Chapter One

Mammoth Mountain layered in a never-ending black snow. They didn’t call it the Neverend Forest for no reason. On-and-on it went, cradling the walled-village of Tartyr upon a mountain plateau, overlooking the black fog that floated in the night. 1,460 light revolutions added up to a full rotation around the sun, or so it was configured by the deities. The light lasted for twelve hours, then the dark would fall for seventy-two, yet the sun could never strike through the black clouds, which were precipitated from the black lakes. It was warm enough for the surface temperature to keep lakes from freezing over, but cold enough for the snow to fall. The rumors spread about how Fernis, the tale of a dragon that lived at the summit of Mammoth Mountain, kept the ground warm with its ferocious breath. But no one had seen Fernis before. He was a myth yet to be discovered. Vaien hoped she’d be the first one to uncover the truth.

She stood on guard in a cobblestone alley, lathered in an icing of black snow. The torchlights warmed the streets, but she hid within her black knight’s armor, spying through the helmet’s visor for enemy attacks. Controversy conjured up a cult within Tarytr, and although Tartyr was a religion with medieval text, the deities sure made it difficult for anybody to get in nor out. But hopefully one day Vaein would release Fernis from his cave at the summit and seek power to do what she wanted. For now, she was enslaved to the walls, chained between them with no chance of unshackling herself to freedom—and not from Tartyr, but from her father, Mortalmore.

He aged like molding, blunk cheese. His ideals fitted perfectly like the bear pelts that wrapped around his feet. And poor Zorky, the bear that hid in her cave for centuries, or so Tartyr’s Prommeth speaks about. In its written text, Zorky would have eternal life, gifting the village of Tartyr with food, warmth, and peace, as long as Zorky was left alone, and it was her cubs that would pay the ultimate bargain. The Prommeth got its name from the prommeth pines, a tree that shot its needles up like a porcupine when it felt threatened. The Prommeth held all religious text, making it the most valuable and vulnerable item in Tartyr.

While the vague, gloomy sunlight faded in the black clouds, the church bell tolled to the sky, commencing the village to all be inside, besides the deities on duty, which included Vaein for knightly protection. No one must be awake in the short twelve hours of light, or else the demons would spot the praisers. That was why the Black Angels sprouted the land black—They could keep hidden in the seventy-two hours of shadows.

Suddenly, a praiser at the end of the cobblestone street stood in a white robe and hood, and beneath the robe was a gold mantle. Vaein stepped out like how she was trained. She stomped two steps forward, entering the alleyway. She twisted, then slapped her wrist against her body’s black steel. Her hand unsheathed the sword from her waist, holding it up for threat.

The golden praiser moved forward, sliding her clogges through the black icing of snow. Vaein’s legs tingled beneath her steel greaves, and she believed it was Fernis’ fire inside her.

The praiser was too close for comfort. Vaein kept guard, following her orders of a Knight. She could not speak as her tongue was slashed with a sword long ago. That was a sacrifice knights made, shedding their blood and honor on knightly rule.

Something shined in glamour from the praiser’s pocket. Vaein loaded her weight back. Through her thin visor, Vaein’s eyes stared straight through the female betrayer, giving final warning to the demon’s that latched onto her back, but it was too late. The praiser unsheathed her knife, initiating Vaein’s power stroke. She sliced the praiser’s stomach from the side, then she slammed her sword into her head, gushing through the woman’s skull, and laid her to bleed white all over the street.

Why would an unshielded citizen try and attack a knight with one of the most powerful weapons on the street? Vaein was smart. She knew it was a Tartyen Trap. Back in the quiet, she pulled out a thin whistle, snuck it through her helmet, and blew it. A Klaw flew around the corner with its massive black eyes and fur, perching upon Vaein’s armored shoulder. Vaein gave the Klaw a name, but no one would ever know it without a whisp from her invisible tongue.

Vaein bent down to the woman’s corpse, cutting off a chunk of her gold mantle. She stained it with white blood and handed it to the Klaw’s massive claws, hence its name. The bird flew off her shoulder and over chimneys of wood-fired smoke. Its fur wiggled with its speed, casting down to Tartyr’s most ancient home.

The Kathedral.

Vaein’s mother, Maeigh, grew to be within the deity’s word. She constructed torture devices in honor and sacrifice for Tartyr’s well-being. If a praiser wanted marriage, they both had to sacrifice themselves to a whole day, drawing a random card that would tell them which device they had to fight the pain off in. Philosophy from the Black Angels spoke of living through hell in order to fight against future chaos, and that was critical in relationships. If they survived the hell, then their strength was dignified and pure.

The Black Angels were one of the five deities. They communicated between the living and the dead, transporting orders between our soil and the Underworld. The deities also included a Staen, a god of strength, a Zerker who’d control the natural anomalies of war and disasters, a Lisp who gave signs for praiser’s future, and the overruling man with immortality—Mortalmore. It taunted Vaein like a curse to know her father had eternal life, and she wondered if she did too. No one experienced that phenomenon before, not even the Angels.

The Klaw dropped the gold fabric into Mortalmore’s hand as he stood at the top of the bell tower. The Kathedral’s bell hung upside down, facing its bottom to the sky for the Black Angels to hear, and one bell was buried beneath the Kathedral, booming to the Underworld. Mortalmore evaluated the white blood on the fabric. He crunched it with his fist and marched down the long staircase.

Mortalmore stood behind a mantel, corralling a big crowd of Black Angels as the bells tolled out the call. They all sat in the pews with their black wings at rest. The wooden seats creaked in the midst of the eerie convention. Everyone silenced.

“The Underworld lurks beneath us, ready to pelt our feet with swords through the soil while they watch Tartyr poisoned from a shadowing cult,” Mortalmore announced. “The Brights deny Tartyr law and hope to incinerate our past and power. They’ve attacked one of our own tonight in threat to their uprising. Their member scarified themselves from one of our knights’ blades, rebounding the celebration of death into their ridiculous rituals, stealing our faith by fighting fire with fire, attacking us with our own vile of death.” The Black Angels sat with anger while they were all quiet and mature. If they gossipped, who knew who’d hear about this outside of the deities. “The Brights want to stay awake in the light and sleep away the night. They want to ban our technology that teaches people the empowerment of pain. They want to burn Tartyr text and turn us into ash!” His voice echoed through the chamber of the Kathedral. “Every Bright must be captured, and they will be put in the spotlight in a hand-chosen contraption in honor for their sacrifice. And like the written text—”

“The white blood writes,” the chamber of Black Angels repeated.

Vaein studied the area of stone homes, curious for any light-stalkers peering through their windows. But as she could tell, she was all alone with the praiser’s dead body. She lifted her hands under the woman’s limp arms and pulled her through the black snow.

“It’s time to unveil the demons that roam in our walls,” Mortalmore said. “It’s time to put an end to the infections in our people!”

Vaein pulled the body around a corner, bumping into the Wheeler with his four-wheel cart. He lifted the body onto the cart and rolled away with it. Vaein watched him leave, then walked back to her stake post.

“We must live through the darkness to tolerate the toughest pain,” Mortalmore exclaimed. “The strongest Tartyens can fight off any demon from the Uppers if they have trained themselves through Tartyr text!”

The Wheeler brought the body into the backyard of the Kathedral. He rolled to a well within a small, stone house. And inside the well bubbled an acidic, black oil. He dumped the body down into the depths of the well, splashing the corpse into the dark muck.

“My Black Angels,” Mortalmore said. “Call out to the Underworld. We need a purifier.”

Chapter 2

Dark logs and stone cozied the wealthy manor Mortalmore and Maeigh owned. Vaein knew she was spoiled. Their house sat right beside Brandy Brook, which flowed the cleanest black water from Mammoth’s peak. The poorest praisers lived at the far end of the brook, after the wealthy got their chances first for clean water. Dirt and prommeth pine needles mixed down the stretch where holding ponds slept. Most praisers didn’t care though, as long as they were occupied within the walls. It was quite the honor to be a Tartyen.

Vaien invited herself into the manor with its pleasant heat. Mortalmore and Maeigh ate a soup with red-glowing mushrooms, a broth from decomposed bones, oats, and spicy herbs. Vaein usually skipped the pottage stew and feasted on grounded-up veggies. Her favorite meal had to be the cub’s meat with a praiser’s homemade sauce, thickened with a taste of spicy, yet sweet, suckle berries.

Her parents drew their attention to her as she closed the door.

“Vaein,” Maeigh said. “Attend with us, will you?” Vaein eyed them up, then sat down on a handcrafted, dark-pine chair at the dining table. If only Vaein could yell at her father to stop smacking at his portage, would she find this conversation pleasant. “We were issued that you were the one who impaled the Bright last light. Is this true?” Vaein stuck out her hand with the palm facing up, meaning, *yes*. “Have you seen this woman before?” Now, she flipped the palm of her hand to the Underworld. “Interesting. Mortalmore hadn’t known her either.”

“She was brought in from the outside,” Mortalmore said.

Maeigh dropped her jaw to Mortalmore. “No, that can’t be. We’ve been on guard and bordering Tartyr non-stop. There’s no possible way this could have happened. It had to be someone from the inside.”

“Or someone from the inside allowed a forester in,” Mortalmore said. Vaein appreciated the break in investigation as the nearby fireplace crackled. “It’s time to discuss bloodline.”

Vaein lifted from her seat in a tantrum. She whipped the palm of her hands to the Underworld again.

“Sit down!” Mortalmore demanded. “The last thing we need is another fury frenzy from you.” Vaein sat back down, keeping her eyes off her parents. Maeigh walked away from the table to hitch something from the basement. “Vaein. We need more family. Right now, with just the three of us, I’m the only one who can outlast the Brights. Until then, they’re going to try to kill you and your mother to torture me. But if we add more siblings for you with our bloodline, we can be an unstoppable force to be reckoned with.” She huffed, angry and disgusted at her father. “All it takes is a pint of my white blood into yours. Our genetics would work its magic, and you’d arise new blood into our family, but we need your approval.” Vaein slammed the palm of her hand against the dark wood, splashing the portage all over Mortalmore.

Maeigh surprised Vaein, pulling her onto her feet. Mortalmore grabbed the giant cork device from the basement door, approaching Vaein with its belly open like a hollow egg. Vaein struggled in her mother’s hold. The wooden cork clanked shut around Vaein, constraining her arms inside the humiliation device. With a click of a hefty lock, her parents pushed her out the front door to face the public in embarrassment.

“Are you sure we should leave Vaein by herself?” Maeigh said.

“She’ll be fine,” Mortalmore said. “Besides, we know where she’s going.”

In the busy night-streets, Vaein reached a one-bedroom home within her cork. Most folks peered an eye on her, but everyone knew not to mess with a deity’s daughter. She triple-knocked on the door, a code of triangle her and her boyfriend have, although, there wasn’t such thing as dating in the Prommeth. Only marriage.

A muscular, handsome man opened the door. He wore a vest over his athletic Stygian wear. Stygian captivated Vaein. She would watch her man compete in an intense snowball fight at Tartyr’s arena. It showed off the town’s top free-for-all survivalist, but usually, Rain won.

He gripped the lock of the cork in his giant hand, crushing it like an egg. He released the cork from her body. Finally, she was able to freely move her arms again . . . Just a benefit of having a deity of strength for a boyfriend.

“The Staen wins again,” Rain said, cocky as ever. “What did you do this time?”

Vaein stole a knife from his desk, slashed white blood from her hand, and wiped it across her lips.

“Your father wanted to impregnate you?” Rain said.

Vaein held her palm up.

“Are you?”

She turned it upside down with wide eyes.

“I don’t know,” Rain said. “Maybe you’re into that.”

She tilted her head at him, hands upon her waist now.

He chuckled. “I’m just messing with ya.” Rain pulled the blinds over the windows. They both sat down on his bed. “I heard you killed a Bright today. What was it like?”

Vaein searched around his bed and found his quill. She tossed it up in the air and dunked it into a stein. She smirked.

“Just that easy, huh?” he said. She nodded. “Well, enough talking from you. It’s my turn.” He stood up and twirled. “I have a match tomorrow night. It’d be great to see you there.” Vaein stood as well and gave a momentary curtsey. “Awesome.”

Chapter 3

It neared hours till the light shone in the sky, but in the meantime, Vaein trampled to the bleachers with the rest of the praisers. That night was packed. Most cheered for Rain, the Staen who could never lose a battle, yet competitors like Torsicko believed they would demolish him one day. Who knew a simple snowball fight could be so serious? But the word flew around, almost as if the demons whispered the Bright’s death into people’s ears while they slept. And demons were praisers who didn’t obey Tartyr’s law. They didn’t have powers, only their greed, arrogance, and attitude. If they could control a situation, they would make it happen, showing the illusion of power.

A twilight storm pounded the arena in black snow. Many torchlights lit the stadium, even some staked on the playing field of snow and ice barriers, along with a few dead oaks, and prommeth pines. Rain sweated already, and they hadn’t blown the trumpet yet. Torsicko stood near the poorer praiser’s bleachers, a place where he belonged. Poor judgement would haunt a man like that, preparing another devil for the Upper. However, Vaein appreciated his Tartyen ambition . . . Added some nice spice for show.

The Odds played their orchestral instruments, welcoming Mortalmore and Maeigh to the overview, a deck hovering over the privileged praisers. Many applauded, but Vaein searched around the stands. Silver never clapped. Instead, she’d glow her grey eyes around, chilling the creeps into anyone she wanted to. It was a rare genetic for glowing eyes around there, but not obscure. Vaein despised her though—It was pretty obvious she was a Bright, she hadn’t been caught though, and it was wrong to assume judgement on someone before forcing them to a crucial, torturous death. More entertaining than Stygian, or so Vaein thought. She was captivated by her mother’s work.

“What a glorious snowfall,” Mortalmore announced. “Who will fall with the snow tonight?” The crowd cheered. “Let the match begin!” The trumpets blew, sending the ten competitors into their free-for-all.

Rain slid behind an ice wall. He scooped up snow and rolled them into spheres. Behind a dead oak, playing tag with the wall of the arena, Torsicko constructed his snow into triangle-shaped frisbees. The snow was so sticky, the competitors could literally build what they envisioned. One competitor built snowmen to mimic a man’s shadow, like bait to purplers, a main source of fish with rich, purple scales.

Rain spotted a girl sprinting for the central ice dome. He launched a snowball, pelting her in the head. Vaein jollied with fast claps. Silver turned to face her, gleaming with her glowers. And she wasn’t afraid to hide them. Silver loved to taunt Vaein. But it grew on Vaein, like a message from the Black Angels saying how much power she had over others in Tartyr. Vaein hoped to change the town one day, in a way where everyone could trust her and feel safe within her hands. But there would never be a time when a regular citizen wouldn’t want power like that. Power was greed, and greed was gutsy, even when they knew they would have to face the immortal Mortalmore.

A ficro flew upon Vaein’s shoulder. Ficros were small, robin-like dragons, born through the one-and-only, Fernis. Although Vaein couldn’t speak, she convinced herself that she could understand animals. And she could. They spoke to her. If only Klaw spoke to her—but Klaws were forbidden to speak. They had only one job—to send and receive messages.

“This isn’t good,” the ficro said. Vaein squinted her eyes at the little guy. “They sabotaged the arena. It’s not safe here.” She feared, wishing for a more detailed answer. “We gotta go.” A flock of ficros flew out of the roof, screaming their wild flames into the chaotic, falling black snow.

Torsicko sliced a guy’s neck with his sharp snow. A little white blood leaked out from the hit. There were two left. Torsicko, and Rain. Rain hustled across the field, sliding behind a dead elk tree. A nearby prommeth expanded its needles after his feet vibrated the ground. But above him, the ficros distracted them all, everybody except for Torsicko. He hunted Rain down. Rain bolted from the tree, dodging the snow from Torsicko’s throw.

“You’re sick, Tor!” Rain said. “That’s how you got your name, right?”

Torsicko stopped in front of the prommeth tree. All was quiet again. The ficros left, and the fans mumbled between each other, listening to the tension.

“You’re named after melted snow,” Torsicko said. “Not quite a strong name for a Staen. You sure have a melting point.”

Torsicko heard his footsteps circling the tree. He bowed down, just missing Rain’s snowball. Rain ran into a giant snow fort. His ammo needed reloading. Torsicko chased after him with one more frisbee.

Vaein got up from her seat and maneuvered around praisers. She made her way down the stairs to the short, stone wall. Her hands laid upon its snowed-over top. Mortalmore saw her, eyeing her up in confusion from the deck. He tapped Maeigh’s arm.

“What?” Maeigh said. “What am I not seeing?”

And through the falling snow, they watched her. Carefully. And Vaein watched Torsicko. And Torsicko watched Rain. And Rain watched his opportunity unfold. When Torsicko snuck by, Rain jumped from an oak’s branch, slamming a snowball into Torsicko’s head.

Torsicko collapsed to the ground in pain. He groaned and moaned, holding his hands to his head. Vaein gripped black snow, squeezing so hard that it melted instantly. Silver dripped a bright, silver tear from her glowing, grey eyes. She eyed down Vaein. Hard.

Rain stood with his hands in the air, listening to the cheers from his praisers.

“Almighty, Staen,” they chanted. “Almighty, Staen.”

Torsicko pushed onto his feet, pissed at Rain’s remarkable sportsmanship. Rain twisted towards him. Torsicko wasn’t finished. He undid his overwear, pulling it off slowly. Beneath, the golden mantle and white robe stole a breath from the crowd. And then, he snapped his fingers and emitted a spark. BLAM! Torsicko’s clothes roared in flame, and he stood amid it, angrier than ever. Rain stepped back.

Vaein didn’t know what to do. She watched in her silence, shocked at the pain Torsicko could withstand. Yet he wasn’t immortal. How was he doing it? His clothes burned away, leaving the fire to clothe him in new wear.

“Capture him!” Mortalmore yelled. The flutes fluttered their warning protocol song. Black Angels swooped over the walls of the arena, tornado-ing around Torsicko, attempting to kill his flame, but nothing did the trick. A black angel tore Torsicko from the ground, dragging his feet on the snow as they flew across the field, but the angel’s wings burned with heat. The angel released him, lighting the falling snow with its wildfire.

Torsicko reached into his flame and took out a ball of fire. He aimed his vision at Rain, then launched the fireball at his face. Rain fell to the ground, his face burned from the immense heat. Beneath Torsicko’s feet, lava flooded above the surface. It moved with him like a rolling rug. The lava melted the snow as it crept towards Rain’s limp body. Vaein jumped the wall and landed in the arena. She sprinted through the flock of black angels, swarming the sky with no action plan against Torsicko. And in the nick of time, she blocked him from touching Rain.

“Very brave of you,” Torsicko said. “For a girl who can’t talk, you sure send a strong message.” He rounded up another fireball into his hand. “Unfortunately, you have no strength.” He shot the fireball towards her face. A black angel swooped down and took the hit, its wings igniting into a wildfire too. And then another, and another. As hundreds of black angels drove chaos around Torsicko, protecting Vaein from harm, she pulled Rain onto his feet and snuck out of the arena with him.

The crowd dispersed to their homes, hiding from the violence.

It seemed they had a real-world devil on their hands now, and no one knew where to start. Demons couldn’t overpower the almighty deities, but Torsicko—

He proved them all wrong.