

RISE OF
ASUR

BOOK ONE:
THE BEGINNING

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CHAPTER 1:

THE SECRET

He kept it hidden, the evil that lurked within the shadows.

It was better that way

– Elenore

The sun dipped, casting streaky orange lines across the horizon. Smoke billowed from chimneys as fires were stoked to warm cottages before the impending dark enveloped the village in an icy blanket. Merek had worked in the forest all day, cutting wood for firewood and to allow for another field to grow crops. A strange sense of foreboding had crept inside him. He tried shaking it off, but it only grew stronger, clawing at him, begging for his attention. He did not want to give into the feeling; he resisted with all his might. It was there, stubbornly refusing to budge.

He drew a breath, trying to calm himself and settle his racing heart. Closing his eyes, he drew another deep breath. The feeling to run and hide clutched at him, yet he remained standing. He was familiar with the feeling and slowly welcomed it like an old friend. It was pointless to ignore it, given how persistent it could be. All the while, it twisted and turned, creating a huge knot that sat at the bottom of his stomach.

It was a warning about *them*.

He was sure of it; the Asur were finally coming, picking up his scent like a wolf after its prey.

The sun was losing its warmth, he would have to hurry if he had any chance of being home before the dark finally claimed its place. He worked even quicker to finish the task before him. Trying not to fumble, he pulled the rope tighter around the pile of timber he had been cutting earlier that day, cursing as the rope slipped between his shaking fingers. *Almost done*, he thought, *almost done and almost out of time*. Dusk was approaching with an icy wind rising from its slumber, whipping, and swirling, lifting his tunic briefly. He fastened the rope to the side of the cart, grunting with effort, feeling the perspiration beading on his forehead despite the cold air. Finally, it was done. He clambered up on the cart, taking the reins in his hands and slapping his horse to head for home.

* * *

Darkness had descended upon the village. The oil lanterns overhead produced a soft glow, illuminating the stone and mud pathway he rode down. A light snow descended over the timber homes of the village. He turned off onto the dark street that contained three homes that were vastly spread. He guided the horse and cart to the end of the pathway before making his way to the small stable tucked in behind his home. Leaving the wagon, which was full of the timber he had cut, he unharnessed the horse, leading him to his stall. He grabbed the currycomb and brushed the animal's coat as he tried to push away the tormenting and troubling thoughts that ebbed at the edge of his mind. Merek quickly finished tending to the horse, the urge to flee still tugging at him as he walked up the wooden stairs of his home.

The smell of dinner made his mouth water, and his stomach

rumbled. He had not realised how hungry he was. A casserole simmered in the pot above the fireplace, releasing the tantalising aroma of differing spices.

Merek's wife, Elenore, sat at the wooden table, cutting bread. A tendril of hair had fallen from the bun used to hold up her long red hair. She brushed it casually away before looking up at her husband. She smiled and rose to greet him. As he embraced her, the same sense of dread swept over him again.

Fear.

Icy terror pressed upon him, sending a primal shiver down his spine. The foreboding sense that something would come to rape, pillage and steal what did not belong to them. He closed his eyes as memories, like a wave, descended and washed over him. He shook his head to clear them.

Merek gently extracted himself from Elenore's embrace.

'What is it, Merek?' she asked, her face puckered in a frown, and she fixed him with a questioning stare. He returned her gaze, his hunger temporarily forgotten.

'It's nothing, Norrie,' he lied. At that moment, two children burst into the kitchen. Their squeals of delight at seeing their father abruptly halted their parent's conversation. He kneeled and scooped them into his arms, laughing at their joy. He could not have felt any happier than at that moment. His fears were temporarily forgotten as he listened to his children's questions.

Merek sat each of them on his lap and noticed how much they had grown the past summer. It would not be long before moments like this would vanish, leaving only a distant memory of what had once been. He could feel his previous fears rise again, threatening to snatch away his momentary sense of happiness. The warmth he felt disappeared, dread now taking its place.

Merek could feel Elenore's eyes on him as he played with their children. She averted her gaze quickly when he looked up, but he knew she was becoming suspicious. She sighed.

'I know something is wrong, Merek. It is written all over your face and the way you are distancing yourself from me,' she said as she met his gaze at last. Merek felt his anxiety rise.

'I don't want to discuss it, Elenore.' He clamped his jaw, trying not to take out this gnawing feeling on her. She was in tune with his feelings and always knew when something was wrong. He vaguely wondered if she had picked up on the terrifying dreams he had been having. He shook his head trying to dislodge the thought. Elenore was still watching him, but she only nodded in reply. She seemed to understand that was the end of the conversation.

Almost every night in the last six weeks, he had experienced recurring nightmares, thrashing and crying out before waking in a cold sweat. He refused to speak about the dreams, telling Elenore it was all in the past. He lived only for the present and the family he loved.

Elenore pursed her lips as she paused in serving the casserole she had made. Merek gave her a brief smile trying to placate her. She shook her head before resuming the task of serving the food.

The family sat at the wooden table, only the noises of slurping, spoons hitting the edge of bowls, and satisfying grunts filling the room. Merek pushed away from the table, hunger now satiated, he leaned back in his chair waiting for his family to finish their meal. Ulric's brown hair fell across his face, hiding the birthmark that was shaped like a teardrop that sat just under his right eye. He was sensitive, caring and almost delicate, quite the opposite of his father. He had inherited his father's looks, but that was about it. His father absently scratched at the stubble on his chin as he

mused about his eldest child. He would have to learn to fight, it was compulsory, but so far, his son had shown little interest, almost a disdain of any combat at all.

‘Papa?’ A soft voice pierced through Merek’s thoughts; it was his daughter, Ada. She fixed him with a look that almost made him squirm. She had insight. It was as if she could reach in and pluck the thoughts right out of his mind. He returned her gaze and smiled warmly. For all his son lacked, his daughter made up for. She was bold, determined, forthcoming and intuitive. He often found her practicing fighting with a handmade sword, usually a stick she had fashioned from a tree branch. She watched him, and Merek knew she was waiting for him to tell her what had caught his attention. He could not escape her questions or lie. She would know. He cleared his throat and gave her a broad smile.

‘I was just thinking about how much you and Ulric had grown.’

She stared at him for a moment before shrugging and returning to her dinner. ‘If you say so,’ she said, putting a large spoonful of food into her mouth.

Merek excused himself from the table and went to the front porch. The dark night spread out in front of him before it stopped at the stairs that led up to the house. A lantern hung off the top of the stair, keeping the night from venturing further in. As was his after dinner custom, he held a glass of his favourite wine in his hand. It relaxed him, especially after a good meal. He rarely drank at the dinner table, preferring to enjoy it in the quiet of the evening, reflecting on his day.

Merek sat in his favourite chair on the small porch, facing the fields that lay beyond. He took a sip of the sweet, fruity liquid. He had helped grow and harvest the grapes used to make the wine. It was delicious and he revelled in the calmness it brought

him. He closed his eyes and finally relaxed. Eventually, his mind strayed from the events of the day and turned to the wave that threatened to crash and wipe out the serenity. Memories buried deep, locked away in the depths of his mind, wakened. They cast an uncertainty on life, making him question all he had achieved and what he could lose. He felt powerless to stop them. Like a tsunami, they rose and crashed, taking whatever stood in its path. His heart felt like it jumped from his chest to his mouth as he shuddered and forced his eyes open. Taking a deep breath, he tried to calm himself, another breath and another, before finally his heart slowed, and he felt in control again.

Elenore stepped onto the porch; Merek heard her soft footfalls on the wooden boards. She hesitated for a moment before clearing her throat. Merek shifted his position in the rocker chair and she smiled warmly as he turned towards her.

He had fallen in love with her the moment they had met and created every opportunity for them to spend time together. Her long, wavy dark red hair and green cat-like eyes captivated him. But it was not only her physical looks that set his heart racing; the more he got to know her, the more his love for her had grown. He had wasted no time in asking her father for her hand in marriage. Elenore's father had agreed, and they married, soon after building their small cosy home and starting a family. He could not imagine life without her. She was everything to him and she was, as the Seer had once told him, his soul mate.

Elenore was good at masking her feelings, but Merek sensed she was concerned.

'Are you checking up on me?' he teased.

She returned his smile. 'Why would I do that? Is there something you are not telling me?' she said as she folded her arms and leaned against the wall of the stone cottage.

Merek knew she was edging to find out more. ‘Come,’ he patted the chair next to him. He never knew how much to tell her, as most of his past was hidden, buried deep inside. He barely let himself think about it, let alone talk about it. He looked out at the snow-covered field waiting for her to take up his offer. An icy breeze stroked its frosty fingers across his face. He pulled the jacket tighter around him. He took a sip of his wine before refilling the glass from the bottle he had leaned against the arm of the chair. He took yet another mouthful of the red drink, savouring the taste. Merek could feel it flood his veins.

‘Why don’t you come back inside? It’s way too cold out here.’ Elenore had not taken his offer to sit with him. ‘The children are asleep,’ she continued, as her gaze lowered. He considered her offer. It would be much warmer inside, but somehow, he felt going inside would spark the dread that had threatened to overcome him earlier. He could not make sense of this, except that maybe it allowed him the opportunity to see the Asur and prepare. He couldn’t stay out here all night. Elenore was too curious already. He took another swallow of the wine; aware she was waiting for his response. Picking up the bottle, Merek stood, leaving the comfort of his chair. ‘Okay let’s go inside and have some tea.’

He followed her inside. The fire was dying down, the last log smouldering. Soft amber shadows flickered on the wall above the timber rack as he walked over to grab another log. The icy dread grasped him, almost choking him with its intensity. Merek dropped the log onto the fire sending a shower of sparks into the air. He grunted watching the fire leap and catch hold of the log hissing and crackling. This time, it seemed so much more intense.

What is wrong with me? He shook his head, trying to shake off

the sick foreboding. He felt the urge to pack up, run, and hide. Forcing himself to restock the fire, his fear turned to anger like the fire before him, smouldering, waiting to take hold.

Merek stood and walked towards the window that faced out to the small village street. Wiping the dampness from the glass pane, he peered out, trying to see through the darkness that was like a blanket covering the outside world. He waited, holding his breath. Merek leaned closer, his breath fogging the window. He frowned. He was sure he could see something move, a shape against the darkness. A dog barked in the distance. There! He was sure he saw movement. He squinted, holding his breath. Merek peered out, searching for whatever was out there.

‘Merek, what are you doing?’ Merek felt himself jump before turning to Elenore. She seemed a little frightened, her eyes wide. He chanced another quick look out the window. Darkness; a normal winter’s night. Nothing moved or stirred, except for a gentle breeze that would barely rustle a tree branch. His wife continued to watch him as he pulled away from the window. Merek’s heart pounded. He had to pull himself together.

‘I guess tea is ready,’ he muttered gruffly before turning back towards her. She stared at him her brow furrowed in a tight frown. ‘I feel like I could do with a hot beverage.’

They sat in silence at the same table where they had eaten dinner just a couple of hours before. His tea was hot and sweet. He sipped it carefully, enjoying the soothing taste of fresh jasmine and the slight hint of mint and honey. She sat across from him, her shoulder tense. He expected she was waiting for an explanation. She wasn’t a fool; she knew he was keeping something from her.

Merek debated what to tell his wife. *How am I supposed to explain my fears without panicking her?* He continued to argue

with himself, *would she understand? Or would she think I have lost my mind?*

His skin pricked with the thought of his wife not understanding the deep-rooted fear that had now taken up residence inside his mind.

‘Merek?’ Elenore interrupted his thoughts. He gazed up at her, blinking, dragging himself to the present moment. ‘What is going on with you?’

‘Just exhausted,’ he said irritably. ‘Sorry, I worked extra hard today. We’ll talk in the morning.’ Merek stood, forcing a smile as his wife nodded. A puzzled look crossed her face. Not only did he have a growing feeling of anxiety, but also guilt. Leaving his wife at the table, Merek made his way into their small bedroom.

A candle burned softly in the room, casting shimmering shadows on the wall as he collapsed into their fur-draped bed. A soft comforting feeling welcomed him as he sunk into the folds. He closed his eyes, giving into the exhaustion.

Darkness surrounded him; he could sense the unknown. Merek stood alone in the darkness. Snow fell in front of him, and he could hear heart-wrenching sobs. He stepped forward, trying to find the person who was crying. He peered into the blackness, but the gloom revealed nothing. Merek continued to walk; the crying grew louder as the darkness lifted. Suddenly, he faced a complete whiteness. He squinted against the glare; the dark now lay behind him.

A small child stood just beyond the line of white. She was sobbing into her hands, her long white hair tied in braids.

‘Are you okay?’ Merek asked. Her back was facing him, and he felt his stomach squirm. She seemed familiar.

‘Papa!’ the girl cried out, removing her hands from her face, and turning to face him. A large gash stretched from her forehead to her chin. Merek drew back.

'No!' He struggled to breathe, trying to make sense of the image before him. His heart sunk. 'Ada...' he whispered, dropping to his knees.

'Papa! Save us!' she cried out, her voice breaking each time she spoke. Merek felt the prickle of terror crawling all over his body like hundreds of tiny spiders. He reached for his daughter, arms flailing as an invisible force, prevented him from going to his daughter's aid.

'Save you from what, Ada?' he shouted, trying to make sense of what was unfolding. Ada didn't respond. She continued to cry, her sobs getting louder. 'Let me help you!' Merek begged. Ada shook her head, staring at her father.

'Run!' she whispered vehemently. Merek stood stunned as he continued to watch his daughter standing alone in the snow. A cold, sick feeling rose inside him. He felt paralysed. A shadow rose behind her.

'Ada!' Merek struggled to move to save his daughter, but to no avail. Anger replaced the sick sense of fear as he tried in vain to rescue his daughter from the darkness slowly drawing her into its fold. Tears ran down Merek's cheeks as utter hopelessness grasped him, pulling him into a dark abyss, and then he was falling.

Merek gasped as Elenore shook him awake. He was drenched in a cold sweat as he gulped for air.

'You were dreaming Merek, and screaming. For the love of the Gods, I hope you have not woken the children!' The nightmares had been frequent, but this would have to be the worst by far. Merek sat up, reaching for the water that sat on the nightstand near the edge of the bed. He poured himself a cup, taking large gulps to quench his burning thirst as he tried to make sense of the dream.

'Merek, I think we need to talk. This has been going on too long. I need to know what is going on. You have not been the

same since you came in from the forest.’ She gave him a hard look as she got up from the bed, reaching for her night coat and lighting a candle. Merek watched her. He was frightened.

Was the night terror a premonition? Were the Gods trying to warn him of what was to come? He closed his eyes, trying to regain control of his breathing before he could trust himself to speak.

It was time he told her; it was not fair to keep it a secret any longer. Licking his lips, he cleared his throat.

‘Before I met you, Elenore, I was part of the Protectors. A special force that dealt with demons.’ He cleared his throat again.

She nodded. ‘Does this have something to do with you acting so strange lately?’ He took a breath and closed his eyes. She was waiting for him to continue; the silence was deafening.

‘They trained us to hunt.’ He paused, watching her reaction. When she continued to sit quietly, he told her more. ‘But they weren’t the animals we usually hunt they...’ He paused. ‘The Asur were monsters, Norrie, the likes of which you’ve never seen; ogres that ride on ugly beasts, killing innocent children and people. They were smart, and we had to be smarter, cunning, fast, and strong. We had to stay one step ahead. They are said to live underground in a complex tunnel system. They want to take over our world, but they want to do it slowly. They enjoy hunting humans and they’re cruel, really cruel.’ He stopped talking, giving her a moment to absorb all he had just said.

‘I am not sure I believe in such things, Merek,’ she said eventually. ‘I believe you though,’ she quickly added. ‘I have heard of these creatures through the stories the Elders tell us. I just thought they were myths, stories to scare us and keep us from going out at night,’ she said, fidgeting with a loose thread on her dress. ‘You never told me about being in the Protectors.’ She paused, reflecting. ‘Why are you telling me now and why were

you acting so strange this evening?’

‘I—’ He shook his head. Fear held him ransom as he covered his face with his hands. She rose from her chair and went to comfort him. ‘Norrie, please make sure—’ She hushed him and bent to kiss him; her mouth pressed against his. He pulled away. ‘Please,’ he begged, ‘you have to keep yourself and the children safe. It’s not safe here anymore.’ She looked alarmed by his fear, slowly nodding her head. Merek shifted uncomfortably and took a breath. ‘The Asur know that I am the son of a great leader. My father is leader of the Protectors, or once was.’ Merek wiped his face as he felt his skin prickle and despite the cold night sweat broke out on his forehead. Elenore waited for her husband to continue. ‘They will be coming for me and my family, that is why it is important that we leave. I am a threat to them. According to a prophecy, I hold the key to bringing about their demise.’ Merek waited. It was a lot for her take in and he had no idea how she might be feeling.

Elenore shook her head. ‘We can’t leave Merek, we have a life here with friends and family. I can’t just abandon them to these evil creatures.’ She placed her head in her hands, sitting back on the bed. Merek stayed silent. He did not want to argue with her. She needed time to think about all that he had just told her. The Asur were the root of the feeling that had snared him and spun his world out of control. He was terrified. Deep down, he sensed the Asur were coming. The urgency to protect his family was stronger than ever. He had lost others that were close to him from the Asur, and he was determined not to lose anyone else.