

CHAPTER 1

I Hatch Out

The first crack in the egg that held me occurred just before midnight. My mum and da weren't there, of course, as the action in the century-long War of the Ice Claws had heated up and they were both away fighting. So they'd gotten a hire broody for the egg — common practice in the war-torn Northern Kingdoms. When my first crack started, the hire broody, Gundesfyr, sent out Mrs. Grinkle, our nest-maid snake, to inform the neighbors. Hatchings were treasured occasions, particularly during times of war, for every new chick was viewed as a potential fighter. Most likely, everyone bent over my shell urging me to soldier on in my first battle — getting out of this egg that had sheltered me for nearly two moons.

“C'mon, chickie! Follow in the flight marks of your da — the old general!”

“And his mum, don't forget his mum! The commando.” The words were muffled through the shell and I really didn't understand much. But I would soon learn that my mum

was a commando in the Ice Dagger unit, and Da was supreme commander of all the allied forces of the Kielian League, which included the famous Frost Beaks as well as the Hot Blades and other divisions. In short, they didn't come home too much.

Don't feel sorry for me. This was the way it was back in those days on Stormfast Island in the western part of the Everwinter Sea. It would have been mighty queer for an owlet to have both parents around. Almost embarrassing, quite frankly.

I soldiered on in the shell, knocking my brains out trying to get out of there, although most of the work was done with my egg tooth. *Peck, peck, ram.* Then pry a bit, rest, then peck some more. Soon I had opened another crack. There was a great hooray and then a gasp. Someone had just arrived.

"What's she doing here?" a voice said in stunned disbelief.

It was, I am told, my tantya Hanja. The good cheer and boisterous spirits receded immediately. Tanya Hanja was Mum's sister. The two of them were as different as sisters could be. Tanya Hanja wasn't a military type. Glaux, no! She would have been disastrous in battle. Instead, she was a quiet little thing, whose whiskers seemed longer than her wings. She had a funny style of flying, a permanent list to port, which disqualified her for military service. To compensate, her starboard wing

had grown much larger than the other, and she seemed a bit lopsided. But she got around.

Everyone called her Prinka Hanja. “Prinka” meant “poor” in Krakish, the language of the Northern Kingdoms. They felt sorry for her because she couldn’t hunt as well as others. Therefore, she led an itinerant life, visiting relatives. Our family dreaded it when she showed up. She had a knack for appearing when something bad was going to happen. So when she arrived the very night I was hatching out, my broody, Gundesfyrr, began to tremble fiercely and crouch over my egg protectively.

“Oh, good Glaux!” Gundesfyrr nearly keeled over as Tantya Hanja approached the nest with me in it.

“Would love to have a peek. I had a haggish time getting here,” Tantya Hanja said. “The winds were against me the whole way. I see I have arrived just in time. First crack already!”

“Second crack, actually,” Gundesfyrr said weakly.

“Can I tidy up here a bit in preparation for the new chick? Would you like me to gather some moss? It’s always comfy, isn’t it, for the little ones as they’re almost bald after they hatch out. And here, Gundesfyrr, let me give you some down.” Hanja poked her beak into the thick feathers of her primaries and plucked out the downy ones beneath.

“Oh, that really isn’t necessary!” Gundesfyrr shrieked.

“Don’t screech, dearie! Not just after second crack. That

could jiggle things up the wrong way for the exit crack. Now we wouldn't want that, would we?"

Gundesfyr exchanged a horrified glance with Elfstrom, a neighboring Snowy, who had entered the hollow and clamped his beak shut at the sight of Hanja. Elfstrom had seen more battles in his lifetime than my two parents put together. He was on leave from a striker unit after a fierce battle in the Ice Narrows. Very little unnerved this veteran commander, but the sight of Tanya Hanja did.

"There you go," Tanya Hanja said, tucking some of her down into the brooding nest. "Now I'll be back in two shakes of my tail feathers with some moss for the little one. Bet he'll be handsome like his big brother, Edvard. Such a handsome Screech, that one." Just as she was about to leave, she turned and said, "Nearly forgot. Might as well take some of my whiskers. They grow so long this time of year that my talons get tangled in them."

Gundesfyr didn't need to worry. There were no odd jiggles to interfere with the exit crack. I hatched out just fine.

Of course, my eyes were still sealed shut. I could see nothing but I could hear voices muttering about Tanya Hanja. I couldn't make that much sense out of it. It just came to me in fragments.

"Why did *she* have to show up?"

"Always an ill omen."