

Hunt of Hearts

Prologue and Chapter One

Early Release

Author's Note

This is an early look at the prologue and first chapter of Hunt of Hearts.

Please only read this once you've finished Shadows of Silver! There are major spoilers ahead. Some details may still change during the editing process.

Thank you for reading and supporting my work. It genuinely means the world.

At the end of the chapter, you'll also be able to share your thoughts or anything you'd like to tell me. I'd really appreciate it. ♥

And if you enjoy this first peek, you can also add Hunt of Hearts to your **Goodreads TBR!**

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This excerpt is an early version of Hunt of Hearts and may differ from the final published copy.



*To the hearts that have bled, loved, and fought. The ones
who have betrayed and forgiven. May you find the
courage to endure what comes.*

*And to those who wrestle with the choices that make
them monsters... this story is yours too.*

Prologue

Three days after the final battle, Fern's antlers were bare of jewels. His face bore the pain of losing his kindred spirit, his life partner.

My hand slipped into his cold touch, while memories of the battlefield seemed to clutch his other hand as tightly as I did. Snow crunched beneath our boots as a soft, grieving wind blew through our hair.

The group followed quietly.
Tears blurred the high trees above us.

Gripping the fur tighter around my chest, I looked up. A single snowflake landed on my nose, reddening it from the cold.

Ryu carried the plank with Arwan's body, his half-shifted dragon form looming over the others. Calista walked beside him, holding the end as they took him to his final resting place.

The Strigforest. Home.

We came to a halt as a Skyrav landed in front of us, splattering wet snow onto the bottoms of our long cloaks.

‘Fern?’ The man tilted his feathered head, eyes slowly catching sight of the blanket covering Arwan.

The silence was deafening.

‘Fern?’ he repeated, sorrow slipping into his voice. ‘Where is—’ He looked back at the blanket. ‘Don’t...’

‘Ulian.’ Fern’s voice cracked. His hand shivered violently in mine.

He was holding back. I lightly squeezed his hand, but his eyes never left Ulian.

‘Ulian, I—’

‘Don’t tell me...’ Ulian whispered, a gleam passing over his eyes. ‘Don’t.’

‘Your brother,’ Fern started, raising his other hand as if it could make any of this easier. ‘Arwan, he—’

An imaginable kick hit my stomach. I glanced at Ulian through my frost-covered lashes, noticing the resemblance I hadn't fully registered—the same set of eyes, the same tense jaw.

We had planned to tell Arwan's mother... but I hadn't even thought about the rest of his family.

'No!' Ulian faltered, his knees giving way as a choked sound escaped him. For a moment, his eyes seemed to search the snow, as if trying to make sense of what he'd just heard, before sobs wracked him. 'NO!'

'He fought,' Fern cried, letting his grief show. 'He fought and he...'

Deyanira stepped forward, as we all noticed Fern couldn't face this alone. A tear glistened down her cheek. We had all lost family, most of us orphaned. Deyanira kept quiet about those she had lost—only Ryu seemed to know something. Perhaps she wasn't grieving Arwan at that moment; perhaps she was thinking of her own family.

Ulían's cries drew more Skyravs from the branches and hollowed nests.

Fern's antlers swayed as his head drooped, wetness melting the snow beneath him.

‘Arwan is with Atheria now,’ Deyanira spoke softly, as if afraid her words might break them further. ‘He’s with your sky goddess.’ She stepped back, giving a slight squeeze to Fern’s shoulder.

It had been three days. Three days since Arwan’s life was taken on the battlefield. Three days since we captured the demon responsible for it all.

My free hand tightened into a fist, trying to contain the emotions within me. Trying to keep control.

Three days of helping soldiers, of travelling to a new hideout. Three days of crying for the lives lost.

I snapped back as a shriek bellowed through the forest, so loud we all flinched. I covered my ears.

A woman stood before us. It didn't take a genius to see the resemblance.

Arwan. His mother. The one he had spoken of so dearly.

Fern struggled for words, and the woman crumpled to her knees.

'My baby,' she cried, hands clutched to her chest. Ulian tried to comfort her, broken himself. 'My baby.'

It was no use.

'My baby, my poor baby,' she wailed, rocking back and forth, digging into the snow.

'We brought him here,' Ryu spoke unexpectedly. 'He belongs with his family.'

The woman didn't respond, only continued to cry as more Skyravs circled us.

Some knelt like her, some pressed hands to their chests in shock, some stood frozen.

I stood frozen too, Fern's shaking hand in mine, his fingers pressing so tightly I was sure it would leave bruises.

I had thought we'd won the battle. In reality, we had lost.

Arwan wasn't the only soul we lost that day... many more had ventured out to find remaining families.

A shiver ran through me. Memories of Elowen clawed their way up.

I pressed them down. I pressed them all down.

I had freely given control to my shadow that day, letting her lead.

Arwan's life had been paid for by the arm of his killer—Kaladin, the one who escaped the moment we focused on Sylus.

Shame rocked me.

I had him. Kaladin had been down, clutching at the bloodied stump of his shoulder, eyes begging for mercy.

My hatred for Sylus had blinded me.

This was my fault.

Arwan's family would never know peace again, and I had done that.

A sob cracked through me. I turned, releasing Fern's hand, rushing away, hearing Vesper call my name—and knowing that the world beyond the burial waited, full of those we could neither trust nor ignore.

Trees blurred past as I sank to my knees, snow cracking as my full body weight landed.

'No, no, no.' I looked at my hands, thick, warm blood covering them. 'I should've killed him, I should've killed him,' I cried, wiping them on my dress.

The blood didn't come off. Cold tears rolled down my cheeks. I was certain my nose was running too.

'Alora.'

The blood disappeared, and my vision cleared. A small breath escaped my parted lips as I slowly looked up, realising I hadn't run away at all.

I was still frozen in place, Fern's hand in mine, fur clutched tightly to my chest.

Vesper stood before me as Ryu and Calista handed Arwan's covered body to the Skyravs, Fern holding Arwan's mother against him.

‘Alora,’ Vesper said.

‘Yes?’ My voice came out smaller than expected, like a little mouse afraid of being caught.

‘We’re leaving.’

‘Wait, the burial—’

Vesper pressed a hand to my shoulder. ‘We’ve taken our goodbyes. It’s time to find camp and treat the others.’ She hesitated. ‘We also have a prisoner to deal with.’

My thoughts stilled at the mention of him. I nodded silently, though I wanted to bury myself deep in the ground, hide from the world. From him. From everyone.

Vesper gave a soft nod before instructing the others.

Fern approached as I stared at the trees beyond, wishing Arwan a final goodbye.

‘Alora.’

‘Oh, Fern,’ I wiped a tear, playing with the hem of my sleeve.

His eyes darted down. ‘I’m staying here,’ he said in a whisper I nearly missed.

Shock hit me. ‘Wait, wait,’ I shook my head. ‘I can’t leave him.’ A tear rolled down his red-soaked eyes. ‘Not yet.’

Something cracked within me. I couldn’t even name it, there were no words to describe such a feeling.

I took Fern’s hands in mine, nodding, feeling my hair ruffle against the fur of my cloak. ‘I understand.’

He slowly reached his hand to my cheek as I pressed it to my face, smiling softly.

‘I’ll be back before you know it.’

‘I consider that a promise,’ I smiled.

Fern gave a small smile before turning towards the others.

After a beat of silence, he nodded tightly, and left without looking back.

‘Alora,’ Vesper called.

I swallowed the pain, setting aside exhaustion to continue the gruelling hike to a new destination.

Vagadian. *Home?* Though the shadows of the battlefield—and of those we’d lost—followed us still.

PART ONE

The Wingless Demon

Chapter 1

The End of Something

Alora

Even in stillness, the past whispered in my mind.

I felt the months settle in my bones as I tried to rescue the frostbitten herbs in my tent, brushing snow-dusted leaves with careful fingers.

Colder air had reached Vagadian, and after three months living in the bog—mud beneath us and thick, orange trees above—the curse had come this far.

We'd chosen Vagadian because it was mostly unclaimed land, a place to heal while avoiding Qetha and keeping our eyes on Sylus.

I was still here, still breathing, still moving forward.

The quiet murmurs of life surrounded my tent. Distant boots walked over the planks; voices lowered as they passed my little corner of the camp. For three months I

had kept mostly to myself, hiding in stillness while the world carried on around me.

Besides meeting Ryu and the others at bonfires and early mornings, I had spent my days on a thin mattress beneath a roof of brown furs, mauling my mind, begging for strategies, plans, anything.

Today was different. Today Ryu had called for me.

Heads turned as I stepped past the tent flaps. Their eyes followed me with wariness. I felt the stares that made me a stranger among those most like me.

Whatever waited inside the meeting tent, I had to face it.

A dark whisper brushed against my mind: *You can't trust them... you can't trust anyone.*

I shoved it down, tightening my fists. 'Three months have passed...' I started. 'Now that Kaladin conquered Qetha... there's no telling what he'll do.'

'Qetha should've been ours.'

'I'm aware.'

A few Noryths gave me strange looks as I shut my mouth and followed the wooden boards to the meeting tent.

The open bog where our tents were pitched reached towards the thicker forest, grey-barked trees standing silently among fallen leaves. My curiosity got the better of me, and I darted a glance to my left. Sylus hung there, strapped between two tree trunks, head bowed, frost clinging to his hair and grey-stained liquid crusted across his chest.

His head lifted carefully, just enough for those whitened eyes to peer through his wet strands. A wicked grin spread across his face, and it knocked the air out of me.

He shouldn't have had the upper hand—not here, half-frozen and tied between trees. But there was something about the way he watched me, like he still knew more than I did.

For a heartbeat, it felt as if he had me cornered again.

Then the feeling ebbed, and reality calmed me. He was bound. I wasn't. I tore my gaze away and fast-walked towards the tent behind the other trees.

I pushed the flap aside. For a second everything went quiet. Eyes darted to me. Even Ryu stopped, smoke

curling lazily from his nostrils in his half-shifted form.

‘Alora,’ he said. ‘Join us.’

Moving to the table, the murmurs started again.

‘We should’ve killed him months ago.’

My head whipped to Calista, who settled at the end of the table, drinking from a giant jug—no doubt something to let the steam off.

After the encounter with Sylus, I wished the same, wondering if Ryu still had some rum left in his stash...

‘I agree. He’s a ticking time-bomb we’re just keeping alive.’ Ryu stood upright at the other end, taking the lead and snapping me out of my alcohol-ridden thoughts.

‘He doesn’t even behave properly when anyone tries to question him,’ Atlas piped up—only seventeen, or eighteen? I’d forgotten—but stubborn enough to speak his mind. Calista shot him a glance, clearly unconvinced by his point.

Ryu circled the table and came to stand opposite me, arms crossed, jaw tight. ‘Alora. What do you think?’

All eyes turned to me—Deyanira, Fern, Calista and Atlas. The final call was mine.

I leaned forward, hunting for my voice. ‘We’ve made no progress. Whatever Vesper is trying with Sylus, it isn’t working.’

Vesper had forced us to keep him alive after the battle. Not out of mercy—she wanted what was in his head. Routes into Qetha. Names. Secrets we could use. Maybe even leverage she could trade if things got worse. Three months of attempts, and still nothing useful. It hurt to say. Speaking ill of Vesper always did. She was my godmother, my mentor. But as a leader... she hesitated too long.

This wasn’t the first discussion about our doubts, and frustrations started to boil over.

Fern slammed his palm against the table. ‘She didn’t do anything when Kaladin took Qetha. We’ve got nothing from Sylus. Our spies in Qetha are probably dead. The prince has to die—then we take Qetha and end Kaladin. Alora breaks the curse, and we’re all free.’

We all stared at him. He had only arrived a week ago, claiming to be ready to find Kaladin and finish him. He wore his mask well—battle plans and cold

precision—but I saw the cracks: clenched fists when no one looked, the twitch of his jaw at Arwan’s name.

Calista folded her arms. ‘I agree with Fern. The rebellion promised victory, yet we sit here with nothing.’

‘The soldiers needed healing,’ Deyanira countered sharply, planting her palms on the rough wood. ‘We had no choice but to pause.’

Ryu rubbed his chin, his gaze flicking to the tent flap.

‘Vesper won’t act until she has answers from Sylus.’

‘She believes killing him could backfire,’ Deyanira added. ‘Strategic value, she says.’

I straightened. ‘So we either wait for answers that never come—or we kill him ourselves.’

Fern nodded, pacing between Ryu and Calista. ‘How? He doesn’t die. We’re not even allowed near him. It’s impossible.’

I locked eyes with Ryu. ‘Not impossible. There’s one way.’

Ryu groaned, pressing a hand to his temple. ‘Alora, that was a rum-fuelled idea, not a strategy.’

‘It would work.’ I shrugged, leaning back in my chair, feeling the tiniest rebellion stir within me.

The others frowned, exchanging confused glances. ‘What would?’ Calista asked, rising from her seat. Ryu exhaled smoke, his confidence filling the tent as he squared his shoulders. ‘We fly him over the border.’

Gasps rippled through the fur-lined tent.

‘Sylus is originally from Nordwyn,’ I explained, waving a hand. ‘Special abilities or not, his body turns to ash the moment he crosses the border. Ryu is from Caldera; he can cross safely, as can I and Deyanira.’

Fern’s lips curved into a grim smile. ‘Finally. A plan that makes sense.’

But then —

We’re killing him?

The whisper clawed at the back of my mind.

We can’t. We need him.

I rolled my eyes at myself. These past few months she had been so capricious.

‘Alora?’ Deyanira’s hand landed on my shoulder. ‘You’re talking to yourself again.’

‘I was?’ I forced a smile, pushing her concern aside. ‘Just planning.’

Ryu's eyes narrowed. 'And what exactly does that planning look like?'

He saw right through me. He was the only one who knew of my pestering shadow. I hadn't had the courage to tell the others. A shadow that was only silenced by violence wasn't something many would appreciate.

So I tried to silence her myself, pushing down the overwhelming rage and the daily temptation to lose control—trying, every day, to be good and act like the heroes we were meant to be.

I leaned back; this was not the time nor place to worry about that. Nordwyn needed saviors, and we would be just that. 'We wait until evening. Then we move him across the border,' I said quietly, almost to myself.

Deyanira shook her head, folding her arms. 'I still don't like it. Too many variables.'

'It's the only way to divert Vesper's attention towards Qetha,' Calista said, planting her palms on the papers spread before her.

'Vesper will keep an eye on Sylus,' Ryu said. 'Everything has to be precise.'

I swallowed. Tonight, I would face him fully. Tonight, everything could change.

The meeting ended with nods, whispers of agreement, and the shuffle of boots on the wooden boards. I stayed for a moment, letting my breathing steady before meeting the outside world.

When I finally rose, the chill of our plans settled in.

Were we ready for this?

Thank you for reading the first bit of Hunt of Hearts!

I'd love to hear your thoughts, it's completely anonymous!

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