

## Chapter 3

Koru's palace, Shang Du, stood on a tower of white granite, the Hakan. Behind it the folded Mountains of Tsme rose in jagged peaks, divided by deep, round valleys where the worms of Meru had crawled. The Hakan rose at the center of a bowl valley. At one time the spire had been joined to the greater peak Mt Nonac by a high wall of the same white granite, but the river Alph had cut a path through the junction. Now the crest of the rock formed a white bridge between Shang Du and the mountain, ornamented with lanterns and a wide path. The Alph entered the valley via a waterfall, the Hundred Ribbons, and circled the valley lazily until it passed underground. Koru's palace up top was opulent and magnificent, horribly furnished, and carried a viewing deck that overlooked the valley and stood above the Tsme Peaks.

I stared at the other seven. Most of them stared at me. I wanted to think, but my mind struggled to comprehend Astras's suggestion. No one quite moved. No one wanted this.

Maybe Astras did.

She kept talking.

"With the assassins gone, they will tell no secrets," she said. "Nor will their remains be recognized. But they carried replicas of All Things Ending, and Kog had those replicas made. If Kog was gone, there would be nothing that connected any of us to him, and if we could all keep our secrets like the dead, we'd live."

And if none of them said anything, they began to move.

"Take your hand out of your shirt," I told Mithrak.

He'd reached under his jacket where I'm sure he carried a gun.

"I'm just scratching," he said.

"Stop."

Hoarfast shifted his feet. Somehow, he seemed closer.

I faced seven of them. Seraphine wouldn't fight nor Astras, Koru would have others fight for him, and Dr Simmons looked irrelevant. That left Mithrak, Cole, Agammae, and the terrible Hoarfast.

I wanted to fight Mithrak, but not him and Cole at the same time. Not if they had help. I never wanted to fight Hoarfast.

Who was this Astras who suddenly had so much to say? What was she even doing? She was a trophy wife. She needed to shut up, look sexy, and be kept. Now she seemed content to wait, but some noise kept building. Maybe the waterfall of Alph was getting louder.

Mithrak scratched himself again. His hand moved toward his armpit.

"Stop that," I told him.

"I'm just scratching."

"I told you to--"

Mithrak's hand shot under his shirt, and I had initiated on the lot of them.

He grabbed his gun, my fist met his face, and I followed through his head. His whole face wrapped around my fist with jaws and jowls moved in opposite directions, until I finished the strike and launched him a dozen feet away.

Agammae went on me. She threw her chair, I blocked, but the chair was a big thing. It filled a lot of space. She came in behind and kicked out my legs. I dropped.

Cole jumped at me and missed. Hoarfast went wide around behind the rest of the group. I had two seconds before he got here. Agammae spun around and jammed her leg between mine. I tried to leap from my back, but she got herself tangled up with me.

Hoarfast passed the spare chairs and drinks table, four steps away.

"Overe!" I shot my legs skyward again as I slip-broke from Agammae's grip. My body moved like a wave, and I ended on my feet. Cole tried to tackle me. I retreated, Agammae sprawled out to snatch my feet, I retreated again, and Hoarfast arrived.

His parentage showed. Lines of gray followed his veins. His knuckles had turned to steel.

He fainted, threw two shots, and somehow, he'd gotten between me and the door. His assault was beyond the rest of them combined. I countered low, he blocked, and we exchanged strikes that didn't connect. Mithrak got up, leaning like the deck was pitching and he'd lost his sea legs. Cole kept trying to grab me. Agammae's hands appeared with knives. I slipped around Hoarfast's jab as his off-hand tagged me, and my side went cold.

I dove off the balcony as flashing knives flew overhead.

Shang Du's balcony overlooked the deep forest. At the bottom of the granite pillar, Alph passed into a dark cavern. Fog and froth filled the pit, and sometimes Koru's children fell in. None of them ever emerged, and rats are strong swimmers.