

CHAPTER 21

ARCTURUS CROUCHED LOW IN the long grass, sweat dotting his brow as he sighted down his crossbow at the grazing beast ahead of him.

“Don’t hold your breath,” Edmund whispered beside him. “Pull the trigger as you breathe out. Easy does it.”

The tip of the quarrel swam in and out of focus, the black-and-white stripes of Arcturus’s quarry blurring in the background. Perspiration trickled down his spine, pooling in the hollow of his back.

Arcturus closed his eyes and fired, and the crossbow leaped in his hands, thudding into his shoulder as it spat the bolt with a dull twang. It whistled harmlessly over the zebra’s head, disappearing into the long grass beyond.

The creature froze for a moment, blinking its long eyelashes as it looked in their direction, then went back to cropping the grass with its buck-yellow teeth.

Edmund squeezed his shoulder, even as Arcturus was flooded with relief. He hadn’t wanted to kill it. It reminded him too much of the

horses he had cared for in the past. They were probably the closest things he had ever had to friends.

“It’s all right, old chum,” Edmund whispered. “There’ll be another chance tomorrow.”

There was a rustle as the young lord raised his own weapon.

Arcturus tried not to breathe, watching as Edmund’s crossbow eased upward, then hung perfectly still in the air. The boy had barely broken a sweat, squinting down the quarrel with a practiced eye.

The zebra bolted, galloping toward its nearby herd. Then, in a shifting mirage of black-and-white stripes, the herd itself moved on in a tumult of thundering hooves.

Edmund cursed, but Arcturus was already up, his head cocked to hear the noise that had startled the zebra. There it was again. A scream in the distance, somewhere to the east.

He turned and saw Elaine running toward him, her black hair streaming as she twisted her head to look behind her. It was then that he noticed the demon.

It was green-brown in color and as large as a stallion, with hooked claws and snakelike fangs. It chased Elaine, lumbering across the plains like an iguana, its three heads swaying on their sinuous necks with every step. Arcturus recognized it immediately as the demon he had seen but an hour before on the stock of Zacharias’s gun. Arcturus could now see the boy beyond, doubled over in laughter as Elaine’s shrill screams rang out. Zacharias was tormenting her.

Without thinking, Arcturus tugged free his summoning leather and unleashed Sacharissa. Then the two were running, and Arcturus was cranking back his crossbow with strength born of fury.

He waited for Elaine to rush past him before kneeling and loading the crossbow. His eyes focused along its length, narrowed against the setting sun on the horizon. Sacharissa crouched beside him, and he laid

the stock against her back, steadying his aim as the demon trampled closer and closer.

It was only now that Zacharias seemed to notice, and the demon faltered as its master ordered it to turn back. But it was too late. Arcturus took a deep breath . . . and fired.

The bolt whipped into the air, striking the beast square in its chest. Its front legs collapsed on impact, and the demon twisted and fell, throwing up the dry savannah dust as its trio of squeals echoed across the plains.

“Trebious!” Arcturus heard Zacharias scream his demon’s name.

He looked up at the boy, now no more than a stone’s throw away. The young lord’s eyes were blazing with hatred, and he raised his hand and traced a symbol in the air.

Then the world flared with light as a ball of fire erupted into existence, streaking across the savannah and setting the long grass ablaze.

Sacharissa covered Arcturus with her body, for all the good it would do. He closed his eyes. Stupid. He had been so stupid. Injuring a noble’s demon, when Elaine had never been in any real danger.

The world roared hot, and beneath his eyelids his vision seared white at the intensity of the blaze. And yet . . . no pain.

He cracked open his eyes, only to see the flames buffet harmlessly around them, stopped by an opaque wall that seemed to hang in the air ahead of him. Tiny cracks appeared along its surface, but it held strong. Soon the fireball dissipated, until the only sign of its existence was the channel of blackened, smoldering grass left in its wake.

Sacharissa whined and licked his face, her fear and confusion mirroring his own feelings.

“Zacharias!” Edmund shouted, and now Arcturus knew the source of the strange spell that had protected them. A blue symbol hung from Edmund’s outstretched finger.

But the blond noble ignored him, instead running over to his collapsed demon and tugging at the bolt stuck in its chest. It had barely penetrated the thick chest muscles, and came out with little more than a wiggle. Zacharias tossed it aside, then there was a flash of white light as Zacharias performed a second spell, sketching a heart shape in the air. Moments later the wound was gone, and the only sign it had been there at all was the bloodstained projectile in the grass beside it.

“Zacharias,” Edmund repeated, squaring up to the boy opposite him, rigid with anger.

“Why did you stop it?” Zacharias growled, standing and facing Edmund. He was a full head taller than the raven-haired boy, but that did little to faze his opponent.

“You mean why did I stop you from *murdering* my guest?” Edmund growled, shoving Zacharias.

Zacharias stared back at him, confusion spreading across his handsome face. It was as if nobody had ever pushed him before.

“He’s a commoner. Who tried to kill my demon,” Zacharias said, as if he were explaining something to a child. “It was a joke, for heaven’s sake.”

“I didn’t know it was yours, and I was protecting Elaine,” Arcturus yelled, the half lie coming easily to his lips.

“Whose did you think it was then, you stupid fool?” Zacharias roared, raising his fingers again. Edmund knocked his hand down and shoved him again. This time, Zacharias shoved back.

“Boys, no!”

Beyond the pair, Alice, Josephine and Prince Harold had arrived on the scene.

“I thought it was an orc’s demon . . . or a wild animal,” Arcturus said lamely. The words were unconvincing in his ears.

“You were being cruel to Elaine,” Edmund said, and it was strange

for Arcturus to see the happy-go-lucky boy so angry. “It seems to me you deserved this.”

Zacharias raised his fist, but then Alice was standing between them, her chest heaving with exertion.

“Don’t . . . be . . . so . . . stupid,” she managed. “You’re . . . supposed to be . . . friends.”

“What gave you that idea?” Zacharias spat.

He turned and stalked away, his back stiff with anger. The demon followed, but not before one of its heads hissed threateningly in Arcturus’s direction. Josephine stood for a moment, undecided.

“Wait up, Zach!” she yelled, jogging behind him.

As Zacharias walked out of earshot, Edmund deflated, and ran a hand over his face.

“That was unfortunate.” Prince Harold shook his head, a grim look on his face. “Arcturus, over here please.”

Arcturus approached him, wincing as the soles of his ragged, stable-boy shoes sizzled in the still-burning grass.

“I’m sorry, Harold . . . I wasn’t thinking,” Arcturus muttered.

“Well, why don’t you *try* thinking next time,” Harold snapped. Arcturus stared at his feet, kicking at the sooty ground.

Harold sighed.

“Forgive me. You have to understand, Zacharias is . . .”

Then he stopped, staring past Arcturus, his eyes widening.

Arcturus spun, his heart racing at the thought that Elaine might be hurt. But she was fine, sitting cross-legged just a few paces behind him, wiping at her tear-streaked face.

No, it was the figure staggering toward them behind her, his face and uniform covered in blood.

It was Rotter. Even as he neared them, he fell to his knees.

“Help me,” he gasped. “For heaven’s sake, help me.”

CHAPTER 22

IT TOOK ONLY A few seconds for Alice to heal Rotter, wiping away the deep cut in his ashen forehead like wine spilled on a table. But in that time it seemed the world became darker, the sun halfway through its descent beneath the horizon.

“What happened?” Prince Harold asked, handing a flask of water to the exhausted soldier.

“Men from the north,” Rotter gasped after a deep draft. “A few hundred of them. Came at us with swords while we set up camp outside Raleightown. I was on the edges, played dead . . . waited till they’d moved on.”

For a moment the group stared at him in shocked silence.

“Did any of your comrades survive?” Edmund asked, gripping Rotter by his shoulder.

“Aye, Sergeant Caulder,” Rotter said, his eyes darting furtively behind him. “Sarge fought like the devil, but there were too many. One snuck up from behind, knocked him out with a club. I think they kept him alive for interrogation.”

“Is the town being pillaged?” Edmund demanded, his eyes turning in the town’s direction. “I don’t see flames.”

Arcturus could see the glow of the town’s torchlights in the distance, suddenly visible in the growing darkness.

It didn’t seem real. It was so quiet. Were there dead men over there, cut down in the dusk light?

“What are they doing here?” Alice murmured. “No pillaging . . . and there are too many of them to be bandits. A dwarven uprising?”

“They were no dwarves,” Rotter growled. “Too tall. But they wore matching cloaks and covered their faces with scarves. Like they were organized. Like someone might recognize them.”

Arcturus felt a chill take hold of him then. Could this be what Crawley had been talking about?

“The riots,” Arcturus said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

“What of them?” Zacharias snarled from behind him, making Arcturus jump. He had not heard Zacharias and Josephine return. The boy’s demon was gone—infused into Zacharias’s body.

“Arcturus is right,” Prince Harold said, holding up his hand. “They are here for us. This is an uprising. Just not a dwarven one.”

“It’s the commoners,” Edmund said, his face filled with sudden understanding. “The ones who started the fire in Corcillum.”

“What are you saying?” Josephine asked. Her voice quavered, and Arcturus could see her face was pale in the dim light.

“They are here for us,” Edmund explained, loading his crossbow with grim determination. “The prince, the nobles. All of us.”

“No!” Elaine gasped and rushed over to grip Arcturus’s hand.

“Why?” Alice asked. “What good are we to them?”

“Because we are weak,” Prince Harold said. “Weak enough to capture. All of us are novices, with our first demons and the most basic grasp of spellcraft. We have not had the time to grow our summoning

levels, or capture more powerful demons. With their numbers . . . they could defeat us without too much trouble.”

“What good would capturing us do?” Josephine demanded, her words verging on a wail. “Our parents control everything, not us!”

“Exactly,” Edmund replied. “With a knife to our throats, they would be able to make our parents do whatever they wanted.”

“Not mine,” Harold said, shaking his head. “My father would never bow to their demands, the stubborn old goat. I’d die for sure.”

“Even if our parents did not love us, the consequences of our deaths would be too costly,” Edmund said, shaking his head. “We are not just their children—most of us are their heirs, their firstborn.”

“Only the firstborn are guaranteed to be born summoners,” Arcturus murmured, understanding dawning on him. If the firstborns were killed, the ability to summon might be lost to their families forever.

“I’m not a firstborn,” Elaine whispered, nudging Arcturus. “My brothers can summon. Will I—?”

“No,” Arcturus said, forcing a smile. “Your parents would never let that happen.”

Elaine gripped his hand, and he felt the weight of her Mite, Valens, alighting on his shoulder. Sacharissa nuzzled the young girl’s waist, and she stroked the demon’s shaggy coat.

“So what’s the plan?” Josephine asked desperately. “Shall we head for the bridge?”

“No,” Edmund said. “There are two ways into Raleighshire. One is across that bridge to the north, and the other is a pass south through the mountains, which will lead us into the orc jungles anyway. With an attack this well organized, we can assume they will have blocked both routes.”

“Well, whatever your decision, you had better make it soon,” Rotter

snapped. "They'll be sending out search parties as soon as night falls, if not sooner. And they have hunting dogs with them."

Prince Harold cursed.

"We won't last more than a few hours; the dogs will follow our scent right to us. Not nearly enough time to send for help."

"So do we fight?" Zacharias said. For all his bravado, the blond noble looked terrified.

But Arcturus could take no satisfaction from it. Not in their predicament.

"There's a rocky outcrop not too far from here," Edmund said. "If we run we might be able to make it there, fortify it."

"With what, sticks and rocks?" Josephine muttered. "That's suicide. I'd rather surrender and let our parents deal with it."

"It's your father's fault anyway!" Zacharias pointed an accusatory finger at Harold. "So what if he has to give up the throne. That's what they want, right?"

"I don't deny it," Harold said simply.

More silence, broken only by Zacharias's angry breathing.

"Let me think," Edmund murmured, gripping the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

It was almost dark now, and Arcturus could see the sun was just a sliver of orange on the horizon. Despair gripped him as the light faded, and his thoughts turned to Crawley's offer. What if he surrendered . . . would he have to join the rebel commoners? Should he?

But how could he betray his friends . . . and who knew if the rebels would succeed? If they did, he would be hanged as a traitor with the rest of the nobles.

"Doesn't your family have men protecting the mountain pass?" Zacharias asked Edmund, interrupting Arcturus's thoughts. "Maybe the rebels haven't gotten to them yet."

“Even if that was the case, there are barely a score of them, mostly retired soldiers that my father didn’t have the heart to fire,” Edmund replied. “His personal guard went with him on his trade mission. They timed this attack well.”

“Do you have any better ideas?” Zacharias snapped.

Edmund gazed toward the town, his brows furrowed.

“There’s something else. But . . . no.”

“Tell us,” Alice said. “If there’s even a chance . . . we should take it.”

Edmund sighed, indecision plain on his face.

“Hurry,” Rotter hissed. “We have to go!”

“There’s a secret passage,” Edmund said. “Beneath a statue opposite the old church in Raleightown. But . . . it leads into the orc jungles, beyond the mountain pass.”

“You want us to go *toward them*?” Zacharias snarled. “And then into orc territory? Are you crazy?”

“The dogs aren’t tracking our scent yet,” Edmund said. “If we go back to the town, they won’t have a trail to follow. Maybe we can hide in the passageway until help arrives.”

“The path back is clear,” Rotter said. “I just came from there.”

“So that’s it?” Alice asked, gazing back at the town’s distant lights. “That’s our best plan?”

Edmund turned to Harold, and the prince gave him a grim nod.

“We go back,” Edmund said firmly. “And hope we survive the night.”