

A RIVAL'S
KNIFE

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NATALIE THORPE

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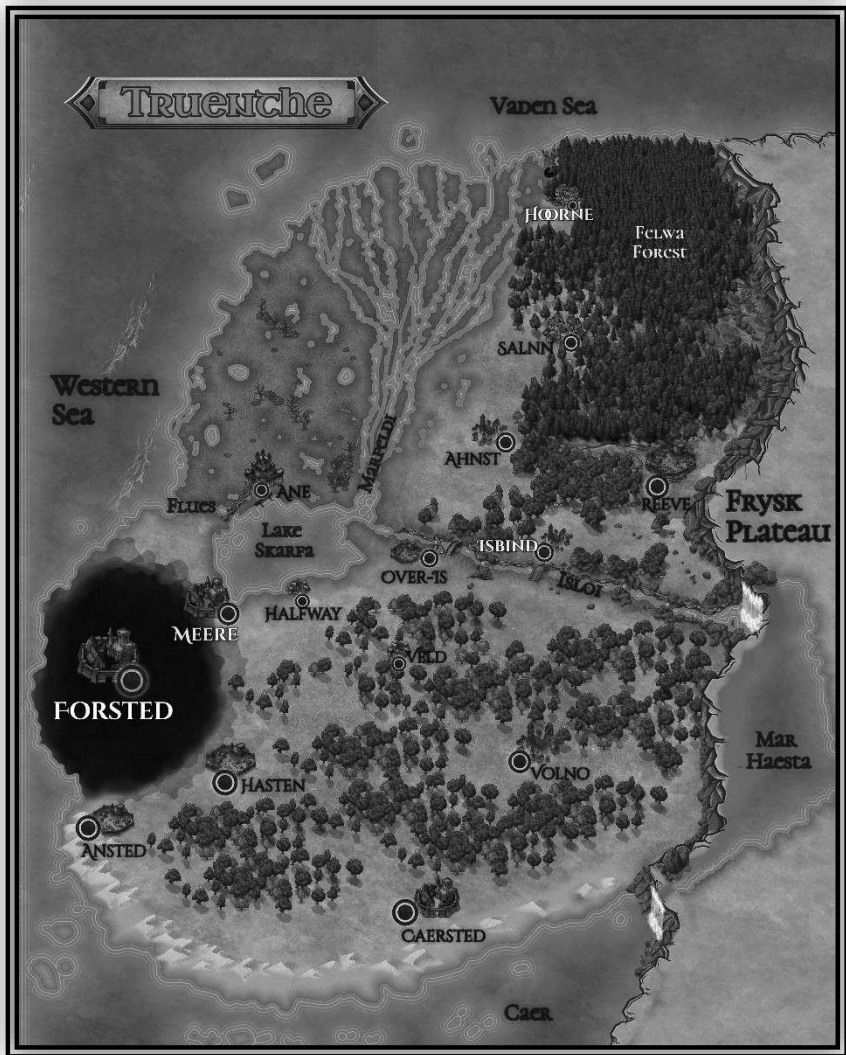
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To Jo,

I wish you could have read this...

I hope it would have made you proud.



PROLOGUE

10 years ago

I won—I think as the raindrop I've been following dripping down the window reaches the end of the imaginary end line and I move on to follow another.

Won again—when that one too reaches the end of its path. It has been raining relentlessly for three days and I'm bored senseless being cooped up in here. No, that's not true. I really don't mind being inside. It's warm, cosy, and safe—oh, and don't forget *dry* since my father and I checked and repaired the roof for any signs of leakage well before the rains started—and there's plenty I could do to keep me occupied. It's just that I haven't been able to see *her* for days. Not that that is in any way unusual, but outside there's at least the *possibility* I might run into her...

We, the older village kids, usually run amok around town on a daily basis, helping each other doing our chores, sticking our noses where they don't belong, having a laugh, but lately, I feel, things have begun to change. It's true that, as youths, we're being busied with more, responsible, chores our elders give us in preparation for adulthood and we don't always have the time to loiter around as we once did. It is what it is. Still, of all the village kids it's Svea I see the least of and it's bothering me. A *lot*. It's as if every time I *do* see her, I feel so much worse when I don't. I feel strange.

Granted, she never really spent much time with me and my 'band of troublemakers'—consisting of me, Kai, Tahvo, Smilla and Ard—as my mother lovingly calls us, since she is a little older than the rest of us, but so is Ard and *he's* been hanging around more often lately. I'm actually quite envious of Smilla who has been showing great affinity for herbs and remedies and has therefore been spending time with Svea and her grandmother in their cottage while both girls receive training to become healers. Often, I find myself needing to suppress the urge to pass by their house in the hopes of getting a glimpse of her, but since Svea lives outside of the village and the forest beyond her house is dense and easy to get lost in, there is no viable reason for me to make the journey up the road.

I sigh. The distant rumblings are becoming louder over the crackling of the fire in the hearth. It looks like this deluge is turning into a full-blown thunderstorm. A sudden flash and a sound like a whip make me flinch and draw back from the window. As I turn away from it to find a safer spot, I hear a sound and turn back.

“Come away from the window, son,” my father warns from his comfortable chair by the fire and my mother looks up from her knitting to give me a reassuring smile.

“Listen to your father, Esben,” she admonishes as I have made no attempt to move away yet.

“I think I heard something,” I say and sure enough, the sound comes again.

“Just a horse that’s spooked, s’all,” papa says, but he’s moved from his chair to stand beside me nonetheless, and when the startled horse whinnies again we hear a second horse along with a man’s panicked voice.

“Sounds like trouble,” is my father’s quick conclusion and he’s grabbed a cloak from the nail by the door before I realise he has even moved. I quickly scramble after him.

“Stay inside,” he says as he moves to open the door.

“I can help!” I shoot after him, grabbing a second cloak which I pull over my head as I follow my father out into the dark near-evening and pouring rain. He doesn’t argue; though I’m a pudgy, blushing sixteen-year-old, still more boy than man, I’m

strong and he knows it—I am *Gifted* after all—and he also knows I don't always listen.

When another flash of lightning lights the road ahead of us we see the source of the sounds we heard and though the image is gone in an instant both my father and I understand the gravity of what was just revealed to us. Skidding in the thick mud we rush over to where Lars is pulling one of his horses' reins with all his might, the beast struggling for purchase as the second horse threatens to skid down the side of the steep incline next to the road along with the cart they are both harnessed to.

“Hold on, Lars!” papa calls out to let the farmer know help is underway.

“Eskil!” Lars calls back, a touch of relief in his panicked voice as my father starts pulling the reins with him. It is useless; the cart is only pulling the horses further to the edge of the precipice, the mud too slick and the horses too panicked.

“Cut them loose!” papa shouts, his voice nearly drowned out by the sound of the rain and thunder.

“*No!* It's all I have! My entire crops—what's left of them!” Lars frantically pulls on the reins causing the horses to move forward ever so slightly while simultaneously causing the cart to slide sideways. Before I realise it, I have moved to the back of the cart pushing with all my might to prevent it from sliding further.

The weight pushes me further down in the mud but I'm relieved to find there's solid rock underneath.

“*Esben!*” my father roars. “Get away from there!”

“I can do it! I push, you pull the horses,” I shout back and while I push with everything I've got, my feet bracing on the hard rock, Lars and my father pull and the cart shifts forward.

Although the thunder seems to fade away, the rain keeps pouring mercilessly and I don't think I've ever been this *wet* before.

“See? That's it! Keep going!” I shout over the noise of the pouring rain but with every pull of the horses—the one nearest the incline now gaining more traction—the thick mud and rivulets of rainwater cause the cart to slide more sideways rather than go straight ahead and back onto the road.

“Hold on! I'm going to push from the other side!” I shout back as I carefully but quickly move to the back right side and take position. I'm covered in mud and slick with rain but there's no use trying to wipe my hands on anything so I just push. With the next pull the cart no longer slides to the right and another pull has it moving straight towards the road again.

A sudden thunderclap and loud crack make the horse on the left rear in panic and my father struggles to hold on to the reins, but the sudden jolt to the rigging and backward push snaps the drawbar, breaking the tug line and sending the cart back over the

incline. It all happens so fast, save for that one second that will forever play itself slowly in my mind.

I see the cart coming toward me, my mud-covered left hand slipping on the rain-slick wood and disappear through the spokes of wheel...

I don't know if the sound I hear is the wood splintering or my own bones or if I imagined hearing that entirely. I don't imagine the pain though. It is excruciating; searing from my arm through my entire body, burning through my throat as I scream.

~

I rouse to the sound of muffled voices but keep my eyes closed because I fear the pain will return if I wake fully. The dull throbbing sensation surrounding my left elbow makes me a little nauseous but it's manageable. Another reason for keeping my eyes shut is that I don't want to see how badly broken my arm must be.

"There was nothing that could be done," I hear spoken in a gruff voice with an accent that immediately identifies the speaker as Kaspar, Lars' rather surly spouse who came here from Frysk. "Believe me, I have seen injuries like these plenty... I had to act quickly."

“I know,” Tove, the village healer, replies with a weary sigh, before adding softly “I still think you should have sent for us sooner.”

“There wasn’t any time, and in that downpour?! Besides, the boy was out cold. Never even stirred. I must admit, at one point I thought he might have succumbed to the injury; he was so still...”

I don’t want to hear any more and I squeeze my eyes shut more tightly in an attempt to drown out the voices.

“Ssh...” I hear close to my right and, in a whisper “It’s going to be all right.” I turn my head towards the voice and open my eyes just a tiny crack to see two hands holding my right on top of the worn woollen blanket that’s pulled up over my chest. I must be dreaming. I’m still at the window in our cottage, hypnotised by following the raindrops down the glass because... I see *her*.

Svea.

“Are you in any pain?” she asks. I open my mouth to say I’m not but my throat feels like it’s on fire and no sound comes out so I shake my head slightly instead.

“Where...?” I barely manage to whisper.

“Here, drink some tea. It’ll help.” Svea brings a cup to my lips and moves a hand to the back of my head to help me lift it upright enough so I can take a few sips.

“You’re at Lars and Kaspar’s home. They carried you here since it was closest. You’ve been out for days...—your mother and father are here, do you want me to get them?” Although there is a worried frown on her face, Svea looks beautiful in the soft morning light that is coming through the window. Her hair is simply glowing and the fact that she is touching me doesn’t escape my notice.

“Later,” I manage to croak, my mind not yet addled enough for me to take advantage of having Svea alone and tending to me. “Is it bad?”

Svea gently lowers my head onto the pillow and slowly bends to place the cup on the floor next to the bed I’m lying, then sits back up again—a little straighter than before—and says very stoically

“Your arm’s off.”

PART ONE

Haine

CHAPTER ONE



I struggle to breathe as the violent waters around me keep pulling me under. I am moving so fast; it is impossible to get my bearings or to even grab on to something just to slow me down. There is no escaping this river and I just have to let it carry me to where it wants and hope I make it there alive.

Every time my head bobs out of the water, I try to draw in a deep breath, sometimes filling my lungs with precious air, most of the times just getting a mouthful of water. My sword and cloak are dragging me under but it is impossible to get them off and I can't afford to start struggling with them too.

I need air!

The roaring water crashes thunderous around me and the sound is painful to my ears, but it's the echoes of another sound—a voice—still circling in my mind which pains me the most...

A piercing wail...

A roar...

A name...

... but not mine.

Never mine.

Never Haine.

I stop struggling and just let the water carry me wherever it chooses to spit me out.

After some time, I come to realise I have stopped moving. Grass tickles my face as I cough up water. I try to push up but my arms are heavy and my wet cloak and sword are weighing me down. Coughing some more, I flip onto my back and a sharp pain lashes through my left side, but I manage to unclasp my cloak and unbuckle my sword before carefully moving to sit up.

I gingerly touch my side; besides the pain and the blood I feel something else, something that is definitely not supposed to be there. It seems to have missed any vital organs and the wound isn't bleeding much so I decide to take a chance and pull it out.

Fuck me, that hurts!

The thing I extract from my side is a small but very sharp blade and I wonder how it managed to stay put in the churning rapids of the Isloi as it didn't seem to have penetrated very deep beyond my

skin. Though bloody, I can clearly see how exquisitely engraved the silvery surface is and I can't help but marvel at its beauty. There is something about the way it shimmers... I rub the blade along my thigh to clean it against the wet fabric of my trousers, then take a closer look and smile as a realisation comes to me: this little knife is Mage-made!

Well, that's a pleasant surprise; I've never seen magic in such a small knife before.

I take a corner of my discarded cloak and cut off a small piece with the little blade—it glides through the fabric as a hot knife through butter!—then cut a few more strips in intend to use as bandages. I wrap the first piece I cut around the knife and tuck it into my pocket. Now I need to find a way to bandage myself.

When I look around to get my bearings, I see a shape lying on the lakeshore not far down from where I ended up.

Seems I'm not the only one spat out by the river.

I haul myself up and lumber over to where a lifeless body lies on its side just at the water's edge. He's a big brute of a man; broad and muscular with a tousle of wet, dark curls and about two weeks'-worth of stubble on his cheek. I nudge his shoulder with the tip of my boot, tipping the body over onto his stomach—he's missing half his left arm but not because of the river; it's been long gone. Next, I grab hold of the collar of his jerkin, then lift the body

up a little. He is surprisingly heavy—I don't remember him being this heavy when I grabbed hold of him and pulled him over the side of Little Bridge with me when he pushed me to tumble over its edge and into the raging river Isloi.

I brace to haul him away from the lakeshore and the strain makes a flash of pain shoot up through my side again.

Fucking asshole!

I drag him out of the water by his neck, not knowing or caring if he's dead or alive, until I reach a bit more solid ground then drop him facedown—*hard*—with the intent of searching his body for anything I can use after I take a breather and the pain in my side has subsided. I lower myself to sit beside him, pressing my hand to my aching wound. After a small moment, I hear a gurgle and the big brute starts coughing up water.

So he's a tough asshole.

I'm not quite sure whether to be disappointed that he's not dead or relieved... if I am where I think I am, I might need him to get out of here alive.

Fuck me, I shouldn't even be here! I should be well on my way to Forsted by now... with my jackdaw, not him.

He stirs and coughs some more, then tries to get up on his hand and knees to look around to get his bearings. When he spots me, he's momentarily stunned before coming to realise who I am and what I

did to get us both washed up here.

Which wouldn't have happened if he hadn't pushed me to trip over the bridge's parapet.

Here he comes...

Still coughing, he slowly crawls towards me; having only one hand to support him—with which he undoubtedly intends to throttle me. I let him get fairly close before stopping him.

“If you’re thinking about killing me...” I try to make my voice sound indifferent but the coughing has reduced it to a feeble rasp. “I’d suggest you take some time to consider your chances of making it out here on your own.”

He stops and narrows his eyes at me warily so I continue quickly before he decides to take his chances and decides to come at me again. “You see, I just dragged you out of Lake Skarfa and *that* there”—I say with a nod to my left—“is the Marfeldi River. Which, you may note, we are on the *wrong* side of...” I wait a moment to see if my message is catching on. “I’ll spell it out for you; it appears you and me are knee-deep in—”

“*Ane Marshes...*” he rasps with a gravelly voice and I nod.

The big, burly brute first looks to his right, to the river, then to his left before turning from his crouching position and dropping to sit beside me—at a distance.

“That’s... unfortunate.”

He says it so stoically, I nearly huff a laugh and I can't help but raise my eyebrows at him in surprise. His face is schooled in a neutral expression as he sits and stares out at the lake before us.

Just like two old friends sharing some solitude and a lovely view instead of two rivals that until recently might have wished each other dead...

And what would I know of friends? I don't even have any. I see my rising pique at the intrusive thoughts reflected in the sudden knitting of the man's brow.

"You pulled me in..." he starts, referring to me grabbing his tunic instead of the parapet, sending us both over the edge of Little Bridge.

"And I dragged you back out again," I bite at him. "I don't like it any more than you do; but we're stuck here together. You'll never make it with only one arm and I..." I draw in a sharp breath and lift my hand from my left side, showing him my bloody fingers. "I need a hand."

"Just the one?" he asks surly with one eyebrow raised, the other frowned.

This time a huffed laugh does manage to escape me.

"Yeah, one'll do."

As it turns out, he really isn't disinclined to lend me his one hand as he holds in place the strips of fabric I cut out of my cloak earlier while I tie them tightly around my waist. In fact, I notice him trying to take a peek at my wound with interest.

"I guess I have you to thank for this?" I say but he just shrugs.

"You got me back," he grumbles.

Guess, I did.

I notice him flexing his fingers and then tightening his hand to a fist.

"Do we need to have it out first, you big brute? Settle matters between us, hmm?" I sternly ask him. "Because we don't have time for that."

For a moment I think he might be contemplating having a go at me anyway but then his face takes on a neutral expression once more and he goes back to gazing out at the lake again.

"What's the plan?" he rumbles in his deep voice.

"We make for the Fortress of Ane."

"Ane?!" he twists to me.

"It's our best chance at finding shelter and food out here. Perhaps even some dry clothes."

"It's a prison," he objects.

"It's our only option. There's *nothing* out here. The Marfeldi's are impossible to cross and I'm fresh out of boats to

carry us across the lake to Meere,” I reply, unable to keep the ire out of my voice.

“What makes you so sure we will find help at Ane?” I huff a laugh. “Status.” Then turn abruptly to pick up my sword and cloak from where I left them.

We set out west, in the general direction of Ane Fortress. The flat wetlands should make it easy for us to spot it in the distance as we draw closer but they will do nothing to help us get there fast since there is no road—or path even—heading towards Ane, *at all*. There used to be. The Causeway it was called, but that was a long time ago, before the lands surrounding the Fortress succumbed to too many floods and were considered lost. No one travelled the Causeway after that, making the trip to Ane by boat instead, and I don't know if the road still stands. It wouldn't have done us any good anyway; the old, elevated road was situated to the south of Ane, leading down across the River Flues to the cities of Meere and Forsted. *We* are on the east side of Ane, where I don't think there has ever even *been* a road.

The loss of the Causeway in the swampy, and frequently flooded marshlands made Ane into a near inaccessible Fortress. A perfect place to serve as a prison; even *if* an inmate managed to

escape—which is highly questionable at best—there was nowhere to go in the barren, wet waste surrounding the Fortress at all sides. I don't know if and how many prisoners have attempted an escape over the years the prison has been in use as such, but I expect their bodies will still be lying in the marshes somewhere—their chances of survival so slim they weren't even deemed worthy of an arrow to shoot them down with. An arrow to the back would have been a mercy.

“I forgot you've probably been to Ane many times,” the big man behind me breaks the silence.

“Why do you think that?” I ask.

“That's what you meant by 'status', right? You're the Roper, the Mage-hunter... and the Unregistered—you do take them there, don't you?”

It irritates me what this man thinks to know about me, to hear the reputation I have gained so thoughtlessly taken as truth.

“Not personally, no.”

“Oh.”

I sigh. “I've been there—*once*. A long time ago. Not on foot though.”

“We'll manage.”

I give him a pointed look.

Well, that remains to be seen.

THE FORTRESS

12 years ago

“Keep up boy.”

Here we go again.

I am thankful for my long legs; it's costing me less and less difficulty to keep up with my father's lengthy strides. If I keep growing this rapidly, I might very well end up taller than him. I feel a little smirk curve up one side of my mouth at the thought, but it quickly falls again; I am still far too skinny. Besides, it's not the length of my legs that has me falling behind a little this time, it's because how unsteady they are.

If I didn't have to get back on a ship to be able to return home, I'd never set foot aboard one ever again!

I hate this place. Not just because the slow swaying of the ship that got us here made me feel sick, not even because it is a dismal, wet place where the moisture seems to fill the very air around me, and not even because the Fortress is a gloomy, depressing mass of dark

grey rock. It's because of the *reason* I am here; I'm being tested, or rather, my magic is going to be.

Two years ago, at seeing the inequality amongst the people, especially between Mages and the rest of the people of the Kingdom of Truenthe, my father—the first and only common-folk general in the Mage-King's army—managed a successful coup with the support of the majority of the people. They even went so far in showing their support for him, that they crowned him King afterwards—the *People's King*. The former King and his spouse are now here; in the prison-fortress of Ane, but it is not them we have come to see.

Along with the Mage-King and the King-Consort, many of their following—those who stood by them and refused to yield and pledge allegiance to the new government—were apprehended and shipped here. All were Mages, just like me, but where *they* will serve a ten-year sentence here at Ane before once again being given the opportunity to swear allegiance to the new King—my father—I get to walk out of here as soon as we're done.

Which I hope is very soon.

We reach a large room or hall and I'm shocked to see a prisoner standing, bound and hooded, flanked by two guards, at the other end.

“Tell me what you see, boy,” my father—the King—commands and I understand why that prisoner is here; I am to use *my* magic to see if I can detect *theirs*—assuming that they *are* a Mage.

I shake my head, mouth dry. “Nothing. I- I see nothing.”

“Take a moment. The journey was tiring.” My father leaves me standing at the door and walks over to softly speak to one of the guards, who nods.

“Anything yet?” he calls back over his shoulder after a while.

I shake my head again, momentarily forgetting he can't see me.

“N-No, fa—Your Majesty. Nothing.”

“Are you concentrating?” He brusquely walks back over to me.

“Y-yes, as hard as I can. I don't see anything.”

“We'll try again later. After you've rested.”

After a meal and a short rest my father takes me back to the room again. This time there are more prisoners—a dozen, also bound and hooded—lined up at the other end of the room. Leaving me standing at the door again, my father walks directly to the right end of the room this time.

“Concentrate, boy,” he urges. “On the first to your left, if

you please.”

I do as he says and turn my attention to the first hooded figure in the line of prisoners. There is absolutely nothing discernible about this person’s features but I see a faint shimmer like sunlight on water...

“Water... I see water. It’s a Water-Mage!”

“Very good!” my father beams proudly and for the first time since we set out from Forsted, days ago, I feel my spirits lift.

“Now try the one in the middle, the left one,” he urges.

“I see... a flame. A Fire-Mage.”

“Excellent! And the one second to the right?”

I concentrate on the prisoner my father asked me to identify but I see nothing. I shake my head. “Nothing. I’m sorry.”

“Never mind, you’re doing well. Second to the left.”

At my father’s praise, I feel more certain of myself, and the answer comes a lot faster this time. “Metallurgy.”

The lessons I’ve had so far, at the Castle, have all dealt with the theory of Mages; the different kinds, their magic’s abilities, how rare or common certain types are... but this is the first time I’ve been able to see and feel their magic for myself and I marvel at how the slightest sensation is enabling me to tell, with certainty, what kind of Mage is before me.

My father walks behind the line of prisoners from the right side of

the room where he was standing, to the left.

“This one,” he says coming to a halt behind the third to the left. I shake my head again and my father walks over to me.

“So it isn’t foolproof. Pity. Well done, boy.”

It has been a long time since I saw my father smile so broadly at me and he actually looks me in the eyes this time too. My father, the King of Truenthe... well, *I* feel like the King of *everything* right now. Maybe being here in this depressing fortress in the miserable marshes of Ane isn’t so bad after all.

CHAPTER TWO



The marshes of Ane are a truly dismal place; a barren stretch of barely passable wetland interspersed with deep fens and clumps of reeds and tall grasses. There is hardly a dry patch or any shelter at all to be found. The waterlogged ground is constantly moving, heaving every time I put my weight down on one foot.

Just like being on a ship...

It's making me sick and I find it unnerving to not know if the ground will hold or swallow me up in one of its quagmires. With every step we need to exert caution, making our trek an excruciatingly slow one. For a brief moment, I had considered letting the big—and heavier!—man go in front but I refuse to follow his—or anyone's—lead.

The entire marshland area is bordered by water on all sides. To the west and north of this useless stretch of 'land' there is the Western Sea, which salty waters have turned the soil there into mudflats of

brackish and treacherous quicksand. In the south there is the vast expanse of Lake Skarfa that connects to the sea via the straight waterway of the River Flues, and to the east the Marfeldi's make for an impassable border.

Officially, the river that flows out from Lake Skarfa is called the Marfeldi River, but the force of water from the Isloi that feeds it floods the low-lying country and has caused the river to widen rather than deepen over time and it tends to split erratically whenever the supply of water increases. About halfway the marshland area, the river's main branch fans out into a multitude of smaller rivers, forming the Marfeldi Estuary or Floodplains. These smaller rivers that often appear and disappear unexpectedly and at random has led to it being referred to as The Marfeldi's. The area is ever changing and heavily influenced by periods of heavy rain and supplies of melt water from the Frysk Plateau carried there by the fast-flowing river Isloi; that violent torrent that chose to spit me out rather than take my life which it easily could have.

We've been plodding westward for a little over an hour and it's already become clear how much of a struggle reaching Ane Fortress is going to be. Of course, we didn't start out at a great point, having been spewed out by the Isloi nearly half-dead—in *his* case—and wounded—in my case—but both of us soaking wet. If

we want to have any chance of making it we must find a way to get dry but so far we've seen nothing but water, fens and pools and we're up to our ankles in them continuously—sometimes even up to our knees!

“I hate to admit it but this is going to kill us,” I grumble.

“It's what they're known for, the marshes,” the man behind me says as if it amuses him rather than worries him.

“Don't excite yourself too much, if I die, so will you.” I snap back at him. “Let's head a little more north, away from the lakeshore, maybe we'll find a little more solid ground.”

“Lead the way,” he rumbles in such an ominous tone I'm reluctant to turn my back to him even though I'm glad to hear it has replaced his chipper attitude.

This is going well... Maybe if the marshes don't kill us, we'll end each other. It's not like we haven't tried before.

I can't help but snort.

“What's so funny?” Big Man asks sternly.

“You and me, trying to kill each other and now depending on one another to stay alive. It's ironic.”

He chuckles a little. “That *would* be ironic... but I never tried to kill you just...”—I turn my head to look at him in surprise but he avoids my gaze before continuing—“...stall you. Why? Did you intend to kill me?” There is no anger in his voice, no frown knitting his brow, just a look of open curiosity. His look disarms me and I

answer in all honesty.

“Never really thought it through. I just grabbed onto the closest thing available... Which happened to be you.”

“Lucky me,” he chuckles again.

Heading north a little was a good bet but it takes another half hour before we notice the ground is starting to feel a little more solid beneath our feet. It is only then that we can think about taking a little rest and try to find a way—*any* way—to start a fire. My mood plummets instantly at the prospect of that seemingly impossible task of finding something dry to burn in an environment that couldn't have been wetter if it had been at the bottom of Lake Skarfa.

So far we've been incredibly lucky the weather has been sunny and fairly mild and toiling through the marshes has been hard exercise keeping us warm. Still, we have nothing to eat and if we have any hopes of making it to Ane, we need to keep our feet dry or they will rot off our bodies. We will also need to pick up our pace as we're losing daylight—and warmth with it.

“I suggest we try to find a place to make camp,” I say with a frown, disappointed at our poor progress. “And, I know it's far easier said than done, but we need to build a fire.”

“Finding something dry will be a challenge that'll keep us warm for a while...” Big Man chuckles. Seriously, it is beyond me

how he is still able to find things amusing.

“Hey, see that?” he says with a nod in the direction of some bushes. “It hasn’t rained in a few days and it’s quite sunny, I’d say there’s our best chance at finding some dry twigs.”

I follow him in the direction he indicated to a cluster of bushes and small, young birch trees.

“There’s a dead one here, nice and dry. Hand me that butterknife of yours.”

“What for?” I bristle at his affront of my sword and the fact that he thinks I’ll just hand it over.

“To cut it down of course.”

“You can’t cut down a tree with a sword!” I say with indignation. “You’ll blunt the blade! And you’ll need *both* hands to swing it with any decent amount of force.”

“You want a fire or not?” he grins mischievously. “Then watch me.”

Intrigued, I hand over the sword and he turns it a little, testing its weight and balance. Then he walks over to the dead tree, aims and swings—once, twice. The tree comes down with a whoosh.

As he turns to me and hands me back my sword, the Big Man grins proudly, giving him a boyish charm. It’s infectious... and I can’t help but huff a laugh. “Butterknife, eh?”

“It was a twig of a tree,” he shrugs, then proceeds to laugh

as well. I've already stopped smiling, having suddenly realised something. "You're *Gifted*, aren't you?"

"Might be. What of it?" he says with a teasing smile.

"Nothing special. I've just never paid that much attention to *Gifted*."

"Why would you? You're—"

"No reason." I cut him off and quickly turn away to end the conversation, picking up the dead tree and dragging it with me to where we plan to make our fire.

The multitudes of fluffy cattails mean we have plenty of tinder but in the absence of flint we'll need to set fire to it by means of friction—I'm not offering up my sword to try and create a spark, that'll surely blunt the edge!—leaving it up to me, who has still possession of both hands, to roll a stick between them until I have blisters. When I finally see a little trail of smoke rise, though, I'm surprised to see the fluff catch alight instantly and it isn't long before we have a proper—albeit spluttering—fire going. Big Man takes off in the direction of some tall reeds and comes back with a bundle of them under his one arm. The sturdier ones he sticks in the ground around the fire, then proceeds to take off his boots and socks which he impales on the stalks. Dropping down to the ground, he stretches out his strong legs to warm his bare feet by