

Ashenvow

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Cael Veyre

Schrijver: Cael Veyre
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Chapter One

The Offering

The Hollow Gate had not opened in nine hundred years.

Aelindra Solvane watched it open now, and thought it sounded like a throat clearing before a lie.

Black iron, taller than a watchtower. Rust-red at the hinges. Chains as thick as a man's waist, drawn back by a hundred straining hands. On the far side, the sky was the colour of a bruise three days old, and there was no sun in it at all.

She stood very straight.

She had been standing straight all day.

The morning had begun in gold.

That was the Dawn Court's way. Every important thing began in gold. Gold thread in the gown they dressed her in. Gold wire in her hair. Gold dust on her eyelids, so that when she blinked, the light would catch, and the people lining the road would see a princess and not a sacrifice.

Aelindra had stood for three hours while the dressers worked.

She was three hundred and forty-seven years old. She had stood for dressers a thousand times. She had never once been asked what she wanted to wear.

"Hold still, Highness," said the old woman pinning her sleeve. "You will wrinkle the silk."

"Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive. You are a credit to your house."

It was kindly meant. It landed like a stone.

When they were done, the dressers withdrew, and her sister came in.

Calyne was two hundred and ninety, and had never learned to hide her face. Her eyes were red. Her hair, the same pale gold as Aelindra's, had escaped its pins on one side.

"Do not," Aelindra said, "or I will start, and we will both be ruined."

"I do not care about being ruined."

"You are the only one in this palace who does not."

Calyne crossed the room in four strides and crushed her in an embrace. The gold wire in Aelindra's hair bit into her scalp. She did not mind.

"You do not have to go," Calyne said fiercely into her shoulder. "We could run. I know a way through the east cellars. I have known it since I was a hundred."

"And the Wound?"

"Let someone else close it."

"There is no one else." Aelindra pulled back and held her sister's face in both hands. "The Rite needs a princess of the Dawn line. Mother has one other daughter, and she is you. Do you want to go?"

Calyne's mouth trembled.

"No," she whispered. "That is a terrible thing to say, isn't it? That I am glad it is you."

"It is the kindest thing anyone has said to me all week."

They both laughed, wetly, and then Calyne pressed something into her hand. A small bronze key on a ribbon.

"The east cellar door," she said. "Wear it. If you ever need it, you will know what it opens."

Aelindra tucked it into her bodice, against her skin.

It was warm from Calyne's hand.

Her mother was waiting in the high hall.

Queen Maelis of Aurelen stood at the foot of the throne with her hands folded, in white and gold, with the sun pouring through the great window behind her. She was eight hundred and ninety years old and had not visibly aged in six centuries. Her face was beautiful and perfectly still.

She had ruled through four wars and two famines. She had never been seen to hurry.

"Daughter."

"Majesty."

"Walk with me."

They went out onto the terrace together. Below, the city of Aurel lay spread in glass and gold, and the crowd was a murmuring sea.

"You will be frightened," Maelis said, not unkindly. "That is natural. The Night Court has been our enemy for nine centuries, and they have told their children stories about us as we have told ours about them. You will find that the stories are exaggerated."

"By how much?"

A small pause.

"Enough," said the queen. "You will need to be clever, Aelindra. And you will need to be patient. The Rite is not a romance. It is a treaty, and you are its signature. Do what it asks of you. Do nothing more."

"And if Kerys Vhal asks for more?"

"Then you will know what she is."

Aelindra studied her mother's profile, the clean line of the jaw, the calm grey eyes.

She had been listening to that voice all her life. Truth-sense was a Dawn gift, and in the Solvane line it ran strong, and she had learned long ago to keep her own quiet. She had learned, too, what her mother's voice sounded like when it lied.

It sounded exactly like this.

Not every word. A word here, a phrase there. A small crack, like ice on a pond. *Enough. You will find the stories are exaggerated.*

Aelindra said nothing.

She had never been wrong in public, and she did not intend to start on the terrace of her mother's palace, with the whole city watching.

She bowed. Exactly as deep as the ritual required.

Then she went to the gate.

That had been the morning.

Now it was dusk, and the Hollow Gate stood open, and her silver-and-gold escort had stopped at the line of white stones that marked the border, because no Dawn soldier had set foot past it in nine hundred years.

Her mother had come as far as the stones.

"Smile," Maelis had murmured. "They will be watching for weakness."

Aelindra had not smiled. She had walked forward alone, with the sun at her back and a single sealed candle in her hands, the Dawn Court's gift. A candle that had never been lit by anything but the first light of the morning. A flame that would not go out.

It was heavier than it looked.

The gate groaned. The chains rattled. Beyond the arch, a road ran down into the dusk.

And at the end of the road, a woman was waiting.

She was taller than Aelindra expected.

She stood without a banner, in a coat of black scale mended too many times to be ornamental. Her hair was the dark blue of deep water, braided

back from a face all angles. A scar crossed her left eyebrow. Her eyes were the pale grey of a winter morning.

Aelindra knew the face. She had seen it a hundred times, on Dawn Court tapestries.

In those, it was drawn with fangs.

It had no fangs. It had tired eyes, the eyes of someone who had spent five centuries on campaign.

Behind her, forty riders sat motionless on black horses, in the same dull armour. They did not look like monsters. They looked like soldiers at the end of a very long day.

One of them was glaring at Aelindra with open loathing.

She was a lean, sharp-featured woman with copper-brown skin and a shaved scalp, and a sword on her back that was longer than Aelindra's arm. She sat her horse like a woman bracing for a blow.

"Princess Aelindra Solvane," said the woman in front. Her voice was low and rough, a voice that did not often speak at length. "I am Kerys Vhal, General of Nythral. I am told I am to be your husband, your wife, or your jailer, depending on who is speaking."

"And which are you?"

"None of them, I hope." A flicker of something that might have been humour. "I am the person who asks you a question before anything else happens."

She stopped. She did not come closer.

"Do you come freely?"

The ritual words. Aelindra had practised them for weeks.

I come freely, by my own will, in the name of Dawn.

She opened her mouth to say them.

And heard, beneath the question, the thing she had been trained from birth to hear: the truth in a voice.

Kerys Vhal's question was not ritual. She meant it.

"No," Aelindra said.

The wind dropped. Somewhere among the riders, a horse snorted. The woman with the shaved scalp went very still.

"I was sent," Aelindra said. "I am three hundred and forty-seven years old, and you are the first person to ask me."

She let that sit.

"My mother chose this. The court chose this. I was told I had a duty. But if you are asking whether I will choose it now..." She drew a breath. "Yes. I think I will. If the terms are what I have been told."

Kerys looked at her for a long moment.

"Then that is a better answer than the one I would have given," she said.
"Thessaly. Stand down."

"General," said the woman with the shaved scalp, low and furious, "she is a Dawn..."

"I know what she is."

"She will have a knife in her sleeve."

"Then she will not be the first." Kerys did not turn her head. "Captain Drake. Stand down."

A long pause. Then Thessaly Drake slid her hand away from her hilt.

It cost her. Aelindra heard the cost in the silence.

"Forgive my captain," Kerys said. "She has buried a great many friends."

"So have I," said Aelindra. "Some of them were hers."

Kerys's eyebrows rose a fraction, the scarred one a little further than the other.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I think that is probably true."

There was a custom, older than the war, that those meeting to make a treaty must first exchange gifts. Aelindra had been drilled in it for a week.

She held out the candle.

"The first light of the Dawn Court. It is lit from the sunrise and does not die. We give it in the hope that it will burn in Nythral as it does in Aurelen."

Kerys took it. She turned it over in her scarred hands, and Aelindra watched her face. There was no disdain in it. There was something almost like wonder.

"It is warm," she said.

"It is meant to be."

"We do not have a great deal of warmth in the dark," Kerys said, a little dryly. "Thank you."

She handed the candle back over her shoulder without looking. Thessaly took it as though it might bite.

Then Kerys unfastened a clasp at her throat, and took a folded length of fabric from a saddlebag, and held it out.

It was a cloak. Dark as a night sky, with a shimmer in it like frost on black glass, so fine it flowed over her wrist like water.

"Dusk-silk," Kerys said. "Spun by the weavers of Karhold. It does not tear and it does not burn. We give it in the hope that Aurelen will find shelter in Nythral, when the light is gone."

"It is beautiful."

"It is warm too." A very small smile. "I am told that is a point of pride with us."

She held it up.

"May I?"

Aelindra blinked.

It was such a small thing. A cloak, a shoulder, a moment's closeness. But no one at her mother's court had ever asked.

"Yes," she said. "You may."

Kerys stepped in and settled the cloak around her shoulders. Her hands did not linger. They touched the silk, not her skin. But Aelindra felt the warmth of her, the sheer physical presence of a woman who had spent her life on battlefields, and her breath hitched somewhere in her chest.

The cloak was warm. It smelled of smoke and cold air and something she could not name.

"Come," Kerys said. "It is cold, and the terms are not for the road."

They had gone twenty paces when Thessaly Drake's horse fell in beside them.

She did not dismount. She leaned down from the saddle and spoke to Kerys in the clipped, low tongue of the Night Court. She did not think Aelindra understood it.

Aelindra had spent six years learning it in secret, from stolen books.

"She is too calm," Thessaly said. "Nobody is that calm. She is hiding something."

"Everybody is hiding something."

"She is a *Solvane*, Kerys."

"She is a woman who walked through the Hollow Gate alone and told me she was not sure she wanted to be here. If that is a trick, it is a very good one."

"It is exactly the kind of trick they would use."

"Then I will be watching." Kerys's voice dropped. "I am always watching, Thess. But I would like to give her the chance to be honest before I decide she is not."

A long silence. The horse shifted.

"If she hurts you," said Thessaly, "I will kill her."

"I know."

"If she does not hurt you, and *you* hurt *her*, I will also be angry."

"I know that too."

Thessaly clicked her tongue and wheeled her horse away.

Aelindra kept her face still. Kerys glanced at her sidelong.

"You understood that."

"Some of it."

"How much?"

"Enough." Aelindra's mouth twitched. "She seems fond of you."

Kerys let out a breath that was almost a laugh.

"She is the closest thing I have to a family. She would walk into the Wound for me. It does not make her easy company." She paused. "She will warm to you, in time. Or she will not. I will not ask you to pretend you do not mind her."

"I do mind her."

"Good. So do I, on occasion."

They walked on.

The camp lay in a shallow bowl of rock, a short way from the pavilion.

Aelindra had expected horror. Fanged soldiers around a pit of bones. She found instead a dozen small fires, and tired soldiers peeling potatoes, and a big grey-bearded sergeant stirring a pot with the air of a man whose whole life had narrowed to the question of whether there was enough salt.

He looked up as they passed. He saw Aelindra, and the dusk-silk cloak on her shoulders, and the general at her side.

He did not salute. He ladled something into a tin cup, stood, and held it out to her with both hands.

"Spiced cider, Highness," he said gruffly. "It is not much. But it is hot."

Aelindra stared at it.

All her life she had been told that Night elves were cruel. That they ate their dead. That they bargained with things beneath the earth.

Nobody had ever said they might be kind.

"Thank you," she said. Her voice was not quite steady. She took the cup, and it burned her palms, and it was the best thing she had ever tasted.

"Sergeant Bram Holloway," Kerys murmured as they walked on. "Two hundred years at my side. His wife makes the best cider in Nythral. He has been carrying a flask of it for this moment since I told him you were coming."

"He did not have to."

"No. That is rather the point."

Aelindra looked back over her shoulder. The sergeant had gone back to his pot and was pretending, very hard, not to watch.

She found, to her annoyance, that her eyes were stinging.

The pavilion stood a mile past the gate, on the edge of the Hollow Marches.

They walked there, the two of them, while the riders fell back to a respectful distance. The road was cracked, and the cracks had silver in them.

Aelindra felt the Wound before she saw it.

A low, wrong note beneath her ribs, like a string pulled too tight. Then the ground split open ahead of them, a long ragged scar across the land, black at the edges and glittering silver at its core. Threads rose from it, thin as spider-silk, flickering in the dusk.

Vowveins. The oldest magic in the world, spilling out of a body that was dying.

She stopped walking.

"You feel it," Kerys said.

"Everyone feels it."

"No. Most of my soldiers only say it makes them sick. You stopped walking." Kerys's mouth tightened. "I think that is why the Rite might work."

"What does it feel like to you?"

Kerys considered the question for longer than Aelindra expected.

"Like a wound in a friend," she said at last. "One you caused."

The words were not ritual. They were not a lie. They were so bare that Aelindra turned her head and looked at her.

Kerys was gazing at the Wound with an expression of terrible patience.

"I did not cause it," she said. "But I have spent a hundred years feeding it. Every battle, every burned village, every dead body sinks into it. That is what the Dawn Court does not tell you. The Wound is not only a result of the war. It is the war's appetite."

"The histories say," Aelindra began.

"I know what the histories say."

"They say you opened it."

"I know."

"Did you?"

"No." Kerys met her eyes. "But I have done enough that I do not mind being blamed. One of those things you will learn on the second night, if you still want to hear it."

"The second night?"

"There is a town," Kerys said carefully, "called Silverfen."

The name hit Aelindra like cold water.

She knew Silverfen. Everyone in Aurelen knew Silverfen. Four thousand dead in a single night, in the last year of the war. A town of weavers and glassmakers on the Dawn border. Every hall in the Dawn Court had its tapestry of the burning, and every one had a tall woman with dark hair at the centre, holding a torch.

She was looking at that woman now.

"You are going to tell me," Aelindra said, "that it was not you."

"No. It was me." Kerys's voice did not shake. "I am going to tell you why. But not tonight. Tonight I will not ask you to listen to the worst thing I have done and then lie down beside me. That would be a cheat."

Aelindra stared at her.

She listened, as hard as she had ever listened to anything. For the lie, the smoothing, the practiced regret.

There was none.

There was only a bleak, steady honesty that frightened her far more than a lie would have.

"Thank you," she said at last, "for not asking that."

"It is the least I can do."

They walked on in silence.

The pavilion was black canvas over bone-white poles. Inside, a brazier threw warm light over a low bed spread with plain wool. There was a table, two cups, a jug of wine, and a knife.

Aelindra looked at the knife.

"For the blood-mark," Kerys said. "The vows are sealed in flesh and spoken aloud. The blood is only ritual. I will not draw it unless you say so."

"And the other part?"

"Is the part I will not touch until you tell me, in words, that I may."

Kerys poured wine. Her hands were scarred across the knuckles. She did not drink. She set the cup in front of Aelindra and stepped back, giving her room.

"Sit," she said. "Please. Before we begin, there are things you ought to hear, and I would rather say them to your face than have them said to you later by someone else."

Aelindra sat on the edge of the bed. The wool was rough under her palms.

Kerys stayed standing. She had the look of a soldier giving a report to a commander she respected.

"The Renewal asks for three vows," she said. "Three nights. Each is spoken at the height of pleasure, given freely by both. If either of us does not consent, the vow fails and the Wound grows. If either of us lies in the saying of it, the same. You have the Dawn gift of hearing truth. I know. Every Solvane has it, and most of them hide it."

"You knew."

"My spies are better than your mother thinks."

Aelindra let out a breath that was half a laugh.

"I will not lie to you," Kerys went on. "I will not ask you to do anything you do not want. I will stop the moment you say stop, and I will not be angry. If you want nothing, we will sit by this fire until dawn and tell our courts the first vow failed. My council will be furious. Your mother will be pleased. And the Wound will grow."

"You would do that?"

"I would rather do that," Kerys said, "than win this war with a stolen night."

It was not ritual. It was the plainest sentence Aelindra had heard in a month.

Her pulse was loud in her ears.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Kerys blinked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You have told me everything I may refuse. I have not heard what you want."

A very long pause.

"I want the war to end," Kerys said. "I want my people to stop being feared. I want to be allowed to put the sword down." She rubbed her scarred eyebrow with a thumb, a tired, unconscious gesture. "And since you ask, I want... you. Not the treaty. I looked at you at the gate and thought, *there is a woman who is not afraid of me*. It was a very selfish thought."

"I was terrified."

"You did not look it."

"I have had centuries of practice."

Kerys laughed. A short, startled sound, as if it had escaped her.

"That," she said, "is a very dangerous thing to say to a woman who has not been touched in two years."

Heat climbed Aelindra's throat.

"Good," she said.

She had meant it to sound bold. It came out softer.

She stood up. The wool beneath her feet was warm from the brazier. She was shaking slightly, and she did not hide it.

"I have never done this with someone I did not choose," she said. "Which is a strange sentence, because there have been three, in three hundred years, and I chose each of them, and none of them made me feel what I felt at the gate. I do not know why. I think it is that you asked."

"You are not obliged to feel anything."

"I know. That is why I do."

The silence stretched between them, warm and thick.

Aelindra drew a breath.

"The knife," she said. "I would like to do that part first."

Kerys blinked. "You are sure?"

"If the vow is to root in the vowveins, I would like it to root in something real. Not just in words." Aelindra picked up the knife. It was plain steel, the hilt wrapped in worn leather. It had been used, and it had been cleaned, and it had been used again. "Will it hurt?"

"A little. A pinprick."

"Then I will go first."

She pricked the tip of her left forefinger. A bead of blood welled, and in the firelight, it was not quite red. It had a thread of silver running through it, like quicksilver in wine.

She held out the knife.

Kerys took it. Her own hand was steady. She drew the point across her fingertip, and a bead of silver-dark blood rose there too.

"The old words," she said. "Do you know them?"

"I know the Dawn version."

"Say it. I will say ours."

They stood very close, finger to finger.

"By Dawn, I give," said Aelindra.

"By Dusk, I take," said Kerys.

"By light, I trust."

"By shadow, I keep."

They pressed their fingertips together. A small warm shock ran up Aelindra's arm. The silver in her blood flared, flickered, and the same silver answered it. For a moment the two beads of blood ran together into a single drop, bright as a star.

Then it sank into her skin and was gone.

"That is the mark," Kerys said, and her voice was a little unsteady. "It is not the vow. It is only the door."

"And the three vows are the rooms."

"Yes. The first is the vow of trust. The second, truth. The third, the vow of self."

"What is the third?"

"I am told it is the one that actually closes the Wound." A wry twist of her mouth. "I have never seen it done. Nobody has, in nine hundred years."

"Then we will be the first."

"Is that a promise?"

"It is a hope. I have been taught not to promise what I cannot control." Aelindra sucked her pricked finger, tasting copper and something sweeter, like honey on iron. "But I would like to try."

Kerys watched her, and something in her face softened.

"Well," she said, almost to herself. "That is a better start than I had any right to expect."

Kerys moved slowly, as one approaches a skittish horse. She stopped within arm's reach and held out her hand, palm up.

"Tell me what you want," she said.

"I want to be kissed."

"Where?"

"Start with my mouth."

Kerys's hand came up to her jaw. Rough thumb against her cheekbone. Aelindra's breath caught.

The kiss was gentle, and then it was not.

It began as a question, and Aelindra answered it. Her fingers fisted in the black scale of Kerys's coat. The general made a low sound in her throat and pulled her closer, and the world narrowed to the heat of a mouth, the scrape of teeth, the taste of wine and winter.

When they broke apart, both were breathing hard.

"Is this still what you want?" Kerys asked.

"Yes."

"Say it so I hear it."

"Yes. All of it. Please."

The coat came off first. Then the shirt beneath it, plain linen, soft with washing. Aelindra's hands shook as she drew it over Kerys's head, and what she found beneath made her stop.

Scars.

A lifetime of them. A long pale line across the ribs. A puckered star beneath the collarbone. A burn, old and silvery, that ran from shoulder to wrist on the left arm. Beneath them all, faintly, the silver tracery of the vowveins, like light under ice.

"I am not pretty," Kerys said quietly. "I should have said."

"You are not pretty."

Kerys's mouth twisted.

"You are *magnificent*," Aelindra said, and meant every word of it, and heard in her own voice how true it was. "I have spent my whole life among people who have never been hurt. Do you know how dull that is?"

Kerys stared at her.

Then she made a sound that was half laugh and half something rawer, and kissed her again, hard enough that Aelindra's back met the tent pole.

The laces of her gown were slow, and Kerys's hands were slower. She undressed her the way one unwraps something fragile, pausing at each fastening to check, with a look, with a murmur: *Still?* and *Yes*, and *Yes*. The gold-wired silk fell in a heap. The dusk-silk cloak followed. Aelindra stood in firelight in nothing but her skin, with the little bronze key cold between her breasts, and the general looked at her with a hunger that had no shame in it.

"You are beautiful," Kerys said.

It was not a flatterer's voice. It was the voice of a woman reporting a fact.

"Come here," Aelindra said.

She pulled her down onto the wool.

For a while there were no words at all.

Kerys's mouth traced her throat, her collarbone, the slope of her breast. When her lips closed over a nipple, Aelindra arched, a gasp breaking out of her. Silver light flickered along her ribs, tracing the vowveins beneath her skin. Kerys's own veins answered, a pale glow running the length of her scarred arms.

"There," Kerys murmured against her skin. "Do you see it?"

"I see it."

"It does that when it wants you. When it knows."

"It is not the only one that knows," Aelindra said, and dragged her mouth back up.

They tangled. Aelindra rolled them over, her hair spilling in a gold curtain around Kerys's face, and kissed the star-shaped scar beneath her collarbone, then the long line over her ribs, then lower, tasting salt. Kerys's

breath came ragged. Her hand tangled in Aelindra's hair, and she stopped herself, and said, in a voice gone thick and low:

"Tell me if I pull too hard."

"I will tell you if I want you to pull harder."

Kerys shuddered.

Aelindra took her time. She had spent three hundred years being told to be careful, and she was tired of it. She learned the geography of this body by mouth and fingertip: the hollow of the hip, the tender inside of the thigh, the place beneath the navel where Kerys's stomach jumped. The silver in their veins brightened with every touch, and each new touch rippled through her own body like an echo.

That was the strangest thing. Not the heat, not the wanting, but the *feedback*. When she dragged her teeth lightly over Kerys's hipbone, she felt the pleasure as her own, hot and bright. When Kerys gasped, her own breath caught.

"You feel it too," Kerys said, wondering.

"Yes."

"I did not know it would be like this."

"Neither did I." Aelindra lifted her head. Her lips were wet. "Is it all right? May I?"

A strangled laugh. "Gods. Yes. Please."

Aelindra bent her head and put her mouth to her.

Kerys made a sound Aelindra would hear for the rest of her life.

She was slow, to begin with. Then, as Kerys's hips began to lift, less slow. A hand fisted in the wool. A hand fisted in her hair. The sound of her name, over and over, broken into pieces. The taste of her, salt and heat, and underneath it a quick-flaring silver that sang along Aelindra's own nerves, so that when Kerys came, shaking, crying out, her heels digging into the bed, Aelindra felt it in her own body, a wave breaking through her, and she gasped against Kerys's thigh and trembled with a pleasure she had not touched herself to earn.

"Aelindra," Kerys said, hoarse. "Come here. Come *here*."

She pulled her up, kissed her, tasted herself on her mouth, groaned.

"My turn," she said.

"Is that a request?"

"It is a promise." Kerys rolled them over, and her eyes were molten. "Tell me what you want."

"Everything."

"Be specific."

Aelindra flushed. And then, because she was three hundred and forty-seven and tired of being careful, she told her.

Kerys listened gravely, and then did exactly as she was told.

Two fingers, slow and certain. Aelindra's hips rose off the bed. She had never been touched like this, as though every movement were a question and her body the answer. Kerys's thumb found the bud at the apex of her and circled, light, patient, merciless.

"Look at me," Kerys said.

Aelindra looked.

Grey eyes. Steady. Burning.

The pleasure built like a tide. Her breath came in sharp, broken pieces. Behind her ribs, the silver burned brighter, brighter, until she could see it through her closed lids. She heard herself say the general's name, once, then again, and then the words the Rite required, rising unbidden from a place deeper than ritual:

"I give you my trust. I give it freely. I will not betray it."

"I take it," Kerys whispered, against her ear. "And I give you mine."

The climax broke over her like light through a shuttered window. Silver fire ran down every vein. For one white, endless moment she was not Aelindra of Dawn, but something larger, something shared. Kerys's breath was her breath. Kerys's pulse was her pulse. She could feel her own body from the inside, and from the outside, and from somewhere beyond both.

Then Kerys's hand tightened on hers, and Kerys came apart too, shuddering, her forehead pressed to Aelindra's shoulder, a word on her lips that was not Aelindra's name.

Afterward, the fire burned low.

Aelindra lay in the crook of the general's arm, listening to the slow wash of her breathing. The silver in their veins had faded to a faint shimmer, like moonlight under skin. The little bronze key had slid round to her shoulder blade. She could feel it there, cool and small.

On the horizon, the Wound pulsed once. Then it grew still.

"It took," Kerys said quietly. "The first vow."

"Did you doubt?"

"Every day, for a month." Kerys's thumb moved over her hip, absently. "I have never had a vow take on the first try. The ones I have forged, in the old days, failed more often than not. Few are honest enough."

"Honest?"

"It is not the touching that fails. It is the words. People lie, at the end. Even to themselves."

Aelindra turned her head.

"What did you say, at the end?"

Kerys went rigid.

"I heard it," Aelindra said. "When you came. Not my name."

"It was nothing."

"You are lying."

A pause. Then, bitterly: "I forgot you could hear that."

"You asked me to be honest." Aelindra rolled onto her side. "I would like the same."

Kerys stared at the canvas ceiling for a long time.

"Silverfen," she said at last. "I was thinking of Silverfen."

Aelindra's blood ran cold. She did not move away. She could not have said why.

"I am sorry," Kerys said. "I did not mean it to be like this. I wanted one night where I did not think of it."

"And you could not."

"No."

Aelindra waited. She had learned, in her mother's court, that silence is a weapon, but also a kindness. If you leave a space, sometimes the truth walks into it.

"I did not want to burn it," Kerys said, so softly Aelindra almost missed it. "I want you to know that. Whatever else you learn."

Aelindra listened.

There was no lie in it.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For telling me the truth, when the lie would have been easier."

Kerys turned her head. Her eyes were wet, and she did not look away.

"If we are going to do this for three nights," she said, "I would rather do it as someone you can believe."

Aelindra kissed her. It was not a kiss of passion, this time. It was a slow, solemn thing, a hand laid on the table.

"I believe you," she said.

And she did.

That frightened her more than anything else had that day.

She did not know how long they lay there. The fire popped. The wind moved in the canvas. When Kerys's hand began to wander again, along her ribs, over the curve of her hip, Aelindra turned her head and looked at her.

"Again?" she said. "So soon?"

"The Rite asks for one vow a night." Kerys's mouth tilted. "It says nothing about the rest of the hours."

"Is that the voice of a soldier or a seducer?"

"I have been told they are the same voice."

"By whom?"

"By people who were not listening."

Aelindra laughed, and pushed her onto her back, and straddled her hips. In the firelight, the scars on Kerys's body looked like a map of a country Aelindra wished to visit.

"Tell me if it is too much," she said.

"I will."

"And if I want something you do not?"

"Then we will talk about it." Kerys's hands settled at her waist, light, warm. "That is the whole of the thing, you know. It is not complicated. You say what you want. I say what I want. We find where they meet."

"And if they never meet?"

"Then we are two people who tried," Kerys said. "That is not nothing."

Aelindra bent and kissed her slowly, unhurried, and the silver in their veins rose to answer.

It was gentler, the second time. She learned how Kerys liked to be held, with one hand spread flat on the small of her back. She learned that Kerys could be made to blush, from the base of the throat up. She learned that when Kerys came, the second time, she went entirely silent, eyes wide, mouth open, as if the pleasure was too large for any sound.

She learned that it did not frighten her to be so close to someone.

It was, in fact, the opposite of frightening.

Afterward Kerys tucked her into the curve of her shoulder, and neither of them said anything. The brazier burned low. Outside, the Wound pulsed, once, in its slow rhythm, like a sleeping animal.

She slept a while after that, curled against the warmth of her, with the dusk-silk cloak spread over them both.

Then, close to midnight, a low voice outside the pavilion called a challenge in the Night tongue, and Kerys woke instantly, one hand already reaching for a blade that was not there.

"General." It was Thessaly. "The Wound is quiet. The pickets report no movement. I wished you to know."

"Thank you, Captain." Kerys's voice was calm, though her heart was racing against Aelindra's shoulder. "Double the watch at the gate. If anyone from Aurelen approaches, I want to be told at once."

"It is done."

A pause.

"General. Did it take?"

Kerys glanced at the silver shimmering in the veins of her wrist. At Aelindra's, still faintly lit. "It took."

Silence from outside. Then, grudgingly, almost inaudibly: "Good."

Boots crunched away over the gravel.

Aelindra let out a breath. "She does not like me."

"She does not like anyone. It is how I know she is happy." Kerys lay back with a groan. "She will come round. Eventually. In about a century."

"I can wait."

"I rather hoped you would say that."

They lay in the quiet for a time. The cold had crept into the pavilion, and Aelindra drew the cloak up to her chin.

"Tell me about Karhold," she said. "Please. Anything. I know the tapestries, and I know what the tapestries say, and I would like to hear it from you."

Kerys was silent for a moment. When she spoke, her voice was softer.

"It is built on a cliff, over the sea," she said. "The sea is black, but when the wind is right, the foam glows. There are stars all night in Nythral, you know. We have no sun, but we have more stars than you have ever seen. We make a festival of them. Lanterns in the streets. Music. Children racing to the cliffs at midnight to see the first falling star."

"That sounds lovely."

"It is." Kerys's thumb traced a slow line along her shoulder. "I would like to show it to you. If we survive the next three days."

"The next three days?"

"The road to Karhold is three days. Through the Marches. I will not pretend it is safe."

"I did not expect it to be."

"No," Kerys said. "I do not think you did."

She said nothing more. Aelindra listened to her breathing slow. In the quiet, she turned the evening over in her mind, the knife and the silver

blood, the two women pressed together, the strange sweet horror of finding that the enemy she had been taught to hate was a person.

I believe her, she thought. And I am going to have to find out what that costs.

She was still thinking it when she slept.

She woke in the dark, hours later, with the taste of smoke in her mouth.

Not her smoke. She had never smelled this.

She lay very still. Kerys slept beside her, one arm flung across the wool. The brazier had gone out.

And in her mind, as clear as a memory of her own, was a scene she had never witnessed.

A burning town. A woman on a hill, with a torch in her hand and a voice in her ear. Not a spoken voice, but a sending, pressed into the mind. A voice made of silk, and patience, and reason.

Burn it, Kerys. You know that I would not ask if it were not necessary.

Aelindra knew that voice.

She had heard it every morning of her life, in the Dawn Court's high hall, reading the histories aloud.

Lord Orsolo Veil.

The High Archivist of Aurelen.

Her heart began to pound.

She thought: *it is a dream. It is the vow. It is a trick of the vowveins, drawing on fears I carried here.*

She thought: *the vow does not lie. It cannot.*

She thought of her mother's calm face, and the thin crack in her voice. *You will find the stories are exaggerated.*

Beside her, in the dark, Kerys stirred, and murmured something in her sleep.

"Aelindra," she breathed. "Do not trust the Archive."

She was asleep. She had no idea she had spoken. The words came out of her like a prayer, and they carried the unmistakable ring of truth.

Aelindra lay frozen for what felt like an hour.

Then, outside the pavilion, very softly, something began to scratch at the canvas.

Aelindra did not breathe.

Scratch. Scratch.

Patient. Unhurried. Like a cat at a door, or a thief at a lock.

She eased out from under Kerys's arm. The dusk-silk cloak pooled at her feet, and she pulled it round herself and crept to the flap. The brazier's last embers gave just enough light to see by. She found the knife on the table, the plain steel one, and closed her fingers round it.

Her heart was hammering so hard she thought it must wake the whole camp.

The scratching stopped.

A voice, cheerful and very quiet, said through the canvas:

"I am terribly sorry to disturb you, Highness. I know it is late. I know you are unclothed, and have had a long day, and that you are holding that knife in a way that would make your tutors weep."

Aelindra froze.

"I would not come in," the voice continued. "I would not dream of it. But I have a rather urgent matter to discuss. It concerns a purse of Dawn gold, a very large sum, and a request that I murder you before you reach Karhold."

A pause.

"I am hoping," said the voice, "that we can come to a better arrangement."

The flap lifted.

A face looked in at her: lean, sharp, grinning. Pointed ears. Leaf-green eyes flecked with amber. A thatch of russet hair full of thistledown.

"Fenn Thistlewick," he said, and bowed from the waist, still crouched, with a flourish that seemed to take up half the pavilion. "At your service, or at least at your price. Do put the knife down, Highness. You will cut yourself, and then your general will wake, and then I shall have a very awkward evening."

Behind her, in the dark, Kerys said, perfectly calmly:

"Fenn. I told you to wait at the border."

Aelindra spun.

Kerys was sitting up in the bed, completely naked, with a dagger in each hand that she had pulled from nowhere, and a look on her face that Aelindra had not seen before. It was not fury. It was the flat, still patience of a woman who has already decided where to put the blade.

Fenn Thistlewick sighed, and let the flap fall.

"Oh, *dear*," he said. "Everyone says she is frightening. I had always thought it was exaggerated."

Chapter Two

The Hollow Road

Kerys Vhal had been woken by a great many things in five hundred and twenty-one years.

Trumpets. Screaming. Once, a bear.

She had never before been woken by a fae smuggler addressing her naked bedfellow through a tent wall.

She was dressed in under a minute.

That was a soldier's habit, and a useful one. Linen, breeches, coat. Two knives, one in each boot. She sat on the edge of the bed pulling on the second boot, and did not look at Fenn Thistlewick, who had settled cross-legged on the rug with his hands raised in the universal sign of *I am a harmless fellow*.

"I would like you to know," he said, "that I came to the back of the tent."

"You came to the *side*."

"A back, a side. It was a tent. They are all more or less back."

"Fenn."

"General."

"You were told to wait at the border stones."

"And I did. For three hours. It was extremely dull. Then a rather important thing occurred to me, and I thought it would be a kindness to share it before the sun came up." He glanced at the crack in the canvas. "Well. Before it failed to come up. Do you know it has been dusk here for nine hundred years? It makes one lose track of mealtimes."

Kerys closed her eyes.

Behind her, the rustle of fabric. Aelindra had found her gown and was making a determined effort to look like a princess in a half-laced bodice and a dusk-silk cloak. She had the knife in one hand still. She held it better than she had a minute ago.

"General," she said, in the cool voice of the Dawn Court. "Who is this person?"

"Fenn Thistlewick." Kerys opened her eyes. "Smuggler. Gossip. Fae of the Thornwild, about eleven hundred years old, though he claims to remember less. He has been selling me information for forty years. He is also, I have to tell you, an incorrigible liar."

"I am a *selective* truth-teller," said Fenn, with dignity.

"Is that what it is called?"

"It is the correct term. The fae cannot lie, you know. It is one of our little hardships." He beamed at Aelindra. "Which is rather a shame in your case, Highness, because I have heard that you can *hear* it. If I could lie, you would catch me. As it is, I merely arrange my sentences."

Aelindra was staring.

"The fae cannot lie," she repeated. "That is true. I know it is. I have read that."

"There, you see? A woman of education."

"But they bargain."

"Constantly. It is the great joy of my existence." He tilted his head. "Shall we? I have a good deal to say, and a little time to say it. Thessaly's pickets are going to find my footprints in about twenty minutes, and she has never liked me."

"Thessaly has never liked anyone."

"She likes *you*, General. That is the trouble. It makes her unreasonable on the subject of who gets near your tent."

Kerys stood. She pulled the second knife out of her boot and set it on the table beside the first, where the princess could see it. A small, deliberate gesture. *I am not holding this. I am not afraid of you.*

She had never done that for anyone in her life.

"Speak," she said.

Fenn spoke.

He told it well, which was the problem with Fenn. He had the gift of making ugly facts sound like a charming anecdote, and one had to listen carefully for the ugliness underneath.

Three days ago, a man had come to the Thornwild market at Whisper Bridge.

"Tall. Veiled. Dawn-accented, cultured. Wore gloves, which is rude in the market, since it makes the vendors suspicious. He wished to hire a fae guide for a discreet piece of work. I was the nearest guide, and quite *very* available."

"What work?"

"He wanted a fae with a talent for crossing borders without being noticed. To follow the princess's procession to the Hollow Gate, slip across behind her, and wait for an opportunity." Fenn turned a coin over his fingers. "Then, when the princess and her new husband, ahem, *wife*, were alone, to put a particular knife in the particular place."

Aelindra's face went white.

Kerys felt it before she saw it. A flinch, deep in her own chest, like cold water on a burn. The vowvein, she realised. Aelindra's fear was *her* fear now. Interesting. Unwelcome.

"Whose knife?" Aelindra asked.

Fenn flipped the coin to her.

She caught it. Turned it over. It was a heavy gold crown, Dawn-struck, with the sunburst on the face and a small mark on the rim.

A quill.

Aelindra went very still.

"That is the Archive's mark," she said. "The Order of Archivists. They strike a quill on the rim of every coin they pay out of the house treasury."

"I thought it might be."

"The Archivists do not hire killers."

"My dear lady, everyone hires killers. I am only sorry that I happened to be the one they found."

Kerys said, quietly, "You took the money."

"I took the *coin*," Fenn did not flinch. "I took five hundred crowns, to be exact. I accepted the contract. I am a fae. A bargain is a bargain."

"Fenn."

"The terms were that I would make the attempt. They did not say I would *succeed*." His grin widened. "I have always held that one should read the fine print."

Kerys looked at him for a long moment. Then she began to laugh. She could not help it. It came up from somewhere she had not known was still alive, and she sat down heavily on the edge of the bed with her hand over her mouth.

Aelindra said, in a faint voice, "Is he always like this?"

"He is *worse*," said Kerys. "He is in a good mood."

"I have excellent reasons to be in a good mood," Fenn said, with enormous satisfaction. "I have been paid by the Dawn Court to kill a princess, and I am about to be paid by the Night Court to *not*. I shall be rich enough to retire to a barge."

"You are not getting paid by me."

"Oh, but I am. You will see." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I have information, General. Real information. The kind that cannot be bought for gold."

"What kind?"

"The man who hired me. I followed him. He was careless, for an Archivist. He did not know I could cross water in a raindrop. He went back

to Aurel and he met someone in the lower archives. A woman who was not an Archivist. A woman who wore white and gold and walked like the sun owed her money.”

Aelindra’s hands went white on the knife.

“No,” she said. “No.”

“I am afraid so, Highness.”

“My mother would not.”

Kerys watched her, and felt, through the thread between them, a flood of pure, desperate denial. Underneath it, thin as a wire, something else. Not surprise.

Recognition.

She knew, Kerys thought. *Some part of her knew.*

Fenn said gently, “I did not say it was your mother who ordered it. I only said she was there. She may have been refusing. She may have been listening. I am a fae. I give you the facts. I do not give you the meaning.”

“She would not.”

“I hope not.”

“She would not,” Aelindra said again, and Kerys heard the shake in it, and moved without thinking, crossing the tent in two steps and putting her hand over the princess’s white-knuckled one.

“Let go of the knife,” she said, low.

Aelindra looked down. She seemed surprised to find it there. She set it on the table.

“Thank you,” she said, in a small voice.

“You do not have to say anything,” Kerys said. “Not yet. Not until you are ready.”

“I am ready.” Aelindra lifted her chin. Her eyes were wet, and she was trying very hard to be a princess. “There is something I should have told you. Last night, after the vow. I had a dream. Or a memory. It was not mine.”

Kerys went cold.

“It was of Silverfen,” Aelindra said. “A woman on a hill, with a torch. Someone in her ear. A voice I knew.”

“Aelindra.”

“Orsolo Veil. The High Archivist.” She said the name like a stone dropped into a well. “He told you to burn the town. Did he not?”

The silence in the tent was terrible.

Fenn Thistlewick, who had never in his life been known to hold his tongue, had stopped talking.

Kerys took her hand off the princess's.

She walked to the brazier, which was cold, and stood looking at the ashes.

"I said I would tell you on the second night," she said.

"You did."

"I meant it."

"I know." Aelindra's voice was steady now, steadier than it had any right to be. "I am not asking you to tell me now. I am only telling you that I know. I did not want you to think you were hiding it. And I wanted you to hear me say that I do not yet know what to think."

Kerys turned.

The princess stood in the grey light with her hair coming down and the cloak slipping off one shoulder. She looked younger than she was, and older too, and entirely unafraid.

Gods, Kerys thought. She is going to be the end of me.

"Thank you," she said, and it was the truest thing she had said in a decade.

They agreed on three things before the horns sounded for dawn that was not a dawn.

One. Fenn would accompany them to Karhold, openly, as the general's hired guide. If anyone asked, he had been engaged to lead the princess's party through the Marches. It was not even a lie.

Two. Aelindra would write to no one in Aurelen. She would send no word to her mother, not even a courtesy. Not until they knew more.

Three. Fenn had a price.

"I don't want gold," he said, when Kerys pressed him. "I have gold. Gold is a bore. I want a favour."

"What favour?"

"I do not know yet." He was grinning again. "That is the beauty of it. A debt, to be named at a time of my choosing. Owed by both of you."

"Absolutely not," said Kerys.

"Done," said Aelindra.

They turned to look at each other.

"A fae debt," Kerys said, "is a binding. You cannot break it. If you refuse to pay, it comes out of you in other ways."

"I know. I have read about it." Aelindra folded her arms. "He is going to help us. I can hear it. He means every word. And I think, General, that we are going to need as many friends as we can find."

"He is not a friend."

"I am a *delightful* acquaintance," said Fenn.

Kerys put her face in her hand.

"I am doomed," she said. "I am doomed, and my captain is going to kill us all."

"She will have to wait her turn," said Aelindra gravely. "I think there is a queue."

Thessaly Drake took one look at Fenn Thistlewick, sitting on a rock at the edge of the camp with a bowl of Bram's porridge in his lap, and said a word in Night tongue that made three soldiers choke.

"Captain," said Kerys.

"General. I know you did not just add that creature to our column."

"I did."

"He sells information to both sides."

"He sells it to *every* side. That is why he is useful." Kerys kept her voice level. "He is coming to Karhold. He is going to tell us everything he knows. If he lies, I will personally put him in the Wound."

"I would really prefer," said Fenn, round a mouthful of porridge, "that you did not."

"Captain."

Thessaly turned her glare on him. He raised his bowl in a cheerful toast.

"This," said Thessaly, to Kerys, in a terrible quiet voice, "is why you should have let me come in with you last night."

"I know."

"You did not even bring a guard."

"I brought the Rite."

"The Rite did not stop a *smuggler* from walking up to your bed."

"No," said Kerys. "But the princess did not stab him, and that tells me a good deal."

Thessaly's glare shifted to Aelindra, who was standing a few paces off, holding her cup of cold cider. The princess met it without a flicker. Kerys saw her shoulders straighten in the dusk-silk cloak, and thought: *She is going to speak. Oh, gods. She is going to speak.*

"Captain Drake," Aelindra said. "I know you have no reason to trust me. But I would be grateful if you would ride beside me today."

"Why?"

“Because you are the person who knows most about what the Marches have cost your people. I would like to hear it. I would like to hear it from someone who is not trying to be polite.”

A long, dangerous pause.

Thessaly looked at Kerys. Kerys, who had no idea what to say, said nothing.

“Fine,” said Thessaly at last, flatly. “But you will not like it.”

“I do not expect to.”

They rode for three days through the Hollow Marches.

Kerys had made this road forty times. She had made it in armour, in rain, in mourning. She had never made it with someone riding beside her who looked at every mile as if it were a page she had been forbidden to read.

The land was dying.

You could see it from the first hour. The grass thinned, then vanished, replaced by a pale, brittle crust like salt. The trees stood bare and silver. Here and there the ground split in long black seams, from which silver threads rose and flickered, whispering against the skin. The Wound was not a single scar. It was a web, a whole country of cracks, and the road crept along its edges.

The air tasted of metal.

The first village they passed was called Harrowmere. Or had been.

It lay in a hollow, a ring of low stone houses around a well. Every house was roofless. Every window was empty. In the centre of the square stood a stone shrine, a little thing, hung with ribbons and dried flowers and small tin lanterns that had long since burned out.

The glass had come first.

Kerys watched Aelindra see it. A broad swathe of the village, melted and fused into black glass, as though a god had pressed a hot iron into the earth. Houses frozen mid-collapse. A cart, wheels and all, turned into a smooth dark sculpture. And in the glass, here and there, small pale shapes.

Aelindra reined in her horse.

“Lightfire,” she said, in a very small voice.

“Yes.”

“The Dawn Court’s weapon. The Sunlance.”

“Yes.”

“I did not think it left bodies.”

"It does not," said Kerys, as gently as she could. "Not as such. These were people who were standing in the road when it fell. The glass takes the shape of whatever it touches."

"How many?"

"Two hundred and eleven. I counted them, the year after. I was ordered to. We buried what we could get out."

Aelindra said nothing.

She slid from her saddle. She walked, slowly, across the square, to the shrine. She stopped in front of the small stone altar, where someone had left a clay dish of withered berries.

And she knelt.

She did not do it for show. Kerys could tell. No one was meant to see. She had not asked the column to stop. She had gone alone, and was kneeling in the dust of a Night village, with her golden head bowed, her hands open on her knees.

She said a few words. Kerys could not hear them. She did not need to. Along the thread of their vow, faint but unmistakable, she felt something pass, something that made her throat ache.

Grief. Real grief. Not for herself.

Behind her, a horse shifted.

Thessaly had come up beside her. She was sitting stiffly, with her jaw clenched and her eyes fixed on the kneeling woman.

"She is not pretending," Thessaly said, in the Night tongue, very low.

"No."

"I wanted her to be."

"I know."

"It would be easier." Thessaly's voice cracked, just slightly. "It would be so much easier if she was pretending."

Kerys did not trust herself to speak.

When Aelindra rose, there were two small streaks in the dust on her cheeks. She wiped them away with the back of her hand, and went to her horse, and mounted without a word.

The column moved on.

An hour later, without looking round, Thessaly said in the common tongue, "Highness. Ride beside me."

Aelindra turned in her saddle, surprised.

"I will tell you about Maren," Thessaly said.

It was the story of a woman Kerys had loved as a sister, and watched die.