

CHAPTER ONE

A horn sounded, low and forlorn, echoing through the clustered wooden hovels in the tiny village of Orvet like the mournful cry of a wounded animal. Bria gazed out the open doorway of Muddleby's Tavern and Inn, surprised to hear a lord's call so far from any stronghold.

"What was that?" asked her Uncle Jezer, frowning.

Muddleby the innkeeper, a short, lean man with wiry arms and a nervous tick in his cheek, mopped his sweaty brow with a soiled rag and grunted, "A herald from Lord Dorsy rode into town just before you came down from your room. That's him summoning the townsfolk to hear him out. Judging from his manner, he bears ill news." He slid a steaming bowl of stew in front of Bria and glanced at her, his expression as soft as his weathered features could allow. "Sorry to hear about your father's passing," he said. "He was a fair man and people hereabouts will miss him. At least he and your mother can be together now after all these years."

Bria didn't trust herself to speak, simply nodding in thanks for the kind words. She and her father had usually traveled through Orvet at least twice a year, and she had fond memories of the tough but kindly innkeeper. He had taught her how to play Foursies in dice as a child, and slipped her muffins crammed with fruit before the caravan left for the next destination. Although her father usually couldn't afford to stay at the inn, if a room were open Muddleby would often give it to them and refuse payment with a shake of his calloused hands. Even now, she could see her bowl of stew brimmed with far more vegetables than those he had placed in front of Vantry and her Uncle Jezer.

"It's not much, but the carrots are fresh," Muddleby promised. "My wife will bring out warm bread in a bit." He shuffled away and tossed another thick log into the massive fireplace. Flaming cinders exploded out into the room, flitting upwards towards the ancient rough-hewn timbers of the smoke-blackened ceiling like spinning fireflies.

Bria turned to her uncle. "Why would a herald summon the townspeople after nightfall?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Uncle Jezer shrugged. He grabbed a rough wooden spoon with a thick hand and leaned over his bowl, slurping up the watery stew with gusto. Bria's nose wrinkled at the stale odor of wine he exuded. Stew dribbled down his blubbery lips, and without slowing pace he wiped at his jowls with the sleeve of his robe.

Vantry scowled into his bowl, the lines on his high brow furrowed, thin lips pressed together tightly in a perpetual frown. “Wilted vegetables soaking in greasy water,” he complained as he stirred the stew.

“It’s tastier than it looks,” Jezer said with a belch, almost done with his bowl. His close-set eyes, pressed into his puffy reddened cheeks, greedily sized up Bria’s portion. Her rumbling stomach reminded her that she hadn’t eaten since an early breakfast. Muddleby’s wife bustled out from the kitchen and placed a long loaf of dark rye and a crock of butter in front of them, but her eyes were troubled and she did not even look up to greet them. She moved away as the horn outside sounded again, somber and troubling. Bria pushed her bowl to Jezer, who grunted in gratitude.

Soon townsfolk began to arrive, their worn shawls and ragged cloaks wrapped tightly against the damp mist coiling around the village. Bria recognized a few from her arrival earlier that day. They had seemed friendly enough then, but tonight their expressions were hostile and cold, suspiciously eying Bria and her companions as if they had interrupted their peace. The nervous townsfolk crowded up close to the smoky warmth of the cobblestone fireplace and spoke in whispers.

Over fifty people packed the stifling room when the herald finally entered. He carried a lord’s horn, with a lute strapped overtop the breastplate that swallowed his boyish frame. The instruments looked far more natural on the youth than the sword hanging awkwardly at his side. His surcoat was tucked into his belt to keep the edges from dragging underfoot, and even the listing helm capping his curls seemed made for another. Bria quickly glanced away when he caught her eyes upon him.

“Good people of Orvet,” he greeted them somberly, his voice strong and resolute. Blond fuzz stood on end along the herald’s lip. “Loyal folk and bountiful providers to the Confederation, I bring you grim tidings. A fortnight past, High Lord Hinrik Biel was killed.”

There was a collective gasp, and curses were spat out from the men at the back of the room. A grizzled man wearing an eye-patch standing near Bria grunted, “How? Speak up lad!”

The herald bristled and tried to stand tall beneath his heavy armor. “All I can tell you is that the dishonorable Thrall assassinated our High Lord in the sleeping hours. Lord Commander Aidan Biel has assumed the High Lordship and returned from the army to rule in his brother’s place.”

Bria’s uncle slurred out, “Damn the Thrall! Cowards to the last. Just like at Pinixer!” A number of people sitting near him echoed his sentiment. Bria glanced around at the wrinkled and weathered faces of the villagers, their lips pursed in angry lines like gashes across the dirty faces. The man standing across from Bria clenched and unclenched his rough hands, as if readying himself to throttle the Thrall assassin.

The herald raised his hand to silence the crowd, “By the order of our Lord Dorsy, in light of the assassination of the High Lord and the threat to the Confederation, the village of Orvet is commanded to offer up an additional levy of ten men for the army, of able bodies and mental capability for military training.”

“Is there news of the war?” the grizzled elder asked. “Do the Thrall march on Travis?”

The herald wiped beads of sweat from his brow with an oversized sleeve. “No. The Thrall do not dare face the Golden Tide on the plain. Our army holds firm.”

“Yet still another ten men!” another man groaned. “This harsh news saddens us all, but we have already sent over forty men in levies this year. We gladly do we all we can to support the war, but we can barely manage the harvest with those who remain.”

There were murmurs of agreement, but another voice objected, “We’ll make due, Horas!” and “If it takes Orvet men to beat back the damned Thrall, let’s all go!”

The young herald slipped the lute from off his shoulder. He cleared his throat and walked toward Bria's table. With a sly smile he plucked at the strings and said, "Those who wonder if they should fight, remember who you leave to protect."

He began to sing in a clear, strong voice and Bria felt the room's eyes fall upon her. The herald stepped away and began a rousing rendition of the "Pillage of Pinixer," recounting how the Thrall had stolen the mountain castle of Pinixer in the dead of night just six months earlier, slaughtering the Griffin troops they had captured. Everyone had heard some version of the tale, but never so expertly performed.

Five young men, laborers by their dusty clothes and deeply-tanned faces, quickly rose and marched to the front of the room, beaming broadly and congratulating one another on their bravery. Several other older men shuffled forward as well, resolution on their grimy faces even as their wives shed quiet tears. Seeing no more volunteers and needing two more men, the herald glanced around the room. Only greybeards and a group of boys younger than the herald remained. Two of the boys, eyes bright and excited, began to stand up, but a couple older men pushed them down and took their place at the front of the room, resignation in their eyes.

The room erupted with cheers, but to Bria their voices were filled with tense desperation. The herald sang a verse vowing that High Lord Biel's men, riding on the backs of fierce flying griffins, would retake the castle from the hated Thrall. The crowd roared, though all knew no griffins would come. None had been seen in generations, much less ridden into battle.

Under the table a hand squeezed her thigh. Vantry! Without looking at him, she smacked his hand away. It immediately returned, creeping quickly up her leg, his thumb rubbing against her skin. He stared at her with his oddly emotionless eyes, a thin smile plastered on his pale face. Smiling never worked for Vantry, it made him look ill.

"Stop it!" she hissed.

She glanced at her Uncle Jezer. Grease from the stew glistened on his lips and chin, and wine stains streaked down the front of his robe. He was of little enough help even when he was sober. She reached under the table and pinched down hard on Vantry's wrist, cutting his skin between her fingernails. With a curse, he snatched his hand away. He licked at the trickle of blood as his thin lips curved up in that ugly smile again.

Bria shuddered and pushed away from the table as the herald finished his song. The townsfolk clustered around the ten volunteers, patting shoulders, wishing them luck, and promising to keep their fields and homes in order until they returned.

Uncle Jezer clutched at Bria's arm, breathing strong fumes of wine into her face as he called out over the din, "How lucky we are! What a voice that boy has!" With a belch, he added, "That reminds me, I should catch the innkeep. With this crowd about he'll likely overpay for a few extra barrels of watered wine to replace his stock."

"I will be in our room," Bria said, in no mood to witness his swindling.

"As will I," Vantry said as he stood up. A young barmaid came to collect their empty mugs and Vantry grabbed her waist playfully. "Bria," he said. "Our serving girl here has such long, dark curly hair – much likes yours was before you cut it so short in that boyish style. You should grow it long again and shape it with pins like she does. It would set off those gorgeous blue eyes." Vantry nuzzled the barmaid's neck and tickled her. The barmaid giggled as Bria stood up.

"Stop it!" Bria snapped. "I like my hair like this."

Vantry's hands moved further up the woman's waist. "You should ask her to sew a more womanly robe for you as well. Like this little tart you've a nice shape to you, but those oversized men's shirts don't do you justice. You and I both know you could be far more beautiful than any of these farm wenches. You could be the envy of every man in the room . . ."

The serving girl elbowed him hard in the ribs and glared at Bria as she walked away. How was this her fault? She had no interest in drawing men's envy, least of all Vantry's. His unwanted attentions had caused her to cut her hair short and choose these bulky clothes.

"How can you even think such things when we have just heard that the High Lord has been assassinated?"

Vantry shrugged, "Another will take his place." He nodded to the volunteers, who drank a toast to the new High Lord. "Regardless, those poor fools will suffer the worse for it."

Her uncle called for Vantry to join him, and Vantry reluctantly stalked off to help corner the innkeep. Fearing that Vantry might slip away from her uncle and catch her alone in the room, Bria followed the crowd outside to catch a breath of the cool night air. She stood on the creaky dilapidated porch, her breath steaming out in a cloud of mist that mixed with the late evening fog. The villagers called out farewells to one another and disappeared down the muddy roads Bria knew so well. The two main roads crossing the Confederation met here in Orvet, near the center of the lands. All her life, and up until her father's death early this year, she had traveled these routes with him, selling their wares at small farming villages like this one.

The heavy scent of manure and hay hung in the heavy, damp air. Through the haze she could just make out the burning braziers illuminating the temple of Belanus not fifty yards distant in the center of the village. Hearing Vantry's forced laugh inside, she hugged herself against the night chill. His interest in her had definitely increased. Her uncle's only redeeming quality was that, whenever possible, he preferred to have them stay at inns. However, he paid only for a single room for the three of them, and although she waited until the lantern was extinguished to prepare for bed, Vantry's leering eyes always sought out her naked silhouette. It did no good to complain to her uncle about his assistant's advances – he loved Vantry like a son. Two nights ago Jezer had even suggested that she should consider Vantry a suitor! She shivered again.

Bria stepped carefully down the muddy street toward the burning braziers. Perhaps she could say a prayer for her father at the temple. He would have called her to his side to help negotiate the price with the innkeep. Jezer ignored her presence entirely. But that was the way things had been since Jezer had taken over her father's routes.

As she approached the temple doors, painted yellow to mimic the solid golden ones of the city temples, a horrid rancid scent, unmistakably out of place, wafted around her. It was not a civilized smell. Not a human smell.

A horse whinnied in the fog behind her. She heard a clink of metal and spun around. The dark looming shape of a horse and rider materialized through the fog, along with another figure on foot beside them. Bria stumbled backwards, her foot slipping in a puddle. She fell to the ground as a spear thunked into the temple door behind her, the shaft shuddering back and forth above her. The rider glowered over her, his shaven pate gleaming in the light of the braziers, cold eyes focused on her as if she were an insect for him to swat. He pointed at her with a metal rod of some sort and yelled out in a cruel, guttural voice. He spurred his horse off into the mist as Bria scrambled to her feet. The other figure jumped forward, shouted out in same harsh language and waved a gleaming short sword. Bria reached for the hidden sheath strapped to her calf and withdrew a thin dagger in her trembling hand. She backed up against the door as her assailant stepped into the light. At five feet tall it was eye to eye with her, but the similarities ended there. Rough pieces of leather were tied haphazardly over its furred body to serve as armor. A pair of tusks jutted out from either side of a mouth full of jagged, misshapen teeth, and the ferocious face was covered with coarse fur like a wild boar. Her eyes widened. A tuskar? Here?

There was a crash of glass as the temple windows shattered, and a second later a clap of thunder rocked the structure. Heat and flame blew open the temple doors from within and sent Bria sprawling to the ground again.

The tuskar leapt forward. She tried to jab at him, but the creature smacked her wrist with flat of its sword. Her blade flew from her grasp and pain flared up her arm. Cries, shouts, and the clashing of metal erupted from all around the village. The tuskar fell on top of her, pinning her down beneath his knees. Bria nearly gagged at the stench of raw spoiled meat and acrid sweat. The dark fur concealed any recognizable expression, but Bria could see the eyes, red-rimmed and filled with animal hatred. A tattoo was branded onto the tuskar's face, a circle of some sort, like a third eye on its forehead.

"You die now," the creature growled at her, spraying spittle into her face. She struggled under the beast, screaming for help. Its eyes gleamed; mouth twisted in a feral grin, a stream of drool suspended from one of its sharp, yellowed tusks.

The tuskar choked off her cries with one hand and lifted its sword for the killing stroke. Suddenly it grunted in surprise as a glistening arrowhead sprouted from the middle of its chest. Its sword dropped from a lifeless hand and the creature fell into the mud beside her. Bria sobbed in relief and kicked the heavy corpse away from her. She scrambled through the rutted street and retrieved her dagger. She could not lose her father's blade.

Her mind raced in a panicked frenzy. What were tuskars doing in the middle of the Confederation? Tuskars lived in the forests like wild animals. A handful might raid farmers on the edges of the realm and steal cows or sheep from the herds, but they didn't craft swords. They didn't attack whole villages. And no rumors claimed that they could talk!

She choked back her tears and looked back toward the inn. Shadowy figures raced through the fiery streets, the shouts of tuskars and men intermixed with indistinguishable cries of pain. Three tuskars chased an old man out of a burning building across from the temple. They slashed at the man's head and arms, toppling him. He lay helpless on the ground as one of the tuskars leapt upon him, gashing his neck with its sharp tusks.

The tuskar stood over the old man and shouted out a victorious cry, but its bellow ended in a gurgle. An arrow sliced through its neck, and two more shafts skewered its companions. They were rapid, precise shots. Bria spotted the bowman on the deck of the inn surrounded by several cloaked figures fighting back against a swarm of tuskars. She stood and stumbled through the mud towards the inn, waving her arms and crying for him not to shoot.

By the time she reached the porch the tuskars around the cloaked figures were dead. She stepped gingerly around the bodies and then heard a chorus of vicious barks behind her. The small figure with the bow cried out in an odd, lilting voice, "Too many! Inside!" Bria rushed into the tavern with the bowman and his companions close behind her. They slammed the door shut as snarls of anger erupted outside.

The bowman flipped down the hood of his mottled brown and green cloak. Bria gasped. His features were narrow, his face dark tan, eyes bright green with no hint of pupils. A thin patch of fine hair the color of forest moss covered his head. Jamari? They rarely came to the human settlements, and she had never seen one herself. Staring at the three others readying their weapons, she suddenly realized that all of them with her were Jamari. First tuskars and now Jamari? What by the gods was going on here?

One of the Jamari, who carried a narrow, curved blade, hissed out an order and Bria shrank back against the wall in terror. Though they had been fighting tuskars, these creatures were no less foreign to her than the monsters outside.

Boots pounded down the hallway from the sleeping rooms and the young herald ran out clutching his sword. His eyes went wide with shock as he saw the Jamari. He raised his sword as if to charge.

"Not them!" Bria cried to the herald. She pointed at the door. "Tuskars! Outside!"

A moment later the wall shook as the marauders threw their bodies against the door and splintered it down the center. Bria stood frozen. Dark furry hands yanked the broken door from its hinges. One of the Jamari stepped between her and the doorway. “*Ovirean elsiras*,” he hissed, crouching in a fighting stance.

With a ragged shout, several tuskar burst through the fractured doorway. The first pair fell dead before their second step, clutching at Jamari arrows protruding from their chests. Others rushed in. A tuskar charged the young herald, swinging a short sword with incredible swiftness. The youth awkwardly countered the tuskar’s blow with his own steel, but the momentum of the creature’s charge sent them both crashing to the floor in front of Bria. Unable to wield his sword with the tuskar on top of him, the herald grappled desperately for control of the tuskar’s shorter blade. The monster grasped the young soldier’s forehead with one of its hairy paws and slammed his head against the wooden floor until his eyes glazed over and his body went limp. With barely a pause, the tuskar plunged its sword into the youth’s chest. Dark blood fountained up into the tuskar’s face as it roared out in triumph.

Bria turned to flee down the hall as more tuskar poured into the inn. One of the Jamari called out in a strange, sing-song language, and a flash of white light filled the room. Magic! A clatter of weapons and bodies hit the floor. Bria glanced back and saw five tuskar lying prone at the door of the tavern. The priests vilified the Jamari for using unnatural magic power, but she had never thought it real. She gaped as two of the Jamari slid their blades across each fallen tuskar’s throat, coating the floor with black, spreading blood.

Bria knelt next to the twitching body of the dying young herald at her feet, his terrified eyes wide, mouth gasping as blood bubbles caught on the fuzz on his upper lip. His life leaked out around the edges of the steel jutting up from his chest as his hands clawed weakly at the pommel, unable to grasp it. The twitching abruptly stopped as his head tipped over to the side, his eyes losing their focus and staring through her as if he saw the door to the afterlife opening behind her.

Finished with their grisly task, the Jamari ran through the shattered doorway to join the battle outside. The scent of burning homes drifted into the tavern as the fires spread outside. Trembling, Bria stared at the carnage around her. The deep throat slashes on the sprawled tuskar looked like wide, wet smiles. Dark streams of blood ran and collected in the uneven gaps between the floor planks. Outside she heard a man shout, “They run! After them!” Terrified to be alone with the dead, Bria ran down the corridor and up the stairs. Nie and Poral, her uncle’s two caravan guards, stood nervously outside the door of her uncle’s room, swords in hand.

“What are you doing here?” she screamed at them. “Tuskar are killing people outside!”

“Your uncle said to guard the door,” Poral stammered as sweat ran down the sides of his bulbous, shaved head. Both guards were large men, but most of their bulk consisted of her uncle’s wine and bread. They licked dry lips as they glanced behind her down the darkened stairway.

“Bria?” The door opened a crack and Jezer’s fat face peeked out. Bria stumbled through the door into the room. He and Vantry were dragging a heavy table over to block the door. “Gods, I was terrified for you!” Jezer panted as he slammed the door behind her. “Did I see true? Tuskar?”

“Yes,” Bria sobbed. “One almost killed me – I was saved by a Jamari!” Tears flowed unbidden down Bria’s cheeks, “Lord Dorsy’s herald was killed right in front of me – stabbed in the chest! His eyes--,”

“Horrible,” Jezer agreed as he tugged at the heavy table.

Bria collapsed on the edge of her bed, her body trembling uncontrollably. She closed her eyes, but couldn’t blot out the image of the dying eyes of the boyish herald, his head lying in the glistening pool of his own blood.

They sat silently in the room as the battle raged outside. Strange tuskar cries filled the air. Bria cried out as an arrow slammed into the wooden shutter over their window. Gradually, the

clashing of steel and cries of pain gave way to the voices of villagers shouting out for aid. Poral banged on the door and called out, "The innkeep says the attackers have run off!"

"Thank the gods for that," Uncle Jezer gasped, mopping at his forehead with a rag. "Vantray, perhaps you and I should see what is happening."

Vantray nodded and then pointed to the front of Bria's robe. "Is that blood?"

Bria glanced down at the crimson smear that covered her. She hadn't noticed it before.

"I want to come with you," Bria begged, ignoring Vantray.

"You'll be safer here," Jezer said. The fear had sobered him, and his eyes were clear and determined. "Stay here and clean yourself up." Bria started to object, but Jezer cut her off. "I forbid you to leave this room until Vantray or I tell you it is safe. Gods, girl, tuskars attack in the middle of the damned realm! You claim Jamari saved you! Nothing about this cursed night is safe and you will do as I say."

They left and Bria slammed the table against the door behind them. They treat me like a child, she thought, infuriated.

She crept over to the window and carefully unlatched the shutter. Burning buildings illuminated mist below. Villagers tended to sprawled figures in the street, but few sounds now rose above the crackling of the flames. Bria latched the shutter again and returned to her bed. She removed her soiled robe and splashed cold water from the washbasin on her face. She scrubbed at the skin until her cheeks and forehead felt numb. After slipping on another robe, she pulled the table aside and cracked open the door. Raised voices echoed down the hall.

". . . to the new High Lord *and* to Lord Dorsy," a man's voice shouted. "They both must be informed of this foul attack! Never before have we faced such a threat!"

There was a shout of agreement but another man's voice cautioned, "Of course word must be sent to Lord Dorsy but we cannot spare anyone to go to Biel. With the fiends out there, who's to say anyone could even make it to Biel? What if the devils return to finish us off? There are few enough of us left."

The first man insisted urgently, "The High Lord must be told."

"I am the village elder. The danger is too great to send any of our men to Biel. We will send a man to Lord Dorsy and defend ourselves until he sends help."

A forced cough Bria had come to recognize as her uncle's interrupted them. "If I may be of assistance, my caravan is headed in the direction of Biel," he uncle said.

The room fell silent for a few moments. The village elder replied, "You aren't of the village . . . but it would be a kind favor if you would pass along this news to the High Lord."

"We'll leave in the morning. However, we need provisions. I hadn't expected to leave so suddenly . . . if you could perhaps help us in some way . . ."

"Of course," the village elder said. "For your kindness, whatever you require."

Bria could hear the pleasure in her uncle's voice. "That would be most appreciated. I assure you that the new High Lord will be advised as quickly as possible to your plight."

Bria could only shake her head in disgust. Since her father had died, she had long hoped that business would take them back to the capital city of the Confederation, but until now Uncle Jezer had gone out of his way to avoid it. It had taken an opportunity to fleece a devastated town of supplies to drive him southward.

The meeting was breaking up. She closed the door and sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. A few minutes later her uncle and Vantray returned.

"Bria," her uncle said. "We leave in the morning. We're taking word of this massacre to Biel for the villagers." Vantray gave her one of his crooked smiles. Uncle Jezer chuckled. "And they are giving us free provisions for our trouble."

"Wouldn't it be faster if they sent someone by horse?"

Her uncle rolled his eyes. “That is precisely why I had you stay in the room. Of course a horse would reach Biel faster, but if these villagers are willing to provision our entire caravan we will gladly make the trip!” He glanced at Vantry and shrugged his shoulders.

Trying to change the subject, Bria asked, “How bad was the attack?”

Vantry said, “At least twenty of the yokels are slain, maybe more, and dozens of hovels put to the torch. Some said the beasts used oil – very organized.”

“Did anyone mention the Jamari I saw?”

“No,” Vantry replied. “You must have imagined them. It is strange enough to have tuskars about, but Mossmen here as well? Impossible.”

“I saw them,” Bria insisted. “Just as the stories describe them. They spoke in a strange tongue, and with a word they caused tuskars to fall unconscious to the ground. They slit their throats and I ran back here.”

“Mossmen are no less savage than tuskars,” Vantry said. “Likely your pretty throat would have been next had you not run.”

Bria doubted that. The Jamari had definitely protected her. Unbidden, the image of the dead young herald returned to her mind. Twenty others dead as well? She turned on Jezer. “You would take advantage of them with twenty of their neighbors just murdered?”

Uncle Jezer opened his mouth as if to speak, but he merely huffed and headed over to his bed. As he packed his belongings he announced, “Bria, you will never learn the art of negotiation. If you do not have the advantage, your opponent does.”

“Must everyone be an opponent?” Bria asked.

Her uncle kept shoving clothes into his satchel. “It is a simple fact. If the village elder had not provisioned us, the local merchant would have charged me extravagantly for those same items. With the war on he knows there are few enough villages between here and Castle Biel with goods for sale. Don’t fool yourself that he would conduct business any differently than I.”

Bria could not dispute that. She knew that many merchants were of her uncle’s sort. “My father would not do business that way.”

Her uncle stopped packing and turned toward her, his bloodshot eyes narrowed. “That is true,” he agreed. “And you lived poorly for it. Your father frequently traded away the majority of his profits in the mistaken idea of being fair. In twenty years of caravanning, he could never afford any more than his ten sickly mules and that tiny hovel that you lived in. I often had to loan him money for food before winter was done! He left you penniless and a burden for me to take care of when he died.”

The words against her father stung, more so because she knew there was some truth to them. Bria regretted bringing him into the argument. Her uncle, his meaty hands aside his ample waist, continued, “Before this bloody war began I had twice the success of my brother in half as many years. In that time I have a larger house, triple the number of mules, and can afford bodyguards.”

“You *need* bodyguards,” Bria said, unable to stop herself. “Because you cheat everyone and they hate you for it. And so do I.”

“You impudent little wench!” Her uncle’s face reddened as he lurched towards her. She leapt for the door but he grabbed her shoulders roughly and spun her around to face him. His eyes bulged and spittle flew from his mouth as he raged, “I have honored your pathetic father’s last request to instruct you in business, despite the fact that like him you have no aptitude for it. And you repay me with words like that?”

Her uncle’s fingers clawed into her shoulders. He had never been this angry with her, but it had been building for weeks. She had never been one to hold her tongue – never a problem for her father – but her uncle only wanted obedience from her.

“I . . . I do not hate you,” she sobbed, trying to placate her angry uncle. “I hate the way you behave. The way you cheat people.”

Her uncle slapped her heavily across the face, pitching her back on her bed. She clutched her throbbing cheek, speechless.

“It is business!” her uncle roared. “The way of success and you will not judge me for it!”

He was breathing heavily, but some of the anger had gone out of him. He rubbed his thick palms together, as seemingly shocked with his attack on her as she had been. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Vantry stretched out on his bed, wearing that curdled smile of his.

Jezer turned back to his packing as Bria rolled to the side, tears burning at the corners of her eyes again. Her father had wanted her to learn how to trade, how to deal fairly with people as he had done. Jezer would never teach her those things. They were foreign to him.

This night, her life, everything was wrong. The news of the High Lord’s assassination, the tuskars, Vantry . . . it was all a horrible nightmare. She wished she could wake up and find that her father was still alive. There would be no war with Thrall, no rampaging hordes of tuskars, no Jamari using strange magic and slitting throats, no burning hovels and dead villagers.

She slipped under the covers of her bed. Stomach roiling, she knew that when she woke up the nightmare would still be real. But they were finally going to Biel. She would leave her awful uncle and find Roryander. He would know what to do.

Bria pulled her blanket up over her head and turned her face into the pillow. She would not let Vantry or her uncle see the tears coursing down her cheeks.