

KING'S TABLE

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To my son Gunnar,
the most dedicated two-year-old swordsman I know.

*“Must the sword devour forever? Do you not know that it will be bitterness
in the end?”*
—Abner of Israel

CHAPTER 1

JINJININ

The fighting pit was dimly lit and hazy with tobacco smoke. Around the rim, day laborers and street thugs and dockhands milled and pressed and crowded to get better vantage points for the next match. The air was hot and thick, as if sweat had formed a warm mist that swirled with the smoke and settled in the lungs.

From where Jinjinin stood, on the balcony above the worst of the crowd, the whole of the pit was visible. The perfectly round floor was flat and clean, marred only by a damp patch where the pit boys had raked away bloody sand from the last match. The contestants, shirtless and glistening under the low torches spaced around the pit, stood waiting.

“See how he stands,” Jinjinin said, leaning close to the woman standing next to him. “See the balance. The poise. You can tell much from the way a man stands.”

“I hope your recommendation was based on more than the way he stands,” said Aln. Her tone was dry, but there was an edge to it. An edge that Jinjinin was not used to. An edge that made him feel cold even in the sweltering, sweat-saturated stink of the death-house.

“Of course,” said Jinjinin, ducking his head. “Of course I have seen him fight.”

Aln was silent. Waiting.

“He was one of mine,” Jinjinin found himself explaining. “It was me that first put him in the pits. He had killed four of the emperor’s soldiers. *Four*. I had to pay dearly to save him from the headsman.”

Aln was not comforted. “Yours?” she said, turning to give Jinjinin a sharp look. “He was your Thrall, and you sold him? Do you mean to tell me that my money is placed on the *leavings* of Jinjinin the border dog?”

Once, Jinjinin would have bristled at Aln’s tone. Once, he might have become violent at being called a border dog to his face. If he made his meager living buying, selling, smuggling and gambling on Thralls stolen across the Botani border, that was no one’s business but his own. Aln did not pay him well enough to endure scorn and insults.

Once, Jinjinin would have said so. But now, he was becoming more certain by the minute, there was more than money at stake.

She was a shrewd woman, Aln was. A merchant who had built an empire of wealth by trading out of the frozen north-eastern docks of the Huctan Empire, she had scores of men and seemingly limitless coin at her disposal. And if the whispers Jinjinin had heard were correct, she was ruthless with those that displeased her.

Their business relationship had begun almost a decade ago. Most of Aln’s money was put to work in low-risk, moderate-return business prospects that yielded consistent results, but she kept a small portion reserved for high-risk, high-return investments. Gambling, for instance.

Thus Jinjinin’s involvement. Aln had money to put on the betting table, and Jinjinin knew who to bet it on. When he came north, he always went to see Aln, who always accompanied him to the death-houses, from which they almost always emerged richer than they had entered.

It was a profitable arrangement for both of them. For many years it

had continued without complication.

Until now. Jinjinin, in the past year, had begun to slip in his recommendations. Four of the last five had been wrong. Four of the last five times Aln had come to the death-houses, she had lost money. Each time Jinjinin had apologized profusely, begged her forgiveness, and sworn to himself more adamantly that he was done, that he would not test her patience again, that his life was worth more than the chance for an easy profit.

But *this* chance, Jinjinin had not been able to pass up. *This* fight, if he was right, would pay for Aln's last four losses many times over. This night would make him a rich man.

Or, if he was wrong, it would make him a dead man. He was becoming more certain of that by the minute.

"My leavings?" Jinjinin said. "I would not call him that. You know I never hold onto a Thrall for long, no matter how good he is. If I never sold a good Thrall, my purse would have shriveled up and starved to death years ago. Thralls cost money, and then they die, and dead slaves earn no coin."

"Indeed," said Aln, narrowing her eyes. "And yet living slaves earn double and double again with every passing fight. I have always wondered, Jinjinin, how you decide when to sell your slaves. How do you balance the risk against the potential gain?"

Jinjinin was not sure if Aln wanted an answer. After a pause, she turned to look back at the pit, but continued speaking.

"I had always assumed that you only sell men you believe to have few good fights left. Four-fight men, for example, that you believe will die as six-fight men. Men that appear, to the buyers, to have great potential, but who possess some fatal flaw that only you, with your vast experience and trained eye, can see."

Jinjinin swallowed. She could not know that he had sold the Botaño as

a four-fight slave. She was guessing, making a reasonable assumption based on the fact that it would take a Thrall at least two or three fights to work his way this far north of the border. She was *not* having him watched. She was *not* already planning his demise.

“Usually, you would be right,” Jinjinin said, lowering his head and trying to pass off his nervousness as concern for his reputation. “In this case, I made a mistake. The Botaño won his last fight—his last fight before I sold him, that is—so quickly and completely that buyers were tripping over each other trying to make me an offer for him. I got carried away. I said to myself, ‘Jinjinin,’ I said, ‘That quick fight was a fluke. The Botaño was lucky. He will not last. Take the money while you can.’ I said that to myself, and I took the money from the highest bidder. It was only when I happened to see his fifth fight that I realized what a fool I had been.”

“A shining commendation for the man who directed my last bet,” Aln noted, turning back to face Jinjinin. Her gaze was colder than the winter wind. Jinjinin swallowed again.

Thankfully, the pit master chose that moment to begin beating his gong, and Aln turned her attention away from Jinjinin to the pit below.

The Botaño was still standing on his side of the circular sand floor, eyes still closed, hands still at his sides. He looked small below the slightly sloped walls of the fighting pit. Compared to his opponent, a stocky man who had the advantage of two inches and nearly sixty pounds, the Botaño looked almost a boy.

“His past three fights have been with the sword,” Jinjinin said in a low voice. “This is why the odds are stacked so highly against him for this fight. For his size too, yes, but that would not be enough for the money men to give ten to one. They know not to underestimate a six-fight slave because of his size alone. But because he is small, *and* because his last three fights were with the sword, they assume that he has made it this far on blade-skill alone. They have not seen him fight hand-to-hand, as I...”

“I think you should know, Jinjinin,” Aln interrupted mildly, “that this will be the last time we do business together. I only put money on this last folly of yours *because* of those odds you speak of. The risk—following your recommendation—is high, but the potential gain is even higher.”

She turned and smiled at him.

“And what’s the fun in gambling,” she said, “if you’re not willing to stick out your neck once in a while?”

Jinjinin swallowed a third time, and nearly put his hand to his own neck. She was *not* threatening him. She was *not* putting all their years of working together on a scale against this single fight. He was *not* going to die tonight.

No. The Botaño would win.

The pit master was shouting the obvious, that both slaves had been condemned to the pits for crimes against the empire, that this was a seventh death-match for both slaves, that the owners had agreed on weaponless combat, that the money tables were now closed, that no one was to throw anything into the pit, that any fighting done outside of the pit would result in immediate expulsion from the premises.

“Yes!” the sweating, smoking, churning crowd around the pit shouted. “Get on with it!”

The Botaño’s eyes were still closed. Always, at the beginning of a match, his eyes were closed. Why? Jinjinin had always wondered, and suddenly he found his curiosity almost uncontainable. Was the Botaño playing some kind of psychological game with his opponent? Planning his strategy? Reliving some memory that gave him strength? Jinjinin felt an insane urge to call out to the Botaño, to beg him to tell his secret now, before it was too late for either of them.

The gong sounded again, a single brassy, rippling note, and the crowds pushed forward to watch. Even on the balcony, where only the wealthier patrons were allowed, Jinjinin had to plant himself against the guard rail

and throw a vicious elbow to maintain a space for Aln at the railing.

The burly Thrall—a one-time sailor condemned for smuggling and murder—tried to close quickly with the Botaño. This was expected. It was obvious to all that if the sailor once managed to wrap his brawny arms around the Botaño's leg or chest or neck, the match would be all but over. The Botaño would struggle, perhaps land a few blows, but the sailor would pull him down and crush the life from him like a bulldog with an alley cat.

The Botaño would know this. He would avoid closing with the sailor at all costs. He would dance away and circle the pit, throwing punches or kicks to disorient or slow or blind his attacker. But always he would continue *moving*, continue circling, continue avoiding.

This was obvious. This was expected.

Only the Botaño did *not* back away from the sailor's advance. He stood, for a moment, as if his eyes were still closed. Then, when the sailor crossed the center of the pit, he charged.

One step, two steps, three, in quick succession, and then the Botaño was directly in front of the sailor, right arm cocked back, fist flying forward like a flung hammer.

The sailor had been approaching quickly, but cautiously. His weight was balanced, elbows in, chin tucked tight against his chest. Even so, it looked for a moment like the Botaño's blow might actually connect. The sheer audacity of the attack startled the sailor just as much as anyone else, and he barely managed to roll his shoulder up to absorb the blow that would have broken his jaw or nose and sent him to the floor.

The Botaño withdrew his fist quickly, trying to wriggle out of the sailor's deadly reach, but he had overcommitted himself. He was too far off balance, too far forward, and while the sailor had been caught off guard, he was also a six-fight Thrall, and he was not slow.

The sailor's hairy knuckles closed on the still-extended forearm of the

Botaño. Time seemed to slow for Jinjinin. He felt his own heartbeat, *once* as the Botaño planted his feet at last and pulled, *twice* as his forearm began to slip through the sailor's vice-like hand, *thrice* as the sailor's hand caught at the wrist and held.

Jinjinin wanted to close his eyes, wanted to look away, wanted to push through the crowd and make for the door and get out of the city before Aln could set her men to hunting him down and cutting him to pieces.

But he stayed. He watched. He could not look away.

The Botaño pulled against the sailor's hand, hard, and the corners of the sailor's mouth turned up. His grip was solid.

The Botaño was frantic now. He gathered himself and flung his body backward, yanking his captured wrist with all the strength and frenzy of a man who knows he is going to die. The sailor stumbled forward a little, but he did not lose his grip.

It was over.

Only the Botaño was moving again, quick as a flashing sea-hawk, all the hysteria gone from his movements like paint wiped from a canvas. While the sailor was stumbling forward with a grin on his broad face—while men who had placed money on the sailor were beginning to nudge each other and nod knowingly—the Botaño had stopped tugging and instead rolled *into* the sailor's reach.

A moment, a second, *half* a second before, the Botaño had appeared frenzied, off-balance, and desperate. Now his face was smooth, his movements crisp and clean, his balance centered. He was clamping his own hand to *reinforce* the sailor's grip on his forearm. He was spinning his back and shoulder into position under the sailor's outstretched armpit. He was pulling.

The over-shoulder throw was perfection. The angle of the Botaño's back, the body-check to destroy the sailor's last semblance of balance, the extension of the arm over the shoulder and powerful upward thrust of

the hip—every movement was flawless, as if the Botaño had thrown dozens of men in his lifetime, scores, hundreds. Jinjinin felt a lump form in his throat at the beauty of it, and wondered if this was how some men felt about the sunset, or the great forests, or the sea. If this was what a blacksmith felt when he saw a truly flawless sword.

The rest of the fight was ugly and brutal, but Jinjinin watched in fascination, unable to breathe as the Botaño expertly dislocated the falling sailor's shoulder and ended him with kicks to the head and body. *This one is going to Taras Abor*, he thought, *and I sold him for the price of a horse.*

But Jinjinin could not bring himself to care about that, just now. He could not even bring himself to rejoice over the fact that Aln would not be having him butchered in his bed tonight, or that he would earn more coin from his small share of her winnings than he had earned in the past two years. In that moment, all Jinjinin could feel was a hollowness in his gut and a certainty that he would never see another fighter like the Botaño.

The roar in the death-house, when the sailor's head snapped sideways on his shoulders and his hands dropped limp to the sand, was deafening. The press of bodies below the balcony had grown riotous. There was shouting, and fighting, and Jinjinin knew that men would be trampled tonight, that *he* would be trampled, if he could not keep his footing.

Aln was saying something to him, shouting something to him. Jinjinin leaned so close that the air from her mouth tickled his ear, but still he could barely hear her.

"You were right!" she said, her previous coldness replaced with the contagious delirium of the death-house. "You were a fool to sell him!"

Jinjinin nodded, and showed his teeth in what he hoped would pass for a grin, and tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

"What is his name?" Aln shouted.

His name? If only Jinjinin knew that. If only he had a name to put to

the memory that would be with him for the rest of his days. But the Botaño had only ever given him a false name, a name he had forgotten to answer to at first, a name that had made him jump and look over his shoulder and clench his fist every time Jinjinin had spoken it.

“He calls himself Jesher,” Jinjinin shouted back.

“Jesher.” Aln mouthed the word, and seemed satisfied.

Then, together, the two of them turned back to the railing and the chaos below. They watched the crowd roil and fight and spill out into the street. They watched the pit boys help the Botaño up to his master and drag the sailor’s body to be winched out and disposed of. They watched, and waited, and when the noise had faded and it was safe to descend the stairs, Aln and Jinjinin went down to the money tables to collect their winnings.

CHAPTER 2

NICK

Far to the south, in the pine forests of central Botan, Nick stood behind a tree. He had an arrow nocked. Although he had been standing still for several minutes, his heart was pounding. He could feel the fibers of his bowstring against the throbbing tips of his fingers.

The soldiers appeared suddenly. They were riding at a trot, crimson cloaks rippling and chain mail tinkling with the bouncing strides of their mounts. There were four of them, as Selena's chickadee calls had warned.

Nick drew his bow. Flickers of movement in the corner of his eye told him the others were following his lead.

The greatest risk in this ambush was that one of the Huctans would escape. If any of the horses managed to bolt—if even one of the soldiers managed to carry word of rebels in the forest—Nick and the other Thanes would be hotly pursued by the time the sun set.

To allay this risk, Nick had instructed the Thanes to kill the horses first. It was a shame, but the beasts were more vulnerable to arrow shafts than armored soldiers. If they could bring down the horses, they could kill the soldiers at their leisure.

Nick relaxed his fingers, felt the bow jump in his hand, and heard the thump of other bowstrings in a circle about the clearing. He saw his arrow pass through the lead horse's body just in front of the stirrup. The animal screamed, reared, gave a desperate buck that sent its surprised rider tumbling, and bolted.

It was a good hit. The horse wouldn't make it fifty yards.

The clearing that had been nearly silent a moment before was now a riot of confusion. One horse had fallen. Another was rearing and screaming, the shaft of an arrow dangling from its shoulder where bone had stopped the steel-tipped point. Nick caught a flash of feathers in the needle-filtered forest light, and another arrow cut the horse's scream in two.

There was no time to watch. Nick drew another arrow from his quiver and fit it to the string as calmly as he could. The fourth horse was bolting, its rider hunkered low and clinging to its back. Nick drew, fired, missed. He shouted in Botani and heard Toledé scream that the horse was hit, that it wouldn't make it far.

It had better not make it far, Nick thought, and yelled for Liana to follow him. A crossbow bolt shattered against the tree he was standing behind, and the blood rose hot to his head. Cursing himself for ignoring the three Huctans still breathing in the clearing, Nick ran after the one trying to escape.

The bolting horse had left the path and was crashing through the underbrush. Liana was already at Nick's left, arrow nocked, floating over the dry pine needles like a forest dryad. Nick fumbled in his quiver as he ran, then slowed and held up his hand to Liana.

He could no longer hear the horse. Toledé had said it was hit. That meant it would lie down to die. When it did, the Huctan might try to escape on foot, or he might stop and set his own ambush for whoever was following him.

Liana drew an arrow to her cheek, covering Nick. Nick ran forward, avoiding dry branches and pine needles, landing softly on the balls of his feet. He reached the trunk of a tree and leaned against it, trying to calm his breathing.

Even in drills, Nick had always had a hard time breathing. When things started moving fast, there was never enough air. Especially not when he had to keep quiet.

Farland had told him that sometimes you had to go ahead and take the loud breaths and hope you wouldn't be heard. That was easy enough to do in practices. It was more difficult when the volume of his breaths might give his position away to a hidden soldier with a crossbow.

Crouching down, Nick swiveled around the trunk, ready to draw. Seeing no one, he motioned for Liana to move around farther to the left. While she did, Nick remained perfectly still, scouring the brush for movement. A mosquito landed on his neck. Nick ignored it.

When he was sure that Liana was in position, Nick clenched his jaw and forced himself to get up. His eyesight had never been perfect at distance, and looking through the underbrush and low rises and falls of the forest, there was no way to be sure that the Huctan wasn't watching his approach. He felt exposed and vulnerable, and at the same time trapped and blinded.

What he wanted, more than anything, was to see the open ocean again.

Nick moved quickly, stomach tightening for the quarrel he half expected to pierce him any second. Flanking a fallen log, he paused near a stand of manzanita, peering through the red twigs and waxen leaves and feeling the insane urge to start yelling at the top of his lungs just to get the Huctan out into the open.

The tension was slick. The mosquito might have still been on his neck, or it might have flown off. Nick didn't notice or care. His ears heard the

screams behind him, near the road, but their meaning didn't penetrate his consciousness. There was no room for anything but finding the Huctan and killing him.

Liana was out of sight, far to the left. Nick thought he heard movement and froze. Slowly he quarter-drew his bow. His hands were shaking. He needed more air.

After a moment of seeing nothing, Nick let his bowstring relax and shifted to the right. He crouched on the balls of his feet, duck-walking with bent knees and one hand to the ground. Reaching a low rise in the forest floor, he slunk forward on his belly until he reached a stump. Rising to a kneeling position, he looked again in the direction the sound had come from, scanning for movement, bow at the ready.

Trained reflexes made him drop suddenly, long before his mind had processed the sound, identified it as a mechanical creak, applied context and further categorized it into the squeak of a crossbow's trigger, and notified him that he should get out of the way. All this occurred to him a moment later, after his face had struck the dirt and the quarrel had buried its full length in the loam beyond him.

The twang of the crossbow rung in his ears, and then the crunching of boots on pine needles. The sound was loud, thunderous, fast approaching him.

Nick scrambled to his feet. The Huctan soldier was in the open now, rushing him, sword drawn, only thirty yards away. Nick drew, let loose, saw his arrow glance off of the Huctan's up-raised shield, and then there were only three steps separating him from an armed and armored soldier.

There wasn't time to run. By the time Nick turned around the sword would be descending on his unprotected back. He swung his bow instead, feeling it jump in his hand as the string met the sword and snapped. He parried the Huctan's first blow and leapt back to avoid the second. The soldier was closing with him, pressing him so he couldn't turn to run. He

held no fear for the bow in Nick's hand, believing that Nick would be unlikely to do much damage with a thin length of wood.

He was right.

Nick swung the bow hard, trying to catch the Huctan in the ear. Bow met shield, and Nick was forced to drop his clumsy weapon to avoid a brutal slash at his unprotected elbow. While the Huctan's sword was still descending on the spot where Nick's arm had been a moment before, Nick turned and bolted.

But the soldier was right behind him, sprinting, just as fast as Nick was on open ground.

Where was Liana?

Nick drew his belt knife as he ran, feet hardly touching the ground, intestines writhing with the certainty that a blade was going to enter his body at any second. He saw a fallen log to his left, low enough for Nick to jump over but high enough to slow the Huctan behind him. Making a split-second decision, Nick made for the log and leapt.

Diving over the brush around the log's base, Nick touched his hands off at the log's crest and began twisting in mid-air. He landed facing the direction he had come from and thrust the point of his knife upward.

The soldier, behind him, had planted his hands on the log and was halfway over. He saw the knife point and instinctively lowered his head to dodge it, but Nick was standing now, tracking, extending his arm. The steel penetrated the man's face, passing through a cheek and releasing a spray of blood as it exited near the man's ear. The Huctan gave a gargling cry, but his hands were planted and his momentum was carrying him forward.

The knife tore out with another red mist as the soldier stumbled past Nick. The Huctan bellowed in agony, but Nick knew he had wasted his opportunity, failed to cause anything more than superficial damage. The soldier reeled, held a hand to his face, and came after Nick with his

sword.

Nick leapt back, knife before him, dancing back from the soldier's blows. The Huctan swung for Nick's fingers, then for his body. Nick dodged, and the Huctan struck again, blood seeping through the fingers of his left hand and murder in his heavy-lidded eyes.

Nick dodged again, but the tip of the blade caught his hip on the down stroke, opening a gill of skin and flesh and sending a flow of blood down Nick's leg. Nick stumbled backward, tried to regain his balance, and realized that the Huctan's third blow was going to kill him.

Just then Liana's arrow took the Huctan in the back, driving through the chain mail and wedging itself into the flesh. The Huctan bellowed again just as Nick hit the ground and rolled, surprised to be alive. He turned back to see the Huctan dropping behind the fallen log, facing the direction the shot had come from, pawing at the arrow in his back even as he scanned the forest for signs of his new attacker.

Nick was already up, turning the knife in his hand, sprinting forward while the soldier's back was turned. He reached the soldier, grabbed a handful of the man's hair, yanked his head back, and struck.

Hot arterial blood flooded over the fist that held the knife, and Nick leapt back from the Huctan's reach as he made a last wild swing with the sword.

Liana came pelting up, another arrow fitted to her bow. She saw the Huctan pivoting on his knees, planted her feet, and sent a second shaft into the soldier's body. At this range, the links of chain mail parted like fish scales.

The Huctan fell. Liana lowered her bow, slowly, like it might break in her hands, and heaved a deep, shuddering breath.

Then she set her bow down and leaned against the trunk of a tree.

Then she sank to the ground and sat, hugging her knees.

Nick looked at his hand, covered in crimson, dripping on the pine

needles. Sweat rolled down his forehead and collected in a droplet at the end of his nose. He looked at his hip, where an ear-sized flap of meat was hanging open and bleeding.

“Salt!” he said. The sailor’s curse seemed inadequate for the situation, but he repeated it anyway, emphatically, like he was chopping wood with the word. “Salt!”

Nick had thought he was going to die. He really had. His stomach was still twisting at the thought of that sword, twisting and contracting as if he had really felt the steel shearing through skin and muscle and organs. Nick started to wretch, then swallowed the vomit hard and straightened. He looked at the knife in his bloody, shaking hand and threw it down.

Liana was watching him, trembling, hiding behind her knees. The soldier’s leg was contracting and extending, contracting and extending, his boot gouging a furrow in the loam. His movement was slowing.

Nick looked in the direction they had come from. The screams had stopped. Silence had descended on the forest again.

He shook his head. Blinked. Bent. Wiped his hand. Picked up the Huctan’s sword.

Pausing for a moment, Nick looked at the weapon that had almost killed him. The handle, long enough for two hands to fit comfortably, was wrapped in thin black leather. The blade was as long as his arm and as wide as two fingers, slightly curved and ending in a beveled tip. On that tip, right on the honed edge of the blade, an almost transparent sliver of Nick’s own blood stood glistening like a droplet of morning dew.

Nick shook his head. Blinked. Looked around him. Liana was still shuddering. The Huctan had stopped moving.

“Let’s go,” Nick said.

Liana remained sitting, leaning against the tree and looking at Nick. The whites of her eyes showed all the way around her irises. Nick went to her and took her shoulder in his clean hand. Softly, he shook her.

“Liana.”

Her eyes focused.

“Let’s go.”

She came.

The Thanes carried the bodies to a hollow, stripped them of armor and weapons, and covered them with branches and pine needles. The horses they tied to their own mounts and dragged from the path as far as they could. Lutho quickly butchered one, saving several large roasts which he wrapped in cloth and distributed amongst the saddle bags. Horse flesh would be a welcome alternative to frost-bitten wild tubers and stolen bread.

They were nine now. Selena, who had been stationed in a copse up the path, had joined them almost immediately. Norr was just arriving from the opposite direction.

Mounting up, Nick surveyed the path once more, swallowed another shivering upturn of his stomach, and signaled everyone to move out.



They met up with Robert the following day, as planned. Warest and Nilico were with him. The sibling pair had utilized their uncanny thieving abilities to empty the coffer of a Huctan guard hut. It was a good haul, and it would help with supplies.

That night the twelve of them sat around small cook fires and ate roasted horse and hard potatoes baked in the coals. There was a feeling of satisfaction in the camp, of a job well done. Nick felt it too, and enjoyed his meal, but perhaps not as much as the others. The flap on his hip, sewn shut now, was throbbing. More than that, his mind throbbed with the knowledge that a single soldier with armor and a sword had been a

good match for two Thanes with bows and salt-begotten *arrows*.

When the general camp giddiness had died down, Nick made his way over to where Robert squatted, staring as he often did into the campfire.

He looked so young, sitting there by the flames. Robert was only a year younger than Nick, and larger in frame, but sometimes there was a smoothness to his face that reminded Nick how young they all were.

As Nick squatted beside Robert, he asked himself for the tenth time, the *hundredth* time, what had possessed him to nominate Robert as their leader. But he already knew the answer. Robert might not be able to jump a log or shoot a bow or help Nilico and Warest run a diversion, but he could make hard decisions. In that way, Robert was older than them all.

It had been Robert who had kept his composure, that fateful day when screams wafted up from the Band's village like wisps of distant smoke on the wind. It had been Robert who had snapped them out of their stupor, organized them, pushed them, saved them.

It should have been Leon leading them in that three-day hell. It should have been Leon—a fighter as good as Jeshar or Timothy and a strategist as good as Nick or Robert—who helped them outfox the Huctan riders all through the hill country.

But Leon was dead. Leon had refused to listen to Robert, had refused to flee, had charged down the mountain towards those screams and drawn Cody after him. Because of Leon, there were twelve Thanes fighting the Huctans instead of fourteen.

Not that the rest of them hadn't wanted to follow Leon, that first day. They had been just as devastated, just as hollow, just as numb. Only Robert, who hadn't grown up trusting in the Band's invincibility, whose identity wasn't yet fully tied to the Band's existence, had shown any sense.

And Robert, Nick was now beginning to see, was the perfect one to lead them. He did not compete with anyone—*could* not compete with anyone—and held no loyalty to any of the semi-rival cliques among them.

He did not try to make himself appear more competent or knowledgeable than he was, but he did not denigrate himself and ask permission to lead, either. When he spoke, he spoke well, and Nick found himself hoping and believing when every rational fiber of his brain told him that there was no reason for hope or belief.

Robert glanced up at Nick.

“Hey,” Nick said.

“Hey.”

They both stared into the fire for a moment more. Nick watched the flames and worked his words in his mouth.

“Good work yesterday,” Robert said. Nick nodded, and wondered why praise felt so good coming from someone who had been a Thane for less than a single winter.

“You heard what almost happened,” Nick said.

Robert nodded. “Sounded like a close thing.”

“Yeah.” Nick swallowed. Waited. Finally spoke.

“We need swords,” he said.

Robert looked up.

“We have four now. Thanks to you.”

“I don’t mean a few,” Nick said. “We’re going to need a lot. If we actually succeed, we’re going to need swords coming out of our ears.”

Robert frowned, and Nick knew he didn’t need to explain himself further. Robert knew what he meant. Robert knew that if they raised the army they hoped to raise—if they actually managed to galvanize the Botani people to fight the Huctans that enslaved them—they would need to equip that army with real weapons. There was a good reason the Huctans had forbidden blacksmiths to make swords and spears these past fifteen years. There was only so much a rabble could do with bows and arrows and pitchforks.

“Look,” Nick said. “We’re *Thanes*, for crying out loud. We had the

element of surprise, yesterday, and twice the numbers, and the high ground... everything. And still, with nothing but bows and arrows, we barely managed to get the job done. I almost got myself killed.”

“It wasn’t a normal battle,” Robert said. “You couldn’t let any escape. You had to expose yourself to more risk than you normally would...”

“You don’t have to make excuses for me,” Nick said, “and that’s not my point. If you had seen the *soldiers*, Robert. If you had seen the way they reacted to the ambush. They were surprised, but they didn’t panic. The three I left behind were forming up to fight back before their horses had even finished screaming. They’re *trained*, Robert, and equipped, and experienced. I know Comaro told us how important equipment and training were, I know he pounded it into our heads, but I don’t think I understood, until now. I don’t think I realized... I didn’t...”

Suddenly Nick could not speak.

“Don’t despair,” Robert said softly, and Nick had to clench his jaw and stare hard into the fire to keep the tears from forming in the corners of his eyes.

“Even if we light the fire,” Nick said, brutally swallowing the lump in his throat and trying to keep his voice from breaking. “Even if we somehow raise the numbers to match them, we’ll still have an army of *civilians*.”

The two of them stared into the fire. Nick sniffed and composed himself. Finally he found his voice and said what he had come to say.

“I want to go check the stockpiles.”

It occurred to him, suddenly, that Robert might forbid him to go back to the Band’s old forest, where they had been making and hiding secret caches of weapons for the last fifteen years. Nick wondered if he would really obey such a command from Robert. Surely he, who had trained his whole life, knew better.

Feeling guilty, Nick pushed the rebellious question from his mind, but

not before the surprising answer—that he *would* obey—dawned on him.

Robert was a long time answering, and when he did speak, his words were slow. Careful.

“I’m afraid they’ll be waiting,” he said.

He meant the Huctans, of course. He knew that Nick had thought of the possibility, but he was speaking his mind. Asking for Nick’s plan.

“I know it,” Nick said. “But it’s been over a month. They may have left, by now. I can be careful. I’ll go, and check, and if the coast is clear and some of the stockpiles are still there, we can plan a way to get them out.”

Robert sighed again. “High risk, high impact.”

Nick nodded. “But the impact is higher than the risk.”

When Robert looked up at him, Nick saw concern and resignation mingled. Robert knew the game was King’s Table, knew that if you couldn’t risk a pawn, you were doomed before the fight had even begun. But he also knew that Nick, his pawn, was a person.

Nick was suddenly glad he didn’t have to shoulder that responsibility.

“Be very careful,” Robert said at last.

Nick showed his teeth in what he hoped looked like a grin.

“When am I not?” he said, and went to pack his horse.

CHAPTER 3

ROBERT

Robert watched Nick leave the fire and wondered if he was doing the right thing.

If ‘the right thing’ was the best thing for their mission, then yes, he thought he was. It was a hard question, but not terribly hard. The cost of risking a good strategist and battle leader was worth the possible gain of having swords. In the long run, it would be much worse to be without swords than without Nick.

But if ‘the right thing’ was not just the wiser strategic move—if it was what a decent person would do—then no, Robert wasn’t at all sure he was doing it.

He wasn’t at all sure of anything, anymore.

He was so tired of being alone. Ever since Timothy had joined the Band, he had felt separated, cut off, apart. Even when Robert had finally come around, when Gerard had finally convinced him that joining the Band was the right thing to do, Robert had not felt truly connected to anyone.

Still, joining the Band had given him some solace. Wasn’t being part

of something he truly believed in more important than friendships? If he missed his father and mother, missed the brother who had become a stranger to him, wasn't that a small thing compared to the cause he had committed himself to?

Yet it *wasn't* a small thing, and only Selena had held him together. Only in her friendship had he been able to find the courage to press on.

And now, even that was gone.

Gone.

The Band was gone. Gerard was gone. Timothy was gone. Selena, only twenty feet away from him, was gone, changed, transformed. She would no longer talk to him as a friend, no longer share easy conversation with him. He was her leader, now. Worthy of respect, and obedience, but not friendship.

Robert got up. He had been spending too much time sitting and thinking. His legs were stiff and cold. He was tired of the cold, tired of sleeping outside. Tired of whining, even in his own head.

He wondered where Timothy was. Had he and Jeshar been caught already? Were they dead? Would they return to the Band, not realizing that the Band was a burned heap of ash and corpses and lost hopes? Would the Huctans be waiting for them if they did?

He hoped not. He hoped that Nick would find Timothy and Jeshar and the swords, and the three of them would come back with new weapons and new vitality, ready to bear some of the weight that sat so heavily on Robert's shoulders.

Was that why he had *really* sent Nick? To find Timothy?

No. Of course not.

Toledé's eyes flickered up from his wet stone as Robert strode by his fire. Toledé had always been passionate about his knives, but since the Band's fall, he had become obsessed. He nodded, as Robert passed, and was absorbed in the honing of his blade before Robert even had a chance

to nod back.

Norr, Kialo and Warest were huddled around another fire, talking in low voices. Norr's pock-marked face, which had never quite recovered from his adolescent acne, was set in a permanent half-smile that never touched his gray eyes. Warest said something that made all three chuckle. Kialo noticed Robert and lifted a hand in greeting. Robert nodded and walked on, trying to swallow the catch of hollow jealousy forming in his throat.

The cold grew colder as he walked away from the fires, like water did when you dove deeper into a pond. Robert shivered, and then was angry with himself for being so weak. Walking briskly, he made his way up the small hill north of their camp. When he reached the top, he stopped and stood still in the moonlight, feeling the cold seep into his clothing and refusing to pull his cloak tighter around him.

Suddenly he wanted to see the woods, to see the spread and roll of them from the branches above as he and Timothy had used to do when they were boys. There was a tree, a pine with branches like ladder rungs shooting out from the trunk. The lowest of them was ten feet off the ground.

Setting his jaw, Robert approached the tree. Hugging it as high as he could, he brought up his knees to grip it tight. He ignored the prick of bark through his woolen pant legs and tried to reach higher. He climbed a little, began to slide, and managed to scrape his palms on the bark before he reached the ground. He could feel the stickiness of sap on his hands.

Angry, Robert threw himself at the trunk of the tree. This time he climbed almost three quarters of the way to the lower branches before he slipped again. The bark opened new cuts in his hands as he slid, and he hit the ground hard, rolling his ankle in the process.

Shamed and quivering, he knelt and hung his head. One hand dug

into the moist earth and squeezed with a silent, trembling fury.

There was a noise, a purposeful twig snap, and Robert's head snapped up to find Selena watching him.

He waited for her to say something. She didn't. After a moment Robert rose to his feet and brushed off his hands, deliberately scraping his palms together in spite of the stinging cuts and sappy stickiness. His cheeks were hot.

"I know," he said, "you or any of the rest of them could have run up the trunk and jumped high enough. I know it."

Selena opened her mouth, then shut it and shrugged.

"What?" Robert pushed. "Not something for a *leader* to say?"

Selena glared, but remained silent. Robert knew he was pouting, knew that he was being disgusting, but he kept pressing.

"You don't like me to admit weakness?" he said. "Am I breaching the protocol between leader and led?"

"You know it's not like that," she said. Her voice was cold.

Stop, Robert, he told himself, but he couldn't stop. It was going to spill out and he might as well help it along.

"No? It's not like that? You just decided talking to me wasn't worth the trouble anymore? Was it just 'being nice' in the first place? Trying to help the new guy find his place among the Thanos? Taking pity on the poor little..."

"Shut up, Robert," Selena said. "You sound like a child."

"Oh," Robert said, his voice very quiet and very angry. "Excuse me a minute while I put back on the voice of a fearless leader."

He was tired of this, tired of it all. It was welling up hard, throbbing at his temples, and he didn't think he could take it for much longer.

"Robert," Selena said. Just that one word, but with that one word her voice cracked the tiniest bit. She cleared her throat to hide the sound, but Robert heard it, and it crushed him.

He sank to his knees. He knew it was dramatic, childish, stupid, but he couldn't help himself. His knees wouldn't hold him up anymore. He knelt, shoulders slumped, and then lifted his hands to cradle his face. His fingers clenched and unclenched, and he had to wait for his throat to loosen before he could speak.

"I'm sorry," he said finally, dropping his hands and trying to straighten his spine. "You're all out there risking your lives, and I'm whining and feeling sorry for myself. I *am* a child."

Suddenly she was next to him, her arms around his shoulders. She had never hugged him before. He should have reveled in her closeness, her warmth, her presence, but he was too full of hollowness.

"Why did you choose me as leader?" he said, and hated the way his voice sounded like he was about to cry.

Selena was silent for a minute. She looked at him. Pulled up his chin with her fingers and *looked* at him, straight in the eyes, for the first time in weeks.

Finally she spoke. "We chose you," she said, "*Because* you're human."

Robert looked up at the stars, far and distant and pure and beautiful through the needled branches in the frozen night air.

"I love you, Selena," he said.

"I love you too, Robert."

He kissed her then, for the first time, and didn't care that his ankle was throbbing and his palms were stinging and Selena's lips were almost as cold as his shivering fingers. He kissed her, and then they sat staring at the sky and the stars and the needled branches.

When it was too cold to stay any longer, they returned to the camp.

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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