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SCOTT BOWLES, USA TODAY

THE SPARKS

BOOK I OF THE FEUD TRILOGY

KYLE PRUE



CHAPTER ONE

TAURLUM MANSION

NEIL VAPROS

Slide the knife between the third and fourth rib.

Neil's father's words rang in his ears as he pulled his dark, ornate hood over his head and raised his cloth mask to cover his mouth and nose. He knew all Taurlum had several weak spots on their bodies, but only one was vulnerable enough to cause an instant kill. All he needed to do was thrust his knife directly between the ribs (*the third and fourth ribs*, he reminded himself) and straight through the heart. Neil's father had taught him this trick on his tenth birthday. It had been one of the more pleasant ones.

He spent a moment adjusting his mask, making sure his face would remain concealed. Not that it really mattered; during the middle of the day, the mask would do little to camouflage him. Any Taurlum would spot a Vapros like him from a mile away. The disguise had been given to him mostly for the sake of preserving his identity. Nobody needed to know *which* Vapros boy had made the kill.

Neil ran his finger over the hilt of the knife. His father had presented it to him upon completion of his assassin's training. Engraved in the handle was the Vapros family crest. The background of the crest was purple and black, with a raven embedded in the center. The Raven was the family nickname, as the black-haired, green-eyed descendants seemed to favor their swift, calculating animal mascot. The raven was known as the bringer of death: an appropriate symbol for the trained assassin. The family motto was inscribed along the bottom: *Victory Lies Within the Ashes*. Neil loved his knife; it made him feel like a real assassin.

Neil craved the assassin's glory but knew in his gut that he desperately needed

another assassin to assist in this mission. Two stealthy ravens against a Taurlum bull was still a risk, but they would have the element of surprise on their side. Alone it was a certain death mission, but his father's orders were clear. Neil was desperately alone.

Making it into the giant Taurlum mansion had been easy. Navigating its giant corridors would be harder. Neil glanced carefully around the marble corner. A single guard stood watch. The man wore simple plated armor with red and gold war paint but had removed his helmet to reveal his entire head. *Not a Taurlum*, Neil thought. The guard lacked the golden blonde hair shared by every direct descendant of the Taurlum line; therefore, this man was not worth his time or effort. Neil squinted in concentration, and then threw all his energy into dematerializing. He reformed a split second later on the other side of the corridor. The guard continued watching the hallway and never noticed Neil materialize just behind him. As silently as he could, the Vapros boy made his way down the hallway toward the communal baths where his target would be waiting.

A Taurlum family crest hung above the door to the bathhouse. Its colors were the same gold and scarlet that covered the uniforms of the Taurlum guards who roughed up villagers in the market. A proud-looking bull stood in the center of the crest, eyes narrowed, as if challenging all who dared to oppose the name of the "great Taurlum." At the thought of eliminating his first Taurlum man, Neil's heart began to quicken, jump-started by adrenaline. He reached for his crossbow and fired a bolt directly into the bull's pretentious forehead. Then he opened the door and dematerialized as quickly as he could.

He reappeared behind a marble pillar a few feet away from the entrance. The inside of the Taurlum mansion was lavishly decorated with red and gold, from long velvet banners to giant tapestries depicting the family's crest. The manor itself stood in the center of the marketplace so that all the merchants affiliated with the Taurlum could get home quickly if the mighty Vapros warriors showed up. Even though Neil was disgusted at the opulence of the mansion, he couldn't help but admire how impressive it was. The entirety of the Taurlum mansion was made of polished marble to accommodate the great weight of its residents. A marvel like this had never been built before and was quite a change from the wooden and brick buildings that filled the city.

A door on the opposite wall opened. Neil risked a glance around his pillar. Two towheaded men wearing red and gold swimwear came into the bathhouse. Neil resisted the urge to snort. They never missed a chance to bear their family colors and boast of their "superior lineage." The two Taurlum were young, one looked to be Neil's age, the other a few years older, and they were unarmed. But their skin, Neil knew, was hard to pierce. The boys might as well have been made of iron.

Neil glanced around the corner to look at their swimwear. He had never seen anything like it. Most people in Altryon didn't have the money or opportunity to swim for

fun, but when they did, their swimwear covered their chests along with their legs. These boys wore nothing except what appeared to be swim shorts. This was most likely because they wanted to show off as many muscles as possible. The taller one chatted loudly and easily to his companion. Neil dared to relax. They didn't suspect he was here. The shorter Taurlum was quieter, but the proud, almost cocky way he held himself when he walked made Neil roll his eyes.

"So," the taller boy was saying as he walked into Neil's line of vision. The Vapros boy held his breath. "Did you hear about the Pig?" Neil recognized this boy now: Michael Taurlum, known as "the Nose" among the villagers because of his prominent snout. He wore a gold ring on every finger, and the multitudes of bracelets adorning his arms clinked loudly. Any normal man would struggle to carry all that jewelry, but Michael's skin bore the weight easily. His droopy, yet unsettlingly alert eyes were fixed on his Taurlum companion and he had a thin, blonde beard growing on his iron jaw. He didn't see the Vapros enemy behind the pillar, which was incredibly fortunate for Neil. Michael wasn't well known for his mercy.

The younger, clean-shaven boy sank into the warm bath water. "The Pig?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Michael climbed into the bath beside him, not bothering to remove his jewelry. "Come on, Darius, learn the damn city." His voice was louder and bolder than his brother's. It was almost as if he wanted the entire city to hear him, and to hear him clearly. It made Neil want to shoot him on the spot. Patience, he reminded himself. He couldn't make his move yet. If these two realized he was here, he would not only fail his mission, he would probably also be killed, or worse, held for ransom. Even if his family paid the ransom to get him back, Neil's cover would be blown and he would be forced to spend the rest of his days working as a socialite. That was not the life he'd been working toward for all these years. He was trained to be an assassin. He could not mess this up. Failure would not be tolerated.

"The Pig is the guy who owns the mask shop in the market," the Nose was explaining to the one called Darius. Neil focused his energy and rematerialized behind another pillar a little farther away from the boys.

Darius cocked his head. "And why is he called the Pig?"

Michael waded into deeper water and smiled. "Because he's a pig," he chuckled. "And because he's famous for forcing himself on women."

Darius's mouth stretched into a grin. "You shouldn't be talking. You're kind of famous for that, too."

Michael's smile quickly turned to a frown. Behind the pillar, Neil nearly laughed out loud. This Darius wasn't afraid to speak his mind. From across the room, he heard the

men continuing with their conversation, but he couldn't stay to listen. There was a mission at hand.

He rematerialized behind a new pillar, edging his way closer to the other side of the room where the door to the next room was waiting. Coming to the baths had been a waste of time; neither Darius nor the Nose was his target. Neil could still hardly believe his father had chosen him for this critical mission. His target was the Taurlum grandfather, the titular head of the Taurlum family. The Vapros controlled the nightlife district and the production and distribution of ale. The Taurlum controlled the markets. But in an unexpected power play, the Taurlum were attempting to corner the market on barley, wheat, and hops, buying up the ingredients needed to produce the Vapros ale. This assassination was in direct retaliation for this ill-advised maneuver.

Neil dematerialized again, and then again, and then stopped short; he was out of pillars. Nothing but empty space stood between him and the door, but it was too far. He wasn't strong enough to rematerialize that far away. Neil felt his heart begin to pound and he ran his hand through his raven hair angrily. He was stuck.

He considered his options. He could try to make a run for it. Darius was sitting with his back to the exit, but the Nose wouldn't sit still. If he turned at just the wrong time, he would spot the Vapros boy. Neil pulled his knife from its sheath. It had been specially curved so that it could slip in between a man's ribs. However, that tactic would prove ineffective against a Taurlum, unless Neil was perfectly precise. The only way to kill a Taurlum was to press the knife into a pressure point. Once the knife pierced the skin there, and the Taurlum started to bleed, he was as easy to kill as any other mortal. It wouldn't be so hard to sneak up behind Darius and stab him, and then it was just a matter of Michael. The Vapros loved to tell stories about how much of a brutish monster he was in combat. Michael also had the added advantage of his massive size. Neil estimated that he stood at nearly six-and-a-half feet tall, and every inch of his body was composed of hard muscle. Darius was smaller and leaner, but Neil didn't let that fool him. Darius was lean, but he had an athlete's hard body and definitely wouldn't go down without a fight. If Neil could only strike down Michael first somehow....

Suddenly, the door Neil had come through burst open, and a guard came running into the bathhouse. "Sirs!" he cried. "We have reason to believe there is an assassin in the house!"

Neil almost dropped his knife. Michael leaped out of the pool, bracelets clanging obnoxiously against each other. The other boy didn't move. "What makes you think there's someone in the house?" asked Darius with a raised eyebrow.

"There was a crossbow bolt fired into the Taurlum seal over the door to this very room," the guard said nervously. "A Vapros weapon, from the looks of it. We are on high

alert. Either one of you could be the target.”

Neil shoved a hand through his hair and cursed his own arrogance. He slid the curved knife back into its sheath and planned his next move. Fighting had seemed like a good idea when it was only two boys in a bath, but now he had lost the element of surprise.

On the other side of the room, Michael scoffed, “I fear no assassin. I am going to go get my hammer and then I am going to find him and use his insides to decorate the floor.”

Darius stepped out of the bath and put a restraining hand on the Nose’s shoulder. “Settle down, Michael. The guards will take care of this. Any assassin stupid enough to fire a bolt into our crest is not stealthy enough to stay hidden for long.”

Darius and Michael left the bathhouse together, leaving puddles in their wakes. Now, only the lone guard remained. Neil waited as patiently as he could but the man didn’t seem to have any intention of leaving. Neil took a breath and tried to still his hammering heart. He had never actually killed a man before. Carefully, Neil raised his crossbow and fired a bolt into the back of the guard’s head. The guard let out a surprised gasp as he began to fall. Neil materialized behind him and grabbed the back of his neck before he hit the ground. As he held onto the lifeless body he began to gather all his energy and then with a strong exhale, he released it. The guard’s body instantly dissolved into ash—clothes, weapons, and all. Every fiber of his being was cremated in less than a second. The ability to dissolve his enemies into ash was a useful one, but for Neil, it only worked on bodies that were already dead, and it would be ineffective as a tool in the coming assassination.

Neil doubted anyone would notice the ash on the ground until he had already completed his mission, but he kicked through what was left of the guard for good measure. A pang of guilt began to arise in his chest and he clutched his stomach. He felt his face grow warm and for a moment, he was sure he would faint. He very quickly found himself vomiting onto the marble floor. He took a deep breath and approached the pool. With cupped hands, he brought some water to his mouth. He swirled it around and then spat it out. *Don’t feel guilty*, he told himself. *Any guard who decided to work for a prominent family like the Taurlum understood the risks*. He started toward the door, but fatigue and shortness of breath made him pause and double over. Materializing took an inordinate amount of energy. He had been stupid to use his powers so often in such a short amount of time. He stumbled to one of the pillars and leaned against it as he tried to stay conscious. A full minute passed before he felt well enough to stand, and as he made his way to the exit, he promised himself not to materialize again unless it was absolutely necessary.

The exit took him to the bottom of a giant spiral staircase. He climbed the steps with

as much vigor as he could muster in his weakened state, panting a little from the effort. By the time he reached the top stair, he was gasping for breath. Before him stood a giant door which stretched up to over three times his height. Why was everything in this house so tall? It was as if the Taurlum mansion was built for a community of elephants, instead of men who just happened to have tough skin.

The door didn't have a handle. Neil threw himself against the wood with all his force, but it held fast, and with a sinking heart, he realized someone with the strength of a Taurlum warrior designed the door. No one without such strength would be able to push it open. Not for the first time in his life, he wished it were possible to materialize through walls.

As Neil backtracked a few steps to try throwing himself against the door again, it was pulled open with a staggering amount of force from the opposite side. The Vapros assassin found himself face to face with a familiar pair of Taurlum brothers, now armor-clad and holding weapons. "Got him," the Nose said to Darius, brandishing a hammer high above his head. Neil forgot every bit of his training and made a run for it.

In spite of promising himself not to, Neil materialized behind the two brothers and bolted into a circular room filled with armor and weapons. He gasped as he entered and realized this was a dead end. He didn't have the energy to materialize again. The two Taurlum turned to face him, amusement spreading across their faces. Michael stood back and watched as Darius began to walk forward to confront Neil. "Remove your hood, Vapros," he commanded.

Neil pulled away his hood and mask to reveal his face for the two young men. Michael seemed slightly surprised by his age, but Darius held his icy composure. Neil was finally able to see Darius up close. He had wavy golden hair and something in his blue eyes that was almost intelligent. Neil quickly decided that Darius's eyes didn't show wisdom but more of an ironclad determination. Unlike Michael, he didn't wear any jewelry. It was as if his entire outfit had been designed to be practical and battle efficient. This didn't stop Neil from noticing the blood smeared on his armored chest. Neil was ready to bet that it wasn't his. "Who are you here to kill?" Darius asked, advancing slowly. Neil backed away until he was pressed up against a giant floor-to-ceiling stained glass window. He glanced over his shoulder. The window would be easy to shatter, but a fall from this height was risky.

"The oldest Taurlum," Neil answered finally. "Your grandfather probably. I haven't exactly looked at your family tree recently."

Darius narrowed his eyes. Neil braced himself for a deathblow. "You're kind of an idiot, aren't you?" the Taurlum boy said, a hint of laughter in his eyes.

This question caught Neil off guard. "Not exactly. I'm just unlucky. Why?"

“Look at you!” he laughed. “You’ve run right into a dead end. You aren’t even remotely in the right part of the house, if you’re looking for my grandfather. Was that your intention?”

Neil tried to stand up straight as he responded sarcastically, “Well, if you could point me to the right part of the house I’d be on my way.”

Michael exhaled heavily through his oversized nose and rubbed his bearded face leisurely. “On with it, Darius. I want to continue my swim.”

As Darius took a step closer to his target, Neil realized he might have stalled long enough to gain back sufficient energy for one last escape. He concentrated his energy and prepared to materialize somewhere near the door. Darius realized what Neil was doing too soon, and before Neil could disappear, the Taurlum had planted his right foot against Neil’s chest and kicked him straight through the window.

As Neil fell, he used the last of his energy to rematerialize slightly closer to the ground. He hit it chest first with a thud. Neil groaned as he tried to get up. His breastplate was horribly dented and his mouth tasted of blood. He slowly made it to his hands and knees and realized he was facing the markets. The massive city wall loomed in the distance, shrouded by a thin fog.

He rolled around and tilted his head back to glare up at the window. He made eye contact with Darius, who now held a mammoth war hammer. A small smile played around the Taurlum’s lips as he raised the weapon above his head. Neil realized what was going to happen just in time. The hammer hit the ground with such force that it tore apart the bricks where Neil had been lying a moment before.

“Is that the best you can do?” Neil shouted. Darius scowled and stepped straight out of the broken window. He plummeted to the ground (as did Neil’s jaw) and landed so hard that the cobblestone street beneath him shattered and sent up a cloud of dust. He rose from the rubble, dusted himself off, and swaggered over to Neil. “If you value your life,” he said, pulling the massive hammer from the ground, “you should run.”

A group of villagers had come running when they saw the boy thrown from the third story window of the Taurlum mansion, but as Darius advanced on Neil they turned to flee. The citizens of Altryon knew what happened when members of opposing houses came across one another. Better to get as far away from the coming brawl as possible.

Neil met Darius’s icy gaze and tore away his dented breastplate. For an instant, he considered fighting. Darius raised a challenging eyebrow and stretched out his arms threateningly. Neil took a step forward, threw his breastplate to the ground, and turned tail to run for his life. Darius smiled and waited a few seconds to give Neil a decent head start. Then, hoisting the hammer above his head, he let out a roar and chased after the terrified Vapros would-be assassin.



CHAPTER TWO

CELERIUS ESTATE

LILLY CELERIUS

Lilly Celerius frowned at herself in the mirror and decided that being seventeen years old looked exactly the same as being sixteen. She lifted a comb and pushed it through her lengthy auburn hair, then gently guided the stray strands into place with her fingertips. She passed her palm down the front of her military coat, checking to make sure each button was still fastened, and then reached up to dab away a bit of smudged lipstick from the corner of her thin lips. She had wide mahogany eyes and well-defined cheekbones. These were common Celerius traits that she wore with pride. She nearly always looked presentable, but this was a special occasion. Nothing could be out of place—not today.

The door to her bedroom opened quietly, and Jonathan came inside. Lilly didn't bother to turn around. She looked his reflection up and down in the mirror. "Yes?"

The servant bowed, then stood at attention like a loyal guard dog. "Are you ready, Miss?"

More ready than you are, she thought, sighing. Jonathan's black hair hung down over his forehead, unkempt and far longer than a servant's hair was supposed to be. His royal blue coat, which had clearly been made for a much taller man, dangled past his ankles. The coat, Lilly knew, had been a gift to Jonathan from her father, and the former wore it proudly almost every day, in spite of the fact that he appeared to be drowning in it. "Let's go," she said, giving her hair a final pat. She hesitated for a quick second to readjust Jonathan's collar for him.

Jonathan bowed again, gestured to the door and answered, "After you."

She exited briskly and he trotted after her, stumbling slightly as he hurried to keep

up. The poor man had never made it past five feet tall and he had to maintain a steady jog to stay next to his mistress. “When was the last time you saw General Anthony?” he asked, trying to sound serious in spite of his hurried pace.

Lilly rolled her eyes and sighed audibly, but slowed her steps. “It’s been weeks, understandably. He’s the busiest man in the entire realm.” Anthony was the General of the Imperial Army.

“At least he made time to see you on your birthday,” Jonathon said.

“Yes.” From the corner of her eye, she saw Jonathan give a little sigh of contentment, which angered her, until she realized his relief was probably in response to her slowing down rather than her brother’s absence.

The Celerius estate was vast and their manor lavishly decorated. Each wall was adorned with their blue and gold colors, and decades worth of medals and weapons hung side by side. These were their trophies. Lilly paused for a moment to admire the crest positioned on the wall at the top of the staircase on the second floor. A downward facing sword above a golden banner was all the Celerius family needed to prove their worth to passers-by. The embroidered letters read, “Highest Honor.” Lilly stared at it and straightened her coat with a quick pull. Jonathan fixed his posture and tried to do the same.

They proceeded toward the grand staircase that led to the front entryway of the Celerius estate. As they descended the long flight of steps, Jonathan comically reached around to hold the back of his jacket to keep it from dragging on the ground like a wedding train. Lilly would have laughed if things weren’t so important today.

“Have you heard the rumors?” Jonathan asked.

Lilly stopped walking. She turned her head slowly and looked down at him, “About Anthony?” Jonathan gulped and nodded as he tried desperately not to meet her icy stare. “Yes, Jonathan,” she said, “I’ve heard the rumors. They are nothing more than Vapros lies and deceit.”

Jonathan smiled weakly but Lilly didn’t lift her glare. Although one would normally associate such large brown eyes with warmth and kindness, Lilly’s eyes could practically freeze time with their intensity. He tried not to squirm in discomfort. Finally, she started walking again, and he closed his eyes and let out a breath he didn’t remember holding before tripping after her.

As they exited the house and stepped onto the gravel road, Lilly gazed across the distant fields that comprised her family’s estate. Jonathan offered a hand to help her into the carriage, but she ignored it and climbed aboard herself. “Miss,” the driver said, turning in his seat to face her, “we can’t get to the military outpost without crossing through the marketplace or the nightlife district.” Jonathan grunted a little as he struggled

to climb into the carriage. "So it's either Taurlum territory or Vapros territory."

Jonathan opened his mouth. "I think we should—"

"Marketplace," Lilly decided firmly. "It's closer, and if we are attacked, we will have an easier time fighting off one bull rather than ten ravens." The Vapros usually travelled in teams and the Taurlum tended to operate alone. Lilly wasn't particularly worried though; it had been a few months since the last physical brawl between families. Even if a Taurlum saw her carriage in the markets it was doubtful that he would attack, unless of course, it was that idiot Michael Taurlum.

"That's what I was going to say," Jonathan muttered, settling himself into the seat opposite his mistress. The driver clucked to the prized Celerius horses and they sprang forward, seamlessly pulling the carriage down the road with a smooth, steady haste. Despite how quickly they reached the city district, Lilly knew that this journey would take her all day. The city of Altryon was twenty-five square miles across and they were travelling across half of it. There were roughly two million people living outside the slums and a population that large didn't exactly make it easy to navigate. Lilly stared absently out the window at the glorious stone walls of the bank where her family stored their endless funds. Selling weapons had proven to be a lucrative business. She could see the great wall of Altryon in the distance and her subtle smile turned into a frown. Everyone in the city was assured daily that it was to protect them from the savages outside the wall, but as a member of the Celerius family she was frequently treated to smaller bits and pieces of information about the alleged "wasteland" beyond the walls. Sometimes when she stared upon its vastness it didn't make her feel safe. It made her feel suffocated.

"I think we're almost to the markets," said Jonathan quietly. "Hopefully everything goes all right."

Lilly didn't appear to hear him. The carriage began to bounce up and down furiously. Jonathan was nearly thrown from his seat. Lilly closed her hands into fists at her sides. "Why are there so many potholes?" she asked through gritted teeth.

Jonathan chuckled a little, but stopped when Lilly turned her glare toward him. "This is Taurlum territory," he said. "There are bound to be a few holes in the road." Suddenly the carriage came to a halt. Lilly's annoyed expression turned to one of fear. She shared a knowing look with Jonathan and they both reached for the door simultaneously.

As Lilly stepped out onto the street, she realized how very out of place she looked here. Her military coat and dress were both a bright royal blue, a color nobody else seemed to be wearing. The crowds of villagers were clad in darker colors, the fabrics stained with sweat and hard work.

It was never difficult to determine someone's social class; all that was needed was a

quick look at their clothes. A large mob had gathered in the streets, blocking the carriage. Lilly looked at Jonathan expectantly, waiting for her servant to order the crowd to move, but he seemed too terrified to speak. She scowled and approached the nearest merchant, checking first to make sure he wasn't blonde. "You," she said flatly.

The villager jumped and stared up at her as he wiped his hands on his stained apron. "Me?"

"Why is the road blocked?" She phrased her sentence the way her father always did; it was an order, not a question. That was the best way to command respect.

The commoner looked at her coat instead of her face as he answered. "Darius Taurlum caught some Vapros kid in his house. He's about to kill him."

Lilly suppressed a smile; it was always satisfying to see her two worst enemies fighting it out. "An execution?" she inquired.

"Not yet. Darius is still chasing him, but he doesn't play around. The kid will be dead before lunch."

Lilly smiled and said, "Thank you, sir."

She glanced back at the carriage and realized that it would take some time to turn around. This made her nervous; the Celerius weren't exactly beloved in the working parts of Altryon. The Celerius estate was on the eastern edge of the city, past the Imperial Palace and the nightlife district. Most people from the working class wouldn't have any reason to venture so far east. Lilly hardly ever journeyed out past the protective gates of the family estate, unless she was accompanying her father on business or to visit other nobles in the area. However, her desperate need to see Anthony had led her to pass through the working class area and the markets on her way to the military base on the northwest edge of the city.

She stood, her face hard, as her driver and Jonathan struggled to redirect the carriage. She could hear a few men in the crowd whispering as they noticed her, but she forced herself not to betray any emotion. "Hello, lovely," called a large, sweaty man, as he broke away from the crowd. "I like that coat of yours."

"Then you should understand what it represents," she said calmly, wrapping her fingers around the handle of her sheathed sword.

The man growled and wiped his forehead with a massive hand, leaving a trail of soot behind. He looked strong. Lilly guessed he was a blacksmith. "You've got quite a mouth," he said, advancing toward her, "and I'm not sure I like your tone."

Lilly took a quick glance at the carriage. Jonathan and the driver were arguing about something and didn't seem to notice her new friend. "Leave me alone," she snarled, as he took another step. "That's your one and only warning."

The man noticed how tightly she was gripping her sword. He snickered. "I've heard

a lot about your family, girlie,” he taunted. “You’re supposed to be quick. But I’m the strongest and quickest in the market. What do you say to that?”

“I’m a lot more than just quick,” she fired back. “Do you require a demonstration?”

Jonathan had finally noticed Lilly was in danger. “Miss?” he asked as he trotted over to her. “We should be going.”

The blacksmith glared at him. “Take a walk, slave,” he growled. “Me and your master are just getting acquainted.”

As inconspicuously as she could, Lilly began to remove her sword from its sheath. Her adversary saw the blade catch the sun and quickly pulled a knife out from a holster on his hip.

Lilly didn’t appear to be fazed. “Last chance,” she said calmly.

They had attracted the attention of a few villagers who gathered around to gawk at the confrontation, but Lilly only had eyes for the blacksmith. “You sure you want to do this, woman?” he asked. “If you engage me in a duel, I’m sure it’s completely legal for me to cut you up. Even if you are a lady.”

“Ah.” She cocked her head and a reminiscent smile crept across her face. “So you underestimate me because I’m a woman.” She let the blade slowly slice through the air. “That’s a mistake.”

He took a moment to size her up. He was around six feet tall and had a large weight advantage over her. With a glint in his eye, he lunged forward with his knife.

She evaded him easily, leaving him to slice nothing but air. He recovered somewhat gracefully, pivoting on his heel to face her. He lunged again, faster this time, but still managed to hit nothing. He swung wildly at her outstretched arm and, to his relief, made contact. His knife nicked her hand and a stream of blood fell to the street. He grinned and took a step backwards. “What now, love?” he asked, arms spread wide.

She held up her hand so that her adversary could see it. Before his very eyes, her skin reformed around the wound and left her with nothing but a quickly fading scar. “Now,” she said, slashing across his neck with her sword, “you yield.”

His hand flew to his throat. Blood dripped between his fingers and puddled onto his toes. It was nothing but a small cut along his throat; Lilly knew it was not enough to truly hurt him, but enough to make him scared. It would have been easy for her to extend a bit more and decapitate him, and he knew it. He dropped his knife, cursing, and retreated into the crowd.

Jonathan was trying not to beam. “Back to the carriage, Miss?” he asked.

She sheathed her sword, eyes still on the place where the assailant had disappeared, and led the way back to her awaiting carriage. “Apparently the road is blocked because of a fight. Taurlum against Vapros,” she explained upon re-entering the carriage.

Jonathan grinned. “So I guess we don’t have to worry about being ambushed,” he concluded. “Our enemies are busy killing each other.”

Lilly gave Jonathan a rare smile as the driver directed the horses down an alternate route. Every street in the marketplace was Taurlum territory, but villagers and merchants, neutral commoners who held no grudge against the Celerius house, frequented the back alleys. Nobody tried to stop the carriage again.

When they finally reached the military establishment, the soldiers on patrol waved them through the giant gates and directed the carriage to the stables where the horses could rest. Jonathan insisted on leading Lilly inside, and even though she knew the military base backwards and forwards, she humored her diminutive servant and allowed him to accompany her to her brother’s quarters. Lilly had grown up playing in these hallways, as Anthony would often let her tag along on quiet days when he worked in his office, catching up on paperwork.

The small office was empty. “Where do you think he is?” Jonathan asked with concern.

“He’s just late,” Lilly reassured him, sinking carefully in a high-backed chair. “He’s busy. He’ll be here. He’s expecting me.”

It wasn’t long before the door opened to reveal Anthony Celerius. Lilly rose automatically as he entered the room, her eyes sparkling but her face arranged in a respectful countenance. Her brother was a large man, and when they were younger he used to hoist her up on his shoulders and gallop around the estate like a pony. Those days were long gone. His broad body was clad in shining armor, probably polished just this morning, and a royal blue cape was draped over one shoulder and connected with a gold brooch that bore their family crest.

Lilly’s eyes widened as she took a closer look at his face. Anthony once had an iron jaw and long auburn hair, but now his once-youthful face was marred with premature wrinkles and his hair was covered in streaks of grey. Being the youngest general in the history of Altryon was clearly taking its toll. “Anthony,” she whispered, dropping a curtsy.

He smiled. Lilly was relieved to see it made him look younger. “Lilly, happy birthday, darling girl.” He came forward, armor clanking, and wrapped her in a bear hug. She allowed herself to grin. “We will speak in the war room,” he said, releasing her and nodding to Jonathan, who had bowed so low that he was having trouble standing up again.

They followed him down a hallway into the renowned war room. Anthony pushed through the door, chatting easily, as if he did not realize how exhausted he looked now. “You remember Carlin Filus,” he said, gesturing to the corner where Anthony’s second in

command stood at attention.

Carlin offered the trio a smile, bearing crooked teeth so different from Anthony's perfect, pearly whites. Lilly suppressed a shudder. Carlin and his smug smile had always unsettled her; he looked like he knew something she didn't. He slid his palm over his brown military-length hair and came forward. "Lilly Celerius," he grinned, reaching for her hand. She held her breath and offered it to him. "It has been too long. How are you on this fine day?"

She was close enough to see the stubble lining his cheeks. He had gained a fair amount of battle scars during his time as a warrior; most noticeable was a deep cut on the upper right side of his lip that made him look like he was permanently scowling. "I am well, thank you," she replied carefully. He pulled her hand to his lips and kissed it formally, his dark brown eyes not leaving hers. It was almost as if he were telling her something silently with his eyes, that he had a terrible secret that he wasn't willing to disclose. Lilly felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck. Then, with a bow to Anthony, he brushed past Jonathan and hurried from the war room, red cloak billowing behind him.

Lilly shivered once he was out of sight. "He's terrible," she said to Anthony, wiping the back of her hand on her dress.

Anthony moved to close the door. "You don't know the half of it," he muttered as he sank into one of the large chairs. Lilly took the chair opposite his, leaving Jonathan to stand awkwardly by the door. "I assume you've heard the rumors?"

Lilly nodded. Anthony flicked his eyes to his sister's servant. "Jonathan," he said, not unkindly, "leave us."

Jonathan looked mildly offended. "Miss?" he asked, looking at his mistress with wide eyes.

"It's all right, Jonathan," she said, and he went, head hanging down like a kicked puppy. As the door closed behind him, Lilly abandoned her perfect posture and leaned toward Anthony intently. "Are they true?" she asked urgently. "The rumors? Jonathan can be trusted, you know."

Anthony shook his head and replied, "Not with this." He rose and retrieved a bottle of gin from the other side of the room. With a heavy sigh he sat back down and poured himself a glass. "There's something very important we need to discuss." She saw him slide a hand over one of his eyes and she realized he had brushed away a tear. "But before we begin, understand that I love you very much, Lilly."

She blinked and said, "Begin what?"

"Our last conversation," he whispered as he took a sip of his drink.



CHAPTER THREE

THE MARKETS

NEIL VAPROS

Neil didn't know Altryon's markets as well as he knew other parts of the city, but he knew a few key things. For instance, half the market was divided into stalls for farmers and other small businesses, and the other half was dedicated to large stone stores that sold luxury goods. Most of the buildings in Altryon were several stories high. This was due to the fact that the city was walled and needed to accommodate its rising population. This information, however, did not help him make a decision about which way to run for his life.

Just as Neil began to gain a lead on his pursuer, the hammer soared within an inch of his head and embedded itself in the wall of a clothing shop. He ducked into an alley, clutching at his chest as he ran. He couldn't take much more of this. The physical exertion was wreaking havoc on his body. Every muscle screamed at him to stop running, to take a break, but Neil couldn't risk stopping.

As he hurtled down the alley, lungs burning, he remembered something his father had told him the very first time he'd collapsed after overusing his powers: "You'll get older and stronger, and so will your powers. Someday, materializing will feel like nothing."

Easy for him to say, Neil thought, pushing his raven hair back off his forehead. Neil's father was the strongest Vapros alive. He had pushed his abilities past every limit imaginable. He could turn his entire body into smoke, envelop live men, and turn their bodies to ash. Moreover, he could accomplish it without even breaking a sweat.

As Neil neared the end of the alley, he allowed himself a quick glance over his

shoulder. The alley was empty. Darius wasn't following him; Neil either lost him, or the brute had given up altogether. Nearly crying from relief, Neil let himself stop running. He was safe. It was over.

For a few blissful moments, the alley was silent other than Neil's heavy breathing. Then the sound of heavy footfalls came within earshot, and Neil cursed and raised his crossbow. As Darius rounded the corner, Neil fired a bolt; the weapon hit Darius's forehead and broke, not even putting a dent in the Taurlum's skin. Darius didn't even seem to notice. Neil sprinted down the alley. "You can't run forever!" Darius shouted after him.

Neil was about to collapse. "If you would hold still and let me shoot you, I wouldn't have to!" he shouted back over his shoulder.

Darius roared as he charged after him. Neil loaded another bolt and fired. It sailed harmlessly over Darius's head. Cursing, Neil rounded a corner and tore down a new street, heading for the square. Darius was gaining, but if he could make it to the busiest part of the marketplace, maybe he could blend in with the throngs of villagers.

Neil had almost reached the square when he was yanked off his feet and into the air. Darius let out a scream of triumph and threw him to the side, sending him flying into the wall of a nearby store. Darius held his hammer high, posing dramatically for the crowd that had gathered to witness the brawl.

A broad-shouldered man in Imperial armor stepped between the boys. Neil recognized him as the Captain of the Guard. "Taurlum," he ordered, drawing a long sword, "by order of the Emperor, I command you to--- "

Without taking his eyes off his prey, Darius swung his arm and knocked the Captain of the Guard into a wall, where he left a sizable dent. Darius blinked and glanced at his victim, acknowledging the fact that he might have gone too far.

Neil lay on the ground, groaning in pain. Darius sneered down at his victim. "Here's to my family," he said, grinning. "And here's to the end of yours."

Just as he began to swing his hammer down, a silver blur shot through the air and imbedded itself in his neck. A small trickle of blood dripped down onto his shoulder. The impact made Darius jerk his arm to the right, and the hammer hit the ground just shy of Neil's head. Darius's expression changed from savage triumph to one of confusion, and then fear. His precious iron skin had been pierced at a pressure point. He was now just as mortal as everyone else around him.

Neil staggered to his feet, smiling in relief. "Today is not your day, is it, Taurlum?"

Darius ignored him. His hand was against his neck, pulling the silver weapon (a throwing knife, Neil now realized) from his skin. "It was a second ago ..." his adversary replied.

“Go home, Darius,” Neil said loudly. Darius growled and held the knife tightly in his fist. A few villagers began to whisper nervously.

“I’m still strong,” he snarled.

“Yeah,” Neil agreed, “but I have backup.” He gestured to the knife in Darius’s hand.

Darius narrowed his eyes. “Who threw this knife?” he roared, spinning to glare at the crowd. The villagers looked terrified.

Neil was regaining energy fast. “You won’t find her over there,” he said quietly.

“What?”

“I said, you won’t find her there,” Neil repeated with more volume.

“I heard you,” Darius said angrily.

“You just didn’t understand.” Neil said. “It doesn’t make much sense, does it? Who would have thought, a great Taurlum man like you, bested by a girl?”

Darius blinked. “Bested by a—”

Before he could finish the sentence, an iron bar had collided with his skull. He stumbled two paces closer to Neil with his arms outstretched and then collapsed. As he hit the ground, a girl with shimmering ivory hair stepped out from the shadows, an iron staff held loosely in one hand.

She smiled. “You fight like a girl, Neil,” she said calmly, dropping her iron weapon.

The crowd of bystanders, realizing there would be no execution today, began to disperse.

Neil looked the girl up and down. “You dress like a man, Bianca,” he countered playfully.

She looked down at herself briefly before meeting his eyes again and asked, “What’s wrong with armor?”

Neil grinned. “Most girls who look like you tend to prefer dresses. Besides, isn’t leather armor a Celerius thing?”

Bianca said, “I could wear a dress, I suppose, but I wouldn’t want to drive you crazy. You might get distracted and lose another fight.”

“I had it covered.”

She snorted. “Of course you did.”

Bianca was several inches shorter than Neil and had a shapely figure. The noticeable curves were a recent development that Neil expertly pretended not to notice. Her grey eyes always seemed to retain a smile. She had a small smudge of ash on her cheek. Neil could only guess where that had come from. He glanced around at their surroundings. “You should get out of here before more Taurlum show up,” he warned. “You know how word spreads around here. They’ll be after us both as soon as they hear Darius Taurlum got his ass kicked by a girl from the markets.”

Bianca tried to pry her knife from Darius's iron hand but she realized that it wouldn't budge. "Yeah," she muttered, "I probably made some enemies today."

Neil stared down at Darius's body. "Are you gonna kill him?" Bianca asked.

Neil drew his knife. "Yeah," he said quietly.

He approached Darius and pulled his head up by the hair. He felt a familiar dizziness beginning to arise but suppressed it. Bianca watched him with quiet curiosity. Neil sighed and dropped Darius. "No, not with all these witnesses.... he's learned a lesson, I think."

Bianca raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "Whatever you need to tell yourself," she said. "I'm sure we're both going to be on the Taurlum's most wanted list after today, anyway."

"True," Neil said and started down an alley. Bianca followed, matching his pace easily. "But things aren't all bad."

"Why not?"

Neil grinned and slung his arm casually over her shoulder. "At least you get to walk down the street on the arm of a handsome Vapros warrior."

Bianca laughed and ducked out of his embrace. "Yes, it's an absolute privilege," she said with a mock curtsy, and then she tossed her hair over her shoulder and skipped down the street ahead of him.

Bianca knew the streets better than anyone else and she led Neil through a twisted back-alley route until they reached the safety of the nightlife district. Neil had dozens of memories just like this one. Since they were children, Bianca always knew how to get where she wanted quickly and she loved to drag Neil along.

Neil slowed as they approached the Vapros house. It wasn't a grand, pretentious building like the Taurlum mansion; in fact, most of the building was underground. The only part visible from the street was a small shack with the Vapros crest etched into the side. The family motto was inscribed on the door: "Victory Lies in the Ashes." Neil put his hand on the iron door as if he meant to open it, then sighed and let it close.

Bianca offered him a sympathetic smile. "He sent you alone. It was practically a suicide mission. He should be happy that you made it home alive."

Neil stared at the ground. "I don't ..." his voice faltered, "I don't think he's going to give a damn."

Bianca squeezed his hand. "Good luck."

He smiled at her weakly. "Please. I don't need luck. No one can resist my apologetic smile."

Bianca turned to leave. "I've seen your apologetic smile," she called over her shoulder. "It needs work."

Neil managed a little smirk in Bianca's direction before he turned and knocked on

the heavy iron door.