

CHAPTER ONE

Ashlath

With the light of dawn yet to cross the horizon, Illian had received the order to track down a band of thieves that had stolen from the royal family of Dancall. It would have been a public humiliation if word had spread that Tyron, the crown prince of Dancall, had again been caught with his pants down, stripped of his possessions while expressing his manhood with a commoner.

What kept Dancall a city of power was its mighty army. And the soldiers and citizens of Dancall remained loyal to the city only because of its king. Megatuis was a just king who ruled with a caring heart and powerful hand. A king who was loved by all. Unfortunately, his only son had not inherited his character and preferred to play in the dirt, sullyng his family's name and rejecting his royal duties. Since the Queen's passing, there had been no one to keep an eye on the prince. And as Megatuis refused to remarry, there would be no other heir to succeed him.

Illian cursed under his breath at the thought of Tyron.

"Concentrate, Illian." River Girl's thought caught him off guard; instead of responding in words, Illian loosened the reigns, patted his trusted friend on the side of her neck, and refocused his thoughts on the chase.

They travelled in silence, struggling to follow the bandits' trail in the darkness. Illian had given up on employing his own senses and was relying solely on River Girl, her keen eyesight, hearing and sense of smell. It was arduous to track anything in the Forest of Darkness during the day and about impossible at night. Unless, of course, you had one of the bloodline horses.

Illian leaned forward in his saddle. "Quiet now, River Girl. First light will soon find us," he whispered, though he could have communicated by thought just as well.

River Girl eased her pace to a walk, her steps becoming a hush. Illian smiled as he strained his ears to hear when hooves met forest floor. Even a skilled rider of a water-descent bloodline horse found it difficult to discern his horse's strides.

"You've been practicing," Illian praised River Girl's skill.

"That I have. Thank you for noticing, Illian."

Illian's smile lingered for a moment longer. Of all the abilities of a bloodline horse, thought communication was his favorite.

Suddenly, Illian slid from his saddle, rolling to break his fall, and ducked behind the trunk of a dark-wood tree. *"The campsite is up ahead. I detect smoke. Move around to the other side and wait for my call."* Before Illian had finished his thought, River Girl had already vanished into the darkness of the forest.

Illian unsheathed his sword, glimpsing a ray of morning light that had

found its way through the thick canopy that gave the Forest of Darkness its name. *Just in time*. He had speculated and hoped they had remained close enough to the forest's edge that the sun might still find them. He'd guessed correctly.

Illian rested the tip of his blade on the ground in front of him, and with his free hand, stroked his thumb along the blade until a trickle of blood ran down its edge. Illian closed his eyes and began his heart meditation.

He spoke the first command, "Release."

Illian's heartbeat slowed, and a dark blood oozed from the tip of his blade. The viscous liquid moved of its own accord, and instead of bleeding into the soil, began to travel upward, mixing with Illian's blood and gaining in speed as it did. Half way up the blade, it came alive, in an instant reaching the cut on Illian's thumb. It entered Illian's body. With deadly speed and determination it cursed through his bloodstream, consuming his heart, searching for more life to devour. But Illian's meditation was complete.

His heart had stopped beating.

Illian waited for the last of the foreign blood to gather in his heart, before he spoke the second command, "Bind."

Illian's heart began beating again, the dark blood no longer flowing of its own will but now a part of Illian, streaming through his body and giving him strength. Illian rose to his feet feeling stronger and more aware of his surroundings.

Under his heightened senses, the slim rays of sunlight illuminated the forest in brilliant light as they reflected off fern fronds and rocks, leaves and the forked limbs of trees. Illian could smell a hint of rain in the air, but it would be awhile before it came—if it came at all. What bothered Illian was the smell of the dying fire and the absence of sound from where the bandits had set up camp. Either they had left, which meant he had further chasing to do, or they were still sleeping, including their watchman, something he highly doubted.

Illian stepped out from behind the dark-wood tree and faced the campsite. He focused more of his blood to flow to his eyes.

"Fly," Illian said, releasing his eyesight from the restrictions of his body.

Freed, Illian's sight latched onto the sunbeams, leaping from ray to ray as they crossed paths, reflecting off a rocky outcrop, a dark-wood tree trunk, then another, and another, until it came to rest above the campsite. Hidden within the sun's rays Illian's sight could now see it all.

It was a massacre.

Bodies lay scattered throughout the campsite, some in pools of their own blood with deep gashes stretching from their shoulders down to their guts, others without a scratch, their eyes blank and wide open. Even in their lifeless state, the slain bandits seemed to be trying to escape whatever monster had attacked them. Illian's sight lingered on the deep lacerations, he knew of only one soldier powerful enough to wield a blade with such deadly precision. *But Korgonians, this far*

south? Illian dismissed the thought and scanned the campsite for any signs of life.

But there were no survivors.

He pulled back his sight and quickly covered the remaining distance to the campsite. Illian felt his hair rise up on the back of his neck as he entered the massacre, for what his eyes could not see his body could now feel.

Fear.

Illian sighed, "What horror befell these men that even death could not remove their fear?"

Then movement.

"Impossible!" Illian breathed, focused on the half dead man whose bloody fingers trembled as he raised them against the wound in his abdomen, trying to staunch the loss of blood that would soon kill him. How could he have missed him; Illian darted through the bodies, mindful not to disturb the clues left behind by the struggle that had placed them here and knelt beside the dying man.

He was met with an empty stare.