

## 1 | THE SOLICITOR

To Vylaena Azrel, pain was more than just a passing nuisance—it was her constant companion. Pain was her bedfellow on cold nights, the long shadow lurking behind each waking hour, a presence as familiar and unavoidable as the half-drowned regret locked tightly behind her ribs.

Vylaena knew the deep bite of a cut more intimately than the passion of a lover; she'd felt the bitter pang of loss more often than her friendless life should've warranted. "Suffer well," her people said, a mantra and a farewell and a way of life compressed into two simple words. Goddesses knew she did.

It was pain—sharp but common, well below her notice except for its unknown source—that drew Vylaena to the front door of her small stone cottage in the Elderwood that summer morning. She was too deep in the ancient wood, and too far from the outskirts of Cyair, to have caught a whiff of the agony shrouding the city. Nor was it the familiar, bleak

anguish of a wounded animal, a rare but natural occurrence in the wilderness.

No; it was a man's pain—a man in a nondescript black surcoat, a short dagger at his belt, wearing thin calfskin boots more suitable for traveling marble halls than this crude forest path.

Men tended to ignore their hurts, Vylaena had observed—preferring to stash them in the hot darkness between their ribs, buried and festering, where they either dissipated on their own or slowly consumed the man from inside. This, however, was a more immediate pain. She could sense it clearly as the man approached the front gate, his step as arrogant as a puffed-up courtier's: he nursed a raw blister on each pampered heel.

Vylaena waited, hovering at the shaded threshold, her own heels throbbing in response. But this was a minor pain, and ignoring it was as simple and natural as blinking. Goddesses knew she'd endured far worse.

She allowed the man to approach, her mild curiosity tempered by well-practiced caution. It wasn't often she received visitors; her cottage was well off the Etherway, and with Cyair so close there was little reason to detour into the wild and unpredictable Elderwood.

The man continued his advance, his features coming into focus as the distance between them shortened. He was not handsome, but the authority in his face lent him an air of importance, daring onlookers to pass him over. Men like that were hard to judge. They might be dangerous, but they might

also be nothing more than hollow swagger.

Vylaena narrowed her eyes. With this one, she couldn't quite tell.

The man pushed through the creaky wooden gate that separated Vylaena's modest homestead from the dense, sun-drenched forest that surrounded it. He, too, studied her intently, his hard black eyes shielding his thoughts. She wasn't sure how much he knew about her—whatever he knew, he wasn't likely to believe—so she braced herself for the usual reaction.

First he'd notice her face: *almost* fine enough to be pretty, though too angular and stern to be mistaken for a traditional beauty. Young, but hardly naive—the sharpness in her eyes left no space for innocence. Then his gaze would travel down, finding a warrior's build beneath a mercenary's cuirass and leggings. Several exposed holsters, holding a variety of mismatched weaponry, divulged an unspoken warning.

She wasn't a woman of whom you wanted to make a closer inspection, but Vylaena knew curiosity would take hold and he inevitably would. Then he'd finally notice the black marks curving over her shoulder, the lines of silver at her ears, and her hair, bound in a thick plait around her head . . .

Blue-black hair, the color of a starless night.

*A Shadowheart.*

The man stiffened as he indeed took notice, but this revelation did nothing to slow his pace. He continued toward Vylaena, undeterred, stopping just outside her sword's reach.

She frowned. So he was one of the dangerous ones, after

all.

“You’re a long way from home,” the man spoke, with the barest touch of an Iedan accent—uncommon, this far south. He dusted road dirt from the front of his surcoat as he regarded her, his angled eyes cool and self-assured beneath the shade of black brows.

Vylaena held his gaze. “As are you. At least far enough for those shoes to bite.”

The man smiled—a closed-lipped twitch of the mouth. “I’ve come to purchase your services.”

Of course he had. No other reason to come this way.

“I don’t do that kind of work anymore,” Vylaena replied simply.

One of the man’s manicured eyebrows lifted. “Oh? Atoning for your sins in self-inflicted exile? Skin did say you had your quirks.”

Vylaena merely watched him, her face devoid of expression. She owed this stranger no explanation. But Skin—he knew better than to pester her without reason.

She gritted her teeth.

The man studied Vylaena a moment longer and then relaxed his stance, leaning into one hip—more at ease in her presence than she liked. “I’m offering six thousand lynd.”

Vylaena blinked, a rare betrayal of surprise. She hadn’t even earned *half* that when she’d taken out the old Elskan crime lord and his entire den of miscreants. This man was either stupid, stupidly rich, or . . .

Or the job was of an unusual variety. The type Vylaena’s

people were known to accept without question or remorse.

*Do you even know why we take those jobs?*

Vylaena took a slow breath. “I’m listening.”

The man’s grin deepened, his narrow lips stretching over crooked teeth. “I’m afraid my business is rather sensitive. Will you not invite me in?”

Vylaena paused a moment, looking him over. He was overly confident for a man of his stature—narrow-shouldered, lean, too short to be intimidating. And certainly too soft to be a warrior. While he might be smart with that little knife he wore, it was clear he’d never handled any real physical conflict.

It was almost disappointing. She’d not had a decent spar in months.

Vylaena stepped aside, retreating into the dim cottage to allow the stranger entry. He gave her half a nod and then strode confidently over the threshold, as if it were his own house he was entering.

*Cocky bastard.* She despised men like him.

It was not a large cottage; three steps took him to the center of the rush-strewn floor, occupied by a solid oak table marred with scratches from an overly sharp kitchen knife. He helped himself to one of the crude wooden stools and gave her a thin-lipped smile, folding his arms atop the worn surface.

“Quaint,” he said, grinning.

Vylaena didn’t claim the other seat. She wanted full access to the dagger at her hip, should the man prove a nuisance.

Instead, she leaned against the wall and crossed her arms, waiting.

“I come on behalf of my employer,” the man said finally, his smile fading, “who asks that you disrupt a caravan expected to make camp at the clearing to the northeast, just past the five-league mark. It’s due tomorrow evening.”

“Disrupt?”

The man nodded, his teeth flashing as the edge of a dark smile escaped his control. “No one is to be left alive.”

Vylaena was as still as the stone at her back, though a private, seething rage began to boil in her stomach. *Of course.* She should have expected that, with such a bounty . . .

“I do escorts and courier work now, not savagery,” she snapped. “Skin should have made that perfectly clear. Find a proper assassin to do your butchering—city’s full of them.”

The stranger’s fingers clenched upon the table; his lips tightened. “A word of caution. Rejecting this offer might be riskier than taking it.”

Vylaena’s hand was already on her hilt. “You’ve a bad sense for risk, to threaten a Shadowheart.”

The man hesitated, holding Vylaena’s gaze as the air hardened around them. She watched him swallow, his throat twitching, drawing her attention to one of the vital places on which he did *not* want her focus. Not while her dagger was half-drawn and there was steel in her eyes. Everyone knew the stories. The color of her hair should have been warning enough. A *rich fool*. Goddesses knew she’d encountered far too many of those in her life.

The stranger glanced away, finally breaking their contact. He allowed his fists to loosen, unfurling his fingers one by one, a deliberate effort to civilize his rage. He smoothed the front of his tunic and when he finally raised his eyes to hers again, she saw nothing more there than mild disinterest.

“I do know better than to threaten a Shadowheart,” he conceded, “but I warn you—my employer will not be pleased.” He eyed her, brow furrowed. “I will give you until midnight to reconsider. Send word to Skin at the Deeps; he’ll get the message to me. But after that . . .” He straightened to standing, giving her a careless shrug. “After that, you’re on your own.”

Vylaena watched, hand still resting on her dagger, as the man stalked past her and out the door, retreating toward the forest path. The creak of the front gate sounded behind him and then all was silent.

Vylaena waited until the throbbing at her heels was little more than a whisper of discomfort before turning, slamming the front door shut. The windows rattled an offended protest in their frames.

*Ridiculous*, she thought. Skin must’ve put him up to this, trying to draw her out of her . . .

Well. She supposed it *was* a sort of self-inflicted exile. Though that hadn’t been her intention.

She meandered over to the window seat and fell onto the patched cushions, plucking a few notes on the wooden lute resting there. It was one of the first things she’d bought after moving into the forest cottage, even before she’d built

a proper bed. Entirely impractical and entirely unlike her, nevertheless she'd made a study of the instrument during the long silences of her life. Music—*ah*. If only she were any good. It took the edge off the weariness that had plagued her for the better part of these last seven years.

Not all pain was physical.

A heavy shadow rippled across the open back door and Vylaena stiffened, abandoning her idle plucking. The soft notes died in midair as her hand flew back to her dagger, the cold metal biting her palm. But she forced her breathing to slow, relinquishing her hold on the weapon as she rose to her feet. Reaching for the hilt had been habit, not conscious thought, and against *them* it would be little use.

Vylaena crept to the back door, dread pooling at the base of her gut. It was full noon, but that hadn't stopped them before. She stepped silently across the threshold, out into the clear light of summer, and glanced into the thick track of trees lining her homestead. Their wrinkled boughs, heavy with greenery, sank beneath the weight of the humid air.

Nothing.

She turned north, gazing past her modest vegetable garden and the thigh-high wattle fence that enclosed her property, slate eyes scrutinizing the forest beyond. Even beneath the brilliant light of a clear summer's day, the shadows beneath the ancient trees were so thick they seemed tangible.

Two eyes, glowing a sharp, ethereal blue, stared back at her.

Vylaena froze, picking out a familiar outline hovering between two briar bushes, the creature's stare pinning her in place. It appeared to be made of midnight—its faintly furry hide was so dark it made the shadows between the trees appear pale by comparison. The thing was as large as an ethermare and likely twice as fast, but Vylaena knew its size and speed had no bearing on how quickly it could kill her. It didn't matter. Not with this creature. One errant thought, and she was done.

The beast smiled at her, flashing fangs like glimmering stars, startling against the unholy darkness of its body.

“No,” Vylaena whispered, dread and anger tangling in her throat, marring her voice. “She can’t have me.”

The creature stared at her long enough for Vylaena to consider the dagger again. But then it backed up and inclined its head—the bow of servant to master—as if promising to return the moment she changed her mind. She didn't know whether it had understood her choked protest or whether it had just read the conviction in her heart, but Vylaena watched, holding her breath, until it melted back into the matted underbrush and was gone.