

## Prologue

Kagh Lefin, Gazer of Halspyr, was on the run.

Somewhere in the forest behind, a Shadow was chasing him down, eager to capture, kill, or worse-Corrupt him.

This wasn't the first time Lefin had been on the run. In a way, he had been on the run all his life. That was to be expected, of course. In this world, those born with magical gifts were bound to be hunted by those who sought to Corrupt and control them for their own purposes. That was why, as a mere boy, he had been trained in the arts of stealth, combat, and magic-so that he could run, hide, and when necessary, fight.

But this night was different.

This was the first time one of Lefin's adversaries actually had a reason to capture him-apart from his mere existence as a Gifted. Tonight, the person chasing Lefin was after not his powers, but after something else...something dangerous...something in Lefin's own travel pouch.

Lefin was dressed in a worn brown tunic, coupled with a pair of trousers of the same color. He wore a pair of thick, sturdy boots that came up about six inches above his ankles. They each had a thin puresteel lining for extra protection. Secured around Lefin's waist was a leather belt with a metal clasp and several clips along its length, given to Lefin by his first trainer, Kagh Tolin. Clipped to the left side of that belt and strapped against Lefin's thigh was a long-handled dueler's axe, Lefin's sole inheritance from his father's passing. It lay sheathed, coming down to just above Lefin's kneecap. Other than the belt and his clothes, the axe was Lefin's only physical possession.

Lefin stood crouched behind a large boulder that jutted out of the forest floor. As long as he remained crouched, it was tall enough to provide him cover to avoid being seen, but at the same time it was short enough that Lefin could easily peek over the top to observe the forest scene before him.

The forest was a thick assortment of tall redpine trees that grew tightly together and stretched high into the sky. Their low-hanging branches bore thousands of long, crimson pine needles that tinged the entire forest with a reddish hue. The ground beneath was littered with deadfall from the years past.

In the sky above the treeline, Lefin could see the full moon high above, looking down at the forest. Its lightward side was showing tonight, in a full, bright phase that lit up the forest enough for Lefin to see the surrounding forest without his enhanced abilities. Lefin shivered. He had never liked lightward nights. They had always made him too easy to track.

For the past few months, Lefin had been working on something important with his comrade, Kagh Paldyas. After following a trail of rumors and legends, Paldyas had found a

ruined shrine of the Pure, one of the hundred or so left over from the Days of Purity. He had intended to renew the magical protections there and use it as a training site for his apprentice, Hersytt. But after a few extra days of scoping out the site, he'd discovered something within the shrine. Something dangerous.

On the ground beside Lefin lay a small leather pouch with closed drawstrings. He glanced at this often to reassure himself. Paldyas would have joked that he was being too paranoid. Lefin wouldn't exactly put it that way. He had never thought himself paranoid, more...careful.

He continued surveying the forest ahead of him. He knew he would have to be on the move soon. His adversary couldn't be too far behind him. Lefin had been spending all night traveling intermittently, moving from one hiding place to the next, doubling back every now and then, making twists and turns at random intervals, taking the most circuitous path possible. A strange tactic, but one he was sure would throw off his opponent.

Lefin watched the forest for a few minutes more, preparing to start moving again. Finally, he stood up fully, picked up the pouch, turned around, and placed it gently in the pocket of his trousers.

Something moved behind him.

He didn't see it, nor did he hear it. Rather, he sensed it within himself, almost like a warning, or a prompting.

Slowly, Lefin turned around and dropped slowly to his knees behind the rock again. He watched the forest through the fog, vigilantly searching for what had caused the Warning. The fog remained silent, unmoving. He saw nothing. He stayed there for a few more moments, staring at the dark, unmoving forest. Then, he engaged his Gaze.

The forest, once dark and gloomy, suddenly brightened to his view. The fog thinned, the moonlight intensified and the darker corners of the forest came into sharper view. With this enhanced eyesight, Lefin could clearly see the details of the forest and analyze the scene to find out what had given him pause.

It didn't take him long. There, at the edge of the forest, about a hundred feet away, was a large, elk-like figure. It was tall and lean, and its long, bramble-like horns were accented by its deep crimson eyes.

Lefin groaned slightly. He had expected anything, but a Brackenhunter was not something he preferred to deal with on such an important night. He'd never fought one, and while he felt decently confident about his hunting abilities, he didn't want to find out now whether a Brackenhunter would be ferocious enough to kill him. He hadn't wanted to

wait much longer, but he decided that while the beast wasn't close enough to see him, it still could easily hear him if he tried to sneak away now. He'd have to wait until it left.

A few minutes passed, and the Brackenhunter finally turned and walked away. Lefin watched until it finally vanished from view, then he breathed a sigh of relief and released his Gaze.

Another Warning pricked him. Lefin spun around for the second time, this time in the opposite direction, rising quickly to his feet.

Out of the shadows, a man appeared. To Lefin's view, he appeared to materialize out of pure shadow, the darkness of the forest collecting and taking the shape of a man. He hovered a half foot in the air, fully formed, then stepped down as if from an invisible platform.

He was of medium height, with brown hair and green eyes. He was skinny and pale, and wore a simple dark robe with embroidered patterns on it. He smiled as he stepped down from the air. Lefin stiffened, axe hand reaching down toward his sheathed weapon.

"If Tolin taught you anything," the newcomer said, "it was how to be jumpy." He stepped forward.

Lefin stepped back, wary. "How do you know my master?" he questioned.

"Your master?" the man asked. He snorted incredulously. "I believe you mean to say *our* master." He stepped forward again, and his face finally became clear. Lefin stiffened once more. He recognized this man.

"You," Lefin whispered.

Kagh Salje smiled through the darkness. His smile was unnerving-not because of disfigurement, but because of how exactly it resembled the smile of Lefin's oldest friend and fellow apprentice. Corruption Shadows were known for their immaculate representation of those they consumed.

"I had wondered when I would next be seeing you, Lefin," Salje said calmly.

"I had hoped it would be longer, Salje," Lefin replied dryly. He didn't have to guess why Salje was here.

Salje watched Lefin with diligent, searching eyes. Lefin tried not to think about where he'd seen that expression before. Screams in the distance. Fire all around. Halspyr falling to ruin.

Lefin pushed it out of his mind. Salje continued to watch him. Lefin needed to get past him, knowing the Corruption had probably sent him as a distraction. Lefin considered his options. Salje was a strong warrior, and Lefin doubted he would fall easily, even if he weren't already Gifted. As it stood, Salje's Corruption may have weakened his original powers in some ways, but it had granted him dangerous new abilities in return. Lefin

couldn't fight those; to attempt to do so was to risk exposing himself to Corruption. So, fighting Salje—at least with the intent to defeat him—was out of the question.

Lefin could just run. His destination was just a short distance away. Once he reached it, he could probably set up a protection or two and block Salje out. But then...how could he outrun Salje? He'd been a faster runner than anyone else Lefin had known before Halspyr collapsed. He would catch up to Lefin within seconds.

Lefin considered his options further, then made his decision. He reached toward the handle of his axe and unclipped it from his belt. Then he sprung at Salje.

The reaction was immediate. Salje faded into shadow, his Warning sense giving him notice of the danger moments before it could harm him.

Lefin landed a few paces beyond where Salje had stood, and turned around. As he did, he felt his Warning sense fully activate. Now that Lefin was in real danger, his protections kicked into full gear. He felt adrenaline course through his body in a sudden surge. His muscles tensed, his ears pricked, and he stepped into battle stance. His Gaze engaged instinctively, and the forest brightened immediately.

Through his Warning sense, Lefin felt a slight tug in his stomach. Years of practicing with his Warning sense let him analyze the prick and understand its message in a matter of seconds. By the direction and intensity of that tug, Lefin could tell immediately where Salje was next rematerializing. Without thought, he spun on the spot and gripped his axe, training his eyes toward the tree trunk in front of him.

Sure enough, Salje formed almost immediately out of the shadow and drew a long-bladed rapier from his belt. The fashioning exactly matched the sword Salje had died clutching onto. Save, of course, for the intricate details carved into the blade—a side effect of the Corruption's touch on Salje's being.

Salje stepped forward and swept his arm upward in an underhand swipe. Lefin's Warning pricked him just moments before the blade made contact with his chest, allowing him to twist out of the blade's reach before it could pierce his skin. As Lefin stepped backward, another Warning pricked him and he ducked, spinning back to face Salje as his rapier swept over Lefin's head.

Salje then swung his leg around to kick Lefin in the stomach. Lefin dodged backward, once again pricked by his Warning sense. He drew the axe in his left arm up and over, moving to bring it down on Salje's back.

Salje started, as if something had stung him, and immediately dodged away, just moments before Lefin's axe came down on where his back had once been. Lefin brought his axe down further into the ground, and lost his balance, toppling to his knees. He mentally kicked himself. He'd known that Salje also had a Warning sense—every Gifted had one—he

just wasn't sure if it had fully activated yet. One of his tactics was catching Salje off-guard before his Warning sense could reach full effect. Evidently, that hope had been in vain.

Salje stood up straight and brought his rapier down on Lefin's exposed neck. Lefin felt the prick, twisted, and parried the blow with his axe.

The two of them battled on for several minutes, striking and dodging at exactly the right moments. Gifted combat was paradoxical that way-landing a hit was almost impossible when both participants could dodge the other just in time. It was exhilarating-if a little tiring. Lefin had to push himself not to stop fighting, so as to avoid stiffening up and gaining a disadvantage. He'd need an advantage if he wanted his plan to work.

After a few minutes, Salje finally came close to landing a hit on Lefin. His rapier passed within dangerous proximity to his right cheek, just below his eye. Lefin smiled, then dropped his axe, reached up, and grabbed the blade of the rapier with his bare hands, stopping it mid-swing.

Salje started, surprised, but didn't have time to react as Lefin shoved the sword forward, slamming the hilt into the center of Salje's chest.

Salje gasped, and his hands flew from the sword hilt as Lefin threw it upward, spinning it slightly towards him, and expertly caught the sword by its hilt. He slashed forward at Salje. Salje dissolved involuntarily into shadow, his Warning sense unable to protect him by adrenaline alone.

Lefin smiled. He'd been practicing that move for a few months now, anticipating when he might next encounter Salje. When Salje Cloaked, he could choose his destination only if his Cloak was voluntary. If it was involuntary, however, Salje would have no choice where he landed-giving Lefin a definite edge.

Lefin picked up his axe, and felt a prick tell him where Salje was about to land. Moving quickly, Lefin reached into his pocket, withdrawing his leather pouch. He opened it, removed its contents-a small carving knife and a single wooden key-then cast the pouch into the forest, towards where Salje would be appearing. False trail set, Lefin turned and bolted the other direction, taking cover behind a tree trunk.

Salje re-materialized seconds later. Lefin watched as he stumbled, looking around in mild confusion, almost tripping on a rock behind him. It was a few seconds before he finally righted himself, then sank to his knees, gasping and leaning against the trunk of a redpine to steady himself.

Lefin frowned. *That was odd*, he thought. Salje wouldn't have let his guard down that easily. Why wasn't he retrieving his sword? It was almost as if...

Lefin caught a violent prick of Warning that felt like a stab to his stomach. He spun as a fist caught him square in the face, pounding him backward into the tree trunk. He cried out, then felt a jattering, skull-shaking thud against his skull as his attacker's fist pounded into it, unimpeded by Lefin's faulted Warning sense.

Lefin's head burned with agony, and he crumpled to the ground, crying out in pain. His vision swam. He felt dizzy. He turned his head upward, engaging his Gaze, trying to get a clear view of his attacker. No, not one attacker. Two. The first was somehow Salje. The second one...

Lefin froze, skin crawling as he recognized the second man's face. No, he thought.

Kagh Paldyas grinned as he met Lefin's eyes. He chuckled. "How's it going, old friend? Do you like my new look?" He spread his arms out, as if to show off the thick black cloak he now wore. "I'd say it suits me."

It did. In a terrifying, twisted, horrific way. No, Lefin thought again, unable to think anything else. Kagh Paldyas-the man Lefin had traveled with for years. This was the only Gifted, save Kagh Yalte, whom Lefin had known since Halspyr's destruction. This was the man who had taken him and Salje in when they'd escaped from Halspyr's ruins in the first place. This was the only man Lefin had ever come to trust.

And now, he had Fallen.

Salje's death had happened all over again.

Lefin tried desperately to pull himself up. His head flared in protest, and he fell, vision swimming once again. His Warning sense flared within him. There was danger. Serious danger. Lefin was about to Fall-about to succumb to Corruption himself. His Warning sense knew it. And he knew it. He needed to get up! Lefin's Gaze activated and, fueled by his Warning sense, Lefin saw what was coming. He saw, moments before it happened, Paldyas's foot coming down on his head. He saw Salje rejoicing in his victory over his friend. He couldn't let that happen. He couldn't-

His Warning sense flared, and Paldyas's foot-seen ahead of time by Lefin's Warning-induced Gaze-crashed into Lefin's face. Lefin cried out. There was nothing he could do.

The last survivor of Halspyr was finally dead.

End of prologue