

Era of Undying

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Prologue

The night was warm, though clouds hung heavily, obscuring the moonlight over the countryside of Ichorisis. The pleasant weather made the small caravan of travelers settle down early by the fire. There were maybe a dozen people in the caravan, so one could easily assume they were just a family of merchants. One aspect that contradicted that idea was how little the group was carrying. Pen had been watching them long enough to know that once anything of value came into their hands, it was quickly sold or hidden away. She had been following them for a while and learned that they hid the most valuable items in a small lock box tied to the leader's horse.

The leader of the caravan was close to the fire, carving into a boar. His arms were painted crimson past his elbows. Everyone else was strewn about doing various tasks, but most of them were sitting lazily by the fire, listening to a short man with scar tissue covering his left arm tell a hunting story. Soon afterwards when the boar was cooked, they all ate and talked and laughed. When most of the boar was gone they settled down for sleep leaving the half-eaten carcass over the coals. The leader had eaten with gore still on his hands but had washed up in the nearby creek before using a saddlebag as a pillow. Two of them stayed awake to keep watch. One stayed by the horses, while the other walked around their makeshift perimeter. Neither saw Pen crouched behind the thorn bush.

Silently, she crept out from the bush to follow the man behind the tree line. He kept the caravan in sight but wandered a good distance into the trees. She wondered what he was doing; he wasn't patrolling. He walked aimlessly, then stopped. She heard running water then realized he was relieving himself. He was clearly relaxed and sensed no danger. She picked up a rock and threw it. It *thunked* against a tree and fell into a bush. The man glanced toward the rustling noise but dismissed it. She almost felt bad at how easy this would be. Then her stomach growled. Gritting her teeth and clenching her stomach muscles, she stifled the noise, but her nerve wavered. Her last proper meal had been three days ago. Doing her best to ignore the hunger pains, she gripped her knife. As the man was arranging his trousers, she stood behind him and struck.

One of Pen's hands covered his mouth first, catching him off guard. He grunted in surprise, but the blade across his throat silenced him quickly. He panicked and buckled as his life pulsed from his throat, but she kept her hold. He was heavy, but she managed to ease him to the ground in near silence. No one moved in the camp, and no one heard their friend die. It took a moment for the blood to finish flowing out, and she cringed when he coughed more over her hand. It

wasn't the first time she'd felt that much blood, of course, and it was by no means the last; it had to be done. She wiped her hand and knife on the dead man's woolen tunic, then turned back to the shadows.

Keeping low, avoiding the dry twigs, she made it around the camp to where the horses were tethered. The other man was leaning against a tree, flask in hand. He was closer to the camp, so she couldn't kill him without exposing herself or spooking the horses. She didn't want to risk sneaking closer to the horses and the strongbox — he was beside the leader's horse. She hid behind a thick oak tree and searched around for a dry stick on the ground. She stepped down hard. It made a crisp *snap* in the silence.

The man looked up and gazed into the darkness in her direction. Pen darted from one tree to another and crouched under the pine branches. He saw her. Stepping away from his tree, he peered into the forest and came closer. He glanced at his companions, then back at the trees. He put the flask away and unsheathed his sword silently, presumably so as not to alarm the others, and then approached her hiding place. He passed her, then paused. Her heart was in her throat. She prayed he wouldn't shout.

“Who's there?” he called.

It wasn't enough to wake the camp, thankfully. The man grumbled “rabbit”, sheathed his sword, and turned back. He passed her again, and she slipped out of hiding to stand behind him. She must be quick and silent: she stabbed the knife into his ear. She used too much force, though, and he hit a maple tree while falling, rattling the branches. He was dead, at least.

She took a breath, forcing her heart rate to slow. She saw no sign of anyone stirring in the camp, so she approached the horses again. The leader of the caravan might have been sleeping on his saddlebags, but the lockbox was attached directly to the horse's saddle, hidden under leather. He probably thought it was safer because it was unexpected. The lockbox was strapped to the saddle, with two locks on the straps themselves. Luckily, the dozing horse provided a little cover, but Pen was still within the ring of firelight, and her legs were exposed. She took out her lock-picking pins and went to work. The second lock gave her a harder time, but both clicked open. The lid of the small box squeaked, but no one noticed. Inside was a silver pendant with a ruby on a thin chain, and a gold ring. Their price could buy her food for at least a week.

A twig snapped behind her.

She spun with knife in hand, but pain erupted in her head and everything went black.

She was on the ground when she came to with a splitting headache. Panic grabbed hold of her when she realized she couldn't move. Her hands were tied behind her back, and her feet were bound too. The panic nearly won when she realized she was by the fire, with the entire camp surrounding her.

“I'll admit I didn't take you for a woman at first.”

The leader stood over her with his arms crossed. He was a big man with thick black hair and beard.

She shifted to her knees, which was awkward with her hands tied, but she managed. Her vision was blurred from the blow, but it was clearing. There were eleven men and women

standing around her — three of them behind her — and one small figure sitting by a tree behind the leader.

“You even killed two of my best fighters,” the leader said casually, as though this were an everyday conversation.

“Even the best can get lazy and ignore the shadows.” She couldn’t feel warmth spreading from where she was struck so she didn’t think she was bleeding; there would probably be a good bruise later. She started twisting her wrist into the rope.

“Let’s just kill her. She murdered Belos!” said a skinny man holding a bow.

“And Hason,” a woman added.

The rest of the followers muttered in agreement.

The leader raised a hand and they stopped grumbling.

“Not until we’ve had a little chat,” the leader said. He knelt before Pen. “Did anyone send you?” His voice made her want to shiver despite the fire’s warmth.

She looked him directly in the eye. “No.”

“Are you alone?”

“No,” she lied. She wasn’t sure if he believed her. He had a good face for gambling.

“What are you doing with your arm?” He sounded intrigued but not entirely distracted.

“Escaping.”

He laughed.

She felt her wrist sting, then blood trickled down her hand.

He chuckled and stood. “I honestly don’t know if I want to kill you or let you join us.”

“She murdered Belos!” the skinny man yelled again.

“I know he was your brother, and I will mourn him too.” His steely voice made the other man look away. “She struck silently, and that could be useful. But considering I don’t let anyone already in kill a member without due punishment, I can’t just let in someone who did kill a member. Killing her would be safer and easier.”

“She’s pretty, though, sir,” a burly man said. “Can we play with her first?”

“Normally I wouldn’t care, but she’s proven to be an efficient assassin. I don’t think—”

She willed her blood to rise. Sensing there the three stood behind her she shot her blood toward them, striking two in the throat and one in the eye. At the same moment she hardened it into a blade to cut the ropes. As the first three fell gurgling and screaming, she stood to face the others, snaking the strings of blood around so it floated in front of her.

All of her opponents had drawn their weapons, but now they froze. Three tendrils of solid blood floated several feet from her wrist, sharpened to points facing the bandits.

Staying calm was a challenge, but she managed it. Panic would cloud her thoughts and thin her blood.

“I don’t believe it,” one man muttered.

“M’lady,” the leader said. One of his hands held an axe, but he raised the other to show peace. “No one else needs to die tonight. You can walk away, and no one here will repeat what happened.”

“Rumors spread like wildfire,” Pen replied.

“Not this one. You can keep what was in the lockbox, plus anything else I have of value. You can take what you need and go.”

“The hell she will!” the skinny man shouted.

He fired an arrow at Pen’s heart.

One tendril caught the arrow, twisted it around, and stuck it into his neck. Three more men charged her with swords in hand. Two were pierced through the heart, but the last one was too close. Pen retracted the tendrils and dived under his blade, which was aimed at her head. She changed her blood into a blade and stuck him in the gut. He fell groaning while she stood with a crimson blade in hand.

One woman charged at her with a hammer. Pen killed her with a dodge then a slice to the neck, following through to the next man, lopping off his arm before stabbing him in the chest. Another turned to run, but she extended her sword into a spear and got him in the back. That left the leader, who had stayed back until now. She faced him.

He had his axe at the ready. She considered switching to a sword for speed but kept the spear for distance.

“Damn that Hados, he was always a wild card,” he growled. “You’re the Blood Warrior.”

She stayed quiet.

“If you leave me be, I’ll tell no one of this.”

“I can’t do that.” She didn’t enjoy killing, but it was necessary. No one could know she existed. Not after what happened to the last Warriors.

“Fine, then.” He had no intention of dying.

He stalked to the left. She followed, stepping over a body. He lunged with the axe, but she parried with the spear. His fist flew, catching the side of her face.

Stunned, she staggered back but managed to avoid his next swing. She caught his axe with her spear and pulled him off balance, hitting him over the head with the end of it. Then she melted her spear, changed it into a hammer, and brought it down on the back of his head.

He went down hard but caught himself on his knees. She sharpened her hammer into an axe and embedded it in his skull.

She slumped among the bodies next to the fire, panting, and listened for any movement, tense with anticipation of another attack — but none came. Then she remembered the small figure by the tree. She stood and saw a boy, perhaps ten years old, hiding behind the tree. He was staring at her and trembling.

The boy bolted into the forest. She swore and followed him. The chase only lasted a few minutes before she lost him in the gloom. She cursed louder. The boy would tell people what he saw. Rumors of her existence would spread. Cursing again, she went back to the dead camp.

She cleaned any dirt or blood that was not her own off her axe. Once it was clean, it lost its form and melted back into her wrist. Despondent, she sat by the fire and ate her fill of what was left of the boar. There wasn’t much after having been picked over by a dozen people. At least her stomach was full for one more night. She then took a pack and filled it with what food was left,

along with the valuables the traveling bandits had hidden on them as well the jewelry from the lockbox.

She took the saddles off all of the horses except the leader's. It looked the strongest; a big gray-and-black-speckled stallion. Hefting the new pack and mounting her new horse, she rode off.

Chapter 1

The day was cheery enough. Clouds filled the sky, casting gray over the marketplace, but it was relatively warm for the ninth moon of the year. The city of Stymphalia was lively, and the western market was crowded with merchants, fishmongers, blacksmiths, and a very large number of people. Pen stood uncomfortably at the edge of the crowd. She swallowed her nerves, since there was no way to avoid them all.

The cobbler's shop was almost empty, which was a blessing. There was only one other patron, who left shortly after Pen entered. The cobbler, who had light blue hair, fixed his attention on her.

"And how might you be today, m'lord?"

She pushed back her hood, revealing dark purple hair that hung to her shoulders.

"My lady," the cobbler corrected himself quickly. "My apologies."

"It's alright. I need new boots. Preferably tall ones to survive the mud." A hole had finally been worn through the side of her current pair.

"Boots, m'lady? Are you sure you wouldn't prefer a pair of sandals or slippers? In fact, I've just finished a pair of sandals that tie all the way up the leg."

"Boots are fine." Pen began playing with two coppers from her purse.

"Very well." He led her to one side of the shop, having seen that she could pay well for his work; a pair was only worth one copper.

It took some time to find a good pair. Pen wasn't particular about style, but she wanted to be comfortable, and most of these boots were too big. She paid the cobbler two coppers and walked out with simple black leather boots.

Pen stopped at a stand and bought a meat pie from a small girl and her mother. The pie was good, but she couldn't place the taste of the meat. It could have been cat. The pie brought up the memory of her son Alard, who had always enjoyed the pies she had made. Her husband Arch loved them too, when they could afford the beef. She'd never thought of making one from a cat, Alard liked cats as a pet: she couldn't make him eat one. The taste of the pie died in her mouth at the thought of her family. She missed them. Her throat tightened at the thought of their deaths.

"—looked terrified."

Pen had perched on top of a low wall to eat her pie when a voice caught her ear. Taking a quick, casual glance, she saw it came from the guard of the city watch.

"Of course he was scared. The kid saw his family killed," his companion said.

"Not just killed: slaughtered by the Blood Warrior. I was there in the Hall, heard him with my own ears."

The pie didn't taste very good any more.

"The kid was scared, so of course the facts were vague," his friend said. "Besides, it's just a kid with an imagination, a traumatic event, and a rumor that crops up every year or so."

“Still, those rumors have done more than crop up. What about that inn? There must have been at least twenty men in there.”

“I heard it was a savage with an axe from the mountains, but I also heard it was three travelers from across the river. Even heard it was a witch with a pointy hat.” His voice had become mocking.

“I get it, probably nothing.”

“Although, I am impressed by the man who survived the spear through the chest in that inn.”

“I heard someone survived falling off the west guard tower yesterday.”

“He was definitely a lucky, drunk fool.”

Pen forced down the morsel in her mouth and threw the rest of the pie to a stray dog. The guards had left a bitter taste in her mouth despite the pie. She knew the attack of which they spoke. The boy with those bandits had escaped, and she had let him. She could have tracked him down but chose not to. Finding him would have been the only way to ensure his silence, but that would have meant killing him. Pen knew rumors were spreading — they always did — but she had had no idea the boy had been heading for the capital! Leaving now was the best idea, but it was dusk, which was when the city closed its gates for the night. She hoped luck was on her side.

It wasn't. Standing at the corner of the street, watching the cold iron gates close, Pen considered sneaking out, but she didn't want to stir up any trouble or draw attention. She turned on her heel and walked to the nearest inn, not wanting to go back to the one she'd used last night lest someone recognize her.

This inn was larger than the last one, with three floors. The traffic in the area must contribute to its patronage. With the last of her spoils from the road bandits Pen paid for a flagon, some cooked chicken, and a room. She took her food to the corner of the tavern, beside the unlit fireplace. With her back to the wall, she ate and listened.

There was the usual chatter of people complaining about taxes and about other people, or swapping stories of war and spoils. The tavern was large and it was darkening with the setting sun. The innkeeper came out of the kitchen and lit the fire, brightening the room again. The shadows were pushed back and twitched along the walls. The smell of smoke filled the air, mixing with the chicken and too many unwashed bodies.

A group close by caught her attention. They were talking about the king collapsing in court today. She felt like she should be worried, like everyone else, but although she had been born in this land, the people were never part of her home. She hardly cared about the royal family; people were necessary to life, of course, like the cobbler, but she paid them no mind and they left her alone. She preferred it that way, but there were exceptions, of course, like the road bandits. Once her chicken was finished and the flagon empty, she went upstairs to sleep. She had lucked out with the bed this time; there were no bugs.

Pen woke the next morning with rain pounding on the window. That was good: it would cover her tracks as she left. Breakfast was a thick porridge that she heard the innkeeper priding himself on. Pen thought it was rather bland.

A man entered the inn, judging by his armour, he was another member of the city guard. He probably wanted some of that bland porridge before starting his rounds. Pen allowed herself one look at the guard to note his position in the room. Her glance became a stare. The boy from the road bandits' camp was with him. The guard was probably taking him to an orphanage after breaking his fast.

Pen pulled up her hood, pretending to be cold, and kept her face down, forcing herself to eat at a normal pace. She tried not to think about how dead the boy's eyes looked, but failed. The room was calm, with most of the patrons most likely nursing headaches from the night before, based on the commotion she'd heard from her room.

"Oi, bard." A man tossed a youth by the fire a coin. "Play something cheerful."

"Anything in particular?" the bard asked.

"Nah, just something to wake up to."

The bard tuned his lute and began a song about a girl and her knight.

Pen gulped down the rest of her breakfast. The bard was seated behind her, and the boy was watching him.

"That's her!"

The bard stopped singing. All chatter died. Pen sensed the boy pointing at her before she looked up. The entire inn had turned to face her. None looked friendly, but most were just confused by the interruption.

"What?" Pen acted just as confused. Her heart thudded in her ears, but she managed to maintain an appearance of calm.

"It was you that killed them. You killed my father!" the boy shouted "You made your blood move."

The entire room was still with rising tension. The guard loosened the sword at his belt.

"What?" Pen scoffed, playing dumb. "I understand you must be grieving, but don't accuse the first person you see, boy."

She stood to leave. Luckily, she had brought her pack downstairs with her.

"Hold on." The guard blocked her path to the door. His hair was purple, like her own, but lighter. The stubble matched. "Murder is a heavy accusation to walk away from."

"What do you suggest I do then? My husband is waiting for me in the next city," Pen lied. "Besides the boy is wrong."

"We'll send word to your husband and bring him in as a character witness, but you're coming with me."

The entire tavern was watching, but she could only feel the accusation in the boy's eyes. He was shaking, filled with hate. Her heart went to him; no one that young should hold so much pain. The irony that she had been the one to cause it was not lost on her.

"Fine." There was no easy way to escape from here yet, anyway.

"Wait." The man who had tossed the coin to the bard stood. "Son, you said she did something with her blood?"

Damn! Pen had thought that the boy's comment had slipped by.

“She did, she made it fly around and kill everyone, and it turned into weapons.”

Half of the crowd snickered. One man outright laughed, and Pen joined them, hating herself for it.

“Would that I could do that! I would be out of here in a heartbeat.”

“But you did!” the boy screamed.

“A woman has never been the Blood Warrior,” the man who laughed exclaimed.

“Who’s to say I couldn’t be a warrior?” Pen challenged. She could hold her own, even without her magic. She was slight, yes, but quick with a knife. “And what about Hamia, daughter of Maniodes? She was the first to start the bloodline.”

The man scoffed. “Every true warrior is a man, after her of course. But that’s just a myth anyway.”

“So just because I don’t have an extra piece of flesh dangling between my legs means I can’t fight? I thought not having one would be advantageous, since they are so sensitive.”

The man stood, clearly getting agitated. She stood her ground, one hand drifting to her knife.

The guard stepped between them. “There’s no need for a fight. She’s coming with me to the castle.”

“Better teach her some manners while you’re at it,” the man growled.

The guard ushered her outside, and behind her Pen heard the chatter resume. She hoped that playing along with the blood magic accusation would divert the attention. The boy followed them.

The rain had lessened during their confrontation, but the roads were slick with mud. Once down the first street, the guard ushered over another man dressed in city watch armour. Whether he felt threatened by a single woman or the magic accusation, Pen couldn’t be sure, but it was probably the magic. The boy trailed close behind as the two guards escorted her to the castle. She wanted to bolt, but that would solidify her guilt, and then she’d be wanted for sure.

The guards took her to a small room in the keep. It wasn’t exactly a cell, but there were no windows. A man came in asking questions: where she was traveling to, who her husband was, which gate she had entered the city. He scribbled notes on a parchment and left without another word. More people passed along the corridor and a man was posted outside her door. She couldn’t escape without causing a commotion and drawing more attention to herself. Playing along might be the safest action for now. The boy had no proof against her, but she had no proof of her innocence either. She heard the boy outside, asking the guards why they didn’t just hang her.

After an hour or so another man entered. He was older, with dark green hair, and introduced himself as Tellus, captain of the city watch. They sat comfortably at the table in the centre of the room as she told him her story. Not the truth, of course, but that she was meeting her husband in the city north of the capital because he had recently acquired a new home for them.

“Through which gate did you enter the city?” he asked.

“South,” she lied.

“Mm-hm. You know the kid is outside claiming your head, right?” He sounded tired.

“I can hear him, and I don’t blame him for being angry. He lost his whole family.” The grief in her voice was real. She hated hurting children.

“Aye, you probably got caught in the crossfire of his confusion. He just wants someone to blame.”

Pen allowed herself a breath of relief; Captain Tellus was on her side.

“We’ve sent word to your husband, what was his name again?”

“Arch.”

“Right, I read it on Connin’s note. It will take some time for him to get the message, and more for him to ride down here,” the captain said. “We still need to hold a trial tomorrow.”

Pen’s heart fell. “But you know I’m innocent.”

“I believe you, but the accusation of murder still needs to be seen by the king, the blood magic even more so.”

“There hasn’t been a Blood Warrior for decades,” Pen protested. “The last one was killed in a failed rebellion fifty years ago.”

“Nonetheless, the king will be informed, and you will be put on trial.” His tone broached no further argument. Pen could see why he was a captain.

There was a sudden knocking on the door. The captain seemed confused. Pen’s heart rate picked up pace again at the sudden intrusion.

The captain stood and opened the door. “What is it?”

Another guard stood in the corridor. He looked nervous about interrupting his superior. “The king would like to see the woman now, sir,” he said.

Pen couldn’t sit still any longer. Trying to act as harmless as possible, she stood. This was not going well.

“How did he find out about her so quickly?” the captain growled.

“I believe Connin informed him, sir.” The guard’s voice was more sheepish now.

“Of course,” the captain exclaimed. He sighed and turned to Pen. “That bastard’s been a thorn in my arse for months. Come on then, lass.”

She took an involuntary step back. “Now?”

“I’m afraid so. The king is waiting.”

Pen didn’t move. A dozen methods of escape came to mind, but all would make her seem guilty, and she would have to use her power.

“I don’t have to clap you in irons and drag you there, do I?” He clearly didn’t want to.

“No,” Pen controlled her stammer. “I’ll go.”

Chapter 2

King Aegeus looked awful. Pen had heard rumors that he was sick, but she had no idea it was this bad. She was surprised he could even sit upright. His skin was the color of curdled milk, and the shadows under his eyes were as dark as bruises. He was dressed regally with a dark blue tunic and black cape, but it only made him look more worn. He held a cloth that was stained with blood, some fresh, mostly dried.

The hall was crowded with people of the court, rich nobles watching the day's proceedings for entertainment. The boy — Pen still didn't know his name — had followed Pen as the captain escorted her to the throne room. After recounting his side of the story he stood close by, fidgeting with agitation. He had painted Pen to be a ruthless murderer who killed his family by making her blood move from her hands. He was telling most of the truth, but left out that they had tied her up and were about to kill her instead. Granted, she was robbing them, but she'd had no real intentions of killing them until they saw her power, and that was the only way she could have escaped.

"You're sure this is her, boy?" King Aegeus's voice was hardly more than a croak, but it still held power.

"It is. She made her blood turn into spears and other weapons and slaughtered my family — my father!" The boy's eyes shone with tears but also triumph.

"And you say you are innocent?" King Aegeus said to Pen.

"I am, Your Grace." Pen did her best to control her nerves, but this had gotten far out of hand. "I've never met this boy until today."

"Liar!"

"Enough!" Aegeus commanded.

A fit of coughing overcame him. He pressed the cloth to his mouth as his whole body shook. The sound was muffled by the cloth, but it still sounded violent. When it passed, he took a few moments to breathe and wipe the blood from his lips.

Everyone in the hall had fallen silent to watch their king die slowly before them, like vultures waiting to strike. The king's only heir was still unborn, growing in his wife, Queen Aethra. Pen had no doubt there would be a lot of change when the king's health finally gave out.

Those vultures would be waiting a little longer, though, as King Aegeus took a shaking breath and spoke. "I'm tired of this squabbling. What do you suggest, Captain? You've heard them both, just as I have."

Pen took a breath of relief; the captain had been on her side before.

"I think we should hold her until her husband arrives, then we can have a proper trial," Captain Tellus suggested. "Your Grace."

"Yes," the king agreed. "I'd thought so too."

A voice came from the crowd. "That may not be necessary, Your Grace."

A tall man in garb similar to the captain's but lacking the badge of office stepped forward. Captain Tellus's eyebrows knitted together, and he scowled in annoyance. It was the man who had taken the notes before. Based on Tellus's expression, this must be Connin.

Connin knelt before the king. "We have a witness who saw her yesterday."

Pen's heart leapt into her throat.

"Bring him forward."

Pen had to admit that no matter how tired the king was, he got straight to business when necessary.

Connin stood and shouted, "Delmore."

A youth of no more than twenty approached the main group. Pen didn't recognize him and thought his blue hair was striking, but the stubbly beard he was trying to grow was patchy. He looked nervous to be called before the king. He couldn't make direct eye contact with the monarch for long, either, as if the sickness might spread to him.

Connin moved to stand beside Delmore. "Tell everyone what you told me."

Delmore took a moment to collect himself. Pen noted that he refused to look at her, even though his eyes were darting everywhere else. He couldn't face the woman he was condemning.

"It's nothing terribly special," he said. "I've been on duty at the North Gate, watching the local traffic for about a week now, and I saw her walk in by herself the day after last." He quickly added, "Your Grace."

Pen could hardly breathe; she scolded herself for not being more careful when entering the city. The fear was making it harder to keep still, but she disciplined herself to act calm, even confused, at his information. She had to play along, even if her instincts were telling her to run.

"You're sure it was her?" the king pressed.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"And why would you remember one face among the hundreds you must see every day?"

Delmore stammered for a moment at Aegeus's bluntness. "I had taken note of her being alone when most people arrive in groups, and—" He cut himself off.

"And?"

"And... I admired her hair," Delmore admitted.

The majority of the room snickered at the lad. He flushed and stared at the floor between his feet. Pen would have felt bad for him if he hadn't just condemned her.

King Aegeus called for silence, and the vultures stopped chuckling.

"There's nothing wrong with fancying a girl, lad," he said calmly.

Delmore kept staring at the floor. That was probably a good idea, because Pen wanted to gouge out his eyes.

King Aegeus coughed again, but this time it wasn't so violent. "Tellus, you said she came from the South Gate."

"That's what she told me, Your Grace." Tellus looked at Pen. Any sense of trust or innocence was gone.

"Well miss... what is your name again?"

“Pen.”

“Right, do you have anything to say on this matter? You’ve been quiet for some time.”

Pen prayed her nervousness wasn’t making her look guilty; she was aiming to appear as an innocent maid. “He must have seen someone else. I came from the south.”

“Well, someone is lying.” Another coughing fit took hold. Pen couldn’t help cringing; it looked like he couldn’t breathe. The cloth in his hand was more red than white now.

“We... we will resume on the morrow,” he said after finally gulping for air. “Tellus, take her to one of the cells and keep the boy close by.”

Tellus took her by the arm and was about to lead her away, but she held back to watch the king stand. One of his personal guards approached to help. The king was clearly unsteady, but he waved the guard away.

King Aegeus stepped off the dais from his throne and limped out through the back door.

Chapter 3

Pen paced as much as she could in the small stone cell. It had a bed and a window, so it wasn't the worst cell she'd been in, but she'd rather be anywhere else. She had let this get too far out of hand, though she was lucky they had glossed over the blood magic charge. King Aegeus probably marked that claim down to the boy's grief and imagination. She might not be lucky next time; anyone accused of magic was sentenced to death almost on the spot. She had to get out.

They had taken her pack and weapons, but she was not defenseless. She approached the door and peered out of the small, barred window. It was dark but she could make out another door like hers directly across the corridor. From this angle she couldn't see any other people.

Pen put her back to the wall beside the door. Digging into her sleeve, into a small hidden pocket, she withdrew a razor. It was too small to be a viable weapon in a fight, but it did the job she needed by slicing open her first finger on her right hand.

She put the razor back and knelt by the door. The side closest to the latch would have been safer, but the wood was tight against the stone. There was a small space between the wood and the floor.

She waited but heard nothing. This could be her only chance of escape, but she risked exposure. She prayed that the corridor was empty.

Willing her blood to move away from the cut, she pulled out a tendril no thicker than a hair. Holding her hand to the bottom of the door, the tendril floated beneath the door. To Pen, moving the blood outside her body felt as natural as moving a limb, but she had to be careful to touch as little as possible. She would get sick if any dirt or toxins got into her system. Not seeing what you were doing didn't help, either. Judging by the placement of the door handle she found on the other side, she could guess where the keyhole was.

She made the tendril rise on the other side of the door and prodded the area under the latch. It took a few tries, each one increasing her chances of being caught, but she finally found the keyhole. The tendril went inside it, and she felt around the gears, as if they were touching her own skin.

Pen felt the grooves and tumblers of the lock mechanism. There were four tumblers in this lock, not too difficult, but it would have been easier if she had been able to see it. It took several tries, but the lock finally clicked, and she withdrew the tendril. She collected the blood into a ball above her hand and used her sleeve to wipe away as much dirt and grease as possible. She then drew it back into her finger. The cut didn't heal immediately, but she stopped the bleeding through willpower.

The door swung outward into the corridor, which was blessedly empty. The pathway to the right opened up but there was a shadow of a figure looming on the wall. Pen closed the door silently and headed left. The route proved fruitless, since it just led down to more cells. She

didn't want to risk the chance of getting stuck. She turned and went back; it wasn't a long corridor, and there were only five cells on either side.

The archway to the end opened to a small room for the guards on duty. A lantern cast a shadow on a table littered with food. The man sitting there was flipping through a deck of cards. It didn't look like he was playing any particular game. He hadn't heard her approach, but he was facing in her direction. She hid by the corner of the archway. The exit was directly across from her, mocking her.

Pen drew from the cut on her finger again. The blood lowered to the floor and snuck around the corner. She hoped that the man was paying enough attention to his cards that he wouldn't notice the movement. She stole a peek around the stone. He was reading one card closely. The tendril continued to stretch along the floor, hugging the wall, and it now gathered in the far corner behind him.

Sending more blood to thicken the end, she formed it into a thin arrowhead and hardened the point. She raised the arrowhead behind the man. Having to watch to make sure she angled the arrow correctly left her in the light and exposed.

The man tossed his card onto the table, sighing and scowling. He sat back in the chair, ruining her angle. He spotted her, shouted, and made to rise. Pen stepped out from the archway, swung the arrowhead and stuck him deep in the eye into his skull.

He slumped back in the chair, staring at her, but even his uninjured eye didn't see her any longer.

She approached the dead man, cleaning her blood in her shirt. He had a short sword at his belt, along with keys to all the cells. Unsure how to cover the evidence of her magic, she took the sword but left the keys. Anyone who found him might think he was negligent and forgot to lock her in. The wound in his eye might be a problem; it was too small to have been made by a blade. Pen unsheathed the short sword and stuck it in his eye. The blade cleaved into his cheekbone, and the force drove the body into the wall. Pen wrenched the sword free with a sickening, wet sound, and the body fell to the floor. She kicked the table. Soup sloshed out of the bowl, and the lamp overturned but stayed lit. Now it would appear as though there had been a struggle.

After cleaning the blood from the blade on the dead man's tunic, Pen strapped the sword to her belt. Through the exit was a stairway leading upward to a thick, dark wood door with hinges that stretched across its width. Fortunately, this door wasn't locked. Pen opened it slowly and spotted two guards chatting at the end of the passage. She squared her shoulders and left the safety of the doorway, turning right. The guards paid her no mind. If they saw her, they probably thought she was a servant. She counted on that invisibility. Servants didn't walk around with weapons, but she could claim she was delivering it from the blacksmith to a noble. She'd think of something if need be; she just had to control the nervous hum in her veins.

A series of stone hallways and another staircase took her up to another room, another door. Holding on to her innocent maid idea, Pen opened the door, stepped through, and found herself at the base of a tower attached to the keep. She paused to breathe in the cool, damp air. The sky was gray overhead; it might rain again.

The courtyard wasn't big, but it was a reprieve from the cold stone corridors. Pen stood beneath an overhang held up by limestone columns. Several people moved about, servants and guards mostly, though one side of the courtyard was taken up by the blacksmith's workshop. She could hear the steady clang of metal striking metal, and nearby horses. The stables must be close.

Pen spotted Captain Tellus across the courtyard.

He had his back to her, talking to a couple of men, probably giving orders. She ducked her head and walked quickly in the other direction. She had always found that if one walks with a purpose in mind, or at least if one looks like it, people tend to leave one alone. It would have been true this time, too, had she not turned a corner into an open pathway and ran right into someone. She let out a sharp yell of surprise as she staggered back. A hand shot out and caught her arm before she fell.

Pen looked up, and her nerves sparked into fear. Delmore held her arm.

Before he could let out more than a surprised, "Hey," she punched him in the gut. He doubled over, coughing, and she took off behind him.

Some people were looking her way after seeing Delmore crumple. They spotted her. Tellus was one of them; the noise must have caught his attention. Pen heard him shouting, "Stop her!"

She had a slight head start, and most of the people were startled. That did not last long. One man made a grab for her, but she ducked in time, weaving around another guard, but barreled into a group of servants and a stable boy in the process. A girl carrying a basket of linens fell, nearly taking Pen with her, but Pen kept her footing and pressed on.

She headed to the nearby barracks. A group of trainees came out of the two-story stone building to investigate the commotion. Pen veered left, hopped onto a barrel on a supply cart, vaulted up to a window on the second storey of the building, then clambered onto the roof. It was made of red clay tiles that slipped and cut her hands, but she made it up. Pausing only for a second to breathe, Pen saw at least two dozen men below. Some circled the building under Tellus's orders, and a couple of others were stringing bows. One aimed a crossbow at her.

"Don't kill her, damn it!" Tellus wrenched the crossbow up as the man pulled the trigger. The bolt flew towards her. The slight rush of air, along with the movement in her hair over the shoulder, was the only indication the man had missed her neck with that bolt.

She turned and ran along the tiles. Arrows clattered on the tiles around her feet, but none struck home. They must have been aiming at her legs on Tellus's orders. She jumped a narrow alley, landing on the neighboring building; this roof was blessedly flat. Her heart pounded against her ribcage like a wild animal, and her veins sang with anticipation, but she refused to draw any weapons or shields with so much attention on her.

The building ended at a road beneath her. The city was built on a hill, so the road was too far down for her to survive the landing. There was a window directly below her, though. She gripped the edge of the roof, jumped, and swung. Her feet just barely touched the sill. Kicking in the glass, she scrambled into the building.

She found herself inside a low-ceilinged attic. There were crates and barrels everywhere that reeked of dyes; it was probably a tannery. There might have been a place to hide, but given how

close the guards were and the noise she made breaking the window, she still wasn't safe. She had to get away from the central keep and barracks.

She opened the only door, then stopped. There was a child in the room beyond, a little boy maybe four years old, playing with blocks and toy soldiers on the floor. He watched her with wide blue eyes. Pen froze, her own son had eyes just as big but they were dark like his fathers. He would have been around this boy's age.

She left the boy where he was and ran to the next door, which led to a landing and stairs leading downward. She could hear voices approaching, no doubt coming to investigate the noise. She flew down the stairs three at a time, rounded a corner, and knocked over a woman wearing brown leather gloves stained blue at the tips.

Pen rushed to another window at the end of the hallway and, this time, used the latch to open it properly. The shouting of the guards was getting closer. Twenty feet below the window was a short wall that separated this tier of the city from the one below, then another fifty feet down to a cobblestone road. The sky had opened and a mist-like rain fell.

Pen hoisted herself through the window, stretching herself as long as possible to gain length to the wall, and dropped. The wall only allowed for a foot-wide stretch of stone. Bracing her feet wide and leaning onto the outside of the building, she paused to thank the gods that she hadn't toppled over.

Her reprieve was short-lived.

Arrows struck the wall to her left. Daring a look, Pen saw six guards and Tellus on the road below.

"You stay there, and I might be lenient," Tellus shouted.

Pen shuffled right as quickly as the foot-wide ledge would allow. She was exposed on the wall, but she knew how to keep her balance. She ran along the ledge, the guards close behind, with Tellus barking orders to cut her off.

The wall descended and curved to the next tier. It looped back on itself, which would leave her facing the guards. Pen crouched and slid partway in the slickness the rain had left on the stones. She vaulted off the wall at the last moment and sailed through the air. She realized that part of the shouting she could hear was her own screams. The road ended and she continued to fall into the tree line that stretched down the hill, dropping away from her.

Leaves and branches filled her vision and raked every inch of her skin as she fell. The skeletal branches left cuts as though from bird talons. One last branch broke under her weight as she hit it full force. That branch had slowed her down enough for her to tuck and roll. The landing was harder, as rocks and dirt ground into the wounds. She rolled to avoid breaking any bones, then landed on her stomach.

Her ears rang, and every sound seemed to come through cotton. Was she drowning — had she landed in a pool of water? She tried to open her eyes, but everything swam. She was still breathing, so she hadn't landed in water. She gulped a couple of mouthfuls of air, then forced herself to her knees. Her vision cleared enough, and her hearing was coming back, but too slowly for her liking. She forced herself to her feet and continued forward. It was that or die.

The grove in which she had landed was wild with birds and small game. They were probably kept here as a reprieve from city life, though the dark stone castle with its red banners still loomed overhead. Pen's whole body ached and bled from dozens of cuts. She was glad nothing was broken, but her left ankle throbbed with every step.

The grove ended, and she found herself in a graveyard. The rain was falling more heavily now, painting the tombstones with dark tears. She had to get out of the rain and find shelter. She couldn't continue on like this, not after that fall.

An archway in the side of the hill led to darkness. Its gate stood wide open, beckoning her to safety. Pen smiled at the irony of hiding with the dead when she might join them soon. She entered the crypt and pulled the gate shut behind her. Her hearing had returned, but the bones in here were quiet. She had slipped from Tellus's grasp for the moment.

Pen turned away from the rain-streaked light and stumbled farther into the crypt. The passage branched in several directions, with walls filled with niches and alcoves. Each space held an urn or a coffin. The stench of the fresh residents did not bother her much; this was not the first crypt she'd slept in. She hoped it wouldn't be the last.

She turned left, then right at the first opportunity, in order to simplify the directions back to the entrance. She entered a small room with a single wooden coffin in its center. This individual must have had wealth to afford his or her own room. She noticed that the lid was not secured. Rusty, broken nails lay on the floor around the coffin.

Pen knelt and opened the lid. A skeleton lay inside, clothed in a purple robe. Wealthy indeed, though any jewels he may have been buried with were gone. The grave robbers had better use for them than the dead did.

Nausea bit at the back of Pen's throat, but she couldn't risk being found. She crawled in beside the skeleton and closed the lid.