

SCALECHASER

*Scalechaser*

A. R. Stonecypher

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# SCALECHASER

Wish Wielder Bonds: Book 1

A. R. Stonecypher

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# LEIDONA



Draekona

LEIDONA

Erivan Port

Dasia Bay

Keep Vyston

Gralland

Eidon City

Swiftden

AHZUREN SEA

Mikkannah

New Solenvale

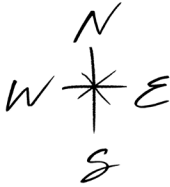
Bane's Barrier

Renala

AEVELLI MOUNTAINS

Jacoban's Temple

Solenvale



# Prologue



Murmurs swarmed around Gage. He couldn't see where the voices originated, and perhaps he never would. Sightless, he stared straight ahead with eyes that hadn't worked since he was a child. He had given his wish; now he needed to wait and see if anyone would grant it.

Gage was already on his knees from presenting his plea. Desperately, he dropped his head into a bow. He wasn't too proud to beg for their favor.

If the volume of murmurs was any indication, the assembly contained at least a few dozen people. Not one of them addressed him. A trickle of sweat formed on his brow. Too much time had passed.

*I wasn't convincing enough. They're going to force me to leave Bane's Barrier with nothing to show for it.*

Gage's hand twitched, knowing what would become of him if he failed here. Manacles, cold and chafing, would carve scars into his wrists. Every crack of a whip would make him flinch, whether it was aimed at him or not.

That couldn't happen.

Gage clenched his fists. This wish would define him. He couldn't let them deny it.

Straightening his shoulders, he rose to his feet, but the smooth sole of his thin leather shoe caught on the ragged hem of his oversized trousers. He stumbled, regaining his footing, and maintained some dignity by glaring in the direction of the murmurs.

"I know you don't grant wishes lightly," he said loudly, firmly. There wasn't any doubt in his decision. "I accept what it means to be a wish

wielder. Grant my request, and when I have magic, you won't have to wonder if you made the right decision. I swear, I'll serve you however you see fit."

The murmuring voices fell silent. Hopefully that meant they were considering him.

Gage kept his back stiff. Wavering wasn't an option. He meant what he'd said. This was the life he wanted.

No one spoke. His breath was loud in his ears, but the people around him were so quiet he nearly believed they had all disappeared.

And then a voice, feminine and assertive, reverberated around the room. "I'll do it."

Gage's pulse skipped as his head whipped toward the person who had spoken. Was she serious? He pressed his lips together, holding back a smile. Struggling to maintain his composure, he inhaled a long, slow breath.

The whirl of mutters rose again, only this time, it wasn't directed at him.

The stern voice of an elderly gentleman rose above the others. "Sit down, girl. You are too young to grant a wish."

Despair tangled around Gage like a weed, shrouding his triumph. He finally had someone willing to help, and she was too young? Maker, give him mercy.

*She doesn't sound all that young.*

If he had to guess, he'd say she was around his age—fifteen, maybe a little older—but voices could be tricky to judge.

"If I'm old enough to be here, then I'm old enough to grant a wish," she said, her tone rising in defiance.

Like most people in the room, she had an accent that curled around each word like a melodic hum. Her voice was deep, almost husky. It was warm and inviting, like the sound of music around a crackling campfire.

"She's right," another girl chimed in, and her voice was so similar to the first girl's, it was difficult to tell them apart. "You can't deny her this opportunity."

The elder grumbled loud enough to be heard. "Children, the both of you! You have been listening to petitions for less than a month. You can't just accept the first person who gives a pretty speech."

"Oh, please. You might still be listening to petitions after fifty years, but that doesn't mean we have any desire to wait that long. Go on, sis, grant his wish."

Shallow breaths escaped Gage's lungs. He waited and listened for anyone else to object, but all he heard was the fierce pounding of his heart.

Boots tapped gently against the stone tile floor as someone made their way toward him. The footsteps were light and slow, not demanding in any way, but they held him captive nonetheless.

The measured gait stopped directly in front of him. He held his breath, wishing he could gaze upon his savior.

"You said your name was Gage? Gage Aymeris?" The girl spoke so calmly it made him wonder if she could read the anticipation on his face.

He nodded.

"I'm W . . . Whitetail," she whispered, as if she was too nervous to speak any louder.

Heat from Whitetail's warm body drifted toward him as she leaned in close. "Are you certain about this, Aymeris?" she continued whispering in his ear. "You do know what we are, right? You know how we're cursed?"

"It's Gage," he said quickly, then nodded again. "But yes, I know." His heart wouldn't stop hammering against his chest.

"If I grant you this, there is no turning back," she warned. "You'll have your wish, I'll be permitted to cross Bane's Barrier, and we will be connected for the rest of our lives. But you can only be granted a single request. There is no changing anything if it turns out the magic you're allotted isn't what you hoped. Are you certain your wish is worth it?"

It was the easiest question she could have asked. "Absolutely."

"All right, then."

"Hurry up, girl! There is still a line of petitioners here to request a wish," the elder yelled.

Whitetail took a deep breath, and it came out shaky. "Ready?" she asked.

"Are you?"

She released a strained sigh. "I'm risking everything by putting my fate in the hands of someone I don't even know. It might be the dumbest thing I'll ever do."

"You're right," he said earnestly. "You don't know me, but you can trust me. I won't let anything bad happen to you. I promise." He didn't know how else to tell her he was entirely dedicated to this decision, so he just stared at her—or in the direction of her voice—hoping his gaze conveyed more than his words could.



“I . . . I don’t . . .” She shifted in front of him, then cleared her throat. When she spoke again, her tone was firmer. “Thank you.”

“What do I need to do?” he asked.

She lifted his hand from his side and placed a smooth small object in his palm. It was about half the size of his little finger. “Hold this tight, and don’t drop it, no matter what.”

“What is it?”

Her response was quicker this time. “A rukasai crystal: liquid magic that has turned solid.”

He gripped the crystal tight, and Whitetail cupped her palms around his fist.

“Now listen,” she ordered. She pulled his fist toward her chest and lowered her head until her nose brushed against the backs of his fingers. Words fell out of her mouth in reverent prayer. “Father Jacovan, hear my plea, and I will surrender all rights to my sanity. You heard his wish, now make it so, for to his land I long to go. By your will, we shall be bound, joined with your Siren, no earthly sound.”

Her low rhythmic voice repeated the stanza again and again until the words flowed into a song. Then the words morphed, slowly transforming into something completely unrecognizable. “*Jacovan, Kejha, li jhel bin solee. Tim naejhin li zhorin l’dri jaree nizha yavins sol luzhee.*”

Her pitch rose and fell, creating the most beautiful sounds Gage had ever heard. Her voice filled his head, blocking out every thought until he mentally sang along with the foreign words. It became a symphony in his mind. Hypnotic. The song entered his ears, swam around his thoughts, and then stretched straight down to his soul. It made him feel warm and content.

That warmth started in his chest. It flowed out to his fingers and down to his toes. Tiny pricks formed in his hands, then trickled toward his feet as if he were being lightly prodded with a needle. The heat coursing through him grew in intensity, and the crystal in his hand became uncomfortably hot. More than hot.

It burned his skin, making him scream like he had plucked a lump of coal straight out of a flame. He tried to pull away from Whitetail, but she held him tight as she continued to whisper her songlike prayer.

He brought his opposite hand up and tried to push her away, but she remained as still as stone. His legs trembled. The heat from the crystal seemed to be radiating into his entire body. Even his feet ached as if blisters were boiling over them, and they no longer agreed to support his

weight. As he fell to the ground, his hand ripped away from Whitetail's, and her prayer ceased.

Unable to stop himself, he wept at her feet.

"I'm sorry." Her tone was stiff, but her fingers trembled as she gently touched the back of his head. "I'm sorry. It's complete."

Two people came and hauled Gage to his feet. He struggled weakly to keep them away but soon realized the burning sensation had vanished. His thoughts remained muddled, both from his aching body and the hypnotic prayer still ringing in his head.

"S-stop," he said. Somehow, he thought he heard the rhythm of the prayer mixed in with the word.

Both people holding him spoke, but only Whitetail got through to him. "It's all right. I can take him."

She wrapped an arm around his back and placed a hand on his chest to steady him. Soft fur from the pelt of some unknown animal pressed against Gage's skin as he draped his arm over her shoulders, but his legs stopped shaking, so he was sure he could move without much help.

"I'll bring you somewhere to rest," she explained.

Why was that music still playing in his head? It was as if she continued to sing.

She directed him to the left, opposite his initial entrance. His fingers were still clamped tight around the crystal, but with a bit of effort, he forced them open. It was still warm to the touch, but not unbearably so. He twisted the small object, surprised it hadn't seared through his skin.

"What do I do with this?" he asked.

"Keep it," she said. She paused, and when she spoke again, her words were clipped. "Don't lose it, no matter what."

"Of course," he said quickly, willing to accept any task she gave him. His voice was shaky, so he cleared his throat in an attempt to calm his nerves. "What's it do?"

"This crystal is the conduit for our merged souls. It proves our bonding worked."

"Our souls?" he asked, once again acknowledging its heat. "Our souls are inside this?"

He closed his fingers around it again. It was so small.

"Only a piece of them," she said.

Their footsteps grew louder, as if they had entered a small hallway. Gage's legs were still weak, and he stumbled as the floor's texture changed

from smooth tile to rough stone. Whitetail grunted as she helped him right his step.

“Do you feel ill?” she asked, sounding more polite than concerned. “I’ve heard soul bindings can drain your energy.”

“I’m fine,” he assured her, “only a little tired.”

She seemed to take him at his word and moved on to business. “When you’ve recovered, you’ll be given magic and brought to the Father’s Council, where they will give you your first task as a wish wielder.”

Gage’s thoughts were still slightly foggy from the music looping through his head. Even so, something didn’t sound right about her statement. “You say that like you’re not coming with me.”

“Well, I’m . . . not.” Her words were hesitant, like she thought he should have already known the answer. “It’s not required for my people and wish wielders to remain together after the bonding. In fact, most prefer to stay apart.”

*How bad could a life of bondage be if I never have to be around my partner?*

He scowled at the thought. “I’ve heard stories about Jacovan’s Heirs. Even if they’re bonded to someone, isn’t it still possible for the curse to overcome them?”

Whitetail’s hand clenched, digging into his side. Gage winced, and she quickly relaxed it.

“It might be easier for us to stay safe if we’re in frequent contact with our bondmate,” she admitted, “but it isn’t a necessity. As long as I stay out of danger, I’ll be all right. Don’t worry. My curse is nothing you need to be concerned about.”

Gage rocked to a stop, and his fingers wrapped around the thick leather and fur of her attire as he turned her to face him. “Whitetail, I promised nothing bad would happen to you. Those weren’t just words. You’re giving me my eyes back. Without them, I’m nothing. Don’t worry about being a burden. I said it before: I’ll serve you however you see fit. My life is yours.”

The air was thick, and it wasn’t until she wiggled out of his grip that he realized he’d been squeezing her shoulder.

“Are you always this intense?” she asked. She didn’t sound angry. If anything, she almost sounded calculating.

Gage leaned away from her and scratched the back of his head. “Uh, yeah. Sorry.”

She let those words settle around them, then turned and walked a little farther. A door swayed open with a subtle creak. “You can rest in this room. Someone will be along in a few hours to take you to the Father’s Council.”

“Right,” he said, withdrawn, knowing he had let his emotions get the better of him again.

Whitetail led him inside to a small cot. “I hope you enjoy your new life surrounded by magic, wish wielder.”

As she said it, dread washed over him, and he feared they’d never meet again.

“Hey, Whitetail?” he said before she could leave. He wanted his parting words to convey the depth of his gratitude. He wanted to promise he’d work hard to earn his wish and be the bondmate she needed him to be. He wanted to tell her a lot of things, but in the end, all he said was, “Thank you.”

Her footsteps trailed away, and the hauntingly beautiful song faded with her.

# Chapter 1



*There isn't a threat. There isn't any danger.*

That would've been much easier to believe if every nerve in Whitetail's body weren't screaming at her to either fight or flee.

She took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. She opened her eyes and peered over the edge of the small cliff to see a trail of large-padded beast tracks. The prints were pressed so plainly into the snow it was as if the creature wanted her to find them. The perfect path led straight to a vast cave carved into the mountainside.

Whitetail's hands shook. She didn't want to do this—part of her didn't even think she could.

Her sister's words bounced around her head. *Promise me, Whitetail. If it ever comes to the point where the beast has to die, promise me you'll be the one to put it down.*

Whitetail had held off hunting the jacobeast for as long as possible. Now she had no choice. There were already teams of slayers scouring the Aevelli Mountains. Some had even found it, but so far, none had survived the attack.

The beast was still alive, but there were too many slayers around for Whitetail to believe it would survive much longer. If she hadn't been visiting Hayden at the slayer's guild in New Solenvale when rumors of the beast arose, she might not have even arrived in time to fulfill her sister's wish before someone else beat her to it.

“*Seis’ka*, Willowsong,” she muttered, cursing her sister. “What were you thinking, *kedrane*?”

She shifted the spear in her hands and thought about her sister’s snow-covered camp. She hadn’t known it belonged to her sister initially—she had simply gone to investigate the site—but when she saw her sister’s belongings scattered around, the truth had been undeniable. The camp had been ravaged. A massive amount of blood coated the scene, but Willowsong’s body was nowhere to be found.

Whitetail clenched her jaw. What was her sister doing so far away from their home? And why now? There were deadly creatures all over the mountains this time of year. Willowsong should never have decided to climb them, especially not alone. If she had waited, or at least gone with a group, Whitetail might not have needed to go on a suicide quest for vengeance. No, *vengeance* wasn’t the right word—more like *responsibility*.

A river of calm flowed through Whitetail, easing her fear and anger. She recognized the magic and welcomed it with a sigh of relief. Silently, she thanked Hayden. Sometimes it was nice being friends with a wish wielder who was capable of giving support even when she wasn’t within sight.

“Should’ve known you’d be the first to find it,” a deep voice said over Whitetail’s shoulder.

Whitetail jumped, turning in surprise and slashing her spear at the unexpected newcomer. The large man threw up his sword, knocking the spear aside.

“Easy! ’S only me.”

Whitetail’s joints locked in place as she took in the sight of the man before her. He had a dark complexion the color of wet sand. Black tattoos crested his cheekbones—long triangles falling like daggers beneath his eyes—and his body contained so much muscle someone could have easily confused him for a full-grown coral bear.

Recognition dawned on Whitetail, and she lowered her guard.

Captain Caizer was the leader of the crew of beast slayers Whitetail had recently joined to track down the jacobeast.

“I know Hayden said I would receive some help from your crew,” Whitetail said, resting her spear on her shoulder, “but I must admit, I expected more than one measly giant.”

She looked up at him. Whitetail wasn’t short by most standards, but she was sure the tunic under Caizer’s thick leather coat could have passed as a dress on her.

“ ‘Measly giant?’ ” he asked, as if he couldn’t believe she considered him inadequate.

“That’s what I said.” She grinned, trying to keep her nerves down. “Would you like me to yell next time so my voice can reach you all the way up there?”

Caizer’s booming laugh shook the air. “No need to strain yourself. Didn’t know any of Jacovan’s Heirs knew how to make a joke. Thought you all tried to stay quiet and blend in with society.”

“Where’s the fun in that? If I wished to blend in, I would have stayed in Solenvale.”

Caizer smirked. “Guess that’s true.”

His eyes grew stern as he scrutinized her, and Whitetail did what she could to look composed so he wouldn’t doubt she could help complete this assignment. Eventually, he looked away.

“Don’t need to worry. We’ll kill this thing. I got backup.”

Whitetail tried to ignore the lump forming in her throat.

“Where?” she asked. There was nothing but rock and snow behind him.

“Split up for the search. Brought the whole crew, but only a few’ll prob’ly be close enough to help fight.”

He took a small bag from his belt and laid it on the ground before lighting it with a flint rock. The bag smoldered, expelling a thick stream of smoke. Black clouds rose high in the air, marking their location to everyone scouring the area.

An eager smile grew on his face, causing the symbols under his eyes to warp. “Let’s go kill a jacobeast.”

“Now?” Whitetail’s eyes darted to the cave, and her heart lurched. “Shouldn’t we wait for the others?”

Caizer gripped his sword tight and pointed it at the cave. “They’ll be here. Best we attack now before it wakes up. Already wasted enough time, don’t you think?”

Without waiting for her to respond, he slid down the cliff. It was a gentle slope, but if he moved a dozen paces to either side he would have trouble finding a foothold. Various ridges and hills jutted away from the cliff, tapering down until they melded with the flat expanse in front of the cave. Only a few sparse spindly trees had found the strength to withstand the harsh climate. Mostly, the landscape was bare apart from the dark dirt and stone of the mountain poking through the glittering snow.

Whitetail stared at Caizer in disbelief as he crept toward the cave. All of the jacobebests she had seen were at least the size of a large warhorse. The two of them were likely to be killed if they attacked it on their own, even with the advantage of Caizer's bulk.

That thought didn't seem to hinder the captain, though.

Groaning in dismay, Whitetail followed. She couldn't let him go in there alone. This was *her* duty.

She caught up to Caizer and peered into the depths of the cave as they continued to stalk closer. The jacobebest's scaled body was curled around itself as it slept. Not much light entered the beast's domain, but with concentration, Whitetail could faintly make out the dark stripes patterned down the creature's back.

Her step faltered. The sight of the beast lifted the hair on her arms. Her hands quivered, and she adjusted her spear before it could slip from her grasp. She wasn't scared but also wasn't as confident as she should have been. The magic in her veins pulsed awake. Her pupils constricted, allowing her to see inside the cave as easily as if it were filled with lanterns.

The beast was there. The beast was a threat. It needed to die before it hurt her or anyone else.

*Kill the threat. Kill it now.*

Her magic drilled those thoughts into her head more forcefully with each step.

Again, Hayden sent out a soothing calm that washed through her. It didn't remove her need to fight, but her hands stopped shaking. She felt more in control. She could do this.

They were nearing the mouth of the cave when a deep growl resonated from within.

Caizer cursed. "Too slow."

They abandoned caution and took off in a sprint, but Caizer's extra weight allowed Whitetail to outmatch his speed. She ran past him, then skipped with practiced grace. Twisting her body in a fluid arc, she launched her spear toward the waking creature. It made contact high on the beast's rib cage.

A deafening roar filled the cave as the jacobebest thrust its body to the side, giving Whitetail her first full view of its grandeur. It was a massive feline, its head rising taller than Caizer's. Instead of fur, shining silver scales coated its body, and larger indigo scales lay in stripes along its back.



It was as deadly as she had imagined yet more beautiful than anything she could have fathomed.

Caizer continued to run even after Whitetail had thrown her spear. He barreled toward the massive beast, unflinching when it swiped its claws through the air. After ducking low to avoid a slash across the chest, he jabbed his sword forward and continued to run, slicing a deep gash up its leg. The jacobeast's responding roar echoed off the rock walls with a reverberation Whitetail felt through the soles of her boots.

The beast snapped its teeth at Caizer, but he twisted his blade up, striking it across the snout. It jerked its head back, allowing Caizer enough time to run around to its opposite side and out of Whitetail's sight.

Whitetail hurried to help Caizer, but the creature was now thrashing so ferociously that the cave walls had become too small to hold three quarreling beings. Whitetail pressed her body against the rock but couldn't prevent the feline's thick tail from whipping against her hip. Her knees buckled, and she fell violently, scraping her chin against the ground.

With a wince, she swiveled her head. The jacobeast's torso rose directly above her. Silver-scaled paws descended in a blink, and all she could do was pray they didn't land on anything vital.

A large shadow jumped between her and the beast. The man grunted as the feline's paws struck his back. Sharp claws ripped through his coat, and he groaned as they tore through skin as well. He threw his hands against the wall as the pressure drove him toward the ground, but unlike Whitetail, he kept his footing.

"Get out of here!" he yelled.

She didn't need to be told twice. Rising, she found her footing and sprinted toward the entrance. The man's footsteps echoed close behind her. She tried not to slow her pace as she shot back into the bright light, squinting. The snow was thick on the ground, and she stumbled. Before she could fall, a rough hand yanked her arm and pulled her to the side. She crashed to safety behind a pile of boulders.

She heaved to catch her breath, then glanced up to make sure her savior was all right. The slayer beside her wasn't quite as burly as Captain Caizer, but he was still impressive, especially considering he looked old enough to be her grandfather.

Malbaen, the oldest member of Caizer's crew, glowered down at her.

“You’re that cursebringer,” he spat as if he hadn’t recognized her while inside the cave. Unlike her, he didn’t have magic to help him see in the dark. “I should have let that thing kill you.”

Whitetail glared back at the menace in his voice.

Thick streams of blood dripped down the back of Malbaen’s coat, and he rolled his shoulders, grimacing with the motion. “What are you even doing here? You’re going to get us all killed!”

Whitetail was both angry at his hostility and still on edge from the fight, so her reply held a challenge. “I have more right to be here than you do.”

He started to argue but was interrupted when the jacobeast burst out of the cave.

Whitetail froze, unsure what to do next. She clenched her fists and tried to ignore her racing heart.

“Get its legs!” Malbaen yelled.

She frowned, considering she no longer had a weapon. Before she could do more than briefly wonder at the impossibility of his command, there was a click and a low whistle. An instant later, a crossbow bolt hit the beast’s left rear leg. Whitetail retraced the bolt’s trajectory, and her gaze settled on two other members of Caizer’s crew.

A tall, thin man with broad shoulders—she thought his name was Jaxlin—stood holding a spear similar to her own. Next to him, Hayden Briston, Whitetail’s closest friend in Leidona, reloaded her crossbow. Hayden quickly finished and took aim again.

From the corner of her eye, Whitetail saw a dark shape hurtle out of the cave and spring toward the beast from behind.

“Wait!” she yelled, but Hayden didn’t see Caizer in time.

The crossbow clicked a moment before he landed on the beast’s back. The jacobeast lurched as Caizer wrapped his arms around its neck, causing the bolt to tear through his arm instead. The captain’s thunderous cry filled the air. With only one arm remaining around the beast’s smooth neck, he was left mainly clutching his mount with the strength of his legs. He must have lost his sword inside the cave because it was nowhere in sight.

The jacobeast bucked to dislodge its unwelcome passenger. Caizer rose an inch off his seat, then drove his knees into the beast’s sides and wrapped both arms around its neck, refusing to be uprooted.

“He’s gone senseless,” Whitetail said, eyes wide.

Malbaen reached to his belt and pulled out a long metal chain with sharp barbs on the end. While retaining one end of the chain in his hand,

he threw the other end at the feline's leg. As the chain stretched toward the jacobeast, he whipped the metal links so the barbs snapped forward, scratching its scales directly below the initial bolt Hayden had shot. The jacobeast snarled and jumped away from the chain.

Hayden squealed when Caizer nearly fell off the beast's back, but his foot landed on Whitetail's spear, which still protruded from its rib cage. He used the shaft to propel himself back into position. The force of his weight caused the spear to lose its leverage and tumble down, landing in a heap of snow.

The jacobeast writhed to be free of Caizer's hold. Malbaen threw his chain again, and this time its barbs tore across the beast's face. The creature jerked back, and Hayden shot another bolt. Her aim was precise, piercing the jacobeast behind the ear. The beast flailed its head, and a massive paw brushed against the wound, smearing a thick streak of blood across its neck and jaw.

Whitetail's chest convulsed with a pang of horror, and part of her wanted to run forward and shield the beautiful beast from its attackers. However, the magic inside her demanded she eliminate the monster. The quarreling desires ripped her in two, freezing her in place.

A guttural growl rose in the beast's throat while its bladelike claws dug into the ground. The feline's muscles were taut, and it bent its legs in a fierce defensive stance.

Malbaen cursed while everyone else yelled at Caizer to dismount. They all knew what that stance meant, but Caizer couldn't seem to hear the warning.

"Captain!" Malbaen yelled.

His footfalls were heavy as he ran to the side, swinging his chain again. Instead of hitting the jacobeast, the barbs dug into Caizer's shoulders, and Malbaen yanked on the chain. Caizer howled as the barbs tore through his flesh, and then Malbaen pulled with a might the captain couldn't withstand.

The jacobeast roared as Caizer was ripped away from it. His body crashed to the ground, and the indigo scales striping the feline's back lifted, creating a shield of deadly spikes. If Malbaen had been a second later, Caizer would've had worse injuries than those he'd acquired from the chain.

The bone-jarring roar snapped Whitetail out of her stupor. She had to kill this threatening creature before it killed her or anyone else. Whitetail eyed her spear lying in the snow, and a quick plan formed in her mind. The beast's spikes now prevented them from approaching it without fear

of being impaled. Hayden had the range, but the spears would cause the most damage.

“Malbaen, get Caizer!” she called.

The jacobeast was more of a threat now than it had been before. A mix of adrenaline and magic caused not only her hands to shake but her entire body. Her rapid pulse crashed against her chest like a caged animal trying to break free. This fight needed to end soon. She wouldn’t be able to hold her magic back for much longer.

She turned to Hayden. “Focus on the exposed skin directly above the shoulder blades. Jaxlin, mirror me!”

Whitetail took off in a run, unsure if anyone would follow her directive. She hoped so; they didn’t have time to debate. With a yell, she circled the beast, waving her arms to draw its attention. She whooped and cawed, satisfied when its large eyes locked onto her.

The jacobeast crouched and shook its spiked body. It swiveled toward Whitetail, exposing its back to the rest of the crew. The click of Hayden’s crossbow rang out. Despite how sharp the scales on its back were, when they lifted in the air, the skin they had been covering was left unprotected. The jacobeast roared as the bolt drove into its back.

Whitetail was already darting toward the beast. She slid in the snow as she reached her fallen spear, then scooped it up and jumped back to her feet.

Hayden was quick on the draw and shot her crossbow once again. The mighty feline lurched, rising onto its hind legs. Its back twitched and arched in an automatic reaction to the bolt’s penetrating sting.

The scales on its stomach were neither spiked nor as durable as the armor covering the rest of its body, so Whitetail rushed to stand directly under the beast. Once in position, she barely had time to register Jaxlin taking a stance beside her. The jacobeast dropped back down, and she hugged her wooden shaft tight, bracing it against the ground.

The feline released a wounded screech as the two spears rammed into its chest. Whitetail’s whole body jerked from the impact. With a sharp splintering crack, her spear snapped in two. The beast’s immense weight pressed down on her, knocking her to the ground.

A whimper rose in the feline’s throat as it twitched, struggling to move. Snow sloshed and crunched as it pawed the ground, no longer capable of rising to its feet.

Whitetail squirmed to get out from under the crushing weight, and panic rose within her. She could still feel a jittering of nerves as her magic

continued to surge through her veins. Any second, she might lose her grip on it.

Malbaen was right. She could kill everyone here.

Squeezing her eyes closed, she took a deep breath and tried to relax.

*Calm down. It's safe now. The fight is over.*

She told herself that again and again. When she was completely convinced the danger had passed, her pulse fell into a steadier rhythm, and her magic stopped trying to force its way out.

“Whitetail!” Hayden’s voice was muffled as she called from the other side of the beast.

“We’re all right,” Whitetail replied through gritted teeth, continuing to wriggle. Jaxlin was beside her, shoving against the smooth scales as well.

The creature shifted slightly as the others came to lend their aid. As they pushed against their quarry, the silver scales started to fall off the jacobeast’s body. They fell slowly at first, losing their hold on the creature’s flesh one at a time. Then more fell, and more, until a shower of scales rained all around.

An agonized yelp sounded from the beast, and its suffocating weight gradually disappeared. The feline’s figure morphed and shrank until it no longer resembled the deadly monster they had fought. When the pressure was gone altogether, Whitetail sucked in a deep breath, then sat up to see a young woman lying in the snow.

The woman was naked apart from being half covered in the glistening fallen scales, making it easy to decipher the various prayers to Jacovan tattooed all around her body in white ink. Jaxlin’s spear had gotten lost in the sea of silver and blue during her transition, but Whitetail’s spear, splintered and broken, still rose out of her chest.

A cold grip squeezed Whitetail’s heart when she noticed the woman staring at her with wide scared eyes. They weren’t the eyes of a human, nor were they the eyes of a beast. Instead, they were a mix of the two: normal green irises accompanied by thin vertical pupils. Those eyes were the mark given to every Solenvian, every Heir of Jacovan, so others would know of the beast they carried within them. And these slitted green eyes were as familiar to Whitetail as her own.

“Willowsong,” she murmured. When the defensive magic drumming within her finally fell dormant once again, the reality of what she had done slammed into her. “Willowsong!”

Whitetail lurched toward her dying sister, flinging snow and scales in every direction. She tried to put pressure on the worst of the wounds.

She'd never wanted to kill the beast, had never wanted to attack her sister. If she'd had her way, she would have tracked Willowsong's bondmate down to reverse the transition, but she'd found out too late. Willowsong's jacobeast had already killed a number of innocents. No slayer would stall their hunt for her sake. They didn't know her, and people were dead. If Whitetail had wanted any chance to see her sister again, she had no choice but to join their pursuit.

"Just wait, Willowsong! You are yourself again. You're going to be fine." She tore off her coat and wadded it into a ball to absorb as much blood as possible. She blinked rapidly to hold back the tears stinging her eyes, but no matter how many times she blinked, there were always more to take their place. "Somebody, help me! We have to take her to a healer!"

"You can't move her, kitten," Hayden said gently from close behind her. "It'll only kill her faster."

Whitetail shook her head frantically. There had to be something she could do.

Willowsong's lips moved, and Whitetail had to put her ear right next to them to hear. Even then, her voice was so soft it was hard to make out more than a few words here and there. "Jaklings attacked . . . Then my curse . . ."

Whitetail flinched as she thought of the packs of tusked canines that roamed these mountains. It would have been impossible for her sister to hold back the jacobeast if such a threat came upon her while she was alone. Whitetail pressed her forehead against Willowsong's and continued to blink. "Shh, shh. I know what happened."

"You came . . ."

"Of course I did." Whitetail stroked her sister's cheeks. "I promised I would."

Willowsong's eyes were glossy. "I broke . . . bond."

"Hush. You need to save your energy."

Willowsong took a quavering breath. "I'm dying," she whispered, the words clearer than anything else she had said.

Whitetail's cry hitched in her chest. Willowsong wasn't a fool.

"Whi . . . *Merra so . . . jav li zhorin?*"

Whitetail pulled back, meeting her sister's gaze, which had finally come into focus. She knew what Willowsong was asking, and she refused with

another shake of her head. She didn't want to say the words Willowsong wanted to hear. Doing so would mean accepting her sister couldn't be saved.

Willowsong winced, betrayal clear on her newly scarred face. Whitetail was dishonoring her in her final moments. Then, worse than the betrayal, Willowsong closed her eyes in acceptance, like she believed Whitetail was right to deny her this. In a flash, guilt smothered Whitetail's grief.

"*Assi! Assi!*" Whitetail rushed to assure her sister. "I will do as you wish." She was willing to do anything to put Willowsong at ease.

With all the strength her body possessed, Whitetail smiled. It was a one-sided smile that didn't reach her eyes, but it was the best she could do. "*Seis'ka*, sis, you're the most majestic feline I've ever seen."

She rubbed a thumb across Willowsong's neck, where a line of tribal symbols were tattooed. *Aevellis a'lazha orro maelith*: beasts of beauty and death. It was the adage of their clan, and Willowsong was living up to the truth of those words now.

Whitetail's smile faltered. "I'm so sorry. Whatever it was, whatever I did to make you hate me, please forgive me—"

A pained look crossed Willowsong's face, bringing Whitetail up short. Her lips were trembling again, but this time, no sound came out.

Whitetail had to swallow before she could shove her regrets aside and start anew. "I grant you my blessing and the blessing of our family. You are free now from the curse of Jacovan's Beast. *Meilon sol zhorin orro sovinna pri neq veladazhi*." She ended with the same words their clans matriarch had always said when blessing the departed.

They had known when they left their homeland that this was the fate that might befall them. They had known what Jacovan's curse could do to them. They had known, but knowing didn't make this any easier.

Willowsong let out a grateful sigh and opened her eyes.

Whitetail held her sister's gaze for as long as possible. Even on the brink of death, her eyes were an impossibly vibrant green. They were eyes so similar to Whitetail's, they could have passed as her own. And as Whitetail stared into them now, she almost believed it was her own life slipping away.

## Chapter 2



The sun was low in the sky, casting a yellow glow over the city. It made everything appear to have been dipped in gold. Gage couldn't have chosen a better time of day to have his sight back.

The city itself wasn't anything spectacular. The wood buildings had mostly rotted away or were in shambles, sprawled across the earth. Keep Vyston had an empty, abandoned look that warned off any who might want to trespass. Nature had long since claimed the regal structure as its own. Large vines, webs, and nests now called the ruins home. Most of the top half of the building was missing, destroyed by some unknown beast years ago. The surrounding area seemed to have been deserted ever since.

Despite the fact Gage felt like he was looking at a graveyard, he couldn't stop himself from gazing in awe. The sun painted everything in such brilliance; it made the city look anything but decrepit.

Jacovan's song crept into his thoughts at the sight. It was the tune he had heard during his bonding, when Whitetail had whispered her melodic prayer. Gage thought about it often, but for some reason, as he looked over this beautiful ruined city, the song was so loud in his head, it was as if Whitetail were standing beside him singing. It made him want to hold on to this view so he could remember it for all eternity.

"Well, what do you see?" a harsh voice asked from somewhere in front of Gage.



*Everything*, Gage thought, but he knew that wasn't what Ravenelle meant. He pushed the song and landscape to the back of his mind and returned to his task.

"There's a lot of wreckage," he said, then shook his head. "She hasn't found him yet."

"He better be here," Ravenelle grumbled.

"Are you doubting my skills?" Cole jeered to the right of Gage. "You wound me, Master Ravenelle. I've never led you wrong before."

The squad's overseer hmphed. A waft of air blew toward Gage as Ravenelle paced back and forth. "She needs to hurry up. The escort waiting to take him to Bane's Barrier won't wait in Eidon City for much longer."

They all knew that wasn't true—anyone sent by the Father's Council would wait for as long as necessary—but Gage wasn't about to contradict their leader.

Cole, however, didn't share his qualms. "What are you talking about? Of course they'll wait." He paused, then let out an abrasive snicker. "Oh, I get it. It's not about the escort. You just want to be back with your wife. Why the rush, Master? Not getting enough nightly cuddles on the road?"

He made exaggerated kissing noises, and Ravenelle didn't sound amused. "Wipe that look off your face and stand ready. We might need to move at any minute."

"Master's always antsy toward the end of an outing. He worries something's going to go wrong," Gage said, hoping to steer Cole away from trouble.

"That's because something usually does," Ravenelle murmured, not quite soft enough to go unheard. Louder, he said, "Aymeris, concentrate."

Gage turned his attention back to the golden ruins. He watched through Tally's eyes as she poked through the dilapidated buildings halfway across the city. She moved cautiously, evidently trying to be as quiet as possible to not startle the man she was tracking. Every step she took was slow, and she kept an eye on her feet as she tiptoed across the dirt. At this pace, Gage wouldn't have been surprised if she was trying to avoid every pebble in her path. If she didn't speed things up soon, they'd be lucky to catch the stray before the next full moon.

Gage couldn't blame her, though. She had only been a wish wielder for a few months, and never had she been this far away from the others. More than that, the man she hunted was older than her and quite a bit larger

despite being weak from lack of food and sleep. Tally was no threat to him, but he could be deadly to her, depending on how mentally stable he was.

The plan had been for Ravenelle to accompany her since his wish gave him the ability to help persuade the stray to come with them, but his identity had been compromised in the previous town when one of the king's knights identified him as a wish wielder. Since they preferred not to fight the man if they didn't have to, he'd decided to stay back for the initial pursuit.

Tally jumped, and then her whole body froze except for her head, which jerked to the side. Gage's shoulders tightened in response.

"What happened?" Ravenelle demanded.

"I don't know. I think she heard something."

"You *think*?" Ravenelle spat out the word like it tasted foul.

"I can see what's going on. I can't hear it," Gage shot back.

Tally looked at an old decayed building. Wood and brick lay in a heap. None of the walls still stood. As she stared, some of the wood gave way, and a part of the pile caved in on itself.

Tally crouched down and crept hesitantly toward it. She peered into its depths, trying to determine what lay beneath. There was a flash of color, and the pile shifted again. Something small and furry scampered out. It was a rodent the size of Gage's fist, with long ears and a ball of knotted fur as a tail.

Gage sighed in dismay. "It's a ruk."

"Maker's wrath! If she doesn't—"

"Wait. He's in there too."

Tally didn't move after the ruk scurried away, so she must have known that wasn't what she had heard. She tilted her head to the side, trying to see as far into the shadows as possible.

And there he was—sort of. The only thing visible was the tip of his boot, but it was definitely him. She inched her fingers forward.

*That's it. Nice and easy. Good girl.*

Her fingers barely brushed the dirt-coated black leather, and the shoe jerked back, disappearing into the shadows. That was fine. A single touch was all Tally needed. She pulled back slightly.

Gage smiled. "She made contact."

Ravenelle made a grunt of approval.

A soft light blurred the edge of Gage's vision, and he knew Tally had begun using magic. Rukasai's glow was always visible if the person hosting him used magic too.

Tally shifted, and Gage didn't have to hear her to know she was talking to the man. He could easily imagine the way her soft voice would try to convince him to trust her.

But it wouldn't be her voice the man heard. When someone looked at her, Tally could make them think they were seeing someone from their past. She simply needed to touch them first. Now she would look like a loved one or close friend—someone he would consider trustworthy.

"She's talking to him," Gage relayed, "and he's listening."

A hazel eye appeared in one of the shadows as the man shifted closer to her.

Gage and the two wish wielders beside him waited in tense silence as Tally tried to coax the man out of his hiding space.

While they waited for Tally to complete the job, Cole spoke up, apparently unable to keep quiet any longer. "You know, Master, I don't get how you can let your baby girl go out there all by herself. Aren't you afraid the stray will attack her or something? I mean, sure, your cover was blown, but you could have sent me or Gage with her."

"Taliana knows how to handle herself well enough. If I'd let you go, you'd have talked too much and scared the stray away before she had a chance to reach him," Ravenelle stated pragmatically. "And Aymeris is more important here at the moment."

*In other words, Gage thought, he wants me here by his side so he's not left in the dark about what's going on.* He said to Cole, "She's not alone. I'm watching everything she does. Now be quiet. Something's happening."

The man pushed a thin sheet of wood to the side, revealing a small tunnel he then crawled out of. When he was free of the debris, he stood, but his back and legs stayed bent. Either he was about to run or had been stuck in that cramped space for far too long.

Tally held her hand out, and he took a single shallow step toward her. Hope and fear welled in his eyes as he stretched shaking fingertips forward, then stopped. He blinked, brows pulling together in confusion. His expression hardened, and he yanked his hand away. Tally waved her fingers, continuing to beckon him closer, but he shook his head, lips moving in a silent rebuttal. He shuffled back toward his hole, then tripped over his feet and collided with the ground.

“Master . . .” Gage warned, but before he could say anything else, the man rolled to his hands and knees and sprung toward Tally, knocking her down. Tally squeezed her eyes shut, and Gage was lost to darkness for a few anxious seconds until she blinked them open again. The world blurred as tears swam in her eyes, and it took Gage another second to comprehend that now she was the one on the ground. The man was a dark shadow from where he stood looming over her, and Tally raised her arms above her head to block whatever trauma was coming her way. Her eyes slammed shut again.

“Speak, Aymeris,” Ravenelle commanded.

Gage unhinged his stiff jaw. “He’s . . .”

Tally lowered her hands and looked up. The man was gone. She lifted herself onto her elbows as he fled. He tripped over some debris, then scrambled, continuing to run.

“He’s running!” Gage exclaimed, and with that, the three men were on the move. “They’re by the chapel!” he yelled as they each took off on a different route to catch the fleeing wish wielder.

Gage reached up to pet the small creature clinging to his shoulder. “All right, Lavi, let’s do this,” he said.

Unfortunately, he had to take his eyes away from Tally. He hated leaving her completely alone, but he needed to see where he was going.

Gage blinked, and his vision changed. No longer was he sitting on the ground next to the stale wooden mass; instead, he was up and running past vermin-filled carcasses of old homes.

He sprinted hard, digging his feet into the ground to avoid tripping over loose rubble. After sidestepping a broken cart, he vaulted over some fallen barrels. A line of animal cages hung in his path. He ducked low, but the sharp movement threw Lavi off-balance. She skittered off his shoulder and had to weave her own route through the obstacles. Gage slowed in his trek but didn’t stop as she rushed to catch up. Her movements were swift as she sprung off the door of a cage, then shot through the air in her pursuit.

Golden light no longer coated the city. The sun had fallen behind the tree line, and everything was now tinged with a blue-gray color, making Gage feel like he was losing his sight.

He shook his head. Not yet. He still had to finish this job.

As he rounded a corner, Lavi scurried over the ground, then hastily jumped back up to his shoulder. Gage moved so fast he didn’t have a chance to see his surroundings and ran directly into a wall. A dull thud

echoed off the stone, and a spike of pain lanced through his nose as a warm wetness trickled down his mouth and chin.

Gage staggered, thrusting his palms forward to catch himself against the wall before the vertigo from his abrupt standstill caused him to topple. With a wince, he lightly touched the tip of his nose. It was tender, but he didn't think it was broken. Lavi nipped at his ear hard enough to sting. She was probably chastising him for not waiting for her to take the lead. He brushed her off.

"Who puts a wall in the middle of the street?" he complained.

As it turned out, it wasn't a wall but a building that had crashed to the ground. A shiver coursed down the length of his spine. Whatever monster had attacked this city, he was glad he hadn't been here when it'd happened.

Since his path was blocked, Gage had to backtrack and find another way. He sprinted down a side street, then turned to run between two buildings leaning on each other. This time, as he ran, he ensured Lavi remained fixed in place.

"Did you find him?" a voice echoed from an open alleyway, and Gage slowed to a stop, turning to find Cole jogging toward him.

Gage shook his head. "I haven't seen him. You?"

"I thought I had him trapped in a corner, but by the time I caught up to him, he disappea—what happened to you?"

"What do you mean?" Gage asked.

Cole gestured to the lower half of his face.

Gage rubbed his chin, hoping he got all the blood off. "Nothing."

An impish grin spread across Cole's face.

"What?"

"Did you run into a wall again?"

"I've never run into walls," Gage said defensively, but when his cheeks grew warm in embarrassment, he tacked on, "before."

"Gage, every time you try walking around without your stick, you wind up running into something. Sooner or later, it was going to be a—"

"Yeah, yeah. Make fun of me later. Where were you when the stray disappeared?"

The smile dropped from Cole's face. "This way." He led Gage to an area where a cluster of buildings met.

Gage held his hand out, allowing Lavi to run into his palm. "Okay, girl, let's see if you can find him."

Lavi curled into a ball, and Gage wrapped his fingers around her. He bent his knees to gather momentum, then launched her into the air as high as he could throw her. Once airborne, Lavi spread her limbs out wide. The wind caught on the loose skin connecting her arms to her legs, allowing her to glide through the air.

Gage saw the sprawling city from the sky. As Lavi swooped in a long arc, he thought she'd concentrate on the alleyways and hidden nooks, dark spaces where the man might have hunkered down. Instead, she noticed him shortly after taking flight. She drifted directly over the man's head, circling him twice. He wasn't on the ground like Gage had expected. He had climbed the slanted buildings and was eluding the grounded wish wielders from the rooftops. Currently, he was trying to reach a higher platform but was having difficulty finding a handhold.

Lavi dove back down to Gage, widening her arms and legs to slow her fall before landing atop his head.

"Follow me," Gage told Cole before taking off after their prey. They ran until they came to an old barn. "He's up here."

Gage searched the side of the building for anything to aid his ascent but found nothing within reach. He went to the next building and lifted himself onto a windowsill, then turned so he could jump up to a gaping hole in the side of the barn. His arms slammed into the wood, and he winced as giant splinters pierced his skin.

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?" Cole hissed in alarm.

Gage only grunted as he heaved himself up.

Lavi squirmed, struggling to remain in place. Her eyes narrowed on a groove in the wood, directing him to an area he could grab. Shifting his weight, Gage reached over to hold the groove for balance, then proceeded to wiggle up the wall. When he was high enough to hug the top of the roof with his arms and upper body, he clicked his tongue, indicating Lavi should look up.

She did, and she caught sight of the stray trying to climb over a mangled knot of warped lumber. The man was on the brink of securing a path for himself, but when he glanced back and saw Gage, he panicked, losing his balance on the unstable ground. The rotting wooden slats trembled and creaked as he fell to his knees.

Gage swung his legs, hiking them onto the roof, then groaned as Lavi dug her tiny claws into his scalp. He clenched his teeth from the pain and was grateful her miniature size prevented her from truly harming him.

Once he was able to rise to his feet, he bent over, breathing heavily, then shook out his arms, which were raw from the climb.

Cole was still berating him from down below. “Are you crazy? That roof’s going to cave in any minute!”

Gage waved at him. “Go find something we can use to bind him.” Then he turned back to the man on the other side of the roof.

The stray wish wielder was struggling to find a safe place to stand. Gage worked toward him slowly, making sure to stay on the sturdiest pieces of wood Lavi laid eyes on.

“We’re not coming with you!” the man called, maintaining a bowed posture as he fought to remain upright.

“You don’t have a choice.” Gage’s voice was calm. “The Father’s Council has summoned you back to Bane’s Barrier. There’s no point in trying to run.”

The stray shook his head, dirt flying out of the unwashed hair matted to his scalp.

“We c-can’t! We have to run! They’ll kill us if we come back with you! They won’t understand. They won’t listen!” His sunken eyes were so wide he looked like a raving madman.

“ ‘We?’ You mean you and your bondmate?” Gage asked patiently, hoping not to panic him further. “I think you need rukasai. If you don’t get any soon, you could die from the cravings. Believe me, my friends and I want everyone to walk out of this alive.”

“N-no! We can’t g-go with you,” the stray stammered hysterically. “We’re supposed to run.”

“You keep saying ‘we,’ but look around. Your bondmate’s not here. You’re the only one on the run.”

“You’re wrong! She is here! She’s always here.” He tapped his chest. “We can’t go with you. The Father’s Council will turn us into slaves. But we won’t go. We’ll n-never be slaves to anybody!”

Pity contorted Gage’s face. This poor man had lost sense of reality. He didn’t realize he was already a slave and that his life was being dictated by two masters: magic and the bond.

“When’s the last time you drank pure rukasai? I can give you some—magic that’s not been tampered with. It can make all of your cravings go away. All you have to do is follow me.” Gage held out his hand encouragingly.

The defiance on the man's face wavered. He looked like he was on the brink of accepting when a deep voice from below made him pause.

"Do you need help up there?" Ravenelle asked.

"No," Gage called back. "We're on our way down."

The stray glowered at Gage's assumption. "Rukasai take you all!"

"I don't think so." Gage reached to his belt and unlatched a small black flask. "You're not a slave?" he asked in a soft, daring tone. "Prove it."

He tossed the flask forward, and it landed halfway between them.

The man turned away from Gage. He put a hand on the twisted wood of the roof, preparing to continue slinking his way across. Then he paused, grumbling under his breath. His hand balled into a fist, and he pushed himself back, lunging for the flask. Gage jumped the instant the stray moved, and Lavi promptly dove away from them both. The man landed on the flask, and Gage crashed on top of him a split second later. The impact of their bodies simultaneously hitting the roof was too much, and it gave way beneath them.

As they fell through the air, Gage grabbed the man and pulled him to his chest. He tried to spin their bodies as they fell to minimize the damage and wound up landing on his left arm. A loud snap sounded, and a searing burn blazed up his shoulder. Gage screamed but locked his arms together, pinning the man's frail arms to his sides.

The flask had toppled somewhere out of reach.

Gage sucked in a sharp breath as the stray wish wielder thrashed against his arms. It was all he could do to keep them in one place as the restrained madman screeched, "You c-can't take us with you! We won't go! We won't!"

Running footsteps stormed through the barn.

"Hold him still!" Ravenelle ordered as he closed in on them.

Gage gasped as another jolt of pain shot up his arm. "Doing the best I can."

The world was a blur as the stray blinked, eyes darting rapidly while he continued his struggle. Gage grew dizzy as his magic forced him to witness the world through the flailing man's eyes. Ravenelle bent down to place a hand against their captive's chest, but had to take a step back when the man's thrashing doubled in intensity.

Mentally, Gage cursed. He needed a better hold but couldn't shift his hands. If he even slightly loosened his fingers, the stray would break free, and Gage would be helpless to stop him. Thinking quickly, he wrapped his



legs around the man's and turned his face to the side so the stray couldn't bash his head against Gage's already-swollen nose. The man still convulsed like a demon possessed him, but now Ravenelle could lean close without fearing a kick to the skull.

"Stop!" Ravenelle yelled, once again placing his hand on the man's chest.

Half a heartbeat later, everything froze. There were no muscle twitches. No screams. The man hardly even breathed. "You're going back to Bane's Barrier, and the Father's Council will decide how to help you. You aren't going to fight anymore."

Ravenelle stood up, and the man deflated. Gage knew it was safe to release him now, but he had trouble making his joints move. One at a time, he pried his fingers apart and unwrapped his legs. Then he rolled the man off of him, careful not to touch his broken left arm. Inhaling deeply, he allowed himself to lie there for a moment as his racing heart slowed.

The stray released a disquieting laugh, rolled toward Ravenelle and wept at his feet, then laughed again.

"You don't understand. You're all blind! All of you! My lady isn't just bound to me; she *is* me. And we want to run. You'll see. We'll be free. Yes, we will be free," the crazed man babbled.

Tally bent down to help Gage to his feet, and the touch allowed him to see through her eyes once again. She glanced cautiously at the stray.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked, shifting until Gage and Ravenelle stood between her and their captive.

Gage ground his teeth, unable to answer through the pain in his arm.

"It's called souljacking," Ravenelle said. "It happens when someone doesn't set boundaries once they've tied their soul to another person. They leave themselves vulnerable for their bondmate to manipulate their mind. Sometimes, it reaches the point they lose all sense of themselves and are only able to think and feel what their partner wants them to."

"It's disgusting," Gage hissed through tight lips.

"I didn't know something like that was possible," Tally whispered, and the note of fear behind her words was unmistakable.

"It's rare," Ravenelle assured her. "but you should still be cautious, especially if you ever decide to meet your bondmate face-to-face."

Tally swallowed audibly, then nodded as if to say she understood.

Cole dashed up to the group holding a long rope. “Aw, man, did I miss the fight?”

“There wasn’t a fight,” Ravenelle said. He hauled the laughing man to his feet and shoved him toward Cole. “Bind his hands and leash him so he doesn’t try to run off a cliff or something. Hurry up. I’m ready to be home.”

## Solenvian Terminology

*Aevellis a'lazha orro maelith.*—Beasts of beauty and death.

*Assi! Assi!*—All right! All right!

*Jacovan, Kejha, li jhel bin solee. Tim naejhin li zhorin l'dri jaree nizha yavins sol luzhee.*—Jacovan, Father, my fate is yours. Now bind my soul to the person who hears your song.

*Kedrane.*—Sister.

*Meilon sol zhorin orro sovinna pri neq veladazhi.*—Relax your soul and soar with our ancestors.

*Merra so . . . jav li zhorin?*—Will you . . . save my soul?

*Seis'ka.*—Curse the mighty. Often used derogatively toward Jacovan, sometimes used as an offhanded comment.