

**TO KNOW A
MONSTER**

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C H A P T E R I

THIRTEENTH

“Let’s see it again,” said Auntie Sumara, eyeing Cassiana’s neck.

Cassiana set down her spoon, reached behind her neck, and unfastened the necklace. She extended her arm across the heavy pine table. The gold braid dangled from her fingers, catching the haze of late-morning sunlight that seeped through the windowpanes. It shimmered—ripples of violet, peach, and rose like the River Megin at sunrise.

Her family leaned forward, taking it in.

Uncle Bern swallowed the mutton he’d been chewing. “It’s beautiful, Cass.”

“Yeah, but it feels strange, you know? Being its new keeper—something so old, so full of the past.” Cassiana hooked it back around her neck and tucked it into the embroidered collar of her tunic. Everyone knew what the necklace meant: the passing of command, the promise that one day she’d take her father’s place leading the garrison. But Cassiana didn’t care about any of that. When her mother had presented it to her earlier that morning, warmth rushed through her chest—as if her father’s last embrace lingered inside the metal itself. Wearing it was like holding him close again. Until his return. *If* he returned.

“It’s like a thin braid of hair,” said Dario, her younger cousin, louder than necessary. Sitting to her right on the same bench, he leaned in for a better look. “How’d Luka beat the strands so fine?”

“And weave ‘em like that?” said Keenan, the older cousin.

“There’s nothing like it,” said Sumara, her voice crisp as dry bread. “One of a kind.”

Ástir, Cassiana’s mother—elbows on the table—pointed at Sumara with her folded hands. “Luca never told a soul how she did it.”

Sumara lifted a brow. “And don’t think every smithy in Hammar hasn’t tried.”

“And failed.” Ástir opened her hands in mock surrender.

“Seven sweaty weeks—that’s how she made it,” said Bern, shaking his spoon at each one of them in turn.

“Imagine being dragged to a Vampir’s nest—by their claws.” Dario’s face twisted in horror.

“And knowing your blood was about to be drained,” said Keenan, his face calm and cool.

“Or your body burned.”

“Okay, Dario, that’s enough,” snapped Sumara.

“And Keenan?” Dario huffed. “Didn’t Grandmother pull her out?”

Do we really have to do this? Cassiana sighed under her breath. But held her tongue.

Sumara’s eyes narrowed. “You should know this, Dario. It was your great-grandfather, Visi. That’s why Luca made him the necklace. She was rightfully grateful. Visi gave it to your grandmother on her fifteenth birthday, and she passed it to Aran on his.”

“So why does Cassiana get it now?” Dario asked, as if something weren’t fair.

Cassiana turned toward him. “That’s what I asked Mum this morning.”

“He didn’t tell me when he left,” said Ástir. “And there was so much going on, I didn’t think to ask. He just said, *Give this to Cass on her birthday*, and slipped it in my pocket before mounting Shine and riding off.”

Did he think he wouldn’t make it back? she wondered. *He couldn’t have known that.*

“That’s Aran for you,” Sumara said, then grabbed Cassiana’s wrist and gave it a firm shake. “Well, you’re thirteen now, Cassiana—an adult. Time you got used to responsibility.”

Cassiana knew she meant well, but the thought of adulthood killed her appetite. Who’d want to give up perfect freedom for that?

“Don’t lose it,” said Dario.

“I’m not gonna *lose it*.” Cassiana mimed drawing a bowstring and aiming the arrow at his face. “I’ll guard it with my life,” she growled.

“How does it feel being thirteen?” asked Keenan.

“You know how it feels.”

“I’m not you.”

“Honestly, the same as yesterday.”

Dario bumped his bowl, splashing soup across the table.

“Dario!” chirped Sumara.

“Good job, Dario,” said Cassiana and Keenan in unison.

“You know, Cassiana starts her training this winter—when the garrison returns,” said Ástir.

Cassiana's heart dropped hard, freezing her in place. *Mother, please, not this.*

"And she'll be ready for the Rite of the Stone in spring, won't you, sweet—"

Cassiana shot up, the bench crashing backwards, taking Dario with it. The table chatter died.

"Sorry, Dario." She yanked him up by the arm.

"What's that all about, Cass?" he grumbled, brushing dust from his trousers.

Cassiana pointed at her mother. "Why would you bring that up now?"

Ástir's eyes froze open, as if facing a wildcat.

"In front of everybody." Cassiana's voice strained. "And on my birthday." Her hands trembled, so she locked them behind her back. "You know I don't like talking about the Rite. I've told you."

Her mother stayed seated. Deep breaths rose and fell in her chest until her face steadied. Slowly, she crossed her arms and raised a curled finger to her lips. "We were all remembering our lineage. You were part of the conversation. So it seemed right to mention. . ." She hesitated. ". . .your future. I didn't mean—"

"You snuck it in," Cassiana cut in. "So I'd have no choice but to—what? Pretend I'm interested? Sit here while everyone goes on and on about it?" She couldn't believe she was speaking up. It felt like someone else had borrowed her mouth. *I'm tired of always hiding what I think and feel*, she thought. *If she'd only take me seriously—for once.*

"I didn't sneak it in."

"Well, you didn't ask either—if I wanted to talk about it."

Ástir drew in a slow breath—as if it were her last. "Sooner or later, you'll have to face this."

"I choose later."

Keenan held his spoon halfway between his bowl and mouth, smirking. Auntie Sumara's eyes flicked between them like an overactive fly. Dario stood gaping. Uncle Bern just kept eating, as if nothing at all were happening.

"What made you think my feelings had changed since the last time I avoided this subject?" said Cassiana.

"We don't have to talk about this now. Let's just—"

"How about we talk about it *never!*"

"Cassiana!" Ástir's chin lifted like a blade. "Why are you behaving like this? Everyone would breathe easier if you showed even the slightest openness to your calling." Her gaze dropped to the overturned bench, then rose again. "Why don't you pick that up and sit back down? Then we can work this through—respectfully."

Heat surged from Cassiana's stomach, through her lungs, and up to her forehead, where sweat pushed out. "I don't want to be a Vigil Guard." The words came sharper than she meant. She'd never spoken them aloud before.

Her mother startled, then steadied herself. Her jaw softened, lips parting. But no sound came. It was hard to tell from her furrowed brow whether she was disappointed or simply in disbelief.

"Bleeding to death on that cold, ugly. . ." Cassiana shook her head, searching for the word. ". . .burial ground—that's what it is—shouldn't be my fate. Even worse, watching my friends and family suffer up there." She drew her arms around herself and leaned forward. "It shouldn't be anyone's fate."

A flicker of sadness caught the edges of her mother's mouth, an emotion she rarely showed.

Bern stopped eating and met Cassiana's eyes with a calm smile she couldn't quite read.

Cassiana's gaze drifted up to the hundreds of freshly cut sunflowers hanging from the rafters like an upside-down field. *They're supposed to represent joy.* Her mouth quivered. *Not today.* Sunflowers peeked from every corner—between old books, wooden cups, and clay jars on the shelves, even from the seams of the oak-paneled walls. Her mother must have stayed up all night placing them.

Cassiana's throat tightened. If she tried to speak again, her words would stick—maybe turn to sobs. She needed air. Space. Anything to escape all those eyes.

The woodland was her refuge. It always had been. Lately, it felt safer than home—a place where the pressure to act the part and say all the right words would loosen.

She had to leave. Now. Before the fire in her chest burned everyone—and her reputation.

Cassiana stepped over the bench, grabbed her satchel from the wall peg, and pushed out the front door.

C H A P T E R I I

THE RAVEN'S NEST

Cassiana hurried along the familiar dirt path toward Cozy Pebble Beach, a remote spot she had claimed as her own at age seven or eight. She needed a place to unwind. Her heart raced more from the weight of the argument—and what might come of it—than from her pace.

At the ridge, a narrow trail sloped down to what had been a sandbar tucked in a bend of Slow Water Creek. But the creek wasn't slow today. A punishing late-summer heat was rapidly melting the high mountain snowpack. Cozy Pebble Beach had washed away.

The creek looked furious.

The murky current hissed and slapped against large stones, splashing and slicing between tree trunks and exposed roots along the banks. Foam and forest debris bounced and spun on the wild surface of the water.

Cassiana pressed a hand to her forehead. "My stuff," she muttered, sure the current had stolen something she'd forgotten to move to higher ground. It happened every year. Thankfully, her old wooden toys, rag dolls, and knick-knacks still sat on the upper bank where she had left them.

But what would it matter if the creek had taken it all? At the end of the year, she'd lose everything she loved—no more jumping off Slipbroke Rock, no more marketplace mischief with her cousins, no more galloping her stubborn horse, Cider, through the barley fields, and worse yet, no more freedom to wander the woodland, savoring its mystery and wild beauty.

"That will all be swept away. Just like Cozy Pebble Beach." She swallowed hard. "Only for forever." She forced back tears. In that, if in nothing else, she was just like her mother.

Cassiana glanced down at her satchel. A stuffed sock doll dangled from the opening, one button eye gazing up at her. "Now where?" she asked, half to herself, half to Charm, then tucked him in and adjusted the strap.

A distant shout made her flinch. Mother. “Just let me go in peace,” she murmured through gritted teeth. She felt embarrassed enough. And she definitely wasn’t going home. Not yet.

Her thoughts were scattered, like loose patches of fabric. She needed a place to stitch them back together. Cozy Pebble Beach was out of the question, and too close to home anyway. It was time to move on from there, find a spot deeper in the woods where people would think twice before following.

“I’m thirteen now.” She pressed her lips into a firm line and nodded. “Let’s find a new sanctuary. A fortress.”

Then Cassiana remembered the ancient path and jogged that way.

Standing at the beginning of the path, she considered the volcanic slate that paved the surface. Vandir, a monster race, had pieced together those heavy stones hundreds of years ago, long before the Dalidians, Cassiana’s people, had arrived. The Vandir lived very far away now.

The cracks between the glassy pavers looked like the sunbaked mud of a dried marsh. The pattern didn’t seem to follow any regular order. But overall, there was a captivating sense to it. Each slab was uniquely cut, intentionally different from all the others. Cassiana always admired the craftsmanship and the mystery it stirred. She often wondered what other art the Vandir created, whether it was just as stunning, and why no one ever talked about it.

She took a step forward and paused.

She had started up this path many times but always shrank back. The farther in she would go, the more unsettling the surroundings felt—a damp, musty smell overpowered the scent of pine, and an eerie hum echoed through the wind-rattled branches—until her courage would falter, and she’d turn with an excuse to do something else. Anything else. Still, the path called to her. More precisely, the breezy inner voice of the woodland, distinct from her usual thoughts, urged her to follow it.

Fear is an infection, she remembered, cured only by striding through it.

Her father always said that.

Cassiana aimed her gaze at a point right before the path curved into darker woods. She rested a hand on Charm’s head and began walking.

She passed the spot where she had last lost her nerve. This was the farthest she had ever ventured into the Amberholt Woodland.

Everything seemed normal enough—except for that smell, which grew more disgusting with every step. “I’m not that scared,” she murmured, eyes darting between the trees. “Probably because I’m still mad.”

She thought of her outburst and pictured her cousins gossiping, her Aunt Sumara’s head still bowed in disappointment, and her mother rehearsing a

boring lecture on respect. *Why do you torture me?* she asked of her thoughts, then shook them away as best she could.

She entered the bend, where the shaded trees seemed to huddle together. Unlike the straight, towering pines common to the woodland, these were scrawny and crooked, their trunks skinned in the same thick moss that drooped like matted hair from the web of twisted branches above.

A long path ran straight through a damp, shadowy corridor of tilted trunks. The path rose above the wet forest floor, where fallen trees and contorted branches jutted from stagnant water like the limbs of half-buried corpses. *Could a dead body turn into a tree?* she wondered, then gagged.

“Here’s where that horrid smell’s coming from.” She could taste it—more bitter than her mother’s medicines. She lifted the embroidered collar of her tunic over her nose.

The bog stretched into shadowy darkness on both sides, with scattered flecks of sunlight glinting on the black water and a pale point of light far ahead suggesting the bog might actually end. She resisted the urge to rush but chose to admire the bog’s peculiarity, believing that the Amberholt woodland was perfect, just as she was, in every way. Her sandals clung to the slimy stones, each step slurping like Dario chewing with his mouth open.

Cassiana blinked as she left the bog, her eyes adjusting to the brightness of a vast grassy meadow adorned with countless clusters of small white daisies, yellow dandelions, and scattered gray stones. A calm brook trickled near the path to her left.

She knelt and drank.

Forest surrounded the meadow’s rim. Behind it, majestic slabs of granite swept up into jagged peaks, their shadows still clinging to patches of snow.

The path veered right, toward three wooded knolls. Between two of the knolls, a massive stone outcrop gleamed in the sunlight as if singled out by Gutten, the creator. The stones at its peak resembled a giant raven, hunched forward, as though guarding its young.

“That’s where we’re going,” she whispered, then let out a small laugh. “See, Charm, push through the scary, and something wonderful always waits on the other side.” She smiled for the first time since she left the house.

The path continued straight, past a tall, lonely ash tree, then veered right and up the ridge of the middle knoll, seemingly toward the Raven stone. The pavers that had lined the path gradually gave way to packed gray earth. Soon, the dirt path narrowed to the width of a wolf’s trail and ended abruptly at a wall of tangled brush.

Cassiana looked for a way through.

“The path has to go somewhere,” she muttered. “And I don’t think I was drawn here just to see the meadow and gag on the stink of that swamp.”

She hopped a few times to get a view over the bramble. No luck.

The only opening was a foxhole. So she sat in the dirt, faced the brush, and kicked at the tangle, scooting forward as the space widened. Bit by bit, she forced her way through the tightly woven undergrowth until it finally gave way to more open forest.

Cassiana ducked under branches, lumbered over rotting tree trunks—wincing at the bitter smell—and crawled between fern beds and brambles. Pebbles and thorns pressed into her palms, elbows, and knees. Twigs scratched her skin and pulled her hair like roughhousing boys.

A branch snagged one of her dreadlocks, yanking her to a stop. She fumbled to loosen it, but the tangle only tightened. So she pulled it free, snapping off a web of small twigs that resembled a tiny bird's nest.

"Might as well keep it there to remember the adventure," she said, leaving it nestled among the many other trinkets of memorabilia that permanently adorned her hair.

As heir to the role of Vigil Guard, Dalidian tradition forbade Cassiana from cutting her hair, which was fine with her. She liked it long. It had grown past her knees, and she'd stopped brushing it over a year ago, so her braids turned into dreadlocks. During the Rite of the Stone, they would shave her head. One of the many reasons she dreaded the Rite.

"We can't have these dragging on the ground, catching on everything," she mumbled, then wrapped her dreadlocks twice around her neck and secured them with wooden hairpins from her satchel. "Should have done this sooner."

The forest felt tight around her, so she paused and got her bearings. Her mother had often warned her not to wander off the path. Children had gotten lost and died in these woods. But her mother had also taught her how to keep her direction.

She rummaged through her satchel and pulled out a wood-handled blade that she used to sharpen the point of a stick. She stuck the stick straight up in a sunny patch of ground, then placed a pebble at the end of its shadow.

As expected, after some time, the shadow moved. With a thin twig, she scratched a line in the dirt between the pebble's position and the new tip of the shadow. That line marked east and west. She double-checked her direction by inspecting lichen on a few tree trunks. Northwest. That was the way.

"Now, we'll need to mark the way forward." She felt around again in her satchel. Her fingers brushed polished stones, a strip of bandage, then finally—"Ah, here." A length of bright blue yarn.

"There's enough of this for five or six markers." She cut off lengths to tie to branches as she went.

Eventually, the brush thinned. The ground grew firmer but also steeper. She slipped and scrambled over loose rock, arms and legs burning. And she hadn't seen the Raven stone since leaving the meadow.

"Why is it you can see mountains from far away, but the closer you get, they disappear?"

Cassiana pressed on.

Then—"There it is!"

Just beyond the summit, the tip of a white boulder pierced the slope.

With each step upward, the towering stones took clearer shape. At the top of the knoll, the outcrop dominated the view like a monument carved by giants. A short saddle of tall grass and low shrubs dipped toward its base.

Cassiana cradled her satchel and ran. At the foot of the great stone, she tilted her head back, eyes wide.

"It must be a thousand times my height."

She smiled, wiping grime and sweat from her brow.

"Absolutely worth it."

From where she stood, the outcrop no longer looked like a raven. But the gap that would have been the space between its feet was definitely a cave. And caves had to be explored.

The question now was energy—did she have enough to get up? Or back down for that matter, which was even harder. She had already tempted fate by hiking off the trail. Now, her tallest climb beckoned her.

She stretched her arms over her head, then behind her back. Closing her eyes, she took deep breaths as she found her first edge on the stone wall face. She secured her foot in a hold and pushed, pulled, pushed. *That one's a reach*, she thought, her chest tight against the rock. *Got it*. Her arms and legs still had strength. But for how long? *Focus on the next hold. Good. Worry about down when you're going down*. Cassiana grabbed another hold and pulled. *That's a ridge. You're almost there*.

At last, she heaved herself onto the ridge.

"That was crazy. Thank Gutten, we made it." She took another deep breath and sat on the edge, her feet dangling.

"Not sure how we'll get down, but we did it."

Although the sun blazed, a strong breeze comforted her sweaty body. Cassiana rubbed her sore neck and swept her gaze over the sprawling waves of pines, alder, and spruce.

She realized she had always explored the woods up close: ants lugging the day's heavy findings to their holes, grub worms squirming under soft bark, all the art in a single leaf. But she had never really considered the whole of Amberholt.

People sometimes said *stretched eyes stretch souls*. She believed she had learned what that meant at this very moment. She breathed in the dry pine-scented wind. Life seemed to have expanded, instantly.

Then she remembered why she had climbed.

“The cave. Where is it?”

Cassiana stood and stretched out her neck for any glimpse of the cave’s opening along the boulder’s face. No luck. She was sure it was at this height and to the right when facing the stone. A narrow ridge swept that way.

“Okay, one last challenge.”

The ledge narrowed as it bent. Her left shoulder pressed against the wall as she inched along the ledge. She couldn’t stop peeking down the steep drop on her right and was sure that no one—not even her father—could survive that fall.

As she eased forward, the wind turned to gales. The farther she went, the stronger and more frequent the gales. One hit hard, pushed her off balance.

“That was close.” She clenched the side. “You still there, Charm?”

She laughed, sweating more from nerves than heat.

With her back pressed against the stone face, she reminded herself that fear paralyzes and is the worst danger. She also remembered how well she could balance on fallen tree trunks and jump from stone to stone across rivers without falling, and how squirrels and chipmunks played on tall treetops and cliff sides without care. If I can balance down there, I can balance up here.

As she scooted inch by inch, her left hand groped across the warm stone face. Her left foot patted ahead to ensure firm ground. Her confidence picked up, as did her pace. She was close now.

A heavy gust hit her again. Sand from the stone’s face blasted her eyes. “Charm!” she yelled—and slipped.

Cassiana landed hard on soft sand, her heart fluttering like a caught moth. She rubbed grit from her face and sat up. Charm beside her, along with the contents spilled from her satchel.

She blinked, realizing where she was. She’d fallen into the cave—thank Gutten, not off the cliff.

Cassiana clutched Charm to her chest. “That could have gone badly, Charm. Very badly.” Her voice trembled.

She crawled away from the ledge, deeper into the cave’s entrance. “We’re here, anyway.”

Standing, she brushed her legs clean and peered farther inside. The interior glowed. She stepped cautiously through the cave’s shadowy mouth, which opened to a round, grassy courtyard as large as a town meeting hall.

Rays of yellow, orange, and golden light filtered through the crisscross gaps between large rocks, which formed the high cave ceiling. The stones were precariously wedged and looked like they could plunge at any moment, crushing

everything under them. No doubt the stones had rested in those positions for thousands of years and would not choose today to dislodge.

Two immense granite slabs formed the cave's sides; each carved into nearly perfect half-circles. Cassiana wondered whether the structure was natural or if someone or something hadn't cut it long ago. Across the courtyard, a smaller opening, adorned with draping moss and flowering vines, echoed with the sound of trickling water.

She had forgotten how thirsty she was. She walked to the pool—its shallow water clear as glass—cupped her hands and drank.

Returning to the courtyard's entrance, she gazed across the countless trees of the rolling woodland, then studied the line of the vast horizon.

The world is big, she thought.

And the cave felt safe—like a nest.

She glanced back in.

“The Raven's Nest,” she whispered. “That's what I'll call it.”

Then a wheezy breath resounded from somewhere within the cave, followed by a cool waft of air. She shivered; the hair on her arms lifted in gooseflesh. Peering deeper, she scanned the cracks and shadows, the seams of light between the boulders overhead. Nothing. Only cave. *Wind can make creepy noises*, she told herself.