

Chapter 1: Arena Battles

Tensions were high, as they always were when the teams came into the arena. It was set up with mostly dirt and boulders forming hills, but there was also a small grove of trees on one edge. No one really knew how York, the head of the council, could change the terrain for every fight in the arena, but York did have pretty powerful magic, possibly more powerful than most war mages, although no one had seen him battle to know if his fighting was as good.

Jorn walked through the crowd gathered to watch, following the team of war mages from Ramere, his city. He carried a book with him, and a pen. He looked around uncomfortably at many of the excited people in the crowd. How could they enjoy arena fights so much?

He stopped suddenly. The team kept walking ahead of him, but that was fine. He knew where they were going. He stared at a young man in the crowd, who appeared about twenty, and was sitting near Team Terrian. He looked like he could be a war mage, as he seemed pretty strong. Otherwise, he didn't particularly stand out because of his appearance. He had brown hair and dark eyes. That wasn't unusual. Yet, something about him caught Jorn's eyes.

"Do you need something?" the young man asked, noting that Jorn had a much more distinctive look because of his golden colored hair and bright blue eyes.

"No," Jorn answered. "We have not met." A contemplative expression crossed his face and he added, "But we will."

“It looks like we just did,” the young man answered. He stood up and held out his hand. “I am Niam, from Terrian.”

Jorn gripped his hand and greeted, “It is good to meet you, Niam. I am Jorn, from Ramere.” He let go of Niam’s hand and added, “We will meet again.” He nodded to punctuate his surety and turned and headed after his team.

Each of the seven teams, from the seven cities, had a platform near the top of the arena to gather. Jorn went to Ramere’s team platform and took a seat. He stared forward in thought.

“What is it?” Tristan, the team coach, asked.

“Nothing, father,” Jorn answered. “Just a feeling I’m not sure what means. I am fine. I will focus on the team.”

“Good,” his father responded. “You are very good at analyzing the opponent. I need your help.”

Jorn raised his eyebrows. “I do wish we knew what teams would be fighting before a fight.”

“Don’t we all,” his father agreed. “If we are called to fight, I hope you have suggestions on who can best counter them and good moves to use.” He shook his head and sighed. “Of course, if they call a team of seven, I will have no options. That is all we have since Threl died in the last battle against Phyrn.”

“I’ll do my best,” Jorn assured him. “It is my job.”

“Not officially,” he father teased.

Jorn looked over at the team. All of them were pacing nervously, ready if called.

They had to sit when York stood up in front of everyone. He stood on a platform high on one end of the arena by the eternal flame, a magical fairy fire where the mages' weapons were forged. He addressed the teams and crowd. "Welcome everyone," he began in a very serious tone. "War is death. War is pain. Good men die, and innocent lives are lost. There is no good way to kill, but the arena has kept the war between the cities to minimal casualties instead of hundreds of thousands. Thus, we are once again gathered, as usual, to put our battles with only a few in the arena, instead of a full bloody battle. Hopefully soon the war will end, but for today, the battles continue."

He looked around. The arena was entirely silent. He continued, "I know everyone is anxious to know who will fight. I know many wish I would announce in advance who the battles will be between, and the stakes. It would make it easier to plan, but in war there is no time to plan. Battles usually come unexpectedly. Thus, the battles here will remain unexpected."

He paused again before continuing, "Tonight there will be a battle between Terrian and Ramere. Ramere is attacking over the land between the two cities that is presently being controlled by Terrian."

Jorn shook his head and complained, "Shouldn't the attacking team know in advance? Don't commands to attack generally come with a little warning?"

"I don't make the rules," his father replied. "That was voted on by our citizens."

They didn't discuss more, as York continued, "There will be five each in that battle. Then there will be a six on six battle between Aschelle and Terrian."

The crowd gasped at the announcement. Six on six battles always had high stakes. Plus, it was unusual for a team to fight twice in a day.

York knew their concerns, so he explained, "In war, an army can attack another army that is weary from battle. All is fair in war. It is unfortunate, but it is strategy." He looked around to see the crowd's reaction, then announced, "Aschelle is attacking to kidnap the Princess Anwyn of Terrian."

A gasp went through the crowd.

"No!" Jorn exclaimed. He turned to his father. "We must throw the first fight so the Terrian war mages are fresh to fight the Aschelleans."

"We can't son," his father replied. "You know the cost of losing as the attacker. Even worse, you know the cost of throwing a fight. If York suspects the fight to be thrown, he could have all the war mages killed. At least one will be."

Jorn rolled his eyes and mocked, "The official penalty for throwing a fight is not death."

"But someone will die," his father reminded him. "Someone always does."

Jorn clenched his fists and argued, "But Princess Anwyn is at stake. I know her. We have met. She is a good lady, one of the purest in the land. If there is anyone with a good heart, it is her."

“We will have to fight,” his father apologized. “Hopefully Terrian can pay the ransom for her if they lose.”

Jorn walked down the stairs with his father and the team. “Luce and Aquin sit this one out,” he suggested to his father. “I think that’s obvious.”

“Yes,” his father agreed.

Jorn continued, “Obviously, on their side, Dane will be at a disadvantage with no water in the arena. They are all particularly worried right now. I suspect that the Princess being at stake in the next fight is going to make them loose focus in this one. That’s my advice.”

“Thank you,” his father responded. “I don’t think either side wants to fight this.”

The team all stopped at the edge of the crowd, and Tristan announced, “Dexter, Verity, Cole, Hank, and Ash. You’re fighting this one.”

Luce winked at them all. “Good luck. I’ll be rooting for you.”

Both teams went to their sides of the arena and faced off. Dexter, the team captain, gathered them before the battle and informed them, “We are going to throw this one. I don’t care if our city steals their land, but they need to be fresh to fight Aschelle for Princess Anwyn.”

“Crush on the princess?” Verity teased.

“That’s my business,” Dexter responded. “I’m the captain. I make the call. Throw it, but make it look like we aren’t, so I’m not killed.”

“You know the penalty if we lose as the attackers even if we don’t throw it,” Verity warned. “We can’t throw a fight.”

“I know the penalty, and it will happen to me as captain,” Dexter responded. “Throw it, but make it look good.”

The rest of the team nodded and listened to his instructions.

The crowd was screaming, cheering for the team they wanted to win. Dexter could hear the people from Ramere chanting, “We want blood! We want blood! We want blood!” His city was always eager for a brutal battle.

York quieted the crowd and called for the battle to begin.

Dexter hit the end of his bamboo staff on the ground, and it immediately grew to ten feet high, lifting him into the air, as he was holding onto the other end. He sprang over to fight against Hrod, the captain of the Terrian team. Hrod was one of the more experienced fighters, so he was good. He fought with metal balls on chains. They hurt when they hit. Fortunately Dexter was very agile and good at dodging Hrod’s rapid strikes with them.

Hrod wasn’t agile. He tended to stand his ground and swing patterns. Dexter knew his fighting style. They’d fought before.

Dexter dodged a blow from a ball and struck Hrod with his staff, obviously much softer than he’d normally strike.

“Thank you,” Hrod said as he struck back, without his usual force.

“You’ll have to hit hard,” Dexter pointed out. “I’ll die if this doesn’t look good. Up and sweep.”

“Again, thank you,” Hrod noted with obvious emotion in his voice, but his ball hit Dexter, hard. Dexter countered by extending his staff again to come down on top of Hrod. As he did, he swept Hrod’s legs. Hrod was ready. When the sweep came, he took a roll. It looked perfect, as if Dexter had knocked him down, but Hrod was not hurt at all.

Dexter came toward him to attack, but started to slip.

Jorn watched as Dexter almost fell, but he suddenly caught himself. Jorn turned to the girl sitting beside him and instructed, “Stop, Luce. They are throwing this fight.”

Luce gasped. “But what if they get caught?”

“Make sure one of Terrian’s goes down,” Jorn suggested. “Make it their weakest. Help whoever is going against Dane. He won’t be as much help against Aschelle to them anyway.”

Luce nodded, and they both turned their attention back to the battle.

The luck seemed to take a turn for Terrian.

Hrod threw one of the balls around Dextre’s ankle, which wrapped the chain around his leg so he could not get away. Without Dexter’s great dexterity, it was easy for Hrod to beat him with the balls until the gem Dexter had on a bracer on his left arm stopped glowing.

Hrod stepped back. That was normal, as the glowing gem each of them had was a sign of their protective magical shielding. The gem going dark showed that they were without protection, so they were out of the battle.

Before leaving the fighting field, Dexter whispered to Hrod, “One of yours must take a fall so I don’t die. I’d make it Dane.”

“Thank you,” Hrod whispered again. “If he doesn’t take the fall, I will.”

A bouncy girl scrambled past Dexter as he left the field. He had fought her many times, as her main ability was also dexterity, so they were a good match.

Dexter came and sat by Jorn and Luce. Tristan walked over to him. “This is a risky move,” he warned. “You know what will happen to you.”

Dexter tensed as he replied, “I know. It’s worth it if we can save Princess Anwyn. If she is captured by Aschelle, they are likely to make a demand Terrian can’t pay and then kill her, or worse.”

“I know,” Tristan agreed. “I said it was a risky move. It didn’t say it wasn’t the right one. You’re a good man.”

They all watched as the fight continued. Team Ramere did a good job of looking as if they weren’t throwing the match, and Dane’s crystal did stop glowing, so Team Terrian did have one man go down. That wasn’t too hard. Cole, one of the Ramere war mages, was able to get his hands on Dane and suck the energy from Dane’s gem. It did mean that Cole was the last one to go down on Ramere’s team, as he absorbed Dane’s energy; but once the others were down, all of Team Terrian ganged up against him.

When the fight was over, York stood up and declared, “Terrian has won the fight. They will fight Aschelle next, but

will get a short rest while the attackers suffer the consequence of losing a battle.” He put his hand on his heart as he announced, “It is always painful to me to see punishment enacted, but it is necessary. In war, the attacking army has casualties and loss. We have civilized war to fights in the arena, where deaths are rare; but we cannot encourage cities to attack where there is nothing to lose, or they would attack haphazardly. As much as I hate blood, there must be a penalty for armies who attack and lose.”

Many in the crowd started calling for the punishment as the guards who were to enforce the punishment walked over toward Team Ramere’s platform so they could get their team captain.

Dexter stood up and took a breath for strength. He didn’t fight the guards as they took his arms, but he looked down and tried to tune out the people from his own city who were again chanting, “We want blood! We want blood.”

He was taken to the center of the arena. There were different punishments that were enacted to keep variety for the spectators, but all of them hurt. His shielding was down, as his gem was dark. Blood would be drawn.

He soon found his answer, as he saw the guard pull out a nasty-looking whip. It wasn’t normal leather. It was a magical weapon. The guard obviously had been on a soul quest. That wasn’t surprising. Lesser war mages from Aschelle were used to administer punishment. Dexter would be hit hard.

Dexter’s shirt was removed, and he was tied to a boulder to be whipped. It was pointless for him to fight. If he fought, the

guards could use any force necessary to restrain him, which would likely end in his death.

Again he heard people from his own city calling out, “We want blood!” He looked up into the stands and saw Princess Anwyn standing with a guard on each side of her. At least she wasn’t calling for blood. She had tears streaming down her face.

He looked at her for strength as the first strike came. Strike after strike came, and Dexter was aware of very little except the extreme pain he was in and the feeling of light-headedness from the loss of blood.

When the lashes were over, he was dragged across the field to his teammates and thrown on the ground in front of them.

Luce dropped beside him and started to stop the bleeding.

“Help Terrian,” he mumbled. “Don’t make this be in vain. Our gems are dark. We can’t help. You need to.”

Luce looked up at her teammates.

“We’ll tend to him,” Aquin assured Luce. “You help Terrian.”

Luce took her seat to watch the next battle.

York was addressing the people, saying, “It is hard to see blood drawn, but war is dark. Remember every time that blood is drawn the hundreds of thousands of lives that have been saved. The Ramere captain will recover quickly, as all war mages do. He will be back fighting soon. Now we must focus on the next fight. We need six members of Team Aschelle and six members of Team Terrian to take the field.”

Six members of Team Aschelle took the field. “Quex the Unstoppable, Freya Flashdaggers, Tor the Brilliant, Adron the Avenger, Lorelay the Queen, and Bailor the Cunning are ready to fight,” Quex announced.

Only four from Team Terrian came on, as war mages were not eligible to fight if their gems were dark.

Hrod stepped forward. “York,” he addressed. “I request a delay of battle. We are already short members, as we’ve had several losses this year and only started with five today. Dane’s crystal is dark from the last fight, so he is not eligible to fight.”

York nodded. “It is sad that your team has had several accidents this year. There will be a soul quest in a week to replenish war mages. Unfortunately, in war, armies can be attacked when they are weakened. The battle must go through. I wish I had the power to delay the fight, but the rules of battle must be upheld. We cannot risk full fledged war breaking out, especially not with the Fae so near. You will have to fight with four.”

“No they won’t!” a voice boomed.

Everyone in the arena turned to see where the voice was coming from. Two strong war mages were coming down the stairs from Cruia’s team.

When they reached the bottom, the one who had spoken before spoke again. “They will not have to fight with four. Chad and I will fight with them. We will be their allies for tonight.”

“And you are team captain,” York verified.

“I am,” the man answered. “I am Kendall of Cruia. Cruia will ally with Terrian tonight and fight with them. That is legal.”

York looked surprised, but agreed, “It is. You may take the field.”

Kendall and Chad went down the stairs to the field and stood on Terrian’s side. Chad held a large bat’leth and Kendall pulled a sword.

Hrod turned to them and said, “Thank you. Will you need repayment?”

“No,” Kendall answered. “Just win.” He looked around and muttered, “I wish I’d brought Galvyn. We could use his bow. They have distance weapons. There was no time to plan.”

Hrod did not get to discuss strategy with them, as York called for the battle to start.

As soon as it started, Kendall’s sword burst into flame. Chad ran into battle toward Quex, who looked to be the biggest and strongest on the Aschellean team. His massive war hammer was intimidating. It would be a good match against Chad’s Bat’leth.

Kendall didn’t charge. He surveyed the situation first. Hrod seemed to be engaging Freya Flashdaggers, who fought with knives that had chains attached to them. Bailor had an Atlatl as a weapon, but Trav seemed to attack him quickly so he couldn’t use it to shoot spears at people. Engaging him up close before he could hide was smart. Zarah was chasing Tor the Brilliant. Tor also liked to hide. He fought with a flaming glaive, but preferred causing distractions instead of being a

heavy hitter. Kendall noted him, as he had fire. Kendall would likely have to go after him, but for the moment, Zarah was keeping him busy with her whip. Kendall looked for who he should fight. Then he noticed Adron the Avenger. He'd seen Adron fight many times. Adron was an assassin. He'd "accidentally" killed in the arena before. He carried a kusari-gama as a weapon. It was a chain with a ball on one end and two bent knives on the other, like viper's teeth, a deadly weapon in the hands of an expert such as Adron. There was likely some kind of poison on the weapon too. Poisons used in the arena were required to be non-deadly, but accidents did happen. Kendall ran after him.

Adron went into the trees to hide, so Kendall followed. Everyone else was fighting on the stones, so Kendall shot fire from his sword and caught the trees on fire. That forced Adron to come out of hiding. As soon as Adron ran out of hiding, Kendall blasted him with fire from his sword.

A tree branch suddenly fell almost on top of Kendall. It wasn't surprising. The arena terrain tended to fight on Aschelle's side. All the war mages knew why Aschelle was seldom beaten; but of course, York denied any favoritism or help for Aschelle, and the Aschelleans simply accredited their unusual number of wins to being good.

Yet, the tree branch seemed to jump at the last second and miss him. That was odd. Next, a stone suddenly rolled at him. As he dodged it, he was almost hit with a dart, but it seemed to swerve at the last moment.

He turned and was struck with Adron's kusari-gama, but his gem shield held, so the dual blades did not penetrate his chest.

They merely cut his shirt. He charged at Adron with his flaming sword.

As he fought Adron, Chad fought Quex. It was a brutal battle, as both pounded on each other, each trying to hit hard enough to exhaust the other's shielding to get him out. Usually there were a few hits after the shield went down, and those were painful. Either Quex or Chad was going to leave the battle in pain.

The first war mage to leave the field in defeat was Gordon, from team Terrian. His double headed spear should have been a good match for Lorelay's fan, but Lorelay was ruthless. Fortunately, Gordon had done well enough that Lorelay was the next war mage out.

Trav from Terrian and Bailor from Aschelle were the next war mages out.

Hrod's heavy metal poi balls were a very good match for Freya's flashdagger's keyoketsu-shogi. They were close to the same weapon, except that his was a blunt force weapon and hers knife-edged. Both were experts, but his ball and chains were faster because of the weight, so he was doing well. Unfortunately, a stone under his feet slipped, and Hrod fell to the ground.

Freya threw her daggers quickly for the kill, but Kendall blasted her with a fireball, knocking her back. A bit of luck made her knives go away from Hrod instead of impaling him, and the fireball hit squarely on her, minimizing the impact on Hrod.

As Kendall threw the fireball, he felt the kusari-gama across his back. Fortunately, his shielding held. He kept his gem in a

bracer as all war mages did. It was still glowing, although not as brightly as he wished. He made a bold move. At the next strike of the kusari-gama, he held his bracer up so the kusari-gama wrapped around it. Then he pulled on the chain, forcing Adron closer to him, and hit him with his flaming sword as quickly as he could. He made several very hard strikes, and Adron's gem went dark.

Kendall could have easily hit him again and have gotten away with it, but he stepped back, as he was supposed to, and let Adron leave the field.

Kendall looked around to see who was out. Adron was, so was Zarah, and Bailor; but Kendall was suddenly hit by a dart. That shouldn't have happened with Bailor out. Aschelle was cheating. He pulled it out. It hurt, and there was some poison on it that made him dizzy. He checked his gem. It was flickering. There was little time before he would be out. He shot a fireball at Tor who was weak enough that he fell. Then he ran to help Chad.

When he reached him, Chad was down. Kendall jumped in front of him and struck with his flaming sword. Quex hit back, hard, and Kendall fell to the ground. Whether his gem was dark or not didn't matter. He was unconscious.

Chad pulled himself up and struck at Quex. Both staggered and struck again. Chad's gem went dark. Quex almost fell, surely making his gem go dark, but he stayed up. Then with a stroke of luck, somehow Kendall's sword went off and blasted a fireball at Quex's feet. It was enough that Quex's gem went dark.

He looked down at Kendall and called, “Foul! His gem is dark!”

Chad held up Kendall’s arm to show the bracer. “It’s faint and flickering, but legal,” he called to the crowd. He dropped down beside Kendall to see if he was all right.

That left only Freya and Hrod. Hrod looked exhausted from two battles, but he kept going. Freya did too. The knives and balls went flying around on their chains, pounding on each other. Finally, Hrod entangled one of her chains in one of his and kicked her, hard. Her gem went dark. As it did, she struck at him with her other knife and cut across his arm, very deeply. His gem went suddenly dark.

“Tie!” York immediately declared.

“Check the witnesses!” Hrod called up.

York smiled at him and responded, “I am sorry. It was too close to call as a decisive win. I am declaring it a tie.”

Hrod knew better than to argue. There was no need anyway. A tie would save the princess.

York looked up at the crowd and announced, “The match is declared a tie!” He turned to the councilman of Aschelle and informed him, “You have twenty-four hours to decide if you want a rematch. If so, it will have to wait until after the soul quests. There will be a truce for the week until after the soul quests to give all teams time to prepare their candidates.”

“I will let you know tomorrow,” Councilman Emmar of Aschelle replied.

York nodded. Then he announced, “In a tie, neither side is awarded or punished.” He motioned to the guards watching Princess Anwyn. “You may release her.”

The first thing that she did was run down to the field. She hugged Hrod, offering, “You are wounded. Your arm is bleeding. Can I help you?”

“I am fine,” he assured her. “I am glad we saved you.”

“I am too. You are a good man,” she replied with a smile. She next ran over to Kendall and knelt beside him. Chad was also kneeling beside him. Kendall was conscious.

“Is he all right?” Anwyn asked.

“I will be,” Kendall answered groggily. “It is not a deadly poison, and I can heat my body hot enough to burn out most toxins. I will recover.”

She put her hand on his chest as he lay there and told him, “Thank you. I do not know either you or your teammate. It was noble of both of you to come to my defense.”

“Glad to help,” Kendall mumbled. “I need to sleep.” He closed his eyes.

“How can I help?” Anwyn asked.

Chad shrugged and answered, “I don’t know. He’ll recover. I’ll take him home and get some good soup in him. He’ll be back milking cows soon enough.”

That seemed an odd comment, as the princess did not milk cows, so it did not seem normal. “Let me know if I can do anything for either of you,” she offered. “You know where to

find me.” Then she added. “Although I do not know either of you and could not find you.”

“All you need to do if you need us is come to Cruia,” Chad replied. “Anyone there will know us and be able to find us for you.” He bid her good-bye, picked up Kendall, and carried him off.

Anwyn had one more stop to make. She went over to Ramere’s team and knelt down beside Dexter, who was still lying wounded on the floor, and told him, “That was very noble of you.”

“What was?” Dexter asked.

“Throwing the fight to protect me,” she answered.

His eyes went as wide as they could with the little energy he had as he denied, “I wouldn’t throw a fight. You have no proof.”

“It’s fine,” she assured him. “I won’t report you. I think it was even more noble of you to not fight and to take the lashing to protect me than it was for the Cruian boys to fight for me. You are my hero today.”

He smiled and assured her, “Since you are safe, it was worth it.”

“Is there something I can do for you in return?” she asked.

“I will be fine,” he assured her. “It is our families who will need help. They will only get half rations of food this week for our loss.”

“What?” Anwyn exclaimed. “That’s horrible! That I can help with. You will see me soon. I will help there.”

Dexter smiled weakly and mumbled, “Thank you.”

Princess Anwyn gave him a kiss on the cheek and left.

“She should have been thanking Luce too,” Jorn teased Dexter. “She was the one manipulating the fighters’ luck in both fights.” He sighed. “But we can’t tell anyone, as it might be considered cheating.”

“It’s no more cheating than what Aschelle was doing!” Luce defended. “At least someone was manipulating the field to fight in their favor; and as for our team, I was helping the other side win. I don’t cheat.”

“And don’t forget that Terrian should have won against Aschelle,” Aquin pointed out. “Freya’s gem went dark first. There’s a reason they never lose.”

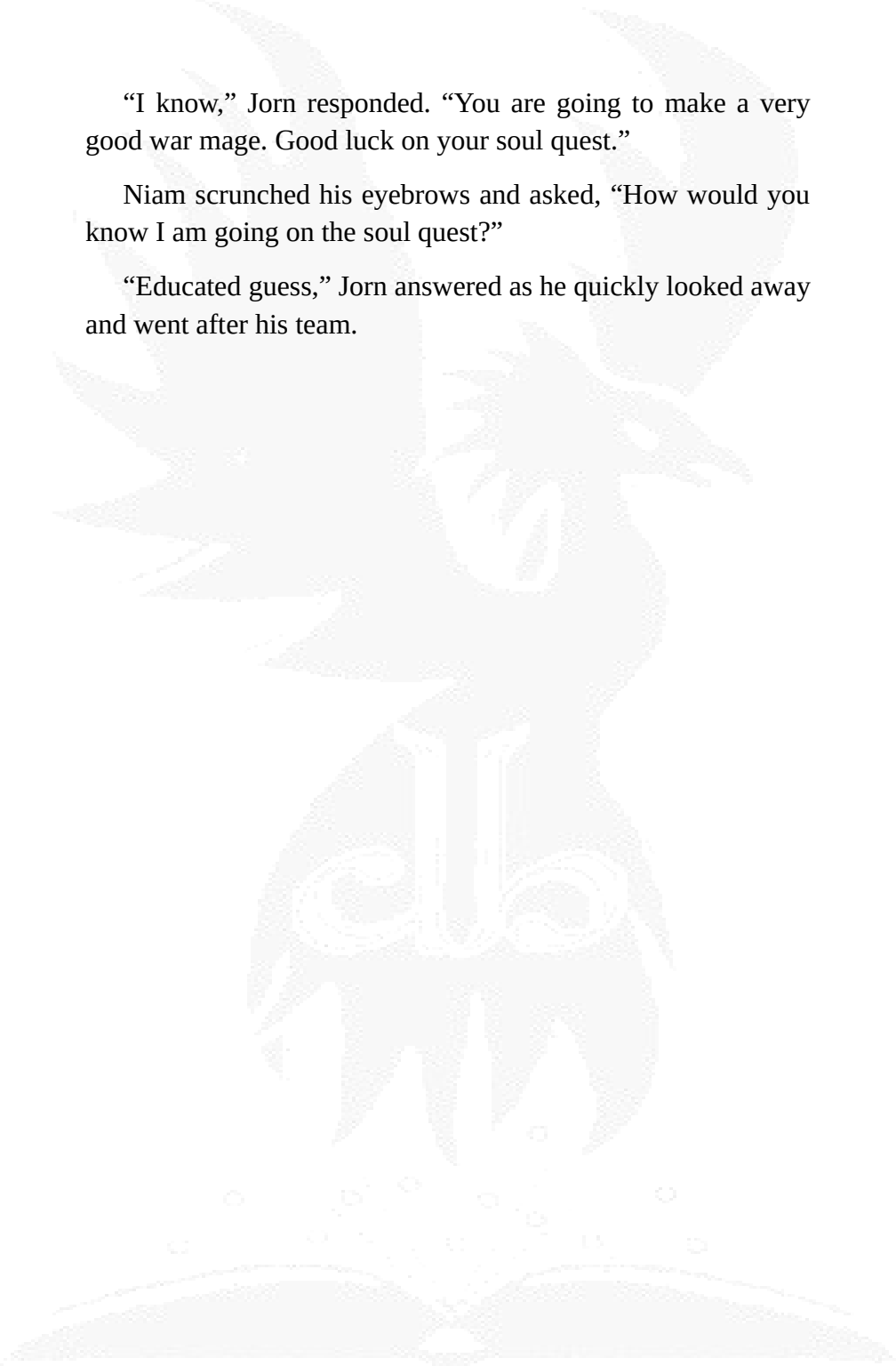
Dexter tried to sit up as he said, “Thanks for the help, Luce. It ended right.”

Luce teased back, “You will do really reckless things for a pretty girl.”

Dexter sighed and mumbled, “Let’s hope there isn’t a rematch.”

They all packed up and headed out of the arena. Dexter was helped out by his teammates. As they left, Jorn saw Niam, who was still sitting in the stands near the Terrian platform. Again, Jorn stopped and stared at him.

“I’m sorry for your team’s loss,” Niam stated, “although I must admit that I’m glad they did. I was rooting for my own city, as I would hate to have seen Princess Anwyn captured.”



“I know,” Jorn responded. “You are going to make a very good war mage. Good luck on your soul quest.”

Niam scrunched his eyebrows and asked, “How would you know I am going on the soul quest?”

“Educated guess,” Jorn answered as he quickly looked away and went after his team.