

## Chapter 3

She was crazy. She was totally, whacked out, *bat shit* crazy. What in hell had just happened? Where was her car? And for that matter, where was *she*? She reached up to find the pendant still hanging from the chain. *What the hell?*

Sitting on hard, rocky ground, her mind turned summersaults as she took in her surroundings. She was still next to a road, but it was not the highway. It was a dirt road, padded down by cart wheels that had left tracks along the surface. She could also make out the outlines of hoofs in the dried dirt.

It was also *warm*.

The full moon was still high in the midnight sky, and it illuminated the world around her fairly well. She could see high, craggy peaks as they rose around her. Some areas were covered in underbrush and dry weather plants. The dumbfounded girl sat in the dirt, completely and utterly confused.

“What. . . the flying... fuck,” she said out loud.

The overly exhausted girl unbuttoned her coat and stared up at the stars. The faint sound of footsteps and a squeaky wheel caused her attention to turn to the left, and she stared down the road. A modest cart pulled by two horses was creaking down the dirt path at a slow, comfortable pace. Nire’s heart jumped into her throat.

She sat perfectly still as she watched the cart pass. The horses were *huge*... and they appeared to have horns on their heads. One situated between its eyes, and the other on the top of its nose, much like a rhino’s horns. Her mouth dropped as the red eye of one of the creatures fell on her. It snorted, and tugged the reins as it bobbed its head.

The driver, who had been half asleep, jerked alert at the strange horse’s sudden movement. He looked around rapidly, and as he saw her sitting on the ground, he pulled the odd horse creatures to a stop.

“Whoa there,” he said to the beasts as he tugged the reins. The cart had nearly passed her, and the driver hand to turn around in his seat to look at her. Leaning over the seat back he looked at the perplexed girl. “You all right there miss?” he asked.

“Um... I... I don’t know...” she forced herself to respond.

“What are you doing all the way out in the middle of Dragons Jaw pass?”

“I’m... lost... I think...” she said, stumbling over her words.

The man looked around quickly. “This ain’t a trap is it?” he asked, a sudden air of concern in his voice.

“What?” Nire responded.

The man looked back at the girl sitting by the side of the road, and considered her for a moment. “Why don’t you hop in, I’m headed down through the southern pass towards the Blackfair border and the Crystal Lakes, if that’s the same direction you’re going,” he offered politely.

“Um… I don’t… really know *where* I’m going…” her voice trailed off.

The man jumped off the cart. “You don’t seem well, did something happen?” he asked as he offered her his hand to help her up.

Nire was still looking around in confusion, but noticed the man’s offer. She took his hand and he pulled her to her feet. “Yeah… but I’m not really sure what,” she said, leaning slightly to the left as she stood.

“Well if ya don’t mind headin’ into the East, you’re welcome to join me,” he said, pulling her onto the cart.

Nire sat down next to him and looked at the strange beasts. “Why do your horses have horns?” she asked, not really thinking before she spoke.

“Horses?” the man asked, following her gaze towards the creatures that pulled his cart. “Oh, you mean the rathes? I suppose some people cut off the horns to prevent injury, but I think that’s a bit cruel, myself,” he answered.

Nire just continued to stare straight ahead. *Rathes?* She thought.

The man called to the beasts and snapped the reins, urging them to move. They jerked and whinnied for a moment, but then began to pull the cart steadily down the road. “They are a bit feisty,” the man continued. “Don’t like to be this close to one and other, especially the males,” he explained.

“But you know, usually their displays of aggression don’t result in injury very often. My father always said that he’d never buy a rathe that had been horned,” he paused, and then continued. “If they ain’t got their horns, they weren’t trained right in the first place.” He nodded sharply as he spoke, in agreement with his father’s statement.

Nire stared at him. He had obviously taken her question differently than she’d meant it, but it had been answered nonetheless. They had horns because they were *not* horses, they were *rathes*. And this man clearly did not believe in having them ‘horned’, because that was apparently something people did. “I’m Nire,” she said suddenly.

“Oh, where are my manners,” the man scolded himself. “The name’s Jerit.” He paused and considered the girl sitting next to him. “Those are some… interesting clothes you have,” he commented.

Nire looked down at her T-shirt, dress pants, and wool, skirt bottomed pea coat. Then she glanced over at Jerit, who wore a rough tunic, trousers, belt, and leather boots that seemed to come right out of the middle ages. “Yeah...I guess so,” she said.

Her head had started to ache, and the back of her eyes hurt. “Um... do you mind if I try to get some sleep?” she asked. “I haven’t slept all night and... I’m kind of confused,” she continued.

“Oh, well, go right ahead... but I doubt the back of the cart will be very comfortable. I’m transporting some mineral... There are heavy blankets on top, but it’s probably pretty lumpy back there.”

Nire was already climbing in the back before he’d finished speaking. It was indeed lumpy, but she didn’t care. She laid her head against the canvas that covered the sides and top of the cart and, being all too tired to question her sense of reality, immediately fell asleep.

When she woke, sunlight was splashing into the back of the cart as it bounced along the road. She looked out the back to see the high, jagged peaks of mountains behind them, as they followed a well beaten road along a river. This area of the road was clearly marked with stones on either side, and the ground was sprouting up short blades of green and yellow grasses. There were not many trees that she could see, but there were a few of them, and shrubs seemed to collect near the riverside.

She stirred. Her back and hips hurt from lying on a pile of rocks all night. She could see the sun through the canvas covering as it hung halfway up the sky. Birds were chirping, and the air smelled clean. She stretched her back, and thought about the inexplicable predicament she found herself in.

“Awake I see,” Jerit said, tilting his head to look back at the ruffled girl.

“Yeah...” she replied. She had hoped that she would wake up passed out on the side of the highway, or at least in the hospital again. Alas, here she was, still being pulled by a cart through crazy town. Crawling forward she threw her leg over the seat back and hoisted herself over to the front of the cart. She sat next to Jerit, and looked out ahead of them with both her hands placed neatly in her lap.

They were in a vast grassland. The ground was still rolling in hills as it came down from the jagged peaks that still hung closely behind them, but off in the distance she could see the land flattening out. The sky was a gorgeous blue spotted with a few clouds, and the sun was bright and warm.

She took off her coat and draped it over the back of the seat. She didn’t have a single thing on her otherwise. Her purse was still in her car, wherever that was, and all she had in her pocket was a breath mint from the basket on the checkout counter at the pub.

“Where are we?” she asked, as casually as possible.

"We're crossing the Burning Planes, along the right fork of the Dragon's Tongue."

"Dragon's Tongue?" Nire asked.

"Girl, don't you know any of the lands?" Jerit asked, a bit stunned. Nire just looked him in the eye and shook her head. "That river over there," he began, nodding his head to the right. "There is a river that comes out of The Dragons Jaw..." he paused. "Those mountains we just came from. It splits and forks, one goes straight south, the other goes south east."

"Ohhhh..." Nire said. *Dragons Tongue*, now she got it. "So why is it called the Burning Planes?" she asked. Nothing about it looked burnt to her.

"Well, not only is it right at the opening of Dragons Jaw, but when the sun sets these grasses take on an orange color, and it looks as if the whole plane is on fire."

"Wow..." Nire exclaimed. "Will we still be here when the sun sets?" she asked, hoping to see what he described.

"Hopefully we will make it to the Eastern trading post by nightfall, but we might be able to catch a glimpse of it."

"Cool," Nire said with a smile.

"Pardon?"

"What?" she asked quickly. "Nothing, never mind..." she added, shaking her head.

"You really don't know anything about these parts?" Jerit inquired again.

"I..." she hesitated, "This might sound weird but... I have no idea where I am at all. I don't even know how I ended up on the side of that road," she confessed, looking down at her lap, curling her fingers into fists as she tentatively waited for his response.

"Hmmm," he paused. "Well there are lots of folk around here out to do no good. I've heard of some of them using a powder that makes you forget things," he offered. Nire knew that was not what had happened, but she nodded anyway.

As the day passed, Nire ran through every possibility she could think of for how she might have gotten there. She had been kidnapped, drugged, and abandoned in the mountains of a foreign country. One that spoke English, and had land formations she had never heard of in geology classes at high school... where strange animals lived that she'd never learned about in biology... and that was stuck somewhere between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century. Yup, that made sense.

There *was* no logical explanation. She was a lunatic, plain and simple. She was probably actually sitting on the end of a hospital bed, playing horsy, out of her *bloody* mind. Or she had passed out in the cold, and was really laying in a coma waiting for someone to pull the plug.

She held the pendant in her palm and looked down at it. *It's all your fault, you know.* She thought to it. *First you fly in my window, then you come to life again, fly me into a black hole, and here we are. All. Your. Fault.* She glared at it. Sure, it wasn't a logical explanation, but it was the only one she had.

The sun lowered in the sky, and Nire looked around at the grasses on the planes. "When do they turn orange?" she asked.

"Just as the sun touches the horizon," Jerit said. "Won't be for a couple hours still."

For a while, everything was quite. The cart moved down the dirt road at an even pace, and a light breeze caused Nire's hair to frequently blow across her face. Reaching up she swept the unruly strands behind her ear, and as she placed her hand back in her lap the wind loosened it yet again. She let out a sigh of defeat and closed her eyes briefly as her hair brushed over her face.

"Do you travel this route a lot?" she asked Jerit curiously, tucking her hair behind her ear yet again.

"Sure do, that's my job. Goin' from the Eastern trading post to the Northern regions, brining mineral one way, and food stuffs the other."

"Is it dangerous?" Nire asked, thinking back to his caution when he had first picked her up.

"Not usually, but going east is more dangerous than going north. Sometimes bandits ambush trade carts in the pass, and take all the mineral they can carry. Sometimes they even take the cart," he explained.

"Has that ever happened to you?" she asked as she dug in her pockets in hope of a hair tie.

"A few times, but most of 'em aren't lookin' to take your life, just your goods. I've even had a few of them only take what they could fit in their bags, and let me be on my way."

"That's... courteous... I guess," she said dubiously. No hair tie. She began to regret taking out the one she'd had in earlier. Yanking her hair around one side she tugged it into a sloppy braid, and tossed it back over her shoulder.

Jerit laughed. "It ain't so bad. Better than being cooped up in one place your whole life."

Nire nodded. She'd always wanted to travel, to go somewhere new. But in her whole life she had only ever seen the highway that stretched between her parent's house and her grandmothers. Save for books and the internet, the rest of the world was a mystery to her. As she stared at her lap thinking about his words, the world around her seemed to take on an orange glow.

She looked up to see the grasses beginning to don an orange hue as the sun set fire to the sky. "Oh...wow..." she said, her breath leaving her.

Jerit smiled. "Just another hour or so until we hit the trading post. You're welcome to stay on board and head back to the North with me, or you can get off there," he said.

Jerit had shared his supplies with her. It was only bread and water, but it was kind of him to offer without asking anything in return. If she stayed on with him, he would have to do so again.

"How long is the journey, all together?" she inquired.

"Well I picked you up pretty late in the trip; you were fairly close to the pass opening. Took me about 4 days to get there from Southcastle, so about 5 and a half days total, sometimes a week depending on weather," he continued on. "But I'm not headed back to Southcastle this time. I'll be going all the way up the Dragons Tongue to the Throat, where the deep mines are."

"Oh... How long does that take?"

"That trip is a good few weeks, if not a month."

"Wow," she said, her voice flat and unenthusiastic.

"So I take it you will be staying at the trading post then?" Jerit said with a chuckle.

Nire laughed "Yeah, probably," she paused. "Are other people around here as nice as you?" she questioned, a hint of sadness in her voice.

It was clear she had nowhere to go and nothing to her name. Jerit thought for a moment. "Eh, most people are pretty friendly, but you do need to watch out for those who are up to doin' no good," he warned her sternly.

Nire nodded. In the distance she could see a wooden wall about ten feet high that was surrounding a set of buildings. There was a watch tower next to the gate, and it looked like there were people as well. As they drew closer, Nire craned her neck to see what exactly it was they were approaching.

The cart pulled up to a gate, and the people who had been outside had since returned in. Jerit shouted to the man in the watch tower.

"Southern supply!"

"Name?" the guard called back.

"Jerit of Stonemarsh"

"Welcome back," the guard responded as the gates began to open, then he paused. "Who do you bring?"

"Just a traveler from The Dragons Jaw," he shouted.

“Will you vouch for her?” the guard asked suspiciously.

“I will,” he answered, and they continued to open the gates.

“What was that all about?” Nire asked him quietly.

“During the day, travelers come and go from the trading posts. But if one comes at night, they need someone who is known to vouch for them. Safety precaution, that’s all. Visitors staying overnight register at the post, and leave a deposit as collateral. If they cause trouble, they don’t get it back,” he explained. “It’s hard to keep drunks and thieves out of trading posts.”

“Oh...” Nire started as the cart passed through the gate. “I don’t have anything on me,” her voice was low and distressed.

“Not to worry, you’re with me. It’s on my head if you cause trouble,” he told her.

Nire smiled. “Thanks,” she said genuinely.

Jerit pulled his cart into a covered area near the walls, where several other carts were also parked. He led the rathes to a stand of nearby stalls, and hung a sign on his cart that read “Trade Cart”.

After rummaging through a sack in the back of the cart, he pulled out a couple of smaller sacks which, Nire could only assume were filled with feed, as he hung them in the stalls with the rathes. He then motioned for Nire to follow him, and led her down the quiet, cobblestone street. *He just left his cart with all his supplies without a worry... she thought as she glanced back. I guess that's why they are so stiff with security.*

The buildings were constructed of wooden planks, and a few had stone foundations. Most of them were not more than 2 stories tall, but there were a few larger ones, including the one that Jerit was leading her into.

The sign hanging outside the building had the profiled silhouette of a panther with its jaws open. Below the image appeared what was clearly a word, but between the heavy scripting and the darkening twilight, Nire could not read it. She cautiously followed Jerit through the door, into what appeared to be some sort of tavern.

“You have a guest tonight?” the dark, *very dark*, man behind the counter asked Jerit cheerfully as he entered. He was broad shouldered and had a square jaw, and something about him was... *off*. Nire had never seen anyone with skin that dark, and his eyes were a strange, golden brown. His hair was black and slick, and his features were sharp, almost fierce looking.

“Sure do,” Jerit responded with a smile as he approached the counter. “Picked her up headin’ south on the Dragons Tongue. Nire hung back at a table as the other continued forward. Her heart sped up, and she swallowed.

The dark man looked directly at Nire. “What’s your name, girl?” he asked with a toothy grin.

The place was packed with people, and they were all watching her. “N… Nire…” She stuttered quietly.

“Cat got your tongue?” he asked playfully, and the other occupants roared with laughter. Nire looked around, she didn’t understand why that had been so funny.

“Now, now,” Jerit said with a smile, “She’s a bit new to these parts, may have had some bandits use that forgettin’ powder on her,” he explained to the man at the counter, loudly enough for everyone else to hear.

Nire blushed, and was blanketed with a wave of anxiety at all the attention.

The laughter quieted, and the dark man circled around from behind the counter and held out his hand to her. “Ah, I didn’t mean anything by it,” he offered Nire with a smile. “My name is Turen, you are welcome to stay with us under Jerit’s voucher” His voice was deep and rolling.

Stay? Nire took his hand, and as she went to shake it he grasped her tightly and held her firm. He smiled widely, and gave her a nod before releasing her hand. She tried to smile in return, but his face was so… strange. She couldn’t seem to put her finger on it, but something was not *right*.

Turen grabbed the attention of one of the waitresses, and told her to bring them both meals, on the house. Nire sat down with Jerit and stared at Turen as he went about his business.

“Jerit… what… I mean…” she wasn’t sure how to phrase her question.

“The joke?” he asked. Nire just looked at him, still trying to figure out what it was exactly that she wanted to ask. “His minor form is a panther, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

It was, in fact. However all that answer managed to give her was a thousand more questions, all of which seemed highly inappropriate to ask. The man *looked* like a panther. She was staring at him. She looked away and down at the table.

Turen brought drinks over for them, and placed them on the table. “Didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable, Miss.,” he said in earnest. Nire looked up at him, and he gave her a toothy smile. He had fangs.

Something slipped.

“*What… what are you?*” she asked.

“*I’m a fox!*” replied the orange haired girl with a smile.

Nire blinked, and both Jerit and Turen were on the side of her chair, their expressions worrisome.

“Nire,” Jerit asked “Are you all right?”

She stared at the middle aged man for a moment, thinking. “I think so... what happened?”

“You just suddenly went blank,” he explained.

“I just... I think I may have remembered something, that’s all,” she said, placing her hand to her temple as if to feel for the memory.

“Oh,” said Turen with relief. “Good, I didn’t think I was that scary,” he joked.

“No,” Nire said. “It wasn’t that.”

“I’ll have those suppers for you soon. You just take it easy now Miss...” he stood to go back to the counter, but then turned. “And if you’re not going with Jerit tomorrow when he leaves town again, you are more than welcome to stay with us,” he added, with another grin.

Once he’d gone back to his business, Nire turned to Jerit. “Jerit, is a “minor demon”, a thing?” she asked quietly.

“Huh?” he said, confused at first. “Well, I’m not sure what you mean by that. Turen is a minor demon, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“So, it is a thing? Then I really did *remember* something?” she asked with hope in her voice. “It’s not just a dream?”

Jerit looked at her perplexed. “Are you saying you didn’t know what a minor demon was when you met Turen?”

“Yes!” she whispered urgently. “I mean, no...” she shook her head. “No I didn’t know what a minor demon was... but then when he smiled at me, I noticed he had fangs, and that’s when I felt like something was . . . *slipping*...” she spoke rapidly, waving her hands in gestures. “And then I was in this... cabin thing, and there was a girl there with orange hair, and she said she was a fox... can a fox be a minor demon?” she stopped and asked suddenly.

“...Yes... a minor demon can have any number of animal forms,” he responded, still confused.

“Okay, then before I came back something like text in a book came into my mind, and that’s what it said “minor demon,” she finished.

Jerit looked at her. “what *do* you remember?” he asked cautiously.

Nire stared back at him. She remembered her life, somewhere that was so obviously *not* here. How would she explain that? She couldn’t... “Nothing,” she responded plainly.

Jerit looked over his shoulder at Turen. The waitress that was carrying their plates walked out of a pair of swinging shutters and headed towards them. “Maybe, it would be best for you to stay here at Turen’s Inn for a while when I leave tomorrow. He’s a good one, and I’m not sure you should be wandering around by yourself if you can’t remember things as simple as the demon races.”

Nire nodded as their plates were set in front of them. There was no arguing with that. She had no idea what was out there beyond this point, and it might be good to learn something about where she was before she went wandering off. *Demons...* She thought to herself. She was not religious, but the concept was nonetheless troubling.

“Jerit,” she began as she looked down at her plate. “Where should I go?” she asked, then paused. “And what’s this?” She pointed to the strange meat on her plate with a raised brow.

He let out a light chuckle. “That is koeshen, it’s a type of bird,” he explained. “And it would probably be a good idea to continue heading east.”

“Why’s that?” she asked as she poked at the strange food. The meat was oddly shaped, it was gray, and seemed somewhat stringy. The other items on the plate could be identified as some sort of vegetable, and perhaps something similar to rice.

“Mainly, it’s the closest capitol from here on out, and it’s also the High Capitol. Can’t get much better than that. You’re already more than halfway there, and I’m sure you’d be able to find someone who was lookin’ to hire a nice young girl.” He paused and thought for a moment. “That and you might find a nice town along the way to stay at too. The East is a promising place for any law abiding citizen.”

She nodded, and put a piece of a meat in her mouth. It was heavily glazed with some kind of sauce, and the flavor was sweet and citrusy. “Mmm,” she said quietly, pleasantly surprised. The meat itself wasn’t anything to rave about, and she assumed that the heavy glaze served to cover the meat’s obvious lack in quality. Despite that, however, the dish that had been served to her tasted good, and not just because she was hungry.

After their meal, Jerit showed Nire up the stairs of the inn, where the various rooms were located. Turen had been kind enough to offer her the spare room, which was reserved for friends of the family. In other words, he wasn’t asking her to pay, nor was he asking Jerit to pay for her. After saying and anxious goodnight to her host and companion, Nire shut the modest wooden door, locked it, and leaned back against it.

Letting out a long breath she closed her eyes, trying to just let it all sink in. The room was small and simple, no bigger than a generously sized walk in closet. There was a single window in the back above the bed, which was nothing more than wooden posts with a straw filled mattress tied to the corners with thick rope. She could tell it was straw filled, because beneath the sheets there were stray pieces boldly attempting to escape.

The only other piece of furniture in the room was a small chest of drawers, with a wash basin and jug of water sitting on top. Wandering over to the chest, she opened the top drawer to find a small towel and a washrag. Pouring some water into the basin, she wet the washcloth, and wiped her face. She felt dirty and would have killed for a hot bath or shower, but this was obviously the best she would be getting tonight.

After drying her face she took off her coat and her shoes, and slowly walked towards the bed. A grimace crept across her face. She flipped up the top sheet, and then the bottom, turned over the pillow, and checked under the bed. It seemed clean enough, and it didn't appear that any critters had taken up residence here. She sat down tentatively, and slowly wriggled under the covers.

It was not all together horribly uncomfortable. Considering her last bed had been a pile of rocks, it was definitely an improvement. The straw was a bit pokey, but she had kept her clothes on, so that helped. Staring at the ceiling she thought about her strange situation. All things considered she thought she was handling it rather well.

She didn't know where she was, so going with the flow and being as inconspicuous as possible really seemed to be the only option. Either she was crazy and utterly delusional about this entire venture, or something completely beyond her comprehension had happened. She fingered the moth pendant that rested on her chest while she thought.

Unable to come to a reasonable conclusion, and being that she was exhausted from the day's surprises, she closed her eyes and decided to deal with it in the morning. Who knows, maybe she would be lucky enough to wake up in the loony bin.

She was sitting in a garden with a drawing pad and a stick of charcoal. She sat on a wooden swing suspended by a grand willow tree, and through the waving tendrils she could see a little red haired girl, no older than five, as she sat in the grass and played. Looking down at her drawing she could see that it was a portrait of the child.

The little girl had a doll, which she cradled and spoke to softly. The day was warm and pleasant, with a light breeze that pushed her wavy brown hair in front of her face. Someone stood behind her, he had not been there before but she felt him there now. A soft smile crossed her lips as she felt his hands on her bare shoulders. Long fingers, each tipped with a sharp, black nail wrapped around the sides of her arms.

As she watched the scene play out in front of her, her internal awareness raised. *This place seems so familiar...* she thought as the man behind her bent down and placed a kiss on her cheek. She closed her eyes, and everything faded away... everything except the hands that were still wrapped gently around her shoulders.

She could feel the moth pendant against her chest, and it began to seem heavy. She could feel the mark on the back of the pendant as it pulsed against her skin... There was a sensation of singularity between the hands on her shoulders and the mark on the pendant that seemed all too

familiar, but she couldn't quite place what it was. *What is that feeling...* she asked herself as she reached out to it with her mind.

The mark pulsed harder. It thrummed against her and the sensation traveled through her core until it hit that place in the center of her chest where it felt like a hot rock was buried. She reached out further... it was getting closer... she could feel it. Whatever it was she was reaching for, whatever answer she sought, it was getting *closer*.

Suddenly she felt as though she had it, but she still didn't know what it *was*. The hands on her shoulders tensed, the black nails piercing her skin. At first she was confused, but then a wave of absolute terror slammed through her chest like a freight train.

Heat and anger filled the darkness. The hands moved from her shoulders, and one of them seized her chin, yanking her head towards the sky. Her eyes shot open as a searing pain crossed her neck, and she felt warm liquid as it spilt down the front of her chest.

The last thing she saw as she fell was his face... and his angry... yellow... eyes.