

The Taming

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Chapter 1

When Thystle left the Fallen Rose Inn, she told herself she just wanted a walk, some fresh air, and nothing more. She walked quickly, with her shoulders hunched inside her long, dark coat against the wind. She continued to pretend she had no destination in mind as her long legs carried her through Haven's central square and market, both empty now. It was pure coincidence, a simple matter of geography, when a short time later she arrived on the other side of Haven, within a block of the Moulterwood Tavern.

She stopped for a moment to look at the tavern, a wide one-story building squatting among several similar buildings, all quite nondescript. She stepped into the deepening shadow of a butcher shop and peered around to make sure no one was there to observe her. Seeing no one, Thystle grabbed hold of the shop's drainpipe and climbed to the roof. From there, both the tavern and the cobbler shop across the street from it were in full view.

Deep orange and red in the clouds above shifted into deep shades of purple, the last of the daylight slipping away into twilight. Thystle crouched down, leaned a shoulder against the shop's chimney, and took a sliver of wood out of her coat pocket. The sliver went between her teeth, which she used to worry at it. Her thin fingers reached into her pocket again. They already felt like icicles in the wind that whipped strands of her long, sun-streaked hair into her face. The wind tugged at the wrinkled bit of parchment she pulled from her dark coat.

Thystle tucked the errant strands of hair behind her ears and smoothed out the note, which showed signs of wear from its many readings. Her eyes needed no light to read in the growing darkness, as a human's might.

To Thystle Moran: Your presence is respectfully requested for the purpose of relaying information about your interests in one Jonathan Revner. Come to the alley behind the cobbler, across from the Moulterwood Tavern, at sunset.

Nothing in the note indicated whether she knew the sender – it was unsigned – but the words “your interests in one Jonathan Revner” meant the sender knew her, and those words alone guaranteed she would meet this person, no matter how much she resisted that temptation. She shoved the note back into her pocket, gaining no new insights by staring at it. Thystle went back to watching the street below. Meeting the note's sender would happen on her terms.

A pair of figures appeared at the end of the street and shambled in her direction, one carrying a lantern and the other a pole. She dismissed the lantern boys' appearance as irrelevant; they were only there to light the few lantern posts in this part of town. After they lit the pair of lanterns near the tavern, using the candle at the end of the pole they carried, they moved on, out of sight.

It was not long before Thystle saw another figure approach from the opposite direction the lantern boys had come from. This figure stood not much taller than the two boys had but walked with a purpose. The fur edging on the person's hooded cloak and the supple leather boots they wore caught her attention, however, as they seemed out of place for this part of Haven. Thystle took the sliver of wood out from between her teeth and pushed herself away from the chimney. She inched closer to the edge of the butcher shop roof, peering over the side at this newcomer.

The figure stopped in front of the cobbler's door and knocked twice and then twice again. The cobbler's shop door opened, and a dwarf with flame-red hair tied in braids and a braided

beard to match stepped outside, closing the door behind him. Nothing about the dwarf said “cobbler” to Thystle. He was too broad in the shoulders, wore a thick belt likely built for carrying a heavy hand ax, and his shirtsleeves were pushed to his elbows to reveal thick, muscular forearms. She suspected the cobbler shop was a front for some other activity, with this dwarf acting as the muscle.

The figure in the cloak pushed back his hood. He was bald, but like the dwarf he sported a beard, though his was gray. Nothing seemed familiar about either of these men.

The dwarf spoke and gestured down the street, in the direction Thystle had come from. The cloaked man turned his head to look and nodded. Thystle caught sight of the sharp point of his ear, and her theory was confirmed that something other than cobbling happened in the shop. The cloaked man was not a man at all—he was an imp. The conversation ended, and the dwarf turned and went back inside the shop. The imp raised the hood on his cloak and walked down the alley beside the cobbler shop.

Thystle stared after him, wondering what an imp wanted with her or knew of Jonathan Revner. When the imp disappeared from view, Thystle slid off the roof and descended to the street again via the drainpipe. It was time for her to find out.

Chapter 2

Thystle crossed the street from the butcher's shop to the building next to the cobbler shop. Dark shades were drawn across the windows, but light appeared around the shades' edges. She was sure the dwarf told the imp of her arrival, but she saw no silhouette on the shades to indicate someone might be watching the street now. All the same, Thystle walked slowly toward the alley, the sounds of her heavy boots no more than whispers on the gravel street.

Out of the range of the street lanterns, the space between the two buildings was pitch black, but this bothered her not at all. Her vision pierced the dark with ease. She did not see the imp as she crept down the alley, but she smelled him nearby—burnt earth and deceit.

"I wondered when you would come out of hiding," a voice in the dark alley said to her, before she reached the space behind the cobbler's shop.

Thystle frowned, wondering what gave her away. She stopped for a moment. "You were late," she replied.

"Forgive me, I had a prior engagement. Come closer, young vampyre. I will not bite, if you do not," the imp told her. There was an amused edge to his voice she did not care for.

Thystle turned the corner into the alley behind the cobbler's shop, in the direction from which the imp's voice came. Without warning, a light flared into being, and she raised a hand to shield her light-sensitive eyes from it. When they adjusted to the sudden brightness, she looked into a strange orb the imp held in his hand, no larger than a human fist. A cloud of tiny lights danced inside of it. The imp placed the orb on the back stoop of the cobbler's shop.

"Faeries," he said in response to her inquisitive look. "I hope you do not mind the light; though I can see in the dark as well as you, I detest having to do so."

"Who are you?" Thystle asked him.

The imp smiled. "Straight to the questions, I see. So much for small talk, I suppose."

Thystle crossed her arms. "I don't care for small talk. I came for information."

"Then my name is unimportant," he replied.

The frown on her face deepened. "Nay. We'll go no further until I know what you're called, imp."

His smile turned sly. "Very well. I am called Jalus."

"Who sent you, Jalus? I've not met you before tonight, so I know you did not connect my name with Jonathan Revner on your own." She eyed him with distrust.

Jalus feigned a look of hurt. "You wound me. Do I really need to explain to you for whom I work?" He raised an eyebrow.

Part of her wanted to hear him admit he worked for Immortals, but his answer was confirmation enough. "What interest could they possibly have in my affairs?"

"We have a mutual enemy in Haven. I brought you here to meet him," Jalus replied. "I believe he shall appear in the tavern across the street this very night, as he has done for the past several nights."

Thystle furrowed her brow, confused at the idea of them having a common enemy. Was the information Jalus possessed not relevant only to her? She said to the imp, "Explain what you mean by 'mutual enemy'. What bone do you have to pick with old man Revner?"

Jalus smirked and crossed his arms. "Ah, *old man* Revner. Did I mislead you about why I

asked you here in my note?"

The wind felt colder now. She glanced around the dirty, refuse-littered alley. A bad feeling wormed its way into her gut and warned Thystle that she had missed the signs that she was walking into a trap.

"Perhaps you should tell me exactly what I'm doing here, imp, before I spread your insides across this dank alley," she replied in a careful tone.

Jalus shook his head at her. "Consider that a bad idea, my dear. My employers know where I am, and there is a dwarf with a short temper inside the shop behind me who might take my death personally."

Thystle opened her mouth to respond to this, but Jalus held up a hand to forestall further threats. "I will not waste your time. I brought you here because there is a man recently returned to Haven who presents a threat to the nonhumans in this town. He means to do away with the likes of you first, and there is little doubt in my employers' minds that this reckoning will not stop with vampyres. He also happens to be responsible for the death of your friend Jonathan Revner, the *younger* Revner."

His note misled her indeed. The information Jalus possessed was nothing like the information she thought he would bring her, or even about whom she thought. Thystle shook her head, trying to understand what he told her, and thought back to a morning a year ago that still haunted her dreams. She wondered how someone could be responsible for what had happened.

"What are you saying to me?" Thystle questioned Jalus, her voice low.

The imp laughed at her. "Surely, you did not think your friend got that way on his own, did you? You thought how you found him was an accident?"