

Diamondheart, Draft 1

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This was my first NANOWRIMO - an attempt to write novel draft in a month. It is rough in many ways, and I'm not sure I knew where I was going, but I still remember it fondly and would like to overhaul it someday. The idea began in my mind with images of a smoke-colored cat in rust-red autumn leaves, a snow white cat curled around a heart of shining cut glass in a palace tower, and the empty-eyed queen to whom the heart belonged...

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1 - Part 1: Where the Cat Led Her

The cat was the only reason she came.

Do not get me wrong, now. Elise was a marvelously curious girl—as they all seem to be at some point in their lives—and she was curious about many of the right things, such as us, for instance. But she was also a *young* girl, and if you had tried to tell her what would happen and invited her along to see it on that fine autumn morning when it began, she would have laughed and then ignored you. After all, Elise was playing in the leaves.

Red, yellow, orange, brown—they flew up into the sky by fistfuls. They rained down again like flames, like butterflies, like a council of fairies. She wallowed in them, buried herself in them, resurrected to watch them fly again. Elise knew leaves were the best part of fall, beating out hay-rides and costumes and the first cider hands down for at *least* as long as one she was playing in them. It would have taken something drastic to call her away from the fun.

Something soft and living tickled her leg. Squealing, she jerked away—and looked into a pair of solemn yellow eyes. The owner of them yawned as insolently as only cats can, and flicked its tail away from her as if it had children squeal at it every day. Elise hardly dared to breathe.

It had been years since she had been this close to a cat. The neighbors' cats ignored her. Her own was dead. Elise loved cats. They were like little kings and queens, all prim and proper, but confident enough in themselves to play unabashed. This one kept watching her as if it were reading her mind. Maybe it was. Who knew what a cat could do? Then it sauntered closer, touching her again.

She relaxed and smiled. Fall and a cat—this was the life. Then the creature was running away.

“Wait!” she called, even though she knew cats do not obey. But this one did. It hesitated a moment, and turned its head back at her, yellow eyes blinking as if to say, “What’s the fuss?” Then it turned and ran again, skimming across the yard like a wisp of smoke. She got up, scattering leaves, and trotted after it.

The cat led her across her yard, and through a hole in the hedge. It led her into a brittle yellow field of grain. It skimmed easily along, dodging between stalks as if there was a marked path, while she pressed through clumsily and felt mud weighing down her shoes. She shuddered when she thought of a snake her dad had found out here, just last week—a copperhead—but she heard a “miau!” ahead and kept moving.

Her walk was taking longer than she’d thought it would, perhaps because she had not been thinking when she set out on it. She had only wanted to follow, and see where the smoke-colored stray was off to. She still did want to see this through... but the sky was growing dim and purple overhead, and she could see a sliver of moon, and her tummy was saying something about supper. She turned to go home, and found in a flash of panic that she did not know which way to turn. The cat had twisted around so many directions that she had lost count, and the grain around her swayed higher than her head.

There was no way to see back.

If she yelled, would anyone hear her? It seemed like the field must stretch on forever, and her neighborhood was a world away.

Fur tickled her legs. A warm body rubbed against her, caressed her, and purred deeply. Elise looked down to watch the beast circle her, more shadowy than ever in the dark but feeling fireplace-warm.

“Stupid kitty,” she pouted, “you got me lost!”

It looked up at her innocently with its wide golden eyes. The purring stopped. The cat slipped away from her, and she followed, unsure what else to do. But, yes, there the stalks seemed thinner—she could see a patch of green—

She walked out of the field and found herself standing at the base of a large hill. Some of the grass there was still green, even after the heat of summer. Coarse red patches of flowers swayed in the breeze. The cat was already out of sight. Somewhere she heard a shrill piping which was probably a bird, although it didn't sound like any of the bird-calls she would hear from her bedroom window. With the sunset-clouds spreading over the hill, and the gold evening light coloring her skin, the place was lovely. It did not, however, get Elise any supper—and the rumble inside of her was reminding her she needed just that.

She turned back towards the field with a sinking feeling in her chest. This was going to be an awfully long walk. It might be even longer without the cat in front of her to chase. How would she explain herself to her mom, anyway?

Before she had taken her next step she heard the birdsong again, and smelled something terribly sweet. Then she was on her knees in the muddy grass, not sure how she got there. Then her head was on her lap, and she was asleep.

For a moment before her eyes closed, Elise thought she saw gray fur.

A fire was crackling merrily on the ground beside her when she woke. Someone knelt next to her and the fire holding a stick which poked through something smelling delicious. It was a healthy, meaty sort of a smell, full of supper promises. The person glanced over at her.

“Good to see you, too,” he said.

She blinked the blariness out of her eyes and pushed herself up on one elbow. She was not on the hill anymore.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

His face twisted in puzzlement, and she noticed his eyes had bits of cat-yellow in them.

"I'm Master Rol," he said. "I'm the Warden hereabouts. Have ya not heard of me? We do not get many young folk on the borders."

Questions raced through Elise's mind. What was the man Warden of? Why did he bring her here? Would he help her go home? Why did she fall asleep? What did he mean by "the borders"? The first thing out of her mouth, though, was "What is for supper?" Master Rol laughed.

"You are a normal girl, whatever strange sort of a place I found you in. It is rabbit, miss, and a good one too."

"Of *course* I'm not strange!" she protested, and the next moment thought, rabbit? That good-smelling meat used to be a fluffy bunny hopping around?

"What's a normal girl doing sleeping at the Edge, then?" Master Rol asked, his face much more serious than his tone. Elise hesitated.

"You don't mean just the edge of the field, do you," she asked him in a very small voice. She might have been mistaken, but for a second she thought she saw fear in his eyes.

"Strange things happen out there," he said, "and it would be best for me to get you fed and safely taken home, and have a talk with your parents."

"You'll take me home, sir?" She asked as he pulled his skewer of meat away from the fire and began dividing it up onto a pair of foil plates.

"Surely," he said, eyes on the meat. "I wouldn't send a child out in the night alone." He handed her a dish and fiddled with the fire, sending up a glowing orange spray. "Where do you come from?"

"I'm from Maple Lane," she answered quickly, "the neighborhood across the field."

"Across the field?" Master Rol asked, smiling in that way which adults generally use on very young children who they are not sure can understand. "You came from across the field, from the other side than the hill?" Elise's face got warm and her neck got prickly. She knew which direction was home! Of course she did. She had lived there, oh, years and years anyway... What was wrong with this man? Was he maybe a little bit crazy?

"Girl, where is your home?" He asked again, his voice soft and urgent. "Don't toy with me. I need to know. Your folks will be worried, and I need to return you to them."

"I *told* you"—Elise began, but his look was enough to make her stop.

"Homeless, then," he said, not quietly enough for her not to hear. "Eat up, we'll talk after," he said in answer to her cry of protest, and motioned to her plate. As much as her stomach growled at the smell of the bunny-meat, it felt strange to try eating warm meat with her bare fingers, and the knot in her chest made it hard to swallow.

“Go on, girl, you need the food,” he insisted.

“My name’s not girl,” she mumbled angrily, “it’s Elise Rachel Summers.”

“Three names?” She spotted a raised eyebrow out of the corner of her eye. “Do folks always call you by the three of them?”

“Nope,” she said, “Just when they’re mad at me or think I’m being silly. Mostly I’m Elise. Don’t *you* have three names?”

“Nobody I know on the borders does,” Master Rol said, “but maybe some of them in the big city do, or Her Grace.” Elise did not answer that because her mouth was full, and she’d always been told speaking with your mouth full was wrong, although sometimes she forgot. So Master Rol continued.

“I don’t quite know what’s happened here, Elise, but I’ll find out. I know a lady who may be able to... help us.”

Elise did not think she needed *help*, she needed *home*. She needed home now, thank you very much sir. But as she chewed on bunny meat, she found it wasn’t so hard to swallow anymore. And as she ate, she watched the dragon-glow or the orange wood at the bottom of the fire, and it crackled and broke and quivered with smoke, and she became warm and full. In the warmth of the fire Elise’s eyes began to droop again. Then her head was on her shoulder, and her half finished plate tilted off of her lap.

Master Rol sat and watched her with a mix of curiosity and pity, the light catching the cat-gold flecks in his eyes. Deep in his throat he whined, as soft and shrill as a lonely dog. The child with three names would need him here, he knew. That poor, strange, mixed-up child from the kingdom’s edge.

2 - Part 1: A Borderland Friend

“You’re lonely.” That was the first thing the stranger said, straight after setting foot out her front door. She said it like an accusation. Elise and Master Rol had traveled all morning since before Elise’s normal wake-up time to get to her, and the first thing out of her mouth was “You’re lonely.” Elise personally thought her quite silly for it. She was sweaty and tired and very annoyed that Master Rol did not believe her about where home was, and she wanted to be with her mom eating scrambled eggs and toast, but she was *not* lonely. Then again, the woman was looking at Master Rol, not at Elise.

Master Rol ducked her a quick, nimble bow.

“Maybe,” he said, “I did want to see your face, Lady. But I also need help. For the girl.”

The woman looked Elise up and down, making her feel as if she was a flower being pulled apart for a microscope. Then her face cleared. Whatever she had been looking for wasn’t there, and she seemed glad of it.

“What’s the child’s trouble, Master?” The woman enquired. “No,” she said when he opened his mouth, “let’s not talk out here. You two come inside. Have a drink. Have some bread.” She opened the door wider and bustled in. “It’s none of the finest, near a week since last baking day, but come on in and we’ll do what we can, shan’t we?”

The inside of her house was small—as small, maybe, as Elise’s family’s kitchen—but it was cozy. There was a fireplace in one wall, and a shelf with a basin running along another wall beneath a diamond-paned window. A large wooden chest sat in front of a green curtain drawn across the far side of the room. The ceiling was bare up to its rough hewn rafters, but the rafters dangled with a Christmas’s worth of bright colors in the way of vegetables and herbs. The planking of the floors was patched over by rag rugs. Unlit candles stood and hung in odd corners. Elise was reminded vaguely of a pioneer cabin she had been to once with her aunt, and of pictures in a fairytale book. She thought that if she didn’t have the sort of house she had now, then this sort of house might not be a bad one in which to live. The woman crouched down and pulled aside a piece of the floor, and descended into the dark hole below. She emerged with a bowl, two rolls, and a jug.

“Come now,” she said, setting them on the table, “eat up. When you’re through, Master Rol, you can tell me what this is that you’ll be needing my help for so badly.”

“Thank you kindly, Mistress Mairenn,” Rol said with a gleaming smile, and pulled out a seat for Elise before settling down himself. Then he placed a finger next to his eye, closed his eyes, and softly rattled off something in a language Elise didn’t know. The only word she could remember afterwards sounded something like “illion.” It took her a moment to realize what he was doing, and by the time she’d blinked her eyes shut he was almost through.

When she bit into it, the bread was harder than the stuff at home. It seemed gritty to her tongue. But it also tasted sweeter, and when she was through with her roll she felt more full than she had expected to be. Master Rol was still eating when her last crumbs were gone. He saw her eyeing him and

raised his eyebrows.

“Mistress Mairenn’s bread is fine stuff, as usual,” he said. “It’s seldom I can get such as this or any grain at all on the patrol. ...My thanks, again!” He called to the cook, who was rummaging for something in the wooden chest by the curtain.

“It is a pleasure to have guests beneath this roof,” she called back. Elise wondered how long the warden and the lady had known each other, and whether she lived all by herself or if her family was out somewhere just now. She wasn’t sure it would be alright to ask.

“You first,” Master Rol told her, passing her the jug. She eyed it in some dismay.

“Where are the cups?” She asked, perhaps too loudly.

“Why do we need those?” He asked, and grimaced. “Child, Elise, here is water, you will need it. Drink, now.”

She shrank, embarrassed. Apparently she’d done something wrong.

“Yes, sir,” she said, sat up straighter in her chair, and tilted the thing cautiously towards herself. She gulped a few times, spilled on herself trying to right the pitcher, and looked nervously up at Master Rol. He, however, had his attention directed elsewhere, to a bit of shaped metal in his hands. Hastily he shoved it into a pouch at his side as she pushed the pitcher across the table towards him.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Here we are,” crowed Mistress Mairenn, appearing with a bundle wrapped in rough brown cloth and twine. “And there *you* are, finished and ready to talk I take is, Master?” Master Rol nodded, and looked at the bundle with what might have been amusement.

“You’ve already placed the need as being a lost child sort of a case then, have you.” The mistress nodded genially, unwinding the twine. “Well, you’re not quite right,” Master Rol said. She paused a moment. “The girl says she isn’t lost. She also says she’s from across the Edge.” As he said *that*, the woman’s fingers lifted off of her package altogether.

“Is it a case for a healer or for a soul-herd, then?” She asked solemnly. Master Rol seemed to consider for a moment.

“For a healer, it may be,” he said, “but if the child’s shadowed she hides it cleverly. Tem of Heart needn’t be bothered for her.”

“Though you’ll bother a biddy like me with your worries,” Mistress Mairenn said.

“Mairenn”—he said, and stopped, checking himself, “Mistress Mairenn, treat this case as if she were merely lost, if you will. I don’t know what strangeness has come in her. I’m just a Warden, a guard. I need to hand her to her folk as soon as ever I can if I’m to get back to my place.”

"I *know* where I'm from! I'm not lost!" Elise cut in frantically. "I'm from *home*. Maple Lane, across the field. What's *wrong* with you?"

Master Rol gave their hostess a warning look, but Mistress Mairenn plunged ahead.

"She may as well hear it now, warden. Somebody's got to tell her how it is. Now listen, child. You just *can't* be from across the field. Nothing lives there—nothing good—it's all a-prowl with shadows and such, which is why we need men like the Warden. Nobody's gone past the Edge and come back into our place alive."

Elise's mouth hung open, then clamped tightly shut, and she gave her head a hard shake.

"You're lying! I'm going home!" she screamed, and she made a mad dash for the cottage door.

Whatever the warden and the border-woman thought of her then, who can fault her, now? They had said her land was a danger or a nothing. Any of us would have done the same. All the same, this complicated matters.

"I'll go for her," Master Rol growled, "whatever she is, we can't let her out alone."

"Do you really think the child would go back to the Edge?" Mistress Mairenn asked. Master Rol didn't answer.

Tired. Hot. Dizzy. Afraid. Elise was all of this and more, and it was a bare few minutes she'd been running. She thought of leaves tossed in the air like fairies or butterflies, fluttering down in red and yellow, orange and brown. She thought of her mother outlined by the back door, and she angrily thought of a yellow-eyed cat. How could anything so small and warm have spoiled everything so badly?

"Elise!" A voice roared out hoarse and frantic behind her. "Stop, child!"

She didn't.

Her feet thumped faster across the ground. She tripped on a twisted root and lay winded, crying in frustration.

"Child, child," the warden gasped as he neared her, "Please don't run from us. I can't... I can't let them take you, too. I... You'll be safe, girl. Safe with us for now." He eased himself down next to her and picked her up like a rag doll.

"Home... would be... safe..." Elise whispered.

"I'll find your home and your folk, Elise, even if you *are* an outlander as you say. I'll spy across the field for you if it'll bring you to your sense." The girl looked him in the eye.

“You’ll go across the field for me?” she asked. “You promise?”

Master Rol hesitated. This was the moment, wasn’t it? If he gave his word to her, he was bound. He saw himself lost in an endless sea of golden stalks, or perhaps in a strange, stark land being eaten up by shadows. No one knew exactly what happened past the Edge, because no one had ever come back. But there was the girl, and her odd clothes, and where he had found her. She did not look or smell of the shadow taken, that much he knew. He bowed his head, resigned. High One protect him.

“I will go,” he said. “If I do not return, stay with Mistress Mairenn and let her scry for your home on our side of the borders.” As soon as it was out of his mouth, he knew he was a fool, but the child relaxed in his arms.

“Thanks so much,” she said. “Tell Mommy I didn’t mean to run away.”

3 - Part 1: Shadows

The danger on the Edge was no superstition, as some would have you think nowadays. People had disappeared, not once, but many times, before it was forbidden for us to walk there and the Wardens were established to guard the way. At first it was no more than a barrier against the curious, that no one would wander out and lose himself in whatever lands lay beyond, as our citizens seemed to be developing such a habit of doing. In those days it was almost a laughable thing that we would have to post a guard on our threshold like a nanny guarding children. As time moved on it became so much more.

They said that *things* wandered there. Things grasped and clawed, mouthed and whispered, were insubstantial as shadows or a mist but solid enough to reach out to you and slay. Things were, perhaps, sent by the very lord of the deep himself. But as long as we stayed in our place, they would stay in theirs. Walk in the light, shut the doors at night, let not your feet stray over the Edge—and all would be safe. You will have nothing to fear. So they said.

Master Rol did not know if he believed in *things*, walking to the field one fine afternoon, swinging a cudgel which would do no good if the rumors were true. He did not know, although he lived closer to them than most anyone else in the land. Soon he would find out, though. He would go into the forbidden territory, and meet whatever was inside. Why? Because a child was delusional? Perhaps it wasn't the child. Perhaps he himself was deep inside of a dream, sleeping on his watch at the Edge of the fields and the safe lands, going to wake up in a moment when he met something terrible and just before he would have dream-died. But no—the child's tears had been real, and the stalks of grain waving like slender bones in front of him were as real as ever they had been.

At the Edge—the true Edge, with his feet almost touching the field—he was shaking. He was a Warden, he was young and strong! But this, this was the unknown, and enough to frighten any man. Before he'd left Mistress Maurenn's cottage, having delivered Elise back to her, he'd asked her if she could simply scry for him what was on the other side. She shook her head.

"Many a time that I've tried, Master Rol," she said, "And always the mirror is dead when I do. I don't believe there *is* anything on the other side, personally—maybe a sea of shadows that don't much like being spied upon."

"Thank you anyway, Mistress." His face had set into grim lines as he'd headed towards her door.

"Warden"—she'd stopped him with her voice. "Why are you leaving?"

Now, at the Edge—on the Edge—over the Edge, he didn't know what he should have answered. She knew where he was going before he'd asked for her scry. It wasn't *that* she wanted. She didn't understand why the Warden of the Borderlands, of all people, would want to walk out on our world.

