chain flew out, landing around his neck. It drew tight, pulling him back against the cage. The boy stood there, cinching tight the otherwise loose chains which shackled his hands.

"Kill him!" The boy strained to hold on as the soldier dropped his sword and worked his fingers under the chain. The blue-skinned creature pulled the metal from his neck as foggy breath escaped his gasping mouth in a fine mist.

Ember froze before the soldier, staring at the dagger shaking in her palm. She'd never killed anything. She'd never done more than practice with

her weapons. *How can I possibly...?*

"Do it quick! I can't hold him."

The soldier tugged the chain forward, overpowering the boy, who smashed face-first against the bars, bloodying his nose. Ember reacted instinctively, plunging her knife into an exposed part of the soldier's abdomen. It slid in deep and easy. Dark-blue fluid ran from the wound, over the dagger and onto her fingers, cold and biting. The liquid froze as it dripped from her hand, forming tiny icicles which broke free as the strange creature slumped to its knees. She pulled her hand away, leaving the dagger in place.

The boy released the chain, and the soldier collapsed face first into the dirt. Ember staggered back so he would not fall on her. A tight knot formed in her stomach and tears welled up in her eyes as she stared at the body.

"It's okay," the boy spoke in a hushed tone. "You had to do it."

The tears flowed down Ember Raneban's cheeks. "Yes," she mumbled, her gaze locked on the corpse. "But I didn't want to..." She saw the tip of her dagger protruding from the soldier's back. Her stomach flipped over and her head spun. She slid to her knees, panting, fixated on the blade's tip; it was covered in ice, but had bluish-water running from it. The soldier's whole body was melting. Liquid trickled from the exposed flesh in drops, forming a pool around his still form.

She glanced where the other guard had fallen, searching for his remains, and found it mostly gone. The water had absorbed into the dirt, leaving the arrows lying in the mud. In the center of the wet area lay a heart-sized, almond-shaped, blue crystal amongst the steel and cloth. Her eyes swung back, and she watched as the soldier she'd killed continued to melt. The body faded until another crystal was all that remained. From her position on her knees, she reached out a hand to touch the glass-like object.

The sound of running feet interrupted her macabre study of the Illyarri's death. She faced them as Cami dove in, arms embracing her. "Ember! You stubborn brat! Are you crazy? Attacking the Illyarri on your own?"

The dark-haired girl squeezed Ember so tight it knocked out what little air she had in her lungs. She coughed, and they both cried into each other, muttering unintelligibly as the others gathered around them.

"Are you all right?" Ethan asked, offering the princess his hand. Evan did the same for Camilaya.

When they were on their feet, Ember nodded. "Thank you," she said, wiping her nose and eyes with her shoulder. "How did you find me?"

Evan spoke up, laughing, "It wasn't hard to track you. If your tracks weren't clearly on the trail, there were always the bits and pieces of your yarn."

"Then, of course, there was the smoke," Cami said.

"Well, we didn't know for sure it was her," Ethan said with a scowl.

Ember glanced away, looking back to where she had left Kattera. "We are not alone, and there are more Illyarri nearby. Free him." She pointed to the caged boy. "I'll be right back, I have to go get some..." She paused, "something."

"Not by yourself, you're not," Nena said, stepping forward.

She didn't argue, only turned and walked into the woods. Behind her, the clang of metal on metal rang as Neko and Ethan pounded on the cage's lock with their swords.



## FREE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Ember returned to where Kattera lay hidden. The cat's eyes were open and vigilant. Anger flashed in them, then relief as she saw Nena following the princess. Ember knelt, peeling back the Hemmel bandage to look at the wound. The bleeding had stopped, but the bite marks had taken on a blue pallor that was spreading to the surrounding flesh.

"How are you?" She gingerly touched the bluish wound. It felt cold.

Kattera mewed.

"Can you change back?"

The white cat shook her head.

"Should I tell them who you are? They are my friends, they followed me from Raneban." Ember gave the cat a probing look.

She shook her head again.

"Ok, our secret." Replacing the bandage, Ember slid her arms under the small feline and cradled her to her chest. "Let's rejoin the others," she told Nena.



THE CLANGING HAD STOPPED, but as they returned, the princess and her guard heard voices arguing.

"I don't need the help of Raneban scum." The boy's otherwise pale cheeks were flushed red as he jumped from the cart, ignoring Ethan's offered assistance and staring him defiantly in the face.

"You'd still be stuck in that box if it weren't for us." Ethan reached out with his right hand, grabbing the boy's shoulder to reassure him.

The boy smacked the arm away. "Unhand me!"

Ethan's eyes glinting with indignation, he used his left hand to seize the boy's wrist. In retaliation, the boy snatched Ethan's free hand, and the youths stared daggers at one another. With a frustrated grunt, Ember handed Katerra's small soft body to Nena, and ran to where the two young men squared off. Nena stared curiously at the bundle of fur.

Their arms locked together, the boys were engaged in a shoving match, each trying to gain leverage on the other. Ethan was taller and stronger, but his feet slipped in the mud when he leaned hard on the stranger. Just as Ember drew close, they lost their footing and tumbled sideways, crashing into her and slamming her to the dirt. The impact knocked her hair wrap free, sending her red curls bouncing. The two boys landed on either side of her, both narrowly avoiding muddy remnants of the Illyarri soldiers.

Ethan jumped to his feet. "I'm sorry, princess! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Ethan. Just knock it off. And, for god's sake, my name is Ember."

She shifted to the other boy as she dusted off her hair wrap; he sat up, breathing hard, holding his left arm to his chest, clutching at his wrist. Her hair settled over her face. She blew it out of the way from the corner of her mouth. Locking eyes with the stranger, she saw his grow moist.

"Are you ok?"

Angry at first, he started, "I'm—" then he winced as he shifted his position. With a deep breath, he spoke softer, meeting her gaze again. "I'll be okay. Thank you." He looked at her orange-red locks. "Are you, Ember Raneban?"

She bit her lip, then answered honestly. "Yes. Who are you?"

"My name's Madera."

"And why were you in that cage?" The group from Raneban looked at him intently, waiting to hear his answer to the princess's question.

He glanced away, mouth opening. "I was..." His voice dwindled to silence.

"Princess," Neko spoke up beside her.

She faced him.

"We need to leave. More Illyarri soldiers are coming. I can hear them."

"Ok, let's go." She turned to Madera to find him on his feet and offering his uninjured hand. "Thank you," she said with a faint smile, taking it and standing.



## MADERA TELLS A LIE

Dusk had already passed and darkness was close behind when the small group stopped for the night. They had traveled northeast towards Traskein in silence, listening for sounds of pursuit. Exhausted, they sat huddled amongst a stand of trees, making camp, and eating a cold dinner. Neko and Nena had declared they could not light a fire for fear of the Illyarri finding them.

The half-moon provided some light when it peered from behind the clouds and Ember studied their tired faces in the thick shadows as they ate. Neko and Nena were alert, constantly looking about or getting up to go check some noise. Ethan watched them, offering his assistance whenever he could get their attention. Evan ate quietly, casting surreptitious glances at Cami. The newcomer sat somewhere alone in the darkness behind the youngest Evergard. She felt safer now that they were with her, especially after her encounter with the Illyarri earlier in the day.

"We should reach Traskein by late afternoon," Neko told the group. "Once there, we will hire a guide to take us into the Voo and find help for Ember's friend."

"We'll need to be careful there," Nena added. "Traskein is a den of thieves. Ember, your hair needs to be hidden completely. If the less reputable citizens learn of your presence there, well, there aren't enough of us to keep you safe."

Ember heard Cami gulp beside her. "I understand," she said. Her entire life she'd been told the same. Leave the castle unattended, step outside of Raneban, or go just about anywhere without her guards, and there were

those who would try to take her. For ransom or leverage or what other nefarious motives, she didn't really know.

"We will do guard duty in shifts," Neko said. "I and Evan first, Nena and Ethan second. If there are more Illyarri or this shark creature Ember spoke of, we need to be ready. Sleep with your weapons in hand."

"What about us?" Ember asked.

"What do you mean?" Neko's brow furrowed.

"We can take a shift," she glanced at Cami. "Break it into thirds."

"Princess, I don't think..." The captain of her royal guard shifted in discomfort.

"Neko, we all must rest, even the men of this expedition."

"Hey," Nena said, raising an eyebrow.

"Sorry." Ember grinned at the older woman, then continued. "If we encounter more Illyarri or some of the forest's creatures, we *all* need to be ready."

Neko tilted his head, deferring to the princess. "Point taken. Cami, you can take first watch with me. Ember, you and Ethan second watch. Nena and Evan the last."

"Good, thank you." Ember smiled at him.

"Um," Madera scooted forward from where he had been sitting behind Nena and Evan, separate from the rest of the group. "Can I help?"

All heads swung to him, some with animosity visible on their face, others with a penetrating gaze, and no one spoke. When he looked down and slid back, Cami and Evan focused on Ember as she cleared her throat.

"Madera, I..." She hesitated.

"I want to help," he said, looking up at her. "You rescued me from... Them." He shivered. "Those creatures."

Ember scrutinized him. "Madera, why were they holding you prisoner? Where were they taking you?"

He glanced away, wiping his eyes. "They..." Tears rolled down his cheeks. Ember got up and went to kneel in the dirt at his side.

"Yes," she whispered, setting a hand on his shoulder.

"I..., they captured me." He shook his head as if clearing away cobwebs, buying time to form his thoughts. "They killed my family and... I don't know..." Madera burst into sobs and pulled further away.

"But why were they taking you southwest?" Nena asked. "The only known outpost of the Illyarri on the Division is deep in the Badlands, atop the Frostdales."

"I don't know!" Madera shouted in frustration, making Ember jump. "I'm sorry," he blurted, reaching out to steady her. "I don't want to think about it... I have nowhere to go."

"Ok," Ember stood, avoiding Madera's hands, but briefly touching his head. "You can stay with us, for now, but tonight you rest. You need it."

The meal was finished in silence. When the gathering broke apart and readied for bed, Cami came to talk to Ember. In whispers, they prepared their bedrolls and shared a few words before the dark-haired girl began guard duty.

"Madera is an interesting one."

"I think he's been through more than he's letting on." Ember glanced in his direction. She could barely make out his shape in the darkness, spreading out a blanket.

"He's cute, though." Cami raised an eyebrow at her.

Ember giggled. "Cami, don't even start with your matchmaking until you have a boy of your own."

Cami's quiet laugh echoed Ember's. "How is your friend?"

They both looked over to where Katerra slept. Her white ears stuck out from the blanket Ember had wrapped her in, the cat's fur seeming to glow in the near-black.

"Better, I think. The Hemmel has stopped the bleeding, but the bite was poisonous. I need to get her help."

Cami nodded and smiled at Ember, then got up to join Neko on first watch.

Ember stared at Katerra's small form, watching as her body rose and fell with each shallow breath. "I just hope it's in time."



## THE WHITE ONE

Ember awoke to Cami's gentle shake.  
"Hey."

"My turn already?" she asked with one eye open.

"Yep," Cami said with a yawn, plopping down next to her.

After a quick talk with Neko, she took up her post on the edge of the stand of trees. She stared into the quiet darkness of night around them, watching and listening. For a bit, she tried to keep her hands busy knitting a hat, but found it too hard to see in the moon's light, filtered as it was by the trees and the clouds. Bored, she leaned against a tree and passed the time reliving the events of the prior day.

She knew she would not be alive if her friends had not found her when they had, that and the amulet. In the rush of their escape, the gift from her father had slipped from her mind completely. Ember pulled it out of her pocket and held it up to a beam of moonlight. The translucent crystal shimmered, and the unfamiliar word that had sounded in her mind came back to her. *Eckar*. She didn't dare say it aloud, not knowing how the magick worked. It hadn't hurt her hand, which left the question of how her father had been burned, churning in the back of her mind.

Somewhere far off, the sound of a gentle rain started. Her eyes drifted closed, lulled by the constant pitter-patter, and her head slumped. The movement shocked her back awake. *Crap. Almost fell asleep*. She stood, stepping from the tree she'd rested against and stretched. The sounds of rainfall grew nearer. *Great, just what we need*. She considered going to her

pack and getting her rain-canvas, but instead pulled up the hood of her cloak.

Then she heard something; voices, soft and distant. The darkness around her provided no clues, only vague shapes, no sign of anyone approaching. Looking back at the camp, she considered alerting Ethan but decided against it until she was sure it wasn't her imagination. She walked forward a few paces, stopped, and listened again. This time, the sound was much clearer.

"Marie." A single name said in a whisper of voices.

*Who and where is Marie and, more importantly, who is looking for her in the middle of these dark woods?* Ember couldn't see anyone, but rather than feeling afraid, she felt comforted. Stepping further into the trees and the darkness of the woods, she saw a soft glow and the rain.

"Come. Come to us," they called, and she moved faster.

She rounded the trunk of a larger tree and found a downpour of drops that seemed to start within a few feet from where she stood and stop just a few feet beyond. In the center of the shower, light shimmered as if dancing on the droplets. When she checked to see where the moon shone through, Ember found a thick layer of branches blocking the sky. The voices spoke again. "Marie. Come to us. Come."

They whispered in half sentences, a chorus floating in the air around her. Each time she turned her head, she heard a different cadence and a new phrase. As she drew nearer, staring at the lights within the drops, the voices came together to say a single word.

"Ember."

She jumped back, gasping, and grasped in her pocket for the amulet.

The voices sang, and the lights continued to dance, more active now.

"Peace."

"Friend."

"Help."

Ember hesitated, then her curiosity got the better of her and she stepped closer. A light drizzle caressed her cheeks, leaving her feeling refreshed.

"Who are you? How do you know me?" Her voice betrayed her uncertainty, but Ember was surprised to realize she felt no foreboding or suspicion.

"No time."

"Must help Earth."

"Marie."

"Aire."

"Friends."

"Fill."

"Ember Raneban."

"Your flask."

She reached for her canteen, undid the lid, and dumped the contents, then held the empty container out to catch the drops before she realized what she was doing.

"Marie, drink."

"Marie, save."

"Heal."

"Who is Marie?" To her own ears, Ember's voice sounded one-dimensional compared to the chorus radiating from the light in the rain. But the voices softened and Ember couldn't hear over the spattering of drops hitting the ground. The shower became a downpour as the liquid filled her bottle. "What? Who is Marie? What am I supposed to do?"

The storm dissipated. From the weight in her hand, Ember could tell the flask was full. She pulled it back, replacing the lid, and as she tied it to her belt, she caught one last fragment of speech drifting in the mist.

"The white one."

Her head snapped back to the dwindling rain, straining to hear more, but the voices were gone.

"Kattera?" she whispered. "Is that who you mean?"

The rain stopped.



## OF DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES

Ember returned to camp, her mind chewing on thoughts of what she'd seen. *Am I just tired, delirious from the shock of yesterday's adventures or from lack of sleep? Was what I experienced even real?* She shook her head. *Maybe I'm asleep at the tree and dreaming all of this?*

No. Her hand was wet from where she held the flask in the rain to fill it. That much at least still felt real, but the voices, the lights sparkling amongst the drops, seemed outlandish. *What was that?* Her mind whirled with questions.

"No," she heard a female voice whimpering as she approached the clearing where the group had their camp. Her pace quickened. She slipped past the trees and discovered Kattera laying in human form, tossing and turning, murmuring to herself. The wound in her midsection was blue and oozing a purple goo. Camilaya slept next to her, undisturbed by the sounds or movements.

Ember bent, lifting the woman's chin after she undid the flask from her belt. "Kattera, wake up. Drink this." She held the container to her friend's lips and let some water spill free. Kat's tongue darted out between unintelligible mutterings until she finally awakened enough to take a swallow.

"Shh now. You're okay," Ember soothed the woman. After a moment, she asked, "What's the matter?"

"A nightmare," Kattera panted. "One I've had before, I think. I saw the fall of Shillish Vane."

"You were there?"

"Yes, I believe so. It's like I was someone else. I was in my cat form, bounding across the plains, and then I came over a hill and stared down into this valley, where the most magnificent city of white stone lay. But in the sky," she bit her lip, "things were not right.

From the west came a blanket of darkness, to the east, bright orange as if the heavens themselves were on fire, each drawing closer."

She paused, taking another drink. "Next, I was in human form, inside the city. I stood with other mages as we tried to defend it, only they called me something else."

"Marie?"

"Yes, that's it. How did you know? Did I say it in my sleep?" Kattera pulled back with wide eyes, studying Ember's face.

"No," Ember looked to the sky, trying to wrap her head around how to explain what she'd experienced. "A few minutes ago, something called out that name in the woods. I followed the sound of the voice, I found, I don't know what it was, an elemental perhaps. They gave me this water, said to bring it to Marie, the White One. That you were a friend."

Kattera squinted at Ember and tilted her head. "Before the dream, I had not heard that name. It's not mine."

"What else happened in your dream?"

She took another long drink. "It was chaos. We created a shield to protect the city, using our magicks. We held it in place as the battle between the Ellyassi and Illyarri raged above. Fire and ice rained, pummeling the land like a massive hailstorm, and we couldn't maintain it. There was simply too much. The shield faltered before giving way completely. That's all I remember. The thing of it was, Ember, they didn't even notice we were there. They weren't attacking us, only each other. We were just caught in the middle..." Her head slumped as her voice wore out. "I'm so tired."

"Go back to sleep. Get your rest." Ember placed a hand on her shoulder.

Kattera curled into a ball and slowly transformed, returning to cat form. Ember removed the Hemmel plant bandage from the wound. The laceration appeared smaller and a lighter shade of blue, and there was less of the oozing goo. She used some of the water to rinse it off and then added more of the medicinal leaf.

Her task completed, Ember returned to her post to stand watch, but she was distracted, staring at Kattera as her mind tried to make sense of the

night's events.

Later, even after she was relieved from duty by Nena and Evan, sleep evaded her. Her thoughts kept racing as she lay next to Cami, her eyes fixed on the little white cat.



## ALONG THE TRAIL TO TRASKEIN

**A**t sunrise, they broke camp and headed in the direction of the main trail, hoping to make it to Traskein before nightfall. The early hours were spent in silence. As the dawn grew warmer, tongues loosened, and the group relaxed, the tensions of the previous day waning. Cami observed Ember as they travelled.

"How are you doing?"

The princess shifted Kattera in her arms and smiled at Cami. "Ok, a little tired, more than anything. I'm relieved to have you all here. It was lonely out there on my own. And Cami," she locked eyes with her friend. "I'm sorry for running off without you."

Cami considered her friend's apology, then said, "Yeah. I wasn't too happy with you. But I know you were only being you. Stubborn."

Ember laughed, a layer of worry melting away. "Like you are any different."

"Oh, don't even compare me to you. Your stubbornness is the stuff of legend in Raneban." Cami's mock indignation was so familiar that Ember grinned wide and felt a lightness she hadn't felt since before the festival.

"That's only because I'm the princess and everyone likes to gossip about me."

"So, there's no truth to the rumors of your legendary temper then?" The tall girl tilted her head and raised an eyebrow.

Ember's cheeks flushed as she glanced away, laughing, unable to look at her friend and keep a straight face. "You know me too well." She turned

back, fighting off more giggles. "But seriously, thanks for bringing the help."

"You're welcome, Ember. I think we're going to need it."

Ember nodded at her, then after a moment, "Can you take Kat for a bit? I'm going to drop back and walk with Madera."

They both peeked passed Ethan and Evan, who were a few paces behind them, to where the boy walked alone, face down, at the rear of the group.



"I DON'T THINK you should be here," Ethan told his little brother. "Mom will be worried sick."

"I know," Evan said, "and I feel bad about that, but I couldn't stay home and do nothing while the rest of you were out here."

"The only reason I don't send you back is it's not safe to travel alone."

Evan bowed his head and grew quiet a moment before looking up at his older brother. "How was it returning to the forests of Nivereth?"

Ethan unconsciously rubbed his arm where the tattoo shone in the sunlight on his bicep. His skin paled as he answered. "I... it took place on the other side of the forests, so I didn't think too much about it, but once we engaged the Illyarri, it was like the challenge all over again. I was hungry for it." His voice grew louder as he spoke. "Ready for anything that might arise. There are many strange creatures in these woods."

Evan watched him, brows raised. "Really? You weren't a little scared?"

"Scared?" Ethan scowled at his brother, then stared away. "Oh no, of course not."

"Hmm." Evan fell into thought, smiling as Ember passed them. "I'm going to keep Cami company," he said and quickened his pace to join her.

As Evan reached Cami, she turned her head to greet him. "Hi, Evan." She glanced behind him. "Where's Ethan?"

The smile faded from his lips. "Oh, he's back there; did you want to talk to him?"

"No, I just..." Her cheeks reddened, and she smiled at him. "Sorry, you two are usually together, so I'm surprised to see you and not him as well."

"Just me," Evan said with a shrug. "Thought you might appreciate some company."

"Thanks," Cami said as she stroked the cat's fur.

"So did Ember say where she found her pet?"

Kat's head popped up, glaring at Evan.

"Not really. Said they met along the trail, and she's a companion, not a pet." Cami's eyes softened as she caressed the creature's head. Kat purred and laid her head down.

"Does she have a name?" Evan asked, seeing his friend engrossed in the animal in her care.

"Ember said it's Kat."

Ethan snickered from behind them. "Cat? That's not very original."

"Kat with a K," Cami clarified primly.

"Still not very original," the older boy pointed out.

Evan glared back at his brother and quickened his pace to put more distance between them, hoping Cami would keep up.

"Ember says she saved her life from that shark creature that attacked her, so if she says her name is Kat, that's what it is. Works for me."

Evan studied the animal, trying to keep the skepticism out of his voice. "How could such a small thing do that?"

"I don't know. Ember said big things come in little packages." She nudged him with an elbow.

Evan laughed. "Yeah, sounds like she was talking about the two of you."

Cami giggled and smacked shoulders with him. "Brute!"

Evan contemplated the cat. "It looks as if her wound is healing."

"Yeah, it's healing quickly. Must be the Hemmel leaf."



AT THE REAR of the line, Madera stared into the dirt as he placed one foot in front of the other. Absorbed in his own troubles, he did not notice Ember joining him.

"How are you doing this morning?" she asked.

He jumped at the sound of her voice and looked up, his expression a mix of sadness and anger that twisted his youthful features into an ugly mask of hate. Ember gasped, causing him to turn away, cheeks burning.

"Sorry," he let out in a hoarse voice. "Lost in my thoughts."

Ember deliberated for a moment. "You seem like you're in a lot of pain?"

He didn't reply. Instead, they walked in silence a few minutes, each pondering the other's presence, before Ember tried again. "Where are you from, Madera?"

He didn't answer immediately, but Ember noticed the space between them grew as he stepped to the side.

"I'm from the Kingdom of Lynch."

"Oh, well," Ember said. "I figured that. Is that why you took a step away from me just now?"

Madera coughed in embarrassment. "No, I..."

"It's ok, Madera. I don't dislike you because of where you are from; my people aren't that way. Well, not all of us." Ember spoke earnestly, although she rolled her eyes in exasperation at the last part.

"No?" A hint of hopefulness crept into Madera's voice.

Ember gave him a reassuring smile. "No. Not as a rule anyway."

"Hmm." He considered her words. "It's different where I come from."

"That's too bad."

"It is?" Madera looked at her, perplexed.

"Yeah, I mean, why hate someone you don't even know? What does that accomplish?"

He opened his mouth to answer and shut it again, but stepped in closer as they walked on.

A little later, Ember asked, "Isn't there anyone who will be worried about you?"

"No! They won't," he said. "I... they, they're all dead."

"Oh," Ember stopped. "I'm so sorry, Madera. I didn't realize." He looked at the ground in silence, avoiding her soft eyes. "My mother died when I

was born," Ember added, tearing up.

"Mine died two years ago," Madera said, then added through gritted teeth, "my father, when the Illyarri took me."

Ember threw her arms around the pale boy, squeezing hard until he pulled away. "I'm sorry for your loss."

## PART VI

TRASKEIN



## A GIRL

**T**he three men ran toward the hill, Markoon clutching his sword in his left hand and holding his right arm to his stomach. The imprints of Illyarri fingers were a dull blue in the bright sun on his flesh. As they dashed up the incline, a shadow rose to meet them from the other side. They stopped, raising their weapons.

The red-haired girl burst over the top, running straight into Warren, who barely managed to move his sword to keep from impaling her. They tumbled down the hill in a mess of flailing limbs and dust.

"Whoa. Slow down," Warren gasped as they came to a stop, the young woman landing atop him. She pushed herself up, panting, her face flush and wet, and studied him. Her long red hair tickled his cheeks as their eyes met. His gray ones looked at hers, taking in every shade of brown and specks of gold. He could get lost in those eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his gaze never leaving hers.

She nodded, her face lighting up. "I think I am... now."

"Here," a loud voice beside them interrupted. "Let me help you up." Markoon knelt, offering his hand. "My lady?"

She took it with a nod of thanks and he lifted her off of Warren.

"How'd you escape and," Markoon peered over his shoulder, "where's the little guy?"

"Back there." She pointed over the hill. The young men noted the charred remains of her rope bonds dangling from her wrists, which they hadn't seen during her fall with Warren. "We need to leave in case he returns."

*"We can handle him." Markoon hoisted his sword, standing straighter.*

*"No, you can't." The red-haired young woman stared at him, eyes narrowed until he glanced away.*

*"C'mon, move it." Gabriel pushed Markoon and lifted Warren to his feet. "Enough trouble for one morning. Let's rejoin the others. There's safety in numbers."*

*The group jogged back to their camp. After resting, cooking and eating the rabbits, and drinking some fresh water, they sat on a fallen log near the dwindling fire.*

*"So, what's your name, young lady?" Gabriel asked.*

*"Braelyn of..." She paused with her mouth open, then closed it as her cheeks flushed, turning her pale skin as red as her hair.*

*"Of?" Commander Shef prompted, squinting to look closer at her and wondering about the truth of this mysterious girl. "Where are you from?"*

*She glanced around at their faces, then off into the woods. "From a small settlement in the desert."*

*"You live in the desert?" Markoon swiveled on the log to study her, raising a curious eyebrow. "Are you a citizen of the kingdom of Lynch?"*

*"No." She grit her teeth. "I'm not from any of your kingdoms. It's simply a settlement with only a few families."*

*Warren sat across the fire from Braelyn and Markoon, unable to take his eyes off the young woman. "Why did the Illyarri have you?"*

*She returned his gaze, then looked at the glowing coals in the fire as she answered. "I don't know. They attacked us and took me as their prisoner."*

*Commander Shef tilted his head back, his eyebrows nearly reaching his hairline. "Illyarri in the great desert?" He waved his right hand in front of him as if to coax more from her. When she didn't answer, he continued. "That doesn't make any sense. They can barely handle being on the Division without powerful magick, let alone venturing near the desert and Ellyassi territory on the other side."*

*"I don't know what to say." Nudging a twig with her toes, Braelyn stared at the ground. "The short one said his name was Talyn Rae. He told me not to speak, or he'd kill my family. They took me away." She shrugged her shoulders as if she didn't understand why they would have behaved any differently.*

*The commander nodded and said nothing further. After a few minutes of silence, he looked at the other adults, tilting his head to the woods. The men stood and walked away from the young trio around the fire.*

*"You must've been scared," Warren said to Braelyn with a wrinkled brow as he added a branch to the coals.*

*"Yes, very. Thank you for coming to my rescue, that was very brave. The Illyarri are formidable." She smiled at Warren.*

*"Ahem," Markoon coughed beside her and brushed some dust off the sleeve of his leather tunic absently.*

*Braelyn turned to him, fresh color surging to her cheeks. "Thank you both," she added stiffly.*

*Markoon's lip twitched, and he gazed to where the others stood encased in shadow, the hum of their voices inaudible above the cracking of the flames. "What do you think they're discussing?" he asked Warren.*

*Warren rotated, straining to see what the men were doing. His undershirt pulled up revealing taut muscles along his torso. "Probably about taking us home. With the Illyarri around, it's not safe out here."*

*Braelyn's eyes fixated on the exposed flesh and neither her, nor Warren noticed as Markoon slid closer to her.*

*"I thought the elementals couldn't come onto the Division." Markoon looked from Warren to Braelyn with questioning eyes.*

*"They can," Braelyn interjected, bending forward to pick up a twig by her feet, sensing something off in the air.*

*Markoon and Warren both turned to her in surprise and waited for her to continue.*

*She stared from one face to the other, then down, her fingers twiddling the small piece of wood. "In small numbers, they can get through the barrier. It takes..." She halted, her entire body going still, as she noticed their wide-eyed expressions. "What?"*

*"How do you know that?" Markoon asked.*

*Again, she avoided meeting their gaze, focusing on the dancing light of the fire. "I don't know. I heard it somewhere; my father, maybe. It requires powerful magick, which is why that Talyn Rae was amongst them. He's very formidable, an archmage. They are weaker here. Much weaker than on their own plane." The casualness with which she spoke seemed forced, but*

*before the boys could press her for more information, they were interrupted by footsteps.*

*The youths looked up as the others returned, Commander Shef standing above the group. "It's not safe to stay here. If that Illyarri mystic returns, he could have us all frozen before we knew he was here. We need to pack up camp at first light and go down into the valley. We'll head to the desert, try to find this settlement that Braelyn is from, and return her to her family. After that, we'll follow the border until we can make our way to Lynch, and from ther--"*

*"I think," Brecks interrupted, "I should return to Lynch with Prince Markoon immediately."*

*Markoon stood, glancing at Braelyn. She was staring into the hot coals, seeming oblivious to the conversation. Markoon declared resolutely, "No. We're staying."*

*"Sire," Brecks said. "It is not safe. If the Illyarri learned who you were..."*

*"No." Markoon shook his head, his black hair bouncing, "We're staying."*

*"Sire, I am responsible for your safety."*

*"Then you best stay on alert. We are helping to escort Braelyn home."*

*At this, Braelyn tore her attention from the embers and met Warren's gaze.*



## MARIE?

The sky darkened as they rounded the lake's edge and the outpost known as Traskein came into view. The trading city sat in a valley adjacent a small cove at the top of the lake. It spread the length of the valley from the docks to the south and north well into the forest which made up its northern border.

The rapid growth the city had experienced over the last decade and a half had seen the shrinking of the forest to make room for that expansion. This was the central hub of the three kingdoms; many said it was soon to be the fourth. Already larger than Vonodora, it only needed to appoint a monarch to declare its status. For now, though, a joint council with delegates from each of the kingdoms ruled the various factions within Traskein. Rumor was the crime bosses, black marketers, and mercenaries were the ones who truly ran the city, but as yet they were too unorganized for anyone to stake a claim.

It was to this den of thieves and merchants that Ember and her friends came in search of help.

The streets on the outskirts were dirt, and the shacks that housed the residents here appeared to be made of the same. Beggars and children rested in the scant shade provided by the structures. These were the people who had nothing and had journeyed to Traskein to make a new life for themselves. The scent of human waste hung heavy in the humid air.

Although the cat was now able to walk, Ember held Kattera in her arms. The wound had healed until only a blue stain in her white fur remained. At every rest break throughout the day, Ember continued to have her drink

from the flask. The rest of the group remained more or less circled around the princess.

The small band made their way deeper into the city, the roadway changing from dirt to cobblestone. The structures became sturdier and closer together toward the heart of town, with only a thin alley here and there to separate a row of homes or businesses. Shops tended to be painted in bright colors with signs hanging over the doors announcing what they sold. A symbol in the shape of a bread loaf here, a cut of meat there. The nicer stores and even some of the plain-looking homes all had iron bars across their window openings. The Raneban party encountered larger numbers of people, some walking in groups along the street, others just sitting in the dirt or on small benches outside buildings.

The young princess pulled the wrap tight around her hair, stuffing a few loose curls in, even though the people they passed paid them little notice. Unlike back home, strangers here were nothing new. Everyone was a stranger, it seemed. One man, however, did look up at them, mumbling under his breath. He stared at Ember and dragged himself forward. From his torn clothes, the thick layer of grime covering him, and the cup he held, he seemed a beggar. Feeling uncomfortable and knowing that, especially in a place like this, looks can be deceiving, she stepped off the cobblestone sidewalk and onto the packed earth of the unpaved street away from him. His eyes followed. Neko took notice of his undue attention. Stepping toward him, the guard kicked at the man's worn boots. "Keep your eyes to the dirt."

The beggar tilted his head; eyes squinting, he pointed at Ember as the group slowed to wait for Neko. "Is that her? She looks so familiar."

Ember's cheeks flushed; how could someone have recognized her here so easily? She held the cat in one arm and adjusted her hair wrap tighter.

"There is no one you know; we are new here."

The homeless man's gaze returned to Neko. "I haven't seen her in so long, I thought it must be her, finally come back." He leaned forward, coughing into his hands.

Realizing that the vagabond might just be crazy, Neko motioned to the group to continue walking. After one last look at the strange man, he stepped away at a trot to rejoin the others.

"Ow." Ember cried out as Kattera dug her claws into the girl's arm; staring at the cat, she faltered, which caused Neko to crash into the rear of the party as he rushed to catch up. Kattera launched herself from Ember's grasp to the dusty roadway.

"I'm sorry, pri...", Neko stopped himself short with a bite of his lip.

"Marie!"

The voice rang out loud and clear from behind them. Both Ember and Kattera spun; the beggar stood away from the wall, staring at Kattera. Arching her back, the cat peered up at Ember.

"Hold up," Ember said to the group, who looked at her with a quizzical expression, and walked towards the man with Kattera at her feet.

"That is her, isn't it?" he said as they approached. "I thought her lost."

"Why do you call her that?" Ember asked.

"I know her. We... were friends."

Kattera purred.

"How do you know her?" Ember probed.

"She was one of us."

"Us?" Ember repeated the word, looking at Kattera, who shook her head.

"Yes, until..." he raised the remains of his left arm, "until the beast ruined us."

The others had gathered around now and Ember shifted to them. "I need to speak to this man alone." She scanned the area. "There, in the alley." She looked at Neko and Nena, "Guard the entrance?"

"Yes," they both answered, nodding in unison. Neko added, "Ethan stays with me. Nena goes to the other end to watch that side." Ember opened her mouth to object, but was silenced by an uncompromising look from the soldier. She dipped her head in consent.

Ember reached down, helping the stranger up as Kattera led the way, followed closely by Nena. "What is your name?"

"Dolan." He swayed as he got to his feet, and followed the women, his right hand touching the wall for support.

Once the guard had done a quick sweep of the alley and was facing the other direction, Kattera took advantage of the darkness and transformed.

"It is Marie," he reached out, hugging her with his one arm. "Sorry, I'm so filthy."

Katerra looked at Ember over the man's shoulder, shaking her head; her face was a mix of wonder and curiosity.

"I don't know that name." Her white hair shone in the dark as she stepped back. "Why do you call me by that name?"

Dolan studied her. "You don't know me? Surely it is you, as the day turns to night, your hair sparkles in the moon. I remember it just like the evening we found you laying at the edge of the Badlands."

"The Badlands?" Katerra shivered at the name. "What was I doing there?"

"We didn't know, never figured it out. Tannen had some ideas about you, but never anything we were able to confirm."

"Tell me please," Katerra grabbed his hand. "Tell me everything. How long ago was this?"

He coughed again, clearing his throat. "About 15 years ago. You were just west of the Vinayak Ice Jungle, lying beneath a Hygrail tree. You were in cat form when we first saw you, and what a sight! Your fur was dirty and yet shimmered in the moonlight like the morning frost. As we got closer, though, you changed into human form. We watched you for a few minutes; you transformed back and forth, in some sorta distress. So we brought ya to Murdrath with us."

"Who was 'us'?" Ember had been about to ask the same question. Katerra beat her to it.

"We were part of the border guard. The Badlands patrol group outta Murdrath. Me. Tannen, the ranger who was our captain. Sakeen, my sister and our healer. And Killian, a mage's apprentice, from what was Viridian Hollow. He could sense your magicks immediately. He said you had the aura of an earth elemental and the power of a master wizard."

Katerra's face twisted in shock. "An elemental? A master... wizard?"

"Yeah, you were just as confused by it then. When you woke up a week later, the only thing you remembered was that your name was Marie. You kept shouting it over and over. You didn't even know that you were a shape-shifter. You trained with Killian; he taught you how to get in touch with your abilities, but said that something blocked you from accessing more than a fraction of 'em."

"What happened? How did I end up lost again? And you," she touched the stub of his arm, "here?"



## THE TERROR OF TRASK

"People went missing, mostly young children, from the villages in Trask. Something was stalking them, a creature that came from the Badlands at night and took its prey under the cover of darkness."

Ember gasped, covering her mouth. That was the stuff of childhood nightmares. Kattera rested her arm on the girl's shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"We pursued the creature?"

"Yes," he nodded. "Even before ya learned how to control your transformations, you had better senses and instincts than any of us. You caught the scent of one of the missing children. We were camped at the Badland's borders and, that night, you disappeared. You went in to scout for them and didn't return. The next day, we went searching for you."

The trio fell silent as voices echoed from the far side of the alley, where Nena kept watch. A raucous group passed by, not bothering to look down the small side street. Ember noticed the city grew noisier as night settled and its inhabitants ventured out. She was unaccustomed to nocturnal cities. It felt odd, and somehow exciting.

Dolan continued. "We followed your tracks for the better part of a day. By mid-afternoon, we found signs of a skirmish and a bloodied child's toy. A little ways on, we found the child. She was dead. There was a new trail, one marked by the paws of a great beast, dragging something large behind it."

Ember felt Kattera's grip tighten on her shoulder.

"The question on our minds was, why did this creature want you over its normal prey? Was it for food? Or something—" A spate of wet coughs interrupted him, "else? " He struggled to utter the word through his hacking. After a moment, he was able to continue. "We followed the trail, but ran into some of the Badland's more savage inhabitants; we had to fall back and regroup. It took two days, but we weren't leaving you in the clutches of that beast."

"It sounds as if you risked everything to find me?" Katerra's words rushed out, her heart pounding in her chest as her mind spun in confusion and disbelief about this stranger and his friends.

"Aye, we did, Marie." He nodded. "You were part of our group. You'd have done the same. Do you have some drink on ya?"

"Only water. But you are welcome to it." Ember held out her flask.

The man accepted it. "Thankee, young one, that will do. What's yer name, anyway?" He took a swig and handed it back to her.

"Em," she said with a glance at Kat.

"Short and sweet, huh?" He smiled at her, showing his black, rotted teeth. "When we finally found the beast's lair, no one was home. No one living, at least. It nested in a deep cave near the Nefarri region of the Badlands, as nasty a place as nasty comes. The entrance and entirety of the cavern was littered with bones and stank of decay." He coughed again, but stopped in the middle, touching his chest. He contemplated the women with a fresh clarity, and questions, in his eyes. "Feels different," he said, "feels better."

Ember looked at her flask. "This water, it made Kate... er, Marie, better. I think it may have healing properties."

"May I have another?" He held out his hand.

Ember handed him the flask and this time, when he smiled his thanks, his teeth appeared a little cleaner.

He swallowed with a large gulp and eyed the container before giving it back.

"Thank you. I feel healthier than I have in a decade." He stared at the stump of his arm for a moment, waiting. Nothing happened. "Didn't think so," he said, grinning, "the rest of my insides seem to be doing wonders. Anyway," he wiped his lips and stood taller, "you want to know what happened next, sorry."

Ember and Kattera waited, the latter tensing inside as if she were in feline form and waiting to pounce.

"We scouted the cave; you had surely been there and in both forms. Tufts of your fur and strands of your hair were all around. Neither you nor the beast were there, however. Sakeen had taken ill as soon as we entered the cave—that amount of death hit 'er like a mountain—so she waited near the entrance, keeping an eye out. We 'eard 'er shout out a warning, which changed to just a scream."

Dolan coughed, covering his face with his hands this time as his cheek's and lips trembled at the memory of that cry from his sister. "We ran back to the entrance, too late. The beast was a massive hulk of muscle and claws. It stood eight feet tall on legs the size of tree trunks. Its upper body spread three feet across, flesh and fur and four monstrous arms. Two almost human, the others like that of a cat with long curled claws. Not the first time we'd seen such an amalgamation in the Badlands, but this one was quick, strong, and smart. He attacked the magicks first, as if he could sense their power."

He took a breath and let out a heavy sigh, followed by a long snuffle, before continuing, his gaze avoiding theirs. It was clear that looking anyone in the eyes while he told this story was too much for Dolan to bear. Kattera and Ember shared a glance, both with tears welling.

"It dropped Sakeen's body, ripped in half. Tannen pulled his bow and I my sword. Killian cast a spell on it, something to slow it I think, and the creature shot right for him. It fell to all six limbs and bounded across the cave floor, its big head low, fangs glistening. Tannen fired arrow after arrow into it. I jumped in front of Killian as the beast approached, trying to block with my sword. It just dodged and bit," he raised the stump, "knocking me into Tannen, then continued on to Killian."

"You need not go on." Kattera stopped him. "I've heard enough."

"No." Dolan shook his head. "I need to say this, I haven't been able to..." He exhaled. "My intervention gave Killian enough time to conjure another spell, and he threw a fireball at the monster. It struck him and we heard it yelp in pain, then fury. It was the only thing that phased the beast. But, as it rolled away, the flames extinguished, and it was back at us. It ran in a zigzag pattern at Killian, who couldn't summon such magical fire again so quickly." Dolan panted, reliving the intensity of the moment.

"How did you survive?" Kattera's voice was subdued.

"Tannen and I got to our feet, too late to help Killian. The beast gorged on his body, distracting it. Tannen's bow broke in the fall. My sword was gone and my arm useless anyway. All we had between us were a pair of short swords, the two most powerful members of our party were dead, and you," he eyed Kattera, "were nowhere to be found. We ran." He stared at the ground, head trembling as tears fell. "I'm so sorry." He sobbed as Kat stepped forward, embracing him. They stood there in quiet while the man wept into her shoulder.

As his breathing evened, Kattera asked him gently, "What else do you remember?"

A faraway look came over his face. "I remember symbols lining the walls. I saw them in the flash of light from the fire. They were like nothing I had ever seen before or since: two curved lines, with two straight lines running through it. The beast was marked with the symbol as well. It looked like a brand, as if the beast wasn't its own person."

Kattera sucked in a sharp breath. She knelt in the dirt and scratched out a design. "Like this?"

"Yes, do you remember it? Do you remember what happened to you?"

"No," Kattera said. "But I've seen it before."

"Where? The dream?" Ember asked.

"I..." Kat faltered. "I think I know who the traitor is."

"Who?" Ember's eyes widened as she waited, staring at Kattera.

"I need to see this cave." She looked back at Dolan. "I need to know what happened there and see the symbol to understand, to be certain. Will you take me there?"



## THE UNCLE'S INN

Ember returned from the alley without the man or the cat. Only Nena followed her back to the waiting group. The princess's face was tight, her gaze focused on the dirt at her feet. The others turned at her approach, questions in their eyes, but only Cami spoke.

"Where's Kat, Em? Did that man take her?"

Ember shook her head. "She went with him; they have something they need to do."

Cami raised her eyebrows. "What?"

"It's complicated." Out of habit, Ember blew a strand of hair from her face. Realizing what she was doing, she stopped, tucking it under her wrap. Her shoulders dropped with exhaustion, the weight of the last few days, the man's story, and the onerous journey suddenly hitting her all at once. "Let's go find our guide. We have our own issues to deal with."

Neko nodded. "We'll find rooms for the night, then I'll go see the merchants about hiring a guide with knowledge of the Voo."



EMBER SAT on the edge of a bed untying her dirt-crusted boots and preparing to remove them. It was the first time in how many days? She tried to remember when she had last taken off her boots. *Or slept in a bed!* That thought brought to mind the festival and how nervous she had been about the recital. That was a lifetime ago, surely not less than a week. She sighed.

Neko had left with Nena a few minutes before, telling the rest of them to clean up and rest. His uncle, whose inn they were staying at, would bring up a hot meal shortly, he had promised. Cami wandered into their room, leaving the boys close to the hearth in the sitting room that joined their bedchambers, and closed the door behind her.

"What's going on, Ember? What's with the cat and that homeless guy?" She took a seat next to her friend on the bed, making it explicitly clear she was not going to move until she had some answers. Ember huffed and frowned at Cami, fiddling with the laces on one of her boots. There was so much to tell. She was grateful to share it with her best friend, even though some of it seemed outlandish and most of it she didn't understand herself! Forgetting about her footwear, the redhead took a deep breath and dove in.

"Kat is really the apprentice mage, Katerra."

"What?" Cami sat up straight. "Elwyn's apprentice? I didn't know they could shape-shift."

"Neither did I." The princess flopped backward onto the bed. "She didn't show me who she was until after that shark creature had bitten her. She changed from the small cat you saw to this large white panther as she bound across the forest and tackled him. Saved my life. Then he bit her, and I found her later in human form."

"Wait, if he bit her, how did you escape? I mean, I know you are great at a lot of stuff, but weapons training was never one of them." Cami waited with her head tilted, staring down at her friend.

Ember reached into her pocket and pulled out the amulet, her hand trembling. "This."

"Your father's?" Cami looked at her in surprise, recognizing the piece, but uncertain.

"Yes. He gave it to me when he told me to head to the Voo. When I was stuck to the tree, it kept getting warmer, made my body hot, it melted my bonds, and when I held it in my palm, it shot fire out of it."

Cami scooted back on the bed, her eyes wide with alarm.

"Don't worry," Ember laughed, sitting up on her elbows. "It doesn't do it randomly, far as I can tell. It might have only had a single use. I tried it later, when the Illyarri had me and Madera surrounded. It didn't work." She shrugged and held it out to her friend.

Cami leaned in, studying the talisman without touching it, as laughter from the tavern below drifted up and filled the silence. "What is it made of? It looks like an Ellyassi crystal, but I've never seen one in that shape before. They are always almond-shaped."

"I'm not sure. Maybe it was once." Ember sighed and looked directly at the other girl. "Cami?"

"Yeah?" Her friend glanced away from the amulet to meet Ember's gaze.

"Thank you," she said, making a point to not break eye contact, even moving a little closer as she spoke.

"For what?" Cami's face scrunched up, confused.

"For coming after me. I was scared out there. I am scared." The princess's heart raced faster in her chest.

Cami nodded, staring into Ember's green eyes. "Me too, Em."

Ember sat up with a relieved huff and they hugged tight.

A loud crash followed by angry voices yelling outside their room brought the girls to their feet. Without bothering to retie Ember's boots, they threw open the door and ran out, finding Ethan pinning Madera to the floor, his fist raised. Evan stood a few feet away, watching with wide eyes.

"Stop!" Ember and Cami shouted in unison.

His features contorted with fury, Ethan paused but didn't take his eyes off the Lynch boy.

"What the hell is going on?" Ember demanded. "Can't you two go five minutes without getting into a fight?"

"I caught him signaling someone from the window." Ethan cocked his fist back further and glared at Madera.

"Stop, Ethan! Let him up," the princess commanded.

Ethan dropped his hand, pushing the boy to the floor as he stood and stomped away, gritting his teeth.

Walking to Madera's side as he sat up, Ember offered the boy her hand, helping him to his feet. "What's going on, Madera?"

"Nothing," he said, and looked from her to the wood floor.

"Who were you signaling?" She studied him while waiting for his answer, noticing his tense form and averted gaze. *What are you hiding?*

"Ha." Madera scoffed bitterly and glared at her with red swollen eyes. "Who would I have to signal?" He twisted away, walking back toward the window.

"Madera?" she asked, her voice softer. Something about his behavior softened her. She wanted to understand and help him. "What were you doing at the window?"

"We should get rid of him now," Ethan said. "He's trouble and—"

Ember's head snapped around, stopping Ethan's rant with a withering glance, before turning slowly back to the dark-haired boy in front of her. "Madera?"

He stared at the floor. "I was just thinking. Looking outside and thinking."

"Then why were you motioning your hand near your face when I came in?" Ethan challenged.

Madera spun, tears streaming. "Because, you oaf, I was looking outside thinking how pathetic my life has become and that I'm stuck in this flea trap of an inn with two junior jackasses from Raneban!"

Ethan's mouth twisted into a scowl, remaining silent as Madera wiped tears from his cheeks. The Lynch boy glared daggers at everyone in the room, and stormed for the door.

Knowing some of his trauma, and her own stress of the last days, Ember reached for him as he passed, but he dodged her hand. Ember, Cami, and Evan winced at the bang of the door slamming shut behind him. Ethan's glower deepened.

After a moment of silence, Cami spun on Ethan. "He's right, you know. You're such an ass."

"Hey," he retorted, throwing his arms up. "The guy's from Lynch, and he was standing at the window making weird gestures. What was I to think?"

"You were to think, maybe he's human. Maybe he's upset, maybe he's," Cami's voice became louder and more heated as she berated Ethan, but stopped suddenly as she saw Ember grabbing her cloak from a chair close to the exit. "Wait—. Ember, what are you doing?"

Her hand on the front door, Ember responded as if the answer should be obvious. "I'm going after him."

The other three moved at once, then froze at the sound of their princess roaring at them. "No! You," she pointed at Ethan, a spray of saliva following her words, "have done enough! Cami, you and Evan keep him from getting his foot stuck in his mouth anymore tonight."

This time when the door slammed, the occupants jumped, then cringed at the sound of Ember's stomping footfalls on the stairs.

On the street outside, Ember found no sign of Madera.



## THE STREETS OF TRASKEIN

Outside the inn, the streets were filled with boisterous people, most heading in the same direction, towards Traskein's various drinking and gambling establishments. Ember searched amongst the crowds, but did not see Madera. The dim light offered by the sun crystals hanging from posts didn't do much in the open spaces with their wide thoroughfares, especially late at night as the charges wore down.

*Where did he go?* She scanned the square, unsure of what to do. *He was upset and angry. He probably didn't follow the throngs into the heart of the city, so where else might he have gone? I hope he doesn't run away...* Ember saw an old man sitting in a rickety chair outside the door to the inn behind her. He had a long white beard and a round belly, looking something like the clay gnomes gardeners back home decorated their gardens with. She couldn't tell if he was nice, mean, or just old and grumpy. The scowl on his face as he stared into the crowd and chewed an unlit cigar left her uncertain but she saw no better choice. *Maybe he could help?*

"Excuse me," she said, smiling and putting on her friendliest, please be kind and helpful to me face. Being a princess she normally didn't have to do this, but her father had always taught her the best way to get what you wanted was to treat others as you wanted to be treated. In her experience, it always seemed to get the best results.

The man shifted his gaze to meet hers, his eyes narrowing as he studied her.

*Oh no!* She reached up, touching her exposed hair as she realized she didn't have her wrap covering it.

"Yes?" the elderly man answered in a dry voice.

"Did you see a boy about my age come out here?" Her smile widened as she pulled her hair back to tie it, hoping its color would be less obvious that way, especially at night.

He bobbed his head in a nod, never taking his eyes off her. "Yes." After a pause as he watched her messing with her hair, he added, "That's a good idea. There are many here who would find you to be a prized catch."

Ember blushed. Her hand fell to her side, fumbling for the reassurance of her dagger's hilt. Not finding it there, her blush deepened. *Oh no!* She could picture it on the bed in the inn, where she had tossed it before Cami came in the room, and cursed herself silently for running out without being prepared. *Should I go back in and get it? No. Madera would be long gone if she did that.*

"What about the boy?" she asked the old man, hoping to distract him from her hair.

"About your height? Short dark hair?"

Ember nodded. "Yes. That's him!"

He raised the hand holding the cigar, pointing to an alley across the way. "There. Down towards the docks he went."

"Thank you." Ember started to turn.

"Wait."

She glanced back, finding the porch gnome's face to be softer but serious."

"Your kind should not be down there. Not after sun-fall."

Ember felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise at the man's words, thoughts of being pursued in the forest springing to mind. It was hard to keep from shivering at the memory of fighting the shark-man, but she was resolute. "He's my friend! I have to find him." She turned and rushed down the alley.

Behind her, the old man shook his head and lit the cigar from the candle on the railing next to him.



## THE DARK ON THE DOCKS

**I**n the twilight, the streets with their closed-up shops all looked the same. Ember exited the alley and walked in the direction the old man had indicated, hoping the slight tilt in the slope of the land meant she was heading the right way. *I hope I find him before he gets too far away and we both end up lost.* The worrying thoughts raced through her mind until she rounded a corner and released a breath that had been caught in her throat. Ahead were the masts of boats, illuminated by the moon which crested the horizon to the east, a majestic view in any other circumstance.

She saw no one, only darkness and dancing shadows cast from apartment windows above some of the stores. As she drew nearer to the marina, there were fewer and fewer lights. Not many people consented to live in this area, and those that did kept their shutters tightly latched. A dozen boats belonging to merchants, traders, and fishermen could be seen docked ahead. Few ventured out onto the waters in the dark. Sailors were a superstitious lot, and there were plenty of stories about Illyarri ghosts in the waters. Most wouldn't even stay on their ships at night. Tales of strange creatures coming out of the black waters and disappearing sailors were the stuff of legend and whisper in Traskein.

Ember wandered the rows of docks, looking for any sign of Madera or even someone to ask. Not for the first time since she'd left the inn, Ember wondered if she was going the right direction. *What if he changed his mind and went the other way? I hope he is here!* A loud clang made her jump and scan the area for threats. Realizing it was the sound of pulleys banging

against the masts of a nearby vessel in the breeze, she took deep shallow breaths to slow her racing heart. There was no one in the vicinity.

As she reached the runway of the last dock, wooden planks beneath her feet trembled. She shivered in the damp air, surveying the marina and listening. The trembling was followed by a soft thud, emanating from within the darkness of the harbor. She peered into its depths and saw nothing, but noticed the vibrations growing stronger.

A closed bait and tackle shop sat behind her. Across from that, a large warehouse, also closed. Between them ran a small alley. Compared to the meager light of the moon, the shadows of the alley seemed oppressive. She contemplated returning to the inn, but what about Madera? *Where is he?*

Trying to decide what to do, she took another glance down the dock. A large form emerging from the mists where she had heard the thuds made up her mind for her. She spun and headed into the alley's darkness.

It was pitch black and littered with garbage, so she navigated through the cluttered mess by running one hand along the brick wall to hold herself steady. The noises from the dock grew soft and distant, insulated as she was by the buildings. New sounds became clear now. Rodents skittering and chittering at her approach, and something else, a rhythmic sigh, like someone wheezing in their sleep. Then, she heard sobbing a little further away.

"Madera?" she called into the dark, clenching her teeth as she waited, hoping it was him.

The sobbing stopped after a sharp intake of breath. Ember was grateful to hear a familiar voice bark in response. "Go away!"

"Talk to me," she implored, biting her tongue to keep from saying more as her frustration grew.

"I don't want to talk. I just want to be left alone."

Ember breathed deep, stepping closer to the sound of his voice, wanting to reassure him that she was there to help. "Don't you think you've been alone enough? Isn't it time you had a friend?"

The sobbing resumed, and she rushed forward, not bothering to run her hand along the wall or check her footing. Her second step landed with a sickening crunch.

"Ow!" A new voice screamed from the ground as Ember fell in a twist of body parts and debris. A hand grabbed her. It felt cold and grimy on her

skin. As she scrambled to stand, a heavy form rolled on top of her.

"What have we 'ere?" Stale air warmed her face and a quiver rippled across her flesh as her arms were pinned to the filth of the alley floor by the larger presence.

She struggled, twisting and turning, trying to get free, panic raising in her chest. Her head snapped from side to side, looking for escape, for help, for anything. *I should never have come alone! Damn stupid impulsiveness!*

An odorous man loomed over her until she was gagged by his rotting, wine-soaked breath. "You woke me from my dream, you...", he ran his frigid nose along Ember's neck and up her cheek, sniffing as he went, "smell delightfully young."

A strained voice sounded from a stone's throw away. "Ember?"

"Go away!" Ember's attacker shouted. "She's mine."

Her eyes finally adjusting to the thick darkness, she saw the man above her looking over at Madera, who drew closer. *Oh, thank the gods!* Relief filled her at the sight of the boy.

"Let her go!" His voice barked, followed by a snuffle as he sucked in snot. He trembled inside but felt his earlier sadness turning to fury at the thought of someone hurting the one person who had been kind to him since his rescue from the Illyarri.

"I'll have you too," the man said with a sneer, grabbing for Madera, "if you get in my way."

Ember moved her leg from its twisted position beneath her, gaining leverage while the man was distracted.

"I—" he started. "Ooooh!" He grimaced in pain as Ember slammed her knee into his crotch. Madera stepped forward and kicked, connecting with the assailant's startled and outstretched face, the crack of breaking bone filled the air. The attacker fell sideways off of Ember, grunting and grumbling in pain, blood gushing from his nose. She scooted away, gasping for breath as she freed herself, relief and fresh fear filling her. Madera reached down, pulling her to her feet away from the man.

"You're gonna pay for that," the man spat, getting his bearing and moving to one knee.

Ember and Madera held hands, sharing a glance of fear and thanks as they stepped back. Their gaze locked for longer than it should; seeing his harsh emotions melt away to something softer, she smiled at him, her heart

warm with gratitude. She gave his palm a squeeze. In front of them, the man stood, a singular beam of moonlight illuminating his bloody, dirty, enraged face. A flash of silver shined as he drew out a knife.

"C'mon." Madera gulped and pulled her by their still-locked hands back toward the docks. They ran, but as they reached the end of the alley, they pulled up short at the sight of an immense shadow looming in the moon's glow just outside. They glanced behind them and saw the man's blade glinting, drawing near as he too edged towards the light.

Unsure which danger to face first, Madera whispered to Ember, "Do you have any weapons?"

"No," she said, letting their sweaty palms separate as she fumbled for the amulet tucked away in her pocket. Her hand shook in her panicked attempt to grasp the one thing that might aid them.

The attacker inched closer, only a few steps away, a leer visible upon his face as he emerged from the inky blackness.

There was a great noise from the docks behind Ember and Madera, a throbbing sound reminiscent of the thudding Ember had heard earlier. The earth shook behind them and the dark shadow became a hulking shape, blocking their escape. At the end of the alley, the man stopped, glowering at the form, then dropped his knife and ran back the way he had come.

Ember trembled as she and Madera shifted to face the approaching mass. They both panted, breathless and terrified, Ember rehashing the words of the old man at the inn, his voice ringing in her ears. This was no place for a child like her at night. She was glad she had not left Madera out here alone, but why had she been so stupid not to bring someone else along? Or at least her dagger! Madera's cheeks burned, horrified that his childish escape had led them both into imminent danger. He hadn't cared so much for his own safety, but putting her in harm's way filled him with guilt even as they faced this newest threat.



## CAPTAIN WYNN

"Ye shouldn't be here," the shadow towering over them said.

*C'mon, c'mon!* Ember's fingers clutched at the amulet, trying to get it free of her pocket as her heart thundered.

"There be bad things," the voice paused, "and people out this time of night." The shape turned and the moonlight revealed a man larger than either had seen before. He stood close to seven feet tall, his chest as thick as a barrel, with arms and legs to match. His clothes were that of a seaman—a sturdy leather tunic, leggings, and a great cloak made from the skin of some large sea animal in a strange faded blue.

Extending a hand the size of a bear's paw towards the pair, he said, "Come." His scarred face, covered with gray scraggly hair, broke into a smile. "I'll see ya to safety."

They glanced at each other, then back to the waiting giant. Neither spoke nor moved, but both of their minds screamed at them to run. Ember's hand finally slipped from her pocket, the amulet clutched in her grasp, the word 'Eckar' ready on her lips. *Will it even work if I need it to?*

Beside her, Madera opened his mouth and uttered, "Who are you?"

With an indulgent sigh, the man said, "Name's Captain Wynn, of the Wynn's Ryder. Not the prettiest ship at sea, but she's damn near the fastest when it comes to outrunning the Illyarri storms along the coast. Now that I've introduced myself, I hope ya see it be time to get out of here. Come on now." The captain turned and headed up the row of docks.

The young pair shared another look as the man moved away.

“Should we follow him?” Ember exhaled the question like it was the last breath she had to give.

Madera looked to the dark alley, then scanned the equally inky docks. “I don’t know what else we can do. I’m not going back in there.” He tilted his head towards the alley.

“Me neither,” Ember sighed.

The man's long legs gave him quite a stride, and they found him to be far ahead already. A loud crash in the alley sent them both scurrying after him.

"Wait," the princess called, shoving the amulet back in to her pocket.

The hulking man halted. They were breathless when they caught up, but both panted a clear "Thank you."

"I sometimes forget my legs be longer than most," he said, letting out a hearty chuckle. Captain Wynn examined the youths in the light for the first time and whistled. "That's some mighty bright hair ye have there, lassie."

She didn't respond, just watched him, frozen in panic. *What if he recognizes me? Where is he leading us?* Her hand again slipped into her pocket for the amulet.

The big man tilted his head at her and shrugged, then swung his gaze to Madera. “Well, what brings the two of you kids out here? What were ya risking yer lives for?”

"I was looking for him." Ember nodded to Madera.

"Well, ye found him." Captain Wynn turned and started walking. "What ya gonna do with him now?"

They followed in silence for a moment before Ember answered. "Strangle him."

"Then ya might've well left him be out here. What's the lover's spat about?" He did not attempt to conceal the mirth in his voice.

"We are not!" they both exclaimed, unconsciously stepping away from each other as they followed the man. Ember was grateful the darkness hid the crimson she felt burning on her cheeks.

"Now, now, keep 'er quiet," the captain said, raising his hand to shush them. "We're not alone out 'ere." For a moment, Ember felt the grimy hands on her arms and the rubbish under her back, and shivered. That was not a situation she wanted to find herself in again.

"It wasn't us that were fighting," Madera said much quieter, and turned his head to study the girl he barely knew who had already risked herself for him twice. "Why did you come after me, Ember?" She smiled at him, her red hair shimmering in the moonlight, and he felt his heart race in a way completely different than it had only a moment before.

Captain Wynn heard the quiet question and tilted his head to catch the response.

"I was worried about you. Ethan can be..." She searched for the word. "Bullheaded."

"You can say that again." He smirked.

"And so can you!" She hit him on the shoulder.

Ahead of them, their chaperone chuckled to himself.

They glared at each other until Ember started laughing, struggling to keep her giggles silent. Finally, she conceded with a wide grin, "I guess that makes three of us, huh?"

Madera laughed as well, finding it hard to take his eyes off her. The more he looked at her, the more he found he wanted to keep looking. Something about her captivated him and when she caught him staring, he felt his own cheeks turn as red as her hair.

"Where am I escorting you two?" Captain Wynn asked as they left the docks and trudged up the hill Ember had come down earlier.

Madera sighed in relief at having her attention pulled away, preventing her from asking why he'd been staring. He found himself wishing they could be alone for a while, but knew that without their rescuer, they would not be here at all.

"It's..." Ember started, her mind jumbled, heart pounding. She questioned the warm sensation running through her in the cool night air as she looked away from the boy. *Why do I feel so different around him?*

"Wait." The burly captain raised his hand to stop them, breaking their thoughts and their strides. "We've got company."



## GOODNIGHT

Ember, Madera, and the captain ducked into the shadows of a storefront and waited. Three forms came into view, two tall, one slightly shorter. The men slowed as they approached the spot on the street where the youths and their guide had been standing.

"Ember," one of the newcomers called out.

"I know that voice," Ember whispered. "Neko?"

"Where are you, girl?" the knight ordered.

Ember recognized Ethan, Neko, and Nena in the fading light of the crystals hanging from above and stepped from the darkness. "Here." She walked to them and gasped as Nena hugged her close.

"You'll give us heart attacks if you keep disappearing like that." Nena's voice was filled with relief.

"I'm sorry," she said as her guard released her. "You're right. I just couldn't let Madera run off alone out here."

A cough behind the guards caused Ember to look up. She saw Ethan studying the ground. "Ember, I..." he started.

"Don't tell me; tell him!" Her nostrils flared as she interrupted him and pointed to where Madera and Captain Wynn had walked from the shadows to join them.

Ethan looked at Madera. "I'm sorry I judged you so quickly."

Madera regarded the older boy, not speaking. Ethan's face darkened, and he shifted uncomfortably as he waited. "Well, say something already."

Madera fumed inside, not wanting to let Ethan off the hook so easily. He glanced at Ember then back at the Evergard boy. "Why should I forgive

you?" the younger boy snarled through gritted teeth. "You've been nothing but mean to me since we met."

Ethan stepped forward, his eyes blazing. "Me? You were the one who said we were Raneban scum! You can't be trusted." He twisted to face Ember. "See his anger? He's from Lynch, for god's sake; he's not one of us."

*Not again!* Ember's rage boiled.

The boys advanced on each other, ready to come to blows as they had at the inn. Ember jumped between them. "Stop!" Her voice rang out louder than she intended.

Neko and Nena grabbed Ethan from behind, forcing him to stumble a few steps back. Captain Wynn placed his large hand on Madera's shoulder, holding him in place. This time, the fight ended before it began.

"Quiet," Captain Wynn cautioned. "I don't think you wanna be drawing more attention to yourselves than you already have." He nodded at the insignia on Neko's sleeve. "Two soldiers of Raneban escorting around a red-haired girl with a fiery temper..." Having made his point, his voice tapered off.

"I don't have—" Ember started, then scrunched her mouth up in a grimace.

"Thank you, ...?" Neko said, eyebrows raised and hand outstretched.

"Captain Wynn," the big man replied, shaking the guard's hand. "Of Wynn's Ryder, fastest ship there is."

"Pleased to meet you and thank you for watching over our young friends."

"My pleasure. Whatever yer business 'ere is, I recommend ya keep it off the docks at night."

"Yes," Neko nodded. "Wise words." He cast a disapproving look at Ember, who he was pleased to notice had the good sense to look a bit guilty.

"But, if ever ye need a ship," the captain continued, "come look me up."

"Thank you, Captain," Ember said, reaching out to shake his hand. "For everything."

The big man smiled at her and emitted a muffled roar of laughter. "Yer sure a pretty thing. Be good to each other." He winked at Madera, and, with a wave, he took his leave and headed up the hill.

Neko shifted to Ember. "Do I even want to know how you met him?"

Ember pressed her lips tight and glanced away. She rubbed at her arms, feeling the greasy residue of the man from the alley and wondered if it would ever wash off.

The guard's demeanor became practical. Taking stock of the group around him, he nodded. "Ok, let's return to the inn; we will be departing early in the morning."

"You've found us a guide?" Ember realized Neko must have more connections in Traskein than she had thought, with an uncle owning an inn and having located a guide so quickly. She decided she would have to press him for more information over the next days of their trip.

"Yes, a man named Jace. He'll meet us at sunrise with supplies." He twisted away abruptly.

"Ok." Ember nodded, her stomach tightening, recognizing the man was keeping something from her. "What else, Neko? There's something you're not telling me."

He let out a sigh and swung back. "We heard news that Prince Rone has gone missing in the Frostdale mountains."

Ember and Ethan both took in sharp breaths.

"What happened?" the princess asked, her face pulled into a worried frown.

"Details were sketchy. He and a troop of soldiers went in after a band of White Nefars that had attacked a village. There was an avalanche; no one's come out since."

## PART VII

# JOURNEY



## INTO THE VALLEY

The king tossed and turned, sweat dripping from his forehead. The attendant on duty wiped a cool wet cloth across his brow and whispered prayers under her breath. "Keep the king safe and deliver him from this evil poison." She swept the cloth over his lips. When she pulled it away, there was a bright red smear on its white surface.

*The group traveled into the valley, walking along a path carved into the hillside. Markoon made a point to stay by Braelyn's side, yet everyone noticed she kept glancing back to where Warren walked in solitude a few paces behind them. Markoon's lips grew tighter and tighter, a mask slipping into place. When nightfall descended, they set up camp in a clearing amongst the valley's lush vegetation. The Valley of Orange, commonly known as the Voo, was many things, changing from a treed landscape to a colorful and almost tropical panorama before drying and merging into the great desert.*

*"Markoon," Commander Shef said. "You and I will take first watch. Warren and Brecks second. Myself and Gabriel the final watch. The rest of you get some sleep while you can. Keep your weapons close. "*

*Commander Shef and Markoon took their places on the outskirts of the clearing while the others prepared for bed. Warren laid out his bedroll and crawled in. Seeing Braelyn staring at him, he smiled.*

*"How are you doing?" he asked.*

*"Good, a little chilled is all," she reassured him, running a hand along the exposed skin of her arms*

*"Do you need an extra blanket? Are you worried?" He sat up, searching for something he could offer her.*

*"No. I'll be fine. Thank you, Warren. You're very kind." She gazed at him with a soft smile.*

*He sat straighter, feeling a warmth run through him at her compliment. He found himself wanting to do all he could to take care of this foreign girl and keep that smile on her face, something about it motivated him to want to be more than he had ever been. His own smile widened. "Well, don't worry. These are the finest soldiers on all the Division."*

*"I feel safe here," she paused with a furtive glance to see if anyone was in earshot, "being with you. Thank you again for what you did today."*

*"Sure, rescuing damsels in distress is what I'm best at." He offered a cheeky grin and puffed his chest out, delighting in her reaction.*

*She laughed and, in the woods, Markoon twisted from his post at the sound, his lips straightening into a thin line.*

*"Oh stop, you don't have to be macho. You're not like him." She glanced out to where Markoon stood and caught him glaring at them. Both turned away. Braelyn peered at the ground shivering and wishing she could crawl into Warren's bedroll with him and disappear from Markoon's view. "He scares me."*

*"You needn't worry about him. He's fine, just a bit aggressive at times. It runs in their family." Warren tried to placate her, although he could tell she was not convinced. She had felt the prince of Lynch's eyes on her and seen his scowls. Her fingers traced a pattern in the dirt, two curved points rising to unequal heights around a round base.*

*"Well—" she began.*

*"Hey!" Her design was brushed away as she jumped. Markoon loomed above them. "You need to keep quiet. Do you want every creature in the Voo to know where we are?" The animosity emanating from him made Braelyn shrink back. Warren tilted his head and opened his mouth, but couldn't get a word out before Gabriel jumped in.*

*"Back to your post, Markoon. If they did bring the whole valley down on us, someone needs to see them coming." The soldier had stopped preparing his own bedroll on the other side of the fire, and barked at the young man as a commanding officer.*

*Markoon spun, his feet throwing up clouds of dust as he stomped away.*

*"Now, quiet down, you two. You need to rest," Gabriel said. Neither of them noticed as he moved his hand off the hilt of his dagger, which was still hanging on his belt.*

*Warren and Braelyn grinned at each other and lay on their sleeping mats, settling into the stillness of the night and staring across the darkness at one another until they fell asleep.*



## "A LITTLE"

**B**y mid-morning, Ember's group finally made it outside the city and on their way to the Valley of Orange.

Ember and Neko walked at the front with Jace—the princess with her hair bound in its wrap, her guard with his hand kept comfortably close to his weapons, and the tall blond tracker diligently scanning their surroundings. "It should take about a day and a half to arrive at the mouth of the Voo," Jace told them as he led the party at a brisk pace through the forest. "From there, it depends on what you're looking for."

"So," the tracker continued after a pause with no response, "what is it we're trying to find?"

Unsure of what to tell him, Ember hesitated, glancing up at the sun peeking through the branches and hearing the voices of Cami and Nena behind them chatting about the vegetation surrounding the wide path. So much that the younger travelers had never seen before.

Sensing her uncertainty, Jace continued after running a hand through his hair to move it out of his eyes, "If you only want me to take you to the Voo, I can do that too, but Neko said you seek something. I know the valley well. It is a place unlike many others, an oasis squeezed between the mountains and the desert. Some of the land's most beautiful and colorful flowers grow in the Voo, including many medicinal and magical herbs that can only be found there."

Hearing this, Ember felt her heart race with excitement. *Maybe this was it!* She decided that, even if Neko frustrated her at times, she did trust him. And he trusted this man. She breathed deep and made up her mind. "I'm

searching for something called the Terra Cree. My father is sick, and he sent me there to find a cure. Maybe it's one of these plants you mentioned?" She bit her lip and stared at the man while awaiting his reply.

"Terra Cree or Terra Tree?" the man asked, stepping around a small branch in the path.

"Hmm... I'm pretty sure he said Cree, but he was delirious with fever." Her eyes widened with hope. "Is there a Terra Tree?"

"No, no, sorry. Not that I'm aware. I only asked to make certain I heard you correctly. I have heard of neither in the Voo. What else did he say?"

"He said," Ember shook her head, "something about the Legend of Shillish Vane. The two were related somehow." The princess sighed and looked up at the sky again, feeling the sun on her face as she walked. She wished she had more information to give Jace, or at least wished the information she had was clearer.

"The fallen city?" the man questioned and nodded in thought. "Hm. That is many days' travel from here into the Badlands. None who have ventured that far have ever returned, and it is nowhere near the Voo. Aside from maps of the old world before the Badlands, there are no modern records of it."

"Yes, I know that," Ember said. "Those are the things he told me." She remembered her father lying feverish in his bed, how the shadows had seemed to dance on his face. Her heart ached, while her resolve intensified.

They walked in silence until Jace stopped them, the entire group circling around him.

"I don't understand," he said. "I'll take you there, but I don't have the slightest idea where to start searching for this Terra Cree. It sounds like a wild goose chase." He looked at Neko and Nena then at Ember. "Young lady, I think with the rumors of war between Raneban and Lynch growing, your father may have sent you away to keep you safe; or perhaps, so you wouldn't witness his passing."

Ember's cheeks swelled; her head ached from the confusion and her stomach twisted into a knot at that idea.

"No—" she spoke as her throat tightened, choking off her words "He sent me... to find a cure."

Cami's hand wrapped around her shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze.

"Ok," the man said, nodding uncertainly, then shrugged. "I'm paid either way. Let's go find this cure."



BY THE LATE AFTERNOON, the group had reached the plains. They walked in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Jace and Nena led the way, the tracker setting the pace to reach a good place he knew to camp for the night, while her eyes scanned the horizon looking for anything of concern, always on alert. Ember and Cami were side by side toward the middle of the group. The princess worked her wooden needles as she walked, knitting and purling, stitch after stitch.

"What are you making?" Cami asked.

Ember paused her needles, pressing them and the small bundle of knitted wool against her chest and smiling. "I think I'm going to make a scarf. It's getting colder at night."

"You already have one though. I remember you packing it." Cami tilted her head, studying her friend.

Ember blushed.

"Oh, did you lose it?"

"No," Ember said, glancing behind them. "It's for Madera."

"Oh." Cami's eyes widened and she too looked at the brooding boy a few paces back. *I'm not sure what she sees in him, but she's always been a sucker for strays.* For a moment, her thoughts drifted to the many pets Ember had adopted as a young child. The castle servants were often left trying to figure out what to do with them. She stifled a chuckle remembering an incident with a goat and the king's robe.

"Haven't you seen how he always seems to be cold and shivering?"

"Not really," she shrugged. "Em, do you like him?"

"No," the redheaded girl blurted, causing the others to look in their direction. "I mean..." She angled away and whispered so only Cami could hear, "A little."



## ETHAN'S CHALLENGE

Madera walked along behind the girls, followed by the Evergard brothers. He kept his eyes down mostly, afraid of anyone catching him staring at Ember, especially the princess herself. He couldn't get her out of his mind. Instead, he focused on the dirt and a dream he had the night before they made it to Traskein. He had been falling from the sky, plummeting toward a snow-covered forest below. His hand reached up and touched his chest and he shivered. Nightmares like that had plagued him since...the Illyarri took him. He felt so lost and alone in the world. Unliked and unloved, the only person who seemed to care—he glanced up, catching a flash of her orangish-red hair peeking out from her hair wrap and smiled—was completely unattainable. *Why am I even still here?* His gaze once again fell to the dusty path as his heart sank.

Trailing Madera, the two brothers kept mostly quiet, only occasionally sharing observations about their surroundings or talking of home. Evan's thoughts ran the gamut of thinking of how his parents, especially his mother, must feel about his disappearance, and the adventure that lay before them. He'd dreamed of days like this since he was a young boy.

"Ethan?" Evan asked, glancing at his brother.

"Yeah?" Ethan looked away from the horizon. Like Nena, his eyes were constantly scanning for threats to the group's safety, concerned for the princess and possibly more so for his little brother. Their mother would kill him if he let anything happen to him.

"Do you think going on this quest will count as my task?" The boyish hope in his voice evident.

"To earn your mark?" Ethan turned, looking him in the eyes, eyebrows raised.

Evan's face reddened and he glanced away. "Yes."

"Ha," Ethan chuckled. "Earning your mark isn't an easy task. Not to mention, you weren't assigned to this." He walked taller as he spoke. "When I took my challenge, I was sent into the forests of Nivereth alone, with nothing but my sword and provisions."

"What happened there?" Evan's eyes widened and he stared at his brother in anticipation of finally hearing the story. Despite numerous prior attempts, Ethan had never really opened up about it.

"Well, I slew the creature that stalked the villages and freed them from its terror."

"The Trid? What about the boy it had taken captive?"

Ethan glanced away to the south and there was a long pause before he answered with a clenched jaw. "I was too late to save him." He took an unconscious step away from his little brother, a scowl on his face.

Evan considered pressing for more from his brother, but when he noticed Ethan's expression and how the space between them had widened, he decided against it. They slipped back into silence as the sun fell lower in the sky and their feet marched on.

After a while, Evan asked, "We'll make the Voo tomorrow?"

"Yes, that's what Jace said. By mid-day probably."

Evan swallowed. He really wanted to know more and, for no reason other than the fact that this was the most time they had spent together in a long time, he decided to try again. "Ethan?"

"Yes?" Ethan peered over at his little brother with a raised eyebrow, curious what he could want now.

"How did you... your challenge, how did you choose that one?"

Ethan sighed, kicking at a stone on the path as they walked before answering. "I didn't. Father gave it to me. He came to me a week before my sixteenth birthday and told me it was time."

"I remember that day." Evan smiled and stared at his brother with wide eyes, excited to finally hear more and hoping it might give him a sense of what to expect someday for himself.

"So do I." Ethan took a deep breath as he thought back. "He told me where I needed to go, what I needed to do, and I went."

"Was it hard?"

Ethan was silent for a moment, then put his arm on his little brother's shoulder. "Yes, very."

"Why hasn't dad approached me yet?"

"He will, when the time is right." Ethan thought for a moment and added, "Don't be too eager. It's not called a 'Challenge' for nothing."

Bringing up the rear came Neko. The large soldier kept his eyes on the group ahead, frequently counting them to make sure no one had disappeared, as well as stopping and scanning for any unwanted followers. It had been a quiet day on all fronts and he was thankful for that, as carrying the largest pack with their provisions left him weary. He'd been on many such journeys with the king but usually with a team of guards to share the burdens of protecting their charge.

He'd be glad when they reached their destination and could return to their homeland. Out here, in the middle of nowhere on their way to who knows where, anything could happen. Slavers were known to overtake travelers and haul them away to work the crystal pits in the lower Badlands. He'd die before he let that happen to the princess but he sure hoped it wouldn't come to that.



## KAT'S TALE

Katerra's paws pounded the earth, throwing up dirt and pebbles in her wake. Each muscle in her powerful legs worked to propel her and her passenger forward across the plains of Trask. Her lungs burned, her nostrils flared, and saliva dripped from her mouth. Somewhere nearby she could detect meat. A soft animal, prey, food. She kept running. No time to eat now. The man atop her, Dolan, clutched at her fur with his good hand, his legs wrapped tight around her waist.

The mid-day sun began its descent on the western horizon. They had left Traskein a full day ago and ridden hard through the night. Now, half a day's ride from the Badland's southern boundary, it was time to rest. Time to recover their strength so they could enter with caution. She slowed to a trot; Dolan rubbed her side, soothing her with words and touch.

A short while later, they came to a stop. Katerra was panting hard, her mouth dry and her stomach rumbling. She transformed to her human form and together they made camp. When the bedrolls were out and a small fire crackling, Katerra finally sat down.

"Get some rest." Dolan handed her the flask of water. "I'll go see if I can catch dinner."

He slid a short spear from his pack as she took a long drink, breathing deep. She closed her eyes for a moment, letting her other senses take in their surroundings, then set the canteen on a rock and pointed to her right.

"Over there, about a hundred yards or so, be quiet and you might catch a Pax."

He looked at her and laughed. "Even in human form, you still have the senses of an animal, huh?"

She smiled at him and lay down.



KATERRA WOKE to the scent of cooking meat. Her stomach rumbled, and she opened her eyes to find night had fallen. Across from her, Dolan stood above their small fire, roasting a Pax. They made for a tasty meal, but you had to catch them by surprise. If not, the rotund creatures curled up on themselves and their skin formed an impenetrable shell. You could still kill them but something in their defense mechanism made the meat inedible in that form. The animal appeared to be about medium size, stretched out and roasting above a fire, plenty for both of them to eat.

She sat up, breathing in the smell.

"How are you feeling?" her traveling companion asked.

"Hungry," she said as she stretched. "After running all day, I could eat two of those myself."

Dolan laughed, bringing a rare smile to his face, and said. "Well, this one will be ready soon."

"Good." Kat nodded, her nostrils flaring as her stomach rumbled. She looked the man up and down, giving him a serious appraisal. "Dolan?"

"Yes, Mari... er, Kat?" He stopped, turning aside to cough into his shoulder.

She waited for the fit to pass, then asked the question she'd been pondering on the trek and unable to voice while in cat form. "What else can you tell me about before, when you knew me as Marie?"

He removed the Pax from the fire and sat next to her, passing her a strip of meat. "Here." Steam drifted from it in the cool night air. He took a bite himself, not saying anything more while he chewed and formulated his thoughts.

"You were a mystery to all of us, even yourself. You knew nothing about who you were or where you came from. The only certainty was your name, that and your power. Like I said before, Killian could sense it."

He chewed another mouthful of meat and rummaged in his pack, pulling out some bread and cheese to share. "Life was pretty much new to you. You were a good person, you cared about others, were helpful, but you had no past, only the present. Which I wouldn't mind having myself..." He chuckled, then continued. "You'd have these nightmares; you'd wake up screaming your own name. Marie, Marie, repeatedly, just like when we found you." He shrugged and raised his hands, indicating he didn't know what to say about it.

She tore off a fresh chunk of meat and chewed while she thought about what he'd said, searching her memories for any reference to that name. Finding nothing, she swallowed and stared across at him. "Did I ever talk about the dreams?"

"Yes, mostly with Sakeen. They were always the same you said, or variations of the same." He stopped as another coughing fit racked his frame. Kattera patted his shoulder, handing him Ember's flask, which contained the last of the special water the princess had collected.

"Thanks," he threw back a gulp. "You and other mages had gathered inside a temple in a large city. Fire rained from the heavens. Your group was trying to protect it, but you couldn't. The onslaught was too great. The sky fell. That's usually when you would awaken."

Kattera's breath quickened as she listened. "This dream, I've had it many times. I believe it was the fall of Shillish Vane. I think I was there when the barriers fell and the Illyarri and the Ellyassi attacked in the skies above."

Dolan nodded. "Yes, that is what we came to believe as well."

"The thing I can't get out of my mind," Kat stared at him, "it wasn't us they were attacking, it was each other. We were just in the way..."



## THE BADLANDS

**B**efore daybreak, the pair was on the move, arriving at the edge of the Badlands as the sun crested the eastern horizon. The land divided here, the green lushness of the plains fading to dry brown, then black decay. Life still existed in this toxic land, although you couldn't tell from the way it looked. The few plants that grew here were poisonous. The creatures that roamed were sick and twisted mutations of life elsewhere on the Division. These were the leftovers of the battle that destroyed the great city of Shillish Vane, which had once been the central hub of known life.

Shillish Vane, also called the White City or City of the White, was where life on the Division was believed to have originated. Prior to the city's fall, Raneban, Lynch and Vonodora had been nothing more than villages themselves. The city of Traskein, in those days, was only a few huts near the lake.

No one dared venture far into the Badlands; few went further than it took to get back in the same day. Only the crystal harvesters ventured farther, and most of them only went by force of the slavers. It hadn't taken long to realize no good came from going there. The best the remaining people of the Division could hope for was to keep the death and decay from spreading. To this end, the Border Guard was set up to patrol and respond to sightings of creatures from the Badlands. It was this small multi-kingdom contingent comprised of a few soldiers, wizards, and rangers that Dolan had been a part of.

"How far in?" Kat asked, as they stood looking into the vastness of the decayed landscape.

"It'll take us close to nightfall; the going will be slow." Dolan shivered.

"Are you worried about being in there after dark?" She watched his expression closely.

He shifted to face her. "Katterra, the Badlands are not a place to be day or night. The further you go in, the worse it gets. The land is sick, the animals are sick, the very air is sick. It'll drive you mad if you are there too long."

"Tell me where to go, you don't need to..."

"Yes, Marie, I do. I need to complete this." He raised up the remains of his arm. "I... must."

She gave him a warm smile, reaching out and touching his shoulder. "I can see you need this as much as I do."

They held each other's gaze a moment longer, then Katterra turned, kneeling. "I'm thankful to have you as a guide. I'll get us there as fast as I can." She transformed, her body folding in on itself, her clothes disappearing until the large paws of a panther emerged from the twisting flesh.

Dolan's mouth hung open, it never ceased to amaze him. The large cat looked at him with one green eye and one blue eye. She nodded over her shoulder and he climbed on.

Some hours later, as they topped a rise, Dolan brought them to a stop, his eyes darting around, searching for the threats his bones told him were around every corner. "I've never been this far in without seeing something alive."

Gazing over the barren expanse before them, Katterra the panther growled. The air was indeed foul here; it burned her sensitive nostrils and made her thoughts thick and slow. She nudged Dolan to dismount and transformed. She came out coughing on her knees.

"Are you all right?" He knelt beside her, swinging the pack from his shoulders.

"I will be." She gasped in deep lungfuls of air, desperate for a clean breath.

"Here." He handed her a dampened cloth. "Breathe through this."

She pressed it against her mouth and tied it around her head. While it was harder to draw full breaths, what got in was less polluted. "Thanks." She reached out and squeezed his hand.

"We are close. Down this path here." He pointed to a dirt trail leading from where they rested. "And across to where the hills are in the distance. The beast's cave is among them."

"Where do you think the other creatures have gone?" Part of Katerra wanted to remember their time in the Badlands, to have more knowledge of what they were facing. Part of her, instead, was grateful for the ignorance. It seemed easier, less frightening.

"I can only guess they don't want to be seen. Most only come out at night." It was a reasonable answer, one that made sense, but Kat saw his uneasiness remained. She studied the land that lay before them, her stomach tightening as she pondered what they might find.

"Ready?" she asked after taking a swallow from her flask.

Dolan took a deep breath, blew it out and nodded at her.



## THE LAIR OF THE BEAST

They arrived at dusk. The dimming light did not allow them the best view of the hills and crevasses. Kattera pulled a torch from the packs.

"No." Dolan stopped her. "Igniting that out here would be a beacon to... everything. Let's wait until we get inside the cave."

"How about this?" Kattera removed a small almond-shaped Ellyassi crystal, which still carried enough of a charge to illuminate the area around them.

He signaled his assent with a shrug and a tilt of his head. "That will keep us from tripping over something unexpected, at least."

"What are those?" Kattera pointed the crystal's light at a group of hand-sized creatures skittering across a pool of water.

Dolan examined them, their dark shells and clattering legs splashing in the squalid water. "I call 'em Black Crabs. They're like the red and white ones you'll find on the shores, but here they are just another sick creature. Keep away from 'em. Their claws are poisonous. The fact they're here is a good sign, though. It means the beast is either dead or gone, but it also means other creatures might be lurking."

They continued along, scanning their surroundings as the ground dipped and disappeared into a black hole in the rockface before them.

"That's it," Dolan whispered.

Kattera looked back at him with a nod, raised the crystal above her head, and moved forward. A frigid, stale breeze blew from the cave, cooling the thin sheen of sweat on her skin. She paused as it sent a chill through her. The scent was musty, long dead, many dead. She covered her

mouth, breathing deep through the cloth. Behind her, Dolan followed, carrying two unlit torches ready.

The dim crystal revealed piles of small, almost shiny bones on the floor near the cave's entrance. They cracked like twigs beneath their feet. The pair paused.

"If anything is in there," he murmured, indicating forward with a jut of his chin. "They're gonna hear us comin'."

"Shh..." Kat whispered. "Do you hear that?"

"What?" Dolan looked into the darkness in front of them, then at her.

"That clicking?" Her eyes narrowed.

Dolan glanced over his shoulder. "The crabs aren't following us."

"No, it's coming from within the cave." She tilted her ear, listening.

"You've better ears than me, Kat." He stopped and knelt, studying the bones. "These've been picked clean."

Kat leaned in further. "It's growing."

Dolan stared up at her, hearing the sound himself now. His mouth dropped open and his eyes widened. "Fire! Now!" He set the torches on the ground before him.



## RAY - RAYS

"What?" Kat gawked at him in confusion.

"We need fire, now!" He pulled his pack off, scrambling to dig out the flint and steel.

"Ow," Kat shouted as something flew past her. She glanced down and saw a thin cut on her bare arm. "What?"

"They're Ray-Rays, small scavenger bugs with razor sharp wings. They fly in swarms, slice their prey to ribbons, and feast on the remains until they leave nothing but bone."

He found the flint and steel and struck them together. A few paltry sparks flashed by the torches. From the cave, the clicking grew louder, followed by a rush of air and a roar of clicks.

"Here." Kattera bent, grabbing one of the torches. She wrapped her hand over its head, closed her eyes, and shouted, "Eckar!" The torch burst into flames. Above them, she saw half a dozen of the bugs fly by.

Dolan held the other torch to the first until it caught fire, then spun it towards the depths of the cavern. The clicking was now a massive roar. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of the small blue bugs stormed at them, their wings shining and glinting like tiny steel knives in the firelight.

"Wave the torch in front of you; make the flames as big as you can. Ah —" he cried as the first few of the insects tore into him, and then the swarm was upon them, a mass of clicking, slicing, and fluttering wings.

The pair huddled close together, crouching on the floor and brandishing the flames against the onslaught. The flying horde split into two groups, parting like a sea and exploding around them. They flew past, heading out

the entrance of the cave. Kattera and Dolan reeled as the cloud of madness stormed, creating a cacophony. The bugs reformed into a large mass of blue flashing blades just outside the mouth, waiting, regrouping, and preparing to come back in.

"Here," Dolan thrust his torch into Kattera's other hand.

"What are you doing?"

He pulled a flask she had not seen before from his pack and popped the cork out of it. With a deep whiff, he held it to his nose and breathed in. "Ahhh." His eyes rolled up as he savored the scent. Losing no time, he poured a line of it on the worn stone in front of them before tossing the flask a few feet away so the liquid rushed out in a pool. He grabbed the torch. "Back up."

The swarm buzzed and clicked, growing larger as they gathered. The insects charged again. As they did, Dolan bent, bringing his torch into contact with the liquid. It caught flame, and the fire burned along the trail he'd made to where the flask dumped its contents. With a thunderous boom, the flask burst into a ball of fire, consuming the cave's entrance as the Ray-Rays rushed at them.

Their screech tore at Kattera and Dolan's ears. Dozens of the bugs broke through the fireball, burnt to a crisp and dead, falling to the ground at their feet; the rest scattered back out the cave's entrance.

"That'll teach ya, damn buggers. Just cost me the last of my whiskey."



## H U S K

Falling onto her bottom in the dirt next to Dolan, Katerra noticed the cuts covering her arm. The criss-cross slices from the insects' bladed wings had done a number on her clothes and flesh. Her dress was in tatters and her skin bled from multiple wounds from the slashes. Dolan had not fared any better, she saw.

"Thank you," she sighed, sagging, letting the ground hold her weight.

"Yer welcome."

"Oh!" She peered at his cheek where a deep trail of blood dripped from his left eye. "Can you see?"

He closed the eye, shaking his head no, but saying, "Well enough to notice they gave you a bit of a haircut." His laughter turned to wheezing as he bent over in pain.

Kat ran her fingers through her white hair, finding it all different lengths, with chunks missing entirely. Seeing the minced sections sprinkled on the ground around her, she realized how much more dreadful the situation could have been. On a whim, she stepped forward, embracing the man she knew so little about, who had risked his life to accompany her. "Thank you," she said again, heart swelling with gratitude.

"Yer welcome." he said, his voice giving out.

She put an arm around his waist and relaxed against him. "Will they return?"

He grimaced. "No, but let's hope that little fireball didn't alert anything else to our presence 'ere." With a sigh, he let himself lean into her as well. They shared the last drops from Ember's flask and rested.

After a few minutes of peace, Dolan lifted his head. "Ready?"

"Yes." Katerra nodded, glancing warily into the cavern behind them. She stood and offered him a hand. On their feet, the wounds were even more clear. Cuts covered both of them and though the wounds were superficial, the multitude of lacerations left them both wet and red, even as they healed with help from Ember's water. They had no time to change their clothes or dress their wounds. Instead, they picked up the torches and made their way deeper into the bone-strewn cave.

The flickering torchlight cast moving shadows around them. The remains of dead Ray-Rays crunched underfoot. About thirty feet in, the tunnel widened, opening into a small cavern. Dank, stale air greeted them in the larger space. Katerra spotted stacks of bones lining the rock walls and remembered Dolan's story of the village children and his own companions. She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head, not wanting to think of what or who they may have belonged to.

The buzzing clicks of a few stray Ray-Rays was the only sound aside from their breathing as they paused, surveying the lair. Symbols in what appeared to be dried blood marked the walls behind the bones. Katerra held the torch high, studying them, scanning for something familiar. Dolan touched her shoulder and pointed.

In the center of the room, the beast's large remains lay on its side, as if it were sleeping.

"Why did the Ray-Rays not touch it?" Katerra wondered aloud.

Dolan shook his head. "Even dead, other creatures still fear it. It was more than just a mutated creature. These symbols," he waved his torch, "are foreign to me, but they have significant power."

"What do you mean?" she said, studying the walls as they moved in closer. She pointed to a series of lines running down the side directly across from the beast. "There. That is what you showed me in Traskein. That I've seen before."

"Where?" The fifteen years between when they had last met, facing this beast, were a void between them. If he had known little about her then, he realized he knew even less now.

Katerra didn't answer, only walked around the room, circling the body, examining the symbols. Dolan waited before adding his observations. "This cave shows signs of possession, of ownership."

She looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Ownership?"

"Yes. This place was marked to remind the beast," he paused as he knelt by the remains, "or by the beast because he had grown mad from the possession. Either way..." Dolan used his good hand to lift the carcass, grunting as he rolled it over, "it should be branded too."

The form landed with a thump on its back, revealing its chest and the same five-lined symbol. The beast's body had suffered severe burns, but the symbol stood out clearly even on the long-dead remains. Kattera knelt beside Dolan and extended her hand, tracing the burnt lines on the flesh. As her fingers came in contact with the mark, her eyes flashed white, images flooding through her mind. She let out a scream and slumped to the floor, unconscious.



## DEALING WITH THE PAST

Katerra awoke on the floor of the cave, unable to move. Her mind cleared as she struggled to get comfortable, and she discovered her arms and feet were restrained with a rough cord that dug into her skin. An attempt to remove them with her magic, or even to transform into a smaller feline shape, failed as well. Her gut tightened at the realization she was bound both physically and magically. The dim light that filled the space was crystal illumination, not fire from their torches. She stared down at her body. Her clothes were different. She no longer wore the dress tattered by her encounter with the Ray-Rays, but instead wore a leather tunic and pants.

Then the stench hit her. Death and decay, much stronger than before; fresher. *How long have I been out?* She started to call out Dolan's name, but hesitated. The crack of bones announced someone's approach. Pushing herself up onto her elbows, Kat faced the cave's entrance. "Dolan?" she whispered.

There was no answer.

A large, dark presence loomed, advancing on her. As it stepped into the faint glow, the first thing she saw was the symbol on its chest. Her breath caught in her throat.

The beast lived! It sniffed at the air and crept nearer, flexing and moving its substantial mass and muscles excitedly. Hovering above her and blocking all light, it sucked in as it breathed. "She's awake." The guttural animal voice made her shiver. She wondered where Dolan was, if he was still in the cave.

"Yes," a human male voice spoke.

"Feed," the primal voice growled.

"No. This one's mine."

The hairs on her arms stood on end at the inflexibility of the human voice, which terrified her more than the urgent craving of the animal one. She could make out the face clearer now. It scowled at her. It had an almost human appearance, but large with wild tufts of dirty blonde hair. She squinted in surprise when she discovered both voices originated from the same mouth.

"Who are you?" Kattera asked, trying to sound more confident than she felt.

A high, cackling laugh escaped the beast's lips. "I am everything, and I am nothing. I am life; I am death. I am order; I am *Chaos*." It crowed with laughter again, its many hands pawing at her restrained form. The beast bent low, face to face with her. "More importantly, Earth child..." It ran its cheek along her body, breathing deep, its lips shivering in anticipation. The movement was uncomfortably carnal and she struggled to understand the distinct difference between the two parts of the beast. He lifted his face to hers and the primal voice growled.

"Powerrrr....."

"More important is your power and how I'm going to strip it away, bit by bit, strip all of you until I consume you." The human voice spoke from that beastly mouth.

"Feeeed."

"Yes, feed, my low friend. Feed we will, but I am first. Such a feast as this should be savored. She is special." The hands left her body, but the fingers kept twitching towards her.

Kattera shifted in her bonds, not caring that the beast saw her scrambling to find any sort of weapon. *What is he talking about? What is he going to do to me? Why does he think I'm so special?*

"What are you talking about? What do you want from me?" Her attempt to modulate her tone was not successful, and dread and confusion seeped into her words.

The deep voice answered. "All of you. Every bit of power your elemental form contains."

A surge of hope raced through her, quickly tempered by puzzlement. "Elemental? I'm not an elemental. I'm a mage."

The beast smiled a sick and savage grin. "You don't know, do you? You don't remember?" The face above her fell into thought. "It will be better if you do." He raised his hands over her head, whispered something she couldn't quite hear, and again she slipped into darkness.



## THE TEMPLE

**I**mages blazed through the blackness of her mind, flashes of strange dreams she'd had before. Faces and places she knew, but didn't recognize.

A great city radiated out from a huge temple at its center. Katerra viewed it from a ridge which overlooked the entire area. The city's buildings were white stone, glistening in the sun and surrounded by the lushest green forest she'd ever witnessed. A wide river dotted by several bridges ran leisurely west to east along the far side of the citadel, separating it from the vast forest.

She blinked and found herself standing inside a large auditorium, inside the temple, where a man's voice shouted above the din of those gathered. "Your traitorous actions will prevent The Flow and may be the death of us all." Hundreds of wizards were gathered. *Hundreds?* Katerra couldn't believe her eyes. She stood among them, was one of them. She looked to her left. Beside her stood a woman she knew, whom she could not quite place. The woman was small, light, almost ethereal, an elemental, but she bore *Katerra's* face.

"Marie?" She spoke the name, and the woman's loving smile both answered her question and filled her heart with a fierce tenderness. Katerra realized they were holding hands as the other woman's warm fingers squeezed hers. A voice boomed from a raised dais in the center of the room where three wizards stared down at a man in chains. A man Katerra recognized. *His face, where do I know it from?*

Her memories of where she had been only a few moments ago and this reality she now stood in clashed in her mind. *The beast. The face of the beast. What beast?* She glanced around, questions rolling as she searched the sea of familiar yet foreign faces. "I sentence you to death," the voice declared. A gavel struck, and uniformed guards took the chained man away. As he passed where she stood, he smirked at Kattera.

The gathering broke apart, voices talking in hushed tones, the mood dark. Marie tugged on her hand and they exited through white marble pillars. All at once, the murmurs became cries of alarm sounding from everywhere in the chamber and out in the city.

"The sky turns black!"

"The barrier has fallen!"

"They're coming!"

A voice, familiar but forgotten, rang out. "Protect the city. Elementals and your partners, to the Equarium. Protect the heart at all costs."

Everyone in the temple ran. Chaos outside brought them to a halt. Voices screamed and people fell. Ahead, Kattera spotted the prisoner darting away from his unconscious guards, his fetters lying on the ground next to them. Loud crashes filled the air. Staring up, she found the skies were alive with creatures in combat, creatures the likes of which she'd never seen. From this battle, chunks of earth, flame, and ice, as well as bodies, rained down, pummeling the city.

An arm grabbed her. She twisted around, finding an old man with a long beard, streaked with white. She knew him. Trusted him. He was one of the three from the dais.

"He's free," she said, pointing toward the figure escaping down the temple stairs.

"I know. I will tend to him. You and Marie take your place on the temple Equarium. Keep us safe." It struck her that his voice was urgent and yet surprisingly calm, which she found reassuring.

She nodded, and he disappeared into the crowd, moving faster than seemed possible for someone of his age. She turned to the woman next to her and they ran together. The disarray of her thoughts matched the conflict above them. *If this is Marie, who am I?*



## THE FALL OF SHILLISH VANE

Outside the temple dome, Kat and Marie took their positions together with all the other mages. Marie stood in front, chanting with her bare arms raised. Katerra had a moment to take in the fact that Marie had dark black hair and, she grabbed a strand of her own, so did she. There were so many questions fighting for her attention but the shouts and screams from all around drove them from her mind. She stepped in behind Marie, repeating the words of the chant, her hands resting just below the other woman's shoulder blades. In a wide circle around and inside the dome, other pairs lined up the same way.

The chanting grew into a thrum, rhythmic and powerful. Kat watched as the body of the woman before her became more and more translucent, her energy spreading out, mingling with the others', and growing. A towering, shimmering bubble formed and moved away from them, until it encased the entire city. The barrier spread for miles, glowing and crackling with energy.

As bodies and debris smashed down onto the shield from the battle above, they remained suspended in the air for an instant before they slid off, crashing into the forests or river to either side. The energy barrier protected the city and kept the citizens safe, but each time something struck it, Katerra felt pain as if she was physically hit as well.

And struck it was, over and over again, as the battle raged above, filling the skies. To the west, the Ellyassi, red, orange, and yellow, creatures of fire. To the east, the Illyarri, blue, silver, and green, a mass of ice-covered warriors. Where the two forces met, there was a blazing line of white and

from that line they fell. The conflict spread as far as the people of Shillish Vane could see, no end in sight.

Outside the protective barrier, the forests burned, buildings crumbled and bodies lay everywhere. The Division's creatures fled as fast as they could, but the seemingly endless number of combatants above rained fire and debris in a blanketing wave of destruction that spread out in an ever-widening circle. If it didn't stop soon, all life on the Division would be snuffed out.

Around Kattera, cries and whimpers rang as mages collapsed, succumbing to pain and exhaustion. As each fell, the bubble grew smaller, retracting with the weakening of their collective power. Minutes turned to hours and the group retreated, step by step, through the wide arched halls into the heart of the temple, pushed by an inexorable and yet invisible force. By the time Kattera found herself at its center, only a few dozen wizards remained standing. All, including herself, were bloodied and tired, but they continued their chanting, arms outstretched, energy flowing from their fingertips in silver strands.

She could feel the other woman, almost hear her voice, even though she could no longer see her. *Where had she gone? What became of those whose partners had collapsed?* There was so much she didn't know and didn't understand but she knew she had a part to play, to protect the city and buy the others time for what they needed to do.

A shadow rose surrounding them in a gloomy haze, followed by a loud popping sound. White light rushed in, blinding the remaining mages. Energy lifted Kattera off the ground, surging into her and embracing her body as pieces of the temple crashed down from above.

"Marie!" she cried out as she fell. "Marie!" The white energy wrapped around her. "Marie!" She curled up and closed her eyes in a cocoon of blazing energy. "Marie!"

Then darkness.

## PART VIII

THE VOO



## WATCH

**W**arren awoke to Commander Shef shaking his shoulder. "It's your turn, boy. To your post."

*The youth nodded and stretched his arms over his head.*

*"It's been a quiet night. Let's hope it stays that way." The commander stirred the fire, added a log, and settled himself down on his bedroll, as Warren got up to stand watch.*

*At his post, time inched along like the days spent in the royal court listening to dignitaries. He'd much rather be out doing anything else. Hunting, training, hiking. Anything but sitting still while people droned on and on. At least here it was peaceful. He still had to listen and pay attention to the world around him, but it was different. Warren broke a twig off the tree he leaned against, using the blade of his knife to scrape off the bark.*

*"What are you doing?" a soft voice next to him asked. He jumped, dropping the knife. Braelyn stood to his right, a smile parting her lips and her red hair dancing in the gentle breeze.*

*Warren's mouth fell open and he fumbled over his words as his lips curled up, matching her expression. He wanted to reach out and run his hand through her hair, wrap it around the back of her neck, and pull her lips to his. "What are you doing up?" he finally managed to ask.*

*"I couldn't sleep. I woke, and you were gone, but..." She grinned at him. "I asked first!"*

*"I'm standing guard," he said, puffing out his chest.*

*"I figured that much. Even if you were easy to sneak up on." He felt a rush of warmth at the laughter in her voice. With a nod of her chin, she*

indicated his hand. "I meant with the stick."

"Oh." He smiled, bent, and picked his knife out of the dirt. "Just passing the time." He grinned at her as he cleaned his blade on his pants.

"You were removing the skin from that creature just to pass the time?" Her smile faded as her eyes narrowed.

"What?" Warren's forehead wrinkled as his eyebrows dipped. "It's just a tree."

"Just a tree?" She asked, tilting her head and looking above him at the branches. "It's not alive?"

He was puzzled by the questions, and started to wonder if she was right in the head. Or had she never seen a tree in her village in the desert? "Well, yeah, it's alive, but it doesn't feel anything."

"It doesn't?" Her smile returned but this time with a glint in her eye.

Warren's face scrunched tighter. "I don't understand what the problem is." He decided his concern was founded. She had been too good to be true. It was clear there was something wrong with her.

"Look." She pointed to where he'd broken the branch off. Sap oozed from the stub. "That's the lifeblood of this creature."

Warren wiped a hand across his forehead. "Yea, it's healing itself." He was losing his patience with this silly conversation. All because of a stick!

Her next question, however, caught him off guard.

"But what would it be doing if it wasn't healing the damage you caused?"

"Hmm." Warren's gaze lowered. He considered her words for a moment before meeting her waiting eyes. "Growing taller, maybe?"

Braelyn nodded, her smile widening, encouraging him to go deeper.

"Huh, I've never thought about it that way before." He studied her anew, feeling foolish for the harsh judgements he had cast on her moments before.

"And how's that?" She smirked.

"That I was interfering in the tree's growth, preventing it from being what it was meant to be."

Braelyn's smile brightened even more, and she reached out, touching Warren's arm. "I knew you were a good man, Warren Raneban."

He blushed and turned aside, feeling unworthy of the comment after being so dismissive of her line of questioning. "Thanks. I'm not—"

*"No." She squeezed his forearm. "It's true. I knew when I saw you on the prairie. The way you carry yourself, how you take in everything around you. Your eyes study the world, not for what it can do for you, but because it exists and the beauty it holds."*

*"Thank you. It feels good to hear you say that." He wanted to say more, to return the compliment, but didn't know where to start. Her hair in the moonlight was breathtaking, and yet that was not close to the most captivating thing about her. He closed his mouth, rather than bumbling his way through what was not clear in his head.*

*"Well, don't forget it." She bent in close and kissed him on the cheek. "I mean it." She shifted to walk away, her hand slipping from his arm.*

*Warren grabbed her wrist and pulled her back to him. She slid into his embrace, looking up with a smile. Their lips met and parted.*



*THEY LAY on the forest floor, their clothes scattered around them. Warren ran his fingers from Braelyn's flushed cheek down her neck and across her naked chest.*

*"I don't want this moment to end," he said, kissing her nose and breathing softly.*

*She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him tight to feel his skin against hers. Gazing up, she whispered into his ear, "We will always be together."*

*After a few minutes of staring silently at one another, they rolled apart to get dressed. He stood and helped her to her feet. "You should return to camp. My watch will be over soon."*

*They embraced again, their bodies pressing against each other while they kissed, before she pulled away slowly. She ran her hand all the way down his arm, until just their fingertips touched. Then she was gone. He watched her slip back among the sleeping bodies, missing her already and longing to have her in his arms again. She lay down in her spot and gazed over at him. He smiled, returning to the woods to finish his duty.*



## A SPLITTING OF WAYS

**L**oud voices from the clearing brought Warren's attention away from the shadowy forest. His eye's widened at the sight of Markoon atop Braelyn, pinning her arms to the dirt.

"Get off me!" She pushed against him, struggling to break his hold on her.

"I saw what you did with Warren. It's my turn now. I helped rescue you too." He growled at her as he worked his knees between her thrashing thighs unsuccessfully.

"Stop it!" Almost managing to get a hand free, she raised her arms in an attempt to push him away. Markoon slammed her wrists back to the earth and bent low face to face. His long hair masked their faces and his hot breath washed over her like bile. She recoiled in disgust.

Warren sprinted from his watch post, covering the distance in seconds. He grabbed Markoon by the hair and yanked his friend's head up. "Get off of her!"

"Ahh!" Markoon shouted as he was wrenched back, reaching behind to get at the hand that had seized him. He thrashed about wildly.

Finding herself free from his grasp, Braelyn kicked at him and scurried away, tears streaming down her reddened cheeks.

"Let go of me, Warren!" Markoon twisted around, swinging his left forearm and breaking the grip on his hair. The boys glowered at each other. "You had your fun with her, now let me have mine."

A splash of warm spittle sprayed across Warren's cheek and a knot formed in his stomach. Until this moment he had trusted the other like a

brother. "Not on your life, Markoon." Warren rolled his shoulders back and planted his feet, ready for a fight.

Markoon shoved him backward and swung his fist. Warren ducked and returned with an uppercut, catching Markoon square in the jaw.

Awoken by the commotion, the others looked up just in time to witness Warren's fist connecting with Markoon's face. The blow knocked the Lynch prince off his feet and over a log. Gabriel and Commander Sheffield were on Warren at once, restraining him and stepping between the young men before any serious physical damage could be done.

"What the hell has gotten into you two?" Commander Shef glared at them until their eyes shifted to Braelyn.

Brecks appeared next to Markoon and helped him up. Huffing, the young man stared at the men in angry silence, eyes darting between the red faces as his humiliation grew.

Before anything more could be said, a flaming arrow flashed into the dim clearing, striking a stump a few feet from where they stood.

"Get down!" Commander Shef waved his hand in the direction of Prince Warren. "We're under attack."

The group dropped to the ground, scrambling for their blades, all but Braelyn who huddled against a tree on the far side of their camp. From the woods, five forms in red rangers' outfits moved in, three with burning swords, two with bows notched with arrows of flame.

"Weapons, everyone," Commander Shef barked. "Gabe, the sword!"

"On it," the big man said, diving to where his pack lay with the Sword of Raneban in its scabbard.

Warren searched for Braelyn, his gaze darting through the darkness until he spotted her. "Braelyn, get down!" Another arrow whizzed overhead. He snatched a short sword in his right hand as he jumped to his feet and spun in the direction of the attacking rangers. The others formed a half-circle around the prince of Raneban and he took off in a charge, Gabriel and Commander Sheffield at his sides, Markoon and Brecks bringing up the rear.

Then darkness fell as Warren slumped to the ground.



## MOURNING DEPARTED

*"What happened?" Warren sat up, temples throbbing. He grimaced and leaned his head forward to rest his chin on his chest.*

*Gabriel knelt before the prince, a wet cloth in his hands. "He'll live," he said over his shoulder to where Commander Shef hurried around the camp, packing their belongings and swearing under his breath.*

*Something seemed odd, but Warren could not quite figure out what it was. He blinked, trying to remove the blurriness from his vision. Slowly, he scanned the clearing. "Where is everyone? What's going on?"*

*Gabriel squatted on a charred log across from him. "You were knocked unconscious."*

*"How? I don't even remember the battle starting." He started to shake his head before he thought better of it.*

*Gabriel sighed and glanced to Shef. "It was Markoon. He hit you over the head with the hilt of his sword, then him and Brecks fled." Shef's mutters grew louder, and the other two heard him say something about "swine" and "cowards".*

*Warren reached up, rubbing the back of his neck. It ached, and he felt a swollen lump. "What about Braelyn? Where is she?" He searched the area with heavy eyes.*

*"She's gone, Warren."*

*"Gone? What do you mean?" He rolled to his knees and worked to stand. "Where is she?"*

*"She left. The rangers came for her. They were her people, and she stopped them from slaughtering us. If she hadn't spoken up when she did,*

*we wouldn't be having this conversation. When Markoon hit you, she screamed at him. Then the prince and Brecks fled, leaving us to fend for ourselves. Everything halted, she ran to you and before we knew it, we were surrounded by a dozen of them, the likes of which I've never seen." Gabe scratched at his beard. "She told them to stop. We were her friends. At first, that didn't seem to matter none. When she told them we'd rescued her from the Illyarri, that got their attention."*

*"She left with them?" Despite his efforts, Warren could hear the desperation creeping into his own voice. He hoped this was an awful joke and that she would come out from behind a tree, laughing. He turned to check, nearly falling over from dizziness.*

*Gabriel steadied him, nodding. "She stayed with you for a moment, whispering in your ear and telling you she'd see you again, but that she had to go."*

*"Which way did she go?" He thought of where the rangers had stepped out of the forest. Before he could take a step in that direction, Gabriel tightened his grip on Warren's arm.*

*"No. No. Prince, you're not chasing after her. She's no longer a damsel in distress. We need to return home. That little fight of yours with Markoon is going to raise all kinds of hell for the king. Markoon had quite a shiner blooming on that ugly mug of his. His father will be none too pleased."*

*No longer trying to hide how frantic he was, Warren insisted, "I have to find her."*

*"Boy," Gabriel grabbed him by the shoulders. "Not today. You have responsibilities." The older man stared the young prince in the eyes until he saw him soften. He reached into a pocket and pulled forth a flame-shaped translucent-orange crystal on a strand of leather. "She asked us to give this to you."*

*Warren took it, examining the strange shape and wondering why she had left it for him. He slipped it into his tunic for safekeeping.*

*They finished packing up camp, though Warren spent most of the time with his eyes eastward in the jungle, looking in the direction of the great desert. The older men kept tabs on him, but let him care for his head and mourn the loss of what they saw as an adolescent crush.*

*As the morning sun rose on the horizon, the three men made their way along the trail that had brought them into the forest. The path led upward,*

*out of the valley. The young prince walked between his two guardians.*

*Not long after they had started their trek, Warren stopped in the middle of the path. "I, uh, need to take care of some personal business." He looked at Gabriel. "Can I catch up with you?"*

*"No." Commander Shef's voice was firm and Gabriel shook his head in emphasis.*

*"C'mon, give a guy some privacy." The prince clutched at his stomach.*

*Gabriel and Commander Shef glanced at each other and chuckled. "Okay, we'll wait up the trail a little way. Don't take too long."*

*"I won't." Warren laughed and headed back to where a large tree offered seclusion. Ducking behind it, he waited, listening to them talk until their voices grew distant. With a glance around the tree to make sure they were out of sight, he spun and ran down the hill.*



## ONE COLD MORNING

Ethan Evergard stood watch in the early hours of the morning. The sky above was dark and overcast. They had camped in a small forest a half-day out from the Valley of Orange, planning to arrive there before noon the next day. His back ached from leaning against the tree for the last hour and he changed positions. A shiver ran through him and he rubbed his hands along his arms against the dawn chill.

He watched over his sleeping comrades, studying them one by one, wishing he could be enjoying a few more hours of slumber himself. Shivering again, he noticed his breath drifting before him. It had certainly turned colder today. Strange, he had always heard things were warmer this close to the western desert.

He looked at Ember and Cami huddled together for warmth. His little brother wrapped tight. Madera. *That kid is trouble.* He'd keep a close watch on the boy from Lynch, regardless of what the others thought. He stuck his hands in his pockets and glanced over to catch Neko's eye, to check how he was handling the elements. *Where is he?* Neko had taken the side deeper in the wilderness, where it was darker and harder to see.

Ethan caught sight of him, also leaning against a tree. The older man's chin rested against his chest. *Is he asleep?* Ethan opened his mouth to call out to the head guard, even across the sleeping group, when a cloud moved and a sliver of moonlight illuminated the clearing.

A hazy mist flowed in from the thick trees, enveloping Neko. Chunks of blue ice covered his left arm, the right frosted over with bluish crystals sparkling on the skin as they swelled and joined, becoming ice themselves.

His face had turned purple, with bulging lines of frozen blue blood vessels protruding from the skin.

"Raneban to your feet!" Ethan shouted, grabbing the hilt of his sword in his right hand. "We are under atta—" Something snatched his left arm. He twisted to find an Illyarri's cool blue fingers wrapped around his wrist. The creature's touch sent a freezing jolt through his flesh. The cold seeped into his bones, his hand turning blue before his eyes. With his right hand, he pulled forth his blade, and the creature let go. It stood too close to draw its own weapon or move away before he could strike.

Ethan's blow took the lower half of the creature's exposed arm with it. His second stroke, using both hands holding the sword, removed the elemental's head. Turning back to camp, he found the rest were standing in a circle, weapons ready. The Illyarri moved in from three sides.

"That way, quickly!" Evan shouted, pointing to where his older brother stood. "To open ground. Get to the plains. We can see them coming out there."

His friends rushed by as the Illyarri surged forward. Ethan grabbed his brother's arm and pulled him aside, letting the others pass before following.

"We need a plan, little brother," he panted. "We can't outrun them forever and they outnumber us."

"How many are there?" Evan asked, his brown hair bouncing as they ran. Ahead of them, Jace and Nena yelled for the girls and Madera to hurry.

"I counted at least six, probably twice that." Ethan looked back to see how much of a lead they had on the Illyarri. They were safe for the moment, but would not stay that way for long.

"We can't fight them on the plains. We have to hold them here. Buy the others some time."

Ethan agreed. "Turn and fight?"

His younger brother nodded. "See that?" He pointed to where their friends were slowing to squeeze through a tight spot. "We can take them there. One at a time."

A large frozen ball flew over their heads, smashing into a tree and showering them with icy shards. They ducked low and hustled as fast as they could through the brush.



## TIGHT SPOT

Ethan and Evan made it through the small opening and leapt to either side as more of the balls of ice rocketed past. Both sucked in heaping gulps of air.

They had not had a chance to do more than a cursory survey of the area as they fled, and Ethan felt panicked as he watched the rest of their group run on. "You sure they won't try to go around?"

"No, they think they have us. Take out your netting," Evan said, focused on his plan, but giving his brother a quick once-over, noticing the wide eyes and open mouth.

"I didn't have time to grab my pack." Ethan shook his head, running through a mental list of what they had left behind. He tried not to swear. This was not the moment to worry about that. First, they had to survive. His heart thundered in his chest.

"Ok. Fall back behind that tree." Evan pointed a few feet away with one hand as he dug in his pack with the other. "We'll let two come through; you engage the first when he gets there and I'll hide here and take the second." With a relieved nod, Ethan retreated and ducked out of sight behind the tree.

Evan pulled out a net of brown and green cloth, throwing it over himself as he bent low to blend with the underbrush. They both heard the approach of the Illyarri. The soldiers spoke in their clicking language, slowing as they neared the spot between the trees. From Evan's vantage point next to the opening, he watched a blue-skinned hand reach through and grab the tree's trunk for leverage. There was a hiss and a crack as the bark froze at the elemental's touch before his blue-skinned face appeared, the tips of his long

ears first. He looked from side to side, glancing where Evan crouched but not seeing him, then called back to his comrades before crawling through. Evan nodded to where his brother hid. He couldn't see him, but hoped Ethan was ready. The first soldier waited while the second climbed between the trees. Once they were both clear, the Illyarri soldiers continued their pursuit of the fleeing humans.

As a third elemental began his climb through, Evan jumped to his feet, dropping the camouflage netting. He raised his sword and brought it down on the soldier's exposed neck, severing his head. The sound alerted the other two who were passing the tree Ethan was hiding behind. They turned, pulling out their swords. At the sign of their distraction, Ethan lunged forward, jabbing his weapon into the first soldier's back. The Illyarri body slumped over and fell to the ground. The second soldier paused, realizing he was surrounded. The brothers stepped closer, weapons ready.

The Illyarri warrior snarled, glancing between the pair. He raised his arms up and spoke. "Ackar." His blue skin shimmered in the pre-dawn moonlight and then seemed to grow. It thickened, expanding until it took on a squared, blockish look. Before either brother could react, the soldier loomed before them, covered in armor of solid ice. The brothers' eyes met. Ethan shrugged, Evan nodded, and they moved in.

Evan swung low, aiming for a leg; Ethan high for the neck. The soldier jumped back from Evan's strike while parrying Ethan's with his own sword, losing his stability in the process. He fell into a tree with a thud and a crunch of ice. Both brothers came at him. This time, he blocked Ethan's blow again, but Evan struck his thigh. The impact only broke off a small chunk of the frozen armor and did no further damage. They kept the soldier off balance and continued attacking, landing strike after strike with limited effect.

Behind them, the body of the dead soldier was yanked from the opening and a new face emerged. This Illyarri creature had a long angular snout above a wide mouth filled with razor-sharp teeth that glinted in the moonlight. He examined the surroundings with eyes that stuck out from the sides of his face.

"Children," he spat, reaching into his coat and pulling forth three throwing knives. Each slipped between the gray knuckles of his right hand. The younger of the pair had his back to him, a nice target.

"Evan!" Ethan cried out. "Down!"

Evan ducked as Phats flung the blades. They flew over the boy's head and pierced the icy shield of the Illyarri soldier, knocking him forward. Ethan snatched the netting from the forest floor and threw it in Phats's face. He spun, grabbing Evan's arm. "Let's go! We've done all we can."



## ON THE RUN

With little time to grab their gear, the humans hurried through the tall grass of the plains with only a handful of supplies and weapons. The sun rose over the mountains that sat north of the Valley of Orange in the distance, providing a clear view of the plains in front of them and the Forests of Nivereth they had exited. The woods ran parallel to the plains until both converged at the base of Stone mountain and the entrance to the Voo.

Jace brought them to a halt after ten minutes. They all panted, bent over, hands on knees as Jace passed around a flask.

"What were those things?" the guide asked, looking in the direction they had come.

"Illyarri," Nena spat. Her mind roiled with images of their escape, of waking to see her brother-in-arms dead, frozen to a tree, and having no chance to grieve, only to run. She wanted to crumple to the ground and wail, but there was no time for that. She was the only one left to protect the princess.

Jace's mouth fell open; he took in a deep breath and squinted at Nena. "Illyarri? Here? On the Division?"

"Yes," the others responded in unison.

"That's not possible. I thought the barriers kept them out." It was clear to the group he did not want to believe it, despite what he had just seen.

Ember understood his confusion. She had thought the same until a few days ago. She made her explanation as simple as she could. "It does. Most

of them, anyway. But they have powerful magic. In small numbers, they can travel in our world."

Jace glanced away to the north. "I'd long heard rumors that the Illyarri had a stronghold in the Frostdale Mountains, but I'd never heard of them out here."

The Raneban princess felt a twinge of guilt for bringing their guide into this situation, especially knowing they did not have time to allow him to absorb the shock. Before she could say anything more, another voice spoke up.

"They do," Madera said, blushing as all eyes swung to him. He'd spoken up on instinct but now felt embarrassed at drawing attention to himself.

"What do you—?" Nena started, but Cami interrupted her with a shout.

"Evan! Ethan!" She pointed back the way they'd come, where the brothers had emerged from the forest and were racing towards them. Cami turned, hugging Ember. "They're safe."

Filled with relief, Ember hugged her back and smiled.

"Do you think they got them all?" Jace asked.

His question was answered a moment later as six Illyarri soldiers and the shark-faced assassin exited the woods in pursuit.

"No!" Cami cried out, giving voice to the dread that coursed through them all.

"Let's go," Nena shouted, grabbing the girls and pushing them forward to where a section of wilderness jutted into the plains on the other side of a hill a short way away. "Hold it at a steady jog; we've got enough distance to keep them at bay for a while. But we'll need to save our strength if we have to stop and fight."

Ethan and Evan gained on them, but so did the Illyarri. The small group came to the hill and slowed to a walk, making their way to the top, everyone out of breath. When they stopped at the crest, the brothers were only a few hundred yards away.

Evan shouted at them. "Into the woods, find cover."

Nena and Jace glanced at one another, sharing a look of agreement. She didn't know the man well, but Neko had recruited him personally and therefore she felt she could depend on him.

"The boys are right," Nena said. "It's time to make a stand. We can't keep up this pace."

Ember nodded and looked to Madera. "Are you with us?"

Panting, he gave a thumbs up.



## A STAND IN THE CLEARING

**I**n the woods, Jace led them along a path, following it for a mile before it ended in a clearing. The spot showed signs of frequent use for camping, with an empty fire pit in the center. A large boulder walled one side, a series of thick trees surrounding the rest.

"Put your backs to the trees," Nena said. "If we need to fall back, retreat into the woods, keep moving toward the Voo. Ember—" She turned to look at the princess. "You go now."

Ember shook her head, determined. "I'll stay to the back, but I'm not leaving you here to fight my fight."

"Dammit, girl." Nena's eyes narrowed. In response, Ember pulled out her short sword and stood ready, a few steps behind her companions.

They waited, panting, listening, hearts thudding in their chests. The sound of running feet caught their attention right before the Evergards came into view.

"Here," Nena shouted at them as they stumbled into the clearing, breathless. "How far away are they?"

Ethan shrugged. "Not sure, lost sight of them as we ran." He fell to his knees, Evan beside him, both heaving for gulps of air. A thin line of spit fell from Evan's mouth into the dirt. He swayed, though he managed to keep himself upright.

"Stand down," Nena said to the group. "We've got a minute, maybe two. Rest, but be ready."



FIVE MINUTES LATER, the group waited in silence, watching and listening for any sign of their pursuers. They did not hear any clicking, which was reassuring until they noticed the forest had gone still as well. There were no birds chirping or insects buzzing. A delicate mist drifted in the surrounding wilderness, as if sunlight heated the moist forest floor, but it kept growing thicker.

"It's getting colder," Ember whispered.

"They're here," Madera said, eyes darting around.

"Look," Cami pointed at the trees behind them. A thick, frozen sheet lined the trunks and connected them, forming a wall. The shifting mist hid it at first, but soon they could see the dam of ice covered everything except a narrow entrance. They were trapped.

A voice hissed from the path's opening into the clearing.

"Surrender."

Ember recognized the voice, remembered the rotten smell that accompanied it. The creature that attacked her in the forests of Nivereth. She shivered, not from the cold but the memory of the creature's savage face, how it had hunted her, and what it had done so easily to Katerra.

"Surrender or die."

Footsteps thudded before them, and the ice-armored forms of six Illyarri soldiers came into view, their blue-skinned bodies encased in blocks of frozen crystal. Nena and Jace, who stood at the front, edged back as the elementals moved in and fanned out in a line.

"The odds look pretty even," Jace said. He shifted from foot to foot, his fingers curling around the hilt of his sword.

"Not like that they're not," Ethan said flatly. "That armor is nearly impenetrable."

"It's hard for them to move in, though," Evan observed, "we will have speed to our advantage."

From the mist at the clearing's entrance stepped Phats, his mouth a snarl of teeth and savagery. The scars on the left side of his neck where Ember had burned him were pink, his clothes were fresh and new. In his right hand, he held his staff, a blue light glowing from the top in a long crystalline shape.

"Turn over the girl," he hissed, looking at Ember, "and her toy, and I'll let the rest of you live."

"No deal," Nena said. The group circled protectively around the princess, Nena and Jace at the fore, the tired Evergard brothers flanking Cami, who held the Sword of Raneban directly behind the adults. Even Madera lifted his blade a touch higher. Ember had both hands around the hilt of her short sword, but found herself thinking of the amulet. *Should I try it again? Would it work? Phats seems to want it, which means it has more power than I know.*

"So be it." Phats smiled, raising the staff into the air.



## ASHER

The crystal tip of Phats's staff flared brighter as he lifted the magical weapon overhead to attack. It caught on a low-hanging tree limb, becoming stuck. The elemental tugged on it, but the branch seemed to be lifting the staff away from him. He snarled and jumped, grabbing it with both hands as it continued higher.

"What sort of trickery is this?"

A loud crash filled the air. The ice walls surrounding them shattered and burst forth in slivers. Ember and her friends had to duck as icy debris flew everywhere.

Uneasy with the sudden and unexpected change in the situation, the Illyarri soldiers backed up, eyes darting around the clearing. From the dark woods, large boulders crusted with dirt and moss rocketed at them. One of them hit a soldier square in his icebound chest plate and his entire body fractured, scattering frozen chunks of blue flesh across the grass.

The other soldiers raised their hands, shouting a word the humans did not understand. Their ice armor began to melt away, but two more met the same fate before they could complete the process. While the Illyarri struck by the flying rocks without their armor were wounded, they did not appear to be as vulnerable to that blow in humanoid form.

"You!" Phats shouted.

From her spot huddled on the ground behind her friends, Ember jumped at the sound of his growl. She had been transfixed by the bombardment and the results it brought, having not expected the armor to be an integral part of the Illyarri being. It made sense. It was clear from their faces and relaxed

grip on their weapons that her friends were similarly in shock. They looked up to see Phats let go of his staff, which was now so high in the branches that his feet were off the ground. He landed with a thud and stared across the clearing to where an old man crouched atop the huge boulder.

The man wore a cloak of loose robes. It was more of a dress really—plain, tan, and covered with stains of dirt. His unkempt gray hair fell to his shoulders, encircling a thick beard which concealed his face. Brown eyes squinted out at Phats. In the man's right hand, he balanced a large rock like the ones that had shot out of the trees, too heavy to be rolling on his fingers the way it was. He said nothing in reply, just waited.

The Illyarri group's leader pulled three more knives from inside his coat. Each slid between a knuckle, ready to throw.

"Really?" The old man laughed hoarsely.

The shark creature threw the blades at the newcomer.

With a flick of his right wrist, the man hurtled the rock through the air. He shot his left hand into the air above him, making a clutching motion.

The rock and knives met with a crash, sending shrapnel whizzing.

Ember lifted her head as soon as the sounds of pelting debris stopped, looking at the top of the boulder. The man was no longer there! She glanced around and found him strolling across the grass toward the shark creature. When her eyes caught up with him, she gasped. A huge fist made of dirt jutted from the forest floor and held the beast tight in its grip.

Phats snapped his teeth at the man and growled low in his throat as the new stranger approached. The three remaining soldiers stepped back, not interfering.

The man stopped before the Illyarri and spoke so quietly no one else could hear. "What are you doing here, Phats?"

"You know why," the creature answered. "Otherwise you wouldn't have meddled."

The man examined the group of humans, pausing at each face, before returning to Phats. "I see."

"Don't play your games with me; let me go or this will be bad for you."

"No," the man said. "Return to your masters; tell them you have failed."

The staff fell from above, smacking Phats in the head before tumbling to the earth. The man nodded at Phats and the fist of dirt crumbled, leaving a small mound on the grass of the clearing as it released him. With a growl,

Phats bent, snatching his staff and glaring into the eyes of his rival for a long moment before turning and grunting at the soldiers to follow.

The man watched as they retreated from view. He stared after them, marking their location long after they had returned to the plains.

Ember broke the silence.

"Thank you," she said to him. "We owe you our lives."

The newcomer walked past her to the back of the clearing where a small path now stood visible. "Come with me." He headed down the trail without checking to see if they followed.

Ember and the others all shared the same confused expression. Full of doubt, the princess looked to her guard for guidance. Nena stared after him, then back the way the Illyarri had gone, before nodding at Ember to follow their rescuer.

## PART IX

TERRA CREE



## SUNBURN

**T**he heat. He remembered the never-ending, skin-charring heat as he wandered the desolate sands for close to two days. Since he'd taken no rations other than a handful of sunberries and a full water skin, it felt like weeks. The great desert was as unforgiving as any place on The Division.

There were no signs of civilization, no traces of people living anywhere in or near the desert. Only the occasional tracks of some creature that had skittered across the sand directly before him. He'd followed the border north for a while, looking for signs of Braelyn and her people's footprints leaving the valley, but soon discovered how quickly the sand covered the marks of those that passed over its surface, including his own.

Inside his head, thoughts clunked along like they were drawn on a wagon with square wheels. Slow and tedious, they twisted to despair as he slid to his knees beside one of the large cactuses that dotted the landscape, resting in the cooler soft sand of its shade. He pulled the waterskin from his side and drank the few drops that remained as he blinked in the direction of the sun. To the west, the blowing sands obscured everything. There was no telling how far from the mainland of the Division he had strayed. He slipped the flame-shaped amulet from his pocket and studied it in the palm of his hand.

"Where are you? Where did you go?" His dry voice cracked as he spoke. If he had the liquid for tears they would've run down his cheeks leaving paths in the sand.

The sun continued to cook him, areas of exposed flesh blistered and peeled. He swayed and collapsed face-first into the sand, the amulet never

*leaving his grasp.*

*When night fell, the temperature dropped in a rush leaving him burning and yet trembling to his core.*

*Voices.*

*Warren heard voices surrounding him, but was still in too much of a stupor to move or see who they originated from. He felt lighter, as if he walked in the air or was being carried. Coming little by little to his senses, he noticed a swaying movement. Had some large bird grabbed him to feed him to its young? There were no claws digging into his body, only the impression of being enveloped in a hammock or cocoon of some sort. His eyes strained to open, but he could not break free from the seal they were under. His mind and body depleted after the days in the desert heat, Warren could not discern how much time passed before he came to rest in what felt like cool grass. The straw of a nest?*

*A pounding on wood sounded, then after a time, the long slow creak of a door opening, followed by more voices he could not understand. Seeing light through his eyelids, he strained to open them. They were caked with sand which he found he could not wipe away. It had not occurred to him to try to move his hands earlier. Now that he tried, he found they were held firmly at his sides. Slavers! was the next thought to come to his mind and his heart pounded in his chest. Squinting and widening his eyes repeatedly, the sandy crust crumbled and they parted the slightest bit. A haze of orange surrounded him, beams of thick reddish-yellow energy shot from larger shapes, connecting with his body at various points. He focused on one of the forms, making out a small creature whose wings fluttered as it hovered in the air. What were they?*

*A man's voice boomed from nearby. "Leave him. I will take it from here."*



## THE SHACK

The group of humans walked in silence, following the surprisingly agile old man down a pathway that seemed to open before him. Although none of them could see the trail more than a few strides in front of their new guide, they thought it must be a trick of the shadows in the forest. Fearful of pursuit, each of them took frequent glances over their shoulders.

"The trail is gone," Ember whispered to Cami.

"What?" The taller girl peered over her shoulder. "Where did it go?"

"I don't know; it seems to be closing up behind Nena." Ember stifled a sigh. This was better than facing the Illyarri, for sure. Still, the number of unknowns on this journey were growing. She hoped she was not wrong in choosing to trust this stranger who led them who knows where.

The rest of the group started murmuring amongst themselves as well, until the man who had rescued them from the Illyarri spun. "Quiet. We are not out of the woods yet."

They fell back into silence, trudging on. Ember wondered whether he meant that literally or figuratively, and tried not to laugh at the ridiculousness of the thought. Distracted by her own humor, she walked with a lighter step, not noticing the others did not.

After half an hour, they emerged from the woodlands above a large and lush valley of vibrant green, dotted with brilliant colors. The youngest of the group stared in open-mouthed wonder. Ember wanted to run her hand along it, like a richly embroidered gown. Embarrassed by her reaction, she peeked at her friends, and was pleased to see the Evergard brothers and

Madera just as enthralled as she and Cami were. Jace gestured at the dense expanse that sloped away toward the desert. "That is the Voo."

The old man paused for a moment before continuing on. To their surprise, he steered them away from the valley, toward the mountain that it rested beneath.

"Where are you taking us?" Ember asked. "We want to go there, to the valley."

He didn't answer, only carried on walking forward.

Ember's cheeks tingled, and she stormed ahead, stepping in front of the group and spinning to stop before him. "Where are you taking us?" she demanded.

The man took a deep breath, tilted his head, and smiled at her. "To safety. Your friends..." he bowed back to the forest, "are still out there. They will not be giving up so easily."

"Then why did you let that creature go?"

"Enough. We need to get inside before they have time to gather reinforcements." His voice stayed kind, even, and unmistakably firm.

"But, I—" Ember started as the man stepped around her and continued on. She bit her lip, knowing everyone waited for a sign from her. "Follow him," she said through gritted teeth.

At the rear of the group, Nena walked alone, slow tears running down her cheeks as she finally took the time to grieve the loss of her brother-in-arms and best friend.



AFTER ANOTHER HOUR of brisk walking, they spotted a small wooden shack jutting from the side of the mountain. This, evidently, was their destination. Ember glowered at it, her anger smoldering. The thing didn't even look big enough to hold them all, let alone protect them from the Illyarri. It appeared it might fall over if anyone blew on it too hard. She asked herself yet again if she had made the correct choice to follow the stranger. Still, here they were.

The man opened the door and ushered them inside. The sun pierced through the wood slats, illuminating the small space and a second door which nestled into the rock of the mountain itself. This one looked much sturdier. As they stood in the entryway, adjusting to the darker surroundings, the inner door swung open, revealing a considerable chamber beyond.

"Go in, I will join you shortly," he said, closing the outer door to the shack.

Evan held back as the others continued in, peeking out through the spaces in the slats. The man knelt in the dirt, placed a spread palm into it, and spoke words unfamiliar to Evan. He raised his hand forming a fist. The earth trembled and two large forms rose from the dirt, their bodies forged from masses of rock and soil, with long blocky arms and legs. Atop their torsos, small solid boulders sat as heads. "Rock trolls," Evan whispered to himself, eyes wide.

"Protect," the man commanded, and the creatures nodded before stepping back against the cliff face, blending into it. Seeing the man swing toward the shack entrance, Evan hurried inside the cavern with the others, passing Nena, who stood by the cave door waiting for their host.

"I think we should set a watch," she said when the man entered.

He smiled at her. "You're safe here, a watch has been set."

"More of your friends from the forest?" she asked, raising her eyebrows. Aside from saving them, this man had done little to reassure her of his intentions.

"Yes," he acknowledged and chuckled. "More of my friends. They will keep anyone that comes for a visit busy." He smiled at her, revealing surprisingly clean and straight teeth given his overall appearance.

"How come we never saw them back in the woods? Where were they?" This last question had a bite to it as a wave of unfounded anger that maybe

he could have helped them sooner, maybe could have saved Neko, flooded into her weary mind.

"They are good at keeping out of sight." He glanced at the others, who were marveling at the size of his living space.

Beat down by his vague responses and not having energy left to quarrel, she asked flatly, "Were they in the trees?"

"No. Most of them prefer to remain closer to the ground."



## THE CAVERN

"This place is amazing," Cami whispered to Ember. The princess nodded, taking in the large room.

Crystal lights glowed along the walls illuminating the front end. They tapered off toward the rear, which stretched further than the eye could see. While the main part of the chamber consisted of a few wood furnishings, the rest appeared to be formed from the rock itself: a sleeping pedestal against one wall, a large desk and shelves with hundreds of books in another, a stone table and eight chairs, all solid rock. Various symbols were carved into the walls' surfaces and she wished Katerra was with them. She might be able to tell them what the symbols meant. Their host appeared unlikely to provide much information about anything.

"How long do you think he's lived here?" Evan asked his brother, as the girls walked towards them.

"Looks like quite a while," Ethan answered.

"His bed doesn't look very comfortable," Madera said, motioning toward the rock pedestal covered with blankets.

"No, it doesn't, does it?" Ember agreed, smiling at Madera. He returned her smile until he caught Ethan glaring at him. Watching the boy wilt, Ember locked Ethan in her furious gaze and bared her teeth at him. The tension was palpable until Cami nudged her friend, directing her attention toward Nena and the old man. The hostility of the moment broken, the five youths formed a half-circle and waited.

"What is your name?" Ember asked, stepping into her position as leader even though she didn't feel comfortable in the role.

"My name is Asher."

"Thank you for your help, Asher. We are in your debt." She tilted her head, bowing ever so slightly.

He bowed at her in return. "Now, you can tell me something." He paused, his gaze fixed on Ember. "Why are the Illyarri after you?"

"Because of him," Ethan pointed at Madera, who had stepped out of the circle and deeper into the cavern. The boy shrunk away even further.

"And why because of you?" Asher asked, raising a curious eyebrow and directing his attention to Madera, who stared at the floor.

With an impatient sigh and flashing a glare at Ethan, Ember said, "We freed him from them, but that's not important; it's me they're after."

Asher's eyes widened. He peered at Ember as he scratched his beard and leaned forward. "It's not?"

Observing from the side of the group, Evan watched the man closely. *He knows more than he's letting on about who we are and why we are here.*

"No," she said in a loud, firm voice. She resisted the urge to smack Ethan on the arm for his insistence on turning everyone against Madera. The focus needed to stay on the reason for her journey. She needed to find the Terra Cree for her father, not deal with Ethan's petty jealousy.

Asher chuckled again, walked over to the table and sat on one of the stone chairs, resting his hands atop the walking stick that lay there, and regarded her. "Then what is important, my dear?"

An idea occurred to Ember. "How long have you been here?"

He considered the question a moment staring at the floor, then looked back at Ember with his soft, brown eyes. "A long time."

"Ok," she nodded, missing the sadness that tinged his voice. "Then maybe you can help us."

"Haven't I helped already?" His soft chuckle belied his amusement at her request.

Ember grimaced. "Yes, but we could really use some more."

"I see." He lay his bearded chin atop his hands and continued his patient, yet seemingly stubborn role in the conversation as he stared at her. "Then how may I assist you?"

"My father is sick, he sent me to the Voo to find the cure." The words rushed from Ember as she pushed from her mind the image of her father

lying ill in his bed. She needed to find the remedy, not worry, and maybe, hopefully, this was the person to help.

"What kind of cure?"

Ember's shoulders drooped. It was always the same question and she still had only a vague, incomplete response. "I'm not sure. He called it Terra Cree. Or maybe Tree? Have you heard of it? Is there a tree with special healing properties in the valley?" She glanced to the exit, her heart thumping as hopeful ideas flit through her mind.

Asher's eyes opened wide and his head shot up before he stood and moved closer. "What sickness ails him?"

Her head snapped back around, hearing the man show an interest for the first time. "I think he's been poisoned," Ember said and took a step back, unnerved by his rapid approach.

"How?" He rose taller in front of her. Ember felt like a small child peering up at an adult high above.

"I don't know, we think there's a traitor amongst our people." She glanced quickly at the rest, and then back to Asher. She tried to find the words. "It's like he's on fire from the inside. A fever is burning him alive."

"And he sent you here to find Terra Cree?"

"Yes. I don't know. He was delirious." She clenched her jaw, cheeks flushed. She hated the tears welling up and the feeling of being young, incompetent, and tired. Not for the first time on this journey, Ember wished she could curl up in her own bed and have someone else solve this for her. Even one of her father's lectures would be easier to take than having to make all of these decisions, and with that thought, her stomach tightened. She felt like she might throw up and then grew angry at herself for her childlike feelings.

Asher closed his eyes, nodding, deep in thought.

Beside Ember, Evan leaned close to Cami and whispered in her ear. Her mouth fell open, and she interrupted the silence. "Em?"

"What?" Ember rounded, her face blazing red.

Cami's voice was breathless with excitement. "I think you've found it."

"What?" Ember's face contorted, her temper getting the best of her.

"Terra Cree," Cami pointed across the chamber to a wall illuminated by a bright orange crystal and marked with glyphs. Ember saw Evan nodding, and followed their gaze. So did Asher and the rest of the group.

On the wall were two symbols she recognized. The first she'd seen on the armor of the Illyarri soldiers. With a gasp, she pulled the amulet from her pocket. The shape of it matched the second symbol. Holding the crystal dangling on its chain, she spoke to Asher. "You can save my father. Come, we must leave now." She grabbed his hand, impatient to get home, but it slipped from her grasp as though she had tried to pull a statue behind her.

"No," the man shook his head at her. "If what you say is true, there is no antidote, at least not in this world." He reached up, pulling Ember's hair free from its cover. "I'm afraid, Ember Raneban, that your father did not send you here to find a cure. He sent you here to take his place."



## REVELATIONS

"How do you..." She started to ask him how he knew who she was, then realized it didn't matter. Her hair alone was enough. "What are you talking about, 'his place'? I wouldn't need to journey here to ascend the throne."

The man huffed and his brow furrowed. "That's really all he told you? To come here, that you would find a remedy?"

"Yes!" she snapped. "Now, enough. We must go!"

"Ember. " Asher's countenance was dark and sunken, as if he had aged from one breath to the next. "If there is a cure, it could only be found in the elemental realm of the Ellyassi. The sickness you describe, he has been poisoned by them, not some traitor. It is their fire that is burning him alive, as you say. The only reason he's survived this long is..." he paused, "well, the reason he sent you here."

"What do you mean? Why would the Ellyassi care enough about killing my father to poison him? It was King Lynch who betrayed us." The Evergard brothers looked at each other, Evan's eyebrows raised. It was rumored the Lynch kingdom worshipped the Ellyassi. Surely it was not such a stretch for both to be involved. Ethan turned a hateful glare to Madera.

Asher walked toward the desk next to the stone shelves littered with open books. "Had your father ever spoken to you about coming to the valley before?" he asked, sorting through the mess.

"Only that this is where he met my mother."

"And what of her?" He remained implacable against her impatience, continuing to search for something on his desk.

Ember's eyes flared. "She's dead."

"No, what has he told you about her?" Cami bit her lip and glanced at Evan. They both knew Ember had a temper and disliked being patronized. Evan looked questioningly at Nena, wondering if they should intervene. The older guard shook her head, and Evan shrugged at Cami.

"She was a great woman, beautiful, intelligent, and full of life."

Ember raised her chin, daring Asher to contradict her. He just asked another question. "And where did she come from?"

"Some small village near here, that no longer exists." Restless with this interrogation, she stepped forward, following him. "What does that have to do with now?"

"Secrets, secrets," he mumbled, then raised his hand in an attempt to calm the princess's growing frustration. "Your father did indeed meet your mother here, or down there in the valley," he replied, gesturing in the direction of the door. "But there's a bit more to the story than that."

"What?!" Ember shook her head, red curls bouncing. Unlike other aspects of life, like his lessons on how to be a just ruler, her father had never been open on this topic with her.

"Just let me speak, young princess." Asher sighed and rested on a rickety wooden stool by the desk. "You should all sit as well; this will take some time to recount."

The Evergard brothers and Cami chose stone chairs close to Ember while Madera went as far from them as he managed. Nena sat down on a wooden barrel against the wall. Only Ember stayed on her feet, glaring at the man, wondering what madness she had stepped into.

"It is not my place to tell you everything I know, but it is important I tell you what I can. Your parents met and fell in love in the valley below, but her family did not approve. They took her away to the desert." He leaned over his desk, picking up a glass and having a slow drink.

Across from him, Ember drew steady, deep breaths, her fingernails digging into her palms.

"Before they left," he continued, "your mother, Braelyn, gave your father the talisman you now carry. After they disappeared, he followed them into the sand-filled wasteland. It almost cost him his life. He wandered aimlessly, lost in the shifting sands. This was about the same time the Kingdom of Lynch went to war on Raneban." He let out a dry cough and

took another sip. "Eventually, young Warren made his way to my doorstep, from out in the middle of the desert, which, it just so happened, was exactly where I needed him."

Ember's unease rose and her hand slipped down to the hilt of her short sword.

"Those symbols you see"—he moved and shifted a crystal to better illuminate them. There were five in total, arranged in a star-shaped pattern—"are symbols of life. The top one does not have a name; it is the one from which all others originate. On the left is Ackar, the symbol of the Illyarri; to the right, Eckar, the Ellyassi's. On the bottom, Triwe(Pronounced Trah-Way), of the Aire(Pronounced Air-Ay). And last but not least," the shape of a tree with a heart at its center, "Terra Cree, that of Urth. I come from there, I am an earth elemental." He peered at them as they shared startled expressions, reading their various levels of understanding and confusion.

Only Ember did not look around or even seem surprised. She just stood, staring, waiting.

"I was born of the great city of Shillish Vane, one of two children created by our mother, Terra Cree, to walk among man. Our mother, who was the heart of that living city and the heart of this world."

"Heart of this world?" Evan asked from where he sat behind Ember.

"She was the life force that fed the land and held the warring elementals at bay. The barriers which brought peace and then life to the Division were her doing. Until, that is, they found a way to poison her, to poison the land itself, and bring the barriers down. All so that they could resume their endless fight." His eyes narrowed and he shook his head in disgust.

"They?" Evan asked.

"The Illyarri and the Ellyassi," he spat.

"You mean the great war? This is what destroyed Shillish Vane?" Evan probed deeper.

"Yes, it was but one of many battles for them, but for us, it was a war that lasted three days and laid waste to Shillish Vane and most life on the Division, leaving only the sick and poisoned Badlands and the few survivors who were far enough away to start life anew." His body shrank as he let out a long sigh, eyes closing, chin bowing toward his chest.

"But what happened to stop the war?" Ember asked, finding herself caught up in the story, despite her urgency to depart.



## FAMILY VALUES

"They didn't know about my sister or me. Or didn't think us much of a threat, anyway. We came together, restored the barrier with our powers, and then separated. Each to do our part to keep them from destroying this world." He stopped and looked around the room as if he'd talked so long, he'd forgotten they were there.

"This has all been very interesting," Ember put her hands on her hips as her face flushed and her nostrils flared, "but what does it have to do with my father?"

"Hmm, yes, your father." Asher mumbled as he refocused on her. "I came here to guard the," he glanced at the symbols behind him and then to the darkness beyond, "entry to the portals and to find a way to restore the barriers to full strength, while my sister returned to Terra Cree, to try to give new life to the earth. However, we are both growing old and with time our powers weaken. The cost of our work has aged us quicker than any of the elementals that came before. Without the heart, the Division does not replenish us."

Ember bit her lip and clenched her fists to keep from interrupting him again, to demand he get to the point.

"Yes, yes," he said, studying the simmering princess. "Patience, child. I'm getting there. We devised a plan, one that would give the power, the strength needed to uphold the barriers to a child of the Division, and in doing so, keep us alive, to buy us more time. The Division's people are all children of the elements, but strongest in them is Urth, and with that the lifeforce that is needed for the barriers. We just required the right person."

Silence fell in the room. Ember opened her mouth to speak and then choked, coughing. She had to take a large slow breath before she could rasp out the words. "My father?"

Asher nodded. "Yes. He came here, brought to me by those that found him, half-dead, face down in the sand. As it happened, he was the perfect host, though not in the shape he was in. I took him to my sister and together we nursed him back to health and imbued him with a part of us, with the strength to protect the Division. Making him its protector, its guardian."

"He's... the Earth Guardian?" Ember stuttered. "The one who keeps the barriers in place?"

"Yes." Asher nodded again.

"And he's sick, poisoned... What happens..." she started, then stopped herself, jaw clenching. "How did they do it?" Her eyes welled with tears. "How did they poison him?"

On the other side of the table, Madera rose to his feet. "It was the ice."



## MADERA'S STORY

All heads swung to look at Madera, his words hanging in the air. Ember found her voice first. "What did you say?"

"It was the ice," he said again, louder this time. "They poisoned the ice."

"That's impossible. Most of us drank the lemonade. We would all be sick." She peered at Asher, brow furrowed. Madera wasn't making any sense. *Those Illyarri soldiers must have...* Her thoughts were a jumble. As far as Ember knew, the elementals did not have magic to alter human minds. She faced Madera. "Why did the Illyarri have you? What do you know?" Ember moved toward him, her hand balled in a fist. Ethan leaned forward, ready to spring on the Lynch boy.

"Ember," Cami warned, trying to catch her friend before her temper got its grip.

"I..." Madera stumbled backward a step. His voice shook as he said, "I was there. The night before the festival, my father's caravan, we were in the lost woods outside Raneban. The elementals met us there, both the Illyarri and the Ellyassi. They joined together, made a deal with my father. The Illyarri magic created the block of ice, and the Ellyassi unleashed some sort of spirit into it. Afterwards, there was a small flaming eye, a seeker, that darted around inside the block, looking out, searching for its target. That's how they did it."

Asher raised his eyebrows. "You were there?"

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?" Ember snapped, glaring at him and yanking her dagger out before he could answer either of them.

Madera backed up against the wall, hands shaking. "Yes, I was there," he said to Asher, then shifted to Ember, tears welling in his eyes. "I didn't understand until now. I had no idea it was all tied together."

"What happened next?" Asher asked.

"What do you mean next?" Ember turned on Asher, her lips tight. "They came to the festival and used it to try to kill my dad." She spun back to Madera, the dagger trembling in her hand. Cami and Evan looked at each other, unsure what to do.

"No!" Asher boomed, his shout making the cave shudder, his eyes never leaving Madera's. "What happened to you?" he asked more gently of the boy, who avoided the man's stare by placing his into the darkness of the corridor.

Ember glanced between them, uncertain. "What is he talking about, Madera?"

"I..." Madera started, then stopped as tears fell, his gaze dropping to the cavern floor. "My father is Markoon Lynch, the king. He gave me to the Illyarri when they were done. I was part of the deal. Me in exchange for the means to kill your father." His eyes lifted to find Embers. "I was the price he paid."

"No," Evan said behind them, his hand flying up to cover his open mouth. "That's..."

"Horrid," Cami finished.

"Evil," Ethan added, falling back in his chair.

"More than that," Ember choked, her dagger falling to the ground with a clang that left everyone's ears ringing. "What did they do to you, Madera?" Her voice was gentle now, the harshness gone together with her anger.

He let his eyes drift away. "Nothing," he mumbled, his body trembling. He slid down the wall, collapsing to the floor, his head dropping forward onto Ember's stomach as she dashed to catch him, her arms wrapped around his neck. Ember held Madera tight, stroking his mess of black hair and listening to his sobs as they soaked into her tunic. The only other sound was the far-off dripping of water. Ethan and Jace looked away uncomfortably. Cami fiddled with the hem of her tunic.

When his tears stopped, Madera pushed Ember back with a deep sniff of his running nose. He glanced to her face, saw it sad and swollen, and turned away in embarrassment. "Thank you," he whispered.

She ran her hand down the back of his head one more time, giving his shoulder a squeeze and whispering, "I'm so sorry." Then she turned to face the others.

"So, we know how and who. Now, what do we do to cure my father?" She put the full force of her princess authority into her voice. Nena, accustomed to being on the other side of that tone, waited to see how Asher would respond and was unsurprised when he remained as steadfast as stone.

"There is no cure, Ember Raneban. He told you to come here so that I could transfer the power to you."

"But..." she stammered. "You said there was a cure." Her temper subdued, Ember looked weary and dejected. Cami moved to comfort her friend, but was stopped by a faint shake of Nena's head. She sat back down.

"Might be," he said. "In the fire realms. They poisoned him; they might be able to cure him. But why would they want to?"

"Surely they're not all bent on our destruction, or resuming this damn war of theirs?"

"True, but they are not like you, they don't think the same. Life and death are different for them. To go through the portals on a blind quest would be foolish."

"What portals?" Ember demanded. She knew there was more that he was not telling them. *I have come all this way, there is no chance I am going to give up now!*

"The portals beneath Shillish Vane—" Asher answered, then stopped himself.

"You said you came here to guard the portals. The remains of Shillish Vane are deep in the Badlands."

"Well, yes," Asher said, his eyes darting around the room. "There is a portal here that leads to Terra Cree and from there to the others."

"Take me there." Ember was on her feet in an instant, sliding her dagger back into its sheath.

He shook his head. "No, we will stay the night here. At first light I will take you home; I will transfer the power from the king to you. The whole of the Division is at stake."

Ember was surprised that the image which sprang to her mind was not her father suffering in his bed, but the painting of her parents together. "But my father!"

"Knows what must be done, Ember." The finality in his voice ended the conversation.



## SLIPPING AWAY

The rest of the evening dragged on in the giant cavern. Ember lay with her head in Cami's lap, tears gently streaming. Madera stared into the corner and wouldn't let anyone come near him. The brothers played a quiet game with rocks, and Nena and Jace talked in hushed voices amongst themselves.

Their host busied himself with the makings of a meal, whistling faintly as time passed. When he finished preparing the food, everyone gathered around the stone table and sat together in silence. Only Asher ate heartily. The others simply rested, stirring the stew and taking occasional sips of the broth. None of the youth's would even meet each others eyes while they ate.

After the meal, they retired for the night. Asher supplied them with bedrolls, which they spread out in different areas of the room.

Cami lay next to Ember, facing her friend. "Em?" she whispered, trying to catch her eye.

"Yeah," Ember replied, her voice sounding hollow as if she were somewhere far away, and indeed her eyes stared into the distance unfocused.

"What are you thinking?"

"Nothing," the princess mumbled, her mind full of defeat. *I failed him. I knew I couldn't do this.* She shook her head fighting back another wave of tears that welled up from within her chest.

Cami slid a hand to the edge of Ember's bedroll, hesitating before caressing her friend's arm. "I'm worried about you."

"Why?" Ember spat, face grimacing.

Cami winced at the sarcasm and self-doubt in the other girl's voice. She grabbed Ember's hand. "You never give up this easily." The princess tried to pull her hand away, but Cami squeezed it tight. Her friend needed her, whether she wanted to accept it or not and this is what friends do, hold tight no matter what.

"There's nothing we can do," Ember sighed.

Cami rolled her eyes and scoffed. Sometimes Ember was too stubborn to see the obvious. "Nothing?" she asked a little too loud. Ember rolled toward Cami, not saying anything. The taller girl scrunched up her face and directed her gaze to the rear of the cavern.

"What?" Ember raised an eyebrow at her friend, feeling obtuse.

"The portal?" Cami mouthed in an exaggerated manner.

A flicker of light flared in Ember's expression and then died out. "No, it would never work. You heard him."

"Yeah, I heard him," Cami responded. "He said there **might** be a cure there."

Ember lifted her head as Cami's words sank in. "He did, didn't he?" The lightness in her expression grew.

Cami nodded and grinned at her. Ember smiled back and reached over, hugging her friend and pulling her close. "Thank you! I had all but given up," she whispered.

They waited for sometime, as the crystals lost their charge, the light in the cavern dimmed to a dull haze. The sound of heavy breathing and snoring filled the room. The girls moved as noiselessly as they could, packing their bedrolls and gathering their few possessions. Both winced and froze at a clank of metal on stone as Cami latched the scabbard of the Sword of Raneban to her belt. The only reaction was Jace rolling over in his sleep with a snort.

Ember shook Cami's shoulder. "Ready?" she whispered.

Cami smiled at her as they lifted their packs, then slipped past their sleeping friends into the deep blackness of the cave.

As they disappeared from the light, Asher peeked out from his bed with one eye open, watching. A moment later, a dark shape followed the girls. Asher smiled, rolled over, and went to sleep.

## End Book 1

To make sure you get updates on The Division and future releases, please consider joining our newsletter by visiting our website at <https://starkissedstudios.com/subscribe>

# CHARACTER ART



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*Ember Raneban*



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*Katerra The White*



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*Madera Lynch*



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*Talyn Rae*



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*Phats*

## THE DIVISION BOOK 2

The Division series is being released first on Amazon's Kindle Vella Platform episode by episode. The episodes will later be collected into book 2. If you want to read Season 2 now, you can find it at [getbook.at/thedivision2](https://getbook.at/thedivision2)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin M. Penelerick is the author of the young adult fantasy series, The Division and other stories.

He spends his time in the mountains of North Idaho, loving, living and adventuring with his wife and partner in life, Genee Jo. They've met many cool people through his writing and from them, stories are born.





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