

ONE

There was blood in the water. Cade heaved on his fishing line, dismayed at the wriggling mass that churned beneath the surface. His catch, a flat silver-bellied fish, emerged half-eaten, flopping glassy-eyed to the shoreline of the river. It had been this way with every cast, the shoals of small fish descending on any other that showed distress, stripping flesh as it twisted on his line. Twice before, he had pulled in little more than a skeleton, though even the scraps that hung off the bone were worth keeping.

Still, the silver fish was prize enough for the hungry boy, and there was no time for another cast. Beside him, Quintus pointed at the sky, warning of the setting sun. Together, they pushed their ragged haul into their wicker basket and stole away into the undergrowth, keeping to the shadows.

It was a curse that the fish only began to rise at dusk, when the insects descended. The insects whined about their heads, but Cade did not slap at them. By now, he could tell by their sound which would simply sup on the salty sweat on his skin,

and which would sting him for the blood beneath. This time, there were few of the latter.

The boys caught sight of the waterfall not far along the river. It was always a risk, leaving the clearing beyond the Keep. But their fruit-heavy diet was taking its toll. Cade's stomach churned at the sight of figs, and their attempts to trap the rodents that frequented the orchards on top of the mountain had not met with any success.

These same rodents were the reason for their unvaried meals, having eaten up most of the ground vegetables the Romans had left behind. What was left they had set aside, fenced off and replanted for next season, painful as that had been. It amazed Cade how much food eight people could consume in such a short time, and now it was fruit, fruit and more fruit.

Quintus caught his attention, and spoke, giving him a thumbs up at the same time.

‘Good trip.’

Cade smiled and nodded, still amazed at the boy's progress. Quintus's English had come along in leaps and bounds, and Cade had become used to his unique diction. Cade's Latin was returning too, swimming back from the recesses of his memory. In fact, all the contenders were practising it, with Amber and the other girls already having studied it at school.

They'd had little to do in the three months since the battle. Three months of staring at the timer, waiting for the Codex to speak. No questions, cajoling or even threats had succeeded in breaking its silence. It was the great weight

that hung above them. That and the timer, ticking down inexorably.

Relieved to be home, the pair hurried down the black tunnel that led them back to the Keep. The fish stew they would have that night was one of the few things Cade had to look forward to. Yoshi had turned out to be an excellent cook, limited though he was by their paltry stock of ingredients.

‘Any luck?’ Amber called as they ducked out of the tunnel.

‘Some,’ Cade said begrudgingly.

Amber sat alone, cross-legged upon the cobbles. The girl was prodding at their small communal fire, and Cade was again struck by how strange it seemed to see her in school uniform.

‘Guys,’ Amber called. ‘They’re back.’

Cade set the basket down and grinned as the others emerged from the Keep, their usual lethargy interrupted by the news of the fishermen’s arrival.

‘Wanna whip this up?’ Cade asked Yoshi, seeing his friend rub his hands together at the sight of the wicker basket.

‘You have no idea,’ Yoshi muttered. ‘Hand it over.’

Without waiting for a response, the boy lifted each fish one by one, grimacing at the sorry state of the first pair; they were mostly skin and bone. Grace shook her head at the sight, but lay a hand on Yoshi’s shoulder as the boy dropped them back in with disappointment.

‘The bones are still good for a broth,’ Grace said. ‘My mum makes one that’ll blow your socks off.’ She wrinkled her nose. ‘Shame we don’t have any chilli.’

Yoshi nodded mournfully, but Scott rolled his eyes.

‘I’d eat a week-old hot dog out of a wrestler’s jock-strap if it meant an end to all these figs,’ he said. ‘Cook it however you want, just leave some for me.’

‘Gross,’ Bea muttered, and Trix gave the boy a glare.

The twins looked sickly pale, and not just from Scott’s joke. They had all lost weight over the past three months, but then the twins had been slight to start with. It was another source of worry for Cade, though none had broached it with them.

The only silver lining was that the contenders had all been given time to heal from their wounds. Perhaps too much time. Cade stared up at the light from the windows of the top floor of the Keep, where the Codex and its glowing timer had settled since his conversation with Abaddon.

The timer had begun at four months. And now, they had a little more than one left, ticking away like a bomb. Far, far more than they had been given before the qualifying round.

It scared Cade, this extra time. Scared everyone. As if they were supposed to be preparing. As if somehow, it would make up for the halving of their numbers. Four school girls, three delinquents, and . . . Quintus.

Thank the heavens for Quintus. It was he who knew how to replant the crops, how to protect against the vermin. How to grind the wheat in a bowl to make flour pancakes. He had even brought down a pterosaur with his sling, though the wily creatures now knew to stay away.

So here they sat in limbo, waiting. Though for what, they didn’t know. Only that it would be cruel and violent, with unimaginable consequences.

Such thoughts were ever-present at the back of Cade's mind, but now they swirled to the forefront as he watched his friends around the fire. He knew them now. Cared about them. Their three months of healing had been more than merely physical.

He knew the joyride that landed Scott in jail had been a cry for attention following his mother's death. Knew Grace prayed every night to the small crucifix around her neck. He learned Bea and Trix had never spent a night away from their parents. That Yoshi's greatest frustration was the Keep's lack of music, while Amber's was the lack of chocolate.

His frustration mounting, Cade's feet moved unbidden to the Keep. They carried him up the stairs, and he tried to forget the pooled blood and bodies that had once littered the floors, the sight of which had turned a safe home into nothing more than a shelter from the wind and rain.

He walked on, past the empty rooms, to the round table at the very top. To the ominous glow of the timer, and the Codex that was its source. He stood, his fists clenched, as the numbers flashed and changed.

36:22:58:26

36:22:58:25

36:22:58:24

'Is this fun for you?' Cade asked. 'Watching us scratch out an existence here?'

His voice felt strange in the empty room. Like he was talking to himself.

‘Some game master you are,’ Cade said, layering his words with as much contempt as he could muster. ‘I’m sure it will be great fun to watch us all butchered when our four months are up. Fun for you, and your so-called Pantheon.’

The Codex’s lens stared back, silent and impassive. Cade ploughed on.

‘I bet they’ll be super impressed with the eight half-starved teenagers you offer up as a challenge.’

Something moved within the floating drone, so minutely, it was almost imperceptible. A gear, twitching. A circuit sparking. Something.

‘I hate to think of all those remnants you left in the jungle. So carefully curated, selected from the very best of human history. Never to be used. Just to rust and rot once we’re dead. We’re the last, right? Nobody else will use them.’

Nothing. He tried again.

‘So this is Abaddon’s swan song for Earth. Going out with a fizzle, not a bang. Eight trussed lambs, ready for the slaughter. I thought you would have something better planned.’

Silence.

Cade tried not to let his frustration show. He turned, letting his anger dissolve into thoughts of fish stew.

Then . . . a voice.

‘Do not presume to know my stratagem, foolish little child.’

Cade’s breath caught in his throat, his stomach twisting. Slowly, he turned, and jumped to see the Codex hovering before his face. The room, once bright with the timer’s glow,

now fell to darkness.

‘Oh, come now, is this not what you wanted?’ the voice said. ‘My attention? Be careful what you wish for, boy.’

It was a deeper voice, rasping and cruel. Not girlish like last time. But then, Abaddon’s last form had been to put him at ease. That was no longer the intention.

‘Call the others,’ Abaddon commanded. ‘It’s time to play.’