

THE STORM WITHIN


SAMPLE CHAPTER

C FRANCIS

Copyright © 2022 by C Francis

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

THE KNIFE

Thais ran along the branch as fast as she dared. A foolish decision to take to the treetops in this half-light, but up here, they would never catch her. Dusk lay like a cloak across the forest, spreading stillness between the trees as animals sought shelter for the night. But there, in the distance, human voices punctured the silence.

Heart hammering in her ears, Thais sped up. Damn the rain. As if running through the canopy half-blind wasn't foolish enough, doing so after five days of summer storms was reckless. Even for her. Each skidding step threatened to topple her into the ocean of ferns swirling across the forest floor. Between the waves, silver fur flashed in and out of sight. Thais had been following it for hours. She could always count on Pax to lead the way. Without him, she would be lost to instinct.

Run. Run. Run, and never stop running.

Underfoot, the bark crumbled and flaked away—another victim of the blight. This diseased branch would never support her weight, light though she was. Thais prepared to leap to a healthier one when a battering ram of frigid air struck her in the chest, as though the full weight of winter had collided with

her. She scrambled to a stop, boots slithering over the wood as if it had turned to glass. Then, for the first time in her memory, she fell out of a tree. On the way down, she caught a low branch to slow her fall, but only just. With only a second to brace for impact, she crashed through the underbrush onto the moss, landing in a heap of aching ribs and embarrassment.

Thais groaned and ran her hands over herself, searching for injuries. All she found was cold. What the Nix was this feeling? Had those distant voices found a way to catch her in the ether? No. Even if it were possible, even if there were Sensitives among them, the ether was warm and chaotic.

This felt like ice, crackling between her ribs, creeping through her muscles, sliding down the scar that spanned her torso from left armpit to navel. Deeper and deeper, fractals of ice spread into every crevice of what it was to be Thais.

‘No!’ That was far enough.

She dragged herself to sitting and whirred around, searching for a source of the cold. Her eyes snagged on a barren slope rising out of the forest to the escarpments of a hill. It loomed over her, almost black against the bruised sky, just enough contrast to make out a cave. No, not cavernous enough to be called a cave. A suggestion of one, perhaps.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the cold receded. Thais managed a faltering breath. Another. And after the third, she dared to rise to her feet, staring at the cave with narrowed eyes. Whatever that sensation was, it must have come from up there. Common sense told her to run the other way, far from the cold and even further from those distant voices. But Thais rarely heard her common sense over the roar of her instincts; instincts drawing her to that cave like a starling to its nest.

She took an uncertain step towards the slope, but before she could venture another, something large crashed through the ferns behind her. Thais spun around as a grey wolf hurtled out of the fronds, landing inches away. He rose to his full

height, only a head shorter than Thais herself, and fixed his amber eyes on hers accusingly.

Pax. More brother than wolf.

Ever since Mamma had placed him in the cradle beside her, his thoughts had filled Thais's mind. Always shifting between the innocence of a little boy, the defiance of a young man, and the wisdom of an old one.

Why have you stopped? An insecure youth, this time. *They've fallen back, but we haven't lost them yet.*

'I know,' Thais mumbled, almost too distracted to form the words. But if she didn't say them aloud, he wouldn't understand the thought behind them. She opened her mouth to tell him about the cold, but the lure of the cave overpowered her. Surprising even herself, her feet began to move again. Instinct coursed through her muscles. Impossible to fight.

Thais! Pax scabbled into her path, his worry like a lump of rock salt on the back of her tongue. *We need to run.*

Thais did run, but not into the woods. Instead, she pelted up the hillside, Pax trailing behind, unable to match her pace. Up close, the cavern looked no more impressive. Little more than a crack in the steep escarpment, in fact. An ancient wrinkle in the rock-face that smelt like rain but tasted like rot. Thais blanched and edged inside, slow as she gave her eyes time to adjust. It wouldn't take them long. Overly large and night-forest green, her eyes were made for dark places. And this place was certainly that. The cave drank dusk's grim light, and the blackness here was thick and cloying.

She had taken only a few paces when Pax caught up to her and head-butted her in the chest. A painful punishment, but well-earned.

What are you doing?

'I don't know,' she said distantly. What *was* she doing here? She didn't doubt this cave was the source of the cold, but why

the Nix was she running towards it and not away? Why would her instincts lead her here?

The cave twisted around a gentle bend, and Thais traced its curve until she reached the back wall. Here, she stopped, eyes widening at the sight of a tall, mottled stone so different from the others. Though the walls were grey, misshapen, and dripping with moisture, this rock was a fierce and brilliant white. Once, it must have been a fine marble statue, but millennia had assailed the figure, leaving it ambiguous and open to interpretation.

Not to Thais.

'It's an ainaren shrine.' Her voice a mere rasp for Pax's sake.

He chuffed impatiently. *We haven't got time to explore, Thais.*

'I'm not exploring. I felt...'

What? How to explain that wintry assault to a wolf? She was certain of only one thing: it had come from this ancient shrine built by a people long gone from the Agea. Thais had encountered dozens while exploring Denari's wild places, but none had wrenched on her instincts so unequivocally. She had to find out why.

Pax pushed his snout into her cheek. *They're closer than you think. I know you can smell them.*

Of course, she could smell them. They were leather, and cheap ale, and tobacco leaf, and cookfires, and sweat, and horses, and steel. Mostly, they were steel. But more deafening, their presence in Nature's Web. As they pushed deeper into the forest, they pressed on the tendrils that connected all living things. Their unwelcome humanity stretched the threads so taut, they were like quivering bow strings.

Closer now—too close probably—but not so close they couldn't spare a minute to investigate why this shrine had struck Thais out of a tree. She pushed her forehead into Pax and breathed in the scent of old rain and old forests.

‘They won’t come up here. They’re too afraid of The Father.’ She jolted her chin at the statue. ‘All humans are.’

Pax lowered himself onto the damp stones and pressed his muzzle into his paws, submitting. For now. Thais stroked the fur between his ears in gratitude, then approached The Father. Etched into the ancient marble, she discerned the remains of his eyes. And though she chastised herself for letting her imagination carry her away, she pondered how judgemental they seemed.

What would The Father make of her? Would he recognise the part of her that belonged here? Well, as much as she belonged anywhere, she supposed. Or would he see only that other part of her, the part who oughtn’t dare approach?

Wind soughed across the cave mouth like the distant howling of wolves, and Thais jolted around. She listened, heartbeat pounding in her neck, then exhaled a laugh. The Father had been gone for thousands of years. Nothing here but stone and myth and the suggestion of a chill. Not quite there, but a reminder it had been.

Thais edged closer, and something dark and slender caught her eye at the statue’s base. A knife of some sort, too dark to make out clearly. Frowning, she dropped to her knees and reached for it, but Pax knocked her hand away with his muzzle.

Don’t touch it!

‘It’s just a knife, Pax.’

I don’t like it. It has no scent.

He pushed his nose into her cheek, but Thais nudged him aside, enraptured by the knife. Who would dare leave it at The Father’s feet? And what sort of knife was this? The blade, about the length of her hand, lay hidden inside a sheath which appeared to be crafted from polished bone. Except it couldn’t be. No creature had bones as black as that.

The knife’s haft was also black, wrapped with smooth leather, bound by woven cord, and unblemished—unnaturally

so. Every weapon in Thais's possession was worn and familiar, like pairs of old boots. This knife was a stranger. No hand its master.

Thais sat back on her heels and turned her head to one side.

'It looks like it's just come off a cutler's workbench. How did it get—'

Pax rose to his paws, and the air reeked with the acrid scent of his aggression.

'What is it?' Thais asked.

He turned to face the cave-mouth and lowered his head, hackles raised.

Shadows.

Thais smelt them too, now—the unmistakable stench of decay. She must have strayed too close to a river. Distracted by those distant human voices, she hadn't noticed others stalking her trail. Damn!

Pax nipped her arm, and his thought hurt. *We have to go now!*

No question about that. They shouldn't be here in this crack in the hillside with nowhere to run. Thais turned to go, then hesitated. She wasn't prepared to leave empty-handed. The cold had to mean something. This knife had to mean something! She snatched it up, surprised by how light it was and how fiercely cold, like lifting a shard of ice, not a weapon.

And though they didn't have a second to spare, Thais couldn't stop her burning curiosity from taking over. She slipped the knife out of its sheath in eerie silence. No friction, no hiss of steel, nothing at all. That wasn't right. She bit her lip as she raised the jagged blade above her head. It was the blackest thing she had ever seen, absorbing what little light trickled through the cave mouth. Where metal gleamed, this knife was dull.

A shadow harnessed into a weapon.

Fierce sparks surged across Thais's vision. Adrenalin, but not her own. She blinked away afterimages as Pax prowled closer to the cave mouth, his tongue lashing the air. Infected by his aggression, Thais leapt to her feet in time to see a grey blur hurtle past the cave.

'Fuck.' She thrust the knife into her pocket and unhooked her bow from her bag. 'How many, Pax?'

In the time he took to pad to the entrance to taste the air, Thais had strung her bow. She was beside him in seconds, crouching at the top of the steep bank.

'Well?'

As she nocked an arrow, the concept of *more than five* slid into her mind. Pax could count no further.

'Fuck.' More resigned this time.

Thais scanned the darkening oakwood for signs of movement. Large swathes had succumbed to the blight, turning the bark and foliage grey and homogenous. And everything glistened with moisture after the summer rains. Keen though her eyes were, they would struggle to pick up the creatures in these conditions.

But in Nature's Web, she felt them. They seeped between the tendrils like an oil slick. Alive but not living. It was said they came from the Realm of the Darkness. Nothingness made flesh. Shadow wraiths. Parts of this woodland were overrun with the rabid opportunists. Thais had avoided them these past nine days; luck that had finally run out. Definitely more than five.

And behind them, the stench of steel. Far closer now.

'Fuck!' All anger and petulance this time. 'There's no way out. I can't go back, Pax. I'll die if—'

Run. I'll cover you.

'They're too fast for you, and there are too many.'

Thais edged past the lip of the cave, drawing her bowstring back until her thumb anchored under her cheekbone. She held

her breath and peered down the arrow shaft, searching for the glister of slick, grey skin.

Every sound became a roar in the stillness. An owl hooting at the crest of the hill. Pax breathing, each exhalation outlined with a growl. And a twang in the trees below, followed by an unmistakable hiss.

‘Get down!’

Thais threw herself into Pax, shunting him back into the cave. As she tumbled after him, something whistled past her left ear and caressed her cheek. She saw the arrow a beat too late, could only watch as it tore through her left hand as though it were made of parchment.

In the stupefied moment that followed, Thais dropped her bow and collapsed to her knees. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. There was only that arrow protruding from her flesh and Pax howling, over and over, splitting her head apart.

And then came the pain. So much pain. Thais retched violently and slumped onto the rocks, breathing at last, but ragged and shallow. She was vaguely aware of Pax licking her face. His conflicting instincts coursed between them, leaving Thais unable to think clearly. To protect her or tear apart the wraith hiding in the woods with a stolen bow?

Thais couldn’t wait for him to decide.

‘Go,’ she said hoarsely and shoved him.

Snarling, he careened down the steep hill. His sleek silver disappeared between the oaks, and the evening swelled with panicked shrieking. Then only a sonorous boom thudding through Thais’s ears. Her heartbeat—an anchor of sorts. She focused on its rhythm to steady her breathing and managed to sit up.

Though her whole arm shook, she lifted her left hand to inspect the injury. The arrow pierced her middle knuckles and exited through the bottom of her palm. Ragged splinters

flecked the wound where fragments of her bow grip had torn away. She was lucky she hadn't been pinned to it.

How the Nix was she going to get the arrow out?

Wet clicking approached from downslope. Quiet but growing louder as the scrape, scrape, scrape of claw on rock crept near. Slow for a wraith. Cautious, perhaps. Thais gritted her teeth and pressed her back into the cave wall to rise to her feet. She drew her short sword and caught the slit eyes of the wraith as it crested the hill. Almost human, with its upright stance, slender limbs, and flat face. But those black eyes, its glistening, storm-grey skin, and its rows of serrated teeth were different enough for her to spare no thought in lunging. Her sword-tip kissed its flank, sending a stream of grey blood ribboning along the steel.

The wretched thing was so fast. It skittered across the rocks, its guttural clicking punctured by a pained squawk. She had wounded it, but not enough.

'Oh, fuck off,' Thais said between panted breaths, keeping her sword between them like a sharp promise. 'I don't have time for this.'

Nor could she fight. Without the arrow lodged in her left hand, this creature posed little more than inconvenience. The half-witted beasts had never grasped the notion of sharpened steel, nor how vulnerable they were to it. But how to fight with one hand lame? She may have been fast and trained since she was strong enough to hold a sparring sword, but—

The damned thing lunged. Thais spun out of its path and twisted into an over-cut. Her point nicked its shoulder. The wraith screeched—a deafening sound more like glass shattering than an animal. Thais fought the urge to cover her ears and planted her feet. She let the momentum of her turn carry her upper body around like a pendulum, sword-tip aimed at that glistening throat.

Something heavy landed on her back in the moment before

impact and twisted her around to fall on her left side. On top of the arrow. Thais screamed gutturally and let go of her sword. It bounced down the rocks in an impotent clatter of steel on stone and wasted opportunity.

Blinking away tears, Thais twisted around to find a second wraith had snuck up on her. She roared until her voice grew hoarse, thrashing wildly to free herself. Pinned and disarmed, the wraiths snorted across her shoulders, beneath her hood, under the collar of her shirt. The stench of rotting flesh made her eyes water.

Pain blistered across her skin, and she screamed again. One wraith had sunk its teeth into her neck, the other her shoulder. They whipped their heads back and forth, shredding her skin to bloodied ribbons. Each tooth was only the size of a poppyseed, but they had hundreds. Wraiths could strip a carcass to the bone in mere hours. How long would it take them to devour her scrawny neck?

Writhing desperately, Thais raked her nails across anything she could reach. A smooth head, a sinewy neck, powerful shoulders, anything at all. Their skin peeled away in thick, fatty curls, but the wraiths only thrashed more.

Panic constricted Thais's chest. If she couldn't find a way out of this—

'No,' she moaned as a warm sensation trickled up her skin. The ether in her mantle was rising to her defence. She was powerless to stop it. 'No!'

Not now. Not here. Not in front of The Father. It was an affront, the worst insult to the ainar. Proof she didn't belong here at all, as though any proof were needed. She didn't belong anywhere. How foolish to forget now.

'No, no, no!'

Why fight it? She had never been able to control the ether, not in the way humans could. To them, it was a gift from the gods. To her, a curse; one she had finally escaped.

Thais twisted and something icy pressed into her flank. The knife, still in her pocket. She contorted her arm to reach it, panting hard as one of the wraiths roved towards her jugular. Her itch grew to an inferno as the particles of ether in her mantle contracted around her, invisible but pulsating with raw power. Her panic had drawn them in. Any moment, it would ignite the fuse.

Thais roared again as she reached for the knife, every muscle in her right arm protesting. Warm beads rolled down her neck. Ice grazed her fingertips. The ether in her mantle pulsed with each thud of her racing heart.

‘No!’

Her fingers caught the smooth haft. Ice and winter and black bones and nothingness. She ripped out the knife and thrust it into the nearest slick body part. The moment the blade touched the wraith’s skin, the creature exploded.

And a heartbeat later, so did her mantle.

In the inexplicable horror of that moment, the stabbed wraith burst into a miasma of black vapour and ice, which almost instantly dissipated out of existence. The other wraith hurtled into the air and slammed against the cave wall. A corona of grey blood radiated around it like a dandelion clock before the creature slithered to the floor.

But it wasn’t just the wraith. If only it had been.

The sudden outpouring of Thais’s mantle was devastating. Nothing could withstand it. Boulders crashed down the hill like pebbles swept up by the tide. Every shrub and flower on the rocky slope was torn from the ground, root and stem. And even nearby trees groaned as they bucked against the ether.

The invisible explosion shredded that hillside, obliterating everything in a twenty-foot radius. And in the forest beyond, the force of the wind stripped the oaks of their foliage, flinging leaves into the sky like green snow.

The stillness that rushed in afterwards was sudden and

complete. The sound of life snuffed out. Only Thais left in the heart of the destruction, and a lone owl soaring overhead. The only survivor.

She watched it fly away, unable to speak, unable to move, unable to think. Everything ached. Not least her soul. The gaping hole she had punched through Nature's Web was an open sore in the centre of her mind. How many millions of lives had she extinguished because she had no control over her chaos?

Many months had passed since her last First Response in the ether. She was too old for losing control like this, and now millions had paid the price. Her shame would have consumed her were it not for the more urgent, more demanding, more incomprehensible thought dawning on her.

Thais lifted the knife.

What the Nix had she found? What was this thing that looked like a shadow but felt like winter? How had it turned a wraith into a cloud of ice and dust?

Blue cold radiated out of the haft, snapping frost into her fingers, up her arm, deep inside her chest. And with it, the overwhelming scent of an unfamiliar forest. Thais shut her eyes as the wild surged into her. A stone arena emerged from her closed lids. It swept around her in a ruin of ancient archways and rows of worn benches. Hewn out of pale rocks, they glittered in the golden rays of an afternoon sun that should not be here.

Thais struggled against the frozen channels carving deeper into her mind. She tried to anchor herself in certainties: the agony in her hand; the rocks digging into her back; the warm beads rolling down her neck. But when a figure materialised on a dais, mere feet away, she let go of reality entirely.

Short, slight, and distinctly not human. Who was this man with a face like a distortion of a person? A tapered chin, wide set brow, youthful features, and those eyes—green like

newborn grass, far too large, and achingly familiar. Within them, Thais saw the promise of something unattainable.

Belonging.

Those eyes promised belonging as certain as sunrise.

She wanted to climb inside them, but with the harsh snap of reality, the man, the arena, those green eyes and their promise flicked out of existence. Thais reeled at their sudden absence and inhaled a sharp gasp that burned like smoke.

Pax was there, licking her cheek, warm and reassuringly alive. Unable to comprehend what had happened, nor understand why Pax was suddenly at her side, Thais gasped for breath. She had to brace herself against his panic.

They've found us, Thais!

