

Coil of War
Excerpt from Book 3 from Coil Trilogy
By Cynna McLaughlin

Prologue

DANE huddled against the side of a burned building. With every breath, he inhaled the stale scent of ash and charred wood. Shivering in his thin cloak, he drew the material closer to his body. His stomach growled with hunger, but he ignored it.

Food was scarce for the Pyrannis living in the city of Gharra, and what was available was far too expensive. Thievery was dangerous for those caught, but if one wanted to survive the coming weeks, then there was no choice.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd filled his stomach with a warm meal. Most of the food he scrounged together went to the women and children hiding in the burned-out buildings around him.

Shoving his dour thoughts away, Dane kept a lookout for a familiar, strolling walk.

It had taken over a week, but he'd managed to leave a coded message for Timosy. Dane had yet to find Thanel since Malirran patrols made it almost impossible to move around Gharra without suspicion.

A slight tug on the back of his cloak had him reacting on instinct. Striking with precision, Dane grabbed ahold of the arm. He didn't show his surprise at the frail bones that rubbed together under his fingers.

Stricken, wide eyes met his, but the filthy face dissolved into outright defiance. The young boy hissed, "Let me go."

The intonation, not the words itself, made him look the boy over again. Soft fingers yanked at his iron grip, and startling white teeth bared themselves in a snarl.

God's blood! The boy was a girl; the gentle breeding was there under all the grime.

Dane's glare stilled the girl, and then she cringed inward. He grabbed both her shoulders and tugged the girl back farther into the shadows. He didn't ask the obvious question. He knew full well why the girl was without a chaperone, slinking around the city on her own. Her entire family was probably dead during what the Pyrannis still alive called the purge. Only the God and Goddess knew how she had escaped notice.

He leaned down and whispered, "It is not safe to be outside tonight. Understand?"

The only sound the girl made was a sharp intake of breath. She nodded once, though her eyes darted this way and that. Her distrust was in every tremor of her thin body.

Dane looked back toward the street, looking both ways, before ducking back to safety. The girl's fingers felt like ice on his forearm. He inwardly groaned. His conscience was going to get him killed.

Turning his full attention back to the child, he leaned down and whispered in her ear again. "If you wait, I'll share what little food I have." He considered the shredded clothes barely hanging on the girl. She'd been smart enough to destroy any clothing proclaiming her heritage, including her shoes. He frowned. She'd made it this long without his protection. Dane had to take the chance she'd wait for him like he hoped.

"Do you know the alley behind the old bakery?" It was only one street over from where they stood.

She studied him for a long moment before she nodded again with flattened lips.

“The alley. Go there. The building is only half standing, but the sign still hangs outside. Make sure no one follows you for a few minutes before you move deeper in the alley. At the corner of the dead end, there is a cellar door half hidden under a shrub. Get inside, and wait for me.”

Dane looked back toward the street, and recognized Timosy’s gliding walk. He gave his battlemate a quick nod before focusing back on the girl. “I swear on the family I’ve lost that you will be safe from harm. Go, rest. I’ll meet you there as soon as I am done here.” When she trembled beneath his hand with indecision, Dane shook her, then let her go with a small push. “Go, now.”

He was a fool for placing his trust in a desperate, starving child. He mentally shrugged. Dane doubted the girl would be there, but he’d done his best.

Unwilling to see whether the girl followed his instructions, Dane waited until his battlemate slipped into the shadows beside him. After clasping Timosy tight, he asked the question greatest on his mind. “Have you seen or heard from Thanel?”

Timosy grinned, and Dane almost laughed aloud with relief. “Thanel is alive and well. He was injured when the Malirrans attacked the castle.”

“Injured? How?” Dane whispered.

His battlemate gestured down to his leg, but didn’t explain.

Dane shook his head at his own folly. He could ask when they were safe behind closed doors. Seeing nothing move in the street, they both glanced up at the windows and rooftops above them. Once certain no one watched them, Dane motioned for Timosy to follow him.

Darting one street over and into the alley, he huffed his surprise when a small shadow separated itself from the wall. The girl had shown up after all.

After giving her a curious glance, Timosy turned his back to watch the alley’s opening. Everyone froze when the cellar door creaked when Dane lifted it. He whispered, “Girl, get in. Timosy, you too.”

Once the door shut above him, the tension left him. Dane moved around the small cellar in the dark with familiar ease, his hand hitting the top of the lantern on the first try. No one said a word until a flicker of a flame lit the room.

Ignoring Timosy for the moment, he asked the girl, “You have a name?”

She ducked her head and wrapped her arms around her chest. She stared at them for a long minute. “Leena. My name is Leena.”

Dane bowed to her in greeting. “Leena, I am Dane Ironside. This is my battlemate, Timosy.”

His friend followed his lead, sheathed his blade, and dipped his head. “Young Leena, are you hungry?” Not waiting for her answer, Timosy pulled his cloak aside and untied a bag from his belt. He dropped the bag onto the cracked shelf to his left. He took a small step backward, giving her plenty of space. “I have jerky and a couple slices of dry bread. It isn’t much, but it is yours.”

A grunt escaped Dane. It was more than he had to offer the child. Leena never turned her back to them, but she snatched the bread and shoved it into her mouth, chewing quickly before taking another bite.