



THE VALDARYN SAGA

Book I

— THE —
JOURNEY
— OF THE —
STRANGERS

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MORGAN WINFIELD

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The Journey of the Strangers

Book I of The Valdaryn Saga

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Note from the Author

This preview contains strong language, mature themes, and emotionally intense content.

Contents

Prologue	Included in sample	1
1 The Ones They Break	Included in sample	3
2 It Had a Shape		17
3 Nothing Left to Go Back To		23
4 Things Buried in Snow		32
5 The Warmth That Shouldn't Be		41
6 Ash and Ember		49
7 The House That Remembers		60
8 Neither Future Nor Past		68
9 Ashes of the Betrayer		80
10 Paradise Between Storms		92
11 Shattered Veil		105
12 The Raging Dark		117
13 Veil of the Grand Hall		130
14 Blood and Water		142
15 Marks of Soltharyn		154
16 The Hall of Ages		167
17 Illusions and Ashes		182
18 Blood, Storm, and Passage		199
19 To the Crystal's Bridge		213
20 Mask of Deception		227
21 The Weight of Choice		242

Prologue

The city burned.

Zarethis stood atop the crumbling walls of the Grand City of Solvaryn, his breath ragged, his hands slick with sweat and blood. Smoke swallowed the stars. Flames licked at the towers as if they hungered. Below him, the golden streets ran red—bright with firelight, dark with blood.

The gates had fallen.

Noctharyn poured through in an endless tide—black steel and crawling shadow, the death of a kingdom given form. Solvaryn soldiers fought back. Brave men and women. All of them doomed. Screams echoed off the stone. Banners fell and were trampled underfoot. The sky itself seemed to weep ash.

This wasn't freedom. This was a grave.

A voice cut through the chaos like a blade. "Zarethis! Tell me this isn't you!"

He turned.

Skultani stood there. Solvaryn's fiercest warrior. The man who'd once called him brother. Blood streaked his golden armor. His sword still dripped, but his hands trembled—not from fear. From betrayal.

"You opened the gates." Not a question. A reckoning.

Zarethis didn't answer. Couldn't. His throat clenched. His fists curled.

"You don't understand," he rasped. "They lied to me."

Skultani's eyes didn't flinch. "No, Zarethis. Nyvaris manipulated you."

The words hit like ice. Not anger. Not fury. Just truth. Cold and final.

He thought he was freeing them. That's what he had been told. That's what he believed. But all he had done was unchain the thing that would devour them.

THE JOURNEY OF THE STRANGERS

Skultani took a step forward, blood soaking into his boots. “End this, Zarethis.”

He could see it in Skultani’s eyes—the warrior still believed there was something left to save.

But there wasn’t. Not anymore. The choice had already been made. The moment the gates opened, the story changed. There was no undoing it. No rewriting the pages already inked.

“No,” Zarethis whispered. “I can’t.”

He closed his eyes and drew his sword.

A single stroke. A ragged breath. A bloom of blood across the armor he used to admire.

Skultani staggered forward.

“You... opened it.” His voice broke, blood bubbling in his throat. “After everything... you were given?”

Ten years. He had been pulled into this world as a boy. Raised like one of them, rose in the ranks, infused with Solvaryn blood—and now his choice was destroying everything.

Zarethis stepped back.

The weight hit then. Not like a blow. Like drowning. Like the walls closing in. He turned toward the gates. Toward what waited beyond.

And he ran.

The Ones They Break

The classroom felt like a prison. It wasn't education. It was a sentence: school. Voices droned around him as pencils scratched against paper, feet shuffled beneath desks, and every sound blended into a low hum that pressed against Ethan Walker's skull. Beneath the window, the old heater vent let out a wheezing rattle. Ethan slouched in his seat, jaw tight, counting the seconds.

Ethan sat in the back corner, next to the windows lining the wall. His hands rested on the quiet rise and fall of his chest. Each breath tugged at the bruises beneath his shirt—reminders of the night before. They weren't fresh, not exactly, but they never faded fast enough. He didn't touch them. There was no point. Pain always became routine once it lingered too long.

His eyes darted to the clock above the whiteboard, its steady ticking a quiet act of defiance. Five hours until winter break. When that bell hit, most of the kids in the room would scatter to warm houses and blinking lights, laughter echoing off the walls. Tables would be piled with food. Cinnamon. Roasted meat. Soft pajamas and louder voices. All that easy joy—so easily taken for granted—would fill the Christmas season.

For Ethan, time off meant silence in a house with drawn blinds and locked doors. He would hear sad music, angry music, and violent movies. Cabinets would swing open, creaking with old rust. The sharp sound of whiskey bottles slamming on counters and tables, heavy footsteps pounding around,

and then—sometimes—a cry. Then a yell. Then curse words. Then maybe cries again. It meant calculating every step—when to move, where to vanish, how to read the room by the shape of a shadow beneath a door or across a wall. He never wanted to be noticed. If he were, that would unleash hell. A hell he'd been through too many times.

The low buzz moved to a higher pitch as laughter cracked from the middle of the room. A girl whispered something about a ski trip to Aspen. Another kid bragged about an NES he hoped would be waiting under the tree. Ethan's gaze shifted to the window. Their world wasn't his. He had never had any of that—ski trips, consoles, cozy laughter. Just noise and slammed doors.

Outside, beyond the senior lot, railroad tracks curved into the woods behind the school. A soft snow was falling over the trees, untouched and quiet—everything the classroom wasn't. Bare branches reached up, catching the newly fallen flakes like feathers. The snow drifted in slow spirals, gathering along the rails and filling the dead grass in between. It was already coating the evergreens. Out there was where he wanted to be. Out there, no one noticed him. Out there, he wasn't anything at all. Somehow, that felt like freedom.

At the front of the room, Mrs. Torrance leaned over her desk, ignoring the rising buzz. She was usually a well-dressed young teacher, but today she seemed off—quiet and withdrawn, her clothes looking as if they'd been picked up off the floor. A crossword puzzle lay in front of her, pen tapping an offbeat rhythm onto the paper. Ethan watched her for a while—the way she rubbed her temples, the tired crease between her brows. He wondered if she ever sat in her car before coming in—headlights off, fingers frozen on the wheel—just breathing.

Maybe just stalling like I do every damn morning on the bus. Just to have one more second before stepping into hell. But no... she chose this. She came back. Some of us would give anything just to leave.

Ethan had had enough of this.

I'm not going to wait, he thought. I'm out of here.

He held his hand up, but she didn't see. She looked as if she were in a trance. The other kids noticed, though, giving him the side-eye. He stood, but as

soon as he started to walk, the world spun—pain exploded in his knees. The floor hit him hard, the tile cold against his skin. His hands scraped a desk rail screw as he caught himself, ribs flaring where the bruises still hadn't healed. The breath left his lungs in a short grunt.

Laughter followed, bright and sharp. Across the aisle, Caleb Toosan leaned back in his chair, foot still stretched out, a grin curling at the edge of his mouth as if he'd been waiting for the perfect moment. "You're a joke, Walker," he said, then whispered, "Fuck you."

Then came the older Toosan—Caleb's brother, the one who'd landed in their class after getting held back.

"Gonna go cry in the bathroom, or just jerk off again?" he sneered, fist snapping into his open palm.

A few kids near the back snickered. One of them muttered, "He probably names his socks."

Ethan didn't say anything. Didn't look at them. His fingers curled against the floor for a second before he let go. The ache in his ribs pulsed with every breath, his knees throbbed, but none of it showed on his face. That was the only control he had—how little he gave them. Something he'd learned at home.

As he pulled himself to his feet, everything stopped. Not gradually. Not the way noise fades when people lose interest. This was sudden, complete. A pressure settled in the air—dense, unnatural. The kind of stillness that felt like a held breath. Ethan looked up.

Mrs. Torrance was on her feet, her face still. It was as if the moment hadn't reached her at all. When she spoke, her voice didn't belong to her. "You don't belong to this world."

The words cut like a clean incision—precise, without feeling. Her voice carried no weight or tone, as if it had been stripped down to sound alone. It was too cold, too clear. It made Ethan's skin crawl.

"What?" he whispered, though his mouth had gone dry.

What the hell does that mean? he thought.

At the edge of his vision, something moved. He caught it out of the corner of his eye—a flicker, barely there—and turned toward the window.

Beyond the school, a shape stood on the railroad tracks at the edge of the woods. It looked human, but not quite. A mist surrounded it. Its outline twitched and blurred, like static, as though the world couldn't decide whether to let it exist. The trees leaned toward it, trunks bending unnaturally before snapping back, resisting its presence. The air itself shimmered, warping around the figure like heat above pavement. The snow beneath it had vanished, as if a giant spotlight were fixed on that one spot.

It was eerie, frightening, but also beautiful. His mouth fell open. And then, in an instant, it vanished.

Ethan's stomach clenched. He turned back to the front of the room, his pulse throbbing in his ears.

"What do you mean?" he asked, louder this time. There was a tremble in his voice that he didn't like.

He squinted, trying to make sense of her face. *It looks like clay. Too smooth. Too blank. Wrong.*

And then, as it had outside, the world snapped back—sudden and jarring, like a cord pulled tight.

Voices. Laughter. Movement. The rattle of chairs. The heater's groan. All of it returned at once, like someone had flipped a switch.

The boy who had tripped him was still there, still smirking, waiting for the next laugh. "Dude's having a seizure," he said, looking around as if for backup.

Ethan barely heard him. His eyes stayed locked on Mrs. Torrance. He knew she'd seemed off today, but *this* off?

She blinked, puzzled, then looked at her crossword. She rubbed her eyes with the palm of her hand, seated as she was before. Like nothing had happened.

"Mr. Walker," she said, her voice dry and uninterested, "do you have a question?"

Ethan hesitated.

Do I have a question? You just... weren't you anymore.

"You said I don't belong to this world. What did you mean?"

The class burst into fresh laughter, louder this time, feeding off the absurdity

of his statement. Chairs shifted. Someone made a mock alien noise. Of course, the Toosan brothers had their say.

Mrs. Torrance looked up over her glasses. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said, already filling in a square on her puzzle. "What do you need, Mr. Walker?"

You say nothing about anything happening in this room, he thought. *What is with you?*

He stared down a moment longer. "I... need to use the restroom."

That single line set off the class again—an eruption of belly aching laughter, as all the mocking, tripping, and comments had boiled over into one final explosion.

This time, Mrs. Torrance did say something. "Settle down!" she cried, pulling her glasses from her face and placing them on the crossword puzzle. She shot the room a silencing glare, then fixed her eyes on him. "Mr. Walker, I don't know if you belong or not. If you need the restroom, go."

Ethan wanted to say something else, but he didn't. *What was the use?* he thought.

As he walked out, his mind was on the shimmering figure. On the thing that twisted the trees. And on that voice that wasn't hers.

I'm not crazy, he thought. *I saw something. I heard exactly what she said!*

He walked down the hall, past the bathroom, and out the double doors into the cold. Back in the '80s, once you were counted in homeroom, there were no other checks. He used that sometimes to his advantage and this was as good a time as any.

He'd need to sneak between cars and dart into the woods, onto the tracks—but that, he'd mastered.

What bothered him was the figure. It was right where he was going.



Ethan made it through the senior parking lot undetected. He stopped at the last car and scanned the railroad tracks—nothing. Then he darted into the woods, running as hard and fast as his body would allow.

Once under the treeline, he moved toward the tracks. The exact spot. He stepped carefully; if anyone looked out a window, they'd see him.

Snow drifted into his hair. He was tall for sixteen, an eleventh-grader who had started school early due to his birthday. Lean and slightly built, his muscles hinted at strength earned from doing whatever he could to avoid being home. His hair—a tousled mix of brown and blonde—looked as if he'd just rolled out of bed. He wore black t-shirts, worn jeans, and old sneakers, never caring much about appearances.

Today, he had on a thick jacket and boots. He hadn't planned to leave school, so the cold bit through his jeans and slipped down his back, sliding past the hem of his jacket like fingers. He only had a t-shirt underneath.

At least I've got boots, he thought.

He moved onto the tracks and positioned himself a little down from where the rail exited the woods, staying out of the school's line of sight but still close enough to the spot.

He knelt, the steel digging into his knees, not helping the bruises surely forming from the fall in class. He could feel the cold through the denim, leaching into his skin. His breath came in shallow curls, disappearing into the gray sky. His body was here, but his mind hadn't left that classroom. That moment. And now that he was here, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Where did it go? he wondered. *It was completely melted. I know I saw it.*

He stared down at the rails. Cold steel—no warmth, no markings. Nothing.

His eyes swept the woods, the tracks, the trees beyond. The snow was undisturbed. No footprints. No movement. No proof anything had happened

at all.

He closed his eyes, forcing himself to remember—every flicker, every shift, every creeping sense of wrong. The mind was a traitor. He knew that well enough. Memories warped, twisted in on themselves, turned certainty to doubt. He had learned that lesson in blood and broken ribs. His side still ached when the cold hit just right.

You ran into me. You should have moved. You imagined it.

He knew how easy it was to question oneself, to believe something had never happened if the lie was told often enough. But he would not lie to himself now. He had seen something, and that meant something had seen him.

He sighed, knowing there was no use in staying.

Shoulders hunched, he began walking along the tracks, his boots crunching over frozen gravel scattered between the wooden ties. The twin rails stretched ahead in a quiet, unbroken line, vanishing into the stillness.

As he walked, his thoughts began to drift, pulling him inward—back to the figure, to the way the trees had twisted unnaturally, to the thing that had stood there, not moving, as if waiting just for him.

He wanted to believe it hadn't been real, that anxiety had made his eyes misfire, that exhaustion had filled in the blanks where logic gave out. But deep down, he knew he'd told himself worse lies than that before—and believed them, too. Fantasy had always been his easiest escape, the place he could run when the world became too loud, too sharp, too much.

Ethan heard something behind him. He stopped and looked around. Nothing. But the air had changed. He felt it.

Something moved in the trees.

A slicing noise tore through the wind and snow.

A sharp crack split the air, followed by an explosion of pain at the back of his neck. His vision blurred, the world tilting—and then he was falling. Knees first. Then his side. Pain flared through his ribs, the breath torn from his lungs as he hit the frozen ground. The cold was immediate, biting through his clothes, wrapping itself around his bones.

And then came the laughter—bright, cruel, familiar.

“Where are you going, Jerker?”

The name dug into him like a knife. It had started as a joke—a stupid twist on Walker. A middle-school insult that had outlived its time. Now it was theirs, a leash they yanked whenever they wanted to remind him he belonged to them.

He turned his head just enough to see them. The Toosan brothers. People always mistook them for twins. They were identical, down to the sharp grins plastered across their faces, down to the narrow glint in their dark eyes. Caleb stood just ahead of his brother, a snowball packed with stone in his palm, its jagged edge glinting in the pale winter light. Cody stood beside him, knuckles white around another rock.

Another strike. His ribs. His thigh. His shoulder. The pain came fast, without room to process, without room to breathe. Ethan folded inward, arms wrapped tight around his head, knees drawn in. *Protect the ribs. Protect the face. Let it happen.* Another hit. His back. His leg. His side.

Then—it stopped. Ethan’s vision blurred. He blinked hard—once, twice. *Don’t pass out, he thought. I’m going to throw up.*

Boots in the snow. Caleb crouched beside him, fingers twisting into Ethan’s jacket, dragging him up until their faces were close.

“No matter where you go,” Caleb said, his voice soft, almost gentle, “we’ll find you.”

Ethan’s breath came in short, uneven bursts. He didn’t want to speak, but the question clawed its way out anyway. He blinked through tears he refused to let fall.

“Why?”

Caleb smiled—flat and cold. “Because we hate you.”

He released him, driving Ethan’s face hard into the ground. A jagged stone split his lip.

Somewhere in the distance, the school bell rang.

The brothers jogged off toward the school lot, brushing snow from their gloves as if nothing had happened at all. Ethan didn’t move. The cold soaked into him, heavy and permanent. His body ached. His chest burned. A shimmer bled into his vision—soft, flickering—as if it were crouched behind

his eyes. An odd wind moved through the trees as he lay there, defeated, and as he bled, the world kept turning.

The blood had frozen against his skin. It cracked when he finally moved about ten minutes later. A dull pulse throbbed at the corner of his mouth where the stone had split his lip. He ran his tongue over it—copper, thick, and bitter. The kind of taste that lingered.

Pain spread from the base of his skull down into his neck, slow and deep, the kind that settled in the bone. By now, it didn't matter if it came from his father or the Toosans. A bruise was a bruise. The ache in his ribs didn't care where it came from.

Snow drifted through the air, catching in his hair, melting on contact. It would get heavier later, burying everything in white. For now, it just dusted the tracks in uneven patches, soft and cold. His jacket was still zipped, still his. A small mercy.

But mercy wasn't enough anymore.

This was it. He was done with school. Done with home. Done with everything. Except Sara. He couldn't be done with her. She was the only reason he hadn't already vanished. Still, he had to leave. Not in a week. Not after graduation next year. *Now*, he thought.

He had waited long enough. Lied to himself long enough. Told himself to hold out, to survive until eighteen, to keep his head down and his mouth shut. But that lie had grown teeth. It had devoured entire years. Turned pain into a habit and silence into survival. And it had never stopped a thing. Not one goddamn thing.

He walked with the wind at his back. Somewhere between the last curve in the tracks and the upcoming bridge, the tears came, but he didn't bother to

wipe them away. No one was here to see. No one to tell him to toughen up. To be a man. To take it like a Walker. He let the cold take them. Let the wind smear them. Let the numbness crawl in where the anger used to live.

Stowe Bridge came into view ahead—a stone arch curving over the frozen creek, cracked with age, dark with moss. He'd spent summers there with Sara. Lying in the grass under the bridge, swimming, listening to the water. Pretending they were somewhere else. It was the only place that hadn't been poisoned by fists or whispers.

Ethan looked up. There were a few ways to get to a place called Dead Man's Hill—one was to go left along the creek here at the bridge. The other was through a path behind his house, just past the backyard and across the street.

He recalled the story of why it was called Dead Man's Hill, an urban legend about a kid who died there in the fifties. In reality, he figured the "boy" was just a teenager—someone old enough to vanish without a trace. The story went that there was no blood. No footprints. Not even the sled that he was riding on the hill.

The ground began to vibrate. A low hum rolled through the steel beneath his boots as he reached the start of the bridge and looked down the tracks into the snowfall. He couldn't see anything past the white and gray blur, the mist rising from under the bridge, but he could hear it. The train was coming.

He stepped off the tracks, toward the edge of the bridge. The wind bit at his face, but it didn't pull him back. He closed his eyes and let the noise swell.

The fists. The laughter. The whispers. His father's voice, thick with liquor, sharp with rage.

It all pressed down—tight and constant—until his chest felt hollow and his ribs ached with something that wasn't just bruises. His hands had curled into fists without him realizing it.

The sound grew. Steel on steel. A deep, grinding roar that he could feel in his bones.

He took one step forward.

The rails shook. The humming turned to thunder. The wind screamed past his ears. The train tore around the bend—a wall of motion and noise, relentless and unthinking. It shot like a missile onto Stowe Bridge, closing

fast.

He didn't move. Didn't blink. Didn't breathe. He just stood there, at the center of the tracks.

Then a voice—

“ETHAN! Holy shit!”

The sound cut through everything. Sharp. Human. Real. He flinched, his muscles locking, his breath catching.

“Get off the tracks!” she screamed. “What the hell are you doing?! Are you trying to die?!”

He knew that voice. Sara!

She was running—boots slipping, arms flailing, hair flying in the wind, eyes wide with panic. She had seconds.

He froze.

She wasn't supposed to be here.

“Move!” she shouted, still running. “Get the fuck back!”

And then—her hands hit him.

They tumbled, her momentum knocking him off balance, dragging them both over the side of the tracks. The world flipped—a blur of white and wind and steel. The train screamed overhead, rattling the bridge, splitting the sky in half.

Then the ground.

Rocks slammed into his back, sharp and cold. Pain lit up every nerve. Sara landed beside him with a grunt, one hand pressed to her ribs, her teeth clenched.

For a long moment, neither of them moved. Then she shoved him—not hard. Just enough.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Her voice broke, raw and shaking.

Ethan blinked up at the sky. Snowflakes hit his face, melting before he could feel them. His ribs burned. His skull buzzed. His hands were trembling.

Sara looked at him as if he'd broken something in her that couldn't be put back.

“You almost fucking died.”

He exhaled, slow and shaky. He couldn't get the words out.

But he knew.

For one second, it had almost sounded like peace.

Silence settled after the train passed. Snow was still falling, soft and steady, but the tracks were visible now, cleared by the weight and rush of steel—tracks that could have been smeared with blood just a moment ago.

They were still on their backs, breathing hard. Ethan's mind scrambled, torn between the shock of what he'd almost done and the sharp, aching gratitude that she was there at all.

Sara Bellies. Her voice could ground him when his thoughts spiraled. Still, had she arrived a second later...

He hadn't planned on seeing her until later, after he'd had time to sort through his own head, but seeing her now felt right. She'd been there through everything: the quiet moments, the chaos, and all the messy in-betweens.

She lived just a few houses down, but her world couldn't have been more different. Where Ethan's life was built on volatility, hers was rooted in routine. A normal family—even if she called it boring. She didn't wake up bracing for disaster. Her home was safe. Predictable. He envied that more than he ever let on.

After a moment, they sat up. Sara hopped down from the embankment and stood near the edge of the bridge, a few feet away. The old stone arch curved quietly over the river, worn smooth by time and softened by a fresh layer of snow. Beneath it, the dark water slipped past snow-capped stones like whispered secrets. On either side, the forest stood hushed and silver-veiled, each branch cradling snow.

He looked at her. Tried not to, but her blue eyes caught his. They were wide, raw, with a mix of concern and shock. She wore her usual ripped jeans

and beat-up Converse, but today she'd layered a hoodie beneath a thin jacket, the kind she probably kept stuffed in her locker. It wasn't enough for the cold. Snow was already melting into the sleeves, darkening the fabric, but she didn't seem to notice.

She could pull off anything, but she never dressed to impress him. She never had to. They'd been best friends since before either of them understood what that meant. Somewhere along the way, it had shifted. There was more between them now. They both knew it. Neither dared say it.

She reached toward his mouth, placing her hand gently under his chin. He flinched, then jerked back and looked away.

"Those assholes again," she said, her voice tight. "I saw you leave. I saw them come back."

He didn't answer at first. Just stared down the tracks. Then he sighed. "Yeah."

She didn't need to say anything else. The look on her face said it all—the pain she saw didn't explain what she'd just witnessed.

"I got jumped," he muttered, brushing snow off his sleeve with stiff fingers, ribs flaring under the motion. "I'm tired of it. School. Home. All of it."

"I see this. You know, I care about you, dumbass." Her voice was quieter now, almost gentle. "We've only got this year and next. You can make it." Even as she said it, she seemed to realize how long an eternity that was.

She paused, and Ethan turned toward her, a question in his eyes.

"I'm going to ask my parents if you can stay with us for winter break. You up for that?"

He didn't answer right away. He knew what she was offering. Escape. But even that wasn't freedom. Not really. Because eventually, he'd still have to go back.

He looked at her. "Yeah," he said finally. "I'd like that."

A faint smile touched her lips. She stepped up onto the empty rail, arms out like a tightrope walker. "When we finally graduate and leave," she said, glancing over her shoulder, "I hope you take me with you."

She wobbled slightly but didn't fall. She tugged on his jacket. "Come on. Let's see how far we can go without falling off."

THE JOURNEY OF THE STRANGERS

Ethan huffed a reluctant laugh and stepped onto the other rail. “I always win.” He spread his arms for balance, and they walked slowly, their steps measured on the snow-dusted steel.

For a while, neither of them spoke. The world fell away—no school, no home, no bruises. Just the two of them and the rhythm of their steps. For a moment, it worked. For a little while, Ethan let himself forget.

Thank you for reading.

This is only the beginning of a long journey — one that spans seven books, countless miles, and characters who change in ways they never imagined.

Whether you're here for the world, the people, or just to see what happens next... I'm grateful you gave this story a shot.

— Morgan Winfield

PS: If this preview struck a chord, I'd be honored if you shared it. Whether it's the link, the file, or just a conversation — every reader helps bring this world to life.