

## CHAPTER ONE



# Broken Arrows

If this is to be my last day, Hironata mused, I'm going down fighting, and I plan on taking as many of these nutsacks as I can with me.

He shifted but was unable to grab the arrowhead that protruded from his lower abdomen. The moment he brushed it with his fingertips, pain exploded through his middle so bad his knees almost buckled. Strands of dark brown hair came loose from his ponytail, and sweat glistened on the shaved sides of his head.

Feckin' cowards, he grumbled to himself. Shooting someone in the back. I thought better even of a Mer'Chien<sup>1</sup>.

He focused his breathing, gritted his teeth, and tried again.

None of these feckin', half-assed attempts, he told himself. Just grab the thrice damned thing.

He did just that and let out a growl of agony. He pulled the shaft forward and snapped the head off it. This time, he did fall to his knees.

Seven Hells, he thought. The world came back into focus, and he examined the broad head he held. Bastard used a hunting arrow. There was no telling how much damage it caused on its way through him, but at least he still stood.

Sort of.

Using the wall for support, he levered himself to a somewhat upright position.

Easy part is over. He drew a series of deep breaths to work up his nerve. Now, he had to draw the shaft out from his back. He needed to be mobile. They were still out there, still looking for him.

Hironata reached behind him and grasped the shaft. With a guttural yell, he yanked the wood out.

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<sup>1</sup> Mer'Chien: One of the Noble Houses of the Areth'kon.

The cool stone of the wall soothed his head and he concentrated on the wounds. He willed his sin'del, his life force, into them. In slow increments, the bleeding stopped, and the flesh knitted together. By the time he finished, he panted through the droplets of sweat falling from his nose and chin. He knew he was not completely healed, but what he did stretched the limits of his abilities. It would have to do until he found Angus or Arielle. He just hoped he didn't rip open all his hard work before getting to them.

He looked down at the broken arrow in his hand. This was going too far, even for the Elc'atar Guard<sup>2</sup>. Like he was supposed to stand by fiddling in his pockets while Enid and Darien were assaulted by Blademasters? And after Nessah was sent to the infirmary last night, and Denuelle this morning?

At least he bought Enid and Darien enough time to get away.

Hironata glanced about, trying to find where he dropped his war hammer. He shuffled over to where it lay and winced when he bent to retrieve it. Damned shoddy work, Meathead, he told himself. Pay more attention to the healing lessons next time.

If he lived to see another lesson, that is.

The assaults made no sense to him.

Things were supposed to have changed. He and his Pride were all pledged Blades<sup>3</sup> now. They were no longer graduates. They proved themselves time and again. Seven Hells, they were feckin' legends around here. They declared their intentions of trying for Yearling<sup>4</sup> two nights ago. He knew the Elc'atar Guard, the Blademasters of the Areth'kon, had no love for him and his Pride<sup>5</sup>. There were far too many incidents of he and his friends breaking and bending the rules for them to just accept them outright. But this was ball banging brutal.

He hefted his hammer over his shoulder and staggered out of the alley between the greenhouses. A quick glance in both directions showed no potential opponents in his path. There might be archers on the rooftops, but there was nothing he was able to do about that. A few graduates lingered on the obstacle courses and parade field, perfecting the skills in which their instructors found them lacking. Best to stay clear of those areas. There was bound to be an Elc'atar nearby, and he didn't want any younglings to get caught up in this. No squad chose to continue drilling in the darkness unless a Blademaster pushed them.

The infirmary sat over a hundred yards to his right. The lower reaches of the complex housed the orchards and greenhouses. Between here and the heart of the compound, the infirmary was the only cover. He needed to traverse the open ground to that point and cross the parade field. The Kal'Parev<sup>6</sup> barracks were two hundred yards beyond that, once again in the open.

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<sup>2</sup> The Elc'atar Guard are the Blademasters of the Areth'kon, the martial school.

<sup>3</sup> Blades: The soldiers of the Areth'kon.

<sup>4</sup> Yearling: Apprentices to the Elc'atar Guard.

<sup>5</sup> Pride: A groups of Blades who are sworn to protect one another's lives.

<sup>6</sup> Kal'Parev: One of the Noble Houses of the Areth'kon.

But, was that the sanctuary he thought it was?

Rhea, the feckin' archer who shot him, hailed from House Mer'Chien. So was Xhioa, the Elc'atar who thrashed Enid when Hironata found them. But Jideen was from House Le'Manon<sup>7</sup>, and he had himself a grand time beating Darien around the quad. Could it be that it wasn't just one House set against them? What if all the Elc'atar, regardless of House affiliation, sought their blood? The Kal'Parev barracks would not be safe then.

Hironata rubbed his chin while he ran through the possibilities. This was too much for him alone. He needed Thomlin or Angus to help him figure it out.

He felt a nudge against his mind, the request of another Lethen'al<sup>8</sup> seeking to communicate with him.

*To arms, folks,* he telepathically sent to his friends. *We've got a situation.*

*We know,* came Ba'ril's brusque sending. *Darien and Enid made it in. Angus is with Enid now.*

*They shot me with feckin' broadheads, bro,* Hironata sent back. *Had two stuck in me. I'm gonna need some help getting back. We gotta figure out what's going on here.*

*What's your position?* Ba'ril sent back almost immediately.

*The greenhouses,* Hironata sent. He wanted to hide his relief at reaching anyone, but he knew it bled through the sending.

*Hold position,* Ba'ril sent. *We're sending a fire team out to you. This is not an isolated incident. The rest of us are converging on Arielle's apartments. It's the only safe place.*

*Good.* Hironata sagged against the wall. *I need a Magi or two.*

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<sup>7</sup> Le'Manon: One of the Noble Houses of the Areth'kon.

<sup>8</sup> Lethen'al: A fallen angel; an Aesari who has been reformed.