

The Darkest Storm

The Darkest Storm

Ellen Wind-van Strien

© 2016-2017 Ellen Wind-van Strien

This edition published 2017

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

ISBN-13: 9789402168167

FOR MY PARENTS--

For always being there.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Prologue	1
One	4
Two	12
Three	17
Four	27
Five	31
Six	39
Seven	52
Eight	56
Nine	70
Ten	77
Eleven	89
Twelve	97
Thirteen	107
Fourteen	116
Fifteen	136
Sixteen	153
Seventeen	165
Eighteen	178
Nineteen	188
Twenty	195
Twenty-One	208
Twenty-Two	217
Twenty-Three	227
Twenty-Four	241
Twenty-Five	252
Epilogue	259

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Here we are again. Book 2. Who would have thought that? This time around I did things a bit differently, asking people what they thought would happen, and took it from there. Of course, I had my own ideas, my own little plans but with the help of Chrissie and Annemieke I managed to make it into one coherent thought. At least I hope it's one. Enjoy the read while I start working on the third installment. Cheers!

PROLOGUE

He didn't understand, what had gone wrong? He had been adamant in getting his Lord the right information but somewhere in the process it had all gone terribly wrong. So, so wrong. And now? Now he was running for his life because of a mistake someone else had made. This was not what he had expected his day would have ended in.

Dogs were barking in the distance and he swallowed hard, sweat was pouring in steady streams down his face. Cassius was swiping at his face, trying to get the sweat out of his eyes but the salty mixture was still stinging him.

How long had he been running for? An hour? Two? He might have been in shape but running for this long was taking its toll on him. He was tiring.

That's when he made a mistake. Cassius tripped over a root, his foot getting stuck behind it and as he fell forward and face-planted himself into the moss covered ground he had to bite his tongue to not scream out in pain. He heard his ankle give, heard the loud crack and he just knew it was broken. Whimpering he rolled on his back, catching his breath while tears sprung in his eyes from the pain throbbing in his ankle.

ELLEN WIND-VAN STRIEN

He sat up, looked down and was horrified by the sight of it.

Broken. He had broken his ankle. How was he supposed to run and hide from his Lord now? They would catch him and then... he swallowed, he just couldn't think about that right now. He used the tree he was sitting next to to help him get up. Cassius looked around and started hopping, making sure he didn't jostle his leg too much. With each hop, it still hurt something fierce but what option did he have? Either lay down on the ground cowering or make his escape in the hope that he could still outrun the dogs.

The latter was too much to hope for but he had to try. He was not a coward after all. His Lord had always commended him on that fact. Cassius got things done, no matter the consequences. It was because of that admirable feat that he was now running, well actually limping, through the forest instead of lying on a marble floor with blood pooling around his dying body. They had given him a running chance.

And he had ruined it for himself. The one chance to earn his life back and he had gone and broken his ankle.

Cassius had been told that if he would make it through the Forest of Whispers he would be forgiven and he would be allowed to resume his tasks. He was so close in reaching the treeline, he could almost see the brightness of the sky through the trees. Salvation was near.

So were the dogs.

He could hear them even better now. It spurred him on but he could only go as fast as his ankle was allowing him. Which wasn't fast at all. Grunting with each hop, he tripped again and went down face first into another patch of moss covered dirt. Laying there for a

THE DARKEST STORM

moment, catching his breath and using the moss to cover his pain filled groan, he turned onto his back.

He wasn't going to make it. The thought seeped into his mind and lodged itself there firmly. This was the end for him, his life was over and all because...

"So here you are." The voice of his Lord interrupted his thinking and when he slanted his eyes upwards he was met with the face he had served for centuries.

"Here I am." Was his reply. "I am sorry I failed you."

"So am I, old friend." Callaen looked down at him with sorrow in his eyes and Cassius closed his on a sigh. "I will make this quick." He knelt down on his knee, his hand coming up and placing his palm on Cassius's forehead. "May you find peace on your next journey." Callaen's hand started to glow brightly, a bluish colour, and Cassius's body grew slack within moments. "Until we meet again, old friend." Lord Callaen closed the eyes of his oldest servant and stood tall again.

"What now, my Lord?" Another man stepped forward and stared at the body on the ground.

"Take the body. He deserves a proper burial." Callaen turned around and started to walk away, his horse was waiting and they had more things to do. He just hoped that Cassius's failings wouldn't have a big impact on what they had set out to do. "And Indar..."

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Make it quick."

ONE

Christine stood in the kitchen area alone, checking her phone. Again. For the fifth time this morning. *Nothing. Still nothing*, she thought. She pulled up her messages and stared at the words she'd written to Sierida. She looked at the timestamp. Everything about the display indicated that the message had been delivered. But there had been no response since; none to this text and none to the subsequent ones.

No call had gone through. None to Rida's phone, and none to Arias's, either. She had filled their voicemail boxes with worried messages. The messages had started out sounding worried, but in the latest ones, she had snarled at them to pick up their damn phone and let her know where they were. *Nothing*. She couldn't reach them. Neither of them had tried to reach her. Even a GPS search of their devices had produced no results. With their phones seemingly off, there was no way to triangulate the signals. Christine sighed. Gazing into her coffee cup for a moment, she suddenly pushed it away. Nothing was going as it should these days. Her father had lost it. He had gone completely batshit crazy, and she only had the wildest ideas to consider as reasons. Her brother and the girl who'd become like a sister to her in the last twenty-five years—closer than anyone had ever been to her in over eight centuries—were now missing.

THE DARKEST STORM

It didn't help that in the wake of Alexander de Clare, her father, being unofficially MIA, she was now at the helm of the de Clare house. Like she had any idea how to lead a clan like this one, or how to lead any clan for that matter. Well, maybe her father had schooled her in a few things, but suddenly being thrown into this role headfirst left her feeling like she had virtually no idea what she was doing. Part of her thought that the others in the clan were thinking the same, but nobody mentioned anything, making her doubt herself even more.

Reaching up, to pull her hair into a ponytail, Christine suddenly felt a surge go through her. She yelped, clutching her side. The pain was instant. It was sharp, and she was sure that her fingers would be bloodied after she touched her side. But her shirt was dry, and underneath it, no skin was torn. Christine gasped, pushing the heel of her palm into her side to counteract the echo of the pain. It was gone now, but its memory lingered.

Her hand was shaking as she attempted pick up her coffee cup. She trembled so much that she couldn't hold it, and dropped it into the sink.

"Damn it..." she cursed. Trying to pick up a shard of the mug, she eventually gave up and just turned the faucet on. Splashing cold water into her face, she tried to calm down and stop her hands from quivering.

Her mind circled around a single name, a single connection that was kept silent.

Arias.

Her brother. What was that damned stabbing pain? What did it mean? Was he dead? Was this why she couldn't reach him or Sierida?

ELLEN WIND-VAN STRIEN

Christine wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. The shaking of her hands wasn't subsiding. Meanwhile, the fear that Arias and Rida were long dead crept deeper and deeper.

After several days of not hearing anything from either Arias or Sierida she was still staring at her phone—no, glaring at her phone—every ten minutes, but it didn't make it receive a message any faster. She had taken to pacing; she never paced, and she hated that she was made to do so.

“You really should just sit down.”

“I can't,” Christine told the woman with the very pink hair.

“You sent her the message. Several even. There is nothing more you can do,” Melanie replied with a shrug, taking her cup of tea and sipping from it.

“Why isn't she responding then?” she grumbled, not understanding why Sierida wasn't answering the phone she had slipped into the girl's emergency bag. The moment it had come in contact with her, Christine knew that it had been activated, which was fine by her because that meant she had a secure line that nobody could track or listen in on.

“Because she isn't on Earth anymore,” Melanie told her calmly, taking another sip from her tea.

“You keep telling me that, and I don't know what that means.” Christine sat down then, across from her.

“It means what it means.”

THE DARKEST STORM

“Is she dead?” Christine asked quietly.

“No, of course not.” Melanie waved her away, like it was just a silly question.

“But you said...”

“I know what I said, but you’re not hearing me.” Melanie shook her head and let out a sigh. “She’s not on Earth, which means...?” She looked hopeful at Christine, waiting for the dime to drop.

“Which means... Another planet?” Christine frowned in disbelief.

“Something like that,” Mel agreed.

“You’re being very helpful, except not.”

“I cannot tell you more.” Mel shrugged and shoved the plate of cookies towards Christine. “She left Earth, and as long as she’s out of reach for me, I can’t help you.”

“Perhaps it’s for the best she’s not here then. That way my father can’t get his hands on her.” Christine sat back in her chair and let her head fall back. “If she knew what he has done.” The memory of what she had overheard ran through her mind. She had only wanted to talk to him and reason with him that he had been ridiculous in his actions when he tried to bind Sierida to him. She hadn’t expected him to be in the middle of some sort of ritual. He hadn’t seen or noticed her because Christine had hidden herself, but ever since that moment, she hadn’t felt right.

She had looked the ritual up and remembered the words that had been spoken. When in doubt go to your local witch, she had told herself. Or in this case, go to the witch that Sierida trusted the most. After Mel explained what Christine’s father had done, the strange feeling she had been walking around with made sense now.

It also explained why the sun wasn't bothering her anymore and how she was now sitting in said sun and not burning up. This was not something she should be able to do for at least another few hundred years, and yet, here she was.

"Do you feel any different?" Melanie asked her, and she shook her head.

"Besides the fact, I can walk out in the sun, nothing," she told the witch. It didn't mean that there couldn't be more; her father was powerful and the spell he had cast... well it bound her and Arias to the old vampire. He had made the mistake—or perhaps he simply didn't care—that she would be collateral damage after he finished that ritual. She knew he was out for more power, and Sierida had been his way to get it until that had backfired. The next best thing was her brother.

She finally understood now what Arias's other half was, the secret her father had been hiding for six centuries. Grinding her teeth together, she tried not to get worked up over this again. It wasn't working though.

"Getting angry won't help your brother or Sierida," Melanie helpfully told her, and that remark made Christine snort.

"You are really helpful today, aren't you?" She shook her head again. "I don't even know where to start looking for them." She went on, "Or that maybe they should just stay away, because they are safer there than here." She looked at the witch now. "I still don't know what his endgame is." And she probably never would. He had vanished after the binding, leaving the house to her.

Melanie had pulled her deck of tarot cards from a desk drawer and split it in three even stacks. One by one, she pulled three cards

THE DARKEST STORM

from each stack and stared at them. Frowning slightly, she sighed and shook her head in disbelief.

Christine narrowed her eyes at the witch. “Did you just do a reading on me?” she asked.

“I did and the cards are telling me that you need to go see a werewolf,” Melanie answered her. Christine glanced at the cards that now lay face up, recognizing some of those images. Judgement. The World. Death. The other cards were of the minor arcana—the suited cards in the tarot. She had certainly not done her homework. She quirked an eyebrow at the witch. “You get all of this from that? I can’t see a werewolf in those.”

Melanie didn’t respond, only giving Christine a quiet, knowing and patient look. The vampire knew it was the kind of glance you gave a small child that was slow on the uptake.

Christine exhaled, deflating a little. Alright, she would play ball. “So ...werewolf? Right, one of them tried to kill one of our eldest vampires and managed to kill two councillors. Not to mention how he kidnapped Sierida...” She stared at Mel who just stared back. “I’m not sure, *canine* is the kind of company I want to seek right now.”

“He has the answer you seek.” Mel shrugged and collected the cards again to put them away.

“Tane Beaumont knows where they are?” Christine looked at her, not sure why a werewolf, especially that werewolf, was in the know on where her brother had vanished to. Melanie just nodded, putting her cup back to her lips.

“You don’t know everything that has happened.” Melanie told her. “Find out that story, and you’ll find what you need.”

Christine just groaned and stood from her chair. “Why Sierida keeps coming back to you, I don’t know. You’re frustrating with your non-answers.”

Melanie just smiled knowingly at her and gave her a little wave.

Christine left the shop, putting on her sunglasses because even though the sun didn’t burn her skin anymore, her eyes were still sensitive to the glaring light. Yet, she took a moment to enjoy the feel of the sun, something she hadn’t been able to do for more than eight-hundred years. She also took the time to mentally go over what the witch had told her. Tane had the answers, but from what she had heard, he had been locked away and nobody was allowed to see him, except for family.

She started walking, mulling over that angle. Determination hardened her facial features when she made a decision. There was, of course, someone she could go see and persuade him to let her see the werewolf. The only one currently out and about, away from the wolf clan: Andrew Beaumont, Captain of the Enforcers.

Reaching her car, she got in, and her mind wandered away again to all the things that had happened. To that pain, she had felt so suddenly and so real, to the things her father had done. The one that nagged her the most was the fact that none of the people who meant most to her were responding to her now.

Hopefully Andrew Beaumont could help her with paying Tane a visit. Deacon, his older brother and head of the wolf clan, would just shut her down since she wasn’t wolf nor family, and his debt to her father had apparently been fulfilled if she had to believe the documents her father had left behind.

THE DARKEST STORM

Growling, she started the car and headed off towards the headquarters of the Enforcers. She had enough of being in the dark.

TWO

It was still strange, being in a different world and finding out that she was related to Odin. That Thor was her father and Sif her mother, and that she had two brothers on top of that. Even after a week of processing that particular news, Sierida still couldn't believe it. It was even more surreal when everyone kept on referring to her as princess or your highness. Arias had found it amusing and kept on teasing her with it. Arias, who had been anointed as someone important as well after they had found out who his mother was. The teasing had stopped quickly after that. Which had amused her in return. Mostly because she had been the one who had tipped them off.

“Sierida? Are you with me?” A female voice pulled her back from her thoughts and Sierida looked at a woman who was standing at the same height as her and had long blonde hair. A pair of eyes so similar to hers that it was like looking into a mirror, were gazing at her. It was Sif, her mother.

“Yes. Sorry.” Sierida apologised with a small smile.

“Where were you just now?” Sif placed her hand on Sierida's, which was resting on the balustrade while they were overlooking one

THE DARKEST STORM

of the many fruit gardens. This particular one was growing a lovely kind of citrus fruit. Sweet as an orange could be, but way juicier.

“Far away, apparently.” Sierida said with a small smile. She looked at her mother, they had been having these daily walks for the last few days and it felt like she hadn’t gotten any further with Sif. The intention had been to convince the goddess to let her and her friends leave, go back to Earth. But Sif had held her foot down on the subject and ignored any attempts by Sierida to change her mind. If this stubbornness Sif was holding onto kept up she would have to go petition Odin or something of the sort and ask him to allow them to return back home. However, this was something she was trying to avoid at all costs.

“I see.” Sif pulled her hand away and stared back out over the garden. “How is Arias?” Her mother asked and Sierida tried not to sigh at another attempt of employing avoidance tactic by Sif.

“He’s fine. He’s currently beating up Griff...” Sierida’s gaze glazed over for a moment as she tried to locate both Arias and Griff. They were in the courtyard near the barracks, showing off to the Royal Guards. She could feel both men being elated and she grimaced. She still wasn’t used to the fact that she could now feel and hear both Arias and Griff. Apparently after she and Griff saved Arias, a link had formed between the three of them. A magical one for her and Griff and well a blood link between him and Arias. On top of that her existing link with Arias had grown in strength. Griff, however was slowly coming to terms with this.

Sierida, in turn was trying to ignore the link as best as she could but wasn’t really succeeding. Especially when she was in any kind of

intimate moment with Arias. It had been so awkward. The first time after that happened she had not been able to look at the werewolf for two whole days. If not for Griff himself she would continue to avoid him yet. He had assured her that he was very capable of shielding from them when they were in the throes of passion. Her face had coloured a nice shade of red at that declaration and Griff had just grinned and had walked off without another word.

“I see.” Sif responded and Sierida just shrugged and smiled. Her mother lifted a hand to her hair and let a few strands fall through her fingers. “You went back to black.” There was a sadness in her voice when she dropped the strands of hair.

“It suited me better.” She honestly said. The Strawberry blonde was not her, even if everyone seemed to have liked it on her. It possibly suited the person who they had said goodbye to all those years ago but not the woman she had grown into. After all her mother had made sure that nothing would remain of Asgard’s princess by once more turning her into an infant with a powerful spell and then sending her back to Earth almost thirty years ago. Sif had offered to return her memories but Sierida had refused. Somehow, asking the big question of “why” would make the fact that her mother had given her up as a child all the more real. It was something Sierida was not ready to tackle just yet.

So a change of topics it would be. Avoidance tactics and their employment apparently ran in the family.

“I wanted to ask you something,” Sierida said.

“What is it?” Sif asked, her voice neutral.

“I want to be combat trained.”

THE DARKEST STORM

“Come again?”

“Combat trained. I want to learn how to use a sword or how to use my daggers properly.” Sierida said.

“You are royalty, you do not need to know how to use a sword.” Sif started but Sierida held up her hand to stop her.

“Is that why my brothers are now sparring with father? Or how my cousin is cheering them on while he awaits his turn?” She had been watching them for days now and each time she had asked if she could join they had gotten this look and told her perhaps later. Her brother, Magni, had finally relented and told her that it had been Sif who had forbidden them to teach her anything.

“Sierida, I...” But Sif didn’t know what to tell her and Sierida could see it in her gaze.

“Why are you treating me differently? I’m sure that my previous self was very skilled with a sword, am I right?” She stared at her mother, her gaze turned soft. There was this nagging feeling that her mother was trying to protect her from something but as with everything else, Sif wasn’t forthcoming.

“If you just took those memories back.” Sif said to her but Sierida shook her head.

“I want to learn this as me, as Sierida. It is who I am now.” And it was something her mother needed to understand. It was her who had created Sierida. Had made her like this. “Please. Let me do this.” She had taken Sif’s hand with both of hers and softly squeezed. “Please.” Sierida looked at her mother and she could see the resolve within the other woman crumble.

“Very well. I will ask Tyr to teach you.” Sif captured one of Sierida’s hands and brought it to her lips before turning and walking away without another word. She left her daughter standing there with her mouth wide open.

“Tyr? She’s going to ask the God of War to teach me how to fight?” Shaking her head in disbelief, she just knew that this was another ploy of her mother. Yet, Sierida was more determined than ever to see this through. The thought that she clearly had inherited this stubbornness obviously from her mother made her grimace.

Then she too left the small platform from which they had overlooked the orchard. It was time to find Arias and convince him as well that this indeed was be a good idea. Part of her, however, already knew that he would be firmly against it. Especially, if she told him who her teacher was going to be. Yes that would certainly go over very well. Except that it absolutely would not.

THREE

Christine shut off the engine, and pulled the key from the ignition. She sat back, looking around. She had never actually been down here. It was the underground level parking that was part of the Enforcers' headquarters. She had taken her brother's car, choosing the parking spot with the number that was stated in bold digits on the entry pass to this level. Getting out and walking to the elevators, she more than ever felt like she was walking in his footsteps as she continued to try to find him and Sierida.

She stared at the buttons, trying to remember which floor Arias had told her the Captain was on. Her eyes kept returning to the number four. Right, she eventually decided. Fourth floor it would be. Pleased with herself she pressed it and waited for the doors to close. So far nobody had tried to stop her. Sure, the entrance to the parking levels was monitored. So it was strange, that no one came asking what she was doing here, gaining access through her brother's security clearance. But, Christine decided that she wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Tapping her foot impatiently as the elevator rode up, she watched the floor numbers change on the display. When the elevator finally

stopped and the doors parted she did not wait for them to open completely. Instead, she pushed through the second she knew she would fit.

A quick glance was enough to read the small but helpful sign on the opposite wall that pointed out that the captain's office was down to her left. So it was the direction she chose.

The door that designated what was behind it as the office of "Captain Andrew Beaumont - Chief of Operations" was ajar. Christine just give it another small nudge to fully open. The desk in the outer office was empty, no secretary in sight but that was just fine with her. It meant there was nobody she needed to persuade to let her see the Captain.

Passing the empty desk to reach the other door, she heard what sounded like someone rummaging around in drawers and going through shelves from behind the milky glass. She felt relieved because someone would at least be in there.

Christine knocked and pushed the door open, not waiting for an answer. She was already halfway in when it occurred to her that no one had prompted her to step in. Had he even heard her knock?

By the lack of greeting, the lack of turning around to acknowledge or, Christine realised that Andrew Beaumont had not even noticed someone stepping into his office. It gave her the opportunity to observe him for a moment. He was tall, well built, currently sporting a beard and his light brown hair looked like it hadn't seen a brush this morning. There was a strange energy about him. Something unsettled, maybe a little nervous, definitely rather indignant. "Captain