

PROLOGUE: NERA



The world is dark, but I am awake, alert. I feel alive in the night. I sit in the moonlight, listening to the forest. Branches scrape, leaves rustle, and I detect the sweat from an animal's skin and the warmth of their breath not far away. Good.

My golden-brown fur covers muscles that ache to pounce, but I don't move. Not yet. My eyes adjust and filter the moonlight into a blend of green foliage and purple shadows. A holly bush trembles directly ahead of me. I smell it in the wind: A wild boar is rooting in the dirt behind the bush. I am Nera, a Beast of claw and poise. Slowly, I slip forward, muscles tense like the spring of a trap. I pad closer, my mind calm, all the tension flicking in my tail. I am invisible in the night, and I am upwind. I am the hunter.

THE CHRONICLES OF AVANTIA

I know no fear. Creeping closer, my attention is fixed on the shaking bush and the prey behind it. I am close enough now. It can't get away — I can outrun it in the chase. I am sure of it. I am no ordinary jungle cat. I am Nera, hunter.

Behind me, I hear a low chirp.

I freeze. The bush stills — the boar heard it, too. My body tense, I glance back: Firepos, my mentor, is watching me in the moonlight. A great flame bird, she is a Beast of terrible fire and wisdom. Now, as my vision shifts to bring her into perfect focus, her feathers shimmer red and orange. Her beak is curled and sharp, and with unblinking eyes she stares me down. She is huge, like me.

I hear the boar begin to dig again. I can get it, I know I can, but Firepos does not break her gaze. She knows something.

Behind the boar, a twig snaps. The boar bursts from the brambles, running fast. My claws curl into the dirt, I slink closer, ready to attack, and — a boy leaps out of the bushes after the boar! His sword raised, he is exhilarated — until he sees me. The youth freezes, our eyes meet, and he frowns, breathing hard. The sword is too big for him, oversized in his hands.