

One

“So, tell me about the dropbears,” my brother, Rhydd, says as we ride toward the Dunnian Woods.

“They’re bears,” Alianor says. “And they drop.”

At a look from me, she throws up her hands. “Fine, they’re marsupials. Happy? They still drop.”

“More like plummet,” I say. “Dive-bomb, maybe? *Drop* implies a slower—”

“Stop, Rowan. Just because you’re the royal monster hunter doesn’t mean you need to be so particular about monsters.”

“Um, I think the fact that I’m the royal monster hunter *does* mean I need to be particular. False information leads to—”

“La-la-la,” she says, hands pressed to her ears.

I turn to Rhydd. “Just wait until a dropbear falls on us. Alianor’s dying words will be ‘That monster moved *so* much faster than I expected.’”

Rhydd grins. In front of me, my jackalope’s nose rises, twitching, as he scans the sky for marsupial monsters plummeting from the clouds.

Dain rolls his eyes. “Trees, Jacko. They need trees to drop from. Remember?”

“Plummet.”

“Yes, princess.” Another eye roll for me, and he spurs his horse to catch up with the other hunters ahead.

The four of us are joking, keeping things light, trying to forget we’re heading into the monster-filled Dunnian Woods to deal with a dropbear-filled cabin. As for why there are dropbears in a cabin . . . The week before, they’d attacked us in the night, and we’d lured them into the cabin to keep them contained until we could figure out what to do with them. We’d left food and water, as well as a couple of guards to ensure they survived their

imprisonment.

Dropbears never used to come this close to Tamarel. Given the choice between a single gryphon and a swarm of dropbears, I'd rather the former. Yes, a gryphon is as big as a small house, with a beak that can snap a person in two. But dropbears only come in swarms, attacking at night with claws and fangs, and a viciousness I haven't encountered in any other beast.

Still, I never considered *not* joining this expedition. I *am* the royal monster hunter. Well, technically, I need to complete my trials first, but until then I carry the ebony sword and do my duty.

I'm also a princess. Mom's the queen, and Rhydd will succeed her on the ivory throne. That's how it works in our kingdom. The oldest child gets the throne, and the next one takes the sword. I'm two minutes older than Rhydd, but after my aunt died—killed by the gryphon that injured Rhydd's leg—we switched roles, which is what we always wanted.

Our kingdom is Tamarel, and it's separated from other kingdoms by the Dunnian Woods and the mountains, both infested with monsters, just like the ocean along our other borders. That's why our clan—Clan Dacre—is in charge.

We have a gift for monsters, and not just hunting them. I'm riding a *ceffyl-dwr*—a carnivorous river horse—with a jackalope sitting in front of me. A pegasus filly flies overhead. A warg—which is like a giant wolf—runs at my side. Rhydd rides our late aunt's unicorn, *Courtois*.

There's another monster who is very much on my mind these days. Tiera, a young gryphon I raised from birth. Last week, I left her in a gryphon aerie with others her age. It was the right thing to do, but it still hurts. So much.

As happy as I am to have the monsters around, I'm thrilled to have so many of my favorite fellow humans on this mission. Riding beside Rhydd is Alianor, daughter of the Clan

Bellamy bandit warlord. She's also a healer in training who has declared she wants to be Tamarel's first monster doctor. And then there's Dain, who's training alongside me to be a hunter. As for grown-ups, we have our trainer, Wilmot, plus my guard, Kaylein, and six monster hunters, not to mention a few members of my father's clan, including my great-great-aunt Yvain. Her family had been tracking the dropbears when we found them, and we left a couple of her granddaughters to watch the cabin.

That's a huge group for an expedition into the Dunnian Woods. Proof of just how dangerous dropbears can be. It's also large because Mom agreed to let Rhydd join us. All Tamarel's kings and queens must be fully trained monster hunters, so he argued that he should come along. He isn't allowed to actually get near the cabin, though. This is why I happily gave up the ivory throne to wield the ebony sword: One of these things is a whole lot more exciting than the other.

We took the back roads through Tamarel. That's a must if we want to get anywhere fast. We're the country's prince and princess riding with an entourage of monsters. For local villagers, it's like the best parade ever. This trip isn't about meeting our subjects, though. It isn't even just about handling a cabin full of dropbears. It's about figuring out why the dropbears are here—what's bringing them and other monsters to our border.

Wilmot and Yvain mapped out a route to minimize our path through the woods. At the edge, we need to leave the horses and the equine monsters behind. The forest is too thick for them to pass through easily, and if we're attacked by predators, it's also too thick for them to defend themselves properly.

We overnight there, and then two of the hunters remain with our mounts while we head into the forest. One problem with that is that equine monsters aren't horses, and we don't treat them as such. Courtois wears a saddle but no bridle. I've been riding Doscach—the *ceffyl-dwr*—bareback. Monsters are never under our control, and they always stay with us by

choice. Courtois has no interest in venturing into the woods and happily stays behind. The pegasus filly, Sunniva, takes off flying, doing as she pleases. Doscach, though, insists on following me, and I have to ask him, very politely, to stay behind. When that fails, Courtois keeps him out by herding him away.

Once inside, we need to move quickly. It's a long hike to Dropbear Cabin, and with the marsupials being nocturnal, it'll be easier to deal with them during the day. We're off at the crack of dawn, and we eat our midday meal as we walk, reaching our destination by mid-afternoon.

That's where my adventure comes to a screeching halt.

"Rhydd?" Wilmot says as our hunters check their weapons. "You'll be staying here with Kaylein."

"What?" Rhydd and I say in unison.

"Your mother said you could come, as long as you didn't get within a hundred feet of the cabin."

"A hundred *feet*?" I say. "I know he can't go to the cabin, but he can't even *see* it from here." I sweep my hand across the view, which consists of trees, trees and more trees.

"Rhydd and Kaylein will stay here and watch for stragglers," Wilmot says. "We'll surround the cabin and then close in on it. A couple of dropbears may escape."

"And run in this exact direction?"

Wilmot skewers me with a look, but I only shoot the same look back.

"Remember that time when we were little?" Rhydd says to me. "We wanted to help Jannah and Dad drive off a pack of wargs, and they left us in the next town, standing on the inn steps with our practice swords, in case a warg came our way . . . while they chased them in the other direction." He lifts his gaze to Wilmot's. "I have no idea why this plan would remind me of that, since I'm no longer a child. Coincidence, I presume."

Wilmot grunts and says nothing.

“I will be thirteen next month,” Rhydd says, his voice even. “I am a young man and a future king, and I would like to be treated as both. That doesn’t mean I insist on being allowed to join the hunt. It means I insist on being told the truth.”

Yvain walks over. “Your mother doesn’t want you within a hundred feet of that cabin, your highness, because you *are* the future king, and because your leg still causes you trouble, and because dropbears are a match for a fully trained hunter, which you are not yet. She’s allowed you on this excursion but drawn the line at actually allowing you to deal with the dropbears. If you feel that treats you as a child, I won’t say I blame you. It’s something you need to discuss with her, though.”

I open my mouth to protest, but Rhydd cuts me off with, “Understood. Thank you for telling me the truth.” He shoots a quick glance at Wilmot.

Wilmot grunts again, but this time there’s apology in it. I still want to argue, which is why my brother is better suited for the throne. We shouldn’t argue with those who are simply carrying out the queen’s orders.

And this is where I need to make a difficult decision. Where I need to remember who I am and my own responsibilities.

If I were the full-fledged royal monster hunter, I’d be leading this expedition. But the reason Alianor, Dain and I trapped the dropbears was because we couldn’t deal with them in any other way.

I’m not fully trained. I haven’t passed my trials. While I’m a good fighter, Kaylein is better, and she shouldn’t be left behind.

“I will stay with Rhydd,” I say. “Kaylein should take my place in the attack.” I turn to Alianor and Dain. “Alianor? Would you stay with me? Dain—”

“No,” Dain says, crossing his arms. “Don’t ask, princess. I’m not staying behind.”

“If Rowan asks, you *will* stay,” Wilmot says. “As long as you’re training as a hunter, you are part of her troop.”

Dain’s scowl should be aimed at Wilmot. Of course, it isn’t. Wilmot is the foster father who rescued Dain from a life of servitude. The one who gets his scowls is me, as usual.

“I was going to give you the option,” I say, channeling my brother with my calm voice. “You may go with the hunters or stay with us. I was also going to suggest to Wilmot that whoever does stay behind should patrol at a hundred-foot perimeter and deal with any dropbears who escape the hunters.” I look at Wilmot. “Would that fulfill my mother’s requirements?”

Wilmot lifts one shoulder. “I believe so.”

Yvain smiles as she pats my arm. “Well done, child. That is a fine plan.”

“All right, then,” Wilmot says. “Dain, you’ll help Rowan.”

“What happened to me getting a choice?” Dain squawks.

“That was your royal monster hunter talking. This is your guardian. Now come along, and I’ll show you the boundary line.”

Two

We're patrolling at a *two*-hundred-foot perimeter. That's what Wilmot insisted on, to be absolutely certain we don't come within a hundred feet. I can grumble, but I understand his point. It's not as if we can accurately measure distance out here, and if we wander too close to the cabin and get hurt, Mom will blame him. Put us at two hundred feet, and we're definitely far enough away.

I still feel like a child again, standing on that inn front step with my practice sword. Maybe I made the wrong choice here. I thought I was being mature, giving up the adventure to protect my brother and allow Kaylein to fight. I also thought we could provide a valuable service. But this far from the cabin, in the thick woods, we might as well be a mile away. We can't even overhear the others.

"I can go see what's happening," Dain says. "Report back."

I hesitate and then shake my head. "We should stick together. I'm sorry."

"Leaders don't apologize," Alianor says.

I disagree, but in this case, she has a point. I should reserve my apologies for real mistakes, not toss them out like flower petals at a spring festival.

"The fact that we're not hearing anything suggests nothing is happening," I say. "Either the hunters are still planning or the dropbears are gone. Let's keep patrolling."

At my wave, Jacko leaps into the lead, his head high, nose higher, like a leporine army general. The warg, Malric, stays at the back of our group. I could say he's guarding the rear, but the way he's dragging himself along—while casting glances toward the cabin—tells me he's feeling like a babysitter put in charge of the children while everyone else goes to the party.

"You can join them if you want," I say.

I get a baleful, yellow-eyed stare for that. When Jannah died, she asked Malric to look

after me. Kaylein might be assigned as my guard on expeditions, but the warg is my bodyguard, at my side nearly every moment of the day, whether he likes it or not.

I fall back beside him and murmur, “I know how you feel. This is boring, isn’t it?”

He chuffs. Monsters are smarter than regular animals, but they can’t talk or understand human speech. What they understand is body language and facial expression and vocal tone.

When Jacko lets out his alert cry, I swear all five of us—Malric included—perk up. Everyone reaches for their weapons, and Malric presses against my leg as he looks about. Jacko zooms to sit on my feet, which I appreciate. In his jackalope mind, he’s protecting me, but I just want him close so I can protect *him*.

Around us, the forest is silent, and I’m about to declare it a false alarm when a growl ripples Malric’s flanks.

I follow his gaze to see the undergrowth quivering. Something’s coming, fast, but it’s small, hidden beneath the ferns that tremble, the only sign of its passage.

Snake? There are several dangerous snake-monsters.

A shape bursts from the undergrowth, racing straight for us only to notice us at the last moment and nearly bowl itself over tumbling to a halt. The creature rises onto its hind legs, swaying from side to side as it surveys our group. Its gaze lands on Jacko, and it lets out a shriek and topples over backward in its panic to escape.

As it runs, I sputter a laugh. “Well, Jacko. That’s a first. Apparently, you’re scarier than Malric. At least to a colocolo.”

We watch the tiny monster run off. From the back, it looks like a lizard with weirdly long legs. Instead of scales, though, it has mottled brown feathers that blend with the autumn undergrowth. When it glances back, we see its feathered rodent head and furry ears.

I bend down to Jacko. “You do know that’s supposed to be your dinner, right?”

He squeaks, gaze fixed on the undergrowth, his entire body tense, as if expecting the rat-

sized monster to wheel in attack.

“That’s what happens when you coddle a jackalope,” Dain grumbles. “He’s scared of his food.”

I shoot Dain a look. That’s all it takes to make him shift and glance away. Dain is cranky about being kept out of the cabin attack, and so he’s taking it out on us, and my look warns him I won’t put up with that. I used to make allowances for his horrible childhood, but I’ve learned that isn’t really what he needs or even wants. He’s given me permission to tell him when he’s being a jerk, and I will, if only in a look.

He knows he’s wrong here, too. Jacko is only half-grown, but he’s already able to hunt for himself. I can only guess that the colocolo makes him nervous because he’s never seen one. While we do get them in the barns during winter, they’re rare, being mostly from the mountains, where they live in colonies.

I scratch behind Jacko’s antlers. “Thank you for the warning.”

Dain snorts, and I expect Malric to do the same, but when I look over, the warg is staring after the colocolo. I frown. Wargs generally just ignore colocolos—too small to be a threat and too small to eat unless they’re starving.

So why—

The answer hits a heartbeat before the ground vibrates under my feet. I leap up and reach for my sword.

“Rowan?” Alianor and Dain say at the same time, as Rhydd pulls his own blade.

“Fleeing,” I blurt. “What was the colocolo flee—?”

Before I can get my sword out, the undergrowth erupts. At first, I see nothing. I’m looking overtop of the bushes, watching for what is coming, my gaze swinging between the treetops and the mid-view, expecting a predator at least the size of a warakin.

Instead, I only hear the thunder of running paws and then shrieks of panic and alarm,

shrieks that come from both monster and human, as the foliage explodes and a wave of colocolos washes over us.

I'm not sure what's happening even as my feet fly out from under me. Jacko screams, and then I'm falling, feeling cold bodies running over me, tiny claws digging in.

I flail as my brain screams that this is ridiculous—they're *colocolos*, barely bigger than mice. Yet I am trapped under this wave of creatures, drowning under it, fighting, clawing at the air, nothing but black above as a writhing blanket of darkness suffocates me.

Another scream, and that cry pierces the panic. That cry is both a goal and a fresh source of terror.

Jacko. He's here somewhere, buried under this wave of colocolos. I fight the horde, my arms and legs churning, knocking tiny bodies aside as I focus on the muffled cries of my jackalope. It's like battling the tide, relentless and unceasing, as tiny reptilian bodies pour over me, too panicked to care about my blows.

Whatever they're fleeing is scarier than a jackalope. Scarier than a twelve-year-old human girl. Scarier even than a warg.

I push down the thought. What matters is that Jacko is suffocating.

One final cry. A horrible, gurgling cry, and I manage to rise, colocolos hanging off me. Then I throw myself in the direction of the sound. One hand touches fur. Soft rabbit fur. I grab as hard as I can, sending up a silent apology as my fingers dig in, knowing if I lose him, he'll be carried away on this tide. I clasp Jacko tight with one hand and then the other, and I hoist him over the bodies.

Something hits me. Something moving against the tide. I'm propelled up as a beast the size of a small pony flips me onto its back. A flash of black fur. A growl.

"Malric," I say, the name coming on an exhale of breath.

Before I can react, I'm swept from the stampede of colocolos, awkwardly half riding

Malric, one leg over him, the other bent under me. Clutching Jacko to my chest, I manage to grab a handful of Malric's fur and stay on as he fights through the tide. At first, I can't see anything. The colocolos keep climbing me, as if I'm a tree stump in their path, their claws needling my skin.

Finally, my head is clear of the river. I see them then, and it is a sight my brain can't quite comprehend. It truly looks like a river, a roiling torrent of brown, the colocolo shapes lost in the flow. There must be hundreds of them. No, *thousands*, forming a deep current.

"Rhydd!" I scream.

I twist, panic lighting anew, imagining him under that sea of bodies.

"Rowan! Here!"

I follow the voice and see him on the "shore." He's with Alianor, and he's holding onto a thick tree branch as she grips his free hand and stretches toward me.

Malric leaps. One massive bound and he's free of the tide, hitting the ground hard enough that I roll off, still clutching Jacko.

I scramble up, stray colocolos running over my feet, and look about wildly. "Where's Dain?"

No answer.

I spin on Alianor and Rhydd. "Where is Dain?"

They're both scanning the colocolo river now. We all are. Jacko climbs onto my head and sounds his alert cry. Malric lopes alongside the colocolo onslaught as he hunts for any sign of Dain.

I break into a run, following the flow, my gaze skimming over it as I shout, "Dain!" Jacko scrambles down onto my shoulders and clings there for dear life.

Thousands of colocolos. *Thousands*. Colonies of them streaming in a panicked rush, trampling everything in their path. I twist to look behind me and see Rhydd and Alianor, now

jogging beside the stampede, shouting for Dain.

I keep running, searching in vain for anything among those feathered brown bodies.

There's nothing. Nothing at all and—

A figure half rises, on all fours, pushing up for no more than a heartbeat before being engulfed again.

“There!” I scream. “He's there!”

I run as fast as I can. Malric overtakes me, but the river of bodies shifts, colocolos swarming over the warg's paws. He tumbles to the side, and I race past even as he snarls and snaps at me.

Dain rises on all fours again, only to topple backward and be carried along by the flow. I keep running until I'm ahead of him. Malric lunges into my path, but I only snarl back at the warg. A two-heartbeat standoff between us. Then Alianor is there, Rhydd behind her, his bad leg dragging slightly.

“Form a chain!” I shout. “Like you were doing before!”

I point at a tree. Rhydd makes it there, one arm wrapping tightly around it as he reaches for Alianor. She clutches his hand. I tug Jacko from my shoulders and he doesn't like that, but he only chatters his disapproval as I shove him toward Malric. Then Alianor grabs my ankle, and I leap into the stampede.

Three

I hit that roiling mass of tiny bodies, and there is a moment of absolute panic as something inside me screams.

What am I doing? Didn't I just get free of this? What if Alianor can't hold me? What if Rhydd loses his grip? I'll be as lost as Dain, suffocated under a river of colocolos.

I grit my teeth as the tiny lizard monsters scabble over me and the sunlit forest disappears into darkness. Alianor's fingers dig into my ankle, and I am safe. She won't let anything happen to me.

Dimly, I hear Alianor and Rhydd shouting to Dain. The last I saw him, he was being carried down this side of the river. Any moment now, he'll hit me or hit Alianor, and we'll catch him.

Something warm brushes my outstretched fingertips. In a sea of cold-blooded bodies, that can only be Dain. I throw myself sideways, hands grasping as I reach. My fingers close on Dain's arm. It's thinner than I expect, but it's warm, and so I grasp it and pull.

Dain screams. It's a spine-chilling scream, and I imagine him being ripped apart by colocolos. I yank with all my might and my hands rise above the colocolo tide, gripping Dain's wrist, his skin darker than I remember—

That isn't skin. Nor is it Dain's hand. I'm holding the leg of some black-furred beast, with a paw as big as my palm. A webbed paw. Claws shoot out, four dagger-like claws, and my brain whispers that this is the point at which I should release my hold. I don't. I'm holding some creature—some monster—and if I let it go, it will die.

When those razor claws spring out, I only release my hold with one hand to keep feeling around for Dain, because he is my priority. I will let go of this beast if I can't hold it and save him, but—

Dain slams into me. There's no doubt it's him—the cursing gives it away. He rams into

my side, and I twist and grab him even as his own hands find my tunic and hold tight. A shout from the shore and we are being pulled in, scrabbling and gripping with all our strength until Alianor gives a tremendous heave and we fly free of the stampede, Dain still clutching my tunic and me holding his arm. We tumble to the ground, and Rhydd lets out a shout, and then there is a scream.

Something rips at my hand sharply enough to make me howl. There's a moment where I think it's Dain clawing at me. Then the scream and the pain merge, and I remember Dain wasn't the only one I was holding. Which may explain why my brother is running at me with his sword out.

I leap to my feet and lift both hands to stop Rhydd. Dain jumps up and pulls his dagger, and then Malric is there snarling and snapping at . . .

A black cat. That's all I see at first, everything happening so fast that my brain is reeling. I blink, and the shape comes into focus. It is a cat . . . sort of. It's the size of a hunting dog, low and lean and rippling with muscle. A sleek black-furred wildcat with webbed feet and gills that flutter as it breathes. What looks like dark stripes at first becomes strips of jet-black scales, glittering in the sunlight that pierces the forest canopy.

"Cath palug," I whisper.

"I can see that, princess," Dain growls, brandishing his dagger. "Now back away from it before it skewers you with those claws."

"But it's . . . it's a cath palug. I've never seen one. It must have gotten swept up in the colocolos and—"

"And it is now crouched in front of you, trying to decide whether you're too big to eat. The answer is no, princess. You are not too big for a cath palug. It's already scratched you, and it can smell the blood, which is dripping from your arm, in case you can't feel that."

I wave off his concern and absently wipe the blood away. It's a small wound, not even

worth bandaging. The monster feline keeps staring at me, its tail swishing. That tail ends in a barb—or it should, but I can't quite make it out while it's moving.

I glance over at the colocolo river, but it's only a trickle now, the main body of rodent monsters disappearing through the forest.

"I want a better look at it," I say.

"Great," Dain says. "Just let me kill it first."

I give him a look for that.

Dain turns to Rhydd. "Please, your highness, could you talk some sense into your sister?"

"Having known Rowan from birth, I can tell you that dissuading her from this is a fool's task. One does not come between Rowan and her monster studies. Would you like me to restrain it, Ro?"

Both Dain and Alianor squawk in alarm.

"Oh, come now," Rhydd says, moving forward. "I'm sure I could wrestle it to the ground and—"

I lift a hand to stop him. "You're giving Dain heart failure. He doesn't realize you're joking."

Rhydd's lips twitch. "Perhaps I'm serious. We are nearly thirteen. Filled with the madness that overtakes young men, I shall throw myself upon the beast and pin it down, surviving with the scars to prove my—"

"Utter stupidity," Alianor says.

"I was going to say warrior blood, but that works, too."

Rhydd takes a strip of dried meat from his pocket and passes it to me.

I peel off a piece and toss it to the beast. It sniffs first, and then snatches it up and swallows it whole. It regards me then, golden eyes fixed on mine. I take a closer look at the

creature while tossing it bits of meat. A cath palug is an aquatic feline, like the ceffyl-dwr is an aquatic equine. Many monsters seem to be a mash-up of two or more regular animals. That leads to stories about their origins, usually some variation of “animal *x* fell in love with animal *y* and had a baby.” Romantic, but as any scientist knows, impossible.

The truth is evolution, with the monsters being a later evolved version of the animals.

At first glance, it just looks like a black wildcat. Then you notice the adaptations: the webbed feet, the scaled stripes and those glorious gills. I don't manage to get around its backside to get a close look at its tail, but it is indeed barbed, almost like a fishhook. I've seen pictures of cath palugs “fishing” with their tails, which is nonsense, of course. The barb is for fighting. Its claws and teeth do the hunting work.

When I run out of meat scraps, I try giving it a dead colocolo, who'd been trampled by its brethren. I toss the lizard-rat at the cat monster's feet, and the cath palug only fixes me with a baleful stare.

Dain chuckles. “I think he's saying he never wants to see another one of those, much less eat one.”

“No doubt,” I murmur.

I back away then and wave everyone else to follow. The cath palug stretches, as if it had decided to rest here and hadn't been “trapped” by humans and their companion beasts. Then it saunters off with a flick of its tail.

“Bye, kitty!” Alianor calls. “No need to thank us for rescuing you!”

“It already did,” I say. “By not shredding my face.”

The colocolo river is long gone, leaving a swath of destruction, as if it truly had been a rushing current diverted from its course. Grass, undergrowth, brush, even saplings have been flattened.

“That was . . .” Rhydd mutters.

“Unexpected?”

He sputters a laugh. “I was going to say terrifying. But definitely unexpected.”

“Fascinating, too.” I walk to the flattened ground and crouch to flip over the body of another dead colocolo. “Fascinating and terrible. Something panicked them enough to make them flee, entire colonies of them, running as fast as they could, trampling everything in their path, even each other.”

Alianor shivers. “I’m with Rhydd on this. *Terrifying* is the right word, because all I can think of is . . . what would make them do that?” She peers into the forest. “While I’m always right behind you for an adventure, Rowan, I’m not sure we should hang around to see what they were fleeing from.”

When I hesitate, she steps toward me. “I’m serious, Rowan. This isn’t the time for scientific curiosity.”

I shrug. “Agreed, but it’s not the time to flee for *our* lives either. That was a panic stampede. I’ve heard of it with colocolos, though it’s usually only one colony. Animals like cows do it, too. Even humans will, if they’re frightened enough. But with colocolos, once they start, they don’t stop. The panic is infectious. For that many colonies to come together, the root cause is likely miles away.”

Rhydd nods. “One colony panics and then ‘infects’ another as it passes.”

“That would be my theory. The only thing killing them right now is each other.”

A moment of silence, respect with a touch of grief, for the monsters so frightened they would crush one another to escape a threat that they’ve long outrun.

“Now the problem is where they’re going,” I say. “Not where they’ve been.”

With that, Rhydd straightens so fast his bad leg falters. He wheels to the east—to Tamarel.

“We need to get home,” he says. “Before they do.”

I nod. On their own, colocolos are no more dangerous than lizards or mice. A colony can destroy a crop, but they're mostly just pests. Thousands, though? They would destroy everything in their wake. Crops, livestock, even humans, suffocated beneath them, as we almost were.

"We need to get Wilmot," Dain says. "Forget the dropbears for now. Warn him . . ."

He trails off with a whispered curse as he realizes what I already know—that we delayed too long with the cath palug. That was my fault. I thought the danger had passed. I didn't stop to think it through. Now that I have, it's too late to go get the others.

The moment I realize the problem, I start moving and the others follow.

"Someone needs to tell Wilmot," Dain says again.

"I will," Rhydd offers.

Dain shakes his head. "That's a messenger's job, not a prince's. Alianor—"

"Alianor has two legs that work at full capacity," Rhydd says. "She can run. I cannot."

"But you shouldn't go alone," I say. "This is still the Dunnian Woods. No one should be alone. Alianor, would you please—"

"On it," she says, and then to Rhydd, "Let's go, your highness."

As Dain and I run, I try not to worry about Alianor and Rhydd. I also try not to worry about Wilmot and the expedition. Shouldn't they have heard us cry out when we were being trampled? They were only a couple hundred feet away, weren't they?

What if something happened to the expedition? What if they'd been fighting for their lives . . . and I just sent Rhydd and Alianor into danger?

Or what if they'd left the dropbears in the cabin and come to find us? Rhydd and Alianor might walk in thinking it was empty, since the hunters were gone.

These are baseless worries. If my hunters had been fighting for their lives, we'd have heard it. If Rhydd and Alianor found the hunters gone, they'd check before entering the cabin.

What's really bothering me is the fact that I'd been too preoccupied with the cath palug to realize the colocolo stampede was bearing down on Tamarel. Having failed there, I'm going to second-guess every impulse now. I suppose that's a good thing in the sense that I'm taking time to work through all possibilities—which I didn't do earlier.

While I do question whether I've made the right choice, I don't turn around. I've already lost enough time. Dain and I run full-out for as long as we can, racing after the colocolo swarm, seeing where they're heading so we can warn the hunters waiting at the forest's edge.

Jacko tires first, and I go to scoop him up, but Malric grabs the jackalope and swings him over his head. Jacko lands on the warg's broad back and latches on, his semi-retractable claws digging in. Then we're running again.

I'd wondered how the cath palug got caught up in the stampede. Of course, we'd been caught off guard, too, but we aren't creatures of the forest. Even Malric and Jacko grew up in the castle. Yet a forest monster should have had time to get out of the way.

Soon I see what probably happened to the cath palug. Earlier, I'd reflected that colocolos were too small for bigger predators. But the stampede has left dead ones trampled everywhere, and few predators will ignore an easy dinner.

As we run, we see other carnivores. A lone wolf crunches through a small pile of colocolos. A wildcat snatches a dead one from the trail right before we pass. Two warakins spar over the right to colocolos still on the path.

I see more animals and monsters on that run than I saw on our entire walk through the forest. Not one does more than glance our way. After a river of colocolos, two human children fleeing a warg with a jackalope on its back is simply another sign that the world is

ending and they should eat while they still can.

And then we hear the screaming.

At first, my heart stops, imagining Rhydd and Alianor and the others being swallowed by a sea of colocolos. Of course, that makes no sense. We must have gone at least two miles, and the sound comes from in front of us.

As we pause, Dain doubles over to catch his breath. I focus on the source of the screaming. How far away is it? *What* is it?

“It’s the colocolos,” Dain says between heaving breaths. “That’s what they sound like when . . . when they’re being attacked.”

He means being killed. He’s just putting a gentler face on it, and I bristle, thinking he’s sparing my feelings. Killing is a part of my job. A last resort, but even when I regret it, I know it’s the right thing to do.

Then I realize this isn’t about me.

It’s about Dain.

When he was only five—a time when my own parents were giving me a colocolo hunt in our barn—Dain’s family sold him into indentured servitude as a ratcatcher. *Killing* rats, because there was no chance that anyone cruel enough to use child labor was going to release the pests, as my parents did after my “hunt.” Dain grew up killing these rodents and, undoubtedly, killing colocolos, too. What he’s saying here is that he knows what they sound like when they’re dying. He stopped himself because he didn’t want me thinking of him killing them.

He didn’t want me judging him for a choice that was never his to make.

I peer in the direction of the squealing and screaming. “What could do that? A cath palug didn’t faze the colocolos. Nor a wolf, a wildcat, warakins . . .”

“Exactly. What could be bad enough to scare the colocolos when none of those other

predators did? A terrible, terrible monster that we absolutely, positively should not get closer to. We should just count ourselves lucky—princess? Get back here, princess. We . . .”

I don't hear the rest. I'm already jogging toward the screams.

Dain is still grumbling. Grumbling, but following. When I point this out, he shoots back that he's just keeping an eye on me, because if I die on his watch, my mother will throw him to a pack of wargs. Ludicrous, of course. We've never had capital punishment in Tamarel. Also, like Rhydd, my mother knows that when I put my mind to something, nothing can stop me. That's why I'm in the Dunnian Woods with my ebony sword in hand. Believe me, if she had her way, I'd be safe inside the castle walls with my history book instead.

Dropbears and colocolos live in and near the mountains to our west. Something has them—and other monsters—migrating east. That's a problem for the country that lies in the east: ours. Now something has the colocolos screaming loud enough to be heard a quarter mile away. I wouldn't be doing my job if I ran in the other direction.

I'm walking now and assessing with each step, listening and peering into the forest. The shrieks have died down to the occasional squeal. When Malric stops and snorts, I nod.

“Time to get off the trail.”

I'm looking for a good route when Dain taps my arm. He motions for me to follow him. When I hesitate, we exchange a series of looks that communicate as much as any words. It helps that Dain expresses as much with body language as any beast—in his case, mostly scowls and glowers and grunts and eye rolls. It's really amazing how many different things you can say with an eye roll, each little nuance giving it a whole new meaning.

In those looks and gestures, I let him know that I'm hesitating because he doesn't want to investigate, so I suspect he's leading me astray. He responds—via a hard stare—that he

wouldn't do that. He's taking the lead because he's the one who has spent a third of his life in this forest. If I want to sneak up, he's better at doing that. True.

With a nod and a wave, I tell him to carry on. He cuts wider around the noise than I'd have, farther from the epicenter of the situation.

"*Epicenter?*" he whispers, face screwing up, when I tell him so.

"It means—"

He waves his hand. "I can figure it out, princess. Smaller words work just as well."

"Words are like tools. Another might do the job, but there's usually one that's exactly right."

He mutters about show-off princesses. Three more steps, and I grab him around the shoulders so fast, he stumbles against me and then shoots me a glower.

"Was that necessary?" he whispers.

"Hugs are always necessary."

The look on his face makes me sputter a laugh and then slap a hand over my mouth to keep quiet. Malric moves up against me. On his back, Jacko strains forward, nose wriggling. I nod ahead, where the forest has gone silent.

"Something's wrong," I say.

"There are many things wrong today, princess. You'll need to be more specific."

I bend and place one hand on the ground. Jacko hops down to sniff beside me. "I could feel the earth vibrating. Even before the colocolos. It's stopped. Maybe you're right. We should head back."

"Come on, princess," he says. "Let's go solve your mystery."

"If you insist."