

THE GHOST WALKER SAGA  
BOOK 1

SPIRE  
AND  
STONE

A. R. GEIGER

Spire and Stone

Spire and Stone

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**CONTENT WARNING:**

Contains suggestions of suicide and references to cutting. Reader discretion advised.

From the east he came,  
With blazing soul,  
And a crest of fiery bone.  
Ghost Walker,  
Child of storms,  
Now stood twixt spire and stone.

*~ The Lay of the Ghost Walker*



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## DREYEN-BRED

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The trainers herded the men into the ring like sheep at an auction, urging them on with boots and blades. They came reluctantly, baring their teeth when a blade drew blood or a boot bruised deep.

Viggo Swifter leaned against the fence, waiting. Three of them were shoved in with him, soldiers captured from neighboring nations during wars and revolts. They were slaves now, Dreyen fodder the old tales named them. Men who could fight and kill, but more importantly, who could be killed.

Viggo could see the fear of such an outcome in their shadowed eyes. They were never told, these men, whether the predator waiting for them in

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the runs had been instructed to send their souls straight to the Pale Lady or to leave them alive.

Either way, they were meant to fight the same.

The men advanced, crossing the green sward as warily as if he—cursed-blood and Dreyen-bred as he was—were a wounded banshee rather than a youth of barely nineteen. Viggo stood his ground, his sword held loosely in his right hand, and watched them circle. Hunting. Probing. They split off almost instinctively, as if knowing there would be little help or support from their companions in this fight. The two older men, more experienced in battles and war, moved to flank him and left the youngest to face him head on. Viggo flicked a glance over his pale face spattered with freckles, his hazel eyes. A Cymeran, he guessed. Probably a peasant's son sold to pay his debts, or a robber's brat. Was there any difference? He was a child, a child with a blade in his hands. He looked as afraid of his own sword as he did of Viggo, and his steel skullcap hid nothing, not his youth, and not his fear.

The other two were warriors. One, a short, bear-like Rekovian, wore a horned helm and carried a broadsword in his hands. A sheepskin vest bore the stains of his last defeat in this fenced run, and his weathered skin was marked with the scars of a thousand campaigns. Viggo could see the smoldering anger in his dark eyes, the bitterness of a slave marked into his face. He would be the first to attack. The man spat on the grass, growling to the other two in a heavily accented snarl, "This'n's weak on the left side. I seen him 'afore. Some'un take his legs."

Neither of his companions responded.

The trainers were waiting, and Viggo could feel their impatience from across the narrow run. He flexed his fingers and smiled at the Rekovian. Mockingly. Patronizingly. He could feel the wolf in his chest, fighting to get out, and he let it show in his eyes like the embers of a waking fire. "I don't think they heard you. Maybe it's the accent?"

The man screamed a guttural challenge in his own language and charged.

Viggo caught his first strike and swung it wide. Steel clashed, shrieking with a voice like shattering stone, and Viggo forgot everything else—the

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trainers, the cost of failure, and the needle of fear that always came when he toyed with the Pale Lady's attention.

Now only the Rekovian mattered, only the blade in his hand and the murder in his eyes.

The man began to backpedal. Viggo advanced as the fight got into his blood, pounding with his pulse until he could taste it. The blade spun in his hands, and he felt, rather than saw, the Cymeran take his chance. The boy charged forward, raising his sword like a club. Viggo ducked beneath a stroke from the Rekovian and spun, striking aside the boy's blade with contemptuous ease. The boy stumbled in the thick grass, young and clumsy as he was, a farmer's son with more experience behind a plow than on a battlefield. His sword fell. Viggo caught his shoulder, kned him hard in the chest, and flipped him.

He hit the ground hard and didn't get up.

Viggo ducked instinctively and felt the Rekovian's blade sweep past his head again, burying itself into the turf. He sidestepped and pivoted, driving the hilt of his sword into the point of the man's jaw. He dropped like a stone. The horned helmet rolled to one side, out of its owner's reach.

Viggo stepped back, but before he could gather his wits or even draw a breath, the third man was on him.

Viggo had seen him before, practicing in the ring with the other slaves, but had never fought him. He was a Jamarick, a huge hulk of a man stolen from lands where the ground was hot and the wind was hotter. He'd been carrying no blade when the trainers had forced him into the run, and even now, with the Cymeran's sword in the grass a few mere feet from him, his hands were bare. He was stripped to the waist, coal black skin gleaming with oil and rippling with muscle, and the full-faced helmet he wore grinned with the face of a skull. No eyes could be seen behind the black sockets of the mask. He slammed into Viggo with all the strength bound in his thick frame, and they both went down, wrestling in the wet grass until the wolf felt him losing ground and tore out of his chest like a demon straight from hell.

The old tales said that two spirits fought in a Dreyen's body. First a man's, and second to it the spirit of the animal that he claimed as his

second skin. For the briefest moment before the man was gone and the beast had taken his place, those standing by the fences could see it in his eyes and hear its challenge in his throat. Shouting greeted its arrival, whistles and cheers from behind him, where his own people stood watching.

When the wolf fought, blood flowed freely. And fights with blood were always more interesting.

The wolf dragged the Jamarick down with him. The man began to scream, from pain or fear or both. It bore down on him, fangs tearing at his shoulder, snapping for his throat. Viggo tasted blood, and too quickly it was over. The trainers pulled him off, and the Jamarick scrambled backward, bleeding from his shoulder and spitting hate in his own language. The words, even without their meaning, stung the air. The Rekovian, too, was struggling to his feet, but the boy—the peasant's son—was still. Viggo shook the wolf off, rising to his feet. The men holding him didn't let go, and Viggo bared his incisors at them, trying not to look at the limp form in the grass or the blood on the boy's white face. He'd done this too many times. He knew better than to look.

Only this time, he couldn't help it.

The child was breathing, at least. His breath was too shallow, but he was breathing. Still, he lay crumpled on the grass as if he would never move again. Viggo's heart lurched, and he looked away before anyone could see his fear. Dreyens weren't supposed to be afraid of death.

The tales said that they knew the Pale Lady too intimately for that.

*Get up.* Viggo picked up his blade, whispering the plea beneath his breath where no one else would see it. *Please get up.* Someone was checking him now, an orderly. Viggo could feel the trainers watching him. Another minute and Vladimer Hunt, Fydera Core's head instructor, would notice his hesitation. If he thought that Viggo cared a whit about the Cymeran's fate there would be no end to the trouble it would cause, both to himself and to the boy.

*Please get up.*

The boy did get up, slowly, painfully, with his hand pressed against his side. Viggo walked away. The boy would live. The herbwomen would take

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care of him. Maybe his ribs would be broken or his shoulder wrenched, and they'd let him earn the money to pay his debts another way.

Before he got himself killed.



Viggo ducked out of the ring like a thief, dodging the attention of a trainer as he skirted the weapons shed and slipped into the trees beyond. A row of damp barrels lined the back of the shed, overshadowed by pines, and he knocked the lid off the first and plunged his head in. The searing cold of snowmelt cut through the heat and aggression of the fights. He came up gasping, shaking wet hair out of his eyes.

The blues and grays of the Fyderan mountain range greeted him. They rose up around the training ring like a row of giants, somber and sad. The pine forests on the lower slopes were flushed a deep green, softening the harsh, jutting cliffs of the mountains. The little valley where he stood—called the Core by the few who knew it—was nearly lost among the peaks.

Briefly, he allowed himself to wonder what would happen if he let the wolf have its way—just this once—and disappeared into the cliffs and trees for a few hours. He would have liked to climb up to the crags and find a quiet place, somewhere he could be alone. Or, better yet, he could slip down the gulch at the end of the valley and follow the birchwood trees to the river. He'd been down there a few times—and only been caught once.

He still wore the marks of that beating on his back.

With a sigh, he let the idea of skipping out go. He wouldn't get far, not so early in the day, and he'd had enough trouble with the trainers lately. From the whispers he'd been hearing from them around the fires after dark, he guessed they were under more pressure than usual. The masters accepted only the best from their bodyguards. They bred only the finest bloodlines, raised only the children with the most promise, and culled out the weaker links. With the task of protecting the kingdom's noblemen—men with the blood of kings in their veins—came a heavy responsibility.

The men who trained their charges impressed that on them firmly, sometimes with fists, more often with words that cut like knives.



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No, he was better off staying in the run today. He'd been punished enough lately, and the retributions for mistakes were getting worse. The whole world seemed to be on edge.

The voice that interrupted him was icier than the snowmelt dripping down his back. "Taking in the sights?"

Viggo swore under his breath and turned quickly to face the man who'd come around the corner of the shed. Vladimer Hunt eyed him critically as he dipped a flask into one of the water barrels. "Your chin's bloody. Need an herbwoman?"

Viggo scrubbed at the blood smeared into the reddish-blond scruff on his jawline, irritation prickling his spine. The Core's head instructor had a way of getting under his skin. "It's not my blood."

Vladimer shrugged, leaning against the barrels as he took a long drink. His shaven head gleamed with sweat, and a broad scar slit his skin from his left ear to the base of his throat. Not many Dreyens held the kind of position and authority that he did here with men and slaves who followed his command. Then again, not many Dreyens lived through working as a king's bodyguard for more than two decades. Some men had the devil's mark on their souls, and who better to teach the young than the men who survived what was generally known as a death sentence?

Vladimer drained the flask and looked at him sardonically, up and down, like one of the slaves he bought from the merchant caravans. "The Jamarick had you down back there."

"Not really."

"Looked like it from where I was." Vladimer filled the flask again, stoppered it, and flicked water into the undergrowth. "I thought I was going to have to step in to make sure he didn't damage one of my wolves."

The mockery in his voice cut like a whip. Viggo bit his tongue hard, a curse stinging the back of his tongue. Seven years he'd held the title of First Unit Captain, seven years he'd proved again and again on blood and sweat and steel that there wasn't a man in the Core—save Vladimer himself—who could best him.

But it wasn't enough, and he doubted it ever would be.

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“Dismissed, Instructor?” he spat at last, choking the words past the anger crushing his ribs.

Vladimer waved a hand. Viggo turned back to the run and the rest of his unit.

The man’s voice followed him, low and cut with steel. “Swifter? Next time a slave puts you on the ground, I’ll make you drink his blood. Keep that in mind.”

Viggo bit his tongue, remembering the last time Vladimer had decided on that punishment, and said over his shoulder, “Yessir.”



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## DEATH'S DAUGHTER

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The trainers had gone by the time Viggo returned to the run. Only his unit was left, ranged along the rail fence. They looked like children sitting there, swinging their feet and laughing. Children with swords hanging from their belts and blood on their hands from the fights.

Viggo vaulted over the fence, half tempted to join in the conversation rather than ending it, but he knew better. "I left for two minutes. No one's planning on grappling today?"

Carver Laite, his unit second, stuck a grass stem between his teeth and grinned. "I thought about it. Sounded hard, though. With Billet, 'specially."

Viggo snatched at the grass stem. He missed, but barely. Carver lurched backward and nearly fell off the fence. "Lazy."

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"Exhausted, actually. Worn thin. Bone-tired." Carver resettled himself with an air of injured dignity, sticking the grass stem back between his teeth. His hair was bone white, bleached by years in the sun, and he wore it long, nearly to his shoulders. "Besides," he grimaced and spat something into the grass. A tick, probably. "We were worried about you. You looked sad."

"I looked sad?" Viggo glanced at the girl sitting on the fence to his right and raised an eyebrow. "That's his best excuse?"

She adopted a mock sympathetic look, one that would have convinced any man who didn't know her well. He almost laughed. For all her graceful features and slender good looks, Dex Blade had the soul of a basilisk, and he couldn't imagine her offering anyone real sympathy. "You did, though."

Viggo sighed and leaned back against the fence. "You're right. I am sad."

She crooned soothingly and scooted over to run her fingers through his hair. "Why're you sad?"

"He's just," Viggo gestured at Carver helplessly, "stupid. I can't fix it."

Howls of laughter greeted the words.

Carver squinted at him, looking pleased. "Life's hard, isn't it?"

Dex laughed. Viggo shook his head. Carver took everything lightly, as if the world were a magician's tale that he'd made up to keep himself amused. The only time he was ever serious was during his fights in the run. He fought like a demon on the hunt. The servants called him *bludhærk*, or blood hungry, and the men he fought swore they could see the madness in him. He'd branded a seven-pointed star into his wrist and carried charms around his neck like a superstitious warlock's son, but he spoke the Pale Lady's name like a curse and laughed when Viggo told him to shut up.

"Besides," Carver added. "You're in charge, so you'll get the blame for us not working."

"And the kick up my backside," Viggo said dryly. "But I'm here now, so it's too—"

"SWIFTER!" Vladimer's harsh bellow cut him off.

Viggo flinched, hearing the instructor's fury from all the way across the training run. Carver's face lit up, and his grin widened. "Someone's calling you."

## Death's Daughter

The curse Viggo spat at him only made him laugh.

Vladimer was striding across the run toward them, his coarse features beet-red from the sun and his constant, vicious temper. A girl trotted in his wake, her slight form dwarfed by his massive frame. Viggo glanced at her, curiosity flaming in his chest as he studied her elfin features and honey-tinted hair. A servant, maybe, but if so, one he'd never seen before. More likely she was a slave, come to work in the kitchens or shine the instructor's boots. Vladimer had several such girls at his beck and call. She'd been bought from the south or the coastline. She was tan from more sun and more heat than could be found in the mountains, but her eyes were as pale as a winter sky. He'd never seen such pale eyes.

He realized too late that he was staring. Carver kicked the back of his leg, and he jerked around to look at Vladimer, blurting, "Yessir, Instructor?"

Vladimer snapped his fingers in Viggo's face. "Something wrong with your hearing?"

"No, sir."

A mistake. Vladimer cuffed him, hard, and snapped, "Then don't ignore me."

"Yessir, Instructor."

Vladimer jerked his head at the girl. "Caitlyn Ashcliff. Arrived here last night. Higher ups figured she'd even out our numbers for the pairing in two weeks. Assess her, get her placed, get your unit out in the run for grappling. You have an hour, Swifter. Don't make me wait."

He turned away without waiting for a reply, already shouting instructions at another unit. Viggo stared after him. He could feel the girl's gaze on him, suddenly burning holes into his skin. Not a slave then. A Dreyen. He wouldn't have guessed that. Her fair hair and slight frame would have suited a pixie or a mountain elf better than a Dreyen.

She was looking at him as bluntly as he had stared at her, and the expression in her eyes was not friendly. No, not friendly or even curious. Guarded, he would call it. As if she expected him to resent her for breathing the same air as he did.

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"Where are you from?" His voice sounded harsh, even harsher than he'd intended, but she didn't flinch. Only her eyes seemed to change, growing a little colder, a little more distant. They were gray, he realized. More gray than blue.

"Crainfell." Her voice was as chilly as her eyes.

Crainfell. Viggo looked down to her left forearm, almost hoping she was joking. But the tattoo was there, peeking out from beneath her sleeve, a black compass etched into her skin, symbolizing Crainfell Core's claim on her.

Carver was the first to laugh. Several others joined in, but Viggo didn't feel much like laughing. Fydera Core was one of three main camps set apart to train bodyguards for Cymera's noblemen. Beneath these were four others, lesser camps that accepted lesser trainees, preparing them to guard lower-class politicians and a few of the richer merchants.

Crainfell didn't even fall among one of those. It was a fringe camp, a halfway house for castoffs who had nowhere else to go. Most of the graduates they produced were commissioned as scouts and trackers, bloodhounds for the king's armies. Not guardians.

He raised an eyebrow. "They couldn't have found someone better?"

She looked at him coolly, as if she couldn't hear the mockery the others were spitting at her. "They didn't need to."

He did laugh then, but not for the reason she would think. It was a good answer, a better one than he'd been expecting. She had some kick to her, for a bloodhound. "All right then." He crossed his arms over his chest, nodding to her. "Let's see what you've got."

The vague order confused her. She hesitated, glancing at the others behind him. "What?"

"Your soul first, stupid," Viggo snapped impatiently. Too impatiently. He winced at the sound. Sometimes he thought he could hear Vladimer's violent temper bleeding into his own words, cutting people aside the same way the man did to him. "Let's see it."

Color rose in her cheeks, but he couldn't tell if it stemmed from embarrassment or anger. Most likely anger.

## Death's Daughter

The blue came back into her eyes before the animal that breathed in her dreams at night and mixed its heartbeat with her own stole the color away. Green replaced it. Green as sea ice and gray as the winter storms that ripped the trees from the mountainsides.

The animal was gray. Gray and black and white, as only a snow leopard can be. Viggo would have expected something lesser, something that would have rated her fit to be left in Crainfell. But the ghost cat, Sphinx-like and worshiped as it was by mountain tribes in the north, was a powerful ally, and hardly one to overlook. Or dump in a nowhere training core like Crainfell.

Murmurs of approval ran through the rest of his unit, and Carver whistled at her appreciatively. "Not bad, gorgeous," he called. "Got any other tricks up your sleeve for us?"

The leopard left her so fast that it tore the green from her eyes and left them gray as soot. She bared her incisors at Carver, not bothering to reply. He laughed.

Viggo intervened before Carver could continue. "That'll do for now. They teach you how to fight?"

She was still looking at Carver. "I can fight."

"Good." Viggo winked at her. "I won't make you fight him. You wouldn't win."

Carver flashed a vicious grin. "No one does."

Dex uttered a snort of laughter. "I have."

"We were six. And you didn't 'win'. You called me names until I cried."

"Mmm, kinda still counts."

"We'll have a rematch later," Viggo told them and turned to whistle sharply at a group of slaves repairing the fence a short way off. One of them, a short, solid-looking Cymeran, raised his head. Viggo motioned him over. He came, but reluctantly, shuffling his feet in the short grass, clearly wishing he'd pretended not to hear. He had gray in his hair and scars on his back that were older than Viggo was, scars from a bullwhip and a cat o' nine tails. He'd been an oar slave once. Viggo could see the marks of the shackles on his wrists and ankles.

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He paused out of striking range, his gaze fastened on the stubble at his feet. "Yessir, Guardian?"

"Stay there. I need you." Viggo looked back to the girl. She was looking at the slave, and he could tell that she was seeing the marks of the whip on his back and the gray in his hair instead of the six inches he stood above her and the extra fifty pounds he must have had on her. Her mistake. "There you go. Have at him. First blood."

"First blood?" She frowned, as if she'd never heard the expression before. As if she were too naive even to be ashamed of her own ignorance.

"First blood. That means you keep fighting until he's bleeding. Or you are." He bared his incisors in a wolf's smile. "Good luck."

She looked at him for a long moment, as if trying to decide if he were really serious. Her hair was plaited back from her face, twisted into a thick braid down her back like a peasant woman. She looked too young to be dangerous. Too young to be here. He smiled at her again, half tempted to ask if she was afraid of blood, but before he could she had shrugged and turned away. The slave looked at her, wariness written into the weathered lines in his face, and, almost unconsciously, he took a few steps back. Young and small as she was, he had good reason to fear her. Man or woman, Dreyens were knit with the Pale Lady, and death followed them like a shadow.

Viggo leaned against the fence. "First blood, *chara*," he called cheerfully to the slave. "She's barely a pup, so it won't take you long. Then you can go back to your work."

*Chara*. Cattle. The slur was intended to goad the man into the fight, and it worked, as Viggo had known it would. He was a slave, but his presence here showed a fighter's heart. Good slaves who knew how to bow their heads were not wasted as Dreyen fodder.

The man's fingers tightened into a fist, and he began to circle. The girl bared her teeth at him, feral as the cat that breathed in her soul. Carver leaned closer to Viggo, lowering his voice. "You don't really think she'll win, do you?"

"Of course not," Viggo replied absently. "But I have to say I gave her a chance, don't I?"



## Death's Daughter

Carver laughed. "Cold."

Viggo shrugged. It might be, but he didn't intend to lose any sleep over it. First blood would keep her from getting badly hurt, and the faster the man put her down the sooner he was done with this. If the girl had been left to Vladimer, she would have gotten considerably less consideration.

Distracted by Carver's whispering, he almost missed the first blow. It was the slave who started things, although most would have held off the fight as long as they could. Perhaps he really did believe what Viggo had told him, that the girl was hardly up to the task—that he might get off with an easy fight. If so, he was a fool. It was always the women who were the most vicious in the cores. Always the women who had more to prove, who studied pain as if it were an art. They were Death's daughters, rocked to sleep with the Pale Lady's frostbitten breath, and she passed her secrets on to them with the favor of a benevolent mother.

This girl, Crainfell trained, fringe-bred, and castoff as she was, was no exception. The first blow clipped her jaw, and Viggo saw the pain of it wake something in her. Anger. Or a lack of pity, a blindness to the man's scars that hadn't been there before.

She ducked the second blow, swift as the ghost cat that shared her soul, and caught his wrist, twisting it down and to the side. Something popped. His shoulder. She kicked him in the leg hard enough to buckle his knee, spun and drove her elbow into his nose with a strength that made even Viggo wince.

The man went down, sprawled in the grass, the blood streaming down his face ending the fight.

Viggo's unit erupted into a round of false cheers, whistling and catcalling raucously. The girl stepped back, away from the man who was swearing hate at her. Her eyes were very, very gray. Viggo straightened up and grinned. "Well done, Crainfeller. That wasn't half bad."

The girl gave him a look of such contempt that heat bristled beneath his skin, raising his hackles. What had Vladimer said her name was? Caitlyn? Whatever it was, she was good. Better than a bloodhound had any right to be. Viggo walked past her, dropped down on one knee beside the slave and felt his shoulder. Dislocated. The man spat at him, but Viggo ignored him

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as he jerked the joint back into place. The man uttered a yelp like a wounded animal, though it snapped back cleanly. Viggo jerked his head toward the healing houses. "Go on. Tell them I said you're off for the day."

The man wiped blood from his face and stood. Viggo turned his back on him and nodded at the girl. "Come with me. We'll get you a tattoo you don't have to be ashamed of."

Her lips tightened into a thin line. She didn't like him. That was painfully obvious, and already he was finding resentment crawling up his skin when he looked at her. Death's daughter or not, she didn't belong.

Not in his unit, anyway.



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## WARREN

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**D**awn arrived late. A watery, timid sun had slipped over the horizon only to be shrouded with mist. Dark, dripping pines wore the fog like a cloak around their bare branches, needles shivering in the wind. Cat could feel the cold in her lungs as she ran on the narrow path. Wet grass slapped against her legs and the thin air stabbed into her chest like a narrow-bladed knife, leaving her gasping. They'd been running for barely a quarter of an hour now—scarcely a mile and a half behind them—but she could feel every step in her pounding pulse, in her gasping lungs. Twelve others from Second Unit ran with her. She could feel them staring, waiting for her to fall behind. Or worse, to quit.

A girl was leading the group—a tall, slender sort with long legs and the grace of a deer on the steep trail. Cat could see her up ahead, running with

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her head up and her long black ponytail swaying. When she at last called a halt Cat stepped off the trail and leaned against the rough bole of a pine, working to swallow her humiliation as she waited for her lungs to adjust.

The others in the group left the trail as well, splitting off in twos and threes. Low chatter echoed among the pines, dampened by the heavy fog. Cat shut her ears to their laughter, looking up at the craggy peaks that loomed overhead. The leopard liked the mountains. It felt at home here, and its contentment made it easier for her to forget the loneliness tugging at her. Maybe she could slip away later and explore. Get up past the tree line and find the hidden ledges, the narrow trails that only the leopard would be able to reach. Heights had always helped her distance herself, forget where she was, and who she was supposed to be. Heights and the rain.

The voice that startled her out of her thoughts sounded as if the mountains had spoken. Deep, craggy, rocky words that could have been uttered by the cliffs around her, rather than by a man's tongue. "Thirsty?"

Cat looked up, heat rising to her cheeks. One of the men from the unit had wandered over and was leaning against a boulder half-buried in the damp ground. She'd seen him during the run, a man a year or two older than she was and at least three or four stones heavier. His black eyes bored into her face with undisguised curiosity, and the smile on his face was twisted by a scar marring his skin from his temple to his jawline. He held up a waterskin when she looked at him, saying with the same gravelly tone, "Gotta keep d—drinking this high up."

He tossed it to her. Cat caught it, sizing him up as she took a long drink. His shirt was damp with sweat, his dark, close-cropped hair slick with it. Corded muscle stood out on his broad shoulders and pressed from beneath his tunic. Everything about him was big, built like a bull or a bear, broad and solid, and yet at the same time he was only a half a head taller than she was. Short, for a Dreyen. Especially a man.

He grinned at her, white teeth gleaming in stark contrast with his ebony skin. "All right?"

Cat bristled and bared her teeth at him. "Fine."

## Warren

"P—pretty tough coming up here from the coast." His words had an odd way of stumbling off his tongue, as if they tripped over themselves every so often. It made him seem younger, somehow. "I g—got here when I was twelve. Couldn't get a f—full breath for a week. It'll pass."

Cat hesitated, not sure whether he was mocking her or not. She took another drink and stoppered the skin. "Thanks."

He nodded, his smile flashing again. It only ever seemed to last the briefest second, like a lightning strike, and it was gone, leaving her wondering if she'd seen it at all. "Heard you come f—from Crainfell."

Her jaw tightened. Word traveled fast in a Core like this. No one's secret was their own for very long. "So?"

"So, you put Mace Harden on his back y—yesterday in grappling. I f—figured I should meet you. See what kind of a person you a—are. I'm Warren. Warren Baxter."

"That's nice."

Warren raised an eyebrow at her, the friendly warmth in his eyes in no way diminished by her rudeness. "You d—don't tell people your name?"

"Cat."

"You l—like it here much?"

"About as much as anywhere else I've been. I like the mountains." A jay called from the branches somewhere above her. "Don't much care for anything else. Where did you come from?"

Warren shrugged, rolling a green pinecone in his fingers absently. His hands were big, too, big and callused. A warrior's hands. "Nowhere s—special. Used to be in Madira, down south a w—ways. Trainer started beating on me one day, said I wasn't talking right. Wasn't the f—first time, but I decided it was going to be the last. Broke his arm, and four r—ribs before they could get me off h—him." He grinned. "Thought they'd shred my back for it. 'Stead, I got sent h—here."

A ghost of a smile touched the corner of Cat's mouth. She could see the pride the story gave him, even after all these years, as if he could still feel the blows landing, still hear the crack of bone, still taste the revenge for beatings he'd taken without fighting back. A disability in the Cores, even one as simple as a stutter, was most often a death sentence. It took a special

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kind of man to turn it to his advantage. "And they welcomed you with open arms when you arrived, of course."

Warren bared his incisors in a savage smile. "E—exactly."

"He charmed us all with his winning smiles and dashing good looks." A girl appeared out of the fog, the leader Cat had seen earlier. She brushed silky hair back behind her ear and smiled at Cat. "We couldn't resist him. I'm Bria, by the way."

"Cat." Cat shifted, aware of how quickly jealousies flared up in the Cores. Friendships were deep, outsiders unwelcome.

Bria stole the pinecone out of Warren's hands and peeled several of the scales off, flicking one at him when he tried to snatch it back. "You keep up well. I had to drag Warren up the hills when he first got here."

Warren managed to retrieve the pinecone, and he held it out of her reach, winking at Cat. "I just d—didn't want to run."

A smile tugged at the corner of Cat's mouth before she could catch it. She wasn't used to friendliness. Men were brutal in the cores, women vicious and vindictive. They didn't joke and tease.

Bria exchanged a knowing glance with Warren. She was darker than most of the women Cat knew, dark like burnt copper, or desert sand. "I heard Viggo welcomed you in."

Cat's stomach clenched, and the memory of the Core captain's sharp contempt rose unbidden in her mind.

"I wouldn't judge the rest of us by that group. They're . . ." Bria hesitated, searching for the right word.

Warren supplied it for her. "S—stupid."

"I was going to say 'unfriendly.'"

Warren shrugged. "Stupid's b—better. Although if I'm a—allowed to curse—"

"You're not." Bria rolled her eyes and flashed Cat a smile. "We're working on his language. He keeps getting us all punishment details for swearing at trainers."

"Only Vladimer."

## Warren

"That's exactly who you shouldn't—" Bria cut herself off and took a deep breath, relaxing into a serene smile. "Warren, one day, I'm going to murder you."

He cackled.

Cat bit back a laugh. "So . . . I *shouldn't* swear at the Head Instructor?"

"Not unless you want our whole unit scrubbing outhouses." Bria tugged the tie out of her long ponytail and shook her hair out. "Warren hates us all, so he does it anyway."

"That's t—true." Warren nodded sagely.

With a flush, Cat realized they were teasing back and forth in an attempt to put her at ease. It was a stark contrast from her reception with Viggo's unit yesterday, and she wasn't entirely sure how to respond.

Bria saved her the trouble. "We'd better finish the run now, or the trainers will have my head for being late." She hesitated, tying her long hair up again thoughtfully, and looked at Cat. "We aren't very formal in Second Unit. I wouldn't worry much about pecking orders and all that. Most of us just help each other out when we need it. So don't be afraid to ask if you want something."

"Ask m—me if you're having trouble with rules." Warren shrugged, rolling a kink out of his shoulders. "I'm always a—around."

Bria shut her eyes, that serene smile returning. "Please. Do not ask Warren about rules. I have enough trouble."

Cat pushed hair out of her eyes, taking an awkward liking to the odd pair. Sincere or not, there was something she liked in both of them. "I'll remember that."



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## COMPASS BRAT

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Dusk fell reluctantly, as if the sun were hesitant to give up the skies it had claimed so late in the day. The snow still clinging to the higher peaks was tinted rose gold by the setting sun, and night's forerunners slipped among the pines, stealing the light and painting the trees black against the fading skies. Viggo ran a hand through his sweaty hair and watched the last of his unit struggle through the Core's obstacle course, a maze of narrow tight walks, mud pits, nets, and rope swings. They were late again, later than usual. A whippoorwill was already beginning to call in the hollows. Another answered it from the trees at the base of the cliffs. And another, further off this time.

Billet, the last boy in Viggo's unit still on the obstacle course, slipped on a narrow tight walk and fell.



Viggo swore under his breath, a sharp needle of anger lancing through his chest. Billet had already fallen three times on the difficult course. He was soaked, plastered with mud and worse things, and discouraged. The others in the unit weren't helping. They'd finished long since, but Core rules stipulated that no one could leave until the last team member had made it through. Most of them were lounging against the fence near Viggo or lying on their backs on the short turf looking up at the emerging stars. They were tired and hungry, and Viggo could hear the resentful murmuring beginning. In a moment, he'd be forced to quell it, before it got ugly.

Billet crawled out of the mud pit, shaking himself off and wiping filth out of his eyes. Someone swore at him. Loudly. In the gathering dark, Viggo couldn't see who it was, but he had a rough guess. Dex never had any patience for Billet, especially when he was running the obstacle courses. She herself was light and balanced, and Viggo couldn't remember the last time he'd seen her fall. But Billet was different, larger and heavier than she was, and not as light on his feet. It never helped to swear at him.

However much they all wanted to.

"Try it again, Billet," he called, masking his own irritation with some difficulty. "Watch the chalk next time, all right?"

The boy nodded, not looking at him. His pallid, blotched face was flushed with humiliation. On another day Viggo might have felt sorry for him, but he was too tired and too hungry to care now. Besides, it was always Billet. Every night. The boy was built like an ox, broad and heavy and as clumsy as a newborn pup. He could outwrestle any slave in the pens, and the things he managed to do with a war axe in his hands made even Viggo flinch. But the obstacle course always caught him. And it always would.

Even the animal that hunted with him and shared his stocky frame was no help. The desert wolf, some called it. Or the devil's hound. The tales said its laughter came straight from the Pale Lady's lips, and the power in its bone-crushing jaws kept most of the cursing and any retribution for his clumsiness at bay. But it was no leopard, and it fell on the tight walks as often as he did.

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Carver came over and leaned on the fence next to Viggo, his lank frame slouched casually against the splintered railings. "Say the word, and I'll run it for him. No one has to know."

Viggo glanced at him. His hair was pulled back from his face, and he was fingering one of the amulets he wore around his throat as he watched Billet. A cougar's incisor, bound to a necklace of woven twine and leather. He claimed it warded off the ghosts that were said to wander the hollows. Viggo didn't think it did any such thing. If such ghosts were real, he doubted the broken tooth of a dead cat would keep his name from their lips. If the dead did still wander these mountains, they would do as they liked, and no one would keep them from it.

He looked back at the training run, watching Billet traversing a net uneasily. "No. Vladimer would find out. You know how many snitches he has. Besides, Billet needs to get this." He spat, lowering his voice, and added, "He's had enough chances."

Carver shrugged compliantly. "Whatever you say."

Viggo grunted. Billet edged out on a tight walk, shuffling his feet along the chalked wood. Blast the boy, he was holding his breath again. How was he supposed to learn to balance properly if he couldn't loosen up? Viggo opened his mouth to shout at him but thought better of it. If he startled him now he'd most likely fall again, and they'd be back where they had started.

Carver broke into his thoughts by saying low, "Trouble's coming."

Viggo looked up and flinched as he caught sight of Vladimer crossing the compound in their direction. He'd been waiting for the head instructor to notice that his unit was the only one not eating in the mess hall. If Billet didn't hurry up, they would all be on punishment detail tonight, and they could forget about dinner.

Unless Vladimer happened to be in a particularly good mood.

Which wasn't likely.

Viggo straightened up as the man drew closer. To his relief, he didn't look angry. More than likely he was headed to his cabin after mess and would be content with a few barbed words as he passed.

Too late, Viggo realized that he was smiling.

Carver spat a curse and retreated, putting the security of the fence between himself and the instructor. Viggo stood his ground, although he was tempted to follow suit and disappear. Vladimer's smile was more dangerous than his anger. Calm brutality was always more painful than wild rage. "Almost finished, sir," he said as Vladimer drew level with him. "Billet was just—"

"Being Billet," Vladimer finished for him. The man was still smiling. But the look in his eyes was colder than the fog that had rolled in over the mountains. He stepped closer, closer than was necessary, closer than was comfortable. "No trouble. Take your time."

Viggo's breath froze, and he took a step back. Stupid, stupid mistake. Any other day it would have earned him a solid blow, but today Vladimer took no notice of it. The man shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. "I asked you to do a job for me, Swifter."

Viggo clenched a fist, his heart thrumming too fast and too loud behind his ribs. He took another step back, and the wood rail of the fence dug into his back. "You did?" His voice sounded hoarse, as hoarse as if Vladimer's fingers were already latched around his throat. He glanced over his shoulder, looking for Carver, but the other man had disappeared. Curse him. "I'm not sure—"

"The Crainfeller, remember?" Vladimer said slowly, enunciating his words with chilling mockery. The muscles in his broad jaw were working. "That little bloodhound. I asked you to assess her."

Viggo's temper flared, and he swallowed, trying hard to keep his tone respectful. "Sir, I did—"

Vladimer's calm snapped. He hit Viggo across the face so hard his head snapped back. He stumbled sideways, a hand clapped over his mouth and nose. "Oh, you did?" Vladimer hissed. "Then what the *bloody hell* is she doing over in Second Unit? Tell me that, Swifter!"

Hot blood slipped through his fingers, dripped down his wrist. His vision was blurred, stars and moonlight sliding in the darkness. He tripped on the uneven ground, his ankle twisted, and he nearly fell, but caught the fence to keep his balance.

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“Was it that difficult, Swifter?” Vladimer was shouting now, and his course features were red with fury. He continued advancing, closing the gap between them as Viggo backed away along the fence. “Or are you just so *bloody* incompetent that you couldn’t see what was right in front of your eyes? I ask you to test her, she puts a slave on the ground in under a minute, *and you cast her off*? Did you really think you were so blessed with bloody talent that you couldn’t spare a bunk for her?”

The rest of his unit were on their feet by now. Even Carver, who’d been the first to back away, had reappeared. Viggo could see the fury burning in his green eyes, but none of them moved to intervene. They knew better. For his own sake, he was glad of that. “Sir, I only thought—”

“You thought you’d dump her somewhere where she wouldn’t bother you, is that it?” Vladimer’s fist snapped back. Viggo flinched, fighting the wolf down to keep it from tearing the man’s throat open when the blow landed, but Vladimer mastered himself and spat, “Did you think I wouldn’t notice her dominating that bloody unit, Swifter?”

“No, sir.” His voice sounded thick, thick with blood, thick with fury. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry! Tell me you’re going to fix it!”

“I’ll fix it, sir.” Viggo wiped blood off his face and spat on the ground. “Tonight. Just as soon as I finish here.”

“You’d better.” Vladimer turned his back. “Or I’ll find someone who will. You’re not half as irreplaceable as you think you are.”

He walked away. Viggo crushed the fury raging through his breast, snarling under his breath, “Neither are you, *Ky’tsa*.”

If he’d been less of a coward, he would have said it aloud. But he’d always been yellow. Right through to his core.



Full dark had fallen by the time Viggo and his unit made it to the mess hall. The moon was out, and the cold with it. Viggo glanced up at it once before he stepped inside. It hung over the trees like a silver coin lost in velvet darkness.

The fire roaring in the central fireplace was newly laid, pine logs popping and spitting sparks across the worn floor. Heat and noise washed over him as he entered, laughter and loud voices echoing along the vaulted ceiling. The broad hall was packed with trainees, long tables crowded and overflowing. Kitchen slaves flitted between the tables. The smell of the food they carried made Viggo's stomach pinch with hunger. He followed the rest of his unit to the table nearest the fireplace. A sheep's carcass hung over the flames, already half eaten and turning on a metal spit. The smell of the mutton mixed with the aroma of the burning pine made his stomach twist again.

He sat, and several slaves whisked around their table, setting down platters of crusty bread and bowls of oil and vinegar, plates and tumblers and jugs of milk and well water. Viggo tore off a chunk of bread and dipped it into the oil, looking up as Billet sat down opposite him. The boy was still plastered with mud and filth, although his hands and face had been scrubbed clean hurriedly. Viggo grinned. "Shower tonight, Billet. I don't fancy sleeping in the same cabin with you smelling like that."

Billet shrugged self-consciously, his broad, rough features growing red. "I'll clean up. Sorry to take so long, Viggo." He gestured at the bruise smoldering beneath the skin on Viggo's jaw. "And . . . sorry about that. My fault."

Viggo probed at the split in his lip with the tip of his tongue. "Not this time. If anyone was to blame, it was me. Doesn't matter." He barked a laugh. "Still, you fall six times in the same night again and I'll have you running the trail until midnight."

"With me on your back," Carver added, leaning over to join the conversation.

Billet laughed. "I'd probably die."

Viggo leaned back to let a slave reach past him with a platter of meat. "Mostly from the stench." The wooden platter clunked awkwardly against a pitcher, slopping water across the table. Viggo caught it before it fell, a snap of irritation shooting through his bones and a sharp rebuke on the tip of his tongue as he looked up. It died unspoken.

The Cymeran boy.

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His arm was bound to his chest with a sling of faded linen, and his face was as drawn and pinched as Viggo had last seen it, painted in blood in the training run. His eyes were as hollow as a dead man's. He flinched when Viggo looked at him and murmured quickly, "Sorry, Guardian."

Heat rose in Viggo's face, and he looked away before the boy could see the guilt in his eyes. A kitchen slave. They'd made him a kitchen slave. Even in that brief glance, he'd seen the shame of it in the boy's eyes. Kitchen slaves were given the worst jobs, the least food, and the most work. And if he owed debts, a few years in the runs as Dreyen fodder would have paid them. Kitchen slaves were slaves for life.

Viggo didn't look up again as the boy set down another platter and moved away. The freshly cooked mutton was still steaming, the aroma smoky and sharp with the flavor of the fat, but he wasn't hungry any longer.

Carver glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. "All right?"

"Yes." Viggo stood up. "I'm going to find the Crainfeller. Vladimer'll have my head if she leaves before I talk to her."

Carver raised his head, looking around the crowded room, and nodded toward one of the corners. "There she is. Next to Baxter, back corner."

Viggo looked in the direction he'd indicated and swore under his breath. She and Baxter, and Second Unit's captain, Bria Xinder, were all sitting together and looking remarkably friendly for it. He and Baxter had never gotten along, not since the other boy had been transferred here when they were twelve. The last time their paths had crossed there had been blood spilled, and not only Baxter's either. Viggo still bore scars from it, although the other man's were more prominent.

He had no wish to clash with him again.

"I'll be right back," he said over his shoulder. Carver grunted acknowledgement as Viggo left, winding his way through the tables toward the back corner where the three of them were sitting.

Slaves and other trainees stepped out of his way. Bria was the first to see him coming. The smile vanished from her face, and she nudged Warren gently. The man already had hostility written all over his face when he

looked up, and Viggo felt his own temper rising at the sight. Warren leaned back in his seat, his black eyes sharp with animosity. "S—Swifter."

"Hey, mute." Viggo leaned against the table opposite theirs and crossed his arms over his chest. "Still acting the watchdog for your pretty mistress?"

Warren went to rise, but Bria caught his arm and pulled him back down into his seat. Her eyes were snapping with anger, but her voice was perfectly in control as she said softly, "What do you want, Viggo?"

Viggo smiled at her. Everyone knew that Warren could have taken her position if he'd wanted it. It wouldn't have been difficult either, at least not for him. Bria's skills lay more in diplomacy and languages rather than fighting. She held her own well enough, especially over the main group in her unit, but Warren was in a league of his own. Everyone had expected him to take her place the day he'd been assigned to Second Unit rather than First because of his stutter. But he hadn't. He seemed to see himself more as Bria's enforcer rather than her rival, and she'd held onto her title much longer than she might have because of it. Viggo seldom saw him with anyone else. "Came to see how our little bloodhound's doing." He looked over at the Crainfeller. She was watching the three of them silently, but even in the uncertain light Viggo could see the irritation in her eyes. They were blue again, as blue as the first time he'd seen them. "Settling in all right?" he asked casually.

Her lips tightened, and he almost laughed. By the gods of war, she had a temper as quick as his own. Good for her. "Fine," she said flatly. Her tone was cold, as cold as the icelands where the ghost cat in her heart thrived.

Viggo studied her more closely, running his eyes over the healing tattoo on her shoulder. The scorpion, poised to strike, was as black as pitch and etched with gold lines. Gold for wealth, black for the darkness in a Dreyen's soul. "Healing up nicely?"

"Yes."

Bria was watching him, and he could see the confusion growing in her expression. Warren was as impassive as ever. Viggo tried not to remember the power behind Warren's punch. He could still hear the crunch of his own ribs breaking, although Warren's scream had been worse. He looked

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back at the Crainfeller. "Glad to hear it. Tomorrow's going to be a little different, though. You're going to join me and my unit in the run. We're over on the western side, near the obstacle course. Ask anyone, they'll show you the way."

The girl stiffened; her eyes darted to Bria. "Why?"

"Because I said so."

That sparked her off. Anger, real anger, flamed in her eyes like a torch touched to oil. It would be interesting to see how far he had to push her before it came out.

And what would happen when it did.

"I'd really rather not," she hissed. "Thanks anyway."

Viggo straightened up and winked at her. "Didn't ask you if you wanted to, compass brat." He turned his back, saying over his shoulder, "Don't be late. Believe me, it'll be twice as humiliating if I have to come get you."

She said nothing else, and he left her without another thought. Most of the tables had begun to empty by this time, with only his unit left in the center of the room. The slaves had begun to clear away the dishes, the scraps of meat, the crusts of the bread. Some of the food disappeared surreptitiously into apron pockets or sleeves, but Viggo pretended not to notice. That kind of thievery hardly mattered; the food would go to the hounds and sheepdogs anyway. He knew only too well what it was to be hungry enough to be desperate for scraps.

The Cymeran boy was with them, clearing a table in the corner. Viggo glanced at him and stayed his steps a moment. He could see the bruises on the boy's face. Maybe in a few minutes the hall would be empty, and he could slip him something more than scraps, something that might actually fill his belly. The boy might not take it from him, but it was worth a try.

His eyes caught the flash of steel in the boy's hand, and he turned away so quickly that he nearly tripped over a bench. One of the other slaves looked at him oddly, and he bared his teeth at her and left the mess hall in a rush. Still, quick as he went, the memory of the resolve in the boy's face and the dull sheen of the knife disappearing into his sleeve came after him, as haunted as the brush of a ghost's hand against his soul.