

CHAPTER I

BREATH OF DEATH

WHAT FEELS LIKE forever ago now, in the late winter afternoon, I was sitting beside a river. It was cold and on the verge of freezing over. My mother had made me a sheepskin jacket over the summer, so I was warm. It was my early Christmas present, because like her, I never coped well with winter, and we couldn't afford central heating. Jedidiah, a British refugee I'd known from three years old, was trying to kill time before his birthday banquet and had taken me to fish with a spear he crafted from illegal wood. No one is allowed to cut the trees where I'm from, so we rarely had firewood through the winter either. Though he was fourteen, two years older than I was, Jedidiah had the strength and stature to rival the eldest boy in our village. I watched him, amazed by his skills. He caught his first fish in minutes, and he brought it to me.

"Here."

He placed the fish in my hands, which were equal in size to his, but otherwise our attributes were north and south: He had

short mousy hair, mine was long and gold; he had bright eyes, mine were deep and dark; and he was built like an athlete, I was petite and frail. Our skin color differed too, but not for the right reason. His family was unanimously pale, but he was born with a warmer tone. My relatives were all olive, so my snowy complexion was a shock to everyone.

Naturally the fish slipped through my fingers the instant I received it, but he caught it. He looked at me with his wonderful smile.

“What was that?” he teased, nudging my shoulder.

“*Shaddaap*, you’re used to it,” I beamed back at him. He brought the fish closer to me again, only this time he held onto it.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? When my dad first showed me one of these, I was speechless. Nothing like what you see on land.”

The late sun sprang from its scales. It shimmered in his hands.

“You’re right. It’s amazing.”

Grabbing my hand, he pulled me from the grass, leading me closer to the river.

“Come on. I’ll show you how to catch your own!”

I just laughed. There was no going back, for the next hour I’d be fishing regardless of how foolish I looked, but at least he didn’t care.

“Alright! *Alright*, I’m coming over!” I squealed.

He handed me the spear and attempted to direct my hands in the correct position, but I was useless.

“You just look down the middle right here...there you go.”

With effort, I managed to adopt the right stance, but he propped up the spear from behind me because it was too heavy to hold steady.

“Aw, where are they? I think they’ve all gone to sleep.”

“Don’t be silly, Allie, here’s one now. Look.”

His finger directed me towards a murky patch a few feet from us, but the sudden break in the clouds revealed a silvery glint.

“There! There it is!” I fought to contain my excitement, fearful of frightening it. It felt like years waiting by that river in the plummeting chill, but in reality, it was a couple of minutes.

“Ok, now just keep your eye on it, and when you’re ready... strike.”

“How do I hit it?” I panicked, jerking back to him. But he turned my face around.

“Don’t look at me, look at the fish! Just imagine you’re throwing a dart, but the dart stays in your hand.”

I was good at darts. My father was gifted a board during his childhood so I found myself throwing at it on the regular. So, listening to everything Jedidiah instructed, I watched, waited for the right moment, and struck the fish with all my might. But I still missed, and it shot off down the river. What I *did* get however was a drenched face – the water shot straight up and splashed all over me. I screamed.

“That was brilliant!” Jedidiah shrieked, rolling on the ground. He even cried.

“Uck, that’s nasty! I might have fish pee on me now or something!”

He wiped his eyes and sat up.

“Don’t worry. I didn’t expect you to catch anything first time.”

He waved his hand for me to come closer, so I sat opposite him, my cheeks burning.

“Do you want to know a secret? The trick is to aim slightly below the fish.”

I wrung out my hair.

“Why?”

“Refraction. What you’re seeing isn’t actually what’s under the water, because of the way light bends. The water distorts it.”

“How?”

“I can’t remember exactly, but we covered it in science not too long ago, and my dad was telling me about it, too.”

My hair had almost dried, but my clothes were still soaked, so I took off my jacket and laid it out to dry. Jedidiah saw what I was doing and also took his jacket off, shuffling over to put it around me. It was miles too big, but still warm.

“No, no, you keep it on!”

“Don’t worry about me. You’re still wet, and I’d hate for you to get a chill on my birthday.”

He went on to light a fire with nothing but a few twigs, like his father Hamza taught him, and we cooked his fish and ate together, something we hadn’t done in many years, because he would always leave to train with his father after school. As we ate, exchanging satisfied glances, all I could think was how grateful I was to have him in my life.

“How’s the fish?”

“It’s amashing, thank you,” I moaned, my words muffled because I hadn’t even finished my mouthful.

“You’ll get there. Keep trying, and one day you’ll have enough fish for everyone in the town to try some.”

“I guess. That’s if I had a spear to start with,” I sighed, which was met with a chuckle. “What?”

“That’s why I brought you out here to try it. I was hoping you’d enjoy it, because that spear is for you.”

I bolted upright, the fish frozen at my lips.

“No...no Jed, you can’t do that for me.”

No one had ever done anything like that for me.

“You worked so hard on it, it’s a lovely spear! You can’t just give it to me – it’s *your* birthday today, not mine!”

The spear was beside him, so he took it with one hand and laid it over his lap. I tried to continue, but he cut me off.

“It *is* a lovely spear, but it’s only that way because I wanted you to have it. All along, honest.”

I simply stared.

“I don’t care if it’s my birthday. You’re always telling me you

wish you could come and do what I do with Dad, so it felt right for me to make you this. Now you can try it for yourself, without me ever having to be there. And look-” He turned the spear over to the other side and pointed to the far end, where the spearhead was. “I even engraved your name into the wood, so you know it’s yours... ‘Allie Mirabel.’”

“Come here,” I whispered, arms open for his embrace.

Wasting no time, he got up, pulled me from my feet once more and hugged me tightly, mouthing tenderly into my ear...

“Thanks for being my friend.”



When we got back home the sun had almost disappeared from the sky, leaving the faintest pink trail in its wake. The moon was visible. I knocked on my door and waited, still holding my damp coat. Hopefully Mom wouldn’t ask what had happened to it – it was getting harder and harder to lie about going to Kingdom-restricted areas on our own. My father’s footsteps diverted my worry, and I could tell they were his, because he always walked around so loudly. Sometimes it was annoying; other times, it was quite funny. The door opened.

“Where have you two been? Come on, we’ve all been waiting for you!”

I was eager to tell him about the spear.

“Dad! Guess what Jedidiah did for me!”

“Tell me about it once you’ve got your shoes off. And what’s that you’ve got all over them? Where have you been, a swamp?”

My shoes got filthy walking through the woods, most of it was marshes. Thankfully Jedidiah quickly spoke over us.

“Good evening, Mr. Mirabel, I hope you’re well. Sorry we came so late.”

My father really liked Jedidiah, probably more than me sadly.

“Ah, the man of the hour,” he laughed, as he punched Jedidi-

ah's shoulder like he always did. "We were just finishing the goat so you've come in good time."

"Don't keep hitting him, Dad, you'll hurt him."

My father just stared, put his hand on my head like I was a leaning post, and proceeded to mess up my hair, badly.

"Oh, don't you worry about him sweetheart, he's growing into a real man now. Soon you will, too."

He winked at Jedidiah, and they both cracked up. I'm sure sometimes he forgot Jedidiah wasn't his actual son, but no one told him that.

"So do you want to hear what I got?" I could've almost burst – my shoes flew off my feet.

"Go on then, Aletheia. Tell me your big news."

"Jedidiah made me a *spear!*"

"What spear?"

"That spear!" I cried, pointing to the one Jedidiah was carrying. It was even too heavy for me to carry back, not to mention almost as big as I was. My father looked at it curiously.

"Oh...that spear. A bit big for you, isn't it?" he chuckled again.

He was his own comedian. He really was.

"I'm only messing, sweetheart. That was a truly lovely thing to do for her, Jedidiah."

"Ah, well, I know how much Allie's into the whole idea of learning what Dad taught me, so I hoped you wouldn't mind me making one for her..." Jedidiah was good at being subtle.

"Of course, we don't mind!" His hand returned to my head. "It looks like you've made one girl very happy today, so it's only right we return the favor!"

My father cheerfully led us into the kitchen where my mom was, working hard on the vegetables from our little orchard, dicing them up ready for a quick boil. The goat smelled incredible, I was already drooling. Jedidiah handed me my spear as we walked in to show my mother. Hamza was also there, keeping his eye on the goat.

“There you guys are,” Hamza sighed, as we walked in. “I was just going to try and find you.”

“Mom! Jedidiah made me my own spear to go fishing, look!” I cried, hurrying to her. I knew she wasn’t keen on the idea of me using anything sharp, but I saw a hint of a grin. “Now I can catch fish for everyone!”

“That’s lovely Aletheia, now go and take it upstairs and get ready for supper. We’ll be serving once these vegetables are boiled,” she snickered, throwing the last of the vegetables in the pot. I’m sure she was laughing *at* me, but I didn’t mind. I was going to become the town’s fish merchant, and I couldn’t wait for her to see it.

Rushing out of the kitchen with the spear, I shot up the stairs and into my bedroom. There was a small mirror in my room my mother bought for me when I was seven, and from looking into it briefly, I noticed my dress was still a little damp and dirty, so I opened my closet and got changed into something fresher. As I returned to the mirror, I heard a knock on the door.

“Who is it?”

“Jed.”

“Oh, come in.”

He wandered into my room and sat on the bed, so I joined him.

“Wow, I haven’t been in here for a while. You finally changed your sheets, too.”

He found that amusing, because not long ago I slept with a very small sheet which used to belong to my mother when she was young. It was too small and the bottom of my feet poked out of it.

“Actually, Mom spent the fall knitting me a new one. She wanted to make sure it would cover me even if I had a growth spurt.”

“Well...that’s unlikely,” Jedidiah winked.

I pushed him, and he fell back onto the bed.

“Stop it! I’ll grow eventually! Look at you, all tall and strong.”

“And handsome,” he winked again.

“*Quite* handsome. Still a bit of maturing to go, I think,” I smirked. “So, what do you want?”

“Just to let you know dinner’s going to be ready in five minutes, and your mom really wants you to hurry up. Seriously, how long does it take you?”

“I was just about to come down...I had to change first, that’s all.”

At *that* moment he noticed my dress, which was typical of him.

“Ah. Nice dress.”

“Thanks. I was saving this one for your birthday. I bought it with one of the new piglets I bred.”

“Aw, you didn’t have to wear anything special.” His smile had vanished, replaced by something even more precious. A mouth void of words.

“I know I didn’t, but I like looking special, and this time I have a reason to,” I shrugged.

Suddenly Jedidiah became serious, looking at the spear I’d set in the corner of my room.

“I do want you to use that, you know.”

I was amazed he didn’t believe I would.

“Of course, I’m going to use it! Whenever I have the time, I’ll be down that river fishing, don’t you worry!”

“You’ll become the best spearfisher who ever lived if you keep using it,” he sighed reflectively. “Just promise me you’ll use it when you can.”

I nudged his shoulder with my own so he’d stop looking at the ground.

“Jed, I promise. Happy birthday.”



Thump. Thump. Thump.

I snatched the clock beside my bed, awake and bolt upright

from the incessant pounding on our front door. *Almost midnight? Who could need us at this hour?* I pondered, but I already knew the answer. I just didn't want to believe it. Before I could put the clock back the clamor ceased and was swiftly followed by an eruption of shouts and one final crash – it slipped from my hand and broke.

I leapt from my covers and out the bed. My family's distress enclosed me, blended with the fury of unfamiliar voices. I reached for the door knob to get out of my room, but I froze. Entirely froze. I could only feel my lungs, my breath agitated and heavy as I urged myself to be still. Fear had shrouded my sense of reason, paralyzing me at the doorway. My mother screamed, but I couldn't lift my arms to hold my ears – rather I screwed my eyes shut, hoping it wasn't real, and I'd wake up. Her scream pierced my mind in such a painful frequency I can still hear her in the quiet. Whenever I'm alone, my ears still ring.

There was another almighty crash and shrill of shattered glass. And silence. I drew one last breath and let out a scream of my own as I forced my door open, so loud I scared myself, I wasn't aware my voice could carry so far. My mother must've heard me, she rushed from the living room to the bottom of the stairs, hysterical.

“Aletheia! Get back in your bedroom *now!*”

I was terrified of her.

“Mommy, what's happening? What's happening? What's happening?”

“Just get back in your room!”

As she climbed the stairway Hamza flew out the living room with a Kingdom guard beneath him – they landed at the bottom of the stairs where Hamza threw hard punches to his head repeatedly. He had the man pinned, but another officer jumped him from behind and locked their elbow around his throat, allowing the other to rise and beat him with his baton.

“*Hamza!*”

My palms trembled on the handrail.

My father appeared from behind the man strangling Hamza, pulled him off and threw him against the wall with a bone-crunching thud. All the men were a state. Mom tried to rush and help my father, but more officers stormed into the hallway. Our door had been kicked down. They took both Hamza and my dad, beating them brutally.

I ran down the stairs to help – they had my mom. As I got closer, I saw from the entrance into the living room Jedidiah fighting three men by himself, using everything within reach: plates, jugs, a candle holder. And he was winning. Our table was in two, where one of the officers had fallen, and Jedidiah was the one striking them down. I screamed at them.

“Jed! Stop! Jed!”

He saw me, and looked up.

“No-Allie! Get-”

They didn’t let him finish. That distraction was all they needed. A baton struck his temple, and he fell motionless. There were too many men in front of me to reach him, I could only watch as two of them picked him up, restrained him with cuffs, and led his limp body out of the house where our fathers lay. The officer confining my mother pushed her toward my father, and she collapsed in tears. I galloped for the doorway.

“Jed! *Jed!*” I screamed so loud my voice broke. “*Je-Jed! No!*”

One of the men who wasn’t holding Jedidiah stopped and grabbed hold of me.

“Get out of here!” he yelled.

I didn’t care about him, I tried to push past him. But I was less than half the size of him.

“Jed! You can’t-*No!*”



I clenched my numb hands, my body clothed in a bitter breeze. We all stood in a line, my family, gazing at the graves of Hamza

and his wife, Olivia. A cold silence cloaked their burial ground, making me shiver with hate. I had a bandage over my left eye from where the officer struck me with his icy weapon, frosted by midnight's breath. Its tip met my forehead like a bitter kiss, leaving a perfect stripe of frozen blood in its wake. But with no pain.

'Hamza Cadman - whose roar was silenced' read his stone. As I walked out from my parents to kneel by his resting place, my lip quivered. He was, to me, like family. Whenever I saw Jedidiah, I always looked forward to meeting my uncle Hamza with him. Now the only other family I'd known were gone: Hamza and his wife, and Jedidiah with them. A reality that stung my heart, and with every beat...agonizing anger gripped my body. It threw me to the foot of my uncle and auntie's grave, and it kept me there, head to the ground.

Behind me, my parents held back their tears, sniffing and attempting to appear strong, presumably so I would cry no longer. But such a painful weight crushed me beside Hamza's grave: the thought I could've done something to stop the officers, or even if I stayed in my room Jedidiah wouldn't have been taken, and he could've saved his father. These questions racked my mind until I was nothing. Nothing but a remnant of someone who once laughed, and was happy. My mother stroked my neck as she tried to get me up, but I stayed where I was, sobbing. Not giving her any thought.

My awareness returned to the crunch of snow-dusted grass beneath my parents' feet, which grew more and more distant, until it had faded to the back of my mind. I was truly alone now, so I looked up, and my neck ached. My fingertips were sore, but with them I touched the rough granite of Hamza's memorial. I pulled them down the slab so I could feel the cracks. And again, and again...until my nails were chipped and throbbing. The wind had locked my watery eyes closed, and my legs had lost all feeling. Drops of tears gently prodded the snow beneath me, my only

warmth being my breath which I tried to catch in my hands and cling to, but every time I did a strong gust would carry it far away. And there I would remain, cold. This heaviness was too much to bear; it had compelled me down, but I knew there was only one person who could raise me up.

Me.

With one last gaze toward the grave, the earth below me heated up, and burned to a thousand degrees. But I wasn't seared by its strength, rather its power charged through me, pulsating around my body like fiery blood, melting away the remorse and awakening my sleeping passion for revenge. My teeth gritted; my eyes pierced the grave like molten swords, ready to impale whoever stood against me. The cold air around me broke and dispersed in terror from me. Only the heated hatred was left. It had consumed me, and all else was irrelevant.

My body glowed in the red mist.

"I promise you both, I *will* find your son. I *will* find Jedidiah," I snarled, and I arose reborn, a woman I remain. Allie Mirabel died that day. She died alongside Jedidiah's father.

But even death can give life.