

Chapter One

Shadow

Something or someone is following me. I've been wandering the woods for quite a while, but now it feels as if something—or someone—is watching. I thought it was one of my aunts at first—it was odd they didn't chase after me this time. Maybe they didn't expect me to go very far. But it's not them.

I stop and pull my hood back to listen to the forest around me. There is only the wind whistling through the branches and the sound of my own breathing.

Whoever is following me is very good at hiding. But I am not afraid.

Slivers of light penetrate the dense foliage in spots, shining streaks onto the blanket of decaying leaves and mud under my boots. As I slice through thick vines and clamber over rotting logs, speckled thrushes take flight from the forest floor before disappearing overhead. I pause to listen to them sing to one another, chirping elegant messages back and forth, a beautiful song carrying warnings, no doubt, about the stranger stomping through their home.

Being out here helps me clear my head. I feel more peaceful here among the wild creatures, closer to my true self. After this morning's argument at home, it's precisely what I need—some peace. Some space. Time to myself.

My aunts taught me that sometimes when the world is too much, when life starts to feel overwhelming, we must strip away what's unnecessary, seek out the quiet, and listen to the dirt and trees. "All the answers you seek are there, but only if you are willing to hear them," Aunt Moriah always says.

That's all I'm doing, I tell myself. Following their advice. Perhaps that's why they allowed me to run off into the woods. Except they're probably hoping I'll find *their* answers here, not my own. That I'll finally come to my senses.

Anger bubbles up inside me. All I have ever wanted is to follow in their footsteps and join the ranks of the Hearthstone Guild. It's the one thing I've wanted more than anything. We don't just sell honey in the market. They've practically been training me for the Guild all my life—how can they deny me? I kick the nearest tree as hard as I can, slamming the sole of my boot into its

solid trunk. That doesn't make me feel much better, though, and I freeze, wondering if whatever or whoever is following me has heard.

I know it is a dangerous path, but what nobler task is there than to continue the Guild's quest? To recover the Deian Scrolls and exact revenge upon our enemies. They can't expect me to sit by and watch as others take on the challenge.

All the women I look up to—Ma, my aunt Moriah, and Moriah's wife, my aunt Mesha—belong to the Guild; they are trained combatants and wise women. They are devotees of Deia, the One Mother, source of everything in the world of Avantine, from the clouds overhead to the dirt underfoot. Deia worship was common once but not anymore, and those who keep to its beliefs have the Guild to thank for preserving the old ways. Otherwise that knowledge would have disappeared long ago when the Aphrasians confiscated it from the people. The other kingdoms no longer keep to the old ways, even as they conspire to learn our magic.

As wise women they know how to tap into the world around us, to harness the energy that people have long forgotten but other creatures have not. My mother and aunts taught me how to access the deepest levels of my instincts, the way that animals do, to sense danger and smell fear. To become deeply in tune with the universal language of nature that exists just below the surface of human perception, the parts we have been conditioned not to hear anymore.

While I call them my aunts, they are not truly related to me, even if Aunt Moriah and my mother grew up as close as sisters. I was fostered here because my mother's work at the palace is so important that it leaves little time for raising a child.

A gray squirrel runs across my path and halfway up a nearby tree. It stops and looks at me quizzically. "It's all right," I say. "I'm not going to hurt you." It waits until I start moving again and scampers the rest of the way up the trunk.

The last time I saw my mother, I told her of my plans to join the Guild. I thought she'd be proud of me. But she'd stiffened and paused before saying, "There are other ways to serve the crown."

Naturally, I'd have preferred her to be with me, every day, like other mothers,

but I've never lacked for love or affection. My aunts had been there for every bedtime tale and scraped knee, and Ma served as a glamorous and heroic figure for a young woman to look up to. She would swoop into my life, almost always under the cover of darkness, cloaked and carrying gifts, like the lovely pair of brocade satin dance slippers I'll never forget. They were as ill-suited for rural life as a pair of shoes could possibly be, and I treasured them for it. "The best cobbler in Argonia's capital made these," she told me. I marveled at that, how far they'd traveled before landing on my feet.

Yes, I liked the presents well enough. But what made me even happier were the times she stayed long enough to tell me stories. She would sit on the edge of my bed, tuck my worn quilt snugly around me, and tell me tales of Avantine, of the old kingdom.

Our people are fighters, she'd say. *Always were.* I took that to mean I would be one too.

I think about these stories as I whack my way through the brush. Why would my mother tell me tales of heroism, adventure, bravery, and sacrifice, unless I was to train with the Guild as well? As a child, I was taught all the basics—survival and tracking skills, and then as I grew, I began combat training and archery.

I do know more of the old ways than most, and I'm grateful for that, but it isn't enough. I want to know as much as they do, or even more. I need to belong to the Guild.

Now I fear I never will have that chance.

"Ouch!" I flinch and pull my hand back from the leaves surrounding me. There's a thin sliver of blood seeping out of my skin. I was so lost in my thoughts that I accidentally cut my hand while hacking through shrubbery. The woods are unfamiliar here, wilder and denser. I've never gone out this far. The path ahead is so overgrown it's hard to believe there was ever anyone here before me, let alone a procession of messengers and traders and visitors traveling between Renovia and the other kingdoms of Avantine. But that was before. Any remnants of its prior purpose are disappearing quickly. Even my blade, crafted from Argonian steel—another present from Ma—struggles to sever some of the more stubborn branches that have reclaimed the road for

the wilderness.

I try to quiet my mind and concentrate on my surroundings. Am I lost? Is something following me? “What do I do now?” I say out loud. Then I remember Aunt Mesha’s advice: *Be willing to hear.*

I breathe, focus. Re-center. Should I turn back? The answer is so strong, it’s practically a physical shove: *No. Continue.* I suppose I’ll push through, then. Maybe I’ll discover a forgotten treasure along this path.

Woodland creatures watch me, silently, from afar. They’re perched in branches and nestled safely in burrows. Sometimes I catch a whiff of newborn fur, of milk; I smell the fear of anxious mothers protecting litters; I feel their heartbeats, their quickened breaths when I pass. I do my best to calm them by closing my eyes and sending them benevolent energy. *Just passing through. I’m no threat to you.*

After about an hour of bushwhacking, I realize that I don’t know where I am anymore. The trees look different, older. I hear the trickling of water. Unlike before, there are signs that something, or rather someone, was here not long before me. Cracked sticks have been stepped on—by whom or what, I’m not sure—and branches are too neatly chopped to have been broken naturally. I want to investigate, see if I can feel how long ago they were cut. Maybe days; maybe weeks. Difficult to tell.

I stop to examine the trampled foliage just as I feel an abrupt change in the air.

There it is again. Whoever or whatever it is smells foul, rotten. I shudder. I keep going, hoping to shake it off my trail.

I walk deeper into the forest and pause under a canopy of trees. A breeze blows against a large form in the branches overhead. I sense the weight of its bulk, making the air above me feel heavier, oppressive. It pads quietly. A huge predator. Not human. It’s been biding its time. But now it’s tense, ready to strike.

The tree becomes very still. And everything around does the same. I glance to my right and see a spider hanging in the air, frozen, just like I am.

Leaves rustle, like the fanning pages of a book. Snarling heat of its body getting closer, closer, inch by inch. I can smell its hot breath. Feel its mass as it begins to bear down on me from above. Closer, closer, until at last it launches itself from its hiding place. I feel its energy, aimed straight at me. Intending to kill, to devour.

But I am ready.

Just as it attacks, I kick ferociously at its chest, sending it flying. It slams to the ground, knocked out cold. A flock of starlings erupts from their nest in the treetops, chirping furiously.

My would-be killer is a sleek black scimitar-toothed jaguar. The rest of the wildlife stills, shocked into silence, at my besting the king of the forest.

I roll back to standing, then hear something else, like shifting or scratching, in the distance. As careful as I've been, I've managed to cause a commotion and alert every creature in the forest of my presence.

I crouch behind a wide tree. After waiting a breath or two, I don't sense any other unusual movement nearby. Perhaps I was wrong about the noise. Or simply heard a falling branch or a startled animal running for cover.

There's no reason to remain where I am, and I'm not going back now, in case the jaguar wakes, so I get up and make my way forward again. It looks like there's a clearing ahead.

My stomach lurches. After everything—the argument and my big show of defiance—I am gripped with the unexpected desire to return home. I don't know if the cat's attack has rattled me—it shouldn't have; I've been in similar situations before—but a deep foreboding comes over me.

Yet just as strongly, I feel the need to keep going, beyond the edge of the forest, as if something is pulling me forward. I move faster, fumbling a bit over some debris.

Finally, I step through the soft leafy ground around a few ancient trees, their bark slick with moss, and push aside a branch filled with tiny light green leaves.

When I emerge from the woods, I discover I was wrong. It's not just a clearing;

I've stumbled upon the golden ruins of an old building. A fortress. The tight feeling in my chest intensifies. I should turn back. There's danger here. Or at least there was danger here—it appears to be long abandoned.

The building's intimidating skeletal remains soar toward the clouds, but it's marred by black soot; it's been scorched by a fire—or maybe more than one. Most of the windows are cracked or else missing completely. Rosebushes are overgrown with burly thistle weeds, and clumps of dead brown shrubbery dot the property. Vines climb up one side of the structure and crawl into the empty windows.

Above the frame of one of those windows, I spot a weathered crest, barely visible against the stone. I step closer. There are two initials overlapping each other in an intricate design: *BA*. In an instant I know exactly where I am.

Baer Abbey.

I inhale sharply. How did I walk so far? How long have I been gone?

This place is forbidden. Dangerous. Yet I was drawn here. Is this a sign, the message I was searching for? And if so, what is it trying to tell me?

Despite the danger, I've always wanted to see the abbey, home of the feared and powerful Aphasians. I try picturing it as it was long ago, glistening in the blinding midday heat, humming with activity, the steady bustle of cloaked men and women going about their daily routines. I imagine one of them meditating underneath the massive oak to the west; another reading on the carved limestone bench in the now-decrepit gardens.

I walk around the exterior, looking for the place where King Esban charged into battle with his soldiers.

I hear something shift again. It's coming from inside the abbey walls. As if a heavy object is being pushed or dragged—opening a door? Hoisting something with a pulley? I approach the building and melt into its shadow, like the pet name my mother gave me.

But who could be here? A generation of looters has already stripped anything of value, though the lure of undiscovered treasure might still entice

adventurous types. And drifters. Or maybe there's a hunter, or a hermit who's made his home close to this desolate place.

In the distance, the river water slaps against the rocky shore, and I can hear the rustling of leaves and the trilling of birds. All is as it should be, and yet. Something nags at me, like a faraway ringing in my ear. Someone or something is still following me, and it's not the jaguar. It smells of death and rot.

I move forward anyway, deciding to run the rest of the way along the wall to an entryway, its door long gone. I just want to peek inside—I may never have this chance again.

I slide around the corner of the wall and enter the abbey's interior. Most of the roof is demolished, so there's plenty of light, even this close to dusk. Tiny specks of dust float in the air. There's a veneer of grime on every surface, and wet mud in shaded spots. I step forward, leaving footprints behind me. I glance at the rest of the floor—no other prints. Nobody has been here recently, at least not since the last rain.

I move as lightly as possible. Then I hear something different. I stop, step backward. There it is again. I step forward—solid. Back—yes, an echo. Like a well. There's something hollow below. Storage? A crypt?

I should turn back. Nothing good can come from being here, and I know it. The abbey is Aphrasian territory, no matter how long ago they vacated. And yet. There's no reason to believe anyone is here, and who knows what I might find if I just dig a bit. Perhaps a treasure was hidden here. Maybe even the Deian Scrolls.

I step on a large square tile, made of heavy charcoal slate, which is stubbornly embedded in the ground. I clear the dirt around it as much as I can and get my fingertips under its lip. With effort, I heave the tile up enough to hoist it over to the side. Centipedes scurry away into the black hole below. I use the heel of my boot to shove the stone the rest of the way, revealing a wooden ladder underneath.

I press on it carefully, testing its strength, then make my way down. At the last rung I jump down and turn to find a long narrow passageway lined with empty sconces. It smells of mildew, dank and damp. I follow the tunnel, my footsteps

echoing around me.

I hear water lapping gently against stone up ahead. Could there be an underground stream? The passage continues on, dark and quiet aside from the occasional drip of water from the ceiling.

At the end of the corridor a curved doorway opens into a large cavern. As I suspected, an underground river flows by. A small hole in the ceiling allows light in, revealing sharp stalactites that hang down everywhere, glittering with the river's reflection. The room is aglow in yellows and oranges and reds, and it feels like standing in the middle of fire. This space was definitely not made by human hands; instead, the tunnel, the abbey, was built up around it. There's a loading dock installed for small boats, though none are there anymore.

Then I see something that makes my heart catch. I gasp.

The Aphrasians have been missing for eighteen years and yet there's a fresh apple core tossed aside near the doorway.

That's when I hear men's voices approaching from the corridor behind me.
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