

Autumn - 30 A.E.

Chapter One Raiders

The air was still, and Darius concentrated. The expanse of the wide meadow and the pine forest encroaching from the west faded from the edges of his vision. There was only the target: a flat, round piece of wood wedged against the trunk of one of the giant elms that added shade to the meadow. A yellow circle, the size of his palm, had been painted in the center of the disc.

The chattering of children from the village behind him and the incessant calling of gulls beyond the meadow faded to the recesses of his mind. The wisp of blond hair stuck to his forehead by sweat and dust no longer itched. The smell of venison roasting on a spit didn't cause his stomach to growl. His awareness was reduced to the soft, even sound of his breath and the feel of the bow.

"Draw back and take aim," Micah's soft whisper came.

His arm retracted, and he inhaled through his nostrils. His chest expanded. He felt the pressure of the bowstring against the pads of his fingers, sinew on flesh. His hold tightened on the bow, and his arm was straight, unwavering. The smooth, polished elm of the grip felt as one with his hand.

Darius was not a tall boy. Just two years older, his brother stood a full span taller. It was all he could do to reach full flexion, but once he did, he held the string and took careful aim. His elbow began to tremble as he waited for Micah's next command. The loose, beige linen shirt ruffled as a breeze gusted for an instant.

"Now release."

His fingers slipped from the string like an autumn leaf letting go of the branch. The bowstring let loose with a distinct twang, and the arrow covered the fifty paces with the hiss of parting air. It impacted the center of the target with a dull thump, and the fir shaft quivered.

He let his breath escape and gasped. The heavy musk of pine boughs baking in the mid-afternoon sun filled his sinuses. The scent from cooking fires wafted on the breeze.

"Huzzah!" Micah shouted. "Excellent job, Darius."

The clamor of the children returned with a rush and with it, other noises. Birds sang in

the trees. A squirrel working a seed pod near the target chirped in protest at the disruption.

Darius smiled at the praise and looked up at his older brother. At sixteen, Micah was already one of the best shots in town and had done very well on his first few hunts. The praise was genuine, and Darius swelled with pride.

"Now again. On your own," Micah said. "Remember to breathe. If you hold your breath like that while you're waiting for a clean shot on a deer, you'll pass out before you get the chance to take it. Steady, even breaths, but you have to breathe. If you're going to hold it, do it at the last second before you fire."

Darius pulled a second arrow from the quiver at his hip and drew his fingers along the wooden shaft, feeling for blemishes. He repeated the methodical process of aiming. This time as he prepared to shoot, Micah shouted next to his ear. Darius's hand twitched as his fingers slid from the string and the arrow struck the outer ring on the target.

"Not bad, but you still need to work on that. Don't let distractions break your concentration. If you are going to join the hunters next season, you'll need to shoot true no matter what."

Darius was preparing for a third attempt when they heard a ruckus from the town. Shouts of dismay became more distinct. The drum of hundreds of hooves rose like thunder, and a cloud of dust was rising above the houses to the northeast. Then there was the distinct clang of steel striking iron and a shriek. Sharp cracks sounded like a whip, or many whips.

Darius swept his blond hair off of his forehead, unsure what to make of the sounds.

Riders cantered out of the southern edge of the hamlet and surveyed the pasture. There were four of them, dressed in black leathers. Their eyes had been outlined with charcoal, and greasy lines of azure and yellow were etched across their faces. Their bare arms were covered with an array of symbols applied with the same oily paint. Three of them wore thick beards and had long, unkempt hair. The fourth, in the lead, was clean shaven and wore his hair in a tight top knot.

The men sat astride tall, well-muscled stallions as dark as their armor. At first, the approaching horsemen piqued curiosity more than fear. That changed when the voice of Darius's and Micah's mother cried out. It was a piercing cry that drowned out everything else.

"Micah, run!" she screamed as she entered the far end of the glade.

Their mother's linen dress whipped like a banner in the wind as she ran. The light blue

was smeared with dark streaks at the shoulder and the hem. The shoulder of the dress, where the white embroidered flowers began to trail down the sleeve, appeared to be torn. Panic strained her voice. Her flowing red hair was bedraggled and mussed.

The strangers spurred their horses to move in her direction.

Micah did not hesitate. He slung his bow across his back and prompted Darius to do the same. He cinched the bindings to keep the weapon from bouncing. His motions were rapid and trained. Within seconds, Micah was half running, half pushing Darius toward the trees. They glanced over their shoulders as they reached the edge of the woods.

The raiders were closing on their mother. Fierce cries echoed across the clearing as the horses angled toward the woman.

Their mother's long legs raced across the field in elongated strides, but her speed was no match for that of the horses. The earth churned beneath the hooves of the beasts. She continued to wave them onward as the front horsemen raised a net between them. The net engulfed her, and she tumbled to the ground in a tangle as the horsemen charged by, focused now on the boys.

"No!" Darius cried and turned around, ready to fight, but Micah held an arm out to stop him.

"Too many. Too late. Run, Darius." He spun Darius around and shoved him into the cover of the trees.

Darius ran like he never had before. He could hear Micah sprinting close on his heels.

Hoofbeats drew ever closer. The horses slowed to a trot as they entered the confines of the forest, and the boys extended their lead.

"Left! Jump! Right! Turn!" Micah's gasping commands came from behind.

Darius knew where his brother was directing him, but the commands helped him stay focused on the path ahead. He darted to the left around a deadfall then hurdled a bramble on the other side. He jerked to the right to avoid stumbling on a patch of rocks and cut into a dense thicket.

They dodged their way through the thick copse of spruce, but they could still hear the men circling around. Darius burst out of the trees and glanced around. His brother stopped short to avoid stumbling into him.

The terrain was a spider web of gullies and trenches as it approached the cliffs that overlooked the ocean beyond.

The barbarians rounded the far side of the grove and spotted them.

Darius leapt into a narrow gulch with Micah on his heels.

Two of the men tracked them from above while the others gingerly stepped their horses into the ravine. The walls steepened, and the floor of the trench sloped downward as they approached the precipice. Soon they were running through a canyon with walls twice their height.

The sea birds called ahead, a cacophony of squawks and shrieks. A strong, salty breeze assaulted them from side passages as they rushed past.

They veered right as the ravine forked and dove into a cave in the side of the rift. Darius crept forward as his eyes adjusted to the dim light.

Gruff, muffled shouts sounded from outside the cavern.

Darius scrambled ahead, clawing his way up a gravel incline. He was almost there.

Light flooded the passageway as the horsemen lit torches and thrust them into the darkness.

Darius and Micah had reached their destination, a gaping crevice in the floor. The smell of stale salt and dead fish drifted up from below. The blackness beneath them seemed impenetrable, but they knew where to go.

They shrugged off their gear, and Micah helped Darius maneuver into position.

"You two get in there with the torches. Drag them out if you need to." Darius heard a commanding voice giving instructions outside the entrance. The accent was thick and foreign.

The flickering torchlight drew closer, illuminating the back of the cave.

"Ulan, they're getting away. Take them out," the barking orders came again.

Then time slowed. Darius felt the familiar smooth groove against the small of his back. He released Micah's hand and slid downward with his hips pressed to the cold, wet stone.

Micah started to lower himself into position. He gave Darius a sly grin, and his eyes shone with victory. Darius watched, and hope changed to horror.

Torchlight flickered off of Micah's strawberry blond hair, then the look of triumph was replaced with shock and the grin transformed to a gape as he was struck squarely in the chest with a long, black arrow.