



Invocation

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Category: Romance, Fantasy

Description: After a brush with death, Novikke awakens to a living nightmare.

The Ardanian army has released an ancient, deadly magic that is slowly but surely spreading across Aruna's home, Kuda Varai. If it isn't stopped in time, the entire forest could die—taking the night elves with it. Novikke and Aruna set out for the night elf city of Vondh Rav to look for a way to save Kuda Varai. But visiting the city brings up uncomfortable memories of Novikke's mistreatment at the hands of night elves. How can she reconcile her feelings for Aruna with her fear of his people? Even as she and Aruna grow more intimate, she begins to dread the heartbreak that will inevitably follow their relationship. A night elf and a human can't have a future together, can they?

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Chapter 1

Novikke flickered in and out of consciousness, catching only flashes of sound and light in brief moments of lucidity.

Shouting. Rough arms on her, and then gentler ones. Voices in languages she didn't understand. Whispers that were far away, like someone trying not to wake her, and others that were murmured directly into her ear.

The pain in her stomach was always there—sometimes dull, sometimes sharp and piercing.

She awoke very slowly, to the sound of distant voices that she didn't recognize. She cautiously opened her eyes.

She was in a dark room. And she was in a bed. Gods, how long had it been since she'd slept in a real bed?

There was a jolt of pain in her stomach, rudely reminding her of what had happened before she'd passed out. She brought a hand to the spot where the sword had gone through her. A thick bandage was wrapped around her middle beneath a thin robe.

She spotted movement out of the corner of her eye. She wasn't alone in the room. Someone stood facing a dresser in the corner, fussing with something inside it. Novikke saw dark hair, dark skin, and she was flooded with relief. He was alive.

“Arun—” she began, her voice hoarse from lack of use, and then she saw the streaks

of silver running through the figure's hair. The figure turned to her, and Novikke froze.

It was a Varai woman. Novikke's mind went to the mage who'd burned her at the outpost, and her heart raced and her skin prickled as she began to sweat in panic.

But this was not that woman. That woman was dead. And this one was older. It was hard to tell the ages of elves, but there were wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and faint creases framing her mouth.

The woman gave her an unimpressed look. "Tuh," she spat dismissively, and Novikke couldn't tell if it was a word or just a sound of annoyance.

The woman finished folding the blanket in her hands, shoved it into the dresser, then exited the room, closing the door behind her.

Novikke lay frozen on the bed. Had they been captured? This didn't look like a prison. She wasn't tied down. And they'd bandaged her.

Groaning softly, she sat up, swung her legs off the bed, and unsteadily stood. Her head spun and black spots dotted her vision. She went to the room's sole window, leaning heavily on the sill. All she could see was forest. Deep blue light of late evening filtered through the trees. When she looked closely, she saw another structure in the trees, and several more dark figures standing outside it. More night elves.

Tendrils of Panic pulled at her head, quickening her breaths. Holding an arm around her bandages, she scanned the room for something she could use as a weapon. There was nothing, unless bedsheets counted.

The door opened again, and she tensed, putting her back against the window.

Aruna stood in the doorway.

He looked her up and down, then stepped inside, letting in light from a fireplace somewhere beyond the door.

Images of him on the ground, bleeding and almost dead, flooded her mind, and she could have cried. He was all right. He looked better than ever, even.

Zaiur's sword was belted at his hip. He wore new clothes and his hair was freshly washed and braided. There was no sign of the injury he'd had before. Novikke wondered if she'd dreamed all of it. She couldn't understand what had happened, how they had both survived, how she'd gotten to wherever this was.

She watched him uneasily, waiting for an explanation. Perhaps he'd finally lost patience with her and the other Ardanians after what had happened. He'd tried to kill Theros—maybe Thala, too. Theros had nearly unleashed irreparable harm upon Kuda Varai, after all. It was unforgivable. Aruna had tolerated everything else they'd done, but not this.

Maybe he had decided that a night elf and a human could not be friends, after all.

She watched him cross the room toward her. He stopped in front of her, his mouth half opening as if to speak and then snapping shut again. She still couldn't tell if he was about to denounce her or praise her.

As if he sensed her nervousness and wanted to calm her, he put a hand on her arm. For a moment, she thought he would kiss her. He seemed about to lean in, but then, to her disappointment, he pulled away, gesturing toward the bed.

She nodded toward his ribs, where Theros's sword had gone through him, and gave him a questioning look.

He smiled a broken sort of smile—the kind that was only moments away from a grimace. He shook his head and gestured to the bed again.

She sat obediently on the edge of the bed, then motioned a request for writing tools. The gesture had been simplified to the point of being unrecognizable to anyone other than themselves by then, hardly more than a twitch of the hand. Aruna was already pulling a notebook from his pocket—the same notebook they’d been using before. He’d held onto it through his entire time with the Ardanians.

When he handed it to her, it was open to a page that he’d already written something on.

“We’re safe. At a village called Rameka, not far from the Auren-Li ruins. Kadaki sealed the magic leak at the ruins.”

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Novikke looked up at him. If he'd taken the time to write an explanation before she woke up, he could have been a lot more thorough about it. She gestured again, and he handed her a pencil.

“Varai village?” she wrote, stating the obvious.

The corners of his mouth ticked up. He nodded. Novikke gave a confused shrug, asking for further information.

Instead of giving any, he wrote, “How do you feel? Are you well enough to walk?”

The faintness she was feeling was probably spell fever. Someone had healed her wound quite thoroughly, otherwise it would have hurt more. “Feel fine,” she wrote impatiently.

Aruna went to the dresser, then handed her a stack of dark clothing. She wondered what had happened to her old uniform. There'd been so much blood. It must have been unsalvageable.

She wondered if night elves ever wore clothes that weren't some shade of black. They must have been dedicated to fashion or stealth or both, to dye seemingly every single piece of cloth they had.

Then she thought of how most of the animals and plants in Kuda Varai were also some shade of black. They probably had wool from black sheep and leather from black deer.

Aruna sat on the bed while she donned the new clothes. She paused to finger the bandages circling her midsection. Her abdominal muscles twinged every time she moved, and she was careful not to stretch too far for fear of tearing something.

“Shaashva verun,” Aruna said softly.

She glanced at him over her shoulder. He was leaning back on his hands, watching her. His eyes flicked toward the bandages, then back up to her face, solemn. Don’t touch that, she guessed.

She finished pulling on the shirt, then a long jerkin and jacket. The clothes were loose in some places and fitted in others, which seemed to be an intentional part of the design rather than a bad fit. It all struck her as a very pleasing combination of artistic and functional compared to fashion you’d find in Ardani.

She theatrically gestured to herself, presenting the strange outfit to him. He smiled, looking more than a little appreciative of the sight. She silently preened.

He went to the door, motioning for her to follow. Novikke picked up the notebook and wrote in it as they walked. Gods knew she had questions.

“Is this your house?” she wrote and then showed the book to him.

He shook his head.

“Who was that woman?” she asked.

The bedroom door led into the main room of the house. They were in a small cottage. There was another bed in the corner of this room, a table with some dishes still on it, and a hearth to one side with a cooking pot over a fire.

“My aunt,” he wrote.

She raised her eyebrows. He’d brought them to his aunt’s house?

She hesitated when he went to the front door and strode outside. She peered through the doorway from the middle of the room. Other buildings loomed in the distance.

Aruna stopped when he realized she wasn’t with him. With a sudden nod, he felt around in his pockets until he found something that he pulled forth. After a second, it glowed with soft blue light. Her mage torch.

She gave a half-hearted smile. She was more worried about the other Varai than about the dark itself. She came to the doorway, took the light, and tried not to think about what had happened the last time she’d stupidly followed Aruna into a Varai settlement.

She followed him out of the house and into the evening. They were in a patch of the forest that was dotted with stone houses with thatch roofs. The area had been cleared of undergrowth and all but the largest trees. It looked remarkably like any other village in Ardani—small houses lining a central path, animal pens nearby, stacks of chopped wood lined up along walls. She could hear a water wheel turning somewhere in the distance.

People hovered near doorways and walked along paths. They must have just been waking up. They wore simple, utilitarian clothing, for working and getting dirty maybe, but not for fighting. A few carried swords, but not all. It wasn’t like the outpost. These were normal people. Civilians.

Every one of them stared when she passed. She tried not to look nervous. Would it be polite to smile? The idea felt absurd.

She was so distracted by the people on either side of them that she didn't see who was directly in front of them until Aruna came to a stop.

"Neiryn!" she said, surprised. He was sitting on a bench by a large fire pit at the center of the village. He turned to her, eyebrows up.

"You're still alive, then?" he said. "Despite your best efforts."

Then she saw Kadaki sitting on his other side, looking small next to him with her hands folded in her lap and her hood up. Her eyes had such dark circles beneath them that she almost looked like she'd been beaten up. She blinked slowly at the fire, then looked up. It looked like even that much movement was an effort.

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“Welcome back,” the mage said quietly.

“Kadaki,” Novikke said, “I’m so glad you’re all right. What you did back there was—”

“Amazing,” Neiryn supplied.

“Yes,” Novikke agreed.

“Yes, it was,” Kadaki said blandly, looking back at the fire. “You have no idea.”

There was a faint air of unease among them. Aruna seemed satisfied with the situation, but Neiryn looked tense and Kadaki looked unhappier than ever. Perhaps it was just exhaustion.

“Then you really fixed it? Everything is all right now?”

Kadaki’s face darkened. “Yes. Everything is fine, Novikke.”

“There’s not going to be any kind of...magical disaster, anymore?”

“Isn’t that what I said?”

Novikke gave an uncertain nod, relieved. “That’s great news.” She looked around at all of them. “Then...this is all over. Really, this time. Right?”

“I should damn well hope so,” Neiryn said.

“What happened to the others?” she asked. “Where’s Thala?”

“There was a disagreement between ourselves and the other Ardanians,” Neiryn said, rolling his eyes.

Novikke sat on the bench beside Aruna. He remained silent, content to have Neiryn to explain everything. “What happened?”

He crossed one ankle over the other and turned his gaze upward, as if organizing the events in his head. “After you lost consciousness, Kadaki finished closing the leak in the ruins that your captain created. Then, after all that, she still managed to heal you enough to keep you alive. Then Vissarion and Aleka tried to kill Aruna, but I stopped them—you’re welcome—”

Novikke’s eyes widened. Neiryn sighed.

“I didn’t burn them, Novikke. If you so much as hold a tiny flame in your hand, humans go running. And that’s exactly what they did. We...” He glanced down at Kadaki, who didn’t appear to be paying attention. “We asked Thala to come with us. She refused.”

“You didn’t go with them?” Novikke said to Kadaki.

“I thought you might need me again,” she said, and swallowed almost nervously. Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t try to kill yourself again.”

“I...wasn’t trying—”

“I thought what you did was ingenious,” Neiryn said. “Stupid, but ingenious.”

“Thanks,” Novikke said uncertainly.

Kadaki's tense shoulders relaxed a little. "You did save his life," she conceded. "It was still a foolish thing to do. I've worked on you a few times since then. You were much worse off when we first got to the village. We weren't certain that you were going to make it."

Novikke glanced guiltily toward Aruna. She hadn't meant to cause anyone to worry.

"That sword is a curious thing," Kadaki said. "I've never seen an enchantment like that. Where did you get it?"

"It's Varai-made."

"Figures. It's a horrible design. No one in their right mind would make a healing spell that only works when it's attacking something."

She didn't disagree with Kadaki's assessment, but she was shamefully reluctant to part with the sword. "But that exchange is what powers it, isn't it? It wouldn't be as strong otherwise."

"Yes," Kadaki admitted. "Normal healing spells don't hold up well as enchantments. They're magic-hungry and unstable. You might get a single use out of it, and not a very good one even then." She looked up at Novikke, the lines of her face grave. "There are many things that are possible with magic but are simply not done. There are infinite opportunities for unethical uses of it. It is not a tool of goodness in and of itself. We must make it so ourselves."

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“Unethical like experimenting with Kuda Varai’s magic?” Novikke asked, without venom, because she guessed Kadaki needed no more chastising.

She nodded slowly. “Yes. Like that.”

“Thank you. For healing me.”

Kadaki dipped her head, letting hair fall in her eyes. “Thank you for protecting Aruna. I saw what happened. He didn’t deserve that.” She paused. “And thank you for protecting Neiryn when he was injured. I’m glad he got to us in time for me to help him.”

Neiryn arched his eyebrows regally and gave Novikke a dubious look, making sure she knew that he had no part in this expression of gratitude.

“You’re welcome,” Novikke said, smirking at Neiryn. “So, uh, why are we in a Varai village? And why have they not killed us?”

“Because this is the closest place we could hide and rest,” Neiryn said. “You had both passed out by the time we left the ruins. We had to carry you here.”

She imagined what a strange sight that must have been—a Varai and an Ysuran bringing two unconscious human women to a Varai village. It sounded like the beginning of a joke.

“It was Aruna’s idea, obviously,” Neiryn said. “I was skeptical. I still am.” He cast his mistrustful gaze into the growing dark around them. “The people here were close

enough to feel the disturbances from what happened at the ruins.” He nodded to a house in the distance whose roof had collapsed, presumably from the earthquakes. “He explained to them about how we saved all their sorry lives, and that seems to have placated them. For the moment.”

The looks the other Varai were giving them made Novikke nervous. Some of them looked merely curious. Many of them looked like they were waiting for the chance to put a sword through them. She picked up the notebook.

“Are we safe here?” she wrote.

Aruna hesitated longer than she would have liked. “Don’t go too far without me,” he wrote eventually.

“Do they know what you did at the outpost?”

“I don’t think they know. By the time they find out, we’ll be gone. We’ve been waiting for you to heal and for Kadaki to recover after overexerting herself. You both seem well enough for us to leave in a day or so.” He paused, then continued, “I don’t want to get in any more fights with anyone.”

That seemed like a monumental task. “Where will we go?”

He just shook his head.

After a beat, she wrote, “Can I have the sword back?”

Aruna looked down at the paper, then up at her, solemn. He hadn’t said anything about what she’d done back at the ruins, which seemed intentional at that point. He was avoiding the subject.

When he balked, she thought he was going to refuse. But then he took the sword, still in its sheath, off his belt, and handed it to her. She fastened it on her own belt, glad to be armed again.

“The two of you never spoke to each other before the captain gave him the translator?” Kadaki asked, squinting. “You just wrote in that book?”

“We didn’t even have a book for a long time. The book is a luxury. Before that, we wrote in sand with sticks.”

“Why talk at all?” Kadaki said. “He was holding you hostage, wasn’t he? Why would he need to communicate anything other than ‘walk where I point’?”

“There were other things,” Novikke said, shrugging.

“Because they wanted to shag,” Neiryn supplied.

Kadaki raised her eyebrows, as if that had never occurred to her. “Oh.”

A flash in the distance caught Novikke’s attention. A collection of glowing eyes shone out of the darkness behind a house, making her tense in alarm. It took her a moment to realize that they were probably Varai and not animals, and that they were definitely too low to the ground to be grown elves.

It was kids. A bunch of kids staring at the strange visitors. She smiled, cautiously amused.

“When was the last time there were non-Varai in this village, do you think?” she said.

“Not for as long as anyone here remembers, according to Aruna,” Kadaki replied. “And elves remember a great deal.”

Something moved in the corner of Novikke's eye. She turned to see an indistinct shadow hovering beside her. No sooner had she turned than the shadow solidified into a humanoid shape—a small boy with indigo hair and luminous violet eyes. Novikke jumped.

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“Hello!” said the boy loudly, grinning at her reaction to his sudden appearance.

She exhaled sharply. She really shouldn’t be annoyed, she supposed. It was her own fault if she let herself be startled by a child. “Hello,” she said, staring. She’d never seen a night elf child. She didn’t know why it felt like such a strange sight—every race had children, obviously. Why hadn’t she ever thought about what Varai looked like when they were young?

He carefully leaned forward from her side to stare at her, afraid of getting too close. He was clutching a black kitten to his chest with one hand and was ignoring its squirming. He peeked up at Aruna, as if making sure he wasn’t going to be reprimanded.

“Hello,” he said again.

Novikke smiled, sensing that it was the only Ardanian word he knew. “Hello,” she said again.

Aruna held up the notebook. “My cousin,” he’d written. “Sorry.”

A taller shadow appeared at the boy’s side, and then a young girl popped into existence.

“Hello,” the girl said quietly, staring with large eyes. She looked more nervous than the boy.

“Hello,” Novikke said.

More shadows came, and soon there was a small cluster of them—most too shy to show themselves. There was a chorus of hellos, and then laughter when Novikke responded. Eventually Aruna shooed them away with a few words and a wave of his hand. They all giggled, and one by one they ran off.

Novikke thought of Zaiur suddenly. She imagined Ardanian soldiers sweeping through the village, killing everyone in their path, like he'd said.

She caught Aruna's eye, feeling guilty again. He looked confused by her expression, not knowing what she was thinking of.

"This is weird," Novikke said quietly.

"Isn't it awful?" Neiryn said. "I told you they lived in huts. I don't know how anyone can live like this. It's like we're still camping. Everything is so dirty. I've been here less than a day and it feels like weeks."

"It looks a lot like the village where I grew up in Ardani, actually."

He looked taken aback, and then uncomfortable. "Oh."

She crossed her arms on her knees, leaning toward the warmth of the fire. "So what do we do now?" she asked. No one answered.

She'd killed Theros. Vissarion and Aleka and Thala had all seen it. She couldn't go back to the army.

They were back to where they'd been before the Ardanians had captured them. There was nowhere in particular to go. No future that seemed promising. Everything was open-ended and uncertain.

They certainly couldn't stay in the forest forever.

She sighed. "Say, Kadaki. Maybe you could magic us up some wine?"

Kadaki slowly looked up, giving her a withering look. "Sure, I suppose I didn't do enough already. It's not like I've already overdrawn my magic twice over and almost killed myself in the process of single-handedly saving all of Kuda Varai, and then saving you as well since you decided it would be a good idea to stab yourself with a sword. All that's not enough, I guess. Mages are just an endless supply of free miracles, aren't they? Of course. Just keep asking for more. It's no trouble."

Novikke raised her hands in surrender. "All right! Sorry."

Neiryn put a hand on Kadaki's shoulder. "We can leave soon, now that you're finally awake," he said to Novikke. Over his shoulder, Novikke caught sight of a pair of Varai watching them. Each wore a sword on their hip.

"That would probably be for the best," she said.

"We should stay a little longer," Kadaki said quickly. When the others gave her questioning looks, she added, "I'm still not feeling well. And I need to spend some more time on Novikke."

"I feel okay," Novikke said with a shrug.

"One more day," Kadaki insisted.

Novikke gave Neiryn a questioning look. He shrugged.

"If that's what you think is best," Novikke said. "Maybe we should try to make ourselves less obtrusive, in that case."

“We came outside because we were trying to make ourselves less obtrusive to Shadri,” Neiryn said. “But with the way the other villagers have been looking at us out here, I’m beginning to think that was a mistake.”

“Shadri?”

“Our host. I gather she’s not thrilled with our presence.”

“Well, she’ll probably be even less pleased if her guests end up causing a scene in the middle of the village.”

Neiryn considered that for a moment. He shot another glance at a group of Varai who had stopped nearby to glower at them. “You have a point,” he said. “All right. Let’s go.”

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Chapter 2

The four of them sat around Aruna's aunt's kitchen table. They all fell silent when the door opened again a few minutes after their arrival.

Aruna's sharp-faced aunt, Shadri, walked in, and slowed when her eyes fell on them. She tipped her nose up and brushed past them, saying something in Varai as she passed. Aruna gave a nervous smile and said something that made the woman huff sarcastically in response.

She set down a basket and set about fixing the fire in the hearth, which had dwindled while she'd been away. Aruna jumped up to help her, but she impatiently shooed him away.

The violet-eyed boy Novikke had met earlier—Aruna said his name was Nhazin—came through the door next, dragging a large stick with him. Shadri looked up and snapped something at him. Nhazin sighed and tossed the stick outside. He was halfway across the room again when she barked at him, pointing at the door. The boy glowered, returned to the entryway, and dutifully wiped his feet on the mat before coming in again.

Their conversation came to an end now that there were other people there to overhear. They sat close to the table, trying not to be any more intrusive than they had to. Nhazin wandered around the edge of the room, playing with the corner of a rug or poking at the fire while he pretended not to stare at them.

Shadri mostly ignored them, but still shot them continual suspicious, annoyed

glances.

Novikke wrote in the notebook while Neiryn and Kadaki quietly began discussing something related to the ruin's magic that was too esoteric for her to parse. "She doesn't like us being here," she observed.

"No," Aruna wrote, not really looking at her. He seemed distracted. "Housing our enemies does not endear her to the rest of the village. I wouldn't have brought you here if I had any other option."

"But she let us stay anyway?"

He shrugged. "I knew she wouldn't turn us away."

"Was it her bed I was sleeping in?"

"Yes."

"Ash. Please apologize to her for me. You could have just put me on the floor somewhere, I'd not have known the difference."

He laughed under his breath.

Shadri had started cooking something. She had a stack of some kind of purple root vegetable that she was cutting into slices and throwing into a pot. Aruna tried to help her again, and she turned him away once more. He reluctantly returned to his seat at the table, frowning.

A while later, Neiryn got up and stood by her while she worked. She glanced up at him, disinterested, and went back to her chopping.

But he talked to her, wearing his best smile, the one that improved his already handsome face by at least several notches. Shadri gave perfunctory responses. Over the course of a few minutes, Novikke watched the angry tension drain from the woman's shoulders. After another few minutes, Shadri laughed aloud at a joke he'd made.

Eventually she started giving him tasks to assist with—cutting or cleaning or fetching this or that—which, to Novikke's surprise, he performed gladly and adeptly. Aruna watched all of this with a faintly annoyed expression.

She was even more surprised when something Neiryn said made Shadri laugh so heartily that she stopped in the middle of stirring a pot and playfully slapped his arm. Her hand remained touching him a little longer than Novikke had expected it to.

The corners of Neiryn's lips curved up. His eyes slid toward Novikke and Aruna, gloating. Novikke, grudgingly impressed, mimed applause. Aruna rolled his eyes.

Kadaki was the only one not watching. She had inadvertently caught Nhazin's attention and was performing an impromptu magic show. She'd seemed uncertain at first, but the longer it went on, the more pleased she looked with the uncritical attention.

Novikke realized, after watching for a while, that she'd been smiling without meaning to. It was all pleasantly domestic.

When was the last time she had spent time with family or friends? Not since her parents had passed, at least. This kind of scene was foreign to her these days.

"Novikke," Aruna said quietly. He'd gotten up from the table, carrying the notebook in one hand. He jerked his head toward the door.

Novikke followed him out into the darkness. He took her hand and pulled her off the porch, around the corner, to the back of the house. He stopped beside the back wall and turned to her. The night was dark, and the shadows behind the house were pitch black. She heard pages turning. She pulled out her mage torch.

His hand penciled letters in the book. Just one word, and then he stopped. He held the pencil against the paper, as if he'd planned to write more but didn't know how to finish. He gave up and held it out to her.

“Why?” he'd written.

Why?

She didn't have to ask what he meant. Why had she nearly killed herself to save him?

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How could she begin to answer?

She studied his face, lit with the blue light of the mage torch. She couldn't quite tell what he was feeling. He looked... serious. She could not guess what he hoped to hear her say.

She'd done it because that moment had sent her into a deeper and more horrifying depth of Panic than she'd ever experienced. It had yawned before her, a gaping void of despair, of knowing he was about to die and that she was powerless to stop it. The suddenness and inevitability of it, the years-long seconds of knowing what was coming and having to watch and wait for it to come, had been torture.

She would have done anything, in that instant, to stop it.

It had been a panicked, spur-of-the-moment reaction that had been more instinct and wild emotion than anything. But even now, after everything had calmed down, the thought of losing him frightened her.

Until now, she'd tried not to think about that fact, not too loudly or for too long, because if she dwelled on those thoughts too much, she'd have to acknowledge they were real.

And then where would she be? A jobless, homeless Ardanian woman on the bad side of the law, with far too strong an attachment to a Varai man. There was no future in that. Pursuing one could only end in failure and misery.

She couldn't want him like that. She didn't want to want him like that.

But she did. When had that happened?

Aruna let out a bitterly amused breath at the stretch of silence. He pointed to the word in the book again, giving her a desperate look.

She took the book from him. “You don’t know what it was like to see you that way,” she wrote.

“I do know what it’s like,” he wrote back indignantly.

Words failed her. She dropped the light and lifted her hands to his arms, holding him by the shoulders. She wasn’t brave enough to speak aloud the things she was thinking—or write them down.

She brought her hands slowly to either side of his face. His eyes burned into hers, unblinking. Her thumbs stroked his cheekbones and his head tilted very slightly to lean into the touch. Her fingers brushed over his strange pointed ears and into unnaturally oil-black hair.

Gods, he was beautiful. She wondered if he realized.

He stepped closer to her, putting his back to the soft glow of the mage torch and framing her in black.

She stood pinned between him and the wall, his darkness and warmth around her. His head tilted down, hiding his face in the dark, but she could feel the closeness of him, could feel his breath on her skin. She waited, hardly breathing. He took a breath that seemed anticipatory, hesitating.

He’d asked her why, but he already knew. They both knew. They both knew they both knew. The silence felt painfully heavy with that unspoken knowledge.

She felt his fingers twitch against her side. Then he dropped the book beside her light and leaned in.

His lips brushed hers as his hand pressed against the small of her back, pulling her into him. She let him part her lips, let him press between them.

His hand rose and knotted in her hair as his tongue brushed hers. She arched into him as twinges of heat ran from her throat to her sex. There was a spark of pain beneath her bandages, and she flinched. Aruna stopped, startled, and began to pull away, and she pulled him back impatiently.

She slid a hand between them and cupped the hard outline of his cock through his pants. He gave a soft groan into her mouth, and kissed her harder.

She stuck out a foot to kick at the fallen mage torch, and after a few tries, it turned off. Blinded in the dark, she started to fumble with the ties on his pants until he caught her hands and pulled them away.

He held one of her hands back against the wall, and with his other he hurriedly unlaced her pants. He slid a hand under fabric, his hand cool against her bare skin. His fingers brushed lower, his touch electric.

She bit her lip as a finger sank into slick folds. He pulled back to tip his forehead against hers, watching her react to his touch. A second finger joined the first, pressing deftly over sensitive skin and drawing pleasure from her with each stroke.

He murmured something to her. It sounded like a question.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. Whatever it was, yes.

Her every muscle had gone tight with need. Her free hand pressed against his

unyielding chest to steady herself. It was all she could do to keep her feet under her. His presence was suddenly overwhelming, covering and pressing against every part of her.

She threw her head back, panting, eyes closed. The rest of the world faded away and all other sensations grew distant—except for his body against hers and those fingers insistently, expertly, stroking that most intimate part of her.

His hand lifted from her wrist and found the back of her neck, and his lips pressed into the hollow above her collar bone. He said something to her, quiet and urgent. The words vibrated through her throat. His fingers slipped over a part of her that sent her over the edge.

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She saw stars, and she struggled to stifle her gasps. Her hands clenched on him.

She tilted her head to kiss him again, and then, hands moving with languid fluidity, she pushed him away enough to unlace his pants. She pulled him free clumsily, her fingers too impatient for accuracy in the complete darkness. He didn't seem to mind.

Her hand slid down the hard, soft-skinned rod, her thumb circling under the head as she slid back up. He made a soft, wordless sound of appreciation and rested his hands on the wall on either side of her, leaning in.

The darkness let her appreciate little things that she hadn't noticed before. The tiny shudders that went through him. The way his breaths grew ragged as he gradually came undone with her movements.

It was all so real and so close and so physical. So very much alive. She felt a certain pride, a certain intimacy, knowing that he was still here because of her, and she because of him.

He nudged her head upward and kissed her again. His cock twitched in her grasp. He gasped a few sputtered words against her cheek, and his hips went stiff. She felt him spill over her hand.

Breathing hard, he leaned heavily against her. She didn't mind. She didn't want him to let go. They could stay that way forever, as far as she was concerned.

But they couldn't really, could they?

Reality came crashing down again. Something in her core twisted painfully. She quickly put a hand to his chest to push him away, then pulled at her clothes, trying to make herself presentable again. His dark outline was motionless in front of her. She didn't look toward his face.

She'd only even spoken to him aloud a handful of times. She had no right to feel this way about him. It was all incredibly foolish.

She bent to pat the grass until she found her light. She flicked it on, located the fallen notebook, and picked it up. She started toward the front of the house. Aruna's arm shot out and caught her arm. Ducking her head guiltily, she let him pull her to a stop.

Bright eyes studied her. His face was flushed dark. He held a hand out for the notebook. She gave it to him. She ground her teeth as she watched him write.

"Every time you touch me, you end up upset."

She shook her head at him. "It's not like that," she wrote.

"Then what is it like?" he scrawled with a heated flourish.

I saved you because I care for you, she wanted to say. But he was looking at her with so much impatience and frustration by then that she couldn't bring herself to admit to such a troublesome thing.

"I wouldn't keep touching you if I didn't like doing it," she wrote. A non-answer. The one good thing about not being able to speak was that it made it easier to avoid questions.

He took the book from her and held the pencil over it. She watched his expression go from angry to something more like hurt and tired. He made several starts and stops

before he wrote, “We shouldn’t do this anymore.”

Novikke’s stomach lurched. Aruna was watching her warily, holding the book at his side.

Novikke got the impression he was hoping she would argue. She wanted to. But this was probably for the best.

She gave a half-hearted nod, and walked past him.

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Chapter 3

They slept, and another day passed.

Aruna sat across from her at the table the next evening after they awoke. He set his chin on his hand and watched Neiryn help Shadri cook again, not looking at Novikke even once. He was in a visibly poor mood. Novikke didn't comment on it.

Kadaki, who had left by herself earlier in the evening, returned and stopped in the open doorway. She stood there until Novikke and Aruna looked over at her.

"You need to see something. Outside," she said. She was looking at a spot between the far wall and the floor, her hands folded in front of her.

Aruna finally glanced at Novikke, waiting for a translation.

"All of us?" Novikke asked.

"All of you."

"Is something wrong?" Neiryn said.

She sighed. "Just come."

They followed her out into the waning daylight and across the village, garnering displeased glances as they went. She led them to the edge of the village, then stopped, waiting. A small crowd of Varai were already there, gazing into the forest at whatever

she'd brought them there to see. None of them looked happy.

At first, Novikke saw nothing. Then, looking closely, she spotted a pattern among the trees. A line of dying trees and bushes and grasses, following an invisible path to the east.

Toward the ruins, which she could see in the distance.

Aruna placed a hand on the closest tree. Its black bark had turned an odd brown-gray, its branches had withered, and its needles had turned from a healthy deep blue-green to almost white. The bark crumbled under his touch, and when he pulled his hand away, his fingers were coated in an ash-like substance. A solid heaviness settled in the pit of Novikke's stomach.

He looked down the path of dying plants, then at Kadaki, and said something.

"What is this?" Neiryn translated quietly.

Kadaki crossed her arms, looking into the trees. "The forest is dying," she said simply.

There was a stunned silence.

"You can't know that. A dead tree or two doesn't mean the entire forest will die," Novikke said.

Kadaki just gave her an unhappy look.

Aruna nudged Neiryn's arm, still waiting for a translation, but Novikke could tell that he, too, had guessed what was happening.

Kadaki pulled them away from the other night elves and explained further as Neiryn murmured translations to Aruna.

Kadaki hadn't stopped Theros in time. Things had already been set in motion by the time she'd closed off the leak at the ruins.

The loosing of the ruin's magic had disrupted the precarious equilibrium of magic energy in Kuda Varai. Like shaking a basin full of water, it created waves, overflowing in some parts and sinking in others. And now that this death had begun, it was unlikely to stop.

"I wasn't sure what kind of effect an event like this would have," she said, frowning up at the dying trees. "But I can feel something happening. The forest is changing. It feels unwell. Magic energy is snapping and flickering everywhere, like a guttering candle."

Novikke couldn't feel any of that. Neither could anyone else, it seemed, not even the night elves. Not yet.

"How can you be sure?" Novikke asked, more because she wanted it to not be true than because she doubted her.

"I'm sure, Novikke. I wish I wasn't."

"What will happen?"

She paused, chewing her lip and staring into the forest.

“Kadaki?” Novikke prompted.

She shook her head. “This—” she gestured to the trees, “—this is not a good sign. I think the forest could die from this. Really die, and not grow back. I can feel it happening already.”

Novikke watched Aruna’s face go dark. “How can we fix it?” she asked.

“I can heal a body, but I can’t heal an entire forest,” Kadaki said. “I believe there’s a way. Anything is possible with magic. There is a way.” She winced. “I just don’t know what it is yet.”

“What was that thing Theros was using?” Novikke said. “Can’t you just...do the same thing, but in reverse?”

Neiryn and Kadaki both looked at each other like that was the stupidest question they’d ever heard, but tactfully didn’t say so.

“That’s not how it works,” Kadaki said. “It’s kind of a one-way system.”

Aruna said something to Neiryn, and Neiryn heaved a sigh and began giving translations.

“If worse comes to worst,” Kadaki said to Aruna when Neiryn had finished, “We could... try to evacuate the forest. Your people could seek shelter across the border. We could speak to your leaders about making a truce with Ardani...”

As Neiryn translated, Aruna's face twisted into an expression of disgust and horror. He launched into a tirade that Neiryn didn't bother to translate, and didn't really have to. Novikke heard Kadaki take a shaky breath.

Aruna abruptly turned and stalked away. Novikke watched him go, unable to offer any meaningful comfort.

The three of them returned to the house and sat around the table. Shadri glanced up at them, perhaps noticing the somber mood, but said nothing. The Varai in the village didn't seem to understand what was happening yet. After a while, Shadri and Nhazin went out, leaving them alone in the house.

There was both too much and not enough to talk about. Too many questions, and not enough answers. Every solution they tried to come up with was half-formed and less than uncertain to work. The situation seemed hopeless.

A while later, the front door opened. Aruna came inside, looking drained. He sat down beside them, licked his lips, and started talking.

"I haven't told anyone," Neiryn said, translating Aruna's words as he spoke.

"Good," Kadaki said. "I doubt they'd be very happy with us if he had."

"Do you know how to fix it?" Neiryn translated again. Aruna was looking at Kadaki.

Kadaki slowly shook her head.

Aruna said something else.

"Will you help me try?" Neiryn translated.

Novikke was surprised he had to ask. “Yes,” she said.

“Yes,” Kadaki echoed.

“Za,” Neiryn said.

Aruna let out a soft breath. His worry and relief were bared on his face. As if he’d thought they would refuse. He spoke again.

“Where do we start?” Neiryn translated.

Kadaki cleared her throat. “I...” She hesitated, uncertain. “I did have a thought. I don’t know for sure that this would work, it’s possible the axis could rebalance itself if it was given a large influx of magic energy to make up for what it lost. But there’s no way we could summon that much magic at once, not without dozens of mages all casting at once.”

“We don’t have time to find dozens of mages,” Novikke said.

“No, we don’t. So where does that leave us?”

Aruna listened carefully to Neiryn’s translations. He waited hopefully for Kadaki to continue, and it was clear Kadaki had nothing more to offer.

The front door banged open. Shadri quickly shut it behind her, barking a string of Varai words into the room.

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All of them watched as she strode across the room to pick up a pack, which she shoved into Aruna's arms before he'd even gotten up from his chair. He asked her something, and she gave a sharp reply.

"What's going on?" Novikke asked.

Neiryn was pulling Kadaki out of her chair. "She says we need to leave. Right now."

"Why?" Kadaki said. "What's happening?"

Shadri was still snapping at them. She ushered Aruna to the door, then turned to the rest of them and impatiently waved them on. She was pushing them all through the door and onto the porch when she looked out toward the village. She froze.

Aruna was looking in the same direction, watching something that Novikke couldn't see in the darkness. After her eyes had adjusted to the dark, she saw the dim outlines of figures approaching. Faintly shimmering eyes hovered in patches of black.

It was just a village, she told herself. They were just people. But there was something about being in the dark, stalked by beings of darkness, that pulled at a primitive, animal part of her. It was impossible not to feel terror when you looked into the darkness of night and knew something was coming for you.

One of the figures stopped a short distance away from the porch. He spoke, loud enough for all to hear. Then another one shouted something. Then another. They did not sound pleased.

“They’re saying that they’ve received news,” Neiryn said quietly. “They’re saying that Aruna is a traitor and that we all need to be taken to Vondh Rav to face justice. They’re telling us to surrender.”

“I’m impressed they haven’t just decided to kill us,” Novikke said.

“I think that’s far from ruled out,” Neiryn muttered.

The mob waited for a response. There was a trace of guilt on Shadri’s face as she sidestepped away, separating herself from them. None of the Varai moved toward her. She wasn’t the one they wanted.

Aruna spoke into the darkness. He didn’t have the confidence in his voice that his accusers had. Even without understanding his words, Novikke thought it sounded unconvincing. An argument erupted, people in the crowd shouting accusations while Aruna tried to defend himself.

There was another pause—a brief impasse. Aruna murmured something to Neiryn.

“They’re afraid of us,” Neiryn translated, then added, “As they should be. We can fight them. Kadaki can shield us from arrows and I can torch them.”

“Are you crazy?” Novikke hissed. “We can’t just start killing people.”

“What do you think they’re going to do to us if we don’t?”

Something flew toward them. They all jumped as an arrow jammed into the wood beside the door. A warning shot.

“Everyone come here,” Kadaki said, her voice solid and commanding. “Now.”

They all turned to her. She grabbed them and pulled them in a tight circle around her. “Stay close to me,” she said, then bowed her head and closed her eyes. Her mouth moved, whispering the words to a spell under her breath.

One of the Varai yelled something at them. Novikke couldn’t help but think that it sounded like a “last warning” sort of tone. She watched the darkness beyond the porch with wide eyes, taking in as much of the low light as she could. One of her hands had found Aruna’s arm without really meaning to, and the other was on her sword hilt.

Footsteps approached. She glanced at Kadaki, wanting to ask what she was planning, but not daring to interrupt her. When she looked back at the darkness, a shape had emerged, lit by the dim firelight coming through the doorway: a man holding a sword in one hand and wearing a murderous expression. He shouted something at Aruna.

Novikke drew her sword. Kadaki’s voice grew louder as the spell took shape.

“Kadaki—” Neiryn said, and Kadaki’s eyes squinted tighter, as if trying to block him out. Neiryn turned toward the approaching Varai, still holding Kadaki’s hand, and summoned a bright flame in his other hand. There was a chorus of gasps from the crowd.

Aruna’s hand shot out to grab Neiryn’s arm. Aruna snarled a warning at him, his fingers tight around his wrist. Neiryn yelled something back, tearing his arm away.

Several people had reached the porch steps. The man in front came toward Neiryn, sword raised.

And then, something happened.

The world spun and blurred in front of Novikke’s eyes. She had the distinct sensation

that she was falling at great speed. There was a feeling like her heart being pulled out through her throat.

And then, with a stomach-wrenching jerk, everything was still again, except they were no longer standing on Shadri's porch.

She took an unsteady step back, feeling like she was was on a ship rolling over tall waves. There was white stone under her feet. The familiar towers and arches of the Auren-Li ruins stood all around them. Crickets chirped nearby, as if to emphasize the sudden silence.

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Neiryn, Aruna, and Kadaki still stood in a circle with her, looking as bewildered and nauseous as she. Kadaki slumped, and Neiryn extinguished the flame in his hand to catch her. She was boneless in his arms, her eyes shut.

Novikke sheathed her sword and flicked her mage torch on. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Too much casting in too short a time,” Neiryn said, lowering her to the ground. “The same thing that happened to her after the last time we were here. Mages can only channel so much magic energy before they hurt themselves.”

Aruna sighed, letting his shoulders slump. He was still holding the pack Shadri had given him. He said something acerbic to Neiryn, who replied with equal venom. There was a tense back-and-forth for a few seconds.

“Stop arguing,” Novikke cut in. “If you can’t talk without arguing then just be quiet. It’s not helping anything.”

“We aren’t arguing,” Neiryn said primly. “We’re discussing.”

Novikke crossed her arms. She glanced down at Kadaki and frowned. “Kadaki can transport people from place to place with a spell? She could have magicked us out of the forest this whole time?”

“Of course not. She’s only one mage. Look at what taking the four of us from the village back to here has done to her. She couldn’t take us across miles and miles of forest. You ask too much of her.”

She leaned back on her heels. “I didn’t mean it that way. Is she all right?”

“She will be,” he said, but he was watching her with a concern that conflicted with his words. Novikke watched as he reached out to brush a lock of hair away from her face. She frowned.

“What’s really going on between you and her?” she said.

Neiryn pulled his hand away, looking up at Novikke. “We’ve become friends,” he said.

“That’s it?”

“What business of it is yours, Novikke?” he said with a tightening smile.

She narrowed her eyes. “She’s my friend, as well. And she seemed taken with you very quickly. Just like Shadri did. I think you have that effect on people, when you want to. And I also think that your desire for companions tends to line up with the extent to which they’ll be of use to you, whether it’s getting you out of a prison or guiding you out of Kuda Varai or hiding you from a bunch of Varai villagers or casting spells.”

Neiryn’s lips twitched. She saw a shadow of anger cross his features. “And when I was saving you from that psychopath who had you pinned? Was that self-serving also?”

She looked away. “It was not.”

“But you still don’t trust me? Do you not believe it’s possible for me to care about someone? Or for them to care about me?”

That cut her a little. She was being unfair. She was taking her stress out on him. “You did say we weren’t your friends. ‘I don’t befriend Ardanians.’ Remember?”

“Kadaki is not just any Ardanian,” he said. “Neither are you.”

Novikke chewed her lip. “Sorry. I didn’t really mean that. I just...” She shook her head.

Neiryn tipped his head toward Aruna, who had wandered off toward the edge of the ruins. “Anyway, are you the only one who’s allowed to have an unusual relationship with someone across enemy lines?”

“That’s not what’s happening with us,” Novikke said, trying not to let her regret leak into her voice.

Neiryn gave her a dubious look.

“Ask him, if you don’t believe me,” she said, with more bitterness than she’d meant to reveal.

He blinked. “Well. Sorry to hear that. I thought you were... You seemed...?”

Novikke turned away to avoid further scrutiny, but her gaze landed on Aruna. He was looking at the trees creeping into the edges of the ruins.

The trees were dry and gray, like they’d been burned. Leaves had fallen off into piles at their roots. She turned in a circle and saw others—thin, withered trees dotting the perimeter. Many more than there had been at Rameka. Like death was spreading from the ruins outward.

“Gods,” Novikke whispered. “Look at that.”

“It’s happening so quickly,” Neiryn said. “Natural death doesn’t come on this fast. It’s like the life is being drawn out of them.”

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She went to Aruna and hesitantly rested a hand on his shoulder. When he turned around, he wore an expression like someone had died. He turned to Neiryn and spoke.

“He says he has an idea,” Neiryn said. When Aruna didn’t go on right away, Neiryn prompted him to continue.

After a moment, Aruna quietly replied.

It took Neiryn a few seconds to react. Then he scoffed, and said something that sounded like an argument, and Aruna argued something back. Of course. Did they know any other way to communicate?

“What’s happening?” Novikke interrupted.

“He wants to take us to Vondh Rav.”

Novikke turned to Aruna, arching a brow. “Why?”

Aruna started talking to Neiryn again, and Neiryn rolled his eyes.

“He thinks someone there might know what to do.”

“He has a point. What other resources do we have? And who else would know more about Kuda Varai than the Varai themselves?”

“It’s suicide,” Neiryn said. “Or volunteering yourself for enslavement, which is even

worse.”

Novikke motioned for the notebook, and Aruna handed it to her. Trying to keep an open mind, she asked, “What do you want us to do?”

“Come to Vondh Rav with me.”

“Why?”

“There might be something there that could help us.”

“Like what?”

He gave an uncomfortable smile and shrugged.

“You’re thinking of something in particular.” She stared up at him, demanding an explanation, and he looked away.

“Ask him what he’s not telling us,” she said to Neiryn.

There was a long exchange between the two of them, which ended with Neiryn throwing his arms in the air in frustration and turning away. She heard the tone of his voice change, and realized that he’d switched from the Varai language to Ysuran to, presumably, curse in the comfort of his native language.

“Stop yelling...” Kadaki shifted, covering her eyes. Neiryn quickly stopped and went to her side.

“What did he say?” Novikke said, hardly wanting to ask.

Neiryn gave the most dramatic, long-suffering eye roll Novikke had ever seen. “I

asked him what he hopes to find in Vondh Rav. He said that he knows of something there that might help us, but he can't tell us specifically what it is. He can't tell us because it's not for non-Varai to know, he says. Goddess-damned idiot..."

Novikke gave Aruna a look. He gave her a stubborn look back.

"We all agreed we'd help you fix this," she wrote.

"There are some things I can't talk about."

"Then how are we supposed to help you?"

"Do what I ask without asking questions?"

He gave her an unhopeful look when she looked up from reading. She frowned.

"Don't you trust us?" she wrote.

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His lips pressed into a line. He just pointed to the word “can’t” again.

“Maybe you should find some other Varai to help you, then,” she wrote. Aruna took the pencil from her to reply.

“I don’t know if they will approve of this idea. We might have to...” He hesitated. “...do some things without their permission. By force or stealth.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“It might be. That’s why I need help.”

“How are non-Varai going to get into Vondh Rav unnoticed?”

“I can get you in. That’s not a problem.”

She was less impressed with this idea the longer they discussed it. But Aruna was looking at her with a hopeless desperation that she couldn’t stand. “You’re asking a lot.”

“I know.”

Neiryn was discussing it with Kadaki, who had sat up but still looked faint. Kadaki frowned after hearing what Aruna wanted of them.

Neiryn looked up at Novikke. “The only way non-Varai go to Vondh Rav is as prisoners, to be slaves or to die,” Neiryn said. “There is no chance in all the hells that

I'm going there, and you shouldn't, either."

Aruna raised the book to write something else. When he'd finished, he handed it to Novikke. She read it aloud.

"We have no other ideas. I have to do something. If you won't come with me, I'll go alone."

He waited a moment, watching them hopefully. His eyes lingered on Novikke for a long while. When she didn't answer, he turned to leave.

She watched him walk away, and her heart sank deeper with each step he took. She sighed, then went to catch his arm before he could get too far.

"I'll go," she wrote, and gave him back the book. He read it, and the lines on his face smoothed with relief.

"Kadaki," Novikke said, "if you stay here and study the ruin, do you think you'll be able to figure out a way to slow whatever is happening to the forest?"

She looked uncertain. "I plan to try."

"Then you two stay here and try to find something you can do, and we'll come back for you when we're finished with..." She shook her head, hardly believing she was agreeing to this. "...with whatever it is we're doing," she finished. She was proud of herself for hearing only a trace of annoyance in her voice.

"Wait," Kadaki said. She searched several of her many pockets before pulling out a palm-sized metal disk. It was covered in enchanting runes.

"Give me a minute," she said, then pulled a steel stylus out of a pocket and started

carving another rune on top of the thing. After a few minutes and a lot of scowling and frustrated prodding at it, she handed it to Novikke.

“What is it?” Novikke asked.

“The same spell I used to bring us here from the village. I’ve set it so that it’ll bring you back to me when you’re finished. It won’t work if you get too far away or if you try to bring too many people, so don’t go wandering to the other end of the forest. It should be strong enough to transport you and Aruna.”

“Should be?”

Kadaki shrugged. “I did my best.”

Novikke tucked the device into her pocket. “Well, I’m already going to Vondh Rav. I might as well add ‘hastily-constructed enchantments’ to the list of foolish risks I’m taking today.”

Neiryn shook his head at her. “Novikke, don’t do this.”

“We’ll be all right,” she said with a confidence she didn’t feel. “Stay here and be careful. Watch out for shades.”

Chapter 4

As they walked through the forest, the deteriorating state of Kuda Varai grew even more apparent.

Every so often, they passed another dead tree or wilting bush or dry patch of grass. The death was rapidly spreading outward from the ruins.

A few miles down the path, they found a dead animal. It was a behemoth of a thing, wolf-shaped but three times as big as any wolf Novikke had seen, with needle-like teeth and fur so dark that it drank and consumed light. She realized it was the same kind of creature Aruna had fought when she'd first entered the forest.

But this one had no visible wounds. It was like it had just lain down and died. It was not only the trees that were dying. It was everything in the forest.

A horrible thought came to Novikke. She tapped Aruna's arm urgently and gestured for the book.

"Will that happen to you?" she wrote.

He stared at the wolf, dead-eyed. He gave her a slow shrug, as if he'd already resigned himself to the possibility.

It was not the only corpse they encountered. Every once in a while, a rank smell would reach them, and they would know there was something dead nearby. A few times, Novikke saw tiny birds lying upside down on the ground, fallen from the trees

where they'd been perched.

As they got farther away from the ruins, the patches of dead things became few and far between, and eventually stopped showing up at all, but the speed at which the forest's demise had already begun was alarming.

Novikke's eyes drifted to Aruna's back as they walked. They didn't talk, and the silence felt heavy and uncomfortable. She was reminded of the first time he'd led her through the forest. He was the same now as he had been then. Distant and unhappy.

When a dark cloud rolled across the sky and covered the moons, she sighed. It seemed only appropriate for a storm to fall upon them now, on top of all their other troubles.

A drop of rain hit her nose, and then another struck her forehead. She pulled up her hood. Aruna stopped, peering up at the sky. The drizzle became a shower. They darted off the path into the narrow shelter below a pine tree. Then the shower became a downpour. Rain slipped through the branches of the tree. Novikke pulled her cloak close around her, but she was already getting wet.

Aruna said something short under his breath. They waited, and when the rain didn't show any signs of letting up, he gave up and ran down the path again, waving for her to follow.

They jogged down the path for what seemed like ages, rain pelting down on them all the way, and then the shape of a building broke through the mist in front of them.

It was a decrepit log cabin, much like the houses back at Rameka. The door was warped from water damage and years of disuse, and stuck in the door frame. Aruna jammed a shoulder against it, and it fell open. They squeezed through the opening into the cool but dry room beyond. As he heaved the door shut behind them, the

sound of the rain faded to a soft drumming.

It was a dark, dusty echo of Shadri's house. The shuttered windows had kept out animals and overgrowth, leaving the place remarkably intact except for the fact that it was empty. Whoever had lived here before had taken their furniture with them.

Aruna was pulling off his cloak and jacket and laying them out to dry. Novikke did the same, then dug the notebook out of her pocket.

"How did you know this was here?" she asked.

He glanced down at the book as he pulled a blanket from his pack. He took the pencil in one hand while he shook out the blanket with the other. "Been this way before." He paused, then added, "Been most ways before."

He stripped off more damp clothes. He pulled his shirt over his head, and Novikke's eyes dropped to the thick scar on his back. The kind of scar that shouldn't exist, because a wound bad enough to create it was bad enough to kill.

His pants came off next. Novikke forced herself to look away before he noticed her staring.

She was still wearing the bandages around her middle. There hadn't been time to take them off yet. She reached under her shirt to unravel them.

Thanks to extensive healing from Kadaki, the wound already looked old. She had a scar very similar to Aruna's. A messy, pink line above her navel. She wondered what she'd tell people if anyone asked about it. Not the truth, in any case.

Aruna sat on the worn wood floor under the blanket. Novikke gave him an expectant look, and he jerked his chin toward the pack. She went to it, and found a second

blanket inside.

She pulled off her rain-soaked pants and sat down a few feet from him, pulling the blanket around her shoulders. She picked up the notebook and thought about writing a few different things before she settled on, “What are we looking for in Vondh Rav?”

He just looked at her, making no move to write.

She glared at him.

He glared back.

She picked up the pencil again. “Am I being taken there to be a mortal sacrifice for the forest?” she wrote, mostly sarcastically, but similarly macabre things had occurred to her.

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He scoffed, looking like he couldn't decide whether to take offense or apologize. He took the notebook.

“We’re looking for Ravi.”

She looked up at him. “Ravi?” she repeated, dumbfounded.

He nodded. He hesitated, then wrote more, propping his head on his hand. “There is a temple in Vondh Rav. The heart of the forest is there.”

“Heart?”

“The place where it was born. The source of the magic that gives it life. Ravi.” He glanced up at her guardedly, silently conveying the weight of this information. The description was vague enough that Novikke wanted to ask more questions about it. She resisted the urge.

“We’re going to ask her for help?” Novikke wrote.

He nodded.

She laughed faintly at the suggestion. She’d rather thought he’d had something more corporeal in mind.

“How does one speak to a god?” she asked.

“She does not speak. But she conveys her will and power to her priests.”

“So we’ll find a priest of Ravi, and they’ll be able to help us stop this thing that’s happening?”

He shrugged, not looking particularly optimistic. “I don’t know about these kinds of things,” he admitted. “But they will be able to help us if anyone can. If they can’t or won’t, I will go into the temple myself and attempt to speak to Ravi.”

“But you don’t think the rest of your people will be on board with this plan?”

He laughed ruefully, covering his face with a hand. “They will not appreciate a brother-killer trying to tell them that they should give him access to the most sacred place in Kuda Varai. They certainly won’t take my word on what they should do, and I don’t think we have the time it would take to convince them. We have to act quickly.”

“You think word travels that fast? They’ll know what you did?”

“Kuda Varai is large, but our numbers are small. We don’t often turn on each other. When someone does, it’s newsworthy.”

The topic made him look unhappy again, so she changed the subject.

“How far is the city?”

“We’ll be there by the night after tomorrow.”

Her stomach twisted with anxiety. They were so close already.

He was already writing something else and didn’t notice her distress.

“Vondh Rav is beautiful. I wish I were taking you there under more pleasant

circumstances. I could show it to you.”

She tried to imagine getting a guided tour of Vondh Rav, and the image was so strange and ridiculous that she almost laughed. “What is it like?”

He thought. “It’s the only city I’ve been to. I don’t know what to compare it to,” he said, looking a little regretful. “It’s noisy. Even during the day. Too crowded. But it has everything. You’d never get bored there.”

“Did you grow up there?”

“No. I grew up in a village like Shadri’s. I moved to Vondh Rav when I got older...and then quickly moved away again.” He smiled wryly.

“I did the same with Valtos,” Novikke wrote. She twirled the pencil in her fingers, watching him. “I could show you Ardani.”

He said nothing. She knew what he was thinking without him having to write anything.

“If you need to leave Kuda Varai after this, I’ll take you. I meant it when I said I’d help you.”

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He glanced up at her again before he wrote, his eyes lingering on hers. “Have you ever seen other Varai in Ardani?” he asked.

She hated to tell him the truth. But she couldn’t lie. “No.”

He gave her a dark smirk.

“That doesn’t mean it’s impossible,” she added.

“How do you think a Varai would survive outside Kuda Varai?”

“Carefully. With the help of a local. The same way I survived in Kuda Varai.”

He closed his eyes, cheek propped on his hand. Rain drummed against the walls and on the ground outside.

“I would like to see Ardani,” he wrote after a while.

Novikke smiled.

“I dreamed of traveling there, when I was young, before I learned it was impossible. I’ve heard Valtos is so large that all of Kuda Varai could fit inside it. Is that true?”

“No. But it’s still pretty big,” she wrote. “You’ve never been outside Kuda Varai?”

He slowly shook his head.

“There are deserts in the southeast, plains across the middle of the country, and snow-covered mountains to the north.” Her eyes went wide suddenly. “You’ve never seen the ocean,” she wrote.

He shook his head again.

“When we finish this, I’m going to take you to see it.”

He smiled in a way that made her think he wasn’t taking her seriously.

“Why—” he wrote, then stopped. Novikke’s gaze hovered on the word. She raised an eyebrow.

He abandoned that beginning and started anew. “I’ve done nothing but hurt you, and you’ve done nothing but help me.”

“You protected me when I couldn’t protect myself,” she wrote.

“Not as much as I should have.”

He still regretted the way things had happened when they’d met. But when she thought about it, she couldn’t see any other way that things could have gone. He’d done all the right things to protect himself and his people, and had still been as fair to her as he could. There was a good reason that humans were kept out of Kuda Varai, as had been made clear after they’d run into the Ardanians. That the two of them had managed to protect each other, in spite of so many people working against them, was a miracle.

She turned the page and realized that the next page was the last in the book. They might need that last page for an emergency.

“Sleep?” she wrote.

Dawn light leaked through the cracks of the shuttered window. Aruna nodded.

Chapter 5

It was the next evening when Novikke saw rectangular shapes looming between the trees in the distance.

The narrow path had widened until it resembled a road—something she hadn't thought existed in Kuda Varai. She could only guess that this meant they were coming to someplace important. And there was only one place of real importance in Kuda Varai.

Aruna stopped and wrote in the notebook. "Vondh Rav is ahead," he'd written, confirming her suspicions.

"How do we get in without being seen?"

"We don't." He gave her a guilty glance. "I go in through the front gate, with my captive."

She frowned at him. He reached inside his pack and pulled out a coiled length of rope, which he showed to her as if asking permission. Suddenly she understood why he hadn't explained more of the details of his plan earlier.

"And after we get in?" she wrote, realizing it was only going to get worse once they were inside the city.

He pressed his lips together and bent over the notebook as he wrote. "No one will give you a second glance if they think you're a slave."

Novikke's lip curled. But he wasn't wrong. Like Neiryn had said, no non-Varai went to Vondh Rav except as slaves. There was no better way for her to blend in.

She held out her arms. Aruna gave a short nod and pulled her hands behind her. She almost protested when he took Zaiur's sword from her and strapped it to his hip, but bit her tongue.

"Just like old times," she muttered. She twisted her wrists, testing the rope. It was looser now than it ever had been when they'd first met. She'd be able to get out of it on her own, if she wanted to. But the sensation of rope around her still gave her a sense of Panic encroaching on her thoughts.

Aruna wrote something, and held the book up for her to read. "Thank you."

He pulled up his hood, shrouding his face, and put a steadying hand on her arm as they proceeded.

As they went farther down the path, buildings climbed out of the dim of evening. Just a few scattered homes at first, and then more. It was nothing like Rameka. As they went farther down the road, they grew larger and more closely packed.

It was much like the area surrounding the walls of Valtos. The notable difference was the way that trees and brush grew between buildings and even in the road. Wherever they could be left alone, they were. The Varai only cut the trees that they absolutely had to.

Night was falling, and people were just starting to wake and emerge from houses. A few of them tossed Novikke angry looks when they saw her.

Just the sight of her was enough to anger them, and she wasn't even wearing her Ardanian uniform anymore. She wondered what they thought she'd done to deserve

their ire.

Ahead, the road came to an abrupt dead end. Bizarrely, a wide set of stairs led into the earth where the road ended, covered by an ornate stone overhang and guarded by several armed and armored men and women. As they approached, Aruna's hand tightened on Novikke's arm. She didn't have to work particularly hard to look nervous.

She was willingly walking into Vondh Rav under the supervision of a Varai man, who she'd allowed to take her weapon and bind her hands. It occurred to her that she might be the most foolish person in the world. She was sure Neiryn would agree, at least.

The guards barely looked at them as they passed. There were no extra security measures to get into the city, evidently. Being Varai was enough to be granted entry.

She breathed out a shaky breath as they left the guards behind and started down the stairway. Aruna squeezed her arm a little, and she silently cursed him. That had only been the beginning. An entire city full of people who wanted to kill her awaited them.

The stairs descended deep into the ground, down a long, straight tunnel lit with torches that were too far apart for her human eyes to make use of. Twice she slipped over an uneven stair and would have fallen if Aruna hadn't hastily pulled her upright.

At the bottom of the stairs, the tunnel opened up into a cavern. Novikke gaped.

They were in an enormous underground city square, dimly lit by fire and mage lights. Buildings were made from stone blocks or carved from the stone of the cavern itself. Apartments built into the walls lined the sides of the cavern. Novikke saw a woman halfway to the ceiling emerge from a doorway to shake out a rug over a balcony. Lines of drying laundry hung across windows.

Suddenly there were night elves all around, entering or exiting the square through tunnel mouths that led deeper into the earth. A group of children played near a patch of trees and ferns that were somehow growing here, in the dark, in the middle of the cavern. In the distance beyond the trees she could see something resembling a marketplace.

She'd thought there were a lot of Varai at Rameka. This was another experience entirely—one that she had not been prepared for.

She'd expected more hateful stares, but hardly anyone looked in her direction. Scanning the space, she saw a few other pale-skinned heads sticking out of the crowd. Perhaps her presence here was not as noteworthy as it had been outside the city.

Aruna had paused at the base of the stairway, allowing her to take everything in.

She turned and made a motion with her arms, drawing attention to her bound wrists. The other humans she saw were walking about freely, unrestrained. Aruna scanned the cavern until he spotted another human. He glanced at Novikke and nodded toward the man, then pointed to his own neck. It was then that she noticed that all the non-Varai were wearing identical leather collars.

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Disgust crept up her throat. She turned a mistrustful eye on Aruna. He took out the notebook.

“It’s how we know they’re accounted for,” he wrote. “The names of their masters are on the collars.”

He wanted to put one of those on her. She gave a disgusted scoff.

Aruna stared at her stiffly. Novikke regretted that her hands weren’t free for her to write, or she’d have told him exactly how she felt about this terrible idea.

His brows tipped inward a little. “It will help you blend in,” he wrote. “People will wonder about you if you don’t have one.”

Against her better judgement, she nodded. Satisfied, Aruna pointed to the “thank you” he’d written earlier.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Novikke muttered. He took her arm again and pulled her into the crowd.

They walked through the square and into another tunnel, down another series of steps, and into an even more massive cavern. Novikke wondered at how it all held itself up. The space was the size of a small town, and it was all under a dome of rock deep in the ground.

It was too dark for her to see where she was stepping. The only light came from too-dim mage lights and occasional flickering torches scattered around on walls and

paths. The lack of vision was disorienting. Bodies she could hardly see brushed past her, further confusing her. The air was thick with words she didn't understand from sources she couldn't see. The longer she was here, the more alien this place felt. It was so much bigger and more overwhelming than she'd anticipated.

She focused on Aruna's hand on her elbow, clinging to that solid touch in the midst of this sea of strangeness. Suddenly she was terrified that he'd let go and she'd be alone, trapped.

Every once in a while, they passed another slave. Novikke's eyes would curiously dart to theirs, but they rarely returned her gaze. One woman she passed had bruises all over her face. Anger and fear flared hot in Novikke's chest as she looked at her. She averted her eyes, resolving to stare at the ground from then on. Aruna's hand squeezed her arm again, in a way that she supposed was meant to be encouraging, but it was a struggle not to jerk away from him.

Aruna stopped beside an open doorway on the bottom floor of a narrow building. Novikke stepped up behind him, glad to be out of the crowd. It was brighter inside, with candles flickering in sconces on the walls. It was a leatherworker's shop, judging by the wares on display.

He gave her a cautious glance, then took out the notebook and had begun writing something when a voice from inside the shop interrupted him.

A man with graying hair appeared in the doorway, glanced at Novikke, and ushered Aruna inside. Novikke watched him narrowly, immediately disliking him.

Words were exchanged. Aruna's voice swung with the same quick, disjointed cadence of all the voices outside. He finally unwound the rope on her wrists.

The man disappeared behind a counter and came back holding one of those damned

collars. He gestured toward a chair in the middle of the room. Aruna shoved her, and she stumbled into it. She shot him an annoyed glance, which he didn't acknowledge. He watched her expressionlessly, arms crossed.

She saw the shopkeeper approach with a needle and thread, and realized that he was going to sew the thing onto her so that it couldn't be removed. His hand palmed the back of her head and shoved it forward so that her chin touched her chest. Leather wrapped around her neck. He positioned it so that the ends overlapped, leaving a square of material where he could sew the leather to itself.

The shopkeeper said something, and they both laughed. They talked as he began to sew. The tone of the conversation was so light, they might have been discussing the weather. She looked at Aruna's feet. He seemed very far away even though he was standing just in front of her. He leaned forward to brush her hair away from her neck and hold it out of the way while the other man worked.

The needle stabbed her as it jabbed through the leather, and she jumped. The man made an annoyed comment and Aruna's hands appeared on either side of her head, holding her still.

Unwelcome images cropped up in her mind—memories of being held down by strong, unkind hands, of being bound, of blades slicing through her skin, of blinding terror. Suddenly it was hard to breathe. Her heart pounded unevenly.

What had she been thinking, coming here, letting them do this to her, putting herself at the mercy of people who hated her? Everything depended upon Aruna. If he could protect her. If he would protect her.

How easy it would be for him to decide he liked her better this way, and just never take off that collar. What was the difference between pretending to be a slave and truly being one, really? She already looked the part. She was already helpless and

alone. He could...

A tremble of Panic vibrated up her throat.

Don't. Stop thinking that.

Calm down.

Calm down.

The needle pricked her skin again, and she flinched. Their voices carried over her head, strangely distant. Every muscle in her body was taut. Her fingers gripped the arms of the chair so hard that she half expected the wood to splinter. Her shoulders were hunched to her ears. Aruna's hands were still on her head, and the shopkeeper's fingers dug into her neck. They wouldn't stop touching her. The collar tightened around her, choking her.

After ages, he finished, knotting the thread and then snapping it off. Novikke stared at the floor, frozen. She heard more talking, and then someone took her hand and pulled her to her feet. The world was distant and unreal. She couldn't really see her surroundings, and it had nothing to do with the dark.

She let herself be pulled out of the shop and onto the street. Bodies pressed in again. Unfamiliar words floated all around. Her throat tightened.

Someone—Aruna—said something she didn't understand. She saw a dark path with no one on it. In a rush, she pulled away from him and darted into the alley beside the shop, away from the crowd. In the relative seclusion there, she put her back against the wall and tried to breathe and not vomit.

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Aruna, a stranger, appeared in front of her. His hands were on her arms, his bright eyes wide. His mouth moved, saying words she didn't know. She didn't know why he bothered.

She shook her head, putting her face in her hands. She was so weak. She'd thought she'd been getting better. It hadn't been this bad in a long time.

"Havash kuva, Novikke," she heard him say.

He tried to come closer, and the wall was still at her back, and the idea of being trapped between his body and the building sent her into another spiral of panic. She shoved against his chest, holding him back. To her relief, he stopped and took a step back. One hand was still on her wrist, annoyingly refusing to let go, but his grip was light enough that it didn't make her heart stutter and her vision blur with fear.

She stood there for a long time, eyes closed, listening to the distant sounds of the road and to her thumping heartbeat. Gradually she began unclenching muscles.

She became aware of Aruna speaking quietly. He was leaning against the wall beside her, not too close, saying things she couldn't understand but could tell were reassurances. His fingers brushed slowly over her wrist. His hold on her was too light to be dangerous. It was more a caress than a restraint.

She opened her eyes, and she was still in the cavern, and immediately she felt the need to escape it. She needed to get out of Vondh Rav.

But she couldn't. She had to help Aruna.

When she'd stopped shivering and the world had begun to come back into focus, she looked over at him. He stiffened as her gaze shifted toward him. The fear in his face was startling. She looked away again. She hated being seen like this.

He took her hand and pulled her from the alley, and though she was afraid to go out there again, she didn't resist.

They walked down the road for some time, and then he pulled her into another building, into a large room full of tables and people she didn't look at. He ushered her into a chair at a table in a dark corner, then fumbled for the notebook. Words appeared in front of her.

"Wait here."

She looked up, jaw clenched. He was leaving her alone?

He didn't wait for a response before he left. He left the notebook on the table with her. She watched him disappear out the front door of the building.

She didn't dare look around the room. She curled her hands into fists on the table and kept very still, as if that would keep anyone from noticing her. Soft voices filled the room. The air was warm and close and smelled like herbal smoke and food. She could hear a few people laughing loudly in a way that indicated they'd probably had too much to drink.

When no one had accosted her after several minutes, she let her fists uncurl. The quiet buzz of the room and the seclusion of her corner let her come back to herself.

She raised her eyes to look up at the dark room, seeing it for the first time. There was a bar at one end, and a hearth at the other. There was a window in one wall, and she peered out of it but could see only dim shapes and motion outside. People sat in

groups at tables near her, men and women alike, but she saw no other non-Varai. Nevertheless, no one seemed offended by her presence.

Of course they weren't. He wouldn't have left her there if it would put her in danger.

She shook her head. She was weak. Weak and foolish.

She pulled at the collar. It felt too tight, but when she pulled at it, there was enough space for her to fit several fingers under it. It could have been worse. She'd heard that people across the desert branded their slaves.

When she'd been sitting there long enough to work up her courage, she passed the time by watching the people around her. A man in a group near the bar looked in her direction once or twice, which made her uneasy, but no one else paid her any mind.

She was there long enough to see most of the other patrons leave, and more come to replace them. Finally, a grim-looking woman in an apron approached her.

"Iv zatur?" the woman asked, stopping in front of her table.

Novikke froze. Would they find it suspicious for a human in Vondh Rav not to speak Varai? Erring on the side of caution, she made a vague motion toward her ears and shook her head.

To her surprise, the woman set down the pitcher she'd been holding and responded with a series of complicated hand gestures. Novikke stared. The woman rolled her eyes and made some more gestures, more sharply.

It was a language made of hand signals, she realized. Did the deaf of Kuda Varai have their own language? Gods, she'd made things worse.

She raised a hand, having no idea what she meant to do with it, and was exceedingly grateful to be interrupted by Aruna's arrival. He and the waitress spoke, then the woman nodded and left.

Aruna hovered by the table, looking down at Novikke appraisingly.

She leaned back in her chair, making no effort to assuage the uncertainty and guilt showing on his face.

She was angry at him. Mostly for the fact that he'd been there to bear witness to her Panic—he'd seen it before, but it felt so much more humiliating this time—but also for helping trigger it in the first place. He hadn't warned her about any of this. He'd planned all of this, and he'd intentionally kept the less appealing parts of his plan to himself until it was too late for her to back out.

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He sat down across from her and scooted something across the tabletop toward her. A long strip of cloth. The enchanted translator he had worn at the Ardanian camp. He must have gone to get it recharged by an enchanter.

She fastened it around her neck beneath the other collar.

“Is it working?” he said after a moment.

She ground her teeth a little, not wanting to speak to him. “Seems like it,” she said, quietly enough to not be overheard. She could understand the voices at the tables nearby now. It turned out that the woman who’d been talking loudly at the table behind her for the past hour had been complaining about her mother-in-law.

He was quiet for a long moment. “I’m sorry.”

She tilted her head away from him, looking out at the tables behind him.

He shifted in his seat. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

She gave a short, harsh laugh. “Of course not. Why would I be frightened by a Varai bringing me to Vondh Rav and dressing me up like a slave?”

He set his elbows on the table and leaned forward. He moved an arm as if to reach out and touch her hand, then pulled it back instead. Novikke wondered if the two of them touching would look strange to anyone watching. Did Varai ever have those kinds of relationships with their slaves? Her stomach turned at the idea.

“Do you want to leave?”

Her eyes flicked toward his. He looked like he was dreading her answer. It was a real offer then, not just empty words. He really was sorry.

“No.”

He looked relieved.

She noticed a head at another table turn toward them. It was the same man who’d looked at her earlier.

Aruna turned to see what she was looking at, and the man turned away. “No one will touch you,” he said, and nodded at her collar. “Because of that. They know you’re mine.”

“Am I?” she said, raising an eyebrow.

“That’s what they’ll think,” he amended. “People respect that here.”

“Because humans are objects to be owned here.”

His gaze dulled a little. “They are intelligent, dangerous creatures that must be kept under control if they are present in our society at all,” he corrected her.

She bristled. “Am I to be kept under control, then?”

“This is for show, Novikke. Nothing has changed.”

She tucked her lips together, looking toward the bar again. “What did you think about that girl with the bruises? Or did you even notice her?”

“I noticed her.”

“And?”

A crease formed between his eyebrows. He didn't answer.

“Dangerous creatures that must be controlled,” Novikke said. “That's what you think?”

“Of course not.”

“It's what you believed when you lived here?”

She saw his chest rise and fall once before he answered. His eyes never left hers.

“I suppose I did.”

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“And when did you stop believing that?”

“Somewhat recently,” he said carefully. “But I never believed in the sorts of things that were done to that woman.”

“Doesn’t anyone do anything about it?”

“It is not illegal to discipline slaves as you see fit, within reason.”

“That was within reason?”

“But there are people who advocate for the rights of non-Varai. People who oppose slavery. My sister is one of them.”

She was surprised and pleased for half a moment before she heard the unsaid implication. “And you’re not?”

“It’s a complicated issue. This way, there’s a system in place to let non-Varai stay here, in the custody of a Varai who becomes responsible for them. Before slavery, all non-Varai were simply executed. There are still those who object to them being here at all and would prefer to go back to that policy.”

Novikke raised her eyebrows. She was getting whiplash. “Is your sister one of those?” she asked, alarmed.

He almost smiled. “She is not. Though she also does not think that non-Varai should be permitted in the forest.”

“That’s a complicated set of views.”

“To an outsider, I suppose it would seem so,” he said.

Novikke slipped a finger under her too-tight collar to pull it away from her neck. Aruna’s eyes landed on the strip of leather, then moved away again.

“You have a right to be upset,” he said quietly.

“Is that really what you think?”

“I should have better prepared you for what you’d see here. I thought... I thought that if you saw the city for yourself, you might feel more generous toward it than if I just told you about it. It’s a complex city full of different kinds of people. Not all Varai are the same. Just like you and Theros were not the same.”

She didn’t say aloud what she’d been thinking—that she had been questioning whether all of this was worth it. Destabilizing the Kuda Varai axis would harm Ardani and Ysura, too, but not as much as Kuda Varai.

She’d be betraying every other enslaved person here if she helped him. Which was worse: letting the forest die, weakening the night elves and opening them up to complete destruction, or helping them and therefore helping them continue raiding and enslaving non-Varai?

She felt the weight of Aruna’s eyes on her, and felt nauseous for considering leaving him.

But she also felt the collective weight of her people’s eyes on her. The other soldiers who might have been burned, like she was, or worse. The other people who might have encountered Varai on the roads near the border, and not been as lucky as she

was. The humans—and sun elves, too—that she'd seen walking by with collars on their necks.

Maybe Neiryn was right. Aruna was the exception. He was the only half-decent night elf she'd met so far.

But then she thought of the mob of children at Rameka giggling and crying hellos at her. She sighed.

As if he'd been reading her thoughts on her face, Aruna said softly, "I like to think we are still worth saving, despite our flaws. Your people and mine."

"I know," she said, and tension drained from his face.

She crossed her arms on the table, still glancing nervously around the room. The air remained thick with discomfort on both sides of the table. Novikke was eager to put it behind them. "We... we did come here for some reason other than to torment me, didn't we? So what do we do now that we're here?"

"Well," he began carefully, "first, we have to go see a priestess."

"And then what?"

"It'll depend on what the priestess says."

"Glad you've planned this out so thoroughly. Do you at least know where to find a priestess?"

"I have one in mind."

She nodded, mentally preparing herself to go out into the city again. "It's good to

hear your voice again,” she said.

He smiled, and her own lips copied the gesture automatically. She loved seeing his smile, even when he was annoying her. “Yours, too. Are you ready now?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Chapter 6

They wound back through the cavern. Aruna led her through sparsely populated dark alleys instead of the main streets, a courtesy that she noticed and was grateful for but was too embarrassed to acknowledge aloud. In a few days, she'd look back on the episode with indifference, but right now it was still a raw wound.

Aruna kept his hood up, and Novikke followed suit. There may still have been people around who recognized them.

They passed a group of men lounging beside the back door of a shop. They stopped talking and watched them as they passed. Novikke stiffened as eyes fell on her.

As they were about to pass, one of the men reached out to grab Aruna's arm.

"Hey," the man said, and jerked his chin at Novikke. "Rent her to me. How much?"

She supposed glaring wasn't slave-like behavior, but she did it anyway. The man only smiled back at her.

Aruna shook the man off and kept walking. "Fuck off."

Novikke gave him a surprised glance. She'd almost thought he didn't know any words like that.

"Ten silver?" the man said.

“Do you see a for sale sign? Go to the markets if you’re so desperate.”

The man put his hands up, looking amused. “All right, then. No offense meant.”

Aruna grabbed Novikke’s arm and pulled her down the alley. She listened for the sound of footsteps following. There were three of them. If they decided to harass them further, she and Aruna wouldn’t be able to fight them off easily.

But she heard nothing. She glanced up surreptitiously as they rounded the corner, and found the men still standing by the door, involved in conversation again.

Aruna let go of her as they turned onto another street. There was a distinctly uncomfortable silence.

“Is that a common occurrence?” Novikke said eventually.

“I wouldn’t know. In this part of town, maybe.” He looked over his shoulder, evidently having had the same concerns Novikke had about being followed. “The Goddess condemns the forceful taking of another’s body. That’s why the thought of it fills one with disgust. It’s anathema to her designs. It’s unnatural.”

“Even if it’s a human’s body?”

“Yes.”

“And what about violence, then? Toward someone else’s body?”

He gave her defensive glance.

“I’m curious,” Novikke said. “About your goddess.”

“Ravi has no objection to warfare. There is honor in being a skillful fighter. Fighting serves a purpose. It’s been a part of Varai culture for as long as we’ve existed, since the Dark Days, because it allows us to protect ourselves when hiding fails us. Rape serves no purpose. It’s cruelty for cruelty’s sake. It’s one of the few true evils in the world.”

“That’s what she says?”

“Yes.”

“Not all Varai are devout followers of Ravi, it seems.”

“Unfortunately.”

He frowned, pausing at an intersection of roads. Then he changed directions. “This way,” he said over his shoulder. “We’ll take a detour.”

“A detour?” she asked nervously, looking around for followers again.

“The scenic route.”

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He led her down another tunnel and down a lot of stairs, then into a busy cavern that was open on one side, facing a dark valley outside. Novikke was out of breath by the time they reached it. She began to think of the place like a giant anthill—a few structures above ground with a massive labyrinth of tunnels burrowing into the earth below.

It was shockingly chaotic. Voices echoed off the walls, amplifying the already significant noise.

“I thought night elves were supposed to be quiet,” Novikke said wryly, leaning close to be heard and to keep from losing him in the crowd.

“Hard to keep things quiet in such a cramped place. I doubt it’s been quiet here for many centuries now.”

“Why don’t they expand the city?”

“Digging through bedrock is difficult, even with magic, and people don’t like to be too far from the surface, anyway.”

She was about to ask why they didn’t build on the surface, and then she remembered the trees in the town above them. They’d carefully built around the trees to avoid cutting them down.

“It’s built vertically so that it doesn’t take up space,” she realized. “So that it doesn’t encroach on the forest?”

“Of course.” He turned to consider her. “You...don’t do it that way in Ardani?”

“No.”

He shook his head. “Humans don’t respect the land.”

“I don’t know what you’re picturing, but the land Valtos sits upon isn’t like Kuda Varai. It’s a lot of flat, empty fields. It’s good for farming, but it isn’t brimming with magic. It isn’t alive like Kuda Varai is.”

“All land is alive.”

“But we don’t have a god living in ours.”

He tilted his head as he thought about that. “I suppose not.”

Novikke ducked her head as they passed a trio of men and women in sleek, gleaming armor. Their matching uniforms made Novikke think that they were part of the city’s official guard. They weren’t the only ones who were armed, though. Nearly everyone in the city carried a knife or sword of some kind.

“So, you don’t have a home here?” Novikke said, her eyes tracking a shop with cages full of black birds out front, and then another selling colorful blown glass lamps.

“No. I spend all my time out in the forest. I move from outpost to outpost on patrol. I don’t have a permanent home.”

“We’re both nomads, then.”

He looked down at her. “You don’t have a place to go home to?”

She almost laughed. “I haven’t had a home for a long time,” she said.

He noted the bitterness in her voice, and gave her a faintly concerned look.

She shrugged, and evaded the question his eyes were asking. “I take letters and news from town to town on horseback. Half the time I don’t even stay in towns. If it’s not convenient to my route, I’ll camp in the woods between destinations.”

“Horseback?” he repeated slowly.

“Yes.”

“It’s not translating.”

“Oh. Horses,” she said. “Those big animals that carried the army’s supplies, remember?”

“Oh.” His eyes widened a little. “You ride them? I was afraid to even go near them. I tried to keep my distance.”

“That’s probably wise,” she said, thinking of all the people she knew who’d been thrown or kicked or bitten. “But they can run a lot faster and farther than people can.”

“They don’t fight when you try to get on their backs?”

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“No. They’re pretty docile once they’ve been trained.”

He shook his head. “You’re braver than I am,” he decided.

They came to the other side of the cavern, which opened into a wide balcony over the forest. As they broke away from the crowd and stepped up to the balustrade, Novikke stopped, staring.

They were standing on a cliff face. Not at the top of a cliff, but on the side, sticking out of the middle of a vertical slope. An impossibly high wall of stone stretched above and below them, dropping down into the valley.

The city had been hewn from the side of the cliff. It was like it had been carved by the gods, a single sheet of stone intricately cut into a thousand balconies and spires and windows, all connected with delicate and precarious stairs and ramps and bridges. Firelight and mage lights glittered in windows and on pathways all along the wall.

It was astonishingly beautiful.

What was it Neiryn had said? Something about huts and caves? Novikke laughed aloud, stunned. He couldn’t have imagined this. She’d have a lot to tell him when she got back.

If she got back.

When she looked over again, Aruna was grinning with uncharacteristic youthful

excitement as he watched her react to the view. When she looked over at him, he pressed his lips together, suppressing the smile. Her eyes were drawn to his mouth, and lingered there. She swallowed, trying to think about anything other than kissing him.

It was only then that she realized how much he'd wanted her to not hate Vondh Rav. He wanted her to be impressed, to see the beauty in it, especially after what had happened earlier. He wanted her to see it the way he saw it. He wanted her to believe it was worth protecting.

"It's... impressive," she admitted. "There's nothing like this in Ardani."

His smile crept back up.

Even with everything that bothered her about Vondh Rav, she found herself growing more curious about it the longer they stayed. She wanted to know everything about it.

"I wish we could have come here without a time limit," she said. "I wish you could show me all of it."

He came to take her hand, looking up at the city above with her. "Maybe someday," he said. He gave her a sad smile. "We should keep moving. It's this way." Reluctantly, he turned toward a set of stairs descending from the balcony.

The stairs ran along the side of the cliff. Beyond an iron railing that did not feel sufficiently large or secure, empty air stretched down farther than she could see through the darkness.

"Gods above," Novikke murmured, peering over the edge. "Isn't this dangerous?"

Aruna looked amused and pointedly set a hand on the railing. "Are you afraid you're

going to fall?”

“No.”

“That’s good. This is not the city for people with a fear of heights.”

He brought her down the stairs and around the corner into another cavern, this one smaller and much quieter.

The buildings there were bigger and covered in detailed reliefs and ornaments. People were dressed in expensive-looking clothes. It was the only place so far where she’d seen people wearing brightly colored fabric, which must have been either carefully bleached and dyed or illegally shipped in from outside the forest. There were no shops. A residential area.

She spotted more guards, too. She made a note of where they stood so that she could keep away from them.

She paused as they passed someone pinning a sheet of paper to a large bulletin board on the side of a building. It was lined with flyers covered in an alien curling script. Apparently the translator only worked on spoken words, not written ones.

The person moved away, and Novikke’s attention was drawn to the paper they’d just posted. It had a trio of portraits drawn on it. A trio of familiar portraits. She ventured closer, filled with dread.

There was an etching that was a surprisingly accurate likeness of Aruna. Below it were two smaller etchings of a sun elf man and a human woman that did not particularly look like Neiryn and Novikke, but they could not have been anyone else.

Aruna had wandered ahead, and came back when he realized Novikke wasn’t

following. He began to speak, then saw what she was looking at. He frowned, his eyes flicking over the words. “That isn’t good,” he murmured.

Novikke looked up to see if anyone was watching, then tore down the paper, folded it, and tucked it into her pocket. “Maybe we should do whatever we’re going to do here quickly.”

He cast an apprehensive glance down the street and pulled his hood closer around his face. “This way.”

They went down a series of remote streets. Aruna stopped on the doorstep of a tall, narrow house. He sighed. “I was going to ask you to stay outside for this part. But I don’t want to risk you being seen while I’m not here, so you’d better come in with me.” He knocked on the door.

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“All right,” she said uncertainly. “What’s going to happen in there?”

“Nothing good, probably. Maybe you should be ready to run, just in case.”

She raised her eyebrows, and before she could inquire further, the door opened.

A tall night elf woman who looked a lot like Aruna stood before them. As soon as she saw him, her expression soured. Then she noticed Novikke, and it soured even more as she looked her up and down.

“Avan,” Aruna said after a long silence. His weight rested on the balls of his feet and he was already half turned away, like he was indeed getting ready to run.

Avan drew herself up straighter, tilting her nose up in a way that reminded Novikke of Neiryn. She wore a flour-dusted apron that felt at odds with her regal bearing.

“Aruna,” she said in a cold greeting, crossing her arms. “Here I was thinking I’d never see you again. Or that you’d be in the custody of the guard if I did.”

“I don’t know what you’ve heard, but—”

“I’ve heard a lot.” She lifted her eyebrows, disapproving. She looked over their shoulders at the empty street, then stepped back. “I suppose you should get inside before someone sees you,” she said grudgingly.

Aruna let out a quiet breath of relief. He wordlessly entered, watching the woman as he passed, and Novikke followed.

They were in the entryway of a narrow but high-ceilinged red stone house with tapestries and cloth draping over the walls and intricate rugs on the polished floors. Novikke's eyes widened. She didn't know what the economy nor interior design fashion were like in Vondh Rav, but she was fairly certain this was the home of someone with a significant amount of money.

A few lanterns lit the room and the hall beyond. It was brighter than the road, to Novikke's surprise, as if it had been lit for human eyes. She caught movement in the corner of her eye. Down the corridor, a human girl peered timidly from a doorway. She wore a collar like Novikke's and a floury apron that matched Avan's. Her eyes widened when she spotted Aruna, and she shrank a little farther behind the wall.

Avan shut the door behind them and crossed her arms, still scowling at Aruna. She glanced over at Novikke again, then back at Aruna.

"I didn't know you were so desperate for a woman that you would resort to slaves, Aruna."

Aruna's eyes dulled. "This is Novikke," he said flatly. "Novikke, this is Avan. Second High Priestess of the Temple of Ravi and also my sister." Novikke's eyes flicked to the woman in surprise.

"Also, yes," Avan said, mocking. "Good to know you haven't forgotten."

"I know you didn't want to see me," Aruna said. "We can make this quick. I wouldn't have come, but I need your help with something important."

"Yes. You want something. That's the only reason you'd come to me. So what is it?"

"It's a long story. But I can explain—"

“Might it have something to do with what Kashava told me the other day? That you abandoned your post and are aiding the Ardanian soldiers that have been encroaching on our borders?”

He closed his eyes. “You know that’s not true.”

“Is it not? Is my wife a liar? Are all the other witnesses to your betrayal liars, also? They’ve seen you leading groups of humans around the forest. Why?” By the time she reached the last word, she sounded more hurt than angry.

She’d cornered him against a wall. Novikke took a half step back. Her eyes went to the sword on Aruna’s hip, but his hand had not moved near it.

She got the sense that it would have been better for her to keep quiet. But Aruna wasn’t saying anything to defend himself.

“He was taken prisoner,” she said, and Avan’s head jerked up toward her. “He didn’t have a choice.”

“There is always a choice,” she said, her lip lifting with disgust. “Any Varai worth the air they breathe would put a knife through their own heart before helping your people.”

Aruna’s expression darkened. He looked away.

Novikke struggled to hold her tongue. He had been willing to die. Until Theros had threatened her. She was the reason he’d done it. It was her fault if it was anyone’s.

A door at the other end of the hallway opened, and another Varai woman entered the house. As she lifted her face, brushing hair behind a pointed ear, Novikke realized, with a pang of apprehension, that she recognized her. It was the woman from the

ambush—the one Aruna had spoken to after they'd killed the rest of the Varai.

She froze when she spotted Aruna. Then her expression twisted. “Son of a hishveh,” she hissed, and strode toward them, drawing the sword at her hip. This time, Aruna’s hand went to his sword.

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Avan put a hand out as the woman approached, stopping her a few steps away from them. “Hold your fury please, Kashava.”

“To the hells with that. I’m going to kill him,” Kashava snapped, pushing at her arm.

“I think you’ll want to hear what I came to say before you do that,” Aruna said—rather calmly, considering the circumstances.

“Why is that?” Avan said.

“Have you been to the heart recently?” Aruna said, making Avan’s brow tick downward. “Have you noticed anything awry?”

Kashava’s eyes shifted to Avan.

“What is it you think I should have noticed?” Avan said testily.

Aruna went to a chair in the corner of the room and sat down. “That the forest is dying,” he said, resting his chin in his hand.

Kashava scoffed, but lowered her sword. “What are you talking about?”

As Aruna started explaining everything that had happened in the past week, the girl down the hall cleared her throat. When Novikke looked over at her, the girl jerked her head, beckoning her over. Novikke glanced up at the elves, who were paying her no mind, then slipped down the hall toward the girl.

The girl pulled her into the next room, a kitchen. There was a ball of dough on the counter and heat pouring out of an oven—the reason for the aprons.

“I’m Zara,” the girl said. She looked perhaps fifteen, with plain but very neat hair and clothes and a nervous smile.

“Novikke.”

The girl looked at her for a moment. “You haven’t been here long. In Vondh Rav, I mean.”

“How did you know?”

“You have that look about you. You can always tell.” She bit her lip, then lowered her voice. “Avan is—she can relocate slaves who are in bad situations. There are people she knows. Places you can go where people won’t hurt you. She could get you away from him. You can trust her.”

Novikke’s eyes widened. “Oh, no, that’s not... I’m here voluntarily.”

Zara at her skeptically for a long moment. “Are you sure?”

“Quite sure.” Finally speaking to one of the slaves in the city made her slightly nauseous. She was already thinking of ways to take her with them when they left the city. Would Kadaki’s device transport an extra person, or would that be too much strain on the spell?

“Um. How long have you been in Vondh Rav?” Novikke asked. She looked Ardanian. She’d probably be curious about news from the outside world, from her home country. She probably had family there.

“I was born here,” she said, to Novikke’s shock.

“There are humans born in Vondh Rav?”

“Of course. It... happens sometimes. You know.” She shrugged, self-conscious.
“You speak Varai very well. Most humans don’t.”

“Thanks.”

There was an awkward pause. Novikke could hear Aruna still explaining things she already knew in the other room.

“Um, maybe we should sit down,” Zara said. She slid into a chair and looked down at her hands as she folded them in her lap. “It seems like this might take a while.”

Novikke sat stiffly across from her. She’d never felt so uncomfortable in her life. What would this girl think if Novikke told her that she was trying to save the people who had enslaved her?

Gods. Maybe she shouldn’t be doing this after all. She hadn’t been thinking straight when she’d agreed to this.

“Aruna told me that Avan was some kind of advocate for humans here in Vondh Rav,” Novikke said. “I didn’t expect her to have slaves of her own.”

She nodded quickly. “She is. That’s why I’m here. She rescued me from a very bad place. I owe her everything.” Zara gave her another hopeful look. “She could do the same for you.”

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Her praise of Avan seemed genuine. Novikke could sense no resentment at all. It struck her as sad that someone could come to have affection for her captors. “But you still wear a collar.”

Zara shrugged uncertainly. “Yes. I’ve worn one my whole life.”

“Doesn’t it get a little tight?”

“No. I’m just used to it, I think.”

Novikke stared at her.

Zara mistook her dismay as self-pity. She smiled sadly. “I know this must all be very frightening for you, but you’ll get used to it, too. It’s possible for humans to live good lives in Vondh Rav, I promise.”

Novikke wanted to protest further, to ask if she wouldn’t rather be in Ardani—or anywhere other than Kuda Varai, really—but held back. It seemed like there was no changing the girl’s mind. “Can you tell me—Avan is Second Priestess? What does that mean?”

“It means she’s the second highest-ranking person at the temple. The First Priestess is one of the most important people in the city. And the Second Priestess...well, she’s quite important, too, as you can imagine.”

“Could she make requests of the Goddess, then?”

Zara raised her eyebrows. “If anyone could, it would be her. Did you have a request?”

“Maybe.” If Ravi was even real, and not just a manifestation of the forest’s magic. “Do you believe in all of that? Their goddess and the temple and everything?”

She looked baffled, as if it had never occurred to her to question it. But of course it hadn’t, if she’d grown up with it. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Novikke shrugged. “You’re not Varai.”

She was quiet for a moment. “If you’d lived in Kuda Varai, you’d understand. I have felt her presence.”

Novikke thought of the presence she’d felt in the forest when that black fog had overtaken them. The unmistakably hostile presence that had threatened to take her away like it had the other soldiers. She suppressed a shudder.

“She’s the patron goddess of Varai,” Novikke said. “Do you think she cares about humans?”

Zara rubbed her arm absently, shrinking. Novikke softened. Maybe that had come out more harshly than she’d intended.

“I meant nothing by it,” Novikke said.

“Officially, she is the goddess of the Varai, and only Varai,” Zara said softly. “But they say that Ravi cares for all living things. That includes you and I, doesn’t it?” She gave Novikke a challenging glance.

“I wouldn’t know,” Novikke said. She really didn’t.

Zara leaned around the corner to watch the elves, frowning with concern.

“Is it true, what he’s saying?” she asked Novikke quietly, looking frightened.

Novikke sighed. “Yes.” She peered around the corner again. The mood in the entryway had gone from violent to somber.

“If you’d been above ground recently, you’d have seen it for yourself,” Aruna said. “Trees and animals are dying. It’s real. It’s spreading. If we don’t do something about it quickly, it will be too late.”

“I’ve been to the heart. I’ve seen no sign of this,” Avan said.

“Then it hasn’t reached the city yet, but it will. If you take me to the heart—”

“I would die before I took someone outside the priesthood there. You disrespect me greatly by even asking.”

“What is that—the heart?” Novikke murmured to Zara, trying to be quiet, but Avan heard anyway and scowled back at her. Zara only gave a tight-lipped shrug.

“This is nonsense,” Avan said. “The forest can’t be killed. The Goddess protects it. You speak of impossibilities.”

“It’s not impossible, I’ve seen it,” Aruna said through his teeth. “It’s happening, whether you like it or not, and we need to do something about it. I had thought that the Second High Priestess would be more concerned about the impending death of everything she knows and loves.”

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“A Second High Priestess is concerned with liars and heretics and turncoats, especially when they lurk within her own family, but she is never concerned with the health of her blessed immortal goddess.”

Kashava had gone quiet while they argued. Her sword was back in its sheath, her expression troubled. “What if it’s true, Avan?”

“I believe he thinks he’s telling the truth,” Avan said. “But what he’s telling us is impossible.”

Aruna caught Novikke’s eye and gave a soft sigh.

This was why he’d wanted to bring help. He’d known it wouldn’t be this simple. They were going to have to take things into their own hands.

There was a knock at the door. Aruna pulled up his hood and stood out of sight of the doorway as Avan answered it. Her shoulders slumped when she saw whoever was on the other side. Peering over her shoulder, Novikke saw silver armor.

“Can I help you, watchman?” she said, loud enough for them all to hear. Aruna turned and silently rushed to Novikke’s side. No one stopped him. His shadow spell enveloped him.

“Forgive the intrusion, Second Priestess...” said the man at the door as Aruna pulled Novikke toward the back door. She felt his spell creeping over her skin.

“Wait,” Zara whispered. She rushed inside the kitchen and came back with something

in her hand. She pressed it into Novikke's palm. A paring knife. Small enough to hide, but sharp enough to harm. The girl's eyes flicked nervously in the direction of the shadow that was Aruna, but she gave Novikke a small nod.

Novikke nodded back in thanks. Shrouded in shadow, she and Aruna left out the back door.

Chapter 7

They emerged onto the dark street. When Aruna drew his sword and broke into a run, still camouflaged, Novikke hurried to keep up, still gripping his hand.

He stopped short as they rounded the corner. Two city guards waited at the end of the street, swords drawn. They were mere dark shapes in the low light, but she could make out that they were turned the other way.

Aruna turned sharply and guided them into an alley. She felt the spell over her flicker as his concentration wavered, leaving her plainly visible for an instant before it slid back into place.

They peered around the corner, watching the street that Avan's front door was on. A few guards stood in front of her house. Novikke heard Avan's protest as they pushed inside to search the house.

Then she saw the trio of figures standing farther back, watching everything. It was the men who'd stopped them before, a few tunnels back. They must have recognized Aruna and followed them.

She heard Aruna's sharp exhalation—as loud an exclamation of frustration as he was willing to give. He silently ushered her back down the alley and around another corner.

“Hey! Stop!” someone shouted, and they broke into a run. They rounded another corner, only to run into another pair of guards on the next street. Two more appeared

behind them, blocking their exit. The other people on the street gasped and ran out of the way, then hovered nearby to watch.

Aruna dropped Novikke's hand, letting the spell fall away. He glanced at her as he raised his sword. Her heart was in her throat. If they arrested him, she was dead.

"Just stay back," he said to her.

She tucked her knife against her wrist and backed against the wall.

"Put down the sword," one of the guards said. All of them closed in. None of them were looking at Novikke.

Aruna darted forward, slashing the sword up toward one of the guards. They'd been expecting him to surrender, and didn't react quickly enough. The guard moved to block, but Aruna's sword speared past it, stabbing through the man's shoulder.

As Aruna moved to block a blow from the other guard in front of him, the two behind him stepped in to strike him from behind. Novikke leapt forward and drove her knife into the closest one's back just before her sword could come down on Aruna.

Novikke's target shrieked. The kitchen knife stuck in her shoulder. The woman spun and her blade arced toward Novikke, who shielded her face with her arms. Pain sliced across her forearm and her chest, and she fell against the wall. Her sleeve and her collar grew wet. She braced herself against the wall, preparing for another blow, but the guard had turned back to Aruna.

He'd killed the first two, but now the third and fourth were on either side of him. There was a flurry of twisting movement that was difficult to follow in the dark. She heard Aruna shout in pain, and then a figure fell, and then another.

Aruna dropped to his knees, gasping. He'd been hit. He raised the sword and stabbed it into the chest of the only guard that was still trying to get up—healing himself with the sword's enchantment. The fallen guard gasped, then stilled.

It was brutal. The ugly, metallic smell of blood permeated the air. It was even worse than it had been in the forest. Bloodshed here, in the middle of the city, felt all the more grotesquely out of place.

Novikke's vision was spotting, and she grew light-headed. She looked down, and blood was coating her clothes. She clamped a hand over the cut on her arm. There wasn't much she could do about the one on her chest.

Everything was quiet again except for the murmurs of onlookers. Aruna's eyes went to her arms.

He ran to her, and she felt the tingle of a spell being cast over her as both their bodies faded to shadow. "I told you to stay back," he whispered, his voice harsh with panic.

Novikke couldn't think straight. Her mind was blank with fear. There was so much blood. Too much. "I..."

He put an arm around her. "Come on."

Several of the onlookers, finally pulled out of their shocked silence, shouted for them to stop. Novikke and Aruna kept walking. Several people followed at a safe distance, not wanting to fight the people who'd just killed four armed guards. Aruna picked up his pace, pulling Novikke with him.

A pulse of black encroached on her vision. Blood dripped over her hand.

"Aruna—" she began, her voice shaking.

“Don’t,” Aruna said sharply.

Several people were keeping close on their tail, despite the shadow spell. Around the next corner Aruna ducked into an alley and then pulled her behind a large barrel. They stayed perfectly still as their pursuers ran past. No one spotted them.

Aruna cautiously emerged from the hiding place and looked down one way and then the other, deciding where to go next. There was nowhere to hide. There were people watching everywhere. Novikke could hear shouting on the streets all around them.

Novikke’s head was spinning. “Aruna, I—”

“Psst,” someone hissed.

They both looked toward the sound. Zara had appeared at the end of the alley, ducking against a wall. Her wide eyes were not quite focused on them.

“Come. This way,” she whispered, then fled around the corner.

Aruna hesitated, then followed Zara with Novikke in tow. She was relying on him to hold her up by that point. Blood continued to drip down her arms, leaving drops on the ground. She was overcome with weakness. Her legs dragged beneath her.

Zara had waited for them around the corner. When she saw them following, she hurried down another few side streets, somehow never coming into range of the people searching for them.

They rounded a corner, and someone was waiting there for them. Novikke flinched, then realized it was only Avan’s wife.

Avan’s ill-tempered wife, who hated them.

Aruna jerked to a stop, raising his sword with one arm and holding Novikke with the other. “Kashava, if you—”

“Quiet,” she hissed, scowling. “Unless you want them to find you.” She opened a narrow back door of the building beside them and gestured for them to go inside.

Aruna paused, his sword hovering in front of him, before relenting and slipping

through the door. Novikke tripped on the step inside, and Aruna caught her. The sensation of falling continued even after his arms were wrapped around her.

“Novikke,” she heard him say, “you’re going to be all right.”

She tried desperately to hold on to him, to stay conscious, to warn him she was about to pass out—but all she could do was fall as darkness closed around her.

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She awoke again with a weak jerk, remembering what had happened in a panicked rush. The first thing she did was reach out, even before she’d opened her eyes.

“Novikke?”

A hand clasped hers. Aruna’s face appeared above her. She’d been here before. When she’d first met him on the road and Zaiur had knocked her unconscious, she’d awoken to his face above her.

But this time he wasn’t the Serious One frowning down at her. He wore his fear and relief on his face for her to see.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She took inventory of her pains. There was not much—not as much as she’d expected. A dull throbbing in her arm and chest. A dizzy, out-of-sorts feeling.

“Yes,” she said. She blinked up at him. “Are you?”

He bent and kissed her. His hand brushed across her temple and behind her ear as he lifted her face to meet his. She made a small, surprised sound, then raised an arm to

drape it haphazardly over him, drawing him closer. Hadn't they agreed not to do this anymore? Suddenly she didn't care.

Someone gasped.

Aruna paused, then reluctantly pulled away. Zara sat on her knees beside him, her jaw hanging open. She snapped it shut when Novikke looked over at her. She held a small bottle of something in one hand.

Novikke's eyes were drawn to Aruna's rolled up sleeve. A long, deep, bright red cut adorned his forearm. Zaiur's sword lay beside him. She narrowed her eyes at him. He'd cut himself to heal her.

"We can't keep doing this," she said dryly.

He looked at her for a long moment, dark amusement and fondness swimming in his eyes in a way that made her chest feel warm.

Zara motioned for him to offer his arm, and he obeyed. She dripped wound sealer over it. Evidently, however Aruna had behaved while she'd been unconscious had been enough to convince Zara to trust him.

"Don't try to get up yet," he said when Novikke propped herself on her elbows. He frowned a little. "I should never have brought you here."

"No, you shouldn't have," said Kashava. She sat atop a wooden box nearby, elbows resting on her knees.

They were in a dark, dusty room that was apparently used for storage. The only light came from Novikke's mage torch on the ground beside her. There were no windows.

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“You wouldn’t have survived that fight without me. There were too many of them,” Novikke said. “You need me.”

Aruna didn’t argue. He just looked at her with that soft, quiet appreciation that made her feel like she was breaking into pieces.

As Zara finished her ministrations on his arm, he ran a finger over the cut to be sure it had closed. Novikke checked her own wounds and found them already sealed as well. Her clothes were soaked with blood. She didn’t want to think about how close she’d come to death. The cut Aruna had taken with Zaiur’s sword had probably been the only thing that kept the blood loss from killing her.

“Where are we?”

“My late uncle’s shop,” Kashava said. “It’s been closed for months. No one will find you here.”

Novikke watched her cautiously. “You came to help us?”

Kashava paused, pressing her lips together. “Only because Zara convinced me to. She has a way of doing that.”

Zara gave her a sly look.

“Then you’re not going to turn us in?” Novikke said.

“Does it look like that’s what I’m going to do?”

“No. That’s why I’m confused.”

“Avan thinks you’re a spy for the Ardanians,” she said, her eyes sharp. “Are you?”

Novikke couldn’t hold back a long-suffering sigh. “No. I’m not a spy. Never have been. Just a courier.”

Kashava straightened, setting her hands on her knees as she turned a fierce gaze on her and Aruna. “Let me be clear. You’re still a traitor as far as I’m concerned. But it’s obvious that you know more about what’s going on than any of us do, and I think we’re going to need both of you in order to deal with it.”

“Then you believe us?” Novikke said, surprised.

“I don’t think you would’ve ever come back here, otherwise. Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re not,” Aruna said. “Will you help us get inside the temple?”

“I won’t help you break into the temple against Avan’s wishes, no,” she said, arching a disapproving brow. “But if you’re telling the truth, I think we’ll see the evidence for ourselves soon enough, and that will convince her to aid you.”

“It may be too late by then,” Aruna said, frowning.

“You keep saying that, yet we’ve seen no sign of it yet in Vondh Rav.”

Aruna just shook his head, resigned to the fact that they wouldn’t be able to persuade her to betray Avan’s trust.

“When was the last time you slept?” Kashava asked. A good question.

“Too long ago,” Aruna said.

“You need rest.” She jerked her chin toward Novikke. “Her, especially. You’re in no condition to go saving the forest right now. Go sleep, and we’ll talk about this more tomorrow.”

Aruna glanced down at Novikke, then nodded.

“Should we take them back to the house?” Zara asked Kashava.

“No,” Aruna said. “I think Avan might kill me if I go back there right now.”

“And the watch will be keeping an eye on the house,” Kashava said. “I’ll take you to a safe place.”

???

Aruna supported Novikke on the way to the next cavern. She’d passed out again the first time she’d tried to get up. Her legs were heavy as they walked, her limbs weak, and the ground seemed to spin and warp under her. Kashava had generously traded clothes with her, taking her torn and blood-soaked clothes.

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They moved in shadow, Kashava casting her shadow spell over Zara, and Aruna casting over Novikke. The roads had quieted since the earlier scuffle. Some time must have passed. Novikke expected to meet another guard around every turn, but Kashava guided them through the tunnels without incident.

The cavern they ended up in was the most crowded and run-down that Novikke had seen so far. It looked like the kind of place people came when they didn't want to be found. People like herself and Aruna.

They dropped their shadow spells as they approached an unassuming building on a side street. A sign hanging out front bore a picture of a cup and a bed.

Novikke reflexively tightened her hold on Aruna as they entered a crowded bar. He glanced over at her, his eyes checking her over like a healer examining a patient. He hooked his arm a little tighter around her waist, and she resented the spike of affection she felt.

A few people looked up, but none were interested enough for their gazes to linger. It wasn't the type of establishment where someone who looked disheveled and nervous would look out of place.

Zara leaned closer to Kashava when someone in the crowd bumped into her, and Kashava's hand came to rest lightly on Zara's shoulder. It made them look almost like a mother and daughter, if you didn't look too closely. Novikke stared, curious again about how close the relationship between a night elf and a human in Vondh Rav could be.

Kashava spoke to the woman behind the bar, then handed coins across the counter. She turned to Aruna, shooting him an ugly look as she did so. She still held a grudge.

“You have a room for the night, upstairs at the end of the hall,” she said. “Try not to cause any more trouble than you already have. The world will still be here tomorrow. We’ll figure this out and deal with it—the right way.”

“I hope you’re right,” Aruna said, sounding like he had little confidence that she was.

Aruna started toward the stairs, but Novikke held back, looking at Zara. She leaned closer, then pulled the translator off her neck.

“We could take you with us,” she said into Zara’s ear, her voice lost to outside listeners in the noise of the bar. “When we go back to Ardani.”

The girl looked up at her in surprise.

“We have a plan to get out of Kuda Varai safely,” Novikke said, not wanting to divulge too much information. “You wouldn’t be caught. We could take you to Valtos.”

But even as she said it, she wondered how a foreign teenage slave girl would make a life in Ardani. She had no family there to take care of her, no money. Novikke didn’t know what skills or education she had, if any. And she’d be a stranger in her own lands. She knew nothing of Ardanian culture or law. The more Novikke thought about it, the sadder she was for the girl.

“I—Thank you, but no,” Zara said in heavily accented Ardanian. Zara gave her a soft smile. “I have a home here. I could not leave them.”

“Couldn’t?”

“Do not want to,” she amended. “Maybe someday I will find a way to visit Ardani. But not today.”

Novikke nodded. “If you’re sure.”

“I am sure.”

She hesitated, then put the translator back on. Kashava gave her a suspicious look, putting a hand on Zara’s shoulder. They started to leave, but Zara faltered again.

“I didn’t know that you were... in love,” she whispered to Novikke. Novikke stiffened. “I’ve never seen a Varai and a human together before now. Not like that. It makes me...” She shook her head, not finding the right words. “I’m just glad that I met you.”

A painful lump was growing in Novikke’s throat. She didn’t know what to say, so she just nodded.

As Kashava and Zara left the establishment, Aruna found Novikke’s hand on his shoulder and grasped it gently. He looked like he’d guessed what Novikke had offered to Zara, and what the girl’s response had been. Novikke shrugged tiredly.

“Let’s go,” she said.

“Try to be inconspicuous,” he replied as he started toward the stairs. He’d pulled his cloak close around his shoulders, shielding the blood on his clothes from view.

“There’s blood on your face,” she said. In the light of a lantern above them, she could see speckles of it on his cheek. She couldn’t tell if it was his or hers or someone else’s.

“Where?”

She reached up, ignoring the soreness in her arm, and wiped it away with her thumb.

“I think I got it.”

Aruna swallowed. He moved toward the stairs.

Up the stairs, down the hall, and in their own tiny, bare room with the door locked behind them, Novikke’s nerves finally started to settle. Aruna carefully unhooked her arm from him, and she leaned heavily against the wall.

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He dropped his pack to the ground on the other side of the room, then looked up as if to ask something. He opened his mouth, then closed it. There was a long silence. His eyes never moved from hers.

Now that they were alone in a quiet room, she didn't have the luxury of anything else to distract her from him, and she thought again of their kiss at the shop.

He took a step toward her.

Novikke took a quick breath, searching for something to break the silence before he reached her. "Your sister is..."

He stopped. His expression darkened. Exhaustion lined his face.

She knew that this hurt him—the fighting and killing. The things Avan and Kashava had said. It wasn't in his nature to do any of these things, but he'd done them nonetheless.

"She does what she thinks is right," he said with an ironic smile. "As she always has." He leaned on the table against the wall across from her, which wobbled on unevenly cut legs. "No one in this entire forest can see reason."

"Maybe tomorrow she will. Like Kashava said."

"Maybe. But I'm not going to wait to find out."

Novikke raised her eyebrows. "What are you planning?"

“To go to the temple myself, without Avan’s help.”

“And then?”

“Get to the heart, and beg Ravi to give me the power to save her.”

“Won’t they deny you entry?”

“Almost definitely.”

“Then how will you get in?”

He smiled bitterly. “I...haven’t figured that out yet. Perhaps Ravi will bless me with inspiration tonight.”

“What would you say your chances are?”

“Low. But I have no better plan, and I have to try something, and I have to do it soon.”

He came closer, standing in front of her. “You should leave,” he said. “Use Kadaki’s device to go back to the forest. It isn’t safe for you here. There’s a good chance I’m going to be killed or arrested tomorrow, and if that happens, it’s best if you aren’t here.”

She frowned. “This is the whole reason I came here with you. For just this situation. Your chances are better if I’m here to help you.”

He shook his head. “Kashava was right. Bringing you here was a mistake. After what happened earlier...”

“If I hadn’t been there earlier, you’d have failed already,” she said, crossing her arms.
“I’m not leaving. We’ll go to the temple together.”

He frowned, eyeing her narrowly.

“And I hope you’re not about to try to make me do otherwise, because I’ll be annoyed if I came all the way here and endured all of this just to be cut out at the last moment.”

“After everything that’s happened, you still want to stay?” He took another small step closer until they were almost touching.

She thought of the dead trees and animals they’d seen, and imagined the entire forest like that—reduced to a dry, lifeless husk. She couldn’t let that happen to Kuda Varai, to Vondh Rav. More importantly, she couldn’t let it happen to Aruna.

“Of course I do,” she said.

He reached toward her, and her heart raced in anticipation of the touch.

She forced herself to say, “Don’t.”

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His hand stopped in midair. She looked down to avoid his hurt expression.

“I must have misunderstood things,” he said, the bitterness in his voice unmistakable. He turned away from her. “Maybe the things we’ve been doing mean something different to Ardanians than they do to Varai.”

“Aruna...”

“First I thought you were merely giving me what you thought I wanted because you were trying to escape. Then, when you kissed me at the Ardanian camp, I thought you might have had feelings for me. And then when you put that sword in yourself—”

His tongue was quicker without the barrier of the notebook between them. She could tell that if he’d had too much time to think about it, he wouldn’t have said any of this. He turned to look over his shoulder at her.

“But I suppose you came to your senses after that,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” he muttered.

“I think I do,” she said with a rueful smile. “You’re an outcast among your people. You’ve had to hurt your friends and family. Everything has gone terribly for you since you met me. I must have had something to do with that, don’t you think?”

“No. Your captain had something to do with it. My leaders and my friends had

something to do with it. But you? No. You're the only part of this I don't regret. If I could go back and change things, the only thing I'd do differently is not take so long to realize it."

"You don't mean that."

"I do. You're better than anyone I know."

She put her head in her hands. "All I've done since we met is make life harder for you. We're only going to keep hurting each other. We weren't meant to be a part of each other's worlds."

"Is that what you think?" He leaned back on his heels. "Is that all that's stopping you?"

"Is that all?" Novikke repeated with a tired laugh. "That's no small thing, Aruna."

"It is to me." His stiff shoulders dropped, as if in surrender. "I love you. Next to that, everything else is small."

Novikke stared at him, disbelieving.

"Don't say that," she said breathlessly.

He looked affronted. "Why not?"

"Just don't."

He set his jaw in defiance. "I love you," he said again.

"You can't."

A number of conflicting emotions played out on his face. Eventually he laughed. “Why not?”

The laugh cracked through whatever resistance she’d had left. She took hold of the front of his shirt, pulled him toward her, and kissed him.

He raked his hands through her hair and then pulled her closer, like he was afraid she might change her mind and back away again.

“I love hearing you laugh,” she said against his cheek. “Why don’t you do it more often?”

“I would if I had reason to more often.”

She pulled away to meet his eyes, knowing that this time, there would be no going back. “We’re doomed.”

“I know,” he said, and kissed her again.

He pushed her backward toward the bed. She sank into it, and he climbed in on top of her. The blood rushed from her head.

“I still feel a little weak,” she said.

He pulled back a little, disappointed. “Do you want to rest?”

No, she definitely didn’t want that. “Uh... no, I just think I might faint if I exert myself too much.”

“Then let me exert myself, instead,” he said, loosening the ties on her pants.

For once, there was no barrier of reluctance and fear between them. She touched him without thinking about how he couldn't have cared for her the way she did him, or how she was hurting him by remaining near him, or how it might be their last time doing this. Finally, she had no guilt or doubt in her heart, because love had crowded them out.

They were still doomed. But at least they were doomed together.

Chapter 8

She awoke in a strange bed, in a strange room. But the warm presence beside her was familiar and comforting. She felt the hot, smooth skin against her naked back, and turned over.

His eyes were closed. She'd rarely seen him asleep before. He always seemed to wake before her. She took the opportunity to stare openly at his face, beautiful and placid. The serenity of the moment disappeared when she thought of the task ahead of them.

She couldn't tell how long they'd slept, but it felt like a long time. They needed to get to the temple. They'd already lost too much time the previous day. They could not delay any longer.

"Aruna?" she said quietly, regretting having to disturb this perfect image of him. When he didn't wake, she sat up and touched his shoulder. "Aruna." She shook him gently.

He didn't move.

She frowned down at him, suddenly seeing how he was just a little too still, a little too deep in sleep.

She thought of the wolf and the birds they'd seen on their way to Vondh Rav, and she stopped breathing.

“Aruna?” she said louder, and his face didn’t so much as twitch in response. A knife of fear drove through her core. She grabbed his arm and shook him. “Aruna, wake up. Please wake up.”

His body was limp in her hands. His eyes didn’t open. Novikke forced herself to put her ear against his chest, fearing she’d hear no life there.

A slow, steady heartbeat thumped in her ear. And he was warm. He was alive. Mostly.

“Please wake up,” she begged him. “Don’t do this to me.”

Every second that he didn’t wake brought the Panic closer. It was coming up her throat, clouding her vision, pushing the world far away, strangling her.

She grabbed his hand and held on tight.

“I’m not going to panic,” she told herself.

The death had spread to Vondh Rav.

And there was nothing she could do about it.

Except...the heart. She could find the heart.

She had to. Because there was no one else. She was the only one who could help him now. If he wasn’t beyond help.

She shuddered. She couldn’t think of that. She had to assume that she could fix this, or the Panic would overtake her.

Her fingers curled around his. “I’m not going to panic,” she said again, and was surprised to find that she believed it.

She took slow breaths, holding tight to his hand. She focused on the warmth of his skin. The calluses beneath his fingers. The hard beds of his nails.

And the world slowly began to come back into focus.

She waited a long time before she dared let go of him, and even then her breath still came in shallow spurts and her heart still raced, but her thoughts were in order enough for her to move. She set her jaw, cloaked herself in cold resolve, and slid off the bed.

She cast glances back at him as she dressed. He never moved. She made herself turn away from him. She tied her boots tightly before slipping out the door and into the hall.

The moment she entered the hallway, she knew something was very wrong. Blaring silence pressed against her ears. The soft creak of the floorboards rang out in the absolute stillness.

She came to the end of the hallway, which opened into a balcony that overlooked the bar. Her blood ran cold.

Dark figures lay prostrate and limp across the room. The man behind the counter was curled up on the ground, as if he’d just lain down and gone to sleep. Customers, some still clutching their drinks, had laid their heads on their tables. A waitress had collapsed on the floor, leaving glasses and plates shattered in an arc around her hand. No one moved.

It was as if a poisonous vapor had swept through the place and silently dropped them

all where they stood.

Novikke turned on her heel and went back to the room. She slipped on a jacket, strapped Zaiur's sword onto her belt, then went to the bed.

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Aruna still looked perfectly at peace. She wondered if somehow, from wherever his mind was, he could hear her.

“I’m going to fix this,” she said. She bent and kissed him—in case it was the last time she got to do so. A sensitive inner part of her chest, the part that felt love and hate most keenly, twisted in pain at that thought. Gritting her teeth, she fought back another wave of despair, strategically replacing it with anger.

Anger at Theros, at Avan, at Ardani, at the Varai. Anger that they hadn’t had more time. Anger at the gods for cursing them with misfortune over and over.

Just anger.

The cavern outside the inn was quiet and empty and still. People lay unmoving on the street and on stoops and at tables—women, men, and children alike. She spotted a group of guards on the street corner, collapsed in a heap of metal armor and weaponry.

The entire city had fallen into deathly silence.

It was unnatural and eerie. Some deep, ancient part of her mind urged her to flee.

She went to a young woman lying prone on the street and pressed her fingers to her throat. She had a pulse. They were all still alive. Sleeping. But how long would that last?

A soft sound echoed off the cavern walls. Novikke put a hand on the hilt of her

sword. A sun elf man wearing a magic-suppressing collar stood down the street, staring slack-jawed at the unconscious Varai. He looked up at Novikke, apprehension lacing his features.

“What’s happened to them?” he said.

Novikke swallowed. She dropped her hand from her sword. “Can you tell me how to get to the Temple of Ravi?”

His dazed confusion turned to dark amusement. “Why? Are you going to take the opportunity to burn it down? You wouldn’t be the only one to consider it.”

What was it with Ysurans and fire? “Where is it?” she said more firmly.

“It’s on the eighth level,” he said. “Below.” He gave a complicated set of directions that Novikke only partially followed.

“Thank you,” she said. She eyed the man, suddenly guilty. There would be other people wandering the city, free for the first time since their enslavement. And she was trying to wake up their oppressors again.

“This isn’t going to last forever,” she said. “You should gather as many people as you can and leave the city, now.”

He gave her a suspicious look, but then nodded and hurried on his way. Novikke took out her mage torch and started down the stairs he’d pointed her to.

None of the Varai had been spared. They lined roads, and she could see them through windows, all eerily still. Every so often, she came across another slave. Some wandered, confused, like the sun elf upstairs. Some ran, hardly sparing her a glance.

In one cavern she spotted a human man with a knife, kneeling over an unmoving Varai. He stabbed the Varai in the chest, over and over. When Novikke passed, the man glanced up, his face twisted in rage, then kept stabbing.

She went down, down, into the depths of the earth far from the cliffside. The air grew damp and stagnant and cool, and the tunnels grew wide and empty. She got the impression that no one lived here. Whereas above, the tunnels and caverns had been lined with dwellings and shops, this was empty but well cared for. The spaces she walked through were immaculate, with smooth, pristine walls and floors carved into dark stone.

A strangely warm breeze hit her face, as if she was nearing a fire, and then the tunnel opened up into a massive natural cavern lined with stalactites and black stone columns. An enormous archway marked the entrance to the temple. Pillars covered in elaborate reliefs of foliage and animals decorated the entryway and the room beyond.

Most shocking of all was a statue, twenty times her height, that stood at the front of the temple. It was an elven woman sculpted from shining black stone, encircled in ethereal flowing robes, with waist-length hair that streamed behind her as if in a fierce wind. Her expression was serene but strong in a way that reminded Novikke of Aruna.

“Hello, Ravi,” Novikke said quietly, and her voice echoed. The goddess seemed to look down at her, judging. She half expected the statue to come to life and block her from entering the temple. Her shoulders hunched as she passed.

Inside the temple, fires burned in braziers, casting flickering light on the walls. Niches carved into the walls held statues and burning candles. Lush scarlet carpet lined the floors.

No one could say that the Varai did not value artistry.

Priests in black vestments lay on the ground along the carpet and in corners. There were more than Novikke had expected. She doubted there was any way she and Aruna could have infiltrated the temple unseen if they had tried to come the previous day. She stepped over them and kept walking.

At the center of the temple was another statue, an altar covered in flowers, and a fountain. It was beautiful, but none of this appeared to be what she was here for. It would have helped if she'd had any idea what this heart was supposed to look like. Hopefully it was the sort of thing that she'd know when she saw it.

Another warm gust washed over her, and she turned toward it, finding an open door hidden to the side of the altar. Through the door was a dark, narrow passageway that led even farther underground. Warmth emanated from below. Novikke rested a hand on her sword and followed the passage down.

She held her mage torch in front of her to light the passage until she realized that there was a soft, gold light coming from the end of the hall. She put away the torch, letting the strange light illuminate her way.

And then she rounded a corner, and the passage opened up into a room almost as big as the cavern upstairs. She flinched as heat and light bathed her. Something big glowed bright ahead, burning her eyes after she'd grown accustomed to the dim. She squinted until her eyes stopped stinging and the shape began to coalesce into something recognizable.

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In the room was a tree. An enormous tree with bark that glowed with life and light and magic, growing deep underground.

The heart of the forest.

She stared at it, and a small voice in her head told her that she shouldn't be there. She walked toward it anyway. She was so focused on the tree that she didn't notice the figure beneath it until it moved.

Avan sat on her knees between the huge roots of the tree, glaring up at Novikke. She was awake.

"Avan," Novikke said in surprise, not sure whether she was happy to see her conscious.

Avan studied her, suspicious. Her eyes went to the sword at her hip. Novikke wondered if she recognized it as the one Aruna had been wearing before.

Her body was sagging, as if she was on the verge of falling asleep like the rest of them had.

She took a step closer, and the woman bared her teeth. "Just stay where you are. Your presence has sullied this holy place enough. You needn't make it worse."

Novikke leaned back on her heels. "I wasn't trying to sully anything," she said. "But there's a bit of an emergency up there. You'll have to pardon me for taking drastic measures."

Avan glared at her. The light of the tree made her face glow. “What’s happened?” she finally asked, her brows drawn together in concern.

“You don’t know?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I did, would I?” she snapped. “I saw the other priests start dropping, and I...” She bit back the rest of the sentence. Her mistrust was palpable.

“And you came down here,” Novikke finished for her. So, she’d known that the tree could protect her somehow.

Her throat moved as she swallowed. “Where is Aruna?” she asked.

“He’s safe. I mean, he’s not...dead. Yet.”

“Yet?”

“Everyone in the city is asleep. Maybe dying, I can’t tell. Everyone except non-Varai. You’re the only one still conscious. I think it’s only a matter of time.”

Avan slowly shook her head. “That can’t be.”

“I couldn’t have gotten here alone if anyone was awake to stop me.”

Avan knew it was true. Novikke could see the despair in her eyes. She put her head in her hand.

She wanted to remind her that they’d tried to warn her. “What is this place?” she said instead.

Avan shot her a hard look through watery eyes. “You know what it is. This is what

you came here for, isn't it? Are you here to finish what the others started?"

"No, I'm not." She took another step toward the tree.

"Stay back," Avan snarled, and Novikke stopped short.

Avan's hand was on one of the roots, holding on tightly. It reminded Novikke of a mother guarding a child, though she wasn't sure which was the mother and which was the child.

"Ravi will protect us," Avan said.

"Ravi is dying, and the Varai are dying along with her. I'm the only one left who can do anything about it." She thought, then amended, "The only one who wants to do anything about it."

Avan scoffed. "Why would you want to help us?"

"Aruna," Novikke replied shortly.

Avan didn't ask why a slave would want to protect her master. Novikke sensed that she'd already guessed she was not really a slave.

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“You choose to aid the enemies of your people just to save one man?”

“Not just to save one man.”

If Aruna hadn't been there to show her the forest through his eyes, if she hadn't met people like Zara or Shadri, she might have never come to see the Varai as they really were: as people, no different from herself and other Ardanians. If she had never come to know them, she would still have been thinking of them as monsters.

“Would you destroy all of Valtos, if you could?” Novikke asked. “The entire city, thousands of people? Would you kill them all? Burn everything they'd built?”

Avan actually considered it for a while before saying, “No.” She looked almost confused. Maybe she hadn't expected Ardanians to have the same morals she did.

“What is he to you?” Avan asked.

“A friend.”

“It's hard to imagine my brother befriending a human.”

Novikke shrugged.

Avan's eyes softened. “Then again, it's hard to imagine him doing a lot of the things I've heard he's been doing.”

“He isn't a traitor.”

Avan shook her head, looking away. “He’s been gone on patrol for months now without returning to the city once. I haven’t seen him in almost a year. Then I hear he’s been seen working with Ardanians, and then he shows up at my door with you, ranting about some disaster coming for us. I do wonder how this all came about.”

“It’s a long story. You should have him explain it to you after all this is over.”

Avan set her jaw as if holding back tears. “I’m really the only one left?”

“As far as I can tell, yes.”

“Then it’s because Ravi protected me,” she said. “But I can feel her weakening. And whenever I let go, darkness starts closing in.”

Novikke looked down at the woman’s hand, which never left the root she was holding onto. “The tree is the source of Ravi’s power?” she guessed.

Avan didn’t answer, and Novikke sensed she hadn’t quite hit the mark. She considered the woman’s words again.

“The tree is Ravi,” Novikke said.

Avan didn’t confirm her guess. She didn’t have to. “Do you understand that no human has ever been where you are right now? Very few Varai have, either. It is a great honor to witness this place.”

Novikke traced the tree’s limbs with her eyes. The branches were thick and gnarled with age. It looked like it had been there since before time had begun. “I know.”

She didn’t know what she’d expected the heart of the forest to look like, but she couldn’t have imagined this. There was a heaviness to the air. The room was thick

with magic and...something else.

“Let me help,” Novikke said. “Tell me what I should do.”

Avan looked small with her grand robes in a pool around her folded legs and the fierce, defensive expression gone from her face. “I don’t know what you should do. I don’t know why any of this is happening.”

At least she wasn’t telling her to leave. “I’m open to any ideas.”

Avan hesitated for a long time.

“You came here for Ravi, yes?” she said finally. “Then let’s see if she speaks to you. Come closer.”

Novikke swallowed her surprise. She approached the tree.

It became apparent what the source of the heat was. As she went closer, warmth bathed the bare skin of her face and hands and soaked into her clothes. Somehow, it never grew uncomfortably hot. It felt like an embrace. Like life.

She stopped beside Avan. Worry lined the woman’s face.

“What do I do?” Novikke asked.

“Listen.”

She listened. And now that she was looking for it, she felt a soft pulsing coming from the tree. Like a heartbeat.

Curious, she reached toward the trunk. She heard Avan’s sharp intake of breath, and she stopped. Heat sank into her outstretched hand, and she could not tell whether it felt dangerous or comforting. Power poured from the tree. It skimmed over her skin, a tense vibration of magic or godliness or something else beyond the understanding of mortals.

And there was the presence again. A familiar sensation of something big watching her, very close and invisible to human eyes. The same feeling she’d had that day in the forest.

Something in her urged her to reach forward. The tree beckoned her.

Was that the voice she’d been listening for?

She reached forward. Her hand pressed against the bark.

A shock went through her. White-hot heat seared her fingers. She shouted in alarm before she realized there was no pain. There was only heat and energy and that heartbeat that she could now hear pounding in her ears, echoing through her head.

Black vapor, somehow dark and luminescent at once, flowed around her, crackling like lightning and sparking like fire. It pressed into her hand through the bark, sinking into her skin. She held her hand there, commanded by the wordless, inaudible voice that rang in her head, until she could stand it no more.

She tore her hand away, and the energy binding her to the tree broke off with a snap. She stumbled back and fell to the ground. The pounding heartbeat in her ears faded. The overwhelming heat subsided.

Her hand was streaked with black from her fingers to her elbow, like someone had smeared soot over her. Thin, glowing veins of gold, threads of light and darkness, bright with inner life, wove through her skin. It was in her.

She looked up at Avan, who stared at her in blank surprise. Novikke wasn't sure whether this had been a punishment or a blessing. "What in the hells was that?"

Avan reached out and took Novikke's hand. She held it for a moment, as if searching for something. She looked up at Novikke.

"I think she has given you a piece of herself," she said, looking torn between awe and confusion and disapproval.

"A piece...?" A piece of Ravi. A piece of the heart. That was what she'd needed. It was a blessing after all.

Novikke pulled her hand away. "I have to go."

Avan's eyes went wide and sharp. "Where will you go?"

"To fix this," she said, turning to leave. She glanced over her shoulder, smiling. "I'll fix it. I promise."

Avan gave her an unhappy, conflicted look. The look of someone whose life and home rested in the hands of a stranger and an enemy.

Novikke turned, still feeling the rush of Ravi's magic flowing through her, and went to finish saving all of Kuda Varai.

???

Even moving quickly, it took Novikke half an hour to get back upstairs to the inn, but it felt like much longer.

Many of the slaves had gone already, but a few had remained to wreak havoc on the city. She passed a few fires.

She pushed open the door to the inn and went up the stairs to their room, stepping over bodies as she went. Her heart pounded as she came to the door. A dark part of her feared she would find him dead from the forest's affliction or murdered by some vengeful human.

But she opened the door, and he was exactly where she'd left him, tucked safely into the bed.

She went to his side, standing over the bed to look down at him with apprehension. She glanced at the black marks on her hand. If this didn't work, she'd have to leave him there.

She reached down and touched his hand.

There was a tiny spark of something when her skin touched his. His eyes snapped open. He looked at the ceiling, then over at her. Reading her concerned expression, he frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:01 am

Novikke's hand trembled. She sank to her knees, resting her head on the bed. "Oh, gods," she whispered. Thank you, Ravi.

Aruna sat up a little. He looked behind her at the door, as if expecting to find some danger there. "Novikke? What's going on?"

He had no idea that anything had been wrong. He'd fallen asleep, and then awoken, and that was all he knew. If he'd died, he would have died in his sleep, unaware that anything was awry. She wasn't sure if that comforted or terrified her.

She looked up at him, tears brimming in her eyes. "I couldn't wake you. The death has reached the city. I was afraid that the same thing that happened to those animals in the woods had happened to you."

"I don't understand," he said. "I'm awake."

"Yes," she sighed. "We need to go. I'll tell you everything while you get ready."

She stepped away as he moved to get up. When her hand disconnected from him, his eyelids fluttered and his head began to tip downward. Novikke rushed to grab him again, and his eyes shot wide again. He gaped at her.

His fingers dragged lightly over hers, searching for something. Novikke could feel the slight tingling of magic flowing from her into him. He could feel it now, too. He watched her curiously.

"Don't let go of me," he said.

“I won’t.”

He was in disbelief when she’d explained everything that had happened. He went out to the balcony over the bar to see it for himself. Novikke went with him, holding onto his hand. He stared at the limp bodies on the floor and in chairs.

He stepped back, his expression tight. “The entire city is like this?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He looked at her like he no longer knew her. He looked down at her hand, now interwoven with strange threads of magic and darkness. “Avan said Ravi gave you a part of herself?”

It was hard to tell if he was upset. A human taking a piece of the goddess of the Varai—it must have been blasphemous. Avan had seen the tree give Novikke her power, and even she had been conflicted about it. The only reason it had happened was that Novikke was the only one left in Vondh Rav capable of doing what needed to be done.

The Varai were all connected to the tree’s magic—the magic that was dying. Novikke did not think they would have the strength left to carry a piece of the heart, or the tree would have given it to Avan, instead.

“I didn’t ask for it,” she said apologetically. “It just... happened.”

“Because she deemed you worthy,” he said with a note of satisfaction. He approved.

“She only entrusted me with this because she had no other choice.”

“If anyone could be trusted with it, it’s you.” He considered her for a long moment.

“Maybe she is like us. She knows that your people and mine should not be working against each other. Maybe she realized that long before the rest of us. Maybe there was a reason we were both on the road that night. Maybe we were meant to meet.”

She had a hard time imagining the gods had ever had such a hand in the life of someone as insignificant as herself. “I’m glad we were both there, even if it wasn’t orchestrated by the gods.” She smiled, then looked down at her hand. “Kadaki said that we might be able to reverse this if we had a large enough source of magic to give back to the axis. Do you think a piece of a god would do the trick?”

“I think it might.”

“Then let’s get back to the ruins and figure out a way to get this thing out of me and into the axis.”

He nodded, blinking slowly. Suddenly she noticed the subtle sluggishness of his movements, as if he was about to fall asleep again. She squeezed his hand.

“Don’t let go,” he said again.

“I’m not going to.”

He nodded. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Novikke began to reach into her pocket for Kadaki’s device, then stopped. “Wait.” She took off the translator, offered it to him, then waited while he put it on. He’d need it when they got back to Kadaki. “Give me your knife.”

He handed it to her, and she slid the blade beneath the collar on her neck. With a few saws, the sharp blade severed the leather. She let it drop to the floor. “Now we’re ready.”

She eyed the enchanted transportation device in her hand. “Say a prayer to Ravi that this thing doesn’t turn us inside out on the way back, will you?”

“Already done.”

Chapter 9

She'd thought the last time they'd traveled by magic had been bad. Apparently it could get much worse if you didn't have a skilled mage guiding you.

As she activated the device, the air and land twisted around them. The world turned on itself, thrusting them back and forth. Novikke's hair whipped in her face. Colors and shapes flashed past in a blur, like unformed dreams. Aruna pulled her closer and held on, as if afraid she might lose him otherwise.

And then her back hit something hard and lumpy, knocking the wind out of her. She grunted as a weight slammed on top of her.

The world stopped spinning. It was dark, and a lantern flickered nearby. Familiar canvas hung overhead. They were in a large tent. Aruna had landed on top of her. He gingerly pulled back to look at her.

"What in all the hells?" said a female voice.

Novikke groaned, struggling to catch her breath. Thala, Vissarion, and Kadaki stood in front of them, gaping.

There was a tense, shocked pause in which no one moved. Then Vissarion drew his sword.

Aruna scrambled off Novikke and pulled her to her feet. She'd landed on top of another soldier, who was clutching his head in pain. She started to draw her sword,

and then a blade pressed against her back.

“Don’t move,” the soldier behind her said. Novikke stopped moving. Aruna glared at the man behind Novikke. He had a hand on the knife on his belt, but he didn’t draw it.

“Take it easy,” Novikke said carefully. “We meant no harm. Sorry for the interruption.”

“Where the hells did you come from?” Vissarion said, waving his sword. “How did you get here?”

Kadaki had taken a step backward, out of Vissarion and Thala’s line of sight, and was chanting something under her breath.

“Magic,” Novikke said.

Kadaki shot her spell at the man behind Novikke. Novikke jumped out of the way to avoid impaling herself on his blade as the man slumped to the ground, asleep.

Vissarion’s eyes bulged. He whirled and grabbed Kadaki by the arm. She tried and failed to jerk away from him.

“Stop! Vissarion!” Thala shouted, and a scuffle broke out between all three of them.

As Thala tried to peel Vissarion off Kadaki, Novikke sliced through the canvas behind them and ducked through, pulling Aruna after her.

They ran blindly into the night—at least, Novikke was blind. She let Aruna guide her as the sounds of shouting and fighting faded behind them.

“Where are we?” She looked over her shoulder and was surprised to see an entire camp—several dozen tents were lined up around them.

What was Kadaki doing here?

“Don’t know,” Aruna said. He sounded out of breath even though they hadn’t run far.

Novikke saw Vissarion leaving the tent and sounding an alarm as they passed the edge of the clearing. She pulled Aruna to a stop behind a clump of brush.

“Hide us?” she whispered.

He nodded. There was the familiar tingle-rush of a spell falling over her. Her body began to fade to shadow.

Then Aruna jerked as if he’d been shocked. His hand went limp in hers. They both became solid again as the spell failed.

“Aruna?”

He slumped. Novikke caught him, and he leaned heavily on her. “Aruna?” she hissed.

Bright eyes looked up at her, heavy-lidded. “Can’t,” he said breathlessly. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right.” She swallowed tightly, ignoring the Panic creeping at the edges of her mind. She pushed him behind a tree, trying not to notice the way he sagged weakly against it.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:01 am

Figures scattered around the camp as a search began. Someone from the camp was wandering toward them, but they were alone. Novikke ducked low in the darkness and held her sword ready. Aruna tipped his head back against the tree, closing his eyes. In the hand that wasn't clutching hers, he held his dagger. They were silent as footsteps came closer.

When the figure was about to pass by them, Novikke leapt toward them, raising her sword.

"Hey!" The figure raised their hands, jumping back. In the scant light, Novikke could see it was Thala. Her sword was still sheathed.

Novikke lowered her own sword a fraction.

Thala gave her a measuring stare. She looked over her shoulder at the scrambling soldiers at the camp, then jerked her head toward the brush Aruna was hidden behind.

Reluctantly, Novikke put her sword down and went to kneel in the dirt beside Aruna. Thala put her hands down, then crept behind the brush with them.

"What a time you chose to get here," Thala said.

"Where are we?" Novikke asked. "What's going on?"

"You're just south of the ruins. How did you—?"

"Kadaki."

She gave a tip of her head in silent understanding. “You’re lucky you got out of there. The entire company is here.”

“All of them?”

Thala nodded solemnly. “After the four of you left the ruins, Vissarion and Aleka and I retreated into the forest. We thought we were doomed without a guide. But we kept walking toward where we thought the edge of the forest might be, and we ran into the rest of the company. When Theros’s expedition didn’t return on time, they set out to find us.”

“I don’t understand. They came into the forest and made it all the way here? Without a guide?”

Thala gave Aruna a guilty look. “The forest is dying,” she said.

He opened his eyes long enough to peer over at her. “We know.”

“I’ve seen animals dropping dead all around the forest,” she said. “How are you faring?”

He gave her another tired, wary look.

“Not well,” Novikke said. “Thanks to Theros.”

Thala nodded. “That’s why we’re able to move freely now. The forest’s defenses are weakening. We don’t get lost like we usually do. We can navigate with the sun and stars without them leading us astray, and without things changing around us while we’re not looking, and no monsters or weird mists have assaulted us the entire time we’ve been here.”

Novikke glanced up at Aruna. He looked nauseated.

“With Theros gone, Vissarion is acting captain. He refused to leave, now that we can navigate on our own. He said we’ve never had a chance like this and we need to take advantage of it. He’s leading the group into the forest to finish what Theros started.”

“No,” Novikke hissed. “Didn’t you tell him that we can’t do that?”

“I tried,” she said, looking pained. “I tried to tell them. Kadaki tried to tell them. They don’t understand, or they don’t care. They’re angry. They know the night elves killed a dozen and a half of their own, including their captain. That’s all they care about. They’re out for blood.”

“We have to get to the ruins. Can you help us?”

“I think so. Can you fix this?”

“Gods, I hope so. Where’s Kadaki?”

She motioned over her shoulder. “Back there. Arrested. She’ll be court-martialed. Same as you.”

“And you?”

She bit her lip. “I’m still trying to avoid that.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:02 am

“Where’s Neiryn?” Novikke said, suddenly noticing his absence.

“The sun elf? Kadaki said that they parted ways. I assume that means that he ran when they saw us coming. I don’t blame him.”

Then it was the three of them against the rest of the company. Two and a half, really.

“Which direction are the ruins?” Novikke asked.

“The other side of the camp. That way.” She pointed.

Novikke scowled at the camp. They’d have to go all the way around. The soldiers had all started searching the woods around the tents. It would be difficult to avoid all of them without Aruna’s magic. And judging by how quickly he was weakening, he would probably slow her down. But she didn’t dare let go of him. For all she knew, she was the only thing keeping him alive.

“There’s a patch of thick brush over there. If you go around behind it, you might be able to avoid them,” Thala said, gesturing to the left of the camp. “I’ll try to slow down the others.”

“Thank you, Thala.”

She nodded and started to leave, then stopped and looked back at Aruna. “I’m sorry about this. Before this, I’d been told all kinds of awful things about Varai, but you’re none of those things. I wish things could have been different between us.”

“So do I,” Aruna said.

Thala gave a hopeful smile. “Astra’s luck to you.” She ducked into the bushes and hurried toward the camp.

Novikke pulled Aruna’s hand, and he followed her through the forest.

They crept through the darkness. The moons were high in the sky, casting soft blue light over the forest. Novikke kept to the shadows of trees, carefully avoiding twigs and patches of crunchy leaves. Only a few of the trees were still alive. They’d gone bare and gray, and the grass and brush beneath them was thin and wilted.

They passed by the camp at a distance. Figures moved among the trees, holding mage torches and lanterns. Novikke wove between them, giving each figure a wide berth. Thala had been right—the brush mostly covered them.

“Novikke...” Aruna whispered.

She glanced up at him to let him know she’d heard, but didn’t stop moving.

“It is imperative that we save the forest,” he said.

“I know.”

“I mean that the entire forest comes before any one individual.”

Her steps faltered. “Stop,” she said.

“Novikke,” he said again. “Look at me.”

She stopped and reluctantly looked over at him. Was it her imagination, or did the

faint glow of his eyes seem dimmer than usual?

“I want to make sure you understand that you have to get to the ruins and heal the forest at all costs. No matter what happens to me.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“That means you must leave me behind if you have to. Do you understand?”

She glared at him. Panic was pushing into her head and body, threatening to take over. Her jaw was tight and tears were springing to her eyes. “Yes.”

His eyes were wide, afraid. “Promise me you’ll follow through until it’s done, if I can’t.”

She laced her fingers through his. “I will. I promise. But you have to stop talking like that, I mean it, or I’m going to—”

He nodded. “Thank you.”

She shook her head. She couldn’t think about that. She focused on moving. She could see the white stone of the ruins now, far ahead.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:02 am

They ducked low and went quiet as a soldier passed by them, his lantern burning Novikke's eyes. She held her breath as the man walked right on the other side of the vines they knelt behind. He was close enough that she could have touched him.

To her alarm, he came to a stop, right in front of them. Then he startled, and the lantern swung toward them.

"Hells," the man said, jumping back and swinging his sword in front of him.

Novikke ran, all attempts at stealth abandoned. Aruna stumbled after her, gripping her hand.

"Here!" the soldier shouted behind them. Novikke didn't look back. Her eyes were on the ruins. White spires loomed ahead as they got closer. She was vaguely aware of others joining the chase. More figures appeared in the trees in her peripheral vision.

"Watch out," Aruna said, and pulled her back just in time to keep her from falling down a steep slope. He pointed along the slope where something resembling a path led down. "That way."

There was no tree cover along the side of the hill, and the moons bathed the path in pale light.

"Archers—" Novikke began.

"Won't catch us if we go quickly," Aruna said, urging her down the slope.

Halfway down, an arrow flew past Novikke's head. A line of figures was at the top of the ridge, drawing bows. She and Aruna were still far from the cover of the trees at the bottom of the path. She looked down into the valley below. They could jump and slide down the side. There was about a fifty-fifty chance that they'd break a leg, she guessed.

It was not a great option, but it was better than getting shot in the back with an arrow, which was what was about to happen.

"Ash," she muttered.

"Jump?" Aruna said.

"Yes."

They jumped.

She tried for a controlled slide and failed almost immediately. Branches tore at her skin and thorns stuck in her clothes. She rolled to a stop at the bottom of the slope, somehow still holding onto Aruna. He winced, putting a hand to his head.

An arrow stabbed into the undergrowth beside them. Novikke flinched and searched for cover. Another arrow narrowly missed Aruna's arm, and Novikke twisted aside as another shot into the leaves beside her. They were still a short sprint away from the trees.

Then a fireball shot out of the woods behind her and landed in the middle of the soldiers at the top of the hill. There was a chorus of frightened shouts, and the archers scattered. Another fireball followed it, and then another, and then the soldiers had all disappeared behind cover.

Aruna twisted toward the source of the fireballs. “Watch what you’re doing!”

Neiryn was posted up in the shadow of a atrophied tree. He looked at his fingernails. “I think you meant to say, ‘Thank you for saving my life, Neiryn! I’m totally helpless without you, as usual!’ ”

Novikke pulled Aruna to his feet and hurried to the cover of the trees. By then Aruna was stumbling on every other step, and it seemed like just keeping himself upright was an effort.

“How do you always manage to turn up just when I need you?” Novikke said to Neiryn.

“It’s a skill. And you’re welcome.” He looked Novikke up and down, as if checking for damage. “You were gone longer than we expected. Please tell me you’ve found a way to fix this.”

Novikke exchanged an uncertain look with Aruna. “We’ll find out soon. I need to get to the ruins.”

“Then get moving. I’ll hold them off.” He shot another fireball in the soldiers’ direction.

Aruna grabbed his wrist. “Stop! The forest is weakened. You’ll burn it down.”

Neiryn gave him a dark look that bordered on sympathetic. “If those Ardanians kill us before we can fix it, it won’t matter anymore, will it?”

Aruna reluctantly let go of him. He was right.

“I’ll be careful,” Neiryn said. Aruna raised an eyebrow, unconvinced, and Neiryn

smiled.

“Come on.” Novikke pulled him toward the ruins.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:02 am

She'd taken hardly a step when a group of figures appeared, out of nowhere, at the edge of the white stone in front of them.

In the moonlight, Novikke could see Vissarion holding onto a disheveled Kadaki, and three others standing beside them with swords drawn. For a few seconds they struggled to get their bearings, then they spotted Novikke and the others. She ducked down a little lower, fearing more archers.

"They have Kadaki," Neiryn said quietly.

They'd forced her to transport them there with magic. Her hair was mussed and her hands were cuffed together. Vissarion let go of her, only for one of the others to take hold of her and bring a knife to her throat. She shook her hair from her face, looking more angry than afraid.

Vissarion took a step toward them, lowering his sword a little. "It's over, Novikke. Surrender. I don't want to have to kill you. Your elf friends, too. If they give up peacefully now, we won't kill them."

Neiryn made an offended sound.

"I'm not inclined to believe that," Novikke called.

He shook his head. "I can't let you help the night elves, Novikke. This is war. There's no room for softheartedness."

"We're not at war with the night elves, you asshole."

“Of course we are. We’ve just never been able to fight them fairly until now.”

“If you let the forest die, there will be repercussions all across Ardani and beyond. The land will sicken.”

“Sacrifices are a part of war.”

“Not sacrifices like this,” Novikke said, almost begging. Her voice was beginning to quake slightly. “This is too far, Vissarion.”

The soldiers behind them were following them down the slope, carrying swords and bows. They were boxed in. Aruna couldn’t fight. Neiryn wouldn’t attack them while Kadaki was held hostage. Thala was somewhere behind them, maybe still too cowardly to fight with them in earnest.

Vissarion came closer. “Come out, all of you, or I’ll order them to shoot.”

There was nowhere to go. There was no hope.

Novikke’s heart pounded. She put her back against a tree. Panic flooded over her. She surrendered to it. What was the point of fighting?

“Novikke,” Aruna whispered. He’d noticed immediately. Of course he had.

She shook her head, and her tense neck muscles resisted the movement. Her throat was closing. She couldn’t breathe, and her skin burned, and she had to run somewhere but there was nowhere to go.

“You can do this. Come on,” he said gently.

“I can’t.” He was going to die. All the Varai were going to die. She’d failed. Fear

clutched her heart in a grasp as hard and cold as iron. Gods, what a fool Ravi was for choosing her for this.

Vissarion gave a command, and bowstrings thumped behind them. Novikke flinched. There was a flash of fire, and a lot of commotion. Aruna pulled Novikke aside, putting himself between her and the archers as they ducked behind the tree.

He clasped her hands and bent to force her to meet his eyes. “Novikke. You’re all right. You can do this. Would I lie to you?”

She just shook her head.

Aruna’s face fell. He held onto her. “You promised me. Remember?” There was a tremor in his voice. After a beat, his eyes went to her hands, and he frowned. He held up her own hand in front of her eyes. “Look.”

The inky stain was still on her skin, and now black vapor was floating slowly off her fingertips. Novikke stared at it.

“She’s still with you,” Aruna whispered, bringing her hand close to his chest. “She won’t let you fail.”

She kept looking at her hand, tucked between Aruna’s. Maybe the magic flowing in and over her skin should have frightened her. But instead, it comforted her. She felt those eyes on her again, and this time they held no malice. It was a warm hand on hers, a motherly word of reassurance, an infusion of strength. Was this what the Varai felt when Ravi’s gaze fell upon them?

“You have to run,” Aruna said.

She looked up at him.

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Run. Without him. He wouldn't be able to keep up.

"I can't," she said.

His voice took on a warning tone. "Novikke, you promised me. Run. Get to the ruins and fix this. Ravi is with you."

"I—" She trembled, unable to shake the impression of invisible walls closing in around her. What if she let go of him and he never woke up again?

"Go." He squeezed her hand hard and gave a weak smile. "I'll see you again soon."

And then he let go of her hand.

She reached for him, but he had already dropped to the ground and gone still.

Asleep. Or dead. She was too frightened to check to find out which one. She stopped breathing. A dark ocean of despair swirled around her, pulling her down. She stared at him, frozen.

"Novikke!" someone said. She looked up, drawn out of the darkness.

Neiryn looked down at Aruna, alarmed, then at Novikke. "Go!"

She looked down at her hand, watching the vapor curling off it, and something warm and strong grew inside her, pressing against the Panic and pushing it away.

She wasn't alone. She had the spirit of a goddess with her. And she had a task to complete.

She turned and ran through the trees toward the ruins.

She crashed through the brush, vaulting over a log and continuing without slowing down. Branches whipped her and tore at her skin. Vissarion flinched as she passed him, shouting something that she wasn't paying enough attention to understand. His sword flashed toward her and grazed fabric, putting a rip in her cloak.

She angled to the side of the group, trying to circle around them before they could react, but they moved to block her. She swung her sword wildly, hitting nothing but forcing a few of them back.

Someone moved in behind her, and she dodged sideways. Something hit her side, and she cried out. She felt warm blood dripping down her hip. She whirled to face the attacker and swung until she hit something. As her blade cut into flesh, she felt the wound at her side healing itself.

Someone pulled at her cloak and she fell, landing in the dirt on her back. Vissarion stood over her. His sword shone above her in the moonlight. He opened his mouth to say something, and Novikke's hand tingled with the unmistakable energy of magic.

Before he could speak, a cloud of black, like ink in water, billowed up from her hand and engulfed him. He jumped, trying to wave it away. Novikke saw his mouth open as he tried to shout, but no sound came out.

She scrambled to her feet and kept running, leaving Vissarion cringing and clutching at his throat. Another soldier reached for her, and another rush of blackness shot out of her hand and shoved him back.

White stone appeared beneath her feet as she ran. The obelisk at the center of the ruins towered ahead. Shouts rang out behind her. She heard Neiryn yell something, and a flash of flame illuminated the ruins.

She didn't stop. She didn't turn around. She couldn't turn around.

She skidded to a stop at the obelisk. The center of the ruins. She'd reached the place where this had all started—where Theros's device had opened the well of magic in the ruins and set the forest on a path toward extinction.

"Now what?" she asked the air breathlessly.

Something quivered within her as if trying to escape. She didn't know how to release it. She dropped her sword and knelt on the stones, gripping her wrist.

"Come on," she whispered to it. "Do something."

Footsteps hit the stone and pounded toward her. She looked up, and soldiers were approaching. Vissarion had freed himself of shadow. Behind them, there were more flashes of fire. She saw Neiryn, and then Kadaki wielding her magic alongside him as they fought the incoming group of archers and swordsmen. In the jumble of figures beneath the trees she spotted Thala, sword up, holding back two of the soldiers.

And Aruna—he was the only one she didn't see.

She grasped the wrist of her marked hand, willing it to do whatever it was supposed to do. "Please," she said. "Please, do something."

On an impulse, she raised her hands and pressed them against the obelisk, beseeching.

For a moment, nothing happened. And then a faint golden light, like the glow of the tree in the temple, grew beneath her fingers.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:02 am

Suddenly, as if a dam had been broken, an incredible force pulled at her, sucking the air from her lungs. She would have shouted in fear if she'd had the breath to make a sound.

Black fog and golden light poured out of her, rushing into the air in a torrent of darkness and lightning. The power and size of it was overwhelming. Kneeling there in the middle of all of that magic, she was a castaway's raft in a stormy sea, and it was all she could do to keep herself upright and conscious.

She gasped as the pulling sensation slowed, then snapped, breaking her connection to the obelisk. Finally released, she stumbled backward. The stones on the ground were glowing, giving off the same life-warmth she'd felt from the tree in Vondh Rav. The tornado of blackness was still growing, getting higher and more solid. The earth shook beneath her feet.

Vissarion and the others had stopped running toward her and were backing away instead, gaping up at the growing shadow-thing in horror. Behind them, the fighting had stopped, and Neiryn and Kadaki and Thala were staring alongside the same soldiers who had just been shooting at them.

Novikke backed into the trees at the edge of the ruins. The glow on the stones was spreading now, painting veins of light in a spiderweb across the ruins and beyond.

The blackness was growing tall and thin, into a trunk with four limbs—into a humanoid shape.

“Five above,” Novikke whispered. The vapor condensed into the shape of a woman,

hundreds of feet tall and pitch black, with billowing hair and robes that floated in wind that wasn't there. Her face was perfect, flat and blank like a statue's, until she opened a pair of glowing, pupilless eyes.

The ground stopped shaking. An eerie silence fell over the ruins, like an invisible snowfall had dampened the sound. The avatar of Ravi loomed over them, unmoving. There was something terrifyingly uncanny about it—that such a large thing could be so silent.

Ravi's head turned, the movement smooth and slow, and looked directly down at Novikke.

Her blood ran cold. Was this the part where she was punished for trespassing in Kuda Varai? For desecrating the temple in Vondh Rav and taking a part of a goddess that didn't belong to her?

She dropped to her knees, feeling that it was the most appropriate gesture, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from Ravi's. Those pale, luminescent eyes pulled at hers, magnetic and terrifying and beautiful. The goddess's face remained expressionless, and Novikke could only guess at what she was thinking.

Ravi slowly turned her gaze to Vissarion and the other soldiers. They drew back in fright. Vissarion raised his sword, which shook in his quivering grip.

Novikke's heart stuttered. Ravi was going to destroy them. This was an outcome Novikke could not have predicted. She'd never intended for anyone to die.

Ravi raised an ethereal hand, and the soldiers flinched. Black mist rose from the earth itself, shrouding them. Novikke waited for them to scream in pain or collapse dead, but none of that happened. Through the darkness, she watched their blades and armor dissolve, as if the black vapor were acid eating away at the metal.

Ravi took a slow step forward, blackness swirling around her, and the disarmed soldiers scattered out of her way. She lifted a hand again, waving it over the trees where Neiryn and the others hid. Neiryn had dropped to the ground, bowing his head, and had pulled Kadaki down with him. He looked up, ashen, as Ravi's shadow fell over them.

The rest of the soldiers shouted and ran as tendrils of shadow reached for them. Bows and swords and chest plates dissolved into dust.

Ravi watched the terrified humans for a moment longer, her thoughts and intentions obfuscated. Then she turned and walked into the forest, towering twice as high as the tallest parts of the canopy. She moved with the silent grace of a shadow, disturbing neither the trees nor even the grass beneath her feet.

Where she walked, trees stretched taller and thicker, gaining years' worth of growth in moments. Patches of dead, gnarled branches straightened and sprouted vibrantly black leaves. The spiderweb of glowing lines growing from the center of the ruins followed her, bringing life where they went.

A light drew Novikke's attention to the tree above her head. Veins of gold traced up its trunk and along branches. Dry leaves unfurled. The entire tree grew lush and verdant again.

A hand touched her arm.

She turned. Aruna stood beside her. His eyes glowed blue with inner light, and she swore she could see sparks of that golden tree-light in them.

She reached out and crushed him to her chest, squeezing her eyes shut against tears. "Gods, I thought you were..."

“I’m all right.”

“Don’t ever do that to me again.”

“I did try to stay awake. It didn’t work.”

She pulled back to look at him. “I mean don’t let go of me again.”

He opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again, glancing away guiltily.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a moment. He raised his hands to her face, wiping a stray tear away. “Don’t be upset. I wasn’t worried. I knew you’d wake me up again.”

She hugged him. She never wanted to let him go again.

She pulled away just enough to turn her head and watch Ravi recede into the darkness.

“She’s incredible,” Novikke said. Aruna stared with her, his arms still wrapped around her. They watched the giant figure until she blended entirely into the darkness, though even then, Novikke could sense her presence in the distance.

Everyone exchanged bewildered, uncomfortable looks. Vissarion brushed dust from his jacket and glanced up at Novikke, looking torn between angry disappointment and lingering fear. Thala and the other Ardanians shot suspicious looks at Neiryn and Kadaki, who shot them right back, but no one seemed interested in fighting anymore.

Novikke sagged, suddenly realizing how tired she was.

“Now what?” she asked Aruna.

He leaned in and kissed her. It was a good answer.

Chapter 10

Novikke, Aruna, Neiryn, and Kadaki separated from the soldiers and went their own way—for good this time, she hoped. None of them were eager to test the tenuous truce that the avatar of Ravi had forced on them. Novikke had suggested to Vissarion that they should gather the rest of their people and escape Kuda Varai quickly while they still could, before the forest grew stronger and started misdirecting them again. Judging by the nervous looks the soldiers exchanged, they didn't disagree with her reasoning.

Kadaki had decided to come with the three of them. For her and Novikke, there was no going back to the army. But they could probably avoid arrest if they didn't draw attention to themselves. They could hide in the massive crowd that was the population of Ardani.

Novikke guessed that Kadaki would have come along even if that hadn't been the case, though. She was fairly sure that she and Neiryn would not be separating any time soon.

The trees were full and tall and healthy again. Taller than before, even. It was quieter than it had been when she'd first come to the forest. There were fewer birds singing and fewer crickets chirping. But Kuda Varai was coming back to life, slowly but surely.

After several days, they were nearly to the edge of Kuda Varai. Aruna said they'd reach it by that evening.

“What are you going to do when we get to Ardani?” Novikke asked Aruna.

“I’m going to find a bath,” Neiryn said immediately. He tilted his head up curiously.

“Do you have hot springs in Ardani? Please tell me you do.”

“In the North, maybe,” Novikke guessed.

“North as in Uulantaava, not Ardani,” Kadaki said. “I don’t think there is enough geothermal activity here for hot springs. I suppose there are some advantages to living next to a volcano.”

“There certainly are. I’ll take you to Ysura someday, Kadaki. I know you’d love it.”

Kadaki glanced up at him, her face turning slightly pink.

“Are there regular baths, at least?” Neiryn asked.

“Are you really asking whether Ardanians have baths?” Novikke said. “Is that a serious question? You think humans don’t know how to wash themselves?”

“Bathing and washing are two different things. The Varai don’t do baths, I hear, due to the short supply of water in Vondh Rav. There’s more sponging and less soaking involved. It sounds wholly unpleasant.”

Novikke looked up at Aruna to gauge his opinion on this statement, but he didn’t seem to have heard. He was walking some distance ahead of them, rarely joining the conversation. He’d been even quieter than usual that day.

“I just hope we come out of the forest somewhere near an inn,” Neiryn went on. “I’m tired of being outdoors. And I haven’t slept for two days. I keep having nightmares about that shadow woman.”

“Nightmares?” Novikke said. “You found her frightening?”

“Of course I did. She was a massive demon goddess made of pure darkness. She could have killed us all with a wave of one of those giant hands, I’m sure of it.”

“But she didn’t.”

“No. She didn’t.”

“I thought she was beautiful.”

He gave her a sideways glance. “I suppose you wouldn’t fear her, would you? You became a part of each other for a while.” He looked down at her left hand. “You’ve still got that... thing, haven’t you? What if it never goes away?”

Black stained her skin from her fingertips to halfway up her forearm. Beneath the black marks on her hand was the faint scar Zaiur had put in her palm.

She flexed her fingers, and she could have sworn she saw a few wisps of black vapor trailing from them.

“I wouldn’t mind if it didn’t,” she said.

“You don’t mind having marks from the goddess of night on you?” Neiryn said skeptically.

“You know, some theological scholars think that Aevyr and Ravi are both actually aspects of Astra,” Kadaki said.

“They would,” Neiryn muttered. “Humans always find a way to make everything about themselves. They’ll reframe anything to fit their view of things.”

“Astra and Ravi are aspects of Aevyr, then,” Kadaki said. “Whichever version doesn’t hurt your delicate feelings.”

“I’m hardly delicate.”

“Oh, Neiryn. Of course you are,” Kadaki replied.

“We’re here,” Aruna said suddenly.

They all looked up. Through the trees ahead, not fifty steps away, was a road.

They stopped on the edge, where dirt met grass. The forest continued on the other side. It was the very same stretch of road where Novikke and Aruna had met.

They all stood there in silence, struck by the realization that this was the end. They’d made it out. They were finally leaving Kuda Varai. It hardly seemed real.

It was the beginning of something new. None of them would be going back to the lives they’d had before—at least not right away.

But somehow, after everything that had happened, none of that seemed as dire as it had before. They’d fought off an army and saved an entire civilization. Novikke had summoned a damned goddess. Everything else seemed simple by comparison. If she could face all that, she could face anything. She could be anything.

She didn’t have to be just a courier. She didn’t even have to be a soldier.

She had become something else entirely, and she found she didn’t mind.

Kadaki cleared her throat. “I’m going back to Valtos to speak to Thala,” she said.

“We’d agreed to meet there next month while we’re on leave. Hopefully the plan still stands, despite the... unexpected events of late.”

“Is that a good idea?” Novikke said.

She smiled. “She’s my best friend. We probably won’t be seeing each other for some time after this. I need to say goodbye.”

“And after that?”

She shrugged. “A mage can always find work.”

Novikke glanced up at Neiryn. He’d already made it clear that he wasn’t going back to Ysura just yet. He’d gotten rather attached to Kadaki.

“And you?” Kadaki asked her. “What will you do?”

Novikke scratched her head. She’d wanted to join the army for as long as she could remember. She’d never considered any other work. “I used to hunt sometimes, when I was a teenager, before I joined up.”

“You’re a skilled archer?”

“No,” she admitted. “But I’ll figure something out.”

Aruna looked as uncertain about it all as she felt.

Neiryn and Kadaki could go wherever they wanted with little trouble. There were many sun elves living in Ardani. Their nations had intermixed since long before the war. No one would look at them twice.

But Aruna didn't have that luxury. She couldn't bring him into a city. Someone would catch the moment they saw him.

Everyone was looking at Aruna. She could tell they were all thinking the same thing.

"We'll be all right. I have a lot of experience living outside of cities," Novikke said, giving him a hopeful smile.

Kadaki's lips pressed into a thoughtful line. "I have something for you." She reached into her pocket, then held out a ring. Novikke had seen her etching runes on it for the past few days.

"This is what you've been working on?" Novikke asked.

She nodded. "It's, um... it's a spell for altering one's appearance. A glamour." She handed it to Aruna, frowning a little. Aruna took it, but stared down at it with his eyebrows drawn in, like he didn't particularly want to be holding it.

"I admit, I'm not the most practiced enchanter, and you won't be able to use it for long without having to recharge it, but I thought it might help."

Aruna finally looked up at her and nodded. "Thank you."

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“The two of you could come with us,” Kadaki said uncertainly. “If you wanted.”

Neiryn, standing behind Kadaki, frowned and gave them a firm shake of his head.

“The feeling is mutual,” Aruna said to him.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page,” Neiryn replied.

“We’ll meet again someday,” Novikke said. “I promise.”

Kadaki nodded. “Let’s hope the next season brings us better luck than this one has.”

“It could only go up from here,” Novikke said.

She watched them start down the road toward Valtos, then turned to Aruna. He wasn’t smiling.

“What’s wrong?”

“We don’t have an answer, do we? Where are we going to go? What do we do now?”

“Now? We do whatever we want. With nobody chasing us and no god-forests to save.”

“And what do you want? With no one chasing us and no one to save?”

Novikke blinked at him. He was looking at her warily, like he wasn’t certain how she

was going to answer.

He'd told her he loved her. She realized that she'd never said it back.

And maybe it wasn't so crazy that he still questioned it. Despite everything they'd been through, they had only met a few weeks ago. And for most of the time they'd been together, they'd been at odds.

Really, they were practically still strangers.

But it didn't feel like that. It felt like she'd known him all her life. She could not say that she'd ever shed so much blood for another person—nor had someone else done the same for her.

She swallowed as she took a step toward him. “Now that I'm finally free to do what I want, I thought I'd like to spend some of my time with... someone I care about. If he would have me.”

He was quiet for a long moment. “Care about?”

“Someone I love,” she said.

“I hope you're talking about me. Otherwise this will be awkward.”

She looked down, smirking. “I'm sorry. I thought you knew.”

His hands absently played with the threads on the front of her vest. Kashava's vest, she suddenly remembered. Didn't look like she'd get the chance to return it anytime soon.

“I did,” Aruna said. “I wanted to hear you say it.”

She had a sudden urge to smother him with kisses. She leaned forward. “I’ll say it as many times as you want.”

“I’d like that,” he said, then covered her mouth with his.

“But,” he said, breaking away, “that doesn’t answer my question.”

“What question?”

“Where are we going to go?”

She rested her hands on her hips. “I don’t know about you, but like I said, I’m accustomed to living out of doors most of the time. All we need is some supplies. I can get some things in the next town. And now that you have that ring, you can even come with me. I can show you what Ardanian cities are like.” She grinned, excited. The idea was more appealing to her than she’d expected.

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Aruna's smile fell a little. He opened his hand and peered down at the ring in his palm. "I'll always be wearing someone else's skin, then? I must live as a human now?"

She deflated a little. "I didn't say that. It's just that with that ring, we can go where we want, as long as we're careful. We're free. The world is open to us."

"Except for Kuda Varai."

"I don't know about that." She held up her marked hand. "What do you think they'll think of this?"

He considered her outstretched hand.

"We saved the entire forest," Novikke said. "The Second High Priestess witnessed it. And Ravi left her mark on me to prove it. Do you think that's enough to earn their forgiveness?"

He took her hand, running his fingers over the black. "It might be," he conceded quietly.

"I'd like to go back to Vondh Rav sometime. We could talk to your sister again. I wouldn't mind asking her about this," she said, nodding to her arm.

He looked up at her, surprised. "You would?"

"Yes. But I'm not dressing up like a slave this time."

“Fair enough,” he said, then pursed his lips, giving her a careful glance. “That collar didn’t look so bad on you, though.”

Novikke raised her eyebrows.

“...it makes a good handhold.”

“Do you think this is a wise point for you to be making, Aruna?”

He smiled. “Sorry.”

“I’m guessing you would feel differently if you were the one wearing it.”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind.”

Novikke blinked. She was suddenly imagining a few scenarios that had never crossed her mind before.

“Well. We should, uh, discuss that more later,” she said.

“Yes. We should probably get all the way out of Kuda Varai, first.”

They were still on the road that passed through the bottom corner of the forest. “Yes. That. Of course,” Novikke said.

She stepped out into the road, looking one way, then the other. The sun had dipped to the horizon at one end of the path, and the stars and moons had begun to rise at the other end. She made a broad gesture to the space around them. “Where do you want to go?” she asked.

Aruna thought for a moment. “You promised you’d take me to the ocean.”

“I did, didn’t I?” At the time, it had seemed like an impossible fantasy—like something they’d never actually get to do. “All right. The ocean, then.”

He gave her a suggestive look. “Maybe we could find a place with a bed somewhere along the way.”

Novikke suppressed a grin. “Oh, I was already planning on that. Don’t you worry.”

She kissed him again, and they started down the road.