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INFINITY RING



BOOK TWO

DIVIDE AND CONQUER

CARRIE RYAN



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Divide and Conquer

Carrie Ryan

SCHOLASTIC INC.

For my nephews, Ryan and Alex
There are so many worlds to explore ahead of you
– C. R.





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Getting Sacked

SERA OPENED her eyes. She was staring at the exact same wall she'd been facing when she'd closed them just a moment before. Her stomach tightened with anxiety. "That can't be right," she murmured.

She looked down at the Infinity Ring, grasped so hard between her fingers that her knuckles were white. "I know I put in the data correctly." Just a few seconds ago they'd been standing in Paris in 1792, and then she'd felt the still-uncomfortable squeezing of her skin. It was the tightening of time and space around her as she moved from one era to another. And it should have brought her, Dak, and Riq to 885.

Yet here they were, staring at the same stupid wall as before.

"This is so cool!" Her best friend, Dak, stood next to her, running his hands over the uneven stone with a look of rapture on his face. Apparently he hadn't spent enough time admiring it before they'd attempted to warp through time. It was bound to keep him occupied for a while. After all, Dak could get excited by something as boring as a wall simply because it was historical — and here, *everything* was historical.

She turned to Riq. He was the one who she didn't know as well, and she hated the idea of him thinking her incompetent. "Sorry, I'm not sure what went wrong. This should only take a second," she told him, her mind already whirring through the complicated mathematical equations to find the mistake. Riq shrugged, as though ending up in the wrong place and time was something altogether ordinary rather than an absolute catastrophe.

"Really, I think we must be dealing with some sort of hidden variable aspect to the quantum entanglement." As her fingers flew over the Ring's controls, Sera felt herself speaking a bit uncontrollably, explaining in painstaking detail the scientific theories behind the warping of space and time. She tried to force her mouth closed, but she couldn't help it. When she got nervous, she talked.

Riq kept his focus on the wall, a frown furrowing his forehead. "I could have sworn this wasn't there before," he said, his fingers tracing over a series of scratches in the stone.

"Check it out! There must be thousands of them!" Dak had found a series of footholds and

managed to climb to the top of the wall. He was staring out beyond it at something in the distance. Then he looked down at Sera, his entire body vibrating with excitement, like the time (was it really only a few days ago?) that the two of them had gone on a class trip to the Smithsonian.

That hadn't turned out well — an earthquake had struck and they were almost crushed by a Viking longship on display. Just thinking about it gave Sera a dawning sense of unease. "Dak, maybe you should get down," she called out. "I'm not sure —"

"Duck!" Riq called out, cutting Sera off.

For a split second Dak looked confused but then he did as he was told, flattening himself against the top of the wall. Just then a storm of rocks and debris came hurtling through the air, raining down around the three of them. The wall shuddered at the impact.

Sera pressed the Infinity Ring to her stomach to protect it as Riq lunged forward, throwing himself on top of her. Now probably wasn't the best time to realize that none of them had showered in several days, and smelled like it.

Then Sera had another realization. If the arrows slicing through the air around her weren't enough of a clue, the moment she actually took in her surroundings all thoughts of quantum entanglement fled her mind. The warp hadn't failed after all.

Where before there'd been the elegant flying buttresses of Notre Dame Cathedral, with its intricately patterned windows, there now sat a dull, plain hulk of a church with thick, bare walls. A palace still occupied the western end of the Île de la Cité, but no longer did it dominate the tip of the island with its impressive turrets and elaborate facades. Everything was different than it had been a minute ago, from the width of the streets to the uneven construction of the buildings to the sounds of men running for cover. Now that she really looked, Sera realized that even the wall Dak had scaled was different. Whereas in 1792 they'd taken refuge against the scrap of an old ruin, now the wall stood strong and sure, rising several yards in the air and securely ringing most of the island.

Leave it to a genius to miss the obvious, Sera thought. *This definitely isn't 1792.*

Wave after wave of arrows and rocks pounded into the ground and crashed into nearby buildings. Sera wondered if it would ever end. Somehow, when the three of them had agreed to travel through time fixing the Breaks in history, she hadn't seriously considered the danger they'd be in.

But so far, time travel had offered up one life-threatening peril after another. Starting with the very first trip, when Dak and Sera had warped with Dak's parents to test the brand-new Infinity Ring. They'd ended up in the middle of a Revolutionary War battle, with uniformed men running at them with guns and bayonets at the ready. The group had barely made it out alive — and they'd been separated from Dak's parents in the process.

Sera wasn't ashamed to admit it: She was scared. She and Dak were just eleven years old and Riq wasn't much older — having the fate of the world in their hands felt a bit overwhelming.

When the rubble stopped falling and Riq pulled away, she noticed that he seemed a little shaken,

too. At least she wasn't alone.

Of course, then Dak called out, "That was awesome!" from his perch.

"How did you know to tell him to duck?" Sera asked Riq. Whether Dak realized it or not, the warning had probably saved his life.

Riq pointed at the wall. "The picture scratched into the stone — it's a duck. That we would warp into this exact spot and be facing this . . . I figured it might be a message for us somehow, and I didn't want to take the chance of ignoring it."

Sera stepped forward and squinted at the poorly drawn waterfowl. Then she saw something that made her lungs tighten. "It *was* a message for us," she said, tracing her fingers over two numbers: 34 and 88. "This is a code for my name. Thirty-four is the number on the periodic table for the element selenium. Eighty-eight is the number for radium. The abbreviations for them are Se and Ra — *Sera*." She cringed a bit. "I know that makes me sound like a total geek."

"No," Riq responded with a smile. "You're talking to a guy whose idea of a good time is tracing the etymology of obscure words. I think it's pretty cool that you came up with that."

Sera cleared her throat, unsure how to respond. She wasn't used to that kind of compliment. "Anyway, it was always an inside joke I had with Dak, but his parents knew about it, too. Do you think they left it for us? How old is this wall, anyway?"

Just then, Dak leapt the last few feet to the ground, landing between them. "Guys!" His eyes were alight with excitement. "You're not going to believe it. The entire Seine is filled with them for as far as I could see! It's like a huge logjam out there. You can't even see the water. They're everywhere!"

Sera couldn't help smiling. She'd been Dak's best friend for as long as she could remember, and she knew he was waiting for her to ask the inevitable question: "What's everywhere?"

His grin widened. "Vikings! There must be seven hundred ships out there — probably more if you count the barques. Those are the little boats." He explained that last bit to Riq.

The older boy gave Dak a forced smile. "Thanks, got that. Linguist here, remember? My vocabulary is just fine."

Dak ignored him. "This is incredible! There have always been debates about how many boats the Vikings attacked Paris with. Some scholars said they stretched for two leagues but others argued there weren't that many based on the application of operational space in a stationary —"

"Dak, focus." Sera rolled her eyes, but not in a mean way. She was used to putting up with his ramblings about obscure historical details. And to be honest, she kind of liked it because it was so, well . . . so *Dak*.

He glanced between her and Riq. "According to the history books, there are thirty thousand Vikings on the other side of that wall, preparing for the great Siege of Paris!"

Something sank inside Sera, but Riq was the one to voice what she was feeling. "Did the history books happen to give a date for this sack?"

Dak nodded vigorously. “November 25, 885.”

Sera sucked in a long breath. “That’s . . . tomorrow,” she said.

But Dak wasn’t finished yet. “Though some historians put the date at November 24 based on the account of one of the monks inside the fortified city. . . .”

Riq looked at Sera, and his expression matched hers. Before either of them could say anything more there was a great blast of horns from the other side of the wall and the roar of thirty thousand men screaming at once. The ground trembled from the force of so many feet pounding against it as the massive horde of Vikings raced toward the city.

Dak seemed utterly unconcerned. “Huh.” His face scrunched up in concentration. “I guess it was the twenty-fourth after all. I can’t wait until we get back and I can correct the —”

“Dak!” Sera shouted. “The Vikings are sacking Paris and we’re *inside* the city! They’re about to attack *us*!”



Mathy Stuff

DAK DIDN'T quite understand why Sera was so panicked. After all, there was a wall *and* a river between them and the approaching horde of Vikings. While the Paris of 1792 that they'd just left had sprawled far into the countryside, the Paris they'd arrived in was little more than a fortress on an island in the middle of the Seine River. Sure, the stone wall ringing the island was already about four hundred years old and was crumbling in places, but it still gave them *some* protection.

Besides, if he knew his history (which he always did), the invasion wouldn't really get under way until the leaders of each side met to discuss the terms of Paris's surrender. Unfortunately for the people of Paris, surrendering wouldn't be enough to keep the Vikings from stealing provisions and setting most of the island on fire — it was just how Vikings did things. And, okay, thought Dak, they probably shouldn't stick around for too much of that. But they still had time to explore the area and figure out the Break before getting worried.

Even so, it wouldn't be good to get hit by a random arrow, and he could tell Sera was freaking out so he let her drag him and Riq to the nearest shelter, an empty house nestled between two bakeries. The air inside smelled of yeast and butter, and dust covered most of the surfaces, causing the spare bits of light sneaking through the cracks in the tile roof to sparkle. The space was narrow, and they wove their way between wooden support pillars toward the deepest recesses of the shelter. Just as they took cover another wave of arrows and rocks flew over the wall, raining down outside.

Thankfully, it looked like everyone else had the same idea as they did and had found someplace safe to hide out. Paris looked like a ghost town. But it didn't sound like one. Even inside their tiny shack, the noise of so many Vikings racing toward the island was tremendously loud. It reminded Dak of going to the biennial SQ games with his parents and the roar of the cheering crowds. Except this crowd was probably more deadly than a couple thousand sports fans.

Now that they were clear of all the falling debris, Sera pulled the SQuare from its satchel. A portable tablet computer given to them by the Hystorians, it was their only remaining connection to the future where, or rather *when*, they'd come from. He noticed her hands shook ever so slightly as she

typed out the password to access the files.

“Okay, whiz kid,” Riq said to Dak as he leaned against a rough stone wall. “You’re the one who’s always bragging about your historical prowess. Any idea why we’re here and what’s going on?”

Dak let a satisfied grin split his face. “Now look who’s interested in what I have to say.” Dak wondered for a second if he’d really get in all that much trouble if he pushed Riq out into the debris storm. He thought better of it when Sera raised her head from the SQuare and scowled at both of them.

“Keep your voices down,” she hissed, though Dak was pretty sure her whisper was louder than her normal tone of voice. “We haven’t spoken to anyone here yet, which means our translation devices aren’t set for the correct local language.”

Before they’d been sent back in time by Hystorians Brint and Mari to fix the Breaks in history, all three of them had been given earpieces and a tiny device to fit over one of their teeth that would translate anything they said. The only catch was that they had to hear someone talk before the device knew which language to use.

“Sorry,” Dak mumbled, but he still took the opportunity to smirk at Riq. Riq was the language expert — his parents had even invented the translation tool — and he should have been the one to remind them to stay quiet.

“Oh, for the love of mincemeat,” Sera muttered. Apparently she didn’t even have to glance up from the SQuare to know Dak and Riq were staring each other down to see who looked away first. (Riq totally forfeited when he turned to look at Sera.)

The SQuare’s screen flickered a few times. “Any idea if they had time to upload anything on this Break?” Sera asked Riq. “I hate to think about being cast adrift with no help.”

Riq frowned and for once it seemed to Dak like the older boy might admit to not having all the answers. “I think they were able to get most everything on there,” he said. “Are the files not showing up?”

Sera shook her head. “Some of it. I guess until we know how many of the files are corrupted, we just have to work with the information we have.” Dak came to look over her shoulder as she chose the option for learning more about the third Break.

A few words and a long string of numbers flashed up on the screen.

Leave a message after the beep:

326274827332 744332413373433231 8121523274 7121734374
71322123323382535393

Dak groaned. “What kind of a message are they expecting us to leave?” He was good with words — facts and details, especially historical ones. Numbers just tended to swim in his head unless they were specific dates. In fact, sometimes in math class the only way he could remember his

multiplication tables was to attach each set to a series of historical events.

He watched helplessly now as both Sera's and Riq's eyes tracked back and forth across the screen. This was so not how he envisioned the Siege of Paris going. Thirty thousand Vikings nearby and he was stuck inside a bakery with two geeks more interested in mathy stuff.

"It could be a code or a cipher," Riq suggested.

"*Hmmm*," Sera murmured. "I guess it could be a monoalphabetic substitution cipher — like maybe an affine?"

Even their conversation was boring! While they were engrossed in their boring boringness, Dak began to ease his way to the door. He only wanted to catch a glimpse of what was happening outside, get a feel for what was going on.

Already the ground was littered with stones of all sizes, some larger than his head and a few so big they could have crushed a cow if any had been milling about (thankfully, it appeared none had).

Dak breathed deeply, letting a smile cross his face. For as long as he could remember, he'd been in love with history. He even read most historical accounts in old books rather than on SQuares, because he loved how history smelled.

But now it felt like the words he'd read had always been dry. They'd tried to capture past events, to transport him there in his mind, but as he stood on the Île de la Cité, the Island of Paris, Dak realized that the books had been mere ghosts. Reality was so much cooler. Smellier, too.

Just then, the bombardment stopped, and the cacophony of war horns and shouts from the other side of the wall was replaced with the sound of ringing church bells. Dak watched as a contingent of Vikings started to make their way into the city over a low stone bridge that stretched across the Seine from the north bank of the river.

Dak wanted nothing more than to run forward and get a better look, but Sera already had her hand firm on his shoulder. "Don't even think about it. We have a Hystorian to find. Here, help us figure out what this means."

She held out the SQuare, and Dak read the highlighted lines:

To find the person whom you seek
Upset the clue within:
To lead you to the Hystorian
Find a roofless inn.

Dak stared at the words, but he had absolutely no clue what they meant. "This should be Riq's gig — he's the expert on things like this," he said. "I'm just the history buff. And as your guide through all past occurrences, I think our time would be better spent eavesdropping."

He pointed toward a small group of Parisians striding through the inner city. Many of them were

priests, with ornately decorated tunics over their cowls. Others were soldiers, their own tunics less ornate and complemented with chain mail.

Dak knew an official welcoming party when he saw one. The priests and soldiers were on their way to meet with the Viking contingent on the bridge, and Dak desperately wanted to be there for the discussion. Although he figured the important stuff wouldn't happen until they'd all gathered in some central location.

"Those are the guys who make decisions around here," Dak said. "The Hystorian is probably one of them, or on his way to wherever they're headed. That's where the history is going to happen, and that's where we need to be!"

"You're forgetting that we don't look like Parisians," Sera argued.

"Well, technically we *are* dressed like Parisians. Just Parisians of another century. We're very fashion forward!" Dak tugged on the ruffles at his wrist and wagged his eyebrows.

"Dak . . ." Sera's tone of voice left no question — she was getting fed up.

Dak put a hand on her arm. He and Sera had known each other for a really long time, since before they could talk, actually, but sometimes he didn't understand her at all. These were real, actual, honest-to-Thor *Vikings*. How could she not want to get closer to them? "Trust me," he said. "Have I steered you wrong before? Besides, I think I know what's about to happen. And it could be crucial to our mission here."

Riq looked up from where he was pawing through a low wooden trunk on the other side of the room.

Dak took a moment to relish their undivided attention before diving in. "The small contingent of Vikings crossing into the city is headed by Siegfried, their leader. Well, I don't know if *leader* is the right word since Viking society wasn't strictly ordered the same as ours. Usually power wasn't quite so concentrated —"

Sera cleared her throat and began tapping her foot.

"Er, right. Anyway, just before the Vikings sack Paris, Siegfried has a little chat with their bishop Gauzelin, and asks him to hand the city over. The bishop agrees. The Parisians figure everything's cool — so they're pretty surprised when the Vikings attack the next morning."

Riq frowned. "That doesn't seem sportsmanlike," he said.

Dak shrugged. "That's not really what the Vikings are known for. They were more the pillaging-and-plundering kind of folk."

Sera's body appeared to tense a bit at that. "So this Siegfried guy — what happens after he takes Paris?"

Dak felt the same excitement he always did before imparting cool historical details. "He becomes one of the most powerful men in France. See, he ends up settling down in Normandy, the region of France right across the channel from England. It turns out that bit of land is pretty strategically

important — it's the perfect launching spot for an invasion of Great Britain in the eleventh century. Siegfried's great-great-great-grandson, Bill Helm the Vanquisher, does just that!"

Sera and Riq stared at him, and it took him a second to realize that they didn't understand the importance of that. He sighed deeply.

"Every modern-day European monarch is descended from Bill Helm the Vanquisher, AKA the dude who conquered England. And, of course, that means . . ." He felt like a teacher trying to pull an obvious conclusion from his students.

"It means every king, every queen — they're all descendants of Siegfried the Viking," Sera answered, her eyes wide.

Riq was the one to say out loud what Dak had already been thinking. "This siege is about more than just Paris. The fate of the whole world is at stake."

Dak nodded. "And with that much power up for grabs, you can bet the SQ is already here."



Starting a War

DAK AND RIQ stood just outside their shelter to give Sera privacy while she changed. Dak had to grudgingly admit that Riq had done a pretty good job putting together proper outfits from the scraps he'd found in the trunk. Of course, it had taken a bit of doing to figure out what went where. They'd shoved their old shoes into the bottom of their satchel, since nothing screamed *anachronism* more than sneakers.

That still left Dak in a shin-length tunic, and he wasn't sure how he felt about it. It was way too easy to imagine accidentally flashing ninth-century Paris. And he definitely didn't want to think too much about who'd worn these clothes before (and how long it had been since they'd been washed).

At least Riq looked even more ridiculous in his own getup. "You remind me of my grandfather with your socks tied up around your knees like that," Dak quipped.

The older boy smirked at him. "You look like my grandma in your little dress."

Dak couldn't think of a comeback fast enough and resigned himself to scowling. He watched impatiently as more and more Parisians made their way toward a large stone cathedral. His toes curled in his new (old) boots, wanting to join in the throng.

"So, you think this Viking leader Siegfried might be SQ?" Riq asked.

"It seems likely to me," Dak said. "Around the late eighth century the Vikings became pretty aggressive and started taking over a bunch of places, pillaging along the way. Before then they'd more or less stayed up in Norway and Denmark, and no one really knows why they decided to expand their territory. Some historians think it's because, with the Medieval Warm Period, it got easier to head out on the ocean, and others think that available land just became too scarce on the Scandinavian peninsula. Now that I think about it, though, it would make sense that they'd actually be led by SQ going for a big land grab."

Riq nodded. "So what do you think that means for us? Where do you think the Break is?"

Dak had been thinking about this already, his mind whirring over all the possibilities. "Okay, pretend you're Siegfried and you're SQ." He paused and squinted at Riq. "Well, if you were a Viking

you'd have a beard and smell less, but moving on.”

“You couldn't get a beard if you shaved your head and glued it to your face,” Riq muttered.

Dak ignored that. “So you're an evil, stinky, *ugly* SQ guy with a big army and you're traveling all over the world pushing people around. What are you really after?”

“Power,” Sera said as she stepped out to join them. Dak choked on a laugh. Like the rest of them, she was wearing hose fastened at her knees with a scrap of lace, and a tunic draped over a long undershirt and tied around her waist with a belt. From the belt hung a sack with a familiar bulge that could only be the Infinity Ring. A formless brown cape hung from her shoulders to the back of her knees, and what was left of her hair was tucked up into a misshapen wool cap.

“You do a pretty good job passing as a boy.” Dak tweaked the cap, making it fall farther over her eyes.

Riq stepped forward and righted it, tucking stray bits of her hair back up under it. “One of these days we'll find a time in history when you can get dressed up nicely,” he said.

Dak wanted to groan, but Sera's face lit up at the prospect.

“Anyway,” he interjected. “Sera's right — it's really all about power. That's pretty much what history is: people grabbing power and then losing it to someone else.” Which is exactly why Dak loved it so much. Science always seemed like a boring recitation of facts, but history . . . it was all one big adventure story.

“That still doesn't help us fix the Break,” Riq said. “And we haven't unraveled the code to figure out what we're supposed to be doing here, or figured out how to find the Hystorian.”

“Code, schmode — we've got this.” Dak grinned. “Watch and learn, my friend,” he said and started strolling toward the church.



The front face of the church loomed over them, towers dotted with arched windows rising on either side of the entrance. Once they were inside, everything was darker, the row of windows close to the ceiling letting in little of the morning's watery light. Already the nave was full of Parisians, many of them spilling into the transepts on either side of the altar.

Thankfully Dak, Sera, and Riq were dressed like everyone else so they didn't stand out so much. Dak used his small size to his advantage, slipping through the crowd toward the front of the church. A times like this it was useful to be young — no one seemed to pay him any attention.

When the contingent of Vikings entered, the crowded church grew so quiet that Dak could hear the rattle of swords in scabbards as the large Danish men strode forward. He was mesmerized. He'd seen depictions of Vikings from tapestries and drawings in his books, but seeing them in person was different. They were huge, with long mustaches braided out to their ears, and beards that fell from their chins.

He'd expected them to look more barbaric — everything he'd ever read about them mentioned their cruelty and filthiness — but these men didn't seem to match that description at all. In fact, they seemed cleaner and better dressed than most of the Parisians.

Their leader, Siegfried, was older than the others. Judging from the lines on his face, he'd probably never once smiled in his life. His cloak was pinned to his right shoulder, which kept his arm free — and even in the cathedral he kept his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Dak was pretty sure that the guy could lop off a head or a leg with one swing, his arms were so thick with muscles. Of course, that didn't stop Dak from edging closer to get a better look. Sera kept hissing at him to stop, but her unease didn't keep her from following as he made his way forward.

Just as they reached the edge of the crowd ringing the altar at the front of the cathedral, an old priest shuffled out of a side room and approached the band of Vikings. He was pretty weighed down with ornate robes that hung from his bony shoulders, and for a moment Dak wasn't sure he'd actually make it across the altar before keeling over. Flanking him were several other clergymen who seemed prepared to catch him if it came to that.

Siegfried stepped forward and spoke first. Dak's earpiece translated every word. "Bishop Gauzelin, have compassion on yourself and on your flock. Allow us the freedom of the city. We will do no harm, and we will see to it that whatever belongs to you shall be strictly protected."

Bishop Gauzelin turned to the priests around him and started to whisper as they debated Siegfried's request.

Dak felt his heart begin to race. "This is it," he whispered to Sera and Riq. "This is where the bishop hands over the city. And did you see what Siegfried is using to pin his cloak?" Dak tilted his head toward the gigantic Viking — whose bronze pin bore the unmistakable insignia of the SQ. "Man, sometimes I hate being right."

"I'm still not sure about this, Dak," Sera fretted. "I think we should figure out what the code from Brint and Mari says before jumping to any conclusions."

It bothered him that Sera had so little faith in him, especially since he'd never been wrong before. Oddly, Riq seemed willing to take his side, which was a rarity in itself. "Do you think that's really all there is to this Break? Keeping that Viking guy from getting into Paris?" Riq asked.

Dak rolled his eyes at Riq's imprecision with historical details. "He's not just 'some guy' and, yeah, I think keeping the bishop from handing over the city is a pretty good start. Siegfried is an agent of the SQ and his power base starts with Paris, so it makes sense to make sure that never happens. We just have to figure out how to do that."

"What if we just —" Riq started to offer.

Dak scoffed and cut him off. "I don't think learning about the origin of some obscure and useless word is what we need right now, and your skills are pretty limited beyond being a linguist."

Riq raised his eyebrows and glanced at Sera, who only shrugged in response. Dak shifted his focus

back to the group gathering at the front of the church, trying to figure out how best to intervene.

His thoughts were interrupted by a smarting slap on the back. "Watch and learn, my friend," Riq said over his shoulder as he strode forward. The next thing Dak knew, Riq was leaping onto the dais.

Sera let out an alarmed little squeak as she tried to grab for Riq's tunic but she was too late. Soon enough Riq was approaching the flock of priests. "What's he doing?" she asked.

Dak shrugged; he didn't know, but whatever it was, he wasn't going to be left out. He was just about to climb up after him when Riq stepped between the two groups.

Siegfried looked Riq over dismissively, the furrows on his face deepening. "Who is this boy?"

Riq responded easily and smoothly, showing no fear or hesitation. "Bishop Gauzelin is not as skilled in the Danish tongue as I am and has allowed my assistance as a translator."

Siegfried frowned. One of the large men in his entourage stepped forward, a large red scar across his face puckering as he asked, "And how does one as dark as you come to know the Danish tongue?"

When Riq hesitated to answer the scarred Viking took another step until he was almost towering over the smaller boy. He had the same brutish look about him as the Time Warden they'd run into in Spain. Dak remembered how they'd been caught in Palos de la Frontera during their first Break. The Time Warden overheard them talking just after they'd warped into 1492 and noticed how out of place the three of them looked in their stolen clothes and anachronistic demeanor.

Dak, Sera, and Riq were all too aware of the men and women who'd been trained throughout time to search for anything or anyone suspicious, and a dark-skinned teenager in medieval Paris who knew how to speak French, Latin, and Old Norse certainly qualified as odd. If Siegfried was SQ then it would make sense that one of his men might be a Time Warden, and the Time Warden's only job was to search out time travelers and eliminate them.

They couldn't risk getting caught and right now, getting caught looked likely. Sera gripped Dak's hand hard enough he was pretty sure she'd leave dents in his bones.

"Do something," she urged.

Dak's mind weeded through a myriad of historical details, searching out the best possible excuse for Riq. In the end, it didn't matter because Riq came up with his own solution: the truth. "My father was a scholar," Riq explained. "I speak sixteen languages."

He delivered the explanation with his usual air of smugness and though the scarred Viking opened his mouth as if to press the issue, Siegfried stepped forward, cutting him off. "Ignore Gorm. What is Bishop Gauzelin's response to our request?"

Dak's translator device switched smoothly to French again, and he overheard Gauzelin and Riq speaking back and forth, discussing their response. The bishop was clearly telling Riq to give in to the Viking demands.

Riq nodded in understanding and then turned to Siegfried. "Bishop Gauzelin tells me that Paris has been entrusted to us by the emperor. It is our responsibility to protect it."

Dak's jaw dropped and Sera frowned. "That's not what the bishop said," she whispered.

"Not at all," Dak agreed. He had absolutely no idea what Riq was planning.

Riq continued to talk, falsely translating what the bishop actually said. "If you had been given the duty of defending these walls, and if you instead gave in to the demands of a foreign army, what treatment do you think you would deserve?"

Siegfried laughed, a deep booming sound that echoed off the stone walls. "I would deserve to have my head cut off and thrown to the dogs."

Riq crossed his arms over his chest and Dak was impressed with how imposing he looked among the massive Vikings and the frail priests. "So you understand our position and why we will not yield.

Siegfried stepped forward until he was towering over Riq. In an instant he'd gone from laughter to fury. Sera's grip on Dak's hand tightened, something Dak didn't even think was possible until he felt bones grinding together.

"If you do not bow to my demands," Siegfried growled, "then tomorrow our war machines will destroy you."

Riq grinned. "Bring it on."

Dak almost groaned at the use of such a misdated phrase but it seemed to have the intended effect of catching Siegfried off guard. The Viking furrowed his brow in confusion before stepping back to join his men. "You've made your choice. Tomorrow face the wrath of Odin's finest warriors." Then they turned and strode from the hall, long cloaks billowing behind them.

The bishop appeared alarmed as he turned to Riq. "What did they say?"

"That we should be ready to fight," Riq answered. It was clear he'd meant for no one beyond their small group to hear the words but even so his voice carried into the crowd. Soon there were strained murmurings that transformed quickly into a startled buzzing as the news made it through the throngs packed into the church. The air hummed with the threat of panic.

Sera finally released Dak's hand, and he grimaced as blood rushed back into his fingertips with a feeling of pins and needles. "What did he just do?" she asked.

Dak stared up at where Riq and the bishop continued to converse. He couldn't help but feel a little jealous of the older boy for taking such a crucial role in changing the course of history. "I'm pretty sure he just started a war."

He watched as Sera's expression morphed from startled to alarmed. But it was envy, not the pending war, that occupied Dak's thoughts. "Riq's totally going to go down in the history books for this, isn't he?"



Another Fan of History

WHEN DAK told Sera there were over thirty thousand Vikings across the river, she hadn't really understood what that meant. Now that she was standing on top of the Grand Châtelet — the huge wooden tower on the mainland guarding the northern bridge to the island city — reality hit her. Hard.

Armored men spread out as far as the eye could see, covering the ground of the mainland's north bank more thickly than blades of grass. Even though dusk was falling fast she could see them milling around, setting up camp and sharpening weapons. In the distance, a large band of them hacked at a massive fallen tree with their axes, honing the tip of it to a point. Another group worked to set up what looked to be a complicated catapult.

It wouldn't be long until they pointed everything they had at the ancient wall ringing the island and let loose with all their might. Sera looked behind her into the city. The wall was old and crumbling, most of it constructed over four hundred years ago by the Romans (according to Dak). She couldn't imagine it holding up for long. Even worse, she'd counted maybe two hundred armed Parisian men during the day. Compared to the legion outside, their force was minuscule.

"You do realize that we're outnumbered, right?" she asked.

Riq glanced up briefly as if calculating. "If each man here personally takes down one hundred and fifty Vikings, we should be fine."

"One hundred and fifty heavily armed, bloodthirsty Vikings," Dak clarified.

Sera stared at the two of them. Neither seemed to grasp the magnitude of the situation. "Oh, no sweat, then."

Sera still felt uneasy at the way Riq had so completely twisted history. No matter how much Dak tried to reassure her that his read on their mission here was the right one, she didn't like how little they knew about what was really going on. She was someone who preferred to amass facts, parse through them, and only then come up with a plan of action that had been considered from every angle.

All of this was happening too fast. The only thing that made Sera less anxious was that at the very least the Parisians now had a fighting chance. Originally, according to Dak, after the bishop handed

over the city, the Vikings had waited through the night to lull everyone into a false sense of security before destroying the island in the morning. Now, because of Riq, the Parisians had fair warning and were able to marshal their forces and make a plan for defending themselves.

It was an old plan, actually. A few decades before, King Charles the Bald had ordered that cities along the Seine build low bridges across the river to keep Vikings from being able to sail inland too easily. But the bridges themselves were vulnerable to attack. Towers were supposed to be constructed to protect the bridges.

A lot of cities had started the fortifications but never really finished them. Because of that, there was nothing to keep the agile Viking ships from sailing inland from the sea, and they'd taken advantage of this, sending out raids that had decimated French cities that lay close to the coast.

Paris hadn't finished its fortifications either, and now that the Vikings were set to attack, everyone was pitching in to hurriedly build another level on the tower guarding the north bridge.

I guess procrastination isn't a modern invention, Sera thought darkly. She had suggested finding a quiet spot for the three of them to hole up in while they worked on the encoded information on the Square. But before they'd had a chance to sneak off, the bishop had asked Riq personally to help out. That's what he got for jumping in as a translator — he'd become too high profile to fade into the background.

Which meant now Sera was tasked with holding rough-hewn wooden planks while Riq and Dak hammered them into place. It wasn't enough of a distraction from the intimidating view, and her mind drifted back to the danger lurking way too close for comfort.

"I'm still not convinced this can work," she said. "Even with the advance warning, I don't see how so few men will keep the Vikings from taking over."

Dak didn't even stop what he was doing as he responded, "Originally, they didn't. The Vikings creamed the Parisians and pretty much took everything they could get their hands on before claiming the city as their base of power and moving on to conquer more."

Sera glanced at Riq, wondering if Dak's answer was as unsettling for him as it was for her. But Riq seemed engrossed in his task and perfectly willing to ignore both of them. "And you think we've changed all that?"

Dak paused. "Maybe?" That his answer was in the form of a question didn't do much to allay Sera's fears.

"On the plus side," Dak added, "at least now we get to see how a battering ram works." He grinned in his familiar way.

"That's not really something I would put in the *plus* category," Sera muttered.

Dak ignored her. "Speaking of how things work," Dak continued. "As soon as it's dark I'm going to sneak down to the riverbank so I can check out one of the longships. I want to see firsthand if the re-creation at the Smithsonian was accurate."

Sera felt her eyes bulge out of her head. “What?” The word came out almost as a squawk and several heads turned her way, causing her to blush. She lowered her voice and gripped Dak’s shoulder. “You’re not leaving this tower, Dak Smyth!”

“It’ll just be for a second,” he argued. “I’ll be careful, I promise. Everyone up here is focused on getting the tower fortified, and all the Vikings are wrapped up in their preparations for tomorrow. No one will notice me, honest.”

Was Dak crazy? He’d done some reckless things in his life, but Sera couldn’t believe he was actually considering leaving the safety of the tower, and alone at that!

“It’s out of the question,” she told him, and for the briefest flash of a moment she felt the dizzy, uneven sensation that preceded a Remnant. She’d had these feelings before — that her life was somehow missing something that she was brushing right up against — but they’d always happened when she was at home near her barn or when she looked in a mirror.

This time there was something about the phrase she’d just said, her tone of voice and inflection, that felt as though it should have been familiar somehow. She pressed a hand against the wall to steady herself, sweat breaking out along her temples. Dak didn’t seem to notice. Or if he did he must have thought she was just upset at his plan to sneak out (which, for the record, she was).

“Listen, Sera,” Dak said, setting down his tools and facing her, “when I snuck you into my parents’ super-secure workshop and you saw all those whiteboards filled with their plans for the Infinity Ring I didn’t try to stop you from working on it. In fact, if I remember correctly I even brought you a nice ham sandwich.”

Dak knew exactly how to make Sera feel guilty and, since she was already unsteady in the wake of the passing Remnant, it was difficult for her to come up with a good response. So she settled on “That was different.”

“How?”

“Because there weren’t thirty thousand Vikings nearby ready to kill you!” Once again Sera’s outburst drew the attention of the workers around them, and this time several narrowed their eyes.

Dak stepped forward and put a hand on her arm. Sera knew as soon as he did it that she’d lost the argument.

“I promise I’ll be careful,” he said. His eyes were pleading and his voice earnest. “You know how important this is to me. My entire life I’ve lived and breathed history, and now’s my chance to actually experience it firsthand. Please, Sera.”

Dak was right; he’d let her play around in his parents’ lab even though he knew he’d be in huge trouble if they’d found out. He’d taken the risk because of how much it meant to Sera. She sighed dramatically and Dak flashed her an enormous grin.

“One boat, that’s it,” she told him sternly. “And first, we figure out how to find the Hystorian. That’s most important.”

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