

Rancid

Vicki V. Lucas

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By Vicki V. Lucas

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AWAKENINGS

*“The words we hear while sleeping resound
within us when we are awake.”*

~STRACHAN DALYEL

A jolt shot through the earth directly below Northbridge. Jehun groaned. He had just examined the area underneath the city beside the Razor Mountains thoroughly. It was his habit to do so before the annual horse races ever since Adoyne had given him the responsibility to ensure the safety of the humans on top of the soil, and Jehun took his duty very seriously.

He knew from experience that whenever large gatherings of people occurred, they broke everything in their paths as they tromped around, never thinking about what was under their feet.

What were they doing now to cause him more pain and work?

He forced himself to ignore the new problem and look at the damage caused by the poison in the water. He was horrified as he rolled through the loam. He had worked endlessly to get the soil soft and enriched with nourishment for the seeds to grow, but the poison from the water had seeped into the dirt and stripped the ground of life.

It almost made him sick to look at it. His hard work was ruined, completely wasted because of one heartless person's actions. And who would clean it up? Of course, it would be left to him to fix. It always was.

The poison spread through almost all Eltiria, stretching as far south as the city of Souchrie. Every creek, stream, and river was saturated. Vile toxin had soaked through the soil, killing every root in its path.

He only explored for a short time before the ruin was more than he could handle. Everything he did was always messed up. Couldn't people for once respect his work and take care of things on their own?

He dove deep down to the walls of the inner core to look for leaks of lava. He loved it there because it was impossible to hear the humans over the roar of molten rock.

Halfway through his underground inspection, he spotted scorching liquid metal flowing out of the walls. The earth searched for something to block the flow while he fretted about the mess it was making.

It was another thing for him to clean up, but if he didn't, the molten metal would escape to the surface and destroy the humans in its path, not to mention that it took forever to clean up hardened lava.

As he worked, he wondered if they realized that he wasn't an ordinary caretaker. He saw a boulder

and pushed angrily on it but jerked back when he heard a voice.

“Take the magic from my heart.”

He never heard anyone here, other than Adoyini. Besides, this voice was too deep and harsh to be Him. Jehun ignored the words and shoved the large rock with all his might, but the boulder refused to move.

He just wanted to be left alone. People were always hollering for help. He was constantly doing one thing after another like moving rocks, breaking up the top soil, and diverting poisonous gases.

It wasn't that he minded helping. He liked lending a hand when he had the time, but he had so much to do. Spring was almost gone, and he still wanted to divert that underground river into a waterfall in the mantle.

Jehun felt bad for the people. He really did. But he was busy. He was doing his best to make sure the toxin didn't spread further into the earth.

So, he had to sacrifice what he wanted to do, once again, and clean up another problem that wasn't even his in the first place.

He knew Adoyini kept calling, and the farmers were giving up hope of crops, but he didn't have time to answer. He'd help them when he had time. They would have to wait.

The strange voice came again.

“Tear Northbridge apart.”

Northbridge? Jehun stopped pushing. A tremor of pain directly under the city followed the words. As

he rushed from the inner core to the north, he wondered who would have the authority to speak into the deep parts of the earth.

As he entered the mantle where the pain was the strongest, he was rocked back by a force of power. The layer of rocks directly underneath Northbridge was trembling as a thin line appeared out of nowhere and shot straight north under the city.

The humans were a short distance up through the mantle. The annual horse racing was in full swing. Thousands of people had descended upon the city to test their horses in all sort of races. Others gathered to sell their goods, gamble, entertain the crowds at night, or steal from others' gain.

If the crack grew any bigger, the rocks would split and create a chasm in the center of Northbridge, killing hundreds of people.

Jehun threw himself into action. He scrambled to find rocks, clay, or loose gravel to fill the gap. But the rift grew faster, as if a large axe was slicing through the rocks without any effort. He worked feverishly, trying to ignore the increasing pain, but the space continued to enlarge.

Adoyni, I need your help! Jehun called over and over, but to no avail. It didn't seem possible for him to stop the destruction. Everything he tried was demolished before he could finish, but Jehun persisted in his fight. Where was Adoyni?

In his frantic struggle, there was another bolt of pain. This time it was sudden and fast like lightning.

He gasped, unable to move in the agony. But as he examined the damage, the gap expanded into a wide breach in the mantle.

Jehun shook off the pain and shoved more dirt at the split, but before he could do much, the crevice extended so large there was no hope of saving the city.

Buildings began to tumble in the south end of Northbridge. The sound of lumber crashing and screams grew louder as the poorer section of the city vanished into the crack that had sprung out of nowhere.

Some people tried to get to safety, although they didn't know which way to run. Some stood still, either frozen with fear or uncertain of what was happening.

Jehun was paralyzed. He could only watch as those he was supposed to protect were lost into the earth and swallowed up to their death as the crevice continued to grow through the city.

As he watched, he knew this wasn't normal. Earthquakes never left a gaping hole in the soil. He writhed in agony, and he felt the cold chill of fear. Someone, other than Adoyni, had enough power to tear the foundations of the world apart.

The last temple of Adoyni broke into pieces before tumbling into the abyss. The air was filled with the rumbling sound of buildings crashing against each other. Carts and wagons slipped into the gap as the horses whinnied in their fright and

frantically tried to get to safety. People shrieked as they clung to each other in their homes, only to scream in horror as entire houses tumbled into the earth.

When the shaking finished, Jehun was filled with shock which numbed the pain for a brief time. A large canyon stretched from north to south for miles, splitting Northbridge in two.

The Temple of All had survived, but the center of the large city was gone. He wondered if it was possible to count the number of humans who had died in the quake.

Only Jehun could hear the cries of the fallen people. Trapped by rubble and debris, they screamed in pain and terror. But he knew they were too far down to be rescued. The walls of the chasm were steep and treacherous. Any rescuer would risk certain death by trying to descend.

Jehun shuddered and deep sorrow welled up in his heart. Never had he known such pain existed. Despair joined the suffering, and he forgot about the small leak of liquid metal as it began to pour out of the inner core.

CHAPTER ONE

Stoned



The first time Kai heard the noise, he dismissed it as his imagination. But when it happened for the fifth time, he couldn't ignore it anymore. He stopped walking, every inch of him praying that he was wrong about what he had heard.

He wasn't. The sound floated down the dark stone hallway to him again. It reminded him of a leather shoe scuffing against a rock or a pelt scraping against a tree, whispering through the silence.

It was so quiet he would've missed it if it wasn't the first sound he'd heard in a while. Although he should have been overjoyed to hear anything, the eerie sound started his heart racing, for he knew one thing. He was not alone.

The smoke from the smoldering torches on the walls made his eyes sting as he peered down the gloomy hallway. Hollowed out of sheer black rock, the weak light revealed very little to encourage him.

Stretching ahead, the corridor continued for fifty paces and then turned to the left. The way behind Kai was not much better. It was roughly ten paces until it twisted to the right.

But looking forward or behind was better than looking down. The floor was littered with skulls and

bones of humans. Every so often he'd have to step over the skeletons that blocked his path.

When his foot hit them, it caused a grating sound that sent shivers down his body. *Am I going to end up like them?* He stepped over a bone that looked like a human leg and curled his lip in disgust.

Where am I? How'd I get here? Kai's head almost grazed the ceiling as he turned in a circle, and he hunched slightly without thinking about it.

As he studied each direction, he fingered the hilt of the sword hanging off his belt as if he was waiting to draw it. His fingers tightened around the hilt, finding comfort in the smooth feel of the metal.

He wanted out. Now. There was a feeling about this place like something really bad was going to happen. A sort of eerie silence hung in the air as if no one else in the world existed. The stillness only allowed the questions to build up in his head louder with each passing moment.

He racked his brains for an answer to explain what had happened, but there was nothing to give him any clues.

The last thing he could remember was standing in the courtyard and watching Eladar, the large Archippi, fall dead to the ground. The memory of the white horse lying in the dirt with his powerful wings motionless filled him with grief and anger.

He shook his head. There wasn't time for this. He had to get home and find a way to cure Rhiana. Then he had to find Shona before something bad happened to her. He'd deal with Belial after that.

Before he could do all that, he had to find out where he was and what was happening to him. *Should I go forward or back? Which way leads out?* He took

two steps forward, but indecision filled him, and he stopped. He'd been dreaming the last time something this weird had happened to him. Perhaps this was a nightmare.

“Wake up,” he whispered. His voice bounced against the walls and fell to the floor. He cringed at the volume of his words.

There was no change. *This has to be a dream! I just can't wake up.* There had to be a way to jolt himself back to the real world. He spied a small rock lying beside the wall of the passageway and picked it up. *If this works, then it won't hurt at all. If it doesn't work, then I'm an idiot.*

Gritting his teeth, he slammed the rock into his left hand. “Stallion stalls!” Kai dropped the rock and gripped his fingers, feeling the warm blood. He poked gingerly at the wound. It stung to the touch. He remembered Taryn yelling at him for dumb swear words. *He's right, too. But I'll never tell him! What would he say? Stars above?*

With a groan of frustration, he returned to where he'd been standing before. Pausing for a brief moment, he strode down the passageway in the opposite direction. His steps slowed to a stop as he glanced back the way he had come.

Whichever way I choose, it will be the wrong way. Then I'll have to come back all this way. Even though he felt that a wrong action was still better than inaction, he couldn't make a decision.

The silence was broken by that sound again. His pulse quickened as his fingers subconsciously tightened further on the hilt. It came again. A bit closer this time.

“Taryn?” he whispered. He suddenly felt stupid. It was probably either Taryn or Lizzy coming back from scouting out which way to go. But why did he send them and not go himself? “Lizzy? Is that you?”

The only answer was silence. He held as quiet as he could and wished to still his loud heartbeats. The strange shuffle started again. Then over the steps came a low rumble like a bear’s growl turning into a roar. Goosebumps ran down Kai’s back. It wasn’t a bear. It was human.

Kai drew his sword and glanced at the blade in the dim light. Etched into silver was the word *Failure*. That wasn’t right. *The word should be...should be...* He couldn’t remember what the word used to be. Maybe he dreamed it was something different. *But failure?*

He wasn’t a failure. He had purified the water and saved Eltiria. *Didn’t I?* All he could recall was Eladar lying dead in the dirt. *Did we fail at cleansing the water?* He fingered the edge of the sword carefully like it was going to disintegrate any second.

The sound was closer. Kai decided he’d figure out what was wrong with the blade and what happened to him later. He turned and ran quietly away from whoever was coming down the hallway.

He dashed through the twists and turns of the corridor, but when his breath started to come in gasps, he paused to listen. Over his panting, he heard the same noise as before. A slow shuffle. It was still behind him.

Running wasn’t doing any good. He turned one more corner, planning to spring a trap on whatever was behind him. The torches on the wall made his eyes water as he squinted to see a door halfway down the hallway.

He trotted to it, hope surging through him. The door knob was a rock crudely fashioned into a handle. He pulled. The heavy door slowly opened like it was reluctant to reveal what was behind it. He tugged on it just far enough to slip through. It was difficult to shut it, so he left it ajar and slipped into the shadows until he heard voices.

CHAPTER TWO

Not a Mouse



Kai slipped through the door and hid behind a pile of rocks while his eyesight adjusted to the brighter light. When he could see, he peered around the boulders. He was in a large room hollowed out of the stone like the hallway. On the far end of the room was a large opening. He gasped.

There was clear blue sky. He must have been in some sort of cave, but now he was out! He could already feel the soft breeze and the sun on his face. He barely stopped himself from running to the opening when he remembered the two voices he'd heard.

His muscles cramped, and as he shifted, he caught sight of two tall shadows that filled him with dread. He knew those shadows. They were Seekers.

He studied the creatures, readjusting his grip on his sword. He'd beaten them once with Taryn and Lizzy. Why couldn't he do it again? *But two against one?* He swallowed. *Every time I need Taryn, he runs off, leaving me to handle things.*

The Seekers wore dark cloaks that seemed to radiate evil. On their belts, they each had an axe. The one farther away wore a sword down its back. Since their hoods were down, Kai could see their faces. Although they bore a resemblance to humans, their faces were too wide to look at comfortably. The skin

was pale white and looked like it could crumble off in chunks.

Yet Kai was drawn to their amber eyes. Void of any emotion, they pulled him in and made him feel like a mouse waiting for the hawk to descend on it. He tore his gaze away and tightened his grip on the hilt. He was no mouse. Not anymore.

“Are you sure this human will come, Volundr?” The first one asked with a touch of impatience.

“The Master said he will.” Volundr fingered his axe as if he was eager to use it.

“I still can’t believe our Master would trust someone like that. I won’t trust him. I don’t care what the Master says. Besides, with Adoyini...”

“Adoyini!” Volundr snorted. “What can He do? He hasn’t been around Eltiria for years. I’ll have no problems handling this human. And, once he is broken, he’ll be a useful slave. You have nothing to fear from Adoyini.” The last word came out like an insult.

“The Master said to make sure he turns. We can’t let him die.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?” Volundr yelled as he drew the sword off his back. “Do you think that I wouldn’t remember the Master’s orders, Torleik?”

“No,” Torleik cowered. “It’s just that...that... the Master was very angry. If we mess this up, it will be our heads.”

“That’s why he put me in charge.” The voice was as sharp as the blade of his sword. “Because I won’t ruin this. I have plans. Plans only the Master can help me achieve once the rotten Archippi are taken care of. All of it hinges on this human, both for me and the Master.”

Kai took a deep breath, unaware that he had held it so long. *Who were they waiting for?* His leg cramped and he shifted impatiently. But his foot protested at the sudden movement, and he lost his balance.

Scrambling to keep from falling, he grabbed a rock. It pulled free from the pile as he recovered. A pebble rolled off the edge and clattered away. He froze as a small avalanche tumbled to the ground.

The Seekers whirled around to the door. “Where did you come from?” Volundr growled. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Kai leaped to his feet and charged them. He stumbled as he started to dash across the cave. Volundr snarled and shoved Torleik aside. He met Kai’s attack calmly, smoothly blocking Kai’s blade in midair with his sword as he stepped in Kai’s path.

Kai yelled and feinted left. The Seeker didn’t take the bait. Kai struck at the monster’s legs, only to be blocked again. He had to get past them and get out of there.

He rained as many blows on Volundr as quickly as he could and pressed forward, but there was no budging. It was like getting a boulder to move.

Volundr laughed. The cold mirthless sound echoed off the walls. “A few more steps, little one, and you’d be free. Enjoy that blue sky, if you can see it.” The monster moved forward.

Kai did all he could to stand his ground, but he couldn’t hold it. He backed up a step and continued pressing his attack. The Seeker met every blow with skill and ease.

“I’ll hack you to pieces,” Kai yelled.

Volundr laughed in response. Kai grew angrier. *Doesn’t it know what I can do? I killed one before. I*

can do it again. He attacked with all the strength he had.

The Seeker blocked it again and smoothly pushed Kai back another step. *Two more steps and I'll be back in the hallway!*

He struck again, hoping for the speed of his sword to come like it did when he sparred with Alyn. But it never came. *I did it before, why won't it happen now?*

The Seeker lunged at Kai. Caught up in his thoughts, he forgot about the cave entrance and leaped away from the blade. Volundr quickly followed as Kai was pushed off balance.

“Too easy,” Volundr said with a touch of regret. “They always are.” With that, he deflected Kai’s sword and used his massive arm to shove Kai through the door.

Kai tripped and fell onto his back. His sword clattered to the ground a few feet away as Volundr spat on him. He rolled aside to dodge the Seeker’s attack and sprang to his feet, trembling with rage. He heard a noise that sounded like a door slamming shut.

When he turned around, his fury was replaced with confusion and frustration. The door was completely gone. All that was left was the same cramped hallway with the endless stone walls.

He could no longer suppress a yell. “Where am I? Get me out!” The words echoed repeatedly through the hallway and slowly faded away with no response. He groaned, stumbled down the stone corridor a few steps and then screamed as loudly as he could.

“GET ME OUT!”

CHAPTER THREE

Drugged and Dying



A scream sharper than a shrill high note of a song pierced through the darkness. Lizzy jerked awake as her heart quickened. *Seekers!* Fear washed over her like a sudden flood, but her eyes refused to stay open.

She struggled to wake up and force herself to move. Yet her arms and legs wouldn't budge. Panic gripped her as she imagined what unseen horror was causing the shriek.

For a minute, she thought she was still with her parents. The yell sounded like a cougar she once saw trapped in a tree by dogs. But somehow she knew this screech was human. She could hear the terror as the cry echoed around her.

It was the sound of something cornered but not yet ready to give up. She fought to keep her eyes open and tried to see something, anything, that would tell her what was attacking.

She glimpsed a small light off in the distance growing close. *Eladar!* She almost smiled. The white Archippos would chase away

whatever evil was close. Her eyes closed as she remembered how the winged horse had fallen to the ground covered with blood. Tears she couldn't wipe away streamed down her cheeks as she recalled the instant he took his last breath.

She pried her eyes open again, trying to clear her head. *Why can't I wake up?* The light blinded her as it grew from the size of a small candle to a large torch. Huge shadows reminded her of Seekers. Her weariness disappeared with horror, and her scream joined the other in an eerie harmony.

The other scream changed to shouted words filled with a tinge of panic and hysteria. "Where am I? Get me out!" It repeated, each time growing stronger with terror.

Lizzy stopped screaming. The voice, although strained with fright, was strangely familiar. The name and face that belonged to the voice drifted away before she could grasp it as her eyes began to close again. She struggled to stay awake.

"GET ME OUT!"

The words shot through her, and her eyes snapped open with realization. Kai! It was Kai screaming! *What's happening?*

During their travels, while fighting Unwants and Seekers, and battling Belial, she'd never once heard such panic and fear in his voice.

She struggled to get to her feet, but her body wouldn't respond. The blanket around her acted like ropes holding her down no matter how hard she thrashed. Kai stopped speaking and returned to his unearthly shouting which made her even more petrified.

She grimaced as light shone brightly in her eyes. Through the shadows, she saw Kai covered in a blanket. He jerked in convulsions. Someone on the far side held his arms down as the other person reached for a flask.

Kai fought as they forced the liquid down his throat. He choked and demanded to be let out. Lizzy watched helplessly, fighting the urge to sleep, as the red liquid spilled out and slid down his face to his throat.

The screaming ceased and turned into moans. His spasms subsided and soon he was quiet. Lizzy could hear shallow breathing in the stillness. *They drugged him.* She shook her head. *I bet they drugged me, too. That's why I can't wake up.*

"It's not working." A girl's voice broke the silence. Although spoken softly, the words echoed through the shadows. "Nothing works. And we don't have much time left."

Lizzy heard a deep sigh. She hoped it was Taryn, but as soon as the voice spoke, she knew it wasn't. She recognized the voice but couldn't remember why. As he began talking, she strained to remember who he was.

“But now that we are here, away from the Archippi, we can try other things.” The deep voice was filled with despair. “You know what we have to do if we lose him.”

“I can’t do it.” The girl responded with a tremble in her voice. “We’re trying to heal him. We’re not...” Silence filled the room until Lizzy started to drift off, but she jerked awake when the girl continued. “We’re not...*that*.”

“We promised.” The second voice was laced with anger.

Lizzy caught her breath. *That’s Aric! He was here when we arrived at Merrihaven.*

He continued talking. “The Archippi were already going to do it.”

The girl’s voice shook like she was close to crying. “I wish that we’d never agreed to it. It’s horrible, trying to cure him, and then...then... What kind of people does that make us?”

“Stop!” The word snapped like a whip. “We had to try.” The words were filled with regret. “We have to face the fact that we might fail him, even after all the fighting he’s done.”

“How much time does he have?”

No one spoke for a long time. Lizzy opened her eyes to see the girl washing the red liquid away from Kai’s face.

Aric cleared his throat. “I don’t know. Maybe one or two days.”

Lizzy gasped and sat up. Pain shot through her head as waves of dizziness threatened to

overtake her. She groaned and lay down, pressing her hands to her forehead. Strong arms pulled her arms away, and a cup was placed on her lips.

“Just a sip,” the girl said.

She struggled, but she was too weak to do anything. Liquid poured into her mouth while she tried to say that she didn’t want it. The sweet medicine gagged her as she choked it down.

There was a shuffling to her right. “Where do you want this?” The voice sounded like it belonged to a young boy.

Aric turned away from Lizzy. “Right there. And that pack of blankets can go down to the tents. Why did you demand we bring that stupid tub, anyway?”

“I don’t know. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Maybe we’ll need a bath before this is over,” the girl said. She turned back to Lizzy. “There now. It’s not that bad, is it? One more time.”

The cup was placed back on her lips, and this time she was too tired to protest. She swallowed obediently as her eyes closed, too heavy to lift again.

“Sleep now,” the girl whispered

Lizzy fought to stay awake. This wasn’t the time to rest. She had to find out what they were talking about and save Kai, but she couldn’t keep the sleep from sweeping over her. She

drifted off while Aric and the girl continued talking.

“He has a high fever again,” the girl said.

Aric spoke up. “He’s losing this battle. He’s got to fight harder.”

“He may be fighting as hard as he can. It’s just not enough.”