

This is an unedited work in progress. I'm sharing to see if you all enjoy it enough for me to continue seriously working on it, or if it's just something I'll keep to myself to pass the time 😊

Thank you for taking your time to have a go at my little project! If you like it, please let me know! I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Chapter one

The winter frost chilled my aching bones as I stood in the meadow with my axe in hand. Trees wept beneath the blanket of snow that fell overnight. It was the first sign of winter, though the season hadn't truly started as autumn was nearing its end. Living beneath the shadow of the Whispering Mountains left the village and woods shrouded in darkness and frost well before the rest of the world.

I raised the axe above my head, ignored the stinging cold in my ears and the tiredness of my arms, and swung it downward. The dull blade sliced into a log, getting lodged halfway down its middle. I lifted the axe and wood before smacking it against the chopping block, and then tossed the separated pieces of fresh wood into the small pile by my side.

The sun hovered above the jagged crest of the mountains. In just a few short hours my day would be done. Being caught outside during the night was a quick way to see yourself in the jowls of the daemons that stalked the night. Because of my close proximity to the mountain range—my home was on the inclination of its many rocky foothills—the shadows kept me secluded in darkness much longer than it did the rest of the world. They all had the good sense to live far from any peaks or landscapes that would put them at the mercy of the creatures of night.

But I was no fool. I understood the risk of living in the shadows, and I had fought many times to survive against those risks. The lingering threat of death would follow me whether I lived deep within the shadows or beneath the brightest sun. No, it wasn't the daemons who haunted my nightmares. They didn't hunt me during the waking hours, placing bounties and searching for my head. What lay out there, beyond the foothills of the mountains, was far worse than any daemon I could ever face. So I stayed hidden, tucked far enough away that even the bravest warriors weren't foolish enough to adventure.

I took another glance at the sky and exhaled a deep breath. The air turned white. Another reminder of the harsh chill that would soon fall colder. I hated the winter, and it hated me too.

Before the sun slipped beyond the reaches of the mountain, I had to check my snares. Warmth soothed my gloved hands as I slid them into the pockets of my fur lined coat. Trekking far from home, I found all six of my traps empty and untouched. Another night without food. That made three in a row. At this rate, I'd be dead by next week. Starved and alone in my shack of a cabin.

I could go to the nearby village, but being around others was dangerous, and even if I wanted to risk it, my money had run out weeks ago.

Rising to my feet and away from the snare, I dusted the snow from my trousers. My gaze drifted through the small thicket of trees. This time of year had always seen less movement as the animals fled to warmer weather and denser forests. But I'd never run out of game so early in the season. Something was different.

A chill ran down my spine at the thought, and slowly, I turned to face the dense forests bordering the edge of human territory. The land of the fae—cursed and forbidden. My mouth became dry as I stood on the fringe of their land, staring into the emptiness of a beautiful, mystical forest.

In my desperation, I stepped closer to the border separating our lands. I had lived so close to them for years, yet I had never seen any sign of life or light within the darkness of the trees. Thanks to a treaty made long ago, fae and humans weren't able to cross over the territorial line. At least, that's what the stories said. The children's songs and scary tales whispered of darkness and hatred within the unspoken lands. Even without the magic in place, no one would dare attempt to step into their territory.

My stomach grumbled, and I gripped it tight, withholding a wince. I could try to cross. Set my traps and maybe find food for the upcoming winter. If legends held truth, then I wouldn't be able to pass the line, anyway. Starvation would take me if the magic separating our worlds wouldn't.

Another step closer. The crunch of snow beneath my boot was the only sound for miles. Magic radiated from the invisible barrier, stinging my skin and standing my hair on end. It was so warm—like a roaring fire melting the frost and ache from my skin. I closed my eyes, accepting its embrace.

Just one more step and I'd be further than any human would dare trek. The fae were vicious, magic-bearing beings. And they *hated* humans. After the Great War, when the races clashed and humankind nearly slaughtered the *demon* race, the Treaty of Peace was enacted, forcing the fae into the forested region and sealing them inside.

But the magic of the barrier was fading. In recent years, especially, there had been a noticeable rift—a tear—that trickled with iridescent light. I had never seen it, but the thought of such a disturbance in the barrier was petrifying.

Still, the temptation of venison or rabbit stew was too good to pass. I knew Nyn'Dira, the forest, would be full of fresh game and empty land for hunting. As I turned from left to right, the shimmer of gold caught my attention.

My heart thundered in my chest. The object was several paces to the left, and lay just beyond the barrier, close enough for me to reach out and touch. But I wouldn't. *Couldn't*. No. Entering their lands was forbidden. The magic would...

I scoffed, and another puff of white air taunted me. I *had* to. There was no one here to help me but myself, and I wasn't going to starve to death. Fae be damned. I'm going to survive.

With a quick glance around to be sure I was alone, I stalked closer to the object. The golden anomaly came into view, and I slowed to a stop. Every heartbeat pounded in my ears as I stared at a beautiful, gold-plated bow. Elegant designs were etched along its length, showcasing its superior craftsmanship. Compared to human weapons, this may as well have been crafted by a God.

My eyes darted to the forest. Surely, no one would just leave a bow like this lying around. It was too beautiful. Too *celestial*. But the fae were known to be tricksters. They enjoyed playing with their victims, taunting them. It wouldn't be unlike them to use such an opulent item to lure the much weaker humans into their land.

Frost stung my skin as I stood for far too long, staring at the elegant bow. It would surely fetch me a hefty sum of silver, possibly gold. Fae materials were rare, which made them incredibly valuable. Winter was soon approaching, and the traveling merchants would be making their final rounds before the week's end. I couldn't pass up the chance. This bow could keep me fed throughout all of winter. Possibly into the spring.

My mouth watered as I gazed upon the bow, seeing nothing but coin and dinner. Cold fingers slithered across the hilt of my sword. I could do it. I could grab it before anything—or *anyone*— could catch me. I could do it.

Icy air burned my lungs as I breathed in quick, frightened breaths. Scanning the forest to be sure there was no one around, I held my breath, leaned through the barrier, and snatched the weapon.

And then I ran.

Chapter two

Two days passed, and I had witnessed no sign of the fae or their magic. The merchant's had arrived yesterday, and I knew they would buy this elegant weaponry for a steep price. Unfortunately, I wasn't the most gifted in charming others, but I knew someone who was, and he was scheduled to arrive to town today.

Slinging the bow across my chest, I stepped out of my one-bedroom home and into the fresh autumn sunlight. Mud soaked through the holes in my worn leather boots as I walked down the foothills toward town. I made a mental note to buy a new pair once I'd sold the glorious faerie bow.

At the base of the foothills, I peered from left to right before stepping away from the rugged landscape and onto the uneven cobblestone road. Small houses made of stacked stone with thatched roofs scattered throughout the rocky hillsides. Nearby was a village called Morinth, deep within the heart of Ravinshire. The Whispering Mountains towered to the west, creating a natural barrier protecting us from the faerie lands on the other side.

Voices carried through the air as villagers wandered through the fields and homesteads, performing their daily chores. Women and men headed to the mines with dirty aprons and old pickaxes. Being so bordered by the mountains, the region of Ravinshire was the leader in trade of iron ore and silver. Most of its residents spent their lives deep within the mines. Even with my shit-stained life, didn't envy them. The mines were dangerous—full of shadows and terror. Daemons lived in the shadows. Some said they were bred in it. I don't know which rumors to believe, and I didn't want to find out.

The homes became denser as I stepped into town. Large, two-story buildings bordered the street. People laughed and spoke to one another as they wandered by, paying no mind to me or my golden bow. Most of the people were too preoccupied with their own duties to have a care of what I was carrying. It was the reason I moved here. The lack of attention meant an increase in safety. At least, for a fugitive like me.

I kept my bright teal eyes on the ground, hiding them from the others as I walked the familiar path to the inn and casually stepped inside. Warmth from the roaring fire soothed the chill in my bones as I stepped across the open room to the bard who sat on a stool by the hearth.

He was a beautiful man, with curly chestnut hair that reminded me of the warmest of summers. His face was chiseled in all the right places, and his hazel eyes gleamed as he glanced up from his lute and spied me walking closer.

“Hey,” he smiled, making his impossibly good looks even more inhuman. “What are you doing here?”

“The traders are in town,” I said, and we shared a light hug. His eyes fell to the bow, and I turned away, suddenly aware of the patrons that sat around the various tables. “Can we talk? Alone?”

He glanced around the room and then tilted his head pointedly behind the bar. I followed as he led me down a narrow hall and into the private quarters. He ushered me inside and then quickly shut and locked the door. “What the hells is that?” he remarked, his face blood-red with shock and rage. “Neer, please don’t tell me that’s an faerie bow!”

“I know!” I argued.

“God’s body, Neer! Fuck!”

“Calm down, Loryk! No one saw me take it—”

“Take it?” he hissed. “You *took* it? What the hells does that mean?”

I released a deep, frustrated sigh. Loryk was my best friend and the only person who accepted me. Being a bard, he was often seen with a joyous smile and laughter on his lips, so his anger was upsetting. But I knew to expect it. I’d be angry at me too.

Removing the bow to relieve myself of its weight, I carefully placed it onto a dresser and then leaned forward with my hands pressed against its wooden surface. “Look,” I said, a bit of venom to my voice. “I already have to live on this God’s forsaken mountain *alone*! I have to scrape and claw and fight every damned day to survive!” My fury rose with every syllable. “I won’t starve to death because some pious pricks wish me dead! This will feed me for the winter! Possibly the entire year!”

“What are you thinking? Messing with the fae is blasphemy. It’s suicide!”

“So is starving!”

His eyes lowered into a deep scowl. “You know I’d never let that happen, Neery.”

I exhaled a half-scoff, half-laugh while shaking my head. Loryk had been my best friend for nearly ten years. We met when I found myself hiding in this dreadful mountain village at just fourteen. He had wanted to travel the world and become the most famous bard to have ever lived, but he refused the journey when I said I couldn't join him. It was never what I wanted, to see his dreams die at my pitiful, worthless hands, but he was as stubborn as the mountains, and vowed to be with me until the end.

I was in no position to argue when he revealed his plans to stay in Morinth and live out his days playing at the Moonshine Inn. It wasn't possible for me to leave with him, nor could I flee the village in search of another place to hide. This was my dead end. The place I would live until I could find a cure for the curse placed upon me years ago.

Shimmering gold glistened when Loryk picked up the bow, and I was pulled from my thoughts. I shook my head and turned away. With my hands to my hips, I exhaled a deep breath. "I need you to help me," I said.

"With what? Returning this back to the depths of hell where it came?" He dropped the bow back onto the dresser, and the light thud of its weight echoed through the room.

I gave him a disapproving look. "I want to sell it."

"Right," he said with a scoff, his eyes veering back to the bow. I continued staring at him, waiting for him to notice my pressing gaze. When he did, his eyes widened, and a subtle flinch caused his spine to straighten. "You're joking. You really think—of all the stupid ideas—!" He turned away, simmering. "If we take this to the merchants, the Order will be on us faster than the God's could save our souls!"

I groaned, tired of his bickering. "Are you going to help me or not?"

He sighed. Crossing his arms tightly over his chest, he eyed the ethereal bow. "Fine. I'll do it. Anything to get this *thing* out of here. But you have to promise me, Neer—*promise me*." He looked deep into my eyes. "Don't *ever* mess with the fae again. This could have serious consequences."

I smiled and kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Lor. I owe you one."

He glanced to the bow. "*More* than one."

I waited just outside of town for Loryk to meander through the markets and persuade the merchants to give him a handsome price for the forsaken bow.

Leaning against a fence post, I picked at my nails, becoming more impatient as time went on. The frustration swelled in my chest like a cyclone. I released a deep breath to relieve the pressure and glanced at my surroundings.

When my eyes fell to Loryk, I stood straighter, and glanced to the sack of food and fat coin purse in his hands. A smile stretched across my face as I sauntered to his side, reaching for the loot. He swiftly pulled it away and gave me a menacing glare.

“What?” I said innocently.

His anger deepened. “I should take this money and run. Could’ve cost me my head showing this off in the middle of town!”

“How did you convince them?”

“Told them it was a family heirloom. One my da found while cleaning out my grandma’s home. She just passed on, so the lie was easy enough to sell.”

I ruffled his curly mane. “I knew I could count on you!”

He huffed and passed me the money. It was heavy. Much heavier than I expected. “How much is this?”

We walked down the road, away from the now bustling village. “Five hundred gold.”

My breath caught in my throat. I turned to him, jaw agape, and stared into his still simmering eyes. “What?” I opened the bag and peeked inside, astonished to find a pile of gold coins.

“Keep it safe. I’ll walk you home. Just in case.”

I chuckled while tying the drawstring and securing the heavy coin purse into my coat pocket. “Like *you* could protect *me*. I am a gifted warrior, you know?”

He scoffed before turning away. With a smile, I kissed his cheek again, and then wrapped my arm around his as he shoved his hands into his pockets. We fell quiet as we walked the desolate path back to my home, the sun already setting behind the mountain peaks.

“Thank you,” I said, shifting my gaze to view his face. “For risking that for me.”

He nodded silently. “Don’t make me do it again.”

“I won’t. A promise is a promise.”

He glanced at me before slowly turning away. “You’ve made *other* promises in the past.”

The hint of a smile tugged my lips. “Oh? I believe I’ve fulfilled all of... *those* promises.”

He raised an eyebrow in a silent scolding. I laughed and nestled my head into the crook of his neck. His warm fingers caressed my hand that was wrapped

loosely around his bicep. There was a quiet tension that fell over us as he became quiet. I could feel it, lingering like a shadow of darkness.

Lifting my head, I noticed his eyes were hard and unblinking. His jaw clenched and lips pulled tight.

“Loryk?” I asked, my voice quiet and calm.

He turned away with a sudden blink. Closing his eyes, he released a deep sigh. “Neer... there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

I stayed quiet, waiting for him to speak. Dreading the words I knew he’d say. The words that everyone whispered through town, and ones I wished weren’t true. Tears stung my eyes as I looked at him, anticipating the secret he’d been keeping from me.

We walked steadily through the foothills, along the pathless trail leading to my home. He stared at the sky, watching as sunbeams sprayed over the jagged peaks. “Remember a long time ago,” he said, his voice hoarse with pain, “when I said that wanted to marry you. Spend my life with *you*... and *you*...”—he cleared his throat—“you said that you could never tie yourself to another. That until this curse was broken, you’d be damned to a life of seclusion and misery.”

Unable to speak, I nodded.

He swallowed, and then spoke through trembling lips. His grip tightened on my hand as he explained, “I’m getting married.”

There they were. The words that slipped through the wind, traveling from the village and into the frigid foothills. The words that I ignored and refused to believe.

I closed my eyes, unable to hold back the hot tears streaming down my face. He continued, “I know that I said I’d stay here for you, and I meant it, but—”

“No,” I sniffed, and then pulled him into a long, tight embrace. He wrapped his arms gently around me, pressing his hands against the small of my back and head. “This is incredible. It is!”

“Neer...”

I tightened my grip as he started to pull away. My heart ached, but I couldn’t hold him back. He meant too much to me. He deserved much more. “Please... Just be happy. It’s all that I’ve ever wanted.”

He sighed and rubbed my back. “I want to be happy with you.”

I backed away and took his face in my hands. “I love you. And I know that you will have such an *amazing* life. With lots of babies and friends and music. You don’t belong here — stuck on this rock with me.”

“But—”

I placed a finger to his lips and looked into his eyes. "Do this for me. You've waited long enough. It's time for you to go... explore the world. Fall in love. Experience life."

He pulled my hand away. "What about you?"

I looked at the foothills, to the shadows that crept across the ground. "I'll find my way. Don't worry about me."

Tears stung my eyes as I took in his features. The face I had known for ten years was finally free. No longer tethered to the bonds that he felt constrained him to my soul.

No longer damned to a life of loneliness and solitude.

I lifted my eyes to the sky and wiped away my tears. "Go," I said, taking a step back. "You can make it to the village before nightfall if you hurry."

"Neer..."

"It's okay." I placed a hand on his cheek, and he leaned into my touch. "Be happy, Loryk. That's all that I've ever wanted."

His lip quivered. "I want you to be happy."

I smiled, and softly kissed his cheek. "I *am* happy."

He looked into my eyes, unable to accept my farewell. I *was* happy, however anguished and grieved I may be. Loryk deserved happiness. He deserved to live, and for as long as I knew him, I had wished more than anything for him to be free of this retched place.

Now, he could. If the rumors were true, he was to marry a girl in Styrr, a metropolis of cities and fine wine. Dancing and parties until dawn. It was a minstrel's dream.

"Go," I urged again. "I'll see you tomorrow, yeah?"

He nodded, and leaned forward, softly placing his lips to my forehead. I savored the touch, wishing it could last forever. Cold bit my skin as he pulled away, took one more look into my desperate eyes, and then started back toward the road.

I watched him until he was out of sight, ignoring the shadows that crept closer, crawling across the ground like waves on the shore. Once he was out of sight, I wiped my eyes and made haste to my home.

As I trekked closer to the small, windowless house, a feeling of dread washed through me. Tucked within the faint shadow of the mountain, I could see my door was ajar. My hands tingled and knees were weak as I slowed my steps. Daemons lurked in the dark. They could have easily broken into my home in search of food or prey.

My heart pounded loudly in my ears, drowning out the sound of the snow crunching underfoot. I unsheathed my sword and carefully approached the home.

The wooden door creaked as I pushed it open and peered into the dark room. My eyes shifted instantly to the oil lantern on the table, flickering with a small flame. I left during the daylight hours. There was no reason for me to have lit that lantern... and daemons weren't intelligent or cunning. No. Something else was here. Stalking my home. Waiting in the shadows.

Sweat beaded across my brow as I scanned the darkness, unable to see anything through the intense black. With my sword held close to my chest, I inched closer to the table. My eyes shifted from left to right as I moved closer. Objects clattered beneath my feet as I tripped over items that weren't typically there.

I maneuvered slowly across the room, and without taking a breath, I turned the knob on the lantern, increasing the light of the flame. As it reached the apex of its brightness, the room was aglow with dancing firelight. Still holding my breath, I turned a shaky head, searching the dark corners.

My home was amess. Items were strewn across the room as if someone had rummaged and ransacked every last inch. My clothes were laid across the floor, shredded and torn. The bed was ripped open with a single slice across the feathered mattress.

But there was no one here. Not a shift in the shadows rippled through the darkness. Releasing my breath, I disarmed my weapon and quickly shut and locked the door. Leaning against it, I slumped forward and rubbed my face. Another look around the room told me whatever had come wasn't a daemon. They couldn't hunt in the light. Bandits or thieves must've made their way here, looking for a place to hide before moving on.

I stepped to the center of the room and lit the large hanging lantern. Light cast through the small space, and I breathed a sigh of relief. At the table, I clutched the back of the chair and leaned forward, reeling from the sudden panic and fear.

But when I opened my eyes, I spotted a note lying on the old wooden surface. Its right edge was tucked just beneath the still flickering lantern. My jaw clenched as I scanned the page, studying the outlined drawing of a beautiful, calligraphic eye.

My heart stopped at the sight of the fae markings etched beneath the image. At the bottom of the page, written in the common tongue of the humans, was a dangerous, deadly warning.

We know.