

CHAPTER ONE

ROLAND AKARA, Prince of the Nomads and second only to Rom Sebastian among all Mortals, sat unflinching upon his mount, scanning the valley below with the eyes of one who'd seen far too much to be either easily disturbed or easily satisfied. He was a warrior, loved desperately by all who followed him, a leader descended from generations of rulers, a man given to purpose without an ounce of compromise.

And that purpose had never been clearer: to usher in the reign of Jonathan at any cost in utter defiance of death.

On the dark stallion next to his own sat his sister Michael, twenty-seven—younger than Roland by three years. A composite bow was slung across her back in the same manner as his. The long drape of her coat covered the curved sword that rode her hip. They were two Mortals, clad in black, overlooking their kingdom.

But this was not their kingdom. This was a valley of death. It spread out to the west and east, a vast waste only intermittently broken by a patch of twisting scrub. Whatever had once flowed through this dry riverbed had all but poisoned it. Even now, hundreds of years after the wars that had ruined massive stretches of countryside—including the vineyards that had once characterized this region—only the staunchest new growth survived.

Michael spoke in a low voice, jaw tight. “He’s there.” A slight breeze

lifted a dark wisp of hair free from the torrent of braids that fell down past her shoulders, each of them tied in darkly colored cords, each of them telling a tale of rank, victory, or conquest so that one might read the entire volume with a glance. Only her brother's plaits, shot through with feathers, onyx, and lapis beads, were more elaborate.

Roland's stallion snorted, tugged at the bit, shifting on the rocky cliff. With a twitch of the reins, Roland commanded stillness. The stallion quieted, his black coat quivering once. They had tracked death to this valley, pushing their mounts to the breaking point through the waning night and the better part of the day. No creature had the same acute sense of smell as a Mortal, and they had picked up the scent from a distance.

Death. The smell of Corpse. The scent was common, particularly near the cities and towns in which the world's millions lived—human in appearance . . . dead in reality.

But the odor Roland and his ranking second, Michael, had chased through the night was different than the scent of mere Corpse. Deeper. Pungent and metallic. The fragrance of Hades itself. The putrid odor rose from the lone outpost on the crusted valley floor half a mile before them, an affront to every breath they took.

Whatever had seized Maro, that impetuous Nomad who'd taken up with the zealots as of late, was either not a Corpse or a new kind of Corpse altogether.

And that was what Roland needed to know.

There had been rumors. Of a new kind of death gathering to crush Jonathan, the Maker of all Mortals, before his inauguration in nine days. Roland had heard far too many rumors to give them much attention. They were as prevalent as lore of the Maker's Hand—the mystical involvement of a divine Maker. But Roland had seen no evidence of the angry god of Order that Corpses clamored to appease by following their ludicrous rules.

But now, with the new odor thick in his nostrils, the reality of an opposing force gained credence in the company of several other

MORTAL

pungent tells: horses. Four in front of the canteen. Two more out back. Fresh earth churned up by hooves, stale water in the trough. The pine wood of the building itself. Maro. Roland had not smelled his death, which could only mean he was alive.

“How did the scouts miss this?” Roland said.

“It’s beyond our usual perimeter,” Michael said. She studied the valley for a few moments. “Thoughts?”

“Many,” Roland said grimly.

“Any you’d care to share?”

“Only the one that matters.”

“And that is?”

“He lives or we die.”

She nodded. “How then should we help that insolent zealot we call cousin live?”

Roland had gone after Maro after hearing that he’d let his drunken mouth flap about bringing the scalp of a Corpse home to the Seyala Valley, home for the last year to all twelve hundred Mortals awaiting Jonathan’s rule. Michael had caught up to him in the middle of the night and Roland had agreed to her company, expecting no real trouble—other than his annoyance—in retrieving him.

Until they’d found Maro’s horse five miles south of the valley, dead, covered in the new scent of death they’d tracked here.

He would have returned for more fighters but he couldn’t afford to lose the new scent—or the chance to learn if the rumored new death was real. With Jonathan’s inauguration days away they couldn’t afford to take chances.

Beyond that, Roland felt a personal responsibility for the hotheaded zealot. If they did salvage his cousin’s life, Roland would personally see that he spent the rest of his days painfully aware of his folly.

“We kill the rest,” Roland said.

“How?”

“I’ll know once I’m inside.”

“You mean ‘we.’ Once *we* get inside.”

“No, Michael. Not ‘we.’”

Michael was in her prime as a fighter, vastly skilled in the blade and bow arts. Last year he’d watched her take on four men at the games and bring each to his knees—three with nicks from her blade just deep enough along their throats to remove any vestige of doubt as to her dominance and precision.

He’d promoted her to his second then, not because she was his sister and bore the same ancient blood of the rulers, but because she could not be matched in battle. And every one of them knew that battle would come.

She turned hazel eyes to him. They had been brown before her Mortality, as had his. Mortals couldn’t smell the emotions and natures of other Mortals—but if he could, Roland was sure, the aroma of loyalty would be seeping from her every pore. She would die for him—not as her brother, but as her prince—as all Nomads had sworn to do.

Which was why he must not give her the opportunity.

“May I ask why?”

“Because I need you to burn that shack to the ground if I fail.”

“Rom is the leader of the Mortals. Over the Keepers and Nomads both.”

He leveled his gaze at her. “Rom’s strong and we serve him, but we serve Jonathan and our people first. Never forget that. One of us must live.”

“Then let me go in first,” she said.

He had to fight the quirk of a smile at the corner of his mouth. “When has any Nomad leader not been the first one in? No. I go first. Alone.”

She acquiesced with a tilt of her head. “My prince.”

“Put up your hood. When I go in, slit the throats of all their horses except one. If things go wrong, return to Rom, give him a full report and lead our people. Am I clear?”

Her jaw was as stiff as her nod.

MORTAL

Roland pulled the horse round and started down the steep embankment, acutely aware of Michael a horse-length behind him.

It was true, what he'd said. The only thought that mattered now was whether they lived or died trying to preserve the life Jonathan had given all Mortals. Jonathan was nine days from his inauguration. And then everything would change.

It was also true that his thoughts were far more complex than he cared to voice, even to Michael.

For twelve years he'd led the Nomads—since the death of his and Michael's father. He had led them in their rebellion against the Order, living in the wilderness of Europa, north of Byzantium, that city once called Rome in the age of Chaos centuries before.

His people had tenaciously clung to resistance out of a fear of being controlled by the statutes of state religion—a religion that still claimed vast casualties among the Nomads as most caved in to the greater fear of Order's Maker. And of rules with eternal consequences.

Those Nomads who remained true were the purest of humanity, a fiercely independent people who carried their fighting and survival skills like a badge of unsurpassed honor. They kept to themselves, vagabonds with a long heritage of carving out harsh livings in the hinterlands, dreaming of a day when they would overthrow Order.

Two years after Roland had become ruling prince, word had come that a child once known to them—briefly sheltered among them as a baby—had been confirmed rightful heir to the Sovereign throne. His name was Jonathan.

Jonathan, the prince of life. He had returned to them with Rom Sebastian and the warrior Triphon—two men altered by a vial of blood obtained by the ancient sect of Keepers in anticipation of the day when Jonathan's blood would ignite a new kingdom.

Mortals, they called themselves.

Roland had offered his full support. Not because he necessarily believed in the sayings about the boy or the Keepers' history of friendship with the Nomads, but because any rebel who stood against

Order was a friend. And so he had welcomed the Mortals and taught them the Nomadic ways of survival and fighting.

Rom Sebastian demonstrated superior skills as a leader. He spoke with strange fire about new emotions unlocked by the blood he'd taken, and of a coming age when all would taste the life he had tasted.

And then the day had come when, five years later, the boy's blood had changed. The old man who had come with Rom—the last surviving member of the Keepers—had proclaimed it ready to bring others to life. The world of Nomads was in an uproar. Could it be? To be certain his people were not being deceived, Roland had accepted the boy's blood himself.

That day, injected with a stent directly from Jonathan's vein, his world had forever changed. Life had come like a tidal wave, sweeping away a death he did not know existed. For the first time he'd felt the arcane emotions of joy and rapture and love. He had raged through camp, delirious. He'd also found the darker emotions—jealousy, sorrow, ambition—and wept as he never had, clawing at his face and cursing his very existence. Whatever challenges this mix of emotions brought, they made him feel utterly beautiful and deplorable in ways he had never fathomed.

Teeming with new, uncaged life, Roland had called for all Nomads to take Jonathan's blood and serve him in a new mission as the last hope for a dead world. Over the next weeks and months, roughly nine hundred Nomads came to life. In subsequent years, another three hundred common Corpses joined them, each approved by council quorum, before the council called for a moratorium until the full maturing of Jonathan's blood.

Within a year the first Mortals born of Jonathan's blood began to note new changes to their senses. They could smell the faintest scents with greater sensitivity than animals. They could perceive swift motion in such detail, all at once, so that the world seemed to slow about them, giving them great advantage in combat. Their

MORTAL

senses of touch, taste, and hearing were all heightened—and continued to heighten—to the point of near insatiability.

But perhaps the greatest physical change for any Mortal was the promise of extended life. When the alchemists among them—most notably the old Keeper himself—first noted the change to their metabolism, he calculated a new minimal Mortal lifetime of hundreds of years.

They were a new race, fully deserving of the name *Mortal*. They were a chosen and powerful people waiting in wild abandon and terrible anticipation for the day when Jonathan would claim the Mortal kingdom for good.

A new era was upon them. Nothing else mattered.

But today there was Maro's foolishness and this new scent to contend with, this death emanating from the cantina on the ancient riverbed not two hundred paces ahead.

Roland and Michael walked their horses abreast of one another, eyes fixed, arms relaxed. The odor was by now so repulsive it was all he could do not to cover his nose.

"Break right, to the back," Roland said. "Slowly. All the horses but one. And listen for me."

"I refuse to lose my prince today, brother."

"Your prince will live a thousand years."

"What if this is more than you bargained for?"

"If it is, Rom will need to know. Listen for me. Do as I ask. Go."

She pressed her horse forward, cutting across his path, angling toward the back of the cantina.

The wood structure was little better than a shack, hastily and poorly built. Roland could see gaps between the wallboards even from here. He drew the hood over his head as the wind kicked up, sending dusty eddies up from the stallion's hooves. Mortals who rode beyond their home in the Seyala Valley weren't always immediately recognized by Corpses who didn't know to look for the unique hazel

of their eyes. But Roland sensed that whoever had captured Maro knew exactly what they'd taken.

He could feel the weight of the throwing knives beneath his coat, strapped two to a side to his belt, as he stopped at the cantina and slid from the saddle. He wound the reins around the rail with a secure tug and glanced at the other horses.

Straight-edged swords hung sheathed from the saddles. They were short, each blade perhaps only two feet in length, a weapon for cutting and thrusting—not slashing from horseback. He had not seen weapons like this before, and yet the hilts were worn and obviously used. At least the fact that they were here meant that the Corpses within weren't expecting any trouble.

Roland turned his eyes to the door, inhaled.

Someone was talking inside. A chuckle. Another voice. Drink flowing into a cup. Wine. Beer. Bread. Salt. Sweat. The faint, acidic scent of fear. Too faint. Far less than the fear that stank upon most Corpses, spawned by the sole remaining emotion that deceived them into thinking they were human.

He'd just set his boot on the first step when another scent assailed his lungs, seeping into his consciousness. A new one he'd never smelled before. Tangy. Sharp, but not offensive. On the contrary, quite agreeable.

Something other than death or fear.

His heart surged and he willed it to calm. Mortals couldn't smell the emotions of other living Mortals the way they could the fear of Corpses. If he couldn't smell Mortals, then the scent wasn't Maro's. And yet it stirred something new in him, so that his heart started again, like a breakaway colt.

He briefly considered retreating to consider the situation, but this was a matter that would be learned only from experience.

Roland mounted the steps, stopped on the landing. He shoved his jacket behind his blades, hitching the side of it into his belt, clearing the path for his knives. He flipped out two, one in each hand. Held

MORTAL

them firm by his waist. Tipped his head down, eyes on the dark seam at the bottom of the door, and collected himself. Not merely his thoughts or his courage—these any man or woman do before engaging an enemy. Now there was far more to gather.

Mortals called it *seeing* and technically it was. But by *seeing* they meant fully understanding every component of that vision so that the world seemed to slow, filling each instant, breath, heartbeat, with information. A superior advantage, a great gift of the extraordinary blood flowing through their veins.

The wind rifled through his braids, swept across his nape. He felt that, and far more. His heart beat like the hide-covered drums of the Nomads. Beyond the odor swilling in his nostrils there was more . . . than the textures and scent and sound of the world immediately before him.

Time seemed to slow around him. There was the door lever, scratched and prematurely weathered. Latched, through the thickness of the wooden door itself. There was the distance between him and that door, the wind, funneling between them, the particles of dust gusting by.

He held that posture, that vision, the scent in his nostrils, for an elongated second until, like a man stepping into another world, he became a part of it.

And then he moved, fully committed, knowing he held a supreme advantage to whatever waited inside.

His shoulder slammed into the door, splintering the wood around its latch. It flew wide with a crash and the details of the room snapped into place all at once.

Bar: across the back of the room, topped with an array of bottles. Three were open, one of them reeking of hundred-proof alcohol. Twelve mugs. Three were dirty. Stools: nine, aligned in front of the bar, no backrests. To the right and left: seven tables. Round. Dark wood, treated with creosote. Side wall: closed door. A back room, then.

Four large warriors dressed in strange, paneled leather armor,

TED DEKKER AND TOSCA LEE

large knives on their belts, leaning on the bar. Two with mugs of beer in their fists. They were larger and stronger than any Corpse he'd seen—muscled necks and quick black eyes, already jerking toward his disturbance.

One common Corpse in a smock behind the bar. No sign of Maro.

Roland saw all of this at once before his boot landed on the floorboards.

The room seemed to stall, the scent of freshly poured beer in his nostrils. One heartbeat. Half of another—theirs. Not his.

And then his hands flashed with the speed of vipers. He flung the knives underhanded with enough force to send them straight and true for thirty paces.

The blades flashed toward their targets, one at each end of the bar. End over killing end, through the air. Turning heads, too slow, eyes bleary with drink. Facial muscles flinching, too late.

His blades took one in the right eye and the other in his forehead, slamming home to their hilts in rapid succession.

The scent hit him then, like a wall. An odor of emotions he'd never encountered before in any Corpse. The realization sliced into his mind like a spear.

But it wasn't life. Not possible.

His hands were already on the second set of knives, committed to the certainty that these men were *not* alive. That they were enemies who would kill him without a second thought. He spun to his right, gaining momentum for a second salvo.

When he rounded again he saw how quickly the other two had turned. As fast as any fighter he'd seen. Perhaps faster.

One had his knife drawn and was halfway through the throw. The other was shoving away his slumping neighbor.

Roland took the one who had launched the knife first—in the face, not certain if his own blade would penetrate the heavy leather armor over their hearts. Without waiting to watch his blade find its

MORTAL

target, he plunged forward and catapulted his full weight toward the last man.

Head lowered, three sprinting strides, up under the man's jaw like a battering ram.

It was customary for Nomads to sew leather into the crowns of their hoods for such a purpose. There were few parts of the body that could not be used in combat if properly protected, the head chief among them. No wasted movement, no wasted weapon, no wasted moment.

He felt the crown of his head crash into the man's jaw. He heard the shattering of teeth and the crack of jawbone. The man arched wildly over the bar, instantly oblivious, limp.

Even as the body collapsed on the bar Roland saw that his third knife had found its mark, leaving only the server behind the bar, wild-eyed and scrambling for a sword propped against the wall behind him.

Patience spent, Roland sent his last knife into the back of the man's neck. The Corpse dropped like a bag of feed.

Roland stepped back and ripped off his hood. The air was still, filled with rot. Four were very dead and would never feel again. The fifth was unconscious, unable to feel anything for the moment.

He would soon learn everything that one knew.

But first—Roland strode to the door leading into the back room and pulled it wide. Inside a small storeroom lay the hogtied body of his cousin, Maro, mouth covered by a thick gag, eyes wide.

Roland took one long look at him and slammed the door shut again. A muffled cry sounded from within.

"Michael!"

She was already at the door, studying his handiwork as one reads the page of a book. Her eyes flicked up at him.

"Maro?"

"In the storeroom."

TED DEKKER AND TOSCA LEE

“Alive?”

“Until I get to him.”

Her eyes settled on the form slumped backward over the bar. She flipped out a knife and started forward to finish him.

“He stays alive,” Roland said.

She halted in midstride, shot him a glance.

“Untie Maro. Use the rope to secure this man to his horse. We take him with us.”

He strode for the door.

“And the others?” she asked.

“The rest remain in their funeral pyre,” he said without looking back. “We burn this box to the ground and piss on the ashes.”