

RIVERWING

Wish Wielder Bonds: Book 2

A. R. Stonecypher

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LEIDONA



Draekona

Evian Port

Dasia Bay

Keep Vyston

Gralland

Eidon City

Swiftden

Miikannah

Doranvan

AHZUREN SEA

New Solenvale

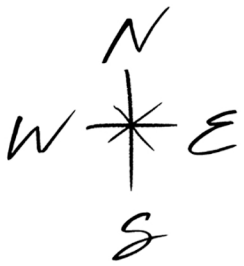
Bane's Barrier

Renala

AEVELLI MOUNTAINS
Reukahvin

Jaicovan's Temple

Solenvale



Prologue



Scattered screams rang through the vines and leaves of moss-covered trees. On the jungle floor, between the layers of wild vegetation, there was nothing but disarray and madness. A woman Hayden had been joking with only hours before lay curled on the ground, supporting a bleeding hip, while fellow beast slayers trampled and clashed all around.

A man with a scarred face ran at Hayden, thrusting a sword toward her. She knew his name—she knew all of their names—but wouldn't dignify him enough to acknowledge it. He was one of the prejudiced idiots foolish enough to start this bloodshed. He deserved to be forgotten.

Hayden heaved her crossbow up and fired without hesitation. The bolt hit the man in the thigh, causing him to trip and collapse to the ground. She hadn't aimed to kill. She had no desire to kill anyone. After all, everyone here was someone she had lived with and fought beside for years. In some ways, this skirmish could be considered nothing more than a familial spat that had gotten too far out of hand, one that had been brewing under the surface for far too long. And when it finally exploded, it did so in the worst possible way.

The slayers were running around like squabbling siblings intent on using their brawn as a means to prove why their opinions were superior to everyone else's, and Hayden didn't have time to help them sort out their differences. She needed to reach her bondmate—the person her soul was tied to—before this fight grew even uglier.

“Whitetail!” she screamed, but her voice wouldn’t carry across the chaos of the battlefield.

Even at a distance, though, Hayden could feel the emotions of the woman she sought, like whispers in the back of her head. Angry. Bloodthirsty. Heat swelled within Hayden’s chest, letting her know how quickly Whitetail was losing her senses. Dark thoughts clouded her mind, growing darker by the second, spurred on by the fighting. She had to convince Whitetail not to give in to those dark inclinations.

Hayden conjured calming thoughts to try to appease the monster threatening to rip its way through her bondmate. The thoughts themselves never reached Whitetail, but the intentions did. That was usually enough to quiet the beast. Now, too much was happening for Hayden to be assured her efforts accomplished anything at all.

Silver flashed in the corner of her eye, and she skipped back before the dagger could land a blow. She snatched a bolt out of the sheath on her belt, but by the time she braced for another attack, the slayer was already fighting someone else. She didn’t pause long enough to register their faces. She pivoted around them, continuing her search.

Her panicked rush to reach her friend was made bearable only by the knowledge that Whitetail, at least, didn’t have to traverse this madness alone. Jaxlin was with her. He would keep her safe.

There was no doubt in Hayden’s mind regarding which side Jaxlin was taking in this fight. He had made it perfectly clear his loyalties lay in Hayden’s best interests, and while she didn’t always agree with what he thought that meant, she loved him all the more for his sincerity.

With the help of her magic, she had seen where he was leading Whitetail. There was a small clearing free of slayers where they could escape the mayhem. Hayden could see it from where she stood, but it was barely visible with the numerous people blocking her path.

Stumbling, she dodged and shoved her way through the crowd, slowly making progress toward the place she would find Jaxlin and Whitetail, her heart and her soul. They would both be within arm’s reach soon enough.

A heavy blow sent someone staggering into Hayden’s back. She shuffled out of the way but tripped over a thick root and crashed into a nearby tree, bashing the side of her face against a low-hanging branch. Blinking black spots out of her eyes, she hugged the trunk

for support and struggled to regain her balance. With ears ringing and eyes watering, she winced, waiting for her sight to clear.

Then a cold dread splashed over her, making her shiver as if she had plunged into a tub of ice. She sucked in a sharp breath, recognizing the unnatural emotion as belonging to Whitetail. It was so intense it smothered her own panic. She gripped the tree tighter, surprised at the force behind her friend's fear. Every step Hayden had taken to close the gap between them had made Whitetail's emotions more noticeable, but this was unexpected. Where before Whitetail had been running wild from the heat of battle, now Hayden could only feel numb shock. Hesitation.

With the sound of battling slayers still crying in every direction, that uncertainty was strong enough to hold Hayden's attention. Slumping into the tree so it could shield her from the warring people on either side of her, she twisted the ring on her right hand and willed her magic to show her what her bondmate was seeing.

Through Whitetail's mind, Jaxlin's face blinked into focus. He was directly in front of her. Tall. Broad shouldered. Beautiful.

But something was wrong. Both he and Whitetail had stopped trying to flee the pandemonium. Instead, they were standing there, staring into each other's eyes. That in itself would have been unusual, but it was even more so with everything going on around them. Why weren't they moving?

Hayden started to yell at them to run as if her command could make any difference from where she stood. Then Whitetail's focus shifted, spreading beyond Jaxlin to the man behind him. The man was a monster of a slayer, one of the largest people Hayden had ever laid eyes on. He loomed above them, snarling, angry . . . with his thick arm wrapped tightly around Jaxlin's neck.

Hayden's heart missed a beat. Then two. Her own shock merged with Whitetail's, sending another tremor coursing through her.

"No," Hayden pleaded.

In her mind's eye, Whitetail desperately looked around for something to help free Jaxlin from the imprisoning embrace. Her eyes swept past a crossbow lying a few feet away.

"Grab it," Hayden urged, knowing her bondmate couldn't hear her but hoping the desire would come across anyway.

Unhinging her frozen muscles, Hayden slid her foot into the stirrup of her own crossbow and tugged on the string. She was too far away to do any good from where she stood, so she resumed hurrying in their direction, keeping close to the edge of the tree line and away from the other fighting slayers. She skipped over roots and wove around vines until the path finally cleared.

Shuffling to a stop, she lifted her weapon and aimed it toward Jaxlin and his captor. She trained her barrel on the massive slayer, but he shifted, moving Jaxlin within an inch of her shot. Her finger froze on the trigger.

A quaking breath slid through her teeth as she waited for them to shift again. Her heart pulsed through every inch of her body, while the bolt in her barrel twitched between the two men. She readjusted the stock against her shoulder, but the tremble in her hands wouldn't settle.

Jaxlin was too close.

Whitetail dove for the crossbow on the ground.

"Wait! No—stop!" Hayden screamed.

Whitetail was fast. She lifted the weapon into the air, and it discharged in a blink.

The world froze as the bolt soared toward its target, but Whitetail wasn't Hayden. She didn't have much practice with ranged weapons, and it made her hasty shot sloppy. The shaft sailed past her mark, not even leaving a scratch.

That single failed shot changed everything.

Horror stricken, Hayden could only watch as the man twisted Jaxlin's neck. It was a quick movement—impossibly fast and yet agonizingly slow. How was it possible for something to feel as if it lasted for only a second while simultaneously dragging on for all of eternity?

She screamed at the same time Whitetail did.

And then it was over. The light didn't fade from Jaxlin's eyes; it was simply gone, like blowing out a candle or closing a book. Swift. Effortless. Cruel.

The ground swayed beneath Hayden's feet. Her chest throbbed, aching with pain as if it were on the brink of ripping in half. Her body trembled and her crossbow slipped an inch out of her grasp, but she tightened her hold. She clutched the weapon in her palm, needing to

feel something—anything—to remain steady. But its weight alone wasn't enough. She screamed again, wanting to release the agony, and only when she rejoined the fighting did she gain any relief.

So she fought harder. Shoving. Screaming. Shooting. All so she could pave the way to where her heart lay. Through blood, tears, and sweat she continued.

But in the end, it didn't matter. He was gone. She was spiraling. And nothing would ever be the same.

Chapter 1



Glowing white eyes shined in the darkness as Reave skulked after his prey. The wish wielder didn't seem scared that Reave hunted him, though. No, the man was angry. Reave suppressed a sigh. He was tired of fighting. He'd never be a pacifist, but once in a while it would be nice to end the night without accumulating countless injuries, minor or otherwise.

The wish wielder swiveled around the abandoned alleyway, searching for where Reave was hiding. "Stop lurking in the shadows like a scared little ruk! Come out here and face me already!" the man snarled, his white eyes blazing demonically.

Reave didn't reveal himself. Instead, he growled back in a similar tone, "Don't make me fight you. Just hand over your magic, and you'll never have to see me again."

Joran had always told him that if he'd calm down and try to discuss matters rationally, he might not always come out of situations with more bruises than when he went into them. But Reave had never been good at small talk. Besides, monsters couldn't be reasoned with anyway.

The wish wielder's eyes darted in the direction of Reave's voice, but they passed overhead, unable to see where he crouched in the night. Reave silently shifted and brought a hand to his belt, where he carried a small pouch that was filled to the brim with a feathery-light powder. As his fingers nimbly loosened the strings, the man laughed. Reave paused, listening to the sound curiously.

“That’s what you’re after? Magic?” The wish wielder continued laughing as if he’d discovered that the howling wolf at his back was, in actuality, nothing more than a small pup nipping at his heels. “Maker’s bleeding jewels, if you’re that desperate, take it! I’ll be heading to the capital soon and can get more for myself.”

He shuffled around noisily, then tossed something onto the ground. It landed with a metallic *tink*. Reave could only guess that the object was a flask containing the wish wielder’s source of magic: *rukasai*—glowing liquid that, once ingested, could allow someone to inherit an unnatural trait for a time. What that trait was differed for every person depending on what *blessing* they’d wished to receive.

Reave frowned. While taking the flask might prevent the man from growing even more corrupt for a few days, it essentially did nothing in the long run.

He reiterated, “I want your *rukasai* crystal.”

The man’s laugh fell silent midbreath.

He didn’t deny having one; it would’ve been a pointless lie. Every wish wielder received a crystal from the person who’d granted his or her wish.

“Now, why would you be asking for something like that?”

Reave finished releasing the pouch from his belt. It fit nicely in his palm and was weightless except for the few coins he had placed in the bottom so it couldn’t accidentally get carried off by the wind.

“I’m not asking,” he said.

The wish wielder straightened, making his dark form loom taller. “Do you have any idea how much it cost me to make my wish? This crystal is worth more than your life. Worth more than what it cost to acquire over half of the slaves working on my plantation.”

Reave clamped his teeth so tight an ache formed in his jaw. It was always about the money to these wish wielders. They never mentioned any concern over the crystal’s true value: the lives it was supposed to protect.

That wasn’t to say the price of the crystal was something to scoff at. Making a wish was extremely pricey, not to mention risky. Most of the time it was something that didn’t even pan out. Those who made a wish when they couldn’t afford it were sold into slavery if their wish was denied. If it was granted, they had to spend the majority of their life serving under the Father’s Council, a group of

people who oversaw the distribution of rukasai and created the laws regarding magic.

But there were always the rare people, like this man, who were rich enough to make a wish without any repercussions. And if it was granted, they were free to use their newfound gift however they pleased. Unfortunately, those types of people were usually power-hungry nobles. And what did power-hungry nobles do when they received the power they wanted? Settle into retirement, happy to live out the rest of their lives in peace? If only. Once they had a taste of the money and influence they could gain with magic's help, they always wanted more. It was *never* enough, and Reave was tired of watching defenseless people get hurt because egotistical fools couldn't restrain themselves from magic's darker temptations.

"I'll give you to the count of three to hand it over before I come and take it."

There, that was reasonable, wasn't it? Joran should be happy. Reave had given the man a choice. It wasn't his fault if the monster decided not to accept the diplomatic way out.

"I know who you are, you piece of filth," the wish wielder spat, narrowing his glowing eyes. "You're the one with that flashy name. Glimmer, Glitter, whatever. You're Lady Saizen's failed prodigy. You're nobody."

Nobody. It wasn't the worst thing Reave had ever been called, but his response was still unforgiving. "One."

"I don't know what you're playing at, but you've taken on a fool's mission. If you lay a single finger on me, you're dead."

"Two."

"Fine!" the man roared, tone throaty and fierce. "Come at me, then!"

Reave was running before the final word reached his ears. The alleyway was dark, preventing Reave from seeing much apart from the wish wielder's glowing eyes. It wasn't a lot to work with, but he had already determined his opponent couldn't see in the dark, so it was still an advantage.

His fingers tightened around the pouch in his hand, and then he threw it at those little white lights. Rather than see the impact, Reave heard a loud puff as the powder erupted into a dark cloud that would

have been much more impressive in the daylight. The wish wielder yelped in alarm, then coughed as he breathed in the powder.

Reave continued to run, not moving directly toward his prey, but in a wide arc. It was only after he was at the man's back and no longer able to see the white glow that he darted in, striking from behind. He moved fast, whipping out the small blade sheathed in his belt and slicing it against the black mass in front of him.

Even without being able to see precisely where he struck, he knew it wasn't a lethal hit. The cut was shallow, but it went deep enough to leave a mark, which was all that mattered.

An angry, pained cry filled the air. The wish wielder twisted his hips, thrusting an elbow behind him. It jabbed Reave in the side, and as he doubled over, he lost his hold on the knife. Before the wish wielder could land another hit, Reave dropped to the ground and rolled away. As he dodged, Reave reached out, grabbed the man by the ankle, and yanked. The wish wielder's foot flew out from under him so swiftly he lost his balance and tumbled onto the rocky dirt, landing with a heavy thud.

Reave continued to roll out of the way. The wish wielder threw a leg to the side, directly into the path he was moving. A sturdy heel hit Reave in the cheek, and he toppled face-first into the dirt. The wish wielder stiffened as if the hit had been unintentional, but once he noticed what he'd done, he kicked his foot out again, striking Reave against the temple. Reave winced at the sharp throb lancing through his head.

Seriously, why did it always have to come down to a fight?

With a pulsing head, Reave pushed his palms against the ground and lunged back before the wish wielder could kick again. He jumped to his toes and skirted away until his back brushed against a stone wall. Then he stilled, quietly biding his time.

When Reave refused to attack again, the wish wielder rose, spitting out a list of profanities. "Hiding like a coward again? I thought I told you to face me!"

A string of light shot through the alleyway like a whip. It was so bright Reave cringed against the wall, shielding his eyes with the back of his hand. Some of the light touched the front of his leather tunic. He blinked, dropping his hand to his vest in surprise. The light was not only cool, but *wet*.

It didn't take long for him to understand. The wish wielder must have found his flask on the ground, then flung the liquid magic within it, splattering their surroundings with its glowing white light. Reave bit back a curse, realizing he now had a luminescent beacon striped across his chest.

The wish wielder chuckled, eyes narrowing on his position. "Found you."

Reave spun as the man lunged toward him, but there would be no hiding now. Even if he could cover his chest, the light was strewn across the ground and walls, making the alley as bright as the morning dawn.

A thick fist jutted out, grabbing the wide belt wrapped around Reave's vest. The wish wielder slammed him back into the wall, and he winced as his already-sore head bashed against the stone.

"And now you're dead," the wish wielder sneered, moving his hand up to Reave's throat. "Burn!"

The alley blurred in and out of focus, so Reave couldn't offer any resistance to the pressure increasing around his neck. For that reason, he could have been choked out in an instant, but when he didn't react, the wish wielder pulled back. It wasn't much, but it allowed the blood to continue flowing to Reave's head.

"I said *burn!*" the man growled again, tightening his hold once more, but his strength waned. "Why can't I . . . ?" The fingers encompassing Reave's throat went slack. The wish wielder's eyes widened in disbelief as his arm drooped down to his side, immovable. He stumbled back a couple feet, then fell to his knees. Before he could take his next breath, his head and shoulders crashed to the ground.

Reave coughed, rubbing his neck. The poison coating his blade didn't work quite as fast as he would like, but the paralysis it induced always helped him achieve his goal in the end. That, and there was the nukovai powder, which subdued whatever tormenting magic the wish wielder wanted to inflict on him. Reave could have informed the man that his eyes had stopped glowing as soon as he breathed in the powder, but it wouldn't have changed anything.

Bending down, Reave ran his fingers along the wish wielder's neck and dug a thick chain out from under the collar of the man's silk doublet. A white stone no bigger than a pebble shined at the end of it. There weren't many ways a wish wielder could carry their crystal

and ensure it remained close at hand, so seeking it out was always the easiest part of the job.

He removed the crystal, then adjusted the wish wielder's position so they could look each other in the eye. The man's dark eyes locked onto Reave's, and even through the paralysis, rage smoldered beneath his stare.

Reave's ire was no less vicious.

Around his own neck, he wore a cord attached to three hollow claws made of stone. He took the claws and placed them on his thumb and first two fingers so they resembled talons. Then he set the crystal within their grasp.

He twisted the jewel in his hand, watching as the soft white light swirled through its facets. Had the man been corrupted before he obtained this, or had he been corrupted by it? Did it matter? Reave glared past the crystal, back into the man's eyes. No, it didn't. This wish wielder chose to come to Doranvan. He chose to have dealings with Malina Saizen. There was no redemption for a sin like that—only punishment.

"Don't blink," Reave warned. It was through the crystal the man received magic, and it was through the crystal Reave would take it away.

He squeezed his fingers, pinching the tiny jewel between the claws. The crystal cracked at first, then easily shattered into an innumerable number of fragments, as if it had no more resilience than a thin shard of ice. The wish wielder could do nothing but watch helplessly as Reave stripped him of his magic. Permanently.

Reave brushed the glowing dust off his hands. He sighed, hoping the rest of Doranvan's nobles would recognize this as the warning it was. If anyone decided not to heed his warning, they would be punished like all the others. Reave wasn't going anywhere.

Chapter 2



A peaceful vision blurred in and out of focus within Hayden's eyes. She tried to concentrate on it, to prolong it for as long as possible, but her magic was fading. She had already drained the last of the rukasai in her flask, and if she wanted to use any more, she'd have to restock from her supply back at the inn.

A hollow ache swelled in her chest as the scene disappeared, and she gulped down half a mug of ale to dull the feeling. She needed the drink regardless of the early hour. And it was *very* early. She had come to the slayer's guild a couple hours before dawn because she wanted to use her magic without feeling Whitetail's disapproval.

She could have gone anywhere, but she'd chosen this venue because she had another obligation to fulfill. She glanced down the length of the bar toward the barkeep kindly offering greetings to everyone who entered his establishment. He seemed like a decent man, friendly, with a constant smile on his face. It was too bad the slayer's guild had a reputation for attracting clientele much less complimentary. Fortunately for Hayden, the particular aristocrat she sought was fond of keeping unsavory company.

The bartender's smile broadened as someone new walked through the door. Over the mug of ale, Hayden's eyes flicked to each person in the room. At least four other people had decided to start their day off with Doranvan's finest brew . . . or maybe their day was ending with it. This guildhall was smaller than others she'd visited, but it contained all of the main defining characteristics: an entire wall

covered in bounties and wanted posters, a bar to help people relax after a hard hunt, and apartments on the floor above for slayers to rest and recuperate.

A young woman skipped down the stairs, looking more lively than anyone had a right to this early in the day. Two men sat at a table in a darkened corner, discussing something intently over their steaming cups of mead. Halfway down the bar from Hayden, a man strode forward and began arguing with the barkeep in an unnecessarily overt tone.

Hayden shifted as she glanced at the loud man. Everything from his dark outfit to his scratchy voice hinted that he was exactly the kind of person who would know how to help her obtain a meeting with the infamous Malina Saizen—a whispered-about menace said to oversee Saizen's Court, the public term for Doranvan's underground fighting rings. Lady Saizen wasn't the type of person Hayden typically appealed to, but the woman was the only lead she'd found in the entire southern half of Miikannah that held any hope of helping her bondmate—and Whitetail needed more help than Hayden alone could give. But proving this Saizen woman even existed was more difficult than trying to keep smoke clutched in her fist, so she was stuck chasing leads and sources she'd rather steer clear of.

"I'm a tracker, you blasted imbecile! My magic led me straight to your door, so don't you dare try to tell me Grayjaw isn't here," the dark-clad man yelled, making the entire room fall silent.

He had a patchy brown beard and long hair pulled back in a bun. His dark outfit made it seem as if he were some sort of assassin, with leather straps and numerous throwing knives hugging his body. Though, if he was an assassin, he wasn't a very good one considering the flagrant scene he displayed in front of the entire room.

The barkeep folded his arms against his broad chest. "Guess your magic led you wrong, friend."

Hayden shifted in her seat again. She had lived among men like this tracker in the past and anticipated his response before the barkeep finished talking. Her hand darted toward the leg of her barstool, where she'd rested her weapon, but the tracker whipped out one of his knives and pointed it at the barkeep before she could draw his attention.

“My magic’s never wrong. Give me a scent, and I can track it anywhere. Rain or shine.” A dirty piece of cloth was wrapped around his free hand, and he brought it to his nose, inhaling deeply. Glowing white specks flashed in his eyes. He wobbled his knife under the bartender’s chin. “Now tell me where you’re hiding that bloody cursebringer, or I’ll have to—”

A metallic ring filled the air. His knife flew out of his hand and bounced across the bar while a bolt pierced the wall a few feet away. His entire body jerked back in surprise. After a brief stunned heartbeat, he swiveled around, eyes twitching furiously as he searched for whoever had caused the interruption. Hayden lowered her crossbow as his eyes narrowed on her.

“Maker, I’m so sorry! I’m such a lousy shot!” she exclaimed with wide innocent eyes. “I was aiming for that disgusting mouth of yours but was a little off-center. Don’t worry, I’ll be sure not to miss next time.”

The tracker’s nostrils flared. “There won’t be a next time, sweet cheeks.” His hand flew toward his knives again.

Hayden kept her eyes wide as she looked around. “It would be an extremely awful idea to start a fight in a room full of slayers.” Her gaze lingered on the lively woman who had come down the stairs. “Especially considering you just insulted one of them. Or are you not aware that *Solenvian* is the proper term used to address someone who was born in the South?”

“Why, you little—”

“Three days ago, the sea sparrow dove too deep,” Hayden declared as he took a step toward her.

The man stopped midstride, and his eyes flashed suspiciously. “What did you say?”

A lofty smile curved Hayden’s lips. “Yesterday the sky was as blue as the ocean. Don’t you think?”

The silent room was filled with another metallic clatter as the man’s knife dropped to the floor. His eyes shot toward the glowing white ring on Hayden’s finger, and then his throat bobbed with a swallow.

“You’re one of Lady Saizen’s wish wielders?” The defiance in his voice drained, turning into something shaky and weak.

Hayden inclined her head slightly. She’d given him the passcodes she’d stolen from one of Saizen’s fighters. They were old codes that

couldn't help her enter the ring now, but she hoped they might give her an edge when she tried to uncover some of Saizen's secrets later.

"You're lying. Anyone could have learned those codes," he spat, but a trace of uncertainty rimmed his tone.

"True," Hayden agreed. Then she pulled a purse off her belt and dumped its contents onto the bar. Instead of coins, silver scales spilled across the counter.

The man's face lost all trace of color. Jacobeast scales weren't worth much monetarily, but in this part of Leidona, they gave wish wielders a reputation of having competed in Lady Saizen's fights. Hayden had obtained her scales free of the woman's influence, but no one in this room needed to know that.

Slowly, she stood and walked the remaining couple of feet toward the man. She kept eye contact, and a bead of sweat formed along his hairline.

Maker, he was already terrified. Saizen and her wish wielders seemed to have quite the reputation.

Bending down, she exaggerated the effort it took to pick his knife up off the floor. It was fairly small: the blade roughly the length of her palm while the short hilt was no wider than her finger. A simplified sunburst symbol was carved into the pommel, similar to the symbols worn by certain merchants around town—merchants she knew worked for Saizen's Court but who had been able to offer her little more than rumor regarding the woman herself. Hopefully this man had better information. He flinched as she brought the weapon to his chest. She slid the blade back into its sheath, then patted her hand against it.

"Why don't you and I go somewhere a little more private?" she purred, leaning closer to him than necessary. Saizen had been a phantom impossible to locate, but if this tracker had the right information, she might not even need to meet the woman in the shadows.

The tracker swallowed again. "Yeah. O-okay," he mumbled.

She gestured toward a table in the back corner of the room and allowed him to lead the way. As soon as she turned, the curious onlookers quickly averted their gazes. Hayden scooped the scales back into her purse then laid three silver coins beside her empty mug, apologizing to the barkeep for the disturbance.

Instead of sitting across from the tracker, she sat directly beside him and crossed her legs. Her foot pressed against his calf, and his entire body went rigid. A small whimper escaped his throat as if the simple touch were a threat in and of itself—which, she supposed, with some wish wielders it would be. If only he knew how entirely docile her magic was, not to mention she didn't have any more rukasai at the moment to make it work.

Uneasiness poked against the corners of her thoughts, like a tickle trying to tell her something was wrong, but she couldn't quite pinpoint what it was. Maybe it was instinct warning her against flirting with this man. It made her feel dirty. This wasn't a playful little tryst that she could laugh with Whitetail about later. This was only a job, and she would get it over with as quickly as possible.

"What's your name?" she asked, leaning an elbow on the table.

He refused to look at her. Instead, his eyes focused on a stain darkening the wood in front of him. "Haythrow. Byrom Haythrow."

"You aren't one of Saizen's wish wielders, but you carry her crest," Hayden said. It was a guess, but if Haythrow were with Lady Saizen, he wouldn't have been so terrified at the prospect of Hayden working for the woman as well.

"Yeah," he admitted, licking his lips.

"Where did you get the knife?" she asked. "And how do you know our passcodes?"

Haythrow said nothing, so Hayden brought a hand up and placed it on his cheek. He flinched away as if expecting her to slap him, so she dropped it to rest on his arm instead.

"How do you know our passcodes?" she repeated, the coaxing words curving like notes in a song.

He relented. "Learned them from a friend," he said, voice hollow and dull.

Hayden frowned. "What else did your friend tell you about us?"

"Nothing. I swear it!"

"Come now, Haythrow. You can do better than that," Hayden said, and her lips puckered into a disapproving pout. Her fingers trailed up and down his arm. He shivered and angled his body away from her, indicating it wasn't from pleasure. Hayden suppressed a sigh. Why would anyone prefer the fear of intimidation when gentle persuasion could work just as well?

“Why so scared?” she said in a velvety voice. “We’re just having a nice little chat. There’s no reason to be afraid.”

Haythrow closed his eyes. “She told me the passcodes and location rotations so I could watch the fights,” he grumbled in defeat. “It wasn’t anything real secret. She’d never do anything to cross Lady Saizen—I promise!”

A small *hmm* rose from Hayden’s throat in a neither encouraging nor discouraging manner. The man licked his lips again, so Hayden pressed on.

“Did your friend ever mention anything about my lady?”

“Only . . . Only things everyone knows.”

“Enlighten me. What do you think everyone already knows?”

Haythrow swallowed, then responded in a small voice, “She owns all the rings and the creatures within them. She takes all manner of beasts from the wild and puts them into the ring to fight people. Everyone is encouraged to fight, but the only ones who ever win good coin are those whose jacobebasts have been tamed.”

Hayden’s pulse skipped. Now there was some information she’d been looking for. She made sure her demeanor remained unchanged when she replied, “There’s no such thing as a tamed jacobebast. A wish wielder can try to stop their bondmate from transitioning, but no one truly controls the curse.”

“Right. Yes, madam. Of course they don’t. That would be impossible.” Haythrow nodded as if he would agree with whatever she said.

Hayden fell silent. If what he said was true, it meant the rumor she’d heard wasn’t simply a rumor after all. If she could figure out how to tame a jacobebast, Whitetail would be safe.

“And you’re sure that’s all your friend told you?” Hayden shifted away from him, folding her hands in front of her in a sign of goodwill. Haythrow’s shoulders relaxed, but she continued her cajoling tone. “She didn’t even hint at how we control the curse?”

Haythrow’s face went blank. “How you do it?” he said dumbly. “There is no *how*. You just do it, right? You possess some special connection to your bondmate that most people don’t have. You’re different from normal wish wielders.”

Hayden pursed her lips. That wasn’t what she wanted to hear. She couldn’t learn how to help Whitetail if the trait was only intrinsic

within certain wish wielders. She should have known taming a jacobeast wouldn't be as simple as uncovering some trick. If it were easy to keep Solenvians safe, the knowledge would have been made public ages ago.

She was so close to finding answers this time, but still not close enough. She had no desire to meet Malina Saizen or anyone who played in her blood sport, but if they were the only ones capable of taming a jacobeast, Hayden might not have any choice. Her shoulders sagged at the thought. Maker, please give her another choice.

Uneasy nervousness prickled at the base of Hayden's skull again. Her head lurched up, gaze sweeping around the bar to see if she was being watched, but no one other than Haythrow looked at her. The energetic Solenvian she'd noticed earlier was sitting alone two tables away. The woman didn't seem to be paying them attention as her knee bounced in a quick rhythm and she slathered honey onto a fluffy biscuit, but was it possible she could hear what they were saying? Or was Hayden being paranoid? Either way, she was sure she wouldn't learn anything else of significance.

"Thank you for the conversation, but I'm afraid I have places to be now." Hayden peeled her eyes away from the woman and rose to her feet. "Do try not to torment the poor barman again. Believe me, the end result wouldn't be worth it."

Haythrow nodded. "Yes, madam—I mean, no, madam. I won't. I promise! Please don't tell Lady Saizen to punish me. Please! When I came here, I was only trying to help her—help the wish wielders like you!"

Hayden paused and looked down at him. He wrung his hands as he begged in his seat. "Help how?"

"That cursebri—Solenvian, sorry! Sorry!" he corrected when Hayden shot him a stern look. "Grayjaw is missing. And I bet his bondmate is too or will be soon. It's been happening to people like you. People who fight for Lady Saizen."

Hayden tilted her head, considering. "Who else knows about this?"

"I-I don't know. It's not a secret, but no one's talking about it. No one's even looking for them."

No one? That was strange. The Father's Council had enough people capable of tracking magic that no wish wielder could stay

hidden for long. If they were being hunted to death, though, why was only one man sounding the alarm?

"Thanks for the warning. I'll keep my eyes open." She turned toward the door.

"Wait!" Haythrow noisily struggled to rise from the table. He tripped over his chair, knocking it to the floor, then ran to the wall of bounties and tore off a piece of parchment. He flipped it over and scribbled something onto the back with a charcoal stick lying nearby. When he finished, he hurried back to her. "Here, take this!"

Hayden looked at the parchment.

"Come on, take it," he urged, waving it in the air. "It's the name of my friend and where she lives. She knows what happened to those who went missing but won't tell me anything. Maybe she'll talk to someone with more authority." His head was downcast, like he thought Hayden would punish him for approaching her without permission, but he held the paper high. "She's dying," he added, tilting his brows in desperation. "She disappeared, but unlike the others, she came back . . . barely. Please. I need to know what happened to her."

Hayden's lips tugged into a frown. He didn't deserve sympathy after pulling a knife on the smiling bartender. The plea remained on his face as he glanced up to meet her eyes, then away again. Her disdain softened, if only a little. She supposed desperate people tended to behave irrationally.

"If I have the chance, I'll see what I can find out," she said in a gentler tone than he deserved. Besides, his friend might know more about taming jacobebests, and Hayden would take any lead available. She accepted his offering and tucked the note into the tight space between her belt and flask.

"I'd be in the lady's debt. And yours," Haythrow said, bobbing his head in a low bow. "I'll tell Jakeira to be expecting you, madam . . . Blasted Maker, I never did get your name."

"No, you didn't," Hayden said. She slid her eyes to the woman sitting nearby. Was Hayden imagining things, or was her ear tilted toward them in interest? "Tell her to expect Riverwing to come calling."

Haythrow blinked in surprise. "A S-Solenvian?"

"My bondmate," Hayden lied smoothly. It was a falsehood that could easily be discredited, but anxiety still nagged at the back of

her mind. She didn't want to hand out any more information to the strangers in this room than she already had.

"I—yes, of course. Thank you, madam. Thank you."

Panic rolled over Hayden like a crashing wave, rising swiftly and from nothing in particular. Her lungs sped up, trying to match pace with her now-racing heart.

Her eyes darted around the room, and she half expected a ferocious beast to burst through the door, but nothing happened. Everything was the same as it had been a second before. The room was still quiet from the dreary dawn. Everyone still avoided looking at her. But Hayden's heart hammered wildly. Her nerves were quick and jittery.

That was when Hayden realized the uneasiness that had been gnawing at her wasn't because of anyone suspicious within the slayer's guild. Actually, it hadn't been her emotion at all. It was Whitetail's, coming through the magical link joining them.

Normally, Hayden could feel a clear distinction between her emotions and Whitetail's, but this had been so subtle, so unexpectedly distant, that she hadn't recognized it for what it was. She hadn't realized the soft tickle of anxiety meant Whitetail wasn't back at the inn where Hayden had left her. She hadn't understood it was a warning that her bondmate needed her. Not until the truth exploded in her chest—a raging panic, loud and unmistakable.

Haythrow flinched as Hayden released a sharp curse, but she didn't acknowledge him this time. All that mattered was that something was wrong with Whitetail.

Chastising herself for drinking all of her magic earlier, she hurried out of the slayer's guild and back toward her inn. She needed to obtain more rukasai, and fast. Fear pushed through her, but Hayden focused every thought, every desire, on her bondmate as she tried to stop Jacovan's Siren from creeping into her mind.