

Chapter 1

A Death in the family

A sea mist had coated the window of the farm's kitchen with minuscule drops of rain. Erik was trying not to think of the terrible gamble taken by his mum. His nervous attention was focused on the droplets. Erik sat perfectly still, watching the flecks of water as some of them joined together to form larger drops, and these in turn amalgamated. Eventually, a raindrop grew to the point where it could no longer cling to the glass, and with an erratic plunge rushed downward, moving all the swifter as it gathered up the water in its path – a catastrophic event in the world of the million mist droplets.

Next to Erik, apparently paying equal attention to the faded patterns in the wood of their well-worn table, sat his dad. Neither of them had spoken in over an hour and their shoulders were hunched from tension. At long last, hollow footsteps rang out, changing in tone as they moved from wooden stair to tiled floor. The kitchen door latch was raised and his mother entered.

'Well?' asked Erik. But as soon as his mother had set foot in the kitchen, he could see from her gaunt, pale face that the news was bad.

'I'm dead,' Freya replied, a tremble in her quiet voice.

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Harald stood up and pulled out a chair for her. She grasped the chair with shaking hand and slid into it, not meeting their anxious eyes.

‘The poison did no good service, then?’ enquired Harald gently.

‘No.’ She shook her head. ‘I didn’t penetrate his armour.’

Taking her hand in his, Harald tried to comfort her. ‘You did your best. We knew it was nearly impossible.’

‘At least she fought.’ Erik stood up suddenly, energy flooding through him after so much stillness. His dad was a kind man, but Erik was unable to control the bitterness that came from nowhere to rage through him. Mum at least had entered the arena on their behalf; she was the truly brave one. Harald had hidden; he always hid.

‘We will find a way.’ Harald pointedly ignored Erik, and put an arm around Freya.

‘Will we?’ She let out a gulping half-cry, a sound that shook Erik with the realisation that she had run out of answers too. It was frightening to see someone who had been so steady all his life unable to control herself. ‘Let’s be honest with each other. At least we have that.’ Her eyes were tearful. ‘We are going to be reallocated.’

Reallocation. Work on the farm was hard. But not as hard as in the coalmines, or on the saltpans, or a great many of the other tasks that had to be done on the planet of New Earth. Reallocation would mean leaving Osterfjord and his friends, and probably it would mean being parted from his parents. Their lives were no longer their own.

‘Why don’t you issue a challenge, Dad?’

‘Stop it,’ Harald snarled angrily. ‘Still you will not take my word.’

‘No. I won’t. Not any more. It doesn’t make sense.’ Erik could feel shrillness rising in his voice and paused to take breath. ‘What can be worse than being reallocated?’

‘There is worse,’ replied Harald ominously.

‘Leave it, Erik. We’ve had this out a thousand times.’ Freya looked

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up for the first time since entering the room, and met his eye. ‘Your father cannot fight for us. That’s the end of the matter.’

‘But why?’ Erik pleaded.

‘I cannot say.’ Harald was grim-faced.

‘Blood and vengeance. I’m fourteen now. I’m old enough. Tell me.’

‘No.’

Even before he knew he was going to do it, Erik threw the clay mug he was holding against the wall. It cracked apart crisply, the clatter of shards resounding around the kitchen as they fell to the tiled floor, leaving a reddish mark on the whitewash. All three of them stared at the remains in silence. He knew what they were thinking: a massive catastrophe was about to overwhelm the family, yet they were regretting something as inconsequential as the loss of a mug. Almost at once, his anger subsided and Erik felt embarrassed and guilty; it was indeed a waste.

As they paused, each uncertain as to what needed saying, footsteps could be heard running through the yard. Hurriedly rising from her chair, Freya began to gather up the jagged pieces of pottery. Then came a rap on the door.

‘Come in!’ Either Harald did not care that the visitors would see the broken mug, or else he actually wanted them to.

A golden-haired girl flew in, bringing a breeze and her stocky brother in her wake.

‘Injeborg, Bjorn, welcome,’ Harald greeted their young neighbours. Freya placed the shards of clay behind a basket and stood up.

‘Hello. We’re very sorry about the duel,’ Injeborg said earnestly. Behind her Bjorn added his condolences with a nod.

With a forced smile, Freya lifted a stray hair back behind her ear. ‘Thank you. And thank your parents for the sword and the potion. They must have been worth months of effort. I’m sorry they went to waste.’

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‘Oh don’t worry, they don’t regret it. Yours was a good cause. We will miss you terribly if you have to go.’ Injeborg’s eager face suddenly clouded over as though she wished to take back her words.

‘Erik, take your coat and go with your friends. Your mum and I have much to talk about.’ Harald gestured to the door.

‘Aye, and behind my back as always.’

Erik slammed the door as he left, the latch rattling and failing to catch. He noticed Bjorn and Injeborg exchange a glance of alarm, but no one spoke. The three walked in silence away from the farm, the hoods of their woollen jackets up over their heads, putting them each in their own world. Erik set a fast pace, even though it meant Injeborg was having to skip from time to time in order to keep up. Bjorn, however, plodded along behind with measured strides. Only when they had crested a hill and brought the sea into view did Erik relent from his moodiness. There was no point fuelling his anger and despair, especially in front of his friends; they only wanted to help.

Behind them were acres and acres of olive trees, set out in neat but tedious rows that radiated out towards infinity from a small community of six farms and a large round building that held the olive press. This was his home, the village of Osterfjord. Ahead, towards the sea, the hillside was sandy and bare. Nearby was a particularly large boulder that gave shelter from the sea breeze. It had served them often before, and they went to sit underneath it now.

‘Don’t be upset, Erik,’ Injeborg said, tentatively moving to place her warm hand on his. ‘It might not be so bad. Even if they reallocate you, it could be to the salt pans. That would mean you living in Hope – not so far away.’

‘And in any case,’ added Bjorn, ‘Central Allocations won’t make a decision before graduation. That gives you a chance.’

‘Did you watch?’ Erik changed the subject.

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‘Yes. We were all in the arena, everyone from Osterfjord at least and many from Hope.’ Bjorn looked cautiously at Erik out of a broad, fleshy face in which watery green eyes were holding a question.

‘I couldn’t bear the waiting. And anyway I wanted to be at home for Mum.’ Erik paused. ‘Did she fight well?’

‘Very well!’ exclaimed Injeborg. ‘She really knows how to wield a scimitar. But you know what she was up against. Ragnok must have had ten thousand bezants worth of armour alone.’

‘More,’ Bjorn knew a lot about the value of arms and armour.

‘It’s so unfair.’ Normally Erik considered self-pity a sign of weakness, and never let it take form in his own mind, let alone allow his friends to see it. But these were not normal circumstances. Not only was he likely to be placed among complete strangers and set to some painfully arduous work, but his own parents considered him a child still, untrustworthy and unequal to a discussion on a future that would affect them all. In his own mind he was loyal, dependable and could hold his tongue if a secret needed to be guarded.

‘Of course it is unfair. Totally unfair and unreasonable. It’s not your family’s fault the solar panel broke. That could happen to anyone. Why should you be punished?’ When Injeborg was angry, her pale cheeks flushed red – only then could you see the resemblance between the slender girl and her stocky brother.

‘Ya. And it’s not as if a new family could fill the quota without that power. It doesn’t really make sense to reallocate you.’ Bjorn tied up the neck of his jacket as he spoke, trying to keep out the cold damp air.

‘Do Central Allocations even think about what it means to split up friends and families? But what can we do? Even to challenge them on a small decision is to be killed in the arena like your mum. Let alone if someone suggested a really radical change.’ Injeborg was

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worked up, talking as much to herself as to Erik.

‘Did you ever daydream about duelling Central Allocations and winning?’ he asked her, the thought soaring up from the bottom of his heart, from where he normally hid it, saved for those moments when he lay thinking of the future.

‘Always.’ Injeborg looked up at him, their eyes met and Erik saw total understanding. He was glad now he had blurted out his wish.

‘Not I,’ Bjorn said with a shrug to convey his pragmatism. ‘It’s too unrealistic.’

A chaffinch landed near them, looking for shelter, head flicking busily so that everything around it could be surveyed by its two tiny black eyes. The warm hand that covered Erik’s tightened as Injeborg unconsciously stiffened, holding herself still so as not to frighten the bird. Erik tasted a happiness that was all the more precious for the bleakness that surrounded him. The affection and solidarity of his friends was a great comfort and the prospect of losing them more painful than the thought of having to labour in a coalmine.

The breeze, which was merely ruffling the tiny feathers of the chaffinch, making it seem like the bird was wearing a fur collar, suddenly gusted. The chaffinch was gone.

In those few moments, deep within Erik, a decision had been made. It was a decision he relished. Impossible as it sounded, he was going to fight Central Allocations and avenge the death of his mother.