

ECHOES OF GERMANIA

BOOK I

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DEDICATION



To my beloved son Taylen.

MAP



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A FEW NOTES



About Folkvagr...

“The ninth is Folkvangr, where Freyja decrees
Who shall have seats in the hall;
The half of the dead each day does she choose,
And half does Othin have.” Bellows (1923:90–91)

Modern media assigns all the glorious fallen warriors to Odin in Valhalla, but in truth Norse mythology tells a somewhat different tale. In the collective Poetic Edda, the accepted scripture of the ancient Norse belief system, Odin tells Agnar that the goddess of war and fertility, Freyja, actually got first choice of those who died in battle. Instead of going to the halls of Valhalla, her chosen went to Folkvagr (Old Norse "people-field" or "army-field"). This beautiful meadow held the great hall of Sessrúmnir, which remarkably also allowed women to enter as well.

Names and Historical Accuracy

The author recognizes the importance of historical accuracy, but ancient Romans had a very short list of names to draw from; to avoid confusion between similarly named characters, some changes were made for the sake of clarity. For instance, the future emperor Claudius would actually have been called Tiberius by his family, the equivalent of his first name, but we already have another main character called Tiberius. Using Claudius instead differentiates this historical character from others with the same name. Similar changes were made with other characters, such as Germanicus, for clarity's sake.

STRUCTURE OF THE LEGION



Praetor: *Legatus Augusti pro praetore*. The commander of two or more legions. The praetor also served as the governor of the province in which the legions he commanded were stationed. Of Senatorial rank, the praetor was appointed by Augustus and usually held command for four years. In the present time, a praetor would be called a general/governor.

Legate: A *legatus* was a high-ranking Roman military officer, equivalent to a modern high-ranking general officer. Initially used to delegate power, the term became formalized under Augustus as the officer in command of a legion.

Broad-Striped Tribune: In the Roman army, the *tribunus laticlavus* ("broad-striped tribune") was an officer who ranked below the legate and above the camp prefect and centurion. A tribune was usually a young man belonging to a wealthy family.

Camp Prefect: *Praefectus castrorum* was third in command of the legion. Generally, he was a long-serving veteran from a lower social status. He was used as a senior officer in charge of training a legion and the tribunes.

Narrow-Striped Tribune: *Tribunus angusticlavius* ("narrow-striped tribune") was an officer in the Roman legion who ranked below the legate, broad-striped tribune, and camp prefect, but above the centurion.

Centurion: A centurion was a professional officer in the Roman legion. He was ranked below the legate, camp prefect, and the tribunes.

Cited from Wikipedia, 2020

PROLOGUE



Germania, around 9 B.C.

Drusus was soaked. From his low-cut leather boots to his crimson shoulder cloak. Rainwater dripped down his metal cuirass, which depicted golden figures of past battles. Even the red crest on his helmet was drenched; it hung limp instead of standing tall and strong. His imperious white warhorse stood inches deep in mud, its metal breastplate and faceplate dull. By no means was this a scene worthy of the mighty Nero Claudius Drusus, Rome's youngest praetor, who was celebrated in all of Rome as its most prominent and fearless general. Despite being only twenty-nine, Augustus himself had made him praetor of the prosperous province of Gaul, an honor that brought the burden of conquering Germania with it like an itching disease from a cheap brothel.

The darkness of the cold night was brightened once more by a powerful lighting strike. For a brief second, the sacred Germanic rock columns that rose from the surrounding wooded hills and lake flashed with metallic light. This was followed by an ear-numbing roar of thunder that swallowed the screams and cries of slaughter all around the dense forest. Rain continued to descend from the skies like a swarm of arrows.

Drusus wiped water from his eyes, barely able to see the captured Cheruski king, who was kneeling in front of him at the hands of two Roman soldiers. His large stature and thick dark beard reminded the young general of a bear. Two little boys kneeled beside him, tiny next to the giant king. Their golden hair was covered in filth, their faces almost swallowed by the dark. But Drusus knew they weren't crying. The barbarians were proud and brave, even the little ones. He had to give them that.

With a moan, Drusus watched another of his men slip on the wet ground. If the rain didn't let up, the mud was going to take more lives than the fighting itself. Drusus hated Germania and so did his men. Its barbaric land was

without roads or cities and was filled with endless forests. Back home there were no forests left; many of his younger men had never seen so many trees before. It terrified them. Especially with that lingering fog that swallowed the world whole. Being sent here was a punishment.

But it was here, in this underworld these barbarians called home that Drusus had led his men to attack the Cherusci Tribe, to foil its revolt against the mighty Roman Empire. He'd been in Vetera, planning the construction of another military fortress along the Rhine River, when word from his Germanic spy, Segestes, arrived about an uprising. Personally, Drusus could not stand the opportunistic traitor, but it was rare to find a creature as gold hungry within the tribes.

Another deafening thunderbolt shook the earth, startling Drusus's magnificent warhorse, its hooves slapping the wet earth.

"Steady!" Drusus tightened his grip as his horse jerked against the reins, knocking over an auxiliary who was holding an oil torch. Drusus gave the horse his heels and then pulled on the reins to force it to an abrupt stop. The horse snorted and shook its head, steadying itself with a few stomps.

The auxiliary who'd held the torch only moments ago lay lifeless in the mud, the fading yellow glow of the torch flickering over his pale skin. Nothing to frown over. He was not even a Roman legionary. Another soldier rushed over to pick up the torch, his face emotionless. *Well trained*, Drusus thought.

"Ave Praetor!"

Ignatius, his most trusted centurion, led a group of soldiers out of the pitch-black woods. They were dragging four women and the spy, Segestes, behind them. Three of the women were warriors, their blue-and-white face paint running in diagonal stripes. The fourth was older and wore a necklace made of animal bones and rocks around her neck. She had a strange symbol carved into her forehead, very similar to the sea god Neptune's trident. Ignatius yanked the old woman closer to Drusus by her silver hair, her strange necklace bouncing with every step they took. The woman hissed, a wild animal caught in an iron grip.

Ignatius stopped in front of Drusus's horse and raised his sword arm across his chest in greeting. "We captured the seer!" he shouted in an attempt to scream over the storm.

The captured Cherusci king, still on his knees a few feet away from Drusus, jerked his head up toward the seer. His ice-blue eyes opened in shock the moment his gaze settled on her.

“Traitor,” he growled at Segestes. “What have you done?”

Segestes did not answer as he slipped and staggered through the mud toward Drusus.

“My Praetor, forgive me,” Segestes pleaded, “but the seer is not at fault for this uprising.” His voice trembled; his hands shook.

Drusus looked down at the fat man who’d betrayed his own for Roman gold. He was annoyed but not surprised that the coward would defend the seer. To these superstitious barbarians, a seer was the highest form of being, even higher than a king. They refused to bow to the mighty Augustus, but every old woman throwing raven bones was hailed as a god.

Drusus frowned. “Did you not say that this woman has foreseen a great loss for Rome?”

“Yes, my P-Praetor,” Segestes said, “but—”

“And did you not say that the men and women of this tribe had considered it an omen to raise their arms in defiance?”

Segestes lowered his head in silence.

“Answer the praetor!” A soldier in a crimson cloak and plated armor slapped Segestes across the mouth with the back side of his hand. Segestes fell sideways onto his knees, blood running from the corner of his mouth. And yet his silence held.

Drusus drew his sword in anger and guided his horse next to the fallen Cherusci king. Even on his knees, this man was taller than most Romans. But instead of raising his sword above the king’s head, he lifted it over the older of the two boys next to him.

“No! Not him!” the seer cried out as another lightning bolt struck a nearby tree with a deafening crack.

Drusus’s horse startled again, so did a few of his men. The echo of thunder rippled through the air as the winds and rain continued lashing.

The seer did not even flinch. “For once the traitor spoke the truth,” she hissed at Drusus. “It was me who foresaw your downfall.”

Drusus nodded, and then nudged his horse closer to Ignatius and the three warrior women. Their eyes were hateful behind faces streaked with paint. Like all women in these savage lands east of the Rhine, they were dressed like men and fought like them too. It equally disgusted and fascinated Drusus.

“Are those her daughters?” Drusus nodded at the three women.

“Yes, Praetor,” Ignatius replied. “They are.”

“Good. Drown them.”

The seer lunged forward, but only as far as Ignatius’s grip allowed.

“Not my children!” She twisted and turned like a stuck rabbit, trying once more to break free.

“And take the two boys to camp,” Drusus added. “They belong to Rome now.”

“No!” the Cherusci king yelled and launched back to his feet. Without a second to waste, he rammed his fur-covered shoulder into the soldier to his right, catapulting him to the ground. He hammered his huge fist into the next soldier’s stomach. The Cherusci king kicked and swung, but there were too many Roman soldiers. Before he could get close to Drusus, he was back in the dirt, soldiers pinning him to the ground.

“Leave him and the seer alive,” Drusus said, “as a warning.” Without another word, Drusus turned his horse back toward camp.

Despite the constant rain drumming against trees and rocks, he could still hear the howls of the seer, the king, and the children being led away.

“Drusus!” the seer’s voice thundered after him, but he did not stop.

“In the name of Yggdrasil, who has spoken to me! In the name of Freya, whose grounds you have dishonored,” the seer wailed, “I curse you! I curse Rome! Your legions’ blood shall soak the mud beneath us like a river! Freya will have her revenge!”

Drusus stopped his horse and jerked around to face the seer. She looked smaller from the distance, and yet, somehow, more solid, more tangible in her defiance. The winds had freed her hair from her braid, wildly pulling it left and right. Something flickered in her eyes—silver, like a daemon. Was that hate? Magic? He felt a shiver rush through his veins as if his blood had turned to ice. For a moment, he considered sparing the seer’s children. Why risk a curse, even if his gods were stronger?

But before he could command her children free, he turned and saw that her daughters had already been carried into the lake, their arms and feet bound.

“Fear not, my children!” the seer wept. “Freya has seen your bravery. Yggdrasil has opened its gate. You are expected in Folkvangr!”

A blaring lightning strike lit up the skies once more as if the gods themselves had heard the seer's heartbreaking cries.

Drusus watched as the surface of the lake frothed. The girls kicked helplessly, but their movements slowly faded. A last twitch here, a last kick there, and they grew still, sinking beneath the cold silver surface.

"My daughters!" the seer's cries echoed over the lake once more.

Drusus waited for a moment longer, his mind filled with doubts. But what was done was done. He signaled his horse to keep moving again, back to camp.

"Druuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuus!"

Better to hurry and pray to his gods for a long life and glory. A sacrifice perhaps?

"Druuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuus!"

He could not imagine anything worse than to die in Germania's endless forests filled with its barbarians and their mystical fairies and giants.

"Druuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuus!"

Surely his gods would protect him. After all, he was Nero Claudius Drusus, one of the heirs of the mighty Augustus, beloved husband and father, commander of five legions, praetor of all of Gaul and Germania.



A few months later, the celebrated and glorified Nero Claudius Drusus, loved and admired by the people of Rome and favored by his stepfather, the mighty Augustus himself, was crushed under his horse in Germania and died from an infection of the leg within weeks. It was a pitiful and agonizing death, nothing glorious or admirable about it. He was said to have closed his eyes to the endless howls of an owl—which nobody but Drusus could hear . . .

CHAPTER ONE



Frankfurt, Germany; Present

The giant man in front of Amalia stretched his neck as if he were Bruce Lee himself. He had a smirk on his face. He didn't even bow to pay Amalia the respect she deserved, that any judoka deserved before a match. His arrogance, however, was not unfounded. He was the best in his dojo and almost twice her size. But despite being only nineteen years old, Amalia wasn't about to flinch. She had faced opponents like him before. Countless times. She didn't even have to glance at her trainer, Herbert, or her father to know that they both wore their usual confident grins. She was sure they were the only ones not whispering or pointing at the obvious mismatch in size between her and her opponent.

Her opponent edged forward and hopped from foot to foot, back and forth like a boxer.

Amalia analyzed the man in front of her. He was enormous—like, Goliath enormous. But that would also make him slow and tire quickly. Not that she wasn't tired herself, physically and mentally. It had been only a week since her father and Herbert took her on another statewide tour of judo matches. She wanted to go home to see her sister and study for her upcoming engineering exam.

"I'll be gentle, sweetheart." He threw her a kiss.

"I won't."

She shot forward and grabbed him by his inner bicep sleeve. At the same time, she stepped forward with her right foot and pivoted, pushing her lower back into his stomach and placing her left leg between his. And in the most artful motion this dojo had probably ever witnessed, she reached up underneath his arm and pulled the giant man over her shoulder and flattened him onto his back. The dull impact echoed through the room and shook the

floor beneath them. The crowd watching went from giggles, whispers, and mutters into deafening silence. Even the referee stood without throwing his arm up to declare *ippon*, the one point needed to win the match.

Goliath was the first to gather himself as he rolled onto his hands and knees.

“You stupid cunt.” He spat on the floor, the veins on his forehead popping as he jumped back to his feet. He launched forward, reaching for her, but Amalia jerked aside. Goliath stumbled into the empty space Amalia had just vacated, lost his balance, and fell onto his knees again.

“Stop it!” the sensei of the dojo shouted.

But Amalia wasn’t scared, and neither were her father nor her trainer. They both stood at the edge of the mat, quietly laughing. Goliath wasn’t an opponent for her, and all three of them knew it. Even less so now that his mind was clouded with rage, which would only make his moves clumsy and predictable.

Goliath pushed himself up once more, fists clenched, ready to strike again, when the sensei grabbed him from behind.

“Have you lost your mind?” He shook the brute. “Calm down.”

“Did the little girl hurt you?” Amalia’s father said. Amalia knew exactly what he was doing. He wanted her to show off all the techniques she wasn’t allowed to use in a regular judo match—some of them dangerous. It had taken her years to perfect those skills, and her father was proud to demonstrate them every chance he got.

Goliath responded with a boisterous roar. He flailed against his sensei’s grip.

“You should go!” the sensei shouted.

Amalia threw her father a disapproving look, her eyebrows drawn together in annoyance, before she bowed and turned to leave. She had barely made it into the hallway when she felt the all-too-familiar grip on her upper arm, a grip she’d endured her whole life from a man whose self-proclaimed “lack of achievement” and selfish ambition had tainted their relationship. An Olympic bronze medalist himself, her father, Lukas Weber, knew only one thing in life: judo. And while others might put that bronze medal on their fireplace, her father hid it in the basement—nothing but gold was worth his breath.

“What are you doing? Go back there and take him out,” he said.

Amalia ripped her arm free of his grip. They both knew she had surpassed her father's abilities years ago, but they also both knew she would never use it on him.

"No. I'm going home to study. I have a test coming up."

Her father rolled his eyes. "Judo is your future."

"Engineering is a profitable and stable field." Herbert, her trainer, had appeared around the corner and was fumbling with his camera that he'd used to record the match. Her father threw him a sharp look.

"I'm nineteen. I decide my future," Amalia said. For years she had begged for a normal life. Begged for time with friends, vacations, or even just time to sit on the couch and watch TV. But for years, she was denied that request. So the day she turned eighteen, she planned to quit judo and move out. In a rare compromise, her father agreed to let her go to university to study engineering and have Saturdays to herself as long as she continued to practice martial arts and live at home.

Her father clenched his fists. "You'll still go for your run tonight," he said.

"Tonight? But the Cherusci Storm is hitting us later," Herbert said. It was a cute attempt, but everybody knew that her father was in charge here. Herbert was so scared of losing Amalia from his Olympic team that he would literally kiss her father's feet if he asked.

Her father threw his hand up. "That old wives' tale. She'll be fine doing a few laps. The storm might wash her head, Cherusci curse or not."

Herbert looked at Amalia, but Amalia shook her head at him. The Cherusci Storm was nothing but a tale to Amalia as well. Supposedly, every hundred years, a major storm hit the region. Historians traced the first storm, through ancient Roman writings, all the way back to a massacre of the Cherusci Tribe by the Romans thousands of years ago. Some spoke of a curse, but analytically minded people like Amalia and her father simply looked at the storm and saw it for what it was: a storm.

"Fine," Amalia agreed. "I'll do my usual run around the lake, but tomorrow I'm studying. All day. Morning to midnight. No judo."

She disappeared into the women's locker room before her father had a chance to respond. After the door slammed closed behind her, she stood silent for a moment, waiting, wondering if her father would follow her. But he didn't.

Amalia slumped onto the bench underneath the metal lockers, her head tilted back to gaze at the ceiling. Olympics be damned. She hated judo. She

really did. At times she even hated her father. All he'd ever wanted was a son to follow his footsteps. But fortune had four daughters in store for him, and she, the youngest of them, had become the chosen one. Not overnight, of course. It all started with a phone call from school. Amalia had thrown a kid—the class bully—onto the floor. Her father was thrilled. Amalia's fate was sealed right then and there.

She was raised far away from giggling children and cheerful toys, confined to stuffy dojos and endless days of physical endurance training. Her father made sure to choose opponents twice her size from day one, mostly male, of course. When other children went to the pool, Amalia had judo training. When the newest movie came out and the whole world was flocking to the theaters to watch it, Amalia was at some run-down jujitsu center.

But the end-result of her father's personal crusade was nothing short of unprecedented. Amalia had become the Knight Templar of judo, undefeated among judokas in two years. And this year was supposed to be her first outing at the Olympics, ready to rock the world. Yet all of this meant nothing to her. She just wanted to hang out with friends, fall in love, and make out in the back of a car—you know, like normal girls.

Amalia sighed as she looked at her reflection in a mirror at the other end of the locker room. Her blond hair was tied into a braid, a few strands falling into her petite face next to the ice-blue eyes she had inherited from her mother.

“Just a bit longer,” she mumbled. Those words had become holy to her.

Amalia changed out of her training clothes and into her jeans and sweatshirt. She would shower later. She still had to do that stupid jog around the lake anyway.

CHAPTER TWO



Horn-Bad Meinberg, Germany

Amalia opened the front door to a waft of tomato and oregano, but before she could savor the aroma, a violent gust of wind blew the door farther open, nearly knocking Amelia over. Her father rushed up the porch stairs behind her to join the battle in getting it closed again. For a moment it seemed as if the wind would win, but her father threw all his weight against the door to finally shut out the storm.

“Ami.” Her mother, Helge, wiped her hands on her apron and welcomed Amalia with a big hug. When she glanced at her husband, her smile remained on her lips but faded from her ice-blue eyes.

“Is dinner ready?” her father asked her mother without even looking at her. No *bello honey*, no *how was your day*, none of that mushy horseshit for Lukas Weber.

“Yes. Would you like me to get you a bottle of beer as well?”

Her father opened the door to the basement next to the hallway. Like every time they returned from a match, her father was going downstairs to his basement office to analyze Herbert’s video footage and look for any imperfections in Amalia’s performance.

“Hefeweizen,” he mumbled, shutting the door behind him.

“Take a quick shower. Anni and I will wait for you in the kitchen,” her mother said, disappearing into the kitchen. Amalia followed her, passing the wall littered with family portraits—big and small—hanging above wooden IKEA furniture.

“Did you win?” Anni shouted the moment Amalia came into view. She had already navigated her wheelchair to her spot at the dinner table, her phone screen bright with the colorful movements of that game she was always playing.

Matching candies or something like that. Anni's blue eyes always sparkled whenever she saw her younger sister. She was two years older than Amalia, but Amalia was nothing short of a superhero to Anni.

"Of course I won." Amalia grinned and took her usual seat across from Anni, who nodded in satisfied approval.

"I knew you would kick ass again," Anni said.

"I'll let you know when my next autograph session takes place." Amalia laughed.

"Modesty, Amalia." Her mother frowned, but there was humor in her tone. She grabbed a plate full of pasta and was about to hand it over to Amalia but then held it back. "What about that shower? You smell like an old man's feet."

"The smell of warriors," Anni defended her sister, a mound of pasta before her.

"Exactly," Amalia agreed.

"That might be, but I'm still the warrior in charge of this kitchen, so off you go."

"But then I have to shower twice. I still have to do my run around the lake."

"Around the lake? Tonight?" Her mother wrinkled her brow and placed the plate of pasta in front of Amalia.

"Mhmm."

"But the Cherusci Storm."

"It's just a storm." Amalia reached for her mother's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. After Anni's spinal injury from falling off a horse, her mother had developed severe anxiety. If people thought Amalia's toughest battles were on the mat against opponents twice her size, they were wrong. It was right here, in her own home, where the matches really happened. Her older two sisters had literally left the day of their eighteenth birthdays, rarely to be seen again. She couldn't blame them; their father had that effect on people. But that also meant that it fell to Amalia to be strong for her mother and Anni, make their lives more bearable from the tyrant watching judo videos downstairs.

"It's just a bit windy outside," Amalia said. "The storm won't hit until later."

Her mother stared back, her face momentarily blank, eyes distant.

“I’ll go now then, to ease your motherly worries.” Amalia lifted her plate to her mouth and shoved down several mouthfuls of pasta. Anni laughed as she watched, while her mother shook her head. “See, all done. Now I’ll be back way before the storm hits,” Amalia mumbled through cheeks stuffed like a hamster. Her mother let out a sigh as Anni giggled in her wheelchair.

Amalia always played the clown for the two, despite actually being more of a serious, restrained person. A splash of color in the grey world of the Webers. To Anni, it could make a rainy day sunny in seconds. So why not? If all it took was playing the court jester, then why the hell not?

“Your love for judo is almost as bad as your father’s,” her mother scolded her with a thin smile on her lips. She seemed calmer. It had worked.

“I do love my judo.” Her mother had no clue how she felt. And Amalia worked hard to keep it that way. Why make her mother’s life harder?

Amalia rose from her chair and gulped back the final swallow of pasta. She turned back to the front door and put her shoes back on. Unlike many other athletes, Amalia trained in whatever she was wearing. She could jog in jeans, skirts, or at times pajamas.

She tightened the laces of her worn-out sneakers and opened the door. Cold air slapped against her face, and the door tugged against her grip. Amalia had to squeeze the handle tight as she stepped out into her gloomy suburban neighborhood.

Amalia took off into the direction of the Externsteine, a nearby rock formation that was the only local attraction. The distinctive sandstone rock formations had revealed caves and ancient tools such as arrowheads dating back as early as 10,900 BC. Horn-Bad Meinberg was otherwise a typical small German city. It had an old town center with some leftover medieval houses and a castle not too far on a hill. All of it was surrounded by identical post-WWII homes. Red shingled roofs, wooden fenced yards, and the depressing lack of pedestrian life outside of the tourist seasons.

Amalia loved jogging around the lake at the foothill of those rocks, always gazing up in awe. The Teutoburg Forest was full of mystic history dating back thousands of years.

The crisp scent of the upcoming storm charged the air. The wind blew from all directions as Amalia’s feet hit the ground in her usual rhythmic jog, her shoes making snapping sounds against the tiny rocks that littered the path. At times, the whistling wind worked with her, pushing her along and speeding her

up, but then it turned against her, aggressively blowing leaves and dirt into her face, almost as if it was commanding her to turn around. Judging by the clouds, that warning was not without merit. She had barely turned onto the narrow, muddy path that would lead through a patch of woods to the lake and caves when the sky above her darkened from gloomy grey to almost pitch black, spreading like a blanket across the heavens. There was no change of color above her, almost as if someone had switched off a light.

Without stopping, Amalia pulled out her phone and checked the time. It was not even five. How the hell had it gotten so dark so damn quickly? She had just made it out of the woods and to the lake that surrounded the Externsteine when the first raindrops kissed the ground in scattered patterns, followed by a deep growl from above. The storm wasn't supposed to hit until eight.

Amalia frowned as she slowed down to a complete stop. Cold raindrops splashed her face as she looked up at the caves. The rock formation that consisted of several tall, narrow columns of grey sandstone were obscured in darkness. It was only five, so the lights that came on at night did not yet illuminate the caves.

Out of nowhere, the wind picked up, churning leaves in quick spirals and lashing at the water of the usually calm lake.

Amalia wondered whether she should turn back or use her phone's flashlight to finish the loop around the caves and lake. But another blaring growl of thunder shook the earth underneath her. It was time to turn around—now.

Amalia bolted back up the path, the rain falling harder, turning the ground to mud. She put several yards between herself and the edge of the woods when a terrifying cry rose above the chaos of the storm. At first, she dismissed it as the wind, but when she heard it a second time, she froze in her tracks. Amalia turned around and stared through the rain toward the lake. *Strange.*

She was about to take off again, to get the hell out of this storm, when the cry echoed through the woods once more, this time with words:

“*Ichk . . . vafluck!*”

Amalia darted back toward the lake. Somebody was in danger. The mud was getting deeper. It splashed, cold and wet, up her legs, arms, and even onto her face. Her heart was thumping fast and out of rhythm; it was all she could hear.

“*Ichke . . . vaflucket . . . dich!*” A woman’s voice shouted in the strangest German Amalia had ever heard. Was it Plattdeutsch, that ancient Northern German dialect that nobody in the whole nation understood?

“*Ichke . . . vaflucket . . . dich!*” the voice thundered through the darkness, louder and clearer now that Amalia was closer to the lake.

Determined to help, she pushed forward as fast as she could when her foot slipped sideways on a wet tree root. She gasped, and just a fraction of a second before her face planted into an enormous puddle of thick brown mud, her body instinctively channeled her fall into the ugliest judo roll in the history of judo. Her torso still landed hard, forcing the air out of her lungs.

“*Ichke vaflucket dich drusus!*” the voice screamed, crystal clear now. Covered in mud, her body heavy, Amalia leaped back on her feet. The lake was right in front of her.

“Hello?” Amalia shouted into the heavy rains that were bashing her face mercilessly.

“*Ichke vaflucket dich drusus!*” The voice shrieked back at her, clearly coming from the lake. But from where? It was too dark to see anything.

Amalia ripped her phone out to turn the flashlight on. Her fingers slipped on the wet screen, but after a few manic attempts, she was able to turn it on. But between the darkness and the sheets of rain, its white beam died before ever reaching the lake. The strong winds had turned the air into a swirl of tiny water droplets and leaves that came from all directions.

“I’m coming!” Amalia hollered out to the lake as she charged into the black water. It was Siberia levels of cold.

“Where are you?”

But this time she didn’t get a response.

“Hello?” Amalia’s voice vanished into the storm as she spun left and right, still aiming her phone ahead of her. She pushed farther, the freezing water now all the way to her chest. Her clothes stuck to her body as waves called up by the furious winds splashed into her face.

But just when Amalia started to believe that the woman had already drowned, that she was too late, a scream that Amalia would never forget, in this life or the next, shook the night sky and the earth beneath it like thunder.

“Drrrruuuuuuuuuuuuuus!”

As soon as the cry had ceased, a lightning bolt hit the rock formation. Amalia winced as the explosion rang in her ears. But the metallic light of the bolt seemed to linger longer than it should have—it lit up the lake and rocks for a few brief seconds. That was all Amalia needed to make out a dark silhouette several yards ahead of her in the center of the lake.

“I’m coming!”

Without another moment to waste, Amalia launched herself forward into the water and swam as if her life depended on it. She battled against the violent waves, which were heaving her up and down as she swam. Every stroke that brought her closer to the woman also sent a mouthful of dirty water into her mouth. She gasped and spat.

“Drrrruuuuuusuuuuuuuus!”

Just a few more feet.

Amalia was now close enough to reach for the shadow of the woman in front of her. But just when she was about to stretch out her arm, the voice growled in a dialect Amalia could actually understand:

“She is coming for your mighty empire!”

Before Amalia could ask what the hell was going on, something grabbed her ankle and pulled her beneath the dark waves. The grip was firm and strong, almost painful. The icy lake swallowed her body. Instinctively, Amalia kicked at whatever had the death hold on her, but there was nothing but water. Her chest tightening, Amalia propelled her arms up and down, desperate to fight her way back to the surface. But she sank deeper and deeper as endless bubbles streamed past her.

“Druuuuuuusuuuuuuuus . . .”

The voice that had the power of a thunderstorm moments ago was now soft and distant. Her frightened heartbeat thrashed against her ears. All she could do now was watch the surface move farther and farther away from her, its light thinning.

Another lighting strike illuminated the world above her, its bright shimmer highlighting a human silhouette hovering at the surface. And there was something else. Something was sitting on the silhouette’s arm. A bird. White as snow, two large amber eyes beaming down into the darkness of the lake like stars.

“Druuuuuuusuuuuuuuus . . .”

And as the world began to dim, a childhood memory came to her wide-open, dying eyes. She watched herself charging down the beach, barely eight years old, white sand kicking up as she pushed forward. She was running from her father to avoid a spanking. She had stepped on his new glasses. He was enraged, Amalia terrified. But she didn't get far before Anni called to her. When she turned, she found Anni standing right behind her, tears streaking her flushed cheeks.

“Are you leaving us?” Anni's eyes were red, her nose runny.

“I would never leave you.” Amalia peeked over Anni's shoulder to make sure their father hadn't followed.

“You promise?” Anni sniveled.

Amalia nodded with a thin smile.

Beneath the lake, Amalia opened her mouth to promise the childhood version of her sister, but instead water filled her lungs.

CHAPTER THREE



The dark depths that had swallowed Amalia shifted with moving specks of light. Amalia woke from a deathlike slumber. She could feel the cold, wet surface of the lake's shore underneath her, both of her feet still dangling in the freezing water of the lake.

Alive. She was alive. And she was breathing. Amalia opened her eyes in response to a voice. It sounded like a young man, though she couldn't make out what he'd said.

Sprawled and soaking wet, she wiped her eyes with her sleeve, blinking away mud and rain.

"Ave tribune, haec est enim nova et barbara," an older man's voice responded in Latin.

Wait . . . Latin?

Amalia shook her head. She was probably just confused. But when she opened her mouth to ask for help, something struck her in the ribs. Amalia gasped and then vomited, muddy lake water spilling down the side of her mouth as she rolled onto her side. *Did someone just kick me?* What the hell was going on here?

Holding her ribs with one hand, Amalia used her wet sleeve once more to clean the last bit of mud out of her eyes.

"Noli ludere cum mortuis," the younger man's voice said in a calm tone—but yes, there was no doubt this time: he was speaking freaking Latin!

Gasping for her breath, Amalia pushed herself onto her elbows and looked around. A few more blinks and the blurry images finally came into focus. In front of her was the lake, calm and beautiful now. The clouds above her were grey but peaceful, the storm gone, almost as if it had never happened. Her gaze briefly stopped at the caves next to the lake. A swarm of birds tweeted cheerfully as they landed on the tallest rock of the rock formation. But then she

realized that the stairs of the caves were gone. Not damaged from the storm—no, gone, as in *vanished*.

She turned her confused stare toward the voices. Between Amalia and the edge of the woods stood a middle-aged man dressed in a Roman military outfit. It looked as if he'd jumped out of one of the Latin books she'd been tortured with throughout high school. He was wearing a round metal helmet with long cheek covers, and his chest was protected by more metal armor. Underneath, he was wearing a red tunic. His leather sandals and leather greaves were drenched in mud. A sword in a leather scabbard hung over his shoulder like a purse. Behind him was a tall young man, who was also dressed in a Roman combat uniform that looked slightly different, more glamorous. His tunic was white and had a narrow purple stripe on it. His armor and greaves were metal with detailed decorations. He was even handsome, his hair and eyes light brown. He must have been Amalia's age, maybe a bit older.

Speechless, Amalia pushed herself into a sitting position. *There must be some sort of cosplay party going on, or war reenactment game or something.*

"*Puto ut vivat barbara,*" the older man said to his companion, both staring at her as if they had never seen another human before.

Amalia's jaw tightened. Were these two for real?

"Can you please call for help? I almost drowned," Amalia said, her voice clearly annoyed. But the older man just watched her every move, his forehead wrinkling.

"*Quam aliena est?*" he asked the younger man. Was she supposed to play along, ask for help in Latin? Like most Germans, Amalia had been forced to learn Latin in high school, but that didn't mean she wanted to play these two idiots' game.

"I really need—"

"*Videtur ut nos intellegat,*" the younger, more noble looking of the two said to his friend.

Amalia narrowed her eyes and let out an irritated sigh. She was exhausted, almost drowned. This was starting to get on her nerves big time. She gathered her thoughts. It had been two years since she last spoke Latin, but she couldn't forget thousands of hours of Latin classes. She mumbled a few words, trying to summon the correct grammar formation when the older man grasped his sword's handle.

"*Delira videtur.*" He took a step forward. "*Proinde occidam eam.*"

“*Occidam?*” Amalia blurted. “Kill? No!”

But the man ignored her, calmly drawing his sword from his scabbard with a hiss of metal—not plastic. This was no prop. It was real. These men were insane! Amalia tried to get up again to give this guy a nice ass-whooping, but her knees straight-up failed her. Last night had been too much. She’d never felt more tired and weak before, but then she’d also never drowned before.

The man was within reach now.

“No!” Amalia yelled as her arms shot up over her head, but the man lowered his sword to his hip, as if he would stab her rather than behead her.

“You’re crazy!” Amalia shouted.

“*Consiste,*” the younger man called from behind to the older man.

Halt, Amalia translated.

The older man lowered his sword. Amalia used the last bit of energy she had left to get back to her knees.

“*Puto ut Latine loquatur,*” the young soldier said to the older one. He pointed at the older man’s sword. “*Exclamabat ad te antequam gladium tuum eduxit.*”

Amalia focused as hard as she could. *Shouted . . . before . . . sword.* Yes! That was it. He said that she shouted in fear before he drew his sword; that she must understand Latin. This was her moment: “*Quod . . . intellegi!*” she growled. Both of the men stared at her. “Yes, I speak . . . I mean, *quam, equam . . . loquimur.*” No that wasn’t right. *Try again.* “*Possum vos intellegere!*”

The two men exchanged confused looks. What was the matter with these two? Maybe this really was a roleplay. Maybe they’d break character now.

“You speak Latin?” the young man asked her in Latin. He did so in a slow, weird tone, as if he were talking to a child. The older man sheathed his sword. It had worked. Now she only had to convince those two to leave her be. She could get help on her own, crawl to the nearest street if she had to, as long as it was far away from these two.

“Yes. I can speak Latin,” she said in her sassiest Latin.

The two men broke out into laughter.

“Let’s speak first,” the younger soldier said, still laughing, “then you can fly if it pleases you.” *Shit.* *Loquere* meant speak, *volant* meant to fly. She’d just told them that she could fly.

The young man narrowed his eyes. He seemed to be the one in charge despite his age. “What tribe do you come from?” he asked, analyzing every inch of her. Amalia remained silent. How could this be? Was this some sort of prank show? Where were the hidden cameras?

“The tribune has spoken to you!” the older man barked, stepping forward with clenched fists.

But the young man, apparently the *tribune*, raised his hand, stopping another attack on Amalia. “She will speak. In time. Take her to the camp.”

“To the camp, my Tribune? But our legate—”

“Will not be your concern. Now do as you are told.”

“Yes, my Tribune.”

The younger man turned around and strode toward a small path in the woods. His long crimson cloak flapped with his movements as he disappeared behind the first line of trees. Amalia’s gaze met the older soldier’s. He let out a sigh, then walked up to her and reached down.

“What are you doing?” she protested in Latin as she tried to push him away, but her body betrayed her once more. Her arms were too weak. God, she was tired.

“Don’t touch me!”

The soldier ignored her as he bound her wrists behind her back with rough, biting rope.

“Let go of me!” She squirmed as much as she could, but her attacker swept her easily onto his shoulder. Amalia formed a fist with both of her tied hands and started hitting the soldier in his spine, but her blows bounced off his metal armor without the slightest dent.

“Help!” Amalia cried out. “Somebody help!”

“Quiet, woman, or I will throw you back in the lake.”

Amalia stopped fighting. She bit her lip, hard, and tasted the metallic flavor of blood. There was nothing she could do right now but watch in horror as this insane man carried her along a small path in the woods. But the terrain wasn’t quite right. The forest was thicker, the trees taller. Where was her jogging trail? Had the storm destroyed it somehow? None of this made sense. Trees and bushes were growing out of control into each other as if these woods had never felt the touch of a human hand before. The light from nearby streets had been replaced with shadows—the trees and canopy were so thick, they blocked out

the sun. Bright moss covered the trunks and rocks, and there was a mysterious fog that gave the forest an even spookier touch.

“Where are we?” Amalia wondered out loud. Suddenly her hair got caught on a branch and jerked her head backward; she almost fell off her kidnapper’s shoulder. But rather than stopping and gently untangling her hair, the damn brute yanked her forward. Amalia screeched as a patch of her hair tore from her scalp and snapped back with the branch, waving at her like a pale flag.

“I told you to be quiet, woman.”

Amalia swallowed all the things she was about to shout at him. She felt angry tears burn her eyes as the soldier carried her deeper and deeper into the forest. Whatever camp he was taking her to, surely there would be a normal person, someone who could help her. She just had to stop provoking this man, be smart. She was about to rest her eyes, gathering her strength in case she needed to fight soon, when a white flicker moving between the branches caught her attention. She focused her gaze and saw, in the far distance, almost hidden by the fog, a white bird sitting on a rock. Its amber eyes glared directly at her. Then it spread its majestic wings and let out a cry that echoed through the forest. It launched into the air, flew through the canopy, and was gone.