

A Sequence of Darkness

Hypnotic Journey

Book IV

Alaina Stanford

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Chapter One

Hopper spun, shielding his massive head from the harsh blasts of snow with his large clawed hand, and yelled back at the others, “Here!” He motioned toward the sheer area of the cliff’s incline to their left. The snow was falling faster, the flakes were getting larger, and the wind was so strong, his friends could hardly hear Hoppers unnaturally deep voice booming from just a few feet in front of them. The large blonde troll headed toward the vertical incline as they followed, eager to find shelter. Hopper’s long legs spanned the distance in only a few quick strides. Cabal pulled his thick cloak tight around him. His pointed elven ears were red and stung fiercely from the cold. He was closest to Hopper. He turned to look back and a blast of frigid air swept across his face. Undaunted, he reached back, took hold of Sarah’s jacket and pulled her petite form forward.

Tom struggled in the waist deep snow to keep up with them. His leathery gray skin held no protection from the cold. He felt foolish bringing only a thin, hooded jacket on what was to have been a short trek. He should have known better. Being avid snow boarder, he was all too familiar with the mountains in winter. Why he thought this realm would be different was beyond him now. Shifting his shoulders, he made an unsuccessful attempt to lift the fabric off the stumps that protruded from his shoulders where his wings once were. A large black blur bounded past Tom as Pony, in his usual big cat approach, seemed unhindered by the blustery weather.

Hopper disappeared inside a narrow gap in the rock face, followed quickly by Cabal and Sarah. Tom stumbled in behind them a few moments later. Hopper shook the icicles off his hairy form and shot a disgusted look at Cabal and Sarah, as they brushed the snow off each other’s thick jackets and smiled in relief. Sarah’s deep blue eyes sparkled at the tall blonde elf before her. She was pleased at Cabal’s quick recovery from the wraith attack. Sarah pulled her long, curly red hair back into a ponytail and spun to help Tom steady himself.

Tom snorted his discomfort and said, “Hopper, you said this was a quick jaunt in the snow to the Troll Tunnel entrance and it took nearly 4 hours.” He turned to face Hopper as Pony decided to shake off the ice and snow from his massive body.

“Pony!” Tom snapped, “As if I wasn’t wet enough!” He spun and glared at the sinewy moor lion whose head stood no less than a few centimeters shorter than he did. Pony’s long hair and large paws made the giant cat look like an over sized lion. He was a creature of the netherworld and as cunning and dangerous as any beast that roamed that realm.

Hopper tried to hide a smile as he watched the pair standing nose to nose staring at each other. Normally the presence of a wraith would have sent Pony into a snarling rage of fangs and claws. However, Tom was no ordinary wraith; he was a victim of magic just as Hopper and Sarah were. Once human, they were now citizens of a realm where monsters and magic are real. Sarah was the lucky one; she was now a powerful sorceress, even more beautiful now than she had been in the real world. Her long hair and big blue eyes made Hoppers chest hurt. Once a successful hockey player, he was now transformed into a giant hairy troll. His massive head, long claws and 8-foot stature, with matching genitals kept him from being with Sarah. Hopper was no better off in this world than Tom. Tom's poisonous claws and long fangs kept him from pursuing any human contact.

Sarah found a way to purge the evil from Tom's wraith form and now he was simply a human trapped in a wraiths body. Pony was the only creature immune to the wraith's poison; as a result, the two had become inseparable. Sarah found solace with Prince Cabal, the leader of the elf warriors. Cabal was a once deadly foe that pursued them vigorously when they first arrived in this world. Cabal fell in love with Sarah the moment he spied her lithe form in the forest. He saved Sarah's life and stood by her side, time after time, proving his love. Finally as they rushed into the mountains to deal with Tom's evil presence, Sarah had lowered her defenses and allowed herself to love again, realizing Hopper's love was lost to her forever.

Hopper's eyes moved from Tom and Pony, to Sarah and Cabal. He couldn't help but grimace. Sarah looked incredible in her short leather skirt, peasant blouse and high boots. The elven sword tied to her belt was the ultimate touch. She was a beautiful vision of a life now lost to him. He knew it was his fault. It was his decision to abandon Sarah. It was he who decided she was better off without him. Now he had to face the consequences of that decision. Hopper watched as the muscular elf reached out and tenderly brushed a lock of Sarah's hair from her face. Hoppers jaw locked and he forced his eyes away to the back of the small cave. He had to let it go. His son's life was at stake, that was all that mattered now. The tiny baby troll whose mother did not survive birth was missing, kidnapped by renegade trolls.

Sarah noticed Hopper turning toward the back of the cave and she moved to his side casting a spell of light before them. The entrance lit up, bathed in a soft green light showing a narrow tunnel heading deep into the mountain. Hopper turned to her and said, "We can't have the light. There's no telling where the renegade trolls are at this point. There are nether beasts roaming the tunnels now due to the breach in the nether barrier. We have to travel quickly and in the darkness, I'm sorry."

Cabal appeared at Sarah's side and said, "Sarah, you could cast a sight spell on yourself. The rest of us can see in the darkness. You need some sort of bat-like sight if we are to move swiftly and safely."

Tom and Pony moved toward the tunnel as Sarah cast a spell of sensory sight on herself. She closed her eyes as her head swam with images she couldn't comprehend. Cabal took hold of her hand and placed it on his shoulder. "Hold on to me until you get used to the new vision. Keep your eyes closed, you won't need them."

Hopper added, "Gravid and the Queen's Guard are trying to reopen the tunnel entrance near the falls. His daughter was taken with Mikado. Gravid is angry and afraid, he is not thinking clearly. If we hurry, we may be able to reach them before they break through. If not, the troll council will consider the invasion of the tunnels by a garrison of elves a declaration of war. We are running out of time."

"Let's go," Sarah said, "I'm ready."

Hopper moved toward the tunnel and said, "Pony take the lead, I'll go next. Tom you stay out of sight at the rear. I don't want the elves to notice your presence until Cabal orders Gravid to stand down."

With that, they rushed into the tunnel. Sarah's hand firmly gripped Cabal's jacket. He reached around behind him and grabbed onto hers. They ran in silence through the darkness. Sarah cast a spell of vitality on herself and Cabal to help them maintain the pace that the others were able to establish. It wasn't long before Sarah's vision began to make sense to her. She realized she was seeing the cave not as it was but as if she were looking at the negative of a picture. She began to recognize Cabal and Hopper's form, in front of him, along with the tunnel walls and open spaces when they rushed past.

After several hours of running through the darkness, Hopper slowed his pace when they reached a large cavern. A narrow swiftly moving stream rushed along the far edge. Hopper said, "Let's take a short break and get some water. Tom, I think it's best if you put your hood up until we reach Gravid. Without your wings and using the hooded jacket to mask your skin, you could pass as an elf or human. Just make sure you keep your claws in your pockets. We just might get away with it long enough to explain your presence."

Cabal refilled his and Sarah's leather pouches with water as Hopper immersed his head in the stream and took a long drink. Tom licked his lips watching as Pony took a quick drink. Water wasn't appealing to Tom anymore. It wasn't what he was thirsty for, not even close, but he wasn't going to give into that thirst. He was going to fight it with every fiber of what was left of his human being. Tom moved to the edge of the stream, scooped up some water and forced it down. He pulled up his hood, and yanked his sleeves down in an attempt to cover the long, black, razor sharp claws that protruded from his hands as extensions to his fingers.

Sarah looked at Hopper; he felt her gaze as if a ray of sunlight had broken through the cavern ceiling, and turned to face her. She reached out and touched his hand softly saying, “We will reach Gravid in time and then we are going to find your son. None of us will stop until you have him in your arms again.”

Hopper tried to smile, overly conscious of his long shark-like teeth, he said, “You’ve always been there for me, no matter what. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your dedication to our friendship. I know we will find Mikado and little Nana too.” With that, Hopper spun quickly, headed back toward the tunnel, and snapped, “Let’s move!”

Sarah glanced at Cabal. She wasn’t certain using her new sight, but he appeared pale. He still had not fully recovered from the battle to capture Tom. He’d been poisoned by Tom’s claws during the fight and had barely survived. Sarah threw a healing spell and another vitality spell at Cabal. He glanced up at her as he felt the warmth and energy penetrate him. His grateful smile made her pulse quicken. For the first time she began to think about what it would be like to make love to this handsome elf. She felt more love for him than she had ever felt for anyone, even Hopper. The two men were not so different. Both were strong, capable, honest men determined to do the right thing. However, Cabal made her stomach jump and heart pound with a simple glance or a light touch of his fingers. Hopper never had that effect on her.

Cabal rose and took Sarah by the hand, pulling her behind him, toward the tunnel. Tom and Pony followed as they began to increase their pace to a slow run. It wasn’t long before the cave that held the remnants of Hopper’s village appeared before them. The smell of smoke still lingered in the air from the renegade attack that killed more than half of Hopper’s tribe. Hopper frowned as they entered and found it deserted. He increased his pace as they dashed across what was left of his village, past the remnants of burned out huts and back into the tunnel.

The sounds of shouting and clashing steel could be heard in the distance. Cabal released Sarah and bolted past Hopper, shouting Gravid’s name. Hopper kept close behind Cabal, fearing the trolls would mistake the elf Prince for an invader and kill him before he could stop them. As they neared the end of the tunnel where a small cave opened to the tunnel exit they saw Gravid and a dozen elf warriors standing firm against an equal number of the giant brown trolls armed with axes.

“Hold!” Cabal shouted, “Gravid! I order you to stand down!”

The trolls spun to face their new opponent but held back when they saw Hopper approaching behind Cabal. The trolls stepped aside and allowed Cabal to move past them toward Gravid who stood in shock at Cabal’s appearance.

“Gravid, stand down.” Cabal ordered, stopping before him. He took a deep breath; he couldn’t imagine the anger and panic that ran through Gravid as he desperately tried to reach his daughter. Cabal

lowered his voice and spoke calmly, "I cannot allow you to start a war. The trolls do not understand what has happened. You must take the guard and leave the tunnels immediately."

"Your Highness," Gravid said between clenched teeth, "My daughter has been taken by their renegades. A young elf child cannot survive long in these tunnels. You must allow me to pursue her."

"Gravid, my friend. I understand your impatience, but this must be handled delicately and with diplomacy. Invading the troll's territory blindly is only going to cause more loss; it will not gain Nana's freedom." Cabal stepped closer to Gravid and placed a hand on his shoulder adding, "You must allow me to handle this. I will find Nana and bring her home to you as quickly and as safely as possible. You know this."

Gravid sighed and nodded his agreement; he had the utmost respect for Cabal. They served the Queen side by side for many years. Gravid fought by Cabal's side in the great wraith war. Cabal was a man of his word. Yet it was his youngest daughter, little Nana that was missing, she was only six years old. Gravid spoke slowly with careful words, "Highness, I believe you will do your best to find my child. I have no doubt of your conviction. Nevertheless, we have no first hand knowledge of these so-called renegade trolls other than what we've seen of Hoppers village. I am concerned the trolls do not have control of this situation. I believe the renegades are hiding among them, traitors being protected by their own kind. I do not have faith that the trolls can be trusted to resolve this issue alone."

Hopper stepped forward slowly, saying, "Gravid, I give you my word I will not stop until Mikado and Nana are safe in their own beds."

Gravid stared silently at Hopper unable to speak. Cabal answered for him. "Gravid, if you would take the guard back outside and allow me to speak to the trolls, with Hoppers assistance I promise you I will do my best to gain access for you and your men."

Gravid turned and ordered the warriors back outside the cave entrance. Cabal faced Hopper with an expectant look then glanced past him to check on Sarah. Hopper spun to face the trolls and said, "Accord from Minous is needed at once." Without hesitation one of the trolls dashed off into the darkness moving past Sarah and Tom without hesitation.

It wasn't long before Minous; an elderly troll with streaks of gray peppered throughout his dark brown hair-like fur appeared. Minous was the head of the troll council of villages. The troll leaders were chosen by the population and held their position for life. Minous had governed over the trolls for nearly two hundred years. He walked slowly toward them hesitating only when he passed Sarah.

He lifted his hand in greeting and said, “Scarlet deliverer. Blessed are we to have you with us. Grateful are we all to be rid of the plague.”

Sarah smiled and said, “Thank you so much, but Ahmity was the one who purged you of the plague. I was merely the voice that sparked the idea.”

Minous nodded and turned to stare briefly at Tom who was still hidden securely behind his hood. The elder troll moved past Tom to where Hopper and Cabal stood waiting and said, “Rumors of abduction have reached us. Abomination this is to steal an elf child as well as Hopper's infant son.”

Cabal stepped forward and said, “I apologize for my warrior’s aggression. They fear for the child. The Captain of the Queen’s Guard is her father.”

Minous nodded and looked at Hopper. “Emancipation will not be easy but it is yours to fulfill. Autonomy is your gift, use it well.” With that, Minous turned and disappeared back down the tunnel.

Hopper turned to a confused Cabal and explained, “He’s given me complete control of the rescue. I will allow Gravid and a handful of his men to accompany us as long as he understands they must do exactly as I say. Where we are going is unlike anything you have ever experienced before. The more travelers, the greater the risk of discovery.”

“Agreed, I will speak with Gravid and allow six of the guards to accompany us. The first time they do not heed me, I will send them back to the surface.” Cabal answered.

The woodland village sat less than a mile from the edge of the cliffs that overlooked the aqua waters of the Alura Sea. The massive trees that sheltered the village from the fierce winter storms broke free to reveal a large central community area hidden under the canopy of the large trees. With the winter upon them, the dense snowfall blanketed the roofs of tiny rustic cottages scattered around the village. Tirana, Gravid’s wife stood outside the gathering area and stared toward the trail that led to the schoolhouse.

She turned to the young man standing beside her. Her son Kaleb was an even mixture between her delicate features and his father’s rough exterior. Kaleb’s eyes were soft and kind. His bearing was tall and proud. The boy had tenderness in his eyes that his father rarely showed. His thick, wavy blue-black hair and cleft chin were the image of Gravid.

She smiled at him and said in slightly more than a whisper, “You should go. School won’t wait.”

Kaleb was barely 14 years old. He stood almost as tall as his mother did. He gazed up at her and said, "I can't leave you and the girls. Not now, not until Nana returns."

Tirana's dark eyes met his and said in a more confident voice, "I'll be fine. Your sisters will be with me. The Woodland Guard has secured the village. We are safe." She pulled him to her and hugged him fiercely. He was as brave as his father but still an innocent. She added, "This is the first day of the new magic academy. You need to be out among the other children celebrating life. I will not have you shut away sitting and waiting for word of Nana."

Her twin daughters Deb and Mandy were at home with their eldest sister Shorey who was deep in mourning over the loss of her husband. Shorey wouldn't leave the cabin and wouldn't allow her small son out of her sight. Tirana's heart ached for her children. Not only had they lost a beloved brother-in-law to the unmerciful wrath of the renegade trolls; they now have no choice but to suffer the unknown fate of their littlest sister Nana.

She fought back the tears that threatened as the urge to rush after her husband surged within her. Gravid headed into the bowels of the earth in search of their child. Fear gripped her when she thought of the dangers that he might face, the same dangers that the trolls were callously throwing at Nana and baby Mikado. She forced the thoughts from her mind as she realized she was still hugging Kaleb.

Releasing him she said, "Go now or you will be late. You don't want to give a bad first impression."

Kaleb tried to smile at her and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek then turned and headed up the path toward the school.

Tirana turned back toward the row of cabins and stores behind the canopied area. The time had come to forsake her tears. Her children needed strength and courage and that was what she was determined to show them. She only wished her 'sight' would give her some word of the children. Some word of Gravid's progress, any word of how this horrible situation will end, but there had been none. It was as if her gift had vanished. Perhaps her extremely heightened emotions kept the visions away. Worse yet, perhaps she was not meant to know the outcome.

Kaleb glanced back as he reached the bend in the trail to see his mother head back to the cabins. It was hard to leave her. He knew she was in agony over Nana. He was confident that his eldest brother Nayr would watch over them while he was at school. Nayr was a Woodland Guard. There was no better swordsman than Nayr, with the possible exception of Prince Cabal. Kaleb enjoyed watching Jack or Cabal spar with his brother. Soon even they would not be able to defeat him. Turning to head toward the schoolhouse for his first day of class Caleb smile with anticipation. He was looking forward to honing his skills and becoming a wizard like Ahmity.

Only one hundred students were chosen to attend the school through the winter months. Come spring only twenty would be chosen to continue and graduate a few years later. Kaleb was determined to be one. As the giant trees began to thin, Kaleb could just make out the tall school in the distance. It sat overlooking the vast sea from high atop the sheer white cliffs. Kaleb's good friend and mentor Crasis appeared before him at the edge of the crowd of children gathered in front of the school. Crasis greeted Kaleb with a broad smile and a slap on the back as Ahmity appeared from within the school.

Ahmity was dressed in the royal blue robes of the Queen's Wizard. The tall, thin wizard surveyed the crowd. He smiled and stroked his long white beard. The children gathered before him were as different in age as they were of creed. A small group of white-haired Snow Sprites that stood no larger than a toddler with their delicate doll-like features, flowing white robe and sparkling frost colored skin. Rainbow Brush Fairies add a flourish of dazzling color to the group with their wild multicolored hair, large rainbow colored opaque wings and bright blue tunics. They quickly transformed from their 6 inch height to that of elf size and gathered with their belongings next to a larger group of willowy pale green forest nymphs. A group of elf children stood behind them. There were noticeably more blue-black haired woodland elves than blonde valley elves. Perhaps in the future that would change once word got out that the school was endorsed and even sponsored in part by Queen Brees. A single chestnut haired grassland elf and three silver haired moon elves stood separated from the others. Two lone human children stood far to the right even further away; a young boy and girl, twins from across the sea.

As his deep blue eyes reached Crasis and Kaleb, Ahmity motioned them to come forward. His voice amplified as he addressed the crowd, "Welcome children of magic! Welcome to your future!" Ahmity smiled and opened his arms as if to embrace them all. "Today will be a day of introduction and room assignments, nothing more. You will all be given assignments according to your magical tendencies and what will be experienced here."

Ahmity handed Kaleb and Crasis each a stack of parchment and said, "Crasis and Kaleb are in charge of handing out the assignments. Once you have received your designation please deposit your belongings next to your dormitory bed, take the colored ribbon off the end of that bed, and return to the front of the schoolhouse for further instruction. Please wait for your name to be called before you approach these young men for your assignments." Ahmity nodded at Kaleb and Crasis and turned to stand by the school entrance.

The school was a two-story structure with straight walls made of stone with two large chimneys, one on each end of the school. Ahmity stood in front of the tall wooden doors and watched the interaction between the various children. He discovered as expected that there was no interaction between the different species. The children kept to their own group and nervously shot curious glazes at the others. It

occurred to Ahmity many of these children had never been outside their home village. Most of his prospective students were innocent in the ways of the world. His heart softened as he recognized the fear in their brave young faces. They would have to learn to be strong if they were to take a position on the Wizard's Council.

He smiled undaunted, the school was small and the dormitories were very simple. One side of the upstairs was a large room lined with beds for the boys; the other side was for the girls. It wouldn't take long for the children to get to know each other despite their age, race and magical differences.

Kaleb and Crasis quickly handed out the assignments and the children disappeared into the school to reappear a few minutes later with their ribbons in hand. Ahmity walked out onto the large grassy lawn in front of the building and had Crasis and Kaleb divide the children into their ribbon-coded groups. Finally, the children stood in ten separate groups. Ahmity had each group form a circle and sit down in the grass.

The children began to get to know each other by playing a storytelling game. Ahmity pulled Crasis aside and sent him into the village to find the Captain of the Woodland Guard. When Crasis reappeared with Captain Ricard, Ahmity explained, "Captain, I need your assistance of a transport team to fetch Jack and Nicole Tyler from their home in the Ringlet Mountains. I am in dire need of their assistance."

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