

CHAPTER ONE



A RAY OF HOPE

EBBARD FELL FORWARD WHEN HIS BINDS WERE CUT.

Clutching his raw wrists, he crawled to his feet and stepped over a fallen mercenary's body.

"Wonderful," he complained in a trembling voice, "you could've come earlier, y'know?"

His savior pulled down her scarf and stepped into the light, revealing her olive complexion and slender face. Low flickering firelight shone against her bright teal eyes as she looked at the disheveled and beaten man who scolded her.

"Are you hurt?" she asked with a smooth accent indicative of her northern roots. Now she stood hundreds of miles away from her home in the southern reaches of Ravinshire, a region whose outskirts bordered the forbidden and dangerous elvish country of Vleland.

Everyone from here to the furthest reaches of Skye understood that southern Ravinshire was a place meant for the most dangerous of men, or the most foolish of wanderers.

But Ebbard and his savior weren't dangerous, nor were they foolish.

Ebbard tugged on his doublet, proudly straightened his posture, and with forced confidence he said, "I'm just fine, given the near bashed-in skull! What took you so long? I nearly lost my tongue! I'd never sing again!"

"What a shame that would've been," she teased with a smile not well hidden.

"Ha. Ha," he mocked. "Get on with it so we can go! I need an apothecary—my 'ead is killin' me!"

She pointed to the door. "Wait there. Gil's coming with herbs and potions."

As Ebbard found himself a chair, the young woman created chaos in the silent night, kicking over empty crates and rummaging through dresser drawers. She wiped her sword clean on her trousers before sheathing the weapon on her belt loop. The dead mercenary's blood stained her clothes as she stepped to his body and dug through his pockets. Parchment crinkled as she retrieved a scroll from his armor.

"Is that it?" Ebbard asked. "All this for a note?"

His savior moved to the fire and quickly read the scribbled parchment. With a deep breath, she crumpled the note into her fist and then tossed it into the flames. The firelight brightened and gave a warm glow to the dark room as the paper burned.

"Was that it?" Ebbard pressed.

She marched away from the hearth and continued her search. "Hardly. That was a bounty. Seems they believe I still have blonde hair and fair skin."

It had been years since she underwent the Change, which permanently altered her appearance to better suit her life of hiding. It was a dangerous procedure that saw most of its patients disfigured or lying in crypts. She was fortunate to have survived with minimal scarring.

"Well, that's a relief," Ebbard said. "What about your eyes?"

Her bright eyes turned to the floor, overcome with anguish. They were unchanged by the procedure and became her most telling feature for those seeking her capture. The door creaked open, and the woman instantly brandished her blade. Her outburst caused Ebbard to nearly fall from his chair. She focused on the door as it gently swung in the breeze, and her gaze shifted to a grey tabby entering the room, its tail whipping through the frosted air.

At the sight of the familiar animal, the woman sheathed her sword with a relieved sigh and then removed a small box and bundle of clothing from her satchel. A warm gust of hot air and bright light quickly filled the dark room where the cat once stood, and she relished in its fleeting warmth. As the light and heat faded, Gil, a pint-

sized dreled wearing nothing but his thick body hair, stood in the cat's place.

Gil was a dreled, a shape shifting halfling, able to transform into any animal he saw fit. He often chose the more inconspicuous of creatures, such as a cat, bird, or horse. While the dreleds could transform into great beasts and conquer entire civilizations, they were born with an overabundance of empathy and kindness, leaving them opposed to the ideals of war or greed.

"Gilbrich!" Ebbard sang. "Come to patch me up, 'ave you? Seems Neer 'as got better things to tend to besides the friend who risked 'is life to find 'er little trinket!"

Gil thanked Neer as she passed him his belongings, and he got dressed before pouring herbs into a small mortar. Gil, like all dreleds, stood just three feet tall, was thinly built with defined muscles, and had a raspy soprano voice. Though he was nearly three hundred years old, not a wrinkle creased his smooth skin.

The deep scar along his brow, which he had received many years before during a fight against a Knight of the Order,¹ glowed in the dying firelight. Neer had always admired the scar, as she felt it gave him a fierceness not commonly seen in his kind.

"Toss another'n atop the flames, would ya?" Gil called to Neer. She followed his instructions and stoked the fire while Gil turned to Ebbard. He pulled a wooden crate over and then stood on top of it to bring himself to Ebbard's eye level. "This'll sting a bit," he explained.

Ebbard winced as Gil rubbed paste across his open cuts and swelling bruises. He was held captive for less than an hour's time, but it was enough for the mercenaries to have their fun. Neer was opposed to his idea of being used as bait to lure them into the shack, but he persisted, as he always did, and now saw himself at the wrong end of a bad plan.

"Smells terrible!" Ebbard griped.

"It should," Gil said, "'tis a mixture of frog shite and herbs."

Ebbard's eyes widened in shock and disgust. Gil ignored him, wasting no time administering the ointment whose smell grew stronger by the second.

"So, Neer," Gil started, "what'd ya find?"

"The big one had a bounty in his pocket," she explained. "Apparently, I'm worth one hundred gold pieces in any currency."

"Oi!" Ebbard cheered. "That's fifty more than last time!"

"Quiet, you!" Gil smacked his chest. "Keep lookin', lass. The arun must be here somewhere."

"What's with this arun anyway, Neery?" Ebbard asked.

"I've told you a hundred times, Loryk," she started, calling him by his given name, which was a pleasantry only his truest friends were permitted, "I was cursed as a child. If I'm to use my magic"—she grunted while lifting a fallen dresser—"the Order can track my whereabouts."

"So, the arun can lift your curse? Is that why we're lookin' for it?"

"One can hope."

Loryk pondered for a moment. "Why can't you just go on without usin' magic? And why would the Shadow Blades 'ave the arun anyway? They're just mercenaries, after all."

Dust swirled through the room as the dresser dropped back to the floor with a ground-shaking thud. With a sigh, she moved to the bed and tore into the feather mattress with a dagger. "The arun is extremely rare, which makes it even more valuable. And a mage going without their magic is like a delvine² breathing out of water. Can they do it? Sure. Is it dreadfully unbearable? Absolutely."

"Them delvine are some fine-looking creatures. 'Ave you seen the paintin's, Gil?" Loryk whistled enthusiastically. "I'd learn to breathe underwater for them any day!"

Gil scoffed and said, "You're as right to sleep with a delvine as you are that kitchen wench you're always boastin' about!"

"Vaeda was a fine woman!" Loryk argued.

Neer pulled the bed across the floor. "If you have to pay a kitchen wench to lay with you, then you're sure to

¹ Taken as infants, by trade or force, the Knights of the Order were genetically modified and brutally trained to be the largest and strongest among humankind. Only males were allowed to join their ranks, and just after acceptance, while still too young to speak, their tongues were sliced from their mouths, forcing them to communicate to only one another through arm and hand gestures.

² A beautiful, mysterious, and deadly semi-aquatic race that dwell in the waters surrounding the Isles of Erasin.

It is because of their presence that the Isles have been left abandoned and prohibited from visitors. Ghost stories of sinking ships, disappearing islanders, and illnesses that overtook the surrounding lands have engrained within the humans the utmost fear of the dangerous isles to the north.

woo the most beautiful, exotic women to bed," she teased.

"Didn't take much to woo you," he remarked.

She shook her head at his flirting, which she knew was nothing more than a playful tease among friends. While examining the floor, she noticed a thin line against the wooden grain. She pried the wood up with her fingers, only to have it fall back into place. With a frustrated huff, she leaned back and rubbed her face.

"What is it?" Loryk asked.

"A square is cut into the wood. I think it's a hidden door."

"Well, open it!"

"I can't lift it. Each plank is independent."

"Use your dagger, doof."

She rolled her eyes, mostly at herself for not thinking of such an obvious solution, then used the tip of her dagger to carefully lift the planks. With a gasp, she fell back as large spiders raced from beneath the flooring. Loryk leapt atop his chair as the arachnids sprinted across the room to hide in the dark corners.

Neer waited for the creatures to pass, then continued digging into the soil. As her fingers slid across a smooth surface, she dug faster, paying no mind to the scurrying insects or filth beneath her nails. Her heart skipped as she pulled a stone box from its hiding place. She scraped the mud from the lid to reveal foreign symbols engraved along the top.

"This is it..." she whispered. "The arun."

She carefully grasped the lid and took a hesitant breath. Inside the rare and mystical box was energy strong enough to lift her curse. A curse that had followed her since childhood and kept her just within the clutches of the Order of Saro. Once she opened this box, everything would change. All the years of suffering and fear that she had endured would be put to an end. She would no longer have to run or hide or look over her shoulder.

Once she opened this box, she would finally be free.

With a deep, calming breath, she closed her eyes and removed the lid. Black smoke slowly rose from the arun, followed suddenly by an ear-piercing screech. Gil fell back and landed in the blood of the fallen mercenary. His large, hairy hands covered his ears, and he closed his eyes in agony. Loryk leaned forward atop the chair and gripped his ears while the spiders twitched and shook. Neer, too, gritted her teeth as blood trickled from her ears. She placed the lid into its spot atop the box, and the world fell silent.

The chair creaked beneath Loryk's weight, injecting life back into the quiet room. He gripped the back of the chair and took a shaky breath. "What the 'ells was that?"

Neer explained, her voice hollow and broken, "It's enchanted... I can't obtain the energy inside."

Loryk groaned. "Perfect! This's exactly what we need!"

Gil gripped his forehead in pain. "Quit your whinin'! Let us think for just a second!" he snapped.

Neer clutched the box with a quivering lip, and a single tear glided down her cheek.

"Neer?" Loryk called. He stepped across the room and placed a hand on her shoulder. "It's all right..."

"Four years." She spoke through clenched teeth. "I've been searching for four years. This was my only chance. Nothing else has worked."

"We'll bring this back to Reiman and the scholars. They'll find a way to disenchant it."

She scoffed, and with a look to the ceiling, another tear fell. She could only imagine the disapproval her father, Reiman, would have at knowing she failed again. To know that she had found what she searched so long to find but wasn't wise or strong enough to understand its power. He warned her about the dangers of this journey and the arun, but she ignored him as she always did.

Her thoughts vanished as Loryk gently wiped her tears away and pulled her into his arms.

Gil stood at the window on his toes and peered over the windowsill. "We've got a problem," he warned.

Loryk rubbed Neer's shoulder. "You all right?" he asked.

She nodded with a sniff, and together they stepped to the window. They peered outside to find the village was empty, quiet, and calm. Neer squinted her eyes, hoping to spot what Gil had warned them about, when suddenly, a shadowy figure flew past. Loryk leapt back with a gasp, while the others remained calm.

"Seems that screamin' bit were just an alarm," Gil explained. "It called upon a marq."

"A marq?" Loryk asked with a slight quiver to his voice. "Those aren't real..."

"They're real. Wispy little enchantments, they are. Hard buggers to dispel."

The small cabin shook and splintered as the black smoke enchantment enshrouded the cabin and crept into the cracks along the walls.

“Only magic can destroy a marq,” Neer explained.

“Then use it!” Loryk pleaded.

“I’m not strong enough to defeat it! Do you want the entire army at our doorstep once the fight’s over? You know the Order can track my magic!”

“Divines...”

“Stop your belly achin’! You’re worse than me wife after a long day o’ sittin’ on her arse!” Gil added.

“I’d gladly trade places with ’er!” Loryk argued. “Neer, what are we goin’ to do?”

“I don’t know!” she said.

“You’ve got to teleport us out of here,” Gil demanded.

“What? I can’t! Teleportation could rip us to pieces!”

“Yeah,” Loryk added, “plus they’ll follow us right to Llyne. Know exactly where we ’ide out!”

“Better to be followed than dead,” Gil said.

“They’re one and the same!” Neer argued.

Another jolt violently shook the crumbling cabin, and the group huddled together. The roof collapsed, and wooden planks buckled beneath their feet as the smoke thickened.

“Neer, we’ve got to flee! If we breathe this in, we’re as good as dead,” Gil shouted.

“I can’t,” she argued.

“Do it now!”

Lightning flashed and winds howled as the dark smoke of the marq seeped further inside. With the arun tucked safely into her leather pack, Neer took Loryk and Gil’s hands and gripped them tightly. She closed her eyes, struggling to focus on her magic as the weight of such stress and panic broke her concentration. The stinging warmth of her energy would strengthen in her chest, only to vanish again with another lurch of the walls.

Gil coughed as smoke crawled across the floor. Wrinkles formed along Neer’s face as she closed her eyes tighter. Magic surged through her, forming beads of sweat across her temple. A soft glow formed around her, enveloping the trio in warmth, and they disappeared.