

BLOOD DRIPPED FROM LANAE Nightshade's blade as she surveyed the carnage surrounding her. Her muscles protested when she crouched to wipe her sword on the tunic of the last dark fae she had cut down. She stood, taking stock of herself, glancing at the blood covering her armor, making sure none of it was hers. Now that the adrenaline of battle had faded, the weight of combat clung to her, creating a deep ache in all her overexerted muscles. The stench of blood and death filled her nostrils as she gazed over the once-vibrant field, now a graveyard.

Their most vicious enemies had attacked Solstice City.

Again.

She cringed at the bloody carcasses dotting the surrounding fields, the grotesque sight a brutal display of the cost of war. Both comrade and foe had succumbed to death in this latest magical attack, but the kingdom's warriors had stopped their attempted invasion.

Although they had spared the city, they lost another few acres of plowing fields to the tainted blood of the dark fae. Their poison was already leaching into the ground and withering the crops, turning the rich earth into a blackened wasteland. The view of the once fertile land now defiled and lifeless made her chest burn with a sense of loss.

Lanae swore this was their purpose. This was why the dark fae leaders sent their men and women to their deaths at the hands of the Solstice warriors: to poison the land and render the kingdom unlivable. Even with their elemental powers at play, the Solstice City guards couldn't push these dark fae off the fields. It was as if they were building a wall against her powers over nature. Once dark fae blood spilled, she couldn't manipulate the plant life to grow in the desolate fields. The thought of her power being rendered useless filled her with a deep, simmering anger.

Lanae's gaze darted around at the remaining soldiers stabbing the enemy survivors too far gone for questioning. Her heart sank with each scene of violence. She searched desperately for her friends' faces amidst the chaos. Rorik's silver-white hair stood out in the darkened landscape. He was frantically trying to save one of the injured soldiers, his hands stained with blood.

As if he sensed her stare, Rorik looked up, meeting Lanae's gaze. His stoic expression, which was so opposite of his usual exuberance, shot a sobering twinge to her heart. His eyes held the pain of loss, and his head swung back and forth in a slow arc. The guard he was patching up would not make it back to his family tonight.

She looked away, scanning the other soldiers until her gaze fell on one of the handful of females in the Solstice guard. Elara's golden mane was splattered with blood and gore, but she still had a smile of triumph on her lips and that insane sparkle in her eyes that she usually got during battle. The sight of her friend's unyielding spirit brought a small measure of comfort.

Lanae's shoulders fell with relief. Although she had trained with other soldiers and had a certain superficial camaraderie with them, Rorik and Elara had been the only two she had truly clicked with.

Her relief was short-lived as Elara sent a finger wave and a nod toward the city. Lanae closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. The reminder that it was her turn to report on the battle made her shoulders sag even more. There would be no rest tonight—not when she had to recount the devastation of yet more crops to the demanding members of the Fae Council.

The council ruled over Solstice City, commanding the army and the citizens alike. Other realms had kings and queens, but they had the council of elders and the members were intolerable where any failure was concerned. And they would see this skirmish as another failure.

Lanae couldn't blame her friend for gloating. If she didn't have to spend the next few hours being grilled, she would gloat, too. She rolled her eyes and gave Elara a nod before she sheathed her swords and abandoned the battleground.

The city gleamed in the distance under the late afternoon sunshine, its towers a beacon of hope amidst the desolation. Although the sight lifted Lanae's spirits, she knew by the time she arrived at the gates, the sun would have set and night would have tossed her blanket over the kingdom.

And tonight was a new moon, when Lanae's lunar powers were at their weakest. The notion gave her goose bumps. She would need to be extra vigilant as she navigated the treacherous road back to the city gates. Her powers might be diminished, but her capability with a sword was as sharp as ever.



LANAE APPROACHED THE GATES, her steps heavy with the day's battles. She put her hand on the hidden pad in the middle of the ancient iron that only those within Solstice City knew about. If a fae touched anywhere else on the door, the iron would scald their skin. It was how the city kept their enemies out. The pad glowed at her touch, cataloging the unique lines and contours of her hand. When the magic in the door identified her, the great gears groaned as they moved into place, unlocking the gate and allowing her entry.

As she moved toward the Citadel in the center of the metropolis, she glanced up at the floating markets teeming with fae and other creatures granted asylum in Solstice City. The rune-powered streetlights glowed, casting a variety of colors on the streets below, transforming the cobblestones into a canvas of shifting hues. The hum of bartering filled the air. It was a comforting token of life's persistence, which was more welcomed than the throes of death she had left behind on the battlefield.

Solstice City shimmered with magic, a vibrant testament to what they were fighting for. Magic that the dark fae wanted for their own nefarious purpose.

She remembered her father, a council member and a diplomat, negotiating the peace talks years ago. Every time they were on the cusp of a deal, another attack would occur, and citizens would die at the hands of the dark fae. Eight years ago, they were close enough to a deal to schedule the signing of the peace treaty. Then everything fell apart. She still remembered that night vividly. She and her brother arrived home from a late evening of school activities to find their home ransacked, and no sign of their parents.

That night, the war bloomed in earnest and all dark fae within the city walls were hunted down and slaughtered. Any portals within the city walls were destroyed, cutting off access to the city. And she was saddled with the burden of raising her brother and finding her place in the world. The Solstice City guard offered her a chance to find herself and earn a living fighting the very creatures who had stolen her innocence.

Every battle since reminded her of what she had lost, pummeling pain through her center.

The wind swirled, whipping the loose strands of her pink and white hair into her face and bringing her back to the present. She wiped her hair out of her eyes just as her shoulder slammed into a stranger, sending a jolt of energy through her and making her sidestep to keep her balance.

Irritation burned through her, along with a lingering tingle of power. But just as her gaze landed on the stranger's emerald eyes, she lost the scathing response poised on her lips. She blinked at the intensity of the stare aimed at her and the crop of fiery auburn hair framing his rugged face. His presence was commanding, his aura exuding a raw, untamed energy that resonated with something deep within her.

His cross expression pulled a muttered apology from her lips, but she could not tear her eyes away from him. There was something disconcerting about his presence, something that both drew her in and set her on edge.

His green eyes scanned her and then returned to hers. "Watch where you're going, soldier."

His tone narrowed her gaze as ire burned through her blood in a zip line of aggravation. *Who does he think he is, speaking to me in such a manner?*

"I could say the same to you, sir." Lanae's hand dropped to her sword, the cold steel a reassuring presence at her side, and she skirted by him. Her knuckles brushed his, and another jolt of power filled her, sparking a curiosity she couldn't quite quell. She continued toward the Citadel, but the encounter had rattled her enough for her to glance over her shoulder.

The man still stood where she had left him, his emerald gaze pinned straight through the center of her being. His open-lipped expression was enough to set her heart pitter-pattering against her rib cage. There was something undeniably magnetic about him, and as much as she tried to shake it off, she knew their paths were destined to cross again.



DRAVEN EMBERWING STARED AFTER the gorgeous, pink-haired fae warrior who had stunned him stupid. Her image lingered in his mind: fierce eyes, a determined stride, and that striking hair cascading down her back in a tight braid woven of white and pink silk, like a wave of dawn and dusk. He had been so thrown from the power surge of knocking into her that all his mouth could come out with was a harsh reprimand. His hand still tingled from where her skin had connected and his pulse continued to gallop inside him, thumping in his ears so loud that the din of the market faded to background noise. The world seemed to shrink to the space between them, her presence overwhelming his senses.

"How much of an idiot can you be, Draven," he muttered to himself as she slipped out of sight. Her departure left an unsettling emptiness. The regret of not even asking her name gnawed at him, a missed opportunity that felt uncharacteristically significant.

He had been looking up at the market, contemplating his route, when he slammed into her. But if he had seen her coming, his brain might have worked well enough to at least get her name. Instead, he was left with the lingering impression of her intense gaze and the electric connection that had sparked between them.

He shook the encounter out of his head and focused back on the market, where he had been summoned, and he also hoped to find a drink to soothe his

erratic powers. The bustling market was alive with the vibrant energy of fae and other magical creatures, their voices blending into a symphony of bartering and conversation. With no other dragons left, the responsibility to reclaim the Dragon's Heart crystal fell on his shoulders, a burden that weighed heavier each day.

The Dragon's Heart, an ancient crystal of immeasurable power, had been under the protection of the Emberwing bloodline for millennia. Its loss had been a devastating blow, one that Draven felt acutely. He had been too young to fight in the war where the Dragon's Heart had been lost. But he still remembered the utter betrayal that befell his kin. It burned as if the fire within him would someday consume him and everyone around him in a blinding explosion of light and flame.

That fateful day, his father had been overcome by black smoke and he handed over the Dragon's Heart, dooming all of them. His mother shooed him into a hiding place and ordered him to stay put until she came to retrieve him. He stayed, even when the buildings surrounding him were nothing but ashes. Ashes that blanketed over him, hiding him from the enemy. He stayed even after the last dragon fell from the sky and was slaughtered with swords and arrows. He stayed after the last of the enemies left and nothing remained but smoke and the dead. The memory of his mother's desperate final command haunted him, a memento of the innocence lost that day.

But even today, Draven could still see that wicked, white-haired fae gloating as he held the Dragon's Heart and fed off its powers, killing all those around him he deemed an enemy, including the dragons. The fae's laughter, twisted with malevolence, echoed in Draven's nightmares, a constant sign of the vengeance he had yet to claim.

That fae had been in his home, plotting war strategies with his father, pretending to be an ally. Time only deepened the wound inflicted by that betrayal.

That fae had cursed his father and led an army against the dragons, destroying his family, his actions searing into Draven's soul.

That fae had forever tainted Draven's view of fae as a species, turning what might have been respect into seething hatred.

Draven would much rather deal with an ogre than a fae any day, and twice on Tuesdays. Especially considering he had tried for centuries to find that white-haired traitor and turn him to dust. But that fae was as elusive as the wind. The hunt for the traitor had consumed him, driven him to the brink of madness, and yet, it had also given him a purpose.

As he continued through the market, the encounter with the pink-haired warrior lingered in the back of his mind, a puzzling enigma he couldn't quite shake. Despite his loathing for fae, there was something different about her, something that called to a part of him he thought long dead. But for now, his focus had to remain on the Dragon's Heart and the vengeance he had sworn to deliver.