

Dana Müller-Braun: Vol. 1, Fallen Kingdom: Stolen Inheritance

Bd. 1: Fallen Kingdom: Gestohlenes Erbe

Age: 16+ | 384 pages | 978-3-551-58495-3 | pub date: March 2023



ENGLISH SAMPLE TRANSLATION

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PROLOGUE

Twenty years ago

The cries of the princess echo through the palace corridors. Her nurse has impressed upon me to stay here. To wait outside the door until I can fulfil my task.

Again, those deafening screams in sync with the thunder and rain pelting against the huge windows of the Palace of Truth. I flinch briefly and glance at the Heroer standing opposite me. I know his name is Nath, even though he barely speaks. He is the prince's Heroer. Strictly speaking, he is his elder brother. The first-born. But like the child the prince's wife is about to give birth to, the firstborn are always of demonic blood. They are the result of original sin. For the gods have placed a curse on all the princely families who ascended to earth from the underworld thousands of years ago. Only the second-born is truly recognised as a child and thus heir to the throne, because he has nothing demonic in him. And yet the souls of the siblings are inevitably connected.

Another Heroer enters the narrow corridor in front of the princess' bed chamber. He is still young, just seven years old, but he already radiates more strength than I can with my seventeen years.

"Why is sister-in-law Everline shouting?" he asks, tilting his head and looking at Nath, who at first remains quite rigid, then takes a deep breath before slapping his ear with the flat of his hand.

"She's not your sister-in-law!" he growls and suddenly his sombre gaze hits me. I immediately lower my head. Of course she is his sister-in-law. I know that and they know it too. But the little Heroer, Marec, is the third-born of the former prince who died three years ago, and thus a demon again. For before a normal child can be born, a demon must always be born first. Kind of like they absolve the child that comes after them of all sins. First Nath was born, then our Prince,

then Marec and finally Andrews, who is considered the only true brother of the Prince and is therefore the Duke of our Principality. Nath and Marec are also his brothers, but demons are not legally part of the family.

Marec will still have to learn that. He is alone. Destined to live a life of protection for his little brother, the Duke. And maybe one day he will forget that he is actually a part of this family.

I close my eyes as the princess cries out again so loudly that the torch holders on the walls shake. The wind whistles through the leaky windows and gives me goose bumps all over my body.

Again I look at Nath and he also dares a fleeting glance at me. My heart trips. This Heroer has always triggered some kind of attraction in me. But we both know we could never be together. I would give birth exclusively to demonic children, and they would be killed immediately because I am not a noblewoman entitled to a Heroer or a Heroe. They are trained to serve the nobles. If they do not enjoy this training, they are far too dangerous.

"Kessedi, it's time!" the nurse calls from behind the door and so I hurry into the chamber.

The prince's wife lies on a bed of dark precious wood, leaning against dozens of purple and gold cushions. Cumin-coloured curtains cover the beams that reach up to the ceiling. Sweat runs down the forehead of the beautiful princess. She is pale as a sheet and the sheet in front of her legs is soaked in blood. And then my gaze falls on the little baby in the nurse's arms.

"It's a girl, Your Grace," she whispers, as if delivering bad news. And yes, that is indeed the case, for a woman is not allowed to take over a principality. That means that the prince's wife will first give birth to another girl without demonic blood, and then she must try to give birth to an heir to the throne. And before him his Heroer. That is the way of things. Nature. Two children of the same sex are always born one after the other.

"Let me see her," the prince's wife blurts out as the nurse places the bundle in my hands. I hesitate, but the older woman shakes her head.

"Your Grace, that is not your child. It is a demon!" she rebuffs, but the princess begins to sob and leans forward towards me. She reaches for me and the girl in vain.

"Let me see her!" she now cries in desperation.

"She is my child!"

"She's not!" the nurse growls, clutching the symbol of our faith around her neck.

"She's a demon!" she then says more emphatically.

The prince's wife begins to shed bitter tears and at that moment I decide to walk towards her. The nurse curses. But this one in front of me is my princess and I am obliged to her. I do not let go of the child, but hold it in front of her. More wet pearls stream from her eyes as she strokes the little girl's rosy skin very gently.

"I'll call you Navien," she whispers, leaning over and kissing the baby before sinking back into her pillows.

The nurse hisses again and I turn away.

"No!" cries the prince's wife. "Bring her back!" Her voice is so broken. So full of grief that tears run down my cheeks too.

"Go!", orders the wet nurse.

I can still see the prince's wife slide out of bed behind me, but immediately fall to the floor. "Bring her back to me!" Her voice makes me shudder. My heart wants to put the little girl in her arms. But this is my task. I must give the demon child into the care of Abbot Rejan and his order to raise her until she can be trained. So I run. Run and run until the cries of the priest's wife fall silent behind me.

CHAPTER 1

The letters on the page in front of me blur. They buzz in my ears before they come together to form a sentence. In a language that only we Heroes understand.

"Say, what do you see?"

Abbot Rejan is the only one who addresses me with this majestic speech. And he knows as well as I do that it is not proper. That although I am the first-born of the prince, I do not - may not - bear a title of nobility and am therefore addressed by my first name. But in the dark study room of his order we are unobserved.

There are only the gigantic shelves full of books, the few torches and candles that bathe the room in a mysterious light, and the old desk at which I sit.

I swallow hard and start to concentrate. If I were to go by my mind, these would just be words strung together, making no sense. But my mind can read them.

Grasp them and understand them. Today they come from the 134th book of the Apocrypha, which I translate for him. Writings about the underworld and the world of light. Their history, which only beings with demonic blood can decipher.

I don't know what the abbot and the lords hope to find in it... But it must be something very important, because besides me, all the other Heroers will be forced to read the Apocrypha.

I close my eyes briefly and run along the lines again in my mind's eye.

"You who were born to bring salvation," I whisper so as not to distract my strength, "are chosen to protect what sins threaten to shatter."

I falter as the next lines appear in my mind and open my eyes. Now I can see them written clearly in front of me. *Born first, atoned second. Bound by souls, the pain not felt. Death will seek you, but it will not find you. For thine is the dominion, sunken in light.*

Pain flares up in my head.

"Heroe," growls the abbot impatiently. But something in me prevents me from telling him these words. As if they had control over my body. As if they would materialise and squeeze my throat with their promising hands.

"I can't," I say, gasping in pain.

"You can't?" Rejan asks, piercing me with his glassy green eyes as I look up. "You can't or you won't? Are the words speaking to you again, Navien?"

My eyelids twitch. Rejan always uses my name when he wants something. When he wants to trigger trust in me in order to get information. And usually he achieves exactly that effect. Only not today. This apocrypha has more power over me than the familiarity Rejan evokes in me. And that must mean something, because since I was five years old I have been sitting here with him every day, translating texts of which there are thousands and which he is incapable of understanding. However, the abbot has always been good at bringing me little gifts from time to time. Sweet foods or dolls that I wasn't allowed to have otherwise. And when I disobeyed, he ... Images and pain flash through me, which I immediately repress.

"I can't read this passage. It's as if it is closing itself off from me," I lie and drawl apologetically, while Rejan still watches me with wary eyes. I can feel it. He doesn't believe me. But I have long since stopped being afraid of his punishments.

"We'll continue tomorrow," he then says with a hand movement as if he were shooing me away like an insect. He is disappointed. I have failed, and already I have lost my value for him.

My heart pounds loudly and heavily as I stand up, bow and leave the study room. Even as I walk along the long stone corridors of the Order, I can hardly breathe. To calm myself, I count the ornate columns that line the path to the palace, and only when I arrive at the huge grassy square in front of the palace do I take a deep breath. Although the monastery is directly adjacent to the palace, I rest my hands on my thighs and gasp. What was that? And why wouldn't the words be

heard by the abbot? There have been apocrypha before that spoke to me or caused me pain when I read them, as if they didn't want me to speak them. But this one was special. As if they would rather have me choke on them than reveal them. I have never heard of that before.

But I have known for a long time that, unlike many other Heroers, I am a gifted reader. At the latest when I had to skip combat units to read, it was clear to me. No other Heroers here in the Principality of Truth are quoted to read as often as I am.

"Navien!", a familiar voice sounds.

I blink to sharpen my vision. "Marec," I breathe and look up at the Duke's Heroer, the Prince's brother. Marec is not much older than I am, though he is, strictly speaking, my uncle. I think that the princely mother had not planned to have two children again, after she had already given birth to Nath as the firstborn and after him to the present prince. But it is a law of nature that two children are always born.

"Is everything all right? Did Rejan overdo it again?" He puts a hand on my shoulder and eyes me. His blue eyes trigger trust and wariness, causing a war within me. Should I tell him about the words? No. Because I, as a firstborn, as a demon, as a Heroe, know better than any royals that we are beholden to the secondborn. Not just because - no, it's much more. We are mentally and emotionally connected to them. And I would never keep a secret from my little sister. Aviehl. She is more to me than just a sibling. More than just the second born who will be the first woman to inherit the throne and be Princess of the Realm of Truth in the distant future. She is the other part of my soul.

The princes and abbots call it original sin. For me, it is simply the course of events. My destiny as the firstborn.

Since I was little, I was brought up to use the few demonic abilities I am allowed to use against Aviehl's enemies. I can hear the other Heroers in my head, sense

other Heroers and sometimes sense people's intentions. That's all I know about my powers.

But I was also trained to fight in a human way, to protect Aviell with my life. And that's what I would do any time. They didn't have to train me to do that. Aviell is the love of my life. Even if others think it could only be someone you love in the flesh. I don't see it that way. She is everything to me.

I clear my throat to centre myself again on my counterpart. "No," I finally say, because it wasn't Rejan who put me in this state, but the voices of the apocrypha. Marec nods, but does not seem convinced. "Aviell has once again fallen prey to hysteria," he continues.

I close my eyes for a moment and search inside myself for her state of mind, but I cannot grasp it.

"Is that why you're here?" I reply, straightening my shoulders.

"No," he admits and takes a step closer.

Immediately my body tingles. If it were up to Aviell, I would marry Marec. But it's not just this attraction that makes me uneasy. There's suspicion above all. And the irrefutable fact that he is my uncle. Even though the princes believe we have no family.

"We could hear you," he murmurs conspiratorially. Damn. I bite my cheek and search for an explanation.

"What could you hear?", I ask almost casually as my body tenses more and more, but I look out over the meadows and countless colourful flowers in the castle park.

"It wasn't very logical and it wasn't words. More like the feeling of having to hold something back."

I nod because I am not able to speak. Since the Heroers can hear each other's thoughts, we are able to warn each other should there be any attacks on the royal house. But I have been secretly practising for years not to reveal everything about myself.

In the abbot's study, I was only apparently too distracted, too threatened, to concentrate on closing my mind to the other Heroers. And knowing Nath, the prince's Heroer, he has long since informed him that a sense of being held back has emanated from me. And that also explains why Aviell is angry. Probably the lord has sent for me. And it's even more likely that he'll put Nath by my side tomorrow at the reading lesson, so that he can read my thoughts. Curse him. My gaze wanders over the huge green area to the majestic palace. The gardens of the palace were built according to the ideas of the prince's wife. Her taste is makelless. Everything here looks peaceful and sunny. The many colourful flowers, the accurate shrubs and paths. The crowning glory, however, is a huge fountain in front of the entrance, made by a stonemason for Aviell's birth. It depicts a woman, one hand on her chest, the other, from which the water flows, stretched upwards. It is supposed to depict Aviell, and I am always amazed at how well she has been captured, even though she was not even born at the time.

As I realise once again how different my life and Aviell's are, I look at Marec, who is wearing the black battle dress of the Heroers just like me. Trousers, top, boots. It reflects us. Our lack of identity. But it's not as if I lament being a Heroe. I realised very early on that I am no one. That I don't have a family. That I can be beaten and treated as if I were cattle. I knew that at the age of six. And if I ever forget, people have left enough scars on my body to keep reminding me. I shake off my head and with it my thoughts.

"I'm going to Aviell," I mumble and want to turn away, but Marec holds me back once more. His touch really burns into my arm.

"She is with the prince."

"I know," I return and tear myself away. Heroers and their charges share an inseparable, strong bond. However, I have yet to meet anyone with a bond even remotely similar to Aviell's and mine. Sometimes it is as if we are one and the same person.

I march quickly along the gravel path towards the huge white palace with all its little oriels and doorways. . It shimmers in the sun as if this were the kingdom of heaven. But that is exactly why this kingdom was built. When the world of light was at war with the underworld because the princes of the underworld wanted to go up to earth, the world of light created an eighth principality shortly before its defeat to compensate for the seven deadly sins that the others embodied. This is what it was all created for. The eighth realm. The kingdom of truth. But to this day, no prince of our kingdom has managed to truly expand it. Apart from the palace and the adjoining monastery, there is only a small village. Which also means that we are dependent on the other principalities and their agriculture. Especially the Principality of Wrath, which borders our country in the southeast, is an important trading partner. More than that, because the first Prince of Truth married the daughter of the Prince of Wrath at that time, which is why the curse of the Heroers also lies on the Prince's family of Truth.

But once Aviell is a princess, I know that everything will change. She is full of drive and dreams of growing our principality and making it a wonderful place, after she has visited every principality of the Death Sins, as is her duty.

As I slip into the castle through a side entrance and walk along the huge corridors, I speak courage to myself until I arrive in front of the double door to the throne room and push it open. As long as Aviell is here, I too may enter. I would not be allowed in alone, unless the prince explicitly requested my presence.

Aviell's gaze is immediately on me, as if she has already heard me coming. Sensed. She stands in front of her father, who sits on the throne and raises his brows. Next to him is the prince's wife, who is the spitting image of Aviell. Raven-black hair, dark eyes and that porcelain skin that shimmers so beautifully.

The prince clicks his tongue. "It's about time, Heroe," he growls.

"My lord, I beg your mercy, I have been delayed," I say coolly and flow into a sweeping bow. When I look up again and his ice-blue eyes meet me briefly, I

shudder. They are the same eyes I look into every day when I look in the mirror. But although I really do look like him on the outside - much more than Aviell or Philip did before he died - it doesn't feel as if he were my father. Even the prince's wife next to him is no more than Aviell's mother to me. But not mine. Maybe I thought for a while when I was little that she loved me like her child too. But that was just wishful thinking. They're not my parents. They have made that clear to me all my life.

"Father!", Aviell is outraged.

He makes a gracious gesture. A barely perceptible nod. Aviell is his angel. But here she will achieve no leniency with him.

"Let me finish, my child," the prince says and beckons me to him.

"Have you withheld words from the abbot, Heroe?"

"She has a name, Father."

He closes his eyes, apparently to pull himself together.

"Don't call me that, Aviell."

"My prince," she improves biting and gives me a stolen look.

I wish she could be quiet just once and not continually put herself in these kinds of situations.

"So, demon!" he addresses me again. His punishment for Aviell.

"No, Your Grace," I lie.

Why I was born in the Principality of Truth, of all places, has always been a mystery to me. The only person I have never lied to is Aviell. Otherwise, I am a master at it. And in a kingdom where everyone is direct and honest. I have often wondered whether I would have been denounced so often if I lived in another principality. Here, it is the order of the day that every little offence is reported.

"Nath!", the prince beckons his elder brother to him. He is the only Heroer he addresses by name. "Tell us what you felt."

"She resisted revealing any of her knowledge."

Is he serious? That could mean anything.

"It was not about the Apocrypha, Your Grace. I was distracted today. It had something to do with Aviell. And it is to her that all my loyalty and commitment go."

Aviell's gaze rests on me and I know exactly what she is doing. She is searching for the truth in my soul. And we both know that she doesn't have to search for long.

"Is that true, Mistress?" he asks his daughter, who fixes her eyes on my face once more to make the feint perfect. She has known for a long time that I am lying.

"Yes, my prince," she lies now too. I feel anger spilling over into me. She is angry because I make her be dishonest, because unlike me, Aviell is a born prince of truth.

"Then go! Nath will accompany you tomorrow and I expect better results in reading the Apocrypha!"

I nod, bow and wait for Aviell to go ahead so I can follow her.

She is fast. She almost runs, but remains the elegant heir to the throne that she is, while more and more anger flows towards me.

When we arrive in her chambers, she closes the door and leans her head against it. Breathes, before turning to me and glaring at me.

"What have you done, Navien?" She touches her chest as if the corset underneath is crushing her. Depriving her of the air she needs to express her anger.

"I couldn't -"

"What couldn't you?"

"If you wouldn't interrupt me, Avi, then I would explain it to you," I return annoyed.

She raises her hands placatingly before placing them back on her sweeping golden skirt. "Sorry." She walks towards me, touches my cheek with her soft hand and gives me an exasperated smile. A dimple forms on her right cheek. Just like mine when I grin. Probably the only thing we have in common on the outside.

"The words forced me not to say them. It was ... as if they were tightening my throat."

"What were those words?" she asks and sits down on the red chaise longue that stands in front of the large white muntin bars.

"Born first, atoned second. Bound by souls, pain not felt. Death will seek you, but it will not find you. For thine is the dominion, sunk in light," I repeat and take a seat opposite her.

Aviell bites her lower lip as she thinks.

"Is that about the Heroers?"

I shrug my shoulders and bow my head briefly. "You're not always supposed to protect me, Avi. I'm a demon. I have to protect *you*."

"Don't say such stupid things, Navi. You know I don't see it that way." Her look seems saddened. Because no matter how she sees it all - that is the truth, and one day she too will give birth to a firstborn who will be despised as a demon and only left alive to protect that of the secondborn. We were both there when Philip died. Our brother. The youngest of the four of us. His Heroer Caleb was beheaded by the prince in the same second. Before our eyes. For without their protégé, all Heroers immediately lose their value and must die. That is the law.

A tear runs down Aviell's cheek. She feels what I feel. She remembers, just like I do. Even though we were only ten and eleven. Our brothers' deaths have left a hole in our souls forever.

And above all, they have proven that without Aviell I would die in a flash. She hates the thought. I, however, don't know if I would want to live a life where my other half doesn't exist.

"Keep the words to yourself," she whispers suddenly, rises and goes to the window. Her long skirt gently brushes the floorboards. The rustling of the fabric pierces the silence in the room. "If your feeling tells you not to let them reach her ears, I trust it."

I nod silently, although she can't see it.

"He wants me to marry," she begins without transition in an occupied voice and with a protective wall around her feelings. "I'm the first woman to take the throne because Philip and Caleb are dead and Mother can't have any more children, and Father says a duke or a mere nobleman is out of the question."

I narrow my gaze. It is customary for the princes to take a non-demoness from a royal family as their wife. But if Aviell is to marry one of the seven princes ...

"Then two principalities would unite," I voice the thought.

Aviell shrugs. "Our father seems to want just that."

I snort, half in anger, half laughing. This is absurd. There are eight principalities. Eight principalities. The kingdoms cannot unite.

"He says that this is exactly what the Kingdom of Truth was created for by God. To compensate for their sins by combining our qualities with them and create a better world for our children."

"And that is why the princes marry the non-demonic children of the other princes who have no claim to their throne. You will be a princess, Aviell. Not the wife of one of those ... monsters. So you should not marry a prince either, but one of their brothers."

"Maybe they're not as bad as we think," she whispers powerlessly.

"Each of them represents one of the seven deadly sins. They are the descendants of the princes of the underworld who came from hell in the flesh, Avi. They are bad," I hiss. Panic breaks out in me. I must not let this happen.

"Please calm down," she breathes weakly and touches her forehead strenuously.

"I'm sorry," I say meekly. I'm sure she has enough of her own feelings to deal with, she doesn't need to feel mine.

"And which one should it be?" I try to keep my unbridled hatred in my mind.

"Anger."

I say nothing, because every word would only trigger more anger. Aviell waits a moment, then turns to me and eyes me as if she is looking for something in me.

Approval?

"There are worse," I press out a lie. Very slightly she lifts one corner of her mouth. "That's true."

"Is he at least good-looking?" I try to lighten the conversation. But there is no point. Avi knows what I think.

"We will find out in a few days. Tomorrow we begin the journey to his principality. After your reading lesson." I nod unsurprised, for we were both aware that we would soon have to set off. The Prince of Truth left a few days ago. After a few months, the prince decided that Avi should already begin her journey through the principalities to fulfil her duty so that she can one day become the Princess of Truth. But the prince seems to have kept it from Avi until the very end that it will be about much more than just fulfilling her duty. Why, I don't know; actually, he is young and powerful enough to continue ruling.

I would like to scream. But this is not my fate. I have no right to suffer. It is hers. And it is also only at her discretion to resist or not. Apparently she has decided to follow her father's will.

"Why does it all have to happen so fast, Avi? Is your father sick?"

"No. There is unrest."

I frown because I didn't know anything about it. How much more is she hiding from me? I don't seem to be the only one who can close her mind.

"Riots?" I ask and take a step closer.

"Yes, people talk about the prince of the underworld who wants to overthrow us all and ..."

"And?" I ask coolly. Some self-appointed prince doesn't scare me.

"And of the return of the archangels."

I would laugh out loud, but that's a side of me that I don't bring out into the open. So I continue to remain attentive and cool.

"That is why reading the Apocrypha has become more important to them. They hope to find clues in the ancient writings of the world of light about the whereabouts of the archangels and whether they can rise again."

I don't say anything back. What could I say? Aviell doesn't know the Apocrypha. They are just stories, and yes, maybe they happened just like that once. But I have never read a word about the archangels.

"Nevertheless, we leave tomorrow and get my duty over with. This union is clever. We need their agriculture and could unite our principalities, which would also benefit us."

I clench my teeth angrily.

Aviell gives me a look that I know only too well. She constantly warns me to keep my feelings to myself if they become too strong, but at the same time she demands that I be myself. This is probably the only point on which we disagree so much.

"That's what I live for," I reply to her unspoken thanks.

"Who are you, Navi?"

My lips quiver. I hate it when she asks that. No one in this world knows me as well as she does. And yet she keeps insisting that I have no identity of my own. And that hurts.

"Your Heroe," I say coolly, because it is the truth. Avi may object to it. She may not see it. But she can't change the things that have happened. And above all, she won't be able to change the fact that I live for her. Only for her and not for me. Silence spreads between us, cutting off my breath. So I bow slightly and leave the room without another word.

Sometimes I would like to cry in such situations. Simply because with Avi and the others it seems as if these tears can take part of the pain with them. Carry it out of the sea into the world where it dries and disappears. I have never shed a single tear. Not even when Philip and Caleb died. Heroers are not capable of that. Demons do not cry.

I walk along the imposing corridors and try to ignore all the pageantry. The velvety curtains, the golden candlesticks and especially the paintings of the princely family. I don't fight with myself because, although I am also their child, I

don't belong. Only when Avieell asks me this one question does it hurt. As if I have the answer to my identity right here in front of me, but am not allowed to grasp it. She knows my role. My destiny. So why does she want more? Why, when she knows full well that I have no identity except that of being her Heroe? She probably has no idea that this is exactly what she is taking away everything I have.

When I finally reach the stairs to the cellar where the Heroer's rooms are, I falter. A soft male, whispering voice catches my attention.

"Are you sure?"

Another voice sounds. One that sounds familiar.

"It's all arranged."

I pucker my mouth and think. I search inside myself for the voice until the face of the new maid appears before my inner eye.

"Everything rises and falls with you," the male voice from the beginning, which I don't know, sounds.

"I know. No one will fight back."

Fight back? Against what? My instinct tells me. Danger is imminent.

I take a step forward as the two continue talking in a slightly more subdued manner.

"Here is the remedy," the man says.

The maid doesn't reply, so I take another flight of stairs and glance into the corridor.

Steel blue eyes meet me. My heart pumps all the blood into my head and muscles. My hand grips my sword. But the hooded man with the ice-cold eyes raises his palm to his mouth and blows demonic power before I can send a warning to the other Heroers.

My vision blurs. I lose my senses - and then my legs give way. The last thing I see are the maid's panicked eyes and the small bottle of green liquid in her hand.

Poison. Demonic poison.

CHAPTER 2

Get the princely family out of here!, it echoes in my mind. Slowly I blink, fighting the fog in my head. But I regret this almost immediately, for all at once, screaming

Dozens of Heroers commandos into my mind.

Avi. My mind returns so quickly that I almost fall back into unconsciousness.

Where am I? Darkness envelops me. It must already be night. At least I am not tied up and seem to be lying on a kind of cot. Carefully I pick myself up and look for an exit from the blackness. A soft beam of light shows me the way to a door.

The Duke!, Marec roars in my head. *They're killing the Duke!*

Panic seizes me. I have to get to Avi.

My hands clutch the handle, yank at it, but nothing moves. So I lunge and try to kick the door in, until I finally run into it and push it open with my shoulder.

Smoke and screaming buzz towards me.

"Aviell!", I shout through the foggy corridors and start to run. I shout it over and over again. In my mind, too.

Aviell is in the throne room! Marec's voice sounds weakened. Beaten down. Split forever. The Duke is dead. His soulmate is ... dead.

I hurry on until I realise that I am in the maids' wing. Images of the maid I saw before I lost consciousness flash before me. She had poison with her. I rush up the stairs as fast as I can. Screaming, bleeding people come towards me. The nobles who live here in the castle or on smaller estates in the area, while behind them their Heroers fight off the enemies. Hooded figures with swords.

I turn and sprint down the servants' corridor to the throne room. I am not here to fight for these nobles. My only goal is Aviell.

Navien!, shouts Nath, the Heroer of the prince, in my head.

Is Aviell safe?

I don't answer. I just keep running through the smoke until I finally reach the throne room. My heart is pounding loudly, but my senses are sharpened. I feel her fear flash through me like a lightning bolt.

Relieved that she is still alive, it takes me only a second to discover her behind the throne. There she has huddled, hidden from the attackers who are fighting relentless battles with the Heroers throughout the hall. And then I understand the deep pain I feel in Aviell's soul. Everything in me freezes as I behold the lifeless face of the Prince. His body impaled on the wall. Beneath him, Nath struggles with soulless eyes.

I have it, I whisper to him in my mind. I would like to say more. Show that I'm sorry. But I don't.

Nath senses my presence and looks towards me. Pain flames in his irises. The first time I see a human reaction in my uncle's eyes. *Take her to the Prince of Wrath!*, is the last instruction I receive from him. Then he plunges further into the fight. Roaring, he decapitates two muffled attackers and draws all the attention to himself.

I quickly seize the opportunity and reach Aviell unnoticed. I kneel down next to her and pull her shoulders up to me. Tears trickle from her eyes.

"We have to get out of here," I whisper, trying hard to sound affectionate. But there's no point.

"They killed them," she sobs, clawing her trembling fingers into my arm. "They killed your mother and father, Navi." Her voice breaks.

I tug at her. I lift her up with all my strength because she is not able to get up herself. "Avi!" I beg her, growling. Her pain almost crushes me. These people have meant nothing to me. And yet I am grieving for them right now, as if they had been the parents to me that they were to Avi.

I force myself to block out her feelings. To focus on my mind and her salvation. Aviell is the heir to the throne. She is now the princess of this kingdom. And more than that, she is everything to me.

I support her and pull her body with all my strength to the small secret passage of the prince. It is easy to reach because it is behind the banner of our principality. Avi's father never took the normal paths, but since no one but he was allowed to use this passage, I have no idea where it leads. *Where to?*" I shout at Nath. But I'm met with nothing but ice-cold emptiness. Nath is no more. Marec is no more. I don't feel a single Heroer of this castle in my mind.

I shake off the thought and continue walking. Dragging Aviell's quivering, crying body with me.

"Pull yourself together!", I yell at her again and again. But it's no use.

The corridor is dark. And then, finally, I see light. I set Aviell down, push the curtain aside and look around the room. It is a kind of library I have never seen before. Nevertheless, I immediately recognise that the shelves are filled with apocrypha. On the wall at the back I spot two short swords hanging in a frame, head for them and snatch them off the wall. My weapons must have been taken by the maid and the masked man so I have at least something useful in my hand. Panting, I let my gaze wander over the floor to my left. Streaks. My heart trips. There must be an aisle. The shelf has obviously been pushed over the floorboards thousands of times.

I put the swords in my chest strap, rush back, hoist Aviell up and drag her along. The shelf moves as expected and a stone passage opens behind it. A way out. This must be it.

Screams sound from outside. I let go of Aviell, who is barely able to hold herself up, claw my nails into the wood of the bookcase and pull her back towards me. The second I hear footsteps and voices.

"I'm sure this is the way to go," says the new maid.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I will kill her. One day I will kill this monster for what she has done.

"I thought you locked them up!" a man growls. I'm unsure if it's the one from earlier. Whatever was blown in my face there has dulled my senses. "She's the future princess's Heroe. You can't just lock her up like that."

"Then you should have given her the poison."

"You know very well that their survival is part of the trade."

I narrow my gaze, but at that moment Aviell whimpers. I immediately jump on her and press my hand over her mouth. With my other arm I hoist her up again and try to move on. Away from the attackers. I am a trained fighter, yes. A very good fighter. But I wouldn't be able to stand alone against all of them.

"There's something!" someone shouts behind me.

I grab Aviell tighter. "If you don't come to now and run, you'll die!", I growl as quietly as I can. She shakes her head, crying. I feel such a deep sadness in her that it takes my breath away. She has lost everything. Except one thing. "Then I'll die!" Her gaze freezes. And finally she nods. I take her hand and just a tiny second later we run. A loud bang sounds behind us, and I know for sure that it was the shelf shielding us from them.

My breath is racing. This is my task here. The only reason I'm alive. I have to protect Aviell. I must bring her to the Principality of Wrath. And God willing, the Prince will rain down all his wrath on these barbarians.

We keep running. Our pursuers are getting closer and closer. I sense them and their bestial intentions.

And then the corridor in front of us opens up to reveal a view of the gloomy forest behind the palace.

At least it seems dark and cool now. Actually, I like this place. It always felt like freedom when Avi and I played among the gnarled trunks and overgrown branches as children. Everywhere small streams lead down to a lake, and due to the high humidity here in the west, the trees and the ground are covered in moss. Once simply magical, the moss benefits me today because it will dampen our steps a little. But all this is of no use if Avi doesn't help.

"Go!", I shout at Avi and run. Pulling her weak body out with me into the cold night air. She stumbles again and again, but I hold her tight.

We run and run until I realise that we won't shake them off. Can't. I only have one chance, so I grab Avi and push her roughly behind a fallen tree.

"This is not your fight!", I impress upon her. "For once in your life, accept what I was born to do and who you are." With these words I draw my swords and face the dark figures. There are four of them. Tall, strong men. All cloaked. But none of them is a Heroer. I can feel that. And whatever they fight for, my reason to fight and win is stronger.

When I realise this and gather all my demonic strength, I strike. I am no longer Navien. I am an assassin. One of the most dangerous fighters, though we Heroers in the Kingdom of Truth must not learn to use demonic spells. I don't need them. My blades pierce their bodies. I feel the blood on my hands. And as I ram my sword into the chest of the last of them, watching in the moonlight as all life drains from his eyes, I realise that I will never be able to wash it away.

Being trained to kill is completely different from this. It is real, brutal, relentless and final.

"Come!" I say to Avi and hold out my bloodstained hands to her after putting the swords away. She hesitates, but then crawls out of her hiding place and examines me. Something has changed not only in me. In her, too. The way she stares at me hurts more than the realisation of what lies dormant inside me. Because for the first time in my life, Avi sees me, recognising the demon that I am.

Nevertheless, she takes my hand and lets me pull her further through the forest. The owls cry. The wolves howl. And it feels like they are singing the song of my broken soul. Aviell is slow. Far too slow, which is why I tug at her arm.

How could all this happen? Why were these attackers powerful enough to kill all the Heroers? To kill the prince? And why did that maid say my survival was part of the deal? I try to order my thoughts and stop thinking about all the death. And

then it cracks far behind us. I stop and try to feel the creature that is coming towards us. It is not an animal.

"Give me your cloak and crown!", I order and look at Avi promptly.

"Navien," she whispers, as if she were appealing to the part of me that I was just a few hours ago. To the person she asked to find herself. I have found myself.

That is my true essence.

"I can't help it if you don't like who I really am." I say it, sensing in both our minds the truth behind it. Then she nods cheerlessly and takes off her royal cloak and crown, which she has worn as heir to the throne since Philip's death. They must have been having dinner when these barbarians attacked. "You hide here, and as soon as it gets light, you run east. Understood?"

She swallows as if she had to drink acid. Meanwhile, I reach into my small leather bag and place a small passport in her hand. Along with healing herbs, burning powder to cauterise wounds, a knife and a small torch, this is part of the basic equipment of a Heroer that we must always carry with us. Finally, it has a purpose. I hesitate only briefly before taking the bag off completely and handing it to Avi. I doubt she would burn herself out a wound, but you never know.

I take another deep breath, then put on my cloak and place the narrow crown on my head. I make sure that the strands of my hair cover my temples. No one should see the mark that brands me there.

"They will hear about what happened. And the prince will be looking for you."

"And what are you doing?" she asks bitterly, her face contorting almost dismissively. She knows what I'm going to do. But she needs to hear it.

"I'll lure them away from you."

Avi's jaw grinds. She does not nod. Says nothing. But I don't need her permission. She may be my princess, but at this moment it is my task to rule over her. To save her life.

I take a step towards her, put my hand on the back of her neck and my forehead on hers.

"I love you," I whisper and don't wait for her to say it back, but push her away from me straight away.

"Now hide!"

She follows my command and I turn to the sound. To the evil soul I feel behind me.

I want to run, to lure him away from Avi, but I freeze when I recognise him.

When we are too young to protect the second-born, we are trained for months in camps. The young man standing in front of me is the brother of the prince of pride. He is the third-born. The Heroer of the duke of the prince of pride.

"Ka?" My incredulous voice echoes through the gloomy forest.

A silvery mist forms in front of my mouth.

"I knew I would kill you one day," he blurts out with sickening satisfaction in his tenor.

"What are you doing?" I growl and search for Avi's soul. Trying to find out if she has found a hiding place.

"Where is that little piece of shit Navien?"

I falter again. He does not recognise me. How can that be? Aviell is my sister. But we hardly look alike.

"Navi is dead," I return coolly.

He laughs. And I'm not sure if this is just a game. Yes, we were ten the last time we met. But my blond hair alone contrasts with Avi's pitch black. He steps closer. My hands clasp the hilts of the swords.

And then I catch sight of his eyes. His black demonic eyes. No whites. No soul. I swallow bitter bile and finally understand why he doesn't recognise me. He is possessed.

I take a step back.

"What did he do to you?"

He laughs again. Soulless. I've heard of rulers casting spells on their Heroers to bring their demonic side to the surface. They strip them of all their human attributes, and what comes out is now before me.

"Navi is not dead. I can feel her near."

"She's about to die," I lie. What does he want from me? Is it not enough for him that here, in his eyes, stands the new princess of truth?

"Then I will kill her."

"You'll have to get past me for that!", I growl and draw my swords.

An inhuman sound leaves his mouth. "Your death is not part of the plan, Aviell, Princess of Truth."

No ... I blink and want to go for him. Kill him. But the realisation of what I have done turns me to ice. Ka seems to have a different plan than those men who chased us. And now he's targeting Avi, who he thinks is me.

"Kill her, Larakai!", Ka suddenly shouts through the forest, and just as I am about to run to her - my soul snaps.

No! Pain floods through me. A pain so abysmal, so final, that I sink to my knees.

The swords fall to the ground beside me. No. Avi...

Her cry echoes through the forest. My soul tears on. Separates from hers as she dies. A light briefly illuminates the forest around me. A light that seems to emanate from me. But I push this thought away with all my might, it is pure nonsense.

Avi!, I scream inside. No more words leave my

Mouth. I want to get up. Run to her. Save her. But the pain in my soul paralyses me. It is worse than any wound. It is so all-encompassing that a tear leaves my eye. For the first time in my life.

Avi ... Her name is the last thing I think. The tiny remnant of her soul, the last thing I feel before my mind can no longer stand the pain and everything is plunged into bottomless, cruel darkness.

When I open my eyes again at some point, the pain has disappeared. But something is still missing. A connection that I have carried in my heart all my life. A face that does not belong to Ka appears above me. Dark eyes are directed at me. I swallow and want to say something, but the young man above me puts a finger to his lips.

His gaze wanders down me. I feel him take off my gun belt.

"No!", I croak, wanting to fight back, even though Avis and my soul have been separated. She is not completely gone. She is not dead. And I have to save her. Again he puts his finger to his lips and for a brief moment I lose myself in his face. What is he? A demon? He seems more like a god.

"Survive, Aviell," he murmurs hoarsely, stands up and disappears from my field of vision.

It takes half an eternity for my consciousness to fully return. He really did take my weapons. But I don't care. I will save Avi if I have to kill someone with my bare hands to do it.

I pull myself up and walk with shaky legs to the place where I last felt Avi. When I get there, I look down at blood. Far too much blood. But Avi is no longer there.

"Aviell!", I scream at the top of my lungs. My mind stops.

I run. Searching for her. For her soul. Screaming over and over again as a red sun rises behind the treetops. How long was I unconscious?

I fall to my knees. Avi is no longer here. But she is alive. I can feel it.

Hooves. Horses. Men. I hear them before I see them. They stop in front of me.

People run towards me. The first to arrive at me is a man. He is wearing a prince's cloak. Emblazoned on his chest is the symbol of wrath – the letter Z entwined with a goat creature - and I know he is going to kill me now. Avi's gone. And I'm just a demon who no longer has a right to live. Who has lost all his value in this world.

"Mistress Aviell," I hear his voice.

I open my mouth to explain to him that she cannot be dead. That he has to let me live because I am her only chance.

"I am so happy to have found you."

I freeze. And then I realise. I am still wearing Avi's crown and her cloak. And my weapon belt has been taken by this thief. Moreover, no being of the other kingdoms has ever seen the heiress to the throne of the Principality of Truth. Since our brothers died and Avi moved to the first place in the line of succession, she has been kept hidden, especially from the princes, because it was clear that she should marry one of them one day. However, since her father wanted this union to be based on political advantages, he was probably afraid that she might fall in love and decide on her own. And now they think I am her. And I have to play along if I want to survive and then save Avi. Spasmodically, I turn my thoughts back to the man in front of me.

I imagined the Prince of Wrath differently. Not so young. And I would never have believed him to have that beautiful angular face and kind eyes.

Watching his appearance, every emotion on his face, distracts me from the pain that Avi's loss causes me. But I must not give in to it. I must draw strength from it all. Because Avi is not dead. My soulmate is not lost.

I let the prince lift me onto one of the horses, just as a mistress would. He sits down behind me and puts me in a side-saddle in his arms.

"How did you find me?", I finally find my voice again, but lend it more kindness than it usually has.

"My Heroer has taken a threat from this principality."

I narrow my gaze and am glad that he cannot see me so closely as we ride through the forest. How is it possible to perceive a threat over so many miles?

"Heroers can do that? At that distance?", I ask, seemingly clueless. But I know it's not possible. Or his Heroer is very powerful.

"Since we are engaged, my Heroer has focused only on your kingdom, Mistress Aviell. I want my bride-to-be to be safe. We were at the castle first; no one was

alive there and I almost gave up hope, but then my Heroer was able to sense you in the forest." His fingers, holding the reins, stroke my arm briefly. A loving, protective gesture that I have never experienced from anyone except Aviell. Without meaning to, I wonder how it would have felt if I had been treated like a second-born all my life. I close my eyes and keep silent the rest of the way because I am too weak. The separation from Avi takes away my life energy. It takes a long time before we slow down. I turn my head a little and look at a gigantic castle. It is barely comparable to the palace of truth in which I grew up. "Aviell," the prince says gently and touches my cheek.

I laugh inwardly. If he knew who I really was, he would behead me instead of giving me this loving gesture.

"We are here."

I nod and let him help me off the horse. Maids hurry over and support me while the prince shouts orders at them and then disappears himself to his companions. The women lift me into the castle. Along the corridors, up the stairs, into a room and on to a large tub.

While two of them take off my cloak and another fills the tub, which emits a lovely lavender smell, my mind finally returns and I stop them. I don't talk and behave like a wounded animal. And they see it, I can see it in their eyes, so I compose myself.

"Leave me alone," I groan. My lips quiver menacingly. Maybe that's why they obey. Or because they think I am Avi.

When they have gone, I drag myself to a large mirror and drop my top. The demonic mark stings me treacherously in the eye. They almost saw it and realised who I really am.

I close my eyes briefly before I stare again at the black heart on my chest and take off my trousers. For a tiny moment I look down at the scars on my thighs and then up at my face. I brush the bloody strands from my forehead. It's a

fucking miracle that the prince hasn't discovered that I bear the mark of the demons on my temple.

Us Heroers are all born with these two marks, the black heart and the lily on the temple, but the latter is different for every demon. No Heroer of this world wears mine. It shows a very rare lily that has only bloomed once in the last thousand years. At Aviell's birth. It connects us. And this mark on my skin is all that has ever been mine alone. Nevertheless, I know what I have to do, clench my hands into fists and take a deep breath.

My hair is full of blood, so no one will be able to catch the deception. They will think I was wounded before. I nod to myself and search the small bathroom. The round ceilings are beautifully decorated with blue and white colours. And right next to the gold-framed mirror in the middle of the room is the white bathtub with golden ornaments. Further back, I recognise an old wooden shaving table and a blade.

Without giving it a second thought, I stride towards it, take off Aviell's crown, lay it on the table and grab the razor instead. One last time I look in the mirror at my demonic lily and cut into my skin. I cut the last bit of my identity from my face.

I do not shed a tear. I do not cry. I do not even moan.

I only see Avi in front of me. This is what I have to do.

For them. And maybe a little bit for me, too. So that I live.

Survive.

CHAPTER 3

Almost two weeks pass, during which I lock myself away and send them all away. I have no strength to face them and this lie, while at the same time fighting against any of the Heroers here in the castle hearing me. One careless moment and they would sense me in their minds. And immediately know who I am. At the same time, there is still this crushing pain in my soul. My sister is gone. And even though I feel she is alive, our connection is eternally wounded. I know it. Feel it. The wound that has cut across our spirit cannot heal again. And yet I know that I can't hide from the outside world forever. I can't. Too much is at stake. And I have to find Aviell.

"Mistress!", the Prince's voice suddenly sounds from outside, as if he has heard my thoughts.

I tighten my knees and remain seated on the bed. By now I know everything in this room inside out. As in the bathroom, the rounded ceilings here are also painted, but in rich colours like red and brown. The curtains on my king-size bed match this colour scheme, as do the old wooden furniture and the golden mirror above the dressing table.

"My prince," I return wanly.

"You ..." He falters, as if he doesn't know how to explain the following to me. to teach him. So far I have always fended him off too. But now too much time has passed to keep stalling him and my wound has healed a little.

"I know you are grieving. For your family and for your Heroe."

I blink as he accepts so naturally that a Heroer's lust can cause grief. But I also hear the anger and impatience in his voice as he continues his speech.

"Nevertheless, the princes expect to see you tonight. I could postpone the meeting, but now..."

I draw in my breath sharply. Aviell's father, the Prince of Truth, was also present at the meetings of the princes that took place every now and then. This one,

however, seems to have been arranged to introduce me. So I stand up and open the door. His loving green eyes meet me. And without wanting to, something in me heals through him. But it is nothing of what has happened in the last two weeks. It's the way he looks at me. Like I'm special. Like I'm not a demon. And that's when I realise he's healing a wound I didn't even know existed.

"Are they here?", I ask cautiously. Careful to behave like a Mistress and not a Heroe. "They are arriving tonight. And they want to meet you. They must. Otherwise you can't be installed as princess and ..."

"Even though I am in mourning, my principality needs a female ruler," I add. Until now it was unusual for a woman to rule, so all the princes have to get to know me first. Or rather, they should get to know Aviell. Because before that, our principality will have no ruler at all. At least that's the rule the princes established when it became clear that no male heir to the throne would be born.

But getting to know each other is not the end of the story. Afterwards, Aviell has to visit all the principalities. Even though that makes more sense, since the other princes also visited every principality in their childhood. Only then can one be legitimately crowned.

Hastily I shake off the thoughts and concentrate again on the prince who is nodding. I look at his dark blond hair. His tall stature and this painted face. We don't know each other, although I have been here for a fortnight. Weeks in which I have not been able to look for Avi. But I can't help her if I act rashly and am exposed.

"Does anyone know who is responsible for the attack?"

The prince lowers his eyes. "We assume that they were rebels who live outside the principalities in the west. We will find them and punish them."

I nod. "And what is left of my principality?"

He sighs. "The buildings. Some abbots, and the village was not attacked."

I close my eyes for a moment, already knowing that the people I grew up with are all dead.

"And what happens to them now? And the dead?"

"According to the protocol, they were taken to a safe place that nobody knows about. The dead were cremated. Except, of course, for the princely family and some high-ranking nobles. They were taken to the crypt and will not be given a proper burial until their murderers hang."

"All right. I will be present tonight," I whisper. I know the protocol. Back then we had to wait two months for the former prince to be buried because his death was a mystery. Aviehl cried a lot because she liked her grandfather. I hardly knew him.

"I'll have something brought in for you to wear." He takes a breath as he wanted to say something else. Instead, he remains silent and raises his hand to my cheek until his fingers very gently run over the scar on my temple. Anger flares in his eyes. His jaw quivers.

The reddish line reaches down to my chin because I decided that it would be too conspicuous if I had a scar only where the mark of the Heroer also pokes out of the skin. I even thought about cutting the black heart off my chest. But I would hardly have survived that.

"We'll take care of it," he promises, growling. I say nothing in reply. Instead, I allow his touch to move me.

"I own a library. Your father wrote me that you like to read."

I swallow hard as I realise again why the two of them were in contact. Avi is his fiancée. I am his fiancée.

"I will go and see her in the next few days," I say and take a step back. His closeness and caringness trigger something in me. Something I have never felt before. But now the injustice I have grown up under almost overwhelms me.

"My prince?", I ask him to finally end this and leave me alone again.

"Taron," he improves on me, again triggering feelings in me that I don't fucking want to feel. But they come. I was never allowed to call a prince by his name.

"Avi," I say. Not only because it's Avie's nickname, but because it's more like mine. Maybe then it won't feel so much like I'm stealing her life.

"I'll have the dress sent," he says pressedly, adding a "Avi" and leaves after indicating a slight bow.

I close the door and drop onto my bed. No. On Avi's bed. For I am due a sword at my neck. And not a four-poster bed in a castle.

As promised, a dress is brought to me a little later. The clothes I have been wearing for the last few weeks would probably not be appropriate for such an occasion. Even though they were nice dresses nevertheless.

I send the maid out of the room to bathe me without her seeing the black heart on my chest and only bring her back in when I have put the dress on and she only has to fasten it. Taron's taste is impeccable. This is exactly the kind of dress Avi would have worn. White, as a symbol of our intercession. Pure, honest. The truth. The fabric allows a small glimpse of my cleavage, but is not too revealing. At the waist, the dress is held by a gold band of fabric and only ends at the bottom. Avie would have loved it and twisted until she was dizzy to watch the tulle flutter around her legs. I, on the other hand, wish I had my black Heroe outfit back. After regaining consciousness after removing my mark, I burnt them. I threw the remains out of the window.

The girl begins to braid my hair around a tiara. Always careful to conceal my scar with strands. I would like to hit her for it. This scar belongs to me, just like the black lily before.

My skin and hair smell of lavender, something I have only noticed on Avi. We Heroes usually only have curd soap and a bucket of cold water a day to clean ourselves.

"Oh, would you rather I let your hair fall down your back?" the girl asks with a pitying look at my shoulders.