

Chapter 1: What's Your Choice?

Drew rode like the wind across the farmlands of northern Kraya on his horse, Tempest. He had to make it in time. He'd only learned of the attack a few hours before, and he jumped immediately on his horse and took off. He had to get there before it happened.

Likely, he was riding to his death. Yet, there was no time to get Allen, Astra, Matthew, or anyone who could help him. Surely he'd be too late if he did, and everyone would be dead.

As he galloped forward, his heart raced, and he could feel sweat on his forehead, not because of the heat, but because of his nerves. He had to save them. How could he face Allen and Astra and tell them he didn't?

He heard screams coming a few farms away, so he kicked his horse to try to go faster. He was late.

Tempest, his horse, jumped the final fence to come to the rescue. Drew hopped off, pulled his sword, and ran into the fight that was going on.

There were nine men trying to get in the front door, and the father and oldest son of the home were trying to fight them off. All of them had swords, and a nine on two sword fight means certain death for the two. The father already had a bad cut on his arm, and the son was forced back, tripping over a barrel. Surely, his attacker would kill him on the next strike.

Drew jumped in front of him to block the killing blow. He couldn't let the boy die. He knew him. The man was Astra's father and the son, her brother.

Astra had worked as a slave for King Jared. Prince Allen fell in love with her and had only a few days before married her. Drew couldn't let her family be killed.

A nine on three fight was a death wish for the three, especially since Astra's father and brother were not the best of sword fighters, but Drew fought anyway. He was an incredible fighter. Still, no fighter can fight against such bad odds.

He could hear the mother and younger children screaming in the house. He had to keep fighting. He kicked one man back and stabbed another. Then he dove in front of the father to keep him from getting stabbed. As he did, he received a cut on his arm. It hurt. If only he'd had time to put on his armor, but he didn't.

The fight seemed hopeless. They were outnumbered, and the father was too weak to fight. Yet, Drew kept fighting. He stabbed another man.

All seemed hopeless until three more horses rode up with men on them. Drew recognized their leader immediately as Obron, the leader of the undead warriors, men who had been cursed for their crimes to never be able to die.

Obron and the other two warriors jumped off their horses and charged into the fight.

In only a minute, all the attackers were either dead or fled.

Obron and his men did not pursue. Neither did Drew. He went about trying to help the father with his wounds.

Astra's mother and siblings ran out of the house. They too went immediately to binding wounds. Drew definitely needed it, but Astra's father was in much worse shape, so he went over to see if he could help him.

The man's wife was aiding him. He'd live, but the cut he'd received would take some time to heal.

Drew turned to Obron and stated, "Thank you. We would have died without you."

Obron nodded to him.

"How did you even know to come?" Drew asked.

"Kish," Obron answered. "She has sources. I was keeping an eye on her. I don't trust her, and I don't want anyone disturbing Matthew on his honeymoon. We helped him get on the throne. Now we have to help him get the kingdoms settled."

Drew put his hand on Obron's arm and replied, "I've been watching Kish too. I don't trust her either, and I don't want Allen and Astra's honeymoon interrupted. It is my job to protect him."

They both went over to see how they could help Astra's family.

When both her father and brother were taken care of, Drew suggested, "Why don't I take you back to Troia with me? Matthew will give you asylum, so King Jared will not be able to come after you."

"That may be wise," the mother agreed. "We do not want to leave our home, but it is not safe. Let us pack our belonging in

our wagon, and we will come.” She instructed everyone to gather what they needed. Perhaps they could come back later and get everything, but they needed at least the basics to survive with.

She led her family into the house. Everyone went except a girl who was probably about fourteen. She stood staring at Drew.

“Do you need something?” he asked.

She blushed and answered, “No, but thank you. You saved us.”

“I think Obron and his men saved us,” Drew corrected.

“My father and brother would have been dead before they arrived if not for you,” she explained with a coy smile. “You are strong, and a very good fighter.”

“Thank you,” Drew replied.

He expected her to go in the house and gather her belongings, but she didn’t. She still stood and stared at him.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

“You’re very handsome,” she told him with a giggle.

He smiled back, thanked her, and suggested, “Perhaps you should pack so we can get going.”

She still stood there awkwardly staring at him.

Obron began to laugh out loud.

Drew looked over at him, then back at the girl. “Perhaps I should help you,” he offered. “I can carry belongings to the wagon for you. What’s your name?”

The girl clasped her hands together nervously and swayed as she answered, "I'm Shelby."

Drew tried not to laugh at her awkwardness. "Shelby, I will be glad to help you pack. You go inside. I will be there in just a moment. I need to speak with Obron first."

She giggled, then turned and headed into the house.

Drew stepped over to Obron and asked, "Do you know where Kish is? Obviously, she didn't come herself."

Obron shook his head. "Hopefully she isn't causing any trouble. I figured stopping this massacre was more important than watching her."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Drew pointed out. "I don't trust her."

"I don't either," Obron agreed. "Yet, it would be a very bad wedding present to Allen to have his wife's family killed on their honeymoon. I have a sense of duty to Matthew, but I want to protect Allen too. He is part of the team."

"He is my friend," Drew added.

"I have no friends," Obron responded. "I am cursed."

"You still have friends," Drew assured him. "As you said, we're all a team. We are also friends."

Obron's expression went even straighter as he responded, "You have a young girl waiting for you inside. Make her day by talking to her."

Drew shook his head, but went into the house.

“I am sorry,” Finn, the guard on Kish’s right, apologized as he and two other guards escorted her into the castle at Kraya. Her hands were tied behind her back and her weapons removed. The burn across her face made her look even more pathetic.

“I had asylum in Troia!” she complained. “This is stepping beyond your bounds.”

“I have my orders,” Finn informed her. “You know your father. Did you expect him to honor your asylum? Since when has a Krehlor cared about rules?”

“I know,” Kish huffed. “The Krehlor are above them. I’ve been taught that since my mother died. I was seven.”

Finn had never seen Kish show any concern for anyone, but the emotion in her voice when she mentioned her mother’s death was obviously there. Kish tensed to keep her emotions from showing. “I am learning that there are many things that my father has taught me that could be wrong.”

Finn nodded in understanding and told her, “I am sorry, Kish. I am only following orders. You know what happens if I do not.”

“I do,” she replied. “Those who defy die, or someone they love does. I have heard it many times.” She looked as vulnerable as Finn had ever seen her as she asked, “Does he intend to kill me?”

“I don’t think so,” Finn answered. “We were told to bring you home. We were told that you have been manipulated into staying in Troia and will be happier here.”

“I chose to stay,” she argued. “I am an adult. I can make my own decisions.”

“You are an adult who can expose your father’s crimes,” Finn corrected. “He will not allow you to live freely in Troia. You know that.”

“I do,” she replied coldly. “I know my father’s way very well.”

The discussion ended because they reached the throne room where her father, King Jared, was waiting for her. They entered.

The first words out of her father’s mouth were, “You look horrible. Have you not been able to get your friend, Matthew, to heal you?”

“He has, father,” Kish replied. “It was much worse, and it will still heal more, although I doubt I will be left with no scars. Are you going to kill Carnell to avenge me?”

“No,” her father answered. “I am not concerned about Carnell. You stabbed him. He is likely dead. I am concerned about you. You need to return home. Whatever Matthew or Allen threatened you with to keep you in Troia, I will help you with. Come home. Your skills are needed here.”

“Matthew and Allen have not threatened me,” Kish argued. “I wish to stay in Troia.”

“Then they have brainwashed you, which is just as bad,” her father retorted. “You will stay here. It is embarrassing enough to have Allen leave and have him marry a slave.”

“She is not a slave. She is free,” Kish argued. “You know the law.”

“Yes, yes,” her father conceded flippantly. “I also know that Allen and Astra will pay. Her family is likely already dead. I ordered them all killed.”

Kish glared at him and seethed, “I know.”

He laughed and mocked, “I’m surprised you didn’t go try to rescue them. I’m sure your sources informed you.”

“They did,” she replied. “I did not go myself, as I had to stay in Troia for sanctuary.”

“So, you protected yourself and let Astra’s family die,” Jared noted. “You know your priorities.”

She glared at him and sneered, “I sent undead warriors to their aid. I believe Drew went after them too.”

Jared tensed at the mention of undead warriors, but then relaxed. “They will be too late,” he taunted as he stepped closer to her. “As far as Drew goes, I am hoping he comes to their aid. I have ordered him dead too.”

“No, father!” she demanded. “No, not Drew!”

Jared laughed and mocked, “Do you have feelings for him? Haven’t I taught you that feelings for people are a weakness? Allen has feelings that I will use against him. He will see everyone he cares about die and learn that he cannot defy me.”

“Don’t!” Kish scolded. “You should learn from him, not fight him. He will be twice the king you ever were.”

Jared’s hand flew back. He cuffed her across the face and yelled, “You will never speak to me that way again!” His face turned red as he ordered the guards, “Take her and beat some obedience into her. When she is properly humbled, bring her back to me.” He raised his hand to strike her again.

Finn stepped in front of her and grabbed Jared’s wrist. “No,” he refused. “You will not hit her, and I will not beat her.”

“I will have you beaten too,” Jared warned. “Beaten to death!” He looked at the other guards and ordered, “Take him away. Kill him! Torture him first.”

The guards began to step forward, but stopped.

Finn kicked king Jared back and drew his sword. “You can kill me, but you aren’t having your own daughter beaten!”

“I am the king!” Jared demanded. “I will decide how to discipline my own child.”

“She is not a child,” Finn insisted. “Take back your order to have her beaten or draw your sword!”

Having a guard reverse an order he gave was not a good precedent for him to set. Besides, Jared was a very good swordsman. He did not trust even his closest guards, so he was well trained to fight. He drew his sword.

Finn glanced around nervously, hoping the other guards did not come to the king’s defense, as they were sworn to do. Only one of them did, but Kish dropped to the ground, rolled into his legs, and knocked him over.

The fight between Finn and King Jared began. Jared was a very good sword fighter, but Finn was too. He had far too much experience with his sword from carrying out Jared's cruel commands.

The fight was intense. Kish and the guards did not try to get involved. They all watched intently, wondering which way it would go. Kish wanted to help Finn. Still, she couldn't kill her own father, and she likely would get in Finn's way more than help since her hands were tied behind her back. She could do nothing but watch.

The tension was great, and the battle bloody. Still, the men kept fighting.

Finally, Finn stabbed his sword into Jared's chest, and Jared fell dead.

Finn immediately turned to Kish, knelt before her, and confessed, "I am sorry, Kish. I did not want to kill your father, but I could not allow him to beat you. I have done too much of his dirty work, and I had to stand up for you."

Tears filled her eyes. She really had no love for her father, but he was still her father. He had provided for her. He had taught her the best that he could.

Finn untied her hands, then turned to the other guards and announced, "I will go to Troia, tell Prince Allen that he is now king, and turn myself in to be executed for King Jared's death."

Kish put her hand on his arm and offered, "I will go with you, and I will plead your case to not be killed. You were protecting me. That was noble." She looked down at her father's dead body on the floor with tears in her eyes, but she

hid her emotion from her voice as she stated, “He deserved to die.”

They wasted no time getting to Troia, so the next day Kish and Finn approached the castle.

“I come from Kraya,” Finn informed the guard at the gate.

The guard called for Hunter. He and several other guards escorted Finn and Kish to the throne room.

“This had better be important,” Hunter warned. “I do not wish to disturb Matthew or Allen with trivial matters now.”

“It is important,” Finn stated. “King Jared is dead.”

Hunter’s eyes went wide, and he replied, “I will get Allen and Matthew immediately.”

Hunter was not about to tell the news himself, but he had Allen and Matthew summoned to the throne room. Allen came in with Astra and Matthew with Lena. Matthew was now king, so he was staying in the castle, even though it was his honeymoon. Allen had been put in as his chief councilor, so he and Astra were also given a room.

“What is your news?” Matthew asked as they all came in.

“Sit, Allen,” Finn suggested. “You too, Astra.”

“Go ahead,” Allen instructed.

Finn knelt before Allen, took a deep breath, and stated, "I must inform you that your father is dead."

Allen gasped. "How?"

"By my hand," Finn admitted. "I will turn myself in for execution."

"Don't execute him!" Kish insisted. "He was protecting me. Father had me captured and taken back to him. He was going to have me beaten into submission. Finn refused to beat me. He gave father the option of revoking the command or accepting a challenge."

"Understood," Allen responded with a nod. He turned to Finn and announced, "Arise. You are pardoned." He held his hand out toward Kish and asked, "I am still the crowned prince, am I not? Father didn't award it to Anton when he returned, did he?"

"No, he did not," she answered. "You are still the crowned prince. You must return to Kraya at once and take your place as king."

Allen reached his hand out and looked at it, indicating to her that he wanted her to take it. She looked at him hesitantly, but did. He held her hand and consoled, "Kish, I am sorry. I know that you were closer to father than I was."

"Close?" she asked. Her expression went hard. "My supposed closeness with father gives me more reason to want to see him dead. You have friends. You have people to care about. What do I have?"

“Us,” Allen assured her. “Kish, what our father has taught us is wrong. I will need to go back and see if Astra and I can fix Kraya. We have our work cut out for us. Are you with us?”

Kish said nothing in response.

“What is wrong?” Allen asked.

“There is more news,” she admitted. “Our father ordered for Astra’s family to be killed.”

Astra gasped. “No! We must save them.” She buried her face in Allen’s chest, and he put his arms around her.

“Wait!” Kish interjected. “I sent Obron with Upton and another undead warrior. Hopefully they arrived in time.”

“Get Drew. Let’s go,” Allen instructed.

Kish looked in his eyes, her eyes actually showing some emotion. “Drew also went after them. If Obron and his men did not arrive in time, I fear that Drew likely died with Astra’s family.”

“We will go at once and see what has happened,” Allen responded. He took Astra’s hands. “Let’s not give up hope.”

Matthew came over and put his hand on Allen’s shoulder, knowing exactly how Allen felt, and offered, “I am sorry, Allen. How can I help?”

“Give me a few minutes alone with Astra,” he requested.

Matthew nodded and told everyone to leave. They all stepped out of the room.

“What do we do?” Allen asked Astra as soon as they were alone. “We need to see if your family is safe. I hope they are.”

She hugged him tighter and cried, “Let’s not lose hope.”

“But we know my father is dead,” Allen replied. “I have no desire to be king. I would rather be Matthew’s councilor and let us live a happy life.”

“We will just have to live a happy life with you as king,” Astra suggested. “You can do great good in Kraya. Your father has caused many problems for the kingdom. It’s now your chance to set things right.”

He rubbed her arm as he added, “Let’s hope Drew is alive still too. I will need him.”

She smiled at him, gave him a kiss, and assured him, “Whatever happens. You have me. We will deal with the situation together.”

He looked into her eyes and assured her, “I love you.”

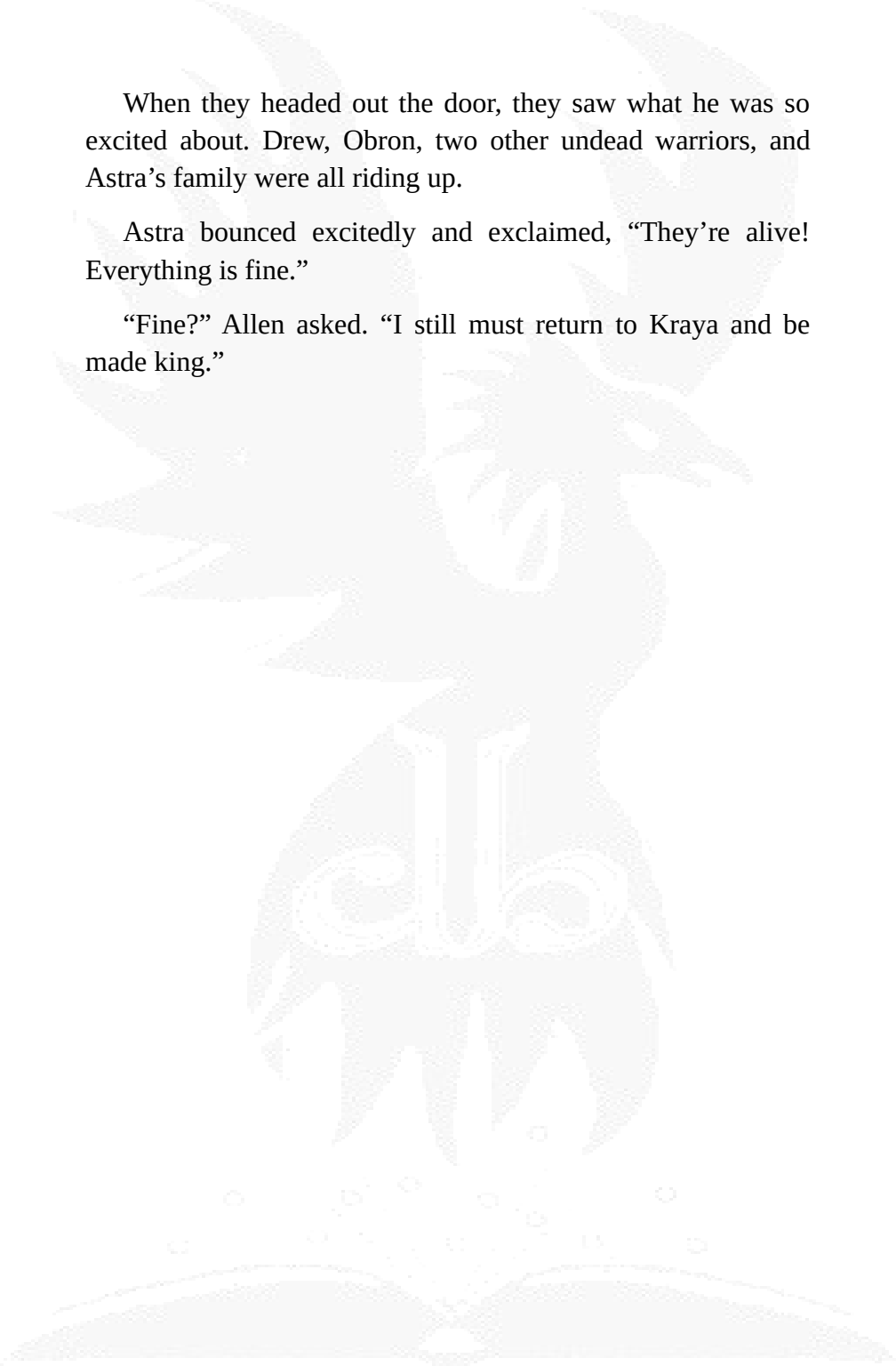
After a little more discussion, Matthew and the others came back into the room.

The tension in the air was great, as everyone was nervous about Astra’s family, and despite the tension between Allen and Kish and their father, their was still great emotion with his death.

Since there was little that anyone could do, Allen and Astra went to their room to pack a few things before going to her family’s farm and then heading to the castle in Kraya.

As they were packing, Matthew ran into their room. “Hurry!” he called. “You want to see this!”

Allen and Astra ran out of the room following Matthew.



When they headed out the door, they saw what he was so excited about. Drew, Obron, two other undead warriors, and Astra's family were all riding up.

Astra bounced excitedly and exclaimed, "They're alive! Everything is fine."

"Fine?" Allen asked. "I still must return to Kraya and be made king."