

Gale's Gift

by Beth Alvarez

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GALE'S GIFT

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Chapter One

Clouds with undersides like gray silk cloaked the sky, the cool ocean breeze carrying the scent of rain. Rainstorms were nothing to be concerned about, but there were more clouds farther behind, riding low on the wind and piling on top of themselves until they turned black.

It was storms like those Morghram hated.

Lightning crawled along the bellies of the thunderheads, though they were yet too far off for thunder to be heard. The winds were still easy, but the pre-storm stillness would come soon enough, and who knew what sort of gale would follow? He couldn't see any rotation in the clouds from where he stood atop the cliff, but he'd heard tales from sailors about hurricanes with an eye as wide as the harbor. But a grown man didn't fear something so simple as the weather; he disliked it, instead.

Shaking his head, he turned back to his window and lifted another plank of pine. He'd lived on the cliff-top above the beach since retiring from the Royal Army, and if he didn't like storms, he'd at least grown used to them. The front of his house faced the sea and he'd added bars beside the windows long ago. Sliding boards behind them wedged the planks between the bars and the shutters, deterring damage. The windows were not fine glass, the panes filled with ripples and bubbles, but they *were* glass; a commodity he was fortunate to have. So he barricaded both windows with care, dusting his hands together before looking back to the storm.

Foam capped the waves in the distance and small fishing boats hastened back to the long piers that lined the shore. But there was something else amid the waves, something small and pale. At first he thought it a pelican or some other sea bird, but it wasn't graceful; it floundered in the water, slipping beneath the surface and then clawing its way back up, slower and weaker each time. A person, he realized. And all the fishing vessels had already moored.

Morghram was not young any longer, a few years past his prime and looking more weathered than that, but he was spry, and the carved stairs that led from the cliff-top village to the sandy shore beneath were not far from his home. He took them by twos, watching the bobbing figure in the sea all the while, his breath catching every time it sank beneath the waves.

He had only a small boat—one he'd built with his neighbor that they shared between them—but it was better than none. He cast off forcefully, leaping into the boat and sparing only a grimace for the stabbing pain of landing on his bad leg.

Thunder growled in the skies overhead, the air growing still though the waves before him raged. Grinding his teeth, he tried to ignore the building storm and focus on each sweep of the oars.

Stroke.

One to carry him up a swell, another to descend.

Stroke.

One to make up the distance he'd lost, one to climb again.

Heat burned in his back and his shoulders, the sound of the waves and his own breath drowning out the crackling lightning overhead. The waves pushed against him and rowing through them took every ounce of power he had, though as he grew closer to the figure stranded in the water, his determination grew.

It was a woman, fair-haired and clad in pale blue silk, clinging to a piece of wreckage. Hope and desperation lit her eyes when she saw him, but it was all she could do to hold on; the

waves threatened to tear her raft from beneath her, the weight of her gown trying to drag her to the bottom.

He drew the small boat as close as he could manage. Diving in to lift her was out of the question, the angry sea eager to sweep him away from his vessel. Instead he clung to the edge and reached across, straining toward her until he was sure he would fall.

She caught him by the fingertips and let go of the splintered wood. He hauled her closer, wrapping both hands around her wrist and gritting his teeth, pulling until he could loop an arm around her and heave her into the boat. She landed with a slosh, her heavy gown bringing up what seemed half the sea with her.

“Hold tight,” Morghram roared above the growing sound of the storm, taking the oars again. He ached with fatigue but the waves were with him this time, letting them glide to shore. With the woman still in it, he pulled the boat as near the cliff as he could manage before offering his arm.

Her lips were pale and they quivered with the chattering of her teeth, but she took his arm and staggered to her feet. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he helped her walk, the two of them climbing the stairway together as the first stinging droplets of rain fell.

They reached the porch of his house just as the clouds opened, lightning drawing patterns of lace across the sky, nothing but their glow visible through the curtain of rain.

“Come inside,” he murmured, half carrying her to the door. “We’ll get a fire going. You’ll be all right.”

She followed without a word, standing as still as a statue when he let her go and turned to close the door against the storm. Holding her arms against chill, she looked around as if confused about where he’d brought her. Given what luxury her dress must have been before a dip in the sea, he supposed she couldn’t relate to the space he called home.

The house was not large, but it was comfortable, made finer by his trade as woodworker. A table and two chairs sat beneath the windows and a chest sat at the foot of the wide bed, but otherwise the single-room dwelling was filled with half-finished furniture pieces and tools. Most pieces were beautifully worked, with detailed carving and lacquers that complemented the natural color of the wood, making his own furnishings appear plain by comparison.

Clearing his throat, he strode to the chest at the end of the bed. “You’ll want to be out of that dress before you catch cold. Give me a moment and I’ll find something else for you to wear. Then we’ll get the fire stoked and get you warmed up.” He opened the chest and paused. “You do speak the trade tongue?”

“Yes,” she replied, watching as he shook wrinkles out of a plain tunic and breeches.

“Good, good. Though I suppose most people do, these days. Just wasn’t certain where you might have been sailing from.” He drew a belt from the chest and then carried what he’d gathered the table. His clothing would make her look like a child, but it was better than nothing. “There, those are dry. Do you need help with your buttons?”

She shook her head, sniffing as she crept to the table. She fingered the rough wool clothing before turning her attention to the half-finished toys beneath it, solstice-gifts he’d started for his neighbors.

Morghram frowned, but made himself turn away. “Very well.” He slipped past her to kneel against the edge of the stone hearth, prodding the fire back to life, scraping ashes into a pail before adding another log to the fireplace. In cooler weather the soup pot stayed above the fire, but it was still summer, so he hung the empty pot and filled it from the wooden bucket beside the hearth. At least the rains would refill the barrel beside his door, sparing him a trip to

the well. A basket on the floor held vegetables and he selected a few, slicing them into the pot with his belt knife.

“You may look now,” the woman said.

He turned his head to look at her as she smoothed the dark tunic with both hands. Her dripping clothing hung over the back of a chair and he was surprised to see how many layers she'd worn. How had she stayed afloat at all, wearing all of that?

Grunting, he cleaned his knife and tucked it away, wiping his hands on his already dirty breeches as he stood. “Bring your things, we'll hang them to dry.” He took a pole from where it leaned against the mantel, mounting it on ledges in the corner. “I'm afraid you'll have to see a laundress to get the sea out of your silk, though.”

She sighed. “With fortune, I'll replace it.” But she did bring her things, passing them to him one at a time to be hung over the pole she couldn't reach. “Thank you, sir. For seeing to me. And for pulling me from the water.”

“Well, I couldn't leave you there. I mean no ill, but you don't look as if you can swim.” He glanced at her, but tried not to gaze for longer than a moment. She was a lady, after all, and in the house of a strange man; he didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

A lovely thing, she was narrow-framed and delicate, with ashen hair and silver-blue eyes that reminded him of the pale sky after rain.

“I can, a little. Just not when wearing that.” She looked at the dress almost wistfully, then tore her eyes away. He tried not to look at her, but she studied him intently, as if memorizing every line in his scarred and weathered face. “Still, I shall see that you are rewarded when the storm abates. My name is Eona. May I ask your name? And where I am?”

“Morghram,” he replied. “And you've landed on the coast of Roberian. Where were you sailing to? Or from, I suppose.”

Eona hesitated. “I've not heard of Roberian. We were sailing to a country called Lore, from my home in the Chains of Raeldan.”

“The Chains,” he repeated, surprised. The islands of Raeldan were on the other side of the world, hardly the sort of sea voyage he expected an obvious noblewoman to make. “Well, you're not far from Lore. It's just west of here. I assume the storm sent you off course?”

“And sank my ship,” Eona said with a sigh.

“Well, that's the way of the sea. Never was fond of it, or its weather.” The door rattled in the wind as if to punctuate his sentence and he turned to make sure it was latched properly. “So you've family in Lore, I take it?”

“I hope so.” She inched to the table, studying the unfinished toys again. “That sounds strange, I know. I'm looking for someone who left without saying where they were going. I set out for Lore because I'd heard it held the largest harbor in the north. If nothing else, it seemed it was my best chance for finding news.”

She was right; it did sound strange. Morghram pulled out one of the chairs, motioning for her to seat herself before he settled in the other, taking a toy and a carving knife from the tabletop. “Must be someone important for you to follow them all the way from Raeldan on nothing more than a guess.”

Eona sat gingerly, resting her hands against her knees. “My husband.”

He raised a brow.

“We've not been wed long,” she continued. “Just a few weeks. Just long enough for him to sink his claws into my family's fortune and run off. He waited until I went to visit my aunt. When I came home, everything had been sold—even the manor itself—and he'd fled with every

coin. I was able to track him to the harbor and get the name of the ship he'd boarded, but whether that ship sailed north or south, no one knew. Or else he'd paid them off. Still, I must be only a few days behind him."

"Well." He cleared his throat, unsure what to say. It was an unusual plight, to say the least. "I'm afraid I can't aid you much. You're right in that Lore is likely the best place to look. Nearly all ships coming into the north come through Lore's harbor. I can set you on your way once the storm passes, but it'll take you at least a few days to get there."

Her face fell. "I don't know if I have days to spare. Are there any dignitaries closer who might be able to help? Perhaps someone who would have records of ships that have passed through the harbor recently?"

Morghram shrugged. "The count might. Roberian and Lore are ruled by the same king, you see. The countries in the triad share records, since Vicamros doesn't like for the regions to hide information from one another."

"And where can I find the count?"

"In the capital city. A day's ride, in good weather."

Her face fell.

"It's nearer than the week it would take to reach the harbor in Lore, though," he added. "I've a handful of things to deliver to the capital once the storm passes, as matter of fact. You're welcome to ride along if you wish. If you don't mind waiting for the storm to pass."

Eona laughed, a sweet sound despite her rueful expression. "As if I have any choices there. All right, I'll wait. My dress might even be dry by then."

He chuckled, turning the half-carved horse in his hand to inspect both sides. "Perhaps. But for now, just rest and make yourself comfortable. The storm might keep us here a while."

Chapter Two

“He won’t help me.” Eona sounded heartbroken, defeated. She didn’t even lift her head to look at him.

Morghram hesitated, unsure what to do. He felt he should comfort her, but before he could say a word she hugged herself and leaned away, staring at the floor. He shouldn’t have let her speak to the count alone. He hadn’t wanted to, for that matter, but the capital city was twenty-two miles from the coast; they’d done well to make the trip in a single day, and he’d had to deliver the furniture loaded into the back of the wagon before it grew too late. In truth, she’d been fortunate that she had a chance to speak to the count at all. Morghram had expected she wouldn’t be seen until the next morning. He cleared his throat, putting his tankard down without drinking. “What did he say?”

She hadn’t been impressed by his suggestion that they meet in the Worn Prayer, but the shabby inn was all he could afford. Though she’d sold her silk gown to a seamstress who could salvage it, the coin she received had barely covered the cost of the simple blue woolen dress she wore now, leaving her with nothing to contribute.

Glancing at his ale, she sniffed disdainfully before speaking. “You were right about their record keeping. He was able to tell me that the ship docked in Lore, but he wouldn’t say who disembarked. I told him what happened, but he said Roberian has no reason to be involved, since I am not a citizen of the triad and Dolbin didn’t commit his crime here. He said I am free to pursue him on my own and take him back to Raeldan, and he suggested I hire mercenaries to help, but how am I to afford them? I’ve nothing left.”

Frowning, Morghram turned his eyes to his plate. There was little he could do. The work he’d sold had brought a fair price, but even that wouldn’t buy a sellsword. Even if it could, he had to think of feeding himself before he could offer coin to someone who was all but a stranger. It was generous enough that he’d taken her into his home for two days of rain, then carted her to the city in a neighbor’s wagon.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last, picking up his fork and motioning for her to do the same. “I suppose we might have expected that.”

Eona took her fork, but didn’t seem interested in the slices of ham she pushed around on her plate.

“Will you stay in the city?” he asked. It was a meager effort to keep conversation going, but the silence was uncomfortable.

“I don’t know. There’s nothing for me here, but little more in Raeldan. Though I suppose I could return to my aunt.” She shrugged, sighing. “I will think on it, though I’m loath to leave without retrieving what’s mine from my good-for-nothing husband first.”

Morghram nodded, finishing his meal before he spoke again. “Think on it, then. I’ll leave once I find someone with goods to send to the coast. No sense in transporting an empty wagon, always an extra coin to be made ferrying cargo. I’ll be in the room next to yours if you need me.”

“Good night,” Eona murmured without looking at him again. She hadn’t eaten a bite.

Though he was grateful to have a decent bed after a long trip, Morghram didn’t rest easy. He didn’t want to leave her alone in the city, especially when she had no other traveling companions. But that brought to mind the storm and the wild waves he’d pulled her from, and he didn’t want to think of what became of the rest of the ship’s passengers.

Why had only she made it so near to shore? What manner of fortune led to him standing atop the cliff at just the right moment to see her before she could drown? And why him, instead of any number of younger, more capable men in the village? The thoughts robbed him of sleep.

Instead he turned his mind to what she'd said of her meeting with the count. Permission to hunt down a criminal was a good start, but if she couldn't afford to hire mercenaries to provide the muscle for the job, how was she to do it? She'd promised him a reward for his assistance; without the means to regain her fortune, it wouldn't come. But that thought stirred unpleasant feelings too. Was it wrong to want what had been promised? He would have helped her regardless of her ability to pay—he hadn't known she was a noble when he rowed out to save her from the waves—but he wouldn't refuse a handful of gold, either. Though he managed well, there was no denying he was past his prime, his hair more gray than black and thinning at the temples besides. Had he the means, he could buy a horse and wagon of his own, maybe even a team of horses, and not have to borrow from old Jod anymore. And independence as he aged was a good thing.

Nodding to himself as if the decision were made, he rolled over to sleep as much as he could before morning came.

When Morghram opened his door in the morning, Eona was just stepping into the hall. She offered a smile, though her eyes were lowered.

“I thought I might see you at breakfast, but this is just as good.” She smoothed her skirts with both hands, hesitating. “I appreciate all you've done for me. But I have to see this through.”

So she still meant to chase her husband. Good. “I understand.” He'd gone over what he would say a dozen times while he'd washed and dressed. That she was planning to continue on her own just saved him the trouble of trying to convince her. “And that's why I'd ask you to return to the coast with me, my lady.”

Eona blinked in surprise.

“I can't afford to pay for another night in the inn,” Morghram explained. “Nor can I afford to hire sellswords for you. But I've a sword and armor in the chest back home, and I was a fair hand with a blade when I was in service to the king. If you'll ride with me, then we'll gather provisions and set out after this thief of yours.”

“Oh.” She lifted a hand, wiping her eyes as a warmer smile wreathed itself upon her lips. “Yes. Yes, I think that's just what we ought to do.”

* * * * *

There was little to see in the rolling fields of southern Roberian, save a few farms and small villages that dotted the way. But the weather was fair and the road clear, and they rolled into the coastal town Morghram called home in early evening.

He let Eona off at his house before delivering the wagon and his cargo to Jod, sharing directions for where the boxes were to be sent in the morning. They'd split the payment for the goods later; they always did. Then he walked back to his house, working over a list of supplies in his head. Late summer was a good time for such a trip. They wouldn't need to carry much food with the fields and forests ripe with good foraging. As long as the weather stayed favorable, the travel would be the easiest part.

Eona was already filling a linen-lined basket with bread, cheese and vegetables from the bins beside the cold hearth. She smiled at him as he opened the door wide and braced it with a piece of wood, letting in the cool evening breeze. Were they not leaving again, he would have

opened the windows. But there was no sense in removing their cover for one night, so he left the windows boarded and lit a lantern on the mantel to drive out the dark.

“No sense in walking in the middle of the night,” he said as he put his flint away. “We’ll pack and rest tonight and set out in the morning.”

“Do you have any idea where we should start?” she asked.

Morghram shrugged. “If we start at the docks, we might find something. A lot of ships pass between here and Lore because it’s the fastest way for average folk to travel.”

Her mouth twitched. “Average folk?”

“Folk like us.” He carried the lantern with him to the chest at the foot of his bed. “Those with magic have their own ways.”

“Oh.” She folded the linen over the top of the food, dusting her hands together. “Mages aren’t common in Raeldan.”

“They aren’t common here, either. There’s the college in Lore, but their numbers dwindle a bit more each year. It’s still an institution, though, so they come and go as they will.” Setting the lantern on the floor, he opened the chest and moved aside the extra blankets and clothing. His armor and sword were hidden in the bottom, wrapped in stained linen. He still oiled it every year to keep it from rusting, usually on cold winter nights when lantern light was too weak to let him work. The sword gleamed bright when he unwrapped it and inspected its edge.

It was good steel, if simple; the king didn’t give his men anything extravagant, just sturdy and useful, though the hilt was stamped with the king’s mark and enameled in the colors of the triad. He laid it aside, sitting on his heels and unwrapping his armor next. His gauntlets and greaves were just as he remembered, if the leather looked a little worn. His helm was bright, if dented. Despite the regular oiling, his lamellar bore hints of rust around the edges of many of the scale-like plates. Nothing severe enough to hinder its performance, he didn’t think. The real question was whether or not it would still fit. Instead of trying it on, he put it all aside. That was a worry for the morning.

Eona watched him, not quite frowning, but the corners of her mouth were turned down. “Do most men here keep armor?”

“Not many. It’s expensive, beyond what most can afford. But I was allowed to keep mine after I retired.” He closed the chest, stacking his armor atop it and propping his sword against the wall. The edge was still good, but he still rose to look for his whetstone amid the tools on the table. If all went well, the edge would stay that way. He just had too much experience soldiering to expect it would go well.

“I see,” she murmured. “I’ve never heard of a man who stayed a soldier long enough to retire. Things here are very different from Raeldan.”

“I would imagine. But with fortune, we’ll have you on a ship headed home within a fortnight.” He tried to sound reassuring, turning his whetstone over in hand once he found it. As an afterthought, he picked up a few carving knives and a small handsaw. They’d do little good as weapons, but one never knew when tools would come in handy. “Hand me that bag from the peg by the fireplace, would you?”

She retrieved the canvas sack, running her fingers over its worn seams as she carried it to him. “Thank you, by the way. For sacrificing your time to do this.”

Morghram grunted, filling the sack with tools and trinkets, odds and ends he thought might be useful for the journey. “Don’t thank me yet. Not until we see if I’m muscle enough to set this man of yours straight.”

“Oh, you will be,” she said. “Dolbin is a coward. You look mean enough, I'm sure you shaking a sword at him will be plenty.”

He raised one thick brow. His face was scarred and craggy, but he'd never thought himself as looking mean. “If you say so.”

Eona only smiled. She said nothing else of the matter, helping him pack what they'd need and cleaning the small house from top to bottom to prevent pests from moving in while he was gone. Between the two of them, the work went quickly, and so did the night.

* * * * *

“We're headed north,” Morghram announced as he climbed the hill from the docks, rejoining Eona in the shade of an old ash tree overlooking the coast. His bad leg protested the climb, but he made it anyway; it was faster than taking the winding path of stairs that bustled with sailors and merchants, and he'd need to get used to walking anyway. “Your ship did dock in Lore. The same ship was hired to transport grain from here to the south end of the world. From what I gather, Dolbin rode with them to save himself time, since everyone in Lore told him he'd have to pass through Roberian anyway. Seems the deck hands weren't fond of your gentleman, they chatted with the porters quite a bit.”

Eona rose from the grass and dusted off her skirts. She still wrinkled her nose when she touched the coarse wool, but he was glad for the change, even if she wrinkled her nose. Traveling with her wearing a corset and layers would have been miserable for both of them.

“He's no gentleman,” she said. “I'm surprised you were able to find anyone who was willing to talk, though. Aren't men usually more quiet about their business?”

“They are, but I've lived on the coast a long time. I've made friends. And carved the figureheads for almost every ship in the harbor, besides.” He scooped the canvas bag of supplies from the foot of the tree, slinging it over his shoulder. She had insisted on carrying the basket of food and he wasn't going to object. It gave her something to do, but also made her look like she was headed to market instead of making a long voyage. Robbers were less likely to bother those who looked like they were carrying nothing of value.

“From what I gather, he wanted to escape the triad. Probably figured someone would be looking for him. Most of the border is guarded where it would be easy to get through. Nobody took him for a fellow who would risk traveling the wilds, which makes his best option taking the mountain pass. Lots of narrow roads there from the ways to the old mines, lots of places they don't bother keeping guard stations. He was last seen in the inn, asking for passage through Roberian's mountains.”

She gave him a doubtful look, trailing along behind him as he cut a path toward the road. “And you don't suspect anyone will betray us to him, now that you've been asking?”

He shook his head. “No reason to. I don't know much about where you're from, my lady, but here, seamen aren't too likely to go running inland after someone who might toss them an extra coin. Most are honest, besides. If they weren't, they'd have turned pirate or been thrown overboard a long time ago.”

“Eona,” she said.

Morghram paused. “What?”

She ran a few steps to catch up with him, swinging the food basket. “I appreciate your manners, but you are doing me a great favor and you have been nothing but kind. You may call me Eona.”

He blinked, taken aback. He couldn't help but think it improper to call her by name, if only because she was of noble blood. Had she been a neighbor, he wouldn't have given it a second thought. But he didn't want to offend her, especially not so early in their travels. Instead he cleared his throat, turning northward and adopting a comfortable pace. "Very well," was all he said.

For some reason, she giggled.

As if marking the road ahead, the wind blew north.

Chapter Three

After a day of walking, Morghram reconsidered; traveling would not be the easiest part.

Eona didn't complain, but by midday, she winced and whimpered and limped along behind him. He expected sore feet, though not so early in their trip, and her pace only slowed further as her energy ran out. By dusk it was clear she could go no farther and he decided to halt near a copse. There weren't many trees in the rolling plains, but clusters marked lines between fields belonging to different farmers.

"Shouldn't we see if we can sleep at one of the houses up ahead?" It was the first time Eona questioned any of his choices, though he didn't doubt it would be the first of many.

Morghram squinted at the dim lights of farmhouse windows a mile up the road and grunted, shaking his head. "I don't think you want to walk that far, and I don't think I can carry you that far, either." It was half jest, but the frown she wore made him uncertain if she realized it. "We'll rest here for tonight and fill our water skins at their well come morning. Don't want to take too much hospitality from strangers when we can camp all right here."

"Very well." She wasn't pleased, but she still sank to the ground and sighed in relief when she took off her shoes. They were little more than silk slippers, something she'd kept from her finery. With the soles as thin as they were, he wondered how she tolerated walking at all. "How much farther is it to the mountains?"

"A good ten days, I'd say." Longer, if her feet blistered. He kept that thought to himself and put down his canvas bag of tools and the bundle of blankets he'd brought to use as bedrolls. Then he trudged between the trees, inspecting the fallen branches beneath them. He'd brought oilcloth to make a tent, but the sky was clear and he didn't want to bother cutting saplings if it didn't look like rain. Not that there were any saplings worth cutting here. He returned to Eona and sat beside her, reaching for the basket of food.

Pushing it toward him, she said nothing.

He drew his belt knife, cutting pieces from a loaf of bread. "It's a long trip, but even if he's hired a wagon, your Dolbin won't make it there any faster."

"Don't call him that," she snapped.

Morghram glanced up as he passed her bread and a sliver of cheese. "He's still your husband, isn't he?"

Her shoulders slumped. "I wish he wasn't. I wish I hadn't met him at all."

He put away the rest of the food, cleaning his knife. As an afterthought, he unfastened a strap of his lamellar and relaxed when it loosened. He wasn't fat, exactly, but he was softer around the middle than he'd once been, and it was rather snug. "If you don't mind me asking," he started cautiously, laying his bit of cheese between two pieces of bread, "how did the two of you end up married?"

"Ah," Eona smiled, turning away. "He was a good pretender. Convinced my family he was someone important, convinced me that he loved me. My parents hoped I would marry well and he seemed to suit what they were looking for. I was all they had, my two elder brothers lost at sea."

"So it was arranged by your parents?"

“No. I pushed for it, truth be told. My family was hesitant at first, since we were never able to meet any of his relations, but they became more agreeable after they fell ill. The first of Dolbin's crimes.” Her tone turned bitter and she scowled at the earth.

“I'm sorry,” Morghram said between bites, “but I don't understand what that has to do with him.”

“Poison,” she replied simply.

Startled, he lowered his food.

“I knew it was odd. My father had never been ill a day in his life. But I didn't suspect Dolbin until it was too late, and I didn't find the arsenic until after we'd married and my parents had passed.” Shrugging, she made herself eat. “It was part of why I went to speak to my aunt to begin with. I never expected to come home to find everything gone.”

That made sense; it was no wonder she'd left her husband behind, fearing for her own safety. But the thought of it rankled, leaving a foul taste in his mouth. “I am sure you will find justice after we track him down.” He didn't know what else to say, but she seemed pleased with that.

“I'm sure,” she agreed. “But that's enough of my story. Tell me of yourself, Morghram. It's unusual to see a man your age who lives alone. You never married?”

He licked crumbs from his fingers as he finished his sandwich, shaking his head. “I stayed in the army longer than most, until I fell from horseback and broke my leg. Didn't want to risk leaving a widow while I was a soldier. Then it took a long time to heal. Didn't want to burden a woman with a cripple for a husband, either. So I learned my craft while I mended, woke up one morning and realized I was too old. Women my age are spinsters who do fine on their own, no reason for them to wed. I've little to offer women younger, no wealth to my name.” Something that could change once they reached their destination, though he dared not entertain the thought for more than a moment. There was better chance they wouldn't even make it that far.

Eona tilted her head, reaching for her water skin. “What about love?”

That yielded a hearty laugh. “Because that worked so well for you, did it?” he teased, though he sobered when she flushed. “Well, still not much hope for an ugly old carpenter. Though I suppose that's hard for a young one like you to understand.”

“I'm not so young as you might think,” she murmured. “I'm likely not much younger than you.”

Morghram raised a brow. “You don't look like a mage to me.”

“No, but there's a bit of the old magic in my family. Enough that we stay young for longer than most, though not enough to make us Gifted.”

He grunted, saying nothing of it. With the troubles always stirring between the college in Lore and the rest of the triad, there was little love for magic-users outside the college halls. It would have been foolish to lump her in with them—he didn't know how mages were viewed in Raeldan—but he didn't see it as something in her favor, regardless. If she wasn't young, she was naïve, and that was rarely better.

Taking a gulp of water, he made sure the stopper on his water skin was tight before putting it down. “Well, go ahead and roll out your blankets and get comfortable. We'll head out around sunrise. I saw a mulberry bush or two behind us, we can add those to breakfast for a treat.”

Blinking in surprise, she looked up. The last rosy pinks of the sunset had faded, leaving the darkening sky sprinkled with stars. “With nothing to sleep under?”

“Nothing but the stars. Be grateful for it, at least the sky is clear.” He unrolled his own blanket, wrapping himself in it and laying down with his head pillowed on his arm. His armor wasn't the most comfortable to sleep in, but at least the grass beneath the trees offered a thick cushion. He could barely feel the lumpy ground beneath. “After all, you never know when another gale might blow in.”

* * * * *

As it happened, a gale arrived early the next morning, not long after they'd begun travel for the day. The sky had stayed clear for the first several miles of their journey, letting them cover just enough distance to leave the cluster of farms behind and find themselves on a narrow road surrounded by empty fields.

Like with her raw feet, Eona didn't complain, but she did look miserable. The rain was cold and the northward wind driving, though there was no thunder—a blessing, given the lack of places to take shelter. Walking in a thunderstorm while clad in armor wasn't something Morghram would have done no matter what his reward might be.

They carried on despite the weather and the rain ceased eventually, though it left them both soaked to skin and squirming in discomfort when the sun peeked out from behind the clouds. The choking humidity was miserable enough without wet clothes to make the swimming sensation worse.

When they stopped for a midday meal, there was still nothing to be seen in any direction, save the narrow road and a few scattered clusters of trees. Morghram took off his armor and laid it in the grass as Eona cut bread and cheese for both of them.

“It's a good thing you thought to bring that oilcloth,” she said as she offered him half the mulberries left from breakfast. “The bread is dry, even if we aren't.”

“We'll be dry soon enough, the way the heat's climbing.” He took his portion with a murmured thanks.

As soon as her hands were empty, she stood and began unlacing the bodice of her dress. He blinked in confusion, then turned away.

“It's all right, I'll still be covered. You're not the only one wearing two layers, and I think you're right in the idea we'll dry out better in one.” She spread her wool dress atop the tall grass and sat down beside him.

He saw the sleeve of her plain linen underdress from the corner of his eye, but he didn't look to see the rest. Instead he turned his head, staring down the way they'd come while he ate.

“You have good manners for a commoner,” Eona remarked.

“A man learns manners when in service to the king. Doesn't often use them, but learns them just the same.” Besides, he knew his place. She was a lady, blue-blooded and regal, even when dressed in regular dyed wool. He was little more than a hired ruffian. If he wanted to be a paid hired ruffian, he'd have to mind his step.

More clouds spilled over the horizon; he studied them a while before deciding they wouldn't bring rain. Shadows moving underneath them warned they would bring something else.

Leaning forward, Eona peered at his face and then followed his gaze. “What are you looking at?”

“Not sure yet. People. Or a man and a packhorse, maybe.”

“Why are you frowning?”

Morghram gave her a sideways glance. “Don't know. Jod says I'm always frowning.”

She giggled. "Well you've smiled at me enough to prove him wrong. Though you do look a bit grumpy when you're thinking."

Unsure how to reply, he didn't. Instead he ate, enjoyed the sunshine and watched the figures that trudged along in the cloud shade. Two men, he decided. Men who had been moving at a brisk pace before they'd come close enough to see the two of them sitting. He glanced to his armor, idly checking to see if it was still wet. His tunic and trousers were still damp, but he slid his gauntlets on anyway.

"Are there many travelers on this road?" Eona asked, nodding toward the men. She didn't hurry, but she did retrieve her dress from the grass and pull it on overhead.

He pulled his greaves on and adjusted his boots. "Farmers, from time to time, but otherwise just men headed to the mountains. The capital is a good ways west of here. East is nothing but the border of the triad's territories. How much bread is left?"

"There's still a whole loaf, plus the heel of this one. I don't suppose we'll be able to find a baker along the way?" She straightened her sleeves, turning her back to him. "Would you mind doing my buttons? It's harder to twist my arms behind me in a wet dress."

Surprised, he stared at the row of tiny buttons up her back for a moment before he obliged. His thick fingers felt clumsy trying to work the buttons through their loops, but he tried. "No baker, but I'll see if I can't scrounge up some game for a meal tonight. Some quail, or a rabbit, maybe."

Eona pulled her ashen hair forward over her shoulder, untangling it with her fingers. "I can't say I've ever tasted either one."

"They're not bad." Morghram glanced over his shoulder. The two men were close now, walking slowly and talking between themselves. They were young, wearing scant and mismatched leather armor. They carried bags, but not enough to indicate long travel.

Whatever they talked about, one shrugged and picked up his pace, moving ahead and making his way down the narrow road alone. The other slowed, studying them.

Morghram paused, his eyes narrowing. "Move along."

Something ugly glinted in the young man's eyes at the command. He squared his shoulders and shifted forward, reminding Morghram of a bulldog trying to intimidate an opponent. But Morghram wasn't a dog; if anything, he was a wolf, and he responded as a wolf might, gritting his teeth and curling his lip in a snarl. He turned away from Eona, shifting the sword at his hip to show the mark and colors on the hilt.

The glint disappeared and the man hurried to catch up with his companion, looking back at them twice.

When Morghram turned to look at Eona, she was pale. She avoided his eye, dropping her gaze to the grass instead.

He went back to her buttons. "Scoundrels always tuck tail at sight of the king's steel."

"Did he mean to rob us?" she asked, voice small.

"Not much reason to rob someone who doesn't look to be carrying much. But an old man might be easy pickings, always worth a glance in their eyes. But they're looking for the easy way out, or they wouldn't be thieves. Sometimes you don't even have to draw a sword to scare them off with it." He patted her shoulder as he finished, then turned to pick up his lamellar.

She nodded, smoothing her hair and bending to take the basket of food. "Let's hope Dolbin is the same sort of thief."

Morghram grunted. With the sort of fortune the man had at his fingertips, he doubted it would be so easy.

* * * * *

They didn't cross paths with anyone else that afternoon, stopping near trees to rest for the evening. Morghram cut saplings to use as a frame for a tent. It was welcome shelter in the drizzly weather that started at dusk, though it was nothing more than draped oilcloth. It kept the water off them at least, and their clothing was dry when they woke in the morning.

By midday they could see smoke rising from the horizon; by nightfall, a well-lit stone tower rose against the sky. The guard tower was a welcome sight for both of them and they hurried toward it in the growing dark without needing to speak of it. A flag bearing the colors of the triad—bright stripes of blue, green, and gold—snapped in the wind; the light of the tower made it look as if it were dancing. There was music too, if little more than bawdy tavern songs, though the singing stopped as soon as the two of them arrived.

Morghram didn't know any of the half-dozen men at the tower, but he'd served with some of their fathers, and they welcomed him with hearty shoulder-thumps and laughter. They had plenty of food, and ale. They weren't supposed to have alcohol at guard stations, but some things never changed.

They exchanged news over the evening meal, and when the watchmen told them they'd seen a man headed north that matched Eona's description of her husband, they both sighed relief for finally knowing they were headed the right direction.

There was only one room for the men to share as sleeping quarters, but it was spacious and there was straw to throw down beneath bedrolls, making it the most comfortable night they'd had since leaving the small house on the coast.

Eona drifted off almost as soon as she lay down. Morghram sat up for a time, mulling over a mug of ale with one of the watchmen.

"I think you're in for more than you bargained for," the soldier said, peering into his own drink. He kept his voice low so he wouldn't wake the lady, but his tone and face were grim.

Morghram sighed. "I think you're right. There were two men on the road ahead of us, looked as if they wanted a fight. That related to what you're saying?"

The soldier nodded. "The triad spends more time fighting itself than fighting everyone around us. With all our resources split between the borders and settling things in the east, there's been no time to mind the problems up north. The mountains are rough. Lots of scum to be swept out of those nooks and crannies. If that's really the way your man was headed, I'd bet my teeth he's signed with them."

Frowning more as the man went on, Morghram took a swig of ale to wash the dread out of his stomach. "We'll just have to hope for the best."

"Still going after him?"

"I'm a man of my word."

The soldier shrugged. "Suit yourself. We'll do what we can. We've supplies. And horses we seized from thieves a handful of days ago. No way of telling who they belonged to, but it won't be any skin off our backs if you want to take them."

"Can't offer much for horses," Morghram said.

"Don't need to offer anything. We're limited on stable space and supplies, they'd just be sold anyway."

"Well, if you're certain, they'd be much appreciated. Might even catch up with the rat, if we're on horseback." Morghram emptied his mug and passed it to the soldier, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I appreciate your help."

The man chuckled, pushing himself up. “Just let us know if you find them. Any nest of them we can clean out is a scab we can stop picking.” He left without saying any more.

Outside, someone was singing again.

Morghram settled, staring at the ceiling. Once again, sleep didn't come easy. But morning came whether or not he was ready, and by the time they'd eaten, the watchmen had the horses saddled and their saddlebags stuffed with supplies for the rest of their trip.

Eona had never ridden before. Morghram was sure her inexperience in the saddle would spell trouble, but the horses were mild as milk. It was good fortune; anything friskier might have turned her embarrassment at having her dress hitched up around her knees into outright shame when she ended up on the ground with her skirts over her head instead.

They walked the animals the first half of the day, spending the second half alternating between a walk and an easy trot. By sunset, the foothills stood as blue shadows against the northern horizon.

Morghram set up the oilcloth tent when they stopped. There would be no need to carry the cut saplings come morning, the foothills and mountains heavily forested, so he drove them deep into the earth with a stone as a hammer, then used them as posts to tie the horses.

“Do you think we'll catch up with him tomorrow?” Eona asked as she cut food for both of them. After only rabbits and quail to go with their bread and whatever else Morghram could forage, she seemed delighted to have something else. The men at the watchtower had given them half a roast chicken for their evening meal and salt beef enough for the next few nights. It seemed generosity, but if they managed to make the return trip, any information they could offer would be worth more than a bit of meat.

He shook his head, settling beside her. “We're still three days from the mountain trails, even with horses. It'll be slower going through the hills. If we're lucky, we'll catch up with him there. Their wagon will slow them down even more.”

“And when we do find him?”

“Shake him down, I suppose. And tie him up to drag him back to the coast.” It was all they could really plan for; it was impossible to say what they'd be up against, but they would know soon enough.

Chapter Four

“Hold on,” Morghram murmured, reining his horse to a halt. Eona stopped behind him, clutching the pommel of her saddle. Four days of riding had made her more comfortable on horseback, but she still looked nervous any time her horse moved without direction, and her gelding pranced in place.

They'd reached the first rocky cliffs of the mountains the night before, but the heavy rainfall that preceded them made the footing unsure, so they had agreed to wait for sunrise before starting up the winding trails.

“What is it?” Her voice was high, her face pinched.

He slid from his mount, handing her the reins. She wouldn't be able to hold the beast if it spooked, but at least she could keep it from wandering off. He didn't reply right away, instead following the traces left in the mud for a little way before grumbling in displeasure. “We've been following ruts left by the wagon's wheels for a few days. Followed them right onto this trail. No wheel tracks any more. Only footprints.”

Blinking, she leaned forward to look at the muddy trail. “You can tell all that? All I see are our hoof prints.”

“They teach all soldiers a little tracking. Was never good at it, myself, but I got by.” Rubbing the stubble on his chin, he walked back the way they'd come. “There weren't any side roads. Nowhere to hide a wagon, either.”

“So where would they have gone?”

Morghram pursed his lips. His eyes drifted to the ledge to the left of the trail. It wasn't a terrible drop, perhaps twenty feet, but that was plenty to shatter a wagon and let the underbrush hide its remains. “They must've pushed it off. Probably means they couldn't take it up the road ahead, but didn't want to leave anything obvious behind.”

Eona fidgeted, peering at the ledge as well. “Wouldn't you have seen tracks from it being pushed off the cliff?”

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “Maybe not. I haven't been watching that closely, since there's no other way they could have gone.”

“Should we go back and find it?”

“No need.” He returned, taking his horse and dragging himself into the saddle again. His leg protested; he thought it fair in its objection, considering his history with horses, though it would have complained just as much had they walked the last four days themselves. “As I said, there were no other trails branching from here. Wherever they've gone, it can't be far.”

The trail narrowed as they went on. Eona stayed at his back, though the path was still wide enough for them to ride side-by-side. They went slowly, Morghram leaning forward over his horse's shoulder to watch the traces left behind.

There were many footprints left where the earth wasn't so hard-packed, though the direction varied. But he couldn't tell if they were left by a few men running back and forth to unload supplies from their lost wagon or many. Everything they'd seen alongside the wheel ruts indicated only two or three men, but if they had some sort of hideout in the mountain range, who knew how many might be waiting for them?

Abruptly the footprints veered toward the stone wall to their right, vanishing into a narrow path hidden by brush. Morghram raised a hand and slowed, turning his horse around.

Again Eona gripped the saddle, looking nervous. "What is it?"

He gestured toward the pathway before dismounting. "In here. Path's too narrow for a horse."

"What should we do with them?" She shifted to get down but he stopped her, passing her the reins to his horse once again.

"We'll decide after we see where the path leads. I'll scout ahead, you mind the horses. It might just be a shortcut up to the next path." He figured that most likely, with the way the trails switchbacked up the mountainside. "I'll only be a minute, but scream if you have a problem."

She opened her mouth as if to protest, but closed it again without speaking. He raised a brow but didn't wait, pushing back the low branches of the scraggly pine and slipping past.

The stone walls were close, barely wider than the span of his shoulders, and the soft carpet of dead leaves and pine needles beneath took no footprints. Were it not for the grasses that were bent and broken, he wouldn't have known anyone had walked that path before him. Judging by the plants, they weren't far behind whoever had been leading the wagon. He'd thought it drawn by horses before, not realizing until now that he'd never seen any hoof prints. A hand-drawn wagon, then; likely something small, just big enough to transport goods and not big enough for a man to ride. Which meant one of the men on foot had to be Dolbin; another point in their favor.

The path was steep, widening before it met the broader mountain road. As he'd expected, it was a shortcut. What he hadn't expected was turning his head to see a pair of men sitting beside an old mine entrance not thirty feet away.

They hadn't seen him, the two of them hunched over a barrel and shaking a dice cup, but Morghram ducked behind the brush at the mouth of the shortcut just the same. Neither one fit the description Eona had given him, which meant their fortune had come to an end. Either Dolbin was inside—and under guard—or he wasn't with these men at all. There was no doubt they were brigands; there was no reason to be sitting outside a run-down mineshaft otherwise. The old mines were places to store stolen and smuggled goods these days. If there were men sitting watch outside, it meant there was business going on inside. Frowning to himself, Morghram turned back down the trail.

Eona and the horses were in the exact place he'd left them, though she gripped the reins of both horses so tightly that her knuckles were white. She straightened when she saw him, though she looked relieved. "Did you find something?"

"Just a shortcut, like I said." He dusted pine needles from his armor, sighing. "And men by the mine ahead on the trail. If Dolbin is with them, he's in the mine now. Under guard, likely doing business with a smuggler of some sort."

"That would be just like him, wouldn't it?" she muttered. "So we confront them?"

He hesitated.

"Morghram?"

"We'll go up," he said, taking his horse and walking it a few paces ahead to give him room to mount. "But we ride around the long way and start a conversation without startling them. Don't want them to think we're trying to sneak up on them. Surprises can make a man unpredictable." And it gave them a chance to run if things went sour, besides. He made himself comfortable before nudging his horse forward, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Eona followed without trouble.

The long way around took only ten minutes more than the narrow trail carved into the cliff. Both good and bad if they needed to flee; the first turn would be close, but if the men in the

mine shaft had arrows, racing down the mountainside beneath them would put them at a sore disadvantage.

The men at the mine's entrance came into view within minutes. Both sat upright when they noticed the sound of the horses, turning to watch them with suspicion. Morghram motioned for Eona to slow her mount, putting himself farther ahead at the same time.

"What you want, old man?" one of the men barked. He was a big fellow, broad through the shoulders and wearing scant armor.

Morghram kept his expression neutral, though the way the man addressed him made him bristle. "Looking for someone. Maybe you've seen them pass?"

The man scoffed. "Nobody's passed here."

"A man," Morghram continued, "with a pretty face. Flaxen hair, eyes like ash."

The second man snorted a laugh, slapping his larger comrade's shoulder. "They're looking for the dandy! You missed him, old man. Passed him on your way up."

Morghram's eyes narrowed. "Beg pardon?"

"He's dead," the small fellow blurted. Stupid, Morghram decided, a label that seemed to fit when the man went on. "Didn't have a shovel, so we dumped him off the side of the cliff."

"You killed him?" Eona choked.

Both men looked offended. "Of course not," Big said. "We just took care of it after his business went south. Now get on, old man. We're in the middle of a game."

Sliding to the ground, Morghram adjusted his armor. "Your game can wait. I'm not done yet. The man was in possession of something that rightfully belongs to the lady. You emptied his pockets before throwing him off the cliff, I'm sure."

"They were already empty when they dragged him out here," Stupid said. His companion shoved him, glaring.

Morghram turned toward the mine shaft's entrance.

"No one's allowed inside," Big said.

"You going to stop me?" Morghram raised a brow.

The two men exchanged looks. Stupid shrugged. "They ain't paying us to stop people. Just to stand watch."

"Lousy watchmen," Morghram muttered. "Eona, you head downhill. I'll be along."

"No." She struggled down from her horse. "I'm coming with you."

Big sighed. "Better head inside and tell the boss."

"I'm not going in. I'm not getting sucked into fighting." Maybe Stupid wasn't so stupid after all. He shook his head, scooping up the dice and putting them into the cup.

His companion sneered. "He's just an old man!"

"An old man whose armor matches," Stupid replied. "You go on, but I'm done. I got my gold." He gave Morghram and Eona a sidewise glance, shaking his head before trudging toward the hidden path they'd discovered earlier.

Big hesitated, shifting on his feet.

Morghram rested a hand on the hilt of his sword, bracing himself as he slid an inch of steel from its sheath.

The big man eyed it uneasily. Then he snorted, shaking his head. "Ain't worth the trouble," he murmured to himself, starting after his friend. "Not for that pay."

Morghram watched the two men disappear into the brush, frowning. Ruffians, nothing more, hired hands that weren't good at anything but dice. Still, two of them could have been more than he could handle. For the second time in their travels, he found himself breathing a

quiet sigh of relief and being grateful for the king's steel at his hip. The sound of the men pushing through the undergrowth faded before he turned to face Eona.

Her silvery eyes were sad, the corners of her mouth downturned, though she wasn't frowning. It was a wonder she didn't; in a single turn, she'd been widowed and her fortune taken out of hands the law could retrieve it from.

He cleared his throat, laying a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry,"

She tried to laugh. "What, for Dolbin? Don't be. He gets what he deserves."

"But he was your husband, nonetheless."

Sadness shone in her eyes. She looked away. "Yes, he was."

Looking back to the shadowed entrance to the mine, Morghram smoothed his hair. "Shall we go on?"

"What choice do we have?"

He didn't want to agree, but what choice was there? They'd come all the way from the coast and were still empty-handed. But there was still a chance to change it. He gazed into the dark, squinting at the glimmer of torchlight far into the sloping tunnel. The wind still blew north. Just as it had when he plucked Eona from the sea, and when their journey began. Still beckoning them onward, urging them farther.

"It's worth a try," he said at last, adjusting the scabbard at his side. He tied the horses to a scraggly pine, looking to the sky before beckoning for Eona to follow. "Keep some distance between us. If we run into trouble, I'll need room to swing my sword."

"Is there room for that in a mine?" She peered down the tunnel, clutching her skirt.

"Don't know. Never been in one." He took his time ambling down the slope. The dirt was hard-packed underfoot, but there were loose pebbles and patches of damp earth to hinder them. Eona walked behind him with a hand on the wall. The rocky walls were sooty where torches and lamps had burned against them, but otherwise clean. He'd expected most of the mountain mines to be for digging coal seams, but coal dust would have left everything black. What this mine had been for, he didn't know.

The tunnel curved to the right just after the burning torch. Morghram paused, nodding at the flames. "See that?"

"What?" Eona slid in gravel, catching herself on the wall.

He put a hand out to steady her. "The way it flickers and dances. There's an air current down here. Must be more openings to the mine."

"And more chances for whoever has my inheritance to escape," she murmured.

Morghram lifted a finger, hushing her.

She tilted her head, listening. "What is it?"

"Voices," he said, creeping ahead.

Lanterns cast dim light on the path before him, sprawling strange shadows out behind him. Morghram gripped his sword, moving slowly. There had been no reason to hide their presence outside, needing information and having room to run. Trapped within the confines of the mine, not knowing how many thieves may be there, things were different.

A shadow sliding across the path ahead was the first indication that someone was coming, emerging from an adjacent hallway just a step ahead.

The figure turned the other direction, never saw them coming. Morghram tensed, shifting back. He could charge the man, catch him from behind, but he couldn't kill him or get any answers before the man called for help. Instead he waited for the brute to put distance between them, letting the man all but disappear into the darkness ahead. Then he moved forward,

following quietly. It was strange; he'd always thought mines and caves would echo. Instead the air was weighty, dense, deadening sounds.

Eona had been right to question the size of the mine shaft. The corridor grew narrower as they walked, though the lanterns were still evenly spaced and burning low. The path wasn't straight, either, curving ever so slightly before it joined another hallway. The man ahead of them turned. They followed.

A brighter light glowed at the end of the short hall ahead of them, crude furnishings visible inside a rough-hewn room. What it was originally for mattered little, but a pair of bunks stood in the corner, the light coming from the other end.

"We're getting ready to ride," the man they'd followed said. "You sure you don't need us to stay for the next deal after that fight the dandy put up?"

"There won't be a fight this time," someone replied. "The client's not a dandy."

Morghram lifted a hand to tell Eona to stay back. She nodded, pressing herself to the wall beside her while he inched forward.

His hope to sneak a peek was dashed before he reached the doorway, the man they'd tailed appearing in front of it.

Morghram had his sword out before the man could do more than shout, lunging in a thrust for lack of room to swing.

The man fell back and sidestepped, jerking a too-large two-handed sword from a barrel by the wall. Across the room another man leaped up from a table, knocking over his chair.

The room was crowded, but big enough to move in. And with Eona in the hall, Morghram had an advantage; no need to worry about harming an ally.

He ducked beneath a lumbering swing, jabbing his sword into a gap in the brute's mismatched armor. Roaring in pain, the man fell, hands cupping his side. The thief at the table surged over his writhing companion with blade unsheathed, striking hard and fast.

His weapon still in his hands, Morghram blocked but fell off balance, stumbling back on his bad leg.

Darting at the opening, the thief swiped at Morghram's leg. The sword caught on a lamellar plate and bounced before raking down Morghram's thigh, lighting a fire in his leg that rivaled what had ruined it years before. He howled, staggering against the wall.

Eona shrieked and the thief turned toward the hallway in alarm.

Morghram shoved himself from the rough wall before the man could move, plowing a shoulder into the thief's side and driving him to the ground.

The man clawed at him, jerking his sword around to strike with the hilt, but Morghram caught it beside his temple and wrenched the blade from his hand.

"Tammin!" the man shouted, writhing beneath Morghram's weight, looking to the other man on the floor. The fellow didn't move.

"Shut up!" Morghram bellowed, striking the man's jaw with the back of his gauntlet. The man groaned, his head lolling. Wrestling him upright, Morghram pinned him to the wall by the collar.

"Dolbin's money," Morghram snarled, giving the man a shake. "Where is it?"

The thief's head bobbed, but for some reason, he grinned. "That's what you're here for?" He clutched at Morghram's wrist, trying unsuccessfully to loosen his grip. "Everything left is in that tankard on the table."

Morghram shoved him against the rock and let go. The man slumped to the floor but Morghram never took his eyes from him, shuffling backwards until he bumped into the table and could reach the tankard. He lifted it and dumped it over his hand.

Eight small copper coins fell into his palm.

Across the room, the thief laughed. "The money's gone, been gone for days. Your friend spent most of it on his own. We took what was left when we killed him, split it between the group. No telling where they are now. You wasted your time, old man."

Grinding his teeth, Morghram threw the tankard to the ground, curling his fingers around the coins.

"Morghram," Eona started.

He shook his head, limping toward her, laying a gentle hand on her shoulder and turning her back into the hallway. "Let's go."

Behind them, the thief still laughed.

* * * * *

They didn't travel far from the old mine before Morghram asked to stop beside the small brook they'd filled their water skins at that morning. He was more grateful for the horses than ever, though even on his own two feet he'd managed not to limp any more than usual. His trousers were plastered to his thigh with sticky, itchy drying blood and he hated to think of the wound beneath.

"You should have let me bandage that right away," Eona chided, tying their horses while he settled beside the stream.

He drew his belt knife, cutting away the fabric to inspect the injury. It wasn't as bad as he thought; not even a fingernail deep. Had it not been for the blade catching on his lamellar, his bad leg might have become his missing leg. "A little bleeding's good for it. Cleans it out."

"Well it's going to have to be cleaned properly. You're just fortunate my grandmother taught me a bit about tending wounds." She gave a lofty sniff, scouting around a few trees before she stopped to pick something from the bark.

He eyed the green fluff in her hand with a dubious frown. "Lichen?"

"An antiseptic," she explained, kneeling beside him. She scooped water from the brook with her hands, pouring it over his leg, rinsing the scrap of fabric he'd cut away and using it to scrub his skin clean.

He grunted and grimaced but she ignored it, making sure the wound was clean before she pressed the lichen to it.

"Feuds between islands of the Chains were common, even after being united. They broke out often enough for most young men to earn a few scars before they married, in any case." She took his belt knife, sitting back and cutting strips of linen from the bottom of her underdress.

"I suppose that's the same anywhere you go," he said.

"I suppose. And I suppose the experience is good for them, as long as they survive. I don't think I'll ever understand the ways of battle." She paused, meeting his eyes. "But I thank you for knowing it. You risked your life for me, bringing me on this adventure, knowing we might walk away empty-handed."

Morghram held his gaze with hers for a long time, studying the dewy silver-blue of her eyes. She was still pretty, still ladylike, but it seemed she'd matured in their travels. Or maybe his opinion had changed, seeing her stubborn determination as they traveled. She wasn't a waif

plucked from the sea; she was a strong woman who'd made a mistake, something of which nobody was innocent. At least she'd tried to set it right.

Realizing he was staring, he tore his eyes away and bowed his head with shame.

She grew still. "Why do you look away?"

He sighed. "I forgot my manners. Forgive me. I've no right to study you when I'm as old and ugly as I am."

Eona scoffed. "I've known ugly people. Hideous people, in fact. I'd rather have you look at me. The worst part about ugly people is that they hide it all behind a mask of prettiness. You never even realize they're ugly until you're close enough to see what's beneath it. And by then, it's too late." She leaned forward, gently cupping his cheek in her hand.

He lifted his eyes to hers again, finding comfort in her smile.

"There's nothing ugly about you, Morghram," she murmured. "Nothing at all."

* * * * *

"We didn't come so close to the capital before," Eona murmured as they rode toward the market south of the city.

"No," Morghram agreed, "but we'll need to stop and sell one of the horses. I can't afford to feed both through the winter. We'll share a mount on the way back to the coast."

Both of them were weary from days in the saddle, but the morning was still young, lending them at least a little strength. The market buzzed with life, just as festive as he remembered, filled with colorful striped tents and bright banners waving overhead. He nodded to the few merchants he knew, making his way to a wide stall at the far end of the market. There he dismounted, leading his horse toward the grizzled blacksmith and his smooth-cheeked apprentice.

"Looking to spend some coin today?" Morghram called.

The blacksmith waved a red-hot horseshoe in his tongs before dunking it in oil. "Depends on what you're selling, you old goat. Where'd you come by a horse?"

"It's an odd story. I'll tell you over an ale next time I'm in for an evening. But I'm selling more than the horse." Morghram tapped the sword at his belt.

The blacksmith's eyebrows rose.

"Oh, you can't sell that!" Eona cried.

Morghram barked a laugh. "I can and I will. I think I've enough adventures for one lifetime."

"Well, I won't refuse." The blacksmith put his tools aside, dusting his hands against his soot-stained trousers. "Slap a new hilt on it and I won't have to do a lick else to have it sold. Let's talk."

They inched farther from the road, haggling back and forth with a few hearty laughs before shaking hands. The smith counted coins from the purse at his belt and then slapped Morghram's shoulder. "Next time we're at the Worn Prayer, then. Safe travels."

"And fair trade to you," Morghram replied, striding back to where Eona waited with the horse they'd kept.

She dismounted, watching the blacksmith's apprentice lead the other horse away.

"It's not much," he said, offering the handful of silver and few gold coins. "But it should be enough to get you back home to the Chains."

Eona stared at the offering for a long time before reaching for it. But instead of taking the money from his hand, she curled his fingers closed around it. "Thank you. But I don't need it any longer."

He stared at her hands against his rough fingers, his brow furrowing. "But I thought-"
"I've learned a lot during my travels, Morghram," she said. "I can never say how much I appreciate all you've done. Don't think of our time together as a waste. We may not have found what we were looking for, but I believe I've found a greater treasure than what I lost."

His eyes darted to her face.

She smiled.

* * * * *

Lightning flickered on the horizon, licking the waves of the choppy sea below the dark clouds. A northward breeze carried the tang of salt and the cool scent of rain. Morghram lingered on the cliff, watching as the thunderheads piled themselves higher into the evening sky.

"Morghram," Eona called from the doorway, drying her hands on her apron. "Come inside already! Supper's getting cold."

"Coming," he replied over his shoulder, offering her a smile before he looked back out at the sea one last time.

He'd always hated storms, feared the way a strong one could take or ruin a man's life. Now he thought that foolish and couldn't think of anything in nature he loved more.

After all, a gale had brought her.

About the Author

Beth Alvarez has enjoyed writing since childhood and is a ravenous reader.

Having studied fine arts in college, Alvarez has worked as a freelance web designer, graphic designer and illustrator. When not writing, she enjoys drawing, playing video games, driving, and sewing for her unusual collection of Asian ball-jointed dolls.

Although primarily interested in writing fantasy, Alvarez is better known for the stories told in her After Undeath series, set in an alternate, paranormally-influenced Saint Louis.

She now resides in the suburbs of Memphis, Tennessee with her husband and daughter, their Siberian husky, and a very mean cat.

For the latest updates, blog posts, and more free stories, visit her homepage:

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