

# Gift of the Destroyer

Jeroen Steenbeeke

---

Gift of the Destroyer  
3rd Edition  
(C) 2011-2012 Jeroen Steenbeeke  
All Rights Reserved.  
ISBN: 978-94-021-0177-5

Cover art (C) 2012 Michael Gauss



*For Merlin, this book's first fan*

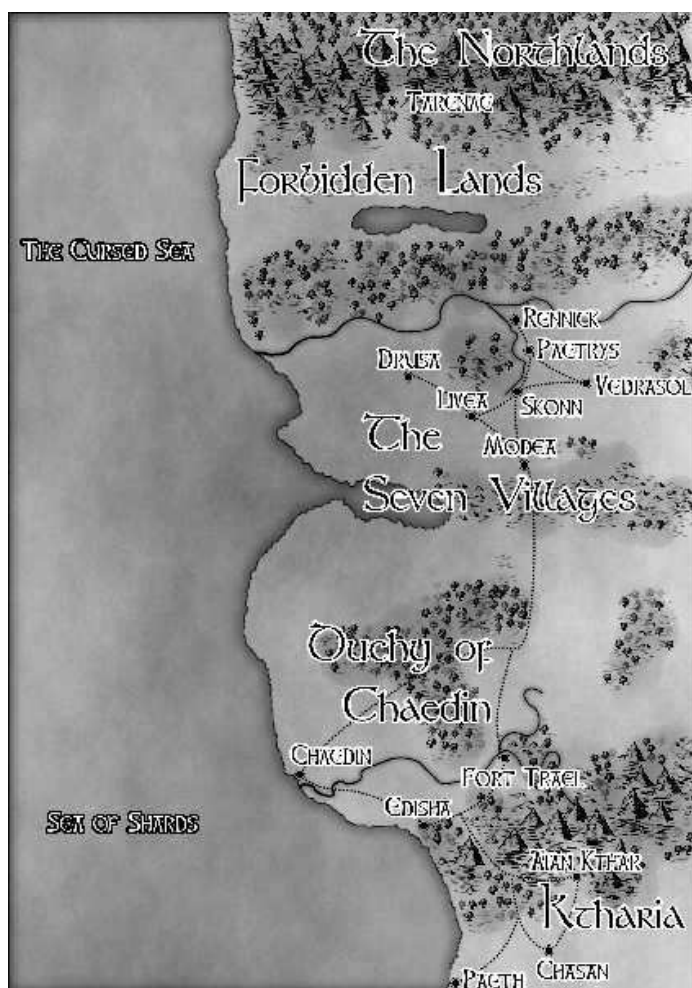
## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a book is a lot of work, and without the support of so many people this book probably would never have been finished. As such, it is only fitting that they receive the proper credit for their contribution.

As such, I want to express a big thank you to everyone who was involved in improving this book: Merlin Kamp, Pieter van den Brink, Rik Hengeveld, Tjeerd Kruidhof, Michèle Koper, Inge Tigchelaar and Luis Brunet.

I want to give a special thank you to Gareth Barlow for his suggested improvements for the second edition, and to Marijn Hoek for creating the cover for the first and second edition.

Finally, I want to give a big thank you to Ashley Davis for editing and polishing the third edition, and to Michael Gauss for the third edition cover.



CHAPTER 1

---

LOVER'S EMBRACE

Lianna covered her mouth in a desperate attempt to keep her tea from spilling. Seated across from her was her great-aunt Daiva, the village Wise Woman, who took hold of Lianna's remaining hand to comfort her.

"I'm too young to be a mother," Lianna said once she had managed to swallow her tea.

"You are nineteen. Your mother was sixteen when you were born," Daiva said. "Though I must admit, she was properly wed."

"I didn't ask to become pregnant!" Lianna said, her voice a mix of frustration and panic.

"You shared the Lover's Embrace with that blacksmith's son. How is that not asking to become pregnant?" Daiva asked in a neutral tone. "Did that oaf of a nephew of mine neglect to teach you that, as well?"

Normally, Lianna would have laughed at that. Daiva did not have a high opinion of Lianna's father, despite being his aunt.

"Lianna," Daiva said, as she noticed her lack of a rebuttal. "Please tell me you did know that the Lover's Embrace is how children are made."

"It's Dreyan's fault," Lianna said. "He kept telling me how hard it was to conceive children, and I believed him."

"There is some truth to it, though, foolish as it is. This will be the first child in Rennick in five years," Daiva said.

"That can't be true!" Lianna said. "There are over thirty families in Rennick; there must have been more children."

"And yet there aren't. I would know; I've been presiding over births for the past thirty years," Daiva said. "People turn

to me when their attempts to conceive prove fruitless. Your child is the first in five years, and the fifth in the past decade.”

“How can that be?” Lianna asked. “And why did I become pregnant when so many others can’t?”

“If only we knew,” Daiva said. “It’s happening all over the Seven Villages, but none of the Wise Women can find a cause. It’s as if the whole world is holding its breath, waiting for something, but we do not know what. We even went through each Village’s historical records to find evidence of similar situations, but we found none. Though we did find out that this is not a recent problem. The number of childbirths has been declining for at least fifty years.”

“And here I am. So many women willing but unable to conceive, and an unwilling farm girl manages to get pregnant by accident,” Lianna said. “Daiva, I don’t know what to do!”

“First we tell your father. He may be a bit of an oaf sometimes, but he loves you, and will support you. Then we’ll have to tell the blacksmith’s son, Dreyan, seeing as he is the father. He’ll either wed you or he won’t,” Daiva said.

“You really think Dreyan would leave his child a bastard?” Lianna said, looking shocked.

“Your child wouldn’t be the first bastard in Rennick,” Daiva said. “Though with the lack of children, the whole ordeal will cause quite a bit more gossip than usual. Besides, being a bastard isn’t the end of the world. I turned out all right didn’t I?”

“You were born out of wedlock?” Lianna asked, not believing her ears.

“I was. My mother — your great-grandmother — had an affair with a married man. He chose his wife rather than my mother, and your great-grandfather raised me as his own. I didn’t even know that your grandfather was only my half-brother until my early teens,” Daiva explained.

“Is that why you never wed?” Lianna asked.

“It is. I did not lack attention from men my age, but none



---

came as suitors. Eventually, the village Wise Woman asked if I was interested in learning her trade,” Daiva explained. “So if my life is any indication, your child will find its way. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Your father is expecting you back to help him tend the fields, and he’ll want to know about your ‘ailments’, as well.”

Crouching behind a patch of bushes sixty feet away, the scarred Wanderer watched the two women exit the cottage south of Rennick. The cottage was built on a small hill overlooking the village. The village was similar in size to the others he had visited recently. He expected to have little difficulty evading the inhabitants.

He waited until the brown-haired woman and her elderly companion were out of sight, and proceeded in the direction of Rennick. To avoid being seen, he remained close to the stream that passed west of the village. It was shallow and relatively calm, giving him plenty of opportunities to cross. He attempted to crouch as much as he could, but pain lanced through his body each time he did. The old wound on his right side was becoming worse, and he knew it had to be treated. In fact, it had been treated, but for some reason it had become infected again. For a moment he considered raiding the Wise Woman’s cottage, but decided against it for fear of picking the wrong poison.

The Wanderer had a tendency to look over his shoulder to see if he was followed, looking past the large sword strapped to his back and into the distance. An old habit, but one that had proven necessary. He was still being followed by the pale man with the wide-brimmed hat, and the Wanderer did not relish another encounter in which he had to contend with both the man and his two dogs. The Wanderer had barely managed to best them in their previous encounter, wounding the pale man,

which allowed the Wanderer to increase the distance between them. But the Wanderer did not know how long he could continue.

He stumbled, splashing face-first into the river. He pushed himself back to his feet, but the water stung his wounded right side. The world spun around him for several seconds before he managed to continue walking. This was not a good sign, the Wanderer knew. He had not stumbled since he learned to walk, not even when he had faced hundreds of the Revenant's hordes.

He needed help, and fast, but he could not risk stumbling into the village. The people of the Seven Villages were friendly, but not used to strangers. There was no telling how they would respond to the sudden appearance of a scarred Wanderer carrying a large sword. He decided to look for an outlying farm, hoping the farmers were more willing to help him. They, too, could be mistrustful, but they were less likely to turn into an angry mob.

As another jolt of pain lanced through his body, he hoped he would not be too late.

Lianna's father, Nerim, stared at Daiva and then at Lianna, his face still holding the smile he had shown when Lianna and Daiva had approached.

"This is a joke, right? One of Lianna's pranks?" he asked, the doubt in his voice audible.

"My dear nephew, you know how much walking pains me. Did you really think I would walk for half an hour, feeling the pain in my legs with every step, just to play a joke on you?" Daiva asked.

"That would depend on the prank I think. I know how much you like seeing a shocked look on my face," Nerim said, his expression still unchanged. Lianna's father tried to keep his expression neutral, but Lianna could see the small trembling

---

in his face. The news bothered him, but for the moment she was spared from his wrath by his disbelief.

"You know her ailments. She has been tiring quicker than usual, and she's often nauseous and dizzy," Daiva said.

"That could be anything," Nerim said.

"Not if a woman also stops bleeding," Daiva said, which silenced him. He looked from Daiva to Lianna and back again, his smile fading.

"You two are really serious?" he asked.

"Yes," Lianna said, looking at the ground.

"Please tell me you know who the father is," Nerim said, looking uncomfortable.

"Oh, you big oaf, how could you think your own daughter to be such a harlot that she would not know the father?" Daiva said.

"Dreyan is the father," Lianna added.

"Kovar's son? Kovar won't like that," Nerim said, and Lianna thought she heard the trace of a chuckle in his voice.

"You think Dreyan won't accept the child?" Lianna asked.

"I don't know the lad well enough. His father would consider it a slight to his family name if he accepted the child, but his mother is much less traditional," Nerim said. "It's strange, though. When I was your age, I was already wed to your mother. Light, you were already born when I was your age."

"So you are fine with this?" Daiva asked.

"What choice do I have? It's not like we can undo a pregnancy," Nerim said.

"Oh, there are ways, but the ones that don't kill you leave you barren," Daiva said, looking worried.

"No," Lianna said at once, placing a hand on her yet-flat belly. "I did not want for this to happen, but it did, and now I will deal with the consequences."

"Good," Daiva said. "Now, all that is left is to tell Dreyan."

---

“I’m a hard worker, I’m honest, and all I ever did to him was drop a bucket of water on his head.”

“Our fathers used to be best friends, but somehow that changed after your mother died,” Dreyan said. “I don’t know why.”

“I suppose it doesn’t matter, as long as we get wed in the end,” Lianna said, placing her hands on his cheeks and kissing him. He returned the kiss, and put his arms around her.

They both sat down next to the biggest tree in the grove, and lay there in each other’s arms for what seemed like an eternity.

“Do you think it’ll be a boy or a girl?” Dreyan asked.

“How am I supposed to know?” Lianna said, chuckling.

“I don’t know — maybe Daiva could see somehow. What do you want it to be?” Dreyan asked.

“I’m fine with either,” Lianna said. “As long as it looks like you.”

“Not just me, I hope; I want them to look like you!” Dreyan said.

“Them? Let’s start with one first,” Lianna said in response, looking at him in mock alarm.

“Could be you’re carrying twins,” Dreyan said.

“Light forbid!” Lianna said.

“Wait,” Dreyan said as he got to his feet. “I thought I heard something.”

The scarred Wanderer ducked into the bushes as soon as the blond-haired man stood up. He did not want to be discovered. The villager took a few steps towards the edge of the grove and peered into the distance. The Wanderer kept low as the villager’s gaze swept past him, staying as still as he could. The wound throbbed now, with fresh jolts of pain sweeping through him every few seconds. He needed help, but he could not be sure that the young man would offer it. There

"I was afraid this might happen," Dreyan said, his face turning pale. He grabbed hold of one of the small trees that circled the grove in which they usually met.

"All the while assuring me everything was safe, that I could not possibly conceive if we shared the Lover's Embrace," Lianna said, not sure if she should be furious or sympathetic.

"Ugh, I feel so stupid now!" Dreyan said. "What do we do now?"

"Tell your parents, get wed, wait until I give birth, raise the child," Lianna said.

"My father will be furious. He'll never consent," Dreyan said. "And he'll disown me if I wed without his consent."

"Are you pledged to another?" Lianna asked.

"Well, no," Dreyan said. "My father has been looking for potential brides, but fortunately most other girls of suitable age are either already wed or pledged to others. Last night he was talking of finding me a bride in Paetrys or Skonn."

To Lianna's relief, Dreyan's bemused expression showed that he did not agree with his father's wishes.

"All the more reason to accept our child and wed me," Lianna said. "Or would you rather be without a wife, and father to a bastard?"

"Lianna, please! I wouldn't do that!" Dreyan said, shocked by her bluntness.

"Even if your father disowns you?" Lianna asked.

"We would be without a home," Dreyan said.

"You could live at the farm. I am the only heir," Lianna said.

"I was raised to be a blacksmith, I don't know the first thing about farming," Dreyan said. "I could learn, though. But even so, my father might come around."

"Why does he disapprove of me, anyway?" Lianna asked.

---

nothing has come southward out of the Forbidden Lands for a thousand years,” Dreyan said.

“Just be careful,” Lianna said, but Dreyan shrugged. He probably thought her fears irrational.

He reached the bushes after a few seconds, with Lianna following moments later. To her relief, there was nothing there. She had already turned around when Dreyan made a surprised sound.

“Lianna, look at this,” he said, and Lianna walked over to him. “This looks like blood.”

Lianna took a closer look and saw the little red droplets on the leaves of the bush in front of them. Next she looked at the sand, and saw that it had been disturbed by someone’s passing. She had no experience in tracking, but the upturned earth looked freshly disturbed.

“There are more drops over here,” Dreyan said. “I told you someone was here!”

“They are heading east,” Lianna said. “Right toward our farm!”

“Could your father have been watching us?” Dreyan asked.

“I don’t think so, but if he did, then he’s hurt,” Lianna said. “Whoever it was is hurt, and needs help.”

“Then we’d better hurry,” Dreyan said.

was a girl as well. The same brown-haired girl he had seen exiting the Wise Woman's cottage earlier that morning.

The world spun around the Wanderer as another wave of dizziness passed over him, and he struggled to keep from falling. The wound was reasserting itself, faster than it had the first time. If it kept going at this rate, he would be beyond help in a day.

If he died now, the world would die with him. He waited until the blond-haired man was no longer looking in his direction, and ran from the bushes. Another clutch of trees stood ahead of him, and he moved from bush to bush in an attempt to avoid notice. When he reached the trees, he took a moment to pause. His strength failed him, and the weight of his sword threatened to pull him to the ground. He knew it would be better to leave it here and return for it after he had regained his strength, but with the man in the wide-brimmed hat chasing him, he knew there might not be time.

Besides, this was his brother's sword, and had been his father's sword before him. He would not leave it even if it killed him.

Walking with willpower more than strength — he continued. There had to be a farm within walking distance. If only he could reach one, he could find help.

"I know I saw something," Dreyan said. "Someone was moving behind those bushes over there."

"Why would someone be hiding?" Lianna said. "Do you think someone is spying on us?"

"I'm going to find out," Dreyan said, and before Lianna could stop him, he dashed out of the grove.

"What are you doing?" she hissed after him. "You have no idea who could be out there. What if they mean you harm?"

"Who could possibly mean us harm? The only people who come this far north are people from the Seven Villages, and

## CHAPTER 2

---

### STRANGERS

Had it not been for Dreyan's presence, she would not have dared to return to the farm. The walk back took about fifteen minutes, during which they found more traces of blood. The person they followed was wounded and bleeding, but managed to move on despite it.

"I hope my father is all right," Lianna said, hoping her father had already departed for the town tavern. She knew a wounded stranger would be looking for help and probably did not pose any danger to her father, yet she was not certain.

The stranger's trail stopped when they reached the farm. There were no further signs of blood, and there were so many footprints that there was no telling which set might belong to the stranger.

"Which one first?" Dreyan asked, looking at the three buildings that made up Lianna's farm.

"The house," Lianna said. "If my father is here, he would have greeted the stranger and invited him in."

The house turned out to be empty, suggesting that her father had already departed for town, so Lianna suggested they check the shed. "If I were wounded and no one was here to help me, I'd look for supplies to help myself."

But the shed, too, turned out to be empty, and none of the supplies were missing.

"What could he possibly be looking for in the stables?" Lianna asked, the stables being the only building left.

"A horse to ride?" Dreyan suggested.

"When he's already wounded?" Lianna asked, picturing a wounded man falling from a plow horse's back before he managed to leave the farm.





When they entered the stables, everything looked normal. The two plow horses were at ease, and preoccupied with their feed.

Still, Lianna was not convinced that everything was in order. She asked Dreyan to stay near the door to watch for anyone approaching, as she herself moved toward the pile of hay farther into the stable. She regretted her decision immediately, as the approaching dusk filled the stable with shadows. She took her time to look around, but saw nothing. Just as she was convinced nobody was there she saw a shadow moving out of the corner of her eye. She turned around to see the silhouette of a large man approaching her. The low light obscured most of his features, but his imposing size was enough to freeze Lianna in her tracks. He had closed the distance between them before she could call for Dreyan, and moved a hand to her mouth to keep her silent.

What happened next, Lianna could not explain. She felt a strange tingling sensation in her chest, and a warm glow washed over her body, growing stronger with every beat of her heart. Within seconds, the feeling had spread to her entire body, and as the stranger's hand reached her mouth, the feeling flowed out of her. The air between them exploded, pushing Lianna against the wall and hurling the stranger across the stable and into the far wall with a loud *bang*. Dreyan rushed into the stables upon hearing the sound. Seeing Lianna afraid but otherwise unharmed, he approached the stranger. Sunset's low light was not enough to illuminate the man's features clearly, but they saw the large sword strapped to his back. The man had a wound to the right side of his abdomen, explaining the blood they had seen earlier, and was close to losing consciousness. He looked up at Dreyan and Lianna, and spoke, "Please, help me."

---

Lianna worried. If the man's size and his weapon had not been enough to cause her worry, then his scarred face certainly would have been. His hair was pitch black and his skin was olive, making it somewhat darker than Lianna and Dreyan's skin. They had taken away his sword and hidden it, and laid the scarred stranger down on top of the stack of hay in the corner of the stable. Lianna remained behind to watch him while Dreyan went to fetch Daiva. Lianna did not like having to watch him on her own, but he wasn't much of a threat as long as he remained unconscious. Lianna had tried binding his wound, but while the bleeding had subsided, she was not sure if it would be enough. Daiva arrived with Dreyan after an hour or so, arguing with him. As she entered, she spoke aloud to the both of them, "This had better be important, I can understand being discreet about certain things, but you didn't have to tell me a fantastic tale of a wounded warrior for me to come."

As she moved to the back of the stable and saw there was indeed a man lying in the hay, she froze for a moment, her open mouth a clear reflection of her disbelief.

"So you were telling the truth," Daiva stated, and went to check the man's wound, removing the bandages Lianna had placed.

"This was done by an animal," she stated. "Something with claws."

"Can you treat it?" Lianna asked. She wondered what sort of creature it could have been. The only creatures with claws that lived near Rennick were cats, and the worst they did was scratch.

"I think so, but this is a very strange wound. It looks like a part of it is already healed, yet some of it looks fresh," Daiva said.

"It needs Essence of Bane," the stranger spoke, grunting, his face a mask of pain.

Daiva nearly jumped at his sudden voice.

---

“And I suppose getting you pregnant is proper?” Dreyan said with a chuckle, upon which Lianna blushed. “I can’t leave you alone with this stranger. I mean, look at him! If he had not been wounded he would have been a formidable warrior — and his sword is unlike anything I have ever seen.”

“I wish you’d stay as well, but I don’t think you should make your parents any angrier than necessary, and the news of our child will be quite enough for them to handle for one day,” Lianna said. “This stranger scares me, but at the same time I have a feeling that he means me no harm, strange as it sounds.”

“But you can’t be sure,” Dreyan said.

“He did ask for our help, and for now he is still too weak to do anything — that wound will take days to heal,” she said.

“Very well,” Dreyan said, and after kissing her goodnight, he went home.

Lianna went back to the stables and looked at the stranger. Despite his scars and his imposing size he looked quite helpless when asleep. She could not escape the feeling that there was something familiar about him, as if she’d seen his face before in a dream.

“What is your name?” the stranger asked, and Lianna nearly tripped over him in response.

“Please don’t startle me like that!” she said in dismay, but answered his question nonetheless. “My name is Lianna, and yours?”

“Brenor,” the stranger said, and paused before asking another question. “Do the others know about your Gift?”

“What Gift?” Lianna asked. She had no idea what he meant.

“Throwing me against the wall,” Brenor said. “You made the air move, and quite violently, as well. You have the Gift of the Destroyer.”

“Essence of Bane? Are you mad? It is poisonous!” she exclaimed after regaining her composure.

“The wound is infected; only Essence of Bane can cleanse it,” the stranger said.

“Infected? By what?” Daiva asked.

“A *Ghiazhra*; you wouldn’t understand,” the stranger said, groaning with pain. “The wound is several months old, but the infection has reopened it.”

Daiva stood up, and motioned for Dreyan and Lianna to follow.

“Essence of Bane is something I use to kill vermin. But this wound is strange, and I think he is telling the truth about it being an old wound.” Daiva said once they were outside, and then paused.

“You are going to give him poison?” Lianna asked, not understanding Daiva’s intentions.

“If I keep the dose small enough the worst that can happen is that he’ll have the world’s greatest headache, and probably be unable to keep his meals down for a day or so,” Daiva said, a wicked grin on her face. “But seeing as I don’t carry around rat poison, we’ll have to get some first. Dreyan, head over to my house and take the reddish powder on the left side of the top shelf. Be careful not to get it on your fingers.”

It took Dreyan a while to get back, and it was already dark when he returned. They went back inside, and Daiva instructed Lianna and Dreyan to hold the stranger down while she applied the herb. The stranger shivered as the powdered herb touched his wound, but to their surprise, did not thrash or scream. Daiva commended his strength, and then instructed Lianna to clean the wound in the morning and re-bandage it. After this, Daiva left.

“I’ll stay here and keep an eye on the stranger so you can rest,” Dreyan said after Daiva had left.

Lianna looked shocked. “You know it isn’t proper for you to stay here. We’re not family, and not wed!”

---

Back in Rennick, Daiva worried as she considered the stranger who had ended up at the farm. His clothing was not out of the ordinary, even if it was a bit ragged, but she could tell he was foreign to these lands. His pronunciation, while clearly affected by the local accent, sounded like that of an eastern nomad, rare as they were in these regions. Nomads carried spears, though, and they rarely traveled this far west. It had been well over thirty years since Daiva had last seen one.

The stranger's wound presented another cause for worry. Despite having been a Wise Woman for many years, she had never seen or read about any such wound. She thought about the name he had used to describe the beast that had caused the wound — *Ghiazhra*. The word was not of the Seven Villages, nor was it of Chaedin. Of course, the language spoken in Chaedin was a dialect of that spoken in the Seven Villages, or the other way around depending on your point of view.

Daiva remembered visiting Chaedin with her stepfather once. She had been a child of four, and the great city to the southwest had seemed magical. They had only been there for a few days, visiting an old friend of her father's, but she had spent much of that time visiting the various markets that dotted the city.

She tried remembering the languages of the foreign traders, comparing their words to the word *Ghiazhra*, but found no similarities. The closest thing she could think of was Northlandic. But unless the stranger in her nephew's barn had come through the Forbidden Lands, the wound could not have been caused by a Northlandic beast.

Something was off about the stranger, as if there were a secret he didn't want to reveal. The sooner he left, the better.

“I...” Lianna managed, caught off guard by the question. She had nearly forgotten what had happened upon meeting Brenor, and had been preoccupied with treating his wound and the matter of her pregnancy. But his words terrified her. She had heard men and women in Rennick speak of Destroyers in hushed voices. Destroyers were often used in tales to scare children. Destroyers were murderous fiends, and now this stranger named Brenor had claimed she was one.

Her voice trembling, she asked, “What do you know about these things?”

The stranger, Brenor, remained silent for a moment. He studied her. When he spoke, she believed she could hear a slight hint of sorrow in his voice. “Someone I knew had the Gift, so I know some things.”

“You knew a Destroyer, a bringer of darkness?” she said, her voice trembling. She would have run, had the stranger not been wounded. A man who befriended Destroyers and suffered wounds only curable by poison?

“‘Bringer of darkness’?” Brenor asked, and then laughed, clutching his aching wound in response to his body’s movement. “If anyone was ever the complete opposite of that, it was she. Just because Destroyers are capable of using their abilities to bring harm does not mean that they will.”

Lianna remained silent at this, considering his words. Was he telling the truth? Was she truly a Destroyer? She had had no conscious control over the explosion of air. It could just as well have been something else. Besides, Destroyers were feared, and she did not think the people of Rennick would understand. She even doubted Dreyan would understand.

“I need to be alone for a while,” she said, and moved toward the stable exit. At the door, she turned around and faced him. “Please try to remain quiet; if my father finds you we’re in trouble.”

As Lianna moved toward the house, she felt a shiver crawl up her spine. *Had she really moved the air?*

As Dreyan entered the living room of his parents' home, he was met with an angry stare.

"Do you have any idea how late the hour is?" his father asked him, his blond beard shaking as he spoke. Next to him, his mother looked relieved.

"I was worried," his mother said, as she walked over to him and took hold of his hands. "There have been rumors of wandering strangers, and when you didn't return we thought something had happened."

That struck Dreyan as rather ironic. Deciding it better to confront them straight away, he took a breath before he spoke. "Well, something has happened, but it has nothing to do with wandering strangers. Lianna is pregnant."

"What?!" his father exclaimed with a voice that contained both disbelief and fury. "I always knew she was trouble, but now she's gone and gotten herself with child without being wed?"

Dreyan met his father's stare as he put the pieces together. The realization hit his father, and he spoke, "You mean to tell us it's your child?"

"Yes," he said simply, and his mother gasped. She surprised him by embracing him and simply holding him, tears flowing down her cheeks. Dreyan did not know if the tears were from joy or sorrow, though he suspected it was a bit of both.

"I do not approve," his father spoke, at a loss for more eloquent words but eager to state his opinion.

"What would you have him do, cut the child out of her womb?" his mother spoke, taking Dreyan's side.

"Nothing quite so harsh, my dear, but he does not have to acknowledge being the father," Kovar said with clear anger in his words.

"You want me to abandon her when she needs me the most?" Dreyan asked. "What was it you said to me when I was younger? About unwed mothers being bad luck? About bastards shaming their families' names?"



---

"No shame will come to us if we deny our involvement, and Lianna is bad luck whether she is wed or not!" Kovar said.

"How can you say that about a woman you barely know? Do you still bear a grudge against her for dropping a bucket of water on your head when she was nine?" Dreyan asked, his voice filled with anger and disbelief.

"I say that because of what happened to her mother," Kovar said in a chilling voice, and they both fell silent. Dreyan's mother gasped again, giving his father a look like he had spoken a rare and foul curse.

After a couple of moments of silence, Dreyan asked, "What about her mother? She died a long time ago."

"And do you know how she died?" Kovar asked. Dreyan shook his head, and Kovar continued. "I used to be a good friend of Nerim as well as Chya, Lianna's mother. I was there when it happened.

"Nerim and I had been spending the evening at the tavern, and we were walking along to his farm singing, as we often did. Had we been less drunk we would probably have seen it sooner, but as it was, we did not notice the fire until we could see the glow coming from Nerim's farm. Realizing both Chya and Lianna might still be inside, we ran towards the farm as fast as our legs could carry us, only to find the building ablaze. Seeing a house burn is a terrifying sight, but when we saw no sign of Chya or Lianna, we still rushed into the burning building. We found Chya downstairs, collapsed and barely breathing, but strangely untouched by the fire. As Nerim tried to take her out of the building, I searched for Lianna. I found the door to her room ablaze, but managed to knock it down and get in," Kovar said, and then stopped for a moment to take a deep breath.

"She was sitting atop her bed, soaked in sweat. At first I thought it was the heat, but when I entered I was struck by the cold in the room. While the whole house was burning, her room alone was as cold as ice and barely touched by the flames.



---

than Dreyan had expected from him. Kovar did not linger, but walked out of the house, his face a thundercloud. Dreyan's mother, Masia, assured Dreyan that he would accept the situation eventually. Dreyan was not so sure. After kissing his mother good night, Dreyan went to bed, but it was a long time before he found sleep.

There, on top of her bed, was Lianna, soaked in sweat and her face strained with concentration,” Kovar told, shivering visibly at the thought of it. “The moment I picked her up from the bed, the cold vanished and the fire leapt into the room. Lianna fainted, and we barely escaped.

“I do not know if it was Lianna or Chya who started the flames, but I have always believed that Lianna herself was holding them back,” Kovar said.

“What are you saying, that she can control fire?” Dreyan asked. “That’s amazing, actually.”

“Don’t you see Dreyan? We have a name for people who control fire. They are called Destroyers. We never found out what caused the fire at Nerim’s farm. Was it a natural accident like a burning candle falling over? Or did Chya or Lianna start it, unable to control their Gift?” Kovar said, pausing to give Dreyan time to consider his words. When he spoke again, he looked directly at Dreyan, and asked, “What if Lianna is one of them? What if the child she carries is one of them? Will you sleep safely, knowing that your child can kill you in a moment of carelessness?”

Dreyan stayed silent for some time. He thought about the events earlier that day with the stranger in the barn. Lianna had been able to overpower him, despite his physical advantage. Had the wound weakened him enough to allow a farm girl to overtake him? Or had there been more to it? Dreyan recalled hearing a loud *bang* before he entered the barn. But even if Lianna was a Destroyer, did that change how he felt about her? He thought of her smiling at him while they sat together at the grove, of her peeking in his direction when he was at work in his father’s workshop, and realized that nothing could change how he felt about her.

“Even if she is, I will not abandon her, nor my own child,” Dreyan said. “And if you were in my shoes, you would do the same thing.”

“Perhaps,” Kovar said, which was more of an admission

CHAPTER 3

---

STANDOFF

Dreyan had woken up early the next morning, despite having gone to sleep only after considerable effort. Lianna's pregnancy was foremost in his mind, but the stranger's arrival lingered in his thoughts as well. After having heard the rumors of traveling strangers the day before, having one of them show up at Lianna's farm was a cause for worry indeed. He still did not understand how Lianna had overpowered the stranger, but found the idea of Lianna being a Destroyer ridiculous. She was a farmer's daughter, not a fire-summoning killer.

Feeling less than joyful, Dreyan attempted to immerse himself in his work, but he soon found that he had trouble staying focused. Something was not quite right today, but he could not figure out what until the moment his eyes caught sight of the dog walking down the main street of Rennick.

It was the biggest and meanest dog Dreyan had ever seen, and it walked along the main street, sniffing the ground as if in search of something. The people standing in its path moved out of the way. A short distance behind the dog, a tall man wearing mostly black leather clothes approached. It was difficult to make out his features due to the wide-brimmed black hat he wore, but the pale skin on his arms and face were out of place. Instinctively, Dreyan took hold of an iron rod standing close to his anvil, and tried steadying his breath for whatever was to come.

"Good day, young man," sounded the pleasant voice of the stranger. The dog had stopped sniffing, and stared at Dreyan. The stranger had also turned toward Dreyan. "I was wondering if you could help me."

"That depends," Dreyan managed despite his discomfort.

---

lightning speed, first pulling the mallet from Kovar's hands, and then, with his other hand, forcing him down to the ground. Within two seconds he had moved over to Dreyan and grabbed him by the throat.

"Let me repeat my question. Where is the man I am looking for?" the stranger asked while Dreyan struggled for breath. The man's voice had turned to a guttural growl, and his façade of pleasantness had vanished. When Dreyan did not answer, he continued.

"Why are you protecting him?" the stranger asked, sounding impatient. Dreyan felt the monstrous dog push its nose against him.

"You are protecting someone. A girl," the stranger said, and threw Dreyan against his anvil with a casual jerk of his arm.

Dreyan's vision swam as he hit the anvil. When he got back to his feet, Dreyan saw a second dog also entering the building, a smear of blood along its jaw.

"Yes, I'm afraid the old woman wasn't any more talkative than you are, but my friend here enjoyed hearing her scream," the stranger said, and Dreyan was filled with despair as he realized the stranger meant Daiva.

"It is the scarred warrior I want; tell me where he is and I'll give you and your girl a swift death," the stranger said, sounding indifferent. Dreyan realized he was still holding the iron rod, and tried to rush the stranger, but he took hold of his arms before his blows could land and threw him down again.

"Such spirit in you — it would be a shame to kill you. I will ask you one last time: where is the man I am looking for?" the stranger asked without the slightest bit of emotion. In response, Dreyan spit at him.

The stranger walked over to him and took hold of his neck again. Despite his struggles, he lifted Dreyan without effort.

"He is strong, don't you think?" the stranger asked, looking at his dogs, "I think we may have further use of him."

"If you'll pardon me saying so, you don't look like you are in need of a blacksmith's services."

"Indeed not. I am in fact looking for a man who passed through this town recently. He would be hard to miss: his face is covered with scars," the stranger said as he stepped closer to Dreyan. "He carries a large sword — a blacksmith such as yourself would not have missed such a weapon."

Dreyan paused. The man standing in front of him sounded pleasant enough, but there was something awkward about him that went beyond his pale skin and strange accent. The presence of the monstrous dog furthered Dreyan's discomfort. Still, Dreyan was not about to send him to Lianna's farm.

"I haven't seen any other strangers, I'm afraid. Though if I do see him, I could tell your friend you're looking for him," Dreyan asked in an attempt to lead the stranger away.

"Skayd," the man said, which Dreyan took to be his name. "And I very much doubt he'll turn back to this village."

The monstrous dog growled, and the stranger grinned, his voice clearly marking his amusement. "I wonder, though. If you haven't seen the man I am looking for, then why does your body carry his scent?"

A chill went up Dreyan's spine. Did the man know he had seen the scarred man? Was this some bluff? Could dogs remember scents that well?

"I think you should leave," someone said from behind the stranger, and Dreyan recognized the voice as belonging to his father. Kovar stood only a few feet away from the stranger named Skayd, his strong muscles tense as he held a large mallet, looking ready to strike.

"Gentlemen, there's no need for violence," Skayd said. "The man I am looking for has something that is rightfully mine. If you know where he is, then please tell me."

Dreyan's father stepped closer.

"You have exactly three seconds to leave, before I -" Kovar started, but could not finish. The stranger moved with