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MARIE LU

SKYHUNTER



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Marie Lu

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**In a world broken by war, a team of young warriors is willing to sacrifice everything to save what they love.**

The Karensa Federation has conquered a dozen countries, leaving Mara as one of the last free nations in the world. Refugees flee to its borders to escape a fate worse than death—transformation into mutant war beasts known as Ghosts, creatures the Federation then sends to attack Mara.

The legendary Strikers, Mara's elite fighting force, are trained to stop them. But as the number of Ghosts grows and Karensa closes in, defeat seems inevitable.

Still, one Striker refuses to give up hope.

Robbed of her voice and home, Talin Kanami knows firsthand the brutality of the Federation. Their cruelty forced her and her mother to seek asylum in a country that considers their people repugnant. She finds comfort only with a handful of fellow Strikers who have pledged their lives to one another and who are determined to push Karensa back at all costs.

After another devastating battle, Mara seems ready to fall. But when a mysterious prisoner is brought from the front, Talin senses there's more to him than meets the eye. Is he a spy from the

Federation? Or could he be the weapon that will save them all?

**MARIE LU** is the #1 *New York Times*–bestselling author of the Legend series, the Young Elites trilogy, *Batman: Nightwalker*, the Warcross series, and *The Kingdom of Back*. She graduated from the University of Southern California and jumped into the video game industry, where she worked as an artist. Now a full-time writer, she spends her spare hours reading, drawing, and playing games. She lives in Los Angeles with her illustrator/author husband, Primo Gallanosa, and their son.

Follow her on Instagram: @marieluthewriter.

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# SKYHUNTER

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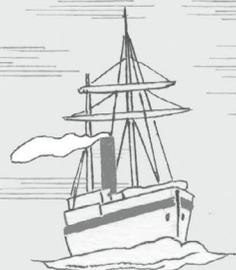
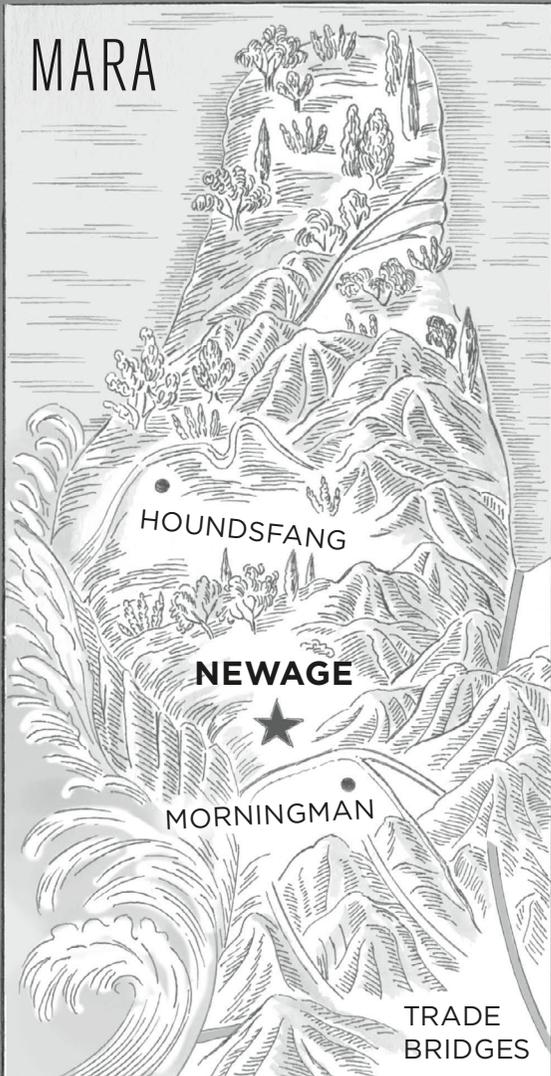
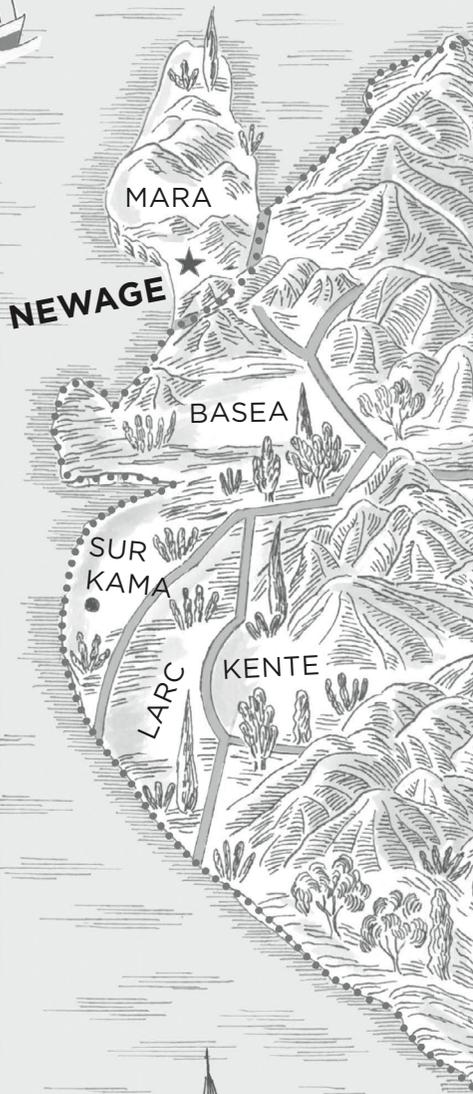
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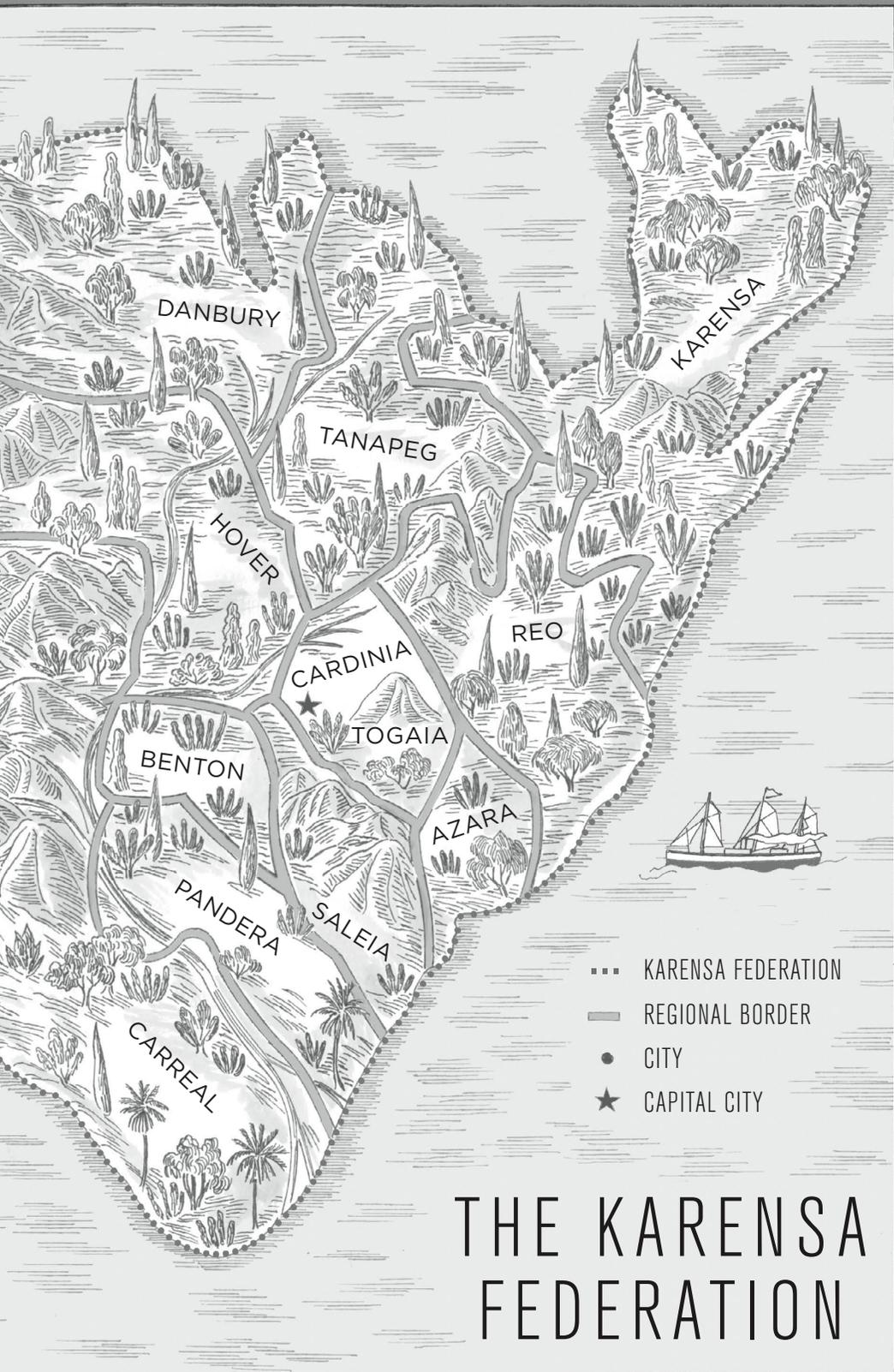
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- ... KARENSEA FEDERATION
- REGIONAL BORDER
- CITY
- ★ CAPITAL CITY

# THE KARENSEA FEDERATION

## **GHOSTS TRAVEL IN PACKS.**

This is the first lesson you're taught when you become a Striker.

You learn that Ghosts used to be human, before the Karensa Federation strapped them down and poured dark poison down their throats, twisting them into monstrous war beasts.

Now you'll see them hunting in the forests at the foothills of the mountains in groups of six or more, a grotesque contrast to the serene, snow-dusted landscape.

Their faces are white as ash, their skin split with deep cracks that expose scarlet, rancid flesh underneath. They are taller and stronger than any human who has ever lived, their limbs grown out all wrong, spindly like a spider's. They smell like blood and earth.

Though their eyesight is poor, they can detect movement well. Their hearing is superb, their ears stretched long and tapering to points. They can make out human voices a mile away. In their territory, to speak is to be found, so we remain silent, invisible to the eye and ear.

Their teeth, too, grow longer and sharper than ours. The discomfort of it makes them gnash their fangs constantly, slicing new tears into their already ripped and rotting mouths.

That's how you know they're coming. The grinding sound.

But the most important thing to remember is this: To kill a Ghost, you must starve its eternally regenerating body. To do this, you must bleed a Ghost out, cutting it at its neck, the only place with a vulnerable vein.

It's what I have trained my whole life to do. My name is Talin. I am a Striker for Mara, the last free nation on this side of the sea. We are legendary bringers of death, assassins of monsters.

And the only thing standing between our home and annihilation.

THE  
WARFRONT

THE NATION OF MARA

# 1

## **THE MORNING DAWNS WITH BOTH SUN AND RAIN.**

Drizzle drifts in the sunbeams, dewing everything with a shimmer of light.

A storm is moving in. We need to finish our sweep early.

Cool wind streams my coat behind me as I head toward our defense compound's main gates. We are at the warfront fifty miles from the steel walls of Newage, Mara's capital, out where our southern mountain ranges give way to dense forests and valleys.

The other sides of Mara are protected by sheer cliffs rising a thousand feet above the ocean, natural formations supposedly caused hundreds of years ago by a cataclysmic earthquake—but here in the south, we are vulnerable to attacks from the Karensa Federation, whose vast territory now extends up to the other side of the pass. They send their Ghosts to wander this in-between land, trying to find a weak spot in our border. So we do a silent sweep every morning, killing any Ghosts we encounter.

It has been a month since the Federation launched a full-scale attack against us, which we barely survived with a temporary cease-fire. But compromise is difficult when what they want is our nation itself. So the

next siege could come today. Tomorrow. A month from now. There is no telling.

When you're fighting a losing war, you are always on edge.

Morning light has turned the sky a bruised pink by the time I arrive at the edge of our compound. As I walk, I notice the metalworkers bustling around their stations, the seasilk trim of their hats trembling in the wind.

"It's the Basean," one of them says with a sneer.

Another lifts an eyebrow at me. "Still alive, huh, little rat? Well, if you die before Tuesday, I'll still win my bet."

Words like these used to stick in my chest until it hurt to breathe. I'd turn my head down in shame and scurry past. But my mother always told me to keep my chin up. *Look proud*, she would say to me as she patted my cheek, *until you feel it*.

So now I wink back and smile a secret smile.

The metalworker looks away, annoyed that his barb didn't hook me. I stand straighter and continue down the path without a word.

I haven't spoken out loud since the night my mother and I first fled to Mara's borders, when a Federation shell of poison gas permanently scarred the flaps of my vocal cords. I was eight years old at the time. My memories of that night are inconsistent—some clear as crystal, others nothing more than a blur of soldiers and the light of fires engulfing homes. I can't remember what happened to my father. I don't know where our neighbors went.

I think my mind has buried most of those memories, shrouded them in haze to protect me. That night left my mother with a head full of snow-white hair. I came out of it with no more voice and scar tissue twisting the inner lining of my throat. To this day, I'm not sure if I can't speak because of those scars or because of the trauma of our escape, of

what I witnessed the Federation doing to our people. Perhaps it's both. All I know is that when I open my mouth, what's left is silence.

I suppose I now make use of that silence. In my line of work, at least, it is essential for survival.

That was what first drew me to the Strikers. When I was small, I would join the crowds to watch the famed patrols head out past New-age's walls, ready to face the Federation's monsters. They are Mara's most elite branch of soldiers, revered by everyone, notorious even in other nations. My eyes would shine at the elaborate harnesses looped around their shoulders and waist, their guns and knives and black steel armguards, the masks covering their mouths, the circular emblem embroidered on their sapphire seasilk coats that draped down to their boots.

I loved their silence. I loved that it meant survival to them. They moved like shadows, with no sound except the hush of boots against the ground. I would linger there, balanced on the branch of a tree, transfixed by their lethal grace until they had disappeared from view.

Now I'm one of them.

It is less glamorous when you are the one riding toward death. Still, it's a job that means I can afford to put food on my mother's table and a roof over her head.

Other Strikers are at the gate now, ready for our sweep. Corian Wen Barra, my Shield, is already here, his back turned to me. Dew shines in the high knot of his hair, and a breeze pushes against his coat's hem.

I'd heard him leave his room this morning when I was still under my furs. He moves so lightly that no one else would have noticed the hush of his door closing.

As always, the sight of him settles my nerves. I'm safe here. I tap his shoulder as I reach him, then give him a mock frown and sign to him, "You left without me."

Corian looks sidelong at me. He clutches his heart, as if I've wounded him. "What—and leave little Talin to fend for herself? I would never," he signs, his gestures teasing and light.

"But?" I sign back.

"But they were serving fresh fishcakes this morning."

"Did you at least save me one?"

"I did, but then I had to eat it because you took so long."

I roll my eyes. He just laughs before he reaches into the pouch at his belt and tosses me a cake, still hot, wrapped in cloth. I catch it easily in one hand. My belly growls on cue.

Corian laughs again. "Look at you, nimble as a deer this morning."

I shrug at him before biting down on the cake's tender meat. Savory juices flood my mouth, along with the grit of minnow egg in the center. When I finish, I let out an exaggerated breath and grin. "Nimble and starving," I answer him.

"Thank you for saving me breakfast, Corian?" he suggests.

I gesture to him with greasy fingers. "You're welcome for my company, Corian."

All Strikers work in pairs. We are bonded until death from the moment we take our oath. Corian and I have trained together, have fought side by side, have been able to guess each other's thoughts since we were twelve. I'm more a sister to him than his blood sisters. When I move, he watches my back. When I lead, he follows. I do the same for him in return. Our lives are intertwined, one indivisible from the other.

He is my Shield, what we call our Striker partner. I am his.

We're a strange pairing. Corian and I have always been opposites in everything. He is the thirdborn—*wen*—son of the Barra family, one of the wealthiest in Newage. His appearance is golden in every way. When he laughs, he leans into it with his entire body, a constantly shifting

mosaic of strong lines. It's the kind of aura that you can't help but be drawn toward. People buzz around him at holiday banquets, all eager to be seen chatting with him.

My full name is Talin Kanami. I'm a refugee from Basea, a nation south of Mara that fell to the Federation ten years ago. My skin is light brown, my eyes green and slender and long lashed, my hair so black that it shines blue, like a slick of oil in the light.

I'm proud of my Basean features, but many in Mara call refugees like me rats. The Maran Senate has banned us from serving in the Striker patrols. I'm here only because Corian asked the Firstblade to make an exception for me.

Now that we've eaten, Corian and I do our routine weapons check, making sure our blades are fresh and bullet chambers are loaded.

"Daggers," he calls out.

I run my fingers against the hilts of mine, then tug once on the harnesses looped securely around my shoulders. We each carry a dozen daggers: six strapped across our chests in a bandolier; two against the harnesses around each thigh; and one tucked along each boot.

"Good," I sign to him. "Blades."

We simultaneously touch our hands to our two swords hung at the hips, then pull them out in unison and sheath them again with a flourish. Like the daggers, these are made of a near-indestructible metal, capable of slicing through almost anything.

I nod at his left blade. "Could use an extra polish, Corian," I sign. "That edge is looking a little dull."

"It'll still cut a throat," he replies. "I'll sharpen it tonight."

"Guns," I move on.

We have two sniper pistols each, equipped with mufflers to silence

them when they fire. A cloth bandolier running around my belt is full of bullets. Corian tosses me a few extra ones from his stash. I catch them and drop them into their slots.

“Bow,” he finishes. “Arrows.”

One crossbow each, strung across our backs, plus a light quiver of arrows, each cushioned with a fabric wrap to keep them from clanking against one another.

Finally, we check our armguards and gloves, then our black half masks, which will cover our mouths and muffle the rasp of our human coughs.

As we finish, Firstblade Aramin Wen Calla comes striding down our ranks for a final check. Our leader is young; some grumble that he’s too young for his position. Not long ago, he’d trained alongside the rest of us as a recruit. But even a few short years as the Firstblade has prematurely streaked silver into Aramin’s thick knot of hair tied atop his head. His eyes are as gray and hard as a thunderstorm, rimmed with ferocious dark powder. His lips are twisted down in a permanent scowl. Black fragments of jawbone stud his ears like multiple earrings. Following the tradition of other Strikers who have lost their Shields in the past, the Firstblade had cut those bones straight out of the Ghosts that had killed his own partners years ago.

It’s hard to grow old in this profession. You promote who you can.

He progresses along our line, stopping occasionally in front of the newer recruits to check a harness, tilt a chin up, offer a few words of courage.

“Talin,” he says when he reaches me.

I place my fist against my chest in a salute to him. He does the same before moving on.

Finally, when he finishes, he stands before us one last time. There are no speeches of glory, no rousing battle cries.

No one needs to tell us that we are the last defense Mara has against the Federation.

Down the line, a hush falls over all the Striker ranks. We pull on our masks at the same time, covering the bottom half of our faces in black. Corian looks straight ahead, his features flattened in concentration.

My heart hardens into stone. My mind pushes away everything except a single goal:

Protect my country.

The Firstblade gives the order. We step forward as one out into the silent world.

If not for the Federation on the other side of this mountainous war-front, if not for their Ghosts stalking the narrow passes, the land is achingly beautiful. The air is cold and crisp, half the sky clear and half a darkening gray. The moon hangs powder white above the tree line, craters visibly speckling its body. A cloud of birds glides through bands of fog drifting through the valley's basin. The water of a nearby stream glows bright blue from the light of tiny river minnows, what our breakfast of fishcakes had been formed from, although now they teem only in the thousands where there used to be millions. Farther down the plains, I glimpse a herd of rare shaggy cows grazing in the mist. Even now, close to winter, they are searching for the sweet, yellow wildflowers carpeting the foothills, gemstones gleaming in the snow.

But what really makes this landscape breathtaking are the ruins of an ancient, long-gone civilization. The structures, scattered everywhere across all nations, are strange and lovely—bones of crimson steel bridges that rise hundreds of feet in the air, crumbling white and dark pillars cut into huge, impossibly perfect cubes. Now the steel and stone are overgrown with blankets of dripping green vegetation.

No one knows exactly how long ago this civilization existed. As old as five thousand years, some say. Whoever the Early Ones were, they

were far more advanced than us. They left behind entire cities. Machines with wings. Ships made of metal. Sheets of engineered rock. A few suggest that some of the species we see now, like the wild cows roaming the plains, evolved from animals domesticated during their time. From the fallen skeletons of their steel structures, we broke down the parts and used them to fortify our halls and towers and bridges. From their abandoned weapons, we created our guns and bullets and blades.

From their books, the Federation learned how to twist humans into Ghosts.

I wonder where they went. One theory says they died out, killed by a sickness, and that we descended from the few survivors. Another claims they abandoned this earth to live elsewhere among the stars, and we are the stragglers left behind. Or maybe they too had demons to face, had destroyed one another with their hatred. I wonder if they would approve of how we have scavenged their leftovers.

We have all spread out by now, cutting a trail through the grasslands toward the woods nestled in the Cornerwell Pass. Occasionally we stop to listen, wondering whether the wind whispering through the pines will also carry the sound of teeth.

But the forest is still today.

We reach the edge of the woods. Here, the light dims, filtered through the thick canopy into rays dotting the floor. Dense layers of fallen logs pile in a green blanket of moss and ferns. The scent of cool, damp earth surrounds us, and from somewhere far away comes the faint trickling of a stream.

As time goes on, I start to notice the finer sounds. The drip of water on a leaf, the thud of a frog leaping onto soft soil. Corian walks several yards away, but our bodies always turn in sync with each other, used to years of our rhythm.

Then I notice a snapped twig against a branch. I pause and lean close for a better look.

Corian senses the shift in my movement without even looking at me. A moment later, he's at my side, warmth radiating off him, his stare focused up on the twig too.

I sign to him with my gloved hands. "See the angle of the break?"

Corian signs back. "It's down," he replies. "Not sideways. Broken by something taller than this branch." He points into the wood. "Came from that way."

"Stag?" I ask.

"Would be more snapped branches here, if it was."

"A scout, maybe? A spy?"

"Could be," he responds. "I heard the southern patrols caught a prisoner of war fleeing through the valley this morning. There might be others."

A glint of something wet on the forest floor catches my eye. I crouch. "Blood," I tell him as I stare down at the single, fresh dot of crimson, the color a shade noticeably darker than human.

Corian nods in agreement, his lips pulled into a tight line. It's not a stag or a scout. We have tracked hundreds of Ghosts. By now, the smallest hint is enough to let us know they're nearby.

I point up once at the trees. "Take top watch. I'll wait for your sign."

Corian taps a fist quietly against his chest at the same time I do. Then he heads for the trees. In two steps, he pulls himself up into a nook. There he crouches, nearly invisible against the dark wood.

I shift toward the thick undergrowth near a pile of mossy logs. During training, I would glide across floors littered with stacks of coins, careful not to disturb any with my boots. Now I pass between the logs without a sound until I settle into the crevice of a hollow trunk.

Long minutes drag by.

A bird's trill catches my attention. Corian's call. I turn my eyes up to him. He's still hunched in the shadow of the tree nook. He signs to me again, pointing three fingers to my right. Then three fingers toward me.

"Three Ghosts east of you. Three Ghosts north. A hundred feet away."

They're here.

My hands rest against the hilts of my swords. I always choose them first. They are the quietest, they have the range I need, and above all, they let me move quickly. In the trees, Corian pulls a gun from its holster and rests his finger on the trigger.

Another pause, followed by an abbreviated sign from Corian: "Warning. Close by."

The forest's silence gives way. The crack of twigs against rotting feet. The crumble of sodden leaves.

Then, finally, I hear it.

The gnashing of fangs wet with blood.

To my right comes the first trio. They move on all fours in a jolty skitter, their arms stretched longer than their legs. An iron cuff circles each of their necks to protect their vulnerable vein. The closest of them turns its milky eyes skyward, searching the treetops before continuing on. New blood drips down its humanlike chin.

I have seen countless hours on the warfront. And yet, to this day, that four-limbed skitter still makes the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

They edge closer. As they do, the second trio comes into view. They reach up on two legs, stretching themselves tall as they peer between the trees.

My gaze focuses on the leader of the group. It is bigger than the others, its cracked muscles more prominent. Like alligators in the southern

lands, Ghosts continue to grow in size and strength until something kills them. If nothing does, they will live forever. Some, I hear, tower higher than elephants.

When this one stretches itself up to its full height, it looks like a hulking beast, its skin cracked and bleeding.

Up in the trees, Corian rises into a predator's crouch and lifts his gun. I tense, willing him to be safe. My hands close on the hilts of my swords. The stillness of the forest settles heavily on my senses, and all my strength coils tight in my muscles.

You only get one chance to move. After that, there is no room for hesitation, no time to rest or regroup or change your mind. Everything—*everything*—depends on your speed. You take them down fast, or they will take you down.

Corian aims his gun at the leader.

He shoots.

The bullet strikes the Ghost hard in its neck cuff, cracking the iron. It lets out a deafening shriek and whirls in Corian's direction with a speed that defies its size. It throws itself at the tree and begins clawing furiously for him.

The others instantly turn in his direction too.

I dart from my hiding place at the same time I yank my blades out. The familiar hush of metal sliding against sheath hums in my ears. My swords catch the light. I race along a fallen log. The closest Ghost to me doesn't even see me coming before I launch into the air and swing my blade at its neck.

It slices clean into the cuff, splitting it. My second blade cuts its vein. The Ghost collapses to the ground, twitching violently as blood stains the green forest floor crimson.

I don't stop moving. The Ghosts are now in a frenzy of rage, their movements like the strikes of an adder.

One swipes at me. I slide to my knees and arch so far back that my head scrapes against the ground. Its claws miss me. I pop back up and slash a fatal wound in its neck, then whirl in the same move and cut through the cuff of the Ghost beside it. My other blade stabs it in the throat.

From his vantage point, Corian fires a second bullet down at the leader, hitting its neck again. It flinches away, then lunges at him. My heart lurches. From the other side of the tree, another Ghost digs its clawed hands into the trunk and tries in vain to pull itself up toward him.

I whip out my gun and fire at it. The bullet strikes true. The Ghost screams, halting its attack against Corian for an instant.

Corian points his gun down at the wounded Ghost and fires three times. The bullets shatter its neck cuff. He fires a fourth shot at the exposed vein. It stumbles to its knees.

The fifth Ghost screams at me. My boot snags against a branch on the forest floor. It costs me just a fraction of a second—but in that moment, the Ghost manages to grip my leg. It hurls me off my feet. I go crashing into the underbrush.

As I scramble back up, it's already lunging for me again. I'm about to lift my blade when an arrow suddenly blooms right underneath its jaw, keeping it from opening its mouth. It lets out a snarl of fury. Behind it, Corian nods at me from his tree. I lash out at its cuffed neck with both blades. One, two, three slashes, and the cuff finally breaks. I yank out a dagger and stab hard into the vulnerable vein.

Only the leader remains now. Stuck with arrows, it whirls and races toward me. I pull out another dagger, tighten my grip on my blade, and brace myself for its attack. Behind it, Corian leaps down. In the blink of an eye, swords appear in his hands.

He rushes toward the Ghost. At the last second, he darts to one side. I twist to follow him. Corian slides into a crouch right as I reach

him. I jump. My boot kicks off against his shoulder and I launch into the air.

I slice down hard, cutting through the cuff. It falls to the forest floor. Without missing a beat, Corian darts up from his crouch and cuts its throat.

A shudder courses through it. As I land lightly on my feet beside Corian, the Ghost falls onto all fours, then collapses to its side.

Corian looks at the bodies littered around us. My hair is tangled and mussed from the fight, and dark strands cling to my damp forehead. My senses still tingle with unease, and my body stays turned protectively toward Corian.

I push my hair back and sign to him. “Are you okay?”

He nods. We exchange a brief smile. Then he breaks his stare with me and goes to check each Ghost’s body, making sure their veins are cut clean through. I do the same, pausing to watch as he stops before the dying leader.

Corian has told me before that Ghosts remind him of humans the most when they are in their last throes. Their movements slow, their breaths curl in the air, and their shrieks, weakened, turn into the sound of something anguished and pitiful. Their eyes water with pink, blood-tinted tears. It is said that they cry because their rotting, eternally growing bodies are in excruciating pain all the time. Their dying whines are a plea for mercy.

I always warn him that they do not have the heart he has. He always reminds me that they once did, that before the Federation filled them with poison, they had smiled and laughed and been in love, that real hearts used to beat in their chests.

Even though Corian stands over the leader as its executioner, he reaches down to pick one of the blue flowers dotting the forest floor. Then he bends a knee in the middle of the glade, his long coat pooling

in a circle around him, and places the flower carefully beside the body. He pulls down his mask and bows his head. His fingers sweep across the floor in a single arc. His lips move without a sound. He always does this, and it is why I respect him.

He is saying: *May you find rest.*

I see the seventh Ghost too late.

It is smaller than the others. Maybe it had been a child when it turned. Ghosts travel in packs—but this one had been lagging behind.

It materializes in the shadows of the woods behind Corian's kneeling figure. Its eyes, milk-white with hatred, turn on my Shield, and its jaws open. It lunges.

My blood turns to ice. I grip my blades and rush forward.

But it is far too late. The Ghost sinks its teeth into Corian's shoulder before he can whirl around in time. It throws him off his feet and onto his back in a single move, then dives onto his chest.

Daggers are already in Corian's hands. He stabs at the Ghost again and again, seeking its vein. I throw myself at the beast with all my strength. It's enough to force the Ghost's attention onto me instead of my Shield. I cut its throat with one swing.

I slide to a halt beside Corian and press down on the wound in his shoulder. He shoves me away with a snarl. His body is already trembling, and his lips are tinted blue as if from the cold. He is signing the same words to me again and again.

“Do it. Do it.”

And I know it is over.

If your Shield is bitten by a Ghost, you must cut his throat before he turns. This is the last thing we are taught. It is taught last because none of us want to think about what it means. Because sometimes the things that cut closest to your heart deserve the weight of being last.

Corian looks straight at me. His eyes are bright with unshed tears.

I tighten my grip on my blade and stand over him. The world takes on the blur of a dream. We never break our stare. For a moment, I think I won't be able to do it.

But my body remembers the motions, even when my mind cannot.

My blade slices through the air. There is a sickening sound, then a sigh.

The forest is still again, and I am the only one left to hear it.

I turn my face up because I cannot bear to look down. Rain beads against the forest canopy. Light rims the leaves in icy gold. It takes me a moment to realize that I am trembling.

As always, I don't utter a sound. But a heart can grieve in silence, so I sink to my knees beside Corian's body and allow the tears to come.