

Chapter 02 – Gray Cloaks

"Ronen," Shiri was exhausted, both mentally and physically. It had been a long, arduous march so far, and she was used to a more leisurely pace. Her head lulled back softly, and she finally stopped their trek through the forest. Her gaze turned towards the cloud-covered sky. Her grayish-blue eyes were not too distant from that of the clouds above. She took a long, deep breath through her nose and let out a happy sigh. "Do you smell that?"

Her Companion paused next to her, resting his hand on the slim hilt of his longsword. He took a breath and sighed at her – his eyes locked on hers for a moment. Like all Vestry members, he had those same gray-blue eyes, but they seemed less bright than hers due to the cool sepia tones of his skin. He caught the scent. The companion ran a hand to his jaw, scratched a finger along his beard, and teased. "Wet leaves?"

A playfully displeased scowl crossed her lips, a soft push of her fist against his arm followed, "No." She gave into his statement with a bit of smirk, "I hate that we missed the Harvest this year." She glanced off towards where she assumed a village lie, somewhere beyond her perception. She brushed a hand back along her pulled-back hair. She gave a small, genuine smile, a fluttering flush of blood to her cheeks for a single moment. "Next year? Maybe we take the time for the Festival, or...."

"Or?" He questioned with a small smile of his own.

"Just us?" She said with a little nervous shake of her shoulders before shaking her head.

"What would the others say? A Hymnist and her Companion?"

She gave a defiant smirk at his jest. "Who cares?"

"I suppose that does sound like them," He smiled and shook his head.

"Yeah, it does...." She laughed a bit, resting a hand on his chest and letting her eyes drift to his for a moment, "Ronen," She shook her head and glanced down. Her fist clenched for a moment, and then she turned her eyes back up, "You know I...."

She was interrupted. The unmistakable sound of a loosed bowstring caught the Companion's ear. His shoulder made purchase on Shiri without hesitation, pushing her to the side as the arrow caught the edge of his shoulder before finding rest in a nearby tree trunk. While the Companion's movement had been sudden and abrupt, neither lost their footing – instead, both slid along the wet leaves underfoot, turning to face whatever had come at them.

Ronen's blade snapped from his belt. His form twisted only slightly, the sword barely moving as both hands gripped the long weapon in a ward position. The sword held low and at the ready, its length from him and passing just in front of Shiri. He put himself between her and the previously unseen enemy. All the while, Shiri moved into a ready stance behind him. The Hymnist's hands arched in front of her, one over the other with palms facing the ground as the very earth trembled. The gray rings of her eyes crackled with energy. After a deep breath, that crackling became more intense – snaps of silver bolts jumping from her eyes as if a summer storm raged within.

The ambush was by no means their first battle. The movement between the two was practiced and instinctual. But they were caught unawares by an enemy neither had faced prior. In the nearby brush just beyond them stood figures in gray cloaks, their faces hidden by simple wooden masks under the hoods of their cloaks. They were well-armed for brigands, with solid steel swords at their arms – except the apparent leader, who held a short ash hunting bow.

"Stand down," Ronen's voice was not loud, but it carried strong on the wind. "Your ambush has failed. We do not want to kill you."

The figures did not respond. Both Shiri and Ronen kept their eyes on them, watching as grips tightened around swords. It seemed that there was little choice left here. The moment of silence and calm dragged on for a moment, but then there was a flash of movement. One of the gray cloaks charged towards the pair, blade tilted forward in the charge.

Ronen tilted a leg back, brushing against Shiri and the two moved as one. His sword spun forward, rising from the low guard to strike swift across the attacker. The woman under the gray cloak could not move her sword to defend fast enough. The tip of the Companion's blade caught her chest, and his movement followed through. She let out a scream, and as the pair slid to a stop, she found her rest on the cold forest floor. The blade returned to the reverse position of his earlier stance.

"Please," Shiri spoke swiftly, a crackling bolt of energy jumping from her eyes to the tips of her fingers as she saw movement, "Do not throw your lives away. We can end this before anyone else is hurt."

There was another moment of silence, and then it was clear that there would be no peace between the two parties. The gray cloaks realized they would not be able to hold back if they hoped to win. Without a word, they charged the pair, leaping through the woods and dashing over fallen limbs and underbrush, swords at the ready.

"I'm sorry. Forgive us," Shiri shook her head as the Graycloaks drew closer.

Ronen tapped her leg again with his own. The two backed up towards the trees as his blade twisted through the air and caught another of the gray cloaks, smoothly slashing across the ambusher's chest. The next weapon to come near was knocked away. The Companion watched the targets closely, his sword racing to strike when an opportunity came, but the sound of steel on steel from his need to defend began to echo through the woods. But he did not fight alone.

Shiri's voice lifted in a soft hum, a melodic dirge that barely raised over the sounds of battle. As they moved and the notes cleared her throat, the sparks in her eyes grew bolder. As one gray cloak approached their flank, slipping past Ronen's guard, the silvered energy leaping from her coalesced into a thin wire. She clenched her fist, and the wire snapped taught, snapping like a whip down and across the man's mask and face. The strike was deep enough that he did not make another step. As her song continued, more tendrils of silver began to coalesce – each a whip of barely visible wire hanging from the tips of her fingers.

The Companion's sword caught an arrow from the air, cutting it in two and pushing it away from the Hymnist behind him. Her hand reached out behind him, the wires wrapping around a gray cloak's blade and pulling it out of their grip before Ronen adjusted again, bringing his sword down upon another

attacker. Ribbons of energy lashed out from Shiri's fingers and struck one of the gang, threatening to pass through her partner's guard. The enemy's morale was quickly waning, but unheard by either was one of the lieutenants of these men and women.

In a moment of desperation, the lieutenant stepped forward, his arm suddenly shooting forward with two fingers together and pointing towards the Companion. His mask obscured his eyes and face, and if he said anything, it went unheard. Energy rippled through his arm, burning skin as it arced in fractal patterns down his arm to his fingers, and then there was a short crack of thunder. Lighting leaped from his hand, riding along his digits and then racing towards Ronen.

"Ronen!" Shiri's voice called out in alarm. She moved to defend him, those silver threads braiding together, catching the bolt, and driving it into the ground.

Ronen's attention was grabbed, and in time to see the magic-user twist to bring his other arm forward. Another bolt lanced through the forest, and he began to twist to catch the blade. His sword stopped when caught by a gray cloak's blade. He couldn't move away for fear of letting the bolt hit Shiri, but he felt her move. She was acting fast, pressing her back against as she slid past him, her hand outstretched, tipped with silver threads.

There was a flash of light as the bolt connected to her hand.

In the moment after that flash, for Ronen at least, time seemed to stop. He saw the sparks of energy in Shiri's eyes flicker and fade, the gray of her eyes dissipating like an early morning fog and a deep ocean blue return to them. He felt her song stop. And time just hung there. The entire battle seemed distant, nothing, as his world focused on her. He felt a part of his soul seem to fade with her. And when the skirmish was over – with any luck, he'd be right behind her.

The Companion's hesitation did allow the blade to catch his arm, though the cut wasn't deep. He pushed the dagger away, and his hand let his sword go for a moment, twisting to soften Shiri's fall. He wasn't sure if it was instinct or desperation but made sure she didn't hit the ground hard. For a moment, he fought next to her body, but it was a losing battle, and he knew it. With little warning, he felt a sudden pain in his side. His eyes drifted down to catch the tip of a blade peeking through his abdomen for a breath before it was yanked back.

He coughed. His eyes followed the blade back to its owner, and his sword followed his eyes in a wild swing. It was not as precise as the others, a brutal and angry swipe that pushed through the gray cloak's arm and into their stomach. Without many around him, those still standing were wise enough to realize they had won, and there was no need to die to prove that. For Ronen, anger and despair were all he felt, and when his eyes met the mask of the caster, he pushed back to his feet.

"You," He growled as he rose, his blade leveled at the magic-user.

The magic-user seemed to hesitate. Ronen stepped carefully past Shiri and marched towards the man, who raised his hands as if to start another spell. There was a sudden twang of a loosing of an arrow. The Companion flinched as the bolt split the magic-user's throat from behind. With a pitiful gurgle, the man stared down for a moment and fell to his knees.

The leader of the gray cloaks shook his head and knocked another arrow. It loosed before Ronen understood what exactly was happening. The Companion reacted it away, but he was weak. Even that

movement caused him to collapse, and he struggled to keep on his feet. Another arrow found purchase in his shoulder with enough force that the shaft cracked and the bolt crumbled. Whatever strength he had left in his arm was sapped, and his blade fell to the ground.

Ronen coughed. Bile and blood fell to the ground in front of him. His vision blurred, and he looked back at the Graycloak leader.

"What part of alive did you not understand?" The leader spoke coldly to the magic-user on his knees, who had killed Shiri just moments before. The leader pulled the arrow free of the man's neck without another word in a single cruel motion. He tossed the bolt aside and looked to Ronen for a moment. The masked face stared at the Companion for a long moment before it raised a hand and made a swift circling motion. "We're done here. Leave him to die with her. It's the least we can do...."

Ronen saw figures passing around him, moving to rejoin their leader. There were still a few of the party standing and a couple of their wounded being carried away. The Companion felt another cough, and he fell forward. His off hand found his sword. He tried to grip the hilt, to raise it again. He could barely find the strength to hold himself up, though.

Finally, he coughed out a single word. "Why?"

The gray cloak leader stopped and turned back to him for a moment. Again, the face behind the mask stared for a long time. But there was no response. The figure simply turned and moved away into the woods. His band followed close behind.

The Companion looked to the enemy magic-user, who struggled to breathe. Blood trickled from below him, pooling in the dirt of the forest floor. Ronen pressed himself up and took a few heavy steps towards the man. He could see him breathing, struggling. "Find rest," Ronen whispered before his sword plunged into the man's chest. He wavered for a moment as his legs began to give, but in an instant, the magic-user had stopped breathing. He pulled his blade free of the body and turned back to Shiri.

His eyes glanced down his own form for a moment, traveling clothes stained – crimson rivulets spreading out from his wounds. His vision fluttered again, blurring as he looked back across the forest floor. He stared for a moment and then made his first few heavy steps towards the Hymnist. It was only a few steps that he could take before his knees buckled and he fell to them. His voice cracked softly, "Shiri?" He asked, knowing she couldn't answer. He fell forward, trying to crawl to her – but he had lost a lot of blood. He was weak and beaten. His soul was torn, if he was honest. If she was gone, what point was there to him staying?