

Lightning Tracks

Song Gate: Book One

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Solstice massacre

Cal lay flat on his stomach, catching his breath. Night was all around him like a black fog. His heart thrummed. His limbs shook with fatigue. Three hours he'd been scrambling up steep slopes, skidding into dark gullies, and splashing through shallow creeks till his Arai uniform was ripped and soaked through. He was used to this sort of exertion, but he wasn't used to it on top of a hard day's travel and no sleep.

He wished he was back over the border, in Korelios. If he was caught in this perilous country his throat would be slit in an instant. But he had to be here. It didn't matter that it was the summer solstice. Duty always took precedence over celebrations. Besides, General Alexander had given the order, and anyone who valued their life did not disobey the general.

Cal checked that his face mask was attached securely to his helmet, ensuring the only visible piece of him was the strip of skin around his eyes, but even that pale bit was smeared with charcoal. Tonight, the Arai were taking no chances.

Cal slithered forwards to get a better view of what lay ahead. Normally Yánda villages consisted of mudbrick huts scattered among the trees, with a central bonfire, a few stick frames for drying animal skins, a seed grinding area, and sometimes a makeshift wooden pen for goats. This one, Cal noticed, had half-finished stone fortifications, a good sign that it was a rebel training base.

A couple of people wandered past the bonfire and Cal got a good look at their clothes. The traditional vibrant Yánda colours were nowhere to be seen. Instead, these people wore dull trousers, shirts and boots, and their skin was dusted with red powder. White streaks of paint sliced their cheeks like whiplashes and more white pigment lined their arms and shoulders, honour markings for Rima, their god of lightning. Copper discs bearing the five-pointer Bandála star hung around their necks. General Alexander was right: these Yánda were Bandála rebels.

Cal looked to his left and, after a long minute of careful scrutiny, he spotted Artemis. She lay flat behind a tuft of grass, watching for his signal. Behind her, the blackness shifted and repositioned as the rest of the Arai readied themselves. They

were two hundred strong, but to the Yánda they would appear as nothing more than shadows threading through the darkness.

Cal nodded to Artemis, she motioned to someone else further back, and silently, the Arai began to circle. Cal stayed where he was, waiting, watching. A Bandála woman peered towards the bush as if sensing movement. She straightened, gave a sharp whistle, and someone tossed a bucket of water onto the bonfire, throwing the whole area into hissing darkness. In the few seconds it took Cal's eyes to adjust, he heard rustling footsteps and the sleek whisper of swords being drawn. Then a warning cry split the night.

'Arai!'

The rebels dashed to their stone wall and grabbed spears hidden behind the bricks. A flaming torch moved along a band of Arai archers on one side of the camp, lighting the arrow tips. When the Arai drew their bows the flames illuminated the dozens of black masks. The first volley landed on the thatched roofs of the houses and people spilled from doorways.

Cal recalled General Alexander's orders: *'Light their houses. Draw them out. They'll have nowhere to run.'*

With burning houses at their backs and the Arai force on every side, the Bandála were trapped. Cal knew from the way the rebels glanced about that they realised their situation was hopeless. Soon, the smoke and flames drove them out from behind their fortifications.

'Shoot them!' Alexander yelled.

The Arai archers fired. Brilliant flashes lit up the night like flint-and-steel sparks as the rebels deflected the arrows. Cal stared, awestruck. He knew the Yánda possessed an unparalleled talent for self-protection. They called it *maléya*. Cal had never seen it used in battle before, though, and it was an incredible and terrifying sight.

'Keep firing!'

Alexander had anticipated this defence tactic. He'd warned the Arai that it might take several volleys before the onslaught wore out the rebels so they could no longer shield. Once that happened, they would move in.

Artemis was firing with the Arai archers, but Cal's bow stayed on his back. Only the Arai with the keenest eyesight were allowed to shoot. Cal's role was to fight the Bandála in close combat. He was hoping they'd surrender before it came to that. Despite the fact that he and everyone else had had extensive training, the Bandála were difficult to subdue. If enough of them banded together, they could punch through the Arai ranks without much trouble. A few rebels must have had the same thought, because they raised their swords, shook their spears, and bellowed a Yánda battle cry.

'Brace yourselves!' Cal shouted, drawing his sword. *'They're going to charge!'*

The archers had just enough time to sling their bows over their shoulders before the rebels ploughed into them. One man swung his blade at Cal. With a flick of his wrist, Cal parried the attack. The rebel came at him again, white teeth bared through his snarl. Cal warded off a few more strikes before disarming him. Howling with rage, the man lunged, deflecting Cal's blade with his bare arm. Sparks flashed, and Cal was momentarily blinded. The rebel pinned him to the ground and raised a huge fist to crush his skull.

Artemis's knuckle guard crunched into the rebel's temple, snapping his head aside. His shields flickered all over his body, like lightning. Another blow sent him rolling across the ground. Cal didn't have time to look for his sword. He and Artemis leapt on top of the man. She yelped and skittered back as an elbow caught her in the stomach. Cal grabbed a fistful of hair, yanked hard, ground a knee into the rebel's spine till he heard a cry of agony.

'You've been neutralised,' Cal said. 'You can't escape. Stop fighting.'

'Alright,' the rebel groaned through clenched teeth.

Cal eased the man's head down a little but didn't let him go. Around them, more rebels were being wrestled into submission. There were dead bodies as well, Bandála and Arai, and a few gruesome injuries. One Arai was impaled on a spear and gasping for breath. Another was trying to hold pieces of his stomach together. Cal was glad for once that they were all masked. He didn't recognise anyone except Artemis, and he only knew it was her because of her green eyes, which right now were focused on the burning huts.

One Arai soldier strode into the light of the flames. Cal saw from the man's armband that it was General Alexander.

'Bring the survivors here,' he ordered.

The captured Bandála rebels were all brought forward, and in the firelight Cal got a good look at the one he and Artemis had caught. He was much younger than Cal first thought. In fact, he could have been the same age as them – sixteen years old. The boy was larger and stronger than either of them, and his charcoal glare was fixed on Cal, watching for an opportunity to strike.

'Kneel down,' Artemis said, resting her hand on the hilt of her sword as a warning. The boy joined the rest of the Bandála without protest.

Alexander did a quick head count then called, 'Roan!'

The captain stepped forward. 'Yes, sir?'

'How many young recruits did you bring with you?'

Roan paused, ever so briefly, but it was enough to make Cal's skin crawl with dread.

'Nineteen, sir.'

'Perfect. Get them to line up.'

Roan cleared his throat. 'Recruits, fall in!'

Cal and Artemis stepped forward and saluted. Seventeen more Arai joined them. Cal was relieved to see that everyone from his training camp was still standing.

‘An impressive group,’ Alexander said. ‘How long have they got left of their training?’

‘Six months, sir,’ Roan replied.

‘Time to see what they’re made of. Recruits, face the Bandála and ready your bows.’

Cal stared at the general in astonishment. So did the others.

‘I said prepare!’ Alexander barked.

Cal swung his bow off his shoulder and nocked an arrow. Everyone’s movements were reluctant, confused. No one seemed sure if the general was serious or not. One rebel thought so, because she tried to run and was cut down.

‘Take aim.’

Cal drew his bow string. Alexander was doing this to scare the rebels, he thought. The general wouldn’t order them to slaughter prisoners.

Would he?

‘Sir, these Bandála have been captured. They’re unarmed. There’s no reason to do this.’

It was one of the twins who’d spoken. Cal could never tell them apart when they were in uniform. He glanced down the line of recruits in time to see Alexander unsheathe his hunting knife and slash the girl’s throat.

Cal almost dropped his bow in shock. Someone fired early and one of the rebels collapsed.

‘Aim,’ Alexander said again.

This time, the recruits obeyed without question. Roan remained as still and silent as the rest of the Arai, but Cal recognised the tension in the captain’s stance and in the angle of his head. He was as powerless as his recruits to challenge this order.

Cal looked down at the terrified rebel, wishing he didn’t have to do this, wishing he could misfire and let the boy scurry into the darkness.

‘Fire.’

Nobody did. General Alexander drew a deep breath, but before any more orders could be given, Cal let his fingers slide off the bow string. At the last instant, he shut his eyes. He couldn’t block out the sound though, the dull thud of the arrow hitting the boy’s heart, the soft grunt as the breath left him.

To Cal’s horror and relief, everyone else followed his lead, and the remaining Bandála fell beside the boy.

‘That,’ Alexander murmured, ‘was very disappointing.’ He snapped his fingers at Roan. ‘Your squadron can organise the bodies. Burn our dead. Leave the rebels

to rot where they lie. Perhaps this will encourage your reluctant recruits not to hesitate in future.’

The remaining Arai force began the long hike back to their horses, leaving Roan’s recruits to clean up the mess. The wind strengthened, stirring the hot night like a beast in restless slumber. Cal retrieved his sword then helped to pile the Arai bodies onto the bonfire. Once this was done, Roan asked them to lay the Bandála soldiers in a line away from the Arai funeral pyre. As the captain set the dead rebels alight, Cal felt a deep, burning satisfaction for this small defiance. Then he and the rest of the recruits, all of them ragged with exhaustion, followed their captain back into the bush.

They reached the horses and the rest of the army just as dawn split the horizon and bloodied the hills. Cal’s whole body ached. He’d been two days now without proper rest, and all he’d eaten were a few dry biscuits and some cured kangaroo meat. He hunted through his saddlebags for his rations, but they were gone. The senior Arai had arrived much earlier, and it seemed they’d helped themselves to the recruits’ food.

For once, Cal was glad he was wearing a mask. No one could see his rage. As recruits of Roan’s squadron, they were always treated like filth. It was because they were *mileskúlos* – mongrel soldiers. None of them was pure-blooded Korelian. Each of them had something else mixed in – either Yándi or Highlander. Some, like Cal, didn’t have a drop of Korelian in them at all. Others, like Artemis, had only the smallest measure of something else in their ancestry. In fact, Artemis looked so thoroughly Korelian that no one would guess she had Yándi ancestry unless they saw the *mileskúlos* brand underlining her Arai tattoo. It didn’t matter that Roan’s recruits were better trained and more highly educated than any other Arai. Once they were identified as *mileskúlos*, they were disparaged, ignored, or dangerously underestimated.

Some of the Arai horses were lame from the hard ride north, and one of the general’s guards commandeered Cal’s stallion for herself, leading the trusting, beautiful horse away without giving Cal a chance to say goodbye. The general and his guards rode on ahead, leaving Roan’s recruits to cover the rear.

Artemis offered her hand to Cal. ‘You can ride with me.’

He pulled himself up behind her, gritting his teeth to suppress his anger and grief.

That evening, as he sat by the campfire, Cal thought he saw a pair of charcoal eyes watching him from the darkness.

The border town

The Arai recruits rode on during the night, now far behind the general. At dawn Cal spotted tendrils of smoke lifting from the horizon. The horses stumbled out of the bush and onto the dirt track, their heads bent and hooves dragging.

Twin pillars of basalt with sundiscs carved into their bellies flanked the road, marking the border between Yándemar and Korelios. It was still two full days' ride to the mountain training camp the recruits called home. Cal had lived there since he was twelve years old. The day he was taken, he'd been playing with his little sister in the fresh snow. The Arai had come out of nowhere, lifted him onto a horse, and clamped a smelly cloth over his mouth. By the time he'd woken up, they'd already marked him with their tattoo and the *mileskúlos* brand.

'You belong to the king now,' they'd said. 'You are Arai. Forget your family. If you ever try to leave, they will be the ones to pay.'

Shaking off the memory, Cal nudged Artemis, who'd fallen asleep on his shoulder.

She yawned. 'Are we home?'

'We're at the border,' Cal replied.

'Is that all?'

'Don't complain. You've just had a nice rest on my back.'

'Nice? It was bony.' Her stomach growled. 'What I would give for some decent food.'

'What would you give?'

'You, of course.'

'Ha! You'd have to catch me first.'

Something sharp prodded his spine. 'Got you,' she said, with a smile in her voice.

'Traitor.'

Roan frowned at them, and Artemis returned the dagger to her boot.

Once they'd crossed the border, Roan reined in his mare and scanned the area with the acuity of a predator. Then he dismounted, unwound his mask, tugged off

his helmet, and ruffled his curly black hair. It was the sign they'd all been waiting for – permission to let down their guard. There was a flurry of movement as face masks, helmets and jackets were flung into saddlebags. Artemis dismounted, kicked off her boots, and waded into the nearby creek. Cal filled his waterskin and took several deep gulps then washed away the charcoal from around his eyes. The water was cold and delicious. A few recruits sat on the bank, maybe remembering the twin who'd died. Cal was still unsure which sister it had been – he didn't want to ask. The surviving twin stared at the smoky horizon and wiped away tears.

Roan leant against a tree away from the recruits. The three red stripes on his armband marked him as a captain in the king's elite guard, but he could've been so much more if he'd wanted – an engineer, or maybe even a palace advisor. Instead, he'd chosen to remain in the mountains and prepare young Arai recruits for service. He was brilliant, intuitive and, when he thought no one would notice, compassionate. Qualities that in Cal's mind elevated him to a much higher standard than General Alexander, though Cal would never admit this aloud. Cal was glad to have Roan as their captain. Their lives would've been very different if they'd trained under someone like the general.

Cal trusted Roan with his life – they all did. The recruits relied on each other too, and while most of them regarded one another as brothers and sisters, Cal had never been able to forget his real family. Safía, the little sister who'd dogged him like a stray dingo pup. Jakob, their father, whose soot-blackened smile and gruff laughter Cal sometimes thought he heard in the north wind. Lately, it was Safía who had been walking through his dreams, crying to him across the snow like she did the day he was taken. He was afraid he'd wake up one morning to find her at the mountain training camp, a fresh *mileskúlos* recruit to add to the expanding Arai ranks. She'd be the right age now – thirteen years old.

Cal shut his eyes and turned his face to the sun so he could see the redness through his eyelids. None of the other recruits had seen their families since they'd arrived at the mountain camp either, and nobody talked about their lives before the Arai. It was either too painful or too distant to remember. Artemis had trusted Cal, and only Cal, with her history. She didn't remember her mother and didn't know who her father was. She'd been brought to Roan as a baby. He'd raised her and she'd lived at the mountain training camp her whole life. Cal had told her his story as well – snatched from the doorstep of his father's smithy – but he hadn't revealed his fears about his sister.

The recruits knelt before the border stones and said a brief prayer of thanks to Basílias, the Korelian sun god. It was spoken without feeling. Cal suspected he wasn't the only one who hated the gods for abandoning him to the Arai.

Roan mounted his horse and ordered, 'Move out.'

Cal climbed up behind Artemis and they rode through the border town in silence. The cracking mudbrick houses were all occupied, some with two or three families sharing a single room. Cal saw threadbare rugs and rickety furniture through the split shutters. An old man leading a malnourished horse moved off the road and rested a hand on the animal's muzzle to keep it quiet. Four skinny children in rags ran into the street, running circles around the smallest. When they caught sight of the black-uniformed recruits, they swallowed their laughter and scooted into the nearest doorway.

A frail woman sat on a step, her grey hair pinned in a bun and her bare, dusty feet sticking out from beneath a tattered dress. When Roan reined in his horse, she said in a voice hardened with bitterness, 'There's no point, sir. The general and his troops helped themselves to all our supplies. There's nothing left.'

'Oh,' Roan said quietly. He paused, studying her and the half-hidden villagers for a moment, then flipped open a secret pocket in his saddlebag – one that the general's guards must have overlooked – and drew out a purse full of coins. He dismounted and offered the money to the woman.

'I'll pay you for the food that was taken and whatever else you can spare.'

Her wary gaze flicked across the recruits.

'We won't hurt you or anyone else,' Roan said. He pressed the purse into her hand then crouched down and whispered something in her ear. She went still, looking at him with a clarity that hadn't been there before. She peered into the purse, rattled the coins to check whether they were real, then beckoned to a young man.

'Give them some emergency supplies.'

The young man looked about to protest but her hard stare silenced him. He vanished into a dilapidated barn further down the road.

Dozens of faces peered out from windows, staying well clear of the sunlight. No one spoke, not even the youngest children. Cal shifted uneasily. He couldn't help but wonder whether they were about to be ambushed.

Several long minutes passed before the young man reappeared with a sack in each hand. Roan took the sacks and distributed portions of bread, cheese and dried meat to each of the recruits. It was barely a handful for each of them, but no one complained.

'Thanks, sir,' someone said.

'Yeah, sir. Thanks.'

Roan inclined his head to the old woman, who stared stonily back. Cal got the impression that Roan had told her something forbidden, something that could get them all in trouble if she repeated it. But that secret had won her trust and got them food. Cal wondered what the captain had said to her.

As they passed the last house, Cal glanced back and saw the town's small population rush to the woman as she distributed the coins.

Questions and punishment

Usually, it would have taken the Arai recruits two days of hard riding to reach their mountain training camp from the border, but to Cal's immense relief, Roan slowed the pace right down, and it wasn't until the third day that they trudged up the slope to the simple wooden huts they called home.

'Get some rest,' Roan said. 'Training resumes tomorrow at third hour.'

A few people sighed. A sleep-in was the best they could expect. When Cal stepped into the boys' hut, the others were already collapsing onto their beds without bothering to undress. Cal kicked off his boots, stretched out on his own lumpy dry-grass mattress, and closed his eyes. One by one his muscles relaxed, easing out the tension and aches of the past week, and he surrendered to the tug of sleep.

Without warning, an image rose in his mind of the young rebel's terror-stricken face. Cal shot upright and sat gasping for a minute while his heartbeat thrummed. He knew he'd never sleep with this dead boy watching him, so he went to the waterhole, sneaking past the girls' hut and out of the camp.

The darkening sky reflected across the surface of the waterhole, like a gateway to the stars. Cal wished he could step through and escape his life as an Arai. He knew he couldn't, though. The cost of freedom was far too steep.

He pulled off his shirt, plunged headfirst into the water, and sank beneath the rippling surface. Mud swirled between his toes as his feet touched the bottom, and dying daylight seeped through the murky brown water, reminding him of the sky during a bushfire, when smoke blocked out the sun.

The following day, after his breakfast of fresh bread and honey, Cal went up the mountain with Artemis and the others for training. No one spoke much, and Cal noticed lots of heads bowed during their morning run. At the summit, sharp boulders protruded like bone fractures, and Cal took extra care as he navigated through them. From this height, the bald patches of farmland in the next valley seemed as though they were being swallowed by the wild.

Artemis leaned against a boulder and flicked her long fringe aside. 'Looks different now, doesn't it?'

Cal nodded. 'I keep seeing that Bandála boy's face.'

'We didn't have a choice. It was them or us.' Her expression hardened, and so did her tone. 'It wasn't right.'

Cal glanced around. 'Keep your voice down.'

'Roan thinks the same thing. Didn't you see him when Alexander gave the order?'

A sharp whistle made them turn, and they jogged back to the training ground where Roan waited with arms folded across his chest.

Artemis started to explain, 'We were thanking Basilias for our safe journey home and—'

'Our safe return had nothing to do with any gods,' Roan growled.

Artemis looked annoyed that her lie hadn't been believed.

'But since you're both so keen to be close to the heavens, you can go up again. At a sprint.'

Cal groaned. It had taken him longer than usual to reach the top the first time. Sprinting the distance would wipe him out for the rest of the morning.

'If you stand there any longer, Cal, you'll spend the next week on mess hut duty. By yourself.'

Cal chased Artemis to the summit and back.

'Again,' Roan said, indicating their third run.

By the time they stopped in front of Roan, they were dripping sweat and shaking.

'Get a drink, then go to the cave,' Roan said.

The cave. Cal almost collapsed with relief. The cave meant shade, cool rocks to sit on, and an easy task such as weapons maintenance. Sometimes all they did was listen to Roan lecture on anything from astronomy to locksmithing to bush survival to horse training.

Artemis took a long drink from a leather waterskin. After she was finished, Cal gulped several mouthfuls and poured even more over his head till his hair and singlet were soaked. Then they trudged to the cave that yawned into the mountainside above the camp. A gallery of faded ochre hand prints, fish, and wallabies splattered the highest rock faces, evidence of the first warriors who had inhabited this land many generations ago. The recruits lounged in the dips and crevasses with their boots off and sewing kits out. Cal found a comfortable rock and started stitching the tears in his uniform.

The air was heavy with a deliberate, concentrated silence. Cal wanted someone to say something – anything – about the solstice mission, but with Roan sitting at

the mouth of the cave, no one dared. Cal saw the aftereffects of the mission in the faces of everyone around him except the captain, who seemed unchanged by it.

Cal respected Roan's rules and judgement. No matter how hard the captain pushed his recruits, he was never cruel, not like Alexander. Even so, Cal wondered if Roan really would agree with Artemis, that the general's order to execute the rebels should never have been given.

As if reading Cal's thoughts, Roan turned to his recruits and said, 'Things will get better.'

It sounded like a promise. Cal sliced the end off his thread and hoped that Roan was right.

The days crawled into a week, then two weeks, then three. Cal heard no rumours of a Bandála retaliation. Then again, not much news at all reached their isolated training camp. The tension Cal sensed among the recruits, the unspoken questions and silent fears, seemed to ease and be forgotten.

But Cal couldn't forget, not when the rebel boy visited him so often in his nightmares. His constant state of exhaustion turned simple chores into challenges. When he was rostered onto dinner duty, he sometimes missed ingredients in the dishes, and had to endure endless complaints from the other recruits.

One evening, he dragged a cast iron pot from its shelf, plonked it on the table, and stared at its pitted base for a full minute before turning to Artemis and asking, 'Do you still think about the solstice mission?'

She scooped a few cups of flour into a bowl before replying, 'It wasn't a mission. It was a massacre.'

Her words drifted into the rafters like a curse.

Cal packed the hearth with tinder then struck the flint and steel. It took him a few tries to get it to ignite, and when it did, the cool, earthy air of the mess hut became stifling. He threw open the shutters to let in the night air.

'You know I'm right, Cal,' Artemis said, adding water and salt to the flour. 'It was a massacre. That's all it was ever going to be.'

'Stop saying that. You're not helping.'

She mixed the dough with her fingers, making loud squelching noises. Cal filled the cast iron pot with cold water then whipped the cover off a bucket of yabbies, tipped them into the pot, and slammed down the lid. The yabbies' claws clicked against the metal as they tried to escape. Artemis emptied the bread dough onto the table and rammed it with her fists.

A shadow passed the window, and Cal caught a glimpse of short brown hair and a strong jaw set in a stern expression. It was General Alexander. Without pausing to glance into the mess hut, he strode up the slope towards Roan's quarters. Cal released an unsteady breath.

'I'll see if any of the others know why the general's here,' Artemis said, and ducked outside.

Cal pushed the bread dough into a couple of baking tins, slid them and the pot of yabbies onto the hearth, and nestled several root vegetables among the hot embers. He placed a handful of small earthenware jars on the battered bloodwood table, opening each of the lids and inhaling the scent of the herbs.

One by one, the Arai recruits filed into the mess hut. Artemis didn't return until Cal was setting the bread and pot of yabbies on the table. She sat down, mumbled a prayer of thanks, and cracked open a yabbie shell like she was killing it all over again. Cal tried to catch her eye, but she refused to look up from her dinner.

Alexander stepped out of Roan's hut, and Artemis stared unblinking as he walked towards his tethered horse and waiting bodyguards. She gulped a mouthful of water, slammed her cup down. Shoved her chair back. Strode out of the mess hut. Stunned silence choked the room. Then plates clattered onto the floor as the recruits scrambled to the window.

'What was the point of it?' Artemis yelled.

Alexander stopped. Turned. Levelled his hazel stare at her.

'Get back to the mess hut, Artemis!' Roan ordered, his eyes wide with alarm.

She ignored him. 'We didn't have to kill those Bandála. It was a massacre. It was wrong. Why did you give the order?'

Cal thought he saw a flash of trepidation in Alexander's gaze. The general looked at the mess where the recruits stood watching, and his hesitation vanished.

Grabbing a fistful of Artemis's hair, Alexander said, 'Roan, bring me a whip.'

Before he had time to think through the consequences, Cal found himself standing in front of the general, breathless with panic. 'Sir, please don't.'

Alexander knocked him aside with a backhand. 'Has this entire training camp lost its integrity?'

With an immense effort of will, Cal straightened and bowed his head in submission.

'Twenty lashes for insubordination, girl,' Alexander said. 'And the rest of you will learn not to question the king's authority.'

Artemis struggled as Alexander's bodyguards strapped her to a wooden bench. Alexander snatched the whip Roan offered, shook out the leather thong, and coiled his fingers around the stock. The two bodyguards clutched their sword hilts, ready to stop anyone who dared to challenge the general. Roan was paler than Cal had ever seen him, but he could do nothing. None of them could.

Cal jolted as the whip cracked across Artemis's shoulders. She screamed. She screamed with the next lash as well. And the one after that. Cal flinched with each stroke. At the fourteenth, Artemis fell silent. At the seventeenth, she was unconscious. By the time Alexander was finished, Cal was fighting back tears.

The general stepped towards the line of recruits, breathing heavily and eyes gleaming with disgust. Flecks of blood dotted his cheek. 'If anyone else from this *mileskulos* camp speaks against the king, you will all be punished.'

He tossed the whip at Roan's feet then swung onto his horse and rode down the mountain trail with his men following close behind.

Cal rushed to free Artemis's wrists, catching her as she slid off the bench. Blood drenched the tattered remains of her shirt, and beneath the broken skin on her back Cal saw shredded sinew.

'Artemis?' Cal said, wiping his eyes dry. 'Artemis, wake up.'

Roan scooped her out of Cal's arms and carried her into his hut, calling over his shoulder for boiling water and bandages.

In that moment, as he sat in the dust with Artemis's blood on his hands, something in Cal's mind clicked. At the first opportunity, he would run, and he'd take Artemis with him.

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