

Chapter One

Venn Connell's boots pounded against the dirt road as she ran, the thud of her soles a steady rhythm to focus herself on the man ahead. Shoving a Feldall soldier out of her way, she leaped onto the back of a fleeing bandit to send him crashing face-first into the dirt, trapped under her weight. Her heart pulsed with the thought of how many dead these outlaws had left behind and how much she would enjoy resetting the balance. She reached around to grab his chin, squeezed his waist with her thighs to keep from being bucked off while he tried to fight his way free. Skin and sinew tugged the edge of her blade as she drew her knife across his throat. The body twitched and sagged, and Venn jumped to her feet to rush to the aid of a soldier pinned against a tree, a dagger inching towards his abdomen in his struggle to fight off his assailant.

"No, no," Venn crooned into the bandit's ear, sinking her own knife into the man's lower back. "Allow me."

Stunned by the pain, the man whirled around to face her, catching her by the shoulders just as she forced a second knife up between his ribs into his heart.

She stared into the man's eyes and saw the wild terror and confusion as the life drained out of him. His grip went slack and he slumped against her before sliding to the ground.

"You good, soldier?" she asked.

He drooped against the tree and mopped his brow with his sleeve. Blood and sweat smeared his face, and he squinted as it dripped into his eyes. More droplets slid off his chin onto the green and gold hawk of Feldall embroidered on his chest, but from what Venn could make out, none of it was his. Between quick breaths he nodded.

New recruit, she reminded herself. She turned away to give him a moment, and faced the other four soldiers in the road.

"That all of them, Rem?" she asked.

"Yes, sir," Remy Herrigan called back.

Venn cringed at the title. As proud as she was to have been knighted by the queen of Andvell for services rendered, it still felt odd to be reminded of it after having spent most of her twenty-three years thumbing her nose at authority.

She bent down to pull her blades from the man at her feet. "Good. Then let's call it a day and head back. Unless anyone wants to wait for more to show up?"

She wagged her eyebrows at the other troops and felt a twinge of disappointment when no one volunteered.

Wiping her knives on the grass before sheathing them, she straightened her leather jerkin and smoothed the black hair out of her face with the back of her wrist. Sweat trickled down her neck as the sun moved west, its rays sneaking through the thick canopy of trees overhead. With a good pace, they'd make it back to Feldall's Keep by supper, and her stomach grumbled in appreciation.

As she headed towards her white stallion, Corsa, Remy fell into step beside her. Venn cast her a sidelong glance, taking in the mess of shoulder-length blonde hair, hazel eyes, sharp features, and the scar that ran from left eye to left ear — a souvenir from a Cordelayan knife fighter after her country had been demolished by a mad sorcerer. Venn knew people focused on

the scar when they saw her, but she thought it gave Remy a touch of distinction. Proof that she had fought and won. A visible warning to anyone who faced her now. It was why she liked having the scout on her team.

Remy nudged her shoulder. "That was a good fight, wouldn't you say?"

Venn ran her fingers over Corsa's mane. "It was a fight."

"It would be great to know where they're coming from," Remy continued, not acknowledging Venn's lacklustre response, "but there's a certain satisfaction each time we take down one of their packs, isn't there?"

Venn forced a smile, appreciating but not matching the woman's enthusiasm. "It's good exercise, at least. Hundreds dead on the road thanks to those bastards, and we're only able to pick them off four or five at a time. I'd prefer running at the source and cutting the issue off at the head." She mounted up and settled in the saddle, patting Corsa's neck as the stallion pawed at the ground. "There hasn't been any news on that?"

Remy rested her hand on her sword hilt, shifting it out of the way as she mounted her own chestnut mare, Shalla. "None at all. It's like they're coming out of nowhere."

Venn frowned and glared down the road in the direction the bandits had come. "They can't be emerging from the mists."

"Are you sure?" Remy grinned, but the expression faltered at Venn's look of surprise. "I just mean it would solve a lot of mysteries. What did you think I meant?"

"It doesn't matter," said Venn, clicking Corsa into a walk. "As much as it would answer a few questions, the possibility of anything popping out of nowhere ended five years ago. Trust me."

She sensed Remy's confused stare, but didn't bother to explain. After five years, Venn didn't think she understood either. At least not enough to make of sense of it to anyone else. She pushed the thought away and stroked Corsa's neck to soothe the rising memories.

The ride home took a few hours, and as they passed forest and then field, Venn scanned the road for more bandits. For a land that had been devastated by magic and by dragon fire, she could never take this route without thinking of how quickly the territory had risen from its ashes. New cottages popped up along the way, creating small villages where before there had only been farmsteads. Gardens and crops flourished with the coming harvest, and people and land oozed a sense of prosperity.

They passed through the gates and headed right towards the barracks, reaching the stables as the sun touched on the horizon, the evening glow surrounding Feldall's Keep with a golden aura. Up on its hill, separated from the rest of the village, the rounded stone walls stood as a symbol of peace and stability. The closest place to home Venn had found in almost fifteen years.

She dismounted Corsa and allowed Paul, the stable-hand, to lead him away.

"Extra carrots tonight, all right?" she called after him. "He gave one of those bandits a good kick to the head and deserves the treat."

"Got it," Paul called back, giving Corsa a proud pat on the side.

"Will you eat with the soldiers tonight?" Remy asked, preparing to lead Shalla away.

Venn debated the alternatives, but a whoop from a scout as he bragged about their recent skirmish to some of the other troops made up her mind.

"You guys go celebrate. I'll run up to the Keep and fill in the family."

Remy tilted her head. "Everything all right? For a victor, even of a skirmish, you don't look too victorious."

"Just grumpy," she replied, and flashed a wink. "Only got off a few good punches."

Remy chuckled. "We'll hope for more action next time."

She raised a hand in farewell and headed off, leaving Venn to her grumpiness.

Not that she wanted to be in a bad mood. The soldiers had done a good job today, clearing the road of the third bandit pack that month, and they had reason to be happy with their success. But she wasn't feeling it. She felt detached from the celebration around her, along with a certain discomfort in her detachment.

Turning her back on the laughs and stories, Venn plodded through the village, skirting people coming and going within the horseshoe of shops. To the right of the village were the homes of the household staff, and light from the lanterns cast a warm glow over the path as she walked between the cottages and the shops towards the Keep.

Sweat gathered under the layers of leather armour and cotton, and she felt more like water than flesh by the time she crossed the bridge and climbed the stone steps to the front door. Grunting against the weight of the door, she stepped into the cool foyer and stripped off the armour, knowing someone would be around in a minute to clean up after her. It was one of the perks of living in the Keep proper and having the Lady of the territory owe a few favours.

Down to her tunic and trousers, Venn heaved a sigh of relief and sagged against the wall, pressing the back of her neck against the cool stone as she closed her eyes.

It felt great to breathe. She still hadn't adjusted to the armour Arms-master Brian insisted she wear on scouting trips. The days when she was free to prowl in the shadows and leap on unsuspecting victims for their coin or food scraps were too ingrained in her habits and routine. But those days were behind her. Now that she lacked for nothing, it was difficult to come up with reasons to prowl in shadows.

"Hey, you're back! That was quick."

Venn opened her eyes to see Magdalen Stanwell, House Feldall's blonde and bubbly enchantress, reach the top of the stairs that led down to her workshop, known around the Keep – either affectionately or with horror, depending on the smells and noises rising from the depths – as the Haunt. Her blue corset and white tunic were stained with some sort of black liquid, but years of experience had taught Venn not to ask. At least this time there wasn't any smoke trailing after her.

Anyone else's company might have grated on her nerves, but with Maggie, Venn didn't feel the pressure to force a smile. "Yep. Everything went according to plan. They're dead. Roads are clear. People free to come and go as they please. All in a day's work."

Maggie's smile widened at her apathetic tone, and Venn could see the understanding in her blue eyes. "Just a matter of routine at this point, isn't it?"

"That's just it," Venn replied, feeling the enchantress had hit the heart of the issue.

"Well, the people appreciate it, and therefore Jax appreciates it. If nothing else, you can pat yourself on the back for giving Lady Feldall some much needed breathing room."

Venn shoved away from the wall and headed towards the stairs. "I'd rather let Jax do the patting. I'm on my way to let her know."

"Oh!" Maggie exclaimed, and Venn turned back. "Did you happen to see William while you were out and about? He was supposed to pick some herbs for me, but that was a few hours ago."

"Nope," Venn replied, popping the word. "Haven't seen your son all day."

"Oh. All right, then."

Venn heard the enchantress's false cheer, no doubt to cover her disappointment, and flashed an apologetic smile before heading up the stairs.

Subtle, Mags. Real subtle.

In spite of Maggie's best efforts, Venn hadn't fallen for Will in the years they'd known each other. Being only two years older than her, he'd become the closest thing to a friend she would admit to having other than Remy, but that's where it ended. No matter how much his mother—and he, she suspected—wished otherwise.

As if summoned by the mention of his name, she bumped into Will at the top of the stairs, too caught up in her musings to notice him until they collided.

He dropped the book he'd been reading, two others hitting the stone with dusty thumps, and grabbed her arm to keep her from falling down the stairs.

"Sorry," he said, releasing her to pick up his book. "The dangers of reading and walking."

Venn bent to grab the other two for him, but Will snatched them back, tucking them under the book he'd been so engrossed in. She quirked an eyebrow, wondering what it was about "Summonings and Banishings" he didn't want her to know about.

"Lucky you ran into me and not down the stairs," she said, allowing him his mysteries. "Reading anything good?"

He pushed his fingers over his short brown hair. "No dragons or anything, but it's an interesting perspective on the theories of—" He noticed her expression, cleared his throat, and answered again with a simple, "Yes."

Catching his chocolate brown eyes, she said, "Sounds fascinating, but you might want to pause the studying and head down to the Haunt. Your mother's looking for you."

Will's cheeks flushed, and he rested his knuckle against his upper lip. Venn struggled not to smile at his expense, knowing how self-conscious he was of being thought attached to Maggie's apron strings at twenty-five. She knew better, but liked to watch him squirm.

Because I'm a rat turd like that, she acknowledged to herself.

"Right. I guess I should bring the herbs to her. I wanted to grab this so I could start —" He held out the book and closed his mouth mid-sentence. "Anyway, sorry to have walked into you. I'll see you later, I'm sure."

He pressed his lips together in a tight smile and headed down the stairs.

Venn finally allowed herself the grin and shook her head, still smiling as she entered Jasmine's office.

Jasmine Reed, née Feldall, as she would always remain in Venn's mind, sat behind her large oak desk, cursing to herself as she tried to clear papers away from a puddle of spilled ink.

"Rough day?" Venn asked, righting the overturned bottle and using an empty sheet to blot the mess.

Jasmine puffed a stray hair out of her face in response and tapped the pile of papers together to straighten them, setting them down in one corner of the desk before burying her face in her hands, her right elbow in the ink stain.

"You might want to move your arm," Venn suggested, dropping into one of the three chairs across from her. She leaned back and stretched her arms out along the armrests.

"Shit," said Jasmine, twisting her arm around to check the damage. She laughed an exhausted chuckle. "Not that it matters. I haven't bothered to get my clothes washed in five years. Found it easier to get the seamstresses to make new ones."

The cause of the woman's dark circles and stained wardrobe shrieked and ran down the corridor screaming, "Nononono!"

A second set of footsteps chased after her. "You get back here, young lady. Don't make me call for your mother."

“No!” the five year old stretched out the word as she turned around and started running the other way towards her room.

The girl’s nurse, blonde hair wild and skirts twisted, poked her head into Jasmine’s office. “I’m sorry if we disturbed you, my Lady. I’ll make sure Naya stays in her room for the rest of the evening.”

Jasmine waved a hand. “You’re doing your best, Tanya. You can’t help it if my daughter is part possessed demon. Do you need me to come help?”

Tanya leaned back to peer down the corridor. “I think I managed to put the fear of you into her blood. She should settle down now.”

She bobbed a curtsy and closed the door. As soon as she was gone, Jasmine’s shoulders drooped, and she rested her chin in her palm.

Venn grinned. “It could be worse. She could be breathing fire as she runs around like a demon. At least you can rest easy that you birthed a normal child. Nothing strange or unusual about that one.”

Her teasing words — only half in jest — made Jasmine’s eyes crinkle with a proud smile.

“So, is there something I can help you with?” she asked, covering a yawn and slouching in her chair, “or did you just stop by to witness my scatterbrained exhaustion?”

Venn’s smile grew, and she propped her boots up on the edge of the desk. “I’m glad I’m not you, Jax. I would have lost it years ago and killed everyone in the Keep. You’re a better woman than I am. But no, I just wanted to give you an update on today.”

Jasmine smoothed down the stray hairs escaping her long braid, straightened her papers again and sat up, the haggard mother gone and the leader of her people taking over. “What do you have to report? Did everything go well?”

“More than well.” Venn crossed her hands over her stomach. “No losses on our side and only a few small injuries. I think it’s the most successful mission we’ve had since these pissers started showing up. Only six this time, too.”

“Any lead on where they came from?”

Venn slid her hands off her belly and back onto the armrests, picking at the peeling wood on the chair. After years of so many people doing the same, the furniture had begun to look aged and worn.

“Nothing,” she said, pulling her attention away from the splinter poking the pad of her middle finger. She crossed her arms to help her stay focused and caught Jasmine smiling at her obvious restlessness. Trying to do a better job of hiding it, she dropped her feet to the floor. “Everything is exactly the same as all the other times. My opinion? They’re a pain in the ass, but don’t pose a bigger threat that the odd clearing out won’t manage. These bandits aren’t trained, and their armour looks like it’s been pinched from wherever they could get it. Their weapons are usually half-rusted and they hardly know how to wield them. They’re out for easy cash from the weakest people they can find on the road.”

Jasmine tapped her thumb against the back of her hand. “We have reports saying most of them are refugees from Cordelay and the outlying areas.”

Venn frowned, thinking of the damage Cordelay had suffered, the entire country devastated by a tidal wave summoned by a mad sorcerer. She was struck by the coincidence of two references in the same day to events that had occurred five years ago.

“The thought had occurred to me,” she said. “But why now?”

Jasmine threw up a hand and sat up. “The dragon’s gone, the queensguard is finally starting to pull back its presence on the roads, so the way is clear for these refugees to cause all

sorts of trouble. We might want to send some troops on a field mission to the ruined cities. If there are people living in the wreckage, maybe we can offer aid and cut down on the attacks.”

Venn heard the subtle request in Jasmine’s words for her to lead at least one of the missions, and sank lower in her chair.

“I’ll start planning tomorrow.”

Jasmine’s lips twitched in amusement at her lack of enthusiasm. “I would have thought you’d appreciate the task. Better than sitting around the Keep all day waiting for them to come to us.”

Venn tapped her toe against the floor. “You know me too well.”

“So what’s the issue?”

As much as she hated the thought of sharing anything so personal with anyone — or admitting that she had anything so personal to share — the frustration she’d felt building up over the last few weeks finally boiled over at the opportunity to vent.

“I’m bored.”

Jasmine’s eyebrow rose. “Didn’t kill enough people today?”

Venn frowned. “You make me sound so evil. I don’t get off on killing people. It’s a fun hobby, but that’s not the point. They’re just too easy to kill, you know? There’s no challenge. Where are the undead wolves or those armoured cougar things? Where are the people who shoot fire from their fingertips?”

Jasmine chuckled, and Venn noticed the way her shoulders drew back and the lines around her eyes smoothed out, as if the reminder of what life had been like back then put today’s troubles in perspective. What was an excitable five year old compared to a fire-breathing dragon and an armoured bear at the gate?

Maybe the dragon would be easier to tame... she thought before Jasmine spoke.

“As much as I can’t bring myself to wish for a return of our troubles just to keep you entertained, I understand what you’re saying. I’ll get someone else to lead the scouts after the bandits. As for you, I might have another opportunity that would at least get you away from the Keep longer than a few nights.”

She reached for one of the papers caught in the ink spill, the top corner of the page lost under the blackness, and held it out towards Venn, who recognised Jayden Feldall’s messy scrawl.

“According to my brother’s latest poor attempt at letter writing, their ambassador in Margolin, Jer Reddington, has gone missing. They’d send one of their own people in to look for him, but tensions with Margolin are running high. Jayden couldn’t say much in his letter, but between the lines, they’re worried. I know you don’t find politics interesting or diplomacy worthwhile,” she said this with a smile, “but there might be a place for you to help.”

Venn pressed her lips together as she perused the letter, considering. A missing diplomat in a sensitive political muddle—lots of potential for intrigue. And it had been a while since she’d mocked Jayden Feldall for anything. It would be nice to see the princess Ariana, too.

Still can’t believe the bastard managed to snag a royal, Venn thought, the idea never ceasing to amuse her.

“All right,” she said, tossing the letter onto the desk and slapping her palms against the armrests. “I like it. If there’s a message or something you want me to bring your brother, leave it in the stables. I’ll leave first thing in the morning.” She stood up to move towards the door, and then paused, running her fingers over the back of the chair. “Thanks.”

Jasmine nodded and pressed her lips together, seemingly caught in some internal debate. Finally, a slow smile spread over her face. “Repeat this to anyone and I’ll have your hide, but some days I miss the old adventures, too.”

Venn left Jasmine’s office with a lighter step than when she’d entered it. She felt sorry for the poor guy who’d gone missing, but at least now she had a purpose. Something to plan and achieve. Maybe a few scuffles in the dust along the way.

Stripping down to her smallclothes, she pulled back the sheets and slid into bed, brain already busy plotting out routes for the morning as she leaned over to blow out the candle. The room fell into darkness except for the dim light of the fire at the end of the bed, sending shadows dancing over the covers.

Falling into a partial doze, Venn thought she saw one shadow rise up above the others.

Sleepy brain, she thought as she yawned and turned on her side.

A creak of the bed, and her sleepiness began to ebb. Slowly, so as not to disturb the blankets, Venn slid a hand under her pillow, reaching for the hilt of the blade she always kept close.

Before she could reach it, the shadow let out a yell and lunged.