

FROM #1 *NEW YORK TIMES*—BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MARIE LU

SKYHUNTER



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Marie Lu

September 2020

ADVANCE READER'S EDITION—NOT FOR SALE

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In a world broken by war, a team of young warriors is willing to sacrifice everything to save what they love.

The Karensa Federation has conquered a dozen countries, leaving Mara as one of the last free nations in the world. Refugees flee to its borders to escape a fate worse than death—transformation into mutant war beasts known as Ghosts, creatures the Federation then sends to attack Mara.

The legendary Strikers, Mara's elite fighting force, are trained to stop them. But as the number of Ghosts grows and Karensa closes in, defeat seems inevitable.

Still, one Striker refuses to give up hope.

Robbed of her voice and home, Talin Kanami knows firsthand the brutality of the Federation. Their cruelty forced her and her mother to seek asylum in a country that considers their people repugnant. She finds comfort only with a handful of fellow Strikers who have pledged their lives to one another and who are determined to push Karensa back at all costs.

After another devastating battle, Mara seems ready to fall. But when a mysterious prisoner is brought from the front, Talin senses there's more to him than meets the eye. Is he a spy from the

Federation? Or could he be the weapon that will save them all?

MARIE LU is the #1 *New York Times*–bestselling author of the Legend series, the Young Elites trilogy, *Batman: Nightwalker*, the Warcross series, and *The Kingdom of Back*. She graduated from the University of Southern California and jumped into the video game industry, where she worked as an artist. Now a full-time writer, she spends her spare hours reading, drawing, and playing games. She lives in Los Angeles with her illustrator/author husband, Primo Gallanosa, and their son.

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Roaring Brook Press, a division of Holtzbrinck Publishing Holdings

Limited Partnership

120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271

fiercereads.com

ISBN: 978-1-250-22168-1 | **Price:** \$19.99 / \$25.99 CAN

On Sale Date: 9/29/2020

Category: Young Adult Fiction | **Format:** Jacketed Trade Hardcover

Pages/Trim: 384 (est.) / 6" x 9" | **Ages:** 12–17

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MARIE LU



ROARING BROOK PRESS
NEW YORK

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Published by Roaring Brook Press
Roaring Brook Press is a division of Holtzbrinck Publishing
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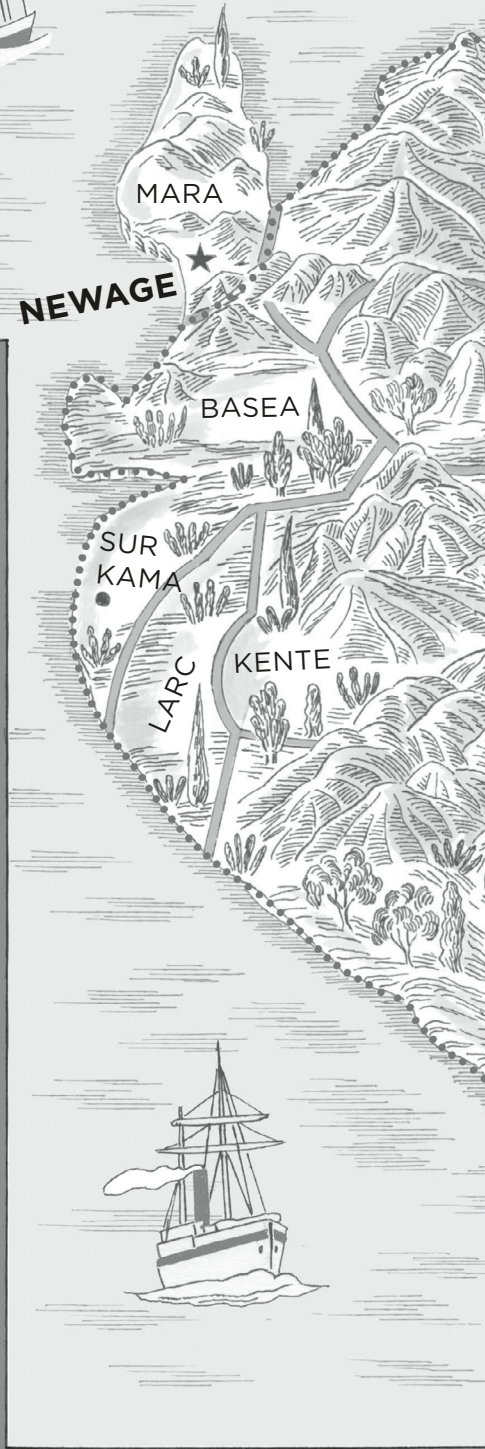
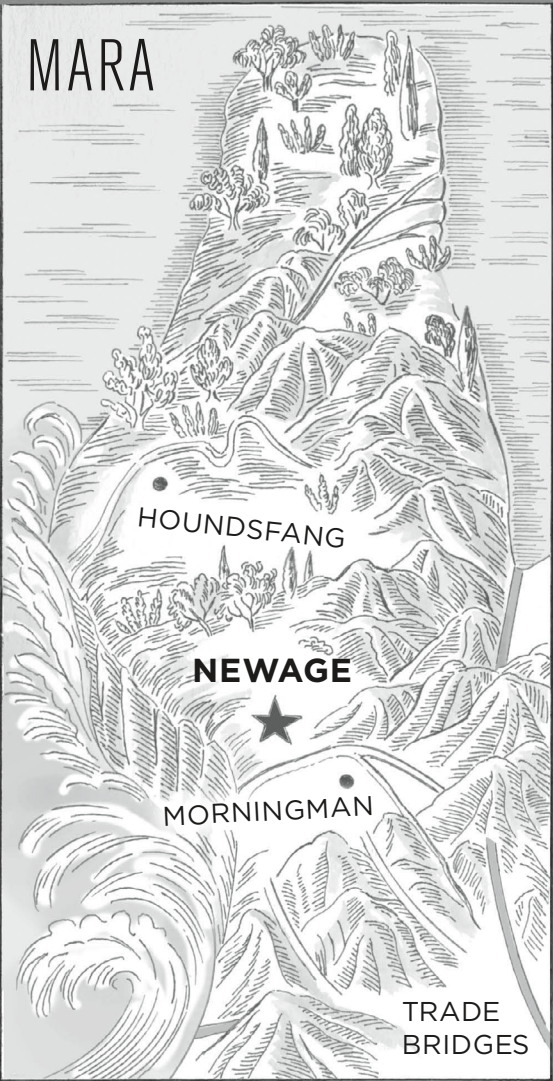
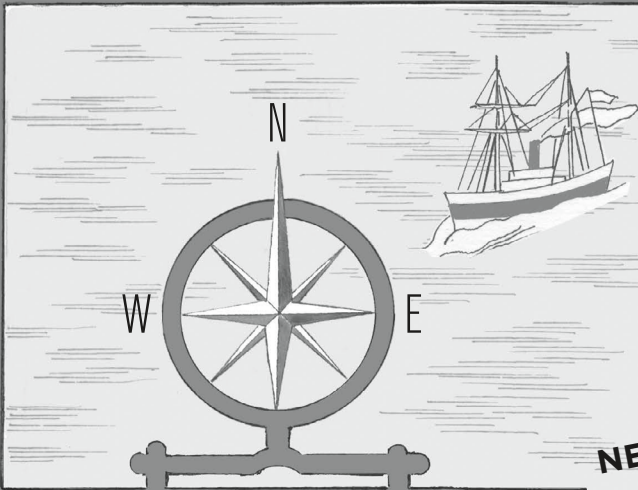
Library of Congress Control Number: 2020908739

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First edition, 2020
Book design by Michelle Gengaro-Kokmen
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-250-22168-1 (hardcover)
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

ISBN 978-1-250-78541-1 (international edition)
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2





GHOSTS TRAVEL IN PACKS.

This is the first lesson you're taught when you become a Striker.

You learn that Ghosts used to be human, before the Karensa Federation strapped them down and poured dark poison down their throats, twisting them into monstrous war beasts.

Now you'll see them hunting in the forests at the foothills of the mountains in groups of six or more, a grotesque contrast to the serene, snow-dusted landscape.

Their faces are white as ash, their skin split with deep cracks that expose scarlet, rancid flesh underneath. They are taller and stronger than any human who has ever lived, their limbs grown out all wrong, spindly like a spider's. They smell like blood and earth.

Though their eyesight is poor, they can detect movement well. Their hearing is superb, their ears stretched long and tapering to points. They can make out human voices a mile away. In their territory, to speak is to be found, so we remain silent, invisible to the eye and ear.

Their teeth, too, grow longer and sharper than ours. The discomfort of it makes them gnash their fangs constantly, slicing new tears into their already ripped and rotting mouths.

That's how you know they're coming. The grinding sound.

But the most important thing to remember is this: To kill a Ghost, you must starve its eternally regenerating body. To do this, you must bleed a Ghost out, cutting it at its neck, the only place with a vulnerable vein.

It's what I have trained my whole life to do. My name is Talin. I am a Striker for Mara, the last free nation on this side of the sea. We are legendary bringers of death, assassins of monsters.

And the only thing standing between our home and annihilation.

THE
WARFRONT

THE NATION OF MARA

1

THE MORNING DAWNS WITH BOTH SUN AND RAIN.

Drizzle drifts in the sunbeams, dewing everything with a shimmer of light.

A storm is moving in. We need to finish our sweep early.

Cool wind streams my coat behind me as I head toward our defense compound's main gates. We are at the warfront fifty miles from the steel walls of Newage, Mara's capital, out where our southern mountain ranges give way to dense forests and valleys.

The other sides of Mara are protected by sheer cliffs rising a thousand feet above the ocean, natural formations supposedly caused hundreds of years ago by a cataclysmic earthquake—but here in the south, we are vulnerable to attacks from the Karensa Federation, whose vast territory now extends up to the other side of the pass. They send their Ghosts to wander this in-between land, trying to find a weak spot in our border. So we do a silent sweep every morning, killing any Ghosts we encounter.

It has been a month since the Federation launched a full-scale attack against us, which we barely survived with a temporary cease-fire. But compromise is difficult when what they want is our nation itself. So the

next siege could come today. Tomorrow. A month from now. There is no telling.

When you're fighting a losing war, you are always on edge.

Morning light has turned the sky a bruised pink by the time I arrive at the edge of our compound. As I walk, I notice the metalworkers bustling around their stations, the seasilk trim of their hats trembling in the wind.

"It's the Basean," one of them says with a sneer.

Another lifts an eyebrow at me. "Still alive, huh, little rat? Well, if you die before Tuesday, I'll still win my bet."

Words like these used to stick in my chest until it hurt to breathe. I'd turn my head down in shame and scurry past. But my mother always told me to keep my chin up. *Look proud*, she would say to me as she patted my cheek, *until you feel it*.

So now I wink back and smile a secret smile.

The metalworker looks away, annoyed that his barb didn't hook me. I stand straighter and continue down the path without a word.

I haven't spoken out loud since the night my mother and I first fled to Mara's borders, when a Federation shell of poison gas permanently scarred the flaps of my vocal cords. I was eight years old at the time. My memories of that night are inconsistent—some clear as crystal, others nothing more than a blur of soldiers and the light of fires engulfing homes. I can't remember what happened to my father. I don't know where our neighbors went.

I think my mind has buried most of those memories, shrouded them in haze to protect me. That night left my mother with a head full of snow-white hair. I came out of it with no more voice and scar tissue twisting the inner lining of my throat. To this day, I'm not sure if I can't speak because of those scars or because of the trauma of our escape, of

what I witnessed the Federation doing to our people. Perhaps it's both. All I know is that when I open my mouth, what's left is silence.

I suppose I now make use of that silence. In my line of work, at least, it is essential for survival.

That was what first drew me to the Strikers. When I was small, I would join the crowds to watch the famed patrols head out past New-age's walls, ready to face the Federation's monsters. They are Mara's most elite branch of soldiers, revered by everyone, notorious even in other nations. My eyes would shine at the elaborate harnesses looped around their shoulders and waist, their guns and knives and black steel armguards, the masks covering their mouths, the circular emblem embroidered on their sapphire seasilk coats that draped down to their boots.

I loved their silence. I loved that it meant survival to them. They moved like shadows, with no sound except the hush of boots against the ground. I would linger there, balanced on the branch of a tree, transfixed by their lethal grace until they had disappeared from view.

Now I'm one of them.

It is less glamorous when you are the one riding toward death. Still, it's a job that means I can afford to put food on my mother's table and a roof over her head.

Other Strikers are at the gate now, ready for our sweep. Corian Wen Barra, my Shield, is already here, his back turned to me. Dew shines in the high knot of his hair, and a breeze pushes against his coat's hem.

I'd heard him leave his room this morning when I was still under my furs. He moves so lightly that no one else would have noticed the hush of his door closing.

As always, the sight of him settles my nerves. I'm safe here. I tap his shoulder as I reach him, then give him a mock frown and sign to him, "You left without me."

Corian looks sidelong at me. He clutches his heart, as if I've wounded him. "What—and leave little Talin to fend for herself? I would never," he signs, his gestures teasing and light.

"But?" I sign back.

"But they were serving fresh fishcakes this morning."

"Did you at least save me one?"

"I did, but then I had to eat it because you took so long."

I roll my eyes. He just laughs before he reaches into the pouch at his belt and tosses me a cake, still hot, wrapped in cloth. I catch it easily in one hand. My belly growls on cue.

Corian laughs again. "Look at you, nimble as a deer this morning."

I shrug at him before biting down on the cake's tender meat. Savory juices flood my mouth, along with the grit of minnow egg in the center. When I finish, I let out an exaggerated breath and grin. "Nimble and starving," I answer him.

"Thank you for saving me breakfast, Corian?" he suggests.

I gesture to him with greasy fingers. "You're welcome for my company, Corian."

All Strikers work in pairs. We are bonded until death from the moment we take our oath. Corian and I have trained together, have fought side by side, have been able to guess each other's thoughts since we were twelve. I'm more a sister to him than his blood sisters. When I move, he watches my back. When I lead, he follows. I do the same for him in return. Our lives are intertwined, one indivisible from the other.

He is my Shield, what we call our Striker partner. I am his.

We're a strange pairing. Corian and I have always been opposites in everything. He is the thirdborn—*wen*—son of the Barra family, one of the wealthiest in Newage. His appearance is golden in every way. When he laughs, he leans into it with his entire body, a constantly shifting

mosaic of strong lines. It's the kind of aura that you can't help but be drawn toward. People buzz around him at holiday banquets, all eager to be seen chatting with him.

My full name is Talin Kanami. I'm a refugee from Basea, a nation south of Mara that fell to the Federation ten years ago. My skin is light brown, my eyes green and slender and long lashed, my hair so black that it shines blue, like a slick of oil in the light.

I'm proud of my Basean features, but many in Mara call refugees like me rats. The Maran Senate has banned us from serving in the Striker patrols. I'm here only because Corian asked the Firstblade to make an exception for me.

Now that we've eaten, Corian and I do our routine weapons check, making sure our blades are fresh and bullet chambers are loaded.

"Daggers," he calls out.

I run my fingers against the hilts of mine, then tug once on the harnesses looped securely around my shoulders. We each carry a dozen daggers: six strapped across our chests in a bandolier; two against the harnesses around each thigh; and one tucked along each boot.

"Good," I sign to him. "Blades."

We simultaneously touch our hands to our two swords hung at the hips, then pull them out in unison and sheath them again with a flourish. Like the daggers, these are made of a near-indestructible metal, capable of slicing through almost anything.

I nod at his left blade. "Could use an extra polish, Corian," I sign. "That edge is looking a little dull."

"It'll still cut a throat," he replies. "I'll sharpen it tonight."

"Guns," I move on.

We have two sniper pistols each, equipped with mufflers to silence

them when they fire. A cloth bandolier running around my belt is full of bullets. Corian tosses me a few extra ones from his stash. I catch them and drop them into their slots.

“Bow,” he finishes. “Arrows.”

One crossbow each, strung across our backs, plus a light quiver of arrows, each cushioned with a fabric wrap to keep them from clanking against one another.

Finally, we check our armguards and gloves, then our black half masks, which will cover our mouths and muffle the rasp of our human coughs.

As we finish, Firstblade Aramin Wen Calla comes striding down our ranks for a final check. Our leader is young; some grumble that he’s too young for his position. Not long ago, he’d trained alongside the rest of us as a recruit. But even a few short years as the Firstblade has prematurely streaked silver into Aramin’s thick knot of hair tied atop his head. His eyes are as gray and hard as a thunderstorm, rimmed with ferocious dark powder. His lips are twisted down in a permanent scowl. Black fragments of jawbone stud his ears like multiple earrings. Following the tradition of other Strikers who have lost their Shields in the past, the Firstblade had cut those bones straight out of the Ghosts that had killed his own partners years ago.

It’s hard to grow old in this profession. You promote who you can.

He progresses along our line, stopping occasionally in front of the newer recruits to check a harness, tilt a chin up, offer a few words of courage.

“Talin,” he says when he reaches me.

I place my fist against my chest in a salute to him. He does the same before moving on.

Finally, when he finishes, he stands before us one last time. There are no speeches of glory, no rousing battle cries.

No one needs to tell us that we are the last defense Mara has against the Federation.

Down the line, a hush falls over all the Striker ranks. We pull on our masks at the same time, covering the bottom half of our faces in black. Corian looks straight ahead, his features flattened in concentration.

My heart hardens into stone. My mind pushes away everything except a single goal:

Protect my country.

The Firstblade gives the order. We step forward as one out into the silent world.

If not for the Federation on the other side of this mountainous war-front, if not for their Ghosts stalking the narrow passes, the land is achingly beautiful. The air is cold and crisp, half the sky clear and half a darkening gray. The moon hangs powder white above the tree line, craters visibly speckling its body. A cloud of birds glides through bands of fog drifting through the valley's basin. The water of a nearby stream glows bright blue from the light of tiny river minnows, what our breakfast of fishcakes had been formed from, although now they teem only in the thousands where there used to be millions. Farther down the plains, I glimpse a herd of rare shaggy cows grazing in the mist. Even now, close to winter, they are searching for the sweet, yellow wildflowers carpeting the foothills, gemstones gleaming in the snow.

But what really makes this landscape breathtaking are the ruins of an ancient, long-gone civilization. The structures, scattered everywhere across all nations, are strange and lovely—bones of crimson steel bridges that rise hundreds of feet in the air, crumbling white and dark pillars cut into huge, impossibly perfect cubes. Now the steel and stone are overgrown with blankets of dripping green vegetation.

No one knows exactly how long ago this civilization existed. As old as five thousand years, some say. Whoever the Early Ones were, they

were far more advanced than us. They left behind entire cities. Machines with wings. Ships made of metal. Sheets of engineered rock. A few suggest that some of the species we see now, like the wild cows roaming the plains, evolved from animals domesticated during their time. From the fallen skeletons of their steel structures, we broke down the parts and used them to fortify our halls and towers and bridges. From their abandoned weapons, we created our guns and bullets and blades.

From their books, the Federation learned how to twist humans into Ghosts.

I wonder where they went. One theory says they died out, killed by a sickness, and that we descended from the few survivors. Another claims they abandoned this earth to live elsewhere among the stars, and we are the stragglers left behind. Or maybe they too had demons to face, had destroyed one another with their hatred. I wonder if they would approve of how we have scavenged their leftovers.

We have all spread out by now, cutting a trail through the grasslands toward the woods nestled in the Cornerwell Pass. Occasionally we stop to listen, wondering whether the wind whispering through the pines will also carry the sound of teeth.

But the forest is still today.

We reach the edge of the woods. Here, the light dims, filtered through the thick canopy into rays dotting the floor. Dense layers of fallen logs pile in a green blanket of moss and ferns. The scent of cool, damp earth surrounds us, and from somewhere far away comes the faint trickling of a stream.

As time goes on, I start to notice the finer sounds. The drip of water on a leaf, the thud of a frog leaping onto soft soil. Corian walks several yards away, but our bodies always turn in sync with each other, used to years of our rhythm.

Then I notice a snapped twig against a branch. I pause and lean close for a better look.

Corian senses the shift in my movement without even looking at me. A moment later, he's at my side, warmth radiating off him, his stare focused up on the twig too.

I sign to him with my gloved hands. "See the angle of the break?"

Corian signs back. "It's down," he replies. "Not sideways. Broken by something taller than this branch." He points into the wood. "Came from that way."

"Stag?" I ask.

"Would be more snapped branches here, if it was."

"A scout, maybe? A spy?"

"Could be," he responds. "I heard the southern patrols caught a prisoner of war fleeing through the valley this morning. There might be others."

A glint of something wet on the forest floor catches my eye. I crouch. "Blood," I tell him as I stare down at the single, fresh dot of crimson, the color a shade noticeably darker than human.

Corian nods in agreement, his lips pulled into a tight line. It's not a stag or a scout. We have tracked hundreds of Ghosts. By now, the smallest hint is enough to let us know they're nearby.

I point up once at the trees. "Take top watch. I'll wait for your sign."

Corian taps a fist quietly against his chest at the same time I do. Then he heads for the trees. In two steps, he pulls himself up into a nook. There he crouches, nearly invisible against the dark wood.

I shift toward the thick undergrowth near a pile of mossy logs. During training, I would glide across floors littered with stacks of coins, careful not to disturb any with my boots. Now I pass between the logs without a sound until I settle into the crevice of a hollow trunk.

Long minutes drag by.

A bird's trill catches my attention. Corian's call. I turn my eyes up to him. He's still hunched in the shadow of the tree nook. He signs to me again, pointing three fingers to my right. Then three fingers toward me.

"Three Ghosts east of you. Three Ghosts north. A hundred feet away."

They're here.

My hands rest against the hilts of my swords. I always choose them first. They are the quietest, they have the range I need, and above all, they let me move quickly. In the trees, Corian pulls a gun from its holster and rests his finger on the trigger.

Another pause, followed by an abbreviated sign from Corian: "Warning. Close by."

The forest's silence gives way. The crack of twigs against rotting feet. The crumble of sodden leaves.

Then, finally, I hear it.

The gnashing of fangs wet with blood.

To my right comes the first trio. They move on all fours in a jolty skitter, their arms stretched longer than their legs. An iron cuff circles each of their necks to protect their vulnerable vein. The closest of them turns its milky eyes skyward, searching the treetops before continuing on. New blood drips down its humanlike chin.

I have seen countless hours on the warfront. And yet, to this day, that four-limbed skitter still makes the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

They edge closer. As they do, the second trio comes into view. They reach up on two legs, stretching themselves tall as they peer between the trees.

My gaze focuses on the leader of the group. It is bigger than the others, its cracked muscles more prominent. Like alligators in the southern

lands, Ghosts continue to grow in size and strength until something kills them. If nothing does, they will live forever. Some, I hear, tower higher than elephants.

When this one stretches itself up to its full height, it looks like a hulking beast, its skin cracked and bleeding.

Up in the trees, Corian rises into a predator's crouch and lifts his gun. I tense, willing him to be safe. My hands close on the hilts of my swords. The stillness of the forest settles heavily on my senses, and all my strength coils tight in my muscles.

You only get one chance to move. After that, there is no room for hesitation, no time to rest or regroup or change your mind. Everything—*everything*—depends on your speed. You take them down fast, or they will take you down.

Corian aims his gun at the leader.

He shoots.

The bullet strikes the Ghost hard in its neck cuff, cracking the iron. It lets out a deafening shriek and whirls in Corian's direction with a speed that defies its size. It throws itself at the tree and begins clawing furiously for him.

The others instantly turn in his direction too.

I dart from my hiding place at the same time I yank my blades out. The familiar hush of metal sliding against sheath hums in my ears. My swords catch the light. I race along a fallen log. The closest Ghost to me doesn't even see me coming before I launch into the air and swing my blade at its neck.

It slices clean into the cuff, splitting it. My second blade cuts its vein. The Ghost collapses to the ground, twitching violently as blood stains the green forest floor crimson.

I don't stop moving. The Ghosts are now in a frenzy of rage, their movements like the strikes of an adder.

One swipes at me. I slide to my knees and arch so far back that my head scrapes against the ground. Its claws miss me. I pop back up and slash a fatal wound in its neck, then whirl in the same move and cut through the cuff of the Ghost beside it. My other blade stabs it in the throat.

From his vantage point, Corian fires a second bullet down at the leader, hitting its neck again. It flinches away, then lunges at him. My heart lurches. From the other side of the tree, another Ghost digs its clawed hands into the trunk and tries in vain to pull itself up toward him.

I whip out my gun and fire at it. The bullet strikes true. The Ghost screams, halting its attack against Corian for an instant.

Corian points his gun down at the wounded Ghost and fires three times. The bullets shatter its neck cuff. He fires a fourth shot at the exposed vein. It stumbles to its knees.

The fifth Ghost screams at me. My boot snags against a branch on the forest floor. It costs me just a fraction of a second—but in that moment, the Ghost manages to grip my leg. It hurls me off my feet. I go crashing into the underbrush.

As I scramble back up, it's already lunging for me again. I'm about to lift my blade when an arrow suddenly blooms right underneath its jaw, keeping it from opening its mouth. It lets out a snarl of fury. Behind it, Corian nods at me from his tree. I lash out at its cuffed neck with both blades. One, two, three slashes, and the cuff finally breaks. I yank out a dagger and stab hard into the vulnerable vein.

Only the leader remains now. Stuck with arrows, it whirls and races toward me. I pull out another dagger, tighten my grip on my blade, and brace myself for its attack. Behind it, Corian leaps down. In the blink of an eye, swords appear in his hands.

He rushes toward the Ghost. At the last second, he darts to one side. I twist to follow him. Corian slides into a crouch right as I reach

him. I jump. My boot kicks off against his shoulder and I launch into the air.

I slice down hard, cutting through the cuff. It falls to the forest floor. Without missing a beat, Corian darts up from his crouch and cuts its throat.

A shudder courses through it. As I land lightly on my feet beside Corian, the Ghost falls onto all fours, then collapses to its side.

Corian looks at the bodies littered around us. My hair is tangled and mussed from the fight, and dark strands cling to my damp forehead. My senses still tingle with unease, and my body stays turned protectively toward Corian.

I push my hair back and sign to him. "Are you okay?"

He nods. We exchange a brief smile. Then he breaks his stare with me and goes to check each Ghost's body, making sure their veins are cut clean through. I do the same, pausing to watch as he stops before the dying leader.

Corian has told me before that Ghosts remind him of humans the most when they are in their last throes. Their movements slow, their breaths curl in the air, and their shrieks, weakened, turn into the sound of something anguished and pitiful. Their eyes water with pink, blood-tinted tears. It is said that they cry because their rotting, eternally growing bodies are in excruciating pain all the time. Their dying whines are a plea for mercy.

I always warn him that they do not have the heart he has. He always reminds me that they once did, that before the Federation filled them with poison, they had smiled and laughed and been in love, that real hearts used to beat in their chests.

Even though Corian stands over the leader as its executioner, he reaches down to pick one of the blue flowers dotting the forest floor. Then he bends a knee in the middle of the glade, his long coat pooling

in a circle around him, and places the flower carefully beside the body. He pulls down his mask and bows his head. His fingers sweep across the floor in a single arc. His lips move without a sound. He always does this, and it is why I respect him.

He is saying: *May you find rest.*

I see the seventh Ghost too late.

It is smaller than the others. Maybe it had been a child when it turned. Ghosts travel in packs—but this one had been lagging behind.

It materializes in the shadows of the woods behind Corian's kneeling figure. Its eyes, milk-white with hatred, turn on my Shield, and its jaws open. It lunges.

My blood turns to ice. I grip my blades and rush forward.

But it is far too late. The Ghost sinks its teeth into Corian's shoulder before he can whirl around in time. It throws him off his feet and onto his back in a single move, then dives onto his chest.

Daggers are already in Corian's hands. He stabs at the Ghost again and again, seeking its vein. I throw myself at the beast with all my strength. It's enough to force the Ghost's attention onto me instead of my Shield. I cut its throat with one swing.

I slide to a halt beside Corian and press down on the wound in his shoulder. He shoves me away with a snarl. His body is already trembling, and his lips are tinted blue as if from the cold. He is signing the same words to me again and again.

"Do it. Do it."

And I know it is over.

If your Shield is bitten by a Ghost, you must cut his throat before he turns. This is the last thing we are taught. It is taught last because none of us want to think about what it means. Because sometimes the things that cut closest to your heart deserve the weight of being last.

Corian looks straight at me. His eyes are bright with unshed tears.

I tighten my grip on my blade and stand over him. The world takes on the blur of a dream. We never break our stare. For a moment, I think I won't be able to do it.

But my body remembers the motions, even when my mind cannot.

My blade slices through the air. There is a sickening sound, then a sigh.

The forest is still again, and I am the only one left to hear it.

I turn my face up because I cannot bear to look down. Rain beads against the forest canopy. Light rims the leaves in icy gold. It takes me a moment to realize that I am trembling.

As always, I don't utter a sound. But a heart can grieve in silence, so I sink to my knees beside Corian's body and allow the tears to come.

NEW AGE

INNER CITY

THE NATION OF MARA

2

WHEN YOUR SHIELD IS KILLED IN BATTLE, IT IS
your duty as a Striker to deliver his uniform to his family.

This is the display of shame we offer for failing to protect each other, and we give it to the family in the hopes that they accept our apology. So on this morning, one week after Corian died, I find myself heading into the heart of Newage's Inner City, Corian's sapphire uniform folded into a neat square and tucked safely under my coat.

The drizzle that had fallen during our sweep has now turned into a steady storm soaking the entire nation. Rain undulates in glittering waves across the pavement as I walk, and I pull my collar higher against the wetness. The hat I wear offers scant protection. My hair hangs in dripping black strings against my face, but I don't bother brushing them aside, as if perhaps I should appear as miserable as I feel. Corian, resembling the sun as he did, had always hated the first heavy rain of winter. It is a cruel irony to deliver his uniform to his family on this day.

The Barra family estate is located at the top of a hill. From the bottom, you can't even see it—built over the bones of a crumbling temple by the Early Ones, the mansion is fully hedged in by cypress so that on-lookers can only catch glimpses of the white stone of its walls through thickets of green.

From this vantage point, I can see the gentle slope of the rest of Newage, the sprawl of estates and apartments and pillared halls protected inside two enormous circles of steel walls. Beyond that radiates the miles of dense shantytowns of the capital's Outer City, where my mother and all other refugees live. Along the horizon rise the shapes of the Early Ones' ruins, silhouetted against the stormy sky.

There are twenty large ruins scattered throughout Mara, and most of the other small cities that dot this country are erected upon or around them. Each of them has a name. There is Houndsfang, the ruin of a jagged steel needle jutting up toward the sky at the edge of our cliffs, upon which is set a small city of the same name. There is Morningman, a city built around a conelike structure of metal and concrete covered in rose vines. And so on.

Newage, the capital of Mara, was constructed right on top of the remains of an entire city from the Early Ones. It's why our streets look cobbled together from two different eras—shards of ancient black steel form the backbone for apartments made of white stone and wood, while cylinders of strange metal act as the buttresses supporting National Hall. The ground of Newage's Inner City is made of a mysterious dark stone that exists only in other Early ruins. It absorbs heat in the winter, keeping the city warmer than it otherwise would be. And as for the huge steel walls encircling the city . . . they existed long before Mara did. On top of the walls' front gates is a mantra engraved by the Early Ones:

*We sow the seeds of Infinite Destiny for our children
so that they may rule from this earth to the stars.*

Infinite Destiny. It is a phrase that the Karensa Federation believes the Early Ones had meant for them, that they are the children who

are destined to inherit their ancient empire. I just stare out at the city and wonder why the Early Ones left it all behind. They must have built the walls thousands of years ago to protect their city from something—but whatever that was, the walls must not have worked.

I don't know why we think they will save us from the Federation's Ghosts, just like how I don't know why I thought I could protect my Shield. I don't even know if I can protect my mother now. My position as a Striker pays me enough to bring her money in the Outer City every couple of weeks. What now, without Corian to stand up for me? Will the Firstblade even allow a Basean like me to stay?

The Barra family knows the instant I arrive at the estate's front gate why I'm here—they had received the Firstblade's handwritten letter of condolence days ago. The two guards standing at the entrance don't even bother to ask my name or purpose. I just stand there, silent and soaked, swaying on grief-exhausted legs, Corian's folded uniform tucked under my arm, until the guards disappear behind the side doors and open the gate for me.

The storm mutes all the sounds in the Barra courtyard. My mother's entire neighborhood in the Outer City could fit in this space alone. I listen to the faint squelch of wet stone under my boots as the guards lead me toward the glowing windows of the estate's front hall. The dripping trees, the fog of my breath in the damp air, the front gate carved with the Early phrase DEO OPTIMO MAXIMO . . . all of it feels like a dream.

I've been here only once, the summer when Corian first chose me as his Shield. He and I had shaken hands solemnly, then lazed under the green canopy of these same trees, stripped down to our short sleeves, our mouths sticky with sweet grapes plucked from the vines.

"If you could go anywhere in the world," he asked me then, his face turned toward the horizon, "where would you go?"

“Basea,” I signed without hesitation.

“It’s probably different now, you know,” he signed gently in return. “After the Federation took over.” There was no malice or pity in his expression, just a grave truth. “It’s not the home you remember.”

“I know. I’m just curious.” I looked back at him. “Why does it matter to you?”

“Why does what matter?”

“How I feel about Basea?”

“I don’t know. Shouldn’t it matter to everyone?” He shoved a grape in his mouth and offered me another cluster of the fruit. “It might be how I feel someday about Mara,” he signed. “If we lose.”

He was sympathetic, but also afraid. I’d never heard a highborn Maran put himself on equal footing with a Basean before. I stared at him, surprised, and then took the cluster of grapes he offered.

“To our home.” I lifted the grapes to his.

“To our home,” he repeated.

Those same grapevines now wind brown and lifeless along the walls. This place flanks the beginning and end of our bond.

The guards stop at the front door and motion for me to enter. “Master Barra is already expecting you,” one of them tells me.

I nod at him and step inside.

A rush of warm, dry air hits me. The faint smell of wood burning in a marble fireplace permeates the space. My boots echo against the floors. When I turn my head up, I see the soaring atrium of the estate’s main hall, a space that stretches up at least three stories, the arched ceiling painted into rainbows from the multicolored glass windows through which shines the weak winter light. Original architecture salvaged from the Early Ones. Beyond the main atrium, the Barra family had installed their own embellishments—a second floor lined with balconies, a spiraling staircase, and a main floor dotted with soft, cushioned seats and

speckled cow pelts. The white engraving around the marble fireplace is embellished with gold. Arched windows reach from the floor to the ceiling, divided by thin black lines of metal, and the light stretches long against white-and-gray wooden floors. Stark beauty, everywhere, of a family centuries old.

Here, I feel myself clash against the pale floors and white walls like a stain. My mother and I had survived our first few years in this nation by running odd errands in the Outer City's shantytowns. I'd deliver messages crumpled in my fists, shovel horse manure for the people who ran stalls rimming the walls, steal and sell metal from the scrapyards dotting the muddy, crowded landscape. I'd collect what little money I could for my mother. I'd huddle on the side of the narrow paths, surrounded by the stench of grease, fried fish, and sewage. No one spared me a glance. There were too many kids like me fighting to survive in the shanties. I was just another face lost in the crowd.

Now I'm here, standing inside the home of a family with obscene wealth, and all I can do is imagine myself as a child, dirty and startled, lost here. How did Corian come out of a house like this? He must have looked like the sun running through these halls, golden hair and skin and laughter against these white surroundings. And I feel the pit of my grief all over again, its pain the same as the hollow bite of a hungry stomach, tipping the world around me until I can no longer see.

No one is in here. I wait for a moment, wondering if maybe I'd come to the wrong room, except that the guards ushered me to this spot.

Finally, I hear the faint echo of footsteps coming from down the corridor. They are the solid, sure steps of an aristocrat.

I don't wait to kneel. Before the figure emerges into the hall, I lower myself onto both knees so that I can feel the cold floor through the fabric of my trousers. I hold Corian's folded uniform out, presenting it flat before me with both hands. Then I bow my head deeply. There is

still a faint scent of Corian from his Striker coat. I catch it now in my bent state, the smell of smoke and sugar, still lingering there from the candies he always kept tucked in his pockets.

The footsteps enter the hall. From the corner of my eyes, I catch sight of a pair of black boots, polished to perfection, and the sweep of a pale coat against pant legs.

I remember the color of that coat. Corian's father has come to greet me.

I swallow hard. I don't know how to apologize for the death of his son. Cannot tell him my deep shame at being unable to protect his favorite child. I can do nothing except remain in this position, holding out Corian's uniform. So that is exactly what I do. I remain perfectly still, waiting for the man to say something.

The boots stop right in front of me. I can feel the heaviness in the air of his father's looming presence.

Tradition usually dictates that, when a Striker delivers his fallen Shield's uniform to his family, the family responds by accepting the uniform with both hands. As Shields are bonded to each other like siblings, the family should then embrace the Shield as if he or she were also their kin.

But long moments pass. I wait. Corian's uniform stays heavy in my hands, untouched, and his father's boots remain leaden before me.

Then his voice echoes above me in a low, rumbling growl. "Do you know why my son chose you as his Shield?" Master Barra says.

I don't dare look up. I can barely manage a shake of my head.

"Because Corian had a bleeding heart," his father continues. "He felt sorry for you, little Basean girl, always crouched like an animal outside the arena. I told him not to choose you. You weren't good enough. He did anyway." His voice turns grating, harsh and cold with grief. "That's why my boy is dead. Because he selected a rat to protect him."

I see the man's boots turn away and point in the direction he'd come. His voice snarls above me with disgust.

"Keep his uniform," he says. "It's already been dirtied by the hands that allowed him to die. This House does not accept trash as an offering."

Then the voice stops, and the boots walk away, leaving me kneeling on the floor. He did not bother dismissing me. Without his permission, I am obligated to stay here.

Families simply do not refuse the uniforms of their fallen children. I hesitate, confused, unsure in the moment what to do. My arms shake from the effort of staying still. My eyes point down at the floor. The wood pattern breaks at the edge of each plank. All I can do is repeat his words, which are spinning through my mind.

He felt sorry for you. This House does not accept trash.

I stare down at my hands and arms and think of Corian's last moments. I see his bright blue eyes pleading for me to end his life before it is too late. *Trash*. I know, logically, that I am not. But it doesn't matter.

I had let Corian die. I'd killed him because I never belonged in the Strikers. My Shield's blood will forever taint my fingers.

I have no idea how long I kneel here. No one else comes to greet me. No one takes Corian's uniform from my outstretched hands. No one wants to accept the apology I have come bearing. The House of Barra will make sure I alone carry the weight of Corian's death.

The light disappears from the room and is replaced by evening. I will myself to stay trembling in place. Waiting. Hoping.

I don't know whether I make it to dawn or not. All I remember is waking up with my cheek pressed against the cold floor. A servant is quietly shaking my shoulders.

"You need to leave, now," he whispers to me. I look up into the grave eyes of a young servant boy nervously wringing his hands. His eyes

dart to the hall behind us as he holds a hand out toward the door. "The guards will show you out if you don't go yourself."

In desperate shame, I hold the uniform out to him, as if even a lowly servant of the House of Barra accepting my offering would be better than nothing. But the boy shrinks away, not daring to touch it. He gives me an apologetic stare, then straightens and leaves me.

I wait a moment longer before I slowly pick myself off the floor. Corian's uniform stays clutched in my hands. My breaths come in slow, shallow gasps as I think about what comes next.

I have lost my Shield, my closest friend. But there is more to lose. If Corian's House refuses to accept my apology, then my standing as a Striker is threatened. They will appeal to the Firstblade to release me from the forces, say I'm unfit to be entrusted with the life of another, unfit to protect this nation. Corian was the only reason I'd been allowed to become a Striker. Without him, I'm left unprotected. And without my aid, so is my mother.

If the House of Barra does not accept me, then I may have just seen my last days as a Striker.

3

I'M DREAMING AGAIN. IN THE DREAM, I'M TWELVE,
and Corian is there.

I'm crouched in the shadows of the back gate leading into the Strikers' training arena, a vast amphitheater in the heart of Newage's Inner City. From here, I can see the apprentices practicing their attack formations, their sapphire coats spinning in lethal unison. It is always like watching a dance, and I'm hypnotized.

I'm not the only one in Mara who loves to watch the Strikers train.

I look down at my own clothes. They're ragged. Even my patched elbows are worn so thin that the cloth seems translucent. Hunger claws at the base of my ribs. Sometimes, I think I longed to become a Striker only because I knew their apprentices got living quarters, three meals a day, and a healthy weekly pay. So I'd fantasize about having all of that, giving my mother the safety of a home of her own. I'd sneak into the Inner City to watch them train at the arena. Now my gaze stays fixed on the youngest recruits as they face off against one another. They're all around my age, some a little older. Soon, each will be paired with someone who best complements their personality and fighting ability.

When you can't speak, you spend a lot of time watching. Parsing. Listening. This, at least, I do well, so I analyze the forms of the

students and take mental notes on how they keep their footing. From the scrapyards dotting the Outer City, I'd learned how to shift my weight in my favor. I knew how to climb up haphazardly stacked metal ruins discarded in the yards, leftovers from the Early Ones dug up by farmers and builders. I could weasel my way inside some ancient engine to strip it of parts, then leap from one stack to another if it teetered. I could dance on unstable sheets of steel, using a blowtorch my mother had bought to sever the valuable pieces to sell. I knew how to twist between the wreckage to hide from bigger kids that vied for the yards with the best metals.

As I watch the apprentices, I mimic their steps, and my movements rise and fall in near-perfect sync with them. A grin lingers on my lips as the exercise warms my limbs. I lose myself in the concentration, until I can believe that the rags streaming behind my limbs are no different from their sapphire coats.

I don't remember how long I stay there in the darkness, going through the motions. All I know is that I'm in midair when a young voice calls out to me from above the back gate's entrance.

"You're really good, you know that?"

The voice throws me off balance. I land awkwardly and fall with a thud, sending up a cloud of dirt. My head jerks up.

There, leaning idly over the top of the gate, is a boy with bright golden hair and a thoughtful tilt to his head. Even in a dream, his features are so clearly defined that it's as if I were looking at him through a magnifying glass. His clothes are finely spun, and rings glitter on his fingers. He's confident, his shoulders straight and chin raised. A high-born Maran.

My grin vanishes. My mother had warned me about rich boys.

"You've been out here every day for months," he tells me. It is a voice that has never hesitated before.

Panic lodges in my throat. I scramble to my feet and immediately start running.

“Hey!” he shouts at me, but I don’t dare turn back. Refugees aren’t allowed inside the Inner City without a permit. If they catch me, what will they do? I’ve witnessed a woman shot in the head for trying to sneak past the wall guards. I’ve seen a refugee whipped to death for attempting to sell bushels of seaweed without a license at the Inner City’s night exchange.

I don’t stop to dwell on it. I just keep going.

Suddenly a force tackles me from behind. Before I know it, I’m facedown on the ground, and the boy’s voice is hovering over my head. I flip instinctively. He goes flying off me as I scramble into a crouch, my fists up.

He laughs, shaking dust out of his hair. All I can think about is how little he cares that he’s dirtied his fine clothes. I try to still my trembling hands. What kind of punishment will this mean for me?

“You’ve obviously never fought anyone in your life,” he says with a smile. “But I’ve been watching you. Your reaction time is incredible.”

When I flush, he offers to help me up. I stare at his outstretched hand, trying to figure out whether he’s serious or about to play a prank on me. Then, tentatively, I put my hand in his. He yanks me to my feet in a single motion, as if he’s been waiting to pull me up all his life. “I’m Corian,” he adds.

I don’t answer.

He frowns at me. “Well?” he asks. “And your name is?”

I pat my throat twice and sign to him. “I’m Talin. I can’t speak.”

I don’t expect him to understand what I said. But his eyes widen—and then he smiles and signs back. “Good. All Striker apprentices must learn how to sign,” he answers. “You know that, right?”

I remember everything about that moment—the movement of his

hands through the air, the easy way he took in my soundless words, the kind smile on his face. I knew that Ghosts on the warfront had powerful hearing, but I didn't know that Strikers used sign language to communicate out there. My lips twitch with a grin. He'd understood me. He *understands* me.

"They use the same signs that I do?"

"Very close. You'll pick it up in no time." I notice some of the differences now, like how some gestures are simplified, while others are more elaborate.

"So you want to be a Striker?" he asks.

I shrug, unsure what I'm allowed to say. "Doesn't everyone?"

"I'm surprised a Basean would want to defend us," he says, and now his face is grave. "Mara doesn't treat your kind that well."

I pause in surprise—a highborn Maran has never even laid eyes on me, much less paid such close attention to me. Much less sounded sympathetic to Baseans.

"We still all have the same enemy," I reply. "Mara isn't the Federation."

He considers me seriously. "Why don't you try out for the apprenticeship, then?" he asks.

"Baseans aren't allowed to."

"So? You move as fast as anyone inside that arena." He nods over his shoulder. "You should at least come to the exams. I'll put in a word for you with the Firstblade, if you're interested."

When I just stand there, stunned, he puts his hands in his pockets and turns away. I envy the straightness of his back, the wild confidence in every line of his figure. He really believes his words can carry that kind of power. It makes me think he must be right.

In that moment, I make a vow to be like him. I'm going to find a way to walk through life with courage seared into my bones.

“No pressure, of course,” he calls over his shoulder as he turns in the direction of the arena. “I just thought I’d suggest it.”

The sun is warm, the sky a cloudless blue. My heart beats rapidly against my ribs. I wait a breath longer. Then my legs finally loosen, and I find myself doing what I would do for the next six years—I follow him. I run and run and run.

But in my dream, I never catch up.

• • •

A knock against my door jerks me awake. My face is still streaked with tears.

I swing my legs over the side of my bed. Weak morning light bands across my arms. My head throbs in a rhythm, aching from nightmares I can’t remember. It takes me a second to register that I’m back in my Striker apartment in Newage, and another to remind myself that I now live here alone. My hand goes instinctively to the black bits of Ghost bone studding my ears. The piercings are still fresh enough to hurt when I touch them.

It’s been two weeks since I tried to deliver Corian’s uniform. I wonder if I will ever stop dreaming about him. The shadows are haunted by echoes of where he used to be. Across the hall is his room, the door closed. I haven’t looked in there since I hung his uniform back in his closet. There’s no need to see his bed, tidy and unused. His dressers empty and weapons cabinet hollow. I can feel his emptiness in the air around me, and the reminder every morning sends such a sharp pain through my chest that I want to curl back into my bed and drift off into oblivion, to lie here and never wake, to stay and stay until death comes to claim me too.

Corian would scoff at me if he saw me like this. He'd roll me right out of bed and toss my coat at my head. The thought of his exasperated glare is almost enough to make me laugh through my grief.

Corian, I think. When you first met me, did you see someone with potential? Or is your father right? Did you really just feel sorry for me?

What does it matter, anyway? No new Striker wishes to pair with me. The Firstblade is debating what to do. Soon, I have no doubt, he'll kick me off the patrols. Then I'll be forced to stand by, as helpless as the day my mother and I fled our home, as the Federation comes marching through the gates of Newage.

The pounding against my door starts up again.

Walk with courage, I remind myself, thinking of the vow I'd once made to be more like Corian. I sigh, force myself to push up from the bed, and reach for my shirt.

When I finally answer the door, I see Adena Min Ghanna from my patrol standing there in her uniform, her smile so big that it looks like it hurts. Her frizzy hair is tied up into a neat bun, and the morning sun gives her dark skin a warm highlight. She adjusts a pair of goggles on her forehead and wrinkles her nose at me.

"You look like hell," Adena scolds. She reaches down to brush a few strands of hair away from my eyes, then tugs once on the bottom of my shirt, which I'd left carelessly loose. "Tuck it in, you heathen."

"I thought Marans didn't have an official religion," I sign, my mood turning me sarcastic.

"It's a saying, Talin," she signs back.

"Why do you look like you swallowed a frog?"

"All Strikers are to gather in the arena this morning."

I squint up at the sky, my gaze settling on the bands of distant clouds. "For what? Is the cease-fire over already?"

Adena shakes her head. “No. We caught a deserter from the Federation.” She leans forward eagerly. “He’s to be interrogated today, before an audience.”

A prisoner of war. Now I remember Corian mentioning someone being seized during the same sweep when he’d died. This must be the soldier.

My heart hardens. By tradition, the Firstblade of the Strikers is the one responsible for interrogating enemy soldiers we capture. He questions them in public at the arena, often by stone or by whip, until they tell us what they know about the Federation. If they don’t cooperate, they are executed before an audience.

It sounds cruel, torturing a prisoner to death. But sometimes cruelty is catharsis. I’ve witnessed firsthand what Federation soldiers can do to the people they conquer. To women. To families. To children. This public death is a kindness in comparison, a pitiful fragment of justice for all of us who have lost loved ones in the most horrific ways.

“You made me get out of bed just because we’re executing some Federation coward today?”

“Is arguing with me your new habit?” Adena responds.

I hold my hands up innocently before replying, “Just asking questions.”

“Firstblade’s orders. Strikers to the arena. So stop playing around and go put on your full gear.”

Adena had been close with Corian too, but the way she copes with his death is to drown herself behind her meticulous habits, nitpicking everything as if she could organize the grief out of her system. She’s stopped by my apartment every day for the past two weeks, bringing me savory pancakes and meat pies wrapped in cloth from the cafeteria, checking to see if I’m sleeping and putting on clean clothes.

I hate myself a little for forgetting that others are also learning how to move on from Corian's death, that Adena is the more considerate one of us, that she knows to think of me even as she struggles.

I haven't lost my Striker uniform just yet. And watching the execution of a Federation soldier might at least distract me from my haze of grief. I bow my head to Adena and start to turn away. "I'll be quick," I promise her.

Adena waits in the open doorway while I wash my face and strap on my harnesses and weapons. A few minutes later, I emerge in my full uniform, and together we head out of the Striker quarters in the direction of the training arena.

Everywhere, there are signs of strain from years of war. The streets are cracked and in desperate need of repair. People buying food in the exchange market clutch ration cards for seaflour, while auctions run high for cuts of beef from the limited numbers of wild cows we're allowed to cull for the month. When a string of children run past us, I notice their bony arms, the too-sharp jut of their chins.

The conditions are even worse beyond the walls, in the Outer City's shanties. Every time we head to the warfront, we ride through their narrow mud paths, lined on either side by shacks made of rusting tin sheets and threadbare cloth. Hollow-eyed refugees from Kente, who brought their famed metalworking skills here to help us build our walls and weapons. Merchants from Larc, whose reams of fabric and bags of colorful spices are popular with Marans. Baseans, whose agricultural skills and hardy crop seeds have helped in harvesting the land more efficiently.

Basean refugees are the most difficult for me to see. Their eyes always light up at me, as if the fact that I'm one of them means that I can somehow save their families.

But I can't remember the last time we didn't have a food shortage.

Mara's ruin-dotted cliffs and mountain ranges have served as a natural advantage for us in the war—but in the end, they may be what kills us. The only crop that Mara harvests is *camifera*, a leathery, nutrient-rich plant that thrives on the wet cliffs fed by salty waves. Originally an invasive species that leached the damp soils of nutrients, *camifera* could be pounded into a flour for breads and noodles or woven into a coarse fabric called seasilk, we learned.

But without trade, this harvest isn't enough to feed everyone. The few herds of wild cows left in Mara are strictly regulated by the Senate to ensure their populations can remain steady enough to feed us. The meat distributed is reserved for Senate leaders and those who live in the Inner City, while people in the Outer City have to resort to eating the rabbits and mice that run rampant in the shantytowns. People risk imprisonment and death to poach the remaining animals, but even then they will all be gone in a few years. If the Federation's Ghosts don't find us first, starvation will.

The worst part is knowing that this is still nowhere near what life would be like under the Federation's rule. I've seen the destruction firsthand in the territories they conquer. It is the fire of an empire that believes so strongly in their superiority, is so certain they are destined to inherit this land from the Early Ones, that they are determined to prove it.

In the silence, Adena glances over at me. Her gaze settles on the dark circles under my eyes. "Jeran told me you've been at the arena before dawn every day," she finally says. "That you've been training past midnight."

"I thought you'd be impressed with how busy I've been keeping."

"I'd be more impressed if you were efficient about it," she replies. "But you're just exhausting yourself. You collapsed twice during training this week. No one has seen you at the mess hall in days."

"Who needs a mess hall when they have you delivering them meat pies?"

“I wouldn’t need to deliver you meat pies if you’d just go to the mess hall,” she replies witheringly.

“Forgive me for enjoying your daily company.”

“Look, if you want to practice in the arena until you’re unconscious, at least use your time right. Come by my shop. I can replace your swords’ hilts with a design that locks together. It’ll let you use both blades at once and free up your other hand for a third weapon.”

I nudge her. “New gadgets you’ve been tinkering with?”

Adena grins and pulls out her own double blades. I can see that she has fitted both ends with an interlocking piece. She slides the two hilts together and twists until there’s a satisfying click. Then she twirls the connected swords with one hand. They’ve been transformed into a single weapon with a blade at either end.

“See?” she says aloud as she twists the hilts again. They separate back into two swords.

I smile. All of Adena’s weapons are altered like this—daggers with serrated blades; bullets that explode on contact with a target; arrows tipped with poison. She’s the only Striker who was given a shop in the metalworkers’ Grid.

“Anyway,” she adds as she sheaths her swords, “take it easy on your training. Come sit with the others once in a while. You can’t hide away forever.”

“I’ll be fine,” I sign. “Really.”

“Convincing argument,” she signs back.

“I just . . . Give me time.”

Adena’s eyes soften at me, and she touches my arm. “Losing your first Shield is always the hardest.” Her gestures pause, turning uncertain. “I know it’s only been a couple of weeks.”

Adena’s first Shield had been her brother, her only family. She’d lost him three years ago to a hostage trade gone wrong between us and the

Federation. I had been the one delivering food to her door then, forcing her out of bed and away from her grief. Ever since, she has looked forward to the executions of enemy soldiers.

“But you know a Striker must have a Shield, right?” she continues now. “The Firstblade’s not going to let you stay unpaired for much longer.”

You can’t stay a Striker without a Shield. If a lone Striker is bitten by a Ghost, there is no one nearby to kill them before they turn. Corian would have twisted into the gnarled, cracked body of a Ghost and come for the rest of us at the encampment. They don’t trust us to have the strength to kill ourselves first.

I look away from her as we approach the arena’s front gates. “I knew my Striker days were over the instant Corian’s father turned me away,” I sign. “Who else would want to pair with a Basean?”

“Plenty would. Don’t lose hope. Aramin hasn’t dismissed you yet.”

“Yet.” I raise an eyebrow at her. “I appreciate your faith in me, but you don’t have to lie.”

“I’m not lying!” she blurts out.

“I know what the other Strikers think of me being on a patrol.”

“Well, they’re fools,” Adena finally adds. She loops her arm through mine and presses herself closer to me. “You’re one of the most talented Strikers ever recruited. Even the Firstblade has admitted that. If he lets you go, we might as well open our gates and wave the Federation in.”

“Well, that makes you the fool,” I sign. Then I smile and lean back against her. “But thank you, all the same.”

Adena shrugs, nudging me affectionately. “Figured you could use the moral support.”

We reach the arena’s front gates and walk through. Inside, Strikers are scattered throughout the space. Some are already waiting up in the seats, while the most dedicated are running through a few quick drills

down in the arena's center. Ema Wen Danna, expected to join Mara's Senate next year, is sharpening her sword as she lectures her sullen brother, Sano, on proper weapon etiquette. They exchange nods with me as I pass by. Others, like Tomm and Pira, both offspring of old money families, sneer and whisper under their breath. I keep my chin up and ignore them.

I see a cluster of onlookers gathered around one Striker in particular. It's Jeran Min Terra, Adena's Shield, sparring with random opponents.

At first glance, Jeran looks like nothing more than a slender boy, his hair tied up in a knot of red gold and his eyes the blue of glacier water, his face too shy for a Striker. It's not the appearance of someone who has racked up more kills than anyone else in the patrols. Deathdancer. It's the nickname he's earned by the fluid way he moves around a Ghost, slicing a thousand cuts with his daggers while dodging every claw the creature might slash in his direction. He always reminds me of water carving through a canyon.

Today he has blindfolded himself, relying solely on his hearing to determine where his opponent is. His leg sweeps in an arc across the ground. His back arches like a bow. As we look on, he disarms one challenger, then smoothly sends another falling backward into the dirt. His movements are lithe and precise, a hypnotizing dance of daggers flashing, blades glinting.

To anyone unfamiliar with Jeran's techniques, it'd seem as if he doesn't even need to think. He just acts. But Adena and I both know how much work he puts into his moves. The onlookers let out a cheer now as Jeran disarms a third opponent, then slides off his blindfold.

Now I notice the Firstblade among those watching Jeran practice. In the midst of applause, Aramin steps toward Jeran and points out some small weakness in the Striker's moves. Jeran listens closely, then copies Aramin's motion. The two move in sync, Aramin explaining as they go.

And in this moment, I remember how young Aramin is, how he used to do these same exercises with Jeran in the arena before our last Firstblade was killed and Aramin was promoted. It still surprises me that Aramin never asked Jeran to be his Shield.

Finally, the Firstblade nods his approval and leaves the circle. Jeran watches him go, distracted, as the other Strikers begin to mill around.

I keep my head down as we enter the space, but it doesn't stop the ripple of attention that hits me. I can feel the stares from the recruits and the soldiers, can hear their whispers and mutters to one another.

"That's the Basean Striker," one recruit says to another. "I guess rats can sneak into the tightest kitchens."

"No wonder her Shield died. Pity."

"Well, I hear she won't be a Striker for much longer. Firstblade's to make a decision this week."

"My mother says Baseans get their black hair from sleeping in the mud."

"I heard it was from sleeping with the scrapyard pickers."

Muffled laughter.

My posture stiffens at that. Last year, I'd had a fling with a young Larcean refugee, a sweet, pretty boy with an easy smile, who worked to sort valuable steel from trash in the Outer City's scrapyards. We only fooled around for a few weeks, sneaking time together in hollowed-out carriage husks in the yards, but it lasted long enough for word to get out to the other Strikers. I haven't been in another relationship since.

The precariousness of my position hangs over me like a storm cloud. *Corian felt sorry for you.* The words buzz again in my mind.

Adena's grip tightens on my arm as she glares at the others. "So eager to insult a fellow Striker when you could probably rip all their guts out," she says to me, raising her voice loud enough for them to hear.

Jeran sees us approach. His face softens with a smile that turns his

eyes into crescents as he hurries toward us, tripping in his rush. I can't help smiling back. Jeran is ruthlessly graceful when practicing the art of death. When he's not, he can't find his balance.

"It's good to see you out of your quarters," he signs.

"You can do a blind run better than anyone," I sign back, smiling at the cloth still looped around his neck.

"I was studying your techniques, you know," he tells me, his expression bashful. "That last move was one I saw you do at the warfront at midnight."

"Me?" I make a mock gesture of fluffing my hair. "What a flatterer, Jeran."

He laughs a little. "Only when deserved. Aramin says I still can't do it quite as well as you."

The thought of the Firstblade's indirect praise lifts my spirits somewhat.

"Why can't you appreciate *my* techniques?" Adena says to him. "You still haven't tried out the ax I designed for you."

"It's too heavy," he insists. "Have you tried lifting that thing during battle?"

"It's the same weight as your sword! I designed it specifically for you."

"It's hard to carry."

"Be honest. You don't like it because it doesn't look good."

Jeran gives me an embarrassed glance before looking back at his Shield. "The hilt doesn't match the rest of my ensemble," he finally signs.

Adena throws her hands up. "I quit. I'm going home. Call me when the warfront no longer requires a sense of fashion."

I walk behind them as they bicker, watching how their steps sync up as if they could read each other's minds. It is the way of Shields, and

how I used to walk with Corian. The pang in my heart is all too familiar now. I clamp down on it before it overwhelms me.

We settle in our seats right as a horn sounds from the far side of the arena. I look toward it to see two guards pulling with all their weight on a chain that keeps one of the central arena's gates weighed down. The door groans as it inches open.

"So, what do we know about this prisoner?" Adena asks Jeran.

"He was captured at the warfront two weeks ago," he replies, fiddling restlessly with his hands like he always does. "The rumor is that he's a soldier who defected from the Federation."

"A soldier? Because he was in uniform?"

"No uniform. He has a brand, though." At that, Jeran brushes a hand idly along the thin trim of black silk on his coat's neckline to indicate where it is. "Some kind of military insignia. They said he was running across the warfront as if being chased, and not with the deliberate movements of a scout."

"Apparently he won't talk," Adena says, then tugs at her gloves. "Not even to save his life. But we'll see if that changes in the arena. By the time they've whipped his back to a pulp, he'll be spilling out the Federation's secrets like a broken water line."

"Maybe he'll want to cooperate now," Jeran offers hopefully, "and we won't have to. Whip him, that is."

I just listen as they go on. Why would a Federation defector not want to tell us what he knows? If this soldier was unhappy enough to risk life and limb to escape to Mara, wouldn't he want to help us defeat a common enemy?

"I think they're about to bring him out," Jeran muses, nodding toward the far end of the space, and my thoughts churn to a halt as I crane my neck in the same direction.

A shout goes up from somewhere in the arena.

“Firstblade!”

The call has barely echoed through the space before every Striker rises in a uniform clatter. I follow suit.

It’s the Firstblade, and his expression now is a mask of grave calm. As he walks to the center of the arena, we all tap a fist in unison to our chests. Jeran’s eyes linger on him longer than the rest of ours do; from the corner of my eye, I can see him leaning forward as if to get a better glimpse. Aramin flicks a hand at us, and only then do all the Strikers sit down again.

I hear the clank of metal. My attention shifts back to the gate at the arena’s end.

A team of guards emerges, dragging a young man between them.

He’s tall, built strong like a soldier. Shadows obscure his eyes. Heavy chains hang from his neck, wrists, and legs, clanking with every move he makes.

At first glance, he seems unremarkable. But there’s something about him that keeps my gaze locked, makes me afraid to look away.

“This is the prisoner of war?” I sign to Adena beside me.

Adena frowns too. “He doesn’t seem like a soldier. Where’s his Federation haircut?”

I shake my head. Most Karensan soldiers I’ve seen have their hair clipped short on the sides in a distinct look. This man’s locks look naturally grown out.

“He seems weak,” Jeran adds as he nods toward the prisoner. There’s real pity in his voice.

Adena lets out a disappointed sigh. “They’ve starved him too long. This won’t be much of a spectacle.”

I take a better look at him.

One thing that separates apprentices from seasoned Strikers is a well-honed instinct. You develop a sense for everything around

you—the shift of eyes and feet, the people not seen in the shadows, the small gestures that others don't notice. The feeling that something is about to go wrong. It is why we practice exercises like what Jeran did with his blindfold, isolating our senses one by one in order to enhance them. Survival out on the warfront depends on cataloging every tiny detail around you.

Over the years, I've honed my instinct into a blade. But when I look at this man, I don't see anything I can grasp. Nothing in his eyes feels familiar—not a glint of hate, fear, or uncertainty. I feel only like I'm staring into an abyss. Like I don't know where I am.

Now that instinct in me flares like a fire. I don't know what it is about him—an unnatural grace in his movements, an emptiness in his eyes—but something else lies beneath the weakened exterior of his figure, some undercurrent of power. It makes him seem less like a soldier and more like a weapon. I have the unsettling suspicion that, if he wanted to, if he didn't look so lifeless, he could kill every guard around him.

Lifeless.

And then I realize, all of a sudden, that the only reason he's a captive at all is because he wants to be. Because he *wants* to die.