

# THE FALL OF THE DIVINE

## 1

### Trial by Fire

Lucian's heart pounded like a war drum, each thud in his chest a grim reminder that death could strike at any moment. The ground beneath him trembled intermittently, as if ready to split open under his feet. The dense forest around him felt like an invisible cage, shadows cloaking his vision, giving him the suffocating illusion of being trapped. The air was thick with the stench of blood and decay, making every breath a struggle. Each inhale came with the weight of the world on his chest, as if everything was collapsing around him. In the distance, faint screams and the sound of flesh tearing echoed, a cruel reminder that death held no mercy in this place.

A boy, no more than fifteen or sixteen, had been cornered in the trial grounds. Armed only with a crude dagger, he fought desperately against a serpent-like creature. The creature's scales gleamed under the dim light, each attack swift and deadly. The boy, exhausted and terrified, dodged frantically, but fear was etched across his face.

Nearby, a slender girl clung to the gnarled branches of a twisted tree, her hands trembling as a tusked beast prowled beneath her. She dared not make a sound, fearing it would draw the monster's attention. She gripped the tree branches tightly, hoping to outlast the danger below.

"I can't die here," Lucian told himself, his gaze fixed on the hulking beast before him. It was a creature made of rock, towering nearly 10 feet tall, like a walking mountain. Every step it took caused the ground to quake. Each roar seemed to rise from the depths of the earth, shaking the very air.

Lucian gripped his short sword, the cold metal biting into his palm—a sharp reminder to stay focused. He knew this trial wasn't about showing off strength, but about testing one's will to survive. Though he had always thrived on extreme sports and was in better shape than most, here in this deadly trial ground, those advantages meant little. The rock beast before him seemed like something out of a nightmare, its enormous body a mountain of stone. Its footsteps shook the earth, and each breath sent vibrations through the air. Lucian had no combat experience; all he could rely on was his sharp instincts and sheer will to survive.

"Stay calm... stay calm..." Lucian muttered under his breath, trying to suppress the rising tide of fear. His eyes locked on the approaching giant. He knew that one misstep could mean his death.

The beast's low growl rumbled like thunder, and it lumbered closer, each step quickening Lucian's heartbeat. Its massive stone claws raked the earth, leaving deep, unsettling grooves in the ground. Lucian tightened his grip on the short sword—it seemed insignificant, but it was all he had.

Suddenly, the beast lunged. Lucian instinctively leapt backward, barely dodging the attack. The creature's claws slammed into the ground with a force that sent rocks flying in all directions, leaving deep gashes in the earth. A stray stone struck Lucian's arm, opening a wound that bled profusely. Pain surged through him, but he clenched his jaw, refusing to falter.

"Pain only means I'm still alive," he told himself, forcing his mind to ignore the searing pain. He knew that stopping now would only lead to death.

The beast lunged again, moving with frightening speed. Lucian rolled to the side, narrowly evading the monstrous claws. As he regained his footing, his sharp eyes caught sight of a crack along the beast's back—a possible weak point.

This was his chance.

Without hesitation, Lucian sprang to his feet, seizing the fleeting opportunity. He didn't have time to second-guess; he had to act now. As the beast landed from its last attack, Lucian leaped onto its back, plunging his short sword into the crack.

There was a dull thud as the blade found purchase in the stone. The beast let out an ear-splitting roar, its entire body shuddering violently. Lucian clung desperately to the sword, nearly thrown off by the sheer force of the creature's thrashing. Sweat and blood blurred his vision, his arms numbed by the strain.

"Don't let go!" Lucian gripped the hilt tighter, his muscles screaming in protest. The blade sank deeper into the crack, with only the handle remaining visible. In this life-or-death moment, his thoughts were crystal clear. The crack in the beast's back was its only weakness—he had to finish this now.

The beast's struggles grew weaker until, with one final, heavy groan, it collapsed. The ground shook with the impact. Lucian tumbled off its back, hitting the earth hard. He lay there, gasping for breath, his body leaden with exhaustion. His chest heaved, his vision swimming, but he was alive. The sounds of the forest began to fade, leaving only the distant growls of predators hunting in the wind.

He turned his head, gazing at the massive corpse before him, a flood of mixed emotions rushing through him. This was the third battle he had fought today. From tree creatures to white-furred beasts, and now this stone giant, his body was riddled with wounds—at least twenty of them. His blood had long soaked through his clothes, yet he still had no idea how many more monsters lay ahead.

After a brief rest, Lucian slowly pushed himself up, taking a deep breath as he glanced toward the cliff in the distance. He knew he had no choice but to keep moving.

Just then, a deep voice echoed from above the trial grounds: "Those who have passed the trial, enter the Gate of Light."

Lucian looked up and saw a large gate of light appear at the edge of the forest, emitting a soft glow. It signaled that he had survived this stage. He took a deep breath, paused for a moment, then dragged his weary body toward the gate.

As he stepped through, his emotions were a whirlwind of relief and dread. On one hand, he was grateful to be alive. Out of the thousands who had entered the trial, he had no idea how many had survived—if even a hundred had made it, that would be optimistic. But on the other hand, he knew this was only the beginning. The real challenge was yet to come. Most importantly, Freya was still waiting for him.