

Excerpt from *Escape to Vindor* by Emily Golus

Published by Taberah Press, 2017

CHAPTER 16 – THE MASTER OF RAVENS

Megan tossed and turned, unable to sleep. Edgwyn had promised to wake her up at the first light of dawn when the camp was unguarded, and Boath agreed to escort her and Nikterra as deep into the woods as he dared. She knew the two of them were taking a huge risk in helping them—the consequences if they were discovered could be severe.

Her fingers idly ran along the sheath of the dagger laying by her side. Boath had given it back to her, and Megan kept it close so she wouldn't forget it in the confusion of the early morning. The Book of Vindor lay nearby in a small sack filled with dried berries.

Maybe she was okay. Maybe the Shadow didn't know she was here. Perhaps it was searching for her elsewhere, and hadn't noticed her yet.

She finally fell into a restless sleep. She dreamed of random snippets of things: kicking a soccer ball through the woods, grey-tipped arrows growing like flowers, Nikterra eating the last of the Grakenbread. None of it was connected or made much sense.

Then the scene shifted, becoming eerily vivid. Megan stumbled through the woods and then, inexplicably, onto a paved street. She looked up to see a familiar mailbox in front of a blue-and-white house, hedged by yellow forsythia.

Home.

She bolted up the driveway and threw open the front door. "Mom, I'm back! I'm here!"

Silence.

The hall and family room were empty. The carpet had been pulled up, and an empty moving box lay overturned in a corner. The only piece of furniture left in the room was an unfamiliar black chair.

“Mom?” Megan asked. Her footsteps echoed as she crossed the room toward the kitchen.

“Mom, I’m here. Arden? Where are you?”

She stepped into the kitchen. Also empty. A ring of those same stern black chairs stood where the kitchen table had once been. The skin on her neck prickled.

“What’s going on? Where are you guys? Mom?”

They left without you.

“This isn’t funny.”

Thud. Thud. The pantry door shook with an unseen impact from behind.

“Arden? Are you in there?” Megan grabbed the brass knob. “Are you okay?”

The brass immediately turned ice-cold, biting into the skin of her hand. The door flew open, and a torrent of cold water gushed out and swept over her. It knocked her onto a floor that was now dissolving under her feet.

A few seconds later, the water rose to her chest, and within a minute the floor had given way completely. She flailed in the freezing waves, struggling to keep her head above water as the pool swirled around her, surrounded by the bare kitchen walls.

Fighting the current, Megan swam to the black chairs bobbing on the surface like ghost ships. She grabbed hold of the back of one and clung to it.

Feathery fingers of ice raced toward her on the surface of the water. She shrieked and tried to climb onto the seat of the chair. But the chair betrayed her, tipping without warning. Megan fell back and plunged into the water.

The entire pool froze solid around her. Megan kicked as the water hardened around her legs. She couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't escape . . .

Then the voice—the rumbling voice that shook her to the core.

I KNOW YOUR NAME.

I KNOW YOUR NAME, MEGAN NAKAMURA. YOU CAN'T HIDE FROM ME.

Megan woke with a cry. She sat bolt upright on her buckskin mat, relieved to find herself back in the Huntsmen tent.

The Shadow spoke to her. It called her Nakamura—her father's last name, her birth name, the name her mother had tried to erase from memory after he walked out. *How did the Shadow know that?*

Those were her first thoughts upon waking up. The second: *Why am I still screaming?*

But she wasn't. Edgwyn was.

"Edgwyn." Boath shook his wife's shoulder. "Edgwyn—wake up, life-love, it's just a bad dream."

"They've got Caldwell. They've got him!" Edgwyn shrieked. "They're coming for Leothian—they've got Caldwell already."

She leapt up from the mattress and stumbled to where her children slept. Leothian whimpered in his sleep, then awoke, crying in terror. Caldwell was already shrieking. Boath watched them, a strange look on his face.

“Nightmares,” he said. He looked at Megan. “You had one too?”

Megan nodded, though her dream had been something worse than a nightmare.

Over the cries of Leothian and Caldwell, more wailing rose from outside. Boath whipped open the tent door.

In the first grey light of the morning, Huntsmen stumbled from their tents, crying out to their neighbors.

“I saw ravens in my night vision—flocks and flocks of them!”

“Ravens and hares, I saw!”

“I dreamed of teeth—broken teeth, lost teeth, and then ravens. Such awful omens!”

And then, over the cries of the Huntsmen, a cross between a whinny and a scream pierced the air. “No—let him go—Photogen! *No!*”

An unearthly shriek followed sending shivers down Megan’s spine.

Bat.

Nightmares, for everyone in the village, all at the same time. The wide-eyed Huntsmen clutched their talismans so tightly that they snapped and crumbled.

Suddenly, a cold blast blew through the camp, and the bonfires went out. A terrible silence fell.

Movement in the water storage barrels caught Megan’s eye. Feathery fingers of ice raced across the surface of the water.

Then a dark shape burst out from the woods and into the settlement. A black raven the size of a mammoth.

Megan recognized the misty black shape: the Shadow.

“Run!” she screamed.

The Shadow-Raven let out a deafening caw and swooped toward the center of the settlement.

Chaos swept over the camp as the Huntsmen scrambled for cover. Women cried for their children, snatching them into their arms as they ran. Many grabbed whatever they could from their tents and fled into the woods.

Megan dashed into the tent and grabbed her dagger and, as an afterthought, the bag containing the Book of Vindor.

“Nikterra,” she cried, running to the canopy.

An arrow whistled. It sliced through the Shadow-Raven as though through a mist. The monster paused and turned its black head toward the shooter.

Boath stood among the fleeing Huntsmen, another arrow already fitted into his bow. “No!” he cried. “We will NOT abandon our homes without a fight. Huntsmen,” he cried, “renew your lost honor. Stay and fight like men.”

A handful of the Huntsmen men crept to Boath and stood behind him, their hands trembling on their bows.

A young mother ran by, holding a toddler and grasping the hand of a crying boy. The Shadow swooped down after them, shrieking.

Boath and his men let fly a volley of arrows. They passed through the Shadow's ghostly body and stuck fast into the tree behind it. The creature flapped unsteadily as though losing its balance. It slowed slightly as the mother and children fled into the woods.

"Megan," Boath called.

At the sound of Megan's name, the Shadow tilted its head in her direction.

It turned, flapped, and dove right at her.

"Run, Megan!" Edgwyn cried.

Megan stumbled and fell face-first onto the ground.

The Shadow shrieked. She could feel the pulses of freezing air from its wingbeats, growing more intense every second.

Scrambling to her feet, Megan sprinted toward the woods. For a moment, the sound of her own heavy breathing, her own wild heartbeat drowned out the shouts from the settlement around her.

"Selena!"

Nikterra galloped toward her, armed with her bow and wearing her quiver of arrows once again. She scooped Megan up and tossed her onto her glossy back. Megan grabbed one of the sacks strapped to Nikterra and held on for her life as they sped into the woods.

Nikterra's hooves splashed through mud puddles and clomped against tree roots. As the woods grew denser, the shrieks of confusion behind them faded. Megan glanced over her shoulder.

Nothing. The Shadow was no longer following. Megan exhaled.

At that moment, something smashed into Megan, knocking her off the centaur's back.

The ground came fast, and Megan hit it hard.