

CHAPTER ONE



HOME
Avelloch

FATE WAS A CRUEL AND MERCILESS BITCH.

A rift tore through the air, sending birds into flight. The sound of whooshing flames interrupted the night, and magic rippled like a wave of heat above the grass. Its crackling grew louder before Klaud and Avelloch fell from its height and rolled across the ground.

Silence filled the forest as the rift collapsed in on itself and disappeared, leaving not a trace of its existence or heat behind. Pale moonlight shone through the thick canopy in purple rays across the empty woodlands. Avelloch curled into the ground, thick grass crunching beneath his weight, and unleashed a hellish scream. His voice was raw with anger and pain. Shriveled black skin covered his right forearm and hand in dark lines, like spirals of paint embossed and burned deep into his flesh. His fingers curled into a half fist, the most it could clench in its necrotic state, as he was consumed with madness.

“No!” he shouted. “What have you done?”

Klaud stood and felt his pocket, checking that the arun was still in place. “I had to!” he argued, his voice full of anguish. “There was no other choice!”

“You bastard!” Avelloch leapt to his feet and charged at him.

Klaud disappeared and stood ten feet to the left.

Avelloch turned sharply, his eyes narrow with rage. “You left her!” His face was red, and veins swelled in his neck and forehead. “I could have saved her!”

He charged again as he spoke, fury and vengeance heating his skin. Klaud vanished. As he reappeared and attempted to speak, Avelloch turned to him, swinging his blackened, half-clenched fist. His knuckles smacked against Klaud’s jaw, sending him to the ground.

Avelloch collapsed to his knees, shouting with rage, pain radiating from his necrotic limb. He clutched his wrist while agony consumed him, filling his veins with fire.

Klaud knelt in the grass nearby and rubbed his injured face. He spit blood into the dirt before twisting his aching jaw with a wince. Klaud glanced at Avelloch and dropped his head with a pitiful sigh.

A minute sound flinched against the grasses.

Klaud’s ears pricked, catching a sound unheard by most others without his heightened evaesh senses. He turned his attention to the forest, spying the cold and calm darkness. A chill swept through the autumn air when a breeze rustled the leaves, masking the sound of faint footsteps.

His spear apportioned into his grasp, and Klaud lifted his arm, readying his weapon, when he was met with several arrows pointing at him from the shadows. The sly crunch of thick grass became heavier as six figures stepped through the tree line, surrounding them.

They wore dark clothes of green, brown, and black to conceal their presence in the darkness of the forest. Long hair of various tones hung across their shoulders to their mid-backs, kept away from their faces in tight, overlapping braids. The graceful etchings adorning their hickory and oak bows, every swirled edge and elegant wisp of their designs, exposed their loyalty to Clan Rhyl.

Klaud's glowing yellow eyes glanced at each of the figures until a man with a scarred face approached, and Klaud exhaled a relieved sigh. "Elidyr," he said, greeting the man he knew from long ago.

"Klaud?" Elidyr remarked, lowering his bow. Moonlight cast against the deep scar marking the left side of his face. "What are you doing out here?" His strong voice displayed an air of dominance and authority, one that came with being a leader and commander. But the slight pull of his brow, the one drawing his face inward, betrayed that sense of dominion with a breath of pity and remorse.

Klaud kept his eyes on Elidyr, not daring to threaten the warriors still drawing their arrows at his skull. "We just returned from Nhamashel," he explained.

The quiver of his voice and fatigue in his expression were truth enough of his claims, and the warriors released a hushed gasp before disarming their weapons and taking half a step back. Their eyes grew wide and jaws dropped at Klaud's impossible claim.

"Nhamashel?" Elidyr asked timidly, uncertain of the truth. "Thallon said you were asking about that place. I never thought...How did you survive?"

"Barely." With a groan, Klaud climbed to his feet and placed his spear on his back. "I have to get to Aélla." He used her given name—the alias was wasted on those who didn't know her as well as he did. It was the reason he used it at all, to protect her identity and keep others from finding the truth of why he was seeking Nhamashel.

Elidyr stiffly nodded before averting his gaze to the left, where a shadow shuffled in the grass. With a suspicious eye, he pointed his bow to Avelloch's obscured figure lying on the ground, and asked, "Who is that?"

Klaud exhaled another breath, this time filled with worry. He closed his eyes and reluctantly revealed, "Avelloch."

Elidyr tensed. Bows clattered, filling the silence with the threat of execution, as the warriors quickly raised their weapons.

"He went there to save her," Klaud said, the words spilling from his lips. "We wouldn't have made it without him."

"*We?*" Elidyr pressed.

Klaud stammered, glancing quickly between the warriors peering at him. "We, as in Avelloch and I," he lied, his voice trembling.

Elidyr's eyes narrowed further. "You know I can't allow him to enter Navarre. Not without Eirean approval."

"I know that. All that I'm asking is for him to be allowed to be with his sister. He risked his life to bring her back." Klaud carefully reached into his pocket and retrieved Aélla's note. "She asked for him. If not for Avelloch, do this for her."

Elidyr took the note and quickly scanned the words. With a sigh, his eyes fell away. He returned the note to Klaud and gave the warriors a subtle nod, instructing them to

disarm. They followed his orders but kept their eyes on Avelloch, who remained motionless on the ground.

"I'll let you both return to her," Elidyr stated, his voice harsh and cutting. "But he is *your* responsibility."

Klaud nodded, and he stepped to Avelloch's side. "Come, brenavae," he said, clutching Avelloch's uninjured arm.

Avelloch snatched his arm away from Klaud's grasp and tumbled face-first into the dirt. The world spun as darkness clouded his vision, sending specks of light and flashes of pain through his mind. Fire raged through his black and decrepit arm. With a groan, he pushed himself up and spit grass and mud from his mouth. Crawling to his feet, he stood and bitterly shoved past Klaud to follow the warriors escorting them through the forest and toward Aélla's home.

Two nights passed as they traveled closer to Navarre, the main city of clan Rhyl. Avelloch hadn't seen his hometown since he was young, and the thought of going back twisted his stomach in knots. He knew he needed to go, for Aélla's sake, but even with her blessing, he knew it wouldn't be a warm welcome.

Avelloch sat with the others across a small campfire, and his eyes lifted as Elidyr spoke to his comrades. The small group of seven avel warriors gathered around the flames, speaking of their mission and purpose. Avelloch had wondered why they were so far from home, but he didn't have the care to ask. Although he had known Elidyr since childhood and grew up playing with his younger brother, Thallon, Avelloch was considered an outsider to his people, and even someone as familiar as Elidyr wouldn't forsake the clan by conversing with a traitor.

Firelight glistened against his pale skin. Avelloch examined his injured arm, quietly listening to the conversations of the warriors.

"Do you think it's true?" Thurandír asked. He was much younger than the rest, with dark skin and curly hair hanging over his ears. "The Nasir can't possibly be in Aragoth."

Avelloch stiffened at their mention of the Nasir. Staring at the ground, he focused on their words, his fury rising with every syllable.

"It can't be," a woman Avelloch had never met added. Her skin was tan, her hair a vibrant blond, nearly glowing in the roaring firelight. She had three twisted scars across her left bicep, deep and disfigured.

Avelloch gazed at them, realizing they formed the claw mark of a wisper. He averted his gaze, chilled by the thought of the deadly, haunting creatures now stalking their lands.

Iron creaked when Elidyr turned the spit, allowing the pheasants his warriors had hunted to properly roast. Juices dripped into the fire, sizzling and brightening its glow. "So far, it seems to be true," he stated, keeping his eye on the meat. "We've scoured the forest, and there are no signs of the Nasir or his followers. Even Ithronél is gone."

Everyone gasped. Everyone except Avelloch, who sat in silence, still as stone and eyes as cold as ice.

Thurandír leaned forward, clutching his forehead. "This can't be happening...," he said.

Klaud added, "If it's true, then it may already be too late. We know what the Nasir is after. We know he's ruthless and will stop at nothing to attain his goal."

"Which is what?" Elidyr asked. "What could he possibly want that's in the desert?" Klaud's deadly eyes bore into Elidyr's. "War."

The silence of the forest grew heavy as they sat in the shadow of misery and fear. Avelloch examined the shriveled, blackened skin of his right hand. He had never witnessed such power or rage. Such pain. Closing his eyes, he shook his head and spoke for the first time since their capture. "He's going to go after her."

Elidyr's face twisted in confusion. "Aélla?"

Avelloch and Klaud shared a glance, and he was relieved to find that Klaud understood who he mentioned. Bringing up a human sorceress to these warriors would only lead to rumors and bounties. Her existence was impossible, yet somehow, she was alive, wielding power stronger than they had ever seen. Uncontrolled, raw, furious power.

"We have to focus on our duties, Avelloch," Klaud said, his voice smooth as silk.

Avelloch understood the calmness Klaud displayed was out of respect and regret, not arrogance or guile. But still, the words struck Avelloch like the sharp end of a dagger, piercing through his chest and spilling the foul stench of agony and vengeance lying just beneath the surface.

Avelloch turned away, swiftly severing their intense gaze. "Is that what you were doing in Nhamashel? In the woods when they were captured? Now?" His furious eyes flashed back to Klaud. "There are more things to this life than *your* ambitions!"

"My ambition?" Klaud said with a scoff, and the calmness in his eyes shifted to anger. "You are deluded, Avelloch. Stuck in your sense of pride and worrying over people and things that you know nothing about! Aélla made her choice! A choice that will affect the fate of the entire world! She's more important than *anyone*. You of all people should understand the weight that I carry! We've both made decisions that we regret. Taking the arun and solidifying his fate is comparable to *your*—"

He instantly fell silent when Avelloch swung his arm upward and pressed a dagger to his throat. A clatter filled the silence as the surrounding warriors procured their weapons, aiming the tips of their arrows and swords at Avelloch. Not noticing the warriors' quick response, he glared into Klaud's eyes, daring him to speak another syllable. Avelloch wouldn't kill him, and Klaud knew this, but the threat was enough to keep him quiet.

Looking into his eyes, Klaud gave a subtle nod, and Avelloch withdrew his weapon, though everyone glared at him with their arrows still nocked. Avelloch shook his head, stood, and marched into the forest.

"You can't—" Elidyr started before Klaud lifted a hand to silence him.

"Let him go," he said. "We aren't yet to Navarre. If he wants to rejoin us before we reach the border, he will."

Avelloch walked until the glowing aura of the campfire faded to black. In the stillness of night, he stood amidst the trees, listening as they whispered and sighed in the cool air. Staring up at the sky, he unleashed his rage and torment in a raw, agonized scream.

Grass crunched beneath his weight when he sank to his knees, the scream still sliding from his throat, becoming quiet and hoarse as the breath escaped his lungs. Once he had released all that he had, when his chest ached and throat was sore, he collapsed forward onto his uninjured arm, his necrotic, throbbing limb curled against his chest.

Every thump of his heart pulsed through his swollen veins and blackened skin, sending waves of agony crashing through him.

But that was pain he could endure. Physical and brutal and real. He had suffered through enough bodily torment to be troubled by its harsh sting. It wasn't the bruises or welts or the insufferably painful limb that he couldn't conquer.

Since that day, long ago, when he was banished from his home and forced to live in exile, he had hardened himself from the unbearable pain caused by others. Shutting himself away from the world and living in complete seclusion kept him from the agony of betrayal and the torment of loss. He cursed himself and the ancient, undying spirits for giving him such a fate, for having him connect so closely to another...to a *human*. The word was sour in his mouth, yet he didn't wretch at its presence in his mind. Avelloch didn't scowl or sneer as he had always done before his journey to Nhamashel.

His revulsion for them had lifted, however slightly, now replaced with something far more damning and intolerable. Sunk deep into his bones, where he feared it would rest forever, never allowing him to find peace or hope, was a deep, brewing hatred.

It was a hatred that came from losing everything so long ago.

A hatred for being exiled.

A hatred for his sister's fate.

A hatred for finding solace in no one but a human.

But more than those, it was a deep, unsettling hatred for his life and how cruelly fate had twisted his existence.