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The Silversmith

Book One of The Selvaren Series

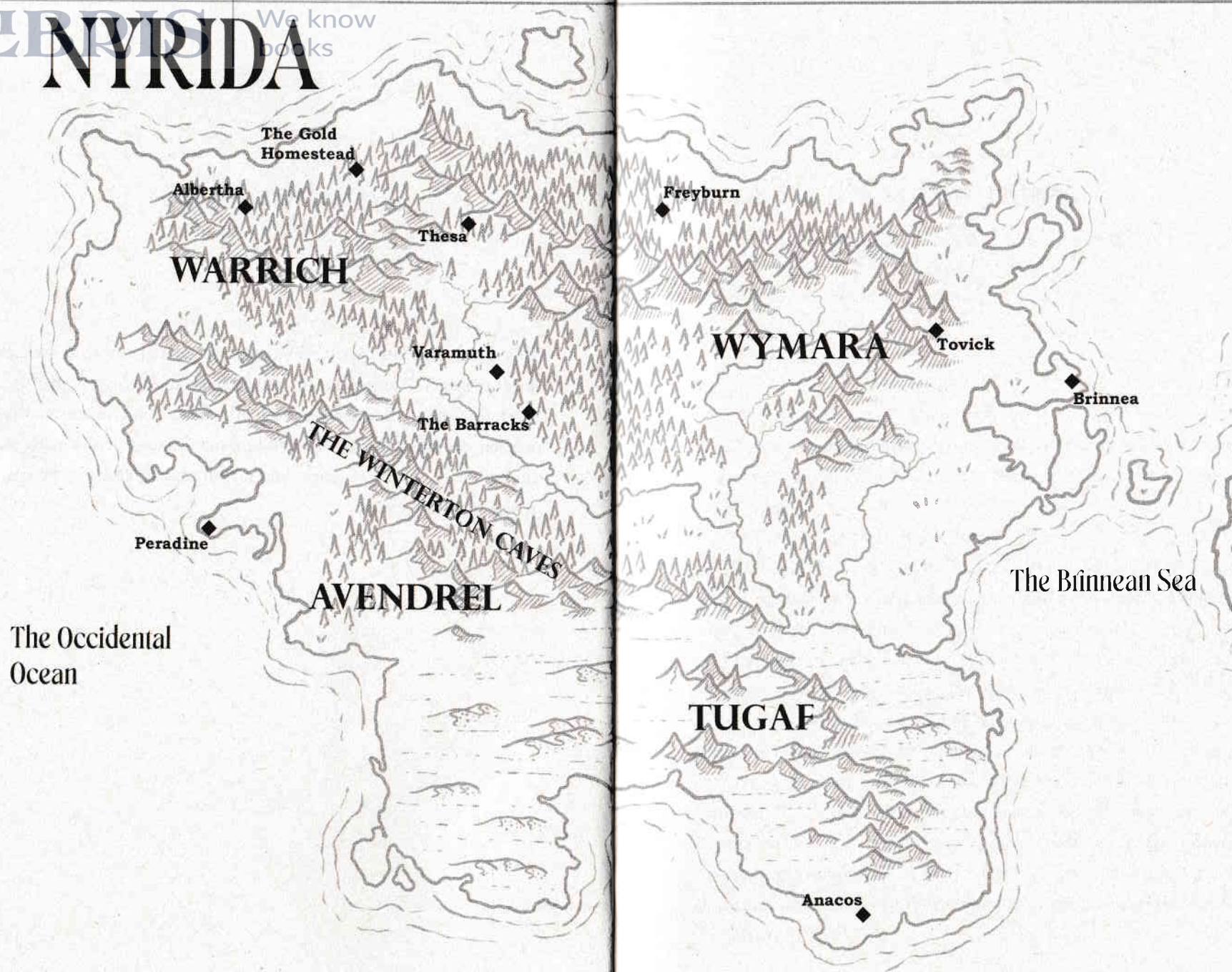


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Brinnea

The Brinnean Sea

TUGAF

Anacos

Chapter One



Two more steps. Two more villagers in front of me. Once they were done, it was my turn to barter with what I had, which wasn't much.

At this point, it was that or starve.

I focused on breathing despite the ache of hunger blurring my vision. Clouds of mist escaped my lips and every breath trembled, along with the rest of my body.

Through flurries of snow, people hustled down the gravel road beneath ominous gray skies. The tips of my fingers—even in my wool gloves—threatened to lose feeling. I gulped. It was already early afternoon and wouldn't get any warmer than it was right now.

Warrich in early winter was cold enough to kill if one wasn't careful. Only the boldest travelers ventured to the northernmost region of Nyrida. And the bitter wilderness, given the chance, spared not a single one of them. Towns were small and sparse. It had taken me four hours to walk here from my home in the forest.

"Next."

The person in line behind me shoved me in the back. I gasped and almost fell to the ground. My knees ached from overuse and exhaustion. And I still had to survive the walk home after this.

Removing my stiff fingers from my pockets, I presented the stall owner with two small coins and cleared my throat.

“Bread, please. Whatever kind you have.”

The man was middle-aged with a crooked nose and chestnut hair speckled with gray. He stared down at my offering and scoffed. “Bread is three coins.”

My stomach plummeted. “Please.” Panic gripped my heart and sent my pulse faster than my body could handle. “This is all I have. There has to be something. I’ll—I’ll come back. I’ll work for it.”

The stall owner looked up at me and narrowed his eyes, a licentious gaze lingering on my face, lips, and a small bit of exposed neck. An eerie smile tilted his mouth. “On second thought, I might consider other forms of payment.”

“What...other forms?” My throat went dry, but while fear burned in my chest, my stomach protested hunger in equal strength. If another form of payment could be requested in the middle of the village market, it couldn’t be so terrible.

He smirked and scanned me from head to toe. I wasn’t dressed in anything fancy—a gray linen shirt, my thickest undergarments and pants, bundled up in all the layers I could find. My well-worn boots were laced tight and my green shawl was thick but tattered in places.

My gut soured when he leaned forward, so no one else could hear, and hissed, “You’ll have to use those pretty pink lips of yours.”

I took a step back and tightened my shawl around my shivering body.

“I—n-no,” I stuttered, horrified that, in my desperation, I had hesitated for a moment.

But I no longer had any solid food left. In a week, maybe less, I’d have no choice but to butcher our last two hens, Daisy and Penny, and I’d never...*killed* before. In the last few weeks, they’d stopped producing eggs, leaving me with only vegetable broth. And after they were gone...

I gulped and surveyed the small marketplace for another booth selling something I might possibly afford.

My mother would have known what to do.

But it had been eight weeks since she left me alone here, without an explanation. I wondered once again where she had gone, with less concern than I should have. The thought that she might be freezing to death, lost in the wilderness, should have horrified me. I should have longed to see her again, but I didn’t. No, the ache of hunger was stronger. I only craved the food and drink she’d know how to provide.

Shreds of hope that my mother would return had carried me through the last eight weeks. It felt unlikely—she had *chosen* to leave me—but I still hoped she would return to the home she’d known and loved for so long. Even if her daughter’s welfare wasn’t enough to motivate her.

A vibrant red cloth snapped in the wind a few stalls away. My breath vanished. Icy sweat beaded at the nape of my neck. Disoriented, I centered my feet in the gravel and tried not to sway. The color reminded me of them...of the discovery that still haunted my dreams.

For months now, I had woken every morning in a cold sweat. And it was always the same bloody, inescapable nightmare that brought me there.

Only now, I wasn't asleep. I was brutally awake and freezing. So it seemed I wasn't free of the nightmares while conscious, either. I blinked once, twice, swallowing down the urge to scream the way I had that day. But I refrained and forced tears to clear my vision and dispose of the memory. So much red.

But it was hard to rid myself of those all-consuming memories when I had little else to fill the space. These days, blood was just about all I could remember.

"Move!"

A body much bigger than my own slammed into my back again, knocking me to my knees. Sharp rocks bit through the cloth of my pants and the thin wool of my gloves. I'd been too stuck in my own head to see the assailant. Not that it mattered. I didn't have an ounce of strength or skill to defend myself, and they were already gone down the rocky path.

I got up and looked around the market. Ramshackle buildings shuddered in the brutal wind, proof of the village's lack of resources. Signs on the stalls showed the price of goods, and nothing cost less than three or four coins. None of the stall owners looked any kinder than the one who'd requested *other* forms of payment.

I resigned myself to returning home.

If I made it back before dark, at least I wouldn't die today.

But you'll starve.

I winced at my mind's voice. Dying today or a few weeks from now. What a choice the gods had given me.

Many times over the past six months, I'd wondered where the gods were. If they were anywhere at all. If only they would humble themselves and use their divine magic to aid the hungry and insignificant. What would my life, and the lives of anyone else starving

in this frigid north, look like if they did? I focused on the sharp cold in my lungs and gathered all of my energy for the journey home.

The trip back through the forest took me more than five hours. I counted every step, and when I lost count, I started over, and over again. It was all I could do to distract myself from the gnawing aches in my feet, calves, hips. From the blisters that split the skin of my ankles. Everything hurt, and it took all my willpower to pretend I hadn't suffered all this exhaustion and agony in vain.

Finally, the weathered stone chimney of my home poked out above leafless trees. I pressed forward, every inhale a challenge. The cabin had been built by my parents before I was born. Though I couldn't remember how it looked in its early years, it was clear that the cabin's exterior had worn throughout time.

Six months ago, I woke up without memory of my first nineteen years of life. I'd suffered a fall and struck my head in the cellar, my mother said, and since then I'd felt like a blank piece of parchment waiting for someone else's story.

Unfortunately for me, *blood* was the brightest stain on that parchment. That recurring nightmare was not just a nightmare, but one of the few memories I kept against my will. A horror I would never forget, no matter how hard I tried.

Before going inside the cabin, I trudged to the barn and checked on the hens. Opening the door required the full weight of my hungry, trembling frame.

Penny greeted me with a string of hungry clucks.

"I know, girl." I sniffled, grabbing the dwindling bucket of half-frozen grain and scattering a half-handful across the floor. Rationing was crucial to keep the chickens alive, just as it was for me. "Come here." I lifted the hens from their nests and set them

on the cold floor of the barn to eat their food. "I'm sorry. I'm hungry, too."

With a heavy sigh, I stepped outside and marched toward the house, pausing only to tighten the shawl around my neck. Dried leaves crunched beneath my feet as I moved. In early winter, the branches of trees formed a cross-hatched landscape that faded into endless distance. On the forest floor, the leaves provided a haven for small creatures seeking shelter from the cold. Despite my loneliness—how I sometimes craved anything but painful quiet—I felt there was strange, silent beauty in such a desolate place.

Twigs crunched to my left. My heart pounded in my ears and my body tensed with anticipation. But when I turned and saw a white-tailed deer dashing into the woods, my shoulders relaxed. I wondered what it was to have the bravery to truly run free. Wondered if I would ever find that. I wouldn't even know where to begin.

A nasty wind swelled out of the trees into the clearing. It bit at my skin like shards of glass, and I picked up my pace to get out of the cold.

Once indoors, I slid my stockinged feet from my boots and lit our wood-burning stove to heat some broth. The cabin had one living area, crowded with a sofa and a chair, the stove, and a tiny kitchen with space for two people to sit and eat, and an insulated chest for preserving food. Just off the main room were two small bedrooms and a room for bathing, the latter of which I entered to start a fire below the bathtub. Beneath the large stoneware basin, my father had dug a small, contained fire pit, which could be easily lit and extinguished as needed. Our home wasn't much, but it had been enough for the four of us once.

My gaze lingered on the larger of the two bedrooms, where I'd found the dead bodies of my father and five-year-old brother, Phillip and Oliver Gold.

Each time I remembered, I felt the scrape of the wail that tore through my throat when I found them. I'd only seen the aftermath. Three months after waking without memories, I found them in my parents' bed: eyes closed, asleep, with no signs of fear in their peaceful expressions. No worried creases had distorted their features. No bruises on their bodies. No signs of struggle. Either it had been so quick, they were both dead before they knew what was happening, or they'd been staged that way for me to find.

The cuts across their necks had been deep and precise. A merciful execution. But on each of their torsos, an X had been carved through their shirts. A mark, or a target, maybe. For what, I didn't know.

I stood near the hearth and stared at the worn leather sofa. Some nights, in the weeks after finding the bodies, I had woken to find my mother asleep there, hair cascading behind her head. Her own chestnut pillow.

Groaning, I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands. Perhaps out of some guilt-driven desire to punish myself—and ruin one of the only fond memories I had of her—I recalled the last thing my mother said to me before leaving eight weeks ago.

"I would give you up to have my boy back. I am done being your safe haven."

That made two of us. I would have switched places with him in a heartbeat.

It should have been you.

I shuddered at the vicious internal voice insistent on reminding

me, entered the bathroom, and drew the curtains closed. As far as I knew, no one lived within miles of this cabin, but I couldn't shake the fear of being watched. Like someone had been waiting for me to return.

I shuddered the thought away and stopped to undress in front of the broken mirror that hung askew on the wall. From what I *could* remember, my pallid skin had once held color but it had gradually faded here in the wilderness. Now, all that was left was the bright pink of my near-frostbitten cheeks after nine—no, ten—hours in the freezing air. I had never hated my reflection, but it pierced me with sadness to see the skeletal lines of my body. Where strong, healthy curves had once arched and bowed through my chest, hips, and thighs, now I was frail and flat. But my mother had assured me, for reasons I didn't understand, that I would be wise to keep a thin stature.

"Delicate and light, Ary. Anything more is unbecoming."

My long, silver-blond hair was tangled at the ends and in desperate need of a trim. Loose strands escaped my braid and trailed down the sides of my face. A string of light freckles painted my cheeks and cascaded over the bridge of my nose. My green eyes were rimmed red with exhaustion.

I watched my reflection as I let my fingers linger over the small scar directly over my heart. Lower down, there was a faded horizontally smile on my abdomen from some surgery I'd had when I was young—a growth that had to be removed, according to my mother. But the scar on my chest was more prominent. I always called it my mystery scar, because my mother didn't know where it came from. Or perhaps she did know and chose not to tell me.

It wasn't the scars themselves that bothered me, but the fact that

I didn't have the memories to explain either of them. I might have found power in my scars had I recalled living through the pain.

I stared at the burning flames beneath the basin, aching to feel the heat. Most days, I let the fire burn longer than it should, but I looked forward to the steaming water. Hot enough to hurt, but not hot enough to peel the skin off my body.

It anchored me to the present, and made breathing just a little easier.

I climbed into the wide basin and let the water engulf me. Sweat prickled my forehead and my limbs burned. I suffered through the heat until I felt my body relaxing. Every muscle in my body was tired, so I laid my head back and let exhaustion take me.

When I woke, the candles I'd placed in the window were out and bathwater licked my naked body with a sinister chill.

I dried off, dressed in my nightgown, and lay down in the bed of blankets I had made for myself on the floor beside the hearth. Oliver and I had shared the smaller bedroom, but since his death, I found it difficult to sleep in a half-empty bed. Every time I tried, my fingers grazed the spot where his little body had once lain tucked up against me. I tried to imagine him there, but my imagination would drift too far, and instead of finding comfort, I found ghosts.

Hours later, a sound above the wailing wind stirred me from sleep. I sat up, wondering if my mother had returned. Unlikely but . . . just in case.

As soon as I rose, a loud, abrasive knock on the front door startled my stiff, frozen limbs to life.

"Ary!"

My eyes shot wide, and panic gripped my throat. That wasn't my mother's voice.

“Ary, you know who this is!”

I threw the covers off my legs, pinched my thigh, and waited to see if I was hallucinating. I hadn’t heard that sharp, raspy, indignant voice in months.

I’d had an inkling someone was watching me earlier. I shouldn’t have ignored it.

“I know you’re in there! Don’t pretend you can’t hear me!”

“Impossible,” I whispered. I pressed my ear to the front door and waited for her to speak again, if only to prove I hadn’t fallen into a fever dream.

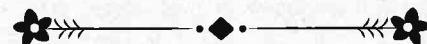
“Open the damn door, Ary!”

A tight ball of fury began to coil in the pit of my belly. Did she think she could come back like she never left? After . . . everything? I rested my hand on the knob and froze, cold air snaking up my bare legs from beneath the door, pricking at my skin.

“Damn it, Ary! I understand if you hate me, but it is cold as shit. I’m out of food and rum, and I am not afraid to break down this gods-damned door with a pickax—”

I yanked open the door and found myself staring into the angry, determined, bright-eyed, and beautiful face of my only true friend—Gemma Tremaine.

Chapter Two



Gemma had matured over the past year. Her mahogany skin seemed a little darker and more worn from the sun. That made me think she had been in the south. The sun was scared to show its face this far north, especially with winter looming.

I remembered her ebony curls, disheveled from the wind. They were longer now, and pulled into a loose, messy bun. Stray strands framed her high cheekbones and striking amber eyes.

Gemma was a filthy-mouthed, relentless force of a woman. My parents had welcomed her into our home from one of the nearby villages, and while I only remembered a month with her, it had been enough time to form an attachment even stronger than any I’d formed with either of my parents.

Gemma was twenty-four—four years older than me. She’d shown me the kind of fire a woman could brandish with her tongue. During that month she’d told me stories of our world. Every one felt like a wonder to me, because history and travel—the world beyond this forest—were things my parents never spoke about.

A few weeks before Phillip and Ollie's deaths, however, Gemma had left us to seek new "living arrangements."

"There you are!" She reached out a foot to block the door before I could close it on her. I wasn't going to leave her out there. But I didn't plan on allowing her in right away, either. She would have to earn it.

I was still trying to recover from the shock of finding Gemma on my doorstep when she tried to step over the threshold. To her annoyance, I didn't budge. "You've got to be shitting me, Ary. Let me in."

"No."

"No?" she repeated, eyes wide and disbelieving.

"No," I said, but Gemma shifted forward to lean more of her weight against the door. "I said no. You can't come in."

"Ary—"

"What do you want?" I demanded.

She grumbled something unintelligible and, with just enough force to unbalance me, shoved past into the house.

"You've become such a gracious host, Ary." She wiped her boots on the bare floor, unslinging a crossbow from her back and placing it on a chair. Irritation burned my throat. I had just scrubbed that floor the day before in my desperate need to control... *something*. "Thanks for the warm welcome. 'What do you want?'" she repeated, scoffing, as she moved toward my father's dusty old liquor cabinet, inspecting the contents. "You don't seem to be overwhelmed with options here, do you?"

"I could say the same for you."

Gemma's body was curved, defined, and strong, but I could tell she was tired. She smirked, but that didn't hide the bags under her

eyes. It was clear she hadn't bathed in days, either. She smelled a little, honestly.

"I won't deny it." She opened and closed the insulated chest. "I haven't had a drink since I stopped in Albertha, and that was two days ago. So you can imagine I'm parched." I picked up a half-empty glass of water and held it out for her, though I knew water wasn't what she desired. She took it anyway, eyeing me carefully.

"You haven't told me why you're here," I said.

"Well—"

"Or why you left when I needed you."

She paused abruptly, with my glass halfway to her lips. Her eyes narrowed.

"If you think it was my choice to leave, you never knew me at all."

My damn mother.

"She forced you out?" I asked, indignance pressing at my throat.

Gemma nodded, then scoffed. "Said I was getting a little too *mouthy*. Is she here?"

"No."

"I'm not surprised. When exactly did she leave?"

"Eight weeks ago."

"Eight weeks!" Gemma gasped. "Gods." She leaned against the counter, waiting for me to elaborate.

"I found... something," I began, uncertain whether to reveal the contents of the note that had sparked our final argument, "and I confronted her about it."

"Good." She pursed her lips and assessed me. "I hope you gave her hell."

When she'd lived with us, Gemma had worked to cultivate in me