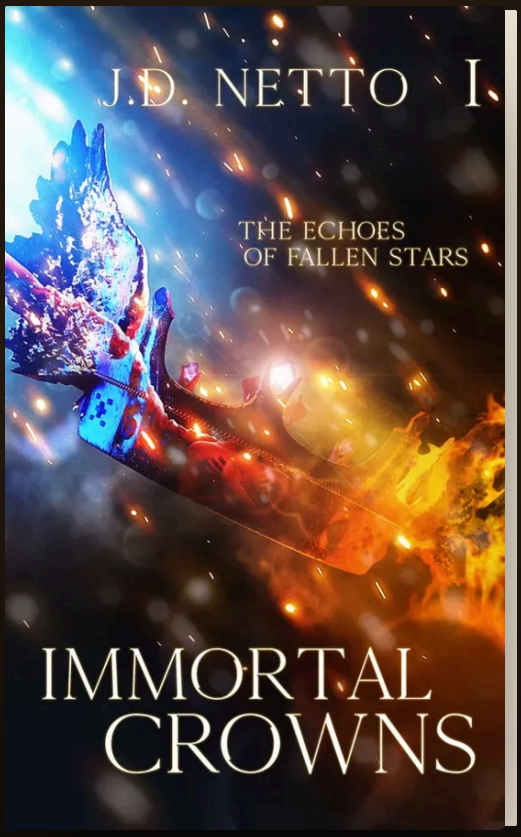
THE NETTOVERSE · J.D. NETTO



IMMORTAL CROWNS

The Echoes of Fallen Stars · Book One

THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS

CHAPTER ONE

ONE

The sun hadn't peaked in the sky when Da knocked on my bedroom door. Three knocks. No words. Little did he know I had been awake for a while already, tossing around my bed. Not that I wanted to go back to sleep. No. My mind wandered in stories of the past.

What are stories if not breath in our lungs? The tales passed down to us shape our future. The ones hidden from us become secrets meant to keep us from harm. Stories and secrets give us purpose, courage, life. Inhaling history, exhaling direction.

Today, the fiftieth day of autumn, was my eighteenth birthday—or as history called it, my Blood-date. A story was the reason I had to get up before the crack of dawn to celebrate my birth. Here I was, keeping a tradition written by those I had never met.

A fire still burned in the fireplace. The shy flame was still strong enough to cast a dancing shadow on the hearth, but it was bound to go out soon and leave behind ash and dust. I had always wondered about the stories that had once burned in the hearts of many but were now forgotten or erased by those who opposed them. How many of those were out there? Maybe one of those would've gotten me out of waking up so early.

I got up and picked a black linen shirt and pants from a pile of clothes on the floor. I grabbed a bear-pelt shoulder cape from my wardrobe and

met Da downstairs. He waited by the door, next to my muddy boots. Ma would've chopped my head off if I had walked in the house with them yesterday.

Da wore black from head to toe; hair braided down his back—a pattern I knew but had never seen him wear. His hair was woven like the roots of the bitterlie tree, random thin braids on the top of his head that merged into a thick braid that fell down his back. This braid was claimed to be sacred, worn by brave soldiers from Metra during King Wern's rebellion in 1148. The lit fireplace reflected on his hazel eyes and nose ring. He was quiet when we walked out the door.

I followed Da to a lake by the edge of the forest; Lake Vur. He had a satchel over his shoulder, whatever trinkets were inside clattered to his every step. There was no long sentimental conversation between us, just our footsteps trudging through the muddy ground.

The moon was on display over the waters of the wide lake. When I was younger, I'd sit on this shore, thinking about swimming across one day. But the lake was so wide, the line of pine trees on the other side looked like needles.

Da stepped into the water, stopping once his feet were submerged. He reached into the satchel and removed a flask with a pointy beak. He poured a white liquid on the palm of his hands: bitterlie milk. Its source was a wildflower only found in the southwest corners of Thestlen, in the woods near our village of Heedeon. Often, it felt as if we lived isolated from the rest of the world, though Metranian laws ruled our village. But even if small, Heedeon held gems like bitterlie milk and a massive population of horned rabbits that sometimes drew hunters from the far corners of the east.

"Goodbye to the boy you once were." He waved me closer. I obliged, shuddering at the cold waters. "Greetings to the man you now become. With the eternal and the mortal, you are now one."

"And I now receive," I said, hoping to remember the poem. "The blessings of old and the curse from the deep. So, I may ride forth one day, and bring glory to my name." I let out a sigh of relief once I finished.

I bent down. He smeared the cold liquid on the sides of my head and then revealed a knife from the satchel.

"Your soul no longer belongs to a boy," he continued. The feeling of the cold blade against my scalp was bittersweet. Shaving the sides of my head symbolized the parts of the old me that had to be left behind. "Your breath now belongs to a man. May Hanell's holy feathers cover you. May his hands guide you." Da released a shuddering breath, as if scared of his next words. "And may his justice measure you."

Dawn crawled across the sky as my hair fell to my feet. He tapped me on the shoulder when he was done.

"Happy Blood-date, Bellwound," he said with a proud smile.

"No cuts," I said.

"By the feather. Even I am proud of myself for that."

Though I had to keep with Metranian tradition, Da never had his Blood-date celebrated. He and Ma had moved here when they found out about me. He read all the stories, decided to follow their rules, but he never spoke of his past.

He led me back to the house where Ma waited by the entrance, wearing a long-sleeve dress tied at the waist by a leather belt. Her hair was the same color as mine, brown like an acorn. She was to braid whatever was left of my hair to mimic the same braid Da had. All Heedeonian women had to learn the pattern once they bore a boy.

She wanted to smile when she saw me. I knew she did. But her lips remained still, her golden eyes empty. She seemed to be fighting inside. I couldn't tell what occupied her mind. My parents had always been private about their feelings. They'd ask me about mine, but I had never once heard them share theirs with each other—or with me.

"Alright, Seaahra, he's all yours now." Da left me by the door. "I'm going to saddle the horses. I hope our trap caught food for tonight."

"Take your time, Stenan." She placed a hand on my back. "And shoes by the door, please, Bellwound. Can't have you smearing mud on the floor since we have guests coming tonight."

"Arnon, Uncle Pyeus, and Aunt Helga are hardly guests, Ma."

"All the more reason to keep the house clean."

I did as she asked. She had me bring a chair from the kitchen to be placed in front of the large mirror by my fireplace. She was quiet as we walked through the house, up the stairs, and into my room.

"So, no big speech on how your little boy is all grown up?" I asked, setting the chair in front of the mirror. Having the sides of my head shaved was going to take some getting used to. "No big teary moment?"

"Trust me," she said, the rays of the morning sun flowing through the window. "That speech is whirling in my head right now. I just don't have the strength to utter it aloud."

"Age is just a number, Ma," I said. "You taught me that."

"Mortals count years, Bellwound. Immortals count ages. Numbers aside, this is a new age for you. Time in your life is now split and marked by this date. Now sit down. Thank the Pale Lion that your father managed to shave the sides of your head without cutting you open. That man can be so clumsy."

"I was relieved," I answered with a smirk.

She carefully ran her hands through my hair, glancing at my face in the mirror. I looked more like her with my head shaved. Maybe because she always had her hair tied back. We had the same golden eyes.

"You ever wonder why it's 'Thank the Pale Lion?'" I asked. "I get that Hanell the Creator is pictured as a strong lion, but what if Lucifer was in his right? Would it not be 'Thank the Dove' then?"

She gently slapped my shoulder. "Watch your mouth, boy."

"Just thinking out loud, Ma. Stories change as they're passed down. It's very convenient to believe that there is an opposition and an ultimate blameless creator. Think with me. Shadow only exists because an object blocks the light. It seems like the faith of Thestlen was written so we wouldn't think much."

"Hold still." She held my head.

"It was just a thought," I said, noticing she didn't care for the subject.

"Excited for tonight?" She separated my hair into three.

"I am," I replied. "Fingers crossed there's a horned rabbit or a winged fawn in the trap. Otherwise, we'll just have, what, potatoes and ale? By the dragon, Arnon wouldn't leave me alone for a year if that happened. He did trap a boar on his Blood-date…"

"You and your 'by the dragon,'" she said. "'By the feather' sounds better."

"It may sound better, but dragons are more frightening than birds. And the stories of the dragon riders from Dragonfang are more interesting to me…"

My words faded as her chin quivered. Her eyes brimmed. She shook her head quickly, trying to hide her sadness. She failed miserably. She sucked in a breath through her teeth, lacing the back part of my hair.

"Something wrong, Ma?"

"Just thinking about life and its ages."

"You're still on that?"

"No parent is ready to see their child grow up. When they do, they finally belong to the world, and we can no longer protect them. All we can do is hope that our rights and wrongs have made them strong and ready."

"You taught me well," I said, her hands tugging at my hair.

"Trust me, Son, our teachings will soon turn to living stories in your head. And they all have twists of their own. You get to interpret them moving forward."

She spoke as if she was about to become like the fire in my fireplace; strong at first, then weak and bound to leave a pile of ash behind.

Her hands trembled as she kept on braiding. We remained quiet until she asked me to turn around so I could inspect her work in the mirror. As I did, she ran her hand over my face, touching the scar over my left eyebrow.

"I remember when you got this," she said.

"Not easy to forget." I shrugged. "I hate it though."

She frowned. "Scars remind us we got hurt trying."

"I disagree, Ma." I shrugged. "They remind us we failed and lived to tell the tale." I raised a finger in the air. "To be fair, Arnon *did* push me into the lake. Had that rock not been there and if I hadn't passed out, I would've—"

"That's what I always admired about you. Since you were a kid, you always had a knack for adventure. Always so curious. You're so like your father. You question everything. You want to know as much as you can."

"Why are you talking like we're saying goodbye?" I grabbed her hand. "I'm just turning eighteen. I'll still be around."

"Pay no mind to your mother today." She cackled. "She's just a pile of emotions."

"Bellwound!" Da bellowed downstairs. "Are you ready? Those horned rabbits will have decayed by the time you decide to come down."

"Coming, Da!" I shouted back, eyes still on Ma. "Are you sure you're alright?" I insisted.

"I will be." She smiled. "One day you'll marry a wonderful man, and by the grace of our Lion God, you two will have a child to raise. You'll then understand my heart now."

I kissed the top of her hand and rushed out the house to catch up with Da.

Our horses, Oraxes and Midnight, were outside, tied to a wooden pole near the entrance. Midnight was my mare since I was young. Her coat was dark, and her eyes were ash. Oraxes was Dad's stallion, white like the foam

at the foot of a waterfall. His mane was always braided, and his scarlet eyes grew scarier with every passing year. We rode east toward the taller trees.

"Mr. Octern shared the wildest rumor this week," Da started, riding beside me. "We were at the pub and the man warned everyone that we needed to listen to him no matter how foolish he sounded."

"He's a drunk," I said. "I wouldn't trust him. He did manage to cheat on all his four wives."

"He bothered climbing on top of one of the tables to shout his story, Bellwound. I had never seen him do such a thing."

"All the more reason to disregard it, Da."

"He said people in the northern parts of the world have seen the dead come to life," he said. "Can you believe it?"

"Those rumors are ancient," I said. "People have always claimed that they've seen the dead come to life or a diamond-eyed man or woman wander the forests at night. The tales of Nephilins and Fallen Stars and monsters."

"Every story has a hint of truth, my boy. Never disregard these tales."

"You're going to tell me you believe these rumors?" The trees rustled to the wind. "Soon, you'll be telling me you believe animals talk and mermaids swim in the far seas."

"A little faith in the Creator would do you some good," Da said.

"I don't know if it would," I said. "Not in these stories anyway. A pale lion casting out a six-winged man? The mermaids seem more believable. Maybe I'd have more faith if I could wander beyond these lands. If these stories are true, there must be evidence somewhere. Hard evidence. Something more than a book or scrolls. Something we can touch. But there aren't any here in Heedeon. Ever thought about wandering beyond the Hills of Yrthran and the River Pentan again?"

"Wanting something isn't the same as pursuing it."

"Before we left, Ma said she admired my spirit of adventure and curiosity. That I had taken after you." My words triggered a frown from him as he tightened his grasp around the reins. "When did you find peace in staying put for such a long time?"

He gave the question some thought. I thought his silence hinted that I had made him uncomfortable. A smile eventually crossed his lips. "After you were born," he replied. "Things change when you have a child. You'll know that someday."

The tall pines and the cornelias crowded with golden leaves marked the entrance to the forest. We had marked our path to the trap's location with a glistening golden string.

"By the feather," Da said proudly. There were five horned rabbits under the wooden crate. We had used wild purple carrots to catch them, each one infused with dragonbane so they could drift into a deep sleep. Scare a horned rabbit and the meat would be as hard as the bark of a cornelia tree.

"Five." Da alighted Oraxes and knelt by the crate. "Five…"

"Plenty, no?" I joined him at his side.

"Yes, plenty. Some say the number five points to the beginning of a new journey."

"Some or you?" I chuckled.

"Alright, you. Let's get these back to the house before they wake."

Da had brought a few burlap sacks on Oraxes. We tucked the horned rabbits inside, tied them shut, and tossed them on the back of our horses; three with him and two with me.

"Did you ever hunt with O'Da?" I asked once we were on our way. "When you lived on the other side of the River Penta?"

"Not much to tell there," he said. "Barely remember anything."

"Was he the one who told you that number five story?" I insisted.

"Maybe," he replied. "I don't really remember, Bellwound."

"You never do," I said.

"Some things are better left forgotten," he said with an edge.

"How come you and Ma never talk about anyone else in our family? I know nothing about my O'Mas and O'Das. Do you have siblings? Do I have __"

"We're each other's family. The ones who truly matter."

"Did something happen back then? I can handle the truth, Da."

"That's one of the most misquoted sayings out there. You don't handle the truth. You live it."

"Arnon's parents don't talk about his relatives either," I said. "Did something happen between all of you?"

"Son, this is the only truth you need." He brought Oraxes to a halt with the pull of his rein. I stopped beside him. "There's a reason for our silence. Respect it. Honor it. Innocence is more valuable than truth."

CHAPTER TWO

TWO

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I didn't insist. The wounds inside my da's heart had probably festered to the point beyond healing. Same with my ma.

Though Heedeonians weren't welcoming of new folk, they didn't turn them away. As the years passed, they became one with this village. Every custom became theirs. They learned the food, the trades, the songs, and the stories.

I hadn't known any other life. I had never even ventured west to the city of Metra. Heedeon had been built in their territory and yet I had never gone there. People here claimed rainbows covered its walls and its buildings were so high, they disappeared into the clouds.

We rode to the stable in the back of the house. Chains and knives and rope were hooked to the wall. In the far back was a carriage Da kept under a thick cloth. I had a vague memory of riding it when I was young.

Once Oraxes and Midnight were inside their stalls, Da meandered to one of the piles of hay. He knelt and reached behind the tangled mess.

"Lost something?"

"Ah." He smiled, revealing a dagger with a midnight hilt. "This is for you." He unsheathed it out its scabbard, its blade white like marble.

"For me?"

"The blade is dragonfang." He handed me the weapon. Thin etchings shaped like vines had been forged on the blade.

"Where did you get this?" My face reflected on the blade's smooth surface.

"Oree. A merchant had it brought in from Winghorn months ago. I had been saving it until now. I figured it'd be the perfect opportunity to use it. We have five horned rabbits to skin after all."

"Thank you," I said.

He grabbed some rope and walked out of the stable. I followed him to what I called the Skinner. It was nothing special; two barks placed side by side with warping branches. I tied one of the horned rabbits by the legs, so it hung facedown.

The horned rabbit's chest was still slowly rising and falling. I placed my hand behind its horns and plunged my new dagger through its skull, stabbing downward through the soft spot behind the lower jaw. I didn't want to risk missing its small heart while stabbing the chest. I cut a ring around each leg, just above the joint. I cut a line jutting from the rings to the backside of its gray coat. A few cuts in and the hide was ready to be peeled off.

Da observed me, but his mind was somewhere else. He looked at me as if this was going to be the last time we'd see each other.

I needed to ask Arnon if his parents behaved the same way on his Blood-date.

I repeated the steps four more times and washed the blade in the nearby stream before walking home. Da and I brought our game to the long wooden table in the kitchen.

"This has got to be a good sign," Ma said, her hair tied in a bun.

"Five of them a good sign?" Da asked with a frown, leaning on the edge of our dinner table.

"You and your stories, Stenan." Ma gently slapped his arm. "Bellwound, if you want to freshen up, I heated water for a bath."

"I won't say no to a bath after skinning those." I cocked my head toward the animals. "My hands smell like shi—"

"Ah, ah." Ma held up a finger. "You better not finish that sentence."

I walked up the stairs and into my room. The water inside the round copper tub steamed. I barred the door, got out of my dirty clothes, and crawled inside.

It'd take a while for the horned rabbits to be fully cooked. Arnon's family would probably show up before dinner was ready. They were always early.

I glanced outside the window, watching the last of the yellowed leaves bounce to the wind as gray clouds hid the sun.

I'd be lying if I told my parents I wasn't planning on venturing out into the world at some point in the future. But all great adventures began with small steps. If I were to have faith in anything, it would be on the courage to take a chance. That's what fascinated me in the tale of the Pale Lion and the Dove. Lucifer took a chance and discovered something new—even if wicked. He was casted out of his home for it, but he followed his heart.

Who knew how truthful these tales were? Stories did take a life of their own whenever they were passed down. To the first storyteller, something was yellow and bright; to the last listener, the very same thing was orange and dull.

Those were a few of the reasons why I couldn't believe in what these tales prophesied. Lucifer's return; Hanell the Creator and Pale Lion roaming Thestlen in the flesh, and the dead coming to life. Kingdoms had been built and destroyed because of this story. I knew that much. It had gathered followers who believed in its different versions. It killed many while providing a throne for a few.

There was something chilling about that thought—a story so powerful that led thousands to commit crimes they believed to be works of good.

I dozed off, watching the swaying branches and the colors that clung to them. It was the lingering smell of the cooking rabbits that woke me up. The leaves had fallen from the crooked branches. The water was already cold, and my fingers shriveled.

I remained unbothered for a while, thinking about the leaves that were once in view outside my window. Someone would only know about them if I shared their existence. Otherwise, they'd fade with my memories forever.

The thought of seeing Arnon brought on a hint of excitement. He had always been in my life. Though there was a time my feelings for him got out of my control, I learned to tame them so I could keep him around.

He had never shown any interest in me beyond friendship and brotherhood. Fuck, I had seen him with the prettiest of girls at the pub. But a heart has no owner. It's a beast that obeys whenever it wants and awakens whenever it likes.

Whatever I had felt for Arnon before had disappeared like the autumn leaves. I didn't know if such feelings would bloom back in the future. But for now, I was content with our friendship.

Ma had brought me these blue robes from Oree a few days ago. The laced shirt was a shade brighter than the pants. Golden patterns were sown on the shirt's hem and sleeves. The pants were meant to be tucked into my black boots—and not just any black boots. Ma insisted I wore the ones she brought home from the market last week. They were no different from the ones I already had, aside from the mud stains and the tears on their shaft.

The Helvugs arrived early as I predicted. Arnon hated it when I called them that. He claimed they weren't fancy enough to be bundled up as a single unit.

I couldn't remember a day when I didn't know them. There was a strong bond between our parents; a friendship that started years before we

were around. You knew they had shared a lot of life by the way they talked and smiled at each other.

Mr. Helvug taught the both of us how to read and how to add numbers when we were younger. Mrs. Helvug had always sown my clothes back to health when I decided to be adventurous with Arnon. They had always been a part of my life. Uncle Pyeus and Aunt Helga. Oddly, Arnon has never felt like that kind of family.

Arnon and I had countless stories to share. From stealing crops when we were six to getting lost in the woods while searching for berries, we had always shared life with each other. Though we always played with the other boys and girls, we preferred each other's company.

He knew most of my secrets, except the thoughts that involved him naked in my bed. I had been able to tame the feelings, but not the intrusive fantasies. Unprovoked, they'd barge in without warning, disrupting the innocence of my mind with their tempting invitation.

He was the first person I told about Meorn, the boy who lived a few houses down. He had been my first kiss; my first everything. And he had told me all about Suella, the butcher's daughter. She was his first.

"So, Bellwound," Arnon said as I grabbed some of the chips from the bowl Ma had put out on the table. "Who'd you pay to kill those beauties for you?"

"You're confusing me with you," I said. "Remember your Blood-date? I think you hired poor old Mr. Octern to kill that elk."

"Don't be jealous that I was able to pay him." He smirked.

The thoughts were back. How could I keep them at bay when I saw the dimples on his face and the way his gray eyes looked at me?

"You also paid him to braid your hair, you fool?" I sniggered, struggling to keep my thoughts away.

"You're jealous of my talents." He ran his hand over the black braid falling down his back.

"Don't start," Mr. Helvug said.

"I swear," Dad started. "If I have to break another fight between you __"

"You know we're always horsing around, right?" Arnon said.

"Oh, and I suppose that's the excuse you used when you broke Seaahra's vase?" Mrs. Helvug asked. "You were both horsing around?"

"Helga," Ma said. "I hated that vase anyway. It's alright."

"And to think that years ago," Mr. Helvug said snidely. "It was just the four of us..."

"Times were different then," Ma said. "Very different. It was another age."

"Never thought we'd make it this far," Da said.

"Were we that terrible when we were young that you didn't think you'd make this far?" Arnon laughed. "By the dragon..."

"You and Bellwound with 'By the dragon,'" Mom said, shaking her head.

"It sounds more menacing," Arnon said.

We all shared a laugh. There was no heavy conversation for the rest of the night. We all ate and drank and shared stories. Da sang a few songs. He and Mr. Helvug were masters at singing. They laughed when they recalled songs from their youth, but then there was one that brought on a deep silence after they finished.

A glory once foretold
Has brought on a curse of old
From the Sea of Glass to the Mountain of Bhorn
Merry were the songs before feathers turned flame
Foolish were the men who believed we had all been made the same
For crowns reminded us that blood spoke louder than blame
He wandered the halls of white
Humming songs into the night
Until with wine he was shamed
Forever casted out into flame

CHAPTER THREE

THREE

I had been standing under the doorway of their bedroom for what felt like an eternity. Whenever I was nervous, I'd sink the nail of my thumb into the pad of my fingers, perhaps to ensure that I wasn't dreaming. This was definitely no dream. The bloodstains on the floor were real. They led to the front door. Handprints, long streaks—signs of struggle and pain.

The rain struck the glass on the windows, my heart beating to the same uneven pace of the drops. My parents were nowhere to be seen. Their bed was broken. Their sheets were torn and scarlet stained.

How could I have slept through whatever happened last night? They were whisked away in the dead of night, hurt and bleeding, and I had neither heard nor seen anything.

Why were they taken? Who would want to harm them? When did they get into the house?

I had heard it said that when confronted with the unexpected, our minds try to find ways to cling to the most logical explanation. I thought about the things they said and the things they avoided saying. Maybe a distant relative wanted them gone? Maybe they had moved to Heedeon years ago because of a crime they committed? I tried to find my logical explanation to anchor me, but there was none.

A pound on the door. I stood still, hoping it had been a branch or an animal.

Another knock, louder this time. “Bellwound, you in there?” Arnon’s muffled voice boomed from the other side. “Uncle Stenan? Aunt Seaarah? Anybody?”

He stepped inside as soon as I unbolted the door, drenched. The hem of his coat and his boots were stained with mud. His braid was wet and dripping. His gray eyes filled with despair.

“Something happened. Something is wrong. Something is very wrong…” His words drifted into silence as he scanned the bloodstains on the floor. “By the dragon. What happened here?”

“I’m not sure.” He followed me into the wrecked bedroom. His face paled at the destruction.

“So, it wasn’t just my house… No, no, no—”

“What?” I asked. “Spill it, damn it.”

“A dream,” he said. “And I woke up this morning and went downstairs. Quiet. Everything was quiet. But my parents’ bedroom, the door was slightly open.” He shuddered. “I peeked inside, thinking they were asleep. Everything was destroyed. Blood everywhere. I checked the stable and the horses were gone.” Arnon paced around, gaze fixed on the broken bed. “And I didn’t hear anything. Nothing. Everything happened and it was like I wasn’t even home…”

“I never woke up as well,” I suggested. “Fuck, I keep trying to find a clue in my head; something that could point to what happened, but nothing.”

“Nothing happened here after we left yesterday?” he asked.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. We went to bed. That was it.”

“No, no, no. You think they’re—”

“Don’t say it,” I demanded.

“There’s fuckin’ blood on the floor, Bellwound.”

"Maybe they're just hurt. We need to look for them. Maybe Oree? It's the closest town with Metranian guards."

Arnon rushed to the settee by the window and sat on its edge. "Those guards never bother coming here now, do they?" The water dripping from his clothes created a small puddle on the floor.

"Because nothing *ever* happens here," I said. "Until now."

He shook his head in frustration. "You're right. Oree is our best option." He pressed the heel of his hands over his eyes. "Shit. And we know every person in this village. What if the culprit lives here? What if we're alive because they thought we were already dead?"

"Let's hope you're wrong," I said.

"Your horses in the back?"

"I pray to any god that they are," I said.

I darted up to my room, put on the boots I wore at dinner yesterday, grabbed the dagger Da had given me, a hooded brown coat stained with mud from my ride days before, and the bear pelts I had worn. I glanced at the mirror on my wall before heading out. No bruises on my face. No signs of violence or resistance. I followed the braided patterns on my head as if they could tell me something. I tried revisiting every conversation I had with my parents yesterday. They acted grim, but nothing explained this.

I rushed downstairs and out the door; Arnon at my heels. The rain struck hard. The wind was cold.

"You mentioned a dream," I shouted amidst the howling storm, beckoning him to rush his pace with a wave. "What was it about?"

"There was a cliff!" He ran so to walk beside me, eyes squinted, arms tightly folded on his chest. "I couldn't see the bottom. The sky was pitch black. The moon was small. I stood on the edge, staring into nothing when I heard a voice calling my name." He wiped the water off his face with a wrist. "I fell down the cliff…into the darkness. But then there was light. It was small at first, like a firefly. Then it grew bigger and bigger, taking the

shape of a winged man of sorts. I felt strange when I woke up. Like something moved inside me."

"Maybe you just needed to take a shit?" I tried breaking some of the tension. "You ate a lot yesterday."

"Maybe..." he smirked with a worried smile.

The stable was behind my house. Its damp brick wall helped me with my balance while I trudged through the muddy soil. The lingering fog hid the east valley and the wooden houses perched amidst the trees.

The hayloft was to my left. So was the carnage. The remains of Oraxes and Midnight were strewn around as if they had been sent to a butcher.

"Fuck," Arnon mumbled.

My feet followed the quick pace of my heart. I tried to ping a culprit. Nothing. No neighbor despised us this much. They hadn't used a sharp blade. Their skin was jagged, as if they had been torn apart.

"Bellwound." Arnon grabbed my arm. "Look." I followed his pointed finger.

All thought halted. A cloaked rider stood by the trees, mounted on a midnight horse. It remained frozen, perhaps expecting us to approach. Maybe he watched us because we were next. The horse's eyes were a glimmer of light surrounded by spike-shaped armor. The rider's drenched cloak hid its body—including its head. Three spikes as tall as its gaze jutted out from its spaulders. I didn't miss the sword clinging to its belt.

"What do we do?" Arnon whispered.

We couldn't run. The rider's horse was surely faster than us. I did the best thing I thought to do.

"Can we help you?" My voice carried through the storm. My hand rested on the hilt of the dagger on my waist.

The rider said nothing. Its horse groaned and wriggled its neck. Its breath steamed from under his cloaked head.

"You need something?" Arnon asked.

"Apologies," said the rider in a deep raspy voice. "I was lost in thought. I couldn't quite believe I had found you both." He pronounced every word as if in awe. "It's been years since I've been around."

"Not from here?" I asked.

"Oh, no, no," the rider replied behind a chuckle. "Definitely not."

"You did this?" I shouted into the storm, expecting the answer I already knew in my heart.

"I just want to talk. I had to ensure you would stick around."

Rage shot down my body. "You could've knocked!"

"Unfortunately," his sigh was steam, "I could not."

"What do you want, then?" Arnon asked.

"A conversation," the rider replied.

"You expect to have a conversation after this?" I retorted.

"Invite me into your home, Bellwound." His horse snorted as he pulled on his rein.

"How do you know my name?" I struggled to remain standing.

"I've gone through shadow and flame to find you," said the rider. "The Fallen Stars know your names. We've been waiting for your Blood-date since the Age of the Regent."

"You waited five thousand years," I said, confused.

"The Fallen Stars are patient," he said.

"The Fallen..." I repeated. "As in..."

"The servants of Lucifer, our Dove." He wheezed. "I'm sure you've heard of us. Thestlen is rich in tales about our kind. Some are right. Most are wrong."

Coincidence? Maybe. Maybe not. The things Da said, Ma's conversation as she braided my hair, the song... and now this; a Fallen Star in this village.

I clung to the lingering silence until the rider pierced it. "I'm trying to be patient." The ghostly horse marched forward. "My orders are to have a

conversation with you. I want to be faithful to the orders I was given…" He hesitated as if he was about to utter blasphemy. "…Please."

A scream. Arnon. No blade pierced him; nothing in sight caused him pain. His legs failed him. He plunged to his knees; hands curled into fists. His arms folded over his chest. He writhed on the ground, rolling on the mud like an animal.

"Arnon!" I knelt beside him and pinned his shoulders on the ground. Mud splattered over his face as his body slithered. "Arnon, what—what's going on?"

"So, she did do her job after all," said the rider. "The seed is inside him." The rider alighted his armored beast. "The hosts are ready in the Dark Beyond. They're ready to cross over."

"What's inside him?" I asked.

His foot sunk into the ground. He removed the cloak from his face, revealing hair as fair as gold and red eyes that glistened in the dark.

"Scarlet eyes…" I whispered to myself before calling out to him. "What do you want?"

"I've told you what I want," he continued. "I just want to have a conversation. Do as you're told and Arnon's suffering will cease. You have something of great value. I must show you what's beneath your home. Come with me and your friend's pain will stop."

Arnon mumbled something inaudible as his face paled. I tried reading his purple lips, but I couldn't understand his plea.

"Seaahra and Stenan raised a stubborn idiot," the rider said with a nod. "I'll tell you that."

"How do you know my parents?"

He chuckled with a step. "You ask a lot of questions, boy."

Arnon gasped for air. His eyes begged me for help. His suffering was stronger than my fear. "Fine, fine. I'll take you there. I'll do whatever you want. Please stop. Make it stop."

Arnon's suffering ceased with the snap of the rider's fingers. He swallowed a long breath, holding a hand around his throat.

"My name is Crocell," he said proudly while Arnon coughed and gagged. "The first Fallen Star to find its host in this new age. The Age of the Fallen. Now, shall we…"

Distant gallops and neighs pierced the storm. Crocell's gaze followed the sound coming from the trees. A rider on a white horse. The approaching man unsheathed his sword, holding it forward. Crocell followed his act, holding a blade gray as ash, edges chipped.

The rider's golden hair was tied into a bun, a few whisps falling over his eyes. Their blue was no match for the storm. He jumped up, clutching to his horse's ashen mane. He used one knee for balance, holding his weapon with the other.

Crocell tapped his horse's neck, the animal fleeing to the woods, leaving him on foot. He held out his arms, ready for whatever fate came at him.

The man on the white horse took to the air, leaping at a height impossible to a human. Crocell darted upward while the man used a tree as a platform to lunge his body toward his opponent. I couldn't keep up with their movements. The raindrops struck their bodies as they attacked each other in midair, in the trees, and on the ground.

"Can you run?" I asked Arnon as the fight continued.

"I think so," he said.

I didn't look back. I pressed my thumb nails on the pad of every single finger, wishing this was a nightmare. "Wake up, wake up," I mumbled as I ran through the short misty distance between the stable and my house. But this was no dream.

I wasn't sure of many things, but there one truth that anchored me as I approached my doorstep; death had come for me and my family.