

CHAPTER 2: ALMOST AN ORDINARY DAY

*To protect your private matters,
Keep your own counsel.
A secret told is no longer a secret.
--Haakor, The Tome, 932 AD*

I don't feel like eating," Anders said as he entered the darkened corridor with Tomas. He ran his hands through his sandy-colored hair, trying to ignore the pain. As he shuffled down the dismal passage toward the eating hall, he glanced at the carved faces of their gods and heroes perched high in the passage walls. On top of each carving rested a chunk of crystal, each exuding a golden aura amid the shadows. The faces seemed to watch him in the flickering light.

"I doubt that will be a problem," Tomas said, looking over his shoulder for Erik and Ana. "There's probably nothing left." He kicked a pebble and sent it skidding along the stone. "Maybe you should talk to one of the Mothers."

"They're too busy, Tomas. You know that." With only four Mothers and over seventy children, they never had time for him.

“How about Mother Elder, then?”

“Idin? You’re kidding!” He whirled and faced Tomas. “I don’t like her rules, and that creepy place she works in all the time. Forget that.” He walked in silence, aimlessly dragging his fingers along the stony wall. “Maybe I’ll feel better tomorrow.”

“Sure, Anders.”

Footsteps echoed behind them. Erik and Ana arrived in a rush, pushing each other along. Erik’s lanky, fair appearance was contrasted by Ana’s chestnut hair and compact build, and his earnest manner gave him the appearance of an academic. “Ana and I have a plan for the Secret Club,” Erik whispered. He stopped and looked at Anders. “What’s wrong with you?”

Anders rubbed his head and turned away.

“Leave him alone, Erik,” Ana said. “Mr. Serious just needs some breakfast.” Anders joined them in moody silence and walked toward the eating hall, its arched entrance filled with golden light.

The four Mothers stood straight and quiet in the stone archway, waiting to greet the stragglers. Except for their coloring they looked strikingly alike: tall, lean, and athletic. Each wore a simple cloth tunic and leggings, enrobed by a long cape clasped ornamentally at one shoulder. The darkest of them stepped forward.

“Well, well, well! The last of the Stage 10s!” Mother Kistran said. “Where have you been?” She bent down to Anders’ eye level and gave him a knowing look. “And how is the Secret Club doing today?”

Anders jerked away from Kistran in alarm. What if she were overheard? Children were never allowed to organize themselves. Idin forbade it. He was careful never to do anything

obvious. Anders entered the cavernous eating hall without a word, suddenly distracted by the rich smell of spice cakes and nut-cream.

“By the way, Tomas,” Kistran called.

Tomas looked back, talking to Anders. “What?”

“I saved you some spice paste.”

Grinning, Tomas smacked Anders on his back and bounded into the eating hall.

The lively sound of children greeting one another rose high in the stony hall as Anders found his customary seat among the other Stage 10s. The Mothers watched over the crush of hungry children, counting heads. “Sixty-eight,” Kistran said. “Three more left. I hardly wonder who those might be.” Anders leaned over the table and peered into the corridor.

Three Stage 12 girls eventually appeared, the dim light casting long shadows as they wandered slowly to the eating hall. The Mothers watched their progress, waiting.

A dark-haired girl stopped at the entrance. “Wait, Sissel. Your braids are loose in the back. Let me fix them before we go in.” The two twelve-year olds flanking the tall, honey-haired girl immediately set upon the task of coiling the many elaborate braids which sat elegantly atop the head of every girl in the caverns.

Anders shook his head as he watched the girls step into the eating hall. It was the same thing every day. His sister Sissel was the slowest girl in the caverns—that is, until she ate. She could eat mounds of food in minutes. Then she worked or studied without a break and never stopped for a single minute of play. He didn’t understand that at all. There were always a few minutes in the day when no one was watching.

“Your braids look so sunny, Sissel,” said one of the girls.

“Don’t talk about the sun.” Sissel’s gray eyes glinted fiercely in the wavering light cast

by the large, irregular crystals set high into the rock.

“Let’s go, girls,” Kistran said. “The food is coming out now.”

With that, they scurried in, falling silent at the sight of Idin. The four Mothers turned to their leader and briskly entered the eating hall, their capes trailing behind them neatly in pleats.

Immediately everyone stood as Idin appeared in the eating hall, her powerful stride and youthful gait belying her seventy years. She passed an imperious look over the silent crowd, her magnificent headdress a swirling mass of pale, narrow braids. Long, silvery-white hair streamed down her back. An intricately molded bronze pin clasped her outer robe at one shoulder, and from it hung a pouch, a key, and a needle on three delicate silver chains.

“Good morning, children.”

“Good morning, Mother Elder,” they chorused obediently. No one smiled.

Idin raised her hands, palms upward, as the children stood lined at their tables like soldiers. “Breakfast,” she intoned, “is served.”

Anders breathed a sigh of relief when Idin sat and turned her attention to the four Mothers. Now he could eat in peace, away from Idin’s piercing stares. His headache began to fade. Breakfast was the only time he ever enjoyed eating—except lately, after all those dreams . . . he rubbed his hands again. Maybe the mugs of warm nut-cream would dull the ache.

He remained standing, eyeing the burnished stone walls reflecting the pale glow from the milky quartz ceiling. Rounded outcroppings, carved with faces of Thor, Odin, Freyja, and their other gods, held huge, flickering crystals of every hue. Their wavering light cast moving shadows upon the rocky images. He noticed a young girl glance worriedly at the carvings.

Geyorg, the oldest, nodded in his direction. Anders thought he was always so solemn and apart from the others. Sometimes it even felt like Geyorg was watching over him in a

fatherly way . . . shifting his thoughts from the painful memory of his father, Anders glanced down. At Geyorg's feet he saw a small rock.

"Sit down, Anders," Ana said. "You act like you're seeing this old room for the first time." She tucked a tiny wayward braid behind her ear.

"I spied a rock."

"You and your rocks." Ana pulled on his sleeve and craned her neck to get a good look at the heavy platters which the Stage 14 children so expertly handled. "Look what's coming! Oh, that smells great."

"I'm going to get the rock before someone else finds it," Anders said. "I'll be right back." He glanced over at Idin. It was safe now. She was still talking with the Mothers, her austere meal cold and untouched.

He walked smoothly toward Geyorg and the rock. Geyorg nodded at him, the light in his eyes dimmed by something vague that always looked like sadness. Anders snatched the gold-flecked stone and studied it. Maybe it would glow in the dark like the last one.

Anders gave Sissel a little wave as he passed her Stage 12 table, briefly displaying the stone before hiding it in his pocket. She grinned at him over her food, her golden crown of braids shining with the reflected light of the crystals. He eyed the towering platters of food coming his way and quickly found his seat, his stomach rumbling.

The Stage 16s—the oldest of the children, aged sixteen and over—had been cooking all morning, accounting for the rich aroma of a warm breakfast filling the cavernous hall. Today the platters held huge stacks of savory cakes and rolls of flatbread spread with nut-cream, spices, and jam. At each place stood a small cup of cloudberry juice and a mug filled to the brim with steaming nut-cream dusted with spices. Children stretched and leaned to see the

food as it was set down the middle of the long wooden tables, their heavy tabletops resting upon enormous cross-sections of old tree trunks from the northern fells. Generations ago, their village artisans had thickly carved the bases into totems bearing the noble faces of reindeer, bears, rams, and horses.

Tomas leaned over and tweaked the nose of a reindeer. “I wonder what kind of jam we have today? I think the winterberry jam is about gone.” He wiggled in his seat. “Too bad. I love that jam.”

“Hurry and eat,” Ana said to Anders. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “You know we have plans to make.”

Anders opened the pocket of his tunic. “I found a rounded stone. I think it glows. It’s for my collection.”

“Very nice, Anders, but it’s just some worn out crystal,” she said, serving herself another cake. “You should eat. It’s good today. But watch out for Garen—he’s in one of his *moods*.”

The four peered over their cups down the Stage 10 table in Garen’s general direction, meeting the boy’s insolent expression as it shined through his veil of straight brown hair. He refused to break their gaze.

“I’ll get him!” Tomas said. “He makes me so mad!”

“Don’t be such a hothead, Tomas,” Ana said.

Tomas wiggled his fingers behind her head and made a crazy face.

“I’m not going to let it bother me,” Anders said. He tried to ignore Garen, who glared openly at the group. “I have things to do today.”

“What could possibly be worth doing?” Tomas asked. “I suppose . . . *the meditative*

exercise?”

Ana laughed.

Erik held up his hand. “Guess what—you’ve all forgotten. It’s the first day of rock climbing season. We’re going to the theater after breakfast.”

Anders leaned back and smiled, his eyes squeezed tight in happiness. Rock climbing! It was the only time he ever felt free, away from the Mothers in the soaring heights of the stone theater, searching for the prize crystal . . . now that it was spring, he could climb every day. He could ignore the gloom. “I’m getting out of here,” he said, grabbing the last piece of flatbread. “I’ll see you at the theater.” He sailed over the wooden bench and raced down the corridor.

Springtime meant many things in the caverns, but it especially meant rock climbing in the enormous theater. It was their largest room, and like all the spaces, its rocky walls were washed with bands of light from the crystals overhead. These were all in shades of the distant sea, gray and green and blue, and they rested on deeply carved sconces of elm and fir. The floor was etched with an ancient sunburst pattern, and against one wall curved nine long steps that produced enough seating for all the children of the caverns. The Mothers kept the towering walls unpolished to improve everyone’s grip on the dangerous climbs, and long ago they had cut scattered niches for their training.

Sissel stood in line, smiling as she looked around the stony theater. “Anders, it’s so great here! It’s not so bad when we’re training like this.”

“In training for nothing,” Anders said flatly. He felt his euphoria wane. Nothing would ever happen underground.

Sissel gave him a sharp look. “Don’t think about it. That’s what *you* always say.”

He shrugged and looked away, suddenly noticing the smooth floor of the theater. He turned, ran, and took a mighty slide along the glossy stone, shooting straight across the room. “Whoa,” he said. Another perfect slide! He glanced around the cavernous space and wished they did not exercise by seasons. It had been nine dreary months since his last climb. He glanced at the rocky ceiling. Would the echo still be there? “Hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo,” he called, listening for the reverberation.

“Anders, are you coming?” Kistran said.

Anders walked to the wall and ignored his sore hands as he started to climb, wearing the embroidered climbing tunic and leggings he had woven over the winter like everyone else.

Kistran directed from below. “Push up with your left leg a bit, Ana, and you will find a perfect spot for your toes. Can you feel it? Then you can move to the right.” She turned her attention to Tomas and Erik, who grinned at Anders and pretended to be hurt by invaders. Each hung by one arm, their tongues stuck out at an angle and their eyes rolled dramatically upward. Anders climbed higher.

In a moment he paused, closing his eyes as he tested his memory of the locations of the various foot rests. Others calculated every move in advance, but sometimes he moved around with his eyes closed as a challenge when things began to feel easy. But however anyone climbed, they all hunted for the same thing: a reward. On every climb a single rose-colored crystal lay hidden, a prize for the most strategic climb over the perilous walls. Anders had won dozens.

Anders effortlessly resumed his ascent, finding niches and outcroppings leading him upward as the air began to feel warmer and thick. He wondered where he would find the prize

crystal. Surely it would be his—today he had quickly outpaced the others. But over his shoulder he saw Garen beginning to overtake him.

A sharp pain stopped him. He flexed his hands, leaning into the stone wall for balance and a moment's rest. He inhaled deeply to calm himself, and returned to scaling the towering height.

“What’s the matter, Anders,” a voice said nastily. “Losing your edge? Your *magnificence*?” It was Garen. Anders tried to ignore him, knowing the boy’s jealousy came from their years of competition at the wall. He pulled himself smoothly upward, touched the ceiling for luck, then began to traverse the wall in search of the prize. His prize.

No! Suddenly the strength in his hands failed. He lurched and slid down the wall, his fingers searching frantically for something to grip. “Help me!” he cried out. He finally grasped an outcropping and squeezed. He hung helplessly against the rough stone, his feet dangling from a terrible height.

Kistran scaled the wall in a flash and grabbed one of Anders’ hands. She pulled him upward as his feet scrambled to find a stable place to set his weight, hot pain searing through his fingers. But even with Kistran holding one hand, he knew he was going to fall. He looked fearfully at the stone floor below and pictured himself lying there in a heap, dead.

“Hold on, Anders,” Kistran said in a low tone. She shifted her position and stretched her left leg, and with her slippered foot she pushed against the back of Anders’ knee, raising it. “Set your foot into the niche.”

He blindly felt for the perch, feeling the sweat beading across his brow as he fixed his weight and straightened. Finally, he was able to relieve the strain on his weakened hands. Except for his labored breathing, the theater was in complete silence.

Anders wiped his forehead, feeling the thundering of his heart lessen beat by beat. “I can get down now,” he said, suddenly yearning for solid ground.

“Slowly,” Kistran said in warning.

He cautiously lowered himself to the floor, and when he landed he shook his head in an effort to dispel the thoughts of his near disaster. Behind his back, he rubbed his hands.

“Carry on,” Kistran said to the other climbers, who still watched from their tiny perches after she turned away. She looked steadily at Anders, who suddenly started to count the cracks in the theater floor.

“Anders.”

He continued his thorough inspection of the stone.

“Explain what happened.”

“I . . . I don’t know,” he said. “I just lost my grip. Suddenly, I couldn’t hang on any more. It was just a mistake. Maybe I’m a little tired.”

“Take my hand, Anders.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Take my hand.”

Anders reached for Kistran’s hand and squeezed it limply, avoiding her eyes.

“Marit!” Kistran called to one of the Mothers. “Tell Idin we are coming.”

Anders’ heart lurched. Idin! He had never been to Idin’s chambers. None of the children had, but they all dreaded going there. Everyone had heard the stories. And no one ever risked injury in the caverns; it was unthinkable. What if Idin and her potions couldn’t fix it? And then to be stuck in her terrible rooms . . . he slowly followed Kistran out of the theater, his stomach in knots.

The long walk down the darkened corridors increased his apprehension as he drew gradually nearer to Idin's chambers. He felt his hands begin to swell. He slowed his pace when the arched entrance loomed before him, but he knew there was no avoiding it. He would have to go inside.

"Come along," Kistran said, who walked briskly through the opening.

Anders held his breath as he crossed the dim threshold. He looked carefully around him, thinking about traps, wild animals, and other frightening things he had heard about. But no such intimidating items appeared. It was mostly dark, but as he stepped deeper into the forechamber the shadowy places began to take on the detail provided by a ring of crystals glowing near the ceiling. Two polished, stone walls contained deeply inset arches, each bearing a collection of ancient artifacts.

He gazed around the dark room in surprise. It was nothing like the stories. He made out the shapes of thick, leather-bound books, piles of shiny stones, and a stack of multicolored crystals which dimly pulsated an eerie glow in their alcove as though alive. He imagined the sensation of touching each crystal, stone, and book. He studied the row of carvings on the wall behind Idin's heavy wooden desk, wondering about the history behind the godlike images. They never heard the sagas in the caverns.

On Idin's desk sat a large stone bowl, its rough perimeter inlaid with spots of something shiny and gold. Beside it lay a mortar, a pestle, and a large piece of amber. An open scroll lay half rolled beside a cluster of vials, each containing a finely ground, colored powder.

Kistran left him alone in the stillness to wait for Idin. He shifted his weight uneasily. He slowly gazed around the rest of the strange chamber, hoping he wasn't in trouble.

Near the far wall he saw a disturbing shape, something large and furry, watching him at a crouch. He chided himself. Nothing was ever alive underground but them. Nonetheless he kept his gaze on the furry outline and edged to a brighter part of the room.

A large wooden chest sat near his feet, at the base of Idin's desk. He bent and ran his hand along the heavy lid carved with reindeer and eagles. He saw three ornate, bronze hinges and realized he must be looking at the back of the chest. He peered around to the front, where in the center hung a thick bronze medallion molded into shapes of fruit and stars. He scanned the room, his eyes straining in the dark. He was still alone.

Anders raised the bronze medallion, revealing an oddly-shaped keyhole. Suddenly the medallion fell from his hand with a loud, metallic clank. He slowly turned his head. No one had entered. Exhaling in relief, he straightened and stepped away.

"I see you found the kist," Idin said as she strode in. Her robes made a soft swish as she swept along the bare, stony floor.

Anders' mouth went dry. "Um, a kist?"

"Kist. The chest."

Anders looked guiltily at Idin as she drew him toward the darkened wall. Unexpectedly he discovered a hidden seating area, thickly lined with layers of embroidered cloth and furs. What had seemed like an animal was only the warm and very thick bear skin on which he was now comfortably sitting. He looked up at Idin, who was staring at him intently.

"Tell me what happened, Anders," Idin said steadily, "but be warned, I have already heard the details."

“It was just a mistake . . .” His attempt to appear unconcerned gave way under Idin’s penetrating gaze, which seemed to bore straight through him and into the wall behind. He lowered his eyes. “It’s a long story.”

“I have time.”

Anders noticed the set look to her jaw and knew he would have to tell her everything. In a low voice he began to tell the truth behind his fall—the dreams, his aching head and hands, his failure to grip the rock.

Idin took a leather pouch from the inner folds of her robe and emptied its contents into her palm. Stone after unusual stone clicked into the pile. With a long, bony finger, Idin felt around the various stones and selected the glassiest one, iridescent in the light. She returned the remaining stones to the pouch and laid the leather bundle on her lap.

“What’s that?” he said, frowning. There was something strange about the stone.

Idin remained silent, then rubbed the glassy stone between her fingers as she listened to the rest of his story. As he spoke, the stone turned dark and suddenly burst into flame; then it turned glassy again and wept tiny droplets of water. Anders glanced uneasily at the stone in Idin’s hand, now dry and inert. It seemed like some kind of test.

Idin dropped the stone into the pouch and tucked it inside her robes. “Anders,” she said, her icy gaze once again upon him. “Look at me.”

Anders looked at the pouch, then at Idin’s face, and swallowed.

“This is important,” she said, her expression softening for an instant. Then it returned to the icy hardness of before. “Dreams have always played an important role in our Nordic tradition. They are to be taken seriously.” She looked deeply into his eyes. “In your case, Anders, I think it has something to do with your father. Missing one’s father can cause great

stress upon a young life. Be easy on yourself.” Idin sighed when Anders bowed his head. “Indeed, it has been a great challenge to cope without our village men.” She extended a tremulous hand as though she wanted to reassure him, but then she seemed to reconsider. She tucked her hand inside the folds of her robes.

Anders began to think that Idin might not be so commanding after all. Then he wondered why she was suddenly talking about his father. He had been dead for nearly ten years—just like all the others.

“I should give you something,” Idin said. She swept out of the room and returned with a small, eight-sided box. It was finely carved with swirls of interwoven bears and fish. “Here,” she said, her arm outstretched. “This was your father’s. He asked me to give it to you when the time was right.”

Anders took the strange box. He cautiously removed the lid and found a miniature penknife and a flat object wrapped in linen. As he unwrapped the cloth, he discovered a slender, slightly torn book. On the cover was etched his name. *Anders*.

He slowly opened the tiny book and touched the mottled pages one by one. Spidery names were written in brown ink next to delicate, detailed drawings that looked almost real. Drawings, it turned out, of him. Of his family. Of his father.

A dreamy image surfaced in his mind, unbidden. He saw himself, sitting on his father’s knee, laughing and reaching for something held high in his father’s hand. It seemed so real . . . so warm . . . he imagined leaning against his father’s neck.

“This is yours to keep,” Idin said, “but do not show the others. It would be unfair to everyone. It’s the only book like this left—even Sissel’s is gone.”

As he clutched the book, another image began to form. His father was leading him on a brown mare through the tall grasses of summer, a fragrant pasture as deep and wide as the sea. It felt so real . . . was it a dream, or a memory? Anders buried his head in his hands, not wanting to think anything more. Loneliness crept over his heart.

Idin put her arm around his shoulder as though understanding his innermost thoughts. She settled him on the fur blanket, where he escaped into the comforting embrace of a dreamless sleep.

* * *

Awakening later in the dark of Idin's chamber, Anders recalled his humiliation at the climbing wall. First I fall in front of everybody, he thought, and then there's all this talk about my father. Now I miss him more than ever. He tried to relinquish all thoughts into the cave-like shadows of Idin's alcove, but a voice unexpectedly rose in the gloom. It was Idin, calling for Mother Solveig. She rolled up a large scroll and secured it with a papery braid made with dried leaves from the planting rooms.

"Yes?" Solveig said as she swept into the chamber, her dark blonde hair sprinkled liberally with gray. She stood next to Idin, looking strangely alert. Anders sensed something was about to happen.

Idin stepped to the deepest shelf in the stone wall and regarded a heavy book in stamped leather. She dragged it from its perch, its lustrous sides glimmering in the weak light as she took her seat. She gestured to Solveig to join her. She set the book on her lap and swept the thick dusty cover with her hand.

“It has been many years since we have opened the Tome,” Idin said. The leather cover cracked as she opened it. “Of all the essential writings inside, none occupies my mind more than Pieter’s prophecy.”

“From the Day of Loss.”

Idin nodded. “There is a passage that explains the need to identify the Hringur—the Circle. Do you remember the three names? The children of the Hringur?”

“The One Who Knows, The One Who Sees, and The One Who Remembers.”

“Yes,” Idin said, looking intently at Solveig. She paused. “It has begun. After all these years, it has been finally revealed. The truth stone has spoken.”

Anders stiffened. That stone—it had been a test after all. But maybe he had heard it wrong. He was so tired lately . . . everything seemed like a dream. Nothing made sense anymore. He burrowed deeper under his fur covering.

Idin leaned toward Solveig. “I think Anders is The One Who Knows.”

Solveig placed her hand slowly to her neck. “He’ll have to undergo the Trials.”

“I know.”

“Do you think he is ready for this?”

“No,” she said fiercely. “He most certainly is not.”