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Ariel, The Broken

James Robert Loomis
Northern Michigan University

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ARIEL, THE BROKEN

By

James Robert Loomis

THESIS

Submitted to
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This thesis by James Robert Loomis is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

Committee Chair: Jennifer Howard Date

First Reader: Dr. Lesley Larkin Date

Department Head: Dr. Ray Ventre Date

Asst Provost of Graduate Education and Research: Date
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	(Last)	(First)	(Middle)
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DATE OF BIRTH:	November	18	1979
	(Month)	(Day)	(Year)

ABSTRACT

ARIEL, THE BROKEN

By

James Robert Loomis

This thesis is a portion of the first book in a planned series of novels collectively called The Slayer Wars. Since I was a child, I have been fascinated by the fantasy genre, and, now that I am older, by the subtle ways fantasy attempts to address human nature, good and evil, racism, as well as the ability of humans to be both great and terrible.

But what is evil? Whose definition do we use to describe the difference? Are we all capable of being terrible as well as great? The fact that humans can, on one hand, say we strive for peace and understanding and then subsequently wage war and kill thousands is problematic. It creates a great contradiction, where a slew of justifications arise, most notably that to keep peace and freedom we must go to war. But who gets to define freedom, and who gets to have freedom? If killing is considered evil, when, if at all, does it become right?

In addition, if we cannot even conclusively answer these questions, how can we begin to answer the question of who we are as individuals? In a world that is always changing, and in our own daily lives where the possibility that something could happen that changes us for the remainder of our lives, can we ever be certain?

It is toward this end that Ariel, The Broken works. Each character struggles with the issue of identity, as well as functioning to increasingly blur the lines of perception and the notion of good and evil. Differing perspectives are explored, causing friends and enemies to find unexpected similarities, often to their own horror, as they become less and less certain of who they are and what truly motivates them.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Tamara, for her support, my mother, Connie, for believing in me, and to my daughters, Isabelle and Laci-Ann, for reminding me why writers write.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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Introduction

When I was eleven years old, I read my first novel. In a tiny corner bookstore in Cadillac, Michigan, I looked over the covers of several different medieval fantasy books, finally settling for R.A. Salvatore's *Streams of Silver*. On the cover was a painting of a dwarf standing ready to do battle, his shield raised before him and his axe held high. In the background stood an elf with dark skin and a large human wearing a wolf as a sash. I had judged a book by its cover, but, fortunately for me, I chose wisely.

I read the book in less than a week, no small accomplishment for a preteen whose afternoons were filled with baseball, football, and dreams of making it big and winning Super Bowls. That one novel, which was the second book in a series, changed me more than any other single event in my life. The words of Salvatore were like a song to me, and the trials of his characters kept me enthralled, showing me depths of my imagination that lay dormant, buried under the limitations of sports and army figures.

I didn't need to know what happened in the first book. I felt like I had known those characters intimately. In them I found a connection, a living tie to knights and dragons, wizards and swords. At the time, I didn't realize how much *Streams of Silver* had impacted me, but now,

years later, I still remember what the pages smelled like. Scent aside, I think about the novel still, and I am still fascinated by the depth of the characters, and how each of them grew not only in that book, but in all of those prior, and after it.

The fantasy genre, as a whole, has influenced my entire life, and has brought me around to the desire to explore certain aspects of humanity I have wondered about for years. Thus *Ariel, the Broken* was born.

When beginning this version of the novel, I realized that the theme of good versus evil had to be present. After all, that theme is the bread and butter of the fantasy genre. Without evil, you can't have the hero to conquer it. But good versus evil wasn't really what I wanted to aim for. I wanted to muddle it, to stir the pot a little, so to speak. I wanted characters who could be heroic and villainous, and who, later in the novel and its sequels, could commit themselves to an action, and, through the observations of other characters, make it difficult for the reader to establish whether that action was good or evil.

The largest question that drove me: Who defines good and evil? Is the definition cultural, personal, or divine? Is it all or none of these? The idea that something—an action, a person – can be entirely evil is too easy, and the same can be said for an action or character that is pure. Almost every choice has some sort of ramification attached to it. Even a seemingly selfless act, such as buying flowers for a sweetheart, has a selfish motive. Why do we do it? We do it because it makes them feel good, which makes *us* feel good. There is no evading ulterior motives.

I also wanted to explore the question of identity. The largest question here was: Can we ever really know who we are? Using myself as an example, I looked back on my life. I had a relatively normal childhood growing up, but then became a troubled teen. After almost two years in a rehabilitation facility, I grew to become an irresponsible young adult who dropped out of

college twice and couldn't hold a job. In my late twenties, I am now finishing up a Master's Degree. After all of that, I have no idea how I got to where I am, and I have no idea where I will go. But, at many of those times, I was *certain* I knew who I was. I am nowhere close to the me I imagined I knew.

When I was in my late teens and early twenties, I thought I had the world figured out. I wondered why a young person didn't run the country, since we were the driving force of the nation. Everything was so simple, so black and white then. There was an easy answer to everything, so long as I wasn't made to suffer for it. I had more of a concept of the world as a whole than a small child, but I still couldn't see far beyond my own circle. Then I grew older and laughed at myself.

So, unless I am some freak of nature, I was left to assume that no one really knows who they are. Over the last seven years since the original draft of the novel, Ariel, my novel's protagonist, has changed almost as much as I have. In the end, it became the core of her character that she has no idea who she is. On one hand, she wants to believe she has a grasp on her life, but through events both normal and rather magical, she begins to realize she has no grasp on her identity.

The final major theme of the novel was born from the search for identity: By trying to be more human, we become less human. To clarify, I must use a more modern example. It seems to me that as time goes on, we adapt every new technology that comes by, integrating it into our lives to the point that we can't imagine ourselves living without it. Take cellular phones for example. It used to be that pagers were the must have thing. Then it was cellular phones. Then cellular with texting, then photography capabilities, then internet. Now it is becoming less frequent to see someone without a cellular phone than with.

It has become so commonplace to be connected to our own circle of friends that we are becoming less and less able to live as individuals. This causes relationships to suffer, because there really is no such thing as space anymore. We advertise our every thought to the world as though what we are making for dinner is somehow important, profound even, and even develop a feeling of imperviousness because we cannot be seen through a screen. It used to be that a troll was a mythical creature. Now it is just someone who posts infuriating comments just because they can do so anonymously. There is little pride left in saying we are human anymore.

What, then, is human? Can we even define that? As soon as the next technology arrives, say, for example, a smaller device that clips on our shirt and is entirely voice activated, we will integrate this new device so deeply into our lives that it will forge us into a different sort of human. This issue overlaps the identity one as well. How can we know who we are, when we rely so heavily on things that are not human? Sure, we create them, but our personalities are heavily influenced by machines.

Where, then, does the line exist between being human and thinking we are being human? I believe that line exists somewhere in the moments when we are alone, with nothing around, and we force ourselves from any distractions until we forget them altogether. In these moments we may find something primal. We will be alone, left to our own whims. No doubt there will be loneliness, but the farther we are from influence, the better it may be. There, we might remember what it is to be human, without devices, without escapes, and without anything we can force ourselves to identify with.

No doubt we will resist such a freedom, our minds rejecting the idea of being without the normal stimuli. But we must remember, humans have been around for but a scant second in the scope of time, and we survived just fine without the technology we have now. Harder, yes, but I

would wager with a great deal more awareness of what it means to be humans, to exist, to struggle and survive.

In *Ariel, the Broken*, I aim to explore this loss of humanity, and, as a result, the confusion of identity. While there are no cellular phones, or computers, or texting, there is the advancement of technologies, as primitive as they may be, and how they influence the lives of the characters. What drives the characters to change will also distract them more and more from who they may really be. Many of them will become byproducts of their society, or of events, but will never feel any sense of wholeness as they slowly realize that what they based all of their beliefs on is a fabrication.

This thesis is comprised of the first four chapters of the novel, and it introduces all of the core characters in an alternating point-of-view format. Additionally, it introduces the main themes of the novel, and begins to establish each character's motivations, goals, and personalities.

Throughout the novel, beyond the scope of this thesis, each character, Ariel in particular, will begin to lose touch with who they are as individuals, and will begin to question their beliefs. The world will begin to change, and new beings will begin to show up, causing the concept of humanity to be brought into question. After all, if there is a being, or beings, with greater potential than humans, where does that leave them?

In later novels, especially, the idea that we have forgotten humanity will take precedence. In reality these 'beings' are closer to being human than anyone else. Instead of surviving and losing themselves in any distraction or ambition, they simply live. Ariel, herself, will begin to transform, bringing her closer to this idea of humanity, which will cause others to drive her

away, seeing her as different. Ariel will serve as a catalyst for much of the novels, since she is the hinge on which I built the story.

Eventually, the continent of Corinth, the land the stories are set in, will be invaded. There will be a great deal of bloodshed, as there are in all wars, but it won't be without a deep exploration into why both sides are both right and wrong. It's easy to assume the defenders are entirely in the right, and the aggressors are in the wrong, unless, of course, it is your own nation doing the attacking. Then it's somehow all right, since it is defending your rights.

My goal with these novels, in the end, is not just to stir the pot a bit. It's to show that there are not two sides to every story. There are many more, and on each side someone benefits, and someone is hurt.

Chapter One: 1690 MR

Wounded

Ariel plodded through the inundated streets of Ambrigal, each step weighted more by the mud of the thawing roads and the insults hurled toward her. She only had to endure for a bit longer. The guards would come eventually. They always did.

“Beast!” a young man yelled.

Ariel cringed at the word, one of the many nicknames the other children of Ambrigal had given her. For years she and her mother had lived less than a mile outside of the town, and she had struggled to find even a measure of acceptance from her peers. Now, nearing her seventeenth spring, she had all but abandoned any hope of even being tolerated.

It wasn't that she was so different than any of them, she knew that. Like any of the other young adults, she liked to run through the rolling hills of the nation of Evenshire in the spring, feeling the cool breezes blowing off of The Great Sea to the west, or Lugh Nadhrassah as it was named by the elves in a forgotten time. She loved to gossip about the older, more settled citizens, and to dream about the day she could finally move away from the dead-end corner of the nation and delve deeper into the heartland, perhaps even to Evenshire city itself.

And she liked to talk about boys. Especially Tomis Drekette, the newest – and cutest – resident of the town. But there was only so much she could tell her mother, at least before parental wisdom began spilling forth, drowning out all hopes and dreams with sensible knowledge and practical applications to real-life scenarios.

“You should just talk to him,” her mother would say. “Tell him how you feel.” And, sometimes, “You're a sweet girl, boys would be foolish not to like you. They'll see that.”

A glob of mud smacked against the back of her head, and she wondered how sweet she was with her shoulder-length raven hair caked with dirt. She didn't even dignify the thrower of the mud – probably a boy – with a response, and let the wet mass roll down her back, leaving a filthy trail down her light-brown overcoat.

Instead, she continued sloughing her way through the muddy main road of the town where she knew Dream – her family's Percheron– waited, tied to a feeding trough outside of Metrin's Saddler, the local tack and bridle merchant. Metrin Ahaer was one of the few people in town Ariel could talk to while looking them in the eye. But he couldn't save her from the mob trailing behind, hurling curses and worse toward her. She had told herself she could get used to the treatment, that the insults were just words, and the mud was just dirt.

As she neared her destination, she could see Dream tethered to the post, and her heart tore even more. The black mare tugged against the reins, trying to pull them loose as a young man approached her. Ariel quickened her pace, sensing Dream's trepidation. She could feel the mare's pulse quicken, and the whinny she issued – though muted by the seventy paces between Ariel and the horse – cut into her as profoundly as a dagger. The man who approached the mare was tall, well-muscled, and, Ariel knew, as foul as they came. She could sense Dream's understanding of who it was that reached his hand out toward her, gently stroking her face.

Ariel recognized him even from that distance. Drake Benningwell, the son of one of the most influential and powerful people in Ambrical. The cause of the host following her. No established citizen ever crossed Theadore, his father, and no teenager crossed his son. Both could ruin a family with little more than a thought. Ariel thought little of both of them. She and her mother had carved out their own existence beyond the influence of the Benningwells. Despite

that, on her visits to the town, she could do little to avoid Drake's influence. Each time, he made it increasingly miserable for her.

He stood before Dream, just beyond the reach of her front hooves as the mare kicked out before her. He uttered words Ariel couldn't hear, but she knew Dream could sense the hatred beneath them. He reached and bopped the beast on the nose, laughing as the horse bared her teeth and snapped at his hand.

Ariel ignored another slap of mud – this one against the small of her back – and began to run as best she could on the slick streets. It was as if she were in a nightmare. Every step she took seemed sluggish and dull. She watched as Drake tapped the mare again, the horse's ensuing whinny long and drawn out. The beast bucked – or tried to – her momentum broke by the tightening of the reins that held her fast to the wooden post. Drake easily dodged Dream's feeble kick.

Ariel could feel the mare's anger, knew Dream recognized Drake as a threat, and that the horse understood him to be the cause of much of her pain.

“Get away from her!” Ariel shrieked as she stumbled toward him, her leg sliding from beneath her, causing her to fall to one knee. Drake didn't turn toward her or acknowledge he had heard her plea. Another glob of mud flew past her head, missing by inches, though she hardly noticed. Her eyes were set on the young man before her. Though he was much larger than she was – his six-foot frame nearly a half a foot taller than hers, and his bulk a third more than her one-hundred- forty pound mass – she felt unafraid.

Instead, her anger mounting, she found her footing. Slamming her feet into the mud with each step, she created craters which bought her purchase on the slippery terrain. She crossed the distance quicker than her pursuers and caught her target off guard. As Drake, his attention fully

upon the tormented horse, reached forward to smack the beast upon the nose once more, he found Ariel between himself and his target. His hand whapped Ariel across the face. She shoved her arms forward, driving them into Drake's chest and knocking him from his feet.

The mob behind her stopped and gasped as Drake lost his balance and fell to the muddy street. An eerie silence gathered over all who witnessed the action. It was unexpected and glorious. Many in the town – even those who tormented the young woman – felt a surge of hope and pride. The young woman before them had done something none of them would dare. Ariel had struck back.

She might have cared that she had crossed a line, had she the capacity for cogent thought at that moment. She had just humiliated the only son of the most powerful merchant in the region, but she felt distant, as surprised by her actions as those around her. The man before her could – and likely would – make her life far worse. Yet, at that moment, she did not care.

It was as though she were separated from her body, but drawn farther inward rather than projected out. She could see Drake before her, could feel the blood coursing through her clenched fists, though the sensations seemed somehow dulled. She heard faint whispers, but no matter how hard she tried to listen, she could not understand them. And, most curious, at the edges of her vision she could see faint red wisps of smoke, which began and ended at her eyelids.

Drake struggled briefly in the mud, sputtering half-formed curses while he stood, eyeing her the entire time. He stepped before her, barely a foot away, and glowered, his arms spread as he puffed his chest in a show of dominance. Ariel felt another rush of anger.

“You have no idea what you've just done,” Drake spat, wiping his hand down his backside, pulling it away and looking at the glob of mud in his hand. His pants, the most

expensive pair of woolen breeches in the town, were soiled and likely permanently stained. Ariel stared at him.

“I could ruin your life with a word to my father. I could make it so you and your mother watch your precious horses starve.”

Ariel narrowed her eyes. It was bad enough that he made her life miserable. That he would threaten her mother was only another layer. But to insinuate that their horses – her mother’s lifelong dream and her best friends – would suffer tore at her. Indeed, Ariel did not understand how close she felt to the animals until that instant when they were threatened. She cocked her head to the side, her lips curling into a frown, but she said nothing.

“Look at you,” Drake whispered after it was clear she wouldn’t take his bait. “You’re just a rat. A dirty little rat girl. Do you know what little rat girls get to eat? Whatever I say they do. And you get to eat dirt.” As he finished, Drake shoved his muddy hand against her face, grinding the wet, gritty mound against her skin.

She could feel small pebbles grinding against her flesh. The cold mud clogged her nose as she tried to turn her head away, and Drake stepped in to keep her within reach. She tasted the stagnant water, and the ancient staleness of the ground. Drake withdrew his hand and gave a curt laugh as he looked upon his handiwork. Ariel spun about without hesitation and stepped toward him, hardly noticing the sudden blank expression on Drake’s face.

She didn’t mean to react, and in her mind she could hear her own voice pleading against any further action. Her life was already hard enough. But in that moment she learned that she could drown herself out, that reason and action were not the same. She shoved Drake again, this time even harder.

Caught off guard by the woman's unexpected strength, Drake staggered backward, his feet struggling – but failing – to find purchase on the slick road. Down he tumbled again, though no gasps followed his fall. Instead, as she looked around at the gathered crowd, Ariel's gaze was met with shock, surprise, and something between pride and sympathy. No matter who she looked to, however, their gaze was soon averted. No one wanted to look upon the doomed for long.

The brief silence was broken only by the sucking of Drake's body as he lifted it from the mud. Ariel couldn't find the words to form an apology, though they would have been lies anyway. Her anger fled from her as quickly as it had come, and Ariel was filled with fear. Her life had just become a lot more complicated, and her mind reeled at the implications of her actions. She felt the strength leave her legs. Even as she began to sink to her knees, Drake was upon her. His strong hands grabbed onto her coat, and her descent was halted. Drake lifted her from the ground, bringing her to eye level.

The gathered mob began to murmur, unsure of what would happen next. Not far away a cry for the town guard arose from some of the shopkeepers who had come outside to investigate the disturbance. Though they had watched with some amusement for a brief time, the sight of the young woman in his hands – and the look of hatred in his eyes – told them the situation had escalated, and was swiftly spiraling out of control. Though everyone was scared of his family, Drake had crossed the line. Soon, the whole of the Gate Quarter was aware of the situation, and cries rang out for both the guard and mercy.

One brave citizen made his way toward Drake. The young man cast a brief glance toward him before returning his glare to Ariel.

“Stop him,” Drake said. With only the slightest hesitation, three of the gathered youths moved to intercept the man.

“Cursed hooligans,” the man said, trying to shove his way through. “A bunion and more for each of ye! Get yer small heads out of your hinds. Can’t you see what he is doing is wrong?”

“She started it,” one of the boys said.

“Poxes in words,” the man retorted. “Ye all have seen the way he – and you! – treat that young lass. Sure’n it’s her right to fight back.”

“You must be new to this town,” said one of the boys, a young man with sandy brown hair. Though he tried to be brave, he could not meet the townsman’s gaze.

“Ah, young Tomis Drekette, sure’n I’ve been here a spot longer than ye. Long enough to know she’s not deserving anything you pith-heads give her.”

“Shut him up,” Drake spat.

One of the youths, a young man nearly the size of Drake, stepped in front of Finyan. Before he could utter a word of protest, a meaty young fist plowed into his gut, driving the wind from him. He crumpled to his knees, holding his stomach and wheezing staggered curses as he fought to regain his breath.

“You’re a monster,” Ariel hissed, struggling against Drake’s firm hold.

“I know,” he replied, a grin growing across his face. He released a hand from her coat, holding Ariel aloft with the other. He balled his hand into a fist and pulled it back. “Now, Beast, you will feel exactly how much of a monster I can be.”

The throng gasped, some even calling out Drake’s name in disbelief. Ariel’s eyes widened, and the cries for the guard became more desperate. Ambrical tensed for the thunderous impact of Drake’s fist, and for a brief second the air grew still.

“Drake Benningwell!” A man’s voice, bold and sure, hammered through the silence like a mace against a plate. “Put her down!”

Drake looked over his shoulder and rolled his eyes. A man in dressed in fine array plodded through the mud from the west, his hind-skin boots splashing dirty water up onto his breeches, and the hem of his long, diamond-patterned cloak drug through the dirt behind him – something the man never would have allowed on a day when his outrage had not driven him to come outdoors dressed in such a fashion. Even his white shirt, soft and full of frills was not safe from his approach, and it sported splatters from the thawing roads.

Drake looked back to Ariel and pulled his hand back once more, causing the woman to flinch.

“Now!” the man screamed.

“Yes, father,” Drake said flatly. “As you wish.” He pulled Ariel closer, putting his lips next to her ear. Ariel tried to turn her head away, but he held her tighter to prevent her from escaping him. “Don’t come back,” he whispered. Then he shoved her with all of his considerable might, sending her through the air to collide heavily with Dream. The sturdy draft horse proved the more unyielding of the two and Ariel struck her as though she had hit a wall. She crumpled to the ground, wrapping her arms about her side.

The mare whinnied and screamed, bucking and tugging at her reigns as she made a lunge at Drake, setting one hoof on each side of Ariel as she straddled her rolling form.

“Drake Benningwell,” Theadore seethed. “You are to go home this instant and await my return.”

Drake issued a low chuckle and walked past his father, never meeting the man’s steel gaze. Theadore watched him for a second, making sure his unruly son was following his order, then he turned back to the gathered throng.

“There is nothing more to see here,” he said. The adolescents, knowing Theadore to be the true source of Drake’s power, didn’t need a second warning. Almost as one, they turned and scattered. Indeed, many of the shopkeepers also promptly returned to their business almost as if nothing unusual had happened.

Theadore approached Ariel, who had risen to her knees, mud caked and rolling from her soft face and stained clothes.

“Are you all right, Mrs. Feithrin?” he asked, extending a hand in offering. Ariel glared up at him, but the man, towering above her and about the same size as his son, gave her a helpless smile, stepping in closer and shaking his hand as though it would be a boon to accept it. Cautiously, she raised a grubby hand, fully expecting some wicked turn from the father of her enemy. He did not flinch, even as she clasped his wrist and soiled his white silk shirt. Ariel trusted him then, and he lifted her from the ground.

“Are you all right?” he asked again as she stood, and the sincerity in his tone touched her. A thousand responses flooded Ariel’s mind. She wanted most to lash out at the man, to take her hurt and rage out on him, the man who had spawned such a monster. She wanted to tell him that no, in fact, she was not all right, that her life became a living hell each time she set foot in the town. That her steps were shadowed from the moment she arrived until she left, and her ears rung with insults and lies for days after she returned home, finally fading to a murmur until she returned and they were struck up again like a mallet against a humming bell.

She wanted to tell him.

“I’m fine,” she replied, her voice cracking.

“I’m fine too, thanks be to ye fer askin’,” Finyan said, stepping closer to Theadore. “Might’n be wanting to talk to yer son ‘bout that fist of his. Sure’n it’d be put to better use against brigands. Or his own face.”

Theadore cast a scowl toward the man, his eyes never leaving Ariel’s.

“Mr. Dutral, there is nothing more to see here,” Theadore said.

Finyan walked away. Still, his departure was followed by several curses, most of them muttered not quite under his breath. Theadore’s attention never wavered from Ariel even as the first members of the town guard finally arrived, his eyes scrutinizing every feature of her face as though he were searching for something, or someone. Ariel shifted uncomfortably.

“Right then,” one of the guards said, the rusty links of his aged chain armor grating together as he approached. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“There is no trouble,” Ariel responded, even as Theadore opened his mouth to speak. She didn’t not know why she said it, but there was something in Theadore’s eyes that compelled her to, something she couldn’t even begin to place. His eyes widened at her reply. The guard eyed her skeptically, for she was covered in mud and the mare behind her continued to buck slightly in agitation, as though even she did not approve of her claim.

“Young miss,” said the guard, the obvious leader of the ragtag group. “Forgive me if I don’t believe you, but it would appear rather the contrary.”

“You heard the young woman,” Theadore said, and the gathered militia bristled at the command. Still, they would not cross so powerful a man.

“Well, if you say so.”

After a few moments waiting for them to leave, Theadore turned around.

“Haven’t you something better to do?” he asked. The five men turned to each other and murmured, shrugging and talking amongst themselves. Finally, they turned and walked away, their job, as far as they were concerned, completed.

“Fools,” Theadore muttered, turning back to Ariel. The woman, much to his surprise, was mounted on Dream, having untied her in the few moments he had his eyes off of her. Still, though, her eyes bored into him as though they searched his soul. For the first time in many years, Theadore Benningwell shifted uneasily.

“We will meet again soon, young Ariel,” he said as she turned Dream about. Ariel responded with a curt nod and urged Dream ahead, her head turned so she could still see him. The mare whinnied softly, tossing her head to the side as though she, too, still watched Theadore.

She urged Dream through the main gate, her eyes still trained on Theadore’s as he stood motionless. With a pat on Dream’s neck, she gave a slight clicking noise and the mare increased her pace, putting distance between Ariel and Ambrigal.

Chapter Two: In the Darkness

Tess'eren crept through the shadows cast by the moonlight cutting through the barren branches of the oaks and elms around him. He timed his footfalls so he could keep his pace as swift as possible while limiting the noise he made when his shin-high boots pressed into the crisp late-winter snow. Each step, he knew, could cascade through the forest and alert his quarry to his presence.

But total silence was impossible. His thick deer-skin coat could catch on branch, or his body could brush against a tree trunk. In those cases where his step proved too heavy and his weighted stride pressed too deeply, or when he stepped on a fallen branch in the dim light, he had to call on his years of training. He had to gauge the noise, with a window of only a few seconds to decide what creature of the forest could have produced that exact level of racket.

Once he decided, he could reach for any number of small, wooden tubes tucked into the various pockets of his tunic. One quick blow through the ancient whistles would produce a call, precisely mimicking the wail or cry of a wild creature. Though the magics that had created the arcane whistles were lost to time, their usefulness lived on in the hands of one of the *Velum Shier*, the Order of the Slayers.

When Tess'Eren stepped on a large branch hiding under the snow, a profound *snap* carried through the still night. Immediately he reached into a pocket set into the left arm of his shirt, drawing forth the ancient whistle. He blew twice into the mouthpiece, his breaths transformed into the grunting of a bull deer anticipating the coming mating season. Confident the noise would set his quarry somewhat at ease, he continued on, following the footsteps in the snow before him.

But he would have to be careful now. The forest did not make many sounds at night. But it did make some, he thought as he put the call back into its pocket, listening intently and noting that no other noise came from the forest. Something unnatural to the woods had come this way. His prey was near. Resisting the urge to quicken his pace and close the gap with his mark, Tess'Eren cupped his hands to his mouth and blew into them, warming them as best he could. It would do no good to meet his opponent with frigid hands, unable to properly grip his sword. Nor would it help hasten his chase, alerting his adversary to his approach, making him the hunted rather than the hunter. From this point forth he would have to be quiet, and, perhaps most of all, prepared for an ambush.

Moving forward, he strained his eyes in the poor light and tried to understand each new track. Here his quarry had paused to catch her breath. There she had skipped off of a tree, grabbing a low-hanging branch and swinging out to place her tracks as far away as possible to hinder his pursuit. The tactic may have worked well against a local posse – for her tracks were well spaced indeed – but, even in the limited light, his trained eyes put him back on her trail in seconds.

He continued on, following the footsteps until they came to a large oak, its trunk splitting several feet from the ground into two separate growths, each towering high above him. The tracks stopped there. He placed a hand on the hilt of his sword. It was the perfect place for an ambush. He looked high above him into branches that loomed in all directions, reaching far back the way he had come in an umbrella of cover. The moonlight streamed down, but was not enough to allow him to see more than ten feet into the tree with any certainty what he saw was a being or a shadow. And worse, his quarry could move about on the hard bark with far less noise than he could on the night-hardened snow.

He began to backtrack, slowly drawing his sword. The purple glow that emanated from the blade would give him away. If he was wrong about his quarry's position and she were not in the tree she would see the light and bolt and be a mile or more from his position before he realized it. But he was certain he was not wrong. He could *feel* her there. His sword, the enchanted *Ichiel* of the *Velum Shier*, told him she was. He could feel her pulse, her fear. She knew she was being hunted. Despite that knowledge, Tess'Eren still did not know where she was. And, with his sword drawn, that put him at a distinct disadvantage.

A loud crunch behind him alerted him to her presence and he spun about, bringing his *Ichiel* defensively before him. The sword illuminated the space before him and his shoulders sagged even as another thud echoed behind him. He lowered his sword. Before him in the snow lay a backpack. Behind him, prodding into his spine, was the point of a sword.

He raised his arms in defeat, his breath clouding before him and blowing away the flakes of snow that fell from the branches above, the remnants of his adversary's leap.

"Turn around," the woman said. Her voice was melodic, soothing, yet her tone was sharp and tormenting. "I would like to look my kill in the eyes, so I can watch him die."

"Isn't that a little harsh?" he asked, turning to face her. His prey stood before him, a woman who came up to his shoulders, her lithe body covered in black, nearly form-fitting clothes. Knee-high boots cut delicately into the snow. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a tight bun behind her head, revealing her delicately upturned and slightly pointed ears. In her hand, now point down, a sword not unlike his own, possessed of the same purple glow. Hers was smaller, lighter, built for speed and finesse. While his by no means lacked grace, by the time he raised the weapon he would likely be skewered. The woman looked every bit inferior to him, by all accounts of traditional warrior thought. He was bigger, stronger, and against most other

opponents he may have tried a bull rush, or a quick retreat. But he knew his prey, had studied her down to the most intimate details. If he ran, he would die before he had taken five steps. This woman was fast, graceful, and, well trained. No *Velum Shier* ever went hunting without knowing his prey. He was outmatched in nearly every way, but he knew her weakness. A smile cracked his face.

“Any last words?” she asked, lifting her sword.

“Black really isn’t your color,” he said, then burst out laughing as the woman rolled her eyes.

“I mean it, Syl. You look *terrible*.”

“*Cursheac Hanali*, Tess’Eren,” she spat. “You can take the fun from a child!”

“Don’t start cursing at me in Elvish. You know I don’t know those words.”

“Because I won’t teach them to you,” she said. “And for good reason!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“*Pushain*.”

“Oh, I know that one,” he said. “And I would never do that with an animal.”

“What?” Sylindia bellowed, her voice carrying far off into the night. She tried not to, but she started laughing. “Ugh. Sometimes I don’t know whether to kiss you or kill you.”

“Then kill me with a kiss,” Tess’Eren whispered, leaning toward her.

“You’re such a *Dimael*,” she said, before she gave him a swift kiss.

* * * * *

With a gentle hand, Yevrian turned the page of a large, dusty tome labeled *The Histories and Regional Changes of Corinth Following the Slayer Wars*, his hand tapping the oaken tabletop as he read. Known even to himself only as Yevrian, he was an unremarkable man, born of a peasant family in a distant rural area of the kingdom of Delermar, so far removed from society they had little use for surnames. His only distinguishing feature was his eyes. Solid, pupilless black eyes that seemed to reflect no light, often kept hidden by his shaggy brown hair. Seated across from him was the most powerful man in Delermar, the king Dervon Tesh I.

Yevrian chanced a glance toward his liege, a well-muscled monster of a man who had taken him on as an advisor for his role in aiding Dervon in overthrowing the previous king. The king ran a hand through his, gently spiked black hair as he, too, perused an ancient text. The frustration crossing Dervon's face told Yevrian much, and he smiled as his expression grew more dour with each passing moment.

Tap tap tap. Yevrian resumed his knocking, a constant, dull thrumming of knuckles on wood. Dervon closed his eyes and growled softly. He glanced up, and Yevrian held his gaze for a moment, brushing his hair aside so Dervon could get a clear view of his eyes, then returned to the book before him. It was a childish game, but one he took great pleasure in. Before he looked away he'd seen Dervon shudder. No one liked his eyes. Not even the battle-hardened king who had been covered in blood and death in the coup that gave him his throne not five years before.

Very few people could push the king and survive, and it was with great joy Yevrian tested him. Quick with wit, word and blade, he had served the Western Kingdom well over the past few years, and Dervon held him in high regard, which was the only reason Dervon had followed the man to the Eastern kingdom of Corinth. But even a king must have a limit. Now

they sat in a dingy basement of a keep Yevrian had secured, and he was anxious to see if the time away from his kingly duties would make Devron even more tolerant.

Tap tap tap.

Devron shifted in his seat.

Tap tap tap.

He slammed his hand down against the table.

“Tell me again about your eyes,” Devron said, his voice beginning in a shout and slowly quieting as he regained his composure.

“Happenstance, really,” Yevrian said. “A side effect of a tremendous fever. But I fail to see, my king, what that has to do with our task here.”

“If you wish to continue searching for the relic you speak of, I would recommend you stop banging the table. I would love to add your eyes to my collection of jewels, and I don’t expect them, despite their oddity, to be much harder to pluck from your head than any stones I have taken from a fallen king’s crown.”

Yevrian gasped, a hurt look on his face. Then he gave a quiet laugh, content he had brought the king so close to violence with so little effort. Still, he was pushing the volatile man too far. Devron was not known for his patience, or his level-headedness. The last thing Yevrian wanted was for one of the aged tomes before them to become airborne. It had taken him years to gather the few books stacked on the table, and they had come at great cost. But he was willing to pay anything in his search.

Long after Devron had calmed and returned to his reading, Yevrian found himself thinking back on the few short, productive years he had spent with the man. It had taken

surprisingly little convincing to get the king to agree to, and help fund, their current search. All Yevrian had made was the promise of conquest, the complete domination of Corinth, and the man's eyes had glazed over with bloodlust. He hadn't even asked what, exactly, Yevrian was searching for, and the man was grateful for that. Not that Dervon would have believed him anyway. Yevrian's simple explanation that it was an ancient weapon that would greatly aid them in the conquest had placated the king.

Such was the glory of warlords. Anything beyond planning a conquest and crushing a people was either too complicated or too boring. Yevrian knew better than to place Dervon in the former category. The man had single-handedly planned the violent overthrow of Alextar, the former king of Delermar. The charismatic man had swayed thousands of men, and even a good number of Alextar's own soldiers to his cause. Dervon had first attempted to persuade Alextar to hand over the crown, a tactic Yevrian still thought a bit droll. But, following the bloodshed, the tactic had served Dervon well, and the people had taken to him quicker than they likely would have had he simply sacked the city without warning. Though Dervon was a warlord through and through, he had somehow transcended the typical barbarism associated with his ilk.

Still, Yevrian understood the need for caution and, if need be, lying. If Dervon knew the "weapon" they searched for was really the location of entities thought of by most to be myth, he likely would not continue to be receptive to Yevrian's plans, which all hinged on keeping the king interested long enough to locate the legendary *Eltheru*, the so-called "Angry Ones," and then release them from whatever bound them.

It was simple on paper, but locating beings which had faded away into legend after the Slayer Wars over four hundred years before was a surmounting task. Yevrian knew the *Eltheru* had once existed, but were they ageless? The information surrounding the physiology of the

beings was scant at best, and Yevrian himself was too young still to say with any certainty they were. As far as he knew, he was unique to the world, and only knew anything of his own existence through the constant humming of the word *Eltheru* in the back of his mind. A word coated with pride, hatred, and exile.

The droning of the whisper had nearly driven him mad, drumming itself through his thoughts ever since he was a teenager. He did not know then what it meant, only that he could not control it, until a chance find in Vanderhol, the most ancient library still standing in Delermar, led him to some understanding of his nature. A yellowed scroll, barely intact through the ravages of time, told him of the Angry Ones, and their fate. Human in appearance, but something more. Something wholly more, yet somehow less. His was a liminal existence, and one which took him years to grow accustomed to. But it was an existence he still knew precious little about.

“Nothing,” Dervon growled, slamming the book closed.

“Do be careful with that tome, my king,” Yevrian said. “That book you so savagely closed is worth more than an entire town in your great kingdom.

“Two towns,” Dervon countered, and Yevrian nodded. It was, indeed, the king’s money that had purchased the tome. It had cost a great deal simply to locate that particular book in the first place, and its owner had not wanted to part with it. Thankfully, Dervon had felt particularly diplomatic that day and no blood had been shed, though the price had caused Dervon to be quite angry with his cohort.

“Yes, my king. And a fee which you have regained through conquest and will make profit on soon enough when we push into Corinth.”

“If we push into Corinth,” the king corrected. “We have found scant, if any, evidence of this weapon you speak of. And this particular tome – the most costly in your little collection – is filled with fables.”

“Were there details of battle?” Yevrian asked. The look that crossed the king’s face spoke volumes. It had never even occurred to the man that important information about Corinthal battle tactics might be gleaned from the pages.

“YThere is more to winning a war than a single weapon, no matter how powerful that weapon may be.”

Dervon raised his eyebrows, and Yevrian knew he walked a thin line.

“Forgive my boldness, my king, but you have allowed your lust for this weapon and your battle-fever to cloud your mind. You have not gained as much as you have – an entire kingdom! – by blindly walking into unknown territory, wholly unprepared. The course you are beginning to walk is the road of folly.”

Dervon’s face screwed up in rage, as though at any second he would strike out at the impetuous man before him. Yevrian sighed and prepared, wondering if his earlier assessment of the king’s intelligence had been as rushed as Dervon’s desire for conquest. He did not want to reveal too much to the King, did not want to unleash the anger that was roiling within him, always trying to escape. Dervon was too powerful an ally. He did not wish to have to destroy him.

“I will walk where I choose to walk,” Devron said, though much of the bluster had been taken from his claim. “You have three weeks to come up with something. If you have not, I will make my decision.”

“What decision?” Yevrian asked, relieved that Dervon had some intelligence left in him after all.

“I will either march upon Corinth with the entirety of the Delermar armies, or I will return to my throne. Either way, you will be left here for the birds and the poor.”

Yevrian smirked inwardly, though he nodded and appeared grave, even fearful.

“I know of one more place to look, and it is not two days march from here. It may prove satisfying to us both.”

“How so?” Dervon asked.

“There is an aged town, mostly abandoned, which houses a large tower. Within that tower lies a most remarkable library. With texts far more rare than those we now possess.”

Dervon stopped him with an upraised hand.

“I will not empty my coffers more so you can add to your already expensive collection.”

“These books,” Yevrian continued, as though the king had never interrupted, “these books are mostly forgotten. The library itself is all but forgotten save by those who have a reason to know. It is said that the town surrounding the tower existed only as a breeding ground for those who have sworn their lives, and their family’s lives to the protection of the tower. But none have been seen to enter or leave the walls in decades.”

“And why are you only now divulging this information to me?”

“Simple efficiency, really. If we had found what we needed to in these texts, then we would not have need to venture to this town.”

“What is its name?”

“Its names are many, depending on who you ask, if you find someone who even knows it is still inhabited. “

“How do you know of this place?” Dervon asked.

“As I said,” Yevrian explained, “I have a reason to know.”

Yevrian knew his response was cryptic. Dervon was becoming increasingly suspicious of his seeming wealth of knowledge. In truth, he did not remember where he had heard of this tower, only that something wanted him to go there. It had once been a fortified city, its sole purpose to protect centuries of history. He could only hope that, in the years since the Slayer Wars, its guardians had grown lax.

“And assuming we find as much there as we have here, how will I be satisfied?”

“Because if anyone is still there, they won’t know we are coming.”

For the first time in weeks, Dervon’s gruff demeanor changed.

The king smiled.

Dervon slid his chair back and stood, walking swiftly toward the door.

“I will send word to my men to prepare for march and battle,” he said as he exited the room. His footsteps ceased abruptly, and he peeked his head back around the doorframe.

“Yevrian?”

“Yes, my king?”

“You now have four weeks.”

“Thank you, my king.”

Dervon’s footsteps echoed down the stone corridor which led to the Delemar Expeditionary Force’s encampment. When the last echo faded, Yevrian growled. It had taken a great deal of willpower to keep his anger in check, to maintain his ally, to keep himself from breaking the prideful king’s fragile neck. He knew he had to release some of his building rage,

lest it consume him from within, forcing his conscious mind away in an uncontrollable tide which he had no choice but to ride to its conclusion.

He let the veil slip away, and on its heels charged his now freed wrath. The book before him, so recently viewed with a shadowed gaze, was bathed in a dull reddish glow. Shaking, he pushed the precious text aside before he drove his fist through the thick oak table.

* * * * *

Tess'Eren leaned in to kiss her again, but Sylindia dropped her sword and backed away, wrapping her arms around her stomach. She knew he thought she was playing, and was likely thinking of a way to continue their fun. But his eyes widened in horror when she cried out. An otherworldly wail the likes of which neither had ever heard before.

“Are you all right?” Tess'Eren asked, taking her slender, suddenly weak hand in his and leading her gently down until she was sitting against the tree she had just leapt from. She had stopped screaming, but within her she could still feel a writhing, foreign mass. She struggled between bursts of excruciating pain and felt with her hands around her abdomen, terrified at the prospect of some unknown thing – a parasite, or worse – digging around within her. But she found nothing. She had heard tell of many strange ailments which affected only Elves, but nothing like what she was experiencing.

It felt like something was trying to force its way into her. She imagined the pain must be like the childbirth experienced by the women of most races, though they were pushing something out. She had no answers, and she couldn't concentrate enough to even attempt to sing, to force the pain outward from her body.

The pain began to ebb, and she only then became aware that Tess'Eren held her cradled against his chest. She was bouncing, and as her senses finally returned in full, she could feel the cold air rushing through her hair and across her skin. The bite of the night chill felt good, and she realized she felt very, very warm. Warmer than she had ever felt, though she felt neither ill nor pained. Her eyes snapped open and she watched for a moment as the trees moved past her eyes, their steady passing halted only when Tess'Eren changed directions to avoid a fallen tree, or a large oak that blocked his determined path.

Only then did she remember how far away they were from any help. Tess'Eren had followed her for hours, for she was no easy quarry, and their training exercise had taken them across miles. They had no horses. She knew Tess'Eren was terrified, could tell by his adrenaline-fueled pace. He was moving faster than she had ever seen him move, even with her added weight. She pressed her head hard against his firm chest as she lifted her free arm and wrapped it around his shoulder, pulling herself closer to him.

"Thank you," she said.

Tess'Eren slowed to a stop, his breath coming swift and ragged.

"Elthera be damned, you scared me to death," he said between gasps.

"Me too."

"What happened back there?"

"I wish I had an answer."

"You wouldn't respond to me. You just kept wincing. And that wail. Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm fine," Sylindia said, though she wasn't sure she believed it. "Put me down, I can walk now."

Tess'Eren complied, though he wouldn't let go of her hand. And she didn't want him to. They walked and talked for an hour, trying to figure out something, anything that it could have been, or what it could mean. Finally, all of their combined knowledge was exhausted.

“When we get back to the Temple, we will go see Tyrildor,” she said, and despite her worries, she couldn't help but smile at Tess'Eren's grimace. Tyrildor was the head of the order of the *Velum Shier*, an elf from the same village as Sylindia, though more than three-hundred years her senior. An elf who lacked the patience and the penchant for the temperaments of humans. While he liked Tess'Eren, and respected him as a member of the order, he made it clear he didn't appreciate Tess'Eren's sense of humor, choice of timing, or his pursuit of Sylindia as a wife.

Still, as the eldest elf outside of *Luasaedach* – the Deep Wood, in the language of men – he was the only one she knew who might have some idea what had happened. He had access to the ancient tomes locked away in the temple, and remained in contact with the distant havens of his people. If there were anyone who might know some obscure scrap of Elvish lore which detailed whatever ailment had beset her, it would be him. Worried it was something which she had not felt the last of, she began to jog. It was a three hour walk back to the temple. She determined they would make it in half that time.

Chapter Three: Outsider

The bridle slipped easily over Dream's muzzle, and Ariel gently tugged on the leather strap, pulling it through the steel buckle before looping it back on itself. With a quick but gentle tug, she tightened the strap, securing it to the mare's raven face. Dream snorted and shook her head, pawing a bit at the straw floor of the stable.

"I know, you don't like it," Ariel said, running a hand across Dream's neck. The mare pressed back against her hand and nuzzled her face against Ariel's cheek. Ariel laughed, pulling her head away and wiping her hand across her wet cheek. "Fair is fair. But you wouldn't have to wear that thing if you could just understand me when I tell you where to go."

Dream snorted again and raised her front hooves a from the floor, letting them thud back to the straw before she side-stepped left then right in her stall. Ariel chuckled at the movement, and warmed under the feeling that washed over her. Dream was trying to tell her something. The warm, calming sensation would come, and her mind would be filled with a flash of sensations. It was the way it had always been. She had the same connection with all of the horses, even the foals and colts. It was as though when they were first born she could look into their eyes and form a connection, a link of communication that was shared, particular, and special. A link she wished she could share with other people.

It had taken her years to become adept at deciphering the strange language, which was full of sensations, colors, smells, and the crisp wind blowing from the west to cut across the rolling hills of Evenshire. But it had taken only a few months to learn to keep quiet about it. When she was a young girl she tried to tell people what their horses wanted, that they were hungry or nervous or scared. She would try to explain the colors of a sunset, or the earthy smell

of honeyed oats, or the strained feeling of an eye widened by panic. She thought everyone could understand. Their laughter and ridicule had taught her otherwise. So she kept it as secret as she could now. What was known was known, but there was no point in reopening the wound.

“I know you understand me like I understand you,” Ariel said, turning around to take the harness down from the wall of the stall. It would be a longer trip to town this time, and a heavier load to bring back. “But it’s not like you’ll turn left if I just tell you to.” There was a shift behind her, and Dream snorted. The horse had moved perpendicular to her, having made a ninety-degree left turn. Ariel cocked an eye and set the collar on the ground. “Right.” Dream circled about until she faced the other way. Ariel laughed and clapped her hands.

“You win,” she said, as she began to untie the harness, feeling rather foolish for thinking that if she smelled honeyed oats and knew Dream was hungry that Dream wouldn’t be able to hear a command and sense what Ariel desired. “You’ve probably been trying to tell me that for years now.” The side door to the stable opened then and Ariel looked over her shoulder. Her mother entered, and Ariel turned back to her task.

“Are you still mad at me?” Jessitha asked, her hands braiding her long brown hair. She finished the braid and tied it off, letting it fall over the ruffled blue cloth of her overshirt. It was one of her “dirties,” as she called them, a worn, stained article she wore to work with the horses, or clean up the fenced running yard connected to the stables.

“No,” Ariel said. “But that doesn’t make me happy about going.”

“Why is it so bad?” Jessitha asked. Ariel growled and rested her forehead against Dream’s neck. Jessitha moved around Dream and stopped a few feet from Ariel. “What’s wrong?”

“Do you ever listen to me?” Ariel asked. “Or is it a habit to ignore everything I tell you?”

Jessitha recoiled. "I think that was a little unnecessary."

"Well, I've told you before. A dozen times. You just don't seem to believe me."

"I do believe you, it's just that --"

"Just that what?" Ariel interrupted. "That three weeks ago I came home covered in mud and manure and you wouldn't even hear about it? That three months before that my head was cut open from a chunk of ice? That a year ago they took the pivots and bolts from the wagon rig so when Dream pulled I was yanked to the ground? Yet you still ask me to go to town. It's getting worse, mother. Do you expect me to enjoy going?"

"Who else is going to go?" Jessitha snapped.

"You could," Ariel said. She had been down this road many times with her mother. But the look on Jessitha's face was somehow different this time.

"I can't," she said, not meeting her daughter's gaze.

"Then hire someone who can. A stablehand, a vagabond, a leper."

"You're being unreasonable."

"Am I? I don't see you covered in mud and bleeding. Coming home reminded once more you're an outsider."

Jessitha wheeled, warning in her narrowed eyes. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Dream snorted and pranced about uneasily. A few of the other horses shifted about uncomfortably as well.

"It's like you enjoy my suffering," Ariel muttered, turning.

Jessitha's hand flew out and her palm connected solidly with Ariel's mouth, causing her to take a step backward. A trickle of blood ran from inside Ariel's mouth where her lip had been cut by her teeth.

"It's nice to know whose side you're on," Ariel said, picking up the harness from the ground and placing it on Dream's neck. The mare accepted the burden, her eyes lowered.

"I'm sorry," Jessitha whispered. "I didn't mean to."

"I know," Ariel said. She walked past her mother and to the front of the stable. "But that doesn't matter much right now."

"I wish I could tell you why."

"I really don't care. Save it for when you are dying."

"You don't mean that."

"Right now I damned well do. Come on, Dream."

The mare brushed against Jessitha as she walked past with heavy steps.

* * * * *

"Ariel will be coming into town today," Theodore said, penning numbers into his ledger. The book was old, the leather covering the wood binding scratched and faded, the corners frayed and torn, revealing the thin oak planks that formed the cover. "You are not to hinder her in any fashion."

His son played with one of his feathered quills, rotating it between his fingers and occasionally tossing it up into the air, watching its unbalanced mass flop unpredictably before catching it. He grunted at his father's order.

“I mean it. I can’t keep cleaning up your messes. It’s starting to become a business nightmare.”

“You own the town,” Drake casually replied. “You are the business.”

Theodore closed his ledger.

“Is that what you think? That I own the town?”

“You are by far the most wealthy.”

“Do you think this all fell in my lap?” Theodore stood up and slammed the heavy ledger on top of his desk, causing Drake to start, quill in midair. In the silence that followed, the soft *tink* of the metal quill tip bouncing from the fieldstone floor penetrated the room like a pike rending armor. Theodore stood, hands gripping his desk as though he meant to squeeze through the dark mahogany. And he truly wished he could. Though he had tried for months to contain his anger toward Drake, he was swiftly running out of patience for the impetuous young man. It took many deep, rushing breaths to calm him, to keep his next words from coming out stronger than the first.

“It took my whole life to build what we now enjoy. My whole life. And you have started to fray and unravel the tenuous strings that hold it all together. This is all supposed to be yours one day, but you haven’t yet the sense to preserve it.”

Drake shifted in his seat and opened his mouth to speak, but Theodore’s upraised hand silenced him. The young man sank back against the plush backrest.

“I suppose it is my failing, however, that has brought us here. Without your mother – and may her soul rest in ever-graceful peace – I have done my best to raise you.”

Theodore walked to the large bar built into the wall of his office. His office, he mused. The place where he had built his trade empire. The room had once been one of three in a small,

ruddy house, with holes in the ceiling that seemed to leak whenever his wife, Odella cried. She cried often in those early years, having been the only daughter of a merchant from Cordomir, to the north. Used to a semblance of comfort, she had been married to him because his dowry had been the largest. Her father never learned the dowry had been his entire savings.

He poured two short glasses nearly full of harsh brandy – Evenshire Gold it was called by those outside the region – and walked back toward his desk. He handed one glass to his son and, without looking at him, walked over to the window, drawing the heavy, crimson drapes back to allow the early spring sun to enter. He basked in the warm glow as though the spear-like rays could somehow tear through him and remove his guilt and pain.

“Your mother would have been proud the day you were born,” he said, taking a long, wincing drink of the region’s hallmark liquor. Sweeter than honey, hotter than fire. That was the selling point of the beverage, one of the first products Theadore had successfully exported.

“Heard it before,” Drake said, and Theadore glared at him. “She died birthing me, and now you hold her death above me like a scythe. Always waiting to strike me down with it.”

“Hold your tongue, boy, until you know what you speak of,” Theadore warned. Drake muttered something under his breath, but he ignored him and began to pace about the room.

Theadore loved Odella, and he did as well as he could, being a merchant in a small, struggling town in the wilderness of Evenshire. Once every month a patrol would come to the town, though mostly for show, a tactic to keep the then King Averdeen’s subjects loyal. It was always a large patrol, full of gleaming knights from Evenshire’s own Blood Riders, the most feared and respected cavalry unit in all of Corinth. The townspeople were always pleased, but he knew it was more of a recreational trip than a protective measure. The soldiers would drink and eat their fill at the taverns, often running up exorbitant tabs that would never be paid. They

would harass the women and, debauch them as well. Then they would leave, always with some rousing speech about the safety of the region.

But there was no safety in those cold times. Brigand bands roamed about the hilly countryside, attacking small settlements in small groups. Quickly in, quickly out. By the time the local militias could be mustered, the raid was over, the bandits escaping into the night with their spoils. When word of the attacks reached Ambrigal, a contingent of soldiers would be sent out, and they would apprehend or slaughter the first group of brigands they came upon and tell the town justice had been served. There would be much rejoicing and relative peace for a few months, maybe even a year, until the attacks would happen again. Not even the slaughter of another family in their sleep could break the faith of the citizens in their King.

Once, his own home had been ransacked. Thankfully, Odella had been visiting her father. When she returned home, however, what little remained of her security had been destroyed. She swore if he did not find steady work – and fast – she would leave. They had no children, could not have them, so there was nothing to tie her to him except comfort.

Then her father had the accident. Theadore still called it that to this day, even though his wife had been dead for eighteen winters. She wondered at first where what little money they possessed had gone, but her questioning soon stopped when she learned she had inherited her father's small fortune. It took a great deal of convincing on Theadore's part to convince her to stay, and many promises of more wealth to come if he could use the inheritance to build an empire. He had come through in ways he'd never imagined. Using her father's already established company, he soon became one of the wealthiest men in the region. Odella never knew that their life savings had paid for her father's assassination.

“Are we done here?” Drake asked, and Theadore, staring at a fading painting of his departed wife, realized he had not spoken for many moments.

“No.”

“Can we get on with this then? I have things I would like to do today.”

Theadore took another deep breath. He wished he could pummel sense into his son. The young man was brutish, short-sighted, and volatile. But he was not without his uses. He kept fear in the minds of the people of Ambrigal, and through that fear Theadore held a measure of respect, and a lot of power. Drake’s continuing antics, though, were beginning to make the people of Ambrigal question his integrity. And worse yet, his son’s actions were becoming known as far east as Evenshire, where his clients were beginning to whisper about his strong-arm tactics. He wouldn’t have cared if Drake’s name was the only one being whispered, but his son was dragging him down as well. The Benningwell name was at stake, and Theadore knew how easily power could disappear.

“I have blood on my hands, just as you have on yours,” Theadore said finally, turning to his son. He refilled Drake’s empty glass at the bar and brought it back to his son. It was not often he allowed Drake to imbibe freely, but he understood the power of liquor in the art of persuasion.

“What do you mean?”

“The girl,” Theadore replied. “Ariel. Do you think me fool enough to believe you have no hand in what besets her here?”

“I never tried to hide it.”

“You will leave her be. That is final.”

“She deserves what she gets.”

Theodore resisted the urge to punch his son in the mouth. It was too late for him to begin being a father, but he couldn't resist exploring his son's mind. To get a feel for the what and why of his hatred for the girl.

"And why, might I ask, does she?"

Drake finished his glass, which Theodore moved to refill. "She's the Beast," he said plainly.

"How so?"

"Have you seen her? Muscles where a girl shouldn't have them. And an odd look about her. Cheekbones too high to be pretty, but too low to be ugly."

"And a demeanor too defiant for your liking?"

"What?"

"She doesn't bow to your whim, so you don't like her. She has too much power."

"She's nothing unless we say she is something."

"Unless *I* say she is something," Theodore corrected.

"And why should she get any special treatment? How many families have you run from this region without a second thought? How many other families stay in line because they fear me, and in fearing me fear you?"

Theodore was taken aback by his son's questions, and inside he felt his chest swelling with pride. He had underestimated Drake. The young man was perceptive, more so than he had ever thought. But still, Drake was not as observant as he believed he was.

"Do you even know what her family does?"

"Breed horses."

"And do you know where many of those horses go?"

“Do you think I am dumb?”

“That depends on your answer,” Theadore responded.

“To whoever buys them,” Drake answered. Theadore scowled at him, his patience worn thinner by his son’s sarcasm.

“Dumb.”

“It must be inherited.”

“Just like my company would be, if only it were to be in competent hands.”

Drake set his glass on the table near his chair and stood. “I fail to see what bearing that uppity little wench’s family has to do with our business, and I’m not going to sit here and be belittled”

Theadore shoved Drake back into his seat. He could feel the veins in his neck bulging, the burning in his cheeks as he fumed just inches from his son’s face.

“That wench’s family supplies horses to many merchant companies – *mine* included. They breed horses for many prominent families in Evenshire, any of which could ruin us, do not doubt. And did it ever occur to you that they may sell some of their horses to supply Evenshire’s military arm?”

Drake shrugged as if it didn’t matter.

“They have a contract with Evenshire’s military,” Theadore shouted, his face an inch from his son’s. He took a calming breath and a step back. “Foolish boy. Foolish, uninformed, short-sighted boy.”

“I’m a man now,” Drake countered, and Theadore detected the hint of a warning – or a threat.

“Then act like one! You think we are invincible, and you act as such. I’m a wealthy man, but not the wealthiest. I’m a powerful man, but not the most powerful. That *wench*’s family has reputation, and they have association, something powerful in its own right.”

“They won’t act against us.”

“No, son, they won’t. But they don’t need to. Word has already begun to spread of how they are being treated. People talk, even when afraid. Wealth and power rest upon a tenuous precipice. What you have started must be stopped, and now. My name has been wounded, which does not please me. I will find a way to restore it, even if it means cutting away frayed ends.”

Theodore paused to ensure Drake picked up on his meaning. His son was a bit slow, but not stupid, and it took only a moment for a scowl to cross the young man’s face. His son likely thought it another bluff, or an insult, but he was growing tired of Drake’s antics. If he must, he held no reservations about throwing his son out.

“You would deny your own son to preserve your reputation?”

“Yes.”

Drake was indeed a man, and he deserved some truth, however difficult that truth may be to accept. The day he feared most was fast approaching. The day Drake would begin to acquire his father’s legacy. But he hoped it was not this day, for he feared it was he, not Drake, who was ill-prepared.

“One day you will understand. Power does not come without a price.”

“I don’t need this,” Drake hissed, standing up and bumping his father with his chest.

“And I don’t need you.”

“Quite the opposite is true,” Theadore said. “If you walk through that door, you will not make it to the gates before you are apprehended and jailed for conspiring against and assaulting one Ariel Feithrin.”

Drake stopped, his hand on the iron latch.

“Furthermore, upon your eventual release – which I could prolong by quite some time – you will be nothing. Tell me, who would wish to follow and obey the whims of the poorest man in Ambrigal? What minions would you have at your beck and call?”

Drake turned back to face him, his face a mask of defeat. Theadore thought he would return to his seat. The young man even took a step at first, then his eyes lit up.

“I just remembered something, father,” he said. “Not five years ago you ran a man named Dougan from this town. A blacksmith, if you don’t recall.”

“What of him?”

“He had a contract with the military arm as well. I remember you speaking of it with a merchant from Evenshire.”

“That was different,” Theadore said. “He crossed us, and not for the first time.”

“Us?”

“Who do you think delivers the orders to Evenshire, you daft boy? You have a great deal to learn about the commerce of this region if you ever expect to inherit my company.”

“No matter,” Drake said. “I still think there is more to this story than you are telling me.”

Theadore had to suppress a grin. How he had misjudged his son! The young man, it seemed, was possessed of an intuition that, though just budding, would serve him well as a merchant king.

“What do you mean?” Theadore bluffed.

“You make excuses for the Feithrin family when you casually run other families from the town.”

“I have never ‘casually’ run anyone from here,” he corrected.

“No matter,” Drake said. You’re hiding something about them. I think you’re scared of Ariel, or her mother, though I can’t yet place why.”

Theodore put his hands on his desk. Though he was proud of his son, he had dreaded this day for years. There was a truth he had hoped to keep forever concealed. A secret which, had it remained secret, would have caused no harm to the young man, but one that had unforeseeable consequences once revealed. He had hoped for more time.

Though he was hardly old, the time was fast approaching when, for better or worse, his son would inherit his company. He had seen too much, had done too much in his climb to the top, that he sometimes had trouble recalling who he once was. Since his wife’s passing, his only comfort had been his son and the security of his wealth. Not even the arms of a different woman had returned his identity. And now he feared too much had transpired, too much of his personality had been inherited by Drake, for his son to be successful.

His son would inherit the company, indeed, but had he learned the proper methods for operating it? Theodore did not believe he had. Where he had suffered, Drake seemed only to see callousness. Where he had succeeded, Drake only saw the suppression of opposition. Where he had failed, Drake saw only an opportunity for revenge. He wished he could have more time to show his son when to use power, and when to yield it. When to destroy a man, and when to build one up. But it was too late. With one observation, one question, Drake had run him out of time.

“Not afraid,” he said, his eyes still cast to his desk. “It’s true, what I said about the Feithrin family’s reputation. And that word has begun to spread about how Ariel is treated. Questions about my company are being raised. But no, I am not afraid of them.”

“Then what? Why does that wench’s family deserve special treatment? If you aren’t afraid of them, then why protect them?”

“Because,” he said, turning his head to look over his shoulder at his son, “that wench is your sister.”

* * * * *

Ariel kicked her feet against the stone stairs leading up to the door of Finyan Dutral’s shop, one of her usual stops when she came to town. Not only were his prices on oats the fairest in the town, he was always kind to her, and was more than willing to share a story and, on a chill spring afternoon, a cup of warm cider or tea.

Still, she was hesitant to enter his store. She was still angry with her mother, and, with her patience thin, did not want to be cross with Finyan. And she felt uncomfortable facing him. The last time she had come to town, he had taken a punch from Drake in her defense. She wondered if she was worth the trouble, since helping her was an ignorable offense at the very least. The incident a month before was still fresh in her mind, and so was Theadore’s treatment of the man. The callous indifference of the merchant lord bothered her.

But the way Theadore had paid particular attention to her after he had sent his son away bothered her even more. She couldn’t figure out why he should come to her aid. Surely, he knew how his son had been treating her. There had been no fewer than six major incidents in the past five years, and word most certainly would have reached him.

And then there was the issue with her mother. She was hiding something, Ariel knew, though what it was Ariel couldn't not decide. It didn't make sense her mother never came to town and always sent her in her stead. Then again, not much made sense to her lately. Her temper had grown to the point she was scared of herself sometimes, and the way she reacted to Drake when he taunted Dream shook her. She struggled to remember the details, and she had no idea how she had managed the strength not only to stand up to Drake, but to put him down.

She felt ashamed of what she was. And, even more confusing, she had no idea what that even was anymore.

"Ya goin' ta stand there all day kickin' my porch?" Finyan asked. "Or are ya goin' ta come inside? Sure'n the mud's all but beaten from yer boots."

Ariel smiled sheepishly, her cheeks growing warm. She hadn't heard the door open and wondered how long he had been standing there watching her.

"I was just waiting to see if you had tea ready," She said.

Finyan smiled.

"Always quick with a reply. Tea's on. I put it on the stove when I saw ya comin' up. Come inside then."

Ariel entered the shop, casting a glance back over her shoulder. Finyan stayed by the door, looking around outside for a moment before closing the door. Inside it was warm, as always. Finyan had an aversion to the cold, but refused to relocate. It was the summer and the fall, he had told her. Evenshire's transition seasons were like nowhere else on Corinth. She took a seat in her favorite chair, a sturdy wooden affair with a high, arching back that was well padded and covered with soft blue velvet. It was wide enough for her to lean against one of the arms and place her knees against the other, taking her weight off of her tired feet.

“Where’s yer horse?” he asked. “The sturdy black one with the white star on her forehead?”

“Dream? She’s at the stables near the gate. It’s still too muddy they say. They don’t want the wagon’s wheels to rut up the roads in town.”

Finyan poured steaming tea into a small cup and brought it to her. She nodded her head in thanks and sniffed the drink, closing her eyes and thinking of rolling green hills and warm nights.

“That so?” Finyan said. “The caravans’ve been comin’ regular.”

“That’s vital for the town’s survival,” Ariel said, deepening her voice to mimic the town’s militia. “No unnecessary wagon travel until the ground dries up.”

Finyan laughed. “Theodore’s wagons’ve been goin’ here and there right in town too. Carryin’ himself no doubt.”

Ariel looked out the window at the mention of Theodore, as if expecting him to come parading past right then, his boots free of mud. Then she remembered him plowing through the streets to come to her aid, without care for his clothing. The memory confused and disgusted her.

“Well, he can do anything it seems,” she mumbled.

“Eh?”

“Nothing,” Ariel said. “Do you have some oats for me?”

“Sure’n I do. Eight bags, like always. Are ya sure ya don’t want some help?”

“I’ll be fine. It’s not far from here to Dream.”

“Well, they’re in the storehouse ‘round back. It won’t be no trouble to give ya a hand. ‘Sides, I haven’t seen yer troupe of admirers today.”

“Me either,” she replied, looking back to the window, her eyes narrowing. “You know what?”

“What’s that?”

“This is the first time in I can’t even recall how long it has been this way. Since whenever there was a day that Drake Benningwell didn’t hate me for some reason or another.”

“Do you miss it?”

Ariel cocked an eyebrow at the merchant. “Miss getting ridiculed and having our horses tormented?”

“Sometimes we are for missin’ the things we least expect.”

“I wouldn’t call it missing. But things do feel quite out of place.”

“Missing.”

“Whatever.”

“Missing something doesn’t always have ta be a good experience. What do they all have against ya anyway?”

Ariel wasn’t quite sure how to answer. After all, it wasn’t as though she had ever received an explanation.

“Because I’m strong?”

“That ya are, but I’m figurin’ that’s a good and admirable trait ta have, ‘specially this far from protection.”

“No,” Ariel replied. “Not strong willed. Strong. Too strong for a proper lady. Stronger than a lot of the boys.”

“Ah,” Finyan replied, nodding his head. “There’s a lot of that type servin’ in the armies of Evenshire. Other kingdoms as well. I can’t see where that’s a flaw ta be dug at.”

“You’re not seventeen.”

“Neither are you.”

“Close enough. Next month.”

“That so?”

“And you aren’t a girl.”

“Says you.”

It was Ariel’s turn to laugh, then. The brief moment of mirth, tempted her away from the question about her usual entourage – if it could be called such. She was grateful they hadn’t shown themselves, but she couldn’t shake the feeling something was about to happen. She told herself there was nothing to be afraid of. She tried to convince herself that she would be left alone for once, and that she was reading too much into it. But she couldn’t escape it. She could feel a malice in the air, but when she looked into Finyan’s eyes she knew he did not share her awareness. Like with her horses. Sometimes she just knew what they wanted, and she would do things her mother would tell her were strange. Until the most unruly bronco calmed, or the most stressed mare let her tie her to a post. Like with the horses she could almost taste what was about to happen. She knew it was something that would change her life, and she didn’t know how.

Ariel thought for a moment she would reconsider Finyan’s offer and ask him to help her, to have someone with her who could summon the town guard should she be assaulted – or have to assault – again. She quickly changed her mind. She could not put him in jeopardy.

“Well, I should be going,” she said, standing up and finishing off the last of her tea. “It’s a long way home and the roads have only started to harden up.”

“Take care out there. Ya don’t want yer horse to throw a leg.”

“Dream will pull us true. She always does.”

“But will she pull you fast?”

Ariel looked at him quizzically. After a moment, she shrugged and set her cup down, brushing her bangs from her eyes. She opened the door and stepped out into the brisk air. Stepping away from a hearthside seat into the nippy air made it feel, for a moment, like the dead of winter. She made her way down the cold fieldstone stairs, acutely aware of Finyan's eyes fixed on her from different windows as she made her way around his shop. She was grateful for his vigil, though she knew it could only extend so far. And she knew his gaze could not stop a ball of mud, or a thrown fist, or whatever else she might face should she suddenly become a target once more.

Chapter Four: Surprise

Ariel turned the final corner and made her way toward Finyan's storehouse, watching the ridges her feet made in the mud. She wondered how long her footprints would remain before the spring rains came and washed them away, or Finyan's boots covered them up with their larger soles.

"Hey," a young voice said. "Need a hand?"

Ariel stopped and counted three puffs of white clouds as she tried to steady herself. Slowly, she looked up. Standing with his hands in the shallow pockets of his leather breeches, his ear-length sandy hair casually tossing in the breeze, was Tomis Drekkette. She fidgeted with a fold in her pants, her eyes darting from his hair, to his hazel eyes, to his broad shoulders and back again.

"Not much for talking?"

"Hey," she said, feeling her cheeks flush. She was surprised to see his were slightly red too, and wondered if it was just the cold. "And no. At least not here." She wondered why she told him that, why she was even talking to him. It was true he'd never harmed her, but she had noticed him at the back of the group that usually followed her, and the last time she had come to town, he had even spoke up against Finyan.

"Where are your friends?" she asked.

"Friends?" Tomis asked, looking about. "Those puppets?"

"You're usually with them."

"Because they're the only ones my age. But since the last time you came to town, I don't want to talk to them. I asked my folks if we could leave this place."

"And?"

“And what?”

“One less person our age living here is a victory for me.”

Tomis looked stung, and when he looked away her face burned. The feeling was foreign, though, as if somehow it was not hers. It carried with it a weightlessness that made it circle within her, hovering somewhere above where she usually felt ostracized.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That wasn’t fair of me.” The words seemed distant to her, and she found herself rubbing eyes that suddenly itched.

“I’m not like them,” he said, looking past her. “I’m not.”

“You have to admit,” Ariel said as she walked around him, bending down and grabbing two large sacks of oats and hoisting them to her shoulder with a grunt. “Your claim isn’t very well backed by the evidence.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tomis asked. She walked out toward the stables that lay three buildings away. “I’ve never done anything to you.”

Ariel stopped and sighed, the bags on her shoulder rising and falling with the sharp movement of her shoulders.

“There were others like you, who didn’t do anything but follow in footsteps. Then, slowly, they made their own footprints. On me.”

“How can I prove you wrong?”

The simple nature of the question made Ariel stop. He hadn’t asked how he could prove himself, which was what she had expected from him, and had heard before. No, he wanted to prove her wrong. The response intrigued her, and she felt herself flush again. Could she alienate the one boy in town she wanted? Could she be wrong about him? She thought of Finyan. He

thought the way she was treated was wrong and took a chance. What would she be if she didn't as well?"

"Grab some oats," she said. "And follow me."

* * * * *

Drake sloshed through Ambrigal's crisscrossing alleyways, his mind as grey as the clouds and as opaque as the puddles. The alleys, the backroads of the town, could be confusing to anyone not familiar with their design, and some were kept in such poor care they were virtually unused. Drake, however, knew their design, had walked them since he was a youth.

He stepped in what he thought was a shallow puddle and sank in past the top of his boot. Cold, water rushed in, soaking his woolen sock and numbing his toes. He pulled his foot from the mire, and leaned against the back of a house, removing his boot and dumping the water before slipping it back on. Normally, he would have been too concerned with his appearance to blunder into such an obstacle, but his mind was too preoccupied with Ariel to even become angry with his misstep.

He continued down the alley, with no sure destination, his mind reeling back over the conversation with his father. Ariel, a sister! A rival, that's what she was. A potential threat to his future in Ambrigal. No, not Ambrigal, Evenshire. He had plans for his father's company. His father thought too small. He wallowed in Ambrigal, using his power to wrest a comfortable living. But there was more to be had, and Drake could taste the potential like the residue of Evenshire Gold on his lips—A reminder that opportunities seldom rose twice.

Why dwell in a town when you could live in the heart of Corinthal civilization itself? Evenshire, with its high stone walls, gleaming bronze portcullises, and diverse culture. With a known name like Benningwell behind him, and a fair share of silver marks, what new glories and

pleasures could he know? What seductress would try to take him for his coin, only to find out he cared naught for her? What one wouldn't try?

But his dreams of drinking from golden cups were slipping beyond his reach. How dare his father place a bastard before his own son, and use her as a bargaining chip to further his own position!

Drake thumped a fist against the weathered and decaying wood siding of one of the houses lining the alley. It all began to make sense. The woman he had thought was his mother – who his father had said died during childbirth – was not his mother after all. Drake had never met who he thought was his real mother. His father barely talked about her, even if asked. Now he learned he has a sister. Jessitha was their mother. His father was in love with his mother. Ariel, or her mother – his mother! – Jessitha would inherit the company. Then it would be divided, but he would be overlooked, his past treatment of Ariel tempering Jessitha's decision, and he would be left in ruin.

In truth his father wanted him to cease his actions against Ariel. He wanted him to remedy his relationship with Ariel, so he could avoid being in such a predicament. His father wanted him to have the company, or at least a share in it. On one hand he doubted his father would disown him. But the man could be unpredictable. He had done worse things in his life, and Drake knew better than to underestimate him. Whether he would remove his own son from his will or not was irrelevant. He *could*.

Drake couldn't risk it. As much as it made bile fill his throat, he had to give in. Ariel would walk the streets of Ambrigal unhindered. He would act the part of the friend until she trusted him. He would hold her hand and tell her stories, and everything else a brother should do.

Then, when his father died and the company was his, he would destroy her. And what fun he would have doing it.

Voices from around a corner gave him pause and stole his building mirth. He cocked his head to to listen.

“I’ll never understand why she keeps coming back. Does she think she’ll make a friend?” a male said.

“She’s such a beast,” a girl’s voice responded. “She’s soo in lo-o-ove with horses. I bet they love her more than they should as well.”

Drake peered around the corner as the two joined in laughter. They were turned away from him, and from the back he could not readily recognize them. But their conversation was not lost on him. They were talking about Ariel, and that could only mean trouble. He thought to come around and confront the two, but he realized it would do little good. They were but two of many, and always before Ariel had been hounded by a pack. And those packs had been organized by him. He needed to learn what was going on and who was there.

A shout came from farther down the alley.

“Kick your haunches,” the newcomer yelled. “She’s loading up her wagon. And get this, Tomis is helping her.”

“That smitten fool,” the girl said. “But this could be more fun than I thought. Think of Drake’s face when we run both twits through the mud.”

“I bet there will be a whole case of wine for us, maybe two if we get them real dirty.”

“You coming?” the young man down the alley yelled. “This is going to be the greatest show yet! Thurstan is already waiting with some others.”

“What about the guards?” the other young man asked.

“Delyn is creating a ruckus on the other side of town. The guards are already rushing there. Ariel has no idea how bad her day is going to get.”

The two nearest Drake raised their hands in acknowledgment and the third ran off, cutting back toward the gates and their target.

He had to act fast, so before the other two had taken two jogging strides, Drake came from around the corner.

“No,” he barked, his voice booming from the close walls of the rickety houses and poorer shops around them. The force and desperation of his voice brought the two to a halt, and they whipped about, shocked to see their leader before them.

“No,” he repeated. After a few long moments of silence, in which they stared at him in confusion, the girl – whose name he could not recall – spoke.

“Why?”

The simple question made his mind reel. He couldn't explain to them what his father had said. He couldn't tell them she was his sister. She was the symbol of what he could do. A living reminder to the other teenagers and even children of the town of who held the power in Ambrigal. Who could build or destroy at a whim. Ariel, who had been a piece more vital to the puzzle Drake was concocting then he realized, was now a loose end he could not tie. To his revulsion, Drake realized she was more powerful than he. And, for the first time, he was scared of her.

He had to act fast. Everything hung in the balance, and he knew he not only had to stop whatever was about to happen, he had to explain it as well. The peers he had lorded over had begun to act on their own. Like a mutinous crew, he would have to appease them. They expected a reward. They wanted placation.

“It’s not time,” he said. The two looked at each other for an answer they could not find.

“What do you mean?” the man said. “You told us the Beast had to pay. We’re going to make that happen.”

Drake realized he didn’t know the boy’s name either. How could he keep an unraveling rope pulled taut if he didn’t even know the strands that composed it? He looked about the alley as though the dilapidated structures would whisper a solution. He stared into a shadowed hole in one of the walls, an exposed weakness where one of the wooden planks had rotted and been broken, perhaps by a stumbling drunk or a passing handcart laden with too wide a load.

“It’s not time,” he repeated. “Yet.” He walked to the house and patted the wall. “Ariel is like this wood. She is weak, fragile. But she holds together. However, she cannot resist the weather, so she becomes sodden, weighed down by uncertainty. But letting her see sunlight, dryer days, will breed in her hope. She will suffer the thought that mayhap she is free from the storm. Mayhap she will be able to be rebuilt. Then we break her again.”

He accentuated the point by grabbing the splintering plank, and with a mighty heave he pulled, a resounding crackle of fracturing wood them. He was pleased to note the drop in their jaws at the way he ignored his now bleeding hand. He was glad no one seemed to be in the home, and he chastised himself for the rash act.

“As you can see, the hole is larger, all the more so because of the hope we have stripped away.”

“So you want us to leave her be, so we can hurt her more another day?”

“Yes,” he replied. “You understand. Good. However, I thank you for your efforts today. They surely will not go unnoticed. I believe you wanted some wine?” The, longing look that fell

over the two before him told him he had, at least temporarily, satisfied them. “Now tell me where the others are.”

“Don’t know,” the girl said. “We just found out. But if you go near the stables you should see, I’m thinking. From what Blaine sounded like, you should hurry. You know Thurstan, quick to act.”

Drake didn’t thank her. He took off running . He knew the fastest way to get to the stables, and it wasn’t far. But he feared the way was not fast enough.

* * * * *

Ariel set the edge of the bags on her shoulders against the rim of the wagon. Dream pranced nervously, and Ariel chuckled. When she had returned to Dream on the first trip with Tomis behind her, the mare had reacted in the same way. She pushed the bags into the back of the wagon, stretching her right arm. She ruffled Dream’s mane, whispering to her. She hazarded a glance over her shoulder toward Tomis and realized it was the first time she had looked at him since she had first encountered him at Finyan’s.

A light feeling filled her stomach as he struggled with the bags. He had seen her take two of them on one shoulder so he had attempted to do the same and was having a miserable time. He was strong enough to handle the weight. Ariel could tell that under his coat he was a reasonably well-built young man, and she found herself imagining what his chest and arms would look like in the summer when he was chopping wood for the fall, or pushing a heavy cart full of goods. Would they be lithe and full of corded muscles straining against a heavy load? Or would they be bulging, vein-covered masses more suited to swinging a blacksmith’s hammer? Tomis slipped in the mud, nearly toppling over.

“You’ll get the hang of it,” she called to him, for he was still more than fifty paces from her. “It took me a long time to get used to hefting two at a time on these roads. It’s all about balance.”

Tomis steadied himself, and even at a distance Ariel could feel his hazel eyes meet hers. Her breath caught, and she forced herself to turn back to Dream, ruffling her mane again as the mare stamped on the ground, pulling against the rope tied to one of the hitching posts outside the stables.

“What’s with you, girl?” Ariel said. The only other time she had seen the mare act like she was at that moment was when she had last visited the town and Drake had taunted her. Ariel looked up, expecting to see the man before her. Her heart raced, and she struggled to regain control. She feared another outburst more than she feared Drake. She had wondered since that day if she was as bad as he was.

She heard a splash from the back of the wagon. She hoped it was Tomis, finally arriving with his bags, but not enough time had passed. He would still be twenty paces away, and only if he had kept the bags from sliding around on his shoulders. She turned and heard someone else approach from her left. Backing away from the wagon, she looked at the two young men standing before her, one leaning on the post where Dream was tied, the other fidgeting at the back of the wagon. Then, from the side of the wagon nearest to Metrin’s, a man stood up and Ariel made a sour face as she recognized Thurstan. He grabbed the wagon and leapt over the side, landing on his feet inside.

She glanced back and saw Tomis standing in the street. Ariel followed his gaze and saw three more, two females and one male, walking toward her, each carrying a length of wood.

“A fine day to you, Beast,” Thurstan said. “Your monthly stocking going well, I hope? Were the townsfolk here in luxurious Ambrigal both polite and helpful?”

“Thurstan,” Ariel said curtly. “Get out of my wagon.”

“See, it’s your attitude, mostly. If you would just be a little more proper and learn your place, you might be treated better. You might even find that we can be—kind to you.”

Ariel heard Tomis approach behind her, and he stopped behind her and slightly to her side. She wished he would keep coming, to stand with her in the upcoming confrontation, but she still drew strength from his presence.

“Listen you pig-headed, spineless oaf, I don’t want anything to do with you, or your dung-fed friends. Especially not from the dog waiting for his master’s droppings.”

“What’s this then?” the boy leaning on the wagon asked. “I think she doesn’t like us.”

Thurstan grunted. “I don’t understand why,” he said. “We come offering an arrangement of peace.”

“Climbing into my wagon and surrounding me with clubs is hardly an act of peace.”

“Those?” Thurstan asked. “Call those insurance.”

“Insurance? From what?”

“In case you decided to get all hot like you did with Drake the last time you were in town. It’s not often anyone has the iron to confront him, and even rarer someone gets the best of him. Especially a girl. You’re a dangerous and unpredictable little thing.”

Ariel thought she felt something from Thurstan, a measure of respect perhaps? Perhaps he really wanted to reach some kind of arrangement. Maybe she should hear him out.

She looked back at Tomis, who was fidgeting nervously, sweat beginning to bead on his forehead. She felt her resolve strengthening, and for a moment the edges of her vision blurred, though she gave it little thought, so sure she felt about how to proceed. She shook her head.

“You have never given me a moment of thought beyond how next to torture me.”

“Eh?” Thurstan queried, and it was his turn to be confused.

“Get out of my wagon.”

Ariel’s bold face caught him off guard, but it only took him a moment to recover. He grabbed a bag of the grain and stood it up so it leaned against the side of the wagon. He drew a slender knife from a sheath tucked into his boot.

“Don’t,” Ariel said, “Our horses need that.”

She took a step forward, and her legs wavered. The boy at the back of the wagon moved to get in front of her.

“It’s a shame, really,” Thurstan said as he reached down with the knife.

“Thurstan, stop,” Ariel pleaded, taking another step before she was grabbed by the young man in front of her.

Thurstan pointed the blade of the dagger at Tomis.

“And here I believed it when he said he would bring you to us and you would comply.”

“What?” Ariel gasped, and she felt her knees sag. The hands holding her gripped her tighter, but they needn’t have. She had no intention of moving. Tomis was shaking his head. The other boy from the front of the wagon moved to him, and took the grain from his shoulders. The young man brought the sacks to the wagon and threw them inside.

“How could you,” she hissed, her eyes locked on Tomis.

“Ariel,” Tomis begged. “I didn’t. You have to – “

“Shut up!” she screamed.

“There’s that fire!” Thurstan said, a wide smile on his face. “Come on, you can do it! Come after me like you did Drake.” He drew the blade across the sack of grain, opening a wide gash in the burlap. He easily hoisted the bag and turned it over, sending the contents thudding to the earth. There was a sickening splash as the oats smacked the muddy soil, and a dust cloud soon formed around the pile. Ariel’s head whipped around at the sound, and before she could even scream in protest, Thurstan had another bag slashed and lifted. The three with the clubs were closer now, but Ariel hardly noticed.

Ariel cried out, tugging against the strong hold on her arms, though her attempts were only half-hearted.

“Stop it,” she heard Tomis say from behind her, though he never moved toward the wagon.

“This is what you wanted,” Thurstan said, cutting another sack. “You set this up, Tomis. You wanted her to join us.” Ariel stopped struggling, and her chin sank to her chest.

“Lies!” he said. “I didn’t want that, and I don’t want this.”

“Oh come now,” Thurstan said, laughing as he dumped the third bag. “Don’t be angry now that your plan has taken a sudden turn. Just because you like the Beast, it doesn’t mean you have to lie to impress her. If you wanted to act all tough and noble, you should have set this up differently.”

“I didn’t – “ Tomis shouted, taking a step forward, but when one of the club wielders turned on him and readied their weapon, he paused.

“I didn’t want any of this,” he said.

“Why?” Ariel whispered, her eyes fixed on the muddy ground.

“Eh, Thurstan?” the man holding her asked. “She wants to know why. Should we tell her?”

“It’s always better to show than tell,” Thurstan replied, dumping the fourth sack into the pile before the wagon. “Let’s see if she likes horse food.”

The man spun about and shoved Ariel hard, sending her stumbling through the slick mud. Had she the heart to fight, she might have been able to catch her balance. Instead, she let herself fall to the ground, her fall cushioned by the pile of oats. Her vision blurred as she lifted a fistful of the grain and let it slide from her grasp. She felt herself trembling, and a small, quiet part of her wanted to get up, but she could hardly hear it over the laughter of her attackers. Then she felt Thurstan’s hand in her hair as he yanked her head back.

He knelt before her, picking up a handful of the oats.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to play with your food?” he asked, then shoved his hand into her face, grinding the grain against her skin and into her unwilling mouth. Then Thurstan placed his forehead against hers. Ariel could feel his hot breath on her face, and she curled her nose at the stench of garlic and wine.

“It could have been so much easier,” he whispered.

Ariel spit oats into his face.

Thurstan recoiled, then gave a laugh. He yanked her head down, driving her face into the pile of oats. He released her hair after a few moments and stood up.

Ariel raised herself to her knees and for a moment she meant to go after him the same way she went after Drake, but there was something missing this time, and she found that strength without will meant nothing.

Thurstan, braced for an attack, only grinned. He motioned to the three with the clubs, and Ariel only had time to hear a slosh behind her before the thin branch smacked into her back. She didn't cry out. The sharp sting of the wood made it so she could not. She lurched forward and once more lay prone as another whack resounded, this time sending needles of pain through the back of her thigh. By the time the third one hit her other leg her mind had caught up and she screamed. She managed to curl herself into a ball by the time the fourth one hit her in the ribs, forcing her to roll onto her side.

Her body was on fire, and she could only hope the beating wouldn't last long. As strong as her body was, there would be a limit. She heard Tomis cry out for them to stop as the next blow struck solid into her stomach, and she wrapped her hands around her gut, the wind knocked from her. She tried to stand, or at least curl up once more, but her body wouldn't respond beyond the struggle for air. One of the young women in the group raised her stick, and she knew its descent would lead to her head.

“Stop this!” a loud voice, a man's voice, boomed, and her attackers stopped and looked.

Ariel, too grateful for the reprieve, lay her head on the ground and gasped.

“The guard!” the girl yelled.

“Damn you, Delyn,” Thurstan growled. “You were supposed to keep them away.”

“Be gone now!” another voice yelled, and this one Ariel recognized as Finyan. She heard the group scatter, their booted feet making sucking sounds as they ran.

The whinnying of Dream as she struggled against her bonds was the only sound. Ariel rose to her knees, aware her cheeks were wet, though she forced herself not to sob. She felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned and saw Finyan, his lips drawn tight. Ariel accepted his hand as he helped her stand.

“You all right?” he asked.

“I’ll be sore, but nothing’s broken.”

“Are you sure?”

Something in Finyan’s tone told her he thought otherwise, and for a moment she wanted to correct herself. Then she changed her mind.

“Where’s the guards?” she asked.

“Chasin’ down them who done ye harm.”

“How did they know? Thurstan said something about one of Drake’s gang keeping the guards away.”

“Indeed, but not all of ‘em went. A few stayed back like always ta gamble. One of ‘em owed me a huge favor that I called in.”

“But how did you – “

“Come now young lady, how many times have you come here and nothin’s happened? It was too quiet. Somethin’ was goin’ on. I knew where you would be, so we came as soon as we could.”

“I wish it was sooner,” she said.

“I’m sorry I let ya down. These guards are as lazy as they come. It took a bit o’ convincin’ ta get them to wrap up their game and come.”

“It’s not your fault,” Ariel comforted. Then she looked toward the alleyways where her attackers had run. “They’ll never catch them.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Drake behind this?”

“Always.”

“One day that boy will pay.”

“Doubtful.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

After a brief pause, they both shared a resigned laugh. Ariel looked down at the grain.

“What am I going to tell my mom?”

“You tell her the truth,” he responded, misunderstanding. “You tell her the Benningwell boy set up a beating fer you.”

“No. About the oats.”

“Ah. Don’t you be worryin’ none. We’ll get your wagon loaded back up full. I have some extra bags from another order. I’ll just use those to fill yours and give them credit for theirs. They won’t mind none, not having as many animals to feed as you and with the caravans coming regular now.”

Ariel almost crushed him with her hug.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice cracking.

“No trouble. Now let’s get her loaded up and get you on yer way.”

“Have you seen Tomis?” Ariel asked.

“Eh?” Finyan queried. “The sandy-haired new boy? He was the first one to set to running when we came to ya.”

“Figures,” Ariel said.

“He hurt you too?”

“No,” Ariel began. It took her a moment to compose herself. “Yes. Let’s just say if I ever see him again he will be the newest girl in Ambrical.”

* * * * *

Drake clenched his fingers around the lip of a stacked oak barrel as he surveyed the aftermath. He had arrived too late, to the sight of the beaten Ariel struggling to right herself as three club-wielding adolescents hammered her about her body. And all the while Thurstan towered above her.

Thurstan, Drake knew, was the mastermind of all of this. It reeked of him. He wasn't surprised when the guard arrived, and was even less surprised when Thurstan ran. No doubt the fool had planned the whole event to raise his own standing in Drake's eyes. Drake laughed at the irony. This attack on Ariel was brazen and foolhardy and would no doubt be pinned on him. And why shouldn't it.

Slinking into the alleyway to avoid detection, Drake sank against the back of a building. How he had erred! He had never known he had a sister, and now he wished he didn't have one. Without even knowing she had a brother, the little witch had somehow undermined him, and all because his father had a soft spot for the girl and her filthy mother.

He peered back around the corner, and watched Ariel struggle to her feet, aided by Finyan, the outfitter. Drake hated that man, who thought he could defy the power structure of the town. He would make his life difficult soon enough. If he ever had the opportunity.

Then his anger was stolen away as Ariel staggered, raising her hand to ward off the doting Finyan. She wiped mud mixed with blood from her face and Drake felt a pang of remorse. For a moment he felt as though he cared for the girl. Then his face became clouded once more as he realized that blood would seal his fate. There was no way such injuries would go unreported by the town militia, and no way his father wouldn't find out.

He moved back into the alleyway once again. He had no idea how he would fix this, if he even could. Maybe he could go and apologize to Ariel in person. Maybe he could call off all

harassment toward the girl. No. It was too late. He was about to give in to despair when he heard a shuffling around a curve in the alley. Fearing it was a guard, he quickly hid behind the stack of barrels, concealing himself from both the alleyway and the open marketplace behind him.

Tomis turned the corner, walking back toward the scene of the crime. He had seen Tomis there, of course, but the newest member of his gang – if it could be called such – had had no part in the affair. Indeed, he was the first one to flee from the scene. And Drake knew something else from his little circle. Tomis, it was rumored, had feelings for the Beast. He had, on occasion, voiced disapproval for the way Ariel had been treated, but his complaints were always short-lived on account of threats that he could easily be treated the same – or worse. But now Drake could use those feelings to his advantage, and he was glad Tomis had been so vocal in during his first few months in Ambrigal. He would use Tomis to clear his name, and to pass on his well-wishes to Ariel with the news that she would forevermore be allowed unhindered visits to Ambrigal. He almost smiled at own his benevolence. He did smile at the thought of his good fortune.

Thinking he was on the verge of clearing his name, Drake stood as Tomis neared.

“Tomis,” he said.

Tomis gave a start, stared at Drake for a moment, and ran.