

# Descent into Darkness

Book Two of the Bound to the Abyss Series



JAMES R. VERNON

# DESCENT INTO DARKNESS

BOOK TWO

A THREE MOONS REALM NOVEL

JAMES R. VERNON

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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# CHAPTER 1

N E W P L A N S  
*S E A S O N O F W A R M T H , 1 8 4 A . P .*

EAN OPENED HIMSELF UP to as much of the energy from the Abyss as he could. It rushed into him, more than he had ever held before. He felt like a jar trying to contain a flood as it swirled about inside of him. The glove on his right hand, as well as most of his sleeve, seemed to burn away as the tattoos encircling his arm blazed to life. Even the grass beneath him withered from the intensity of the power flowing through his arm. He grasped her arms tight as she sat on top of him.

The female creature straddling his body stared down at the glowing tattoo in wonder. The brightness from the tattoos on his arm illuminated her pale, blue skin and put a spark in her pupil-less red eyes. Her violet, bat-like wings stopped their flutter. Unfortunately, the light only distracted her for a few moments. The beautiful woman shook her head and tried to free herself from his grasp again. Tried and failed.

She pulled and yanked her arms in multiple directions trying to get free, but Ean held on tight. They thrashed about on the forest floor, kicking up dirt and leaves. The power raged through him, giving him the strength to keep her from going after his friends. From his position pinned beneath her, he watched as the creature's expression changed from surprise to annoyance and ended on anger. She sneered down at him, her dark red eyes seeming to glow as she struggled against him.

Eventually she slowed, a blank expression washing over her face as she looked down at him. Was she giving up? Ean had no idea how fast she could run or fly, but he hoped that he had given Jaslen and Bran enough time to get away. As for himself, he had no idea what he was going to do about this creature straddling his body.

As her struggling eventually ceased, she continued to stare down at Ean, her blank face masking whatever emotions she was feeling towards him. After what felt like an eternity of silence, she finally spoke.

"You're an...interesting...human. What's your name?"

"Ean."

"Just Ean? How simple." That sly smile had returned, and her arms relaxed in his grip. "My name is Azalea, Ean the human. There seems to be a little more to you than I originally thought. I find you quite...intriguing."

Her voice had taken on a more sultry tone at the end, and she leaned down a bit so that her face was closer to his. Ean had no idea what to do. He still kept a solid grip on her upper arms, but she seemed much calmer now. Had she accepted that the other two were gone? He watched her as she gazed right back into his eyes. Her lip twitched slightly as she smiled down at him. It was then that he realized the position they were in and could feel his cheeks reddening.

"Well," he said breaking the silence. His voice warbling slightly, causing him to wince before continuing on. "If you think you can handle not killing anyone for a few moments, I'll let you get up."

"Who says I want to get up?" Her fingers curled into his shirt. Using the grip, she slowly pulled Ean up to the point where their faces were practically touching. "I said I found you interesting, Ean. Maybe I want to have some fun with you."

Her tongue darted out, brushing his lips for only a moment before disappearing back into her mouth. Ean knew his face must be red by this point; it felt like it was on fire. His hands relaxed slightly around her wrists as he tried his best to speak.

"I'm...uh, glad that you have calmed down. It was--"

"Shhh," she quieted him with the sound, but even more so with how she did it, lightly touching her lips to his. He felt his jaw drop slightly but didn't care. "Time for talking is over."

Leaning back, she gave him a seductive stare that melted his resolve. He let the energy from the Abyss flow out of him slowly until it was completely gone. As his hands slipped from her wrists, she let out a short laugh as that sly grin returned.

"Oh, little one, whatever am I to do with you?"

Before he could ask what she meant, she pulled him up slightly higher...and then brought her forehead crashing down into his.

All Ean felt was a sharp pain as she struck, but dropped into unconsciousness before his body even hit the ground.

FLOATING IN DARKNESS, EAN struggled against the weight of unconsciousness. As the darkness slowly receded, voices seemed to drift through his thoughts. Although barely audible, the female voice with its impatient tone was loud and clear.

"...better know what you're doing, imp. I have no intention of..."

"...trust me. In the long run, things will work out well for you, you just..."

"...and you're sure that he..."

"...looks young, but has..."

"...better not betray me..."

The snap of a twig to his left made him sit up. His vision returned, but the cobwebs weaving his mind made it hard to remember where he was and how he had gotten there. Instant nausea hit. Trying to blink away the darkness, he peered into the dark shadows of the trees. His hands grasped at the earth and leaves beneath his fingers. Then that familiar tingling feeling, like pins-and-needles lightly jabbing his skin, caught his attention.

"Zin." Although the imp only went up to his knee, he resonated a distinct and

noticeable presence through Ean's connection to Abysmal energy. "Is she still here?"

He struggled to his feet. His stomach churned, and it felt like something was crushing his head, but he kept it together. If only he could clear the cobwebs from his mind and focus.

Zin's presence moved a bit closer and then stopped. When the imp spoke, his voice was low, and Ean detected a hint of annoyance.

"We're still lost in the woods, in what little moons' light can break through the trees, and your 'friends' have left you, taking the food with them. There are plenty of squirrels and rodents for me to snack on, but I doubt I could catch enough to keep you fed. And then of course, there is our new companion..."

"New companion? What are you--"

"Aww," a new voice said in the dark. "I hope you're not holding a grudge for the little tap I gave you on the head, little one."

That womanly voice, a mixture of playful and sultry, brought everything back. The fight with Bran and Jaslen. Summoning the beautiful creature. The struggle. Receiving a head butt, then the blackness. Finding her by sight was impossible, but then he felt her, felt the Abyss covering her like a thick blanket, and turned his head towards the sensation.

"Can this human see in the dark like us?" Her voice sounded surprised, and a little impressed. "I wouldn't think his hearing was that well developed he could find us by sound."

"No, no," Zin's voice said from the darkness. "Apparently he can feel things connected to the Abyss. It's something new and makes games of hide-and-seek incredibly unfair."

"Interesting." He felt the woman rise and start to move towards him. Ean tried to climb to his feet, but dizziness overwhelmed him and he sat back down. Feeling around in the dark, he tried to find something he could use to defend himself.

"You don't need to worry about her, Ean." The imp said. "She's agreed to join us. Whether or not that's a good or bad thing is up for debate, but at least she promised not to kill us. And trust me, that's a pretty big deal for her kind."

Ean listened, trying his best to comprehend what was going on, but a fog still clouded his thoughts. And she was still moving closer. If only he could start a fire or had a candle he could light, anything that would let him see...

With a thought, he opened himself up to the energies of the Abyss, letting the power flood through him. The tattoos on his arm lit up, basking the trees of Rensen forest in their blue light. A flurry of movement signaled creatures fleeing deeper into the woods from the light. When he caught sight of the blue-skinned woman, sitting cross-legged with her leathery wings folded against her back, the name Azalea flashed into his mind. She flinched at the light and held up a slender blue hand to shield her eyes.

"Dim your light, little one," she requested. "Or are you trying to punish me for what I did?"

"Maybe I am."

"Aw, don't be that way. You started it, after all. You got me all worked up over a good meal and then denied me of it. Can you really fault me for being angry? If it makes you feel better, I didn't go after your friends, although that boy's angst and

jealousy tasted absolutely delicious."

"You only left them alone because I showed up, Yulari," Zin said with a grunt. Ean could see the imp clearly now. His beady yellow eyes were locked on the woman. A fresh scratch adorned one of his pointed ears. There were scratches all over his brown skin, and his clawed feet and hands were covered in dirt. "I had come back to check on Ean and found him unconscious on the forest floor while you were about to head out into the woods. It took me a bit to 'convince' you to stick around."

The woman shrugged, not bothering to deny it.

"Wait," Ean said, placing a hand on his head. The energy from the Abyss had eased the pain, but putting thoughts together was like trying to carry water in a sieve. "I thought your name was Azalea. Why did Zin just call you Yulari?"

"Azalea is her name," Zin cut in. "Not that you can believe anything she says. Yulari is the name of her race. I figured a healer of your intelligence would have known what you were bringing out of the Abyss before you had the bright idea of summoning her."

Zin paused to give Ean a snide eye roll. "If you recall, I warned you to never summon a Yulari. So imagine my surprise when I saw Azalea standing over you, about to leave you for wild animals to snack on. I had half the mind to leave you there, too. It would serve you right if a wolf came and had a little snack of your foot. Maybe then you would finally learn to listen to me."

"You let your pet imp talk to you like that?" Surprise touched Azalea's voice.

"He isn't my pet. He's, well, he's my friend."

She let out a laugh, then took a closer look at Ean and grew serious. "You mean that, don't you? You actually consider this little worm a friend. How curious. I think I am starting to understand why--"

"I'm standing right here you know, life sucker," Zin cut in. "You could at least wait until I wasn't around to insult me to the boy."

"Life sucker?!" Anger flashed across her face for a moment, and then was gone, replaced by her playful smile. "Little imp, if you're smart enough to be able to talk, you should know better than to call any of my kind that name. You're lucky we have this little arrangement, otherwise I would rip each of your limbs off and beat you with them."

"Enough!" Ean was letting things get out of control again, but this time he would stop it. "What do you mean, 'arrangement'? What have you two been discussing while I've been...sleeping?"

He made a point of staring directly at Azalea and was surprised when she looked away quickly.

"Well, we had quite the lengthy discussion," Zin said, a hint of amusement in his voice. "And to sum things up, she's agreed to help us and follow your orders--" Azalea coughed loudly, cutting the imp off. He looked at her with a frown before continuing. "Agreed to try and follow your orders whenever possible."

Ean looked over at the Yulari and this time received a nod and that same smirk that seemed to be a permanent fixture on her face. Shaking his head, he turned back to Zin.

"And how exactly can she help us?"

"The better question," the Yulari said, a hint of annoyance to her voice, "is what *can't* I do. Or more importantly, what *can't* you do, little one. Obviously you know

very little about the Abyss and how to use that energy coursing through your body. You're also a horrible warrior, so I can handle any fights you get into. Unless, of course, that would hurt your ego too much, having a girl fight your battles."

She stared at him, expecting an answer, but Ean refused to play her games. Returning her gaze, Ean plastered on a blank expression. Realizing she wasn't going to get a rise out of him, she sniffed indignantly and continued on.

"Well, if none of that sounds appealing, there is one last thing I can do that you cannot."

Without warning, she extended her wings and pushed off into the air. The light from Ean's tattoos silhouetted her in the darkness; the shadows created only seemed to add to her beauty. She hovered for a few moments slightly off the ground, her leathery wings beating just fast enough to keep her aloft. Then, with a wink at Ean, her wings tripled in speed and she shot into the air. Branches rained down as she dived through the canopy above and disappeared. Moments later she came crashing back down, dislodging even more twigs and leaves from above, before landing in front of Ean.

"So, little one," she said mockingly. "Which way do you have to go in order to get out of this forest?"

His supplies were gone. His friends, well, ex-friends, would be almost impossible to find, and he wasn't sure that he wanted to find them. And even if he did want to and eventually found them, they still would have no idea which way to go. Azalea was his only hope now. The fact that Zin seemed to support the idea of having her along cemented his decision.

Ean searched her eyes for any sign of treachery. He saw mockery and arrogance reflected in those blood-red eyes, but no treachery. Trusting his gut, he relented with a defeated sigh. She meant him no harm...at the moment. He extended a hand in her direction.

"You swear to follow my orders and not ignore them when you think they're inconvenient?"

She gave his hand a puzzled glance and then gripped it firmly, her nails digging into the skin of his hand.

"I promise, little one, that as soon as you make my presence in this world more permanent, I will aid you to the best of my ability."

"It's a deal then," Ean said, pulling his hand away. He grimaced a bit as he noticed small pinpricks of blood where her nails had dug in. "And the first thing you need to do, after telling me which direction to go, is to stop calling me 'little one.'"

"Fair enough, child," she said with a smirk.

Wonderful. Another person that teased him about looking young. Ean was eighteen-years-old, but due to his thin build, smooth complexion, dimpled cheeks, and scraggly black hair, people often mistook him for much younger. He found it demeaning when strangers referred to him as a boy, but a child was even worse.

"Now make my visit here a bit more permanent." Ignoring Ean's scowl, Azalea turned and walked over to a pile of leaves. Brushing them out of the way, her summoning circle came into view. It still glowed faintly with the power that kept her tied to this world.

Ean took a few deep breaths to compose himself before moving over to join her. Making her time in the realm more permanent meant transferring the summoning rune

to something he owned, just as he had carved Zin's rune into the pendant around his neck. It had to be something that he could keep close as well, just in case she got out of control and he had to send her back to the Abyss. It would be much easier to break the rune if it was inscribed on a physical object anyway.

Ean spied a small, flat piece of bark resting on the forest floor. It was about half the size of his palm--thin enough to tuck into a pocket, with a large enough surface on which to draw the intricate summoning rune. Picking up the wood, Ean was about to open up his Pocket to retrieve his carving knife when a thought struck him.

Well, it wasn't so much a thought as it was a feeling. Taking the bark in his right hand, he placed his left one down on the summoning circle. Closing his eyes, he pictured the rune on the ground transferring onto the bark. A chill washed over his body, moving from his left hand to his right, and sure enough when he opened his eyes, the summoning rune that had been on the ground was now perfectly inscribed on the piece of wood.

He glanced up to catch Azalea's red eyes studying him carefully. When their eyes met, she broke their gaze and turned to walk away, mumbling under her breathe. "He could have at least bound me to this world by something more flattering than a scrap of wood."

Ean was about to call her out, but she spoke again, louder this time.

"If you want to get out of the forest, you need to head that way." She pointed off in a direction opposite the one he would have chosen. "I could fly to the edge of the forest in barely any time at all, but since I'm supposed to follow you two geniuses around, it will probably take us a day or two on foot. Unless you are as weak as you look of course, then I would say three to four days."

"Leave now? I can barely see anything," objected Ean.

"Well then, I suppose I'll have to lead you by the nose, and then you and your ugly little imp will be out of the woods in no time."

"Unless you enjoy being called soul-sucking hag, I would stop with the insults and call me by my name," Zin retorted.

"Fine, fine, can we go now?" Azalea was staring at Ean, her hands now on her hips with one foot tapping impatiently on the ground. Ean returned her stare, drinking in Azalea's form. White leather hugged her curves. Thick purple hair hung to her shoulders, framing a face with petite features. Any normal man would consider her beautiful...if they could ignore the bat-like wings spread out behind her.

Ean knew better. As alluring and almost hypnotizing as her beauty was, deep down she was no ordinary woman. She was just another denizen from the Abyss. A creature of darkness. If Zin hadn't made a deal with her, she would have killed them both by now.

"Yes, we can leave. There's nothing left to pack. So if you're ready to go, then so am I."

Without another word, the Yulari walked off into the dense forest. Zin and Ean hurried to catch up. The threesome walked single file through the forest, with the light of the moons barely breaking through the canopy and creating dappled shadows on the leafy ground. Azalea took the lead position, while Zin and Ean walked a few paces behind.

Zin had been the one to support the decision of keeping Azalea around after all. It

was confusing now to see him frown in her direction. Ean couldn't exactly ask the imp what the problem was with Azalea only a few steps ahead of them. So, all three of them walked on in silence until tiny rays of light began poking through the canopy above, signaling the beginning of a new day.

# CHAPTER 2

## OUT OF THE WOODS

THEY WALKED ON THROUGH most of the morning. Every now and then, Azalea would tell them to stop and then fly off into the air. When she returned, she would always point them in a different direction than the one they had been going in. It was surprising for Ean to see how off track they could get when he believed they were going straight. It made him wonder if she was purposely misleading them. He wouldn't put it past the creature to keep them lost longer than necessary to make herself seem more useful. Every time Azalea altered their course, he glanced over at Zin to raise a questioning eyebrow. The normally cautious imp didn't seem concerned, so Ean decided he had no choice but to go along with whatever the Yulari said.

"Not too much further now," Azalea said after her sixth check of their position. "You've been keeping up a better pace than I gave you credit for, and I'm very surprised that the imp's little legs have been able to keep up as well. Guess I underestimated you both."

"These legs don't feel so little when they're kicking things, Yulari," the imp responded. "Keep that in mind."

"Such big threats from such a little creature," the Yulari retorted, her expression that of mock concern. "Good thing I have Ean to keep you from hurting me. Oh wait, it's the other way around. It's a good thing you have Ean to keep me from hurting you. But don't think the fact that I can't kill you because of our partnership doesn't mean I can't hurt you. So watch your tone when you address me."

With a sigh, Ean decided to step in before things got worse.

"Azalea, once we're out of the woods, we'll run into other people, which will certainly be a problem with how you look. When they catch sight of your blue skin, red eyes, and wings, I'm afraid they're going to come after you with sticks and stones. And when they are done, I'll be next just for being with you."

"Oh, by the Abyss." Azalea's voice was a mixture of sadness and condescending. "Don't you know anything about Yulari? Well, you are going to learn something today."

Stopping, she turned around to face him. Once she was set, her wings lowered and

folded about her body, underneath her arms. Then her entire body seemed to shimmer, blurring the image of her entire body until Ean was barely able to make her out. Then, just as suddenly as it had appeared, the blur was gone and Ean's jaw dropped.

Standing in front of him now was a woman slightly smaller than himself, short blonde hair framing a petite face, her body covered in what appeared to be a thick cloth robe. The woman's features resembled Azalea's but were slightly muted, the thin nose a bit more rounded out, the mouth smaller but with lips just as full, her eyes slightly slanted and of a dark green color with actual pupils. Her hair was cut the same, but was a dirty blond color. Her skin had taken on a lightly tanned tone, like someone that spent most of their life out in the fields but had just spent the Chill season indoors.

But there was something else. That shimmering effect was still slightly there, although it didn't blur her appearance any longer. It was the same effect Ean saw on Zin any time he became invisible.

"Well?" Azalea asked, lifting her arms up and slowly spinning around. "Will I pass for human?"

"Yes, absolutely, unless normal people can see that shimmering effect as well."

She stopped spinning abruptly and turned to face him. "What shimmering effect?"

"I think I can see the spell or whatever it is that changes your appearance. The same thing happens when Zin tries to turn invisible."

"Oh really? How peculiar." Shrugging, the Yulari spun one last time with a laugh before dropping her arms. "Well, I'm sure it won't be a problem."

Raising her arms again, the shimmering effect washed over her once more and in an instant, she had returned to her pale blue skinned self. "All that spinning made me forget which way we need to go. I'll be right back."

Taking off into the air once more, Azalea was only gone for a moment before fluttering back to the dirt and mud of the forest. With a casual wave of her hand she motioned for Zin and Ean to follow. The three of them walked on in silence again, with Zin shooting daggers with his eyes at the Yulari while Ean pretended not to notice.

"Here you are," she said, spreading her arms wide. "Delivered from despair and starvation by your wonderful Yulari guide. Just a little bit further and we'll be out of these woods and hopefully to more populated areas." She flashed Ean a smile and patted him on the head. "Not that I've found your presence boring, of course. It's just that you stink of depression, and it leaves a sour taste in my mouth."

Ean dodged another head pat from the Yulari and returned a furious scowl. "Quit patting my head like I'm your puppy. And I'm not depressed. If I'm not exactly cheerful, it's only because it's been a rough journey, and I'm tired. That's all."

"You sure?" Tilting her head, Azalea gave him a quizzical look. "I'm pretty sure I've been smelling depression wafting off of someone, and it certainly isn't the imp."

"How do you know it isn't Zin?"

She flashed Zin a wide grin. "The only emotion that I've been smelling from him is distaste, and I'm sure it is directed at me."

Returning her grin, the imp began making his way towards the end of the forest. "Finally, something we agree on."

Ean jogged to catch up with Azalea, who was trailing after Zin, and in no time they were walking three abreast out of the forest into a clear stretch of land. Hills of green

grass rolled into the northern horizons, a refreshing change from the brown dirt of his village. To the west he could see the Skyfall Mountains, not that far off in the distance. It was what he saw to the east, though, that made his eyes go wide.

A huge stone wall trailing north to south towered over the land. It stretched up into the clouds and out of sight and seemed to travel into the horizon without end.

His mind reeled from the sight of such a massive creation. Who could have built such a wonder? Did it protect them from something worse than the Abyss on the other side? How had no one from his village ever mentioned something so wondrous and intimidating? When Ean was finally able to shake away his shock, he turned to his companions.

"What in the world is that?"

Azalea shrugged, as if something as grand as the giant wall was commonplace for her. Zin shrugged as well, but moved closer to Ean's side to speak.

"The wall was here the last time I lived in your realm, but no one seemed to know who built it or why, and that was a long time ago. At this point, the gods are probably the only ones who know its purpose."

Ean nodded and returned his gaze to the wall. Maybe he would be able to see it up close. Not today though. He needed to spend what was left of the afternoon traveling towards the capitol of Lurthalan.

By the low position of the sun over the mountains, Ean knew dusk was on its way. That meant if they wanted to make good time, they would be relying on the three moons to light their path.

"Well, let's move on," he said. "We have no idea where we came out from or how long it will take to reach the city. My best guess is that if we head northeast, we should eventually reach Lurthalan or at least a road that heads there."

"Sounds like as good a plan as any," the Yulari replied. The shimmering effect washed over her again and the vision of an ordinary girl returned. "Just in case we meet anyone out here."

She walked past him, giving his shoulder a playful shove. Or at least Ean thought it had meant to be playful. He stumbled away a few paces and almost ended up on his back. Either Azalea forgot her own strength sometimes or she was messing with him again. Regaining his balance, he marched off after her with Zin following behind.

It was nice to have open space all around him. Even at home he had been used to having the mountains surrounding his village, so to have nothing but the open plains in front of him was pleasant.

Ean wasn't sure how long they had walked, but eventually Azalea had put some distance between herself and the two of them. She paused at the top of the hill and shielded her eyes as she looked out over the next horizon. After a few moments, she called back to them.

"If you two are done crawling along, there are buildings up ahead."

Sure enough, when Ean and Zin reached the top of the hill, spread out before them was a farm. A large field full of some kind of plant taller than any of them spread out at the bottom of the hill. Ean knew a good deal about plants that were useful for medicine, but he knew little about any kind of edible plant outside of the bean plants that were grown in his village. At the opposite side of the field, a barn and small wooden house sat with a few chickens grazing outside.

"I think we've been spotted," Azalea said, pointing towards where a figure was exiting the house. The person took a few steps in their direction and then waved.

"Zin, you better--" Ean began to say, but cut off as he realized the imp had already turned invisible. "Alright, let's go down and say hello."

As they made their way down the hill, the figure began making his way through the field towards them. By the time Ean and Azalea had reached the field, the figure was coming out of it.

The man that stood before them was average in every way possible. He stood about as tall as Ean, wearing a simple, brown short-sleeved shirt and matching pants. The wrinkles in his face and his scraggly white beard made Ean put his age at over fifty, and the way he was slightly bent over made Ean think he was possibly older than that. The man's dark, sunken brown eyes looked at Ean first, then lingered on Azalea's face quite a bit longer before he spoke.

"You two lost?" His voice mirrored his appearance, the words coming out of his mouth slow and sounding coarse. "I don't get no visitors from the south. None, actually. Nothing but forest that way. Nobody's got no reason to visit an old man living smack in-between Halyquain and Lurthalan."

He paused for a moment to reach out a hand in Ean's direction. "Name's Dotain, by the way. Dotain Frelyn."

Ean gripped it, surprised to find a strong grip. Maybe he wasn't as old as he seemed, or at least not as frail as Ean had imagined. Must have been the years toiling the fields under the hot sun that had withered his skin and made him appear much older.

"My name is Ean, and this is Azalea. It's nice to meet you, Dotain. As for how we got here, we were coming from Rensen on our way to Lurthalan and got lost in the forest. Thankfully, we made it out and wound up here."

"I see, I see," Dotain said, one hand rubbing at his chin. "You must have gone off the road. Very foolish. And lucky to have made it out. You two related?"

The question caught Ean off guard. His mouth worked but nothing came out as he tried to think of an answer.

"Yes, we're brother and sister." Azalea said before Ean could get two words together. "Ean is my older brother, but I'm the wiser one out of the two of us."

"Brother and sister, that's good." The man mumbled, then shook his head. "Well, it will be getting dark soon. Nothing else nearby, so why don't cha spend the night. I was about to put on some dinner."

"My brother and I would appreciate that. Plus a conversation with a real man like yourself, rather than my slow-witted brother, would certainly be a pleasant change."

The old man grinned ear to ear, but his eyes took on a hunger, as if someone had just passed a freshly cooked steak underneath his nose.

Ean shot Azalea a dark look, more for her flirtations with the old man than for the insult. The Yulari looked young, especially in her human form, and Ean would have put her around his age in her early twenties. He had no idea how a Yulari aged, but the farmer was clearly double that if not more. Yet she batted her eyelashes at him and playfully placed a hand on his shoulder. The woman had no shame.

The old man either didn't see Ean glaring at Azalea or chose to ignore it. He returned Azalea's smile, showing off a mouth that was missing a good deal of teeth.

"That's good, very good. Why don't you two follow me and I'll show you where you will be sleeping. Then I'll get to making us some dinner."

The old man started to make his way back through the field. Azalea winked at Ean, then followed after the man. Ean stared after her in frustration until she disappeared into the tall plant stalks. The way they were laughing as if they were old pals, made the pair easy to trail. Ean caught up to them just as they were exiting the field, standing in front of a rickety white barn with peeling paint.

"I only have the one bedroom, so you two will have to sleep in the barn." Waving a hand at Ean, the old man motioned him inside. "Why don't you take your things inside and find a nice place for the two of you to sleep. Your sister can accompany me inside while I get dinner started."

"We don't really have much to--" Ean began, but Azalea cut him off.

"That sounds like an excellent plan, and it will let Dotain and I get better acquainted." Turning towards Ean, her voice became more drawn out and serious. "You go ahead Ean and find a good spot. You can take your time. I'm sure Dotain will be pleasant company."

"But..."

"Run along now and we'll see you inside a little later," she said, her voice stressing the end of the sentence. All Ean could do was stand there and watch as the two of them headed into the house.

"Don't forget that I'm your big brother," Ean called out to her in warning. "And I have more power in my one arm than you do in your whole body. Don't try to eat anything I'd disapprove of or we'll have a serious problem."

"He's so over-protective," Azalea said with a chuckle and linked arms with Dotain. "Of course, I can't blame him. I have been known to break a few rules every now and then."

Dotain joined in with her laughter. Ean fumed.

"And that's why you can never completely trust a Yulari. They always have their own agendas."

Ean almost jumped out of his skin. He had completely forgotten about the imp. "Is that wise," he growled at the now visible Zin. "He could come back out here any second."

Laughing, Zin shook his head. "I doubt that. That man's full attention is on Azalea. The only way he would come back out here is if she told him to, and from the looks of it, that girl wanted some time alone with him. Probably wants to feed off of the lust the man was feeling towards her."

"What? If she feeds off of him, won't that kill him?"

"No, no, I doubt she would do what she tried with Bran," the imp said, raising his hands in a soothing gesture. "Yulari can feed off of emotions without killing a person, without even touching them actually, although they enjoy direct contact more. Think of it this way. When you smell something delicious being cooked, it makes you hungry right? But you're not truly satisfied until you actually get to eat the food. It's similar for Yulari. They can survive off the emotions that creatures put out, but they are much more satisfied drawing them directly out of a body. It's just unfortunate for the victim that having them drawn out usually kills them."

"You're sure she won't kill him?"

"No, I never said that. I just said she didn't need to kill him."

"Oh, that makes me feel much better." Dismissing the other questions he had for Zin about their new companion, Ean decided it would be best if he got into the house as fast as possible. Moving into the barn he found a spot that suited their needs, dropped his things, and was back outside before Zin had even taken a step inside.

"Come on," he said to the imp. "Let's make sure she doesn't get us into trouble."

"No thanks. I'm going to look around for my own dinner. Good luck, though."

Ean frowned as the imp turned invisible and disappeared around the edge of the barn. Mumbling to himself, Ean walked into the house.

The front door brought Ean to a narrow hallway. To his left was a sitting room with a chair and a barren fireplace. A little way down the hall on the right was a staircase that led to the upper floor. The first thing Ean noticed as he entered the house was how run-down the inside was compared to the outside. A thick coat of dust covered the furniture, most of which had seen better days. The paint was filthy, with thick strips curling away from the walls. Save for one large window that let in a swath of natural light, the shades were drawn and the house was dim. Overall the place barely seemed lived in. Judging by the light and sound of voices coming from behind a door at the end of the hall, the kitchen and his Yulari were in the back.

The second thing he noticed as he walked towards what he believed was the kitchen was the smell. It wasn't a putrid smell or anything too offensive, but the place did smell musky. Like wet clothes left too long to sit in the dark. That combined with the general disrepair of the entire house was starting to make Ean feel a bit uneasy. He moved at a brisk pace to the end of the hall, not bothering to pause and announce himself as he pushed open the door.

Stepping into the next room, he sighed with relief at what he found. The room was indeed the kitchen and it was in much better shape than the rest of the house. Candles were lit and a large open window looked out onto the plains, allowing a great deal of light into the room. A table, in much better condition than the rest of the furniture in the house, sat in the middle of the room surrounded by five equally well put-together chairs. Against the far wall was a stove; the door opened showing off the fire inside. On top sat a pot, steam and the smells of meat and vegetables wafting out of it. Both Azalea and Dotain were standing in front of the stove, speaking loudly over the crackle of the fire.

They stopped speaking when Ean entered and turned to face him.

"Well, you moved a lot faster than I thought you would, brother," Azalea said through a tight-lipped smile. "I was hoping to get a little more time alone to talk to this pleasant man."

"No worries," the old man said quickly, "I'm sure after dinner your brother will want to catch up on some sleep. We could continue our conversation then."

"I'm not sure that's--"

"An excellent suggestion!" Azalea said, cutting Ean off. "My brother has been pushing himself a great deal and could use the rest."

The look Azalea directed towards Ean sent a chill through his body.

"You're right, of course, sister. A little extra rest will be good for me. Especially knowing that the two of you will be safely inside."

He tried to put as much emphasis on the word 'safely' as he could. Azalea had

agreed to listen to him, and she was smart enough to understand what his words really meant. The smug grin that his words earned from Azalea did nothing, though, to ease his worries. Ean shook his head, the realization that he might not get much sleep that night souring his mood even more.

"Take a seat." Dotain stirred the pot as he spoke. "Tell me your story. I want to know why anyone with a lick of sense would stray from the main road through the forest."

"I didn't want to leave the road," Azalea said, sending Ean a glare. "You see, my brother means well. I love him to death, but he's a headstrong fool like our father. May the gods give me the patience to continue to travel with him on our way to the city."

"What my sister isn't mentioning is that we ran into some bandits on the road and had to abandon most of our supplies to get away from them." Ean flashed Azalea a self-satisfied smirk. He could lie just as well as she could.

A slight movement out of the corner of his eye made Ean turn towards the old man. Ean caught him glancing over his shoulder at the two of them but as soon as their eyes met, the old man quickly turned back to his cooking.

"Bandits, you say?" His attention on stirring his stew, the old man's voice sounded disinterested. "The traders that buy my crops have been talking a lot more about bandits. They say whole packs of them roam the land now, some even setting up camps in the forest somewhere. I don't much worry about that though. Only people I see out here are the traders. And now you, I suppose."

The old man leveled a hungry look at Azalea, and she returned an encouraging smile. Ean's stomach churned. He wondered if anyone would blame him if he hurled all over the table. The old man had no shame either.

Turning back to his pot, the old man continued on. "Off to the capitol you said, right? I haven't been there in years. No need to really. Too busy for my tastes, all them people running around doing who knows what. That city can be as dangerous as the woods. You two are better off finding a nice place in the country. You know, I could always use another hand around here, boy, and I'm sure we could find something for your sister to do."

"That sounds lov--" Azalea began, as she moved to take a seat across from Ean.

"That's a generous offer, but we have to go to the city. We've got business for our village that we have to take care of."

"Well, your sister could always stay here while you--"

"Again, a generous offer, but my sister will be staying with me." Ean had tried to keep his voice civil, but he must have missed the mark as a look of anger flashed across the old man's face. Ean watched as Dotain reached at his side, grasping for something that was not there.

A sharp pain struck Ean's left shin, and he bent over in his chair to rub at it. Looking up he caught Azalea frowning at him and shaking her head. She had kicked him! Ean sat fuming, rubbing at his leg while Azalea spoke.

"Excuse my brother. He gets a bit over protective. He often forgets that he's just a poor village boy while I've had much more experience out in the world. I've been trying to teach him to respect his elders, but as I've said, he is quite the hardhead."

Waving her off, the old man returned to his stew. "It's nothing. That's good that your brother is protective." Then Ean heard him say under his breath, "And even better

that you don't listen to him."

Ean was done. If the fool man wanted to try and "take advantage" of his sister, let him try. It would serve him right if she drained every last drop of his life...

Flashes of his nightmares ran through his mind. Torture, corruption, murder...

He couldn't let her kill him, regardless of how little he thought of the man. He would not even entertain the thought. Ean would just have to have a talk with Azalea before anything happened. She had promised to listen to him after all.

"All ready!" Dotain said, interrupting Ean's thoughts. "I'm sure you'll like it. It's a family recipe. A rabbit stew with a few secret ingredients."

Grasping the pot with a towel, the old man carried it over and set it down in the middle of the table. Producing three bowls and a set of spoons from a nearby cupboard, he distributed the utensils and began dishing out the stew.

Ean's mouth watered as Dotain poured some stew into a bowl in front of him. He had been so worried about what Azalea might do that he hadn't realized how hungry he really was. Stirring around the contents with his spoon, it was easy to pick out the bits of rabbit meat, and the potatoes were a staple food in his village of Rottwealth. While his stomach growled he studied the flecks of oniony greens as they floated at the top. Not many people knew that onions could thin the blood; he had used them as a remedy often enough on sick patients. The peppery black herbs smelled similar to Balalur, an herb useful for fighting off colds. He had never thought to add it as seasoning to a stew before.

"This smells wonderful!" Azalea said, clapping her hands together excitedly. "I've never had rabbit stew before."

Ean couldn't help but laugh. "I know soup isn't your usual meal. Are you sure you can handle it?"

The look she shot him could have curdled milk.

"I don't understand where the sarcasm is coming from, brother. Why, only just this morning you were harping on me to try new things. Would you prefer that I go back to my usual menu? It would be a simple matter of..."

"No," Ean said vigorously. "My apologies. Go ahead and fill up on the stew. Lots and lots of stew. Only the stew."

Azalea's green eyes scrunched in merriment as her lips curled back in victory. It annoyed him the way she took such pleasure in seeing him squirm.

"Yes," Dotain encouraged, the real meaning of their conversation lost to the man. "Eat up. Plenty here. Enjoy."

Dotain pulled his own bowl closer and sprinkled something into it. He stirred the contents around before bringing a spoonful to his mouth. He took two more mouthfuls before he noticed Ean and Azalea staring at him. "What?" he mumbled.

Ean spoke first, more curious than anything else. "What did you put in your stew?"

"Just some spices, nothing special, just adds a little kick to the flavor is all." Keeping his eyes down, Dotain continued to shovel spoonfuls of stew into his mouth.

Moving closer to the man, Azalea reached over to put a hand on his arm. "I like a little kick in my food as well. Can I have some spices to put in mine?"

"No!"

Both Azalea and Ean were taken back a bit by the sudden outburst. Dotain had an annoyed expression as he looked at Azalea, but it quickly turned into one of