

SUDDENLY—FAR TOO SUDDENLY—THE LAST ray of sunlight slipped away. The landscape dimmed and the shadows blended into darkness. In the city, shops locked their doors, while inns with their burning hearths stood like lighthouses pulling ships to land. In the more soothing atmosphere of the city's outskirts, mothers called their children indoors to ready themselves for bed. The heat was melting as a cool breeze sifted its way through the leaves.

But these signs of the approaching night were not welcome to Alinn. Darkness chilled her uneasy spirit. She gazed up at the fading sky, then scanned the rows of houses and the open countryside beyond, searching for anything amiss. For now all was quiet and she had light to guide her, but once the darkness settled, she would be stumbling blindly away from the men hunting for her. Something in the back of her mind told her she might as well lie down now and let them take her. She couldn't run forever. The more obstinate part replied that she only needed to run until they gave up. She pressed forward.

Still, as she walked, she couldn't prevent her mind from clouding over with churning emotions and memories. The emotions held her in an almost unbearable grip, while the memories played before her eyes as vividly as if she were reliving those moments in her life.

Her mind drifted back to the day in her childhood in which her life had changed forever. The eastern clouds had shimmered with the soft, pink shade of dawn as she and her family had finished burdening their horses with belongings. She recalled the dread that had hung in the air so thickly that

she felt it tingle on her skin before sinking deep into her young heart. The entire world seemed breathless with anticipation: the birds were hushed, the wind was still, and even the horses stood motionless, waiting to be urged forward.

Alinn's mother, Nakita, mounted the family's bay stallion with her six-month-old son secured carefully in front of her. Beside her, Alinn's father, Khaed, swung the girl's small form onto the second steed and then sprang into the saddle behind her. Clinging tightly to the horse's mane, Alinn glanced over her shoulder and squinted in the dim light to study the deserted town that had been their home.

Distant shouts kept her blood coursing wildly through her veins. She could envision what a horror the approaching Aihremakan army must be with its mass of tall, angry men wielding flashing swords and sharp arrows. She could see their dark, bloodthirsty eyes as they searched for her. With a gasp she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to block the image from her mind.

As her father spurred the horse forward, Alinn leaned back against his chest and felt the wind rush through her hair. The air was cold and dry, stealing her breath away

and stinging her cheeks until they went numb. Shivering, she tightened her grasp on the stallion and swallowed. The seconds stretched into eternity until a shout broke out over the sound of the wind in her ears. She jerked open her eyes to see Nakita pulling her horse back so abruptly it reared in protest. Her stomach fluttering with fear, Alinn turned her head to see a line of horsemen clothed in Aihremakan chain mail and leather cutting off their path. The foremost man, apparently the leader, kicked his mount forward a step and nodded his head casually as Khaed yanked his ride to a halt.

"Escaping to the Toryn mountains?" The man's face was impenetrable. "It's a dangerous journey, I hear. The bogs are treacherous, full of creatures that don't like trespassers. But then I suppose the Toryn people are wild, passionate barbarians whose bloodlust must be at least as strong as those creatures'. Maybe they should be the ones fearing you." His laugh came out as a deep, guttural sound. "And don't deny it. Toryn raided and leveled numerous Aihremakan villages to the ground; your nation forced us into this war. So don't force us to deal with you as cruelly as your people dealt with us!" He turned his intense eyes on Alinn's father.

"Drop your weapons. Surrender!"

"I'm a man trying to take his family to safety, not challenging your soldiers to battle," Khaed responded gruffly. "Let me keep my arms to protect my family on the journey. Let us go our way."

The leader's clutch on his horse's reins went taut and his face, if possible, became firmer. "You think I'd trust the word of a Toryn man?" His voice trembled ever so slightly. "Drop your weapons now before I force you!"

Khaed glanced at his wife. With a kick, she spurred her horse past the men as Alinn's father drew his sword. Holding his daughter protectively with one hand and his weapon with the other, Khaed charged toward a space between two of the men. For a moment, Alinn thought they could make it. Then she heard a horse whinny in pain as her mother's shout pierced the air. One of the men had buried an arrow deep in the horse's chest. Legs buckling, it crashed into a heap in the grass and sent Nakita and her son tumbling off. The boy shrieked, but his cry was cut short on impact. The Aihremakan leader, still on horseback with his sword held high, towered over Nakita's form.

A shout snapped Alinn out of her thoughts. Two children were racing each other home, laughing and yelling to one another. Night had almost fallen. In the east, several stars glittered in the sky, but they quickly blurred into one large clump as tears formed in her eyes. Running her fingers unconsciously along the scar that traced from her right temple to her jaw line, she bit her lip. No, she told herself firmly, she would not cry now. She decided to find somewhere to hide and rest for a while.

An old farmhouse glowed invitingly some yards to her left, but it was the barn behind it that she approached. The door creaked as she opened it just wide enough to squeeze through. Straw scratched at her legs and caught in the hem of her dress, mud stuck to the bottoms of her boots, and the air, with its mingling scents of hay and manure, assailed her nose. A cow blinked lazily as Alinn stumbled to the back and leaned against the wall, this time feeling safe with solid darkness surrounding her. She tried to close her eyes and stop the thoughts from coming, but memories came crowding into her brain anyway.

How long had she and her father wandered through the

wilderness, running from soldiers, running from the memories? In the day they had shivered against the bitter cold of winter, stumbled through miles of swampland, and climbed ever higher into the mountains. At night, Alinn would curl up as close as she dared to their crackling fire and try to drown out the distant screeching of unseen things.

Khaed didn't speak much, and a few times he frightened his daughter by dropping to his knees and sobbing aloud. The first time, he'd wrapped his arms around her and cradled her tightly, and she'd let her own tears fall freely down her cheeks. But as time wore on, new thoughts began to emerge. The memory of the soldiers' attack played in her head hauntingly. The aching sorrow remained, but now that the shock had worn off, burning hatred replaced it. What would she give to see all of the Aihremakans, especially their king, as miserable as she and her father were now?

At last Alinn and her father found themselves high in the mountains, beyond the dark forest with its creakings and rustlings and onto the snowy slopes overlooking miles of empty bog land. The sky seemed to be permanently overcast, and the wind never stopped blow-

ing. Every morning, snowflakes would descend from the grey clouds swirling overhead and coat their freezing forms. In the night, they'd huddle close to one another in any small cave or beneath any outcropping they could find. Other than occasional orders to the horse, neither Khaed nor Alinn spoke much; they took comfort merely in one another's presence and lost themselves in their own thoughts.

Sometimes shadows fell over them and they looked up to see a distant form soaring high above them. The stallion would toss his head anxiously, sometimes stopping altogether. "Forward, Halir," Khaed coaxed, and the beast would press onward reluctantly.

At last their destination came into view: a huge building called the Sanctuary perched high on the mountainside. Set against the backdrop of rugged mountain slopes and the distant valley, the Sanctuary looked lonely. They hurried to the Sanctuary's tall wooden door and Khaed pounded the metal knocker against it.

The door swung open to reveal a woman with wrinkles carved into her pale face and black hair frosted grey. She interviewed Khaed carefully before welcoming both the newcomers with a warm smile.

A younger woman ran out to tend to their horse while another rushed to take their belongings. This was just one of many Sanctuaries throughout Toryn, some full of male prophets and others female. They were being sought out as refuges during the war, because Aihremak didn't care about attacking religious locations. Here, knowing the foreign soldiers would never come, Alinn felt safe at last.

Remembering the comfort of the Sanctuary, Alinn wrapped her cloak around herself more tightly and tried to curl up against a bundle of straw. It made a hard, prickly bed. Gaps in the barn's wall welcomed cool air inside, but it did not relieve the stench, which, accustomed as she was to the pure mountain winds, was giving her a headache. The thought made her long to be able to return to the Sanctuary. Yet, ironically, when she had lived there, Alinn had felt discontent and alone. The refugees and prophetesses had been strange company when her father left for war.

Meli, the grey-haired Head Prophetess, took personal responsibility for Alinn's well-being, promising Khaed that she would do everything she could to make the girl feel at home. She gave Alinn a tour of the en-

tire Sanctuary, introducing her to refugees and prophetesses, and took the fabrics donated by generous citizens and fashioned beautiful clothes for her. Every morning she would take Alinn out horseback riding or walking to get exercise and fresh air. Then, each afternoon, she took Alinn to the Sanctuary's huge library to read from dusty, leather-bound books of Toryn history and literature, as well as to study geography, mathematics, grammar, spelling, and science.

"It is important for you to learn as much as you can," Meli explained to the girl one day, "for as long as this war rages, we women will be the ones holding our country together while the men fight." She winked at Alinn. "Don't think because you are stuck behind that you don't have an important role to play too."

"Maybe it's not the role I want to play," Alinn muttered, staring blankly at the history book before her.

Meli reached across the table to pull the thick volume toward her. "Do you even know how the war began? Rogues belonging to neither Toryn nor Aihremak attacked Aihremakan towns, slaughtering and pillaging and burning as they went. The Aihremakans mistakenly believed they were our people.

They thought they were retaliating when they attacked us. Believe me, dear, the Aihremakans have suffered as well. There are little girls over there, just like you, who've lost loved ones. They're as confused and hurt as you."

Alinn blinked back the tears that attempted to form in her eyes. "You don't know anything," she muttered bitterly. "You've spent your life up here, away from everything. You haven't seen..."

Meli sighed and rolled up the sleeve of her dress to her elbow to reveal a long, pale scar running down her arm. "Believe me when I say I've witnessed cruel acts just as you have. Just realize that not every one of the Aihremakans is our enemy. Not every Toryn soldier out there is just, either. There is hatred and brutality on both ends. Your father is a good man and is doing the right thing by protecting his daughter and his country. You would not be doing the right thing by going out there with hatred in your heart. There is a difference between justice and revenge, self-defense and murder. Don't blur the lines, child."

Other days, Meli taught Alinn about what she insisted was to be her "calling."

"How do you...know so much about things?" Alinn

questioned one day.

"We see only what the Father reveals to us," Meli, the grey-haired Head Prophetess whispered to Alinn, and the girl noticed the reverence in her voice.

"So you do see the future," Alinn said, her eyes wide.

"More importantly, we can understand what is in people's hearts, if we ask," Meli said with a gentle smile.

"You just ask?"

"Just ask. Close your eyes and concentrate."

Alinn closed her eyes reluctantly, shutting out the white marble floors, the high ceiling, and the fountain in the center of the room. A prophetess's skirt swished as she walked past Alinn; the water bubbled ahead of her, and low voices echoed in the hall outside. Words tried to form themselves in her brain, but the idea of requesting a favor from the Father, the God who had let her dear mother die right in front of her, angered her. The emotion simmered deep down inside, until slowly it boiled up higher, higher, until it felt as if it were suffocating her. With a gasp, she opened her eyes and lifted her head to Meli. Shuddering from head to foot, tears flooded her eyes.

"I can't!" she almost shrieked. "All I see when I close my eyes...is...is..." Her voice

broke.

There were tears glistening in Meli's eyes, but the girl across from her didn't want sympathy or advice. Turning, Alinn raced from the room, down the endless halls, past startled women and confused children, and into her own bedroom at the far end of the Sanctuary.

It was there that Alinn could scoff at the prophetesses and long to be free from this place. She couldn't stand being here when her country was being torn apart. She wanted to fight against the soldiers that had caused her so much pain. She wanted to be with her father. With the desire swelling inside her soul, she gazed out her window, down the mountainside, past the empty plains below, to the distant northern horizon. Somewhere in that direction lay Aihremak.

Years later, Toryn was forced to surrender and Aihremak occupied the country. Soldiers, on their way home, began to flood the Sanctuary. A young woman who hadn't seen her father since the age of twelve, Alinn watched eagerly and hopefully every time a soldier was welcomed in, waiting for the day Khaed would walk through the door.

That was why, on the

evening a young man calling himself Rayvik slipped inside and greeted the women with a smile, Alinn was standing off to the side, studying his face. It was clear immediately from his short, sandy blond hair and piercing blue eyes that he was Aihremakan--certainly not a usual guest in the Sanctuary. Meli questioned him sharply, studying him with her shrewd eyes, but soon relented.

"You may enter," she determined, but Alinn caught her breath, overwhelmed by terror and fury all at once. For the first time, she doubted Meli's gift.

Rayvik stepped in with another grateful nod of his head, caught Alinn's gaze, and paused. On the way down the hall, as the prophetesses swept on ahead to prepare for their new guest, he asked for her name.

"Alinn," she snapped back at the strange man. Knowing that the Head Prophetess was only a few yards ahead was all that kept her even semi-calm. Her whole body trembled as she felt the churning emotion sweep through her like a gathering storm. She didn't bother to hide the hate shining in her eyes.

"You seem out of place here." He peered around, as if to make sure no one had overheard, but the people they were passing in the hall kept their

distance. A mother pulled her little boy close to her. "Excited for news?" he inquired, as if the stares didn't faze him.

"Maybe." Alinn felt like she was choking.

Rayvik glanced at her with a twinkle in his eyes and a wide grin. "I know something you'd be interested to hear. I met your father on the battlefield."

Alinn blinked. Hate and fear and the eagerness to hear about her father vied for control within her. "Is he all right?" she demanded.

"He was the last time I saw him. To be honest, I owe him my life."

"What?"

"He almost killed me," Rayvik murmured, his face serious for the first time. "We met each other in battle and —"

"I don't believe that," Alinn interrupted viciously. "If you survived meeting him in combat then you must have killed him, because he'd never let a bloodthirsty Aihremakan soldier live. I'll kill you my —"

"Don't be ridiculous, sweetheart. I hate Haidon and everything Aihremak has done as much as you do, and that's why your father spared my life. I have a letter as proof." He pulled a paper from his pocket and slipped it into her hands with another quick smile. "If you can't trust me, you'll have

to trust the words of your own father."

Maybe it was just his charm, but Alinn was reluctant to doubt his words. They walked silently into the long dining hall to join the other Sanctuary occupants for supper. Though she sat down the table from him, she still caught his eye several times, and she still heard every word he spoke.

That night she curled up in bed and read the letter written in her own father's hand, describing the long, bitter days he'd spent as a soldier. As she read his tender words of affection, her lip trembled, though she held the tears back. He spoke cheerfully of their meeting again soon. Alinn was so grateful to hear from her father that she almost forgot herself and thanked Rayvik when she saw him at breakfast the next morning. Almost.

Days passed, but the Aihremakan soldier did nothing to increase her suspicion. Still, whenever he tried to speak to her, she answered shortly, and if she saw him from a distance, she walked the other direction. Her deeply ingrained distrust and hatred for his race wouldn't allow her to acknowledge the fact that there was something drawing her to him. After being alone so long, after being ignored by every other young

man that had stayed in the Sanctuary due to the ugly scar marring her face, the attention he paid her was far too welcome.

Finally, she saw him down the hall one day and found herself pausing.

"You're afraid of me," Rayvik said, though he didn't seem upset.

"No, I'm not," Alinn protested, glancing across the hall at a painting so that her scarred cheek was hidden. "I distrust you. But distrust and fear aren't the same."

"Your prophetess friends trust me, and they say they can discern between enemies and friends." When Alinn didn't respond, he began to stroll forward and she followed, as if pulled by an invisible string. Gazing up at the pillars stretching toward a ceiling inlaid with gold, he questioned, "Enjoying your magnificent prison? You were only touched by the shadow of war when soldiers stumbled inside. You've all been caged up in luxury like the master's favorite pets."

Alinn spun round to face him straight on. "How dare you say that!" she snapped. "My father wanted me to be safe. I'm all he has left!"

His response came unexpectedly.

"You're tired of feeling safe. You're tired of being

locked away when there is evil out there that has wronged you. You are trapped here, where these prophetesses are full of good, pure thoughts, and all you can focus on is the past and the anger. You have a right to be angry...to be dissatisfied with this."

The hallway was dim, but several yards behind Alinn, sunlight poured in through a window in the ceiling. The light reflected in Rayvik's eyes. For once, the smirk vanished from his lips and a hint of bitterness leaked into those blue eyes. His fist was clenched at his side.

"Fine words from an Aihremakan," Alinn muttered at last, "criticizing a sanctuary in Toryn. Did you come here hoping to find citizens weak enough to betray their country?" She turned and marched down the hallway, letting her scarlet sash trail behind her and the gold chain about her waist clink defiantly. Behind her, Rayvik's soft laughter echoed in the vast space, but she only held her head higher and walked faster.

It wasn't long after that meeting that Alinn realized she couldn't avoid him. He was a white tiger, devilishly beautiful. Whenever she saw him, he walked smoothly, with confidence, because he knew exactly where he was going and exactly what he was doing. His eyes

glittered with assurance, and the smirk on his face told the world he felt his power.

Did he know that look in her eyes? He probably recognized the expression by now; she was sure he'd spent time around enough admiring girls. Had he seen the tremble in her hands? If he was confident and sure, then she was just growing more uncertain and self-conscious. Now she felt her loneliness steadily breaking down the shield she'd built. The flames didn't look quite as dangerous as they had at first. Did the sense of danger attract her? She wanted desperately to belong, but not to him. And yet, a part of her said that was exactly what she wanted.

Outside the barn, a sound recalled Alinn to the present. Horses were pawing the earth and snorting. Peering through one of the cracks in the barn wall, she saw five Aihremakan guards seated on their usual white stallions just a few yards away. Alinn lay motionless in the straw, hardly daring even to breathe for fear they'd hear her.

"Focus," came Meli's voice. Beside her, Velara nodded. Alinn was perched on the edge of the fountain, trying to let the sound of running water soothe her thoughts. Closing her

eyes, she imagined herself on the edge of a precipice, swaying, teetering, and falling. With a jerk, she opened her eyes and caught herself before she fell backward into the water.

"This is ridiculous," she proclaimed with a defiant shake of her head.

"Don't give up," Velara began, but her flawless features mocked Alinn's scarred face.

"I'm not wasting my time," Alinn spat out. Leaving Velara and Meli dumbfounded, she dashed from the room, holding her hand to her face to cover her scar. Tears threatened to fill her eyes, but she refused to let them come. Slowly, she lowered her hand to her side.

It was then she saw Rayvik strolling down the hall, glancing at the rows of paintings decorating the walls. Her heart beat faster. He turned and saw her; her thoughts clouded over with uncertainty. She felt frozen in place, and the words stuck in her mouth, but only for a moment. Lifting her eyes to his, curving her lips to match his smile, she greeted him with a casual air that surprised her. The white tiger strode toward her, and she held her ground. He couldn't know how hard she was fighting. Or did he?

"I hear the women tell you to 'muse'?" Rayvik asked.

Alinn shrugged. "They

think anyone can see things if the Father reveals it to them.”

“But you don’t see anything.”

“Maybe.”

“I think,” Rayvik went on, “it’s because you’re focused on the past. And why not? Why sit here wasting your time when you know what really needs to be done? The only way that Toryn will ever be free is if Haidon dies.”

She lifted her eyes to his, more open now to what he had to say.

Rayvik sat on a nearby bench. “Do you want to know why I hate him so much?”

Alinn nodded, and Rayvik explained how he and his brother had joined the army.

“It felt like we were on the right side,” Rayvik said. “Until...until we set fire to a village and my brother realized a woman and her children were trapped in one of the houses. He rushed in to rescue them, but our commanding officer reprimanded him for the action. That man told him to kill those innocent souls, and of course my brother refused.” Rayvik paused. “My little brother died alongside them for that.”

Alinn sat in silence. She couldn’t fathom how anyone could commit such injustices. Glancing at Rayvik, who wore an expression of pain and anger,

she decided then that it was no coincidence they’d met one another. She hadn’t meant to open her heart to Rayvik and tell him her sorrows, but she told him anyway. He shared her anger and sadness, and in their mutual feelings, Alinn felt understanding and security with another human at last.

That had been the beauty, the tragedy, of their meeting, Alinn thought as she scooted closer to a crack in the barn wall. One of the men raised his voice slightly, and she was able to catch what he was saying.

“It’s been four days,” he muttered. “She can’t avoid us forever.”

“Perhaps the witness was wrong; she wasn’t sure. Or maybe we’re looking in the wrong direction. Rayvik said--”

“Rayvik is a treacherous snake. He told the king if would give him the chance he’d track her down himself, but with his kind of record I doubt he’d hesitate to cover for a Toryn woman. He probably stalled us from pursuing her. In fact, I think he was involved in the assassination plot. Either way, though, he’s a deserter, and he’ll get what he deserves.”

“Yes,” another man said as they all spurred their horses forward. “He’ll be executed in Elvonia in the morning, and

good riddance.”

They disappeared into the darkness, leaving their words echoing in Alinn’s ears.

She and Rayvik had decided that Haidon had to die, and that they were as capable as anyone else to be the ones to kill him. Alinn had insisted on being the one to do the actual killing, and upon consideration, Rayvik had agreed. A woman would be the last person anyone would suspect.

Alinn didn’t want to waste any time. Her father was war-weary and brokenhearted, and she didn’t want him to have to live in bondage to Haidon any longer than necessary. Haidon would die, and then she would search for her father. Rayvik agreed.

Without a word of goodbye to anyone, they escaped the Sanctuary for Aihremak that night, taking two horses from the stables and packing all the provisions the beasts could carry. Alinn didn’t even glance back as they wound their way down the mountainside.

A few hours later the pair stopped to rest.

“And a pistol is really the best way to do this?” Alinn asked as they discussed their plans.

“Trust me; weapons have changed during the war,” Ray-

vik replied.

Alinn stopped questioning him after he taught her how to fire it. The sheer force of its release made her gasp in surprise. The power almost made her dizzy when she imagined gazing at Haidon himself, and burying a bullet in his forehead.

She sat down before the fire and lost herself in her thoughts.

“You really needed to get away from that Sanctuary and have a chance to live,” she heard Rayvik say after a few minutes. He smiled and seated himself beside her. Alinn instinctively leaned away from him but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Hungry?” Rayvik asked after a short silence, turning to her. The fire had roared to life, reflecting in his eyes and casting flickering light on Alinn’s face. Knowing it was shining directly on her scar, she pressed her hand to her cheek.

“No,” she said firmly, “I’d rather sleep.” She was about to escape to the safety of the shadows, but she felt Rayvik’s hand on her own, gently pulling it away from her face. Frozen, she flinched as he traced his finger along the white scar running from her temple to her jaw.

“That was a nasty cut,” he muttered, removing his hand and giving her a chance to breathe again. “No one would

inflict that sort of injury unless they were just trying to hurt and scare you. Or if they were taking their time killing you. Let me guess: it was your parting gift from the Aihremakan soldiers that attacked your family?"

Alinn nodded and turned away, wanting desperately to hide from his piercing gaze.

"Want to know a secret?"

He leaned closer, his face serious but his eyes sparkling.

"You're too self-conscious."

Glancing up into his face uncertainly, Alinn caught his smile and grinned back. "We're not going to let those soldiers or Haidon ruin our lives," he said. "Deal?"

"Deal," she murmured.

With a growing sense of urgency, Alinn stepped to the barn door and peered outside. The world was enveloped in velvet blackness. Only the stars lit her path; only the crickets broke the silence; only the night breeze kept her company. The darkness weighed heavily on her, like it was pressing in on all sides and slowly suffocating her. But no, that wasn't the blackness at all—that was the weight of her own emotions, wasn't it?

She and Rayvik reached Aihremak in three days. Before they rode into Elvonia, the first town on Aihremak's border,

Rayvik stopped their horses and turned to Alinn. "Now remember," he cautioned, "you don't want to stand out. Keep your hood up and your hair back. Anyone who sees your dark hair will know you're foreign."

They rode into town quietly, entered the first inn they came to, and sat near the hearth to eat supper. No one seemed to notice Alinn next to Rayvik and his charming aura. As a woman placed his food before him, he mentioned that he was a soldier returning home from war, and asked if there was to be a celebration at the capital city.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "I can't believe you haven't heard yet! King Haidon is going to speak on the steps of the old church tomorrow evening."

Giving Alinn a significant look, Rayvik said he couldn't wait to attend. The woman left.

"I'll be in the crowd to help you escape and make sure nothing goes wrong," Rayvik muttered across the table to Alinn. He gave her a sideways smile. "And when it's all over... just imagine."

The food seemed to stick in her throat, but she'd never felt more prepared. "I'll find my father and we'll be able to live in peace," she whispered. "We'll be free at last."

Off to the east, the sky

was starting to turn grey. Had her thoughts really kept her up all night? Her legs were stiff, her head ached, and her whole body trembled. A rooster crowed nearby and she realized she was on the outskirts of a city. Catching her breath, Alinn approached it slowly, running her eyes along the wall surrounding it. It was Elvonia.

Again, uncertainty plagued her. Alinn knew what was supposed to happen at sunrise, but the question was, should she care? She had escaped, after all. Rayvik may have been captured and sentenced to death, but hearing about his offer to the king to hunt her down had reawakened her suspicions. What if she risked herself for someone who wouldn't risk himself for her?

She tried to imagine pressing toward the Toryn wilderness, finding her father, and seeking refuge at the Sanctuary. She wanted desperately to see her father again. But that was impossible, because she couldn't imagine facing him now and seeing the disappointment in his eyes. That would be worse than death.

Deep down, she knew there was no abandoning Rayvik. Whatever happened now, they were bound together. She had to find a way to rescue him.

She sat and stared at the city while behind her, the sky grew lighter. Even the stars in the west began to dim and dis-

appear, and the breeze became stronger. Somewhere in one of the lone trees dotting the sea of grass, a bird chirped bravely.

Closing her eyes, she saw the crowd before her again, shouting, dancing, and laughing in Aihremak's capital under the afternoon sun. Buildings towered over the wide city square, casting cool shadows on its edges that some sought for relief from the heat. Soldiers slapped each other on the backs in congratulations, citizens embraced them, and mothers, wives, and children cried with joy as they were reunited with their loved ones. Tucked away in the shadow of an overhanging roof, Alinn wrapped her cloak around herself and fingered the gun at her side. Women dressed in long, colorful skirts strolled past. Children shouted and chased each other, startling Alinn when they nearly ran into her. The littlest boy accidentally hit a grocer's fruit cart instead, knocking some of its contents to the ground. He glanced up fearfully at the grocer, but the man just grinned at the boy, helped him to his feet, and cleaned up the mess himself. None of the Aihremakan citizens seemed ready to let anything bother them. Their long war was over at last. Alinn closed her eyes and ground her teeth in quiet rage.

Somewhere in that mass of men, women, and children before her, Rayvik was posi-

tioned, watching and waiting. And King Haidon was standing directly across from her on the wide steps of the church. His grin sickened her, and the light in his eyes looked terrible. Alinn tried to contain herself. Any moment and she'd raise her gun and aim it straight forward to line up with the monster's forehead. She didn't care if every citizen in the square saw her, for she had a quick, almost effortless escape planned.

Overhead, children shouted excitedly from the rooftops, and Alinn hesitated for the first time. Her fingers shook and her mouth went dry as she grasped her weapon and struggled to pull it out from behind her cloak. She glimpsed the queen gazing affectionately at the king. The memory of the last glance her parents had shared flashed through her brain--and her heart stopped beating. With that single memory, a dozen more flooded her mind, unbidden but unstoppable.

Her mother was being struck down before her eyes; her father was desperately trying to stop the soldiers--too late. She was in the wilderness again with her father, bent over to hide her face from the icy wind and to hide her eyes from the sight of her father's face etched with the suffering. She was lying on her bed in the Sanctuary, holding the pain inside as she stared out her window, wondering how anyone could be cruel enough to

kill in cold blood. Then the soldiers were in front of her again; the leader was clenching his jaw, trying to hide the misery and hatred in his eyes.

She'd become one of them.

Alinn made a wild movement to shove the pistol back into the holster, but it slipped from her clammy hand, clattered to the cobblestone road, and fired. The bullet buried itself into the heavy door of a shop across the street. Panicked, Alinn had fled toward the alley behind her.

Alinn opened her eyes to study the guards standing at Elvonia's gate, and stood slowly. Meli had once told her that if she only tried, she would see the day when her own bitterness stopped imprisoning her. That would be the day clear vision and guidance from the Father would come to her.

Well, Alinn saw clearly now. The dilemma was plain, but it was just as obvious that there was no running, no hiding, not anymore. *A life for a life*—that was one of Aihremak's most famous laws. Whether or not that bargain could save Rayvik from all the crimes he'd been convicted of, she wasn't sure. But that didn't matter. It was worth the risk. Throwing her hood back and letting the breeze catch her hair, Alinn walked toward the gate.