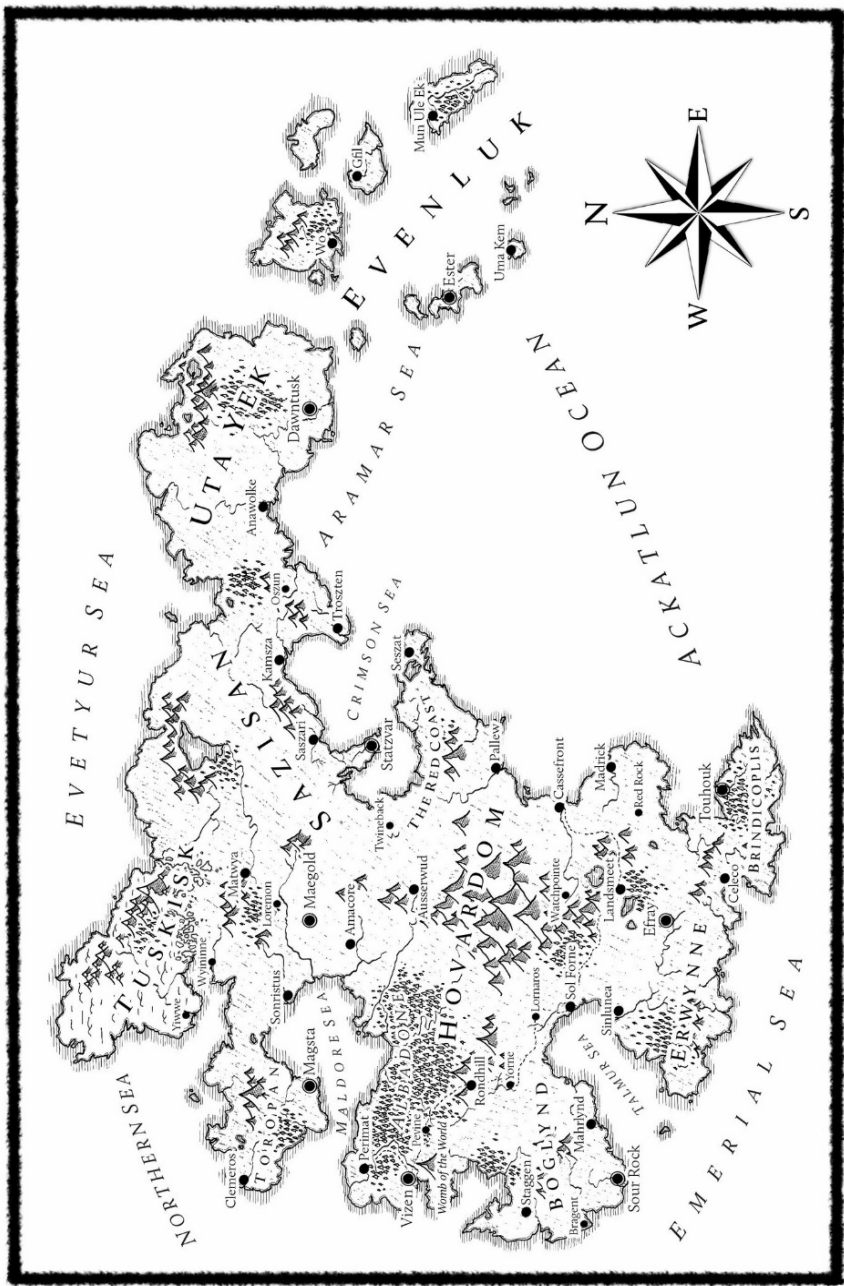


A
CONTRACT IN
Sol FORNE
THE EIGHTH CHANT SERIES

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I.

A CONTRACT IN SOLWAY



The town of Yorne left a sour taste in Vaelin's mouth. She was more than happy to be moving on. There was just something about the people there—they wore neighborliness like a mask beneath which festered a deep-seated hatred for strangers. Behind the surface of every smiling eye was a barely contained inexplicable rage at all outsiders that manifested itself through small, at times almost inconsequential, gestures: from an old woman raising a handkerchief to her nose to stifle a non-existent stench, to a barkeeper spitting into a mug of wine before handing it out with a false smile. The Yornefolk truly did not suffer strangers, or perhaps it was just her they didn't like.

There weren't any folk that looked like Vaelin, with her eyes the color of ink, her gray skin, and pointed ears that were like those of the long-gone elvenfolk. She must have looked like some sort of monster to these folk. The glares she drew ranged from bewildered to offended, but there was nothing she could do about her appearance. At least not at the moment.

Vaelin was almost delighted to see the barkeep spit into the mug of another tavern guest as well. *At least he is*

consistently awful, she thought. Yorne was nice and clean enough but nothing so fancy as to warrant that sort of attitude. *If this is how they act around merchants and peddlers, then I'm surprised they have any trade at all.* She was even refused boarding at a miserable, empty little inn, although, after seeing the unswept main hall littered with dirty dishware from the previous night's supper, sleeping under a tree somewhere seemed preferable.

But like with all things in her long life, she was only passing through. Her true destination, as she traveled southeast down the *Red Road*, was the beautiful seaside city of Sol Forne.

In Perimat, at the northwestern edge of the Kingdom of Hovardom, she had received a letter informing her that her old friend and companion, Myssa, had died. How Myssa or her courier had come to find out where Vaelin's travels had landed her was itself a mystery. Even in death, that woman would not cease to surprise her. Vaelin had read and reread the letter Myssa had sent her until its contents were imprinted in her mind. Still, she enjoyed opening that worn and wrinkled piece of paper—tracing her fingers across the swooping lines of Myssa's immaculate penmanship, touching the accidental thumb mark on the side of the page where Myssa spilled a bit of ink—it was almost like touching her hand again.

Dearest Vaelin,

I hope this letter finds you well. By the time you receive it, I will be dead, which is really for the best. I wouldn't want you to see me the way I am. I'd rather be remembered by you for the young woman I was when we shared our

adventures all those years ago. You'll be interested to know that, in my excursions across the continent, I have found what you've been seeking for so long. Your centuries-old search can finally come to an end. Go to the Academy of Sol Forne. Ask for Cressena, my assistant. She will tend to the rest. I hope you've been staying out of trouble, but I know I'd be a fool to believe that.

*Yours, forever,
Professor Myssa Lonne*

She hadn't seen the woman in over fifty years—the thought of how time affected humanfolk always filled Vaelin with warm regret. *Wolf spit! What was I supposed to do with Myssa, anyways? Hold her shriveled old hand as she lay immobile, her mind in a fog, and watch her wither away? No, thank you!* These intrusive thoughts only made her longing grow worse.

Curse these thoughts! And curse me for conjuring them!

Myssa was a professor of archeology who specialized in ancient elvenfolk religious artifacts. When she caught ear of Vaelin's very direct knowledge of elven history, she had immediately Contracted her for an excursion into the Red Coast. Even back then, the Red Coast had been contested territory between Hovardom and Sazisan, so Vaelin had to devise a way to sneak Myssa into the area undetected. All it took were some gold pieces, a wood coffin, and a...

Sharp pain—ice and fire all at once—rose at the back of her throat and climbed up behind her eyes. *Not now!* Vaelin's hands shook as the Hunger began to overtake her. Its voice, like the hissing of steam, whispered at her incoherently—her own thoughts bouncing back at her over and

over again. She had hoped it would come when she was in Yorne, but in a way she was happy it hadn't. She wouldn't trust forging a Contract with a single one of those spiteful Yornefolk.

Solway is the next town over if I'm not mistaken. She hadn't been this far south since that art festival in Efray. Had it really been sixty years?

As the pain began to spread, solidifying in her chest, the ground quivered in sympathy. The earthquakes seemed to be growing stronger over the past year, ever since the Tragedy of Albadone. Wishing trees, the Guardians of the forest, and many other beings of pure *life energy* like her had perished in that conflagration, and the impact on the Cycle of Nature had been profound. She could sense the fragility of it each time the Compulsion called to her. Vaelin had felt someone attempting to heal the Cycle through vigorous enchanting, but she could also feel their patch was incomplete, temporary—on the verge of collapse. She, alone, held the missing piece to heal it completely.

Her search for the artifact had never been more urgent.

She produced her long-stemmed wooden pipe—the etching of *Life* engraved onto it—and a small sack containing fragrant herb from her yellow-tinted leather satchel. Vaelin had picked up this batch of herb back in Rondhill. The city had transformed into quite the mercantile hub since she had been there last—one could find just about anything there these days. After placing some herb into the bowl of the pipe, she held a small circular lens with a shaky hand to focus the light of the sun onto its surface. Smoke lifted like a small pyre and, in three steady puffs, Vaelin lit the pipe. The Hunger was muffled to a dull ache, its voice receding

to the back of Vaelin's mind. But the herb could only slightly alleviate what would soon become an unbearable and excruciating pain. She had to reach Solway—the sooner the better.

The terrain began to shift as she left the flat plains behind, heading for the rocky hills. Gnarled olive trees began to emerge from the wheat fields, as did purple and orange prickly pears and the occasional palm tree. Much could change in fifty years. Entire cities could go to the weeds. Where Vaelin was sure Solway had stood, was now just vast countryside—the remnants of old buildings scattered about like a graveyard.

A nearby hill—the tallest in the area—was dominated by a white-walled villa surrounded by an unwelcoming wooden barrier. Not the prettiest thing she had ever seen, but it definitely belonged to a minor lord or some such. Vaelin didn't trust lords, ladies, or nobles in general, with Contracts unless circumstances were dire. Their requests leaned on the spiteful and self-serving side. She preferred contracting peasants. At least their requests were simple: find a missing goat, fix the roof—that sort of thing.

"You, there!" a man's somewhat musical voice called out. "What do you think you're doing?" Two men in boiled leather armor paced in her direction. One of them, with his barrel chest, balding gray hair, and heavily calloused hands, was obviously the other's senior. The younger man's hair was dark and curly yet shaved on the sides—a popular look in those parts some one hundred years prior. *Looks like we've circled back around.*

Upon seeing her up close, the younger man reached for his short sword. “What the dirges are you?” he cursed, his face running pale.

Always with that question. The only thing humanfolk seemed interested in asking her was what she was. “I may be a bit lost, but is Solway nearby?” Vaelin asked, changing the subject.

“Solway?” the older of the two drifted, chewing his lip as if remembering something long forgotten. “Solway... was destroyed by a flood. Now, this is all Thane Coddington’s land.” The man didn’t seem particularly convinced of his own words, yet he nodded to himself as if they had been rehearsed.

“You must leave!” the young one ordered, a crack in his voice revealing him to be even younger than he appeared. “You are trespassing, demon!”

“I’ll gladly be on my way,” Vaelin said. “Where is the nearest town?”

“If you keep down the *Red Road* you’ll find Addleton,” the older man said. His voice did possess a nicely musical quality—Vaelin imagined him standing atop a tavern table, mug of wine in hand, raising a heartfelt song. In her daydream, there was not one dry eye in the tavern.

How delightful!

“Any place I may find work?” Vaelin asked. Where there was work there was common folk.

The older man rubbed his bearded chin. “There is a small encampment just south of... Thane Coddington’s land. About a mile passed the woods, you can’t miss it.”

“Thank you,” Vaelin answered with a quick bow, then, turning to the quivering young man, she added, “and you

should learn some manners. One rude comment can sour even the sweetest of wines.” Vaelin flashed a toothy grin. The young man just about fainted at the sight of her sharp white fangs. Even the older man appeared startled.

Thane Coddington’s land continued for another mile south. The two guards stalked her the entire walk from what they must have considered a safe distance. Other than the guards, she saw a few other men, women, and children in shabby clothes picking ripe apricots from trees and placing them into baskets, while others harvested the wheat fields with scythes. They were all too intent on their work to notice her. Their livelihoods were likely tied to the quantity of crop they could gather in the least amount of time.

Humanfolk lives were so short. Vaelin couldn’t think of anything crueller than for some lordling to lay claim to the hard work of these folk only to sell this same product back to them. *No, nobles are not a good source of Contracts.* Anyone who abused the power they held in such a way could not be trusted with more of it.

The men tailing her halted and watched her continue—Vaelin assumed that meant she had reached the perimeter of Thane Coddington’s land. Sparse liontails and pines appeared along a winding dirt path. Eventually, the path diverted westward while Vaelin proceeded south through the trees. Soon, she reached the encampment the older guard had mentioned.

Several tents of varying quality were pitched throughout the wooden thicket that surrounded the base of the nearby hills. From the guard’s tone, Vaelin had assumed that this was going to be some sort of merchants’ or soldiers’ camp, but this was something entirely different. Groups of dirty

children ran around laughing and hitting each other with sticks; a woman was tanning leather stretched across a wooden rack; two men sat on low stools outside a tent, blissfully smoking their pipes. Every part of the scene reminded Vaelin of what one might find in a town. The two smoking men eyed her dismissively, and then returned to their animated conversation. As she moved through the first line of tents, the encampment only grew thicker. *Is there even an end to it?* she wondered.

The Hunger began to grow yet again—icy fingers plucking her lungs like strings, its voice just out of earshot. She needed to feed, and soon. In a slight panic, Vaelin grabbed the shoulder of a young woman that was pacing by. The woman eyed her as if startled out of a daydream. “Excuse me,” Vaelin began, “what is this place?”

The young woman scanned Vaelin with her ice-blue eyes, unsure of what to make of her. The woman was too gaunt to be called beautiful, but there was something in her look that made her welcoming. “This is Solway,” the woman said levelly.

Vaelin raised an eyebrow. “I was told Solway had been destroyed by a flood.”

The woman smiled mirthlessly. “Must have been one of Ad’ere’s men that told you that. It makes them feel better to believe that lie.”

“Ad’ere?”

“You may know him as Coddington. That’s what he goes by these days,” she said, her face scrunching in disgust.

“I remember Solway fondly,” Vaelin said. “What happened to it?”

Giving Vaelin a final once over, the woman asked, “Would you like some orzo? I’ve got some brewing in my tent.”

“Orzo sounds delightful.” It didn’t, but Vaelin hoped she had found her mark.

The young woman introduced herself as Ingrid and led Vaelin through several rows of tents until she reached a small one with a violet blossom painted on its side. Only then did Vaelin notice that many of the other tents had similar markings painted on their sides and fronts—here a bear, there a lily, or a fish.

“Your family sigils?” Vaelin asked. Even the Hunger failed to dampen her curiosity.

Ingrid sat down on a mat in front of her tent and motioned for Vaelin to join her. “So, you have been to Solway before!” She smiled—not beautiful, but still very pretty.

“We’re not nobles,” Ingrid continued, “but we are very old families. Some of the first to ever travel to Hovardom during the First Reign. I am Ingrid Ad’evola, or ‘child of the violet’ in Old Oshemari. And my neighbors over there,” she pointed at a tent that had a sun painted on its side, “are the Ad’utot, or ‘children of the daytime’.” Her face darkened. “Coddington may have taken everything else from us, but he will never take our names—who we are. We paint our tents to never forget.”

“What exactly did this Coddington man do to you?”

Ingrid reached with a thick mitt for the iron kettle that hung over a small fire. She poured the deep brown liquid into two small ceramic cups and handed one to Vaelin, who nodded her head in thanks. An old man walked up to Ingrid’s tent, enticed by the smell, and held out a ceramic cup

with a toothless smile. Ingrid nodded and smiled back at the toothless man as she poured some orzo into his cup. The man bowed as deeply as his bent back allowed and returned to his tent.

“There was a flood, that part is true,” Ingrid began. “A little over one year ago. Never in my life have I ever seen so much rain. And that wind! Houses were coming down as if Ulfer himself was blowing on them. We had no choice but to flee. We packed what little we could and sought safety in Sol Forne. When we returned, one month later, we found workers taking what was left of our homes apart as others picked fruit and olives from trees *our* ancestors planted. And we found guards that told us we were trespassing into Ad’ere—Coddington’s—land.

“He was one of us, once. Iselmo Ad’ere. ‘Children of the wheat.’ He always complained about how backwards we were and bragged about Vizen’s greatness. Fancied himself a lordling, that one. We should have seen this coming, but we could have never imagined...” Ingrid laughed bitterly. “He took our land while we were gone and gave himself a new name—a Vizenian name. Coddington.” She spat on the ground, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears.

“Now, this is what remains of our lovely town. Just a group of folk in tents, so close to their homeland that they can reach out and touch it but can never live on it.”

Vaelin felt for the young woman. She knew what it was like to feel helpless. But the pain that raged inside of her was growing hard to contain—impossible to ignore. She sipped on her bitter beverage and nodded. “I also lost my home, many years ago,” she said. “It’s not an easy thing.”

Ingrid nodded in agreement. "It's not so bad, living in tents. Except for the occasional hog stumbling into the camp from the woods and causing a ruckus. At least we still have our lives, our neighbors, and our names."

"And orzo," Vaelin added, lifting her cup.

"Thank the gods for that!" Ingrid clinked her cup to Vaelin's, her face almost betraying a smile through her sad bright eyes. Suddenly, the woman stared at Vaelin as if seeing her for the first time. "Mind if I ask what... what you are exactly?"

Vaelin smiled apprehensively. *Every time that same question!* "I'm a traveler." Ingrid leaned in as if expecting more, but Vaelin just sipped her drink and left it at that. "May I ask *you* a question, Ingrid? If you could have one thing in the entire world, what would it be?"

"What sort of question is that?" Ingrid asked, slightly annoyed that Vaelin hadn't given her the answer she sought.

"Humor me."

The young woman puzzled the question in her mind for a few moments, licking a brown orzo stain at the corner of her mouth. Her eyes returned to Vaelin, and with a sad smile, she replied, "There was this bracelet that my mother gave me when I was a girl. I gave it to my little sister Hereni, who remained in Sol Forne after the floods. I told her to keep it as a way to remember me and our mother. Now that my home and all my belongings are gone, that's the last thing I possessed that tied me to my family. It may sound childish, and maybe even selfish, but I would very much like that back."

Perfect. "That does not sound childish in the least, dear Ingrid."

“And what about you, Vaelin?” Ingrid asked. “What is the one thing in the world you wish you could have?”

“Freedom.” Vaelin didn’t have to think of her answer.

Ingrid’s brow furrowed. “You seem pretty free to me. You said it yourself, you’re a traveler. What could be freer than that?”

“Well,” Vaelin stood, “being a traveler, you learn that not everything is as it seems.” Vaelin handed her empty cup to the woman, doing her best to keep her hands steady. “Thank you kindly for the orzo and the neighborliness. I will be on my way now.”

“Very well. May the gods bless your path wherever it may lead, traveler,” Ingrid said, giving Vaelin a final curious glance.

Vaelin headed out of the encampment and back into the thicker edge of the woods. She sat with her back to a pine tree and lit her pipe once more. The pain in her chest was swelling like an ocean at high tide, and soon it would drown her. The tips of her fingers felt as if cold needles were pricking them. As much as she wanted to, she couldn’t feed in broad daylight. There were certain things that humans were not able to comprehend, and others still that they wouldn’t wish to. There had been many instances in her long life when she had almost been caught while forging a Contract—too many for her liking: a village guard spotting her as she slipped into an inn window, or a housewife raising the alarm with a scream in the night. Vaelin fancied herself experienced at this point in her life, but caution was always paramount, especially in a dense encampment.

She waited for the cover of night a few hours later, then made her way back into the settlement. Cold beads of sweat

began to crown her head—the herb had done little to nothing this time around. Her vision tunneled, and the ground felt like jelly underneath her feet. At last, she reached Ingrid’s tent undetected—the painted violet on its side barely illuminated by a nearby lantern. The longer she waited the harder it would be to keep her movements furtive. She reached for the tent flap and pulled it open as carefully as she could. Within the tent, Ingrid’s sleeping silhouette was scarcely visible.

Vaelin entered.

The silence that surrounded the campsite felt thicker inside the small tent. Kneeling next to Ingrid, Vaelin unsheathed Vitra, her dagger, from the adorned scabbard at her hip with her right hand. The etching of *Binding* was engraved into both her palm and the pommel of the dagger. The blade was so black it stood out even in the darkness of the tent, as if someone had cut a dagger-shaped hole out of the world itself.

Vaelin unbuttoned the top four buttons of her shirt, exposing the three pulsating wounds on her chest. Quickly, she placed a hand over Ingrid’s mouth. The woman’s eyes went wide, and she struggled under Vaelin’s firm grip. With the dagger, Vaelin sliced the palm of Ingrid’s hand—the blade was so sharp it might as well have been cutting through clotted cream.

Ingrid screamed and thrashed, trying to pull Vaelin’s hand off of her face to no avail. Vaelin set Vitra onto the rug floor of the tent, and grabbed Igrid’s bloody hand, pulling it close to her chest. Ingrid’s resistance was useless. Vaelin wiped the woman’s hand over her wounds, smearing dark blood across her chest.

Instantly, she was overcome by a wave of white heat that thawed the cold that had threatened to overtake her moments before. The voice taunting her receded deeply within her. The pulsing of the wound slowed until it stopped altogether. The Hunger was satiated once again. Ingrid's eyes were still wide but her screams and kicks had stopped. She stared intently at Vaelin, who took in slow breaths of relief.

"I'm sorry I had to do that to you," Vaelin said, releasing the woman's hand. "But the Cycle of Nature itself was at stake."

Ingrid didn't seem to understand. *They never do. They couldn't even if they tried.*

Vaelin sighed. "Allow me to explain myself." She didn't like this part of the transaction. In her long life, the reactions to her story had varied greatly—Vaelin only hoped that Ingrid would at least remain calm.

"I am a *djinn*. Every so often I must feed on blood as I have just done with yours. It keeps me alive, and it keeps the flow of the Cycle of Nature intact."

She appears to be taking it well thus far. Ingrid's eyes remained on her, wide and attentive.

"Once I've fed," Vaelin continued, "I strike a sort of deal—or Contract as I like to call it—with the person whose blood I took. In this case, that would be you."

Ingrid seemed to have calmed, so Vaelin released her hand from the woman's mouth. Surprisingly, the young woman sat up smoothly. Her demeanor was still defensive, but an inquisitive, almost curious, expression sparkled in her gaze within the dim light of the tent.

"Remember when I asked what you would like most of all in the whole world?" Vaelin asked. "I will ask you again,

this time as part of our Contract: Ingrid Ad'evola, tell me, what is your wish? The one thing you want most in the world."

"Wh-what do you mean?" Ingrid asked, her voice barely a whisper.

"That's the cost," Vaelin explained. *How has she not grasped this yet?* "I feed off blood and form a Contract with the person I feed from. In exchange, I must perform a task. I can't conjure something from nothing or return the dead to the living. But, if it's within my powers—say, retrieving a mother's bracelet from a sister in Sol Forne—your wish will be my command."

Ingrid licked her lips. "What I want the most?" she asked herself, her eyes fixed on the few drops of blood still running down her wrist from her cut hand.

Her eyes finally lifted to meet Vaelin's.

"The one thing I want most in the world is..."

"Yes?"

"Thane Coddington's head."

"Wolf spit..."

Vaelin felt ill.

But this time, it wasn't from the Hunger.