

CHAPTER 3

A Flight of Dragons

The arrow tore through the air with effortless celerity. The deadly projectile was in pursuit of perfection, and would not accept anything less than total victory. It reached its destination with full force, and plunged its head deep into the heart of its prey. For a moment, all was silent.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Professor Tusk as he lifted his bow in triumph and turned to his students. “That is what you call a bulls-eye. I assure you that, one day, all of you will be able to replicate this perfect shot. Until that day comes, you must practice. You must hone your skill so that when you are ready, whether that is as a High Guardian, city watch, or just a protector of your home village, hitting a bulls-eye will be as natural and as automatic as breathing.”

The professor reached behind his head and grabbed another arrow from his quiver. In one fast, fluid motion, he drew, turned, and fired. The arrow tore through the air in the same trajectory as the first, and pierced the same wooden target. The arrow stood, quivering, its point touching that of its brother. Another bulls-eye.

The professor put his bow down on the table in front of him. He removed the quiver from his back, and placed it next to the bow. “As you can see, there are twenty-five stations set up with all of the instruments we have been talking about in our ranged weapons class. There are throwing knives, axes, spears, and bows. Get together into groups of four, and pick a station to practice the techniques we went over. Help each other out, but safety is of utmost importance.”

Professor Tusk raised his voice to stress his point further. “Do not, I repeat, do not ever use a weapon while your fellow warriors are near a target! Anyone who ignores the safety of others will be punished accordingly! Do I make myself clear?”

The class universally replied with the chant of the warriors in a low, grumbling tone. “Dragoon!”

Kase felt someone gently poke his rib cage. He looked back, and saw John gesture with a quick chin-lift to join him for the group work. Kase acknowledged in the same way, and as the other class members were scrambling and calling to each other in excitement, Kase and John walked calmly towards one of the empty stations. Along the way, John silently gestured to the two other members of their foursome, Rocky and A.J.

A.J. went to the far end of the table and grabbed the bow. She looked it over and studied its construction to see if it was up to her standards.

Rocky quickly ran up beside her and grabbed a spear that was on the table beside the bow. “You look good holding that bow,” Rocky said as he moved closer to her.

A.J.’s expression did not change. She was fixated on her weapon. “Do you think you can throw that axe better than I can use this bow?” She ran her hand over the bowstring, barely touching it in an almost seductive gesture.

Rocky looked at his spear in confusion. “I’m ... not holding an axe?”

A.J. put the bow back down on the table and turned to Rocky. “I wasn’t talking to you, I was talking to John. He’s obviously the only one I’m concerned about beating in this session.” She looked at John over Rocky’s shoulder.

Rocky turned around in disbelief. His cool and sly demeanour unravelled in the process. “Wait. What? You didn’t just ... I can’t believe ... you can’t be ...” he stuttered in a panic.

Everyone laughed.

“At a loss for words?” A.J. said, as Rocky mumbled and scrambled to keep his quick tongue from stopping.

Rocky brought his palms up, as if to slow his own thinking. “Okay,” he started, “first of all, I’m the best long range weapons warrior west of Kimroad.”

A.J. and Kase laughed harder, and this time John couldn’t help but smile.

“Second, the only one I’m really worried about is Kase.”

A.J. stopped laughing and opened her mouth wide. “Is that so?” She turned to Kase. “It’s on then,” she said with a wink.

“Hey,” Rocky said as he tried to regain A.J.’s attention. “I’m ...”

“Attention!” yelled Professor Tusk from the other end of the practice field. The students went quiet, and stood straight in acknowledgment. “Make sure that each group member gets to use each weapon. This is a training exercise for *all* long range weapons, so I expect everyone to familiarize themselves with each one today. Don’t just focus on one weapon; you will need to know how to successfully use each one in this class, and beyond. Also, don’t hesitate to help each other with form and technique. Helping each other will make you stronger as a whole, as well as an individual. Understood?”

“Dragoon!” the class responded in unison.

The group turned back to the table. “Would you like to go first, Kase?” A.J. gestured towards the table.

“I’ll go first,” Rocky said confidently, and playfully pushed A.J. out of the way. “Then after I’m done, you’ll be calling me Bulls-eye for the rest of the class.”

A.J. started laughing again. “Alright, Bulls-eye. Show us how it’s done,” she said sarcastically.

“Watch and learn,” Rocky replied as he grabbed one of the spears from the table. There were four sets of each weapon, so each

team member had multiple chances before they had to re-gather their ammo from the target.

Rocky followed the instructions laid out by Professor Tusk in their earlier classes. He lifted the spear to his shoulder with a loose grip, and held it at its balance point. He faced the target, bent his knees, and turned slightly sideways to get in his ready position. He focused on the bulls-eye, stepped forward, and launched it.

The spear flew through the air with poise and precision. Its nose was heading straight for the centre of the target, but started to flutter and dip. Rocky held his breath while he watched the spear lose its speed. It landed well in front of the target.

“Looks like you fell a little short of the bulls-eye,” said A.J. as she reached over and touched Rocky’s slumping shoulder. “I guess we’ll just call you Shorty.” Kase, A.J., and even John started to laugh.

“That is not funny,” said Rocky as he looked at A.J. and shook his head. He grabbed another spear right away, and tried to redeem himself.

“Wait,” said Kase, still laughing. In a steadier voice, he tried to give his teammate some advice. “I noticed your release point was a little low. Try releasing it a little higher, so that it carries a little more, Shorty.”

Rocky looked at Kase and gave him an unenthusiastic glare, but acknowledged with a nod. He turned back towards the target, steadied himself again, and made another throw. This time, the spear had a lot more speed as it flew towards the target, but it curved left and missed again. Rocky’s shoulders seemed to slump forward a little more in defeat.

“It looked like your grip was a little tight.” A.J. tried to give encouragement this time.

Rocky looked at her and nodded as he tried to take in the advice. He steadied himself again and turned towards the target.

“Also, your legs look a little stiff, and your chest was angled forward and down, Shorty.”

Rocky seemed unimpressed with A.J.'s last comment, but took her advice nonetheless. He steadied himself again, and concentrated. "High release, loose grip, bend the knees, chest up," he said softly to himself. He repeated it over and over as he stared at the target. He took one step and threw the third spear, ending his throw with a soft grunt. Although this spear was on line, he must have put too much into it: it flew well over the target.

Rocky seemed frustrated, and grabbed the last spear forcefully. He didn't look at his friends, or wait for any more advice. He readied himself for a quick throw.

Before he could heave the last spear, John reached out and touched his shoulder. "Breathe," said John in a deep and calming voice. Rocky took a deep breath and seemed a little more relaxed. "You've got this, Rocky," added John as he released his hand from Rocky's back.

Rocky suddenly stood tall and focused on the target again. He threw his last spear. The spearhead cut through the wood, piercing the top of the target. Although the spear had hit the largest of the five rings, Rocky couldn't help but show his excitement.

"You did it!" cried Kase.

Rocky let a smile cross his lips as he turned to A.J. "It's not exactly a bulls-eye," he said to her, "but that was a good shot, right?"

"It was a great shot, Rocky," she said, and gave him a jab to the shoulder. "Just keep trying. You'll hit that bulls-eye soon enough."

"Are you going to show us how it's done, then?" replied Rocky with a sly grin.

"Watch and learn," replied A.J. She slung the quiver of arrows across her shoulders and walked to the target line, holding the bow loosely in her left hand. She raised the bow towards the target and drew an arrow back with the elegance and grace of a seasoned marksman. With her form confident and relaxed, she released and sent the arrow

on its way. The whole group watched on as the arrow flew effortlessly through the air, and lodged itself in the second smallest ring on the target.

“Great shot!” said Kase in encouragement.

“Not exactly a bulls-eye,” Rocky chipped in softly.

“What was that?” A.J. turned to Rocky and grinned.

“Nothing,” Rocky said as he looked towards the target, and couldn’t help but smile.

“That’s what I thought,” replied A.J., who was still grinning. She grabbed another arrow, reloaded her bow, and shot again. This time, her shot was a little closer, but still on the second ring. She grabbed her third arrow, and ended up with the same result. She took a breath before loading the last one, and then drew it back and fired. Unlike the others, this arrow found the centre of the target.

“Finally!” said A.J. in triumph. She looked at Rocky for a response, but he didn’t turn from the target in order to give her the satisfaction.

“Great shot, A.J.,” said Kase, as he tried to keep things going. “John, do you want to go next?”

John nodded at Kase, axe still in hand. A.J. and Rocky’s bickering didn’t affect him as he threw each axe at the target. Although his form was nearly perfect, his aim was a little off. All the axes hit the target, but they landed in the three to five ring range.

Kase was up next, and grabbed the first of four weighted throwing knives. He judged the distance and decided to pinch the blade instead of the handle. Keeping his wrist straight, he threw it in one quick motion, and watched as it slowly spun through the air. The knife landed, point-first, beside the arrow in the centre.

“Bulls-eye!” exclaimed Rocky. Instead of congratulating Kase, he turned to A.J. “Looks like someone else can hit a bulls-eye too!” he said, mockingly.

“Nice shot Kase,” A.J. said, ignoring Rocky’s immature comment.

“Thanks,” Kase replied as he picked up another knife. Holding it like the first, he threw it at the target. It landed in the bull-eye too. This time, all of the group members were as quiet as John.

Kase threw the third and fourth knives in the same way, and both ended up hitting the bulls-eye, just as the first two did.

“That’s amazing Kase!” said Rocky. His eyes were locked on the target.

“How did you do that?” asked A.J. as she stared at the target too.

Kase shrugged casually. “I used to practice at home, before I came to The Academy,” he said. “I had targets set up all over the farm, and I tried to work as much as I could. It’s pretty easy once you get the hang of it, but when we start doing moving target training next year, it will be a little more challenging.”

“I understand,” said A.J. “I mean, I practiced too. Still, you must have spent hours and hours crafting your skill. You’re crazy!” A.J. finally looked at Kase and smiled. “If you see something wrong with my technique, please let me know!”

“Me too!” chimed in Rocky.

John swung his arm and tapped Kase’s shoulder. He nodded his head at Kase and pointed to himself.

Kase was beaming with pride; he was glad that his group looked up to him. “Absolutely!” he replied with excitement.

The four members walked to the target and gathered their weapons. Along the way, Rocky kept talking about the tosses that Kase made, and was very enthusiastic about improving his knife-throwing with Kase’s help. He didn’t stop talking, not even to sweet talk A.J.

Once they gathered the weapons, they went back to the table and arranged them how they originally were. The three members took a step back and got ready to watch Kase with the next weapon.

Kase grabbed a throwing axe. He steadied himself, looked at

the target, and threw it: bulls-eye. He took the second throwing axe, relaxed, and threw it: bulls-eye. He threw the third axe: bulls-eye. Before throwing the fourth, he flipped it in his hand, showing how steady he was with the weapon.

"I bet Kase could hit the bulls-eye with his eyes closed!" exclaimed Rocky. Kase looked back at him and grinned. Instead of focusing on the target ahead, Kase closed his eyes and threw the axe with confidence. He stood tall and waited for the reaction from his friends.

"Ooh ..." A.J. said as she winced. Kase turned to see the result. The axe was lodged on the edge of the outermost ring. "Looks like you're human after all," A.J. quipped.

Kase laughed. "To be honest, I didn't really practice blind shots," he admitted.

"Maybe next time," A.J. jabbed him in the shoulder and moved towards the table. She grabbed the throwing knives and got ready for her next session. Kase backed up and stood with Rocky and John.

"Still impressive," Rocky whispered.

Kase had won over the respect of the other group members, and for the rest of the class, he helped his friends with their techniques. All of them improved, which made them elated in the process. Rocky even got a bulls-eye with one of the throwing knives, which made all of the group members happy, until they realized that he would not stop talking about it.

"Did you see that throw?" Rocky kept asking. He was proud of his accomplishment, and very thankful that Kase had improved his throwing technique in such a short amount of time. "I think Kase is even better than the professor. He should teach the class next time!"

Unfortunately for Kase, the professor happened to be walking by at the time. "Is that so?" said Professor Tusk upon overhearing Rocky's remark.

"No, I didn't mean ..." Rocky said nervously. He scrambled for the right words.

“Why don’t you show me your skills, Kase,” interrupted the professor. “I want you to use each weapon once, so I can see your technique.”

“Yes, sir,” Kase said with confidence. The other group members cleared away from the table so that Kase had enough room. Just as he had done before, Kase grabbed the throwing knife. He steadied himself and threw the knife at the target: bulls-eye. He looked back at Professor Tusk to see what he thought, and received an encouraging nod.

“Very good,” said Professor Tusk. “Keep going.” He rotated his hand in a move along gesture.

Kase hit the bulls-eye using the axe, spear, and bow and arrow. As he was setting the bow down, he heard a slow clapping from the professor’s direction.

“Excellent, Kase,” Professor Tusk replied. “Your technique is exquisite. You’re very skilled with the long range weapons, and I’m excited to see what else you can do in this class.”

“Thank you, Professor Tusk,” replied Kase. “It was an honour to demonstrate for you.” He smiled. “It was actually pretty fun, too.”

“It was exciting,” Professor Tusk admitted with a nod of approval. He left the group and continued on helping the other students with their attempts.

When the professor was out of earshot, A.J. punched Kase in the arm. “Are you kidding me?” she exclaimed, her face beaming. “Professor Tusk never gives out compliments! You have to teach me everything you know!”

“Me too!” exclaimed Rocky.

“And me!” said John. Everyone turned and stared at this uncharacteristic outburst. Kase was thrilled that Professor Tusk had complimented him, but he was even more delighted to be the reason John spoke.

“Absolutely,” he replied with a proud smile.

Kase, A.J., John, and Rocky continued with their long range weapons practice for the rest of the period. When their class was dismissed, they had a break for lunch, and all went their separate ways. After a quick stop at his dorm room, Kase headed out of the warrior castle and to the administration castle to eat.

While he was walking through the common area, feeling elated with his day, he noticed Niveous and his friends standing around a tree on the far side of the park. They were laughing together, and pointing at someone in their group.

Kase suddenly felt his mood start to deflate. He was about to turn away, until he recognized the girl that they were laughing at. It was Talen. Niveous was holding something above his head and out of her reach. She was outnumbered. He wanted to change that.

“Give that back, Niveous,” Talen said sternly. She had her arm extended with her palm facing up. Her tiny stature didn’t even reach his bony shoulders.

“Hey, Sharaine, look at this image of Talen,” Niveous said to one of his female friends in the group. “She’s not the prettiest girl, is she?” He dangled the sage mirror out in front of her; Sharaine looked at the image and laughed. Talen tried to reach for it, but he pulled it up and out of her reach.

“Too slow, Talen,” Niveous said as he held the mirror above his head. “Looks like this is mine now.”

Niveous hadn’t noticed Kase sneak up behind him. He wrapped his fingers around Niveous’s tiny wrist like a vice. Niveous’s body instantly went limp, but Kase remained strong. The mirror fell from Niveous’s grip, but instead of letting it fall to the ground and shatter, Kase reached out and caught it. Niveous’s friends were shocked. Talen was expressionless.

“Hi, Tal,” said Kase. “Is this yours?”

“Hi, Kase,” Talen responded. Kase knew she was happy to see him, even if she didn’t show any emotion. “That is my sage mirror. May I have it back, please?”

“No problem, Tal.” Kase handed it to her.

“Please let go of me,” said Niveous in a hurt whisper. His arm and upper body were trembling.

“Oh, Niveous? Is that you?” Kase asked sarcastically. “I didn’t recognize you there.”

“This hurts so much,” replied Niveous.

“Let him go!” cried Sharaine in a high-pitched, terrified shriek.

“I’ll let go of you, but you and your friends have to make a promise to me,” said Kase in a calm and direct voice. “I want you to promise that you won’t bother Talen anymore. Tal is a friend of mine, and if she tells me that you’re causing her trouble, I will make sure that the next time we meet, your wrist won’t be the only thing that hurts.”

Kase let go of Niveous, who fell to the ground and grabbed his wrist with his other hand. His friends gathered around him in concern, but Niveous was able to get up on his own. He looked back at Kase with a glare. “You’re going to regret this.” He walked away with his friends, defeated, and did not look back.

After watching Niveous and his posse walk away, Kase turned to Talen and shrugged. “Problem solved,” he said casually as he brushed his hands together.

“I can handle my own problems, thank you very much,” Talen said as she sat down. There was a thin blanket beneath her, now rumpled with everyone’s passing. “Bullies often pick on someone that they feel they have power over: someone who is different, someone who bothers them, or someone they know they can get a big reaction from. From what I’ve read, when dealing with bullies, the best thing you can do is ignore their advances, stand up for yourself, and walk away the bigger person. The worst thing you can do is sink to their level and hurt them back. Bullying is not the answer to bullying.”

Kase took a step back. He was confused. “I’m sorry, Tal,” he replied solemnly. “I saw that you were in trouble, and I know that

Niveous isn't a nice person, so I came over to lend a hand. I didn't mean to say that you needed my help; it's just that, where I come from, friends help each other out."

Talen stared up at him, but didn't respond. It was awkward silence.

"I guess I'll be going then," Kase said. "Bye, Tal. It was good to see you again."

He turned to walk away. After a few steps, Talen made a high-pitched, short shriek. He stopped, raised an eyebrow, and turned back. She made the same noise again, and then stopped; her face was expressionless.

"That's the sound a mother rainbow sloth makes," she said. "She lets out a high-pitched squeak when calling for her baby. The baby makes more of a lower 'ah' sound to communicate back, like this." Talen imitated the baby sloth sound, and Kase couldn't help but smile.

"I know it's no duck sound, but it's something that I know." She looked down at the large, mostly empty blanket, and back up at Kase. "Would you like some of my lunch?"

"I'd love some," Kase said as he sat down next to her.

Talen and Kase had a picnic together in the common area park, and talked about the cuteness of rainbow sloths, their habitat, and random facts that Talen knew about this favourite animal of hers. They also talked about where they grew up, their families, and life at The Academy. Kase was learning that Talen's experience as a scholar was quite different than his at the warrior castle had been thus far.

But as their friendship was blossoming, a dark shadow slowly crept across the field. The two of them were too involved in conversation to notice the group that was approaching them, until the shadow fell onto the sunny edge of the blanket that they were sitting on.

"Mister Garrick," said Professor Winters in an unimpressed tone.

Kase and Talen looked up at the group that had assembled around them, which included the professor, Niveous, and the rest of

the bullies. The professor pointed at Niveous's injured wrist. "Are you responsible for this act of violence?" he asked.

"Yes, Professor Winters, but—" Kase started to plead, but was cut off instantly.

"You apparently have not learned. Two violent outbursts in so little time is a serious matter. Come with me: we are going to see the Grand Master of The Academy immediately."

The professor reached under his robe and pulled out a set of restraints. "To prevent further outbursts, please extend your arms so I can put these on. I will be escorting you to his office personally."

Kase got up from the blanket. "Is that really necessary?" he asked. "I'll come with you, but I don't think I—"

"Extend your arms!" Professor Winters commanded. Kase acknowledged and let the professor restrain him. He looked back at Talen, but didn't have a chance to say goodbye. He walked away in silence.