

Chapter Eight: Yavenna

As faint starlight bathed the balcony, Yavenna held her hand out to look at the engagement ring. The foul thing was so heavy, and her finger had been itching ever since the King slid it onto her finger, two hours ago. But she couldn't risk taking it off. If anyone saw her in the gardens she wouldn't be able to explain why she wasn't wearing it.

Yavenna lowered herself from the balcony using a rope she'd brought with her from Tarhasta. She'd tied it to the leg of a table. Sharva had checked earlier that there was no one occupying the room below, and Yavenna had commanded her maid to return to the balcony in one hour's time. She only hoped no one saw her. Biting her lip, she clenched the rope, trying not to think about the King and his beautiful jewel. Trying not to think about the fact that she was now betrothed to someone she'd like to never even see again. She landed on the grass with a tiny thud, and pulled on the rope so Sharva would hoist it up.

Yavenna held her face up to feel the slight evening breeze on her skin. Oh, it felt like so long since she'd run. As long as she was back in an hour, she could run for miles now. She bounced across the manicured lawns to the walls between the gardens and the city and looked up at them. They were high, but thank goodness, they were built from ancient weathered stone, so there were plenty of footholds. She leapt up the walls and scrambled down the other side into the wide square in front of the castle, adjusting her head scarf once she was back on two feet. She'd dressed all in black, and tied a scarf over her hair to hide its gleam.

There were plenty of people out in the sprawling city, but Yavenna kept her head down, and tried to find her way through the back streets, keeping close to the buildings. She heard the sound of people leaving taverns and restaurants but only saw few revellers. There were more beggars than she'd ever seen in Iscaran slumped in corners of the wider streets, but she gave them a wide berth – she hadn't brought any coins with her.

She tagged behind a family returning home to their village from an evening's work and prayed the gates would still be open when she came back.

Then, suddenly, she was free. Out in the open, rolling fields and small thickets of woodland stretching way out in front of her. She put one foot in front of the other, slowly at first, getting used to the feel of the grass through the soles of her shoes, one eye looking out for ruts and large stones. Then she threw her arms out, luxuriating in the feel of the air on her skin as she sprinted through it. Oh, the feel of her speed, it was so exhilarating. And as she ran it felt like the air was washing her misery away.

Faster, she ran faster. She was running as fast as any horse. So fast now. She didn't know why she could run so quickly, but she knew she loved it, knew she craved this feeling of power and speed. She could run away now. She could leave Gelenburg and never see the King again. She could keep running all the way to Tarhasta. She could live on foraged vegetables and sleep in barns. Should she do it? Would it really mean war? Suddenly she heard a low growl. Gasping, she stumbled to a halt. What was it? What wild animals were there in Arvad? Her stomach dissolved to water as she remembered

that she'd been in so much of a hurry to run she hadn't brought her dagger – she didn't even have the tiny one – she'd given it to the young man. Spinning around, she tried to listen for strange noises, but her heart was beating so loudly in her ears she could hardly hear anything else. She scanned the landscape in front of her, her eyes resting on a thicket of cedars. Wasn't that a group of shadowy animal figures? She swallowed. Well, being eaten by monsters would be better than sharing Ulric's bed, she was certain of that. As she stared into the darkness, she realized a man was walking towards her. Was he a guard from the castle looking for her? Was he in league with the shadowy monsters? As he got closer she could almost make out his face, but one of his eyes was seemed to be glowing and that was all she could look at. Then as her eyes got used to staring in the darkness she saw who it was. A handsome face with dark wavy hair pulled back into a ponytail, two lightish eyes, one with a lighter circle around the pupil. *Him*. It was him. Was it really him? How could it be him again? Were they destined to keep meeting?

“Hello, again.” Well, at least he sounded as surprised as she felt.

“Hello. Look, I don't know what you're doing here, but we should get somewhere safe, I just heard something growling.”

But the young man laughed. His voice was deep and throaty and made a delightful fluttering start in her belly and snake up into her chest. He pushed his hands in his pockets. “It's alright. It's this stray dog that's been following me about. It won't hurt you.”

He smiled at her, and she thought again how attractive he was. Without thinking, she pushed the scarf back off her face and shook her hair out, swallowing.

Clouds blew away from the moon and instantly the grassland was bathed in a clear grey light. He looked her up and down. “What're you doing out here on your own? Aren't you an important person or something? I'm surprised you're allowed out without servants, or guards. Are you safe here?”

“No, I'm not allowed out here on my own, but yes I am safe. I can run really fast.” She cleared her throat, trying to get her voice back to normal. She wasn't sure how much to tell him. All she knew about him was that for some reason the King's soldiers were after him.

“What about you? What are you doing here? Why are you wandering about outside the city in the dark?”

He looked closely at her and took a step nearer. “I'm here because my friend was captured by the King's soldiers this afternoon; for no reason at all. I don't know why they took him. Whatever it takes, I'm going to get him out. And my dog disappeared yesterday. He never leaves my side. I'm worried he's injured, or being held in the castle. I have to find him, too.”

Yavenna's stomach tightened – was he telling her the truth? He was very handsome, and he seemed kind, especially if he was trying to rescue his friend and his dog. But what did she really know about him? He hadn't even told her his name, or where he was from. He could be anyone. She swallowed, and twisted a lock of hair around one finger. She should fight the attraction to him that was building within her. In this strange new land of Arvad there was no one she knew or could trust – apart from Sharva. On the surface Arvad seemed fertile, pretty and gentle, yet already she'd found extremes of brutality, monsters and things that made her feel distinctly uneasy. Just because this young man seemed kind and was attractive, didn't mean he was trustworthy. She had to stay on her guard, not let herself be dazzled by the first handsome young man who showed her attention. She lifted her chin up and made herself stand up straighter.

“Where are you going?” he looked back at her, into her eyes. “What are you going to do now?” He shoved his hair back from his face with one hand, and she caught a whiff of a muddy, masculine smell – something like earth, mixed with a citrus-leaves. Annoyingly, she liked it.

“I’m going back to the castle now. I just came out for some fresh air. It was a bit stuffy inside.” She’d have to go back now, she definitely couldn’t risk him seeing her run. That’s what she should do. But, oh dear - she didn’t want to go back. She wanted to stay out here in the moonlight. With him. Abruptly, she remembered what had happened the first time they’d met. He’d seen her hold up the coach so it didn’t fall on him. She squeezed her eyes shut. Goodness, she’d forgotten he knew her secret. Well, he hadn’t said anything about it. Was it possible he didn’t remember what she’d done? Or maybe he was trustworthy after all.

Without realizing what she was doing, she touched his arm.

“Look, I live in the castle. Perhaps I could help you. Maybe I could try to find out if your dog actually is there?”

He narrowed his eyes, and rubbed his chin, thinking.

“Thank you. I’m already in your debt for saving me from the soldiers. But I can’t ask you to do anything else; it would be too dangerous for...”

“No...” she didn’t let him finish. “I want to help.” She didn’t really know why. It was probably just her immediate loathing of the King that made her instinctively want to help anyone who was suffering at his hands. “Perhaps we could meet here again...then I could tell you if I found anything out.” She thought quickly. “Tomorrow night. The same time.” Her face went hot. She couldn’t look at him. He’d think she was pushy. Goodness, why had she suggested it?

But he leant in towards her and touched her neck, she felt his fingertips brush her skin through the mass of moon-lit hair. “Yes. I’d like that. But - are you sure?”

She jumped slightly, but didn’t move away. “Yes. I am. I’ll see you here tomorrow.”

He stared at her, and she could see his face was flushed.

A howl broke the silence of the evening.

He took his hand from her neck. “Are you really sure you’re alright to get back to the castle on your own?”

She felt heat rising in her cheeks, and knew that her face was probably as flushed as his. She nodded slowly, trying to ignore the stupid fluttering in her stomach. “I’m going back straightaway. It won’t take me long.” She met his eyes, wondering about the yellow circle, but not wanting to ask him about it. Then she suddenly realized she didn’t know what to call him, “What’s your name.”

A dog barked in the woods. He lifted his head to look over her shoulder towards the trees, then looked back at her. “It’s Mal. What’s yours?”

“Yavenna.”

“Goodbye, Yavenna.”

He looked at her for a minute more, and the fluttering increased in her belly. Then he smiled briefly and turned away, striding off towards the copse.

“Goodbye,” she whispered, not wanting him to go, and staring at him till he reached the trees. Mal, his name was Mal. *I’m glad I met you Mal*, she thought. *Will I see you again?*

She shivered, then turned around to start the long run back to the city, looking over her shoulder after a few steps. But he’d vanished into the woods, the landscape was already empty.

By the time she arrived back at the city gates, she was even wondering if it had been a dream. The guards were locking the gates, but they opened them to let her in, without asking her too many questions. Like a cloud of dust blown by the wind, she ran back through the almost deserted streets.