

LBRIS

We know
books

STARSLIDE

ALEX ASTER

BLOOMSBURY  ARCHER

LIBRIS

We know
books

Starside



LBRIS

We know
books



1



This will kill me.

My sweaty palm curves around my dagger as I weave through the crowd of spectators. My blade is hidden up my sleeve, the sparkling metal cold against my pulse. One wrong move, and I'll stab myself, but it's better than having my weapon noticed this far from the front.

I lift to my toes to gauge my distance—and there it is.

The platform. A massive stone the size of a stage, black rock speckled with silver like a fallen slab of night. It's beautiful, one of the last remaining shreds of magic on this side of a land halved.

Soon, it will be covered in blood.

Hundreds have traveled from every corner of Stormside, armed with the best metals and years of elite training, to fight for a place on that platform. Thousands have risked their lives traveling down barren roads, just to watch.

The Questral only happens every fifty years.

Fifty of us mortals will be allowed past the gates, into the land of the immortals, to undergo a deadly journey.

Only a handful ever return. Most are killed by legendary beasts or the ruthless immortals themselves.

But the prize at the end of the quest is worth the risk. A goblet full of something that can turn miles of ash to fertile plains, summon storms after years of drought, cure any disease, grant power or wealth or even immortality.

Magic.

There are just fifty coveted spots. Hundreds will fight to the death for them during the king's mysterious Culling.

But to even qualify for the Culling, you must first reach the platform.

A ring of king's guards surrounds the stone, their well-worn silver armor glinting beneath the blazing sun. I squint, trying to find the one guard I need to stay the hell away from, but he's noticeably missing. *Strange.*

Relief slides down my spine. My chances are pretty much fucked as it is, but at least I won't be going up against *him*.

The king's eyes and ears, known only as the Watchman, stands just left of the stone, a gleaming silver hawk perched on his arm—one of the king's coveted rarities. Silver is the color of the gods. As the most powerful figure on this side, the king believes he's owed everything in that hue. Harboring creatures of the shade is a crime punishable by death.

Even so, I've seen the rare silver animal caged and sold in the illegal desert markets. They have to be caught young, when they can't put up a fight. Because the older ones . . .

They themselves are weapons.

The hawk's feathers shine like melted moonlight. Its long talons look like curved daggers. A chill sweeps down my arms, below the thick sleeves. I've seen guts spilled across streets, because of those talons. I've watched that hawk decapitate a thief, then fly off, head clutched in its claws like a damned trophy.

As if sensing my notice, the bird's head turns sharply, dark eyes boring into mine, and I fall back onto my heels, heart in my throat.

Ten minutes. Once the hawk gives its first scream, I'll have just ten minutes to make it onto that platform. Its cries will mark down each minute, until time is up. Any moment now, it's going to open its beak, and all hell is going to break loose.

I'm still too far away.

I quicken my pace while trying not to attract attention, part of my strategy. It's not just the king's guard to worry about. Some spectators will take it upon themselves to cull potential volunteers before they even get close to the front, in a twisted way to ensure only the best make it on.

Today, murder is sanctioned. *Celebrated.*

So, unlike the circle of armed hopefuls at the front, already staring down the king's guards, ready to fight, I'm trying to get as close as pos-

sible without being noticed. I shoulder through the crowd, head low. No one stops me, assuming I'm just a fellow onlooker. They must see the lack of muscle. Lack of sword. Lack of height. Pale skin without the healthy flush of nourishment. Hardly enough to go against heirs and warriors who have trained their entire lives for this day. Volunteering for the quest, in their eyes, would be a death sentence.

They're fucking right.

Someone slams into my back, sending me stumbling forward. *Shit.* I barely manage to keep my dagger flat against my skin as I topple forward, right into the woman in front of me.

She throws a scathing look over her shoulder that only deepens when I angle past her, apologizing under my breath. Judging by the thick, tightly woven material of the coat she now clutches in her hand, she's a traveler from far north.

Almost every village has sent volunteers or witnesses to our town of Nightfell, named after the black rock at the center of it. I slip past unfamiliar fabrics. All are faded, ripped, and covered in a layer of dirt, the tattered remains of something that once might have been beautiful, but is now only ruins. Just like everything else on this side.

A roaring has me wrenching my head back up. Next to the platform, a tower of flame shoots skyward, crackling in shades of shredded sunset.

I don't have to wonder what it's for—I know. The bodies that don't make it onto the stone will be thrown into the fire, left to burn.

I swallow. It's almost time.

"Looking to feed the flames?"

The gravelly voice comes from a slim, tall man with slicked-back hair, leaning all his weight upon a sword I'd bet my own dagger he can't hold up properly. Metal is heavy. Most men who visit the forge want the biggest weapon they can afford, but few can get it off the ground when it counts.

At his statement, several heads turn toward us.

Fuck.

Though my tongue itches to ask the man if *he's* looking to sharpen my blade, preferably between his ribs, I push my metal higher up my wrist and offer my most sheepish of smiles.

"Of course not. Just trying to get a better view." My voice says *That's ridiculous. Me? Try to qualify for the Questral? That would kill me.* It

echoes what Stellan told me this morning when he saw the dagger in my hand.

“I didn’t fish you from the ashes to watch you die in the gods-damned village square,” Stellan said, yet there he is in the crowd, watching me from afar with narrowed eyes, his white brows furrowed in frustration. He shakes his head, letting me know, until my very last breath, that he did not sanction this.

“You’ve trained me for this,” I told him in the forge, the place I grew up, the splitting of steel as natural as his endless whistling. He found me in the gutters of this world when I was just a child, an orphan with nothing to her name. Not even a name, really.

At that, his eyes lit with a fury so fierce it nearly diminished the forge behind him. Then that anger melted into something I had never seen in his expression before. Terror. “This isn’t what I wanted.”

Still, he didn’t ask for the dagger back, even though it’s the greatest weapon he’s ever made, crafted from a piece of a world so cruel and deadly, he’s refused to speak of it. Even to me.

Which is a shame, because the knowledge of how Stellan made it to be one of the Fifty would have really helped right about now.

No, he won’t watch me die. Not yet. I’m going to make it to the platform. First, though, I need to get past this man who is digging a hole into the ground with his sword. He’s still studying me far too closely.

I shrink into myself, as if unnerved by his notice. As if afraid of the sword he can’t even hold up. I take a shaking step back, shoe sinking into the mud.

The man smirks, taking his time to look me over, his gaze snagging on my clothing. He must be wondering why I’m wearing long sleeves and fabric up to my chin in scorching heat. He must be noticing the clear lack of scabbard and baldric. He frowns when he reaches my worn boots, the fabric shrunken and split. The people to his left and right turn back around, already uninterested.

But he keeps looking, taking in my brown hair that I carefully braided and pinned at the back of my head, to keep the long strands out of my face—and to keep others from using it against me. It might be the most obvious sign that I’m here for something other than entertainment, but his stare just wanders, until it finally meets mine.

All at once, his interest grows. My eyes—they’re dark blue. A rare shade. Now, I wish they were a different color entirely.

I don't drop my gaze. He tilts his head. Finally, he leans toward me, his metal leaning with him. "Don't let me stop you."

I smile my thanks and pass him by.

That's when his hand slides down my body. Squeezes. I freeze.

Bile crawls up my throat, but I swallow it and the urge to cut his hand clean off. I can't be noticed. Not yet, so many rows away.

I do what I've done for years. I bury the rage and keep moving.

That's when a scream cuts through the crowd like a scythe.

The silver hawk. Its sharp beak is opened wide, emitting a piercing wail.

It's time.

A flash of color snags my attention as a man hurls himself from a rooftop, attempting to get onto the stone by jumping. It looks like he might make it.

He almost does.

Then, just before his feet land, a guard's sword goes through his gut. He slips in his own blood right off the stone.

His body is quickly thrown into the fire. The flames roar, then crackle.

Fire or stone. Death or life.

This is the Questral.

In a wave of weapons, the first ring of volunteers rushes forward, only to be met with a wall of king's guards, all wielding the highest metal. *Silver.*

Metal is our last remaining magic—ore from the ground, infused with power. Some varieties hold more of it, making a weapon stronger. And silver is the strongest of all mortal metals.

They're dead. I see their swords from rows away, and I know for certain they stand no chance.

Still, they lift their blades. They bellow as they lunge forward, ready to duel.

And one after the other, copper, tin, and aluminum swords shatter against higher metal.

Their wielders are run through. They fall. *They all fall.* Their bodies are kicked to the side, then thrown into the flames, before they've even taken their final breaths.

Fuck.

The next surge of volunteers is already rushing forward. More metal fractures and breaks.

Panic rises within me like a bitter tide. My eyes widen at the blood, already spilling rivers across the stone and dirt around it. But my thumb traces the etchings down the hilt that I carved myself, the curve of a flame that mirrors the one currently melting a pile of flesh and bone. A reminder of why I'm here.

For you. I'm doing this for you.

The hawk screeches a second time. One minute, already gone.

No more standing still. I use the chaos as a cover and duck, slipping through rows, eyes fixed on the glimmering stone. Five rows away. Four—another screech. Three.

Clashing metal sounds to my left. The crowd erupts in mayhem as nothing short of a legion forces itself through its center, curved shields creating an orb-like barrier. They march as one body, inching forward, shoving anyone in their way to the ground.

Only when they reach the platform do the shields part, and out walks a man wearing glimmering armor that mimics the sun itself.

It's crafted from pure, unfiltered gold. Selling just a piece of it would feed our village for a year. It's nearly impenetrable, crafted with the utmost care.

I know. It was made in Stellan's forge.

The crowd murmurs to one another, but the displeasure doesn't rise above a whisper because Cadoc is the heir of House Bolter, one of the five remaining Great Houses on Stormside. Thousands rely on the house for food, since the Bolters own most of the remaining fertile land on this side.

It isn't an accident. Every Questral, House Bolter has sent its eldest through the gates, and they have returned with enough magic for another half century of prosperity. For themselves, at least. They've hoarded relics and knowledge that make it easier for their descendants to survive the next quest. Over generations, the house has ballooned in power.

Unlimited access to gold from their House's mines doesn't hurt either.

I don't have a legion. Thanks to Stellan, I don't need one. He taught me to be strong. Independent. Resilient even through tragedy.

You rise. You rise from the ashes like a phoenix, he told me when I was just a child who wouldn't stop crying.

Phoenixes aren't real, I told him.

"Not here," he said. *Not here.*

It was the most he ever revealed about the place beyond the gates. The one we're all now risking our lives to visit.

Starside. The land of magic and immortals. A place that is said to glimmer like diamonds and cut like teeth.

A paradise that is lusted after and feared in equal measure. Immortals don't die from disease, they don't bleed, they don't need food and water to survive. Their eyes glitter like gemstones. They are the descendants of the gods. The gods themselves live on that side, imbuing their land with endless resources.

We kill each other for scraps of that magic.

I'm so close. The crowd is still partially scattered, and I use that to my advantage. The stone glimmers brightly, winking beneath the sunlight. I take another step forward—

And nearly take an arrow in the eye. At the last second, I turn, and crimson spatters as the arrow goes through the skull of the man behind me. He slumps to the dirt, body crunching the glass of discarded goblets, drinks left by those who have waited days in the same spots to catch a glimpse of the action.

A sword is gripped in his lifeless hand. It's a lesser metal. Still, a half-starved man from the crowd lunges to take it. Another fights him.

My path has been noticed. I duck—then am slammed to the side as someone pushes past, making a run for the platform. A woman with tan skin and dark hair, cut close to her scalp.

The arrow was meant for her. That's made clear when another one whistles through the boiling afternoon air, right at her chest. She dips to avoid it, rolls, and pulls her own bow and arrow from her back so quickly, her movements blur.

She doesn't even stop, or slow. She just aims without looking, fires, and keeps going, before leaping onto the platform.

The archer falls from the top of a nearby building, his body hitting the road with a sickening thud.

A fourth cry.

Just seven minutes left.

I bolt, then almost trip over a body, curled low. The ridges of a spine are clearly visible through thin fabric. A head whips to the side, and—it's just a child. Clutching a jagged piece of glass as a weapon.

My gaze lifts to the platform. There's an opening, a gap between

king's guards already dueling other opponents. I should run. I should take my chance. But instead, I find myself crouching.

"Don't do this," I tell the child. He looks at me with wide amber eyes. And I know I'm a damned hypocrite as I say, "You won't make it."

But his mind is set, just as mine is. "My family is starving. I'm—I'm their only chance."

I swallow past the knot in my throat. "Do they know you're here?"

He shakes his head.

I look down at my dagger. "Listen, I—"

Before I can finish, the boy turns and lunges. He makes a run for it.

He's small. No one even seems to notice. He might actually reach it.

A moment before he does, someone steps into his path. A king's guard. His mouth turns into a cruel smile, looking down at the boy with relish.

Fifth screech.

I should stay back. Wait for the right moment. It's the only way I'll make it.

But when the guard's silver sword comes crashing down, I throw myself in front of the boy without thinking. The dagger I've tried so hard to hide slips from my sleeve, and I turn it midair, until the cold hilt hits my palm. I lift it right in front of my face at the last moment. Close my eyes tightly. The guard's sword slams against my dagger with bone-rattling force a second later.

And there's a glorious crash as that silver shatters.

The crowd has gone silent. Slowly, I open my eyes. The guard is staring down at me, mouth agape, as if still not comprehending what just happened. Not understanding how a dagger went up against his silver sword . . . and won. When he finally notices the metal of my blade, his face pales.

His hilt hits the ground and he staggers back, a coward without his sword. The boy has slipped away, and made it onto the stone. Before I can join him, the crowd stirs back to life, and half a dozen people hurl at me in a wave.

No going back now.

Sixth screech.

A copper blade reaches me first, and I turn, lifting my dagger, my metal just skimming its edge—but it's enough. The weapon breaks apart in a spray of splinters, just as a nickel sword aims for my neck.

Cracks spiderweb across its blade already, the mark of either bad welding or too many fights. Either way, it takes just a brush of my metal to turn it into shards at my feet and some of the people charging forward stop in their tracks. Rethinking going against my metal. Good. Just when I think I'm in the clear, a rallying cry sounds right behind me.

The man from before, with the wandering hands, is struggling to lift his sword up as he lunges at me, sharp edge trained right at my spine.

I don't think. I remember how those hands slipped down my body, and—

I cut them clean off. The Starside steel goes right through skin and bone. The blade glimmers even more than usual, as if savoring the blood. His heavy sword falls to the ground, fingers still curled around it. The man screams. A few people gasp.

Seventh cry.

When I raise my blade toward the crowd again, no one moves. Even the king's guards look hesitant to face me, now that they've seen my metal best theirs. They each only get one sword. Without it, they're dead.

My chest rises and falls wildly as I take a step back, inching myself toward the platform. Maybe I'll actually make it. I finally turn to jump.

And a man who looks like he was sired by the towering Dagger Mountains themselves blocks my path.

Shit.

Pagnus Ender, from House Ender, known for their magnificent size, rumored to have gods in their blood lines, takes a step toward me, and the very ground seems to tremble. I catch my horrified expression in his gleaming bronze armor, the top of my head not even reaching his stomach, his blade nearly the size of my body.

His house has eight heirs, and half are expected to make the quest this time. I see them now, positioned at the other corners of the platform, each sporting their house's metal. Already culling the potential recruits, alongside the guards, which aren't even *trying* to cut them down, likely from orders from the king, who has partnerships with all the Great Houses.

Of course, he's the one person standing between me and the platform. Of fucking *course*.

I take a deep breath. Steady myself. Take the stance I've fallen into as easily as sleep for years. Prepare for a blow that might be my last.