

The Raven's Burden

by J.A. Stowe

One

“Stupid elementals and their stupid, sensitive feelings,” I mumbled between pants for breath.

Beads of hot sweat slid down my skin, but an icy breeze swept over the cold water of the canal beside me, and I shivered in the dying light. The sun dipped below the Qaanir skyline, casting dark shadows over the edge of the barracks platform and making my torturous run even more frustrating.

I stumbled over a hole in the packed sand under my feet and glared at Skye's blurry, blue-haired form. Apparently, calling the acting commander a butthead was punishable by ten laps around the platform.

Usually, training with the new army recruits was my favorite part of the day. Well, it was all of my day, every day. But no matter how hard I worked, no matter how many hours I spent in the training yard, it never felt like enough.

I made a promise to the Ancients after the siege, and I intended to keep it. Qaanir was rebuilding and our army was learning quickly. But Valeria would die. The suffering she'd caused and the lives she'd destroyed demanded vengeance, and my hands itched to wrap around her throat and take it.

She'd stolen so much from the four worlds. From me.

Cyrus had taken command of Qaanir's new army and personally oversaw their physical training while Felix, Skye, Shael, and Quillon's head Cleric handled the more magical aspects of training.

I'd lost much of my fitness since leaving the Order, but after just a couple weeks of Cyrus's ruthless coaching, my strength and endurance were already the best they had ever been. As much as I hated to admit it, Cyrus's hard-ass attitude ended up being just what I needed to push myself. If only to prove him wrong.

But today, Cyrus had other business to attend to. I'd expected him to put *me* in charge. After all, I was the one most skilled with pointy things. But to my horror, he'd pulled Skye from elemental magic lessons to oversee the training of the fighters.

I rolled my eyes and almost lost my balance again.

The fact that Skye was selected over me was insulting enough, but the power had gone straight to Skye's head. And he wasn't afraid of handing out punishments. It was ironic that the only elemental in the four worlds with healing magic was a raging sadist.

I pouted as I passed the sparring recruits, beating each other to a pulp with bare hands and wooden weapons. I could have been the one knocking the teeth out of a druid, but instead I was stuck on the sideline.

Skye caught my gaze and smiled. At this rate, the recruits would finish before I completed my punishment. I pushed mana into my legs. The raw mana buzzed through my muscles, and I picked up the pace. Just a few more laps and I'd still have time to take out my frustration on an unsuspecting recruit before bedtime.

My new training clothes allowed me to move easily. Felix had found me the daeva equivalent to a sports bra and leggings. The short, flexible corset was surprisingly comfortable, but showed a lot of my skin.

It was strange at first, but it felt liberating to reveal my marks and scars. I wore my past with pride, but no longer felt defined by it. My marks told a story of my time in the Order, of my escape, and my endurance. I was a survivor.

Until a couple months ago, that meant hiding behind masks and an alias. But now, with my secret out, I could finally be myself.

Being with Sebastian again had brought out the desire to let go of my secrets and have someone truly see me. To truly know me like he did. Like I thought I knew him.

Sebastian.

A hollow ache squeezed my heart as I pushed myself harder.

Since he bit me during the siege on Qaanir, his shadowed face, his corruption, haunted me each night while dark thoughts filled each waking moment. I analyzed every memory, every interaction, looking for something I could have missed. A way I could have put it together sooner.

A way I could have saved him from Valeria.

My darkness was growing stronger, like it did every time I was too far away from the guys. For a while, I'd tried to convince myself it was in my head, just a lingering effect of my concussion. But even now, I could feel its icy chill creeping through my blood.

It shrank away whenever one of my guys' auras touched it. Skin contact worked best. With my secret out, I'd started wearing less to bed, when I needed skin contact the most. When the nightmares, fueled by darkness and corruption, plagued my mind.

The darkness corroded my mana like acid, slowly eating away at my power. I wasn't sure what to do about it or how alarmed I should be, but it would have to take a backseat for now. If I told the guys, they'd probably overreact and lock me up in a tower, guarded at all times, for my own good. I could practically hear Cyrus ordering me to stay out of trouble.

But I had it handled. Between the war on Draqaar and Felix's visions of the Aether, there was too much to be done to risk triggering Cyrus's tyrannical tendencies.

Speaking of Cyrus ...

The golden man himself strode from the dock to the barracks building that housed the storerooms and Quillon's fancy office. Cyrus towered over the milling heads between us, his sunny aura radiating bright light around him like a halo. It was always strange seeing the Aegis men around anyone of normal proportions. They carried an air of importance and intensity that drew the attention of anyone they passed. One didn't need to sense auras to tell these men were powerful.

After glancing over my shoulder to make sure Skye wasn't watching, I sprinted through the crowd of soldiers gathered in the cramped spaces between dormitory tents, playing cards and eating their night's rations.

I slowed to hide behind a burly druid. Now I was close enough to see Cyrus clearly, and the dark-haired daeva woman beside him. My eyebrows rose.

Sabrina? What was she doing here?

They walked through the open doors of the barracks and disappeared into the office at the back. I followed them, trying to stay out of Skye's line of sight. I used a group of recruits as cover until I reached a gap in the crowd and executed an entirely unnecessary combat-roll to the next tent, covering my sweaty skin in grains of sand.

I sprinted the last distance to the barracks and paused for breath, pressing my back against the brick wall to stay in the shadows. Skye was busy watching the sparring matches in the training yard. Good. He wouldn't notice my absence for a while. I slithered inside and into the lantern light.

I dragged my tired feet to the back of the building and to the closed door of Quillon's office. I pressed down on the handle. It was unlocked, and Cyrus's massive form was just inside. I slipped through the door, closed it behind me and threw my arms around Cyrus, burying my face in his soft shirt.

He tensed under my touch.

Sunshine and mint tickled my nose, and the corrupt, oily mana in my body shrank away from his power.

"Thank the gods you're back." My voice was muffled by his shirt. "Skye's been on a power trip since you put him in charge. We're gonna need some serious magic to remove that stick up his butt."

At the clearing of a throat, I raised my head and looked around the room for the first time. Quillon propped a hip against the dark wood desk. Sabrina sat in one of the high back leather chairs. Her straight, black hair was twisted in a bun at the nape of her neck, held in place with an ornamental silver pin.

Ari stood glamoured in the corner, wearing his full black cloak, mask and glove ensemble that showed nothing but his smoldering lilac eyes. They focused on me, and I quickly moved along.

A man I didn't recognize stood beside Quillon. He wore an exquisitely embroidered gold and red Daevasi suit. A gold lace mask covered the top half of his face, set with rubies along the upper edge like a crown. Long, copper hair cascaded over his shoulders in silky waves. His lip curled and his purple gaze flicked to Quillon.

A scroll unfurled on Quillon's desk caught my attention. A floor plan labeled Orsava Estate. How did he have a floorplan of Valeria's estate?

"What's going on?" I asked.

Quillon rolled up the scroll, dropping it and a stack of documents in the top drawer of his desk. I chewed my cheek as my stomach roiled. What was he hiding?

He crossed his arms and nodded to me. "This is the Enchanter. The one I was telling you about."

The unfamiliar man's demeanor changed in an instant. An eager smile lifted his full lips as he reassessed me. "The Enchanter?"

“Uh ... hello.” I turned to face the new man. “And you are?”

He frowned, but his pleasant facade quickly slid over his face again. “I’m Rorick, the King of Rotuun.”

A moment of silence stretched between us. Did he expect me to bow or something?

“That’s super cool.” I brushed the sand off my hands and held the right one out to him. “You can just call me Arsyn.”

“Arsyn. What a beautiful name.” The corners of his eyes pinched as he shook my hand. His palm was soft and came away smudged with dirt. He stared at it then pulled a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and wiped his hands.

I tilted my head at Sabrina. She always talked about how she never wanted to return to Draqaar, so she was the last person I expected to find in Qaanir. Other than maybe the bennu Luminary.

“I used to be an Equidan diplomat,” she explained. “Cyrus brought me to Qaanir for a few days to ensure everything’s in order for the summit.” She took in my sweat-drenched clothes, wild braid, and mud-spattered skin. She arched a slender eyebrow. “It appears we have a lot of work to do.”

I smoothed my hair and brushed more sand from my pants onto Quillon’s expensive-looking rug. It was lucky they didn’t show up last week when Cyrus let us spar with real daggers. By the end of the day, I’d looked like a serial killer from a B-horror movie. Given the way Rorick paled at the sight of a little dirt, he would probably have fainted.

Cyrus placed himself at my back. His warm aura caressed my exposed hunter marks. “The army is far from prepared, but we’re making progress. The recruits with magic have been training in their gifts and joining the rest of the soldiers in physical training once a day. When they’re done, we’ll have a robust force, but—”

“But in the meantime, you need some extra insurance,” Sabrina interjected. “I have contacts with the best mercenary groups in the four worlds.”

“Mercenaries?” King Rorick said. “Surely that won’t be necessary.”

Quillon ignored Rorick and nodded. “We’ll take all the help we can get. Valeria may be licking her wounds for the moment, but I’ve learned not to underestimate that woman.”

I stretched my sore arms over my head. “Don’t bother with the mercenaries from the Copper District. Their leader liked to put his hands in places they didn’t belong. Until one night a rogue hunter snuck into his open bedroom window and cut them off.” Rorick cringed, and I winked at him. “They call him Captain Hook now.”

“Alright, Enchanter. I think it's past your bedtime.” Cyrus wrapped a tree-trunk sized arm around my waist and dragged me out of the room.

“What the hell?”

When I resisted, he slung me over his shoulder and strode out of the barracks. “I brought you a gift from Earth. It's in your room.”

I pushed myself up and studied his back. Cyrus didn't give gifts. “What is it?”

“It's a surprise.”

“I don't like surprises.”

“I don't like back talk. Guess neither of us gets what we want.”

I rolled my eyes, but relaxed against his muscly body, letting his big steps gently sway me back and forth. Normally, I would protest being carried, but after a day of running, my legs felt like they would fall off. I'd let him get away with it. Just this once.

“What's with the bigwig in Quillon's office?” I asked as we passed the training yard. The recruits were still sparring, and Skye frowned from across the sand. I stuck my tongue out at him.

“The rulers of the four remaining kingdoms of Draqaar are finally arriving in Qaanir for the summit. Rorick got here last night and the queen of Eqiid should be arriving at any moment. The king of Izik has a longer journey, but he's expected in two days.”

I wrinkled my nose. If the others were anything like King Rorick, I'd be tying bed sheets together and propelling down from my balcony to avoid them.

“What? No trumpets? No fanfare? I at least expected them to have a parade through the canals so they could lord over everyone they passed.”

Cyrus’s chest rumbled. “Quillon's planning a ball.”

“Oh gods, not another ball. Please tell me we don't have to go.”

Cyrus stayed silent.

“Pretty please?”

“An alliance would be beneficial for Draqaar, and the Aegis is part of the summit. We must maintain a seat at the table with the representatives from the other kingdoms.”

I groaned, and a big hand smacked my butt.

I stiffened, eyes wide.

“No more back talk,” he said. Luckily for both of us, shock held my tongue. “You’re a member of my team now, Enchanter. You’ll do as I say.”

My mouth fell open. Was he being serious?

Apparently, he was expecting an immediate answer, because he slapped my butt again, harder this time. I yelped, but he kept his hand against the stinging skin, rubbing a circle with his thumb.

“Will you follow my orders?”

I squirmed against his hold, but he was much stronger. Cyrus’s warm hand left the material of my leggings again, winding up for another spank.

“Fine!” I said. “I’ll play nice.”

“Yes, *sir*.”

I sighed. This man was insufferable.

I lifted my arm and smacked his butt as hard as I could, but it was like hitting a marble statue, and I instantly regretted it. Cyrus stopped walking and set me down in front of him.

“Did you just hit my butt?”

I shook out my hand. My palm was already turning red. “I’d say it hit back.”

Cyrus shook his head and resumed walking toward the barracks dock. Apparently, we both had a knack for stunning the other into silence.

I hesitated. I’d gotten into the routine of jogging to and from the barracks platform every day, but Skye’s punishments ensured I’d gotten plenty of exercise today. So instead, I followed Cyrus to the small dock and joined him on the rickety taxi boat that waited for him.

I sat next to him on the narrow bench and leaned into his arm. His sunny aura wrapped around me like a blanket.

Cyrus was right.

The alliance was more important than my stubbornness. I was part of Cyrus's team now. He'd put his neck out for me when he discovered my identity and didn't take me to Niaras like the Aegis required. I'd do as he said for now. I'd go to the ball, I'd converse politely and laugh at banter about the Daeva stock market or whatever Daevasi joked about. I'd do anything to ensure the alliance went ahead as planned.

But I'd stay as far away as possible from the garden maze. Nothing good ever happened in a palace maze during a Daevasi ball. I knew from experience.

Two

“Who's that?” I asked Cyrus as our taxi boat pulled up to the palace dock. Or tried to. A dozen covered canal boats clogged the small dock, a seemingly endless number of Daevasi filing down their ramps.

I'd spoken too soon about the lack of trumpets and parades. The palace entrance swarmed with powerful daeva in extravagant dress. They moved in an eerily organized fashion, like a diamond-encrusted hive mind. And at the center was their queen.

“Evelda. The queen of Eqiid.” Cyrus sighed at the flood of Daevasi blocking our way. “She must have just arrived.”

She glided along the grand walkway like an absurd ghost. The silk train of her dark blue dress slid across the ground behind her. Her black hair twisted around her head in a complex plait of glittering gems. Atop it all was a hefty crown that appeared to contain more jewels than metal.

Luckily, the anthropomorphic disco ball made a perfect distraction, and no one seemed to notice us as Cyrus and I hopped from our taxi and slipped around the procession into the garden. The back entrance was clear, so we went inside and climbed the servant's staircase up to the third floor. My legs burned with each step.

“Why did you put Skye in charge instead of me? I train with the troops every day. Skye just waves his hands around and grows flowers—”

“Trains the elementals.”

“Whatever.” I paused at the top of the stairs to catch my breath. Running all day had made me tired and grumpy. “I've never even seen Skye fight with a sword. I bet he'd try and hold it like a pencil.”

My boots sank in the plush carpet as we walked down the lavishly decorated hallway. Quillon had roomed us all next to one another, though Quillon's room had a door leading directly to mine. One I'd been sure to block with a heavy dresser at the first opportunity. I just had to hope the door didn't open outward.

“As capable as you are in combat, I can trust Skye to keep the recruits in order and not start an underground fight club.” Cyrus stopped outside my door.

I smiled. “Now you're just giving me ideas, Captain.”

I reached out to open the door to my room before remembering what Cyrus had said about a surprise from Earth. Cyrus watched me, smirking. It didn't set me at ease. Cyrus only smiled at two things: bending others to his will, and ... wait, no, that was it.

I pressed my ear to the polished wood. Something stirred inside. Something alive.

“You didn't get me a pet, did you? I already have my hands full with Felix.”

Felix had developed a habit of turning into fuzzy creatures with big, pleading eyes, knowing I wouldn't be able to resist giving him cuddles and scratches. His favorite of late was a koala because I carried him around like a baby, bouncing him on my hip and everything. Maybe I did have a deeply buried maternal instinct.

I carefully cracked open the door and peeked into the room.

“Syn!” A high-pitched squeal pierced my ears as Em jumped up from my huge bed and ran at me as fast as her short legs could carry her.

“Em!” I bumped the door open with my hip and flung my arms out to her. She lept at me, latching onto my body like a monkey. I hugged her and spun us around the room.

“I'll leave you to it.” Cyrus closed the door, a smile still on his face.

“I missed you so much,” Em said. “There's no Enchanter Inc. without the Enchanter.”

It had been nearly two weeks since I'd teleported Sebastian and me to the Aether from our living room. I had the guys here, but no one could replace Em in my life. We'd been through too much together and had pulled each other out of sticky situations more times than I could count. She was my sister.

I loosened my hold on her and dropped her gently to the ground, but she didn't let go of me.

“This place is so crazy. Your bathroom's the size of our entire apartment back in Haven.”

“Are Alani and Inala here?” I asked. I hadn't seen them since the ambush at the Festival of the Evermoon. When Alani had been gravely injured by hunters.

Em shook her head. “They've been a bit skittish after what happened in the Driftwood District.”

I nodded and sighed. That was understandable. Alani almost died. Skye's healing had been the only thing that saved her. "As excited as I am to have you here, we're in the middle of a war. Your girlfriends are right to stay away. It could get dangerous."

Em laughed as she perused the perpetually refreshed food cart by the door. "You're starting to sound like Cyrus."

"Ew. You're right." I scrunched up my face. "If I ever tell you to stay out of trouble, tie me up and drag me back to Haven."

Em's face fell as she raised the silver cloche from my favorite strawberry pastries.

"What?"

"It's just ... I don't think either of us will be returning to Haven soon."

"Why?"

"News of the Enchanter's silver blood reached it. With the recent hunter attacks, that's all people are talking about. There's a lot of conspiracy theories."

"Oh." I dropped onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. I'd found a home in Haven when I had nowhere else to go. "That."

The mattress bounced as Em fell beside me. "Sabrina's doing what damage control she can, but it's safe to say we're out of business for a while."

"I'm sorry, Em."

I'd always been afraid of what would happen if my secret came out, but there was a part of me that hoped my work as the Enchanter would have earned people's trust.

Did that mean I had to leave it all behind? My job as the Enchanter? The Dungeon? Donald? Our cozy little apartment in the Silver District?

At least now I had Qaanir and the Aegis.

Most people in Qaanir weren't familiar with hunters. They'd heard the rumors of my blood, but it didn't draw much of a reaction from most of the citizens beyond curiosity or confusion.

I didn't mind what the people of the four worlds thought of me. Truly. They could despise me or brand me a hero: it wouldn't matter to me. I'd braced myself for rejection years ago.

What I'd come to fear most was the reaction from the Aegis men. But we'd already weathered that storm, and we were stronger for them knowing I had hunter blood.

“It doesn't matter,” Em said, sitting up. She clapped her hands and rubbed them together. “I'm staying as long as you're here, and it sounds like there's plenty of work to get done.”

“Right.” I scooted to the headboard and tried to rekindle the lighthearted excitement that flooded me when I first opened the door. I tapped Em with my foot. “You should stay in my room. It'll be just like old times. Remember? When we stayed in that horrible little studio above the seafood restaurant?”

When we first met four years ago, we didn't know what we were doing. We just ran from our pasts and our problems, but we always had each other. We always would.

“We smelled like fish for months.” Em wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “As much as I'd love to relive the glory days, I'd rather not get in between you and the guardians. Gods know what you guys get up to in this bed.”

I laughed. “It's just been Felix and Shael most nights, but all we do is sleep. Or try to.”

Felix was still having visions almost every night, and my corruption-fueled nightmares made me a difficult bedmate. Luckily, Shael was a deep sleeper.

“In fact, they've all been perfect gentlemen. Which I'm *totally* fine with.” I shrugged. “I mean, there's so much to do, and we're all so focused on preparing for war and ... and they're not even my type.”

Em gave me an incredulous look. “Right. They can probably tell you're not ready yet.”

“What? Of course, I'm ready,” I said haughtily before pausing. “Ready for what, exactly?”

“To open your heart.” Em's voice grew softer. “After what happened with Sebastian.”

I flinched. I hadn't heard his name out loud since the day of the siege. The corruption stirred inside me, as if conjured by his name. An icy chill crept up my spine, making me shiver.

“I'm so sorry.” Em reached for me. “How are you doing?”

I stood and shook off her hand, but I knew the chill wouldn't go away. Not until I was near my Aegis guardians. "I'm fine."

I'd been saying that a lot lately. But I'd never had so many people that cared before. Em opened her mouth like was going to ask again.

"I need to take a bath," I said, pointing to a streak of mud on my arm and started walking to the bathroom.

Em cleared her throat. "I'll just be ... here."

I smiled and nodded. Neither of us was good at the whole emotion thing. Once inside the safety of my marble bathroom, I turned on the tub's faucet and dumped half a bottle of bubbly soap into the bath. I'd just learned I was basically exiled from my home. If there was ever a time to treat myself to a bubble bath, this was it.

I stripped off my training clothes and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Lines of new muscle defined my body. I'd returned to the strength I had when I was a hunter, still under the strict control of my father. But I'd lost weight in the two weeks since the siege. I could blame it on my rigorous training schedule, but it was more than that. The anxiety and fear that twisted my stomach in knots made it hard to keep anything down.

My silver eyes seemed duller than before. Shadows shifted behind them.

Steam began clouding the surface of the mirror at the edges. I undid my braid, letting my silver hair fall around my body like a wavy curtain of molten metal. It was getting way too long, reaching the small of my back.

So much had changed in my life since the Aegis men came along. I felt almost unrecognizable from the person I used to be. But here she was. The same old Arsyn Morgan stared back at me. Sure, I had a few less curves and a few more scars, magical markings, and magical scars, but it was still me.

I stepped into the massive marble tub, centered below a towering window. Droplets gathered on the stained glass. The hot, foamy water lapped at my body, soothing my aches and tight muscles. I sucked in a breath and plunged my head below the surface.

The Morgan heir. The Enchanter. Both were lives and titles that I'd left behind. One I ran from, and the other I clung to until I couldn't anymore. But who did that leave me now?

When my head broke the surface again, I wiped the water from my eyes and nearly had a heart attack. A cloaked figure stood at the foot of the tub.

“Holy shit, Ari! What did I tell you about creeping?”

The Wraith's cloaked back was to me, but his aura was unmistakable. His spicy scent, like freshly baked gingerbread, overpowered the floral fragrance of my soap. The shadowy purple tendrils of his aura gently scraped against my bare skin like blunt fingernails. It pushed back the dark mana that gripped my stomach. I sighed and relaxed back into the tub.

Ari was nearly as tall as Cyrus, but his presence was more of a whisper. Where most of the other guys seemed to command attention like breathing, one would only notice Ari if he wanted them to.

He turned his head until I could see the profile of his face, covered by his mask. The heavy hood draped low over his eyes. “Rorick wants you.” His gravelly voice echoed off the tiled walls.

I snorted and covered my mouth with my hands, splashing water onto the floor. “You're losing your touch. You were there in Quillon's office. He seemed appalled by my very existence.”

The summit will be a dangerous time for you. He'd switched to talking in my head. It always seemed more comfortable for him. *The Enchanter represents a path to power. The rulers will be vying for your regard. They may recognize unity is necessary for their survival, but that doesn't mean they won't see the summit as an opportunity to seize power.*

I scrubbed my arms, watching as the soapy water carried away grains of sand. “What about Quillon?”

“Quillon most of all.” Ari slowly turned to face me. His lilac eyes burned in the darkness of his hood. The bubbles concealed my body, but my arms still itched to cover myself. “The king of Qaanir has more than just power at stake.”

With that, black shadows condensed around Ari, and he disappeared. His mana lingered in the air, caressing my skin and smelling of warm baked goods. I sagged against the smooth marble at my back.

“Nothing like a cryptic warning to set the mood for a relaxing evening,” I muttered to myself and finished washing the dirt and sweat from my body.

Three

“Now that one!” Em’s voice carried to me through the bathroom door.

Shael and Felix must have finished training and returned to the room. We'd fallen into a routine over the last couple of weeks. I'd gotten used to having a raging furnace on one side of the bed and a raging cuddler on the other. It would be strange to sleep alone now.

I stepped out of the bath and wrapped a towel around me before cracking the bathroom door open.

Shael lay on his back on my bed, a pair of tiny fireballs spinning around his finger, getting dangerously close to the gauzy drapes gathered at each poster of the bed.

That man was a walking, talking fire hazard.

Em sat at the end of the bed with a black cat at her feet. In a flash of orange mana, the black cat was gone, and Felix stood there, naked and doing jazz hands.

Em clapped excitedly.

He towered over her. It was easy to forget how tall Felix was. He always moved quietly, like a stalking predator. His presence was light and comforting, though he looked scary at first, with his inky slicked-back hair, stubble, and druid marks, which climbed from the tips of his fingers and toes to his neck.

Em pointed to a mark on his bicep that looked like a tattered feather. She didn't even cringe away from Felix's junk. I was so proud of her. She'd really come a long way from that day in Mr. Eckson's waterlogged apartment.

“Your wish is my command, m’lady.” Felix bowed and orange mana gathered around his feather mark before he shifted into his raven spirit.

Em gasped at the huge bird. I'd never seen him this close before except when he was dive-bombing me on a ship in the middle of the Draqaari sea. He stretched a wing out. It was as long as my arm. His onyx feathers shone like obsidian glass in the flickering lamplight.

“Raven.” Em stared blankly at Felix until something seemed to click in her mind. “*You're* the Raven Priest? That wasn't in any of the Aegis forums.”

In a flash of orange mana, Felix returned to his normal form. He scratched the back of his neck. “Uh, yeah.”

“Do you get the visions like the prophecy said? What have you seen? The prophecy said the arrival of the Raven Priest tells us we're approaching the possible end of the worlds. Is that true?” Instead of being saddened or worried by this information like a normal person, Em's face lit up.

With every question, Felix seemed to shrink.

Shael sat up and shot a look at Felix.

The whole Raven Priest business was a touchy subject. He still wouldn't talk about it with any of us, but Ari listened in on his thoughts. The visions frustrated him, and he felt the weight of every sacrifice, every hope and expectation keenly. But despite weeks of visions, he hadn't made much progress in discovering their messages. I just wished he'd let us help him.

“Have you seen how we stop it?” Em asked.

I loved Em, but sometimes she got too caught up to read social cues.

Tightly gripping the door handle, I closed my eyes and sucked in a deep breath, guiding my mana down my arm to the leaf-shaped mark on the back of my hand. My fox spirit stirred in my chest.

Come out and play.

Her soft fur brushed against my palms as I stroked her fuzzy head. Her joy and excitement raced through my heart, making it beat faster as her fur enveloped me, sliding around my shoulders and over my head like a living blanket.

When I opened my eyes, I was much closer to the ground. I let out a chattering battle cry before charging into the room. My weird legs were still hard to control, and I tripped on the rug. Em yelped and jumped away, climbing onto the bed.

“Is that you, Syn?” She paused to examine me. “You *are* kinda cute.”

My fox spirit pushed for more control. I relaxed, letting her rise and assist me. She guided my movements and strengthened my muscles. I tried to pounce on Felix, but he caught me deftly and cradled me to his chest like a baby.

“She is cute, isn't she?” He booped my nose.

I nipped his finger with my sharp teeth. He sucked in a breath. A drop of blood gathered on his fingertip. Orange mana swirled around us like a vibrant fog, obscuring my

vision. A deep growl rumbled through Felix's chest, and his amber eyes slid from his bloodied thumb to me. His pupils were oval slits, like a snake's.

Maybe I took this distraction too far.

I wiggled out of Felix's hold and launched myself at Shael. He stood as I wrapped myself around his neck. I'd never felt so agile and energetic. I could get used to this whole fox thing.

"I'll protect you, Enchantress!" Shael raised his hands, prepared to fight. I licked his cheek. He was always on my side.

"Oh, no." Felix tilted his head at me. His smile was predatory, and his voice was deeper, not his own. "She woke my spirits. Challenged them. I can't deny them their chase."

Felix took a step closer, and Shael blasted him with wind. Em braced herself, wrapping her arms around the dark wood bedpost.

Felix slid back a step but maintained his footing. As Shael threw a small fireball, Felix jumped onto the bed, rocking the mattress, and it flew to where Felix had been a moment before, igniting the richly decorated rug.

Felix wasn't stopping, he didn't even seem to notice the fire. Luckily, Em was here. She grabbed a throw blanket from a chair and smothered the flames.

Felix reached for me, but I jumped off Shael's shoulders. I saw a flash of orange out of the corner of my eye as I ran to hide under the coffee table. Lumbering footsteps chased me, but I managed to wedge myself under the low table.

Before it was ripped away.

I turned to see a hulking black bear towering over me. He swiped at me with a heavy paw, but I jumped out of the way and tore across the carpet.

He was at my heels until I got to my walk-in closet. Felix tried to follow but his big burly bear shoulders couldn't get through the door frame. Safely inside, I turned around to gloat, drawing a rumbling growl from the bear.

He shifted into the black cat again to slip through the door. Once inside, he turned back into a bear and pulled the dresser down. It crashed into the door, slamming it closed and blocking it. There was nowhere left to run.

My closet was huge, but his bear form still filled every inch of space. He launched himself at me and pinned me to the floor.

His wet nose nuzzled at my neck as I felt his mana surge again. Bright orange light clouded my vision and burned behind my eyelids as he shifted back. My druid mark went dark on my hand, and the feel of fur slid across my bare skin. Felix's powerful mana replaced it, raising goosebumps on my arms. Citrus and pine filled my nose as his mana sank into my blood.

“Enchantress?” Shael called, his voice muffled.

Skimpy lingerie and lacy underwear littered the carpet. It looked like a tornado had hit a Victoria's Secret.

I laughed, the absurdity of the situation hitting me for the first time. “We're fine!”

Felix stared down at me, his inky black hair falling into his warm brown eyes. His wicked smile morphed into something softer as he lowered himself, molding his naked body to mine. We aligned perfectly, and I tried to ignore his hardness between us. He braced himself above me on his forearms and cradled my head in his hands. His fingers scraped against my scalp and his thumbs brushed against my sensitive ears.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

The raven spirit. The visions.

My hands wandered to his silky hair, remembering the night we met in the basement of the Dungeon.

“You can talk to me,” I said. “I've kinda made a career out of solving other people's magical problems.”

A shadow passed over Felix's face and he flinched. He jumped to his feet and turned away from me. “It's my burden to bear.”

I sighed and climbed to my feet. He was almost as stubborn as me when it came to his visions. I snagged a silk robe from its hook and put it on. Its hem kissed the ground, pooling around my feet.

“That doesn't mean you have to shoulder it alone. You have the team.” I edged closer and touched his shoulder. His skin was hot, as if he was burning with fever. “You have me.”

He shuddered and hugged himself. “I failed once before. I won't again. I—I can't.”

“Let me help you.”

“No.” He shrugged off my hand and lifted the dresser, pushing it away from the doorway. “I won't let you get hurt.”

He opened the door to Shael and Em waiting on the other side. Shael was holding his hand to his ear like he'd been listening through the door. Felix shifted into his raven and flapped his long wings, stirring Em's hair as he flew past her, headed for the open window.

I sighed and pressed my fingers to my temples against a growing headache. “And here I thought Ari was supposed to be the gloomy, mysterious one.”

At least the others were acting normal. Well, normal for them.

Cyrus was constantly vying for control, Ari was as dark and secretive as ever, Quillon was up to something, and Skye was still pretending we'd never kissed.

Normal.

Shael pushed his way through the clothing carnage that used to be my closet and wrapped me in his scalding embrace. Shael was still my steady flame in the darkness. My guiding light. Just his presence alone lightened my heart.

“It's getting late,” Em said from behind Shael. “I'll leave you two alone.” She winked at me before she left.

Shael turned me around in his arms and guided me to the huge four-poster. Wispy curtains draped overhead and gathered at each post, tied with silk cord. Shael peeled back the fluffy bedding for me. I slid into the softness, and he climbed in behind me, molding his body to mine.

It's my burden to bear.

“How do I help him?” I whispered.

“Hmm?” Shael's lips brushed my neck as he settled in behind me.

“He doesn't trust me enough.” I closed my eyes. The burning city played on my eyelids. The bells, the screams. “I don't blame him.”

“It's not you.” Shael was silent for a moment. Long enough that I thought he wasn't going to say anything more. “He doesn't trust anyone with that stuff after what the priests at our temple did.”

I remembered what they'd said about growing up in the Northern Temple and Felix had mentioned it before, too. "Did you know him before the Aegis?"

"Yeah, but we didn't know him well until we joined the Aegis. He was a priest at the Northern Temple where Skye and I grew up. They kept him pretty isolated from everyone else. There's a prophecy about the Raven Priest in Porada, especially in the north. And I guess it's spread, since Em knows about it. As she said, his arrival marks the apocalypse, but he's supposed to follow his visions and save the four worlds."

"No pressure," I muttered.

"No shit." Shael chuckled.

I knew what it was like to grow up isolated, controlled, the world and your "gift" weighing heavily on your shoulders.

"The priests used him to force the futures they wanted, but it was never so simple. Visions are complicated and things didn't always end up the way they hoped."

A chill crept up my spine. *Force the futures?* What exactly happened at the Northern Temple that made Felix so afraid of sharing his visions? I snuggled deeper into Shael's arms, willing the chill away.

Shael's aura flared as he warmed me with his magic. "We can't always control the future. Sometimes we need to let the fates take the reins. Just because something is bad, or it hurts, doesn't mean it isn't necessary."

Shael moved through life like a wildfire. He didn't seek to control the future. He let the winds of fate blow him forward. As appealing as this approach was, a part of me resisted it. I couldn't simply kick back and relax while fate decided my future. I'd help Felix untangle the meaning of his visions if I could. If not for the fate of the worlds, then for Felix.

But after everything that happened with Sebastian, the thought of the future of the four worlds depending on my actions made me nauseous. I'd let love cloud my eyes and put all of Qaanir at risk.

How did I convince Felix to trust me when I couldn't even trust myself?

