FORGING SILVER INTO STARS

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PROLOGUE

CALLYN

This was supposed to be a peaceful protest.

It's the only reason we came. Da kept insisting, "You owe it to your mother, Callyn. The queen should know the will of her people."

Maybe I do owe it to her. Maybe Mother would want me and Nora to be here. I reach up and rub the pendant that hangs over my heart the way I do anytime I think of her.

This was only supposed to be a gathering of like-minded people who opposed the king's magic. Safe. Small. Da wanted Nora and me to come because he said it was important to make a good showing so the queen would listen. He even tried to convince Master Ellis to come, along with his son Jax, my best friend. Their blacksmith forge was too busy to leave, though—and travel is difficult for Jax on his crutches. But now that we're all packed along the cobblestone roadway leading to the Crystal Palace, I don't know if any of us needed to come at all. There are hundreds of people here. Maybe thousands.

Most are armed.

All are shouting.

Nora squeezes my hand. "Those people have swords," she says, and her voice is nearly lost under the cacophony.

I follow her gaze. A *lot* of people have swords. And axes, and arrows, and hammers. I see bricks in a few hands. Anything you could reasonably consider a weapon. Guards stand in front of the gate, trying to talk people down, but there are only a dozen of them and a huge press of people straining at the steel bars. Behind the guards is a short stretch of shining cobblestones that end at the base of the steps leading up to the palace. The summer sun fills the air with heat, and the smell of so many sweating bodies pressed together is oppressive. It's doing nothing good for anyone's temper.

A shouting man tries to push through the crowd, and Nora stumbles into me, squealing when he stomps on her foot. He's got a dagger in his hand, and it comes dangerously close to my sister's eye. I jerk her out of the way.

"She's just a child!" I snap at him.

He gives me a rude gesture over his shoulder.

So peaceful. I scowl. Nora is only twelve. She shouldn't be here. I'm not entirely sure that *I* should be. I set my shoulders. "Da."

He's not even paying attention. He's chanting with the crowd. *Bring us the queen! Bring us the queen!*

"Da!" I shout over the noise. "Da, we need to get Nora out of here."

He doesn't look at me. "Queen Lia Mara will have to listen, Callyn. There are so many of us here. The queen must know: we're doing this for *her*."

Nora clutches my arm. This is her first time seeing the Crystal Palace, and on any other day she'd be staring up at the massive glistening structure with her mouth hanging open. She'd be asking if I thought we had a chance to see the queen, or if the street vendors in the Crystal City make better meat pies than what we sell in the bakery.

Right now she's burrowing into my side, edging away from a man who has a hand on the trigger of a crossbow.

"*Da*," I say again. "Da, please—"

My voice is swallowed by sudden noise. A massive cheer goes up among the people, and at first, I'm not sure what's happened. I think perhaps the shouting really *has* made a difference, and I stare up at that gleaming staircase, wondering if the queen will appear at the top.

No. The crowd has broken through the gates. I see a guard lift a sword—and just as quickly, he disappears under the sudden crush of the crowd. Without warning, we're jostled forward, and Nora and I have no choice but to move or be trampled ourselves.

I keep hold of my sister's hand, and she clings to mine. I lose sight of Da almost immediately, and I cry out. "Da! Da!"

"Move, girl!" shouts a man to my left, and I take an elbow to the ribs. I stumble into Nora and we nearly fall. Luckily the crowd is so dense that we all but bounce off another woman. We're carried forward with the mob. Weapons glint in the sunlight. I hear a few screams in the crowd as others must be pulled under, but it's a quick burst of sound, and then it's gone.

My heart is pounding so hard that I can't breathe. My hand has gone slick, but I keep a tight grip on Nora's hand. I can't lose my sister. I *can't*.

I don't feel the steps, but we're moving upward. I can't see anything but the bright sunlight overhead, the mountains beyond the palace cutting a line through the sky. Glass shatters, and it seems to keep shattering. More screams ring out. The massive doors to the palace have been destroyed, leaving a gaping hole for everyone to stream through.

Bring us the queen! Bring us the queen!

The shouts are so loud, and they seem to come from every direction. My feet crunch on broken glass, and I realize we're about to be swept inside the palace.

No. My heart stutters and rebels. I don't want this. I'm not here to be a part of an attack on the royal family.

For an instant, I don't know what to do. Nora is crying now. Something must have hit her in the face, because blood is streaming from her nose.

There. To my right, a woman falls, leaving a gap in the surge of people. Bits of glass glint along the stone walkway leading to the doors. I give Nora's arm a firm tug, and we stumble out of the crush of people just as another cheer goes up inside the palace.

"They've found the king and queen!" a man yells. The cheering grows louder.

"What's happening?" Nora gasps between sobs. "What are they going to do?"

People are still surging past us. I've completely lost track of my father. "I don't know." I touch a hand to my pendant, pressing the warm steel into my skin. I wish Mother were here now. I consider the steps, the rapid stream of people, and I'm glad Jax didn't join us.

Soldiers are rushing up the stairs now, swords drawn, and I drag my sister farther away. Some of the protestors have turned to fight, and the clash of steel against steel makes my ears ring. Mother would have been right at home in the midst of a battle, but I'm only at home in the bakery. I've never wanted to be a soldier.

A man takes a sword right through his belly. He coughs blood onto the walkway.

I slap a hand over Nora's eyes, but she grabs at my hand and tries to see, her mouth wide with horror.

A man speaks from the shadows by the doorway. "She's a child! Get her out of here."

I can't tell if he's a soldier or a protestor. There's too much noise, too much fighting. But he's not in the melee, so he must not be a soldier.

"I'm trying!" I shout back.

"Go down the side stairs!" he yells, just as a soldier spots us.

I suck in a breath, but I have no time to react. A blade is swinging in our direction. Nora screams, and I shift to cover her with my body. I brace for the impact.

It never comes. Just a screech of steel as sword meets sword. I catch a glimpse of black armor, a flash of red hair.

"Go!" the man shouts.

I drag Nora. We run, half stumbling down the stone steps. The cheering in the castle has grown louder, carrying over the sounds of fighting. Screams sound from every direction. Suddenly, we're not the only ones running down the stairs.

"Magic!" a woman shouts. "The king's going to use his—"

Thunder cracks behind us, so loud that I nearly stumble again. I turn to see a blast of light flare through every window of the palace, brighter than the sun, like a million bolts of lightning all at once.

All sounds of fighting cease. There's a pulse of sudden, absolute silence—and then screaming. A man is on fire, stumbling out of the doorway of the palace. Then another. And a third. The soldiers at the top of the steps have stopped fighting, and they're staring in horror.

So am I.

Nora tugs at my hand. "Where's Da?" Her voice is high and panicked. "What happened to Da?"

I don't know. *I don't know.*

A woman shrieks from the top of the steps. "He killed them all," she cries. "The king's magic killed them all!"

More guards are beginning to arrive. Panic still fills my chest, but I'm aware enough to know that things won't go well for anyone left here.

"Come on," I say to Nora. I drag her toward the streets, and we slip into the city just as guards begin lining up to block the fallen gate.

I want to run, but guards might be looking for protestors now, so I hold tight to Nora's shaking hand and head toward a tavern, walking sedately. I keep my eyes locked ahead and focus on breathing. On moving forward. Everyone else is rushing toward the palace, so no one pays us any mind.

The sun is so bright and warm, and it seems like a cruel joke, as if the sun has no right to shine. My chest feels hollow.

Eventually, Nora stops crying, and she looks up at me. "Was that true?" she whispers, and the horror in her voice echoes what I feel in my heart. "Did the king's magic kill them all?"

"I don't know," I say.

But I press a hand over that pendant, because I do know. I saw that flash of light. I heard those screams. I saw the flames.

The king's magic once stole my mother.

And now it's stolen my father, too.

SIX MONTHS LATER

CHAPTER 1

CALLYN

I've been staring out at the night for hours, daring the dawn to keep its distance, but the first hint of purple appears along the crest of the mountain anyway. When I was a little girl, my mother used to say that if you could throw a stone high enough, it would fly over the mountaintops and land in Emberfall.

She also used to say that if you were lucky, it would land on the head of one of their soldiers and crush their skull, but that was back when Emberfall was an enemy of Syhl Shallow.

I tried and tried when I was a child, but I never threw a rock over the mountain. Not even when rage over my mother's death propelled the rocks high into the sky.

I rub my hand over her pendant. I don't know why I'm thinking of my mother. She's been dead for years.

Any latent rage should be directed at my father, anyway. He's the one who left us with this mess. It's been six months, and there's no coming back from the dead. From what I hear, not even the king's awful magic can make *that* happen.

The moon hangs high over the trees, making the frozen branches glisten, turning the ground between the house and the barn into a wide swath of crystalline white. A few inches of snow fell at dusk last night, keeping away any customers Nora and I might have had for the bakery.

The weather didn't keep the tax collector away.

I glance at the half-crumpled paper with what we owe printed neatly at the bottom. I want to toss it into the hearth. The woman came by carriage, stepping fastidiously through the late-winter slush to enter the bakery—which is really just the main level of our *home*. Her lip curled when the door stuck, but I haven't been able to replace the hinges yet. She said we have a week to pay the first quarter of what we owe, or our holdings will be seized by the queen. As if Queen Lia Mara needs a run-down farm on the outskirts of Syhl Shallow. I'd be surprised if she knows the town of Briarlock *exists*.

A week to pay twenty-five silvers. Three months to pay the full amount due: one hundred silvers.

During the bakery's best weeks, my sister and I are lucky if we make ten.

If the tax collector sneered at the bakery door, I can only imagine her reaction to the rest of the property. It's likely a good turn of luck that she didn't want to see the barn. I can see the wood panel hanging crooked from here, snow swirling through the gap. The metalwork is rusted and bent. Jax said he'd try to fix it when he had time, but he's got paying customers, and he never likes to leave the forge for long.

Jax is a good friend, but he's got his own problems.

As usual, I wish Da had made a different choice. He could have kept on hating the king without risking everything we have. He could have participated in the protest without giving the rebels every coin we had. Now, the small barn and bakery are nearly impossible to handle on my own. Nora helps in any way she can, but at twelve, she's barely more

than a girl. I can understand my father's desire for vengeance—but it sure didn't put food on the table.

But if Da were here, *would* he help? Or would he be like Jax's father, drowning his sorrows in ale every night?

Sometimes I don't know if I should envy Jax or if I should pity him. At least he and his father *have* coins.

I could sell the cow. She'd fetch at least ten silvers. The hens are good layers, and they would go for a silver apiece.

But if I lose my access to eggs and milk, I'll have to close the bakery.

Mother would tell me to sell the whole property and enlist. That's what she would have done. That's what she always envisioned for me. It was Da who wanted to keep the bakery, Da who taught me how to measure and knead and stir. Mother loved soldiering, but Da loved the art of feeding people. They fought about it before the battles with Emberfall. She was going off to war, demanding to know why he wasn't enlisting as well. Didn't he care about his *country*?

Da would counter that he didn't want to leave his children in an orphanage just so he could die on a battlefield.

Mother said he was being dramatic, but of course that's what she ended up doing.

And it's not like he did any better in the end.

Even still, I can imagine Mother staring down at this tax notice, looking around the bakery and the needed repairs to the house and the barn. "You should have enlisted six months ago," she'd be saying sternly.

And if I did, Nora would . . . go where exactly? She's too young to be a soldier. She'd hate it anyway. She blanches at the sight of blood, and she's afraid of the dark. She still climbs into bed with me half the time, after she's had another nightmare about the Uprising.

"Cally-cal," she'll whisper sleepily, my childhood nickname soft on her lips as she winds her fingers in my long hair. She's the only one who can make a name like Callyn sound whimsical.

She'd be put in an orphanage—if she were lucky.

She *will* be put in an orphanage if I can't pay these taxes. Or we'll be begging on the streets.

My eyes burn, and I blink the sensation away. I didn't cry when Mother died in the war with Emberfall. I didn't cry when Da died and we had to beg for passage back to Briarlock.

I won't cry now.

Out in the barn, the hens start to cluck, and Muddy May, the old cow, moos. The door rattles against the wood siding. That faint hint of purple over the mountains begins to streak with pink. In a few hours, the glistening snow will be slush and mud again, and Nora and I will be bundled up, thrusting a hand under the hens to find eggs, bickering over who has to sit in the cold to milk May.

But those hens keep clucking, and a faint orange glow suddenly pokes from below the creaking barn door.

I sit up straight, my heart pounding. It's been half a year, but the events at the Crystal Palace are still fresh in my memories. The clap of thunder, the flash of light.

But of course there's no magic here. Could it be a fire?

Underneath my flare of panic, I have the thought that I should just let it all burn to the ground.

But no. The animals don't deserve that. I grab for my boots, jerking them onto my feet without waiting to lace them. I sneak down the hallway past Nora's room, stepping lightly so I don't make the floor creak. If I didn't want her to see the note from the tax collector, I definitely don't need her to see the barn burning down.

I make it to the steps down into the bakery, but I trip over my loose laces and nearly go face-first into the brick floor at the bottom. I overturn the stool where I sit to take orders, and it clatters to the ground, rolling haphazardly into the shelves. A metal bowl rattles onto

the bricks, followed by a porcelain dish I use for large loaves. That shatters, bits going everywhere.

Amazing.

I wait, frozen in place. My leg is at an awkward angle, but I hold my breath.

No sound comes from upstairs.

Good.

The cold hits me in the face when I slip out the door, but I hear the cow again, so I hurry through the frozen mud. I have a few weeks' worth of hay and straw in the loft, but I'm always good about stacking them away from the walls. Some must have gone moldy anyway, and moldy hay is always likely to start a fire. That stupid door needs fixing.

Like a working door will matter if the barn is a pile of ashes.

Halfway across the frigid yard, I realize the tiny glow hasn't spread.

And I don't smell smoke.

Muddy May moos again, and I hear the low murmur of a man's voice.

I freeze for an entirely new reason. My heart rate triples, the world snapping into focus.

Not a fire. A thief.

I grit my teeth and change course, striding across the yard to the small shed where we keep tools. Mother's old weapons are wrapped up under my bed, but I don't have much practice with a sword. The ax hangs ready, slipping into my hand like an old friend. I can split firewood without breaking a sweat, so I have no doubt I can make a thief regret his choices. I swing the ax in a figure eight, warming up my shoulder. When I get to the broken door, I grab hold and *yank*.

The door creaks and moans as it moves faster than the hinges are ready for. The shadow of a man shifts behind the cow. A blazing lantern sits not far off—the source of the orange glow.

I swing the ax around, letting the flat side slam into a wooden post. The hens go wild with clucking, and May spooks, jerking the rope where she's tied and overturning the bucket.

"Get out of my *barn*," I yell.

May spooks again, her hooves scrambling in the dirt as she shifts away from me, and she must slam into the man, because he grunts and then falls, tangling in the length of his cloak. Wood clatters to the ground beside him, and I hear a crack as it gives way.

"Clouds above, Cal!" he snaps, jerking the hood of his cloak back. "It's just me!"

Too late, I recognize the light hazel eyes glaring at me from under a spill of dark hair. "Oh." I lower the ax and frown. "It *is* you."

Jax swears under his breath and reaches for his crutches, dragging them through the straw. His breath clouds in the frosty air. "A good morning to you, too."

I'd offer to help him, but he doesn't like help unless he asks for it. He rarely needs it anyway. He rolls to his foot smoothly, if not agilely. He gets one crutch under his left arm, but the other snapped at the end, and it's too short now.

He looks at the jagged end, sighs, and tosses it to the side, then switches the good crutch to his right side to compensate for his missing right foot. "I thought you'd be asleep. I didn't realize I'd be taking my life into my hands by coming here."

I'm trying to figure out if I'm at fault here or if he is. "Do you want me to run back to the forge for some tools?" I offer. He used to make his crutches out of steel, but his father always said it was a waste of good iron. Now he's well practiced in making them out of wood.

"No." He tugs his cloak straight, then balances on one foot while he uses the good crutch to right the milking stool. "You can grab the bucket, though." He drops onto the stool, then blows on his fingertips to warm them. He puts a hand against the cow's flank. His voice gentles in

a way that only happens when he talks to animals, never people. "Easy there, May."

The cow flippantly seizes a mouthful of hay and whips her tail, but she sighs.

I seize the frigid bucket and hand it to him. "You . . . you came over in the middle of the night to milk the cow?"

"It's not the middle of the night. It's almost dawn." He grabs hold of a teat with practiced ease, and a spray of milk rattles into the tin bucket. "I didn't want to wake you by firing up the forge." He hesitates, and the air is heavy with the weight of unspoken words.

Ultimately, he says nothing, and the breath eases out of him in a long stream of clouded air.

He studies the bucket. I study him.

Most of his hair is tied into a knot at the back of his head, but enough has spilled loose to frame his face, throwing his eyes in shadow. He's lean and a bit wiry, but years of forge work and using his arms to bear his weight have granted him a lot of strength. We've known each other forever, from the time when we were children, when everything in our lives seemed certain and sure, until now, when nothing does. He remembers my mother, and he sat with me and Nora when she didn't return from the war. He sat with me again when Da died.

He doesn't know his own mother, but that's because she died when he was born. When his father is drunk, I've heard him say that was the first mark of misfortune Jax brought on the family.

The second mark came five years ago, when Jax was thirteen. He was trying to help his father fix a wagon axle. It collapsed on his leg and crushed his foot.

I guess the third mark almost came courtesy of my ax. "I'm sorry I almost cut your head off," I say.

"I wouldn't have complained."

Jax is one for brooding, but he's not usually so sullen. "What does that mean?"

He lets go of a teat to thrust a hand under his cloak, then tosses a piece of parchment in my direction. I drop the ax in the straw to fetch it.

When I unfold the paper, I see the exact same writing that was on the parchment from the tax collector, the note that's still sitting in my bedroom.

The number on his is twice as large.

"Jax," I whisper.

"The tax collector came to the forge," he says. "She claimed we haven't paid in two years."

"But—but the forge has so many customers. I've seen them. You—you make a decent living . . ." I see his expression, and my voice trails off.

"Apparently when my father leaves to pay the taxes every quarter, he's not actually paying them." Jax is dodging my gaze now.

I wonder if that means his father gambled the money away—or if he drank it away.

Not like it matters. Both options are terrible.

May's milk keeps spraying into the bucket rhythmically. I grab the other milking stool from the corner and plop it down beside him. Jax doesn't look at me, but he ducks his face to toss the hair out of his eyes.

I watch his hands move with practiced efficiency. His fingers are red from the cold, scarred here and there from forge burns.

I wish I knew how to help him. I barely know how to help myself.

My midnight worries feel so selfish suddenly, when I have options. They're not options I want, but they're options I have. I *can* sell the farm. I *can* enlist. I'd probably never make it past the rank of cadet, not with Father's stain on our family, but I could do it. Nora *can* go to an orphanage—or I could possibly use part of a soldier's pension to pay for her to have a guardian somewhere.

Jax can't do any of those things. His father barely stays sober long enough to work *now*. Jax is the one keeping the forge in business. He can't be a soldier. With a missing foot, few people would take a chance on Jax as a laborer—or anything else.

If they lose the forge, they'd lose everything.

I put a hand on his wrist, and he goes still. "You don't have to milk the cow," I say quietly.

He turns to look at me. There's a shadow on his jaw, and I wonder if he got the bruise when May knocked him down—or if his father did it. They live all the way down the lane, but when they fight, I can often hear it from here.

He must notice me looking, because he turns away—which says enough.

I let go of his wrist.

He keeps milking.

"We owe a hundred," I whisper so softly that I don't think he'll hear it.

But he does, of course he does, because he turns to look at me again. Our breath clouds in the air between us. He always smells faintly of smoke from the forge, and the scent is sharp in the cold air.

When we were younger, after he lost his foot, I would bring him sugared twists of dough from the bakery every day, along with books from my mother's library. We loved tales of romance or history, but our favorite books were the stories of wind and sky and magic from the winged creatures in the ice forests to the west of Syhl Shallow.

I remember the day my mother stopped me. I'd been twirling around the kitchen, eager to go visit my friend.

He won't make a good husband, she said, and the feel of her disapproval was so thick in the air that I felt like she'd slapped me.

She didn't let me go. I didn't see him for weeks, until he found some crutches and hobbled his way down the lane to our bakery.

I never told him what she said.

It didn't matter, because he's never said or done anything to indicate he even saw me that way.

But there are moments like this, when it's cold and dark and the entire world feels like it's caving in, and I wonder, just for a heartbeat, what it would be like if Jax and I were more than friends. If we were in this together.

"Callyn?" Nora's worried voice calls from out in the courtyard, high and frightened. "Callyn?"

I jerk back and inhale sharply. "In the barn!" I call. "I'm here!" I look at Jax. "She doesn't know," I whisper fiercely.

He nods.

The door rattles and creaks as she tries to push it to the side. She's in a sleeping shift, her feet bare. Her hair is a wild mess of tangles that reaches to her waist, and she's shivering wildly. Tears seem almost frozen on her cheeks.

"Nora!" I exclaim. I pull my own cloak free. "You'll freeze to death. You need to get back in the house!"

"I—I was worried—"

"I know. Come on."

At the barn door, I pause and look back at Jax. To my surprise, he's watching me go.

I wish I knew what to say.

He must not either, because he gives me a nod, blows on his fingers one more time, and turns back to the bucket.