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BOOK TWO OF THE LEGENDS OF THE FIRST EMPIRE

AGE OF SWORDS

BY THE
AUTHOR OF
AGE OF MYTH

CHAPTER ONE

THE STORM

Most people believe the first battle of the Great War occurred at Grandford in the early spring, but the initial attack actually took place on a summer's day in Dahl Rhen. —The Book of Brin

“Are we safe?” Persephone shouted up at the oak.

Magda was the oldest tree in the forest, massive and majestic. Standing before her was like staring at an ocean or mountain; each made Persephone feel small. Realizing her three-word question might be too simple, too vague, she added, “Is there more that needs to be done to protect my people from the Fhrey?”

Persephone waited for an answer.

Wind blew; the tree shook, and a massive branch fell.

She jumped when it hit the ground. Falling from such a height, the limb would have killed her if it had landed a few inches closer. Broken branches suspended in the forest canopy were called widow-makers. Since Persephone had already lost her husband, the dead wood lying beside her must have been an overachiever.

“What’s that about?” Persephone asked Suri.

The young mystic with the white wolf glanced at the fallen branch and shrugged. “Just the wind, I think. Feels like a storm is coming.”

Once before, when Persephone had sought the great tree’s counsel, Magda’s advice had saved her people. Now she was back, seeking answers again. Months had passed since her last visit, and life at Dahl Rhen had returned to a comfortable routine. The destruction created by the battle between two Miralyith had been cleaned up, but Persephone knew that hadn’t ended the conflict. Questions remained—questions no human or Fhrey could answer. And yet . . .

Persephone looked at the fallen tree limb. *It’s not a good sign when Magda starts a conversation by trying to crush me.*

“Something wrong?” Arion asked. The Fhrey was still learning their language and stood beside Suri and Minna watching the proceedings with great interest. She wore the green hat Padera had crocheted for her; its whimsical quality made the Miralyith appear more approachable, less divine, more—human. Arion had come along to witness the oracle in action, although Persephone had expected more talk and less action.

Suri looked up at the tree. “Don’t know.”

“What’s Magda saying?” Persephone shouted to Suri over the rising howl of wind.

That was how it was supposed to work. Persephone posed questions to the tree and the mystic revealed the answer after listening to the rustling of leaves and branches. But Arion was right about something being wrong. Suri had a perplexed look on her face—more than merely puzzled; she looked concerned.

“Not sure,” the girl replied.

Persephone clawed a lock of hair away from her mouth. “Why not? Is she talking in riddles or just ignoring you?”

Suri's face twisted in frustration. "Oh, she's talking, all right, but so fast I can't tell what she's saying. Just babbling, really. Never seen her like this. She keeps repeating 'Run . . . run fast . . . run far. They're after you.' "

"*They?* Who? Is she talking to us? Is that the answer to my questions?"

Suri shook her head, short hair whipping across the tattoos on her forehead. "Nope. She was yelling *before* you said anything. I don't think she heard you. I'm not even sure how Magda knows the word *run*. I mean, seriously, how does a tree know what that is?"

"Are you saying the tree is hysterical?"

Suri nodded. "Scared to death. I know mice who have made more sense. She's not even using words now, just making noises." Suri's brows jumped up, her face tensing, eyes squinting, mouth pulling tight.

"What?" Persephone asked.

"It's never good when a tree screams."

Tall grass slapped Persephone's legs, her dress whipping and snapping. Ripped from their branches, the oak's leaves flew thick as snow in a blizzard. Under the dense canopy, Persephone couldn't see the sky, but the wind was stronger than ever. Stepping out, she discovered that what had been clear blue just moments before had turned a tumultuous gray. Dark clouds bubbled one upon another, turning midday into twilight. A strange green light cast everything in an eerie, unnatural hue.

"What's happening?" Arion asked.

"Tree is panicking," Suri answered.

"Maybe we should return to the dahl," Arion said, her head tilted up. "Yes?"

Minna whined and drew closer to Suri, nearly knocking the girl down. The mystic knelt to comfort her wolf. "Not right, is it, Minna?"

Looking more serious, Arion gave up speaking Rhunic and returned to her native tongue. “*We need to—*” She was cut o by a blinding ash and horrific crack.

Minna yelped and bolted down the slope.

Persephone staggered. Blinded by the afterimage that left a bright, splotchy band across her vision, she vainly tried to blink it away. Her nostrils filled with wood smoke, and she felt the heat of a blaze.

Magda is on fire!

Arion lay on the ground at the base of the tree, both hands raised, shielding herself. The Miralyith shouted a single word—nothing Persephone recognized—but it sounded like a command. The fire engulfing the old oak vanished with a *pop*. In its place was a terrible hiss and smoke swirling in a malevolent wind. Magda was split down the center, cleaved in two. A horrible blackened gash with bright-red edges flared with each gust of wind. The ancient and wondrous mother of trees had taken a mortal blow from the gods.

Persephone helped Arion to her feet.

“*We need to run,*” the Fhrey told them.

“What? Why?”

Arion grabbed her by the wrist and pulled. “*Now!*”

Persephone’s scalp tingled as Arion dragged her down the hill and out of the glade toward the thick shadow of the Crescent Forest. Suri and Minna were already ahead of them, sprinting.

Crack!

Lightning struck the ground somewhere behind them.

Crack! Crack!

Two more bolts rent the air close enough for her to feel their heat. Running together, Persephone and Arion followed Suri and Minna as they plunged headlong into the forest through

thickets, brambles, and thorns. Gasping for air, Persephone glanced back. A series of scorch marks smoldered in a direct line between the oak and where they stood.

Crack!

They all jumped as the sound exploded directly overhead. Like the old oak, the trees above caught fire. One huge branch fell like a giant torch— another widow-maker wannabe.

“Need shelter,” Arion said, and pulled again.

“Rol nearby,” Suri shouted. “This way.” The girl dashed deeper into the wood, Minna bounding at her side.

Persephone might not understand the language of trees, but she understood anguish. The wood shrieked. Branches snapped, trunks groaned, and the forest cried out as the wind stripped away summer gowns of green. Then a new sound rose, a loud, all-encompassing roar from everywhere at once. At first, Persephone thought it might be sheets of rain, but the noise was much too loud, far too violent. Balls of ice tore through leaves and branches. Fist-sized missiles assailed the canopy, ricocheting o limbs and trunks. With arms raised over her head, Persephone screamed as two huge chunks of ice struck her back, glancing blows, but they carried the sting of a switch and the force of a punch.

Ahead, Suri stopped at the foot of a sheer, rocky cli and slapped the face of it with her palm. To Persephone’s immense relief, a section of the stone’s face opened, revealing a little room neatly carved out of rock. The mystic leapt inside, followed closely by the wolf. From the doorway, Suri swung her arms in huge circles, waving the other women to safety. The chieftain of Dahl Rhen and the Miralyith crossed the threshold together, crouching to avoid hitting their heads. Once in, Persephone turned to witness the destruction.

Crack!

Another bolt of lightning split the air, and for an instant, a dazzling array of translucent shades of green illuminated the leaves, a light brighter than the sun.

Crack!

A nearby cottonwood caught fire. Sheared in half, the tree fell in a rain of sparks and flame. The wind fanned the fires started by the strikes, spreading an inferno—ice and fire, wind and debris. Persephone stared, lost somewhere between horror and awe.

Suri slapped the keystone, and the door closed.

Outside, the lightning cracks and hammering hail continued, but from a safe, muffled distance. Panting from the run and realizing they'd escaped without significant injury, the three exchanged the stunned looks of survivors. Relief washed over Persephone . . . until she noticed they weren't alone.



Gifford would never win a footrace. Although he came to this realization late in life, everyone else knew it the day he was born. His left leg lacked feeling, couldn't support his weight, and dragged. His back wasn't much better. Severely twisted, it forced his hips in one direction and his shoulders in another. Most people pitied Gifford and a few even despised him. He never understood either.

Roan was the exception. What everyone else saw as hopeless, she took as a challenge.

The two were out in front of Gifford's roundhouse, and Roan was lashing the wood-and-tin contraption to his left leg, tightening its leather straps. She knelt in the grass before him, wearing her work apron, a smudge of charcoal on the side of her nose. Her dark-brown hair was pulled back in a short ponytail so high on her head that it looked like a rooster's crest.

Dozens of cuts from working with sharp metal marred her clever little hands. Gifford wanted to hold them, kiss the wounds, and take the pain away. He'd tried taking her hand once, and it hadn't

gone well. She'd pulled away, her eyes widened with fear, and a look of horror crossed her face. Roan had an aversion to being touched—Gifford had known that— he'd simply forgotten himself. Her reaction wasn't limited to him. She couldn't suffer anyone's touch.

Yanking hard on the ankle strap, Roan nodded with a firm, determined expression. "That should do it." She rose and dusted her clean hands symbolically. Her voice was eager but serious. "Ready?"

Gifford answered by pulling himself up with the aid of his crafting table. The device on his leg, constructed from wooden sticks and metal hinges, squeaked as he rose, a sound like the opening of a tiny door.

"Do you have your weight on it? Try. See if it holds."

For Gifford, any attempt to support himself with his left leg was akin to leaning on water. But he'd gladly fall on his face for her. Perhaps he could manage a roll and make her grin. If he'd been born with two stout legs, strong and agile, he'd dance and twirl like a fool to amuse her. He might even make her laugh, something she rarely did. In her mind, she was still a slave, something less than nothing. Gifford longed for Roan to see herself the way he did, but damaged as he was, he made a poor mirror casting back a broken image.

Gifford tilted his hips, shifting some weight to his lame leg. He didn't fall. A strain tugged on the straps wrapped around his thigh and calf, but his leg held. His mouth dropped open, his eyes widened, and Roan actually *did* smile.

By Mari, what an amazing sight.

He couldn't help grinning back. He was standing straight—or as straight as his gnarled back allowed. Using magic armor fashioned by Roan, Gifford was winning an impossible battle.

"Take a step," she coaxed, hands clenched in fists of excitement.

Gifford shifted weight back to his right side and lifted his left leg, swinging it forward. The hinges squeaked once more. He took a step the way normal people did a million times, and that's when the brace collapsed.

"Oh, no!" Roan gasped as Gifford fell, barely missing the newly glazed cups drying in the morning sun.

His cheek and ear slammed into the hardened dirt, jarring his head. But his elbow, hand, and hip took the bulk of the punishment. To Roan, it must have looked painful, but Gifford knew how to fall. He'd been doing it his entire life.

"I'm so, so, so sorry." Roan was back on her knees, bent over him as he rolled to his side. Her grin was gone, the world less bright.

"I'm okay, no pwoblem. I missed the cups."

"The metal failed." She struggled to hold back tears as her injured hands ran over the brace. "The tin just isn't strong enough. I'm so sorry."

"It held fo' a while," he said to cheer her up. "Keep at it. You'll make it wuk. I know you will."

"There's an added force when walking. I should have accounted for the additional weight when your other leg is raised." She slapped the side of her head several times, inching with each strike. "I should have realized that. I should have. How could I not—"

He instinctively grabbed her wrist to prevent additional blows. "Don't do—"

Roan screamed and jerked away, drawing back in terror. When she recovered, they exchanged embarrassed looks, mirroring each other. The moment dragged unpleasantly until Gifford forced a smile. Not one of his best, but it was all he could manage.

To ease past the uncomfortable pause, he picked up the conversation where they'd left off, pretending nothing had happened. "Woan, you can't know ev-we-thing when doing something new. It'll be betta next time."

She blinked at him twice, then shifted her focus. She wasn't looking at anything in particular; she was thinking. Sometimes Roan thought so intently that he could almost hear it. She blinked again and emerged from the stupor. Walking over to Gifford's crafting table, she picked up one of his cups. The awkward moment vanished as if it had never happened.

"This design is new, isn't it?" she asked. "Do you think it could hold its shape at a much larger size? If we could find a way to—"

Gifford's smile turned genuine. "Yew a genius, Woan. Has anyone told you that?"

She nodded, her little rooster crest whipping. "You have."

"Because it's twue," he said.

She looked embarrassed again, the way she always did when he complimented her, the way she looked when anyone said something nice, a familiar unease. Her eyes shifted back to the brace, and she sighed. "I need something stronger. Can't make it out of stone; can't make it out of wood."

"I wouldn't suggest clay," he said, pushing his luck at trying to be funny. "Though I would have made you a beautiful hinge."

"I know you would," she said in complete seriousness.

Roan wasn't one for jokes. Much of humor arose from the unexpected or preposterous—like making a hinge out of clay. But her mind didn't work that way. To Roan, nothing was too absurd and no idea too crazy.

"I'll just have to think of something," she said while unbuckling the brace. "Some way to strengthen the metal. There's always a better way. That's what Padera says, and she's always right."

Roan had good cause to think so highly of Padera's opinion. The oldest resident of Dahl Rhen, she'd seen it all. She also had no trouble expressing her thoughts, regardless of whether people wanted to hear her opinion or not. For reasons beyond understanding, Padera had always been particularly harsh with Gifford.

As Roan struggled with the buckle, the wind gusted and blew his cloths from the crafting table. Two cups fell over, making a delicate *clink*. Thick, voluminous clouds rolled in, blotting out the blue and blanketing the sun. Around the dahl, people urgently trotted toward their homes.

“Get the wash in! Get the wash in!” Viv Baker yelled to her daughter.

The Killian boys raced after chickens, and Bergin rushed to shut down his new batch of beer. “A perfectly blessed day just a minute ago,” he grumbled, peering up at the sky as if it could hear him.

Another gust made Gifford’s entire set of cups collide and ring. Two more toppled, rolling on their sides and making half circles on the tabletop. He had been having a productive day before Roan had stopped by, but she was always a welcome distraction.

“We need to get your pottery inside.” Roan redoubled her effort to remove the brace but was having trouble with one of the buckles. “Made it too tight.”

The wind grew stronger. The banners on the lodge cracked with a sharp report. The fire braziers near the well struggled to stay lit but lost their battle, both snuffed out.

“That’s not good,” Gifford said. “Only time they’ve blown out was when the lodge’s woof came o .”

The thatch of his little house rustled, and dirt and grass pelted his face and arms.

Frustrated with the buckle, Roan reached into one of her pockets and pulled out another of her inventions: two knives bound in leather so they could both cut at once. She used them to release the brace’s straps, freeing him. “There, now we can—”

Lightning struck the lodge. Splinters, sparks, and a plume of white smoke preceded a clap so loud that Gifford felt it pass through him. Giant logs exploded and thatch ignited.

“Did you see—” Gifford started to say when another bolt of lightning struck on the other side of the lodge. “Whoa!”

He and Roan stared in shock as a third and then a fourth bolt hit the log building. Cobb, the pig wrangler and part-time gate guard, was the first to react. He and Bergin ran toward the well, picking up water gourds on their way. Then another bolt of lightning exploded the well's windlass into a cloud of splinters, and both of them dived for the ground.

More lightning bolts rained, both inside and outside the dahl. With each shaft came screams, fire, and smoke. All around Roan and Gifford, people ran to their homes. The Galantians, Fhrey warriors who had been welcomed to the dahl when exiled, rushed out of their tents and stared up at the sky. They looked just as frightened as everyone else, which was as disturbing as the cataclysmic storm. Until recently, the Fhrey had been thought to be gods.

Gelston the shepherd ran past. Lightning hit while he made his way between the woodpile and a patch of near-ripe beans in the Killians' garden. Gifford didn't see much, just a snaking, blinding brilliance. When his sight returned, Gelston was on the ground, his hair on fire. Bergin rushed to the man's side and doused his head.

Gifford shouted to Roan, "We need to get to the sto'age pit. Wight now!"

He grabbed his crutch and pushed himself up.

"Roan! Gifford!" Raithe yelled as he and Malcolm hurried toward them. Raithe still carried two swords: the broken copper one slung on his back and the intricately decorated Fhrey blade hanging naked from his belt. Malcolm held a spear with both hands. "Do you know where Persephone is?"

Gifford shook his head. "No, but we need to get to the pit!"

Raithe nodded. "I'll spread the word. Malcolm, help them."

The ex-slave moved to Gifford's side, put his shoulder under the potter's arm, and practically carried him to the big storage pit while Roan followed close behind. With the first harvest still more than a month away, the pit was nearly empty. Lined with mud bricks, the hole retained the smell of

musty vegetables, grain, and straw. Other members of the dahl were already there. The Bakers huddled with their daughter and two boys against the back wall, their eyes wide. Engleton and Farmer Wedon peered out the open door at the violence of the storm.

Brin, the dahl's newly appointed Keeper of Ways, was there as well. "Have you seen my parents? They're not here," she said in an unsteady voice.

"No," Roan replied.

Outside, thunder cracked and rolled continuously. Gifford could only imagine the lightning strikes that accompanied them. Being down in the pit, he couldn't see the yard, just a small square of sky.

"I need to find them." Brin bolted toward the exit, springing like a fawn. Unlike the crippled potter, Brin *could* win a footrace, and she was easily the fastest person in the dahl. The fifteen-year-old regularly won every sprint during the Summerule festivals, but Gifford had anticipated her dash and caught her wrist.

"Let me go!" She pulled and jerked.

"It's too dangewous."

"I don't care!" Brin yanked hard, so hard she fell, but Gifford still hung on. "Let me go!"

Gifford's legs, even his good one, were mostly useless, and his lips slid down the side of his face because he didn't have the muscles to support them. But reliance on his arms and hands turned them into vises. Gavin and Krier, who always picked on him, had once made the mistake of challenging Gifford to a hand-squeezing contest. He humiliated Krier, making him weep—his name magnifying the boy's embarrassment. Gavin was determined not to suffer a similar fate and cheated by using both hands. Gifford had held back with the first boy but didn't see the need to do likewise with a cheater. He broke Gavin's little finger and the tiny bone that ran from the second knuckle to his wrist.

Brin had no possibility of breaking free.

Autumn, Fig, the Killians, and Tressa stumbled through the door, all of them exhausted and out of breath. Heath Coswall and Bergin came along just after. They dragged Gelston, who remained unconscious. His hair was mostly gone, the scalp red and black. Bergin was covered in dirt and grass and reported that the lodge was burning like a harvest-moon bonfire.

“Has anyone seen my parents?” Brin asked the newcomers.

No one had.

As if the wind and lightning weren’t enough, hail began to fall. Apple-sized chunks of ice clattered, leaving craters in the turf on impact.

More people raced into the shelter of the pit, running with arms and baskets over their heads. They led to the back, crying and hugging one another. Brin watched each come in, always looking for but not finding the faces she sought. Finally, Nyphron and his Galantians charged in with shields protecting their heads. Moya, Cobb, and Habet were with them.

“Let me go!” Brin pleaded, struggling against Gifford’s unrelenting grip.

“You can’t leave,” Moya said, her hair a wild mess. “Your house is burning. There’s nothing—”

Outside, a roar grew like the angry growl of a colossal beast. Everyone stared out the doorway as the sky turned darker still, and the wind blew with even more force. Without warning, the Bakers’ roundhouse ripped apart. First the thatch blew away; then the wood beams tore free; finally, the log walls succumbed and disappeared, sucked into the air. Even the foundation of mud bricks was sheared and scattered. After that, a whirlwind cloud of dirt and debris consumed everything outside the storage pit.

“Close the door,” Nyphron ordered. Grygor, the giant, started to haul it shut just as Raithe arrived.

“Has anyone seen Persephone?” Raithe asked while scanning the crowd.

“She’s not here. Went to the forest,” Moya replied.

Raithe drew close to her. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Suri, Arion, and Seph went to talk to Magda.”

“That old oak is on top of a hill in an open glade,” he said to no one in particular. Raithe looked like he might throw up. There had been rumors that the Dureyan was in love with Dahl Rhen’s chieftain, but a lot of recent gossip had turned out to be untrue. Seeing Raithe’s face removed any uncertainty. If Roan were still outside, Gifford would have looked the same way.

Everyone sat or knelt in tearful silence as the roaring grew louder. With the door closed and guarded by the giant, Gifford let go of Brin, who collapsed and sobbed. All around, people quivered, whimpered, and stared at the ceiling, no doubt wondering if it, too, would be ripped away or cave in.

Gifford stood beside Roan, the crowd pressing them together. He’d never been this close to her for so long. He felt her warmth and smelled charcoal, oil, and smoke—the scents he’d come to associate with Roan and all things good. If the roof collapsed and killed him, Gifford would have thanked Mari for her final kindness.

The shelter was little more than a hole in the ground, but because it protected the dahl’s food supply, the pit was solidly built. The best materials went into its construction. The walls were dirt and stone, the ceiling braced by logs driven into the ground. Most of Gifford’s work ended up in that pit. Huge clay urns held harvests of barley, wheat, and rye. Their tops were sealed with wax to keep out the mice and moisture. The enclosure also safeguarded wine, honey, oil, vegetables, and a cache of smoked meats. At this time of year, most of the urns were empty, and the pit was little more than a hole, albeit a sturdy one. Still, the ceiling shook, and the door rattled.

The only bit of light entered through the narrow cracks where the door didn’t precisely meet its frame. This sliver of white flickered violently.

“It’ll be okay,” Gifford told Roan. He said it in a whisper, as if a secret chosen to share with her alone.

Around them, people wailed, and not just women and children. Gifford heard Cobb, Heath Coswall, Habet, and Filson the lamp maker weeping openly as well. But Roan didn’t make a sound. She wasn’t like them; she wasn’t like anyone. The light from the door highlighted the contour of her face, and she didn’t look scared. Instead, intensity shone in her eyes. If not for the dozens of people between Roan and the exit, he had no doubt she would have opened the door. She wanted to see. Roan wanted to see everything.

After what felt like hours, the clatter of hail stopped, but the rain continued to fall, hard at times then lighter, only to pound once more. The howl of the wind faded. Even the cracks of lightning fell silent. Finally, the light from around the door became bright and unwavering.

Nyphron shoved the door open and crept out. A moment later he waved for the others to follow.

Everyone squinted against the brightness of the sun, struggling to see. One of the lodge’s banners lay on the ground, its ends frayed. Thatch and logs were scattered everywhere. Not a single roundhouse had survived. Branches, leaves, and broken bodies littered the yard, none of them moving. Overhead, clouds were breaking up, and patches of blue emerged.

“Is it over?” Heath Coswall asked from the back of the crowd.

As if in answer, a loud boom sounded, and the dahl’s front gate trembled.

“What is that?” Moya asked, speaking for everyone. Another bang hit, and the gate began to buckle.



The room where they sheltered was like the one under the waterfall that Suri had shown Persephone months ago, which had provided refuge from a pack of wolves and a deadly bear named Grin. Carved from natural stone, the room was about the size of a roundhouse and had strange markings near the ceiling. While the waterfall room was slightly larger and square, this one was perfectly round and contained six stout pillars surrounding a gemstone the size of a storage urn. Embedded in the floor, the standing crystal gave off a green, unnatural light. Six heavy benches encircled the stone, as if it were a camp fire and the room used for telling ghost stories. In front of the bench farthest from the door stood what Persephone first thought were three small men. Each was less than four feet in height, their faces illuminated by the eerie emerald light. She might have screamed, and certainly would have recoiled, if their expressions hadn't been so clearly marked by shock and fear.

"He . . . hello," Persephone stammered, a bit embarrassed and out of breath. "Sorry for barging in. A bit scary outside."

None of the three replied.

Stocky to the point of appearing square, with large hands, broad noses, deep-set eyes, and bushy brows, they stood as motionless as statues. They wore shirts of metal rings, and a row of metal hats lay on the nearby bench. The reflection of the green light from their armor made them appear to glow in the dark.

Dherg.

Persephone had met their kind before. She'd traveled with several caravans to Dahl Tirre and the nearby port town of Vernes where the Dherg had shops. She and her husband, Reglan, had traded with the Dherg on behalf of Dahl Rhen, swapping antlers, hides, and pottery for bits of tin. The Dherg were far less intimidating than the Fhrey but even less trusting.

The Dherg on the left had a long white beard and a sword. The one on the right also had a sword, but his beard was gray. The fellow in the middle had no sword at all and almost no beard. A massive pickax was strapped to his back, and around his neck he wore a golden torc.

“Is this your rol?” Persephone asked.

The Dherg didn’t answer. They didn’t even look at her. Instead, the three focused on Arion with a mixture of hatred and terror.

“Do you mind if we share it until the storm passes?” she continued, undaunted.

Still no answer.

Persephone wondered if they even understood Rhunic. Not all Dherg did. There were orthodox factions that shunned outsiders and foreign ways, including language.

“I need to sit,” Arion said, and staggered toward the benches.

At her approach, two of the Dherg—the ones with the beards—bolted for the door. One slapped the keystone, and it started to slide open. The moment it did, the noise outside grew deafening.

Neither the voice of hail nor the roar of fire, this rumble was louder, deeper. The growl of whirling wind. Persephone had seen it before. As a girl, her father had held her high on the dahl’s wall to witness a god’s wandering finger scratch the back of Elan. Across the distance of more than a mile, the whirling black funnel ripped up trees. Persephone had wondered what it would be like to be a rabbit or mole caught in that cataclysm. Now she knew. Outside, leaves, grass, dirt, stones, hail, branches, and whole tree trunks flew sideways, smashing into one another. A loud shattering *crack* issued from somewhere in the storm—another tree snapping in half. Persephone felt a pull like the current of a powerful river dragging on her as air was sucked out through the opening.

The white-bearded Dherg felt it, too, and braced himself at the threshold. He looked at the raging storm then glanced back to Arion, trying to decide. With his beard whipping, he shouted, “Close it! Close it!”

The gray-bearded one clapped hand to stone. The door reversed direction, the stone rolling back into place until the roar was shut out once more.

"You're doing that!" the white-bearded Dherg accused in Fhrey, pointing at the door while glaring at Arion.

She shook her head wearily while sitting on the stone bench. *"Not of my making. Believe me."*

"I don't believe you!"

Arion flexed her fingers. Shock and worry creased her brow. She reached up and put a hand to the back of her head.

"It's okay. It'll come back." Suri pointed at the series of runes chiseled along the top of the walls. *"The markings."* They were the same as the ones on the bandages that had prevented Arion from using magic.

Arion nodded slowly. She was frowning but looked relieved. Seeing that the Dherg were still glaring at her, she pointed to the runes and said, *"Those are yours, so you know I'm not responsible for what is happening out there."*

Persephone had never seen Dherg quite like them. None of the others she'd met were dressed in metal. The traders in Vernes wore floppy wool hats of bright orange or red, and long tunics usually dyed yellow or blue. Metal in the southern regions wasn't common, and the Dherg coveted it like sacred relics—their form of magic. They haggled stubbornly for even small bits of tin. But it was their other metals that were truly remarkable: wondrous bronze, which could be forged into invincible weapons, and gold and silver, which shone with divine light. She wondered if these three were rulers or otherwise-powerful members of Dherg society. Whoever they were, it'd be a mistake not to make a good impression. Or at least the best that could be made after barging in on them.

“I’m Persephone, chieftain of Dahl Rhen,” she said, thinking it was time someone did the polite thing. “This is Arion of the Fhrey. And this”—she gestured toward the mystic—“is Suri. Oh, and her wolf, Minna, who is very nice, and will do you no harm.”

Perhaps because they realized Arion wasn’t capable of performing magic, or because Persephone had been the first to address them, the three finally appeared to notice her existence. They looked at her with no less suspicion but far less fear.

“Now then,” she said, offering the friendliest smile she could conjure. “Who might you be?”

They all offered one more glare at Arion before the white-bearded one spoke. “I’m Frost of Nye. This is Flood,” he said, clapping a hand on the shoulder of the one beside him, making the gray-bearded Dherg wince. “And he”—Frost pointed at the one with the pickax who hadn’t run for the exit—“is called Rain. My companions obviously weren’t properly watching the door.”

“Us? And what were *you* doing?” Flood asked Frost. “Why was guarding the door our responsibility?”

“I was busy trying to remove a pebble from my boot.”

“Careful, it might be your brain. If you toss it away, then . . . well . . . now that I think of it, we likely wouldn’t notice any difference, so go ahead.”

Frost scowled.

“Honored to make your acquaintance.” Persephone bowed formally, which appeared to surprise them.

“Now, how did you know about our rol?” Frost asked no one in particular. “These are secret places, safe areas known only to our kind.”

“Suri is a mystic and has lived in the Crescent Forest all her life.” Persephone glanced at the girl. “She led us here.”

The Dherg smirked. “All her life? How long could that possibly be?”

“Suri is . . . well . . . special. She’s located many rols. Haven’t you?”

Suri was petting Minna’s neck, oblivious to the conversation.

“Suri?” Persephone nudged the mystic with an elbow.

“What?”

“I was telling them that you have a knack for finding rols. Could you explain how you do it?”

Suri shrugged. “Empty places feel different from the ones filled with dirt and stone. It’s fun to find the spot that opens the door. Although Minna sometimes gets bored if I take too long. Don’t you, Minna?”

“We just came here to get away from the storm,” Persephone said. “No idea it was occupied. I hope you don’t mind, but as you can see the storm is . . . the storm is . . .” A thought wriggled into her head—and then more than one. A whole set of puzzle pieces fell together: the suddenness of the storm, Arion telling them to run, and the trail of scorched divots left in their wake.

She turned her attention to the Miralyith and spoke in the Fhrey language, “*Arion, how did you know?*”

The bald woman sat on the bench, head resting in her hands. “*Know what?*”

“*You told us to run. And that lightning, it . . . it wasn’t random. I don’t know how, but it was trying to hit us. Right?*”

“Yes,” the Fhrey said, looking up. The relief that Suri’s explanation had provided earlier was gone, replaced by a painful expression as Arion rubbed the knit hat on her head.

“*This was how it was in the war.*” Frost seemed to be talking to his companions, but spoke in Fhrey. “*When the Fhrey attacked, we’d shelter in rols.*”

“*You couldn’t know anything about the war,*” Arion said. “*I was young, but I remember. You don’t. You only know stories. Dberg don’t live that long.*”

“*Don’t call me a Dberg . . . you . . . you . . . elf!*” Frost’s hand went to his sword.

Arion's brows rose at the term *elf*.

"*Hold on, hold on,*" Persephone said. "Maybe we should all calm down a little. I'm sure Arion meant no disrespect. The storm is too dangerous for any of us to leave, so let's make the best of it. We don't know how long we'll all be stuck in here."

Overhead, thunder boomed, and the wind's howl continued.

Persephone moved to take a seat on the bench beside Arion and was unpleasantly reminded about the hail that had struck her back. She also had time to notice the many cuts along her hands and legs from the thorn bushes. Her left ear hurt as well, though she didn't know why.

"Might as well sit down," Persephone told the three.

Frost and Flood looked at each other and then returned to the benches on the far side of the glowing green gem. Rain, who hadn't stopped looking at the runes since they'd been pointed out, had wandered into the shadows. He stood near the back wall, head tilted up, studying the carvings.

"Pardon me for asking, but if Dher . . . er . . . what Arion said isn't the correct way to refer to your kind, then what is? It's the only term I've ever heard."

"*Dberg* is a Fhrey word meaning 'vile mole.' How would you like it if we called you *Rbunes*?" Frost asked. "That's also a Fhrey word. You know what that means, right? 'Barbarian,' 'primitive,' 'crude'? Do you like being called that?"

Persephone hadn't thought about it before. To her, to most everyone in the Ten Clans—few of whom spoke Fhrey—Rhune was just a common term, a name. Now that he mentioned it, she realized it had been an insult. "So what do you call yourselves, then?"

"Belgriclungreians," Frost said.

Persephone took a breath. "Really? That's . . . that is a mouthful, isn't it? And what brings you to the Crescent Forest? I don't remember your kind ever coming this far north."

The three exchanged looks—uncomfortable expressions—and Frost growled, “That’s really none of your business, now, is it?”

Persephone was becoming exasperated by the e ort of the conversation. Even idle chitchat seemed to provoke their ire.

Outside, the noise grew softer, only rain now; the storm was lessening. The patter became a pleasant, comforting, non-threatening sound. *Does that mean it’s over?* Persephone wondered, realizing she wasn’t at all certain what *it* was. Not exactly.

That morning had begun so agreeably. A clear sky and a leisurely walk through the forest made a refreshing change from the growing tension about a potential war. Prior to a few months ago, the Fhrey were thought to be gods—seemingly immortal. Then, Raithe of Dureya had killed one, throwing everything in doubt. A few weeks later, he slew Gryndal, the seemingly all-powerful Fhrey Miralyith, and all skepticism had vanished. The Fhrey were not gods, but they were powerful. Retaliation was only a matter of time. Still, Persephone had expected an army, not lightning bolts.

“*Headache?*” Suri asked after seeing the Fhrey rub her temples.

Arion replied with a shallow nod and got up. Her movement sent a jolt of fear through the two bearded Dherg, who briefly jumped to their feet. When Arion lay down on the floor and rested an arm over her eyes, they relaxed.

“What’s wrong with the elf?” Flood asked.

“Don’t talk to them,” Frost snapped.

“Why do you call her *elf*?” Persephone asked.

“That is what they are to us,” Frost said. “*Nightmares.*”

Persephone said, puzzled, “But *elf* is a Fhrey word.”

“Not much sense calling them names in our language. What good is insulting someone if they don’t know you’re doing it?”

"You aren't pronouncing it right," Arion said. *"It's ylfe, not elf."*

Persephone moved to where Arion lay and knelt beside her. The Fhrey used both hands to rub her eyes.

"The pain is bad?" Persephone asked.

"Yes."

"Is there—" Persephone stopped when the ground shook.

Everyone exchanged glances with similar worried expressions.

The earth quaked again, accompanied by a muffled thud.

"What is that?" Persephone asked.

No one answered.

The Dherg were on their feet again, all three looking up.

Another thud, louder this time, sent a tremor through the rol, and dust, bits of rock, and pebbles rained down from the ceiling, glinting o the gemstone. Persephone got to her feet and approached Frost, who, along with Flood, was backing away, moving toward the door again.

"During the war, did the Fhrey ever manage to get into these rols?"

The two Dherg looked at each other with so much concern that Persephone didn't need an answer.

"How?" she asked, as another shudder shook the room. The stone ceiling cracked, and a large piece of rock fell, followed by a shower of dirt. Through the gap, a massive eye peered in.