

✦ BOOK 2 ✦

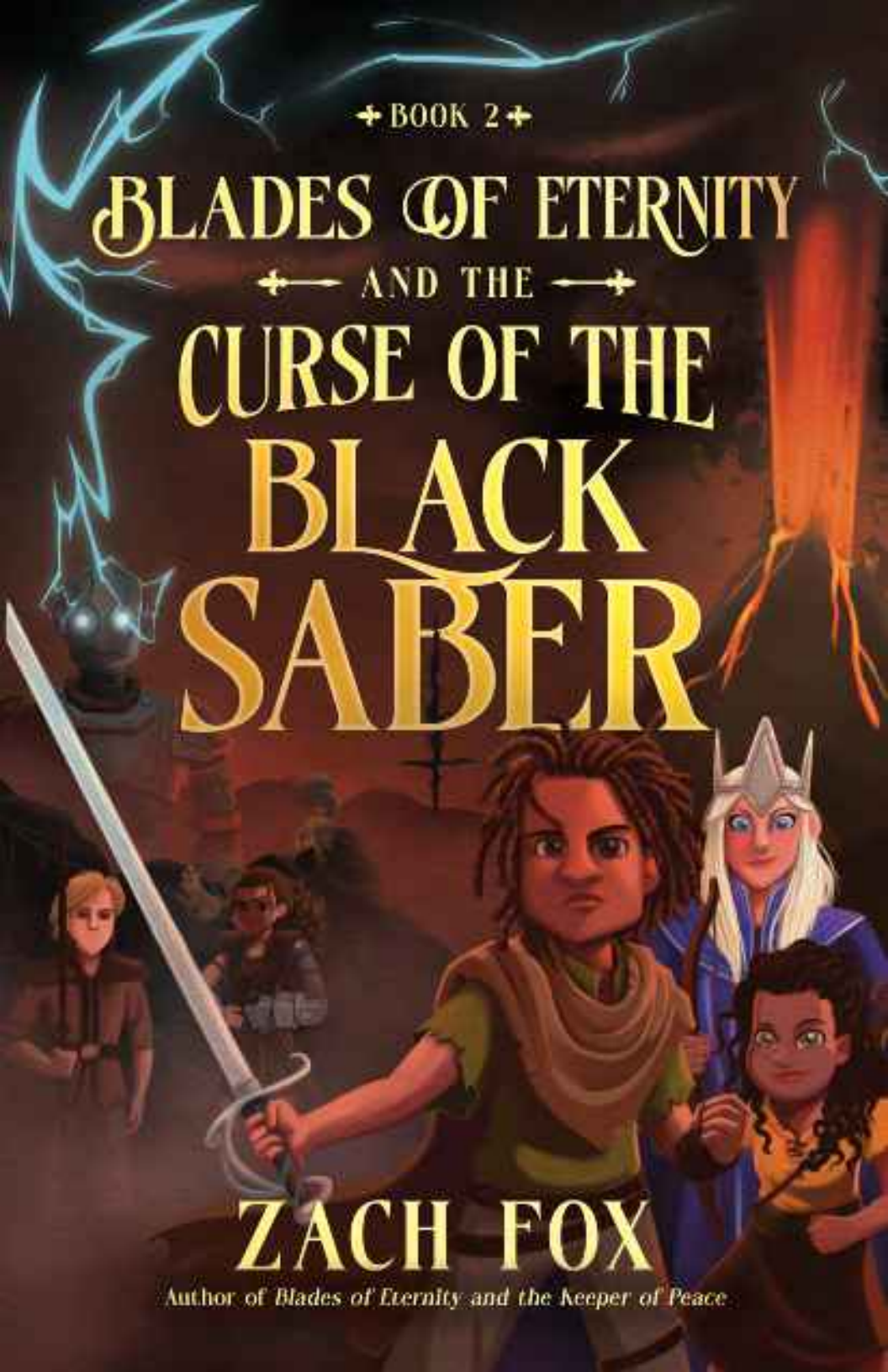
BLADES OF ETERNITY

✦ — AND THE — ✦

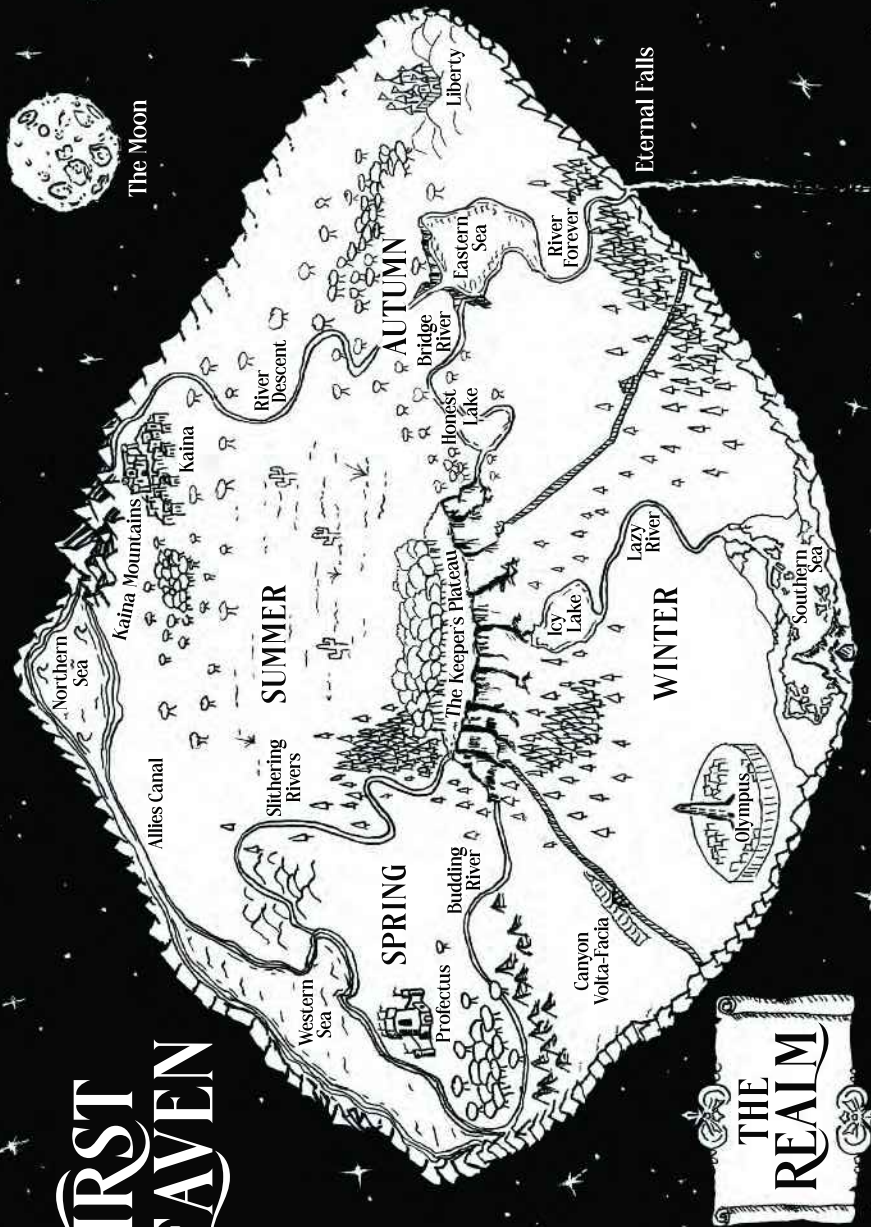
CURSE OF THE  
BLACK  
SABER

ZACH FOX

*Author of Blades of Eternity and the Keeper of Peace*



# FIRST HEAVEN



# PROLOGUE



## ELEVEN YEARS AGO

**M**erlin had only two options: tell King Winter his secret or let his daughter die.

Serving the King of Winter was a tedious task, like walking a tightrope. The only thing the king wanted more than results was control. And Merlin had to tell his tyrant king that he'd done something in secret and that he'd hidden it for many years: he'd married Queen Vestal of Spring fifteen years before, and the Princess of Spring was not an eternal child, but his daughter.

Earlier that night, Vestal had come to Merlin's rooms in Winter through a portal he'd given her. She'd been hysterical as she explained, "Adelaide has been trampled by a horse and cart. Her left arm and leg are broken. Please do something, Merlin!" pleaded Queen Vestal. "My healers say they have to amputate or she'll die."

Merlin wouldn't let that happen.

Merlin hugged his wife and said, "Aegis barely lets me out of his sight. He's going to find out."

“What is the king going to find out?” said an arrogant and snobby voice that Merlin despised. Vestal and Merlin looked toward Merlin’s door, and Sylvan the fox stood smiling, eyes narrowed. Merlin wanted to throw the sneaky fox into the Underworld. He had to tell Aegis.

When Merlin told King Winter his secret, he’d expected the king to accuse him of treachery. But to Merlin’s surprise, a thin smile had slithered across King Winter’s face. “We must go and save the girl,” he’d said, cool and even, as though he were talking about the weather.

Merlin realized then the cost of telling Aegis. Vestal was ambitious in her own way, but Spring’s army was smaller and its technology inferior. Merlin feared he’d made her a target for Aegis. Another governor—the Queen of Spring—would be very useful to Aegis. And if something was useful, Aegis would control it. Merlin knew that from experience.

Merlin had caught King Winter’s attention when he was young. His skills in science and politics were unmatched, and back then, it had thrilled Merlin to have the eye of the king. It had been a game to him—getting into King Winter’s fold, climbing in the ranks. A game he was good at. And when Merlin was barely twenty, Aegis had granted him power. Not just political power, but power from the black throne—the very one Merlin had built for King Winter to rule from in tandem with the golden one given by the Lamb. And it was a strange power. Power that was...unscientific. Merlin never aged another day.

It was a power, Merlin knew, that the Lamb had not intended. And in hushed whispers, creatures had started calling him *wizard*. It was an unholy title for someone who used power that wasn’t from the Lamb. Under the service of King Winter, Merlin mastered that power.

He touched what couldn't be seen and gave form and substance to things that shouldn't be felt—portals to get around quickly, illusions to deceive. But there was a cost to being a wizard. A cost Merlin hadn't anticipated. With each of Merlin's innovations, Aegis had become more and more fond of his favorite pet. And Aegis would not risk losing his prize. Merlin had accidentally become too valuable. Now he was all but a slave.

As Merlin snatched the tools he needed for his daughter's surgery from his workshop, he thought of the word *sin*. He knew he shouldn't hold the power from the black throne. But now that he had it, he couldn't bring himself to let it go. Like it was somehow alive, holding and using him rather than the other way around.

And *sin* was the seed of his greatest and most terrifying idea.

Merlin grabbed the metal prosthetics he'd developed and stuffed them in his bag, remembering how impressed he once was with Aegis's persistent ambition. Once, Aegis had been reading a copy of the Book of Origin when Merlin asked, "My king, what is your greatest ambition? Let me help you achieve it."

Merlin shook his head at the memory, wishing he'd never asked the question. Aegis had studied Merlin before taking the ancient scroll of the Book of Origin and holding it over the flame of a candle until it caught fire.

As Aegis pitched the burning scroll to the marble floor, he smiled and asked, "Tell me, Merlin, how can I conquer Heaven and the Realm?" Aegis didn't just want to be king of the governors, but king of creation.

Merlin had impressed himself with his answer. "If you want to defeat an impossible foe—if everything has to go your way just to give you a chance at victory—the key is to have ten perfect plans all

in motion at the same time. Then you only need to win one in ten times to win it all.”

“Get me ten flawless plans” was Aegis’s simple reply.

So Merlin made ten plans. There was one plan to defeat the Keeper of Peace and one to capture him. Another plan involved planting agents in the service of the other governors.

But Aegis’s favorite plan was Merlin’s design for a secret weapon. Merlin called it the Black Saber. With the strange power that Aegis had given him, Merlin could forge a blade made from greed and selfishness. It would prey on the secret sins living in the heart of a creature. And the closer a creature was to the Black Saber, the greater its pull, and the stronger its sinful desires would grow. When Merlin had detailed his plans for the saber, Aegis had said, “Well now. Every creature is a little evil. None are perfect. Not even one.”

“You fool,” Merlin said to himself. “You’ve served him too long.” He buttoned his bag closed and eyed the plans for the Black Saber he had strewn across the table. Then he unbuttoned his bag and shoved the plans in before marching from his room, thinking of all the terrible things he’d done for Aegis.

With each new plan Merlin had devised, Aegis became more possessive. King Winter had given Merlin a security detail—“For your protection,” Aegis had said. Merlin knew the truth, though—Aegis was afraid of losing him. And now that Aegis knew Merlin had married Queen Vestal of Spring, the king would try to control her too.

Merlin glanced at Aegis just before he opened the portal to Spring. He couldn’t let King Winter control his wife. It was a bit of a puzzle, but as he thought about it, Merlin realized it was only a matter of leverage.

When they stepped through the portal into Spring’s throne room, Vestal was waiting, cheeks wet with tears.

Vestal grabbed Merlin, and he felt her quiver in his arms. No one else knew this fragile woman. Everyone knew the Queen of Spring with all the answers, strong and brave. But in his arms, she was just herself, Vestal. No position, no crown. And that was her secret: The queen and the crown were only a mask. The real Vestal, obscured by the masks, was only exposed in his arms. In his arms, she was vulnerable.

Merlin kissed her forehead and softly asked, “Where is she?”

Vestal looked up and nodded. “This way.” Vestal took his arm and led him to a nearby room.

Merlin stopped when he saw a red squirrel, bound and sitting between two guards. “Who’s this?”

Vestal hesitated before saying, “This is Gaffer.”

Merlin could smell the squirrel’s breath and was suddenly furious. “Is he the one who ran her over?” The squirrel lifted his head, revealing bloodshot eyes over tear-stained cheeks. From a glance toward Vestal, Merlin knew right away Gaffer was guilty.

Gaffer coughed. “I didn’t mean to, sir—honest!”

Merlin wanted to unload all his powers on the careless buffoon.

“I didn’t mean to hurt no one, sir! I was only trying to take the edge off, if you catch my meaning.”

“Our decisions always affect others. Always.” Merlin opened a portal above the squirrel. Gaffer looked up, confused. And then Merlin opened a portal below him. The squirrel fell through the portal below and came out of the one above, over and over and over, yelling and falling in an unending loop.

Aegis grinned as Gaffer continued falling through the portals. Vestal took Merlin by the arm and led him to a door. Merlin opened it and put a hand on her shoulder. “Stay here, darling. She’s going to be fine.”

Vestal squeezed his hand and nodded. But before Merlin closed the door, he heard Vestal thank Aegis.

And he heard Aegis's reply: "I did not come here for your thanks, Queen." And Merlin knew for certain what he had feared all these years was true. Aegis would use his marriage to Vestal to control Spring. He closed his eyes and pushed the horrible fact from his mind. He needed to focus on his daughter.

"Get out," he said to the healers. When they only stared at him, he opened a portal to Winter's tundra and pushed one of them through before closing the portal and leaving the poor man to freeze. "Anyone else need some fresh air?" The others ran from the room, tripping over each other as they did.

Merlin looked his beautiful daughter over. Her dark curls were dripping with sweat as he petted her head. She was breathing fast and shallow. Splintered bone was poking from her leg, and though the bone hadn't broken the skin of her arm, she was bad off. Spring's healers were right. He would have to amputate.

Merlin opened his bag and pulled out his metal prosthetics. He'd never expected to use them on his daughter, and the thought made his eyes sting. He took a deep breath. He would have to tether them to her spine so her brain would control them like normal limbs.

Merlin would need an assistant for the surgery. He frowned and reopened the portal. A shivering healer crawled back through. "Get up," ordered Merlin. The healer stood rubbing his arms, trying to warm himself. "I've got to take the arm and the leg. Assist me."

"Yes, sir," the healer said, jumping into action. "We've already sedated her."

"Don't talk. Just do what I tell you to." The healer nodded, and the surgery began. There were two big challenges Merlin had to navigate:

controlling the loss of blood during amputation and tethering the prosthetics to Adelaide's spine without paralyzing her.

Spring's healer was skilled; he was able to control the bleeding effectively. Attaching to the spine, though, was well outside of the man's expertise, and so the healer was little help there, only holding Adelaide steady and handing Merlin tools. But that was all the help Merlin needed.

When the metallic limbs were attached, a small light glowed blue at the knee of the leg and the elbow of the arm.

"What is that?" asked the healer, pointing at the light. "Is that because you're a... a *wizard*?"

Merlin shot a sideways glance at the healer. "I thought I told you not to talk." The healer lowered his hand but kept looking at the light.

Merlin resented the derogatory term. Of course, Merlin *was* a wizard. But he didn't like the term. Not precisely anyway. He resented the word *wizard* only as much as he resented the loss of his freedom. But he didn't really hate the power, and he knew it. He just didn't like the strings that came with it.

Merlin eventually sighed and relented. "This isn't wizardry. It's just part of the way the Lamb made us."

The healer squinted at Merlin but didn't say anything.

Merlin knew the man would need an explanation. "You've seen lightning flash in the sky?"

The healer nodded and met Merlin's eyes only for a moment before looking away. "That's electricity. Our bodies have a small amount of that same thing. If you harness electricity, it can be very useful. In this case, I'm using the electrical current that's already in my daughter's body. These limbs will function with the power of her naturally occurring electricity."

The healer still looked confused, but Merlin lacked the patience to explain further. He checked Adelaide's pulse. It was strong.

Now for the moment of truth. Merlin took a deep breath and poked the metal with a scalpel. When her newly attached metal limbs twitched, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"It worked?" the healer asked in a whisper.

Merlin nodded. "What's your name?"

"Gavin, sir."

"Thank you, Gavin."

The man wiped his sweaty brow and showed a toothy smile.

"What can I give you as payment?" Merlin asked.

The healer thought for a beat before saying, "Just never throw me through one of your wizard holes again."

Merlin clenched his jaw but nodded. Merlin looked back to his daughter, Adelaide, whose chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm, and then he cracked the door and peeked out into the hallway. The squirrel was still falling in the endless loop, and the two guards were watching in amazement. But Vestal and Aegis were nowhere to be seen.

Merlin knew what he had to do. He couldn't return to Winter, but he couldn't stay in Spring. By removing himself, Aegis wouldn't have leverage over his wife.

Merlin paced to his daughter and ran his fingers through her curls. He lightly kissed her forehead and whispered, "Goodbye for now, Addy."

Merlin looked back at the healer. "Look after her for a while?" Gavin nodded, and Merlin held out his hand. When they shook, Merlin said, "Thank you, Gavin."

And then he turned and stepped into the hall. The two guards

stared at him wide-eyed before he flipped the top portal to the ground so that the falling squirrel flew up from the portal. Merlin grabbed him and threw him to the floor before closing both portals.

Gaffer was breathing frantically as Merlin said to the guards, “Throw him in a holding cell.” The guards sprang to action, dragging the squirrel from the hall.

Merlin stood alone, soaking in his last moments in the castle he’d come to feel so at home in. The place he’d become a father.

And then he opened a portal and stepped through, into Autumn. Merlin took one fleeting look back through the portal, and then he closed it.

Autumn’s forest whispered as a cool breeze rustled the leaves. The temperature felt pleasant to Merlin, after living with the extreme cold of Winter. Merlin made his way through the forest slowly, trying to convince himself that he’d done the right thing by leaving.

He would go back. When the time was right.

Or maybe he would go to Summer and tell King Uriel about all Aegis had planned. Aegis had once called King Summer “the one who stands between me and the Realm.” If he could work his way into King Summer’s good graces, perhaps he could get Adelaide to safety in Summer.

As he walked, Merlin kept looking over his shoulder, expecting someone to be following him. But he was alone as he marched for miles through the dark forest, far from any town or city. When a thin orange line glowed on the eastern horizon, Merlin sat down on a fallen tree and unbuttoned his bag. He nibbled on some bread he’d stashed in his pack as he looked over the plans for the Black Saber he’d sneaked out of Winter.

Merlin rubbed his eyes, trying to think out his next move. And

then he heard a twig snap just before a burst of pain shot through his head and everything went white.

When he opened his eyes, seeing as if through a fog, a sack was pulled over his head, painting his world as black as the secret saber he'd designed.

## CHAPTER ONE

# HERO



**H***ero.* That's what they cheered on the streets of Summer's capital, Kaina, as Prince Melik walked by. And that's exactly what he didn't feel like.

Some clapped and others shouted thanks. Children stared in awe, and a small boy in a red tunic tugged on his father's shirt and asked, "Is he the one who beat the dragon?"

Mel nodded several times in a charade of thanks. In truth, the moment he stepped outside the city gate was the happiest he'd had all day. He marched to the bank of Canteen Lake, which was more of a pond, except during the rainy season. And it was not the rainy season. Not by a long shot.

The sun was high in the cloudless blue sky, and beads of sweat tickled their way down his face like little crawling insects. His shirt stuck to his back as he stood at the bank looking south toward Winter.

Winter held the two reasons that no matter how loud the crowds

cheered his name, and no matter how many songs were written and sung about him, Mel didn't feel like the hero they made him out to be.

He had failed Brutus. And he'd failed Vashti. Mel rubbed the bulging blister on his hand as guilt struck his heart like he had beaten his post.

It seemed that each strike of the post brought a haunting memory rather than relief from guilt. With one, he'd remember Brutus surrounded by wolves, his dying shriek echoing in Mel's mind. And with the next, he'd see Vashti trapped behind Winter's gate, Aegis towering over the girl.

In part, the beating post was why he'd come to the lake. Back inside the palace, Mel had beaten his to bits when Michael, his father—Mel winced at the thought—had found him crying. Michael had tried to comfort him, but for some reason Mel didn't know how to talk about, he didn't want Michael's comfort.

Mel looked down into the waters of Canteen Lake, and it startled him how much his reflection looked like Michael. He kicked the water before looking across the lake, south, recalling what he'd said to Michael, only half regretting it: "You're not my father and you never will be! My father is King Uriel, the only King of Summer!"

Michael had nodded softly. "I'm sorry, Mel. I wanted..." he'd started to say before he hung his head. Then Michael had retreated, leaving Mel alone to go on apologizing to his lost friends with each strike of the post. That's when Mel had left the city and come to Canteen Lake. He wanted to be farther away from Michael and closer to Brutus and Vashti.

Even though Brutus was dead, and Vashti...maybe worse.

A well of emotion rose in Mel's chest as he stared as far south as his eyes could see. The Keeper's Plateau was a dark silhouette on the

southern horizon, blocking any view of the frozen wasteland that lay on the other side.

The well in Mel's heart kept rising until a tear wet his sweaty cheek. A year ago, he would have been annoyed at Brutus's harsh instruction or Vashti's sarcasm. But just then, Mel would have given anything to hear their voices.

The heat of the Summer sun struck him like he was a beating post as another tear fell from his eye. And then Mel began to hum an old and sacred song.

It was a song he'd not heard often, as it was reserved for honoring fallen heroes. Brutus and Vashti were the real heroes. Not him.

His hum turned into words that echoed across Canteen Lake. He sang louder and louder, praying that somehow, the song would reach his friends, whether dead or alive. And then a humming bass of a voice joined his, singing the low harmony, and Mel turned to his right to find his father, King Summer, standing next to him singing. On his left, Mel heard Sareef's voice joined with the high part.

The king laid his arm over Mel's shoulder as they sang the hero's lament in the old language, the three of them staring south over the lake. The lament was plain, lacking the frippery of modern songs, and Mel thought that somehow, the tribal melody was more honest for it.

When they'd sung the final word, the echo of that harmonized note lingered in the air. And when it died to the ear, it lingered still in Mel's soul. The trio stood in silence, watching the Summer heat make a waving haze of the horizon.

"Come here, son." King Summer pulled Mel in, and Mel rested his head on his father's shoulder. Mel tried his best to breathe slowly, not wanting to cry.

When his breathing steadied, a terrifying realization settled over

Mel. It had only been a feeling he didn't have words for until he was sheltered in the embrace of his father. "I'm really not your son, am I?"

Uriel kissed his forehead. "Sure you are."

Mel took a step back and held the king's gaze. "I know you adopted me. But what I mean is, I'm not *really* your son. Right?"

The king smiled. "Wrong."

Mel's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

The king's gaze was as firm as it was easy. "Adoption is different, sure. But a thing isn't less just because it's different."

Mel choked up again, and he knew that if he tried to talk, he'd burst into tears.

So he just looked up at his father, who said, "You are completely my son, and you always will be. A father raises his son into the will of the Lamb. It is my job to see you walk in His plan. I'm seeing that now."

Mel loved his father. The king's love was as plain as it was steady. It was a love that Mel trusted.

King Ur put his arm back around Mel, turning and walking toward Kaina. Sareef silently kept stride with them as King Ur said, "Sometimes when I need to clear my head, I walk out here in the fields. In this yellow grass, in the shade of the fever trees on the bank of Canteen Lake, I've wrestled with a thousand questions. But each time, I make the same walk back to Kaina." His father pointed at the city, and Mel could see a few kids peeking over the city wall, pointing at him. "I see that city, all these creatures, and it reminds me why I am king. We rule not for the privileges of a ruler. But for the ones we are responsible for. For me, the walk back to Kaina is a sacred reminder."

Mel thought of Vashti again, trapped behind Winter's gate with King Aegis towering over her. He was responsible for her. "What are we going to do about Vashti?"

King Summer stared at Kaina, and Mel knew he wasn't really focused on the city. He was focused on nothing but his own thoughts. After a few moments when only the raucous sounds of an ordinary afternoon in the city met his ears, his father calmly said, "Nothing."

Mel stared at him.

His father shook his head. "We won't do anything, Mel."

"But we can't just leave her there," Mel blurted out.

"My son, we have to think of all of Summer."

"Father, she sacrificed herself."

"Yes, and she saved the Realm."

Mel shook his head. "She wasn't trying to save the Realm. She was trying to save me."

"Think, Mel. She did what she did for a reason. You are the Prince of Summer. She understood how important you are. To risk your life on an impossible rescue betrays what she did to save you—so get it out of your head. Prayer is the best help we can give her."

"Prayer!" Mel met his father's eyes again. "I'm going to save her!" His voice echoed over the open fields. His father stared at him, silent and steady as the desert heat. So Mel continued. "She was... She *is* different. She's loyal. She has an honorable heart."

His father nodded.

Mel felt tears sting his eyes. "Why did it have to be her? Why did she have to sacrifice herself?"

King Ur's lips spread in a faint smile—one that was sad, or maybe grateful. Or both. "It's always people like Vashti who will pay the price."

"But why?" Mel pleaded.

"Because only those like her are willing to pay with their lives."

Somehow, Mel found comfort in those words. But it only made him want to rescue Vashti more.

His father seemed to read Mel's mind. "We are not attacking Winter or launching a rescue. Do you hear me, son?"

"Are we cowards?"

"We have the advantage, Mel," said Sareef. "While I hold this blade"—Sareef held up the Heir—"no one can attack Summer. Remember the Book of Origin: *Wherever his presence is, no life could make war.* We are safe, Mel. Your people are safe."

"You don't know what King Winter is planning. I talked to the dragon, Apollyon. They'll come for us. He has agents hidden in every corner of the Realm. King Winter won't stop until he has everything. The whole realm."

King Summer studied Mel for a breath before saying, "Mel, it's a fool's quest. You succeeded last time not because you're smart but because the Lamb led you."

Mel fell silent, realizing his father was probably right.

"Has the Lamb told you to go back to Winter?"

"No," Mel admitted.

"I didn't think so. I've sent word to Queen Autumn. If she joins us and Spring, our three kingdoms can overwhelm Winter."

Mel rolled his eyes. "Not Queen Autumn! She's a true coward."

"You misjudge her. She isn't quick to go to battle. There is wisdom in that. But now that her son has seen how evil Aegis is, she'll join us."

"Ulysses? That prince is as twisted as King Winter! He actually agreed with Aegis when he said that they have the right to rule the Realm because they are better than the rest of us."

"Come now, Mel. Ulysses isn't that bad, is he?" King Ur studied Mel hard.

"Father, he almost wouldn't help us escape Winter. When I tried

to convince him, he pulled a knife on me. If Vashti hadn't put a dagger to his throat, I'm not sure what would've happened."

King Ur squinted and Sareef set a hand on the king's shoulder. "Uriel. Your son speaks the truth. The elder Prince of Autumn isn't right."

King Ur nodded once. "Still, we will wait for the Queen of Autumn's reply."

"I can't just sit on my hands. Father, I won't do nothing!"

"No. I suppose not." King Ur glanced toward the city gate. "But perhaps some time with clergy will calm you."

Mel frowned. "What clergy?"

"Father Flick..."

As they approached the city gate, Mel saw Father Flick waiting for him and breathed a sigh of relief.

And then his father added, "...and Father Ubba."

Mel frowned as Father Ubba tottered through the city gate to join Father Flick.