

CHAPTER ONE

Princess Jatta woke on the cold marble floor, groaning weakly. Soaked in sweat. The nightmare was fading, but the horror of it lingered.

Her brother was mauled.

Instinctively she knew it, just as she knew the nightmare had been real. It had now gone, retreated deep below the throbbing in her head. 'Art, I'm sorry,' she whispered, knowing she was to blame but remembering nothing.

A face peered down at her. She strained her neck to see. Her father. Soft cloth brushed her face, mopping her forehead, the sweat from her lip. She tried to move but couldn't.

Tears pooled in his eyes. 'You've come back. My precious girl.'

You've come back? She blinked up at him, understanding nothing. He'd never cried, not that she knew. She felt one tear spatter on the marble tiles beside her face, wanting it to stop, watching his chin instead. Two . . . three . . . four tears for Arthmael. They fed her fear.

'Art's dead,' she moaned.

'Arthmael's alive.'

'No. It's my fault.'

He wiped his eyes, then searched her face. 'What do you remember, Jay?'

She opened her mouth. But there were no words to explain,

only confusion. A vein in her temple throbbed. She let her face roll back on the tiles and shut her eyes to recall.

Marble, cold against her cheek. Nothing. Nightgown wet with sweat. Nothing. Body shivering on the tiles. Nothing.

She opened her eyes, trying to focus. Chains clanked as she tried to move. The bedchamber tiles were smeared with bloody paw prints. They glistened in the dawn light.

‘Blood.’ More the repugnant smell of it than a memory.

‘Blood? Yes, Arthmael’s. He survived, Jay.’

‘No.’ But she desperately held onto his words. ‘Wh—what happened?’

‘Wolves.’

Wolves. Her first memory. Her mortal fear. These dark magic monsters had killed her mother.

She groaned. ‘They came back for me.’

‘Yes, Jay.’

‘But they g-got Art instead.’

‘He heard you scream.’

‘Let me see him.’ She tried to sit up. Iron clanked. She lifted her head to see her wrists and ankles loosely wrapped in chains. ‘What—tell me, what have I done?’

Her father busied himself unravelling them. ‘You had a fit. You thrashed about. I ordered the chains to stop you harming yourself.’

A fit? Nothing was making sense. She sat up, rubbing her cramped, bruised legs, focusing on the room. The wall lamps lay smashed. They’d been flung around, weaving burning oil. The scorch marks looked like ice-skating trails across the white floor. Bedding lay strewn in burgundy-spattered tatters. More bloody paw prints danced around her wardrobe, which had been dragged across the room, all ten doors of it, and

lay on its side through her smashed glass doors. Half of it lay in the garden beyond. How could wolves have come, and she survived? Arthmael, too? Such monsters were blood-crazed. Indestructible.

‘They weren’t supposed to let me live,’ she whispered. ‘Not if my amulet failed.’

‘They shall not destroy you.’ The King’s voice was commanding, as she had always known it, and Jatta’s pounding pulse slowed. ‘Jay, we must renew your amulet’s magic. This morning I’ll send an ambassador to the Sorcerer.’

‘Maybe this time . . . shouldn’t I go, too?’

‘No!’ His eyes narrowed, suddenly severe. ‘Never imagine you’ll ever leave this palace.’

Jatta flinched.

‘I’m sorry, my little Jay.’ He cupped her elfin, almost child-like face in his scarred hands. ‘But you know Lord Redd’s magic protects you only within these palace walls. I’ve lost your dear mother. I won’t lose you, too.’

CHAPTER TWO

The summer sun had barely risen, but most of the palace's servants were at work. As soon as her father left, Jatta slipped into a dressing gown and poked her head into the corridor. Guards had been posted outside the chambers next door. They stood to attention, shock flickering across their faces, as she hobbled painfully toward them. She knew she must look a disturbing sight, her baby-fine ash hair matted with blood, her feet bare, her ankles bruised. She limped past them and into her brother's bedchambers, anxious about what she might find.

Arthmael lay pale and still, his eyes closed. The quilts had been pulled down, exposing his heavy arms and powerful chest. Spots of blood stained their whiteness, while black thread traced across his flesh, as if some mischievous child had scribbled over him as he'd slept.

Pharmacist Yeemans bent across him, rubbing healing ointment around the surgeon's black stitches. Though his touch was light, her brother groaned.

He was alive. Jatta hadn't allowed herself to fully believe it till this moment. She tiptoed closer. Not sure what to say, she shyly stroked his hand. His eyes opened. She leaned forward, braving a smile. He registered her slowly, then his jaw hardened in aggravation.

'Go away,' he said tersely.

It felt like a slap.

'I—I was worried. I needed to see you're all right.' She bit on her lip, wincing. Of course he was *not* all right. 'How—how are you, Art?'

'Scarred for life, thanks to you.' Then he grimaced, sharply drawing in breath. Talking seemed to cause him pain. Jatta blushed with guilt.

Pharmacist Yeemans spoke gently. 'Prince, please remember none of this is your sister's fault.' But Arthmael's accusation, his rare anger too, confirmed that it was.

'I . . . Please, Art, I'm so sorry.'

He waited till the pharmacist's back was turned. 'Why, in glory's name, weren't you wearing the amulet?' he growled under his breath.

'But I never take it off.' She pulled out a pearl string from around her neck, eager to prove herself. Cupping her hands so that only he might see, she showed the disc of fiery opal set in gold.

'Then why—?' His face screwed up and he groaned through gritted teeth. After some seconds the pain seemed to ease. 'Well, it didn't work last night, did it?'

'I'm sorry.'

'Glory, Jay. What's to be done with you now?'

'Father says we'll plead for a new amulet, that everything'll be all right. Ambassador Sartora's in the treasury now, choosing a worthy gift.'

'What's to be done tonight, though?'

'Tonight?' she echoed, confused.

'Tonight, Jay.' He closed his eyes wearily. 'It'll be back tonight.'

The blood drained from her face and she stared, looking almost as ill as her brother. 'The wolves? *Tonight?*'

'*Wolves?*' His eyes opened. He stared back as if she was being deliberately stupid. Then his expression softened. 'Yes . . . the wolves. Jay, how much do you actually remember?'

'I remember sitting at my desk after supper. Drawing. Then, um—then waking up on the floor.'

'Nothing else?'

Jatta shook her head. 'Father says you heard me scream. What happened?'

He sighed and closed his eyes.

'Tell me what happened, Art.'

The pharmacist returned. 'Highness, your brother is tired.'

'All right, rest now,' she whispered. But Arthmael was already asleep.