

## Prologue

My hands are empty, but no less deadly than if I were holding a knife or sword or bow and arrow.

Every day for years I have walked down this hallway. This hallway of polished walls and too-bright lights. My feet should have worn footprints in the stone-metal floor long ago.

At the end of the hallway is a room. It's small and bare. There's usually something waiting for me in it.

My fingers feel odd as I flex them; I like the weight of the weapons in my hands. It's natural. But after practicing my archery for four hours and knife-throwing for three, *they* told me that I wouldn't have anything, not even a simple dagger.

*They* are the white-coat doctors, engineers who designed and made us. Colorful silver, gold, seastone Directors who assess and dictate our lives. They give me direction through speakers in the wall that are all around me. They watch me through invisible cameras so they know I'm following orders. And if I don't...a collar sits heavily around my neck, a reminder of the agony that comes with it.

I reach the end of the hallway, stand in front of the door as I wait for it to open. Briefly I wonder if Syssic is undergoing the same thing right now, in some other wing of the palace. He's also in training right now; he'll be executing with me in the Arena, they said. The first time I met him we happened to be hunting at the same time. I attacked him and he nearly ripped off my arm.

I nearly ripped off his head.

Since then we've developed a sort of truce, half out of agreement and half because the Directors purposefully forced us to train together so we could learn to cooperate. I guess they

don't want us trying to kill each other in the Arena. That's not our job. But our uncertain cease-fire is also to avoid the punishment we both received.

I really do hate this collar.

I focus my attention back on the door in front of me. It's almost time to begin and they do not like delay. They're very precise, very particular about these tests, I've come to call them. I don't know why. I don't know what they're waiting for. All I know is what I need to do when that door opens.

With a quiet beep as a signal the door slides open, melting into the wall like liquid. I step into the room and the door flows seamlessly shut behind me.

There is a boy standing in front of me, a young man. All I take in is that he is more than a foot taller than I am, sandy brown hair and wide, terrified gray eyes, before a flood of anger and hatred kicks in like a reflex.

He doesn't speak. He doesn't even have time for a scream. I launch myself across the room, sinking my claws into his chest as I tackle him, twist myself around him and break his arm with a loud snap. I am deaf to his cries and my teeth find his neck. With a quick jerk I wrench his head from his body. They thud to the ground at the same time.

I step away from the dead boy, a familiar roaring triumph coursing through me, quickening my pulse, bringing a smile to my lips. A fierce delight pulses in my fingertips.

The door opens again and my pleasure fades to puzzlement because there are two men standing behind it. One is a white-coat doctor-engineer with graying hair and blue bespectacled eyes. I could recognize Doctor anywhere: my creator. The other I have never seen before. He is dressed head-to-toe in black--the King's color--with short dark hair smoothed back, and he stares at me with vivid emerald eyes, smiles with thin, stern lips.

They never come to see me. The last time I met with them, I had just awoken. They told me my name. They told me that I was seven years old. Last time, they told me my training was beginning.

The seasons have passed five times since then. Whenever they let me outside to hunt I made note of every time winter came again. I'm stronger now, faster, but still a child to them. In age, that is.

Because I will have a very important role in serving the Kingdom of Pyre.

The King's-color-man steps forward and I back away slightly, unsure of what to do. I glance at Doctor. Am I supposed to kill this man too? But my prey has never entered through the door; they are always waiting in this room. I glance at my collar; if I'm disobeying orders it's going to turn on any second.

"It's alright, Syren," Doctor says and my head snaps up. "We are not here to hurt you."

I nod slowly, turning my attention back to the man in front of me. "Hello," I say cautiously. Years have taught me to be polite, if only just.

"Syren," he says, "lovely Syren." He looks at me and then at the headless corpse still in the room. I suddenly become aware that I am covered in blood: my hands, my face, my clothes. It's starting to dry but it still feels warm. "You've done well," he continues and waves my creator forward. "She's ready."

Doctor has a key in his hand. It's a shiny white color, sleek and small. It matches my collar. I stand very still as he inserts the key into my collar and twists. I feel something shift, move, gears coming apart, and then the collar snaps open and I am free of its sick weight.

Before he says the words I know what it means. My training is over.

"Syren," the emerald-eye man says, dark smile in place. "It is time for the Ninety-Second Executions."

I nod. My life as an Executioner begins.

