

Order of the Furnace

Book 1: Rebellion

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Prologue

Not today. I won't die today. I promise.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Lena Faran made her way, on her stomach, through the dark, damp grass at the foot of Castle Winlow wondering if her next breath would be her last.

Lena was a squire in the Order of the Furnace and over the past few years she had found herself in many life-threatening situations. However, right now she was hard pressed to remember anything quite as grim as what she was doing now.

Castle Winlow, the rebel stronghold, towered over her, brutal and grey. Lena pressed herself to the ground and inched forward, feeling as if a million eyes were on her, watching and waiting for the perfect moment to strike and whisk her life away.

She carried on regardless, checking the ground for traps and other devices that could cause problems during the coming fight. She reached forward and felt a wooden stake coming out of the ground which, if left, may hurt a horse or soldier. She grabbed hold of it and pulled. *Come on!*

After a brief struggle the stake came loose. Lena pulled it out of the ground and slid it into the bag on her back with the rest she had discovered. She moved on. Mud oozed into the gaps of her thick clothes; she would have groaned if she could make any noise...

Then, without warning...*THUNK!*

An arrow hit the ground next to her; its wooden shaft only a short distance from her face.

Lena froze; her heart in her mouth.

No!

Chapter One

Earlier that night, Lena stood outside her tent and felt the spring wind bite her face; it made her shiver. She gritted her teeth, crossed her arms over herself, and rubbed her shoulders for a little warmth while she looked around the army camp.

It was barely past midnight and the camp was lit by a thousand glowing lanterns, torches and fires. Despite the time, the camp was still a loud, chaotic place brimming with activity. Lena could hear the blacksmiths' hammers crashing onto anvils, teamsters crying out to one another and soldiers, marching up and down in procession.

Lena looked to her left and saw one of the Order knights passing by, whose golden mechanical armour hissed and clanked, leaving deep foot-prints in the ground. When the knight saw Lena, she raised her arm and waved.

'Sir Poland's looking for you,' the knight called out. Lena waved back. 'Thanks, I'll go to him.'

'Good luck!' said the knight, stomping off in the opposite direction.

Lena left her squires' tent and made her way through the camp to the kitchens a short distance away, yawning as she went. As she got closer the aroma of baking bread and crackling bacon replaced the usual camp smells of manure and sweat.

The kitchen itself consisted of a simple, long wooden table covered in food behind which were greasy-aproned cooks stirring massive pots, checking spitting frying pans and pulling steaming loaves out of ovens. Lena's mouth watered.

When Lena arrived at the kitchen she grabbed a hunk of warm bread from the table and one of the cooks' assistants handed her a mug of sweet tea. She thanked the assistant, turned away and blew on the tea, watching as the steam swirled in front of her. She took a sip and a bite from the bread, and then left the kitchen feeling better for something hot in her stomach.

Ten minutes later she arrived at the squires' mustering post on the other side of the camp where she saw her lord and master, Sir Alberghast Poland.

Sir Poland, the knight-commander of the Order of the Furnace, was standing tall and proud and already in his magnificent, ornate armour. In his gauntleted hands were pieces of paper. He looked at each in turn with his brow furrowed.

'Milord,' said Lena.

'Ah, Lena,' said Sir Poland. He raised his bushy, silver eyebrows, briefly revealing his bright eyes beneath before they returned to the papers. 'There you are.'

'You needed me?'

'Yes, yes,' Sir Poland replied gruffly. 'You're scouting no-man's land this morning.'

'Okay. Who's with me?'

'Davos, Benji, Aisha, Berry, Xander and Ana. You'll need to gather them.'

'I'm leading?'

Sir Poland shook his head. 'Not this time. It's Berry's turn.'

'Really?' replied Lena. 'But last time-'

Sir Poland frowned. 'Berry needs the experience more than you do. She's been on the side-lines long enough.'

'But... Lena wanted to stomp her foot but she resisted. She was too old for that sort of thing and Sir Poland hated it.'

'Leave it, Lena,' said Sir Poland. 'It's in the past and she's learned her lesson.'

Lena sighed and gave up arguing; she could see the old knight had made up his mind. 'Where is she?' she asked.

'In her tent, I imagine,' said Sir Poland.

'I just came from there!'

'And now you can go back. You have your orders.'

Lena saluted her knight commander and left in a huff.

'And less of that attitude!' cried Sir Poland.

Chapter Two

Lena made her way towards the second squire's tent. When she arrived there was a crowd outside. They were all peering in with the occasional gasp and *oooooh!*

'What's going on?' Lena asked the boy closest to her. It was Silas.

'Erik's upset Berry,' Silas replied.

Lena had known Silas Anderson for her entire time with the Order as he had joined the same month as she did. Silas was a quiet boy and a good ally in a fight. He had grown up on the streets of Jultsthorne: a huge, dangerous city in the East of the Empire. He was short for his age, only coming up to Lena's shoulder, but this wasn't a disadvantage; his height meant it was just harder to hit him on the battlefield.

Lena sighed. 'Let me through!' she called out.

The other squires moved out of the way and Lena stepped through the canvas.

Like her own tent, this tent contained row upon row of beds, enough to sleep fifty squires. It was neat and orderly, although the two squires screaming at each other on the floor near the entrance meant it was less orderly than normal.

Lena saw that Berry had pinned Erik to the ground. Two other squires were trying to pull Berry off but they weren't having much luck.

'Call me that, again!' shouted Berry. 'Come on, say it!'

Berry had Erik's collar in one hand and a cruel-looking knife in the other. Erik had managed to get hold of Berry's wrist but the knife was getting closer nonetheless.

Lena raised her voice: 'Berry, we don't have time for this!' But

Berry ignored her. Lena tutted and saw the knife was now touching the skin on Erik's neck. She turned to Silas.

'What happened?'

Silas grinned. 'Berry was waking everyone up and Erik wanted longer in bed. She hit Erik with the flat of her sword to get him moving and she told him if he didn't the next whack will be with the edge.'

'I bet he didn't like that.'

'Nope.'

'So he..?'

'Yep.' Silas tried to keep himself from laughing.

Lena sighed again. It was too early for this.

'Get off me!' yelled Erik at Berry. 'You're mad!'

'Don't call me that then!' screamed Berry. 'You know I *hate* it!'

'I didn't say anything!'

'Yes you did!'

'What did I say?'

'You know what!'

'No!'

Lena went over to Berry and Erik and waved away the two squires who were trying to help. She knelt down.

'Come on, Berry, we've got things to do.'

Berry turned her head and looked at Lena.

'What?' Her eyes were wide and manic.

'Work. Us. Leave him alone,' said Lena.

'But-!'

'Sir Poland's orders. We're scouting. You're in charge.'

'*I'm* in charge?' The anger in Berry's face faded to happy surprise. 'But what about last time?'

'No one was seriously hurt,' said Lena. 'Come on, we need to go. And I don't think Sir Poland would be pleased if he heard about all this.' She looked at Erik who had gone quiet while she and Berry spoke.

Berry let go of Erik's clothes and he slumped to the floor.

'Okay...' she said. She stood up, brushing herself down, and Erik, now free, scrambled away.

'Go on, *Strawberry*,' said Erik. 'Run away.'

The temperature in the tent dropped a few degrees and all eyes turned on Berry.

Berry Weyman's parents had wanted Berry and her sisters to be the sort of children who play musical instruments, paint pretty pictures and take an interest in clothes, so they gave them names they thought would be suitable for these pursuits. Unfortunately, Berry and her sisters: Daisy, Peach and Petal, had all found swords, chain mail, danger and dirt far more interesting than pianos and watercolours. Daisy and Petal had become bloodthirsty mercenaries, fighting for whoever paid them the most, while Peach was last seen hunting in the deadly jungles of Pala five years ago. She had not been seen since.

Berry glanced at Lena. 'Now, I can't ignore that can I?'

Lena looked at Erik and frowned at him. 'Fine,' she said to Berry. 'But be quick.'

Lena and Berry left the squires' tent minutes later with Erik howling within.

Chapter Three

‘So what are we doing?’ asked Berry as she and Lena walked through the camp. ‘Great!’ she said sarcastically after Lena had told her. ‘I’d rather clean out the horses. At least I won’t get shot at there.’

‘Same here,’ said Lena. ‘But orders are orders.’

Lena and Berry saw the other scouts waiting for them at the edge of the camp. They greeted each other and made their way towards Castle Winlow. Ahead, Lena could see tiny dots of light shining from the battlements of the castle: torches of soldiers that, from this distance, looked like fireflies.

‘Spread out,’ ordered Berry when they were close enough to do their work. The scouts fanned out until they were about ten metres away from each other.

‘You know what to do,’ said Berry.

‘Aye,’ came a chorus of hushed voices.

Lena crouched down and began to slowly shuffle slowly toward the far-away walls of the rebel castle.

THUNK!!

Lena stayed where she was for a few seconds more.

Her mind raced, her heart beat loudly in her chest, and her eyes fixed on the arrow in front of her.

This is bad, she thought. This is really bad...

Thankfully, the arrow wasn’t on fire. It must have gone out either on its way down or when it hit the dirt.

It meant they couldn’t see her from above right now; but had they seen her before it went out?

What should I do? Come on, think!

Lena decided to stay where she was. She hadn't heard any shouts from the battlements and if she moved straight away the soldiers above might see her. Lena waited, squeezed her eyes shut and braced for the next arrow. It never came.

Lena sighed with relief. *That was close!*

She began crawling once again. She kept going, pushing forward. Her heart was still being fast but she had caught her breath at least and could think clearly again.

Finally, Lena reached Castle Winlow's curtain wall. She stood up and put her back against it, staying in the shadows and out of sight.

'Find anything?' hissed a voice from the darkness. Lena tensed but it was just Berry.

'Stakes; a few traps. Nothing much,' Lena replied. 'You?' The shadow shifted and Berry appeared.

'Same,' said Berry.

'How are the others?' asked Lena.

Benji and Ana found bear traps.

'Are they okay?'

'Benji is.'

Both squires were silent for a time. Ana had only been with the Order for a couple of years but it was still hard losing another squire.

'Okay,' said Lena. 'We'd best carry on.'

Berry turned to leave. 'Keep going,' she said over her shoulder. 'I'll see you back at camp.' And with that Berry slid off down the wall like a ghost, leaving Lena alone.

Lena took five steps left and looked out over no-man's land again. She then got down on her belly once more and started crawling away from the castle.

She would have to make the trip back and forth another ten times tonight.

Chapter Four

When Lena had finished her duties she made her way, dirty, stinking, cold and wet, back to the army camp. Dawn was breaking and sunlight glinted off halberds, pikes and helmets; birds sang in the trees. It could almost be a nice day, Lena thought.

She called out the day's password, walked past the forward defenses and into the camp proper. It was busier now as final preparations were underway. She went back to her tent where she washed and changed. When she had finished cleaning up she left and looked for Sir Poland again.

Lena caught sight of the old knight coming out of one of the Order's pavilions.

Lena moved forward quickly, darting between soldiers with the occasional '*hey!*' and '*oi!*' being shouted at her whenever one of her feet landed on someone else's. When she got closer, she saw Sir Poland looked worried.

'Anything wrong, Milord?' she asked.

'Lena,' said Sir Poland, his voice like ice. 'Go to the marshals. Tell them to prepare. We fight within the hour.'

'Yes, sir,' replied Lena. She turned to go but then hesitated. She knew what she about to do was against the rules, but she had known Sir Poland for a long time and he always said he wanted her to think for herself.

'What's happened?' she asked.

'Something doesn't feel right about all this,' said the old knight.

'In what way, Milord?'

'We've been away from the kingdom for two years now

and something has changed, I can feel it. Duke Winlow has always been loyal to the crown. It is very odd for him to rebel like this.’

Lena looked at Sir Poland but remained silent.

‘It’s no matter,’ the knight continued. ‘Go, do what must be done.’ Sir Poland waved Lena away.

Lena went to each knight-marshal in turn to relay her master’s commands. She saw the Moles’ engines roar into life; the auto-trebuchets loaded; the ballistae bound into position like excited dogs; and the siege towers unfold themselves until they cast great shadows over the camp. It was impressive no matter how many times she saw it and she was sure it must strike fear into the hearts of anyone they fought.

‘We’re ready,’ said Lena as she entered Sir Poland’s tent once again. She saw Sir Poland checking his armour a final time.

‘Good,’ replied the old knight. He paused, turned, and looked Lena over. ‘Now, this is an important day for you, is it not? Are you ready for your first proper battle?’

Despite the years of training and studying, Lena knew what she was about to do was very dangerous. She was strong, a good rider and well-practiced with swords, spears and all manner of weapons; but she had seen the result of many battles as the squire of Sir Poland: the cuts and wounds, the dents, bruises and much, much worse. She had come close to death on quite a few occasions without even being in a battle, but all that would be nothing compared with what was about to come.

‘I think so,’ Lena replied.

‘I can’t hear you, squire!’ said Sir Poland. ‘I asked you if you were ready!’

Lena clenched her fists and looked Sir Poland in the eye. ‘Yes, sir!’ she cried.

Sir Poland smiled through his bushy beard.

‘That’s more like it. There’s no shame in being afraid, Lena, but when the time comes I know you will do well; I don’t doubt that. Keep going the way you are and you will be *Lady Faran* in no time at all.’

‘Thank you, Milord.’ Only knights of the realm were called Sir or Lady and Lena couldn’t wait to be one herself. It would be a great honour.

‘Remember, your brothers and sisters will always be nearby and I’ll be keeping watch too,’ Sir Poland continued.

‘I know, Milord,’ Lena replied. ‘I’ll try to stay alive.’

‘See that you do.’

‘What will I be doing?’ Lena asked.

‘You’ll be with me in the vanguard of course.’

Lena’s heart sunk. Sir Poland was always one of the first into battle and the last to leave. Today was going to be even harder than she had been expecting.

‘But we need you kitted out first,’ said Sir Poland.

‘Go and find Kruger. He should be waiting for you.’

Chapter Five

Lena left Sir Poland's tent and, trembling only ever so slightly, walked towards the other squires who had gathered nearby.

When she got closer she saw Berry and Silas. Berry was already in her armour and practicing her sword swing while Silas stood next to her. Even though the siege of Castle Winlow would be Silas' first battle too, he looked nowhere near as nervous as Lena felt.

'Over here!' Berry shouted and Lena went over to her friends.

'Tell her,' hissed Silas to Berry. 'Go on.'

'What is it?' Lena asked.

'Look over there.' Berry moved her head slightly. 'The Vulture's turned up again.'

A few hundred feet away, on top of a rise, Lena saw Grand Minister Erin, King Claudio's special advisor. She was standing with a retinue of her personal guard and dressed in her usual black clothes. Her shoulders were hunched and she stood motionless, looking thoughtful. Erin was one of the most powerful people in the kingdom and also the head of the Jasareen, the King's assassins, which made a lot of people even more nervous around her for very obvious reasons.

'She gives me the creeps,' said Berry, pushing her sword back into its sheath with a grunt. 'She just stands there and watches as if we're here to entertain her. This is the third time she's shown her face in as many months.'

'She *is* allowed to be here,' replied Silas.

'I know,' said Berry. 'But it's like she's perched on our

shoulders. It's weird. What's she worried about? It's not as if we're going to disappear on her.'

'I think something odd might be going on,' said Lena. 'Sir Poland was a bit worried earlier. Something isn't right about this fight.'

'What do you mean?' asked Silas.

'I don't know,' Lena replied. 'Maybe it's nothing.'

'The Duke's a rebel,' said Berry, shrugging her shoulders. 'And we protect the kingdom from threats. It doesn't say anywhere our own people can't be the threat. We'll fight whoever we have to.'

'I know,' said Lena, but she didn't feel convinced.

Before they could carry on, Kruger, the squire-master, interrupted them. He marched up to the squires and loomed over them, peering through the nest of scars that crisscrossed his face

'You lot!' Kruger shouted. 'Stop wasting time. You're here to fight, not socialize. Lena, Silas, come with me. The rest of you, get your things together and report back here in fifteen minutes. It's time.'

Silas and Lena followed the squire-master into a nearby pavilion. Inside, many of the Order's weapons and armour could be found. Kruger pointed to two clothes-horses covered in metal plates.

'Get them on, gather your weapons, and meet me outside with the others. Quickly now.'

'Yes, sir,' replied Lena and Silas together.

Kruger left and the squires helped each other into their battle-dress. It wasn't anywhere near as good as a knight's armour but it should keep them safe enough for the next few hours.

'Are you ready?' asked Silas as he buckled Lena's cuirass. The locks of the armour hissed as they connected.

'I think so,' said Lena. 'You?'

Lena turned and saw that Silas now looked very worried.

'I'm a bit scared,' said Silas. 'If I'm honest.'

'It'll be all right,' Lena replied as calmly as she could.

'Really?'

'Sure. We're the Order of the Furnace after all. Remember what we've been taught and stay close to the others. Just stay alive.'

Silas nodded. 'Thanks, Lena. I will.'

They finished dressing, took their weapons and went back outside. They found Kruger standing in front of the other squires with a list in his hands.

'Silas Anderson, Michael Obasi, Ton Singh and Sebastien Delure, you'll be in the Moles,' barked Kruger. 'Berry Weyman, Lena Faran and Thomas and Gregory Delure, you'll be in the vanguard. The rest of you will be manning the siege towers with me.'

The squire-master paused and looked over his charges.

'Any questions? No? Good. You know where to go. Dismissed.'

Berry nudged Lena in the side.

'Looks like we're together,' said Berry. 'Come on, let's get ready. This'll be *fun!*'

Lena was almost certain it wouldn't be.

Chapter Six

Lena sat on her piebald horse and watched the battle begin.

The auto-trebuchets rumbled into place and started hurling great rocks at the castle walls and the ballistae-hounds ran from position to position, firing their bolts then moving on as their missiles flew through the air. Castle Winlow's walls could barely be seen with all the dust and debris flung into the air.

After a time, it looked as if the rebel castle had been weakened enough to start the assault. The siege engines stopped and Lena tensed. It would be their turn soon.

'Bring the Bull!' cried Sir Poland.

Lena watched as the Bull, a massive soul-machine covered in pistons and steel that seemed to run on rage alone, strode forward towards the main gates of castle Winlow.

It lowered its head and charged.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The ground shook with the Bull's footfalls followed by an almighty crash as the Bull's horns hit the castle gates. Lena's horse whinnied at the noise and she patted its neck to quieten it down.

'There, there,' said Lena into the horse's ear.

The Bull turned, walked away, and charged again. The wooden beams of the gate were giving way, bending and breaking inwards, then cracking under the onslaught.

'As soon as the Bull is through we advance,' said Sir Poland.

Lena turned to see Sir Poland sitting on Pandora, his Archon. Pandora shone in the morning sun, proud,

magnificent, and bigger than the largest war-horse. Like the Bull, Pandora was a soul-machine; she contained the spirit of an animal but her body was made of metal and mechanical parts. Pandora could run all day without getting tired and carry a knight in full battle-armor and never slow down. Lena hoped one day she would ride an Archon into battle, but for now she could only imagine what it would be like.

There was a loud crash and Lena felt the horse underneath her tense as the Bull smashed through the gate in a cloud of dust. Moments later, it reappeared again and stepped aside, snorting and shaking its head.

It was Lena and the vanguard's turn now. She looked to Sir Poland.

'Here we go,' said Sir Poland to Lena quietly. He winked at her and then, in a much louder voice, called out: 'For King Claudio, brothers and sisters! Charge!'

The siege engines of the Royal Army and the Order went quiet and the vanguard geed up their horses and Archons. They stampeded into Winlow castle's courtyard, passing the Bull, the broken gate, and rubble that now made up the castle's entrance.

Inside, Lena looked up and caught sight of Duke Winlow's soldiers scattering and looking for cover. An odd feeling came over her: she found herself feeling sorry for them. Her own fear had now gone; the ride had made her excited and eager, as if nothing could stop her, and she now understood: while she was scared, those she was about to fight were just as scared as she was, if not more so.

'Halt! Dismount!' cried Sir Poland once the vanguard was within the castle courtyard.

Lena's training kicked in. She slid off her horse, drew her sword and readied her shield, as did the rest of the vanguard. They were like a well-oiled machine; unstoppable.

'Hold!' ordered Sir Poland.

Lena was tense, ready to fight; but when she peered over her shield she saw the courtyard had emptied of Duke Winlow's soldiers. They had disappeared behind overturned carts, hay bales and anything else they could find. Lena felt strangely disappointed. Behind her she heard the horses and Archons ride back to safety.

Then she saw the bows.

'Winlow knows us well,' Lena heard Sir Poland mutter.

'Defend!' he called out to the Vanguard. 'Position three!'

Lena huddled together with rest of the vanguard. They sheathed their swords and raised their shields over their heads or pushed them forward as one. Their shields clicked together, turning the knights and squires standing in the courtyard into what looked like a huge metal turtle.

'Brace!'

A moment later, Lena could feel arrows thudding into her shield. They made her arms ache. She crouched down further and pushed her shoulder against the shield to soften the blows.

'Ready counter-measures!' shouted Sir Poland.

Our turn, thought Lena.

Lena reached up and within her shield found two buttons. She pressed one and waited.

'Fire!'

Lena pressed the second button and heard a rush of air. On the other side of her shield small bolts hidden in the central hub uncovered and fired outward. The bolts entered the air around the knights filling it like a dark cloud. It would expand very quickly, spraying the deadly bolts all over the courtyard in every direction.

She could hear cries; the bolts had done their job.

Lena was about to unlock her shield when she felt a nudge. 'Wait for it,' said Berry who had taken position next to Lena.

From behind them came the heavy pounding of the

ballistae-hounds running through the castle gates. They took up positions behind the vanguard and started firing their six-foot bolts at the defenders. Once the first detachment had done its job they moved away, letting another detachment take their place. This continued for a few minutes and Lena noticed she hadn't felt any arrows hit her shield for a while.

Then Lena heard another voice far above her.

'Clear!'

Lena hit a switch that opened a small viewing panel in her shield. Above, she could see Kruger on the battlements waving down at them.

The siege towers had been successful. Those in the towers had done their work and pushed the defenders off the walls and into the main keep. Lena relaxed a little. The first part of the battle had been won and she'd barely done anything.

'That went well-' began Berry.

There was a rumble; terrible and deep under their feet. The ground shifted. Lena staggered, barely able to keep upright.

'Oh no...!' She groaned. Berry steadied her. She looked around and saw smoke appear from some nearby doorways. 'No, no, no...!'

The Moles.

'Vanguard,' said Sir Poland; his face now cold and terrible. 'With me.'

Lena and the rest of the vanguard ran to one of the smoking doorways littered around the castle courtyard. Once there, Sir Poland peered inside.

'Duke Winlow has done something,' said the old knight. 'Quick, follow me.' Sir Poland disappeared through the doorway and the rest followed.

Lena hoped Silas and the others were all right.

Chapter Seven

The vanguard raced down into the depths of Winlow castle. They clanked down the stairs, following the smoke that rolled along the ceilings above them. Lena could feel heat on her face, making sweat run into her eyes.

When they reached the bottom, the stairwell opened out into something out of a nightmare.

Lena spluttered and looked on, dumbstruck. Fire seemed to hang in the air and crawl up the walls as if the stone itself was alight. It was horrible. Smoke billowed, making Lena cough and splutter.

‘Over there!’ cried Sir Poland.

Lena looked to where the old knight was pointing. At the far end of a long, vaulted cellar, through the smoke, she saw the Moles. They were blackened and some were still on fire. *Silas...*

‘Snap out of it!’ shouted Sir Poland. He nudged Lena forward. ‘Get in there and help!’

Lena nodded and ran down the length of the cellar. As she went she held her hand over her mouth, trying to keep the smoke out. The closer she got the more the heat beat at her and her armour felt heavier and heavier.

When Lena arrived she saw the first Mole was completely out of the ground and its hatches were open; Lena guessed it must have been the first to arrive. The machine’s sides were now scarred black and it was terribly damaged. She stopped and started to peer inside.

‘Not that one,’ said Sir Poland coming up right behind her. ‘Move on.’