

Aelon

Chapter 1

It was a lovely afternoon. The sun glittered off of the green grass. Aelon was just coming in from the wheat fields for a midday lunch. Guiding Lither, his dappled grey plow horse, he headed towards the small cottage surrounded with small wild bluebells and lilies. He unbuckled Lither's bridle, and unhooked her leash. Gently patting the mare's head, he gently murmured, "There you go, girl." She snorted, feeling patronized, then meandered towards the meadow in the back of the house. Aelon shook his head. Smiling, he stepped into the house.

"Ah, there you are, Aelon! I was wondering when you'd come in!" His mother smiled, looking up from the kitchen table where she was slicing a roll of brown bread. Already, there were two rolls out, filled with cheese and a small portion of meat. "Here's one for you, give the other to your father." She glanced toward the other room, looked at Aelon a second, then whispered, "Try not to upset him, it's one of his bad days."

Aelon nodded. Cautiously, he quietly entered into the living room. There sat his father, smoking a pipe. Light from the open window by the fireplace glinted off the man's long grey hair and dark eyes.

"Father, I've brought you some food," he softly plied.

The man turned his head and took the roll, placing it on his lap. "Dark days... we will all fall, fall fall fall... I have seen it. I have seen it, boy! They may call me a fool, but I have seen that darkness! She will return, and kill us all."

In times past, Aelon had tried to object to his father's dark prophecies. But over the years, he realized that it was pointless. "But father!" he would object. "Even if the Dark Sorceress returns, even if we all are going to get killed, why dwell on it?" But his father would go on

headlessly of whatever Aelon had said, usually much more virulently. So now, Aelon just let his father continue on with his mutterings. “Sorcery... Aelon, beware the darkness! Beware the smooth words of the darkness. Let yourself not be corrupted, do not feel for any lost in it! Ah, sweet hatred! Hate all the dark creatures. Hate them! Reject them! Feel no sympathy!”

At this moment his mother swished in. “Aelon, a moment?”

“Of course, mother,” he replied, inclining his head slightly. “Do excuse me, father.”

He followed his mother back into the small kitchen. *I really should expand this kitchen when we have enough money for wood*, he thought to himself. There certainly were trees in the area, but he had never been skilled with the axe. His wood planks had always been uneven and crooked. The only thing his planks had been good enough for was the horse stable.

“My dear,” his mother smiled, breaking him out of his reverie, “why don’t you go visit Lila? I’ll finish up in the field.”

Aelon smiled brightly. “Thank you, mother,” he grinned, kissing her.

She smiled and watched him as he grew smaller and faded into the distance, heading towards the village center. As he munched on his roll, walking on the edge of the corn fields, he thought about the town’s history. Sanere was a relatively boring town, part of a small country known as Einthar, generally a farming country. They had been at peace for forty three years. Forty three years ago, the Sorceress had been defeated and driven out of the country. Some said she would return, however, that she was gathering dark creatures to her side, biding her time. Aelon’s father, a self proclaimed prophet, often traveled throughout the land, preaching about impending doom to any who would listen. Aelon and his mother tried to stop his father from taking such journeys (and thus saving the family money), but as the title owner of the land, all money was rightfully his.

It was a peaceful day, with the gentle breeze sifting through the corn fields, rustling the long, heavy leaves. The sound seemed to sink into him, calming his mind, removing the encounter with his father. It was like wheat chaff, flying off into that wind. There was something healing about the outdoors. They were only a mile away from the town, but it still felt sometimes as if they were far away from civilization, surrounded by nature. Sanere was a simple village, made up of around 200 people. Most of them lived within the town, although there was a significant number of farmers. Others sold things such as clothing, furniture, animals, and bread.

His boots clacked on the cobblestone as he passed the weaver's house. "Well if it isn't Prophet Jaren's son!"

"Greetings, good Pelion!" He smiled, walking by.

A man came out from a side alleyway.

"Ah, dear Aelon!" He said, running up to Aelon. Pieces of straw clung to his torn clothes and greying, disheveled hair.

Aelon groaned internally. He forced a smile. "Greetings, good Heckron!"

"My dear boy, do you have a coin to spare for a poor man? You would not believe the misfortune I have been dealt!"

"Misfortune?"

"Indeed! I worked an entire morning with Horsecarer Penten, but he refused to pay me when I had finished!"

Aelon immediately recognized this as a lie. Horsecarer Penten was an extremely honest man. There were really only two possibilities. Either Heckron had been sleeping in Penten's barn and been kicked out in the morning, or Heckron had done such a horrendous job that Penten had no reason to pay him.

“Really?” Said Aelon, pretending to be surprised. *Let’s see if I can’t catch him in his lie.*

“I always thought Horsecarer Penten to be quite an honest man.”

“Oh he certainly puts on such airs! But he is an *evil* man, dear Aelon! I worked so very hard! This entire afternoon!”

“Afternoon? I thought you worked this morning?”

“Oh yes, both!”

“Ah, I see. And what did you do?”

“I cleaned out the stables. How the sun beat upon my poor old back!”

“But good Heckron, aren’t the stables enclosed, and thus in the shade?”

“Oh, I was shoveling the piles already outside!”

“But if they were outside, why would you need to shovel them?”

Heckron turned red, but continued unflaggingly, “How in the name of the sky’s fine stars should I know why Horsecarer Penten wants anything moved?” He cried out, waving his arms.

Aelon laughed, “Here, sir, a coin for your fascinating tale.”

Heckron snatched it, greedily. “Well thank you! At least some have charity for the unfortunate! A million good tidings your way!” He skittered off back down the alley way.

Aelon continued down the road. Ah, there was the baker’s shop. He opened the door. A little bell rang.

A tall, slim man walked out, dusting flour off his apron.

“Ah, Aelon, what a pleasant surprise!” He smiled slightly, a hint of irritation in the lines around his mouth. Baker Beren had never really forgiven him for the lightning incident.

“Lila!” He called. “Aelon is here!”

There was a sound of running.

“Aelon!”

A tall girl with long silver hair ran in. Sometimes Aelon missed her dark waves. He could still see her running through the young corn field, her hair plastered to her face, the rain pouring down. He could hear the loud, cracking thunder. He could see the flash, striking her, feel the electricity running through him. The terror, running through him, more painful than the electricity. He could still see her falling. He thought she was dead. The rain blinded his vision as he flew, faster than he had ever run, tripping over a fallen corn plant, scrambling through the mud, clawing up... running, running, running, but never fast enough. Bending over her, calling her name over and over again. She lived. He lived. Her hair would never be brown again.

“Aelon!” She repeated, smiling widely. Her bright eyes glistened with joy. Sprinting over she grabbed his arm. He smiled down at her. “How I’ve missed you!” She continued. “It’s such a lovely day. Oh, do say we shall go for a walk!”

“I missed you too. Of course we shall go for a walk! How about the arbor gardens?”

“Yes, where else?”

“Father...”

“Yes, yes, go, go.” Baker Beren, gasped, exasperated, throwing his hands up. He smiled a little more. He couldn’t stay irritated for too long. Aelon was, after all, a good man, despite the fact that he’d caused his daughter’s hair to turn white.

And so, with Lila clutching his arm affectionately, Aelon left the bakery. Together they headed toward the garden on the outskirts of town. At the entrance of the gardens, a small box hung. Aelon dropped two copper coins into it. Farmer Retsor’s gardens were not especially exotic. In fact, they were rather simple. However, they were still a relaxing area that many of the townspeople used to relax after a hard day of work. The light filtered through the dark green oak

trees, cool and soft. They meandered to the middle of the garden, where Aelon's favorite tree stood. It was a small wisteria, its purple blooms trailing long and full down the branches, weighing the boughs down. Together, they sat on the weathered bench in the shade. If only they had known what was coming.

Chapter 2

Six months later.

The only coherent thought Aelon had was that his father had been right after all. For there, despite all his doubts, stood the Sorceress. While the majority of people had scoffed at Jaren's prophecies and lived their lives as usual, the Dark Sorceress had built an army. The borders of Einthar, unprepared for war, had not stood a chance. Now she traveled from town to town, terrorizing each one, exerting her authority. It felt like a nightmare. The monster from under the bed was real. She spoke.

"Ah, dear little townspeople. I have tried my best to be gracious, but even one so generous as I must seek payment. A queen requires gifts, after all." She stopped pacing to smirk at the crowd. "I will give you a choice. Let's call it an experiment of mine. Your choice, dear people. Either one of you will be killed... or one of you must consent to a lifetime of imprisonment under my watch."

Silence fell thick and heavy over the group, terror like a fleece. The crowd stood wordless, words caught in their throats.

"Oh, oh, what shall it be? I can hardly wait, for so thick is the anticipation!" She laughed.

Even under such mocking, they still stood silent, like ghosts.

"Well then. Let's see... I'll take the most pathetic scum you have. Wouldn't want to disturb the delicate symbiosis of the worker bees by taking a baker or a weaver." She paced in

front of the line of people. The Dark Sorceress stopped in front of Heckron. “Ah, the perfect subject for my experiment. Definitely the most pathetic specimen. Perfect. Come now, guard, take this one,” She said glowingly, pointing at Heckron.

Heckron screamed as the guards dragged him, struggling. “I’m innocent! Innocent! Please, please! I have children! A wife! A farm!” He blatantly lied.

“Oh, not only worthless to society, but a coward too! Ah, this gets better all the time!”

She drew her sword and held it over Heckron’s head. “My dear, dear people, let me rid you of this little worm. Be grateful; I shall deliver you from the sucking leech. Never say I was a worthless queen. Look! I already improve your lives.”

Aelon could barely breathe. The blood pounded in his ears. He couldn’t let this happen. It didn’t matter what Heckron’s worth was in society, he was still a *person*. He moved to step forward.

His mother grabbed his arm. “No, Aelon!” She hissed.

But he was determined. He stepped out of the crowd. “I’ll take the imprisonment.” He flinched at his own words. It sounded as if he were ordering bread from Baker Beren.

The Dark Sorceress moved her sword away from Heckron’s neck and looked at Aelon. “How... predictable. The young hero steps forward to protect the wretched scum.” She smiled widely, her teeth showing. “But dear hero, don’t you think *I* should be hailed as the hero? After all, I am about to free you from a most draining louse! I rather think Sir Rat here is the villain.”

Aelon opened his mouth to speak, but was grabbed by guards, and his words were swept away. *And thus I condemn myself*, he thought.

“Dear hero, come along, no didlydadling! Time to face your choices!” She laughed, grinning even larger.

The last thing he saw was the terror on Lila's face before they spun away under green magic.