



Divide and Conquer

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

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



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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.”

Dak’s response was a groan. “But those puzzles are so hard! And when we asked about a roofless inn, everyone looked at us like we were crazy!”

She arched an eyebrow, a skill she’d perfected after spending several hours in front of the bathroom mirror. “Then I guess you won’t get to see your boat tonight.”

Dak buried his head in his hands and Riq slapped him on the back. “Get to work,” he said, almost gleeful at Dak’s despair.

