

# Chapter One

When I was a boy, my mother would often take me to a clearing in the woods. Though I have many memories of my mother, this day as a bubbling toddler remains one of my favorites.

She never liked to dress like the royalty she was, for my mother was a very humble woman. White linens flowed from her ankles as she floated barefoot over ancient tree roots and grass fields. Toddling on pudgy brown legs, I followed her through the wilderness with wide eyes and adoration.

“Come, Adis,” she said, voice like the rain on a dry day, “The sun will be setting soon.”

She carried a brown wicker basket in her left hand and my own hand in her other, still sticky from the mornings honey bread. She whistled with the birds as they sang into the afternoon, smiling at the sky as though I wasn’t there at all. Everything she did was beyond that of any other woman I had ever seen; languid and joyful was every movement that passed through her figure. She was so beautiful that when I was a boy, I was convinced she was a nymph like the ones from the bard stories.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” she looked at me with a gleaming smile, and I couldn’t help but giggle. The seam of trees had broken apart to reveal a dip in the land covered entirely in vibrant wildflowers varying in color. Where the flowers ended, short grass ebbed the lapping sides of a wide stream that quietly flowed between stacks of rocks and fallen, decaying logs. My mother picked me up, then, and I hugged her side tightly as she strode to the water and sat the basket down.

“Your grandmother brought me here when I was just a girl,” she said, toeing the water, “It was her favorite place, she claimed here she felt closer to the water spirits.”

I reached my small hand up to her dark, curly hair, and tucked it behind her ear with a clover I had picked. She kissed my forehead softly and placed me back onto the grass so she could collect thin sticks and grass.

“She would have loved you very much, your grandmother. I see her in your eyes.” While she spoke, my attention had been taken by a fiery red butterfly fluttering over my knee.

“Coming into royalty wasn’t something I ever planned on as a girl, I wanted to live in a small cottage by the main river,” she laughed a gentle huff before returning to sit by my side. Catching sight of my butterfly, she reached slender fingers toward the creature and it landed on them. Almost as if trapped in a spell, the butterfly turned around to face her and flapped its wings.

“I love your father very much, he has given me a fruitful life,” she turned her attention to me then, using her free hand to stroke my cheek, “he gave me you, and I could never ask for more.”

The butterfly flew away, leaping from her fingers and fluttering past my nose once more before disappearing into the flowers. With this, my mother took the pile she had collected and began to weave the sticks and flowers into a circle.

“I can only hope you find love for yourself, and not for anyone else. There are so many souls out in the universe, even the butterfly carried one. To find the other soul that is meant to blend and mend with yours is so rare that it can be dangerous. If you happen to find this match; they will test you, challenge you, and bring much pain. On the other hand, they will bring unexplainable joy into your life like no other can. They can teach you and mold you to be better and more caring,” she placed the woven crown onto my head and smiled when I shifted it sideways.

“Your father is a caring man, but he is stuck in the old ways. Love is a fickle thing, as fleeting as a fiery butterfly and striking as stones on the stream. All I can ask is that he allows you to choose your own fate, and not a council for political benefit.”

I crawled to her lap, brown shorts collecting grass stains as I dragged my knees through the weeds, and wrapped my small arms around her middle.

“My little Prince,” she said, squeezing me back and kissing the top of my head next to the crown, “I look forward to what you will achieve.”

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It was often that my mother spoke of love. I suppose that talking about such things was a distraction from the raging war she hated. When I was six, my uncle, Titus, a noble knight of Brandor, was wounded in battle.

My father was sitting on his throne when the messenger entered the kingdom hall with hastened footsteps. Next to him sat my mother, elegantly molding into the dark oak throne he had built for her. I sat on a velvet stool near her feet while fiddling with a carved wooden horse. Most things in our kingdom were made of wood. Our castle was built right in the middle Telian forest, which also happened to be the only forest on our continent.

The battle at Balterrain had been non-stop for weeks, constantly raging on as the cavalry forces fought between the divide between the range. Uncle Titus had been in command of the men as a knight, and was shot by a crossbow through the leg.

“Sire, the wound was already infected when he arrived. Our physician is doing everything he can-”

“I will go to him,” my father said, already on his feet, “come, Adis, it is time you learn what war will do to a man.”

Swallowing, I followed my father as he weaved his way through the stone corridors of the castle. I didn't know much about Titus, we hadn't spent much time together apart from usual feasts and banquets. He was a kind man, I knew that; the kind to offer help to any old woman carrying water from the well.

We entered through the archway to the hospital wing only to be overwhelmed by the smell of metal and sick. I wanted to plug my nose as nausea overwhelmed me, but I held my head up and tried not to look too closely at the wounded soldiers bleeding out on their beds.

"Titus," my father muttered, reaching for his brother's dirtied hand that dangled over the side of his cot.

"It is good to see your face, brother," Titus said, words passing through cracked lips. His usually dark skin had paled as thick beads of sweat poured from his hairline. My eyes were drawn to his wound- a grotesque chunk of torn flesh surrounded by dried blood and puss. The original and sloppily wrapped bandages were sitting in a heap beside the leg that the doctor had removed.

"You fought bravely, and you are strong. What's another scar?" My father brought his hand closer to Titus's chest and covered it with his other.

"Warren," Titus murmured, eyes fluttering, "as a man, you are a good one. As a king, you must end the suffering of our people. How many more men must die before you see that this war is pointless."

My father spoke over the coughing that followed, "I cannot do what you ask of me, the Delcan is not worthless. We need control-

"See, brother," Titus dropped my father's hand to point at his head, "you have always cared more about your staff than the sheep."

"Control of the river *is* the needs of our people-

"No, Warren, you've read the prophecy as many times as I have," Titus took a sharp inhale of breath as the doctor rubbed green plants into his wound, "It is not you nor I who will ever bring peace to Brandor," he looked over to me then, eyes shining from pain, "It never was."

"This isn't about peace! This is about making our kingdom as prosperous as we can for our people. You and I, together," hastily, my father placed his hands on Titus's shoulders.

His eyelids fluttered lower as Titus picked his head up to speak in a whisper, "trust in the words of the past, my time here has come to an end."

"No, no-" my father shook Titus's shoulders, "Titus! please Titus," the doctor felt the pulse point on his neck.

"I'm sorry, my lord, there is nothing to be done," he said grimly. My father moved his hands from Titus's shoulders to smudge a stain of dirt from his cheek.

“I will be in my chambers,” he said before bumping past my shoulder to rush back through the corridors.

I stood frozen in my position, my uncle’s dead body lying before me, unsure of whether to follow my father, race back to my mother, or break into tears.

“Sire, this is not a kind place for someone of your age. Leave here,” the servant of my father, Micah, said.

I nodded quickly and turned, following the familiar path to my father’s bedroom. I was out of breath by the time I arrived at the cracked doorway, and I would have entered if not for the wailing I heard from outside. Slowly, I crept closer to the gap in the doorway to peer inside. My father, the noblest of kings, kneeled next to his bed with his head in his hands. My mother was kneeling on the floor beside him, cradling his shoulders and rubbing his back as he sobbed into the sheets.

“I can’t do it alone, I just can’t.”

“You are not alone, love. I will always be at your side.”

My father didn’t leave his bedroom until the following night. I stood in my room obediently as my servant, Nola, latched a green cape around my shoulders and adjusted the crown on my head.

“Did you know my uncle?” I asked her simply to break the silence that had weighed heavily on the kingdom all day. She seemed to be caught off guard by my question. I didn’t speak much at all on a normal day, nevermind twenty minutes before my own uncle’s funeral.

“I met him once,” she said, “when I was a very young girl.”

“What was he like?”

She smiled a little, “he was very kind to me. I was two coins short of a loaf of bread at the market and he was in line behind me. Because of your uncle, I was able to feed my family that night.”

I glanced at myself in the mirror to see the tears that had formed in my eyes. If I grew up, would I be more like my father or my uncle? Titus had spoken of a prophecy, but I knew of no such thing. If I was to end the war, would that mean victory? Would it mean defeat? Or some other thing stuck halfway in between. Regardless, I looked nothing like Titus and all like my father. This disappointed me in the heat of the moment, so I returned my gaze back to the servant who was waiting for my reply.

“He sounded like a very nice man,” I told her, because that seemed the polite thing to say.

“Sr. Titus would have made a fine king. As will you someday, sire,” she dipped her head down and smoothed my shoulders one more time.

We stood on the wide stone balcony to watch Titus’s body be placed on the pyre. This was the first time I had seen my father since I peered into his bedroom, and he looked drastically different than that night. His face was blank, completely void of any

emotion. Usually, he pretended to be this way so he seemed more in control. The clothes he wore, all crisp lines and clean edges, complemented this put together attitude. In his hand was a roaring torch.

“My brother was a good man, and a loyal knight of Brandor. His sacrifice will not be forgotten.”

The soldiers banged the hilts of their swords onto the stone ground in agreement. Without another word, my father tossed the torch onto the pyre and the wood quickly became engulfed in flame. I resisted the urge to grab my mother’s hand and instead watched my uncle burn with the branches and logs.

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I started training very young, but true lessons started the spring of my tenth year. Often after training, I would set out into the woods alone. It was a habit I had acquired from my mother. Standing at the forest edge, I removed my boots and socks to wiggle my toes in the grass. The trees provided shade as opposed to the sweltering, open training fields. Walking along the stones and weeds brought clarity to my mind and cooled the sweat gathering under my collar.

On this day, I followed the pathway behind the castle that I had known since I was very young to the spot near the stream when I heard a rustling in the bushes.

I instantly put my hand on the hilt of my sword and squinted in the direction of the sound, watching for moving leaves and branches. The sound came again and my shoulders tensed.

“Is someone there?” I asked, parting the leaves and poking my head through. There was someone standing in my clearing near the stream. Their arms were broad, coated in a thin red tunic. The person had a brown cap that covered their blonde hair as they struck a sword in coordinated motions.

“I am Prince Adis of Brandor,” I said, trying to make my childlike voice sound more intimidating, “show yourself.”

The person turned around immediately and dropped their sword to the side, “I’m sorry sire, I did not hear you come near.”

At a further inspection, I figured the person was a boy around my age, “you are very skilled with your weapon, why have I never seen you at training?”

The boy scratched the back of his neck and fiddled with the hilt of his sword, “It’s complicated, sire.”

I approached him again, “I have time.”

The boy looked around him and inhaled deeply before removing his cap. Long strands of hair fell down to his chest, “you are a woman,” I said, feeling just as shocked as I sounded.

“Yes,” she said and bowed before me, “my name is Opal Canmore.”

“Canmore,” I repeated, and the name sounded familiar on my tongue, “have we met?” she did not look familiar.

Opal shifted uncomfortably, “No, sire, I am the daughter of the palace chef.”

“So what are you doing out here?” I gestured to the field.

“No one comes here very often.”

I smiled, feeling amused, “I do.”

“Interesting that our paths have never crossed before,” she said, returning the smile hesitantly.

“Tell me,” I sat on the grass and crossed my legs, “why do you train with a sword?”

She joined me on the ground and wrinkled her nose. “I do not wish to become a broodmare like so many women in Brandor.”

“Bearing children is an honorable duty in the service of the kingdom,” I said, lowering my brow.

“I hardly agree. Raising a child seems pointless if his only future is to go die in the war,”

she squeezed her eyes shut and put her hands on her knees.

“You disagree with my father’s position on the war with Merete,” I stated this as a fact, but it must have come across as defensive because she seemed to back up.

“I have much respect for your father, sire, he is a great king-”

“Opal,” I said and scooted closer to her, “I am not offended.”

Opal and I became great friends after this. Every day after my lessons from then on, I would meet her in the spot by the stream and teach her what my instructor had taught me. Rarely did she ever require assistance, it was I that was routinely defeated by her skills.

“Who taught you all this,” I asked her months later in late fall when the great green spruces had turned vivid orange.

“My fighting skills?” She said as she swung her blade to collide with mine. I placed my feet wider apart and twirled my own sword free.

“Your abilities have outmatched mine from the beginning, and I have the best teachers in Brandor,” She ducked over my swing and struck at my leg, which I was able to block with a wobble in my step.

“My brother, mostly,” she said. Never before had she mentioned her brother to me, and in my moment of confusion, she tripped me over into the grass and poked her blade at my throat.

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” I panted.

She dropped the sword and sat next to me. “I don’t, not anymore,” she said as she picked at a blister forming on her hand.

I observed her expression as if she were a piece of art in the kingdom hall. It was no wonder she was able to pass as a male when she wanted to; her nose was broad and her chin matched. The mole above her right nostril always flared with the skin when she was upset, as she was clearly now. It's not that her masculine features made her unattractive, on the contrary. I found her much more interesting than the other women my father had already been introducing me to.

"He was killed in the war, wasn't he," I concluded, and suddenly her hatred for the war and need to train made sense to me. She ripped a chunk of grass out of the ground and threw it over her shoulder.

"He was only nineteen, he taught me everything."

"Opal I'm so sorry-" I started to say before she interrupted me.

"It's not your fault, Adis. Just drop it," she stood, picked up a rock, and began walking to the stream.

"But my father, you must blame him and in connection with me as well-"

"Adis I said shut up!" she threw the rock into the water and it crashed loudly into the lapping waves.

"You can't talk to me like this," I stormed toward her until I was right in her face. I was already a few inches taller than her, "I am your prince!"

She pulled back and lowered her head, "Of course, sire." Silence fell over the two of us before she spoke up again, "I thought you were different than them. I guess I was wrong. You are my prince, and I cannot make you leave, but I ask you as a friend to please leave me alone."

I swallowed and squeezed my eyes shut before reaching for her shoulder, "Opal, I'm sorry. I didn't mean-"

She flinched away, "Please," with one last glance at her face I turned around, placed my sword back into its sheath, and walked into the forest.

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I was quiet at dinner. Mostly, shame welled in my gut. It was rare I ever used my royalty to openly gain respect, but never had I used it as a threat against someone I considered a dear friend.

"Your progression is rapid, son," my father said, breaking the silence while he cut into his pork.

"Thank you, sire," I said, still mostly apart from the conversation. My parents didn't know of my friendship with Opal. I was too afraid of my father getting the wrong idea and punishing her, so I always kept my mouth shut.

"There is a tournament in Grimborg next Saturday, do you find yourself ready?"

"Pardon?" I said, coughing on a sip of water I had taken.

“This is no small commitment, Adis. It will be your first introduction to the world as a Prince of Brandor.”

“I understand the importance,” I hesitated internally and felt my cheeks flush with pride, “yes I find myself ready.”

“Good, I will send Micah to assist you further in your training tomorrow morning.”

Micah approached me and nodded, taking the platter I had left and adjusting the fork so it wouldn’t fall.

“I have faith in you, Adis,” my mother smiled from across the table.

“Thank you,” I said and took my first bite of potato. The rest of the dinner was full of trivialities between my parents, but I was too focused on the rush in my veins at the idea of my first competition. I wanted to tell Opal but wasn’t sure if she wanted to see me yet.

“May I be excused, father,” is what I settled on.

“Yes, of course,” he smiled, “get some rest, son.”

I returned the pleasantries and tried not to appear in a hurry as I made my way to the kitchens. There was a route I took that avoided the direct view of the guards so I wouldn’t be disturbed.

I moved silently through the kitchens, trying my best not to disturb the servants cleaning the dishes that were used to my frequent visits. The room where she and her father slept was at the end of a hallway behind the washing bins in a cool corner of the castle. A faint candle glow came from below the door, and I lifted my fist to knock.

“Opal, can I come in? It’s Adis,” there was no response, so I slowly opened the door. She was sitting on her bed with her legs crossed. In her lap, she played with a set of stone dice, “I apologize for my behavior. It was wrong of me to assume you would want to talk about your past problems. I shouldn’t have assumed anything.”

She huffed out a laugh and looked out the window next to her bed, “I never thought I’d get the prince of Brandor to apologize to me.”

I came closer and sat on the edge of her bed, awkwardly placing my boots next to each other under me, “You’re the only person who treats me like a normal person. Being a prince has its benefits, but I don’t get to have many friends. Not that I can’t be sure aren’t just my friend for status.”

“Yes, because why would anyone want to be friends with you,” she smiled and I laughed with her.

“I have some news,” I said.

“News?”

“I am traveling to Grimborg for my first tournament,” the words felt unreal, even in my own mouth.



“You’re competing in the Grimbord tournament,” she burst out laughing so suddenly she had to grip her stomach, “Adis, you are a good prince; good fighter, even. You are also fourteen and going up against men who have trained their whole lives.”

“I have been training for my whole life! I am a prince!”

She snorted and reached over to ruffle my hair, “and you still get your ass kicked by your chef’s daughter.”

“I can win.”

“Well, I assume my father will be catering the event, so I will be right at your side to watch.”

“I’m grateful for that,” I said, and I noticed at that moment how nice her eyes looked with the moon shining on them.

“You should get going before anyone goes looking for you,” she suggested, so I stood, put on my boots, and thanked her once more before sneaking off to my bedroom.

Training with Micah throughout the week was grueling. Often I forgot just how talented with a sword my father’s servant was. Micah had been my father’s servant for decades. I didn’t know exactly what he had done before joining service to the royal family, but I could only assume it had something to do with battle.

Because of my excessive training, my time after usually spent with Opal was cut short- both from lack of time and exhaustion. She understood this, so instead of hiking to the spot each day, we would sneak off to a hidden corner in the castle and play dice. As time crept nearer to my competition, I began to wonder about my opponents and their culture. As far as kings went around our region, my father was considered a gentle one. It was rumored that King Frederick of Merete was a ruthless warmonger who took pleasure in ravishing the outlying villages near Balterrain.

“Those rumors are silly, don’t you see they are just trying to convince the citizens to keep promoting the war?” Opal said on Wednesday afternoon just before my last dinner in Brandor prior to the competition when I brought up the topic.

I rolled the wooden dice onto the stone floor between us, and they both landed on twos, “perhaps, but just last week an innocent village was set ablaze by a group of Meretian soldiers. Are you saying they acted on their own will and without the suggestion of their king?”

“It is entirely possible,” she rolled a four and six.

I held the dice in my hand for a moment, tracing the numbers etched into the wood, “The Meretians have no honor anyway, their kingdom is overrun with hatred and terrorism.”

Opal sighed and snatched the dice from me, “You are far too gullible for your own good, Adis. The prince of Merete is your age, do you think he holds the same opinions about Brandor that you hold of him?”

I didn't know what she meant by this. It was a well-known truth throughout Brandor that Merete was a place no one would ever want to live in. I was aware that Merete had a prince, but I never gave him much thought.

When my time with Opal ended and dinner was served and eaten, I once again made the journey to my room. There, Nola was waiting for me with a hot bath already drawn.

"You haven't bathed in days, sire. You leave tomorrow morning, and you don't want to be smelling like you just shoveled the horse paddocks do you?"

I looked at Nola sideways, "are you implying your Prince smells like horse dung?"

"Quite so, sire. But a warm bath will also soothe your muscles and help you prepare for the tournament."

I nodded, "very well then."

The water was hot, and as I settled in up to my neck, I could see chunks of dirt float to the top. While the steam from the water-filled my head and Nola brushed soap over my skin, I found myself thinking about the prince of Merete again. He would also be competing in Grimborg. What would he look like? Would his forehead sprout horns mid-battle? Was his skin dark like mine, or pale like Nola's? It occurred to me then that I had never actually seen a person from Merete before, what if they look nothing like me at all and walk on all fours?

"Have you been to Merete?" I asked as she moved a dark clump of soapy hair to the side for a better angle.

"Never. I was raised here in Brandor and have never left the city except to travel with you."

The topic left me uneasy when it came time for bed. In my restlessness, I lay awake and truly considered what Opal had said. The hatred for Merete in Brandor powered the war that still raged on, and though I tried, I still could not fathom Brandor in any status with Merete besides battle. Peace was not something I had even heard whispered since Titus died.

"Adis, may I come in?" my mother's voice came from the doorway. I smiled at her presence, thinking perhaps her insight may help me come to a conclusion.

"Do you think what they say about Merete is true?" I asked her as she sat on the edge of my bed, "Are they really as awful as father claims?"

She picked at the blanket with her nails as she thought of her answer. I could almost see the sentences forming in her mind as the moonlight from my window danced on her cheeks.

"It is unfair to judge an entire population on the actions of a few," she said, "however based on the evidence I have seen, the people of Merete hold very different values as you and I."

"Then the war must continue?"

She sighed and looked out the window, “The war isn’t over culture, Adis, it’s over control of the Delcan.”

“Of course I know that,” I sat up and clenched the blanket with my fist “I’m just starting to wonder if everything I know about them is because of what father *wants* me to believe.”

“Your father wants what's best for the kingdom. If keeping up partially fabricated ideals about Merete and their people is what’s best for the kingdom, then that is what he will continue to perpetuate.”

“But how will we ever find peace if our people believe the opposition to be monsters?”

She smiled weakly at me and lowered her head, “that is a challenge you will have to face when you are king.”

I released the blanket and let my shoulders drop. Wanting to change the subject, I brought up another concern plaguing my mind, “I hear there is a prince my age there.”

“Yes, and princess,” she confirmed.

“I wonder what he is like.”

“Maybe one day,” she leaned forward and kissed my brow, “you will find out for yourself.”

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