

The **GLASS**
ARROW

**KRISTEN
SIMMONS**



**TOR
TEEN**

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THE GLASS ARROW

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PART ONE

THE GARDEN



CHAPTER 1

RUN.

My breath is sharp as a dagger, stabbing through my throat. It's all I hear. *Whoosh. Whoosh.* In and out.

They're here. The Trackers. They've followed Bian from the lowland village where he lives. The fool led them right to us.

The forest I know as well as the lines on my palms is dense and shrouded from the midmorning light. I keep to the shadows, skirting around the bright open patches where the sunlight streams to the forest floor. My calloused feet fly over the damp leaves and gray pebbles, keeping me stealthy as a fox.

I run a practiced pattern, just like my ma taught me as a child. A zigzag through the brush and trees. I never run in a line; their horses will catch up too quickly on the straightaway, and they're not all I have to worry about. I know the Tracker hounds have picked up my scent too, but they're scroungers, weakened by hunger, and not as nimble as me in these woods. I'm banking on their starving stomachs leading them directly to the bait meat in my hunting snares.

My thoughts jolt to the traps. There are six placed strategically around our camp. I know they're good because I set them myself, and checked them only this morning.

In my mind I see a Tracker's heavy black boots clamber over the loose branches, see him fall ten feet down into a muddy hole.

Another might trip the spring of the rabbit cage so its razor-sharp teeth bite down through his leather shoe.

Trackers are cunning. But not as cunning as me.

I swing around a stout pine, locking my body in place behind it so that I'm absolutely still. The coarse bark imprints onto the naked skin of my shoulders but I hold my position. That's when I hear it. The thunder of hoofbeats.

A shot pierces the air. Gunfire. Someone yells—a man's voice, strained, hurting. It's either one of them or Bian. He's the only man old enough to make a noise so deep. Tam's not yet seven, and if he were caught, his cry would be shrill. Childlike.

Tam. I must find Tam and Nina, the twins. They count on me when they're scared. Though when I conjure them in my mind—Tam's black hair and button nose, Nina's ever-watchful eyes—I am the one who's scared.

I've prepared them, I tell myself. I've prepared them like my ma prepared me. They know the hiding place—the abandoned wolf's den in the south woods. An image of it breaks through from my memory: the narrow, shale entrance and damp inner chamber, smelling of mold. The rocky floor lined with the brittle bones of squirrels whose souls have long since passed to Mother Hawk. At first it looks to be a trap in itself, but if you squeeze past the tapering stone walls, the rock gives way to soil, and the twisting roots of an old pine create a ladder to climb upward into sunlit freedom.

This has been our hiding place for my entire life. The twins know this. I've drilled them on this plan since my ma died four years ago, when I was eleven. Since they were toddling, crying in that cave for fear of the dark, and I had to carry them the entire way, singing their favorite lullabies, saying, *you're so brave, you're so brave*. Lifting them out myself, because they weren't yet strong enough to climb.

I made them practice hiding even when Salma told me not to—that I shouldn't "frighten them." Stupid—readiness was how we'd survived two raids from the Trackers in our youth. But

though Salma is two years older, she acts like a baby. She hates the mountains, and hates my ma, even in death, for stealing her away here, for giving her freedom. And why she hates *that*, I'll never know.

Salma. I've lost sight of my cousin, and Metea, Bian, Tam and Nina's mother. They're my only family, the only ones who live with me in hiding.

Another shot. My hearing sharpens, hones in on the sound, and I alter my course. I have to see if it's Bian that's in trouble. In his panic I'm sure he's run for the wolf's den. If the twins are there, if Salma and Metea are there, he'll give them all away.

I'm running westward now, aware of the heat and the moisture coating my skin. The trees spread, and I enter the clearing where the moss beneath my feet grows plush and soft as fur. Most days I love it here, but today this area is treacherous. There are few places to hide, and at any given moment I am exposed on all sides.

The hoofbeats have faded behind me, and the stillness makes me leery. Only a fool would think I'd lost them. No, they're stalling, waiting to box me in.

I am less than a mile from our camp. For a flash, I debate running back to get a weapon. Any weapon—a bow, a knife, a steel pan. Anything that can be useful to defend myself, but I don't have time. My usual obsidian blade is now in Tam's tiny hands. I pray he won't have to use it.

The sound of labored breathing, of something wounded, cuts through the trees. I skid to a halt, swinging myself onto a low branch so that I can get a better view of the surrounding area. Just north, thirty paces or so, I make out a figure crumpled over the ground.

Bian.

His long, dark hair is matted with mud and leaves. His tunic—the one he trades his T-shirt for when he comes to visit us in the mountains—is twisted around his body and stained with an ink

darker than berry juice. From the corner of his chest a spear nearly as tall as me juts out at an angle like a sapling after a windstorm. Weakly, he reaches for it with his opposite hand. Then his arm drops and he grows still. Too still.

I will not approach him. I *cannot*. My heart twists for the boy I have called brother all my life.

Silence. Even the birds are voiceless. Even the stream has stopped.

I must get closer. If he's alive, I can help him.

I climb down, one painstaking step at a time, crouching low to sneak towards him. As I close in, I feel my blood grow slow and thick.

Bian is dead.

The spear is planted straight through to the earth. There is a wound in his leg where a bullet has pierced his jeans, and another in his chest. Dark blossoms of red are still seeping out across the sweat-dampened fabric. His mouth and his eyes are wide open in shock.

Still ten paces away and sheltered on one side by the thick, tri-split leaves of a wormwood bush, I fall to my knees. I don't understand why they've done this—why he's been shot *and* speared. Trackers carry guns, and for their grand prize, use nets. They don't use the antique weapons of the upper class.

The answer pops into my mind as soon as I ask the question. These Trackers are not bounty hunters out on a slave-catching mission. These Trackers are hired thugs, paid for their services by some rich Magnate businessman looking for hunting fun. A bit of adventure.

It sickens me but I can picture it: The first shot, to Bian's leg, was meant to slow him down, to fix the game. He'd stumbled, made an easy target for the men pursuing him. The Magnate managed to spear him in the chest, but the wound had not been fatal. So the Tracker had shot him again.

Poor Bian. Poor stupid Bian. Who never heeded his mother's

desperate pleas that he cover his tracks when paying us a visit. I hate him for bringing this upon us. I hate him more for dying.

Enough time has been wasted. There is nothing I can do here.

Find the twins. Find Salma and Metea, I order myself. But though the grief has dried, my feet are clumsier than before.

The woods are unnaturally silent. I doubt the Trackers have taken the Magnate home. They would have returned to collect his spear, and besides that, they haven't gotten what they've come for. The real trophy.

Me.

They'll want Salma, and Nina too, though she's still too young for auction. Metea is in real danger. She's too old to bear children—she was already forty when she had the twins. If she's caught, they'll kill her, just like they killed her son, Bian.

But they'll bring the girls—Salma, Nina, and me—to the city. My ma's stories flash through my mind, blending with Bian's, brought back from the civilized world. The Trackers will sell us to a farm, where we'll be groomed and fattened, and sold at auction to any Magnate who can pay the price.

To be free means to be hunted, and there aren't many of us left.

I begin to follow one of my hidden hunting trails up a steep embankment towards the cave. I don't know how long we've been under attack; the sun is high now, it must be almost midday. Surely the Magnate will be tiring, slowing atop the show pony that has replaced his electric car as a sign of status. I'm tiring too. My muscles have grown tight, my tongue thick, and there's less sweat pouring down my face and between my breasts than before.

“Aya!” Metea's faint cry steals my focus.

I cut sharply left, scaling a large boulder that leaves me momentarily exposed to the sunlight and any roaming eyes. Without delay, I hop down into a small clearing where I see Metea lying on her stomach.

Now I don't think about consequences. I don't care if they see me. Metea has been a mother to me since my ma died. It scares me to the core that she is down; she's fit and able to run. She should be heading for the cave.

"Go, Aya!" she cries, twisting her face up to meet my gaze. "Salma has taken the twins!"

I look at Metea and see Tam's small nose and Nina's dark eyes. Bian's broad shoulders. Her hair has become more salt than pepper these days, and her eyes and mouth bear the marks of too much smiling. But now her face is all twisted up with a pain that makes my whole body hurt.

"Come on, get up!" I say, scanning the trees for movement.

"I can't. Go, child! The Trackers, they . . ." She cries out, and the sound is like a pestle grinding my heart into the mortar. I lock my jaw.

Metea had gone into hiding when she learned she was pregnant with the twins. My ma helped her through the birthing. She didn't cry out once.

"I'm not leaving you!" I say.

I try to force her over onto her back. A groan comes from deep in her throat, and draws a whimper to my lips. Now I'm certain the Trackers have heard us.

I succeed in turning her but can't hide the gasp, or stop the sick that fills my mouth. There are deep lines scratched into her shins and thighs, and a serpentine gash across her belly, sliced straight through the yellow dress Bian brought her for her birthday. The red blood seems darker next to that bright fabric. When I look closer, I can see the white and purple flesh within the wounds that I recognize from cleaning a kill.

My throat is knotting up. I can heal most cuts, but nothing so deep. Metea will need a hospital. She will need to go into Bian's village for treatment. I press down on her stomach to stanch the bleeding and to my revulsion, my hands slide away from the slippery surface of her skin.

Metea grasps both of my arms.

“The Trackers have wires!” she sputters, and her eyes are now so wide I can see the perfect white rings around her brown irises.

“Wires,” I repeat. Long, metal, snakelike whips that stun and slice their prey. This can’t be right. Only Watchers, the city police, carry wires. Trackers belong to the Virulent caste, the bottom-feeders of the city. They are thieves and murderers. Thugs. They have guns, not the complex weaponry of the Watchers.

Then I remember the spear protruding from Bian’s chest, and I remember my conclusion that the rich Magnate has hired these thugs for sport and entertainment. Maybe he’s outfitted them with wires. If that’s true, who knows what else they got.

“Is Bian with Salma?” Metea asks me. There is a slur in her words, as though she’s drunk on shine, and my fear catapults to a new level. I don’t have to answer her. She sees the truth flicker across my face. Her eyes slip shut momentarily, and I shake her.

“You know what to do,” she tells me.

I must sing his soul to Mother Hawk, who will carry him to the afterlife.

“Yes,” I promise. Though now my voice sounds very far away. Then, as if struck by a bolt of lightning, she rouses, and sits straight up.

“Run, Aya! I feel them! They’re coming!”

I know a moment later what she means. The horses’ hooves are striking the ground, vibrating the gravel beneath my knees. I look to the brush beside us and quickly consider dragging Metea into it, but the horses are too close. If I’m going to save myself I don’t have time.

“Get up!” I am crying now. The salty tears blend with my sweat and burn my eyes.

“Leave me.”

“No!” Even as I say it I’m rising, hooking my arms beneath hers, pulling her back against my chest. But she’s dead weight

and I collapse. She rolls limply to one side. I kiss her cheek, and hope she knows that I love her. I will sing Bian's soul to the next life. I will sing her soul there too, because she surely is doomed to his same fate.

"Run," she says one last time, and I release her.

I sprint due north, the opposite direction from the cave where I hope Salma has hidden the twins. I run as hard and as fast as I can, fueled by fear and hatred. My feet barely graze the ground for long enough to propel me forward, but still I can feel the earth tremble beneath them. The Trackers are coming closer. The Magnate is right on my heels.

I dodge in my zigzag pattern. I spin around the pine trees and barely feel the gray bark as it nicks my arms and legs. My hide pants rip near the knee when I cut too close to a sharp rock, and I know that it's taken a hunk of my skin, too. No time to check the damage, no time for pain. I hurdle over a streambed and continue to run.

A break in the noise behind me, and I make the mistake that will cost me my freedom.

I look back.

They are close. So much closer than I thought. Two horses have jumped the creek. They are back on the bank now, twenty paces behind me. I catch a glimpse of the tattered clothes of the Trackers, and their lanky, rented geldings, frothing at the bit. The faces of the Virulent are ashy, scarred, and starved. Not just for food, but for income. They see me as a paycheck. I've got a credit sign tattooed across my back.

I run again, forcing my cramping muscles to push harder. Suddenly, a crack pierces the air, and something metal—first cold, then shockingly hot—winds around my right calf. I cannot hold back the scream this time as I crash to the ground.

The wire contracts, cutting through the skin and into the flesh and muscle of my leg. The heat turns electric, and soon it is shocking me, sending volts of lightning up through my hips, vi-

brating my insides. My whole body begins to thrash wildly, and I'm powerless to hold still. The pressure squeezes my lungs and I can't swallow. I start to pant; it is all I can do to get enough air.

A net shoots out over me. I can see it even through my quaking vision. My seizing arms become instantly tangled.

"Release the wire! Release it!" orders a strident male voice.

A second later, the wire retracts its hold, and I gasp. The blood from my leg pools over the skin and soaks the dirt below. But I know I have no time to rest. I must push forward. To avoid the meat market, to keep my family safe, I must get away.

I begin to crawl, one elbow digging into the dirt, then the next. Fingers clawing into the mossy ground, dragging my useless leg. But my body is a corpse, and I cannot revive it.

Mother Hawk, I pray, please give me wings.

But my prayers are too late.

My voice is only a trembling whisper, but I sing. For Bian and for Metea. I sing as I push onward, the tears streaming from my eyes. I must try to set their souls free while I can.

Out of the corner of my eye I see the boney fetlocks of a chestnut horse. The smooth cartilage of his hooves is cracked. This must be a rental—the animal hasn't even been shod. An instant later, black boots land on the ground beside my face. Tracker boots. I can hear the bay of the hounds now. The stupid mutts have found me last, even after the horses and the humans.

I keep trying to crawl away. My shirt is soaked by sweat and blood, some mine, some Metea's. It drips on the ground. I bare my teeth, and swallow back the harsh copper liquid that is oozing into my mouth from a bite on the inside of my cheek. I am yelling, struggling against my failing body, summoning the strength to escape.

"Exciting, isn't it boys?" I hear a man say. The same one who ordered the release of the wire.

He kneels on the ground and I notice he's wearing fine linen pants and a collared shirt with a tie. If only I had the power to

choke him with it. At least that would be vengeance for one death today. His face is smooth and creaseless, but there's no fancy surgery to de-age his eyes. He's at least fifty.

He's wearing a symbol on his breast pocket. A red bird in flight. A cardinal. Bian has told me this is the symbol for the city of Glasscaster, the capitol. This must be where he plans on taking me.

He's ripping the net away, and for a moment I think he's freeing me, he's letting me go. But this is ridiculous. I'm who he wants.

Then, as though I'm an animal, he weaves his uncalloused, unblistered fingers into my black, spiraled hair, and jerks my head back so hard that I arch halfway off the ground. I hiss at the burn jolting across my scalp. He points to one of the Trackers, who's holding a small black box. Thinking this is a gun, I close my eyes and brace for the shot that will end my life. But no shot comes.

"Open your eyes, and smile," the Magnate says. With his other hand he is fixing his wave of stylishly silver hair, which has become ruffled in the chase.

I do open my eyes, and I focus through my quaking vision on the black box. I've heard Bian talk about these things. Picture boxes. They freeze your image, so that it can be preserved forever. Like a trophy.

I'm going to remember this moment forever, too. And I don't even need his stupid picture box.