

Night
Fire
Wind
Sand
Plant
Ice
Water

Fire
Wind
Life (Plants, Animals, Flesh)

Ridden

By Me

Chapter 1:

Somewhere down below, beneath the eastern valley of the Cherry Mountains, in the heart of the great and glorious Island Nation of Vermillion, stood the Oakwood Stronghold. It was a worn-down village, with wooden barracks and dusty roads, all surrounded by a wall of stone. Soldiers stood at every corner, swords drawn and shields raised. Training arenas took up most of the room within the walls. They were the most pristine-looking space within the stronghold, though even they were littered with the rubble and ashes from the cottages burned down to make room for their creation.

Most of the citizens of Oakwood resided in a series of cramped barracks towards the northern wing of the stronghold. In one such structure, a young girl lay upon a wooden cot, bundled in thin and dirty linens. Hazy sunlight spilled over her eyes as they fluttered open. It warmed her brown skin, giving her the boost of strength she needed to push herself out of bed. A clank of metal accompanied her movements: the sound of the golden-clad armor she'd decided to sleep in. Her tangled black hair hung down to her shoulders, but Jordan shoved it beneath her helmet. Surely, she would need to comb it later, but right now she didn't have the time for such menial tasks.

Glancing around, Jordan made out the snoring figures of her bunkmates tucked beneath their covers. She scoffed at the sight. *They're all sleeping in again! And on a day as important as this!* Jordan readjusted her sheath and lowered her faceplate before exiting the barracks. Cool air filled her chest as she stepped outside, making her shudder. Nevertheless, she continued walking towards the arena.

"Jordan!" called a voice from behind her. The young warrior grit her teeth and turned around. Before Jordan stood her grandmother: a kindly old woman smiling ear to ear, holding a strawberry cake within her arms with sixteen flickering candles rested atop the frosting. "Happy birthday, darling! Make a wish! Make a wish!"

“Grandmother Clara, please. I have work I need to attend too.” Jordan dipped her head and walked past.

“Come on, darlin! One little bite won’t hurt! Just one little bite!” Grandmother Clara smiled sweetly and held the cake up to Jordan.

“Sorry, I’m in a rush.” Jordan continued walking away.

“Wait up, darlin! Wait up! I know you’re busy and all, but I’m sure you can spare a few moments for your grandmother! Please? I’ll even make you another cake!” Grandmother Clara hobbled in front of Jordan and gazed up at her with pleading eyes. “There’s a lot I want to talk to you about, and after today, we might never get the chance to talk again.”

“You’re being dramatic,” huffed Jordan.

“Please,” begged Grandma Clara. “You know how I feel about you becoming a dragon rider. And I know that you disagree. All I’m asking for is just one moment. I want to give you something.”

“No thank you.”

“It’s really important. It’ll only take a second. Just a second!” Grandmother Clara grabbed Jordan’s armoured hand and attempted to drag her back toward the barracks. “Please?”

“Leave. Please.”

“It’s from your parents, Jordan. Your parents!” replied Grandmother Clara. Jordan raised her eyebrows at the mention of her parents, and she finally took a step forward.

“Please don’t take too long,” sighed Jordan. Grandmother Clara looked back and gave Jordan a toothy grin.

“It won’t! I promise! Now, come along, kiddo! Come along!” Grandmother Clara made her way behind the barracks, with Jordan in tow. “Your parents wanted me to keep this safe for you. This particular one is your mother’s. Your father had one too, though Castor already took that one. But this one should fit you. You’re the same size as your mom, after all.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Jordan. Grandmother Clara simply gave a giggle and took Jordan by the hand, while cradling the cake in the other. She led Jordan to a case resting on the ground a few meters behind the barracks. Grandmother Clara knelt down and opened the case, and Jordan gasped at what lay inside.

“You come from a long line of noble dragon riders, Jordan. I may have had my doubts when you were younger, but all these years I’ve kept this safe for you,” Grandma Clara said. Jordan knelt beside the case. Inside it lay a golden saddle and bridle, etched with the ebony figures of flames and flowers. Unlike the equipment meant for horses, however, these bridle and saddle were forged for dragon-riding. The straps were made from chains instead of leather, and the saddle was much larger and oddly shaped. The reins, too, were much longer. They attached to an iron muzzle used to bind the dragon’s jaws.

“How did you find these? How long have you had them!?” Jordan removed the armored glove covering her hand, and ran her bare fingers across the scarred leather. Grandmother Clara sat beside her cross-legged.

“They were still attached to the dragons’ backs when the Vermillion Army found them. It took me some wrangling, but I managed to convince the government to let me keep them for you and your brother.”

“Thank you.” Jordan set the glove on her hand. She placed the saddle back in its case, lifted it, and stood up. “I must be on my way now, Grandmother.”

“Darlin, please. Just a little longer? There’s still an hour left until the ceremony! We can spend some time together! Please? Just a little time?” asked Grandmother Clara. “You’re always training, and I never get to see you anymore. Once you leave, I’m going to be so lost. So, so lost. Please, I’m begging you.”

“No, please no more.”

“You wake up so early! For heaven's sake, you’re the only one in your group that sleeps with your armour! I know you want to work hard, but believe me, you work hard enough already!” Grandma Clara picked up the birthday cake she’d set down and made her way towards Jordan. “Please? I spent so much time making it!”

“You know guilt tripping doesn’t work on me,” replied Jordan coldly.

“It’s hard! I know! I know all you’ve ever wanted to do is become a dragon rider, believe me, I know! But once you leave Oakwood, I won’t be able to see you again! Please, I just want to spend a few last moments with you!” Grandma Clara finally caught up to Jordan and grabbed her arm while still holding the cake.

“Leave me alone!” Jordan shook herself free from Grandma Clara’s grasp, and the elderly woman stumbled backwards. The cake fell out of her arms, splattering on the ground. Grandma Clara froze at sight. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she buried her face in her hands. Her frail body jolted with stifled sobs. Jordan simply stood there, trying to ignore the guilt welling up in her chest

“I just wanted you to eat cake!” Grandmother Clara turned and walked away sobbing. Jordan simply stood there, staring dumbly at the saddle and splattered cake.

“I’m sorry,” Jordan mumbled silently. She held up the saddle and pressed it to her chest. She scraped dirt over the cake with her boots in an effort to hide it. Her mind swirled with guilt and anguish. She wanted to run after her grandmother, but her stubborn body would not move. She could only stand there, gazing upon the mess she made.

“Well, it’s official. You’re the biggest piece of crap I know,” chided a sassy voice from behind Jordan. She whipped around to see a pale-skinned girl with a bony frame standing before her. The right side of her hair was dyed a bright red, and the left a slick black. She wore tight golden armour, which covered only her chest and half her thighs, leaving most of her skin bare. A red rose rested above her ear. She picked it up and twirled it in her hands.

“I swear to the stars, Rowan. I ain’t in the mood right now,” grumbled Jordan.

“You know how many people would kill for a grandmother like that?” she asked. “You damned witch, do you have any idea how lucky you are?”

“Did you come all the way back here to pick a fight with me?” snapped Jordan. She withdrew the blade from her sheath. “Because let me tell you, you aren’t getting anywhere wearing showy clothes like that. What kind of fighter doesn’t cover their stomach? If you aren’t wearing the proper armor, you’ll end up stabbed! Care for me to demonstrate?”

“Normally I don’t care for your ‘fight me’ crap, but I must admit, you have crossed a few lines with treating your grandmother like that. Consider this an act of justice and honor.” Rowan spat. She flicked her wrist. With a flash of light, the flower between her fingers turned into a long bullwhip. Swinging her arm, Rowan sent the whip flying towards Jordan.

“I swear to the stars! Can’t you just leave me alone?” Jordan yelled. She swung her sword to Rowan’s attack, only for the whip to wrap around the blade. Rowan swung her arm back, attempting to yank the sword from Jordan’s grasp. Jordan dug her feet into the ground, refusing to let go.

“You know how many people would kill to be in your spot? To have a grandmother like that? You know what it feels like for me to watch you throw that all away?” Rowan hissed. She retracted the whip, and Jordan faceplanted into the forest floor. She let out a loud groan, shuddering as mud splattered across her armour.

“Why don’t you just cut the justice crap? I swear to the stars, you’re just looking for a reason to fight me. You’re only jealous because I’m the junior commander! The highest-ranking trainee in our division,” Jordan replied. She pushed herself out of the mud and leapt towards Rowan with an outstretched sword.

“Your whole family is made of dragon riders! You were practically handed your rank on a silver platter! I’ve spent my whole life working my way to the top. You’re the last person I need to defeat to become the junior commander! And mark my words, Jordan, I will become the next dragon rider!” Rowan twisted her arm, and her whip morphed into an ax. A loud clang filled the air as it collided against the sword, leaving both warriors shaken.

“My parents died a long time ago. It’s true they were dragon riders, and it’s true I want to continue their legacy. But I work just as hard as you do to become a dragon rider, because it’s my dream too. Sorry to disappoint you, Rowan, but I don’t plan on giving up so easily,” Jordan replied. Wind whistled in her ears as she leapt back and lunged forward.

“You damned brute! I hope you burn! You know what? I’ll make you burn!” snarled Rowan. She clutched at her stomach, attempting to staunch the bleeding. Still, she held up her ax, which morphed into a flaming torch. Rowan launched herself towards Jordan, wildly swinging the fire into her face.

“Your movements are becoming erratic and uncoordinated. I’ve fought you before, Rowan.” Jordan swiftly leaned back and jumped to the side, avoiding two of Rowan’s swipes. With a single slash of her sword, Jordan landed another hit on her opponent’s shoulder. “You excel at long-range attacks, but your hand-to-hand combat is less than satisfactory. You leave yourself open. Believe me, if I actually wanted to hurt you, you’d be six feet under by now.”

“Shut up! Just shut up! I don’t care what you’re saying! I don’t give a crap about you!” Rowan continued to flail wildly. Eventually, one of her swipes hit Jordan’s face, who screamed and stumbled backward. Jordan slashed out with her sword and struck Rowan in the chest, sending her flying into a nearby oak. A sickening *crack* filled the air, and the tree fell forward. Rowan gasped and leapt towards Jordan, tackling her to the side. The pair barely evaded the tree as it fell. Both lay sprawled on the ground beneath it, their weapons knocked aside.

“The hell did you save me for? I could’ve gotten out there by myself!” protested Jordan from beneath Rowan. She pushed her comrade off of her, and scrambled to her feet. She looked down at Rowan with concern. “Are you alright?”

“Are you blind, idiot? I’m obviously fine! Sorry for saving your stupid butt though,” Rowan snorted and looked away. Jordan rolled her eyes and stretched out her hand. Rowan took it and rose to her feet. As soon as she regained her footing, however, Rowan launched a punch at Jordan.

“Oh? We’re back to this?” Jordan said. A sharp pain shot through her body as Rowan struck her stomach. She quickly dove to the ground, picking up her sword and holding it out. Rowan retrieved her ax, which quickly morphed into a whip. The pair circled one another, like a pair of lions sizing one another up, each waiting for the other to make a move.

“Are you two for real?” grumbled a voice from above Jordan and Rowan. A wall of ice suddenly burst forward from the ground, separating the pair. The two warriors looked up to see a cloaked figure descending from the sky. He landed atop the ice wall, and removed his hood. He was a black-haired boy similar in complexion to Rowan, with thick bandages covering his eyes. “Rowan, you’re going to get us kicked out of the division if you keep this up.”

“Relax! The only thing I destroyed is a tree! Besides, I’m just getting started!” Rowan leapt atop the ice wall and stared down at Jordan. “That witch over there is the last person standing between me and being Oakwood’s Junior Commander. She has a few things coming for her.”

“I understand you two have your own little brawls, but can you keep it in the arena? Last time you two fought, you destroyed half the barracks!” scolded Crow. “The town can barely contain the two of you! Can’t you just hold it in for another half hour? We’re going to be leaving for Camp Fireborn pretty soon. Maybe destroy everything there instead?”

“Great speech, but if I don’t beat the bloody crap out of this witch in the next ten seconds, my fists are gonna fall off!” declared Rowan. She raised her whip, preparing to pounce towards Jordan. Before she could move, however, Crow stretched out his hand. A beam of ice shot towards Rowan, freezing her in place. Her icy body toppled to the ground, leaving Jordan dumbfounded.

“I swear you two drive me to the brink of insanity,” grumbled Crow.

“You should keep her like that. She’s nicer when she’s all frozen and quiet.” Jordan replied.

“Do I have to freeze you too?” asked Crow.

“Oh-uh- Have a good day, Crow! See you later!” Jordan quickly re-sheathed her sword and ran off.

“She’ll be fine. Trust me, I’ve done this more than once.” Crow approached the frozen Rowan, picking her up, and floating into the air. “Do you plan on destroying anything else?”

“Nope. Wrecking stuff just isn’t fun when I’m not fighting your twin,” yawned Jordan. Crow sighed and placed the hood back over his face.

“I swear you two are going to kill me one day,” he grumbled as he flew off. Jordan crossed her arms and gave a sigh. She gazed down at the fallen tree. It was then she noticed a rod sticking out of the ice wall. She grabbed the end and pulled. The rod slid out, causing Jordan to topple backwards in the process.

“Ow!” she groaned. She lifted the rod above her head, peering at it through her armour. As the rod touched the sunlight, it let out a soft glow. Slowly, it shrank into a red rose, identical to the one Rowan possessed. “Did she seriously drop this when we were fighting? And she says I’m the clumsy one...”

Glancing around to make sure she was alone, Jordan slipped the rose into her hair and set the helmet above it. She knew she’d have to return it to Rowan eventually, but for now, she might as well have some fun with it. Picking up the saddle’s case and slinging it over her shoulder, Jordan turned towards the arena, and began marching towards it.

Jordan made her way onto the dusty streets of the stronghold. The sleepy town slowly woke up around her. Various carts and wagons passed by, pulled by pairs of reindeer and the occasional hefty jackalope. The latter was quite a luxury to have, as they'd grown scarce in the face of the war. Once they were common as cattle, though the vast majority had been seized by the Vermillion kingdom to be used for the war, presumably for transportation or meat. Their antlers and bones were unbelievably sharp: one of the only known materials capable of piercing dragon scales.

One of the creatures, a large creature with silver fur and white antlers, came to a stop beside Jordan. Behind it stood a golden chariot, with the Vermillion Royal Army's Insignia engraved into either side. The vehicle and jackalope both seemed too grand for the dusty streets of Oakwood. Jordan swiftly stood to attention and pulled her fist to her chest. Such was the Vermillion salute. Jordan respectfully lowered her gaze. She did not know who precisely was in the chariot. She hadn't even dared to look. She knew that as a mere trainee, all other soldiers outranked her. Any disrespect towards her superiors would not be tolerated.

"Sir, Private Jordan Bishop of Oakwood's fifth division reporting." Jordan spoke stiffly and silently, more so than usual. Today she could take no risks. She could bear no semblance of disrespect or rebellion. "I apologize for not reporting to my post at my assigned time. I assure you I will not repeat such an offense."

"At ease, Private Jordan. My my, you seem a tad tense, don't you now? You trainees are so easy to scare," spoke a gruff voice from above Jordan. She dropped her hand from the salute and removed her helmet. Jordan allowed herself a peak at the man standing above her. He was an older soldier, with streaks of gray in his black hair and wrinkles teasing his sharp jawline. Nevertheless, muscles packed every inch of his body, and an aura of power lingered around him. His mouth twisted into a smirk, and his gaze glinted mischievously. "Have no worries, you still have a half hour before the ceremony. Try not to worry so much, alright?"

"Right! I'm sorry! My deepest apologies, sir, I shall not repeat such an offense again!" Jordan gave another salute and gazed downward. Her tangled hair hung over her blushed cheeks, and Jordan did her best to sweep it aside.

"You certainly are a worrisome one, aren't you? No need to apologize," chuckled the soldier.

"Sorry sir! I'll stop," replied Jordan.

"Stop apologizing," he repeated.

"Sor-I mean, yes, I'll stop apologising." Jordan clenched her teeth and jaw, not daring to look the soldier in the eyes. She could feel his eyes watching her, observing her. At last, he gave one final chuckle and sat back in his chariot.

"I haven't introduced myself yet, have I?" he said. "My name is General Glade Brawd'r of Silverside's third division."

“General Glade Brawd? As in *the* General Glade Brawd? The General Glade Brawd that single-handedly took down an entire fortress and slayed a thousand Cerulean dragons in a signal night?” squealed Jordan. She gazed up with wide eyes, barely able to contain her excitement. “Sir! I-I’m a huge fan!”

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Private Jordan Bishop. Your ambitions and feats have reached the ears of many high-ranking individuals,” replied General Glade with a smile.

“Really? Did you hear I’m the highest-ranking trainee, not only in Oakwood, but from the surrounding seven divisions? Including your own stronghold of Silverside?” bragged Jordan with an eager smile.

“Well, I was thinking more along the lines of you being the only trainee around that sleeps in armour. But you can say that other stuff to make yourself feel better,” teased General Glade. Jordan instantly flushed and gazed down. “Say, you’re Castor’s little sister, aren’t you?”

“Yes sir,” replied Jordan. General Glade nodded and gazed off towards the arena.

“Your brother is a dear friend of mine. I’ve fought many battles alongside him, and he’s told me quite a bit about you. If my understanding is correct, your parents and brother were all dragon riders, and you want to follow in their footsteps, don’t you?” asked General Glade.

“Yes sir.”

“I offer you my deepest condolences for the loss of your parents. I worked alongside them many times. They had been worthy warriors, until they were slain by the Cerulean scum. I’m a lucky man to serve with the children of such honorable soldiers, though it is my hope neither you nor your brother meet the same fate as them,” continued General Glade. Jordan tensed at the last part, giving a slight nod.

“Permission to speak freely, sir?” asked Jordan, her face flushed. General Glade raised an eyebrow.

“Permission Granted.”

“Sir, if I may ask, why are you telling me this?” said Jordan. “I’m just a simple trainee, and I’m sure a General such as yourself has better things to do than make small talk with an individual of my rank.”

“Well, Private, it’s simply a matter of acknowledgement. Though, your brother did ask me to seek you out. From what I’ve heard, he writes you a lot of letters. I take it you’ve read them?” asked General Glade.

“He’s writing letters to me? Are you sure? The last message I got from him was three years ago!” exclaimed Jordan. “I just thought he was too busy to talk to me.”

“Quite the contrary. He spends nearly every moment off the battlefield in his tent writing to you. Funnily enough, he thought you were ignoring him. He’ll be glad to know you’re well.” General Glade withdrew a small envelope from his belt and held it out to Jordan. “He asked me to hand-deliver this message to you, though he said you shouldn’t open it until after the ceremony. Can I trust you’ll do that?”

“Of course.” Jordan took the envelope and gave General Glade a nod. “Thank you, sir. It truly means a lot.”

“You should get going, Private Jordan. The ceremony will be starting soon. I’m sure I’ll see you there.”

“You’ll be attending?” asked Jordan with surprise.

“Why, of course! After all, I will be the one conducting the ceremony,” grinned General Glade. He yanked the reins of his jackalope, and the creature leapt forward with the chariot in tow. As he disappeared into the crowd, General Glade turned to shoot Jordan a wink. “I have a feeling you’ll enjoy it.”

Jordan dug her fingernails into the paper, wrinkling it and smudging the ink. She barely resisted the temptation to tear it open and devour the letter inside. *You’ve waited three years for a letter from him. What’s another hour?* Jordan reminded herself. She released her grasp on the envelope and searched for some place to store it. *Maybe my boots? Wait, no, that’s too stinky. It’d probably fall out if I put it in my helmet. And the chestplate is too hard to take off. I swear to the stars, why doesn’t armor come with pockets?*

Jordan knelt down and opened the case, looking over the precious saddle inside. It was then she noticed a second envelope resting atop the saddle. On it was scrawled her name in her Grandmother’s handwriting. Jordan scowled and picked up the envelope, crumpled it.

Despite all her years of training and grinding, however, there was one truth Jordan could not ignore.

I'm not the strongest one here. That person's Crow. We've never fought, but I know he can beat me. He knows it too. I don't know why he doesn't fight with us. Not when he knows he's more powerful than the rest of the division combined. I guess he's just too nice for it. It's a dishonest victory on my part, but I'm willing to accept that if it brings me closer to becoming a dragon rider.

Soon, Jordan, Rowan, and Crow arrived at the arena: a large dusty pit in the center of the town. A large pyre of oaks stood in the center of the arena, surrounded by a ring of Vermillion foot soldiers. Jordan slowly walked towards it, gazing up at the pyre with curiosity and awe. *I wonder why they're going to burn all that wood. Is it a ritual or something?*

Dozens of division members stood around the arena, talking eagerly and happily. Some turned to whisper and stare at Jordan as she walked by them, and she couldn't help but smile at the attention.

However, it wasn't long until her spell was broken. A trumpet sounded in the distance, and a drumroll echoed throughout the arena. Then came the soldiers. They rode upon the backs of deer and jackalope, bearing the full glory of the Vermillion Nation. They all moved in unison, step for step and breath for breath, as though a single creature possessed them all. They paraded around the arena a few times before finally coming to rest around the perimeter.

The last man to enter the arena was General Glade, with his silver jackalope and golden chariot. Somehow, he seemed even more magnificent than when Jordan saw him for the first time. She crept closer towards the pyre, where General Glade stood to address the crowd.

"My fellow citizens of Vermillion, I bid you welcome to Oakwood's fifth triennial Reaping Ceremony. As you all know, today marks the sixteenth birthday of this division's youngest member, and as such, it is time for all of them to enter service of their kingdom. For their entire childhoods, these brave youth have trained to fight. Our nation has instilled them with courage. With strength. With discipline. With strength. It is with great honor and pride that I can say these children have proven themselves worthy of becoming the men and women to defend Vermillion. To the fifth division of Oakwood, I welcome you into your service. Your comradeship. Your new purpose. You may weep for your old home. For your families. For your friends. But fear not: today is the day your lives begin anew!"

The crowd erupted into cheers. A wide grin broke across Jordan's face, and her hands began to ache from how much she clapped. However, a solemn face in the crowd caught her attention. She glanced over to see Rowan looking towards the general with contempt. Crow still had an arm wrapped around her. Jordan scowled at the sight. How dare they not cheer! She'd surely have to give both of them a beating for their disloyalty later on.

"As you all know, our great nation of Vermillion is at war. Half a century ago, we were given a choice. The Cerulean Empire invaded our shores and slaughtered our people. They told us to join them, or face their wraith. We refused to give up on our freedom, and since that day we

have stood strong! The war has raged on for fifty years, but we are still here!” The crowd erupted into another wave of cheers, but General Glade quickly lifted his hand for silence. “Some people may not want to leave the safety of their homes. They’d rather hide beneath their blankets than lift their swords and fight. They’d rather remain prisoners of their own fear than take a chance at freedom. Such cowards have no place in the Vermillion empire!”

Another round of cheers echoed through the arena, with Jordan’s voice among them. The general’s words invigorated her. Inspired her. This was her home. The nation her parents had given their lives too. She would do the same. She would take any risk and perform any sacrifice needed to ensure victory for the Vermillion nation. As the cheers died down, General Glade continued speaking.

“While all of you have demonstrated exceptional growth over the last few years, there are those among you that have exceeded even our greatest expectations. To those such individuals, we offer an opportunity to become a dragon rider, the most elite and exclusive position within our military. While in past years, a single candidate was chosen from each division to become a dragon rider, this year, things will be a bit different,” stated General Glade. “Though in past years I shall now announce this division’s top five potential candidates for attaining the title of dragon rider. Should I call your name, please come to the front of the arena. Our first and highest-ranking candidate is none other than Private Jordan Bishop. Please come forward.”

Jordan threw out arms, and the arena erupted into cheers and claps. The crowd swiftly parted for her as she strode towards General Glade. Her heart swelled with pride, and she smiled up at the sky. *I’m doing it, mom and dad. I’m going to become a dragon rider!* From the corner of her eye, she made out the distant figures of Crow and Rowan clapping for her. The sight brought her grim satisfaction. Turning to face General Glade, Jordan greeted him with a nod. He smiled and reached out his hand. Jordan shook it, and took her place beside Glade. Clearing his throat, the man addressed the crowd once more.

“Our second and third highest-ranking candidates are the twins Private Rowan and Private Crow Ashford, respectively. Please come forward!” There was a brief silence amongst the crowd, though everyone quickly resumed clapping and cheering, if only for the sake of politeness. Everyone except Jordan. Her jaw hung open and her gaze had gone blank. *Since when were twins? I could’ve sworn Crow was older. Wait, how are they second and third highest ranking? Last I checked, weren’t they at the bottom of the list? Something isn’t right here...*

Crow and Rowan came to stand beside Jordan, though neither looked her in the eye. Instead, they both closed their eyes and lowered their heads. Their faces were expressionless. Jordan noticed their arms linked together. Jordan clenched her teeth and gazed away. *I’m on to you, Rowan.*

Rosaline Ortiz”

A black-haired girl with wide eyes stepped forward, waving and smiling to the cheering crowd. She wore a long sundress and carried a suitcase with her. Jordan couldn't help but chuckle at how out-of-place she seemed in the dusty arena.

"Private Ramzy Brown, please step forward."

A tall, muscular man with tanned skin quickly made his way towards the center. He towered above everyone around him, rivaling even the General in height. He gave no acknowledgement to the cheers aside from a curt nod. Odd, but acceptable.

"Our next two candidates are the twins Private Rowan and Private Crow Ashford. Please come to the center of the arena."

"Rowan! Fight me!" Jordan called. Rowan turned around and placed a hand on her hip, and a scowl quickly spread across her face.

"The hell? I thought we were done with this!" hissed Rowan. Crow turned to stand beside her, though his face was covered by his cloak. "Look, I'm done with your crap. I don't want to fight you."

"Aww, come on, Rowan! It's all in the name of fun! Give the people what they want!" replied Jordan. "Come on! The Rowan I know wouldn't back down from a challenge!"

"What do you mean the Rowan *you* know? You barely even know me!" snapped Rowan. "Screw you, Jordan. I know that you like to go low, but this is a new level. It's the damned *Fireborn Ceremony*? You know, just that thing we've been waiting for our whole lives?"

"Everyone here already knows I'm going to become a dragon rider. It's practically guaranteed!" replied Jordan. "You can't blame me for trying to have a bit of fun."

"That's enough out of you, Rowan," said Crow. He stepped in front of his sister, placing a protective arm in front of her. "You too, Jordan. Please. Not right now."

"Well, then how about *you* fight me!" replied Jordan. She waved her sword in the air, beckoning Crow forward. "Come on! Fight me, you coward!"

"Jordan, please. Not right now," replied Crow.

"Aww, you're no fun! Come on, people! We want to see the mage fight, don't we? Come on, Crow! Fight! Fight! Fight!" The crowd around the pair quickly took up Jordan's chant, and they closed in on her and Crow. Rowan screamed for them to stop, though her protests were swallowed up by the jeering and cheers.

"This isn't going to go how you want it too, Jordan," Crow said simply. He tugged his hood down to conceal his face. Jordan simply smiled.

"Oh? Do you know how I want it to go?" replied Jordan. Crow simply sighed. He raised his hands, and a bolt of fire flew towards Jordan. The warrior simply dodged it and leapt away. She rushed towards Crow and struck him on the head with the hilt of her sword. He fell to his knees wordlessly and knelt there for a few moments. He gave a slight nod.

“Congratulations. You’ve defeated me. Now leave me and Rowan alone, will you?” Crow rose and disappeared into the crowd. Everyone was silent for a few moments.

“That was kinda anti-climactic,” whispered one voice.

“Yeah. There wasn’t even any blood!” another agreed.

The group began to disperse, leaving Rowan standing there alone with her sword. She blinked, dazed at the prospect of winning the battle. Well, it was the outcome she’d wanted, wasn’t it? It wasn’t the one she’d expected, but it was what she desired. As the crowd withdrew, Jordan made out Crow and Rowan amongst them. She tried rushing towards them, calling out to them, but she was swept away in the crowd.

I’m glad no one’s ever seen me loose to him, but this whole thing still seems like a dishonest victory. I already know I’ve been chosen to become a dragon rider. Castor wouldn’t have bothered to send me a letter otherwise.

he stronghold and into the crowd, she could feel the searing glares of the townspeople. They quickly parted ways to let her through, whether out of fear or respect, Jordan did not know.

“At least we’ll finally be rid of her. Poor Clara. I can’t imagine having to raise such a demon like her,” whispered a voice from behind Jordan. The young warrior scowled behind her helmet, and gripped at her sword’s hilt. She stepped onto the dusty pitch and gazed towards the

”Nuh-uh, you ain’t eating this cake without giving me some sugar! Bring it in, baby! Bring it in!” Grandma Clara laughed. Jordan chuckled nervously, closing her eyes and leaning in to give her grandmother a kiss. A splat of frosting met her face instead as her grandmother smacked the cake into her face. Jordan opened her eyes and fell back sputtering, wiping the crumbs and cream from her cheeks. In front of her, Grandma Clara cackled wildly with laughter, her entire body rocking as she did so.

“Grandma Clara!” yelped Jordan.

“You fell for the oldest trick in the book! The oldest trick!” wheezed Grandma Clara. She’d gone purple from laughing so hard. “Now now, darlin! Don’t fret. I’ve made another cake in the kitchen. Cover your eyes, will you? I have a surprise for you! The biggest surprise you’ve ever seen!”

“Alright,” sighed Jordan through her cake-covered face. What a wondrous occasion this was. She covered her eyes with her hands, and allowed Grandma Clara to lead her into the kitchen. “Will you hit me with cake again?”

“I make no promises, darlin! No promises at all!” chuckled Grandma Clara. She stifled her laughter, and a shudder passed through Jordan’s spine. After a few moments, the elderly woman spoke once again. “You can open your eyes now, darlin! Open them wide!”

Jordan’s eyes fluttered open, and she gasped upon seeing what lay before her. A bittersweet, heart-wrenching feeling surged through her body, gripping at her heart and shaking her soul. There, b

“It was your mother’s. Your father had a similar one, though Castor already took that one. After your parents...” Her words trailed off, though she swiftly started talking again. “I mean I decided to keep them safe for you until y’all were old enough for ‘em. Safe and sound until you were all grown up. And now’s your time, darlin.”

“Thanks. It’s nice.” Jordan She swept a gentle hand over the creases and scars on the dusty leather, though she quickly grit her teeth and pulled away. It was her last day with her grandmother, but she refuse to allow any tears. She knew she was too weak for such pain.

“It’s nice? Come on, I’m sure you have more to say than it’s nice” chirped Grandma Clara. “It’s a very valuable heirloom. You’d better not get any cake on it! No cake at all!”

“I won’t,” replied Jordan tersely. She wiped the frosting on her face and hands, and flicked it away. Her jaw clenched, and her eyes narrowed. She reached out to shake her

grandmother's hand. Her movements seemed robotic and inhuman. "I wanted to thank you for taking care of me. But I must get going soon."

"Oh darlin, I'm so proud!" Grandma Clara jumped at Jordan, sweeping her into an embrace. "You're such a strong and amazing young girl...and I have to say, I couldn't have been prouder of what you've become."

"Thank you, ma'am. But I must get going." Jordan began to walk away, but her grandmother grabbed her hand and pulled her back.

"Stay for a while, won't you? Just for a short while? Are you seriously going away wearing the clothes you slept in?" asked Grandma Clara, gesturing to Jordan's body. It was decked with dragonhide armour, complete with a red helmet and sheathed sword.

"I slept in my armour so I could leave as soon as possible. You know the penalty for being late to the Recruitment Ceremony is severe."

"Well, at least let me walk you there. I want to see you going off," replied Grandma Clara. She gazed up towards Jordan with large, gleaming eyes. Giving a sigh, the girl gave a curt nod.

"Very well then," said Jordan. She slung the saddle onto her back, and marched towards the door. She noticed a small satchel hung on the doorknob. She picked it up and inspected it.

"I packed a bag for you. I know it's not much, but I figured you'd want it..." smiled Grandma Clara. Jordan simply hung the satchel back onto the doorknob.

"You know they don't allow luggage at the camps. The penalty for violating that rule is severe," she said. Grandma Clara pouted and crossed her arms.

"Please? You can smuggle it in. There isn't much in there," she asked. Jordan shook her head.

"I don't have time for this. I have to go," Jordan turned and pushed the door open. She clutched the saddle tightly and dipped her head. She pushed the helmet over her face, only to feel tears stinging her eyes. *Don't cry. You can't let anyone see you cry*, she reminded herself.

"Jordan? Are you sure?" Grandma Clara appeared from behind the door, disappointment lingering on her face and the satchel tucked in her arms. Jordan simply nodded, unwilling to speak any words. Grandma Clara sighed and dropped the satchel onto the floor. "Alright then, I suppose we should get going."

As Jordan and Grandma Clara made their way onto the main street, the sleepy town awoke around them. Various carts and wagons passed by, pulled by pairs of reindeer and the occasional hefty jackalope. The latter was quite a luxury to have, as they'd grown scarce in the face of the war. Once they were common as cattle, though the vast majority had been seized by the kingdom to be used for the war, presumably for transportation or meat. Their antlers and bones were unbelievably sharp: one of the only known materials capable of piercing dragon scales. Many had been fashioned into spears and swords for the sake of battle.

One of the jackalopes tromped along beside Jordan and her grandmother. Silver light shimmered across its gray pelt, revealing white streaks running through its fur. Its antlers swayed and bobbed as the Jackalope walked forward. Jordan reached her hand out. Her fingers brushed through its short fur, causing the creature to grunt and pause. The owner of the Jackalope, an elderly man seated in an intricate carriage being pulled by the creature, let out a sharp huff and gave Jordan a piercing glare. Upon seeing the satchel and saddle slung over her shoulder, however, his gaze softened.

“You’re one of those new recruits, aren’t you?” he asked, tilting his head as he looked down at Jordan and her grandmother. Glancing away, Jordan gave a slight nod of head. The old man gave a sympathetic sigh and opened the carriage door. “If you’re headed towards the town square, I can give y’all a ride...”

“Thank you, sir...” Jordan replied silently. She slowly climbed into the carriage, before turning to help her grandmother in. With a flick of the reins, the owner ordered the jackalope to continue forward. After a few moments of silence, he turned to speak to Jordan.

“You’re going to Camp Fireborn, ain’t you?” he asked. Jordan gave a silent nod. The owner looked away and gave a sigh. “It’s awful brave of all you young folk to go on risking your lives like that to defend the Red Isle like that.”

“Thank you...” said Jordan, unsure of how else to respond. The elderly man simply continued talking.

“I have a daughter. Was around your age last time I saw her. Ivory Griffin was her name... golden hair and hazel eyes. Her mother’s eyes. She used to write me letters. A lot of letters. And one day they just...stopped. Never got another message. I...I mean, I know she’s busy and all, y’know? With fighting?” the old man gave a chuckle and wiped at his eyes. “Just wish she’d...well.... Just wish she’d write back. It’s been a few...months since I heard from her, I think. Or a few years...But I send letters to her each Saturday morning. Just tell her that I’m proud. It’s cheesy, I know...but it helps me. And hopefully it helps her.”

“Hopefully...” Jordan agreed. Her heart throbbed in her chest, and she glanced over to Grandma Clara. The elderly woman sat with crossed legs, her hands folded in her lap, and her eyes fixed on the bustling street below them. Jordan bit her lip and gazed away, trying to push the rising soreness out of her mind. “I...I’m sure you’ll see her soon, sir!”

“I’m looking forward to it!” chirped the old man. He turned around and playfully bumped Grandma Clara. The elderly woman snapped out of her trance and glanced over at the man. She gave a chuckle and spoke.

“Us old hoots will just be stuck here in Oakwood in the meantime.” Grandma Clara’s eyes fixed on Jordan, a hidden flicker of worry flashing through them. “I’m expecting a letter each weekend. If not, I’m riding this here jackalope all the way to Camp Fireborn and giving you a big ole smooch in front of your war buddies. Agreed?”

“R..right! A letter each weekend! I’ll do that.” Jordan forced a smile onto her face. She glanced off into the busy street below, watching the carts and wagons bump along below her. On

one rather particularly decorative black carriage lay an oddly-shaped figure wrapped in white cloth. Dried red stains covered the center of the figure, and a golden sword and shield lay beside it. Jordan's stomach twisted into a knot as she realized what it was. Upon sighting the carriage, Grandma Clara and the old man both lowered their heads, and drove the jackalope towards the side of the road. Slowly, the bustling street cleared up as each cart and wagon pulled aside to let the carriage through.

A procession of three people dressed in all black, a man, a woman, and a young child, all followed the carriage. All eyes on the street followed them: gazes of pity, of respect, of fear. And through it all, Jordan couldn't help but wonder: would she end up like that?

As the carriage and procession rounded the corner, however, the business of the street resumed. Grandma Clara and the old man, however, remained silent. Even as the Jackalope reached the town square, there were no words. Jordan slipped out of the carriage and glanced back at her grandmother and the old man. Both of them refused to meet her gaze. Clutching the saddle in one hand and her satchel in the other, Jordan slowly made her way into the crowd at the center of the square on shaky legs. As she turned to wave towards Grandma Clara and the old man one last time, she saw the carriage and Jackalope had already left.

Giving a sigh and shaking her head, Jordan forced herself to continue marching forward. She had bigger things than saying goodbye to worry about now. The town square lay before her, surrounded by the largest buildings within Oakwood. Spires and statues and all sorts of decorative emblems covered the town square. The most magnificent of these, however, was a large brick hearth perched in the middle of the city, built from the remnants of an old fountain. A large pyre was stacked in the center of the hearth, ready to be burned. Jordan circled the hearth a few times, admiring its immense size and intricacy. Soon, however, the structure would be reduced to little more than ash blowing through the wind. But Jordan wouldn't be there to see the aftermath.

As she waited for the remaining recruits to gather, Jordan wandered towards the library, which stood towards the side of the town square. It was a cozy brick building behind a flight of marble steps, full of scrolls and books and artifacts from centuries gone by. Jordan found herself wandering towards the building, gazing up at it longingly. She'd never been a fan of the library, but now she found herself regretful of not having spent more time there. Well, that's just something she'd have to do when she got back! Because she would come back. And she would read every single book in that library.

"Jordan! Jay-Jay! J-dog!" called a shrill voice from across the square. Jordan turned to look behind her. Standing above the crowd on top of one of the hearth's walls was the slender figure of a small girl. Sunlight streamed onto her pale skin, giving her a ghostly appearance. Her hair, a short unruly bob barely reaching to the bottom of her neck, ended in jagged and ruffled edges. Each side was dyed a different color: the right a sleek and heavy black, and the left a bleached white. Below her, a somewhat smaller boy sat against the hearth's wall. He had the

same pale skin, though his long hair was dyed only black. It hung over his eyes as he looked down at his hands, fiddling with an unseen contraption.

Rowan and Crow Ashford. Brother and sister. Oakwood's resident outcasts. At least, that's what they called themselves. Few people paid the pair any mind: even with their antics, rarely did they ever cause any true trouble. Rowan was certainly the most outward of the two, while Crow mostly kept to himself...only to be swept up in his sister's mishaps. Despite their infamy on the streets of Oakwood, however, few people knew much about the pair. As far as Jordan was concerned, they had parents and a house somewhere. And they had a pet dog at some point. She'd never been particularly close with either sibling, but being in the same year as them, she'd be around them much more than she was used to.

Jordan sighed and glanced away at the sight. She grit her teeth as blood rushed to her cheeks. Dozens of people around the square had gathered to watch Rowan yelling towards Jordan. Without much of a choice, Jordan slowly walked towards the pair, and sat down beside Crow. He gave a slight nod to acknowledge her presence, though his gaze remained fixed to the object in his hand. Giving a sigh, Jordan glanced up at Rowan. The short hair girl smiled down at Jordan, and jumped down from the hearth to stand in front of her.

"You wanted to talk...?" asked Jordan.

"Not really," replied Rowan with a smile. "I just don't have anything better to do"

"Riiight...so you wanted to hang out?" asked Jordan. She stifled a chuckle and glanced over at Crow. He paused his fidgeting, but refused to meet her eyes.

"That is one interpretation of my words..." replied Rowan. She sat down beside Jordan, and placed a hand over her shoulder. "But yes, I would appreciate your fellowship during this treacherous journey."

"Well, guess I don't have anything better to-" Jordan's words were cut short by a loud crackling from behind her. Crow, Rowan, and Jordan all jumped and turned around to gaze behind them. There stood a man, decked in full golden armor with a Redscapes insignia engraved into the chestplate.

Behind him, the pyre had gone up in flames. The trio watched in awe as the crackling blaze consumed the red oaks piled atop the hearth. A smouldering, burning scent filled the town square, accompanied by the thunderous hissing from the fire. Plumes of smoke rose up from wood, spiraling into the sky to join the sparse clouds covering the heavens. A soft breeze whistled by, blowing the withered ashes free from the pile. They rained down onto the landscape below like snowflakes, and Jordan couldn't help but watch in awe as they drifted gently towards the ground.

The soldier dressed in golden armour walked in front of the crowd, and they immediately fell silent. Dozens of servicemen in matching uniforms marched into the town square, lining the sides and surrounding the crowd inside. They moved in perfect unison: each step, each swaying of the arm, each bobbing of the head perfectly timed with the one beside it. They seemed indistinguishable: as though a single mind controlled them all. Slowly, they all came to line up

beside one another. The man standing before the hearth lifted his hand, and the town square fell still. Only the crackling of the flame echoed through Oakwood, and for a few moments, all seemed still. Gazing about the crowd, the man gave a satisfactory nod. He withdrew a scroll from his belt, unraveled it, and began to read.

“To the youth of Oakwood, her majesty Serena Hamilton of the Red Isle thanks you for attending this ceremony today. As I am sure most of you have heard, our beloved Red Isle is under attack from the Bluekin invaders of the Blue Isle. Our forces have grown weaker in the face of such an attack, and as such, we have been required to seek alternative methods to continue our fight,” the man glanced up for a second, before returning to read from his paper. “As stated under the Section II of *The Queen’s Appeal*, ‘All able-bodied individuals between the ages of 16 and 60 must enter and complete military service in order to defend their nation from the Bluekin invaders. Any opposed to this law, and any withholding their service from the queen’s guard, are to be immediately and unquestioningly put to death. Individuals possessing no prior training in combat or dragon riding shall be provided with the necessary training to complete such tasks.’ So, my dearest youths: it is as such I have come here today to provide you with this training, so you may enter into the service of your queen and your nation.”

The words stung Jordan’s heart. She glanced to her side to see Crow still fidgeting and looking down at his hands, while Rowan gazed impatiently towards the man. A shudder seemed to go through the crowd. They’d all heard the words before. They all knew this was coming.

Somewhere at the back of the crowd, a young boy quickly ran for the exit of the town square. As swift as the wind, two soldiers jumped in front of the boy with their swords drawn. Fear flickered across his face, and he tried to return to his place in the crowd. It was too late, however. Each soldier seized the boy by the arm and hoisted him off the ground. He opened his mouth- to scream, to beg for mercy. But before his tongue could utter the first word, his head went flying across the square.

The soldiers slowly began to drag the headless body away, while a third ran to retrieve the open-mouthed head. A trail of blood stained the path behind them. Though it was unspoken, everyone knew there would be no honor in his burial.

“As we were saying before that rude interruption,” continued the golden-suited man with a smile. “My name is General Glade of her majesty’s royal guard, and it is my job to train all you pipsqueaks about the art of war. Now, I hope all of you have said your goodbyes and brought all you need, because as of now, you are no longer children. You’re soldiers in the service of this nation, and we expect nothing but the best from you. We will now be departing for Camp Fireborn. Minister Olsen, if you would...”

A hooded figure in a scarlet robe stepped out from behind the queen’s guard. He moved easily through the crowd, which swiftly parted ways for him. He stepped onto the hearth’s edge. The flames licked at his bare feet and red robe, though his skin and clothes were left unsinged. He began to chant in a low voice, his words unintelligible in the face of the crackling flames. The crowd watched in awe as he walked straight into the pyre. After a few moments, the fire began to

glow brighter and brighter. The smoke dissipated swiftly, and a circular shape began to take shape in the flame.

The blazes swirled and danced, their colors flickering from yellow to blue to black before finally settling on a mellow crimson. Minister Olsen stepped out of the fire, gazing towards the crowd before him. He withdrew a small blade from his robes, and held it up for all to see.

“To enter the portal, one must offer blood...” he explained. He raised his hand and slit his wrist with the blade. A spurt of blood left his hand, and he thrust his arm in front of the portal. The crowd watched as the blood trickled down his palms and dripped down his fingertips. It splashed down onto the pulsing embers at the base of the hearth. Slowly, the portal began to swirl. It flickered colors for a few moments before settling on a deep shade of black.

Minister Olsen handed General Glade the blade, before stepping through the portal. As his red robes disappeared into the crimson flames, the fire returned to its natural orange hue. General Glade looked out upon the crowd. His gaze caught on Rowan, who stood smiling from ear to ear. He held the blade towards her.

“Darling with the half-dyed hair, would you do me the honor of going through the portal first?” General Glade asked. Rowan let out a snort, tucking her hair behind her ears. Slowly, she reached out to grab the blade. Instead of slitting her wrist, however, she began to wave it around playfully, twirling it in her hands like a baton of sorts. General Glade stared at her impatiently. “Darling, would you please hurry up a little bit?”

“Totally!” replied Rowan. She began to move towards the portal slowly. Very slowly, with each step and movement exaggerated. A smirk flashed across her face. It was met with a hard and irritated look from the general. Jordan felt Crow sigh behind her. Crow stood there, shaking his head towards his sister. He swiftly walked after her, before snatching the knife from her grasp and dragging her towards the flames.

“Hand,” he ordered. Rowan did not comply. Grumbling, Crow forcefully took her hand from her side, and slit it down the wrist. He held her hand over the embers, and the blood dripped down onto them. As it trickled through the wood and charcoal, the flames once again flickered a bright crimson.

“Ow!” protested Rowan. “That hurt!”

“Look.” Crow pointed towards the trail of blood leading out of the square: the only trace of the decapitated body. Rowan bit her lip and gazed up at her brother. He gestured towards the portal. Wordlessly, Rowan slipped through the flames, vanishing as she crossed the portal. Her brother glanced up at General Glade with cold, burning black eyes. The general flicked his hand dismissively, gesturing towards the portal. Crow gave a sigh, before slitting his own wrist and following his sister.

One by one, the youth of Oakwood slowly followed suit. They disappeared into the burning crimson portal, till at last, only a half dozen or so remained. Jordan, who had stood towards the side so as to avoid being noticed, could no longer avoid General Glade’s watchful gaze.

He held the blades towards her. Instinctively, Jordan reached out to grasp it. She stood before the crimson portal, gazing into the flames. After a few moments of standing there, feeling the warm fire lap against her skin, she turned to gaze at the town behind her.

The bustling street of deer and jackalope.

The library behind her, grand and magnificent as ever.

Her little cottage at the edge of the town, the place she'd known her whole life.

And her grandmother, the woman that raised her for 16 years.

Only to watch her leave to fight a war that was not her own.

"Excuse me, madam, but would you mind stepping through? Or do you need an exclusive invitation?" snapped the general. Jordan snapped back to reality, and found herself once again facing the portal. Slowly, she held her wrist over the embers, and drove the blade across her chocolate skin. It hurt like hell for a moment, with sharp pain running through Jordan's body. She shuddered, though the pain slowly subsided to a gentle throb. She felt the blood running down her palms, trickling down her fingers. Slowly, it dripped down onto the pile of blood-stained ash beneath her. The flames danced and swirled at the offering, and the portal pulsed and glowed.

Jordan gave a sigh and gazed about Oakwood one last time. The place that was, and always would be her home. General Glade snapped his fingers, and Jordan stepped closer towards the blazes. Closing her eyes and holding her breath, she stepped through the portal.

Chapter 2:

Sandy dunes and red pillars of rock stretched out before Jordan, extending past the horizon. The whole landscape was little more than a barren desert wasteland, with no foliage aside from some sparse grass clumps and cacti. A few meters from where she emerged from the portal, however, Jordan could make out a collection of tents, cabins, and other structures clumped together. A large banner hung in front of it all on two metal poles. Squinting from the sunlight, Jordan made out the letters.

‘Welcome to Camp Fireborn,’ the sign read.

Flicking her hair back, Jordan marched into camp.