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### Phoenix Rising: A Scout is Born

Seth Hunter

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# Phoenix Rising: A Scout is Born

An Honors Thesis

Written by:

**Seth Michael Hunter**

And submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of  
the Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers

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Dr. Jay Curlin, thesis director

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Dr. Johnny Wink, second reader

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Dr. Jason Doroga, third reader

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Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program Director

April 17, 2024

Phoenix Rising: A Scout is Born

My name is Raven. I am a soldier who fights for others. This is my story of how I had to choose to deny my inner darkness so that I could reach my full potential and save the ones I love.

Everyone has this darkness in them, but it is up to you if you will choose to feed into this darkness or cut it off. Either it will kill you or you will kill it. Trust me, it almost killed me when

I let my desire to take revenge for my father's murder.

**Prologue**

The Kingdom of Taris lies in flames, a shadow of what it once was, crippled by the Brutes of the Northeast. The King and Queen's deaths, followed by their only daughter's capture, cast a shadow over Taris, far darker than the depths of the Old Mines.

**The Prophecy of the Phoenix**

Some say it is only a legend, but others argue that it will someday come to pass, whether that be from belief passed down, or desperation for someone to save them...

*The Phoenix is an ancient creature, a bird made up of flames. There can only be one Phoenix, when one finally dies, its flame will fizzle out into embers, producing another egg. Once the egg hatches a new Phoenix will rise out of the ashes of its predecessor. The egg will only hatch when someone worthy of its powers is called to serve. This person will have to choose to rise out of their own personal ashes, turning away from their anger, their hatred, and their desire for revenge. These feelings will be replaced by a desire to use their past to help others...to protect the weak.*

*The egg lies underneath the training grounds of the Phoenix Scouts, waiting to be awoken by the next one to possess its powers.*

Centuries have passed since the last Phoenix was awoken, causing many to doubt whether or not the prophecy was written by a lunatic or one of the Old Mages of a time before...

## Part One: The Appointment

### **Chapter 1**

The crunch of leaves upon the forest floor is growing louder. As I hear the crunch for a few minutes, flames begin to flicker through the thick leaves in the forest.

These Brutes have a lot to learn about night patrols, I think to myself. At least they aren't talking with one another.

As the Brute patrol passes through the curve of the trail, I start to slow my breathing. My heart beats out of my chest, and I can feel my blood pumping through my veins, my hands beginning to shake. The torches cast dancing shadows in front of us and reveal the weapon that the lead Brute is carrying--a spear much longer than the short sword I have strapped onto my thigh. As the enemy draws closer, the sweat coats my palms, despite its being a cool autumn night.

‘How can they not see us?’ A hand gently grips my left shoulder. Slowly I turn my head and look into my master’s dark eyes, and he gives me a nod of encouragement. My fear flows from my body as I remember his words from my first day of training:

“We thrive in the night. Our dark cloaks and heightened senses give us an advantage over the Brutes. While they carry torches underneath the night sky, we rely on our eyes to adjust to the darkness—this is an ability most do not have, and one of the first innate abilities that you need to possess in order to become a Phoenix Scout. While they blind themselves with their torches, we can learn where they roam, without them having but a thought that we may be lurking, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.”

“Aye,” I replied, “But what if they see us under the moonlight?”

He had a sly grin and responded, “That is the reason why we wear these mottled cloaks, they aren’t for making us stand apart from the more...conventional troops. Camouflage is not only just for blending in with the colors of our environment, but our cloaks help prevent our shape from standing out in the wilderness. We learned this trick from birds that rely on their own natural patterns to blend into their surroundings to evade predators. Your mind will notice shapes

before it notices colors in the wilderness, similar to how you notice movement before shapes. Make sure to apply your face paint in different colors for various contours of your face.

“Make sure you don’t paint your whole face as one color. Don’t make that mistake.

Thankfully I did it only once during a training session with my master. You can also generally be safe to cover your face with the shadow of your cowl built into your cloak and hope the enemy doesn’t notice...these Brutes we will be fighting tend to miss details, since their vision isn’t as good as ours. You’ve seen how boring their buildings are, right? Their lack of detail.”

“Only in sketches,”

He nodded.

“Master, why do we have to paint our faces then?”

He stared off for a moment, his eyes furrowed seeming to think carefully about what to say next. “Because not every enemy you will face will be a normal Brute. Sometimes there are other kinds...and rumor has it there are alliances being formed in the shadows that even our best spies cannot uproot information about.”

I quickly snap back to reality as my Master places an arrow on his bow string. I pull on my cloak, relying on it to mask my presence as the enemy draws closer. By now, they are so close, I could toss them an apple. This is a smaller patrol, but I notice one is wearing leather armor instead of the standard iron plate armor that the Brutes are known for. My blood runs cold and my heart sinks.... he’s a tracker.

I see the tracker inhale deeply through his nose, his piglike nostrils flaring out. He closes his eyes. I see his face scrunch. He has to smell us.

“I think—”

“Shhh” my Master cuts me off.

The Tracker grunts something to his patrol, and then my ears are filled with the bone-chilling screech of the Brutes drawing their roughly crafted weapons from their rusty sheaths, amplified by my adrenaline rush.

I can see his red eyes scanning the tree line to my right, slowly getting closer to our position in the woods. As the Tracker’s eyes stop on mine, his expression changes. I can sense that he sees the blue of my eyes, now that he pinpointed our location from his strong sense of smell, dozens of times stronger than a human’s sense of smell. I feel a deep desire for revenge flare up, like oil on a fire, urging me to kill him now. My training tells me to ignore this urge, and the words my Master once told me.

“Revenge won’t fill the hole in your chest. You must find something else to fill it with. Revenge takes more out of you, the more you act on it, the more you feed it, slowly consuming you.”

THWAP! I hear and then see an arrow pierce the Tracker’s throat before I am able to place a finger on the soft fletching of my arrow.

I draw the string back on my bow and slip my middle finger into the corner of my mouth, feeling the string go taut and I am suddenly reaching my anchor point. After the grueling hours upon hours of training, this has become muscle memory for me. I raise my bow, centering the tip of the arrow at the throat of the Brute to the right of the now dead Tracker.

THWAP! Before I am able to release my arrow, another one of my master's arrows strikes him in the throat. I shake my head in amazement at the speed and accuracy of his last two shots. I decide to take down the lead Brute who is carrying the spear, so that I don't have to worry about his extended reach if they decide to rush us. The lead brute drops as I go to draw another arrow from my quiver, but my master's hand stops me.

"Let's test your swordsmanship," I hear him calmly speak into my ear.

I sling my bow onto my back and draw my sword. I feel the razor edge scratch against its leather scabbard on my left leg.

As I raise my blade to a defensive position, I then notice a blur of movement in the reflection of the polished, mixed in with the waving leaves that have finally turned a deep shade of orange, towards the direction the patrol moved in from.

'Must've been a bird or something,' I think to myself.

I parry the charging Brute's battle ax to my left, holding my short sword in my left hand as I move my right hand behind my back, pulling a small blade from its concealed leather sheath.

Before this beast is able to recover his stance, I am slipping my thin blade into his armpit, slicing through his tough flesh, and fatally wounding him, blood already pooling out as my blade left his skin.

I quickly turn to my left, seeing three Brutes close in on my Master. With the knife still in my right hand, I rear back and throw it into the middle Brute's neck. My Master, being an expert in the Jar Kai fighting style, utilizes two long daggers slightly shorter than the sword that I wield. The blades are thicker on the bottom, and the extra weight allows him to absorb blows easier.



Blocking the first swing with his right hand, he sidesteps to this beast's exposed left side, slashing with the left, causing him to collapse to the ground, dying almost instantaneously. Closing the gap, I quickly thrust my blade into the last enemy's back. My blade screeches as it sheers through the poorly smithed backplate, my enemy falling to the ground after I pull the blade out of the last brute.

I hear a "Good work, still room for improvement, but good nonetheless," as my master nods at me.

I am puzzled by the sudden widening of his eyes and begin to turn around. Something slams into my upper body, forcing me to the ground. As I fall, I see a crossbow sticking out of the woods, and hear my sword clatter on the rocky trail below. I reach to the pain in my chest and...I feel nothing as the forest roof is all I can see as my body slumps backward. Everything turns black.

It feels like a flame is burning in my shoulder, while my eyes are peeling open. Suddenly I realize the shirt I wear underneath my leather chest piece is soaked with a warm liquid, and my chest piece is discarded to my right.

'What happened to my armor?' I think to myself, the words unable to come out of my mouth.

My vision is blurring and refocusing, and I think I can see a two-inch tear in the armor. Looking down at my chest I can see a stick with some feathers on the end coming out of my chest.

"Don't worry, I got you," I can hear from a distant voice that sounds like its coming from the end of a tunnel.

As my vision fades out, I see something being poured at the base of the stick, which by now I think is a crossbow bolt. How did that get there? Suddenly the pain comes back, forcing a scream out of my mouth, seeming to come from the depths of my soul. All of a sudden, a bright light burns around the bolt. I begin to smell burning lantern oil, mixed with the scent of burning flesh. My flesh I realize. As I begin to fade out again, the flames grow brighter, consuming everything I can see.

## Chapter 2

The scent of burning flesh fills my nostrils once more as I come back into consciousness. I can feel the wind roaring around me and feel as if I am flying like a bird through the sky. As I start to feel that I am bouncing, I realize I am slumped over on a galloping horse.

As quickly as the pain subsided, it came back. It washes over my entire body as I begin slipping back into the void...A vision fades into view as I see a flaming bird in the sky and feel as if I am flying after it.

All of a sudden, I am back in my childhood home, overwhelmed with the scent of my mother's stew, my stomach began to rumble. This is my favorite meal, and exactly what I was hoping for on my birthday, if the market had the ingredients.

"Suppers ready!" I heard, jumping off of my bed, the book I had been reading thudded onto to the wooden floor below. I barely heard it, my stomach growling with excitement.

Suddenly I am no longer viewing this through my own eyes, but through our foggy kitchen window.

My heart drops as I heard the thunder of beating drums in the distance, slowly getting closer. At once I realize that this is the day that changed my life forever. The day the war began...the day I lost everything, gaining an uncontrollable desire for revenge...

I could see the memories flash back to my father as he closed his eyes to conceal his fear to us. He slowly raised himself up from the table and limped to the supply room. His injury was a testimony to his faithful service in the Seventeen Years War, whose treaty that ended the war signed on the same day as my birth.

Once he donned his battle-scarred armor, he embraced my mother and I. We could hear doors being kicked open throughout the village, coming with it screams of women and children, but also war cries of fellow Seventeen Years War veterans. "It's going to be okay," he whispered to us, "Always remember that I love you both dearly. Run to the castle gates, me and the boys will buy you time." My father said this with sadness in his eyes, but also something else...perhaps an understanding of what he had to do, and a knowledge that his sacrifice would be worth it.

"Here is your birthday present, it looks like fate chose this day for you to become a warrior." As my mother finished this statement, I saw a tear run down her face as she handed me a short sword, much like what the elite Phoenix Scouts wielded in battle.

A razor edge forged out of the strongest of steels, with a bronze handguard and an oak grip felt perfect in my hands, the ridges etched in the grip a perfect fit.

“You don’t have to fight, you still have a year before you choose your path,” my mother choked out, even though she knew what my reply would be.

“It’s in my blood,” I said as my eyes locked with my father’s, who could only manage a proud nod. “Besides, I’ve been training for the past three years. Must be fates way of calling me to the Path of the Warrior.”

After she hugged us tight as if she never would again, my mother stepped out, meeting my Aunt Claire on our front porch. They ran towards the castle gates as my Uncle Ben met us in his scratched, yet polished armor.

“Just like the ol’ days, huh?” Uncle Ben said moments before an arrow struck his shield.

We raised our weapons along with our voices in a united battle cry as we ran towards a squad of Brutes. These things are uglier than in the books, I thought to myself. They almost look human but with a pig snout and elephant-like ears. Their eyes seem foggy compared to a human’s.

Like a fox, my uncle dashed around the enemy formation, slicing two fatally with his sword before they even had time to raise a sword in defense.

I saw a wagon to my right, jumped on it and then over the heads of the Brutes, slashing down into one’s neck as I soared over. As I landed, I turned around, and stabbed another brute in the back before he could face me. I realized my father has already dispatched three enemies and my uncle had dropped the rest.

My bones seemed to vibrate inside of me as I heard the loudest roar of my life. Standing as tall as three men, my heart sank wondering how we could kill this monstrosity.

“Run!” my father yelled over the yells of warriors and children, mixed with the clashing of metal blades, “We cannot kill him alone!”

My uncle grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the fight. I screamed in violent protest and hit him as I watched this monster prepare to fight my father. Something like a laugh came from deep within the creature as it raised its massive steel club, the head of it seeming to be as big as a horse. Right before his shield was struck, my father turned and smiled at me and I could see him mouth “Go,” to me. I saw his shield arm crumple under the massive beast’s blow, and I realized there that my father’s last act would be to sacrifice himself so that I could get away.

Tears streamed down my face as I sheathed my sword and ran towards the castle gates with my uncle.

“Open the bloody gate!” My uncle screamed at the young soldiers that were assigned gate duty. Their young faces were only a year or two older than my own.

“Y-y-yes sir!” one managed to get out, struck by fear of the advancing enemy soldiers.

At this point I realized how fast my heart had been beating, my peripheral vision returned to me.

“Someone get a bloody healer,” Uncle Ben grumbled.

Blood streamed down his sword arm, with a cloth drawn tight around his bicep, which slowed the bleeding but didn’t stop it.

“Where’s my mother?” I mumbled to myself, the world around me began to spin. “Where is she?” I demanded, as I grabbed the gate guard and shook him violently.

“You’re the only ones we have let in since the battle began,” he managed.

My heart seemed to change places with my stomach.

“No, where is she? I-I have to go find her,”

Suddenly the rush of battle left my veins and I could feel a burning sensation in my left calf, with it a stream of warm liquid flowing into my boot. The pain caused my leg to collapse, and I fell to one knee. I crawled towards the battle once again, as I attempted to draw my sword, not being able to grip the handle of my sword as it clattered on the ground, dripping with green blood of my new enemy.

“Get them to the hospital now!” A Lieutenant of the Knight’s Legion commanded his soldiers.

“No, no, I have to find...” as I felt a flask being pressed to my lips, a warm liquid washing down my throat. With the rush of the liquid came a warm feeling that drove the pain out of my body. As the pain began to vanish so did the rest of the world.

Right before I had faded out entirely, I heard the clacking of horse hooves on the cobblestones of the castle roads. I turned and saw one of the mysterious Phoenix Scouts clad in his green, brown, and gray stained leather armor, heavily armed with his long bow, sword, and a spear strapped to his horse’s saddle. Ten more followed behind him, ready for battle. The lead man nodded at me as I faded to the abyss.

### Chapter 3

I struggled to open my eyes, my whole body feeling as if it were glued to the cloth sheets I was laying on. My eyes slowly cracked open, and the world was a blur around me. One by one I was able to get my limbs to work, as I wiggled the fingers of my sword arm, and slowly started to gain feeling in my arms, barely able to rotate my wrist and my elbow. I was unable to move my left leg and tried harder.

“Agh!” I cried out in pain after my legs protest.

“Good you’re finally awake,” a young nurse said, turning towards me.

Her storm gray eyes were the first thing I was able to make out and then she smiled at me. She seemed to be around two or three years older than me. We locked eyes until she realized my struggle had caused the wound in my leg to partially re-open. She blushed and then began to tend to my bleeding leg.

“Now what did you do that for?” she questioned.

“What happened, I don’t...”

“You were brought in here with a torn-up leg, we were able to patch you up. You could have lost your leg. How were you injured? We assumed that you were struck by a stray blow during the battle when you were running towards the castle,”

“No, it must’ve been during the battle. My father, uncle and I fought a Brute squad of around ten or so of them and then...” my voice trailed off.

My heart sank as I flashed back to the battle, able to hear the drums once more, as a tear began to fall down my cheek.

“Was my father brought in? He had to have survived, right? What about my mother? Did they find her? They had to have found her,” I begged to know.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know. I was assigned to you after the emergency care to make sure you remained in stable condition.” Her eyes filled with emotions.

I nodded in response, and she dabbed a cloth at my cheek.

“My name is Satine, what’s yours?”

“Raven, I wish we were meeting under better circumstances,” I struggled to smile until I looked into her eyes again.

“Are you a soldier? Is that why you were in the battle?”

“No, I don’t go through the trials for another year,” I responded.

“Then why would you have fought? Most your age would have run away.”

“I’m going to become a warrior, like my father was. Him and my uncle fought, so why shouldn’t I?”

She nodded, “You’ll be in here for a little while longer. Our alchemists are making more healing potions, but we had more casualties than we were ready for...” as her voice trailed off.

“How many did we lose?”

“Between the soldiers and civilians injured we don’t have space in our hospital. We’ve set up multiple field hospitals. Our hospital can hold about two hundred or so patients, and I’m



not sure how many field hospitals we're at now. Last I heard we had several more treatment tents under construction, and that's not including the dead...our outposts throughout the kingdom were mostly wiped out in the first ambush." Satine told me. "Every where we go you can smell the metallic stinge of blood in the wind," her voice trailed off, her eyes glossed over for a moment.

"I'm sorry you've had to see all of this and I want to thank you for helping me."

"At least I haven't lost anyone close, my family was off trading in the seaports, so they survived the battle. I can't imagine losing your whole family in one day."

"I didn't lose everyone; my sister was off on a trip with our grandparents. I don't know what I'm going to do without my parents. How can I tell her what happened?" My eyes began to go out of focus again.

She gripped my hand as I started to drift off.

"The potion has some...side effects. Nothing too bad but the mages told me that you might feel sick as you're healing. It's a new potion they are working on. They used it on just a few others."

"Am I a guinea pig?"

"Not exactly, it was an emergency situation. They didn't mean to make you a part of their experiment."

"Oh gosh," I hurled into the trash can beside my bed, "Sorry about that,"

She laughed, "You're fine," she managed through short laughs.

Her laugh seemed to make the pain subside for a moment as I looked into her eyes while she re-wrapped my leg.

A bell rang and she looked at me again, with what almost looked like disappointment in her eyes.

“I’ve got to go, that’s the end of my shift, but I’ll be back to you again tomorrow morning.”

As she began to turn away, I asked, “How long was I out?”

“A few days, we thought you wouldn’t make it.”

“Wait! What about my uncle, I think he was wounded.”

“What about me?” I heard as he rounded the corner.

“Uncle!” I exclaimed as he embraced me.

“I’m proud of you Raven. You made your family proud. I was worried about you for a minute there, your leg got infected by some poison that the Brute’s will dip their weapons in.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know...we hid your cousins underneath the trapdoor in our closet. I’ve been called back to service, we lost a lot of officers in the battle...they’re going to put you, your sister, and your cousins into the orphanage. I’m going to need you to take care of them for me until you begin your trials...rumors are going around that anyone who wants can volunteer a year, maybe even two years, early.”

“You mean I can go join the Knight’s Legion now?”

“With parent’s approval yes...if you’re selected, but you shouldn’t have any problems considering your recent—experience. In your case I guess I’m the one to sign off...you know your mother would kill me if I did this.”

“Uncle, I have to. I have to kill that monster that took my father from me and find my mother.”

“It would take at least a year to train you...maybe sooner if they fast track new soldiers. There’s no guarantee that you would even be sent to fight. You could just get assigned to an outpost where most new soldiers go. The Brutes retreated once someone got word to the Phoenix Scouts...They scared them away. During the last war, they were one of only a few types of soldiers who could stand up to them.”

“If I became one, I could avenge his death,” I whispered under my breath, I didn’t even realize that I had said it out loud.

“Have you heard the prophecy? Regarding the Phoenix Scouts.”

“Not exactly, only bits and pieces sitting around the campfire with my school friends,”

“The Ancient Mages predicted an event—an event where the kingdom fell on the anniversary of a previous war...a man would rise out of the ashes of his own personal turmoil to become the Master Scout...the prophecy says that he will gain the powers of the Phoenix. No one really knows what it means, how much is literal, or even if real mages prophesied it. But it’s interesting to know the history. They saved your father and I during the last war. At the Battle for Damascus...Did he ever tell you that story?”

“No, I only know that was where he was wounded.”

“You know he kept fighting for days, hiding his wounds so we could stay together.”

“I had no idea. I had heard rumors of the war, and my teachers told me that he fought valiantly.”

“He was awarded the second highest medal our military offers.”

“What? The Medal of Valor?”

“Yes,” he replied, his eyes no longer looking at me but rather they seemed to flashback to a time before...probably this battle or perhaps the last one we had just fought in. “Your father was so proud of you Raven...he would always talk of the day he would watch you choose your path in the kingdom,” a single tear rolled down his face.

I stared off, looking out the window as I wondered when I would wake up from this awful nightmare, even though I knew what had happened was real. I began to sob uncontrollably as my uncle embraced me; feelings of despair, anger, and confusion washed over me.

## Chapter 4

“Welcome to your first day of training, recruits. My name is Sergeant Wells, and I will be your primary instructor for your time here. As you all know by now, we are at war.

---

“UP, DOWN. UP, DOWN” was all I heard; my arms felt as if they were going to fall off if I had to do just one more pushup. “Someone here thinks that they’re special. That they can take a nap while their fellow recruits are training. Well, you are wrong buddy. Look what everyone else has to go through while you get to rest,” bellowed one of our trainers.

I looked over at my fellow recruit who decided deserved a nap while the rest of us trained. He had an embarrassed look on his face, with regret filling his eyes.

“Was it worth it?” the trainer demanded.

“N-no sir,” the recruit squeaked out.

“Everybody, ON YOUR FEET!”

“Yes, sir!” we gasped in unison.

“Do you think that was hard?” he inquired of us, no one brave enough—or dumb enough—to respond. “Did you?” he looked around, “This is NOTHING compared to war. Some of you may know that already,” I locked eyes with him for a moment until he turned to the other recruits. “Dismissed, get yourselves cleaned. Once you are back into your garrison uniform, we will meet in the classrooms on the third floor of the barracks building. The Phoenix Scouts will

teach you some—unconventional strategies that they found useful during the Seventeen Years War,”

*Geez I thought to myself, we still have three more months of this...at least we're about a quarter of the way through. And then after this I've got to go to Knight's school...*

“MOVE! Just because your physical training is done for the day doesn't mean you shouldn't move with a purpose!” he bellowed at us.

CLANG. A sword hit the ground and the clang pierced all of our ears. The recruit who dropped the weapon quickly bent down to pick it up, but it was already too late.

“WHO DROPPED THAT WEAPON!” bellowed Sergeant Wells.

My heart dropped as soon as I realized he heard the clang of metal on the cobblestone pavement after Sergeant Wells had walked off.

“Looks like we don't have discipline anymore, do we? EVERYBODY, DROP!” he paced around the group of recruits who awaited his next command. “UP, DOWN, UP. ON YOUR FEET! GET TO CLASS!”

“Oh no,” grumbled my best friend Bern, “I must've left my sword back at the—”

“JUST WHEN I THOUGHT YOU EXCUSES FOR RECRUITS WERE DONE SCREWING UP TODAY, SOMEONE DECIDES TO LEAVE THEIR SWORD BEHIND,” our spirits sank as we heard the bellowing voice, “CLASS IS PUSHED BACK. LOOKS LIKE ONE OF YOU THINKS WE ALL NEED MORE PHYSICAL TRAINING,”

*When I thought the day couldn't get any longer, I thought to myself, my arms already felt like noodles after the intense sword training we had already endured throughout the afternoon.*

“Good afternoon,” rasped a man with a cowl drawn over his head, casting his face into shadows, “today you will learn about some...different tactics than what the Knight’s Legion traditionally uses. These strategies were developed during the Seventeen Years War. The High Commander of the Armies of Taris realized that in order to defeat the large army of the Brutes, we would have to change things up. It took many men’s lives in order to figure out what worked. So pay attention unless you want to end up like so many men that we lost during the last war...”

The sound of our quills scratching into our parchment paper filled my ears, my hands struggling to even hold up this small instrument...*how will I be able to hold up my sword tomorrow.*

---

“Hi Raven! I heard your platoon had the day off today to let you celebrate the end of Basic Infantry Course and I was hoping that I’d see my favorite soldier here!” Sabine ran over to me with a basket full of baked treats.

She gave me a hug that took my breath away. *Can she not feel my heart beating out of my chest?*

“Hey Satine! I was hoping you’d have the day off too,” I smiled as she handed me the basket, “Wow,” I mumbled between bites, “This is the best thing I’ve had to eat in months! Did you make these?”

She blushed, “Yep, just like my mother taught me,” she smiled again, her eyes looking at the ground and back up into mine again.

*I need to ask her to go with me to the graduation dinner next week* I thought to myself.

“Guess what!” she asked once I finished my third muffin in the span of about a minute.

“What’s up?” I replied.

“Next week I get to travel to Whiteridge to train under Master Apothecary Jenny Bridge for the next few months! I’ll be learning more about the natural remedies that the sea-farers have discovered!”

“Wow! That, that’s great! When do you leave?” *Please don’t be before Friday*, I thought to myself.

“We are doing all of our pre trip preparations on Wednesday and heading out Thursday at sunrise, we get to ride in special carriages! I heard they keep snacks on board for us!”

*You’ve got to be kidding me that’s just my luck—the day before.*

“Were you about to ask me something?” she implored.

“Oh—uh, I forgot, that sounds like a great opportunity! You know one day you’re going to become the best caregiver in the kingdom! No wait, the whole world!”

She blushed and then responded, “Thanks, I’m sad I’m going to miss your graduation though. I’m really proud of you. I still remember the time we first met, and the doctors wondered if you’d live, but here you are. Did you get selected for the fast track to the Knight’s Legion?”

“My instructors actually held me after our last testing session. They told me I’m meeting with our commanding officer over the training regiment. It’s either really good, or really bad. I’m hoping they don’t know about my sneaking out to get my squad special snacks from the bakery every few weeks.”



“Raven! Why would you do that?”

“Well one of my best friends has this condition he didn’t tell the army. He passes out without having enough sugar...they would kick him out if they knew about it. I had to help him, he’s a good soldier, this is his dream. He’s better than me in many areas.”

*I thought back to the time he destroyed me in sword and shield training neglecting to tell Satine that story...*

“I’m going to miss you, Satine,” my eyes unable to meet hers, my heart dropping farther every time I felt it beat.

“I’m going to miss you too, Raven. I’ll be back soon. You better write letters to me while we’re apart from each other!” as she hugged me.

## Chapter 5

“Recruit Raven!” I hear my name called outside of the training regiment’s commander’s office.

My hands shook as I reached for the door handle, struggling to turn it because of the sweat in my palms.

“Good morning, sir,” I greeted Captain Vaughn.

“Good morning, Recruit.” He responded.

“Hello there,” a man seemed to speak from the shadows themselves, causing me to jump. “A little jumpy, eh?” He chuckled.

“I guess so, sir.” I managed.

“Do you know why you’ve been called into your commander’s office?” the mysterious stranger asked.

“No sir,” I replied. *Maybe he doesn’t know about my sneaking out. Better not admit to something they don’t know about.*

“The Scouts have noticed you have some...talents that most of this kingdoms soldiers lack,” he told me.

*Maybe he doesn’t know—*

“We know about your sneaking out,” said my commander coolly.

*Why would this Phoenix Scout be here if I’m in trouble? Maybe he was just in here...*

“We don’t know how long you’d been sneaking out for extra rations, but it took my best men to realize that you have been sneaking about. Lucky for you, I was having trouble sleeping and went for a midnight walk to clear my head. That was when I barely caught a glimpse of you. It’s impressive how you moved within the shadows...If you had some proper camouflage, it’s likely I never would have seen you. Several sentries missed you.”

*This feels like a compliment more than a discipling.*

“The Phoenix Scouts are impressed with your skill. You’re extremely lucky they are impressed by your...innate abilities. You will still be disciplined, but you will not be kicked out. At least from the military as a whole.” Captain Vaughn stated with obvious disapproval in his voice and gaze towards me.

“You’ll begin training for selection immediately. I hope you are in good shape.”

“What shall I address you as sir?” I asked.

He smirked and replied, “You’ll find out soon enough,” as he led me out of my now former commander’s office.

Once we were out of earshot from Captain Vaughn’s office, the man started up a conversation.

“Calm down, we aren’t as centered on formalities as the King’s Infantry. We value discipline but see that it has a time and place. Between you and me, I know why you snuck out. At first, I thought you were stealing some extra snacks or meeting a girl. Then we realized that you did it to help your friend. You know it was very risky to do that. Had I not figured out the reason, you would’ve just been kicked out of the Infantry. I knew your father didn’t raise you

like that, and my gut told me otherwise. Plus, I figure you're still into that nurse," after that he gave another half-smile, raising an eyebrow at me.

"How did you—" I was cut off.

"Just assume I know everything." He chuckled.

"I thought you were soldiers, not investigators?"

"We're a lot of things. Sometimes soldiers, sometimes special response to—special crimes—and sometimes spies. We train to have a variety of missions. We do...a little bit of everything."

"Ok, then. What will the training consist of?" I asked, hoping it couldn't be any worse than the last training I had gone through.

"Did you think that the King's Infantry training was rough?"

"At times," I gulped. *It can't be any worse, can it?*

"Our training is much more intellectual, more precise, and has much more physical training. When you're stuck behind enemy lines, in a four-man team or sometimes alone, you can't rely on your numbers and set up a patrol camp overnight. We attempt to replicate that in our training."

I nodded, not sure what to say, not wanting to seem cocky, but also not seem to be scared.

"It will be the most fun you never want to have again, you'll miss it but not really want to go back," he seemed to reminisce, a smile in his eyes as he remembered his past.

## Chapter 6

THWAP! I heard my bowstring snap back as it launched an arrow forward.

“Miss,” said the archery instructor, nicknamed Whistle.

“But I hit the second ring from the center,” I said in protest.

“Anything but a perfect shot is a missed shot. That’s the difference in shooting between a brute’s armor and hitting his heavy iron plate. Most of the arrows we carry can’t penetrate the thick iron plates our enemy’s wear.” Explained Whistle.

“Why don’t we carry heavier arrows?” I implored.

“Too heavy, if we carried those arrows, we would limit our reserve to a quarter if not less. Your back would not like two dozen armor penetrating arrows.” he stated matter-of-factly, “But that doesn’t mean we don’t make it easier every now and then for—particular mission sets,”

“What is the next weapon I will get to master?” I asked.

“Who said you mastered this one?” Whistle said looking at my target once again.

After a very exaggerated rolling of my eyes, he pulled a blade from underneath his cloak.

“I keep this one strapped to my thigh,” he explained, “it is perfectly balanced, see?”

Whistle placed the knife on his left index finger.

The blade was about 8 inches of layered steel. It was a perfect mirror of its single recurve before it sharpened to a lethal point. The only difference was one end had both edges sharpened and the other was blunt so he could hold it.

I blinked and the blade was sticking in the throat of the dummy target.

“Do you know why we don’t aim for the chest?” Whistle inquired, as he pulled the knife out of the target.

“The Brutes don’t wear anything to protect their neck, and they tend to wear thick iron plates on their chest.” I stated, thinking back to the classroom time we had.

“Yes. Also, their anatomy is...different than ours. You and I would generally die from a stab wound in the chest where the brutes can sometimes take it. They may fall down but they’ll get back up occasionally.”

“This war is going to be harder to win than I thought, isn’t it?”

“The last war was one was seventeen years long. That’s enough shooting for now. I think it’s time for a run through the woods.” Whistle stated as he took off towards the tree line.

The cool breeze felt good on my perspiring skin, but the chill down into my lungs caused me to gasp for breath, as Whistle seemed to fly still ten yards or so ahead of me. The crunch of leaves and my heavy breathing are all I could hear, focusing on just putting one foot in front of the other. Suddenly Whistle stopped and before I could register what I saw, I already ran into his straightened arm at my chest.

I groaned on the ground, “What was that for?”

“This isn’t the King’s Infantry Raven. You can’t rely on that one foot in front of the other fodder. When you’re in a formation of forty other soldiers that may slide, but when it’s just you and MAYBE a small team that will get you killed. See how easily I took you down?”

*How is he not out of breath we’ve been running for half an hour.*

“You’re right,” I managed to get out between breaths. *It was hard enough breathing before I slammed into the cold dirt.*

“I know our methods may be cruel at times. And sometimes we may go a little too far but it’s because of what we went through in the last war. I don’t want to lose anymore brothers...” Whistle stared off for a moment.

I nodded my head, still breathing heavily, feeling my heartbeat in my temples.

“I think we’ve done enough training for today. How do you feel about grabbing some grub at the Weary Mare? I hear the old man who runs it has some new items on the menu that I’ve been wanting to try.”

“Oh please, these rations aren’t bad by any means but they’re kind of bland.”

“That they are” he chuckled. “Anyways we still gave to get back to the training grounds so you can bathe...we don’t want you representing the scouts smelling like that.”

I groaned thinking about how long the run in was.

“Don’t worry we won’t be running. There’s someone I want to introduce you to.” Whistle said as he walked towards another clearing in the woods.

“Do I finally get my own horse?” I exclaimed.

“Indeed, his name is Buck,”

I walked up to Buck, a dark brown horse with black stripes throughout his coat, seeing how strong of a steed he was. I hopped on and he immediately kicked his hind legs up into the air, sending me upwards and onto the ground once again.

Whistle began to laugh, and I realized then where my horse got his name from.

“Oops I may have forgot to tell you one thing. We started training all Scout horses to only allow a rider onto their backs if they knew a code word. You only have to tell Buck this word once, and he’ll let you on. But you’ll still have to earn his trust.”

“Thanks for letting me know beforehand.” I said attempting to suppress a smile.

“It’s red five,”

“Um, okay.” I responded and walked over to Buck. He snorted and backed up until I put my hand onto his neck and said, “Red five,” into his ear. He turned to me and brushed my shoulder with his snout.

“Hop on,” Whistle told me as he climbed onto his own steed. “And hurry up and get adjusted...that one’s fast and you won’t have long to get ready before he takes off. You’ll have to build trust with him so you can learn to control him and so he follows your commands. Remember you’re his boss. Take control.”

The wind roared around me and cooled my skin and caused the sweat to roll off as Buck picked up speed. It didn’t take long for the satisfying breeze to become bone chilling once the sun went down, but the full moon lit our path as the leafless branches scratched against one another in the wind, which would bring heavy storms tonight.

Buck’s hooves clacked on the cobblestones as we kept pace with Whistle. He had strong muscles, yet his soft coat contrasted and gave him the appearance of a regular horse one might have found in one of the many farms outside of the castle gates.



I felt him tense up under me as he prepared to jump over a creek that was about seven feet long. As we soared over, I felt weightless, as if I were a bird flying through the night sky. The twinkling seemed to be just outside of my arm's reach.

I didn't even notice we were already on the ground again until Whistle told me to pay attention. The stars were mesmerizing on this cloudless night and made me think back to the last time I saw Satine before she left for her training. The letters we have been writing one another have kept me going through Scout Training. I hoped that I would be able to see her soon. In her last letter she told me that they should be back to the kingdom for a week long break as long as the battles up north do not disrupt their travels.

---

The smell of fresh bread filled my nostrils as we walked into the Weary Mare. I could barely hear my thoughts as the sounds of laughter, song, and a lyre played.

“Ay, look what the cat dragged in,” teased the bartender.

“Looks like it left you in here awhile ago,” Whistle retorted as he embraced the man.

“It's been far too long since your shadow crossed my door, what took ye so long?”

“This bloody war ol' friend. I thought the last one would be the last one...but alas, here I am training my replacement,”

“How's he been doing? I heard about this one. The boy who took up arms instead of hiding away like most his age would have—heck done.”

“He has surprised me,”

“In a good or bad way?” I teased.

“Both,” Whistle said. “More good than bad. You have come a long way. But don’t let that get to your head, you have a lot more training before you are ready to fight alongside more Scouts,”

“No need to worry about that tonight gentleman, tonight we celebrate! Food and drinks are on the house!” said the bartender.

“I never caught your name,”

“I’d tell ya...but then I’d have to kill ya,” he said through boisterous laughter, “Nah lad, the name’s Old Mare,”

“Good to meet you, and thanks for the food and drink,”

“Oh don’t mention it. Your old pal here saved my skin a time or two during the last war...” as Old Mare trailed off. “Anyways help yourself to refills. Join the fun and celebrate for awhile, I don’t think Ol’ Whistle’ll care. ‘Specially since he went through what you’re about to go through,”

As the night drew on the songs grew louder as we sang along with old veterans from the past war, and younger soldiers in training for the current war. The old timers, as we were told to call them, went through countless war stories, telling what to do and what not to do. Some stories were full of laughter, and some were filled with tears as men remembered seeing their brothers in arms struck down during the fierce battles.

One old mysterious man was at the Weary Mare, sat with us all but didn’t join in song. He listened but never spoke. Most of the time he seemed to be in another place, possibly reliving

some of his worst moments during the Seventeen Years War. His scars on his face and arms a testament to what he must have gone through.

The creak of the door was disheartening as I realized this would probably be the last celebration I could have for a long time.

“Who was the quiet old man with all the scars?” I asked Whistle.

Whistle took a moment and a deep breath. “That man is a hero from the war prior to the Seventeen Years War. He was actually captured by raiders. Back then we had a pact with another kingdom to the south. Until they betrayed us. That man was quite literally stabbed in the back and left for dead. Until an officer found him and realized he would be worth more to them alive than dead. He was tortured for an unknown number of days until our forces raided the outpost he was held in underground. He didn’t talk for a long time. No one knows what all he went through. The thickness of his scars tell how long he went through the torture, and how long he resisted without telling any of our information. Had he cracked we would have been ambushed and our own spies would have been killed or tortured. He was in charge of the Secret Spies Cohort of the King’s Circle,”

I couldn’t think of anything to say and just nodded.

“He’s a true hero of that war...a forgotten war and a forgotten hero. The last king disbanded the Secret Spies Cohort publicly...but many speculate that it still is used on ‘special’ occasions,”

“You don’t think that he still—”

“Don’t think about those secret things...or at least don’t talk about them in public. It could earn you a visit from them...if you believe they still exist,”

## Chapter 7

“Keep running!” my master yelled.

*I've already ran for two hours...how could I go any longer?*

The sound of my feet striking cobbled pathway filled my ears and became my entire focus.

*I thought when I finished my first phase this would get easier...*

The sweat poured down my face as I gasped for air. Each breath brought life back to my lungs which dissipated with every step that I took.

*How has he hardly broken a sweat?*

“I know this may seem pointless to you. All of this running. You never know if you will always have a horse with you. Not every mission allows for that. Sometimes you will be cut off from your friends, so far behind enemy lines, that this run will feel short. Imagine this with all of your equipment and your supply pack,” my master stated through even breaths.

I just nodded in reply, since I thought that if I spoke a mere word I might collapse to the earth.

*Not a bad idea, maybe I could get a ride.*

“One time...during the last war we were cut off miles behind enemy lines. Our horses had either been killed or scared off during an ambush. We barely survived...”

He stared off for a moment.

“That was when I met your father,”

“You knew---my father?” I exclaimed between breaths which caused me to cough more than I had anticipated.

“I did. He saved my life once. That is why I volunteered to train you, Raven. I see you have your father’s fighting spirit within you. But that willingness is not enough. You must train. You must perfect your skill. And then you will train more, because you should never stop improving.”

*What does he know about my father? Maybe he can answer some of my questions. He never wanted to talk about what he went through during the Seventeen Years War. Especially when he was wounded.*

“Stop for a minute, catch your breath. Drink some water from this stream,”

“Were you—there when he was—wounded?” I gasped.

“No, we did not fight together in that battle. But we spent many nights together watching out for enemies that might want to ambush our position while our group slept at night. We were part of a special unit. It was the Scouts, Knights Legion, and the Mage Corps.”

“I thought that magic was banned?”

“It was. Then it was brought back when we started to lose our momentum in the war. We almost lost the war in a mere five days. The King realized that we needed all of the help we could get. The only problem was that most of the wizards had been hired out of the college at Winter’s Edge, in the northern arctic. Sadly, they did not share the same loyalty that most of our soldiers possess. Unless they had grown up here, they really only cared about the money. Magic

is a very powerful tool that can help us win most battles. They were one of few groups that could take on beasts like the one that killed your father.”

“Where did they go after the war?”

“They left us. They went back to their school to learn more. There is nothing wrong with a desire to learn more, but they had been consumed by it. It is all that they ever thought about. To grow in knowledge of the arcane arts brought more power among their ranks as well. Let this be a lesson to you, always strive to learn more, but if you begin to only care about your own power for personal gain, you need to check your heart.”

I nodded in response, unsure how to respond to my master.

“Break time is over, we can talk more about this when we get back to the campsite,”

*Already? That break went by fast.*

I shook my head as I began my former regimen of one foot in front of the other.

*Maybe when I complete my training, he might tell me more about my father and the mages.*

My whole being filled with relief as I realized that the clearing on the path ahead of us was our campsite. Buck snorted in excitement when he saw us.

*I wonder if he wanted to see me, or he knew that I would feed him when I returned back to our small home away from home.*

By now I had learned to enjoy my time out in nature. At first I missed the warmth of my bed, and the glow from the embers in the fireplace. But now I enjoy the sight of the countless stars in the night sky, each seemed as if it were a far off lantern from another world, that was just

out of grasp. The sounds of nature filled my ears again as I caught my breath. The bugs chirped, the sound of a creek nearby that would be my next stop, and my absolute favorite was the peace of being away from the hustle of the kingdom.

“Go wash off in the stream, I don’t want the wind to blow your scent over here while try to fall asleep,” my master said with a smile.

“You don’t smell so good yourself,”

“Much better than you, you had best get used to those long runs. I could’ve gone another hour before I began to sweat as much as you have,”

---

The smell of stew filled my nostrils and the boils of the stew being cooked filled my ears while my stomach growled. The past run had drained my energy, but I now began to realize that I have improved drastically from where I began.

“It may be time for you to begin The Trials Raven. This is an important step in you becoming a Scout. You will go on your first solo reconnaissance mission. There should not be any trouble, but I know that you will be more than prepared for a few Brutes,”

He handed me a bowl of stew and sat across the fire with his bowl. He stared into the flames for a minute before he began to eat his stew.

I tipped the bowl towards my lips and felt the warmth go all the way down my throat into my stomach. I closed my eyes as the flavors of beef, carrots, green beans and potatoes filled my mouth. The energy returned to my bones as we sat by the fire in silence while we absorbed the warmth from both stew and fire simultaneously.



Buck neighed, and threw his head to the right, which signaled to me that he was hungry. Again. I groaned as I stood up and my knees popped in protest as I walked over to Buck and pulled an apple from the sustainment pack that was attached to his saddle. He stood up on his two back legs in excitement and grabbed the apple from my hand. He brushed his head against my shoulder as he chewed the apple.

“I feel ya buddy, I was real hungry too,”

He snorted in response, but I could tell he wanted another one when he threw his head to the side again.

I laughed, “Sorry buddy, gotta save the last one for our ride back to the kingdom tomorrow. We wouldn’t want you to starve on the way back now, would we?”

He seemed to roll his eyes in protest and snorted again.

“Goodnight, Buck.”

I patted his fur and then walked back to the fire. By now my master had begun to make his kingdom famous apple cider.

“Since you completed your run today without a complaint, I decided I deserved a cup of my apple cider. And I figured you could use a cup too,” he said with a wink as he began to stir in all of the ingredients.

I stretched my legs as I sat down on the fallen log, picked up my bowl of stew and drank three more bowls by the time the apple cider was done.

“Maybe that nurse will be back in the kingdom by the time we return tomorrow,” he said with one eyebrow raised.

I rolled my eyes, “Hopefully so. Hopefully so.” I stared into the fire once more, this time I imagined what Satine and I would do when we were reunited.

Once the cider was finished, we both drank two cups slowly. The warm drink began to put me to sleep so I washed our bowls and cups off in the stream and packed them away before our long ride back to the kingdom the next day.

As I laid down under my blankets I looked up once more at the night sky. Thousands of lanterns twinkled at me, and seemed to say that they would keep watch while we slept. The thought of being with Satine again consumed my mind as I slowly drifted off to sleep, almost able to feel her with me.

## Chapter 8

The musty smell of old parchment paper fills my lungs as I entered the Office of Investigations. The Minister of Investigations looked up from an old maple wooden desk, and he began to pull out a stack of parchment and handed it to me.

“Ah, you must be Raven,”

“Yes sir,”

“Have you been told why you have been called here?”

“For my first mission, sir.”

“As you know by now, many women and children have disappeared since the start of the war. We are beginning to think that these missing people, like your mother, were not just executed. We aren't quite sure yet of the purpose, but we have reason to believe that these people are being kept in the Old Mines...”

“How did you discover this?”

“We have spies everywhere. The only problem is them getting back to us in one piece to send us what they've learned. One of my men realized that the younger soldiers have newer armor plates, and the mines the brutes used to mine from were collapsed at the end of the last war...so he decided to investigate the Old Mines that we quit using about a hundred or so years ago. And he found evidence of recent activity,”

“He recognized his wife when he delved deep into the mines. He was unable to get to her from where he was, so he went to our nearest village, left a note, and went back to get her. He hasn't been heard from since and is now missing. The mine has since been abandoned, but we

are searching for evidence as to where these workers have been taken. That is where you come in Raven.”

“When do I leave?”

“Three days from now. We wanted to give you ample time to recover from your last training *scenario* and also time to see your *special* friend,”

“Does everyone know about her?”

“Just assume I know everything,”

“I’ve heard that one before...”

He chuckled, “I’m sure you have. You’ve got a good trainer.”

“Indeed I do.”

---

My heart began to pound and my palms began to sweat as I realized that today is the day that I get to see Satine before my mission. She was finally back from training, as was I. Her last letter was still in my pocket.

I used what little allowance I had been given as a scout in training to buy a bouquet of flowers from one of the carts in town.

*I hope she likes them.*

My heart skipped a beat as I saw her leave the inn that they had stayed in the night they got back.

We ran towards each other and embraced.

“I’ve missed you so much Raven.”

“I’ve missed you too, Satine. I got you these.”

She smiled and grabbed the flowers.

“I love them! Thank you!”

We hugged again and then began to walk together.

“Raven, you should’ve seen the sea, it was beautiful!”

“I bet! I’ve only heard stories of what it is like out there, hopefully one day I will be able to make the journey.”

## Chapter 9

The new summer season brought a new chapter in my Scout training. I have been sent on my first unsupervised mission. The Old Mines. I have heard stories of massive spiders that call this place their home. The old men in the tavern tell the stories their grandfather's told them.

“Do whatever you can to avoid those mines...nothin' good comes out of 'em. My grandfather's brother died in those mines...the ceiling collapsed trapping thirty men in a dark, dusty demise. Not a way that I'd want to go out,” one old man would tell this story to scare his kids from wandering in.

The mines have been decommissioned for at least my and my pa's lifetimes...I wonder what's down there and what it may have grown into if it's had this long to roam around the depths, unbothered by the miners. I'd like to say I don't believe in the rumors, but lately some...strange things have been happening around the kingdom. Whispers of a new dark magic have been spreading like wildfire across Taris. Warriors that died hundreds of years ago taking up their weapons again...wolf-human beings roaming around at night and giant spiders from old legends.

Many say these are just rumors, but there have been some credible witnesses that report these things...hopefully it is just in their head, but I am unsure.

Per my training I left a note with my personal details, where I was headed, and when I should be return, hidden in a secret container inside of Buck's saddlebag.

As I walked away from Buck a familiar feeling slowly left me as our distance grew greater.

*I really am alone now. I can't afford to make any mistakes here.*

The nervousness flooded my veins and I had to force myself to slow my breaths to avoid losing control of myself.

The mouth of the Old Mines grew larger and larger with every step I took. Eventually I reached the entrance and found a small opening.

*Could be kids sneaking in or could be Brutes. I guess I'll find out. Maybe I'll find that other scout.*

I hoped that the man was still alive, but I knew he had been missing for far too long.

I feel ice roll down my spine as I see the main entrance to the Old Mines...I tell myself nothing is down there; the rumors are just that...but something in my gut tells me otherwise...something feels...dark about this place.

I pulled out the map of the old mines and lit my torch.

---

The dust filled my lungs the deeper I travelled into the mines. The map was my guide throughout the constant twists and turns with a plethora of off-shoots that were all thankfully marked on the map, or I worried that I might never make it back out of this place.

The thick dust on top of everything told me that no one had been here in ages. That and all of the cobwebs I kept getting stuck by, the countless threads trailed off me. I gave up my attempt to brush them all off as I might never finish my journey if I let myself stay consumed by the futile attempts to keep the webs off of me.

*I haven't felt this alone in a long time.*

The whistle of the breeze throughout the mines caused me to jump every time, never able to get used to the eerie sound.

No matter how hard I tried, every footstep seemed to echo for miles through the seemingly eternal darkness.

*Wait.*

Something hissed at me.

“Hey!” I shouted, as I waved my torch frantically in my left hand and drew my short sword with my right hand.

The weight of my blade brought comfort, yet I felt the fear flood my veins as whatever the beast was growled again.

I gulped and began to step forward, very slowly.

Suddenly a large rat, the size of a large dog stood up on its hind legs.

*How is it so big? Left alone and being one of few predators down here, that thing is huge!*

I slashed once across its body from its front legs all the way down until it dropped on the ground.

*I hope there aren't more of those.*

Somehow, I had the feeling that this rat would be the least of my worries while I was stuck in these mines.



A few minutes had passed where I turned into a deeper part of the mines. The temperature dropped further, and the chill made the hair on my arms stand up.

At once, eight beady lights appeared in front of me. I jumped and threw my torch, where it landed at the feet of a spider even larger than the rat I had just killed.

*No. Nope. This can't be real.*

I dropped my sword and quickly unslung my bow with an arrow already on the string and then sent it into the head of the spider before I gave myself the time to freak out.

*I am NEVER coming down here again.*

I slung my bow, picked up my sword and torch and began my journey yet again. This time much more carefully.

Normally I would pick up my used arrows, but not this time. No way I would touch that thing in a hundred moon cycles.

At every gust of the wind, every creek of the wood caused me to jump out of my skin. Every step that lit up the tunnel further I worried that I might find one of those spiders again.

*I'd rather fight ten rats at once than have to face another one of those spiders. What happened down here to allow them to grow that big? Could it be some mage experiment gone wrong or just the darkness and lack of other prey?*

I tried to distract myself from the fear with thoughts of Satine. That helped for a little while until I realized that if I am distracted, one of those massive spiders might jump out from the darkness and eat me.

*Mother used to say that they are more scared of me than I am of them. Something tells me that these massive spiders aren't afraid of anything.*

The tunnel opened up into a massive cave, but the only way forward was along a wooden bridge. I peered over the edge, unable to make out the bottom. I huffed and decided I better see what's down here.

I slowly made my way across the bridge until

SNAP!

The snap of the bridge filled my ears as I fell into the darkness below, unable to see where I may land, the only thing I could do was brace for the impact of the darkness that approached quickly below.

## Chapter 10

All I could feel was a piercing pain in my skull as the dust settled around me. I looked up and realized I would not be able to make it out the way I came. It must have been fifteen or twenty feet. Luckily, I didn't break any bones but I as I stood a pain shot through my right ankle. I slowly rotated it until I was able to put weight on my foot and began my trek to find out where this tunnel came from.

I slipped as I stood on one of my three dozen arrows. I was able to recover most of the arrows that fell out of my quiver, but a few had been broken or rolled off too far after my fall.

"...twenty-three, twenty-four, crap" I said out loud realizing I'd lost five arrows after I'd wasted some earlier taking out the aggressive wildlife that called this dark hellhole their home.

Thankfully my torch was still burning until I noticed something strange...

*Is that a light around the tunnel? There's no way the sun is shining this far deep.*

I gulped as I realized the rumors were true...the brutes had begun operating down here. Which meant I wasn't alone. I checked my short sword and dagger to make sure they were still in their scabbards just in case I had to use them. Although getting into a fight down here, alone, and in an unknown area was a recipe for disaster. I went on ahead and placed an arrow on my bow and nocked it into place. The familiar click of the nock into the bowstring brought me comfort and made me think of my time training to become a scout.

I started to realize that this rock tunnel wasn't nearly as corroded as the passages above. I was able to find some pieces of moldy bread and fresh bones on the ground, and even a pickax

that wasn't rusted. Very crudely smithed, but not rusted yet. All signs that this mine was in full operation.

CLANG! I froze as I heard something metallic strike the rock behind me. A woman's scream pierced my ears as she begged her attacker for mercy.

As I turned around, I felt my heart rate increase and my adrenaline rush into my veins as I went to go help this woman.

*This is stupid. What are you going to do when you run into a group of ten brutes, all alone, with no hope of someone finding you. What are you gonna do, leave her behind?*

I sighed as I realized I couldn't live with myself if I let this woman die down here...plus she may be the lead I've been searching for in the search for my mother...

I traced my steps back to where I fell through the ceiling.

*How did they not hear this? Well to be fair they aren't the brightest...they probably just assumed the cave collapsed due to the lack of support beams in the tunnels the brutes had dug.*

There was a group of workers crying at the feet of two brutes. One wore the red insignia that marked him as their equivalent of one of our Army's sergeants. I pulled the string back on my bow, felt the tip of my middle finger in the corner of my mouth as I found my anchor point just like the thousands of times during my training. I breathed out, releasing my arrow at the end of my breath. I had another arrow nocked on the string before the second brute had time to react. He thumped to the ground and landed on one of the women. They gasped and I quickly ran over and told them to be quiet.

“Thank you, thank you, they’ve been working us for weeks...barely feeding us,” the woman sobbed between words.

“It’s alright now. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

I realized these women were barely older than me, their faces covered in cuts, hair matted from the dust, and cheeks sunken in.

“We were taken after our village was attacked. We live a couple o’ days journey north of the castle...” the other woman said.

“How many Brutes are down here?” I implored.

*Please don’t be more than a squad.*

“I’m not sure...maybe a dozen? They don’t have much more than that, they killed all the men and barely feed us...we think it’s so that we won’t rebel,”

“Hold on, I think I have something y’all will need,” I said as I pulled some field rations out of my pocket. “My horse has more in his saddlebag, I’m going to find us a way out of here. Have you happened to have met a woman named Ariya? She’s my mother. She’s been missing since the first day of the war,”

“I’m sorry, I don’t think so. The Brutes killed anyone that they deemed unworkable, but I don’t think anyone with that name was at the prison camp we taken to before we were brought to the mines. Some prisoners are forced to cook, like the older women, and the others are forced to go into the mines, or” she started sobbing, “Or be used as moving target practice for their archers,”

I felt my heart pound in my chest, a desire for vengeance filling my mind.

*No, it's ok to feel this way, but you can't let it control you. That will only get you and these women killed. You must focus on what you care about to win this fight...Not what you hate.*

“Where is the way out?”

“Follow the torches on the left side of the wall. That's how the Brutes keep from getting lost down here,”

*Huh, that's the first smart thing I have ever heard of a Brute doing.*

“Alright. How many more workers are down here?”

“At least two dozen other women,”

“Go gather them, tell them to wait about an hour and then slowly make their way to the entrance. I'll take care of the Brutes,”

“But there's at least a dozen more, you'll only get yourself killed,” the quiet one protested.

“Don't worry, I'm a Scout,” I said with a smile.

*I'll make quick work of these cowards.*

“And make sure to stay quiet. If they hear you all they will come to investigate. I want to make sure and surprise them,”

I turned around and followed the torches on my left. After a few hundred paces I noticed a slight uphill trend in the tunnel.

*That's clever, the Brutes reversed the old miners' tricks. In the mapped sections of the mine the torches on the right marked the way back.*

I heard shatter and froze. Mid-step, I stayed frozen. Listening.

*I must be close to some of the Brutes.*

I heard a grunt and what sounded like meat hitting someone. More grunts followed.

*Must be arguing.*

The shadows of two brutes danced on the walls of the tunnel, I saw four figures all huddled around a fire. Their weapons laid against the wall and hands as close as they could be to the fire without being burned.

*These Brutes get cold easily for living up in the mountains.*

I aimed for the one closest to me, deciding that I would shoot two Brutes, throw my dagger at the third and then close the distance and dispatch the last Brute with my sword.

I heard a squish noise as my first arrow pierced the neck of one Brute, a screech came from the one next to him. He fell forward into the fire with a blood-curdling scream. My second arrow went high, but this Brute wasn't wearing his helmet.

*Should've been wearing your helmet, bud.*

The arrow pierced his skull and stuck into the wooden support beam above the firepit. My dagger sunk hilt deep into the hairy back of the third Brute. I drew my sword, the only thing going through my mind was the image of my father's final stand...

*Time to die, pig.*

The rage filled me, my vision constricting to where the only thing in this world was the Brute and my sword. He picked up a mace, a weapon that was deadly to most, but heavy and

slow. A weapon like this won't work on an agile opponent. The Brute had fear in his eyes as he approached me, he swung the mace over his head twice, a futile attempt to gain some momentum to break my guard. I sidestepped the Brute easily slashing low at his left calf, severing the muscles as my blade cut through him like butter.

This one didn't screech like the others. This one yelled a true battle cry.

*Think you're a warrior, do you?*

He pivoted around, resting his knee on the ground, drawing a dagger in his offhand. The Brute attempted to swing again but I cut too quickly for him. He dropped his weapons and bowed his head in defeat. I could feel the temperature rising inside of me, the only thing to me was to ensure this Brute was dead. He began to raise his hands in surrender, and looked up at me. The rage in my veins pumped even stronger, as I lost control of my actions. I swung my sword down, the Brutes eyes widening in shock.

As the Brute slumped to the ground my heartbeat began to slow, my vision expanded and I realized the horror of what I just did...I murdered this Brute after he attempted to surrender. I dropped my sword, and my hands began to shake uncontrollably as I realized what I had just done. In the past I had only killed in battle, to protect others and myself. But this...this was murder.

Seconds, minutes, hours may have passed. It didn't matter to me. All I could think of was what I had just done. I lost the battle inside, the battle for control over my emotions.

"You will never reach your true potential until you learn how to control your emotions. If you let them control you, your bloodlust for revenge will only get you killed in the end.

Everyone has this darkness inside of them. The difference between good and evil is the choice to



starve this inner darkness, to deny it and choose to walk in the light,” the words of my master echoed in my mind.

*What have I done. This is not how my father would want me to avenge his death.*

A group of women screaming for help brought me back to reality. I grabbed my dagger from the back of one Brute, and picked up my sword.

I ran as fast as I could towards the sound of fear.

“No! Please! We didn’t kill them; a soldier is here!” one woman screamed before a Brute stabbed her.

I shot an arrow a second too late and the Brute slumped to the ground beside his victim who was still breathing.

Another arrow was in my hand, on the string, and on its way to my next target before the prisoners realized I had returned. The Last Brute raised a rusty ax in his left hand and was about to strike another prisoner.

*Almost there...*

“GAHHH!” the Brute exhaled as I slammed into his back sending us into a tumble across the dusty floor.

I landed on my back, the air was knocked out of me as the Brute produced a knife and raised it high above my throat. I wrapped my legs around his back, and trapped his lower body just like our ground fighting instructor taught me. I raised my hands and grabbed his wrists.

*Come on, come on. You can hold him back.*

The blade slowly lowered towards my throat, close enough to where I could see the crude edge, covered in smeared blood.

*What do I do? I cannot overpower him alo---*

Blood sprayed on my face as one of the prisoners struck him in the back of the head with an old pickaxe. His body slumped and the seven remaining prisoners began to kick and punch his body.

The women all screamed their rage that had been bottled up for a long time. Minutes passed and one by one, they slowly began to come out of their rage, be it from fatigue or coming out of shock from the horrors they had been enduring as prisoners of war.

The women collapsed, laying on the floor and held each other while they cried. I stood up and began my search for more prisoners and more enemies.

*Maybe mother is trapped somewhere within a brute fortress. She was always skilled at sewing, perhaps that is what she has been forced to do. I know she is still alive. She has to be alive.*

## Chapter 10

As I limped through the dark tunnels, I could not get one thought out of my head: I have become a monster. After I murdered the Brute who attempted to surrender, I could not get his face out of my mind. His sly grin, that quickly turned to fear when he realized that I would not be taking him prisoner. The realization that he would die in these old mines, alone and afraid.

*I can't ever do that again. I know that a part of me is evil, but I have to fight it. I have to lock it away deep, never to see the light of day. If I keep it there long enough and starve it, it will lose power. I have to learn to let go of this desire for revenge. Father didn't sacrifice himself just for you to let this evil conquer you from the inside out.*

Something that felt like a bee sting shot into my neck. I reached up to swat away the bug and wondered how it got down here. My vision began to swirl, my eyelids growing heavy as I lost control of my legs until...

---

Suddenly I flashed back to my old house. I was at the table with my parents, but they weren't talking. I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I tried to stand, but my legs felt like they were nailed to the floor. My hands were stuck to the table.

*What is going on, why can't I move? I know this place, but it doesn't feel right.*

The world went black, I felt as if I were falling into the depths of the Old Mine again, but this time it was colder. So much colder.

The sounds of battle surrounded me, I watched again as my father sacrificed himself to buy us time to retreat back to the castle gates. This time I looked around for my mother, now that I knew she didn't make it to the gate. A black fog surrounded me, and I fell into the darkness once more.

Now I was alone again, I wandered the depths of the Old Mine but the torches were slowly dying as the darkness consumed the area around me.

Through the fog I saw a fireplace and began to walk towards it. My feet felt like logs, my mind pounded against the inside of my skull, begging for some relief.

As I grew closer to the glow of the fire it suddenly vanished.

I heard a sword clang on the ground, and realized it was mine. I stood once again over the body of the Brute that tried to surrender. But this time his body didn't fall over. This time the Brute stabbed me through the chest, a deep, evil, animalistic laugh that shook my bones. Suddenly the beast that killed my father loomed over me, my father's voice told me to run, but I could not.

The beast laughed in my face, and then kicked me towards the fire. It raised its club, just as it did in my father's last moments and soared in a downward motion towards me.

---

Slowly I woke back up, metal clamped tight around my arms.

*Where am I? What happened.*

I was still in the mine, but now I was trapped inside of a cell.

"Hey you, you're finally awake," a voice thundered, my head began to pound once more, as I shut my eyes.

"I guess the poison hasn't worn off yet. Too bad for you. Anyways, as you may now know, you've been captured. The letter we sent out was a fake. Your fellow Scout was killed by us. The fool fell for the same trap you did. Only he broke his leg, whereas you merely bruised. In fact, you can see him right now," the man grabbed my chin and pushed my chin to my right, and pointed my eyes right at the man that we thought sent a letter to us.

Seeing this man's death brought back the rage.

*No, you must control it.*

“You will pay for this,”

“How, what do you think you can do about it?”

“How about you take these chains off of me and I will show you, coward,”

“ME, the coward? I’m not the one that trapes through the shadows, striking out and killing without giving my enemy a chance. Isn’t that what you *scouts* are trained to do?”

End of Part I

## Part Two: Captivity

### Chapter 1

The darkness surrounded me. It’s all I know now. It had only been two days here, and my stomach felt as if it had begun to eat me from the inside out. The thirst was even worse. My mouth had dried long ago, and it felt as if I were shriveling up. My wrists swelled up against the chains that bound me, causing even more discomfort.

---

I had to shut my eyes as a silhouette walked towards me with a bowl of soup. They tossed it onto the table, causing it to spill.

“Got a spoon for me?” at least I attempted to say that, but my throat scratched in protest.

An animalistic feeling rushed over me and I devoured the bowl in seconds, I licked every last drop off of the bowl and that had spilled onto the dusty table that became the only thing I could feel.

*When you're hungry enough even this garbage starts to taste heavenly.*

This cycle continued for what felt like the passing of many moons. I tried to keep track of time by my hunger, but when you know you're being starved that stopped working very fast.

---

By now the dreams began to move into reality, my father's death played over and over, the image of my mother as she ran out the door, but the brute I murdered in the mine mocked me. He just stared, his lifeless eyes bore into my soul, asked the question, "Why?" I was a Scout, I was supposed to have honor, a code, that was our moral justification for why we were considered the heroes in this war. But now I had crossed that line, and I relive it constantly.

In my nightmares I strike him down, but instead of falling he just laughs. He stood up and beckoned to the darkness, where everyone I cared about was lined up in front of me. They would be struck down, my body felt as if it were filled with lead and all I could do is watch.

I would wake up and scream, as sweat poured down my face, the only reason I could tell I had awoken was the agony I felt across my body.

---

Despair washed over me as I realized it had been days, maybe even weeks since I had been captured. I didn't even know where I was, how could any of the other Scouts?

*Your mission isn't over yet. You found out some good information. The rumors are true, the Brutes are using the Old Mines, but not how we originally thought they were. If I can escape,*

*find out where I am, then maybe we can shut down their mines and they won't be able to produce any more weapons and armor...this could turn the tide in the war.*

The light blinded me as my captor pulled the hood off of my head, which exposed me to the burning torchlight that nearly singed my hair. The chains pulled my arms down, simple movements became nearly impossible.

“By now you must have realized that escape is impossible. The Brutes recruited me to build this prison,”

“Who are you, you've been torturing me for weeks and haven't asked me a single question,”

*If only he would get a little closer, I could get just one hit in...*

“I have many names. These Brutes call me the shadow master, but you may know me as *Benedict*,” the emphasis on his name.

*Where have I heard that...no it can't be.*

“Traitor!” I screamed as my throat burned.

*So this is how the Brutes have always been one step ahead the entirety of the war...they've had a double-agent this whole time.*

Benedict chuckled, “Yes, you played right into my trap. Although it wasn't meant for you but your master. He truly is one of the strongest Scouts. But I never expected him to send you *alone* for this mission. I guess he didn't care for you as much as you thought, hmm?”

“Why? You were one of the most respected Scouts, even on the King's Advisory Council,”

“Oh posh, like any of that truly matters. During the last war we advised the King...he never listened. He didn't care about what our spies brought back. He didn't care about us, he only cared about ensuring his own power. Building his wealth higher and higher at the cost of lives. We were just numbers to him, that's all we've ever been. I had a chance to make a difference...to avenge the fallen...to KILL THE MAN THAT COST ME MY FAMILY!”

His fist slammed onto the table in between us, spilling his ink and feather on the ground, but a small pin rolled towards me.

“The *King* who put on a façade of care. He tricked all of us...” A look of betrayal as a tear slid down his face, “And he tricked you and all the others who *served* the *kingdom*. All you've served is a monster. I realized he is no different than the Brutes. The Brutes have always been pushed aside, crushed by the *King* who used them to make us think that he cared for us. We were all pawns, all of us. All the battles we fought, the number of those we killed in battle rose quicker than we could keep track...But the *King* didn't care. He was born into royalty; he never endured the hardships of war. Only the benefits. His vault filled with gold and silver while his men poured out their blood,”

He picked up his ink, feather, and some paper from the ground. I slipped the pin underneath my foot before he could notice.

“But alas, no time for politics today. Today we will see whether you live or die. If the Brutes decide they have no use for you, we will just send you to the arena. Trust me, you don't want to go there, it's—brutal to say the least,” with a smirk he pulled out a loaf of bread and tossed it in front of me.

“Here, it's been a few days since you've ate,”



“You think my loyalty can be bought buy a piece of bread?”

“No. But you are of no use to me dead. And if you get sent to the arena you will want your strength. Personally, the Brutes all think you are only a coward. But I know of your abilities and will bet on you. Even if I can’t turn you to assist me, I can at least sponsor you to be my champion in the next arena tournament. I figure you can take out most of the other fighters and earn me a fair amount of gold before someone gets lucky...or decides to cheat the game and kill you.

“You’re starting to sound like the *King* you hated so much,”

“Yes. Yes, I am. Because of what he took from me, I will now take from others. Someday you’ll realize all that hero nonsense is just a way for men like the *King* to control people like us...You’ll want to eat that before the rats smell it by the way. Your new cell attracts those critters much quicker than the dungeon that was built into the mines,”

The bread was hard as a rock, merely leftovers of what the Brutes didn’t want to eat already.

*Still better than nothing.*

I had to break a chunk off and let it soak in my mouth before the stale bread was chewable. I was able to finish the loaf and somehow didn’t crack a tooth.

*The pin!*

I lifted my leg and looked at the pin. A new spark of hope ignited in my heart. Who knew such a simple mistake by my captor could possibly lead to my escape. I picked the pin up with my toes and brought it up to my hands.

*This lock is rustier than I thought. This is going to take some time. I guess I have plenty of that at the moment.*

A door slowly creaked open and I quickly slid the small pin into my pocket. A Brute entered the room and looked around. He grunted as he looked at me. I could feel the hate in his eyes as he walked towards me.

“Ah!” slipped out as the Brute punched me in the nose.

I laughed at him, “Is that all you’ve got?”

He roared in anger and hit me again, this time in the temple, stars spun into my vision as I hit the floor.

I lashed out with both feet, hit him in the left knee and he collapsed to the ground.

*Not so tough now, huh?*

I could see that I broke his knee, with his leg bending the wrong way.

*Maybe I haven’t been down here as long as I thought if I still have enough strength for that.*

The Brute cried out in pain, held his knee on the ground in front of me. I realized that if I could just slip the chain around his neck...

BAM! Benedict kicked the door open and saw me as I pulled the rusty chain against the writhing Brutes neck, who clawed against the old steel in vain.

“Go ahead. Kill him. I don’t care. I killed many like him in the last war, and even during this war,”

“Now that you say it, I don’t think I will.”

I released the thriving Brute, and he sat up. He looked at his leg in fear.

Benedict approached him and as I thought he was going to help the Brute, bent down and snapped his neck from behind.

“I never liked this one anyways. Now I can replace him with a stronger pawn, and they’ll believe you’re the one who killed the fool who snuck in to get a blow into one of the *legendary* Scouts. Have fun with your punishment for this idiot’s death.” He chuckled as he walked away and called for the guards in the tongue of the Brutes.

Blood poured from my nose, and my whole body began to ache as I imagined what this beating would feel like. The Brutes may not be very intelligent, but they are loyal to one another. And now they are going to think that I killed this one. I sighed as I watched three Brutes charge into the room, raising their clubs as they approached me.

*This is going to hurt.*

Chapter 2

“Raven,” a familiar voice whispered in the darkness.

*No, it can't be. How could she be here. They wouldn't send my mother here; she could barely swing a pickax.*

“Raven, come back,” this time Satine whispered to me.

Slowly I stood up, my body aching, my mind going back to the beating that I had endured.

“Raven, help us,” the voices whispered this time in unison.

*How could Satine be here. She's supposed to be studying on the coast...away from the war...safe.*

I opened my mouth to reply but no words came out.

Slowly I could see her, her hair blowing in the wind.

“Satine,”

She quickly turned to face me.

“Raven, where are you?”

My feet felt as if they had been anchored into the ground a thousand years ago.

Eventually I could move my feet and tried to step towards her, every fiber in my body burned in protest.

Satine disappeared, being replaced by my mother. She held two needles with a quilt in her lap.

“Come back,” I croaked out, my heart filled with despair. All I wanted was to feel her embrace once more. Just one more time.

I heard the sounds of battle behind me and turned to face it. There my father was, fighting in battle once again against that monster. The monster’s head turned 180 degrees around and looked at me. It laughed as its head rotated back towards my father.

*What is this nightmare?*

The roar shook my bones once more as the beast raised its arm.

My bow appeared in my hands with an arrow already on the string. I centered my aim to where the arrow would pierce the beast’s skull.

I released the string, and the arrow flew perfectly towards the monster but bounced off.

The beast merely laughed as it looked over at me before it swung its arm towards my father who had his shield raised—in vain.

“No!” I cried out once more and fell to my knees.

I was unable to see, but the world spun around me.

*What is this awful place?*

The light surrounded me, as I was taken back to the clearing in the forest where I had my last moment with Satine.

“When will I see you again?” she asked, sadness in her voice.

“I don’t know,” I stared off, unable to meet her gaze, “I guess when I am back on leave and you come back from studying.”

“But--but that could be a year from now,”

“I know,”

“You don’t have to fight; we could run off. We could take Buck and then board a ship headed for Florician Isles,”

“I can’t, I’m sorry, I can’t,”

“Why not?” she begged.

“I have to fight. I have to fight for what’s right. If I don’t then who will? If we lose to the Brutes, then everything we know and love will be destroyed. And I have to find her.”

She grabbed my hands while tears streamed down her eyes, “What about us? Maybe we could convince the Floricians to aid Taris in the war,”

“I’m not a diplomat, I’m a warrior,”

*I wish she understood how much this hurts me to leave her.*

“What if I were selected to support the Scouts in a mobile treatment unit?”

“No, I’ve lost too much from this war already. I cannot lose you too Satine,”

“But we could see each—”

“And you could die. Do you know how many of those tents have been burned down with the nurses still inside? I can’t go on missions if I am worried about what may happen to you while I am gone.”

*What if I ran? No. Mother could still be out there, I know she is. But what about your future with Satine? If you leave her long enough, she may end up with someone else.*

“I’m sorry, Satine. I have to go, I can’t sit by while others die. This war has to end. No, we have to win. If we lose the war...I can’t bear to imagine that. So much has been destroyed already, we would lose everything. We would be enslaved and might never see each other again. And that’s if they didn’t just execute me. I’m not just fighting for others or to find my mother. I’m fighting to ensure that you don’t have to live through that Satine. I hope someday you’ll understand that I have to go.”

I embraced her as tears fell down both our eyes. The stars shone above us, but I felt the darkness that I would soon be walking into.

---

Cold water stung my face as I was ripped out of the dream realm.

“Have a nice nap?” Benedict mocked.

He paced around the table in front of me.

The water forced me to shiver uncontrollably. I tried to fight it, but I didn’t have the strength to do so.

“Chilly hm?” he grabbed a bowl and uncovered it.

The aroma of beef and carrot stew filled everything in me and I began to crave it. An animalistic feeling inside of me awakened as I breathed in the smell once more.

*I can’t remember the last time I had something half-decent to eat.*

“Want some?”

“Not if your mother cooked it, hungry as I am I wouldn’t even touch that—”

He tossed the hot stew onto my face. But I was able to catch a chunk of beef before it fell to the ground. I savored every last bit of juice before I swallowed the meat.

*Might need to try that again, I guess he’s a bit of a hothead.*

“You think you’re funny?” Benedict screamed. He turned around, took a deep breath, and faced me once more.

“The Brutes are becoming...impatient. If we couldn’t call them that before. They instructed me that if I am unable to extract any information from you soon, they will kill you. I forgot they think you killed their friend earlier. Whoops.” He stated without remorse.

“You aren’t going to get anything out of me,”

*I guess I should hurry up and escape before they kill me in this chair. It’d be a shame to go out like this.*

“Really? You know I could care less. You really don’t know much more than I would. I’m more just using you to get some...experience before I interrogate your master. The Scouts held me back. They held a leash on me like a dog. But now, now I don’t have that leash. Now I can do whatever I want to learn information from someone. And you’re going to help me do that. Until the Brutes decide to kill you. One tried to sneak in after you were knocked out from that beating,”

“You really are a freak. You know most of the Scouts didn’t like you. They say you went crazy during the last war, the King only kept you on his council because of your father’s relationship with him.”



“Do you *really* think I don’t know that? Once I decided to defect, it was merely a game to see how long I could go before they kicked me from the council. Pretty far, it turns out. Eventually I got tired of the theatricals and salutes for someone who was born into leadership and didn’t have to do a single thing to get there.”

“Blah, blah you hate the king. I get it. When are you going to start the torture, then? I’m getting bored.”

“Oh, you’ll lose your sarcasm soon. Don’t you worry *boy*, I have merely been warming up.”

He stood, eyed me with disdain and turned to walk out the door.

“Good luck tonight, I hear the Brutes have some new soldiers they were going to teach how to punch. Good thing we have you to help them learn.” He said with a sly grin.

I couldn’t help but smile when I realized the small pin was still within reach of my legs. I picked it up and began to work on picking the rusty lock that held my hands together.

*I’ll show them how to fight...Don’t you worry. First, I’ll have to scrape some of this rust away...even if I had a key I don’t know if I could get these chains unlocked.*

My joints cried in protest at the awkward angle that on a normal day, still would have caused me some pain...but after that beating.

*Just a little bit more to scrape off and then I can work on actually picking these pieces of junk.*

## Chapter 3

*Click!* The sound of freedom filled my ears. The chains fell to the floor, a little louder than I had anticipated.

*I hope no one heard that.*

I rose from that old wooden chair that had been my home for...I don't even know how long at this point.

*Time passes strangely when you're captured.*

I kicked the chair, snapping one of its legs into a makeshift weapon.

*Should be good 'nough till I can get something else from a Brute. Good thing they taught me how to use improvised and enemy weapons during training.*

I swung the makeshift club a couple of times to get used to the weight.

*Wait a minute. I've got an idea.*

The chain that lay on the floor was fashioned into multiple segments about a foot long held together by straps of leather. I undid a section and wrapped the foot of chain around my new club.

*This'll teach them to hit me while I'm down.*

I slowly opened the door to find my freedom. And maybe a few Brutes to take out as well.

The door creaked open and caused me to cringe.

I slowly stepped out and took a deep breath.

As I made my way through the musty tunnels I felt a breeze.

*Follow that and you'll find your way to the surface.*

Slowly I made my way, zigzagging in the dark until I could hear something...

I could hear the clash of swords and men yelling various commands...

*The Knight's Legion!*

I was hit with a renewed energy as hope filled my veins once more and I hobbled along towards the sound of battle.

My hands began to flex and grip my makeshift weapon tighter as I mentally prepared myself for what was to come. I had never fought malnourished and wounded before, and this would be a new type of test.

I saw a door, closed shut, and pushed on it. The door slightly opened revealing a ray of sunshine that blinded my eyes, yet brought me happiness. That stopped as soon as I realized that the door had been chained shut...from the outside.

*Benedict. That traitor left me here to die.*

I slammed my weapon against the door, in vain, and tried to force the door open to no avail.

"Heeeelp!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, the hope seeping from my body.

"Fall back and regroup!" I heard someone yell to the men fighting outside.

"NO! We cannot stop now. We have almost pushed them to their breaking point!" this voice I recognized. This voice that had taught me, yelled at me, and trained me for months.

*He found me.*

I looked around for another way out.

*The door may be chained from the outside, but the hinges the door hangs on are inside the tunnel.*

I reared back with all of my might and swung the chain wrapped stick at the hinge. I hit the hinge over and over until my hands were raw and my muscles on fire. Sweat dripped from my face after about five minutes of this. Eventually, the hinge broke, and the door slumped in the middle, still supported by the bottom hinge of the wall.

I wiped the sweat off of my face, motivated by the sounds of men fighting outside.

*Not just men, my brothers.*

Finally, the bottom hinge snapped off and I shoved the door forward. The weight of the wood tore the other side off of its hinges and landed on a brute archer on the other side. I stepped out into the sunlight and breathed in the fresh air that brought life to my burning muscles.

A warmth rushed throughout my body as I realized that I would be saved. The Knights would win this battle and free me.

I picked up the fallen archer's bow and some arrows. He squealed under the weight of the door that slowly crushed him. He looked up at me for mercy, but none was found there.

I closed my eyes and rolled my shoulders forward as I prepared to join the battle.

## Chapter 4

I struggled to pull the string back, which brought pain through every fiber of my muscles. I turned quickly towards another archer posted up on a tower and released the arrow to quickly. I missed, striking the wooden support beam above his head. The brute looked back confused and spotted me. He then centered his aim right on me.

I fumbled another arrow onto the string, as I watched what could have been a smile begin to form as he got ready to kill me...

Suddenly an arrow flew to the brute's head, pinning his skull to the tower. He dropped his bow but not before he let go of the arrow that began to fly towards me.

I closed my eyes and braced, not ready for death. The arrow whizzed by me hair, and I felt the wind from it as it barely missed me.

I didn't realize I had dropped the bow and went to pick it up, my almost death motivated me to have the strength to pull this string back now.

I realized now that the Knights were attempting to break down the gates of the compound we were in. I heard shouts and a ram as it pounded against the heavily reinforced gates.

Eventually, the Knights broke through, and I saw my best friend at the front of the formation. He looked at me with shock and then ran towards me. We embraced and he picked me up off of the ground and squeezed the breath from my lungs.

"We thought they had killed you," he whispered.

"Well, you might finish the job if you don't let me go," I managed to squeak as he let me go.

I couldn't put into words the relief I felt when I realized that I wouldn't be tortured anymore.

"What did they do to you?" he asked me.

"A lot," was all I could get out as I stared off for a minute, reliving the darkness for a second.

A familiar figure pushed some soldiers aside and embraced me, "I'm sorry Raven. I shouldn't have sent you to the mines alone. I thought you were ready,"

"Master, it wasn't your fault. It-it was a trap. One anyone would've fallen for. Benedict was behind it. He turned on the kingdom. He turned on the Scouts."

He shook his head slowly as he pieced together what had happened.

"Why did he torture you? You wouldn't have known anything he hadn't."

"He said to practice. The trap was meant for you, but when I was the one captured, he decided to do some things that he couldn't as a Scout. He wanted to see what he could do without 'the leash' the Scouts had on him,"

Kaleb tightened the grip on his sword, and I could see his jaw clench with anger. "If I get my hands on—"

"No, don't even think about that. Benedict has been a Scout much longer than you have been alive. You are a skilled warrior, but he is...not as honorable as you are," my master told him.

Kaleb shut his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath through his nostrils. He then let go of his sword.

“Has anyone found my mother yet?”

“No, I’m sorry Raven. We haven’t found her,” My master replied.