

Chapter One

I stop in my tracks to stare at the town rising before me, white spires stretching into the midday sky. As we approach the gates, I cannot stop gaping. It's as if we have walked clear into the clouds and found a mystical city there.

"I have never seen such a place," I whisper.

Dain—my fellow monster hunter in training—turns to look at me. "You live in a *castle*, princess."

My twin brother, Rhydd, shakes his head. "She means we have never seen a town like this. Even our castle isn't so grand, and these are just ordinary buildings."

Dain grunts in grudging understanding. He's never been beyond the mountains either. Few people in our expedition have. Our kingdom, Tamarel, is bordered on three sides by monster-infested waters and on the fourth by monster-infested forests and mountains, which we had to cross to reach this nation, Roiva.

Our journey was not uneventful. Dain nearly got trampled by yet another khryosomallos. My jackalope, Jacko, nearly got carried off by a wyvern. And while my party would claim that I nearly got dragged away by a nekomata, I saw it the whole time and was just trying to get a closer look. Overall, though, we made it through easily, and we could claim that's because we're an awesome party of monster hunters, but the truth is bigger. Much bigger—as in, dragon-sized.

For the past few months, monsters have been on the move. Some have completely fled the Dunnian Woods. Others have just relocated within it. There's a mother dragon in the mountains, where there hasn't been a dragon in generations, and the monsters have steered clear. Even the dragon herself has gone silent, tending to her babies.

That dragon is the reason we're here. She's on our soil, and we need to protect her. I may be the royal monster hunter but really, I'm more of a referee. While I will kill monsters if necessary, my real job is finding ways for humans and monsters to live together by relocating

the beasts and educating the people. We believe humans can live peacefully with the dragon. We could be wrong, and if so, we'll need to drive her out. What we don't want is for people from other kingdoms to do what they did to the original dragons: kill them and steal their babies and force the beasts to flee to distant lands.

I'm part of an expedition to explain the situation to kingdoms beyond our borders, starting with Roiva. We have good relations with Roiva. Better yet, they're a land of scholars who pride themselves on their universities. Who better to enlist in our dragon-education plan?

We've crossed the mountains, come through a swath of arid scrubland and finally reached this border town. A messenger has gone ahead to announce us. It's not as if those in the guard tower could miss us. We have a giant wolf—a warg—plus a jackalope and a dropbear. A pegasus filly periodically flies over our heads and a *ceffyl-dwr*—a carnivorous aquatic horse—trots beside me.

We're also a party of over a dozen people. There's my brother and me. Two of our friends, Dain and Alianor, plus Trysten, a kinda-sorta-prince we're returning to his homeland. (Dain, Rhydd and I are twelve years old, while Trysten and Alianor are thirteen.)

As for adults, there's Liliath, my and Rhydd's great-aunt and a member of our royal council. Having the passage to Roiva clear of monsters provided the chance of a lifetime and she couldn't pass it up. There's also my bodyguard, Kaylein; Wilmot, my trainer and Dain's foster father; and a half-dozen guards.

We haven't even reached the town gates before they fly open and a man on a white steed rides to greet us, followed by six more horses. Both the riders and their mounts are dressed in finery that sparkles in the sunlight, as bright as the town's white spires.

The riders are men and women mixed, most with skin as dark as that of my bodyguard, Kaylein. Natives of Tamarel have brown skin, like my own, though there are many families like Kaylein's, who are originally from Roiva, and even a few people as pale as Wilmot, who

hails from the kingdoms beyond.

As soon as the riders draw near, the leader dismounts and bows. “Prince Rhydd and Princess Rowan. I am Sir Terry, lord of this town. You honor us with your visit.”

“Did we have a choice?” Dain mutters under his breath. I shoot him a look, but he’s right—the only road to the Roivan capital runs straight through town.

“Thank you, Sir Terry,” Rhydd says. “The honor is ours. You do not need fear a royal visit. We are simply passing through, though we may shop for supplies, if that is acceptable.”

The man straightens, his chin lifting. “The crown prince and princess of Tamarel shopping like common travelers? Never. We will see you are fully restocked for your journey.”

“While that is unnecessary, it would be appreciated.”

“You will be my guests tonight.”

Rhydd glances at Liliath. As heir to the throne, my brother outranks her, but she’s with us for exactly this reason—so Rhydd may seek her counsel in our mother’s absence.

“Liliath of Clan Dacre,” she says, stepping forward. “Aunt to Queen Mariela and member of the royal council. Your offer is very kind, Sir Terry, but we did not intend to impose on your hospitality.”

“It is no imposition, and I insist. It is already late afternoon. By the time you restock, you would barely pass our western gates before you needed to make camp. Please do me the honor of hosting you this evening. I’m sure it has been many days since you’ve eaten a proper meal or slept in a proper bed.”

Beside me, Alianor whispers, “If he mentions a hot bath, I’m abandoning you and staying here forever.”

Liliath nods to Rhydd, turning the decision over to him. He glances at me. Only a half year ago, I’d been heir to the throne. The death of our aunt—the former royal monster

hunter—and an injury to Rhydd’s leg allowed us to switch future roles. I say *allowed* and not *forced*, because it’s what we both wanted.

“Hot baths?” I say to Sir Terryn. “We could be swayed from our path with the promise of those.”

The white-haired man laughs. “Yes, princess. I do believe we can provide that.”

“Do you mind my sister’s entourage?” Rhydd asks. “The warg is her bodyguard, and the jackalope her companion. The pegasus and ceffyl-dwr will be fine with a stable and pasture separated from other horses. Also, Dain here has a young dropbear.”

“I see it clinging to him,” Sir Terryn says with a smile. “We will happily accommodate whatever you require for both human and beast. I daresay my staff will be delighted to see such wonders, particularly the pegasus.” He shades his eyes to look at Sunniva flying overhead. “She is a beautiful creature.”

“Just don’t tell her that,” Rhydd says. “She’s more of a princess than my sister. All right, then, Sir Terryn. Lead on.”

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We have been treated like royalty. Yes, as Dain would point out, Rhydd and I *are* royalty. At home, we live in a castle, and we have staff who cook our food and tidy our rooms. We are extremely privileged, which we recognize and attempt to repay with our service to the country. Still, our treatment at Sir Terryn’s goes beyond what we’d receive at home, and it is miles above how we expected to spend tonight.

Baths are drawn before we even get into Sir Terryn’s sprawling manor house. We are offered the choice of assistance or privacy. I select privacy, and Alianor naturally accepts the pampering. Our clothing is whisked away to be washed, and we rise from our baths to lush robes that Alianor threatens to steal—which is more than a threat, considering she’s the daughter of a bandit warlord.

We're then shown into our guest quarters, an area bigger than my room at home. A roaring fire chases away the autumn chill, and Malric—my warg—takes up position in front of it with Jacko angling in to catch a bit of heat.

Trays of food wait in my room, and Alianor and I devour them while Liliath and Kaylein have their baths. Clothing is provided for dinner, along with entertainment. I eat so much I struggle to stay awake for the festivities. My body aches from a week of sleeping on the ground, and I barely sink into the bed before I am soundly asleep.

I wake to fur in my mouth . . . jackalope fur, it seems, as I open my eyes to see a bunny butt on my face.

“Jacko?” I croak.

He gives a semi-apologetic chirp and hops onto my chest before resuming the real cause of my early waking: his alert cry. I scramble up. Alianor groans beside me and Malric snaps at the jackalope, telling him he's done his job and can be quiet now.

“Malric's right,” I say around a yawn. “I got the message. Please stop before you wake the entire household.”

“Too late,” Alianor grumbles as she lifts her head. “What's he going on about?”

At a movement in the room, I glance to see Kaylein silhouetted in the moonlight, sword in hand. Malric is my constant companion, and he considers himself my bodyguard, just as he was my aunt Jannah's. Outside the palace I need a human one, too, at least until I'm older. That would be Kaylein, the youngest member of the royal guard at eighteen. She was supposed to sleep in another room—as was Alianor—but Kaylein insisted on a floor mat and Alianor insisted my bed was big enough for two.

Now Kaylein is at the balcony door, and when she opens it, a roar echoes in the distance. I'm out of bed in a flash, running to the balcony and leaning over the railing as Malric tugs at my nightgown.

“The creature is at least a half mile off,” I say, pulling my gown from his jaws.

Kaylein says, “I think he’s more worried about you vaulting over the railing to investigate.”

Alianor comes out, yawning. “What *is* that?”

“It sounds like some kind of wildcat,” I say. “A big one. A lion maybe?”

“Oooh. I’ve never seen a lion.”

“Neither have I. I do know people in other kingdoms keep them in menageries.”

I squint into the night. The sound comes again, a wild and angry roar. There’s something else in the sound, too . . . a note of fear.

The sound chills my spine, and I shiver. We don’t have menageries in Tamarel, and while I’ve heard there are excellent ones abroad—dedicated to helping injured or rare animals—I’ve also heard the horror stories that made my ancestors outlaw them. I’d be surprised to find that in Roiva, though. Their nation is known for its educated and forward-thinking ways.

When the door opens, I turn to see a maid standing there, wide-eyed.

“Is that from a menagerie?” I ask.

“N-no, Your Majesty. It is a monster. It came from the mountains, and it has been terrorizing our town for weeks now.”

Alianor turns to me. “See? I told you there was a reason Sir Terry was being so nice. There’s always a reason.”

“A monster?” a voice says. We turn to see Trysten at the doorway.

“Hey!” Alianor says. “This is our *bedroom*.”

“Yes, which is why I’m staying out here.” He turns to me. “Rhydd’s on his way. Did someone say that’s a monster?”

Before I can answer, footsteps sound outside the door, and Dain and Wilmot step past

Trysten.

“Now we know why they wanted us to stay,” Dain mutters.

“I just said that,” Alianor says. “Bringing up the rear, as always.”

He rolls his eyes and walks in past the maid, who still hovers just inside the door. His dropbear—Dez—clings to the front of a shirt Dain has hastily pulled on.

“Can you see it?” he says to me as he steps onto the balcony.

I shake my head.

“What can you tell us about the beast?” Wilmot asks the maid.

“Nothing. No one can get close to the creature. It seems to be living in a ruined building to the south.” She points. “It was an old guard tower that collapsed in an earthquake.”

As she speaks, Rhydd appears.

“Why did your lord not just ask for our help?” Rhydd says. “We’re traveling with the royal monster hunter and two members of our monster hunter troop.”

“He knew you had urgent business with the king. He feared you would not stop.”

Rhydd sighs. “So he put us up for the night, knowing we’d hear the beast. I’ll need to speak to your lord about this.”

“B-but you must help,” she says. “Please.”

“We will,” I say as I come in from the balcony. “We just aren’t happy with how Sir Terryn went about it. Can you tell us anything about the monster?”

“Just that it is a terrible and fearsome creature that roars nightly and steals lambs from our flocks.”

“And babes from their cradles?” Wilmot says dryly.

“Not yet, but it will. You must free us from—”

“—this dreadful scourge? Yes, yes. I’ve been a monster hunter for twenty years. I know the routine.” Wilmot turns to us. “Dain and I will take care of this.”

“What?” I say. “And leave me here, when there is an unknown beast I may have never seen before?”

He sighs. “It was worth a try. Come on, then. Let’s free this land from the dreadful scourge. Or at least get that blasted beast to stop roaring so I can sleep.”

<CN>Chapter Two

Wilmot doesn't bother rousing Sir Terryn. I'm sure the lord can hear us preparing to leave—kind of hard to miss the clomp of a half-dozen pairs of boots. Trysten will stay behind. He has too little experience with monster hunting, as much as he'd like to join us. As for the lord, Wilmot will deal with that matter later. We have a monster to catch.

According to the maid, the tower is a mile away. We could see it from the balcony, so we don't need directions. The only horse we have is Doscach, my *ceffyl-dwr*, and we don't bother asking to borrow others. I leave Doscach behind, too. This will be easier done on foot.

We make our way along the dark streets, windows opening as people peer out at us. They can hear the beast roaring and now they hear the sound of our passing. If they look out, they'll see a party of foreign-dressed strangers with swords and bows on their backs accompanied by a warg, all of us making our way toward that roar.

Those shutters close quickly as we pass, lest we ask for help. I could grumble at that, but it's not as if we'd accept help even if it were offered. We're Tamarelian monster hunters.

From the balcony, the building had seemed a simple structure: the collapsed remains of a stone guard tower. Now that we get closer, I can see there's also a small garrison amongst the ruins.

We're still a hundred feet out when we reach a fence. A sign informs us that this is a historic site undergoing archaeological study. That's why the tower and garrison haven't been repaired. They're digging up the ruins to see what lies beneath.

"It's like a mountain," I say as I look at the toppled stone and mounds of dirt. "A cavern, at least."

When Alianor frowns over at me, Wilmot says, "Rowan is right. The ruins of this building could act like a den or cave. The maid said the monster came from the mountains, undoubtedly driven out by the dragon."

"It stopped here," Alianor says. "And holed up someplace that reminded it of home. Poor

thing.”

“Yeah, you won’t be saying that if it tries to devour you,” Dain says. “Whatever it is, it doesn’t sound small.”

We pause at the fence, and I look at our companion beasts. They’re all staring into the shadowy ruins. I’d have preferred to leave Dez and Jacko behind, but I know better. Jacko has been known to chew through cages, and Dez escapes into rafters. They’re predators, and they consider it their duty to protect us.

“Malric?” I say.

He growls, his chest rippling.

“Yep, whatever’s in there is big,” Alianor says.

Up close, the roar still sounds like a wildcat but also like the bellow of a bull, and there’s something about it that makes my ears ring and my head boom, as if a headache is coming on. That nudges a vague memory from a bestiary, but when I try to pursue it, nothing comes, and there’s little point in trying to identify the beast from its roar. I’ll see it soon enough.

I glance at Wilmot for instructions—he is my trainer, after all. But he’s watching me, and I realize he wants me to lead. This expedition is taking the place of my trials, and to satisfy the council, he’ll need to tell them all the ways I proved I was worthy of the ebony sword on my back. Soon I will lead the monster hunters, and so I must begin that now.

I squint along the fence. Then I say, “I’d like to circle the ruins and try to pinpoint exactly where the sound is coming from.”

We’re not even halfway around before I realize the futility of my plan. That booming roar echoes off everything, and the more I hear it, the more my head hurts. I have no idea where it’s coming from except “somewhere in the ruins.”

“I suggest we move past the fence and surround it,” I say. “Space out, but in pairs—keep someone close enough to see you and come to your aid if the monster charges.”

“Would you like to assign pairs, Rowan?” Wilmot asks.

I’d rather let people pair off themselves, but I need to take the lead and assess strengths and weaknesses, as uncomfortable as that is.

“Alianor? Go with Wilmot, please.” That puts our most experienced monster hunter with our weakest. “Rhydd? You’ll be with Kaylein.” Both are expert sword fighters, and Rhydd has had monster-hunter training. “Dain? We’ll triple up with Malric.”

With the groups set, I assign search areas. Arguably the strongest team is Malric, Dain and myself, plus the two smaller monsters. We’ll start at the darkest portion, where our beasts’ night vision will help.

Dain and I circle around to the back. There, the tower ruins face the open desert, away from the lights of the city. Then we separate with Malric between us as we advance on the ruins. Our portion is the tower itself, half toppled onto the garrison. When I squint, I can make out several openings where the stone has crumbled enough for a beast Malric’s size to crawl through.

That’s when the monster stops roaring. The wind has brought the smell of humans, and it has gone silent.

“I like this gap over here,” I say, pointing.

“You mean the darkest and scariest one that is also the one the beast most likely used?”

“Exactly.”

“One could argue, princess, that we’d be better off going in through a less likely opening and sneaking up on it.”

“It already knows we’re here.”

“Which means it’s crouched just beyond that gap, waiting to pounce and devour you.”

“Pfft. No. I’m the princess. You’re going through first.”

He gives me a look. “If I actually thought you’d let me, I’d take you up on that.”

“You’re the archer. You provide backup for”—I pull the ebony sword from my back—
“the royal monster hunter!”

“Yeah, you run through holding that. It’ll catch on the stonework and impale you before the monster can eat you alive.” He lifts a hand. “Please do not tell me it’d kill you before it eats you.”

“Depends on what kind of monster it is.” I glance at the gap as we approach. “You should probably stop talking now.”

“Me?” His voice squeaks adorably.

“Such a chatterbox.” I notice Jacko nearing the gap and hurry to stop him. “Uh-uh. No bite-sized monsters through the hole first.”

Jacko glares at me and chitters.

I point at my boots. “Protect my feet. That’s your job.”

He still grumbles but hops over to stay at my feet. I stop just outside the gap and return my sword to its sheath. Dain’s right that the blade is too big for this, so I take out my dagger. Then I pause. When I look over at Malric, he’s nearly invisible, black fur against the darkness. Just his yellow eyes show, those eyes fixed on me, waiting for me to figure it out. That’s progress. A few months ago if I’d approached this gap, he’d have yanked me back.

“You first,” I say with a wave.

That makes sense, as much as I hate putting anyone else at risk. Malric grunts and moves to the opening. He sticks his head in, and I hear him sniffing as his ears swivel. The gap is just big enough for him to pass through with his head ducked—in other words, waist-high on me.

He takes one step through and then another. I wait until his hindquarters are inside. Then I start forward, brushing his tail. He doesn’t wheel and snap, which means there’s no immediate danger. I follow.

Inside, it's pitch dark. I blink hard to no avail. Taking out a fire stick, I light it and raise it above my head as Dain lights one behind me.

I step forward. My foot hits something that clatters loud enough to make me wince. I lower the fire stick and see the leg bone of a full-grown sheep or goat. The beast's dinner. That means we are indeed looking at a large monster, one at least the size of a wolf.

I point it out to Dain, who nods. Then I extend my arm and wave the fire stick. We're inside the tower, with a ruined staircase to my left. The remaining space is small enough that I can tell it's empty. I lift the fire stick and peer up. Nothing obviously hiding there either.

Dain taps my shoulder and points. There's an opening ahead, and it's the only exit. I nod and start forward. When I reach it, I examine the stone sides—it's the remains of a doorway that once led from the tower into the garrison. The falling tower crushed it until only a hole remains, one that we'll need to crawl through. I stick my arm in as far as I can reach and wave the fire stick around.

A screech sounds behind me. I jump up so fast I drop the stick. Something swoops at my head as Dain shouts a warning. A leathery wing smacks my face, and I stagger back, my dagger rising. Another shriek as a dark form flies up into the tower.

"Was that a harpy?" I say, backing against the stonework.

"Looked like a bat," Dain says. "But it was huge. As big as a harpy."

Another dark form swoops. It's coming straight at me and I swing my dagger to slash at it, but before I can, a shrieking cry rings out and Dez leaps from Dain's shirt, red eyes flashing in the darkness. The creature starts swooping up, winging away as fast as it can, but the dropbear is faster, zooming up the stonework. Another cry, and Dez leaps clear over our heads. A thud as she smacks into the flying beast in midair.

"Dez!" Dain says.

He runs forward to catch her as she hurtles toward the ground. He's too slow, though,

and she hits, landing right atop her prey. She looks up at him, her wide face turning his way as if wondering what all the fuss is about. She's a dropbear. That's how she hunts. She drops. She'd struck the creature in midair and ripped out its throat before it even hit the ground.

"Good girl," I say as I crouch beside her. "Such a good girl."

She looks up, blood dripping from her mouth. Then she glances at Dain.

"She's waiting for your praise," I say. "Yours is what matters."

He tells her she did a fine job, and then she dives into her meal, ripping at what I see now is indeed a bat, much bigger than those we have at home. Its body is as long as hers. Dropbears may look adorable, but they are deadly predators, even when they're as young as Dez.

Using her prehensile hands, she rips a chunk of meat and holds it out to Jacko, who takes it and nibbles delicately.

"You're going to need to stash that," I say. "We can't stop for a snack."

She doesn't understand me, of course, and just keeps eating, but I move back to the ruined doorway, and Dain lets her take another bite before scooping her up. He sets the dead bat aside and tells her she can return to it, and she snuggles into the pouch across his chest.

I light another fire stick. Through the doorway, I kneel to see a room, and I motion to Dain that we're going in. Then I wave for Malric. The warg sniffs the entrance and grumbles deep in his throat at the indignity of needing to crawl on his belly. He does it, and I follow with Jacko.

<CN>Chapter Three

I'm barely through when Wilmot's distant voice rings out. "Don't move. Stay right where you—"

A roar cuts him off, and I stumble up into a run even as Malric snaps at me. I race into the remains of a large room. The roar comes from the next section. When I don't see an obvious entrance, I stop short . . . and then I spot a pile of rubble with wavering light behind it. It's another ruined doorway, this one mounded high with debris.

I grab rocks and wood and throw them aside. Dain curses as one hits him, and then he starts helping me dig. Soon, I can see the next room. Wilmot stands across it, and he's looking at something over here. He stands in some kind of pit, the top of his head below me.

I clear a gap big enough for me to fit into and scramble through as Malric growls behind me. I pop out the other side and nearly tumble down. It seems Wilmot isn't standing in a pit—I've come out on a landing over a sunken room.

"Hey," a voice says to my left. "Nice of you to join us."

I look over to see Alianor at the far side of the landing, which is cracked down the middle. It's not an actual landing, I see now. Most of the room has fallen into the space below it, and that's where Wilmot stands. Alianor and I are on the part that didn't collapse, but it did crack and it's sunken in the middle. All of this is not nearly as important as what stands in that crack, having cornered Alianor.

"A nian," I breathe.

The beast turns its head my way and roars, and while I'm sure I should shake in terror, I grin instead. I don't even think Jannah ever got to see a nian. They live in the mountains, but on this side, near the grasslands, and they don't tend to bother people, much less venture into towns.

The roar should have given it away. It's said that a nian's roar can split open a man's skull, which is obviously impossible. As with every legend, you need to dig past the exaggerations to the truth, which seems to be that the pitch of a nian's roar hurts our heads.

I thought that roar came from a big cat. I'm partly right. The nian has the head of a lion, complete with mane. The body is more canine, with a ropy tail that looks like it belongs on a bull or boar. The beast also has boar-like tusks.

"So, Rowan?" Alianor calls. "Do you think you can stop admiring this monster and save my life? It looks really hungry."

I wouldn't say that, but it does seem upset. It's not as big as I expected. Maybe a little smaller than Malric, but still definitely big enough to kill Alianor. Right now, it's settling for roaring at her from the rubble piled in the crack between us.

"Wilmot?" I call.

"I have it in my sights," he says from behind his bow.

"Same here," Dain says to my rear.

"Alianor, would this be a bad time to ask how come you're up here and Wilmot's down there? I thought we were working in pairs."

"He told me to stay here," Alianor says.

"No," Wilmot says. "I told you to stay down here, in a safe spot, while I checked what looked like the beast's den. But you spotted bones."

Alianor is a healer in training, specifically a monster healer, and if she sees bones, it's like me spotting a new monster. She has to investigate.

"Has the beast made any aggressive moves?" I ask.

"Besides snarling and flashing tusks as big as my forearm?" Alianor says.

"That's a threat display. Is there anything near you that it might want?"

"Just bones."

She picks one up, and the nian stops roaring.

“Uh,” she says. “That’s weird. Does it want the bones?”

“It seems young. You could be in the middle of its toy pile.”

“Seriously?”

She picks up the biggest bone and throws it. The nian leaps, and behind me, Dain sucks in breath. Malric crouches, ready to attack. The nian only chases the bone, picks it up and brings it back to where it started.

“Did it just fetch the bone?” Alianor asks.

I take a step toward the nian.

“Princess,” Dain warns.

I nudge Jacko back with my boot. He chitters but moves behind my feet, as I’ve been teaching him to do.

I take another step. The nian is down in the crack, maybe ten feet from me, its head just above the tilted floor I’m on. I crouch.

“Hey, little nian,” I say.

“Princess.” Dain’s voice rises.

“Keep your bow on the beast,” Wilmot say. “Rowan’s fine.”

“Hello,” I say to the nian. It turns its leonine face toward me, bone still in its mouth.

“Where’s your pride?” I ask. “Your family? You seem a little young to be off on your own, especially for a girl.”

She’ll have no idea what I’m saying. It’s my tone that counts. I’m working this through, too. It’s a she—I could tell that when she was facing Alianor. Her size and short mane mean she’s young. Nians live in prides, like lions, and females generally stay with them.

The nian stares at me, and there’s no fear in her gaze. No confusion either, at this puny prey creature being so bold.

“Dain?” I say. “Can you get the bat Dez caught?”

When Dain hesitates, Wilmot reminds him to listen to me. He goes and brings back the bat. I take a moment to prepare the mangled creature. Then I hold it out by one leathery wing and step toward the nian. She waits patiently. I toss the bat to her, and she catches it in midair and then starts ripping into it.

“The maid lied,” I say. “Well, on the lord’s orders, I’m sure, so I don’t blame her. This nian didn’t come from the mountains. No wild predator eats that calmly in front of other predators.” I nod toward Malric. “She’s barely noticed a warg. She’s paying no attention to Jacko. And she’s not the least bit fazed by humans.”

“So she won’t kill me?” Alianor says.

“Mmm, I wouldn’t wager on it. Obviously no one has been eager to come fetch her, so she’s hardly a house pet. You’ll be safe where you are. We need to . . .” I trail off as I turn to Wilmot. “I’m not sure what we need to do.”

“What are our options?” he asks.

Before I can answer, Rhydd appears, crawling through a hole in the far wall. I quickly tell him and Kaylein, who’s close behind, what’s happening. Then I respond to Wilmot’s prompt.

“The problem,” I say, “is that I don’t want to return her to Sir Terryn. I know people keep monsters in menageries, but as the royal monster hunter, I can’t condone that. However, this isn’t our kingdom. But since Sir Terryn tricked us into doing this for him, that means he doesn’t get a say in what happens to her now. She’s our responsibility. Yet even if we had the time to escort her back to the mountains—which we do not—she wasn’t raised there and likely can’t fend for herself. That’s why she’s hiding here and stealing livestock. We also can’t allow her to just keep doing that.” I sigh. “It’s complicated.”

“My head was already hurting from her roars,” Alianor says. “Now it’s hurting twice as

much.”

“Rowan is correct,” Wilmot says. “I believe she’s covered all the possibilities, none of them ideal. We have ourselves a dilemma.”

“May I ask what you suggest?” I say.

“That we begin by sedating her. That needs to be done whatever the ultimate solution.”

I nod. “Agreed. Alianor, you have the sedative, right?”

She holds up her pouch.

“Excellent. Now Dain will tackle her to the ground, and you’ll inject her while I stand guard.”

Dain makes a noise behind me.

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll tackle her, and you stand guard.”

“You know what would have been really helpful, princess? If you’d put the sedative into that bat she’s eating.”

“That *would* have been smart, wouldn’t it? However, barring that . . .”

I take two running steps toward the nian. Dain only has time to squawk before the beast slumps to the ground a heartbeat before I hop down beside it.

“You’d already sedated the bat’s remains,” Dain says.

“It *was* an excellent idea.” I gingerly check the nian’s breathing while holding my dagger. Jacko noses at the beast’s leg.

“She’s unconscious,” I say. “We should truss her and return her to Sir Terryn’s home. Kaylein, please run and tell them we’ll need a wagon.”