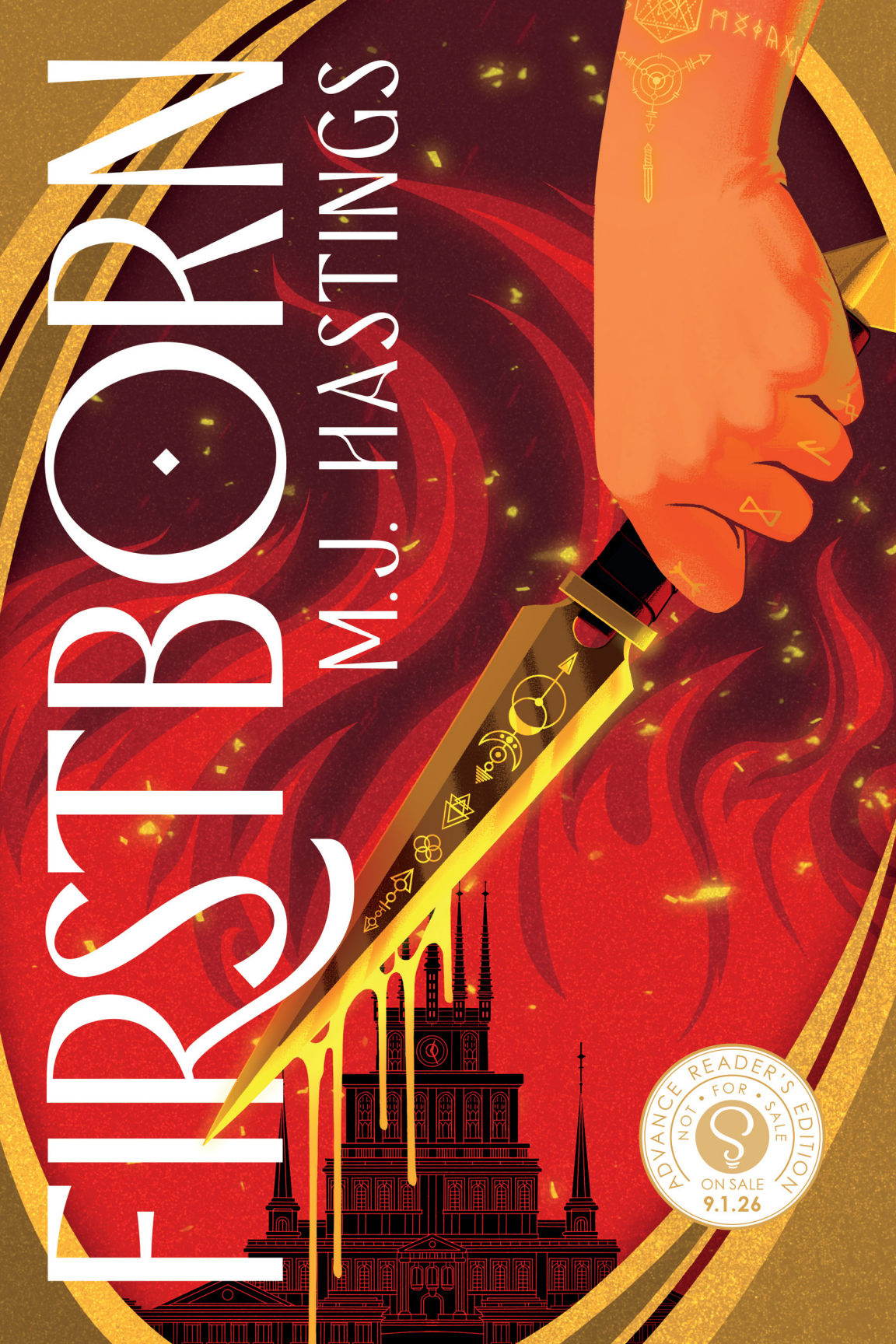
FIRSTBORN

M.J. HASTINGS



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Dear Reader,

I try hard not to be that person who says "I saw that coming" after hitting a plot twist in a book or a movie (nobody likes that person)… but as a book editor who does think about plotting all day, I do think that trait is part of the job.

And still, I had no idea what was coming for me in *Firstborn*.

This submission knocked me off my feet. I was locked in from the opening pages with its propulsive prose and epic fantasy world. This is a story about a government that divides people into birth order to serve their country. To fight magic-wielding enemies. To prove devotion to country before family. A world where…

The firstborn take up arms.

The midborn take up books.

The lastborn are *taken*.

You'll enter the firstborn barracks where children are trained to fight, make your way through the midborn schools where brilliant minds work to create anti-magics, and puzzle at the heartbreaking mystery of the lastborn children. And between all the multiple POVs, secret codes, and epic battles for their lives, is a sizzling love triangle. The heat is on in this book. The romance brings a refreshing new angle to themes involving emotional and physical intimacy in a world that denies both—but also deliciously delivers on your favorite tropes:

There's only one bed (*oh no!*)

Enemies ~~to~~ **and** lovers

A barn scene I can't quite talk about yet without blushing

Even when you think you know what's coming, there are plot twists upon plot twists, brilliantly planned to surprise and seduce you. With wide crossover appeal for YA and New Adult audiences, hand this book to fans of *Fourth Wing*, *The Hunger Games*, and *A Court of Thorns and Roses*…and to all the daughters and sons who love to take up books.

Happy reading.

Warmly,
Mabel Hsu
Editorial Director, Stonefruit Studio

For my mom and dad,
who gave me everything,
and to my sisters,
for whom I would brave anything

THIS IS A WARTIME BOOK

This book was printed during the Dursti Rebellion, in the year 936, in full compliance with the rebellion's regulations for conservation of essential materials. This book has been bound in anti-magics to make it indestructible and impenetrable by Arcanic magic, and any of its craft derivations, including runecraft or the illegal act of bloodcraft.

PART ONE

THE GOOD SOLDIER

ONE

The best Bastard is a dead Bastard.

—UNKNOWN

BRYN

It was a moonless night in the twenty-first year since the Arcania-Dursti ceasefire was called, and for nearly three hundred Firstborn soldiers, that meant one thing—the Trial of the Long Night would commence at dusk. I'd be naked before lunch, and dead by dawn.

The Long Night begins with flesh and ends with blood, the Sisters liked to say, as if their prose rendered the occasion mysterious and beautiful. I suppose it was better than saying, *We're taking bets on which of you live and which die*, or *There are no pretty soldiers in the top ten*. The latter was surely true as *I* happened to be in the top ten, and no one could be less impressed by my godsdamned face than me.

At the moment, it was *everywhere*—posted on every placard and billboard, flashing from every rune screen, the changing odds updating continuously thanks to the strange half magic we'd cracked from the Arcanists. It was worse in the Red Row, where more robust gambling took place, with the rich throwing down piles of money on their

favorite soldier. On the few occasions I'd walked past the Row, some asshole would inevitably frown at me, confused as to why I didn't look like the woman peering down at them from the screen, where my own likeness smirked at the world with supreme confidence. It was a superior version of me, all creamy skin, glossy hair, and taut muscles, the picture of a honed, healthy soldier. Even a whisper of curves. It was laughable. Anyone who'd met me knew I was all sharp angles. All sharp everything.

I was nearly to the Paddock door when a whistle sounded from afar. "Bryn Ruelle!" someone shouted. "Take your clothes off, Ruelle!"

Ignore, ignore, ignore. I clenched my jaw hard enough to crack glass, all of me tense as a bowstring as dozens of eyes found me, followed by a chorus of cheers and taunts. The guard at the Paddock opened the gate to admit me, but two overzealous bookies rushed us. I kept my head bowed as the guard pushed them back, until one got past him and shoved a camera in my face, ripping my hood back in the process. It took me one move to wrench the bookie's arm behind his back and immobilize him. I threw the camera on the ground, smiling when it broke into a dozen pieces.

"Fucking Bastard bitch," the bookie hissed. "Don't look *nothing* like your pictures!"

"How original of you," I said with a sanguine smile, pushing him away from me with enough force that he stumbled across the pathway, cursing me all the while, a chorus of *bitch* and *Bastard* and *scrawny nobody* intended to thoroughly insult me. He was too stupid to realize he'd done me a favor. The news would pick up the story about our altercation, and it would only increase my odds. *Ruelle looks tough. Ruelle looks ready. Ruelle is a godsdamned wild beast*, some broadcaster would report. This morning was all about driving up odds. Good odds got me in the Oval earlier; getting in the Oval earlier meant more kills, and more kills were my ticket out of the Citadel. More kills meant sand between my toes, the wind whipping my cheeks, the sharp

tang of brine—or so I had read. I'd never seen the North Sea, and the soldiers stationed there never returned. I couldn't blame them.

The Paddock door slammed behind me with a *clunk*, bringing with it the smells of sweat and adrenaline and the lingering scent of cheap soap. The communal changing room was a ruckus today, men and women disrobing without reservation, sleek muscled flesh everywhere you looked. Naked bodies held minimal shock value after years spent living in the barracks, but I might have enjoyed ogling a few of them had I not been so damned *vexed* by it all.

I walked past the inches of glorious skin, eyeing the screen displaying the rotating list of the Citadel's most infamous criminals. As usual, the same one caught my eye: ENEMY NUMBER ONE, it read. Beneath it was a shadowy figure, a man whose face was cloaked in darkness save for the jagged scar snaking down his hideous visage. The Reaper, the Arcanist ghost we'd been hunting for two years now. His face was featured throughout the Citadel nearly as much as mine, tacked to every post and door and spare inch of wall. "You'll be someone else's problem tomorrow," I muttered to his picture.

I made my way to a bench, where I sat for a long moment, steeling my nerves. Then I began to strip, moving too-thick fingers numbly down my army-issued jacket, and at last, *at last* I let myself look at the screens installed on every square inch of the space. It was a list of soldiers' names, containing—wouldn't you know it?—a picture of me. And my name was at the very top.

LONG NIGHT ODDS
Wagers taken at registered locations.
No credit. Cash only.
First Position: Ruelle, Bryn: 5 to 1.

I huffed. I'd been trading the top spot with Tasch—that heartless, disgusting brute—back and forth over the last week, but overnight,

my odds had improved to five to one. They were the best Long Night odds I'd ever seen.

For the past twenty years, the eldest Dursti sons and daughters had been conscripted into Durst's military academy, where they spent seven years becoming hardened, lethal soldiers who would be unleashed upon the Arcanists, our neighboring enemies, if they dared break the ceasefire again…or worse. They had magic, and we had none. Before we graduated, we were put to a final challenge—the Trial of the Long Night, where every Firstborn soldier must kill a Bastard to advance. Along the way, someone clever had decided a profit could be turned by betting upon which soldiers would make the most kills, and the pomp and circumstance around the Long Night had grown greater every year.

This year, that top soldier was me.

Five-to-one odds that I would not just survive, but make the *most* kills of any soldier, winning glory and bragging rights and the post of my choice. Any post, anywhere.

"You look especially grumpy today," came a deep voice from behind me. It was Kir, my handsome, overly chipper roommate, unbuttoning his shirt to reveal his long, lean torso. "The top spot chafing a bit, Ruelle?" He gave me a cheeky grin. Kir could find a way to flirt in the middle of a beating. I suppose it was why we were good roommates. Kir winked when I frowned. Kir laughed while I…frowned more deeply.

"I hate this," I groused. "The festivities, the cameras everywhere, my stupid face on every screen."

"Oh, come now, it's not *that* stupid of a face," he said with a smirk.

"I nearly had to fight the two bookies who waylaid me on the way in."

"Ah, well, lucky for you that fighting is what you do best. Can't really blame them for wanting to get an early look at you before Promenade. It's more money in their pockets if they can broadcast you first."

I threw down the jacket, then started on my shirt, while Kir stripped off his pants. "But I do wonder," he said, every inch of tanned muscle flexing as he stood, "if it's the bookies who are bothering you or if it's something else." He shot me a knowing look. "A twelve-year-old something who shares your last name."

"It's not," I said, tearing off my socks. *Wren*. My strange little sister. When would *they* come for her? We all knew the tired expression, the line from our Holy Book that had conscripted a generation of us into servitude. The Sisters of the Night whispered it like a prayer from beneath their blackened shrouds. To the rest of us, it was a curse:

The first children take up arms.

The second children take up books.

The third children are *taken*.

Taken where? I'd asked the Sisters as a child. *Taken to do* what*?* I'd received a slap across the mouth when I was a girl and a beating when I was a teen. I'd stopped asking questions, burying the fear deep within me. The Lastborn disappeared at age thirteen, taken to a secret location, trained in arts unknown to all but the highest members of our military, and when there were enough of them, when they were *ready*, they would stand against Arcania when it made the inevitable, critical error of invading Durst. But in two decades, not a single Lastborn had come home. It was coming soon, they whispered, the day when Durst's most secret, most formidable weapon would return, bringing a perfect, lasting peace. That's what *they* said. It should have eased my mind. It didn't.

"I don't care a whit about Wren," I said, stuffing my socks into my shoes.

"For such a good soldier, you're a terrible liar," Kir said, as his shirt came off.

"Asshole," I said with a roll of my eyes. Bra and underwear off, replaced with the only clothing I would wear for the next two hours—a standard-issue black sports bra and matching underwear, made from

athletic material that would wick and dry quickly, whether soaked with water…or blood.

I lined up behind Kir, who wore a tight pair of black briefs ending mid-thigh, while he shook his head at me and muttered something like "hopeless" beneath his breath. I could hear the churning mass of people standing just outside, the giddy crowd of spectators ready for the Long Night viewing of the Firstborn, stripped down to our underwear and parading into the Paddock like a herd of lethal prized stallions.

I might have lost my modesty long ago, but not my pride. Ignoring how my body was too thin in some places, too large in others, I forced my spine straight and long. Somewhere in the crowd would be a Bastard child, wondering if she could ever be more than the traitor's blood that flowed within her. I had once been that Bastard child, waiting for the day when I would show them who I really was—the best. Someone worth more than a life of servitude and field labor. Then the bell rang. Silvery trumpets sounded. The Paddock doors opened, and the Firstborn marched into the crowd in a long single-file line.

Cheers went up as we walked from the pavilion down the walled entry. The top bookies were nearest the doors, looking us over, taking rapid notes, calling out numbers and statistics, money changing hands while the leaderboard whirred and clanged, and the announcer called name after name from the speaker. Farther off, the generals sat together, as stoic and severe as a grove of dead trees, examining every muscle and divot and flaw and *weakness* of our bodies for the Citadel to debate before the sun set and the betting closed.

And thrown across each general's shoulders—a long red cloak, gleaming like a jewel against the flat gray morning. Its outside was red, for allies; its inside was black, for enemies; all of it was magicked against bullets and arrows and magical attacks. The red cloak was the mark of a Firstborn soldier's achievement, a symbol of strength and survival. If all went to plan, I'd be wearing one of my own by tomorrow.

If not, I'd be burned in it.

Then my name was called. I walked half naked beneath the ancient stone arch that had stood in the Promenade for centuries, had survived the fire the Arcanists had rained upon the Citadel when I'd been a child, passing the writing there for the thousandth time. *Bon mort*. It was the old language, and I wondered why no one had ever scrubbed it from the stone, this bit of common tongue that tied us to our enemies, wiped it away like so much else that had been erased from before the war. The message, I supposed, was as timely now as when it had been first carved into the rock. *Bon mort*. In the old tongue, it translated to *die a good death*. And I wondered if that would happen for me tonight, during the Trial, the most important—and possibly last—day of my life.

I scrunched my brow. *The second most important day*, I thought. The most important was one I couldn't remember.

I had been little more than a toddler when I was snatched from my mother, who'd cried and wailed and fought the soldiers that stole me away from the Oval, out of the arms of a lowborn woman little better than a slave. Had I been born a stone's throw to the west, I would have been an Arcanist myself, an enemy to be killed without question. Instead, I was a Bastard, the name given to those of us who'd been on the wrong side of the river when the Great War split our country down the middle, fracturing us along old ethnic lines—Arcanist versus Dursti. Any magicians Durst absorbed were, of course, executed, and when the heads stopped rolling, the rest of us—the prisoners of war; refugees fleeing Arcanic violence; people like me, whose territory had been annexed by Durst; anyone, really, with too much Arcanic blood—were interned within the Oval, the hundreds of acres of sprawling forest that was our prison. Our loyalties, our blood—our filthy, tainted blood that *could* manifest magic—couldn't be trusted after the war; two decades later, that still held true. The Bastards were the lowest members of Durst's martial law caste, a stratification established by the war's survivors who had clawed and scratched their way through the wreckage.

My mother had fought the Dursti soldiers tooth and nail, sobbing over the toddling daughter she might never see again. That's what I told myself, anyway. It felt better than the truth—that, like so many desperate Bastard mothers, she'd volunteered her baby willingly, offering me to the soldiers while knowing I might die during the Culling, but hopeful I would pass their test. That I would live. That *we* would live because I was different.

I was dressed in brightest red, and the Dursti soldiers took me to the forest's edge, where they sat me down like a living flame atop the snow. Our country had split, our cultures had diverged, and though we hated the Arcanists, we could not erase the legends that bound our lands. The Old Gods still roamed this wood, and today they would cast their judgment upon me.

The Dursti soldiers slit the throat of the lamb they'd brought, leaving it before the pines, leaving *me* there with it, then crept to high ground, taking no chances with the beasts they hoped to summon, the scopes of their rifles trained upon me. And they watched.

The flamewolves came that day.

I imagined the soldiers holding their breaths, the rifles shaking in their hands as the wolves padded forward on silent paws, teeth like razors, claws like knives, all while they debated whether it was a kindness to pull the trigger and put a bullet through my head. Bullets could not harm the wolves; only magic could do that, and the Dursti soldiers watching had none. The wolves sniffed me. They growled. Their hackles raised, saliva dripping from their wide-open maws, hot, fetid breath drenching me. They lunged…for the lamb.

The wolves bypassed me, fangs sharp as rune blades biting and slashing at the dead lamb while I watched. I sat stock-still, dressed like a drop of blood, until the wolves retreated into the forest, refusing to turn their backs to me, their eyes glistening like cold stars on a frozen night before their forms wavered and disappeared.

And when they were gone, and I still had not cried, nor whimpered,

nor made a sound, I was someone else. I was reborn. The Dursti priestesses runemarked me that day, obliterating the crude marks given to the Bastard born at birth, inking a long series of symbols down my left forearm that would forever define me, that would trace me wherever I went. I was a Bastard no more. I was full Dursti, with all the rights that accompanied it. I was not even two years old, and I was already a soldier.

The Culling changed my fate, and the fate of everyone tied to me. That of my mother, who was conscripted to bear two more children. That of my brother, Asa, then my sister, Wren. Asa came screaming into the world just two years after me, but it took my mother years to produce tiny Wren. We didn't know our fathers, whether it was the same man, or different. I only knew my mother was sent away regularly with the expectation that she would conceive. The midwives had known that she shouldn't have another after Asa, that a third child wouldn't go easy on her, and they were right. It was Wren's birth that had killed her.

But there was no time to think about that, because cheers erupted as I walked through the Paddock, cameras trailing me. A row of commentators stood in a line, staring into the cameras as I walked past, fragments of broken sentences tickling my ears.

"This is the first time children chosen during the Culling have participated in the Long Night, and already one has claimed the top spot… Ruelle, sister of the brilliant Asa Ruelle of the Midborn Makery, is a talented Breaker and code master herself, making her a formidable opponent physically and intellectually… Ruelle and the other top ten contenders will enter the Oval early, giving them the best chance of making the most kills before sunrise, but also putting them in the vulnerable position of being hunted by the Legacies before the rest of the Firstborn are admitted… This Long Night is the most decorated to date and is expected to generate enough revenue to feed the Legacies for a year, to provide infrastructure and build schools, to dole out more plots of land, to perhaps end the practice forever…"

Legacies—the politically correct label someone had ascribed to the Bastards to make us feel better about our treatment, about how we were still interned in the Oval decades after the war's end. I held my head high as I strutted like an overly confident peacock, wearing an expression on my face that I hoped looked haughty and dangerous. Fragmented conversation hit my ears: *Ruelle* and *Bastard* and *the one to beat*.

"*That's* her?" said a loud bookie, in the front row, wearing a too-tight shirt and sniffing with the characteristic habit of a coca addict. "Looks like a stiff wind could blow her over!"

I took a step closer to him. "Why don't you come down here and find out?" I said with my best saccharine grin. He had the good sense to take two large steps back, putting him outside of striking distance and keeping his godsdamned mouth *shut* as I walked past. I smirked. The cameras clicked, the leaderboard whirred, and someone cheered at the threat of violence.

I walked, chin high, spine erect, every inch the predator, part of me reveling in the moment—it was *my* name the crowd called, *my* name they cheered louder than the others—the rest of me dreading how the night would end.

But for as many looks of awe, for all the cheers and hoots and whistles, there were also looks of scorn. There were boos. There were curses, and there were jeers. The Citadel liked to brag that it had eradicated the old prejudices against the Bastards, but we knew better. The Dursti had long, unforgiving memories. *The best Bastard is a dead Bastard*, they liked to say.

"Bastard bitch!" someone yelled, and it cut through the crowd, sharp as wolves' teeth. It was a term that the Citadel's anti-Bastard faction had taken to calling me, all of whom would be delighted if someone buried a rune blade in my belly tonight.

"We should be hunting you tonight, bitch!"

"Criminal! Whore! *Traitor!*"

Then a sound split the air, clean as the throwing of a knife, and a heap of metal landed before me. I gaped.

It was a sickle. One of the light nonmetal ones, sharp enough to thresh wheat for the granary, weak enough to be useless as a weapon should any Bastards attempt an uprising. The Citadel had learned that lesson the hard way. It had bought us another decade of Long Nights.

"Bastard!" cried another voice. "Go back to the Oval, you *fucking Bastard bitch*!"

I froze. I'd heard the slur enough that it had lost its effect, but something about the sickle, thrown at my feet, sent the blood ringing in my head. As if that were where I belonged. A poor, uneducated, traitor-born nobody, fit to do nothing more than work the fields. Twenty years since the war, and I was still little better than a criminal. Something within me began to burn.

I picked up the sickle. I slammed it hard over my naked knee, hard enough that a sharp *crack* sounded through the Paddock as the alloy broke and splintered. I didn't feel the large red mark bloom across my leg, didn't care that it would leave a nasty bruise by nightfall. I only heard the silence of the gathered crowd as I took the sickle, now in two pieces, and threw it on the ground.

The crowd drew a collective breath.

Frenzied cheers erupted. The leaderboard flashed, *plink-plink*ing as the odds changed, every camera now zooming in on my face, which I very much hoped conveyed nothing but grim determination and lethal, dangerous focus. And the crowd began to chant, "*Bastard Bitch! Bastard Bitch! Bastard Bitch!*" I supposed it was better as a cheer than a slur.

And then I was atop the dais, standing on a scale while one of the technicians weighed me and another measured my height, my chest, the circumference of my waist, the length of my arms and legs, announcing my stats to the crowd. A beam of soft light appeared over me, and when I looked to the left, there I was—a giant holographic

projection of me allowing everyone to get a good view as I was weighed, measured, and patted down, a hundred eyes raking over my mostly naked form, murmuring and whispering and hollering. I opened my mouth, and the technician took a scan of my teeth. My identifying marks were noted—a birthmark here, a scar there, my many lumpy lash marks, as that would be all that was left to identify some of the soldiers found tonight. The leaderboard above the Paddock changed by the second, whistling and whirring, and I didn't allow myself to look.

Another raucous set of cheers went up. I turned and saw Tasch's massive form magnified by the runic holograph at another weigh station. Even from here, I had the sense of him leering over me, smirking at the crowd. He raised his arms, and the screaming intensified, every divot of his considerable muscle on display. Gods, I hated him. The bookies shouted, scraps of paper flew through the air, the broadcasters nodded and spoke to the cameras, and I moved off the platform, still wearing little more than my underwear.

We headed to the outdoor training field, where fifty sparring rings stood, each of them occupied by a Bastard chosen to fight us while the Citadel looked on. I watched the first round of soldiers spar, arms crossed, waiting for my name to be called, when someone clapped me on the shoulder.

"Ruelle!" It was Nikt, standing with Kir. "Join us for a drink after the fights. We'll watch the results come in!"

"If you start drinking now, you'll be wasted by nightfall," I countered, watching the Firstborn land punches against the Bastards chosen for today's demonstrations.

Nikt gave me a cheeky grin. "I might die tonight. Might as well enjoy what's left of my last day!"

"Stop being dramatic," I sniped, rolling my eyes at him. "We're certain to die if we enter the Oval drunk."

"Yes, I'm so concerned for you, Number One Firstborn," Kir said dryly.

"Ruelle," Nikt said, slapping me a little too hard on the back. "Relax. Have a damned drink. Best to have a bit of fun before someone puts a knife through your belly!"

"Unlikely," said Karis, her dark eyes twinkling as she pointed to the wager board. "Look at her odds. Five to one. She's the favorite! Even better than Tasch, and certainly better than you lot!"

"Bah, we're not important enough to end up on the wager board," said Kir. "And that's how we like it. Flying under the radar makes us less likely to get killed, isn't that right, Bryn?"

"Probably," I said. "Wouldn't doubt if someone takes a stab at me just for the money."

"Tasch might, jealous bastard," Karis said. "But the opposite could also be true. How much can I pay you to take him out?"

Nikt scowled. "I'd do it for free, if I could get my hands on him."

"Bryn's the only one quick enough," said Karis. "But she's far too principled."

"Wet blanket," Kir muttered under his breath.

"So," Nikt said, looking at me through lowered brows, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "What's your strategy for today? Who are you hunting with?"

I cleared my throat, carefully watching the soldiers sparring below me, refusing to meet Nikt's eyes. "I'll be alone."

The other three stared at me for a moment, then burst out laughing.

"The top Firstborn doesn't have a pack lined up for the Long Night?" Nikt said, wiping his eyes.

"Sort of typical, innit?" said Karis, her cheeks rosy from laughter.

"Seriously, are you mad, Bryn?" Nikt asked. "You're the best of us and all, but there are thousands of them"—*them* being the

Bastards—"and only a few of us. They'll pick you off, easy as kittens. You need a team."

"Yeah, join us!" Karis said.

"Might end up in the top ten with you in our pack!" said Nikt. "Extra rations for a year!"

"Like you need to be fattened up," Karis scoffed, and Nikt rubbed his stomach, looking offended.

"I'll have you know that this stomach was hard won by many beers and stolen rations," Nikt said. "We'll take you, Ruelle!"

"Anyone would take her, dummy," Kir said to Nikt, staring at me in challenge. "It's that she *wants* to be alone, isn't it, Bryn?"

I shrugged, mindful of the clicks and whirs of cameras around us, holding my chin high with feigned confidence, while Nikt waved a hand at me. "Bah, she doesn't have a pack because she doesn't need one! She'll probably kill a dozen Bastards without getting a hair out of place! Rack up the body count! Makes you the one to beat."

"Or the one to kill," I said. Their faces soured at that bit of candor. "All the betting does is put a target on my back. Makes me the symbol of everything they hate."

"Trust me, they hate all of us," Nikt said, Karis nodding emphatically as a new round of participants entered the sparring rings. "As for me, I'm staying near the forest's edge. Don't want to get taken down by one of the wolves, or ambushed by Bastards hunting in a pack. Hopefully I'll run into a group of the younger ones and make an easy kill."

"There's no sport in that!" Karis said. "And we don't attack children, you creep."

"I didn't say *children*," said Nikt. "I'm not a monster. I said *younger ones*, like our age, which is perfectly sporting."

"Bryn, it's the most important night of your life," Kir said, his brow crinkled in concern. "It's not safe to be alone. You don't want to be killed. Or worse, fail to make a kill and become a Bastard."

"I've already been a Bastard," I said with bite. "And considering they're weaponless, overworked, and half-starved at the best of times, I'm not overly worried." But silence rang out. I'd made it weird with the pesky truth.

"Maybe I can find a very old one, and put him out of his misery," said Karis, clearing the awkward pause away with a grin. "There's a community of elderly near the south Oval. I hear they just sit there during the Long Night, ready to die, hoping some Firstborn will make a clean kill. That's where I'm headed."

"Noooo," Nikt said, drawing out the word. "Do *not* go there. That's where the smugglers wait. The ones that sell us into the Trade."

"They don't sell *us* into the Trade," Karis said. "It's the Bastard children they're interested in."

The Trade. The faceless fear whispered about in dark corners, the Arcanists' black market network that traded in humans—usually defenseless Bastard children—selling them off as slaves to the highest bidder. It was the real-time proof that Arcanists hid in our midst, working against us.

Nikt shrugged. "Might be easier being sold off. The thought of killing something makes me queasy."

I forced my jaw to remain unclenched, ignoring the feeling of Kir's eyes on my face.

Karis clapped Nikt on the back. "No one would want you for the Trade anyway," she offered. "But Bryn should go for *him*." Karis gestured to the sign displaying the mangled, scarred face of the Reaper. "If you captured the Reaper, Bryn, you'd win without question. He alone counts as thirty kills. You'd kill two birds with one stone! Capturing the Reaper and ending the Trade, plus winning to boot."

"Pssh," Nikt said, waving a hand at her. "He's not even real. He's just a compilation of all the criminals the Dursti police can't catch, rolled into one person to make them look less incompetent."

"He's *real*, you idiot," Karis chided.

"Then how's he hiding here? With the security, the anti-magic? It's not possible!"

"How does the Reaper manage to hide among us and steal the Bastard children?" Karis snapped back. "The Arcanists find ways around our safeguards!"

"He's real," I said, interrupting their bickering. "The Breakers have spent the last two years hunting him and his network, trying to find the children he's sold into the Trade."

"See! Bryn would know," Karis said.

Nikt threw up his arms. "But you never found him, did you? And that's because he's…" He dropped his voice to a whisper. "Not. Real."

The arguing grew louder, and Kir finally interjected by asking, "So that's a no to the drink, then?"

But then my name was called. I didn't bother turning around as I waved a hand at him. "Can't. Things to do."

Nikt bellowed after me. "Make a stop by the Row on the way home, Ruelle. Maybe getting laid would loosen you up!"

I gave him a rude gesture, hoping the press didn't see it, but Nikt, godsdamned attention whore that he was, held his arms wide and turned in a circle. "Did you hear that, mates?" he announced to the soldiers around us. "The deadliest Firstborn in history has things to do! Knives to sharpen, boots to polish! As for the rest of us, we'll be at the Pour Bastard later, getting pissed on her behalf if you'd like to join us!"

Karis pulled him down, laughing as I walked toward the sparring ring while they chanted, "Five to one! Five to one! Five to one!"

Every one of them was an annoying asshole. I smiled to myself. I hoped they all survived tonight.

My Bastard opponent was sweat-slick and spent by the time I stepped into the ring. It wasn't the set of his feet or the flex of his muscles I marked as I sized him up—it was the tightness bracketing his mouth, the resignation behind his eyes. Dead, hopeless eyes.

As untrained partners go, he was decent, pushing me enough that I could show off without overexerting myself. I didn't miss how he surrendered as soon as I got him on the ground, how he let me pin him to prevent the beating a less generous Firstborn might deliver—like the one Tasch was presently giving his opponent. A smart soldier would have pounded him to a pulp. But I wasn't smart. He yielded, and it was done. I'd gotten what I wanted, working up a healthy sweat, all while the cameras clicked nonstop and some enterprising reporter droned on about how fit and fiery and *excited* I looked. Then I left for the changing room, the crowd giving me a rousing cheer as I exited. I found a flask next to my things. Kir must have left it, pushy bastard. I took a long draw, the liquor burning down my throat. I would need it for what came next.

I could avoid the unpleasant business no longer. I headed for the Lastborn dormitories, cutting through an early autumn garden to avoid the bustling Long Night fervor, relishing the quiet, the crunch of pea gravel, the stubborn flowers still clinging to summer's end, until I crossed onto cool gray flagstone and the mighty shadow of Midborn University. Each stone set into its ancient walls was as cold and perfect as the Midborn students themselves, including my genius brother. *Asa*. He was somewhere within those ancient walls, saving the world or curing cancer or both, probably, at this very moment. Our enemies could wield magic, but it was the Midborn who had learned how to hack it. Manipulate it. Unweave its mysteries into the science we called Craft so that we stood a chance against enemies who could hurl fire, drown us on dry land, boil our blood, and choke the air from our lungs. Then there were the Detectors, the Midborn detectives who would yank you from your bed if they heard the bloodsong, the inaudible music that denoted some unwitting soul had quickened into a magician. It was rare, but it did happen among the Dursti, especially among the Bastard-born who were just a few generations removed from the Arcanists. I pitied those who transformed. A quickening meant death.

If Asa was the golden child and Wren was our would-be salvation, I supposed I was the clever one. I was a Breaker, one of the army's appointed code busters, a vocation assigned to me after my childhood assessment proved I was good at unscrambling nonsense and putting it back together.

I keyed in the runic combination to the wooden door hidden within the bricks, the one used by maintenance and service folk and other Bastard born, like the person I used to be. I was careful to hide my face as I stepped into the protected quadrant where the Lastborn congregated.

And there she was, my strange little sister, standing in a small garden, her feet caked in dirt. I couldn't help thinking, not for the first time, that Wren Ruelle had always been odd.

First, there was her appearance. White-blond hair, dangling to the middle of her back like a silver flame. I could have shot her from across the other side of the Oval with hair like that. Her eyes were black as crows, except around the irises, where they were rimmed in a cool spring green. It gave her gaze an intensity beyond her years. It unnerved others. It unnerved *me*.

She'd never cooed as a baby, hadn't made a sound, in fact, until she was five, when she unexpectedly began speaking in full sentences, with a vocabulary far too advanced for a child. "When a birth kills the mother, it leaves a mark on the child," her wet nurse Saskia would say when she'd had a bit too much *sakt* and felt like bragging that her great-grandmother had been a fabled seer. "See the mark beneath your sister's jaw?" Saskia pointed to the dark bit of pigment slicing below Wren's chin. "That ugly bit of bruise? Your mother's death was written on your sister's flesh before she was born."

"It was not," I bit back, not believing a word of it. "And it's *not* a bruise. It's a birthmark. I have it and so does Asa." Wren and I looked nothing like sisters. She and Asa favored each other, fair and willowy, while I was small for my age, with dark hair and thick brows that I was told I furrowed too frequently. But the birthmark we all shared.

"You lost the mark when you sliced your chin open as a young'un, Miss Bryn," said the nursemaid. "No, your sister's mark is different. It's a death mark. There's no healing, no stitch or medicine that could wipe it away," Saskia explained, shrugging as she folded some of Wren's swaddling things and tucked them into a shabby army-issued drawer. "There are dark and terrible things waiting for Wren Ruelle."

I fought the chill edging along my spine, recalling the final promise my mother had wrung from me as she'd died: *Don't let* him *take her.* My mother had lost too much blood, Saskia reassured me when I'd worry over the promise like a dog with a bone. My memories of her were blurry at best—a curtain of shining dark hair, the press of her warm cheek against my own, the soft smell of lilies. But the conviction in her eyes as she demanded I protect Wren from *him*—whoever *he* was—*that*, I remembered with startling clarity.

I'd forced myself to roll my eyes at Saskia, to laugh off the superstitions attached to the Old Gods. But as I watched Wren now, I wondered if perhaps *some* of the wet nurse's observations hadn't been entirely off base.

The early afternoon was cool, dew still lacing leaves and petals, sending an iridescent sparkle wherever the sun touched. And though I crept up on her as silent as a cat, it didn't stop Wren from sensing my presence, even with her back to me.

"Hello, Sister," Wren announced. She turned, fixing me with her peculiar black-green eyes.

I cleared my throat. "Hello, Wren. What are you doing?"

"The dirt feels nice. Have you ever tried it? Walking on it barefoot?"

Despite my best efforts, my brows drew together. "Why would I try walking in wet dirt?"

"For fun, of course."

"It doesn't *look* like fun."

"I suppose you're not familiar with fun." She didn't say it cruelly, but it stung all the same. It was a point I couldn't argue with. I watched

her lyrical gracefulness, the way she moved to music I could never hear. What would it be like, I'd always wondered, to have been born last? To never have to spar, or run until I vomited up my breakfast, or shiver half naked in the freezing cold? To never learn to take a beating or to give one? To be the chosen one who would disappear, only to return and end the war? If that had been my life, perhaps I, too, would dance. I had, sometimes. Wren forced me to twirl along with her, to learn the complex dances the Sisters of the Night taught the Lastborn. She'd tried to convince me I had a talent for it—*it's the same reason you're good at fighting, the rhythm, the cadence*—but it was a gracious lie. I'd always stepped on her toes.

I cleared my throat. "I can't stay long." I hated this part, the explaining I thought I needed to do, the apologies I should make for being busy and distant, the pretense of closeness; it was all the difference between doing something because you wanted to or because you had to.

"Of course not," Wren replied. "You've had somewhere to go since you were eight. So why don't you tell me why you've come so you can remove the guilty look from your face."

I forced myself to spit out the words. "I've come to say goodbye."

Wren's tiny brow scrunched. "Why?"

I shrugged, swallowed. "Just…in case."

She cocked her head. "In case of *what*, Sister?"

My frown deepened. "In case I die today."

Wren's gaze flicked to mine. "Is that likely?"

I took a step closer, lowering my voice. "It's the Long Night, Wren."

"I understand that, Sister. And I understand it's possible you will die, but I'm wondering if it's *probable*."

I mumbled, "Guess not."

"Excellent. It's far too early for the macabre."

I rolled over a rock with my boot, chewed on the inside of my mouth. "What about you? Any word on when you'll…depart?"

"Such things are never known."

"Yes, but…you have a way of knowing things."

"I suppose I do." Wren shrugged. "Mother did too, or so I'm told." I withheld my grimace. *Don't let him take her*.

"Any word of where you're going, or when you'll return?" *Or if you'll return*.

"Of course not." Wren narrowed her eyes at me. "Did you say goodbye to Asa?"

"No," I bit out. What would I have said to him? *I'm sorry? I failed you? I pushed you away?*

"Wren! It's time," one of the house mothers called across the quadrant, hands on her hips. The Lastborn went on lockdown during the Long Night, a security measure instituted after an angry Bastard used the Trial's distraction to storm the barracks and kill four children before a soldier shot him dead. We had minutes left, and I…I scrambled for something wise, something weighty or warm to say to my sister, but my lips wouldn't move. The seconds ticked by as if in slow motion, as Wren took my hands in hers, squeezing them gently. Her smooth, tiny hands. Would I ever see them again?

"I know what our mother made you promise as she died, Sister," Wren said softly, as if reading my thoughts, my guilt. "It was unfair of her. And I think it's time you let it go." She said it so gently, and I wondered who was truly the older one between us. "I'm going to be fine, Bryn. *You're* going to be fine. And we *will* meet again."

"You don't know that," I whispered.

"My heart knows it," Wren whispered. "Your life has been hard. And I didn't help, did I? I gave them another reason to tease you. Because I was strange, unlike the rest of the children. I know it bothered you." She said it in that unaffected way that somehow made it worse.

"It didn't bother me," I lied.

"Brave Bryn," she said. "Maybe the next time we meet, you will see

me as myself. Not a child who needs protecting or coddling. Not an obligation. Not the reason our mother died."

"I don't see you as that," I said, the words thick and false across my tongue.

"*Wren Ruelle!*" the house mother bellowed, not bothering to hide her irritation. I was suddenly *very* interested in the dew drying against my boots, in every blade of grass, in anything that wasn't this goodbye to my stranger of a sister. Somewhere, a bell chimed. Wren squeezed my hands once more, then released them.

"Don't worry about me, Bryn. I'll make my own way in the world." She pulled me into a hug—quick, tight, fierce. It was over before I remembered to squeeze her back. "I wish you all the luck in the world, my brave, strong sister. And whatever you're looking for tonight, I hope that you find it."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. "Goodbye, Wren," I said softly. "Take care of yourself."

Wren nodded. "We'll meet again."

I tried to shake off the voice that whispered otherwise. I took a final look at my little sister, drinking her in. The childish roundness of her face, the glow of innocence she wore like a second skin. I hoped life never beat it out of her. I turned. I walked away. I did not let myself look back.

A scant fifteen minutes had passed since I'd left the armory, and it was that sliver of time that changed my life.

I wondered, later, what would have happened if I had not spent that time in the quadrant. If I'd bypassed the Lastborn's barracks, foregone pointless goodbyes, and dressed for the evening's festivities. Because when I returned to my room, something was waiting for me.

On top of my bed sat a familiar slip of ticker paper. An encryption. I'd worked through a thousand of these before, a communiqué containing a series of runes that had been intercepted and required

interpretation. But never outside the heavily warded, anti-magicked room in the armory. And certainly never in my bedroom.

My eyes tore across the page. It was a cipher, a jumble of runes and symbols across different dialects. The time stamp showed me it had just come across the wire at half bell, a little over twenty minutes ago. And someone had immediately snuck into my room and placed it atop my now-bare bed.

Clutching the paper in my hand, I strode into the hall and looked around. *No one.* I looked beneath my bed, through the drawers, in the tiny closet, and found nothing out of place.

I scanned the page again and realized instantly that this message was above my security clearance. Far above it—a complex runic series, in the old languages that brilliant students like Asa studied at the university. Only a handful of symbols were familiar to me. I might have tossed it in the bin, except there was one word I decoded in a second, as easy as breathing. It made the hair on the back of my arms stand up.

RUELLE.

I blinked. Something within me went hot and cold at the same time.

I needed to be smart, rather than curious, to burn the damn thing, take my shower, and leave for the feast. But I was not smart. I looked at the clock. I would give it ten minutes, then forget I'd ever seen it.

I removed my decoding kit from my pack and went to work. Two more words jumped out. **ARCANIA. HIRSCH.** My blood turned to ice in my veins. Hirsch, the cruel leader of the Arcanists. The reason I was heading into the Oval tonight. The reason we'd lived under the threat of war for two decades. The minutes ticked by as I scribbled across the text, marking words here and there.

After a few minutes, I realized I'd been mistaken. It was *not* my name on the paper, sandwiched between the scrambled names of our enemies. No, the name that jumped off the page was far worse.

WREN RUELLE.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo © R. McCracken

M. J. HASTINGS is the oldest (and bossiest) of five sisters, which explains how she grew up to become an attorney, one who refused to have the imagination beaten out of her. She graduated from law school with honors and went on to serve as a federal law clerk and practice complex civil litigation. Her greatest education, however, was her childhood in rural Kentucky, which left an indelible mark on her life and her writing. M.J. lives in Louisville with her family. *Firstborn* is her debut novel.

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