



CHAPTER 1

ECHOES OF THUNDER

Torrents of rain poured down the high castle walls in the kingdom of Katolis. The raindrops sounded like pebbles beating against the pane-glass windows. Black storm clouds swirled in the sky, flickering with silent lightning.

Wrapped in a soft blanket, Ezran settled into his four-post bed, his unruly brown hair splayed over his pillow. Ezran's room was as messy as any eight-year-old's, but the room itself was grand and royal. The walls and floor were made of finely wrought stone, and the antique wooden furniture boasted delicate carvings of animals and forest scenery. Candles flickered, casting peaceful shadows across the walls.

The brightest light in the room emanated from Bait, Ezran's pet glow toad. This furless creature slept curled in the nook of

Ezran's elbow; he was the size of a cat but not nearly so cuddly. He kept his slick yellow-and-blue lizard skin close to his master's side, breathing in sync with the boy.

"Knock, knock! May I come in?" A voice rang from just outside Ezran's door.

"You're the king! I don't think you have to ask," Ezran called back.

King Harrow stepped into the room.

"Kings don't have to ask, but dads do," he said, winking at Ezran. He gave Bait a light pat as he sat on the edge of the bed.

The tiny monster grumbled a complaint, but secretly appreciated the affection. Bait was a loyal pet, but like most of his species, he was perpetually grumpy, a consequence of the fact that just about every wild animal larger than a glow toad considered glow toads delicious.

The king reached up and adjusted Ezran's covers. "Are you comfy cozy?"

"Comfy cozy," Ezran said. "You can sing now."

In a soft voice, the king sang the same lullaby he had repeated nearly every night since Ezran's mother died when he was an infant.

*"The Sun is down, and the Moon is high.
Baby yawns wide with a sleepy sigh.
The Sky fills up with Stars that blink.
Baby's eyelids start to sink.
The Ocean kisses the Earth good night.
The waves say hushhh . . . little babe, sleep tight."*

Ezran smiled. “I love that you still sing that to me. Even though it’s for little kids, it makes me happy.”

“Good,” the king answered.

“Will you still sing it to me when I’m grown-up? I want you to.”

“If you still want me to, then yes.”

“Even when I’m king? You have to promise me that you’ll still sing to me.”

Harrow hesitated but then answered, “I will always watch over you, even when you are king.”

He leaned over and pressed a warm kiss into Ezran’s forehead. This was always the moment Ezran yawned, feeling so sleepy, so suddenly.

“Good night, sweet prince,” Harrow said on his way to the door. He paused at the adjoining room. “And good night, Callum.”

Ezran’s older half brother, Callum, sat by an easel in the connecting room. He had a blanket draped around his shoulders and a gloved hand wrapped around a mug of tea. He sketched rapidly by the candlelight.

“Night!” Callum answered without looking up from his drawing. He liked King Harrow, and he appreciated everything the king had done for him since his mother died, but the king wasn’t Callum’s dad. Sometimes the good-nights felt awkward.

Harrow slipped out, closing the door behind him.

Callum continued sketching. The fourteen-year-old could draw anything he had seen in perfect detail, even if he’d only seen it for an instant. But this sketch was from his imagination—a

fantastical creature that was part giraffe, part alligator. Callum thought to himself that the “girrafigator” might look awkward, but it literally had a thick skin if anyone tried to tease it. And besides, if it needed to teach one of its tormentors a lesson, having a long neck that culminated in sharp teeth and powerful jaws might come in handy.

CRASH!

A sudden clap of thunder startled Callum from his thoughts.

“Callum!”

“It’s okay, Ez,” Callum called. He put down his pencil and went over to his kid-brother’s bed. “It’s just a thunderstorm. Nothing to be afraid of. Go back to sleep.”

“I wasn’t scared,” Ezran said. “Bait was scared.”

At the sound of his own name, Bait looked up with a frown and turned a deep shade of red. He did not appreciate any suggestion of cowardice on his part. He’d met many a glow toad in his day and knew that he was in the bravest five percent. Or at least the bravest ten percent.

But Bait could never stay angry at Ezran for long. His color faded as he fell back to sleep.



Lightning flashed, and the elves saw the human soldier patrolling the royal forest. The young man was on high alert, his eyes darting left and right as he scanned the thicket.

Rayla, the youngest of the team of elves, rubbed the handles of her blades with her long elven fingers. Did the soldier realize

they were watching from the brush? Could he know that his very existence hung in the balance?

If the elves' leader, Runaan, gave her the signal, Rayla would take the soldier's life. She'd have no choice. She was an assassin, after all, and a fine one at that. She was swift with her blades and nimble on her feet. She could run and jump through the tall trees as well as any of her elders. Rayla would do anything Runaan asked of her.

Walk away, Rayla chanted in her mind, as if she could will the young soldier to leave his post. *Don't see us. Go home.*

The elves' mission had little to do with this particular human. He was just an annoyance on the journey to their true targets. They'd leave him alone if they could. But if the soldier spotted them . . . Rayla tried to stop thinking about it.

"Is anyone there?" the soldier called out into the darkness. He sounded confident, maybe even brave, and Rayla knew this did not bode well for him.

The elves stayed still. Rayla held her breath. One second passed. Then another.

"Declare yourself, in the name of King Harrow!" the human shouted.

Just a few more seconds of silence, Rayla thought to herself. *A few more seconds, and he'll realize it was nothing and keep moving.* Could the soldier hear her pounding heart?

Another flash of lightning brightened the sky, and the human's eyes grew wide. There was no question about it now. He had seen them.

He fired an arrow from his crossbow in their general direction, then turned on his heel and raced away.

In the blink of an eye, Runaan signaled with an almost imperceptible nod of his head.

Did he nod at me? Rayla wondered. No one else flinched. *Yes, he must have chosen me. Now I am death for this soldier.*

Her training kicked in, all the actions and reactions she had practiced endlessly became instinct in this moment, and she sprinted after her prey. Killing this human was her duty now, nothing more.

The soldier ran down the path as fast as a human could, his bulky cloak flapping in the wind, his clunky weapons slowing him down.

But Rayla was a creature of the woods. She leaped from tree branch to tree branch, her feet barely grazing the bark before she sprang to her next perch. She soared over the forest, always anticipating the target's next move. Faster and faster Rayla pursued, closing in on the soldier with each leap. The rain stung her cheeks. The putrid smell of the storm overwhelmed her senses. She'd never felt more alive.

The target was just out of reach now.

Rayla paused on a branch, her violet eyes narrow and sparkling in the dark woods. Then she leaped to the ground behind the soldier.

The soldier whipped around, but Rayla was already back in the darkness. She watched as he swung his crossbow wildly.

Get out there! Rayla told herself.

Before she could rethink it, she burst from the shadows and delivered a swift kick to the human's chest. He tumbled down a ravine into a river of mud. Rayla followed.

At the bottom, the soldier tried to fight, but it was pointless; Rayla had her blades at his neck in an instant.

“Please!” he begged. His panicked eyes took in her intricate weapons.

Do it now! Rayla thought. *Hesitation is torture, not mercy...* A swift execution was the only kindness she could offer.

The soldier was peering up at her now, searching for her face beneath the hood of her cloak.

“Who are you?” he asked softly.

Another flash of lightning. The target's face was illuminated for a moment, but a moment was all it took. Rayla saw the soldier's fear. She saw his sadness. She could almost hear his thoughts: *I'm going to die. I'm going to die.*

But she also saw his love for life and the promises it held for him—promises she would sever with her blades. She let her grip on her weapons loosen ever so slightly.

The soldier took his chance and crawled backward in the mud. Then he ran.

Rayla dropped her arms to her sides and hung her head, her will melted in the storm. Why was she so weak?

She stood still as a statue while the target made his escape.