

PROLOGUE:

The tree's gnarled roots twisted around her foot, and she rushed to the slumbering ground. Branches slapped her pale cheeks, leaving burning red flesh in their wake. Her head rested on a pillow of dead leaves, and her lungs burned while she gasped. The earthy bitterness lingered after she spat the dying plants from her mouth, and she returned to lying in the foliage. In the icy glow of the full moon, the leaves danced and twirled with the sighing wind as their partners before landing softly on the ground.

Pain flared like wildfire in her ankle. She collapsed into the dead undergrowth, listening to it crunch. Brow furrowed, she inhaled before returning to her task of untangling herself from the roots. Forcing herself to stand, she gingerly placed weight on her leg. A violent string of curses against the Maker escaped her lips as she pitched forward into the dry brush. Pain burned through her useless leg. She glanced back over her shoulder to see what her pursuers would do.

Thief. That was what they had called her when finding her with a bag full of bread and small jewels. Dragged to the dungeon, she had slipped between the bars as the traders waited for the King's Woodsmen's justice. She knew her neck would stretch for both if caught.

Scanning the dark woods, the woman knew they were close. *Thief! Thief!* The chant, a battle cry of the small town's traders, haunted her. She heard them, saw their torches, as she ran through the fields and splashed in the frozen water. The sky darkened as she listened to their shouts. She could pinpoint her followers as their torches flickered against the darkness.

Run, she ordered herself as the pain in her leg grew. She swallowed and looked deeper into the woods. From stories, she knew what lay hidden deep in the shedding trees. Godless creatures. Ones that could perform magic with a simple thought. She knew they could force her to live as a wild dog with merely a blink and eat scraps from their tables. With that fear, she willed herself to go on.

Forcing herself to stand, pain flooded her senses. She silently cried, her hand reaching out to grasp her ankle. The woman took a step, and a soft whimper escaped her lips. With deep breaths, she brought the trembling leg up and took another step. The pain burned this time, and her desire to scream grew. She wobbled before her leg gave out and caved to the broken bone. Behind her, the hounds bayed, forcing her to try again.

The woman staggered until her ability to stand abandoned her. Unable to stop herself from falling, she tumbled down the hill. Branches and bushes whipped past her, slapping her across the face, and a yelp escaped her lips when she reached the bottom. She was abruptly silenced with a thud as her chin connected with a rotten tree stump. Teeth sinking into her tongue, her mouth filled with the thick coppery taste of blood. It encompassed her senses, taking all of them over as she gagged. Coughing, she watched the blood splatter across the leaves and ground. The salty smell of the blood mixed with her tears, and she watched as the vital dark liquid dripped from the bushes. Her muffled screams came out as a whimper, while the blood dribbled down her chin. Gaze drifting, her hand wiped the blood away from her chin. It trailed behind her in the darkness as more blood took its place.

Dark eyes scanning around, the woman saw nothing but slumbering woods. In the distance, she heard them. *Thief! Thief!* She heard something else in the void. Hidden

behind the shedding trees, the woman barely noticed it. Twigs broke. Fear gripped her. The men were hoping to surprise her. Horse snorting, her head whipped around as the twigs broke again. She saw the horse in the corner of her eye. Black as the surrounding night, she barely noticed the rider. In a blink, he was gone, and the woman knew she needed to continue.

She pulled herself to her feet as pain flooded her senses, and she whimpered. She took a step, letting out a soft cry as pain radiated through her body. Leg trembling, she stepped over and felt the limb give way. This time her arms braced her from collapsing, and she pulled herself forward. She dragged the leg behind her. With each pull of the broken limb, pain shot through her, and air caught in her throat. Tree bark gave way and peeled from the sleeping trees as she crawled through the woods. Still, the woman forced herself to continue. Behind her, her broken limb caught on a downed branch, and pain forced her to drop into the foliage. Deep, ragged, broken breaths escaped her lips as a blood and saliva mixture splattered on the dead ground. It dwindled to a steady throb as she heard the hounds and shouts grow louder. The desire to run faded as she heard the yips and bays of the hounds grow closer. A fresh voice overpowered her senses.

Let them come. Better to die than be a cripple.

She rested on the ground, resigned to her recapture. The woman saw a blur of a horse as it moved closer to her. She knew they were coming, and a spark of fear reignited inside of her. Her fingers searched for a weapon, and her grip tightened around a broken stick that was twice her size. She brought it closer as the black horse and rider appeared in front of her. She clutched it closer to her chest as her gaze met the rider's. He

advanced, and the woman found herself unable to breathe as she heard the yips behind her moving closer.

The woman stood with the broken tree limb as a crutch. The mob approached even closer. The lights from their torches danced, and she feared they meant to smoke her out. Ahead of her, the horse approached. She scanned the darkened forest, knowing that if she didn't act, the rider would run her down. The thumping of her heart grew to drown out the sounds of hooves crunching on snow and the bays of the hounds.

She gripped the broken branch. Survival returned to the forefront of her mind and, releasing a ragged breath, the woman used the crutch in her escape. The woman forced herself to creep forward even as she noticed the horse and rider were gone. The hounds grew closer, and the woman kept inching forward. She stumbled, trying to catch herself with her broken leg, and her mouth opened in a silent scream. Blood poured from her mouth as she examined the starless night through the shedding trees.

Head turning to the side, her body twitched as she gasped for air to push down the agonizing pain. The woman watched the black hoof resting next to her. She rested on her elbows and silently studied the hooded rider. Face hidden by his cloak, the woman trembled as she realized there was no escape. As the woman waited, the rider shifted in the saddle.

The rider's next action surprised her. His face was hidden under the hood and she watched as a pale hand extended towards her.

"Take my hand, and they cannot harm you." She studied the extended hand with urgency. Fear remained, as she knew she didn't want to die. Her eyes glanced back at the

growing torches as she heard the beating of her heart. Gaze returning to the extended hand, the woman extended hers. Rumors returned to frighten her as their hands almost touched. The offer was repeated, and with a trembling blood and dirt-covered hand, she accepted the offer.

WOODSMEN

CHAPTER ONE:

Twenty years had passed since Carsen Federal had last laid eyes on Knarq. A simple son of a fur trader, he knew his father had been afraid of him. Or just afraid of the magic he possessed. His father's fear made him abandon Carsen after his mother's death, leaving him alone. His only safety from the slavery his father had abandoned him into had been with the elves. They had allowed him to run freely through the woods and eat at their tables as he grew. Never did the elves make him feel unwelcomed, and he never desired to return to the large city of stone.

Until that day.

The city rose with every sway of the ship on the frozen waters. It stood tall in the dirty snow. His dusky brown eyes locked on it as if he couldn't pull away while the wintry wind bit his reddening cheeks. The enormous stone castle crept closer, taunting him with the banners whipping in the air. Carsen forced his gaze to abandon the castle, breaking his trance. He wrung his hands together, hoping they warmed before they vanished under his cloak. He swallowed, and his silent gaze rested on his older hunchbacked companion sitting on a wooden barrel.

Sea winds pulled at his coal-black hair, yanking at it as one would a knot. He attempted to ignore several strands that escaped the confines of their leather tie and waved freely in the bitter wind, enjoying their liberation. Carsen relented, pushing them behind his numb ears. His gaze rested on his companion, who had not moved from his perch. Pipe smoke danced from under the dark, fur-trimmed cloak. Unlike Carsen, the

master wielder seemed unaffected by the freezing winds that pulled at his long, graying hair. It enraged Carsen.

Habakkuk, his companion, was a familiar figure in the King's court. The wielder knew the ways of the court. *It is everything I need to learn. If I cannot lower myself to learn, what importance to the people am I?* Despite that reminder, Carsen felt another come to light as he exhaled. *Habakkuk is the King's oldest friend. I am not.*

Sea air, rich with salt and fish, met him as he leaned over the wooden railing. He swallowed; anxiety coursed through his body, making Carsen want to drop through the decks. On every passing wave, the city of stone loomed closer. He lowered his head as the thumping headache grew and silenced the roar of the wind. His fear strangled him, darkening the world around him.

"Where is your accompanier?" Heart jumping in his chest, he turned to face the master wielder. New terrors grew as Carsen pondered if his teacher could sense his uncertainties just as he sensed her deep in the ship's bowels. Within the bond, emotions were not minor. Her thoughts mingled with his, twisting to get his approval and remind him that he would never be alone. They could be mistaken as his own thoughts if Carsen wasn't careful. Carsen's grip on the railing tightened as he remembered the simplest rule. *If your accompanier is afraid, there is a reason.*

Carsen's gaze met Habakkuk's as his teacher stood over him. Earthy brown eyes met Carsen's blue hues and while water slapped the sides of the vessel, Carsen nervously waited for the approaching question. His demeanor tried to stay stoic, but his insecurities betrayed him. Their views on the accompanier station were different and, despite his

efforts to accept the old views, Carsen could not see her as a slave. Only an equal. When Habakkuk tried to repeat his question, Carsen interrupted. “Below.”

Rebukes did not sedate the mumblings of the old wielder. “Accompaniers must be with their wielders!” Frustrations grew in the link. Carsen struggled to ignore the rants of the other wielder. It registered in the back of his mind as its grip tightened until it nearly broke him and made him drop to the deck. Unlike the stories of old, the link didn’t share thoughts or visions. It relayed only the basics of human nature and feelings. Their training allowed both the wielder and accompanier to hide things, but the strongest feelings escaped.

In the cold, Carsen felt his face warm, and his gaze drifted to the capital. Carsen felt a wave of comfort. As the older wielder prattled on, Carsen watched as his accompanier climbed the stairs from below the deck.

The comfort warmed him as her gray eyes looked toward him, and Carsen recognized the familiar, mischievous gaze. Carsen’s eyebrow rose as she opened her mouth. She could never equal the memory of Habakkuk’s deceased accompanier. The berating from Habakkuk continued, ready to strike the last attack. Carsen refused to allow it. “Did you sleep?” His gaze returned to the castle, and he watched it gleam in the winter sun.

Beside him, the woman snorted. She could not hide that it had been her fears that had strangled him. Her shadow cast over him as she joined him at the railing.

“I’m certain the rats sleep better than me on this ship.” Carsen looked at her, but his accompanier avoided his gaze. Out of respect, Carsen stayed on his side of the bond. “I also discovered your gift, master wielder.”

“In the presence of King Richard—”

She was quick in her attempt to get in the next comment.

“Kari,” Carsen warned, silencing her. Unsure of the mentioned gift, Carsen watched her lips twitch, and he knew the attire of the court was far from his accompanier’s favorite. Kari chose the leathers of a man instead of gowns. Habakkuk attempted to prove the two could blend in with the ways of the court. Watching the city advance, the fear of this tormented Carsen, while Kari’s hand rested on her sword’s hilt.

The older wielder joined them. Habakkuk mumbled about muscle aches while Carsen bit his tongue, forcing himself to remain silent. He knew Kari’s past and how it would haunt her if others knew. It was far from the cold, damp air. Carsen glanced at Kari. He watched and waited to see if she would take offense.

She looked away.

In the silence, Carsen read them both. Their roads were entwined many times. Kari was always ready to defend herself and her secrets. Habakkuk was determined that the ways of the wielders would be respected. “To disrespect the King, Ameli, is a dangerous thing,” Habakkuk warned.

Carsen looked at the wooden docks and made out the figures. The pressure in his chest returned, strangling him, and his gaze turned to Kari. She was chewing on her lip

and Carsen debated whether or not she was going to sink her teeth into Habakkuk's comments. They were like night and day, pulling Carsen between them like the tides. When Kari chose not to reply, Carsen felt the nervous grip loosen as Habakkuk pressed the issue. "If you had chosen elf kind—"

"My accompanier is of my choosing." The old code falls from his tongue, but Carsen knows the recital would not dispel Habakkuk's concerns. Carsen had felt the warmth of acceptance since their first connection. He knew it would always be ready to comfort him like a warm drink, soothing every ache and chill that ran through his body.

Familiar sick feelings returned as the ship docked. He watched as the two guards approached the ship. Their armor glinted in the sun. From the corner of his eye, Carsen watched as Kari moved from the ramp to behind him; her dark hood covering the blonde locks and hiding her face in the shadows. Reaching out in the link, Carsen hoped she would accept the warmth of compassion. She refused. Once again, Carsen attempted to break the grip her fear had.

"Wielder Habakkuk, Wielder Carsen." The use of his title made Carsen's attention slowly return to the guards. Even with them standing close, their voices seemed so far away. "Your presence honors King Richard. If you and your—" Eyes glancing at Kari, Carsen feared what his accompanier would do.

Carsen wondered if she would cave to her fear. "Accompanier, you may call me that." Blinking, the pressure suffocating him dissipated. Her next words were more shocking than her first. "See that my wielders are secured in the castle. I will be along shortly." To him, the words were formal and foreign. Carsen pictured his accompanier

standing in the cabin, repeating those words over and over. Her feelings struggled in the link, tensing and releasing, before going still.

Under the hood, Carsen could still sense the uneasiness. Shielding her from the armored guards, and Habakkuk, who was mumbling about how improper it was, Carsen led her away. “What frightens you?” Carsen whispered. Reaching out with compassion in the link, Carsen inhaled as he waited to see if Kari would accept the warm feelings of comfort to sedate her fears. Unlike the other times she had accepted it, Carsen felt emptiness. “*Kari.*”

“I will be fine, my wielder.” The terms Carsen rarely heard escaped her lips. Carsen felt a chill slip down his spine. Slipping his hands into his robes, Carsen shivered and took a step back. “I will meet you at the castle, Carsen.” There was a pause, and Carsen saw her look over her shoulder. Silence took over both, and he feared what she would say. “To make the master wielder happy.”

A faint smile crossed his lips as Carsen nodded. He allowed Kari to leave, her hand still resting on her sword’s hilt before Carsen turned to spy the raised eyebrow of his teacher and the displeasure painted across his face. Straightening, Carsen’s gaze remained firm. “My accompanier will be along shortly. She has other matters to attend to.” Gaze remaining on Habakkuk, Carsen expected a verbal retort. Habakkuk’s disappointed look fought with Carsen’s stare of defiance. After a moment, the two wielders came to a silent agreement with a single nod.

“The King is expecting you.” The repeated order brought Carsen out of the silent debate. Gaze drifting to the guards, Carsen nodded. Returning to the submission of the master wielder, Carsen heard the request. “This way.”

Following behind Habakkuk, Carsen’s eyes wandered over the city. Knarq had always overwhelmed him. The smells of fresh bread, rich and mouthwatering, mixed in his nose and mouth. Pungent reminders of the fishmonger came from near the docks. As they walked, the one thing that haunted Carsen was the eyes. Rows of onlookers watched the two wielders, and their eyes followed him as Carsen moved silently after the guards and his master.

Whispers followed them as they climbed the long path that twisted around the city. Moving past the temple of the Brotherhood of the Maker, the hushed tones were mixed with amusement, curiosity, and fear, drowning out his own thoughts. Carsen knew Knarq was not a city of tolerance, and the simple pointing made him remember it.

He tried to block them out. Carsen bowed his head and moved after Habakkuk as they drew closer to the white gates. Like the whispers, the cold gnawed at him as he climbed. The once pure snow was gray slush under his feet. Despite that, he trudged on. Swallowing, Carsen mentally blocked away the snippets of conversations he heard. Mental haze took over, and it allowed Carsen to abandon the path and ignore the whispers and pointing.

He felt the tug on his robes, and mentally Carsen returned to the human capital. Glancing down, Carsen met the wide-eyed, silent request of a small boy. Around him, the whispers fell silent as he bent down to the child’s level. Water soaked into Carsen’s

robes, and he saw the hope in the boy's dark brown eyes. Before Carsen could speak, the boy asked a simple question.

“Can you do magic?”

Laughing, Carsen's head lowered. His cheeks turned red, warming him with the comfort that Kari denied him, and when Carsen looked up at the dark-haired boy, he noticed four other children repeating the same question had joined them.

“Can I do magic?” His simple question made their heads nod in agreement. They quickly added a chorus of pleases.

Carsen picked up a handful of slush and gravel. The damp stones froze his fingers as he flattened out his hand. Blocking out the still-pleading boys and the cold nipping at his flesh, Carsen fixated on the slim coating of gravel. In his mind, the hand faded away, and the gravel hung in the air. As he saw this mental image, the pleas from the children fell silent.

The first to ask moved closer. Unaware of the small boy inching closer, Carsen's focus remained on the gravel as he kept it from falling. A shaking hand glided under the gravel, and the boy lets out a sharp gasp. Lowering his gaze, Carsen heard the giggles as the gravel lowered to his outstretched hand.

“Wielder Carsen!”

His concentration shattered, and the gravel fell to the ground. It pelted all their hands as a shadow overwhelmed them. Glancing up, Carsen heard the children giggle as

they fled. Meeting Habakkuk's eyes, Carsen saw his hardened gaze soften before he spoke.

“The King is not one to be kept waiting.” Standing, Carsen nodded. He followed in silence before looking back and spotting the boy once more. The smile remained on the boy's face as Carsen entered the courtyard.