

# SKYBORN TRIALS



HANNAH PARKER

# Trials

Skyborn, volume 2

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## Chapter One

The early morning mist flowed down from the hillside like small streams between the jagged crags that adorned the landscape. I stared at the ceiling, the wooden knots and splinters my only numbness against the burning sensation still stinging my eyes. How long has it been since I stopped crying? Since I laid there, unrested, with no more tears to shed.

Once the flames died down, we made haste to gather our fallen comrades but, Kiyne was nowhere to be found. We searched all night, and well into the early hours - I wouldn't let them give up. But, when the sun finally took its place high in the sky, and I saw nothing more than empty fields before me, I knew it was too late. Kiyne was gone.

The Marauders had left without much more of a fuss but, to where we didn't know. We didn't dare to follow, and even they had taken their dead with them when they fled. Arden said it was the threat of Dragon fire that deterred their advances but, I didn't believe him. If the Arcanon and their Dragons were so fearsome than the Marauders wouldn't have attacked us at all, and yet, they followed us here, and they held their ground to fight us whether we would've unleashed the Dragons upon them or not.

I turned the gem over and over in my pocket, feeling its smooth surface brush lightly against my fingertips. If only I'd been faster to put up my barrier, perhaps then Kiyne would still be with us.

"Hey," Mara's voice interjected through my train of thought. Caution and an odd sense of fear seemed to hang on her tone, "you hungry?"

I sat up in my bed, my stomach growling in response to her question. The mere thought of food had escaped me for so long, no wonder my body could answer before I did. I'd hardly eaten since the battle, choosing rather, to isolate myself in my regret.

Mara pushed the door open slowly, her grey eyes peering in before her body squeezed through the narrow opening a bit.

"You don't have to be so sneaky," I laughed. "I'm awake."

Her hips made quick work in thrusting the door open the remainder of the way as she pulled through a tray of foods with her; meats, cheeses, breads, and even warm cider. She'd definitely been hard at work to even find me such a variety, likely in hopes something would pique my interest.

“How are we feeling today?” she asked warmly, taking a seat at my bedside and sliding the tray of food onto the makeshift table.

“Better, I guess.”

Mara gave me a half-smile, “I brought some treats,” she said. “Cured lonfri isn’t easy to find around here.”

I scanned over the tray, spotting the slab of lonfri and plucking it up excitedly. Lonfri had been my favourite food since I was a little girl; a rare mix of wild rabbit and deer cooked down, mixed together, and smoked with an assortment of herbs and salts that made it both tangy and sweet. I took a large bite, my stomach screaming at the sustenance it was about to obtain, and my mouth salivating at the very idea of eating a full meal again.

“Well, that’s a good sign,” Mara snickered.

I scarfed down the rest of the cured meat, devouring the whole slab in a few quick bites. The rest of the food seemed appetizing but, I didn’t want to push my luck. After not eating for so long, I really didn’t want to test the boundaries of my stomach.

“Lord Arden has news,” Mara added, her tone becoming stern and serious yet, confident, as I was more familiar with.

“Oh?” I asked, taking a large gulp of the warm cider. Pear, with a hint of clove and cedar; it warmed me both inside and out, like some sort of strange healing concoction.

“He says they’ve been tracking the Marauders’ location. A wounded soldier fell behind, leaving an easy enough blood trail for them to follow. He’s looking for volunteers to scout their locale.”

“I’ll go,” I said without hesitation. If there was any way I could take down those Marauders for what they did to Kiyne, I was up for it.

Mara grinned, “let’s go talk to him first, okay?”

I nodded in agreement but, the fire within me began to boil once more.

The villagers seemed to have returned mostly to normal, save for the few new hands that had to move and carry supplies. Even Graven had been recruited to help move a bundle of lumber from the edge of the mountains and down for our new barricades; his tail easily managed the weight, one after another, and he almost seemed to enjoy the work.

“Lord Arden,” Mara interrupted as we approached.

He turned to face us, the voices growing quiet behind him. I felt their eyes upon me, the feelings of despair, dread, and irritation that my mere

presence brought upon their lives in only a few short weeks. I tried to dismiss it, keeping my eyes focused on the map sprawled across a rock surface, reminiscent of the one Mara had shown myself and Kiyne before our venture into the Ethereal.

“You’re alive then,” Arden commented rather harshly, his stature turning to tower over me completely.

“I heard you’re looking for volunteers to scout the Marauder location,” I stated calmly, wasting no time.

The Arcanon whispered amongst themselves, briefly calling Arden’s gaze from me before they were humbled.

“I am,” he remarked, “but you’re not one of them.”

I felt the heat rise in my chest, “why not?!”

“You’re untrained, reckless, and inconsistent at best. You could make things difficult for us, or blow our cover completely.”

My fingertips began to tingle, a strange orange glow igniting beneath my skin before the heat surmounted. Small sparks flickered from my nailbeds, falling to the ground before causing any damage and fizzling out against the morning dew.

“Alina,” Mara whispered, drawing my attention.

I looked down to see the sparks, curling my fingers into balled fists yet, still, they glowed. I felt the heat in my body rising, my cheeks throbbing as if embarrassed but, it was stronger, and much more powerful.

Arden took hold of my arm, his grip strong but, not hurtful. “See, Alina!? This is why!”

The small sparks and orange hue had grown into the same flames from the firewall I’d created only days before. My body was engulfed in it, just as my heart was engulfed with rage.

I could feel Arden’s magic, the strange ability he had to manipulate emotions and change them into whatever he wished. My mind was still ripe with anger at being told to stay put and be left behind. The Marauders had to be stopped, and what good was I going to do here? Till a field? Absolutely not! I gritted my teeth, trying to fight Arden’s power, but my body was becoming calm against my will, my aura weakening, replaced by a fierce blue hue before finally fading away.

“Odaer will expect you, and your rage,” he commented, finally letting go of my arm.

I felt an eerie sense of serenity fall over me despite my fight. The tranquility that Arden had emitted had consumed me, holding me against any will of my own.

“Why would he attack? Why him?” Mara commented, turning my attention.

She was right. Who was Odaer, and why was it such a big ordeal that he led the attack on the village?

Arden returned to the map, shaking his head, “I don’t know. I don’t even know how he’s lived this long, and out of my sight.”

“Who is he?” I asked.

“One of the first Skyborn,” Arden replied. “A man who should’ve died long ago, even with his power.”



## Chapter Two

I knew my lineage well enough; that Odaer was Skyborn, and that his gift was passed down to my mother, and then me, so how was he still alive? And how had he managed to survive all these years in secret?

“I thought all Skyborn were dead?” I questioned.

“Those who had made the sacrifice, yes, but Odaer remained,” Arden responded.

Arden passed around the map a few times, his hand once more clutching his chin as he did when he took deeply to thought. He paused, his hands fanning over the map as his blue aura once more emitted itself, falling from his body and onto the map below. Strange symbols and land masses began to appear, just as Mara had shown us before with the Ethereal realm but, this map was much larger.

“Do you remember the Forgotten Plains, Mara?”

Mara stepped forward, looking over the map with her father.

“I remember the stories but, isn’t it merely a fantasy?”

“Much more than that,” Arden replied.

My eyes widened, looking over the vast continents that spread across the map both above and below our own realm. I’d seen the Ethereal before, and I could identify its location with the mass of trees that sat upon it but, here, there was much more.

“The other Skyborns reside there,” Arden began, “if they can aid Alina, then perhaps we can make short work of this war before it gets out of hand.”

“I thought the other Skyborns were dead?” I interrupted.

“Yes but, that does not mean they are gone entirely. They are simply bound to another realm,” Arden explained.

Mara scanned the map before looking up, “how do we get there?”

“Take the Dragon,” Arden responded, pointing toward Graven. “His bond with Alina should be strong enough to pass the barriers into the Further.”

“The Further?” I asked.

“The world after death. Where many beings go once their time here, or in the Ethereal, has ended,” Mara replied. “Though I thought it was just a

story, to make us feel better when loved ones passed on.”

Arden gave Mara a harsh glance, “You are to take Alina to the Forgotten Plains, to meet with the other Gem-Bearers, and nowhere else.”

His instructions seemed clear yet, the harshness seemed unfit and I couldn’t quite place why.

Mara sneered but, nodded in agreement.

“The Further is no mere other realm like the Ethereal. If you become lost or stay too long, it may take hold and claim you. Do not let its ghosts deter your path,” Arden cautioned.

“Come on,” Mara said, turning away.

I moved to follow, Arden grasping at my arm one last time, “keep an eye on her,” he whispered. “This will prove to be a difficult trial for both of you.”

I could see the fear in his eyes as he finally released his grip. He was afraid, not for me, but for his daughter.

I took long, quick strides to catch up to Mara, her steps clearly hastened in frustration rather than purpose.

“Gather your things, and meet me by the pikes,” she said without even turning to face me, “one hour.”

I stopped at my small hut, watching as she stomped away. What in Arden’s words got under her skin? She was always so strong and collected, what could have irritated her so badly to make her short with everyone else around her?

I wasted no time collecting my things and throwing them back into my satchel. I didn’t want to keep Mara waiting, especially in a foul mood. My clothes and belongings really hadn’t gotten much of a chance to be strewn about anyways; what with the battle and my emotional defeat taking up most of my time. I grabbed my small axe as it leaned against the bedpost, taking a moment to look it over and remember my training with Kiyne. He’d been so patient, yet so ruthless. Was he in the Further now? Perhaps I’d get to see him again.

I stood by the pikes, staring at the sharpened edges as they’d grown in number since the few we’d laid before the attack. The village was taking every precaution now that the Marauders had found their location, even in the fog. They were no longer safe beneath the natural veil, and they had to be prepared for another attack, when, not if, it came.

“Alina,” a voice echoed in my mind.

“Graven,” I replied, turning to see him striding my way.

“Going on another adventure it seems,” he huffed.

“To the Further. Have you ever been?”

“Can’t say that I have but, I’ve heard its stories.”

“Lord Arden says it is the place beyond. Where many go after they die.”

“Yes,” Graven replied, “But, it is not the only place.”

“There’s elsewhere?”

“Of course. Just as there is good and evil in this world, so is there in other worlds.”

“There are other locations besides the Further?”

“Yes, Alina, and in time, you will become familiar with them too.”

My heart sank; what if Kiyne wasn’t in the Further, and was in one of the other places? The dark places. What if his death on the battlefield meant he went somewhere for the evils of this world? I couldn’t bear the thought, and I fought to shake it from my mind.

“Ready?” Mara’s voice called out.

Her bow was strapped to her back alongside her quiver but, she had no bag at her side, save only for the small hip pouch she was accustomed to. What good was a bow going to be against ghosts?

“We better get going, it’s a long trip,” she reminded.

I looked at her inquisitively.

She pointed over the mountains, “into the horizon and beyond the sky,” she said with a rather melodic tone.

I couldn’t help but feel for Ove and Keldi as they watched us take flight to the Forgotten Plains. Though I couldn’t feel Graven’s own thoughts or feelings on the matter, I knew they were similar to my own. With the Arcanon preoccupied with the Marauder hunt, it was only fitting we left some sort of protection behind for the villagers.

The day had already begun to fade from us but, I was far too distracted by the view to notice. As we soared over the mountains, the mist began to dwindle and I could spot the snowy peaks as they poked through the cloud cover. Pale white glittered against the rays of a hidden sun, the fragile visage of snow one that would cling to my memories whenever I closed my eyes. We got snow in the lower regions but it was often dirty, slushy, and discoloured when met with the wagons and a warm breeze. Though many

children still played with it, it was nothing like the purity that spanned before us.

I felt a light tap on my shoulder, turning to see Mara in front of me pointing to our left. Graven swooped down lower, gliding slightly toward her direction and that's when I spotted them – Winglings; small reptilian-like birds, all grouped together and floating along the breeze like falling leaves. Of course, the moment they noticed Graven, it was all over. Their flock quickly squawked, their formation splitting up as they dipped down into the clouds for safety. We all couldn't help but giggle a bit. I guess they couldn't speak Dragon.

As our journey continued, I could feel my energy waning. I'd spent so long binding up my emotions, my frustrations, that any little sleep I'd gotten didn't leave me feeling rested. It was as if my yawn had the same power as roaring thunder as I felt both Mara and Graven glance back at me.

"Shall we find a spot to camp for the night then?" Graven suggested.

I yawned again, "that sounds like a good idea. Mara?"

"We should be approaching the Osfilian fields shortly. We can land there and make camp along the rocky ridges of Mount Yeris," she replied.

It was settled then, camp for the night and resume our journey in the morning. By then, I hoped, I would be well-rested and ready for more.

## Chapter Three

The sound of hoofbeats stirred me from my slumber. I'd only managed a wink or two, at long last, and now, even that, had been taken from me. I shifted my body, the length of chain whining at even the twitch of my fingertip. If the pain didn't take me, the exhaustion from moving these bulky restraints around would. At least he'd left me alone after a few days. When he realized I'd given him no information about the stone, or Alina, he lost interest.

I remember the night of our battle when we finally stood to face them. I could hear Mara screaming for me to move back but, that meant more targets for his Warhammer. I felt her eye move and her bow lower as she called to Alina to raise the barrier. I tried to push back but, he was too skilled, too strong. If I'd hesitated, even for a second, he'd have killed me and went straight for her. I couldn't let that happen.

The last thing I saw was the plate mail along his upper arm as his elbow came down upon my temple, knocking me out cold. Would I be left to die? Would I just be thrown into the fire? I couldn't recall. My mind had gone black, and when I awoke, I was here.

The Marauders had taken up refuge in an old fortress known as Ingar's Hall; a place that once stood as a fearsome beacon to the world with its tall iron gates and black-stone walls. The armies housed here were bred for a single purpose – killing, and they were good at it.

But everything changed when the Arcanon came. The skilled murderers of Ingar's Hall were easily outmatched by Dragon fire and fierce magic. Even their iron arrows could not hold up against the hail of an icy barrage from a single Arcanon. Once the hall was taken, it was left for ruin, with both Ingar and his descendants leaving it to rot as nothing more than a relic of the old world.

How long the Marauders had been holding up inside its skeletal remains I couldn't tell. They seemed to have an abundance of supplies gathered from what I could see from my position. Torches kept the corridors well-lit but, the dungeons had flooded out long ago, so it was no use to them, for either supply or prisoners, such as myself.

I recalled seeing beds as I was dragged in, through a doorway along with the large, battered throne room. Of course, that was still left intact. Even Marauders liked acknowledging some form of leadership with honour, though it was kept as more of a monument where they could drink and bark orders at one another.

I watched the day go by through a large hole in the wall, likely caused by Arcanon battle long ago, and only widening with time. It helped keep my mind in place, that I wasn't so damned as to not see the sun.

They'd come for me during drunken tirades when wine and women had faltered and only the thrill of inflicting pain would bring a smile to their already reddened faces. Fire pokers, daggers, and even bare fists were brought down upon me. Whatever their quarrel, I was on the receiving end. I learned not to scream, not to utter any words to make it less amusing for them. It's likely what drew them away; I'd begun to bore them, so now I was just left here to die.

"Not quite yet," his voice would call to me. Every time I felt myself fading, he'd slide a plate of food my way, more than enough to keep me filled and functional.

Just as I'd finally settled again, awkwardly seated against some old iron support beam, I could hear footsteps approaching. No sleep for me tonight, I guess.

He pulled over a small stool, plopping it a foot from my position as he took a seat. Fierce emerald eyes stared down at me, ones all too familiar in my mind. For a moment I thought of home but, the clang of armour shook me, and I stared, once more, at the face of my oppressor, a gangly grin painted over a weathered, and scarred face.

"Kiyne, is it?" he said gruffly.

I didn't reply.

"That's alright. I'm going to tell you a little story," he continued. "So, listen well, and you may even learn something."

I felt the heat of his breath on my face, the smug aura of his being weighing down on my already aching body. A story before I was knocked out again? Sure, why not. At least then I'd get some proper rest.

"You've been rather stubborn since you got here," he went on. "I like a man that can hold up to a little interrogation now and again."

I remained silent.

“That’s alright, don’t talk, just listen. There’s a lot more to this whole... predicament than you really understand, you see.”

It didn’t take him long to stand, to pace around as he continued his tale. What truth there was in his words, and what was easily fabricated, I couldn’t tell. But, the passion in his tone let me know it was all too real, at least to him.

“I know I’d seen those eyes before. Those green eyes, just like my own, and Signy’s. She stared at me so coldly, with so much hatred and grief. I knew right then and there who she was. Alina? Is it? I wish I’d gotten to know her growing up. I spent so much time away, trying to fix it all, that I never got a chance to meet my own grand-daughter.”

A shiver went down my spine as his words rang through my ears. Grand-daughter? Alina? It couldn’t be true.

“I am Odaer, first Skyborn to the Heart, and the first, and last, mortal to obtain such a title. Of course, I’m not so mortal now, am I?”

He laughed rather hard at his own words, and I waited for him to reveal some magical amulet, or scarred body to reflect his long life but, he revealed nothing.

“Ah yes. I was the only harbourer not to relinquish my power and sacrifice myself thus, even without the gem, I am still gifted, of sorts. But, alas, without that gem, and your friend, I am at a loss to complete my work. I never meant for it to become like this. These battles, the Marauders... I’d give it all for my dear Signy to return to me.”

“Signy’s gone,” I hissed. “Alina’s family is gone!” “Mara. Myself. We’re her family now!”

He grinned, almost relieved, but I could still see the mischief beyond his stare.

“I never meant for the village to burn but, she wouldn’t listen. Not even to her own father! The gem was safe but, she was not. If she’d only listened to reason! I would never hurt my daughter, you must understand. I summoned them to lure them out, and away but she didn’t budge. I grew angry, irrational, and they set fire to the village, burning at my command. I knew she’d flee then, and I could speak with her but I never saw her. She couldn’t burn, she wouldn’t have. My power had become her own, or so I’d believed then...”

The panic in his voice, the moment of vulnerability he'd displayed in his lamentations, were all gone in an instant. His emerald eyes became hollow and cold once more as he stared past me, to somewhere, some other time, long ago.

"My daughter had turned to ash right before my eyes and I never even took the time to grieve..."

"The fault is yours," I muttered.

"Yes. But this time I make no mistakes. Not with Alina. She has the stone and the power, and I've already worked everything out."

I was curious, watching as his own worn face displayed a devilish smirk as he began to pace quicker this time.

"I exchange you for Alina, and then the ritual moves forward. Blood of my blood. Leaf of my legacy. And she will suffer no more."

"She'll never agree to it."

"Oh? You don't think so? I heard the way she screamed for you. For me to have mercy. It's the only reason I didn't kill you right then and there."

"She won't. I'm not worth it. Not for your sick little game."

"This is no game, boy! I take back the gem, and the power, and no longer will my family suffer for my mistake. I should've destroyed the Ethereal when I had the chance. When we were to make the sacrifice. I won't hesitate this time. That forge... those Elves... they'll pay for Signy's life with their own!"

His words made little sense, it was clear to me now that he was truly the one who burned down Alina's village and took her family from her. But, a ritual? What ritual? And what role would Alina play? Would he sacrifice her? No, he said his family would no longer suffer. His target was the Ethereal, where it all began, and if he gained control of the gem, it would only be a matter of time before he reigned fire down upon it.



## Chapter Four

I awoke to the sound of birds chirping; singing their sweet melodies as they fluttered overhead. The sky was clear, and a bright sun greeted our eyes with warmth and delight. It was the first clear, promising day I'd seen in what felt like forever.

Our landing was smooth, and the plains had allowed for Graven to use the full width of his wingspan to ease our descent. We huddled amongst the narrow cliffs of Mount Yeris' edges to stay hidden from both above and along the horizon. They were nearly barren, and sparse of anything but dust and splits but in the dark it made no difference. Mara had built a small fire; enough for some warmth, and something she could cook a small meal on from the little kindling she could find but, it wasn't enough to illuminate our presence to any unwanted visitors.

I began to roll up my pack and ensure all our items were in order while Mara, of course, had awoken long before me and was likely off on another hunt. So I sat, waiting, and wondering what awaited us in the Forgotten Plains, and beyond, the Further.

"Life. Death. And many emotions," Graven whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Those in the Further do not always know they are dead. It can be... difficult, to speak with them."

I never really thought about death; after my parents died, I refused to think about it. But then my adopted mother perished as well, Yefilda, Mara's mother, and I was stricken once more with grief. I'd grown numb to the condolences, and apologies. The hugs and sympathies were all temporary and I soon learned that the less I relied upon them, the less likely I would be upset when they, too, were gone.

Mara never really displayed any emotions; she, like her father, had been taught from an early age that all life returns to that which bore it at some time, and Yefilda's essence was now returned to the Aura. They were to appreciate the time with her and relish in the fact they would return to the Aura as well and be reunited with her.

"Hey Dreamer," Mara shouted.

Once more I fell back into reality, turning to meet her gaze with a smile.

“I found some berries in some scant patches of shrubs but, not much else. Seems this place must’ve cleared out after our pheasant hunt last night,” she said with a giggle.

“That’ll go well enough with the bread we’ve brought,” I laughed.

We ate in silence, taking large bites so we could get back on our journey.

“Aren’t you hungry?” I asked Graven.

He shook his head, “I ate before we left.”

I looked at him, puzzled, “but, I never saw you...”

“You wouldn’t like the answer if I told you what I’d chosen to snack on. Now, hurry along.”

I threw my bag around my shoulder once more, polishing off my last bit of bread and berries in a single mouthful.

Graven stood, shaking off the idle birds that had perched along his back. He spread out his wings, wide, letting them stretch as he shifted about.

“C’mon Mara!”

Mara rolled her eyes; her quiver already refastened and bow in hand as she stepped forward.

“Why so eager?” she asked.

But I didn’t really have an answer for her. I was eager to learn my powers, to meet the first Skyborns, but I was also eager for this all to be over as quickly as possible.

“Everything... I guess.”

Mara laughed, launching herself onto Graven’s back with a single swing of her arm along his spikes. I still was nowhere as graceful, climbing along his legs before I finally reached my seat. Mara had taught me the basics of my magic yet rarely did she flaunt her own. It made me curious; perhaps when we met the Skyborns, they’d teach her a thing or two as well. There was so much unknown to us, and I had no idea what we were in for.

The cool morning breeze was a welcome awakening to my face as we pressed onward toward the Further. I watched as clouds shifted around us, from deep blues to bright yellows as the sun moved across the sky. When we finally arrived at the Forgotten Plains, the more wildlife began to spring up below us with herds of wild Elk, and even a few horses, to spot amongst the thick layer of trees. I admired their freedom, their lack of fear when they saw our shadows approaching overhead and simply continued to graze or

roam. The land here was very much untouched, and still wild in many ways. I'd wondered how many people actually made this journey. Did they come to pay respects? Ask for advice? Or were we the few?

"You ask a lot of questions," Graven muttered. "Mara's people are well-versed in the legends of the Forgotten Plains, and the Further. Perhaps she can answer your queries."

I hadn't even thought to ask. It was, after all, Mara's father, Arden, who had sent us on this journey. She had to know even a little about where we were going.

"Mara?"

"Hmm?" she replied, pulling her gaze away from the green fields below.

"How, exactly, do we enter the Further? It's a land of the dead isn't it?"

"Well, yes, and no," she replied. "We can safely enter if our intent is good-natured but, if we tread too far, and for too long, we'll be unable to return from it."

"You mean we won't be able to leave!?"

"Exactly," she said. "The Further isn't meant for most living beings. Those with great magical prowess have entered for longer stays but, it is still unwise to stay any longer than necessary."

Graven began to descend from the clouds, vast mountains coming into view as the wild below us gradually shifted into rocky terrain.

"The Further is pure and beautiful; like a world of green trees that are always full. Wild flowers are in constant bloom and all manner of creatures co-exist in harmony. There is no hatred, or fear, only peace."

The Further sounded beautiful, far different than the barren land I'd imagined. There were no piles of bone or scary monsters running amuck, just the happiness everyone had always strived for their entire lives.

"How will we find the other Skyborns?" I asked, quite unsure as to where we'll even begin in such a joyous place without being distracted.

"Oh, that won't be difficult," Mara replied rather simply. "Look!"

Mara leaned forward against Graven's back as we cleared the last round of mountains; there, a plateau stood surrounded by cascading waterfalls, centered where only flight would ever reach its surface. Trees scattered its lands, creating small woodlands for refuge while a great lake seemed to border each one. As we got closer, I could see a large structure begin to tower toward the sky, its beige form littered with crooked staircases that

circled around its entirety. It seemed old, as if older than the land itself, and I knew what Mara meant. That was where we were going. That was where the other Skyborns would be met.

## Chapter Five

We landed at the edge of the plateau's ridgeline, as close to the tower as we could come without breaching the thick of trees. I couldn't help but feel a bit queasy, staring over the edge at all the water falling away from us, from what I assumed, were underwater springs. Were we simply elevated on some narrow island? All the mist from the water blocked my view of below but, the water had to go somewhere, right?

I felt a tug on my cloak as Graven's single claw pulled me back. He'd folded himself into a comfortable position, like a cat on a windowsill ready to take in the afternoon sun.

"You're getting a little close, don't you think?" he remarked, baring his fangs ever-so-slightly as if to mock my curiosity.

I turned away, adjusting my bag on my shoulder and offering a mild glare in return.

Mara had already scouted ahead, looking down the small footpaths to find a suitable route to our destination. I watched from afar as she lightly patted the ground with her palm, gently curling a bit of dirt into her palms before she closed her eyes and blew it into the wind. The dirt swirled in the breeze, blowing up before pulling to the left and out of sight.

"There's our path," Mara said confidently.

I quickly hustled to her side, knowing well her steps would always be ahead of my own but, I didn't want her too far ahead. This place seemed small from above but, once we'd landed, I could see how truly vast the landscape really was.

Graven was far too large to take the journey with us, even on foot, and I had no doubt his imposing stature would quickly draw unwanted attention our way, so I didn't fight when he offered to stay behind. Besides, he seemed more than content with taking a nap and simply enjoying the sun.

The breeze was gentle, not overly warm or cool, but seemingly perfect. Like the warmth of a late spring morning when the dew would awaken the flowers and fade away just before noon. The grass was long, flickered with greens and ambers as it waved in the wind. Stray goats munched just off our little pathway, seemingly becoming the caretakers of the fields without command.

Mara seemed unphased by the land but I couldn't help noting every creature, and every flower along our way. Birds would flutter alongside us, one or two taking a moment to rest on Mara's shoulders before playfully flying off again. Wild pigs would sit before us, undeterred by our approach and often forcing us to go around them and through the long grass. Even the flowers seemed to wane in our direction as we walked by, following our shadows until we were no longer in view. It truly did feel peaceful here, with no gaze cast upon us in fear or irritation, only minor curiosity.

Voices broke through my wandering mind, and I could see a few figures off in the distance. They looked to be plucking something from a riverbed, their laughter telling me that they were at least successful in their task.

Mara paused, just enough for me to catch up before she took a few steps forward again. Her pace seemed to hiccup as if she was unsure of her decision to continue on.

"Mara?"

"It's her," she stammered. "It's my mother."

I took a long gulp before finally, my eyes followed hers, landing on the long red hair of the woman who seemed to be staring back at us. I felt the atmosphere shift, not in a good way but, not in an overly bad way either. It was as if this wasn't meant to happen and yet, here we were.

"Yefilda?" I said aloud.

"Alina?" the woman responded. "Mara?"

I could feel the wind break as Mara hurtled forward, she and her mother clutching one another in the blink of an eye. Their embrace was long, sweet, and well overdue, and I felt my eyes well up in response to their joy.

"Alina!?" Yefilda shouted, pulling me into their embrace as I approached. I couldn't help but cry, my well of emotions finally tipping over the sight of a long-forgotten face. It had been so long since I'd seen her, her grey eyes like mirrors, always reflecting light and love upon me. I was not her real daughter but, she'd never treated me otherwise.

"What are you two doing here?" she asked, finally letting her grip on us loosen but never letting go of our hands.

"We're here for Alina," Mara stated.

"Alina?"

"To see the Skyborns."

Yefilda smiled at us, her gaze turning to me as she finally dropped my hand only to pinch my cheek, “I always knew you were different.”

We followed her to the edge of the river where she and the other women had been pulling in piles of fish with their hand-woven nets and lines. They smiled at us, each one offering a warm hug in response to our introductions. It had been a long time since they’d seen anyone new, and they welcomed our visit without hesitation. They did not appear as ghosts, or pale reflections of their former selves like I’d anticipated. I looked upon Yefilda and she appeared just as she did in much of her life; warm, happy, strong, and beautiful. These women were no different.

“We don’t need to eat but, it passes the time,” she said. “Besides, it is a little fun when you snag a big one, or a turtle, by accident.”

We took a seat along the shore, Mara updating Yefilda on our journey, and our encounter with the Marauders. I could see Yefilda’s glow falter for just a moment at the mention, her eyes flickering in response. It had been the Marauders that slew her as well.

Yefilda had been off on a hunt with a few other Arcanon from the village. It was easier to hunt wild game without the flight of Dragons so they chose to travel light, and on foot. They were ambushed, blind-sided on the edge of a cliff where their option was to stand and fight, or flee over the cliff and be at the mercy of the rocks below. After my village, and several others had been destroyed, they stood to fight but, they were out-numbered and with Yefilda’s last breath she summoned a powerful windstorm to carry both herself, and her enemies, over the edge and down to the rocks below.

Her body had somehow floated down from the rocks, where we were able to retrieve her, and the other Arcanon. Arden promised she died when she hit the rocks but, looking upon her and the others, we knew it was she who had used the last bit of her magic to float them down water where they could be retrieved and given a proper burial. I never bothered to suggest otherwise, it would’ve been too hard on Mara, and it was already too hard to begin with.

“I see things have only gotten worse in Odaer’s search,” she said.

We nodded.

“He knows Alina has the gem. And he knows who she is,” Mara added.

“How? We spent so long hiding her away after Signy’s death. He’d never find her, not even with Hondor’s tracking abilities.”

“My eyes,” I whispered. “He stared into my eyes.”

Yefilda turned to me, “Odaer is truly your grandfather, Alina. If he’s found you, no good will come of your meetings.”

“What?” I said, confused.

“You have your mother’s eyes, his eyes. That some fierce and determined emerald gaze that always brought out so much fury into the world.”

“Grandmother says she’s Skyborn,” Mara interrupted.

“Then Odaer’s legacy continues.”

“Lord Arden...father, sent us so Alina could train. Speak with the others. Learn to control her power before Odaer gets ahold of her.”

Yefilda paused, looking off toward the tower we’d spotted on our flight.

“I’ll take you,” she said sternly. “The path is not as easy as they make you believe. The Skyborns are well-protected by their companions, and always watching. This is no easy feat.”

“Companions?”

“Many of the Skyborns were Mages, and their companions and familiars followed them, even into death,” she replied. “You aren’t the only ones who have come here in search of Skyborn knowledge. And you certainly won’t be the last.”



## Chapter Six

The atmosphere seemed to shift as we made our way toward the tower. Yefilda called it the 'Unalter' where the Skyborns chose to reside to both watch over the Further, as well as the other realms from high above the clouds. Visitors were permitted but, the process was often long and one had to pass a test of truth simply to ask for an audience which deterred many, if not all, from proceeding.

I kept back a few paces, once more admiring the lay of the land while Mara and Yefilda conversed. She had been a mother to both of us but, I knew this time was better suited for Mara than myself. After all, I was here to train, and not to be lost in reminiscence.

"You still alive back there Alina?" Mara joked.

"Kind of," I laughed.

"I hope you're ready," Yefilda interjected.

"What exactly are these companions?" I questioned.

"A companion for each Skyborn that will test your worth through a series of trials. Each trial pertains to the Gossamer Gem they once held in their possession."

"Mind. Spirit. World. And Body. Right?"

"And Heart."

"I thought I held the heart?"

"That may be but that doesn't permit your passage through that trial by default."

"How am I to prepare myself when I don't even know what I'm up against?"

Yefilda stopped, turning to face me, "you prepare your body, mind, world, spirit, and heart for whatever they may throw at you. And they will be merciless."

"But I don't know what they will throw at me!"

I felt flustered, watching once more as the embers began to spark from my fingers in their strange orange glow. How could I fight what I could not see? We had encountered the Marauders and knew their tactics so we knew what to expect when they attacked again. But these trials were different, and

if no one else had undertaken them before, how was I to be ready to face what would come before me?

Yefilda placed her hands on my arms and I felt the warmth of her own spirit wash over me. She'd always been good at calming, even those in an utter panic were left at the mercy of her tranquility. I felt the flames slowly begin to dissipate once more as she held me close.

"Is that how you and Arden bonded?" I asked. I couldn't help but spit it out. It had been in my mind for so long and their personalities seemed so mismatched that I always wondered how they truly united.

"In a sense," she laughed.

They'd both been excellent negotiators and healers. I watched them as they easily calmed the most hateful mortals, and as they commanded armies of frightened soldiers with only a few short words. Mara had explained it was their gift, something more that they'd been gifted at birth from the Aura; the ability of compassion, and empathy.

"Thank you," I said softly.

"It is a lot to ask, Alina, I know. But you must expect the unexpected. These trials will no doubt test your limits, your deepest desires, and your greatest fears."

I swallowed hard; I was transparent to the other Skyborns. My emotions, my thoughts, they would read me and test me without so much as making a move or saying a word. Expect the unexpected; well that sounds easy enough.

We continued on, and I felt the wind shift. The warm breeze grew cold with its gentle flow becoming wild and untame. A large shadow swooped overhead and for a moment I thought it was Graven but, when it finally blocked out the sun, I knew I was mistaken.

Feathered wings seemed to span for miles and a long, edged tail snaked behind a massive body like a ribbon on the mast of a small ship. It let out a tremendous screech, bringing us to buckle our knees and cover our ears. Its form shook the ground as it landed, causing us some unbalance before we rose to greet it.

Mara prepared her bow but, Yefilda held her hand down. This beast was not here to fight us. It was here for me. This enormous bird was the first companion chosen to initiate my trials.

"Alina," a strange but gentle voice cooed through my mind.

I looked around to see Yefilda and Mara staring forward as well; did they also hear her?

“My name is Karah, and I belong to the Skyborn of World.”

I could see the wide eyes on both their faces. They could hear her, just as I did. So it wasn't just me being afflicted by this odd voice.

“Though I only instruct you, yes, they can hear my words as well.”

A long brown beak peered out from tufts of blue and burgundy feathers; magnificent golden eyes staring down upon me as her head tilted back and forth in response to our own curious nods. Two long feathers stuck out from either side of her head like horns but their deep blue hues bent and wobbled in the wind, just like our hair, and the rest of her feathers.

“I wish to speak with the World and all the other Skyborns.”

“Yes,” she responded in her dual-layered tone. As if two people were speaking at once, layered over one another just enough to match but still sound slightly off. “They’ve known of your arrival for quite some time, which is why I’m here.”

“My first trial,” I whispered.

“Shall we begin?”

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes before finally exhaling.

“I guess so.”

## Chapter Seven

I felt a strange rush of air like my body was being pushed from behind by some unseen force. Was that it? Did I just have to withstand some wind? No. It wasn't that simple. I watched as the world around me changed, colours becoming mute and grey. Birds could no longer be heard chirping yet I still spotted them flying about. The wind ceased and I couldn't see either Yefilda or Mara who had been standing beside me only mere minutes ago.

"You must believe, Alina, if you are to succeed."

"Believe? Believe what? Who?"

I watched the world change again, flashed of my life flashing before me. My childhood with my parents, smiling and laughing. The fire that destroyed my life, and my home. My new family, and my friends. And now, in the Further. I stood atop a platform; a golden cloak wrapped around my shoulders as a crowd of onlookers looked up to me as if awaiting my command. Soldiers, not just any soldiers, the Marauders. The gem I'd held was tacked onto a chain around my neck, its orange hue glowing dimly. I heard the cries above and looked up to see a swarm of Dragons flying overhead.

"What is your command, your face?" a Marauder asked.

I looked around, spotting no Mara, or Kiyne, and not even Odaer. It was me he was talking to, and only me.

"We raid the village at nightfall! Shall we give them no mercy!?"

Village? What village? I looked into the distance to spot the wall of mist to the west. Unadine! They meant that village! Had I gone back in time? Or was this happening now? Could I stop it? How!?

"There will be no attack!" I stammered in a panic.

*What are you doing, Alina?* A voice called out from beyond.

Confused faces met my words, voices beginning to grumble before growing loud.

"They took our homes! Slew our families! Destroyed our lives!" they began to shout back. "They deserve to see vengeance!"

*What will you do, Alina?*

I looked around to see the anger, the screeching and growling growing around me and closing in. Did the village really bring them so much harm? Was that why they attacked us? Had the Unadine betrayed them without us ever knowing? Were they merely out for revenge? No. I didn't believe it. I couldn't. Even if it were true, there was no justice in bloodshed. Even in our defense to their attack, we'd built barricades. I'd put up my wall of flame. I didn't want anyone to die, not on either side of the battlefield.

"No," I said lowly. "No! We shall not seek out vengeance!"

That's it. I had to believe. I had to believe I was right. I had to believe bloodshed wasn't the answer. I had to stand for what I'd believed in all these years. No more hatred. No more death. The world couldn't change under revenge, and the constant back and forth of differing opinions.

I felt the heat of fire growing around me, the crowd had swelled against my tiny platform but I held firm. There would be no attack. Not on my command. Not today, or any other day so long as I stood there.

My body lurched forward, the wind pulled from my lungs as I was once more met by greenery. The sound of bees buzzing awakened me; birds chirping a welcome sound to my ears. I sat up in the field of grass, eyes darting around for my company.

"Alina!" Mara cried out, running to my side. "Are you okay?"

She offered me a hand, and I took hold as she pulled me to my feet. I wiped the dust from my body, taking another quick look around for Karah, or the Marauders. I heard a voice, nothing more than a whisper on the wind this time before it slowly faded out.

*You've done well, Alina. Your journey continues...*

"Where is-"

"Gone," Yefilda answered, looking up at the sky. "Just as you fell into the grass, she simply...vanished."

"I passed," I said with a shrug, half unsure of my words.

"That's excellent news!" Mara said, curling me into a hug.

I smiled as her arms nearly crushed me, "only four more to go," I whimpered.

What trial awaited me next down the road to the Unalter? My morals had come into question. My beliefs and what I held to be true to my view of the world. What hardship would come next?

## Chapter Eight

Every snapping twig or brush of grass nearly sent me bolting into hiding. I had no idea what trial awaited me or who would bring it. My thoughts ran rampant from riddle-telling spiders to dancing dogs. I still had four trials ahead and we were edging ever closer to the tower as the day seemed to escape us.

“If we’re lucky, we’ll reach the base by nightfall and we can make camp there,” Yefilda said rather confidently.

“Yeah, if luck allows us no more trials till we get there,” Mara laughed.

I groaned. I didn’t want anymore. I didn’t even want the first one. I knew deep down another was coming, and soon but, after the first, I was already done with the process. Yet, I could feel the Skyborns still watching me, waiting to strike.

The sun had begun to fade, painting the sky in a rich colour of lavender and magenta that sat below an ocean blue. Stars twinkled above us as they began to glitter into existence and I couldn’t help but wonder if all realms truly looked upon the same sky.

“Alina! Look!” Mara cried out, pointing ahead. This time she didn’t falter, firing an arrow off from her bow into the distant trees before us.

“A stag!” I cried out. My stomach rumbled. Venison would be a tremendous treat for all of us, especially after walking all day with little more than berries and bread to fill us.

Both Mara and Yefilda gave chase, Yefilda leaping into the tree limbs whilst Mara continued her pursuit on foot. I was left to stand, alone, waiting as the daylight dwindled and hoping for their victorious return.

I could at least build a fire. I’d watched Mara, Kiyne, and everyone else at home do it with ease. All I needed was some dry grass and a rock. Luckily, we were close enough to the tower that a few stray stones had fallen away, breaking into small bits and pieces that I could carry by myself. I made a small circle with the broken stones, filling it with small bunches of dry grass and leaves. I’d built the pits before, many times but, the spark part still frightened me.

“Deep breath, Alina. You can do this,” I said to myself.

I puffed my cheeks, pushing out a whoosh of breath before snapping two small stones together in my hands. I had to learn not to close my eyes every time I struck them together. The idea of fire still haunted me. If I let it grow too large, or if a spark strayed from my target, I could burn down the entire Further with the flick of my wrist.

I shook my head. I was being dramatic. I knew what I was doing. I could control this. Everyone else could do it. I had to learn. I needed not to be afraid anymore.

Another flick, and this time I watched as sparks fluttered from my work. I smiled, which shocked even me. Once more. One more go and that's all I needed.

I struck the stones together once more, creating a barrage of sparks this time with several landing in the bits of grass I'd thrown together. Smoke began to slowly rise and I dropped to my knees, throwing the stones from my grasp as I began to blow gently on the small embers that had sprung to life.

I did it! I finally did it! And all on my own! I couldn't help but jump around a bit. Excited at my own accomplishment. To others, it was likely a minor feat, something they learned at a young age for survival but to me, it meant everything.

"You're growing quite quickly," a deep male voice called out.

I stopped bouncing, turning to stare into the tree line as two eyes peered back, their black mirrors reflecting the flames now glowing brightly behind me.

The large stag we spotted earlier strode out of the trees with poise and confidence. He seemed unphased by his pursuers and even less fearful of me and my newly acquired skill.

"Where are my friends?" I demanded.

"Not far behind," he replied. "I always admired the Elven Huntresses. But I cannot deny I fear them. They are quick, clever, and most determined."

"You're another trial, aren't you?"

He must've been more than ten feet in height. His body surpassing the size of a common field bear back home in both size and presence. He bowed his head, his large, velvet-like antlers nearly touching the ground as he did so, despite his tall stature.

“I am Rolan, companion of the Mind.”

“I thought I’d at least get some sleep before another trial came for me,” I replied rather bluntly.

He reared his head back, laughing.

“We’re trials, Alina. We are not bound by your bedtime.”

I glared; Perhaps it was unfavourable or disrespectful but, after a long road and an empty stomach, my temper had become remarkably short.

“Ready or not,” I sighed.

“Here we come,” he said as he lowered his head and charged at me in an instant.

I could see the foothills, the Unadine as its torches burned against the dark and mist. Arden had gathered many of the Arcanon, and even a few villagers once again, each one equipped with some manner of armour, and a weapon. Were they going after the Marauders? They couldn’t be!

“Use caution,” Arden instructed “We don’t know where they could be hiding. Trees. Caves. Burrows. Tread carefully.”

The small crowd nodded, each following his steps as he moved into the mist and away from the torch light.

Arden had said they would be scouting but with this number of recruits, and their armour, I knew he had prepared for a fight.

They wandered along the random rock faces that sprouted out like trees for what must’ve been hours. Their steps were light, cautious, and calm, with even the villagers following their Arcanon guides with the utmost precision to avoid detection. They had sprawled out into several small parties, some heading toward the mountain and others into the valley. Arden had prepared them well but I knew the Marauders would be ready and waiting, wherever they were hiding.

I could see a faint glimmer in the forest ahead of Arden but, he didn’t seem to notice. It was like a glint from metal, a scone or rather, an arrow tip.

“Lord Arden! They’re right there! Right in front of you!” I screamed but, there was no response.

*They can’t hear you Alina.* Rolan’s voice echoed. *You are only a spectator in this fight...for now.*

Fight!?



The arrows flew out like hail, whipping through the trees in rapid succession and taking out the men surrounding Arden. He reacted quickly, his ears picking up on the pullback of bowstrings at the last second and bringing him to duck behind a small rock.

Agonized screams erupted as the Marauders sprung from their hiding spot in the trees like wild animals on the hunt. They took no pity on those they'd wounded, stepping on them, tearing into them with swords and axes without mercy. They were unguarded and unprepared, and the Marauders took full advantage of it.

Arden whirled around, drawing his sword and cutting down enemy after enemy with small, calculated steps and attacks. He stood calm but his eyes displayed his maddening fear. He hadn't thought of this outcome either.

"We have to help them!" I shouted.

*We cannot*, Rolan replied again.

"Why? Why are you showing me this if I can do nothing?!"

*You can do something*, he retorted. *You can give up this journey. Return home. Fight alongside those who remain. Avenge your fallen.*

I stared at the scene unfolding before me in utter disbelief. Was Rolan truly suggesting I turn tail and run? Now? Could I even make it in time?

*Graven can always hear you. Summon him and he will take you to them. End this madness before it takes any more lives, Alina.*

My eyes darted across the battlefield. The villagers were no match for the Marauders as they took them out one by one. Even as they swung their swords in desperation, they were helpless against the mercilessness and wrath of their opponents. One. Two. Three more bodies fell at my feet as I followed Arden like a shadow. For every enemy he cut down, three of his own men fell beside them.

This was not a battle. It was a massacre.

*It is your decision, Alina...*

I could do it. Command Rolan to free me from this trial so I could summon Graven and go home. But, would I even make it in time? Would I save them? Would I even save Lord Arden? If I stayed, they would all perish. There would be nothing, no one to go home to. My mind was racing. I didn't know what to do. Flee and fight, or stay, and train. If I stayed, I could become stronger. I could avenge them, all of them. My family, Kiyne, the villagers.

Blood covered Arden, his face splattered red as he continued his fury. From enemies, allies, friends, he couldn't let their death be in vain. He wouldn't let it. He flipped his sword in his hand, thrusting back into the mid-section of a Marauder prepared to cut his throat. The man fell, lifeless, as Arden pulled back his sword to swing at another enemy, severing his head before he even got close.

A voice began to call out, familiar, but damning as it grew louder and louder.

"Odaer," I whispered.

"Take your men and get out of my sight," he ordered, looking at the battered Elf as he killed more of his men.

"No," Arden replied with ferocity. His blade rose in his hand, flying to his side as he cut through another Marauder trying to run at him with a mace.

"You've lost enough for one night. Do you wish to lose them all?"

"Why show mercy now? You're not known for kindness."

"I need you to relay a message for me," Odaer grinned. "Alina for Kiyne. My granddaughter for your weld-master."

"You're bluffing. I watched you kill the boy myself."

Kiyne was alive?! No. He couldn't be. Odaer was merciless, just as everyone had said. A killer. A destroyer. He wouldn't have let him live.

"Even I could barely see through the beast fire, so how do you know what you truly saw that night?"

Arden growled.

Odaer tossed a large blade to his feet, "here."

It was Kiyne's sword. We hadn't found him, or his sword when the morning arrived but, that didn't mean he was alive. Did it?

"Would I exchange a corpse for my own family member?" Odaer scoffed. "I'm insulted, Arden. I am a man of my word, you know that."

Arden looked around at his soldiers; those who weren't dead were severely wounded and he knew if he hesitated any longer, he too, would be slain just like the rest.

"I'll meet you at Bindi's Bay in three days' time. My granddaughter had better be with you."

My body was trembling. My mouth was dry, and every fiber of my being screamed at me to run. To flee and fight. Kiyne was alive! I had to get

to him. I didn't care what Odaer had planned for me. I could handle it.

*Is that your final decision?* Rolan's voice interrupted again.

I paused. My body finally growing still, and serenity once more enveloping me.

Arden bent down, taking Kiyne's sword in his free hand. He watched as Odaer walked away, back turned toward him. He could slay him right then and there. Two swords were at the ready and yet, he only watched.

"No," I replied, clenching my fists. Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I couldn't help but snarl.

The Marauders vanished into the shadows, taking their weapons and leaving the wounded behind. They had acted like ghosts; soundless and veiled by mist and shadow, just as the Unadine had once been.

Arden stood straight, analyzing the scene before him. A few of the Arcanon appeared from beyond, their eyes taking in the scene before them as they carried their own wounded on their backs.

"Gather the bodies," he ordered. "We make no further progress tonight."

I awoke from what felt like a nightmare, however, my body was still overcome with emotions, my heart pounding in response to the horrors I'd witnessed. The fire still roared at my side but Rolan, that mythical Stag, was nowhere in sight. I held my head in my hands, rubbing at my eyes and temples trying to make sense of it all.

"It was a dream. A dream. Just a bad dream," I kept repeating.

"That damned thing was quick," Yefilda said, emerging from the shadows of the woods with Mara at her side.

How long had I been out? Seconds? Hours? No, it couldn't have been long. Rolan had said they were close behind. Was I only seeing that vision for a few minutes?

Mara looked at me, noticing my confusion as she approached from behind Yefilda.

"Alina? Did you build this?"

I looked over at the fire again, "Y-yeah," I replied. "For our dinner. But I guess he got away."

Mara sighed, "yeah he just took off, like a ghost. Couldn't even find tracks."

I took a deep breath, curling myself into a seated position and hugging at my knees while I lost myself in the flames.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost yourself,” Yefilda commented.

Slowly she unraveled a pack from her back, pulling out a couple of leaves filled with salted fish. She gracefully flayed them on a couple of twigs and put them near the fire before taking a seat next to me.

“They’re better a bit warmed up,” she said with a smile.

Mara sat down across from us, staring through the fire and into my very soul, “another trial,” she managed to divulge.

I nodded, “Kiyne... he’s alive.”

## Chapter Nine

My sleep was restless, if I could call it sleep at all. My mind was a mess of visions and knowledge that had been thrust upon me by the Skyborns and their companions. Kiyne's preservation was solely in promise of me showing up at Bindi's Bay in three days. The Unadine battle behind Arden. It was all so much to take in and even more to process what to do with it.

I rolled up my bedroll, tucking it back into my satchel. The fire was barely smoldering any longer and the gentle coo of birds greeted me just as they greeted the rising sun. A pink sky edged the horizon as light danced upon its surface once again. Small droplets of dew glittered against the rising morn, like twinkles of starlight on the blanket of night, just before sliding from their placement and onto the ground to feed the trees.

Mara yawned, rolling herself out of her odd little nest of blankets and leaves before finally perking up. It was odd for her to sleep in this late. She was always up well before dawn but, perhaps the Further had merely been too much for her, warranting the much-needed rest.

Yefilda was already awake, analyzing the trails to the tower and adjusting our route accordingly.

"Ah, you're both awake," she said warmly. "We'd best get a move on quickly; we've only got a little time left."

A little time left? What did she mean?

Mara let out a scream, "what's happening!?"

I ran to her side, looking down at her legs just as she was to see them growing oddly translucent.

"It's like you're fading away!" I shrieked.

Yefilda hurried to us, looking Mara over a few times with concern, "the Further is trying to claim you. You've been here too long."

I remembered Mara explaining on the flight here that we only had so much time here before something happened but I never had imagined this. I thought the heart would simply grow attached to the peace. I never thought the Further would literally take her from the physical realm.

"Why is it only affecting her?" I asked, checking myself over repeatedly.

"You're meant to be on this path," Yefilda replied. "Mara is not."

I could see the panic and fear all over Mara's face, it was so unnatural and frightening. Someone I knew to be strong and confident was now riddled with pure terror. I had to help her, to get her out of here as soon as possible.

"I'll call Graven. We'll get out of here now!"

"No!" Mara said, clutching my hands in her own. "You have to keep going!"

"Mara I won't let you fade!"

"I won't let you abandon this quest! You have to do this. For me. For Kiyne. For everyone!"

Yefilda placed a hand on each of us, once more washing us over with her compassion and tranquility in order to clear our minds.

"I'll take care of Mara, Alina. You need to get to the Unalter. Learn your power. Take hold of your destiny."

I wanted to help Mara but, I didn't know how. How could I go on without them? Without their guidance and support? They were strong, powerful, and skilled. I was just running into dumb luck and convenience. I was no Mage, or Hunter, not like them. I was Alina, just some orphaned girl with an odd talent to talk to Dragons and put her hands in fire. I was no hero or saviour.

"Alina, if you do not move forward Mara will be stuck here. And if Odaer succeeds, the Further may no longer be safe, even for the dead."

"You have to keep going, Alina," Mara added.

My eyes grew blurry, tears fighting against me once more. The red flush in my cheeks was growing but, this time the glowing orange from my hands didn't emit any flames.

"Look, Alina, you've already grown so much," Yefilda commented, pointing down at my hands.

I glanced down through my tears; she was right. Though the aura still grew, no sparks ever fell from my fingers. I didn't want to leave them behind, or go off on my own but, I knew deep down it was my only option. The only way I could save them.

"I'll fix this, I promise," I said, clenching my fists and running down the path Yefilda had examined earlier. I could hear Yefilda's words as she'd been looking down the path earlier. 'To always move forward, despite the

dangers that may lie ahead; because no matter what comes before you, you're still progressing.'

The Unalter wasn't far now; I knew I'd make it there well before nightfall, especially after running for so long. I'd taken only a moment to rest, to catch my breath when my tears finally cleared and my heart had finally settled away from my throat. Still, I couldn't help feeling uneasy. Not only was Kiyne depending on my return, but now Mara was as well. If I didn't want to do this for me, I definitely had to do it for them.

I'd picked up my pace, careful to watch my surroundings but not allowing myself to be distracted like usual at the vast array of scenery surrounding me. I had to keep my focus. I was so close. I could even see the Spiral of stairs that awaited me just a hundred feet away.

The sky grew dark, and though I was steadfast in my assignment I couldn't help but notice the lack of clouds. Rolls of booming thunder began to ring in my ears, yet no lightning brightened the horizon. My steps slowed, and my heart began to race once more as I knew yet another trial was coming for me.

## Chapter Ten

Slowly I began to feel the ground quake and rumble, grass waning back and forth in a vicious breeze as it swept across the fields. I took a deep breath, holding still, eyes spanning for what creature would manifest before my eyes this time.

Dust clamored in front of me, tearing away my view of the Unalter with its rising assault. It climbed higher and higher as the ground trembled more and more, bringing me to stabilize myself in a low crouch.

*Alina.*

*Alina!*

*There.*

*There!*

It was as if several voices were speaking, all at once, calling my name and talking amongst themselves in confusion.

*You're here.*

*Here!*

*Finally.*

*Finally!*

They kept talking over one another, repeating, shouting, and changing tones. I couldn't help but try to peer through the growing dust storm for the source of the voices; to locate the haunting calls that seemed to be all around me, but in front of me at the same time.

They emerged all at once, in a sudden clearing from the thick of the beige and brown cloud of dust, staring down at me with deep honey eyes filled with wonder and secret. Wild horses in deep golden hues, thick blacks, and mixed patterns. I felt their eyes penetrate my very being, staring deep into me as if searching and looking into my soul.

*We are the last.*

*The last!*

*Yes, before you can ascend.*

"Who are you?" I asked, still confused by all their voices and repetition.

*We are the wild. We keep the Skyborn of Spirit.*

Finally, their voices had united, at least for their introduction as they spoke only through my mind.



“But I’ve already faced a Spiritual conquest with the World.”

*We are not the same.*

*Not the same!*

*We see beyond your beliefs.*

*Beyond your morals!*

*We see deeper.*

*Deeper!*

*We see your true intentions.*

*Your inner desire!*

*Your fear.*

“Is that so?” I asked, rather harshly. Who were they to judge me? How did they know how I felt about anything or anyone? How I will see this through. “What are my true intentions then?”

*We will show you.*

*Yes!*

*Yes.*

*We’ll reveal what you deny yourself, Alina!*

I stood firm, awaiting the vision, or dream, or devoid world they’d show me. Yet, nothing happened. There was no breeze to thrust me into a grey world, or a fire to lift me onto a great platform to address my followers. Not even a calm voice to lead me into a vision of bloodshed and hate. Instead, one of them took a few steps forward and began to dig at the ground with a single hoof, revealing a small, clear puddle just below their form.

*Look.*

*Look!* They all cried out at once.

I knelt down, looking into the rippling water, my expression still one that was unimpressed and tired. I could see my eyes, red from so many poured tears, my cheeks pale from exhaustion.

“What am I looking for?”

*The truth.*

*The truth!*

I sighed, staring down, waiting for something to emerge or reveal itself but, all I could see was my own reflection.

“This is getting ridiculous,” I whispered to myself. “Trials, fighting, tests. I don’t want any of this. I never asked for any of this.”

Before I knew it, I was standing face to face with an exact replica of myself. The puddle had twisted and manifested itself into my very reflection, the same emerald eyes, choppy brown hair, and awkward stance. As I moved, she moved. Every breath. Every whimper. The very same.

I stood up quickly, taking in my own image with caution and awe. This was no reflective pool or piece of glass. This was a person. My person. Staring back at me.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Alina,” she replied flatly.

“I’m Alina.”

“As am I.”

“No... really. Who are you?”

“I am you. Undiluted. Untainted. Unrestricted.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am your other choices. What could have been. What may be.”

My eyes narrowed.

“What may be? What are you going on about?” I asked.

“Speak clearly.”

“What?”

“Ask.”

“What may be?”

“What may be.”

“Leave. Relinquish the gem. Be free. Run. Run away and let them fight. This is not your burden to bear. You did nothing wrong. You exist and yet you’re punished. You. Kiyne. Run. To the far North. Beyond. Let it end their way, as they started it.”

“These are the same questions as the World!” I growled.

“Not questions. Feelings. You want to run. You want to be free from this. You don’t truly want to fight. You never did. Kiyne didn’t have to fight. Neither did Mara. They did it for you. And you do it for who?”

Riddles. I hated riddles. I couldn’t speak. It was right. I didn’t want this. I didn’t want to find my inner powers and be the hero. I wanted to enjoy my peaceful village with my friends. I wanted to buy a horse and travel the world for the right reasons, not these ones. I wanted to be far from here. Far from the Marauders and Odaer’s War.

“You didn’t want to come here. You didn’t want to fight either. You’ve only ever wanted your own life.”

“I want peace... and quiet,” I said in a hush.

“Leave. Take Mara. Take Kiyne in exchange for the gem. Abandon this quest. It is not yours. It belongs to another.”

“Another?”

“One who wants it. Who was prepared for it. The Brave. The Chosen.”

Was I not chosen? No. This was thrown on me by some cursed lineage I knew nothing about until a few weeks ago. But, I did take the gem in the first place from Bryden’s hut. I could’ve left it. Put it back that same night. Anything. Yet I didn’t. I tried once, and Graven stopped me. He knew I wasn’t thinking straight. When the Marauders attacked, I could’ve handed over the gem to them directly. Not Kiyne. Not Graven. No one would’ve stopped me then, yet I didn’t give in.

“You’re wrong,” I stated firmly.

“Oh?” they looked at me with a curious smirk.

“I could’ve given up. I could’ve given in but I didn’t. I learned to fight because I wanted to. I kept the gem because I wanted to. I’m here because I want to be. I want to succeed. There won’t be peace, or freedom, or quiet for me, or anyone if I don’t succeed here and now. My friends are depending on me. Unadine. The Arcanon. The Ethereal. They’re all looking up to me. No one forced my hand. This was my choice. This journey is mine and this pathway is my own.”

“You believe in false hope.”

“No. I feel it. I know it. I feel it in my heart. My soul. When I sleep, or eat, or even breathe. I know what I must do, what I have chosen to do. Despite how my mind or heart fights me. I know deep down the truth. And you, nor any other trial will stop me from succeeding here!”

Anger. Fury. Passion. Several emotions fell upon me as the dust picked up again. I squinted, trying to keep the dirt from my eyes as it whirled my doppelganger out of sight.

*She’s true.*

*True!*

*Ascend, Alina.*

*Ascend!*

Their voices screamed out to me one final time before fading with the dust storm as quickly as it came in. The sun shone again, the sky cloudless and clear. The breeze was calm, low, and gentle, and the rumbling ground had ceased.

I smiled to myself, looking up at the grand staircase that stood before me. I took a step forward, ready, willing to finish this journey and find out what, exactly, I was capable of.

## Chapter Eleven

I suppose I overestimated my own ambition because after the third or fourth, I forget really, round the tower, I was beginning to lose steam. I'd trudged up mountainsides, navigated narrow escarpments and dangerous bridges, even climbed the most jagged trees; I wouldn't let this defeat me.

Finally, I came to a break, a small center where I could climb in and take a break from the never-ending circle of stairs. The Unalter seemed riddled with age and decay and I couldn't help but wonder if its wear was truly from its years or, from war. Had the Further always been a land of the dead, or was it something much greater in a past life?

As I took time to catch my breath, my mind once again began to race with the potential outcomes I may be faced with. I still had a trial or two ahead, and Mara's stability in the Further was dwindling. Not only were the lives in Hulknaut on the line but, now those of the Ethereal, and the Further as well. I took a few deep breaths and began my ascension once more. I wouldn't let fading sun, nor wind, nor companions, deter me from my goal.

Round and round and round again as I climbed ever higher. I felt as if clouds would soon form below my feet and that I'd be amongst stars if I continued any higher. What did the Skyborns even look like now? Were they ghosts? Or were they like Yefilda? My mind was a mess of questions until finally, just as darkness encroached, I reached the top.

Five pillars stood before me, circling the roofless room as if they were once supports to a much higher platform. Each one displayed similar carvings to those around the forge grounds in the Ethereal. The Body had the water droplets falling into the palm of a hand closest to me. The Spirit showed wind swirling outward from an outstretched arm next. The World displayed vines and trees that stretched over a praying servant on the far end. The Heart showed the flicker of flames from snapping fingers on the inner side next to the World. And the Mind rest at the center, with an open eye on a forehead with all eyes always watching the one before it.

I would be lying if I said I didn't expect tombs or statues instead but, only small steps stood beneath each pillar, like pedestals to welcome praise and prayer by those who'd successfully conquered the Unalter's stairs long ago.

“Alina,” voices began to whisper once more.

I turned to look, faced only by nightfall and the shadow it now cast upon my only exit. My only light source came from the moon above, gracing me with its dazzling white luminescence as I tried to find my bearings again. If I stepped too far, I could fall right off the edge, and that would put an end to everything right then and there.

*Alina!*

*True!*

The voices continued, almost beckoning me as I tried to stay still and fight off running to hide or discover what was trying to call me. Ancient torches began to sputter and ignite around me as the voices began to harmonize, calling to me louder each time.

I covered my ears, the voices nearly deafening me like the ringing of bells before I’d finally had enough.

“Stop!” I commanded.

Silence. Finally.

I sighed, uncovering my ears and almost expecting the voices to start again but, there was nothing. Slowly the voices were replaced by the sound of approaching footsteps, their pace calm as they entered the room from the darkness of the staircase. Large white hoods veiled their faces from me as one by one they stood before me, gravitating the room before standing on the small pedestals before the five pillars.

The first to unveil their hood was the World; bright eyes, coloured violet, glimmered in the moonlight as she looked upon me. The Skyborn of World – loyal, and morally righteous, she was the first to sacrifice herself for the greater good of both the Ethereal, and Hulknaut. She set the precedent for the others to follow.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Alina,” she said softly. “My name is Mederia.”

I’m not sure if I expected Giants, or booming voices to continue, or glowing figures at this point. All my previous thoughts seemed to escape me when the raven-haired beauty of Mederia graced me with her visage.

“It seems you’ve passed our trials, and still you stand tall, willing to fight, and willing to sacrifice yourself for the greater good of all our realms.”

I was dumbfounded. I didn't know whether to bow, ask questions, or give praise so I stood silent, only hoping my expression was one that was welcoming enough to suit their words.

"Of course," I mumbled. "Not all justice is true."

She smiled in reply, her thin lips spread over her smooth complexion.

The second to unveil themselves was the Body, which both confused and astounded me. A tall man stood, his hair peppered grey and its length neatly tucked into a high ponytail. Wrinkles and lines fought each other for dominance over his dark-skinned face as he smiled at me.

"I am Stein, Alina. And you have faced my trial throughout this journey, beginning when you stepped foot in the Further," he said proudly.

I stood perplexed; when had the body challenged me? I'd encountered no companion or guard, so how had I completed his trial?

"Each time your emotions flared, you struggled to maintain control. You wanted so fiercely to let loose that power within you but you never did. You were strong, determined, and diligent. Never letting your body be consumed by your feelings."

I remembered time and time again the glowing embers at my fingertips and the fires that threatened to erupt but not once did I let them. Though Yefilda had helped me once before, she wasn't always there to calm me. Only I was there. Only I could keep myself calm and collected.

"I've grown," I replied with a grin.

He smiled, his deep brown eyes revealing a great deal of pride, and I assumed to be surprised.

"You are most brave," he responded.

The Mind soon followed, revealing a young Elven woman with a freckled pink complexion, and a mess of dirty blond hair that was unfurled around her like wildfire. She stared at me with curiosity and glee; her ocean-like eyes studying me like waves to a shoreline.

"I'm Ferah!" she sang. "You deliberated. Hummed. Cooed, and even second-guessed yourself but you never swayed."

I wanted to laugh, watching as she rocked back and forth like she was dancing to some unheard song. I had at least expected the mind to be more refined, and calm but I suppose with a wealth of knowledge like Ferah's, she took joy in the simple things.

"I want to save them. All of them. But had I left..."

“You were courageous. To see such horrors unfolding before you and yet, you held your ground.”

“I will continue to stand and fight, for all of them.”

Ferah clasped her hands together, jumping up in excitement.

“You’ve come a long way,” the fourth shadowy figure interrupted.

A young girl stood before me, her cloak easily hiding her shape as choppy brown hair bounced beneath her hood as it was pulled away. Mirror-like eyes reflected my own, and I knew the Spirit stood before me, once more a near-replica of myself.

“I am Irena,” she said directly. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen my own true self; so long that I’ve forgotten what I actually look like, but I imagine I’d look somewhat like you.”

I felt a little saddened for her, she sounded young, even if she was only replicating my image for herself. To forget who you are seemed like a fate worse than death.

“I sacrificed my image so others wouldn’t have to. So, they would not lose themselves to war. So, you would not lose yourself,” she added.

“I am Alina. Daughter of Signy of Hearthmound. The Skyborn of Heart!”

She smirked in response.

“You are that. I challenged your desires. Your will. Your pursuit. Yet you refused my offerings and held to your word.”

“I’m not a quitter,” I replied firmly.

“So, it seems, but you’ve still one trial left,” Irena said with a bit of a laugh.

I stared, slightly confused. Had I failed her test?

She shook her head before the four of them turned to stare upon the fifth pillar, the Heart, and the figure before it.

“The last trial is one of true reflection. For you are the Skyborn of Heart and here before you, stands the very same Heart,” they announced in unison.

The Heart let down her hood, her emerald eyes ones of ferocity and true determination. Auburn hair danced along her shoulders, draped in front in a heap of mixed braids and tresses that flowed over her chest to her waist. I could feel her warmth radiating as she smiled upon me.

“Hello, Alina,” she said soothingly. “I am Signy, the Skyborn of Heart.”



## Chapter Twelve

It couldn't be. My mother had died in the fire when I was only young. Her legacy as Skyborn had been passed down to me, as it had been to her. How did she stand as Heart? How did she stand here at all?

I wanted to run to her, to wrap my arms around her and tell her everything. I wanted to laugh, to sing, to cry for her. My emotions were jumbled so much that not even tears sprang from my eyes and yet somehow, behind her gaze, I felt she knew everything. She felt the same way I did.

She stepped down from her perch, sensing my dilemma as I'd expected and tenderly placed her hands on my cheeks, just as she did when I was a girl.

"You're alright my sweet girl," she said in her soothing voice.

She'd always done this to calm me. To bring me back to my senses whenever I became flustered or upset, usually over the most minuscule things. Would the others scold her for it? I didn't know, nor did I care. Right now, my mother was here with me again and all I desperately wanted was for time to slow down.

"How?" I stuttered.

"I wasn't sure either," she replied. "But it was necessary."

"The village. Your legacy! -"

"I was the sacrifice. When the time had come, Odaer's power had passed and it was I that was assigned to the Beast Gem, the Gem of the Wild, and its power. The duty to end its influence fell to me. But Odaer took that from me, and burdened it with you."

I breathed in deep, trying to make sense of everything happening around me.

"When I died, I was still tasked with ending the gem and its influence in our worlds. Though my own power was lost, my duty was not. Now I stand, as your final trial, Alina."

"W-what do you mean?"

"You may relinquish your power unto me. I will be restored in the Hulknaut, and you will no longer be burdened with this duty."

It sounded too good to be true. To get my mother back, and be able to fight alongside her against Odaer and his men. What would he think of his daughter and granddaughter teaming up to fight him? It made me smile.

“However, I am only able to take my place as Skyborn to make the final sacrifice and end this war once and for all,” she added, the sorrow evident in her eyes.

I knew what she meant. She could come back, only once, to make the choice her father had taken from her. The gem would be destroyed, my mother would, once more, be gone, but the war would be over.

“No more talking to Dragons?” I began. “No more strange powers or gifts? No one hunting me down?”

She shook her head, “just my sweet Alina.”

Could I truly renounce my power so easily? My mother had been prepared to do it before. She was ready. She knew the outcome. But now it was my turn, or was it? I could give it all to her and go back to my normal life but, would it stop? Would Odaer truly be satisfied watching his daughter die a second time to save our worlds? He didn’t want the gem for power, hell, he didn’t really want it at all. All it did was help his army to grow. If he truly wanted to attack the Ethereal, he could, and he’d still do a lot of damage with just mortals at his back. No. My mother’s sacrifice would be meaningless.

I felt the pain in my chest as my mind raced with the possibilities. I could be free of this burden, but watch as my mother was torn from me again all in vain. Or I could take this power and fight against my grandfather, and do what he couldn’t - unite the wild and take down my enemies once and for all. I could restore Mara’s physical form. Rescue Kiyne. I had made my decision.

“I’m sorry,” I said, taking my mother’s hands in my own. “This burden is mine to bear now.”

She smiled at me, half upset, and the other half proud. I could see the tears begin to stream down her pale cheeks as she tried to fight them. My mother wasn’t one to display any emotions, even in my lifetime.

“I will make this right. I swear. I can’t risk Odaer continuing on, filled with more hatred at losing you a second time.”

The others began to whisper behind us.

“What are they saying?” I asked.

She closed her eyes, finally pulling away from me but choosing to take hold of my hands instead.

“You’ve completed your training,” she said quietly. “You’ve passed your trials, Alina. You are a true Skyborn.”

“What about you?” I asked, concerned now for not only her position on the Unalter, but her afterlife as well.

“I think I’ll go join your father,” she said with a smile. “He’s been waiting in Halfden’s Fields for what, 10 years now?”

“Halfden’s Fields?”

“The resting place for the greatest warriors from all realms,” Stein replied, coming down to join us. “I know of no other place where someone like Signy should spend their eternity.”

I smiled as my mother pinched my cheeks one last time.

“Go on now, I hear you can talk to Dragons after all. So... show us what you’ve got!”

Leave it to my mother to challenge me one final time. I closed my eyes, the sights of the Further spanning before me as I searched for Graven. The sightlines were now much more expanded than I’d previously been witness to. I knew how to communicate but being able to properly visualize, and see in real time, was a different sensation. I could hear his breaths and feel his scales, his spirit as he waited at the edge of the Further; loyal and protective.

“Graven,” I said, looking down upon his form as he lay sprawled in the grass.

“Alina?” he asked, perking up.

“I need you to come to the Unalter. It’s time,” I said. “And hurry! Mara only has a little time left before she’s trapped here!”

I felt the wind from his wings as he spread them out into the sky.

“Hmm,” he added. “It seems now I can follow the path of not only your voice but your scent, and spirit as well.”

“I’ve completed my trials,” I responded.

“Then our souls are now entwined for eternity.”

## Chapter Thirteen

I leapt onto Graven as he circled below, his form was large enough that the risk of missing the landing only frightened me a tiny bit. I trusted Graven to catch me and ensure my safe landing.

I bid farewell to the Skyborns, and my mother, as Graven and I made haste in the cover of night. How long did Mara have left? I hoped it wasn't too late. I couldn't bear the thought of losing her. Not now. Not ever.

I knew I hadn't left Mara and Yefilda too far behind but in the dark they'd be easy to miss, save for the speck of firelight that flickered below us.

"There!" I said, pointing down toward the fire.

He stretched, pulling his wings in tightly before diving down toward the small flicker of light in the darkness. The open field made for another easy landing, and I jumped from Graven's back to Mara's side the moment we hit the ground.

"How is she?" I asked, looking at Yefilda with worry.

"She's alright but, it's over-taking her quickly," she stated.

I looked down to see Mara's legs, hands, and mid-section consumed. It was only a matter of time before it overtook her completely, binding her here for eternity.

"Mara, the trials are complete. We can go home now," I said softly, hoping to stir a response from her.

Mara looked over at me with lifeless eyes, barely able to hold her own head up to even look at me.

"Go where? We are home, Alina."

I gulped, hard.

Yefilda leaned down over her, "Mara, you're not thinking straight. This is not your home."

Mara's gaze shifted from me to her mother, her translucent hand struggling to take hold of hers.

"I am home, mother, with you. I want to stay here with you."

Yefilda looked pained. Of course, a mother would want to be with her child but she knew deep down it wasn't possible. She couldn't stay. She leaned in close to Mara and spoke lowly, something in old Elvish, far

exceeding my basic knowledge of the language just like the words spoken in the Ethereal.

Mara closed her eyes, nodding gently before trying to push herself up. It hurt to see Mara so weak and frail; it wasn't like her at all.

I took hold of her shoulders, guiding her toward Graven as her mother kept up from behind. Mara wanted to walk, and she'd kill us before she let anyone carry her but Graven was not so understanding.

His large black tail slithered around Mara's waist, gently pulling her away from our grasp as he picked her off the ground and placed her on his back.

I gathered Mara's belongings as I listened to her lecture the large beast below her as if he was some stray dog who'd stolen her bread. Even weakened, she still had a sharp tongue. I couldn't help but giggle a bit, slinging Mara's bow over my shoulder and quipping her quiver to my hip.

"Take care, both of you," Yefilda said, making sure I had everything we'd come with. "It was good to see you but, don't come back and visit so soon okay?"

I laughed, giving my adoptive mother one final hug goodbye before I, too, climbed onto Graven's back. Not only was I leaving my own mother behind to the unknown, but my surrogate mother, Mara's mother, as well. It was a lot to bear, both emotionally, and spiritually.

We waved once more before Graven took to the sky with a single flap of his wings, prepared for the long journey home.

"We'll put a stop to it this time," I thought confidently.

"I hope you're right, Alina." Graven replied.

## Chapter Fourteen

Our flight had been rather uneventful. Mara slept while I held her close in front of me, making sure she never slipped from Graven's back whenever we needed to soar higher or float down to navigate the mountains. I watched as the wonders of the Forgotten Plains fell behind us, the freedom of the wild fading from my sightlines but, never from my memories. We'd managed to make no time there but, I kept its vision close, promising one day I would return there to truly feel the liberation of what it was like to be unbound.

Mara's colour was slowly returning, her skin once more solid and less ghostly than it had been when we left the Further. I was worried it would follow her but, it seemed to let go the moment we escaped the clouds surrounding it. Her strength would return to her, Yefilda promised but, it would take a great deal of time, and rest so I made sure not to stir Mara, even as I excitedly watched the dawn crest upon the horizon.

One day remained before the meeting at Bindi's Bay. I didn't know what to expect or prepare for, but I knew I had to be there, whether Arden agreed to it or not. No one would stop me.

Graven's wings had carried us fast and far. He didn't take a moment to ask for rest, or even slow to glide on the winds that traversed the mountain passes, he could sense my urgency though I tried not to reveal my true intentions.

With my powers now broadened, I made sure to practice reluctance, and shielding. I couldn't let my mind be exposed to anyone or anything that held great power and magic. I was an easy target to them before; easy to manipulate and read. I wouldn't let that happen again; I would not be so easily subdued. As much as I trusted Graven not to disregard my desires, I knew he would still try to stop the exchange, even at the cost of his own life.

As the night escaped us, dawn finally carrying in the sun from its realm of slumber, I could see the snowy mountain peaks that once waved farewell to us as they bowed before us once more. I felt welcomed, and looked up to, even though the mountains were merely idle pieces of the land thrust

toward the sky. Somehow I could feel eyes upon me, and I knew it was from the rocky surface now beneath our feet.

“Hmm?” Mara mumbled, stirring from her rest. I’d wrapped her in the thick of my cloak, making sure she was warm and comfortable throughout our journey home. It had taken us days before but with our endless and hasted flight, we’d made it just in time to greet mid-day.

“Hey,” I said looking down at her. “We’re finally home.”

Grey eyes flickered to life once more, the sound of home ringing through her ears and breathing new life into her form as if I’d waved a fresh cup of tea beneath her nose. She stretched her arms, careful of her position as Graven began to descend from the sky.

“Home already?”

“Mmhm,” I replied with a grin. “We flew all through the night, we had to get you out of there as quickly as possible.”

“You worry too much,” she scoffed, looking down over the familiar landscape.

I folded my arms across my chest, letting out a protest in the sound of a huff.

“I wasn’t going to let you die.”

“I wasn’t going to die, Alina. I was just-”

“Going to stay,” I interjected.

She sighed, nodding lightly, “yeah.”

Mara had consciously made her decision to stay in the Further with her mother but, she chose to leave with me. She hadn’t been under some odd influence from the Further’s land or its magic but, rather she had seen the faces of eternity and she wished to embrace it. I had to know what had changed her decision, even in such a weakened state, that she would choose to follow me home.

“What did Yefilda say that made you change your mind?”

“She told me that the Aura had not chosen for me and that I was making this choice without exploring my life, my decisions, with rationality. I was being selfish. Childish. It was not my time. I was not ready,” Mara looked sorrowful. “The Further may lay claim to me but, without a life fulfilled, I would not be allowed to stay. I could be pressed into another realm, somewhere dark and void without any sense of joy or contentment. I

couldn't do that to my mother. I couldn't stay only to be torn from her by ill will. And I couldn't do that to you either, Alina."

I smiled lightly, grateful for both Yefilda's words, and her knowledge that managed to convince Mara otherwise. I needed her here, at my side. I needed her support, her logic, and her calm mind when mine went all sorts of mad during the most remedial tasks.

"I'm glad," I replied, pulling her in for a hug.

Graven landed just outside of Unadine, taking caution not to interfere with the last few pikes being erected at the front gate.

Voices stirred around us, the mist veiling the source before they appeared from the front gate with torches lit and curiosity at its peak. I felt the tone change when they noticed the familiar form before them, their guard dropping only slightly to welcome us home.

"Alina! Mara!" Bryden called out, his voice a welcome change in the atmosphere.

I helped Mara down from Graven's back; even as he lowered himself, it was still quite a jump, and I couldn't risk her hurting herself any more than she already had.

"Careful," I said to the approaching villagers. "She's weak. She needs healing."

They nodded in reply, careful to help Mara down before her protest to walk came back with more intensity. She didn't let them lay a hand on her once she was safely on the ground. All they could do was stay nearby and hope she didn't tumble or stagger too far out of the range of their hands.

I sighed, both relieved yet tense with the knowledge that still rest upon my own shoulders. Tomorrow we had to meet with Odaer but, tomorrow I would also get back my friend.



## Chapter Fifteen

“How do you know of this?” Arden snapped, his eyes staring through me as if to search for the answer before I could reveal anything.

“I saw it with my own eyes!” I hissed back.

“Impossible! It was nightfall, in the fog. Even from above with the eyes of a Dragon, you’d see nothing more than a few glimmers of steel waving through the darkness.”

“The Mind revealed the sight. I saw the blood. I heard the arrows as they fired off from the trees and struck down your men. I watched as you dove out of the way to protect your own skin!”

My words were harsh and cold. Arden had been rather distant since our return. After he and Mara had spoken, he had become rather vicious and withdrawn. I knew she’d told him about her decision, and our meet with Yefilda. The meet didn’t seem to bother him but, her decision to stay there did and it rattled him to the core.

Arden let his shoulders drop, finally ending his verbal rampage upon me, “we weren’t prepared.”

I, too, finally let my guard down. Letting my emotions cool themselves before finding the words to speak. No glow had floated down my veins and into my fingers. No sparks to set the small hut on fire. I was finally in control.

“You went to scout with so many men, did you not know they’d expect you?”

“No. I knew they’d expect us. But, I didn’t know he would be leading them.”

He scratched his head, taking a seat by the small hearth as the flames danced before him, “he could sense my presence. I thought the time had passed but, it seems he is still connected to the Arcanon.”

“Connected?”

“Arcanon are bound to both their Companion, as well as the others, similar to Mages and their Councils,” he went on. “Odaer was the first mortal Arcanon appointed to our order. His blood still flows with our magic. It’s why he’s lived for years beyond his time, and how he can still track us.”

“But, my mother wasn’t that old. Nor am I. How has he managed to survive?”

“Odaer was a powerful warrior in his day. With our magic, his aging process slowed almost indefinitely. It was years before he finally committed to something more than battling and brawling but, with your grandmother’s death, all he had left was Signy. She was all that kept him level-headed and out of war. He had hung up his Warhammer, his armour; he wanted the best for her.”

I couldn’t fathom a time when Odaer had been kind and compassionate. He truly loved my mother with every fiber of his being, and I slowly began to understand the rage in his heart but, I could never condone it.

“Signy’s fate as a Skyborn was the end for him. When she vowed to take up her duty and make the final sacrifice, he went mad. His heart was broken. His world was shattered. I could understand his pain but, we both knew the severity of the situation. It was Signy’s choice, not his.”

“To lose your entire world in one person, just so others may have a long and peaceful life... when I lost my mother, I thought I’d lost everything but, I was wrong.”

“He didn’t see things that way,” Arden reiterated. “Had it been my own daughter. Had it been Mara. I don’t know if I’d have made the same mistakes.”

I placed my hand on Arden’s shoulder, feeling his body tense with the emotions coursing his veins.

“You are strong and wise. You would know it is Mara’s decision. Just as it had been her decision in the Further.”

“Had she stayed...”

“But she didn’t. Yefilda wouldn’t let her. I wouldn’t let her. She changed her choice. She made her sacrifice for all of us.”

Arden stood up from the fire light, finally turning back to me.

“We leave at Dawn for Bindi’s Bay. I expect you’ll be in tow, whether requested or not. So, I’d like to make things clear for you.”

I swallowed hard. I knew Arden would have a plan. He always had a plan, especially for something as big as this.

He lay out the map to myself and the other Arcanon that were to accompany us at the meet. The Bay was only a few hours south of our location, just down the hill, making the journey rather simple. Though

someone could choose to flee into the open water, and hope to get to sea, there wasn't much for options of cover with no rocks, or trees to offer any sort of defense should one side choose to attack the other. Even fleeing would only result in turned backs and scattered masses, making a hail of arrows rather deadly in mere seconds.

"Alina will take to the front for the exchange. Once Alina shifts and Kiyne is on the return, we will draw water from the Bay to seal her in a protective bubble. The Master Arcanon will quake the ground beneath us, so we must be ready. Our enemy will not expect such a result and will be left off-balance and forced to adjust. We get Alina out of there as fast as possible and use the cracks in the ground to prevent escape. We will not let the Marauders win this time."

"He is expecting us regardless, so this time we'll be on even ground," another Arcanon piped up.

"Precisely," Arden replied.

"Alina, you must be ready to flee with Kiyne should things go sour, do you understand?" he said, his eyes once more upon me.

I nodded simply. I would make sure Kiyne was taken to safety if it was the last thing I could do.

"Good. Get some rest. We have quite the early day ahead of us."

## Chapter Sixteen

I hardly slept at all. I kept looking at Mara and thinking about the rescue mission. I'd make sure Kiyne was safe. I'd make sure he was behind Arcanon guard before I even made a movement to return myself. Odaer's focus would be on me and me alone so that's all I had to do. I had to keep his eyes on me.

Mara had been adamant about coming along, but she was still too weak. Her bow arm still shook as she drew back the string, her arrows firing low and into the ground. I understood her frustrations more than anyone but, I didn't want to risk her getting in the way or hurt, and neither did Arden, which is why we left Graven in charge of her safety.

I stared out the window, waiting for the birds to sing in the sunlight over the mountains. Dawn was still edging its way in but I could hear the Arcanon shuffling about outside, gathering their own armour and preparing themselves for a final battle. I'd never seen the Arcanon fight before. I knew they were powerful in the ways of magic and spells but besides a few odd tricks to amuse children, they were never ones to display their absolute power.

I'd made it to the door just before a hand threatened to knock. I'd heard the footsteps as they grew near, and made sure to greet them before they could wake Mara. Even in her refusal, she was still weak enough to fall into a deep sleep against her will, and I wanted her to stay asleep this time.

I kept my axe on my side, just beneath the length of my cloak. I had to be prepared too, even if I wasn't very good. Odaer knew my magic, so I had to make sure I could defend myself in other ways against Marauder assault. I didn't want it to get that far, I had to make sure Kiyne, and everyone else, was well protected before making my move to run and draw their attacks.

The road was long and dark as we glided down the hillside, looking more like a fire-serpent in the thick of the mist rather than some group of wanderers. The sun began to rise over us as we spotted the bay below, the water glistening beneath the early light like some beautiful oasis.

Bindi's Bay was once home to a proud fishing village and marketplace that saw all sorts of creatures from across the world. Goods, services, and stories were all traded, purchased, and sold. I remember Yefilda telling me

of the Elven across the sea, with their sun-kissed skin and fiery tempers that made them more like Berserkers than Hunters. Some would come for wares, while others came for exploration. But, when Scarlet Eels decided to call the Bay their new home, the fishing dried up, and so did the desire to land there. Slowly the marketplace dried out, vendors choosing to travel elsewhere to sell wares across the world. Fishing ceased, with the eels eating many of the local species and destroying any of the egg sacs left to hatch. Fishers moved to safer shores, and the bustling town died out, leaving nothing more than a rotting image of what was once a prosperous, and vivacious landmark.

I was curious to see the village, the eels, and hear more of the stories but, that would have to wait for another day. Today we had work to do, and I wasn't going to let the desire to explore history deter me from my goal. Odaer would be taken down, and Kiyne would be saved.

We stood along the shallow shoreline of the Bay, the village only twenty feet or so behind our backs. What ghosts would linger to watch our own story unfold played at the back of my mind while I watched the Marauders ride in. My eyes stretched far, farther than I'd ever been able to see before but, they still weren't as perfected as they could've been. I could see Odaer, with his great horned helm, and I could see a horse attached to his side, carrying a chained man with a hood over his head. That had to be Kiyne.

I took a few breaths, trying to calm myself from hysterics as the truth unfolded before me. It was really happening. The exchange that was requested when the Mind had shown me only a few nights before... it was here, and I wasn't sure if I was ready anymore.

"No grand entrance this time?" Odaer commented as he approached. His hand went up, stopping the rest of his men from their procession.

Their horses neighed, kicking up a mild fuss before finally coming to a halt. Many stood at his back, but we knew it wasn't all of them. I imagined the others were waiting just over the hill. Waiting for someone to give the signal so they could fire off their arrows and take all of us down the moment the wind changed. If that were to happen, I would reign fire upon them in an instant.

Arden stepped forward, leaving me to wait for his own command as he and Odaer drew close.

“You ruined my entrance last time, so I didn’t want to risk it,” Arden snapped back.

Odaer removed his helmet once more, placing it on a small latch against his horse’s saddle. He glanced over toward me before returning his attention to Arden.

“I see you agreed to our terms,” he grinned.

“There wasn’t much choice,” Arden sneered.

“Ah, but you could’ve chosen to run again.”

“You’d only track us down once more.”

“Had you left the girl; I would have never pursued.”

“Alina is family,” Arden stated. “Family isn’t left behind.”

Odaer’s confident grin shifted into a grimace, his eyes now firmly on me.

“No. Family isn’t left behind.”

Odaer turned from us, taking down the man from the horse attached to his own, and quickly removing the hood before throwing him down at Arden’s feet.

“The boy,” he snarled.

Arden paused before turning his head to the side and giving me a nod.

I stepped forward, trying to keep my pace but hastening as I saw Kiyne’s eyes finally set upon me.

“Kiyne,” I said lowly as I ran to his side.

“Alina,” he whispered. “You shouldn’t be here.”

I fell to my knees, wrapping my arms around him in a tight embrace. I felt him tremble beneath my touch, as if sore and broken. I couldn’t have imagined his pain before, but as I hugged him, I could feel every cry, every whimper, and every mark that had now been scarred across his being both physically and emotionally.

“What have they done to you?” I said, trying my best to fight back tears.

“Alina, you can’t be here,” he continued. “He only wants you. He’s going to destroy the Ethereal. All of it.”

“Well?” Odaer commented, looking down at myself and Kiyne. “Take your weld-master.”

I looked up at Odaer with a cruel stare.

“Release his chains,” I ordered.

“Of course, my dear,” he said calmly. “How silly of me.”

He tossed the key to Kiyne's restraints to me, watching as I quickly unfastened them and tossed them toward the water. Had they been lighter they would've sunk to the bottom but, I couldn't throw something that heavy and seeing that they'd been strapped to Kiyne only angered me further.

"Alina," Kiyne begged, trying to take hold of me as his hands were freed.

"Go," I said to him, once more standing to face Odaer.

"Alina," Arden whispered.

"Go, both of you."

It was as if the wind had stopped completely, and the only sound were the words that I allowed to echo out. I felt the rage in my body threaten to expose itself, the fire that wanted to flow from my hands at the ready whenever I could command it.

Arden helped Kiyne to his feet, slowly guiding him toward the Arcanon at our backs as I remained on the field.

"You have your granddaughter, let them leave, and I will go with you," I stated firmly.

"As you wish," Odaer commented, watching as the two departed.

"Alina... remember," Arden whispered against the silence.

The Arcanon had already begun their attack, pulling the water from the Bay and launching it over the Marauders before me, ensnaring them in a whirlpool and leaving them helpless. I watched as their bubbles tried to pin me but, I wouldn't be left to be shielded. I would fight.

"Alina!" Arden ordered as I took a stance back, taking my axe from beneath my cloak.

The Marauders not caught up in the waves lunged forward, prepared to strike both me and the Arcanon down before the Masters began their quakes. Vicious tremors scattered beneath the ground, sending both myself and my attackers off balance. Some fell into the deep crevices that had erupted on the surface, while others managed to catch themselves and continue on. I watched Odaer move in motion with the quakes as if detecting them and adapting with ease. His hand went up once more, two fingers beginning a signal I could only believe to be 'fire'.

"No!" I shouted, running forward and turning myself on my own comrades. I threw down my axe, pulling my hands in toward my body

before letting the orange glow within finally emit itself in the open. I balled my hands together, creating the fire once again and letting it spread wider and wider as I separated my palms against my chest. I thrust my hands into the ground once more, the same barrier of flame shooting from the deep cracks in the ground and cutting off the Arcanon from the Marauders.

I felt the hail of arrows fly over my head, and I watched as each and every one crashed against my wall of fire, falling to the ground, useless. I could see Odaer out of my peripherals, his hand lowering and his eyes filled with surprise. He may have anticipated the Arcanons' attack during nightfall, but he hadn't expected my salvation.

"Alina!" Kiyne and Arden cried out.

I could see their faces beyond my wall of flame but this time it was me on the opposite side. The flames grew, higher and higher to combat any attacks that were flung toward it. I placed my hand against the wall, expecting heat but once more feeling nothing. I watched as both Kiyne and Arden panicked, looking for a way in to pull me through.

I could've jumped through the fire with ease. I could've taken their outstretched hands and pulled myself to them, leaving the Marauders, and Odaer behind once more. But they wouldn't stop. If I left with my friends, my family, they wouldn't stop chasing us. I had to protect them. To fix things and make them right. The war would never end if we kept running. It was time to face it.

I turned to Odaer, his eyes watching me with fascination and surprise.

"Let's go," I said.

A delightful grin danced across his thin, cracked lips, his hand outstretching to me as if calling me home. I took hold, pulling myself to his side and looking back once more to see my family; safe behind my wall of flames and protected from any further harm.

"Welcome home, Alina."



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