

RISE OF CITHRIA

THE CHOSEN

by

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Book 1 of Rise of Cithria

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Rise of Cithria – The Chosen

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Prologue

When the Thandaran Empire arrived five centuries ago, they found an untamed, fertile island called Andua. As with every other new land they discovered, the Thandarans subjugated the Anduain people, including the old races of elves, nuathreens and firbolgs. They renamed the island Caldera, and colonized it with their own citizens. Over time, the Anduains and their culture diminished, retreating to the west, into the oldest, most remote areas of the island imaginable. They were hunted, and persecuted, but they endured, and they kept their stories and history alive for centuries, until the moment finally came when the Thandarans left the island, retreating to their besieged homeland far across the sea.

With no Thandaran army to keep the peace, the island fractured. The east, under the control of former Thandaran nobility, remained Caldera. The west became Andua once again. And lurking across the narrow sea to the north was the land of Bergmark, home to fierce havtrols, opportunistic dwarves, and magic-wielding humans. War broke out, leading to chaos, death and destruction... until Damhran, grandson of a Thandaran clerk, ascended to Caldera's throne.

Damhran rallied the Calderan forces to victory after victory, eventually claiming most of the island, staying the hand of Bergmark, and forcing Andua into a tenuous peace. From his home in Corendar, the capital city of Caldera, Damhran presided over an era of prosperity unprecedented in the history of the three realms. But it was also a time for resentments and rivalries to simmer below the surface. Damhran's peace strained, but it held for almost forty years – until the day the Century Star appeared.

The Century Star grew bright in the sky, and then faded away, as it did every hundred years, and its arrival triggered prophecy, introspection, and devastation. Damhran saw the star as a sign that his time as King had run its course. A young Anduain warrior named Darren believed that the star signaled the rise of his people. In Bergmark, however, the star coincided with a tragedy, as a volcano erupted, destroying the dwarven kingdom and covering the lands of Bergmark in fire and ash.

War came once again. Damhran retired, passing the throne to his son, who was ill-prepared to handle it. Darren ascended the throne of a new Andua, and he rallied his people to the cause of freedom as their King. And the people of Bergmark, with no lands left to sustain them, invaded the island, looking to claim greener pastures.

For seventeen years now these nations have fought, trading lands, glory, and lives. The balance of power has shifted back and forth among them, but none of the three kingdoms has managed to strike a

blow decisive enough to claim a final victory. But times are changing. Bergmark's fierce, yet ageing, armies have slowly dwindled in numbers, and Andua's forces have suffered several notable defeats. Caldera, long under siege, is at the brink of victory.

But old enemies lurk beneath the surface, waiting for the right time to strike. And the three kingdoms, weakened by decades of war, are at their most vulnerable. The fate of these lands, and their people, is at stake.

A new war is coming.

Caldera

Chapter 1

“Coward, coward...”

The word stabbed at Aiden, like the point of a knife in his back. The mob of children had gathered at the edge of Alvarton’s market, where the uneven stone paths turned into a worn, grassy road. They chanted the word over and over, as if singing a verse in some cruel playground song. He walked away as stoically as he could manage with a beaten cloth sack slung over his shoulder and the hood of his worn, frayed red cloak pulled low over his face, hiding what everyone already knew to be there. He hated coming here for this very reason. If he could afford it, he would have sent someone else to pick up his food, but he barely had the money to feed himself. That meant he had no choice but to suffer through this lonely, humiliating ordeal every time his pantry emptied out. The kids would taunt him loudly, the adults would scorn him silently, and he would try to get through it all fast enough that none of the local toughs would think to provoke a fight.

By now, the adults knew him on sight. His sturdy Sotheran build and the fact that he owned only one dingy old army cloak always gave him away to the locals. They rarely said anything to him, though, at least not to his face. As long as he had some spare coin to spread around, the merchants in Alvarton would take it. They’d wait until after he left to call him the Coward, or the Wolf Cub, or whatever new nickname had made the rounds in the pub. The children weren’t so forgiving.

The fat, freckle-faced son of a woman hawking bread had recognized him, and it had taken only seconds before he’d scampered off to tell the other village children that the Coward was back. He only had time to buy bread, a small wheel of cheese and a cheap flagon of wine before they began congregating in the center of the market, pointing and laughing. As soon as he had left and moved onto the east road, they’d gathered at the edge of the town center, near the mile marker, taunting him.

“Coward, coward...”

No matter how many times he heard that word, the sting never lessened, and neither did his fear that this would be his fate for eternity... to be mocked by children until he died of old age, worthless to his people and to his kingdom. Blood rushed to his face in shame, as it always did when he left this place, and the brand on his cheek grew hot. He rubbed it absent-mindedly, a rough-edged 'C' burned onto the left side of his face. He'd tried growing a beard to cover it up but that only made it more noticeable because the hair around the brand didn't grow. Not that it mattered. By now, everyone in this part of Caldera knew who he was and what he'd been. He ignored the sounds of thrown rocks landing harmlessly on the ground behind him, and trudged along the path, hoping only to get home without incident. The sun would be up

for another two or three hours, which was roughly how long it would take to reach his small home in the hills. Once there he could throw off his clothes, eat a meager dinner, drink some cheap wine, and try to forget about his fate for a few precious minutes before falling into a merciful, drunken stupor.

Unfortunately, an incident seemed to be coming his way.

Aiden saw it out of the corner of his eye - the smooth silhouette of a hooded bandit lurking in the thick woods to his right. Whoever he was, he was cocky, because he followed far too closely for someone who should value subtlety and stealth. Aiden kept his hood low and his gait steady, trying not to tip off his pursuer that he could see him darting from shadow to shadow. The bandit made no noise, which suggested some skill at stalking prey, but he apparently thought Aiden's hood blocked his vision because he was far too careless about keeping his profile low. Aiden gritted his teeth. It was only a matter of time before the bandit attacked, looking for an easy target on a secluded road, and Aiden had no weapon to defend himself with. He'd taken to leaving his sword at home to avoid even more raised eyebrows when coming to town. Had he brought it, he could have taught this bandit a painful lesson about stalking a former armsman of the Sotheran Army. But with no sword, he'd be at the bandit's mercy if he didn't have a good plan.

The clop of hoof beats caught his attention, and he turned to see two horse-drawn carts moving onto the road behind him. Merchants, leaving the Alvarton market for the day. They were catching up quickly, so he moved over to let them pass. The first one had an older man and woman up front. Brin, he thought, based on their style of dress, probably refugees staying near the Silver Hills, like himself. The man held the reigns of his horse loosely, and a few empty sacks lay scattered in the back. The second cart had a younger man driving, Artoran probably, with a woman and two small children - too young to have been part of the taunting crowd - along with a few sacks of food that they either hadn't managed to sell or had traded for. Aiden kept his head down and let them go their way, hoping none of them recognized him or cared to see his face. But he knew salvation when he saw it, and he picked up his pace to stay in sight of the merchants as long as possible.

A surreptitious glance toward the woods revealed no sight of the bandit, who had likely decided to be cautious now, at least until the carts pulled away and left Aiden alone again. He wondered if he could hail them down and ask for a ride. In most cases they'd probably let him, but if he tried to hide his face from them they'd get suspicious. If he didn't... well, he couldn't take any more disapproving looks today. He decided he'd just walk faster, instead. The carts were already pulling away from him, and he couldn't hope to keep pace, but he could keep them in sight long enough to dissuade the bandit and send him back

to Alvarton for easier prey. If he'd thought the Goddess still listened to his pleas, he'd have prayed for her help to keep them close. He only wanted to get home without trouble.

Had he sent any prayers, they would have been answered. A man appeared from the edge of the woods ahead of the carts. He wore a black, hooded robe that hung to his feet and covered his face, like Aiden, only his was in far better shape, with a decorative blue and silver trim along the edges. He walked to the middle of the path and waited, facing the oncoming carts, and for a moment Aiden thought this might be his mysterious bandit, but he seemed too tall, too broad, too menacing.

The carts slowed down as they approached the stranger.

"You there. Step aside," the older man in the lead cart called out, annoyed at having his trip home so blatantly interrupted. The stranger casually pulled back his hood and flung his cloak off his shoulders, revealing a man close to Aiden's own age, rugged looking, with tanned skin and long blond hair, and a short beard with braids in it. He wore drab gray clothing covered by well-worn chain mail, and he gripped a long-handled hammer in his right hand. Aiden caught his breath. This man was no resident of Caldera. This was a Bergsbor, an invader from the land of Bergmark, standing before them in full battle garb. A Warshield.

He raised his hammer to the sky. Aiden instinctively reached for his belt, remembering with a silent curse that he still had no weapon.

The Brin couple recognized the threat almost immediately. Anyone from the county of Brinwall knew the look of these Northmen, who'd ravaged their borders for years. The old woman screeched in terror, and the old man tried in vain to get his horse to turn around, all while the Warshield shouted an ancient chant to his gods. Without warning, a bolt of lightning crashed down into the front cart with a deafening crack, splintering it into two pieces and sending fragments of charred wood flying about the path. The Brins were thrown clear in opposite directions and landed roughly on the ground while the horse whinnied in panic, pulling desperately at its collar. The mother in the second cart screamed, while her husband tried just as vainly to turn his horse around.

This isn't possible, Aiden thought, his body frozen in shock. Warshields can't summon lightning from the sky.

The Bergsbor turned to the old man, holding his hammer out in front of him, both hands wrapped around the handle. Tiny bolts of blue lightning crackled dangerously around him. The Brin slowly lifted his head off the ground, blinking as if stunned, but conscious enough to realize the Northman was approaching him with murderous intent. He held his hand up, pleading for his life. The man's wife, who had recovered more quickly, also screamed out for him to stop. Both of their pleas were ignored. The

hammer came down, crashing into the Brin's shoulder and crushing his chest. The second blow followed immediately, caving in his head. The old woman wailed at the sight of her dead husband, and the Bergsbor turned to her and raised his hand. A smaller, thinner bolt of lightning arced outward from his palm, striking her, and knocking her flat to the ground where she writhed silently.

“Alfrith! Here!” The Artoran woman in the second cart held a sword up to her husband, shouting at him to take it, while trying to scoop up her two children with her other hand. Alfrith struggled with his horse before reluctantly taking the sword just as the Northman turned his attention to them.

“Get out of here!” Alfrith yelled back to his family. He gave up on the wildly out of control horse and stepped down from the cart to face the approaching Warshield. He held his sword like a stick, completely unsure of himself, and he shuffled his feet, backing up so he could keep his distance from the Northman while staying between him and his family. Alfrith’s wife jumped off the back of the cart, which rocked dangerously as the confused horse tried to pull free, and dragged the two children out. The Warshield, showing remarkable quickness, darted forward at Alfrith. One swing of his hammer was all it took. The weapons collided, knocking the sword out of Alfrith's hands, sending it skidding across the ground out of reach. The Northman followed with a roaring bellow that sent a shockwave radiating out from his body, kicking up dust and dirt in all directions and knocking Alfrith off his feet.

Aiden took a step back without thinking, only now realizing that he’d watched the whole scene play out in front of him as if he were just a spectator. As if he were the coward everyone thought him to be. This was battle. This was what he wanted, what he’d been denied for two long years. But he hadn’t expected to be thrust into the middle of it, deep inside his own kingdom. He had no weapons, and no armor. He stood little chance against a fully armed Warshield, if that’s even what this enemy was. But he also knew that if he let this man slaughter everyone here today, then he deserved that coward's brand on his cheek. He deserved to be mocked and scorned.

Coward... coward...

Aiden squeezed his hands into fists, feeling a strength in his body that had been dormant for years. This wouldn't be the smartest decision he'd ever made, but he wasn't looking for smart. He was looking for brave.

So he dropped his pack and charged.

The Warshield stood over Alfrith and held his hammer high. He didn't seem content to smash the man's skull, however, because he began chanting his spell again, the one that destroyed the first cart, and would no doubt flay this poor man’s skin from his bones. Aiden ran at a full sprint toward the discarded sword lying on the ground, hoping to distract the Warshield long enough to save Alfrith. The Northman's

eyes darted up, and he seemed to realize that the Calderan lying prone on the ground wasn't his immediate priority anymore. He turned toward this new threat, just as Aiden had hoped for, and as he shouted the last words of his chant, Aiden changed direction in mid-stride and threw his large body at the Northman instead of the sword, hitting him in the stomach with his shoulder as lightning cracked loudly into the empty ground behind him.

The two of them tumbled into the dirt, rolling over each other until the Warshield kicked up his knees, flinging Aiden away to his left. He followed that up by swinging his hammer sideways, but Aiden grabbed the handle, preventing the blow from having any real force. Aiden pushed off the hammer and rolled sideways into a crouch, then leapt toward the discarded sword, grabbing it with his right hand. He was back on his feet in an instant, facing off against his enemy, who'd also regained his footing, and held his own weapon menacingly. Aiden swung the sword about, testing its weight and balance, and he knew right away it was junk. The edges were dull, the blade slightly crooked, and if hit in the wrong spot, it would likely snap in two. He might as well have been holding a blunt stick.

Well, Aiden thought, if the sword couldn't handle parrying blows from a giant hammer, then the answer was simple – don't parry. Be aggressive. Aiden steadied his stance and his breathing, and took the fight to the Bergsbor. He swung carefully and deliberately at first, keeping his enemy at a distance while he thought of his next tactic, because now he worried the sword wouldn't even pierce the Northman's chainmail armor. He never had a chance to find out, though. The Warshield quickly tired of the duel, raised his hand to the heavens and let loose another small bolt, like the one he'd used on the old woman. The magic coursed through Aiden's body, making his muscles twitch violently and then tense up until frozen in place. Aiden fell to the ground like a toppled statue, unable to do anything except stare up at the Warshield, who grunted at him in annoyance before heaving his hammer back and over his head. Aiden was trapped. He could feel the first sensations of his body loosening up, but it wasn't fast enough. He wouldn't be able to avoid the crippling blow in time.

He would die, painfully – that is, until an arrow clipped the Warshield's ear.

The Northman cried out angrily and grabbed the side of his head, looking around for the arrow's source. Aiden used the extra seconds afforded to him to roll clumsily out of the way. He stood up awkwardly, fighting against his reluctantly loosening muscles, ready to fend off another attack. But the Warshield didn't come for him. He was too busy scowling at something over Aiden's shoulder. Aiden followed his gaze, seeing a young man in a black cloak standing in the middle of the path holding a nocked bow, aimed right at him. The bandit. Aiden almost laughed before realizing he was in the way, so he ducked to the side. The bandit fired another arrow that glanced off the Warshield's left shoulder. It

didn't penetrate the armor, but the Warshield narrowed his eyes at this new danger. He turned to Aiden and snarled, then ran into the woods along the side of the path. Aiden hesitated, wondering if he should chase after him with no reliable weapon. But his decision became moot when the Northman vanished. Once he reached the shadows of the trees, he disappeared into thin air.

Aiden froze. That was impossible. He'd seen that ability before, but only from highly trained assassins. They called it fading, and it was their most closely guarded secret. And as far as Aiden knew, they hadn't shared it with the people of Bergmark. He backed away, suddenly afraid for his life. He turned to the bandit, feeling the need to have an ally nearby, only to find him leaning over to pick something up off the ground. Aiden almost called out to warn him, before realizing what exactly the brigand had picked up. Aiden's pack. With his food, and his money, and his wine. The bandit threw it over his shoulder. He saw Aiden looking at him so he smiled back and gave a quick wave, then ran off into the woods where he vanished himself.

Aiden stood there in disbelief. Both of them could fade. Both of them had assassin training. What had he stumbled into?

He scanned the road around him. Alfrith and his family had escaped, running as fast as they could back to Alvarton, leaving their cart and horse behind. The old man from Brinwall was dead, and his wife lay still, too. The horse from their cart had pulled free of the wreckage and was galloping the other direction, dragging parts of the harness behind. Aiden was alone, and he knew he couldn't take that Warshield if he came back, not with this flimsy excuse for a sword. He exhaled. He knew this feeling, the rush and the wild uncertainty of battle, both of which he'd been so effective at harnessing. He laid out his options before him, and he found the one that made sense. He hefted the crooked blade in his hand and ran into the woods. The sword was useless against the Northman, so he wouldn't use it on him. Instead, he'd find the arrogant little bandit who thought he could steal from a highly trained soldier. If he was lucky, he'd not only retrieve his pack, but maybe a little bit of his pride as well.

Chapter 2

Aiden crashed through the woods like a lumbering bear, pushing aside low branches and trampling the brush under foot. He hadn't run like this in over a year, and his body did its best to remind him of that fact. His legs burned, his chest was tight, and his breaths came fast and shallow, but he didn't mind. Fighting that Warshield had reawakened something inside, something that had been slumbering ever since being forcibly branded by his own countrymen. Tonight, for the first time in two years, Aiden felt like a warrior again, and he wasn't about to waste that feeling by accepting his fate and trudging back home. No, tonight he would show his fellow citizens of Caldera that he was no coward.

He made enough noise to wake the entire county of Artora, but that was his plan. Aiden had trained as an armsman, not a bandit, which meant his skills were best utilized in an open, face-to-face fight, not in tracking someone who could disappear into thin air. So Aiden gambled that by making as big a ruckus as he possibly could, the bandit might come to him instead. He'd already shown his overconfidence earlier. Plus, you didn't take on someone who could fade in a wide open space. A thick forest with plenty of brush would help even the odds.

It was a calculated risk, though, because his current direction would take him toward the river. Any minute now he would be within shouting distance of the relocated goblin settlements nestled along the riverbank, and he didn't want to attract any curious hunting parties if he could help it. Not to mention that these woods were home to more than just goblins, if you believed the stories. And with night approaching, the dangers became even worse. He needed to finish this soon and get back to safety, before he stumbled into even more adventure tonight.

The crack of a branch made him stop, and he looked around carefully to see if his ruse had worked. It took a few moments to get his labored breathing under control, but once he did he stood completely still and silent, waiting to see if the bandit had taken the bait. The sun had dropped low in the sky by now, making the shadows in the forest long and dark, plenty of room to hide in for a thief. Hopefully this one felt safe enough to stalk a clumsy, lumbering oaf, and would maybe even show himself before launching a few arrows.

“You really should learn to be quieter, old man.”

The voice came from behind, maybe a dozen yards back. He debated turning to face him, but decided instead to stay still. He wanted the bandit to feel like he was in charge.

“And you, boy, shouldn't take what isn't yours.”

“Curious words coming from a man with an arrow pointed at his head. Drop your sword.”

Aiden didn't want the bandit to do anything rash, like shoot him in the back. He also wanted him to feel comfortable enough to get a little closer. At this distance, Aiden was a sitting duck. A skilled archer could get two or three shots off before he could close the distance, and that's only if the first shot didn't kill him. He needed to close the gap to around three or four paces before he could make his move. But he could be nonthreatening and still have a little bit of fun.

"I don't think I want to do that."

The bandit chuckled under his breath. Aiden heard a couple of soft footsteps.

"You do what I say and you don't have to die today."

"I will do nothing you tell me to do, unless it includes retrieving my things."

This time the laugh was loud and haughty.

"Well, aren't you a brazen old man? A little thick in the head, too, because I don't think you understand just how precarious your position is right now."

"Explain it to me, then. Use small words."

Another footstep. Aiden grinned. Almost there.

"I have an arrow pointed at the back of your neck," he proclaimed, a little too grandly. Aiden suspected that this bandit was more concerned about putting on a show than actually killing people. "All I have to do is let it fly and you'll probably die before you even have time to feel it pierce your skin. It won't be as painful a death as I normally like to hand out, but it will be fast, which will save me from having to hear you moan in agony. Now drop your sword."

Another small footstep, and Aiden decided this was probably his best shot. He held the sword out to his right, holding the hilt between his finger and his thumb, letting the blade dangle over the ground next to him. He let it hang for a moment, purely for show since the bandit seemed to enjoy that, then dropped it. The blade hit the ground, digging into the dirt a bit, before tipping over.

"There's a good man," the bandit said.

Aiden heard a couple more footsteps, so he glanced over his shoulder. He could see the bandit at the edge of his vision, shrouded in shadow, standing about four paces behind him. More importantly, he'd lowered his bow slightly, thinking his prey had been disarmed. In reality, Aiden secretly slipped the palm-sized rock he'd been holding in his left hand this entire time into his right.

"Now, why don't you kick that sword away?" the bandit asked. "Just a bit."

Aiden moved his leg back, as if to do what he'd been told. Instead of kicking, though, he planted the leg a half step behind him, then spun around to his left, launching the rock at the bandit. The bandit

realized the danger too late, and as he twisted his body to avoid the rock, he ended up moving his right arm into its path, where it struck him just below the shoulder with a thud.

He cried out and pulled his arm in, letting go of his bowstring and dropping the arrow he had nocked. Aiden charged, covering the space in three quick bounds. He leaped at the cowering bandit, who used his longbow to defend himself, but Aiden grabbed the bow and twisted, prying it free from his hands. The bandit immediately slipped away and pulled a long sword out with his left hand, while Aiden, still clutching the bow, hurried back to pick up his own sword. The two stood a few yards apart, their weapons ready, sizing each other up.

This was the first time Aiden had been able to get a good look at the bandit, and his early impressions about him seemed to be right. He looked young, late teens perhaps, with a mop of wavy, tangled black hair on his head, the hint of a beard on his face, and deep-set black eyes. His light-brown skin was natural, not tanned like Aiden's, and he suspected that at least one of the boy's parents was Movri. He wasn't especially tall, and his build seemed slight, but he'd just shown himself to be quick and nimble on his feet. After sizing up the boy, though, Aiden got the impression that he'd been well-born, despite his dubious parentage, and had only recently taken to the life of a bandit.

"Well, this is an interesting turn," the bandit said finally, breaking the silence.

"I don't want to hurt you," Aiden replied. "I just want my pack returned to me, along with everything that was inside when you stole it."

"I saved your life. This is just payment." The bandit motioned with his head to Aiden's pack, slung over his shoulder.

"I don't much like those terms," Aiden moved a step closer, "and I don't recall agreeing to them."

"You could agree to them now."

"Or, I could drag you to Corendar and watch them hang you for banditry and theft."

"Really?" The bandit smiled at him, but it was the kind of smile someone gives just before they knife you in the stomach. "So they take the word of a coward at face value these days? I'll have to remember that if I ever get such a lovely brand."

"I am no coward," Aiden said, his tone as serious as he could make it.

"Your face says otherwise."

"A brand doesn't make it true." Aiden suddenly wondered why he needed this thief, of all people, to believe him.

"Ahhhh. Is this a sore subject?" the bandit asked mockingly. "Or are you just afraid to talk about it?"

Aiden pointed the sword at the bandit. "You are playing with fire, boy."

"Ohhh, now I'm the one who's scared."

Aiden held the longbow out in front of him with both hands, ready to snap it in two.

"Just how attached are you to this thing?"

"Okay, now wait a minute," the bandit said, suddenly serious. "Let's not get hasty here. We can be civil about this."

"Can we?"

"How about a trade?" The bandit slipped Aiden's pack off his shoulder, and held it out gingerly with his right hand. His face scrunched up in discomfort. "My bow, for your pack?"

"So you can point it at me again?"

The bandit shook his head in frustration. "Well, then we're at a bit of a standstill, aren't we?"

They stood in silence, staring at each other, although their stances were less aggressive now.

He's right, Aiden thought, but not about the impasse. He couldn't go back to Corendar. Even if he felt like dragging this boy all the way back to the city, there was no guarantee that anyone would believe what he had to say, or care about it even if they did. For every city guard he spoke to, he was just as likely to find someone willing to pay a bounty as he was to find a former soldier who'd knock him on his backside for betraying his people with cowardice. He'd even run into guards once who wouldn't let him into the city and he certainly couldn't bear dealing with that embarrassment again. No, the bandit was right. This brand would keep a lot of doors closed to him unless he had something better to offer them than an alleged thief.

Like perhaps a Warshield.

Aiden held his breath as a plan formed in his head.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"What's yours?" the bandit replied, his voice even haughtier than normal. "Or should I just call you Coward?"

"My name is Aiden," he said, keeping his tone calm and cool. "I'm from Sothera, just outside Solstin. Now tell me yours."

The bandit cocked his eyebrow. He pressed his sword hand against his sore shoulder, rubbing it. Aiden quietly hoped he could still use that arm well enough to handle his bow.

"I am the Owl of the Shadows, the Eagle of-"

"Your real name," Aiden said, cutting him off. "Not some bandit title you made up to scare the poor folk."

The bandit smirked at him, then looked away in annoyance. He stared up at the trees nearby, probably thinking up a lie to tell him. Aiden didn't care. He'd use any made up name he was given if it helped him achieve his goal.

"Finias," he said finally, and Aiden was surprised because he actually believed him.

"Well then, Finias. You did save my life, and I'm ready to agree to terms of repayment."

"You are? What terms?" He looked interested now.

"Your service. To me. And mine to you."

Finias huffed in disbelief. "Are you mad? What would possibly make you think I'd agree to that?"

"I want your help to kill that Warshield."

Finias stared at Aiden blankly for a long moment before finally replying, "No."

"Did you see what he did when he ran away? He faded. Disappeared into thin air. Warshields don't do that. You can, obviously. But not him. Something isn't right about this."

"I think it's you," Finias said. "You said it yourself. Warshields don't fade. So you must be mad."

Aiden grunted. "I saw it with my own eyes, and you would have too if you'd been paying attention to him instead of my belongings."

"Why should I believe a story like that?"

Aiden held his arms out in exasperation. "Why would I make up a story like that?"

"Because you're mad!"

"What will take for you to believe me?"

Finias shrugged. "How about if he proves it? That's it. I'll believe it when I see it happen. Wait, maybe I will see it happen, because he could be right here watching us, couldn't he?" Finias turned left and right, looking dramatically into the shadows nearby. "Here, little shadow Warshield. Come out and play with us, because I know you're watching, aren't you?"

Aiden shook his head. "Whether you believe me now or not, it makes no difference. I just need your help to find him and kill him. That is the bargain."

"This is silly. You're insane. And I have no idea why you'd want to drag me down into your crazy little world."

"Because I can't find him alone."

"Then go to the guards."

"The guards will know soon enough. But I need to find him first. We need to find him."

"Why? Why me?"

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