

# Burn Forever

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## 4719 AR

When the twenty-four-year-old Riven emerged from the library, her eyes were once again drawn to Starrise Spire. The magnificent tower adorning the outer wall of the Confluence District was something of a miracle. At its top radiated a celestial light, clearly visible despite the bright noon sun. It filled Riven with a warm and hopeful feeling. It was this light that had spiritually guided her parents as they fought off the demons spewing forth from the Worldwound, now the Sarkoris Scar. The city of Nerosyan was still licking its wounds, sure, but there was joy in the air now. It certainly made their biweekly visit a lot more enjoyable.

Riven was still admiring the light when she felt something brush up against her arm. She turned her head and saw an orange tabby perched on top of a waist-high wall, rubbing its head against her hand. Letting out a little squeal, Riven diverted her attention immediately to the cat, gently stroking its lusciously thick fur, cautious not to startle it.

"Ooh, aren't you pretty? Yes, you are! Look at your pretty fur shine in the sun."

The cat purred contently, and Riven grinned from ear to ear.

A voice came from behind. "Are you done, child? We're getting ready to leave."

Riven's mother, Asylli Kalandra, painted an impressive silhouette. She was tall, strong, yet lithe. Long golden blond hair, reminiscent of Riven's, flowed freely past her shoulders. Her pupils were dark brown and, like most Elves, filled her eyes completely. They conveyed alertness, wisdom, but also kindness.

Asylli looked from Riven to the cat and back.

"No."

"What?"

"You know what."

"I didn't even say anything!"

"You didn't have to. It can't come home with us, Riven."

Thwarted yet again.

"Why not? Our mansion is huge! Surely there's room for a small kitty?"

Asylli sighed patiently as Riven put on her best pleading eyes. "Our woods are no place for a cat. Besides, your father is quite allergic."

Riven huffed. "How can an Ulfen warrior, of all people, be allergic to a small little furball?"

"Ridiculous, I know," Asylli conceded with a small chuckle, "but no less true. Come now, child."

"Fi-i-i-ne," Riven replied with a big sigh.

She turned to the cat, which was still rubbing its head against her arm, unperturbed by this familiar argument between mother and daughter. "I have to go, kitty. Don't worry. I'll convince Mum sooner or later. Bye for now!"

She jogged to catch up to her mother, who always made big and purposeful strides no matter how relaxed she was. And she was relaxed. It had been a year since the Fifth Mendevian Crusade emerged victoriously from their campaign against the demon hordes of the Worldwound. It had been a difficult time, with Riven and her sisters spending months on end by themselves in the family mansion while their parents went off to war.

Now everything was as it should be: the demons had been defeated, and Asylli and Kvedi Kalandra were back home. What's more, the Kalandra line had been declared a noble house in the wake of the Crusade. Asylli came from a noble line of elves to begin with, but proud Ulfen warrior Kvedi had been a little more uncomfortable with the concept of nobility. Not so for Riven and her sisters: they had quickly grown accustomed to the prestige and luxury their new status offered. Her parents did their best to keep their daughters humble, with varying amounts of success.

As they made their way back to the carriage, Riven cast another glance at the celestial light.

"Whenever we feared, we looked back at that light," Asylli said, catching Riven's eye. "We could see it from almost anywhere we fought."

Her mother didn't speak of the Crusade too often, and Riven paid attention whenever she did. In many ways, Asylli was her biggest hero. "Is it magical? Divine? I heard the goddess Iomedae placed it there herself."

"We certainly thought of her whenever we saw it. Iomedae, or Queen Galfrey, but then Galfrey was often right there alongside us, fighting the demons."

Riven had never seen a demon before, but from the stories, they sounded nightmarish. The idea of her parents fighting not one but many filled her both with excitement and dread. Thankfully, that was all over now.

Her mother seemed to hear her thoughts. She pointed at a group of former crusaders who were loading cargo onto an already heavy-laden cart. "The crusaders are leaving Nerosyan to fight elsewhere. It's all too easy to focus on the biggest or most current threat, but it's equally important to make sure a resolved threat stays resolved. Something like a demon horde is rarely fully defeated by a single victory, no matter how great."

Riven nodded dutifully. She didn't fully understand yet, but she felt the importance of what her mother was telling her.

Once again, Asylli seemed to pick up on her thought. She put an arm around her daughter and gave a kind smile. "Be kind, child. Protect the ones you love and let them protect you."

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Turning a corner, they finally reunited with the rest of the family. Kvedi Kalandra, a large and imposing bearded man with bright blue eyes who nevertheless radiated a "friendly bear" energy, was stacking bags on the roof of their carriage.

"Honestly, how many dresses do you girls need? Think of the poor horses who have to carry them all. Think of your poor father!" he complained in a less-than-serious tone of voice.

Vilde Kalandra, the smallest of the four sisters, let out a bright and musical chuckle. "What would we do without you, Daddy? Truly, you inspire us every day."

"Flattery will get you nowhere!"

"I will help you, Dad," said Lilianna Kalandra, the youngest and most soft-spoken of his daughters, as she picked up a bag. Her gentle exterior belied her physical strength. Especially in combat training, which Asylli and Kvedi had insisted their daughters keep up with, Lily showed she had inherited her parents' fighting ferocity.

"Looks like you two have everything in hand," Vrynn Kalandra said with a smug smirk. Every Kalandra daughter had inherited their mother's blond hair, but Vrynn's was darkest of all. Riven often joked that it was because of the darkness in her soul.

As Vrynn climbed into the carriage and Asylli mounted one of the horses, Riven put her hand on her father's shoulder and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you for putting up with us, Daddy."

"You know me, Riven, I am nothing if not a-a-a-achoo!"

Her father's sneeze was powerful enough to knock one of the bags from the carriage roof. Riven caught it just in time to also catch her mother sending her one of her famous I-told-you-so looks. Riven just rolled her eyes and chucked the bag back onto the roof.

After Kvedi had joined his wife—they both preferred to ride on horseback—the carriage began its journey back to the forest mansion. Huddled inside, the four sisters chatted about their day in the big city. Lily had gotten paint supplies, Vilde had availed herself of the latest fashion, and Vrynn had hung out with all the people her parents had told her not to hang out with. Riven herself had visited the library, procured some local delicacies, and simply strolled around.

"Did you have fun at the library, Riv?" Vrynn asked with a suspiciously broad smile.

"I guess?" Riven replied carefully. "I discovered there's a new book in Eisenfrost series." She patted her bag to indicate the location of the detective novel.

Her older sister's smirk widened, if such a thing was possible. She was up to something.

"Had to follow that cute boy to the back for it, didn't you? *All the way* to the back."

"So? They didn't have the book on the shelves yet. He let me take a sneak peek at some upcoming titles."

"Right . . ." Vrynn replied, letting every ounce of disbelief she could muster slip into her voice. "Did he also let you take a sneak peek in his pants, by any chance?"

"N-No!" Riven stammered. "I was just— He was only showing— Don't make stuff up!"

Vrynn made a lewd gesture by holding her fist in front of her mouth and rhythmically pushing her tongue against the inside of her cheek.

"Go to Hell, Vrynn!" Riven exclaimed, cheeks red as a tomato, as Liliana and Vilde giggled hysterically.

Vrynn didn't stop. She added obscene sucking and moaning sounds. *That's it*, Riven thought. It was time to play the hidden ace up her sleeve. She was saving this one for later, but desperate times called for desperate gossip.

"Oh yeah?" she said with a venomous smile, "well, I saw *you* making out with the girl from the general store!"

Instantly, Lily and Vilde let out a perfectly synchronized dramatic gasp and turned towards Vrynn.

Her victory was short lived. To Riven's intense disappointment, Vrynn showed absolutely zero sign of the embarrassment Riven had thought to inflict. She shrugged casually and in a cocky tone said, "What can I say? I was curious. I couldn't resist."

As Lily and Vilde pelted Vrynn with questions about her little sapphic excursion, Riven crossed her arms and pouted. Damn Vrynn and her unshakable confidence!

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Riven was still sulking when they arrived at their ancestral home. She exited the carriage as soon as it stopped and made her way through the garden.

"Oh, come on, Riv!" Vrynn said as she came up from behind. "Don't be so uptight; I was just kidding!"

Riven stopped in her tracks and turned to her sister, hands balled into fists at her side. A powerful anger—perhaps an Ulfen familial trait—had bubbled to the surface and was now overflowing. "You *know* I hate it when you tell lies about me! Even as a joke, don't spread your *bullshit*!"

"Language!" came the chiding voice of her father from afar. How had he even heard her?

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Vrynn said, raising her hands in a conciliatory gesture but still grinning.

Riven scoffed and continued to stomp towards the mansion until she suddenly felt her sister's arms develop her in a bear hug. "Forgiveness, Lady Riven! Your sister begs forgiveness!" Vrynn pleaded dramatically.

Riven tried very hard not to smile. While there was no one in the world who could rile her up quite like her older sister, Vrynn could also cheer her up like no other.

"Fine, fine, just let go of me, you freak," Riven laughed.

"You've really gotta learn to loosen up a little, Riv. Mind like a river, remember?"

It was an ancient Elven saying their mother had taught them. It meant being ever moving, ever purposeful, making your way through the world, letting nothing stop you, but also being flexible and resilient. How does a river respond when a stone is thrown into it? A brief splash, and it moves on.

"I hate you," Riven said, but there was no venom behind it.

"I love you too," Vrynn replied as she finally released her bear hug and put her arm around Riven's waist, resuming their walk through the garden. "Seriously, though, that guy from the library is cute."

"Like the girl from the general store is cute?"

"Lana. Yes, just like that."

"I didn't know you liked girls."

"Hm . . ." Vrynn hummed, as if she hadn't even fully considered it yet. "Yeah, I guess I do."

"Sorry if I outed you. That wasn't very nice."

Another careless shrug and smirk from Vrynn put Riven's worries to rest. Vrynn would find only acceptance from her sisters and parents—that much Riven knew for sure. Still, it was amazing how few things truly fazed Vrynn.

"Are you going to continue to see Lana?"

"Maybe. Hopefully," Vrynn replied. "She's gorgeous, and funny, and she can do this thing with her fingers where—"

"Lah lah lah lah lah!" Riven yelled loudly as she put her hands over her ears.

Vrynn burst into a hearty laugh—a stark contrast to Vilde's gentle, musical giggle.

Once Riven was certain she wasn't going to learn details about her sister she really didn't want to learn, she removed her hands and shook her head in amazement. "I really hate how nothing embarrasses you."

Shrugging as if to prove the point, Vrynn smiled another easy smile. "It's one of my many, many skills."

"You should work on your kissing face, though," Riven said, mockingly sticking out her tongue and swirling it around messily while crossing her eyes.

"I'll kill you!" Vrynn yelled with a laugh as she chased Riven inside.

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The Kalandra family mansion, bordering the Estrovian forest, was a place of warmth. Of ancient Elven make, it had stood for centuries, and much of it was naturally grown. Even the base of the dinner table Riven and her family were now sitting at had grown from the soil underneath the floor and then been lovingly fitted with a marble top. Art adorned some of the walls, while other walls were artistic pieces unto themselves. Weapons and other artifacts from the Crusade were respectfully displayed in wood-and-glass display cases, no less important than their peace-time counterparts. All this history was framed by numerous candles providing warm light that always made Riven feel safe and secure.

Dinner was a happy affair in the Kalandra household. It was a moment for storytelling, and this evening, it was Kvedi telling boisterous tales from his youth. He had singlehandedly fought off two bears. He had rescued at least three princesses in one night. He had solved an ancient riddle that had stumped his tribe for centuries.

It was all nonsense.

Asylli occasionally shot eye rolls and headshakes at her daughters when Kvedi wasn't looking, eliciting riotous laughter from the girls.

Dessert was especially successful, as Riven shared some of the treats she had picked up in Nerosyan. It was a rare moment of silence as she and her sisters were completely focused on devouring the sweet confections. Perhaps it was this silence that allowed Asylli to pick up a noise. She suddenly rose from the table and cocked her head to listen.

"Trouble?" Kvedi asked, gathering from her expression that this was serious.

Creatures from the forest, ranging from innocent critters to more dangerous predators, would sometimes venture close to the mansion, but her mother's expression told Riven this was something different.

Asylli calmly but quickly walked over to the living room and took her glaive from the wall, as well as Kvedi's battle axe. She threw it at him, and he caught it nimbly, assuming a ready stance. The girls all grabbed knives from the table—hardly good weapons but better than nothing. Riven breathed nervously, following her mother's gaze towards the ceiling. There was something moving upstairs.

"What is that?" Vilde whispered.

The answer came all too quickly as a monster burst through the ceiling and landed right next to her father. Though she had never seen one, Riven immediately recognized it. This was one description her father hadn't exaggerated: a huge, hulking form; eyes full of malice; pointed ears, but bulbous and twisted, as if in mockery of Elven ears; clawed hands and feet; rows and rows of vicious teeth . . . This was a demon.

Kvedi felled it with a swift strike, but more of its kin immediately spewed forth from the hole. Asylli's glaive whooshed through the air in an elegant and utterly deadly dance, cutting down demons almost as quickly as they emerged.

Riven huddled together, knives held outward in defense. The stream of demons seemed impossibly endless. Not only did they pour from the hole, they were now also emerging from other rooms, surrounding the Kalandra family. Riven dodged the swipe of a claw and brought her knife down to strike back, but it hardly did any damage to the shrieking monster.

"To the kitchen—four steps!" Vrynn commanded.

The cluster maneuvered into the kitchen. There were bigger knives to be found here. Vilde and Liliana made a feint outward, allowing Riven and Vrynn to grab the biggest and strongest ones from countertops and drawers.

Riven held out a large cleaver for Vilde, who turned and reached out to grab it. The moment she did, something severed Vilde's hand at the wrist. Vilde shrieked in pain, but even that didn't take long. A demon pulled her away from their cluster and impaled her on its claw. Blood burst from her lips as Vilde's eyes went wide.

"No!" Riven cried in anguish, feeling part of herself die as she watched the light in her sister's eyes go out.

Kvedi screamed as he charged the group, while Asylli fought desperately to get closer to her daughters. The demons' numbers were overwhelming.

Liliana managed to kick one of the monsters that leapt at her onto the table, sending the dinner candles flying throughout the dining room. One of them landed on the curtains, which were already starting to catch fire.

"To me!" Asylli yelled above the noise, and the daughters moved to make their way to her. Vrynn screamed in rage as she slashed at a demon who tried to grab her. Riven jumped to avoid an attack from another and then blocked its follow-up. A third attack came from the other side, but her father stepped into its path. The assailing demon raked deep and bloody cuts across his back.

Attack after attack came with hardly time to think in between.

Riven managed to land an attack on one of her assailants, plunging her knife in its left eye. It howled in pain and flailed around wildly, hitting some of its kin as it stumbled. Vrynn followed up with a second strike, after which Riven quickly pulled her back into a safe position. For a moment, their defense seemed to be holding.

An enormous, clawed hand wrapped around Riven's waist and lifted her into the air. Its strength was incredible. The creature would have doubtlessly proceeded to eviscerate her if it wasn't for Asylli stabbing her glaive in its back. The abomination roared and threw Riven clear across the room.

"Riven, no!" she heard Liliana shout, as she flew straight through the pantry door. It splintered apart and Riven landed painfully on her back. Numerous pieces of fruit crashed down around her. She shook her head to clear her swimming vision and was getting back up just as the ceiling collapsed. Large wooden beams came sailing down from above. Riven dived towards the door, but a beam struck her back and pinned her to the floor.

Liliana moved in her direction to help, but more of the ceiling crashed down in front of Riven, barring the entrance. Seeing it would be impossible to help her sister, Liliana pivoted to defend against her attackers once more. Too late. One of them lunged forward and sunk its vicious needle teeth in her neck.

"Lily!"

Riven had meant it to be a scream, but she found herself barely able to breathe. The heavy beam on her back compressed her chest. She tried to inhale and immediately felt a sharp pain bloom. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew she must've broken at least some of her ribs.

She reached out a desperate hand towards Liliana, but her younger sister was already slumping lifelessly to the floor. Riven desperately tried to wrench herself free. All it did was send down more debris in front of her, until her view into the dining room was almost completely obstructed. There was just enough of a gap to helplessly watch her father take a hit from behind, spin and slash at his attacker, and receive a killing blow to the head.

"Daddy!" she wailed, right as Asylli screamed something in Elven. Riven had never heard so much anguish in her mother's voice before, but she felt that same anguish now.

Vrynn dodged backwards from a snarling bite attack, only to have two demons grab both her arms while a third came from behind and snapped her neck like a twig.

"V-Vrynn . . ." Riven whispered breathlessly as the impossible horror unfolded before her.

No demons came for Riven anymore. Either they didn't want to dig through the rubble to get to her, or they simply didn't know she was still alive. This left the young girl a helpless spectator for this gruesome slaughter. She was starting to feel the senseless violence sap her strength.

In the dining room, Asylli, and only Asylli, was still alive. However, as impossible as the odds had seemed before, so much worse were they now. With no other targets left, every single demon was moving to surround her. Slowly. Menacingly. Monsters playing with their food.

To make matters worse, the fire that had started in the curtains was snaking its way through the Kalandra mansion. It ate everything in its path, and soon reached the rubble in front of Riven.

Asylli caught Riven's eye through the rubble. The moment must've lasted no more than a fraction of a second, but Riven felt like the world was moving in slow motion. There was a look in her mother's eyes that would haunt Riven for years to come. It was a poignant mixture of hope and grief. One of her daughters was still alive, yet they would never be together again. Her lips formed words Riven couldn't make out.

"Mum . . ."

Asylli let out a loud battle cry—the finality of which made Riven weep—and swept her glaive in a wide arc. The weapon inflicted wide-spread destruction, but it wasn't enough. Three demons fell, and five took their place, closing in ever further.

Riven whimpered, tears streaming down her face, as watched the demons cut her mother to pieces.

They were dead. All of them.

Time seemed to lose all meaning then. A wave of pure desperation hit the pinned-down Riven, and she blacked out.

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When she awoke, all her senses screamed at her in alarm. Her throat felt like somebody had shoved hot coal down it. She coughed as black smoke poured in all around her.

She was still trapped underneath the heavy beam. Riven felt an icy panic race down her spine. She thrashed wildly for a moment, but it accomplished nothing. The flames were creeping closer and closer, and she could feel their heat on her face.

A surge of adrenaline cleared her mind a little, and she managed to put her hands on the floor in front of her. It, too, was getting uncomfortably hot. Chunks of burning wood were falling from above. In a few moments, she would be dead. In a final moment of desperation, Riven braced herself and then, with all her might, pushed up.



At first, nothing happened. Then, little by little, the beam pinning her down shifted. The hard-fought space allowed her to take a breath, lending her a bit more strength. In a cry of pain, grief, and terror, she finally pushed the beam off.

Her entire body was screaming in pain. Breathing was still difficult, and smoke-induced coughing made matters worse. The way forward was blocked, and a new wave of fear struck her. She was still trapped, nowhere to go, and the fire was getting closer. From all directions came the horrible sound of wood splintering and crashing. The mansion was coming down all around her.

In a blind panic, Riven turned and began kicking against the outer wall. It had already taken structural damage, and if she could make a hole, she could get outside.

Despite her pain and burning lungs, she screamed and kicked. She poured every last shred of her strength into the effort, and finally, the wall cracked at the bottom. More flaming debris fell from above, and Riven quickly went prone. On hands and knees, she crawled toward the opening. As she squeezed herself through, something stabbed her throat. A piece of wood from a rack that had once held provisions—red hot and sharp like a knife. She had no choice. Riven continued to crawl forward, the wood slicing across her throat. The heat instantly cauterized the wound, scarring her even as she made her final escape.

Moaning and desperately clawing her fingers into the dirt outside, she was at last able to pull herself free from the wreckage.

She kept crawling for a few more meters and then tried to stand upright. The sharp pain in her chest kept her hunched over. She turned. Her home was a flaming inferno. A funeral pyre. Tears streamed down her soot-covered face as Riven slowly backed away. The uncaring reality of it all was too much to bear, and she felt her mind go numb. Stumbling away from all she had ever known, she moved in a daze.

Get away from here. Get away. One foot in front of the other. One foot. In front. Of the other.

Part of her wanted to go back. To be with her family in the end. All she had to do was lie there, in the rubble, next to her murdered parents, her slaughtered sisters. She could die with them. That would end the pain. That would end the soul-crushing loneliness that was already starting to settle in her heart, and that would forever be there.

Riven did not go back. She kept moving, clutching her side, stumbling in the direction of Nerosyan as she could actually make it that far. Just as she collapsed and fell to the forest floor, she saw yet more fire. Demons? No, these fires were only small. Torches. A group of clerics emerged from the darkness. As they rushed to her side, she fainted.

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**4724 AR**

Riven awoke in a gasp. For a miniscule moment in time, she thought it had all been a dream. That made reality all the more painful.

Like so many nights since, she had been sweating profusely in her night terrors. Taking slow and deep breaths, she kicked away her sweat-soaked sheets and got out of bed. She swiped away the wet strands of hair matted to her forehead. Breathe in for four seconds, hold for four, out for six. Gradually, she regained her composure.

Riven opened the door to the small balcony and stepped outside. The cold midnight air that blew over the convent felt good. It helped dispel the nightmarish image of encroaching fire. She looked out over the city of Nerosyan, across its dark roofs, past the Church of Iomedae that she was now a part of, towards the celestial light atop the Starrise Spire. It shone brightly in the black of night. She wished it filled her with hope like it had before.

Inexorably, her thoughts drifted back to the nightmare. As always, she had seen her mother, mouthing something to her. Over the years, Riven had filled in the words in many ways.

"I love you."

"Remember us."

"Live, child."

Imagining her mother's voice speaking those words had soothed her, if only a little. Now, even the memory of her voice was starting to fade. This made Riven sad, but most of all angry. It was as if the mansion's fire had never dowsed; it was just living inside her now. Part of her would burn forever.

As she clenched her hands around the cold stone of the balcony rail, she closed her eyes. She pictured her mother Asylli, standing among the dead bodies of her father Kvedi, and her sisters, Vrynn, Vilde, and Lily. She watched Asylli mouth her unheard words and added a new interpretation: "Avenge us."

Riven whispered a prayer to the goddess Iomedae. Like so many times before, she prayed for deliverance from her pain and grief. She prayed for the souls of her family. She prayed for power, for the means to strike back. For revenge.

Someone heard her. Someone had been listening for a while now. Someone decided it was time to give Riven the power she craved.

That someone was not Iomedae.