DEDICATION:

To Mom, for sharing your dream and helping to make mine a reality.
When the fighting ends and the dead are counted, the Truth will endure. But whose Truth? Thus, the call to arms.

— Former First Lord ArWhym Ellenrond, justifying the Reformers Rebellion

MUDLANDS
36 TURNS EARLIER

ArWhym closed the boy’s lifeless eyes and bowed his head in prayer, his white locks hanging to his shoulders. Beside him, the stream that bisected the battlefield gurgled, its once-clear waters ruddied with death. The fighting had turned this part of the meadow into a muddy morass, with bodies piled upon bodies.

He stood, his shoulders drooped in defeat despite being on the winning side. “This must end,” he declared and looked to his top commander, Ather Sandoval, who knelt nearby.

Ather wiped a dangling bead of sweat from his brow with the back of his blood-spattered hand, leaving an uneven streak of red across his forehead. “If we keep winning, the other regions will rise,” he argued.

“No.” ArWhym shook his head and cast his gaze across the battlefield. “For every soldier we kill, two more march to take his place.” He looked toward the cloud-covered sky and exhaled a long, lung-emptying breath that drooped his shoulders farther. “We’re left recruiting boys whose voices haven’t cracked. When they fall, what then? Their mothers?”

Ather grunted as he hefted himself to his feet. “Mudlands women are tougher than the men back home.” He towered over ArWhym with shoulders broad as the trunk of a Wildeash tree.
“If the Council keeps pressing men into service, the other regions will rise. As their losses mount, even the soldiers may turn.”

ArWhym bent to retrieve his staff from the ground and accepted the big man’s forearm to help him stand again. Next to the burly officer, the former First Lord of the Council of Truth and the leader of the Reformers Rebellion appeared shrunken and frail. “If the other regions were going to revolt, they’d have done so already. And the army—with Samir Fen named my replacement as First Lord, the army’s support for the Council is certain. This rebellion was a mistake.”

The declaration was met at first with a steely silence, then a dispirited suggestion. “We could quit fighting and hide in Bothera or the Fringe. Eventually, the others will see the right in our cause.”

ArWhym leaned against his staff as if his legs alone couldn’t bear him. “They see the right. They know the Council perverts the Truth with its edits. Still, they’ll not rise in our lifetime.” He turned a flinty gaze toward Ather. “As long as I live, the purges will continue. I won’t hide while others die in my stead.”

“And those already dead?” Ather asked. “They didn’t die for you. They died fighting for a cause you can only serve alive.”

“Look around!” ArWhym’s tone sharpened, and he swept his arm out to display the devastation. “With every victory we bury more of the future. If we fight on, there’ll be no one left to carry the banner. Reforming the Council of Truth was never worth such a price.” He straightened his back, then grasped the commander’s shoulder. “Trust me. I’ve thought this through.”

Ather stiffened and brushed his leader’s hand away. “I won’t do it.”

ArWhym ignored the protest. “If you hand me over, you can negotiate a safe return for our men, a future for Stern and the other children.”

Ather squinted back with a granite jaw and searing eyes. “I’d rather die than live as a traitor.”
The white-haired leader of the rebellion shrugged. “Negotiate that, too, if you must.” Using his staff as a walking stick, he started up the incline and back toward camp.

“And what of your son?” Ather called. “He’s been held captive in Riverbend three turns. You think they’ll free him as well?”

The words cut deep. ArWhym stopped, then swayed before righting himself and delivering a halting response. “Death would be kind. I can’t bear to imagine what Samir will do otherwise.”

Ather spat on the ground. “I’ve fought by your side from the start. I won’t do this!”

ArWhym spun back around, pointing his staff with flinty determination. “You will,” he commanded, his face flushed. Then his expression softened, and a mirthless half-smile revealed his resignation. “You will,” he repeated, his quiet voice approaching a whisper. “You’re the only one who can.”

“Curse you and the Council both!” Ather spat again, but he still moved to join his leader and help him up the incline with a steady hand against the old man’s lower back.

As they reached the top, a zilhorn sounded, its plaintive call opening the battlefield to the scavengers. “I’ll await you in the pass,” ArWhym mumbled, then looked up at his friend and fellow rebel. His weary face told of countless trials, his stooped body of the passage of many turns. His glistening eyes, though, welled with hope for the future. “Get a good price for my head.”
The guilt of a father’s transgressions must be borne by his sons, generation after generation, until atonement is complete.

—Truth (Judges 4:12)

Riverbend

“Catch the Rat!” a woman shouted—the same words used every turn to signal the beginning of the Hunt. A pack of youths bolted toward her.

“Which way?” an older boy at the front called out, gripping a broom with prickly vine woven through its bristles. Past fifteen turns, with stubble shading the angles of his jaw, he looked like a man. This would be his last Hunt.

The woman pointed in the direction of the bridge that crossed the Inge River into RatsNest, and another woman several blocks away shouted, “Rat! Rat!”

The boy rushed toward her. “Bet the Rat Man’s heading home,” he said and flashed a knowing smile to a friend keeping pace beside him.

At the back of the pack, Whym struggled to keep up. Only a moon past his sixth turn, he clung to a broom taller than him, his unruly mop of brown hair obscuring his vision. When his ankle turned on a loose cobblestone, he tripped over the broom’s worn straw head. His knees and elbows hit the street before he could raise his hands to brace his fall.

His best friend, Kira, stopped to wait when he cried out. “Get up!” she urged, bouncing on her toes and shifting a small hearth broom from hand to hand. “They’re leaving us behind.”

Whym hopped up, brushed grit from his skinned knees, then sprinted to catch up. By the time he reached her, the other chil-
dren had rounded the corner. He could no longer see the pack, but he could hear their voices. “I think they’re heading toward the bridge.”

With Kira by his side, they ran until their lungs burned in their chests. Then they slowed to a jog, then a walk. Then Kira stopped. The calls of the other children were now faint and far in the distance. “We’ll never catch them,” she said.

Her shoulders sagged as she peered dolefully across the river. Since the first pink megara blossoms heralded the start of spring, the two friends had talked about little other than being named Guardian of the Faith, the title given to the first child to find and beat the Rat Man. Although the authority attached to the title only lasted during the feast day following Spring Clean, the bragging rights endured.

For Whym, though, the title was about more than bragging rights. As the great-grandson of ArWhym Ellenrond, instigator of the Reformers Rebellion, he’d been picked on and bullied all his life. But soon, he’d be escaping the city’s slum to attend school in NewTown. He longed to start this new phase of his life being known for something other than his family’s past.

When he’d mentioned his plan to his mother, however, she’d not shared his enthusiasm. Far from it—she’d refused to let him join the Hunt. “Tradition,” she’d sighed at his pleas to change her mind, “is sometimes best forgotten. When you’re older, you’ll understand.” With his father absent, as always during Spring Clean, he’d had no recourse. Undaunted, he’d waited for her to leave, swiped her broom, then sneaked away to meet Kira.

Like the other adults in the city, Whym’s mother would be spending the morning tidying her workplace, a tiny workshop that converted salvaged wood into combs. The Hunt seldom ended early, so Whym expected to be caught when she returned home at midday to scour their home. For a chance to be Guardian of the Faith, he was prepared to accept punishment.
“Let’s take a shortcut!” Whym grabbed Kira’s arm and headed in the opposite direction. Reaching the main bridge required rounding the bend in the river, a lengthy detour. But there was a rope bridge nearby that crossed below the bend. If he’d guessed right about the Rat Man’s destination, crossing the rickety rope bridge would allow the two to overtake the others despite their slower speed.

“But we don’t know for sure that’s where they’re going,” Kira protested, pulling her arm free.

“When I’m Guardian, I’ll let you fetch my dinner,” he teased, then took off.

The tactic worked. “You can shoo flies from my food,” she squealed and rushed after him.

They took the narrow stone steps up to the hanging bridge in threes, but slowed to a walk when they reached the wooden planks that swayed beneath their footfalls. To keep his balance, Whym held the rope with one hand. With the other, he clutched the broom’s straw head against his side, the clacks of the handle counting their progress. “If I were the Rat Man, I’d hide under some straw out by Flint’s Folly. No one would find me there.”

“Then you’d face a bunch of angry, hungry grown-ups instead of kids,” Kira mocked. “You know the rule. If the Rat Man’s not out of the city by sunset, a fast replaces the feast.”

Whym knew the rule, but in the more than thirty turns since the Council of Truth had started the tradition of the Hunt, not once had the children failed to find and expel the Rat Man from the city. Kira’s comment, though, drove home a point Whym had never considered. The Rat Man’s a real person. “Do you think we’ll recognize him?” he asked.

“Of course! He’ll be in a fur outfit with a tail.”

“No, I mean recognize him,” Whym clarified as they neared the bridge’s end. “It’s not like someone in NewTown would do it. The Rat Man might be our neighbor.”
“I bet the Council found a beggar from the Maze.” Kira’s eyes alternated between the wooden planks and the approaching embankment. “Anyway, that’s why he’s hooded. We’re not supposed to know.” When they reached the stairs on the opposite bank, Kira yanked Whym’s shirt and dashed past, nearly causing him to lose his balance. “There he is!”

Whym looked just in time to see a hunched figure hobble into the entrance of the tangle of winding alleys known as the Maze. “It’s a place for adults,” his mother had scolded when she’d learned Whym had once accompanied his father there on an errand.

“Folks there’ll sell anything they get their hands on, including you,” Kira’s grandmother had cautioned.

Kira bit her lip and looked at him, asking, without words, whether they should follow the Rat Man into such a dangerous place.

“It’s Spring Clean. No one’s selling anything today,” Whym urged her on. They rushed off together in pursuit.

When they neared the arched entrance, the street was empty but for a water chestnut vendor sweeping around his metal roasting pan. The tiny shops and carts out front were just as Whym remembered. Without the crush of people and the competing smells of food vendors, though, the Maze was just a cluster of narrow alleys stinking of urine and refuse. “They’ll be here soon,” he warned when he heard the rumble of the approaching pack not far behind.

Kira again looked to Whym for reassurance. He hesitated, his fear of the place rivaling the thrill of the Hunt. “Psst,” hissed the vendor, pointing toward an even narrower alley to the right. It was the nudge they needed. He and Kira hurried down the alley, peering down the dead ends as they followed it deeper into the Maze. But when they reached the next fork, there was no one to guide them.
“You go left,” Whym directed and took an apprehensive step into the deserted alley to the right. Kira remained frozen, alternating between staring down the left fork and watching Whym. “Come out, Rat Man, and I’ll be easy on you,” he called as he followed the narrow street, his cracking voice exposing his false bravado.

“Whym?” A hooded figure, wearing a shabby coat of mismatched fur pieces, hobbled from behind an empty stall. The man’s arms were bound behind his back, and his feet were shackled, accounting for his odd gait. Attached to his back with butcher’s twine was a tail that dragged on the ground behind him and looked like one long link of sausage.

“Dah?” Whym recognized his father’s voice. When the Rat Man shuffled toward him, though, Whym backed away until he thumped his elbow against another stall. He dropped his broom and ran back toward Kira. As he neared the fork, an older boy arrived and shoved past, knocking Whym to the ground and against the wall.

“Rat Man!” the boy whooped, and swung his broom. More children darted past Whym and Kira to join him.

Tears streamed down Whym’s cheeks as he pressed his back against the stone, watching. His father lay curled on the ground, crying out when the prickly vine pierced the threadbare fabric below the fur coat. More and more children arrived, and the blows continued until the Rat Man’s cries were drowned out by the crush of voices filling the alley.

“Beat the rat,” the boy who’d knocked Whym down ordered with authority—an authority that would be bestowed the next day when he’d be named Guardian of the Faith.

Whym clutched his knees to his chest and hid his face between them as the youths dragged his father down the alley and out of the Maze. He knew the tradition—the mob would drag the Rat Man to the city gate and leave him, beaten and humiliated,
beyond the walls. Then the residents of Riverbend would cele-
brate their triumph.

“Whym?” Kira’s voice roused him. He looked up to see her
holding his mother’s broom, the handle snapped in two. She slid
down next to him and took his hand in hers, the din of the crowd
now a faint whisper. “Next turn, we’ll stay home and clean,” she
offered. He buried his head in her lap and wept.