

# 1

First Blade Leith Torren's mark of failure throbbed blood down his left arm. His knees ached against the cold, stone floor. How long would King Respen keep him kneeling after giving his report?

Respen leaned back in his throne, the candles' flames dancing in his eyes. "Claim your seat, First Blade."

"Yes, my king." Leith clenched his right fist and thumped it against his chest. Pain spasmed from the wound in his left shoulder, courtesy of former First Blade Vane's knife. Gritting his teeth, he eased to his feet and faced the table.

Shadows prowled the edge of the light cast from the two flickering candles. Eleven Blades hunched in chairs scattered around the long table, an empty seat for each of the Blades that had been killed three days ago. A few of the younger Blades shifted. The Blades had never had dealt with so many rapid promotions all at once, especially not promotions among the top Blades, and none of them had moved into the chairs for their corresponding rank yet.

Leith straightened his shoulders. He was the First Blade now and expected to take command of the Blades. He sharpened his voice and gaze into a dagger's edge. "Take your seats."

The other Blades scrambled to their feet. Their boots scuffed on the stone floor. Wooden chair legs grated. When the last Blade slid into his new seat, Leith claimed the chair to Respen's right.

Respen's jaw tightened his beard into a sharper point. "First Blade, you will remain here to recover from your wound. The Twelfth Blade will also remain here."

Leith tapped his fist over his heart again. “Yes, my king.” He bit the inside of his cheek, tasting blood and bile. What was Respen planning now? Leith had foiled Respen’s plan to assassinate the Resistance leaders and supporters, but that failure wouldn’t stop Respen long.

Respen swiveled his gaze to Martyn Hamish, now sitting on Leith’s right. “Third Blade, you will take charge of the Blades searching for the traitor Vane. The Seventh and Eleventh Blades will go with you.”

Martyn nodded, his curls flopping, and thumped his chest.

If only Leith had been given that mission. He could’ve slipped into Walden and talked to Renna. And Shad and Brandi too, of course.

Respen’s fingers drummed a rhythm on his armrest. Leith’s muscles tightened. The other Blades leaned forward. Only the hissing of the candles broke the hush. The darkness ringing the room closed around the table.

“Second Blade, you will ride to Blathe. There, you will meet with my army. Report to General Wentle. He will brief you on your mission from there.”

Army? Leith fisted his hands below the table. He barely heard Respen send the rest of the Blades to other towns loyal to King Respen, some to send reinforcements to General Wentle and some to assist what Respen called the southern and western divisions of the army.

Had Vane known about this army? If so, then he supposedly would’ve told the Resistance. Unless this was something even Vane hadn’t known about?

This wasn’t good. Leith’s heart pounded in his ears. Not good at all. An army. Secret instructions. Leith needed to report to Lord Alistair at Walden. Now.

But he was stuck at Nalgar Castle.

Should he sneak out? If he did, Respen would know Leith was the real traitor. Was this information important enough to break his cover? Or should he wait in case he learned more?

With a final salute, Respen swept from the meeting room. For a moment, none of the Blades moved. Eleven pairs of eyes swiveled toward Leith. No time to appear rattled.

He pressed the palm of his good hand on the table and shoved to his feet. He had to gather the cold detachment that had served him so well when he'd killed.

Leith's boots thumped on the stone floor as he strode across the room toward the line of pegs next to the door where his weapons hung. The other Blades' weapons dangled from the other pegs. He drew one of his knives, whirled, and stabbed it as hard as he could into the tabletop. A sharp thunk speared the room. The tabletop vibrated.

Ranson Harding and Blane Altin, the youngest Blades, both cringed. A few of the others flinched.

Leith swept his gaze around the room. "I'm the First Blade now. Anyone have a problem with that?"

His voice sparked like flint grating on steel. If only he didn't have to make them fear him. But Vane had kept them in line with fear. If Leith didn't do the same, the Blades wouldn't heed his orders. They'd question him, and questions could lead to answers that would endanger those he cared about at Walden.

"What about you, Second Blade Craven?" Leith planted his hands on the table and glared at the Second Blade.

Craven shifted his gaze to the candle a few feet away. "No. You'd thrash me soundly."

With Leith's injured shoulder, not likely. Craven had a good four inches on Leith, several years, and a stockier build. But Leith wasn't going to argue. If Craven wanted to continue to be the same obedient muscle he'd been with Vane, that was his problem.

"And what about you, Fourth Blade?" Leith switched his gaze to the thin Blade sitting next to Craven.

The Fourth Blade shook his head. The scruff below his nose, long and pointed like rat's whiskers, twitched.

Seventh Blade Quinten Daas crossed his arms, his fingers tapping on his elbows as if he itched to reach for a knife. When Leith met his gaze, Daas held it for several moments, a fire burning in their depths. When he finally glanced away, a chill crawled along Leith's arms. That one was going to be trouble.

Martyn scowled at the other Blades. Leith tipped his head towards him, a silent nod of thanks. Martyn had his back, honoring a promise they'd made years ago.

What would Martyn do once he learned Leith was spying for the Resistance? Would he side with Leith then? Or would he join the other Blades in trying to kill him?

"Good. Get out of here." Leith waved toward the door. "Move your things into your new rooms before you leave."

The Blades nodded, stood, and hurried towards their knives hanging from their pegs.

Martyn eased to his feet and sidled over to Leith. "So, First Blade, huh?"

Leith grimaced. Chief among King Respen's killers. "I'd rather be Third Blade, but that's your rank now."

They strolled to the door. Leith reached for his weapons and winced as he slung the leather straps over his shoulders. The knives settled against his chest. He swung his belt around his waist, ignoring the twinge in his wounded shoulder.

He faced Martyn as his friend finished buckling on the last of his knives. "You be careful. Vane will be dangerous." Not that a dead man could be dangerous, but Leith couldn't tell that truth to Martyn.

"If you could handle Vane, then so can I." Martyn slapped Leith's good shoulder.

"I barely escaped." It was the truth. Mostly. "Steer clear of Walden. Lord Alistair will be doubly alert now."

Martyn leaned against the door. "I'll try, but if Vane is there, I'll have to track him there."

Leith nodded. What would happen if Martyn were caught snooping around Walden? Would he and Shad try to kill each other? Or would Martyn discover the unmarked grave and its secrets Leith had tried so hard to hide?

Leith pressed a hand to his shoulder. His wound throbbled again. Back at Walden, he'd thought he could handle returning to the Blades to continue spying. He'd thought it was where God wanted him to be. But how long would he last here when every word had to be a calculated lie?

Martyn threaded his fingers through his blond curls. "Are you all right with this? Being the First Blade and all?"

Leith leaned against the wall. The last time he'd tried to voice his doubts, it hadn't gone well. Leith met Martyn's gaze and put every bit of steel he could muster into his voice. "Yes. I know where my duty lies."

"Good. So do I." Martyn slapped Leith's good shoulder.

“I know.” Leith did know. All too well. Before this was over, Leith might find himself on the wrong end of Martyn’s knife.

## 2

Leith leaned against the wall as Harding and Altin laid his straw tick and blanket on the cot in the First Blade's room. His extra set of clothes, one in all black and one in a prairie tan, hung from pegs on the opposite wall, along with a few extra knives. Below them, a stand held his basin and pitcher of water, the only furniture in the room beside the cot and small table next to it.

Even the servant's room he'd been given at Walden had been cozier than this stone dungeon. Actually, Leith had seen the dungeons below Nalgar Castle's North Tower. They at least had a window.

"Anything else, First Blade?" Altin clasped his hands behind his back. Behind him, Harding rocked back and forth, as if all he wanted to do was bolt from his First Blade's presence. Did they think he'd turn into a monster because he was the First Blade?

Perhaps he'd have to.

"No, you're dismissed. Twelfth Blade, assemble the trainees in two hours."

The Blades saluted and slipped from the room. As soon as his door closed, Leith locked it and inspected the wall separating his room from the Second Blade's. He found a loose stone low in the wall. Apparently the rumors that the former First and Second Blades spied on each other were true.

At the base of the wall lay a stone wedge. Leith picked it up and jammed it between the loose stone and the rest of the wall. With the wedge in place, the loose stone couldn't move.

Once he'd searched the wall and found no more loose stones, he sank onto his cot. His shoulder had gone from aching to stabbing. He closed his eyes.

Had he done the right thing in returning to Nalgar Castle? Should he have taken up Lord Alistair on his offer to get Leith out of Acktar? Leith could've been far away from here. Free.

Then what? He would've been out of the fight. Craven would've been First Blade, Martyn Second Blade. And Leith wouldn't know about the army Respen was sending against the Resistance towns.

Should Leith slip out tonight to warn Walden? Lord Alistair needed to know about the army and the Blades sent to aid it.

But if he left, Leith wouldn't be able to gather any more intelligence for the Resistance. Should he risk discovery? Or wait?

Leith rolled his shoulder and sucked in a breath. He wasn't going to be climbing over the castle walls anytime soon. Could he bluff his way out the gates?

Perhaps he'd be better off waiting for his moment. Surely Respen would send him on some mission before the month was out. Vane had always been coming and going, checking on the other Blades. Leith simply had to bide his time.

As long as he didn't slip up in the meantime. He leaned against the wall. The cold from the stones seeped through his shirt. A tingle swept down his spine. How long could he go on like this? Pretending his heart hadn't been touched by God and nothing about him had changed?

Best to be prepared. He unhooked one of his spare knives and sheathes from the wall. Biting his tongue to keep from crying out, he shimmied on his stomach through the dust under his cot and reached for the far corner. Moving by feel, he wedged the knife between the wall and the cot leg. He tightened the leather straps and wiggled from under the bed.

Hopefully he'd never need it, but just in case, he had it stashed away. If he were ever caught and locked in his room, perhaps the Blades searching for weapons might miss it.

Footsteps scuffed on the stone outside his door. He brushed at his shirt, but he couldn't get all the dust out. A knuckle rapped on the door once, twice, as if scared the door would bite.

“Come in.” Leith leaned against the wall and buried his thoughts deep in his chest. As far as anyone could see, he was the First Blade.

Balancing a tray piled with bandages, salve, and a bowl of water, the oldest Blade trainee eased the door open and tiptoed inside. A foot shorter than Leith, the boy’s arms looked barely bigger than Leith’s knives. When the boy ducked his head, his mop of dark brown hair fell across his blue eyes. “Sixth—I mean, *Third* Blade Hamish sent me.”

“You can set the tray on the table.” Leith waved with his good hand. The trainee hurried across the room, circled to stay as far away from Leith as possible, and leaned over to set the tray down.

Leith rested his head against the wall. All the trainee saw was a First Blade who could lash out at him at any moment. Given Vane’s lack of patience, Leith could only guess what the former First Blade had done to set the boy’s hands to trembling and his eyes to darting glances at Leith through the fringe of hair.

Leith should be hard. Cold. He should make the trainee jump to attention.

He could do it. Ice lurked in his chest, waiting to form a numbing wall around his heart. He’d tapped that cold so many times over the years. He’d done it when he’d faced a fellow trainee, drawn his knife, and become a Blade. He’d done it again a year later when he’d leaned over a bed where a boy a few years older than him slept.

He was still a Blade. He still could kill. The chills on his back crept down his arms.

No. He wasn’t going to become a First Blade like Vane.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” Leith held his hands palm up. “What’s your name?”

The boy eyed him as if waiting for Leith to change his mind and draw his knife. “Jamie. My name’s Jamie Cavendish.”

Perhaps being friendly was a mistake. But it was better than terrifying the trainee. Leith unbuckled the straps crossing his chest and the belt around his waist. “You’re thirteen, right?”

Jamie bit his lip and nodded. A hint of red tinged the ends of his ears. If he was anything like Leith had been at that age, he was bothered by his lack of height for his age.

After setting his weapons on the floor beside the cot, Leith pulled his black shirt over his head. He gritted his teeth as his movement wrenched his wound.

Jamie’s eyes widened and traveled down the length of Leith’s right arm. His lips moved, probably counting Leith’s marks. Leith forced himself not to flinch. Thirty-six scars marred his shoulder and arm, the marks of thirty-six successful missions for King Respen.

“Help me with this bandage.” Leith eased onto the cot. He tugged on the bandage Renna had wrapped around his shoulder three days ago. Almost he wanted to leave it in place. If he closed his eyes, he could still feel the gentle brush of her fingers against his skin.

But his two-day ride across the stretch of prairie from Walden to Nalgar Castle had soiled the bandage. A spot of brown, dried blood stained the center.

Jamie stretched to keep his feet planted as far from Leith as possible, while he helped Leith remove the bandage. Jamie bit his lip. Had he realized the bandage was neater than Leith could’ve managed by himself with only one arm? Thankfully, the boy was only a trainee. He wouldn’t dare say those questions aloud, especially not to the First Blade.

As they reached the final layer, Leith gritted his teeth. The bandage had darkened to a deep burgundy, so thick with dried blood the linen was no longer visible. When they worked the bandage free, it’d yank the scab off.

Jamie filled the basin with water, wet a rag, and handed it, still dripping, to Leith. Leith pressed it to his shoulder and closed his eyes. The coolness filtered through the blood and bandage onto his burning shoulder.

When the bandage was as damp as he could make it, he dropped the rag, grasped the edge of the bandage, and tugged. The scab tore from his shoulder as if peeling away a layer of skin. With a final tug, the bandage dropped free.

Leith pressed his chin to his chest to look at his wound. The middle drooled blood, but the edges only oozed a clear liquid from the burns that had closed the wound.

When he raised his head, he found Jamie gaping at him. “You cauterized your own wound?”

Leith couldn’t help the quirk to the corner of his mouth. “Yes, and I don’t recommend it.”

Shaking his head, Jamie dampened another cloth and handed it to Leith. Leith pressed it to his shoulder while Jamie laid out fresh bandages and worked the stopper from the salve.

Leith spread the salve over his wound and allowed Jamie to wrap the bandage around his shoulder and arm. If only Renna could tend the wound. But she was safely tucked away at Walden, and he wasn’t about to wish her to Nalgar Castle.