

WARRIOR
OF THE WILD

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PART 1



CHAPTER

1

An ax swings for my head.
The dull training weapon may not be enough to decapitate me, but I know all too well the sharp sting of metal on skin.

I duck.

A whoosh of air sails over my head, and while I'm still crouched, I thrust my ax straight out so the blunt tips of the double heads whack right into Torrin's armor-clad stomach.

He lets out a sad breath of air. "Dead again."

Ignoring the instinct to correct his form, I opt for a quick "Sorry," as he rubs at the spot where I struck him.

He grins at me. "If I had a problem, I would find a different sparring partner."

That smile of his sets my stomach to fluttering. It gets more and more charming every day.

But shame spreads through me when Torrin's eyes raise to my hair. He hasn't said anything about it, and I'm in no hurry to offer up an explanation for its shorter length. Thankfully, Master Burkin strides over to us, saving me.

"Well done, Rasmira," he says. Then to Torrin, "You're too slow on the recovery. Unless getting eviscerated was your intention?"

A look of annoyance flashes over Torrin's face, but it disappears as quickly as it comes. "Maybe it was, Master Burkin."

"And maybe you'll fail your trial tomorrow. This is the last day for me to shove any more training into your thick skull. Let's pair Rasmira up with another boy so you can watch."

Being put on display is the last thing I want. It separates me even more from the rest of the trainees. I already receive more attention, receive the highest marks. It's as if my instructor, my father, and everyone else are *trying* to make life harder for me.

Burkin searches through the other pairs practicing in the training house. "How about . . ."

Not Havard. Not Havard. Not Havard.

"Havard!" Burkin calls on the second-highest rank in our training group. "Come pair with Rasmira so Torrin can observe how to properly recover from his own swing."

"I know *how* to recover," Torrin says defensively. "Rasmira is just fast."

"The ziken are fast, too," Burkin says, "and they will not have blunt claws for weapons. Now watch."

I've spoken to my father about Burkin belittling the other students in order to raise me up. Complained profusely.

Nothing has changed.

So I'm forced to face off with Havard. He's the biggest boy I've ever seen, with a scowl across his lips to heighten the effect.

No one ever did like being second best.

Then again, perhaps no one ever hated being first more than I.

I swing for Havard's head, just as Master Burkin wants. Havard ducks and thrusts out with his ax just as I did before. With the same momentum of my initial swing, I curve my blades around, effectively blocking the jab toward my stomach.

"Perfect," Burkin says. "Now step it up, Torrin. Else tomorrow will be the last day any of us sees you alive."

And with that, Burkin stomps off to find other students to nag.

"Doesn't he realize how hard it is to take this seriously when it's the last day of training?" Torrin asks.

I'm about to respond, when a blur streaks toward me out of the corner of my eye.

I throw my ax up just in time.

It would seem that Havard isn't done with me yet.

"Something is different about you," Havard says, looking me up and down. The motion makes me feel dirty.

But then his eyes fix on my hair.

He laughs once. "You've cut your hair. Were you trying to make yourself uglier? Or does Torrin prefer it this way?"

I shove at our joined axes, sending Havard back a step. He has a knack for finding just the right ways to bring me down low. My eyes sting, but I have long since learned to control tears.

My father cut my hair last night. It used to flow down to my waist in blond waves. I loved my hair, despite the fact that it's more white than golden, like my mother's and sisters'. But now it

barely reaches my shoulders, just like the rest of the men wear their hair.

I know that if my father could somehow force me to grow a beard, he'd do that, too.

My knuckles whiten where they grip my ax.

Havard notices. "You're going to strike me?"

"I'm considering it."

He snorts. "How would it look if the village leader's daughter started a fight the day before her trial?"

"Like she got pissed off by the village idiot."

His eyes sharpen. "You want to be very careful of what you say to me, Rat."

Rat—his charming nickname for me. Havard has been using it since I was eight. He said I scurried like one every time I tried to find my feet after he'd knock me down in training.

And when I would come home covered in bruises from my shins to my cheeks, Father began training me at home, too. For the last ten years, I have learned very little other than how to handle an ax.

But that is why I'm the best.

Because I know he's not expecting it, I fling my fist at Havard. His eyes were trained on my ax, not my free hand. The blow catches him on the chin, and I'm pleased by the way my knuckles smart. It must mean I hit him hard.

Havard cannot keep challenging me. I have to put him in his place. For one day, I will be his ruler, and if I cannot keep one bully in line, I'll never be able to look after a whole village.

When he sends a returning fist my way, I move to block it with my ax.

But he uncurls his fingers, wraps them around the shaft, and traps my ax in place. After dropping his own weapon, he sends his now-free hand toward my face. I feel my skin split across my cheekbone as my face wrenches backward.

Burkin notices.

“Havard! No fists! You will apologize to Rasmira.”

Havard is furious at being caught when I wasn't. Rage fuels him now—he's past the point of listening. Past the point of being sensible, which is right where I want him.

He picks his weapon back up and flies at me, ax, legs, and arms swinging intermittently. I block each attack one after the next, just waiting, waiting, waiting.

There.

After a sweeping move meant to cleave me in two from head to toe, Havard's ax nicks into the dirt floor.

I've already sidestepped it, and now I sweep his legs out from under him, landing him on his ass for the whole room to see.

“Quicker on the recovery!” Burkin barks out. “By the goddess, do none of you listen?”

Some of the trainees laugh, but I barely hear it. My entire focus is latched onto Havard lying on the ground.

I kick his weapon far from his reach, then lower my ax to Havard's neck so the two blades rest on either side, pinning him to the floor.

“Dead,” I say. And then lower, so only he can hear, “Challenge me again, and the next time we face off, it won't be with training weapons.”

Havard answers with a disturbing smile. “You won't live long enough for us to face off again.”

I kick him, send my leg straight down into his stomach. “And you need never rise from this floor. Apologize if you wish me to free you.”

Once he catches his breath, Havard tries to use his hands to thrust my ax away from himself. I kick him again. This time my heel comes down on his nose.

Burkin does nothing. Will never do anything, because I am my father’s daughter. Displeasing me would displease Father.

A little voice scratches at the back of my mind, warning me that incensing Havard is no way to earn his respect and loyalty. I’m abusing my own power.

But a much more prominent voice practically shouts, *Make him bend.*

Finally, through a blood-soaked face, Havard says, “Apologies.”

I let him up, and training resumes.

TORRIN WALKS ME HOME, as he’s done every day for the last month. Though now it feels as though he’s always been by my side, we only became friends about six weeks ago. Before that, he was part of Havard’s group, just another face in the crowd of my tormentors.

I remember vividly the day everything changed. Havard thought to gang up on me with the help of his best friends, Kol, Siegert, and Torrin. But instead of siding with Havard, Torrin helped me fight them off. Afterward, Torrin begged my forgiveness for playing the part he had the last several years. He said that as our trial had grown closer, he’d given some serious thought to what it means to be a warrior. “It never sat right with me—the way Havard

treats you,” he said, “but rather than face what I believed to be wrong, I did the easy thing. I don’t want to be that kind of man. I know it’s too late to take back what I’ve done, but I’d like to start changing now. I hope you can forgive me for the past.”

I didn’t think I was the forgiving type. I didn’t think I believed people could change. But as I watched Torrin start living his life separate from Havard, I started to become closer to him. For the first time, I had a friend. Someone who didn’t hate me for what I couldn’t control, for being my father’s daughter.

Now Torrin gently touches my cheek where Havard struck me. “We need to get this looked at right away.”

I’m torn. I want to shrug him off because I don’t need him fussing over me. He would never treat a male warrior this way. And yet, I don’t want him to stop touching me.

“Irrenia will do it when she gets home,” I say.

“Even with the cut, you’re still lovely. How do you manage that?”

Lovely.

I have received praise for being brave and strong, for having impressive aim, for holding my ax properly.

But no one has ever praised my looks.

A blossoming warmth spreads inside my chest, traveling upward. It envelops the pulsing sting in my cheek.

I have no idea how I’m supposed to respond to something like that. How do women handle such praise? Saying *thank you* doesn’t seem right. Especially when I don’t agree.

Thankfully, Torrin saves me from having to respond. “I overheard some of the trainees talking about sneaking out tonight to witness the Payment. Do you want to go? Not with them, obviously. With me. Separately.” He takes his hand back, and we continue

walking toward my home. He moves slightly closer to me so that our arms brush as we walk. It's such a subtle change, but I notice, as if he'd bounded into me headlong.

At this point, I'm convinced I would do anything as long as it means spending more time with him.

"Sure." I try to sound as though I couldn't care either way. I hope he doesn't realize just how good it feels for me to be around him. While I'm almost certain he feels the same way I do, it's impossible to tell for sure. But why else would he look for reasons to touch me? Why would he try to spend as much time as possible with me outside of training?

But if he does like me, then why hasn't he kissed me yet? Maybe he is just as nervous as I am. Maybe it's his first experience with courtship, just as it is mine. I've never seen him with another girl.

We pass through the streets of Seravin. Homes made from rock slabs line either side of the street. The gray-black stones have been painted over with deep azures and muted greens—the colors of the sky and sparse grass that breaks through the rocks. To the right, a cart is being heaped with chunks of meat to be presented for the Divine Payment. Two nocerotis, large beasts with sleek hides and two horns jutting out of the tops of their heads, are attached to the front, ready to pull once smacked on their hindquarters. Children, too young to begin training for a specific trade, play a game of pebbles in front of their homes.

And all the while Torrin's fingers are inching closer toward mine.

"I hope this year's Payment doesn't require us to skip meals again," he says as he watches hunters layer more and more valder

into the cart. Each one is the length of two handspans and has enough meat to fill a small family. “There were several times during training last year that I thought I would pass out.”

My chest tightens at those words. Peruxolo, the low god, demands payment each year. He collects different resources from every village. Ours is responsible for providing him with the best game. Our hunters are the most skilled of all the nearby villages. Even still, there is not always enough meat to go around.

Sometimes the Payment is so great that some in the village must go without food for days at a time. Parents and older siblings, like Torrin, skip meals so the younger ones can fill their bellies. Because of who my father is, my sisters and I have never had to go hungry. Other families are not so lucky.

Hunger is a better fate than facing Peruxolo’s wrath, but I still feel sick to think of people starving.

“You will not go hungry during this Payment, Torrin,” I say as I take his hand in mine. “I will make sure you and your brothers are fed each mealtime. My family always has more than enough food.”

Torrin turns toward me, a peculiar expression upon his face. Confusion? Guilt? No, perhaps just surprise?

“You would do that for my family?”

“Of course I would.” His intent eyes make my insides squirm. I try to lighten the air. “Because I don’t want to be seen with you if you don’t keep up your impressive physique.”

He laughs, and the action makes me smile in return.

We’ve reached my home now, and Torrin releases my hand. I try to keep from frowning until I realize his face is approaching mine.

This is it, I think as my heart begins racing. He's going to kiss me.

And he does.

On the cheek.

I don't break eye contact as he pulls away. Maybe if I just look at him longingly, he'll see what I want and he won't be afraid to give it to me.

He looks back at me, his eyes deepening again. I think he might be reading my mind.

"I'll pick you up tonight outside your window so we can witness the Payment. I can't wait." He rubs his thumb against my lips before departing.

But it's still not a real kiss.

I NEARLY FALL OUT of bed when knuckles rap against my bedroom window. Of course, I've been expecting Torrin, but I'm not used to sneaking out at night. I may be excited, but perhaps a bit anxious as well.

I've never left the boundaries of the village before.

When I rise and go to the window, Torrin has his face squished against the glass and is making a funny face.

My lips tilt in a smile as I open the window.

"Ready?" he whispers.

"Yes." I grab my ax—a sharp blade meant to do damage, not a training weapon—from beside the window and sling it through the strap on my back. Then I lift myself through the window one leg at a time.

Torrin doesn't waste any time at all lacing his fingers through

mine. My home is among those at the edge of the village boundaries, so it isn't long before we are in the wild. We take the rough terrain at a steady jog.

Everything in the wild is dangerous, including the ground, which is composed of broken-up rocks teetering against one another. It's difficult to find even footing. Any step could result in a twisted ankle, and rockslides are frequent. Though a more traversable road wends through the wild, we can't risk taking it, else we might be seen by the adults tasked with delivering the meat to the god.

We have to give the inna trees a wide berth. Their branches grow to a couple feet in length and naturally sharpen into deadly points that can pierce through our armor if we aren't careful.

As we walk, a lonely valder blurs across our path. As soon as I blink, it's already moved on. The valder are our main source of meat, but they run so fast, they're easy to miss. Our hunters are trained to be quick with their throwing hatchets—the only weapons that can be thrown fast enough and hard enough to catch them. I'm shocked to find one so close to the village. It's as if it knows it's not in danger now that all the meat has already been collected for the Payment.

As we veer around another tree, a distant cackle carries to us on the wind.

That'll be the ziken.

They're the reason we need to train the best warriors. With their paralyzing venom and ability to regenerate lost limbs, the ziken are formidable foes. The beasts love nothing more than the taste of human flesh, and they know exactly where to get it. That's why we always have warriors scouting the perimeter of the village.

As soon as Torrin and I pass our trial tomorrow, we will join the ranks of warriors and be charged with the village's safety. Our lives will be consumed with killing the beasts.

I wonder if any will come out to play tonight.

TORRIN AND I STAND in the shadows of the trees, waiting for the god to appear.

In the clearing ahead of us, seven wagons wait in a line, heaped with various goods: precious stones and gems, fine clothing sewn with metallic hems, preserved fruits and pickled vegetables, flasks of fresh water from the Sparkling Well, herbs and medicines, fresh and dried meat—and in the final wagon . . .

I cannot bear to look at that last wagon.

“What do you suppose the god looks like?” I whisper.

“They say he never shows his face,” Torrin whispers back.

“Maybe he doesn't have a face.”

“Maybe his nose is embarrassingly large, and he doesn't want anyone to know.”

My lips twitch, but I cannot manage a smile with the threat of danger surrounding us.

The light of the full moon makes it easy to spot my father standing next to our wagon. The nocerotis are harnessed to the front. They are restless, sensing the tension of all the men waiting. My father reaches out a hand, patting the rough hide of one of the beasts.

I wonder if the god isn't watching them, relishing in their discomfort. In making them wait.

“You don't think he knows we're hiding out here?” I ask.

“Your father?”

I shake my head. “The god.”

Torrin doesn't say anything for a moment. “Havard's boasted of sneaking out before to witness the Payment, and he's still alive.”

Unfortunately.

Still . . .

“Maybe we should turn back,” I say.

“Rasmira—” Before he can say anything else, the heads of all the nocerotis snap to attention, focusing in the same direction. The fidgeting of the leaders stills, and many of their faces go pale.

My father is the most skilled warrior I have ever seen. How terrible could the god be that even he would be afraid?

Tree branches on the opposite side of the clearing rustle, and it takes me a moment to notice the hooded figure in black furs and armor.

Because he isn't on the ground.

He's floating in the air.

A cape drapes across his shoulders and hangs just above his boots. He's impossibly tall, yet slimmer than I imagined, even with the furs giving him extra bulk. Over his right shoulder, I spot the head of an ax.

The only uncovered parts of Peruxolo's body are his hands, which are . . . surprisingly normal. He has, at least, the hands of a human, but what lies beneath that hood?

Every leader in the clearing drops to their knees. The god does not approach them, though his voice is not difficult to hear.

“The gems are few tonight,” he says, a deep and cruel rumble that I feel in my bones. A man stands from his kneeling position, presumably the village leader responsible for providing the gems.

“My god—” He is cut off by a raised hand.

“Come forward,” Peruxolo purrs, and just by the tone of it, I know something awful is about to happen.

The leader hesitates, and I can see him swallow from this distance.

Peruxolo cocks his head, and that is all it takes for the leader to obey.

“That’s enough,” Peruxolo says after a moment. And the man opposite bows his head to the ground.

I know already that he will not rise again.

With a single flick of Peruxolo’s wrist, the bowing leader topples over, blood pooling around him, choking gurgles coming from his lips.

We’ve been told stories since we were children of the god who can kill without touching his ax, but to see it . . .

Torrin trembles slightly from beside me as the leader goes still and silent.

“I trust that someone will let the Restin village know I expect double payment on their gems by next month.”

The guards who accompanied their leader from Restin start to move toward the body.

“No,” Peruxolo drawls out lazily. “You will leave him for the ziken to feed on.”

It’s a shameful thing. Our people are buried under rock so thick that no animal can desecrate their bodies.

Almost without thinking, I grab Torrin’s hand. His fingers curve around mine, and I look down at the sight of our joined hands. A rope bracelet peeks out from beneath his sleeve, lengths of his little sister’s hair woven with the reeds—the child his mother lost at birth last winter.

Despite the danger, my racing heart calms somewhat at the sight.

“If I don’t receive double by next month,” Peruxolo says, “I’ll pay a visit to the village.”

Everyone in the clearing cringes at those words.

“Back up,” he continues. The leaders and guards do so, stepping away from the wagons. Only then does Peruxolo descend. He curves through the air in an arc before bending at the knees to catch himself on the ground. He rises, head held high, hood still firmly in place.

Peruxolo climbs into the last wagon in line.

He leans down to examine the drugged girl lying across the floor. He places a thumb and forefinger on either side of her chin, turning it from side to side as if she were a doll.

“She’s pretty. She will make a fine sacrifice. At least I can count on the Mallimer village to do their part each year.”

The Mallimer village leader nods. Actually nods. As though he’s done some great service.

My father turns away from the scene. Does he imagine how it would feel if one of his own daughters were taken? I know how much our people suffer, because I see the shrunken bodies and hollow cheeks that follow the Payment each year. But now I’m reminded how some villages have a heavier Payment than we do.

“Hitch the wagons together,” Peruxolo orders.

My father and the others remove the nocerotis from each wagon, yoking them all together in front of the first wagon. They connect the wagons in one long train. Peruxolo sits at the head of the reins and slaps them down on the hides of the wide beasts in

front. So very slowly, all those goods, the wealth of seven different villages, rolls away.

My whole life, I have heard whisperings about the god, Peruxolo. He moves objects without touching them. Kills men who displease him with a look. Floats above us in the air. Sometimes the ground shakes when he walks. He has even been known to kill entire villages. Only twenty years ago, the Byomvar village was eradicated in the short span of a week when they failed to meet the requirements of their Payment for the second year in a row. They all grew sick until their bodies collapsed.

Peruxolo appeared hundreds of years ago in our lands and made it his home, demanding tribute every year in exchange for not slaughtering us all where we stand. His power is unlimited, he himself is immortal, and we have no choice but to abide by his wishes.

We're taught to pray for Peruxolo's mercy each night, but I do not. My prayers are only for Rexasena, the high goddess. She is an unseen deity who lives in the heavens. But I feel her all around me. In my sisters' laughter. In the sun's warm rays. In the peace I feel inside. She encourages goodness and kindness in this life so we may experience bliss in the life to come. But Peruxolo? He is a bane on the mortal realm, making us suffer unnecessarily for his own gain.

"Let's go," Torrin whispers. "Your father's leaving. We should try to beat him home. We don't want him to notice you're missing."

I nod and let Torrin lead me back the way we came. Despite the dangerous terrain, my thoughts circle around that girl in the last wagon. I wish I could help her. But to do so would be to doom the entire Mallimer village to a worse fate. We have no choice but to let her go.

I shiver from the thought of the death that awaits that girl.

“What’s wrong?” Torrin asks as we dodge another tree branch.
“Did you see the gunda?”

I nudge him with my shoulder. “The gunda isn’t real.”

“How would you know? You’ve never been out in the wild before.”

“It’s an imagined monster meant to scare children away from the dangerous wild.”

“Don’t shrug it off until you see one.”

“You do realize the flaw in that logic?”

He grins, and I look away so as not to be caught staring at his mouth.

“Come, now,” Torrin says. “You’d love to stride back into the village carrying the gunda’s head. Imagine the look on Havard’s face!”

I know he’s trying to make me feel better, and I let him, because I *want* to feel better.

“Imagine how spent we’d be then before tomorrow’s trial,” I say.

“Worried you’ll fail?” he teases.

Though we’re both eighteen, we will not be considered adults by the village until we pass our trial. It is a dangerous challenge filled with ziken, the same creatures that roam these very woods. And the consequence for failing is no small thing. Tradition dictates that those who fail face banishment and the mattugr. It is the absolute worst disgrace to be bestowed by my people. If any individual isn’t excelling in their profession, they’re smart enough to switch to something more befitting their abilities before the year of their trial.

“If I were to fail,” I say, “who would trounce you so thoroughly during training drills?”

“An excellent point. We’d best stick together tomorrow, then.”

I don't think I'll ever tire of hearing the word *we* leave his lips.

After tomorrow, things are going to change. When I beat my trial, I can finally move out of my father's house. I can see Torrin whenever I like. No more sneaking around because Torrin is afraid of my father.

And I'll finally be free of my mother.

A sharp yank snaps my head backward. I think I've caught my hair on something, until I'm suddenly spun around, and a powerful pain shoots clear to the back of my skull, starting at my right eye.

I barely manage to catch my balance as my hands fly over my eye. Then I hear quiet laughter.

It would seem that Torrin and I were not, in fact, the only ones to sneak out tonight.

"Something in your eye?" Havard taunts as he shakes out the fist that struck me. That sends his accomplices, Kol and Siegert, into a fit of laughter.

I wipe at my watering eyes so I can properly see the threat, but my right eye appears to already be swelling shut. I can't believe I didn't hear Havard coming. I was too distracted thinking about Torrin.

"Go back to the village, Havard," I say. "I beat you at every fight you instigate. How could you think this would be any different? Are you so fond of pain that you now seek me out for it?"

An unkind thing to say, for sure, but sneaking up behind me to strike was low of him.

Havard rips his ax from off his back and advances toward me. "Let's have it out here, then! See how you do against a real weapon."

The shout sends bats sailing upward from the trees, their chirping and clicking following them into the night, and I hope no ziken were near enough to hear Havard's outburst.

I pull my ax from my back, preparing to defend myself against Havard and his friends. Torrin does the same from beside me. We spread our legs apart, one foot forward, in a readying stance. Kol and Siegert mirror their leader, advancing in a straight line.

“Rasmira.”

Everyone freezes at the new voice.

Havard's shout didn't alert the ziken.

It brought my father.

CHAPTER

2

My father, Torlhon Bendrauggo, is flanked by three other warriors from our village. He surveys the scene quickly: Havard, Kol, and Siegert charging toward us with their axes as Torrin and I are about to defend ourselves.

“You’re injured,” Father says, as though I maybe hadn’t noticed the flaring pain in my head. “Which of these boys hit you?”

“Master Bendrauggo,” Havard starts as he hides his bloodied knuckles behind his back, “we—”

“To the village. Your excuses can wait until we’re out of the wild.”

No one dares to argue. Five axes are returned to their owners’ backs, and we’re shuffled along with my father and the guards dispersed among us—as though we’d try fighting one another with them here.

It is a long trek back to the village boundaries. We take the road this time, which is much easier. We need not worry about brushing against stinging agger vines, skimming poisonous yoonbrush needles, or getting a foot stuck in a snaketrapp plant.

When at last the road dumps us into the village, Father rounds on the boys behind me.

“Since you four seem to think you’re already men, you can take watches tonight. Show us your prowess at protecting the village.”

Havard won’t look my father directly in the eye as he asks, “For how long?”

“Until you’re needed for your trial.”

There is the punishment. No rest before the most important day of our lives.

“What about Rasmira?” Torrin asks.

“That is none of your concern. Now stay here. If I hear word from any of your parents that you returned in the night, it’s banishment and the *mattugr* for all of you.”

We are all silent at that.

In the old language, *mattugr* means “might.” But it has no implications of strength. No, the *mattugr* is a challenge. If one has been issued the *mattugr*, it is because one has lost all honor, and the only way to redeem oneself is to attempt the challenge given. Attempt, because the quest is always something that is meant to end in death.

A *mattugr* has never been issued from my village during my lifetime. But I have heard stories of challenges given in the past.

Walk for a thousand days without pausing to sleep or eat.

Jump from the tallest peak and land on your feet.

Sleep for a night at the base of a pool of water.

Other challenges are less obvious in their implications of death, but they are no less deadly.

Kill the gunda and bring back its carcass.

Take a tooth from the mouth of a living mountain cat.

Face the ziken without a weapon.

That my father would threaten us with the mattugr—

He is *furious*.

“Rasmira, follow me.” Father turns on his heel and leads me deeper into the village. All is quiet, for all are asleep save the warriors left roaming the outskirts, watching for danger.

Father marches right through our front door without bothering to check that I follow still. I’m half-tempted to make a run for it. Mother’s likely still up.

But I follow through, and the metal door doesn’t make a peep on its hinges as it closes behind me. Very little is built out of wood, for it soon becomes brittle and fragile once the ground no longer nourishes it. The wagons carrying the god’s spoils will crumble in a few days.

Our home is the largest in the village, with a massive receiving room. It’s bedecked with the finest decorations to show our standing: furniture handsomely crafted out of marble and cushioned with bird feathers, mounted horns from various beasts my father has killed, jewels cut and crafted into the most beautiful designs.

My mother and sisters come running into the room at the sound of the front door closing.

“You’re safe,” Mother says. “Bless the goddess!” She tries to throw herself at my father, but he stays her with an upraised hand.

“Did you know Rasmira had left the house?” Father demands.

Mother finally takes notice of me standing behind Father. She debates for a moment. I can tell she wants to lie, to say she did know. But to be caught in a lie is a grave sin.

“I hadn’t! I thought her in her room.” That’s probably not entirely true. I doubt she thought of me at all.

Father looks pointedly at the three girls standing beside her. “Tormosa, Alara, and Ashari are not in their rooms.”

They are second, third, and fourth oldest, respectively. Salvanya is the oldest and already married and living in her own home. Irrenia is number five, but it would appear she isn’t home yet.

“You know how Rasmira is. She keeps to herself! How was I to know?”

“Rasmira is important,” Father begins. I close my eyes, dreading this turn. I know that when I look at my mother, she’ll be livid. “She will be a warrior and will protect this village. She will lead our people after I am gone. Already she is the best of the apprentice warriors. Who else will carry my legacy but her?”

The last line was too far. Mother shrinks back. She never wanted to have children. I know because she’s said so more than once. She’d hoped to give father a male heir and be done with it. But then girl after girl after girl was born. Six of us. My birth was the most difficult, and now she can’t have any more children. A blessing for her, but something my father is always throwing at her, as though it’s somehow her fault.

“I left of my own will, Father,” I say. “I’m to blame. Not Mother.”

He ignores me. “Do you have any idea how important tomorrow is for her? She will participate in the most difficult test we’ve ever devised, and afterward, she will finally become a ma—woman. A woman.”

“Father—” I try again.

“Go to your room, Rasmira. Get rested.”

“But you’re making the others stay up to guard the boundaries! What is my punishment?”

“Your eye is swollen shut. That’s punishment enough. The boys were fighting you in the woods. Their punishment is more severe.”

“Torrin wasn’t, though. He was on my side.”

“And is he the one who convinced you to sneak out of your bed tonight?”

My silence is answer enough.

“Go to bed. Now. The rest of you girls go to your rooms as well. Where is Irrenia? She should see to Rasmira.”

“Still out,” Mother rushes to say, glad to have an answer to something.

“All right. You can wait up for her and direct her to Rasmira’s room when she gets in. I’m to bed.”

Father pats me once on the shoulder before shuffling off. A sign of affection that Mother watches with a sharp eye.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper to her.

“Torlhon said you’re to go to bed,” she bites out. “So be off. Tomorrow we can finally be done with you.”

She sits herself in one of the cushioned chairs, staring fixedly at the door. My sisters go to their rooms, and I do the same, unwilling to be left alone with Mother.

My room is the last at the end of a long, empty hallway. Embers from the fire set the room aglow. Elda, the housekeeper, lit it before I climbed into bed—shortly before I climbed out of it and snuck out the window.

I don’t go to the bed now. If the boys are punished with a night without sleep, then I will be, too. I sit on the floor, reach under the bed, and pull out a small box.

Good thing Elda doesn't bother with cleaning under the bed.

I open the lid and stare at the shiny contents.

My mother and sisters (save Irrenia) all chose jewelery as their professions. All the miners bring the best finds to Mother with the hopes of earning her favor. She's also the most beautiful woman in the village—a fact she never lets me forget—and sometimes miners will seek her out when they don't have jewels to sell. They shower her with compliments. No one has a larger section in the high goddess's Book of Merits than my mother, I'm sure.

At the top of my jewelry box is a sapphire necklace, the centerpiece the size of the pad of my thumb. Salvanya, my eldest sister, gave it to me as a gift for my last birthday. Beneath it is a bracelet rimmed with rubies. That's from Tormosa. Alara and Ashari made me matching ruby earrings.

I've never worn anything in this box outside the confines of this room. If my father saw me dressing in such finery, he'd be ashamed. Warriors do not wear jewelry. Even Torrin gets flak for the sentimental bracelet he wears, which is why he tries to keep it hidden under his armor at all times.

And if my mother saw me, she'd laugh and probably make some comment about how gems could never hide how ugly and unfeminine I am.

I wade through more items: a turquoise choker, a topaz anklet, an emerald-dressed headpiece.

At the very bottom are two plain items, but they're my favorite. I pull them out, even dare to put them on.

Black earrings. My ears were pierced by the time I turned six, but before that, I longed to wear beautiful earrings like my older sisters. Mother knew this, so she made me earrings out of special plain black rocks. She called them lodestones. Some natural

reaction between the two ends draws them together, holding up the pieces with my ear suspended between.

I remember what she told me, how I was one end of the earring while she was the other, held together by a powerful force.

That was before I declared myself a warrior. Before my mother hated me. I wouldn't dare wear them in front of her now. She might demand them back.

But I dream of wearing them in front of her, of her seeing them and remembering the words she once spoke.

I know it's foolish thinking—nothing could sway her now. She wears her hatred like an armor fused to her skin, never to come off. It is the only thing that protects her from my father's constant rejection.

She doesn't realize I would give up his praise in an instant if it meant I could have a real mother. One like Torrin's, who grieves every day for the child she never even knew.

A door slams, and I hurry to throw everything back in the box, pulling the stones from my ears and chucking them inside, closing the lid, and shoving it under the bed.

My door opens not even a second after the box slides out of sight.

"What did I miss?" Irrenia asks. She is only one year my senior and the sister I cherish the most.

"I snuck out of the house. Father blamed Mother for it."

She opens her mouth, likely about to demand more details, but then she sees my face. "There's a cut on your cheek, and what happened to your eye? Mother didn't—"

"No. It wasn't Mother." She is not foolish enough to actually strike me. Not when I am warrior-trained.

Irrenia enters the room fully, gets behind me, and steers me down the hall. "Tell me everything."

I do so as she plunks me into a chair in her room and digs in one of her drawers for some sort of salve. She rubs it onto my swollen eye, and it begins to twitch from the stinging sensation caused by the salve.

"Ow," I say.

"Oh hush. It'll feel better in a moment."

I close my other eye and take in the rich scent of Irrenia's room. She does not work at the jewelers with everyone else. Irrenia trained to become a healer. She passed her trial just last year, but she's already the best with medicine in the village. Her room is filled with her own concoctions, and it smells of soothing herbs. Lately she's been experimenting with ziken venom, trying to find a way to make the warriors immune to their paralyzing bite.

Irrenia has the kindest spirit of anyone I know, which is why she is always home so late. She can't bear to turn away those who are sick or injured. She continues to work each day until she has no more patients or until she drops from exhaustion.

Though I still cannot open my injured eye, the stinging sensation abates, replaced by a soothing numbness.

She rubs more salve onto the wound, and I finish telling her everything that happened tonight, leaving out no details.

"Sneaking out was stupid," she says when I'm finished. "There are a hundred different ways you could have been injured or killed. I'm just relieved a punch to the face is the worst of your injuries. What if you'd run into the ziken in the wild? We wouldn't have even recognized your remains in the morning! And what would happen to Father then?"

“Oh yes, poor Father. Whatever would he do without an heir to carry on his legacy?”

“He loves you, Rasmira. It would break him to see you go.”

Because of his own investment in me. It has nothing to do with me as a person.

“At least Mother would be happy then,” I say.

She flicks my swollen eye with a finger.

I let out a sound that probably wakes Ashari over in the next room. “What the hell, Irrenia!” I cup a hand gently over my eye.

“I don’t want to hear you talking like that. Everyone has problems. Don’t make Mother’s and Father’s your own. You are not at fault for anything.” She puts a finger under my chin to raise my eyes to hers. “I love you. It sounds like that boy of yours is quite fond of you. Your instructors adore you. But even if they didn’t, it doesn’t matter. You are worthy of love. Not everyone knows how to love the right way. But you remember how that feels and vow never to do it to others.”

“You’re awfully wise, you know that?” I say. “And you’re the kindest person I know.” I tell her that last part every day. If there is anyone who deserves a place of honor in Rexasena’s Paradise, it is Irrenia. And I remind the goddess every day through my compliments.

“Enough about me,” Irrenia says. “Let’s discuss how we’re going to get this boy to kiss you.”

CHAPTER

3

Despite all of Irrenia's wild ideas ("Find a way to get trapped in a dark, tight spot with him," "Pretend to trip in his direction so he has to catch you with your lips inches from his," and "Tell him you've got something stuck in your eye, and you need him to take a look"), I've decided that I will not wait any longer for Torrin to make the first move.

I'm going to kiss him.

As soon as we've both passed our trial—it's the perfect moment.

I fall asleep on the floor of my room with that thought in my mind. The next morning, I take some satisfaction in my aching back and neck. Torrin had to stay up all night. I'd tried to do the same, but at least I can say I'm being punished for my part.

I do not need long to prepare myself in the morning. I wash

myself down with a rag and soapy water, put on a fresh set of warm hides, buckle my boots, and then survey my armor lying out on the far table. Our metalsmiths pound iron into flat sheets and shape them to our bodies. Mine fit perfectly, and I take pride in the simple act of donning them each morning. I like to start at the bottom and work my way up. First come the greaves, which consist of two separate sheets for each lower leg and slide into thin openings in my leathers. I curve one over the top of each shin; the other two slide over my calves. The thigh guards are a bit trickier due to the size, but they slide on the same way. I pull my breastplate over my head and tighten the straps, remembering the embarrassment on Father's face when the smithy had to round it out more for my breasts. My forearm and upper arm guards go on next.

Last and most importantly, I slide my ax through the sheath on my back.

I check and double-check everything. Ensure that all is secure, tight, and comfortable.

At a knock on my door, my heart skips a beat. I know it can't be Irrenia. She said the previous night that she was to go see patients until the time of my trial.

It's Father.

He strides into my room and looks me over from head to toe, hands hidden behind his back.

When he finishes his assessment, he nods to himself. "Your eye is better. Irrenia did fine work. And I'm proud of you, Rasmira. You will do splendidly today. Let us forget last night's escapade ever happened."

I bet Torrin wishes he'd extend the same sentiment to him.

"It is customary for family members to bestow a gift after you complete your trial, but I wish to give you mine now."

He shows me what he'd been hiding behind his back.

There's no other word for it. The ax is *beautiful*. I take it in my hands to inspect it. The iron has been polished until it shines. It is a bit heavier than my first ax, the shaft as long as one of my legs. But the weight is perfectly balanced. The double ax heads are wickedly sharp, ready to cut through flesh as effortlessly as a fish skims through water. Etched into the blades are a series of swirling knots, alluring and intricate. Some of the designs morph into dragon-like figures; others take the shape of birds.

Black leather coats the handle, giving me a perfect grip.

"It's exquisite," I say. "Thank you."

"You haven't even seen the best part. The bladesmith has added a new feature." Father extends his hand, reaching for a notch I hadn't noticed along the handle. He presses it down.

A metal spike springs from the tip of the shaft, right in between the blades.

I gasp in excitement. "This is wonderful."

"Only the best for my daughter."

I set the ax down to grip my father in a hug. He pats my shoulder once before holding me back at arm's length. Warriors do not embrace. Men do not like long hugs.

For the hundredth time, I wonder why I can't be a warrior *and* a woman.

But I don't let Father see my disappointment. I lift my old ax from my back and replace it with the new one.

"It looks good on you," Father says. "Now come. We're due at the amphitheater."

We jog past many townsfolk on their way to the trial: miners with soot-stained hands, broad-shouldered builders, hunters with throwing hatchets hanging off belts at their waists, jewelers

wearing their best pieces as advertisements, healers heavy-laden with slings of bandages, ointments, and other remedies.

Today no one has to work. Today is a day of trial, and all the apprentices who have turned eighteen throughout the year will get to partake in the individual trials of their trades. The whole village shows up for the warrior test—even those who don't have children participating. Simply put, ours is the most exciting to watch.

I'm sure my mother would prefer to stay home, but she wouldn't dare disappoint Father by not showing up to give her support.

An arena is located on the most eastern edge of the village. An amphitheater was carved out of rock hundreds of years ago; in the center rests a maze built of rock and metal.

Most of the village has already gathered. Old men with metal staffs hobble up the stairs. Children cling to their mothers, anxious over the close proximity of the wild resting beyond the inna trees. Warriors who have already passed their trials stand guard at the tree line and around the maze, ready to step in should any of the beasts inside the maze get loose.

I should probably be nervous, but I'm not. I have fought the ziken before during training exercises. And it's hard to be scared with the heavy weight of an ax against my back.

Father separates from me once we reach the ground level of the maze to talk with Master Burkin about the trial. As I watch him go, I see movement out of the corner of my eye. Irrenia is waving wildly to get my attention from up in the amphitheater seats. I return the gesture, happy that she's here. Mother and the rest of my sisters are there as well, seated beside her. Salvanya and her husband, Ugatos, stand and offer brief waves. Tormosa, Ashari, and

Alara stand as well to show their support, and the latter puts her fingers to her lips to give off a loud whistle. Only Mother is seated and purposefully looking away from me.

Someone nudges my shoulder.

“Are you nervous?” Torrin asks.

“Torrin, I’m so sorry. How are you feeling?” His eyes are rimmed with sleepless red, and his body sags with exhaustion.

“Never better,” he says, completely undaunted. “Think nothing of yesterday. I’d do it again to spend more time with you.”

My face warms at the words. I answer his initial question. “I’m not nervous. Are you?”

“Of course. Everyone’s watching. Your *father’s* watching.”

I know he says this because my father is the most important man in the village, but part of me hopes it is also because he plans to court me after the trial and he wants to make a good impression. Especially after last night.

I remember my resolve to kiss him after the trial, and my heart does a flip in my chest. It must be a private moment. I don’t think I’m brave enough to kiss him in front of the others. And if he rejects me, then I don’t want anyone to witness that, either.

“You’re staring at me,” Torrin says.

“You’re the only thing here worth looking at.” I’m surprised by the brazen words after they’ve left my mouth.

But Torrin doesn’t tease me for them.

“That’s not true,” he says, locking eyes with me.

For the first time today, a bit of nervous energy stirs in my belly. I laugh off his comment.

“Warriors, quiet yourselves!” Master Burkin calls, silencing our chatter. “There are various entrances to the maze, so I will be

spreading you out. Follow me. Be ready when the doors open, but don't enter until you hear the horn blow.

"The rules of the trial are simple. The hourglass will turn. By the end of the hour, you all must have killed at least one ziken and you must avoid being bitten. Anyone who fails to meet *both* requirements will face banishment and the mattugr."

A spike of fear ripples down the assembled warriors.

Burkin turns. As one group, we follow. A foot blocks my path, but I jump over it before I can trip.

"The maze is a dangerous place for a rat," Havard says. "There's more than ziken to worry about in there."

I narrow my eyes at Havard. It would be just like him to spoil this for me, to try to get me banished and left to die outside of the village.

"Tell me, Havard, will you be able to see the ziken charging at you past your broken nose?"

It's swollen to twice its usual size and bent horribly to the side. I hadn't realized I'd kicked him so hard during training yesterday, and it must have been too dark last night for me to notice.

Havard scowls at me. "You'll get what's coming to you."

He walks off. Torrin steps in front of me before I can get any ideas to follow.

"You four, enter here," Master Burkin says. He starts divvying us up, putting three to four people at each entrance as we circle around the arena.

"Rasmira, Torrin, Siegert, and Kol, you stand at this door. Best of luck, Rasmira, though I know you don't need it."

"Thank you," I say flatly, irritated that he hasn't given anyone else the same good wishes.

A look of frustration crosses Torrin's face at the words. Before I can say anything to try to make up for what I cannot control, the look disappears.

"It's a lot different viewing the maze from this angle, isn't it?" Torrin asks as he pulls his ax off his back.

The rest of us do the same. Siegert and Kol glance at me with cruel smiles on their lips, as if they know something I do not.

"The walls seem higher," I say, avoiding their stares.

The metal door starts to lift, pulleys screeching as it heaves upward. While we wait for the horn to sound, I take another chance to survey the crowd. My father has joined the rest of my family. Their eyes are all on me. Now I really feel waves of tension. *Mother is watching me.* I can't mess up. Even if it's impossible, I have to try to make her proud. I cannot be hated by her my whole life. Once I pass my trial and become a woman, I have the option to live in my own home. She'll have Father at the house without me. She'll get the attention she craves from him. Goddess knows I receive too much of it.

Everything will be the way it should have been from the beginning.

The deep blare of the horn sounds above the chatter of hundreds of voices. My stomach plunges to my toes, and Torrin and I are off.

The ground is uneven. I lift my feet high above the rocks as I run to avoid tripping. Some grass cracks through in places, breaking up the ground further. Siegert and Kol race against us. At the first fork in the maze, they veer right while Torrin and I head left.

I relax a little one they're gone. It's easier to focus when it's only me and Torrin. Now if I could just forget the fact that my mother is watching me from the seating above the arena . . .

Low shrieks sound throughout the maze. Someone has run into the ziken already.

“Come on,” I say, excitement pulsing through my veins. Torrin quickens his pace to keep up with me. We turn right, left, left, right, plunging as deep into the maze as possible, listening to the hungry calls of the ziken.

We take one more turn before a flash of black streaks across my vision.

“Finally,” I breathe.

The ziken halts and turns as soon as it hears us coming.

When standing on all fours, most ziken are between two and three feet tall. Instead of fur, they have a shiny black exoskeleton, as thick as any armor forged by man. Their eyes bulge outward, like an insect’s, and I can see my reflection multiplied a hundred times in the faceted eyes of the beast before me. Its legs end in sharp claws, and its mouth unhinges to let out an unsettling cackle. Bulbous red-orange eyes fix on me, and then it flies toward us at a gallop, tail whisking behind it.

“I’ve got this one!” I shout to Torrin.

I sprint headlong toward the ziken, holding my ax so it is parallel with the ground. The creature never wavers in its direct path to me. I hear my blood in my ears, see my breath pool out of me in the cool morning air.

I dare a glance up into the stands, unable to help searching for the look on my mother’s face. Will she seem anxious or eager? Will she be watching me at all?

But what I find is worse than all the options I’d considered.

Indifference.

If I win my trial, I will be a woman, finally able to leave her household and live on my own. She never has to see me again.

And if I die or lose, I will also be gone from her sight forever. Either way, she wins.

I return my gaze to the creature just in time. A jolt runs up my arms when we make contact, my ax connecting with the creature's neck. I'm bigger, stronger, and the ziken skids backward, its neck trapped in the space between the ax blades. A sharp crack ricochets around me as the tips of my blades connect with a stone wall of the maze.

My finger slides across the switch, and the spike drives from the tip of my ax, piercing the creature's neck. With the ziken's next cackle, brown blood bubbles from its throat.

I brace a foot against its body and pull my ax free, a liquid slurp coming from the wound as I do so. I flip the switch again, allowing the spike to slide neatly back into place. The ziken falls to the floor, blood oozing from the wound. But almost instantly, the skin starts to heal over. Before it can recover, I lift my ax above my head and bring it down on the creature, successfully severing the head from the body—the only wound the beast can't recover from.

Blood drips from my ax as I look up into the seating once more. My father stands and clashes the rod of his ax against the ground in approval. Everyone in the crowd stomps their feet. My eyes seek my mother's face. She still watches me, and I swear I see the almost-imperceptible movement of a nod. If it was a nod, was it one of approval? Was it her face turning downcast in disappointment? A physical sign of her resigning to her fate?

I am a skilled warrior. She knows I will not fail. She will have to walk this world knowing I'm in it, too, somewhere, keeping her husband from her as Father trains me, dotes on me.

"Well done," Torrin says, pulling my attention back down to

him, “but the next one’s mine.” The eagerness is apparent in his voice.

“Of course. I bet I can kill more than you by the end, though.” We’re running again, searching right and left for more signs of the creatures.

“Are you willing to wager on that?”

“Of course.”

“All right, what do you want if you win?” he asks.

I know what I want, but I’m still not brave enough to ask for it. No, I will surprise him with a kiss after the trial. “If I win, you have to clean and polish my ax after the trial—and every day for the next month after we start taking rotations guarding the village boundaries.”

“That is easily doable.”

“What do you want if you win?” I ask.

“That’s—”

A ball of smooth black skin attaches itself to Torrin’s back. For a moment, I’m unable to move, horrified by what’s in front of me. He can’t be banished. I need him.

A second later, I’m launching myself forward. Grabbing the ziken with my bare hands, I tear it from Torrin’s back and throw it in the opposite direction. The beast is heavy; it doesn’t sail more than a few feet. But by then, Torrin has turned around, fire in his eyes, ax straight. He takes a swing at it, severing off an arm and biting into the neck. With a second swing, he detaches the head.

“Torrin,” I say, barely above a whisper, staring at the little drops of blood falling from his neck. He probably can’t hear me over the sounds of the audience’s loud exclamations.

“It’s okay. Those are claw marks. It didn’t bite me.”

I don't dare believe him without checking. I inch down the armor at his back to get a better look at the exposed skin of his neck. Yes, claw marks. And he hasn't started shaking from the venom spread through their bite.

I sigh in relief.

"Did you honestly not believe me? Or were you simply desperate to see beneath my shirt?"

I glare at him. "Don't you scare me like that again."

"It's all right. I won't. Come, now. We've done the hard part. All that's left to do is survive without sustaining a bite. Let's go on."

We're running again. Despite the previous scare, we're still eager to reach more of the deadly beasts.

"What were you going to say?" I ask. "What do you want if you kill more of them than I do?"

"That's easy. I want you to put in a good word for me with your father."

"Oh." It makes sense, I suppose, but it bothers me that he wants to use me like that.

"Get that frown off your face, Rasmira. I want you to put in a good word for me so he'll give me permission to court you."

I nearly drop my ax.

"Don't look so surprised."

"I'm disappointed that I have to let you win now."

He smiles at me, and it makes the future seem so bright. I don't even care if I have to deal with my mother's hate. My teacher's false praise. My father's single-minded adoration. As long as I can protect this village, spend time with my sisters, *and* have Torrin, I don't need anything else.

We round another corner and stop dead in our tracks.

Five ziken beasts block our path, almost as if they were waiting for us.

They cackle at the sight of us, and the sounds send a shiver down my back.

“The one in the middle is enormous,” Torrin says.

My grip on my ax tightens. “Then I’ll kill it and leave you to deal with the hatchlings.”

Torrin snorts. The others can hardly be called newborns. They are only marginally smaller.

“The sensible thing,” Torrin says, “would be for one of us to take on three, and the other to take on two, including the big one.”

“I don’t think they’re going to give us much say in the matter.”

As if in agreement, all five of them race for Torrin, clinging to the left side of the path where he stands, instead of spreading to the right side where I am.

I try not to be offended. He is taller, bulkier. And while I am certainly no fragile or dainty thing, I must not look as threatening.

How very misguided of them.

“Rasmira, get over here,” Torrin says. It’s not fear in his voice. Mostly anticipation, but he doesn’t like his odds five on one.

“Perhaps I should just run. I need only be faster than you.”

Torrin gives me a gesture, and by the gasps in the audience, I can tell at least a few people saw it.

I laugh and leap to his side just as the horde reaches us.

They pounce, hind legs sending them flying through the air, jaws unhinging, teeth flashing in the light of the sun.

I hold my ax out in front of me, turn it sideways, and use the length of the rod to connect with three separate ziken, careful not to let teeth get anywhere near where my hands are spaced apart. I skid

back across the rocky soil at the impact. One of the beasts takes the rod in the mouth, another at the neck, and the third—the monstrous one—hits at the knees and continues sailing over my head.

Brown blood smears the rod from the ziken who took it in the mouth, but that particular beast finds its feet and licks its lips, as though even more crazed by the taste of its own blood. A tooth flicks to the floor as it roves its mouth with its tongue. A canine. Good.

I bring my ax down on its head, the sharp blade sinking in deeply, right between the beast's eyes. Before I can pull it back out, the monstrous ziken charges me again, this time from behind.

I spin my body around, bringing both ax and impaled ziken with me. The two beasts collide, and my ax finally dislodges from the first one's head as both beasts are sent flying off to the left.

The final ziken, the one that took the rod to the neck, is still wheezing on the ground. I step up beside it, raise my ax high in the air, and bring it down across its neck. The head rolls off to the side, brown liquid spreading across the rocky ground.

Another loud whistle rises up from the stands.

I look up at Torrin. He's swinging his ax back and forth, keeping his two ziken at bay.

"They're both still alive?" I ask. "Come, now, Torrin, I've already killed one, and I got stuck with three of the beasts, as well as the large one that made you piss yourself."

"Then give yourself a pat on the back!" he shouts back to me.

I laugh and turn, ready to meet the two beasts that have found their footing once again.

My hands tighten around my ax, loving the feel of the leather-laced handle. I feel powerful when I hold it, unstoppable, even. My

blood sings in my veins from the thrill of battle, and I eagerly await the next onslaught.

The ziken that took my ax between its eyes has already healed itself. Its armored skin has reconnected so perfectly, one wouldn't be able to tell it was ever injured.

And the large one—its eyes flash orange with the direct sunlight shining on them. Thick droplets of saliva hit the ground as it licks its lips.

“Come take a bite of this,” I say as I swing my ax at it.

It dodges to the side before taking a swing at me. One clawed foot connects with my breastplate. Sparks rain to the ground at the contact, and the ziken cackles menacingly at the sight. It's startled by the hot sparks, and I use the beast's confusion to send another swing its way.

My ax embeds into its shoulder, and I yank it back out as the other ziken decides to pounce again. In the same motion, I swing my body around, connecting with the smaller ziken's side.

I remove its head with the next swing.

That leaves the big brute.

It eyes me warily, takes in the two dead ziken I've already dispatched—

And runs off down the way Torrin and I just came from.

“Get back here!” I yell as I bound for it.

Torrin catches me by the arm and halts me. “Leave it, Rasmira. Let's see if we can reach the middle of the maze before the time runs out!”

I wipe my bloodied ax blades on the leather covering his greaves.

He leaps backward. “Disgusting.”

I grin. “Race you there!”

It doesn't take long to reach. The middle of the maze is a vast opening. It seems that everyone else has already arrived, and they're all battling their own ziken—some taking on two or three at a time.

Torrin takes no time at all to launch himself into the fray as if he didn't sustain an injury. I hop in after him. The hourglass must be done soon, and I don't want to waste a minute of this experience. It's an opportunity to show everyone what I can do.

The ziken are everywhere. It's a wonder we ran across any in the maze. But they are no match for us. We have been trained for the last ten years to do one thing: kill them. They don't stand a chance.

Axes swing. Heads roll. Brown blood flies everywhere. It's disgusting and thrilling and freeing. I don't care that I've got blood in my hair, that Havard will probably pass his trial and continue to cause trouble in my life. I don't care if my mother still doesn't approve. In just a few more seconds, I will be a woman. I will be free from my father's household. Torrin will court me.

Everything will be different.

I step onto a loose head and nearly lose my balance. I huff out a laugh before continuing onward, swiping at the nearest beast to me.

Torrin sidles up next to me, holding a ziken head with one hand below its mouth and the other at the apex of the head. "Rasmira," he says in a childish voice, moving the ziken's mouth so it looks like it's speaking. "Torrin has killed eight beasts. How many have you killed?" His puppeteering act draws a laugh from me.

"Just because we have to kill them, it doesn't mean—" I start.

A loud howl rises above everything else. The entire crowd leans out of their seats, straining to get a better look.

Over on the far edge of the maze's center, Havard battles with his own ziken.

Did he get bitten? I wonder with equal parts eagerness and pity.

No. It is merely a battle cry. Undoubtedly an intentional one so everyone can see him swipe the head off the largest ziken in the maze, the brute I faced earlier. It must have found its own way to the center. The crowd's quiet anticipation allows us all to hear the ziken's head bounce onto the stone floor.

A sharp pain takes hold in my left forearm. I suck in a breath and look down only to find nothing there. I look around me. There are no ziken nearby. Yet, as I squint at my arm, I can see—

No.

How can it be?

My first instinct is to look up into the stands to check if anyone saw. But everyone is still awing and clapping over Havard's kill.

Everyone except my mother, who watches me as if I'm the only person out here.

I start to panic. I don't understand. What happened? Where did the teeth marks on my skin come from? The leather is torn there, right in the gap between the two sheets of armor. How—

I finally catch sight of the head still grasped in Torrin's hand. Only now it has red coating its teeth.

My blood.

Stupidly, I think Torrin must have accidentally hit me with it. But once I find the courage to drag my eyes up to his face, my world shatters.

He's shaking with laughter. Cold. Fierce. Laughter.

When he catches his breath, he says to me, "Your life is over, Rat."