



A Reader's Quick Guide to Better Books

**How to use only 10% of a book to
decide if it's right for you.**





The 4 Pillars of Better Books

one

curiosity

A good book should spark your curiosity and give you at least one question you want answered in the first 10% of its content (Does Jack marry Jill? Will the cookies bake properly or burn the house down? What is this character's backstory? etc.). If a book does not accomplish this, it may not be the book for you.

two

characters

You should have at least one character you want to know more about in the first 10% of a good book. That could be the book boyfriend you long for, the villain you love to hate, or an interesting narrator you want to learn from. If you are reading a book and you have no connection to any of the characters, your reading time might be better spent elsewhere.

three

clarity

This one is fairly straightforward: do you understand what's going on in the writing? Not necessarily the plot (because some genres keep you guessing until the very end), but the actual writing itself. If by 10% in you still have to re-read every third sentence to try to understand what the author is saying, it might be best to put the book down (textbooks, unfortunately, are exempt from this rule).

four

experience

A good book should be one that you enjoy reading! Does the experience of the book make you happy? Do you like the writing style? Do you like the way the author drops breadcrumbs of information? Do you like the way the characters talk to each other? If there is something in the first 10% of the book that makes you happy, then that is most likely a book you'll want to keep reading.





Rate your current read

Rate your reads from 0-4. Use and reuse this form as many times as you need when deciding if a book is worth your time.

one

curiosity

Do you have questions you want answered after the first 10% of the book? Yes No

Write your questions here:

two

characters

Is there a character you want to know more about after the first 10% of the book? Yes No

Write which character here:

three

clarity

Do you understand the writing within the first 10% of this book? Yes No

four

experience

Is there something within the first 10% of this book that makes you happy while reading it? Yes No

Write what makes you happy here:

“readability” score

0 = this book is not compatible with your tastes

1 = this is not likely to be a good book for you

2 = this could be just an “OK” book

3 = this book will probably be one you enjoy

4 = this will most likely be a book you

absolutely love





Ready to test it out?

I have provided you with the first 15% of my book *For Evergreens and Aspen Trees* to practice using your form with. I will leave a marker for when you have reached the 10% mark to use your guide, but I wanted to also provide a bit extra for when you want to keep reading (5% more than Amazon will give you!). Consider it my “warranty” to you.

Happy reading!

Sincerely,

A. L. Lorensen



THE SONGS OF LORALAN

FOR
EVERGREENS
AND
ASPEN
TREES

A. L. LORENSEN



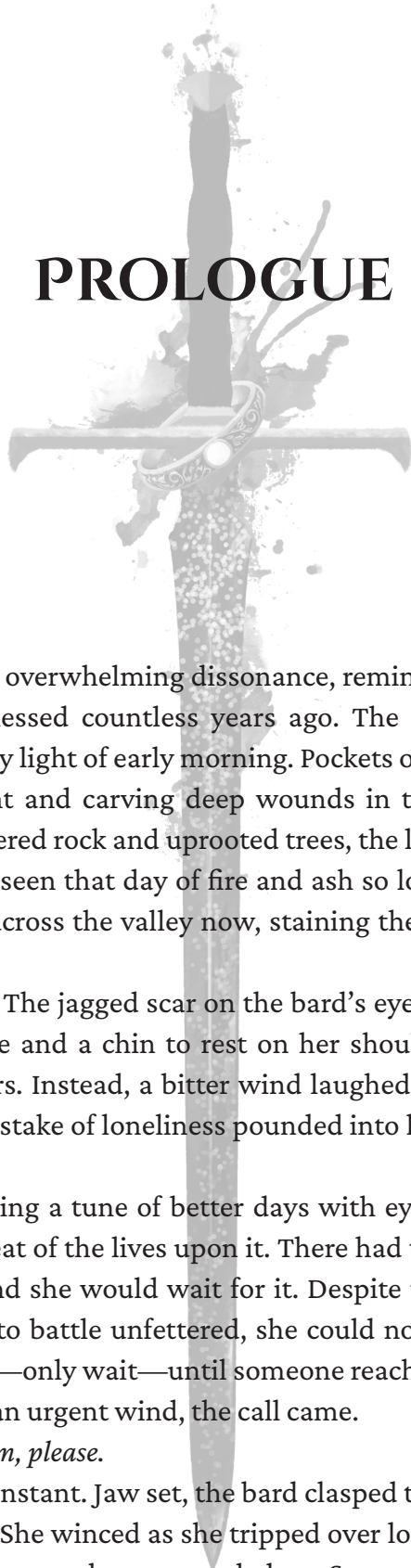
FOREWORD

Three laws govern the magic of Alchilon:

1. Magic may not be given to those without lest it become a curse upon their heads.
2. Magic bound is magic beaten.
3. The dead must remain with the dead.

These laws were intended to protect the weak and balance the powerful. They were well-intentioned choices made by well-intentioned beings. However, as is often the heartbreaking case, even the best of intentions can be turned against us. In all my years studying the history of this world, the Ancient Laws have caused more pain, sorrow, manipulation, and bloodshed than I believe those original lawmakers ever intended.

-J. Lashton; *The Nature of Enduring Warfare* (12th Edition); pg. 3



PROLOGUE

The waves crashed in overwhelming dissonance, reminiscent of the mourning dragon cries the bard witnessed countless years ago. The smells of ocean salt and iron tangled in the watery light of early morning. Pockets of water riddled the valley, their waves spitting sparks of light and carving deep wounds in their beaches. From the bard's mountain perch amidst shattered rock and uprooted trees, the lakes looked like so many fallen scales. Like the ones she had seen that day of fire and ash so long ago; the day she wished to forget. The bodies scattered across the valley now, staining the lakes crimson, did nothing to banish those memories.

"Too many lives wasted." The jagged scar on the bard's eyelids burned. She half-expected warm arms to draw her close and a chin to rest on her shoulder while deep, soft words of comfort thrummed in her ears. Instead, a bitter wind laughed as it whipped around her and tossed her dust-worn skirt. A stake of loneliness pounded into her chest. The war had cost too much.

The bard waited—humming a tune of better days with eyes closed—and listened to the thrum of the earth and the beat of the lives upon it. There had to be one voice still out on that bitter battlefield. Just one. And she would wait for it. Despite the songs she sang and stories she told of heroes rushing into battle unfettered, she could not carve that same path. It was her fate and her curse to wait—only wait—until someone reached out to her.

And there, carried across an urgent wind, the call came.

Help him. Someone, help him, please.

She was on her feet in an instant. Jaw set, the bard clasped the strap of her lute close to her chest and slid into the valley. She winced as she tripped over loose roots and trod on shards of debris, but she kept her course to the carnage below. So many dead lay abandoned in the

valley. The dead must remain with the dead. She knew *that* better than anyone. But if she could save even one life before death could stake its claim...

When she reached the mountain's base, she removed her boots. The water-logged earth seeped between her toes, cold and sorrowful. The loss and heartbreak swirling in the murk overwhelmed the bard and brought tears to her eyes. She breathed in until her chest ached from the strain, and then let the breath and emotions pass through her until they dissipated. She listened. Three heartbeats throbbed through the earth. Two weak and fading, the other one...

A shudder ran through her. *Seething* was the only way she could describe it; a paltry word that came nowhere near its full presence. She had lost track of the years since she had last felt something so dark. She needed to complete her work before that *thing* overtook her.

She kept careful watch on that presence and focused on the cries she had heard.

Please, if there is a god anywhere, please help him.

She ran, swift as wingbeats, across the crimson ground. She dodged fallen bodies and plunged her feet into icy pockets of sea until she found her. A broken girl, all alone, at the edge of the battlefield. Bodies piled around her like fallen leaves. Her blade was stained with blood almost as deep as the blood flooding the back of her tunic.

The bard approached, not daring to hope the girl was still conscious, but she was mistaken. The girl snatched at the bard's skirts as soon as she saw them.

"Please." A sob tore through her throat. Congealed blood dribbled from her mouth. "Please, help him. He's out there. He...He can't die. I *promised* him."

The bard crouched and put her hand over the girl's. "Shh, all will be well. I will help you and then find your friend."

"*NO!*" The girl's vehemence startled the bard. "*Him* first! He *cannot* die. He *can't!*"

"I understand. I will help you; if you only ask—"

"*No!* I...I don't deserve help!" More sobs wracked her body. "Dead...All dead, because of me. I...I killed them. I killed them all." Her eyes fluttered, her consciousness waning. "Please... Please save him."

The bard's throat hitched in frustration. She could save them both if the girl wasn't so stubborn, but without that critical request for help...She knew her curse's limits all too well. Biting back a retort, she placed her hand on the girl's feverish forehead. "I will help him."

The pain melted from the girl's body. Her eyes finally closed. "Thank you." A last whisper before her body fell still. Not dead, but dancing along its treacherous line.

The bard fought back tears as she stood and searched for the other weakened heartbeat. The only other survivor. Of all the wide-eyed young soldiers around her, only two remained. The ground shuddered, a lingering sob over the lost.

The bard found her target and ran to the other end of the battlefield. She met a gruesome sight at the end of her trail. Despite the countless battlefields she had seen, she would never be used to the gore they left behind. Her stomach churned at the agonized young soldier.

Drenched to his shoulders in his own blood, his breathing was shallow, erratic, and labored. The whites of his eyes shone stark against the crimson as they rolled in his head. His limbs twitched, either reaching for the sword at his side or in the final throes of death. His life-force spilled undeterred from a gaping hole in his head where half his skull had caved in on itself. She suspected a mace to be the culprit.

The bard tucked her legs beneath her and cradled the soldier's head in her lap. He moaned and gurgled blood and spittle. His arms shook to fight her, or so she assumed. The bard hushed him as she would a terrified child and pressed her hand to his skull. Blood dripped between her fingers and left trails down her arms. She tucked him tighter against her, heart aching, and hummed. Gold light illuminated her skin and seeped into the wound.

The instant her magic touched him, a green mist leaped to life and batted the bard's hand away.

She tilted her head and let her magic fade into her bones for a moment. The gold light died. When it did, the mist receded to a spot on the young man's chest beneath his tunic. She pulled back the fabric and found a silver ring on a leather cord. A homemade talisman. It glowed green the closer she came, but its light was fading. The caster was dying. The girl.

"Someone loves you very much." The bard brushed blood-crusting hair from her patient's forehead. "Talismans are no small thing." She touched the ring. It burned bright and hot. At least, it would have for anyone other than herself. She allowed her magic to flow through her fingertips. "*Hush. You have done what you can to protect him,*" she said in the Ancient Tongue, the rich, cadence-like language of magic. It would share her message with its wielder. "*I will do what I can to save him, as I promised.*"

The ring continued to burn bright and fierce, pulsing as fast as an anxious heart. It matched the other heartbeat's tempo she sensed elsewhere on the battlefield.

The bard hummed again and stroked the ring's curve. "*All will be well,*" she said. "*All will be well.*"

The fight left the talisman's caster with a slow and agonizing withdrawal. The ring's glow faded to almost nothing, and the protective mist disappeared.

The bard kissed the ring and wasted no more time. She had a promise to keep.

Golden flames encased her body as she placed her hands on the young man's wound. The song the earth had sung to her through the wind, trees, grass, and soil every night for the past three months tumbled from her lips, focusing her magic.

A ruler will rise
To vanquish the Night.
To bring evil's demise
And bring all to right.

To Death they will fly
And to Earth they return.
The Laws they defy
Before this world burns.

Blood of sorcerer
Blood of saint
Shall become the restorer
And cure Earth's blackest taint.

Thrice failed
Is thrice cursed.
If good does not prevail
Then Earth shall see its worst.

MOVEMENT INTERRUPTED HER. Stumbling, shuffling; the air thick with the stench of defeat and vengeance. Seething hatred washed from the lakes' mist and solidified into a single presence. It had returned. Fine hairs along the bard's spine stood on end.

You must leave, Sister Earth whispered to her. You cannot be lost.

A thick shield of fog rolled in. The bard suspected it came as a gift from her worried friend.

She checked her patient. Though still bleeding, his skull had been repaired. He breathed deep and even, and his limbs had quieted. Although not fully healed, she had gotten him through the worst of it. He would live.

Whatever vile thing headed her way continued to shuffle closer. She hesitated, unwilling to leave the young man behind, but Sister Earth urged her away, echoing her words to the nameless caster.

All will be well. All will be well.

Her friend had yet to steer her wrong.

She departed, melting back into the mountainside and leaving the grisly battlefield behind her. As she picked her way back up the mountainside, she chanced one last glance back. The seething presence crouched beside her charge, examining his face and checking for signs of life. Frustration. Fury. Desperate opportunity. They all flowed from the presence—the *man*, though only just—as inexorably as the waves against their shores.

He stood and looked across the battlefield, and at that moment the bard saw a flash of bone-white blade—a sword strapped at his waist.

Dread thrummed through the bard and summoned goose-flesh along her arms. She had not seen that sword for centuries; knew it had been too much to ask to never see it again.

FOR EVERGREENS AND ASPEN TREES

Leave, the Earth begged. Leave before it claims your soul.

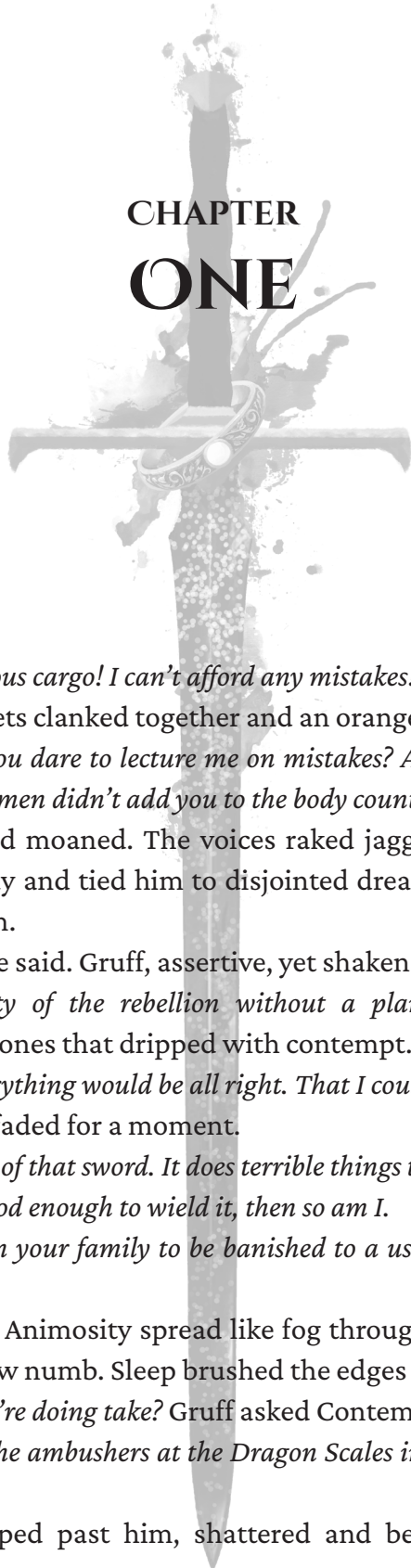
The sword-wielder gathered the boy in his arms like he might a sack of flour for barter and limped away from the battlefield. The bard closed her eyes, heart aching, resenting her inability to intervene.

All will be well, the Earth whispered to her once more. All will be well.

PART ONE



LORATE



CHAPTER ONE

Gentle with the precious cargo! I can't afford any mistakes!
A laugh. Trinkets clanked together and an orange glow came from somewhere.
Of all people, you dare to lecture me on mistakes? After the carnage you left behind?
You're beyond fortunate that Osmen didn't add you to the body count.

He furrowed his brow and moaned. The voices raked jagged claws across his throbbing head. Fevers wracked his body and tied him to disjointed dreams that fractured further from the voices floating around him.

It wasn't my fault! Someone said. Gruff, assertive, yet shaken.

Charging after the entirety of the rebellion without a plan 'wasn't your fault'? another responded in deep, resonant tones that dripped with contempt.

The sword it...it told me everything would be all right. That I could win if I acted quickly.

Silence. The orange glow faded for a moment.

Perhaps I should relieve you of that sword. It does terrible things to an untrained mind.

NO. If my ancestors were good enough to wield it, then so am I.

And now you are the first in your family to be banished to a useless fort in the King's Army. I'm sure they are all very pleased.

Blessed silence took over. Animosity spread like fog through the quiet, but he didn't care. The throbbing in his head grew numb. Sleep brushed the edges of his mind.

How long will whatever you're doing take? Gruff asked Contempt.

Tell me what happened to the ambushers at the Dragon Scales instead of asking stupid questions, Contempt responded.

Phantom branches whipped past him, shattered and bent against the moonless sky.

Waves crashed in terrible cacophony. Lakes scattered across a barren valley, surging against their shores like a shattered ocean. The stars glittered across their waves.

Screams. So many screams. A sliver of the night sky swinging in long, beautiful arcs. A white blade meeting it. Sparks shrieking into the night. A head of dark curls. Pain splitting his skull. The ground—his eyes—stained scarlet.

...thought we had them, but their leader was...unearthly.

They escaped? Contempt asked, sounding as if he already knew the answer.

No. All dead, at too great a cost.

His heart clenched. He moaned and fought his sheets. They tightened around him. Long, bony fingers pressed against his forehead. He couldn't force his eyes open.

This ring will help. Contempt again. *Be sure he keeps it close. For all your failings, you are regrettably in the best position to keep him safe. For now.*

Your faith astounds me, Sedick.

Consciousness—*sound*—faded away. Only memories remained, swirling into nothingness. Glimpses of a smile and green eyes faded too fast for him to catch. A woman wreathed in golden flames, humming to him.

All will be well.

All will be well.



HIS HEAD THROBBED. The pressure nearly drove his eyes from their sockets. The musky candles on the dining table and dusty hearth fire only exacerbated the pounding in his head. He shifted on his makeshift bed and twisted the two rings strung around his neck to distract himself.

The only relief was a cool whisper of a breeze between the warped wooden slats of the nearby window. It brushed the bandages pulled tight around his head and cooled the sweat beneath them. He itched to uncover the window entirely—let the air soothe every bit of him, from the top of his head to the burn scars across his torso—but he refrained. The frosty air might make Linae sick.

As if on cue, a wail sounded from the hallway. Hasty footsteps went to Linae's aid.

"Hush, my love," a woman said. "What is all this fuss about?"

Lady Vineae crept past the dining room, her tiny daughter cradled against her chest. She bounced Linae as she wove between the myriad of trunks, sacks, and other belongings scattered across the floor. Her well-worn silk skirts brushed the dust from the floor in swirling clouds. She hummed softly as she tucked blankets more tightly around the infant.

He had developed a deep respect toward the lady of the house over the few days he had regained consciousness. She had a warmth and a sort of...familial comfort about her.

The humming stopped when she looked up and saw him. She peered at him for a few moments before she drew back. "Oh! I didn't realize you were awake! Your bandages make it hard to..." She stopped herself and shook her head. "I'm sorry. Did Linae wake you?" She should have been more worried about her own sleep rather than his, judging by the dark circles beneath her eyes. But she wasn't. She cared more for a stranger than she did herself.

He shook his head at her question and immediately regretted it. Arcs of pain crackled through his spine and behind his eyes. He blinked them back as best he could. "Don't worry about me." He winced at his voice; it sounded like he had eaten glass.

Lady Vinea watched him with a small smile on her face. "You've come into my care on the verge of death and with no memories. I can't help but worry."

His stomach twisted at the reminder.

She gestured with an elbow to the rings around his neck. "Does that help?"

A smile pulled too tight on his cheeks. "Not yet," he said. He touched the larger ring, thick and gold and gaudy, centered around an ugly black stone. Lady Vinea's husband, General Laire, had told him one of the king's warlocks had made it; a man named Sedick that specialized in memory magic, whatever that meant. It was supposed to help recover his memories so long as he kept it around his neck. Skepticism and a hint of unease lingered with him at the prospect, though. Nightmares of whispered words and shattered visions still plagued him. And new monsters haunted him in the night, leaving him breathless and petrified. Surely a magic ring meant to help would not leave him so utterly terrified. But he was desperate enough to try anything, no matter the nightmares. A lifetime's worth of memories was too precious to sacrifice to fear.

He absently toyed with the leather strap around his neck until the smaller ring fell into his palm, a silver band with simple filigree across it and curling words on the inner rim. He couldn't read the language, though. According to Lady Vinea, Laire had found him with it. Touching it calmed the night terrors.

Lady Vinea tapped his foot with hers. "Don't fret. Lord Sedick is an odious man by nature, but Laire and I can both attest to his magic's effectiveness." She brushed the side of her palm around Linae's face, her eyes warm with adoration.

"I have to agree, much to my chagrin." General Laire Baison entered the room.

He got to his feet and nodded, blinking back the spots that swam in his eyes. Uneasy trepidation laced his veins, but he fought it back. This man had *saved* him. Lady Vinea tried to get him to sit again, worried about his injuries, but he assured her he was fine. He greeted General Laire with a small bow.

Laire stood a good head and shoulder above his wife and stooped to kiss her. He then cooed at his daughter. Linae squealed in delight and pulled on his short, silver-flecked beard. Laire chuckled. Linae curled her fist around his finger. "I'm happy to see you up and about, my

boy,” Maire said to his guest. “Mace wounds are serious business and have killed more men than I can count. You’re lucky to be alive. How do you feel?”

He shuffled his feet and touched the bandages on his head, trying to pull a smile. Why couldn’t he look him in the eyes? “Sore, sir.”

Maire straightened and looked at him fully. “Is that all?”

He glanced between Maire and Vineia, not sure how to respond. They had both been so kind. How could he say it? Did he *want* to say it? He stretched a smile in his aching cheeks. “I’m not sure I know what else there *could* be. A man with no name can’t ask for much.” He chuckled, but it sounded hollow even to his own ears.

“What about Tristan?”

Both men looked at Lady Vineia with surprise. Maire’s shock mingled with...something else. He put a hand on her arm in a silent signal, but she ignored him. She shifted Linae and smiled. “What if we call you Tristan? It’s what we would have named our son if we had one.”

His mouth fell open. A thousand emotions clamored for space all at once. He glanced to Maire for guidance on how he should answer, but Maire’s expression was unreadable. “Why—What have I done to deserve such an honor?”

Lady Vineia took his hand and squeezed it. “No one deserves to be alone. We may not be the most well-to-do family, but we can be yours if you’ll have us.”

He didn’t know how to respond. His gut squirmed with discomfort, even as tears of gratitude filled his eyes. A new family? He hadn’t grieved the loss of his old one, if he even had one. Deep down, he wanted to believe he still did; that they were doing everything they could to find him. But belief was a shadow of reality. Kind, generous people wanted to be part of his life. *Now*. In the real world. Did he dare push that aside for only a sliver of hope?

He brushed the moisture from his eyes. “I’m...*honored*. But I couldn’t possibly take the name. If you have a son, then what—”

“We won’t.” Lady Vineia curled Linae closer to her. She stroked the infant’s fine hairs. “One was miracle enough.”

He didn’t know what else to say. He was quickly running out of polite excuses. *Why* did he need excuses? He couldn’t say. Something filled him with unease as if he were treading places he didn’t belong. But did someone with no memory belong anywhere?

General Maire must have sensed his hesitation and cleared his throat. “Take the name.” He clapped a hand on his shoulder. “You’ll need one if you plan to become a soldier here.”

He recoiled. “A *soldier*?”

Linae fussed in her blankets. Lady Vineia bounced her and excused herself to their back rooms, casting her husband a parting, questioning glance.

He—*Tristan*, he supposed he should start calling himself, since they were so insistent—looked at General Maire in consternation, trying not to let his unease win out. More indiscernible emotions swept through him. He didn’t belong here. He didn’t belong with Maire. Something not quite right swirled about the general—he couldn’t place what—but it made

him want to *get out*. He shoved the feelings aside. His battered mind had already played too many games with him. “You want *me* to be a soldier?” Tristan asked. “When I don’t even know who I am? Or what you fight for?”

“That part’s easy.” Laire waved his hand dismissively. “We fight for freedom from the monsters that walk among us. We will rid Loralan of the Ancient Races’ evils and their foul magic.” Laire looked at him with somber kindness. “And what better way to find out who you are than in fulfilling a purpose?”

Tristan rubbed his thumb over the silver ring, trying to ignore the rushing in his ears. Too fast. This was all too much, too fast. “I’m sure there could be other ways—”

“What else did you plan to do?”

“I...well...” An excellent question that he should have had a response to. Vague snippets of something floated through his mind. “I was hoping to find out who I was. See if those memories are still out there somewhere. Maybe.”

Laire leaned against a wall, arms folded and face unreadable again. “Where would you start?”

“Maybe you could tell me about the Dragon Scales?” Tristan couldn’t say why that name had stuck with him, but it floated ever present in the back of his mind. Someone had mentioned it. And he could have sworn it had been Laire.

A shadow crossed Laire’s face, and his brow furrowed. “The Dragon Scales? As in the fairy tale?”

All the breath fled from Tristan’s lungs. No. It *couldn’t* be a fairy tale. “The what?” He kept his voice light, but inside his stomach churned.

“The Dragon Scales is a place of lore that doesn’t exist. Said to be the safest, fastest path between the Ancient Lands and Loralan’s capital. It’s a wide valley littered with pockets of the sea, scattered about like so many fallen dragon scales.”

Something leaped in Tristan. Voices and images that he couldn’t quite see or hear. A deeper ache settled on his bandaged head, and orange-tinged dread settled in with his hope. He fumbled with his rings. They were both hot to the touch. The Dragon Scales *had* to be what he was looking for.

“Only problem with the place is the unholy storm that shields it from outsiders all but one week out of the year. Manifestation of some goddess’ wrath or some nonsense like that.” He picked at his teeth. “All too convenient an excuse for why nobody’s found it if you ask me.”

Tristan rubbed his forearm, trying to play off the desperation building in his stomach. “So it’s not real?”

“No more real than an elf’s love.” Laire spat at the floor and ground it out with his boot. “And I know all too well that *that* is nothing but fantasy.” He pushed himself away from the wall. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be more help on that front. But my offer still stands. You are welcome to stay here at Lorate.”

Tristan curled his rings in his fingers, his head spinning, and said nothing. He couldn't articulate the emotions swirling through him like a building storm.

Laire placed a warm hand on his shoulder and grounded him from his panic. At least for a moment. "Let me reword it this way; family is hard to find. When you have it, never let go." His focus slipped to somewhere far beyond the fort, lost in a world Tristan couldn't see.

Tristan knew he was trying to help, and he was grateful for it, but Laire's words drilled deep into his chest, carving more wounds on his heart.

Laire blinked and returned to the moment. "Vinea and I only transferred a few days ago. It's a temporary placement, but it will be home to us for a while." A yawn leeches itself from his throat. "I can't attest to the men yet, but I can attest to myself. I will give you a home and a purpose and a family here." He stood in the doorway, the picture of strength and benevolence. "Besides, where else could you go?"

Those words shot Tristan in the chest as true as any arrow. He staggered from their force. A lump formed in his throat. He looked at the dusty floors, at the footprints and scuff marks and swirls from the wind blowing through doors and windows. Even the floor knew its past better than he did. He couldn't bring himself to respond to General Laire's question, even though he knew there could only be one answer. What good was choice when he had only one option, anyway?

General Laire nodded once as if taking his silence for consent. "Come on." He glanced through the window slat gaps. "It's late, but I'm sure men will be in the mess hall. Let's have you meet the rest of your new family."

Laire strode into the night. Tristan followed, wishing he could go back to an hour ago when he still had power over his life. He winced at how ungrateful those thoughts sounded.

The breeze that had teased him through the dining window slats washed over him the moment he stepped outside, ruffling his dark hair not pinned down by bandages and plucking his tunic. He imagined being somewhere—anywhere—else. A place he felt at home; where he knew himself and could make his own choices.

General Laire crossed the fort yard to a squat, ramshackle building. Lantern light glowed through the rough-hewn wooden wall's gaps. Tristan followed, unsure if the light seemed inviting or like the glint of an ancient, many-eyed monster ready to swallow him.

The room inside was sparse but clean. Rows of simple wooden benches and tables lined the wall. A small fireplace crackled in the back. Ten men huddled around it while another lounged in the corner. They nursed drinks and chatted amongst themselves. Quiet chuckles rumbled through the room. The one in the corner—a narrow-waisted, broad-shouldered man who even sitting towered over the other men—seemed content to watch from beneath his mane of sandy hair. The warmth and calm enveloped Tristan. *Could* this become home?

His hope fizzled the moment the men caught sight of him and Laire in the doorway. The temperature dropped as all conversations stopped. They only stared. Cold. Unfeeling. Barely

veiled hostility. Tristan's mouth ran dry. His gut shrunk. He wanted nothing more than to disappear.

Laire straightened to his full height and met their stares. "I have not officially introduced myself yet. I am General Laire Baison. As I'm sure you're aware, King Osmen has transferred me to replace General Tal Hasson."

They said nothing.

General Laire seemed unfazed. "I trust we'll know each other better in time. I must return to help get my family settled, so I can't join you tonight, but this man will." He dropped his hand on Tristan's shoulder. "He is a fighter. Please take good care of him." He leaned closer to Tristan and spoke only to him. "You'll be all right. You can't survive what you have without the grit to survive more." With that, he left.

Tristan nodded to the room with a tight smile and tripped into a seat, wishing he could vanish. He hadn't been prepared to be thrown to the wolves all on his own.

The murmuring began.

"The invader has a pet, does he?"

"General Tal would never pick favorites."

"Bet the bandages are so he can spy on us better. I can't hardly see his eyes."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. That's not how spying works."

"*You* tell me who he is, then!"

"Bet you he's one of those monsters in disguise."

"An Ancient One wouldn't want us!"

"How do you know? They're *monsters*! They do what they want!"

Tristan tried to ignore them. Sister Earth, he tried. But their words pounded on his head like the mace that nearly killed him. Who was he? Who *was* he? He didn't know. He could be anything. That was the terror of nothingness. The images of his dreams marched through his mind like a parade of horror. An empty wasteland. Howls and shrieks. Black, soulless eyes as wide as his face. Rows upon rows of teeth. Spindle-like fingers reaching for his throat.

Who are you? They hissed in time with the surrounding murmurs. *Who are you?*

He didn't know. *He didn't know!*

Tristan put his head in his hands, trying not to shake. He tugged feverishly at the gaudy gold ring. It had to show him something. It had to.

Nothing.

The rush of hissing inner voices grew with the surrounding chatter. *Spy. Assassin. Murderer. Enemy. Monster.* The words swirled in his mind until he heard nothing else.

Someone clattered into the seat across from him. It jolted the table and broke him from his spiral.

He looked up. The loner from earlier—the sandy-haired young man with shoulders nearly as wide as the bench—had sat across from him. He munched slowly on a piece of toasted bread and studied Tristan.

Tristan fidgeted in his seat. What did the newcomer want? What did *anyone* want from him? He had nothing to offer himself, much less anyone else. Couldn't they let him wallow in peace?

"So, who are you?" the man asked.

Tristan broke.

"I don't *know*!" He slammed his hands on the table. "Why don't you ask everyone else since they're so keen to pass judgment?" The room fell silent. His mind did not. He glared at the watching men as their lingering whispers plowed wounds in his thoughts. They averted their gazes, shoulders hunched. He gained no small satisfaction from their discomfort. "My memory's gone. Taken. I don't know anything." The barbs in his voice didn't mask the brokenness. He studied his palms, where he had calluses at the base of each finger. He didn't know where he'd gotten them. Such a small, stupid thing he wished he knew.

The man across from him kicked his feet up. "If *you* don't know anything about yourself," he ate another bite, crumbs spewing like sparks, "what makes you think these idiots do?"

Tristan gaped at him. He opened and closed his mouth like some demented fish as his halted thoughts tried to form words with no success. "What?"

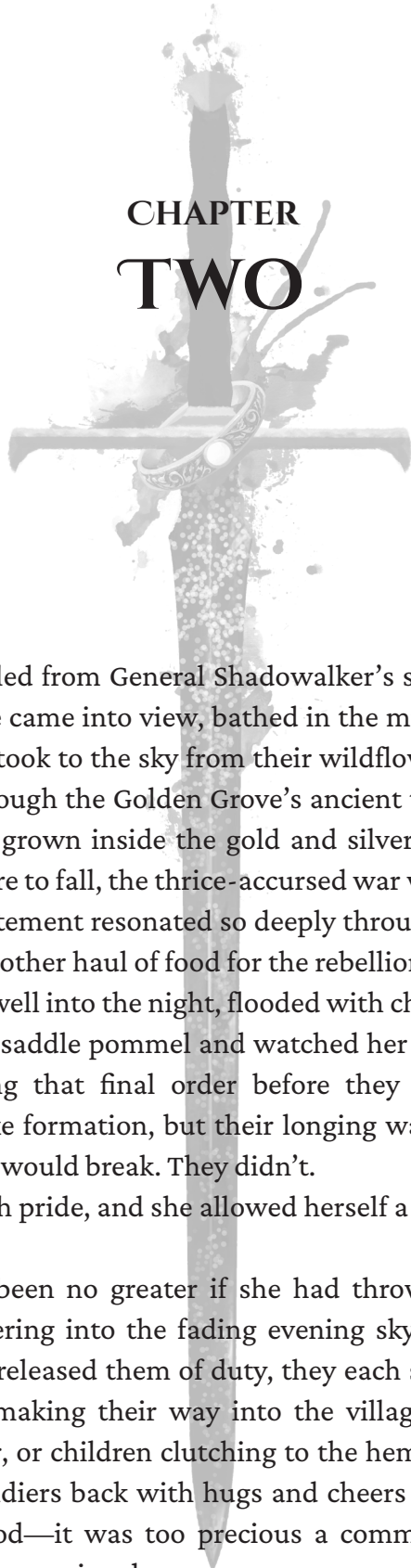
The man smiled. "You are the only person who knows you the best. Don't let them choose who you are. You're capable enough to do that yourself."

Tristan could only sit there with his jaw dangled open. The silence stretched on as his thoughts collided to process the man's words.

A deranged laugh spilled from his mouth. He couldn't help himself. The stranger's notion had been so unexpected. So needed. All his pent-up emotions and uncertainty tumbled out in an instant. Once he started, he couldn't stop. Rolling, choking from his throat, the laughter washed away the dark thoughts swirling in his mind. Tears pricked his eyes. From relief or mirth, he couldn't tell. "You...you sound like an eighty-year-old man," he wheezed. He couldn't say anything else. Could not express the other emotions fizzing through his body.

"And you sound like a lunatic." The man grinned. "Just my kind of person." He brushed the crumbs off his tunic and extended his hand. "I'm Styra Glanson. Traveling sage. Resident water enthusiast. Collector of lost souls." He raised an eyebrow. "And you are?"

"I'm...not a sage. Or a lunatic. Maybe." Tristan flicked the moisture from his eyes. "Still trying to figure the rest out." He shook Styra's hand with a wan smile. "They call me Tristan."



CHAPTER TWO

A roar of triumph swelled from General Shadowwalker's soldiers as the golden canopies of the Golden Grove came into view, bathed in the mist of azure waterfalls. Swarms of pygmy dragons took to the sky from their wildflower nests, glittering in a riot of jewel tones. They winged through the Golden Grove's ancient trunks, dodging through doors and windows that had been grown inside the gold and silver-veined wood. One of the last bastions of magic left. If it were to fall, the thrice-accursed war would be lost.

The anticipation and excitement resonated so deeply through the soldiers they practically hummed. Another victory. Another haul of food for the rebellion and all those that relied on it. The parties alone would last well into the night, flooded with cheap ale and high spirits.

Aspen leaned against her saddle pommel and watched her troops. They eyed her beneath their leather helmets, awaiting that final order before they could consider their mission complete. None of them broke formation, but their longing was palpable. She let the silence drag on, seeing if any of them would break. They didn't.

Aspen's heart swelled with pride, and she allowed herself a small smile. "Go on, then," she said.

The deluge would have been no greater if she had thrown open a dam. The soldiers' whoops knocked birds scattering into the fading evening sky and rattled the trees' golden leaves. Even though she had released them of duty, they each stopped first to salute her, two fingers to their lips, before making their way into the village. Elves—mostly elderly with stooped backs and white hair, or children clutching to the hems of robes—poured from their homes and welcomed the soldiers back with hugs and cheers and offerings of food. None of the soldiers accepted the food—it was too precious a commodity to take from their own people—but the gesture was appreciated.

Aspen watched as groups laughed together and pantomimed their success. Her heart warmed in her chest. Twenty years of war had taken many things, but it was moments like that that made her remember their sacrifice was worth it.

“They’re a little livelier than usual tonight, wouldn’t you say?”

Aspen turned to her cousin, Ash, who had sidled her mount beside hers. The trees’ golden glow haloed her honey-blond braid and small face smudged with dirt from their journey. Her gray-green eyes were nearly the same color as the feather fletches on the quiver of arrows she carried across her back. Aspen’s mount, Stormbreaker—a massive, dapple-gray unicorn—shifted beneath her, snorting and tossing his head in greeting to Ash’s.

Aspen scratched him beneath his mane. “As they should be. A victory against the soldiers at Bael is no small feat.”

“Helped in no small part by the legendary General Shadowwalker, of course.” Ash looked at her with an impish grin and waggled an eyebrow.

Aspen rolled her eyes. “Perhaps. But now *Aspen Tanner* is going to bed.”

“Good. If you wake up before noon tomorrow, I’ll tie you to the bed until you get some proper rest.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Aspen clicked to Stormbreaker and away they went. She waved to Ash over her shoulder.

She followed the outskirts of the Golden Grove proper, nodding to elves as she passed. The older ones eyed her with disdain and stepped back a few paces as if she might taint them. Whispers of *half-blood curse* and *coward* followed in their wake. The children waved and offered hay to Stormbreaker. They gave Aspen hope.

She stopped at a small hut nestled just outside of the golden tree line. Vines climbed their way up the walls and had nestled beneath the shingles, and cobwebs had gathered in the corners of the windows and doorway.

A hollow pit formed in Aspen’s stomach even as relief washed through her. She was home, but it was an empty one devoid of the life and color that had once filled every corner of the clearing.

Aspen dismounted and unsaddled Stormbreaker. She gave him a thorough brush down until his silver coat shimmered and then sent him on his way to roam where he pleased. He whiffed at her cheek before trotting into the trees to find his herd.

Aspen watched him go and then waited for the moment she had watched from her bedroom window nearly every night of her life.

The sun dipped behind the Architect’s Heart, the mountain range shaped in a protective ring around the Golden Grove, and a great sigh went up from the trees. The leaves shimmered and rustled, and their golden light dimmed. A few moments later, the first moonbeams caressed the trees, and the leaves shed their golden coats. Golden hues faded to silver in the moon’s embrace and drowned the grove in their brilliance.

Whenever you’re here to see the leaves turn from gold to silver, you’ll know you’re home.

Aspen rubbed the base of her left thumb, the mark beneath her bracer burning. She remembered the boy that had told her that. Remembered the promise they had made to each other.

And how she had shattered that promise.

Aspen trudged through her door, knapsack weighing on her shoulders and sword heavy at her side as the nostalgia turned bitter in her mouth.

The silver leaves gilded every edge of her cottage. Dazzling specks of dust were wisping away from the open door. She grimaced and slammed the door against the light, drew the curtains tight, and basked in the blessed dark. She could forget for a moment the dust that had built up over her months of absence, that she had left a dish or two in the sink, and that she was alone in a home that had once been full of life.

Aspen unbuckled her sword from its sheath and hung it in its place against the wall. Her knapsack she dropped to the floor without preamble, and then she slumped into her chair next to the cold hearth. She *could* have lit it. She could have lit a candle, at the very least, but the night was warm, the hour too late, and the price of getting up was far too great.

Now that she had settled in, though, the ache of battle crept through her bones. The jagged wound that ran from her right shoulder to her left hip throbbed. She'd have to have Ash help her with some salve eventually.

Aspen flexed her shoulders and stretched her neck. Despite her soldiers' success, a worm of worry crept at the corners of her mind. She tried to shake it off. The ambush at Bael had been as fruitful as she had hoped. They had secured more supplies for the rebellion, caused some mayhem, and had gotten away with no casualties. On either side. A perfect mission.

And yet, the worry remained. She had a knapsack weighed down by snatches of paper, clustered together from correspondents across Loralan. Nothing significant. Nothing alarming. Save for a single name woven through them. Lorate. A nothing fort in a tiny village, unimportant to the rest of the world.

Weariness settled across Aspen's bones. "We'll settle it tomorrow," she said to herself.

She hummed to herself as the blanket of sleep hovered over her eyes. When was the last time she slept? She couldn't remember. She ought to get into a proper bed. It wouldn't do to be sore for roll-call the following morning. She had to...

Sleep...

She was nearly there when someone rapped on her door. "Aspen?"

Aspen rolled her eyes to the ceiling and curbed a sigh. Maybe if she didn't move, they'd look for her somewhere else and leave her in peace.

Another knock. "I know you can't let a mouse by without waking up, Aspen. I hate to interrupt you, but we have to talk."

Aspen padded to the door with a groan. "Ash, you're *absolutely certain* this couldn't have waited until morning?"

Ash folded her arms and raised an eyebrow. "Considering I usually have to *force* you to sleep, you think I would do this if it was avoidable?"

Aspen opened the door wider with another sigh. "I *suppose* you can come in, then."

"As if you could stop me." Ash slid past her with a smile. "I'd light a fire to brighten up this den of yours, but we don't have time for that." She lit a few candles and sat down. The cheeriness melted from her face the moment Aspen closed the door. Concern pulled tight around her mouth and eyes.

Aspen edged into the seat across from her, a thousand thoughts circling through her mind. "What's wrong?"

Ash steepled her fingers and pressed them against her lips. She watched Aspen, eyes darting back and forth. Studying her for who knew what. Aspen had long since learned the art of silence, but something about Ash's piercing, gray-green gaze was always too much for her. She shifted in her chair as much as she could stand before finally snapping.

"*What?*"

Ash leaned forward, covering her face with her hands. "There's really no good way to tell you," she said into her palms. She slid her hands away from her face and pulled her hair back tight. "There's been another prince sighting."

Aspen's heart plummeted to her seat. She didn't move. Didn't breathe. A lump caught in her throat and choked her. Stars swam in her vision as her ears rang and blood fled from her face. All thoughts of sleep vanished in a second.

"*No*," she said, not realizing it had been audible. Not again. She couldn't do this again. How many times now? Five? Six? She had lost count against the raw, aching heartache that drained the lifeblood from her veins. She couldn't look at another pair of too-blue eyes—another smile not quite crooked enough. Each hope dashed to pieces against the bitter rocks of reality. "He's dead, Ash." The croak finally made it from her constricted throat. "Haven't we been through enough to know? Haven't I?"

"Aspen, I know. Sweet Sister Earth, I know." Ash leaned back in her chair, eyes cloudy as she watched the candles' dancing flames. "I hate to bring this to you. Especially when the last one was so..." She glanced at Aspen, searching for a word. Probably one that would best spare her feelings.

Aspen was too old to be coddled. "Disastrous? Horrific? Catastrophic in every way because I let my desperation cloud my judgment?"

"I suppose that's...several ways to put it," Ash said.

Aspen massaged the bridge of her nose, a dull ache settling in behind her right eye. "Have them send someone else. Or better yet, no one at all. Can't they let his memory finally rest in peace?" She bit back the emotion that threatened to reach her voice.

"He's the only one that can lay claim to the throne and give us legitimacy," Ash said with regret. "We have to take any chance we can to find him." She looked at Aspen. Aspen's inner

hurt was reflected in her face. "And you are the only one we can trust with certainty to get it right."

Aspen shut her eyes; closed out the world for two moments. The only moments she could spare. She cursed to herself. "I won't do it, Ash. If someone wants to bring him to me, fine."

Ash closed her eyes, the pain evident on her face. "You know that's not how this works."

"Make due, then." Aspen knew she was putting Ash in an impossible position. She knew this wasn't her fault. But Aspen could not do it anymore. To herself or anyone else. "I have soldiers to train here, and I'm sure orders will come from Dallowyn any day now of where he wants us next."

"They could do without you for a few days. Lorate's only a three day's ride at—"

"Lorate?" Aspen's stomach plummeted. Not Lorate again. That had been another dread she had hoped to bury. Aspen crossed the room to her knapsack, despite her aching joints, and retrieved her satchel of messenger pigeon scrolls. She dug through them until she retrieved a bundle tied together. All in various handwriting. She sat down again and studied them in the candlelight. "Why does that place keep coming up?"

Ash craned her neck to see. "What is it?"

"Messages from the scouts. Several of them have made passing remarks about Lorate; said that it's come up in several conversations across the kingdom. Nothing substantial or out of the ordinary, but this many at once..."

Ash crouched next to her and ran her fingers over the scrolls. "Maybe it's a sign?"

Aspen snorted. "Doubtful. But it warrants some extra study, at least."

"I'd say quite a *lot* of things require further study, namely your ability to control your soldiers, oh *esteemed* General."

Aspen shut her eyes and inhaled deeply. She needed to employ a guard dog. Or twelve.

"Elder Inula, to what do we owe your visit?" Aspen asked as she glanced to the doorway where a new visitor had emerged.

The tall, regal elf glowered beneath the copper circlet on her brow. The flaxen tresses combed past her knees stood in stark relief against her deep green robes, and she clasped her long, graceful fingers in front of her. "I thought you ought to know already," she said, her green eyes dim with aloof disgust. "General Shadowwalker has eyes and ears everywhere, does she not?"

"None where your oversized nose can't reach, apparently," Ash grumbled to herself.

Inula's eyes narrowed. "Did you have something you wished to share, Ash?"

Ash beamed a dazzling mockery of a smile. "Nothing at all, mother, except to tell you how radiantly spiteful you look this evening."

Inula's grasped hands tightened. "I told you never to call me that."

"Radiant?" Ash asked airily.

"*Mother.*"

"Oh, but I thought you were all about titles?" Ash placed her hand on her chest, her face screwed up in exaggerated apology. "Or is that only for ones you feel you've earned?"

Aspen withheld a snort.

"Enough, *whelp*," Inula said. "You are lucky I allow your presence here at all after your banishment." She turned to Aspen, cutting Ash out of the conversation. Ash made a face and a few unsavory gestures. "You are to go to Lorate at once," Inula said.

A new wave of dread settled over Aspen. That place again. Her reluctant resolve to go doubled, but she couldn't let Inula know that. "My apologies, but I am otherwise detained. Unless these are orders from General Dallowyn, I'm afraid—"

"They are." Inula handed her a ribbon-bound scroll with a smirk. "His network has uncovered a plan for Lorate to invade the Golden Grove. Heard some fool nobles discussing it over dinner." She brushed an errant strand of hair over her shoulder. "We don't know when or how, but anticipate it will be in the next few months. Although my personal force is formidable, and your soldiers are...*adequate*, they will not match the numbers Osmen will send after us. We must request aid from the Midnight Fens while their gateway is active in Lorate."

Aspen's mouth went dry. An invasion. Already, her mind buzzed with preparations that had to be made. She would have to appoint someone to oversee training and general management while she was gone. Her soldiers would have to give up some of their accommodations to provide room for the Midnight Fens' forces. Food would need to be reallocated—

She shook her head. All that in time. Right now, Lorate was their only path forward. Aspen nodded and took the scroll from Inula. She felt the buzz of protective magic around it. Duplication spell, most likely, in case something were to happen to it.

"We will ride at once," Aspen said, the words dull and lifeless in her mouth.

"No mounts," Inula said.

"You can't be serious!" Ash leaped to her feet, cheeks flushed with outrage. "That's a two-week journey by foot!"

"The Midnight Fens do not tolerate beasts of burden of any kind. It will already be a miracle if they let half-bloods such as *you* in." She looked Aspen and Ash up and down with contempt. "Besides, your mounts have just returned from a long journey. They require their rest."

Ash clenched her fists, her lips pressed tight. "Ah, yes, but the half-bloods are disposable, is that right?"

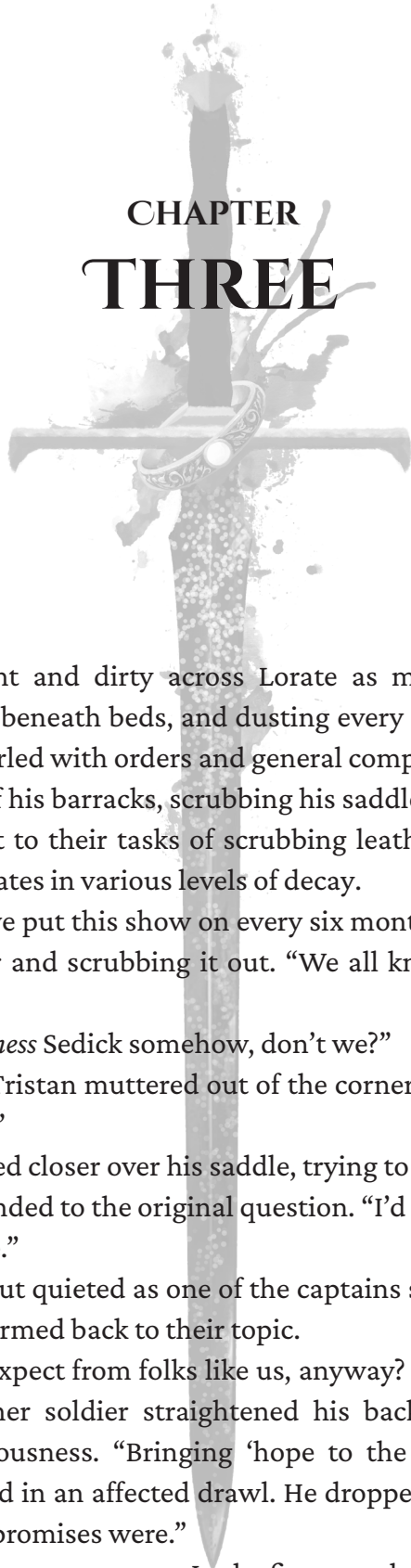
Aspen clamped a hand around Ash's arm before she could say anything else. "We will leave immediately." She bowed to Inula, the movement stiff and reluctant, and forced Ash out the door.

"Oh, and *General*."

Aspen stopped with a masterfully concealed sigh but didn't turn around.

"Your purpose here is based solely on your ability to perform. Don't fail us again."

The words fell like death knells on Aspen's ears.



CHAPTER THREE

The sun shone bright and dirty across Lorate as men trundled about, polishing weapons, sweeping beneath beds, and dusting every surface. Plumes of dust wafted into the sky and swirled with orders and general complaints.

Tristan sat on the stoop of his barracks, scrubbing his saddle. Styra and a line of five other men sat next to him, all bent to their tasks of scrubbing leather down. Some saddles, some boots, others leather breastplates in various levels of decay.

“Don’t understand why we put this show on every six months,” one said, splashing a little bit of spittle onto the leather and scrubbing it out. “We all know this place has gone to the roaches.”

“Have to impress his *highness* Sedick somehow, don’t we?”

“More like his lowness,” Tristan muttered out of the corner of his mouth to Styra. “Can’t be taller than my hip, can he?”

Styra snorted and huddled closer over his saddle, trying to hide his laughter.

“No,” someone else responded to the original question. “I’d just as soon throw him under a plow and bury him in manure.”

They all laughed at that but quieted as one of the captains strolled by to check their work. Once the captain left, they warmed back to their topic.

“What’s he supposed to expect from folks like us, anyway? We all know we’re a token fort and nothing more.” The other soldier straightened his back and peered down his nose, frowning with mock imperiousness. “Bringing ‘hope to the common folk’ and becoming ‘heroes to the people,’” he said in an affected drawl. He dropped the act with a scoff. “What a stinking pile of manure *those* promises were.”

Tristan shrugged in reluctant agreement. In the five years he’d been at Lorate, they had not

seen a single moment of action. No battles, no rebels; not even a rogue highwayman. Those were reserved for nobles and knights and career soldiers. Not a bunch of rag-tag farmers and merchants. They hadn't been much of anything except a joke to the rest of the King's Men. Their fort inspector, Lord Sedick, always made that abundantly clear when he made his visit every six months. The people of Lorate were supportive and kind, but the rest of the kingdom...Fort Lorate did nothing to help their waning hopes. Tristan couldn't help but wonder why King Osmen had created Lorate in the first place.

"Wet that for me, would you please?" One of the men asked, handing a brush to Styra. Styra handed it back sopping wet in the blink of an eye. Tristan couldn't remember seeing him put it in the soap bucket. The other man didn't seem to care that it dripped all over his trousers and went back to work. "You know, when I found out that General Laire used to lead the Vanguard, I was actually *excited*. I thought maybe I *could* learn something. Look where that got me, scrubbing boots that'll never be clean." He motioned to the boots, covered in dust and grime and mold.

"There are better things than learning how to fight," Styra said, taking a drink from his water skin. "I consider it a blessing that we have that luxury."

"The old sage strikes again," Tristan said with a smirk.

Styra rolled his eyes.

"I agree with Styra," one of the others piped in. "I'm *all for* not having to fight a war I didn't start, so long as I and my family get paid for it. There are worse things that could happen."

"Exactly!" the one on the end crowed, setting a breastplate down and moving to the next one. It almost crumbled in his hands. "Like getting caught in General Shadowalker's clutches."

The man with the boots scoffed. "I don't think he exists. What kind of general's never been seen on a battlefield?"

"A coward."

"Nah," the man with the breastplates said, giving up on his pointless task. "He's been plenty successful over the past few years to prove he's real. Did you hear what happened at Gravaym?"

"That's got nothing to do with it! It's all that filthy magic they've got. No wonder they turned on us and started this whole war. We were easy targets!"

Styra stiffened at Tristan's side. It looked like he meant to say something, but he shook his head and mumbled to himself. "Everyone loves to conveniently forget Brahmon."

Tristan furrowed his brow. "What's Brahmon?"

"A half-blood village. Or it was, until Osmen burned it to the ground. *That* was the start of the war."

Tristan looked askance at Styra. "How do you know these things?"

Styra shrugged, his focus far away as he scrubbed aimless circles on his saddle. "I've been around the kingdom a time or two."

The other men continued with their tirade. “It’s not fair, them talking through trees and addling people’s minds and whatnot. I mean, look at Tristan and what they’ve done to him! What kind of sane person believes in the Dragon Scales?”

“A smarter one than you, old man!” Tristan threw a rag at his face.

“Tristan! Catch me!”

Tristan hardly had time to register the words before a small blonde girl launched herself into his arms. His freshly cleaned saddle crashed to the dirt, cleaning supplies and all, as he tried to keep her from the same fate. She squealed with glee. That sound alone kept Tristan from begrudging her the two hours of wasted work. He grinned and swung her around a few more times, much to her delight. (10% ends here)

The men scoffed at the saddle in the dirt. “Never would have gotten away with that with General Tal around,” one of them said, but he still smiled at Tristan and Linae.

Styrax whacked the man over the head with a wet rag. “He wouldn’t have let you be a lazy sod, either, so you take your pick!”

“Linae!” Lady Vinea strode across the fort yard as quickly as her skirts allowed, her lips pressed together in the worried sort of irritation only mothers seemed to possess.

“Uh-oh,” Tristan said, his hand cupped to Linae’s ear conspiratorially. “We might be in trouble.”

Linae nodded. “Uh-huh.”

Tristan bit back a chuckle and set Linae down.

“Hello, Tristan,” Lady Vinea said with a harried smile.

Tristan bowed his head. “Lady Vinea.”

She waved her hand. “You know you don’t have to call me that.” Without skipping a beat, she frowned at her daughter. “Linae, how many times have I told you not to run off?”

“But mama, I—”

“How. Many. Times?”

Linae scuffed her shoe and swished her skirts. “A lot,” she grumbled.

“That’s right. And do you see the weapons and big animals and people running?”

Tristan saw a much different Fort Lorate than Lady Vinea did; at least the one she tried to portray to her daughter. The “sharp” objects were nothing but a collection of hunting daggers fashioned into a passable warrior’s weapon. The soldiers had repurposed their farm horses as battle steeds. Shaggy and sway-backed, some of them might have been big, but they didn’t have a mean or rebellious bone in their bodies. And the men...well, he wouldn’t bet a copper coin on any foot-races. The fort itself posed more danger than its occupants. Draped in an unholy stench fueled by mounds of manure and other waste, it crawled with rats, mice, roaches, and feral cats. The years hadn’t been kind to Fort Lorate.

“This is no place for running wild,” Lady Vinea continued. “I need to keep you safe. Now, will you *please* listen to me?”

Linae nodded, her bottom lip quivering. She balled the seam of Tristan's pant leg into her fist.

Lady Vinea sighed, gathered her skirts about her knees, and crouched to meet Linae's eyes. "Do you remember the surprise?"

Linae lit up like a gold coin in the summer sun. She tugged on Tristan's trouser leg. "Mama says you have to come to town with us!" She produced a wilted, half-smashed crown of braided dandelions. "And you have to wear this!"

Lady Vinea passed a hand across her eyes and stood. "I said we would *ask* him if he would come." She looked ruefully at Tristan. "We thought it might be a welcome break from preparations for the esteemed Lord Sedick."

Tristan grimaced. "My lady, I've heard it's best not to invoke such wrathful spirits."

She chuckled. "You are right. Talking about him will only bring him to Lorate faster."

"A fate we all hope to avoid, I'm sure." He bowed his head. "I'd be happy to escort you to town, m'lady." He took the crown from Linae and affixed it atop his head. "And I would be honored to accept this gift, my lady."

Linae beamed with pride.

Tristan smiled and turned back to Lady Vinea. "Would you like for me to invite Styra as well?"

She hesitated a moment, thoughts flashing through her eyes faster than Tristan could read them. Finally, she splayed her hands and donned another smile. "I don't see why not. He would be welcome. Thank you."

"Of course!" Tristan grinned at Linae and hoisted her onto his shoulder. "Will you help me call for him?"

Linae giggled and nodded.

Tristan cupped one hand around his mouth while he kept Linae steady with the other. She cupped both hands around hers. "Hey, fish boy!" Their shouts floated across the fort yard. Linae broke into more giggles.

Styra rose from his perch with a world-weary sigh. "What do you two hooligans want? I don't think they quite heard you three towns over."

Tristan waved him over. "We're escorting Lady Vinea and Linae into town. Let's go!"

"Do I have to go with *you*?" Styra trotted to them with a grin. Styra was still the only one that actually appeared to belong on a military base, and Tristan tried not to feel too woefully inadequate as he stood next to him.

"Seeing as how they requested me first, I'd say yes, you do," Tristan said. He sniffed in mock disdain and nearly choked on himself.

Styra elbowed him. "Careful! Don't want to hurt yourself!"

Tristan rolled his eyes and fought back a grin. "My apologies, Lady Vinea, for this empty-headed simpleton. He's not much for educated conversation, but he'll be the perfect sacrifice if we run into any danger."

Styrax bowed low and kissed the back of Linae's hand. She accepted the gesture with the dignity only a five-year-old could muster. Styrax winked at her. He bowed to her mother and offered to take the shopping basket slung over her arm.

Off they went—a grand procession through the rancor of Fort Lorate—with Tristan's saddle and other chores abandoned in the dust. They could wait a few more hours. While Linae giggled on his shoulders, arms outstretched to take in the sun and the sky, Tristan could almost forget the piles of manure and refuse, the rats and roaches in every dark corner, and the omnipresent stench.

Almost.

Tristan, Styrax, and the two ladies left the fort into the soft, broad-leafed forest around it. There was no hint of a breeze, but the trees provided a gentle liveliness. Leaf edges caught the sun's glint, and the drops of light they failed to catch speckled the ground below. The grass sparkled with dew that dampened the squirrels foraging for seeds. They scampered back to the waving canopies, where the melodies of bird-song met in light harmonies that faded into the still sky. The embrace of the Phoenix Ridge mountains surrounded Lorate's valley on every side, and, if the breeze blew just right, the scent of the sea on the southern side of the mountains carried over their peaks.

As the minutes grew long, Linae slumped against Tristan in boredom. When it seemed she couldn't take it any longer, she tugged on tufts of Tristan's dark hair. "Tell me about how Papa found you!"

"Linae," Lady Vinea said, voice sharp with reproach. "It's unkind to demand things, and that story is too violent."

"But, Mama!" Linae protested. "I want to hear about Papa being a hero! You always say he is!"

Lady Vinea watched her with pursed lips and raised eyebrows. A single corner of her mouth twitched, as if she fought back a smile. "You could make an excellent negotiator one day." She brushed back an errant strand of hair with a sigh and brushed dust from her skirts. "You may only hear the story if you ask Tristan *politely*, and only if he agrees to tell it."

Linae craned her neck to look at Tristan upside down. "Please?"

Styrax laughed. "How can you say no to that?"

"It is difficult," Lady Vinea said with a wry look.

"How does this sound, oh great mistress, so none of us get in trouble?" Tristan asked Linae as he swooped low under a branch to her delight. "Why don't *you* tell the story?"

"Okay! I'm better at telling it, anyway."

"Linae!" Lady Vinea said with mild horror.

Linae ignored her and puffed up self-importantly. "You were on a secret mission to the most magical place of all—the Dragon Scales! You had to fight *hundreds* of elves, dwarves, and other monsters to protect the kingdom, and you were beating them all!"

Tristan walked a little taller. He liked this version.

“But one snuck up and hit you on the head. You almost died!” She bounced with excitement as she warmed to her favorite part. “But Papa saved the day! He fought them away and brought you home to get better. And now you’ll live with us forever and ever!”

“Maybe!” He lifted her from his shoulders. Her foot caught the leather strap around his neck and pulled the two rings it carried from beneath his tunic. “I couldn’t have told it better myself! You should be a bard someday.” Linae tried to protest her unceremonious dismount, but Tristan told her she was so big and grown up now that she made his shoulders ache. She seemed grudgingly content with his answer and trotted to hold her mother’s hand.

“*That* was different,” Styra said with a crooked grin. “I seem to recall fewer ‘evil things’ and less fighting on your end.”

Tristan laughed, keeping the bitterness at bay. “You’re lucky you recall anything at all! Better than an empty-headed sap like me.” Much as he tried, he couldn’t keep all the bitterness from his voice. The scar on the crown of his head burned. He toyed with the rings around his neck. “All I have about that night is whatever Laire told me. That and the Dragon Scales, which he *refuses* to mention.”

Styra gave him a sideways glance. “Are you all right?”

Tristan sighed. Five years around Styra and his observation skills still surprised him. The knucklehead. “It’s stupid.”

“Are we ever *not* stupid?”

“No, really. You don’t need to worry about it. I’ll be fine.”

“Tristan,” Styra faced him, walking sideways. “I met you when you were more bandage than face with little improvement since. You can stop the dignified act and just tell me what’s wrong.”

Tristan rolled his eyes with a self-deprecating smile. “You’ll laugh.”

“It’s my favorite pastime, second only to swimming. Go on.”

Tristan rubbed his forehead. “I just...” He shook his head and sighed. “It really is stupid, but when Linae suggested staying forever, it—” he waved abstractly, fishing for the correct word. He didn’t find it. “I can’t stay here forever. I *can’t*. But I also can’t help but feel that may be all I’m meant to do.”

A squeal from Linae fractured their conversation. “Look, we made it!” She pointed to the smoke and dust rising above the forest canopy. Amiable clatter bounced through the trees.

“This isn’t the best time to have a lengthy conversation,” Styra said as his attention darted between Lady Vine and Linae and Tristan. “But two quick thoughts. One, listening to what everyone says you’re ‘meant’ to do is almost always wrong. Two, don’t worry about where you’ll end up. You’ve never been one to settle for mediocrity.”

Tristan smiled at him. “Do you practice your sageness, or does it come naturally?”

Styra bowed with a great sweep of his arms. “Would that I could tell you, but alas, my secrets are mine alone to bear.”

Tristan rolled his eyes. “Someday I’ll figure it out. You can’t hide everything forever.”

Styrax smiled, a knowing look behind his eyes. "We'll see."

They trotted to catch up with their charges.

Though smaller than most in Loralan, Lorate's town bustled with all the fervor of a community three times its size. Tristan attributed it to the townsfolk's nature. Descended from Phoenix Ridge miners, Lorate's villagers knew how to enjoy their time in the sun. Luthiers and ale makers rivaled the farmers in numbers. Anything from weddings to blown dandelions could become an excuse for a town-wide celebration. Cheap drinks and even cheaper food flowed in abundance.

At least, that was the Lorate Tristan used to know. Over the past five years, although the bustle and busyness remained, the tone had shifted. Laughter rarely punctuated conversations. The wellsprings of food and drink had faded to occasional trickles. Celebrations became fewer each year.

Linae brushed past Tristan as she ran to the center market of town in pursuit of a group of children chasing a honey-colored squirrel. Lady Vinea tried to call her back to no avail. Tristan snapped from his haze.

"I'll keep close to her," Tristan assured Lady Vinea, trying to dismiss the unsettled feeling in his stomach. "Styrax can help with your shopping."

"What if *I* wanted to watch Linae?"

"No!" Lady Vinea glanced around the square and up at the rooftops, eyes darting from one building to the next. After a few moments, she realized Tristan and Styrax were watching her, taken aback by her tone. "Oh! I apologize. Styrax, I hope you know that that was not a reflection on your character at all." She touched his shoulder briefly in apology. "I would just so appreciate it if you could come help me, and if Tristan stayed here in the square."

Tristan and Styrax shared confused looks but shrugged at each other.

"Absolutely, my lady," Styrax said. "Whatever you need."

Lady Vinea smiled. "Thank you." She turned to Tristan. "And thank you, too. I'm sorry she insists on being such a whirlwind. Just stay in the square, and I'm sure she'll be fine."

"Not to worry." Tristan waved and loped after Linae, smirking at Styrax's silent dismay at being the pack-mule.

Shop owners called to him as he passed.

"Morning, Tristan!"

"Good to see you!"

"Any luck finding the Dragon Scales? I heard it's hiding out with a group of friendly elves." Uproarious laughter followed the remark.

Tristan smiled and waved. "Not as much luck as you have finding the bottom of your tankard!"

Another roar of laughter from onlookers as the man sulked.

Tristan found Linae entrenched in a passionate debate between tag or hide and seek. She

clenched the squirrel to her chest as it tried to escape. The poor thing's eyes looked ready to pop from its skull. Linae nuzzled her face into it, blissfully unaware of its plight.

Tristan leaned against a nearby building to watch. Linae was fine. No point in interfering with her fun.

"...Don't understand why it's gone on so long."

The voices of two women—probably hawkers for the stall by how well their voices carried—drifted to Tristan as he sat at the wall. He glanced their way. One younger woman with a riot of freckles across her face brushed the dust from her vegetables as she chatted with the portly, graying baker beside her.

"Twenty-years since the Day of Bluest Blood... I'm not sure how many more times I can raise my prices before people accuse me of robbery!"

The baker wiped the hair from her face, leaving a smudge of flour on her temple. "We've all had to adjust to the war. If you need anyone to blame, blame the rebellion! Their prince died in battle years ago. They don't even have a claim to the throne anymore, but they still fight anyway and prolong this mess. Stupid beasts, the lot of them."

"Finest potatoes this side of the Phoenix Ridges! A dozen per copper!" The freckled woman frowned and put her potato back in its stacks while a group of people passed her by. "They never found the prince's body, though."

"They're just saying that to keep us guessing," the baker said through smiling teeth as she accepted a coin from a passerby and handed him a loaf of bread. "They're trying to hold out long enough to wear us out."

"They're doing a good job of it." She nodded to the group of children Linae played with. Her freckles creased. "I'd sign a peace treaty right now if it kept those little ones away from war."

"Just wait until you met the Ancient Races in person. You wouldn't be so eager to have anything to do with them, then."

Their chatter fell away to mild-mannered bickering. Tristan relaxed the hand he didn't know he'd clenched.

King Osmen had established Fort Lorate as a morale boost for Loralan's commoners. But a single gesture couldn't erase twenty years of pain. These people needed more. They needed an end to the bloodshed. Tristan wished he could do more than sit in a useless, backwater fort and play soldier.

He stewed over that, watching Linae play through the merchant stalls, until Lady Vinea and Styra—overburdened with fresh food and yards of textiles—came to fetch them. Lady Vinea smiled until she saw Linae. "*What* is in your hand?"

"A squirrel!"

While Lady Vinea haggled with her daughter to let the rodent go, Tristan helped divide Styra's load. Styra made grand theatrics of his broken back and splayed knees from all the work he'd done. Tristan rolled his eyes.

Lady Vinea's and Linae's argument ended when the squirrel finally extricated itself from the girl's clutches and scurried off. Lady Vinea snatched Linae's hand before she could chase it, and away they went. Tristan and Styrax hurried to catch up.

As they left, Tristan brushed against someone in the crowd. He turned to apologize, but the words froze in his throat. A pair of green eyes framed by dark curls looked back at him, stunned. His heart clenched. The crowd continued to part around him, but for a moment, time froze for him. Not moving. Not breathing. An inexplicable feeling came over him as if he'd watched the world turn from silver to gold in an instant. A feeling of *home* washed over him.

"Who—?" Before the word finished, she was gone. She'd slipped into the crowd and away from him. "Wait!"

Useless. She had already disappeared from view. He stood in the crowd, staring at the spot he had last seen her. No. No, she couldn't be gone. There had been *something* there. Nostalgia. A memory? His heart leapt to his throat at the thought. He had to find her. For the first time in five years, something from his past stirred within him. He couldn't let her go so easily.

He was about to dive back into the crowd when a tiny hand grabbed his. "Tristan, come on! Momma says it's time to go!"

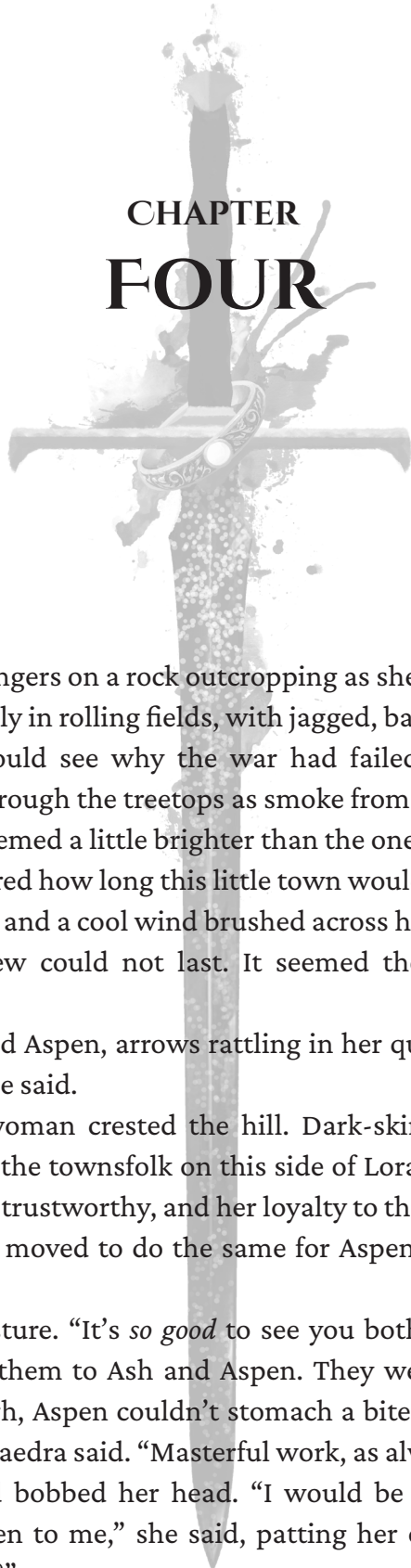
"But...I..." Tristan scoured the crowd again, his heart feeling like it might shatter. The blood drained from his face. How could he have lost something so important so quickly? He couldn't have imagined it, could he?

"Tristan, come on!"

He nodded mutely, looking one last time. Nothing.

"*Tristan!*"

He looked at her and smiled, even though it felt hollow. "All right. All right, I'm coming. Let's go home." He left, feeling like he had abandoned a piece of himself in that square that he would never get back.



CHAPTER FOUR

Aspen drummed her fingers on a rock outcropping as she looked across the sleepy town below. Nestled snugly in rolling fields, with jagged, barren mountains as sentinels on three sides, she could see why the war had failed to extend its reach here. So secluded. Laughter filtered through the treetops as smoke from cooking fires mingled with the skies overhead. The clouds seemed a little brighter than the ones over the front lines, ripe with smoke and blood. She wondered how long this little town would stay that way.

The sun warmed her back and a cool wind brushed across her face. She closed her eyes and basked in the quiet she knew could not last. It seemed the war would leave no village unspoiled.

Ash rose to her feet behind Aspen, arrows rattling in her quiver as she strung her bow on her back. “Chaedra’s here,” she said.

Aspen rose just as the woman crested the hill. Dark-skinned and light-eyed, Chaedra blended well with the rest of the townsfolk on this side of Loralan. Her quick smile made her welcoming, her attentiveness trustworthy, and her loyalty to the Prince’s Rebellion deadly.

Chaedra hugged Ash and moved to do the same for Aspen but stopped. Aspen nodded a greeting and her thanks.

Chaedra returned the gesture. “It’s *so good* to see you both.” She withdrew some scones from her apron and handed them to Ash and Aspen. They were still warm. No matter how delicious they smelled, though, Aspen couldn’t stomach a bite. Too much turmoil to think of food. “I heard about Bael,” Chaedra said. “Masterful work, as always, General Shadowalker.”

Aspen smiled faintly and bobbed her head. “I would be nothing without all the good soldiers crazy enough to listen to me,” she said, patting her on the shoulder. “You’ve done great work here. How are you?”

Chaedra pulled her dark coils from her face, eyes bright. "I'm well. These are good people here." Her smile turned to frown. "Which is what makes your reason for being here even more disturbing." She fumbled through her apron and produced a letter. She handed it to Aspen. "My informant knew nothing about ulterior plans Osmen and his men may have. She gave me this letter, though. The tone is...concerning, to say the least, which is why I contacted you before this whole invasion business, but I couldn't find anything specific in it." She folded her arms across her chest, brows furrowed in concern. "Maybe you'll see something I didn't?"

Aspen took the parchment. "Thank you, Chaedra. And you're sure you can trust this informant?"

"I am. She knows what it's like to lose family to this war. We all do." Chaedra twisted a faded silver band on her finger. "She wants it to end just as much as the rest of us." Chaedra caught Aspen watching her fidget and stopped.

Aspen placed a hand over Chaedra's. Chaedra's promise band—gifted by her fiancé before the King's Men had slaughtered him—was warm against Aspen's palm. "I trust your judgment."

Chaedra nodded. "Thank you, General."

Aspen nodded and tapped the letter. "If I may, I'd like some time to look this over before we head to the village. Might give me a better idea of what I'll be looking for there."

"Oh, uh..." Chaedra cast a sideways glance at Ash. Ash shook her head almost imperceptibly, and then coughed into her fist when she noticed Aspen watching her.

Aspen arched an eyebrow, her stomach already coiling in dread. Ash wouldn't. Not after the conversation they'd had in the Golden Grove. "Is there something I should be aware of, Ash?"

Ash smiled blithely, her eyes never quite meeting Aspen's. "Not at all. It's nothing I haven't already told you."

Apparently, Ash *would*.

Aspen's throat clenched, and she ground her teeth. Her heart beat faster as it sunk to her toes. "I thought I made it *abundantly* clear that we were not to pursue this?"

Ash finally met her gaze, her face forced into neutrality. But Aspen could see regret in the tightness of her jaw. "You did. But I chose to ignore that. For your sake, and for the rebellion's."

Aspen let out a bark of laughter, a shallow husk of a thing that grated on her throat. "My sake? Do I not get my own say in the matter?"

Ash sighed and rubbed her brow. "Of course you do, Aspen," she said. "I'm just trying to help."

"Then stop it," Aspen said, more venomous than she had intended. "I don't need that kind of help."

Chaedra had been following the conversation, eyes darting between the two of them as they argued. "If this is about the prin—"

Aspen cast her a look that cut off the words in an instant. She rounded back on Ash. "I am *not* doing this, Ash. Not again."

"You think I would make you do this if I didn't have to?" Ash asked, the words nearly a hiss through clenched teeth. "What other options do we have?"

"*Plenty.*"

Ash shook her head. "No, we don't. Chaedra and I already have it arranged, and—"

Aspen threw her hands up, casting an accusatory look at Chaedra. "Not you, too."

Chaedra lifted her chin but crossed her arms over her chest as if to protect herself. "My informant helped coordinate it. I can't let her risk be pointless. She'll be bringing him to town any moment for you to see him and make your judgment. He'll be wearing a dandelion crown."

Before Aspen could retort, Ash jumped in from the other side. "Four seconds, Aspen. Four seconds for you to say yes or no, and then we—"

"I'll save you those seconds," Aspen said through gritted teeth, blood roaring in her ears. "*No.*"

Ash and Chaedra both fell silent, but Aspen sensed the lingering, stubborn fight in them. That was not a battle she was willing to lose.

"The prince is dead," she said. "No look-alike impostor will change that."

Ash tried again. "Aspen—"

"*No!* No more of this nonsense. We go to town to find what we can about the invasion, and then we *leave*. We will leave ghosts in the past where they belong."

Ash opened her mouth one more time, but Aspen cut her off. "Ash, don't make me pull rank," she said, hating how tired she sounded. "I will if I have to. This is not something I'm willing to negotiate."

Ash pursed her lips, hands clenched around her bow. Chaedra shuffled her feet and fidgeted with her ring. Aspen knew that was as close to a concession as she would get from them. She sighed. "I'm here to do one job, and one job only." She gestured to Chaedra. "Lead on. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can work on protecting the Golden Grove."

Chaedra nodded, her jaw tight. "Yes, General."

Aspen inwardly winced. Perhaps she had been too harsh.

Chaedra led them down to the village single file, traversing long-forgotten goat trails. As they shuffled across loose shale and hugged the edge of the mountainside, Ash sidled up to Aspen.

"Aspen, you know I never do anything to hurt you, right?"

"I do." Aspen leapt across a gap in the trail that dropped straight down the mountain to a cluster of pine trees waiting to skewer unsuspecting travelers. "But you know that doesn't keep me from speaking my mind."

“Sister Earth *forbid* you ever stop doing that.” Ash followed her across the gap with a rueful smile. “I just can’t help but think; what if this next one *was* him? It would make a world of difference for the rebellion and, most importantly, for *you*.”

Aspen clenched her teeth against the surge of hope in her chest. Of *course*, it would make a difference. The rebellion would have its legitimacy back. She would have *him* back. Her best friend. The only man she had ever loved. But it was not to be. Five years of bone-aching, mind-numbing heartbreak had taught her that. “I don’t have that kind of faith anymore.”

She left it at that. Ash’s sadness radiated off her, but Aspen ignored it. The silence between them dragged on until they reached the base of the mountain.

“I won’t be able to come into the village with you,” Chaedra said, brushing dust and leaves from her skirts. “The seamstress is expecting me, and it might draw suspicion for me to accompany you down. Go to the main square. The market gathers there, and it’s where you’ll find the loosest tongues.” She gave Ash one more hug and saluted Aspen, two fingers to her lips. “Go in luck. I will be ready for when you need me again.” She left them.

Aspen nodded to Ash, and they separated, one to the eastern part of the village, the other to the west. They’d go from the outer edges and work their way in. Better to divide the workload that way.

Aspen tapped her fingers on her thigh as she wound her way through the little fort town. Every so often, she touched the hem of her cowl to keep it in place. It wouldn’t do to flash her pointed ears in a place like this. Lorate was too small for a stranger to go completely unnoticed—the whispers and less-than-subtle glances made that all too clear—but the townsfolk played it off as best they could. The market stall owners called a little louder as she passed, their eyes searching for hidden pouches of gold. The regular folk drew further away, their glances taking in her sword and shadowed face. The war might not have sunk its teeth into this tiny corner of the kingdom, but its rumors and worries were still felt.

Whispers followed Aspen as she passed.

“Where’s she from?”

“A sorcerer, do you think?”

“What would a sorcerer be doing in a place like this?”

“What do sorcerers do *anywhere*? Still can’t understand why his Highness tolerates them. They’ve got the same magic as all the rest of the beasts.”

“But they’re *human*. Mostly, anyway, I think. And I’d rather have a human with magic than an elf with one any day.”

Aspen flexed her fingers beneath her cloak. *Wonder how they’d feel about something like me with magic?*

She let the thought and the whispers slip from her mind as she crossed through alleyways and stalls. She had to find someone willing to talk to her. This excursion would have all been for nothing if she scared them all away. She had to understand why Osmen would send *this*

fort, of all of them, to invade the Golden Grove. And once she understood why, she could stop it. Every step made her thoughts spin faster, exploring plans and options and battling back the anxiety that rippled through her chest like a raging ocean.

"Is there something we can help you with, dear?"

Aspen broke from her thoughts like a drowning man gasping for air. She blinked, and her whirling thoughts subsided for a moment. "Pardon?"

"I'm afraid if you walk one more circle in front of my stall, you might fall over."

Aspen smiled at the portly woman behind the bread counter and her companion in the next stall over. Her cheeks ached as she stretched them into a smile she didn't believe. "My apologies," she said as she approached their stalls. "I wander when I think."

"Ale! Flagon of ale for the lady? Only a sample of what you'll find at the Black Leech, Lorate's finest tavern!" A man in another stall tried to push a flagon to Aspen. She waved it off, but he persisted. "It'll clear those wandering thoughts of yours!"

"Leave the girl alone, Brogan," the older woman said. "Save your energy for the inspector's men." She rolled her eyes. "Never can seem to do anything *but* drink."

Brogan frowned. "You never let me have any fun, Grimmel."

"Not when it comes at the expense of a young lady!"

Aspen's smile softened to something a bit more genuine. She liked this Grimmel. She plunked a coin down and took a loaf of bread from her stall.

"I can't imagine what would have you so deep in thought," Grimmel's stall neighbor, a young woman with dainty freckles dusted across her face, said. "If I had looks like you, all I'd try to do is get some handsome soldier to notice me."

Grimmel gave her a sideways look. "Is that right, Bren?"

Bren's face darkened beneath her freckles. "If I weren't already married, of course." She organized her already tidy potatoes.

Aspen tucked her dark hair deeper into her cloak and fidgeted with the bread in her hand. She tore a piece and took a bite. It melted in her mouth. Her eyelids fluttered as she savored the taste. "Did you say the fort inspector's coming today?"

"Ah, yes. The great Lord Sedick comes to grace us with his *noble* presence," Bren said. She snapped a carrot in half and spit.

A flame of fury roared to life in Aspen's chest. She ground her teeth and tapped the dagger hidden beneath her tunic. What she wouldn't give to sink it into Sedick's unsavory places.

"Hush, Bren." Grimmel's attention darted to Aspen. Perhaps the war had touched them more than she originally thought. "A member of the king's court in our village is a blessing."

Bren scoffed, and her nose curled in disgust. "I'd feel more blessed if he actually paid. And left my sisters alone," she said.

Aspen's lip curled. Sedick left a trail of abominations wherever he went. She listened closely as the women bickered, but nothing useful came from it. She took another bite of her bread and scanned the square, wondering where Ash had gotten to. Ash had to have better

luck with her information gathering. But could Lorate *really* be a threat to the Golden Grove, no matter the information they found? Aspen doubted it. But then why send them at all if that was really what Osmen intended to do? There had to be more than just—

All thoughts vanished the moment a man brushed past her. Dark hair, firm jaw, straight nose with a slight bend at the bridge, and a smile that pulled higher at the right than the left. A crown of wilted dandelions rested against his brow. His stride, his smell, his *presence*, felt as familiar as watching the Golden Grove leaves change from silver to gold. A breath of home that flooded her senses. Aspen's heart stopped beating when he turned to look at her. He stopped, confusion flashing across his face.

"Who—?"

No. No. Aspen darted behind a crowd of people passing and hid behind Grimmel's stall.

"Wait!" he called.

Aspen didn't respond, her breath ragged in her throat. He looked—He looked just like—

NO. She had told Ash not even an hour ago that she would not do this again. He was dead. He was dead. He was *dead*. No crown of dandelions—no impostors, no matter how convincing—would ever replace him. No matter the stirring in her bones. No matter how desperately she wanted to look again, follow him, and never let him leave her sight. She shook her head. Not now. She couldn't do this now. She had to meet back up with Ash and Chaedra. Had to come up with a plan. She willed—*begged*—him to leave.

Aspen watched him through a slit in the stall's wooden planks. He searched the crowd, his expression almost... *broken*. It looked like he might tear through the crowd after her, but a tiny blonde girl appeared and took his hand. She tugged him away, and after a few minutes of coaxing, he finally left, glancing back every few steps, his face ashen.

When he had disappeared into the crowd, Grimmel chuckled and lifted Aspen by the elbow. "I see you've found Fort Lorate's most eligible soldier. Haven't seen someone so overwhelmed by him before, but s'pose everyone's got their limit," she said with a smile. "Best prepare for a fight if you're after him. Every young unmarried woman in town is after him and his friend, Styrax." She cast another sideways look at Bren. "*Married* ones, too."

Bren flushed and crunched a bite off her broken carrot.

"Soldier?" Aspen rasped. Her heart still thudded in her chest and echoed in her ears. Much as she tried not to, she caught herself looking into the crowd for one more glimpse of him. If it really was *him*, he wouldn't be a soldier. Couldn't be. He would rather wallow in the Pit for the rest of eternity.

"I know they don't look the part—no crests or swords—but Tristan and Styrax are the best and brightest. They all are." Her chest had swollen with pride.

"You're sure it's just the *young* ladies with their hearts turned, Grimmel?" Bren asked.

"Oh, you fiend!"

The two women bandied words between them, but Aspen heard none of it. Instead, she stood rooted to the spot, every hair and muscle and fiber electrified. Her tongue swelled in her

mouth and nearly choked her. Her arms hung limp and useless at her sides, and locked knees were the only things that kept her legs from collapsing. That and pure force of will. Tristan. That was his name. Of course not *him*. No matter how much they looked alike.

Aspen grit her teeth until they ached. No more of this. She would have no more of it. She turned to the insistent ale hawker, her mouth dry as the soldier's face swam in her eyes. She plunked a coin on his counter. "I'd like that drink now."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A. L. Lorensen has had a lifetime passion for writing and the art of storytelling. She graduated from Utah State University with a Bachelor of Science in Social Work and maintained her writing on the side. A. L. mainly writes fantasy, but has dabbled in fiction, mystery, comedy, and anything else that may strike her fancy. *For Evergreens and Aspen Trees* is her debut novel.

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