

## OROCS

Caley was momentarily blinded as she stepped out into the sunlight. After her eyes adjusted, she saw she was in some sort of arena, like the Colosseum. Unlike the rest of the castle, this seemed to be made of petrified gray parchment with honeycomb-shaped openings above rows of stands. It looked a bit like a gigantic open-aired hornet's nest. In fact, she could swear she heard a faint buzzing coming from somewhere. Everyone was lined up at attention in their armor, and as Caley walked toward them with Kip, she felt a bit like a gladiator.

A seriously unprepared gladiator.

A man in military armor with a rhino-horn nose marched up to the students. Caley had seen him in the Council Chamber.

"I am Commander Pike, Master of the Equidium." The rhino-man's voice rumbled around the arena. "For a thousand years, on this sacred soil, each noble child of Erinath was cut from the womb of tenderness and mercy to be bathed in the blood of sacrifice and pain and born anew as Equidium competitors. Train hard, fight hard, and you will be victorious. Give in to the coward's way and bring shame and dishonor to yourself and your family."

Caley noticed Kip blanch a bit.

Pike turned toward an iron gate that slowly began to rise, its sharp teeth wrenching from the arena floor. The class craned their heads to try to get a glimpse of what was inside the darkened tunnel. Everyone seemed terrified and thrilled at the same time.

"What if I can't ride one?" Lucas asked. "Dad's already disappointed about my baest."

"Be proud of whatever you are," said Lidia, who was having a bit of trouble fitting her helmet over her elk horns.

"Besides, I don't think orocs eat shrubs," jeered Ithica.

"Kip, what's an oroc?" Caley asked.

No sooner had she said this than she heard the sound of claws on concrete, and from out of the tunnel burst creatures beyond Caley's wildest dreams. They looked like horse-sized prehistoric dragonflies. Their tear-shaped heads had huge multifaceted eyes and horned antennae. Their sleekly muscled bodies were covered in fine, fibrous coats in a variety of shades from foam white to onyx black, many shot through with iridescent patterns and streaks. Long, glowing fibers were arranged in a spiky line down their necks, almost like a horse's mane. Their four legs were barbed and boney, ending in clawed feet. Their torsos tapered into long tails nearly the length of their bodies ending in a variety of shapes: forked, wedged, notched, and fanned, like bird feathers. As soon as they were free of the tunnel, they each unfolded two pairs of

dragon-like wings that shimmered in the sun. They lifted straight up into the air like helicopters and began circling the arena, splitting the air with their high-pitched, almost insect-sounding shrieks.

Everyone stared, some looking stunned, some looking euphoric, and others looking like they just wanted to run away and hide.

"That's an oroc," said Kip, gawking saucer-eyed at them.

As Caley stared at the amazing creatures swooping and swirling above her, the most powerful sensation came over her. It wasn't fear, or awe, or anything like that. It was a feeling so strong and so deep that she would never in her life forget it. The moment she set eyes on the orocs, there was only one thing she wanted to do more than anything she had ever done before.

She wanted to ride one.