

Chapter 1

The small carriage rocked gently as it made its way down the path headed for Quakeshire. Alania Silverwind had been in the damned thing for hours, fighting a wave of building nausea rising in her stomach. She cranked open the window, the cool air of fall wafting in, easing her nausea only slightly. The other two travelers she shared the carriage with were trading nervous looks, obviously concerned for the small gnome whose complexion went from her original bluish hue to a more seasick green.

"Ugh, how much farther is it?" Alania asked, her small hand on her stomach, willing it to settle.

"Not far now, miss. From the looks of it, we just escaped the forest. No more than an hour left of our journey." Replied an elderly dwarf, his long silver beard braided and adorned with tiny brass clasps. Alania groaned, trying to maneuver the window to send the cold autumn air across her face, a challenging endeavor considering she was considerably shorter than the personage that the carriage was made for.

Alania was a mountain gnome, standing at an impressive three foot two inches. Her bright pink hair fell in curls down her back, free from the usual ribbon she tied the tresses with. She wore a pair of black leather trousers, the fabric of her dark green traveling tunic falling past her waist and secured with a black leather corset. The boots she wore were practical, simple things laced up tightly to protect her thin ankles from twisting. Not that she had to worry about that with the line of work she was in.

The elf on the other side of the carriage reached into their pocket, retrieving a green and yellow candy.

"Take this. It's a green tea and ginger lozenge. It will ease the nausea." They said kindly, handing the little morsel to Alania. She gratefully accepted, nodding her thank you as she popped it into her mouth. Immediately, the flavors of the lozenge assaulted her tongue. There was definitely a mild hint of green tea, but the spice of the ginger made her nose tickle. She pulled out her handkerchief from her front pocket, gently wiping at her small, upturned nose.

After a few moments, Alania's nausea began to ebb, and she sighed in relief as the village of Quakeshire appeared in the distance. Thanking the elf once more, she turned her relieved mind to the plan when she finally made it to the village.

First, she needed to find lodging for a few nights while she secured a more permanent place to set up. After one hundred years in the city of Frostguild, serving under her master, Alania was more than ready to start making her own way in the world. The temperate weather of the lower regions of Elanzea was quite different from the cold and unforgiving fjords she was used to.

Frostguild was a vast city of Dwarven design, made with the most up-to-date technology and housing the most extensive library in the entire realm. It was the perfect place for a

book-obsessed gnome to begin her tutelage under the most accomplished linguist and literary mind in Elanzea. Corlieus was stern and demanding, but he taught Alania everything she knew.

As the carriage made its final trek to the village center, Alania realized she wasn't in the bustling city anymore. The village had, at most, a dozen buildings at the city center, all of them at most two stories. A few roads led off the main street, and small shops lined the dirt paths snugly, making the village look homey, if not a little crowded.

They still lit their lampposts with a flame, not the fancy magicked flames used in the city, and the inn was hardly bigger than the reception room of the library back in Frostguild. Alania's heart skipped a beat as she wondered if she had done the right thing coming to such a small village instead of staying in the city. But she reminded herself that Quakeshire didn't have a bookstore, at least not one that catered to the myriad of languages the realm played host to. In the city, bookstores were a dime a dozen. No, here she would be able to carve a new life out for herself, and she didn't have the funds to make the trip back anyway.

The carriage stopped in front of the meager inn, and the carriage driver hopped off his seat at the front to begin unloading the few belongings Alania had brought with her. When all the luggage lay on the ground by the inn, Alania and her travel companions said their farewells, and she threw her pack over her shoulder and picked her trunk up with a grunt before making her way into the inn to inquire about lodging for the night.

The innkeeper was a stout human man in his midlife, according to the grey that peppered his temples and beard. He smiled warmly at Alania, greeting her with a wave.

"Hello, miss! Travel long?" His kind voice boomed good-naturedly throughout the building, making a few patrons look up from their food to inspect the newcomer. She smiled shyly at the man and tugged at her trunk. Seeing her struggle, the innkeeper sprang into action. "Oh, allow me! I assume you need a room?"

Alania smiled, allowing the large man to quickly pick up her small trunk and hoist it onto his shoulder.

"I am, in fact. I plan to stay a few days while I find a place to open a bookshop." She announced to the room, looking each patron in the eye. "I hope you will all come by once I am set up!" Some of the patrons smiled. Others rolled their eyes and continued on with their meal and ale. *'Good enough reaction, I guess.'* she thought as she turned her attention back to the towering tavern owner. He grinned down at her as he made his way to the stairs by the fireplace. Motioning her to follow, he ascended the steps just as Alania passed the warm hearth.

"Room is 4 copper a night; add an extra copper for supper. You'll need to pay in advance, and any extras will cost ya." He explained as they made their way down a corridor lined with doors. There were five rooms in total, each with a large number hammered on the door. He went to room number 4 and shifted, taking a keyring off his belt and handing it to the gnome. "If you'd please," he said with a kind gesture of his hand. Alania fumbled momentarily, then unlocked the door and entered the room.

To her surprise, the room was sized for her small stature, with a table, a stool, and a small bed in the sparsely decorated room. A small candle sat in a candleholder on the table, which the innkeeper quickly lit before placing the trunk down at the foot of the bed. Alania smiled at the unexpected lodgings, placing her pack on the stool before turning to the man.

"Thank you, uh.." She realized he had yet to give her a name.

"Helman, miss. Hubert Helman. And it was no trouble, honest. Now," he clapped his hands now that his burden was lifted. "How long do you want to stay?"

Alania gave the man enough for three days of lodging with three extra copper for the meals. The man quickly counted through the coin, smiled, and waved goodbye; promising supper would be brought up shortly. Looking around her room, she sighed, a smile creeping over her face.

"So it begins."

Chapter 2