

PROLOGUE

“Run, Andrew, run!”

It was dark as he heard the cry. Heart pumping, his breath caught in his throat as he tried to run, but he was boxed in by tall walls with tiny windows. There were walls everywhere he looked, big gray stone blocking him as he tried to run.

There was nowhere for him to go except for a long corridor that stretched out in front of him. It seemed to be twisting and undulating. Even as he tried to run, the floor was moving as he struggled to keep his footing. He heard someone screaming to him, telling him to run faster. Over and over – *run faster, Andrew!* He was trying – God help him – he was trying, but the shifting corridor and rolling floor made it so very difficult.

Light!

He saw light at the end of the corridor and he ran for it, propelling himself out of the building that was jerking and rolling. As he landed heavily on the dirt beyond the corridor, he turned to see that that building he was in – the one with the twisting corridor – was breaking into a million pieces, shattering as he watched.

He couldn't even stop to breathe. Stones were being thrown at him as the building collapsed, giant stones hurling at his head. He no longer heard the voice telling him to run, but he didn't need to. He continued to run, as fast as he could go. He had no idea where he was going, only that he had to break free of the disaster that was trying to swallow him up.

Around him, everything was distorted by the storm raging overhead and disaster happening around him. He was so scared. God, he'd never known such fear. Something – *someone* – was trying to kill him. He knew that.

He had to run for his very life.

Sinister laughing now filled the air. He could hear it behind him, a booming sound, like thunder. In fact, it rolled like thunder. The sound undulated, almost as if it were coming from under water. Overhead, lightning crashed and that crazy laughter could be heard again. It was terrifying.

He was trying to pick up speed. As the ground lurched beneath his feet, he could see a gateway of some kind ahead. If only he could make it. But then the laughter came, louder than before, making him feel as if it were right behind him. In a panic, he turned to see if the threat was upon him and that's when he saw her...

Mother....

He came to an unsteady halt. His mother was simply standing there, smiling at him. But it wasn't a normal smile – there was fear in her eyes. He took a step in her direction, to go to her, but, suddenly, she screamed at him.

Run, Andrew, run!

The cries had been coming from her. Behind her, a dark figure rose up, as if bursting forth from the very ground. A shadow of extreme size enveloped her and she began screaming again as the shadow swallowed her up.

In the midst of that murky shadow, he caught a glimpse of black, wicked eyes.

God, he knew those eyes.

He turned on his heel and began to run again, running as fast as he possibly could while the wicked laughter rang out behind him and his mother's screams were drowned out. Grief swamped him; why didn't he try harder to get to her? He'd left her to die and by the time he reached the gate he'd been striving for, he was gasping with agony.

His mother... his sweet, gentle mother had been consumed by the monster and he couldn't save her. Just as he reached the gate, the twisting and trembling gate, the entire thing collapsed and everything went black.

... *nothingness*...

With a start, Andrew d'Vant suddenly sat straight up in bed, sweating profusely, feeling as if he'd just had the fright of his life. Taking a deep breath, he struggled to calm himself. He was in his familiar tent, with his familiar possessions around him, trunks of valuables, fine furnishings, coinage, and plate.

It was dark and damp this night, with the moon periodically hidden behind dark clouds that were blowing across the glittering sky. It gave the illusion of a curtain being lowered and raised as the light from behind his tent flickered and undulated.

Somewhere in the distance, thunder rolled. A storm had blown through, perhaps feeding that terrible dream. But the truth was that he'd been having that dream for as long as he could remember, ever since being chased from his home at a young age and left to fend for himself. Those days were long gone now, and he'd made a success of his life.

Even if his brother had tried to kill him.

But his mother... he'd had this dream so many times and he'd never been able to save her. Perhaps it was that sense of loss, of failure, that fed his drive and made him what he was today – a sword for hire. He was paid to fight other men's wars, proving himself the most powerful mercenary the world had ever seen. He always had to be better, stronger, and more intelligent than everyone else because, long ago, he'd been powerless to prevent the incident that had shaped his entire life.

In a sense, every sword stroke, every victory, was a victory he'd wished he'd had those years ago when he hadn't been victorious, not saving his mother. He'd failed when she'd needed him the most.

He didn't fail any longer.

Wiping his hand over his sweaty face, he happened to see a half-open missive lying on the table next to his bed. The candle was burning very low, barely illuminating the missive he'd received from yet another man who wanted him to fight his war for him. Only this missive hadn't come from a man. It had come from a woman, and she was begging for his services to save her family home.

Torridon...

That's what made this missive different from the others he'd received over the years. A woman was asking for his help, and that was unheard of. But, somehow, it meant more to him than any other missive he'd ever received. His mother had asked for help once, and he hadn't been able to help her. But this woman... he *could* help her. He had to. Because maybe in some small part, it was a victory struck for his mother from those years ago.

Aye, he knew now why he'd had that dream again. It was the fact that a woman had once again asked him for help. Even though he had offers for other jobs, huge-paying jobs, he was going to ignore them all in favor of helping this woman.

And this time, he wouldn't fail.