

✦ BOOK 1 ✦

BLADES OF ETERNITY — AND THE — KEEPER OF PEACE



ZACH FOX

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— AND THE —
KEEPER
OF PEACE


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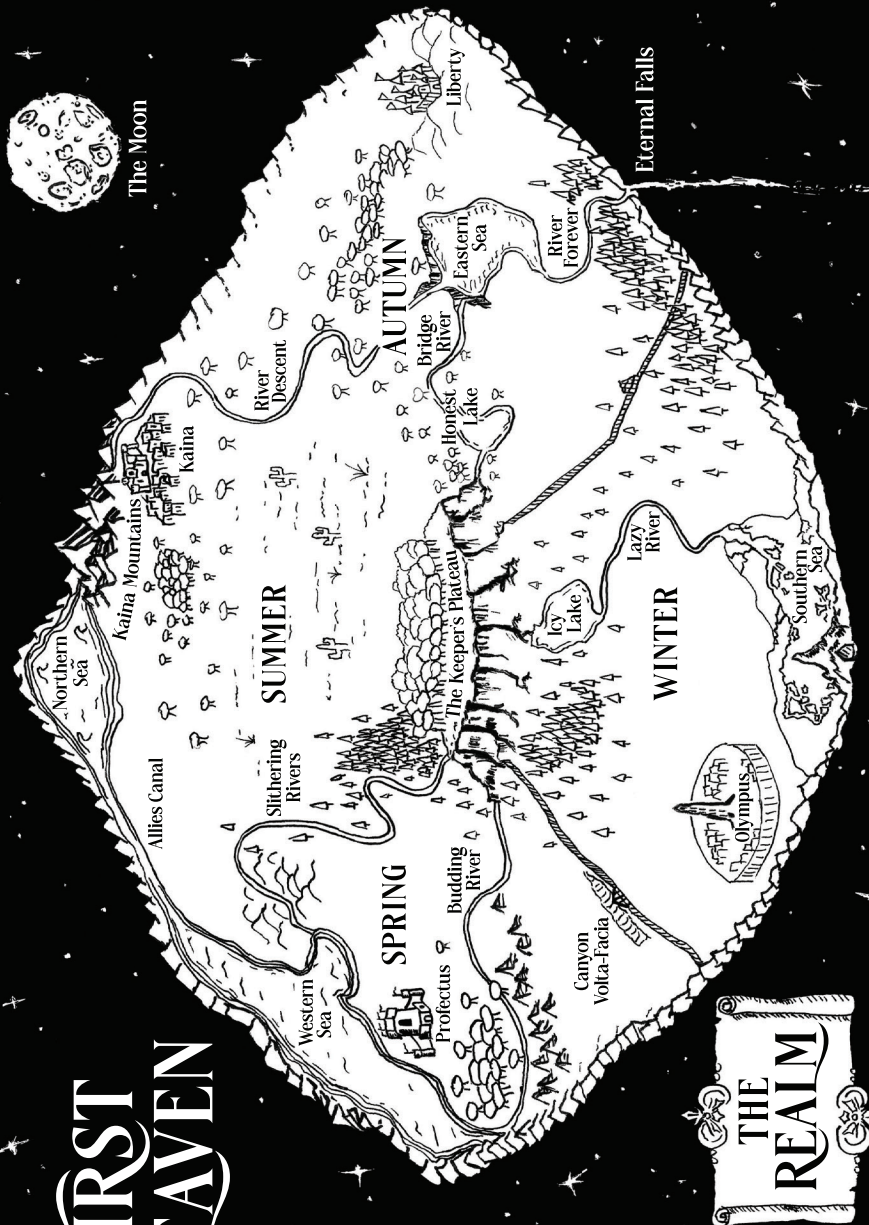
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*For my wife, Beka.
You are the dream I wanted to reach.*

FIRST HAEVEN



PROLOGUE



The night was like any other. Except it wasn't.

Sareef lingered in the shadow of a tree, studying his surroundings. The moon was full and high, painting the snowy woods white through the bare trees. Ahead, a clearing glowed in the pale light. If he was going to be ambushed, this would be the place. But he couldn't find anything out of the ordinary.

Still, he couldn't shake the feeling.

For the last hundred years, his eyes and ears had failed to explain the feeling. But the feeling always found him, the way a child's fingers always find the itching scab.

That feeling was whispering now, telling him the same thing it always did: Something was hiding just out of sight.

He crouched, gripping his sword, the Heir. The blade was given to him before the Great Beginning, by the Lamb. With the sword, the Lamb had also given him his title and his mission. He was the Keeper of Peace, protecting the harmony of the Realm.

“So long as you wield the Heir, no life can attack the kingdom that shelters you,” the Lamb had said. And so he had wandered between the four kingdoms—Summer, Autumn, Winter, and Spring—for thousands of years. Once, he’d enjoyed company in the castles of the four kingdoms. But since the feeling began to creep over him a hundred years ago, he’d isolated himself.

To Sareef, the branches looked like bony fingers reaching to grab him. Something was threatening the peace, and that meant something was threatening him. Neither wind nor wolf howled. It was as if the forest itself was stalking him in unnatural silence.

He steadied his breathing, closed his eyes, and listened. At first, his ears told him only as much as his eyes—nothing. But slowly, the beat of his own heart came into focus.

And still he listened.

Then he heard something like a whisper. Breathing mouths. Ten, maybe twelve creatures surrounding him.

He crept forward, feet never sinking into the snow.

There was the soft crunch of fresh snow as those who were hunting him adjusted to his movement. He stepped to the right and heard the creatures move to tighten their net. He did the same on the left. Again, they adjusted.

As the creatures grew excited, Sareef could hear them panting faintly. Wolves. Winter’s Pack.

Sareef inched toward the clearing. The pack would let him have the glade because they would think it impossible to defend. But by drawing them into the open, Sareef would know their number and position and have full range of motion in a fight.

When he reached the center of the clearing, he stood tall and took his hand off the Heir.

“Alpha,” he spoke calmly.

After a few silent moments, the leader of the pack stepped into the clearing. A monster of a wolf, black as night, his orange eyes glowing out from his shadowy face.

Slowly, the other wolves emerged from the woods. Ten total.

“Why are you following me, Alpha?”

“Your presence is required by the king.” Alpha’s face held no expression, and his words were those of a soldier. Plain and hard.

“Required?”

Alpha’s only reply was a sharp exhalation, and his breath hung in the winter air like a ghost.

“He is not my king and can require nothing from me.”

At that, Alpha’s hair stood up on his back. Several of the pack growled.

Sareef pulled a pin from his cloak and tied his straight, black hair in a bun. “Don’t think it has escaped me, Alpha, that your king did not send an emissary but soldiers.”

Alpha bared his yellow teeth and bent his head low. They stood there in the moonlight, staring at each other, Alpha crouched and ready to pounce.

Sareef closed his eyes and opened his ears. The first strike wouldn’t come from Alpha. He was the distraction.

Snow crunched to his left as one of Winter’s Pack crouched, ready to strike. Still, Sareef stood unmoving, resisting the impulse to reach for the Heir.

The wolf grunted, lunging for Sareef. No one saw what happened next, but they all heard the wolf yelp as it fell to the ground.

Sareef was standing one step left of where he’d been, the Heir resting in its scabbard. The wolves were stunned, but they were soldiers

with orders, so another lunged. It fell, just as the first. Then two more attacked, both dead before they hit the snow.

The remaining six tightened their circle. Sareef held his ground, calm and erect, sword in its scabbard. Three wolves lunged at the same time. Two fell with a yelp to their deaths. The third sailed through thin air where a second before Sareef had stood, and landed awkwardly in the snow.

For the first time, the four remaining wolves saw the Heir unsheathed, gleaming pale and terrifying in the moonlight. She was thin, with a slight curve, and clean, as if she'd never taken a life.

Neither sight nor sound betrayed what the Heir had done. Only the six motionless wolves told that story.

"Alpha. Tell your king he should have come himself."

"I have come, Sareef."

Sareef spun, the Heir at the ready. A man more than a head taller than Sareef stood at the edge of the clearing, fine white hair flowing over his shoulders. His eyes were blue like fire and his lips spread in a thin smile. King Winter.

"Aegis!" Sareef whispered.

"It's good to see you, old friend."

"Friend? A friend would have sent an invitation."

"You wouldn't have come. You have the integrity needed to follow the truth you can't see. You knew this was coming. That's why you haven't visited the halls of the four kingdoms in so long." Aegis chuckled. "Really, I owe you thanks. Since you've hidden yourself so well, no one will come looking when I make Winter your new home."

"So you will try to rule the four kingdoms?"

King Winter raised his eyebrows. "Tell me, Sareef, what good is a throne if you're still slave to a higher throne?"

Sareef's eyes widened as his heart quickened, and for the first time that night, he was truly scared. For a hundred years, Sareef had believed that one of the monarchs would try to seize control of the Realm. But he'd never imagined that one might take Heaven's throne. "Aegis! You would rebel against Heaven? Your heart has turned to evil!" Sareef's hands tightened around the Heir.

"Evil? No, my friend. It is evil to create little servants, tell them they are kings, and call it love. It's evil to say, 'I'm generous because I gave you breath and merciful because I let you keep it.' You see, the Lamb isn't right just because he came before us. He's a tyrant who always keeps the best for himself. It will be my greatest act of good to climb to the heavens, topple his throne, and take his crown."

Sareef needed to escape. The border to Autumn was less than a mile east. Sareef was fast, but so was Aegis. A race to the border would be a game of chance.

But then he had an idea. Aegis loved the sound of his own voice. If Sareef could lure him into conversation, maybe he could get a head start.

"How can you do this? You were there before the Great Beginning with the Lamb. Your sword, Whistler, was given to you by the Lamb. You are the greatest among us governors, but it was the Lamb who made you that way. You're supposed to protect the Realm, not bring it to war."

The smile faded from King Winter's face as he looked to the night sky. "I was there. I remember when he gave us thirteen governors the Blades of Eternity. When he gave you the Heir. I remember the first time I held Whistler. I looked at the other twelve governors and felt immense and powerful. When I pulled Whistler from her scabbard, I watched you twelve shudder then, the way you are right now."

Aegis drew Whistler as he spoke, and a chilling chord sang from the blade. The sword seemed to move in tandem with his limbs, like it was part of his body.

The blade's song folded over Sareef like a blanket. To Sareef, it seemed as though the blade were speaking to him, calm and soothing. He remembered sitting in King Winter's ivory tower, next to a hearth, hot fire toasting his cheeks, as he listened to Aegis sing as only he could.

Sareef would have smiled at the memory, but instead, he frowned. That was a lifetime ago, and Sareef couldn't shake the feeling that the blade's song was charming him only to hide something, the way a mother's lullaby serves as a veil between a child and the harsh world outside its mother's arms. Sareef exhaled hard. The melody, disarming as it was, was only a spell. The kiss of an enemy. Sareef shivered as he dislodged the song from his heart and gripped the Heir.

Aegis scowled, seeming to notice Sareef had resisted Whistler's song. "I enjoy your company, Sareef. Your feeble strength makes me feel strong. But for all the strength I feel when I look at you and the other governors, I felt just as weak when I looked at the Lamb. You see, power is always a comparison. Next to an ant, a squirrel is strong. But next to the lion, he's weak. Or take your blade, for instance. It was beautiful when the Lamb gave it to you. But you've made it a legend. The Heir, sword of silence." It was a nickname that the blade had acquired over the years, as Sareef always dodged an attack rather than parrying. "A blade that has slain a thousand yet never touched another sword. But put it next to my blade..."

Aegis made two clean strokes with Whistler, and two chords sang out in harmony, echoing through the frozen forest.

"...and the winner is obvi..." Aegis lost his words as Sareef shot from the glade like a bolt of lightning.

Sareef felt a branch scrape his face as he darted toward the border. He chanced a glance backward but saw no one pursuing. For a split second, he thought he'd make it. Then he heard a cracking above his head and rolled right on reflex.

A note rang out as Whistler crashed into the ground where he'd just been. Aegis had run along the branches and attacked from above.

Sareef was on his heels as Aegis lunged at him, note after note singing out from Whistler, forming an eerie song. With each swing of Whistler, the song grew stronger, until Sareef felt it vibrating through him. The song sounded and felt like hopelessness. Like defeat and loss.

Sareef could feel the song railing on him, as if his heart had a door and the song were a battering ram slamming against it. And he felt the door starting to splinter.

This was the real power of Whistler. Not the song itself, but the way the song manipulated those who heard it. The Lamb had given Aegis the blade with the responsibility of bringing glory. Long ago, when Aegis sang about the Lamb, he'd said it was like bringing one thing into perfect focus in a person's heart, obscuring everything else.

In Sareef's heart, his belief that he'd make it to Autumn's border was obscured by the speed and strength of Aegis. *How could I defeat a force like Aegis?* He chased the thought from his mind.

Sareef faked west and cut east toward the border just as Aegis sliced through a tree like it was a blade of grass. If Sareef hadn't swerved, he'd have been crushed by the falling tree.

Aegis stood between Sareef and the border, and for a moment, the song's echo faded to the near silence of the sleeping forest. But in a blink, Whistler swung and the song continued. Trees fell as the blade sang, each stroke coming so close to Sareef's face that he could

feel its breeze. He dodged, sidestepped, and rolled, all while looking for an opening to attack.

Instead, with each move, he felt himself giving up ground. The blows came faster and faster, and the song grew stronger, fracturing the door to his heart. Aegis used attacks like a tightening noose until Sareef knew he couldn't duck the next strike.

So he did what he'd never done and used the Heir to block. When the blades met, the saddest chord ever heard rang out. It echoed on and on until the sound reached the farthest corners of the four kingdoms.

Creatures in every kingdom heard the sound and wondered at it. The day would come to be known as the day of the sound.

Sareef clenched the Heir, pushing against Whistler with shaking arms. With the last of his strength, he pushed Aegis away and immediately slid the Heir into her scabbard.

Sareef knelt down in the snow and stared into eyes that burned like a blue flame. The moonlit woods were quiet, but Whistler's song echoed still in Sareef's broken heart, his voice cracking as he said, "I yield."

CHAPTER ONE

BORDERS



100 YEARS LATER

Borders were a fascinating temptation for Mel. Or maybe it wasn't so much the border as it was the things on the other side. No matter the reason, whenever he found a window to escape his responsibilities as Prince of Summer, he wound up at the border of one of the neighboring kingdoms.

"Young master. It's nearly time to turn back." Nag yanked him from his thoughts back to the present. "We have to strike our post before the witan."

Spring lay far to the southwest, but Autumn was only fifteen miles to the east, just past Mount Kaina. On this particular day, Mel strolled along the border of Autumn with his babysitter, the horse Nag. Technically, the horse's name was Shadowflash, and he held the title Dominie—he was a real thoroughbred of a horse. But Mel took pleasure in turning everything official and serious into a joke. So Shadowflash became Nag, and his title babysitter.

Mel ran his hand over the tops of the half-grown cornstalks,

wondering what it must have been like before the border laws, when you could move about in the four kingdoms without stopping at checkpoints. His father, King Summer, often spoke of those times.

“It all changed after the day of the sound...” his father would say. Since then, Summer had regarded the other kingdoms with suspicion—Autumn and Winter in particular. His father had developed an alliance with the Queen of Spring, however.

King Summer believed the sound had come from Whistler, King Winter’s blade, and he’d said just that at the witan fifty years ago. But at that meeting, King Winter only expressed his “shared desire to solve the mystery.”

Mel’s father had called for another witan this very night. Representatives from the other three kingdoms had been arriving for days, and Summer had become an unusual mixture of creatures, reminding him of the goulash made by the royal maid Helda.

There were panda bears, musk oxen, a beautiful bird called a pheasant, merchants selling vibrant silks from Spring, stunning carpentry from Autumn, and devices to make life easier from Winter. There were missionaries from Spring fervently preaching on street corners. Mel thought it a welcome change from the boring monotone of Summer’s priests.

Mel had caught himself staring at the strange creatures a half dozen times, but he was most excited to see King Winter, as were most of Summer’s residents. From what he’d heard, Aegis was stunning in every way: tall, strong, and dangerously smart.

It was barely noon, and Mel was in no hurry to get back. “I don’t need to strike my post, Nag. Helda tells me I’m perfect.”

Everyone in the four kingdoms kept a post. It was nothing more than a log really, aside from how it was used. At eventide each day, they struck

their post with a dull sword for each sin they'd committed during the day, plus one extra for the sins they weren't aware of. Then, once a year, they brought their posts to the temple where the priests burned them.

The horse twitched his ears and glanced at Mel. "Well, you'll still need one for the sins you're not aware of. Like arrogance."

Mel smiled. "You don't understand, Nag. I'm a picture of humility."

Nag shook his head. "You shouldn't say that, young master."

"Oh! And why not?"

"Pride before the fall and all that," said the horse. "Besides, it's a show of solidarity to strike your post before a witan."

"It's a show all right."

"It is an indication that one's intentions at the witan are pure."

"You know, Nag, I hadn't thought of that! Once you beat a post, you can't possibly tell a lie."

Nag glared at him but didn't bother to answer Mel's sarcasm. "Your inability to understand is not your failure."

"What does that mean?"

Nag looked straight ahead, taking his time to find his answer. "Once, long ago, before you were born, when the Keeper of Peace still visited, there was such an awesome respect for the significance of the post in our lives. The Lamb gave us the sacrament of the post so that by striking it, our sins are transferred to it. And then, when that post is burned by the priest, our sins are destroyed."

Nag's gaze softened as he turned back to Mel. "So you see, young master, the post is a reminder not of your sin but of your deliverance from it. It seems to me that our young have grasped the ritual, but not the reality behind it. I fear my generation taught yours what to do without telling you why."

Mel thought of a few sarcastic comments but kept them to himself.

Something about Nag's words provoked him. "You should be a priest instead of a babysitter."

Nag smiled at that. "No. I enjoy my time with you too well."

Nag really wasn't half bad. He was polished and serious like everyone who worked in the Royal House. And he did do that annoying thing with his lips. But secretly, Mel enjoyed his company.

Mel was just about to turn and head back when something flickered on the horizon. His heart skipped a beat as a blue flag with a white dragon came into focus. Winter's standard. It could mean only one thing: Winter's royal caravan was headed his way.

"Nag, look!"

When Nag saw the flag, his body tensed, and he stood more erect and soldierly. "Oh, dear."

"Come on, Nag! How about a piggyback?"

"You're funny, young master. A jester-prince."

"No. Seriously. Let me climb up."

"Oh, fine. That's what I'm here for. I'm just a carriage with a brain and a heart." Nag stopped and Mel hopped onto his back.

"Oink-oink, piggy," Mel teased.

"Too far."

"Just get me to that caravan, Nag."

"Young master, it's highly irregular to approach a royal caravan without official business."

"Well, I'm officially curious, you worrywart."

"As you wish, young master." Nag took off, and Mel's dreads bounced off his dark, sweaty cheeks as they galloped toward the caravan nearing the border fence.

The forward guard for the caravan held his right hand up, palm facing out, a sign of peace in the four kingdoms. Mel did the same.

When they were fifty feet or so from the caravan but still on opposite sides of the border fence, Mel waved and introduced himself. “Melik, Prince of Summer.” He hated his full name, but the formalities of royal life made him use it.

“Lafe, Captain of the Guard of the Kingdom of Winter. How can I be of service, Your Royal Highness?”

“I don’t have any real need of service. I’m simply curious. Is the King of Winter with the caravan?”

Lafe eyed Mel suspiciously, but then he seemed to decide Mel was harmless, and his expression relaxed. Lafe opened his mouth, but before he spoke, a voice came from the carriage.

“Captain, why have we stopped?” The voice was too young to be King Winter’s. But it had a harshness that meant whoever it was expected to be obeyed.

“The Prince of Summer greets us, Your Highness.” As Lafe spoke those last two words, Mel’s heart fell to the pit of his stomach. And his fear was confirmed as the Prince of Winter, Azazel, stepped out of the carriage onto the ground.

He was taller than Mel by several inches, hair long and snow white. Mel had met him once, many years ago when they were children. Mel didn’t like him then, and judging by the cocky smile Azazel was wearing, that wasn’t about to change.

“Well, Prince Melik. I would’ve recognized you anywhere.” His smile widened. “Pint sized and dark as you were the first time I saw you.”

Mel immediately felt like a volcano about to erupt. He’d enjoy crossing blades with the Prince of Winter but knew his duty to Summer: peace. So he chose his next best weapon. Words.

“Greetings, Prince Azazel,” Mel said flatly.

“Hard to forget your better?”

“Well...you’re a bit taller than I remember, but your hair is still white as bird’s poop.”

Azazel’s smile disappeared, and Mel thought he’d seen Azazel’s hand twitch toward his sword. Maybe.

Azazel stood on one side of the border, and Mel sat on Nag, a few paces away, on the opposite side of the fence, each glaring at the other.

“A dirty mouth on a dirty boy from a dirty country.” Azazel shook his head disapprovingly, like a parent scolding a child. “I don’t know why Father even entertains you northern barbarians. King Summer’s witan is a joke.”

Mel could feel the lava rising in his chest. But Azazel was baiting him, and he wasn’t about to lose a contest of words. “Perhaps your father means for you to learn kindness and general decency. Things we teach our children here in Summer.”

Azazel spat across the border into Summer.

Nag stirred uneasily. “Young master. Perhaps we should greet the prince properly and escort him to the city?”

Azazel laughed. “Best listen to your maid, boy. Or I’ll show you how we deal with children who misbehave in Winter.”

Mel leapt from Nag and strode toward the border until a space only the width of the fence was between them. “I’d love to see how you deal with children. But I suspect your mouth got ahead of your blade, boy.”

Mel spat across the fence onto Azazel’s feet.

Mel stared unblinkingly into Azazel’s lightning-blue eyes as a hot gust blew. Mel knew what was going to happen. He didn’t know how he knew, but he knew it as sure as he knew he’d be striking his post later. Azazel was going to draw his blade, and Mel would draw his. When the gust died, there was a moment of perfect stillness.

And then it happened.

To the few onlookers, it must've seemed that they drew their swords at the same time. But Mel drew his a split second after Azazel. Then two things happened. Their blades met with a sharp clang, and a girl's voice shouted almost as loud as that clang.

Both Mel and Azazel looked to see who had yelled. She was tall and sharp-featured, with hair as white as Azazel's. She leapt down from the royal carriage with impossible grace, landing in stride as she walked straight at the pair of swordsmen.

"Brother, put your sword away. And Prince Melik..." Her face was hard as stone. "I would greatly appreciate if you'd take the stallion's advice and escort us to the capital."

Mel felt awkward, his sword still pressing against Azazel's. He took a step backward and slid his sword into its scabbard. "Forgive me, Princess." He thought to compliment her but somehow couldn't put the words together, so he just stood there stupidly.

Azazel put his sword away. "You should know your place, sister."

Her eyes darted at Azazel. "And you should live up to yours." She walked past her brother to the fence and gave a slight bow. "I'm Eva, Princess of Winter. Please forgive my brother; I'm afraid he's not used to the heat." Mel knew who she was, of course, though he'd never had occasion to meet her.

"It's fine. I'm Mel, by the way. I mean, I know I already said that. But not to you..." was all he could bumble out as he stared at her. He'd heard Princess Eva was beautiful, but she was something much more than that. Her snow-white hair blew gently in the breeze, dancing past dazzling blue eyes. But it wasn't just her appearance. She moved with elegance and spoke with unwavering strength.

Eva grinned. "Well, Mel. Would you do us the honor of escorting us?"

Mel just gaped, trying to think of the right words to say as Eva's smile grew. Mel was relieved when Nag spoke. "Your Highness, there is a checkpoint a mile north up the fence line."

Finally, Mel was gaining his wits. "Yes. We'll ride ahead and arrange passage across. And we'll see you the rest of the way to the capital."

"Thank you, Mel."

Her smile widened and Mel's heart jumped as he said, "You're quite welcome, Eva...I mean, Princess. I mean..."

Eva offered him no bailout. Instead, she just grinned at him. He turned and walked away, only because he didn't want to look any dumber than he already did.

As he mounted Nag, he glanced back at Azazel, who was still glaring at him. Mel again felt the volcano in his chest.

"Young master," Nag said.

"Not now, Nag."

"Princess Eva may have just stopped a war." Nag's voice sounded like it did when he was teaching Mel in school.

Mel had lost his head in the moment, never thinking about how far-reaching the consequences of his decisions might be. Nag was right, and it scared Mel. "Thank the Lamb."

"Yes. Thank the Lamb for Princess Eva, who you're quite taken with, if I'm right."

Mel stifled a smile. "I don't know."

"You don't know, huh? Well, I know one thing for sure," said Nag as they trotted up the fence line.

"What's that?"

"You're going to need to beat the bark off your post before the witan."

Mel chuckled. But then a thought struck him and he spun Nag around. "Princess!"

She looked in his direction but said nothing.

“When will King Winter be arriving?”

Mel was surprised when Princess Eva’s cheeks flushed rosy. But when she spoke, her voice was calm and steady. “He’s not coming. Prince Azazel will represent Winter.”

Mel’s heart sank.