

The SINS *of*
KINGS

DANIEL THOMAS VALENTE

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KINGS

Book One of the *Last of the Valdryz*

PUBLISHER LOGO??

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THE SINS OF KINGS: BOOK ONE OF THE LAST OF THE VALDRYZ

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For Claudia

*Without your love and patience,
none of this would be possible*

I'll be in the garage

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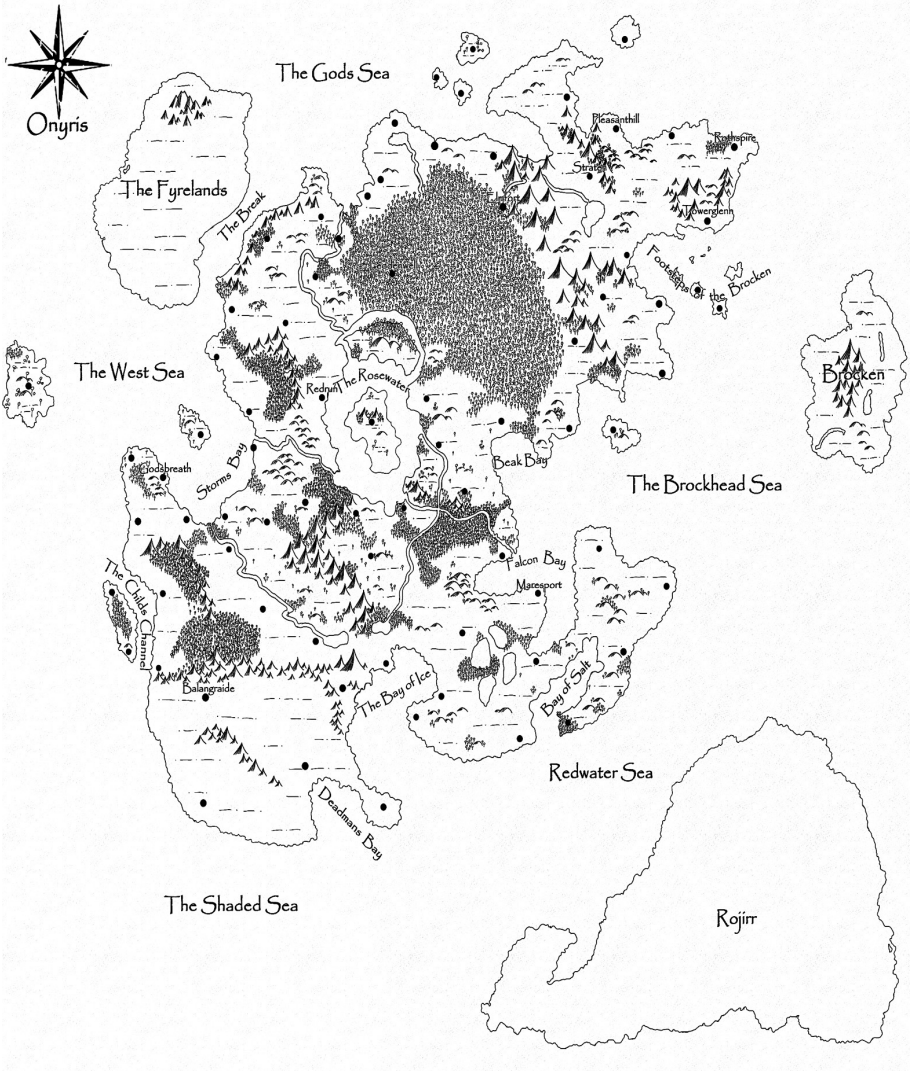
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1 DARRIN

THE EYES OF THE FOREST

Two severed legs stood upright in their boots. At least that was what Darrin Cantlay thought he saw.

“Come! Look at this!” Darrin called back to his two companions. He squinted, his amber eyes narrowing in an attempt to focus on the strange sight. Sweat dripped from his mop of curly black hair down his tawny forehead. He sighed.

Without waiting for their response, he dismounted from his piebald charger and strode towards a fallen oak that barred their path. The ground, still slick with mud from last week’s storm, proved a danger of its own. Though he wore heavy black boots, his feet nearly slid out from underneath him, and had he not caught himself just in time, he would have slammed into the forest floor.

He steadied himself, hoping his fellow rovers hadn’t noticed his lack of footing. *Bart would never let me live that down*, he thought. The last thing he wanted was for that lowborn arse to have anything *else* to tease him over.

More cautious than before, Darrin reached the fallen oak and peered over the top of it. *Still too far away*. He would have to climb over the massive tree in order to be certain the severed legs weren’t some trick of the forest.

His mother had told him stories of Nauringale Forest when he was a child; tales of wild beasts hunting lost travelers, shadowy figures changing once well-known paths, and blood-thirsty monsters feasting on unsuspecting victims. He had never believed her, though. Well . . . maybe he half believed her.

As Darrin leaned against the oak awaiting the others, the day was turning to dusk. He glanced at the bruised pink sky and wondered if he shouldn't have heeded his mother's words more carefully. He glanced nervously over his shoulder.

Haron Ridgefront, Chief Rover of the Eyes of the Forest, cantered slowly upon a dappled-grey destrier almost the same color as his hair. His rough-hewn face may have once been called pale, but the years he'd spent patrolling the forest had turned it near as tan as Darrin's. "Probably more *huge* bear tracks," he snorted in his gruff northern accent.

"Can't be a blood drinker's bracer," added Bart, who was trailing behind his chief; the pimples on his ruddy face were close to bursting. "Tinny found one of those two days ago." He removed a weather-beaten glove and scratched at his cheek with dirty hands.

Darrin bristled at being called *Tinny*. Bad enough that the other Eyes had taken to calling him *Tin Horse* after he naively boasted to his instructor of his wish to be the next Iron Horse, but Bart—that foul smelling son of a tanner—had no right to refer to him as *Tinny*.

"It's neither." Darrin gnashed his teeth. *And if you call me Tinny again, I'll show you my iron.* He clenched the sword hanging from his belt. *Then we will see if I am a Tin Horse.*

"Ain't but a fallen tree, lad," said Haron, his bristly gray eyebrows arched in concern. "Will is gonna 'ave a right bugger a' this mess when his woodcutters come through." He leapt off his horse, his travel-stained leather boots sloshing in the mud. He took two steps and placed a gloved hand on Darrin's shoulder. "Aye, it's big. But a lordling like you should 'ave no trouble jumping it."

Darrin stared back, exasperated. Blood rushed to his cheeks, turning his light-brown skin scarlet. Haron never missed a chance to insult his noble birth, as though being born to the

lord of Redrun somehow deprived him of having any sense. But Darrin knew he'd spotted something peculiar, and regardless of his companion's mockery, he hoped they might take him seriously if he proved his use. Their commendation was needed if he wished to rise in the ranks.

He had joined the Eyes of the Forest three months ago—two days after his eighteenth birthday. Now, as he stood behind the fallen oak, he wondered if he should have listened to his father and attended lessons at the Lyceum instead of defying him to become a rover.

Damn you, Father! he thought. *You were right; I am no warrior.*

“Further down.” Darrin attempted to steady his hand as he pointed at the severed legs. “Past the bloody tree! Do you see it?”

He watched Haron shade his eyes from the setting sun. Bart joined them, but before he could utter one of his low-born jests, Haron silenced him.

“Keep quiet. I think Cantlay may ‘ave found something.”

Until then, Darrin had never heard Haron say a kind word about him. He smiled for the first time since leaving Elmfort.

This was his *staining* after all—his first mission after taking the Oath of the Eyes. It was during this patrol that he was expected to depart Elmfort in a clean, beige uniform and return covered in the colors of the forest. Rovers wore these stains as a badge of honor. Haron was so stained it was impossible to believe his clothes had ever once been clean.

Darrin's gaze flicked back to the legs sticking upright in the middle of the glade like two small tree stumps. “You see those?” he asked.

“Aye,” answered Haron.

Gods! It's not a trick of the forest. Darrin didn't know if he should be excited or appalled.

Haron's baleful brown eyes narrowed, and he placed his hand on the hilt of his dagger. "Best get yer blade ready, boy. You was the one to find them. Time's right you earn your *eyes*."

"You mean . . . closer?" Darrin asked, the skin at the back of his neck tightening.

"No!" snapped Bart. "Run back to the Oak Gate and tell us what you see from there."

"Shut that flytrap 'o yours, Bart!" Haron said. "Pay no mind to 'im, Cantlay. He's a twat an' he knows it too." He glared at Bart then turned to Darrin. "Now, time ya go an' see if that ain't what we think it is."

Nauringale Forest was the largest in Onyris. The Pedagogues of the Lyceum in Rose Isle estimated it to be seventy-five thousand square leagues, but in that moment, the forest seemed to condense into a claustrophobic mass of roots and branches that almost appeared to be reaching out for Darrin with their grasping tendrils.

He knew this was his lot, though, and he hoped this single event might prove to his companions that he was not a child who played at being the famous knight, Sir Matthew Dorne, the Iron Horse. He was not a Tin Horse.

He scrambled over the oak, his slender frame sliding over the slick moss, then moved carefully to what he was now certain were a pair of severed legs.

Darrin heard Bart snicker, safe behind the fallen tree. "Brave soul, that one is. I can hear me mum's voice right now: 'That's why we don't climb trees, Barty, broken arms and scratched knees.'"

Darrin glanced back in time to catch Haron rapping Bart over the head. He stifled a laugh and crept forward. When he finally reached the legs, he stooped down and let out a choked gasp. His stomach roiled, hot sick lurched up his throat, and he vomited.

My first staining, he thought, and it's my own sick.

“Gods!” said Haron, jumping over the oak as if it were merely a branch. He reached Darrin and pulled him to his feet. “Get it together, lad.”

Darrin looked up at his chief and noted how the stoic face of the older man had dimmed. He thought he saw a hint of fear creep along the creases near his eyes.

Two legs, hewn at the knee and still in their boots, stood upright. No blood on the ground and no blood on the severed limbs.

Where's the body? Darrin surveyed the glade but saw nothing else. It seemed to him that the forest grew silent, and he thought he heard Haron mumble a quiet prayer.

“What is it, Harry?” asked Bart, still standing behind the oak.

“Best come see for yourself,” Haron answered.

“Safer back here.” Bart ran his fingers through his stringy red hair. “Me mum says she wants me home for dinner.”

“Your mum’s been dead for three years,” said Haron. “Now get your arse over ‘ere!”

“I guess I will be seeing you tonight, Mum,” murmured Bart as he attempted to climb the tree. Halfway over, his muddy boots slid on the wet moss and he fell to the ground with a thud.

And you call me a fool? Darrin smirked.

“Get up, ya twit,” said Haron. “You’ve an eye for this sort.” He lifted one of the severed legs, staring at the intricate pattern stitched into the leather.

Bart shambled towards them, covered in mud. “Hand over that foot!” But his smile disappeared as he stared at the boot.

They're both afraid . . . Maybe there is something more to this?

“It’s the Wheel, Harry,” whispered Bart. “The Great Wheel . . . ya see it? This is a Graymere’s boot.” He pointed at

a detailed etching of a giant wheel with many spokes, all bleeding into trails that ended in stars, suns, and moons.

“A Graymere?” asked Darrin as he eyed the supple leather and tried to find an answer for why one of the royal family’s legs would be in the middle of the forest.

“Aye, I think it might be. But these legs is new dead,” Bart said. “Old dead is all pale and blue—or maybe yellow, like Harry’s armpits.”

Haron scowled. “His Grace and the prince were ‘ere only a fortnight ago. Came to watch your batch receive their honors.” He looked at Darrin then back to Bart. “Ow new is this dead, Barty?”

Darrin recognized the soft grin that pulled at the corners of Bart’s lips; it was the same smile he wore when Haron praised him earlier. Bart was the son of a tanner, and his years apprenticing for his father gave him insight into the colors and textures of skin.

“By color alone,” Bart started, “I’d say one day cut—not over two at most. Look at this . . .”

But Darrin did not want to look anymore. He felt the hot sick rise in his throat again. *How can they look at this carnage so dispassionately? Is Bart enjoying this?*

Bart pulled the boot away from the leg. “This ain’t an old man’s leg, mind you.” He pressed his gloved finger deep into the dead flesh. “It ain’t all speckled and saggy yet. This ain’t the king’s legs. It belongs to a man thirty to forty years old. My guess is the prince.”

Prince Odain? Darrin recalled an adage his father was fond of reciting. *Scratch a king and you will lose your head. Kill a king . . . and you will wear his crown.* He grew quiet, wondering if this was a declaration of war they had stumbled upon.

Bart glanced at the others and laughed. “Belonged to, I mean. This poor bugger ain’t walking this off. And these

boots—” He rubbed the leather almost tenderly. “These are castle quality. No tanner outside of Rothspire can do this . . . ’cept maybe me dad.”

“Who’d be fool enough to kill a Graymere?” asked Haron as he stared at the stump.

A name came to Darrin, and before he could stop himself, he blurted out, “The Voress Ní?”

The Voress Ní were a rumor. A hushed name he remembered from his mother’s stories. According to her, they were a mysterious organization of councilors, lords, and criminals referred to as the *Shadow Kings*—when referred to at all.

Bart and Haron both laughed.

“Aye, and maybe Naught itself cut this poor bastard’s leg off with the Blade of Darkness,” said Bart, his beady eyes taunting Darrin.

Haron smirked but cuffed Bart’s ear. “Don’t go saying that name aloud, ya fool.” Ten more creases seemed to materialize on his already-leathery face.

“My father says the Voress Ní are still active,” started Darrin. “They rule over the Vines in secret, operating in the shadows of the lands by the Redwater Sea.” He knew the others wouldn’t believe him, but that didn’t make his theory untrue.

“And your father is a middling lord of a bankrupt and decrepit holdfast.” Haron’s face grew stern. “*Lord Phillip Cantlay* says what he must to excuse his debts to His Grace.”

Angered, Darrin glared at his chief but held his tongue. There was nothing he could say if he still wished to be a rover after today.

“Aye, but I hold you to no account for your father’s folly, my lad.” Haron softened and ruffled Darrin’s hair. “Mine was a gambler and a drunk. Suppose we should both be glad we’re rovers now.”

Darrin shrugged from his chief’s touch.

Hearing his father's name aloud reminded him of their awful parting. He had walked away from the lordship of Redrun, renouncing any future claim to the lands he once called home. His heart ached at the memory, though more from his mother's tears than his father's angry words.

Darrin pushed the thought aside and stared at the legs. "Do we take them back to Hadley?"

"The captain is back at Elmfort, boy, fifty miles away." Haron pulled off his grass-stained cloak. "There's an outpost not five leagues away to the south where we can get ourselves some fresh horses and a hot meal . . . and maybe some cold ale. We'll 'ave one of their boys ride back out to Elmfort with these. Let Hadley and the stewards suss this out."

We were the ones to find them, so shouldn't we see this through? Darrin knew better than to question his chief again, but if the legs belonged to the Prince of Onyris, perhaps it wouldn't be wise to entrust them to strangers. "Haron, maybe we should—"

"Listen to your chief?" Haron scowled at Darrin then motioned to Bart. "Get our mounts round that tree, Barty. It's getting dark, and I want to put as much mud between us and this accursed place as possible."

Just then Darrin realized something none of them had caught earlier. "Mud! Why are there no footprints in the mud? How did we not notice this?" he shouted, no longer worried about Haron's rebukes. He took slow deliberate steps, inspecting the ground.

"He's lost his wits," said Bart. "Damned fool."

"You're the only fool I see," said Haron. "Cantlay is an Eye for certain."

"There are no prints." Darrin felt more astonished than worried. "We've been riding through mud since we set out, but there's not a print here other than ours."

Haron nodded.

“You said, one, maybe two days since these legs were cut, is that right, Bart?” asked Darrin.

“Could be three,” said Bart.

“Not more than a week, though?” asked Darrin. “Can you be certain?”

“Well . . . not a chance it’s over a week.” Bart studied the boots. “Now, I’m not me father—he could tell ya down to the hour.” His thin lips sagged into a frown. “I’m not as good as him, but I can say these ain’t been here over four, five days at the most.”

From one day to five, thought Darrin. But still . . . the storm was only seven days past.

“Where are the prints?” Darrin asked. “There are none leading up to this place, and none leading away. If these were put here five days ago, there’d still be prints in the mud. Men leave prints. But . . .”

“What if a hawk—” Bart wiped at the oily strands of red hair that fell over his eyes— “dropped ‘em from its beak?”

“These’d be half a stone each at the least,” said Haron, his crooked nose twitching. “There ain’t no bloody bird flying round with fourteen pounds of flesh in all the Wide-World.” He draped his cloak around the legs and lifted them up.

“Haron is right,” said Darrin. “*Someone* placed them here.”

But why? Why had someone placed a Graymere’s severed feet here? Or why would someone want us to believe they’re a Graymere’s? Maybe the Voress Ni are sending a message? “We need to alert the king.”

“Best get going, and now,” commanded Haron. “The sun is almost gone; I don’t want us here come nightfall.”

“Just a few more minutes,” Darrin urged, forgetting his rank.

“That’s an order, boy! You got eyes but no brains.” Haron’s face twisted into a veil of rage. “I’m Chief Rover, not you. And I say we leave. Now!”

“Aye!” As discouraged as Darrin was to end his investigation, Haron’s anger terrified him more. He snapped out of his thoughts and repeated his compliance.

Bart struggled round the oak with their horses. The animals had caught wind of something that set them at unease, and they grew fey as they approached Haron holding the severed legs.

“Steady now, steady,” said Bart as he yanked at their bridles. “I don’t think they’re loving this stretch of road.”

“Me neither.” Haron leapt atop his charger. “Now, mount up!”

Beyond the path came a crashing noise that exploded from behind the fallen tree. A murder of crows screamed into the dusk. The rovers jerked their heads at the loud crack of heavy branches.

Haron Ridgefront turned quickly on his destrier, steel bared. “Ride, you fools! Ride like death!” His voice boomed like a war horn.

Darrin’s charger bolted before he could mount. He struggled to run alongside it, one hand clutching tight to the pommel, his lungs searing with every breath he took. He could not do this for long. His heart would burst, his arm would break, or he might fall, trampled under heavy hooves.

Gods! Save me! He managed to get his foot into a stirrup, and with all of his remaining strength, he pulled himself up into the saddle just in time to look behind him.

A bear reared up, standing at least twelve feet tall. Its teeth were daggers, its eyes glowing black and red.

He knew he should have listened to his mother’s tales. Had he not been atop his horse, he would have stood frozen in fear. *I’m going to die on my first roving . . .*

Wet with blood and mud, the creature roared. The sound was the most terrifying thing Darrin had ever heard. Worried his ears might bleed, he released his reins and covered them.

Haron turned his horse and whirled upon the beast—his blade glinting in the moonlight. But just as he approached it, five gruesome claws slammed into his chest and hurled him to the forest floor.

“Haron!” shouted Darrin. He didn’t know what to do, but his charger neighed wildly and raced off into the forest.

The bear moved like a black leopard as it turned from Haron and darted towards Bart. Slower than Darrin to mount his red warhorse, Bart screamed.

The bear roared again and charged.

Bart pulled tight on his reins, spinning so quickly that Darrin was certain the destrier’s legs would break, but they didn’t. He took off like a bowshot into the thick cover of pine trees.

The heavy thudding of the bear’s paws in the mud grew closer to Darrin, but he dared not look behind him. If he were to survive this, he must keep his wits about him.

Haron must be dead, he thought. If his neck didn’t snap then for a certainty his legs shattered. Darrin pushed his horse forward. And now Bart is gone too.

Low-hanging branches slapped against Darrin’s face, leaving bloody welts and lashes, the pain a mere annoyance. The sound of his horse’s hooves stamped out all other noise.

Haron said there was a village five leagues from here. He ducked his head and held tight to his galloping charger. Can I make it that far? Not at this pace. My horse will collapse if I keep at this run.

He chanced a quick glance behind him. The bear was nowhere to be seen. The sound of its footfalls had vanished. *Did it give up?*

He slowed to a canter and scanned the forest. Night had fallen during the chase and he had to squint in order to see anything. His senses sharpened slightly, and when he could finally think straight, one singular thought filled his mind. *Haron!*

He stopped riding and took a breath. *I must go back for him.* A single line of the Oath of the Eyes came to him: *Rovers do not leave their own to die in the forest.* He would not have it said that Darrin Cantlay broke his word . . . even if it meant his death.

He turned to the side of the path and rode a few yards into the overgrowth, taking a cautious sip from his water skin but stopping himself from drinking any more than absolutely necessary. *I must save some for Haron.*

A soft voice came from the edge of the forest.

“Tinny?”

Darrin gazed into the dark overgrowth, certain he recognized the voice. “Bart?” he answered quietly. “Bart, where are you?”

“Oi! Sweet Gods!” Bart rode out from the cover of the woods. “What in the name of All was that?”

Relief washed over him. Bart was alive. He never thought he’d be happy to hear that voice again. “How?” was all Darrin could ask.

“Gave it the slip, Tinny. It looked glad enough to ‘ave you!” said Bart as he neared him, but Darrin noted the terror behind the jest.

They rode together, branches crowded over their heads as the forest grew closer and thicker. Away from the path now, it was as though they’d wandered into a world of suffocating darkness. Darrin walked his horse carefully over a twisted root that sprang from the ground like greedy fingers.

“Haron . . .” Darrin’s voice was a rasp.

“Aye . . . he’s dead, ain’t he?” asked Bart. “Or at least, will be dead.”

“Aye.” Darrin shuddered. “But a rover does not leave the fallen. We have to go back.”

“Back?” exclaimed Bart. “There ain’t no back now, Tinny. That thing! It’s still out there. Me mum ain’t ever told stories of a beast like that!”

“Your mum isn’t a rover, though, is she? Is she stained like old Haron?”

“She’s stained, alright. But no, she ain’t like Harry.” Bart hung his head.

“He might still be alive . . .”

“Did ya see that thing?” asked Bart.

“I’m going back for him.” Darrin reached for the sword at his belt. *The Iron Horse would never turn aside from a companion.*

“Aye, and maybe I ride for that outpost ole Harry mentioned,” said Bart. “I’d rather ‘ave a meal than be one.”

Darrin stared at Bart. Darkness shaded his face, but his eyes burned with disgust. “You can go where you like, but a rover who abandons his companion is no rover of the Eyes of the Forest.” With that, he turned around and made his way back to the path.

“And a rover ain’t a warrior . . .” Darrin heard Bart mumble as he disappeared into the forest.

Darrin neared the spot where the bear had attacked them. He tightened his fists and took a sharp breath. “Haron,” he whispered. His charger’s footfalls were the only response.

“Cantlay . . .” a muffled curse answered.

“Haron?”

In front of the giant oak that blocked the path lay Haron’s horse, crumpled and broken, its neck snapped.

Darrin dismounted, tying off his charger. “Haron? I’ve come back for you.”

Where is the old bastard?

“You’re a bigger fool than Bart,” said Haron, his voice no more than a gasp. “I told you to ride.”

“The Eyes do not leave a companion behind.”

“Stout-hearted fool,” Haron spat.

Darrin crawled over the oak to find his chief slumped against the tree, blood dripping from his mouth.

Gods! Darrin bent down and placed his hand on Haron's shoulder. "Here, let me help you up. I'll take you back to Elmfort."

Haron laughed, and as he did more blood spewed down his chin. "I'm done for, Cantlay. Leave me, save your skin."

Haron's legs were a tangled mess. One had bent almost completely behind him and the other was shattered—bone protruding from the shin. His left arm dangled from the shoulder; blood pooled around him.

"I cannot leave you to be this beast's dinner," said Darrin.

"It'll come back," Haron murmured. "And best it have only one Eye to feast on . . . not two."

"Three Eyes!" Bart rode forward from the forest, sitting nervously upon his steed, and looked down at them. "A three-eyed meal is one for legend."

A figure cloaked in brown and green approached them, birthed from the forest itself. Its voice was a soft hum—the sound of wind in the reeds—and hollow, yet musical. "The beast shall trouble you no more. Come with me! Your trials are at an end."

The rovers stared up in fright. The sudden appearance of another presence made Darrin step back. He tried to speak, but his voice turned dry in his throat. Unable to make out the shape of the figure, he squinted.

A man towered over them. Eight feet tall—but no, it had shrunk into a bent old hermit who stood no taller than a child.

It vanished, but its soft voice—the passing of a whisper—rustled through the leaves like wind.

"This way . . ."

CHAPTER 2

EDLEN

THE EXECUTIONER'S LAMENT

Edlen Graymere spun a small astrolabe between her fingers absentmindedly as she gazed out of her grandfather's window. Far below the tower lay the tourney field. She stared down, imagining the ringing sounds of steel on steel, the thunderous footfalls of warhorses and the shouts of mail-clad knights.

One day I'll be down there, she told herself. *Right in the thick of things.* Her revelry was short-lived, however, as the deliberate coughing of her grandfather reminded her of her lessons.

Forced from her fantasies, she dropped the astrolabe. It shattered on the stone floor with a clang.

"Just missed the bloody rug . . ." she muttered. *That's my luck, though.* She knelt to pick up the pieces and looked up at her grandfather, ready to apologize.

"Leave it, leave it now." Laustair rose from his high-backed chair, glowering at her.

Shame-faced, Edlen continued to collect the debris, certain her grandfather would devise some unique punishment for this. Her thick, jet-black hair draped her pale face like a raven's wing. Deep-blue eyes, which normally gleamed like summer sun on the Rosewater, shaded over with a mist of gray.

"I told you to leave it!" Laustair stood over her, imposing and stern. He wore long gray robes—stained and blotchy—that housed a world of muted colors within roughly stitched

wool. A white beard hung from his face, pulling the skin around his mouth into a disconsolate frown. His eyes, though, held no hint of his untellable age; they flashed brown and gray like burning coal.

“Had you been paying attention to your lecture, you would not have broken an irreplaceable tool, made many hundreds of years before your father cursed me with you.” He glared implacably before a wide smile broke his lips.

“Grandfather?” asked Edlen, unsure how to respond. The old man had a tendency to tease her, but to say he was *cursed* with her? Perhaps she had truly offended him. She studied his face then anxiously grabbed at the pieces of the broken mariner’s tool, setting them in a neat pile on the floor.

The smile on her grandfather’s lips gave way to a hearty laugh. He knelt down to pick up the debris. “It is nothing but a bauble, dear girl. A trinket I purchased in the Great Wheel; it holds no value. And even less now.” He laughed again—a warm, contagious laugh.

Edlen smiled, her nervousness transforming into relief. Perhaps there would be no punishment. Still, she rambled an excuse. “I’m sorry, but Old Tulk, the stableman, was bringing horses out for the tournament, and a few have run off.” She giggled. “Now he’s hobbling after them. Look for yourself.”

“Horses run and men chase after them. Men run and other men chase after them. It is a tale as old as all the lives of horses and men,” her grandfather said without even a glance to the window.

Edlen stared up at him and tried to riddle out the meaning of his words.

Laustair was her mother’s father, and though Edlen’s mother died sixteen years ago, just after her birth, her grandfather had been her tutor for as long as she could remember.

It was difficult to tell if a person aged when you spent every day with them, but Edlen believed it near impossible for anyone

to be older than her wizened grandfather. Though she loved him dearly, she feared his admonishments. And it seemed to her, she earned more of these chastisements daily.

Laustair placed his hand on Edlen's shoulder. "*Old Ian Tulk* possesses more wisdom in his little finger than some of the king's councilors can claim to have in their entire bodies." His mischievous grin brightened the deep lines on his face.

Edlen returned his smile and figured now would be the best time to ask to be dismissed from her studies. "May we continue our lesson tomorrow?" She eyed him eagerly. "Rhen is fighting in the melee today, and I promised to see him off before it begins."

Rhen was her best friend. And though he was a brocken—a descendant of the giants who walked the Wide-World in the elder days—she thought of him as a brother. They had both recently turned sixteen, but Rhen already stood near ten-feet tall. He would become the sworn Shield of Edlen's cousin, Princess Amara, on his seventeenth birthday.

"Ah . . ." Laustair peered down at the field. "A mighty warrior he will become one day, but I fear his strength will never match that which I empower you with."

"What strength?" Edlen snapped. The memory of the master-at-arms refusing her request to practice with live steel still gnawed at her. She had no proof, but she knew Laustair had issued that order. "You've yet to place a sword in my hand."

Laustair turned from the window, and Edlen noted his surprise. "You are willful, Edlen. Your tongue is sharp. But the sword you long to wield will never be stronger than the thoughts in your head. A sword does not unlock the mysteries of the mind."

He pointed toward an enormous row of bookcases that stood against the eastern wall of his chamber, the bracelets on his wrist clinking together. "Those tedious tomes you shirk from

contain more power than an entire army. There is time ahead of you to slash and parry, but *wisdom* alone outlives such brutish tactics. Those with severed arms find it exceedingly difficult to hold the hearts of men.”

“But,” asked Edlen, her lips pursed, “is it not the strength of *swords* and the *victories* of heroes that protect our lands?”

“No, my dear,” Laustair said and tapped the top of his head. “It is here that protects our realms. Is it the hammer that builds the castle? It is but a tool. A hammer in the hands of a fool might destroy a wall the same as build one.” He stood, glanced out the window, then paced the stone chamber. “Intelligence is the means of prosperity. A sword is also but a tool. Corpses of men and women who lifted swords and axes litter the Wide-World. Children your age and younger find their throats slashed because ignorant people wield sharpened blades.”

Edlen listened dutifully but wondered if her grandfather was not simply over worried for her safety. She watched as he stepped to the bookcase and studied the faded spines of countless texts crowding his shelves. *I can just as easily die from a papercut too . . . or boredom, if I'm forced to read one of those.*

Laustair’s eyes darted up and down until he reached for an ashen gray, leather-bound script. He pulled it towards him and blew dust from its cover. “A shame,” he grumbled.

Gods! That is no book, it's a bloody anchor, thought Edlen. “What is that?” *Why bother asking? She knew. It's my punishment.*

“It is a little light reading.” Laustair turned and dropped the massive thing on the nearest table. A goblet of water wobbled before falling over when the book landed in a thunderous thud. His piercing gaze caught Edlen. “This is *The Executioner's Lament*. I expect a full report on the merit of its text at our next lesson.”

Edlen inspected the cover. What at one time had no doubt been a lustrous black leather had faded into ugly gray. Though

torn and frayed, the intricate inlay of a dazzling curved axe still glowed on the cover in mesmerizing mother-of-pearl. The cost of this artwork alone was more than some realms held in their entire vaults.

“It is . . . large,” Edlen said with a hint of sarcasm.

“And irreplaceable, my lady,” Laustair answered. “I suggest you treat it with slightly more care than my astrolabe.”

At this, Edlen peered at the pile of broken pieces she’d set aside and cursed herself for dropping the silly thing. “But our next lesson is in three days! I won’t finish this until I’m as old as you.” She stared at him imploringly, her thin nose wrinkling at the thought of reading the ponderous tome.

“Best to get started soon then,” Laustair replied, paying no attention to her attempt at pity. “I hold no certainty I will live long enough to see that day.” He messed her hair.

“But . . . the tournament?” cried Edlen.

“You will be witness to many tournaments in your life. Perhaps, you will fight in one or two as well. But our lesson is in *three days* by your own admission, and I expect—”

“A full report on the merit of its text by then,” said Edlen in a singsong sort of way.

“I knew you were a quick learner.”

Edlen placed the book under her arm and rushed from the chamber. She bounded down the stairs and exited the tower.



Bright-blue sky stretched above Edlen as she stood in the manicured courtyard of her grandfather’s tower. She squinted up at his window and noticed him gazing down at her—framed in silhouette—over a hundred feet above.

How does he climb those stairs every day? Edlen thought. *Maybe that’s why he’s so cranky?* Edlen strode from Laustair’s tower and wandered the sprawling castle grounds of Rothspire.