

PROLOGUE

Her heart thundered in her chest like it was going to burst as she ran, but she kept pushing on. Her pursuers weren't giving up and neither was she. The forest urged her on as she ran and the leaves whispered words of encouragement to her soul.

Try as she could, she couldn't come up with a reasonable explanation as to why she was being hunted like a beast, why anyone, for that matter, would want to hurt her. But if the bleeding wound in her side told her anything, it was that reasonable explanation or not, her assailants weren't going to stop until she was as dead as a doornail.

Quickly, she closed her eyes and whispered to the forest in the sacred tongue, a language known only to her kind and that which nature itself understood. "Prevent the pursers," she said and immediately, it responded; the forest loved her and was already on her side even before she spoke to it.

Without having to say another word, a path opened before her and she took it, vines creeping to cover it the moment she stepped away. She came upon a clearing in the forest and her soul was lifted; she was safe. But no sooner had she given that sigh of relief that an arrow suddenly came out of nowhere and struck her in the shoulder, embedding itself very close to her chest. She screamed in a mixture of pain and surprise as she hit the ground, clutching her latest wound even as the older one still bled profusely.

"There's the little witch," said a man as he came strutting out of the forest with four more men behind him, each one armed with a bow and arrow. The man was tall, sporting a black hair that stopped at his neck and a little moustache conversant with men of his age. He wore a chainmail unlike the full knight armour that his men were putting on. A sword hung at his hip, a bow in his hand and a signet ring bearing the engraving of two snakes coiling round a sword with an eagle wing on each side on the littlest finger of his left hand. The engraving was one which the fallen woman knew so well; the symbol of the house of Winchmore, rulers of the great Kingdom of Cyrian.

"Nicolas," she said, seething with rage as she looked up into the blue eyes of the man who had smiled so many times at her before but only a scowl graced his face now.

"Hello, Fara," he replied, giving her a quick condescending smile. "I must say that I never knew that you could run this fast. Guess you were humoring me by letting me win all those races since we were children, right?"

"You shouldn't have attacked my people," she said, standing up as a spell began to take shape in her mind. But as the spell took form in the palm of her hands, two arrows lodged themselves in her back and she screamed as she fell on her knees in another wave of pain.

Fara realised that the arrows had been laced, she could feel the poison running through her veins even as she was on the ground. Quickly, she muttered a spell and the death fluid stilled in her body. But it was only a matter of time, she knew that. She would never be able to hold it forever. Eventually, she would lose control and the poison would run its course, killing her as it did.

But that would not be until she had cleared up one thing. "Why are you doing this, Nicolas?" she asked, looking into his eyes and wondering what could have caused the fine young man she had known to become that; whatever *that* was. "We were on the same side. We were a family."

"Fara, this is the task that the Creator had set before me. A task which I must perform," he replied.
"Surely, you understand this."

"The Creator has nothing to do with this!" she returned, her anger springing anew. "This is a reflection of your fear, Nicolas. You, the mighty son of Eldor, are afraid of what we are, of what we can become."

"Afraid?" he repeated as if she had just made the most ludicrous statement in the entirety of the realm. "I was not the one who ran away and left her kin to die back there, Fara. *You* did. *You* are the one that's afraid, and you should be."

Without warning, he brought out his sword and stabbed Fara in the chest, burying the blade almost completely in her heart. She looked down, a surprised expression on her face as her mind still seemed unable to comprehend the steel weapon embedded in her body. She fell to the ground, the fight clearly gone out of her as she bled onto the soil.

But just as the blood touched the ground, it immediately transformed into a green light energy; the energy of life. The wind picked up speed, howling like an injured wolf and the forest echoed it. The energy flowed up to Fara, filling her in her attempt to heal the fatal wound in her chest from which crimson fluid still gushed out.

"This is a war you cannot win, Nicolas," said Fara to him as her eyes turned green and her voice echoed from within the earth. "The soul of magic can never be destroyed." And then, the energy dissipated and Fara breathed her last.

Everything seemed to cease in its step the moment the last drop of life drained from the witch's body and silence descended upon the forest so heavily that even the men felt it within their souls.

But Nicolas wasn't prepared to let it remain that way. "Well, I am Nicolas, Vanquisher of evil," he said to Fara as he pulled his sword from her corpse. "And I will not rest until I prove you wrong."

They had both made promises, and they were ready to keep them, even after death.

ONE

Kyra's hair swayed with the wind as she attempted to survey where she was and which way to go. She had tried countless times to get her hair braided and away from her face but the unruly thing just wouldn't budge, always loosening itself as if in mockery of her attempts. And added to her dilemma was the fact that she was in some sort of grassland with a very tired body and no end in sight. Just then, as if to get itself noticed, her stomach growled in hunger.

"Just hang in there, belly," she said, patting it affectionately. "I just have to find us a way out of this godforsaken land and you can get fed, how about that?" She wasn't sure if it was in response to what she had said but the growling stopped and she had a moment of peace to herself.

Contrary to what anyone would think at the sight of her, Kyra wasn't a homeless person. In fact, she had a very nice home; *had* being the operative word. She didn't need a seer to tell her that her uncle and aunt-in-law would never take her back after what she had done.

Kyra had grown up an orphan. She lost both her parents at a very young age, so young, in fact, that she had no memory of how they looked, or anything else about them for that matter. She couldn't even tell which features she took from which of them or which one of them she looked the most like. They were a mystery to her, a hole which existed in her past that she had no idea of how to fill.

Fortunately, her uncle and his wife had taken her in, nursed her to maturity, given her good food to eat, a warm bed to sleep in, the best clothes they could afford. All in all, they treated her like the daughter they never had.

But even with the love they had given to her, Kyra had a problem with her foster parents which only grew worse as she herself grew older. The problem was getting her a suitor. It wasn't that Kyra wasn't beautiful; she definitely was that and more. She was of her average height, not so short that the man would have a problem with her in a public pose or so tall that he would be intimidated by it. In addition to her height, she had well-defined hips and bosoms just right of her age, dazzling brown eyes and raven-black hair that even though caused her endless trouble during styling still left the men ogling her all day long. In truth, she was very pleasing to the eyes and no one could dispute it.

The suitors themselves weren't the problem either; the line outside their house was never ending and many of them even got into bitter fights daily over her. Every man wanted her, ranging from the most famous of them to the richest, they all vied for her hand in marriage and were ready to do whatever it took to win it.

And so, the real problem, truth be told, was Kyra herself. Despite her right age and the countless suitors of standard, she just never seemed to want to pick any of them. Her aunt-in-law had warned her times without number that she had to pick a suitor soon or they would all get disinterested and leave. "No man wants a disdainful woman," she had said to her.

But the suitors never left and Kyra never picked. Somehow, deep within herself, something nagged her that she could never settle down with any of them and be happy, and that caused her foster parents merciless headaches.

It was on one of those days when the argument was at its peak that they cornered her in the barn and told her that they had received her from one William of Fraischer, a lord from the far south of the realm,

and he was coming to take her home with him in a couple of hours. Kyra had never been so enraged as she was in that moment of what she termed as pure betrayal; all she could see was red. Everything happened so fast after that.

The initial reason why Kyra was in the barn was to check on the hay they had harvested the day before; that was what she was doing when her foster parents delivered the news to her. One moment, she held a burning torch in her hand which she was using to inspect the hay; the next, she was throwing the torch into the hay and it was on fire. As if fueled by the furnace of the underworld, the fire grew so quickly and wildly that it caught the whole barn in a matter of seconds. And then, Kyra ran.

She had been thinking about it for a very long time, even packed all her clothes into her satchel on so much occasions to leave; but she never did, not until that day.

Without thinking too much about it, she pushed her uncle and aunt-in-law out of the way, ran of the barn, grabbed her satchel from where she had stored it under the bed, and ran. Her uncle chased her down, threatened to lock her up in a dungeon till she became a grandmother, resorted to begging her to come back home before threatening her again with disowning. But Kyra never turned back. She ran into the forest and two days later, she was still running from the only people she known in the world and surviving on the berries she had picked as she passed through the forest. Unfortunately, the forest was now very far behind her and unless she ate some real food soon, she probably wouldn't see another sunrise again.

Just then, as if in answer to her predicament, the smell of cooked meat suddenly wafted through the air.

"Food!" she exclaimed, putting her nose in the air and sniffing like a dog as she attempted to find the source. And she stumbled onto a footpath in the grassland; one she never would have found without luck. "Yes!" she exclaimed again as she saw fresh boot prints, and even a cart trail. Prints meant people, and people meant food; she had saved herself.

As if by an unknown source, strength coursed through her body and she ran down the path, laughing as she went. The wind picked up speed and the grasses swayed with it, their rhythm mixing almost as if they were cheering alongside Kyra. But she took no notice of them. All that was on her mind was that she survived, even as she knew little of how important it would turn to be.

TWO

The town which Kyra came upon at the end of the path was a lot farther than she could have anticipated. The night had already fallen and the moon risen before she arrived in. As she walked, lot of people kept glancing at her and she fully understood why. A woman, especially one of her age, didn't normally travel alone, not to talk about at that time of the night.

But understanding aside, the townspeople's glances were the furthestmost thing from Kyra's mind at that moment. The sudden burst of strength that had gripped her earlier was gone and it replaced by an even larger feeling that she desperately had to see to; tiredness. "Just keep putting one foot in front of the other, Kyra," she said to herself as she walked. "One foot in front of the other."

She finally looked up as the road branched into various streets and realised then that she had no idea of the town's layout; she had been too busy avoiding the stares to ask. Fortunately, three men were passing by just then and made to ask them. However, not even one of them acknowledged her presence when she spoke to them, almost as if they were oblivious to her presence.

"Don't mind them, my girl. They're just being rude," said an old woman as she came up behind Kyra that she jumped with a start. But the old woman didn't seem to notice her fright; or pretended not to. "Tell me, what are you doing outside all alone at this time of the night?" she asked.

"I just arrived in this town," she replied. "Can you please tell me where the tavern is?"

"By the Creator, you're travelling alone?" she said, her eyes widening in surprise as she looked Kyra from up to down again; she couldn't believe what she was seeing. "How old are you?"

"I clocked seventeen three weeks ago," she replied, earning another scandalised look from the woman. "Please ma'am, I haven't had a decent meal all day, can you please point me towards the tavern?"

"Of course, my girl," she replied, giving Kyra a pitiful look and thinking she had probably run away from home to meet a man. "The tavern is just right down the road, don't turn to the left or to the right and you won't miss it."

"Thank you very much," replied Kyra, quickly continuing on her way before the woman could ask more about her supposed runaway.

True to her words, Kyra found the tavern right down the street, just a few buildings away from the point she had met the old woman.

The tavern was a grey heavy wood building. At just two floors high, it loomed over the town filled with only small houses. Its wall was pretty clean, its surface undisturbed; a clear sign that it was built recently. A sign of a pride of lions announcing the tavern as *The Den* hung above the doorpost, shaking as if in greeting when Kyra opened the door.

The inside of the tavern proved a lot warmer than the outside, courtesy of three hearths placed in the corner of the reasonably large establishment. The tables were distributed evenly across the room, some occupying as much as five chairs while others only held one. Some occupants of some tables had pulled in extra chairs to up to six round a table accommodate their numbers and others added extra tables to give more room for the steaming plates of food and foaming ales in front of them. But despite the

cacophony of arrangements, the tavern surprisingly maintained a level of order; at least, as orderly as room full of drunken men could be.

Immediately Kyra closed the door behind her, all activities ceased and the eyes of everyone zoned in on her, nailing her to the spot.

"Hello," she breathed with a sheepish smile and a small wave and they all turned away, almost as if they together came to the conclusion that she wasn't worth their time. Using her hair to hide her face, Kyra quickly crossed the room to an empty table at the far corner of the room. The last thing she needed was trouble and no one made trouble like a drunk.

"Welcome to The Den, what can I get you?" said a fat woman with a dirty brown apron who came to meet her as soon as she was seated.

"Please bring me your best loaf of bread, a bowl of meat sauce, and a cup of your best wine," she listed off and the woman turned to go and get her order ready when she stopped her. "Also, do you know where I may lodge in for the night?" she asked.

"Of course, my husband, Paul-" the woman pointed to a man at the top of the staircase in the room who waved back in response "-owns an inn. It's right upstairs."

"Thank you very much," Kyra replied, thanking the woman again as she brought the small feast to her.

"That would be three gold and two silver coins," she said and Kyra immediately counted them into her hands.

The woman held a very surprised look as she left. It was customary for a customer to haggle a price before paying it and she would normally argue it for about three minutes before they even agreed to pay half of what she had demanded. But the young girl with the black hair had barely even blinked an eye before she paid and it baffled her.

What the woman didn't know that the money that had used to pay for the food wasn't exactly hers, it was her uncle's. Thing is, her uncle was so rich that he sometimes left coins lying around the house, forgetting to pick them up. Being the good daughter that she was, Kyra would pick the coins up after him until her pouch was full and then return it to him; only for him to lose them again and the whole process to begin anew.

But careless or not, her uncle's habitual forgetfulness proved helpful to Kyra as she was now in possession of three pouches filled with gold and silver coins in her satchel, making her almost, if not *the*, richest woman in the land; not that any man in the room would allow it to remain that if they knew. And she wasn't prepared to let them know.

Like an underfed animal, Kyra descended on her meal ravenously, forgetting for a few minutes what she had been taught her about how a proper lady should behave in public. She had just finished her meal, playing with a piece of bone and enjoying the cup of wine in her hand as she crossed her legs on the table, much to the disapproving glares of the people around, when commotion suddenly erupted outside.

"It's happening again," announced one of the men as he stood up with a flagon of ale in his hand and swayed outside. The other men seemed to understand what he was talking about as they all followed

him outside too, different expressions on their faces from anger, to excitement, to just utter boredom. Kyra had no idea what was going on but she followed suit anyway, more out of curiosity than anything.

Stepping outside, she realised that the whole town seemed to have converged in one place. Everywhere was so tightly packed that it was hard to see around anything. At the very back, Kyra shoved her way to the front and then wished she hadn't. In the middle of the converge clearing, a man half beaten to death was being dragged in a circle by the horse rode by another man who was clearly the richer and more powerful of the two. Some of the crowd cheered him, others jeered him; but none made any impression on the man as he looked as if he might as well be the lord of the realm.

All of a sudden, a woman burst out of the crowd, running in an attempt to help the dragged man and stop the man dragging him. She failed in both attempts. "Please, have mercy!" she shouted, tears running down her face as she ran after the man on the horse. "Don't do this, I'm begging you."

But the rich man wouldn't listen. "Now you'll see what happens to those who tries to betray my confidence," he said to the spectators before calling, "Dragur!"

Immediately, a burly man wielding a big, wicked-looking sharp axe stepped out of the crowd, earning a gasp from the people. But no one made an attempt to stop him even as they all looked displeased at his presence

"Yes, Master," said Dragur, his voice booming like the thunder as he knelt in front of the rich man.

"End him," came the command and Dragur raised his axe.

She was about to witness an execution, it suddenly dawned on Kyra and fear gripped her heart. "Don't!" she shouted and all of a sudden, a burst of energy shot through her body.

Time began to slow down around her and everything came in great details to her eyes. She felt the wind caressing her cheeks in strands, whispering strange words in her ears which she had never heard before but somehow understood perfectly. It was an instruction, an encouragement, a call to action. The energy collected in her palms and she directed it at Dragur and his master, immediately sending both men flying backwards in a massive gust of wind. The both of them landed on their backs, rolled a few times on the ground, and then they stopped; they were knocked out cold.

"Witch!" someone suddenly shouted from the crowd and all eyes turned to her. But this time, they were filled with contempt.

"Wait," was all she could say before the whole town rushed at her in a fit of fury. The strange energy she had felt before had deserted her by now and all she could do was turn tail, grab hold of her satchel very well and run like her life depended on it.

The reason why Kyra had always been filled with so much indecision about her life came back to her as she ran for her dear life. She was a witch; and in her world, witches were never meant to survive.