Protect

Book 1 of the Unwelcome Trilogy

R.D. Brady

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“The strength of a family, like the strength of an army, is in its loyalty to each other.”

- Mario Puzo

“God, give me strength each day to fight for my family.”

- Nehemiah 4:14

CHAPTER 1

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER THE INCIDENT

Lyla Richards crouched down, her head tilted to the side as she strained to listen. Her dark brown ponytail swung over her shoulder with the movement. She narrowed her blue eyes. The forest around her had gone silent. But she had heard something this way.

"What is it? What do you hear?" whispered Jamal Nguyen, one of her closest friends and fellow Phoenix as he crouched next to her. At twenty-four, Jamal was one year older than Lyla, but he deferred to her.

Since joining the Phoenixes at age seventeen, Lyla had quickly established herself as a top-rate fighter, hunter, and tracker with almost supernatural skills. She gave him a disgruntled look. "A very loud man talking to me and drowning out any other noise."

Jamal cringed and shrugged. *Sorry*, he mouthed.

She shook her head. She and Jamal had been on guard duty at the northern end of the camp for hours. This part of the camp opened out into dense woods. There was thick underbrush and the trees had grown closer together, making it difficult to see anything creeping up on you until it was too late, which was why you needed to listen as well as watch.

It had been quiet. But she'd heard a shuffling noise, which she'd

been trying to pinpoint just now. It wasn't an animal. It was larger, although she supposed it could be a bear. She gestured for Jamal to stay where he was as she crept around the trees to her right, staying low to the ground, using the trees and brush for cover. Her olive-green cloak blended in with the lush woods around her.

She passed through the trees and then paused. There. She turned to her left, crouching low behind a dwarf Alberta spruce.

A huff sounded from ten feet to her left and she recognized the sound—human. She pulled out her staff and moved forward silently, her senses on high alert. She thought there was only one in the immediate vicinity, but that didn't mean he didn't have a friend or two nearby.

Seconds later, a man stumbled into view only ten feet away. His sweat-stained clothes were shredded and he wore only one shoe. Dirt marked his face, and hair sprung from his head like it was trying to escape. He mumbled to himself as he walked. "Monsters. They're coming. They'll get me." He let out a cry and sank to his knees, tears rolling down his cheeks. "They got Shelly. I'm sorry, Shelly. I'm sorry!" he wailed.

A branch snapped and the man whirled around, nearly losing his balance as he lurched to his feet.

She watched him from her hiding spot, trying to determine the best approach. Was he deranged or sick? Either way, they couldn't risk bringing him into the camp. *I'll send Jamal for—*

"You okay there?" Jamal asked as he stepped into view.

Damn it, Jamal.

The man's eyes grew big and he let out a shriek as he flew at Jamal. "You have to run. They'll get you, too. Their ships—the skies are theirs. They'll kill us all." The man grabbed Jamal's shirt with both hands. "You have to go. They're coming!"

Jamal stumbled back, but the man held on. Lyla burst from her spot. "Let him go."

But the man didn't seem to hear her. He pulled a knife from under his shirt. "They came from the sky. They're monsters. They'll kill you. You should die before they can."

"No!" Lyla slammed her staff into the man's arm and he screamed

and dropped the knife. She swung the staff up and snapped it into the back of the man's head. Jamal caught him as he dropped, lowering him to the ground.

"What the hell was he talking about?" Jamal asked.

Lyla didn't look at Jamal. She scanned the area around them for anyone who might be with the man. "I don't know."

"Should we bring him back to camp?"

Lyla shook her head. "No. Get Simon and Frank. He's not going anywhere until Simon looks him over."

Simon Tolliver took off his glasses and wiped them on his shirt. "It's rabies. Advanced. He doesn't have much longer."

Lyla's stomach clenched at the pronouncement. Even if he had been in the beginning stages of the infection, rabies was a death sentence. Maybe in the Before they could have done something, but now, now there was no hope.

"Did he say anything else?" Frank Raffe, the head of the camp, stood with his arms crossed over his muscular chest. His deep, commanding voice was that of a man responsible for the lives of nearly two hundred people. White hair and lines in his face were testaments to the seriousness with which he'd taken the job for the last three decades.

"He mumbled something about ships and monsters. I couldn't really make it out," Simon said.

"Anything that can be done for him?" Frank asked.

"No. I could give him some meds to make his last few hours comfortable, but we're running low as is."

"Understood." Frank looked over at Jamal, who stood guard over the man. They had carried the man into a cave that was a few hundred yards from camp. Now they all stood at the entrance of the cave, the man on a stretcher farther in, a blanket covering him. "Jamal, escort Simon back to the camp to grab some meds. We'll give him a little, but it might be more humane to just put him out of his misery."

Jamal nodded to the man. "What about him?"

Frank's voice rang with authority. "He's *not* coming into the camp. We don't need people worrying about what's out here. There's enough tension because of the move. We'll keep him here until it's over."

Lyla said nothing as Jamal and Simon headed back to camp.

Frank glanced her way. "You're awfully quiet. Does that mean you agree?"

Lyla looked up at Frank. He'd been their camp leader for years, but she'd known him her whole life. He'd been her father's best friend. And when her father passed, he'd unofficially stepped into that role. "I don't disagree with any of it. But I hate that these are the choices we have before us."

"This world is not an easy one."

The man tossed and turned. Sweat rolled down his face as he mumbled. "They're coming. Run, Shelly. Don't let them get you."

"What do you think he means?" Lyla asked. "He said there were ships in the air. People from the sky."

"He's hallucinating. You know that technology no longer exists."

True. At one point, planes, cars, and computers were so much a part of everyday life that people didn't even think of how remarkable they were. But ever since the asteroid, the world had changed. It was nothing like the Before. There were no governments. People banded together, creating camps, trying to eke out a living and defend against other camps. And Mother Nature.

Lyla wasn't sure who was the bigger threat. They'd had to fight more than one group trying to steal their resources. But Mother Nature —there was nothing they could do to stop her. Swarms of tornados and waves of earthquakes decimated areas. Torrential rains could appear from a blue sky and wipe out a valley without notice. The asteroid had killed most of the world's population and now the aftereffects seemed to be trying to finish the job.

"The ships are coming! Run!" the man yelled, struggling to sit up, but the yell proved too exhausting. Tears rolled down his cheeks again. "Shelly."

The man's pain was difficult to watch, and Lyla couldn't help but wonder who Shelly was. Was she a figment of his imagination, too?

"Your shift's up. Why don't you—"

"No," Lyla said quickly. "I'll stay."

Frank narrowed his eyes, searching her face. "You took a double shift already."

"Yes. But we both know that this needs to be kept quiet. No more people should be let into the loop than need to be. Just do me a favor and stop by and let Muriel and Riley know, okay?"

Lyla knew Frank wanted to argue with her. But he also knew she was right. Finally, he nodded. "Very well. I'll send Jamal back with some food, all right?"

Lyla was not looking forward to the night ahead, but she nodded. "Great."

Frank headed back to camp and Lyla settled down by the front of the cave, her back against the wall.

"They're coming. You need to run." The man's voice was soft, but the words were desperate and sent a chill up Lyla's spine. *It's just his imagination,* she reminded herself again and again as he rambled through the long night. Finally, as dawn broke, the man went silent and he found peace.

And Lyla wondered why his hallucinations had taken the shape they had. *Why ships? Why monsters?* She looked at the man one last time as she pulled the sheet over him, preparing him for burial.

What did you see out there that made you hallucinate something so impossible?

CHAPTER 2

TWO DAYS LATER

Twelve-year-old Riley Quinn hurried down the path of tents toward the one he shared with his mom and his aunt Lyla. He ducked through two tents side by side. "Come on, Dave," he called, looking over his shoulder at his friend, who followed him.

Dave grimaced, his limp a little more pronounced than when they'd started out. "I'm coming."

Riley slowed. *Shoot*. He always forgot about Dave's leg. Normally the limp was barely noticeable. It was only when he ran that it became truly obvious. Dave had broken his leg when he was around five, and it hadn't set correctly. Back then, the camp hadn't had a doctor and no one even realized it was broken. They thought he'd just banged it up good. By the time they realized what had happened, the damage was done.

Riley glanced past the last row of tents toward the barn. The camp was spread out over an acre on the edge of a long lake. The tents were at the western part with the crops to the east, nearer to the lake. It was a freshwater lake, meaning it worked for watering. A fifteen-foot wooden fence surrounded the crops, with only one entrance. The barn was north of the tents. But that wasn't their destination. They were

heading past it to the training yards to watch the Phoenixes, the camp's security force.

David hurried to stand next to Riley. "Why did Mr. Tolliver have to keep us so long today?"

Riley shrugged. "You know Mr. Tolliver. He gets into certain subjects." Mr. Tolliver, the camp doctor, was also their schoolteacher. And he did have a habit of going off a planned subject if he got distracted by something else. Riley wondered if he'd ever pick up on the fact that kids sometimes introduced those subjects just to get him focused on something else.

Today, it had been ancient Egypt. And Riley had to admit, he loved when Mr. Tolliver took them with him into the ancient past, back before the asteroid, when the world had created incredible things. Ancient Egypt held a special interest for Riley. Pharaohs, the pyramids, the Great Sphinx—he couldn't get enough of it.

He dreamed of one day going to see it all with his own eyes. But he knew that was just a dream. No one crossed the ocean anymore. Besides, who knew if Egypt even still existed? The Great Pyramid was right next to the Nile River. It was probably underwater. So much land was now underwater that Mr. Tolliver couldn't even show them an official map of the world. He'd crossed out a lot of places he knew were underwater from reports before all the electricity and worldwide communications systems went out.

"Did you hear what Mr. Tolliver said about electronic libraries? A machine with thousands of books in it, but it could fit in your hand. Can you imagine?"

Riley shook his head. "No, I can't." And he really couldn't. Whenever anyone talked of the Before, it all seemed so incredible. Cars that could transport people miles in minutes, planes that flew through the air, even machines that made food.

"Man, I would give anything to see that." David grinned at him and then his eyes lit up. He nodded down the road. "They're coming."

Riley looked to where David motioned and saw them—the Phoenixes. Mr. Tolliver explained that the Phoenixes had been named so because they stepped out of the ashes of the destruction to help people survive.

He and David ran to the edge of the path and stopped as the group of warriors marched past. They were in charge of protecting the camp's residents—everything from humans to animals. Each had a brown or green cloak that helped them blend into the trees. Each had a sword strapped to their side, and each carried a tall staff. They trained every day without fail, and there were always a handful patrolling the perimeter of the camp.

Each soldier was tough as nails and ferocious in a fight. Jamal and Addie Hudson, Lyla's closest friends, went by, giving both boys a grin.

Riley stood on his toes, trying to see through the group. He grinned when he caught sight of his aunt and nudged David. "There she is." Lyla stood in the middle, dwarfed by the Phoenixes around her.

At twenty-three, she was one of the youngest and looked it. She was the smallest warrior by far. But Riley had seen her take down everybody she'd ever gone against. She was fearless and respected by every single Phoenix. Even the older Phoenixes asked her for help. And Riley knew one day she'd be in charge of all of them.

Lyla caught sight of Riley and gave him a smile.

He waved. "Have you started your training yet?" he yelled. "Can we watch?"

A few of the warriors grinned at his yell.

She said something to the man next to her before jogging over to Riley. She reached out and ruffled his hair. "We haven't started yet. Weren't you supposed to go help your mom get ready for the move?"

Riley groaned. "We have two whole days."

"Two days is not a lot of time to get things done. We're even cutting our training time down so we can get the camp ready. It's going to take *all* of us"—she looked at each of them—"to make this move happen."

"Sorry, Lyla," David murmured.

Lyla looked over her shoulder at the Phoenixes as they disappeared behind the barn, then turned back to the boys. "Tell you what, if you guys get done what you need to get done, you can come watch."

Riley grinned, opening his mouth to thank her.

Lyla put up a hand. "But then you will help us get the camp ready."

Riley and David were already nodding before Lyla finished speaking.

She smiled. "All right. Go. I'll see you in a little bit."

CHAPTER 3

Lyla caught up with the Phoenixes as they entered the training area. The 'training area' was really just an open piece of ground between the barn and some of the wooden cabins. Otto Swingler glanced back at her and then waited until she caught up, falling in step with her. He leaned down, way down, and whispered, "Can we meet up tomorrow morning?"

"Yeah. By the old oak."

He nodded.

"See you then." Otto hurried toward the rest of the group.

Addie caught the exchange with a raised eyebrow. She grinned, the sunlight shining off her dark skin. Lyla knew Addie thought something was going on between her and Otto, but Lyla was pretty sure his tastes did not run in her direction. No, Lyla was helping Otto with his fighting skills. He was easily a foot taller than any member of the camp and built of solid muscle, which made him a target whenever they got into skirmishes with other groups. Most people figured they should take out the big guy first.

With Otto, that was relatively easy to do. He had no feel for fighting. He needed to know exactly what he should do in each situation to respond. He couldn't make it up on the spot. But the bigger problem was that his heart wasn't in it. Otto's size was impressive, but he was a gentle giant. Lyla could only get him to fight by reminding him he was

protecting other people. It was why it was so difficult to train him—he never went full out or even close to full out during training. He was too worried about hurting someone.

Lyla had spoken with Frank about it. But Frank knew that just the sight of Otto could be a deterrent, so he asked Lyla to work on getting his fighting skills up. Lyla had been working with him, but she hadn't really seen any improvement.

She caught the gaze of the head of the Phoenixes, who stood in the middle of the training yard, his legs braced. Allan Carter looked at her and then looked away. Allan was another big guy, but he liked to fight, maybe a little too much, in Lyla's opinion. Allan had made it clear that he viewed being in charge of security as a stepping stone to camp leader. And the fact that Frank had made clear his preference for Lyla taking over one day had not helped improve Allan's opinion of her. It also didn't help that his ego always seemed to need feeding.

But as much as he would like her out of his way, Lyla wasn't really worried about Allan. After all, she knew she was good, and so did everybody else, including Allan. So while Allan may dislike her, when push came to shove, she was the first one he called up when he needed someone at his back.

Allan waved everyone toward the stable and Lyla frowned as they all headed that way. Addie and Jamal bookended Lyla as they headed in.

"What's this all about?" Lyla asked.

"It's probably about the ship from yesterday," Addie whispered.

Lyla stopped still, meeting Jamal's gaze, the words from a dead man ringing through her head. "What?"

"Oh, right, you two were out on patrol," Addie said. "Saul was out gathering herbs for the kitchen when he claimed some sort of ship flew overhead. It was probably a big bird. Saul's not exactly comfortable in the woods."

"I'm sure that's it," Jamal said quickly, flicking his eyes to Lyla and away again. Lyla could hear the nervousness in his voice.

A second person claiming to see a ship? What was going on?

Addie scoffed, oblivious to the tension in both Lyla and Jamal.

"Please, there have been no ships in the air since the asteroid. I think Saul was drinking."

"He doesn't drink," Lyla said.

"Well, then it was a big bird. I mean, what else could it be?" Addie asked.

The eighteen Phoenixes were spread out across the space, leaning against walls, sitting on bales of hay, all facing Allan, who stood in the hay between the stalls. Lyla, Addie, and Jamal quickly sat on some bales near Otto. There were thirty-six Phoenixes in total, but the rest were on guard duty. Frank had doubled the guard. Lyla thought it was in response to the rabies scare, but now she wondered if there was an additional worry occupying Frank's thoughts.

Allan gestured for quiet, and all the murmurs stopped. "We've had reports that the Tanners lost most of their crops to an earthquake swarm."

"Oh no," Addie murmured next to her. Lyla felt the same despair at the thought.

Allan put up a hand for quiet. "We will aid them if we can, but we will also need to make sure our own food stores are protected."

Allan wasn't talking about protecting them from the swarms. They all knew that was impossible. When Mother Nature struck, all you could do was sit back and wait until she was done. No, Allan meant we might need to protect our food from the Tanners. We traded with them and occasionally shared news. But when hunger hit a camp, there was no telling what people would do. They'd had other camps attack them in the past after a crop devastation. It was the reason the crops had a fifteen-foot wall surrounding them.

"What about refugees?" called out Montell, a tall African-American Phoenix a few years older than Lyla.

"If they make it down to the new camp, we'll take in anyone willing to work, the same as always." Allan looked around, making eye contact with most of the Phoenixes. "We'll need extra guards on the food supplies as we head south. I expect you'll all volunteer?"

Everyone nodded back at him. Food was life. It was that simple. But this year it would be even more important. An advance group had gone down ahead to begin setting up the camp, but it was new land.

There were no guarantees the crops would take right away. They might need to make this year's yield stretch.

Allan paused. "Now, there is another issue which you no doubt have heard about. Saul claims to have seen a ship in the sky. Frank sent out some runners yesterday in that direction. They reported no further sightings. However, we are going to keep extra guards on duty for a while as a precaution. In addition, the silence rule applies. No one in the camp is to know about the sighting. Right now, it looks like Saul was mistaken, and there's no point having everyone jumping at shadows for no good reason."

"Are we going to send anyone toward the coast? Saul said the ship was heading in that direction," Shane Summers called out.

"Frank and I have discussed it. And we will be looking for volunteers. Until then, we need to discuss the new guard schedule. I'm afraid you guys aren't going to like it too much."

Lyla tuned him out, turning her head toward the front gate with a frown. What was that? There was a strange noise under the normal sounds of the camp.

"I'm sorry, Lyla, are we boring you?" Allan asked.

Addie nudged her shoulder.

Lyla stood, the hair on the back of her neck rising. "Something's wrong."

Allan might not like Lyla, but he trusted her instincts and was immediately on alert. "Where?"

"Front gate."

He pointed to a group of Phoenixes to his right. "You six, front gate. The rest of you span out."

Lyla moved at a jog along with the rest of the Phoenixes, trying to figure out what exactly was on her radar. But she couldn't pin it down. She just knew something was wrong.

A whistling sound came from overhead as a ball of light skimmed through the sky.

Lyla whirled around. "No!"

The ball of light slammed into the stable. Lyla was flung into the air before being slammed onto her back as shards of wood pierced the air.

Her head ringing, Lyla rolled to her feet, pulling her staff from

behind her back. Lyla stumbled forward to where Allan lay. "Allan, are you—" He stared straight ahead, a gaping wound in his neck and chest, his right arm gone.

Lyla looked across Allan's body and saw more Phoenixes down, at least five by her count. Screams sounded behind her, followed by that strange noise, but this time it was louder and closer.

Then the first one stepped into view. Lyla blinked, thinking she'd hit her head too hard in the fall. The creature was at least eight feet tall in a dark suit, a helmet covering its face.

It leveled a weapon at Lyla. Without hesitation, she rolled, and a ray of light burst from the staff. It engulfed Allan in blue light for only a second before reducing his body to ash.

CHAPTER 4

Riley and David were headed away from the stables with the intent of going straight home. But then they'd started messing around with one of the moves Lyla had shown them to disarm someone. As Riley landed in the dust at David's feet, he grinned up at him. "That was awesome."

David stepped back with a grin. "Yeah." He glanced back toward the stables. "We better go check with our moms or we'll never get to see the training."

Riley rolled to his feet, wiping his dusty hands on his pants. "Hey, maybe they'll let us practice with them."

David's eyes lit up. "Yeah. I'll go get my sword." David's sword was really just a stick. Each of the kids had one. They trained three times a week with them.

"Five minutes," Riley called over his shoulder as he took off on a run to get his own and beg his mom to let him watch the training.

Riley ran down the path, dodging other people who were carting vegetables and lugging bags. He swerved around a group who were setting up the tables for dinner. Most gave him a smile as he passed. He turned down the row of tents that bordered the back of the camp. Stopping at the fourth to the last one, he peeked in, hoping his mom was out.

His mother raised an eyebrow at him. "Yes?"

His mom looked just like Lyla, with the same blue eyes and the same pale skin, though she usually wore her dark brown hair down.

Shoot. "Um, can I go watch the Phoenixes train?"

She smiled but shook her head. "You know we need to pack up. There's a lot to do."

Riley kicked at the ground, but he'd known she was going to say that. The camp had gotten too big to survive another cold winter. Riley still remembered how hungry he'd been most of the last one. And he didn't like to think of the people who hadn't made it. Now that all the crops were in, they were to begin their migration south.

His mother sat on her cot and waved him over. He dragged his feet on his way to her. Once in reach, she pulled him down next to her, wrapping her arms around him. He leaned into her. He was probably getting too old for her to do that, at least in public. But in private, he was okay with it.

She placed a kiss on his forehead and squeezed him tight. "Tell you what. You get all of your clothes and books in your pack and then you can go play with David for a little while."

He grinned up at her. "Thanks, Mom."

She ruffled his hair as she let him go. Then she stood up, looking around, her hands on her hips. "Okay. Let's see. I need—"

A loud noise rang out and the ground trembled. A gale force wind slammed into the tent as his mom threw herself over him. "Riley!"

CHAPTER 5

Shock robbed Lyla of movement for a moment, but as soon as two more beings appeared behind the one who had annihilated Allan, she was all action. She swung up to her feet and dodged to her right as the being aimed at her.

And the whole time, she assessed. *Strong, tall*. *Need to get him off balance*. She slipped in at it from the side, slamming her staff into the side of its knee. It wobbled. Sliding her knife from its sheath, she plunged it toward its ribs.

And it broke. *Oh my God*.

The being grabbed her by the throat and lifted her up. She kicked up, catching it in the groin. It loosened its grip slightly. She kicked off its chest with both feet and threw herself backward, landing on her back. Rolling to her side, she kicked at the side of one of its knees and then the other. A shadow passed over her and her head jerked up as another took aim.

Without thought, she rolled between the creature's legs, keeping it between her and the other one. She stomped on the back of its knees and it crashed to the ground. Then she slammed her foot into the back of its head. It pitched forward. The second one, unable to get a shot, raced toward her.

Lyla tensed, ready to face it, when a blur of motion sped in from the left and Otto tackled the being to the ground. Lyla rushed forward as

the being caught Otto in the chin with its staff. For a moment, the thing raised its chin, revealing its neck. Lyla slammed her staff into the opening and the thing convulsed. Otto rolled off of it.

In the distance, she could hear that horrible blasting noise repeating over and over. And she knew with each sound that someone was reduced to ash.

"Otto, go. Evacuate the camp. Now!"

Otto stumbled to his feet, looking dazed. She pushed him away from the creature as it started to get to its feet. She wasted no time. Her staff crashed into one side of its head, twirling back to hit the other. She brought the end of the staff toward its neck, but it dropped its chin and the staff slammed into the helmet instead, jarring her painfully.

I can't hit them. I can't hurt them.

She swept the staff toward its knees, but it met her with its own staff. *Don't let it get a shot.* She attacked and it blocked every move. Now it was on the attack, pushing her back. She defended, knowing she needed to get control of this fight or she was done for.

She backpedaled and then feinted to the right before shifting left and catching it in the knee. She slipped behind it, slamming her staff into the back of its legs, causing it to stumble forward. But it whipped around. She dove to the ground to avoid the staff swinging at her head. She slammed her heel into its right knee and then into the front of its left. Wrapping her left foot around its ankle, anchoring it in place, she kicked at its knee with her right.

Windmilling its arms, it toppled to its side. She lunged forward, her staff raised, but a blast sent her stumbling back. Her head whipped to the side and another creature, this one even larger, approached, its staff sending out bursts.

Lyla sprinted toward the trees, shifting direction to avoid getting hit, but some blasts came way too close. She didn't slow down as she hit the trees and circled to the left. They weren't defending the camp anymore. The camp was done. They needed to get out. And she needed to find Muriel and Riley. But guilt, strong and deep, accompanied her.

We should have listened. We should have warned everybody.

CHAPTER 6

Riley lay still as the ground tremors stopped. The back half of the tent had collapsed around them.

His mom groaned, pushing the tarp away from them. "Riley? You okay?"

Riley blinked hard, his head ringing. He spit dirt out of his mouth and pushed his hands against the ground, still on his knees. "What was that?"

His mother wrapped her hand around his arm and pulled him up without a word. Fear flashed across her face and a trickle of blood dribbled down from a cut on her forehead.

"You're hurt."

His mom swiped at the blood and then kicked back the tarp. She pulled him toward the tent's entrance. Outside, people screamed and some sprinted past the tent toward the camp center. In the sky, a cloud of smoke drifted upward from the north side of camp.

Riley's heart began to pound. "Mom?"

"You stay right by my side, okay?" she ordered, a tremor in her voice. She grabbed her scabbard from her cot, looping it over her shoulder. Riley stared at her. She rarely ever carried her sword.

"Mom?" he asked again, fear spreading through him.

She grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze. Her bright eyes stared

into his. "It will be okay. Just stay with me. You do not leave my side, do you understand?"

He nodded before his head jerked toward the center of camp. Louder screams echoed from the camp along with a blasting noise. "What's that noise?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, honey."

He peeked around her. More blasts sounded from the center of town now. People ran past their tent. He saw Thad Williams run by, his arm bloodied. And he could see more people running in the distance.

He pictured the people in the middle of the camp. That's where the school was. He'd run past over two dozen people on his way home. Had they escaped? And then his stomach clenched.

The Phoenixes had been there, too. He grabbed his mom's arm. "Mom. Lyla. She was there. She was training."

His mom patted his hand, but he could see the tremble in it. "Don't worry about your aunt. She'll be fine, and she'll come find us. We need to run now, okay?"

She didn't give him a chance to argue. She just grabbed his hand and pulled him away from the center of camp, toward the trees. Riley sprinted next to her, but his mind kept going back to the picture of his aunt with the rest of the Phoenixes. What was happening? Were they all right?

That strange noise sounded behind him again. What *was* that?

A man jostled into him in his haste. Riley nearly went down, but his mom kept him upright.

They were almost at the end of the row of tents when his mom yanked him to a stop, pulling him behind her.

"Mom, what are you—" The words died in Riley's throat as he looked beyond her.

Ahead of them stood a man. No, that wasn't right. The thing was over eight feet tall, wearing a skintight suit of dark blue fabric, a matching helmet covering its face. In its hands, it held a long brown staff with a white bulge at the end.

A man next to them ran to the right, trying to get around the thing. The being turned and a bolt of energy escaped its staff. The man

exploded, disappearing in a blink of blue light. All that remained was a pile of ash.

Riley could feel his mom shaking. She reached back and touched his arm. "I love you, Riley."

The being raised its staff and pointed it at them.

CHAPTER 7

Riley felt the breath leave his lungs as the being leveled its weapon on them. Then a dark figure darted from the forest behind it. Riley's heart clenched. *Lyla.*

Lyla swung her staff at the side of the being's legs. It stumbled back, trying to regain its balance. She hit it under the chin with her staff. It flew off its feet, landing with a thud that made the ground shake.

Another swing and her staff landed on the being's throat. Lyla kept all her attention on the creature at the end of her staff. "Run, Muriel, run!"

His mom grabbed Riley's arm and yanked him into the trees. A blast hit a tree next to him, leaving a scorch mark on the base.

Riley glanced behind him. Another being was sprinting toward them. It fired at Lyla, but she twirled out of the way.

Two more Phoenixes appeared between the tents. One had the beings' weapon. It fired. The being didn't turn to ash, but it did stop, clutching its side.

"Look out, Riley!" his mom yelled as they went over a rise and down a steep hill.

Riley's hands flew in front of him. He slid down a few feet, trying to keep his balance. But he was moving too fast. He tripped over a rock jutting out from the ground and landed hard on his side. His

momentum kept him moving forward. He rolled, bouncing down the hill. Each time he hit the ground he let out a grunt. And it seemed like every time he touched the ground, he managed to slam into a rock or branch hidden in the leaves.

At the bottom, he rolled to a stop, his back resting against a tree, his body feeling like one giant bruise. His breathing came out in ragged pants and he couldn't seem to stop shaking. That thing had tried to kill them. And Lyla was still back at camp with God knew how many of them.

And for the first time, he feared that Lyla was going up against an opponent she couldn't beat. And if she couldn't beat them, then who could?

His mom skidded to a halt next to him, branches and leaves stuck to her hair and clothes. Scratches and smudges of dirt ran along her cheeks, but she seemed oblivious to her own cuts, too focused on him. She ran her hands over him, checking for any injuries.

"Are you okay?" she asked, even as she pulled him to his feet. She shot a glance back up the hill where the blasting noises continued to ring out. "We have to keep going. Can you?"

He barely had a chance to nod before she grabbed his hand and pulled him away. Riley ran with his hand in his mom's, and with each tree he passed he expected one of those things to step out. His breathing turned choppy, and it was only fear that kept his legs churning.

When the trees grew too dense for them to run side by side, his mom took the lead. She never hesitated, she just kept moving. He followed her as they moved over downed trees, pushed through brush, dashed through creeks and streams. Even as her breathing became labored, she didn't stop. She silently pushed him on, urging him to keep moving every time he thought about stopping. But it wasn't just his mom's determination that made his feet move. It was the memory of that being etched into his brain. If it caught them, they were dead. So every time Riley wanted to quit, he made himself run faster.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, his mom pulled him to a stop at the edge of a stream. Riley bent at the waist, trying to catch his breath.

She stood panting beside him, taking in huge lungfuls of air as she scanned the forest behind them and looked up and down the stream, holding on to the trunk of a maple tree for support. She turned to look at him, her cheeks red but the rest of her face abnormally pale. "We're going to get some water, but we need to be quick. Okay?"

He nodded, his heart still racing, and suddenly he became aware of how dry his mouth was. His mom pulled her sword and scanned the riverbank again before nodding. Riley walked next to her, scanning as well.

They reached the water's edge. She continued her vigilance, her gaze continually surveying the area around them. "Go ahead. Get some water."

He dropped to his knees, plunging his hands into the icy water, and pulling cupped handfuls to his mouth as fast as he could manage.

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Not so fast. But hurry, we can't stop for long. We need to keep moving."

He slowed his drinking, knowing she was right and that drinking too quickly would only give him a stitch.

Riley stood up and she leaned down to drink. A shadow moved by a tree. Riley's heart rate doubled. He stumbled back. "Mom!"

In one graceful move, she pulled Riley behind her, the sword extended in front of her.

"Just me," Lyla said, stepping from the trees.

His mother let out a cry and ran the short distance to his aunt. She pulled Lyla into a hug. Riley wanted to do the same, but he held himself back. But he did let himself smile. Lyla was okay. She'd found them. It would be all right now.

His mother pulled back, studying Lyla's face. "Are you all right?"

Riley could see the cuts along his aunt's face and palms, the bruise on her cheek. There were holes in her cloak and it was singed around the edges. He swallowed. She had just missed being hit by those things.

But Lyla nodded, giving them both a small smile. "I'm okay."

"The camp?" his mother asked.

Lyla shook her head. "Scattered. And those that didn't scatter …" Her words died away.

There was a catch in his mother's voice. "How many?"

Lyla's gaze shifted away. "Hard to say. But we lost a lot. Any survivors are grouping at the Old Mill tomorrow morning, then heading south."

"What were those things?" his mom asked.

Lyla's eyes were troubled. "I don't know. But they're hard to take down—really hard."

The enormity of what had just happened hit him. They had been attacked. The camp was gone. Riley felt light-headed, and he swayed a little bit, his throat feeling tight. "David," he said. "What happened to David?"

Lyla darted a glance at his mother before walking over to Riley. Putting her hands on his shoulders, she looked into his eyes. "I'm sorry, Riley. He's gone."

Riley stared at her, not really comprehending her words. His vision became fuzzy at the edges. He backed away from her. Why would she say that? David couldn't be gone. It wasn't possible. "But … he can't be. He's my best friend. He's not gone."

Lyla took his arms again, not letting him retreat any further. She kept her gaze steady as it met his. "I'm sorry, honey. I saw him. He's gone."

He shoved at his aunt. "But why? Why would they kill him? He never hurt anybody. He never—" His words choked off, the tears in his throat making it impossible to talk. "You're wrong. He's not dead."

Lyla didn't move with his shove. She looked into his eyes again. "Riley, he is. And if you want to be mad at someone, be mad at those things. They're the ones that did this to him, to our home."

Riley's knees went weak at her words. David was dead. It wasn't fair. He was small for his age, and he never hurt anybody. His chest heaved. He stared at his aunt, feeling the tears roll down his cheeks. "Why David?" He threw his arms around her neck and sobbed. "Why? Why him?"

Lyla wrapped her arms around him and rocked him. "I don't know, but I *will* find out."

CHAPTER 8

Lyla sat on a rock just inside the cave, her eyes peeled to the forest for any sound, any movement, even as she fought off her exhaustion. She had led Riley and Muriel through the forest, keeping a grueling pace for hours. She needed to get them far enough away from the camp that they wouldn't be followed but also get them close enough to Old Mill that they would be able to meet up with everybody.

And with every step she took, she thought of the people they had lost. She pictured Allan, his eyes staring out at nothing. She heard the screams again and again and felt powerless again and again.

Addie and Jamal had been heading in the direction of the front gate just before the attack. They'd headed straight for them. *Damn it.* She closed her eyes, trying to get control of her emotions. She'd managed to avoid thinking about them all day. But now with the world quiet, there was nothing to distract her from her fears.

You don't know that they were killed. They could have survived. They have *to have survived.* She raised her head, staring into the star-filled sky, taking a deep breath. She willed back the tears that wanted to fall. There was no time for grief right now. Grief was a luxury of the safe. And they were not safe. Not yet.

Lyla glanced back into the cave. Muriel sat up against the back wall. Riley was curled into her side. Lyla had called a halt about an

hour ago. She had wanted to keep going, but neither Muriel nor Riley were ready for this kind of hike. They needed to stop.

Lyla had found the cave. It was the best they could do for cover. It was more of an outcropping than a full cave, but it would at least keep them covered for the night.

Lyla had covered the opening with tall branches. Now it would be almost impossible to find the entrance unless you already knew it was there.

Her gaze roamed over Riley and Muriel, feeling that protectiveness for them that she had felt for as long as she could remember. She had been terrified today when those things attacked. Not just because of how hard it was to take them down, but because when that explosion went off, she hadn't known where Riley and Muriel were. She'd been terrified that Riley had doubled back to watch them train. When Riley was born, Lyla had been amazed at how such a tiny little boy could make her smile with one little look. And that joy at his presence in her life had only grown over the years.

There were only eleven years between them, and he'd become, in her mind, a little brother. Which meant it was her job to protect him. Ever since she was little, she'd felt a driving need to protect, even with Muriel, who was the older sister by six years. But for as long as both of them could remember, Lyla was the one to step in front of Muriel, keeping the danger from reaching her—because the idea of someone hurting her family was too unbearable for Lyla to face.

The world they lived in was hard. Strangers could bring death by weapons or disease. A simple cut left untreated could become infected and quickly be beyond the scope of their limited medical skills. Storms cropped up out of nowhere, sometimes bringing swarms of tornados or earthquakes, sometimes both. Three years ago, a tornado swarm destroyed the crops just before harvest.

That had been a cold, hard winter. They made it through because they had each other. She knew that. Lyla spent that winter hunting for every small piece of game she could find and bringing it back to feed the camp. She still remembered how cold she'd felt, her toes and fingers going numb. But she'd pushed on, knowing lives depended on her, knowing the two lives of her little family depended on her.

Lyla looked back at her sister, who ran a hand through Riley's hair. Muriel was the softness in this cold world. If Lyla was the fist, then Muriel was the heart. And the fist wasn't much use if the heart stopped beating.

Lyla pulled her gaze away, not liking where her thoughts were heading. *They're alive. Focus on that.* But the fear wouldn't leave her.

She had been a warrior for the group for seven years, fully initiated when she was eighteen. But so far that had meant fighting off humans and animals. In all of those fights—and there had been many—she had never been as terrified as she was today. She couldn't kill those things. All she'd been able to do was throw them off balance, allowing people a chance to escape.

Lyla studied the forest floor below. It was quiet, but not too quiet. Every once in a while an animal would dart out. But their occasional appearance did nothing to distract her mind. Ever since those things attacked the camp, one single question flashed continually through her mind: *What are they?*

The shortest one she saw had been at least seven feet tall. The tallest was close to ten. And they were incredibly strong. *And we cannot get through their suits.*

There had been no warning of their approach, despite the guards that always surrounded the camp. No warning except the ravings of a man on the edge of death. And Saul, who said he'd seen a ship flying overhead the day before. They must have been doing reconnaissance on the camp.

Lyla closed her eyes. She had no doubt those perimeter guards had been the first to die today. And despite all their training, it had been done silently and efficiently. *Might as well have had no guard for all the good it did.* One minute everything was normal and the next, all hell had broken loose. The first blast had taken out five Phoenixes and the ones left were barely able to defend themselves, never mind the camp.

All their precautions to keep the camp safe had proven worthless. The fighting skills that worked against humans and animals had failed spectacularly today. But how did you prepare to fight an enemy you never knew existed?

At the snap of a branch, she whipped her head to the right as a

small deer wandered out. It found of patch of grass it liked and contented itself with eating. Lyla relaxed, knowing the deer wouldn't be standing there so calmly if those things were nearby.

Above her, a full moon shone down. It was a beautiful sight, all bright and luminescent in the dark cloudless sky. Beautiful as it was, she wished it wasn't quite so bright. While it made it easier for her to see, it also made it easier for her to be seen.

She squinted and could just make out the face in the moon. Long ago, her father had told her that the man in the moon was real and that he watched over them. When she was a kid, whenever she was scared, she would look up at the Moon and remember her father's words.

Nothing can happen to you when the man in the moon is watching.

She smiled, but then the smile faded when she remembered finding his body four years ago. He had gone out hunting with Chris, Muriel's husband. It should have been fine. Spring was in full effect. But a snowstorm had sprung up out of nowhere. They had never returned.

When the snow stopped and they still hadn't returned, Lyla had gone looking and she'd found them both. She closed her eyes against the pain the memory still elicited.

She glanced back at the Moon, the memory of her father's words about the man in the moon no longer provided her comfort. She let out a sigh, pulling her legs up and wrapping her cloak tighter around her. How she wished she could believe her father's words now.

But now I think it may be the man in the moon we need to worry about.

Muriel joined her at the entrance of the cave, peering out into the dark night. "Anything?"

"All quiet." Lyla tilted her head toward the back of the cave. "How's he doing?"

Muriel sat next to her with a sigh. "He's asleep. The one good thing about all that running is that it tired him out. But today was rough."

Lyla nodded, not turning. "For all of us."

Silence descended as they both stared out. Lyla watched the deer. It finished its meal and wandered back into the trees.

"Lyla, what were those things today?"

Lyla glanced over at Muriel, whose eyes were full of fear. Lyla tried to keep that fear out of her own eyes. It had always been that way. Lyla

was the one who swallowed down her fear and kept a brave face, even when she was terrified. Her strength allowed Muriel to feel her fear and pass through it.

Today she pulled on all those old habits and shoved her fear away. But she couldn't help remembering plunging her knife into the being's chest. It would have been a killing blow if it had landed. Instead of a dead opponent, she'd been left with a shattered knife. Lyla liked to think that she could handle anything, face anything. But at that moment, she had been powerless. All her training, all her hard work, and she couldn't kill the thing.

Lyla strove to keep all emotion out of her voice and just report on what she knew, which wasn't much. "I don't know what they were. All I know is our swords can't cut through whatever armor they were wearing. The best we can do is knock them off balance."

"They can't be human, can they?"

Lyla paused before speaking. "I don't see how. I mean, occasionally you might see a tall human. But a group of them that are eight feet tall or taller?" Lyla shook her head. "No. They can't be human."

"So what does that mean? Robots? Aliens?"

Lyla thought of the things she had taken down. They had been warm, and although strong, they were soft, like skin. "I don't think they're robots. As for aliens …" She shrugged. "I just don't know."

Muriel went silent. Lyla pictured the fight back at the camp. They hadn't been able to fight the beings—not in any real sense. She'd seen seven of her Phoenixes get evaporated and countless others. She closed her eyes. *How are we going to defeat these things?*

The ash itself brought back horrible memories. It reminded her of the five years when ash had covered everything. Her father said a volcano must have erupted. Even when the ash stopped falling it took two more years for it to disappear entirely. It was in the water, the food, everywhere. Muriel, who'd been pregnant at the time, had been terrified that it would affect the baby. When Riley was born happy and healthy, they had all breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"Did you know anything about them?" Muriel asked.

Lyla looked up, guilt eating at her. She sighed. "Two nights ago

Jamal and I found a guy just outside the camp. He was sick, delirious. Simon thinks it was rabies."

Muriel gasped, her hand flying to her mouth.

And it was just that type of reaction that had led Frank to decide to not inform the rest of the camp about the man. Nothing terrified a group more than a disease with no cure. "He was ranting. We thought it was just the fever talking. He said they came in ships. He said they would kill us all. We thought he was hallucinating. And then yesterday Saul said he'd seen an airship. But it all just seemed impossible. That type of technology doesn't exist on this planet anymore." Lyla paused. "But it might exist on another one."

"Is that what you think they are?"

"Crazy as it may sound, it's also the most logical explanation." She sighed. "Damn it, we should have warned people. We should have—"

Muriel put her arm around Lyla's shoulders and squeezed. "You can't blame yourself. I mean, there have been days when getting a fire lit has proven almost impossible. So how could you believe a sick man ranting about flying ships? I mean, look at how we live. Some days it feels like we are one step removed from Neanderthals or cave dwellers." Muriel looked around, her voice dry. "Says the woman hiding with her family in a cave."

A small smile crossed Lyla's lips.

Muriel shook her head. "I'd settle for some electricity or an indoor toilet. But spaceships? They shouldn't exist here. Not unless someone brought them from somewhere off this planet. You couldn't have known."

"But someone had to have known about them. Maybe other groups saw them first. We can't be the first ones they attacked."

"You still couldn't have known. We don't have communication with any other groups, at least not regularly."

"But that's the problem," Lyla burst out. "If something happens, we don't learn about it until it's too late. We need to be working together with other groups, not isolated from them."

"But with the distance, it's too difficult to maintain that communication. I mean, if we had radios or computers like before the asteroid, it would be easy. That's assuming we could find people we could trust."

Lyla closed her eyes, picturing the last group of people they'd had trouble with. The men had barely been human. They'd had trophies of their kills around their necks. And they had decided their camp was their next target. It had been a bloody fight, but eventually Lyla and her people succeeded. But it reinforced why they needed to stay isolated.

Lyla sighed. "But we need to do better than this. We're barely surviving. It's not enough."

"Maybe we should join up with another group. Safety in numbers."

Lyla shook her head. "Not now, not with those things out there. That just means they'll find us sooner. Smaller is probably safer."

"But that will make basic survival that much more difficult."

Lyla nodded, feeling even more exhausted all of a sudden. She rested her head on her knees. "I know, I know. Damned if we do, damned if we don't."

Muriel pulled her into her shoulder.

Lyla sighed, letting herself lean on Muriel, both physically and otherwise, for just a little bit. "There has to be a better way to survive than this, though. And we have to figure it out. We're all living from day to day. I *have* to believe there's a better way."

"Even with the aliens?"

"Well, maybe not *with* them," Lyla said. "But maybe some group figured out a weakness. That would be something we all need to know. Right now, one group could figure it out, and we'd never know."

"Do you think they have a weakness?"

This time Lyla's voice was confident. This answer she was sure of. "*Everything* has a weakness."

Muriel took Lyla's hand and squeezed it.

Lyla looked up into her sister's eyes.

"I need you to promise me something," Muriel said.

Lyla didn't like the tone of her voice. "Okay."

"Whatever happens, you take care of Riley."

"Of course I'll take care of him."

"No." Muriel's eyes were intense. "You're a better fighter than me. If things go bad, you get Riley and run. You don't think about me."

Lyla yanked her hand away, shaking her head. "No. I'm not leaving you behind. We'll all get out."

"Lyla, you know as well as I do that if these things keep coming, you have a better chance of surviving than I do. Which means if Riley is with you, *he* has a better chance of surviving. You have to promise to take care of him. You can protect him better than I can."

Lyla wanted to argue with her. She wanted to tell her that it would be fine. That they *would* all get out of this. But that wasn't true. The strongest would survive. And she was stronger than Muriel. She gripped Muriel's hand. "If it comes to that, I'll protect him with my life. But it won't come to that."

Muriel studied Lyla's eyes for a moment before she reached up, pushed a stray hair off Lyla's forehead, and placed a kiss there. Then she leaned her head into Lyla's, just like she'd done since they were kids. "I love you, Lyla."

"I love you, too." Lyla let herself close her eyes for just a moment and enjoy the feel of her sister with her. Because she had a feeling—and she knew Muriel did, too—that this moment of comfort would be their last for a while.

CHAPTER 9

The dream faded as Riley blinked his eyes open. He reared back at first, seeing a figure leaning over him in the dark.

His mom's voice cut through the fear. "Riley."

He closed his eyes. Mom was here. It was all right.

But his mom just shook him again. "Riley, it's time to get up."

He groaned, his whole body feeling heavy.

"Riley, we need to go now."

Riley opened his eyes, the dim light in the cave enough to confuse him. *Where*— He stared at the rock ceiling and then his mom before the memories from yesterday rushed back to him all at once. He sat straight up, his pulse racing.

His mom put her arm around him. "Shh, honey, it's okay. You're safe. I'm here. Lyla's here."

Riley looked to where his aunt stood at the entrance of the cave, her staff in her arms, her sword strapped to her side, her cloak covering her. He felt better at the sight of her. She looked like she always did—strong, confident.

He remembered her taking down that thing from yesterday. She'd defeated it. His pulse calmed a little. As long as Lyla was around, they were safe. He pushed off the ground, his legs already tired. But he knew his mom was just as sore. He didn't ask about breakfast because he knew there would be none today. "I'm ready. Where are we going?"

"To meet everyone else," Lyla said.

But Riley heard the words that hadn't been said. *To meet everyone who is left.*

Lyla looked at him. "You ready?"

He nodded. "Let's go."

Lyla led the way. The Moon gave them enough light to see by, especially once his eyes got accustomed to it. Lyla moved like she had night vision. She never stumbled, never got caught on a bush. She moved soundlessly through the trees.

They walked in silence in the dark for an hour before dawn broke. The sky shifted from black to blue with angry slashes of pink. But they didn't stop as the sun rose higher in the sky. It felt like they'd been walking for hours before Lyla put up a hand for them to stop. They had not seen a soul, which wasn't unusual. But Riley had hoped they'd come across some people from camp. They'd just come over a rise, and Riley knew the Old Mill was just over the next one.

Instead of heading there, Lyla gestured toward a tall series of bushes. She slipped behind one and was completely hidden. Riley and his mom followed suit.

Lyla glanced over at them. "The mill is just ahead. I'm going to make sure everything is all right. You two stay here, out of sight. If you hear anything you don't like, you two get out of here and I will find you."

His mom pursed her lips together at Lyla's order but eventually nodded. Lyla squeezed his mom's arm and ruffled Riley's hair before she slipped away.

He watched the spot where his aunt disappeared. In his mind, he pictured her being ambushed by those things. He started to tremble and couldn't make himself stop.

His mother wrapped her arm around him, rubbing his arms. "She'll be fine. It'll be okay."

Riley hated when adults said things like that. They were empty words. There was nothing fine about any of this. Things were *not* going to be okay. But for now he let himself be lied to. And he let a small part of himself believe his mother was right.

Riley lay down, staring up at the sky as time dragged on. He

wanted to sleep, but he was too scared to even think about closing his eyes. He started counting, his fear for his aunt making it hard to stay silent. When he passed five thousand, he began to shake. "Something's wrong. We need to go find her."

His mom shook her head. "No. We stay here."

"But—"

Without warning, his aunt reappeared, and Riley felt relief flood him.

She smiled. "Everything looks okay. Let's go."

"How many people are there?" his mom asked.

"About twenty," Lyla replied.

"Only twenty?" His mom's eyes grew large, her face paling.

Lyla squeezed her arm. "Yeah. But that doesn't mean it's everybody. People were scattered. They could be being cautious. They know where we're heading. They could meet us down there."

She nodded, blowing out a little breath, a small tremor running through her.

"Now let's go. They're getting ready to move in a few minutes." Lyla started to jog. Riley stayed behind her with his mom, not liking how worried she looked. Ahead, he saw the Old Mill.

It had once been a lumber mill. The old saws inside were rusted over. Most had crashed to the ground. One wall had collapsed and the other three leaned precariously into one another. Trees had begun to reclaim the space, an oak growing in the middle of the building, its top branches reaching just below the ceiling.

Riley scanned the area but didn't see anyone. Where were they? His heart clenched. Had something happened?

His aunt turned to the left just before they reached the clearing around the building. Riley heard a dull murmur and his heart raced. People. There were people ahead.

Riley smiled just before a scream split the air.

CHAPTER 10

Lyla clamped onto Riley's arm as soon as the scream sounded and dragged him into the trees. Muriel was right behind them.

And then Lyla heard the blasting noise.

"Move," Lyla whispered furiously as soon as they were hidden by the trees. She grabbed Riley's hand and sprinted forward. Muriel stayed glued to their heels.

A scream sounded in front of them followed by the blasting noise. Lyla yanked Riley to a stop and paused, trying to listen over the sound of her pounding heart.

She could hear someone coming behind them. And they were not coming quietly. And she knew there was also someone ahead of them. *Right or left?*

Riley stared up at her with big eyes, his breath coming out in pants. Muriel stood waiting, trusting her. Lyla tugged him to the left. "Come on."

They took off again, dodging through the trees. But Lyla could hear someone still giving chase—someone big. "You two keep running. I'll be right back, okay?"

Riley stumbled, shaking his head, his eyes huge. But Muriel took him by the arm, pulling him forward. "She'll be right back." She gave Lyla a nod.

Lyla turned and climbed the maple near her, scampering up like

she'd done a thousand times in training. She crouched low on a branch fifteen feet up and scanned behind her. There was a cliff face ten feet to her right. She couldn't tell how high it was, but she could see the flow of water beyond it, letting her know it would be high enough for her needs.

Crashing sounded through the brush. She tensed, taking a few deep breaths to center herself. *Whatever is going to happen is going to happen. Don't anticipate. Just react.*

One of the beings sped into view. The thing was big—close to nine feet tall. And it was broad—almost four feet wide at the chest.

Lyla swallowed as it raced toward her—raced in the direction that Muriel and Riley had disappeared. Fear swelled up in her chest. She shoved it down. She would let herself be scared later. Right now, she had to protect them. That came before everything else.

She tensed, waiting for the being to approach, not sure what she would do if it looked up and saw her. But it didn't look up, too focused on the path ahead.

As soon as it was under her hiding spot, she swung from the branch, slamming her feet into its back. It was like hitting a tree. It stumbled forward but didn't fall.

Lyla hit the ground but quickly rolled to her feet, pulling her staff into her arms.

The being turned, but Lyla was already moving. She sent her staff up between its legs. The being paused, and then its legs buckled. Lyla slammed the staff into the back of its legs, its ribs, the back of its neck. The being jostled with each hit. It raised its weapon and Lyla brought her own staff across its hand with all her might. Using her staff, she twisted its hand, and then with a quick snap of her staff, disarmed it. Its weapon went flying into a bush.

The being paused as if in disbelief. Lyla aimed another shot at its groin, but the being sidestepped and reached out, one hand wrapping around Lyla's neck. Her staff slipped from her hand. Her feet lifted off the ground, kicking and not finding purchase. Fear poured through her as her mind scrambled for something, anything, to do against its strength.

It's stronger. You're faster and lighter. Use it. The voice barking in her head sounded exactly like her father.

She kicked out, hitting it in the groin again, then grabbed it by the back of the head with one hand and punched it in the throat with the other. She ran her feet up the being's chest, slamming the heel of her boot into its chin and using the momentum to flip herself over and out of its grasp.

She rolled as she hit the ground and grabbed her staff in one fluid motion. She moved forward, never stopping her strikes—knee, groin, ribs, neck, side, groin, stomach, neck. Over and over again, she struck, not giving herself a chance to pause, not giving it a chance to do anything but back away.

Lyla adjusted her grip and slammed the end of her staff into the middle of its neck. It grabbed at its neck as it stumbled back and tipped over the cliff's edge.

Lyla didn't wait to see if it survived. She took off after Muriel and Riley. But part of her couldn't help but cheer.

She sprinted through the trees, her eyes peeled for any sign of Muriel and Riley's passage. A broken branch here and a footprint there pointed the way. She picked up speed as she rounded an oak and saw them up ahead.

Muriel whirled around as Lyla approached, her face determined despite her fear. But her face melted at the sight of Lyla. Lyla didn't pause as she caught up with them. "Keep going."

But she did take the time to run her hand over Riley's hair. Together they ran, no one speaking. Then Riley tripped, tumbling to the ground.

Lyla was at his side in an instant. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. The blasting sound came from ahead.

Lyla went still. Another blasting sound came from their left, maybe a hundred yards.

Lyla directed them to the right, her eyes scanning for any threat. They ran in silence, but Lyla still couldn't hear anything over the sound of blood pounding in her ears. Even as she ran, she tried to calm her breathing, forcing herself to breathe in cadence with her steps. *Focus, breathe, listen.*

And too close, she heard the sound of someone running toward them.

Ahead, the ground rose sharply. A wall of rocks. It was a thirty-foot-high retaining wall left over from the Before. The rocks jutted out, making it easy to climb, but the moss covering it would make it slick.

"This way. Quickly," Lyla said. She headed to a small alcove, hidden next to the wall, pulling Riley and Muriel in with her.

Muriel looked out. "Shouldn't we—"

"Shh." Lyla nodded outside. Muriel's eyes grew wide. One of the beings stepped into the clearing. Lyla slowly eased Riley back toward her and slipped her hand over his mouth. His breaths were coming out in loud pants. He turned to her. She gave him a small smile with a nod.

It'll be okay, she tried to tell him with her eyes, but inside she was shaking. She couldn't think of a way to get them out of here. And if those beings looked too closely, they'd see their hiding spot for sure.

A second being stepped into the clearing. The two seemed to confer before one started heading to the right. The other took up position thirty feet away from them. The path leading back to the Old Mill was open, but there was no way they could make it without that thing seeing them.

Maybe I could outrun them. I could head to the mill, lead it away, and then somehow get back to Muriel and Riley. Even as she thought it she knew it was a suicide mission. And then it hit her. *We're not going to make it*.

Muriel shifted so that she was closest to the exit. She turned to Riley, running a hand over his face.

And Lyla's heart broke. Muriel knew this was the end, too. They wouldn't be able to escape this time. Lyla's heart tripped as she looked into Muriel's face, the face that looked so much like hers.

Muriel gave Lyla the smile that reminded Lyla so much of their mother as she leaned over Riley's head to kiss her cheek. A tear slipped down Lyla's cheek, but she nodded at her sister and took a breath. They would face this together, just like always.

Muriel's eyes were bright with tears. "Remember your promise."

Lyla's stomach dropped and the world seemed to stop. She reached for Muriel's arm. "No, Muriel."

But her hand touched only air as Muriel sprinted from their hiding spot and out into the clearing.

CHAPTER 11

"No!" Riley yelled, lunging for his mom. Lyla clamped a hand over his mouth and yanked him away from the alcove opening.

Riley struggled against his aunt's grasp, but she held on, not giving him an inch. His whole body shook with fear and horror as he watched his mom race away from them.

No, Mom. No!

He struggled against his aunt, but she held him so tightly. He was shaking so hard he could barely stand. All Riley could do was watch as his mom disappeared down the path, one of the things charging toward her as it caught sight of her. A second being appeared and took off after her as well, and Riley felt his knees give out. But Lyla held him tight, not letting him fall.

Riley felt the tears rise in his throat. *Mom, come back,* he begged silently. *Mom*.

Lyla lowered her head, her voice fierce in his ear, but even then he could hear the tears she held back. "Do *not* throw away her sacrifice. You run, God damn it."

She grabbed his hand and pulled him into the clearing, and they headed in the opposite direction his mother had disappeared. Behind them, he heard the blasts from the things' spears. His heart seemed to stop. But his aunt just tugged him harder, pulling him farther away.

Riley got his feet under him and started to run, a picture of his

mom frozen in his mind. His aunt set a grueling pace, never letting go of Riley's hand.

At one point, Riley stumbled, going down hard on one knee. Lyla was in front of him immediately, kneeling down. "Get up, Riley. Get up."

Grief and fear rose in him, tears rolled down his cheeks. "It hurts."

Lyla's face held not an ounce of compassion in it. "Yes, but it doesn't matter. Not right now. Later, you can let yourself feel the pain, the hurt. Right now, you survive. So get. Up."

Riley looked at his aunt, who always had a smile for him, a laugh. But she wasn't laughing now. Her face was set like stone.

"We need to go back. Mom needs us—"

"She's gone, Riley."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do, and so do you. And we need to move. You want to be a Phoenix? Show me you have what it takes. Get. Up."

With a shuddering breath, Riley got to his feet. His knee buckled, but he waved his aunt off when she reached out a hand. "I got it," he spit out.

"Good. Let's go."

She took off again, and Riley was right behind her. He didn't utter a single word of protest as they cut over hills and slogged through streams. She led them on, never stumbling, never questioning where she was going. Riley followed behind her, a sense of unreality falling over him. He kept replaying his mom running out into the clearing over and over again, trying to find a way that his memory was faulty, something to assure him that she hadn't done that. Tears streamed down his cheeks, but he left them unchecked as they trekked on.

Mom, come back.

They ran until the sun sank below the horizon and the sky had turned pink. He leaned against a tree, exhaustion falling over him like a blanket. He couldn't remember ever being so tired in his whole life. He just wanted to close his eyes and see his mom when he woke up. His aunt disappeared from view for a moment. He knew he should probably be sacred, but he was too tired, too numb to feel anything, even fear.

Lyla reappeared seconds later. "I don't think anyone's following us. We should be good. We'll sleep here tonight." Lyla pointed to a tree with low branches that would act as cover.

Riley only nodded, too tired to do anything else.

Lyla looked at him and her expression softened. "Come on."

He blinked hard, forcing his eyes back open. He'd nearly fallen asleep while standing. "I thought we were staying here."

"We are, but there's something we have to do first."

Lyla led him around a small rocky hill. She climbed up about six feet, waving him up behind her. There was a large flat rock at the top. She pulled him up and then took a seat, her feet dangling over the edge. She patted the rock next to her. "Take a seat," she said softly.

He looked up at her. This Lyla was the aunt he knew, not the warrior. This was the one who always had time for a hug or a laugh. Tears laced her eyes and Riley felt the grief take him over. When she was the warrior pushing him, it was easier to shove his own feelings away, to not give in to them. But now? Now she was Lyla and he felt his eyes burn with tears.

Even so, he hesitated, fear of what could be lurking holding him back. If Lyla thought it was safe, though, it must be. And while part of him worried about being out in the open, another larger part of him couldn't work up the energy to care even if there was one of those things in the trees.

On automatic pilot, he climbed and sat next to her, feeling the warmth of her arm through his shirt. Neither of them spoke. They simply sat and watched the sunset. It was a beautiful one. The sky was a blaze of color, pale blue to orange, pink, red, and finally black, dotted with stars.

Riley watched it all, almost numb. *She can't be gone. She can't be*. He repeated the same phrases over and over in his mind, each time picturing a different ending. He grabbed his mother to keep her from leaving. He ran after her. He yelled and distracted those things making them follow him instead of her. On and on his mind teased him with all the possibilities. But they didn't matter. He'd done none of that. And his mother was gone.

Riley looked over at his aunt, surprised to see tears streaming

down her cheeks. She looked down at him, wrapping an arm around his shoulder. "Your mom gave us that sunset and every one we see from this day forward. It's our job not to waste them."

Riley watched the night sky through his own haze of tears. Memories of his mom, her hugs, her laugh, what seemed like every moment with her went through his mind in an unstopping reel. And the dam he had built up over his emotions during their escape burst wide open.

"I don't want her to be dead," he sobbed.

Lyla wrapped both her arms around him. Her tears dripped onto his neck, her voice thick. "Me, either, Riley. Me, either."

CHAPTER 12

FIVE YEARS LATER

Seventeen-year-old Miles Jones walked down the row of shelters in the Attlewood camp, books cradled in the nook of his right arm. His left arm, which stopped just below the elbow, was pressed on top of the stack to keep them from falling.

Two of the Phoenixes, Rory and Angel had returned from a scavenge and had managed to find some medical texts. Miles knew one of them was useless—all about laparoscopic surgery. He was lucky if he had a sharp knife, never mind anything more advanced. But the other one on infectious diseases might end up being useful. And who knew? Maybe someday the laparoscopic one would be as well. There were some places that managed to get electricity up and running, at least sporadically.

The shouts of a group of boys drifted down toward him. Four teens walked down the dirt path, jostling and pushing each other. In front, Adros Ryder, a muscular boy with unkempt blond hair and the ringleader, spied Miles.

Miles groaned, picking up his pace. He didn't need this today. He ducked his head, attempting to skirt past the group.

Adros stepped in front of him. "Hey, Gimpy, reading more books?"

"Leave me alone, Adros." Miles tried to walk around him.

Adros put out an arm, blocking his way. His friends lined up next to him, also blocking Miles's path.

Adros snorted, glancing at Miles's pile of books. "*Laparoscopic Surgery*, *Infectious Diseases*, and *The Gods of Ancient Egypt*. Think you're so smart, don't you?"

"He is smart. And we're lucky he is." Riley Quinn stepped out from between the cabins next to them. With dark brown hair lightened by the sun and bright blue eyes, Riley was in appearance the polar opposite of Miles with his dark skin, hair, and eyes. Yet there were no two closer. They were brothers in every way except biology.

Riley stepped onto the path, his arms crossed over his chest. The action pushed out his biceps, making them look even larger. Miles knew it wasn't an accident. With Adros, it was always important to remind him when a fight would be evenly matched.

And Riley was the only one who was a match for Adros physically. But Adros had never been able to take Riley down in any training exercises. Because unlike Adros, Riley used more than just muscle when he fought. He actually used his brain. Which probably made it unfair for Adros, because Miles was pretty sure he didn't have one.

"There a problem here, Adros?" Riley asked, coming to halt next to Miles.

Adros's friends took a step back as if to signify they had no allegiances to him.

Adros put up both his hands with a smirk. "No problem, just talking." He whacked Miles's right arm, sending the books flying. "See you later, buddy." With a laugh, Adros walked away, his minions following behind him.

Miles squatted down to get his books. "Asshole."

Riley crouched down next to him, reaching for a book. "Yeah."

"I got it." Miles's voice was rough. He felt his face burn.

Riley ignored him, picking up the books. "Hey, he's a jerk. Don't let him get to you." Riley stood, reaching down his hand.

Miles clasped it, letting Riley pull him up. "Thanks."

Riley handed him the books. "You're worth ten Adroses."

Miles smiled. "Only ten?"

Riley shrugged. "I could be talked into twenty."

Miles laughed, feeling some of the tension leave his chest.

"Why don't we go down to the training yard? You're getting pretty good with that sword and shield."

A few months ago, Riley had surprised Miles with an attachment for his half arm that Hilda, the metalsmith, had created. It was a metal sleeve with a sword at the end. At first, Miles had balked at using it, but Riley had needled him until he agreed. And Miles had to admit, he liked having the use of two arms in a fight instead of one. It had been awkward to use in the beginning, but now it was a like another appendage. And it made him feel powerful. Not an emotion he was used to.

Miles wanted to go with Riley, but duty came first. He shook his head. "No. Maybe tomorrow. I need to go through these. One of the Carolina kids is sick. I'm trying to figure out why."

"Fine. But I'm going to hold you to it."

"Ah, gentlemen. Just the men I was hoping to run into." Simon Tolliver, the camp teacher, walked down the path, his legs moving fast. Simon was a few inches shorter than Miles's six feet, with a very thin frame. Miles figured it was probably nervous energy or brain energy that kept him from gaining weight. The man was always moving, always thinking.

"Hi, Simon," Riley said.

Miles nodded his greeting. "What's going on?"

Simon came to a stop next to them, his cape swirling around him. "It seems some of my students are under the impression that Phoenixes do not need to know anything from books. I thought you two could come and disavow them of that notion."

Miles shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't. I need to go see Dixie."

Simon's smile dimmed. "I heard she was sick. Any ideas what it is?"

Simon had been the camp doctor for years, more out of default than anything else. But when Miles had shown an affinity for the work, he'd happily handed over the reins, even though Miles was only seventeen.

Miles had a few ideas about Dixie's illness, although as he hefted the textbook, he knew he needed to check a few more things before he was sure. "I'm close. Hopefully I'll know by the end of the day."

Simon nodded before turning to Riley, his expression bright again. "I guess that just leaves the two of us, Mr. Quinn."

Miles could tell Riley was scrambling to come up with a way out of the request. It's not that Riley wasn't smart; he just hated being the center of attention. But at the same time, having Riley support Simon would go a long way in demonstrating how important education was to the kids.

"Don't forget you promised to help me with Dixie in a little bit." Miles turned to Simon. "I need some help moving her and her cot."

"Oh, no problem. I'll have him back to you in plenty of time." Simon looked at Riley expectantly. Miles shrugged at Riley behind Simon's back. *Best I could do, buddy.*

Riley sighed. "Okay, Simon. Let's go."

Simon nodded. "Wonderful, wonderful." He latched on to Riley's arm before he could escape.

Riley looked back at Miles, and Miles struggled not to laugh. Riley, undeniably the toughest of the young Phoenixes, looked miserable. Facing a legion of aliens was not a problem. Standing in front of a classroom full of kids—terrifying.