

Chapter 1: The Performance

“You have failed me for the last time, Irvan,” Thallas hissed as he glanced around furtively to be sure no one was watching.

Only several horses tethered nearby and the surrounding woods themselves witnessed their conversation, so his secret was assured.

Their deathly silence cloaked Thallas as he glared at the cowering Irvan with burning eyes.

His glare broke as a resounding cheer from the circus tent across the meadow made him glance up quickly. The wind then rustled the trees, whispering as if they anticipated what he was about to do.

He drew back slightly into the woods with Irvan to be sure that he could not be seen from the kingdom’s walls. All seemed quiet as the sun drifted below the horizon.

Thallas snarled at Irvan. “I asked only a simple murder, and it was too much for you.”

Irvan cowered backward, tripping over his words in fear. “She was so young and seemed so innocent, so I wondered what she’d done to –”

“So you went soft,” Thallas sneered. “We can’t have that in the guild.” His cold glare held Irvan’s gaze, and his dagger slid silently and covertly from its sheath.

Irvan trembled. “It won’t happen again.”

“I’m sure it won’t,” Thallas hissed, as he slid the dagger under Irvan’s ribs toward his heart.

Irvan opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came out. The attack had been too swift, and Thallas too well practiced in the art of silent murder. Irvan’s eyes dilated and he fell to the ground.

Thallas chuckled victoriously. “I’m quite sure you’ll never fail me again.”

A cheer from the nearby circus tent echoed through the deathly silence as if to praise Thallas for his swiftness, or condemn him; but he knew they couldn’t know of what he had just done.

Thallas kicked the dead body behind a tree, washed his hands and arms in the stream, and picked up his cloak. He fastened it over his bloodstained clothes and walked to the circus tent as if he was innocent. He had left no clues to the murder that had just been committed on the outskirts of the Kingdom of Hearth.

The ringmaster was announcing an act as Thallas entered. “Ladies and gentlemen, if you will turn your attention to the center ring, you will witness the most amazing, most skilled,

most entertaining performer in the trade, risking life and limb. It's Trixie, the amazing knife thrower who has come all the way from the Island of Arimbas to perform for you!" The ringmaster pointed to the curtain with a flourish.

Backstage, Trixie bounced around in anticipation of her performance. This was her favorite act; she never tired of it.

As the crowd cheered at her introduction, she sprang through the curtain with a sequence of several flips and posed for the applause which came as thunder. The energy of the audience excited her, and she did several more flips.

Every act she had done so far had sent them into frenzied excitement, and all of them paled in intensity to what she was about to do – knife throwing.

Trixie beamed at the response and looked around the audience. She noticed there was a nice-looking man in the third row and wondered if she should do her triple-under-spinning juggle or her twisting-over-crossing juggle with the knives first.

Then she realized that the lady in the back looked lousy in red, wondered if birds could fly if they were fed lead, and thought how funny the fat man on the end of the row would look if he had feathers instead of hair. He looked funny enough with hair.

She bounced around and did a few more flips as the stage hands put out a board so Cami, her assistant, could stand in front of it. Cami wasn't from Arimbas – poor girl. She didn't even have pointy ears.

Trixie next noticed the redhead with the muscles was handsome. She always liked red hair, since hers was auburn. Of course, humans didn't have violet eyes like her, but they would probably look bad with violet eyes. They definitely would look bad with yellow eyes, and she really thought they'd look ridiculous with two noses.

Cami scanned the crowd, took a deep breath, bit her lip, and stepped in front of the board. It was brightly colored, but hard and unyielding. Feeling it against her back always reminded her of what would happen if Trixie ever missed – not that she ever had, but Cami realized it only took once. Sweat beaded her forehead as she stared at Trixie.

Trixie picked up five knives, juggled them, and then threw them as she caught them at the end of her juggle.

Cami closed her eyes, but she could still hear the knives slice the air as they sailed toward her. She heard the “thu-thu-thu-thu-thunk” and felt the cold steel by her as they hit the board in quick succession. She opened her eyes to see that Trixie had, as usual, placed every knife perfectly.

The crowd stared in fear and gasped in terror as the knives pierced the board almost close enough to Cami to draw blood, and then it roared with applause as they breathed relief. They could tell that this was no trick board; Trixie was simply good.

The audience was amazed as Trixie threw each knife quickly and accurately. She spun, flipped, bounced, and juggled as she threw, and she never once missed by so much as a hair.

Her energetic, contagious smile stayed on her face. It brightened as the audience's cheers seemed to scream to the

stars of her glory, and the act was only beginning. They were about to witness the blindfold routine.

As the stage hands cleared the board of knives, Trixie, with many flourishes and three back flips, tied a blindfold over her eyes and turned to the audience so that everyone could see that her eyes were well covered.

The crowd perched anxiously on the edge of their seats. The air in the tent grew hot and heavy as a sheen of sweat seemed to blur the faces of the anxious audience.

Trixie reached for some larger knives. She balanced one on her fingertip, then flipped it into the air and caught it. She spun it slowly on her palm. It felt good; nice balance, fine weight.

They were her favorite knives; inferior to Arimbian knives, like the ones she had used when practicing back home with Trevor, but they were very good considering humans made them.

As the audience watched, the knives flew suddenly straight up into the air. Trixie whirled beneath them, her dress and hair fanning out behind her. Time seemed to slow as the knives began to descend.

The spell was broken as the first hit Trixie's hand. Nobody saw her throw them, but the knives were suddenly outlining Cami, close enough that, from the audience, it nearly seemed that they had hit her.

Trixie's blindfold fell to the floor as she flipped and took a bow.

The cheers and applause rolled through the tent. Trixie basked in the glory and flipped around taking multiple bows; Cami didn't.

Cami marched furiously toward Trixie, and the storm of applause was suddenly silenced.

"I quit!" she yelled, making the audience stiffen in their seats. She wrenched the knives out of the board. "I don't want knives thrown at me anymore!"

She threw the knives at Trixie as fast as she could, but Trixie did not seem disturbed in the slightest, as she easily caught all of them. The thought that this could be part of the act swept through the audience, relieving the intensity of Cami's supposed rage, and cheers swelled.

Arimbians were amazing! The people of Hearth had never seen a performance like this before.

Trixie bounced over to the board and stood against it. "Fine," she called to Cami. "You throw and I'll stay here." No fear, no trepidation, no concern crossed her face.

In fact, she was thinking about how great it would taste to have some Arimbian Cholz berries right then, considering whether she should change out of her yellow dress and into her blue dress for the next act, and wondering if the man on the second row could juggle.

Cami timidly stood by the table of knives and hesitantly picked one up. It felt heavy and cold in her trembling hand, as if this instrument of destruction deliberately sapped her strength and confidence.

She felt the eyes of the audience boring into her and she trembled under their scrutiny. The silence seemed thick and heavy as she anticipated her throw.

Although she had rehearsed this with Trixie, the pressure was now on, and the breathless crowd stared at her as if to watch her hunt her prey. She realized it only took one mistake to kill, and she couldn't do it.

She dropped the knife on the ground and fled from the tent.

Trixie's smile never faltered. She seemed completely unfazed by the actions of her assistant. The audience laughed, assuming it too was part of the show.

Trixie did three handsprings and a twisting flip. "Since my assistant just ran away screaming, because she probably actually thought about what she was doing – although I don't know why – I need a really gallant gentleman to come up and play," she announced with even more than her usual enthusiasm.

Trixie's enthusiasm was contagious, and many people were eager for a chance to volunteer.

Trixie scanned the audience and picked out a man with broad shoulders, dark hair, and deep blue eyes on the second row. "You sir, come up here please. You're handsome, and I bet you give good hugs." She giggled.

The man looked surprised because he had not been volunteering, but he did as he was bidden, though he seemed slightly confused by her offer.

He bowed slightly. “Apparently I am at your service. May I ask what you wish me to do?” He had a reasonable, polite voice, and his manner hinted at noble breeding.

Trixie realized that humans didn’t seem to hear as well as Arimbians, noted that one of the ladies on the front row looked as if she had two heads because of the child on her lap, and decided that after the show she should climb the tent pole and see how things looked from the top of the tent.

“Just follow me,” she explained, returning to his question. She grabbed his arm, pulled him into the ring, and gave him a hug.

“Yes, you’ll do perfectly,” she announced. “Can you throw?”

He stood stupefied like a rabbit in a den of lions, although Trixie was hardly a lion. “I’m not trained in knife throwing,” he said hesitantly.

“That’s all right. I really doubted you had been.” Trixie twisted her hands together, raised her shoulders, and rocked back and forth in perfect imitation of the look a three-year-old gives to his mother to prove just how innocent he really is. “At least you’re handsome.”

The man’s mouth spread into an amused smile. He shook his head and held his hands in front of him. “I won’t argue with a lady. Just tell me what you want me to do.”

“All you need to do is throw the knives at me,” she said, leaving out the implied *obviously*. “It’s really easy. Even a bollyhup could do it.”

The man looked a bit confused, as if he had no clue what a bollyhup was, and smiled contemplatively. Trixie couldn't tell what he meant by it. He shifted his weight nervously from foot to foot. Then he spoke. "Easy for you, my lady, but I'm not so sure about this."

"Why? It's very exciting!" she said with a few flips to prove just how exciting it was.

"I am a human, and do not have the dexterity of an Arimbian," he explained. He stepped back. "It's too dangerous. I could miss, and I could never do something that could harm a beautiful lady."

Trixie bounced around. The handsome man called her beautiful, so she hugged him again.

As she hugged him, she whispered in his ear. "Don't worry about a thing. They're trick knives. I'll be fine. Just play along."

She saw the man relax, noticed that humans have bigger feet than Arimbians, and hugged him one more time for luck.

The man held back a chuckle. "Just tell me what to do," he replied and hugged her back. "I think I'm starting to understand how this is done."

The audience laughed so hard the tent shook.

"First, you answer a few questions," she began. "Starting with, what's your name?"

"My name is Darin, my lady."

Trixie liked being called a lady; it didn't happen often in circus life, so she hugged him again and juggled a few of the knives.

“Well, Darin, what do you do for a living?” she asked next.

He began to answer, but she cut him off. “No, let me guess.”

She glanced at him, which meant she saw more detail than most humans would if they looked closely. His tanned skin, broad shoulders, and muscular build would imply he did some type of manual labor, something involving outdoors and strength.

Although he wore no armor, she noticed a sword by his side, and the calluses striping his palm showed that he definitely used it, or at least practiced.

She also noticed that humans don't have the range of movement in their wrists that Arimbians do, and that there was a man on the front row with a cloak the ugliest color of gray. She wondered if she dropped a chicken, would it bounce? She reminded herself to try it after the show.

“I bet you're one of the king's personal guards,” she announced.

Darin chuckled and the audience laughed. Trixie wasn't sure why it was so funny, but laughter was one of the things she liked from an audience, so she didn't think about it too long.

She kneaded his arm muscles with her fingers for a moment to get a feel for who he was. “You seem very strong. You probably work pretty hard. Are you a farmer?”

She wasn't sure why a farmer would carry a sword, but the random, flitting pattern of her thoughts did not give the question time to leave her mouth.

"I have spent many hours tending stock and working fields," he answered. Trixie noticed it was easy to tell whether or not humans were lying by their voice and wondered why he was smiling like that when his voice rang with such sincerity.

"Great!" Trixie exclaimed. "I got it on my second guess!" The audience laughed uproariously at that. Trixie wasn't sure why, but she didn't really care. She loved any reaction as long as it involved either laughter or applause. "Well, farm boy, all that muscle earned on the farm ought to make you great at this activity." The audience chuckled again.

"It's really easy." Trixie casually juggled three of the knives in one hand. "You just throw the knives where I tell you."

She made a mark on the board and showed Darin how to get the right release, which is hard for humans since it's all in the wrist. As Darin picked up a knife and turned to throw, his sword knocked against the leg of the table. He put down the knife, undid his sword belt, and placed his sheathed sword on the table so it would not get in the way. He picked up the knife again, looked at the encouraging audience, refocused on his target, closed his eyes, and threw.

"You came within a half foot," Trixie announced. "That's pretty good for a first try." She handed him another knife. "This time, I suggest you try it with your eyes open. Humans usually find it easier that way."

Darin avoided her eyes in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I'm new at this."

She beamed at him. “That’s fine. Just keep your eyes open on the next throw.”

Darin threw the next knife and came within two inches of his target. Trixie did a back flip. “Wonderful! You’re ready to start.” She cartwheeled over to the board and stood in front of it. “Throw,” she called enthusiastically.

Darin slowly picked up the suddenly heavy knife. It didn’t look trick to him, but he knew little of performers and their ways.

Though the audience cheered him on, and Trixie showed no fear or nerves, it seemed to him as though they all stared at him in accusatory silence.

Sweat beaded his forehead and palms, threatening to make the knife slip from his hand.

“They’re trick knives,” he reminded himself. His wrist flicked as Trixie had shown him, and the knife flew straight and true.

Trixie spun seemingly from nowhere and caught the knife. The audience applauded wildly, and Darin began to breathe again.

Soon there was a barrage of knives flying through the air toward Trixie. She jumped, dived, flipped, and whirled as she caught them, mesmerizing the audience who hung on her every move.

Trixie’s talent awed the audience, as did Darin’s showmanship. He caught on to the game quickly and came alive as he became more confident and felt the thrill of the roaring applause.

Unfortunately, the thrill of the audience ended where the tent did. As Trixie started her act, there were two teenage boys outside of the tent in a fistfight.

“I told you I didn’t take it!” a blond haired boy hissed, twisting to release his arm from the lock his twin brother held it in. Prickling needles ran up his arm as blood flowed through it again. He kicked his twin in the stomach, cradling his arm.

To his twin, it seemed as though the kick came from nowhere, its force knocking him to the ground.

“You lost it!” the first yelled. “It wasn’t my fault!” He threw himself on top of his twin. The twin lifted an elbow as his brother’s dark shape flew at him out of the darkness.

The boy fell heavily to the ground beside his brother, his world spinning, blackness threatening to overwhelm.

Suddenly their shirt collars jerked them up, and they found themselves being held apart by the scruff of the neck.

“You will stop fighting now!” a firm voice scolded. They twisted around to see who was holding them firmly apart by their shirt collars.

“Who are you?” the boy asked, surprised that he saw a woman.

Her thin arms held them with surprising strength, and her almost-beautiful face scowled at them. Her blondish-brown hair was cut short, coming only a hand’s breadth down the shoulder.

She could have been beautiful, but her features were sharpened by a hard, deadly look. Her cold, dark eyes stared at them.

“I’m Adria,” she answered as if that ought to mean something to them. “Do you care to explain yourself?” It was not a question. It was a command.

“Absolute...ly...” The boy’s boldness vanished under her hard, unyielding gaze.

He noticed that her clothes matched her gaze, a leather tunic, shirt, breeches... and sword, a sword that he was sure she knew how to use.

This woman looked less like a woman and more like a hardened warrior, more terrifying the longer he met her gaze.

He trembled. “It was nothing,” he mumbled around the lump in his throat.

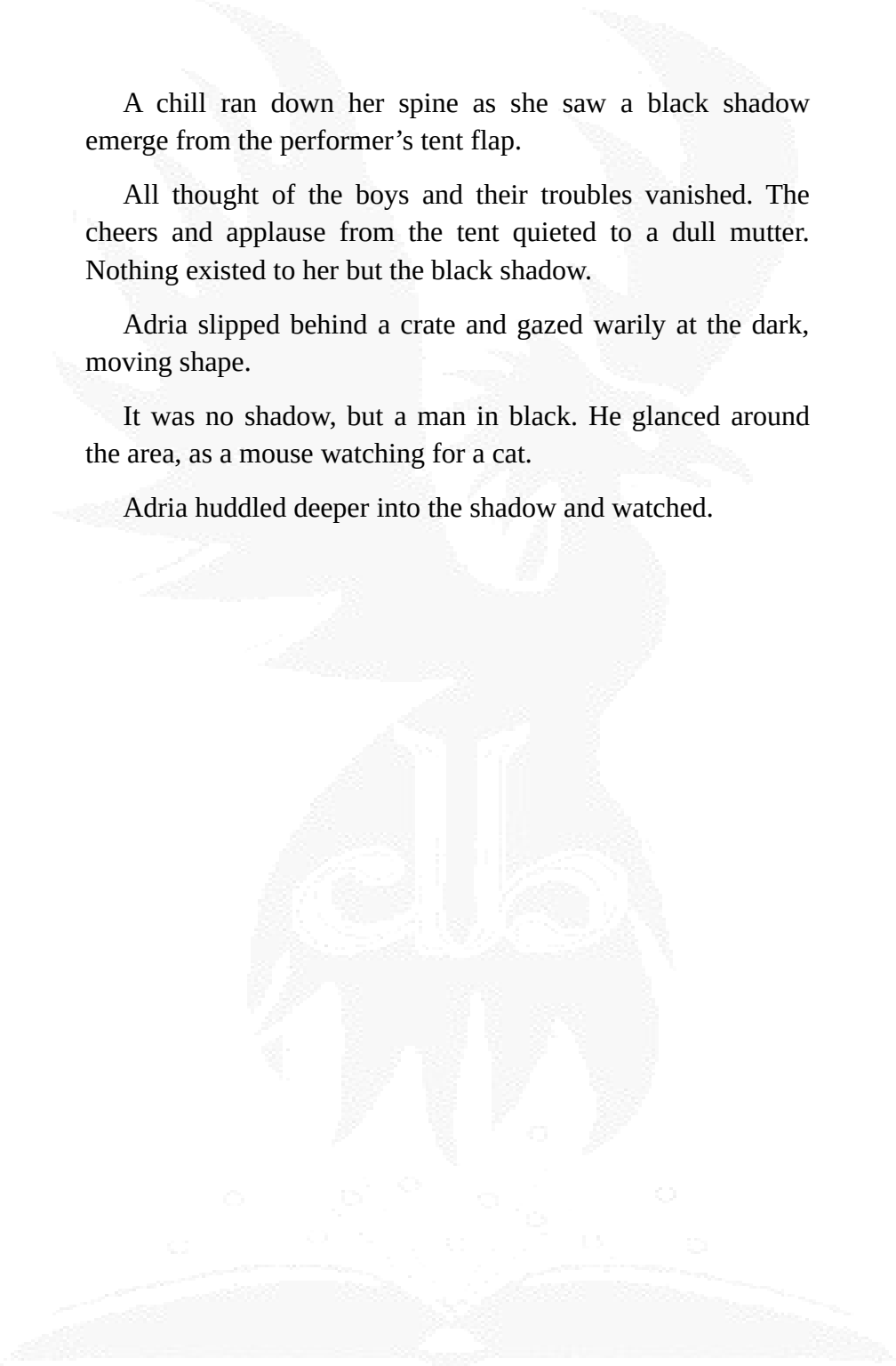
“Then don’t fight over it,” she ordered.

She released her grip and sent them on their way with a firm shove and some advice. “I suggest the two of you leave now, before I change my mind about being so kind. I don’t like people who cause trouble on my watch.”

The boys ran.

“Idiots!” she muttered. “What a job!”

She started off after the boys, sure they were merely looking for a more private place to continue their fight, but something moved stealthily on the edge of her vision and she stopped to investigate.



A chill ran down her spine as she saw a black shadow emerge from the performer's tent flap.

All thought of the boys and their troubles vanished. The cheers and applause from the tent quieted to a dull mutter. Nothing existed to her but the black shadow.

Adria slipped behind a crate and gazed warily at the dark, moving shape.

It was no shadow, but a man in black. He glanced around the area, as a mouse watching for a cat.

Adria huddled deeper into the shadow and watched.