

Prologue

Sky omen. The words pulsed through the palace courtyard, and the morning bustle died away as men and women stared upwards. The spy's gaze followed, finding an almost perfectly round halo of colored light shimmering in the sky. He had never seen anything like it before.

An uneasy hush settled on the crowd. *What could this mean, this day of all days?*

"It is a sign of good fortune," an elderly Brethren monk called out. "Taus bestows his blessing on the joint rule of King Alexor and Queen Nyla."

There were murmurs of agreement as people slowly returned to their work. Yes, it was a portent of good their nods and smiles conveyed, even as they glanced nervously at the sky.

The spy stood a moment longer staring at that halo of light. He was not a particularly superstitious man, but it struck him as strange that the last sky omen had appeared on the day the royal twins were born. That day, eighteen years ago, a double rainbow with a single base had arced across the sky above Tirragyl. It had heralded chaos and conflict, for the birth of the royal half-souls had almost torn the House of Taus apart. Now here was another sky sign on the day of their crowning.

With his attention on the strange sight, the spy did not notice the kitchen boy until he brushed up against him.

"A letter for you, Raven," his messenger whispered, deftly slipping something into the pocket of the spy's robe before turning and melting back into the crowd.

As his fingers felt the weight and smoothness of the envelope, the spy smiled, the omen all but forgotten. It had been quiet these last few months and an assignment from a wealthy Highborn was just what he needed. Curious, he slipped the envelope out of his

pocket and looked down at the seal, but at the sight of the serpentine 'L' pressed into the red wax, the spy's smile faded.

The Warriors' High Commander stared at the strange ring of colored light in the sky and felt a familiar sense of unease

The same feeling had come over him in his War Chamber a few days earlier. He had been talking to his commanders when a sudden wave of disquiet lapped through his thoughts, there one moment, gone the next. The brooding emotion had also gripped him several times at night as he startled awake, hearing a bell ring its clarion call through his dreams. Even yesterday, as he read an ancient manuscript and his gaze fell on a passage of destruction and war, a tingle of apprehension had coursed through him. And now this omen of doom.

Mikel dropped his gaze from the sky to the steel glint of the river far below and let his eyes follow the Feyn's course through the valleys and hills. Could an enemy be following that winding river right to the Guardian Grotto's entrance, even now? Surely the Guardian rock would have warned him, imparting a sense of clarity and *knowing*, as it had before.

But this sense of foreboding was as useless to him as a warped arrow. It did not tell him if somebody approached. Nor if they were friend or foe.

The young Charab steadied his breath, drew back the bowstring, and released the arrow, watching it thud into the center of the target. Smoothly, he drew another arrow from his quiver and turned his body fractionally for a better aim at the next target.

Then he stopped and lowered his bow.

Behind him, his village was silent as a grave. Strangest of all, no sounds carried from the boys' training turf. No clunk of wooden swords. No elders' berating voices.

The Charab swung the bow across his shoulder and bounded across the boulders to a point above the sandy turf. As he looked across to the training field, he saw that the constant dance of thrust and parry had ceased and that the elders and boys stood motionless, staring upwards.

He followed their gaze and took in a sharp breath of wonder at the rainbow circle—beautiful and otherworldly—in the sky. The elders claimed such sky omens warned of approaching battles or deaths of kings or even power shifts in other realms. The young Charab had never paid much heed to their foretellings. The pain of the people he was destined to lead would not lessen with such events. Approaching battles did not frighten them. On the death of one king, an equally brutal one was sure to rise to power. And he suspected that the Charab people had long been forgotten in other realms.

Even if they were still remembered, he doubted that a shift *there* could undo what held the Charab captive *here*.

The ancient curse that bound his people to Taus could never be broken.