

*For John
I appreciate you.*



INTO
Ebanmoor
Burden of Birthright

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First edition

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Title and cover design by John Sutton, with thanks to
Simon Wijers of unsplash.com

Character illustration of Devlin Roysley by Rieno Monterona.

ISBN: 9798547874857



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Gatekeeper

The Woman.

She had haunted his nightmares for as long as Jordi could remember. Lurking within the shadows, always just beyond his vision. She watched. She waited.

After all this time, Jordi finally had a name for her.

Jael Calinbern, queen of the ancient triad monarchy and mistress of the Devoted. Mother of Bravians and the first Bloodfyre. She had used her eight hundred years of existence to perfect the craft of Dark Matter, honing the abilities of longevity, age reversal, and rejuvenation until she stood unchallenged. Her enhanced mental capabilities were unmatched. There had never been – and there never would be – any who could stand alongside her as an equal.

Now, Jordi realized grimly, another achievement could be added to her abilities. Jael Calinbern had successfully learned how to travel between worlds, to leap from one existence to another as effortlessly as one might cross the street. He swallowed nervously. Surely nothing could be outside of her reach at this point. Time and space belonged to her. The most dangerous person in Ebanmoor was now the most dangerous person *in existence*.

And she was within Jordi's mind.

Jordi remained frozen, fear immobilizing his limbs. The Control room belonged to him and only him. It seemed impossible that anyone, even Jael, could enter this place without his consent.

Yet here she was.

The woman smiled at Jordi warmly. Her hand was still extended towards him inviting Jordi to approach and take a seat on the throne she insisted was his birthright.

Devoted child. That was what she had called him, however repulsed Jordi might feel about the term. His mind screamed that it could not be so. He would never betray his friends to the likes of this woman. It made his blood run cold to think that his actions and his journey into Ebanmoor, however unintended, had granted her access to the Daughter of Kings and the Son of Bravians. He had gathered them together, placed them within Jael's reach.

Jordi had done her bidding. He had become her devoted child.

His lower lip wobbled uncontrollably.

"What do you want?" he asked, fear in his tone. Jael blinked sadly.

"You still do not trust me, do you, child?" she said, a look of regret crossing her features. Jael was a beautiful woman, tall and slender, with shapely curves and long legs. The tight-fitting pants and revealing tank top she wore showed off her figure to its greatest advantage. Her copper-colored hair was chin-length, its loose waves framing her round, perfectly sculpted face. Her brown eyes looked at him with friendly reassurance but there was arrogance and a touch of cruelty in the curve of her mouth; an aura of predatory confidence that said she was certain to get her way. Jordi was terrified of her.

"You stabbed me!" he blurted out resentfully, loathing how pathetic his words sounded. "Twice, when I was sleeping, you tried to murder me!"

"I know what it looked like," Jael admitted soothingly. "You do not yet understand how leaping works. I cannot interact with you outside of this room. I have been trying to call out to you, but the only way to do so is to wake you up and force your mind to bring you here."

“I don’t believe you!” Jordi snapped, crossing his arms. The woman sighed.

“There will be plenty of time for explanations,” she said, “but for now, please take me at my word that I am neither angry with you, nor in any way wishing you harm.” Jael rested her hand on the arm of the throne, gazing at him invitingly. “Come closer, Jordi Brown.”

“Not a chance!” he shot back. The woman frowned a little, annoyed.

“You do not have many other options, child,” she said, her tone colder than before. She gestured at the room around them. “What else can you do but obey me?”

Jordi shook his head, determined to resist. Inwardly, however, he knew Jael was right. The Control room was a small, circular area. The only exit was at the back of the room into the Void, but the woman stood between him and the doorway. He tried to calm himself, focus on his breathing. If he could concentrate hard enough he was certain he would wake up back in Ebanmoor; back with Lady Clair and Dev Roysley who would have the ability to protect him.

He closed his eyes, going deep within himself.

“Jordi Brown,” he heard the woman say. There was an edge to her tone. “Open your eyes. Come to me.”

Jordi ignored her, his hands balling into fists. He intensified his efforts to reconnect with his physical body. He could feel it now: the soft rise and fall of his chest, the weight of his head against his arm. *It’s working, he thought. I’m waking up.*

Jael became angry.

“Obey me!” she snarled, all semblance of kindness gone from her voice.

Jordi felt a wave of fear rush through him, but he continued to delve deeper, sensing that his body was stirring. The sleeper frowned, unconscious still but less so than before.

Almost there...

A blow to the side of his face sent Jordi reeling back. He gasped in pain and fell against the wall, grabbing the windowsill for support. Jael's eyes were filled with rage, her hand raised to strike again.

"You worthless little brat!" she hissed, her face twisted into a terrifying scowl. Jordi scrambled backward, petrified, as Jael advanced on him. "You dare to defy me?! Do you think I can't take what I want from you by force?! Pathetic, useless little worm!"

Jordi's back collided against the wall. He had nowhere else to go. He cowered as Jael stood over him, palm extended over her head in a posture of uncontrolled fury. Jordi shut his eyes and threw his hands up defensively, waiting for the blow to come. Instead, he felt Jael grab him by the front of his shirt, hurling him across the room as if he weighed nothing. The impact against the far wall knocked the air out of him. He slid to the ground, stunned.

Jael Calinbern strode towards him, yanking a knife from her belt. Her features were dark with rage. Grabbing him by the back of his neck she pressed the blade against his throat and pulled his face close to hers. Jordi stared into her eyes, terrified.

"What do you think will happen when I stab you, Jordi Brown?!" she questioned angrily, shaking him. "You think you'll wake up like those other times? Hm?"

Tears rolled down Jordi's face, choking as he felt the cold metal against his windpipe. He writhed in agony. Jael grinned with malicious pleasure.

"This isn't the same as those other times, boy," she told him through grit teeth. "We're in reality now! If I put this blade into you, you die, understand?!"

He nodded frantically. The woman released him, shoving him roughly against the wall.

“Good,” she snapped, putting the knife away. “No more games, got it? The next time you cross me I’ll kill you and be done with it!”

Jordi absolutely believed she meant it. He was shaking violently and openly sobbing. He had never been so scared in his life. Jael huffed, pushing her hair away from her face, and straightened her clothes. She walked towards the window and shot him a disdainful frown.

“If you had cooperated,” she said darkly, “this would have been so much nicer for you.”

Jordi drew his knees towards his chest, rocking gently. He watched the woman place her hands on either side of the window and look out. A smile of satisfaction crept over her face.

“There he is,” she breathed, more to herself than to Jordi. She ran her fingers down the glass, stroking the area where Dev’s face was. “My greatest creation. My beautiful, *perfect* boy.” Jael glanced back at Jordi, flashing him an amused look.

“He was so docile,” she told him, “so desperate to please me. Even when he was a child I knew that he would be the most powerful Bravian who ever lived – except for *myself*, of course.”

Laughing softly, Jael tilted her head. Jordi followed her gaze to that of the slumbering Lady Clair. He shivered at the way the woman looked upon the princess.

“Clever girl,” Jael muttered, her lip curling into a snarl. “Centuries of work ruined by one pretty face.”

Jordi stared at the woman. “What will you do to them?” he asked, feeling a nauseating dread welling up inside of him.

Jael grinned wickedly.

“Kill them both, obviously,” she smirked, looking delighted at the effect her words had on him. “That’s where you come in.”

Jordi swallowed nervously. His face was throbbing where she had struck him. His lower lip had split and he could taste blood.

“What do you need me for?”

“Not so much *you*,” Jael shrugged indifferently. “More your body.”

She came for him, grabbing him by the arm and hauling him over to the throne. Jordi winced in pain but didn’t dare resist her. As he fell into the chair he realized there were shackles attached to the inside of the arms. Jael placed his wrist into the first one, shutting the restraint with a metallic snap.

“I’m going to borrow your physical body for a moment or two,” she explained, giving him a mocking smile. “Don’t worry! You’ll get it back! *After* I’ve killed the Daughter of Kings and the Son of Bravians.”

Jordi shook his head frantically as the woman placed his other wrist into the handcuff.

“No!”

“You, my dear,” Jael said, patting his cheek, “shall have a front-row seat! You are in for quite the show! Can you imagine,” she grinned, ignoring Jordi’s sobs, “the look of betrayal you’ll see on Clair’s face when you stab her in the gut?! She won’t understand why you would ever do such a thing!”

“Please,” Jordi begged, twisting against his restraints. “Please don’t do this!”

Jael laughed merrily. “Devlin, of course, must be killed first. It won’t be difficult. He trusts you, Jordi Brown.” She raised her eyebrows in disbelief, continuing sarcastically, “what an honor! It’s almost like you remind him of someone!”

“Stop!” Jordi pleaded desperately. “I’ll cooperate! I’ll do anything you want!”

“But Jordi,” Jael sneered, placing her hands on her knees and looking into his face. “You already are!”

His legs weren't secured. He could have kicked her with everything he had. The way Jael was leaning Jordi knew he would have a decent amount of force; hard enough to send her reeling away from him. Maybe even giving him time to wake up.

But he couldn't do it. He was too scared of her, too frightened of the pain he knew she would inflict upon him. Jordi hated himself for it. He hated that he wasn't brave enough to help his friends.

And now they were going to die, seemingly by his own hand. It was too much for Jordi to bear. He stared past Jael at the window, at Clair, then at Dev. Sleeping peacefully. Believing they were safe. Jordi let out an anguished moan. The woman smiled and turned away.

"Goodbye, Devoted Child," she said mockingly, walking towards the doorway that led to the Void. "Thank you for lending me your body. It's much appreciated!"

Twisting, Jordi watched as Jael Calinbern strode confidently towards the exit, flinging the curtain aside.

A violent force threw her back.

Jael careened into the wall at the front of the room. Her eyes were wide with shock. An arrow had pierced through her torso, pinning her between the two windows. As Jordi watched, stunned, a second arrow zinged past his ear. He flinched in surprise. It shot through Jael's shoulder, eliciting a screech of pain from the woman. She grabbed the shaft of the first arrow, blood starting to run from her mouth. Her eyes met Jordi's, then moved to something behind him, her face stretching into an expression of disbelief.

Jordi yelped in shock as a hand grabbed his arm. Whipping his head around, he stared at the newcomer in open-mouthed amazement.

It was a woman- no, a girl, really. She was petite, with short brown hair and hazel eyes that were fixed on Jael with a mixture of grim determination and anger. She held a crossbow in her hands but she tossed this aside as she

focused on Jordi's bindings and ignored Jael's enraged screams. Jordi watched as the girl produced a thin metal tool and quickly began prying at his cuffs. His vision became blurred, everything swimming before his eyes as his brain rapidly tried to catch up to this turn of events. The first of his shackles gave way with a crack, the sound returning him to the present. He saw Jael, eyes burning with hatred, reach up and grasp the arrow embedded in her shoulder. With a grimace she yanked it free, throwing it to the floor. Then she placed both hands on the shaft of the projectile in her stomach. Her eyes never left Jordi's.

The girl faltered, glancing at her crossbow as if contemplating using it again. Deciding there wasn't time, she redoubled her efforts to release Jordi from the final cuff. The instant it broke, she let out a relieved gasp and grabbed Jordi by the hand. He scrambled to his feet as she pulled him towards the Void.

"Go! Go! Run!" the girl shouted, throwing the curtain aside with one hand while holding Jordi tightly with the other. Jordi risked a quick glance back and saw that Jael was pulling the second arrow out of her body, screaming in pain and frustration. She would be free in seconds.

He turned and ran.

Jordi nearly halted when he saw the Void. Or, the place that *should* have been the Void. Rather than the small, dark room with a hole in the floor, Jordi was shocked to find himself in the middle of a swamp. The doorway they ran through opened into the center of a dying forest, the rotting limbs sinking into an algae-covered mire. Everywhere he looked Jordi saw pools of thick, bottomless mud overlaid with a jumbled network of logs and fallen trees. The consistency of the mire would pull a hapless victim down, down to their murky grave.

Traversing the swamp would require time and concentration. They had neither. The girl never paused, spreading her arms for balance and teetering precariously across the first fallen tree in their path. Jordi took a

steadying breath and followed, the air around him thick with the putrid smell of decomposition and rot.

They had only made it a few meters when Jordi heard the sounds of pursuit. Jael, freed of the restraints that had pinned her to the wall, charged after them and stumbled into the Void with an enraged scream. Jordi looked back anxiously. The woman was limping, her hand shoved into the gaping wound in her stomach. She left a trail of blood in her wake. Her eyes, however, were filled with fire. She looked at Jordi with burning hatred. He was terrified.

“This way! Hurry!”

The girl spurred him on, her voice filled with urgency. They continued their haphazard escape through the swamp, tripping over branches and sliding on the slippery, moss-covered terrain. Jordi couldn't hear much over the sound of his own ragged breathing but he knew that Jael was only steps behind. His fear of the terrifying woman aided him as he tried to ignore the burning in his lungs and the cramped muscles in his legs. If Jael caught them, Jordi knew she would kill them.

The girl also must have known this, for she never glanced back, hands in front of her face to protect her eyes against the dead branches and jagged tree shards in her way. Jordi, half a pace behind, kept his gaze locked on her and desperately tried to follow in her footsteps to avoid falling into the deadly swamp. The conditions were rapidly deteriorating. Solid footfalls became few and far between. Whole stretches before them were impassable bogs with no logs or debris to traverse. Jordi kept feeling his shoes sinking into the mud; the sticky, slime-filled muck grabbed at him and threatened to suck him down. Twice, while jumping from one tree branch to another, Jordi slipped off the algae-covered limbs and fell into the bog up to his waist. Both times, however, he was able to get enough of a foothold to shimmy himself across the treacherous little bridge and continue after the fleeing girl.

Every time he paused to listen, even briefly, he could hear the sound of Jael in hot pursuit.

They reached a large, open area. The trees thinned out to make way for a massive, impassable lake. The green surface was still and foreboding. An eerie mist hovered in the air. The only way across the expanse was a large, rotted tree that had fallen across the entire body of water, its far end disappearing into the fog. Jordi shivered. It was high enough over the water that if they fell in, they would not be getting back up.

The girl went first, her shoes slipping and sliding over the rounded surface. Mushrooms and algae squelched wetly beneath her feet and dropped into the water below with a dull plunking sound. Jordi had no choice but to follow. His heart was in his throat as he began the long, dangerous journey across the ancient log. He could hear the sound of branches breaking and booted feet splashing as Jael charged through the swamp after them.

He breathed a sigh of relief when they made it across safely. Looking around, however, Jordi realized that there was nowhere else to go. They stood on a tiny island of twigs and muck, held together by the twisted roots of the fallen tree. Without a raft, their journey was over. Panicked, Jordi looked across the bog just as Jael stumbled up to the far end of the tree bridge. She saw their predicament and halted, grinning.

“Oh, dear!” she said mockingly, breathing hard. “Looks to me like you’ve hit a dead end.”

Jordi’s little rescuer stood on top of the log, holding a root for balance, and faced Jael. Her expression was calm.

“You still have to cross the lake,” she said grimly, raising one of her eyebrows. “I’m not sure you’re in the best condition to do that.”

Jael touched her bare shoulder where the arrow had gone clear through. It bled freely, soaking her shirt. Jordi could see her other injury as well, obscured somewhat by

her clothing but visible enough to observe the mangled flesh and clotting blood. Jael laughed.

“This little mark?” she said lightly, using her hand to brush some of the blood away. “Poor, *stupid* girl. Apparently, you know nothing about me!”

Jael’s eyes flashed golden-yellow, the glow giving her features a terrifying appearance. Jordi’s breath caught in his throat, remembering something Dev told him about CHAS. The Shimmer effect. A by-product of prolonged use of the cognitive state. The Feral had such eyes. Somehow it was even more frightening to see it in Jael.

He stared in disbelief as the wound in her shoulder began to recede and disappear.

Impossible, he thought, horrified. In less than a minute, Jael stood before the cornered pair healed of all injury. The Mother of Bravians had repaired her body in front of their very eyes. She gave them a smug smile and climbed onto the makeshift bridge.

“Your meddling will cost you your life,” Jael told the girl, taking a step towards them. “What name shall I call you? I like to know who it is I’m destroying.”

The girl looked at Jael disdainfully.

“I have many names,” she said, standing her ground. “And you are mistaken, Jael Calinbern, triad monarch of ancient times. I know *everything* about you.”

This made the advancing woman pause. She frowned, staring at the girl doubtfully. Jordi looked from one to the other, gawking.

“Your name,” Jael ordered softly, her eyes narrowing to slits.

“You may call me Gatekeeper,” the other returned, “for this is as far as I will allow you to come.”