

Chapter One

Seven years later the pursuit continues.

Adorned by untamed grass and jutting rocks, the valley's terrain slanted downwards. Moonlight blanched her path as the wind bent the grass. The small crystalline rose secured to her forehead by a band of gold caught the moonbeams beautifully, as if made of ice. Ona Snowsong glanced over her shoulder without slowing her run, her cherubic eyes wide searching desperately for the creature hidden somewhere in the umbrageous shadows. Even through the fear the same innocence reflected by the eyes of nature's creatures resided in her turquoise depths.

In wind's cool breath her clothing billowed, the belt bottom style of her blouse's sleeves and pants legs whipping about wildly. The cotton lining the inside of her velvet jade garments provided some protection from its chill.

The amarok gave chase behind her. She could hear the titanic wolf's breathing, but its jet-black body harmoniously melted into the darkness shunned by the moonlight. Unable to use magic on her due to the tear-shaped aegis around her neck, the warlock had sent the amarok instead not long after her location had been discovered earlier that evening. Its hellish howl sang eerily, making the night more terrifying. The image of the beast's fangs gleaming flashed vividly in her mind as her heart pounded in her chest.

The next howl to chill the night sounded much closer than the first, hinting at a speed terrifyingly swifter than that of a mundane wolf. Her own speed exceeded human standards, but still her chances of outrunning it grew exceedingly darker. It was with terror Ona realized she hadn't any hope in outlasting the stamina of the monstrous beast behind her. Her mind raced at the sound of nearby snarls, the creature producing them within the unlit shadows. She froze upon sight of a massive head peering over a gathering of towering rocks with bared fangs and a burning yellow glower. Something about its feral glare trapped her in a deadlock. With baleful eyes trained on her, the wolf—its size comparable to a large horse—leaped over the rocks, fur lustrous in the lunar

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phosphorescence. Two yards away, Ona knew her chances of escape had died.

It drew near and lowered its head close to her face, so that she could see her bloodless countenance in the reflection of its eyes. The vileness of its hot breath smelled like carcasses. It worried her windblown hair like a foul breeze. Witnessing the fierceness of its gaze resonating its predatory nature, she wondered what the amarok would do should she defy it.

The behemoth black head made a slight jerking motion in a silent command for her to follow, but Ona found her feet wouldn't move. The thought of following its lead to Luke Knights kept her from budging despite her fear of this creature's short temper.

What, she asked upon reaching out to the amarok with her mind, has the warlock offered you?

Come, the deep, savage voice growled. The sensation of its malevolence in her head disturbed her, and Ona fought the impulse to instantly reject it. Again she repeated her question more imploringly. The reply was the same. Come.

Adamant, she shook her head and remained anchored to her spot on long, trembling legs. Its patience was as thin as sodden paper, however. A blatant snarl emerged from its throat like the sound of a demon. She saw the blur of a forepaw and felt the impact of rock against her body a split second later. Her legs burned, the torn fabric of her pants stained with warm blood. Barely allowing her the time to comprehend what had happened, the amarok pounced. Ona's eyes automatically squeezed shut. After a while she dared to open them, meeting a lupine face. Its moist nose nearly touched her own. The stench of its horrid breath was nearly overwhelming, threatening to be the death of her if nothing else was. The large muzzle pointed to the heavens to howl as if summoning forth the gates of Hell. Rigid, Ona watched its piercing glare return to her and shrieked at the wolf to leave her be.

With splendid brightness, the gem shone in a cry of assistance. The amarok's jaws gapped wider in a visceral reaction, feeling threatened. Peering into darkness amassed in its jaws, her heart leapt into her throat. Without warning, a sudden hoarse cry of "Kar! Kar! Kar!" introduced a new presence. Fangs halted inches from her head, moments from tearing it off the rest of her rigid body. Growling, the amarok jerked its head in the direction of the cries. Ona found herself able to summon her breath once again, her heart still pounding. Something small and sharp arrowed towards the beast. Vexed and defensive, it abandoned her in favor of the new target.

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Lifting her gaze in dread, Ona expected to see Luke Knights punishing the amarok for disobeying orders and nearing killing her. She was useless to him dead. Instead of a demented warlock conjuring his ruthless magic, she saw a stranger's silhouette with what looked to be a strange cape on his back. She tried focusing her eyes, but found her vision of the doddering world was becoming blurry. In perplexity of the pain in the back of her head, she touched her fingers to the tender spot and flinched from the sharp sting. Her hand was held before her sight as the ground careened sickeningly. Upon her fingertips was the crimson warmth of dripping blood. Her cognition becoming lethargic, her unfocused thoughts ruminated over whether this was death. Uncertain if she should be more frightened, Ona rested heavy head in the gathering warmth.

Something winged and agile darted about the amarok, besetting it with loud, hoarse cries and barks. The flying creature suddenly retreated, its darksome form melting into the shadows to allow a new, bigger creature to take its place. This new combatant, kept ill-defined by darkening vision, dwarfed even the amarok. It challenged the lupine giant, the croaking cry it emitted loud enough to rival the other's howl. Ears flattened against the amarok's large head as it hunkered down low in response to the other creature swelling in size. Intimidated, the amarok tucked its tail between its legs and departed unceremoniously. The newest creature shrunk as her consciousness slid deeper in the widening abyss and agonizing pain numbed her elusive thoughts.

Her heavy lids fell. It was with difficulty she managed to wretch them open again. She had barely perceived a man's approaching figure before they closed a final time. Descending into unconsciousness, she felt the stranger examine her wounds with cautious fingers, retreating when quiet mutters of pain slipped past her lips. He lifted her into his arms, where she winced. His voice spoke to her, but she couldn't comprehend his words. As her senses failed her, the warmth that held her faded. She plunged into nothingness, dreams taking hold.

Groggily, Ona awoke to the caress of the sun's incorporeal warmth. Her limbs felt as though they had been stretched beyond their limits, and her head felt heavy. Pulling herself up to a sitting position with protesting arms and an aching neck, she immediately checked that her gem still hung above her collarbone, relieved when her fingers closed around the cool metal. It was then she acknowledged the jacket that had been laid over her.

"Feeling okay?"

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Startled, she snatched her gaze up to a pair of dark, slanted eyes behind stray strands of hair. Silky jet-black hair reached past broad shoulders. Beneath the shoulders his build was well toned and lithe. The man could not have much older than she was, Ona surmised. His intelligent eyes studied her with an unreadable expression, never looking her directly in the eye. Befuddled and wondering how much of last night she had imagined before passing out, Ona took a moment to gather her thoughts before she hoarsely replied.

"I think so. . ."

He held a black canteen before her wordlessly. Uttering her thanks, she gratefully accepted, the cool water within soothing her parched throat. It was handed back to him once she had emptied its contents thirstily, along with the long jacket. He simply set them aside, his eyes gliding to her as they gleamed with suspicion.

"Your wounds closed on their own last night," he said, his intonation almost accusing. "Do they still hurt?"

"Not much," she answered, hiding her gem behind her fingers when his observant eyes began to analyze it closely.

"That's good to hear. You're lucky not to have been killed." A drawstring bag was set before her. Raising onto his long legs, he gathered up the canteen and jacket. "Travelers avoid this area for a reason. I'd take caution if I were you. You have heard of the raven prince?"

Ona nodded. "I've heard rumors about him from several towns."

"The area around here isn't too far from his barrier. Any who approach Prince Raven's forest are killed by it instantly. I'm guessing you're not from anywhere near here, but the closest town is Hazelknot. The food and canteen in that bag should last the trip –you do know which direction it's in?"

"Yes," she answered. Satisfied, he departed until her voice halted him. "Where are you going? There's no civilization anywhere near that direction, is there? And I never caught your name."

"You never said yours," he countered, glancing over his shoulder.

"It's Ona."

His steps resumed, his footfalls muted by the grass. "I never asked. I'm not going anywhere you wish to follow. You should rest before you start back to Hazelknot."

She watched him traverse the winding path up the slope, two slits in the back of his tapering black suede shirt. With careful fingers she prodded the wound in the back of her head, wincing upon contact the tender bruise. Glanced back to the man, she saw him vanish behind the

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zenith of the hill. Ona entertained the thought of following him, seeing he was headed in the same direction the Soul Gem had been nudging her in. She lacked the strength, however. Taking his suggestion wasn't an option, either. The warlock's threat still cast an ominous shadow over Hazelknot, forcing her onwards.