

Cade Seagram can hardly believe he is finally holding Serena in his arms. He has traveled so far and endured so much to find her.

And yet here she is.

Their respective travels and travails have left their mark on both of them, but neither seems to mind or even notice, so relieved are they to finally be reunited after far too long.

The last time Cade saw Serena Vasperan was at the mystical crossroads, where they had confronted the sinister shape-shifting entity that had been stalking them all in one form or another—and overshadowing Serena since her birth. Cade feels that familiar pang of guilt as he remembers their trusted friend and companion, Diana Perinova, whose mind, body, and soul had been ravaged by the unnamed malevolent force. But Diana had been strong...strong enough to offer the ultimate sacrifice of her own life so that they might gain enough of an advantage to survive the ordeal. She shot and killed herself with a pistol that Serena had taken from a thief back in the town of Leavesden. And by doing so, Diana had imbued the gun with the blood of an innocent—her own blood—which seemed to grant the weapon additional power against the nameless and ageless adversary. Having suffered so much and for so long under the torment of the unholy being, Diana probably had more reason than anyone to want it vanquished—no matter the cost.

Then Serena had tried to purge the withered and weakened form of the entity through fire from a broken lantern. Except the flames had only served to burn away the entity's façade—that of a wizened old crone—and reveal the evil force's true shape: an enormous gargoye-like winged shadow-demon with blazing red eyes. Even now, in his mind's eye, Cade could see Serena dwarfed in size and shrouded in shadow as she faced off against the self-described force of “discord, ruin, and chaos” and posed to it a challenge.

A final showdown on its own terms in its own realm.

That was when the portal between realms had opened up unexpectedly at the intersection of the crossroads.

And when Cade and Serena had each finally professed their secret love for each other.

Sealing it with a kiss.

Then Serena had disappeared through that portal, lost to Cade for what seemed an eternity. He had been so grief-stricken by his heartsickness for her and his own despondency at having failed to protect her as part of the pledge he had made to himself and to her. Though, thankfully, the entire time he had spent searching for her matters little to him now—because he has finally found her; his oath fulfilled.

His vision is suddenly blurred by a welling of tears of the purest gratitude, and Cade can feel a smile spread across his face—an unfamiliar sensation for him of late—as he notes that Serena’s eyes are just as green as he remembers them in his dreams. They seem even more vibrant, in fact; so bright compared to her too-pale skin—like twin gemstones set in an alabaster statue. Whatever mental, physical, and perhaps even spiritual exhaustion Serena must have endured on the other side, waging battle against the unnamable entity, the toll it has taken on her is evident.

Cade tenderly brushes back a wayward curl from Serena’s forehead, watching as the setting sun glimmers in the strands of copper and gold woven through her otherwise chestnut hair. Then he traces his finger down her cheek to her jawline, gently cupping her chin between his thumb and forefinger. He can feel his heart hammering in his chest as he watches her expression melt into a dreamy smile of anticipation, her eyes slowly closing, and her lips parting ever so slightly as she readies for their kiss.

Then Serena’s silken lips are on his—tentative and yielding at first, then more eager as their kiss intensifies. It is the kiss he has dreamed of for what has seemed like a lifetime of lonely and empty nights.

Serena’s hand glides up to the back of Cade’s neck, her fingers gently combing through the sandy blonde curls there; his hands bracket her hips and work their way up her waist in a rustle of the finest silk. The smooth caress of the fabric against his hand is almost sensual.

Cade’s brow suddenly wrinkles as he realizes he cannot recall ever seeing Serena in a silken gown such as the one she is now wearing—colored a deep forest green that is almost iridescent in the fading orange light of the setting sun. He could swear that when he had first found her again, she was still clad in her customary travel-worn tunic and leggings of a blue so dark, it is almost black.

The color of twilight.

Knowing that he should be focused more on his kiss with Serena, he still cannot help but begin to wonder why he is unable to recall anything at all about the circumstances of his reuniting with Serena. A growing unease begins to stir in the pit of his stomach.

Before Cade can give this lapse of memory any additional consideration, a sudden gust of wind rises with an almost gale force, swirling around the embracing couple, threatening to rend them apart. Cade's vision is almost instantly obscured by the rippling tangled curtain of Serena's hair writhing around his head. He shuts his eyes against this phantom wind and tries to tighten his protective grip around Serena to shield her from whatever storm is rising.

But Cade embraces nothing except vacant air—because Serena is no longer there, and he finds his arms are aching empty once again.

Along with his heart.

Cade Seagram jerked awake with an audible gasp, his faded denim-blue eyes wide open, and a fresh wave of agony surging through his body—originating from both his throbbing skull and his swollen shoulder.

Cade winced and bit back a cry, closing his eyes against the wave of nausea as he tried to slow his breathing enough to lull the reawakened pain back to a tolerable slumber. The last tattered fragments of his dream continued to dissipate like smoke, as if carried off by the night breeze that whispered in his ears while the harsh reality of the cold winter grass prickling against his back like thousands of tiny arrowheads returned to him. The dream kiss with Serena still lingered like the ghost of a memory on his lips, though, accompanied by the familiar ache of emptiness and loneliness that settled back into its seemingly permanent place in his chest.

Gradually, the agony in his head and shoulder began to subside enough for him to open his eyes again.

The sky above him was a vast jeweler's velvet of shimmering diamonds, and Cade's eyes immediately found the now familiar star, the emotional residue from the dream still a thick fog clouding his senses.

Serena's star.

Pelagus, the Hand of the Archer; part of the constellation Sagittarius. The star he had been using as a guide of sorts to find Serena. The only guide he really had—other than his intuition, which he was trusting less and less these days.

His eyes fixed on the star, Cade wondered yet again if Serena could see it, too, from wherever it was she now dwelled.

Cade covered his eyes with the crook of his good arm, fighting back the residual wave of melancholy stirred up by the particularly vivid dream. If only he could veil his despair as easily as his vision.

By whatever gods still existed, he was tired. Physically exhausted to the very marrow of his bones. Emotionally weary to the core of his soul.

As he lay alone and shivering in the frigid winter grass, with the emotional turmoil conjured up by his dream still clinging to him like stubborn spiderwebs, it would have been all too easy for Cade to convince himself that the events leading up to this very moment—including Serena's very existence—were all part of some elaborate dream. To the point that he was finding it more and more difficult to recall with any certainty any life he may have had before this very moment. His days as the eager apprentice blacksmith to his father now seemed like they belonged to someone else; a stranger.

Even more disconcerting to Cade was the contrary notion that everything he now perceived as his reality—the loss of his companions and even his very purpose in finding Serena again—was the real dream; a nightmare from which he could not wake.

When Cade was attacked by the Brigand ambush a few days ago, a shameful part of him had hoped that they would simply kill him and put an end to his seemingly futile quest—so that an honorable death in combat might earn him passage away from this futile existence, and perhaps even to whatever netherworld Serena currently occupied. Perhaps there he could atone for his inability to protect her in this world by keeping her safe in the next realm.

But that remote possibility, tempting though it could be for him at times, still could not deter Cade from his solemn pledge to Serena and the promise of seeing her again. Some impulse within him—perhaps simple stubbornness, even—refused to surrender to the quick and easy death by a Brigand's bullet. So he instead fought valiantly and with surprising cunning—fueled, in part, by that single-minded focus that still drove him so relentlessly. And perhaps there was even an underlying bitterness that served to motivate him, as well. A seething bitterness that

threatened to consume him in his weaker and lonelier moments when he felt most alone and forsaken; the last of their trio and separated from his love, the one he had sworn to protect.

Whatever it was that had compelled him, Cade had somehow managed to beat the odds by single-handedly defeating all three of the marauding Brigands. Using Serena's bow and her last remaining arrow, he had handily disposed of their leader with a remarkably accurate first shot straight into the thug's thieving heart. Then he had wielded the bow as a club to bludgeon the remaining two, killing one by breaking his nose and sending splinters of bone into his conniving brain. The third he left teetering on the brink of death—not out of mercy, but rather out of exhaustion. Thankfully, the aim of the gun-toting thieves had been as poor as their choice of weaponry; none of their bullets had found Cade on the rare occasions when their rusted and ill-kept pistols did not misfire. Unfortunately, their crude weapons had still served as efficient bludgeoning tools—with one particularly well-timed blow to Cade's skull. He must have blacked out briefly at some point during the melee, because he still could not recall how he had also injured his shoulder.

A gnawing sense of unease made Cade wonder if the blow he had sustained to his head was not at least partially the reason for his increasingly unreliable memory. He had only the vaguest idea of how much time had passed since that fateful night at the mystical crossroads—or about almost any other event since then; including the Brigand ambush. His hunger and thirst seemed to be his only semi-reliable methods for marking the passage of time anymore. But that, of course, was by no means accurate. Once you reached a certain level of weakness from food and water deprivation, anything beyond that seemed immeasurable.

As if his injuries and lack of provisions were not enough, Cade's mobility was further impeded by the slaying of his adopted horse, Diablo (which had once been Diana's), by a Brigand's bullet that had undoubtedly been intended for Cade. So now Cade wandered the featureless landscape on foot, seeking shelter and sustenance as he stubbornly continued his quest to find Serena somehow.

Sleep was the one thing, however, of which he had a surplus—probably too much; which was something that should have concerned him had he given adequate consideration to his head injury. Though his was rarely a restful slumber. Whether brought on by hunger or thirst or fatigue—or his mind's stubborn insistence at remaining active in spite of his broken body—Cade's dreams were extraordinarily vivid, which only served to increase his level of confusion between his waking and slumbering lives.

He dreamed mostly of Serena, not surprisingly. And in these pseudo-nightmares, he found himself wandering an ashen and barren wasteland, the sky above filled with leaden clouds

broken only by the occasional flash of sickly-green lightning—like the bizarre green fire he had seen during the Black Count’s assault to take Vasperan Manor.

*(and like the green dress Serena had worn in his dream, or the green gemstone he had lovingly polished for her)*

Often, there were voices carried on the wind in these vivid dreams; cries, curses, and lamentations—sometimes Serena’s voice, sometimes Diana’s. Other times, his parents’ or his sisters’. But even more unsettling, was the faintest metallic tinkling sound of tiny bells—like those a

*(gypsy)*

dancer might wear on her wrist or ankle bracelet. Slightly off-key and just loud enough for Cade to hear, the sound of these bells

*(jingling jangling gypsy bells)*

was enough to drive him mad—even in his dreams.

Madness.

Which reminded him of one of his one relic from the confrontation at the crossroads. He reached for it now, finding it in its customary place, tucked in a hidden pocket in his travel-worn beige jerkin.

A card.

Not a playing card—for it was larger in size and missing the customary array of clubs, spades, hearts or diamonds familiar to gamblers through the ages.

No, this card was different in so many ways.

The back of it was solid black—blacker than midnight despair. The front of the card resembled a standard Tarot card rendered in the style of a woodcutting, but unusually vivid in color. It showed the figure of a man clad in tattered rags, bracing himself against a fierce rainstorm. Sometimes when Cade stared at the card too long, he swore he could almost hear the rumbles of thunder as he blinked against the imagined flashes of lightning. The figure’s shoulders were slumped as if burdened by an unbearable unseen weight, yet he still defiantly

brandished a guttering torch against the onslaught of rain while shielding his haunted eyes with his other arm. His expression was eerily emotive considering the medium, his face a grim mask of weariness and emotional torment—yet still infused with stubborn purpose. And all too often, in the grips of his nightmares, Cade saw his own haunted face staring back at him from the bewitched card.

Beneath the eerie visage, spidery letters branded this tragic figure as THE TORCH-BEARER.

Despite the card's fiendish significance, Cade had grown to rely on this mysterious talisman to keep him focused on his purpose, at times when he might otherwise falter. Not just because the invitation to meet at the fabled crossroads had been scrawled on the back of the card in silvery iridescent ink (though there was no trace of the writing on the card anymore). Cade also kept it as a warning of sorts to himself; a caveat against the tragic figure he himself might become under the weight of his seemingly futile quest to find and rescue Serena from wherever she was.

There was one more reason why Cade had saved the card—though he would have denied it to anyone, including himself. He thought he sensed a power infused in it... A power that he naively hoped might serve him somehow—if only he could divine how to wield it.

Cade tucked the card back in his pocket and breathed through the waves of pain and hunger pangs until they finally began to recede somewhat. Another glance skyward at the steadily sinking moon reminded him that the night—and time in general—was rapidly slipping away from him. Bracing himself against the inevitable pain, he boosted himself up into a sitting position using his right arm. He could still barely lift his left arm because of the bad shoulder, so he kept that arm cradled to his chest by a makeshift sling fashioned from a torn strip of Serena's black cloak that he now wore. He would be of no good to himself or anyone else with only one usable arm, so he hoped that by keeping it immobilized, it might heal more quickly.

Cade had to blink back a wave of dizziness as he rose and stumbled gingerly to his feet, his brown leather boots crunching down the frozen blades of grass that had been his bed. To steady himself and regain his focus, Cade reached for the one other totem still in his possession... The one that never failed to renew his dwindling hope—even when he was at his most hopeless.

The bow slung across his chest.

The bow he now carried that had once belonged to Gideon Mortriste, Serena's mentor and the last of the Archers of Laummoren. Though it was now useless to Cade with only one good arm, he still carried it for reassurance and as a reminder of his pledge to return it to Serena.

Even now, as he placed a hand on the flawlessly polished wood of the bow, Cade thought he could sense some of the weapon's innate power coursing through him, compelling him to carry onward—even against seemingly insurmountable pain, fatigue, hunger and hopelessness.

Drawing on that power now, Cade took a deep shuddering breath and raised the hood of the black cloak that had once been briefly Serena's, but which he now wore. Then he stumbled onward in the direction of the sawtoothed silhouette of the Amaranth Mountains off in the distance—toward his hometown of Darrowdale, where he hoped to find rest, fresh provisions, arrowheads, and hopefully healing before he resumed his quest to find Serena.

And he muttered a silent prayer to whatever gods still existed that he would make it there before the next moonrise.