



KAREN FROST

DAUGHTER  
OF  
FIRE

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THE DARKNESS RISING

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# CHAPTER 1

*“When hope is lost, it takes a character of great courage to find it again.”*

*– Author unknown*

*“There are no innocents. Only victims.”*

*– Vardan Ironwill, Captain of the King’s Regiment*

IF YOU’RE NOT CAREFUL, THE hungry ghosts of your past will eat you alive. As the less-than-noble knight Sir Idras once told me, a drowned man always wants companions. The dead may be lonely, but only a fish can survive underwater.

Just a few months ago, I’d been a daughter of the Ice Crown, the land of snow and ice. I had parents from whom I’d never spent a night apart and brothers for whom I’d have walked the length of our kingdom Ilirya and back again. Everything I had, everything I was existed in a tiny world of its own, a single snowflake in a snowstorm. And then, like a candle blown out by careless lips, all of it had been extinguished in an instant. I had neither a home nor a family anymore. I was adrift—with only my ghosts to keep me company.

I’d have given all that I had and more to change the past, to save my family from the enemy raid that killed them, but there is no magic that can turn back time and undo what has been done; time only runs in one direction. And Death doesn’t give back what he takes. With my once happy life shattered, all that remained was survival. Putting one foot in front of the other, taking my days by the hour, I had traveled to Windhall University, where I started training as a war mage. What else could I do? With my old life in ashes, I had to build a new one, however I could. As a war mage, it

would one day be my fate to be the sword that cut down Ilirya's enemies, then be cut down myself in the unending circle of violence that had engulfed the kingdom's southern border for four decades. Miraculously saved from slaughter at the hands of the villainous Northmen, I was expected to die in the south for a kingdom I barely knew. Then there would be no one left to avenge the destruction of my village.

It was at this intersection of past and future, family and expectations, duty and destiny, that I found myself as I lay on the floor of Windhall's infirmary. By coincidence or fate, I had been snatched from the jaws of death by the healer Timo right before the one event I never expected could happen. The ambassador of the Northmen, those murderers of my people, had appeared in the infirmary. As weak as I was from my brush with death, this was likely the only chance I would ever get to take revenge for everything that had been taken from me. I had drawn every ounce of magic that I possessed with the goal of obliterating her from the earth, but then I'd been tackled to the ground. With every second I remained pinned to the floor by the healer-student Lyse, the chance to avenge my family was slipping away.

"Your family lives." She whispered the words into my ear, low and urgent. Her breath tickled my skin, and I could almost feel her lips as they moved. If I'd thought about those lips so near to me, it had always been in a different context, not like this. But the words made no sense. They might as well have been in another language. They had no meaning. I had to get up. I had to avenge my family.

Everything was spinning, blurring, falling as my head reeled. My body burned with my magic, which, frustrated by Lyse's tackle and the presence in the infirmary of Draks, a mage bane able to extinguish the magic of other mages, seethed angrily in my veins, looking for release. I had told Lyse a dozen times what had happened to my family. She had sat and held me while I cried for them. So why was she stopping me from doing what she herself would surely have done under similar circumstances? I gritted my teeth and tried to shimmy free.

Of all the people in my new life at Windhall, it was Lyse for whom I cared most of all. Lyse had been the first friendly face I'd seen, the guide to my new life. In time, she had become the most important part of my newfound family. More than that: She was my lodestar. Even so,

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my emotions for her were subsumed in that moment by the hatred I felt for the Northmen and the overwhelming desire to attack the ambassador. Hate, after all, is a hungry beast that only becomes more ravenous the more it's fed. I didn't have time to think about what she was trying to tell me. Whatever it was, we could discuss it after I'd avenged my family.

No matter how hard I tried to wriggle out from under from her, my body refused to obey. What was happening? From the corners of my eyes, I saw the glow of white magic around me: It was Timo's magic, which Lyse was able to channel through their shared magical bond. Using it, she was pulling energy out of me, enough to keep me still and helpless on the ground, away from the ambassador. No! My head began to feel light and fuzzy. If I didn't shake her off soon, my opportunity would be lost.

Chancellor Vandys, the head of Windhall University and the ambassador's escort to the infirmary, stared down at me. Disgust and horror mixed with surprise writhed across her face. She hadn't expected a student to attack her guest. The Northman woman, however, seemed unconcerned. Her casual indifference infuriated me. Could she not tell from my pale skin and thin frame that I was an Ice Crawler, a victim of her people? She should at least have had the decency to look worried when I charged her. Was I really so inconsequential in her eyes? Chancellor Vandys took her elbow and whispered something in her ear, glancing at me as she did so. "Whatever the meaning of this, I will address it later," she snapped to Lyse and Timo.

"Chancellor, please don't be upset!" Lyse's voice was strained. "Aeryn isn't herself. We almost lost her just now in a training accident in Raelan's class. I'm sure this is a lingering effect of her near-death experience. She may think she's still in the training salle. She'll be fine in a few minutes."

I didn't need Lyse to protect me. I needed her to release me. The Chancellor huffed, glaring at me through narrowed eyes, but said nothing in response. My eyes burned back at her. She murmured to the Northman woman just loud enough that I could hear, "Very well, we'll tour the academic building. Please come with me. I apologize for this."

The two headed for the door, the Chancellor looking over her shoulder at me reprovingly. No! I ground my teeth, fury turning to anguish as I tried desperately to shake Lyse off and follow them, but I couldn't. The infirmary door closing behind them sealed forever my only opportunity to avenge my

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family. All the life and energy went out of me at once, like a sugar cube thrown into water. Misery swept over me in a heavy, oppressive wave.

Lyse's hands started stroking my hair. "They're alive, Aeryn. They're alive. It's okay. You don't have to fight. Let her go."

I couldn't hear her words; they were too much for me. Far too much. All the bitterness, the sadness, the loss, and the grief that I'd experienced over the last few months came rushing in to take the place of the mindless rage that had filled me upon seeing the ambassador. Not an hour before, I had almost died when my fellow war mage Faegan had sent a knife hurtling into my chest. I had been so close to going home, to reuniting with my family. Now I was once again left with ashes. The taste was bitter on my tongue.

Lyse didn't have to hold me down anymore; I lay with tears pouring down my face, sobbing for everything I had lost and would never recover. "My family is dead, Lyse." My voice was like the wail of a young child: small, pitiful and lost. "You know they're dead. How could you let her get away? How could you take from me my one chance to avenge my family?"

"Your family may not be dead," she said. "Listen to me, Aeryn, please."

She moved off me, and I slowly got to my knees. I was too weak to stand, so I sat cross-legged on the floor instead. My chest heaved as I tried to recover my breath. It was as though I'd been running for hours. It had likely been dangerous to try and use so much of my magic so soon after almost dying. I was lucky I hadn't passed out from the effort. I rubbed the spot on my chest where Faegan's knife had penetrated. Why did everything seem to happen all at once here at Windhall?

Lyse took up a spot on the floor across from me, our knees almost touching. Her soft brown eyes were intense and full of concern as they stared into mine. Of all her qualities, it was her deep empathy that always stood out most to me. When she reached out and wiped the tears from my cheeks, her hands were gentle and caring. They lingered on my face without her realizing it, and I resisted the desire to lean into them and rub against them the way a cat does the hands that stroke it. I was no longer angry at her. Nothing that had happened in my life was her fault. All she'd ever tried to do was make my life better. I was barely aware of wishing she would hold me.

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Her voice was low and urgent when she spoke, too low for Timo and Draks to hear. “Aeryn, I’ve made some enquiries. No one has heard of the Northmen raiding into Ilirya.”

I shook my head as though it would clarify the meaning of her words, but it didn’t. “I don’t understand. What are you saying?”

“Do you think that Chancellor Vandys would be walking around Windhall with a Northman if we had resumed war with the Northmen? The ambassador is the only Northman allowed in the entire country, and she would have been kicked out of Ilirya at the first report of resumed fighting.”

“Maybe the chancellor hasn’t heard yet,” I said, confused. “In the Ice Crown, news travels slowly. And who would notice if some Ice Crown villages were snuffed out?”

“But Aeryn, think about it: *You’re* here. Everyone you’ve met, from the members of the King’s Regiment who found you, to the knight who brought you here, to even the university administrators would have known about what happened to Thamir, all because of you. Moreover, the ambassador surely would have known if her own people had resumed war against us. So why is the chancellor talking to a Northman ambassador? Because there was no raid.” Her eyes bore into mine, lit by an intense glow.

“No, that’s—no—that doesn’t make sense,” I protested, unable to believe what I was hearing. “Jale told me that I told him about the raid; about how all the houses were burned and everyone killed. It—happened. Of course it happened.”

“You were told a lie. Aeryn. Have you remembered *anything* about the attack since coming to Windhall?”

“No.” I hung my head. It was my greatest shame: After all these months, I still couldn’t remember a single thing that had happened on the worst day of my life. All I remembered was waking up in a rest house in Ithaka, far away from Thamir.

“Because it didn’t happen,” Lyse insisted, shaking her head.

“Lyse, that’s crazy!” My head was swimming. I closed my eyes and dug the heels of my palms into my eyes to steady myself.

Lyse put her hands on my knees. Her voice was hushed and tight. “The kingdom needs more war mages, Aeryn. We’re hemorrhaging at the front, badly. Would you have left your family willingly to come to King’s City if

soldiers from the capital had come and asked you? What if they'd told you that you would probably never see your family again?"

I frowned. In my wildest dreams, I had wanted to come to King's City and attend a mage university to learn to be a powerful mage. But in reality, I had been nervous even at the thought of going to the provincial capital Namoreth, which was only a few days away from my home in Thamir. I wouldn't have been able to bear being as far away from the Ice Crown as King's City, and I certainly wouldn't have left Thamir if I'd been told I could never return.

"You were kidnapped, Aeryn," Lyse said. Her eyes were soft with sympathy.

"But—How could I forget something like that?" I objected halfheartedly, feeling as if I was sinking into deep snow. How could Lyse be right? It all seemed so conspiratorial. These things didn't happen, did they? "Jale and Gamiel are members of the King's Regiment! They wouldn't lie."

"Wouldn't they?" Lyse raised her eyebrows. "Their duty is to the king, not to regular citizens like us."

I shook my head, which by now was throbbing. I was a wobbling top spinning out of control. I didn't know what to believe anymore. Lyse's arguments seemed impossible—and yet at the same time, they made sense. The thought made me sick. I desperately wanted my memory back. If only I hadn't fallen from that horse on my journey with Gamiel and Jale, I would know the answers to all these questions.

"If I was kidnapped, how did Jale and Gamiel think they would get away with it? If I hadn't lost my memory, I would have told someone. I would have escaped!"

Lyse's eyes flickered over my shoulder. "Timo can erase memories a little to ease his patients' pain. Do you know what Jale's affinity is?"

A memory struck me like lightning. I saw, as from a distance, me and Gamiel standing outside in the morning light, minutes before we parted ways. She and Jale had been sparring. Because they hadn't used magic in their fight, I had asked her what Jale's affinity was. "I call it the mind spike," Gamiel had replied. "With enough force, I would not even have remembered my own name."

I stifled a moan as a wave of cold ran down my spine, making me shiver. The hairs on my arm all stood on end and without my realizing it, my hand

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rose to cover my mouth. Jale had used his affinity on me. He had destroyed my memories and lied to me about how I left Thamir. Lyse was right. She had to be. It was the only thing that made sense.

Lyse continued, “There have been other students here at Windhall whose stories didn’t quite seem to add up. Students who, like you, had affinities that Ilirya desperately needed. I ignored them at the time. I thought I was being silly. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about this sooner, Aeryn, but I had to be sure. When the ambassador walked in, everything clicked into place. I knew what they’d done.”

The room was spinning too fast. My fingers curled against the floor, trying to hold on. If Jale had lied to me, then what did that mean for my family? Could Lyse possibly be right that they were still alive? That there had been no Northman attack? Seeing my face, Lyse jumped to her feet. “Let’s get you back to the dorm. You look ill. I shouldn’t have told you this now. You almost died and you need to rest.”

“Lyse...could my family really be alive?” My voice was barely a whisper. The thought was like a patina of ice: If I spoke too loudly, it would shatter into a million pieces.

Lyse nodded. I climbed to my feet shakily, feeling like a sapling. A mild wind would have felled me, leaving my roots exposed to the air. As shocking and terrible as the discovery that I had been tricked by Jale and Gamiel was, the feeling of betrayal was eclipsed by a growing hope. My family was alive! I could see them again!

Lyse took hold of my arm. “Come on,” she said gently.

As we walked back to the dorm, I thought I’d become so light I might lift off the ground and fly away, back to Thamir. I wanted to wrap my arms around Lyse, bury my face in her shoulder, and tell her over and over again that my family was *alive*, that the ghosts that haunted me could finally find peace. They weren’t ghosts after all.

“Lyse, my family... I can’t believe it!” I exclaimed as we sat on her bed in her room. “I have to go back! I have to know for sure. I have to see them again. I have to touch them.”

My hands fluttered like agitated birds until Lyse grasped me gently by the shoulders, bringing me back down to earth. Her expression was pained, full of sorrow. Where her palms touched me, my skin burned slightly, even



through the fabric of my tunic. Her soft brown eyes were deep pools of regret. “You can’t, Aeryn,” she said, quietly but firmly.

“I may not have money, but I can figure out how to get back to the Ice Crown as I go,” I replied, shaking off her concern. My mind was already halfway to Thamir, calculating what it would take to get there. “I can leave tomorrow. It will take time, yes, but—”

“No,” Lyse said, shaking her head as she cut me off. “Think about it: The soldiers who took you wanted you badly enough to kidnap you and erase your memory. There haven’t been many war mages at Windhall in the last few years. You’re worth too much to the kingdom to be allowed to leave.”

“What...what are you saying?” A knot formed in my stomach. All the lightness that I’d felt walking back to the dorm rushed out of my body, leaving me as cold as an Ice Crown winter.

Misery was etched across Lyse’s face. “You can’t leave Windhall right now, no matter how much you want to go back home. Once you’re discovered missing, the King’s Scryer will seek you out immediately. You won’t make it a full day outside the city before you’re found and dragged back. You’ll never be able to leave Windhall after that, not even to go into the city for the day. What’s more, they’ll know you found out that your family is alive and erase your memory again. Everything will have been for nothing.”

“So I’m supposed to forget my family?” My voice rose. “Is that it? Stay here and never see them again? I just found out that my family is still alive, Lyse. How can you ask me not to go see them?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying!” Lyse’s eyes begged me to understand her, and I did, but not necessarily in the way that she wanted. I was a guard dog of the kingdom, and as such, my life was not mine. Lyse, on the other hand, was free to do whatever she liked. She wore neither collar nor leash. She could go home to see her family at any time. I rubbed my face with my hand in frustration and stood.

“It’s just for now. It won’t always be like this, Aeryn. One day you’ll be able to go back, when you’re not being watched so closely. Until then, write a letter instead,” she begged. “I’ll have it sent myself. That way no one will know that you know your family is alive. It may be slow, but you’ll have an answer as certainly as if you went home yourself.”

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“A letter, Lyse?” I scoffed. “No one in Thamir can read, much less write back. You know that.”

Lyse winced. In that moment, I remembered how very different she and I were. She came from a House and had grown up with servants and tutors. She had never hunted for food or trapped for skins with which to make clothing. She had never carried a bow or tanned a hide. She had never known the howling winds of the north, and no ghosts had ever haunted her dreams. But she was still the Lyse whom I adored, the one for whom I’d have done anything. I relented. “A soldier at the garrison may be able to read it for them.”

“Aeryn...” Lyse reached out to take my hand, but I pulled away. I needed to be alone, and I needed time to think. So much had happened in the last hour that I had to process it or my head would explode. Too many emotions experienced too close together had turned my insides to knots.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I said, striding to the door before she could catch me.

I didn’t feel like going back to my room, so I walked to the training field behind the dorm, stopping briefly by the armory to collect a bow and a quiver of arrows. Round archery targets were set up at the far side of the field, and I stomped over to them. This, at least, was something I knew and understood; something that reminded me of home. I notched an arrow, pulling the string back to rest against my cheek. After a breath, I let the arrow fly. It hit dead in the center of the target. I notched another arrow, pulled back, and released. It split the first arrow in two. I notched a third arrow, pulled back, and now the three arrows were all exactly in the center of the target, the last two each splitting the arrow that came before it.

In the Ice Crown, this ability to aim true would have kept me alive by always keeping me fed, but here in King’s City, it was a curse that was keeping me from seeing my family again. Moreover, it was one of the reasons I’d been taken from them in the first place. The thought made me want to burn Windhall and everything around it to the ground. I should have been elated that my family was still alive—and I was—but finding out that I wouldn’t be able to return to them and hold them in my arms again left a taste more bitter than an unripe berry in my mouth. How dare anyone—from the King’s Regiment to the king himself—keep me from them? Why did they get to choose my life for me? How could the King’s

Regiment, which was supposed to defend the kingdom, turn out to be nothing more than a band of child thieves?

“You are looking angry,” said a voice unexpectedly at my side.

“Pavo!” I exclaimed.

Pavo came from the last of the nomadic hunting tribes in the far southwest of the kingdom. His long, strong limbs attested to a lifetime of walking desert and savannah plains. He was colorful, exuberant, and good-natured. He was also a weather mage, a desperately needed affinity in some parts of the kingdom, including his own home. Although Pavo couldn't have been more different from me, we were similar in our alienation from the world in which we found ourselves at Windhall University: two fish out of water.

“Well? What is making Aeryn unhappy today?”

“I want to go home, but I can't because I'm a war mage. I'm trapped here.” There was no use explaining everything. It wouldn't change anything, and besides, I was tired. Exhausted, in fact. The physical effects of my near death earlier that day were starting to set in, and I felt sluggish.

Pavo nodded understandingly. He reached into the leather satchel he wore slung at his side, rummaging around until he drew something out. It was a book. My eyes widened in surprise. Based on our classes with Professor Kalmath, I was sure he couldn't possibly read it. He drew out a quill, too, which still had some residual ink on it. He flipped open the cover of the book and, to my amazement, wrote something on the inside cover. Then he closed the book, tucked the quill back into the satchel, and handed the book to me. He said, “I am hoping you are seeing your family soon, Aeryn.”

“You can write?” I sputtered.

Pavo grinned, then winked. “I am liking Professor Kalmath's class. We are doing *so* well at learning, no?”

Before I could think of a response, he sauntered away. Curious and astounded, I opened the book. On the inside, in beautiful, looping script that was nothing like how he wrote in Professor Kalmath's class, Pavo had written: *Not all caged birds are tamed.* I looked at Pavo's retreating figure and shook my head. In the course of one day, I had survived near death and found out that my family was still alive and Thamir safe. Why shouldn't it also turn out that Pavo had been faking in class just for his own amusement?

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I walked to the targets and pulled out the three arrows. The first two were ruined, but the third I placed back in the quiver. Then I walked back to the armory and began to make new arrows to replace the ones I'd broken. In the quiet, I could almost pretend I was back in Thamir fletching arrows. It was the closest I would come to home for the foreseeable future.

That night, as I lay sleepless in bed, I made the constellations over Thamir dance on my ceiling. The Monkey, the Twin Sisters, the Horse, the Water Jug, the Beetle, and the Fox sparkled blue above me, as vivid as they were high in the sky over the Ice Crown. Here in King's City I couldn't see the Sisters or the Beetle, but I knew exactly how they looked. My mind was full of thoughts and emotions. How could Gamiel and Jale have made me believe that all I loved had been destroyed? How could they have lied so brazenly and without conscience? What sort of a King would allow a girl to be kidnapped from her family and forced into being a war mage?

My rage alternated with joy. For all my suffering, for all my anguish, my family was still alive. Far from where I lay in my bed in Windhall, my brother Kyan might be turning in for the night after working the forge at the garrison all day. My brother Kem and his wife Danver might be leaning over the crib of my new niece or nephew. And my parents might be sitting before the village fire, fletching arrows of their own and sharpening knives. I might not be able to leave today to return to them, but they were *alive*, and I *would* find a way to get home to them. I would start by having Lyse help me write them a letter, and then I would plan how to get home. I was caged, but not tamed.

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The next day, neither Faegan nor Raelan turned up for our mage skills class, so Cayleth—who had become one of my closest friends in the short time I'd been at Windhall—and I went apple picking in one of the orchards next to the university instead. We brought with us a small hand-pulled cart in which we planned to gather the dusty red apples. Cayleth had worked out an agreement with the cooks by which we would pick the apples and in return they would make apple tarts for dinner. There were so many apples that we'd filled the cart after only an hour, so we climbed a tree and sat on its branches watching traffic far in the distance file toward the western gate of the city. After everything that had happened the day before, picking

apples with Cayleth felt surreal. How could we be doing something so banal when the day before I'd almost died, then found out that the family I thought was dead was in fact still alive?

"When you almost died yesterday, did you see the Eternal Realms?" Cayleth asked.

She took a bite of an apple. It crunched crisply beneath her teeth. My hand unconsciously felt the small pink scar on my chest where the knife had lodged. It was almost in the center but slightly to the right. Had it been to the left, it would have hit my heart, and then even Timo couldn't have saved me. I shook my head. "No, only blackness."

"Huh." I could hear her shrug, her red tunic rubbing against the rough bark of the tree. A moment later, she said, "Faegan shouldn't have thrown that knife. It was a dishonest move. You could have died. The only reason you didn't is because of Timo and Lyse. They should expel him, but they won't because he's the Baron of Ardeth."

"We both know Faegan hates that he's not as strong a pyromancer as I am, and he *really* hates losing. I should have been watching for him to try something."

"That's no excuse. And the Baron of Ardeth should be especially careful. What kind of leader is underhanded like that?"

Now it was my turn to shrug. After everything that had happened yesterday, I didn't have the strength to care. I had more important things to think about, like how to return to my family and how long it would take.

"We should go back." I shaded my eyes and looked at the angle of the sun in the sky, which was sinking lower in the sky. "The cooks will need the apples to start the tarts and we need to get to combatives class."

"Let's stay a little longer. Maerys won't mind if we're late," Cayleth said, referencing our archery instructor. "After all, it's not like you need any archery practice. You're better than she is and you both know it. And of course, she'll have heard about how you almost died yesterday. She can spare you an afternoon to lounge in the orchards."

I gazed up at the sky, unexpectedly happy to have an excuse to avoid going back to the campus. After a minute, I hazarded a question that had been bothering me. "Cayleth, what would you do if you found out that your older brothers were alive and that you'd been kidnapped from home

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in order to get you to Windhall?” There was no easing into the question; I had to be blunt.

Cayleth’s older brothers, Bron and Baylen, had been killed fighting on the southern front while serving in the army. When we’d met, Cayleth told me that she had enrolled at Windhall to become a war mage as a way to protect her last brother, Baran, who was now also in the army. Her affinity, illusion, could be used as war magic, but unlike pyromancy, could also be used for other purposes. This meant that while I had no choice but to be a war mage, she did. She *wanted* to be here.

She sighed. “That’s a hard question.” She shifted on her branch, moving closer to me. “Lyse told me about your family and what happened. I’m sorry.” Her voice was soft.

“She told you?” My eyebrows shot up. It wasn’t Lyse’s secret to tell. I stifled a stab of resentment and hurt; Cayleth needed to know, even if I hadn’t been the one to tell her. She needed to know for whom she was fighting. Did she really want to fight for a kingdom that kidnapped its own people?

“Lyse thought it would be good for me to talk to you since we’re both war mages. She’s worried about you, Aeryn. A lot happened yesterday. You almost died, for one thing. And then you tried to charge a Northman? In front of the Chancellor? It must be a lot to take in. I can’t imagine what you must be feeling.”

“What am I supposed to do, Cayleth?” My mouth quirked into an unhappy line. The bitterness from last night was back, and with it an overwhelming sense of being both tricked and ensnared. I hated nothing more than feeling trapped. In the wild, an animal will chew a limb off rather than remain trapped. What was the price of escape here? “How can I trust anyone here in King’s City?”

“I know,” Cayleth said, shaking her head, her black hair whipping into her eyes. “What happened to you was wrong. There’s no excuse for it. In your shoes... I can’t imagine how angry I would be. I understand if you hate everything about Windhall right now. Know that I’m here for you, whatever you need. And I support whatever you choose to do.”

We lapsed into comfortable silence for several minutes more. The cool fall air and the warmth of the sun on my face were nice, even if they were temporary. I couldn’t hide from Windhall forever. Finally, Cayleth swung

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down from the tree and took hold of the handle of the heavy cart. I took up a position behind, and together we trundled back down the orchard's rutted grass toward Windhall. The cooks wouldn't be able to complain that we didn't bring enough apples.

Lyse was waiting for us at the gate. A glow of happiness filled me, and I smiled. The anger I had felt at her yesterday for stopping my attack on the ambassador and for delivering the bad news that I would have to wait to see my family was long gone, replaced by the usual pull I experienced whenever I was near her. She didn't return my smile, however. "There's been another person reported missing in the city," she said, her expression serious. "This time, it's a noble."

My stomach dropped. With everything that had happened, I had forgotten that I wasn't the only person who had been kidnapped. King's City had been eating its children for years, and I was the only one who'd cared enough to notice. Now, it had swallowed another person.

## CHAPTER 2

*“Bravery cannot be taught.”*

*– Knight Commander Bronwen Lionheart*

*“Policing a city is hard, not to mention it’s made harder  
by the fact that the City Guard is often no more lawful  
than the criminals it is their duty to apprehend.”*

*– Pergam, Lord Marshal of King’s City*

ALTHOUGH THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE noble could have been a coincidence, there was no question I had to find out more. So far, Lyse and I had discovered five people missing from the city in the last year, and those were just the ones we knew about. How many more were unknown to us? Lyse had dismissed my suggestion that it could be Dark mages kidnapping the northwest quarter’s denizens for their own nefarious purposes, but if not that, then it still had to be something coordinated. These hadn’t been the types of people to disappear on their families. Now that I knew that I, too, had been kidnapped, I felt more of a kinship with the missing than ever. I didn’t deserve to be snatched from my home, and nor did they. If no one else would look for them, I would.

We had to wait until the seventh day of the week, our free day, to venture into the city, and in the meantime, the week dragged on endlessly. I was impatient and distracted in all my classes. With Lyse’s help, I had carefully drafted a letter to my family, taking care to stress that I was fine and I would be home as soon as I could. I needed it to look as innocuous and unremarkable as possible, just an anonymous citizen writing home.



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Even though Lyse had told me it would take weeks for the letter to reach Thamir, it was hard to stem my impatience. This was my first link to my family in months. I wished I could snap my fingers and the letter would be there instantly. How would I survive the agonizing wait until a response might come? Could my family get a soldier at the garrison to write a letter to send back? How long would that take? At least while I waited for news, I could use the investigation of the noble's kidnapping to distract myself.

On the seventh day, Lyse met me in the dining hall as I finished breakfast. My heart thrilled to see her, and even my magic surged in my veins a little. Her eyes, too, sparkled when they found me. "Are you ready?"

Her delight at seeing me was entirely dissimilar to how Cayleth or Kaylara reacted around me. It was...something more. After the events in the infirmary, it was impossible to deny that she had some sort of feelings for me. I had seen the fear in her eyes when she thought I might die and heard the terror in her voice. Even so, that knowledge didn't change anything between us. She was with Timo, and there didn't seem a way to bring up this unspoken aspect of our relationship after she had avoided addressing it the last time. Still, I knew the issue would come to a head eventually, whether she wanted it to or not. It was just a matter of time.

"Ready," I replied, smiling back at her.

"Let's go then," she said, linking her arm in mine. "We'll have a long walk since we'll be headed to the eastern side of the city today."

As we strolled across the green toward the road to the city's western gate, I asked, "What do you know about this missing noble?"

"His name is Theratos. He comes from one of King's City's Houses, albeit one of the lesser ones. He teaches music."

"When did he go missing?"

"Two weeks ago. Timo heard about his disappearance from a patient in the city whose daughter took lessons from him. By now, the city guard will surely have started to investigate."

"Could he have left King's City and gone somewhere else?" I asked, echoing the argument that Timo had once made about the disappearances in the northwest quarter.

"He could have," Lyse agreed, shrugging. "Or perhaps he'll have already been found with his face in a tankard of ale in the northwest quarter or lying dead in an alley somewhere in the city."

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“You don’t think that’s the case or else we wouldn’t be going to investigate.”

“Something feels wrong about it, but I can’t say why,” Lyse said, unlinking our arms and rubbing her hands together unconsciously. I had noticed she only did it when agitated or anxious. Theratos’s disappearance unnerved her. Still, I immediately missed the contact and wished she would reach out again.

“Are you starting to believe me yet about Dark mages?” I arched an eyebrow at her.

“You and your theory of a grand conspiracy of the Dark mages!” Lyse exclaimed with feigned exasperation. She tossed her long dark hair and looked at me with a playful smile curving on her lips. My heart doubled its time in my chest. The pull between us was as overpowering as it had ever been. Maybe even stronger, if that was possible.

I had to remember not to lose my head in the heady feeling of being near her, so to remind myself that she was promised to someone else I asked, “How’s Timo?”

I hadn’t spoken to him since the day in the infirmary. Although I had caught sight of his shockingly silver hair across the green or leaving the dining hall a few times, we seemed to exist in two separate worlds. In truth, I didn’t mind. Even though he had saved my life, seeing Lyse with him made my stomach churn, and I had found myself quickly making excuses to leave whenever they were together. It was unfair to resent him for his relationship with Lyse.

Lyse fidgeted with a lock of hair, looking away from me and into the distance toward King’s City. “He’s been busy. There’s been an outbreak of plague in Port Bluewater, probably carried in by the sailors. He left Windhall a few days ago.”

“Will he be back soon?”

“As soon as he can. It’s hard to know in advance with these sorts of things.”

“I’m sure you miss him.”

“Of course!”

She didn’t look at me as she said it, and I knew she was thinking about more than just him. I couldn’t stop myself. The subtle signs of conflict on

her face were too tempting an invitation to press her. I smiled playfully. “Would you miss me, too, if I was gone?”

Her smile flickered, the way a candle does in strong wind. Lyse knew what I was asking. She looked at the ground, and for a long time, I thought she wouldn’t answer. Then she said in a voice barely above a whisper, “Of course I would miss you very much.”

Without my anticipating or planning it, we’d hit the very inflection point I knew had been pending. The wall that Lyse had built to cordon off her emotions was showing signs of crumbling, and I had to know what lay on the other side. I had to know how strongly she felt the pull between us...even if that meant I was asking her to choose between me and Timo. I pushed forward. “More than you miss him?”

Fear and panic filled her eyes. Tension pulled her body taut like the string of a bow. “You can’t ask me that.” Her voice was a hoarse whisper, her eyes pleading.

“I know you feel it, too.” With my words and with my eyes, I was trying to urge her to be honest with herself and with me. To admit that she felt that same electric connection between us that I did.

She shook her head. “No. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do! Every time you’re near to me... I know you feel it.”

“Timo... I’m bonded to *Timo*. We’re a *pair*. I...hardly know you,” Lyse protested. She wasn’t protesting against me, however, but against her own feelings, and we both knew it. She stopped walking. Her eyes were wild now, dark with fear.

I raised my hands, palms facing her in half-supplication. I wanted her to know that it was okay to have feelings for someone other than Timo. She wasn’t betraying him by having them. Her heart belonged to her alone. “Some things happen without anyone planning it. It’s okay to feel—”

“Do you know what you’re asking me?” Lyse hissed, looking around as though someone might overhear us. “Timo is a Great Mage! My family will benefit from the pairing. We’ll be able to overcome some of the cloud left by my great uncle Nagyar’s Dark Magic when Timo is the King’s personal healer.”

My stomach lurched. Acting as I was on impulse, I hadn’t thought through what I was asking of her if she chose me, and it hurt like a kick from Sir Idras’s horse Snowflake to hear it from her so plainly. How could I have

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been so stupid? Of course a pairing with an Ice Crowner was undesirable for someone from a House. The Ice Crown was so poor and rustic that it didn't even have Houses. Nor, as a war mage, would I ever become either wealthy or important. Everything I couldn't change about myself was exactly what made Timo a good match for her.

My shoulders slumped, and my body tried to make itself as small as possible. What had I been thinking? That she would confess her feelings for me and give up everything that she could have with Timo to be with me instead? What could I offer her in return for all that? My stomach started to hurt. Why hadn't I kept quiet?

I considered whether we should abandon our trip into King's City. What use was it to go now when the morning was ruined? When Lyse met my eyes, however, the expression of quiet longing and doubt on her face said all the things that she refused to. Just because Timo was a good marriage match didn't mean I was wrong about her feelings for me. Without thinking, I reached out and ran my thumb along her cheek. She quivered at my touch, but she didn't pull away. In a voice quiet as the wind through the trees, she whispered, "Yes, I feel it, too."

What might have been tears glimmered in her eyes. Then she took my hand and set it back at my side. "I'm with Timo, Aeryn." That was it. She spun on her heel and began marching toward King's City, leaving me standing alone in the middle of the road. The conversation was over. She had made her choice, and I was to understand that it wasn't and couldn't be me.

\* \* \*

Theratos lived in a multi-story rectangular house, whose tall windows overlooked the cobble stone street. The houses in this neighborhood were pressed tightly together and had triangular roofs, giving them the appearance of jagged and broken teeth in a giant creature's mouth. This part of the northeast quarter was mostly quiet but for pedestrians and occasional carts passing through, carrying fish from the wharves to the King's castle and other noble houses. I could faintly smell salt in the air, which Lyse told me came from the sea half a mile to the east. It was the type of neighborhood from which I imagined people generally didn't go missing.

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Lyse knocked on the door of Theratos's house, and it swung open slowly to reveal a small man with a narrow face, a crooked nose, and owlsh eyes. He scowled at us, his face sour. "What do you want?" he asked suspiciously, looking around us as though we'd been accompanied by a small army.

"We're looking for Theratos," Lyse said.

"He's not here."

"We know that. We mean we'd like to help find him. What do you know about his disappearance?" I asked.

The door started to close in our faces, but Lyse stopped it, catching it with her left hand while reaching into the satchel at her waist with her right. The servant saw the flash of coins that materialized in her hand. He licked his lips, calculating their value against talking to us further, and then his hand flicked out and the coins disappeared into a fold in his robes. "What do you know?" Lyse's expression was stern.

"Master Theratos left to teach a lesson in the southeast quarter in the morning and never returned. When he didn't come back by nightfall, I walked to the merchant's house and asked after him. The servants there said he had left hours before. That was all I ever learned."

"Is there any place else he might have gone? Had he ever disappeared before?" I questioned.

"No. He was a quiet man. Spent all his time at home with his nose in a book when he wasn't teaching."

"Did he have any enemies?"

"A flute teacher? Hardly," the servant scoffed.

"Could he have left the city? Did he have family he might have gone to visit unexpectedly?"

The servant looked disapprovingly at me. "Would Master Theratos have left the city without having packed a single thing or informing me of his travel? No."

"Then could he have owed someone money and left to avoid them?"

The servant didn't bother answering. It was clear he was becoming impatient with my questions. Lyse's coins—and therefore our time—were running out. "Is there *anything* else you know? Something that stands out to you as being unusual? Perhaps something that Theratos did or said before his disappearance? Perhaps you saw someone watching the house or following him?"

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The servant shook his head. “The Master has disappeared into thin air, it would seem. It is a mystery.”

He shut the door, and Lyse and I were left standing on the street, no wiser than when we’d left Windhall. I tried to push away my dismay. There was no use dwelling on our failure. I asked Lyse, “What do we do now?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head.

Since there was nothing more to be learned about Theratos’s disappearance, I had another idea. “Can we go to the Boar’s Tusk Tavern?” When he’d dropped me at Windhall, Sir Idras told me that if I ever needed to get in touch with him, I could pass word to him there. It was a long shot, but perhaps if he was in the city, he might even be there now. I missed the giant, rambunctious knight. He had been the closest thing to family after I had been taken from Thamir. Lyse nodded. I could tell she was still avoiding meeting my eyes, and it hurt.

It took us half an hour to reach the old, ramshackle tavern in the southwest quarter of the city. The Boar’s Tusk Tavern was small and unassuming, identifiable by a peeling wooden sign painted only with the head of a black boar. Two tiny, dirty windows looked out over the street, which was narrow and had an intangible air of disrepute. Inside, several men and women were eating lunch at the handful of small, square tables. I could tell immediately, however, that none of the tavern’s patrons were the unmistakable Sir Idras. I swallowed my disappointment. I had wanted to tell him about my kidnapping. Together, we could have plotted my return to Thamir. Deep down, he was an honorable man; he wouldn’t let this injustice stand. He would help me.

Lyse walked to the bar, where the tavern owner stood rinsing mugs using a bucket of water and a rag. She wordlessly held up two fingers, and he nodded and filled two mugs with ale, which he handed to her. Lyse passed him some coins and sat down on a stool in front of him, motioning for me to join her.

“Has Sir Idras been here lately?” I asked the tavern owner, taking a seat.

He scratched the rough black stubble on his cheek. “No, he’s been gone a while. A few weeks, maybe? He’ll be back. He always is, that one.”

More disappointment. This day was turning into one letdown after another. We might as well go home now.

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“When you see him again, will you tell him Aeryn came looking for him? Tell him I’m from Windhall. He’ll remember me.”

“I’ll do it,” a young woman’s voice said from behind us.

I turned at the sound and saw a female knight approaching us, a mug in her hand. She was only lightly armored, with a combination of scale and chain armor on her torso over a light purple tunic. Light-brown leather bracers ran from her wrist to her upper arms, and solid metal greaves reached from her ankles to her knees. A sword in a royal-blue scabbard hung from her leather belt. Her long brown hair flowed down her back freely but was kept out of her face by two thin braids. She smiled and sat down on the free stool next to me. Her face was open and friendly.

“Hi, I’m Asher,” she said, extending a hand to me in greeting.

I shook it. “I’m Aeryn, and this is Lyse.” I gestured to Lyse, who waved.

“Why are you looking for Idras?” Asher asked.

“He’s a friend. I’d like to see him again. It’s been a few months.”

“I squired for Idras several years ago. He’s a...very unique knight.”

“That he is,” I agreed, smiling as I thought of our adventure to steal back Snowflake after he’d lost her while gambling.

“Once I watched him wrestle an actual bear as part of a bet,” Asher said.

“Who won?”

“Depends who you ask. Idras is the victor in all his stories, haven’t you noticed?” She chuckled, her eyes sparkling. “I don’t blame him; we should all be the hero of our story. Are you from the city?”

“No, we’re from Windhall. We’re visiting for the day.”

“Mages! There’s a surprise. I can show you the city, if you like. I know all the best sights.” She winked. I blinked in surprise, taken aback by her brazen flirting. No one had ever been so forward with me. We’d just met! I wasn’t sure how to react. Although my heart still longed for Lyse, she had been clear in her rejection of me that morning. And Asher was undeniably attractive. I blushed. Beside me, Lyse stiffened.

“Actually, we’re on a bit of a mission,” I said.

“Oh?” Asher arched her thin eyebrows. “Tell me more.” She put her chin on her fists and leaned forward, her eyes shining.

“It’s nothing,” Lyse said, elbowing me hard in the ribs. Whispering so only I could hear, she said, “She’ll think we’re ridiculous if you tell her.”

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I whispered back, “No, she won’t! Maybe she can help! She’s a knight; maybe she knows something.” Returning to face Asher, I said, “A noble has gone missing in the city. Have you heard?”

“No,” Asher replied, cocking her head. “Is this person important to you?”

“No, not exactly. Many people have gone missing in the city, particularly in the northwest quarter, and we’re trying to find out why.”

Asher’s eyebrows knit together in puzzlement. “Isn’t that the job of the city guard?”

“Well, yes, but they’re clearly not doing a good job if it keeps happening.”

She nodded. “Fair point. What have you found out?”

“Nothing. The man vanished into thin air.”

“A real mystery,” Asher said, looking interested. “What did the city guard say?”

I dropped my gaze. “We haven’t gone to them. Why would they tell us anything?”

“Nonsense!” Asher exclaimed. “If there’s news of your missing persons to be had, the city guard will have it. Would you like me to take you to them?”

“Yes!” Hope bubbled in my chest. Could this be what we needed to finally start uncovering who was behind the kidnappings? Maybe our trip into the city wasn’t a waste of time after all. The city guard might have ignored two students from Windhall University, but they wouldn’t ignore a knight.

As we walked north through the city on the way to the city guard’s northwest garrison, Asher regaled us with tales of training to become a knight. She’d become a page at the age of seven, then she’d become a squire at fourteen and was assigned to serve Sir Idras. Sir Idras, being known in the knighthood for his less-than-noble reputation, was most commonly not given a squire, but since the knighthood was thinly stretched by the war, she had been assigned to him for a year until a more appropriate knight could be identified. She’d then spent the next three years serving Lady Avrill of Qarys before she was knighted.

“Idras gave me my first warhorse—we call them destriers—after I was knighted, but don’t ask me how he got Stormcloud because I don’t want to know.” She smiled and winked.



I laughed. Asher's good humor was infectious. "Will Sir Idras be back soon?"

"Yes. He's out riding the circuit, which means traveling through the countryside to maintain law and order. With so many soldiers pushed to the southern front, brigands, thieves, and lawbreakers of all kinds are taking advantage to wreak havoc. We try to send knights out to keep some of the lawlessness tamped down, but it's hard. We've even had some knights killed in the last few years."

I thought back to the band of brigands that Jale, Gamiel, and I had encountered on our travel toward King's City. "It sounds dangerous," I said.

"It is!" Asher grinned. "But no one becomes a knight who's afraid of riding into danger head on."

The second she said it, her face froze for a moment, then fell. Her eyes misted over with a profound sadness and her mouth twitched as she tried and failed to regain the smile that had been there. She ran her hand over her hair, and I could see that her hand was trembling slightly. Had someone close to her paid for their bravery with their life?

"You must be *very* brave," Lyse said. Her condescending tone, which I hoped that only I could hear, was so out of character that I gaped at her for a moment. Why was she being rude? It wasn't like her at all. Asher didn't hear the comment, however, lost as she was in whatever thoughts she was thinking, and I was glad. We needed all the help we could get to find who was kidnapping people from the city. It wouldn't do to alienate our new ally. I wondered if she might know a way to escape Windhall without being caught. Maybe I wouldn't have to wait for Sir Idras.

A few minutes later, we arrived at the garrison. It was a long, low stone building with dark and ominous windows and the city guard's wooden heraldic shield hanging above the door. Inside was a single room with several desks at the front and a large cell with thick bars at the back. A few prisoners milled around behind the bars, looking bored. One slept on a pallet bolted to the wall, a hand over his face. The desks in the room were unoccupied but for two. Neither of the green uniformed guardsmen sitting at them seemed to have noticed or cared about our entrance.

Asher walked up to the closest desk, whose occupant sat with his feet propped up on it and a hat slouched over his face. She rapped on it sharply.

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He had been sleeping and awoke with a twitch. "Excuse me," she said, "we're here to inquire about some missing people."

The guardsman looked from her to me to Lyse and back to her. His lip curled. "What's this?" he asked. "Is it children's hour?"

"Do you have a list of the people who have gone missing from this quarter and what the investigations turned up?" Asher asked, crossing her arms.

"Oh aye, I'll get that for you, will I?" the guardsman answered in a surly tone.

"Thank you," Asher replied as though his question hadn't been rhetorical.

The guardsman gaped at her. "Go on, jog on. I've got better things to do, runts."

Asher sighed. I wondered whether we shouldn't leave now, before he became even more abusive toward us. Clearly there would be no winning him over with charm. "You know," Asher remarked with studied casualness, "when my father Ivar, the late Lord Chancellor, requested that Lady Marshal Heika reform the city guard, he intended that it become an open and friendly service, to rebuild the trust of the people after years of corruption under the previous Lord Marshal. I'm sure that this is exactly the sort of thing he would have pointed to as a positive example of helpful behavior."

The guardsman jumped to attention, his feet slipping off the table and his hat almost sliding off his head. His eyes wide, he breathed, "You're the daughter of Lord Chancellor Ivar?"

"I am," Asher said. "Not that it should matter to the performance of your duties. Now, Aeryn, please tell him what we need."

I fumbled for words for a moment before I managed to squeak out, "We'd like the names, locations, and dates of any unusual disappearances in the northwest quarter."

The guardsman looked at us with an inscrutable expression on his face that I thought might be disbelief, then walked over to another desk in the room. Sitting upon it was a large, leather-bound book, which he carried back to us and dropped with a thud on his own desk before us. He pointed to it.

Asher's eyebrows knit together. "The list is in there?"

"That *is* the list," he answered.

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“It’s massive!” she exclaimed. “How many years does it go back? Twenty? Thirty?”

“This one? Eh.” He picked it up and weighed it in his hand. “Five years, give or take.”

## CHAPTER 3

*“Empty the prisons and send the inhabitants to me, if you must.  
We need more fighters if we’re to survive the winter.”*

*– Private Letter from General Oran, commander  
of the King’s Army, to King Hap*

*“All animals leave a trail, Aeryn. All you have to do is look for it.”*

*– Jax*

LYSE GASPED. HER HAND FLEW to the base of her throat. “Only five years? How can that be?”

The guardsman shrugged, his eyes dull and uninterested by the subject. His uniform had a dark stain on the front, and his hat looked like Snowflake had walked back and forth over it several times. I thought of Jale and Gamiel’s perfectly clean and polished armor. Even Sir Idras had taken care to always keep his armor presentable. If this was the type of person who was supposed to find the quarter’s missing denizens, I could see why they hadn’t been found.

Asher flipped to the first page of the book. A name was written on it in an untidy black scrawl and below it, I assumed, the details of their disappearance. Asher rubbed a hand over her face. “All right, Aeryn, what do we need to know about these missing people of yours?”

“I—I don’t know,” I stammered, slightly dazed. “I didn’t think there would be so many.” I thought for a moment. What might be recorded in that book that would help us? We were looking for tracks in the snow to see what animal left them and where they went. What would my father have said? I chewed my lip. “We’re searching for clues; some sort of pattern:

From *where* are people disappearing? *When* did they disappear? Did anyone see anything unusual?"

Asher nodded. "We're going to have to take notes to keep track of it all."

She walked around to the other side of the guardsman's desk and sat in his chair. She asked him, "Do you have a quill and parchment we could use?"

It took a moment, but he furnished the requested items to Asher, who dipped the quill into the inkwell at the desk, then poised it above the parchment. "Aeryn, will you please read the first page for me?"

I blushed. "I'd better not. I don't read very well."

"That's all right," Asher replied, smiling at me. "Will you, please, Lyse?"

Lyse leaned over the book and began to read: "Waran, age thirty-eight, cobbler. Missing near the Hogshead Market on the fourth day of the eighth month, mid-morning. Last seen wearing brown trousers and a shirt. Missing the small finger on his right hand, one tooth. No family outside city. No witnesses." She added, wrinkling her nose, "That's not very helpful."

"Too soon to tell. Try the next one," Asher said.

Lyse continued. "Olun, thirty-one, wheelwright. Missing near the western gate on the twenty-third day of the sixth month, noontime. Last seen wearing a blue tunic and gray trousers. Brown hair and eyes, average height. Wife suspects disappearance could be related to gambling debts."

After reading a dozen or so reports, with Asher dutifully copying down their details in a small, cramped script on the borrowed parchment, Lyse paused. Each of the disappearances so far seemed different from all the ones that had come before. Men, women, children, bakers, laborers, and grandmothers had all gone missing, each in a different location on a different day.

"I don't see any pattern at all," Lyse said, crossing her arms.

"Keep reading. There has to be some sort of clue," I replied. I closed my eyes, trying hard to find the pattern. It had to be there somewhere. Even if not all the disappearances were kidnappings, some had to be. What was the thread that linked them all together?

Lyse turned to the next page. "Zana, age twelve. Missing near the King Hadriel III fountain on the twenty-first day of the sixth month, morning. Last seen wearing a blue dress with small white flowers. Blonde hair, brown

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eyes, approximately five feet tall. Abducted in crowd during the summer solstice celebration. Parents believe culprit was wearing brown cloak with hood, approximately six feet tall. No further witnesses.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere!” Asher wrote the information with a flourish.

“A man in a cloak is hardly a good clue,” Lyse argued, rolling her eyes.

“Who wears a cloak in the summer?” Asher challenged.

“We need a map,” I said. “We need to see where people are going missing.”

“That’s a good idea,” Asher agreed. To the guardsman, she said, “Do you have a map of the northwest quarter that we could use?”

Pages of Asher’s neat, precise notetaking later, we had gone through most of the book, and the map of the northwest quarter that the guardsman had given us was full of dots marking the locations of each disappearance. Asher set the quill down, rubbed her eyes, and massaged the muscle of her palm below her thumb. “I hope you see more than I do, Aeryn,” she said. “There are a few places, such as the western gate and the Beggar’s Market, where the disappearances seem to be a bit more common, but otherwise they’re scattered all over the quarter. They happen everywhere, in every month. I don’t see any patterns. Are you certain there’s a band of kidnappers running around King’s City? There are all sorts of reasons people disappear.”

I shook my head. Doubt was creeping in. Was I imagining things? Was Lyse right that I was seeing a conspiracy where none existed? Had I projected my own misfortune onto people who, in reality, had suffered their own unrelated tragedies? But no, my instinct told me it wasn’t all coincidence. “No, I’m not certain,” I replied. “But don’t you find it odd that so many people have disappeared in the last few years? Doesn’t it seem strange to you?”

“I don’t know. I’ll ask around and see what more I can find out. Maybe someone has heard something. If you’re right, maybe your kidnappers tried to take someone who fought back and escaped.” Asher stood and adjusted her sword belt. Then she folded the map up and handed it to me. “Will you return to Windhall now?”

“Yes,” Lyse replied quickly before I could say anything. “It’s getting late.”

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“If you’d like to stay in the city longer,” Asher said, addressing me, “I’m happy to escort you back whenever you like.”

“She’s coming with *me*,” Lyse snapped. I blushed, embarrassed by her rudeness. Why was Lyse behaving like Asher was an enemy? Asher had been nothing but helpful.

Asher shrugged. “I’ll let you know if I find out anything.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

The three of us walked out the garrison and back into the afternoon sun. Lyse wrapped her arm in mine and smiled at Asher. “It was nice to meet you, Lady Asher. Thank you for assisting us today. I’m sure you must be very busy. We can see ourselves home now.”

Her smile was a little too stiff, and her words were all wrong. They were too formal, as though we’d just met Asher and not spent the day investigating disappearances together. I blinked at her. What had gotten into her?

Asher nodded, then said to me, “If you need me, I’m at the knight’s garrison next to the castle. Anyone there can direct you to me.” She flashed a flirty smile. “Have a good evening.”

She turned and headed east, a slight swagger to her step, and Lyse dragged me south toward the western gate. She was walking too quickly, and I almost had to jog to keep up with her. After several strides of this pace, coupled with a heavy and oppressive silence between us, I planted my heels and dragged us to a halt.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing!” Lyse replied, her face flushed.

“You were very rude to Asher! She was being very helpful.”

“We don’t need her help. We can do it ourselves.”

I put my hands on my hips. “No, we can’t! We never would have gotten that information without her. Why don’t you like her?”

Lyse squirmed uncomfortably. “I don’t dislike her.”

I threw up my hands. There was no use arguing. “Good,” I grunted, “because we need her help. Whoever is abducting people is obviously very clever.”

\* \* \*

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Throughout the next week, I seemed to see Lyse everywhere. She watched from a distance during combatives practice. She helped me write my lines for Professor Kalmath's class and brought me my favorite tart as a special snack before bed. She appeared by my side as if by magic during every meal and walked me every day to Raelan's class. I was torn by this intense interest. On the one hand, I selfishly treasured every glance and every touch from her, but on the other, her attention cut like a knife. She had been clear about her choice, and it hadn't been me. Why reject me only to toy with me? What did she expect? That we could fall back into being the closest of friends but never anything more?

So long as that pull existed between us, the knowledge that we would only ever be friends hurt me far worse than Faegan's knife had. How could I pretend to not have the feelings that I did? How could I be expected to smile and act as though nothing was wrong when it was, to me, all wrong? But I had no choice: I could suffer in silence or I could cut her out of my life entirely, and that was no choice at all. I chose to suffer.

A few days after our trip into the city, Kaylara found me after dinner to tell me that there was a lady knight asking for me. Had Asher discovered something? I jogged quickly to the front entrance, where Asher stood holding the reins of a tall bay horse.

She beamed brightly when she saw me. "Aeryn!"

"Do you have news?" Without realizing it, I held my breath.

Asher grinned proudly. "I have something better: a witness. Can you come now to meet him?"

There was no prohibition against leaving Windhall after classes were over for the day, so I nodded. Asher mounted the bay, who I assumed was the famous Stormcloud given to her by Sir Idras, then reached down to help me up. I landed behind the saddle's high cantle and wrapped my arms around her waist. She was warm and smelled of sandalwood soap. I felt a small shiver of...excitement? It was hard to ignore how close together our bodies were. Only a little farther apart than when Lyse had tackled me in the infirmary. Before I could think about it further, however, she said, "Hold on! Cloud is the fastest horse in the knighthood!"

She clucked once, and he took off like lightning. I clung to Asher for dear life as Cloud's powerful haunches drove forward beneath us. We streaked toward the city, the wind blowing through my hair and snatching at my



clothes. Asher laughed with reckless abandon, and her joy was infectious. I laughed, too, letting my arms relax slightly.

When we reached the western gate, Asher reined Cloud in, and we entered the city alongside other pedestrians and carts. We walked north into the northwest quarter, down shabby, meandering streets until we arrived at a particularly rundown area that I estimated must be near the northern edge of the city. Asher pulled Cloud to a halt, and I slid off clumsily, with Asher landing easily next to me a moment later. She left Cloud's reins over his neck, confident he would stay for as long as she needed him to, then walked up to a house and knocked on its rough, unpainted door.

It was opened by a broad-shouldered man with thin, long gray hair that reached to his shoulders. Day-old white whiskers sprouted from his cheeks, and his blue eyes were rheumy. His round nose was round and red. Wordlessly, without even seeming to acknowledge us, he turned and walked back inside the house, leaving the door open. Asher motioned me to follow her. We stepped past the threshold and found the man had taken a seat in a rocking chair in front of a fire in the hearth. He stared into the fire so intently that I wondered if he'd forgotten we were there. Was he ill? Why had Asher brought me here? She hadn't explained on the ride, preferring, I surmised, to surprise me.

"Yorel, will you please tell Aeryn about your daughter Emira, as you told me?" Asher said gently, kneeling and taking his hand in hers. "I've brought her here to listen. She's trying to find people like Emira."

Yorel looked up at me with eyes made hollow by deep loss. His cheeks were soft and sunken. I wondered how old he was. By how many years had his grief aged him? He said quietly, as though talking to himself and not to us, "My Emira was taken from me two years, three months, and a handful of days ago." He looked back at the fire. "She was so much like her mother: so full of life and fire. My shining star."

Asher squeezed his hand, encouraging him to go on when he paused. He coughed, then continued. "It was late and we were almost home. She had been helping me carry bricks from the brickworks. She didn't want me to do it; said I was too old to be doing this work, that I should stop before it ruined me. But of course I couldn't. We needed the money. We both knew that.

## THE DARKNESS RISING

“Bad things happen in this neighborhood all the time after the sun’s set. I knew it was dangerous, but...” A tear ran down his cheek. “I should have been more careful. I shouldn’t have let her come. I should have made her stay home. Two men came out of the darkness. They must have been waiting there. For her, for me, for anyone who happened to come past them that night, I don’t know. They knocked me over and grabbed her. One of them threw her over his shoulder and began to run.

They must have knocked her out or else she would have fought. Oh, she would have fought! The other man, he did something to me. He magicked me, I know he did. It felt like I was covered in thick black tar. I couldn’t move, couldn’t fight to get her back. I kept trying to yell, to tell them to let her go, but I couldn’t. And then they were gone.”

Tears began to run down his cheeks freely, and my heart ached for him. Had my parents, too, watched me be taken, helpless to stop it? I knew Jale’s story had been a lie, but I didn’t know the truth. What had happened in Thamir that day?

Yorel continued, “When I could move again, I ran after them. I ran all up and down the streets calling for her, but it was like they were ghosts. No one saw or heard a thing. They were gone forever, and my Emira with them. For a year, I looked for her. I spent every copper I had trying to find her. Every day, I went to the city guard and demanded answers, but there were none to be had. She had disappeared.”

He fell silent. Asher looked to me, waiting for me to ask a question. I hadn’t expected this. This was everything I’d been looking for: proof that there was at least one mage involved in a kidnapping. My triumph was cut short by a small detail that nagged at me: How did the mage or mages evade the city’s magic wards? The city guard should have arrived within minutes of unsanctioned magic being used in the city. They would have turned the city inside out trying to root out the mage that had set the wards off. Where were they in Yorel’s story?

“After Emira was taken, did the city guard come?” I asked.

“No.” Yorel sighed. “But the kidnappers would have been long gone by then anyway. It wouldn’t have mattered.”

How had the mage done it? Was Yorel mistaken about the magic? Or worse yet, lying about the whole thing? I dismissed the idea immediately. There was no way to feign such deep sorrow.

I ran through possibilities in my mind. Could someone have figured out a way to subvert the wards? Could there be gaps in them, like holes in cheese, and the mage had found them? Lyse had shown such faith in the wards when she told me about them that I had believed they were impossible to trick, but why should they be? Perhaps the mage who had originally set them had inadvertently left a gap that the kidnappers knew how to exploit. Or perhaps they were old and crumbling...or even long gone. Could that be why Lyse had been able to use Timo's magic without triggering them? I also had to admit the possibility that the wards had worked as intended but the city guard simply hadn't bothered to respond. There was no way for me to know the truth.

The mystery of the wards aside, we had our first clue, which was that whoever the kidnappers were, one was a mage who could create a temporary tar-like substance. "Yorel, what color was the mage's magic? Was it red? Blue? Yellow?"

"Color?" Yorel looked confused. "There was nothing. Only black."

"Black magic," I repeated. "You're sure?"

Yorel nodded. A shiver ran up my arms, making all the hairs stand on end. Black magic could only mean one thing: a mage who practiced Dark Magic. I leaned against the wall to steady myself. Even though I had suspected it for a long time, the confirmation was still breathtaking in its ramification: evil had returned to King's City. And no one else seemed to know.

"I'm so sorry about your daughter," I told Yorel. "But I'm going to make sure whoever did this can't take anyone else."

Although I had no way of keeping my promise, I intended to try. No parents deserved to have their children taken from them. I nodded to Asher, and she nodded back. Between us, we could find a way. I just knew it. Asher thanked Yorel for his time and we left him, creeping back outside on tiptoe as though we were leaving a funeral.

"How did you find him?" I asked Asher, laying my hand on Cloud's reddish-brown neck.

Asher grinned and waggled her eyebrows, pleased with herself. "I have my ways. I might even be able to find you more like him. It will be hard, but after hearing his story, I don't doubt that there are others." Then, peering into my eyes, she said, "You looked like you saw a ghost in there."

## THE DARKNESS RISING

What's really going on here? Who's taking these people and why? You can trust me."

I bit my lower lip. Lyse wouldn't like me telling anyone else about Dark Magic since no one was supposed to know, but now that I was certain at least one Dark mage was active in the city, it was only fair to tell Asher. After all, we had to start sounding the alarm. The citizens of King's City needed to know. It was bad enough to be kidnapped by members of the King's Regiment, but it was far worse to be kidnapped by Dark Mages. I had been taken to Windhall; Emira, I was sure, was now in the Eternal Realms.

I looked around us. We were alone on the street. Dropping my voice, I said, "She was taken by a mage who uses something called Dark Magic, or Blood Magic. Dark mages use pain to become more powerful."

"I've never heard of it." Asher's light voice showed she didn't fully understand the gravity of what I was telling her. "You're sure it was a Dark mage?"

"Yorel said the mage's magic was black. No other mages have black magic. The only way to have it is to have practiced Dark Magic." I thought of Raelan and his black eyes. My stomach twisted into a knot. Was he involved in this? Or did he know who was?

Asher looked thoughtful, but not scared. "Would the Mages' Council know who this Dark mage is?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. If they did, wouldn't they stop him?"

Asher tapped the pommel of her sword with the pad of her thumb, thinking. "So this Dark mage spends years kidnapping people...and no one has ever noticed him? How has he gotten away with it for so long?"

"I don't think anyone knows to look. Dark Magic was banned in Ilirya a long time ago and all reference of it was scrubbed from the records. Probably there are only a handful of people in the entire city who have even heard of it. Certainly not enough to see the signs and know what they mean."

Asher blew out a puff of air from her cheeks and ran her hand over the top of her head. "Well, since *we* know what it means, we can tell the city guard and they'll find the bad mage and stop it." She looked at me with a half-smile. "You've solved the mystery of the disappearances in the northwest quarter, Aeryn! You did it!"

I blushed and dropped my gaze, but Asher's confidence was contagious. It was so simple: We had all the proof that we needed; the city guard would have to act. They could even get the Mages' Council to help find the Dark mage or mages. I balled my fists. Despite my friends' doubts, I had been vindicated. No one else would be kidnapped by Dark mages now. Their reign of terror was over, starting now. Exuberance made me feel light as air.

At this time of the evening, the city guard's northwest quarter garrison buzzed like a giant beehive, full of guardsmen and women and tough, grizzled criminals packed into the large cell in the back. The garrison looked nothing like it had when we'd last been there. Asher strode into the middle of the open room, head high, and demanded to speak to the garrison's lieutenant from the first guardswoman she encountered. The short, muscular guardswoman, who wore an eyepatch and a crossbow strapped to her back, jerked her thumb at a tall, thin man with dark-brown skin and wavy black hair who stood in a corner of the room next to the cell. "That'd be Lieutenant Bogdan Hookhand o'er there," she grunted. "G'luck with 'im. He's in a right mood tonight."

Asher marched with unflagging assurance to the lieutenant, me in tow. I wasn't sure that now was the best time to approach him. Bogdan was arguing with another guardsman, their faces close together and red, their expressions strained, and their bodies tense. Asher was undaunted. Since the two men appeared to be on the verge of coming to blows, she wasted no time. After clearing her throat to get the lieutenant's attention, she announced formally, "Lieutenant Bogdan, I am Lady Asher. I have a matter that needs your attention."

Bogdan, who did, in fact, have a hook for a right hand, stopped arguing with his subordinate and glanced at Asher. His eyes traveled from her face down to her feet and back to her face again, then he spat on the floor. "Well? What is it?"

"We're here to report that we've found the perpetrators of a kidnapping. And also, the use of something called Dark Magic in the city. The Mages' Council needs to be warned about this, as well as the Lady Marshal, so that swift action can be taken to stop it."

"Is that right?" Bogdan replied coolly.

"*Immediately*," Asher stressed, her brow furrowing at Bogdan's reception of her information.

## THE DARKNESS RISING

Bogdan looped his thumbs through his sword belt and rocked back on his heels, sucking on his front teeth as he squinted at Asher. My heart sank. He wasn't going to help us. After a moment, he said, "You know, the thing is, I don't know you from the Queen Consort. For all I know, you could be anyone, coming in here talking about whatever this Dark Magic nonsense is."

Asher's jaw flexed as she ground her teeth together. "Lieutenant Bogdan, I am clearly a knight of the realm! My destrier is standing outside the garrison right now and my name is listed in the codex of the knighthood. What further evidence do you need?"

Bogdan sniffed loudly, then spat again. I wondered how much of the floor that we were standing on was covered with his spit. He challenged, "So why don't you go tell them yourself, Lady Knight?"

"The Dark Magic is in your quarter!" Asher snapped, her face turning a pale crimson. "It is your responsibility as lieutenant of the northwest quarter garrison to—"

Bogdan cut her off, holding his left hand up. "That's right, *I'm* the Lieutenant, not you. You've made your report to me, so I will handle it. Now good day to you both."

Asher looked like she was about to say a good many things that were likely to get us in a heap of trouble, so I grabbed her arm and began to drag her out of the garrison. With her plate armor on, she was harder to move than I had anticipated. It didn't help that she was struggling against me, trying to fight her way back to Bogdan, but I held firm. Bogdan obviously wasn't going to help us, and we were no good to anyone sitting in that cell at the back of the garrison. "Let it go," I hissed to her. "We'll tell someone else."

"How dare he!" Asher fumed. "I knew the city guard in this quarter was renowned for its laziness, but this is unacceptable! He is sworn to protect the citizens of this quarter! What an insolent, lazy, good-for-nothing..."

"We'll find another way," I soothed. "It's getting late; I need to get back to Windhall."

Based on the dying twilight, it would be full dark soon. I put my hand on Asher's shoulder to settle her, and her attention turned to me. She smiled, momentarily forgetting her anger at Bogdan. I smiled back but felt a pang

of sadness. I wished it had been Lyse who had made this discovery with me. It should have been the two of us, not me and Asher. I dropped my hand.

Once we were out of the city, Cloud swiftly covered the ground between King's City and Windhall with his long, even strides. The road before us was illuminated by the bright light of the full moon, like a shining white path. When the city was behind us and Windhall only a dark outline on the horizon, it felt as if we were flying. Only the sound of Cloud's feet pounding rhythmically against the ground reminded me that the earth was still below us. Although I clung tightly to Asher, I couldn't shake my residual sadness. Even though Lyse was with Timo, I nevertheless wished it was Lyse whom I held. No matter how good Asher smelled.

When we reached Windhall, Asher pulled Cloud to a halt. The campus was quiet and still. Candles—some lit by mage fire, others by flint—burned in many of the dorm windows as the students studied before bed. I slid off Cloud's tall back and stood next to him while Asher dismounted as well.

"I'll tell the Knight Commander, Lady Bronwen, about what we've learned tomorrow," Asher said. Her voice was full of certainty and conviction. "She'll see that it's handled. She'll tell Marshal Heika and the Mages' Council, and then knock some sense into that stupid Bogdan Hookhand."

She cocked her head, grinning impishly. "I'm glad we met. Who knew that such dark and devious things were happening right under our noses in the city? I grew up here and I still had no idea!"

A wave of melancholy swept over me. "I wish the kidnappers had been discovered earlier. I hate to think of Yorel all alone in his house, missing his daughter. Maybe Emira could have been saved, if only someone had realized what was happening back then."

I wondered what my parents were doing at that moment. I had been gone for months. Were they as hollow and despondent as Yorel? Did they think me dead, or did they have hope that I was still alive? Had they done anything to try to find me? White-hot anger flashed through me. Jale and Gamiel weren't so different from the Dark mages. They deserved to be stopped just as much as the Dark mages, if only I could find a way.

Asher hadn't noticed my shifting moods. She said, "At least we'll stop them now. Thanks to you, we know what we're up against." She shook her head. "I'd like to round up those kidnappers myself."

## THE DARKNESS RISING

“Will it really be that easy to catch them?” I asked.

“Absolutely! The city guard may be useless, but the knighthood never fails. Oh! You have a moth in your hair.”

She leaned in close to me in order to see better in the dark, then reached behind my ear to pick off a small, light-colored moth. It must have caught in my hair as we were riding. She flicked it away, and it landed somewhere on the grass.

“I should head back to the city,” she said, casting a glance over her shoulder at the hulking outline of King’s City. “Good night, Aeryn. I hope to see you again soon. I’ll send word if I hear anything more.”

She took my hand and raised it to her lips, kissing the first knuckle the way I imagined ladies had their hands kissed at the king’s court. The action was simultaneously intimate and chivalrous. My body unexpectedly thrilled with excitement in response. Could there be a little space in my heart left for Asher? She winked, then mounted and wheeled Cloud around, dashing off into the night. Within moments, the two were swallowed up by the darkness.

I listened to the sound of Cloud’s hooves striking the ground until I could hear it no more, then I turned to go back to the dorm. It was only then that I noticed Lyse standing several dozen paces away with a lantern. I hadn’t seen her before because my back had been to her. Although the light of the lantern lit her face poorly, it was impossible to miss the devastation on her face. I raised my hand in greeting and opened my mouth to ask what was wrong, but before I could speak, she spun on her heel and fled toward the dorm. I realized then that from her angle, it must have looked as though Asher had kissed me.



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DAUGHTER OF FIRE  
THE DARKNESS RISING

BY KAREN FROST

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