

# ONE



PAXON LEAH PAUSED IN THE MIDST OF CHOPPING WOOD TO gaze out across the misty Highlands surrounding the city of Leah. The Highlands were called Leah, too, and the confusion sometimes caused outlanders to wonder if the inhabitants were limited to a single name for everything. It was worse in his case, since his surname was Leah, as well, passed down through countless generations from the rulers of old, for whom the city and the Highlands had been named when the Leahs were their Kings and Queens.

But all that was long ago and far away, and it had little to do with him. He might be the descendant of those Kings and Queens, but that and a few coins would buy you a tankard of ale at the Two Roosters tavern. There hadn't been a monarchy in Leah for generations; the last members of the royal family had walked away from the responsibility not long after Menion Leah had helped dispatch the Warlock Lord by finding and employing the fabled Sword of Shannara. Vague history, long forgotten by many, it was a legacy he carried lightly and with little regard.

He chopped another dozen pieces of firewood for the winter stash before pausing again. The Leahs were commoners now, no different from anyone else. They hadn't even served on the Highlands Council, the current governing body, for many years. His parents had inher-

ited the shipping business that had been in the family for half a dozen generations—a once-thriving but now marginal source of income and sustenance, operated by his mother and himself, but mostly by himself. He ran shipments on the average of twice a month, making just enough money to feed and clothe the family—the family consisting of himself, his mother, and his little sister, Chrysallin. His father had been gone since he was ten, killed in an airship accident while flying freight into the Eastland.

He finished cutting up the firewood, stacking it by the storage shed next to their cottage, still pausing now and then to take in the view and dream of better times to come. Not that things were bad. He had time to hunt and fish, and he didn't work all that hard—though he would have preferred the harder work if the business would improve. At twenty, he was tall and lean and broad-shouldered, his hair red in the tradition of his ancestors. There had been hundreds of redheaded Leahs over the years; he was just the latest. And he imagined there would be hundreds more before the line was played out.

With the wood neatly stacked, he carried his tools into the shed, cleaned and oiled the saws and ax heads, and went into the house to wash up. It was a small cottage with a kitchen, a central living space, and bedrooms for his mother, his sister, and himself. There was a fireplace, with windows to the west-facing front and to the south so there was always plenty of light—important in a climate where the days were frequently gray and hazy.

He glanced at the old sword his sister had hung over the mantel above the hearth, its metal blade, leather pommel, and strap-on sheath all as black as night. Chrys had found it in the attic and proclaimed it hers. The markings on the weapon indicated that the pommel leather and sheath had been replaced more than once, but the metal blade was the original. She said it had belonged to those Leahs of old who had gone on quests with the Ohmsfords and the Druids, all the way back to Menion Leah and forward to their great-grandmother Mirai. Paxon supposed it was so; he had been told the stories often enough as a boy by both his father and his mother. Even

some of their friends knew the tales, which had taken on the trappings of legend over the years.

He washed his hands and face in the kitchen sink, pumping water from their well, dried himself, and walked back into the living area to stand before the fireplace. The tales about that black sword were cautionary, whispering of dark magic and great power. It was said the blade had been tempered in the waters of the Hadeshorn once, long ago, and thereby made strong enough that it could cut through magic. A handful of Leahs were said to have carried it into battle with the Druids. A handful were said to have evoked its power.

He had tried to join their ranks more than once when he was much smaller, intent on discovering if the stories were true. Apparently, they weren't. All of his efforts to make the magic appear—to make the sword do anything, for that matter—had failed. There might have been more to the process, but the blade didn't come with instructions, and so after numerous attempts he had given up. What need did he have of magic, in any case? It wasn't as if he were going on a quest with Druids and Ohmsfords.

If there even were any Ohmsfords these days.

There was some doubt about this. All of the Ohmsfords had left Patch Run—their traditional home for hundreds of years—when his great-grandmother had married Railing Ohmsford and brought him to the Highlands to live. His brother, Redden, had come with them, and for a time had shared their home. But eventually he had found a girl to fall in love with and had married her and moved out. Both Redden and Railing had stayed in the Highlands until they died, twins closer than brothers to the end. Redden's boys had moved away and no more had been heard of them. Railing's granddaughter, always closer to her grandmother's side of the family, had taken back the Leah name when she married and had eventually passed it down to her children.

Since then, there had been no Ohmsfords in the Highlands, only Leahs, and Paxon couldn't say if there were Ohmsfords to be found anywhere in the Four Lands these days. Certainly, he hadn't heard mention of any. Which was sad, considering that the families had

been friends over many, many years, and the relationships had been close and personal, including most recently the marriage of his great-grandmother to Railing.

But everything comes to an end, even friendships, and families die out or move on, so you couldn't expect that nothing would ever change.

The Ohmsfords had possessed real magic, inherited over the years as a part of their makeup—a power born of Elven magic that had come to be known as the wishsong. Redden and Railing Ohmsford had both had use of it—though it had skipped other generations previously, and every generation since Railing's marriage to Mirai Leah. None of the offspring from that union and for the three generations following had possessed the wishsong magic, so for them—as for him—it was another slice of history that was interesting to talk about, but of little practical consequence.

Besides, he wasn't so certain that having use of such magic wouldn't be more of a burden than a gift. He had heard the stories of what using it had done to the twins, particularly Redden, who had been rendered catatonic after employing it in the terrible struggle against the creatures of the Forbidding. He had recovered, but his brother and Mirai had feared he wouldn't. All magic was dangerous, and any use involved a certain amount of risk. It didn't matter if it was something you were born with or not—it still posed a threat.

Which was in large part why magic was outlawed all through the Southland—everywhere the Federation was in control, which these days included everything south of the Rainbow Lake, including Leah. The northern territories didn't feel the Federation presence as heavily as did the major Southland cities, and in truth Leah and the villages of the Duln were still disputed territories, with the Borderlands laying claim to them as well. But no one wanted to risk bringing the Federation authorities down on their heads by testing out their tolerance for those using magic in deliberate defiance of the edict—especially when the prevailing view in the Highlands was that magic was a source of power best left to the Druids, or left alone entirely.

Paxon studied the sword and scabbard a moment longer, then

turned away. A relic, an artifact, or his sister's momentary infatuation—what difference did it make? It was nothing to him.

He went back outside and glanced at the sky. A few clouds were moving in, but nothing threatening. Still time to work on those radian draws he had been mending for the transport. He had a run to make the following week, and he wanted the airship to be fully operational well before then. He was thinking Chrys should go with him. It was time she began taking an active interest in the business. Still only fifteen, she was wild and impetuous, just beginning to recognize her lack of interest in authority and fully engaged in finding out how much trouble she could get into. At least, that was what he perceived. His mother was more tolerant, seeing Chrys as a young girl growing up and still finding herself, while Paxon saw her as trouble on the prowl.

Like the time she found a way to haul the Radanians' tractor onto their barn roof. Or the time she put twenty live pigs in the butcher's bedroom. Or the time she and three others went down to a council meeting to protest involvement with an irrigation plan that potentially would have dammed up the Borgine River and killed thousands of fish, dumping vats full of dead fish on the chamber floor to emphasize their point.

Or all the times she stayed out all night with boys. Or the times she came home from the Two Roosters walking sideways and singing bawdy Highland drinking songs.

His sister needed something to focus on besides finding new and creative ways to entertain herself, and it was time she began contributing more than housecleaning and dishwashing to the family effort. She already knew a sufficient amount about flying airships to help him on his runs, and eventually she would be old enough and might become sufficiently dependable to make runs on her own. In the meantime, she could learn to fly the transport and lend a hand with crewing.

Maybe that would help keep her out of the Two Roosters and similar drinking holes, where she already spent far too much time.

He walked back into the kitchen and began looking through the

cold box and pantry. His mother had gone to her sister's house for a few days, helping with the new baby. So it would be up to him to make dinner for himself and Chrys—assuming his sister put in an appearance. These days, it was no sure thing. He worried for her, and it frustrated him that she paid him so little attention.

*You aren't my parent*, she would say. *You can't tell me what to do*. Aggravating.

Sometimes, he wished their father were still there. Chrys had grown up too fast and too independent without him there to help rein her in. Maybe he could have exercised better control over her than Paxon.

He shook his head doubtfully. As if *anyone* could control Chrysalin.

He left the kitchen with a glass of ale and went out to sit on the porch rocker. Maybe he would have to go looking for her, bring her back to share dinner. He didn't like eating alone. He didn't like eating while worrying about her. It was bad enough that he had to do everything when their mother was away. Chrys didn't seem to think she had any responsibilities at all. She acted like she could do what she wanted and that ought to be the way of things.

She acted like a child, he thought, fuming. She acted like no one mattered but her.

But she was a child, of course. She was fifteen—and when you were a fifteen-year-old girl, no one else mattered but yourself.

She had a good heart; he would concede that. She was kind to others, especially to those in need of kindness and less fortunate than she was. She was quick to lend out or even give away what she had to those who didn't. She could be your friend in a heartbeat, if she saw you wished it. She stood up for what she believed in. She would not back down or be intimidated. His memories of her growing up softened his momentary frustration. She would get back to who she had been; he was sure of it. She would be all right in the end.

He finished off the ale and took the empty tankard back into the kitchen. He should go down to the airfield and work on mending those radian draws, he thought for the second time in the last few

minutes. He should forget about Chrys and dinner until the day was a little farther along. Worrying about the future seldom did anything to help improve it. If you wanted to do something about the future, you had to put some effort into it. That usually involved working on something that would make the future you sought more attainable.

As he was going out the door, he glanced once more at the ancient sword above the fireplace. It'd be nice if you could make things better just by using magic. If you could skip the work part. Even if you could only do it once.

Staring at the sword, he wondered suddenly if his life was going in the right direction. He was flying freight on airships because his father had. He was running the family business because he was the oldest, and if he didn't do it no one would and his mother would have to sell. But was this what he really wanted to do? Or was he just marking time, doing what was easiest, taking on the familiar and not risking anything?

The front door flew open.

"Paxon!"

He turned around to find Jayet, one of the serving girls at the Two Roosters, standing in the entryway, looking distraught. "What's wrong?" he asked quickly.

"Your sister!" she snapped. "That's what's wrong. You'd better come right away!"

Chrys. Of course it would be Chrys.

He didn't argue with Jayet. He just did what she asked and went out the door behind her, working hard at keeping up because she was striding ahead so quickly.

"What's she done now?"

"Gotten herself in trouble. What do you think?"

Jayet was small and tough, physically compact, emotionally cool, and a bulldog at everything she did, which made her perfect for working at the tavern. She was Chrys's friend—or as much of a friend as anyone could be to his sister—always there when it mattered, ready to keep Chrys from getting in too deep with whatever mad scheme or stunt she had taken it into her head to try out.

Her mop of spiky white-blond hair bounced as she glanced over

her shoulder at Paxon. “She got into a dice game. There were five of them, all locals except for this one man, who claims to have flown in on business from the Southland cities. Doesn’t look like a businessman, but who knows? Anyway, I’m not paying much attention to them. No one’s causing any trouble—Chrys included—when all of a sudden she leaps up and starts screaming at him. Just screaming like she can’t stand to be in the same room with him.”

“He did something to her?”

“He cleaned her out. He threw five sevens, a sweep, took the pot and everything that was bet. Including what she wagered and didn’t have on her. Apparently, she was so confident about winning, she told him that if she couldn’t pay him one way she would pay him another. He took her at her word, but I don’t think she saw it the way he did. Chrys would never agree to anything like that.”

He assumed not, but his sister was growing up fast and the boundaries of what she would allow might be expanding.

“Anyway, she claimed he cheated. The other players backed right off, refusing to get involved. If Chrys hadn’t been so furious, she might have thought twice, too. This man didn’t look like the type you wanted to go up against. He told her she lost, so if she couldn’t pay, she belonged to him. That was the bargain. She told him what he could do with his bargain, and when I left they were standing toe-to-toe with everyone else standing back.”

They were past the yard and down on the road now, heading into the city. He could see the sprawl of buildings below, the businesses surrounded by residences, the airfield situated south, and the barracks and training field for the home guard and airmen set west.

“No one got between them? Not even Raffe?”

She shook her head. “Especially not Raffe. He knows this man, I think. They might even have done business together in the past. You know Raffe, always on the prowl for an easy score, always walking on the edge. I think there’s some of that in play. Raffe just stood back and watched it happen.”

“What about City Watch? Did you think to call them in?”

She wheeled back on him. “Look, I risked a lot just by coming to

tell *you!* Raffe told me not to do even that much, warned me to mind my own business. But I came anyway, and I might lose my job because of it! So don't be asking me about City Watch."

He shut up then, deciding she was right, this wasn't her problem in the first place, and he should just be glad she'd bothered to come tell him what was going on while there might still be time for him to do something about it.

She started off again, walking more quickly than before, and he hurried after. "Sorry about the City Watch comment. Thank you for coming to get me. I owe you."

"You bet you do," she threw over her shoulder. "Come on! Walk faster! Chrys is in trouble!"

Picking up the pace, he did his best to comply.

# Two



IT WAS NOT AN OVERLY LONG WALK TO THE TWO ROOSTERS, which was situated at the northern edge of the city, just a quarter of a mile downhill from where Paxon's parents had built their home. It was a small, intimate tavern, the sort Chrys would choose because she liked to claim places as her own. She had been Jayet's friend all her life, and that had probably contributed to her choice of taverns after her friend went to work there. Jayet was older, but not necessarily more levelheaded. Chrys was clearly the wilder of the two, the one who needed an older sister to help guide her. Unfortunately, Jayet wasn't up to the job.

Still, she was better than nothing. At least she thought to voice an objection now and then, and occasionally to provide a different point of view before things got too far out of hand.

Paxon was thinking about this as they reached the Two Roosters and pushed through the doors into the main room.

Everything was quiet, as if nothing of what Jayet described had occurred. Paxon glanced around the room. There was no sign of Chrys.

Raffe was behind the bar trying hard to look like he was busy but not succeeding, his eyes shifting to find Paxon then moving quickly away again.

"Do you see the man she was with?" Paxon asked Jayet.

She shook her head. "He's gone. So is she."

Paxon could see that for himself. He strode over to the bar and Raffe. "Where is my sister?"

Raffe glanced up and shrugged. "She left with some man. Not too long ago. Why?"

"Where did they go?"

"How should I know?"

"Think about it."

"Look, Paxon, it isn't my job to look after girls who make foolish bets and then find out the hard way when they have to pay the price. Especially ones who just seem to be asking for—"

He never finished whatever it was he was going to say. By then, Paxon had seized him by his tunic front and dragged him halfway across the bar. "I'm only going to ask you once more before I break your arm. Where is my sister?"

"Let go of me, or you'll . . ."

His hand was groping for the club he kept under the counter, so Paxon dragged him the rest of the way across the bar and threw him on the floor, stomping hard on his wrist for good measure. Raffe screamed as the bones crunched.

Paxon knelt with his knee on the tavern owner's stomach and his hand around his throat. "You should answer me, Raffe. Right now."

"Airfield!" the other gasped, grimacing in pain. "He has a ship there!"

"What's his name?"

Raffe shook his head.

"Answer me or I'll break your other arm."

Raffe spit at him. "Go ahead! He'll hurt me worse than you can even imagine if I tell you who he is!"

"Paxon!" Jayet was beside him, pulling him back. "Forget this! Go after Chrys. That's what matters. You know where she is. Maybe you can still reach her before they leave!"

He was so enraged he almost didn't hear her. But she yanked him backward again and he finally rose, taking a moment to look down at

the man at his feet. "If I find out you've lied to me, Raffe, I will be back for you. If I find out you lied, I'll kill you. She's fifteen years old!" He stepped away. "Let me know if he does anything to you because of this, Jayet." Then he was out the door.

Maybe he should have taken time to find out more, he thought as he raced toward the airfield. Maybe he should have beaten it out of Raffe. But there wasn't time. There was every chance he was already too late to catch them. If the stranger, whoever he was, had an airship waiting, he was likely already on his way back to wherever he had come from.

But why he was bothering to haul along a fifteen-year-old girl, lost wager or no, was troubling. Most men wouldn't have made the effort. Most wouldn't have gotten into a dice game with her in the first place. But Chrys was tall and mature looking for her age, so he may have thought her much older than she really was. What really distressed him was the thought that it wasn't the money that mattered, that it was Chrys he had been after all along. Young girls were taken by force all the time to work in the pleasure houses of the large Southland cities. Chrys wouldn't be the first to end up that way.

Except that she wouldn't end up that way, he reminded himself. He would find her and bring her home long before she got anywhere near that life. That was a promise.

He ran through the city, charting as direct a path as he could to the airfield, avoiding major avenues and crowds, trying not to exhaust himself before he reached his destination. If Chrys had been taken to the airfield on foot, he might still be able to catch up to her. There was no mention of horses or carriages or other travel. He had to hope. Using alleyways and cut-throughs, he shaved a few more minutes off his time. And the airship would not necessarily be prepped and ready to lift off. It would take time to attach the radian draws and power her up.

He ran faster, close now, the buildings beginning to thin out and become smaller as the edge of the city neared. He was running full-out, eating up the yards, setting a blistering pace. He would reach her, he told himself. He would find her.

And suddenly it occurred to him that he had no weapons.

After all, talk might not be enough to persuade the stranger to let his sister go. Just the fact that he had taken her in the first place—an act that amounted to the kidnapping of a fifteen-year-old girl—showed a certain disdain for authority or any interest in the moral high ground. By deliberately taking Chrys, this man had revealed his character and likely his intentions.

Paxon slowed, trying to think what to do. He should have brought that old sword. Weapons weren't something they kept in large numbers in his home, although there were hunting knives and a solitary long knife. But the black-bladed sword was a real weapon, and he should have thought to bring it.

Too late for that now. He began to run faster again, catching his first glimpse of the airfield through gaps in the buildings at the end of the street. He would try to find a weapon on the way. Anything would do.

Then he was past the last of the buildings and out on the open field amid the airships. Leah was small compared with the big Southland cities, but even so there were dozens of vessels moored over acres of ground. He slackened his pace, casting about anxiously. He searched through the ranks of airships, advancing slowly as he did so, trying to find something that would show him the way. There were men and women everywhere, servicing the airships. A few pilots stood by watching or walked the decks of the vessels or stood in the pilot boxes. He scanned the insignia emblazoned on the pennants that identified the ports of registration of the airships.

He did not see Chrys anywhere.

And then he did.

She was being led up a mobile boarding ramp to a sleek vessel of a sort he had never seen before. The ship had caught his eye because it was so different, and there was his sister. He charged forward, breaking into a run once more, darting through the forest of hulls and masts as he did so. He kept searching for a weapon as he ran, but none appeared. The workers on the field were not wearing weapons, and there were none lying about.

Finally, in desperation, he snatched up an iron bar. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

When he was still fifty yards or so away, he slowed to a walk. He could tell the ship wasn't leaving quite yet. The crew was still rigging her; the diapson crystals hadn't been powered up. He had time. He wondered suddenly why Chrys wasn't fighting. She seemed to be boarding willingly, offering no resistance. That didn't seem like her, especially given the story behind her abduction. The confrontation at the Two Roosters did not suggest that she had suddenly changed her mind about accompanying the stranger to whatever fate he had in store for her. No, something about what he was seeing wasn't right.

Chrys was no longer in sight. The stranger who had led her aboard reappeared at the railing of his vessel, caught sight of Paxon, and moved to the boarding ramp. Paxon continued to approach, but more cautiously than before. He watched the stranger descend and walk out to meet him.

"You would be the brother, I expect."

Paxon stopped six feet away. "I want my sister back."

"She hasn't stopped threatening me with you since I brought her to my vessel." He smiled. "She keeps telling me what you will do to me once you get here. I must admit to a certain curiosity, given all the terrible injuries she has assured me you intend to inflict. Is she always like this?"

Paxon was a little taken aback by this friendly chatter, but he was in no way deterred from his purpose. "You've kidnapped a fifteen-year-old girl," he snapped. "That's an offense everywhere. It doesn't matter what she did, you have to let her go. But I will make good on her debt, if that's what it takes."

The man shrugged, but the smile did not fade. He wasn't a big man, wasn't even striking in any particular way. Yet there was an unmistakable confidence about him, and no visible sense of concern over Paxon's appearance. "I'm afraid her debt is much more than you can afford, young man."

"I'll work it off."

The smile widened. "In a couple of months, if you work hard, you probably can. But she can work it off more quickly by coming with me."

Paxon was both enraged and frightened on hearing this. He was beginning to feel that talk alone was not going to be enough to get Chrys back. He was going to have to be more aggressive, and he wasn't sure he was up to it. "The City Watch is on its way," he warned.

The stranger shook his head. "I doubt it. But even if it is, they won't be able to do anything about your sister. I have immunity from interference from the local authorities. I can pretty much do what I want. Which, in this case, means taking your sister with me to pay her debt." He paused. "She might be willing to go with me by now, you know. She might have reconsidered; she knows she is in the wrong, and she might be ready to pay the price for her foolish behavior. You should be proud of her."

Paxon shook his head in denial. "I don't know what you are talking about. She would never go anywhere with you willingly, whatever you say. Let me ask her face-to-face. Let me talk to her."

"Oh, I don't think so. It would be better if you just turned around and went home again. She'll be back in a few weeks. There won't be any permanent damage. And she will have learned a valuable lesson."

Paxon hefted the iron bar. "If you don't release my sister right now, I will board your ship and take her back myself!"

The stranger nodded. He raised his arm, making a small gesture with his hand. A signal. "I was afraid it might come down to this. You have no idea who I am, do you? If you did, you might think twice about threatening me."

"I doubt it. Are you going to set my sister free or not?"

"What I am going to do is to give you one last chance to walk away. You should take it."

All at once there were three men standing behind him, crewmen from his vessel from the look of them—big and strong, hard men much older and undoubtedly more experienced at fighting than Paxon. They carried no weapons, but gnarled hands and muscular arms suggested they did not need them.

The stranger had quit smiling. "Drop your iron bar, Paxon," he said. "Let's make this fight more even. Fists only."

To Paxon's surprise, he did as he was ordered. He couldn't have explained why; it just seemed that it was something he had to do, and so he did it. He stared down at his discarded weapon, horrified.

"Much better." The stranger stepped back and his men stepped forward. "Don't hurt him too much," he told them. "Don't break anything. Just show him the error of his ways."

They came at Paxon in a rush, slamming into him with such force that they knocked him off his feet. They were on top of him instantly, fists pummeling him as he tried to fight back. He might have landed a few good blows in the struggle, but in the end there were still three of them and only one of him, and he was overwhelmed.

Eventually, the pain and the shock caused him to lose consciousness. When he came awake again, a hand was slapping his face in a rhythmic fashion while another was holding up his head by his hair.

The stranger was kneeling before him. "My name is Arcannen. If you wish to pursue this, you can find me at Dark House in the city of Wayford. You should stay away, but if you can't help yourself you had better bring a real weapon, not an iron bar. Because if I see you again, I will kill you."

He rose and stood looking down. "Let him go."

The fingers tangled in his hair released their grip and his face slammed into the earth. Pain exploded in his head, and bright flashes appeared behind his eyelids. He lay helplessly, fighting to stay conscious. But it was long minutes later before he could bring himself to open his eyes and turn himself over to discover that the stranger's airship had begun to lift off, light sheaths gathering in sunlight for the radian draws to channel to the parse tubes, thrusters powering up. As battered as he was, as defeated as he felt, he found himself admiring the sleek lines of the vessel, wondering again why he had never seen this sort of airship before. He made himself memorize her look, the emblems on her pennants, the insignia on her bow.

A black raven, wings spread, beak open wide. Attacking.

Then the vessel wheeled south and sped away. By the time Paxon was back on his feet, she was little more than a dot in the distant sky.

He stood looking at nothing for a few moments, waiting to recover from his beating, then turned about and stalked from the airfield. He had really never had a chance at getting Chrys back from the stranger. Arcannen—that was a name he wouldn't forget. He had provided it willingly—something Raffe had refused to do—so he was confident that it wouldn't help Paxon to know it. He was a man possessed of a new style of airship and a crew that likely would do anything he asked them to. Somehow, he had been able to persuade Paxon to put down the iron bar when that might have made the difference in the fight.

And he had Chrys in his possession. He was flying her back to Wayford to something called Dark House. Paxon could only imagine what that might turn out to be.

Come find out, Arcannen had challenged. Believing Paxon would never dare to do so, that he had found out the hard way what would happen if he did. The beating was a warning. *Stay away. Don't come after me. Let your sister go. She belongs to me, and I can do with her what I like. You can't prevent it, and you shouldn't try. You are a Highlander of no importance living in a place of low regard, and you can never hope to be the equal of me. Stay where you are and stay healthy.*

He left the airfield and trudged through the city toward home, picturing Arcannen's face and hearing his smooth voice in his mind. So certain that Paxon had been put in his place.

Well, he was in for a surprise.