

Drowned in Lotuses



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CHAPTER ONE

FIRST GLANCES

Deraman stepped into the deep vines of green and wood, dry leaves crunching at his feet. He moved down the forest with his hand clasped around the hilt of his sword. He had been walking by the River Damsel for days to reach the outskirts of Visceria. In all four directions, there were only thick plains of wood and grass. Deraman stared up at the sky and sighed,

Was this a good idea?

The outcome of leaving the little hut he called home was either death or success. Although his motives were clear, he was still unsure.

Could he go against a King, the King of Visceria, who was worshipped by his people?

Deraman rushed towards the cold river. Sitting by the edge of a rock, he dropped his sword by the bank. Crawling over to the water, he washed his face and drank some water.

Whoosh!

A crisp wind swept past his ears. He looked around the canopy of evergreen trees. His warrior senses came alive.

He was being watched.

As fast as the speed of his thoughts, his hand reached for his sword but found nothing at its place. His eyes wandered in panic looking frantically for his sword.

“Looking for this?”, a voice offered lazily. His gaze tossed through the vines and curls of green and finally landed on her. “My, my! What an astonishing piece of art!” A maiden sat on a rock with her legs crossed in her faded red gown. Her hands pet the sharp cuts and turns of his sword. She had already unsheathed the weapon and was now waving it around aimlessly.

Deraman was already prepared with his second pair of weaponry, a mere dagger. That’s all he had to defend himself now. The girl looked up through her curious eyes. The sunlight beamed off of the sword and glazed itself so beautifully on the tiny freckles by her cheeks, as if the lining of her skin was made of fire. Her face too thirsted for something.

Deraman stood up, dirt streaming down his legs. "Give it back, miss. A sword is no craft for a woman." He said gravely.

"And it is a craft for a cowardly man?" her voice achieved an octave of authority. "Like yourself?"



He hissed at her in frustration and started sprinting towards her, his dagger aimed at her. The lady stood in front of him, with her sword ready to defend. Deraman reached forward swiping his dagger towards her chest cavity but her blade blocked him right away and the dagger went flying and landed at the river bank.

"Ready to surrender to a woman? You say a sword is not a craft for a woman, yet the sharp end of it is pointed towards you." The sword was now resting on the arteries of his neck, "I would apologise for my prejudice but I don't sympathise with thieves." He stated vaguely.

"If I were a thief, your head would've been split into half and I would've already vanished." She replied cheekily.

Deraman swallowed slowly as she stepped back, the force of the sword left his neck bare. She sheathed the metal. "You're lucky I don't chop off tongues in the first encounter. You won't be that lucky the next time you utter those feeble words from your mouth."

"Who are you?" he demanded, not even giving a thought to her threat.

Her brows slipped into a challenge, "That question can cost you, mister. My identity is not my virtue. Tell me yours first."

"My name is Deraman." He mumbled searching her eyes for a response.

"Curious", she smirked. "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet", she said in response. She offered the sword to him and he hesitantly grabbed it.

"So, are you a traveller, Deraman?" she diverted the subject

"Are you a thief?", he smirked.

"No, but I just hate people with backward opinions on women. That's all." She explained, shrugging her shoulders.

"I am a traveller, of a sort, you could say. I am here for business." He didn't want to reveal his true intentions since she was a stranger.

Of course if you could call challenging a King, business.

"A traveller, you say? With a sword?", she squinted her eyelids suspiciously.

"What can I say? Defending myself is a requirement when it comes to travelling into a kingdom full of poisonous women like you." Deraman offered a dangerous grin. His eyes looked towards hers, searching for recognition of humour.

Luckily, her head snapped back to him in offense. "Oh! You wound and flatter me." Her mouth was set into a wicked grin.

"I assume you are headed towards Visceria, King Nakul's kingdom?", she offered.

"Yes, I have some business there which I hope will be successful." He muttered. He didn't wish to offer her any details of his quest of revenge and thirst.

"Looking at how lost you were while struggling in the woods, I'd say you need help to get to His Majesty's kingdom. I come from the roots of Visceria. It's not far from here." She raised her eyebrows.

Visceria was the land of noble Kings and great warriors where the saints of old had scorched their nails boasting about the tales of sorcery and blood of their mighty rulers. It was the home to King Nakul and his ideal life. He had a gorgeous wife, Urmila, and two maiden daughters, Persephone and Aphrodite.

Behind his greetings of welcome and fame, stood a creature poisoned at heart. The merry hustle and bustle of the happy streets was enough to hide his devious intentions.

"Please, lead the way, miss." Their bodies traced a path between the canopies of trees and disappeared further into the deep.



The girl had carefully observed and listened to Deraman's anecdotes of his life back home. He had told her about his mother, Emese, and how her homemade stew was the absolute best.

Now, they had finally reached a small village on the outskirts of Visceria. The forest was almost ending around them. Deraman offered his hand to her, as she was climbing down from a rock. She gaped at the veins of his hand and slid hers into his palm, hiding a smile through her shoulder. Deraman tried his level best to not notice how she smelled of lotus leaves and grass.

The sun had gone to bed hours ago and stars had been lighted by the violet sky. And now it was time for them to part ways. They stopped at the village and stared at each other eagerly as if they were conversing through their eyes. "I believe my nightly duties call me now", the girl muttered gazing into his eyes.

"Yes, indeed. I, too must find some shelter. I think, from what I hear of this kingdom, the inn keepers will not mind me checking in this late", he stated. She nodded in agreement and waved him goodbye as he did the same.

She vanished in a Whoosh!

Stop thinking about her

But how could he?

Deraman shook his head and centred his sprinting thoughts. He had business to do. He advanced towards the Grand Palace of Visceria, home to the High King Nakul.



Deraman lurked behind the marble columns that held up the beautiful courtyard, adorned with lotuses and water fountains.

He had managed to enter the Palace of Visceria through the caves of the King's secret spies. It wasn't easy, since he had to knock out some of the Royal Guards in the process.

The night caressed against the moonlight, shimmering through the open courtyard, penetrating the water fountain in the most glamorous way possible. Deraman crouched in the darkness, peering at the door leading to the Throne Chamber. Creeping further in, he took stock of his surroundings and his eyes finally settled on the Throne. The empty courtroom seemed absolutely emotionless, just like the King.

As a wave of high pitched yells echoed, his eyes peeped through his peripheral vision and saw a lady as her figure climbed the stairs to the Throne in a daze. She dramatically sat down on the Throne.

The woman was young and gorgeous beyond her years. Deraman watched as she giggled and crossed her legs.

"I am Aphrodite," she bellowed in the most authoritative way she could. "I am your rightful queen. Kneel before me, courtesans and peasants. I shall command you all." She giggled again with excitement.

Aphrodite...the daughter of the King.

Deraman, not wishing to stay there any longer, left the courtroom while Aphrodite's maniacal laughter echoed behind him.

After petrifying the guards outside the King's chambers, Deraman swiftly entered his room. His body hid in the darkness, moving along the walls. The motionless figure of the King heaved up and down in slumber.

Deraman walked up to The King and put his warm palm on his mouth and as fast as a piercing arrow, King Nakul's eyelids snapped open. The King sat up immediately but Deraman's hand did not move an inch and he slid his unsheathed blade under his cold and bare throat.

The King couldn't scream. Couldn't call for help. The blade set itself on his pulsing artery and Deraman spoke, his voice was an octave above a whisper "Do not call for help. Your life wreathes in the palm of my hand."

The King squinted his eyes but he couldn't see the man's face through the shadows. "Count your precious moments as King. We never know when someone might steal your crown. Heavy is the head that wears the crown."

Deraman slithered away into the darkness. King Nakul was left staring, as Deraman left the room leaving no trace or a whisper.

King Nakul was left in shock, shivers creeping up his neck. He could've just died. His eyes drifted back and forth, his hand reaching for his wife Urmila but he found the bed unoccupied and cold.

He was at the mercy of only shadows when a light flickered in his vision. The velvet sofa across the wide room, was occupied with none other than Urmila. She was sitting with her legs crossed, one hand on a flamed candelabra and the other on some pieces of parchment. Her beady eyes read the papers in deep emotion. She looked up at him as if she just noticed his presence.

"Oh! My King, my dearest," Her voice purred in misery. "I haven't ever seen such emotions presented, with only ink and paper." She peeped back into the papers.

The King froze at the sight of what she held. The letters. The claims and promises he had written to his lover in his youth.

"Your words quench my everlasting thirst and even if I had an ocean full of ink, my words would still not suffice my love for you. Oh my! Such deep thoughts", she quoted a line from the letters.

Urmila rose from the couch, her face grim as she walked with the candelabra aimed at him. "Tell me, my King. Why was I not enough? When I agreed to marry you on my father's orders, was that not enough?" A traitorous tear slipped from her eye.

She continued, "Were two beautiful daughters not enough for you, my love?" The hot flames inched towards his face and King Nakul was forced back until he hit the wall.

"I left my happy life," her voice rose in envy. "For you. For your bloody kingdom! Fine. Let blood stain these walls. Mark my words, Nakul. When the time comes, you will be drowning in your own blood and my kin, Aphrodite will be the Queen."

With that, Urmila touched the corners of the parchment with the flames. Her pupils danced with the fire as did the papers and sheets of love and promises. King Nakul just stared as his letters turned into black soot.



Deraman sighed and leaped from the window of the King. His heart was thumping in his ears as his feet landed on the balcony platform below. He hissed in pain but it subsided as soon as he sensed a familiar lotus and grassy scent. He whipped his head to follow the sweet smell and realised where he was.

A balcony. He was standing in the middle of someone's balcony.

His head rotated around the giant open balcony and finally landed on her. The girl from the forest.

She was huddled back in surprise at the corner, her eyes wide and her breaths came in gaps. Her faded gown was replaced by a white plain nightgown. "Deraman?", she whispered

"You?", he gasped like someone had pulled out a carpet from under his feet. "What are you doing here?", she asked.

"I-I... I'm here for business." He struggled to explain himself.

"And your business involves jumping from my father's window?", she crossed her arms.

"I-I... Wait? Your father's window", he muttered out. "Your father?", he repeated for assurance.

"Certainly, My father, King Nakul, High King of Visceria" she exclaimed.

"What was your name again?" he asked, still confused.

"Persephone it is." She replied. "Do you mind telling me what business you had in my father's bedroom?".....



CHAPTER TWO

WAS IT FATE?

What to say?

At that precise moment he was at a loss what to do, what to answer.

It was impossible to tell the truth so he just left, jumping from rooftop to rooftop as Persephone watched him go knowing that the moment would come when they would meet again, and that this time she would require an answer.

Unsure whether she could trust this young warrior, Persphone went to see her father to make sure everything was fine. Both her parents reassured her, saying that they had not seen anyone. Despite that, her father seemed to be slightly under pressure.

The next day at night fall, Deraman who had been hiding in a simple little-frequented inn decided to return to his business with the king.

He took the same path to enter the castle, redoubling his efforts and being much more vigilant than the first time.

From a distance he saw Persephone... such a beauty in a magnificent red dress and her loose hair. She seemed to be waiting for someone. He refrained from moving closer though his heart desperately wanted to and he followed his path to the king's grounds.

As he was walking silently through the halls of the castle, a dozen guards appeared out of nowhere but he managed to slide in through the first door within his reach. His heart was thumping. As he took a few minutes to catch his breath, he heard the footsteps of the guards stop behind the door. He began to wonder if he had been smart enough and, without giving it a second thought, he jumped out of the window just before the door opened and landed in a stack of hay.

This time he knew he had not been seen and he had no choice but to leave the castle.

Once he knew he was out of reach, Deraman started walking without any purpose, alone in the dark, lost in his thoughts, just wondering how he would solve his issues. He had no idea of what to do, everything seemed confusing.



After a long hour, an idea struck him. Many years ago he had heard a story about three goddesses, living in the woods, who could shed light on his fate. Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, the three sisters were known for weaving the fate of humans. They were called the Moirae. Assured that it was the best thing to do, he decided to go and meet them.

He crossed several fields and a huge forest and finally found the thatched cottage where the sisters lived.

At the door, he had barely raised his hand to knock when three old women opened the ancient wooden door, as if they had been waiting for him to come.

"Good evening, Deraman!" the three sisters said, in unison.

"How on earth do they know my name?", he pondered, puzzled, and asked:

"My name, how do you know my name?"

"Don't be such a fool..."

"...you know us and what we are capable to do"

"...we are the goddesses of your fate."

Wow, it was really impressive! So all the stories he had heard were true after all... unbelievable!

"I'm Clotho, and this is... »

« ...Lachesis, and this is ..."

"... Atropos, we are the Moirae."

Deraman found it weird that the sisters should always cut their sentences in three parts but he understood that they complemented each other to perfection. The youngest would start and the oldest would complete. The young man asked:

"Please, with all due respect, may you tell me what my future will be?"

Clotho began "I see a great life..."

"...with ups and downs..."

"... and an unexpected end to your quest" Atropos ended.

He begged for more details. Unfortunately, the old ladies refused but gave him some advice:

"You will need some partners for your business against the king, warriors..."

"...and knights, to succeed in your quest..."

"...people you can trust. You mustn't fight alone" the sisters replied one after the other.

This idea had never occurred to him. He liked being on his own but he didn't have much choice.

"Yes, but who? Could you be more precise?" Deraman questioned.

The oldest refused but Lachesis persuaded her sisters to help him. So they did him a favor and gave him three names:

"I see Remus and..."

"...Romulus..."

"...and the son of the White Mare."

"Well I guess I will have to find them. Thank you ladies, you have been a great help for me" he ended.

"Wait Deraman, you have to know... in your adventure you will lose something..." the oldest one said sadly.

"...something you care about..."

"...someone precious to your eyes", the two others added.

But he had already left the place and didn't hear this tragic part.



Without wasting time, he went looking for Remus and Romulus first. He travelled for four days and finally arrived at the top of a hill. An outstanding verdant hill with few cottages only. Deraman went to a cottage, to seek information about the two brothers. He knocked at the door, once...twice...but nobody responded. So he went to a second cottage but again, nobody. He looked around, no one was outside. He began to wonder.

Am I at the right place?

Confused, he knocked at all the cottages' doors to find someone. The frustration overwhelmed him. He was losing hope when suddenly he heard a sweet voice telling him to follow the vervain. "It will help you to find what you're looking for". Without understanding, Deraman started following the vervain plant all the way to the front of a porch. It was a wonderful cottage deep in the forest. Step by step, he approached the door. As he was stretching his arm to push it, a maid opened and said

"My master was waiting for you, adventurer" the maid uttered in a clear voice.

Deraman entered and followed her along a dark and mysterious corridor and finally, there they were ... Remus and Romulus! Deraman felt a wave of excitement run through him.

"What do you expect from us, young guy?" Romulus enquired.

"Could you help me to fight King Nakul?" Deraman asked in a powerful voice.

"You're not serious, are you! What do you offer?" Remus said in a thundering tone.

"I can offer you a kingdom with a lot of power and glory. If you help me in my crusade against the King, you will be legends!" He explained with conviction.

After some reflection Remus and Romulus accepted his offer on one condition. They had to be free to stop the mission whenever they wanted. Deraman didn't have the choice, he really needed them, so he agreed.



After recruiting the two brothers, all three decided to go in search of the Son of the White Mare who was said to have gained his immense power by suckling the milk of the Mare, whom he was raised by.

Deraman was impressed by this strong man with golden hair just as flamboyant as the fire and who never parted with his sword.

Deraman promised him glory, power, the chance to fight alongside warriors in honourable battles and a place to lead the kingdom. Of course he couldn't refuse the offer. And they set out again in the direction of the kingdom, all four of them, ready to fight a whole army, determined to save the people from a tyrant.

Before launching attack on the king, they settled in a cabin a few miles from the kingdom. From morning to night, without stopping, they would practice archery, hand-to-hand combat, wielding the sword.

Each was going to use their trump card: the son of the white mare would use his strength, Remus his fighting technique, Romulus could rely on his cunning and Deraman on his courage.



During his trip to find his companion in arms, Deraman had heard about the legend of a magical fountain. At a time when gods and goddesses travelled around the world to discover humanity, a young lady and an inexperienced god had fallen in love drinking the water from the fountain. Since that time, it has been said that, if you drink the water you will find your one true love.

Now crossing a small village, he saw a fountain very similar to the fountain of the legend. Deraman was intrigued by it, as if the source of water was calling him. So he decided to go closer to find out where the humming was coming from. Standing by the fountain, he tried to peep into the water.

The calling was still there.

Suddenly he felt someone push him and he fell in the water. While he was trying not to drown, he saw the face of a gorgeous girl: his beloved Persephone! When he finally reached the surface, he knew, he knew... he knew that he had to join her.



His joy was immense! He had fallen in love with her; from the little he had seen of her, he had understood her temperament: she was rebellious yet full of honour, charismatic yet gentle, sincere and benevolent.

That same evening, he decided to go and see her, maybe talk to her. He moved closer to the ramparts of the kingdom, climbed into the tallest tree and stabilized on a branch just in front of Persephone's room. He found her on her balcony, staring at the sky, watching the stars and the moonlight. He could spend hours just admiring Persephone, her face, her hair in the wind, her eyes shining like the stars in the sky. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever set eyes on.

But after this moment of happiness, when he jumped back down from the tree, he spotted a sheet of paper lying on the ground. As he could make out the name of Persephone, he bent over to take a closer look, puzzled. A shock! What he read terrorized him and he started to panic:

"DON'T MISS THE FIGHT! The biggest you'll ever see! Persephone against Aphrodite. Who will be your future queen?"



CHAPTER THREE

T'WAS A BLOODY MATTER

“A fight to the death”, screamed Deraman. “My beloved Persephone is in danger!”

It was long known that in the kingdom of Visceria, succession was a very bloody matter. In order to settle disputes as to who would be the king, it was customary for the princes to fight each other in the arena, to death if necessary. However, the current king had two daughters, so nobody expected this barbaric custom to actually take place.

“I already had few hopes for this king... Never did I expect he would sink even lower in my eyes.” Deraman steeled himself, and ran towards the coliseum, as fast as his legs would carry him, which was located smack-dab in the middle of this bustling city.

Little did Deraman know, the king had no hand in this shameful display. His head may have been the one to wear the crown, but he was only a placeholder, just as powerless as each and every one of his subjects. In truth, it was the deceitful Queen Urmila who had arranged for all of this to transpire. In fact, nobody could have fathomed just how far-reaching her machinations were.

Deraman reached the coliseum, and quickly made his way through the crowd, eventually reaching the spectators’ seats. At the highest point of the coliseum, two luxurious seats stood; one for the King and one for his consort, the Queen. Once both seats had been filled, two slender figures appeared, and converged to the middle of arena, accompanied by two much burlier figures. One of them was Deraman’s love interest, the brave and stunning, a little tomboyish, princess Persephone, dearly loved by her people, and her arrogant, scheming sister, who somehow shared the same name with the Goddess of Beauty, Aphrodite. Behind them, two royal guards carried the utensils of their battle-to-be. To Persephone, a single-bladed kopis was given, and to Aphrodite, a double-bladed xiphos. Yet by the time Persephone had laid her hands on her blade, the royal guards seized and immobilized her.

“Father, what is the meaning of this?” cried out Persephone.

“Your quarrel is not with father, but with me”, her sister snapped back. “Mother, if you would be kind enough to explain.”

Queen Urmila rose from her chair, and spoke to the citizens gathered. "My beloved subjects, we have gathered here today, not to witness a fight, for my younger daughter's life was forfeited the moment she decided to betray her lord and father!" The queen's words made the crowd uneasy.

"Indeed, it was just yesterday that a dastardly assassin visited our very bedchambers to bring death upon my husband. Worse yet, my once dear Persephone was seen conversing with this assassin immediately after his failed attempt to take my husband's life. By the gods watching and by Zeus himself, my punishment for her treachery shall be swifter than his lightning bolts."

"Lies!" retorted Persephone. "The man you speak of was noble and kind, he would never...."

"So you admit it", argued Aphrodite. "Mother, may I mete out her punishment? I assume Father has no objections?"

Persephone looked at her father's sullen, defeated face. He would trust his favourite daughter with his life, and yet, that very same life had been jeopardized by the man his daughter appeared to be in cahoots with. He no longer knew who or what to trust.

"Worry not, dear sister", said a snarky Aphrodite. "Tonight, Hades will wed again."

Aphrodite raised her xiphos to the height of Persephone's neck, and prepared herself to strike. Persephone tried to struggle, but the grip of the guards holding her was tougher than iron. At that moment, a boisterous voice rang out. It belonged to the man who had stolen Persephone's heart.

"King Nakul, I see now that my previous warning fell on deaf ears. Your sins were dire already, but your cold-heartedness is too much to bear. This time, my warning shall be made public to all, and it will be the last warning you shall receive. I, Deraman, scion of the gods, declare war on you, and on the snakes that nestle in your throne. I have no hostility towards your people, and I am certain that even they can see that you, neither your queen nor your precious Aphrodite are fit to rule. You do not deserve a soul as pure as Persephone's, and so I claim her as my spoils of war. When I return to this land, I will bring forth the wrath of the gods themselves, and beasts so terrifying that no mortal eyes have ever fallen upon them. Until then, you may continue to savour your pathetic excuse of a life!"

"Guards, kill this wretched assassin! His blasphemy knows no bounds!" yelled Queen Urmila at the top of her lungs.

In response, Deraman whistled a strange tune, and all of a sudden, a gust of uncontrollable wind blew, strong enough to wrest trees from their roots. This tune was his secret method of communication with his stalwart allies. After all, these insurmountable winds were nothing more than the winds released by Romulus, who was in possession of the ox-hide bag that once belonged to Aeolus, the god of winds, inside which every single type of wind was sealed.

The winds eventually died out, but that was when an even more impressive spectacle appeared; an immaculate, winged white horse appeared in the sky above the arena, and swooped down to Persephone's side, freeing her from her captors with a swift kick. At the very next moment, Deraman leaped down from the spectator seat right to the back of the winged horse.

"Take my hand, Persephone! I can get you out of here!"

Unable to contain her amazement, Persephone complied. Within a fraction of a second, the horse began to ascend again, as its wings began to flap once more. As the humans on the ground began to seem smaller and smaller, Persephone waved goodbye to her father, but not before leaving her mother and her sister with a little parting gift, she cursed them from above.

"Be careful mother and sister! I think it's starting to rain!" she yelled at them.

She could no longer hear their cursing by the time the winged horse had reached the height of the clouds.

"I expect some delicious hay as a reward for this!" she heard the horse say to Deraman.



"Don't be alarmed," explained Deraman to her. "This is my good friend, the son of the White Mare, whose father just so happens to be the legendary Pegasus. His name is Ippos, by the way."

Eventually, Ippos stopped by a lush green meadow, miles away from the kingdom of Visceria. Once Deraman and Persephone had descended from his back, Ippos changed into his human form and waved his golden locks around.

"This is our designated meeting spot with Romulus and Remus, right?" inquired Deraman.

"I am fairly sure it is," said Ippos. "Deraman, would you mind hunting something for us while I set up a tent? And you princess, would you be so kind as to fetch us some fresh water from the nearby river?" Deraman and Persephone both nodded, and set out to complete their respective tasks.

Two days had passed since Persephone escaped from her kingdom, and yet, neither Romulus nor Remus had shown up. Could something have happened to them? Deraman, Persephone and Ippos braced themselves to approach the kingdom of Visceria once more, this time in search of their companions' whereabouts.

Meanwhile, inside the palace, Queen Urmila was furiously pacing up and down her chambers. The disgrace she had to endure that day, she would inflict a thousand times upon the man foolish enough to oppose her, and to her accursed daughter Persephone, who had refused to play her part in her mother's schemes. At some point, the captain of the royal guard knocked on her door.

"My queen, we have captured the associates of Deraman the Usurper. They are two men, who call themselves Romulus and Remus."

"Bring them forth", demanded the queen.

Romulus and Remus were brought before her in chains, both of them badly injured in the battle that eventually led to their capture.

"My dear men, I know not with what lies this so-called Deraman convinced you to aid him, but what I do know is that I am not the monster your leader claims that I am. Tell me, what trifles did he wave before you, so that you would fight for him?

"He promised us a kingdom", said Remus curtly.

"He promised us power and glory", added Romulus.

"Such pathetic baubles... Kingdoms crumble, power is taken away and glory is tarnished. I can offer you something that far surpasses those ephemeral things."

The queen reached under her bed, and pulled out an ornate-looking treasure chest. Inside the chest was an amphora, which seemed to be as old as Chronos himself. She then fetched a cup, and poured some of the amphora's contents into the cup, a golden liquid with the consistency of wine.

"Nectar..." stammered the two men.

"That is correct. I offer you the drink of the gods. With it, even immortality can become yours. So I ask you, for the first and last time; will you fight for my sake?"

Romulus and Remus looked at each other, before giving her their answer.



CHAPTER FOUR

ONE DEAD...

Deraman and his squad were increasingly worried about the soundness of their companions. They had waited too long for them and had now gathered to discuss their next move.

"We cannot wait anymore" stated Ippos. "We have to go because they will soon spot our location". "We cannot keep our position concealed for much longer" warned Deraman "we must either infiltrate Visceria or leave this area".

"I agree", contributed Persephone. "But we cannot leave them behind!"

"You have to understand that it is either us or them" stated Deraman . "We don't even know if they are alive or not. It has been four days."

"But where do we go now?" asked the son of the White Mare. "Does anyone of you have a plan?"

"I know the solution for our current problems" answered Deraman "But you might not like it."

"What is it?" inquired Persephone.

"There are myths, rumours of a certain source of power, that have assisted rulers of Visceria since the very beginning. The legends mention the magical sceptre of Hermes as the artefact. However, there is a problem. Nobody knows the exact location where it is kept, except for its guardians. Luckily, all the legends mention one specific region."

"Well... which region do we have to travel to then?" inquired the curious Ippos .

"A dangerous place. I will tell you the details later."

Deraman, Ippos and Persephone gathered their equipment and got ready to embark on their journey. They knew it was going to be a long, troublesome and exhausting journey. They were aware that their mission was going to be no vacation.

At dawn, they were just about to depart. In that split moment, two black dots emerged from the forests outside the city. They were approaching the establishment that had been prepared for the journey just a day before.

When they got closer, the travellers immediately recognized their lost companions: Romulus and Remus. When they reached the former camping point, they were welcomed warmly. After rejoicing, the two brothers explained the cause of their delay.

"After your actions at the arena, the soldiers of queen Urmila found and captured us," said Remus
"But fortunately we managed to escape."

"So" continued Romulus "What is the plan? I see you are about to hit the road."

"Yes..." said Deraman suspiciously "How exactly did you manage to escape?"

"That isn't important now," said Remus confidently "Time is scarce: we have to go because there is a good chance we might have been followed."

The brothers proceeded to lend a helping hand and after gathering the rest of the equipment the team left. After a rapid discussion, they finally set off toward the destination of their dangerous quest.

The region in question was Arcadia. As a secluded area at the edge of king Nakul's kingdom, it sported a variety of unexpected danger sources: a large number of warriors were stationed there, with one sole objective: to protect the holy sceptre at any cost. Despite the warriors' loyalty to the king, Arcadia had gained partial independence in its past, which was in part helped by the royal family, especially the king being banned from entering it. This law was enforced because the sceptre itself had a very dangerous trait: if kept too close, it made its bearer greedy, wanting more power, and even more malevolent goals. But this didn't make the area safe for Deraman and his companions: the road leading to Arcadia was well known for being one of the most dangerous places to travel in the entire kingdom. The journey to the sceptre would be riddled with unexplored land, unknown regions and unimaginable dangers, none of which Deraman, the Usurper ever experienced.

It had been three awful long days since they had been wandering around trying to figure out where they should go next. They got so lost in their thoughts that they were unable to notice the growing danger of the King's army. When they realised that they were being followed this whole time, they had to act quick. The Son of the White Mare had an amazing idea. His plan was to go and try to distract them, so the rest of the team could continue the journey peacefully, without much to worry. It was indeed a risky, and dangerous plan, but he was ready to even sacrifice himself for the better good. And the squad hurried towards the other direction, as fast as they could. They'd been walking for almost a whole day, and they had yet to find clues about the whereabouts of the sceptre they were seeking.

Then Persephone noticed that a big river flowed across the road and there was no bridge or anything to cross the river. When they reached the shore, the Oracle of all lands appeared in front of them, and spoke to them. "If one needs to cross this river, they shall have to prove they have a strong, brave heart, the courage of a thousand lions and the wisdom of all owls. After that, I'm obligated to grant all of your wishes, but only one to each of you!"

"Well, this is great, 'cause it's not like any of us have any clue about the way we can prove this" said Romulus

"Don't be so pessimistic! I'm sure someone has a great plan...", said Persephone
"To be fair, I don't have any idea, and I think Deraman hasn't got one either" mumbled Remus, while Deraman agreed with a hum.

"I can't believe this! We've come this far, and no one has any suggestion?" said Persephone .
"What if we tell him our initial plan, about defeating the king, and searching for the sceptre. Because if you think about it, it is a brave thing to do, and destroying the sceptre before killing him surely is wise."

"We can't lose anything if we try it , right?" and with that Deraman told the Oracle everything about their plan, and to their surprise he accepted it.

And so Persephone asked for the berries of the deep forest that had the power to cure any injury. Deraman asked for Hades's Helmet, which could make anyone who wore it invisible. He had heard from someone that it was a very valuable object, and he thought they could use it later when they finally reached the sceptre. Remus asked for a bridge, so they could cross the river without a problem. After Persephone and Deraman crossed, they looked around at the other part of the river but forgot to ask about Romulus's wish. Later when Deraman remembered, he asked Romulus about the matter; 'What was your biggest wish Romulus?'
'Oh, it's not important, really, just something I heard about. If we can trust the rumours,

we're going to be wealthy the minute I sell this'
'Haha, what else could our dear Romulus ask for, other than money? We can already read you like our palms!' laughed Deraman, but he was sure something was fishy about the twins. If only he could figure it out. However, he didn't have time to ask more questions, because they reached a small village.

After they arrived in the village, they decided to ask the locals, about the sceptre, and its whereabouts. When it seemed like no one could help them, an old lady called out for them;
"Come closer dears, don't be afraid, come closer..! I overheard what you were asking about, and I think I can help . . .

"Really? Then what are you waiting for, come on, tell us!" - said Romulus.
"Why, now, don't be impatient dear, you'll know everything when the time comes. Until then, why don't you adventurers come, and rest a little in my inn?.." "This is a scam, I'm telling you, she only wants to take our money!" -said Romulus again.
"Stop whining, perhaps this is our only chance! And thank you , lady, for your kind offer, we'll gladly take it." - told them Persephone, and they went into the inn. The old lady gave them food, and a place to rest and they all fell asleep.

When the morning came, the old lady was already up and waiting for them with breakfast.
"Good morning dears! Hope you slept well! Still interested in my little tale?"
"Of course we are, hurry up ",said Romulus
"Haha, okay young man, then let's begin! The ancient legend says that not more than five miles away from this very inn, there is an old ruin of a once beautiful maze. In that maze lives the sphinx. You only have to guess one of its riddles, and it will answer any of your questions. But don't forget, you can only ask once!"
"That's it! We should set off right away!" said Deraman enthusiastically. They got up, ready to leave.
"Thank you, dear old lady, thank you!"
"Yeah, thanks a lot, but I still can't understand why couldn't you just tell this yesterday." mumbled Romulus.
"Oh, haha, well young man, what if I say you were right all along? Adventurers, never let innocent faces fool you" said the old lady, with the brightest smile.
"See, told you guys! That lady, I can't believe we've been fooled by her!" shouted Romulus, furiously.

It took them about half a day to find the maze. Luckily they found it easily. In front of its entrance, there was a sign, which told them to be careful, and there was no person ever who came out of the maze alive. Needless to say, this did scare them a little, but they were already there, they couldn't just give up. So they went in. That very minute, everything became dark and foggy, they could barely see anything. They completely lost their sense of time, the only thing they knew was that they were never this hungry, and thirsty before. They were probably wandering around, more than a day when they noticed a flicker of light.

"Guys, look! Something shining there, come on!" - said Remus, and they started running towards it with great speed. It was none other than a chalice. When they went closer to it, all of a sudden the sphinx appeared in front of them.

"I see, you mortals are here to try your luck ...How sweet, perhaps you didn't notice the sign? Nevermind, don't answer, I couldn't care less about your lives! I hope you are ready to solve my riddle!" said the sphinx. "What goes on four legs at dawn, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?"

"I'm not great with riddles, so I'll let you guys solve this one." said the twin brothers.

"Persephone, do you have any idea?" asked Deraman.

"Yes, I think I do'. With that she said, "A man..... who as a baby crawls on four legs, then walks on two legs as an adult and in old age walks with a cane as his third leg."

The sphinx got extremely angry because no one had ever guessed its riddles before but it had to keep its promise.

"Oh very well, you are correct..." - said the sphinx - "Now, you can ask me a question!"

"Oh right, our question is...." started Persephone

"Where can we find the sceptre we are looking for?" finished Deraman.

"The sceptre you are looking for..? Hmm, I have a great idea. What if, instead of me telling you travellers, you just grab my chalice, and it will take you there, faster than a blink?"

"Great, finally someone who doesn't play around, and can get on fast with things!" - said Romulus, and all of them grabbed the chalice at the same time and to their amazement, they were there. And as they were looking around, they saw the silhouette of the town.

"Now we shall wait till nightfall" said Deraman to his companions.

"No! We must not waste our time! Who knows how long Ippos can hold the ginormous army, that the queen sent after us!" said Romulus in an ardent tone.

"Yes! I say we enter now!" yelled Remus, with enthusiasm, purposefully taking his brothers' side in the argument.

"Please keep your calm gentlemen, we needn't worry, time is still on our side, we must make use of it." stated Persephone calmly.

In the end, logic prevailed, and the heroes settled on a hill, overlooking the town, waiting for the fall of the night.

In the evening, as the silence of the night had fallen on the land, nothing was to be heard, except the gentle wind blowing and the warriors perfecting their masterplan. At around midnight, following a thorough discussion, they felt, that the hour of glory had finally arrived. They broke camp and made sure, that they would not leave a trace of their activities. As they began approaching the town, in which the sceptre was held in, they experienced a strange sensation.

"We are under the dangerous effect of the sceptre, it has partial control of our emotions. We must proceed with great care." stated Remus.

"How do you know that?" asked Deraman suspiciously. "Nobody told..." "

"It does not matter now. We must focus if we are to reach our objective." stated Romulus interrupting his companion.

Not a word was spoken after this, and they continued to sneak towards the town.

Their plan was simple. It involved taking minimal risk and getting to the sceptre without drawing any attention. But they could not have anticipated the real effect of the sceptre's presence. The closer they were the stronger it got, forcing the human mind to do things otherwise it wouldn't. They felt an urge, an overwhelming urge... to kill.

Wherever they went a track of dead bodies was left behind them. Blood was rushing down the streets, in streams. Their secret mission had turned into a massacre. Their previous plan, of getting to the sceptre unnoticed, had been abandoned by their instincts. They wanted it quick, no matter the casualties. As the heroes reached the temple, the sanctuary where the sceptre was kept, they

felt their anger growing inside them. When they looked back on the burning settlement, they felt no remorse, it was a perfectly ordinary act.



Entering the temple their eyes locked onto the relic they so desperately wanted. They had no time to waste, Deraman grabbed the sceptre out of its place and pointed it towards the sky. In a sudden moment, the building surrounding them started trembling.

"Quick! We must leave now!" yelled Deraman as he turned around, only to see Persephone held by Romulus, pushing a knife to her throat.

"What are you doing?" asked Deraman. He so wished to help the captured Persephone, but he knew, that Romulus was playing a dangerous game, so he stood still in his place.

"It is quite simple" said Remus, stepping in front of his brother. "While the queen held us, hostage, she offered us things... things you never could."

"Your vision was always flawed", took over Romulus. "She cleared ours. She showed us the possibility of what could be... but only if you were stopped, in this maniac plan of yours.

"The queen is smart"- Remus spoke again. "She knew, without inside help, she could never stop you. So she offered us power, wealth and freedom for our entire lives. Nobody would turn down an offer similar to that."

"And now hand us the sceptre Deraman or the woman you love dies," Romulus said calmly.

"Deraman don't..." whispered Persephone.

"I... I cannot let you go", yelled Deraman desperately. "It is not worth it" and with that Dereman tossed the sceptre into the hands of Remus.

"All this happened, and yet you never seem to learn... so naive. It has been an honour.....", Romulus slit Persephone's throat and at the same time his brother used the sceptre to open up a portal, and in a few seconds both of them disappeared. Deraman rushed to the cold, deceased corpse of the

once beautiful and lively Persephone. He felt emptiness. Just endless nothingness. But there was no time for grief, the sanctuary started to collapse. He rushed to the entrance but he tripped and a statue fell on his leg, breaking it, making escape seem impossible. As he lay down on the ground, bleeding from his wound, he felt, that life was drifting away. In that fateful moment, the doors opened and the silhouette of a man appeared. At that moment, Deraman fell unconscious.



CHAPTER FIVE

A BITTER SLUMBER

Deraman woke up feeling vengeful, puzzled and befuddled to find out he was saved by a man called Tanggang. Deraman was confused with Tanggang's motive.

Why did he save me? What is he planning to do to me?

After having thousands of thoughts recurring in his mind, he eventually gathered some courage to confront Tanggang and ask him about the deeds he had done.

After listening to Tanggang's explanation, apparently Tanggang was repenting. He was repenting to lift his curse up. He was cursed because of his act; reprisal on an ungrateful child. After contemplating, Deraman decided to trust Tanggang. He then proposed his idea; being of a hopeful nature, he began at once to invent plans to find out the whereabouts of Romulus, Remus, Urmila and Aphrodite to ensure he got his revenge for the sake of the death of his beloved Persephone and his plan to kill the Queen.

He decided to go to Mt. Ledang where lived "Nenek Kebayan" who was described as an old ugly woman with a hunchback. Her hair was long and white, and she walked around aided by a stick. She was known as a spirit or jinn that lived in the forest and mountain. She loved to help others in need with her magical powers.

After climbing there, he found strange behavior among people. It was as if people were in trance. Most of them had blank faces as if they were terrified of something. He asked people around what was happening, but no one had the courage to open. Hurriedly they went to find Nenek Kebayan to help him find the whereabouts of Romulus, Remus, Urmila and Aphrodite.

Instead of Nenek Kebayan he ran across a beautiful, enchanted forest. He was enchanted by an elegant woman who he believed was Puteri Gunung Ledang. Knowing she was linked with Nenek Kebayan, Deraman went closer to seek help from her.

As he got closer to her.....her face became older and uglier. He was shocked, it was Nenek Kebayan. He assumed he was hallucinating because he hit his head quite hard when the cave demolished.

Without wasting any time, Deraman hurriedly approached and asked Nenek Kebayan about everything. She gave him one condition before answering his request. The condition was to drink a potion; she said the potion would help him visualize better. Without thinking Deraman said yes.

Nenek Kebayan then reached for a potion and gave it to Deraman to drink. Without being hesitant, he took the potion and chugged down the whole thing. After being dizzy and nauseous he went into a deep sleep. Deraman was then stuck in his sleep.

She did that to ensure that Deraman would be protected and safe.



Deraman became a prisoner of the vortexes of his mind and soul, unable to tear through the seams of time paused in his head. He lay, almost lifeless on a stone slab under the evening sun, in the forest of Mt. Ledang.



Nenek stood at the foot of the slab, ribbons of magic coursing through her hands, trickling up to the fortress of her mind. A chill went to the back of her spine as her pupils rolled back to her head.

Laughter...a child's laughter

A young maiden's smile popped into her visions, she knelt to pat a young boy's head.

Bound by the limitations of Nenek's jinn abilities, she, too, was trapped next to Deraman's sleeping corpse, compelled to protect his mortal shell from harm.

CHAPTER SIX

“COME BACK”

Queen Urmila stalked down the castle steps, her expression dark and mesmerizing in the minimal light of the dungeons. Down and down, she crept until the prison cages flooded her view. In the cages, slept convicts and drunk lads, all wanted of some dirty crime. She finally waltzed in a cage, secluded to the corners, the iron door squeaking at her arrival.

In the center, a feeble figure lay in the grubby stone. She raised her head meekly at the door, her eyes watering and blurring her already diminishing vision.

“My, my Persephone” purred Urmila approaching the figure. “Don’t cry, darling.”

The girl groaned in pain and clutched her slashed arms and limbs. Blood and dirt caked her distraught face, as her knees scraped themselves on the ground.

“Unfortunately, your *knock off* version wasn’t of much use either since the Raktabija is licking her bones clean as we speak.” Urmila bent down and grasped the girl’s dress collar, lifting her weak body in the air.

Alive and well, the real Persephone’s body clung her mother’s grip, as Urmila pet her mucky hair. “Worry not, my love. I have a better plan, one that will serve my purpose and poison that bastard’s wound.” Her hand drifted to her pockets and took out a vial of cobalt fluid.

Persephone’s eyes widened at its sight, but she couldn’t speak. She shook her head violently, sobbing as salty tears graced her cheeks. Urmila hushed her daughter and shoved the vinegary liquid to her lips and down her throat.

“And you, my precious; will be my sword.” Her words leapt away as Persephone’s eyes turned dark and bloodshot, veins greening all over her face. She rose, not as herself; but as something evil... something darker.

“Avenge me, daughter!” Urmila’s voice thundered in the dungeons as Persephone left the chambers with vengeance and ambition flooding her system.



Persephone's slender figure stormed in the forest hills of Mt. Ledang, speeding past the thorny growth and trees with her hand plastered around the single bladed kopi. After the Queen had poured the potion into Persephone's body, she had left the palace and stormed out to seek revenge on Urmila's behalf.

The Queen had come up with a diabolical plan indeed. She had joined hands with the Raktabija- a hideous, sooty beast with blood oozing out of his mouth. He was known for it; the blood could duplicate him, aiding his terrorizing motive.

Hence, the queen saw potential in it, she set him free from the castle prison, but with a price. She traded his blood for his freedom from the cage.

The Queen searched and searched for a herbologist to combine the blood's duplication abilities into the mud and construct a *knock off* version of Persephone to pose for her, while the real one was abducted and whipped away into the Palace prison for later use.

The Queen had planned a bloody murder.



Nenek stood calmly, her eyes closed on the scene, hands structured around Deraman's forehead, sifting through his early memories. Her spirit magic awakened when Persephone emerged from the trees, eyes opening suddenly to the sounds of crunching leaves.

Her eyes were clouded black, as her arm swung true to the blade, thrashing the empty air where Nenek stood a few moments ago. Their eyes met as Nenek dodged one more strike, her eyebrows scrunchered in confusion and her body rose into motion as her arms dripped with sparks of light.

Their strengths collided and met again and again, both regal and powerful in the nightfall, sparks ricocheting off the stone slab where Deraman dreamt silently of moments lost in time. The fight seemed almost unstoppable, no force on Earth could separate these driven warriors.

Persephone twisted her wrist and Nenek's powers slammed into her but she held her ground just as Persephone closed in their distance, compelling Nenek to gaze into her eyes. Her inky pupils lasered into Nenek's, forcing her to stop her magical assault. Nenek's sparks diminished, leaving her defenceless against the cruel trickery that oozed out of Persephone's cornea.

And that was when she thrust her blade, knocking her aside to the mucky sand and leaving her there.

She ambled over to Deraman's side, her face drowned in disgust and envy. Her fist rose to the grip of the blade and aimed it at his stomach- ready to end it all.

Her breath knocked the air out of her lungs and the blade flew out of her grip, as Nenek pushed a viridian crystal into her back, light dripping from it into Persephone's body and limbs.

The crystal soaked her mind and soul, killing the parasite that clung to her from the potion, her eyes came back to their original shade. But her spirit arched out of her mortal shell, into the *air*.

As if Deraman detected the presence of her spirit, his aerial form too rose out of his corpse into the blissful breeze. Persephone turned and gaped at him, as they both twirled in a wisp of ancient magic and love.

"Persephone?" Deraman couldn't believe the sight in front of him. The Persephone he thought as dead and gone, smiled at him.

"Yes, Deraman. I'm alive." She whispered, joy brimming her to the top. "Come back."

