

Chapter 2

It was a warm day at Eveshi. The city was in the middle of the kingdom, far away from both sea and mountains. For most of the year, the rain wasn't a problem: three to ten days of rain a month. The problems were in winter. More than fifteen days of rain a month, more than half coming from the sea, the rest rumbling down from the mountains, and the forest undergrowth growing without control. In spring, half of the work was to clear again the paths from herbs and thorny bushes.

That month had been particularly harsh, with over twenty days of incessant thunderstorms from the mountains. The storms from the mountains were the worst: they would strengthen for days before finally move. When that happened, they were filled with rain and electricity.

It was a sunny day. The city happily welcomed the warmth, after days of cloudy skies and cold winds from the mountains. Several children were playing in the streets, running and laughing, and the adults returned to their woodcutting works in the forest.

One of those men was walking in the wood with a little girl running after him to keep his pace. They deepened into the forest for a good bit without speaking. When they finally stopped, the girl was out of breath. Calmly, the man knelt to pick a few herbs.

«Dad, why had I to come?», complained the girl. «I could be playing with my friends at home».

«I need to show you a couple of things. It will not take long», the man reassured her. «It is important. You will have to recognize those herbs by heart, when you will be fifteen».

«Why should I worry about something I'll have to do when I'm fifteen?».

«I am serious, Nawde», replied her father. «You will understand. Now, you just have to observe and learn».

«But I already know a lot about herbs!», continued the child. «That one is deadly nightshade. Over there I see a wolfsbane, and near that yew there's a plant of moonflower. This part of the forest is known for its abundance of lethal herbs».

«And do you know how to use them?».

«Most of them are extremely beautiful!», exclaimed the girl. «The fire lily is my favourite flower».

«Do you know about the castor oil plant?».

«Ugh, of course», groaned Nawde. «That plant is the one from which we extract that disgusting oil. There's one right there, near the moonflower».

«It is the deadliest plant I know. A single seed kills a grown man in two days, in agony. And the worst thing is that it is unstoppable. There is no antidote». The girl's eyes widened in disbelief.

«The castor oil plant?», retorted. «But that's impossible!».

«Do you want to try?», ironically asked the man.

«No!», cried Nawde, jumping backwards.

«Do you know why I want you to know about castor oil seeds?».

«To make me poison someone?».

«Be serious», her father blamed her. «Because they cause severe diarrhoea and vomit. If you eat something poisonous, you have just one chance: eat a couple of seeds. Five if what you ate was particularly lethal».

«Eating a poisonous plant to save myself from another poisonous plant?», repeated Nawde, sceptical. «That's insane!».

«Strangely, castor oil seeds are most dangerous for humans: it takes eleven of them to kill a dog and *eighty* to kill a duck», explained the man, then he suddenly lowered his voice. «It would take nine to kill you. However, if you are poisoned in some other way -like the wolfsbane- you'll have to eat a seed together with what poisoned you. It seems to be an efficient cure for us».

«Nine? But I'm normal. And who are "we"». The man sighed deeply.

«No, you are not. Not completely, at least», he said.

«What do you mean, dad?».

«Centuries have passed since the dragons have disappeared, but somehow they generated a race of humans called Dragonbloods. You, like me, belong to this race. We are hated and hunted, just like

dragons were hunted and hated. They were more powerful than humans, we are just different. The only thing we inherit from draconic blood is wings. They start to grow at the fifteenth year of life, and reach their full size at seventeen. I will teach you how to slow down this growth».

«Why should I slow it?».

«Because they will come for you», gravely said his father, looking away. «To kill you».

«But you haven't got wings», argued Nawde, pointing at his back.

«That is what you will have to do when you reaches the seventeenth year». He closed his eyes, as if speaking costed him a great effort. «You will have to cut them off and burn the wounds».

«Burn the wounds?», repeated the girl. «Dad, I'm scared. I don't want to burn me».

«But you will have to!»», shouted the man, suddenly enraged. «Or you will *die*, Nawde!». He fell on his knees. «I am sorry. I am so sorry. But you *have* to understand».

«Dad?»», hesitantly called the girl.

«I will teach everything I know about plants. I will teach you the basics of combat. Then I will be ready to die».

«Dad, what do you mean?»», begged him Nawde, even more frightened. «Are you going to die?».

«I am ill, Nawde. I think I will live for other two or three years. No more».

«Two or three years? Why? Dad, please, don't die».

«I am ill, I told you. I am trying to heal myself with herbs, but so far it just slowed down the disease».

«There must be a cure! We must get to the capital and bring you to a doctor!».

«No!», shouted the man, instantly silencing the child. «They would see my scars and they would understand. And they would come for you, then!».

«Dad, you need a doctor!», started to cry Nawde, grabbing his jacket. «Please, don't leave me».

«I am sorry, sweetheart. There is nothing I can do», sadly murmured the man, crying as well. «But you have to be strong. You have to survive. I ask you this favour, the most important favour I ever asked you. Live».

«Dad...».

«Promise!».

She hesitated and took a deep breath. «I promise».

«Take a few seeds of castor oil's», ordered the man, drying his eyes on his sleeve. «And then we will start with the herbs you will need». Nawde nodded.

«Are we the only ones to be strange?»», she asked.

«No. But the others cut their wings just like I did: probably, you will never see a Dragonblood with wings». He sighed and turned to the wolfsbane. «Do you know why there are so many lethal plants, here?».

«Because there's fertile ground?».

«Because I planted them all years ago, when I discovered you were a Dragonblood. I cultivated them for you, Nawde».

«How can you know I'm one of them? I look normal».

«Your eyes, sweetheart, your eyes», murmured the man. «Has someone ever told you you have funny eyes?».

«Yes, Mr Hossyn told me that grey eyes aren't that rare, but he never saw grey eyes with red shades».

«Only Dragonblood have two-coloured eyes», he explained. «Nobody knows what it means, or why we have them. Normal people doesn't know that, otherwise we would have no chance of surviving».

«But what is, exactly, a Dragonblood?»», asked Nawde.

His father sighed again. «Sit down, sweetheart. It will be an interesting story». He waited for the child to sit near the deadly nightshade before speaking.

«This is a story my mother told me. We pass it from Dragonblood to Dragonblood, to keep it alive. This is the story of Dragonbloods. This is *our* story».

«Centuries ago, dragons and humans lived in peace. They were good years. No Dragonblood

slaughtering, no hate for dragons. But love cannot live without equality. Dragons were stronger and smarter than humans. They were sources of wisdom and knowledge. Their flaw was their low number».

«Humans were hundreds of thousands, dragons were tens. They were looked at with respect, but not out of love: out of fear. Humans thought of them as tyrants. And in the end, they acted against them».

«Dragons were overrun. They were hunted down for years, until they disappeared. And when the humans remembered the Dragonbloods, they treated us just like dragons. But Dragonbloods were more difficult to recognize than their draconic parents. Some of them cut their wings, some just hid them. People started complaining about the bloody slaughter. They were tired of blood and death. The King decided to put an end to it».

«King Jewins recruited a group of veterans, naming them "Dragonblood Security Guards". The guards' job was to control the Dragonbloods. They listed the name and location of almost every Dragonblood in the kingdom. Those were called "Listed Dragonbloods", and they were granted the rights every human had. They were still looked at with suspect, but the war was over».

«One night, the King was found dead in his bed. Everyone incriminated the Dragonbloods. Poison, it was said. A counsellor, called Asheart, organized an offensive against them. It has been a shameful act. He brought an army against a group of scared citizens. The Dragonblood Security Guards were renamed Dragonblood Hunters. King Jewins's daughter, princess Vymaha, tried to defend them, but she was poisoned just like her father. All Listed Dragonbloods were murdered by guards and neighbours».

«The survivors fled. They barricaded themselves in the ancient Fortress of the Moon, in the northern mountains. Counsellor Asheart besieged the fortress for two years, in vain. The fortress had been built by dragons for flying creatures. It was unreachable by soldiers».

«One day, the Dragonbloods suddenly surrendered. They were taken and brought to Syeh, where they were processed and beheaded. Only a hundred Dragonbloods survived, but they were no more seen in the kingdom until their descendant came back. Since then, all Dragonbloods in the kingdom cut their wings off». He finished his terrible tale. His voice was hard. «We are forced to hide».

«Why did they surrender?», asked Nawde, shivering with horror. «If the fortress was unreachable, why did they give up?»

«There is a poem about it. I do not know who wrote it, but it seems to be from a Dragonblood survivor».

«A poem?». The man nodded.

*«The world in peace was,
humans stopped their madness:
we accepted their jealousy,
they accepted our flaws.*

*Then the good King was gone,
humans went crazy again,
the Princess cried in vain,
Asheart the murderer had come.*

*The ancient Fortress housed
our brothers fleeing from the human death,
two years, it firmly stood against Asheart,
and for two years we lived.*

*Then the mountains sent their monster,
of all their guardians the one who is merciless,
human justice condemned the guiltless.
Completed was the human murder».*

«It is quite a sad poem», commented the man.

«The poem speaks of a monster. What monster?».

«It means an earthquake», explained her father. «After seeing one, I think you too would refer to them as merciless monsters».

«Just one more thing, dad», said the girl, sadly lowering her eyes at the sudden thought. «Will I die?».

The man opened his mouth to say something, but no sound came out of it. He took a deep breath and tried again. «Yes. You will probably live long enough to have children, but in the end they will find you. No Dragonblood can survive the Hunters».

The child nodded. «What about the herbs?».

«This is foxglove. It is not as lethal as the deadly nightshade or the wolfsbane, but it is also a innocent-looking plant», explained the man. «And that one, your favourite flower, is a fire lily, also called flame lily. All the plant is poisonous, especially the roots, and cause diarrhoea, vomit and loss of consciousness. Over here you can see a plant of Angel's Trumpet, so called because it is said that its flowers are the trumpets of the angels coming to guide you to your death. They are poisonous, obviously».

«And that plant over there, with the white flowers?».

«That is a henbane. In small quantities is not lethal, but I can assure you it is still poisonous», said her father. «If you want to survive, you must know how to use poisons».

«Will I ever need it?».

«I do not know, sweetheart», he answered, frowning slightly. «I hope not, but no one knows for sure».

«I have a question», continued the girl. «If I meet another Dragonblood, what should I do?».

«Who knows? Some Dragonbloods think just like humans. Some do not».

«What is that supposed to mean?».

«That is supposed to mean that I do not know. Other Dragonbloods can be dangerous just like humans».

«So, if I meet one...».

«If he knows you are one, you have either to kill him or to run. If he does not, do not tell him».

«But another Dragonblood could help me!».

«Or kill you», retorted the man, angered by the girl's stubbornness. «I cannot tell you. Do not trust anyone! Not even your mother knows you are a Dragonblood!».

Nawde felt a void in her stomach, and it wasn't because of the castor oil seeds. «Mum doesn't know?».

«Of course she does not. Nobody knows, I told you».

«If mum doesn't know», repeated Nawde, sinking in desperation. «I really can't trust anyone».

«That is the truth».

«Not even Dragonbloods».

«No», confirmed the man. «Not even them».

It was too much for a ten years old girl. She broke into desperate tears, while her father impotently watched at her.

«Not all of them», hurriedly corrected himself, trying to comfort her. «Not all of them».

«But you just said that...».

«It does not matter», he interrupted her. «You will be free to trust someone, if... if that someone helps you escaping the Hunters, knowing you are a Dragonblood».

«And you think I'll ever meet that someone?».

Her father looked at her. She had stopped crying, but large tears were still in her eyes. She was clinging to her remaining hope. The truth had the power to shatter that hope. He did not have the heart to kill her hope so mercilessly. She was still a child.

«Yes, you will», he finally lied. «On the word of Byhor son of Wyenis, *my* word, you will meet

someone worth of trust». Nawde dried her eyes and smiled slightly. Her hope brightened her eyes, making them spark.

But the heart of her father sank in sadness, knowing that his little flower was destined to die.

Nawde was carefully distilling the wolfsbane extract -so concentrated to be able to kill at contact-when the boys arrived. They were five, four boys and a girl. They were looking for fun, and since they had heard that that part of the wood was particularly filled with deadly plants and herbs, they had made their way through the undergrowth, not knowing of the comfortable path Nawde used.

When they finally reached the little opening where the girl was working, they were tired, angry and with cuts all over their bodies. They really needed to vent their irritation on someone. And when they saw the little girl busy with gardening works they decided to target her. The first insults were light, aimed more to irritate than to offend.

«Nice flowers, gardener», mocked her the taller boy. «But I fear they won't survive the winter», he added, stepping on the lilies.

«No!», cried Nawde. «You idiot! That is the only plant of fire lily in all the wood!».

«You called me idiot?», angrily said the boy. «How dare you!». He made a few steps towards her.

«Chill, Yevan», said the girl of the group, with false sweetness. «She told the truth».

«Very funny», muttered the boy.

«Get off», ordered Nawde. «Those plants are lethal».

«Oh, really?», ironically said another boy. «I think the little witch is trying to scare us. Let's find this out». He took the vial from her hands. «Hold her», he ordered to the others.

Two boys grabbed her arms and pulled them backwards, making her fall on her knees.

«No, please, no!», screamed Nawde. «That's deadly poisonous!».

With an unpleasant smile, the boy dropped some liquid in his mouth. He immediately spat it out. «It's disgusting!».

«I'm telling you this plant is mortal!».

«I don't think so, or you wouldn't have been here, gathering it. It must be some sort of juice», replied the boy, as he threw the vial at her, shattering it and spreading the venom all over the girl.

«You... The wolfsbane», she murmured, too scared to say anything else. Not realising what they had done, the five turned and run, laughing light-heartedly. «What did dad told me to do if poisoned?». She looked at the moonflower near her. And next to it there was the castor oil plant, the deadliest plant on the planet.

«Eat a seed», she remembered, taking it out of her pocket. It was wood-brown and smooth. It tasted horribly.

Nawde was clutching her stomach in agony. Like fire, the pain was spreading to her entire body, making her scream. She plunged her fingers in her own flesh, trying to stop the pain. Convulsive movements were shaking her body. Tears of pain filled her red-grey eyes.

«You must be strong, Nawde», said her father. «The castor oil will save you, but this is its price». The girl lost consciousness.

A terrible pain woke her. It was pitch black, and she started to scream again. Twinges of blinding pain stabbed her stomach. The pain intensity raised again, she saw a blinding white flash and then everything turned black.

It was morning when she woke again. She was suffering more than ever. She suddenly turned on a side and vomited.

«Nawde!», called her father's voice. «How are you feeling?».

«Dead», she croaked, before losing consciousness.

«She is strong». It was her father's voice. «She will survive this».

«How could that happen?», asked her mother. «She has been poisoned!».

«A group of stupid boys made her eat the roots of a poisonous plant».

«What happened to them?».

«The wood is filled with dangerous plants. Some of them can be lethal even on contact», explained the man. «When I found them, they were already dead».

Nawde's mother got up and left the room.

«I see you are awake», greeted her.

«How could they poison themselves? They didn't got through the wolfsbane».

«They did not exactly *stepped* in it», admit the man.

Nawde looked in his eyes. «Dad, what happened to them?».

«I found you unconscious, and I brought you home. I was so angry. I took some wolfsbane's essence and searched for them. I found them before the others. And then...».

«Dad, what did you do when you found them?».

«I told them they had stepped into a poisonous plant, and I gave them the essence. I said it was the antidote. They all drank it, little bastards. They poison a girl and then trust her father to give them an unknown liquid in a vial».

«They drank the wolfsbane?», asked Nawde, looking at her father in horror.

«They drank it», he confirmed.

«You killed them!».

«Yes, I did», replied the man. «And this is what you will have to do, too. My family survived here in Eveshi thanks only to their skill with poisons».

«You're a murderer!».

«I took my revenge», coldly retorted her father. «They would have killed you, if you had not got the seeds with you. You would not have made it to the city».

«How can you be so calm?».

«Because agitation does not help concentration, and when you poison someone, you must be concentrated», explained the man. «You will learn this, too».

«You knew I was going to be all right!», she accused him. «You did it on purpose!».

«Of course I did», replied her father. «I am not going to save you from the Hunters only to have you killed by a group of stupid kids».

«They didn't kill me! I ate a seed!».

«I know», said the man. «And you do not know how near you got from death».

«You said that *nine* seeds would have killed me: I ate one», retorted the girl. «What do you mean now?».

«A seed can kill a full grown man. You are ten», he answered. «Two seeds would have been fatal».

«Two seeds...». Her voice faded.

«*This* is why I ran after them».

Nawde's shoulders fell. Her eyes finally stopped sparking, dying silently. She bended her head.

«There's really no hope for me? Do I have to become a murderer?».

«I fear the answer is yes». She nodded.

They used wooden staffs to train in combat. Nawde had always been agile, but she never wielded a weapon, so she felt really uncomfortable as her father gave her a staff and assumed the expression of a general looking at his soldiers.

«Let me start from the basics. Guard on!».

The girl pointed the staff to his chest.

«You must practice», muttered the man. «Feet a little farther from each other. Stand a bit lower, and bend your legs. You have to be ready to attack and defend every second».

She adjusted herself, still aiming at her father.

«Go for the head, if you can. A hit in the chest can be serious, but it rarely kills at once. Hit their heads, at they will fall dead at your feet».

She corrected the aim.

«Focus on yourself and your enemies, but do not forget the rest of the world. Keep an eye on where you are stepping». She nodded.

«Go».

She swung the staff to his head, only to have him parry it easily. She attacked time and again, but the man was always faster. Not even one of her attacks reached him: they all stopped against his staff. After five minutes of unsuccessful efforts, the girl stopped, panting.

«Good job, sweetheart», complimented her father.

«I hit you not even once».

«It is not about hitting me. It is about strengthening you», he said. «You pushed yourself to your limits. And this is good».

«I will never be able to fight».

«Why are you saying so? Of course you will!».

«I'm too weak: even this staff is starting to be heavy, now. You said I'm quick, but how can I be quick with that thing?».

«You will learn. Would you prefer to fight bare handed?».

«Yes», provoked him Nawde. «I would prefer it».

«Then drop it and prepare yourself, because even if you are unarmed, the Hunters have weaponry».

«Are you going to attack me with...». She never finished the question, because her father swung his staff with force, aiming at her legs. She jumped backwards, almost dodging it. Her legs hurt like fire when the wood hit them.

«Still not fast enough!», the man teased her. «Again!».

This time Nawde was prepared, and she literally jumped over her father's blow, landing just in time to receive a hit in the stomach. She fell to the ground, moaning.

«It is just a bruise! Up!», ordered her father. «We will practice until you will understand how to dodge a hit». She painfully pulled herself off the ground, hesitantly standing in front of him.

«Coming!», shouted her father, swinging the staff vertically. She stepped backwards, avoiding it for a few centimetres.

«Good», he cheered her. «This is a good dodge».

«What's the difference?».

«You pulled yourself out of my reach, so you gained a second or two. That an advantage».

«Just a question, dad», she said, trying to delay the next attack. «And I think I've earned the answer. How do you know how to fight? You aren't a warrior».

«When you live in constant fear, you ask for safety. My grandmother asked a warrior -my grandfather- to teach her how to fight, and he did. From that moment on, everyone in my family learn how to fight in young age, just like they learn about poisons».

«Fear of what?».

«The Hunters», he explained, mournfully. «Humans think we are monsters, merciless evil beings. That is the same thing we think of Hunters. They wander around the kingdom, killing or capturing every suspected Dragonblood. They have become so famous that, now, normal hunters are called hunt men, to avoid misunderstanding. The idea of a good Hunter is like the idea of a talking rock: insane».

«But not all the people think ill of us, otherwise they would call the Hunters at the first clue about our blood».

«And that is what they do. They call the Hunters, the Hunters come and check your eyes. If you have two-coloured ones, you are dead».

«They know about the eyes?», asked Nawde, suddenly scared. «You said only Dragonbloods know about them!».

«I said normal people do not know. Otherwise, how could you prove that someone is a Dragonblood?».

«By looking at his back?».

«We burn our entire back, not just the wings. You can say you fell in the fireplace -that is actually the truth- and they are lost».

Nawde looked in his eyes, and for the first time she saw the fear. A primordial fear, that filled his eyes and his soul. She searched her own mind for the same fear, but she couldn't find it.

«Dad, what's wrong?», she asked. «You aren't scared, you're obsessed with the Hunters».

«I have my reasons», he answered, harshly.

«What scare you so much? It's not the Hunters, I can feel it».

«No, it is not the Hunters. And it is not me», confirmed him. «Now sit and listen. I am not going to tell it twice».

Nawde sat on the ground, surprised by her father's seriousness. From the day he showed her the castor oil secrets, he had become a very sad presence. He laughed no more, and even his smiles were rare.

«I met your mother fifteen years ago. I worked as a woodcutter, and so was she. We started to compete. Every day, we told the other one what we had done, and every day we argued about who had done more. They were good days».

«As you can imagine, when we stopped arguing we started dating. In less than half a year, I married her. It did not change much, we were just living together, until something unexpected happened».

«Your mother was pregnant».

«We were both happy of the news, and when the girl finally came to this world, we left our jobs. Your mother became a carpenter, while I opened a herb shop. We were both happy, because we had much more time to stay with our little darling».

«One day, three years after the girl's birth, a man came to Eveshi. He was dressed in bright colours, and he entertained all the children of the city with tricks and jokes. He was loved by every child».

«When he left, he asked just one thing in payment: to shake hands with everyone. I was in the woods, gathering herbs for my shop. The major gladly accepted such a cheap payment».

«The handshakes took more than two hours. When they finally ended, the man continued his journey to Syeh».

«And our daughter was gone. He captured her after seeing her eyes. He was a Hunter, after all».

Nawde's eyes widened.

«This means that...», she stammered.

«Her name was Zjena. She was your older sister», he continued. «That same year, we had you».