

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

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WITH GINA DETWILER

THE
WINTER
WAR



Nashville, Tennessee

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Printed in the United States of America

978-1-4627-9675-5

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: JF
Subject Heading: SPIRITUAL WARFARE—FICTION

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 • 22 21 20 19 18

CHAPTER 1

Armor of Lies

Ponéros was delighted.

He gazed upon his new creation, a Forger far different from the other Forgers in his army, those slave-soldiers who guarded his stronghold and fought his wars. He decided to call him Thayne. The perfect name, he thought, for the one who would destroy the Prince Warriors once and for all. Thayne was bigger, stronger, and smarter than any Forger before him. He had something else the other Forgers did not.

A suit of armor.



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Ponéros's Weavers had spent eons crafting this armor to make it stronger and more resilient than the armor of even the most powerful and experienced Prince Warrior. Thayne's helmet was fused to his body armor, so thick it could never be separated or infected by the call of the Source. The helmet had a long, gleaming scythe, sharper than any sword, set right at the top. Around his waist, Thayne wore a Belt of Lies made of a magnetic metal that would repel any Prince Warrior's sword. His heavy breastplate was riveted to the belt, protecting the orb in the center of his chest from ever being pierced. His boots were so massive they could crush ten Prince Warriors with one small step.

Ponéros could almost taste the victory to come.

But that was not even the best of it. Ponéros had another surprise in store for his enemies. A weapon more devastating than any he had made before. The armor of the Prince Warriors would be useless against it.

He called it *Askalon*.

"We are ready," Ponéros said, savoring the moment. "Just in time."

"Yes, master."

Ponéros slid off his throne and moved to the portal of his new lair, which lay at the bottom of the boiling sea in the deepest crevasse of Skot'os. A better hiding place than the skypod he had previously occupied, which had been too easily discovered by that turn-coat dragon Tannyn. No one from Ahoratos, not even Tannyn, would ever find him here. It was only temporary, anyway, until Thayne invaded Ahoratos and secured the Mountain of Rhema. Such a defeat would

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be so debilitating to the Prince Warriors that they would certainly never rise again.

Ponéros opened the portal, but the boiling sea did not flow in, held in check at his command. Huge, reptilian creatures with snakelike tails and spiked heads glided by, swift and silent, yellow eyes piercing the murky depths. Ponéros reached out to touch the edge of the acid-green water, causing a stirring among them. Another creature swam into view, one with the same snakelike tail as the rest but with a more streamlined body and green-gold gills that fanned out like wings on either side.

The creature slid into the bunker and raised itself upright, balanced on its coiled tail. Two small flippers on its body suddenly grew into long, tapered arms, ending in sharp talons. It bowed its spiked head and peered at Ponéros with slitted yellow eyes.

“Master,” whispered the creature in a soft slithery voice. “What do you require?”

“Sybylla, you are looking lovely today.”

The creature tilted her head slightly in silent acknowledgment.

“Gather your children,” Ponéros said. “Take them to the boiling pool, under the mountain. Make sure no Prince Warrior passes through.”

Sybylla closed her eyes and nodded her head. “Your will be done.”

CHAPTER 2

A Gathering of Princes

Day 1

The Cave was filled with Warriors. It seemed to have grown, stretched to accommodate this massive gathering—Prince Warriors from all over the world who had been called for a single purpose. None of them had ever seen such a large assembly of Warriors in Ahoratos before. There was an electric energy in the atmosphere. Something big must be happening.

They stood shoulder to shoulder, back-to-back, Warriors of all ages and sizes and colors and languages. Their armor, too, was quite varied. Some armor was very plain and simple, others more elaborate and detailed with fancy engravings or intricately scrolled edges. Above their helmeted heads, tiny white puffs called Sparks darted about, filling the darkened Cave with spectral light. Long, jagged stalactites, glowing blue as if lit from the inside, dripped from the ceiling. The walls were rimmed with more glowing stalagmites and rock formations on which some Warriors sat in small groups, fingering their seed-shields and their Krýsen nervously. Others shifted about, murmuring to each other, filling the air with anticipation.

All were wondering the same thing: *Where is Ruwach?*

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Evan never knew there were so many other Prince Warriors besides him and his friends. He looked around, admiring some of the fancier armor. His own armor had grown with him in the past two years; his breastplate was bigger and thicker, now embellished with the Crest of Ahoratos, the funny symbol that looked like an *N* but really was an *A*. Every mission he went on seemed to make his armor a little stronger. He hoped someday he would have really cool armor like Mr. J. Ar's.

"Whoa," he said, even though it was something he was trying not to say so much. His brother, Xavier, kept pointing out that he said that way too often. Xavier liked to point out all the things Evan did that he didn't like. Not that Evan got to see his big brother much anymore since Xavier was just too busy these days, between high school and basketball and his new crowd of friends. Evan relished those times Xavier would challenge him to cannonball contests in their pond, or practice sword fighting with him in the backyard. He even looked

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forward to Xavier's criticisms, because at least that meant he was paying attention.

"They must come from all over the world," Evan said. He jumped up to get a better look and came down on the boots of a tall Warrior standing near him.

"Oh, sorry," he said, embarrassed.

"Ei hätää," said the Warrior with a quick smile.

Evan stopped and stared, his jaw dropping open. Because not only had the Warrior spoken in another language, but Evan had actually *understood* what he said: "No problem."

"Whoa." Evan turned away and nudged Xavier. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"Watch this!"

He tapped the Warrior on the back. The Warrior turned around to look at him again.

"Pardon me. Do you have the time?" Evan asked.

"Ei ole aikaa Ahoratos," said the Warrior.

There's no time in Ahoratos.

"Okay, thanks," said Evan. He looked at Xavier. "This. Is. Awesome."

Xavier nodded, his eyes widening in amazement.

They pushed through the crowd, calling out for their friends. They heard the chatter of the other Warriors as they went, and every different language they heard they found they could understand perfectly. Evan had to stop himself from tapping people on the shoulder and asking them questions, just to hear their answers.

Finally, Evan spotted Ivy's red hair spilling out from her helmet. Brianna was with her, wearing her

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signature lip gloss, though it wasn't as glittery as it used to be. She'd switched to less sparkly shades now that she was older.

Next they found Finn and Manuel, who were together, because they'd been practicing sword fighting in Manuel's backyard when they were called to Ahoratos.

"Where's Levi?" said Brianna, looking around.

"Haven't seen him," said Finn. He was the oldest and felt it his duty to look out for the others. "Maybe he didn't come."

"The Rec-ing Crew isn't complete without Levi," said Evan.

"The what?" said Manuel.

"It's the name I came up with. For us. Because we all pretty much met at the rec center. Get it?" Evan looked at his friends, waiting for some reaction.

"I get it," said Ivy. "Pretty cool, Ev."

"Yeah, not bad," said Finn, giving Evan a fist bump. Xavier rolled his eyes.

"Stellar," said Brianna, looking around. "Levi must be here somewhere." She pushed through the crowd, calling Levi's name until she found him, sitting all alone on a rock, staring at the wall. He had a strange look on his face, and it seemed as though he didn't even know where he was.

"Levi!" said Brianna, giving him a little hug. "There you are!"

"Oh, hi," Levi said, barely even looking at her.

"You okay?"

"Sure."

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“Are you sure you’re sure? ’Cause you look like somebody just died.” Brianna laughed, but Levi didn’t. His face scrunched up as he turned away quickly. He looked as though he might start to cry. Brianna frowned, concerned. She started to ask him something when her attention was caught by a sound—a melody, beautiful and sweet—and the darkened Cave filled with spellbinding light. All the Warriors stopped talking and stood at attention, listening. It was as if the light and the music were connected, one giving shape to the other. The Sparks were instantly drawn to it, gathering and forming an image the Warriors all knew well.

Ruwach.

The Warriors watched in awe as the Sparks created a hovering vision of the small, purple-robed creature who was their guide in the Kingdom of Ahoratos, the Unseen world. Unseen by *most* people, anyway. But Ruwach himself did not appear in person. Instead, his voice came through the music, the notes translating into words that each Warrior understood in his or her own language.

“Welcome, Warriors,” said the Spark-created version of Ruwach. “I have gathered you here for an important mission. Perhaps the most important mission of your lives.” Trembling murmurs swept through the crowd. “The enemy is preparing to cross the Bridge of Tears and invade Ahoratos.”

“But he can’t!” Evan yelled out. Everyone looked at him. Evan’s face reddened. “I mean, he’s not allowed to cross the bridge, right?”

The question hung in the air for a long moment.

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“That is not quite true, Prince Evan,” the image of Ruwach finally responded. “Ahoratos must be defended, as must any kingdom. That is why you are all here. To defend Ahoratos. Beware, for the enemy is always looking for a weakness. This is the danger. For your weakness is often the thing you refuse to see.

“Stand firm, Warriors. Stand *together*. And you will have victory.” He added: “Remember, you have everything you need.”

“Man, I wish that guy Ponéros would just stay dead,” Evan mumbled. “How many times do we have to beat him?”

“Only the Source can really do that,” said Finn. “And he will, one day. In the meantime, we need to make sure Ponéros stays out of our territory.”

“Right,” said Xavier, impatient to start. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

The image of Ruwach disappeared as the Sparks dispersed. They flew to one wall of the Cave and re-formed into a sparkling archway. The wall of the Cave dissolved, revealing the landscape of Ahoratos through the arch.

The Warriors gasped at the sight, for Ahoratos looked quite different than it had before. The sky, usually golden, was slate gray. The trees looked as though they had lost all their leaves, and the grass was brown and dead. A harsh wind fell upon their faces as they began to march out, their boots crunching on the dried grass. But they kept moving forward, following the steady beam of their breastplates, which pointed them in the direction they were to go.

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Evan couldn't see much at all because of the taller Warriors marching in front of him. But he didn't like the way the air felt, or the way the few trees he could see were completely bare. Or the way the sky was gray and ominous.

"This doesn't look like Ahoratos," he whispered.

"It's looked different every time we've come here," Xavier said, although Evan could tell he was concerned as well.

"I didn't think there was weather in Ahoratos," said Brianna.

"Where do you think we're going?" Evan asked.

"We'll know when we get there," said Xavier.

Evan had a sudden thought that wherever they were going, he wasn't going to like it.