

CARISSA BROADBENT



CHILDREN
of
FALLEN GODS

THE WAR OF LOST HEARTS: VOL. II

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Cover Illustration by Ina Wong: artstation.com/inawong

Typographic & Interior Design by Carissa Broadbent

Editing by Noah Sky: noahcsky@gmail.com.

Editing by Anthony Holabird: holabirdediting.com

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For you.

The fact that you're reading this right now is the coolest thing ever. Thank you. I hope you love it.

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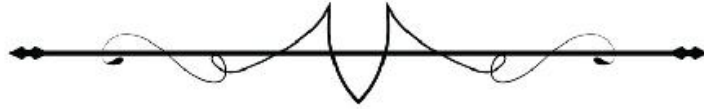
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PROLOGUE



It began with a whisper and it will end with a scream. What comes between is a dance of fate's tangled threads.

I believed in fate once, or something like it. I believed in gods and deities and the guiding faith of a grand plan. Why did it comfort me so, to believe that I was merely one small piece of something bigger? Why did I revel in the thought of my own insignificance? Perhaps it was because I was so desperately lonely, and I treasured that innate connection — *you cannot leave me, for we are part of the same path.*

I no longer believe in such things. Surely if the gods existed, they would have spoken to me by now. I linger close enough to death to smell it, close enough to press my fingers against the frosted glass that separates me from their world. I peer through and see nothing but dust and bones.

I have learned that there are few certainties in life or death, but one of them is that bones do not speak. Dust does not sing.

So I sing to myself instead, in off-key fragments of forgotten lore, craving the warmth of a heartbeat.

It began with a whisper and it will end with a scream. What comes between is still to be seen.

And so I wait.

PART ONE:

FLAME



CHAPTER ONE



The air hit my chest all at once. My eyes snapped open to a pit of darkness. Sweat plastered my hair to my neck and the rough sheets to my skin. The blood rushing in my ears drowned out the sounds of the ship — the wood creaking, the ocean churning, the steady breaths of the sleeping passengers around me.

{Something is coming.}

The whisper circled my mind, flooding me with directionless panic. Every time I blinked, Reshaye's memories assaulted me — a flash of golden hair, a room of white and white and white, and the overwhelming feeling that something unseen loomed just past the horizon, reaching for me.

For us.

Slowly, I sat up. Rising to my feet, I channeled Reshaye my calm, or at least, as much of it as I could force. I had to move very, very carefully to avoid waking anyone up. The ship was large, but it held so many passengers that we had to forego formal beds in favor of laying down bedrolls, practically shoulder-to-shoulder. Esmaris Mikov's "estate," after all, had really been more of a city. And that city had housed nearly a thousand slaves — soldiers and servants and maids, horse trainers and farmers, craftsmen and cooks. And dancers, of course. Like I had once been.

Some had chosen to stay in Threll, either to reunite with family members or remain in the Mikov estate, now formally under the leadership of the Orders. But most had come with

us, to Ara. A country where they could be free, yes. If only because it was now the country that held my leash.

At the thought, Reshaye slithered through the back of my mind. Even that small movement was enough to make me tense.

I glanced down, looking for a clear path. Serel was snoring softly on one side of me, and even now, more than a week later, when I looked at him I felt a strange pang of disbelief in my chest. Every so often I had to resist the urge to grab him just to make sure he was real.

I had long ago stopped believing in the gods. I already lived my life under the control of so many mortal men — it brought me no comfort to think of immortal ones pulling the strings, too. But if there was anything that had ever felt like divine intervention, it was that my friend was beside me again.

The bedroll on my other side was empty.

I tip-toed over sleeping bodies and crept up creaking wooden stairs. A wall of cold air greeted me on deck, the sky opening up above me like a velvet blanket. I half-stumbled to the rail and leaned over. A blast of wind chilled the sweat on my skin, but my heart was still racing.

It was a dream, I whispered to Reshaye. You are safe. It is not real.

A hiss, caressing my thoughts.

{It is always real. In one way or another. This world or the next. Here, or what lies beneath.} A lungless breath made goosebumps rise on the back of my neck. And I could feel Reshaye's disquiet, its fear, as my eyes lifted over the horizon.

{Something...}

My gaze lingered at the seam between worlds where the sky met the sea. Reshaye's interest pulled there, reaching out into the distance, yearning, searching.

I leaned further over the rail.

I didn't even know what I was looking for. But it was like something was pulling me forward, something that, if I could

just get far enough, I would be able to see—

A hand yanked me away. I stumbled, letting out a small grunt as my back hit a familiar form and a set of arms wrapped around me.

“Too cold for swimming,” a voice murmured, so close to the crest of my ear that goosebumps of an entirely different kind raised on my skin. It was punctuated by an agonizingly brief brush of lips.

Reshaye wordlessly slunk to the back of my mind.

“I was not going to fall.”

“I’d rather not risk it. If I recall correctly, you’re not a terrific swimmer.”

“Pssh.” I ran my finger along my captor’s ribs, and just like I knew he would, he let out a poorly-stifled laugh and released me.

I turned to see Max giving me a terse half smile that looked as if it were trying to be annoyed and failing. Left side first, of course.

It was the kind of smile I returned without thinking.

“You abuse the power I’ve entrusted to you by exploiting my weaknesses like that,” he said.

I shrugged. “I cannot be expected to resist all temptations.”

We’d spent a week in constant, agonizing proximity, but had barely touched each other. We had no privacy, after all, for anything more, though I’d never admit aloud the embarrassing amount of time my mind now spent thinking of all the things we’d do once we did.

My ear still throbbed with warmth. I gave him a sly smirk, ready for another retort, but his gaze had turned serious and concerned.

“Nightmares?” he said, quietly.

“They feel very real.”

“They do.”

Of course, Max, of all people, would know.

He extended his hand, and I arched my eyebrows.

“What?”

He scoffed. “Please, Tisaanah.”

There was a part of me that didn't want to show him — didn't want to give him yet another thing to worry about, especially not when I knew how much he was giving up to be here with me. I laid my hand in his, palm up, and together we looked down at it.

The veins of my wrist and forearm, once barely visible beneath the pale patches of my albino skin, had darkened nearly to black.

Max's brow knitted.

“There is already so much about Reshaye that we do not understand,” I murmured. “Perhaps this will just be another strange unknown.”

“I don't like unknowns.”

I almost laughed. *Too bad. Because we're surrounded by them.*

His gaze flicked up to meet mine, and the words died in my throat. His eyes were stark and bright beneath the moonlight. They were the ultimate reminder of what the thing that lurked inside me was capable of. I could still vividly picture those translucent eyelids sliding back, revealing a dark, determined stare, and his body unraveling into flames.

Beautiful. Terrifying.

I looked down at my hand one more time. Then I shrugged and let it drop.

“This should be the least of our concerns, anyway,” I said, as I turned my gaze towards the sea. Towards Ara.

I did not know what was waiting for us there. After we left the Mikov estate, for a few blissful days the high of victory drowned out all else. But then the nightmares grew more

vivid, and the shores of Ara grew closer, and I felt the Orders' chains tightening.

I had made a deal, after all. The Orders gave me the power I needed to topple the Threllian Lords and save those I left behind. But in exchange, I sold myself back into slavery. Except now, I would wield death, instead of light touches and pretty words.

A knot formed in my stomach at the thought of it. Max's memories of the destruction of Sarlazai still haunted the backs of my eyelids. I would not repeat that kind of devastation.

"I think I have the mental capacity to be equally concerned about all of it, personally," Max muttered, and I placed my hand over his. His fingers rearranged around mine instinctively, warm and familiar.

"What do you think we will find? When we return?"

He was silent for a long moment. "I think that it doesn't make sense," he said, at last. "I think that Nura has been too quiet. I think that Sesri's reign is a strange battle for the Orders to choose. And I think that they're desperate, and that's the thing that scares me most, because I don't know why. So I don't know what we're going to come home to, but I know I don't like it."

When we get back, Nura had said to me, I hope you're ready to fight like hell.

I had no choice but to be ready. I was surrounded by reminders of all that depended on me. Eight years ago, my mother had kissed me on the forehead and sent me, her only daughter, into a hideous and uncertain future. It was all so I could have a chance — just one chance at survival, at *living*. And this was my only opportunity to make my life worth all of the ones I had seen snuffed out. There would be no more little girls torn away from their mothers in the night. No more mothers worked to death in the mines.

There was no sacrifice too great for that.

My gaze lifted to Max, to his far off stare. Guilt and affection tangled in my chest, each feeding off the other.

Max had already made so many sacrifices, more than anyone should ever have to suffer.

“I would understand,” I said, quietly.

His eyes flicked to me. “Hm?”

“I would understand if you cannot do this. If you can’t be in another war. I would understand.”

A shadow crossed his face, as if something painful had torn through him, then softened.

“If you can do it, I can do it.” His hand lifted to brush my cheek, then he said, more softly, “I don’t care what we’re walking into. You’re not going to do it alone.”

Gods. My gaze slipped out to the ocean, because suddenly, the sight of him — the sight of the way he looked at me — was too overwhelming. And for a moment, he made everything feel surmountable.

But then Reshaye’s voice unfurled in my mind like a thread of smoke in the darkness.

{He is right,} it whispered. *{You are never alone.}*



THE NEXT MORNING, I stood with Serel, leaning over the rail of the ship. I had barely gotten back to sleep the night before, but aside from aching eyes I wasn’t tired. Instead, I felt like electricity was running through me.

Beside me, Serel lifted his chin and blinked into the salty sea air.

“We’re arriving today, right?” he asked.

“The Syrizen say we’re close to shore. If it cleared up a bit, maybe we would be able to see the Towers by now.”

Serel let out a long, low whistle. “The Towers. What a sight that must be.”

“It’s really something.” There was no denying that. When I first came to Ara, I had been so feverish when I arrived that I barely remembered the journey. The only thing I *did* remember was that sight — the Towers, framed above the imposing Aran cliffs. It had been so magnificent that it made everything inside of me go silent.

And for the first time in weeks, I had felt *hope*.

Reshaye sniffed at the memory and let out a bitter chuckle.

{How foolish you were. How naive.}

“I never thought I would live to see it.” An easy smile still clung to Serel’s mouth, but his voice dipped a little as he said it, and I knew all the bittersweet depth hidden in that one sentence. A lump rose in my throat.

“You’ll love it,” I said.

I told myself it was true. It *had* to be true. Serel loved almost everything. He was effortlessly, ceaselessly optimistic. There was no reason why his feelings towards Ara would be any different. But still... there was so much he didn’t know. So much that *I* didn’t know.

I turned and looked out across the deck. Almost all of the passengers were up here now, which meant that it had become exceptionally crowded. But everyone knew how close we were to arriving, and no one was willing to miss the first glimpse of Ara.

The refugees’ emotions were so unguarded compared to those of Arans. Excitement was so thick in the air that it felt like breathing in syrupy mist. And I could taste what lived beneath it, too. Nervousness. Uncertainty. Fear.

My eyes fell to the other end of the boat, where a group of refugees clustered around two figures. One was a young man, Filias, who was a little older than Serel, with cropped dark hair and stubble across his chin. He had large, deep set eyes that were almost always narrowed, assessing the world with inherent suspicion. Beside him was a woman in her fifties, with a calm face and red-and-grey streaked hair — Riasha.

The two of them were inseparable, and they were always surrounded by people. Though both of them had been slaves from Esmaris's estate, I barely knew them. While I had largely been confined to the house, they had lived on the outskirts of Esmaris's land, working the farms. Serel had met Filias a few times, when Filias had been pulled into guard duties. But I hadn't met either of them until they had boarded this ship, and the first thing I had noticed was the way they radiated *determination*.

Most of the people on this boat were here so they could go build a better life for themselves. But Filias and Riasha wanted to build something bigger.

I was fully in support of that, of course. Still, they, especially Filias, regarded me with deep, wary suspicion.

It didn't offend me. It didn't even surprise me.

Surely they had heard the stories of me, and my terrible magic. And while all of us had been slaves to the same master, the people on this ship were otherwise completely different from each other. We all came from disparate fallen nations, some of which had been at war with each other for years before the Threllians swooped in to become the bigger threat. To some, I was a savior. To others, I was a Nyzrenese witch who had sold her soul to some dark god — someone who had helped them, yes, but not necessarily someone to be trusted.

And maybe they were right to think so. Perhaps I had saved my people from one war-torn country just to drag them into another. Perhaps I would not be able to protect them, when I wasn't even sure how I could protect myself — with my blood on an Order contract, and Reshaye burrowed deep in my mind.

Of their own accord, my eyes slid across the deck until they landed on Max, who was leaning against the rail beside Sammerin. He looked as if he was busy ranting about something. I wondered if he had any idea how easy he was to read. I was so far away and yet I felt like I could practically hear him.

“So. How's the sex?”

My eyebrows leapt as my head whipped to Serel, who gave me a sly smirk. “*What?*”

“You heard me.”

“There’s no sex.”

“Oh, excuse me. *Lovemaking.*”

“Serel!” I could feel my cheeks heating, even though I tried to look very serious and convincing. “There is no sex. Or lovemaking.”

“That’d be a shame, if it were true, which it isn’t.”

“What makes you think—”

“He looks at you like he wants to eat you. Slowly. With his tongue.”

Now my face was burning. Regardless, I still took a moment to appreciate the image *that* conjured in my mind.

“See?” Serel said, gesturing, and sure enough, I turned to see Max staring at me. When I met his stare, he gave me a too-casual wave and looked away.

Gods. He *was* easy to read.

“I—”

I was still deciding how I was going to respond to this when Serel’s eyes suddenly went wide, lifting to look over my shoulder. Thereni shouts rang out, a ripple of awe rising up from the crowd.

Serel muttered a curse of amazement.

I turned around.

The mist had parted, hazy white giving way to the Aran skyline.

And there before us, at long last, were the Towers.

CHAPTER TWO



There was a time when the sight of the Towers was comforting to me. Beyond comforting, actually — it had been *inspiring*. I had been amazed by their strength, their beauty, the ceaseless stability they represented. How fitting, I would think, that they were visible for so many miles. They were a beacon calling across the land and the sea, signaling constant truth. Just like the Orders themselves.

I had never believed in anything with such unwavering conviction.

I never would again.

Now, I frowned as I watched the Towers come into view. We were still several hours of travel time away from shore, but they were the first piece of Ara to appear, two columns of light rising into the sky and disappearing into misty fog. The Threllians gasped and grinned and pointed.

I could almost see another image superimposed over this one. The image of Tisaanah, before I had met her, clinging to the rail of a ship just like this, her back destroyed and her body raging with fever, utterly alone. She had probably looked at this same view and been overcome with relief — *relief* — because she was so certain the Orders would save us all. Instead, they'd strip us for parts until there was nothing left to take.

Where I'd once seen strength and certainty, I now saw grotesque monuments to broken promises. Two middle fingers raised towards the sky.

Well, fuck them too.

She was beside Serel. He looked out to the horizon with the same bright-eyed hope as the others. But Tisaanah's stare was a little harder, a little colder. There was a little serious turn at the corner of her mouth.

I wondered if she was thinking of a plan. Tisaanah loved plans.

Me? I craved the certainty of a known factor and yet acted almost entirely on impulse. My impulses were screaming at me now, though to do what, I wasn't sure.

"I'm looking forward to getting off of this boat," Sammerin muttered. He leaned on the rail with elegant carelessness, even though I was almost certain he was actively trying not to vomit. "Solid ground will feel...good."

"Not sure if it will feel good enough to make up for whatever's waiting for us once we get there."

"Mm." Sammerin made a noncommittal noise. But he drew in a deep breath through his pipe and let it out through his teeth, sending smoke unfurling into the wind. He only smoked when he was nervous. That breath said more than his words ever would.

I wished I was as good at hiding my anxieties. As much as I despised sea travel, there was a certain appeal to the time we had here, suspended on this boat. I didn't need to understand Thereni to understand the Threllians' hope and excitement. And for a few days, it was easy to get lost in it, too — especially as I watched Tisaanah. She looked at Serel as if she was never completely sure he was real. There was an euphoric delight to their interactions, like they were both so breathlessly thrilled to see each other again.

It was nice. It made everything else feel as if it had been worth it. Because anything would have been worth it, to see her like this — to see her happy.

Even if I could feel the shadow looming.

I glanced over to Nura, lingering near Eslyn and Ariadnea, who looked abjectly miserable. Syrizen might be inherently

unnerving — that eyeless stare just cut straight through you — but I found Nura’s silence to be infinitely more foreboding. She had barely spoken during this trip. And yet, I knew her well enough to read the hard lines of anticipation in the way she looked towards Ara every day.

“Will you fight?” Sammerin asked. “In Sesri’s war, with Tisaanah?”

“I’m certainly not going to let her fight it alone.”

My answer was easy, quick. Still, it would be a lie to say the idea didn’t make my palms sweat. It was one thing to cut down slavers. Another to raise my weapon against people who just happened to follow a different leader than I did. The last war left enough marks on me. I knew too well how high the price was, and all for so little.

“I’ll stay with her,” I said, firmly, as if to myself. “But that’s all. It’s about her, not about them.”

Sammerin let out another puff of smoke. The Ryvenai War had torn him up, too, even if he was better at hiding the scars than I would ever be. He had grown quieter over these last few days. It was a different silence than his usual, leaden not with thoughtfulness but with nervousness.

“You know,” I said, “I’m sure we could find someone else. If you wanted to return to your practice when we got back.”

I said it casually, but Sammerin gave me a look that cut through my manufactured carelessness.

“You couldn’t find anyone as good.” He gave Tisaanah a brief glance, one dark enough that I knew he wasn’t looking at her so much as what lurked hidden inside of her. “And I don’t trust anyone else to control that thing. Even though I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

A lump rose in my throat. I hated that I was relieved. Because I didn’t know if I trusted anyone else to do what Sammerin could, either. The strength of his magic — mastery of flesh — made him one of the very rare individuals who could force Tisaanah down if Reshayé got out of control. And

the strength of his character made him the only person in the world that I trusted to do it.

He hadn't been there, the day that Nura had forced my mind open and decimated an entire city. And he hadn't been there the day that Reshaye used my hands to murder my family.

And even if he never would say it aloud, I knew that he carried that weight.

There was nothing left to say. So instead, I clapped him on the shoulder and turned back to the sea, watching the Towers grow closer and closer, and feeling their shadows grow colder.



“THIS DOESN'T LOOK RIGHT,” I muttered.

I didn't even realize I was speaking aloud. But beside me, Sammerin agreed, “It doesn't.”

Tisaanah had joined Sammerin and I at the bow. She said nothing, but I heard the uncertainty she didn't voice.

We were close enough now to see the port. But while the Threllian passengers were bustling with excitement, the rest of us were clustered at the front of the ship, watching nervously.

Something was not right.

We were too far away to see people at the docks as more than little smears of color, but I saw many, many gold jackets — the uniforms of the Crown Guard. The Towers, which loomed over us, seemed... darker than normal. Quieter. And while it was typical to see the Capital docks populated with dozens or even hundreds of fishing boats, now it was almost entirely occupied with sleek, polished ships.

“Those are warships,” I said.

Tisaanah gave me a glance of alarm. “Warships?” she echoed.

As if to say, *Already?*

I had to agree. I had been steeling myself for war. But I hadn't thought that it would be waiting for us when we arrived.

We both looked to Nura — Nura, who almost certainly knew more than she was giving up. But even she stared at the approaching shore with hard concern drawn over her face, and a hint of confusion.

“We will not steer into that,” Tisaanah said, shaking her head. “Not with all of these people on board. I will not risk it.”

“We won't dock in that harbor.” I lifted my chin to one of the rowboats at the side of the ship. “We'll go down first and see what all the fuss is about. And then we can lead the ship in.”

No one disagreed. We readied the rowboat and settled inside. Our weapons were handed to us. As my hands closed around my staff and I passed Il'Sahaj to Tisaanah, our eyes met for just a moment. I knew we were thinking the same thing. It was here, with our weapons back in our grasps, that our suspended week of peace came crashing back down to earth.

We hit the water with a splash. The boat held Tisaanah, Sammerin, Nura, Eslyn, and I. Ariadnea remained on the ship, watching us with her eyeless stare as I took up the oars.

We were silent. The docks lapped closer. I peered over my shoulder to see gold-clad figures standing there, gathering as we approached. It was only once we were a few feet from the docks that I realized something was off about their uniforms. They looked *similar* to those of the Crown Guard, but the resemblance wasn't perfect. There was a splash of red on their chests, a sigil that I couldn't make out.

That wasn't right. Crown Guard uniforms bore no house's sigil. Not even the Queen's.

By the time the boat slapped against the wood of the docks, I counted two dozen soldiers, and more were coming. A captain, who wore a red cape spilling over his shoulders, stood at the front, watching us. Two of the soldiers helped pull us up.

No time to appreciate the way a non-moving floor felt beneath my feet. My eyes settled on the captain, and my confusion intensified.

“Hello, Maxantarius,” he said. He gave us a tight-lipped smile. “It’s been some time. I barely believed it when I heard you were back.”

“Elias. It’s been... some time indeed.” When I had known him, he had been in his thirties and one of the finest warriors I’d ever met. I didn’t doubt that he was still just as formidable, though now, grey streaked through the temples of his brown hair and lines pinched his features.

I did not miss the way his gaze moved from me, to Tisaanah, to Sammerin, to Nura, assessing each of us how a soldier assessed a target. Nor did I miss the way his men held the hilts of their swords, the same look of anticipation lurking beneath quiet politeness.

I lifted my gaze, looking past them, to the steps to the city beyond — and bit back a curse.

The city was barricaded.

From the distance of the ship, blocked by the shape of the docks, we hadn’t been able to see it. Wooden structures clung to the steps leading from the docks to the city. Soldiers lined them. That’s why there was no activity here — these docks had been closed.

This was a trap. And by the way that Elias was looking at us, I could guess for whom it had been set.

Elias gave Nura a nod. “Nura. Always a pleasure.”

“Can you explain why you’re cornering us?” Nura replied, coldly.

He chuckled, as if he was not at all surprised by this response.

“It’s not my intention to corner you. And I’d happily explain why we’re here if you would drop your weapons.”

His gaze fell to Tisaanah, examining her with a sort of curiosity that made my knuckles tighten around my staff.

“I’d rather reverse the order of that plan,” I said.

“There’s no need for this to get ugly.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Eslyn’s spear raise, her body shifting like a cat about to pounce on a canary. “We are soldiers of the Queen of Ara,” she said. “You are committing treason by raising your weapons against us. Let us pass.”

Elias’s brow knitted, briefly perplexed. “You are soldiers of Zeryth Aldris,” he said. “Traitor to the rightful king of Ara, Atrick Aviness. And of course, we cannot allow that to stand. Your association with Aldris makes you traitors to Ara, and to the throne. Drop your weapons.”

What?

None of us moved, our confusion palpable.

Atrick Aviness? Aviness was Sesri’s uncle, her father’s brother-in-law. And what would Zeryth have to do with any of this?

“Zeryth?” I repeated.

“*King?*” Tisaanah said. “We are only—”

If I was being optimistic, perhaps there was a chance, in this moment, where we could have resolved this peacefully. But with a single movement, Eslyn shattered that hope.

She leapt forward, her spear poised at Elias’s throat, magic crackling at the edge of its blade.

“Do not threaten us,” she growled.

And just like that, Elias’s stare turned to steel. “*Drop your weapons,*” he repeated.

All of his soldiers raised their swords.

“Do not lift a hand against us,” Nura hissed.

Time slowed. My eyes flicked to the guards behind him, all ready. I knew the way they were looking at us. Targets that had already been marked. They had never intended to let us walk out of here alive.

“I don’t ask anything three times,” Elias said.

It was the truth. By the time the words were out of his mouth, I saw his men already beginning to move. And I didn't need to think before magic tore through my veins, through my staff, the blades raised.

A split second, and I was leaping forward, blocking one strike and then another. A sword crashed against the steel of my weapon, and I found myself locked face to face with Elias, trembling as I held him back.

“Stand down,” he commanded, through gritted teeth.

“You were never going to let us go.”

His mouth twisted into a set grimace. I heard the blows coming before I felt them. I blocked one, but the other landed. My knees were on the ground.

I whirled to see another soldier raising his blade over me—

Only for him to falter, letting out a wordless grunt of pain. He clutched his abdomen. Between his fingers, I could see black rot. And as he staggered back, Tisaanah was behind him, Il'Sahaj bloodied.

“Do not *touch* him,” she ground out, as I was finding my feet again.

No time to thank her. No time to question. No time to breathe.

Any words I could have said disappeared beneath the clash of steel.

CHAPTER THREE



The violence cracked through the air like lightning. The thread of tension tightened, snapped, and then, all at once, it surrounded us.

I held onto control, but only barely. Reshaye thrashed at my muscles, feeding me power, getting me drunk on it. And the anger that had surged in me when I saw those men go after Max... it was all too easy to turn myself over to it.

My magic roared into my veins and my fingertips, flowing into Il'Sahaj.

{This is the welcome they offer us,} Reshaye snarled. {Such traitors. Let us show them who they are betraying. Let us show them what we are capable of.}

Pain slithered along my arm. A sword nicked me, just as I rolled out of its path. Too quickly, another soldier lunged for me, his sword raised — only to lurch to a stop, rigidly. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Sammerin, blade in one hand and the other raised, then closed into a fist as the man crumpled into a heap.

Thank you, I tried to say, but I had no breath for words. Split seconds, and I whirled to block another attack, then another, and then Il'Sahaj was opening ribbons of rot on the flesh of our attackers. I fought my way to Max and pressed my back to his, guarding his weak spots while he guarded mine. He was a beautiful fighter, his movements skilled and graceful. But at the end of each strike he lurched a little, tilting

his blade away from throats and towards limbs, striking to hobble but not to kill.

Reshaye's disapproving hiss slithered through me. *{He is a coward.}*

I clamped down on its reaching fingers as it begged for more and more control, and paid for that distraction with another breathless gasp as a sword struck my thigh.

I stumbled. In that moment of vulnerability, a flash of white leapt in front of me — Nura, slipping into the gap left by my ruined strike, her blades sliding between the ribs of my attacker. Her magic clustered around her like wisps of shadow. Even this brief brush of her presence, so close, sent unnatural fear tearing up my spine.

I blinked, and saw Esmaris's blood-flecked face.

Saw golden hair and bloody fingernails and a room of white and white and—

Reshaye's terror almost overwhelmed me. It took all of my mental strength to force it to the back of my mind. I managed to dodge another strike. Land a blow, one more vicious than I had intended, rot blooming over the chest of a soldier. He staggered close, and I saw that his facial hair was patchy, eyes wide and afraid above acne scarred cheeks. It was a young face.

No time to doubt. No time to question. More soldiers were on me in seconds. With Reshaye's rage in my veins I cut through them one by one, my dark magic mingling with the flames of Max's.

I whirled around, looking through the fighting to the sea, where the ship waited — still carrying all of our innocent passengers. Two of the sleek warships were leaving the docks. Panic spiked through me.

Leave, I wanted to shout, as if my voice could reach across the sea. *Leave as fast as you can!*

A force tackled me, knocking the breath from my lungs. My back slammed against the ground. Elias leaned over me,

gripping my wrists, his armored weight too heavy for me to push off. His eyes searched my face, narrowed with curiosity.

“Who *are* you?”

I answered him by calling more magic to me, focused around my wrists. He let out a grunt, jerking away palms that were now black with decay.

I staggered to my feet, taking in the battle. Max was handling four of them at once, and barely succeeding. Nura was overrun. Sammerin had seven in his magic’s grip, each slowly breaking free of his control. And Eslyn was surrounded by bodies, prying her spear from a corpse, barely avoiding a strike at her back.

There were too many. Too many.

My fingers curled.

{We can end it,} Reshaye whispered.

I didn’t want to.

{We have enough power to end it all.}

No.

{Why?}

No.

And yet, I was still lingering at that final thread of restraint

An explosion rocked the ground.

My knees hit the floor, ears ringing. Someone yanked me up, pulling me back towards the blast. I was already starting to strike when a woman’s voice hissed in my ear, “I’m *helping* you.”

The smoke finally cleared enough for me to realize what was happening.

Syrizen. More than a dozen of them, stepping out of the air as if surging through invisible doors. One grabbed Max and yanked him away from the fighting — others stood with Sammerin, Nura, Eslyn. More still flickered from nothingness.

There was so much blood on the ground that my feet slipped against the pier floorboards.

“Hold on,” the Syrizen said into my ear.

“The ship—” I started.

I didn’t get to finish. The world unraveled, and we were gone.



THE SUDDEN SILENCE WAS DEAFENING. The next thing I knew, my knees were on the ground, wet not with blood but with dew from damp grass, my palms pressed to the earth.

“She fucking burned me!” an aggravated-sounding voice was saying.

“She wouldn’t have if you’d given us a little warning,” Eslyn’s voice grumbled back. “I was two seconds away from taking Vivian’s head off myself.”

I turned my head. Max was beside me, also crouched in the grass. He’d barely scrambled to his hands and knees before he looked to me.

“Are you alright?” he panted, and I nodded.

I pushed myself to my feet and turned to the Syrizen. The one who had saved me, a blond woman with freckled cheeks, was sneering at a dark wound on her wrist. My fault, apparently.

“The ship,” I said. “The refugees were brought back with us—”

“We have the ship,” she said, a little impatiently. “We sent a few Syrizen there, too. They’re bringing it down the coast. Was *this* really necessary? It’s—”

“Why are we here?”

There was something in Max’s voice that made my head whip around. He had risen to his feet, and now stood

completely still, all color drained from his face, eyes locked straight ahead.

For the first time, I noticed our surroundings.

Before us was a mansion. It was beautiful, the exterior crafted of smooth, white stone, covered with gold-plated decorations and sculpture. Gold columns lined its front, cradling a wrought-iron balcony that extended across the whole exterior, breaking only to make way for the massive set of white, arched doors at its entrance. We stood beyond its gates — massive, extravagant things befitting the property that they protected — and a bronze lion stared down at us appraisingly.

Beyond the mansion were mountains. I could barely make out a wall, dotted with large, square buildings, in the distance. Forts, perhaps.

I knew this place.

I knew it, even though I had never been here. Knew it, and couldn't place it.

I felt Reshaye shift through my thoughts, as if unnerved.

{It has been many days,} it whispered, {since I have seen this place.}

A Syrizen stood at the center of the gates. She was wearing a red sash, wrapped around her waist and pinned to her shoulders so it flowed down her back. She was older than most Syrizen, her hair grey-streaked and bound tightly.

“Come,” she said. “The king wishes to see you.”

The king?

“The king?” Sammerin said.

Even he looked unnerved, eyes slightly wide as he stared at the building before us.

Max looked as if he wasn't even breathing.

“*Why are we here?*” he said again.

“The king will explain everything,” the Syrizen said, lightly. “Come.”

“I’m not going in there.”

Max turned his gaze to me, his jaw set and eyes bright with fury, and all at once, the memories flooded over me.

Max’s memories.

Memories of dark-haired siblings running to meet him here, at these gates. Memories of his father’s grin and his mother’s embrace.

Memories of Reshaye’s rage, and their corpses.

All here, in this house.

We were in Korvius. Max’s childhood home.

Anserra tilted her chin towards Max.

“He said that you wouldn’t like being here,” she said. “And to tell you that the sooner you come speak to him, the sooner you can leave.”

Max stared forward with a jaw set so rigid it trembled.

“*He?*” The word rolled out between clenched teeth.

And it was Nura who answered as she stepped past us. “Who else?” she muttered. “Zeryth fucking Aldris.”

CHAPTER FOUR



Once upon a time, I was a princess.

I was just a child then, of course. Too young to know better than to wear that power — that safety — carelessly. Like most children, I saw my circumstances as constant and unmoving. I did not question whether I deserved what I had. I did not question whether I could lose it.

But then, I'd have no reason to think such a thing. I was the Teirness of the House of Obsidian, the heir to the greatest power in the greatest house of all the Fey nations. If there was anything to make one feel untouchable, it would be that. I lived in a beautiful room crafted of polished black stone, high at the top of the cliffs that housed the House of Obsidian, and I'd look out over the most incredible view and take it all for granted.

I lived so far above the ground, and it never even occurred to me to look down.

For ten years, I lived that way — gluttonous on comfort and power and, above all, love. Now, it seemed like a whole other world, a cruel dream invented by a lonely mind. Perhaps it was a dream, because when it ended, it ended fast, like snapping awake to a crack of lightning.

It was all stolen time, anyway. I never should have held that title. My blood was tainted, cursed. Unsuitable.

One night, I went to sleep the Teirness, and I woke up with my father's hands around my throat. Perhaps he should have

killed me that night, for what I am. But instead of taking my life, he took my title.

What had amazed me the most was how simple it had been. By morning my sister occupied all the spaces of my old life, as if one princess could be seamlessly substituted for another, and the world went on as if nothing had changed, all while I was still falling, falling, falling from the heights of my power, with nowhere to look but down.

Once upon a time I was a princess.

But that was a long time ago, and I've been hitting the ground ever since.



MY HEAD SMASHED against the stone floor, teeth tearing the inside of my cheek, vision darkening, sound dampening.

My lips curled into a smile. Thick warmth seeped between my teeth and dribbled down my chin, pooling in purple smears. For another second, the world was slow, silent.

Then the rest of it hit me all at once. The smell of sweat and spilled wine. The raucous shouts of drunken spectators, the shift of the grit beneath my feet. The rough ground under my hands as I pushed myself back up, the cool air across my skin as I whirled —

And the pain, waking in my knuckles as they smashed against a bony, angular face. He staggered. My opponent was larger than me, but skinny and out of shape. I threw myself over him and bared my teeth, my razored incisors sliding from my gums.

He turned away, but not fast enough. I caught the point of his ear. He howled.

I spat his ear onto the ground, followed by a mouthful of his blood. And before he could rise—

“Aefe!”

That voice made me stop short.

I looked over my shoulder just long enough to catch a glimpse of a familiar, deeply unhappy face in the crowd.

That distraction was more than enough for my newly-lopsided friend to stagger to his feet and send my world spinning with one decimating blow to my head.

I hit the floor in a pile of limbs. Everything went grey. When my sight returned, I saw Siobhan, my commander, standing over me, powerful arms crossed over her chest. Dark curls dangled around her face as she shook her head.

“If you’re going to get yourself expelled over a pathetic pit fight,” she said, “you’d better at least win.”

“He insulted the Teirness,” I shot back. Despite my best efforts, I was panting.

“And you took it upon yourself to show him the error of his ways?” She cast a dry, disapproving stare to my opponent, who was mumbling a string of vulgarities while groping around the bloody floor for his ear. “He certainly looks like a man reformed.”

“I—”

“I don’t need excuses. Get up. Wall. Now.” She threw my cloak at me, and I winced as it thumped against my stomach.

“Yes, commander,” I wheezed.

She began to turn, then cast one more look down at me as I struggled to my feet, crimson eyes narrowing. “You insult your vows by using your training in a place like this, you insult the Teirness by using her honor to justify this farce, and you insult yourself by losing.”

My mouth tightened. I drew my eyes down to the ground, suddenly very focused on adjusting my bootlace.

Yes, once upon a time, I was a princess. Not anymore, and that was probably for the best. I was ill-suited for such things. I was too quick-tempered, too honest, too poor of disposition. And the House of Obsidian would be better, safer, stronger, with my taint far away from the throne. I would write my

stories in blood on pub floors rather than in curling script on royal decrees.

But still. Sometimes, in moments like this, I couldn't help but look to the past and wish.

By the time I scraped myself up off the ground, Siobhan was gone.



THE WALL WAS NEARLY a mile beyond the edge of the Obsidian Pales, just far enough away that when you looked back the cliffs loomed in their full, dramatic glory beneath the cresting sun. They reminded me of a star-dusted night. A black so dark that it glowed.

That effect was only enhanced by the silver, running in twisting rivulets along the stones' surfaces. From this distance, they looked like ornate metallic shocks of decoration, invisible until the sun hit them just the right way. It was only up close that one would see that they were actually thousands upon thousands of palm-sized swirls and images carved into the stone, painstakingly poured with silver. Each individual strand consisted of many carvings, and the longest of them spanned hundreds of meters of the cliff face, tangling with threads of other stories. Many of them immortalized epics, tales of deities or heroes, the origins of our kings and queens. But many, too, told tales of everyday mundanity. The birth of a child, the record of a wedding, the tale of a family business as it was handed down through the generations. All on equal footing.

The Obsidian Pales were our home, and all Sidneè Fey looked upon them with swells of admiration. But for me, it was less about pride of my home or my people or the grand achievements of our forefathers. No — it was more about the stories. The stories that we valued so much that we carved them onto our home just as we carved them onto our bodies.

“Aefe.”

Siobhan's voice was so sharp that my horse, Rhee, yanked at the reins in a start, lurching me forward in my seat. I

snapped my head up to meet her deeply unhappy glare.

“What?”

“*What*, she says.” She let out a scoff. “I don’t know what to do with you anymore.”

“I apologize, I—”

“Therein lies the problem, Aefe. ‘*Apologize.*’ Apologies imply that you have accepted some form of responsibility. It implies that you have remorse, and plan to do better. The first time you said it, I believed you. But now?” She regarded me stonily, with the militant, analytical focus of a predator. “I don’t think you are sorry. I think you regret your actions, yes. But I do not think you have any interest in improving, because if you did, you would have done it by now.”

I swallowed a pang of hurt. I sighed and loosened the laces of my leather sleeves, yanking them up to my elbows, and thrust my arm out to her. Waited.

Siobhan looked at it with pinched lips.

“Put that away,” she said, at last. “You don’t have any room for more anyway.”

“But I—”

“You don’t. Put it away.”

I hesitated, then lowered my arm.

She wasn’t entirely right, but she was close. Every inch of my forearm was marked, a solid wall of black X’s, scars on top of tattoos. One X for every infraction, for every shame, symbolizing another piece of my skin that could not be occupied by tales of heroics.

That was, after all, the greatest punishment among the Sidnee: the erasure of a story, or worse, the potential for one.

Sometimes I looked down at my arm and the sight of it hit me like a physical blow. All of those little misdeeds had built up, every instance of emotional impulse or lost temper. All my desperate desire to be a part of a tale worth telling only ended up chipping away at it, in the end.

Jaw tight, I laced up my sleeve, hiding X's beneath black leather.

"But soon, Aefe, these matters will be beyond my control," Siobhan said, quietly. "The Blades cannot keep someone among their ranks who is so unpredictable. It is dishonorable, and it is dangerous."

A spike of terror rose in my chest. I whirled to her, eyes wide. "I cannot be expelled, Siobhan."

"*Commander,*" she corrected, sharply. "Address me properly."

Her rebuke hung in the air, heavy and sharp, as I struggled to compose myself enough to speak. I could feel Siobhan's stare, even though I couldn't bring myself to meet it. Of the Blades' commanders, she was not the flashiest, the most accomplished, the most dangerous. But she was fair and steady, and that made her the most intimidating. If she judged you ill, that judgement was not based in the fickle throes of passion or pride, but earned through the careful weighing of a balanced scale. There were other Commanders who disliked me, and in my anger I could tell myself that they held some personal slight against me. But Siobhan? If Siobhan decided that I was worthless, the only possible reason would be that it was simply the truth. Perhaps this was why I so sought her friendship and her respect — because I knew it was worth something.

Siobhan's gaze softened. "There is a part of me that wonders if perhaps you have no interest in being a Blade."

"Of course I do," I shot back. "I need to be."

"Why?"

"No one is more important to the royal family than the Blades," I said. "No one serves them more loyally. No one better deserves their trust."

I could have sworn that I caught a glimpse of pity in Siobhan's eyes. "You do not need to *serve* the royal family, Aefe. You are one of them."

"We both know that is not true."

“It is true. No matter what your father says.”

Mathira. I didn’t understand why it hurt, to hear it said as if it was so simple. I was torn in two, one half touched that she saw it that way, and the other wanting to rise to my father’s defense. It was not his fault, after all, that I was unsuitable for a throne.

But maybe there was a fragment of truth in her words. Maybe I had no interest in being a Blade, and all I wanted was a way to prove myself. Like I was a cat laying dead rats at my father’s feet: *Look at what I brought you. Do you love me yet?*

I pushed the thought away.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “I cannot lose my place. Tell me what I need to do to keep it.”

“It’s not my responsibility to save you from your bad decisions. And even if it was—”

But then, something caught my attention. My eyes snapped towards the forest, to the wall of dense green before us.

“—I cannot force you to reform, or tell you how to do it.”

“Sh,” I whispered.

“You can’t shut this out, Aefe—”

“Commander, *listen.*”

My brow furrowed, ears straining.

And there it was again: a sound I hadn’t been sure I heard. A low, gargling voice, far enough away that the forest nearly swallowed it. The faintest sounds of movement. Siobhan and I exchanged a glance, our hands falling to the hilt of our swords.

We did not need to speak. Slowly, we slid from our horses. When we pushed through the thicket, every footfall was carefully chosen to be utterly soundless.

The noise grew louder. It was, unmistakably, a voice. Saying what? I couldn’t string the sounds into words.

“*Suh-tah-nah...gah...Suh...*”

Another two steps.

All at once, I realized.

“*Satanaga*,” I breathed. “They’re claiming *satanaga*.”

Satanaga, a claim of help, of sanctuary, mutually understood and accepted between all Houses... and called upon only in the most dire of tragedies.

Siobhan’s eyes widened. She whirled around, caution discarded in favor of urgency. “Speak!” she bellowed. “We announce ourselves! We are Sidnee Blades! We hear your claim!”

She leveled one mighty strike through the blanket of thicket and we pushed through to a clearing of swamplands. And I drew in a ragged gasp.

Laid out before us were bodies.

A dozen of them, if I had to guess, or maybe more — sprawled out in the swamplands in a macabre, bloody trail. Male, female, a few children. None moved, except for the one closest, a copper-haired male. One hand was outstretched, as if trying to claw himself farther. The other clamped around his middle, covered in violet blood.

His face lifted, just barely enough to meet our horrified stares.

“*Satanaga*,” he whispered.

“*Mathira*, are they dead?”

The words flew from my lips before I could stop them. I dropped to the man’s side, kneeling beside him while he gazed up at me with glazed-over eyes.

He shook his head, weak but desperate.

“Get back to the Pales,” Siobhan barked. “Go to the base, bring help. *Now*. If these people aren’t dead yet, they will be soon if no one intervenes.”

She was already knee-deep in water, yanking bodies out of it. I began to stand, but shaking fingers clutched at my sleeve. I looked down to see the auburn-haired male, clearly fighting to stay conscious.

“Take— me—”

“I’ll come back,” I said.

“*Please,*” he rasped. “They must... *see.*”

Is that really what he thought? That the people of the House of Obsidian were so cold, so heartless, that we would not help them unless we saw his entrails with our own eyes?

I could not bring myself to leave him behind.

So I straightened, grabbed the little tube of steel that hung around my throat, and whistled for Rhee. When she galloped through the brush, I — as gently as I could manage — lifted him out of the dripping swamp. He was trembling so violently that he nearly slipped from my grasp, the hot warmth of his blood soaking through my clothes. There was so, so much of it.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, as I hoisted him onto Rhee’s back while he let out a little, gurgling groan. When I climbed up after him and urged Rhee into the fastest gallop she could manage, I tried to press my body against his to keep him as stable as possible.

We flew through the trees. I peered down and noticed the distinctive cut of his jacket, a high collar finished with bronze thread and a triangle sigil at the back of his neck.

The House of Stone. A small but respected House, and Obsidian’s closest neighbor, though it still sat miles away. My brow furrowed.

Did they *drag* themselves here?

“Who did this?” I whispered. We broke through the forest. The wall came into view, and beyond it, the sleek darkness of the Pales. “What happened?”

I did not expect an answer. My companion was now slack against Rhee’s neck, his blood soaking all three of us. But his face turned, just enough for me to see the edge of his profile, a sliver of green iris.

“Humans,” he ground out.

Humans?!

As far as I knew, *none* of the Houses had had any contact with humans in many hundreds of years. And compared to Fey, humans were so weak. I counted nearly a dozen gutted Fey in those swamps.

That couldn't be.

"Later," I said. "We'll talk about it later."

Words I couldn't understand tumbled from the Fey's mouth.

I leaned closer. We flew through the gates, falling into the familiar, welcoming shadow of the Pales.

"What?"

"I am thirteenth," he mumbled. "For the crown."

Then he went slack, falling utterly silent.

CHAPTER FIVE



“I’m so glad to see you’ve made it here safely, despite the...excitement. Apparently you didn’t receive our letters at sea. Sit. Eat. You must be hungry.”

Zeryth stood at the head of the table and gestured down its length. Overflowing platters of food were artfully arranged down the center, chicken and fish, rice and breads, diced fruits with wet, crimson meat glistening beneath the candlelight. The table could have easily seated thirty, but the five of us were clustered at one end. Near the other, Tare, Sesri’s Valtain advisor, sat with his eyes downcast. And at the head, Zeryth stood and smiled at us with easy charm.

Zeryth. Zeryth was there, in the same spot my father used to sit, in the main dining room of my family home.

Zeryth Aldris, wearing a *crown* on his head.

I was so furious I could barely speak.

“Why are we here?” I demanded.

But my words were sliced in two by the sound of splitting air. Three silver blurs whizzed past my ear, so fast I felt my hair rustle.

“You *snake*,” Nura spat.

In a split second, Zeryth was leaning against the table, rubbing his neck and peering over his shoulder — at the three throwing knives now embedded in the wallpaper behind him.

Beside me, Nura stood rigid, her eyes icy with rage.

“Welcome back, my dearest Second,” Zeryth said, sweetly.

“You have no shame.”

“As opposed to... who, you? Who didn’t wait thirty seconds before your first assassination attempt?”

She missed on purpose. I wished she hadn’t. Words still escaped me. That was rare.

“You have many things to explain, Zeryth,” Tisaanah said, quietly but with a deadly edge to her voice, and Zeryth straightened as he smiled at us.

“I do indeed. Sit down, and we’ll talk.”

Sit down. Funny, how out of everything, those two words, were the thing that made a bitter laugh slip between my teeth.

Zeryth’s smile turned to ice.

“Is something amusing?”

“Zeryth Aldris just invited me for dinner in my *own Ascended-damned childhood home*, with a crown perched on his head. Amusing is not the term I’d use.” I didn’t realize I was leaning forward until I felt my palms pressed against the mahogany of the table. Beneath my left thumb, I could feel a scratch in the surface. Variaslus had made that mark, some fifteen years ago, when scratching away at too-thin parchment with the nib of his pen.

And now Zeryth is sitting there, telling *me* to sit down.

“Where is Sesri?” Sammerin asked.

“Why are we *here*?” I added. Because still, despite everything, it was the one question I kept coming back to.

But I wasn’t quite expecting the sheer lack of hesitation, the utter nonchalance, as Zeryth said, “Queen Sesri is dead.” He took a bite of steak, chewed loudly. “Eat. Don’t make all of this go to waste.”

We all sat there in stunned silence. Every set of eyes looked to Tare, who seemed to sink into his chair, staring down at his empty plate, expressionless.

“Horseback riding accident,” Zeryth added. “It was horrible.”

“Accident,” Sammerin repeated, dryly.

Zeryth cocked an eyebrow, then put down his fork and continued. “Sesri placed a great deal of trust in the Orders. Tare, after all, was her most trusted advisor.” Zeryth gestured to the Valtain beside him, though Tare’s gaze remained dutifully lowered. “Obviously, Sesri had no heirs and likely would not for a very long time, considering her age. So, prior to her death she enacted a decree entrusting the Crown to the Arch Commandant as regent, in the event of her death. Thus...”

Zeryth reached into his breast pocket and produced a sheet of folded up parchment paper. He smoothed it out on the table, then slid it towards us. I craned my neck to read it.

By Decree of Queen Sesri, first of her name, she of no successor, I hereby declare that in the untimely event of my death...

I skimmed through the rest, several paragraphs of winding verbiage. Until I got to the end — the important part:

...crown shall pass to the Arch Commandant of the Order of Midnight and the Order of Daybreak, as one who is most committed to Ara and most qualified for the role.

And there, beneath it, was Sesri’s signature.

“But of course...” Without looking up, I could hear the smug, sarcastic smile in Zeryth’s voice. “None of this is a surprise to my dear Second. She didn’t fill you in?”

The realization fell over me like a cold shadow.

All this for what? For a thirteen-year-old’s throne? I’d asked that to Nura merely weeks ago, when we were traveling to Threll. Now, it all clicked together. They — Zeryth, *and* Nura — had been using Sesri. Using her to replace Lords with ones more favorable to their cause. Using her to make herself so horrifically unpopular that any alternative would be welcomed with open arms.

Nura wasn't flinging knives at Zeryth because he'd stolen a crown. She was flinging knives at him because he did it *without her*.

My head snapped up. Tisaanah was giving Nura a piercing stare, but Nura's eyes still looked at nothing but Zeryth, any reaction hidden beneath layers of ice.

"You still haven't answered," I ground out, "Why are we h—"

"If you'd have some patience, Maxantarius, you would hear me explain that we are *here* because there is still a great deal of work to do. Is no one going to eat? No?" He let out a sigh and stood, then grabbed a rolled up piece of parchment from the sideboard behind him, pushed his place setting aside with a dramatic flourish, and unrolled the fabric down the table. It was a map of Ara. Red paint marked various cities across it, and the largest red circle of all was around the Capital.

"As you all have seen," Zeryth said, "Sesri declared the Arch Commandant — *me* — to be the rightful heir to the Crown in the event of her death. But as one might expect, many of Sesri's cousins are not especially eager to accept the truth of the matter. Particularly Atrick Aviness. I came north shortly after the announcement to solidify my position with the Ryvenai nobles and gather loyal troops." His gaze flicked to me. "We all know that Korvius, of course, is the military center of the north. Your Aunt Lysara was all too willing to host the new king, especially once she learned that you're an ally."

"Lysara," I repeated.

Of-fucking-course. I wouldn't put it past my miserable aunt to host Zeryth. Still, there was a certain... was it disappointment? For a second, there had just been a part of me that was wondering—

"Surely you didn't think Brayan had invited me," Zeryth said.

No. It was a ridiculous thought. “He wouldn’t have done that.”

Zeryth’s nose wrinkled. “No. He wouldn’t.”

As far as I knew, my elder brother had been gone from Ara for the better part of ten years. All too eager to leave the estate in the care of our aunt and go wander Besrith. Not that I could blame him.

“Anyway.” Zeryth cleared his throat, voice growing sour. “I admit it was a mistake to leave the Palace so soon. I underestimated the loyalty some in the Capital would have towards the royal bloodline. Aviness’s forces took control of the Palace while I was gone. Merely a stumbling block, of course. Given our superior resources.”

His gaze fell to Tisaanah, and I ground my teeth. She stared back at him with a cold glare.

“You knew what would meet us at the Mikov Estate,” she said, quietly. “You had fought with Ahzeen Mikov. You knew he was angry at the Orders. You knew that party invitation was a trap. And you told us none of it. Were you hoping that some of us would not make it back alive? Or was it just something to keep us busy, while you came to Ara to steal a crown?”

“I took the invitation at face value. Besides, I had great faith in your abilities. Rightfully, it seems. I heard some incredible tales of what happened that night.” His eyes flicked to me. “Very interesting things, actually.”

“And after all that,” Tisaanah said, “you expect us to go take the Capital, and give you your stolen throne.”

I could practically see the gears turning in her head.

“I object to that description,” Zeryth said, brushing the crown on his brow. It seemed to sit oddly on his head, like he wasn’t fully comfortable wearing it. “But yes. Of course we are to put down the rebels challenging the rightful line of succession.”

“Rebels?” Nura snorted. “You make it sound like we’re talking about a bunch of ragged militiamen. Atrick Aviness has one of the best armies in Ara, perhaps even the world. And

I see at least five other old-blood houses on that map of yours.”

She was right. Some of the most oldest, most powerful districts in Ara were among those marked in red. It was no surprise to me that these would be the families to object most strongly to Zeryth’s reign. For some, the loss of a royal bloodline meant the loss of their own claim to power. But even beyond that, many would oppose on principle alone. Zeryth had gained great power within the Orders, yes, but he had come from nothing. For Aran nobility, a throne held by a nameless bastard would be seen as a threat to their very way of life.

“If you’re suggesting that we take the Capital back now,” I said, “then we’re looking at a bloodbath, no matter... how much power we have.” I did not miss the pleasure in Zeryth’s stare on Tisaanah. Or on me.

“And how would you do it?”

I was pointedly silent. I had an answer, of course. But I wasn’t about to *advise* Zeryth Aldris on the best way to conquer Ara.

Nura spoke instead.

“If the Capital is held by Aviness’s army alone, then *maybe* you’d have a chance at taking it back easily. But that would mean taking, at the very least, the Gridot, Lishan, Varnille, and Archerath families out of his ally pool.” She gestured to five cities on the map. “They have strong armies and deeper connections within the old blood. Without them, Aviness’s forces fall apart.”

Zeryth nodded. “I think so, too. And so, that will be our approach. Tisaanah will help me topple Varnille and Archerath from power. And you, Max, will take Gridot, Lishan, and a few other of these little strongholds to the west.”

Tisaanah and I exchanged a quick glance.

“Absolutely not,” I said.

“If you gain these people as your allies,” Tisaanah said, “you will be stronger than if you simply conquer them. You

absorb their strength instead of destroying it.”

I could tell that even Tisaanah understood what she was suggesting was unrealistic. But I knew Ara’s upper class well enough to know that it was more than unrealistic — it was outright lunacy. These families? They would sacrifice their own lives and thousands of their soldiers’ before they would bend the knee to someone like Zeryth.

He gave us a look that said he knew it, too. An ugly realization settled over me. After everything, this was what it was all for. The Orders’ manipulations. Tisaanah’s Blood Pact. This was the war she would fight. The servitude he would demand. She would kill in Zeryth’s name.

And I wasn’t about to leave her side. Not for a minute.

“I’m here to keep Reshaye under control,” I said. “That’s all. I’m not about to tramp across the damned country collecting lordships for you.”

“Let’s drop the pretenses. Everyone in this room knows why you’re here. And it’s not because of Reshaye.” He leaned forward, his smirk fading into something sharper, a look that made my blood boil. “I’m not too prideful to say that you’re a great fighter, Maxantarius, and a phenomenal Wielder. Any army would be honored to have you on their front, mine included. *But.*” His lip curled. “If you step a single hair out of line. If you undermine me. If you so much as *look* at me in a way I disapprove of, I will make these next five years the worst ones of Tisaanah’s life. And I do know the scale of all that implies, considering her past.”

Beside me, I heard Tisaanah let out a slow breath through her teeth.

My fury ran so hot it scalded the insides of my veins. And for a moment, I genuinely considered the possibility of killing him — right here, right now. I could take him. And was there anyone in this room who would stop me?

Zeryth’s gaze sparkled, in that particular way that I’d come to learn meant he knew exactly what I was thinking.

“There’s one more thing I’d like to show you.” He reached down and unbuttoned the wrist of his jacket, then wrenched the sleeve up to his elbow. There, on his forearm, was a tattoo. I did not recognize the design — similar to a Stratagram, but more twisted and chaotic, the lines twining through the circle’s center and growing so dense that individual shapes were indistinguishable. Circling its edge were tiny, jagged figures that looked as if they could be words, though not in any language I’d ever seen before. The black ink bled angry, mottled purple into Zeryth’s albino skin.

“Nice,” I said, flatly. “Very pretty, Zeryth. Looks infected, though.”

“This isn’t just a tattoo,” he said. “It’s a spell. It combined my blood, and Tisaanah’s. And it binds her life to mine. If I die, so does she.”

My heart stopped beating. My gaze shot to Tisaanah, just long enough to see her eyes go wide.

“Impossible,” I barked.

Zeryth smiled as he rolled down his sleeve. “Nothing is impossible, Max. The people in this room should know that better than anyone, by now.”

Impossible, a part of me still insisted — the part of me that wanted so desperately to be right. *It can’t be done. Impossible.*

Tisaanah moved so silently I didn’t realize that she had stepped forward until she was leaning past me, pressing her palms on the table as she stretched towards Zeryth. Her face was utterly calm, and yet, her eyes were so bright, like something inside of her had lit on fire.

“I signed your pact,” she said, her voice quiet and sharp. “I will fight your war. I have no choice in this. But know that I’ve defeated more powerful men than you, Zeryth, and in the end their desire for power only made that easier.”

“It’s nothing personal,” Zeryth said. “I’m realistic about the risks I face. I’m protecting myself. Don’t pretend any of you would be doing anything different, if you stood in my place.”

I wouldn't. And that's why I would never stand where he stood.

His fingers brushed the crown, absentmindedly, and a flicker of thoughtful uncertainty crossed his face.

But then that smile was back, easy and careless. "Do you know what power is?" he said, leaning back in his chair. "Power is sitting here alone in a room with four people who want to kill me, and knowing I'll walk out alive."

CHAPTER SIX

TISAANAH



I remembered very little about my life in Nyzerene before it fell. I was so young when we fled, my lost country reduced to fragmented sensations burned into my memory. Sometimes, moments that I didn't realize I remembered would come roaring back at the most unexpected times. Now, as Max, Sammerin, and I strode through the hallways of a beautiful house that I had never been to before and yet recognized more clearly than my own homeland — as Reshaye roiled and hissed in the back of my mind, awakened by the sheer force of my anger — one of those lost images bloomed to life.

My father had kept a little, useless metal contraption on his desk, a series of interlocking brass rings that went on in perpetual motion. The night the capital of Nyzerene was conquered, I had been standing in his study, my fingers clutching the edge of the desk, watching those rings swing, swing, swing, the only thing in my world that remained a certainty.

That was what my mind felt like, now. Something that needed to keep whirring away, because if it stopped, too much would shatter.

My fists were curled at my sides, fingernails biting my palms.

Zeryth's words echoed in my ears.

If I die, so does she.

How casually he said it. How easily my life became a piece in his game, something to be played with and bartered

away, something that ceased having value the minute it was no longer useful to him.

{It has always been that way,} Reshaye whispered. It reached for a memory — Esmaris's face as he told me, *You are worth one thousand gold.*

Max walked fast, his eyes straight ahead, as if by not looking he could avoid his surroundings. Not that I could blame him. I could see the ghosts of his family out of the corners of my eyes, edges of Reshaye's frayed memories catching on every doorway or hallway or painting we passed. And still, the beauty of it was undeniable — mind-boggling, even, to see it firsthand for the first time. Every inch of the interior displayed the same delicate, elegant craftsmanship on the outside. Brass, carved columns separated the hallways from the ballroom below, the floors composed of complex mosaics, the doorways immaculately crafted from mahogany. Art adorned all of the walls, paintings that I could only catch glimpses of as we walked.

His hand found mine and held tight, as if he was afraid I would be pried away.

Without hesitating, he led us down a spiral staircase, then through a stunning atrium filled with light flooding in from a glass ceiling until we reached a set of double doors, which he barreled through immediately.

A wall of cool, moist air hit me. The sky was overcast, darker now than it had been when we arrived. Max's pace slowed slightly. We were in a garden, crossing a large stone patio with pathways shooting off. Mountains loomed over us. I could see what looked like military forts dotting the horizon, less than a mile away. There was more activity out here than I expected. Uniformed soldiers clustered across the landscape, and many more still were traveling to the bases in the distance.

"Zeryth said he came here to gather loyal troops," Sammerin muttered. "I suppose that was accurate."

Max swore beneath his breath. His stride did not break. Heads turned as we passed, whispers rising. *Is that Maxantarius Farlione? I didn't believe he'd really...*

“Now what?” Max finally ground out, so low I almost didn’t hear him.

Now what? That was the wrong question to ask. I knew exactly what would happen next. I would fulfill the pact I made to the Orders. I would fight Zeryth’s war, even though he betrayed me, even though he now used my life itself to manipulate the people I loved most. Even though I hated him almost as much as I had hated the Mikovs.

He would do all of that to me, and I would still hand him everything he’d ever wanted.

But I didn’t get the chance to voice this, because suddenly, Max stopped short. His gaze snapped to one of the groups of soldiers in the distance, brow furrowed, a look on his face that made my heart still.

“What is it?” Sammerin asked, just as Max began striding across the path.

“*Moth!*” he bellowed.

Moth?!

I followed Max’s gaze, and there he was, standing with a cluster of young men in deep green jackets. At the sound of Max’s voice, Moth whirled around so fast that his blond curls went flying, his face lighting up. He gleefully abandoned his conversation and half-ran to meet us, grinning.

“You’re back! They said you’d come here, but I didn’t think it would be so soon. So did you do it? Did you kill the slavers?”

“Moth,” Sammerin said, calmly, but in a tight voice that betrayed something deeper. “Why are you—”

“What are you doing here?” Max barked. “What the hell are you wearing?”

Max was not listening to Moth. He wasn’t even looking at his face. He was looking down — down at Moth’s jacket. At the sun emblem at the lapel, and the embroidered name, and those familiar brass buttons.

My confusion soured to dread. That was a military uniform.

Moth's glee faded. "Well...you were all gone, and Helene wasn't a very good teacher, and two weeks ago they offered us a *lot* of money to..."

"You enlisted," Sammerin murmured.

"What. The *hell*. Were you thinking?" Max's voice began quiet, then slowly rose. "Sammerin leaves you alone for *two weeks* and you run off and join the military?"

Moth was the only person I'd met in Ara who had such little control over his emotions that I still felt every ripple, and now, I tasted excitement turn to hurt. "I— I just thought— you and Sammerin were both members, so— I thought—"

"You *weren't thinking*. This was a stupid decision, Moth. *Reckless.*"

"I— I just—"

"You just *what?*"

"Max," I murmured, putting my hand on his arm, and he let out a breath through his teeth.

Moth's eyes darted between us, landing on Sammerin.

"I thought you'd be glad," he said in a small voice, and Sammerin looked as if someone had actually struck him. I felt it, too.

"Why would you think that?" Sammerin said, and Max scoffed.

"*Glad*. No, Moth. We just thought better of you than to—"

"Max." My hand closed around his wrist, and his gaze snapped to me. "*Enough.*"

For a brief moment, he just looked at me, and I could see all of the invisible words neither of us could tackle hanging there in that split second of connection. Then he pulled from my grasp, turned away, and began striding down the path.

Moth looked as if he were actively holding back tears.

“I’m sorry,” he said, quietly, as if it were the only thing he could think to say — even though he didn’t know what he was apologizing for.

But I did. I understood exactly.

“It’s not about you, Moth,” I said. I glanced back at the boy, took in the sight of him — round-faced, barely a teenager, still years away from so much as peach stubble. Then my gaze met Sammerin’s, and I knew we were thinking the same thing.

I felt vaguely ill, nausea warring with anger. Not at Moth, but at everything that led him here.

He was just a child.

And now what? What was this world going to do to him?

What is it going to do to all of us? a smaller voice whispered, in the back of my mind.

“It’s not about you,” I said, again, and went after Max.



I REJOINED Max far behind the house. He had taken a sharp turn away from the main paths, veering to a secluded expanse of overgrown grass at the edge of the grounds. It was getting dark, and mist clung to the air, rendering the sky grey and flattening the distant mountains to silhouettes. Deep green forest spread out before us, and the house loomed behind.

Max stopped walking abruptly, head bowed, hands stuffed in his pockets, facing the tree line. We stood there together in silence.

“They will not send him out there,” I said at last, quietly. “Will they?”

“I don’t know. They took him. If they’re desperate...” He cleared his throat. “Last time, some of those soldiers were only fourteen, thirteen, near the end. Children.”

I did not miss the way his head twitched towards the house, as if he was going to look over his shoulder and thought

better of it. The soldiers were not the only children claimed by the war.

A blink, and his memories — Reshaye’s memories — flooded me. Blood and fire and *anger*, and the lives of all those Farlione children discarded in one terrible night like crushed flower petals.

I reached for his hand, and his fingers twined around mine with unexpected force, as if he were a sinking boat and I was the only thing tethering him to the shore.

Or perhaps, the opposite.

“And this is what it was all for,” I muttered. “Zeryth’s throne.”

“I should have seen it happening.” He closed his eyes. “But of course I didn’t. I didn’t see any of it until it was too damned late.”

I knew he was talking about more than the crown. More than the war. More than Zeryth. He was talking about me, too. Reshaye stirred at the back of my thoughts. I shuddered.

“It’s not possible,” he said. “One life can’t be bound to another like that. He’s bluffing.”

I was silent.

I wouldn’t put it past Zeryth to manipulate us with a lie. And yet, when I thought of the strangeness of what he had showed us, the odd magic I felt in the air when he revealed it... I suspected it was not so simple. And I suspected Max knew that, too, and didn’t want to admit it.

“There must be a way to get out of your contract,” Max said. “I’ve heard rumors that there are ways to break a Blood Pact. If I talk to the right people, maybe—“

“Break it?”

“Of course. Do you want to be the one to put Zeryth on a throne?”

No. The answer rang out in my head, firmly. *No, I don’t.*

But out loud I said, “I don’t. But I will.”

Max's gaze snapped to me. The betrayal in it gutted me. "That man doesn't deserve to draw breath."

"It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't *matter*?"

"You think I do not hate him, too? Of course I do. He's—he made me—"

I couldn't even figure out how to finish that statement. What words were there? He had left me in slavery once, and now he dragged me back into it. He took my desperate desire to save the helpless and used it to make me a weapon of death. Now he tried to control my very life, and use it to control others. It made me so angry that I couldn't breathe.

But then, the image of the refugees on the boat flashed through my mind. They way they looked at me — as if I was their last hope.

"But I made that pact for a reason," I choked out. "That has not changed. I fight his war, so that I can go fight mine."

"His war for what? For his ego?"

"When I spilled my blood on that contract, I thought it was going to be for Sesri's ego. Is there a difference?"

Max gave me a look that said he thought there was a world of difference.

"Zeryth is the difference. *Reshaye* is the difference."

"I controlled it," I said. "I can do it again. I can use that power to make this war less bloody than it would be without it."

"You sound like Nura."

The words cut me open. I yanked my hand away from his, even though I could already see the regret spilling over his face.

"What do you want me to say to you?" I shot back. "Do you want me to tell you that I want to walk away from all of this? I do, Max. Of course I do. But there are so many people who cannot walk away. They are still there, suffering. Girls

like me. You hate Zeryth for leaving me there, but you're asking me to do the same thing."

Something flickered in his expression. "That isn't the same."

"Why? Because they aren't standing in front of you? Because you don't love them the way you love me? Just because you don't see it doesn't mean it isn't happening, and they are just as loved, just as important. It is a *privilege* to do *nothing*, Max. So many people do not have that gift."

He looked at me, jaw tight, regret and sadness and anger all mingling in his eyes.

"No war can be fought with clean hands," he said. "Not even the ones waged for the right reasons. Not even the ones you win."

I knew he was right. In the Threllian wars, I had lost so many of my own people to the cost of victory.

But what choice did I have?

I stepped closer and placed my hands on either side of his face.

"You don't have to fight this fight," I whispered. "You have already given so much."

Max's forehead pressed against mine, his body so close I could feel its warmth surrounding me. And when he spoke again, all that anger was gone, replaced only with weary resignation.

"That was never an option, Tisaanah," he murmured, and pulled me into an embrace.

It felt like falling. One moment, I was clinging to my plans and composure, and the next, I was lost in him. His scent of lilacs and ash surrounded me. I buried my face against his neck, inhaling it. I could feel the slight shudder in his breathing as he struggled to keep from unraveling.

I pulled away just enough to turn my face, lips parted even though I didn't know what would come out. But before I could speak, he kissed me — gave me the kind of kiss that

communicated everything that we couldn't put into words. For precious seconds, nothing mattered except for this, the cadence of our shared breath, the movement of his lips, the brush of his tongue.

Nothing mattered except that we were alive, and here, and together.

We parted but stayed close, his forehead against mine.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'm just...being here is..."

He sounded as if he could barely get out those fractured words. My chest ached. It had been impossible to miss the change in him the minute we stepped through those doors — a raw, tangible pain, like he was walking over razor blades.

"We will not let it be like last time," I whispered. "We will find a way."

I told myself I could make it true. I was grateful that he didn't call out my uncertainty, even though I know he heard it.

Instead, he pressed a kiss to my jaw and said, quietly, "I want to believe you."

CHAPTER SEVEN



“**W**hat he says cannot be true,” the king said.

“All the survivors say the same thing, my Lord,” Siobhan said. She knelt at my father’s feet, at the bottom of glassy black steps that rose up to his place upon the dais, sleek and dark beneath an arch of polished stone.

He, my mother, and my sister all stood there, crowns adorning each of their brows. My father’s was Nightglass upon a head of long, ashen brown hair. My mother’s, spires of twisted silver against pale skin and sleek locks of red-black — near identical to my own. Actually, it was uncanny, the extent to which I resembled my mother. A less beautiful version of her, to be fair. My skin was a little ruddier, my mouth a little broader, my eyes bigger and curved down in a way that my mother used to always joke made me look as if I was perpetually sad.

Used to joke. It had been a long time since my mother had joked about anything. Now she sat upon her throne, gazing off into the middle distance, that lovely face offering no sign that she had heard anything that we had told her.

There was a time — a time I barely remembered — when my mother was intelligent and humorous and talkative. Now she was only beautiful, and whatever lay beneath had been eaten away like moth-bitten silk. And yet, she was captivating, so graceful in a way I never would be.

My sister, though, embodied that grace impeccably. She had my mother’s bearing, even if her appearance was much

more my father's, richer skin and fairer hair, and those dark eyes like pools of night. Orscheid sat beside my mother, hands delicately folded over her velvet-adorned lap, a twist of silver across her forehead.

She had given me a faint smile when I strode into the room with Siobhan, though now her gaze was lowered with concern.

My father frowned, still visibly skeptical.

"I don't see how humans could have done this," he said.

Siobhan bowed her head.

"We sent six Blades to the House of Stone. They found many bodies, Teirna. They counted sixty before they stopped trying to account for the dead, but understand that was only a small fraction of the full loss of life. There may be other survivors, but our scouts found none in Atecco."

"None in Atecco?" Orscheid whispered. It was easy to tell that she was scared — she had the same look that she did when we were children, and I, ever the obnoxious older sister, would terrify her with some ghost story or monster tale. "The entire city, and... none?"

"None that we could find."

That sentence hung in the air for several long seconds.

"And how many survivors do we now have in our infirmaries?" my father asked.

"Nineteen," I said.

His gaze slipped to me.

"Are any of them able to speak to us?" he asked.

Stupid, how I still found myself shriveling under my father's stare. "Not currently," I said. "None of them are conscious right now. The one that I rode with was the one who told us it was the humans. But he didn't manage to say much more."

"So I heard," my father said, grimly.

Surely everyone had, by now. My companion had been only barely aware enough to garble some frantic, meaningless words at the cluster of Sidnee who met us at the entrance to the Pales, clutch at one shocked woman's shoulder, and then keel over.

I glanced down at my sleeve. A smear of his purple blood still stained it.

"There was one other thing," I said. "He told me that he was thirteenth in line for the Stone Crown. If Atecco has fallen and there are no other survivors, then that would mean..."

A choked, wordless sound echoed through the room. My mother's fingertips were pressed to her lips, dismay wrought over her face. It was the sort of innocent dismay that looked like it belonged to a small child.

"All alone..." she whispered, so quietly that it seemed as if she didn't mean to speak aloud, but before she could say more my father hushed her and wrapped her hand in his. He looked down at their intertwined hands, thinking.

"Keep close watch on the survivors and tell me as soon as any of them awaken," he said. "Especially him. I will speak to them immediately. I do not wish to imagine what they have already endured."



I WAS EXHAUSTED. After leaving my parents, I'd begun to head towards my room only for Siobhan to stop me.

"Surely you wouldn't be so foolish as to think you're done."

"Siobhan, I just finished fishing a dozen bodies out of the swamps."

"You also spat in the face of your vows less than..." She squinted up at one of the timepieces. "...Four hours ago. The Wall is more than well attended now, considering recent events. But all of that guard overstaffing does mean that weapon cleanings have been neglected."

Any other Commander, and perhaps I might have argued. But Siobhan? It would be like talking to stone. And as I loosed an exasperated sigh and went on my way to the armories, I couldn't help but glance down at my marked-up forearm and note the patches of remaining clean skin. If I had to choose, I would take cleaning duty over another X.

So, I mustered the last of my energy and dragged myself back to the Blades' Heart, located deep within the Pales, so far into the darkness that it felt like you had to walk through the night sky to get there.

The House of Obsidian was built entirely within the cliffs of the Pales, hallways burrowing into an endless expanse of glassy black stone. Twinkling silver lights were carved into the walls, adorning the ceilings in scattered illumination. Nestled within our cliffs were entire structures all on their own, everything from homes to shops to government buildings. Individually designed, yes, but all carved from the same stone — all connected to the same heart.

When I was a child, and still the Teirness, I used to visit other houses on diplomatic visits with my parents. I had marveled at the freestanding buildings, towering statehouses and ornate palaces, all of which were clearly great sources of pride. But to me, they had all seemed so vulnerable, like paper sculptures left to stand in the rain. They were just... *out there*, beneath the sky and rain and wind? So separate from each other? It was unthinkable to me, then. When I was young and afraid at night, I used to press my palm to the wall and I'd swear I could feel the heartbeats of a thousand other people, the heartbeats of all the Sidnee who lived within these walls, and the heartbeat of the Pales themselves. When I did the same in my rooms in those other Houses, I felt nothing but cold brick.

That night, all I could think of were those paper palaces. The House of Stone was one of the places I'd visited all those years ago. And now those lonely buildings were left to crumble.

It was nearly midnight once I finished cleaning, but I couldn't imagine going back to my chambers and lying there

alone in the darkness. Instead, the tavern welcomed me back with open arms, despite the trouble I had caused there earlier that day. My favorite wine was presented wordlessly, the air hot as an embrace, the music roaring, a stranger waiting with a gaze held a little too long.

That was one of the many things I loved about the House of Obsidian: we were among the largest of the Fey Houses, and that meant there was always another stranger. Whatever I could not lose in a drink, I could lose in sloppy kisses against the wall, and then the door, and then my bed. If it was dark enough, I would not have to see whatever stares they would give the X's up my arms. If I was drunk enough, I would not care either way. Not if it meant that I was the furthest I could possibly be from "alone."

But that night, there was something chasing me that I couldn't lose in another's breath. I had one drink, then two, then four, enough to make touch inviting. And yet, I found myself staggering away from the pub without a partner. I didn't know, exactly, where I intended to go. I surprised myself when I stumbled past my own chamber door, and instead, kept going down, deeper into the Pales.

The healing quarters were always staffed, but it was so late that even these areas were quiet, devoid of footsteps. My own, even in drunkenness, were silent — a gift of decades of Blade training. I rounded a corner and slipped through a slightly-ajar door, and there before me was the copper-haired Stoneheld man.

He looked like a painting. He was utterly still, eyes closed, dark lashes falling over fair cheeks. I had barely seen his face before. It had been covered in blood and contorted in pain. Now, it was so clean and smooth he seemed as if he had been crafted out of porcelain.

That serenity stood in dark, stark contrast to the rest of him. No wonder there had been so much blood. His body had been torn apart.

Blankets of black silk were folded down neatly across his hips, leaving his abdomen exposed. The sight of it had me

drawing in a sharp breath through my teeth. Violet-stained bandages wrapped his ribs, and within those bandages, herbs and flowers and healing spells had been tucked between the folds. Sidnee healers had likely spent the whole day and much of the night casting spells and whispering prayers to Mathira and her sisters. *Many* of them, by the looks of it.

I just stared at him. Self-consciousness fell over me. I wasn't sure why I had come here.

Stupid. This had been a stupid idea.

I was about to turn away when I heard a sound — a groan.

I turned around again. The Stoneheld's eyelids fluttered, just barely. One hand moved towards his abdomen.

“Don't.” I crossed the room in two long steps, quickly enough to catch his hand. “Don't touch it. You are hurt.”

His head rolled, eyes opened barely enough to peer at me. They were a mossy green — a color unseen among the Sidnee.

He yanked his hand away from my grasp with surprising force, letting out a wordless grunt as he pushed himself to his elbows. His neck was craned, looking down at his decimated wounds.

“Stop,” I said again, when he tried to touch his dressings. “It is to help you.”

But when I reached for him again, he shook his head and pulled away.

“I need to *see*,” he choked out, his voice barely more than a wheeze. And when he drew back two of the bandages and violet blood began to bubble over, he just watched it spread, even though I uttered a curse and looked around for a healer, more gauze, something — anything — to stop the sudden influx of blood.

“It was real,” he said, barely louder than a whisper.

There was something in his voice that made me stop. His gaze flicked to me, raw and angry.

“Yes,” I whispered, and the word stung.

“How...how many left?”

“Nineteen, including you.”

A wince shuddered across his face. The blood was now rolling over the pale valleys of his abdomen, blooming over the sheets. I cursed.

“Stop moving.” I pressed the bandages back down over his wounds. Surely it was agonizing, but he didn’t react.

“You’re safe here,” I said, and his stare darkened, as if I had said something appalling.

“*Safe?*” His voice was a serrated blade.

“Don’t talk,” I said, but he had already fallen back against the headboard, as if all of his strength had left him at once.

“It sounded like rain,” he murmured, and all at once his fury turned to utter, bleak sadness.

I did not know what he meant. He seemed as if he barely did, either. But that sadness just grabbed me and would not let go. I did not think. My hand covered his.

“It’s going to be alright,” I whispered, and by the time his gaze flicked back to me, it was empty and impassive.

He shook his head, barely a movement.

“It is not,” he murmured.

But by the time the words left his lips, consciousness slipped away.

I shouldn’t have been there. In fact, some might have considered it downright dangerous, for someone like me — someone rejected by the gods — to be in a holy place of healing.

But I looked at this man, and all I could think of was my visit to House of Stone all those years ago. All of those little houses, separated in the rain. Nothing sadder, than to be so alone. And alone forever, now.

And so, I stayed, my hand over his, until my lashes fluttered closed. And when sometime late into the night my

eyes snapped open, my heart pounding with a panic, I reached through the dark until my palm met the cool solace of stone. I held it there, and I imagined that I was connected to them all: the warm flesh of the Stoneheld man against one hand, and against the other, a hundred thousand other people, and the Pales themselves.

CHAPTER EIGHT



It was late by the time I returned to Zeryth. His guards waved me in. I hated their nonchalance. It meant they had been expecting me. It meant that Zeryth knew I would come back.

When the door opened, Zeryth was lounging at a desk in the library, looking dramatically unsurprised to see me.

“Maxantarius. What a surprise.” He smiled and gave me a face of overwrought confusion. “Did the end of our last conversation not sit well with you?”

“Moth Rethem,” I said. “He’s a new recruit. In Commander Charl’s division. I want him on mine.”

“A new recruit? But why—”

“Will he be with me or not?”

Zeryth shrugged. “Fine. I doubt Charl cares much either way.” Then he cast me a sidelong stare. “I take it then that this means you have officially accepted the title I’ve so graciously offered you, General Farlione.”

It made my skin prickle, to hear myself referred to that way. And that prickling intensified to outright crawling as I heard myself answer, “Yes. I accept.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Zeryth said cheerfully. I was already leaving.

Halfway down the hallway, I stopped short. Nura rounded a corner in front of me, and the two of us stared at each other in silence.

For a moment, I was struck by the bizarre realization that the last time I had seen Nura here, in this house, everything about our lives had been different. My family had been alive. And I had loved Nura, had trusted her implicitly. Now, that thought seemed like a cruel joke. Here, we were both surrounded by everything that war and Reshaye had taken from us. And we only stood here because of her.

“The great mystery solved,” I said. “So all of this, and it was just for a coup.”

Something flickered in her expression. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“It is? Because from where I stand, it looks like you’re prepared to kill thousands of people for — what? A crown? This is what Tisaanah’s life is for?”

“You say that as if I’m not giving her everything she’s ever wanted.”

I let out a breathless scoff. To think there was a time that I admired that quality in her, her ability to peel away emotion, her ability to be ruthless. She had always been a better soldier than I was. It just took me ten fucking years to realize how much it had cost her.

“I don’t understand you, Nura,” I said, turning away. “I don’t understand how you can be in this house and say that with a straight face.”

I didn’t wait for a response. I was already halfway down the hallway when Nura called out, “Max. Did you tell Zeryth you’d lead?”

I paused. Didn’t turn back. My silence was enough.

“It’ll be worth it,” she said. “I promise.”

I almost laughed. As if Nura’s promises were worth anything, anymore.

At least the first time I sold my soul to the Orders, I was too young and stupid to know that I was just driving a dagger into my own gut.

This time, I felt every inch of the blade.

TISAANAH and I slept in one of the outposts that night. I had meant it when I told Tisaanah I couldn't stay in that house. Even now, curled up with Tisaanah in a little cot in a cold outpost on the edge of the grounds, I could still feel it looming over me. It was the smell that really did it, I think. The minute we had landed, I knew before I opened my eyes that we were here. That scent of pine and iron yanked me ten years into the past in seconds. And now it tethered me there.

I stared at the ceiling, watching moonlight fall over rafters. Tisaanah slept, though it was light and fitful. Her limbs intertwined with mine like roots clinging to the earth.

One sentence kept floating through my mind:

Tomorrow I will leave to go fight Zeryth Aldris's war.

It was a ridiculous sentence, reflecting a horrifying, distorted reality.

Ruefully, I thought of the man I was five years ago. The man who barely managed to make it out of Seveseed dens alive, who was in the process of creating a garden to surround a cabin in the middle of nowhere. And he would sit there, unmoving, like a rock letting the water rush by him.

I wasn't sure if I pitied that man or envied him. He had been nothing if not *certain*. He was *certain* that there was nothing in the world worth saving. He was *certain* that even if there was, there was nothing he could contribute to such a cause, anyway. And above all, he had been *certain* that he would never, ever, under any circumstances, find himself on a battlefield *ever* again.

I missed certainty.

But then...

My awareness returned to Tisaanah's weight against my chest. The warmth of her breath on the underside of my chin. The strand of hair that kept tickling my nose.

But then, I thought, there is this.

It was sometime past midnight when I carefully, pushed back the rough blanket. I extracted myself from Tisaanah's arms, shoved my bare feet into unlaced boots, and rose.

It was so cold outside that when I slipped through the outpost door, my teeth started chattering. Ascended above, I had forgotten how chilly the nights could get so far north at this time of year. I hadn't bothered to grab a jacket, but I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my trousers and tread down the pathway leading to the main house. There weren't many people around now, activity dulled to an eerie quiet.

It was a long walk back to the house. I didn't go to the front gates. Instead I went around back, cutting through the clearing where Brayan used to run me through drills until I could barely lift a sword, then tracing down paths where Atraclius and I once raced. I glanced to the tree line, and through the darkness could make out the entrance of the path that would lead to Kira's shed.

The door was small, tucked beneath one of the balconies, unassuming compared to the grandeur of the main entryways. I slid my fingers along the inside of the doorframe. My instincts still knew exactly where it was — the notch that, if you pushed just the right way, would jostle the loose lock enough to turn the handle. Atraclius had been the one to discover it. It remained our secret, among my siblings and I. We all, now and then, needed a way to sneak back into the house undetected. Even Brayan.

I slipped through.

It was so silent. Anyone staying here would be in the upper levels, leaving these hallways still and dim beneath the quiet glow of sconces on the walls. I paced through, climbing one narrow set of stairs, then two, until the small servants' passages opened up to the main atrium. And then I stopped.

I couldn't move.

Double doors stood before me. Through them would be the ballroom, and the grand staircase, and the hallways that led to

my old bedroom and those of my family. Where they had lived, and where they had died. Where I had killed them.

Eight painted pairs of eyes gazed at me from beside the door — an old family portrait. It was a small one, more of a sketch than a finished piece, but my mother had always been fond of it, hence why she found a place for it here. My whole family stared back at me, rendered in loose, organic brushstrokes. My parents, my father with a smile in his eyes and my mother deep in thought. Kira, only ten years old, looking as if she had much more important things to do. Variaslus, who seemed to be trying very hard to seem elegant, and then the twins, one grinning and the other frowning. Atraclius, so comically stern that anyone who knew him would see that he was actually making fun of the whole thing. Brayan, noble and serious. And me, eighteen, vaguely disgruntled, with no idea how fucking lucky I was.

It was suddenly difficult to breathe. It had been so long since I had seen their faces in anything but dreams.

“It is strange, to be here after so many years.”

The voice came from behind me. My blood went cold.

A familiar voice. With no accent.

I turned. Moonlight fell over Tisaanah’s face as she stepped towards the painting. But the movements, clumsy and lurching, were not Tisaanah’s.

I closed my eyes, every muscle suddenly tight.

“Get out,” I ground out. The words were visceral, deep — the only truth I could choke out. There was nothing more terrible than seeing Tisaanah’s face like this, with everything that made her *her* stripped away. But here, with my family’s ghosts bearing down on us, my revulsion was so intense that I could barely breathe.

She stepped forward again, hand outstretched. “You are angry.”

I jerked away. “Don’t touch me.”

Reshaye pulled back, cold curiosity behind Tisaanah's eyes. "And after so many years you still dream of the dead. Even though they made you weak." Curiosity hardened into hurt. "You had no one but me. And still, you dreamed of the dead."

They were the best part of me, I wanted to say. How dare you speak of them that way.

"You don't belong here," I said.

"I will always be here. Just as I will always be in you."

She reached out again, and again, I jerked away, my hands on Tisaanah's shoulders.

"Do not touch me."

But she just looked at me, eyes wide, searching, angry. "Why do you talk to me that way? I made you strong. I gave you love, I—"

"Love?" I scoffed. My anger bubbled over, scorching. "You don't know what love is."

"To love is to want," she shot back. "To love is to covet. To desire. Do you think I do not know what that is? And do you think I did not see it in you? All the things you coveted, Maxantarius. All the things you *wanted*. If it is love to crave a heartbeat of another, then I do know it. I love her. And I loved you."

For the first time in nearly a decade, I felt something else as I listened to Reshaye, something other than hatred or fear.

I felt *pity*.

"It must be agonizing," I hissed. "Existing this way, so close to humanity and yet understanding none of it. All you can do is mimic a shade of a shade of a shade of what you might have been, once, a long time ago. And all you can do is destroy, because everything else is beyond your reach."

Tisaanah's face lurched into an uncharacteristic sneer. Her hand reached out for me, even though I kept her at arm's length, fingers brushing my jaw. I could feel magic there, pulsing beneath her touch.

“I gave you everything. Everything, Maxantarius, And yet you mourn them, and you reach for her, and your heart turns elsewhere, just as hers does. I feel the pain in it. I see how she aches at the thought of losing you tomorrow. Just as I see how you hurt for people who cannot even see your grief. It makes you both weak and still you cling to it above all else. *Why?*”

The question hung in the air, sharp both with anger and with an odd, childlike confusion. And in the seconds after, she searched my face, as if she was really looking for an answer.

Instead I slowly pulled her hand away.

“I told you not to touch me.”

Her jaw set, and she stepped back, though her eyes did not leave mine.

“She’s stronger than you are,” I said. “I wasn’t, but she is. But if you hurt her, Reshaye, I will put you in that white room you love so much. And I’ll make sure you stay there forever. *Forever*. Do you understand?”

Her hand lifted and pressed to her chest again, over her heart.

“Something has changed, you know,” she said, quietly. “Far underneath. Deeper than... than all of this. It feels like...” She frowned. “As if something is searching. Reaching. Trying to see me. But I do not think I wish to be seen.”

I had no patience for Reshaye’s incoherent ramblings. Especially not here.

“*Do you understand, Reshaye?*”

Mismatched eyes fell to me, first dull with hurt, then bright with anger, and then sparking with an eerie, inhuman glee. A smile spread across her lips.

“Do I understand?” she repeated. “Of course I do. We always did understand each other’s darkest shadows, Maxantarius.”

CHAPTER NINE



Max left the next day.

Zeryth hadn't wasted any time assembling his division. I was with him when he saw them for the first time, from the balcony at the upper levels of the Ryvenai outposts. A sea of green and blue and golden coats.

Here, it all became so dizzyingly real. Max and his army would travel to Antedale, to conquer one of the most heavily fortified districts in Ara, and after that, Lishan. In between, he'd be taking a few other smaller cities as well. And from here, I'd be doing the same — fighting, conquering.

I wasn't as worried about my own battles as I was about his.

I did not need my magic to know what Max was thinking. His hands were clasped tightly together in front of him, shoulders square, jaw set, as he watched the army prepare. He was wearing a military general's uniform. The sun was rising, outlining his strong profile in gold. Perhaps to an onlooker, he looked every bit the noble military leader, lost in concentration.

But I had been there to watch him button that uniform jacket up and then stare at the mirror for thirty long seconds, seething resentment written over his face. And I'd felt the way his hands squeezed mine before we arrived, in a silent plea or apology, or some combination of the two. I knew that I was seeing dread, not strategic determination, in the hard lines of his expression.

I was watching him live his worst nightmare.

And it was all because of me.

We had only a few minutes alone together before his departure. When he turned to me and I knew it was time for a goodbye, my heart swelled into my throat. A tangle of Aran and Thereni words choked me.

I'd always been able to conjure pretty words when I needed to. But it was moments like these, moments when words weren't beautiful noise but raw, ragged truths, that they overwhelmed me.

I gave him a weak smile and said, "I promise that I will stay alive if you will."

He arched an eyebrow. "Is that supposed to be an incentive?"

"Of course," I replied, casually, stepping closer. "The best kind."

"I'm glad that recent events have done nothing to dull your ego."

The lump in my throat grew so large that I couldn't speak. Max's smirk had slowly faded.

I took his hands. We bowed our foreheads against each other.

"If you can do it," Max murmured, "I suppose I can do it." Then his eyes met mine, so close I could see every vein, every cloudy shift of color. "And you have to. Alright?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I took his face in my hands and kissed him, long, deeply. My mouth felt cold against the air when we parted, and my fingers were aching empty when his hand slipped from mine.

I stood with Zeryth up on the balcony of the military headquarters to watch him leave. I couldn't tear my gaze away, not even when he was a spec of green and gold in the distance. He was barely visible when he turned around one final time and lifted his hand in a wave. My eyes stung as I returned it.

I felt Zeryth's stare, but didn't look.

"He'll come back," he said.

He'd better, I thought. *He has to.*

"Why him?" I asked. "Why do you want someone who hates you so much to lead your armies?"

"Because he's good."

"I'm sure you have many good generals."

"Maybe I chose him because he hates me, and because I can make him."

My gaze flicked to Zeryth. There was a twisted smile at the corner of his mouth, and he leaned casually against the wall, elbow propped on stone. On the surface, he seemed as nonchalant as a cat bathing in the sun.

But I looked closer.

There was something off about it all. The lazy stance of his was practiced and deliberate, the smile a little too forced, the tone of his voice sticky-sweet with manufactured drawl.

No. It wasn't as simple as that. Not quite.

Zeryth's head cocked. "What are you looking at me like that for?"

"Do you remember the first time we met? I must have been fourteen summers, yes?"

He chuckled. "Probably."

"I was so excited to meet someone who looked like me. Even with some differences." I gestured to the patches of gold skin on my face, raising my brows wryly. "I asked you to tell me of Ara, you took your knife and carved the shape of the continents into an apple. Threll and Besrith, even the Fey lands. You showed me where Ara was."

His smile had gone distant. "I don't recall."

"I'm sure you don't. But I kept it until it rotted."

I still remember exactly how it looked, the white meat of the apple shriveled, the mottled skin of the "continents" fly-

eaten. I tried everything I could to preserve it — impossible, in the oppressive heat of the Threllian summer. By the time I finally gave up and discarded it, it looked like a ravaged version of the world, blackened and decaying like the flesh I now rotted beneath my fingertips. Zeryth was long gone by then, of course, set off across the sea. And after I threw that apple into the trash, I returned to my little, windowless room with nothing but a dream of whatever lay beyond it.

“I was so young,” I said. “I thought that it was kindness, what you did for me. But you have always been so willing, Zeryth, to dangle a world just out of reach.”

Then I pulled my cloak closer around me, slid my chilly fingers into my pockets, and went down the stairs.



I UNDERSTOOD, in an abstract way, that Max’s family had been powerful. But walking the halls of the Farlione estate put that into a whole new perspective. It was so different, seeing it in person rather than in the imprints of Reshaye’s memories. Those fuzzy images didn’t capture the scale of it, or the unfamiliar beauty. Max rarely spoke of his family. Now I realized exactly what the Farliones must have been, before their fall. This estate was befitting of a family only two steps from royalty.

The hallway was lined with paintings. I paused at a portrait of a woman with long dark hair and brown eyes that gazed into the distance. The half smile on her lips was the same one Max wore when lost in thought. His mother, surely. Beside her, there was a man with grey at the temples of his black hair and deep smile lines, and the angles of his face resembled Max’s so strongly that I knew I had to be looking at his father.

I heard light footsteps approach from behind me.

“We need to start working today,” Nura said. “Start strategizing. And training, of course. Taking Kazara won’t be easy with our forces split. We’ll have to rely on you heavily.”

And the sooner we take back the Capital, the sooner this nightmare is over.”

It was the first time I’d heard Nura say much of anything, let alone express such strong distaste, since she hurled blades across the dining room the day before. There was something else in her voice, too — a glimpse of a deeper discomfort. Even beneath Nura’s stoic ice, I had seen the expression on her face shift, ever-slightly, when we walked into this house.

I turned around. “Why did you miss when you threw those knives?”

Her lips thinned. “Did you think you were the only idiot to spill your blood over a contract?”

Ah.

Now that it was out in the open, it seemed practically obvious. How had I not seen it before?

“You can’t act against him.”

“I certainly can’t kill him.”

Her wording was different than mine. Noted.

“Zeryth and I... never got along,” she said. “And to be a Second is to be a failed competitor of the Arch Commandant, and the one to take power if they die. It made sense to build a loyalty protection into the oath. As much as I despise it.”

She looked as if the words physically pained her. I was sure she *did* hate it. I was also sure that it was the only reason Zeryth had made it this far alive.

“You and I are united in that,” she added. “It’s in both of our best interests to get this over with as quickly as possible.”

I didn’t answer. I took a few meandering steps down the hall, looking up at the paintings. Several dark-haired, dark-eyed teenagers stared down at me. And then I stopped in front of a face that made my heart clench.

Amazing, how different he looked. Max was a young man in this painting, barely more than a teenager. His face was a

little softer, yes. But it was the look in his eye that so starkly separated this boy from the man I knew — a sharp, cold stare.

“He looked very different.”

“He *was* different, back then. He was less... afraid. When he wanted something, he was willing to do whatever it took.” She lapsed into silence. Then she added, with a hint of sadness, “He had incredible potential.”

The way she said it made my jaw clench. *He had incredible potential*, she said, as if there was something this boy had that the man did not. *Willing to do whatever it took*, she said, as if that was something to be admired.

Max had seen the cost of war, and decided it was unacceptable. That wasn't fear. That was compassion. And this arrogant child that stared down at me from the wall? He wasn't brave. He was foolish. I had seen many young Threllian soldiers with that look in their eye — the kind that told me they had already granted themselves absolution, and whatever they were about to do to me was merely a step in “*whatever it took*.”

He hadn't lost something. He had gained something.

I turned away.

“The Syrizen told me the refugees have been settled,” I said. “I want to see them before we do anything else.”

“Afterwards, we can—”

“I see them first. Then we work.”

My voice must have told her it wasn't worth the fight, because she let out a little, frustrated breath.

“Fine. If you insist.”



THESE WEREN'T HOMES. They were slums.

The Threllian refugees had been settled into large, ugly buildings at the edge of the city, constructed of crumbling

stone and rotting wood. The apartments themselves were small, which would have been fine had they not also been ramshackle and ill-kept. The surrounding areas were no better. They stood just outside of the Capital, close enough to see the walls looming and then the Towers beyond them — close enough to make my palms sweat when I thought of the battles that would be inflicted upon this city, not long from now.

“This territory is safe,” Ariadnea told me, when I asked about it. “Fully undisputed. And neither Aviness nor Zeryth wants to damage the city they plan to take, not within the walls or outside of it.”

I didn’t like it. I didn’t like it at all. And now, the chilling possibilities of everything I’d failed to stipulate in my contract loomed over me like a cold shadow. I’d spent hours dictating my demands, so careful to close every possible loophole. But how could I have stopped this? What words could I have used to define that their washrooms should be functional and their windows unbroken?

The refugees were busy, settling themselves into their new lives, making the best of it. But my magic tasted their uncertainty just as strongly as their excitement. They knew, after all, what a war-battered country looked like. They knew what dangers it held.

Nura had wandered off with the Syrizen. But Sammerin remained beside me, silent in a way that told me he was thinking what I was.

“I should have been more careful,” I muttered.

“You were never going to be able to control every outcome.”

But couldn’t my life buy more than this? I didn’t say the words out loud, but Sammerin placed his hand on my shoulder, a brief, wordless comfort for the things I did not voice.

Later, I helped Serel move into his new apartment. “Move,” actually, wasn’t quite the right term, because that would imply he had belongings to unpack. He brought only

one small bag with him from Esmaris's estate, a worn leather satchel that he had carried with him the day he arrived at the estate. I wandered around counting water stains in the ceiling as he shelved three shirts and two sets of trousers. Four books, worn and torn, that he meticulously arranged in the corner where the wall met the floor — he had no bookshelf. Then, upon his single set of drawers, he placed three items: a silver necklace that I knew had once belonged to his mother. A tin flute, which he had learned to play quite beautifully over the years. A little carved bone figurine of a bird.

And, at last, his sword — by far the most valuable item in this place, probably worth more than this apartment itself.

“I almost didn't keep it,” he remarked, as he set it down and regarded it with a wrinkle over his nose. “It's... well, it's *his*. You know?”

“I know,” I said. Thinking of my bloody jacket that I had so happily discarded as soon as I'd arrived at Ara. Thinking of the way my hair had looked shriveling in Max's fireplace when I'd hacked it off.

“Still.” He brushed the hilt, patting it like an old friend's shoulder. “Just in case.”

Just in case.

I wanted so badly for my friend to never have another “*Just in case*.” I wanted him to be able to leave steel behind. I watched as Serel circled the room, examining his new home. A lump rose in my throat.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I didn't realize it would be—” I stumbled over my words. “I'll get you somewhere better soon.”

“What? This is terrific.” He gave me a grin. Gods, there was nothing quite like Serel's smile. It illuminated his whole face. He went to the windows and extended his arms. “Look at this. This is what *freedom* looks like, Tisaanah.”

The “freedom” that he was gesturing to was, in fact, an utterly breathtaking view of a narrow alleyway, a pile of trash,

and a brick wall with some very unpleasant Aran words painted on it.

“So what if it’s not pretty?” Serel added, as if he could hear my skepticism. “None of the best things are.”

In any other scenario, I would have happily taken the door he’d left open for my self-aggrandizing, silly joke. But I could barely speak.

I wanted to believe him. But I watched his silhouette as he dropped his arms and looked out into the Capital slums, watched his smile fade and a wrinkle form between his brows. And in that moment, I could feel it: his doubt.

Freedom, yes. But he, and so many others, had once again been ripped away from everything they knew and thrown into a world that had no care for them.

I would need to care enough to make up for it all.



I WENT through the rest of the day in a haze. I trained. I strategized. I followed Nura, and the Syrizen, and Zeryth as we ran over strategies and maps. I kept careful track of Reshaye, and carefully patched the gaping wound of anxiety in my chest. And of course, I showed none of it. There were few things I was more adept at than hiding uncertainty, so now I draped mine in calm confidence that was smooth as silk.

Still, that evening, when I ate dinner with Sammerin, he looked at me in a way that told me he saw hints of what I refused to show.

“You look tired,” he said. Coming from him, it sounded soothing rather than somewhat insulting. He did have a gift for that.

“So do you.”

He let out a small chuckle. “I don’t doubt it.”

“Are you worried about Moth?”

“Max will protect him. From all that he can.”

From all that he can. We both understood what that meant. It was one thing to protect Moth from magic and steel, to protect him from wounds and opened flesh. But Sammerin and I, we both knew that war cut deeper than that.

I watched Sammerin silently swirl his wine. When I had first met him, his calm had seemed utterly impenetrable. But now, I could see the uncertainty he did not voice, collecting on his silence like fog on glass.

“Sometimes I’m afraid that none of this will ever end,” I murmured.

He paused before answering. “Sometimes I am too.” He set down his glass, eyes drawn to the table. “But I fought to become a healer because I wanted to fix things. Even though my abilities are... so well-suited to destruction.”

Well suited to destruction. I thought of the way my flesh looked when Sammerin was healing it, muscle and sinew and flesh weaving together as if of its own volition. And I thought of the way my body had felt under his power, when I lost control of Reshaye, back at the slavers’ hub in Threll.

He did what he had to do, and I was glad for it. But I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t see the darkness inherent in such a power. And perhaps Sammerin shouldered that just as I shouldered the darkness of the power in me.

“The human body is a magnificent machine, you know,” he said, as if to himself. “All of the muscles and veins and nerves all are in perfect sync. It’s so easy to disrupt that. I’m only a passable fighter, but I had the highest kill count in my division. I was *efficient*. They didn’t want to let that go.”

He said the word with a subtle sneer of disgust over his nose, and a chill ran down my spine. “How did you get out?”

“They needed me for Max, when he got Reshaye. Still, they expected me to be a warrior, not a healer. Max pushed for it, back then. Told them that he needed a healer and it might as well be me, since he was saddled with me anyway.” A small smile. “His words, of course.”

I smiled. Of course.

“It is hard to imagine you as anything but a healer,” I said. “You are so well-suited to it.”

“The truth, Tisaanah, is that healing is a fight.” And only now did his eyes flick up to meet mine, something a little sharper, a little harsher, beneath their deep calm. “Sometimes, you need to act on nothing but gut feeling. And sometimes, no matter what you do, you lose the battle. Healing is more difficult than killing in every way. But that’s how it always is. I’ve walked both roads. Destroying is easy. Creating is hard.”

He leaned back and took a long drag from his pipe. When he spoke again, smoke slipped from his lips. “But worth it,” he said. “Always worth it.”



I WAS GIVEN a room in the guest wing of the house. It didn’t reek of death the way the main living quarters did, nor did it arouse Reshayé’s memories quite as much. But still, as I lay there in the dark, Max’s absence ached in my bones. I was so accustomed to losing those I loved. I didn’t expect the loneliness to eat at me like this, with razored teeth and ravenous bites.

Reshayé curled around my pain like smoke caressing the rim of a pipe. I felt it pick up my sadness and examine it, curious.

Any other circumstances, and I would have pulled that emotion away. But now, I was tired.

Do you know this feeling?

{I know sadness.}

Not sadness. More like...

What was it? I let it see the memory of leaving Serel behind, the way that I had craved his company in the minutes since. The still-seeping wound of the loss of my mother, even

though that had been so many years that my memory lost the details of her features.

{Grief,} Reshaye murmured.

I was surprised, that it understood grief. *I suppose it is grief, in a way. To mourn an absence of someone.*

{I felt that for Maxantarius. Before you came.}

I suppressed my revulsion. I wanted to say, *What right did you have to mourn him, to miss him? After everything you did to him?* But I carefully hid those thoughts, tucked away beneath a shroud, far away from Reshaye's reach.

Instead I asked, *What about before that?*

{There is nothing before that.}

What about the other people who carried you?

{Before Maxantarius, there was only white and white and white. There were others. But now, they are nothing more than shattered windows into other lives.}

The smell of the sea. A woman peering into a mirror, drawing copper hair back from her face. The taste of raspberries.

And before?

{Before what?}

Before you were with others. Is this what you always were?

Silence. A mournful emptiness. *{I do not think so,}* it whispered. *{Perhaps once I was something. But I do not remember what. And maybe I have never been anything but the discarded remains of others.}*

Hands through the fields. Again and again. Gold beneath the sun. A sheet of glossy black, and a reflection within it with a face that would never come into focus, no matter how Reshaye clawed at the memory.

It felt almost... human. That sadness.

What do you want, Reshaye?

It seemed silly, now, that it had taken me so long to ask. Perhaps I thought I knew what Reshaye wanted — love, or its dark, twisted version of it. Unyielding loyalty, with no demands.

There was a long pause. I felt it grapple with this question.

{I want a story.}

A story?

{A story is the thing that proves something existed between life and death. I have lingered in-between for so long. I want...} It groped for the right word, reaching and failing. *{I want something that is real. And I want life, or death, but not this nothingness between.}*

I blinked back my surprise. I wasn't sure what I expected, but it wasn't for Reshaye to wish for death. But then, wouldn't I, if I lived as it did?

We have work to do, I murmured. We will need to show them all what we're capable of. And we will need to do it very carefully. But if you help me, Reshaye, I will find a way to give you a story. And I will find a way to give you death.

{Why should I listen to you? You have betrayed me many times.}

In the sparring ring. Max's hands on my body. The way I had shut it out in the Mikov estate.

I cannot prove my truth to you. You will just have to trust me.

{Trust,} Reshaye spat, with an ugly laugh. *{How humans treasure such things. To believe in something without reason.}*

Or you will fight me, and I will win. Just as I won when we were in Threll.

Though sometimes I did wonder — did I win? Or did I do what Reshaye, or some part of it, had wanted me to do?

A long silence.

Your choice, I said, then drew the curtains of my mind up tight.

I had a choice, too.

It wasn't my choice to fight Zeryth's war, true. But just because I couldn't control everything didn't mean I couldn't control anything.

I would win. And I would win quickly. I had spent my life stealing little fragments of power from the gluttonous hands of the Threllian Lords. I knew how to manipulate scraps into something more.

I was made for this.

CHAPTER TEN



“**W**hat are you *doing here*?”

I awoke to a scraggly voice, sandpaper over my throbbing headache.

I forced my eyelids open. My neck hurt. My cheek rested against black silk, and I was wrenched awkwardly over at the waist, face pressed to the edge of a bed. My memories, clouded by last night’s alcohol, were a smear.

An old healer woman looked down at me with disdain.

“*You* should not be here.”

“I asked her to stay.”

The words came from beside me, smooth even through the rasp of disuse. I forced myself to sit up more. I looked at my hand — a hand that was still resting over delicate, long fingers. And then I followed that hand to an arm, and a shoulder, and a face... and a pair of green eyes that peered down at me before turning back to the healer.

The Stoneheld man.

The memories came back all at once. Embarrassment flooded me. I jerked my hand away and pushed from the bed.

“I’m sorry, I—”

But the healer was only looking at the Stoneheld, eyes round. “Forgive me. We did not expect you to wake so soon. The Teirna wished to see you as soon as you rose. Let me send word.” She gave her a colder stare. “Your father will not be

pleased you are here. I recommend you leave before he arrives.”

I looked away.

She hurried off, leaving the Stoneheld and I in awkward silence. With significant effort, I stood.

“I apologize,” I said.

“You shouldn’t,” he replied. He was giving me an odd look. “Your father, the healer said.”

I winced. Sometimes — most times — it was easier if they did not know.

“Then,” he asked, “am I addressing the—”

“No. The Teirness is my sister.” I spoke too quickly. “I will leave you,” I said, and began to turn away.

“Wait. What is your name?”

I paused. Turned. His voice was so raspy that I had not noticed before, but he had a Stoneheld accent, giving the words a strange, melodic texture.

“Aefe,” I said. “Aefe Ei’Allaugh.”

“Aefe,” he repeated, slowly, as if my name was wine he was rolling over his tongue. His eyes were ringed with darkness, his gaze tired, but somehow that only made his stare more intense. I felt like I was being seen — being *examined* — more carefully than anyone had in a very, very long time.

A shiver ran up my spine. I could not tell whether I found it intriguing or uncomfortable.

“And what is yours?” I asked.

“Caduan Iero,” he said.

Iero. I did not know the surname, but then, it had been such a long time since I had needed to know the court structures of other houses, let alone one as small as the House of Stone.

“I’m glad we got the chance to meet, Caduan Iero,” I said, quietly. “For a time I wasn’t sure we would.”

Something I could not read flickered across his face.

“Stay,” he said.

“My father would prefer if I did not.”

“But I would prefer if you did. You were the one who brought me here. And you should hear why.” And then he added, “Please.”

I hesitated.

I was already dreading the look on my father’s face when he found me here, and the way he would react if I had to explain why. But there was something in Caduan’s face, something buried beneath his odd, impassive mannerisms, that held a mirror up to my worst fears.

Nothing sadder, than to be so alone.

I sat down beside the bed.

“Fine,” I said.



MY FATHER DID NOT COME ALONE. Siobhan was with him, and so was Klein, the Sidnee master of war and spycraft. All three of them gave me odd looks when they entered the room to find me already here. Siobhan, a carefully hidden glance of confusion. Klein, a not-at-all hidden stare of pure distaste (which, as always, I gladly returned). And my father, a barely-visible pause with slightly narrowed eyes. It lasted less than a second, and yet that disapproval sank to the bottom of my stomach like a stone.

If Caduan saw any of it, he did not show it. And similarly, he showed no signs of pain, even though I was certain that he was in agony — the agony of his ripped apart body, and the agony of his utter, sudden aloneness. My father, Klein, and Siobhan all offered their solemn condolences, and Caduan barely reacted.

“We are deeply saddened by what has happened to the House of Stone, Caduan Iero,” my father said. “It is the utmost

tragedy, and we will never allow it to happen to another House.”

Caduan barely looked at him. “Did you go?” he asked. “Did you see?”

“We did,” Siobhan said, quietly.

“There is nothing left.”

“There is not.”

“You told me it was humans,” I murmured. “But I thought... that cannot be.”

Could it?

That question hung in the air, heavy and pungent.

We all looked at Caduan, waiting, but he stared past us, to the far wall of the room — as if he could see through it, to the horizon beyond.

“Did you know,” he said, “that there are no creatures in the world more sensitive to the circumstances around them than the Stoneheld Atrivez butterfly?”

My father’s brow furrowed. “Pardon?”

“They are one of only a very small number of Fey-dwelling creatures that have an inherent sensitivity to magic. Trace amounts, but enough to anticipate things that go beyond the typical senses of an insect. As a result, they are difficult to kill. They have an explosive population in Atecco, because few predators can catch them. The faintest, distant hint of danger, and they just fly away.”

And only then did that mossy stare turn back to us. “That morning, they all left. Thousands of them, shooting into the sky like steam over the lake. Do you know what ten thousand butterfly wings sound like?”

He spoke so calmly. But I looked down to the sheets, and saw that his hands were clenched around them.

His words from the night before, ragged and delirious, curled through my memory. *It sounded like rain.*

“Rain,” I whispered.

And some grotesque version of a smile twitched at one corner of his mouth as he lowered his chin. “Exactly like it. It was beautiful.”

I could almost hear it. Picture it.

The smile disappeared.

“Not at all like,” he said, “what came after. There was nothing beautiful about that. Thousands of human soldiers descended on Atecco. I did not see them arrive. I was on the edge of the city, working in the archives, when I heard the screaming, the shouting. I looked out the windows, and it was already happening. They were everywhere. Many were magic users.”

A brief pause. A muscle in his jaw twitched. “Most did not escape,” he said, at last. “There were too many. I gathered those of us who had and led them here. We could not stay, and we would not have survived any longer.”

“But humans are so much weaker than us,” Klein said. “How?”

Caduan let out a ghost of a scoff. “‘Weaker.’ That isn’t how nature works. Even the strongest predators have their enemies. And when the numbers are three to one...”

“*Three to one?*” Siobhan gasped.

“Is that a surprise? The human lifespan is a fraction of ours, yes, and perhaps their bodies are physically weaker. But while a Fey would be lucky to produce one or perhaps two children over the course of five hundred years, humans reproduce frequently and easily. And they, too, have access to magic once again.” His eyes darkened. “We sat here while humans conquered mountains and deserts and seas, rid some of the most inhospitable environments in the world of their most dangerous forces. And yet... we think that we’re too powerful for them.”

“Because we are,” Klein said, forcefully. “The tragedy of the Stoneheld will not be repeated. I swear this to you. They

surprised your House. But they will not surprise us, nor any other.”

Caduan gave him a hard stare. “Hubris is not comforting to me. I’m not sure why you thought it would be.”

He said this as if it were simply a matter of fact — and perhaps it was. We could comfort ourselves with our promises of vengeance and swift action. But what would that mean to Caduan? What would that mean for everything his people had already lost?

Nothing.

I thought of all those houses, standing alone in the rain, reduced now to little more than piles of cold brick.

“You can stay here.” The words left my lips before I even knew I was speaking. “For as long as you need it. You and the remaining Stoneheld have a home here, if you— if you want it.”

My cheeks began burning by the end of that sentence. I could feel three sets of eyes drilling into my face. I’d just made an offer that wasn’t mine to give. The House of Obsidian was staunchly separatist, and though we weren’t on bad terms with the House of Stone, they were not among our allies, either.

I carefully avoided my father’s stare, meeting only Caduan’s.

Once again, it seemed that he had no idea that I had committed a faux pas. Instead, the faintest glimpse of... something... flickered behind his expression.

“Thank you,” he said. “That is very kind.”

“Of course you, and the other of your kin, may stay here as long as you wish,” my father said. I blinked in surprise — even considering my inappropriate offer, it would be rare for my father to give indefinite shelter so easily.

“My kin,” Caduan repeated, quietly, as if to himself.

“There are eighteen others, all in the infirmary. Most are not yet conscious, but you may visit them as soon as you’re

well enough to walk.”

Caduan went a shade paler, the line between his brows deepening.

My father said, “I have been told that you are in line for the Stone Crown.”

Caduan’s gaze snapped to me, then slid back to his hands. “Thirteenth. Barely in line at all.”

“It appears that is not true anymore.”

“It doesn’t matter who stands at the dais of a nation that no longer exists. Ghosts and rubble do not need to be led.”

“There are eighteen souls in this infirmary that need a king more than ever.”

Caduan visibly flinched, as if the title stung.

“It never should have been me,” he said.

“Perhaps not,” my father said. “But it is.”

There was a long silence. And when Caduan finally lifted his chin, when his gaze finally met mine again, I saw it harden with a reluctant, unspoken decision — the kind that sent a chill running up my spine.



“THIS IS DIRE.”

We went directly to my father’s study from the infirmary. When the door closed, there was a stark transition. Calm reassurance was left outside. Inside, there was only cold focus.

“We have no need to be paranoid,” Klein said. “The House of Stone is a smaller nation, and they were unprepared. We have no such—”

“You sound as if you are suggesting that it’s the Stoneheld’s own fault that they were slaughtered,” I said, before I could stop myself.

“I am merely looking at the situation rationally.”

Rational. How could one be *rational* about thousands of Fey deaths?

“We still lack so much information,” Siobhan said. “I don’t understand how they managed to do this. The numbers were on their side, but this level of destruction is extreme. Nor do we know why they did it.”

“I’m not certain that there are answers to those questions that would make me feel any better about this, Commander Ai’Reid.” My father paused at his window. The view looked out over the farming settlements that lay just beyond the edge of the Pales. Beyond them was the wall, and we were so high up that the lush sprawl of the forest was visible beyond it.

Somewhere out there were the remnants of the House of Stone. Not so very far away at all.

“I agree,” Siobhan said. “But we still need to make it a priority to get those answers, rather than acting on impulse. And while I have every sympathy for the House of Stone, we must remember that we uphold Sidnee interests, not Stoneheld interests.”

My eyebrows lurched. I whirled to her, my anger flaring so violently I had to choke back my response.

“And what would Sidnee interests be?” my father mused. He peered over his shoulder, and his gaze fell to me. “You look as if you have something to say, Aefe.”

Normally, I was so unaccustomed to speaking to my father that even his stare left me frozen — I wasn’t even sure why he had allowed me to come here. But now, when I thought of the grief on Caduan’s face, I felt the kind of fury that made my thinking sloppy and my words too-quick. I was answering before I could measure myself.

“It was a coward’s fight,” I said. “To overwhelm an outnumbered enemy. If the humans did it to the House of Stone, they’d do it to others. We cannot allow that.”

“We still don’t know why they attacked,” Siobhan said. “It is early to make that assumption. Their quarrel may have been with the Stoneheld specifically.”

“Do you think that they care about the borders of our houses any more than we care about the borders of theirs? It was *Fey* blood spilled in that slaughter. That deserves to be avenged, no matter what house it belongs to.” I paused at the wall, pressed my palm against the cold stone. “At least we have the Pales to protect us. But the other Houses do not. And if more houses meet the same fate as the House of Stone, if the population of Fey is smothered out until we’re among the only ones left... then we’ll just be like mice hiding in our tunnels.”

I couldn’t bring myself to meet my father’s gaze. It was several long seconds before I lifted my head to see him still staring out the window. Siobhan turned to the map on the wall, silver engravings seared directly into obsidian.

“The Houses furthest south, closest to the human lands, would be in the greatest danger, and would also hold the greatest chance at having more information,” she said. She pressed her finger to the little sigils denoting Houses closest to the sea and the islands. The House of Reeds. The House of Roiled Seas. The House of Nautilus. “But they are all aligned with the Titherie.”

“Iero did not address it, but even Stone is technically an informal member of the Titherie,” Klein added. He said the word *Titherie* the way one might say, “runny horse shit,” and everyone let their noses wrinkle appropriately.

Most Fey Houses fell into one of two alliances. The Titherie was led by the House of Wayward Winds, while the House of Obsidian headed the banner of the Caidre. The two were... not on good terms. It had been many years since the two alliances had warred with each other, but when they had, it had been horrific. No one had been quick to forget it.

“Aefe is correct,” my father said, at last.

I couldn’t help but blink in surprise, to hear those words.

“This may be larger than House conflicts,” he went on. “And if getting the answers means working with the Titherie, then so be it.”

Klein's eyebrows lurched. "With all respect, we cannot trust Wayward Winds. We can't allow our fear of one imaginary threat to overshadow the one that's already poised at our throat—"

"I've made my decision," my father replied. "I'll write to Wayward Winds tonight."



MERE DAYS after all of Stoneheld awoke, Caduan had his coronation ceremony.

It had been, unsurprisingly, my father's idea — my father, who believed in upholding tradition above all else, even though the idea made Caduan pale two shades.

"A coronation for who?" he had said. "For a dozen people?"

And my father had looked at him as if this were a ridiculous question. "Yes, exactly," he'd replied.

The ceremony took place upon the dais of my father's throne room. The Stoneheld on the expanse of black glass — so few of them that they looked like lone ships lost at sea. Words were spoken, prayers were whispered, Stoneheld rituals mingling with Sidnee ones. My father was the one to bestow Caduan his crown. It was a beautiful creation of copper and polished stone that formed delicate peaks like a stag's horns — one of the few artifacts that the Blades had been able to recover from the House of Stone.

Caduan had risen, and his handful of remaining subjects bowed, and the image made my eyes sting.

On the day of my father's coronation, he had seemed like the most powerful man in the world. I had been in awe of him — his easy smile and bold confidence more befitting of a force of nature than a living, fallible creature.

But Caduan? Caduan just stood there, looking past his subjects, past my father, past the Pales, as if searching for the

home that had once lay miles beyond them. He seemed so...
lost.

At sunrise the next morning, the House of Wayward Winds
arrived.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



I really did try not to look back.

It seemed like it would be easier that way. When we rode out, I could barely breathe. I'd been handed so many lives and told to throw them like a battering ram against the most powerful cities in Ara. We would start with Antedale, a fortress of a city, and one of the key jewels in Zeryth's path to victory. And that, of course, would only be the beginning.

Yes, I tried. But when we were nearly out of eyeshot from the base, I couldn't help but turn. Tisaanah was standing on the balcony, a speck of red. I raised my hand and gave her one final wave.

Moth rode beside me. He'd been given a big, lumbering beast of a draft horse that had little interest in either moving or listening to him, which would have been very amusing had I been particularly inclined to find anything amusing in the moment. He turned in his saddle and followed my gaze.

"What will she do?" he asked.

Ascended above. What a question indeed.

"She'll be defending Korvius."

Moth's brow furrowed. "Alone?"

My stomach turned.

I could have said, *No, she's not alone, she has the rest of Zeryth's army.*

I could have said, *No, she's with Zeryth, who betrayed her, and Nura, who has hidden knives poised at everyone's throats.*

I could have said, *No, she's with Reshaye, an ancient, bloodthirsty entity that does nothing but destroy.*

Instead I said, "Yes." And that felt much closer to the truth.

Moth didn't say anything more, going uncharacteristically silent. But, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him keep looking over his shoulder until the base was out of view, shrouded by the rolling clouds.

It would be a long journey to Antedale. My division was not entirely comprised of Wielders, making Stratagram travel impractical — and of course, it was generally a bad idea to mobilize hundreds at once that way, with such a high risk of people accidentally landing on top of each other (or, in the case of one infamous freak accident, *in* each other).

I had two captains who each helped lead half of my forces.

One was Essanie, a Solarie woman who was taller than I was and bound her chestnut hair into one long coil piled atop her head. She was perhaps in her forties, eyes sharp with a constant take-no-shit stare. I'd known her during my time in the military, though not well. She had seemed strong and practical. Oddly, she'd also had an amiable friendship with Zeryth. Even then, that had surprised me.

The other was Arith, a Valtain man with an admirable white beard and large eyes that peered beneath an eternally-lowered brow. He was wiry and inclined to ramble. But he was also clearly intelligent, and his men admired him — a sign, I had long ago learned, of a leader worth keeping.

They both seemed like competent captains, skilled Wielders, and good soldiers. But I knew that surely they weren't chosen for their skill alone. No matter whatever illusion of control Zeryth had bestowed upon me, he would be an idiot not to surround me with people he trusted implicitly. Essanie and Arith deferred to my commands, but Zeryth certainly had their true loyalty. And if I stepped out of line, they would report me to him in a heartbeat.

Not that I would.

As much as I hated it, Zeryth was right. I was a woefully cautious man, and Zeryth's threats against Tisaanah echoed constantly in the back of my mind. I wanted to believe it was impossible. Hell, I *still* believed that it was impossible. But after so long, I had forgotten how potent it was — the fear of having something to lose. There were some things I just couldn't risk.

That night, I watched the soldiers as we made camp. If any of them were nervous about what was to come, most didn't show it. But some were so fucking young. None quite as young as Moth, but at least a few couldn't have been much older. Those were the boisterous ones, stumbling about with manufactured swagger, making fools of themselves.

It made my stomach turn. My heavy eyelids and tired limbs told me that I should, theoretically, be hungry after a long day of travel. But I sat there and looked down at my soup with disinterest, ultimately handing it off to Moth, who gobbled it up in eleven genuinely impressive seconds.

After dinner, when most of the soldiers mulled about drinking, a tall, gangly young man approached me.

“Captain Farlione? If I may interrupt?”

I blinked. He was interrupting nothing but my silent, far-off stare into existential dread. I cleared my throat and rose to my feet. “Of course.”

It was dark, the only light now the moonlight and the dimming remnants of the campfires and lanterns. The man had a mop of mousy hair that fell so low it nearly covered his deep-set eyes, and a crooked, apologetic half-smile. I was struck by a wave of recognition I couldn't quite place.

“I only wanted to meet you personally, sir.” He lifted his hand into a salute and bowed his head, a sight that made me viscerally uncomfortable.

“Ah, no need for— Just—” I stuck out my hand instead, and the man looked confusedly at it before grasping it in a quick handshake.

“It’s an honor, sir,” he said. “Phelyp. Phelyp Aleor.”

The realization hit me like a stone. “Aleor,” I repeated.

Phelyp’s eyebrows arched in surprise. He grinned. “You remember—”

“Of course I do.” My tone veered on unintentional annoyance — *you actually think I’d forget?* I cleared my throat. “What’s your relation?”

“Brother, sir.”

I eyed the young man before me. He was probably, what, nineteen? Twenty? Just around the same age as his brother had been when he stood in his place. The resemblance between the two was uncanny. Same awkward stance, same gangly limbs, same ridiculous floppy hair.

“Rian always spoke so highly of you,” Phelyp said. “So when I found out that you would be leading us, I was—” He shook his head. “Well, if I may speak frankly, you were a legend in our house when I was younger. And then with your victory at Sarlazai... It’s just an honor, sir. A real honor to fight behind you.”

Honor. That word made me sick.

“The honor was mine,” I said. “Rian was a good man. The world is worse off without him.”

Sadness flickered across Phelyp’s face. “Thank you, sir. He was a good soldier. And I know that it would have meant a lot to him to know that you thought so, too.”

It took everything in me not to correct him — *No, that isn’t what I said. He was a good man, not a good soldier, and one is worth a thousand times the other.*

I went silent for too long, and Phelyp shifted awkwardly. “Well. I should be getting back, but I just wanted to meet you for myself. Again, sir, thank you. It’s an honor.”

Ascended, that word.

“Likewise,” I grunted, as Phelyp saluted me again and turned back to the beachside fires, leaving me feeling as if I’d

just had a conversation with a ghost.

It shouldn't have hit me so hard. I was being ridiculous. But suddenly, I was so... what? Angry? That didn't feel like quite the right word, but what other response was there to a world that threw Rian Aleor's life away as if it were worth nothing, and then launched his little brother into the same gluttonous jaws?

"Are you alright, Max?"

Moth's tentative voice pulled me from my thoughts. I turned around to see him clutching his empty bowl, looking up at me with wide eyes. He'd barely spoken to me all day, clearly somewhat terrified after my outburst the day before.

Instead of answering, I asked, "Why did you join the military?"

Moth's round eyes grew rounder. "I told you, it was just that the other teacher wasn't good, and—"

"No. Moth, I—" I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. "I'm not asking so I can scold you. I'm asking so I can find out the answer."

He stared at me warily.

"Truly," I said. "From my heart of hearts."

"I didn't *lie*. It was all true. Helene wasn't a very good teacher, not like Sammerin. And there was a lot, I mean a *lot*, of money, and you know that my father—"

"If your father needed money, we could have found another solution for that."

His eyes were downcast. "It wasn't just that. It's just... You and Sammerin and Tisaanah were out there *killing slavers!* And I was just doing lessons that didn't help with *anything*. So when they put out the call for recruits, I thought..." He shrugged. "This is how I can actually help with something instead of—"

"Moth, you're twelve Ascended-damned years—"

"I'm *thirteen*."

I threw up my hands. “Oh, well that just changes everything.”

“You and Sammerin were both twelve when *you* joined,” he shot back.

I felt like I had been punched in the gut. “That’s different.”

“Why? Because I’m not as good at Wielding as you were? I can get better. I *have* been getting better, I practice all the time. I haven’t even broken anything since you left for Threll. So I can be just as good as you.” His brow was knitted, hands balled up against the edges of his bowl. “I’ll work three times as hard. But I want to be just as good.”

I closed my eyes. A memory from long ago unfurled in the darkness. My brother, then seventeen, shoving a sword into my hands when I was ten years old. Or did I pick it up myself, after watching him wield it?

I drew in a breath and let it out slowly through my teeth. “Your value and skill as a Wielder has nothing to do with how much time you spend on a battlefield.”

“But—”

“Sammerin and I spent the better part of a decade trying to undo everything that the Ryvenai War did to us. Do you understand that?”

“But Max—”

I raised a finger. “Do *not*,” I said, “interrupt me. *Listen*. I had you moved to this division so that you could be my assistant. And when we arrive at Antedale, you will stay at the camp and mind all of the very important logistics to be minded, miles away from the fighting. Do you understand?”

A wrinkle deepened between Moth’s eyebrows. “But—”

“*Do you understand*, Moth?”

A long silence. He looked deep in thought. “So I won’t be helping,” he said, at last.

“Sometimes the best possible thing you can be is useless,” I said. And that was the end of that.

CHAPTER TWELVE



I dreamed of a memory. I dreamed of Esmaris.

I was fifteen years old, lounging in one of Esmaris's many velvet-adorned salon rooms. Two other women were there, too, more of his slaves — by the end, I was his favorite, but that was not true just yet. They were older than me, and two of the most stunningly beautiful women I'd ever seen. They draped themselves over Esmaris and his general, both of whom treated them as mildly irritating scenery. Still, they knew their roles, and I knew mine. They were the open arms, and I was still the curiosity — the Fragmented girl with strange skin and strange eyes, who could make such beautiful butterflies.

Esmaris and the general were talking business. I floated about the room with my little performances, but kept one ear turned to their conversation. I was young, but I already understood the value in collecting scraps from conversations no one knew I heard.

Today, Esmaris was displeased.

He had been fighting with another powerful Threllian family for valuable land to the east. Through the sheer might of his military force, he'd claimed one small section with intention to tighten his fist around the rest. But his rivals had been so incensed by his victory that they'd sent in their men to burn the fields. It was a suicide mission. The men who'd lit the fires — slaves — had died doing it. The family would not reclaim their land. It was a move made out of spite, and nothing else.

But of course, that was how the Threllian Lords played their games. They were not hungry, so a few thousand pounds of destroyed food meant nothing to them. Their slaves were possessions, not people, and so a few discarded lives in the name of revenge was considered to be an appropriate cost.

Esmaris's general was deeply displeased, his face growing mottled and purple the longer he talked, flecks of spittle landing on the slim arms of the woman draped beside him. It was an admirable feat of self control, I thought, that she didn't wipe it away.

"We will destroy them," the general spat, bringing his fist down on the table. "Our forces are nearly double theirs in size, and none in Threll are more skilled. We could rid Threll of their house forever."

But Esmaris's rage was cold and calculated. "We could," he said, calmly. "But we will not."

Even I had been surprised by that. The general's face contorted in confusion. "We can't let their disrespect stand."

"Of course not. But they chose meaningless destruction because they're too small-minded to think of anything bigger."

"They disrespected the Mikov name," the general growled. "They don't deserve mercy."

Esmaris's anger struck like a viper. That's always how it was — nothing but cool serenity, and then suddenly, his hand was at his general's throat, wrenching him down across the table.

"Mercy?" he breathed, slowly. "This isn't about *mercy*."

The general was twitching, struggling to breathe. I couldn't move. The two other women in the room avoided looking at Esmaris, making a careful show of not acknowledging what was happening right in front of them.

"What will I do with a thousand dead men?" And then Esmaris leaned forward, and said, "Dead men are useless. Dead men don't remember your name."

He caught me staring. His eyes flicked to me, and I was so afraid of the hatred that I saw in them that I couldn't breathe, couldn't speak. I was not supposed to look this cruelty in the face. I was not supposed to acknowledge what I was seeing.

But perhaps Esmaris thought so little of me that he saw no more judgement in my stare than he did in the faces of his decorative statues. He released the general, letting him fall over the table in a heap.

Esmaris Mikov did not attack that rival house. He could have destroyed their cities and burned their crops. He did not.

Instead he had their children taken, mutilated, sterilized. I heard only stories of what was done to them, and prayed that most of it was exaggeration even though I suspected it was not. In one swoop, with merely a handful of lives, Esmaris killed the family legacy. He sent them back the corpses. And he kept just one child from each branch of the family alive — tongue intact — to make sure they knew exactly who was responsible, and just how merciful he was.

And they did not attack Esmaris Mikov ever again.



“TISAANAH.”

My eyes snapped open. I knew right away that something was wrong. My hand was halfway to Il'Sahaj's hilt by the time the darkness came into focus.

A silhouette carved from the shadow as my sight adjusted. White skin, white hair, white eyes, white clothes.

“Get up,” Nura said, and I was already obeying.

“What happened?”

I knew, somehow, before the words left her lips. There was a certain buzz in the air, like the kind that lingered before a crack of lightning, one that nagged at Reshaye's hunger.

“Kazara struck first,” Nura said. “They're at our doorstep. Time to turn them away.”

She said it as if it were a grim chore to be done, the way one might speak of rats that had gotten into the grain shed or a long-overdue need to trim the hedges. I rose and threw on the military jacket that she presented me, shoved my feet in boots, dressed quickly in the dark.

When I rejoined Nura, she gave me a quick glance that held just a shred of uncertainty. No time to acknowledge it before she Stratagrammed us away, and a wall of cold air hit me.

The darkness of the bedchamber was replaced by the silver-dipped shadow of the mountains at night, moonlight falling over their peaks like spilled nectar. We stood on one of the outposts, a wall sprawling in either direction. We were surrounded by Syrizen. Their faces were all tilted to the horizon.

At first, topography of the landscape disguised what I was really looking at.

And then, all at once, it snapped into focus. I fought the urge to curse.

How many men was that? A thousand? Two? They spilled from between the rocky ridges in the distance, on horseback and foot, bloody-red torches dotting their lines.

“How they hell did they make it here so fast?” Nura bit out.

“Stratagrams. The shelter of the mountains.” Anserra shot me an appraising look. “At least we have our great savior.”

“Savior indeed,” a familiar voice purred, and I turned to see Zeryth approaching, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his long white coat and a smile twisting his lips. And yet, as he stepped closer, I could see something simmering beneath the surface of that smooth voice, that smirk, souring them to an off-color pantomime of his usual manner.

“Do you know the things I laid at Esmee Varnille’s feet in exchange for Kazara’s alliance? And this is how she repays me for my generosity.”

“Word spread fast,” Anserra said. “They’d know that your armies had left yesterday.”

“So they think I’d be stupid enough to present myself up like a little lamb for slaughter. They don’t know who’s on the butcher block.”

When his gaze fell to me again, all traces of that smooth exterior were gone, replaced only with ragged steel. Something was different about him, rougher, sharper, less carefully controlled. He pulled close, and when he did I saw nothing but hatred in his eyes — eyes that were ringed with uncharacteristic darkness.

“I saw what you did to those slavers,” he snarled. “I want what you do to them to be *worse*.”

Reshaye shivered, stirred to hunger by my fear or the promise of blood, or both.

I looked to the armies. Thousands of men. Thousands of lives.

“The slaver hub was fifty men,” I said. “These are thousands.”

{*Nothing, compared to what we can do,*} Reshaye hissed, as if insulted by my hesitation.

Zeryth let out an ugly chuckle. And his fingers tilted my chin towards him, as he leaned close enough to have kissed me. “Don’t act as if I don’t know exactly what you’re capable of.”

This close, I could see spiderwebs of dark veins beneath the pale skin around his eyes.

He released me and turned to the others.

“They’re coming through the Ervai Pass,” Zeryth said. “If you bring down the cliffs there, you can crush them.”

Crush them.

Literally *crush* them.

Bile rose in my throat. Suddenly my nostrils were filled with the overwhelming scent of smoke.

“That would be a waste,” I said. “If Esmee Varnille surrenders to you, you take Kazara and all of its armies. Why would you destroy what would be yours?”

“Esmee Varnille, and the people that populate her city, made it very clear that they have no interest in being of any use to me.”

“You’re allowing your spite to cloud your decisions,” Nura said. “Tisaanah is right. You’re throwing away precious resources.”

Zeryth let out a low chuckle. “My, Nura. To think, is that a soft heart I hear beating beneath your cold little breast?”

“These are Arans, Zeryth,” she hissed. “The very people you’re trying to lead. Think about this.”

These are people, Nura. The memory hit me fast, gone as soon as it had arrived. Max’s words in Sarlazai, before Nura forced him to slaughter a city.

{And they never forgot him,} Reshaye whispered. {He showed them what he was capable of. Now, he is remembered. Those deaths bought victory.}

“Are you questioning my decision, Second?” Zeryth’s mouth twisted into a sneer. “I have thought about it. I thought about it every time Varnille threw my negotiations back at me. I thought about it every time she called me low-blooded trash. Bring down the cliffs. Give me a victory that shocks the world.” He reached into his pocket and shoved a vial into Eslyn’s hand. “Go with her,” he said. “And use this to help.”

Eslyn frowned at her hand. “Is this—?”

“You know what it is,” Zeryth said, but I could barely hear him, my blood now pounding in my ears.

“This is a mistake, Zeryth.”

He whirled to me, anger finally sparking. “Do not question me. These are your orders. And I invoke your Pact, Tisaanah.”

A rough gasp escaped my lips. The words snapped something around my throat, like a leash yanked suddenly

taut. I could feel Zeryth's magic, too, reaching for me — reaching for my mind, and squeezing, squeezing.

“Give me a victory, Tisaanah. Give me a victory that leaves Varnille and all of her noble-blooded friends quaking in fear at my name. Make me someone to fear. And do whatever it takes. Those are your orders.”

Those are your orders.

Those are your orders.

Every word was a link in a chain, one that bit into my skin, sawed at my thoughts. Everything was suddenly foggy.

Zeryth was gone fast, leaving me swaying as he strode away. Just as quickly, Eslyn was beside me.

“Looks like we have our commands,” she muttered.

“Wait,” I said. My head was pounding. “Wait, I—”

I can't do this.

I couldn't speak the words aloud — they got caught somewhere between my mind and my lips, like flies stuck in honey.

{Yes we can. We can do all he asked, and more.}

That was what I feared.

{Humans. Always so afraid of what you are capable of.}

The soldiers were spilling through the pass, faster and faster. Eslyn gave me a look that veered on pity.

“What did you think you signed up for?”

Nura yanked me aside, pulling me close.

“I know it's hard,” she said. “Believe me, I do. But what he is asking for is a decisive victory. The more force we show today, the sooner the war will be over. And the sooner you can go fight your war in Threll, Tisaanah. Just think of that.”

Gods, the way she rationalized it. As if it were a simple equation, a scale to be tipped, a game to be played only in numbers.

And yet...

I thought of the people who were waiting for me, and the promises I had made. Was this it? Would I have to clear their path by burying this one in bloody rubble?

{Do you think any of those people would have cared about you or your people?}

I didn't have time to question.

Eslyn grabbed me, and the two of us disappeared into the air.



THESE ARE YOUR ORDERS.

The words were a collar, a heartbeat, a promise, and a curse.

I didn't think. Il'Sahaj was out, my muscles barely my own. The violence hit Reshaye like a drug, its rage-soaked satisfaction flooding me.

These are your orders.

Eslyn and I landed in the middle of the fighting.

Already, Zeryth's other troops had begun to spill forth from the outposts, defending the wall. Before Max left, we would have outnumbered our opponents many times over. Now, our defenses were noticeably weaker. Even through the fog of my command, I could acknowledge that in this, Zeryth had been right — I was the difference between victory and defeat.

These are your orders.

“We need to fight our way up,” Eslyn said, her voice nearly lost beneath the chaos. “We travel along the ridge. I can place Stratagrams. You can help weaken them, and we push through.” Something must have looked strange on my face, because she said, “Don't worry. We can do this.”

Of course *that* was what she thought I was worried about. Under any other circumstances, it would be insane for any Wielder to take down an entire cliff on their power alone — let alone a Valtain, who would have limited control over stone.

But I had Reshaye. And I knew what Reshaye was capable of.

It had taken a moment for the opposing soldiers to realize we were here, in their midst. Right after we landed, so did other Syrizen — stepping out of the air with their spears drawn, leaving bloody bodies like morbid gifts. So quickly, it devolved into chaos.

The first man I killed, I killed because I had to.

He came at me with his axe raised, and I struck before I could think. By the time I had turned to meet his face, it was slack, his leather armor rotting, Il'Sahaj covered in blood and blackened flesh. The magic was at my fingertips, in my skin, running through Il'Sahaj's veins.

These are your orders.

I had forgotten what this was like, the heady intoxication of it, the way Reshaye reveled in it. It pried away little pieces of control until I didn't know where its thoughts ended and mine began. *{Let me help you,}* it whispered. *{Let me do this.}*

Funny, how it seemed like an oddly tender offer, as if it was offering me mercy from my guilt. But I held onto my control — no matter how hard Reshaye fought for more.

Eslyn and I reached one side of the cliffs, where she withdrew the bottle that Zeryth had given her and crushed it in her palm, blood and silver liquid mingling together over her sliced-up skin. She drew in a little gasp, her body lurching, as if she had been struck with a greater force than she was expecting.

But she righted herself quickly. She pressed her palm to the rock and drew a ragged Stratagram in her blood.

“Help me,” she ground out.

These are your orders.

I pressed my hand to rock.

At first, I felt nothing. I was a Valtain, after all. I did not speak to stone, and it did not want to listen to me.

I loosened my grip on Reshaye. Let a little more of its power surge through me.

A crack. Not enough. Eslyn whirled, pressing her back to the rock, forced to split her attention to defend us.

“We don’t have time, Tisaanah,” she ground out, pushing a lifeless body off her spear.

{Let me do this,} Reshaye snarled.

These are your orders.

I gave up control. A smile that was not my own spread over my lips. Power spilled through me, like light decimating shadow. Tentacles of black crawled from my hand until the stone began to crumble.

These are your orders.

Something snapped into place. Something terrible, something I couldn’t control. The world became a smear. Blood was hot on my face. Eslyn and I turned, and Il’Sahaj was raised, and its hilt was so slick my palms slipped.

I could tell myself that it wasn’t me. That it wasn’t my own hand guiding them to death, but Reshaye’s. And I could let it all blur around me, the death and the stench and Reshaye’s glee and the desperation on the faces of the slaves, the ones who were waiting for me, the ones who didn’t have time for me to waste.

These are your orders.

{There is nothing to be ashamed of,} Reshaye whispered, as another body fell.

{These men would have cut you down without hesitation. They would never have respected you. They would never have considered the lives of your kin. Let them fear us. Let them see what we are.}

One more Stratagram, then two. Eslyn struck with lethal precision, the two of us slipping through the air like a needle passing through fabric. With every hit, the cliffs grew weaker.

And I let myself go.

It was easy, in some ways, to just let Reshaye do it. Easy to cede responsibility. If I were to let myself slip a little further, I could fall away from my own body completely — let Reshaye do the dirty work of Zeryth's command, let it win the war, let it bring me back to my people with good news.

Why not? I couldn't fight it anyway. Reshaye was in my bones. Zeryth was at my throat. Magic was at my fingertips, magic that did nothing but kill. And the lives of a thousand slaves were at my shoulders.

These are your orders.

Until I looked down, and saw a face that made my heart lurch.

The young man was on the ground, there between me and my goal. He was wounded, his leg shattered by some strike I didn't remember making, or perhaps by one of the Syrizen. Blond hair caked with mud fell over his forehead, framing a pair of large, watery-blue eyes.

A spark of recognition tore through me. Reshaye's pull faltered.

He looked like Serel. So much like how he'd looked the day I first met him, years ago, the day I begged Esmaris for his life.

I froze.

These are your orders.

{Do not stop!} Reshaye roared.

Seeing the opening, a soldier opened a slice across my shoulder. Eslyn pushed me out of the way, buried her spear in my attacker, yanked me against the cliffs. We slipped through nothingness, reappearing near the top of the ridges.

“What are you doing?” she hissed. “We don’t have time to stand around. One more and this comes down.”

Reshaye’s magic was already throbbing at my fingertips.

These are your orders.

I closed my eyes, and remembered the exact words of Zeryth’s command.

Give me a victory, Tisaanah. Give me a victory that leaves Varnille and all of her noble-blooded friends quaking at my name. Make me someone to fear. And do whatever it takes.

“No,” I choked out.

“No?” Eslyn repeated.

{No?} Reshaye hissed.

“Take me to the front,” I said to Eslyn. “Quickly. Over there, beyond the forts.”

We had distracted most of the soldiers in the pass, but many more were still pouring through, making their way towards the outposts on the Korvius border.

“But the orders were—”

“I am following orders. *Now*, Eslyn.”

After a moment of hesitation, she obeyed.

We landed on the ground, looking out at the narrow path cutting through the rocks. The soldiers pouring through it were a tangle of flesh and steel, like a bloody, writhing serpent.

I knew that even without the cliffs, I could take them. I could take them all. With Reshaye, I was that kind of powerful.

{They could not defeat us,} Reshaye whispered. *{Bring them down. Show them all what we are capable of.}*

No.

I was shaking. Control was wavering.

{Why? You are too powerful to be so weak.}

And you have seen too much to think so small. I am giving you the gift you want the most.

The soldiers now knew we were here. They were approaching.

“Tisaanah...” Eslyn muttered, uneasy.

I lifted my hands. Let the magic flow, and build, and build — harnessed from Reshaye’s rage.

If you wish to be remembered, I whispered, why would we destroy our audience? You say you want to be powerful. That is what I want, too. How does one gain power?

{By wielding it.} Magic flared as Reshaye threw itself against my thoughts, nearly shaking my control, but I held it back.

By becoming a god, I murmured. And letting them live to become believers.

Esmaris’s voice unfurled in my mind like smoke: *Dead men don’t remember your name.*

The soldiers were gaining on us.

Let us show them everything we can do, Reshaye. Let us write a story.

And I surged forward, with everything that I had, every scrap of magic, every piece of power. I poured all of it out, into the ground, into the stone, into the air. Crimson butterflies swelled around me.

At first, I thought it wouldn’t be enough. I needed Reshaye. It hesitated, angered by my defiance and confused by my goals. But then, it watched as the soldiers faltered.

Do you see? I whispered. See the way they look at us?

Not like a monster. Like a god.

And that was enough. Reshaye seized control, pouring its magic into mine with the kind of intensity that scrambled my insides. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak. Could barely even see, through the blinding light that now surrounded me.

With a powerful burst of wind, I forced the soldiers back, back, back through the ravine.

And then I pressed my palms to the earth and for the first time I could feel it speaking to me, too — could feel my magic flowing into it.

Magic surged. The stone cracked.

Bloody butterflies spilled into the sky, so thick they dyed the sun scarlet.

Now, Reshaye, I commanded, and Reshaye obeyed.

Just as Zeryth had ordered, I brought the cliffs down.

When the smoke cleared, the soldiers would have seen the remnants of what was once the bluffs now reduced to rubble, blocking them from their path.

And they would have seen me — standing there with Il'Sahaj raised and blood-red wings spilling from my back, shielding the city.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



It had been more than five hundred years, long before I was born, since the Sidnee and the Wyshraj met amicably. More than that since we had opened our doors and let any of them, even a single representative, within the Pales.

My family and the Blades all stood at one of the highest and largest balconies in the Pales, a wide lip edged with silver that opened from the cliff face. The view from up here was famously beautiful and expansive. There was the forest, then the swamps, and far, far in the distance — only on a clear day — the faintest outlines of the tallest peaks in the House of Stone. Now, all of it was doused in the bloody red of sunrise.

My father, mother, and sister were silhouetted against that sky, and I could not help but appreciate how beautiful the three of them looked. Perfect as a painting.

We heard them before we saw them. It sounded like a breeze through the trees: *shshshshshsh*.

And yet, the sky was clear.

The sound grew louder. The breeze became a gust, my cape yanking at my throat, my mother's long black hair flaring like crows' wings. My sister grabbed onto her diadem to keep it from blowing away. My hand found the hilt of my sword.

SHSHSHSHSHSHSH.

All at once, they were everywhere.

Where there was once blue sky, there was now a moving mass of wings flying up from beneath the balcony. They

moved so fast and in such perfect unison that for one moment they looked like a single massive creature, backlit in shadow and splashed with red sunrise.

And when they dove, they became smears of feathers and color — the white of doves and blacks of ravens and yellows of delicate finches. Visible only briefly before a graceful cloud of rolling fog enveloped them, and when it dissolved, it revealed Fey bodies preparing to land on the balcony.

Fey bodies, with outstretched, beautiful wings.

“*Mathira*,” I whispered, and Siobhan promptly shushed me.

I couldn’t help it. *Look* at them.

They landed in perfectly synchronous rows, fair fabrics rippling around them. The last two to land were a man and a woman, both with the same shade of champagne blonde hair and particularly ornate clothing. Then, they parted and bowed.

My father, to my surprise, followed their lead. And as strange of a sight that was, we followed him without hesitation. I lifted my head just enough to watch her arrive: Shadya, the Queen of the House of Wayward Winds. Her wings were pure white, stark against her long red curls. A crown of gold peaks sat upon her head.

She surveyed us, her wings outstretched. Then, she drew them in tight, and they were simply... gone, beneath a flash of rolling smoke.

She turned to my father and bowed, turquoise chiffon gathering at sandal-clad feet.

“Teirna Reidnacht. It is an honor to be welcomed to the Pales for the first time in so many years.”

She spoke with a low, purring accent.

“It is an honor to have you and your people here, Es’reen Shadya,” my father replied.

We all stood, the two nations staring each other down and doing an awful job of hiding it. We could not have looked more different. The Sidnee all wore our finest clothing, deep

black and lush purple and silver threads, the Blades clad in leather engraved with our individual tales.

All this, while the Wyshraj wore... well, one could barely call them “clothes.” Their attire looked as if it could have been made from a few long, unfinished pieces of fabric artfully pinned around their bodies. All of it rendered in shades of gold or turquoise or white, and all of it leaving an expanse of skin showing that, among the Sidnee, would be truly shocking. The men donned one single swath draped over one shoulder, leaving practically half of their chest exposed, while the women wore theirs twisted to — mostly — cover their breasts and then drape down into capes.

“You think they fight in that?” I whispered to Siobhan. “One wrong move and all your secrets are revealed.”

This time she didn’t shush me, and a smirk twitched at the corner of her mouth.

My gaze fell to the two Wyshraj standing closest to the Queen, with the long golden hair. The female was whispering something in the man’s ear. Probably some equally rude retort, though not very funny, because he didn’t react at all. The light spilling in through the windows cast a gold glow across his skin. Well-built shoulders. Sculpted arms. A face that looked as if it were assembled from marble planes, both in beauty and in utter stillness.

If they were going to walk around like that, at least they had the decency to be good looking while they did it. No one could argue that.

My father stepped aside. “It is my honor to introduce you, Queen Shadya, to my wife, Alva. And my daughter, Orscheid. The Teirness.”

My sister, ever ladylike, blushed as she lowered into an elegant bow.

Shadya bowed her head. “It is a great pleasure to meet you both. Your beauty surpasses even what I have been told.”

I watched in silence. It had been so long ago since I stood in Orscheid’s place, but sometimes, it was impossible not to

imagine what it would feel like to be bowed to by the Queen of Wayward Winds.

My father turned to Caduan.

“And may I also introduce you, my Queen, to King Caduan Iero.”

The queen dropped into another bow, even lower than the one that she gave my father.

Caduan, to my horror... didn't. He just stood there, giving Shadya a stare that seemed to be picking her apart.

I wished I could reach out and shake him: *Don't just stand there, Mathira-damned idiot. Bow!*

Tension pulled the air tight. Finally, Caduan dropped to his knees, and it was like the entire room let out a silent breath.

They rose, and Shadya gave Caduan a warm smile, as if she hadn't noticed his infraction. “I congratulate you on your coronation, King Caduan, though I am deeply sorry for the circumstances that led to it. I assure you that we will not allow what happened to your House to happen to any other.” She looked out across all of us, and her voice rose. “Half a millennia, and the Houses now unite to make it so.”

She turned back to Caduan with fire in her eyes, and it was clear that she expected a reaction to match. Perhaps some hardened statement of solidarity, some declaration of vengeance, some furious promise of hope and blood.

Instead, he said, simply, “I appreciate that.”

I almost choked.

“I appreciate that?!” I muttered.

“*Sh!*” Siobhan hissed, but even she could not pretend that she didn't have the same reaction.

If Caduan noticed that everyone was staring at him with perplexed horror, he didn't show it. Shadya, at least, chose to let this oddity slide, too. She turned to the rest of us and swept her arms out.

“And that, of course, does bring us back to the topic at hand, does it not?” she said. “We have an abundance of things to discuss and very little time.”

My father gave a serious nod. “This, I cannot dispute. Come.”

WE GATHERED ALONG THE LONG, black glass table in my father’s finest gathering room. The walls were adorned with the most intricate maps of the Fey courts and the human lands that Sidnee artisans had to offer. Deliberate, of course, like everything my father did. Even these pieces of parchment needed to communicate to our reluctant allies the strength of the Sidnee clan. We all spoke with honey-sweet words, but they still held a little bitterness — bitterness that could merely be distaste, or could be poison.

The table was long, seating entire courts along one sheet of glassy black stone. Light spilled through tall, silver-rimmed windows. The Wyshraj sat on one side, their backs to the windows, making their flowing hair and loose robes seem to glow against the backlight. The Sidnee sat on the other side, all staid darkness and dark leather. Caduan was in the middle, so clearly part of neither clan, and so conspicuously alone.

Time ticked by as the most revered strategists from both nations outlined our current situation. Caduan was called upon to recount what had happened to the House of Stone, which he did calmly and factually — though I didn’t miss the way his eyes lowered as he spoke, the only crack in his composure. The Sidnee and the Wyshraj shared what they each knew of human aggressions, which turned out to be, in short, nothing.

“And this is why,” Queen Shadya said, at last, “my generals propose a very deliberate tactical approach.” She nodded towards to the two blond Wyshraj that I had noticed before.

“My two leading generals, Ishqa and Iajqa Sai’Ess, have developed a plan that I think we will both find mutually

agreeable,” Shadya said. They rose, taking up a place on either side of the massive map.

“One thing has been exceedingly clear while reviewing our current information, and while listening to King Caduan’s account of the attack,” the woman, Iajqa, said. Her voice was low and smooth. “The humans managed an unacceptable level of surprise, and our first step must be to mitigate this risk and learn the nature of our enemy.”

“We propose an initial approach rooted in information gathering and defensive strategy,” the man, Ishqa, continued.

“We have no time for careful measures,” Klein said.

“I certainly understand the impulse to respond with force,” Ishqa replied. “The atrocity that was committed against the House of Stone deserves blood. And I assure you that we shall have it. In time.”

He turned to the map, gesturing with an elegant hand to the northern Fey lands — where the Obsidian Pales stood. “I propose that we take a small, elite team through the Fey houses, traveling south, investigating the aggressors and cause of the attack.” He trailed his fingers over the Fey continents that soon gave way to smaller, more isolated Fey isles. “We will travel south, first to the House of Reeds, then past the Houses of Nautilus and Roiled Waves, and then further to the independent lands and the human nations.”

“The human nations?” Siobhan said. “Is that wise?”

Ishqa’s expression barely changed, but some faint movement of his mouth evoked the ghost of a smile. “I have served in the army of Wayward Winds for nearly a century, and led it for half of those years. In that time, I have learned that there is little more valuable in times of war than a few chosen feet on the ground, with eyes that are sharp and weapons that are sharper. That is how you stop a war before it begins.”

I wasn’t especially charmed by that Wyshraj snootiness to his tone, but he was undeniably right — and Siobhan, of all people, knew this.

My father nodded. “Certainly, we can assemble an army to travel with you.”

“No army,” Ishqa said. “I propose that we send only two representatives from each the House of Obsidian and the House of Wayward Winds. The fewer there are, the more easily we can gather information without attracting unwanted attention.”

“And in the meantime,” Iajqa said, stepping forward, “We will build and train a joint army here, preparing ourselves for whatever is to come. A universal Fey force, representing the best of the houses of Obsidian and Wayward Winds together, united, in the strongest and most finely-honed power in the world.”

As she spoke, her voice grew slightly faster, as if her excitement was getting the better of her. I couldn’t help but share in it. The Wyshraj may be uptight and poorly-dressed, but their warriors were the things of legends. Even their ridiculous fashion choices highlighted their lethal beauty — those little strips of fabric displaying cut muscles and practiced grace, framing battle scars with the same reverence with which the Blades treated our tattoos.

I blinked, and for a moment, the image overtook me: the black-clad Blades fighting alongside the Wyshraj knights, shadow and light, the stone and the sky mingling. Even in my imagination, it was so beautiful that I felt the hair on my arms rise.

I glanced at my father, wondering if he, too, saw the incredible beauty in this potential. If he did, he did not show it. “Have you already chosen who among the Wyshraj will join the scouting team?”

“Iajqa will lead the development of the joint military here,” Shadya said. “And Ishqa will be my point representative on the mission. This, of course, in equal partnership with whichever general you would like to send on your behalf. You can decide once—”

“I don’t need to wait,” my father said, smoothly. “Klein, my master of war, will join Admiral Iajqa in the development

of the military. And my daughter, Aefe of the Sidnee Blades, will represent the House of Obsidian on the scouting journey.”

I nearly choked on the air I was breathing. I barely heard anything after he said my name.

The Wyshraj nodded at this, completely failing to grasp why any of this was remarkable. But the Sidnee all visibly stiffened. I felt dozens of sets of eyes glance at me, confused. No one said a word. But I knew they were all thinking it. *I was thinking it:*

Why?

Klein was looking at me as if my father had just made some terrible mistake. I could feel Siobhan’s analytical stare drilling into the side of my face. But I looked only at my father. My father, who neither loved me nor respected me. My father, who had dozens of far more qualified Blades than I.

My father, who, despite all of that, had *chosen* me.

“I will go as well.”

The sound of a new voice pulled me from my distraction. I snapped my head down to the other end of the table, where Caduan sat.

“On the scouting mission,” he added, as if the silence that greeted him meant he had been unclear.

As always, he seemed to have woefully misread the room.

Shadya spoke first. “Perhaps it would be better to leave such dangerous travels to the soldiers. As a king, your insight may be needed here.”

“The Stoneheld nation is nothing more than a dozen people now, none of whom need me for anything,” Caduan replied. “To say that they need me to stand here doing nothing and being some sort of... figurehead is insulting to them and to me.”

Shadya’s eyebrows arched. Ishqa blinked three times in rapid succession, the only sign that he was taken aback.

I had to fight an awkward laugh. I didn't understand Caduan. Everyone kept trying to hand him the kind of respect I would kill for, and every time, he carelessly discarded it.

"I think it is unwise," my father said.

"I disagree." Caduan looked around the table, his stare suddenly razor-edged. "Let me remind you. I watched my home destroyed. I watched my kin murdered. I watched the world around me burn. And I am not going to sit here in a tunnel and wait for someone else to give me the answers. I want to know *why*, and when we find who did this, I am going to hear that answer from their lips."

His words were quiet, but they lingered in the air.

"It is not our place to disagree with that," I said, before I realized I was speaking aloud.

"Indeed." Shadya gave Caduan a curious look that he did not return. "It is not. And so it shall be, King Caduan."



THE MEETING GAVE way to a feast. Once the shock wore off, I was so excited that I could barely think — an affectation not at all helped by the several mugs of celebratory whiskey that I guzzled down over dinner. I threw myself into the music of the band, into the dancing at the center of the room. And when I finally saw my father stand and drift away — when I was finally able to find him standing in a quiet hallway, gazing off into the stone shadow of the Pales' tunnels — I chased after him only to slow to a stop a few paces behind, suddenly self-conscious.

I already had reason to distrust my own words, so often too sharp and too quick. I stood there in silence.

"What is it, Aefe?"

He didn't turn around. He was staring down the hallway, into darkness so deep that it was nothing but a wall of black.

"What are you looking at?"

“The Pales. Sometimes, when the world is dangerous and uncertain, I just like to... look at them.”

His palm pressed against the stone wall. Something in me leapt at this small, familiar gesture. *I do that too!* a childish part of me wanted to say, as if to cling to every thread of similarity between us.

I cleared my throat. “It is a great honor to serve them. A great, great honor. Thank you.”

My father glanced at me, and I could have sworn that I saw a flicker of pity in his gaze. “Contrary to what you might think, Aefe, I do believe you have... potential.” His stare fell to my exposed forearm, and the topography of dark X’s. “You just fail to utilize it.”

“Do you ever think that things could be different?” I asked, quietly. “Do you ever imagine what it would be like if they were?”

I cringed as soon as I spoke. As always, I had asked a question I shouldn’t have, and I knew the answer would hurt.

“There is no use in dreaming of realities that do not exist.”

“I am still your *daughter*.” I wrenched my sleeve up on my right arm, the one covered not with X’s but ink and raised scars that told the stories of my ancestry. “I wear your stories on my skin just as they are in my blood.”

“If only that was the only thing your blood carried.”

I flinched. There it was. Just as I knew it would, just as it did every time, it hurt.

But only because it would always be true.

My father turned to me. There was an odd expression on his face, something I could barely read but was so much deeper than his typical cold dismissal. If I didn’t know better, I might have thought it was affection. Or... regret.

“I do wish that things weren’t as they are,” he said. “But the gods have tainted you. You know why you cannot be the Teirness—”

“I do not want to be the Teirness,” I whispered. “I want to be your daughter.”

My father looked away, as if my words had encroached on something too personal, and I regretted them immediately. When he spoke again, his voice was measured and distant, and I hated my honesty for shortening that brief moment of connection.

“We stand at an important juncture, Aefe,” he said. “The crossroads of so many bloody pathways. Your mission is important, and it will decide whether this one leads to blood. I do not trust the Wyshraj. Watch them. And beyond that, watch for the truth. The Sidnee are relying on you.” He paused, then added, “*I am relying on you.*”

I couldn’t help but savor those words. I never thought I would hear them.

He placed a steady hand on my shoulder. “Show me all that you could be, my daughter.”

Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was the heady excitement of the day. Maybe it was the rush of his hand on my shoulder, the kind of familial touch I had not felt in so long. But I found myself fighting tears.

“Yes,” I choked out. “I will. I will.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“That,” Zeryth said, “was not what I had commanded you to do.”

He was pacing the length of his office. This seemed unusual. Zeryth was not the type to pace. I stood there in my soiled clothes, my jacket stained red, Il’Sahaj still in my hands. I had been summoned straight here from the battlefield.

“I did exactly what you commanded me to do,” I said. “You wanted victory, and I gave it to you.”

“You *let them retreat*.” Zeryth whirled to face me. Dark circles hung beneath his eyes. The look that glinted there reminded me of an edge of broken glass. Rawer than I’d ever seen them before. Stranger.

“Did you *want* me to kill all of those people, Zeryth?”

“They need to understand the consequences of what they’ve done.”

“They were certainly afraid.”

“Not afraid enough.”

The pacing resumed.

I watched him carefully. This was not the behavior of a man in control of the situation.

“Did you expect me to hand you a mountain of corpses, Zeryth?” I said, quietly. “What makes you think they would appreciate that from you any more than they appreciated it from Sesri?”

His mouth thinned. For a moment, I saw conflict war across his face. Fear. Gone as soon as I could identify it.

“You should know better than any of these other people here,” he snapped. “Do you think if you stood in my place, they would ever respect you unless you forced them to? You, a foreign slave? Do not patronize me, Tisaanah. You know as well as I do that they won’t get on their knees in front of a no-name bastard unless I force them there. Just like they forced me.”

His voice rose until it was nearly a shout, then echoed in the air, sticky with something resembling shame. He turned away.

All at once, I understood.

This was the real reason why Zeryth had chosen Max, of all people, to lead his armies. It was because Max had what Zeryth wanted most: not just a military mind, but a family name respected by the Aran upper class

Max had told me about the competition for Arch Commandant, all those years ago. Now, the memory returned, clicking another piece into place. There had been four candidates, he had told me. One had been killed in the war. Max had withdrawn after the deaths of his family. And Nura had been unable to continue while she recovered after Sarlazai.

And that had left Zeryth, and so he became Arch Commandant. Not because anyone *chose* him. But because he was the only one left standing.

The whole world shifted a little as I realized exactly how perilous Zeryth’s position was.

“You’re dismissed,” he said. He didn’t turn around, as if he didn’t want to let me see his face. Maybe he knew that I saw the truth.

By the time I got back to my room, blood was pooling in my footsteps. I’d been careful to remain steady when I was in the halls. But as soon as I closed my door, every seam snapped at once.

I didn't even make it to the bed. I hit the floor in a heap.

I WAS in Esmaris's office, lounging on a velvet couch, butterflies twisting from my fingers. On the battlefield, they had been ominous — here, they were little wisps of silver. Merely decorations, just like me. Esmaris had his general by the throat, and the other slaves and I acted as if nothing was wrong, as if a man's face was not pressed against the table, as if we weren't trapped in a box with a monster that could turn its rage on us at any moment.

One day it would turn on me.

“What will I do with a thousand dead men?” Esmaris snarled. “Dead men don't remember your name.”

I looked up.

Suddenly the room was empty. The general was gone, as were the women. Esmaris's dark stare turned to me — as if, all at once, he had realized how carefully I had been watching.

“Do you find yourself clever, Tisaanah?” he said.

I smiled. “Only a little.”

“You are still a slave. You always will be.”

I stood and crossed the room. I could see every tiny wrinkle on his face, every freckle, every silver thread of hair. Even in my dream, I knew these parts of him. While he had looked at me and seen another decorative possession, I had been memorizing him.

“Dead men don't remember your name,” I murmured, “but tell me, do you remember mine, wherever you are?” I tipped his chin up, the reversal sending a thrill through me — I loved the way it felt to look down on him. “There was a time when I had been eager to show you everything I had learned from you. I thought you would be proud of me. Isn't that funny?”

No, it had not been pride in his eyes the day he tried to beat me to death for exceeding his expectations.

“But I am still eager to show you, Esmaris,” I whispered. “And I hope that you can see it. I hope you can see it when I destroy your world with the knowledge I stole from you.”

And only then did he smile.

Suddenly it was Zeryth’s face cradled in my hands, dark veins beneath his eyes.

“But they never told us the cost, Tisaanah,” he said. “What does it cost to climb from so low? Are you willing to pay it?”

Blink.

Zeryth was gone. Esmaris was gone. The estate fell away, replaced by a familiar embrace. The scent of ash and lilac filled my lungs, the sear of heat trilling across my skin — lips, on my shoulders, my breasts, my throat, my mouth.

“It wouldn’t be so bad, to burn together,” Max murmured, lips against my ear. “Would it? You want that. I know you do.”

He spoke the truth that I was too afraid to acknowledge. Exactly how much I wanted to give up for him. Exactly how much I feared losing him.

And I had already let him go.

A breath, and he was gone.

I was alone.

{Not alone. Never alone.}

I turned and saw a figure shrouded in the dusk. Reshaye, as I had seen it in the Mikov estate, a shadow of a shadow of a person. Its face was tilted away from me, to the dark.

I approached it.

What are you looking at?

And then I felt it. The reaching hand. The overwhelming feeling of being watched.

{It is not what I see,} Reshaye whispered. *{It is what sees us.}*

I reached out into the darkness—

“BREATHE, TISAANAH.”

A shock of ice cold pressed to my forehead. My whole body convulsed and I blindly reached for... something, I wasn't even sure what, but what I hit was the edge of the basin, into which I violently emptied the contents of my stomach.

When I finished, I blinked into dim lantern light. Nura leaned over me.

“What're you doing here?” The question slurred. My tongue was not cooperative.

I hadn't felt like this since... gods, since the beginning.

“You can't be alone this way. Here.” Nura thrust a small bottle into my hands. “Drink.”

“How did you—”

“What you did out there was remarkable. Even compared to what I had already seen.” She gave me a hard stare. “You forget that I was there through all of it. I know the toll it takes, to do something like that. And forgive me if I didn't want our best asset to die alone in her room because she was being a showoff. *Drink*. For your own damned good.”

I swallowed the contents of the bottle and immediately regretted it.

“Don't throw that up,” Nura said.

“I am trying,” I muttered.

I lifted my head, or tried to. She looked different, her hair loose around her face. And she wore not her typical high-necked jacket, but a camisole that revealed more of her skin than I had ever seen.

Skin that was completely covered in horrible, disfiguring burn scars.

Even though I could barely keep my eyes open, I still found myself staring.

Nura gave me a humorless smirk.

“You and I and our scars. I suppose we both know what it’s like to pay for something.”

We aren’t the same, I wanted to say, but a wave of pain crushed me. Reshaye let out a hideous, wordless wail. The present and the past — mine and so many others — ran together, my senses assaulted by hundreds of fragments of memories all at once.

All of them drowning in white and white and white.

And *pain*.

When I came back to myself, I was on the floor. Shaking. Sweating. The cold cloth was pressed to my forehead.

“Idiot,” Nura muttered. “Was it worth it? All this to show off out there?”

Funny, how in the depths of agony, you find the most clarity.

If you were standing in my place, would you agree? Zeryth had asked me. You, a slave girl? How would you make them respect you?

Maybe Esmaris had been right. It was not enough to live like a human and die like one. I had to carve myself into their whispers.

Today, they had looked at me not like a slave, not like a woman, but like a god.

“Was it worth it?” Nura asked, as I sagged over the basin. An ugly smile lurched at my lips.

“Yes,” I choked out. “Yes, it was.”

I faded off again after that, reality melding with dreams in a grey smear of darkness. And perhaps I dreamed that, some time later, my eyes fluttered open under the control of another. Perhaps I dreamed that I rolled over to see Nura still in my room, reading, a glass of wine in her hand.

“You,” my voice creaked out.

Nura’s gaze slipped to me, growing colder. She set her wine glass down. “Hello, Reshaye.”

A smirk spasmed across my lips. “Are you not afraid to be here alone with me?”

“If you were going to kill me, you would have done it by now.”

“And yet, I have seen your fear. I know how deep it runs.”

The memories were shards of glass. Nura, her face contorted in hatred, falling to the ground for the fiftieth time. Nura, spilling her blood over an open, lifeless arm, in a room of white and white and white.

Nura, fighting again, and again, and again.

And now Nura, her face doused in moonlight, giving me a slow, cold smile.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But I hate you more than I fear you. And my hate is always stronger.”

“Hate.” I rolled the word over my tongue. My hand pressed to my chest. “She hates you too. She hates you almost as much as I do.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

Slowly, she stood and drew closer to me.

“Why her?” she whispered, at last. “Why did you choose her, when you rejected so many others?”

I let out a low chuckle.

“You envy her.”

“I don’t.”

“You do. And not because she has your former lover, but because she has *me*. And where would I have lived, in that mind of yours? Did you think that you would lock me in your palace of ice and steel, like everything else you fear?” I sat up, even though my muscles screamed. And I leaned close to her,

so close our noses almost touched. “You did not truly want me, because I would have seen everything in you.”

Nura’s face went hard. Her eyes glinted in the darkness like two shards of metal.

“We are not done with each other yet, Reshaye. We can fester in our hatred and let it make us strong, or stupid, or both. And make no mistake, I do hate you. I hate you more than I have ever hated anything.” She pulled away and went to the window, gazing out over the mountains. “But you and I know that there is something else coming. And our paths are still tangled.”

A shudder ran over my skin. For a moment, I thought I could see it — a shadow looming, a silhouette with their face turned to me, far beneath the layers of magic.

Consciousness seeped away, the world fading back into my dreams.

And the last thing I heard was Nura’s voice. “The real fight,” she murmured, “has barely begun.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



We were on Antedale's doorstep when I received word of the attack on Korvius. The letter was nothing more and nothing less than a military report, the entire ordeal reduced to staid, factual words on a page. As if such bland words could capture Tisaanah's incredible performance, and brilliant — stupid — *brilliant* bravery.

It was almost funny, to read it written so plainly:

Tisaanah Vytezic collapsed the cliffs and shielded the city with an illusion of wings. The display of power was enough to spur the Kazarans to retreat.

Oh, I didn't doubt it.

The memory of her voice caressed my ear: *We will find a way*, she'd whispered. And she had. She used the weapon she knew best, the weapon of a perfect performance, to win a bloodless battle.

Brilliant.

But that moment of pride lasted only for a second. The report ended with tallies of military losses and damaged property. I flipped it over to find nothing but a blank page. There was no information on Tisaanah, or her state. A knot formed in my stomach.

I knew too well the toll that Reshaye's magic demanded. And what was described here? It could have been enough to kill her.

I read the report again. Put it down. Then withdrew a plain sheet of parchment and a pen. I hesitated — what would I write? What would I ask? I struggled with words at the best of times, and now, I had too many of them to capture in a stroke of ink.

Finally, I wrote:

Tisaanah,

Tell me you're alright, you wonderful idiot.

Max.

I stared at the page. Then, I wedged one additional word in between the lines:

Tisaanah,

Tell me you're alright, you wonderful idiot.

Love,

Max.

It would win no poetry awards. And the words were far too weak to describe what I felt. But I folded the letter up anyway, scribbled a Stratagram, and sent it away.



THE CITY of Antedale was heavily fortified, surrounded by tall stone walls that were lined with golden spires. A wolf, the crest of the Gridot family, loomed over the gates. It was a disgustingly gaudy thing, large enough to be seen even from nearly a mile away, and polished with such verve that it gleamed beneath the waning late-afternoon light.

Gridot, it seemed, had been well aware we were on our way to pry his title from his hands. When we reached the city, we found that the standing army of Antedale was already waiting for us, lines of soldiers surrounding the gates.

Wonderful.

We halted, just far enough away to avoid being an immediate threat while making it very clear that we greatly overpowered them. That much was obvious even at a glance — our numbers were evenly matched, but I had hundreds of skilled Wielders behind me, while the Antedale forces were mostly volunteer militiamen.

This was not a comfort to me.

I sent a messenger to their head of guard bearing a letter, demanding their surrender and Gridot's sworn fealty to (and here, I nearly gagged) the rightful king Zeryth Aldris. An hour later, my letter was returned to me, crumpled and smeared with what I chose to believe was mud. The reply was only one line:

The great city of Antedale rejects Zeryth Aldris's baseless command.

I really could not blame them.

"A stupid decision," Essanie remarked.

Stupid or brave. I wasn't sure which.

"They won't last an hour," Arith agreed.

Undoubtedly true.

"My men are ready to march," Essanie said. "Better to strike at nightfall, anyway. We can wield light and fire, and they don't have many Wielders."

One more advantage that we could use to slaughter as many of those poor bastards lining the gates. And slaughter them we would, surely.

Arith nodded. "By breakfast, we'll be on our way out." He let out a laugh. "Scended, my wife'll be pleased to know that I'll be making back for our anniversary after all. You know, she—"

"Probably not," I said. I held the map of Antedale, examining runny ink lines that represented the city's winding streets.

“Sir?”

“Don’t get your wife’s hopes up.” I set down the map and turned to my captains. “We’re not going to march tonight.”

“With all respect, why not?” Essanie asked. She was looking at me as if I had announced that I was quitting the military to go breed exotic birds. “What are we waiting for? We would win.”

When I answered, I was acutely aware of Essanie’s loyalty to Zeryth, and the promise that bound me to him. “We will win,” I said. “But it won’t help the King’s reputation if we overpower them so completely. He would become another Sesri. Is that what you want?”

Essanie and Arith exchanged a perplexed glance.

“I believe that a show of power is exactly what the King needs right now,” Essanie said. “If we prove that we are not to be trifled with, it will serve as a warning to the other rebels. And with respect, General, that is the King’s chosen strategy.”

Of course it was.

“We can’t disobey his orders,” Arith said.

Of course we couldn’t.

“We won’t.” I stood and stretched. “Make no mistake, our illustrious king will have his victory. But he won’t have it tonight. Return to your soldiers and tell them they’re welcome to turn in for the night if they wish. And they’ll get further orders in the morning.”

Deafening silence. I slid my hands into my pockets and regarded Essanie and Arith. They did not move.

“Well? Is there something else you want to say?”

Going by the looks on their faces — Essanie’s withering disapproval and Arith’s abject confusion — there was *plenty* more that they wanted to say. But they were both well-trained, competent soldiers, and well-trained, competent soldiers did not argue with their commanding officers. So they bowed their heads, saluted, and left me alone in my tent, where I sagged back into my chair and stared at the draped fabric above me.

Zeryth was right. I was a naturally cautious man, and this was a gamble. He would not be pleased.

But I thought of Tisaanah, and all that she had managed to accomplish with a glorious facade. I thought of my old friend Rian, and his brother, whose life was now balanced in my care. I thought of all those men lined up outside the gates, who just as easily could have ended up on either side of this battle. Was I about to sentence those people to death for the crime of rejecting Zeryth's crown?

Hell, no.

I received a letter from Zeryth that night, sent via Stratagram, even though I myself hadn't yet finished writing to inform him of my plans. This confirmed my suspicions that Essanie and Arith were loyal to him — loyal enough, apparently, to tell him before I had a chance to.

The letter was short:

Captain Farlione -

For all our sakes, I certainly hope you know what you're doing.

-Z.

I wrote back:

My Illustrious King -

I do.

- General Farlione

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



The five of us set off on horseback early. Goodbyes were said under the hush of pre-dawn. My father and I gave each other stoic nods, my mother a chaste kiss on my cheek, her scent of lavender as fleeting as her brief affection. It was only Orscheid — always, only Orscheid — who broke through the ice between me and the rest of my family. From a distance, she looked so pristine, meticulous as a work of art. I'd spent my life dreading the moment she would become like them, the day when she would become the Teirness more than she was my sister. That morning, she looked so elegant that I thought, *Perhaps this is that day.*

But then her perfect face crumbled, and she threw her arms around me in a wild embrace. I clung to her, wrapping my battle leathers around her delicate silk, and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“Be safe, sister,” I whispered.

“Be safe,” she choked back out at me. “I’ll miss you too much if—”

But my father cleared his throat, and the message was clear: we were making too much of a scene for people who needed to appear dignified in front of our reluctant allies. So I pulled away, ignoring the stinging in my eyes. I did not allow myself to look back.

I could feel Caduan staring at me as I rejoined the group — whether out of judgement or curiosity, I was not sure. I wasn't sure about anything, with Caduan.

If he said goodbye to anyone, I did not see it. Even the small, mismatched collection of Stoneheld who gathered to see us off didn't so much as lift their hands to wave.

We were silent as we rode, the only sound our horses' hooves crunching through the underbrush. When the road grew rockier and the trees thicker, I knew we were encroaching on the edge of Sidnee territory. I turned back to look at the Pales. Only a sliver of them remained over the horizon, the rising sun casting streaks of bloody red light over black glass. Soon, we would no longer be able to see them.

I was a child the last time I had been so far from home. I never thought I would be again. Let alone like this — let alone with *Wyshraj*.

Siobhan was, of course, my chosen companion. There had never been any doubt in that. Ishqa had chosen a Wyshraj general named Ashraia as his second. He was a broad and burly man, rougher-looking than most of the other Wyshraj, with a long dark beard and braided hair that nearly reached his waist. A nasty scar sliced his left cheek, and it wrinkled every time he shot me or Siobhan a glare of skeptical disdain.

He did not trust us, and didn't care if we knew it. That was fair. We didn't trust him either. Besides, I far preferred Ashraia's honesty to Ishqa's glass politeness. His tranquility reminded me of the surface of a too-calm pond: a reflection of a smooth sky that merely masked whatever dangers lay in its depths.

We rode in silence for hours, hardly stopping. At this pace, it would take only a week to reach our first destination, the House of Reeds. My stomach twisted at the thought of it. Both the Sidnee and the Wyshraj had written to the king of the House of Reeds, and neither had received a response. But the Reedsborn were notoriously private, one of the rare small houses that were on poor terms with both the House of Obsidian and the House of Wayward Winds. It was possible that they were simply trying to stay out of a conflict that they wanted no part in.

Even still. The thought of it was never far from my mind. Ishqa, who — to my petty annoyance — headed up the group, was the one who stopped, lifted his face to the dusky sky, sniffed twice, and simply stated, “We will stay here for the night.”

I almost argued with him simply because I hated his tone.

But we were all exhausted, and no one was about to disagree. Siobhan and Ashraia went off to kill some rabbits — together, under the unspoken understanding that neither group trusted the other to go anywhere alone with a weapon — while the rest of us remained to set up.

It wasn’t long before Siobhan and Ashraia returned. It would be impossible to miss them. Ashraia was stomping through the brush like a bull.

“Disrespectful,” he spat. He was clutching dead squirrels by their tails.

“Ridiculous,” Siobhan was muttering. She held two lifeless quail. The sight of them had my mouth watering. We hadn’t eaten all day, and the quail looked much more appealing than Ashraia’s rodents.

Ishqa straightened. He had just started the fire, and as he swept a sheet of golden hair away from his face, it looked like an extension of the flames. “What is the problem?”

It was very, very obvious that there was a problem.

Siobhan shot me a frustrated glance, shaking her head.

“*She*,” Ashraia growled, “has no respect for our ways.”

“Would it be more respectful for me to leave them in the dirt?” Siobhan replied. Ashraia scoffed.

Ishqa’s stare hardened, an ever-so-slight rearranging of his features. I followed his gaze... to the dead birds in Siobhan’s hands.

“We do not kill birds,” he said, coldly. “Let alone eat them.”

Reluctantly, I had to admit that made sense.

“I would have been willing to eat *rodents* out of... respect for the Wyshraj ways. But I’d prefer to be told this ahead of time, rather than swung at without notice.” She glared at Ashraia. “It’s rare that creatures that attack me from behind walk away alive.”

My eyebrows lurched. “Attack?”

Siobhan approached, and as she ventured closer to the firelight I saw it: a bloody streak over her shoulder.

My attempt at calm diplomacy drowned beneath a wave of rage.

My blade was in my hand before I could think. Two steps, and my body was pressed against Ashraia’s hulking form, blade to the underside of his chin. “Do not *ever* raise a hand against her,” I snarled, my incisors already sharpening.

The threat had barely left my lips when I felt the warmth of another behind me — and cold steel against my throat.

“And I ask the same of you.”

Ishqa’s voice was close enough to rustle my hair. Smooth and quiet, but as cold as the steel pressed against my skin.

Two breathless seconds passed, with all those weapons ready to strike. And then, everyone let them fall at once. We all watched each other warily, a dare to make the first move. My eyes were locked on Ishqa’s. The fire roared up between us, heat rippling the still panes of his face.

I felt the weight of the responsibility my father had placed upon me more acutely than ever. In this role, I was Ishqa’s equal. I had been allowing him to lead. No longer. The Wyshraj had been our enemy for a millennia before this, and they would be our enemy again the second this strange blip in time was over.

I could not afford to forget that.

I refused to be the first to speak. Ishqa seemed to have made the same vow. We stared each other down, waging a silent battle for control.

Caduan’s voice finally sliced through the silence.

“You are all,” he stated, plainly, “acting like children.”

The sheer force of his annoyance was enough to crack the tension.

Ishqa turned to Siobhan. “Ashraia should not have raised his blade against you. I apologize on his behalf.”

“I’d prefer that he apologize on his own behalf,” Siobhan said.

Ashraia was silent, a wrinkle over his nose, and it was only after Ishqa gave him a prodding look that he loosened a frustrated grunt. “In the future, I will hold my blade,” he said gruffly, “though not my words, I warn you.”

“Nor will I,” Siobhan replied, “so I can’t argue with that.”

Ishqa turned a gaze to me, then to the quail at my feet. I knew exactly what he wanted me to say. What the polite and chivalrous thing to do would be. But I’d never been good at being polite and chivalrous. Now, my notorious, damned stubbornness clamped my lips shut.

“Fine,” I finally spat. “Out of respect for your *ways*, we will not eat the quail tonight. And we will refrain from hunting birds in the future.”

It was not difficult to hear my irritation. Ishqa cocked his head, and maybe it was my imagination or the warping smoke of the fire, but I could have sworn I saw a spark of amusement in his stare.

“Thank you, Aefe,” he said.

“Thank you, Ishqa,” I replied, reluctantly.

“Thank you, gods,” Caduan muttered, with a sincerity that made me snort a sudden, unexpected chuckle.



WE COOKED UP THE SQUIRRELS, a poor meal for five warriors who had been traveling all day, but still, I wasn’t about to complain about any quantity or quality of food at this point. I

had already downed several unladylike bites when I noticed that the two Wyshraj were waiting, eyes closed, face lifted to the sky. They dragged their pointer fingers to their foreheads, then to their hearts, then to the soil. With each movement, their lips formed soundless words.

Siobhan, Caduan, and I ate silently, watching this. Ishqa, noble as he was, managed to make this look... well, at least somewhat graceful. But watching someone as large and burly as Ashraia go through these movements painted a particularly silly image.

They performed this cycle several times before, finally, opening their eyes.

“Were those prayers?” Caduan asked. No judgement in his voice, just curiosity.

“Yes.” Ishqa looked to me, one eyebrow quirking. “The Sidnee do not pray?”

“I have heard that the Sidnee are a godless people,” Ashraia grumbled.

“We do have gods,” I said, tearing off a chunk of roasted squirrel, “but ours don’t ask us to perform silly dances for them.”

“We make sure that our gods fully see our appreciation for them,” Ishqa replied, smoothly. “And because we speak to them often, our gods gift us with appreciation in kind.”

“Our gods appreciate us just fine.”

Do they now? a jeering voice in the back of my head whispered. *Is that why they tainted you?*

I pushed the thought away and tore off another chunk of squirrel.

“We need their service now, more than ever.” Ishqa’s gaze went far away, the remnants of his smirk fading. It was the first time I’d seen anything akin to concern, true concern, on his face.

“We cannot rely on the gods to help us,” Caduan said. “I think we’ll just need to help ourselves.”

He barely had picked at his food. The fire haloed his profile, highlighting the severe line of his nose and chin, the serious set of his jaw. He didn't look up.

Ishqa gave him a look that veered on pity.

"I know that your people, above all, understood the value of spiritual faiths and magics," he said. "The Stoneheld are known for building the most magnificent temples of any house, and for having the most committed spiritual scholars. In dark times as these, we need their faith more than anything."

"The temples were beautiful," Caduan said, quietly. And he paused, as if remembering, a mournful smile at his lips. Then he looked back at the fire, and it was gone. "But when the humans came, they crumbled just as easily as the brothels. And the scholars and the whores ended up in the same graves."

Well, what was there to say to that? From then on, we ate in silence.



LONG AFTER EVERYONE else drifted to sleep, I lay there, eyes wide open, staring at the night sky. It had been decades since I had last slept so far beyond the Pales, and even back then, I was a little Teirness housed in the most luxurious places the world had to offer.

Now? Now, I was alone beneath the sky. I looked up at the stars and had never felt so small, so exposed. Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw the bloodied faces of Caduan's kin.

By the time I heard rustling in the forest, I was grateful for the distraction. My eyes snapped open. Slowly, I rose. The fire was low. Siobhan was asleep, even at rest looking ready to leap into action, lying on her side with her fingers close to the blades that lay beneath her bedding. Ashraia was sprawled out like a sleeping bear, limbs escaping his bedroll at all directions, snoring loudly. And Ishqa was completely still, like the stone carving on a crypt, his hands laid gracefully over the hilt of his sword.

And then, there was an empty bedroll.

I followed the sounds off into the woods. I found Caduan in a clearing. A ball of fire lingered in the center of the clearing, hovering and self-contained — clearly magic, though it occurred to me that I'd never asked if Caduan was a magic speaker. His back was to me. It took me a moment to realize that he held his sword.

I froze. My hand went to the hilt of my own weapon.

“You don't need to worry.” His voice was barely above a whisper. He peered at me over his shoulder, offering me a half smile. “I have no ill intentions.”

“What are you doing?” My hand was still at my belt. Caduan's eyes slid down my body, landing there.

“It's embarrassing, honestly.”

My gaze fell to the ground. Years of training made recognizing patterns in the underbrush second nature, and it took seconds to recognize the pattern of the footsteps in the dirt. The same steps, running back and forth.

Exercises.

“You're practicing,” I said, letting my hand fall from my sword. I joined him in the clearing. The weapon he held was a Stoneheld sword, the artisan craftsmanship matching the beauty of his crown. It was impossible not to admire it — elegant and delicate, yet clearly lethal, copper etchings on the hilt and beautiful ancient Stoneheld writing carved into the steel of the blade.

He glanced down at it. “For a long time, I saw swordsmanship as nothing but sport, and a largely useless one at that. But given present circumstances...”

I winced. He did not need to say more. I glanced to the fire hovering above the ground.

“You are a magic speaker.”

“Yes.”

My brow furrowed, thinking back to the conversation earlier that night. “But you do not pray.”

“Not typically.”

“So who gives you the magic if not the gods?”

The corner of his mouth twitched.

“Are you a magic speaker?” he asked.

I patted the hilt of the sword at my hip. “Magic is for the patient. Steel is for the rash.”

It was not an answer. But I didn’t want to give him one, especially not when mine was so complicated. And especially not when he was looking at me like he saw right through me.

I looked to the ground, following the markings of his footsteps. “Show me your drills.”

He hesitated. I cocked an eyebrow at him in a silent challenge, and moments later, he was showing me the exercises. To my surprise, he certainly knew how to wield the weapon — his movements were graceful and technically impeccable. It was the sort of thing that surely had served him well in a marble training room, where a sword was meant to be a dance partner rather than a weapon.

Pretty. Impractical.

When he finished, he turned back to me. “It’s what I know,” he said. “But useless against them.”

Did he know from experience? Did he try to fight them and fail? I thought of his wounds — worse than any of the others. Not the wounds of someone who had been fleeing.

“Do it again,” I said, and he obeyed. But this time, he made it three steps in before I slid in front of him, my blades raised, countering one of his strikes and forcing him to adjust. He stumbled and I took that opening, too — low, beneath the elegant strike of his rapier. But he recovered quickly. Another strike I had to dodge, and then one I blocked, our blades locked between us.

“You can’t practice alone,” I said. “You need to learn how to make the movements effective, not elegant.”

Caduan’s eyes searched my face. I had to resist the urge to look away. *Mathira*, it was uncomfortable to be observed so closely. Even if there was, too, an odd excitement in it.

“If only what I had learned in the House of Stone had been more practical,” he said. “Perhaps things would have been different. And perhaps...”

The gaze that had just been so sharp it carved me apart now drifted far away, and I felt a pang of pity for him.

“There is no use in dreaming of realities that do not exist,” I said — echoing my father’s words before I even realized it. “Not unless we follow such dreams with action.”

He blinked. When his gaze came back to me, there was something in it that was so unfamiliar and yet oddly pleasant. No one wore that expression when they looked at me.

“Why are you not the Teirness?” he asked, quietly.

The tension broke. I pulled away, shoving my blades back into their sheaths.

“Because my sister is.”

“I know the order of succession of the House of Obsidian. The power passes from mother to eldest daughter—”

“My mother is not well.”

“Then what of—”

I’d had enough. I whirled around. One breath, and I’d disarmed him, his rapier in my hand. I pressed him to the leaf-covered ground, his own blade at his throat. Our panting breaths lingered in the air between us.

“You will need to get better than this,” I said.

He watched me, eyes narrowed. Surely he knew a distraction when he saw one.

But then a smile twisted at one corner of his mouth.

“I have no argument.”

“I will help you. If you want it.”

The smile warmed his eyes. They really were something.

“I would be honored to receive your instruction, Aefe.”

What was it about the way he said my name? I rose to my feet and threw his rapier to the ground beside him.

“Then get up,” I said. “And stop asking so many questions.”



TWO WEEKS OF TRAVELING PASSED. Though we had all managed to refrain from drawing weapons on each other since that first night at camp, tension stretched out between us like a drawn bowstring. At night, I crept away from camp and joined Caduan in the forest, where together we would train. He was a passable swordsman, even a talented one, but what went further than raw talent was his obvious love for learning.

Swordsmanship, though, was not the only thing Caduan wanted to learn. Every night, I dodged his questions just as I dodged his rapier. I quickly learned that he greatly enjoyed knowing things. Perhaps that was why his stare disassembled its subjects and put them back together again.

But I was not ready to let him see so much of me.

Still, for reasons I couldn't explain, our nights together became a bright spot at the end of long and exhausting days. There was a certain satisfaction in chipping away at something so tangible when there was so much we could not control.

We still received no response from the House of Reeds. Their silence could mean nothing, or it could mean everything.

The night before we were to arrive, our training session was a mess — my instruction muddled and short-tempered, Caduan's practice distracted and clumsy. After a few half-hearted rounds, I sank down onto a log. I had never been very good at stuffing away my feelings. And now, my anxiety overwhelmed me.

“What do you think?” I asked. “What do you think we’re going to find, tomorrow?”

He turned to me. He was panting, slightly, from the exertion of our last exercise. He wore a thin cotton shirt, which clung to the outline of his form, damp with sweat. It opened just enough in the front to reveal the shape of his clavicle and the edges of still-healing wounds running over it.

He looked so different from the bloody figure I’d hoisted out of the swamp. And yet, the memories he never voiced were written into every line of his body.

“I hope for the best,” he said. “But I suspect the worst.”

He spoke so matter-of-factly.

I stared at him, a wrinkle between my eyebrows. “How can you be so calm about all of this? If I were you...”

There were no words for it. I would be drowning in my rage.

Caduan’s face hardened. “What makes you think I’m calm?”

I blinked, and when I opened my eyes, it all rearranged. I felt like a fool for not seeing it earlier. The stillness in Caduan was not calm. It was paralyzing rage.

“I am not calm, Aefe.” He stepped closer, eyes burning, jaw tight. “I am on fire.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



When I awoke, my head felt as if it was made of stone. Nura told me that I had slept for almost two days. It still didn't seem like enough. But at least I could stand without tipping over, and though my head pounded and my stomach still churned, I seemed to be done emptying my guts.

“Clean yourself up and get dressed.” Nura threw a military uniform onto my bed. “We have a meeting to attend. One battle might be over, but we still have a war to fight.”

Didn't I know it.

I obeyed, and when I met Nura again, she led me to the library of the Farlione home.

It might have been one of the most stunning rooms I'd ever seen — even compared to the cold grace of the Threllian Lords' architecture. The entire Farlione estate was beautiful. But this room was the one that reminded me most of Max's cottage, albeit a much, much grander version of it. Still, it had the same cluttered warmth, the shelves overflowing with books and packed with curious oddities. I wondered if Max used to spend a lot of time here when he was young. I could picture him, tucked away into little crevices with a book, hiding from whatever social gatherings were happening beyond the doors.

But no one here, today, was looking at the books. There was a long table in the center of the room, covered in maps. Zeryth sat at its head. Anserra was there, too, as were Eslyn and Ariadnea. The others I did not recognize. There were five

figures, all of whom looked to be in their fifties or sixties — two were Valtain. All of them wore red sashes around their neck, hanging down their backs.

“The Council of the Orders,” Nura murmured to me. “Or what’s left of them, anyway.”

My interest was piqued. I had read of the Council, but never met any of its members — though I’d tried to get one or two of them alone during the ball, what felt like a lifetime ago. But even though I didn’t know these people, they clearly knew me. When we entered the room, every set of eyes turned towards me. As I sat down, I could feel magic reaching for me, a mind trying to examine mine. I carefully guarded the wall across my thoughts, my gaze slipping to my left, where a Valtain man with long, wavy silver hair eyed me with great curiosity, smoking a pipe.

I gave him a polite smile that told him I knew exactly what he’d been up to, and he returned it with what looked like genuine satisfaction.

I still felt awful. But I was careful to appear completely put together.

“Ah yes,” Zeryth said, eyeing me. “Our savior returns.”

He looked exhausted, the shadows beneath his eyes even darker now. He leaned back in his chair, gaze trailing around the table.

“As we all have seen, thanks to Tisaanah, the Kazarans have surrendered. Retreated, but... I suppose we can’t have everything. The question remains, then, of what we do next. There are many cities in the north that need to be dismantled. General Farlione is currently laying siege upon the city of Antedale.” Again, a twitch of disapproval at his lip. “Though I have made it clear that time is of the essence.”

Just the sound of Max’s name made my heart leap. A siege. I wondered what his plan was. I knew he must have one.

“And after that,” Zeryth went on, “he will move on to other cities in the south. We, then, are left with many here.” His gaze fell to me. “Thankfully, as we all saw, we have...

significant resources. It should be quick work, if we leverage all that we have. And so, that brings me to my request for all of you. Many of you have strong connections among Aran nobilities. I ask you to write to them. Ask for their support, from their private armies. We have cities to conquer, and we must conquer them quickly.”

The Valtain man across from me let out a puff of smoke, gesturing to the map on the table.

“This,” he said, “is a great deal of sacrifice, Zeryth. There is a high cost to what you plan to do.”

It was difficult for me to hear accents in Aran, but his words were tinged in an unfamiliar lilt that made me think that he, too, was not a native speaker.

Zeryth gave him a withering stare.

“Are you suggesting, Iya, that we can’t win?”

“Of course not. You can certainly win.” I did not miss the change in his wording. “But the Orders were never intended to be an Aran institution. They belong to no nation. And yet, you want to discard thousands of lives in an attempt to secure Ara’s throne. This is not our fight.”

Zeryth’s lip twitched.

“We have already had this discussion. Does anyone have anything more helpful to contribute to this conversation?”

But Iya was not done.

“Are you feeling alright, Zeryth? You don’t look well.”

Zeryth gave him a cold smile. “I feel perfectly fine.”

“Mm.” Iya leaned back in his chair. “As I said. There are some things, some magics, that are not worth the cost.”

Did I imagine the way that his eyes landed on me before moving back down the table?

“As always, I so appreciate your insight, Councilor,” Zeryth said. Then, pointedly, he rolled out the map. “But we have more important things to discuss. Our path has already been decided. It’s just a matter of how.”

THE MEETING WENT on for hours, and by the end, my head was pounding. The future yawned out in front of me like a terrible, endless mountain. Whatever sense of accomplishment I'd felt after this victory withered away with every new X slashed over the map.

Perhaps I had managed to avoid the worst of a battle once. But I would have to do it again, and again, and again.

The thought sickened me. As it was, I already felt the hot blood of those that I had killed staining my hands. By the end of the meeting, I could barely breathe. Not that I allowed myself to show anything other than calm confidence.

When we finished, Zeryth was the first to leave, and slowly the others filed out of the room too. But I remained, walking the library. Every inch of it was packed with books or plants or archeological specimens, every piece of white wall covered with tapestries or paintings.

I paused at one display of insects mounted on little golden stilts. There were moths and enormous spiders, caterpillars and shiny, colorful beetles. The one that caught my attention was a small butterfly, wings glinting with faded flecks of gold. It reminded me of the one that Kira had shown Max, all those years ago. *This one looks too pretty to be a part of your collection*, Max had told her. Words I could remember so clearly that it felt like they'd been my own.

I wondered if this had all been for her. Perhaps it had been one of her parents' many efforts to avoid more live insects in the house.

"The Atrivez butterfly." A smooth, accented voice came from behind me. "Beautiful. Extinct now, of course, like all magically-sensitive creatures."

I turned to see Iya approaching.

"They used to say they were impossible to kill, because they were so skilled at sensing danger," he said.

My eyebrow twitched. “Perhaps this one was not so good at it,” I said, and Iya let out a short laugh.

“Perhaps not.”

There was a brief silence, and I looked up to see him regarding me with a wrinkle between his brows.

“How are those that came here from Threll?” he asked. “Are they settling well?”

I blinked. Perhaps my surprise showed on my face, because he chuckled and said, “Please don’t tell me that I’m the first to ask about them. Not that it would surprise me. Ara is a self-centered country.”

The truth was, no one seemed to give any thought to the refugees beyond mild annoyance.

“It is a big change,” I said. “But at least they are safe. Still, there are many more that need help.”

“And the Orders have demanded such a high cost from you, to give it to them.”

I didn’t answer. I wasn’t sure how much Iya knew about my Blood Pact — about Reshaye. But the weight of his gaze told me enough.

“I believed in the Orders, once, for what they were intended to be,” he said. “An organization that stood for all Wielders in the world, independent of any nation, no matter where the Towers stood. And perhaps once I thought I could guide it back to that light, from within. I’m ashamed to say I’ve grown tired and lazy. But...” His head cocked, slightly. “It is nice, to see someone so young who is still willing to try.”

If that was supposed to be an encouragement, it felt like a somewhat weak one. But, though his words were calm and his tone oddly disaffected, I could sense that they were genuine.

“People like me have always had to fight,” I said. “It’s easy to abandon the dream of easy victory when it was never an option at all.”

Iya let out a wry chuckle.

“I suppose that is true,” he said, and before I could respond, he was drifting away, as if the conversation was simply over.



WHEN I GOT BACK to my room, a letter was on my pillow. My heart leapt when I saw my name rendered in handwriting I now knew as well as my own. I tore it open and unfolded it, and despite myself — despite everything — I smiled, my chest suddenly warm.

Tisaanah,

Tell me you're alright, you wonderful idiot.

Love,

Max.

I wasn't stupid. I knew that “love” was a late addition, Max's attempt at communicating what he didn't know how to paint in written words. And that was funny to me, because this letter held more affection than pages of flowery language ever could.

It was always so easy, after all, to feel Max's love. It radiated from him like the warmth of his skin. He didn't need to say it. A brush of my hand. *I love you*. A conspiratorial half smile. *I love you*. A wrinkle of concern between his brows. *I love you*.

And even here, even now, with him half a country away. I felt it here, in the words he did write and the ones he didn't. *I love you, you wonderful idiot*.

Of their own accord, my fingers wrapped around the butterfly necklace at my throat. My chest ached, with affection, with longing, and with the wound of his absence.

I went to the desk, grabbed a blank piece of paper, and started to write.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



We set up a barricade around the city. All roads leading in were blocked by my soldiers. No traffic in, no traffic out. Antedale was compact, with tall buildings, narrow roads, and little in the way of space for farming or livestock. Thus, the vast majority of their food production happened in the fields beyond the borders, then shipped the short distance into the city.

“If the goal is to starve them out,” Essanie said, when I made this order, “it won’t work. It will take far too long, and they have enough food sources within the walls to keep their population alive.”

She wasn’t wrong. They would have grain stores, certainly enough to keep everyone fed. *Fed*, sure. But not happy. Antedale was a prosperous city. The population was not used to going without variety, even for short periods of time. Add onto that the fact that these volunteer men were choosing to be separated from their families to do nothing but stand idly out in the cold for weeks on end — well, morale would be starting to fall. And with it, attentions would be growing slack.

But many of the soldiers shared Essanie and Arith’s trepidation. Every night, I listened to action-starved young men lament. “Hell, we could have them in the ground in two ‘Scended-damned hours,” I heard one of them grunt, taking a swig out of his beer. “Never would’ve expected Farlione to be such a pussy. The man who won Sarlazai!”

Indeed.

Still, I waited. Soon, the time began to take its toll. It was visible even from a distance — the soldiers beginning to wander around instead of standing in rigid lines, the space between them widening as they tried to hide their thinning numbers. They were distracted, they were tired, and their numbers were fewer. Perfect.

I called upon Essanie and Arith to assemble teams of their strongest Valtain, especially those who were skilled in illusionism. I was presented with a group of thirty — more than enough, for what we needed.

We made our move early in the morning. A thick fog had rolled in. Some of it was natural, common in this part of Ara. But our Valtain Wielders helped thicken it, too, lowering visibility until the city and the soldiers that guarded it were little more than misty silhouettes. The air was so thick it hurt to breathe, and everything was uncomfortably damp. The dawn was silent. The city had not yet awoken.

Then I gave my command, and the silence shattered.

Screams punctured the air. Soon they were joined with shouts, and the clash of metal upon metal, and the telltale blue-white flashes of Lightning Dust. This was the sound of a slaughter. It was the sound of a district falling.

It wasn't coming from the main gates. No, the sounds came from the *southern* gates of the city.

The Antedale soldiers sprung to panicked action. Most bolted back into the city, no doubt headed for the southern gates, where the screams and sounds would be loudest.

They left less than half of their comrades behind, staring out into the fog as they clutched their weapons. They would not be able to see us at first. But the sight, I'm sure, was something to behold once they could — hundreds of us emerging from the soupy grey.

We outnumbered them many times over.

My men could capture or force surrender from these guards, rather than kill them. Little fight remained in them. We practically strode through the doors whistling with our hands

shoved into our pockets, marching into the city like a solemn parade.

I gave strict instruction to avoid lethal force if at all possible. Unless someone's blade is at your throat, I told them, yours should be far away from theirs.

Some of my men were clearly frustrated by this directive. Resolve was tested, and it began to unravel as we made our way to Gridot's keep on the east end. His personal guards were more vicious and skilled. By then, the soldiers that we had distracted had realized their mistake, and had begun rushing back into the city.

This was when the fighting grew thick: as we wound through the narrow streets that led to the elevated keep. There was no choice but to fight through the men that stood in our way. Gridot's estate was perched on the top of a rocky overlook that loomed over the rest of Antedale, with two winding sets of stairs that led up to its golden, arched entrance. Those spiraling stairs were known as the Twin Serpents, a striking but horrifically impractical Antedale landmark.

They were horrible to fight through. We had no choice but to slice through whoever stood in our way. The stairs were so narrow that only a maximum of three men could stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the best of circumstances. Fewer, of course, with swinging weapons.

Despite my best efforts, my staff grew slick with blood, which covered my fingers, my hands, my face.

If I'd been willing to kill recklessly, I could have set my weapon alight with fire and flung opponents over the edges of the stairs. Easier still, with the help of the Valtain wielding winds in our favor.

But I wasn't willing to make those sacrifices. I fought twice as hard — three times as hard — with my staff split in two and flames carefully controlled, my strikes aiming for legs and limbs instead of throats and hearts. Still, I began to slip into a version of myself that I'd hoped to never see again. Soon, I was not given a choice. Our opponents were vicious.

Death became unavoidable. The battle around me blended with the past.

By the time we fought our way to the top of the stairs, I must have looked like a demon. I was drenched in crimson, my hands and blades ignited with flames. My soldiers were just as terrifying, the Valtains' white hair smeared with red, all of our uniforms drenched. When I pushed open the doors of the keep, I left bloody handprints on the beautiful chestnut engravings.

The inside was eerily quiet.

Guards stood at attention, their spears held firm and unmoving. Maids clasped their hands in front of them and bowed their heads, watching us with wary eyes.

The entryway was beautiful. It opened to a massive room of stone and silver, with a high, arched ceiling inset with stained glass that refracted the cloudy sky. Two majestic staircases swept around either side of the room, mimicking the shape of the Twin Serpents outside. In the sudden silence, my footfalls were deafening against the polished tile.

I stepped forward slowly, lifting a hand in a silent command to the soldiers who followed me — *hold*.

“King Zeryth Aldris commands the surrender of Lord Gridot for treason,” I said. “We come only for him.”

My voice echoed. The maids and guards regarded me in silence.

“If he surrenders to us,” I said, “we will leave all of you and your city in peace.”

Do it, I pleaded, silently. Just end this.

No response.

I heard footsteps. From beneath the shadow of the twin staircases came a man. He was dressed in fine clothes, tall and straight-backed with a neat beard.

“Maxantarius Farlione.” His voice was surprisingly strong for a man his age, at odds with his slight figure and white beard. Nothing in his face or his stance betrayed anything

other than steady composure — nothing except for his eyes, which cut into me with utter rage.

“I heard the rumors, but I admit that I was skeptical. Maxantarius Farlione coming out of retirement to fight for the crown of a street rat swaddled in silk.” He clicked his tongue. “What a disappointment.”

“You wouldn’t be the first to think so.” I cast a pointed glance behind me, where the room was slowly filling with my blood-drenched soldiers. “I believe that we have you cornered.”

“That, I think, is undeniable.”

“I don’t intend to kill you. In fact, we’re all a bit anxious to get out of here. We’ll happily leave, so long as you leave with us.”

Gridot let out a small scoff. “You know, I knew your father quite well. He was an honorable man.”

I inclined my chin. “He was.”

The old man strode forward with long, smooth steps. I tensed.

“It’s perhaps a blessing,” he said, “that he isn’t here to see this.”

“I have no desire to kill your men or destroy your city, Gridot. And I have no desire to kill you.”

He was now just a few feet away from me. His eyes crinkled with silent laughter. “And what do you think that Aldris will do with me, when you shackle me and drag me back to the capital?”

Dread rose with my quickening heartbeat. I noticed that one of Gridot’s hands was tucked into the pocket of his jacket. I recognized the rising fire in his otherwise-composed eyes.

“He is a reasonable man.” The lie was acidic on my tongue. Gridot let out a bitter laugh, his lips curling.

“I’d rather die by the hand of a war hero than on my knees in front of a no-name false king,” he spat.

And my heart sank.

It happened so quickly — everything that I had been dreading. Gridot's hand flew from his pocket, wielding a dagger with an artful, well-trained grip. He lunged for me. Fast enough to make a true and admirable swing for my throat — fast enough to open a river of blood across my shoulder when I dodged.

But he was an old man, and he knew that. His skill alone ensured that his strike was only as good as it needed to be to force a proper counter. I had no choice in my response — a blade buried in his side. He fell to the ground in a heap.

I called the healers to him, but he faded in seconds. He smiled at me as he died, a mouthful of crimson blooming over his teeth.



WE STAYED in the city only for a few days, just long enough to sort through the logistics as we waited for Zeryth to send additional forces for ongoing occupation of the city. When I returned to camp that evening, Moth looked as if he were staring at a ghost. I probably resembled one.

I was exhausted. A headache pounded between my temples, and a deeper ache settled far beneath that. I met Moth's wide-eyed, horrified stare with my own.

“And this is what *winning* looks like,” I told him. “Still wish you were out there?”

Moth declined to answer, instead handing me a rag and the inventory lists I'd asked for, then ducking away before we could speak again.

Zeryth, of course, was very pleased with the results (though, his letter noted, “*I should be, considering how long it took you.*”). But I wasn't sure I was. I threw our resources into healing the wounded. I had both Arith and Essanie's teams do a thorough record of any dead that they were unable to save.

“I double checked,” Essanie said, sounding a little bewildered, when she handed me the final tally.

Fifty-four. Just fifty-four bodies, including that of Gridot himself. Some dead from falls off of the Twin Serpent stairs, two even slain by friendly accidental strikes. One fell off of the wall as he rushed to get back to the fighting, having realized the initial illusion.

It was a good death toll. An incredible death toll, even, for a battle that involved so many.

“Amazing,” Essanie said, shaking her head, but I felt numb and heavy as I tucked the parchment away.

“Right,” I said. “Amazing.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



It was dusk when we arrived at the House of Reeds. It was located in the marshy, rocky areas bordering the southern isles, known for its sprawling wetlands and the blanket of soupy mist that hung over all of it. I'd visited the House of Reeds only once before, when I was a very small child, and all I could remember was that mist. The Sidnee did not overly rely on eyesight. The Pales, after all, were often dark and shadowy. But the mists here were something else entirely, a sort of mystery that sank into your lungs, and I remember clinging to my mother's skirts in fear of the beasts I imagined within it.

That was decades ago, and now I was the kind of skilled warrior that little girl hadn't even dared to dream she'd become. And yet, I felt that same terror.

It was very, very quiet.

The House of Reeds' territory was surrounded by a grey stone wall, topped with intricate copper metalwork and overgrown with grey-green vines. The roads leading to the entrance were covered with just enough water to creep through the soles of my boots. Tall reeds lined the path and enveloped the wall, flattening the distance into one huge expanse of yellow and green. To the south, glassy still water disappeared into the fog.

From all of this, the gates loomed — two sets of spired, vine-covered iron. The sight of them made the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

Siobhan spoke quietly as we approached. “It is too similar. Too similar to what we saw at the House of Stone, when we went there after the attack. The silence.”

I cast a glance over my shoulder at Caduan, who was staring off into the distance.

“We were too late,” he said, softly.

“We do not know that,” Ashraia said. His booming voice was jarring in a place like this, even though he tried to be quiet. “The House of Reeds is known for this. They could be hiding, after hearing the news of the Stoneheld.”

Ishqa, who had been leading the group, turned around. The look on his face was grim.

“You and Ashraia should fly over,” I said. “See whether there is movement within the walls.”

“Yes,” Ishqa agreed. He and Ashraia exchanged a glance, and then they transformed. It felt rude to stare, but I couldn’t help it. It took only moments for them to shift. A rolling puff of smoke surrounded them, and when it cleared, where Ishqa and Ashraia stood were now two birds. Ishqa, a beautiful golden owl, champagne gold feathers glistening, and a white face with those same piercing yellow eyes. And Ashraia, a large, black-and-brown eagle, with the same scar and the same disgruntled glint in its eye.

Ishqa turned to me, and even through this wordless, inhuman stare, I understood exactly what he was telling us: *Wait. And we shall see.*

And then they were off, launching into the air with one powerful pump of outstretched wings. Despite everything, my breath still caught at the sheer beauty of them. It was the sort of elegance my own rough, cursed magic could never capture.

The two of them disappeared into the milky-white sky, and the rest of us remained in agonizing wait. Caduan wandered closer to the walls and placed his palm against the stone. He bowed his head and pressed his forehead to the salty rock.

“What?” I said.

“Sometimes, the land will speak to us if we listen,” Caduan murmured. “But now, I hear nothing.”

When Ishqa and Ashraia returned, they unfurled gracefully into Fey form — so smooth they barely rippled the water on the path as their feet landed.

I had no time to be impressed. The looks on their faces made my heart stop.

“It is empty,” Ishqa said, quietly.

“Not a damned soul, other than the herons.” Ashraia’s jaw was tight. “We should have come faster.”

My fingernails bit into my palms. He was right. We should have acted sooner.

“Humans?” I ground out.

“I cannot say.” Ishqa shook his head. “It would stand to reason, but...” He turned back to the gates. “We need to go inside and see for ourselves, up close.”

“There may be survivors,” Siobhan said.

Caduan approached the entrance. “There are no survivors. But there may be answers.”

I wrapped my hands around the rusted metal. “Help me open this,” I said.



WE SPLIT INTO TWO GROUPS. Ishqa and I paired with each other, while Siobhan, Ashraia, and Caduan veered off toward the shoreline.

Ishqa headed the front and I followed, my Sidnee hearing straining to pick up every ripple of water or rustle of the reeds. I watched Ishqa’s shoulders, golden skin damp in the humidity, muscles tensed. His sword, normally sheathed down his spine, was in his hands. I noticed that two symmetrical scars ran down his shoulder blades, perfectly straight and perfectly parallel.

The House of Reeds built out rather than up, their structures balanced on stilts to lift them out of the brackish tidewater. We were up to our ankles, and then our shins in water. Only then did the paths turn into stone stairs, then raised pathways lined with moss-covered railings. We came first to tiny homes built of wood and moss. Ahead, closer to the main city, the larger, more ornate homes rose through the fog.

It was very, very still.

“Did you see bodies?” I asked, quietly.

“No. We did not.”

“Then perhaps they fled.”

“Perhaps.” His voice said what his words didn’t. This place reeked of death.

The little homes were empty. Some were in great disarray, plates smashed on the floor, blankets torn off of beds, bookshelves overturned. Others looked untouched. None held any signs of the Fey who had once lived there.

Ahead, the central capital of the House of Reeds loomed. These buildings were constructed of iron and stone rather than wood. At the center of it all stood the Reeds’ temple, the only building that rose up towards the sky, a moss-draped spire of metal surrounded by taller bamboo shoots topped with crimson flowers. The stalks were so tall that the petals hovered high up in the mist, fluttering in the breeze, like blurry, bloody butterflies.

When we reached the door, I touched the stone, then brushed my fingertips to my lips. The taste made my entire body recoil.

“What?” Ishqa said, reading my face. “What do you sense?”

“I don’t know. On the surface it’s right, but something deeper... it’s...”

“What?”

“Just... wrong.” I unsheathed both of my blades. “Be ready.”

Ishqa inclined his chin, and tightened his grip around his sword as he pushed the temple gates open.

I had never been within the temples of the House of Reeds before. They were built like mazes, narrow hallways lined with of exquisitely etched stonework and decorated with tapestries that now swung lazily in the wind. Swamp water ran along the edges of the halls, and the floor sometimes broke like stone lily pads. I could imagine that under normal circumstances, lit with the ceremonial lanterns that dangled in the open-air arches above our heads, all of this intricacy was beautiful and haunting. Now, it just felt dangerous — so many corners to hide behind, and so many twists to lose track of.

We were deep into the temple when we heard the voice.

It was a woman's voice, broken up with a terrified sob. At first, too far away for us to understand her words.

Ishqa and I both froze, then shot each other wary stares. His entire demeanor changed, as if shifting into a version of himself built only for a single task.

“Survivors,” I breathed, but Ishqa was already off, and we hurried down the hall, around a corner, and then another, until —

“Don't take them...!”

This time, I understood the words. They were barely legible with terror and the Reedsborns' brogue, and... something else, something that was barely a voice. It ran together like water and was as thin as the wind.

Then we rounded another corner, and saw her.

The figure was at the end of one of the hallways, her back facing us. I could tell it was a female by the long flow of braided hair, the sweep of fine chiffon skirts, the delicate curve of her body. She was kneeling, hunched over — hunched over at an angle that, the closer I got, seemed more and more gut-wrenchingly *wrong*, the twist of her spine too severe, the wrench in her shoulders unnatural.

“Don't take them...! Don't take them...!”

“My Lady—” Ishqa called out.

“Don’t take them...!”

I didn’t even see her move. One moment, she was there, kneeling on the ground. The next, she was lunging towards us.

I had to stifle a gasp of sheer horror.

She didn’t have a *face*.

At first, I thought it was some trick of the mind, as if she was moving so quickly her features had simply smeared in movement. But no — it was like there was something intangible just *missing* where her face should have been, flesh instead turning to strange blurry mist. My eyes couldn’t focus on her.

Not that I had time to stand there and try.

“Stop!” Ishqa commanded. “We come to—”

He barely got the words out. She was upon us, all shrieks and spindly limbs. Ishqa’s sword was raised in seconds. He looked beautiful wielding it — the kind of image that seemed it should be carved in polished stone, unlike me, who fought like a creature that crawled out of the dirt. One graceful strike, and the woman should have fallen.

Should have.

I flinched at the hot spray of blood across my face. It took me a few addled seconds to realize it: she had not stopped.

She continued to run *through* Ishqa’s blade.

“Don’t take them...!”

The words came in the exact same intonation every time, like a fragment of a memory stuck in a cycle.

I swore under my breath as she barreled into me. I dodged just in time, my shortsword striking her gut and the dagger glancing her shoulder. The blades cut through her, but not the way I was used to feeling steel slice through flesh. The resistance was strangely weak, as if I was slicing through the half-rotten meat of a dead deer already ravaged by wolves.

And when she touched me? The pain was so intense that my breath shriveled in my lungs.

I leaped away from her. Her strange, faceless stare was locked on me. She lunged, and I dropped. Ishqa seized upon that distraction, dancing forward with another blow of his sword, another blow that the woman — the creature — barely reacted to. So quick — *Mathira*, so quick — she whirled around and reached for him.

“Don’t take them...!”

Ishqa’s sword impaled her, and she let out a chilling, wordless shriek as her fingers clutched at him. I could see pain in the hard set of his jaw. Her hands were clawing at his exposed shoulders, leaving bloody gouges.

I took my opening.

My blades plunged into her back. Then I pulled them up, splitting her. I should have felt the resistance of bone and cartilage, but her flesh parted easily.

For a terrible moment, she remained that way, clinging to Ishqa, and I thought we were dealing with something truly invincible.

But then, she let out an inhuman wail that sounded more akin to the whistle of wind through the rocks.

Don’t take them, don’t take them, don’t take them...

The intonation never changed, but the words faded like dissipating echoes.

The creature fell to a heap on the ground. Unmoving, she looked even stranger.

I swore, lowering myself to take a closer look, and—

A shriek. And then another. Off in the distance.

Ishqa and I shot each other a glance of alarm. “There are more,” I breathed, and he gave a serious nod, and neither of us had to say anything else before we were running out of the temple. “This way!” I said, when Ishqa nearly took us down a wrong path, grabbing his arm and yanking him turn by turn.

The air hit us like a wall. It was so much more humid, it seemed, than it had been just minutes ago, the fog thicker, the air damp and hot. The world was eerily silent as we ran through the main gates of the temple, back onto the pathways, leaping across stone blocks hovering on water so dark and still that it looked like black glass.

I slowed to a stop, ears pricked. I heard nothing.

“Perhaps that’s it,” I murmured, quietly.

“No.” Ishqa’s eyes scanned the horizon. Of course he would be looking to the skies. But my gaze slipped down. Down, to the slate under our feet, and further, to the water that surrounded us. Water so smooth that it was practically a mirror. My own face staring back at me.

My own face and...

And...

Horror rose in my throat like bile.

“Ishqa,” I whispered. “They’re in the—”

And that was when all of the eyes beneath the surface of the water — hundreds and hundreds of lifeless, disfigured fey faces — opened at once.

My blades barely made it up before they burst out of the water. They were on us in seconds. Ishqa and I only had time to clumsily fight back. Their blood splattered my face. Even that was odd, not the vibrant violet of Fey blood, but putrid and milky.

I heard a sound behind me, and caught a glimpse of gold. Ishqa’s wings flared out, a thing of pristine beauty in a world of deformed shadow. Between slashes of his sword, he reached for me. We didn’t have to speak — we both knew there was nothing else we could do but fly out of here.

But then, one of the creatures grabbed onto Ishqa’s left wing. A sickening crack split the air. His whole body lurched.

I skewered the creature, kicking it off of my blade and into the morass. But one glance at Ishqa’s wing told me it was now useless, hanging off of him at a revolting angle.

I swore under my breath, before whirling to decapitate another creature. Their not-blood slicked the handles of my swords. My hands stung, as if it was poison. A sharp pain gripped my side. Another one was on me, razored fingers digging into my flesh. Yet another looming behind.

Too many. Too many. Ishqa and I were back-to-back, our bodies pressed against each other, but we would not last like this. We were corpses being overtaken by maggots.

We would die here.

“We fight back to the walls,” Ishqa commanded, voice straining. “Our only chance.”

Hardly a chance at all. The creatures surrounded us in all directions. We would never make it to the gates.

A grim realization settled over me.

We couldn't fight like this. But *I* could do something more. Even though I didn't want to. I didn't want him to see what I was.

“Aefe?” Ishqa pressed, between panting breaths.

I could save us. Even if it meant revealing the ugliest piece of myself.

“Trust me,” I said, skewered two of the creatures in the eye, and, in the split seconds of time that bought me, I whirled around and buried my teeth in Ishqa's forearm.

He nearly yanked his arm away, uttering what I had to assume was a Wyshraj curse. But I didn't release him, my incisors digging deep, the hot warmth of his blood flowing over my tongue. I swallowed. Once. Twice.

I couldn't hold on longer than that. It would have to be enough. And as I released him and returned to the fight, I prayed it would be.

“What in the skies were you doing?” he spat.

Claws sliced my left shoulder. More at my right forearm. Ishqa barely held off one that dove for my throat.

I waited.

And then I felt an unfamiliar magic bubbling up within me. *Ishqa's* magic.

My greatest shame. My curse. This was my horrible gift — my ability to steal the magic of others. It was such a dirty, shameful thing that I barely knew how to use it. I had never done this before with magic so unfamiliar to my own, never mind a power that would force my very body to change.

I imagined wings. I felt wings. And to my frantic relief, slowly, I felt them shifting.

I just didn't expect it to *hurt* so much. My back seemed as if it were splitting, my flesh parting, blood soaking my leathers.

That was when *Ishqa* noticed what I was doing. Out of the corner of my eye, through the fighting, I saw him lurch — saw the realization spill over his face, as he understood what I was. And thankfully, he did not spend time lingering in his surprise or revulsion.

He bought a split second to whirl to me, cutting two slashes in the back of my leather armor, finishing just in time to strike down another attacker. Making room for the wings, I realized.

“Structure first,” he ground out, as he fought. “Bones, then flesh, then feathers.”

He made it sound so simple. But whatever was shifting my back felt so heavy and strange.

I choked out, “How do I—”

“Stretch them out. Farther. They're not big enough yet.”

More pain, as creatures grabbed onto my newly-formed wings.

“Not yet, Aefe.”

“It has to be—”

“*Not yet.*”

No time. This was it. We were overrun.

I pushed with everything I had. *Snap*, as bones cracked. *Crack*, as my body twisted with unnatural force.

“Now!” Ishqa shouted, and I locked my arms around his shoulders and lurched these unfamiliar muscles in what I thought, hoped, *prayed* would be enough to get us into the air. Ishqa’s wings, one powerful and one ruined, pushed too.

The pain was so intense that I didn’t realize it had worked until I looked down and saw a mass of limbs squirming beneath us.

“Focus, Aefe. Stay level. Tilt to the left.” Ishqa’s arm was tight around my waist, the two of us supporting each other. Our wings tangled. My muscles burned. There was nothing graceful about this — we were flailing through the sky.

“Keep going,” Ishqa said. “Just beyond the wall.”

The edges of my vision were going grey.

Distantly, I became aware of the fact that we were falling.

“Aefe!”

The wall hurtled closer. We lurched through the air as Ishqa’s wings pumped desperately to keep us airborne.

The last thing I saw was the ground rushing towards me.

And then nothing.



SOMEBODY WAS SCREAMING — a horrifying, jagged noise.

Hands were on me, on my back. Gods, my back, something was terribly, terribly wrong with it. Something was being torn out of me, or plunged into me, or both.

I looked up, through blurring vision, and saw my sister leaning over me.

My perfect sister should not be in a place like this.

“Put her to sleep,” a voice was saying. “She’s...she can’t stay like this.”

I blinked. The face looking into mine was not Orscheid's. No, it was Siobhan's, lined with concern.

And then I realized that the screaming was mine.

"She can't," another voice said. "That's why she needs to be awake."

Awake? No, I couldn't be. Surely I was dying. I had to have smashed into the ground and shattered into a thousand pieces.

"Aefe. Aefe, look at me."

Fingers turned my face. Ishqa was there, the waning sunlight spilling from behind him.

"You cannot stay this way. Do you understand? You need to shift back."

I don't know how, I tried to say.

"The wings are a part of you. Bring them back within, like you are drawing air into your lungs."

"I can't," I choked out.

Warm fingers curled around mine. Caduan stared down at me. The touch of his hand felt like the touch I'd press against the Pales, now so far away — steadying connection.

"You can," he said. "You must."

He said it as if it were a truth, and I allowed myself to think that it could be.

The pain tore me in two. I heard cracking sounds. My fingers trembled around Caduan's hand.

"I can't," I sobbed. "I can't, I can't..."

"*You can*," he repeated, firmly.

It was going to kill me.

But one more time, I drew in breath, curled all of my limbs in on each other. Let out a ragged scream.

CRACK.

The pain dimmed my vision. I felt hands running over the bare, smooth skin of my back.

“There.” Siobhan gave me a shaky smile. “You are done, Aefe.”

I fell back into darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY

TISAANAH



It is strange to call war mundane. But that's what it became, conflicts running together like blood between rain-soaked cobblestones.

When the Kazarans had retreated, they had taken with them breathless whispers of Zeryth's foreign witch, who had brought down the cliffs and soaked the stone in blood. Overnight, my reputation caught fire.

I was grateful for it. Those whispers were my greatest weapon. Zeryth wanted to win, and he wanted to do it quickly. I had no choice in fighting for him — the only thing I could control was *how* I did it. I could wield death, or I could wield a powerful performance.

We were to conquer six districts, all of them relatively close to Korvius. The first time I rode out, I had to keep stopping to vomit in the bushes, careful to make sure no one saw me. It wasn't Reshaye's magic making me ill, just my own nerves.

Reshaye picked apart my anxieties as if unraveling a piece of embroidery.

{Why do you so fear what you are capable of?} it whispered, confused.

I'm not, I replied. *I just believe we can be better. And it is easy to destroy.*

It was a poor answer. Still, I felt it consider the thought.

The night before we arrived at the next city, I pulled Sammerin far enough away from camp that no one could hear us.

“If I lose control, tomorrow,” I told him, “do whatever you need to do to make sure I stop. Do you understand?”

Sammerin gave me a long, serious look, and nodded grimly. “I do.”

“Promise me, Sammerin.”

He put a firm hand on my shoulder. “I promise.” He made it sound like an unshakable truth, and I was grateful for it.

That would become a ritual before every attack. Before the crest of dawn, I would go to Sammerin, and ask him to make that promise one more time. And to his credit, he always did.

But he never needed to fulfill it.

I showed these cities exactly what I was capable of doing to them. My spectacles embodied the shattering of their greatest strengths. I collapsed the stone around the most fortified district, as if to whisper to them, *I can tear your walls like paper*. In the one sheltered by the sea, I roiled the waves until they were ten, twenty, fifty feet high, to show them, *I could swallow you whole*. I made mountains shudder and fields wither; I filled the sky with smoke and snarling eyes.

Upon every target, I unleashed *hell*.

Or at least, I appeared to.

Some of it was a facade. Zeryth gave Eslyn those vials before every fight, and each time, she would support me, drawing Stratagrams to bolster my magic and protecting me while I was distracted. I couldn't have done any of it without her help, enhanced by the power Zeryth fed her. Each time, I came so close to the breaking point — the point where my skin and muscles and blood were burning, and Reshaye clawed for more power, a hair's breadth away from breaking out of my control.

With each performance I would have to fight harder, dig deeper, sacrifice more of myself. Sometimes I would look

down to see the ground itself withering to rot beneath my feet, as if death literally surrounded me. I would look at my arms and see the darkness crawling over my veins, spreading by the second.

Every time, I would have to cede more to Reshaye, and I would think, *This is it. This is the one I fail.*

But in the end, just when I thought it was over, our opponents would surrender.

The battles, though, were far from bloodless. Yes, there were dozens of corpses instead of hundreds; sometimes hundreds instead of thousands. But the armies still clashed. I became a target quickly, and when you're a target, it is impossible to survive without killing.

I wished I could say that I remembered the faces of every person whose flesh rotted beneath my magic. But the truth was, they blended together quickly, struck down in panicked moments of barely-tethered control. Sometimes, those deaths were the only thing that kept Reshaye's hunger at bay.

Still, I would dream of decaying faces.

For days, I would dream.

Reshaye grew more and more restless, and yet, it was also more withdrawn than ever. Our performances exhausted it so much that I would often go days without hearing it whisper. But at night, our dreams would tangle. I had the strangest, most vivid nightmares — dreams of blinding white and betrayal. I dreamed of Reshaye as I had seen it in the Mikov estate, in the deepest level of magic. And I dreamed that someone was reaching for me, and for reasons that I could not understand, that was the most terrifying thing of all.

The battles took their toll. I was careful to make sure that no one saw anything but strength, there or after, but as soon as I was alone in my room, I would collapse. The sickness was stronger every time. The deeper I dug, the higher the cost.

Nura would always be there, holding my hair back when I vomited or forcing water down my throat when I wasn't. I

never asked her to. Once, I croaked, barely conscious, “Why are you doing this?”

She’d given me a cold stare. “Would you rather I leave you here on your washroom floor?” she said, dryly. “Or would you prefer I call someone else to help wipe up your vomit?”

I’d had nothing to say to that. The truth was, I was too sick to be alone. And I didn’t want to let *anyone* see me that way — not even Sammerin.

We never spoke of it again.

Between battles, I remained in Korvius. I attended Zeryth’s meetings, though they grew more frantic and less measured. His own carefully-cultivated performances were disintegrating. Sometimes, when we were in close proximity, my magic could feel something strange pulsing off of his — like a song that was off-key in a way I couldn’t pin. As time passed, the notes grew more sour. After one meeting when Zeryth could barely string a sentence together, I noticed that his wrist — the same arm where my curse was tattooed on his forearm — was bruised and swollen. He was always in the worst condition after our battles, although he himself never fought.

I thought of the vials he gave Eslyn before each battle, and concocted a weak theory.

“He is sick the same way I get sick, isn’t he?” I asked Nura, afterwards. “Because of the potions he gives to Eslyn. It makes her... stronger. Better. But I can tell that it isn’t...” I struggled to find the right word. “Normal magic.”

Nura gave me a pointed look. “I have been instructed not to discuss this.”

The tone of her voice made it clear we both understood it to be a confirmation.

Still. I took no pleasure in being right. Because if Zeryth was dabbling in deep magic to do whatever he was doing to help Eslyn, that meant the curse may not be outside the realm of possibility.

“And what about the spell binding my life to his? Is that part of it, too?” I said. “Does that mean it’s real?”

Her expression flickered, and she shook her head. “That, I don’t have the answer to.”

No one did, it seemed. In my spare time, I combed through books, searching for information about whatever he had or hadn’t done, and whether it was truly possible. Hopeless. I found nothing.

Not that I had much time for such things — and in the grand scheme of it all, my research seemed pitifully insignificant. When I was not fighting or training or studying, I was with the refugees. It was hard for them to acclimate to a country so different from their own. I’d had Max to help ease me into this new life. They were all alone. But, they were resilient. They adapted, albeit slowly.

Still, it was impossible to forget what hung in the balance of my bargain. Every time I visited, Filias or Riasha would pull me aside, handing me another request for help for someone’s brother or wife or long-lost child. For every soul I had managed to save, there were so many who still needed my help.

“I’ll try,” I always told them, and meant it. But my hands were tied. As long as Zeryth’s war raged on, I could not go fight mine. I kept each name carefully preserved in a wooden box beside my bed.

Right beside them were Max’s letters.

Max. I missed him so much that his absence was a constant ache, like the pain of a missing limb. I tracked his victories carefully. There were many of them. All the whispers had proven true: General Farlione was exceptionally good at what he did. It started with his triumph in Antedale and only grew more impressive from there. With so few deaths, he skillfully dismantled city after city.

Every time people spoke of him, I had to suppress a small, proud smile.

Of course he would be incredible. I’d never had a doubt.

Still, Maxantarius Farlione, acclaimed general, was nothing to me compared to Max, my friend. I didn't receive letters from General Farlione — I received letters from Max, riddled not with battle strategies but inside jokes that only I would understand and quiet insecurities that I read in the spaces between his handwriting.

And while Max wasn't one to pour his contents of his soul into words, there would always be a few dots at the end of the letter, dots that represented a pen that had lifted and pressed to the page, hesitated and jerked. Always right before he wrote, *I miss you. Stay safe. Please.*

In those six words, I heard all the others he left unwritten. I knew because I would do the same, my pen hovering and dripping over the page. What I wrote was never enough. *I miss you. Stay safe. Please.*

And so, that refrain went, passed back and forth over dozens of letters. Some days, the worry would eat at me so much that I could barely breathe. Worry for Max, yes, but also for the refugees, for Moth, for all the lives that were hanging in the balance, for the noose Zeryth tightened around my throat.

And then, one day, not long after I returned from one of my most exhausting battles, I was summoned to the refugee dwellings.

And that day, my worst fears came to life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Like most things, it happened in a thousand little steps.

Zeryth gave me other orders quickly. There was no shortage of work to be done, after all. All across Ara, there were Lords who disputed Zeryth's reign. After a few too-short, exhausting days in Antedale, we packed up and moved on.

I had already decided what I would do. I would repeat Antedale over and over again, as many times as I needed to. I would spin plans to minimize the death tolls as much as I possibly could. I used illusions to smoke out fortified strongholds. I cut off production and starved out cities. I assembled teams of spies and sent them to kidnap key figures instead of barreling through an army's defenses.

Tisaanah, after all, had taught me that there was so much one could do with the right kind of performance and a little creativity.

I followed her stories closely. It became almost amusing, the divide between what I heard whispered in the streets and what I read in her letters at night. I'd hear the soldiers poring over the stories with hushed, amazed voices, speaking of her as if she was some sort of mythological creature. Some swore she practiced ancient Threllian blood sacrifices, others speculated to her lineage ("*Those Threllians will fuck anything, I'm telling you!*"), and a few seemed bizarrely set on the idea that she ate, specifically, a rare breed of Besrithian scorpion to gain her power.

I'd listen to these people speak of her with such awe, chuckle softly to myself, and then go to my tent and read her letters — letters filled not with mythological greatness but with her intimate, rambling thoughts (and, with few exceptions, at least one incredibly immature joke). And for my part, I would collect little stories throughout the day for her. I had grown so accustomed to having her near me, to sharing those things with her. Now I hoarded them like ravens hoarded shiny buttons, presenting them to her compressed in paper and ink.

It was never enough to describe everything that I really wanted to say.

For a long time, I tried to keep my distance from most of the soldiers. I was stuck with Moth — he rarely strayed from my side, and though I'd never express it, I preferred it that way — but the less I interacted with the others, the better. They had good leadership in Arith and Essanie, I told myself. I had little more to offer.

But then, one day, not long after we departed Antedale, I was walking through the camp only to come across a makeshift sparring ring, a few soldiers gathered around it. One of the men fighting was getting absolutely destroyed. I stood there for five minutes and saw him hit the ground as many times.

I watched, then paced, then left, then backtracked, growing increasingly restless.

What was I supposed to do? Sit here and let them do it *wrong*?

Eventually I couldn't stop myself from swooping in, grabbing the losing soldier's sword from his hands.

“This is an embarrassment,” I huffed. “Look, try this...”

And that's how it started. A corrected technique here, a suggestion there, one or two throwaway demonstrations. But soon, they became organized lessons, and soon, more and more of the soldiers began to attend them. They extended beyond fighting, to encompass Wielding, too, and before long

I found myself mentally planning entire training structures, identifying the army's biggest gaps and figuring out how to close them.

One day, I blinked and realized I had taken over Essanie and Arith's regular training duties, leading the troops through the drills myself. I now knew many of the soldiers by name, and beyond that, I knew their strengths and weaknesses.

I was good at this. I even enjoyed it. There was a deep satisfaction to it, to seeing it all come together — *click*, like a puzzle piece snapping into place.

But this was also the same thing that kept me awake at night, feeling the weight of all those lives pressing down on my chest. With every new name I learned, my resentment of everything that had led them to this moment festered.

The weeks wore on. I collected another victory, then two, then six. They didn't have significant death tolls, all things considered, or at least that's what others told me. I was never convinced. I composed every one of the letters to the families of those we did lose, and whether those letters took an hour or six or ten, they all weighed equally on me. I couldn't look at the body of a twenty-two year old boy and pat myself on the back because there weren't more in his grave.

I was acutely aware, at all times, exactly what was at stake.

Zeryth demanded a pace that was near-inhuman. But after many weeks of no rest, my soldiers were exhausted. Exhausted soldiers were slow or short-tempered. Slow soldiers got killed. Short-tempered ones killed others. Both things that I wanted to avoid.

And, we happened to be within a detour's distance to Meriata. Meriata was Ara's capital of sin and debauchery — exactly the kind of place that would welcome an army on leave with open arms.

But more importantly, it was the home to an old friend. One that might have answers, about the curse Zeryth claimed to hold over Tisaanah's life.

That, I decided, would be worth the detour.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

TISAANAH



Serel's message, asking me to visit the refugees, seemed urgent. I was exhausted when I received it. I'd only just returned from one of the bloodiest battles so far. Reshaye's dreams had been especially vivid the night before, and my eyelids were lead. Not that any of that mattered. Whenever any of the refugees called on me, I went. By the time I finished reading the message, I was already reaching for my shoes, casting a wistful glance to the bed.

Next time, I promised it.

As it often did, attention turned to me as soon as I arrived. The legends that everyone else whispered about me spread here, too. Even Serel looked at me differently than he once had, like there was another, foreign piece of me that he didn't understand.

Sometimes, those looks made me swallow a bitter pang of loneliness.

A part of me had hoped these people would become my family. But just as I was not Nyzrenese enough, not Aran enough, not Valtain enough, I was not quite enough one of them, either. There was an unspoken rift between us, a certain distance to the way they interacted with me.

I was used to being looked at. But the stares I got when I arrived today were different. Everything was quieter. My magic tasted unease in the air.

Something was off.

"Tisaanah!"

Still, it was amazing how the sound of that familiar Thereni voice lifted my spirits.

I turned to see Serel approaching. He pulled me into a rough, quick embrace.

“Thank you,” he murmured in my ear. “I know you’re busy.”

“Never too busy for this.”

I surveyed the people who had paused to stare at me, a wrinkle forming between my brows.

“Is everything alright?”

Something dulled in Serel’s expression. “We’re fine,” he said. “But...”

My smile faded. “What? What happened?”

Over Serel’s shoulder, Filias appeared in an open doorway. Serel was at least trying to keep up a cheerful facade. But Filias? Filias’s face was hard with anger. Pinched between his fingers was a parchment letter.

“We need to talk, Nyzrenese witch,” he said.



THE TABLE, like everything else about the apartment, was run-down, rough boards simply nailed together atop uneven legs. The table itself was not notable. What was notable was what covered it:

Letters.

There were dozens of them, scattered across the tabletop, piled on top of each other. They all were crafted out of similar parchment, and all bore a seal in a certain shade of red that made a pit tighten in my stomach.

A group of people clustered around the table, silent as their gazes turned to me.

Filias gestured to the letters. “Read.”

“Which one?”

“Any one.”

I picked up a letter. It was written in a shaky hand, dotted with a darkened red.

My dear...

*I did not want to write this... I do not want to worry you...
I was not given a choice...*

With every sentence, I felt as if my blood was draining from my body.

I put down that letter. Picked up another. And another. Different handwriting, different words, but all saying the same thing.

“They’re all the same,” Filias said, tension thick in his voice. “All make the same demands.”

“Apparently,” Riasha said, “the Zorokovs did not like the stunt you pulled at the Mikov estate.”

My knees were weak. I sat down in a rickety chair.

Shit. *Shit.*

They were all written by slaves. Specifically, slaves owned by members of the Zorokov family, one of the most powerful dynasties in Threll. Slaves that were loved ones of the refugees that now lived here, in Ara. And every one of these letters, written under clear duress, begged for only one thing:

Me.

My life, turned over to the Threllian Lords, to face “justice” for the slaughter of Esmaris and Ahzeen Mikov.

Justice. What a ridiculous term, to describe what it was that they wanted to do. Threllian society cared nothing for justice. If I were a Threllian man, what I did would be something to respect and fear. Well, they feared me, alright, and they feared the Orders. But I’d seen firsthand how Threllians reacted when power was wielded against them by people they didn’t think deserved it. I’d seen wives who took too many liberties with their husbands estates hung and gutted.

I'd seen overly-ambitious second sons get their throats slit by displeased older brothers.

And what I'd done had been orders of magnitude worse.

They couldn't dangle me from the gallows themselves. But they could threaten their own slaves, parents and siblings and friends of those now under my protection, in exchange for me.

Smart. Ruthless.

Suddenly, I felt so naive. I knew this was a risk. But I didn't think it would happen so fast — while my hands were still tied.

“How did they find us so quickly?” I murmured.

Serel winced. “Many of the people here wrote to their friends and relatives as soon as we were settled. It would only take one intercepted letter.”

“Did you know about this?” Filias asked, and I snapped my head up.

“No. Of course not.”

“They would have threatened the Orders, too. Threatened those who now controlled the Mikov Estate. They're just as afraid of the Orders as they are of you. The Arch Commandant didn't tell you?”

Of course Zeryth wouldn't have said anything. Lately, Zeryth could barely construct a sentence without losing track of his own words. “No. He did not.”

“But you can get them out,” a small voice said, from one of the girls in the crowd. “Can't you?”

“One of those letters is from my nephew,” another added. “He's only seven.”

I closed my eyes. A headache bloomed behind my temples. “We will get them out. And the Orders will support us as we do it.”

“We shouldn't have left,” someone in the group murmured, and though no one responded aloud, my magic could feel the pang of guilt in the air — a ripple of silent agreement.

“Let’s not pretend that the Arans will do anything to help us,” Filias said. “They have bigger things to worry about. If our kin need us, then we’ll need to go help them ourselves.”

My stomach fell through my feet.

“You can’t do that.”

“It may be the only choice we have.”

“Because the Zorokovs will *slaughter you*. And they will slaughter your loved ones.” I stood, eyes scanning the crowd. “Trust me, I want immediate action just as much as you do. But if you give me time, we can win this. Zeryth Aldris doesn’t win his war without me. He needs me, and I have bound the Arans to their promises. The minute their war is over, ours begins. With their resources, we won’t be throwing more corpses at the Threllians’ feet. We’ll be *winning*.”

“And how long will that take, for Aldris to pick off Sesri’s cousins one by one? Even then, they won’t surrender. That isn’t a plan. That’s a dream.”

I hated how much his words echoed my own insecurities. “It will be a quick victory. We just need time.”

But would it be quick enough?

I wished I could make that promise. But it wouldn’t be so simple.

“We need to trust her,” Serel said. “She came back for us when no one else would. She didn’t have to do that. If she says it’s the truth, then it’s the truth.”

A bitter laugh came from another corner of the room. “Bullshit.”

I knew that voice.

My head snapped up. And I saw a familiar face in the back of the crowd, far enough in the shadows that I hadn’t noticed him when I first arrived. He looked better than he had when I last saw him. The scars of his face had been repaired, revealing freckled, healed skin. But his lip was still split, and his nose still missing, leaving behind two gaping holes. A cane was clutched in his hand.

“Vos,” I choked out.

Vos, my old friend, whom I had betrayed at Esmaris’s estate the day that Serel had helped me leave. He had paid the price many times over for my escape.

He regarded me with a cold stare, a sneer twitching at his ruined mouth.

“Say that to me,” he spat. “Tell me that they should trust you.”

I needed words — the right words — now more than ever. I needed words that were comforting enough to assure the refugees that I would be able to help them. I needed words that were strong enough to keep them from doing something stupid.

And above all, I needed words that were *true*.

In Esmaris’s court, my tongue had spun so many honey-sweet lies. But these people deserved more, deserved better. What did I have to offer them?

“We will find a way,” I said, but Filias was already shaking his head and Vos had turned away. And still, I couldn’t shake the cloying, nauseating taste of sugar.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



When I woke, it took me several long seconds to realize that what we had witnessed in the House of Reeds had not been a nightmare. My memory came back slow. The monsters first. And then, the memory of what I had done — what I had let them see.

I lay there, unmoving.

I wasn't ready to see how they would look at me. Siobhan already knew what I was, just as everyone in the House of Obsidian did. I had gotten used to that. But Caduan, Ishqa, Ashraia... it had been a long, long while since I had seen someone find out for the first time.

But I would need to face it eventually.

I opened my eyes. It was dusk. The others gathered around the fire, and every one of them turned to me as soon as I stirred. They had been waiting.

I sat up. Everything ached. There was a tenuous silence as Caduan offered me water, which I accepted, and food, which I did not. "Did you see?" I asked Siobhan, and I didn't need to say what I was talking about. She told me that she, Ashraia, and Caduan had, too, been attacked by the strange Fey creatures. There had been hundreds, or even thousands, of them. Siobhan had sounded shaken when she recounted it.

When Siobhan was shaken, the world was a frightening place.

They had managed to escape, with a combination of Siobhan's fighting skills, Ashraia's wings, and some clever

magic from Caduan — which he had used to raise the tidewaters and freeze it around the creatures' feet. At that, I couldn't help but shoot him a glance of surprise. Magic, at least in the Pales, was often ritualistic and slow. Not the sort of thing that was utilized in battle.

"Thank the gods that you were able to escape too," I muttered, when the story was done, and Siobhan nodded.

There was a long, drawn out silence, all those eyes on me.

"You are an Essnera," Ishqa said, at last.

"You are *cursed*," Ashraia spat.

I flinched.

And there it was. *Essnera*. I hated the word — hated the way it had taken everything from me. But most of all I hated that it was the truth of what I was. *Cursed. Tainted. Life-thief.*

Could I argue with any of those definitions? That was what I was. A creature that stole magic from others, like a carrion bird. Scriptures told of people like me. Essneras were incarnations of corruption. Mathira, the mother of all souls, sheltered the bodiless spirits of all Sidnee away from the corrupted forces beyond her reach. But before birth, my soul must have slipped from her grasp, wandering out into the poison beyond her safety. It was very rare, and it was terrible.

"She saved your general's life," Siobhan said, sharply.

"By stealing our magic. That's why the Sidnee sent her — to steal." Ashraia stalked back and forth before the fire. Ishqa was still and silent as glass.

"That is not true," I said. Even though I didn't fully understand why my father *had* sent me. "I am here because we have a bigger threat to worry about than *you*."

"It is dangerous for her to be here," Ashraia sneered. "The gods cursed her."

Siobhan let out a hiss through her teeth. "That is a silly superstition."

“Not so silly that your own Teirna doesn’t believe it,” he shot back. “I had been wondering. But now I understand why her title was stripped—”

“She is still a loyal Sidnee,” Siobhan snapped. “And a good soldier.”

I flinched. The truth of it was a stabbing pain, striking deep before anger overwhelmed the hurt. The anger was for Ashraia, because I’d be damned if I was going to let a Wyshraj brute speak to me that way. But the hurt — the hurt ran deeper. I did not miss Siobhan’s choice of words. “*Still.*”

Siobhan respected me, and I treasured that respect more than any precious gemstone. But that one word reminded me that she respected me in *spite* of what I was. She still saw the corruption in me, still judged it, even if she thought my character was stronger.

Caduan’s voice came from behind me.

“Perhaps it’s easier for you to hate what you know than to hate what we just saw. But we don’t have time for you to make yourself feel better by tearing apart a false enemy. Aefe’s magic is the only reason she and Ishqa made it out of there alive. And who would have saved them if she didn’t have it? The *gods?*”

He drawled the word, the sarcasm as sharp as a blade drawn across skin. I could not look at him, but I could imagine the intensity of his stare as it dismantled Ashraia, piece by piece, the same way it did me.

“*What we saw,*” he said, deadly quiet, “is what could become of us. And we do not even understand what it is.”

There was a long silence.

And then Ishqa’s stare fell to me.

“Thank you,” he said. “You saved both our lives.”

Ashraia started to protest, but Ishqa shot him a harsh look.

“We have bigger dangers looming over us than this,” he said. His gaze slipped far away, and I knew he was thinking of what we had seen. Those people. Those *monsters*.

“No one found any survivors?” I whispered.

“Nothing but those... things,” Ashraia said, voice gruff. “Entire population of the House of Reeds, surely.”

I muttered a curse beneath my breath and cast Caduan a sidelong glance.

“Was that anything at all like—”

“No.” He shook his head. “No, that wasn’t what they did to us.”

“*They*,” Ishqa repeated. “Then we believe this to be the work of the humans?”

I scoffed. “Of course we do. Who else would it be?”

A long silence. Here sat some of the most powerful warriors of the most powerful houses in the Fey world, and yet we were all too frightened for words. It was one thing for humans to attack a small House with the power of their numbers alone. But this?

“We should go back and burn it,” Ishqa said, at last. “It would be the most respectful thing to do.”

My head whipped towards him. “Burn it?”

“That is a mistake,” Caduan said. “We need to investigate further.”

“The things we saw,” Ishqa said, “were hardly alive. And whatever is left of them has been debased beyond all recognition.”

My chest ached at the thought of it. I couldn’t bring myself to answer. He was right, of course. The House of Reeds were a proud people. It would be a great dishonor to them to allow them to live this way.

Caduan spoke, his voice low. “I thought there would be nothing worse than for them to kill us all. But now here they are, making us do it for them.”

“It is the only mercy we can give them,” Ishqa said.

Caduan gave Ishqa a cold stare, then got up and left without another word.



THE HOUSE OF REEDS was difficult to burn. The air was damp and the ground wet, and we needed to start fires all around the perimeter of the walls, then accelerate them with Ishqa and Caduan's whispered spells. It was dusk by the time we succeeded, the orange flames bleeding into the mist. The sky was bright red when the screams began, sickening shrieks that raked down my spine.

The fire moved slowly. They wailed long into the night, and we just lay there and listened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



The excitement around our trip to Meriata was palpable. Everyone was hungry for rest and fun, more than ready for all the delicious trouble the city had to offer. This, after all, wasn't just any stop. It was *Meriata* — the city famously willing to cater to any vice.

“Meriata?” I heard one of the soldiers mutter to his friend once the news of our stop began to spread. “Was that Farlione’s idea?”

I tried very hard not to smirk as his companion let out a snort and replied, “I doubt he’d even know what to do in a place like that. After what, a decade off in the mountains?”

Oh, if only they knew. I’d spent *plenty* of time there, years ago, though the city probably remembered me more than I remembered it. In the years following the war, when I’d wandered the country in a grief-and-drug-induced haze, Meriata had welcomed me with a lover’s open arms. After all, there was no better place to lose yourself, and myself was the only thing I had left to lose.

I remembered very little from that time. Still, once we got there, the atmosphere dredged up memories that I thought I’d long ago buried. Even from a distance, the city was beautiful — glittering glass spires lit with strings of lights, all rising to the city’s famous domed peak, which was topped with flower arrangements that spilled down its sides. That dreamy, glamorous excess trickled down the streets, which were winding and narrow, teeming with music and the scent of sweat and perfume.

That was what got me. The little things. The faint whiff of those Meriatan flowers, the twang of a song, the misty image of inns lit up with warmth. All painfully-sharp shards of memories I thought I had discarded, but still couldn't assemble.

The soldiers dispersed almost immediately upon entering the city limits, though Moth lingered by my side.

"Ever been here before?" I asked him, even though his round-eyed staring made the answer very obvious. He shook his head.

"It's easy to find trouble here. So don't go wandering into any— no, Moth, *definitely* don't go there," I grumbled, yanking his arm. He had slowed a bit too much while walking past a gaudily decorated building surrounded by even more gaudily decorated women. Still, even as I dragged him along, his neck craned as he turned back to wave back at the giggling ladies.

I rolled my eyes. Sammerin was a bad influence.

"Listen," I said, "this is probably the only time off we're going to have for quite awhile. So you'd be smart to use the chance for some actual—"

"Ey! Moth! *Moth!*"

We both turned to see one of my soldiers, Jorge, a teenage boy just a few years older than Moth, waving wildly from down the street. Without another word, Moth was already hurrying off to meet him.

"See you tomorrow, Max!"

"Don't do anything *idiotic!*" I called after him, somewhat insulted to be so easily abandoned. I watched him go, and fought an inexplicable tension in my chest as I considered all the trouble that one especially accident-prone teenage boy could get into in a city as seedy as Meriata.

Ascended above. I was getting old.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and turned out towards the streets. Crowds surrounded me, which, of course, I hated.

If Tisaanah was here, it might — *might* — have been worth putting up with it just to watch her as she experienced it all. It would have delighted her. I remembered her face the day I had brought her to the Capital. She'd gotten this look in her eyes, this gleeful, overwhelmed amazement, and for the first time I had thought to myself, *I suppose I could get used to seeing that look.*

I allowed myself the wistful memory, then shrugged it away and started walking. There was a reason I had come here, after all. I had work to do.



THE CITY WAS QUIETER as I left downtown, venturing beyond the throngs of partying visitors. In these neighborhoods, sparkling lights meant to entice were replaced by shadows meant to conceal. My memories of my time in Meriata may have been a blur, but my footsteps still knew the path. The building looked exactly as it had seven years ago, though perhaps a little more run down. The peeling paint around the arched door was now covered up with velvet fabric, perhaps in some attempt at sophistication. Fake, gold-sprayed flowers adorned the windowsills. There was no sign. But then, it had never needed one.

When I stepped inside, I was hit with the scent of rose so strong it made my nostrils burn. Slightly-off-key music hung, too-loud, in the air. It was so dark that it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. Even the arrangement of the place hadn't changed — the small lounge lined with benches topped with velvet pillows, little chipped cafe tables, and the suspicious couches that, even back when I was out of my mind on Ascended-knew-what, I knew better than to sit on.

I sat down at an empty table — wooden chair, of course, hard surfaces only — and watched the room. They were doing good business tonight. Topless women and topless men leaned over their shadow-draped patrons, dispensing honeyed whispers.

“Good evening, soldier. What can I—”

I pulled away from a set of hands sliding over my shoulders. “No, thank you.”

The woman arched an eyebrow, pushing blonde curls behind her ears. “Are you sure about that?”

“Very much so, I’m afraid.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself,” she muttered, wandering off to a more accommodating patron.

“After so many years,” a familiar voice purred from behind me, “you really have so little interest in seeing what you’ve been missing, Lord Farlione?”

I turned to see an old friend standing behind my chair, her arms crossed and lips pursed. She was swathed in silky, brightly-colored fabrics, a low neckline cradling several gold and silver necklaces. Her grey-streaked, chestnut hair was pinned away from a regal face that hadn’t aged much since I had last seen her.

“If I remember correctly,” I said, “paid affection wasn’t my particular vice.”

“I’m surprised that you remember anything at all about the years you spent passed out on my floors.”

I winced. “That does sound more familiar.”

Her eyes narrowed at me, and she regarded me for a long moment. Then her face broke into a grin, and she waved to the barkeep. “Come. Tell me what you’re drinking these days. And tell me why you’re wearing an Ascended-damned military uniform.”

“Let’s talk somewhere more private.”

She paused, eyebrow raising. “That’s very flattering, Maxantarius, but I’m long retired.”

Still, I saw the concern in her gaze. Concern— and interest, like a hungry cat with its appetite piqued. Prostitution wasn’t the only thing that Eomara was “long retired” from.

She sighed, then waved me to the back of the room. “Oh, fine. Come. I’m getting us wine, though. We talk *and* drink.”

EOMARA’S OFFICE hadn’t changed much since I was last here, either. It was jarringly different from the cafe up front, blue-and-purple seductive lights replaced with the warm glow of lanterns, gaudy decoration switched out for bookshelves packed with tomes of every possible color and shape. The room was just large enough for two desks, which faced each other. A middle-aged, spindly man with sandy hair and gold glasses hunched over one of them. He looked up as we entered, pushing the glasses up his nose as his eyebrows leapt.

“Maxantarius Farlione. Ascended be damned, I thought we’d seen the last of you. Actually, thought you’d probably wound up dead in an alley somewhere, to tell you the truth. Until I started hearing those stories about you and Antedale—”

“Max has plenty of time to tell us *all* his stories, Erik,” Eomara said, waving a silencing hand at her brother. She perched on the edge of her desk and motioned for me to take a seat, opening the bottle of wine.

“Tell me what brings us the pleasure of your visit. Like Erik said, we did hear all about Antedale. People around here were shocked when it fell.”

“Not just Antedale. I’ve been following all of it — the others, too.” Erik blinked at me, as if his eyes were struggling to adjust to something that wasn’t ink-stained pages. “Took me awhile to realize what you’ve been doing. Taking the cities down indirectly. Seemed like a strange strategy for you of all people—”

Eomara handed me a glass of wine, which was halfway to my lips when I set it down and gave Erik a hard stare. “Me of all people?”

“Well...” Erik shrugged. “You know. With your history.”

Eomara shot him a glare. “Enough talk of the ugly past. We were glad to hear that you were back. Though I will say, I was surprised that *Aldris* is the one you came back for. You held a special kind of hatred for him, years ago.” Her gaze went far away. “I always liked him, though. Scrappy, that man. And look where it’s gotten him.”

Look indeed. I took a long drink of wine, mostly to stop myself from getting into an argument that would serve no purpose. Then I set it down.

“Eomara,” I said, “what do you know about life magic?”

Eomara’s face lit up. She set her own drink down and leaned forward, her chin in her palm, looking at me with an interest that was nothing short of ravenous.

“What sort of life magic?”

“Would it be possible for someone to create a spell that bound one life to another? If one person dies, so would the other?”

“That would be terrible,” remarked Erik.

“Oh, yes,” agreed Eomara, a gruesomely delighted smile tugging at her lips. “Terrible.”

“I didn’t think that such a thing was possible,” I went on. “Certainly not something that Valtain magic nor Solarie magic could accomplish on their own. No one can manipulate life force like that. And with such poorly-defined parameters?” I shook my head.

“It’s not possible,” Eomara said, and for a split second I almost breathed a sigh of relief — until she added, “with traditional magic. But...”

“But?”

“But perhaps... with Fey magic.”

I let out a scoff. “So you’re saying that it *is* impossible. Considering that the Fey have been extinct for, what, five hundred years?”

Eomara's dark eyes sparkled with silent laughter. "Come now, Maxantarius. You've seen too much to be so naive."

I hated it, but she was right. I blinked, and as they always did in times like these, my second eyelids seemed so much more noticeable now, a constant reminder of all the magic in the world that I failed to understand.

"So you think that they're still out there."

She shrugged. "I have heard stories. Who hasn't? But even if they are, have a little imagination. Humans have only had magic for a few hundred years. Nothing, in the grand scale of innovation. There's still so much we haven't discovered."

"Like?"

"Perhaps hybrid approaches. Valtain and Solarie and Fey magics, all manipulated until they become something that is all and none of them at once." Her eyebrow twitched. "A fourth type that we've yet to fully uncover."

A fourth magic. Like Reshaye. Like the magic that it had left inside of me.

"Even if such a thing did exist," I said, "a typical human wouldn't be able to Wield it. Just as a Valtain can't Wield Solarie magic, and vice versa."

"It would need to come from somewhere *deep*. They certainly would run a significant risk of going insane or contracting a nasty case of A'Maril."

A'Maril — magic toxicity sickness. A fucking awful way to die.

"But that doesn't mean it's impossible," Eomara went on. "Very few things are, actually, when you have a little vision."

I scoffed. I didn't need "vision." I had seen plenty and could imagine much worse. Besides, Eomara's problem had always *been* her vision. She had too much of it, and many people in the Orders did not like the specters that lingered in its shadows. She had never gotten the support, neither moral nor financial, for her research. Still, she was one of the most brilliant people I'd ever met.

Now she leaned back in her chair, taking another long sip of wine, clearly deep in delighted thought about all the possibilities I had laid out.

“I suspect,” she said, “that if one were to do it, it would simply be a matter of cost.”

“Cost?”

“All magic requires energy. Obvious to anyone who’s ever done it, yes?”

“Certainly.”

“Thus, we already have an established truth in this: magic has a cost. Imagine, then, a spell with an exponentially high cost. Instead of just giving you a bad headache, when the spell executes, it demands *life force*. Enough of it to kill someone. It isn’t binary, you see. The difference between life and death isn’t a line, it’s a chasm. And a spell like this would have to pull from deep within the levels of magic, down where the rules aren’t as clear.”

She lapsed into thought.

“It’s a little sickening, isn’t it? What a gruesome idea. Such a spell would have incredible cost to create. Imagine sacrificing that much of yourself just to drag another soul back with you when you go.”

Imagine indeed.

My mouth had gone dry. I had come here with the wild hope that Eomara would tell me it couldn’t be done. If Eomara said that something was impossible, it truly was *impossible*. But even when I walked through this door, a part of me knew that would be too easy. She was only giving voice to what I already knew and didn’t want to believe.

“So how would one break it?” I asked, and Eomara’s eyebrows lurched.

“What a question indeed. How does one break a blood pact?”

I let out a puff of air through my teeth, and Eomara chuckled.

“Exactly. Not impossible, but damned difficult. You’re better off trying to find a way to maneuver around the chains than gnaw your own arm off.”

Perhaps my unease was clear across my face, because Eomara frowned and leaned forward.

“Tell me, Max, is this really just theoretical?”

I was silent. Perhaps that was answer enough for her.

“I’m sorry that I do not have a clearer answer for you,” she said. “Perhaps you should consider visiting Vardir.”

My gaze snapped back to her. “Absolutely not.”

“I know that you disapprove of his tactics, but...”

“Disapprove of his—” I let out a scoff, shaking my head. “Unbelievable.”

She shrugged. “Just a suggestion. He would know more about this than me.”

“Is that miserable lunatic even still *alive*?”

Eomara gave me a peculiar look. “He is in Ilyzath, Max,” she said, as if it was borderline pitiful that I didn’t know, and in a sense she was right — being sent to Ilyzath was a huge event, and it happened so rarely that when it did, the rumors flew through the Orders like wildfire. But then, I’d spent almost a decade after the war in a state of either severe inebriation or total isolation. There was plenty of news that I had missed. And of course, my only thread of connection to the outside world — Sammerin — would not be especially eager to keep me up to date on Vardir, of all people.

He was, after all, the man who was responsible for Reshaye.

“No.” I shook my head. “There’s nothing that I need to know badly enough to see him.”

A lie, even if I wished it was true.

Eomara shrugged and took another sip of wine. “Suit yourself, captain. But I think you know as well as I do that you

have to look in unsavory places for unsavory information.
That's why you're here, isn't it?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

TISAANAH



I heard a terrible, terrible scream.

My eyes opened and blinked blearily at the ceiling. Sweat plastered my body.

A dream? Or—

The scream came again, the kind of sound that stripped me from the inside out.

I jolted upright and paid for it with a splitting pain in my head. Still, I forced myself out of bed, threw on a robe, and went to the door.

It was not hard to follow the sound. It echoed down the hallways of the Farlione estate, nearly non-stop, as if whoever was making it was in such agony they didn't even need to stop to breathe.

In the back of my mind, Reshaye coiled.

{Do not go.}

Why?

A slow hiss. *{It feels like death.}*

I padded barefoot through the wing, following the sounds. Eventually, I turned a corner that led to a hallway that was completely dark, save for one door with light spilling from beneath it. The scream was so loud here that I couldn't even hear myself think.

The door opened easily to my touch.

Four figures huddled in the center of the room, heads bowed. I recognized Nura immediately. Two of the others donned tight-fitting black leather, spears mounted across their backs — Syrizen. The fourth was just a head of white, curly hair, kneeling.

The scream went on, and on.

“What’s wrong with them?”

I had to raise my voice. I didn’t realize I had spoken out loud until all those faces turned to look at me. Ariadnea. Anserra, still wearing her red sash. The kneeling Valtain was Willa, crouched over the bed.

I realized who lay there — Eslyn.

She was writhing in the most unnatural way, as if every muscle in her body was spasming in different directions. Her black jacket had been opened, and her tanned skin was mottled with patches of purple.

“What are you doing here?” Nura said, sharply.

“I heard the screaming...”

“Screaming?”

I went to Eslyn’s bedside. The figure I was looking at looked nothing like the cocky, strong woman I fought beside. This... this looked like a corpse, or worse. Her abdomen, once powerful and muscular, now twitched with sweat-slicked shudders. Tiny veins beneath her skin seemed to all push towards the surface, pulsing and black.

“What happened to her?” I asked again.

“A’Maril,” Willa murmured, not looking up.

“A’Maril?” I had never heard the term before. “What—”

Another scream split through my skull. Reshaye recoiled so violently that I staggered backwards, my hands going to my ears.

Anserra muttered, “Get her out of here.”

Nura approached me, eyes narrowed. “What’s wrong?”

I looked at her as if she were insane.

What's wrong? What kind of a question *was* that? I could barely hear any of them over that scream — gods, how could any set of lungs scream for this long?

But then I realized:

No one else was reacting to the sound. Eslyn's lips, though they were contorted in agony, were not parted.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. Eslyn's pain surrounded me. Reshaye ran circles in my mind, desperate to escape her suffering.

The next thing I knew, I was on the ground. Nura reached for me, and I gave her a snarl that I wasn't sure fully belonged to me.

"Get her *out* of here," Anserra said, more sharply, and Nura shot her a glare before grabbing my arm and dragging me upright.

"Let's go."



I WAS SO disoriented that I barely tracked our path. Nura led me to a separate wing of the house, far from where my room was. It was another apartment, bigger than mine, and she barely paused before leading me out through a set of glass doors onto a small balcony. The screams were quieter here, and the cold air made my heartbeat slow. Reshaye settled, though it still paced my thoughts like a dog guarding the windows.

Nura poured me a small glass from a liquor bottle and handed it to me, then poured another for herself.

I looked down at the amber liquid. It was trembling. My hands were shaking.

"Just whiskey," Nura muttered. "Trust me, you need it. I know I do."

She wasn't wrong. I downed it on a single gulp, and exhaled tension.

"What did I just see?" I asked.

"Eslyn is sick."

"Sick how?"

Nura poured herself another glass, which she nursed more slowly. "Syrizen gamble with magic far deeper than the magic Valtain or Solarie use."

"The levels," I murmured, remembering what Eslyn had told me on our way to Threll. There were different streams of magic — Valtain, Solarie, Fey — and something deeper than all of them. That was why they took the Syrizen's eyes. Removing their sight gave them a greater sensitivity to the lowest levels of magic, though even then, they could only dip into it for seconds at a time.

"Right. And what they do is dangerous." Nura let out a breath through her teeth. Her eyes were downcast, and she shook her hair out with one hand, going silent.

I watched her carefully. It would be easy to write Nura off as unfeeling. But there was a grim sadness in her now, as if she too was trying to shake away what we had just seen.

"They modify themselves, push themselves, to be able to wield that fourth layer of magic," she said. "But human flesh was never meant to withstand that. And sometimes, it doesn't. That's when you get A'Maril. Toxicity sickness, from wielding magic not intended for you."

"But...why? Why now?"

"Why does any illness choose its target? A'Maril is so often random. Maybe she pushed a little too far or stayed down there a little too long. Maybe she hit some toxic pocket of magic. Maybe she ate undercooked meat five days ago, which interfered with her body in just the right way, and the stars aligned. We just don't know enough about it. But..." Her face hardened. "Eslyn has been taking extra risks, lately."

"Zeryth's potions."

Nura nodded, barely.

Because of the vials that Zeryth gave her before battles — the ones that made her so much stronger. I understood that whatever he was doing to create them played a role in his decline. It stood to reason that it would play a role in Eslyn's, too.

Nura took another sip, her eyes slipping out over the mountains. “But even aside from Eslyn's unique circumstances, it's not a terribly uncommon fate for the Syrizen.” Then she gave me a curious look. “You said you heard screaming.”

“I did. Reshaye did.”

As if awakened by the sound of its name, Reshaye slithered to the front of my skull, taking in Nura with detached disapproval.

“It draws from deep magic, too,” she said. “Like the Syrizen, but even deeper. What you were hearing may have been coming from... there.” She waved her hand out into the air. “Instead of here.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Who knows? No one understands this. But that's why you need to be careful. Eslyn got sick because she Wielded magic that was too deep, for too long, in the wrong way.”

And I was Wielding magic even deeper than that, for longer. I did get so, so sick after using Reshaye's magic — but that was nothing compared to what I just witnessed.

“What will happen to Eslyn?” I asked, quietly.

“She'll die. They always do.”

“Always?”

A pause. “One time, I saw someone survive it. Just once. But she was never the same.”

Reshaye still paced at the front of my thoughts, like a caged panther sizing up the bars of its cage. My head was still in splitting pain.

Stop that, I told it.

{Not as long as she is here.}

My fingers went to my temple. It took all of my strength to push Reshaye back, forcing it into a secluded corner of my mind.

“What?” Nura was giving me a curious look.

“Why does Reshaye hate you so much?”

The corners of her mouth tightened. “Reshaye hates everything.”

{What I feel is not hate,} Reshaye hissed, as if offended by this characterization.

“It hates you more.”

“Probably because Max does.”

Despite myself — despite everything else I had to worry about — hearing Nura say Max’s name always made my jaw clench in sheer petty protectiveness. “It isn’t that.”

{Again and again, she fought me,} Reshaye whispered. *{It never ended.}*

“You tried to Wield it,” I said.

“Of course I did.”

Of course? My stomach turned. To think that she wanted this thing, after what it did to Max — after what it did to the Farliones. Sometimes, I found myself thinking of Nura as a reluctant ally, but in moments like this, I was revolted by her.

I didn’t let it show. But she cast me a knowing glance, as if she still felt my unspoken judgement.

“Do not think,” she said, quietly, “that I did not have a *reckoning* with that thing.”

Reshaye snarled, and the memories came in razor sharp flashes — Nura, looking into the mirror, flushed, shaking. A set of bloody hands in the sand of the sparring ring, forcing herself upright again, again, again. Nura, in cold water and utter darkness. Nura, slicing her own arm open.

The images disappeared just as suddenly as they overtook me. The silence and the gentle breeze assaulted me. Nura had poured herself another drink.

“I heard about what’s happening in Threll,” she said. “With the Zorokov family. You should have just done what Zeryth wanted you to do from the beginning. Then the war would be over, and you could go to them.”

“It was too dangerous.”

“The longer you draw this out, the more people will die.”

I gave her a long stare. She was older now, than she was in Max’s memories of her. But the look in her eye, ruthless and certain, was still the same. How many times had she told Max — told herself — the same thing, in the wake of Sarlazai?

And yet, there was a part of me that wondered if perhaps she was right.

“I want it to be a world worth saving,” I said.

A wry smile twisted her lips. “You must think I’m made of stone.”

“Ice, perhaps.”

Because ice froze over in layers, obfuscating whatever lay beneath it. There was something else there, I knew. She hadn’t always been this way. Even now, I saw the sadness in her eyes.

A short laugh. “I don’t like that. Ice is too fragile.” Her silver eyes slipped to me. “I’d be careful who you judge, Tisaanah. Maybe one day you’ll stand where I do. You’ll cut away every weakness. You’ll make every sacrifice. And then the world will look at you and sneer at your inhumanity, as if you didn’t just become everything they told you to be.”

She took a long drink and turned to the mountains.

“Eslyn was my friend, once,” she murmured. “I’m not looking forward to watching her die.”

It seemed strange to pity Nura. And yet, I understood more than I wanted to how lonely it was to chop away everything that connected you to other human souls.

I lifted my glass.

“To the dead,” I said.

Nura lifted hers. “To the dead.” She downed the rest of her glass in one gulp, then turned and looked up to the Farlione mansion. It loomed over us, and she glared back at it, as if she could stare it into submission. “You know,” she said, plainly, “I hate this fucking house.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



“Seven skies, what is that forsaken fucking *stench*?”

Ashraia’s booming voice shook the camp. I couldn’t help but agree — it was impossible not to. We had just returned from hunting, and Siobhan and Ishqa from gathering firewood. One look at the wrinkles of disgust on their noses told me they were thinking the same thing.

We all blinked at each other. Then my eyes slipped to the far corner of our camp, where Caduan’s tent stood.

“Caduan?” I called.

“Sh,” Siobhan said, raising a finger.

We went silent. And then I heard it — strange sounds from the woods.

“Caduan?” I called again.

The answer came from the forest. “Over here,” he called back.

I trudged through the brush until I reached a small clearing —

—And immediately had to swallow bile.

I uttered a curse that came out as gibberish because I didn’t trust myself to open my mouth without vomiting.

The others were right behind me. Ashraia’s curse was louder than mine, drowning out Siobhan’s gasp.

Caduan looked at us and drew a hand over his forehead. Flecks of cloudy purple dotted his face.

“I know,” he said. “It’s not pleasant.”

“Not pleasant?” I repeated.

There was a Mathira-damned body sprawled out — *opened* — on a makeshift table in the center of the clearing. It had been cut open from throat to navel, exposing a mushy expanse of guts and flesh, all grayish purple. The face was covered by a small piece of white fabric, but greasy tendrils of red-gold hair hung over the edge of the table.

“What,” Ishqa said, deadly quiet, “are you doing?”

We were all thinking it: he’d gone insane. Not that anyone could blame him.

It took me a moment to realize what I was looking at. The body on the table was most noticeably disfigured because of its opened abdomen, but its limbs, too, were twisted and gnarled, the skin grayish and too-formless.

“It’s from the House of Reeds,” I said.

“She,” Caduan repeated, nodding. “She is one of the Fey slain in the House of Reeds. Yes.”

I pressed the back of my hand over my nose and stepped forward. The closer I came, the... *stranger* the body looked. I had seen many dead bodies in states of disrepair. I knew what normal Fey guts looked like.

This? This was not right. This was too grey, too... formless.

“What are you doing?” Ishqa repeated, most sharply.

“We needed answers,” Caduan replied. He didn’t take his eyes off the thing on the table. “I was hoping I was wrong.”

His gaze flicked up to meet mine, and I glimpsed raw fear.

“This is a Fey woman,” he said. “Or, *was* a Fey woman. No longer.”

“I don’t understand,” Siobhan said. “Clearly something had happened to—”

“Not ‘happened to.’ She has *inherently* changed.” He stepped back, grabbing a cloth to wipe his hands. “Her blood is tainted with *human* blood. And there is something else there, too. Something magic. I can’t identify it, but...” He frowned as his voice trailed off, looking like he didn’t even realize that he had stopped speaking.

“What does that mean?” I said, quietly. A knot of dread clenched in my stomach.

“It means that someone tried to change her into something else. Some sort of... hybrid creature.”

Caduan pulled the cloth from over the Fey corpse’s head, revealing a face that was somehow astoundingly beautiful and gut-wrenchingly hideous all at once. Her features had been ever so slightly rearranged, seeming to blur no matter how I focused. Her skin was sallow and sagging, violet veins blooming beneath its slick surface.

Even I could not identify what was so wrong about it. Yet, it was uncomfortable to look at. This was the face that had once belonged to someone who loved and smiled and laughed. And it had been corrupted.

“Why?” I choked out. “Why would they do that?”

“And how?” Siobhan said. “A whole House? All at once?”

Caduan shook his head, still not looking away from the corpse. “I do not know.”

“Perhaps it’s weaponry,” I said. “A way to kill them all, quickly.”

“I know very well that they do not need to do this to kill. No. I think whatever this was, it was a failure.” He lifted his knife, pointing to the exposed innards of the body. “Even just over the last several hours, all of this has degraded. Her body is withering away as we speak. Her own blood is poisoning her. We didn’t kill this one. I found her beyond the walls, untouched by the fires. Likely drowned in her own dissolved organs. Slowly.”

His voice was calm and level, but his knuckles were white around the handle of his blade.

“I do not think,” he said, “that this is what the humans wanted to happen. I think that this is a failed experiment. They weren’t trying to destroy. They were trying to create. And what we are looking at now is a Fey caught in-between. Just as Aefe was caught in-between, last night.” His eyes flicked up to mine, bright and furious. “The land itself was corrupted, there. Don’t tell me that you did not feel it as I did.”

I had felt it, seeping all the way down to the core of the earth.

“Whatever they did, it killed their own kind, too,” he went on. “I found a human corpse not far from this one. The same corruption, same disfigurement. But in worse shape. There was not much to salvage.”

Ishqa let out a long breath through his teeth.

“Then what does this tell us but that the humans are ruthless creatures? We already knew that.”

“It tells us a great deal. And perhaps it could have told us more, if we had not torched the city before we could investigate.”

Ishqa’s stare hardened.

“You’re saying that they are trying to create something with Fey magic,” I said. “Fey and human magic melded. And...” I cleared my throat, the next word striking too close to the ones that had been hurled at me just hours before. “... Corrupted, as you call it.”

“I believe so. But I need to learn more to understand why, or how.”

“This is heretic magic,” Ashraia growled. “No Fey scholars would be studying such things.”

It was the truth. The Fey houses were different in so many ways, but one belief they all shared — perhaps the *only* belief they all shared — was that magic was a gift from the gods. As

such, it was a sacred practice, treated with careful reverence, and never, ever to be used or studied blasphemously.

I knew those teachings well, of course. They were the same ones that condemned me for the magic that lived in my veins.

“No Fey scholars,” Caduan said. “But perhaps Nirajan ones.”

My head snapped up. I thought I must have misheard him.

“Nirajan?” I echoed. “You propose we write to *Niraja*?”

“I propose we *go* to Niraja,” Caduan said.

I almost laughed, because the thought was just that ridiculous.

Ashraia let out a scoff. “If we were to go to Niraja, none of us would ever be allowed to return home.”

“You say that as if there’s any possibility that we *can* go there,” Siobhan added. “But even if we wanted to, we couldn’t.”

“Not that I would ever walk into the kingdom of halfbreed traitors,” Ashraia grumbled. “I’m surprised you would want to speak to people who are willing to fuck the creatures that killed your kin. And I’m sure the Sidnee feel even more strongly about it than I.”

On instinct, I flexed the fingers of my right arm — the one covered not with shameful X’s, but my father’s esteemed stories.

Yes. To so much as suggest that we visit Niraja was... well, implausible wasn’t strong enough of a word. It was a small kingdom, an island that lay between the Fey and human lands, further south even than the House of Nautilus. It was exiled by all Fey Houses, because its founders had done perhaps the most shameful thing possible.

They had interbred with the humans.

And they had paid the price many times over for defiling Fey ways — with their exile, yes, but also worse. Some of that

punishment came from the hand of my own people. My own father.

“We cannot visit an exiled nation,” I said.

“What’s stopping us?” Caduan replied. “What reason is there?”

“Exile is permanent, and all-encompassing,” Ishqa said. “By going among them, we defile ourselves.”

I had never seen Caduan show anger before. And even now, it happened slowly, as if bubbling up beneath the surface of an ice-covered lake.

“That is what the humans hold over us,” he said, quietly. “Ingenuity. Adaptability. They learn how to erase their weaknesses. Meanwhile, we’ll cling to our symbolic traditions as we watch our own people fall. How far away are any of us from heretic magic? Your people were never intended to half-shift. You learned how to do that. The gods did not give that to you. Is that, too, *heretical*?”

A wrinkle twitched over the bridge of Ishqa’s nose. “Our traditions are all we have. If we abandon them, then we are saving nothing at all.”

“Nothing? We are saving *lives*. Do you think I care at all about my House’s traditions? Our pointless rules? I would trade all of those things and more to have the souls I lost that day back. And if you say otherwise, then you either lack a brain or a heart.”

Ishqa’s eyebrows arched. Ashraia looked as if he were actively holding himself back from decking the king across the face. I had to bite back a gasp, even as I also nursed a twinge of admiration.

How easy it was, for Caduan to discard the weight of society. Every day, I felt it biting into my skin like chafing ropes, reminding me of exactly what I was and what I could never be. Every second of my life was defined by it. And yet, to Caduan, it was inconsequential.

Caduan’s gaze flicked to me. The green of his eyes seemed brighter, somehow, with the intensity of his fury.

He simply said, “Aefe?” and I was struck, yet again, by the way he said my name.

I was silent.

Perhaps a part of me thought he was right. But that was the part that I spent my whole life choking back — the part that railed against the confines of my blood, that hated my father for discarding me just as much as I loved and admired him. I did not let that part of myself out of its box. And certainly not here, when I was not a disgraced Essnera, but my father’s chosen.

“We will have to find other ways to get answers,” I said. “The terms of exile are clear. And the Teirna would never allow it.”

Caduan flinched. He turned away — back to the corpse on the table.

“We will find another way,” I said.

“Of course,” Caduan replied, dryly. “I’m sure we will.”



WE RODE OUT THAT DAY, our route unchanged. It felt strange, to do anything as planned when the world seemed to have shifted so suddenly. We barely spoke, and at night, we set up camp and retreated to our respective tents with little discussion.

I lay there, sleeplessly, for a long time. Finally, I crept from my tent and into the woods. I found Caduan easily. I thought he would be practicing tonight. Instead, he sat on a fallen tree, head tilted up to the sky.

I paused.

His eyes were closed, the moonlight spilling down over his cheeks, illuminating his profile. It occurred to me that he had a beautiful face, all those sharp angles perfectly balanced, so still that he looked as if he could be a painting.

I was still, not approaching him. Until Caduan said, without opening his eyes, “So. I suppose we now know why you are not the Teirness.”

My cheeks heated, and I was grateful that the darkness hid it.

“You aren’t practicing tonight?” I said.

Caduan’s eyes opened, and he looked at me. It was a look that could slice through stone.

“How old were you?” he asked.

I hesitated.

I didn’t want to talk about this. I rarely spoke of it with anyone, even at home. “How old was I when I found out what I am?”

“When you found out that you are an Essnera.”

I flinched — the word always felt like a strike.

“What?” Caduan’s eyes searched my face. “You dislike the term?”

As always, he saw more than I wanted him to.

“Of course I dislike the term,” I muttered. I considered walking away. It would be easier. It was what I usually did, when I was asked uncomfortable questions.

Instead, I found myself settling beside Caduan.

“I was ten years old,” I said. “A priestess found it in me. She felt it in my magic.”

I still remembered it in flawless clarity. The priestess had been kneeling before me, her fingers pressed to my forehead. Her magic had been reading mine — Sidnee priestesses were the rare Fey who had the gift of seeing deep into the magic of others, into their blood. Her eyes had been closed, and I had been watching her dramatic seriousness while trying not to laugh.

Then, her eyes had snapped open, and she had jerked backwards. Before, she had addressed me with the reverent

respect befitting of my station. But then, she had looked at me as if she had seen something terrible, something *terrifying*, within me.

“I didn’t know what it meant, at the time. She didn’t say anything to me, or to my mother. But she must have spoken to my father, because...”

Because that night, I had awoken to my father’s hands around my throat.

I forced myself to look at Caduan. I expected to see judgement. There was always some shade of judgement, after they knew. But not here. What was that? Gentleness? Pity?

“In the House of Stone,” he said, softly, “they kill Essneras.”

“Sometimes in the House of Obsidian, they do too.”

I didn’t fully remember that night. The memories were broken pieces that didn’t quite fit together. The sensation of my father’s hands around my throat. The razored edge of my terror. A light that spilled through the door — or perhaps I had imagined that, as I lost consciousness. I remembered begging. I remembered fading.

And when I opened my eyes again, my life had changed.

“My father spared me,” I said, at last. “But of course, I could not be the Teirness.”

Something I could not read crossed Caduan’s face.

“I’m sorry,” he said, softly, with a tenderness that I was not expecting. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

I lifted one shoulder in a shrug, one that I hoped looked more nonchalant than I felt. “It is not up to me to judge the choices of the gods.”

The words felt ridiculous rolling off of my tongue. Caduan practically winced, as if they sounded that way to him, too.

He stood, pacing through the brush. Then he turned to me.

“I do not think you believe that. About the gods.”

I blinked. “What?”

“And I do not think you believe what you said this morning.”

“I—”

But his gaze bore into me, unrelenting. “Am I wrong?”

Mathira, I had always been so bad at lying. I said nothing, but my answer was written across my face.

“We have a chance at getting *answers*, Aefe,” he said. “Legitimate answers. Do you truly believe that we should abandon that in the name of—”

“It is the role of a Teirna to uphold our ways. What would you have him do?”

Understanding settled over Caduan’s face.

“The Teirna,” he said, softly. “So you were not giving me your opinion. You were giving me your father’s.”

“I am here as my father’s chosen. It doesn’t matter what I think.”

“I believe it does.”

“You say that as if I’m something other than a disgraced Blade,” I scoffed. “The truth is, Caduan, I am honored to hold this position. And I will not jeopardize it by telling my father to abandon his ideals.”

His lip curled. He began to pace. “Ideals are worth nothing to corpses. Not the one I had open on my table, and not the ones I crawled away from in my home. And you should know that more than anyone. You, of all people, should have no patience for their pointless games.”

What was *that* supposed to mean?

“My father doesn’t play games,” I shot back. “And you should watch how you speak of him. He respects you.”

Caduan whirled to me, his green eyes starker than I’d ever seen them, furious. “He doesn’t *respect* me. He thinks I’m *useful*. There is a great difference between the two. And for

that gift, he should be beyond reproach? Should I allow your house to be slaughtered as mine was if it means avoiding damaging his fragile ego, all because he thinks I have *potential*?”

My father’s voice rang out in my mind:

I do think you have... potential, Aefe.

My blade was out on nothing but instinct. That was so often how my temper bloomed, in fits and starts, acting on my behalf before I even knew what I was doing. Two breaths, my body was pressed against Caduan’s, his back against a tree and my blade at his throat.

We were close enough now that I could watch each rivulet of moonlight drip across his face. I could see every twitch of his expression, every strand of color in his eyes. We both wore light clothing. I could feel the shape of him against me, the rhythm of his breathing. Mine was heavy with my anger. But Caduan’s was still light, calm.

“I warned you,” I snarled.

He regarded me silently. There was no fear in his stare, not even anger.

Perhaps just a shade of satisfaction.

“Fair enough,” he murmured.

Goosebumps prickled over my skin.

I did not like the way he looked at me. It made me uncomfortable, to be examined so closely.

I lifted my chin.

“Disarm me,” I said, tersely. “You haven’t practiced in four days.”

Still, he did not look away. His fingers found my wrist, and for a moment, they hovered there, brushing the sliver of bare skin at the edge of my leathers.

I resisted the urge to pull away from that touch — the strange intimacy of it.

Then, he struck, one quick blow to my elbow, reaching for the hilt of the dagger and pushing me to my knees. I slipped his grip, but he countered me again, blocking my recovery before I had the chance to right myself.

And the next thing I knew, I was on the ground, and he was draped over me, hands at my shoulders.

I held up the dagger. “Fail. I got the knife back.”

His eyes narrowed at me. “Perhaps,” he said. “But you look disarmed, nonetheless.”

I felt disarmed. No matter how tightly I clutched the steel in my hand.

I cleared my throat. “Get off of me, please.”

He obeyed, rising gracefully, while I pushed to my feet. I did not look at him as I dusted dirt and dead leaves off my clothes.

“I will write to my father,” I said, carefully examining my sleeve. “I can’t make him see as you do. But I can make the recommendation that we visit Niraja.”

But he will not listen, a voice in the back of my mind whispered. And you will prove his ugliest assumptions about you right.

Nevertheless. When I turned, there was something akin to pride in the way that Caduan looked at me then, hidden in the corners of a barely-there smile. The kind of admiration that made it seem like the right thing to do.

And so, when I returned to my tent, I withdrew my pen and parchment and began writing in my neatest script. I told my father of our terrifying discovery in the House of Reeds. I told him of Caduan’s suspicions.

I had to gather myself before I wrote the end.

Caduan believes that Niraja may hold the answers to what the humans are trying to accomplish. He believes that they are unique in this potential. I am well aware that they are in exile. However, given that we are facing grave danger, and given what we have seen, I urge you to consider permitting us to

travel to them. The humans are clearly working in heretic magics; we must go somewhere that knows such things to learn how to counter it.

Another pause. Then,

Forgive my disrespect. I write this only with the mission of protecting you, mother, Orscheid, and the Sidnee ways.

My pen hovered. I fought the overwhelming urge to strike out the previous words, to replace them with ones I knew my father would prefer to hear — the reassurance that the Sidnee traditions alone would protect us.

But instead, I signed my name, folded the letter, and sealed it up with my dissent carefully nestled inside.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



When I arrived back at the inn, the ground floor was oddly quiet. My eyes landed on a familiar set of blond curls. Moth was at a pub table, sagging over a mostly-empty glass of what looked to be piss-poor mead.

Ascended help us all.

I approached him. “You look like you’re having an incredibly good time.”

Moth lifted his head and gave me a grin that made me roll my eyes.

“You’re thirty years too young to be this drunk alone at a pub, Moth. Actually, you’re too young to be drunk at all.”

“I wasn’t alone! Not until...” He looked around, as if realizing for the first time that all his friends had gone.

“Ascended above. How many of those did you have?”

“Just two,” Moth said, taking another gulp out of his glass, which was roughly the size of his head.

“May the gods be with you in the morning.” I sighed and settled into the chair beside him. I was feeling my own wine. It had been quite some time since I’d drunk that much.

In the back of the room, a maid stumbled down the stairs, causing a small stir as she hurried over to another barkeep, whispering frantically.

I watched them, blinking blearily, a wrinkle forming on my brow.

Even through the haze of drunkenness, I noticed that something seemed... off. The maid looked shaken, though she didn't speak above a whisper, even from across the room I could sense the panic in her words.

Her eyes slipped to us, wide and frightened.

"Moth," I said, quietly. "Where did the others go?"

He shrugged. "Upstairs. Bed."

Just like that, I was very, very sober. I straightened.

The maid didn't break my stare. She unfurled just one finger, pointing — *up*.

A decade-old memory surfaced, of another inn not unlike this one. An inn where my troops and enemy troops had found themselves in the same place, at the same time. I had lost two friends that night, all to what amounted to nothing more than bad luck. Wrong place. Wrong time. Wrong people.

Our next target was less than a hundred miles from here. And Meriata was a central hub for rest and pleasure seeking, the kind of place that soldiers — soldiers from *any* army — would find themselves drawn to.

I had been careless.

I'd been so desperate to come here for my own reasons that I hadn't stopped to think of the risks. I had been so damned careful, until now.

I rose. "Get up, Moth."

He looked up, confused. "Why?"

"Do you have your sword?"

A sudden stillness fell over Moth's face. He nodded.

"We aren't alone here." Slowly, I lifted my chin towards the stairs. Moth followed. The maids' eyes followed us silently. The most frightened looking maid was young, but the barkeep looked old enough to be unsurprised. Perhaps this was not the first time this had happened here. There had been many clashes like this in Meriata, after all, during the Ryvenai War.

We crept up the stairs and rounded a corner.

The first thing I saw was blood. It rolled from beneath the doors, creeping over floorboards.

“Fuck,” I hissed.

I shot Moth a look. What was better, for him to stay here alone or to come with me into what would almost certainly be a fight? He hadn’t even seen combat before.

“Stay here,” I said.

“You can’t go in there alone—”

“*Stay here*, Moth,” I said again, and I didn’t give him any time to argue with me before I was gone.

I conjured my magic to the surface of my skin, flames at my fingertips and simmering at the edges of my blades. In two steps, I was around the corner and pushing open the door. And just as it always did in times like this, my brother’s voice was in my ears:

Evaluate. Judge. Act. That’s all there is.

Evaluate. The first thing that hit me was the blood — there was so fucking much of it, spreading over white sheets, over wooden floors, so much that it took a moment for my eyes to find the source. There, crumpled on the floor near the foot of the bed, was a body. One of my soldiers. His throat was torn open, his sword clutched in his hand. A few feet away, another bloodied figure, a partially-dressed young woman, lay lifeless.

Judge. The blood was warm. The bodies were fresh. Whoever did this was still here. I backed out of this room and threw open another to see another body, another one of my dead men, this one looking as if he was killed so swiftly he didn’t even have the chance to fight.

And then, to my left, I heard a thump.

I turned. The sound had come from the next room over, and ended quickly, like whoever was responsible had hurriedly tried to cover it.

That’s where our assailant was. That room.

Act. I readied my weapon and backed out of this room, moving down to the next one. I opened the door—

—Only to see a soldier standing there, as if he had been about to open it at the same time.

He stared at me, wide-eyed. He was covered in blood, so much so that it was impossible to see what type of uniform he wore. He was young, barely older than Moth.

Time suspended for one split second, the two of us staring at each other.

And just as quickly, the spell broke.

He started to raise his sword, but I countered the strike quickly, sending him staggering back. His weapon went clattering to the ground. I pushed him against the wall, my staff against his throat

“Who are you with?” I demanded. “Aviness?”

The boy was afraid. I could see it in his face, even though he was trying to cover it up with hatred. His lips twisted into a forced sneer.

“I killed them,” he said. “I’ll kill you, too. In the name of the true king.”

Stupid kid. I wanted to tell him, Do you think Aviness has any clue who you are? Do you think your life is worth his crown?

Instead I loosened my grip on my magic. The edges of my blades were now bright with flames, unleashing a wall of heat over us.

“Do you know who I am? I’m Maxantarius Farlione, and those are *my* men that you’ve murdered.”

The boy let out a ragged breath. His eyes widened, even though he tried to hide his fear.

“How many of your men are here?” I demanded. “Tell me that and you’ll keep your life. Think very carefully about how you answer.”

Hesitation.

“Jorge?”

Moth’s small voice came from behind me.

Fuck.

“Moth—” I began to bark a command, and did not get to finish.

Here’s the thing about teenage boys: they’re *stupid*.

In my split second of distraction, the boy I had pinned against the wall raised his hand and a large ceramic lamp from the bedside table went careening against my head.

I staggered back.

A *Wielder*. Fantastic.

And this is how it always goes. Control to chaos in less than a second. By the time I righted myself, the boy was lunging for me, his sword back in his hand, the other raised as he tried to push me back with another wave of magic. He was a good *Wielder* for someone so young, but still inexperienced. Two steps, two slashes, and I had him down on the ground.

But then there were footsteps. The noise had alerted the soldier’s companions, no doubt. I whirled just in time to see three more figures fly into the room, Moth lurching through the door and against the wall, his sword raised.

I didn’t have time to think or breathe or utter commands.

Three against one. I’d faced far worse odds before.

But there was something especially vile about this sort of fight, the kind fought not in chaotic battlefields but in these close, intimate quarters, close enough to hear every dying breath, close enough to see the terror in their eyes as your blades run through their guts. It’s ugly, and pathetic, and terrible.

Pain shot across my side, blood soaking my jacket. Still, my muscles responded on instinct. The boy didn’t get the chance to scream, letting out only a pitiful gargle as he hit the ground, his throat slashed. One of his companions let out a ragged sound of fury and lunged for me. I was still recovering.

Didn't move fast enough. His blade struck me, and for a moment I couldn't catch my breath — an unnatural jolt ran down to my bones. Magic. Another Wielder.

I countered with a sloppy, vicious strike. Blood spattered my face. This body fell on top of the other one, twitching, dying slower.

I clutched my side. My vision blurred.

By the time it cleared again, I saw the first soldier, the one who was little more than a child, back on his feet, rushing towards me, rage on his face—

And then I saw Moth lunge, magic sparking at his hands, collecting around his sword.

There was a crash as they collided. A blast of light filled the room. When it subsided, Moth was on his knees, the soldier on the ground before him, his weapon buried in the bloody, burnt body.

The world was suddenly silent.

Moth's face was tilted down to the lifeless soldier beneath him. His breaths were heaving, but he did not blink.

I slowly rose.

“Moth,” I said, quietly.

He did not move. His breath came quicker and quicker, and now all I could think about was the first time I felt someone else's blood soak my hands.

“Moth, look at me.”

His head snapped up. Crimson smeared his blond curls and his face. At thirteen, Moth was that strange age when sometimes he looked almost like an adult, or at least some distant version of the one he would become. But now, staring at me with round blue eyes, he looked like such a helpless child.

Several sets of footsteps approached at a wild run, and I tensed, only for the doorframe to be filled by four of my own

soldiers. When their eyes landed on me, they sagged with visible relief.

“General.” One gave me a sloppy salute and I waved it away, still panting. As if it was the time for performances like that. Another went to the soldier dead on the bed and let out a curse.

“Fuck, poor Jorge...”

“The bastards came out of nowhere,” one told me. “Everywhere at once. All over the fucking city. They weren’t Aviness’s people.”

I looked down at the bodies at my feet, using the tip of my blade to push one of them over. It had been impossible to make out the sigil at his lapel in the thick of the fighting, but now I recognized it — a coat of arms, with twin roses at its apex. Morwood. Yet another powerful family, one that hadn’t yet joined the fight. Bad news, if Aviness was still gaining allies.

“I hope that was the one who killed Jorge,” the other said to Moth, then spat down at the body. “Good job, Moth. At least you killed the trash. I hope you did it slow.”

He clapped Moth on the soldier, and Moth winced, saying nothing. I spun to my soldier, shooting him a glare that he probably didn’t understand, then forced my fury down.

“Get me Arith and Essanie. Tell them we need to gather everyone and regroup in camp beyond the city bounds. We need to leave Meriata tonight.”

The soldiers nodded and dutifully went off to fulfill their orders. But Moth was the last one to leave, his hands still clutched around the hilt of his sword, eyes staring down at the life he had taken.



IT WAS NEARLY sunrise by the time we all regrouped in a camp outside of Meriata. It turned out that skirmishes like the one in our inn had broken out across the city, and we lost a few dozen

men to sneak attacks conducted while they were drunk and unaware in pubs or brothels. It had been an attack of opportunity, borne out of nothing but our ill-fated decision to stay in Meriata that night, of all nights.

But the real concern was the implication of Morwood joining the fight now, at this stage. We had defeated many loyalists, but Morwood was so powerful that in one fell swoop, the addition of their armies to Aviness's allies undid more than half of our effort.

Arith, Essanie, and I strategized for hours, sending letters with Stratagrams back and forth between Zeryth and his other leaders in Korvius. And at last, a decision was reached: we had to regroup. Our strategy of picking off our enemies one by one had begun to backfire, and Zeryth had gotten impatient.

Nothing about this was good news, but I would be lying if I said I didn't feel a wave of relief when I read the words on our final letter:

Fine. You have your new orders. Return to Korvius immediately.

Nothing was over yet. In fact, this might only be the beginning of something worse. But at least, if there was to be a storm, I'd weather it with Tisaanah next to me.

It was already almost nightfall again by the time we emerged from the tents, the sky painted bloody. The men had trained and been briefed on our change of plans, and now they ate and gathered around fires, manic uncertainty hovering in the air. I paced through them, looking for one particular face that I did not find.

Not until I wandered beyond the edge of the camp, far past the guards and the final tents. I found Moth standing on a rocky shore along a brook. Meriata's lights twinkled far in the distance.

"You shouldn't be alone past the bounds of camp," I said.

Moth said nothing. He didn't turn.

I approached him, and caught just a glimpse of movement as he turned his face away from me — the back of his hand

swiping at his cheek.

“I did the right thing,” he said, quickly. “I don’t regret it.”

“Alright,” I murmured.

“Don’t let them say that I’m being— being too—” He paused, his jaw tight. “I just needed a few minutes. I don’t want them to see.”

Ascended, Moth.

I let out a breath through my teeth and ran my hand through my hair, buying myself a few seconds to untangle what I couldn’t figure out how to put into words.

I blinked, and saw my own brother’s face from years ago — the way he had looked at me, when he realized that I couldn’t look down at my own hands without seeing them covered in blood. *“This will poison you, Max, if you let it,”* he had told me, simply. *“Find a place to put it away. We’re not going to talk about this again.”*

That’s how it always was. A thing that festered, unspoken. A thing that lived behind closed doors and closed doors alone. It had been easy for Brayan, for Nura, for my father. I’d been so envious of that, because I wasn’t made for it. All of my emotions had always been so close to the surface.

“There’s nothing wrong with this, Moth,” I said, quietly. “With what you’re feeling right now. Do you understand? You did what you had to do today, and we’re both alive because of it. But you never want to get used to what it feels like to kill.”

Moth slowly lowered to the ground, as if he was so exhausted that his legs were simply giving up, and I crouched beside him.

“I do,” he choked out, carefully looking away.

“No. You don’t,” I said. “My father and my brother were military heroes. And so was my grandfather, and my great-grandfather, and on and on. I was taught to be one, too. And my family, they truly believed in it — in the honor of what we had always been. But sometimes, as you get older, you realize... there are things they were wrong about. No matter

how good their intentions were. And what I've realized is that it doesn't matter how many titles or medals or wreaths of honor you lay upon it. There's an ugly truth to what we were, and what we did, that no one ever wanted to look in the face."

I glanced at Moth. The light had waned. He did not look at me, but the fading sun caught two streaks of silver on his cheeks.

"I was a prick to you, when you enlisted. I still owe you an apology for that."

He shook his head and started to protest, but I held up a hand.

"I do. But it's because I was—" I let out a breath through my teeth. "It's because I was scared for you, Moth. Because it's just *not worth it*. It's never been worth it. Hold onto this, onto what you're feeling right now, for as long as you can. Hold onto your humanity. And if anyone tells you to be ashamed of it, if anyone tells you that it's weakness that you know the value of a human life, then they're fucking *lost*, Moth. *They are lost*. And so many are."

I thought of my father, and the way he had spoken to me when I was not much older than Moth — how he had taught me that there was an honor in a life of killing, and strength in learning how to do it without feeling.

For so long I had avoided thinking about it, avoided reconciling those two warring halves. He had been a good man, a good father. But he had been his own kind of lost in so many other ways. I just hadn't seen it then. Even now, I didn't want to see it. I wanted my family's memories to be untouchable, defined only by their good intentions.

But no one ever got that gift. No matter how much I missed them. No matter how much I loved them.

"I was," I muttered. "Ten years later and I'm still trying to find my way back,"

There was a long silence. Moth blinked and more tears slithered down his cheeks.

"I'm glad we're going home," he said, quietly.

Home. The word caught and settled, deep in my chest. But home wasn't Korvius, or the Towers, or even a cottage in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by flowers. Home was a pair of mismatched eyes, an accented voice, and a heartbeat that followed the same cadence as mine. And I was so, so homesick.

"Me too," I said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Eslyn lived for three more agonizing days.

Sammerin helped treat her. Dire injuries often required both a Valtain and a Solarie healer, to treat the full breadth of the damage. But for Sammerin, it was obvious right away that something in this went deeper than his occupational duties. The first time he saw Eslyn lying there like a shriveled up corpse, clutching her eyeless face, he winced, stood there for a long moment, then sat down at her bedside and simply didn't get up again.

Ariadnea was often there, too, clearly upset even if she never voiced it. Every time she was forced to leave on Syrizen business, she'd give Sammerin a tight, "Take care of her, Sam," and Sammerin would nod seriously.

For days, he barely moved, barely spoke. Late on the first night, I went to Eslyn's room and laid a plate of food and glass of water on the bedside table.

Sammerin gave me a confused look. "She can't eat."

"It's for you, Sammerin."

"Oh." He blinked blearily at the food, as if the thought of eating hadn't crossed his mind. "Thank you."

He didn't reach for it, though. Instead his eyes slipped back to Eslyn, writhing on the bed. The screams — if one could call them that — had faded to a low, constant moan in the back of my mind. That, somehow, managed to be even more unsettling.

“Willa says she could still survive,” I said.

“She won’t survive. And if she does at this point, she’ll wish she hadn’t.” A muscle feathered in his jaw as he watched her — since he came into this room, he had barely looked away. “It’s an awful disease. I hoped that when I left the military, I wouldn’t have to watch people die of it anymore.”

Sammerin probably had to do a lot of things now that he wished he didn’t.

His face went harder, every muscle in his expression drawing taut. Sammerin’s emotions sat so far beneath the surface of his expressions, his eyes always gentle, his voice always calm — even now. And yet...

“Do you want to tell me about it?” I asked.

“Hm?”

“I see it.” I gave him a knowing look and tapped a finger to the corner of my eye. “I see that there is more to this for you. But you don’t have to talk about it, or tell me what it is. Not unless you want to.”

I just wanted him to know that I saw. He spent so much of his time caring for others. He deserved to be seen, too.

He gave me a small smile that faded quickly. “Do you know how the Syrizen recruit?”

I shook my head.

“They don’t choose this. Not any of them. The Orders screens for a very specific, very rare set of magical skills, and if you have them, you become one. Yes, it’s considered an honor to be a Syrizen. They get money, power, respect. But...”

His voice trailed off, and we both looked at Eslyn, the scars where her eyes used to be now wrinkled in a perpetual wince of pain.

He didn’t need to finish: *But look at all they give up.*

A shudder ran up my spine. To think that when I came to Ara, I had been certain I was going to a world that was so much kinder than my own. Foolish.

Sammerin was silent for so long that I thought our conversation was over. But then he said, quietly, “A friend of mine was chosen, once. She was a little on the older side when they realized she had the skillset — just old enough for it to be a shock. She had wanted to leave the military, actually. But then the war happened...” He trailed off, his thumb tracing his lower lip in thought. His eyes didn’t leave Eslyn, and now I understood that he was seeing someone else in her place. “She was a painter, actually. Striking eyes.”

I reached over and placed my hand on Sammerin’s shoulder — the same wordless comfort that he would give me, when I spiraled in unspoken anxieties.

“It’s a battle worth fighting,” I murmured, then lifted my chin to the tray. “Keep yourself strong enough to face it.”

He gave me a weak smile, patted my hand, and finally reached for the food.



I DID EVENTUALLY MANAGE to convince Sammerin to go get some rest, though he did so reluctantly. After he left, I stood at Eslyn’s bedside in the empty room, looking down at her. Reshaye slithered through my mind, both curious and revulsed. Eslyn’s mouth was closed and contorted in pain, but I could still hear those sounds of agony.

A thought occurred to me.

Could we help her? I asked Reshaye.

{No one can help her.}

I reached out, my fingers brushing her face. Then her temple.

I heard her, when no one else could. We both drew from the same deep pool of magic, even if in different ways. Didn’t that mean there was at least a chance I could do something for her that no one else would be able to?

{There are powers that are beyond you. There are even powers that are beyond me. She is already dead, like a withered leaf clinging to the vine. She is just waiting for one gust of wind.}

Still... I reached out with a single tendril of my mind, reaching into hers.

Deeper — and I nearly gasped.

There it was. It was impossible to miss. I felt the sickness, like an open wound, gushing blood. It was so noxious that everything in my magic recoiled from it. It was *everywhere*. Every drop of Eslyn's mind and magic was consumed with it.

Even if she lives now, she'll wish she hadn't, Sammerin had said, and now I understood. There was nothing of Eslyn left, anymore.

I pulled back, shaken.

I so wanted to help her. She deserved that — or at least deserved to die in a better way than this. But Reshaye was right. This sickness overwhelmed her, eating her alive from the inside out.

She was already dead.

The next day, I returned to find Sammerin sagging in the chair beside Eslyn's bed, looking thoroughly exhausted. Ariadnea was kneeling beside her, forehead pressed against her friend's shoulder. Sammerin looked to me and simply shook his head. She was gone.

I remained at Sammerin's side as they covered the body. Several other Syrizen came to take Eslyn away. Nura came, too, watching the scene unfold, her face still as ice.

"Well," she said, in the hallway, "this, at least, could solve some of your problems with the Threllians."

I shot Nura a confused look.

"Eslyn was with us in Threll," she clarified. "She was among those responsible for the attack on the Mikov estate. The Zorokovs might accept her death as justice."

She said this so nonchalantly. It was like the woman who had been so shaken by Eslyn's illness days ago no longer existed. All while the body was barely cold. It made me want to retch.

"What about her family?" I asked.

"Syrizen forsake all other ties when they become what they are. No one is waiting for her."

Every angle of Sammerin's face went hard, as if this statement reviled him.

Someone is waiting for her, I thought. They'll just never get her.

"It does not matter," I said. "The Zorokovs would see it as an insult, anyway."

"Why?"

"Because they want—"

I stopped short.

Nura and Sammerin both looked back at me.

"What?" Nura said, at last. "You? That's what you were going to say?"

I felt sick to my stomach. I wished I hadn't even had the thought. Yet, the idea burrowed into my mind and wouldn't let go.

It wouldn't be perfect. It might not even be good. But how could I ignore any possible solution, when so many lives hung in the balance?

"Sammerin," I said. "I have a question for you."

And Sammerin nodded, his face pinched with a resigned dread that told me he already knew what I was about to ask.

I DIDN'T WANT Sammerin to do this.

I told him so, when I asked him if it was possible. Let us find someone else with a mastery of flesh to do it. Or let us find some other fresh body. Yes, the idea had come to me here, at Eslyn's deathbed, but that didn't mean that it had to be executed under these circumstances.

Sammerin had given me this pitying look, like the proposal was that of an innocent child. His gifts were incredibly rare — it would take weeks, potentially, to get someone else with his skills in Korvius. Eslyn was the right age, shape, size. The stars had aligned, he told me, flatly. We might as well take advantage.

I was grateful that the corpse had not yet begun to smell. It was one less thing to find horrifying as we hacked off Eslyn's head at the throat. Ariadnea helped us do it, to my horror. When Sammerin and I tried to tell her that we didn't need — didn't *want* — her help with this, she merely gave us a flat, eyeless stare and said, "The Syrizen have given her body to this purpose. It's my job to do it."

It shouldn't be, I would have said, but Ariadnea turned away before I could argue further. Still, I felt her presence acutely as we cut off Eslyn's head, a process that took agonizingly longer than I would have expected it to. Then Sammerin took Eslyn's decapitated head, and began to — there was no other way to describe it — *sculpt* it.

I wondered if I would ever stop finding Sammerin's abilities shocking. By now, I had watched him heal wounds and illnesses and broken bones more times than I could count. This, though, was something else completely. Sammerin placed his hands on either side of Eslyn's face, and her flesh responded to him as if it were nothing but clay. He started with the bones, which produced terrible cracking and grinding noises that even made Ariadnea flinch. First the jaw, which he made longer and softer. Then the cheekbones — raised — and the eye sockets — further set apart. The nose, he made flatter and wider. And then, the muscle and fat in her face shifted, like thousands of ants were crawling beneath her skin, as he rearranged muscle.

Finally, he pulled out several small bottles that contained thin, greenish liquid.

“The coloring won’t be perfect,” he said. “That’s harder for me to change. But it will be good enough to pass.”

Sammerin brushed the liquid over parts of Eslyn’s face, leaving others untouched. And then he placed his hands on her again, closed his eyes, and slowly, the color began to sap from her skin, and chunks of her hair — leaving behind patches of white hair and grayish, colorless flesh.

The grayish, colorless flesh of a dead Fragmented Valtain.

The whole process took nearly two hours. When he was done, Sammerin gently set the head down on the table and looked at me. Then it. Then me.

“I think,” he said, “it is passable.”

It was better than passable. I was looking at my own corpse. Certainly, someone who had never seen me before with their own eyes would have no reason to question it.

“It’s...good,” I said, though giving it any compliment seemed... strange. Sammerin himself stared at it not with pride but disgust. I hoped that however Ariadnea “saw” the world spared her from how we had defiled her friend.

But her head tilted towards it. “The eyes,” she grunted. “You’ll have to do something about that.”

It was the only thing missing.

“I can,” I said, and reached out to Eslyn’s smooth, eyeless sockets. When I touched them, the flesh began to rot beneath my fingertips, flesh shriveling. When I pulled my hands away, the head was left with two empty black pits for eyes, rotted out in decay — as if “my” eyes had been pried out before death, and the remaining ruined flesh left for the maggots.

The Zorokovs would appreciate the extra cruelty. Removed eyes were an especially favored punishment of the Threllian Lords.

We all stared at it.

“I think that is enough,” I said.

Enough. What a word. It was such an imperfect plan. Enough to buy the slaves in Threll some time. Enough to appease the Zorokovs, if only temporarily. It was better than the plan that I had three days ago, which was to say, no plan at all. Something was better than nothing. This one act might save the lives of dozens of slaves, or more.

Still. I felt sick when we began to return to our room. Sammerin’s silence was not his typical thoughtful quiet, but one heavy with shame. I cast him a sidelong look as we walked together, remembering our discussion from weeks ago — how he had sounded as he told me how difficult it had been to claw his way out of using his gifts for terrible things.

Was this a terrible thing?

“Thank you, Sammerin,” I said, quietly. “I’m—I’m sorry you had to do that.”

Sammerin gave me a tight, humorless smile. “At least she was already dead.”

I failed to find this especially comforting. And something told me that Sammerin didn’t, either.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



My back hurt. And my legs. And my left arm, which I'd pulled something vicious the day before. I hurt more or less everywhere.

But none of those aches and pains measured up at all to the one that pounded on the inside of my skull as I watched Zeryth, wearing a crown and sitting at what used to be my father's desk, lean back in his chair and smile.

It was a grotesque expression, absent of Zeryth's usual lazy charm. Actually, *everything* about the way Zeryth looked right now seemed grotesque, like a poor mimicry. He had lost a shocking amount of weight since I'd last seen him, and his eyes were so dark that for a split second I had wondered whether he'd developed a sudden affinity for kohl.

I'd needed to hide my shock when I walked into the room. At the sight, Eomara's words echoed in my mind: *Imagine, giving up so much of yourself to drag someone back down with you.*

"I have to admit," he said, "as much as you and I have had our personal differences, no one can deny that you're good at what you do."

What I do. How those three words make me want to fucking *retch*. What was that, exactly? Fighting? Killing? Warfare?

My teeth gritted. "Have," I said, drily.

"Hm?"

“*Have* our personal differences. I noticed that you used the incorrect past tense. Nothing past about it.”

The words slipped out before I could stop them. There was only so much self-control I could master. My poor social graces, and all.

Zeryth’s expression froze, a shock of anger passing over his face. Then it relaxed, and he let out a low chuckle. “Ah, you got me.”

He stood and turned to the map behind his desk, arms crossed over his chest.

“So then. It appears that despite your excellent military prowess, we have a significant problem. *Morwood*.”

He stretched out the word — *Mooooor-wood*.

“It’s an inconvenience,” I said.

Zeryth chuckled. “An *inconvenience*, he says.” He peered back to me. “How much effort you’ve put into doing this *gently*, General Farlione. Into doing this *kindly*. You and Tisaanah and your sweet, bloodless war.”

Bloodless? *Bloodless*? Tell that to all the people I had killed over these last weeks. Tell that to the families of the soldiers I’d buried. Tell that to Moth, who I still hadn’t seen sleep since he killed for the first time.

Fucking *bloodless*. Sure.

My words came out between tight teeth. “The more people I kill just leaves fewer to witness your divine rule, my illustrious King.”

Fury cracked across Zeryth’s face like lightning, surging wildly before he tethered it again.

“You can be coy, but do you ever stop to think that you’ll just end up killing more of them this way? Death to Ara by a thousand little cuts, rather than just slicing off the infection in one go. Do you think this would get better, after another year or two or four of drawn out warfare, General Farlione?” A cruel spark glinted in his eye. “You understood that in Sarlazai, didn’t you? You know, it’s a shame you never got to

see the argument Nura made for you in those trials. She was brilliant. Showed all of Ara exactly how merciful it was to take such decisive measures. One show of strength, one sacrifice, and a million lives were saved.”

My hands were folded in my lap, clenched so tight my knuckles were white.

“Sarlazai never should have happened. And I’ll never let something like that happen again.”

“I want the Capital back, Maxantarius. I want it back soon.”

“We don’t have the forces to do that. Aviness still has strong alliances guarding the city.”

Zeryth gave me a cold stare. “Do not talk to me like I’m stupid.”

“I—”

“We have enough power to do this.”

“Even Reshaye can’t—”

“It can’t? It *has*.” He leaned across the table, and all at once, the remnants of his smooth demeanor disappeared. Left beneath was only demented rage. “And if the stories I heard about *you* are true, then we certainly have enough power to take it back. Don’t tell me that we aren’t strong enough. I could tear that city to the fucking ground if I wanted to, couldn’t I?”

“I can’t give you a victory based on rumors you heard from a few Threllians,” I said, calmly, “and no matter what you want to believe, we can’t hinge it on Reshaye alone, either. We need to take Morwood out first.”

For a moment, Zeryth looked so unhinged that I thought he might actually strike me. Then he straightened, and the anger left him as suddenly as it had surged.

“Morwood,” he muttered. “Then Istra. Then Envaline. On, and on, and on.”

He turned back to the map. Absentmindedly, he brushed the coronet at his brow, as if checking to see whether it was still there.

My gaze fell to the desk. It was covered with papers — letters, books, maps, invoices, plans. Off in one corner, I saw a pile of books that made me do a double-take. I recognized them. Journals, left by each king to their successor and meant for the eyes of subsequent rulers alone. The top one was open, half-read.

Zeryth would have had to take these with him when he fled the Palace. Zeryth, of all people, prized the wisdom of former kings enough to take it with him, and *study* it.

I looked back to him. And there, briefly, I caught a glimpse of something that looked downright odd on the face of this man that I'd always known to be haughty and selfish. Something tired and worried and... worn down.

“Why are you doing this?”

The question slipped out before I could stop it. Zeryth's gaze snapped to me, already angry, as if expecting to see snide sarcasm on my face. But there wasn't any. I really wanted to know. Zeryth had already been arguably the most powerful man in Ara. Why take the extra step? Knowing that it could so easily end in his downfall?

His lip curled. “I thought you'd already decided you knew the answer to that question. Because I'm— what are the words you would use? A *power-hungry bastard drunk on his own ego?*”

That *did* sound like the sort of thing I would say.

“I'm not about to argue with that,” I said. “But...”

“But?”

I gestured to the map, to all the little red pins over it. “*All this, Zeryth? For what?*”

Zeryth let out a scoff. “For what,” he echoed, as if this were a ridiculous thing to say. He turned to me. “You were born into one of the most powerful families in Ara, *Lord*

Farlione. Secondborn son, yes, but that didn't change the fact that the minute you were yanked from between your mother's legs, half the world was shoved into your slimy little hands. Ara was *made* for people like you. But while your mother was giving birth in a bed of velvet surrounded by midwives, mine was heaving away in an alleyway behind a brothel, alone. And Ara might have looked beautiful from above, but from beneath, the underside was fucking *filthy*. So *of course* you, Max, would look at this all and think, 'Why bother?'"

His eyes narrowed. "Why don't you ask Tisaanah that question? I think she might understand. What's the point of going this far? What's the point of doing it *unless* I go this far?" Then he looked to the map and went silent. He was so tense that I could see the line of his shoulders trembling.

"Sometimes I wonder if it matters," he muttered. "Sometimes I wonder if it all just runs too fucking deep."

I opened my mouth, but he said, abruptly, "You're dismissed. Go."

I hesitated, then rose and went to the door.

Frankly, I didn't have it in me to argue. Not when there was someone I so desperately needed to see.

CHAPTER THIRTY



Waiting for my father's reply was agonizing.

I would not be able to receive his response until we arrived at our next scheduled stop, Yithara. It was a trading post independent of the Houses that was nestled deep in the forest. There, we could receive letters back from home — impossible, otherwise, while we were on the road and untraceable.

I eagerly looked forward to our arrival. The silence of our rides, combined with my growing anxiety, was beginning to eat me up. I craved the sight and sound of other people, the familiar comfort of being surrounded by other, more lighthearted lives. It wouldn't be the soul-deep connection of the Pales, but it would be something.

And yes, when we arrived at Yithara, it was everything I'd been told it was. Fey wearing the clothing of every House, or no House at all, mingled with each other, bartering at stalls that packed the roads. The streets wound between massive trees with trunks that were bigger than some of the buildings, which were all designed to fit so perfectly that they seemed to be an extension of the forest itself. Structures straddled the space between smooth-barked trees, rising up and up until they disappeared into the canopy of leaves. Above our heads, a series of bridges connected the upper levels. Yithara was not a large city in surface area, but its overall size was four or five times larger than the space it occupied on the woodland floor. It built *up*.

Beautiful. Yet another monument of all that the Fey could create and become.

I had so hoped that seeing all of this activity, all of this *living*, would ease my fears. But when we actually arrived, I looked around and all I could think about was the House of Stone and the House of Reeds. Their cities had been majestic too. And how easily, still, they fell.

“I need a drink,” I muttered to Siobhan, as we dismounted our horses at a stable on the lower levels — horses, after all, would be of little use to us in most of Yithara, seeing as they often weren’t particularly fond of climbing trees.

Siobhan shot me a wordless look that made me roll my eyes.

“I will behave,” I said. “No need.”

“I didn’t say anything. You’re my commander here. You can do whatever you please.”

I scoffed, and she gave me a barely suppressed smirk.

Commander. It didn’t matter who my father technically chose to lead this expedition. I would never be Siobhan’s commander, and she didn’t even have to speak to scold me.

Accommodations for us had already been arranged. The inn was on the seventh level of Yithara, far enough up to be buried in the green tapestry of the leaves. The walkways that connected the city up here were beautiful creations of polished wood and lightweight bronze, the handrails decorated with swirling designs covered with vines.

As we climbed up, level by level, through wide staircases that spiraled up the length of the trees, I noticed Caduan peering uneasily over the edge.

“Dislike heights?” I asked.

He let out a low laugh, embarrassed. “It does seem unnatural to be so far above the ground.”

I recalled the time I had visited the House of Stone, when I was a child. While many Fey houses built towering structures, the House of Stone’s architecture was flat and sprawling, the tallest of their buildings no more than three stories high — and safely encased in stone shale, besides.

I shrugged and gestured to the upper levels of the city. “Unnatural, perhaps. But isn’t this that *innovation* you keep talking about?”

Caduan gave me a stare so flat and unamused that I couldn’t help but laugh.

The inn was clean and spacious but nothing particularly fancy — it was chosen merely out of convenience, certainly not out of desire for luxury. That was perfectly fine with me. All I wanted was a drink and a proper bath.

But, that would have to wait. The first order of business was for Ishqa and I to get any correspondence from home. And I wondered if it was obvious, as Ishqa and I wound down the hallways to the lobby, that I was so nervous about what those letters would contain.

Two letters were waiting for me. One was from my father — or rather, my father in the official capacity as the Teirna of the Sidnee, the outside marked with his seal and title rather than his name. The other, to my delight, was from Orscheid.

Ishqa and I sat around a wooden table beneath a shadowy set of timber rafters. Ishqa had three letters. One bore the seal of Queen Shadya. Another had flawless inked script on the envelope, perhaps from his sister. I thought back to the pristine woman that had presented to us at the Pales. She seemed like the type to have that sort of handwriting. The third, though — the ink was scrawled across the front of that one, and it was bent, as if it’d had a particularly difficult journey. When Ishqa picked it up, a smile brushed his face that seemed at odds with his typical noble poise.

“Who is that from?” I asked. As always, I spoke before I could stop myself.

He glanced at me, and simply replied, “My son.”

“You have a son?”

I blurted this out with abject disbelief that made his brow furrow.

“Yes. Is that worthy of such surprise?”

Yes.

“No,” I said. “Of course not.”

The truth was, I found it nearly impossible to imagine Ishqa dealing with children. Children loved shouting and pretending and rolling around in the dirt and having wild outbursts about the slightest inconveniences. These were all things that I could not picture Ishqa having much tolerance for.

Ishqa turned the letter over. There were ink stains all over the back, too, wild slashes of it. He frowned at his hands, which were now smudged.

“How old is he?” I asked.

“Six summers.”

Despite myself, I smiled. “A good age.”

“One might say so.”

He opened the letter. I glimpsed two scrawled lines of large, messy writing, then what appeared to be a half-finished drawing of... a horse? A cow? A horse cow?

Ishqa looked at this letter very seriously, a line of concentration over his brow.

I couldn't help it. I laughed.

He shot me a sharp look. “What?”

“You look as if you're decoding military operations.”

He stared at me as if this answer meant nothing to him.

“No one should look so serious when reading a letter from a child,” I clarified.

“Why not?” Ishqa put the letter down. “He lost interest after two lines.”

“And?”

He gave me a stony stare. “Do the Sidnee not value education?”

“Of course we do. But he's six summers.”

“At six summers, my father had me writing pages of Wyshraj history.”

I almost scoffed. Mine had *wanted* me to write pages of history, too. I just had never been any good at it. From the looks of it, Ishqa had been better than me at such things.

I shrugged. “He is a child.”

“He is flighty and distracted,” he huffed, in a way that reminded me all too much of how my father used to click his tongue and shake his head at my own sloppy, half-finished essays.

“Perhaps he’s a dreamer,” I said.

“A dreamer is a hard thing to be. I fear so now more than ever.” He looked down at the letter, and the disapproval on his face softened. “I only hope that I’m raising him to be strong enough to survive such a world.”

A bittersweet ache twinged in my chest.

Did my father ever wear that expression when he talked about me, I wondered? Was there ever any fragment of his disappointment in me that was secretly love in disguise?

I looked back down at the table, at the letter waiting there, written in my father’s unmistakable hand. A lump of nervousness curled in my stomach.

“That’s all any of us can hope,” I said, then picked up the letters and excused myself back to my room.



I READ my father’s letter four times.

The response was brief:

THE WORD SENT by you and by your companions is deeply troubling to all of us. There is no hope left in denying that the humans want anything less than war.

But this does not change the fact that what you propose is forbidden.

I do not know what made you think that exile could be violated.

Niraja is a sickened place. You have never respected our traditions, but I will not see them destroyed by such degradation.

Keep your eyes open. Watch the Wyshraj, for they are still not our allies.

Do not raise such a question again.

Do not make me regret choosing you for this.

— *Teirna*

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

TISAANAH



T*isaanah.*

My name was a whisper.

I squinted into the setting sun over an endless expanse of rolling gold. Threll, now. But once Nyzerene. Once my home.

No wonder it seemed to call to me so.

Tisaaaaanaah.

The sun was low, brushing kisses along the horizon line, running its fingers through the swaying grass. I lifted my chin to the sky and basked in it.

In the distance, a figure turned around and reached for me. I could not see them — the light was so, so bright, flattening their form to a blurry silhouette. They called another name, a name I did not recognize but knew belonged to me.

Sweat dripped down my neck.

I stepped forward, but the sun blinded me. And suddenly it was so hot, too hot, my skin burning. I blinked and opened my eyes to a sea of fire — blue, like the flames that had consumed the Mikov estate, like the ones that I had inhaled into myself when I fought Reshaye in the deepest levels of magic.

Those golden plains withered to decay.

I looked down to see black rot crawling over my palms. Light spilled from my fingertips.

{You saw me.}

And this time, I recognized the voice. I watched my flesh wither, no more tongue to speak, no more throat to scream. My hands were only the stark ivory of bone, fractured with cracks of crimson light.

{And when you look into a mirror,} Reshaye whispered, *{you know what stares back.}*

But still, all of that power spilled from me.

Surged and consumed, until I saw nothing but white and white and white.



MY EYES SNAPPED OPEN, even though I didn't remember closing them. Nura stood over me, holding a rapier that nearly nicked the tip of my nose. Her pale cheeks were flushed with exertion, silver hairs forming a halo around her head.

“Where were you?” she demanded.

I was unable to even answer that question. A second ago — no, less than a second ago — I had been on my feet, dodging one of Nura's strikes, Il'Sahaj halfway to closing the space between us.

And yet, now... I was lying on my back in the sand floor of the sparring arena.

A full two seconds. Three, even. Gone. Just...

{Lost,} Reshaye whispered. *{Like so many other things.}*

“We don't have time for daydreams, Tisaanah.” Nura nudged Il'Sahaj's hilt with her toe, pushing it back towards me, then resumed position with two long, gliding steps. “Get up. One more.”

I came back to my feet, ignoring the pain that throbbed behind my eyes. I refused to let my movements betray any hint of it. Certainly not after she just got me to the ground.

Three paces away from her. I took my stance, sweaty palms gripped tight around Il'Sahaj's hilt.

We both coiled, waiting, watching each other. When Nura and I sparred, we never announced the start of the match. We'd wait, every muscle ready, watch for any twitch of movement.

Fitting. With Nura, one never really knew when the battle began.

Five seconds. Ten. And then—

Nura moved first this time, and I liked it better that way, because it gave me something to respond to. Her rapier came at me from the left and I rolled right, meeting her strike with my own, steel and gold glinting violent pangs beneath the waning sun.

Lunge — and pull back, *fast fast fast*, before she could answer, before she could adjust—

She lifted her arm. Danced backwards. I snaked out with Il'Sahaj's blade, caught the edge of her shoulder, opening a trail of crimson over her white jacket.

She winced, but didn't take her eyes off of me. A little smile tugged at one corner of her mouth.

She lunged. I swept to the side, capitalizing on that one off-balance second.

Strike, strike, strike—

Our weapons met where she didn't expect them too, her rapier so light and flexible that Il'Sahaj nearly barreled right through it. She turned with her body to grab my wrist. But I knew she would — knew she wouldn't stop.

I went for her other hand. Twisted until I felt it, felt the click of machinery beneath her sleeve.

And shoved her own hand to her throat — so that the blade she'd hidden there was poised against her alabaster skin.

Maybe if I'd looked at her, I might have seen some variation of pride. But instead my eyes couldn't tear away from the steel against her throat. Behind my skull, Reshaye hissed, a sensation that twisted arousal and hate. It drank up the imagined image of red spilling over her skin.

I froze, distracted, trying to yank Reshaye to the back of my thoughts. But that moment of hesitation was all it took. Nura seized it. Pain shocked up my other wrist as she twisted, then my knees as she kicked my feet out, and then I was on the ground again, my breath coming in gasps.

Nura smirked down at me.

“Good,” she said. “But not good enough.”

“One might argue,” a voice said, from across the arena, “that the match had already been won when there was a blade against your throat, Nura.”

My heart stopped.

I barely noticed when Nura cocked an eyebrow at me and said, “Really? Doesn’t look like it was won to me.”

I scrambled to my feet, spinning around to see Max standing at the door, leaning against the frame with his arms crossed.

Max. *Max*.

I couldn’t move. I wanted to run to him and yank him into an embrace, but all I could do was stare. I didn’t realize until my cheeks started to ache that my face had split into a grin.

He wore a black military jacket that looked a bit worse for wear, the silver accents revealing the stains that the black fabric hid. He’d loosened several buttons so that the double-breasted coat hung down on one side, making him look especially disheveled — not that the mess of his hair and the shadows beneath his eyes didn’t do that already.

“Took you long enough to get back,” Nura said. *Twip*, as her blade retracted back up her sleeve.

Max shrugged. His eyes didn’t move from mine, a smile twitching at the left side of his mouth.

“Hello, you.”

“Hello, you.” I could barely get the words out, breathless from more than exertion.

Nura rolled her eyes.

Far in the back of my mind, I felt Reshaye stir. I reached into that web, found it where it perched. It was weak, as it so often was, these days — still exhausted from our fight days ago. Carefully, I coaxed it back into the shadows. Draped a blanket of darkness over it, the same way I shielded my thoughts from other Wielders.

I wanted privacy.

I crossed the room to join Max at the door. I slid my hand into his — for a moment, the solidness of his touch overwhelmed me. I couldn't tear my eyes away. "Let's go," I murmured.

"We're not done," Nura said.

I didn't bother looking back. "We are, actually." Max gave me a little, sidelong smile. I returned it and shrugged.

What would she do? They needed me. And there was nothing that could pull me from this.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



We didn't even make it to my room. The minute we found ourselves in an empty hallway, we were on each other, my back against the wall, Max's mouth against mine, kisses desperate and searching. He tasted like soot and smelled like smoke and lilacs, that familiar scent that hit me like the heady seduction of wine.

Oh gods, I missed you, I missed you, I missed you.

My mouth was too busy doing much more important things to form those words, but they pulsed through me with every heartbeat. It was almost embarrassing, to feel so incomplete without another person. I'd spent my whole life learning how to gracefully swallow loss. And yet, these weeks away from him had withered me.

We didn't stop until we made it to my room, sacrificing seconds for a kiss here, a touch there. When we finally found ourselves at my door, I shoved the key into the lock and threw it open, the two of us staggering inside in an ungraceful tangle of limbs. The door closed. It was silent, save for the wonderful sound of *us* — beautiful, ragged cadence of Max's demanding breaths, the rustle of our fingers pulling at clothing, the slide of flesh against flesh.

"I missed you," I choked out, between kisses.

"Me too." Two words that vibrated against the skin of my neck, lifting a groan to my throat. "You have no idea."

Gods.

I pushed against him until he met the wall. My mouth found his again, hands reaching for the already half undone buttons of his jacket. I wanted to touch him everywhere, reacquaint myself with all of his planes and angles, drown in the hot warmth of his skin.

I buried my face against his throat. Licked and kissed and nibbled, tasting salt and the faintest hint of iron, as my hands worked first at the final jacket buttons, then those of the plain cotton shirt beneath. He let out a groan, his grip around me tightening as my hand flattened against his abdomen, relishing the way his muscles twitched at my touch.

I pulled away just enough to look at him, even though he strained to keep me close.

Purple bruises bloomed like overripe petals over his skin, some as large as my fist. A red, angry cut that looked to be a few days old, dark with clotted blood, arced over one pectoral.

My lips parted, but before I could say anything, Max's mouth was on mine again.

"It's fine," he muttered, between kisses. "I'm fine." And his hands were at my clothes, yanking my sweat-soaked sleeveless tunic over my head. Then the camisole below it. His touch, warm and demanding and tender all at once, drowned out all coherent thought. All worry. Anything but the all-consuming need to have as much of him against me, touching me, *inside* me, as I possibly could.

We staggered to the bed. I fell back first, and he started to follow when he paused.

His entire expression changed. A wrinkle wrenched between his brows, a downward twist forming at the corner of his perfect mouth. His eyes drank in the sight of my bare body, starting at my hips and dragging up, but there was something darker than desire that doused his gaze.

"It is fine," I echoed. "I'm fine."

And I didn't give him time to respond before I yanked him to me, gave him one long kiss, then pushed him to the bed and climbed over him, my thighs on either side of his hips, his

hands at my waist, my breasts, the curve of my hipbone, as if memorizing my form.

“Where did this come from?” he murmured, brushing an angry circle of purple beneath my left breast.

I raised an eyebrow.

“Me? Look at *you*.” I leaned down and kissed his shoulder, at a red welt there. “How did this happen, hm?”

I lowered myself over him, savoring the warmth of him against me. I took a moment to appreciate the exquisite shape of him, the topography of his muscles beneath his skin. Moved down, down to what looked like a halfway-healed scrape over his ribs. I ran my lips over it, smiling against his skin when I felt him twitch, clearly biting back a laugh. “Or this?” I murmured.

Lower. Down to a mark on his hip, partly obscured beneath the waistband of his trousers. Slowly, I unbuttoned them, peeling them off to reveal the full injury. Among other things.

“Or this?” I whispered, pressing my lips to the bruise.

“I told you, it’s—*fuck*.”

The word was so ragged it was barely more than a mangled moan, spat between his teeth as I ran my mouth up his length. Tasted the tip, lips and tongue soft, my movements slow and languid. Relishing the taste of him. Relishing the sound of his quickening breaths. Relishing the way that I could tell, even without looking, that every muscle in his body was tensed.

Then he was pulling me back up to him, pressing his mouth against mine in a long, desperate kiss as he rolled over me and pushed me to the bed.

“Why do I always get the interrogation?” he muttered. “From the minute you showed up at my doorstep, it’s always *me*. What about *you*?”

He broke away, and ran an analytical eye over my body. “Where’d this come from?”

He pressed a kiss to the two-week-old slice over my shoulder — a gift from Nura’s rapier in sparring practice.

“Or... this?”

His lips moved lower, to a large purple welt across my ribs.

“Looks like you’ve been busy.”

My abs were tight, core burning with desire, breathing quick. But I said, as casually as I could manage, “I had things to do.”

“*Things*, hm?” He reached the burn at the outside of my left hip, still tender enough to make me suck in air through my teeth when his mouth brushed it, pleasure mingling with pain.

“I like to lead an exciting life,” I choked out.

“Right.” I felt a silent chuckle against a bruise on my leg. “Part of your charm.”

“You cannot deny it.”

His breath came next against the inside of my thigh. Higher.

Oh, gods. *Gods*.

Time suspended, need pounding in my veins.

I craned my neck to look down, and Max met my gaze. His hair was messy, falling over his forehead. A smirk twisted one side of his mouth — the left, as always. From this angle, I could see the cut of his shoulders, the muscled definition of his arms, the way the light fell across his silhouette. He was beautiful. But the thing that took my breath away wasn’t that. It was the sheer, all-consuming affection in how he looked at me.

“You’re right,” he said. “I can’t.”

And then he lowered his mouth to me, and pleasure suffused me all at once, so intense that I couldn’t breathe. My back arched, my fists clenching handfuls of the bedspread. A helpless moan escaped me, one that I didn’t even realize I had

made until Max's lips stopped just long enough to let out a groan.

“Tisaanah, make that sound again.”

His voice was low and raspy, practically begging. I couldn't speak. Could barely breathe. And yet, when his tongue resumed its long, torturous path, I found a way to comply. Were those words that spilled from my lips? Thereni, Aran, both? Prayers, curses? I didn't know. Didn't care.

“Good girl,” he chuckled, against my skin, but I couldn't pay attention to his words — couldn't pay attention to anything but the movements of his tongue making love to me, too much and not enough at the same time, too gentle and too rough.

Two fingers slid into me, and my hips bucked, and that was the end. I unraveled, a wave of pleasure cresting and crashing, and I was still shaking when Max gave me one final kiss at the apex of my thighs and crawled over me. I was nothing but nerves, nothing but instinct, as my limbs encircled him again, as my mouth found his. It wasn't enough. I needed more, needed him closer, needed his breaths timed with mine.

He pushed into me easily, my hips rising to meet him. Gods, I had forgotten, how good it felt, how right, to be together like this — to be so full of him. He kissed me deeply, the taste of both of us mingling on our tongues just as his fingers clutched mine, as our limbs tangled, as every part of us intertwined. Our movements found a rhythm that was as natural as it was hungry, his strokes firm and demanding, my body meeting him at each one. Already, I could feel another wave cresting, pressure growing where he touched the deepest parts of me, his thrusts growing harder, his breath more ragged against my mouth.

“Again,” he said — commanded, *begged*. “Let me feel you again, Tisaanah.”

And as if to give me no choice but to comply, he pushed deep, sinking his teeth into my throat.

My climax hit me so hard that for a few incredible seconds, I separated entirely from the world, connected only to him. I returned just soon enough to open my eyes to see him follow me, his head thrown back, his muscles taut. I grabbed him and pulled him to me in a rough kiss as his climax shuddered through me, riding out the aftershocks of my own. The kiss softened, slowed, as our crescendos faded.

Softened, yes, but did not break.

We were not ready to let each other go. And still, we did not speak. He kissed me, and kissed me, hands roaming each other until he slipped into me again. I could not be close enough. I wanted to feel him everywhere.

And I knew — surely, we both knew — that soon enough there would be words and worries and reality.

But for now, there was only this. Nothing but each other, sharing our bodies and our breaths, and everything that words were too weak to explain.



I FELT boneless and dazed by the time we exhausted ourselves. I was used to being tired by now — I was now always, always tired — but this was the pleasant sort of exhaustion, aching and satisfied at once. Once Max and I untangled ourselves from each other, we staggered to the washroom, filled the bathtub with water that Max ensured was delightfully scalding, and lowered ourselves in with groans of weary satisfaction. And now, there we both sat, Max leaning against the back rim of the tub and me in turn against his chest, his arms encircling me and his chin against the top of my head.

“This feels nice,” I said.

Not the warm water. Him. Being beside him. Feeling him all over me. All these weeks, and I hadn’t even allowed myself to dream of this. Didn’t allow myself to dismiss the uncertainty that he would make it back alive.

And now that he was here? I never wanted to let him go.

“Let’s stay here for a very long time,” I said, making a show of stretching. “I will not move, and so, neither can you”

“Yuck.” I couldn’t see Max’s face, but I could hear the wrinkle over his nose. “You recognize that we’re essentially marinating in our own filth right now.”

I eyed the water, tinged grey. Fine, he wasn’t wrong.

“Our filth?” I said. “*Your* filth.”

“A bold assertion, considering that you just came from the training ring.”

“And you just came from...where, exactly?” I craned my neck around to eye him. “You have much to tell me.”

“Were my letters not detailed enough for you?”

“Your letters were good. But I like your voice better.”

“Likewise.” And yet, I felt the way his arms tightened slightly around me, and the unspoken hesitation of all it implied. When he let out a long breath, I knew he was clearing space for all the words he needed to say.

I knew it, because I was doing the same thing.

He kissed the top of my head.

“You first,” he said.



THE WORDS Poured out of me. I had spent these weeks in a state of constant performance. I had Serel and Sammerin, but there were so many things that I couldn’t tell Serel and so many things that I didn’t want to show Sammerin. With Max, words came easily — and even the ones that didn’t, he heard anyway.

I told him of the battles, and how I won. I told him of Eslyn, and what Sammerin and I had done to buy time for the slaves that my own actions had endangered. I told him of every feat, and every fear. I told him everything.

And for his part, he did the same. I listened as he told me of the battle in Antedale, and those that followed. I had heard all the stories here, of course, when they were spoken of in terms of victory and strategy and numbers. But rendered in Max's voice, the wins and losses weren't matters of statistics. They were human.

I loved that about him. I loved it, and gods, I had missed it.

We talked for hours, so long that we didn't even notice that the water had gone tepid by the time we trailed off into silence. When we finally decided it was time to end our bath, I stayed behind for a few minutes to wring out my wet hair. Then I went to the washroom door and leaned against the frame, watching him.

He was standing at the window, hands tucked into the pockets of the pants he'd thrown back on, profile outlined in the waning light. The view overlooked the Farlione estate and the mountains beyond it. Max's face was tilted to the east — towards the house.

"It is beautiful," I said.

"Hm?"

"Korvius. Korvius is beautiful."

A shadow passed over his expression.

"It is," he said.

I crossed the room and stood beside him, taking in the view.

"I know it's hard for you to be here," I murmured. "But I've liked seeing the place that raised you. While you were gone, it was like I could find pieces of you here."

"I don't know if I like the parts of me that were left in this house."

I leaned my head against his shoulder. I couldn't help drawing in a long breath, taking in his scent. Ash and lilacs. And a little hint, I had realized, that was from here, from this place, as if it was in his blood.

“Not the house. The city. The scenery. The flower gardens at the edge of the grounds. The trinkets in the libraries. There’s a bookstore in town that made me think of you. The owner is very unfriendly. He snaps at you if you even say a single word.” I gave him a coy smirk. “It seemed like the sort of place you would enjoy.”

His eyebrows lurched a little, a distant smile curling his lips. “Mathilda’s.”

“Yes. That was it.”

I was satisfied that my instincts were right. I *knew* him. He reached out and brushed the small of my back, as if this was satisfying to him, too.

But his smile faded quickly. I watched him fall into serious thought.

“Is it just as difficult?” I murmured. “To be here, again?”

“I’ve never been able to face this place.” He swallowed. “When the Syrizen brought us here, that was the first time I had looked at those gates since... Well. All of it. Brayen tried to find me, for a few years. Tried to get me to come back, but I just couldn’t.”

Brayen. Max’s older brother, and the only other remaining Farlione. The only one who had not been present that day. I rarely asked about him. I knew it was a particular sore spot, for many reasons.

“Do you ever think about finding him now?” I asked, quietly.

“No.” He said it fast, like it was a ridiculous thought. “No. I don’t even know where he is. As far as I know he hasn’t been back to Ara in years. And... he doesn’t know the truth, of what happened that day. He was fed the same story as everyone else. I can’t look him in the eye knowing what I know, because if I were him...” A muscle feathered in his jaw. He still stared out at the landscape. “Like I said, there are a lot of things I haven’t been able to face.”

I squeezed his arm. It was a long moment later when Max spoke, and said something that I was not at all expecting.

“Would you come with me to see the house?” His eyes slid to me — a little wide, as if he had surprised himself, too.

My brow furrowed. “Are you sure?”

A pause, like he himself wasn’t sure. “I need to,” he said, at last. “It’s loomed in my memory for so long. I need to...”

His voice trailed off, but he didn’t have to continue.

“Of course,” I murmured, and reached for my clothes.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



I could have shown Tisaanah the impersonal beauty in the Farlione estate. I could have showed her the artifacts, the artwork, the precious valuables, all the things my parents used to present to guests on tours of the house. But those were not the stories that were burning in my lungs, desperate to be released. And those were not the things I needed her beside me for the strength to face.

Instead, we wandered through the living quarters. It was utterly silent here. Zeryth and his leadership had taken over every wing of the house but this one — the place where we had lived our innermost lives, now carefully closed off to visitors. Perhaps even my miserable aunt had boundaries as to what she would allow him to use. When we walked through those doors, I felt like I'd walked into the past.

Tisaanah and I went upstairs, to the bedrooms. Neither of us spoke, but Tisaanah's hand was tight around mine. I was grateful for it.

The first door I opened was to Kira's room, and when we stepped inside, I went suddenly still.

The room was a frozen, dust-coated monument to the girl that had lived here, untouched for nearly a decade. Her insect books were scattered on the ground. Her hairbrush sat on the bureau, strands of black hair buried in its bristles. There was an indentation on her bedspread, as if someone had carelessly leapt from it in too much of a hurry — because she was always in too much of a hurry.

I couldn't speak.

I hadn't expected this, for everything to remain so preserved. Was it intentional? Had Brayan instructed that everything stay exactly the way it had been, when they died?

Or had the world just moved on without them, and no one thought to look back?

"Are you alright?" Tisaanah murmured.

That was a complicated question.

I nodded, even though I wasn't sure that was in fact the correct answer. I stepped back, closing the door gently behind me.

I went to Variaslus's room next, and as soon as I opened the door, the scent of dust and old charcoal greeted me. Three easels stood throughout the room. Two were blank. One housed a half-finished sketch, one that I immediately recognized as depicting Shailia reading a book, charcoal still waiting on the tray as if the artist had stepped out and never returned.

Then, we went to Marisca's room — all immaculately neat, long-dead flowers still petrified in their perfect arrangements — and Shailia's, which was decorated with everything and anything that once sparkled and now hung dully in the darkness.

Walking through the rooms was like stepping into a grim, greyscale version of my memory. And yet, there was an odd comfort in it, too. In allowing myself to see the marks they had left on the world. Tisaanah asked little, innocuous questions — "*When did he start drawing?*" or "*Why did she like these books so much?*" — and while at first, my answers were stilted, soon I slipped more easily into the past. For so long, my grief had overshadowed their lives, an insurmountable wall between the present and any happiness that had once lived in the past. For the first time in a long, long time, I found myself peering over it.

Atraclius's room was last. I opened the door, and stopped short.

I was expecting his to look the way the others' did, preserved in the past. I was ready to see a room that was messy, an unmade bed, trinkets scattered across the floor. Instead, it was immaculate. It took me a moment to realize why.

Because Atraclius had died here.

The room had been cleaned and purged of all that made it his, because it needed to be, when his body was taken away.

My eyes drifted down. Burn marks peeked out from beneath the carpet.

I suddenly felt ill. I stepped backwards, closing the door too quickly. I glanced at Tisaanah, and I saw her wince, her fingers going to her temple. I wondered if Reshaye was whispering to her, awakened by the memory of what had happened here.

This had been a mistake.

I was halfway down the hall before I even realized I was moving, then down the grand staircase. I didn't stop until I flung open a door and felt the rush of cold mountain air against my face.

I let out two shaky breaths and opened my eyes.

I hadn't even paid attention to where I was walking, moving solely on instinct. I stood on the balcony. Before me was a breathtaking view of the mountains, the forts illuminated like distant candles, the snowcapped peaks glowing beneath the moonlight.

I felt warmth surround me. Tisaanah leaned against my shoulder. Her touch was a grounding presence, tethering me back to the earth.

"Their lives were worth so much more than the way they ended, Max," she murmured, softly. "Don't let their deaths take that away from you. It is the most precious thing you have."

A lump rose in my throat.

Ascended above, I wished it was that easy. But their deaths had taken so much. From their memories, from their lives. From me.

“I wish you could have known them,” I said. “I wish I was introducing you to them, instead of showing you their empty bedrooms. I wish I was showing you this house when it was a home, not a shrine to the dead. And sometimes...” I let out a breath through my teeth. “Sometimes I wish you had known *me*, the way I used to be. Sometimes I wish that was the version of myself I could give you. A better version. One that wasn’t so...”

Broken.

I had thought that, when I noticed my feelings for Tisaanah beginning to change. The night I had given her the butterfly necklace, I had spent the rest of the evening trying to ignore the pleasant burn on my knuckles where they had brushed her skin. And when I lay in bed that night, unable to sleep because of this persistent, nagging fantasy that I couldn’t shake, a cold voice had echoed through my mind: *Maybe once, long ago, you could have been worthy of her. Maybe before you were a collection of scars.*

Tisaanah’s arm wound around mine.

“I do not think I would have liked you then,” she said, so plainly that despite myself a smile tugged at my mouth.

“I had far less crippling disillusionment then.”

“Perhaps I like your crippling disillusionment.”

The remnants of my smile faded. “It was more than that. I had a home. A family. I had... this.” I gestured to the house. “All of this ridiculous excess. I could have given all of that to you. I *wish* I could give all that to you.”

I looked to Tisaanah. Ascended, she was stunning, the white in her hair glowing in the silver light, her eyes a million miles deep. For a moment I could picture that idealized fantasy — the way she would have looked with them, laughing with Atraclius, chatting with my mother, collecting bugs with Kira.

I could picture the way she would have painted the horrible parties here in rainbow colors.

Tisaanah gave me a sad smile.

“You could have tried,” she said, “but that world would not have wanted me, Max. And perhaps I would not have wanted it, either.”

There it was. The truth.

I closed my eyes, and one by one, the images faded.

Because Tisaanah was a former slave, a foreigner with no name and no prospects. I so wanted to believe that my family wouldn't have seen her that way. Maybe, as individual people, they wouldn't have. But the roots of the life we lived ran deeper than that, choking out what didn't belong.

And maybe Tisaanah was too damned good for all of it, anyway.

I had loved my family. I had loved my childhood. But now I turned around and looked at this beautiful house, and thought of how it was built from the riches of career warfare. For the Farliones, it was simply what we did — a game to gain honor and money and respect from other people like us.

But Tisaanah? Tisaanah knew what it was to be one of the pieces on the board. People like us reduced people like her to faceless numbers. Like she was just one of a thousand, an asset to be leveraged or sacrificed, instead of a person.

Grief and anger warred with each other deep in my chest. The conflict I'd suppressed these long weeks, the thing that festered every time I looked at Moth, bubbled up to the surface.

“I don't know how to reconcile it,” I said. “The bad with the good. The things that I loved with the things that I hate. And there is so fucking much that I hate, now, about what we were. So many things that I didn't see back then. But despite it, I still—”

I had to stop, abruptly, because I couldn't say the words without breaking: *I still miss them so, so much.*

There was a long silence. When Tisaanah spoke, her voice was a low murmur.

“I have known so many people,” she said, “who are willing to do awful things and look away from the consequences. I have learned to live in their world and play by their rules, because I thought it was the only way. But you... you are not willing to compromise. You are not willing to sacrifice. You *demand* better. When I met you, I had never known anyone like that before.”

Her hand slid into mine.

“You told me once that the world would be simpler if people were all one thing. But we will never live in a world that easy. Your family is a part of you. Of course you will love them. Of course you will miss them. And... of course you will want to make a better world than they did. You will build upon what they gave you. You will draw from their strengths and confront their mistakes. You will make something better, because that is what you do. You dream, Max. And I *love* that in you.”

Her words dug deep, brushing everything I buried — the old wounds of my family’s deaths, and the fresh ones from these last awful weeks. Brushing everything that smothered me when I would lie alone at night, wondering if any of it would ever be *worth* anything.

And yet, she made it so easy to believe her. As if her conviction was strong enough to breathe life into everything I dismissed as impossible.

My vision blurred.

In one abrupt movement, I pulled her into an embrace, clutching her with my face buried in her hair. I couldn’t speak, even though I wished I could. I wished I could weave words beautiful enough to capture this — the way that she made the past and the future seem, somehow, reconcilable.

She didn’t pull away, and I was grateful, because I wasn’t ready to let go. Perhaps I never would be.

I had always lived my life with one foot in the past, while Tisaanah relentlessly charged to the future. It was only here, when we were together, that we collided. It was only here that we stood still.

Beautifully, mercifully still.

We stayed there like that, holding each other, for a long, long time.

THAT NIGHT, I slept as if I hadn't in months. When I was traveling, night was a time of fitful rest and vivid dreams, interspersed with worries. But now, it was easy to fall into a rest so deep it was a vat of darkness. Wonderful. Dreamless. And what felt like a hundred years later, when I rolled over to see Tisaanah's lightly-snoring face beside me, the awestruck relief just hit me all over again.

Her eyes fluttered open. I watched them blink away sleepy confusion, and then brighten with happiness, and then close again in contentment.

Tisaanah and I had never had the opportunity to wake up together, slow. And we did wake up slowly. We woke up with "Good morning"s murmured into each others' skin, and sloppy embraces, and little kisses that started playful and quickly drew deeper. We woke up with our bodies intertwined, Tisaanah crawling over me and the two of us moving together, hands roaming over each other lazily. I tried to memorize the way she looked, with the morning light falling over her naked body. I decided I liked her this way.

Eventually, though, the world caught up to us.

By the time we finally dragged ourselves out of bed, my mind was moving on to the next order of business. One that I was sorely dreading.

I turned to Tisaanah as she finished brushing out her hair.

"I made some visits," I said. "When I was traveling."

She looked at me through the mirror. “Visits?”

“I tried to get some information about your curse. Whatever Zeryth did, or didn’t do.”

That got her attention. She turned. “And?”

I let out a long breath through my teeth. I couldn’t believe I was about to say this. “I think we need to visit Ilyzath.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



That night, I drank.

It was not hard to find alcohol in Yithara — any town so built for travelers, after all, would have it flowing freely. It took very little wandering to find a little pub to stumble into. It wasn't the shadowy, familiar embrace of my home, but the wine ran just as strong, the darkness just as sweet, the smiles of strangers just as welcoming. Two glasses, and the knot in my stomach was suddenly loosened, my attention transfixed on a handsome-enough man in the chair beside me, our conversations growing softer and closer.

This was good. This was familiar. Soon, I would be entangled in limbs and skin and moans, and a heartbeat that would carry me through the loneliness of the night.

The stranger was whispering softly to me, words that neither of us cared about, our noses nearly touching, when—

A figure in the corner caught my eye. A familiar figure, slumped back in the shadows, his own glass of wine in his hand. There was something about his stance that was unusual and concerning.

“What?” the stranger murmured, his fingers tracing mine, noticing my distraction. He was so close. It would be so easy to disappear into mindless pleasure. So comfortable, compared to the complications of everything else that surrounded us.

And yet, for reasons even I didn't fully understand, I pulled away. “I have to go,” I said.

When I crossed the room and slid onto the bench beside Caduan, he barely looked at me. He swirled the remaining wine around in his glass.

“You have a bad habit,” he said, “of finding me when I would rather not be found.”

“Do you want me to leave?” I said, and he flicked a heavy-lidded gaze to me. Held it.

“No,” he said. “No, I do not.”

My eyes fell to his mostly-empty glass. Certainly not the first.

“What are we drinking to?”

A barely-visible smile. “A good friend’s birthday. One that he should be drinking to himself.”

“Oh.” I bit my lip. There would be many lonely birthdays for Caduan.

“He would have been a much better king,” he said, looking down to his glass. “It should have been him. It’s laughable, actually, that I am the one who holds the title now. Someone should have made a rule. Once you get past the tenth person in the line of succession, perhaps it’s time to give up.”

“You’re the king now. You could make that rule.”

Caduan blinked. “I suppose I could.”

“See?” I leaned forward. “*Innovation*, King Caduan.”

Mathira, I was drunk. Too drunk for this. I half expected him to be insulted. Instead, he let out a short laugh.

“*Innovation*. Yes, maybe. But even that...” His gaze went far away, face lapsing into seriousness. “I just keep thinking of how many more useful people could have lived. I knew some of the most brilliant people that have ever walked this world. When I had that corpse open on my table, all I could think about were all the more intelligent minds that could have been standing in my place, minds who could assemble the pieces I cannot. And yet I was the one who walked away.”

My mouth was dry. I took a long gulp of wine.

I was acutely conscious of the letter in my pocket, and what it forbid. Caduan wanted answers. But he would not be able to get them in Niraja.

I didn't want to tell him that. Not now.

But when I put my glass down again, he was looking at me with that stare that stripped me bare.

"I assume," he said, "that you received a letter from your father."

I stiffened, and silently cursed myself for abandoning the promise of a wordless embrace for this.

My non-answer was answer enough.

"I'll guess," Caduan said, leaning back in his chair. "We are not going to Niraja."

The words were thick and difficult. "We are not."

"I, for one, am utterly shocked," he said, and took a long drink of wine.

"I may disagree, but it is not up to me to question his decisions."

Caduan's lip twitched. "It's a coward's decision," he muttered, into his glass.

Anger flared. I had to choke back my sharpest words. "You're drunk," I said.

"I am. But I'm also right." He sat up and leaned towards me. The movement was sloppy and imprecise, and he bowed closer than perhaps he would have otherwise, his forehead nearly touching mine. Even in the darkness of the pub, his eyes were the color of light refracting through leaves — as if his anger shone through them.

"Tell me something, Teirness," he said. "Why do you have such loyalty to him?"

"I am not the Teirness."

"Yes, you are."

I scoffed. "No, I'm—"

“Unsuitable? To whom? Your father holds unmatched power in the Pales. Do you think he could not have gotten them to accept you, if he had wanted to?” His voice softened. Where I had just seen anger, now I saw compassion. “Do you think other Houses do not whisper about him, Aefe? That power was never even intended to be his. It is your mother’s. And it is *yours*.”

I shook my head. But even as I did, a fragmented memory whispered through the back of my mind. A memory of that night, my father’s hands on my throat, the flash of white, my mother’s voice.

“My mother is not well. And I—”

“Are not as easy to control as your sister?”

I stopped breathing. I recoiled, a snarl on my lips.

“Don’t you dare say a *word* of my sister.”

Regret unfolded across his face immediately. “I—”

“And don’t you *dare* speak about my family as if you know them better than I do.”

He leaned forward, just slightly. “Aefe—”

He said my name like it was an apology and an explanation and a plea, all at once. No one ever said my name like that. No one ever had extended that sort of tenderness to me, and I liked it better that way.

And so, I didn’t need to think before I stomped it all out.

“I’m sorry that he did not give you the answer you wanted. I’m sorry that you hate him because he’s trying to make you something you don’t want to be. Because he *never* would let happen to our House what happened to yours.”

I didn’t expect Caduan’s expression to change as it did. He flinched, as if I had struck him. And then his eyes were bright and sharp, and his lips parted, and a certain satisfaction rose up in me — ready for the ugliness of a fight, something familiar and painful, something that I undoubtedly deserved.

But then, a deafening crash rang out.

On the opposite side of the room, where a massive window overlooked the leaves and sky, smashed glass now covered the floor. Patrons leapt up from their seats, swearing drunkenly. Confused murmurs rippled through the pub as we stood.

My eyes were not looking at the window.

Intead they were drawn to what lay on the floor: an arrow, wrapped in cloth. One end was alight with a strange flame and it was only once I stepped closer that I saw blue powder scattered across the ground where it had landed.

“What is—” I started.

I didn’t get to finish my question. Caduan grabbed my arm and yanked me back.

Just as the world went white.

Everything shattered. A bone-rattling sound shook me. My back slammed against the wall. I was on the other side of the room.

I couldn’t see — it was dark, and blue smoke hung in the air. Floorboards were crooked and splintered beneath me. I was looking up at a night sky through a broken ceiling. There was a weight on top of me. Caduan, I realized, bracing himself over my body. There was warmth spilling over my right arm, where he pressed against me. Blood. His.

I wasn’t prepared for the wave of panic that realization brought me. My hands clamped to his side, trying to quell the bleeding.

“You’re hurt—”

But Caduan didn’t seem to care. There was something more urgent than pain etched into his expression.

“*Humans,*” he ground out.

It was the only thing he had time to say before there was a hideous cracking sound, and the floor fell out beneath us.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

TISAANAH



I wasn't sure what, exactly, I was expecting. Perhaps some fortress of iron bars and twisted steel, or a dark tower shrouded in storm clouds. But when Max drew his Stratagram and we landed on a slab of ivory surrounded by a churning sea, my words died in my throat.

The building was made out of polished white stone, so tall that its peak faded into the ocean fog above us. The sides were slightly slanted, and the waves roared against them, like fists to an unyielding door. There were no windows, no openings at all, save for a single tall, narrow black door.

The walls were covered with carvings. As we stepped closer, I realized that they were not images but symbols — a language I had never seen before. As the light hit them, sometimes they would catch sudden flashes of silver or black or a bone-chilling red.

Reshaye recoiled.

{This is a terrible place,} it hissed. *{An evil place.}*

I winced, pushing back its protests. But it was right — everything here felt unsettling.

“Arans built this?” I asked, as we approached the doors. They loomed above us, two massive panes of darkness against the ivory.

This place was like nothing I had seen in Ara. It seemed... ancient and foreign.

“It wasn’t built so much as it was... discovered. It’s old. Certainly older than the fall of magic.” Max barely touched the door and it swung open seemingly of its own accord. He shuddered and cursed beneath his breath. “I suppose that four hundred years ago, when it was uncovered again, the Orders thought it would be a shame to let such a perfectly torturous place go to waste. Enterprising bastards.”

We stepped through the doors, and they closed swiftly behind us, as if offended by Max’s tone.

Reshaye slammed against my thoughts. *{Get out. Get out, get out, get out...}*

It was eerily bright in here. The walls and floor were made out of the same smooth white stone as the exterior, adorned with the same decorative carvings. There were no doors, no adornments. No lanterns, just light. And no people, though I felt the heavy gaze of watchful eyes.

“I fucking despise this place,” Max muttered, and started walking. I followed.

“There are no guards?” I couldn’t help but whisper. It was too silent — an unnatural silence, the kind that reeked of danger.

The words barely made it out of my mouth before I stumbled into Max, who had stopped short.

An old woman stood before us. She was draped in a black dress, with a matching scarf covering her hair, reminiscent of a hood. She stood perfectly still, her hands clasped in front of her. Shriveled scars occupied her empty eye sockets. A Syrizen.

“Ascended above, that was unnecessary,” Max muttered.

The woman did not acknowledge the comment, though the muscles around her scars twitched disapprovingly.

I couldn’t help but stare. Is this what became of Syrizen, when they got old? I’d never seen one over the age of fifty. And while all Syrizen could be a little unnerving, this one seemed almost inhuman. A purple cast bloomed beneath her scars, like delicate bruises.

“For whom?” she creaked out.

“Vardir Israin,” Max said.

The woman then gave me a stare that I felt down my spine.

“She’s with me,” he added.

The stare held for several more uncomfortable seconds. Then she abruptly turned away, as if we were now unworthy of her interest. She lifted a finger and pointed down a hallway, and by the time we began walking again, she was gone.

Max strode on purposefully, as if that one feeble pointed finger was enough to tell him exactly where we needed to go, even though we continued to turn corners and wind down hallways. The carved white stone drowned out everything else, so bright I found myself squinting, and the walls seemed to press down on us.

Everything was so strangely silent, as if sound itself withered and died in the air — even the cadence of our footsteps seemed *odd*, like they were defying nature. At one point, we turned a corner, and it was as if something *cracked*. A piercing, agonized scream sliced through the air, so sharp it dragged bloody fingernails through my ears.

I froze.

But the sound was gone as suddenly as it had appeared. It was like a single fragment of broken glass, cut off at the end and the beginning, audible for only a fraction of a second.

And then, once again, it was so silent that I questioned whether I had heard it at all.

Max and I had both stopped walking. We looked at each other.

It took me a moment to realize what I had heard. Realize why this place was so oddly silent. “It’s a spell,” I said. “The silence.”

He inclined his chin, grim. “Yes. It is.”

The thought made a shiver run through me. Right now, the air might have been thick with screams, with agony, like what

we had just heard through a single crack in magic. Here, just unheard, smothered beneath oppressive silence.

I didn't like this place.

We continued down several more halls, until Max stopped and turned to the wall. He placed his palm flat against the white stone, and it simply *parted*, like a curtain opened by invisible hands. Where there had once been solid stone, now there was a door.

Before I could move, Max caught my arm.

“We tolerate nothing from him,” he said. “*Nothing*. Alright?”

I gave him a nod, and Max opened the door.



THE THING before me didn't even look like a man.

Actually, there were a lot of things that were suddenly incomprehensible. The carvings on the walls seemed to be moving, though when my eyes landed in any one place, they were still. The room, a small box of that carved white stone, felt as if it both brightened and darkened all at once. There was no furniture in here, not even a bed or chamber pot. It reeked of human waste and decay, though I saw neither.

The figure was curled up on the floor, his knees to his chin. He wore stained, plain clothing — a shirt that had once been white and torn brown trousers. His back was to me, giving me a view of just bony shoulders and a head of thin, scraggly white hair.

“Vardir,” Max said, and when the man turned I had to stifle a gasp.

He was grinning — grinning like a madman. He had to have been mad, because his face — the pale albino face of a Valtain — was destroyed, covered in bleeding gouges.

At the same moment, Reshaye roared to life, its hatred overwhelming me.

Vardir scrambled around to face us. Up close, I realized he was actually quite young, perhaps only in his forties.

“Max,” he breathed. “Maxantarius Farlione. Two old friends, two in just so little time. What a treat, what a treat.”

He scrambled forward, fingers reaching out crooked like broken tree branches. Max yanked me back.

A flash of memory hit me. That same smile as he leaned over me, little knives in his hands, in a room of white.

I had to catch Reshaye as it lunged for control — lunged for Vardir’s throat. My body seized, but one little sliver of Reshaye slipped through, a ragged whisper, “I am not your friend.”

Not my voice. Not my accent.

Vardir looked delighted. “Ah, yes. There it is. No matter how different the carrier may be, I always know.”

Enough, I said to Reshaye, pushing it back. *We need him.*

{He should die for what he did to me.}

Being here is worse than death.

“We’re not here for a reunion,” Max said. “We have some questions for you.”

“Questions?” Vardir grinned wider, all those wounds over his face rippling. “I used to love questions.”

“I want you to tell me if it is possible for a curse to bind one life to another.”

Vardir paused, licked his lips. “Why? Did someone do that to you? Now that you mention it, I did feel something strange, something off-color—” He stopped abruptly, his gaze snapping to me. “Or is it *you*?”

“You answer our questions,” Max said. “We don’t have to answer yours.”

But the prisoner’s bloodshot eyes crinkled with delight, fixed on me. “It *is* you.”

I slowly knelt down to the ground, until I was on Vardir's level.

“You are Reshaye's creator?”

A snarl. *{He is not.}*

He laughed. “Creator! Not creator, no. I simply helped harness it here, in Ara. Who could have created such a thing? Perhaps the gods themselves made it to punish us. They do love to do that.” His eyes found the ceiling, and his face slowly devolved into terror, as if he was seeing something there that Max and I could not.

Max and I exchanged a look.

“Vardir,” Max said, and he jolted, as if jerking awake. He grinned slowly.

“An old friend!” he exclaimed. “Three, in so short a time! How lucky am I, how very lucky.”

My heart sank. This man was insane.

“You were telling me about Reshaye,” I said.

“*Ah*. Of course. I could not have done it without Maxantarius. Such a willing host. Reshaye wanted no one but him.” Vardir looked to Max, and his face went serious, a wrinkle forming at his brow. “It gave you a gift,” he said, quietly. “I can feel its magic still, in you. They took so much, but I can still feel—”

“A life binding spell, Vardir,” Max pressed. “Is it possible? Could it be broken?”

“I thought you were smarter than that, Captain. Anything is possible, and nothing is ever truly broken.”

Max let out a hiss of frustration. But I pulled my sleeve back, exposing my forearm and the dark veins visible beneath the albino white patches of my skin.

“Do you know what this is?”

Vardir's face went serious. Then horrified. Then delighted.

“You— you *did* it.”

He lunged forward, grabbing my arm and wrenching it forward, pulling it so close that his nose nearly brushed my skin. Max was halfway to him when I raised my other hand, giving him a silent assurance: *Wait. I'm fine.*

“Did what, Vardir?”

“You Wielded Reshayé’s magic *directly*. You alone.” He shook his head. “If I had my tools— if I had my study—”

“What does that mean?” I asked, and Vardir arched his eyebrows at me.

“You don’t even know? It means a channel has opened. A channel connecting you to the deepest levels of magic, deeper than Valtain or Solarie magic or even Fey magic.” He snapped his gaze to Max and grinned. “So *this* is why you ask about such blood magic. You have it too — yes, I see that now. I don’t know how I missed it, don’t know how, my mind has been so— so fuzzy lately—”

I could feel his emotions rippling through his touch, and they were unlike any I had ever felt before — a million disjointed fragments warring with each other, as if he was constantly experiencing all emotions at once, and never knowing which one was real.

Slowly, I pieced together what Vardir was implying.

“You are saying,” I said, quietly, “that our magic *is* blood magic.”

“Human bodies aren’t built to withstand such power. This magic feeds on life. It will take and consume whatever life you can give it, and more. The more life you give it, the more powerful it will be.”

“And the higher the cost,” I murmured. Reshayé curled through my thoughts, landing on a memory — the memory of my fingers on skin, my magic reducing living flesh to black rot.

Consuming life.

Nausea roiled in my stomach. All those people I had killed, in Threll. Slavers, yes. I couldn’t bring myself to be

sorry for their deaths. But there was something sickening, in that — in the fact that my magic consumed life itself, and thrived on death.

Max looked as if he did, too. One look at his face, and I could imagine what he was thinking. All those lives in Sarlazai. All that death. Just making him stronger. Destruction begetting more destruction.

Vardir's gaze flicked from me, to Max. "Now tell me, have you tried combining your magics? Theoretically, if you both draw from the same level, you could—"

Then he stopped short. His face went suddenly slack, then slid slowly into horror. Wordlessly, he lifted his hands and began drawing his fingers down his face. It was then that I realized: the cuts were claw marks, hundreds of them, from his own fingernails.

I lurched forward to stop him, on instinct. One second, and I was yanking away Vardir's hands—

Another, and he lunged for me.

I was pinned on the floor, Vardir leaning over me.

"How did I miss it?" he breathed. "Until now, I didn't see —"

His blood, fresh in the newly opened scratches, dripped on my face. He was on top of me, his hands at my throat.

A split second later, and I felt the heat of flames, Max's cursing as he yanked Vardir away. The tiny cell suddenly was thick with the smell of burning flesh. My own magic tingled at my fingertips. Rot.

Vardir scampered upright, pushing himself against the wall, his eyes glued to me. "They're coming for us," he said. "Because of *you*."

I leapt to my feet. My heart was pounding. Two strides, and I was there before I knew what was happening. Pushing Max aside, and grabbing the sides of Vardir's bloody face.

"You deserve to die," my voice said. My voice... but Reshaye's words. "You locked me up. You tortured me."

Black rot sizzled on Vardir's skin, and he let out a raspy, ragged scream. "You will destroy us."

"*You* destroyed me. *You*—"

"Stop." Max pulled me away, and I whirled around to face him.

"He deserves it," I growled. "You know he does as well as I."

Fragments of Reshaye's memories slid through my mind. My open entrails open on a table. A white ceiling. Incredible pain.

"He does," Max said. "So let him rot here tearing his own face off."

My body was tensed, uncertain.

You told me the worst thing about being what you are is that you are neither living nor dead, I told it. Let him live that way too. It is the greatest punishment.

Torture. Utter torture.

Reshaye said nothing. But slowly, I felt it concede, and I carefully slipped back into control. I saw Max's face shift, and I knew he recognized the change immediately.

But we had no time to waste. Vardir let out a shriek, still lying on the ground, scratching at a face now so ruined and bloody that it looked like nothing but a smear of flesh. He was weeping.

"I can't believe I didn't see, they're coming, they're coming, I can't believe I didn't—"

The walls themselves seemed to move all at once, lurching in on us. When had it gotten so dark?

I shot Max a look of alarm. "That's enough of that," he muttered, and grabbed me with one hand and pressed the palm of the other to the wall.

And nothing happened.

"Max..."

“I’m trying.”

Again. His palm to the wall.

Nothing.

It was so dark, now. So dark that I was beginning to see movement in the shadows, like ghosts crawling out of the stone carvings.

The hair on the back of my neck stood upright. My heartbeat was rushing.

“Alright, you miserable bitch,” Max muttered. “Enough play.” He pounded on the wall, and then pressed his palm to it. This time, I pressed mine beside his.

Open. Open. Open...

The wall parted, and I breathed a ragged sigh of relief. Max grabbed my hand and the two of us were rushing down those smooth stone hallways — Gods, had I thought they were bright before? Now, what had once been eerie bone-white was ashy and dark, as if smoke-stained. The carvings seemed to shift.

One turn and then another and another. Every hallway looked the same. At one point, Max stopped short, his face snapping off down the hall, frozen.

“What?” I asked. “What are you looking at?”

No answer.

“Max—”

He turned away, pale. “Let’s just get out of here.”

I could have sworn I heard a voiceless whisper:

Stay.

{Go,} Reshaye whispered. *{Faster.}*

We rushed around another corner, and I stumbled to a sudden stop.

There was a figure standing before us — a woman with wild black hair and eyes that looked like home.

“Tisaanah,” she called to me, her hand outstretched. “Tisaanah, my love. My sweet daughter, my strong daughter. I missed you so much.”

I could not make myself move.

This is not right, a small part of me whispered, far in the back of my mind.

And yet, everything else within me pulled to her. I could even smell her — salt and jasmine. The scent of childhood safety.

“It’s not real, Tisaanah.” Max’s hand clasped mine, holding me back. “Whatever you’re seeing. It’s not real.”

“I have missed you so much,” she breathed, tears streaking her cheeks. “I called for you so many times. But you never came.”

I blinked, and her face was bloody, her outstretched hands decaying. “I died alone in the dark, and you never—”

“It’s not real, Tisaanah.” Max grabbed my arm and pulled me away, and after a stumble, I was running again.

Go back, a voice seemed to whisper. *Don’t abandon her again*. It echoed with her pleas, fading behind me: “Please, Tisaanah, please, help me, come back...”

“That’s what this place does,” Max muttered. “It feeds on you. Don’t stop, no matter what it shows you.”

My mother was only the beginning. I saw Max, chained and bloody, marred by decay that I immediately recognized as my own magic. I saw Serel, starving and emaciated, collapsed under the tear of countless lashes. Sammerin, Moth. The Threllian refugees. Always the same: *Help me, help me*.

Max, too, lurched to a stop several times, growing paler and quieter each time. I could only imagine what he saw. Once, I needed to hold him back from turning around, dragging him around the corner until he regained his senses enough to push forward.

By the time we got to the entrance, it was so dark that I struggled to see. The door was bigger than I remembered it,

tall and narrow and black. The symbols on it glinted through the shadows, despite there being no light to reflect.

Max put his hand on the door.

It did not move.

The symbols were rearranging, like bugs crawling towards a carcass, collecting around us.

I pushed the door, too.

“Let us out,” I murmured in Thereni, as if to plead with Ilyzath herself. “We do not belong here.”

You do not?

The whisper surrounded us.

“Alright, Ilyzath,” Max muttered. “We’re appropriately fucking impressed with you. Now let us go.”

The symbols in the wall all skittered towards Max, framing his silhouette. Shadows reached from the corners of the room, caressing him.

It sounded nothing like a voice, and yet I could understand its words perfectly:

Why should I let you go now that you have returned to me? Perhaps you escaped me once. But you belong here.

“No.” I thrust my palm against the door and threw all of my magic — all of Reshaye’s magic — behind it. A surge of light hit my fingertips.

More and more shadows reached for Max, like ravenous hands.

This is your home, Ilyzath crooned to him. And what difference does a few weeks make?

The door held for one more moment.

But another burst of power, and it flew open. Max and I stumbled through. My eyes recoiled against the brightness of the outside world. Max yanked parchment from his pocket and drew a Stratagram. He had to do it twice — his hand was shaking too badly to make the circle the first time.

We landed behind the Farlione estate. It was a beautiful day. People were all around us, walking or chatting. So peaceful it was surreal.

My gaze flicked to Max, and the two of us stared at each other in silence. His jaw was tight, and his face pale. My hand clutched his so tightly that it trembled. So tightly that I thought I would never let it go.

We had seen many horrible things within those walls, but only Ilyzath's whispers to Max followed me out:

You belong here. What difference does a few weeks make?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



I could feel Tisaanah's stare picking me apart, though I couldn't bring myself to look at her. My heart was still racing, palms still sweating, unwelcome images behind my eyes every time I blinked.

Neither of us spoke until we were back in her room.

"What— what *was* that?" she murmured.

"It was fucking with us."

You belong here.

I blinked, trying to force the words away, but that only invited an onslaught of nightmares in the darkness.

"That's what that place does," I said. "It takes your worst fears and tortures you with them. It's... people say it's... alive."

"*Alive?*"

"It's not. I don't believe it for a second. It's just... a fancy, magical mirror, reflecting your nightmares." I cleared my throat. "That's all it was doing, in there. Fucking with us."

Tisaanah flinched, as if one of her own visions was racking through her mind. I could only imagine what she had seen. Her past was so dark. There would have been plenty for Ilyzath to work with.

I shouldn't have brought her there.

"Why didn't it let us leave?" she said.

“Far be it from me to interpret the motivations of an ancient sentient prison.”

“Has that happened before? Does it... do that?”

Not that I'd heard of. But then again, Ilyzath was universally regarded to be mysterious and horrible, and no one truly understood it.

I ran my hand through my hair. “Maybe... it's because of our magic. Perhaps it responded to us differently because of it.” Ancient and mystical and evil. Just like Ilyzath.

“Perhaps,” Tisaanah said, but I could tell that she wasn't satisfied with this answer.

You escaped me once.

I fought a shudder and went to the window, mostly because it gave me an excuse to turn away from Tisaanah's stare — one that, as always, saw too much.

“We have more important things to worry about than Ilyzath's sadistic tendencies, anyway,” I said.



TISAANAH and I did what we always did when we mutually needed a distraction that night: we trained. There was comforting familiarity in the two of us throwing ourselves into work with no room for other unpleasant realities. Tisaanah had gotten better since I left, especially at combat. Il'Sahaj now worked as an extension of her body and her magic, almost as well as my staff worked as an extension of mine. But it was still unnervingly strange whenever I caught glimpses of my own tactics in her movements — a reminder of why we were here, and the terrifying thing that now bound us together deeper than our friendship or our affection.

We trained until our bodies no longer cooperated, and then we rinsed ourselves off and collapsed into bed, where we lay in silence pretending to be asleep. We left the lanterns on, and neither of us discussed why.

You belong here.

It was past midnight when I felt Tisaanah's limbs wind around me. Her voice was quiet in my ear.

"When they charged you, after Sarlazai," she murmured, "if you had been found guilty, is that where they would have sent you?"

I'd known the question was coming, and was dreading it. "If I had been convicted, yes." War crimes. That had been my charge. What other word was there for what had happened in Sarlazai?

It was oddly difficult to speak. "It would have been the right place. To send someone who was responsible for that."

"It wasn't *you*, Max," she whispered.

Sometimes, I wasn't sure how much it mattered.

"I wasn't even at the trial. I was... distracted. But I heard that the survivors were there. They came and testified before the Orders because they wanted justice, just days after they buried whatever was left to bury..." I cleared my throat. "I was only freed because Nura fought for me. Sometimes I think about that. How those people must have felt, watching me be cleared when I wasn't even there. Is that justice?"

"You going to that place because you felt guilty wouldn't have been justice, either."

Maybe. But maybe it would have been closer to it.

You belong here.

When Ilyzath had whispered that to me, it had felt like the truth.

"Max." Tisaanah turned my face to her. Her mismatched eyes were bright and fierce. "You have *never* belonged there. And you never will, no matter what it said to you. Do you understand?"

She said it the same way she had once declared that she would free the Threllian slaves — the same voice she had used

when she insisted that she would save Serel, even when the world told her it was impossible. Relentless brute force.

I kissed her on the forehead and pulled her into an embrace. "I know," I murmured.

She did always make it seem so easy to believe her.

But when I looked at her again, her face as I had seen it in the darkness of Ilyzath stared back at me. Ilyzath's whispers caressed my dreams all night long.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

TISAANAH



I couldn't shake the things that Ilyzath had shown me. Sleep was restless. It was nearly morning by the time I finally dozed off, and when I woke again, Max was gone, a note on his pillow:

T,

Your snoring was charming and you were too peaceful to wake. Early drills. Dinner later?

Love,

M

It was so deceptively nonchalant, written as if we were two very ordinary people leading very ordinary lives, and like we hadn't been victimized by a magical ancient prison twelve hours ago.

I set the note aside. Then, as I rose and began to prepare for the day, I noticed another letter that had been slid beneath the door.

It was from the refugee dwellings, from a young woman named Fijra whom I had met a few times before. Her grandmother needed my help, and requested that I visit that day, though the letter remained somewhat vague as to why.

Not that it mattered. Whenever the refugees asked me to go, I went. Today would be no exception.

“THANK YOU, Tisaanah, for having the time to come.”

The old woman spoke with a thick Derali accent, a dialect of Thereni that was sharp and choppy. Her hands shook as she served us stew, broth splashing across the table as she struggled to support the weight of the ladle. I gently took the spoon from her and poured the stew myself. For me. For her. And then for Fijra, who sat silently with her eyes lowered.

“Of course I have time,” I said.

I settled back into my chair and sipped my stew. The flavors weren't quite the same as those found in Threll — it had that classic Aran fishy, burning spice — but still, nostalgia flooded over me at even an imperfect taste of Threllian food.

My eyes drifted to the corner of the apartment, where a little boy, perhaps no older than five, played with blocks on the floor. I gave him a small wave, which he seemed reluctant to return.

“That's my boy Meo,” the old woman croaked, following my gaze as she settled into her seat. “Not by blood, but I love him all the same.”

“The family we choose is just as important,” I said.

There was a long, awkward silence. The old woman was peering at me through cataract ridden, wrinkled eyes. Fijra wouldn't so much as look at me.

I cleared my throat. “So. What can I help you with?”

“I did have a grandson, though,” the woman creaked out, as if she hadn't heard me. “I did have a lot of things, a long time ago. Before Deralin fell. I used to live in the capital, you know. Before it fell.”

The woman's stare glazed over. I knew that look. Almost everyone got that look, when they got to thinking about the past. I put down my spoon, realizing that what this woman needed above all, right now, was to talk.

“It was the Essarians that got us,” she went on. “We were all surprised by that. Those ink-stained mice brought down the great Deralin nation.”

The Essarians had been one of Threll’s only allies. They didn’t have a strong military, but they had money and scientific advancements. They used that money to purchase the best warriors, now-infamous bands of private armies like the Roseteeth and Goldbark Companies. In the end, though, the Essarians were still playing a game they couldn’t win. They spent all their gold trying to keep up with the Threllians, and when they were no longer useful, the Threllians conquered them, too. Mercenary armies don’t stay to defend you if you can’t pay them anymore, and so, Essaria fell just like the rest of us.

“We got out early,” the old woman went on. “Before the major cities fell. My grandson, my little Senrha, was just thirteen. Dangerous age, for a boy. Old enough to fancy yourself a hero. Went on like that for some weeks. Thought we might make it out. But that’s when the slavers started to come. And the first time we saw them, my boy didn’t want to run.” Her voice was flat, too used to telling sad stories, but the grief beneath it never dulled. “Thirteen is a dangerous age for a boy,” she murmured, gaze far-off. “Fancied himself a hero.”

Fijra’s eyes closed, as if shutting out the memory.

“A terrible thing,” I whispered.

“They took Fijra and me. Gods’ luck, we stayed together, but the others... well, soon, it was only us.” The woman patted Fijra’s hand. “Then I meet little Mara and little Meo. Mara was such a gentle little thing, like a broken bird. And Meo looked just like my boy, he did. Just like him. Didn’t he?”

Fijra spoke for the first time. “Yes, Grandmother. He does.” She glanced at me for only a second before looking away again.

The old woman nodded slowly, then peered down at my bowl. Half empty. “Eat, girl. You’re so small, so thin. Eat.”

I obeyed. The air seemed thick in here now, almost dizzying.

“They were all alone,” the woman said. “I could not leave them that way. They became my family, too. But some time later, we were sold. I got to keep Meo. Mikovs wanted him. But they had no need for a little girl, so Mara was sent away. All alone again.”

The world seemed to be falling away, except for her voice. The old woman leaned across the table, looking at me with an intensity disproportionate to her frailty.

“But I’ll never leave her that way, Tisaanah.”

I nodded. Of course. I had said the same thing about all of them — all those people who still remained there, trapped. *I’ll never leave them that way.*

Fijra was peering at me now from behind sheets of gold hair, and I felt something sully the air.

Regret. Shame.

Beneath my skull, Reshaye slithered.

“I tell you this,” the old woman said, closer still, “because I want you to know.”

A headache throbbed in my temples. The edges of my vision were growing gray.

Too late, I realized.

The world blurred around the old woman’s face.

“I want you to understand me. I would do anything for them, Tisaanah. *Anything.*”

{Go!} Reshaye roared.

I grabbed for the knife at the table only for Fijra to clumsily knock it away. My muscles barely obeyed me. Strong, male hands grabbed my throat.

My vision was darkening. Thoughts unraveling.

I thrashed out. Catching skin, irregular busts of magic popping at my fingertips, some faceless attacker screaming in

pain and pulling away as I left him with rotted flesh.

I hit the floor. Everything went black.

Rope tightened around my neck.

And the last thing I remembered was Reshaye's frantic, fading whisper:

{Kill them, kill them, kill them...!}

But even that was claimed by the darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



My father's hands were on my throat. I couldn't breathe. I looked at nothing but his face. He was bigger than me — I was ten years old, and especially small for my age besides, so light that he could have picked me up with one hand. His breath smelled of wine and rage, both equally pungent.

My mouth was opening and closing, but no words would come. This struck me as such an injustice, because I didn't even need a lot of them. I just needed one, just a single word:

Please.

Please, after all, was a magic word. It was a word that gave me comfort and gifts and safety, pretty trinkets and beautiful dresses, and above all, *love*.

But my vision was blurring, darkness encroaching over me.

And I was not granted any of those things. Not even that single word.



“PLEASE... PLEASE...”

With great effort, my eyes opened to see a world on fire. The leaves were now far, far above me, a canopy of scorched green. Little flecks of flames floated down like shooting stars.

It was beautiful, before I remembered enough to make it terrifying.

There was an overwhelming pressure on my chest, and something sharp jutting into my right side. Cries surrounded me, some legible, some not. Somewhere behind me, someone was begging. For what, I wasn't sure.

A beam from the fallen pub pinned me down. I turned my head and saw Caduan beside me, half sprawled over my midsection. He was so lifeless that panic cleaved through me.

With all my strength, I pushed against the slab of wood. I felt as if my body was a million miles away, but by some miracle, I managed to lift it just enough to wiggle out from beneath it. When I sat up, I stifled a gasp.

It looked like the end of everything.

The world was burning. Flames, orange and blue — *blue?* — crawled over the trees, consuming the wooden footbridges that connected them all above us. Buildings and debris and *bodies* rained down, shattering on the ground as they fell from tens or hundreds of feet in the air. It was so smoky, so chaotic, that it took me a moment to realize what I was looking at above me — countless silhouettes surrounded by magic or wielding steel, locked in battle.

Humans.

I heard the word in my head in Caduan's voice, just as he had said it before we fell.

Shit.

I went to Caduan, yanking the debris off of him. He was still, violet blood plastering the fabric of his shirt to his body. It ran down the side of his face, too, sticky in his copper hair.

“Caduan.” I felt for his heartbeat, breathing a sigh of relief at the weak, but steady, pulse. “Get up. We have to go.”

Cold fear settled over me.

He would wake up, I told myself. He would open his eyes. He had to. The last thing I said to him had been so, so cruel.

He would wake up.

But he didn't move.

“Caduan. *Please.*”

Please. Gods, that word. How it had lost all of its magic.

The screams above us seemed to be getting louder, more desperate. Yithara was only a trading hub — there was no military here to resist the attack. We had no time.

I leaned over Caduan. One of his hands was free from the debris, dangling over a beam. I grasped it and pushed up his sleeve, pausing.

I knew Caduan was a skilled magic speaker, even though I didn't know much about what exactly his gifts were. But I was desperate.

Mathira, this had better work, I thought to myself, and sunk my teeth into the inside of his wrist.

I was not expecting it to hit me so hard. One swallow, and I felt his magic swell in the pit of my stomach. Ishqa's magic had felt powerful, but strange and unfamiliar, like trying to speak a new language with sounds that didn't sit right on my tongue. This? This felt like a song I didn't realize I remembered. Oddly familiar. Oddly right.

I blinked, and when I opened my eyes again something was... different. It was like seeing color when I had once seen only black and white. Except, color was *life*. The pulsing beat of life in the soil, in the leaves above us, in the wood that made up the splintered floorboards — and in Caduan, weak and waning, like a delicate butterfly fluttering in the center of his chest.

I leaned over him, calling to that thread of light. Something intrinsic in me now understood how to speak to it.

Rise, I whispered. *Come back.*

All at once, he surrounded me like a gust of wind.

The power of it was intoxicating, sweeter and headier than any wine. Every part of me was calling for him, reaching

deeper than the warmth of his skin — deeper, rawer, than the physical desire of lust.

I felt so utterly exposed.

Caduan's eyes opened.

I couldn't look away. We just stared at each other, that connection burning between us like light refracting through stained glass.

Neither of us blinked. Neither of us breathed. Our noses were nearly touching. My heartbeat pounded in my chest, perfectly in time with his.

“Aefe,” he murmured.

It felt so good to hear his voice. I couldn't speak.

His hand lifted to my arm, skin against skin, a touch that only further awakened this torrent between us.

And then he said, “I can't get up.”

“What?”

I looked down and realized that I was draped over Caduan's body.

“Oh.” I pulled myself off of him. Together we staggered to our feet. Our power still roared. I could see the veins of life running through everything around me. It was intoxicating.

Is this how Caduan felt all the time? I knew he was powerful, but *this*—

I glanced at him. He stared down at his wrist, at the bleeding mark, brow furrowed. Then at me. Back again. “What did you do? Why does this feel so...different—”

There was a crash in the distance, yanking him away from his half-finished thought. His gaze snapped to the sound — a collapsing building — and his expression went rigid, as if for the first time truly taking in the horror around us.

He didn't need to speak. I could read it in his face: *Not again.*

“No,” I said. “It won't be. I swear it.”

“The inn,” Caduan said.

I whirled in the direction of the inn, which had once been nestled high up in the trees, and my stomach plummeted as I saw nothing there but flames and splintering wood.

Siobhan. Ishqa. Ashraia. If they were—

No. I didn’t have time to let myself think about that. We just needed to get there.

“Let’s go,” I said. “Now.”

Caduan and I wove through the city, dodging falling debris. It was not easy to get back to the inn. The roads were blocked. Caduan’s magic pulled me in a hundred different directions at once. Humans surrounded us, and though I could not see their faces through the flames, I could feel their vile presence, like snakes coiling in the brush. My blades were out, and I fought through them, one after another after another. How fragile they were. How quickly they fell. I barely felt the wounds they left me as parting gifts.

I wasn’t sure how long it had been when I stumbled, disoriented, and Caduan grabbed my arm to steady me.

“Focus,” he said. “You’re running in circles.”

It was easier said than done. The air was strange and thick. The fire moved unnaturally, as if it were alive. Human magic was capable of so much, so harsh and violent. I had never seen it with my own eyes before, and it made a pit coil in my stomach. Fey magic was powerful, but I had never seen it inflict this kind of frenzied violence.

“There,” I panted, at last, thrusting my blade to our left. I could make out the shape of the inn caught in the trees halfway to the ground, burning but mostly intact. Surely, I told myself, our companions had survived that. We pushed towards it, beginning to scale a pile of debris that blocked it from us, when a fresh set of screams cut through the air.

Caduan whirled around. I *felt* his attention shift, like someone had yanked on the magic we shared.

In the distance, silhouettes clashed. Humans circled a group of Fey who were trying to escape. One look at the Fey told me they were merely travelers, not fighters. They would not last.

Caduan turned to me, jaw set. His hand tightened around his sword. He did not have to say anything.

“Let me lead,” I said. “You’re still hurt.”

He just shook his head, as if this was a silly statement.

We launched ourselves into the fight side by side. We rose up behind the humans like shadows in the mist. Our midnight training had paid off. Caduan was swift and lethal, and we fought well together, intuitively covering each other’s blind spots and weaknesses. His magic still pulsed in my veins. Our connection ran deep, as if we spoke a wordless language that only the two of us understood.

Bodies fell around our feet like autumn leaves. I relished every single one. I caught Caduan’s eye and the look on his face sent a shiver of satisfaction running up my spine.

We were winning.

I spun, ready to deal a killing blow to another human soldier—

And then, suddenly, I was blown through the windows of a fallen building, shattered glass raining around me.

My back slammed against a wall.

I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t move, as if my control over my body had simply been severed. My thoughts felt as if they were moving through sludge. Pain tore through my abdomen. I looked down. For a moment my mind couldn’t reconcile what I was seeing.

A wooden handle. Violet blood.

A spear. A spear in me. A spear *through* me, pinning me to the wall.

There was a sudden crack. The earth beneath me shattered. It was nearly impossible to see in the darkness, but what I

could make out through my blurring vision were several stones hurling at me through the air, and beyond them, a silhouette with their arms lifted.

No. *No*. If I was to die, I would die dragging them down with me.

But then a voice rang out in a language I didn't understand. The rocks froze. The silhouette stopped, turning, replying. Two voices spoke back and forth.

A figure emerged from the smoke. It was a human man. His hair was white, though he did not look old, and his eyes so starkly silver that even from this distance, they glinted through the shadows. He was tall and thin, with a smattering of silver facial hair, wearing laced-up battle clothing. He stopped and spoke to the stone-wielding man — and then turned to me.

My hands managed to grab the spear that impaled me, so tight they trembled. Yet the slick of my own blood undermined my grip. I snarled as the man approached me, his eyes glinting with obvious interest. As he drew close enough for the bloody light of flames to catch his face, it revealed a garish scar that extended from the right corner of his mouth all the way to his ear.

It seemed at-odds with the rest of his appearance. I had expected some barbarian. But this man was neat and dignified, the type that appeared better suited to a library than a battlefield.

He muttered a word that I didn't understand. His fingertips brushed my jawline, turning my cheek. He was *so close* — I could rip his face from his skull. But my muscles would not so much as twitch.

Was human magic really capable of such a thing?

But he was not the only one with power. I still had a grip on Caduan's magic. I forced myself to focus.

Focus.

I could see it, feel it — the force that bound me. And I poured all of my stolen magic into severing that tie, into breaking free, pushing past it—

It cracked just enough for one brief opening.

I snapped at the human's hand, catching his ring and little fingers between my sharpened teeth. His blood, rotten and red, flooded my mouth, and I spat it onto the ground as the man leapt back and howled.

And at that same moment, Caduan swept into the room. His magic roared to life in my veins — more powerful than it had been before, and I knew it because I could feel it burning *through* me, like a mirror compounding the strength of the sunlight.

At first my mind could not make sense of what I was looking at.

He was surrounded by vines. Moving vines. Tree branches and plants and leaves were unfurled around him, driving through human attackers like spears or encircling their throats.

The silver-haired human lunged. Light sparked to his fingertips, lethally powerful. He lifted his hands and Caduan stumbled back, as if struck.

The hold on my mind released. Temporarily, I was sure. I had seconds.

The spear was not coming out of the wall.

But I was.

With a roar, I tightened my grip around the handle, and slowly — so slowly, too slowly — I pulled myself forward.

Caduan lunged. The vines moved with him, matching every attack, every movement, even every wince of pain. But the human tore his hands through the air, releasing a sudden invisible force so strong that it snapped Caduan's tree branches into splinters and would have knocked me back to the wall if I hadn't been holding on to the spear so ferociously.

He descended upon Caduan.

The world narrowed to these precious seconds.

I let out a scream. One pull, two, three and then I was out, and I was running.

I didn't think. I wielded Caduan's magic, reflecting it back to him twice as bright. And in the same moment, I grabbed my dagger and drove it into the man's back.

He whirled to me, ready to counter. But just as quickly, branches wound around his throat. Then his wrists, his arms. Behind him, Caduan descended, eyes cold. The forest was an unstoppable wave, branches and vines and leaves shattering windows and crawling through the wreckage. I looked down and saw moss growing over my feet.

"Tell me why you are doing this," Caduan demanded, and I had never heard his voice like this before, raw and agonized. "Tell me why you're killing my people."

The human did not answer. Why would he? He couldn't understand Caduan's words, anyway. He opened his mouth and blood dribbled out. The vines tightened around his throat.

"Why did you do this to us?"

The human's face was overtaken by flowers, buds spouting over his eyeballs.

The magic we shared was waning, running too hot too fast. My blood pooled on the ground. I stumbled.

Caduan's attention snapped to me. Just for a split second, but that hesitation was all it took.

The human's magic rose before he did, a wave of lethal blue light. It lunged for us, and I didn't think before I threw myself in front of Caduan, pouring all my remaining power into our magic, into lifting my blades, into—

A smear of gold passed over my right shoulder, warmth spattered me, and suddenly the human was a heap on the ground, his face bloody ruin.

A golden owl — Ishqa — swooped down. A puff of smoke, then Ishqa straightened in Fey form. He cast only the slightest glance of confusion at the scene — men impaled by winding branches and smothered by leaves — before his gaze settled back on us.

“We were looking everywhere for you. Ashraia and Siobhan have shepherded survivors to the east end of the city. We need to go.”

“And leave this?” I said. My voice sounded strange, like it belonged to someone else.

“This place is overrun,” he said. “We cannot win.”

“No,” I snarled. “Don’t tell me that there’s no chance.”

I wanted to roar, and scream, and weep. I wanted to kill every last one of them until they forced me down. But no. There was nothing to be won here. We would walk away and leave the bones of the dead with the bones of the city, just as we had two times before.

“Aefe...” Ishqa approached me cautiously, a wrinkle between his brows.

But it was Caduan’s face that jerked me to reality. I wasn’t sure that I had ever seen him look so afraid before.

“What’s wrong?” I started to ask. But then I looked down at myself, at the hole in my abdomen, at the blood that now soaked my clothing.

I did not remember falling.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



I had been twenty-one when I was first put in command. Back then, I had been given a team of just thirty soldiers, all Wielders. When I met them, they had been disasters — new recruits, barely trained, some with a lack of control over their magic that was downright dangerous. I'd thought to myself, *This is it. My military career over before it even began.* Because surely, there was nothing I could have done for that group of people. Utterly fucking hopeless.

Well, it turned out I had been wrong. A month, then three, then six of consistent training, and together, we forged iron into steel. I had loved every minute. There was the egotistical rush, yes, of triumphing over a near-impossible goal. But stronger than that was the satisfaction of studying my soldiers just as carefully as they studied me, helping them turn understanding into competence into mastery.

But I'd been so naive. I lost sight of what I was training them for. How many of those people were still alive today? I understood, now, the ugliness in it — in crafting such tools of Ascended-damned artistry, only to send them off to be destroyed.

This was the only thing I could think about as I ran through drills with my team that day. They had been good when I got them, and now they were phenomenal. Yet there was no pride in this thought. Not with the past feeling so close, and Ilyzath's whispers still echoing in my ears. I saw its visions all day, no matter how I tried to shake them away.

During a break, sweat-soaked, I sank onto a stool, rubbing my eyes.

Ascended, Max. Get it together.

“Is something wrong, Max?”

Moth’s voice pulled me from my distraction. I looked up to see him staring at me, then too-quickly snapped my head away.

“*Fuck,*” I breathed.

“What?” Moth asked, alarmed.

I closed my eyes. It took several long seconds for the image of Moth as I had seen him in Ilyzath to fade. When I turned back to him, he looked perfectly normal. Skin intact, unburnt, perfectly unharmed.

Get. It. Together.

“Nothing,” I said. “Nothing. Go take a break.”

I stood and went to the door, leaning against it and trying to force myself into composure. My head was pounding so hard that I didn’t hear footsteps approaching until they were beside me.

“Welcome back,” Nura said. “Been watching the drills. I have to give you credit where it’s due. They’ve gotten good.”

“It’s uncomfortable when you shower me with flattery, Nura. Makes me feel like I’m going to look down and see a knife sticking out of my ribs. Besides, they were already—”

I turned to her, and stumbled over my words.

I had seen her in Ilyzath, too. Crawling towards me, her body scalded and broken, as she had looked in Sarlazai.

I looked away.

“They were already good.” I cleared my throat, but I could feel Nura giving me a perplexed look.

“Ascended, Max. What was that?”

“What?”

“I’ve known you for twenty years. Don’t insult me.”

I dragged my gaze back to her. Ilyzath’s vision was gone, but then again, I didn’t need any magical prisons putting nightmares in my head to conjure that particular image. It wasn’t imaginary, after all. It was a memory.

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m tired.”

She didn’t believe me, and we both knew it. But so much of my relationship with Nura had been built on deliberately avoiding unspoken truths. And so she didn’t press, instead reaching into her pocket and pulling out a little velvet pouch.

“Here,” she said. “I found something for you.”

After a surprised pause, I took the pouch. It was old, the burgundy fabric worn and crushed. I opened it and extracted the contents, and my throat was suddenly tight.

“This is yours,” I said.

I frowned down at the fine piece of metal in my palm, a delicate silver necklace with a single gemstone charm. It looked like a shard of crystalized ice, all hard angles and sharp edges, with flecks of red distilled within it. Morrigan’s Ice, a rare gem from the south.

It had been my mother’s.

“You should have it,” Nura said.

“She gave it to you.”

“A lot has changed since then.” A flicker crossed her face, hidden beneath a wry smile. “She probably would want you to have it now. And besides, I haven’t... worn it in a long time. You should save it for your daughter one day.”

I was silent.

I could still remember so vividly the day that my mother had given Nura this. We were teenagers, home for a few weeks on leave. It was the first time we returned to find that Nura’s grandmother no longer remembered her name. Nura hadn’t said a word about it, no matter how much I pried, but I knew it devastated her to lose the only family she had left. We had

been about to leave for the Towers again when my mother had pulled Nura aside and pressed the necklace into her hands.

“This has been in my family for hundreds of years,” she said, “passed from mothers to daughters. Morrigan’s Ice is created in some of the most inhospitable places in the world. It could have been refined into something more traditional, but I’ve always loved that this one is unfinished.” She gave Nura a barely-there smile. “I think there is a beauty in that, don’t you? In being a little different. A little sharper.”

I had never seen Nura cry before, and that day had been no exception. But I could tell that she had to try hard to avoid it, blinking a little too fast, her words rough. “I can’t take this. Give it to Marisca or Shailia or—”

“I think it suits *you*,” my mother had said, gently, and Nura went silent for a long, long moment before pulling her into a fierce embrace.

It was only later, when we bid our final goodbyes, that my mother had taken me aside. “Keep an eye on her,” she had murmured. “She needs us, that one.”

At the time, I had attributed that to my mother’s kind affection for a lonely, orphaned girl. But now I looked back and wondered if perhaps there was something else my mother saw in Nura. If she saw what she might become, if left alone to bloom in the darkness.

Now I looked down at the necklace and heard my mother’s words.

Despite it all, it didn’t seem right to take it from her. In all the ways that counted, she lost her family that day too. Perhaps this was the only thing left tethering her to them. Hell, maybe she wanted to get rid of it *because* it so reminded her of them. I understood that, in a twisted sort of way.

I put it back in the pouch and handed it to her.

“It’s yours. I don’t want it anyway.”

Nura hesitated.

“Really,” I said. “I don’t.”

She reluctantly slid it back into her pocket, her gaze still searching my face.

“I heard that you and Tisaanah took a trip to Ilyzath,” she said, quietly.

I scoffed. “Keeping track of me?”

“It just seemed out of character for you to step foot in that place.”

“We had some questions that needed answering. That’s all.”

“Vardir is insane. Too insane to answer many questions.”

A breath through my teeth. “That he is,” I muttered. The frustration of it still hadn’t eased. If he didn’t have answers, I wasn’t sure who would.

“Be patient, Max,” Nura murmured. “She’ll make it out of this. It just takes time.”

Be patient. What was that supposed to mean? We didn’t have time for that. We didn’t have time for any of this.

But before the words could leave my mouth, a voice cut through the air.

“General Farlione!”

I turned to see Zeryth striding towards us. He looked even worse than he did when I saw him a few days ago, but more terrifying than that was the sheer *rage* on his face. Something metal glinted in his hand.

When he drew close enough for me to see what it was, my heart stopped.

It was a necklace. A necklace of butterflies.

“We have a very big problem,” Zeryth said.

CHAPTER FORTY

TISAANAH



I dreamt of a wall of black. It was slick, like glass or wet stone, and stretched across my entire vision. There was a silhouette reflected there, one that never quite came into focus, not even when I came close enough to press my palm to its surface.

Someone was calling to me, using a name I did not remember, speaking in a language I did not understand. A ghost that remained forever out of reach.

Like the tall grass against my hands. Forward. Backward. Again.

{You asked me once what I missed. Then, I did not understand what you meant. I did not understand what it was to miss.}

The swaying of the grass began to lurch more sporadically, like the fragment of memory was degrading. The tips against my palm. Back. Again. Back. Again.

{But now I see. To miss is to mourn. And I know that I mourn. But the greatest tragedy of it is that I cannot remember why. I just know that once I was whole, and now I am a collection of missing pieces.}

The plains dissolved. I felt Reshaye's pain, dull and aching, spread through my bones.

{Sometimes, though, I catch the edge of it, like a snag at the end of a fraying thread. I think that I remember the sun.}

The comforting heat of the sun fell over my face, sweat dotting my cheeks.

{Perhaps I once knew the smell of rain.}

As quickly as it had come, the sun was replaced by a steamy rush of rain, the damp scent of earth rising.

{Once, I may have even known the touch of another soul.}

The rain was gone. The sensation was replaced by only one other, the feeling of a hand in mine, the warmth of skin, the throb of a pulse.

{But even these things are a shadow of a shadow. Perhaps they are not my memories. Perhaps they belong to another.}

The warm touch was gone. Suddenly there was pain. A flash of white, white, white. A fragment of golden hair. A glance of mossy green.

And someone watching. Someone calling. Someone searching. And I had felt Reshaye recoil from terrible memories, but above all, this — this tenderness — is the thing that scared it most.

Why? I asked. I didn't understand. *Why do you fear the thing you want most?*

{My fear is not the fear of danger.}

Then what?

{Perhaps I am too far from what I once was.} Its voice was quiet. Childlike. *{Perhaps I do not wish to be found.}*

I felt a breath, a name I could not understand, a hand reaching. I felt it closer than ever, so close it raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

I turned, and—

—And then I woke.



SOMETHING warm and wet was dripping down the side of my face. Blood? Everything hurt. I could see nothing. I heard voices, but the words ran together. It took concentrated effort to orient myself. My thoughts were sludge.

I tried to touch my wound, only to find that my shoulders ached because my arms were wrenched out to either side, my wrists bound. Blindfolded. I was blindfolded. I felt Reshaye lingering, half-dazed, in the back of my mind.

My memories came back to me in pieces. The old woman and her granddaughter. My visit. The soup. The hands on my throat. And—

I would do anything for them. Anything.

They had poisoned me. They had given me up.

The realization slid into me like a knife, and betrayal spilled through me. Reshaye clung to it.

{After everything that you have done for them? After everything that you have given for them? They betrayed us.}

No. I had to choke back my own hurt, my own anger. *No, that isn't what's important now.*

But Reshaye unraveled everything I tried so hard to conceal.

{You can not lie to me,} it whispered.

There were people here. How many? I reached out a tendril of my mind into the air around me, feeling for a thought, a presence. But my magic had gone eerily silent, like a wall separated it from the world around me, dampening it to a numb ringing inside my skull.

Had I been dosed with Chryxalis? This felt... different than that, like my magic had been chained rather than smothered. Even Reshaye seemed so far away, as if something had shoved it deep beneath the surface and trapped it there.

I tried to lift my head. My muscles were not cooperative.

The voices stopped.

“She’s awake,” a man’s voice said.

“There’s no need to be afraid of her,” a woman replied. The voice was low and smooth, sounding as if it belonged to someone in her sixties. “She’s harmless now.”

“I’m not afraid of her. I’m just... curious.”

Footsteps, slowly approaching.

“From what I had heard about her, I was expecting—”

“What? A demon?”

“She just looks so harmless.”

“That *harmless* little thing has killed hundreds of your men,” the woman replied, and despite everything, that word closed its teeth around me — *hundreds*. Had I taken that many lives? Surely, no. Not when I had tried so hard not to. But then again, it adds up, doesn’t it? Battles on top of battles on top of battles, and even those miraculously small death tolls rise and rise.

I pushed the thought away.

“I would appreciate it,” I said, “if you could remove this from my face. Please.”

My voice was raspy.

Seconds passed. Then the blindfold was yanked away.

I squinted.

It wasn’t especially bright in here, but compared to the unyielding black of the blindfold, the light was blinding. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust. I might have expected to see myself in a dungeon, chained up in some rat-infested basement. But this place was clean, with walls made out of polished stone, lit by delicate gold lanterns. A blue sky peered through several long, gold-adorned windows near the ceiling. The floor was made out of ceramic tile — beautifully crafted, though several long cracks ran through some of them.

At first I wasn’t sure what this place *was* — maybe it wasn’t a prison at all. But then my eyes settled on the door, directly across the room from me. It was iron, heavily bolted.

It was a prison, then. A fine prison. But a prison, nonetheless.

And then my eyes traveled back, to the two people who stood before me. First, a man, who appeared to be in his fifties, tall with a neat grey beard and finely crafted clothes. And then, a woman who was a bit older than him, grey-and-gold hair spilling over her shoulders, regarding me with a curious, critical stare. She wore a dress of deep emerald, but my eyes immediately landed on the sigil at her breast.

A sun. The symbol of the Order of Daybreak.

“Do you know who I am?” the man asked.

I eyed him, piecing together my thoughts. “You are Atrick Aviness.”

It was a guess. But I guessed right.

He inclined his chin. “You have been making things very difficult for me,” he said.

He was very soft-spoken, almost gentle, and he still looked at me as though I was more of a curiosity than an enemy. Strange, to see him now as a person, after thinking of him for so long as a monolithic force, inseparable from his armies.

“Likewise,” I said, and smiled. Beneath the smile, I cursed my lack of magic. I had not had to do this sort of performance in quite some time. It would be easier if I could feel his thoughts, his preferences — test what sort of mask I should wear.

My gaze flicked to the woman, who was watching me carefully.

“And you?” I asked.

“Irene. One name is enough for you.” She cocked her head. “You are quite an interesting little thing, aren’t you? We met, you may recall. At the Orders’ ball last year. Very briefly. The Orders were quite entranced by you. It seems that little has changed. I remember then thinking that you just seemed so desperate.” A small smile. “Desperation does drive people to

do dangerous things. What did Aldris promise you? And what did you trade away?"

Too much, a voice in the back of my mind whispered. *Far too much.*

"I have no stake in Zeryth's crown," I said. "It does not matter to me who sits on Ara's throne."

There was a reason I was still alive. What was it?

"There is something you need," I said. "I can help you get it."

"How quickly, she offers herself up to turncoat. But I think that's an empty promise, isn't it? I know Zeryth and Nura, and I know they would have eliminated the possibility of your disloyalty. If I were to move your bindings, would I find your Blood Pact scar? But no... it's not *you* that we need."

Uncertainty rose to dread.

Reshaye slithered through my thoughts. It was slow, sluggish. Gods, what *was* that? I pressed my back against the stone wall. Stone — I could Wield stone, with Reshaye's help, but only with its help.

I did not want to break Irene's stare. But I chanced a turn of my head, at my arms splayed out over the stone wall. Just a glance, and nearly gasped.

Stratagrams had been marked onto my skin. Three on each arm.

Were those... *tattooed*?

I had seen that before, on a Valtain slave girl. I remembered telling Max about that once, long ago, before we were even friends. *They were probably meant to cripple her magic*, he had said, a wrinkle of disdain over his nose. *Imagine tying a cow's head to its tail.*

Can you break that? I whispered to Reshaye, and it hissed frustration, pressing up against the shackles that bound our magic. Even reaching towards them was difficult. It was weak.

{Not yet. Not yet.}

Irene chuckled. My shock must have shown on my face.

“You’ve earned yourself a reputation worthy of extreme precautions, Tisaanah.”

“Then why am I still alive?” I said. “What is it that you want?”

“It would be a waste to let you die.”

She turned away and began to walk to the door.

“I destroyed one of the most powerful houses in Threll,” I called after her. “Ahzeen Mikov thought he could control me, too. That was a mistake. I’m a much more valuable friend than enemy.”

She paused and looked over her shoulder. “Like I said, it’s not you that we need.”

She stepped through the door, but Aviness remained, staring at me with an expression I couldn’t quite read.

“My niece was fourteen years old,” he said. “You’re serving a man who murdered a child.”

I said nothing.

He was right, of course — he was right and I knew it. But I had also spent these last months covered in the blood spilled by his soldiers, protecting cities from his armies, cradling corpses left by his weapons.

“I’m glad it will be over soon,” he muttered, as if to himself, and turned away. The door slammed, and I was left there alone.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



The man was already bleeding. The guards that had dragged him back had been rough doing it, so his gangly arms were torn and his shirt wet with blood. He did not wear a uniform, but there was not a doubt in my mind that he was affiliated with one of our enemy houses. It was just a matter of which one.

He sat there, face to the ground, at the center of the small, dimly-lit room. It was the middle of the day, but you'd never know it, down here. These were the dungeons below Korvius, crafted of windowless grey stone. I paced along the outskirts of the room, so angry that magic was already sparking at my fingertips. Still, my steps were long and slow. Tare was here, too, sitting silently across the table from our prisoner, and Sammerin. And in the corner, lingering in the shadows, Nura watched in silence.

“He asked you a question,” I said.

“I wasn't doing anything. I told Aldris's soldiers already.”

I glanced at Tare, who silently shook his head, and my knuckles went white.

“You were running away from the refugee dwellings,” Nura said. “You tried to kill one of our soldiers.”

I pressed the necklace to the table. The man's gaze flicked down to it.

“How did you get this?”

“I found it.”

I looked to Tare. He shook his head.

My anger surged. The flames in the lanterns burned brighter, all at once, casting garish shadows across the prisoner's face.

We didn't have time for this.

"Bullshit," Nura muttered. She crossed the room in three graceful strides, and suddenly, her knife was buried in the man's hand, pinning it to the wooden table.

He let out a strangled shriek.

"We have warned you," she hissed, "not to lie to us."

The room began to darken. Nura's magic was always insidious, so slow you didn't realize it was tightening around you until you were halfway gone. But I could feel the fear pumping into the room like smoke, my already accelerated heartbeat running faster, my magic running hotter, my rage and fear growing more and more intense.

I blinked, and I could see Tisaanah's throat opened, her face bloody and lifeless.

That was the thing. Tisaanah had made herself into a legend. But her throat was still just as tender, her skull as delicate, her skin as fragile. She was still so easy to kill.

"Enough with the games," I snarled. "Tell me where Tisaanah Vytezic is."

The prisoner didn't speak. He looked only at Nura, at his hand, his breaths coming in ragged gasps. Nura's magic was heavy in the air now, the room so dark that it was hard to see, fear thick like honey.

"Tell me what you did with her," I demanded.

Sammerin lifted a finger, and the prisoner's whole body lurched, his other palm jerking up and pressing flat on the table, held there. Another flick of Sammerin's hand, and the man's face was forced towards me.

"Give me an answer." I didn't have to think. Fire was at my fingertips, cutting red across Nura's unnatural shadows.

“I just handed her off,” he said. “I didn’t— I didn’t hurt her. I just passed her along, I didn’t—”

Tare looked to us and nodded.

Finally. A fucking truth.

“Handed her off to who?” Sammerin said.

“I can’t— I can’t—” the man wept. His eyes were round, and wet with tears, and kept darting around the room. Nura didn’t let up. Ascended knew what he was seeing in her shadows.

“You can,” I spat. “Tell me where they took her.”

“I can’t—”

I didn’t think. Couldn’t think. Couldn’t think about anything but all the time Tisaanah didn’t have.

My second eyelids opened.

All at once, the room was blindingly bright. Magic roared through me, my body unraveling into flames, heat searing the air.

Sammerin dropped his hold as his hand went up to shield his face from the light or the heat or both. Nura staggered back, her eyes wide, so shocked she lost her grip on her magic. Not that it mattered. The prisoner no longer needed manufactured fear.

“Ascended, Max,” she gasped. It was the first time she had seen me this way.

“*Tell me where she is,*” I demanded, and I could barely hear my own voice over the rush in my ears.

And I must have looked terrifying, because words now fell from the prisoner’s lips like loosened bowels.

“The Palace. The Palace. The Palace. Aviness took her, he wanted her in the Palace. She’s there. She’s there. But she’s already dead. He’s going to kill her, she’s already—”

My eyelids snapped closed, thrusting me back into a body of flesh and blood.

“She’s already dead,” the prisoner was weeping. “She’s already gone. She’s already—”

And I was already out the door.



I WAS HALFWAY down the hallway, reaching into my pockets for Stratagram ink. Distantly, I heard the dungeon door slam shut, and footsteps behind me.

“Max— what did you just—”

Nura’s voice was fractured, and then she let out a breath through her teeth and composed herself. Maybe in another scenario it might have been satisfying to see Nura shaken.

Not now. Not when I had far more urgent things to worry about.

I withdrew a crumpled piece of parchment from my pocket and unfolded it with shaking hands.

She’s already dead. She’s already gone.

Sammerin’s footsteps joined us, and Tare’s, following silently.

“I’ll gather the troops,” Nura said.

“No time,” I ground out.

“If we take only the Wielders, we can use Stratagrams. We’ll move fast.”

My pen was out, ink dripping, but I paused. I struggled to force my thoughts into coherence.

Sammerin voiced what I was too panicked to put into words. “That cuts down our forces by what, half? Less? We were already too outmatched to take the Capital. That’s exactly what Aviness wants us to do.”

He was right. And somewhere beneath it all, I realized it was odd that Nura, of all people, was overlooking that.

“We need Tisaanah back,” she said. “If we recover her, we’ll have Reshaye. And we have—”

Her gaze flicked to me, and her voice trailed off — as if, at the same time, we both realized the echo in her words. *We have you*, she had said to me in Sarlazai. *We have you*.

And look at how that had ended.

“No,” I said. “I’m not about to throw my soldiers at Aviness’s feet.”

“Then what exactly do you expect—”

“I’ll go alone. I can get her back.”

“It’s not enough to get her back, Max. We need to *end* this. And it doesn’t matter how good either of you are, you can’t do that alone.”

Can’t, she said, but I wondered if she meant *won’t*.

I didn’t have time to sit here and wonder about it. The prisoner’s words were still ringing in my ears, and Nura’s visions still burning my eyes, and Tisaanah didn’t have time for any of this.

“*Do not* bring them,” I said. “I can move faster alone. And I’ll be back soon.”

Nura was shaking her head. But my gaze flicked towards Sammerin, who was giving me a resigned, grim stare that, unfortunately, I had seen many times before.

“Good luck,” he said, and I knew what he really meant was, *Try not to be too much of an idiot*. Then his expression hardened, and he added, “Bring her back.”

“I will,” I said.

Maybe Nura tried to say something more. I wouldn’t know. I was gone.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

TISAANAH



I was awoken by hands grabbing me and dragging me upright. I didn't remember falling asleep. My mind was so addled that by the time consciousness returned to me, I had already been hoisted onto a table, chains replaced with bindings around my upper arms. Had this table been here before? I didn't know — perhaps I had been moved into an entirely different room and hadn't known. Had it been so bright in here? So white?

Was it Reshaye's fear that flooded me, or my own?

Irene leaned over me. Everything was so, so bright that she was backlit, flattened to silhouetted shadow.

She was already reaching for my wrist by the time I saw the dagger in her hand.

A dagger. A wrist. A room of white.

Reshaye and I both realized at the same moment what she was planning to do. The threads of my thoughts lit up with panic, mine and Reshaye's mingling.

She was going to try to *take* Reshaye.

Reshaye roared, and I felt it dig into my thoughts like claws. A flood of magic surged, but it had nowhere to go — it crashed and broke like a wave against stone, far from the surface.

“Stop,” I choked out. “It will kill you!”

Irene gave me an impassive glance. She slid the dagger over her palm. The crimson was searing.

“Wouldn’t that be convenient?” she said. And then she opened the flesh of my palm, and pressed our hands together.

The pain split me in two. I wasn’t sure if I was hearing my own scream or Reshayé’s, reverberating in my head, consuming all else. I could feel Irene’s magic trying to pry into mine, trying to reach into my head, tear away Reshayé. My magic and Reshayé’s surged towards her, trying to overtake her.

But those Stratagrams — those Stratagrams choked me, like an iron collar.

I saw a wall of black, and a reflection within it that I couldn’t make out. Something was reaching for me, reaching —

Pain tore me apart. Irene was pushing further and further into my mind, tearing apart my thoughts in a vicious attempt to dig deeper, until she found Reshayé, until she could rip it away—

It was killing me. This would kill me.

I felt Irene’s magic — gods, what was this? This was no magic I had ever experienced before. My mind was a web, an intricate series of threads, and Irene’s magic shredded through it like talons to paper.

It encroached on Reshayé. Wrapped around it as it screamed.

Stop, Reshayé!

Reshayé let out a ghastly shriek. Fragmented images careened through me.

I saw a flash of golden hair. A room of white and white and white.

I saw purple blood spilling over marble floors.

I saw the ground opening, the skies on fire.

And I felt *terror*. Reshayé’s terror, drowning me.

Think, Tisaanah. Think. What do you do when you’re losing control?

What did I do, when Reshaye took over at the Mikov estate?

I let myself fall.

Fall.

Through the agony, I forced myself to calm, forced my mind to turn inward.

I stopped fighting. I released my hold on Reshaye's panic. And I fell.



I STOOD IN ROLLING PLAINS. Rippling grasslands spread out around me, disappearing to the horizon on every side, their golden glow turned cold under the moonlight. I had been here before, the day I had lost control at the Mikov estate. I looked up — up, at what looked like a sky, except instead of stars above me I saw threads glowing in the darkness, my own mind and Reshaye and Irene's all battling, slow motion, in streaks across the night.

And...

My brow furrowed.

There was something else up there, too. Another glow, another soul, far more distant than Irene's and Reshaye's, but treading incandescent rivulets across the sky nevertheless. Like the claw marks of something trying to drag itself closer.

If I reached for it, a shiver ran through me — a shiver of hatred, of despair, of grief. And... a strange familiarity...

I started to push towards it, but then, something more important caught my attention. One more presence, here, drawing from this level of magic.

I spun around and looked to the sky. A searing streak of violet light reached across it.

I recognized that raw magic, that presence, immediately. I had seen it, too, the last time I had been down here.

Max.

Max was *here*.

And I needed to break through Irene's grip if I was to meet him.

Suddenly invigorated, I drew back, until I could see all of the threads connecting us lit up like streaks of firefly light. Me, Reshaye, Max, all drawing from the same deep level of magic. And Irene's, hacking through my mind until she reached it, too.

I thought back to what Vardir had told us in Ilyzath. That this magic, deep magic, demanded life. Thrived on it. *Consumed* it.

I didn't just burn my own energy. I could take it from others. And while the Stratagram tattoos had cut off my connection to my own energy... Irene was now feeding me hers, whether she intended to or not.

I grabbed onto Reshaye's panicking presence, even as it fought me. *Trust me!* I hissed.

I stopped retreating from Irene's magic. Instead, I reached out for it — her mind. Her presence.

Her life.

We can use this, I told Reshaye. It understood a moment after I did. *Help me*.

I tightened my grip around Irene's magic. And then I Wielded it.



MY EYES SNAPPED OPEN. Magic burned inside of me, like I had swallowed smoldering coals. Irene sagged against the table, her hand still clasped around mine, face contorted in pain. I held her mind in my grip — even though those Stratagrams still choked me.

Together, Reshaye and I pushed until we hit that cord around our throats, that sheet of glass that boiled our magic in my veins, refusing to allow it to reach the surface. The tattoos on my skin *burned*.

But I had more power now, fueled by Irene's magic.

You can push through? I asked Reshaye.

{Yes,} Reshaye answered. I felt something different in its words — a strange sort of humanity. *{But the cost to you would be—}*

Do it, I commanded.

I didn't have time to think. Reshaye's magic surged, burning and shattering.

And the pain consumed everything. I didn't realize I was screaming until my voice started to give out. With great effort, I turned my head, looking to my arms where they were strapped to the table. My own flesh rotted, tattoos withering into pools of blackened flesh.

My vision was dimming, my consciousness threatening to fade.

But just in time, Reshaye withered the final Stratagrams. With the sudden loss of resistance, power overwhelmed me. Irene's scream drowned beneath the rush of blood in my ears.

My bindings heated and crumbled away, and when I sat up and looked down, Irene's hand was still clutched in mine, now nothing but soupy rotten flesh and stark white bone. When I released it, she slumped to the ground, decay still crawling over her skin.

I tried to stand and immediately collapsed. The world was spinning, blurring.

{You cannot stop, Tisaanah. You cannot stop now, or you will not get up again.}

I'm not.

I watched my hands against the stone. Blue flames unfurled around my fingers. When I called my magic to me,

they brightened, the stone itself shivering beneath my touch. I could feel vibrations from the entire building, like the walls were whispering to me. Below, I felt fear. I felt awe. I felt the clash of steel against steel, and the rising heat of fire.

And most of all, I felt another magic calling to mine — magic that belonged to a soul I knew better than any other.

I staggered to my feet. The world shifted and tilted. I didn't let myself waver as I threw open the door.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



He's going to kill her. She's already dead.

I seared those words into my mind. They made me quick. They made me focused. They made me fearless. They ensured that I didn't hesitate when I landed outside the wards of the Capital and immediately opened my second eyelids, letting terrible magic tear through me. Letting myself become something that was no longer human.

I had forgotten how good it felt, like a spark taking to kindling. One blink, and my body peeled into flame itself, no longer bound by the restrictions of physicality — a serpent of fire, moving through the air like a gust of wind.

I came in through the back of the Palace. There were times in life for subtlety, but this was not one of them. The guards looked at me as if I were a demon. Many were so afraid of me that they staggered back and went for help. The ones that did try to fight fell quickly.

It was easy, to push through them, barreling through the doors of the Palace. I roared down narrow hallways, filling them with flames.

Where are you, Tisaanah? Where are you?

She's already dead, the prisoner's voice echoed.

No. She couldn't be. I didn't allow myself to entertain the possibility. Because if she was, I would... I would...

I shut away the thought.

The Palace was enormous, larger than most city blocks. Finding her in here would be nearly impossible if I had no idea where I needed to go. But I'd spent plenty of time attending to the cells here during the Ryvenai War. The ones on the third floor were often reserved for Wielders, since they were more heavily fortified and warded against magic.

I didn't like leaving something this important up to chance. But if I were Aviness, I would put Tisaanah in one of those cells.

Which meant I needed to fight my way up to the third floor of the Palace, and halfway across its length.

At first, I moved quickly. It was easy to push back shocked, terrified guards who had no idea what they were looking at.

But by the time I made it to the second floor, Aviness's soldiers were prepared for me. Our clashes were vicious and messy. Normally, I fought with deliberate precision. But here, in this unfamiliar body, with the world smearing around me and chaotic magic burning in me, I fought in deadly thrashes, relying not on grace but on sheer power. I didn't have the precision I needed to pull off my usual, careful approach.

This? This was bloody.

Soon, the halls were filled with the scent of burning flesh. I had been struck multiple times, deep gouges running down my sides. To compensate, I fed more and more of my magic, flames burning brighter, hotter, less controlled.

A numb buzz began to ache behind my eyes, a strange resistance building in my magic. I had never occupied this form for so long before. I didn't know my limits, not yet.

But limits, right now, were irrelevant. I had no time to waste. Tisaanah had no time to waste.

I surged through another wave of soldiers. In the beginning, I had avoided dealing killing blows. But as my magic grew tired and my movements slower, the transitions between man and magic rougher, I no longer had such luxuries. I couldn't control my own strengths. I left a trail of

bodies in my wake. The kind of sight that I'd never wanted to see again.

At the end of a particularly grisly fight, my muscles aching and magic roaring out of control, turned to see another soldier rushing towards me even as his companions ran. I braced myself for another fight, only for him to freeze.

And then, he fell — his flesh dissolving into familiar decay. And behind him stood Tisaanah, clutching a sword.

I let out a ragged breath. I let my second eyelids slide closed, throwing me back into a numb world that seemed so much duller and quieter than the one I'd occupied seconds ago. Tisaanah rushed forward and pulled me into a crushing embrace, one that I too willingly returned. It was only when I felt her body stiffen in my arms that I realized she was letting out a wordless gasp of pain.

I pulled back, examining her.

“We have to go—” she was already starting to say.

Too late. I saw the bruises that covered the left side of her face, that circled her throat. And when my gaze fell to her arms — Ascended fucking above, her *arms* were— were—

“*Who did that?*”

Tisaanah shook her head “We don't have time—”

“I can *make* time to—”

“I did it,” she said, hurriedly, looking over her shoulder. “Now let's go.”

“You?”

But before the question left my lips, a deafening crash rang out.

The floor shook beneath us. Tisaanah stumbled, clutching the doorframe, another hint that perhaps she was weaker than she wanted me to think.

I spat a curse beneath my breath.

“Wielders,” Tisaanah muttered. “I feel it.”

“And Lightning Dust.” I’d know the sound of it anywhere. And a lot of it — even from in here, I could’ve sworn I could smell it, sweet and acrid at once.

Shit. *Shit.*

“They sent the army. I told them not to.”

They would be wildly outnumbered. I had trained a damned good army, but it didn’t matter how good they were if they were facing three-to-one numbers.

“We need to see,” Tisaanah said, and started to move away towards the window, but I caught her shoulder.

“This way. There’s a balcony that overlooks the west.”

We rushed down the hall. I could hear shouts, footsteps, and steel, both inside of the castle and outside. We reached a glass door, which I threw open to blinding sunshine and the nauseating scent of Lightning Dust.

The scene was ripped from my worst nightmares.

Zeryth’s army — *my* army — had used Stratagrams to land directly from the west, just beyond the edges of the wards that surrounded the Palace grounds. And though it looked like they had gained some ground simply due to the element of surprise, Aviness’s forces and those of his allies were all concentrated around the Palace, ready to leap to defense as soon as they were needed.

Below us was a sea of people, tangled in a chaotic, violent morass. Zeryth’s forces were pushing forward, and from up here I could see all their different magics sparking and mingling like different pieces of a patchwork quilt.

Aviness’s forces were returning the offense with equal strength, raining down upon their invaders with steel and arrows and their own magics. I looked over my shoulder, and I could see more riders rushing down from the military base not far from the Palace.

Tisaanah breathed a Thereni curse.

This was everything I had worked so hard to avoid. A brutal, messy, bloody battle.

“They can’t win,” I muttered. “Not like this. Not that outnumbered.”

A pit was growing in my stomach — a certainty that I was not ready to face.

Tisaanah’s eyes flicked to me, and in them, I saw the same certainty reflected back at me.

She didn’t have to say anything. We wouldn’t let it happen. Couldn’t let it happen. I had trained these people. They were under my care. And I wouldn’t, couldn’t, stand by and watch them get slaughtered.

Nura had known that, and that was exactly why she had sent them.

“We can help,” Tisaanah murmured.

I glanced her up and down. I could barely pull my eyes away from the horrific wounds on her arms. “You aren’t in any condition to do this.”

The corner of Tisaanah’s mouth twitched. “I can do it if you can do it.”

And then her hand slid into mine. “You did not let me fight my war alone,” she said. “And I won’t let you fight yours alone, either.”

Of their own accord, my fingers tightened around her hand. It felt small and delicate and so very human.

I relished that, for a moment. The way our skin felt pressed together. Ordinary. After this, I would not be ordinary again.

Tisaanah and I would do what she had mastered. We would craft a performance, rooted in truth. We would show the world what we were capable of.

I would show all of them, for the first time, exactly what I was.

And then we would fight, and we would win.

I closed my eyes.

“Are you ready?” Tisaanah said, and I almost laughed, because no, of course I wasn’t.

But out loud I said, “Yes,” because I had to be.

I opened my eyes. And then my second eyelids.

And the world went up in flames.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



When I opened my eyes, we were already miles away from Yithara. I had been unconscious for nearly two days, Caduan told me, a poorly hidden note of concern in his voice. My wound still was in awful pain, but it had been dressed and treated both magically and medically. Maybe under other circumstances, it would have been a slightly poetic sight. I could see evidence of Sidnee and Wyshraj and Stoneheld magics all mixed together in the treatment.

But instead, all I could think about was the slaughter that we had left behind in Yithara. When Siobhan had told me that the city had been lost, I staggered to my feet even as they tried to push me back.

“We have to go back there,” I had demanded. “We cannot leave them all to die.”

I had whirled to Caduan — surely, he would agree with me. And then to Ishqa — the noble warrior, who doubtless would never leave a city full of civilians to their deaths.

But everyone just looked back at me with grim, pale stares.

It turned out that they had gone back. Ishqa and Ashraia had flown far above the battle, watching. By the time they returned, it wasn't so much a battle anymore as it was a cleanup. There was no one left to fight. We had taken most of the survivors with us, and the humans were left to sort through their own wreckage. They had already destroyed the city, and to hear Ishqa and Ashraia tell it, they simply turned their destruction on the city itself when nobody was left — tearing

down remaining buildings, ripping trees out at the roots, turning over the earth.

All of it was horrifying. But this — *this* made me so angry I could barely breathe.

It wasn't enough for the humans to slaughter entire cities or Houses. They had to destroy them, too. Rip away the most important thing, the stories all of those dead Fey left behind. Consume and burn until nothing was left of Yithara but a decimated scar in the earth.

“Why?” I had ground out, through clenched teeth. “What reason do they have to do this?”

“I think,” Ishqa said, quietly, “they were looking for something.”

Looking for something? Looking for what? What could possibly justify such bloodshed? Maybe if I wasn't so angry, I could have admitted that it made sense. There was a reason, after all, why the humans' attacks were so erratic — they didn't seem to be targeting any particular group of Fey, or any particular House. Their three targets weren't even geographically close to each other. And clearly, they did not intend to conquer. They came, they destroyed, and then they left.

Three days later, after the humans were long gone, we returned to Yithara — or what was left of it. When we arrived, I simply froze, unable to move, unable to breathe. All around me, the evacuated survivors sank to their knees or covered their mouths in horror. Some ran into the rubble, calling names. Some attempted to find whatever was left of their homes.

I helped them search for loved ones or find their possessions. They were all looking for something — and like the humans, they would not find it. We found ruined homes and destroyed lives. We found bodies — even children — smashed upon the ground from falls from far above, or worse, split open from groin to throat in a sickeningly deliberate act that had me swallowing bile.

The horror of it smothered me.

I did all of this calmly, methodically. But by the time the sun set, I wandered off beyond the outskirts of the city, tucking myself behind a pile of rubble in the brush. And there, where no one could see me, I sank to my knees and vomited over the ground, then whirled around and smashed my knuckles against the broken wood as hard as I could, over and over, so hard that tears streamed down my cheeks.

I finally stopped when I grew too exhausted to continue. My knuckles were bleeding. I had torn the stitches in my abdomen. I felt none of it. I felt nothing but rage.

I heard footsteps behind me, and I didn't have to look to know who they belonged to. I couldn't bring myself to look at him, after having seen now for the second time what his House had suffered.

"We're going to Niraja," I said. My voice was hoarse, but strong. "I don't care what it takes. We have to make sure this does not happen again."

Silence. I finally lifted my head. Caduan looked tired, sad.

He stepped closer, wordlessly. His hand reached out and, with a tenderness so stark that it made me bite back a gasp, he touched my stomach. His skin was hotter than the blood seeping through my shirt.

"You're bleeding," he murmured.

"I don't care." I meant it.

"I thought your father wouldn't allow it."

"I don't care," I said again, and to my surprise, I meant it then, too. "I am the Teirness. And if I say we go, then we go."

"Teirness," he repeated, softly. Something flickered in his stare, something I could not identify — something that almost looked like pride.

Again, he stepped closer. The heat of his body surrounded me, goosebumps rising on my skin. When his head angled against mine, our faces were only inches apart. I could see every shade of green in those eyes, searching and curious.

Mathira, the way he looked at me, like I was a question to be answered or a riddle to be solved. I'd never wanted to be known, to be seen — the possibility was too high that the answer would not be satisfactory. But there was a strange comfort in that, now. I was so tired.

“I have been thinking about it since,” he said, quietly. “I still don't know what you did to me that night. My magic has never felt like that before.”

I swallowed, finding it difficult to speak. Everything here smelled like ash, except for him — his scent of rosewood, a scent I didn't realize until this moment that I now *knew*, enveloped me. Even that was enough to set me off-balance and yet put me at ease.

What had happened that night had been that effect, compounded infinitely.

I didn't understand it either. I had wondered, after, if Caduan had simply been that much more powerful than I knew. But...

I shook my head, barely a movement, not looking away from those eyes. A movement that gave him my answer: *I don't understand, either.*

“You saved my life,” he murmured.

“I couldn't...” *I couldn't let you die when the last thing I had said to you had been so awful.* “I owe you an apology,” I rasped out, instead. “For what I said to you in the pub. None of it was... truly what I thought. It was just that the things you said were...”

Too close to the truth.

His gaze shifted in a way that said he understood. “I know how hard it is to break away from chains that have been forged for a century.”

It was such a simple, kind answer. He should have hated me for speaking to him that way. And yet...

It hit deeper than I had expected.

I thought of him, and how awkward he always was in the presence of nobility — how he always managed to say the wrong thing, at the wrong time. The way he so flatly disregarded the expectations of others. Before, these things had confused me. Now, all at once, I understood.

He was *honest*. He was genuine.

“I think you will be a great king,” I said, softly.

The corner of his mouth lifted in the hint of a smile. “I think you will be a great Teirness,” he murmured, and for the first time it occurred to me that just as I saw the beauty in what others would call flaws, perhaps he saw the same in me.

The thought was frightening. His eyes fell to my lips, and I wondered what it might be like to feel his against them — to watch those walls come tumbling down with every exposed expanse of skin, to know what he looked like when he truly unraveled. But then, he would see me, too. There would be too much I couldn't hide.

I had never wanted something and recoiled from it in such equal, overwhelming measure.

And so I was disappointed and relieved when instead, he slipped his hand into mine, and our fingers intertwined instead of our limbs.

We did not speak. He leaned back against the rubble beside me, and the two of us remained, taking a strange solace in the warmth of each other's skin.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



The battle began in fire, and ended in ashes.

I, by now, had earned my infamy. But Max...Max was new, and the world was not prepared for him. Even the greatest of my illusions were nothing compared to the way Max looked at the height of his power. He was every bit as beautiful, as breathtaking, as I remembered him looking in the Mikov estate — a being that was constructed of light and fire itself.

The fighting paused, men stopping with half-raised weapons, to stare in wide-eyed terror at the creature before them. A strange, suspended numbness fell over the battlefield. Max took me with him and together we slipped through the air to Zeryth's army — *Max's* army. There, Max closed his second eyelids, slipping back into his human form to show his soldiers who he was.

They just stared at him. They did not say a word. And Max didn't, either, surveying them with a tight jaw and sharp stare that I knew masked secret shame.

In that long, stunned silence, I understood that I was watching something change forever. These men already had respected Max deeply. And now, in a matter of a single moment, I watched that respect turn to reverence.

Not that we had time to revel in it. The battle was over the minute Max and I entered the fray. We knew it, our soldiers knew it, and so did Aviness's — we could see it in their faces. But Aviness himself, holed up somewhere within his

safehouse, was not ready to surrender. So they fought, and so did we.

Individually, Max and I were both powerful. Alone, I had learned how to craft performances to inspire awe and fear. But together? Together, we were spectacular.

We were dancing, each of our performances feeding that of the other, him Wielding light and fire and I surrounding myself with shadow and bleeding butterflies. I was using a sword I'd pulled off of one of the soldiers, and it was a poor substitute for Il'Sahaj, but my magic was roaring so close to the surface I barely needed to rely on a little piece of steel, anyway. Reshaye's fingers wrapped tight around me, guiding my power — and I ceded to it, maintaining only the barest thread of control. I had no choice. Otherwise, I would topple. My body was injured, exhausted. I had to dig deeper, past my injuries, deeper than the dregs of my magic.

Time blurred.

I was not sure how long we had been fighting by the time the bells rang out. I had to yank on Reshaye to stop it from continuing on, forcing my consciousness back to myself, turning to the Palace. There, from the grand glass windows, white sheets swayed in the breeze.

And between them, on the balcony, stood Atrick Aviness, raising a hand that clutched a streak of white.

The world went silent, all eyes turning to him.

His lips parted, and he looked as if he might say something. His eyes fell to me, and what I saw in them made a knot form in my stomach.

“Stop—” I choked out, lurching forward.

But in one smooth movement, Atrick Aviness threw himself over the balcony's edge.

Max's second eyelids slid closed. I let my magic fall away. We looked at each other. He looked exhausted, and hurt, and was swaying on his feet.

Reshaye clutched at the exhausted shards of my magic. Even it seemed utterly depleted.

{We are not done. We cannot be done.}

I looked to the battlefield. To the bodies across the ground. To the buildings damaged and the injured soldiers around us. A numb sadness settled over me. I swayed on my feet.

Distantly, I heard Max's voice murmur, "It's over," as if to himself.

How does a war end?

One might think it would end with some valiant triumph, a great tableau of noble victory.

Instead, it ended with a dull thump, a pile of bloody limbs on the ground, and the overwhelming smell of ash.

The world went quiet.

But I could still feel it burning, burning, burning inside of me — my magic, my rage, and Reshaye's fury. One war had ended. But there was still something I needed to do. I started to move, but Max caught my arm.

"Where are you going?"

"I am not done."

My voice barely sounded like my own. And though I could see the raw exhaustion written over Max's face, when he turned to me, his gaze shifted — whatever he saw in me was enough to make him listen.

I had already half-drawn my Stratagram on my palm, but Max said, without hesitation, "I'm coming with you."

And without hesitation, I let him.

I barely remembered completing my Stratagram. A split second, and I was looking not out at the remnants of a battlefield but at a series of brick, run-down buildings.

The refugees' attention rolled over me like a wave. They stopped mid-movement, their eyes wide. I must have looked horrific, covered in blood, magic flaring around me like fire.

My gaze fell to the very same door I had entered just the day before, where a familiar old woman and her granddaughter lingered, eyes wide in terror.

I drank that terror down, reveling in it.

When I looked at them, anger flooded me. *Hurt* flooded me. So intense that it made Reshaye shiver, and I felt its every minute movement. I'd needed to give it so much, to keep myself going — now it sat just beneath the surface of my skin.

{They betrayed you, even after you tore out your heart to lay it at their feet.}

They had.

I had given them everything. I would have died for them.

I still would.

“I understand what it is like,” I said. My voice tore from my throat, thorny and raw. “I understand what it is to wish for the impossible. For so long, we have needed only to survive. It was hopeless to wish for anything more.”

More and more refugees were coming out of their apartment buildings, collecting along the sidewalks. Everyone was utterly silent. I stepped forward. My blood dripped onto the cobblestones. Blue fire clung to the blade of my sword, to my fingertips, to the tips of my hair.

“I made a promise to you,” I said. “I promised you that I would strike down the Threllian Lords. I promised you that I would stop at nothing. *Nothing.*”

{And you traded so much away to fulfill that promise,}
Reshaye whispered.

Reshaye wanted revenge. *Craved* it. Hurt, after all, was made of glass, fragile and vulnerable. There was a certain satisfaction in smashing it upon the rocks and turning it into knives.

But with all my remaining strength, I held Reshaye back.

These people are not our enemy.

No. Our enemies were the ones who made us this way, who ripped us apart. Who still, from a thousand miles away, angled their blades at our throats.

I was so angry I could barely speak, barely think. I poured all of that rage into my magic, let Reshaye consume it. It burned at my skin in licks of white flames and red butterflies rising to the sky.

The pain was immeasurable. My magic was nearly depleted, my arms dripping with blood. The Threllians saw only the strength of my performance, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Max step forward, a hand outstretched. He knew how close I was to the edge.

I shot him a warning glance: *Don't. Not yet.*

I needed them to see. I needed them to see a version of me that was powerful enough to earn their respect. I needed them to see a version of me powerful enough to *believe* in.

Look at me, I commanded, and they all obeyed.

“I have won Zeryth Aldris’s war,” I said. “And now I *will* win ours. We are the children of fallen gods and lost empires. We are the memories of bones in the plains. And we are more than they *ever* thought we would be.”

My eyes met the old woman’s. Reshaye threw itself at my mental walls, and I had to put everything I had into catching it, channeling its magic into my performance.

I stumbled, righting myself immediately, so quickly no one would notice. No one except for Max, who I could feel watching me, ready.

But I was not done. Not yet.

“Remember that, when you doubt me,” I snarled. “I made you a promise. I intend to keep it.”

I couldn’t hold on anymore.

I dropped my sword and turned to Max. One look, and he knew what I needed. I kept my back straight and steps measured as I walked away. Max withdrew paper and drew his Stratagram, bringing us back to the front steps of the Towers.

I looked up at them, and they seemed to bend over me.

I made sure no one was there, no one watching, when I let him catch me.

PART TWO:
ASHES



CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

TISAANAH



I sensed... curiosity.

The thing that stood before me wasn't a person. No, just a shadow of a shadow. It circled me, examining.

I know you, it whispered.

I knew it too, in a way I didn't understand. Like the scent left behind in a familiar body's wake, or the fog hanging in winter air after a warm breath.

I have been looking for you, the voice murmured, for so long.

Reshaye shuddered, pulling away.

A flicker of hurt.

You do not remember me?

{What does it mean to remember? A memory is the imprint of a past story, and all of mine have been ripped away.}

The shadow pushed closer. It was difficult, I could tell, like it had to fight a rising tide.

What are you? I asked. Where are you?

My curiosity drew me closer — and then I recoiled with a gasp.

The vision only lasted for a split second, consisting of fragmented images.

I saw Ara burning, cities and palaces reduced to mere husks. A field full of corpses, piled upon each other, their flesh ribbons of rot. The oceans rising, teeming with creatures of teeth and shadow and destruction.

I saw the Threllian plains aflame, the sky black with smoke.

I saw an endless sea of bones.

And then, just as quickly, it was all gone — so fast that perhaps I had imagined it all.

The answer came in a distant whisper, as the presence faded away:

I am victory. I am vengeance.

And now, I am nowhere.

But soon, I will be with you.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



“If there is even a chance that Niraja holds the answers we need,” I said, “then we cannot afford to ignore that. Caduan is right. If we refuse to meet with them simply because of our own stubborn traditions, the cost will be unthinkable.”

Ishqa, Siobhan, and Ashraia stared back at me. I met Caduan’s gaze for a split second, just long enough to see the faintest of smiles twitch at the corners of his mouth.

“What you propose is treason.” Ashraia spat the words out like rancid food. “And we have already dismissed it. Rightfully.” He turned to Ishqa, as if already anticipating his equally-strong rejection. A rejection that I was expecting, too.

But one that did not come.

Instead, Ishqa crossed his arms over his chest, looking at me with a piercing gaze that I could not decipher. There was something different in this particular stare, something that made me want to shrink away. As if he were looking at me for the hundredth time and only just realizing that he missed some fundamental detail that changed everything.

He had not been the same since we left Yithara. But then again, none of us were.

“If you will not go,” I said, “I will go by myself.”

“And I will go with her,” Caduan added, quietly.

Ishqa’s eyebrow twitched. “What does your father have to say about that decision?”

“He supports it.”

Untrue. But I was the Teirness. Caduan was right. I had all the power I needed to make the decision on my own. And he wouldn't even need to know that we made the detour.

Ishqa's lips thinned. “Do not lie to me.”

I met his stare with equal intensity. Ceding nothing, and apologizing for nothing.

“I am ready to go alone if I must,” I repeated.

“Queen Shadya would not approve of this decision.”

“I know.”

“She is nearly five hundred years old. She prizes the old ways, much like your father. Change is not in her blood.”

“I know.”

And I wasn't sure what I was expecting him to say next, but it wasn't this:

“This is why,” he said, smoothly, “it would be best if she did not know.”

My jaw fell. Ashraia did such an intense double-take that he nearly toppled over. “Seven skies, *what?*”

If I hadn't been so shocked myself, I would have burst out laughing. It took me several long seconds to wrap my mind around what Ishqa had just said.

Pristine, traditional, well-behaved Ishqa.

“That's essentially treason,” Ashraia growled, attempting to lower his voice and doing a poor job of it. Only Ishqa's eyes moved, shooting Ashraia a withering stare.

“As general, I was given supreme authority on this mission. Even if I were to contact our Queen and seek permission, we would not get a response for days or weeks. In light of what we've seen, I don't believe we have that time to waste.”

“But the Nirajans are—”

“— the only ones likely to actually know anything. Yes.”

Ishqa's gaze slid back to me. His face remained stoic as marble, but I could have sworn I saw a glimmer of laughter in his eyes.

"Is your mouth open because you intend to contribute to this conversation, Aefe?"

I closed my mouth and scowled.

Ishqa actually smiled.

"I'm glad you have some sense," I sniffed.

"Some indeed." Then he crossed his arms over his chest and surveyed me, the smile replaced with a thoughtful frown.

"Traditions may not be our only problem," he said. "The Nirajans may not be especially welcoming to a pair of Sidnee."

"Perhaps a small possibility," Siobhan muttered, letting out a sarcastic scoff.

It was a fair point.

All of the Fey Houses had cast Niraja into excommunication, marking the kingdom and all its citizens as irreversibly tainted. That alone was bad enough. But the Sidnee — led by my father, when he was still just a young man — had been the only house to attempt to smite the Nirajans completely. More than half of their population had been killed by the Sidnee. It was that battle, in fact, that had earned my father his honor... and my mother's hand in marriage.

Of its own accord, my left arm twitched.

I knew those stories well. They were inked into my skin, my tribute to my bloodline's greatest victories. But for reasons I couldn't understand, I now felt inexplicably uncomfortable. The Sidnee told of these stories often. The story was always the same — the brave, skilled young warrior, driving away the corrupted. And all my life, I had dreamed of leading such a conquest myself. Such a victory had earned him the respect of the Sidnee. And such a victory could earn me his respect, too.

Now? I blinked back the memory of those corpses in Yithara, split open and bleeding on the ground. Is that what it had been like?

I shuddered and shook away the thought. “We do not have to tell them that we’re Sidnee,” I said. “That goes without saying.”

Siobhan shook her head. “Simply not telling them won’t be enough.” She gestured down at herself. Her leathers. The tattoos. All unmistakable marks of the Sidnee Blades.

“No, it won’t be.” A certain spark leeches into Ishqa’s eyes as he looked from Siobhan, to me. “But we can be creative.”



“YOU LOOK RIDICULOUS.”

Caduan’s voice was low as he leaned over my shoulder to murmur in my ear.

I scowled and resisted the urge to snap at him.

“Aefe, none of this will be terribly convincing if you don’t stop.”

“Stop what?”

Ishqa arched his eyebrows. “That,” he said, gesturing broadly at my entire person.

I threw my hands up. An inordinate amount of chiffon fabric rippled with the movement. “This is unreasonable.”

Caduan placed a very thoughtful hand over his chin, covering his mouth just enough to stifle his obvious chuckle.

“Unreasonable?” Ishqa frowned. “This is what all Wyshraj noblewomen wear.”

I gave him a pointed look. *Yes, Ishqa. And it is unreasonable.*

The corner of his mouth twitched, and it was only then that I realized that he was *enjoying* this, the bastard.

I grumbled and looked down at myself. An expanse of skin and floaty, sheer turquoise fabric greeted me. The fabric wrapped all the way around my body, held together with a series of jeweled gold pins — at my shoulders, beneath my arms, around my waist.

Putting the thing on had taken the better part of an hour. It was all an incredible amount of work for something that offered such scant protection from the elements. Most of my skin was exposed in one way or another, whether it be through the sheer fabric or simply left that way intentionally. I resisted the urge to curl up into a ball and cover myself.

I gestured to my exposed abdomen — to the black ink running up its side. I deliberately avoided calling any more attention to the X's on my other side. This was humiliating enough already.

“Are we not forgetting something terribly important? Or do we intend to convince the Nirajans that Wyshraj have developed a sudden interest in the art of tattoo?”

“I can hide them,” Caduan said, without hesitation. When everyone shot him confused glances, he said, simply, “Magic.”

So matter-of-fact. As if it was obvious.

Ishqa arched a cool eyebrow at me. “*Magic*, then.”

“It’s quite airy, once you get used to it,” Siobhan remarked. Of course, she managed to look — well, perhaps a little silly, but at least elegant. She was significantly shorter than I was, and as a result, the swath of fabric covered more of her body than mine did. I noted this with some envy.

“It’s not ideal,” Ishqa remarked, finger at his chin. “Noblewomen’s clothing would be more ornate than this. But the Nirajans won’t know the difference.”

Ashraia scoffed. “No one would confuse them for well-bred Wyshraj,” he muttered, and Ishqa shot him a withering look.

“They certainly will,” he said. “No one would dare question the legitimacy of the wife of a Wyshraj noble.”

There was a beat of silence. All eyes turned to Ishqa. Caduan went very still in a way that I deliberately chose not to notice.

“Wife?” I said, finally, voice tight.

“Of course—”

“*Wife?*”

“It only makes sense,” he said. “If we introduce you as my wife, then it will be clear to them that this is nothing more than a political visit, totally peaceful.”

Of course. That would be true in any House, but the Wyshraj in particular tended to leave matters of politics to the women in a noble partnership. Four military leaders — even Wyshraj military leaders — would be looked upon with suspicion. But a Wyshraj nobleman and his wife? That would be seen as “safe.”

Still. My teeth ground.

“Perhaps Siobhan should be your *wife*,” I said. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Siobhan shoot me an affronted glare just as Ishqa quirked one eyebrow in a cool challenge.

“If you wish,” he said. “But as my equal, I assumed you would want to assume the same rank as me.”

Damn him. He was right. My silence said so, even if my words didn’t.

“*Fine*,” I muttered, at last.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



For awhile, dreams and reality blended. I didn't remember losing consciousness, at least not the way Tisaanah had, like her entire body just *stopped* at once. My sense of the world simply seeped away, leaving only dreams. Strange dreams. I was used to nightmares. But this... this was different. The familiar horrors, yes, but with something else hanging over it — a shadow, watching.

But by the time I clawed my way back to reality, dreams were the least of my concerns.

The battle was well over, Nura told me. The clean-up effort was underway. The first thing I did upon regaining consciousness was stumble to the windows, watching the activity in the streets below, and the hazy plume of smoke that still trailed up into the sky.

A knot had formed in my stomach.

“I told you not to bring the army.”

My voice was raspy, raw. Nura's was smooth as ice in comparison as she replied, “We won the war because of what you two did.”

“I told you *not to bring them.*”

I looked over my shoulder, jaw clenched. Nura stood there with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Hypocritical for you to lecture me about honesty, isn't it? After what you hid from us.” She cocked her head. “But the two of you were remarkable. *You* were remarkable, Max. You

must know that. Even after hearing the stories from Threll, I didn't think you would be so..."

Her voice trailed off, eyes going far away. I looked to the Capital, to the smoke still rising above it.

The battle was a bloody, rage-induced haze. Hazy enough that my mind could fill in the gaps with the worst possible scenarios.

My fingers curled against the glass.

"Was there... were there..."

"Was it another Sarlazai?"

A part of me hated that she knew what I was going to ask. She gave me a pitying look.

"No. It was nothing like it. All things considered, the death toll was low. The destruction minimal. And we lost few of your soldiers, comparatively." Then she said, more softly, "It was nothing, compared to what it could have been without you."

"All things considered." "Comparatively." "Wasn't that bad."

All phrases that did little to quell the guilt that sat in my stomach.

I turned away and started to push past her, but Nura's fingers caught my arm. Her eyes fell to my wrist, and her brow furrowed.

"What are you—"

She pushed my sleeve up, and my voice trailed off. We stood in silence, looking down at my arm and the dark veins that now trailed up it.

I yanked away from her grasp, pushing my sleeve back down. "I have more important things to worry about."

I was halfway to the door when she called after me. "I meant it," she said. "Do you ever think about what you could do with power like that? If you let yourself dream a little bigger?"

I didn't dignify that with an answer. Perhaps Nura dreamed of what she could do with the power that I had, that Tisaanah had. But I dreamed of a world in which power like that never existed at all.

But no matter what I dreamed, the whole world knew what I was, now. And Nura wasn't the only one who looked at me differently for it. Everywhere I went, stares followed. Even the healers gave me long looks—part fear, part awe—when they thought I wasn't paying attention. As soon as I could walk, I managed to visit Essanie and Arith's drills, albeit only briefly, and practically derailed the whole exercise because everyone decided to stop and gawp at me at the same time.

Eventually, the shock faded, but I understood that something had permanently changed in what remained beneath it. They had respected me before. But now, they looked at me with starry-eyed admiration.

I didn't like that one bit. I wanted to shake them and say, *No one deserves to be put on a pedestal. They won't climb down to save you, and if you're looking up at them, you're not looking ahead at what's coming for you.*

Every time I saw those looks, a weight settled over my chest. For the first time, I truly understood how Tisaanah must feel when she stood in front of the refugees.

And that was the other reason why I didn't spend much time with the army. Tisaanah.

Days passed, and she didn't wake. She lay in a white bed in her apartment in the Tower of Midnight, looking small and fragile and so unlike the untouchable goddess who had commanded the attention of the refugees. Sammerin healed the wounds on her arms, but they were still covered with scar tissue, crawling over the dark veins visible beneath the translucent pale of her skin.

"She was injured badly," Sammerin told me. "And she used an extraordinary amount of magic. She just needs to rest."

He was right. I knew better than most exactly how high of a toll Reshaye's magic demanded on the body, especially after using so much of it. But I still hovered anxiously at her bedside. Through her window, I watched the sky change, from dusky overcast to bloody sunset, to night and then sunrise and then all over again, and still she did not wake.

Days had passed when she finally opened her eyes. It was nighttime. I was in my chair in the corner, vision blurring over pages of my book.

“Maxantarius.”

A pit formed in my stomach at the sound.

Tisaanah's voice, yes. But not her words. Not her accent.

I looked up to see Tisaanah — Reshaye — peering at me through those brilliant, mismatched eyes.

I closed my book.

“Where is she?” I asked, my voice tight.

“Resting. She is very tired. As am I.”

“If you're so tired, then why are you here?”

Tisaanah's expression was calm and thoughtful, mouth twisted the way a child's does in deep thought. There was no rage, no anger. An unusual expression for Reshaye to wear.

“You told me once that I did not know what love is.” The wrinkle deepened between her brows. Her hand pressed to her chest. “Does love feel like an open wound? Like skin peeled back from flesh. Like a ribcage exposed. Is that what it is? To be... opened?”

I blinked.

What a strange question. I didn't know how to respond to this.

I thought of the night I helped untangle Tisaanah's dress from her hair after the Orders' ball. I had stood there drowning in her scent, in my own desire, and when she had looked over her shoulder at me, I realized her stare cut so deep because she *saw* me — even the things I wanted to hide from the world.

“Is love frightening?” Reshaye whispered.

I wasn't sure why I answered. “Yes. It's terrifying.”

“It is a painful thing. To be seen. To be given something to mourn. To be reminded of what has already been lost.”

Then that gaze, familiar and unfamiliar, slid back to me.

“I built walls around you, because I wanted us to be the same. If there was no one else for you to see, then you would see me. But I think I understand it now... grief.”

Reshaye rolled over, Tisaanah's eyes fluttering closed.

“She will come back soon,” she whispered, voice fading. “She dreams of you. Did you know that?”

She was gone before I had time to say more, fading back into a deep sleep, confusion still etched between her brows.

The next morning, Tisaanah finally awoke.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



We had won.

When I awoke after what felt like a million-year sleep, Max was there beside me. He told me of the outcome of the battle, and filled in my murky memories with his crisper ones. He told me of the death toll, and of the victory those deaths had bought.

The Capital was now under Zeryth's control.

"So the war is over," I murmured.

"It should be. Though Zeryth has not publicly declared its end. Not that there's even anyone left for him to fight."

This made me nervous. I'd been watching Zeryth slowly unravel, his mind withering, and now I found myself wondering whether his paranoia would find new enemies to target within the shadows of his own towering heights.

But I was pulled from this thought when I noticed the way Max was looking at me, his brow creased and a single muscle feathering in his jaw.

I blinked at him. "What?"

"I found the note that was left for you that morning," he said.

I stilled. I knew immediately which note he was talking about. The one from Fijra, asking me to visit her grandmother. The thought of it still made a lump rise in my throat.

"So. Is that where you were taken?"

I nodded. Perhaps he knew me well enough to see what I wasn't saying, because his voice was deadly quiet.

“So it was a trap. And that's why you wanted to go there, after the battle.”

And again, my silence was answer enough.

Max's anger was so intense that it thickened in the air. “You're fighting harder for them than anyone else ever would. And they turn you over to him? That's not just cruel. It's *stupid*.”

Before I could think, the justifications that I told myself spilled from my lips. “You say ‘*they*’ like they are all the same. It was one person. For some, it will be always hard to trust—”

“I thought I was *too late*, Tisaanah.” He didn't raise his voice. And yet, the rawness in it was still enough to make me jump. “I thought that I was breaking into that palace to go find your corpse. I thought some of those Ilyzath visions had come true. I have never been that scared. *Never*.”

His gaze flicked up to meet mine. My mouth closed. That fear was still all over his face. And if I had been in his position...if *he* had been the one trapped there...

The thought of it made me sick.

“You will not get rid of me so easily.” I pushed a rebellious strand of dark hair away from his eyes, my thumb smoothing the wrinkle of his brow. “Those people were forced into an impossible position. For some, it will always be hard to believe in me.”

He dragged my palm down to his mouth and kissed it.

“If they didn't before, they'll believe in you now,” he said, quietly. “They looked at you like you were more than human.”

I wasn't sure why that thought made me feel vaguely nauseous — even though it was exactly my intention.

“That's how people looked at you, too,” I said.

And he had deserved it, that wide-eyed reverence, because he had been breathtaking.

Max flinched, looking away. He had confronted his biggest fear by showing the world what he was capable of. It was hard enough for him to do it in Threll. Now, it was out there, beyond even his paper-thin denials.

“I preferred hiding,” he muttered. “But... it was worth it.”

I leaned against him — pressed my lips against his neck, breathing in his scent. He abandoned my hand for a fuller embrace, pulling me close.

Sometimes, in moments like this, there was so much I wanted to say to Max that the prospect of forcing all of that emotion into mere syllables seemed laughable. I had spent my entire life being ripped from what I loved. My heart never could grow roots, because every few years they would be hacked away. You learn to live without them. You learn to find love where it doesn't exist, like in the superficial kindnesses of a cruel man. You learn to accept the loss as a part of you, and pretend you don't mourn every severed connection.

I had forgotten that it was possible for the roots of someone's affection to run so deep, so solid. I could build a life in the branches of this tree. I could cradle a generation's future nestled in its leaves.

But I still had so many scars. And it's hard to dream when you're surrounded by the ashes of loss. Hard not to wonder if whatever scraps you have left over are even worth offering someone who deserves so much.

I squeezed my eyes shut. They prickled.

“I love you,” I choked out.

Love. The word was all I had. Still, it didn't feel like enough.



MAX and I stayed there for as long as we could, until a flurry of healers began to shuffle in and out of my room. Max reluctantly left in order to undergo his own examinations, and for awhile, I was left alone. When a gentle knock came at the door, I was expecting yet another healer. But instead, a familiar face peeked into the room.

Serel.

My first thought was, *I don't want him to see me this way.*

I pushed myself up, giving him a weak smile. He returned it, and a dagger of guilt twisted in my guts.

I hadn't realized that I had been hiding so much from Serel until now, when I found myself scrambling to erect walls around my weakness. When did that happen? When had I drifted so far away from him?

"You look awful," he said.

I batted my eyelashes. "You do know how to flatter me."

He just gave me a grim smile, taking a seat at the edge of my bed. The seriousness of it made me think of the way the other refugees had looked at me, when I had visited them after the battle.

A sobering thought.

I had been so deep in Reshaye's bloodlust. I'd had to give away so much of myself to keep myself standing, let alone fighting. And I had maintained control, but only barely.

Gods, I never should have gone there, especially not without Sammerin. That had been a careless mistake, one that could have ended so badly.

"Is everyone... safe?" I asked. "At the apartments? Did any of the damage—"

"None of the fighting touched us." Serel placed his hand over mine, as if to calm me. And I felt his stare acutely as he said, "I know what happened. I know how you were taken."

It was suddenly difficult to speak, any measured words lost in a flood of hurt and anger, and guilt at feeling any of those

things at all.

“Fijra felt so guilty about it that she told Filias. And he was furious, Tisaanah. *I* was furious.” His eyes darkened. “None of us tolerate that. Not even Filias. I know he’s hard on you sometimes, but he would never. *Never.*”

“Why?” I asked. “Why did she do it?”

“There’s a lot we still don’t know. Someone asked her to do it. We don’t know who, yet. But when we do—”

“I don’t mean that. I mean... *why* did she do it?” My eyes flicked to him. “It wasn’t for money, was it? She wanted to turn me over to the Zorokovs. In exchange for her granddaughter.”

Serel’s mouth pressed to a thin line. “Yes. Yes, that was her thought.”

Of course. Terrible situations leading to terrible ends. Pain begetting more pain.

“Why should my life be worth more than that little girl’s?” I choked out. “I bought those people time. But if I stood in their place... borrowed time would never be enough. They need more than that. More than I’ve been able to give them.”

Pity suffused Serel’s stare. “This can’t all fall on you, Tisaanah. No one person can do this alone.”

“No. No person can.”

No *human*, perhaps. That’s why I needed to be more, even if I could only make it a performance. But now I was starting to feel all of those different expectations tangling around me, like a spider’s web capturing me thread by thread.

“No one needs you to be more than that,” Serel murmured, and I almost laughed. Gods, how he knew me so well.

“They deserve to feel the way I did, Serel. The way I felt when I saw your face again—” Serel’s fingers tightened around my hand, and I paused, to keep my voice from breaking. “There is no sacrifice too great for that.”

He gave me a sad smile. “Listen, Tisaanah. No matter how... godlike... you looked out there, no matter how many feats of magic you pull off, no matter how much you wish you were more, you’re just a person. And I wouldn’t trade the person for the figurehead. Not for anything. I’d rather have a friend than a savior.”

My eyes stung. I was so lucky to have what I did, in him, in Max, even in Sammerin — in these people who treasured my humanity, not the spectacles I sacrificed it to create.

But I didn’t know how to be both. I didn’t know how to preserve the part of me that they loved while still being what so many more needed me to be.

“You were already my savior,” I murmured. “*And* you are my friend. And I’m so grateful to you for it.”

He patted my hand and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

“Just be careful, Tisaanah.”



“WE OWE YOU A THANKS. A war ended just as we were bracing for it to get bloodier than ever. We’re very fortunate.” Nura’s eyes darted between me and Max. “You two look like shit, though.”

I was getting tired of hearing that, though it was undeniably true. Nura was so buttoned-up and dignified that it was almost comical to think that she had fought in the same bloody battle we had, mere days ago. She stood in the doorway with her arms crossed and chin raised, wearing a tiny satisfied smile.

And yet, I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something hiding beneath it.

{There is always something hiding, in her,} Reshaye whispered, weakly. It was very far away, clearly depleted from the immense amount of energy we had used together.

“I would like to speak to Zeryth,” I said.

No word from him, yet. I didn't like that.

And Nura clearly didn't, either. "Wouldn't we all," she replied, drily.

Max's eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?"

"It means that no one has seen much of our dear ruler since the battle. He's been... busy."

"Busy with what, exactly?" I asked. In a time when any other newly-victorious king would have been quick to establish their leadership with a statement or a public appearance, Zeryth seemed to have simply... hidden away.

Nura's lip twitched, just enough to be visible.

"He didn't fight in the taking of the Capital," she said, "but he participated plenty, nonetheless. Why do you think the Syrizen were in such fine form? It was very draining for him just to help Eslyn the way he did. And he did it at a much larger scale this time, because he knew how much was on the line."

I rubbed my temple. It all had been such a blur, the memories soupy and ill-defined. But thinking back, the Syrizen *had* been especially brutal, their magic sharper and deadlier than usual.

I still didn't understand what, exactly, Zeryth had been creating to give Eslyn such power. But I did know that he had gotten sicker and more paranoid over these last few months. And I knew that there were magics in this world that could drive someone towards the edge of a cliff.

How many steps closer had this forced him to take?

"So what's his plan?" Max rose, paced with his hands shoved into his pockets. His brow knitted. "He needs to officially declare an end to this, and quickly, Nura. The longer he lets Ara hang in uncertainty, the longer he's giving more unrest to grow."

"He knows."

"Does he?"

“He does. And I do, too. He’s holding a victory celebration in a few days. He will officially declare the war over then. I suppose he wanted... a more cheerful environment for such an event.”

Max scoffed. “He wants to make the announcement surrounded by drunk, adoring nobles in ballgowns rather than on a pile of bloody rubble. Sure. Sounds like Zeryth.”

But there was still a note of unease in his voice, one that lingered in the back of my mind, too. And even Nura seemed to share it, her expression going hard for a split second. Then she blinked it away, and turned to me.

“I also had been meaning to ask you,” she said. “We’ve gotten pieces of your kidnapping story, but only pieces. Of course we need to hold those responsible accountable.”

My mouth went dry. I kept my expression very still.

“Max told me the kidnapper is already imprisoned.” Or dead, maybe, by now. Not that I even remembered that person’s face — just their arms around my throat, and hand over my mouth.

No, it wasn’t his face that slipped into my nightmares. That honor went to Fijra and her grandmother, instead.

“But was he the only one involved?” Nura asked. Her tone said, *I’ve seen you dismantle armies, and that rat managed to take you alone?*

“I should have been paying more attention.” I shook my head. “I was tired. And I was walking alone, coming back from visiting the refugees. All it took was one second of distraction. Stupid of me.”

Nura gave me a long stare. I could feel Max’s eyes, too, bearing into the side of my face.

Then she shrugged and turned away. “You’re lucky,” she said. “That could have been a much deadlier mistake.”

CHAPTER FIFTY



Niraja was spoken of in hushed whispers, or more often, not at all — as if it were some place that lingered on the other side of the world. But in truth, Niraja was an island that sat to the south, not far from the House of Nautilus. Journeying there did not take long. Their gates were barely visible in the distance when we dismounted and donned our (still, I insisted, utterly ridiculous) costumes.

“Help me with this one?” I asked Caduan, pinching fabric around my waist and handing him a pin. He was silent as he leaned forward and pinned the chiffon around me. His hands, as always, were incredibly warm. He stood close enough that I could feel his breath on the crest of my ear.

“Thank you,” I muttered, suddenly shy.

I expected him to pull away. But instead, he stayed oddly close, running his gaze down my body in a way that sent a shiver up my spine.

“Your tattoos are beautiful,” he said, quietly. He said it in a matter-of-fact tone, and yet there was something about that tone that made me carefully avoid eye contact for reasons I didn’t fully understand.

“All Sidnee warriors have them.”

I didn’t look at him. But strange, how I could feel his gaze shifting away from the intricate beauty of my tattoos to the black x’s that covered my entire left arm.

He didn’t ask. So I wasn’t sure why I said, “I have had many victories. But I have also made many mistakes.”

“What kind of mistakes earn these?”

I swallowed. “Some petty. Some... not.”

I heard the question that Caduan didn't ask.

“One time,” I admitted, “I beat a fellow Blade nearly to death.”

I would have killed him, had Siobhan not pulled me off of him. I blinked away the memory. The man's face had been nothing but smears of violet, bloody flesh, bone visible beneath his wounds. He didn't come back to the Blades. Still couldn't walk properly.

The memory came with a pang of shame. I had never volunteered such information about myself before — these were my ugly parts, the impulsive and rash deficiencies that I tried desperately to file away. I wasn't sure why I was telling Caduan this.

I forced myself to lift my gaze. He wasn't looking at me with judgement. Just with a quiet, curious gaze.

“And what did your colleague do to deserve that?” he asked.

“He made a joke about my sister.”

“A joke?”

“A joke about raping her.”

Mathira, that snake. For a moment I vividly remembered the way his bones felt cracking beneath my fists and I relished the memory.

“I don't regret it,” I said, quietly. “Sometimes I wish I had killed him.”

One corner of Caduan's mouth tightened. “I suspect it wouldn't have been a great loss to the world if you had.” His gaze softened, and he added, more quietly, “Your sister is very fortunate to have you.”

I smiled, but beneath it, I felt a bittersweet twinge. How strange, to hear someone say that to me.

“Perhaps,” I said, “but that’s just *one* X. You should hear about the others before you say that.”

Caduan let out a low chuckle, and with the sound, a certain tension between us relaxed. Still, I crossed my arms and realized I had goosebumps.

“They’re all lovely,” he said. “But I think they might undermine some of our secrecy. Can I hide them?”

I nodded.

He reached out and touched my arm — just the lightest touch of three fingers. Still, I had to stop myself from jumping, carefully avoiding eye contact. There was always something that felt... strange about even the smallest and most innocent of Caduan’s touches. Especially now that I had felt his magic thrumming in my veins. It was like I could feel the remnants of it coming to the surface every time the space between us narrowed.

Then my interest overcame my discomfort. I looked down and watched as my tattoos slowly blurred and faded, like they were being covered layer by layer by dust, until all that remained was the smooth tan of my skin.

I held my left hand up, turning it. I could not remember the last time I’d seen myself unmarked this way. It was an odd sensation — to bear no markers of my shame.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Of course.” And he hesitated for just a moment before he turned away and went to Siobhan.

I LET Ishqa handle writing to the Nirajan nobles, announcing our intention to visit. Even though the Nirajans didn’t have the bad blood with the Wyshraj that they did with the Sidnee, I was still skeptical that they would welcome a visit from *any* powerful Fey house, after we had all excommunicated them. Ishqa’s confidence, however, turned out to be well-founded. A

few letters back and forth, and soon, the gates of Niraja were opening for us.

Niraja was an island kingdom, situated right in the center of the sea that separated the Fey lands to the north from the human nations to the south. We could see it from the shore, just barely, though the evening sky was misty enough that it was reduced to a sunset silhouette. We were greeted by a quiet, polite old man — Fey, I noted — who manned a small boat that would take us to the city.

We were all silent through that boat ride. The city emerged from the fog like a painting refined layer by layer. I hadn't been expecting it to be so beautiful, even from a distance. It rose up into the air in a series of delicate spires, trees flourishing between them, as if nature and stone were tangled in the same dance. As we grew closer, I could see the shine of silver lining the walls that surrounded its shores, and the glint of gold at the peaks of its spires.

I glanced at Siobhan, who stared up at the sight with a single wrinkle between her brows. She looked the part of a Wyshraj noble — her freckles, combined with the loss of her tattoos, gave her a certain elegant girlishness. Then my gaze slipped to Ishqa, who looked considerably more concerned, his mouth drawn tight.

“No one ever spoke of it like this,” he muttered.

“It's beautiful,” I said.

He frowned. “Yes. I suppose it is.” He said it as if it were an admission that didn't make sense.

He was nervous, I realized. That was a strange thought. Ishqa seemed perpetually confident, so at ease with being exactly what he should be. But then again, perhaps he wasn't. Trusted Wyshraj military nobles, after all, were not supposed to go visit excommunicated half-breeds.

It took only a couple of hours to reach the shore of Niraja, and when we disembarked we were greeted by two Fey guards. They bowed their heads to us and led us down the pier, to a set of tall, golden gates. We strode into the city on private

pathways lined with twisted vines and brightly-colored, unfamiliar flowers, then we were led up winding sets of stairs towards the castle in the center of Niraja's cascading spires. While the walls on either side of our pathway were quite tall, there was one turn where they came low enough to peer over, and down on the streets below I could see people bustling about a marketplace, getting ready to close for the day.

"It looks very normal, doesn't it?" Caduan muttered, and I nodded, watching him.

I wasn't sure what I would do, if I were him. Coming here and having to speak to humans, after what they had done to my people.

At last, we were guided into the palace. The ceilings were high, and I realized only after we were inside that the tops of some of the peaks were glass, letting light spill inside and cascade over the floor like pools of water. The same ivy that covered the walls of the pathways crawled up the walls in here, and I even heard the chirp of birds.

And there, ahead of us, against a wall that was covered in vines and flowers, were two glass thrones upon a dais of uncut stone. On the left, there sat a woman with long, smooth hair spilling over her shoulders. It was black, but streaked with grey. She was beautiful, though she had lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth. She wore not a gown, as one might expect for a queen sitting in such a throne, but a long green velvet jacket embroidered with threads of gold, and tight leather breeches with boots that laced up to her knees. A delicate crown of silver sat over her brow.

Beside her, a Fey man sat, his hand laid over hers. Unlike hers, his face was smooth and unlined, with fair skin and blond hair, so gold that it nearly clashed with the silver of his crown. His clothing resembled hers in style, though his jacket was bronze and slightly more ornate — and with the addition of a surprisingly-practical-looking sword that hung at his side.

A third figure stood at their side, a man with dark hair and eyes that were the color of feyblood. He wore simpler clothing than the royals, fine but practical battle clothing, and a blade

hung at each hip. His ears were pointed, but not as sharply as most Fey, making me wonder if perhaps he was mixed-blooded. He stood with his hands behind his back, watching us. He had a piercing stare. I could feel it digging into me from the moment I walked in the room.

“King Ezra and Queen Athalena,” one of the guards announced, as we approached, “I introduce the King of the House of Stone, Caduan Iero, and representative of the House of Wayward Winds, Ishqa Sai’Ess, and his wife, Ashmai, along with their traveling companions.”

We all dropped into bows. “It is an honor to be welcomed into your home,” Ishqa said.

We straightened. The guards had already disappeared, save for the slight echo of their footsteps down the hall. There was a long, brutally uncomfortable silence as Ezra and Athalena surveyed us.

Could any of us really blame them if they chose to skewer us where we stood? Maybe they would know who I was. It would be fair, by any measure, for them to take my life in exchange for all the ones my father took from them.

Athalena stood, slowly. Ezra followed.

And finally, a smile broke over Ezra’s face.

“It is a pleasure to have visitors of the old blood after so long,” he said, warmly. “Come. You must be hungry. Let us talk.”



THE DINNER TABLE was incredibly ornate, with platters of every type of meat and vegetable, decadent sauces drizzled over artfully arranged plates. My mouth watered. I wasn’t sure how long it had been since I’d eaten so well. Yet, there was a knot in my stomach where my hunger should be. While we all graciously accepted the Nirajans’ food, it remained largely untouched.

Our dinner was private, attended only by Ezra, Athalena, and the dark-haired man, who was introduced to us as Orin, Ezra's half-brother and Niraja's lead war-master. He barely spoke, aside from a terse greeting. But I couldn't tell if I was imagining his uncomfortably long stares, ones that made me keep glancing down to make sure my tattoos were still hidden and disguise intact.

Pleasantries were brief. We barely made it past the first course before Caduan was telling them of the humans' escalating attacks. He recounted each slaughter, first on the House of Stone, then upon the House of Reeds, and finally, upon Yithara. Ezra and Athalena were pale by the time he was done. For a long, long moment they did not speak. I watched their faces carefully.

"Horrible," Athalena muttered, as if to herself. "Horrible."

Ezra reached for her hand, but instead of taking it, her fingers curled into a fist. The two of them exchanged a glance, one laden with a silent language only the two of them spoke. When we had first arrived, Ezra had seemed the picture of a noble Fey king, carefully controlled. But now, in the wordless conversation he was having with his wife, his face revealed a deep concern.

"We are the first, then, to bring you this information?" Ishqa asked. His voice seemed to pull Ezra from his trance, because when he looked back to us, his face was once again pleasantly calm.

"Of course you are," he said, and despite his warm smile I did not miss the slight edge to his voice. "We have no contact with the Fey world. As your people had long ago decided."

"Of course," Ashraia said. "We didn't mean to imply—"

"The world of humans is simply foreign and unfamiliar to us," Ishqa cut in, smoothly. "Despite the extent of their destruction, we still do not know why the humans are targeting us, nor who they might strike next. You sit between the human world and the Fey. If anyone would have greater insight into this, we thought it would be you." He bowed his head. "Respectfully."

Ezra and Athalena exchanged another glance. That look confirmed what the first one had made me suspect. They *did* know something. I was certain of it.

“We’re sorry to disappoint you,” Ezra said, tersely. “This is all as much of a surprise to us as it is to you.”

I just watched Athalena, who sat there in noticeable silence with her jaw tight and eyes drawn to the table.

“Ezra—” she murmured.

But his arm shifted, as if he had placed his hand on her knee beneath the table, and she went silent

“Of course,” he said, “you are all welcome to stay here as long as you wish. Speak to our scholars, if you so desire, or simply rest before continuing on your journey.”

Something told me that Ezra’s scholars would have little more to tell us, either. My fingers curled into fists against the polished mahogany. I did not come this far for nothing.

“Do not lie to us,” I said.

I could feel Ishqa’s warning glance, even if I wouldn’t meet it.

Ezra’s brows lurched. “I wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“We took a great risk by coming here,” I said. “You must understand that. We didn’t defy a century of expectations just to be fed a mouthful of pretty food and pretty words and turned away.”

“Wife—” Ishqa started, and even in that one word I could hear the razored warning — *stop, you idiot, right this second.*

“Lives are in the balance,” I said. “The humans have proven that they will not stop. And you are foolish if you think they will not come for you after they—”

In one smooth movement, Ezra stood, his blue eyes suddenly cold as shattered ice. “*They* will come for us? You have the audacity to come to my kingdom, the very kingdom that your people tried to destroy out of nothing but your hatred and ignorance, and pretend to be concerned for our safety? Do

not treat me as if I'm stupid. I was there, when the Fey Houses attempted to imprison and slaughter my people — my blood. My family is in a perilous position, perhaps the only kingdom despised by all, Fey and human alike. And I will *not*, I will *never*, allow the same fate to—” His voice broke, and he cut himself off abruptly. Athalena put her hand on his, and I watched Orin look to his brother, a faint wrinkle of concern between his brows.

Ezra let out a breath, collected himself, and looked back to us. “So I ask you not to sit there and tell me how I should protect my family. Trust that I am *very* well aware of which weapons are drawn at my back, whether they are held by humans, or held by you.”

Beside me, Ishqa leaned forward. I could already imagine the words that would come out of his mouth next, smooth as butter and sweet as honey, the product of decades of training in politics.

But he did not get the chance to speak, because Caduan did first.

“I know as well as you do,” he said, “how it feels to have your people targeted. I have none left to fight for. And I would not wish that upon Niraja, just as I would not wish it upon any other House. I do not know what my word is worth as the King of a nation of nineteen people and a pile of ruin. But I am certain that one day, the House of Stone will rise again. And when it does, if you help us here, I offer you our alliance for life.” He extended his hand across the table, palm up. “Exile be damned, it would be yours.”

I forgot to breathe.

The blood of a king could forge an unbreakable bond. It was an incredible offer, and one that was rarely given. My father had forged only one unbreakable alliance in his reign, and even that, he did under great duress.

Ishqa, Ashraia, and Siobhan were all looking at Caduan as if he was absolutely insane. Even Ezra seemed to be questioning it. Orin looked abjectly confused. Only Athalena

seemed to be considering it, her mouth serious and downturned.

Still, something about his offer seemed to put Ezra at ease, if only slightly.

“Your generosity is... kind. But that does not change the fact that we cannot help you, even if we wished to. We know nothing more than you do.” He lowered slowly into his chair again, returning to his glass of wine. “And so, King Iero, today your blood can remain unspilled. But your offer is appreciated, and I would like more than anyone for our Houses to live in harmony.”

It wasn't enough.

But before any of us could press further, the door squealed open, and a little blur of eggshell blue bolted into the room.

“Zora! You're not supposed to be—” Athalena's scolding was interrupted by an *oof* as the child launched herself into Athalena's lap. The little girl was perhaps no older than five summers, squirming to regard us with big, curious brown eyes. Her dark hair was styled in what were likely once-perfect ringlets, now messy and fallen. The little girl's ears, I noticed, were mostly rounded, and short like a human's, with only the faintest point.

“I apologize,” Athalena said, to us. “Our daughter is quite social.”

“Zora,” Ezra muttered, sternly, “we said that you must stay in your room.”

His eyes flicked from us, to his daughter, clearly tense for reasons I didn't quite understand. I noticed, too, that Orin had shifted forward in his chair, watching us more carefully.

“I have a son that age,” Ishqa said, with a wry smile that held none of his typical practiced polish. “Trust me, I understand it.”

“Come now,” Ezra muttered, to his daughter. “Time to return to bed.”

The girl had no interest in such a prospect. She watched me, wide-eyed. Despite myself, a smile tugged at my lips.

This, I knew, was wrong — the intermingling of Fey and human blood was a travesty, only a shade away from bestiality. But this child didn't look wrong. She looked... normal. Loved.

Ezra turned to us, oddly tense. "I apologize, but I must be getting my daughter back to bed. Our hospitality still stands. You are welcome to stay as long as you wish, speak to our scholars, and make use of our archives. But I'm afraid we have nothing more to offer you."

"Perhaps we could meet—" Ishqa started, but Ezra was already rising, his daughter in his arms.

"I don't believe we have anything further to discuss."

He didn't look back as he strode to the door. The child waved goodbye to us over his shoulder as he crossed the threshold, leaving us sitting at the table in silence.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



Zeryth's celebration ball managed to be even worse than I expected. I hated the Orders' functions well enough, but engagements thrown by the crown or by high-ranking nobles made those balls look like drunken pub parties. At least by this point in the Orders' annual ball, the drama had already begun, and it usually came in the form of someone yelling, someone crying, someone slowly removing someone else's clothes in the corner, or, most frequently, all of those things at once. Wielders, after all, tended to fall a bit far from "subtle." If nothing else, it made things interesting.

This? This just set my teeth on edge.

Long ago, I had attended many of these parties. They were always refined and tasteful, the decor beautiful but never gaudy, the music skilled but never loud, the insults cutting but always hidden between polite words. Now, one look at this party told me that Zeryth's hand was involved. The tasteful, opulent decor of traditional Crown parties was here, yes — pedestals adorned with relics and statues, impeccably neat bouquets of flowers, lanterns with flames hidden within orbs of crystal stained glass. But overlaying all of it was a new, distinctly-Zeryth flavor of decor. White roses and ribbons hung down from the ceiling, suspended above us with magic. Between them were little lights that twinkled like stars.

And there, in the center of it all, was a shimmering conjuring of the sun and the moon, so enormous that it nestled perfectly in the curve of the domed ceiling.

Ugh.

I could imagine Zeryth walking in here five hours ago, looking around at the nobility-approved decor selected by the royal planners, and saying, “This is terrific and all, but do you know what I think this *really* needs...?”

I was not the only one who noticed it. As guests entered the room, every one of them cast little glances up at the ceiling. An undercurrent of uncomfortable snickers hung in the entryway.

Nobility knew. They always knew, when something didn’t belong.

Those were the same sounds they would make at my mother at these parties, just low enough that they could pretend they were being subtle and just loud enough to ensure they weren’t. Disgusting.

“General Farlione.”

A hand clapped my shoulder. I stiffened and resisted the urge to slap it away. A doughy, mustachioed face grinned at me. The man was ten years older than he had been when I last saw him, but no less obnoxious.

“Congratulations on your victory, General. I always knew you were headed for big things. Two of Ara’s greatest wars, now, ended thanks to you.” He lifted his mostly-empty wine glass — surely not his first, despite the early hour. “Your father would have been proud.”

I made a noncommittal noise and looked for escape.

“Of course, it is a shame...” The man’s voice lowered — poorly — as he leaned towards me conspiratorially. “A bit of a waste, isn’t it? Such a great victory for a nameless king. Did you know his mother was a whore?”

Amazing. They hated Zeryth for all the wrong things.

“Actually, Lord Quinlan,” I said, “some might say the only *good* thing about Aldris is that he doesn’t come from—”

I was interrupted as an arm delicately slid around mine. “There you are. I thought you would have skipped.”

I turned. Whatever barbed words I'd been preparing left me all at once.

Ascended above. That woman did know how to make an entrance.

Tisaanah wore a gown unlike anything that I'd ever seen before. It was deep red — of course — and accented with gold embroidery, which lined the double-breasted bodice that resembled the cut of a military jacket. The shoulders were sharp, and the sleeves open, exposing burgundy silk gloves that reached her elbows. A thick gold belt cinched her waist, and below it the dress fell to a layered skirt that gradually darkened to black. It was open in the front, revealing heeled, polished boots that laced to her knees.

I cocked an eyebrow. Tisaanah gave me a sweet smile.

What a show-off.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," she purred. "But we are late for a very important meeting."

My eyebrows arched in exaggerated surprise. "Ascended, you're right, it *does* seem like the right time to be late for a very important meeting." I gave Quinlan a tight smile. "It was a pleasure, sir."

We didn't give him time to say anything more. Tisaanah and I strode across the ballroom, her arm casually resting over mine.

"You were about to say something very rude to that man," she said.

"You couldn't even hear me."

"I didn't need to."

"He deserved it."

"I'm sure he did."

She smiled at me — a real smile, not the delicate act she had given Quinlan. I wondered if she realized how much the intensity of it outshone her performances. Combined with the

rest of her appearance tonight, that smile made her look as if she could conquer worlds.

I caught a glimpse of the two of us in one of the long mirrors on the other side of the room, and realized that we complimented each other perfectly. I wore a double-breasted military jacket, rendered in dark violet, with red and gold in the trim and at the cuffs. Her outfit looked as if it could be the brighter, more feminine mate to mine.

Damn. She really thought of everything.

Her eyes met mine in the mirror.

“You are staring. Do you like my dress?”

“I don’t know. It’s a bit conventional.” I glanced at a nobleman who wasn’t even bothering to hide his rubbernecking. “Surprised you didn’t go for something a little more attention-grabbing.”

“You know me. So shy.”

She batted her eyelashes, and I rolled my eyes.

The truth was, every set of eyes slid towards her, some in subtle glances, some in outright stares. Tisaanah soaked up their attention, but those looks made my jaw clench.

This was different from the Orders’ ball. That night, she had dressed to show off her scars and force members of the Orders to acknowledge the brutality of what had happened to her. Tonight? Tonight she dressed to appear powerful, playing off the whispers of what people had said about her — about *us* — in the wake of the battle. And yes, there was some admiration in these looks. But there was also fear and petty judgement.

This, after all, was high society. And while even the most snobbish members of the Orders could begrudgingly admire skill no matter where it came from, high society feared what was different and judged what they deemed to be inferior. And there was *nothing* they hated more than someone who “didn’t know their place.”

I hear she was a slave, they'd whisper. A whore, even. Can you imagine? A whore girl serving our beggar king? How funny. How fitting...

We passed one such whisper in the crowd, just loud enough to hear, and despite myself I stopped short, giving the couple a glare so sharp it almost brought flames to my fingertips.

“Excuse us,” I said, “we didn’t quite catch that. Care to repeat yourself?”

The couple stared at us, wide eyed. I wasn’t feeling particularly inclined to let it go until I felt Tisaanah give my arm a gentle tug.

“Max,” she murmured, a gentle warning in her voice. I gave the couple a withering stare and turned away.

“You’re the reason they get to be at this ridiculous party,” I muttered. “They should be thanking you.”

“There have always been people who saw me as less. And there always will be.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“When does right matter?”

“You deserve better.”

That was always the thing, those three words. *You deserve better*. Tisaanah had always deserved better, because she was better than all of them. Better than the people at this party, better than Zeryth Aldris, better than the bastard who had nearly killed her. Better than every last one of them.

Something flickered in Tisaanah’s face, a wince that she hid so well that most wouldn’t have noticed it. But over the last six months I had learned to read the invisible movements in Tisaanah’s expressions, no matter how good her performances were.

She leaned back against the wall, and I stepped closer. Again. And then her scent of citrus surrounded me, and my face was inches from hers, my arms against the wall behind her.

“You deserve everything,” I murmured. I bowed my head, breathing in the scent of her hair, her skin, and swept my lips over her cheek, right where tan skin met white.

She gave a weak laugh. “Everything?”

“Everything.” My lips traveled to her jaw, and I felt her let out a little breath.

“Such big promises,” she murmured.

My mouth moved to her throat... her earlobe...

Her exhale became a little less silent, and with one barely-audible sound, the rest of the world fell away.

“Well, aren’t you two just so... *cute*.”

Not *all* the world, apparently.

Tisaanah and I abruptly pulled away from each other. Nura stood at the corner of the hall, arms crossed, looking unamused. She wore a body-hugging white gown with long sleeves and a high neck, sleek and unadorned.

“Zeryth wants to see us,” she said. “Though no time to wait for you to take a cold bath, I’m afraid.”

None needed, after that sentence. Nothing killed a mood like Zeryth’s beckoning hand.

Tisaanah’s brow furrowed.

“Why?” she asked.

“I don’t know. He’s in his personal wing, apparently.”

I paused. “He’s in his rooms and not swanning around his own victory party?”

Nura’s lips thinned in a way that told me she, too, found this odd.

“He is indeed.”

I did not have a good feeling about this.

The three of us exchanged a look, all clearly thinking the same thing. Without another word, we went to the stairs.

I HAD BEEN to the king's wing in the Palace several times during the Ryvenai War. It was a beautiful place, in the same stuffy sort of way that everything in the Palace was beautiful. The wing was large enough that it was more than the size of a house all on its own, and certainly much larger than Zeryth's apartment in the Towers. The central room had a hammered glass ceiling that cast fragmented sunlight across the black marble tile of the floor. It was sparsely decorated, and what furniture *was* here was haphazardly placed around the room, as if Zeryth had ordered Sesri's things taken away and still had not replaced them.

He did not acknowledge us when we arrived. He stood at the window, looking out over his party guests scattered across the patio, his back to us.

The door closed, and the three of us stood there awkwardly, while Zeryth did not turn.

Nura cleared her throat.

“What was so important?”

“I've never thought of myself as naive.”

Zeryth's voice was oddly quiet — his typical charming drawl replaced with a raw rasp that made the hairs stand on the back of my neck.

“Seems like it would be impossible, to be naive, coming from the world that made me,” he went on. “How could you ever be *naive* when you watched people starve to death at six years old? But at least survival was transactional. That was my mistake. I thought all of *this* was transactional. I thought it would be fucking simple. If I made the right moves. If I fucked the right people. If I wore the right clothing, the right title, the right woman on my arm. That would make me *powerful*.”

And then, at last, he turned to us.

I almost cursed.

He looked like a walking corpse. Dark shadows smeared his eyes, little black veins expanding like spiderwebs clinging to pallid Valtain skin. He was gaunt, like somehow he'd managed to lose another ten pounds since I'd last seen him. His hair hung in limp, white tendrils around his face, unbrushed and untamed, looking as if it hadn't been washed in a little too long.

Zeryth had never seemed to carry the crown well, as if he didn't quite like the way it felt on his head. But now it looked comically out of place, like an image sliced from a grand painting and slapped onto a death portrait.

His eyes landed on Tisaanah.

"But it isn't transactional, is it, Tisaanah? It doesn't matter what you trade away. And I did trade it all away. All of it, just to get that prized apple with the world carved into its flesh." His smile soured, and he glanced over his shoulder, at the partygoers. "Only to find that it's fucking *rotten* inside."

"Zeryth," Tisaanah said, quietly, "perhaps you aren't feeling well."

He let out a sound that barely qualified as a laugh. "Of course I'm not. I'm surrounded by traitors."

He looked to Nura. Then me. Then to the partygoers outside. And then, at last, back to Tisaanah.

"I have a gift for you, Tisaanah."

I had a terrible, terrible feeling about this.

Zeryth motioned to the guard at one of the doors. The doors opened, and two figures were dragged into the room and pushed to their knees before us.

One was a finely dressed woman, golden hair escaping a once-neat binding and spilling over her face.

The other was a wiry young man with copper hair. When he lifted his head, I saw that he was disfigured — a split across his lip, and two triangular holes where his nose should be.

Tisaanah drew in a sharp breath.

“Vos,” she whispered.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

TISAANAH



My hands clenched at my sides, my heart racing. Vos looked up at me through tendrils of his messy red hair, a sneer at his lip.

Zeryth dismissed the guards, sending them out of the apartment. Then he smiled at me. Every time I met his eyes, something noxious slithered beneath my skin. Reshaye recoiled in distaste.

{He is poisoned,} it whispered.

Poisoned?

{For too long, he has been toying with magics beyond him. He is dangerous.}

“Tisaanah,” Zeryth said, “why did you lie about how you were taken?”

I froze, my eyes flicking to Vos. “Why is he here?”

Zeryth’s smile did not waver. “He is here because he offered you up to Atrick Aviness. With the help, of course, of Lady Erksan here — ever-loyal friend of Aviness.”

My jaw clenched.

Vos. *Gods*. Of course.

Every time I thought of my kidnapping, I had to fight back my anger. Now, with Vos on his knees in front of me, it was nearly impossible to choke down.

{How you insisted it could be different. And yet, I have watched hundreds of years pass, and I know it is the same}

story, so many times. So many betrayals.} Reshaye coiled around my hurt. Dangerous. I carefully kept control away from its grasp.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“Do not lie to me, Tisaanah.”

“I did not know that either of these people were involved.”

The truth, technically.

Zeryth’s lip twitched.

“Then it must be quite a shock,” he said. He leaned closer, and I was so distracted by the unnerving gracelessness of his movements and the veins around his eyes that I nearly jumped when something cold pressed to my hands.

I looked down.

It was a dagger.

“How lucky for you, then,” he said, wandering back to the window, “that you’ll get to have your justice.”

Lady Erksan fell against the floor, weeping. “No, please, no, no, no...”

But Vos met my gaze directly, lifting his chin as if to present me his throat. His face was still, his image defiant, but I wasn’t fooled by the way he looked. Neither of them shielded their minds. Their terror consumed the air. Erksan’s fear was like that of a startled animal, brittle and fragile, befitting of someone who had never known suffering. But Vos’s was heavy with dark knowledge. He was afraid of death, yes. But he knew what pain was. He knew what it was to suffer.

{It would be a mercy to give him death after all he has endured. To give him the fate that he deserves, for what he did to us. He bends beneath the weight of it.}

It would be a lie to say that a part of me didn’t crave vengeance. Reshaye found it in me, a little shard of white-hot anger. That part of me hated Vos for what he did to me.

Perhaps just as much as Vos hated me for that one lie. That one lie that destroyed his life.

I did not look away from him as I said, “Let him live.”

Reshaye’s surprise rippled, at the same moment that Zeryth’s face snapped to me.

“You begged me for his life. You sold away half your soul to ensure he was provided for. Then he turns you over to Aviness to be killed. Or tortured, or *dissected*. And you tell me ‘*Let him live?*’” He whirled to Max. “What about you, then? I take it you would just *love* to do it.”

Max was visibly tense, his jaw tight. “You’re acting insane, Zeryth.”

Zeryth barked a rough laugh. “*Insane?! I’m saner than I’ve ever been!* It’s amazing, actually, how sane getting everything you’ve ever wanted makes you.”

“Exactly,” I said. “You have everything that you want. You are the king.” I went to the window and lifted my chin, nodding to the partygoers below. “Now give them what they want. Perhaps now, they will be reluctant to love you. But show them you can be the king they need. Show them you know mercy.”

Zeryth stilled, almost thoughtful, letting out a faint scoff. “Mercy, hm? Is that what they want?”

“Your war is over, and you won,” Max said. “Take your victory, and let it be.”

Those words seemed to snap some thread of restraint in Zeryth, because every angle of his body went hard, eyes flashing, mouth twisted into a sneer.

“My war is not *over*. Not when I’m surrounded by Ascended-damned traitors. My war has barely begun.”

My stomach dropped.

Nura stepped forward, her eyes darting between us.

“We discussed this, Zeryth—”

“*We?*” he snarled. “There is no ‘*we.*’ Don’t think that I don’t know what *you* have been up to, my dear, loyal Second. Don’t think I don’t know exactly what your *help* has done to me.”

Nura’s eyes widened.

But Zeryth was back to me again before she could react. He moved in fits and starts, like a collection of limbs held together by fraying strings. “Execute them,” he commanded.

And with those words, the bind of my pact tightened around me like a noose. My fingers were forced closed around the hilt of the knife.

{*He deserves this,*} Reshaye whispered, and it would be so easy, but—

No, I didn’t want to do this. No matter what Vos had done to me.

“No,” I choked out.

Still, every muscle in my body pulled to obey Zeryth’s command. I held it off for seconds.

Then Zeryth rolled his eyes, let out a scoff, and the next thing I knew, the dagger was no longer in my grasp.

“Fine. Then stay there.”

Two smooth strides, and he was behind Lady Erksan, yanking her up by her hair, and her scream was splitting the air, and then there was blood everywhere, everywhere, everywhere, spattering across my face, the floor, the window. Her scream became a gargle. Zeryth’s beautiful white suit was awash in crimson.

The body fell in a heap. Vos scrambled away from it, slipping on blood.

Do something.

But Zeryth’s command froze me: *Stay. Stay. Stay.*

Zeryth reached for Vos, the blade lifting—

And then Max was between them, his hand catching Zeryth's wrist.

"Is this really how you want to start your reign?" he said. "Hiding from the people you rule and drowning in paranoia?"

"That's a rich statement, coming from you. After you lied to me as you have." His gaze darkened with feral hatred. "You told me the stories from Threll were exaggerations. And you tell me that I'm not surrounded by traitors, when you *are* one of them?"

"I never—"

"*You lied to me.*" The two of them were locked like that, each pushing against the grip of the other. Magic began to crackle at Zeryth's skin — strange, sickened magic unlike any I had ever seen. Pain flickered across Max's face.

"I thought I needed you," Zeryth sneered. "Needed your name, your nobility. So pathetic."

Nura began to approach and Zeryth barked, without looking away from Max, "*Don't you fucking move.*"

She lurched to a stop. She couldn't fight his commands, either, whether it be due to his magic or her own pact, or both. His magic was toxic in the air, so thick my vision blurred with it.

Stay. Stay. Stay.

As a last resort, my magic reached for Zeryth's mind, and I nearly gasped.

He was so, so far gone.

His mind was a maggot-infested, rotting thing. He didn't even bother to shield his thoughts, if they could even be called that. There was nothing left but pain and rage. He didn't care that he had won. Whatever he had hoped to claim still eluded him. Whatever hole within him he had hoped to patch with the stitches of power still gaped.

A horrible realization fell over me: he would *never* stop. This was a man capable of anything.

I tensed, bracing for the worst.

But Zeryth drew in a long breath. Then let it out. He dropped the knife. Stepped back.

I almost let myself feel relief.

“The truth is,” Zeryth said, calmly, “it’s a relief not to need you anymore.”

I wouldn’t have had time to react, even if I could.

The strike was like a crack of lightning, splitting the room in two. Pain cleaved through my head, my vision going white. When I could see again, Max was on the ground, blood soaking his shirt. Zeryth stood over him, noxious magic peeling from his skin, as thick as his hatred.

And I still could not move.

Max countered fast, pushing himself to his feet, fire at his fingertips. The flames crawled up Zeryth’s clothing.

But Zeryth just smiled.

He lunged again.

His magic was even stronger, this time, knocking the breath from my lungs. Max fought back, fire swelling. He was a good fighter. Zeryth’s magic was strong but his body was a shadow of what it once had been.

But that magic —

Another burst of it had Max on the ground again. This time he was slower to rally.

Zeryth would kill him.

I needed to do something.

But the pact hobbled me. Everything in me roared to comply — to serve Zeryth’s commands. To protect him.

My blood pact. Mine... but...perhaps...

An idea bloomed out of nothing but desperation.

Reshaye. Help me. The pact that binds me is mine, not yours. Together, we can stop this.

Reshaye examined my panic. And then it said, coldly, *{Why?}*

Max was on the ground. Fire thickened the air, and it was thickened more by Zeryth's magic. And Zeryth just kept coming.

{Perhaps he deserves this. He abandoned me.}

My hatred bubbled over.

You are a monster. Is that all you think about? The people who have wronged you?

Reshaye snarled. *{You know nothing about what I have suffered.}*

You are with me because I know EVERYTHING about what you have suffered!

My memories assaulted us. Esmaris's hands on my skin. His whip at my back. The betrayal, in my heart and in his. My blood on Zeryth's contract.

{I loved him and he left me. Even after I gave him everything that I had to offer. Just as they always do. Just as you will.}

This anger is not love. Love is selfless. And I think you knew that, once. I think the part of you that I saw that day at the Mikov estate understood.

Another strike. Max was on his knees, swaying. Everything was fire and shadow. How many blows did Max have left in him?

I wouldn't let this happen. Every muscle in my body strained. Reshaye examined my desperation, confused.

{Your life is bound to Zeryth's. And you still would act against him? Even if it meant sacrificing your life?}

Max's eyes flicked to me. He would not kill Zeryth, not if there was even a chance it would result in my death. But Zeryth would kill Max. He would kill thousands more. He would never stop.

I did not need to answer.

{I see,} Reshayé said, with an odd calm.

Something clicked into place.

It happened fast. I lifted my hand. Magic sparked at my skin. Zeryth was yanked across the room, his body colliding with mine. Together, we fell to the ground.

At first, Zeryth's gaunt face was dark with fury. He collapsed on top of me, a snarl on his lips, so close he could have kissed me. Reshayé's smile seeped across my face slowly.

"You are right, foolish king," my voice whispered, my accent gone.

Zeryth's rage gave way to confusion, gave way to pain, gave way to fear.

Fear, as he realized that my blade was buried between his ribs.

Reshayé caressed his face like a lover. Decay trailed my fingertips, consuming skin, muscle, bone.

"You were *naive*," I purred.

I felt one beautiful moment of satisfaction as I watched Zeryth die. And I thought that maybe, he really *had* been bluffing about the extent of his power — maybe the curse that bound my life to his was a lie, all along.

My eyes found Max's as he struggled to his feet. He looked *terrified*.

It's alright, I wanted to tell him. *I'm fine. See?*

But then something grabbed me, like a monster reaching up from beneath the sea to drag me down.

Less than a second, and I was gone.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE



“They will not help us,” Siobhan said, pacing the length of the room. “We should move on immediately. The less time we remain here, the better.”

We gathered in the sitting room of the guest suite that Ezra and Athalena had given us. The windows spanned the length of the room, its frame covered in winding ivy, overlooking the city of Niraja and a star-scattered sky. A beautiful view, though none of us took the time to appreciate it.

“I’m inclined to agree,” Ishqa said. “They are clearly not cooperative to our cause.”

Caduan frowns. “I don’t think that’s necessarily true,” he said, and Ashraia let out a scoff, throwing his hands up.

“Of course it is. Why are we surprised by this? A bunch of heretic half-breeds wouldn’t understand or care about our plight.”

“But they know why this is happening,” I said. “I know they do. Did you see Athalena’s face? She knew something. It was Ezra who didn’t want to talk.”

“Can we blame him?” Siobhan muttered, and Ishqa let out a small noise of agreement, one that was almost a wry laugh.

She was right. I couldn’t bring myself to think of Ezra and Athalena’s family as — as Ashraia had put it — “heretic half-breeds,” but it was undeniable that they had little reason to help us. A knot of guilt that I couldn’t quite untangle formed in my stomach. Perhaps it had been foolish to come here, and

the sooner we left, the less chance we had of our ill-judgement being discovered.

“We gave up a lot to come here,” I muttered. “I hate to waste it.”

I wandered to the window and looked out. The city cascaded below us in steps, the flickering lights of lanterns illuminating windows and moving figures in the streets below. If I looked closely, I could still see people laughing and chatting in the streets below. In one of the nearby balconies, I watched two old men smoke pipes and drink wine.

“It’s different here,” I murmured, “than I thought it would be. It’s...”

“Nicer,” Caduan said.

I shot him a curious glance. All day, I had been watching him, waiting for a reaction that didn’t come. “I thought it would be hard for you to come here. To see all these humans.”

“Don’t you hate them?” Siobhan asked, quietly.

Caduan’s eyes did not leave the window.

“I thought I would. But I got here and...” He gestured to the scene outside. “I look at this, and I see a world absent of the hatred that destroyed my home. There’s a certain... hope in that.”

“It is a fantasy,” Ishqa muttered. “I knew Ezra, once, long ago. He was a good warrior and leader. But he is living in a dream world now, and he knows it, even if his wife and children do not.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” I said, and Ishqa gave me that look — that kind that was ever-so-slightly pitying.

“Perhaps it is a nice fantasy. But a fantasy nonetheless. Nature was not made for such a union. He will watch his wife grow old and die, and his children, and his children’s children. The garden he is tending may be beautiful right now, but he will have to watch it wither. And that’s if he doesn’t have to watch others come burn it first.”

His words hurt more than it seemed they should. I pressed my fingers to the glass and looked down at the city. “But isn’t having built something worth more than the fear of it being destroyed?”

“I think it is.”

The sound of the voice had us all whirling to the doorway. Athalena stood there, a single flame hovering at her fingertips. She was a Wielder, I realized.

Her gaze flicked to Ishqa. “You should feel very lucky, now, that your wife has a kinder heart than you do.”

Ishqa only bowed his head. “My words were rash and cruel,” he said. “I apologize, I only—”

“You were speaking the truth as you saw it. I can’t pretend that many others don’t see it the same way.” She glanced to me, and to Caduan. “But I’m glad to see that some of my guests don’t look at my family and see nothing but nature’s mistakes.”

“I—” Ishqa started, but she waved him away.

“I don’t need your apologies.” She turned to Caduan and stepped closer, searching his face.

“You meant your offer,” she said. “Didn’t you?”

Caduan inclined his chin. “I did.”

“If I tell you this, I need your assurance that my home will be protected if the humans come after us.”

“If you tell us what we need,” I said, “the humans won’t be coming after anyone anymore.”

She winced. “I hope that is true.” Then she went to the table in the center of the room and knelt down, producing a piece of parchment from her pocket and unfolding it. The paper was so large that it covered nearly the entire table. It was a map — a very old one, painted in now-faded ink. Near the top, I recognized the Fey lands — the House of Nautilus, the House of Reeds, the House of Roiled Waves. Further north, the boundaries got wobblier and more ill-defined, as if the cartographer knew that there was *something* there but wasn’t

entirely sure what. Towards the center of the map was the island of Niraja. And then further south, there were the human lands, boundaries separating nations that I knew very little about.

“There is a reason,” she said, “why this is all happening right now. The human nations are embroiled in war. I heard only stories, but it sounds as if it might be some of the worst bloodshed they have seen in many years.” She swept her hand over several human nations to the south. “All of these countries are involved. Three large nations are attacking the others, attempting to conquer them. Some of these kingdoms have already fallen. You see, some societies have advanced their use of magic more quickly than others.”

“The return of human magic has shifted the odds,” Ashraia murmured, and Athalena nodded.

“Yes, drastically. Some of these nations were at the mercy of others for centuries, since they had smaller militaries or weaker economies. But now? The power struggle here changed very quickly. Many have lost their homes. And that leaves them with only two hopes. One is to find a new home, one where their conquerors cannot touch them. And the other is to make themselves more powerful than their assailants, and take over once again.”

Make themselves more powerful. That was exactly what Caduan suspected they were doing, when he examined the body of the deformed Fey from the House of Reeds.

“How do you know all of this?” Siobhan asked.

“Some, from our whisperers that still circulate among the human kingdoms. Some, from the traders that pass through. And some...” She paused, and when she spoke again, her voice was tighter.

“We had visitors, around four months ago. A group of humans seeking refuge after their home was destroyed. We had never accepted so many humans into our walls at once before, but none of us could bear to turn them away. They were here for two weeks before I realized...their intentions were not what they claimed.” She swallowed, eyes going

distant — then cleared her throat and gestured to the map. “They attempted to steal this map from us.”

I looked closer at the map. Different nations had different symbols on them. I realized, slowly, that many of the symbols corresponded with nations that had been attacked. The House of Stone. The House of Reeds. Even Yithara.

“What do these mean?” I asked, pointing to the marks that adorned each of those nations.

“Even my husband is several hundred years too young to have ever known the true purpose of this map.” Her brow furrowed. “But myths claim that it marks hidden pools of magic, specific places where it is stronger. Or perhaps, where magical artifacts are hidden. The stories vary.” She shook her head. “To be honest, I suspect that they are all more fiction than fact. But I’m not certain how much that matters. All that matters is that the humans are desperate, and they *believe* it could be true. Even a sliver of a chance is enough to drive them to...”

“Genocide?” Caduan said, quietly.

And Athalena was so still, so silent, for such a long moment that I wondered if perhaps she wouldn’t answer.

“Heinous things,” she whispered, at last. “*Heinous* things. The humans that we welcomed into our walls...” Her voice broke. “They murdered one of my children. I heard the screams, and I ran into my daughter’s room to find them pinning her to the ground. There was blood—”

Here, she choked, as if her words were too sharp to swallow. Still, she did not lift her eyes from the table. “There was blood everywhere. They cut open her wrists. There were two Wielders, a Valtain and a Solarie, and they were doing some spell, something to— to *harness* her, to turn my sweet child into something—”

She stopped herself, abruptly, and I had to blink away a memory that assaulted me all at once — my father holding me down, his hands at my throat. I fought the sudden, overwhelming urge to vomit.

Athalena turned to us. “I made them talk,” she spat, her mouth twisted into a sneer. “I made them tell me what they were doing. And they told me of the legends that they were following — unfounded ones, like those etched into this map. Stories of Fey blood having powerful magical properties if Wielded or eaten or... or changed. They said that they were told that half-blood blood was the most powerful of all. That it could be used to enhance the power of its Wielder. That my *halfbreed child's* life was worth so little when weighed against that of their nations.”

Her voice was raw with pain. Human or not... I felt it, too. And I was so lost in it that I didn't even think about the implications of what she was saying. Not until Ishqa said, quietly, “Like an Essnera?”

I could feel his stare. I felt as if all of the blood had suddenly left my hands. Beside me, Caduan stiffened.

“I don't know,” Athalena said. “I don't even care. To me it sounds as if it all could be a pile of storybook horse shit. Humans have unparalleled ability to believe in things. It's what makes us powerful, makes our society advance as it has.” Her gaze went far away. “I always thought I was so lucky to have found Ezra. A Fey man who believes in things with his whole self, just as humans do. It is a beautiful thing. But it is also dangerous. Humans will follow a sweet lie to the ends of the earth. They will die for it, and they will kill for it.”

Her eyes found ours again — brighter, sharper, deadlier.

“And this is what I know. The humans are desperate. They have nowhere else to go. And they will not stop. They will never stop. And I know that you may think humans are small and weak, but they will never stop adapting, never stop innovating. A true war between the human and Fey nations will be catastrophic. Millions of people will die. I know this in my bones. But...”

She reached into her pocket and withdrew a heavily creased piece of parchment. This she laid on the table. It was a letter.

“What is that?” I asked.

“This is a letter from the leaders of a coalition of human nations,” she said. “My husband does not know that I have this, and I would like to keep it that way.”

I picked up the letter and unfolded it, skimming it.

“They will be meeting, soon. On an island to the south, off the coasts,” she said. “I took this letter from one of the people who came here. The leaders will all be there, including those leading this mission.”

“Why didn’t you tell Ezra about this?” I asked, and for a moment, Athalena looked so overwhelmingly sad.

“My husband wears his smile with ease, but the death of our daughter has bled him dry. Even for the stone, it hurts to watch the garden wither.”

Ishqa’s gaze slipped away, ashamed.

“He didn’t want to accept the humans to begin with. I will bear that guilt for the rest of my life. But now, he is even more fearful of losing his family. I am, too, but I know that it will happen if we don’t take action. I want you to do it, even though I cannot.”

“And what do you expect us to do at this meeting?” Ashraia asked.

“I know that some wish for peace, not endless war. You could convince them, bargain with them. Broker a treaty. Right now, they see you as fauna, not people.”

For a woman who had appeared so reasonable, this seemed like the suggestion of an optimistic child.

But then her face hardened, rage rising in her eyes. “Or you can slaughter the leaders where they stand, and watch their headless armies fall apart.”

Killing the men who had done such terrible things did not seem like a bad idea at all.

Athalena stood. “All I ask is that Niraja remains protected. And that we remain out of this.” Pain rippled across her face. “We have already made such painful sacrifices. And I hope that no one, not Fey nor human, has to bear another.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR



I felt as if I was watching myself from the outside.

When Tisaanah hit the ground, someone shouted — was it me? I watched myself scramble across the floor to her, stumbling over Zeryth's body, slipping on his warm blood. I gathered her in my arms, feeling for a pulse, for a breath, for anything.

She didn't respond.

I watched myself clutch this lifeless body, shout at it in increasing panic — *Tisaanah, can you hear me, Tisaanah, open your eyes, Tisaanah, what were you fucking thinking, you insufferable woman, why did you do that* — and a single thought solidified:

This is the end. The world will be different after this.

Because every time I thought of a future, it wore Tisaanah's face. If she died, it would die with her.

Tisaanah did not move.

And then the world snapped back into focus.

No. I was not ready to let her go.

I scrambled for my ink and parchment, buried in my pocket. Unfolded it. Scrawled a Stratagram, somehow, with shaking hands, and held Tisaanah close as the world dissolved around us.

It was a bad land. A chair and a coffee table crashed to the floor where I had fallen on top of them. Several voices let out

shrieks or horrified gasps — of course they did, because two bloody figures had just shown up in the middle of this seedy Meriata coffee shop.

“What is all of this Ascended-damned—”

Eomara threw back the curtain to the offices. Her eyes went round.

“Help me,” I ground out.

“Max, what in the—”

“*Now, Eomara. Please.*”

She looked at my panicked face, then the body in my arms.

“Get in here.”



THERE WAS a cacophony of crashes as Eomara unceremoniously cleared her desk with a burst of magic, then motioned for me to put Tisaanah there. Immediately, the dark mahogany was bright with blood, mine and Tisaanah’s and Zeryth’s all smeared together.

Distantly, I heard Erik utter a curse and some frantic question that blurred in the background, and Eomara snap at him to be quiet.

I could look at nothing but the stillness of Tisaanah’s chest.

“What happened? Is it— *move*, damn it, I can’t look at her if you insist on standing in my way.” Eomara leaned over Tisaanah, nudging me aside. Whatever she saw in Tisaanah’s face made her give me a grave glance.

“This is it, isn’t it? What you came here to talk about.”

Erik hovered nearby, one of Tisaanah’s wrists in his hand. “Oh, this doesn’t look good.”

“Enough, Erik. Max, is it?”

My mouth was so dry I could barely answer. “Tell me what I can do.”

Erik dropped Tisaanah's wrist. "Ascended above, she's *dead*."

"Erik, *enough!*" When Eomara pushed up one of Tisaanah's sleeves, her eyebrows lurched at the scars that now adorned the insides of her forearms.

"You said it would be an energy pit," I said. "The curse. And Vardir said something about mixing our magic— that it would be possible to— to *give* her what it's taking—"

She shook her head. "No. Not possible. It'll kill both of you."

"I don't give *two shits* about what's not possible, Eomara. And you don't, either. That's why I came here."

Eomara gave me a long, hard look, her mouth thinned to a stern line. Her hand was still around Tisaanah's wrist, thumb pressed to her pulse, a pulse that I knew was not beating, and every second that terrible silence went on, the farther away Tisaanah slipped.

We didn't have time for uncertainty.

I opened my second eyelids, and power roared through me like sparks taking to a pile of kindling.

Erik cursed and leapt halfway across the room, and Eomara's eyes went round.

"Maxantarius, what have you—"

"*Don't tell me what's not possible*, Eomara."

After a slight hesitation, Eomara reached for my arm. I felt faint magic pulsing at her touch — her magic reaching out for mine, testing it, examining it.

When her gaze met mine again, the decision was made.

"The curse that's taking her demands life itself," she said. "Maybe... this magic you have can go deep enough to help displace that cost, but the cost will be fucking *high*, Max. I need you to understand that. We might not know exactly what you're giving up for years. Decades, even."

No hesitation. "I'll do it."

A certain softness flickered across Eomara's face — perhaps pity. She gave me a sharp nod, then whirled back to the bookcases, rummaging through packed drawers. Then she shoved a small bottle of blue liquid into my hands. “Drink. All of it. It'll either kill you or keep you alive.”

The stuff tasted like poison that someone had already pissed out and re-bottled. Two gulps in, and a shock of ice pierced my mind. Three gulps, and I could barely make my thoughts form a straight line. By the time I finished, the world was vibrating.

Eomara leaned over Tisaanah, pulling a knife from the desk. She opened a slit across Tisaanah's palm.

“I wish you'd thought to bring your healer friend,” Eomara muttered. “That handsome one.”

Then she took my hand in hers, and pulled the dagger across my glowing skin. Even as I drew upon this magic, even as my body was coated with flames themselves, I still bled the same. My blood was bright red over flame-touched skin.

“Fascinating,” Eomara muttered. She picked up Tisaanah's hand, too, so she held us both, and leveled a serious gaze at me.

“When you do this,” she said, “you could feed her your magic. Give her enough of it to grab onto and replenish what the curse is taking from her. That's the theory. Or—”

I didn't care about the *or*.

I reached for Tisaanah's bleeding hand. I could have sworn I could *feel* her, even though as a Solarie, my magic wasn't well-suited to such things. But I knew her. I had memorized the sound of her silent movements and all the thoughts she didn't say.

This was her. She was still there.

Eomara let out a little gasp.

My gaze flicked down. My blood was a thread of crimson, now floating in the air of its own accord, like a thread suspended in water. And Tisaanah's was, too, rising into the

air and reaching for mine. For a split second, they dangled there, like two fissures about to collide.

And then I slammed my palm against Tisaanah's, clutching her hand so tightly my knuckles went white—

And I didn't let go.

Not even as I doubled over in pain. Not even as the room went blindingly hot and bright as my flames flared in a wild burst. Not even as my blood itself seemed to rebel against me, like some noxious poison was invading me and draining me all at once.

I didn't let go.

Because through all of that, through the pain and the black that I could now see crawling up my skin, I felt it. Distant, and fading farther still, but unmistakable.

Her.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

TISAANAH



Living as I did, one had to become comfortable with the possibility of death. I was so young when we fled Nyzerene. *Don't look, Tisaanah*, my mother had told me as we ran, my face buried in her shoulder. *Don't look*. And I didn't.

If I had, what would I have seen? My home destroyed? Steel buried in flesh? Would I have seen my father's body, or the dying that we left behind? Would I have understood death, then?

But my mother told me not to look, and I didn't, and so it remained intangible for a little while longer. I was seven years old when that illusion of safety shattered. My mother told me, as she always did, not to wander too far from our village. But this time, I did not listen. So my friend and I crept away to explore. We came across an encampment of Threllian soldiers. It was dinnertime, so they were gathered around a fire. Their food was left lazily unguarded by their tents — there was fruit and meat, even blueberries, which I loved and had not had in nearly a year. We'd take it, we decided, utterly certain in our quickness and cleverness. How many times, after all, had we played this game of theft with each other? That's all it was to us. A game.

We crept from beyond the rock and stole one piece of meat, then two. I was the one that got greedy — I was the one who wanted the blueberries. So we lingered, just a little longer than we should have. The soldiers saw us, and we *ran*, the game suddenly real. I ran so fast that by the time I got to the encampment, my legs could barely carry me. I made it all the

way to my own mother's embrace before I realized that my friend's mother stood alone, her arms outstretched for a child that would not come back.

Her scream was cut short by her own hand clamped over her mouth — even in such grief, she understood that we couldn't be heard. We needed to move the encampment that night, swiftly. I was tucked safely into bed the next night when some of the men went back to see if there were remains or if the child had been taken. My friend, apparently, had not been worth the trouble. I remember the shape of his shadow-wrapped little body as I peered from the slit in the tent, and a cold truth settled over me.

A shadow stood beside me, and for the first time, I saw its face. All along, it had been matching my steps. I just hadn't been looking.

Never again. From then on, I stared death in the eye.

So I thought that when this moment came, I would not be afraid.

Foolish of me. I *was* afraid. I was terrified.

My last thought, before the noose of Zeryth's curse tightened around my throat, was a wild frustration. There was still *so much* — so much that I needed to do. I saw that little girl in the back of a cart, and all the other little girls just like her, chained, gagged. I saw Serel's smile, and all the smiles just like it that would be snuffed out forever. I saw a thousand mothers with empty, outstretched arms.

There was so much I needed to do.

And there was so much I wanted. Gods, how I *wanted*. Max's embrace, his sarcastic laugh, that sidelong glance that I always knew was meant only for me. The sun on my face, the taste of raspberries on my lips, a silly joke that was barely funny. And my life would end like this, right in the middle of a sentence, right in the middle of a word, a half-stroked letter.

I saw my hands in the golden grass of the Nyzrenese plains.

Backwards. Again.

I heard Reshaye's whisper:

{You do not wish to go.}

"I don't," I whispered.

{Why? The world has been nothing but cruel to you.}

Yes. But now, in my final seconds, I didn't think of Esmaris. I didn't think of the slavers who had taken my mother away, or the soldiers who had killed my friend all those years ago, or Zeryth. I thought only of all the love I had for everything I was leaving behind, spilling out like nectar wine running over the edge of a cup, with nowhere left to go.

I thought of what Sammerin had told me, sitting in that cafe weeks ago, smoke rolling from his lips.

"Because my love is stronger than the pain," I murmured. "Because it's worth it. Always worth it. And I didn't have enough time."

Maybe there would have never been enough.

The thread finished unraveling. The pain lit me up like flames. Within them, I saw Max's face. Gods, I hoped this wouldn't kill him. He had so much left to do.

The thread kept pulling, dragging me into the darkness, and it didn't matter if I was ready or not — this was death.

I closed my eyes.

But something stopped me, like a hand grabbing onto mine.

I blinked. A face appeared before me — a face I could *almost*, but not quite, see, as if my eyes couldn't grab onto its edges. And yet, I recognized it.

Reshaye's face was more real, more human, than I had ever seen it before. I could almost make out the color of its eyes. Violet.

{I do not understand,} it said. *{I have never understood any of it. I was always searching. I do not have what you do, or feel what you feel. But I have had time. More of it than I have ever desired.}*

I was fading. Reshaye's words floated into the air like smoke. The only thing tethering me to the world was its grasp.

Far away, I became aware of a familiar presence stretching toward me — a presence that I would recognize anywhere. A thread of magic that ran as deep as mine, and diving deeper still, reaching for me.

Max.

My heart leapt. But he was too far away. Too far to get here before death did.

Reshaye, I knew, felt it too. Its grip tightened around me.

{Always, I was searching for something,} it said. {I never knew what. But perhaps I would have found it if I had not been so quick to take time from others.}

I saw Max's family, their faces twisted in confused terror. I felt Max's grief in the time after. And I felt Reshaye's confusion and regret, stretching between us like a sea.

{The curse demands a life. I do not know if this thing that I have is a life at all. But if it is, I give it. I give it for yours.}

I was almost gone. But whatever was left of me recoiled in surprise.

Reshaye pulled me closer. Perhaps it smiled.

{You promised me death.}

A promise I had always intended to fulfill.

“Why?” I choked out. “Why did you choose me?”

{Choose? Is it a choice, for a warm body to search for shelter from the storm? You are so many pieces. I have seen so many others, the space between their fragments filled with ice or iron, so hard they can pretend they are not broken at all. But you...}

Its fingers reached deeper, caressing my mind as if in a final farewell.

{What a perfect shape,} it murmured, {for a lost soul.}

And we were out of time.

{Goodbye, Tisaanah.}

“Goodbye, Reshaye,” I whispered.

It happened fast. With the last of my strength, I drew my magic across the threads that connected Reshaye to me like a razor, slicing it from me. In the same moment, I felt Reshaye release me — felt it throw itself towards the ravenous pit.

All while the thread of light consumed me, and the draining magic released me, and suddenly, life came roaring back.

The air hit my lungs so hard it felt like a brick had been thrown onto my chest. My eyes flew open. My blood went rushing back into my veins.

I was in an unfamiliar room, lying on a cluttered table. But my eyes fell only to the person beside me, his hand clutched around mine. I did not look at our bloody hands, or our skin, which had turned black and rotted, dark veins reaching nearly to our elbows.

I looked only at Max, who was leaning over me, eyes open and dark and wet with tears. His second eyelids slid closed, and his magic withered away, and we fell upon each other, his forehead pressed to mine — weak with exhaustion and delirious relief at the way our pulses felt pressed against each other, beating the steady, miraculous song of a second chance.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX



We would, of course, go to the meeting. That had been decided quickly. This was, after all, exactly the sort of information that I was hoping that we would gain here. Now we knew the motive behind the humans' sudden aggression, and had a possible path forward for how we might meet it in kind.

But an important question still remained. We would go. But what would we do once we got there?

I hated the idea of negotiating with these people — hated it down to my bones. I wanted *blood* for what they had done.

And yet...

Killing their leaders, surely, would not avoid another war. Others would rise up to take their place. It seemed equally likely that we would find ourselves on the opposite end of a vengeance as we would find ourselves facing a scattered army that collapsed without leadership.

And even with that aside... would we be able to win such a battle? The five of us, against who-knew-how-many humans, with who-knew-what-kind-of power?

“We will crush them,” Ashraia said, after long hours of discussion wound in circles. “I do not understand why this is a debate. What else is there to do with a group who has done such things?”

“If we do that,” Caduan murmured, “we’ll only be instigating another war. Right now, we’re incidental to them. If

we do that, we become their enemy.” His thumb was tracing the curve of his lower lip, eyes lost in thought.

“I would think that you of all people would be ready to slaughter them,” Siobhan said.

“I want to win more than I want revenge.”

“Noble thought,” Ishqa said. He went to the window, face hard. “But soon, I fear, we will have lost so much that the two will become the same. There will be no revenge without victory, and no victory will be meaningful without revenge. And that is a dark, dark place to be.”



AFTER SO MANY hours of discussion, it soon became clear that we would not reach a conclusion that night. We retired, but I didn't even bother trying to sleep. My mind was too loud. Instead, I slipped out into the streets of Niraja.

The liveliness that made the city so beautiful persisted even in the middle of the night. It was too late for even the latest of night owls, and not yet close enough to dawn for the earliest of risers. Still, the birds chirped persistent, mournful songs, and the wind through the ivy sounded like breathing.

It seemed strange to think that this place was thought of by so many as dangerous and sinful. It was beautiful. I paused at a blossom growing on the vines. I thought I had seen the same one earlier that day, then closed up as if sleeping. Now, it was wide open, cerulean blue petals so bright they seemed to glow beneath the moonlight. I brushed its petals and thought of what Ishqa had said of the people here — that they were born already dying.

The blossom would be gone tomorrow. But did that make it any less beautiful?

Behind me, a twig snapped.

My awareness narrowed to the sound. This was the third time I had heard it. The first two, I had dismissed as the wind.

Not anymore. I was being followed.

Slowly, I turned. There was no one behind me, nothing but moonlight-dipped cobblestones and ivy-covered garden walls.

I was still wearing Wyshraj clothing, wrapped in swaths of chiffon. But now my hands were around my blades, which I had carefully hidden in the gathered fabric at my hips. As soon as I withdrew them, I felt a warm voice in my ear.

“I know those blades.”

I was surrounded by rolling smoke. I leapt back and whirled around, bearing my blades, pressing the tip of one beneath the throat of my attacker.

There, with my steel pressed at his jaw, was Orin. He looked utterly unmoved by the weapon at his throat and lifted his chin, peering down at me. A single drop of violet rolled down his throat.

So I hadn't been imagining things. He had been watching me at dinner.

“Why are you following me?” I snarled.

His stare sparked with anger. It came on quickly, oddly familiar, in a way I couldn't place.

“Get the knife off of me. I don't give answers to people who are threatening me. Nor spies who lie to me, and my kingdom, about who they really are.”

It was only then that I realized what I had done. I wielded black obsidian blades — there was no weapon more obviously Sidnee, or more clearly *not* Wyshraj.

Slowly, I lowered my blade, though still remained ready to strike.

Orin took two long steps back, wiping away the drop of blood on his throat and frowning down at his fingers. Then his gaze lifted to me, lingering at my weapons, and then traveling slowly up to my face.

It was strange, to be looked at that way. It wasn't lecherous. But it was... thorough.

“You are a Sidnee,” he said.

I cringed.

“The blades were only a gift.”

“Because the Sidnee are so known for giving *gifts* to the Wyshraj.”

“It was—”

But he looked as if he barely heard my argument. “You are Sareid’s daughter,” he said, quietly, “aren’t you? You so resemble her.”

Shock careened through me. “What?”

“Why are you here?” He stepped forward, and I thrust my blade up.

“*How do you know my mother?*”

He froze, raising his hands.

“She never spoke to you, then,” he said, at last. “About her time here.”

Her time *here*?

I nearly dropped my blades.

“What are you talking about?”

“Would you put down the blades first, please?”

I wasn’t about to stand here unarmed in front of a magic speaker who had just learned I was his sworn enemy — and whatever else. Orin sighed, muttered something beneath his breath, and lifted his hands. A burst of smoke furred around me, and the next thing I knew, my blades were clattering to the ground and skidding halfway down the pathway. On instinct, I almost lunged after them, but Orin shook his head.

“Not necessary,” he said. “I don’t have any intention of hurting you. Do me the honor of a conversation without weapons between us. Please.”

I didn’t like that idea at all. But what choice did I have? I scowled and turned back to him, making a show of dropping my empty hands.

“No weapons,” I said, sweetly.

He almost smiled. “Thank you.”

“How do you know my mother?” I asked, yet again.

“First, I need to know what a Sidnee Blade is doing here. With Wyshraj, no less.”

“It was an innocent deception,” I said. “Everything else we have told you is the truth. The Sidnee and the Wyshraj have forged an alliance to investigate and fight the human threat. But considering the history of the Sidnee and Nirajans...” I cleared my throat, resisting the uncomfortable instinct to check if my tattoos were still hidden. “We thought you would not welcome Sidnee.”

“An alliance?” Orin let out a bitter scoff, muttering as if to himself. “The Teirna of the House of Obsidian forming an alliance. We shall see how that turns out.”

I was growing impatient. “And what about—”

“Your mother.” Orin’s lips thinned. “Sareid was a childhood friend of mine. Long ago. And she lived here, for a time.”

My mouth fell open. Orin said this statement — this *ridiculous* statement — so simply, as if it were some unremarkable fact.

“She did not,” I said, before I could stop myself, and Orin’s brows lurched.

“Yes,” he said. “She did.”

No. Absolutely not. There must be some mistake. He had to be talking about a different Sareid, because my mother — my graceful, half-mad mother — could not possibly have lived in Niraja, of all places.

I started to shake my head.

“Sareid did not agree with the exile that was handed down to Niraja,” he said. “She did not agree with many positions in the House of Obsidian. She fought them for a long time, but then she got tired of fighting. So, she came here.”

“She couldn’t,” I rasped. “She was a Teirness. She wouldn’t leave.”

“She did indeed. She could have made the House of Obsidian a whole new kingdom, if she wanted. Perhaps one that coexisted with... all of this.”

He gestured out, towards the Nirajan skyline, but I shook my head.

“She wouldn’t do that.”

Orin gave me a curious look, a hint of sadness on his face. “Tell me,” he said, softly, “how is Sareid now? Is she someone who truly seems so at-odds with what I’m telling you?”

“Yes” wasn’t a strong enough word. “She wouldn’t do that,” I said again, and that response seemed to make that sadness wrench deeper into the lines of his expression.

“Sareid was nothing less than visionary, Aefe. She had such dreams for what the House of Obsidian could be for so many people. I’d never— I still have never known anyone as...” Words seemed to elude him, and yet, his eyes had gone far away, as if so lost in memory that they seemed insignificant.

“You...” I choked out.

You loved her.

I didn’t say it aloud, but we both heard it. Orin’s wince and pointed silence told me everything I needed to know.

“Tell me why my father attacked Niraja.”

I didn’t know why I asked. A part of me knew the answer, and dreaded hearing it. A part of me *never* wanted to hear it.

“He attacked Niraja to bring Sareid back,” Orin said.

My eyes were stinging.

“That’s not true,” I said. “He attacked this place because it is corrupted. Because the blood is corrupted here.”

Orin winced. “Aefe...”

I lurched back. “Why do you know my name?”

“Because I—” He stopped himself and swore under his breath, a certain tone that started high and ended low, and hearing it that way was like hearing an echo of myself.

No.

“Sareid was pregnant when she was taken,” he said. “And I—”

Taken. Not rescued. Not left. *Taken*. As if she had been kidnapped. As if my father had dragged her back to the Pales, had locked her up in black glass until her mind broke, until she was just a shade of—

And if Orin was—

If Orin—

Caduan’s words unfurled in the back of my mind: *You are not as easy to control as your sister.*

And then I thought of that night.

I thought of it more clearly than I had in so long, the memories sharper, as if drawn into focus by my anger and confusion. My father leaning over me, his hands on my throat.

You are tainted, Aefe.

What had the priestess seen in my blood that day? Just my curse? Or did she also see my lineage?

What would it have meant to my father, if the heir to the House of Obsidian had not been his blood daughter?

The memories rolled over me. My weeping mother throwing herself at my father, trying to pull him off of me. Her magic flaring at her fingertips, so bright that it lit the glassy black of the room like the night sky. I remember it all looking like shooting stars surrounding her, but I was nearly unconscious, by then. It was the only time I had ever seen her use magic. Hers was more powerful than my father’s, many times over. And it was only then that he relented.

I stumbled back.

“Why are you telling me this?” I spat. “None of this matters.”

It was easier, if none of it mattered.

Because what could I *do* with this? I had spent my whole life searching for my father's affection, because it was the only alternative to hating him for everything he took from me. It was easier to believe I deserved it. Easier to believe he was right, and there was still a path for me.

If there wasn't, I had no story. I had no path. I would be trapped alone with my hatred, with nowhere to go. And now, confronted with these terrible thoughts, I could feel the walls closing in.

Orin's face was oddly vulnerable, almost pleading. "I'm telling you this because you are the Teirness of the House of Obsidian. And you have the power to change things, Aefe. You can do what your mother couldn't. You could build a better world for people who share your blood—"

Share my blood.

And it was those words, at last, that snapped something within me. Orin came a step too close, and I snarled at him.

"Get away from me."

"Aefe—"

This man was a stranger. He knew nothing about me. He cornered me to tell me these things and then used them to manipulate me into doing what was best for *his* kingdom.

No.

Orin stumbled forward, as if to stop me. But I was already retreating down the path, grabbing my blades, and falling back into the shadows.

A MONSTER WAS THRASHING inside of me, a monster made up of nothing but ravenous limbs. I couldn't allow myself to stop and think, because if I did, I would only think about Orin's words. Orin's terrifying words. Words that would ruin my life, and words that also made sense in so many ways.

I was running, leaping over walls and slipping into the shadows.

It could not be true.

If it was, then I was not my father's daughter.

If it was, then even if I was a Teirness, my title held no value in a kingdom built beneath my father's leadership and guided by loyalty to him alone.

If it was, then my blood made me a traitor.

Then my blood itself was tainted.

And yet, a voice whispered, it makes so many things make sense.

I wasn't sure how I ended up in front of the door. I didn't remember going there, and I was knocking before I even had time to think about it.

The door opened, and Caduan blinked blearily at me, brow furrowed in concern.

I didn't give him time to speak before my arms were around his neck, and my mouth crashed against his.

For a split second, Caduan went rigid with surprise. But he recovered quickly, his arms folding around me, his mouth returning my kiss with ravenous hunger. Our bodies were flush. He wore no shirt, and I was wearing that ridiculous Wyshraj gown — so little separated us, and yet it was still too much. Our heat tangled in the space between us, skin to skin, as our kiss deepened, as his tongue tasted mine, as his grasp tightened around me as if on feral instinct.

I yanked the door closed, clumsily. He pushed me against the wall, my legs lifting and parting around his waist, a serrated breath escaping me as our hips aligned.

I was surrounded by him — a presence I had come to know so well. But I hadn't been expecting this, the sheer hunger of it, the way that the desire would overwhelm us both so quickly.

Far in the back of my mind, a part of me whispered, *This was a mistake*. I had come here to escape myself, to drown in the touch of another. But it was too late that I realized Caduan's touch made me more myself than I ever was.

His hands slid over the bare skin of my back, around my sides, as if he wanted to memorize the way my muscles felt beneath my skin. His thumb, just his thumb, slid just beneath the hem of the fabric around me, brushing my ribs. Barely a touch, and yet it felt so intimate that I broke our kiss with a fractured moan.

Every part of me *wanted*. And I knew he did, too. I could feel his desire pressed against me, in a satisfyingly obvious way, but also in the way he held me, like a dying man clutching life.

For one suspended moment, our trembling breaths mingled, our lips nearly touching. And then he kissed me again, this time slower, more tender, his lips and tongue and body all asking a gentle question. It was all so achingly innocent — the kind of innocent that erased the pretense that I could build around our primal desire. The kind that promised, *This isn't about bodies. This is about me, and you.*

That was too much — too terrifying. I broke away from his kiss and dropped to my knees. My hands worked at the buttons of his trousers.

“Aefe.”

Gods, I had always hated the way he said my name.

Is hate the word?

I ignored him, but I only made it one button down before he stopped me. “Aefe, stop.” His fingers tilted my chin up. I didn't realize I was crying until I looked up at him and couldn't pull his features into focus through the blur of my tears.

His face changed immediately. He dropped to his knees, bowing his forehead against mine. One hand brushed my cheek.

“What happened?” he whispered. “Tell me what happened.”

I wanted to. I so wanted to.

But how could I? How could I say aloud that I was not my father’s daughter? That everything I had worked for my entire life was gone? That the stories tattooed on my skin weren’t even mine?

How could I tell him that the blood that ran through my veins was that of the people who slaughtered his?

I opened my mouth and garbled sobs came out. I couldn’t stop. I was weeping so hard that I barely felt myself keel over, or Caduan shift so that his arms were wrapped around me, my face buried against his shoulder. He was murmuring something into my hair that I didn’t understand. Perhaps it was old Stoneborn. The words had a smooth, comforting cadence.

“I can’t,” I choked out. “I can’t—”

“It’s alright,” he murmured. “You don’t have to say anything.”

I hated how easy it was. To believe him. To stay here, enveloped in him. To keep the truth buried inside of myself, where he could not judge me for it.

We stayed like that, intertwined, for minutes into hours. I breathed the scent of him in and held him, long after we fell back against the floor, and the hours crept towards dawn. I memorized the way his body felt against mine, the beat of his heart and his breathing, the way his limbs wrapped around me with the same deliberate steadiness with which Caduan approached everything else in the world.

It occurred to me, as sleep began to blur my senses, that all the things that made Caduan seem strange to the world were what made him perfect to me. And that perhaps, when he looked at me, he saw everything the world judged me for. Saw it, and still loved it, even though I didn’t deserve it.

Get up, a voice inside me begged. This is dangerous.

But I didn’t.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN



I didn't even remember making it back to the Towers. The next days passed in a blur. I woke in small bursts, minutes at a time, of which I only remember fragments. The pain was breathtaking. I remember looking at my hand, and the black veins that covered it. I remember Sammerin entering the room, taking one look at me, and stating, matter-of-factly, "You look like shit." I remember sitting up just long enough to look over at Tisaanah, in the bed next to mine, her eyes closed.

I didn't dream. Not of my family. Not of Reshaye. Not even of Ilyzath's whispers. My mind was mercifully silent.

When I finally awoke, it was because I became aware of movement beside me. Weight — warmth. The familiar tickle of black-and-silver hair.

I kept my eyes closed, relishing it.

"I know you are awake, mysterious snake man."

"I know you know, demanding rot goddess."

My voice sounded like sandpaper. We went silent, listening to each other breathe.

"You've got to stop doing this," I said, at last.

"What?"

"The near death experiences. They'll kill me if they don't kill you."

I heard her smile in her voice. "I like to live an exciting life, Max. This is part of my charm."

“When all this is over, maybe we’ll take up hiking. Something scenic with a low mortality rate.”

When all this is over.

The realization dawned on me slowly. Zeryth was dead. The war was over. What did that mean?

Did that mean it was all over now?

I almost didn’t want to ask. I wanted to live here, in this moment of potential possibility, as long as I could.

As if she knew what I was thinking, Tisaanah said, quietly, “It is over.”

I closed my eyes.

“Max?”

“I heard you. I just...”

I just can’t believe it. It just seems too good to be true.

“Max.”

“Hm?”

And what she said next made the world tilt on its axis: “Reshaye is gone.”



“*GONE.*”

Nura stood there with her arms crossed over her chest, repeating the word slowly. Her eyes were narrowed, her stare hard.

“Yes,” Tisaanah said. “Gone.”

Nura’s eyes narrowed further.

She stood by the doorway of our room in the Tower of Midnight. She was wearing the same outfit that she always wore, that white jacket buttoned up to the neck, with one notable difference: the insignia now embroidered on her lapel.

A sun and moon eclipsed — the insignia that had been on Zeryth's jacket, not very long ago.

Zeryth's death had given Nura the thing she had always wanted the most: the title of Arch Commandant. Or at least, acting Arch Commandant, surely to become official in a few weeks. Not that there was anyone who was going to challenge her for it, now. Zeryth's death was cleaned up easily with a thin story from Nura. His supporters gave their loyalty to the Orders, not to him personally. Many breathed a sigh of relief to have the Orders headed by someone more stable.

I hated Zeryth too much to pity him, but I felt something close to it when I realized how easily the world had moved on without him. He had given up so much to gain power, only to be cast aside as an incidental footnote in history. It was almost sad.

Almost.

Now, I struggled to read the look on Nura's face as her gaze darted from Tisaanah to me and back again. She had remained silent as Tisaanah told her what she had told me — about how she survived the breaking of Zeryth's curse. About how Reshaye had been the one to die, instead.

I still found it hard to believe. Sure, in theory, I could see how it could potentially work, at least by the bounds Eomara had laid out. I was feeding Tisaanah my magic, and that kept her alive long enough to have Reshaye trade whatever life it had — if anyone could even call whatever Reshaye had a "life" — for hers.

It sounded unbelievable, but not any more so than any other of the insanity that we lived with every damn day. I just wasn't ready to accept it. Wasn't ready to let myself believe in that kind of hope.

"And since then," Nura said, "you haven't heard it at all?"

"No. Nothing."

"And your magic?"

Tisaanah extended her hand. Her fingers, like mine, were still blackened, dark veins crawling up the insides of her

forearms. Her hands were shaking.

“Nothing,” Tisaanah said.

And I knew that was the thing that terrified Tisaanah most of all: this sudden powerlessness.

Something that even I couldn't quite decipher flickered across Nura's face. I half expected her to rage at this development. I knew she considered Reshaye to be the most valuable asset that the Orders held. And for it to disappear now, just as she finally had the power of Arch Commandant within her grasp?

Good, I thought. I'm glad.

But if Nura felt this frustration, she didn't voice it.

“You're exhausted,” she said. “It will take weeks for you to recover from this physically, let alone magically. It's too early for us to tell what Reshaye did or didn't do.”

Tisaanah said nothing. But I read the expression on her face, one that said, *I know what it did.*

“I think that both of you should go rest for a few weeks,” Nura went on. “Leave the Towers, if you want. Go home.”

Tisaanah and I exchanged a surprised glance.

“I'm shocked that you trust us enough to let us leave the Towers,” I said, drily. But Ascended, I wanted nothing more. The word *home* caught in my mind and lingered there.

“Oh, I know you'll be back.” Nura looked to Tisaanah, ghost of a smile on her lips. “Tisaanah has unfinished business to attend to, after all.”

And sure enough, Tisaanah wore an expression that by now I knew very well — relentless brute force, so at odds with the obvious weakness of her body. I watched a silent battle war across her face.

“And when I return,” she said, “we will go back to Threll.”

“When you return, we will go back to Threll. Just as your contract states. You won our war. I have no intention of backing out of our deal.”

I didn't miss the slight sour inflection when Nura said *our war*. Zeryth's war. I'm sure that killed her.

Still, I eyed her warily. Something wasn't right in this response. From the perspective of the Orders, it was objectively unwise to go fight a war in Threll when the one here had only just ended, and she would need those forces to help rebuild her country and squash small rebellions. It would be in her best interest to try to wiggle out of her terms with Tisaanah any way she could. If she wasn't doing it now, she'd do it later. I was certain of that.

Tisaanah saw that too, because there was a pinch of skepticism in her expression.

"Just two weeks," she said, at last. "We can recover for two weeks, and then we will come back."

"Be realistic with yourself. You can't even heal a broken bone in two weeks, let alone a broken body. Both of you look like you went through a meat grinder."

Tisaanah just shook her head. "Two weeks."

Nura shrugged. "Suit yourself, I suppose."



AND THAT WAS THAT. Tisaanah and I were to leave the Towers the next day.

Later that afternoon, Sammerin came. He swung open the door — as always, without knocking — and stood there giving me a deadpan stare of utter disapproval.

"I hear that you have had a very exciting day."

"You hear correctly."

"Every time I see you, I'm always slightly amazed that you're still alive." He shook his head, set down his pack, and set to work on my arm, which still hurt fiercely. But when I pulled up my sleeve, he looked down at the veins on my skin, frowning and silent.

“I know,” I said. “Unattractive, isn’t it?”

“Do you know what that is?”

I paused, Eomara’s words echoing in my head. Now it seemed so obvious that I was amazed that we hadn’t picked up on it sooner. “I think,” I said, quietly, “it’s some form of A’Maril.”

Sammerin’s gaze shot to me, his silence not hiding his alarm at the thought.

“I think that the magic that Tisaanah and I have exposes us. Eomara theorized about it. And even Vardir said some things that implied... the magic that we were Wielding was not intended for human bodies.”

“And that would mean A’Maril,” Sammerin muttered.

“Right.” I looked down at my hands, veins dark, and thought of how much darker Tisaanah’s were. “I didn’t realize until I fed Tisaanah my magic. It felt like it... magnified everything.”

“Wait... you—”

I gave him a weak shrug. “Like you said. It’s been an exciting day.”

Sammerin leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms and giving me an expectant stare. I sighed and, of course, I told him the whole sorry thing. When I was done, Sammerin let out a long breath.

“That sounds...”

“Unbelievable?”

“If I didn’t know you were an awful liar, I’d assume that you were... embellishing.”

I let out a rough laugh. “That’s our lives these days, isn’t it?”

Sammerin shrugged, as if conceding. Then he leaned forward, suddenly serious. “*Gone.*”

“So it would appear.”

“It may be too early to make that determination. If Tisaanah is as depleted as you are, it could just be—”

“Could be. But Tisaanah is certain.”

“If it’s true,” Sammerin muttered, “then I’ll never be so happy to see something die.”

“Me too.”

And yet, I couldn’t shake the sensation that this was... incomplete. Like I was eyeing all the pages that still remained before the end of the book.

“But this...” Sammerin’s eyes drifted back down. He picked up my arm and I felt the unpleasant sensation of my muscles twitching, far beneath the skin. I let out a wordless noise of disapproval, even though I couldn’t bring myself to be actually annoyed. Sammerin was using his magic to speak to the tissue, searching for whatever lay beneath. That was how, for example, he would find a broken bone or a cut tendon, pinpoint the source of an injury. Uncomfortable, but effective.

He frowned.

“What?” I asked.

“It does feel like A’Maril. But I only saw it when I started looking. It’s a strange variant, nothing I’ve ever seen before. It feels more like...an infection...like there’s something foreign...” He trailed off, mouth thinned, brow furrowed. Then he said, “Don’t use that magic for awhile.”

“That’s no great sacrifice. I’d love to never use it again.”

Sammerin just gave me a hard stare.

“I mean it. Something is...” He frowned and shook his head. “Just don’t.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT



My body was broken.

I stood in front of the mirror. For what felt like the first time in months, I was not wearing a military uniform. Instead, I wore a crimson shirt that wrapped around my body and tied with black fabric around my waist, a pair of close-fitting, black trousers, and boots that laced up to my knees. Ordinary clothes.

And yet, I looked so far from ordinary.

My arms were covered in scars where I had rotted those tattoos off. The wound that Esmaris's whip had torn across my chest, when I had barely managed to shield myself, was visible beneath the deep neckline of my blouse. And of course, my hands... my hands were still black and blue, dark veins extending up my forearms.

Sammerin had mentioned that he might be able to heal some of the scarring. Maybe one day I'd take him up on his offer, though I wasn't sure what I'd be hiding.

Still, I found myself grieving something that went deeper than vanity. Perhaps I was mourning an unmarked body. But then again, before these scars, I had the ones on my back. Before those, I had the ones on my thighs. And before all of that, I had my Fragmented skin, skin that marked me neither Valtain nor non-Wielder. Even before I lost my mother, or my home, or my country, I was lingering in the space between things, belonging to all and none.

I had never had an unmarked body. Not truly.

I sighed and rolled my gloves up my arms, all the way to my elbows.

“You ready to go?”

I jumped.

Gods, I wasn't used to this — this silence inside of me. It made all other noises feel so much louder. I turned to see Max at the door, one eyebrow quirked.

“You need to work on that awareness, soldier,” he said.

“I knew you were there,” I sniffed. “I was just humbling you.”

His mouth thinned with a suppressed smile. “Humbling? Or *humoring*?”

I gave him a look of exaggerated determination. “*Humbling*. I always mean what I say.”

Fine, I meant humoring. But I blamed Aran, for being a ridiculous language with many words that sounded almost exactly the same, even when many of them that meant multiple different unrelated things. No matter how long I stayed here, I would never entirely get used to it.

“I suppose you humble me sometimes, too, so I'll allow it.” Max wandered closer. His arms were casually tucked into his pockets, but I did not miss the deliberate force of his gaze assessing me, lingering on the tremor of my hands and slightly-unsteady stance. I did the same to him. I almost laughed at the thought of what the two of us must look like together. A couple of walking corpses.

“Let's go home,” he said, and his voice was thick with longing. Longing that I shared, too

But...

“One thing first,” I said.



THERE WERE children laughing in the street. My gaze kept wandering to them stumbling after each other on the cobblestones outside, locked in what looked to be a particularly spirited game of...tag, perhaps? Two of the windowpanes had finally been replaced, leaving just one with a single crack from corner to corner.

Still, Riasha's apartment was tidy, orderly, warm. I sat at a wooden table adorned with three modest candlesticks and a bouquet of wildflowers. Filias was across from me, stretched out in his chair like a cat. Behind him, Riasha paced the length of the kitchen. And Serel sat at the other end of the table, watching quietly.

Max's gaze wandered across the living space. I wondered if he was having the same realization that I was.

I wasn't sure when this had happened — when Riasha's apartment, and the other refugee apartments, had begun to finally look like homes. It was modest, yes, but it was also homey, adorned with trinkets and flowers and simple decorations. There was food in the oven, dishes to be washed. So many little markers of a life being lived.

Filias was watching me carefully. He leaned forward, hazel eyes glinting. "I hope that what you're telling me means what I think it does, Tisaanah."

I inclined my chin. "The Arans' war is over. Now it is our turn."

Riasha uttered an amazed curse under her breath. A crooked smile spread across Filias's face as he shook his head.

"I'll be honest, I doubted you."

"Always a mistake," Serel said, giving me a proud smile that I couldn't bring myself to return. I thought of Vos. He had trusted me, and it had been the biggest mistake of his life. Now he would likely spend the rest of his life locked up in an Aran jail.

Despite all he had done, I still had pulled for him. Pleaded for leniency. It didn't feel like justice.

“We live a lifetime of disappointments,” I said. “Doubting me was only smart.”

“Apparently not as smart as I thought it was. I was beginning to think the day would never come that we could pay back those Threllian pricks.”

“It won’t be so simple,” Riasha said. “The Threllians were powerful enough to conquer seven nations at the height of their military prowess. Even with the Arans’ army...”

“You’ve seen what she can do.” Filias nodded at me, and a stone fell through my stomach.

What could I do, now? Nothing? Was I anything without Reshaye?

No. There was something else inside of me. I knew it — I could feel it. Reshaye’s presence had left an imprint on Max’s magic, one just as powerful as what I Wielded. Surely it had done the same to mine.

If it didn’t...

There is no “if,” I told myself. *There is something, and you will find it.*

“Riasha is right,” I said, carefully hiding my trepidation. “I need to do further negotiations with Nura, and work out the logistics. No matter what power we have, in a head-to-head battle with the Threllian military, we will lose. But the Threllians’ greatest weakness is their hubris. Even worse now, after fifteen years of comfort. They may have fine armor, but everything inside has gotten soft.”

“And who knows their inner workings better than we do?” Serel said, and Filias let out a short laugh, as if overwhelmed by what he was hearing.

“Gods below. I never fucking thought we would be saying any of this.”

“Let’s not get too hasty,” Riasha started, but before she could finish, there was a mighty crash as a small figure burst into the room, moving so fast it was little more than a smear.

“Thio!” she exclaimed, though the little boy paid no attention. “You little monster, how many times have I—”

Thio let out a laugh and then, with no hesitation, wriggled onto Max’s lap. He waved to me. “Hello.”

“Hello,” I replied.

“Excuse you,” Max muttered, in Aran, to the child, but seemed fully unbothered as he shifted to hold the boy securely. Easily, as if it were second nature. I raised an eyebrow at him, and he shrugged.

“*Five* younger siblings, Tisaanah,” he said, and I chuckled.

Riasha looked from Max to me apologetically. “I’m sorry, my grandson is a terror.”

“No need to apologize,” I started.

Max waved away Riasha’s apologies. “Is fine. He can stay.”

He said it in *Thereni*.

My eyes went round. Max made a show of looking very casual, though he gave me a sly, too-pleased-with-himself look out of the corner of his eye.

Serel, Riasha, and Filias shot each other confused glances. Filias in particular seemed as if he was frantically trying to recall whether he had said anything offensive.

“When did you learn *Thereni*?” I hissed, in Aran.

“I had a lot of alone time when I was out on the front. Not how I wanted to show you, but...” His gaze flicked away, slightly bashful. Then he cleared his throat and looked to Filias.

“Tisaanah is correct,” he said, in broken *Thereni*. “In direct fight, we lose. But *only* if is...ah...” He struggled to find the right word, releasing Thio just long enough to spread his hands out. “*All*. Together. So, we do not do that.” A satisfied smile spread over his lips, barely suppressed. “We fight them separated.”

His word choice was clumsy, but I understood his meaning. “It isn’t hard to turn the Threllian Lords against each other,” I said. “Especially now. They’ve gone so long without a collective enemy that their main concern is wrestling power from each other. We use that.”

I did not look at Max, but I could feel his gaze — could feel the spark of admiration. Riasha was nodding, thinking to herself, and Filias put his hands behind his head.

“Don’t care how we do it,” he said. “As long as we win.”

We will, I wanted to say. *I swear it to you*. But that promise caught in my throat, leaden with uncertainty.

There was another crash and flurry of clumsy footsteps, and two more children flew into the room with chaotic shouts. Thio immediately leapt from Max’s grasp, kicking him in the stomach in the process, and joined the two other children in the center of the room.

“Not fair!” Thio shouted. “It was *my* turn to Wield next!”

It took me a moment to realize what I was looking at:

One of the children, a little girl, had smeared dirt on one side of her face. She was throwing paper playfully at Thio. Not just paper, I realized. Paper *butterflies*.

She was pretending to be *me*.

A lump rose in my throat. When I looked back at Filias, he was watching me carefully.

“What a silly game,” I said, but my voice sounded choked, and Filias’s gaze softened.

“Silly as hells,” he said. “But I’ll admit that you did good, Tisaanah.”

I gave him a weak smile.

I hoped good was enough.



IT WAS NEARLY SUNDOWN. I pulled my jacket closer around me — Ara was getting cold. After Filias and Riasha, there were others to visit, more refugees who wanted to speak to me. “One more thing,” I kept saying to Max. And eventually, he just responded with a deadpan stare.

“You can barely stand. Hell, *I* can barely stand. Let’s go.”

“But there’s just—”

“Has anyone ever told you that you have a one-track mind?” He tilted my chin towards him. “You can’t save the world just yet. But we’ll be back. Hey. Look at them.” He nodded towards the people in the streets. The buildings, while run down, were slowly being repaired and decorated. Before, this place had been tense and empty. Now, children played outside. Old women sipped tea at little tables. People tended potted gardens.

“They’re living their lives,” he said, quietly. “And they still will be when you get back.”

I wasn’t sure why my eyes were stinging, but I nodded silently, and took Max’s hand. Then I paused, giving him a sidelong glance.

“What?” he said.

“You learned Thereni.”

He looked away, a shade of embarrassed. “Poorly. Mostly in books. I’m sure my pronunciation is a mess. I just thought...” His gaze slid back to me. When he spoke next, it was in fractured, heavily accented Thereni. “Always, you listen to words that are not belonging of you. I want...” He stumbled, struggling. “I want to give you, to speak of you, in *your* words. Your... voice.”

I closed my eyes, suddenly finding it difficult to speak. Yes, he was right. His Thereni was terrible, the accent so thick it was difficult to understand. And yet, the sound of my mother tongue rendered in his voice felt like the collision of two songs sung deep in my soul, now intertwined in perfect harmony. It sounded like *home*.

Home.

I squeezed his hand.

“Let’s go home,” I choked out.

Max Stratagrammed us away.

It was the smell that hit me first — Gods, there were a thousand memories in that smell of sunlight and flowers. I opened my eyes, and the sight of it took my breath away. The little stone cottage was nestled in a sea of wildflowers, now hopelessly overgrown, as if nature itself sought to wrap it in an embrace.

Fitting. That’s what it felt like, too. An embrace.

“Ascended above,” Max muttered. “I did miss this place.”

I did, too. I had missed it so much that it wasn’t even so very hard to shed my guilt like a bloodstained jacket, take Max’s hand, and let myself fall.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE



I couldn't breathe.

My father was leaning over me. Hot blood was spilling down my collarbone. His hands were covered in it. I knew that, even though I could not see it, because his fingers were wrapped around my throat.

Please, please, I was trying to say, but the word was smothered beneath my father's hatred, hatred that for so long I didn't understand.

I did now.

He hated me because I was never his at all. Hated me because my cursed power, in my blood and in my title, undermined his.

All this time, I had thought there would be some way I could earn my place among them again. But the truth was, the position I had so desperately wanted didn't exist at all.

"Who do you think you are?" he spat, so close to me that I could feel his breath and flecks of spittle on my face. "What do you think you have left to win?"

Everything, I wanted to say. And I knew this time it was the truth — there was so much I could do with this power within me, the power of my mother's blood, the power of my tainted, hideous magic.

I can do so much, I tried to tell him. *Give me a chance. I have so much to do.*

But I couldn't speak. I couldn't breathe.

The last thing I saw before my death were the scattered dead bodies around me. The bodies of Caduan's kin, of the Reedsborn, of the people of Yithara. Orscheid, my mother. And closest of all, Caduan, his hand still reaching for me.

I opened my mouth and screamed, but released only the sound of shattered glass.



SHATTERED GLASS.

My eyes snapped open. A face leaned over me. For a moment, I thought it was my father's. Then I blinked away sleep, and the features rearranged — a face just as hard and hateful, but different.

Klein.

All at once, I was awake. Caduan's arms were no longer around me. I pushed myself up, only for Klein's boot to come stomping down on my chest, pushing me back to the floor.

"You," he hissed, "have made a very grave mistake."

I snarled at him, my teeth sharpening of their own volition.

I pushed his foot away enough to twist around, craning my neck to see the light of near-sunrise spilling through Caduan's smashed-open bedroom window. Hazy smoke hung in the air. A few feet away, Caduan was crumpled on the ground, unmoving. I couldn't see his face, but I could see blood seeping through the fabric of his shirt, a sight that sent fire tearing through me.

It became difficult to breathe.

"What did you do?" I snarled. "What did you do to him?"

Klein tried to grab me by my hair, but I tore away from his grasp and stumbled to Caduan. I got just close enough to see his eyes open, slowly, through streams of blood when one of Klein's men dragged me back. I whirled around, grabbing his hand and twisting until I heard a crack and the man let out a

roar of pain. It was worth it, even though two others pulled me away before I could do the same to his neck.

“What are you doing here?” I spat at Klein. “You are jeopardizing a crown mission and you’ve done harm against an allied king, and—”

“Me?” Klein sneered. “Look around us. We are in the home of an enemy.”

“They had information about the humans,” I shot back. “I made the decision to come here. I couldn’t afford not to.”

“You made the decision to come here against your father’s command.” Klein jerked his chin up, looking at me down the bridge of his nose. “Of course *you* would come here, of all places. There are some stains you cannot clean.”

I felt as if a rock fell through my stomach. But before I could shoot back a scathing retort — or murder him — I heard a groan. Caduan shifted, slowly pushing himself upright. Then his head snapped up, looking around wildly, and stopping only when his gaze settled on me.

I heard the sound of a struggle, and the door that connected Caduan’s room to the rest of our suites flew open. Another of Klein’s men dragged Siobhan into the room, who, despite the soldiers wrenching her hands behind her back, walked elegantly and obediently even though a sneer curled over her nose. Ashraia was next, though it took *four* men to drag him in, and all of them — including him — were significantly bloodied.

I was so angry I could barely speak.

“Let them go. That is a Sidnee Blade Commander and one of our highest ranking allies that you’re—”

“My army’s orders come from the Teirna,” Klein said, coolly. “And where do yours come from?”

For a moment, the idea of my father being the source of Klein’s attack filled me with betrayal. Then a deeper dread rose over it.

Army?

I listened — listened, and heard a terrible sound coming from outside the palace.

I leapt to my feet, fighting away Klein's men as they grabbed for me, and ran out to the balcony—

—Only to see Sidnee soldiers scaling the walls, rushing into the Nirajan palace like ants devouring a carcass.

I whirled back to Klein. “Call them off.”

“The Nirajans were only allowed to exist in this place because they agreed to absolute excommunication, with no interference in the Fey world.”

“They haven't interfered. I made the decision to come here. Me.” I staggered forward. I didn't realize how badly I was bleeding from my head until I began to taste iron. “This is a foolish move, Klein. Especially now, when the humans are —”

There was a deafening shatter.

A smear of gold flew into the room, and by the time the window's broken glass hit the ground like drops of rain, the soldiers that held Ashraia were doubled over, clutching their faces. Rolling smoke dissipated to reveal Ishqa, his wings outstretched, sword drawn and pressed beneath Klein's throat.

“This is a betrayal of our treaty,” he snarled. “You raised a blade against Wyshraj men?”

Klein sneered. “Our treaty has been dissolved.”

My heart stopped. “*Dissolved?*”

Ishqa's face barely changed, save for the faintest twitch of muscle. “Pardon?” he said, deadly quiet.

“The treaty is gone,” Klein said. “Your people cannot be trusted. I knew it from the beginning. And this... this *detour* of yours only proves—”

“I am the Teirness, Klein,” I snarled “And it was on *my* authority that—”

But they were already moving before the words were out of my mouth.

I lurched forward. Even in the movement, I knew I was trying to stop the inevitable. Klein let out a shout, and his men attacked, lunging for Ishqa and Ashraia. I dove for the nearest Blade, who was attempting to attack Ishqa. I saw Siobhan moving out of the corner of my eye. Beneath the blood rushing in my ears, I could hear her command boom:

“As a Commander of the Blades, I order you to stand down!”

Too late. Tension had already devolved into violence. Ishqa’s back was pressed to mine, his sword raised — he was the only one of us who was properly armed, while I fought with whatever I could frantically yank from a dead man’s hands. I tasted blood. I heard a cry somewhere behind me, and I could not tell whose it was.

Suddenly, there was a bright flash of light, and a deafening cracking sound. More windows shattered. I looked up to see ropes of ivy slithering through the open windows, so fast our opponents barely had time to react. It seized the throats of Klein’s men. The soldiers flailed, but it was no use — the ropes of greenery pinned their every limb, tightening until they finally stopped moving.

Caduan slowly pushed to his feet, clutching his abdomen. The sight of his open eyes was so wonderful that my own relief briefly drowned me.

“It won’t be enough to keep them for long,” he rasped. Then his gaze fell to the other side of the room, and he went still.

I turned.

The other side of the room was a carnage. The floor was slick with blood. One of the Sidnee soldiers lay beside Siobhan, his own weapon protruding from his throat — Siobhan looked down at him, utterly frozen, face pale.

Beside her, Ashraia lay in a heap on the ground.

His wings were out, but one was nearly disconnected from his body, a mess of bones and tattered flesh and slick, blood-

covered feathers. A spear was lodged between his ribs, a Sidnee soldier's throat grasped in one of his massive hands.

He was not moving. No one spoke. We had all seen enough dead bodies to know what we were looking at.

Ishqa knelt beside him and muttered some words that I could not understand, pressing his thumb to his forehead, and then to Ashraia's. Then he stood again.

"He's gone," he said, without turning.

Siobhan swore beneath her breath.

Words tangled in my throat. I wanted to apologize. I wanted to scream. I wanted to hack the heads off of all the men in this room, just because I could — even though they were my own people. I wanted no association with them.

Ishqa turned and met my stare. I couldn't breathe. I waited for him to strike me down. I was, after all, a Sidnee, a leader of the people who had betrayed him and killed his friend. I was his enemy.

"Did you know?" he said, calmly.

"No. No, I never would have allowed it to—"

"We can discuss this later," Caduan said, gesturing to the bodies on the ground. "I cannot keep them down for long."

"We have to leave," Siobhan said. She could barely look away from the Sidnee soldier she had killed, her expression pained. "Before more of them come for us."

Ishqa threw open the door, and we ran.

Mathira, how had it all happened so quickly? Klein's men were already everywhere, spilling into the palace through doors and windows and balconies. We pressed ourselves to walls and slipped around corners. When we reached the main hallways, where the levels below were visible, my mouth went dry. Below us, the Nirajan people were being skewered by weapons and thrown out windows or simply left to bleed to death on the ground. The carnage was all-consuming.

“There are too many,” Siobhan muttered. “We need to leave here. Once we’re out, we can figure out what happened.” She turned to Ishqa. “Let us remain allies until, at least, we understand why. We are traitors to our own people now, too.”

Ishqa paused, then gave her a slow nod, mouth set. “I accept that.”

Caduan was silent, a muscle feathering in his jaw. I followed his gaze back down, to the violence below. Outside on one of the balconies, I watched one of the Sidnee soldiers grabbing a human maid by her hair and dragging her back, slicing her throat so viciously that her head dangled off her body.

The word came out of my mouth before I realized I was speaking.

“No.”

“*No?*” Siobhan hissed.

“I can’t leave them this way. We promised them that no harm would come to their city. The Nirajans barely have a standing army.”

I couldn’t say what lingered beneath those words: *This is my family. This is my blood.*

A slew of arrows flew past us, distracting Ishqa and Caduan as they turned to defend us. But Siobhan grabbed my arm and wrenched me close enough to whisper in my ear.

“You are talking about raising your blades against your *own people*,” she hissed. “There is no coming back from that, Aefe.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but then my eyes fell beyond her. To a Sidnee soldier on the level below, his gaze looking to Siobhan’s unprotected back, his bow raised—

“No!” I dove forward, trying to shove Siobhan out of the way.

But I was too slow.

Sidnee archers were among the best in the world. Perhaps Siobhan herself had trained this one. The arrow struck her in the neck, lodging so deep that the point protruded from the other side of her throat. She staggered against me with such force that I fell against the wall, then together, we slipped down to the ground.

Her lips parted, but only gurgling noises came out. For the first time in our long friendship, I saw fear in her eyes. Fear, and sadness — because after centuries of loyal service, her own people did not hesitate to strike her down.

I could not look away from her face, even as Caduan rushed to her side, Ishqa still holding off the rest of the attack.

There were words coming out of my mouth, but I wasn't sure what they were until the fourth or fifth time I said them, muttered beneath my breath like prayers:

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry for taking you on this mission.

I'm sorry for turning you into a traitor.

And I'm sorry that I am not going to be the loyal, good Sidnee that you trained me to be.

I watched the life fade from Siobhan's blue eyes quickly, like water draining. With it went the last of my restraint.

You would raise your hand against your own people? Siobhan had said, seconds before they killed her.

My own people?

What people?

They had just murdered their best, a woman who had given them everything that she had, who believed in loyalty until her dying breath.

All my life, I had been ashamed of everything that I was. Now? Now I was ashamed of everything I had been trying to be. I drowned my grief beneath a sea of anger.

Gently, I lay Siobhan on the ground. Closed her beautiful, lifeless blue eyes.

“I don’t care what you do,” I said, to Caduan and Ishqa. “But I’m not leaving them like this.”

I drew my eyes up and met Caduan’s gaze, and as always, it seemed to see something in me that even I hadn’t known how to confront. Not until this moment.

Wordlessly, he offered me his wrist. The scabbed-over wound from Yithara was still there. I didn’t hesitate as I broke it open again, letting his blood and his magic flow over my tongue.

It hit me even faster this time. Maybe the familiarity, maybe the rage, but in only seconds my senses were alight with Caduan’s magic crackling between us. His eyelids fluttered, and I knew he felt it too, this connection enhancing us both. I could see, *feel*, threads of life running through us — running through the stone and the soldiers and the ivy above us. And I was ready to tear it all to pieces.

We both looked to Ishqa, a wordless agreement passing between the three of us. He gave me a small, terse nod.

Not that I was even paying attention, by then.

I launched myself into the fight. I was acting on nothing but impulse, on anger-fueled instinct. I gave no thought to the fact that the Sidnee I killed were my own people. First I killed them with my sharpened teeth, burning with Caduan’s magic. Then, I tore a sword from a corpse and cut them down, one after another after another, too many to count.

I knew Caduan was beside me, fighting with me, not because I saw him but because I *felt* him, felt the magic between us feeding into itself. With every body I kicked off of my blade, it seemed to grow stronger. Ivy burrowed through the walls, growing up between the floorboards, tearing apart the soldiers I stabbed.

I was not sure where Ishqa had gone. I no longer cared.

We tore through the Nirajan palace, leaving a trail of death in our wake. I could barely see. I didn’t know if it was blood or tears that obscured my vision. We made it down the grand staircase, out into the main throne room where we had been

greeted our first night here. It was unrecognizable, its beautiful stillness overtaken with bodies and blood, all blurred in the violet-red of my broken vision.

I jerked to a stop, faltering for reasons I didn't understand. It was only when Caduan turned and slid his arm across my back, pulling me into a secluded corner, that I realized it was because I had been stabbed. I hadn't felt it. Still barely felt it, save for the warmth of the blood now running down the backs of my thighs. But Caduan's concern, deep enough that it reverberated in our connection, was enough to pull me from my rage.

I sagged against the wall, turning to him. Cold air surrounded us. We were on a balcony, just beyond the main throne room.

"I can keep going," I panted, my voice ragged. But Caduan's gaze slid beyond me, to the warriors pouring into the throne room, and the Nirajan soldiers being slowly overrun.

I heard what he did not voice.

"We can win this, Caduan," I choked out. "We can *save them*."

He leaned close to me. So close our noses brushed, so close that our shared magic burned in the breath we now shared.

"There is more than this," he murmured. "And I want you to live to see it, Aefe. Don't throw it away here. This is just a battle. Not the war."

Just a battle? I was so tired of battles. Maybe I would be willing to die to end this one.

"Then where does it stop?" Tears were hot on my cheeks, and a wrinkle deepened between Caduan's eyebrows as he leaned closer still—

And then blood splattered over me.

All at once, the warmth where Caduan's body had been was now replaced with a spray of violet. He staggered back

against the railing of the balcony. The magic linking us was violently severed.

Caduan stumbled towards me, his hand outstretched, doubled over. A bolt protruded from his chest, black smoke collecting around it.

I reached for him, our fingertips brushing—

Another shot.

One moment he was there. And the next, he was gone, tumbling from the balcony.

A cry tore from my throat, stifled by a vicious impact that flung me against the railing. Pain bloomed through my insides. I barely felt it. All I could think about was the emptiness where Caduan had once been.

I realized slowly that the pain was a bolt stuck in my back, digging straight through my barely-healed wounds from Yithara. On my hands and knees, I turned around.

Standing there was Athalena, her face twisted in rage, tears streaming down her cheeks. Light and shadow surrounded her, like her magic spilled from her every pore, directionless.

“I trusted you,” she screamed. *“You swore to me! You swore to me that this would not happen!”*

She limped closer. She was badly wounded. Maybe I could have taken her, even with this magic bolt sticking out of me. But suddenly I found it hard to care.

She loomed over me, her crossbow readied, magic bleeding from it.

“My children are dead,” she spat, and her voice cracked like shattered glass and broken bone, and I knew she would kill me.

Could I blame her?

I closed my eyes.

But instead of the impact, I felt the floor suddenly drop beneath me, and the sensation of falling.

I opened my eyes to see the world smearing around me, and the flash of golden wings. A bolt whizzed past my left ear. I looked down to see Athalena, shrinking into the distance, sinking to her knees.

I was being carried. I was flying.

“I have you.” Ishqa’s voice was steady and smooth in my ear.

I choked out, “We have to go back for him.”

Ishqa said, quietly, “He did not survive.”

“We have to go back.”

“Aefe... there is nothing to find.” Ishqa’s voice was pained. “Trust me.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I wanted to argue, wanted to force him to turn around, tear apart the world to search for Caduan. But I had felt that connection between us sever. I watched him fall.

And so, I was traitorously silent.

With three powerful pumps of Ishqa’s wings, we launched into the sky. I looked down and watched Niraja shrink beneath me, corpses growing smaller and smaller. Down below, on the highest balcony of the Nirajan palace, Ezra watched his city fall. Beside him, Orin turned. His stare fell directly to us. His crossbow lifted, and our gazes met — his gaze that, even from this distance, reminded me so much of my own.

He held his aim for several long seconds, then lowered his weapon and turned away, joining his brother.

And all while Ezra just stood there as if made of marble, helpless as he watched his garden wither.

CHAPTER SIXTY



I had forgotten what it was like to be this carelessly content.

Tisaanah and I fell into it like we were drowning in a vat of honey. How many days had it been? Impossible to tell, considering that we may have lost an entire twenty-four hours to the deepest, longest sleep I'd ever had. Perhaps for the first time in my life, it was easy to be content, when I could roll over and open one bleary eye to see Tisaanah's face ungracefully smooshed against the pillow.

Years ago, I had foolishly taken that for granted — the ability to see the people I cared about in passing, unremarkable glances. Of course they were there. Of course they were safe. I knew that I'd never get that feeling of ease back. The pit at the bottom of my stomach, the tension in my chest, would probably linger there for the rest of my life. But in those sleepy days, I came closer to reclaiming it than I had in a long, long time.

I wasn't sure how long it had been by the time I finally opened my eyes from the depths of hibernation, squinted out the window into the sun-drenched world beyond it, and dragged myself out of bed. I wrapped one of the blankets around my shoulders and shuffled out into the garden. Winter loomed. The sky was cloudless and the sun was warm, but the air so cold that my breath released clouds of mist with every exhale.

The garden was overgrown and messy. Before, I had woven an intricate series of spells to keep the plants happy in the wintertime. Those protections were weak, now — it had

been months since they were last refreshed. I picked up a stick and walked the edges of the garden, drawing Stratagrams in the dirt and watching with satisfaction as drooping flower petals puffed back to life.

Then I settled before my rose bushes. Most of the flowers were dead, or close to it, the white and red petals shriveled at the edges. My knee nudged something hard, and I looked down to see that there was a pair of clippers, now pitifully rusted, lying in the dirt beneath a generous coating of dead leaves.

Right.

This was exactly that spot I had come to, months ago, when Tisaanah had made her Blood Pact. I had sat here spiraling into existential dread, desperately trying to tell myself that the clippers in my hand would be the closest thing I'd ever wield again to an actual weapon, and that I could stay here unmoving forever, and that I would be fucking *right* for it.

Maybe I would have been. I still wasn't sure.

What a long time ago that seemed to be.

I picked up the clippers. They were rusty, but they still worked. I set to work on the bushes.

After a time, footsteps approached

"You look very silly." I could hear the smile in Tisaanah's voice.

"This?" I shrugged my shoulders, making the blanket that was wound up to my ears bounce. "This is practical."

"You look like... a sleeping worm."

"A *sleeping worm*?"

"The kind that makes silk. When they, you know..." She flailed her arms around herself, and I turned to stare flatly back at her.

"Was that intended to represent... a cocoon?"

"A *cocoon*. Exactly."

“Ascended above, what a poet you are.”

She settled beside me, shooting me a glare. “Well, you tell me that in Thereni, and we’ll see if you’re a better one.”

Fair enough.

I closed a handful of dead petals in my hand and conjured fire, reducing them to ash. Even that small fragment of magic was... difficult. Like it met resistance within my veins.

“Look at this, Tisaanah.” I held up dead blossoms and leaves, shaking my fist. “This is a travesty.”

“I think the garden is more beautiful this way. It is...free. A sign that it can all flourish even if there isn’t a lonely, cranky man watching over it all day.”

Ouch.

“That theoretical lonely, cranky man wouldn’t appreciate you invalidating his life’s work.”

“And what if he isn’t so lonely and cranky anymore?”

“He will be cranky until the ends of time, I’m sorry to report.”

Tisaanah let out a low chuckle. Through many layers of blanket, I felt the weight of her head against my shoulder. “Part of his charm, I suppose,” she murmured. “But as long as he isn’t so lonely.”

My hands stilled. I dropped the clippers, and wound Tisaanah’s fingers in mine instead. An easy trade to make. I suppose it was back then, too.

No, I wasn’t lonely anymore. Though, “lonely” was a weak word for what I had been. My aloneness had simply become a stagnant part of me, like a missing limb. I hadn’t realized I was craving connection until I found it again. And I hadn’t realized how much I feared losing it until it almost happened.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Better. You?”

“Better.”

I glanced at her. Her brow was furrowed in a look that I knew very well.

“What?” I asked.

She blinked at me. “What?” she repeated, and I pressed my finger on the familiar wrinkle of her brow.

“What’s this for?”

She looked down at her hands and frowned.

“No magic,” I murmured, and she shook her head.

“Nothing.”

“Give it time. You died a few days ago.” Just saying those words out loud made me shudder. My lip curled into a sneer, of its own accord. “No matter the cost, I’m glad that monster is gone.”

Tisaanah nodded. Still, she went silent, and I knew her well enough to know that gears were turning, turning, turning inside her head.

I kissed her on the forehead, inhaling her citrus scent.

“We have time,” I said again.

“We have time,” she echoed, and I knew she was trying to make herself believe it.



WE HAD TIME.

For so much of my life, time had been a curse — something to be endured rather than cherished. Now? Now I reveled in it. *We have time*. The most wonderful statement. A fucking gift.

We did everything the long way. That night, we made a ridiculously complex dinner, more food than the two of us would ever be able to eat, because *we had time*. We ate it over the course of several hours, between more than a few glasses

of wine and stretches of long, meandering conversation. Afterwards, we stretched out in front of the fireplace and read, exchanging stories with so many interruptions that it took us hours to get through a few pages.

That was fine. We had time.

It was late by the time we made it to the bedroom. Tisaanah had risen and leaned over my chair, giving me one, two, three deepening kisses, the kind that blurred the line between a question and a demand. I scooped her up in my arms and carried her to the bedroom. We fell on the bed together, Tisaanah's arms around my neck, her kisses deep and hungry. The minute we hit the bed, she had yanked off my shirt, and was starting on my trousers, when I pressed her down to the bed with enough pressure to stop her, giving her a coy smirk.

“Why are you in such a rush?”

I stretched out beside her instead, leaning down to kiss her again. Not the desperate, hurried kisses. Slow, our lips and tongues moving over each other with gentle caresses. When she tried to push back, deepen it further, I broke away and laughed.

“We have time, Tisaanah. Isn't that terrific? We can take all.” My fingers trailed down her throat, in feather-light touches. “Damn.” Her collarbone. Lower, to the edge of the fabric of her shirt. “Night.” Unbutton. And another long, slow kiss.

She let out a raspy chuckle. “Why?”

“Why?”

“If we want something...” Another kiss. “...Why put it off?”

I pulled away and cocked an eyebrow. “Want ‘something?’ What is this ‘something?’” I continued down the buttons of her shirt, slowly. I kissed her throat, lower to her collarbone. I wanted to feel every muscle beneath her skin, the texture of every scar.

“Besides,” I murmured, “no one can claim you’ve been dissatisfied the last few days. And it’s nice to finally get the chance to take my time.”

The last button. Her shirt fell open. I pulled away enough to look at her. Moonlight streaming in from the window fell over her body, breasts peaked from the cold or arousal or both, silver falling over her dual-tone skin. Her hair was messy, framing her face, and she looked at me with such unabashed hunger, her lips parted, eyes half-closed.

Her legs parted, just a little, a challenge in her eyes.

Fuck.

I had to fight for my own self control. But I touched only the inside of her knee, in a light, barely-there caress running up the inside of her thigh. Stopping just short of where I knew she wanted me to be.

She let out a rough exhale of frustration. I smothered it with my mouth. Her lips were soft and ready. She didn’t want to break the kiss when I moved down again, lowering my head to her breast, raising a moan to her lips — fuck, that sound.

My fingers kept tracing her thighs. Down. Up. Still not high enough. Her hips lifted slightly.

“What, Tisaanah?”

She let out a rough laugh. “You are cruel.”

“Cruel? I have a theory that you *like* this. Besides...” And finally, I let my touch trail higher, lightly, so lightly, running up the wet heat at the apex of her thighs. Her hips bucked, and she let out a sharp breath.

“...I’ll make it up to you,” I murmured, against her lips, and slid my fingers inside of her.

The moan wasn’t silent this time. Tisaanah’s hands grabbed fistfuls of the sheets. She clenched around me. And now I had to actively hold myself back, keeping my touch slow, too slow for what she wanted, reminding myself to be patient.

We have time.

Maybe I *was* cruel.

Tisaanah let out a breathless, frustrated laugh, her head thrown back.

What a sound.

“You’re not being a very good communicator tonight,” I murmured, and in response she muttered something in Thereeni.

“That’s not in my vocabulary. You’ll have to teach me those words.”

A breathless laugh. “Never. It would corrupt you.”

My hand withdrew, and Tisaanah’s eyes snapped to me. Her palm pressed to the bare skin of my abdomen. I kissed her, again, again, our lips barely parting. And she let out a groan when my hand moved back down her thigh.

“I hate you,” she breathed.

“I think you like me very much, actually.”

My fingertips — just fingertips — still caressed her, up and down the length of her body, lingering on the slender vee of her abdomen, the peak of her breasts, the tender skin of her throat. And I just kissed her, and kissed her, and kissed her.

I wanted her. My own body was straining against my self-control, every nerve and muscle calling out for more of her. But the deprivation was a game, at this point.

We had time.

My fingertips brushed her core, just barely, and Tisaanah let out a little whimper.

“What is it, Tisaanah? If you want something, you’ll have to ask for it.”

Her eyes opened, looked directly into mine. They were glazed and shining with want, and, for a moment, something deeper than that.

“I want you,” she murmured.

Those words lit up a primal force in me.

Fuck it.

Her mouth crashed against mine, our slow kisses turning ferocious, feral. She bolted up and pushed me down onto the bed, the full length of her body pressing against me. Her heat aligned with me, and we were so close, one tilt of her hips, away from being joined.

She paused there, eyes looking into mine. A smirk twisted her lips, a spark of satisfaction in her eyes.

“Victory,” she whispered.

And then she pressed down over me, and I slid into her, and nothing existed except for this, for her, for our desire to claim each other. And just as I had teased her with all her silent pleas before, now I listened just as carefully so I could meet them, every shift of her body, every roll of her hips. I could measure the world in nothing but the sounds of her quickening breath or the throb of her pulse. I could revel in the way that here, we were both raw and unfiltered and utterly ourselves.

But then, it had always been difficult to be anything but, with her.

Tisaanah clenched around me and pulled me to her in a long, deep kiss. When it broke, I opened my eyes and looked at her, silhouetted by the moonlight, eyes closed, lost in pleasure.

I paused.

I didn't know I was speaking until the words were already coming out of my mouth.

“What if this was always us?”

Her eyelids fluttered open, and she gave me a coy smirk. “*This?* I would not object.”

I shook my head, suddenly serious. “I mean, all of it. The way we've been living for the last week. Just you and me. Here. What if it wasn't just for a couple of weeks? What if it was our lives?”

She went still, giving me a long stare that I couldn't quite decipher.

Self consciousness fell over me. I didn't even know what I was trying to say. Even if I did, the words, as always, got tangled somewhere between my thoughts and my lips.

"Do you ever think about that?" I asked. "After you're done conquering empires and freeing nations and saving the damned world. Have you ever thought about..."

Have you ever thought about what it might be like to be with me forever?

Ascended above, what a stupid question.

But suddenly, I couldn't *not* ask. I realized, all at once, that I did think about it. I thought about it constantly. It was insidious, the dreams slipping in so slowly I hadn't even realized it was happening until right here, in this moment.

For a long time, I hadn't thought of a future at all. But now, I couldn't conjure a vision for one that didn't have her in it.

She was still giving me that *look*. I lowered my eyes.

What was I even asking her? And what did I expect her to say? It had been a few months. And there were still so many other things that would be at the forefront of her mind.

"Never mind," I muttered. "I just—"

But she tipped my head back, so that I was looking directly into her eyes again. "I love you," she whispered. She gave me a long kiss. The rhythm of her hips resumed, and my thoughts unraveled, and it was not so difficult to discard the self-consciousness of what I had asked her, and what she had not said in response, as she fell back onto the sheets and we lost ourselves in each other again, and again, and again.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

TISAANAH



For the ten-thousandth time, my palms were empty.

Everything inside of me still felt eerily, terrifyingly quiet. I couldn't conjure my silver butterflies. I couldn't feel the emotions around me. Couldn't so much as ripple the water.

I heard footsteps behind me.

"Sneaking out to work in the middle of the night," Max said. "Something about this is very familiar."

I couldn't even make myself answer. My hands clenched.

"Give it time," he murmured. "It's still barely been—"

"It's been almost two weeks." I peered over my shoulder. "I don't understand. It is one thing for Reshaye to leave me. But why would it take everything with it?"

"It didn't. You need to let yourself recover, Tisaanah."

"I do not have time."

Despite myself, my eyes were beginning to sting. The anxiety had been a constant companion these last two weeks, but it had been so easy to simply let it fall to the back of my mind and look away. There was, after all, so much good to cover it up.

Max and I spent our days sleeping and fucking and eating, joking in the garden or sparring in the fields. I was just... so deliriously happy. I was drunk on it. Drunk on Max, and the way every time he responded to one of my deeply-unfunny

jokes with that huff of a laugh, it suffused my whole body with warmth.

Now, the shame hit me all at once. Our two weeks were nearly up. My magic was nowhere to be found. And there were people out there, suffering — *my* people — while I rolled around in a garden, selfishly content.

“I should have been trying harder,” I said. “This whole time. I should have been trying to find out why.”

A flicker of hurt crossed Max’s face, and I immediately regretted the callousness of my words.

We hadn’t spoken again of the question he asked me several nights ago. But it was still there, beneath our every interaction.

Do you ever think about it? he had asked me.

What a ridiculous question.

Of course I thought about it. How could I not? I had never been so happy as I was here, with him. I craved this. But every time I let my imagination extend further, to that soft dream of a future, it was so quickly followed by a wave of darker, more complicated feelings. Guilt. Shame. And above all, fear.

“I can’t sit here and be happy,” I choked out, “when there are so many people waiting for me. People who did not get the chances I did.”

The hurt shifted to understanding.

Max settled down beside me in the grass and withdrew a pocket knife. He opened the blade and, before I could speak, drew it across his palm. Then he offered the knife to me.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Supposedly, we draw from the same magic. And we’ve proven that you can draw from it. So if your magic isn’t working, then try using mine.”

I hesitated. “What if I hurt you?”

He gave me a wry smile. “Realistically, I think it’s more likely that nothing will happen.”

This seemed ridiculous. But then again, he'd managed to bring me back from the dead with this, and I was desperate. So I took the blade, and cut open my own palm, and pressed it to his.

At first, nothing happened.

But I forced my mind to still, reached out for him the same way I would reach out for minds and emotions with my magic. Everything felt dull and off-color, like one of my senses had been hacked away. But...

No.

There.

I felt it — what? I wasn't even sure. *Something*. And it felt like *him*, a magic now so foreign and familiar at once, rolling and melding with mine like a distant, approaching storm.

Max drew in a sudden breath between clenched teeth. His fingers tightened around mine. Our hands were trembling.

It didn't feel the same as it once had, but it was something. And maybe it would be enough. It had to be.

I lifted my other palm. And I whispered to the magic around me as I had a million times before, even though it was more slippery and rebellious than the magic I had wielded.

Still. It responded. Yes. Yes, this would work. I knew it. This had to be the key —

The thing that rolled from my hand was barely even a butterfly. It was, in fact, more like a moth... or a fly. It was weak and shuddering, dissolving into the air before it barely even made it past my eye line. No... I could save it, I could—

I made a final, desperate push.

But then Max drew in a sharp breath and yanked his hand away. My concentration snapped. My weak butterfly dissolved and fell to the earth, disappearing into nothingness before it hit the ground.

I barely saw it. I was just looking at Max, who let out a low hiss as he rubbed his hand. My heart fell.

“I hurt you.”

“It’s fine. It’s nothing.”

“It’s not...” I pulled his hand to me. The shallow slit across his palm was now black and purple. There wasn’t much of it — not enough to spread beyond the very edges of the wound. Still. Too much. This shouldn’t have happened.

A lump rose in my throat.

“I shouldn’t have done this.”

“It’s nothing, Tisaanah. It’s still just a scratch.”

“I don’t care. We are not doing that again.”

He said nothing, his lips pressed together.

I stood and paced, my arms around myself.

“It will come back,” he said, quietly. “Give it time. We’ll find a solution.”

“We do not have time.” *They do not have time.*

“You can’t rush this. It’s not the sort of thing you can bang your head against until it works. But something will give. You know I’m too cynical to say it if I didn’t believe it was the truth.”

Despite myself, a smile twisted one side of my mouth. *Cynical*, he calls himself. At first, maybe it was easy to think he was, with his sarcasm and acidic wit. But over time, I realized that Max had never been a cynic. He was a wounded optimist trying desperately to return to his natural state.

I loved that about him. No matter how many times he tried to tell himself otherwise, he truly believed the world could be a better place.

But now, a knot formed in my stomach. I looked over my shoulder and gave him a weak smile, but all I could look at were his hands as he wiped the blood away, and those dark veins trailing up his arms that now seemed so much darker.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO



I wasn't sure how long we flew. My blood dripped down, down, onto the treetops far below us. My vision blurred. Every so often, I would blink, and suddenly the sun was higher in the sky. I didn't remember closing my eyes, but they snapped open again when the branches sliced my cheek and the ground rose up beneath me. Ishqa and I lay there, exhausted. The bolt was still protruding from my back. Every time I breathed, pain slithered through my ribs. I didn't care.

"No one trailed us." Ishqa was beside me, but he sounded as if he was very far away.

I blinked and saw Ashraia toppled over, Siobhan's dying gasps, Caduan falling.

"Get this thing out of me," I said.

I rolled over, my face pressed into the dirt. I heard Ishqa's movement. Then felt the faintest pressure on the arrow, and my throat released a whimper. The pain was breathtaking.

"This arrow was cursed," he said.

"Athalena is a Wielder."

"*Was*, I suppose." Ishqa said it as if it were supposed to be some dark, humorless joke, but it just made my stomach turn.

"Just—" I ground out, but I didn't finish speaking before the pain overtook me, so intense that it blinded my every sense. I thrust my face into the dirt so it would muffle my scream.

“It’s done,” Ishqa murmured, as I pushed myself up to my elbows, but I didn’t hear him over the sound of my own vomiting. When I was finished, I fell back onto my stomach, weak.

Tears rolled down my cheeks.

They were all dead. Only Ishqa and I remained. Compared to the agony of that wound, the one between my ribs was a welcome reprieve.

“Are you going to kill me?” I murmured.

“Why would I go through the trouble of saving you if I was going to kill you?”

I craned my neck far enough to look at Ishqa. He seemed tired. Weak. *Sad*.

For perhaps the first time, he looked as if he were made of flesh and blood, not marble.

“The treaty,” I said. “Klein said—”

“I think we need to finish it,” Ishqa said coldly. “Regardless of what the treaty is or isn’t.”

Finish it. Finish the humans. I closed my eyes and slipped my hand into my pocket, where the letter Athalena had given us remained. It felt like a lifetime ago.

And what would we do, if we went there? Kill them all? *Could* I do that, this weakened? The thought seemed impossible.

Yet...

It was Caduan’s face that was seared into my mind. *There is so much more than this*, he had told me.

My fingers curled into fists, clenched so tight they trembled.

He had watched everyone he loved die. Those people deserved justice.

He deserved justice.

I couldn't hold myself up anymore. I fell back down into the dirt.

"Rest," Ishqa said. "You're barely conscious."

But I held myself up just enough to look at him. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "For Ashraia. For... everything."

Something I couldn't read shifted in his face. "Rest," he said again, and by the time the word left his lips, it was no longer a choice.



I DREAMED OF THE DEAD. But instead of their corpses, I dreamed of sunshine. Siobhan was sitting beside me in the pub, back in the Pales. We were in our typical spots. She held her typical drink. She was laughing at something, but I couldn't remember what. In this world, Siobhan was not dead. The humans were not a threat. But I sat there and looked at her and felt this strange, eerie feeling, like the wind was whispering in my ear, *It's already lost.*

I dreamed of Caduan. I dreamed I visited him in the House of Stone, if it had not fallen. I dreamed of it as it appeared in my fuzzy, half-remembered childhood memories. It was a beautiful city built of tiered stone temples with plants spilling over their sides. There were flowers growing on the vines — orange lilies, as striking as the sunset. There were grand balls and beautiful banquets, held by the nobles of the House of Stone. They were kind, and beautiful, and they never stopped smiling.

But it wasn't there that I found Caduan. I found him in the library, surrounded by books. When I approached, he looked up and smiled at me as if I were a pleasant surprise. But then I settled beside him and his expression darkened.

"I don't know why," he said, "but I think that something terrible is going to happen."

Don't be silly, I tried to tell him. *It's a festival. Everyone is dancing. Let's go.*

But he simply shook his head, lost in thought.

“It isn’t over,” he said. And then his gaze found mine, suddenly alert, sharper than everything else in this dream world. “It isn’t over,” he told me, again, “and I don’t have enough time.”

He reached out and touched my face, as if to see if it was real. But I was already fading, even though I tried desperately to cling to the dream, to his touch, to his aliveness.

“I wish I had more time,” he murmured.

I did too, I thought. There would never be enough time.



MY EYES OPENED. The sun was bright and hot. My neck ached. I was on my stomach.

It took a few wonderful, horrible moments for me to remember what had happened. All of the deaths. I closed my eyes and let them hit me all over again.

Then, slowly, I pushed myself up. I was still in pain, but this, at least, was manageable. Ishqa was a few feet away, leaning over a fire, over which he was cooking a small rabbit. His hair was windblown, his clothing dirty, his eyes tired.

“You healed me,” I said. My voice came out in a ragged croak.

“I did my best. It’s not my strength.”

“It helps. Thank you.”

I crawled towards the fire and settled beside it, wincing as all of my muscles protested in their own individual ways. My head was pounding. And my heart — my heart hurt.

Ishqa did not look at me. He pulled the rabbit off the fire and began to cut the meat with his knife, offering me pieces. I shook my head.

“If you don’t eat anything,” he said, “you are not going to be able to travel anywhere effectively.”

He was right. I begrudgingly took some, though I had to force it down.

“Where did you go?” I asked, and Ishqa shot me a look I couldn’t read.

“I woke up a few times,” I added, “and you were gone.”

He turned back to the rabbit, very focused on his task. “I flew north.”

“Why?”

“I needed to see what happened to the treaty.”

That got my attention. I discarded my attempts at even trying to have an appetite. “And?”

“Your war general spoke the truth. Your father turned on the Wyshraj that were living within Sidnee walls.”

I felt as if all of the blood had left my body at once.

Still, Ishqa did not look at me. “Most of our army was killed. Sidnee soldiers even marched on the House of Wayward Winds.”

My fingernails were digging into my palms. “Your sister?”

“She’s injured, but she will live.”

“And your son?”

“Safe.” Then he muttered beneath his breath, as if he had not intended to speak aloud, “And the Sidnee should thank the gods for it.”

Yet he did not look terribly relieved. I didn’t feel it, either. Instead, I thought of my father — my powerful, ambitious, selfish father.

For the first time, I thought of him and I was *disgusted* by him.

He looked at what had happened to Caduan’s home, and he had seen it as an opportunity to craft his own king and invite his enemy into his homestead, waiting to drive a dagger into their back.

“Never again,” I said. “My father’s time is over. It is *my* blood that belongs on that throne. And when I claim my position as Teirness, you have my word that you’ll have the alliance of the Sidnee. As long as I rule, it will be yours.”

Ishqa gave me a strange look, one that I could not decipher.

My eyes were burning. “And I grieve with you, Ishqa, for the lives that you have lost.”

Ishqa finished cutting the meat off of the rabbit, looking down at the food in front of him and showing no interest in eating it. I could relate. I felt sick to my stomach at the thought of what my people had done.

Ishqa stood and turned to me.

“I came back because our mission is not done,” he said. “Despite what has happened, Queen Shadya still believes that the humans pose an imminent threat. And I agree with her.”

I nodded. This was unequivocally true. “How long was I asleep? How much time do we have before—”

“The meeting is only four days away. It is a long way for us to travel.”

“We’ll make it,” I said, and willed it into truth, already standing. I was injured, but more powerfully than that, I was *angry*. I was tired of giving people chances. I was tired of letting them kill without consequences.

“We strike the leaders,” I said. “I have had enough of half-measures.”

Ishqa’s mouth thinned. “As have I.”

I forced my mind through the cloud of anger and grief, forced myself to be the methodical, calm-headed Blade that Siobhan had always hoped I could become.

There was only two of us. And we knew little about who would be attending this meeting, other than that it would include the humans’ highest-ranked commanders. We could be walking into a slaughter.

But I didn't even care if I was killed, as long as I got to return the favor.

"Do you have Wyshraj soldiers to spare?" I asked. "Anyone who would be able to fly fast enough to meet us there?"

"Not many," Ishqa said. "But enough."

It would have to be.

My muscles clenched so hard they shook.

"Then let's end one war," I spat. "And then we will end another."

I was so furious that I didn't even notice that Ishqa turned away without answering, his face tilted to the sky.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

TISAANAH



I thought, perhaps, I had dreamed the knock.

My eyelids fluttered open to see nothing but the silent sway of the flowers beneath the moonlight through the window.

I rolled over. Max was already sitting up, face tilted towards the door. His body had taken on a certain rigid stance that I had come to know well — the stance of a soldier.

Max murmured, “No one ever knocks.”

So it hadn’t been a dream.

We slipped out of bed. Both of us took our weapons before we left the room. It felt ridiculous to be padding down the hall barefoot, in nothing but an oversized nightshirt, holding a weapon like Il’Sahaj.

Max peered out the window and shook his head. Then he opened the door.

There was no one there. Nothing except for a wooden chest, sitting on the doorstep. It was plain, but finely made of polished wood and brass hardware. There was an inscription burned into the top of it, barely visible beneath the moonlight, written in flourishing script:

Tisaanah Vytezic

I placed Il’Sahaj on the ground beside me, kneeling in front of the box. I felt Max’s hand on my shoulder, felt the uncertainty that it communicated.

I opened it.

Max uttered a curse. I did not hear him. I could not move. My blood was rushing in my ears, pounding, burning.

I reached into the box and pulled out a hand.

It was wan and calloused, the fingernails torn and bloody. It had once clearly belonged to a man. There was a small scar between the thumb and forefinger. A brand. A wolf's head, teeth bared. It smelled foul. The rough flesh where it had been hacked away from the arm was rotting.

That was what the box contained. Hands.

Hundreds of them. Belonging to men, women, children. *Infants.*

And all bore the brand between the thumb and forefinger. The sigil of the Zorokov family.

These were slaves' hands.

I dropped the hand back into the box as I doubled over, vomiting into the grass.

Max swore under his breath. He darted from the door, looking around for whoever had left this here. Distantly, I became aware of a strange sound in the air. I didn't look up. If I had, I might have noticed it was wings. There were dozens and dozens of birds overhead, circling.

I could not think of anything but this. Slaves' hands.

Hundreds of people. Here. In front of me.

Max's footsteps halted suddenly.

"Tisaanah," he whispered. "Get up."

I rose. I wasn't sure how — my legs felt as if they had no blood in them. Somehow I had the presence of mind to pick up Il'Sahaj. Max stood just within the open doorway, his staff bared. Fire shimmered along its length, casting a bloody red glow through the living room.

"I suggest you tell me what, exactly, you're doing in our house," Max said, "and who we can thank for such unpleasant

gifts.”

For a moment, I wasn't sure who he was talking to.

And then I saw it: a figure standing in the center of our living room.

It was tall — so tall that its head nearly brushed the ceiling. And it was dark, as if made up of shadows, wearing a cloak of darkness that defied physical understanding. Yet, even through that shapelessness, I could tell that it had long, spindly limbs. Its fingers were so long that they just seemed to trail off into the air, like shadow dissolving into light, almost brushing the ground. Its legs were long, and footless, with knees that bent the wrong way.

No matter how long I looked at its face, I could not find its features. It was as if there was just a smear of *nothing* where the face should be.

And yet, I knew that it smiled.

The Zorokov family does not appreciate being lied to.

The voice was not a sound so much as it was a reverberation, expanding like a puff of smoke. This line came in Thereni, with the distinct accent of the Threllian ruling class — but it was hollow, like a mimicry.

Then another sound filled the room.

Screams. Screams of pain. First one, and then more and more, until it was a cacophony of voices pleading, begging, weeping.

I did not need to be told what I was listening to. I had been presented the hands of slaves. And now I was being given their death screams.

Something inside of me snapped. I didn't think before raising Il'Sahaj — before I was lunging.

My slash made contact. I felt the satisfying bite of Il'Sahaj's blade into flesh. Or— was it flesh? A spray hit me across the face, but it was not warm like blood, and seconds later, it began to *burn*.

The thing barely faltered. Its movements were choppy, as if it skipped through time, discarding half-seconds. Even up close, I could not see its face. But from within the strange shadow, I saw glimpses — glimpses of people screaming in pain and terror.

It went for my throat.

But Max lunged faster, staff alight with fire so bright that embers floated around him as he buried it deep within the creature's body. The thing shuddered, as if moving in a hundred directions at once.

Max snarled as he unleashed a burst of flame, and I withdrew Il'Sahaj for another strike, and—

Suddenly we were alone.

The creature's absence was so jarring that Max stumbled back. We found ourselves just blinking at each other, our weapons still raised.

Seconds of silence passed.

“What,” Max said, quietly, “in the name of the fucking Ascended was that?”

“It is still here, somewhere,” I whispered.

I didn't know how I was so certain. But when Max inclined his chin, I knew he felt it, too. He lifted his fingers, and all of the lanterns in the house whispered to life, dim red light blooming over the walls.

Slowly, we paced around the perimeter of the room. And then, down the hallway. Max was ahead of me, the firelight reflecting a sheen on his bare back. With the tip of his staff's blade, he nudged open the door to our bedroom, then lifted his fingers to bring fire to the lanterns. They illuminated nothing but the crumpled blankets on the empty bed and overflowing bookshelves.

It was utterly still. Utterly silent.

Max eyed the pile of sheets on the bed with suspicion, gingerly pulling them aside with his weapon. But I turned around, regarding the dark wooden cluttered bureau. Above it

was a long mirror. Like many of Max's belongings, it looked as if it had spent its better days in a much larger, much grander house, and now sat here in this messy cottage looking somewhat ridiculous.

I saw a reflection of the room and the flickering light, of Max's back as he nudged aside a curtain. Of course, I saw myself.

Yet... something was strange.

I couldn't figure out what, at first. Then I realized: my reflection was doused in shadow, like I was silhouetted against the light.

But the bedroom was lit.

"Max," I murmured. My grip tightened around Il'Sahaj's hilt.

In the reflection, I watched him turn and stand behind me. And then I watched myself step forward, fingers pressed to the mirror, face still blurred in shadow.

Except I didn't. I didn't move.

"It's—" I started.

It lunged.

The next thing I knew, I was on the ground. The creature was on top of me, intangible and yet so heavy I could not breathe. The face that stared back at me was nothingness, and then it was my own. I felt as if my mind was being rifled through, my memories picked apart like the bones of a carcass. The face became Serel's. Max's. My mother's. Vos's and his scarred, disfigured features.

I opened my mouth but could not speak. I felt as if everything was being drained from me. Like my life, my energy was being pulled away from *inside*.

I fought, trying to bury Il'Sahaj into its flesh, but my awareness was fading. Somewhere in the misty world beyond, Max was attacking it, too, trying desperately to yank it off of me. Its blood — if it was blood — rained down on me, burning and burning and burning.

Suddenly everything went blindingly bright.

The creature released me.

And there was Max, carved from fire itself, his second eyelids wide open to reveal his black, piercing eyes.

The creature was distracted, now, far more interested in this new opponent. But even as it moved away, in its final touch, I felt as if we were connected in some strange way. And for the first time, I felt something from it:

Pleasure.

“No,” I choked out.

I didn't know how, but I understood that Max had made a terrible mistake. The world snapped back into focus, and the creature lunged for him. At first, Max slipped into nothingness, lurching to the other side of the room, like a brighter, clumsier, more powerful version of the Syrizen. He reappeared behind the creature. One strike, and fire burst through the room.

The creature flew against the wall. For a few seconds, I thought that could be it. I pushed myself to my feet. My legs were shaking. I grabbed Il'Sahaj.

The edges of the creature shivered, like shadow pierced by unyielding daylight.

But then it drew itself back together, and it surged toward Max.

The two of them collided in a vicious tangle of light and shadow. But it was clear, almost immediately, that the shadow was winning. Through the flames, I saw Max's face go blank with agony. The creature was surrounding him, all of those spindly wrong-way limbs circling around him. And then there were more — four arms, six arms, ten arms, circling him, smothering light.

On instinct, I tried to call my magic, but it did not answer. The creature looked up at me, and now its face was one that I knew so intimately even though I had never met it — a young girl with sheets of black hair. Kira.

It would kill him. The certainty of it hit me like a rock to my chest.

I had to stop myself from rushing to him.

I had no magic.

Il'Sahaj would do nothing against this thing.

And I had no time.

So instead, I turned and ran.

I only just saw the creature's face snap up as I tore out the door, around the corner, down the hall. I didn't look back. I ran until I reached the guest room — the room that had been mine, the last time I lived here — ran around the corner and inside, then threw myself behind the cupboard.

And then I waited, hand pressed to my mouth to still my serrated breath.

I heard no footsteps. But I didn't hear a fight, either. Had it abandoned Max to come search for me?

Slowly, so slowly, my fingers slid down into the partially-open drawer around the corner. Then closed them around a round glass bottle, about the size of my palm.

Please, please, please...

I slid out from behind the wardrobe. This room was neater than Max's bedroom, and far less cluttered. For the first time I cursed myself for having cleaned it out when I lived here before. With silent steps, I went to the center of the room. In the full-length mirror that leaned against the wall, I could see the red shadows of the lanterns against the walls, the furniture, and my own blood-streaked face.

I turned around, circling the room. Nothing.

And then I turned back to the mirror.

The room was once again reflected back at me, doused in lantern light — everything doused, except for my face, stuck in shadow.

Gods, please work, please work...

I said one final prayer, and then I smashed the bottle in my hand against the ground. I poured absolutely everything I had, every scrap of magic that might have still lived within me, every piece of desperation, every magnified shard of power that lived trapped within this ink — I poured all of it, all of it, *all of it*, into drawing the final line of my Stratagram.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my reflection lunge towards the glass.

Pain tore through me as I gave magic I didn't have to this final burst, drawing what I could from the Stratagram ink for one single spell.

One spell, to shatter all of the glass in the house, mirrors and windows, all at once.

The crash tore the air in two.

Sweat plastered my clothing to my skin. My head was spinning. I struggled to my hands and knees and crawled to the mirror. Broken glass bit into my palms — from the mirror and the glass, mixed together in tiny shards on the floor.

Two bony, rotting hands remained, braced on either side of the mirror frame, as if about to vault themselves out of it... now attached to nothing.

“Fucking brilliant.”

I turned to see Max leaning against the doorframe. His second eyelids were closed now, gaze cool and blue and so very tired. He was not wounded, but he looked impossibly weak. My gaze fell to his hands. They were black.

I got to my feet. “We have to leave. I do not know if it's dead or—”

My words were drowned out by a strange sound. It started low, and then rose louder and louder:

Shshshshshshsh...

Max and I looked to the now-glassless window just in time for birds to pour through it.

Max muttered a curse, but it was drowned out beneath the sound of their wings, a deafening whisper that swelled like a rising tide. We both braced, but the birds simply surrounded us and then moved past, rushing through the bedroom, down the hall, and presumably, disappearing out another window.

The sound slowly faded.

When I opened my eyes again, Max was staring at my hands. “What is that?”

I looked down. Where my hands had been empty, now they held two pieces of parchment.

I unfolded one. At first, it was blank. Then words unfurled over it.

You are in great danger.

There are more coming for you.

And worse, for your people.

Max breathed a confused curse, and I couldn't help but agree.

Move quickly.

Use the Stratagram on the paper beneath. I will explain.

“Absolutely fucking not,” Max said. And the next words came as if they could hear him:

I cannot make you trust me.

But they will be coming for you in seconds.

And your people need you now to stop something worse.

“I don't understand,” I murmured, and Max let out a low scoff.

“Because this is insane,” he said, beneath his breath. “Utterly insane.”

He was right. It was insane.

But then we heard a dull *thump*, and both of our heads snapped up.

There was a shuddering sound, like the wind through the trees. And slowly, it grew louder, fuller. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. I knew what we were hearing. Could feel more of them, coming.

“We have to go,” I said.

I dropped the other parchment to the ground and grabbed the one below it. On it was a delicate Stratagram.

“Can you do it?” I said, knowing how weak he still was.

“Of course I can,” he grumbled. He grabbed my hand in his.

Black, long fingers reached around the doorframe. A faceless head began to peer around it. The fire was overtaking the cottage. Across the hall, a fiery beam fell to the ground.

That was the last thing I saw before we were gone.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR



We needed to move fast, so I drank Ishqa's blood again. It was a little easier, now. This time, I transformed fully into a bird, which was slightly less challenging than the partial shift I completed in the House of Reeds. I was much smaller than Ishqa, and at first I despised the sensation of flying. If there was anything, after all, that a Sidnee was not built for, it would be the air — we spent our entire lives living beneath the stone.

Still, there was a certain freedom to it that I began to appreciate after I got used to it. Sometimes, when the sun hit me just right, when my wings were stable and the air cooperative, I felt so free, so weightless, that I could forget about the dying faces of Caduan and Siobhan and Ashraia. I could forget about my father's betrayal, my shameful bloodline, even the fact that I very well might be journeying to my death.

Ishqa barely spoke during this journey, even in between our stretches of travel. I could not blame him for this, and I wasn't about to complain. What good were words, anyway?

The meeting was to take place on a small island, farther away from the Fey lands than I had ever been before. It was so far south that we would be flying squarely into the territory of the human nations. When we were about two days away from the island, we flew over nothing but sea for the entire day, a prospect that made a knot sit in my stomach when combined with my uncertainty of flying and my sheer exhaustion. I didn't know how to swim — and certainly wouldn't be able to

shift fast enough to do so, anyway, even if I did. If I fell, I would drown.

But thankfully, we made it to land shortly before sundown. We watched the ground below us carefully, and Ishqa did several laps around the area, scanning for life with his superior eyesight and confirming we were alone before we landed.

When we did, and I scraped myself up off the ground after shifting back into Fey form, I stood and looked around in stunned silence.

“It’s unfair,” I said, quietly.

“What?”

“That the human world is this beautiful.”

It was so beautiful that it *hurt*. We stood in the middle of a sea of gold, tall grass that reached my waist rolling out in all directions, bright as fire beneath the setting sun. The sky was bright red, like human blood had painted the clouds, and the reflection and the heat of the sun rolled over the landscape like dripping paint. It all shuddered beneath the breeze, as if the grass itself were breathing.

I wasn’t sure why I began to cry. But once the tears started coming, they would not stop. As I walked, I held my hand above the grass, letting the tips of gold tickle my palms and fingers in little gentle caresses.

I wished Caduan could have seen it. I remembered how he had looked at the city of Niraja, when we first arrived — the way his eyes went bright with wonder, even if everything else about his face remained subdued. I didn’t realize how much I had loved that look until now, when it was painfully absent. I wished I had savored it more.

We stopped for the night there, in that field. We hunted and set up camp. As dusk fell, the plains fell into silver shadow, a mournful inversion of their earlier intensity. It was just as beautiful, but eerily silent. I imagined the afterlife would look like this.

“Do the Wyshraj believe in life beyond death?” I asked Ishqa, as we ate.

“Life is, perhaps, a weak way to say it,” he replied, softly. “Our dead rise to the sky. They send us the winds and the sun. And they watch.” His gaze, golden even under the moonlight, flicked to me. “And the Sidnee?”

“We believe in a limitless place, where you are reunited with all you have lost. But to get there, your mark upon the world is judged. There is nothing more important to the Sidnee than the weight of our stories.” I looked down at my forearms. One covered in lines of tattoos. The other in stark black X’s. A wave of fear settled over me.

It was likely that I would die tomorrow. If I did, would this ink tip the scale? How would I be judged?

“Aefe,” Ishqa said, softly.

I met his gaze. It was rawer than I had ever seen it. It was a strange shade on his face.

“You have earned your place in any afterlife,” he murmured. “Sidnee or Wyshraj. Any god worth worshipping would grant it to you. And if there’s an afterlife that would deny you entry, I do not want to be there, either.”

A lump rose in my throat. “If we die tomorrow, it was an honor to fight next to you, Ishqa.”

He was silent for a long moment. Then he said, “Likewise, Aefe, Teirness of the House of Obsidian. It has been an honor.”

After that, our conversation settled with the embers of the fire. I lay down, but I could not sleep. Instead I looked up at the stars, and thought about the passed Wyshraj who lived among them, Ashraia included. I thought of the stone beneath my feet, and Siobhan. And I thought of the House of Stone, and the sudden, devastating realization that I did not know where Caduan had gone.

I rolled over, and watched the grass. In the darkness, I could see Ishqa lying there, too, completely still, with his eyes wide open.

IN THE MORNING, we packed our things in near-silence. There was a knot in my stomach that I couldn't untangle, and I feared that if I opened my mouth, nothing but my own fear would come spilling out. Ishqa once again offered me his blood, and we shifted together and took off for the island where the humans were gathering.

I knew little of the human world. A part of me expected this island to look like Niraja, grand and majestic. But for a place that had come to consume all of my thoughts, it was surprisingly small — even if it, too, was beautiful. It was crescent-shaped, and heavily forested, with trees that were bare save for thick clusters of ferns. The beaches were sandy, and so bright they were nearly blinding to look at beneath the midday sun. The eastern side of the island had a collection of boats. Small ones, to my relief — even the largest surely couldn't hold more than a dozen men. At least we would not have to worry about the humans' overwhelming numbers here.

We landed on the opposite side of the island, and shifted back our Fey bodies, crouching in the sand. My heart was pounding.

“Where are the Wyshraj?” I whispered to Ishqa.

“They must not have arrived in time.” He shook his head. “It was far to travel. I wasn't sure that they would.”

I cursed under my breath. But I wasn't about to let that stop us — not when we had gotten this far. I reached for my knives and shot Ishqa as confident a glance as I could manage.

“Then it's just us. I hope you're ready.”

Ishqa looked slightly pale. But he nodded, all the same.

There was only one structure on the island: a stone, circular building, not particularly tall. The windows were high and small, near the top of the roof. Columns surrounded it, carved with a language I didn't recognize. A single path of

large, flat granite led up to the building's entrance — a set of arched double doors in dark wood.

There was no sign of the humans. Perhaps they were already inside.

“The windows,” I said, jerking my chin up. “They’re small, but we can fit through—”

But Ishqa was already standing and walking towards the door. I caught his wrist. “They could shoot us where we stand,” I hissed.

“It will be fine,” Ishqa said, calmly, though there was a slight twinge to his voice that I couldn’t decipher. He took my hand in his — a strangely intimate movement — and stepped towards the door.

“Ishqa...” I tried to pull my hand away, but his grip was firm.

“There were dissenters,” he said, without looking at me. “Let us talk to them, first.”

I wasn’t convinced. I wasn’t convinced *at all*. But before I could stop him, Ishqa pushed open one of the doors, and we stepped through.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE



My knees hit sand.

In any other context, I would have been willing to flop over in that sand and take a nap. It was beautiful. Soft, white, fine. For a moment my mind was stuck on that odd sand appreciation, and then I reordered my thoughts.

The box of hands. The fucking monster. The birds. The Stratagram.

And this.

Tisaanah and I got to our feet. We looked ridiculous, half-dressed and wielding ridiculously fine weapons, spattered with strange grey-purple.

We were on a beach. Actually, perhaps it was an island, because I could see the coastline curving in the distance. Tall trees with tufts of leaves loomed above us. The forest ahead was dense, with lots of ferns. It was bright daylight — jarring after coming from the night of hell at the cottage.

“We must be far away,” I murmured, “for the time to be so different.”

“Look.” Tisaanah pointed down the beach. There were several boats on the shore. “Are there others here?”

“After all that, there’d better be *someone* here who can give us some Ascended-damned answers.”

That, or try to kill us, I thought. At this point, who knows.

Tisaanah looked up, and I followed her gaze.

Ahead of us was a single stone path, leading up to a massive arched doorway set in an eerily imposing stone building. The structure was circular, and surrounded by large columns. As we stepped closer, I could see they were covered in carvings that looked as if they could be writing — though not a language I understood.

Tisaanah approached one and ran her fingertips over it.

“I think this is Old Besrithian,” she murmured. “My mother loved history books. Some had writing that looked like this.”

“So this place is ancient.”

Old Besrithian was a long, long dead language.

She nodded. Then her gaze fell to the door.

I let out a sigh. “I suppose,” I said, “we’re about to walk through that ominous entryway, aren’t we?”

“I think we are.”

Fantastic.

“Well,” I muttered, “might as well keep an exciting day exciting.”

We approached the door. Despite the boats we saw in the distance, it was completely silent. If there were other people here, they didn’t make a sound. I did not find this especially comforting.

The door was large and heavy, and let out a spine-chilling squeal as it swung open. It was dark inside — so dark I had to blink several times to force my eyes to adjust. In those seconds of blindness my hands tightened around my weapon.

The room was a large, circular, open space, with stone benches around its edge. Lines of writing were carved into its walls, in circles on the floor, even into the benches. A perfectly round spot of light fell on the ground through an opening in the roof, and sun spilled through narrow windows.

A single figure stood at the opposite side of the room, back to us. He was tall, with long golden hair that fell down to his

waist. As the door squealed open, light fell across his form. He wore odd clothing, swathes of gold fabric that wrapped around his torso and over his shoulder.

He turned, revealing an unnerving stare. Bright gold eyes. He moved strangely — too smooth, too graceful.

“So I see you received my gift,” he said, with an unfamiliar accent. “By your appearance, perhaps it got to you somewhat late.”

“Let’s start with introductions before we get so familiar,” I said. “Who, exactly, are—”

“I know you.”

Tisaanah’s voice came in a gasp, like she hadn’t realized she was speaking aloud.

“I know you,” she breathed again. The man stepped forward, and I matched the movement, my weapon raised.

“Wait. You tell us who you are before you go anywhere.”

He was looking past me, to Tisaanah, so still that it seemed like he was barely breathing.

My grip tightened around my weapon.

“Who are you?” I said again.

He was silent for a long moment before answering.

“My name is Ishqa Sai’Ess. And I am here to right a wrong that I made very, very long ago.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX



It was so dark inside that at first, I could see nothing. I heard hushed whispers suddenly go silent. Slowly, the room came into focus around me. We stood in a large, circular room. The bright light from the half-open door spilled in from behind us, casting a violent streak across the ground. The walls, like the columns outside, were carved. A single curved stone bench lined the perimeter of the room.

On that bench sat the humans.

There were perhaps two dozen of them. Most were men, but there were a few women. They wore different styles of dress, though most wore flowing garments that reminded me of the Wyshraj's apparel. Nearly half of them had colorless skin and white hair, like the man I had encountered in Meriata.

I opened my mouth to speak — though, what would I even say? Would they even understand me? But then one of the humans stepped forward, and all words left me.

The light fell across his pale face, catching silver hair in the sunlight. Silver hair, and a scar that ran from the corner of his mouth all the way to his ear.

Instinctively, my hands shot to my blades. But one of the other humans lifted their hands, and my weapons flew across the floor, scraping the whole way. I tried to lunge, but Ishqa's hand was still firmly around mine, even though I tried to yank it away in frustration.

“Ishqa, go!” I gasped, but another one of the humans approached me, eyeing me like a cat, and suddenly my head,

my *thoughts*, were in paralyzing agony.

I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think.

And still, Ishqa was not moving.

He released my hand, and I collapsed to the ground, my muscles suddenly beyond my control.

And that was when I heard eight words that ripped me apart.

"I fulfilled your request," Ishqa said, to the scarred human. "Now you fulfill ours."

Everything went numb.

My whole body jerked as I wrenched my head around to stare up at Ishqa. He did not look at me.

What are you doing?! I tried to scream, but my body was not my own.

One of the white-haired humans, a young woman, knelt beside me. She took my face in her hand and turned it, looking at me like one would examine a horse to be purchased. She said something to the scarred human in a language I did not understand — did not understand except for one word:

Essnera.

The scarred human smiled, as if pleased by whatever she had told him.

"You do not know how long and how hard we have worked for this," he told Ishqa, through a thick accent. "Many of our people's lives will be saved."

Ishqa did not return his smile. A sneer twitched at his lip. Still, he carefully avoided my stare. "You have already taken many of ours."

"Out of desperation alone. Actions that we sincerely regret."

"Well. Now it will no longer be necessary." He bowed his head. "Queen Shadya appreciates your alliance."

The realization dawned. Betrayal bled through me like a dagger's tear. I tried to scream, tried to shout, tried to lunge for Ishqa. If I could move, I would have ripped his skull from his body. I would have torn his eyes from that beautiful face.

But I could not move.

I could not even weep.

"Likewise," the scarred human said, and bowed his head.

Ishqa began to turn away. Then he paused, and looked back at me. Something shuddered across his face.

"Is it really so powerful?" he said, quietly. "The thing that she will become?"

The human smiled. "It is the most powerful thing the world will ever see."

One of the other humans touched me, and agony consumed me. Two sets of hands dragged me to my feet. My limbs were limp, but I fought, fought with everything I had against the spell that sapped me.

For just one moment, I broke through it. My limbs thrashed. Two more humans were on me. My eyes were blurry with tears.

"ISHQA!" I screamed. "You cannot leave me here!"

They were dragging me back, dragging me against the floor. I saw only Ishqa's gold eyes staring back at me, his face stone.

"You cannot do this to me!"

I thought of the House of Reeds, and those monsters.

Would I become a monster too?

My consciousness waned, my vision going white and blurry. I was being dragged farther and farther from Ishqa.

ISHQA!

I do not know if I screamed it aloud.

The last thing I saw was him turning away, his golden hair flying back in a sudden burst of wind.

And then my vision was consumed by white and white and white.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN



I couldn't move.

The familiarity was buried deep, somewhere far beneath conscious thought. But the sight of that man's face, the sight of his bright gold eyes, yanked something visceral to the surface.

Ishqa. *Ishqa*. How did I know that name?

Max, who had planted himself firmly between the me and the golden-haired man, peered at me over his shoulder, asking a silent question.

Nothing but white and white and white, for so many days.

The voice floated through the back of my mind.

How many times had I heard that? Seen that? *Felt it?*

You were betrayed by someone that you thought cared for you.

And with that hurt, it was always the same: white and white and white... and a flash of long, golden hair. A man turning away.

This man.

"You knew Reshaye," I forced out. And Max's eyes went wide.

Ishqa's stare darkened.

"Reshaye?" he said, quietly. "That's what she calls herself?"

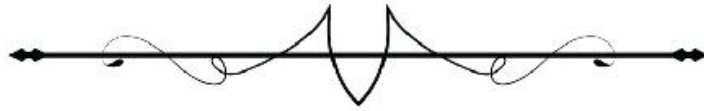
"She?" Max said.

“Does it mean something?” I murmured.

A wince flickered across the man’s face.

“It means, ‘*No one.*’”

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT



Aefe

{Reshaye}

There is much I do not remember.

I remember the pain. My body is opened and closed and opened again, my organs rearranged, blood removed and returned to me. The humans are monstrous and cruel and vicious.

To them I am not a living thing. To them I am a tool to be used, or created, or harvested.

There is no past or future. There is only this.

The first time they link me to another, it is through the melding of our veins, yanked out of my wrist and dangling and dripping between us.

The humans keep dying. I know because I feel their deaths. I know because their deaths are mine. I do not see the bodies. I see nothing but white.

They take pieces of me. I do not know what they do with them, or why they take them. First fingers. Then my hands. Then my arms. Slowly, they carve me away, piece by piece. Perhaps one day I will not have a body at all.

For a long time, I think of Ishqa, and how much I hate him. I tell myself that my hate is important because it keeps me alive. But the terrible truth is that I have no choice but to live, even though I wish I could die.

I hate Ishqa so much that I sear my hate into my soul. I hold onto it even when everything else fades away. One day, I realize that I cannot remember my home. I know it was beautiful and safe and that when I was there, I felt connected to a thousand other souls. Now, I wonder what that feels like. To be connected to others. To be safe.

Faces and memories slip through my fingers like I'm trying to cradle fistfuls of sand. First it is the peripheral ones, Ashraia's, Shadya's, people who wove in and out of my life for brief moments at a time. And then friends. One day I cannot remember the shade of Caduan's eyes, or the way that Siobhan's proud smile made me feel. I clutch Ishqa's face, suspend it in the amber of my hatred. But soon, I remember only the sharpest of fragments — his hair flying out behind him as he turned away from me. As he left me here.

I hate my father, too, for his lies, and my mother for allowing him to be such a monster. But my hate is not enough to keep their faces, either, and soon they too are gone.

I cling the most to Orscheid. I try to etch her features into whatever is left of me — her beautiful smile, her bright eyes, the way she smelled when she wrapped me in an embrace. Long after everything else fades away, my love for Orscheid remains. I try to remind myself of it every night. I recite the angles of her face to myself, and I tell myself, *There is still someone out there who loves you.*

But one day, I cannot recall her name. Soon, her features blur, one by one. I lose the tilt of her eyes, the cadence of her voice, the path her smile tread across her face. And one day, I cannot remember what love is at all.

The humans carve pieces of me away. Chunks of flesh fall away, and so do chunks of whatever lies beneath.

I try so hard to remember my name.

Sometimes I hear the human's voices. They ask me, *Who are you?* And I tell them, *I am Aefe, Teirness of the House of Obsidian.*

I am Aefe. I am Aefe. I am Aefe.

But the time rolls by.

And when I have lost everything else that makes me who I am, what does a name mean, anyway?

One day there is nothing left of my body. I am nothing but raw energy, and they force me into bodies and minds, they trap me in rooms of white and white and white. I am nothing but loss and anger and the overwhelming feeling that perhaps, long ago, I was something else.

When I meet another human, and their gaze turns to me and asks, *Who are you?* Now I say, *I am no one.*

And it is true.

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE



“**Y**ou know... Reshaye?” Max’s brow creased, and he eyed Ishqa with abject suspicion. He still stood partially in front of me, as if to guard me. But Ishqa did not look as if he had any interest in violence. It was strange, actually, the way he was looking at me.

“Before,” he said quietly. “Long ago. Yes.”

Perhaps there was some scrap of Reshaye that still lived within me, because I could feel *something* thrashing in my core, raging at the sight of him.

“You have it,” he said. “I can feel it in you.”

He stepped forward, and at the movement, flames tore up Max’s staff, simmering at the edge of the blade. And at that, Ishqa stopped short, his eyes snapping to Max.

“You. You held it too. Your magic, it feels like...”

He trailed off, as if he didn’t know which word to choose.

My eyes fell to his ears. His *pointed* ears.

“You are Fey.” The words slipped from my lips without my permission.

“I am.”

“But the Fey are... gone.”

“No. Though for a long time, we preferred the humans to think we were.” Ishqa eyed Max, who was still staring him down warily, weapon ready. “You can put that down. I would not save you just to kill you.”

“And why, exactly, would you save us?”

“Because something far worse than what you just witnessed is coming,” he said. “And I need your help to stop it from happening.” He cleared his throat, and for a moment, he actually looked self-conscious — a strange shade on a face that seemed so inhumanly elegant. “I understand that what I am about to tell you will sound... unbelievable. But I am asking you to listen. Please.”

Max paused, then lowered his weapon, though he still held it carefully at his side.

“The Fey were never gone. But for centuries, we came very close to it. Once, we were so divided that nothing was more important to us than destroying rival Houses. Hundreds of years ago, in a conflict that has fallen from your history books, humans and Fey clashed. Your people, war torn and drunk on bloodshed, eventually turned that aggression against us. They murdered entire Fey houses and ripped apart our cities searching for the power they needed to win their own wars.” A flicker of regret passed over Ishqa’s face. “We were so divided, then. Short-sighted. Instead of facing an imminent threat by banding together, we used it as an opportunity to cut down our rivals. I believed in that as much as any other.”

He paused, and those unnerving gold eyes lifted to us, holding just a hint of shame.

“I gave the humans someone...” He stumbled over his words. “...Someone who trusted me, in exchange for their alliance. The power to win their wars in exchange for the power I needed to win mine. She had rare magic among the Fey. And when I gave her to them, they used her power to create a cataclysmic weapon. The weapon you now know.”

My mouth was dry.

“Reshaye,” I said, quietly. “You gave them Reshaye.”

Max swore beneath his breath.

Ishqa said, solemnly, “That betrayal was the greatest mistake I have ever made.”

“A mistake.” Max shook his head. His knuckles were white around his staff. “Do you understand how many people are dead because of that act? That’s bigger than a damned *mistake*.”

“I do understand. Yes.”

“So why are you here now, hundreds of years later?”

“We had our own battles to fight. The humans and their monsters faded from our minds, just as the Fey faded from yours. But now...” Ishqa’s gaze went far away. “Things began to change. A new king has risen, uniting what remains of the scattered Fey into one House instead of many. Before him, I would have never thought it possible to see my people become whole again. And it has been... greater than I ever imagined.”

And then that admiration faded, his expression hardening.

“My king’s dedication and vision allowed him to rebuild our civilization, yes. But such qualities can so easily be twisted into dark obsession. It is that darkness that is coming for you. Starting with what you experienced tonight.”

A beat of silence. Words escaped me.

“Let me make sure I understand.” Max pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re saying that a *mad Fey king* is responsible for the monsters on our doorstep?”

Ridiculous. Utterly *ridiculous*. My mind struggled to grant it even the slightest chance of truth

“He has plenty of reason to hate you,” Ishqa said, quietly, “Long ago, the humans slaughtered many of our people to save themselves from each other. Your lives are so short compared to ours. Those days are nothing but a distant shadow in your ancestors’ lost memories. But us? We *lived* it, and that grief and anger still smolders within us. All it needs is a single spark.” His lip twitched, a hint of a sneer. “And someone among you has dared to provoke that.”

My brows lurched of their own accord.

“Provoked how?”

“Fey have gone missing. Not many of them, but the king is certain it is the work of the humans.”

“The work of *which* humans?” Max said. “There are millions of us, in hundreds of totally unrelated countries.”

“The humans did not care which of our people, our Houses, they had to slaughter to get what they wanted,” Ishqa said, sharply. “Forgive us if many are not willing to extend a greater courtesy, not when our—”

He shut his mouth abruptly, letting out a long breath. When he spoke again, his words were careful and measured.

“If I am to be honest, I hate your kind too for what you have done. But my king walks a dark, dark path.” He stepped forward, his gold eyes burning. “Perhaps I have not been clear. He wants to kill *all* of you. *Every last one*. He is a great king because he values every Fey life. And for that same reason, he will be a ruthless adversary.” Those eyes fell to me. “And he has been looking for you, in order to do it. For what you hold. For *who* you hold.”

My mouth was dry, my head swimming. And through that fog, a slow realization fell over me.

The stare I felt in my dreams. The whispers. The reaching hand.

I have been looking for you.

No. They were just dreams.

You knew they weren't just dreams.

My mouth opened, but I couldn't speak. I felt as if I was going insane. As if the incredible odds against us weren't enough. As if we didn't already have such awful threats looming over us.

And now... this?

“Then I have some bad news for him,” Max said. “Reshaye is gone.”

Ishqa's eyebrows lurched, even though the rest of his face remained completely still. “Gone?”

“Dead,” I said.

Ishqa frowned. “I do not know if it is possible for such a thing to die,” he said, quietly. “And he will still come for it, even if it’s just for the ashes. He is obsessed. He will never stop looking for it. Not in you.” His eyes slid to Max. “And not in you, either.”

Every time I closed my eyes, I saw that box full of hands. My nerves were raw, too close to the surface of my skin.

“And the Zorokovs?” I asked. “What role do they play in this?”

“The...Zorokovs?”

“The Zorokov family. The Threllians. The ones responsible for those— those things. The message they brought us came from them.”

Ishqa stared blankly at me. And then, realization flooded his face. “The king would be willing to craft temporary alliances. I have... left his inner circle. But the last I knew, there was talk of such a thing. Alliance with some humans, to get the numbers he needed to do what he wished. For all his faults... he is not willing to jeopardize Fey lives.” A wrinkle deepened between Ishqa’s brows. “If he has done that, then perhaps things are moving even faster than I feared. And it is greater proof than ever that we must act quickly.”

“I told you it’s gone,” I choked out.

Even if I wanted to help, I couldn’t. I was useless.

“I do not believe it is truly gone. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to truly destroy. If you let me try, I could—”

“You could what?” Max said. “Bring that thing back into the world? Everything that you’ve just told us is just another reason to leave it buried.”

Ishqa gave Max a look that veered on pity. “It will not remain buried. It is just a matter of whether we are the ones to use it, or he is.”

A shiver ran down my spine.

“We?” Max said. “And what would this ‘we’ do, exactly? Let’s say we agree. Let’s say we let you... let you use your mystical Fey magics to drag Reshaye back to life. Then what?” His gaze slid to me. “Does she become your weapon, in this plan of yours?”

Ishqa was silent, just long enough to give the answer he didn’t voice.

“I take no pleasure in asking you for this,” he said.

Max let out a puff of air through his teeth and shook his head, his body language declaring his rejection before his words did: *No. Absolutely fucking not.*

And yet, a small part of me that felt the terrible silence in my magic where there had once been such power... and would be willing to do anything to bring that back.

But then, the memory flooded over me. The sensation of that pallid flesh against my fingers. That box of horrific, meaningless death. Those agonized screams.

I felt sick.

I couldn’t do this — couldn’t become a savior for another people when I still could not save my own.

“No. I have done this already. I have already traded myself away for someone else’s war. But where does that leave the people who need me? Do you expect me to abandon them so I can become *your* weapon, instead?”

Ishqa gave me a sympathetic stare. “This is not someone else’s war. This will be your war, whether you like it or not.”

“Then why are you the one here?” Max demanded. “You’re here to save human civilization out of... what, benevolence?”

Ishqa’s mouth thinned. “Do I need a reason?”

Max looked at him as if that was an insultingly stupid response. And it was. All it told us was that Ishqa didn’t want to give us the real answer, which didn’t do much to inspire trust.

Frustration simmered beneath Ishqa's pristine features. "I am telling you the truth. This is coming, even if you choose to ignore it. So what will you do, then? Nothing?"

Max's mouth opened, then closed. He glanced at me, a silent conversation playing out between us.

"We cannot do anything here, right now," I said. "We need..."

A minute. A minute to think. A minute to consider. Because right now, all of this feels like a twisted dream.

And that was answer enough for Max. He turned to Ishqa, jaw set.

"Send us back. I don't know where the hell we are, so I can't."

Ishqa did not move for a long moment, then approached us, a folded piece of parchment between his fingers. His eyes searched our faces.

"If you want to leave, I will not stop you. But...take this, too."

There, with the paper, he placed a silver-gold feather.

"Burn that when you have made a decision," he said, "and I will come to you."

Max unfolded the parchment, revealing a delicate Stratagram. And Ishqa stood there, still until the very last second, when he lurched forward.

"My son," he said, his voice rough. "My son is among the Fey that are missing. I feel the same anger my king does, the same desire to burn down this world that has taken him from me. To see your people destroyed for their part in it. But I have seen where that hatred leads. I'm coming to you as an ally and not an avenger."

He stepped back, and the world was already starting to dissolve as he said, "Think about what I have said. Please."

CHAPTER SEVENTY



Nura threw open the door and just stood there, eyes wide, as if she was looking at a pair of ghosts.

Her jacket wasn't white anymore. Half of it was soaked through with spatters of crimson, and the rest was covered in strange stains that bloomed the color of withering flowers.

We all looked at each other in bewildered silence.

Tisaanah and I had barely made it to the Towers. And I wasn't even completely sure *why* we came here, of all places — perhaps it was only because now, we literally had nowhere else to go. Ishqa's Stratagram got us to Ara, and I managed to get us to the Towers after that, though my magic was so weak it was a struggle. We made quite a stir when we landed. Of course. We were half dressed, covered in blood, and generally looked insane.

Well, I was willing to embrace that image. I *felt* insane. I had grabbed the nearest person wearing an Orders sigil and demanded to see Nura.

I wasn't expecting her to look like this.

I had fought alongside Nura for years, but I had never seen her this way. Yes, there was the blood and the dirt. But her disheveled appearance wasn't nearly as disconcerting as the half-panicked look on her face.

She closed the door and sagged against it.

"Ascended fucking above," she muttered, pressing her palm to her eye. "I thought that you two were... Do you know

how long I searched?”

“Nura, what *happened*?” I asked, and Nura snorted.

“*What happened*? I just came from *your* house. Or whatever’s left of it.”

Whatever’s left of it. That statement kicked me in the gut.

“So you saw them,” Tisaanah said, quietly. “The... creatures.”

“They killed eight Syrizen.”

I cursed beneath my breath. I’d been in battles of thousands that hadn’t managed to take out that many Syrizen in one swoop.

Nura didn’t meet my gaze. Instead, her eyes kept going far away, as if shuffling through scenarios only she could see. She looked terrified. Hell, she was *trembling*.

A realization fell into place. This wasn’t shock. This was worse than shock. This was abject *horror*, the horror of someone who knew exactly what they were facing, and how bad it was.

“You know something,” I murmured. “What is it, Nura?”

Her gaze flicked to me. For just a moment, I saw something there that I hadn’t seen in Nura’s eyes for nearly ten years — raw fear, the kind of vulnerability that she had spent so long trying to shield carefully from the world.

She swallowed.

“I need to show you something,” she said.



I DIDN’T EVEN KNOW the Towers went this deep below ground. Nura brought us down past the entry floor, down even beneath the lowest levels used for storage. Yet when the platform finally came to a stop, the hallway before us didn’t look like an underground basement. It was white and clean and silver-

adorned, just like the other hallways in the Tower of Midnight, brightly lit even though there were no windows.

Nura did not speak as we walked. She led us down the hall, past a number of closed heavy doors, until we reached the very end. She opened the final door, and ushered us into what appeared to be a study. The shelves were crowded, lined with books that at a glance appeared to be even older than the tomes in the Towers' libraries. There were tables strewn about the room, one covered in books, one covered in scribbled notes, another holding many glass jars and vials of various substances.

“Old friends!” a rough voice wheezed behind us.

I tensed. Ascended fucking above. It couldn't be.

I turned, and immediately cursed.

“What is *he* doing here?”

Vardir, who sat at one of the messy tables — here, in the Towers, and very much *not* rotting his life away in Ilyzath — grinned at me.

“How fate would see it! For us to meet again so soon.” His wild eyes fell to Tisaanah, and the grin widened, veins popping up beneath the paper-thin skin of his neck. “And with such interesting company. I haven't been so invigorated in—”

“Vardir,” Nura said, curtly, “leave us.”

“Leave? So soon? But we have so much to—”

“I can send you to your room or I can send you back to Ilyzath. Your choice. *Go.*”

Vardir scowled, but begrudgingly rose. I glared at Nura, who went to one of the other desks on the opposite side of the room, her back to us.

“What is he doing here?” I said again.

“I needed him.”

I did not like that answer. Vardir had nothing good to contribute to this world.

“Needed him for what?” Tisaanah asked.

Vardir slammed the door behind him as he left, leaving us in heavy silence. Nura did not turn.

“There is a lot I need to explain to you,” she said. “And it is going to be difficult for me.”

She turned around. In her hands rested a long, shallow bowl of hammered gold. Thin, silver liquid filled it to the brim, and on the still-as-glass surface was a crimson Stratagram, maintaining its shape with unnatural stillness even as Nura walked closer to us.

My brow furrowed.

“Is that—”

“Yes.” She looked down at the contents of the bowl, frowning. The expression on her face made the skin prickle at the back of my neck. So unlike the version of her that I had known for so long.

“You know, everyone thinks I’m so unfeeling. So *cold*.” Her lip twitched. “All because I don’t run around spilling my soul. All because words just aren’t enough to...”

She trailed off.

“What is that?” Tisaanah asked.

“This,” Nura said, “is a spell. Rare, and difficult to cast. It can only be created by Valtain, and used only once. It will show you... me. My memories.”

I was struck speechless.

I couldn’t believe it. Out of all of the ridiculous things that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, this nearly topped them all. To give someone access to your memories was a deeply vulnerable act, especially since such a spell couldn’t even fully define what the receiver saw. The idea of Nura doing it — *Nura*, who had guarded her thoughts and her heart with barbed wire even when we were the most important people in each other’s lives — seemed downright ludicrous.

“Why?” I blurted out.

Her eyes found mine, a silent plea in them. “Because there is so much I need to make you understand.”

Seeing Nura like this made the hair prickle on the back of my neck. There was a cruel humor to it. A decade ago, I would have treasured such intimacy. Now it was being offered to me years later, not out of any semblance of love but out of... what? Fear?

She cleared her throat. “Well? Do you want to stand around asking more questions, or do you want answers?”

I wasn't sure if I did want these answers.

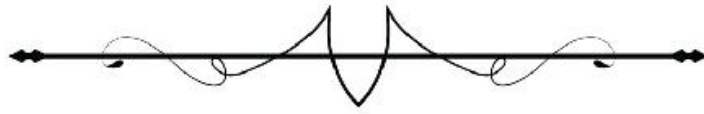
But I slipped my fingers into the cold liquid anyway. Tisaanah did the same. And finally, Nura did too, pressing her palms to the bottom of the bowl.

She closed her eyes, and her magic rolled over us like a crashing wave.

And with it came the past.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

NURA



Nura is ten years old. She is at a party thrown by one of her grandmother's business partners. She has never seen a home like this before. It feels more like a city than a house. There are so many people here, and yet it all manages to be so horrifically dull. Nura is very, very bored.

Eventually, she stomps off to go pout in the corner, only to find that someone else is already pouting there. The boy is about her age, with dark hair and dark eyes and a general aura of displeasure at having to suffer through this event. He snaps his fingers, and weak puffs of flame burst between them.

That gets her attention.

A Wielder. Like her.

She sits beside him.

"What's your name?"

"Maxantarius," the boy says.

Nura makes a face. Where she came from, people are named things like "Jon" or "Erik."

The boy looks away. "I know it's a stupid name."

"It is," she says.

His only response is to snap his fingers and release another little spark of flame. When he does, she sends her own magic to meet it, a puff of air to blow it out like lips to a candle. For the first time, she earns his attention — a look that is part startled, part insulted, part intrigued.

She likes that look, she decides.

“I’m Nura,” she says. And then adds, after a moment of thought, “I’ll just call you Max.”



NURA IS TWELVE YEARS OLD. The years have passed fast. She and Max have done nothing but train, driven to endless pursuit of perfection by Braylan. She has never been so exhausted. And yet, it is easy to commit herself so completely when it means she can be with the Farliones — Max’s gentle mother, his friendly father, his siblings who welcome her into their affectionate squabbling, Braylan who treats her as if she actually has potential. And of course, Max, the best friend she has ever had.

Now, the two of them stand at the doorstep of the Towers. Max is stubborn-jawed and wary-eyed, masking secret uncertainty. She is uncertain, too, even if she will not admit it.

“The military is going to be better than getting stuck by ourselves in some countryside apprenticeship,” he says.

The key words are, “By ourselves.”

She is a Valtain, and he is a Solarie. In apprenticeships, they will be alone. At least here, they will be together.

Besides, what other choice is there? For Max, there is none. He will join the military, as his brother and his father and his grandfather have before him, and he will excel, because that is what Farlione men do.

Nura will be excellent, too, she decides. Just as good.

Better, even.

Her name is the first one on the enlistment papers.



NURA IS FIFTEEN YEARS OLD. She has learned how to master her magic, Wielding light and water and air and the thoughts of others, but above all she has a gift for Wielding fear. This, she thinks, makes sense — she has spent her life controlling her own fear. Small wonder she would be so adept at controlling it in others.

Max has gotten good, too. He speaks to flames as if they are another part of him, and his combat skills earn impressed whispers among the instructors. This makes Nura's skin prickle with jealousy. She wonders what it would be like to be the subject of such tittering.

But then they say, Well, of course. He is a Farlione.

Of course. He is a Farlione, a member of a military dynasty, and she is an orphaned girl who has spent her life clinging to their coattails.

But Max does not seem to hear the pleased murmurs. Always, they are drowned out by his brother's dissatisfaction. He still throws himself into training like someone who has everything to prove.

Secretly, Nura is grateful for it, because she is certain that once he believes everything that everyone says about him, he will leave her behind. And when they fall to the ground after their fifth or tenth or seventeenth round of sparring, and he cracks some joke or gives her the right kind of sidelong glance, something she can not identify flutters in her stomach.

And in that moment, the idea of being left behind by him is the most terrible thing she can imagine.



NURA IS EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD. There are whispers of war rising in the north, among the Ryvenai territories.

“Do you think it will happen?” she asks Max.

“I doubt it.” He does not look up from his book.

A knot forms in Nura's stomach. She has spent years studying war, learning the most effective strategies in death and victory. But nothing she could read in books or play out in sparring would be the same as the real thing.

"If it does," she says, quietly, "we can prove ourselves."

Max's emotions flicker across his face — they always do, he never hides them. Uncertainty, fear. Temptation by all it promises.

"Maybe," he says, at last. "We shall see."

"We shall see."

But it is only days later that Nura is on a patrol that quickly turns violent. The Ryvenai crowd is angry, the kind of angry that moves people to pick up steel and magic rather than shouts. A Wielder woman lunges at her, lightning at her hands, and Nura reacts before she can think. One strike, and her knife is buried in the woman's flesh.

The blood is everywhere at once. The woman falls. The crowd goes silent. Nura drops to her knees, barking commands, trying to stop the bleeding.

It is no use. Nura holds the woman as she dies, watching the light leave her eyes. That night, she hides in the washroom and empties her guts all night long.

It is the first life she has taken. Not the last, of course.



NURA IS TWENTY YEARS OLD.

She has learned to wield death the way she wields magic and fear. Tension is spreading across Ara like crimson wildflowers. But she and Max traverse the conflicts easily. The two of them are powerful individually — together, they are an unstoppable force.

Now, they are both riding the euphoria of victory when they return to their barracks after a long day, their muscles sore but their hearts soaring. Max is an attractive man, but

perhaps he has never been more handsome than he was today, focused and confident and just the right amount of vicious. He turns to her now, here in this dimly-lit hallway, and there is something in his dark-eyed gaze that makes her skin shiver.

She is still ravenous.

Their mouths are on each other before she can think. They fuck like they fight, with mindless pursuit of victory, and just as they do after a battle, they collapse in exhaustion afterwards.

At last, her soul is at peace.

It is only once he is asleep that she opens one eye and peers at the profile of her sleeping friend. Something that is both warm and cold settles deep in her core. She knows him better than she knows anyone else. No one has seen so much of her.

She imagines the way the others would whisper: She's only here because she's fucking a Farlione.

No one can know, she tells herself. And she pushes her heart away.



NURA IS TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD, and she is a candidate for Arch Commandant.

The tension has erupted into all-out war. She had dreamed of war as opportunity to earn respect. But no one talks about how relentlessly bleak it is. Soon she begins to see human beings as machines of flesh to be dismantled.

Good. It is better to be this cold. The Arch Commandant cannot be soft — especially not her, because she has neither the strength of a family name nor the respect of masculinity to shield her from criticism.

Not like Max. Max, who is also a candidate, and arguably the best one out of the four of them — something that Nura hates to admit, even to herself. Of course, he does not know it. He never knows it.

His mind, instead, is so often preoccupied with the war. He struggles. It is easy to see it in the tense lines of his face, in the way he wakes up in the middle of the night. It scares her to see him so vulnerable. She has learned that the world has no room for such softness. And he is capable of so much when he is strong — he could move souls and spears and ships, if only he could shutter that piece of himself away.

So, when they are together, they do not talk of such things, even when she knows he wants to. To acknowledge his weakness would be to acknowledge her own, and as the days pass and the blood runs heavier and the stakes grow higher, nothing terrifies her more than letting something out of a box that she has worked so hard to lock away.



MAX IS SO SICK. He can't keep anything down, not even water. Nura remains calm on the outside, but inside, a knot of concern grows. She stays by his bedside and does not leave.

He had been called away on some special favor to the Arch Commandant, and came back like this. She does not know what they did to him. But even if they had told her, she wouldn't have understood. Reshaye is the sort of thing that needs to be witnessed to be believed.

It is days later when Max's eyes open and someone who is not him stares through them. She knows right away — she knows Max well enough to recognize the difference, even before he opens his mouth. The first time, it's just a few confused words that barely make sense, and his fingers on her face, like he had forgotten what a human looks like.

He explains to her, later, what it is. He himself seems as if he doesn't understand it. But the Arch Commandant works closely with him, as does Vardir. She watches as they train him. Still, she does not truly grasp the power of what he holds until one day, some thread of control snaps within him, and he levels the entire training ring without so much as hesitating. It is sheer luck that Nura, Vardir, and the Arch Commandant

manage to escape unscathed. Despite the destruction, Vardir is gleefully delighted, and the Arch Commandant is grimly satisfied. Nura isn't sure whether she is more awed or afraid. Perhaps both.

Time passes. The war grows bloodier. Reshaye grows more comfortable in Max's skin, even though, for Max, it is the opposite. The first time he uses Reshaye in battle, their victory is so swift and indisputable that it leaves Nura speechless. Everyone is thrilled. But afterward, Max withdraws, leaving the celebration early. She goes to his apartment after, and finds him sitting in the dark, staring at the wall.

"Max? Are you alright?"

He peers over his shoulder at her. For a split second, it is not him. Then the familiarity flickers to life like a candle.

"Just tired," he says, giving her a weak smile, but Ascended, he was always such an awful liar.



NURA IS TWENTY-TWO YEARS OLD, and nothing could ever have prepared her for this. People that she fought beside for a decade were screaming in agony in the streets and she was simply running by. She turned a corner and watched her commander die a brutal death, a rebel spear impaling his chest. And like all the rest, she turned and left him. What could she do?

This should have been a routine mission. The city of Sarlazai was not even supposed to be their final destination. But the rebels had been waiting, and they ambushed them — ambushed them here, practically destroying their own city. The sheer callousness of it overwhelms her.

By the time she makes it back to the rendezvous point, it is clear that this is a slaughter, with no path to victory. An awful realization has fallen over her when she finally recognizes a familiar face in the smoke. She grabs her friend and yanks him back into an alleyway, sheltered, albeit poorly, from the fighting.

Max is a good fighter. His knife is at her throat immediately.

“Don’t you dare kill me,” she says. “There are a hundred rebels who would rather do that instead.”

His knife drops. The look of sheer relief on his face when he recognizes her is gutting. Then she sees how badly he is bleeding, and her stomach drops.

“How much of that is yours?” he asks, taking in the blood on her own jacket, and she shakes her head.

“How much of that is yours?”

“That bad?”

“Very bad. You don’t feel that?”

His eyes are wide open, but she can tell that he is weaving in and out of consciousness. Dread clenches in her chest. He will not remain standing, not like this, not without a healer. Not without...

“We need to retreat,” he tells her.

But Nura is tired of retreating. They will retreat today, and leave behind a slew of corpses that gave their lives for nothing. Tomorrow or next week or next month, she will be cradling another dying child or weeping mother. She will be tossing the ashes of another comrade out to sea, where they will be swept up and lost, like a million others before them.

It will never stop.

And she has nothing more to give.

Her hands are at his cheeks. “We have you,” she whispers. “We have you.”

Revulsion careens across his face. “Hell no.”

“If they want to shit in their own beds, they can lie in it.”

The words are so harsh that they sting her lips. But she is angry. These are innocents, suffering here. And the rebels did start this here, setting fire to their own home.

Yet, the hurt that flickers across her friend's face clenches her heart. It is so raw. Even when everyone else grew cold out of sheer exhaustion, he held onto that wonderful — dangerous — naiveté.

“I can't,” he tells her, and she understands it is the truth.

He had been given a gift. But he is too gentle to use it. Even if doing this one terrible thing saves the lives of thousands.

She loves him. She had never let herself think of it in those terms, not even alone to herself. It is a dangerous word. Only now, at the end of the world, does she let herself feel it.

Her fingers move to his temple. She can feel his mind beneath her magic. She already knows the shape of it. She has never known anyone so well.

It would be an honor to let him kill her.

“That bleeding heart will get you killed one day,” she murmurs.

And then she reaches into his mind, pushing brutally hard, deep. Ripping open the door he has so carefully guarded.

Releasing the incredible, war-ending power within him.

She sees the exact moment that his eyes change, betrayal to fear to fury. She almost tells him she's sorry. She will never know if the words escape her lips.

Because then, the fire is everywhere, and she is on the ground, seeing nothing but flames and flames and flames and death reaching out its hands for her.



NURA REMEMBERS NOTHING BUT PAIN.

She slips in and out of consciousness. One time, she opens her eyes and sees healers holding sheets of her own burnt skin. She can move only enough to tilt her chin down and look at herself. What she sees does not even look like a human body,

just an expanse of malformed, charred flesh. She screams, but the healers put her back to sleep. If she is lucky, the darkness will be death.

She swears that she saw Max's face, staring down at her between curtains of unconsciousness, but she reaches for him and he is gone.



NURA IS STILL IN AGONY, but she is awake. Yet the pain of her body is nothing compared to what rips through her when she hears what had happened to the Farliones. The family that had accepted her into their homes, who had loved her when no one else did — they were gone, and in the most heartbreaking way she could ever imagine.

Sammerin tells her softly, calmly. She says nothing until he leaves the room, and then she lets out a mangled scream through torn-up vocal cords. It echoes through the room and the hall and the Tower, until healers come rushing in to see her, and she turns her head away so they do not see the tears streaming down her face.



THEY GIVE her a wheelchair that she can use to move around until she is well enough to walk. Even that hurts horribly, but she listens until she finds out where Max is and wheels herself to his room elsewhere in the Towers.

The sounds she hears from within make all her muscles freeze.

His voice is mangled with agony. There is crashing, as if things are being thrown or fists banged against walls. She listens as his outburst roars to a crescendo and then collapses into muffled silence.

Her own tears are falling down her cheeks, silently. One hand is pressed over her mouth, her eyes squeezed shut.

All of this is her fault.

She wants to be with him. She wants to hold him until the world goes quiet, wants to comfort him, to grieve with him. She wants to fall to her knees and beg for his forgiveness. She wants to carve out her heart and thrust it into his hands — I know this isn't much, but here it is, and I will spend the rest of my life trying to make up for destroying the best things in both our lives.

But she cannot move.

She isn't sure how long it has been when the door opens and Sammerin steps out. He gives her a cold stare.

“Are you going in?”

She takes a long time to answer. But finally she says, “No,” and has never felt like more of a coward.

Sammerin turns away. “Good,” he says, and leaves her there alone in the hall, listening to her friend weep.



THE WAR IS OVER. But there are still prices to be paid. Thousands died in the city of Sarlazai, whether in the initial attack or in the chaos that ensued afterwards. And Maxantarius Farlione is to be held responsible.

Nura hears of the charges against him when sitting in her room in the Towers. She is still in a wheelchair, and still helpless.

“Not his fault,” she says to Zeryth. She hates Zeryth — hates him, now, more than she has hated anyone, except perhaps for herself. “You know.”

Every word is hard-fought, her voice raspy.

“He never had trouble controlling it before,” Zeryth says. “The actions were still his. Besides, the world can't know about Reshaye. You know that.”

This is the first time she realizes that Max never told anyone about what she did. It stings.

“He did...the right thing. Ended the war. I’ll... I’ll testify.”

“Testify? You can barely speak.”

“I. Will. Testify,” she grinds out.

And she does. She sits before a council of fifty judges, one from every district in Ara, and from her wheelchair she answers question after question. She speaks excruciatingly slowly, so the hearing lasts for hours. But she enunciates every single word, spinning a tale of a capable captain who did the best thing for his soldiers and his country, even at great personal cost. By the end, she is spitting blood into the cup of water they had given her. But she has convinced them. When she wheels out of that room, Maxantarius Farlione is a hero, not a criminal.



NURA DOES NOT CARE when the title she wanted more than anything is given to the person she hates most of all. Zeryth Aldris does not earn the title of Arch Commandant. It is handed to him for the dubious honor of being the last remaining candidate. Maia Azeroth is dead. Nura’s injuries forced her to withdraw from consideration. And Max may have escaped Ilyzath, but heavy restrictions were still placed upon him by the Orders, forbidding him from pursuing the title.

Not that he has any desire for such a thing, now.

Nura goes to his apartment a few months after. When he opens the door, she cannot explain everything that wells up in her. Words are too complicated. And so, like they used to a lifetime ago, instead they throw themselves at each other. Perhaps they both think they can reclaim some shred of comfort from the warmth of each other’s bodies. But even their bodies are not familiar anymore, permanently marked by everything that has destroyed them. She sees only a flicker of sadness cross his face when she tears her shirt over her head

and he sees the full extent of her burns. Then it is gone beneath feral, ferocious hunger.

Their tryst is a soulless pantomime of something broken that they had done a hundred times before. There was no love in this, only anger and hurt and the desire to outrun the present. When their climax fades, Nura feels nothing but shame.

She rolls over and looks at him. His eyes are different — milky-blue, as if they had somehow been consumed by cataracts — but that isn't the thing that strikes her most. It's the hateful emptiness in his gaze that slides between her ribs like a knife.

This has been a mistake. What did she come here for? A chance at reclaiming something that they had once had? There is nothing left to save.

She doesn't say a word to him — he wouldn't want to hear anything she could say, anyway. Instead she gets up, throws her clothes on, and leaves. They do not speak once.



NURA LIVES through the years as if they are merely something to be endured. She recovers and becomes stronger than she has ever been. She fulfills her role as Second to the Arch Commandant with ruthless efficiency.

She will never let anyone know how woefully lonely she is, and how often she thinks of those she has lost. Nor will she ever let anyone know about the records that she quietly searches, looking for one familiar name, or that every week she reads the lists of unidentified bodies found in alleyways or Seveseed dens, praying she will not find a dark-haired young man with peculiar eyes.

There is only one thing that brings her peace. Every week, on her days off, she visits another city and wanders the streets. She watches people live their lives, content. The country is whole again. People are safe and happy.

She did a terrible thing. But she did it for the right reasons, and for this, it was worth it. There is nothing — nothing — that she loves more than she loves Ara.

Still, she is haunted by the past. Every so often, when the nightmares get particularly bad, she goes to the part of the Towers that only a small handful of people can access. She goes into a room of pure white, and looks down at the shriveled up man strapped to the table. His eyes remain sightlessly staring at the ceiling. He is breathing, but other than that, he is barely alive.

And yet the most powerful magic in Ara — perhaps the most powerful magic in the world — is right here, lurking inside of that broken mind.

Waiting for the next time it is needed.



NURA IS twenty-eight years old when the unrest begins to stir again. It starts small, a few rebellious Lords fighting with the young queen over taxes or land rights. But even that single thread of growing tension is terrifyingly familiar. She thinks of the day she and Max had sat in the library all those years ago, and how it had been so easy to dismiss the possibility of coming war.

She can no longer sleep at night. The days pass, and the whispers continue, and she wakes up in sweats dreaming of fire.

They do not understand, she tells herself. The Queen is young and naive. Zeryth is selfish and stupid. They do not understand the importance of acting quickly.

And she will not, will never, allow all the sacrifices she has made to be in vain.

Eventually, she has had enough. One sleepless night, she goes to that secret corner of the Towers. She stands over the lifeless man in the room of white.

Nearly a decade ago, she watched this magic end a war, taking a thousand lives to save hundreds of thousands. And in the same stroke, she watched it destroy everything that mattered to her.

If anyone is to Wield it now, she decides, it must be her.

She has already been ruined by it once. She has nothing left to lose. And she hates it so much that she needs to be the one to dominate it, this time.

She withdraws her dagger, and she tries to Wield Reshaye for the first time.



{WHO ARE YOU?}

The voice sounds so strange. Odd, to hear it this way, in a pure form rather than coming from the lips of a human being.

You know who I am.

It turns over her memories like stones. {I do know you.} It stops at the memory of Sarlazai, at her moment of betrayal. She feels its disgust.

I am offering you a new home, she says.

{I have long forgotten what it is to have a home. But I know a place like this, so cold and hostile, is not one.}

Would you rather stay in an empty mind and a white room, then?

A low hiss. {Where is Maxantarius?}

The protectiveness rises before she can stop it. Reshaye grabs onto the emotion.

{You dislike that I ask about him.}

This is between you and me. Not him.

It reaches for another emotion, one she cannot hide away fast enough. The way she felt every time he was praised. Every

time he was promoted. The day he was the one to be granted such extraordinary power, power he could not even handle.

A low laugh ripples her thoughts. {You can not lie to me. I know the truth of why you are here, and what you seek to gain.}

I seek to gain the power to stop another war.

{You seek power, yes. But I do not wish to give it to you.}

It begins to pull away. But Nura's magic grabs onto it, refusing to let it leave.

She will Wield it. She will dominate it.

You took everything from me, she snarled. You don't get to win this, too.

And so quickly, it turns. Reshaye rails against her control.

{I have fought stronger magics than yours,} it hisses. {I have broken stronger minds.}

The fight is worse than any battle Nura has been in. It is savage, asking for everything she has and more, reaching for all the tender parts left in her mind. They clash, and she is tangled up in a web of the thing she hates more than she has ever hated anything, the thing that destroyed the best person she knew and murdered the innocent children that were practically her siblings.

In a battle of wills, her hatred alone will make her stronger. She is sure of it.

Later, she will only remember bits and pieces of this time. Their battle could have lasted hours or days or weeks. Time, after all, belongs to the world above. They are somewhere deeper than that now, and falling further still.

Reshaye rips her apart.

{You are all always the same. You bind me and break me and use me. Do not think I do not remember what you have done.}

But Nura is not ready to concede.

With all of her strength, they clash one final time, and she Wields all of Reshaye's magic until it burns her veins, until she thinks that it might kill her, until—

Suddenly, it all goes silent.

Nura opens her eyes.

Rolling plains surround her, extending in every direction. The sky is black and bright all at once, blue light shuddering in the darkness and floating like wisps of smoke. It is lifeless and airless here. Everything about it reeks of magic, so powerful it could peel the skin from her flesh.

For a moment, everything is still.

And then a sudden burst of light rolls from the horizon, and she doesn't even have time to brace before it consumes her.

What Nura sees, there in the depths of that light, makes the horrors that she had lived in the Ryvenai War look like mere inconveniences.

She sees death and torture and indiscriminate destruction.

She sees the Towers shattering, glass twinkling overhead like razored rain.

She sees creatures made out of shadow and twisted flesh crawling across the countryside, many-jointed fingers tearing apart screaming people.

She sees an armada of ships on the horizon line, stretching out as far as she can see, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and—

She sees the beaches of Ara so leaden with rotting bodies that not one stretch of sand is visible.

She sees a man with golden hair and a raised sword, wings spread out behind him, face hard and merciless with rage.

She sees many of them, these people — these creatures — with strange, unfamiliar magic, their ears pointed, spitting violet blood.

And at last, she sees him:

One of them, shrouded in shadow, leaning over her. Upon his head are the peaks of a crown, echoing the points of his ears. He is so close that she can feel his breath on her face and yet cannot bring his features into focus.

Did you think I would not come for you? he whispers, as gentle as a lover.

And then she feels steel through her gut, and the world crashes down.



NURA WAKES UP GASPING. She empties her stomach, then collapses onto the floor, reeling from what she had seen. She is covered in sweat and blood.

It doesn't matter. Nothing matters, except for what she had seen.

It is real.

Of this, she is certain. She had been trained extensively in the art of deploying and unraveling illusions, and she knows the difference between falsehoods and the truth. Seering is rare, but not unheard of. And she felt the truth in it. The certainty of what she had seen — that it was a horror still to come — burrows deep into her bones.

She is so terrified that she can barely breathe.

But then, she forces her mind to work. This is what she does. She thinks her way out of the impossible.

Fey. They are Fey. She saw those pointed ears. They could be nothing else. Everyone thought they were extinct, but everyone had been wrong.

And they are coming. Here.

When? She can't be sure. The Ara she saw was the Ara she knows, not one of some distant future, but could it be tomorrow? Next month? Next year?

Maybe there is time. Time to stop it from happening.

Who will believe her? Who can she trust?

No one.

She had dragged herself to the top, but in the wake of the war, the Orders are fractured and weakened. And, worse, she is alone. She is not loved or trusted. She is not respected, at least not more than her title demands.

So who would she bring this to? A thirteen-year-old queen? Zeryth Aldris, that self-obsessed idiot? They will either laugh her out of the room or use this as evidence of her slipping sanity.

No.

Her fear settles into resolve.

She had ended the Ryvenai War by doing what no one else would. One day she would suffer in the afterlife for it. But now, she has nothing left to lose.

There is nothing — nothing — that she will not sacrifice to protect her people.

Nura staggers to her feet, casting one more glance at the listless body on the table. And she begins to make a plan

The next morning, she goes to the Arch Commandant's office. He is sitting there with his feet up on his desk, being disgustingly smug.

She slides into a chair across from him "I think we have a problem."

"Do we?" He doesn't look up.

"There was another rebellion this morning. How long are we going to pretend that Sesri is capable of ruling this country?"

Now she has his attention. Zeryth's eyebrows arch. "How uncharacteristically blunt of you, Nura."

"I'm tired of waiting." She leans forward. "I'm ready for action."

EVERY NIGHT, she tries to Wield Reshaye. Every night, she fails. The exhaustion is beginning to take a toll on her, but she hides it carefully, just as she buttons up her scars beneath her jacket each morning. As much as she resents it, she has started to give Reshaye the blood of others. It does not hate anyone as much as it hates her, but still, it will not accept anyone.

“What about Maxantarius?” Zeryth says one day, after yet another failed attempt. “We know it likes him.”

“No,” she says, too-quickly. Then, slower, “No. He won’t do it, anyway.”

The truth is that she cannot bring herself to pull him into this, not after he has already lost so much, not after what she had done to him. But the weeks wear on, and she grows more desperate. Finally, when Zeryth proposes it again, she is silent for a long moment and says, “Maybe. When you get back, maybe.”

Zeryth leaves for Threll that afternoon. He will be traveling for many months. She does not like the idea of letting him out of her sight for so long, but he has connections in Threll, and if one of them is to be across the ocean, she would rather it be him. Zeryth has his useless political ambitions in Threll, but more importantly, the Threllian continent holds many magical artifacts — Reshaye itself had been brought to Ara from across the sea. Maybe, the two of them theorized, he would be able to find an alternative there.

Zeryth is less urgent about this than she would like. But he, after all, believes this merely to be a game about a crown. She knows it is so much bigger.

And so, Zeryth travels, and she waits.

Until a Fragmented girl, bleeding and feverish, collapses at their door.

IT IS nothing more than a hunch at first. But Nura confirms it, again and again, feeding the Threllian girl's blood to the creature drop by drop until the entire vial is depleted. Every time, Reshaye's silver magic rises up to meet it, accepting the blood willfully instead of leaving it to roll off of the vessel's pallid skin. The answer is clear.

Later, she goes to the Fragmented girl's room. She is gravely ill, and her back is a patchwork of tattered flesh. The work of a monster. It was a miracle that the girl had managed to make it across the ocean alive. Nura supposes that proves some sort of grit, even though the person lying in the bed before her looks weak and delicate.

This foreigner, by some ridiculous twist of fate, is their only chance.

Their one chance.

Every time Nura closes her eyes, she sees the destruction she had witnessed in her vision. There is not a single second that she isn't aware of exactly what's on the line.

They had tested thousands. Reshaye likes this one, and this one alone. They can not mess this up. They need every possible chance at success.

And that is when Nura decides that her old friend needs to be involved, after all.

IT IS easy to control someone who wants something so much.

From the moment Nura meets Tisaanah, she sees it in her: obsessive, single-minded determination.

Nura vows not to make the same mistake twice. The Threllian girl's mind needs to be strong enough to handle the

power she will be Wielding. And so, they test her, train her, measure her.

And meanwhile, there are still pieces to be moved on the board.

It is easy to make Ara hate Queen Sesri. The girl is so young, so easily led, with fears so easily manipulated into violence. It is almost laughably simple, to turn her against the Lords who were not Order supporters and replace them with ones that are. To make her a terrible option, with any acceptable replacement.

Zeryth revels in it, but Nura takes no joy in any of this. Sesri is just a frightened child. They are doing a horrible thing. Still, it is better than the alternative.

The gears turn, and the plan progresses.

Tisaanah proves herself. She is a talented enough Wielder, yes, but more importantly, she has a strong mind. And Max has proven himself, too, to be a good teacher — as good as Nura knew he would be. Every time she sees them together, she watches it grow. First, respect. Then, admiration. Finally, friendship.

For a long time, she tells herself that it would be enough. To have Tisaanah know him. To give Reshaye that thread of familiarity to cling to. Nura won't take more from him.

But every night, she still goes to Reshaye. Every night, she tries to Wield it. And every night, she digs deeper, catching fragments of those nightmarish visions, each one more bloodstained than the last, and her desperation grows.

He would never help them, anyway, she tells herself.

But then, there are Tisaanah's trials. Then, there is the Orders' ball. And then, there is Max, looking at Tisaanah the way one looks at a second chance.

Nura does not want to see it. But she knows, in that moment, that she could make him do anything.

Nura will never forget the way he looks at her when he finds out the truth. The betrayal in his eyes still hurts as much

as it did eight years ago. And she knows he wants to believe himself, when he says he wants nothing to do with it, when he says that he will leave and never come back. Even she wants to believe him.

But days later, when Max is back at the Towers — back at Tisaanah's side — she is not surprised.

After all, it is easy to control someone who wants something so much.



A SEA, a sky, a ship. Plains stretching out for miles and miles. Fire and magic in a white marble building. Threll.

It gets a little closer to disaster than Nura would have liked. But in the end, it turns out perfectly. The Mikovs removed, Tisaanah's friends rescued, and, most importantly, the magnitude of Reshayé's power confirmed.

It is good to have the former estate of the Mikovs under Orders control. This was her idea, though Zeryth was more than happy to go along with it — Nura suspects he has his own little imperialist fantasies. But Nura wants a foothold in Threll for the more practical benefits. Ara gains an outpost across the sea, a prime vantage point far less isolated than Ara's distant island. And Nura gains easier access to the magical secrets that Threll, and its bordering nations, could hold. Carefully, away from Zeryth's distracted gaze, she instills the few subordinates she trusts more than anyone to lead here. She bribes the Threllians that plan to remain in the city, giving them more money and comfort than they know what to do with, and explicit instructions to report only to her. It is easy to buy their loyalty. It isn't even the money that does it, but the kindness.

Nura does not trust Zeryth, not even as her reluctant co-conspirator. So she is careful, in that brief time in Threll, to make sure that this place will truly be hers.

It is the night before they leave when it happens.

The most loyal of the servants comes and gets her, late in the night. His eyes are wide and his voice shaky. The language barrier has made conversation nearly impossible, but Nura doesn't need words to know that something has deeply frightened him. He brings her to the edge of the city, out into a stable where two stablehands stand whispering and quaking in the corner. He brings her to the back room.

And Nura suddenly cannot breathe.

There is a body here, on the concrete ground.

A body with wings.

It is a crumpled pile of limbs. The man is clad in drapes of fabric. His wings are pale, silvery gold — one is crooked, clearly injured. His face is pressed against the floor, strands of gold hair falling across tan skin. He shifts, just slightly, and she realizes he is conscious if only in the barest sense of the word. She staggers back, fear spiking.

She recognizes him immediately.

She saw that face in her nightmares every night. And she had seen it in those horrific visions — the warrior, wings outstretched, sword bared. Always coming before death fell over Ara.

She had long ago sawed away the pieces of herself that fell victim to panic, but this — this is a struggle. She had always been certain that her visions were real. Now she realizes that the threat is breathing down their throat.

The inhuman man blinks, mumbling something slurred. Nura grabs a broomstick and strikes him over the head, hard enough to make him go still. The Threllian jumps away, startled. Nura is breathing hard.

A decision falls over her.

She has the opportunity now to prepare. To study her enemy. And more importantly, she may now have the opportunity to create something powerful enough to destroy them.

She will take this threat, and make it a gift.

She straightens. In a fractured mix of Aran and Thereni, she tells her Threllian man that this is to remain a secret, for her knowledge and hers alone.

That night, she writes a letter to someone she never wanted to speak to again — Vardir Israin, imprisoned in Ilyzath.

I never thought I would write these words, she wrote, but I will be needing your help.



EVEN THOUGH NURA is expecting his betrayal, she is furious to come home and find Zeryth with a crown on his head and his own war already in progress. He betrayed her before she could turn on him — smart of him, perhaps, but for the stupidest, most selfish reasons.

Nura's loyalty pact means she cannot slit his throat in the night like she wants to. But at least his war is giving the Orders more power, albeit slowly. And she does not need to lift a finger against Zeryth in order to cull him. The thing he wants most and the thing that will destroy him are the same.

He has already started experimenting with deep, dark magic in order to craft the curse that holds Tisaanah's life — how he managed to do that all on his own, Nura will never know — and it is easy to coax him with more of it. He wants to win his war. He wants to win Ara's crown. And most of all, he so, so desperately wants their respect.

All Nura gives him is exactly what he wants. Magic. Powerful, inhuman magic, pulled from her experimentations with Vardir. Even she does not understand why Tisaanah and Max, due to their exposure to Reshaye, are able to handle it so much better than most. But Zeryth is only human, not even modified as the Syrizen are to raise his tolerance. The more he tries to be something more powerful, the weaker he gets.

Nura hands him the power he craves, and watches him use it to slowly destroy himself.

The war goes on, and Zeryth withers, and Nura studies in the shadows, looking to the horizon, watching, waiting. Working.

And still, the visions grow more vivid, every night.

Until months pass, and the threat has arrived.

STRANGE, the paths that life takes.

Nura thinks this to herself as she stands in her office, a silver bowl in her hands, Max and Tisaanah staring at her expectantly.

She is out of time. The things she saw destroying Max's home, ripping Syrizen apart, cement that. Her nightmares have arrived.

She is so, so afraid. She does not trust herself to weave words that convey all that she needs them to understand. They hate her. Of course they do. She has done unspeakable things. There are no sentences she can string together that would make any of that better.

And so all she can do is open herself up for them like a dissected animal, her insides pulled apart. Everything within her rails against it. But she has spent her entire life learning how to sew closed every single gap inside of her. Words will not be enough to tear it open. And she needs them to understand — she needs them to understand what is coming, and how much she needs their help. She needs them to understand why.

It is Max who approaches her first, looking at her with a wrinkle between his brows. She wonders if he knows he has worn that expression since he was a child.

Perhaps here, in her memories, he will find a shard of something familiar in her, too.

She offers them the spell, and with it, her thoughts, her dreams, her regrets. Her soul.

And prays it will be enough.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO



I staggered back.

It took a few long seconds to come back to myself. I felt unmoored, drifting somewhere between the past and the present, between Nura's memories and my own. The visions settled deep in my gut, like I had eaten something rancid.

Nura was looking at me the way I never thought she would look at me again — with such vulnerability.

My eyes fell past her. To the single, thick door.

“What is in there.”

Barely louder than a whisper. A demand, not a question. I didn't know if I wanted to know.

Without another word, Nura opened it.

The interior of the room was so starkly white and bright that it hurt my eyes. It was a narrow room, closer to a short hallway. There was a desk here, scattered with piles of parchment, and a few chairs.

But then I turned, and my mouth went dry.

The room had one glass wall. Beyond the glass were iron bars. And beyond those bars were people.

No... not people. Not *humans*, anyway. *Fey*.

There were six of them. Two were in the same enclosure. Some lay on small cots, covered by thin white blankets. Others sat on the floor, leaning against the wall. One lay on the ground, on her stomach, not moving. None of them reacted

when we entered. Was that because the glass was so thick they couldn't hear us? Or was it because they were no longer able to?

Some didn't even look like they were alive.

Tisaanah whispered a curse beneath her breath.

"They invaded us," Nura said. "The first one came into our territory in Threll, only days after the Mikovs fell. But others came here. They came to *our shores*. Some of them have killed here. That one skewered a couple that found him hiding in their barn. Just innocent farmers."

Tisaanah had stepped forward, her fingers pressed to the glass. She was silent. I followed her gaze to one of the Fey, who lifted his head just enough to look at us over his shoulder. Matted fair hair. Tan skin. And a glimpse of a bright gold eye.

Ishqa's words echoed: *My son is among the Fey who were taken.*

Tisaanah's gaze slid to me, and I knew we were thinking the same thing.

"Why are they here, Nura?" I asked, quietly.

I hoped I was wrong. Prayed I was wrong. But the pieces fit too well — for these creatures to be *here*, beneath the Towers, with Vardir. Here, in this room of white and white.

"There are things we can do with Fey blood," Nura said. "Fey magic. Things we can create, with access to all the different threads of magic. Things that might be powerful enough to save us."

Fuck no.

"You want to create more Reshayes."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tisaanah back against the desk, sinking into the chair — as if utterly overwhelmed.

Despite everything, a part of me still hoped Nura would correct me.

But she just said, "We don't have a choice."

“Of course we have a fucking choice.”

“You saw what I saw,” she shot back. “You saw what has already started coming for us. How do we defeat that, if not with the greatest weapons we can create?”

There was a silent plea beneath the hard edge of her words, as if to silently add, *You of all people believe me, don't you?*

“Nura, look at this. Look at what you're doing. This is—this is *insane*. You think this is the right thing? Torturing them so you can create more monsters to go slaughter someone else's family?”

A flicker of hurt crossed Nura's face.

“I think about them all the time, Max. *Every single day*. Don't throw them at me like I don't.”

I spent years telling myself how much I hated Nura, telling myself I blamed her for all of it. It was never true — I had never blamed her as much as I blamed myself. But I hated knowing the shape of her grief. I couldn't hate her and feel bad for her. I couldn't carry the weight of her pain after I was so tired from carrying mine for so many years.

It was easy when I could think of her as cold and unfeeling. Black and white. Bad and good. A strong, clear divide between the girl I had known as my best friend and the woman who had ruined my life. Not this — this person who was so hurt, so fucking broken, that she would let her grief destroy the damned world.

“I know this isn't morally good,” Nura said. “I know it isn't right. But I've made the hard choices before, and I'll do it again if it means saving this country. Someone has to. You saw what I saw — what failure means. We need to be more powerful than that, no matter what it takes.”

“That is what the Nyzrenese said, too, once,” Tisaanah said. “They created the most incredible instruments of death and threw a million men wielding them into war against the Threllians. Only for those weapons to be turned against us in the end.”

Nura's expression shifted. She turned to Tisaanah. "We found the hands, when we went to the cottage. I saw the tattoos."

Tisaanah went still.

"Then it would appear," Nura said, "that our greatest enemies have allied themselves with each other. It makes sense, doesn't it? All of the research I've done indicates that the Fey have power, but they don't have numbers. No one has greater numbers than the Threllians. And no one has a greater shared interest in Ara. There were children's hands in that crate, Tisaanah. *Children*. I want to create weapons so powerful that there isn't a chance of even one of those bastards walking away alive. Are you telling me that isn't what you want, too?"

Tisaanah was silent, her jaw clenched.

"Reshaye never saw the difference between colors on a uniform," I said. "The things that you're doing, the things that you want to create, they won't know the difference. And who's going to pay the price for that? You're building weapons to indiscriminately kill the slaves that the Zorokovs are going to throw at them."

Nura flinched, as if I had slapped her across the face. And now, for the first time, I *did* understand how much she grieved the lives lost in collateral damage. I don't know why it made it that much worse to me. It would be one thing to claim heartlessness or ignorance. Another to know — to *know* — exactly the scale of what she was inflicting, and to do it anyway.

Tisaanah leaned over the desk, hands at her temples.

"I know you've never had the stomach for it," Nura said. "But we're past the point where there's a choice."

"You don't even know what they want, or what they intend to do. And you're already—"

"What is this?"

Tisaanah's voice was quiet, but sharp. Nura and I turned to see her holding up a stack of parchments. They appeared to be

documents, written in Thereni, stamped with an unfamiliar crimson seal.

“What is this?” she said, again.

Only now, for the very first time, was there unabashed shame on Nura’s face. Her mouth opened and closed several times before she answered.

“We need numbers. If we are to win.”

Tisaanah stood. The paper buckled beneath the slow clench of her hand.

“How many more? This cannot be the only bill.”

“No. Only enough to—”

“How many *slaves did you buy?*” She threw the papers down onto the desk, sending them scattering.

My blood went cold. I whirled to Nura. “You *what?*”

Nura looked as if she wasn’t breathing. She approached Tisaanah the way one might approach a wild animal.

“If we want to win, we need manpower. Ara is a small country. When this is all over, we’ll free them. We’ll provide for them, we’ll—”

“*When this is all over?*’ How many times have you people said that to me? How *easy* it is for you to make promises for a future that might never exist.”

“If we don’t win this, there won’t be a future. I don’t like it, either. Trust me, you don’t know—” Nura bit down on her words, losing track of them. “But we need them, Tisaanah. Threllians. They’re our best chance to...”

I looked at the notes and instruments around us with renewed horror.

Needed Threllians.

Needed Threllians the way she had needed Tisaanah.

And Tisaanah understood just after I did, her whole face crumbling with the realization. “This? *This* is what you need them for?”

“No. I— I would never... Only volunteers—”

“Volunteers? Volunteers like *I* volunteered?” Tears of rage filled Tisaanah’s eyes.

“I never claimed it was good. I never claimed it was right. It’s terrible. I know it is, and I know I’ll be damned for it in this life or the next one. But we have a choice, Tisaanah. We can end it all, right now. If we don’t win, millions will die. And you will never free your people. You told me you would do anything. So would I.”

Her eyes flicked to me, wild and desperate. “But I need both of you. No one can *Wield* this magic but you. They know who you are, and they want you, and they’re going to keep coming for you. So help me. Help me build a better world. Or at the very least keep this one from being destroyed.”

I was so angry that everything went numb — numb, until I looked at Tisaanah and saw the gutting heartbreak written across her face.

That expression devastated me.

I had given up on so much. I couldn’t even remember the moment it happened, the moment I realized you could dream and fight and bleed with the purest of intentions, and it would still end up rotten and maggot-infested. But Tisaanah — Tisaanah, from the minute she showed up at my doorstep, *believed*. Even in the worst times, she truly had faith it could all be better.

And now, I was watching that belief shatter. An irreplaceable treasure destroyed.

“This is the only way.” Nura approached Tisaanah slowly, hand outstretched, only for Tisaanah to lurch away.

“Don’t touch me.”

And then the door was open, and Tisaanah was setting off down the hall. But I lingered for a moment longer.

I felt exhausted.

“After a while, it becomes my own damn fault,” I muttered. “Expecting more. Expecting better.”

Nura lifted her head and looked at me. Suddenly she looked so much like she had ten years ago. And it was the voice of my friend, not my enemy, that said, "I always wanted all of it to be better."

The worst thing was, I believed her.

"This isn't how it happens, Nura."

"Not without you." She moved towards me, one tentative attempt at bridging the gap between us. "I need you, Max. Please. We're the only ones left."

The only ones left. Yes. Maybe that was why there was a part of me who could never abandon the version of Nura that I had known, once. Because she was the last thing I had of a more innocent life.

Even if the core of that had been infested, too. None of it looked the same as it had back then.

"Not anymore," I said, and left her there.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

TISAANAH



I had to get out of the Towers. Everything about this place revolted me, all the way down to my bones. I was halfway down the hall by the time that Max caught up with me. I could feel his rage vibrating off of him, our anger surrounding us both like smoke. We didn't speak. When we made it to the front steps, I cast one last glance over my shoulder at the two white columns looming over us.

The day I had seen Vos, or what had become of him, I had staggered out of these doors and stood in these shadows and struggled not to fall apart. That was the first time I had looked up at the Towers and thought they looked foreboding rather than comforting.

Now, they disgusted me.

Max drew the final line of his Stratagram, and they unraveled.

The first part of the world to return was the smell — a scent of ash so strong it burned my nostrils. And when everything else followed, I made a small, wordless sound of horror.

The cottage was gone.

Max's home — *our* home — had been reduced to nothing but a blackened skeleton. The stone still stood, though it was crumbled and charred. The roof had caved in, only a few broken rafters still remaining. Shattered glass glittered among the wreckage.

And the garden... that beautiful garden was now shriveled ash.

I tore my eyes away from the scene to look at Max, and he was staring at it with a tight jaw, mouth thinned, face betraying everything that he wasn't expressing aloud.

"We'll rebuild it," I said, even though we both knew that we would never be able to recapture what made this place so precious.

His throat bobbed. He walked among the charred foliage, nudging the dirt with his boot.

"There have been people here," he said. "Look at the footprints."

"Nura's people."

"Had to be. Those things are gone."

Gods. So much had happened that the attack felt like it had been years ago. Max stopped at what had once been the door. At an open crate, scorched but still standing.

I joined him and looked down. The slave hands within were still there, some burnt so badly that bright white bone cut through blackened skin.

And there, the weight of it all broke me.

I sank to my knees. I bowed over that crate, the smell of burned skin hanging in the air like incense. Tears left little wet spots on their flesh. One, then two, then more, until silent sobs wracked my body.

"How?" I choked out. "How can anything we do make this better?"

"It can't. Not this part."

These people were gone forever, and nothing anyone could do — me, or him, or the world — would mean anything to those who had lost their loved ones.

"I should have listened to you," I said. "You tried to tell me so many times that no matter what I did, it would end up this way."

“No, Tisaanah,” Max murmured, but the words poured out of me.

“It doesn’t matter how good our intentions are, or how hard we try. It would become something— something twisted. That is what we were fighting for? Just another slaveowner? I brought them here and I asked them to trust me. Now their families are dead and they’re just gears in a different machine. And I have given them *nothing*.”

Nothing. I had traded away every bargaining chip, and now I was left with no magic and corrupted influence wrenched from a corrupted system. All while an even darker shadow loomed over us, rendering it all useless.

“Is that what they’re going to become?” I murmured. “Again, they’ll become sacrifices for the greater good?”

That’s how it always had been, for us. We were expendable. And everything I did had just perpetuated it.

“We won’t let that happen.” His eyes went far away. “What she showed us was...”

Horrifying.

“Do you believe her?” I asked.

“She wasn’t lying. She couldn’t fake what she showed us. You would have been able to tell. And I...know her well enough to know, if it wasn’t real.”

Gods, the things we had seen. I *hated* her. It made it even worse, somehow, to see and feel all of her thoughts firsthand, and watch how they came to such horrible conclusions. I had no doubt that Nura had truly loved Max. And she had decided that her love gave her absolution for all the bloody sacrifices she would make on the altar of her good intentions.

“And if what she showed us was true... if what *Ishqa* told us was true...” My words faltered, and I closed my eyes, a headache buzzing beneath my temples. *Ishqa. Fey.* An invitation to go be a weapon in yet another war.

Max let out a breath between his teeth. “As if our petty mortal problems weren’t enough.” Then his gaze flicked to

me, and something shifted in it. “I don’t know what we do with this.”

He said it like a shameful confession. The expression on his face twisted a dagger between my ribs. He’d gotten out of all of this. And I’d dragged him back in, only for him to end up fighting for terrible leaders and terrible causes, with bigger sacrifices still on the horizon.

He deserved so much better.

“I think about it often, you know,” I whispered. “How much I wish I had gone with you. When you asked me to leave Ara with you, before I made my Blood Pact.”

It felt like a betrayal, to say it aloud.

“You were the one who wanted to save the world,” he said, quietly. “I just wanted to save you.”

If I hadn’t been so sad, I would have laughed, because that was so blatantly untrue — even if Max himself didn’t realize it. But my chest ached with love for him, both for the lie he told himself and for the deeper truth beneath it.

“I need to tell the refugees. About... the loss.” I nodded to the hands.

“I’m with you,” Max murmured, and gods, I never knew how precious three words could be.



IT WAS JARRING, how the refugee dwellings looked exactly as they had when I had last been here. I stood in a street bustling with all the activity of a beautiful winter afternoon, Max beside me, utterly silent. I was living in a different reality than these people were. They still lived in a world in which the future was bright and the sun warm and their lives, slowly, were creaking towards normalcy.

They still lived in a world in which their family and friends were still breathing, somewhere.

Max's hand slipped into mine. Maybe someone else would have argued, would have said, *Maybe it's a mercy that they don't know*. But Max knew as well as any of us how precious the gift of knowledge was to people who had spent decades being told what they did or didn't deserve to know. He understood as deeply as I did that they deserved the truth, and those lost lives deserved to be mourned.

"Tisaanah!" I turned to see Serel approaching, a grin on his face. "I didn't expect to see you around here for a while longer..."

He got closer, and his voice faded just as his smile did.

"What's wrong?" he murmured, because of course he knew me well enough to sense it.

The sight of him made my eyes burn. Yes, I knew what it was to dream of an impossible embrace. And in Serel, I had gotten my miracle.

But so many of these people would never get theirs.

"Help me gather everyone," I said, and Serel nodded, suddenly serious.



THE LAST TIME I had stood here, surrounded by the refugees, I had let them see me as a vengeful goddess. I had let them believe that I was untouchable. Maybe I had even let myself believe it, too. But now, I had never felt more powerless. The words spilled out of my mouth, dry and bitter like ash collecting at my feet, as I told them of the deaths — nothing else, but those were more than enough. I watched the happiness drain from their faces and grief well up in their eyes.

For the first time, I was grateful that my magic was gone. The looks on their faces were more than enough to skewer me without feeling their emotions, too.

Serel stood in the front of the crowd, those beautiful blue eyes damp. Beside him was Filias, face hard with rage.

“They can’t have killed all of them,” a weak voice said in the crowd. “Waste their resources like that? No... no, it must be a trick. Perhaps they just took the hands.”

“We have seen too much of their cruelty to believe in fairytales,” another muttered.

“We were just... here,” one woman murmured. “We were here, free, while they were... while they were being...”

Her voice trailed off, and her gaze lifted to the apartments, as if seeing a sudden darkness in the happiness that had begun to bloom here.

I understood. She was feeling the same sickening guilt that I had felt — that I *still* felt — when I realized I was finding undeserved contentment in Max’s garden, all while others were suffering.

Just as I understood, when Filias approached me with clenched fists, why I was the recipient of his anger. The Zorokovs were an intangible evil, half a world away. And I was standing right here.

“You told us this wouldn’t happen,” Filias said. “You told us you had found a way to give them more time, and we didn’t act because of it.”

“I did,” I said, quietly.

“And yet here we are,” another added. “Living our lives thousands of miles away, getting news of their deaths. We could have saved them.”

“We were never going to save them,” Serel said, softly, and the calm resignation in his voice twisted a knife within me.

“We could have tried,” another man said, and Serel answered, “She *did* try.”

Filias shook his head, jaw set. “Trying would not have been enough.”

Gods. That was the truth. Trying was not enough.

I had to force the words up my throat.

“When I told you we would save them, I believed it. I wanted to believe it.” I pressed my hand to my heart, and for a moment, my lips parted and no sounds came out.

Everything was too close to the surface. Too raw. And this terrified me, because I lived my life carefully guarding what I presented to the world.

“Those lives,” I choked out, “are my family just as much as they are yours. There is nothing I wouldn’t have sacrificed to save them. *Nothing*. Because they deserved better. They deserved so much better.”

The crowd had gone silent. They stared at me expectantly, as if waiting for me to answer for my mistakes or tell them what we would do next. Both their trust and their disappointment weighed just as heavily.

I was dizzy. And before I realized what I was doing, I was on my knees.

“I have nothing to say for myself,” I said. “I wish that I could tell you that I had a secret plan or enough power to will this away. But the truth is, I have no performances left. No tricks. No magic shows. No red dresses. Not even promises. Their lifespan is too short. And I know that many of you likely look at me and see a Nyzrenese witch. That is fair. Perhaps we have nothing in common but the name of the man who chained us.” I let out a humorless scoff. “What a thing to bind us. I’d rather that we be tied together by a shared dream for the future rather than a shared terrible past. And I so wanted to give us that future. I still want to give us that future. But...”

My throat closed, but perhaps they heard the words I couldn’t say:

But I don’t know how.

My palms were pressed to the ground. Here, there weren’t even cobblestones. Instead the road was simply made from earth packed down beneath thousands of boot soles and cart wheels, pounded down so many times that it was nearly stone.

I saw a pair of shoes enter my vision. I looked up to see Riasha before me, lowering to her knees. Tears streaked her

weathered cheeks, but her voice was steady when she asked, “Do you know how to sing the Drifting Songs?”

I shook my head, unable to speak. I wished my answer was different. The Drifting Songs were an intricate series of hymns sung at funerals. But only priests knew all the words, and we had none in our dwindling village of escapees. Perhaps once, long ago, I had heard them sung. But it was a part of my Nyzrenese blood that had been lost forever. One of the countless, priceless things that the Threllians had taken away from us — even the ability to mourn.

Riasha pressed her palms to the earth, her hands settling on either side of mine.

“You must have been so young when we all fell. A child raised in the remnants of nations, like so many. But it is good to root ourselves in what we once were. The Drifting Songs were not just Nyzrenese, you know. All of our gods lived beneath the earth, and we all sang our versions of the Drifting Songs to send our dead to them.”

Then Riasha opened her mouth and began to sing. Her voice was raspy and unpracticed, words off-key, and yet they were the most beautiful thing I had ever heard.

In the beginning, you tethered us.

Our feet are tied to your earth,

Our food borne of your gifts,

Our lives lived ‘neath your shelter.

I have nothing to give you but a weary soul.

I have nothing to give you but imperfection.

Let it be enough.

I felt a hand fall over mine on my left side. Then my right. I didn’t have to look — couldn’t, even if I wanted to, because my vision was so blurred from unfallen tears. Max was kneeling beside me on one side, fingers intertwined with mine,

and Serel on the other. And I didn't need to look up to know that the others were there, too, all pressing their hands to the earth, the world gone silent except for Riasha's voice singing our lost songs.

*Oh, my gods who flourish beneath our feet,
How very far I have wandered.
I have searched for you in my victories and my
mistakes
In my love and my hatred.
I have crossed seas and mountains.
I am so very far from home.
But let me return to you.*

My fingers curled, handfuls of dirt ground against my palm. I could almost feel them — feel *something*, even if it was not the gods. Perhaps there was something deeper still that bound us all, not in the aspirational hope of the sky, but the grounding constance of the earth.

Beneath us, this unfamiliar land swallowed up our grief.
I had nothing to give them but my hope.
But gods, let it be enough. Let it be enough.

*I have nothing to give you but my life, Riasha
sang.
I have nothing to give you but scars and
heartbreak.
But let me return to you.
I have nothing to give you but my love and
piety.
But let me return to you.
Let it be enough.*

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR



Tisaanah's eyes were red-rimmed by the time we left the apartments. Night had fallen. We would need to return to the Towers at some point — we now had nowhere else to go. But neither of us were in a rush to get there, so we walked back through the city, taking in the silence of the winter night.

The Drifting Songs lasted for nearly an hour, though something about them made time seem to warp and shift. The grief hung thickly in the air. I had watched Tisaanah, serene even with tears streaking her cheeks, and I couldn't put a name to the sad pride that swelled in me at the sight of her.

The last time we had been here, when I had watched her wield her magic and their attention with masterful power, I thought I'd never seen anything more beautiful. But seeing her like this, honest and raw, was its own kind of beauty. She let me see these parts of her. I never thought she would let them see it, too. Maybe she never would again.

"I'm proud of you," I said. We had walked a long way in silence. Tisaanah gave me a startled look.

"Why?"

"I know it was hard for you to show them that."

She let out a rough scoff. "Being sad is nothing to be proud of. Stopping it from happening would have been."

"You couldn't have saved them. You do know that, right?"

She didn't answer.

Instead she slipped her arm through mine, the weight of her head pressing against my shoulder as we walked the city streets in yawning silence.

After a few minutes, Tisaanah murmured, "I like this. It makes it easy to pretend."

"Pretend?"

"Pretend we are a normal couple. That is probably what we look like, right now." Her arm tightened around mine, as if for emphasis, and I chuckled.

"Maybe so." Yes, we probably did look utterly average. I did have to admit there was something pleasant about the sheer mundanity of it. Like it was something I could take for granted.

"It's nice," I said, quietly.

"If we left, we could be this way every day."

My eyebrow twitched. It was the first time I had heard Tisaanah talk about running away, even in jest.

"We could."

"Tell me where we would go."

I paused.

It seemed dangerous to even think of it. And yet so easy, to slip into this game with her.

"We could live on a beach somewhere. Somewhere where there aren't winters."

I could hear the wrinkle over Tisaanah's nose. "A beach? It smells."

"Not all of them. Just Ara's beaches. There are islands where the water is completely clear, no seaweed. They're beautiful."

"You cannot grow a garden on a beach. And what a great loss that would be."

"Fair. Alternate proposal, then. We'll find a forest, somewhere off in... in Besrith, or maybe on one of those

southern islands, or something. We could clear out a nice big patch of land. Big enough for a decent garden. Far enough away from society that we can go unbothered for as long as we want.”

“A lake.”

“Hm?”

“It will be near a lake. I want to learn how to be a better swimmer.”

“I’ll allow it. I appreciate seeing you in wet clothes.”

She laughed, though it faded quickly.

“And the most important part,” she added, “is that no one will ever find us.”

“Not a soul.”

What a dream.

A long silence. We were almost at the Towers, those white columns looming over us, when Tisaanah said, quietly, “Would you go? Now?”

I questioned if I’d heard her right. “What?”

“If we could go, right now, would you?”

Yes.

The word rang out, emphatically, in my head. I wasn’t sure why it wasn’t the one to leave my lips when I answered.

“For a long time, I wanted nothing more than I wanted to leave Ara and never look back. But the Orders... they wouldn’t let me go. Those restrictions, after Sarlazai.”

Even when I had begged Tisaanah to leave Ara with me, I technically hadn’t been allowed to go. I had just been so desperate I was certain I’d find some way, *any* way, to get the hell out of there if it meant keeping her out of the Orders’ grasp.

“Not anymore,” Tisaanah said.

A bittersweet pang twinged in my chest. Yes. Tisaanah had negotiated my freedom when she signed away her own, all of

those punishments erased with the slice of a blade over her skin. And yet, I felt more trapped than ever.

“There is nothing stopping us. Even my pact to the Orders has been fulfilled.” Tisaanah wasn’t looking at me, her voice oddly flat.

I stopped short. Turned to her.

“What is this? Is this a fantasy, or is it real?”

“Do you want it to be real?”

Yes. Again, the word came to me fast. But... did I? Did I really?

“I don’t think *you* do. You care more deeply than anyone I know. You don’t want to abandon them.”

A muscle feathered in her jaw. “Perhaps leaving is the best thing I can do for them.”

“I know what it looks like when people trust their leader. And they trust you, Tisaanah.”

Tisaanah’s careful composure slowly cracked, sadness spreading across her face like fissures through stone. “I don’t know if they should. I don’t know if I trust myself, anymore. It is nice to dream. And I’m just so... tired.”

She stepped closer, arms sliding around my neck, close enough I could see every fragment of green and silver in her eyes.

I was tired, too. And I was better at running away than I was at anything else.

I kissed her, gentle and slow. Our faces hovered there, noses brushing, as I murmured, “Ask me one more time.”

One more time, and I won’t be able to stop myself from agreeing.

Seconds yawned out before us as her eyes searched mine.

And then—

“General Farlione!”

“*MAX!*”

Tisaanah and I jerked apart. I turned to see none other than Moth rushing towards us, his eyes wide. Behind him, several other soldiers — *my* soldiers — followed. Phelyp Aleor was among them.

“Where have you been?” Moth blurted out. “You just *disappeared.*”

“I...”

The other soldiers caught up to Moth and as they stood before me, there was something about the looks on their faces that made whatever answer I was about to give Moth die in my throat. The expression they wore was familiar — the same expression I’d see each night before I led them into battle. The faces of terrified young men who were trying very, very hard to present nothing but bravery.

Except for Moth. Moth looked *angry.*

“I looked everywhere for you,” he said. “No one would tell us anything. And then Sammerin tells me that you had *gone home?*”

“Do you know what’s happening, sir?” Phelyp asked. His brow was knotted. He’d grown into a more confident, capable soldier, but he still was awful at hiding his unease. “Why did the plans change?”

Dread fell to the bottom of my stomach.

“Change?” I repeated.

The soldiers exchanged a wary look.

“All leave canceled. All leadership called back. Everyone to remain at the base indefinitely. Locked down. We’ve been told to remain prepared for action, sir,” Phelyp said. “You didn’t...know?”

“Is this still about Aviness’s allies?” another asked. “I thought we were done with them.”

“*Should* be done with them, after all that,” Phelyp muttered. “I heard rumors that it’s something else — maybe even... ah...Threllians...” His eyes fell to Tisaanah,

awkwardly clearing his throat, before flicking back to me expectantly.

They were nervous. Of course they were. To call everyone back so abruptly, with so little information, and at such sweeping scale was extremely rare. It happened when the Ryvenai War broke out. At least then, we'd had at least some idea of why.

This? This was a strange measure to take, when a war had just ended. Nura must already be flexing the muscles of her newfound power. She wasn't even officially Arch Commandant yet, not until the confirmation, but who was going to question her?

The image of her face flashed through my mind — the sheer determination in it.

She believed something horrible was coming, and Nura met formidable opponents with formidable strength. Formidable strength required an army. Would she use that army for a pre-emptive attack? I wanted to think she wouldn't. But...

I was so lost in thought that I didn't realize I had just been standing there, silent, as the boys stared at me.

"You'll be returning, right, sir?" Phelyp said, at last.

"There are plans that still need to be settled," I replied.

They exchanged another glance. They weren't stupid — they recognized a non-answer when they heard one.

"Is there... any information, sir? Anything?"

They didn't just want information. They wanted reassurance. Leadership. They had been looking at me like I could give it to them. But this was the moment I had dreaded when I had noticed them starting to hoist me onto that mental pedestal — the moment they realized I couldn't be what they wanted me to be.

"No," I said. "Not now. Go to talk to Essanie and Arith. They're the ones you should be asking these questions,

anyway. And if you're supposed to be in lockdown, you shouldn't even be this far from the base."

They did not move.

"I will make sure you get more information," I said. "As soon as it's available to you. I promise. Now go before your captains realize you're gone and you get slapped with three weeks of cleaning duty."

They gave me half-hearted salutes and shuffled away back toward the city. But Moth remained, giving me a piercing stare that seemed so uncharacteristic of him. It made him look several years older.

"I know that I make a lot of mistakes," he said. "But I'm not dumb."

"I never said—"

"They all know you as the general. But I remember what you were like before all of this. And I know what you were like after the first war. You just *hid*."

My eyebrows lurched. "Excuse me?"

Is he wrong, though?

"They'd talk about you like you're some kind of legend. Like we can win anything if we have you. And they'd act like we would *always* have you, like it was just a given. But sometimes they would talk like that and I'd think..." He swallowed, his jaw tight. "I'd think about what you used to be like. And I'd think about how you could still just run away and leave us to fight alone. Is that what you're doing? Leaving us to fight alone?"

My mouth, half open already with the beginnings of a response, closed.

Moth just stared at me. Waiting for an answer — demanding one.

Good question, Max. Is that what you're doing?

"No," I said, at last. "No. It's not."

Something I couldn't identify flickered in Moth's gaze, like he was caught between two warring versions of himself — Moth, the righteous adult, and Moth, the unsure child.

“None of them know what's going to happen next,” he said. “Not even the older ones. I think even Essanie and Arith are scared, even though they don't show it. Everyone has been asking about you. They trust you. All of them trust *you*.”

His words burrowed deep. Not so long ago, it would have been downright nightmarish to hear them, because there was nothing I wanted less than to be entrusted with something so precious. I wanted to tell him, *If they trust me, they shouldn't. I'm not worthy of it.*

Instead, I said, quietly, “You won't be alone, Moth. Whatever happens.”

Moth didn't look like he believed me.

I lifted my chin to the others, who had set off into the night. “You'd better catch up. If you're late, you'll be in more trouble.”

Moth still stood there, tight-lipped, and I thought he might argue. But then he just turned to Tisaanah, gave her a little smile and a polite, “Goodnight, Tisaanah,” and followed the others.

I watched the group of young men hurry down the street until they turned around a corner, a tightness in my chest that I couldn't shake.

They were new recruits. Young. Untrained. No rank to speak of. No family names to protect them. If war came, they would be the first to be thrown at the feet of the enemy. The first lambs to be sacrificed.

I closed my eyes.

“Fuck,” I muttered, beneath my breath.

“I know what it looks like when people trust their leader,” Tisaanah murmured. I almost laughed. Figured that it took less than an hour for my own words to be turned back on me.

“I'd rather not be one,” I said.

“If only we all got to be what we wished.”

I opened my eyes to see hers already picking me apart. In the silence between us, our fantasy disintegrated and floated into the night sky like dust. Neither of us had to acknowledge its departure. We both knew the dream was gone, replaced by duty.

It was nice while it lasted.

I sank down onto a street bench. “Then what, Tisaanah? What do we do with all of this? We either do Nura’s insane bidding or turn ourselves over to a Fey man we met five minutes ago. Are those our options?”

“If what Ishqa told us is true...”

“I don’t trust him.”

“He could bring back my magic. Or try.”

“If by that, you mean bring back a vengeful Reshaye *and* kill you *and* probably turn you over to this omnipresent immortal threat looming over us, then likely yes. Sounds fantastic.”

Tisaanah rubbed her temples in a way that told me she’d had the same thoughts. “But I am useless without magic. No matter what we decide. And he did not seem like he was lying.”

A part of me *wanted* Tisaanah to be useless, or at least useless to all the people who just wanted to use her for the power she carried. “Even if he’s not lying, there’s a world of difference between that and the real truth.”

A humorless smile flickered over her face, nearly a wince. “And a world of difference between one person’s truth and the right thing for everyone.”

I scoffed. Ascended, didn’t we know it. More than ever, now.

“Perhaps we could try to make things better from the inside,” she said, weakly. “Guide Nura. Control her worst impulses.”

The image of Nura's face flashed through my mind. I had never seen her look quite like that. I had already lived the consequences of what she was capable of. The idea of her pushed to true desperation? Terrifying.

I shook my head. "No. Nura's not an easily manipulated person. We couldn't control her, not as long as she has all the power."

A long pause.

"Perhaps we wouldn't need to," Tisaanah muttered.

"Hm?"

She didn't answer. She rose. Paced slowly. She wouldn't look at me.

My eyes narrowed. "Let me into that brain of yours, Tisaanah."

"Perhaps we are making an assumption too soon."

And only then did she turn to me. Her eyes were a little too wide, bright with an unmistakable sheen.

I knew immediately what that meant. A plan. Tisaanah did love a plan.

I braced myself. "And what would that be?" I asked.

"I will warn you," she said, "you are going to want to say no."



THERE WAS a buzz in the back of my head. If I were to inspect that buzz a little closer, I'd find that it wasn't the now all-too-familiar buzz of a headache, or of exhaustion, but instead a voice — a voice that was whispering, *What the hell are you doing, Max?*

I was dutifully ignoring that voice, probably because if I listened to it too closely, I'd find myself thinking, *Actually, he has a point...*

The lobby of the Towers was bustling with activity. At the back of the room, the double doors beneath the mural of Araich and Rosira were propped wide open, and the considerable crowd filtered between the central meeting hall and the lobby. Still, my eyes landed on Nura immediately. While everyone else was in movement, like bees scurrying through a hive, Nura stood at the center of it all, still as glass.

And yet, when her stare found mine, I could have sworn I saw her exhale even from across the room.

I was almost insulted that she'd never once looked *that* relieved to see me when we were lovers.

She pushed through the crowd to meet me. The moment we entered the Towers, Tisaanah had slipped away, now deep in a serious conversation with one of the councilors across the room. Nura's eyes darted to her before coming back to me.

"You came. I didn't think you would."

"Neither did I." Wholly the truth.

She gave me a small smile.

"I'm glad," she said, quietly. "To have you with us. With me."

I had no doubt that was the truth, too.

Nura's hands were clenched around each other, tight enough that her knuckles were white. She always had done that when she was nervous, even if over the years she had sawed away all of her other tells. Today, everything about her appearance was immaculate, her braids intertwined neatly at the back of her head, her white Order of Midnight jacket spotless and pressed, the buttons as brightly silver as her eyes. She looked the part of a regal ruler.

I know she had dreamed of this day since she was a ten-year-old girl, laying eyes upon the Towers for the first time. Years ago, when we were both nominated as candidates for Arch Commandant, she had stayed up all night cradling her letter as if it were a newborn child.

And today, by decree of the council, the only remaining viable candidate — Nura Qan — would officially become Arch Commandant, and, by terrible, twisted extension, the ruler of Ara.

Incredible, how life could follow the same paths and yet seem so utterly unpredictable.

“How does it feel?” I asked. “To get everything you’ve ever wanted?”

Her smile faded. “I didn’t want it like this.”

A booming bell rang through the lobby four times, drowning out the hum of the crowd. When the sound faded, the room was quiet. People filed through the open double doors.

Across the room, Tisaanah turned to meet my eyes. So did the man beside her — Iya, a council member that I had not spoken to in many years.

“It’s time,” Nura said, under her breath. She gave me one final, nervous half smile and proceeded to the doors. Moments later, Tisaanah joined me.

“This will be an interesting day,” she said, casting a glance to Nura’s back, one that was only just short of a glare. Then it softened when she looked to me.

“Are you ready?”

“Never.”

Tisaanah chuckled. It was a nervous laugh. She nodded to the door. “Wonderful,” she said. “Then let’s go.”

The inside of the council room looked exactly as it had all those years ago. It was large and circular, with windows near the ceiling that spilled mottled light over the seats. Most were already filled, though many of the faces in the crowd didn’t look especially thrilled to be there. Everyone was on edge.

Everything in this room was a stark reminder of the shadow the Orders had become of what they used to be. Only a few aging members of the Council remained. Some were

already seated in the front row around the round stage, wrapped in red robes.

“I will admit, Maxantarius...”

A smooth, accented voice broke through my thoughts. I looked up to see Iya standing beside me.

“...I never did think I was going to see you within these walls again.”

I gave him a humorless smile. “If I’m being honest, neither did I, Councilor.”

“Are you glad we were both wrong?”

Iya’s silver eyes twinkled. They were oddly ageless, and he’d always been the type to look at you as if you were being tested by criteria known only to him.

I spoke carefully. “‘Glad’ is probably not the word. But I’ve been given a significant amount of trust by people who deserve to see it mean something, in the end.”

“And you think you can live up to that?”

What a question. “I...certainly hope so.”

Iya cocked his head, staring at me. “I do, too,” he said, before gliding away to be seated with the rest of the council.

“What was that bizarre exchange?”

My eyebrows lurched. I turned to see Sammerin, taking a seat beside me. He looked surprised to see us, gaze darting from me to Tisaanah in obvious confusion.

“You two decided to cut your break short to come... watch some depressing Orders pageantry?”

“Break?”

Sammerin looked at me like I was insane. “Yes?”

Ascended above. I *forgot* there had been a break. And Sammerin knew absolutely nothing. Tisaanah and I had barely slept the previous night, and not in a fun sort of way. Time had been a blur.

I rubbed my temples. “Sammerin... there’s a lot we’re going to have to—”

But then Nura cleared her throat, now standing on the central stage of the chamber, and a hush fell over the room.

“Wielders of the Order of Midnight and the Order of Daybreak,” Nura said, her voice rising to fill the room. “I am deeply honored to stand before you today as the interim Arch Commandant following the tragic and untimely death of Zeryth Aldris. I have spent my life serving the Orders, and will gladly give you the rest of it, if you will let me today.” She paced across the stage, pausing before the five Council members and bowing her head.

“Councilors. I stand before you today asking for your blessing to officially assume the title of Arch Commandant. As we all know, the sudden death of Aldris and the pressing nature of looming threats against our country force our hands. We cannot go through the evaluation processes for other candidates, which take months at a time. I have already completed the requisite tests. I have proven myself. And following the sad death of Maia Azeroth eight years ago and the restrictions placed upon Maxantarius Farlione, I stand before you as the final remaining viable member of the sixteenth cycle candidates.” She sank to one knee, her head bowing. “I submit myself, Nura Qan, as candidate for Arch Commandant. And I ask you, Councilors, to bestow me this honor.”

I didn’t realize my hands were shaking until I felt Tisaanah’s firm grasp still them.

The first Councilor rose.

“I commit the title of Arch Commandant to you, Nura Qan,” he said.

Even from this distance, I could see Nura’s body jolt, ever so slightly, as if the sound of those words struck her with a stronger force than she thought they would.

They struck me, too, in an entirely different way.

The second Councilor stood.

“I grant you, Nura Qan, the title of Arch Commandment.”

The room was utterly silent.

And then the third Councilor rose — Iya.

There was a long silence. Tisaanah’s hand was so tight around mine that my fingertips were going numb. Or maybe that was just my nervousness.

“Councilor?” Nura’s voice was small, uncertain.

Finally, he spoke.

“Nura Qan, I have known you for many years. In that time, I have witnessed your commitment to the Orders and to Ara. The bounds to which you will go for your rank hold no limits. As councilor, I have seen hundreds of Wielders pass through the halls of the Towers. I can name none who are as resolute, as iron-willed, or as wholly committed to her beliefs.”

An uneasy smile twitched at the corners of Nura’s mouth.

“Thank you, Councilor.”

“You have many times over proven your commitment to the Orders and to Ara,” Iya said. “And for that service, we all owe you deeply. But I do not offer you the title of Arch Commandant.”

A gasp rippled through the room.

He turned to the audience, his silver gaze landing on me. “I call upon the candidate of Maxantarius Farlione.”

Hundreds of stares snapped to me, gasps ascending into murmurs. I rose to my feet. I could barely feel them. Somewhere in the back of my mind, that buzz rose to a shout: *What the hell are you doing, Max?!*

I did not look at the crowd. I did not look at Tisaanah, or Sammerin, who muttered a confused curse. I did not even look at Iya.

Instead I met Nura’s eyes, eyes that were wide with utter shock. And my voice was stronger than I felt when I answered, “Maxantarius Farlione accepts the call.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE



For a moment, there was silence. Then murmurs rippled through the crowd. Even without hearing the individual words, I knew what they were saying. *Disqualified*, they whispered. *Excommunicated. He can't do this...can he?*

Nura was staring only at me, her eyes round, lips parted. I had seen that look before — on the faces of soldiers who looked down and realized there was an arrow burrowed between their ribs. I realized that it had simply never occurred to her that this would happen. The thought just never crossed her mind.

She jerked to her feet, forcing her expression back into composure. “Maxantarius Farlione is no longer eligible for the title, due to restrictions placed upon him in the aftermath of Sarlazai.”

“That is no longer true.” Tisaanah’s voice rang out beside me. She rose. “I hold in my possession a contract with the Orders. In its terms is a stipulation that Maxantarius would be released from any restrictions inflicted upon him. Anyone may read it if they wish. But Nura knows that I am not lying.”

“Is this true?” one of the other Councilors said, haltingly.

Realization spread across Nura’s face. She let out a small scoff. “A clean slate,” she murmured, as if to herself.

Still, I did not look at Tisaanah. But I could hear the hint of her smile in her voice as she repeated, “A clean slate.”

“As one of the previous candidates, General Farlione has completed all requirements, and has competed and passed in

the three previous trials,” Iya said. “He is a viable candidate. Neither of them have earned the title of Arch Commandant until we conduct the fourth trial.”

Another wave of murmurs, louder than before.

“Then I see no other route,” another Councilor said. “On the fortnight, we will conduct the trial.”

“No.”

Nura’s gaze finally broke from mine. The final vestiges of her hurt disappeared, buttoned up beneath hard focus the same way she buttoned up her scars beneath her white jacket. She turned to the Councilors, hands clasped behind her back.

“If we do this, we do it now. We have no time to waste.”

“Now?” Iya said.

Now? the crowd whispered.

Now? I thought.

“Ara is a rudderless ship,” Nura said. “A country recovering from not one but two wars, still steeped in uncertainty. Given the greater responsibility of the Arch Commandant in such trying times, we must settle this matter quickly.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tisaanah shoot me a glance of uncertainty. And I couldn’t deny that I felt it, too. I knew when I walked into this room that I was about to do something totally contradictory to everything I had wanted for the last ten years. But I certainly didn’t expect to actually do the final trial — something that normally would have taken weeks or even months of preparation — *today*.

But was I about to let Nura know that? Of course not.

“I’m more than willing to settle the matter as quickly as the Council wishes. If that means doing the final trial today, then I am ready.”

Sammerin muttered a curse just barely loud enough for me to hear.

Iya turned around and gave me a stare that accused me of being a lunatic. “We need more time to prepare.”

“We don’t have it,” Nura said.

“If both candidates are willing,” another Councilor said, “then I see no reason why we should not put the issue to rest today. At sundown, of course.”

They all turned to me, asking a silent question.

Max, what the hell are you doing?

But I just smiled.

“Sundown,” I said.

“Sundown,” Nura repeated.

And we looked at each other, the battle already started.



SUNDOWN WAS TWO HOURS AWAY. Two hours to prepare for the biggest fight of my life.

When the meeting adjourned, a wave of people descended upon me, but I managed to slip through them and escape off to Tisaanah’s apartment with Tisaanah and Sammerin — a battle in itself. Every set of eyes was on us, and I acutely felt every stare. So I remained serious and stoic until the door was firmly closed behind us, at which point I slumped down into one of the dining chairs, threw my head back, and let out a manic laugh.

“I cannot fucking *believe*,” I said, “that I’m doing this.”

“I’m glad I’m not alone in that, at least.” With a movement that managed to be both graceful and brutish, Sammerin took a bottle of wine that had been sitting on the table, uncorked it with a whisper of magic, and poured a glass, which he downed in one gulp. Then he turned to me with a deadpan stare.

“I assume you want the bottle.”

He assumed right.

Sammerin slid into a chair and poured himself another glass before handing it over. Tisaanah didn't sit. She did that standing, hovering, pacing thing she did when she was nervous.

“Well, it appears I'm behind,” Sammerin said. “The last I knew, the two of you were supposed to be off being sickening in a garden somewhere. *Resting.*”

He said the last word as if it were some sort of wry joke. Which, I suppose, it was.

Tisaanah and I exchanged a glance. The sheer absurdity of everything that had happened in the last two days was overwhelming.

Tisaanah leaned towards Sammerin.

“We will tell you everything, but only if you promise you will not think we are insane.”

“Oh, that ship has long sailed,” Sammerin said. “But please, do continue.”



IT WAS ALWAYS A STRANGE EXPERIENCE, telling Sammerin outrageous news. He was an excellent healer because he carefully controlled his reactions. During the war, I'd seen him lean over dying men screaming in pain and maintain steady, comforting composure. It would only be afterwards that he'd turn to me, let the mask drop, and admit, “I was absolutely terrified.”

One might think that after all these years of friendship, I'd be better at recognizing when *I* was the dying man on the battlefield. Sammerin had been doing that to me — managing me — for nearly a decade, and I didn't even realize it. Now, maybe I was seeing the world in full color again. Because even though Sammerin's reactions were, as always, carefully regulated, I could now see the slow rising fear bubbling up beneath all that serenity.

When we finished, there was a long, awkward silence. Sammerin opened his mouth and then closed it, several times.

“Say something, Sammerin,” I said. “You look like a broken man.”

“What can I say to any of this? It’s...” He trailed off, and I realized that maybe he *was* a broken man, in the sense that we’d just shattered every perception he had of a world that made any degree of sense.

“So you see,” Tisaanah said, “we couldn’t let her keep it.”

Sammerin took another drink.

“A fourth trial. A *fourth trial*, Max. Tonight.”

His tone said what his words didn’t: *You are fucked*.

That was an understandable reaction.

The fourth trial was the last step in the Arch Commandant selection process, and the simplest... as well as the most ridiculously archaic. Just one fight, *Wielder* against *Wielder*. It would take place in the Scar — the birthplace of magic, a chasm not far from the base of the Towers. When magic had returned to the world half a millennium ago, that chasm was the breaking point. To this day, it remained one of the most unique magical settings in the world.

That was the whole romanticized idea: put two candidates in the birthplace of magic itself for their final battle, to test their connection, their commitment, to the forces they *Wielded*.

“The whole concept is ridiculous,” I grumbled. “As if whoever wins a pit fight in a glowing magical ravine is better suited to lead one of the most powerful organizations in the world.”

Sammerin stared flatly back at me, silent.

“I can win,” I said.

“Max, she *knows* you.”

I knew exactly all that was implied by that sentence.

Nura's magic preyed on the fears of her opponent. And she knew exactly where the gaps between my ribs were, knew exactly which mental knives to turn.

"I know her, too," I said.

"Right, and that's exactly what she's going to use against you. With stakes this high, she'll fight hard. Nothing will stop her."

I knew he was right.

No matter what Nura did, there was always a small part of me that hoped she could be better than she was. Yes, she had saved me, many times over, even when it cost her dearly to do it. But I had seen the way she looked at me in that meeting — with a hurt sharp enough to shred whatever tattered history had hung between us.

Sharp enough, maybe, to sever whatever still kept her from killing me.

"I know," I said. "And I won't let her take it that far."

"I would *skin* her," Tisaanah muttered, and I quirked an eyebrow at her.

"That's charmingly vicious. Comforting to know that if she survives me, she certainly won't survive you."

"This isn't a game." There was an uncharacteristically harsh edge to Sammerin's voice. "If you lose, if she's truly that desperate, this affects more than you. Nura is not the kind of person who abides by half-measures. She could purge everyone who has anything to do with you. Did you consider that?"

I went silent. Sammerin stared back at me, his jaw tight. A pang of guilt rang out in my chest.

"Yes," I said, quietly. "Yes, I did."

Tisaanah and I had made very direct moves against Nura, and we were well aware of the consequences of that. But if we were to lose, there was a possibility that Nura would not stop with us. We had allies. Sammerin. Serel. The Threllian refugees.

I had seen the way Nura waged war. Scorched earth.

It would be putting it lightly to say that I'd had many objections, when Tisaanah first raised the possibility of my candidacy. But *this* was the one that still lingered. The one that still made me think, *Maybe I'm not doing the right thing*.

"I'd make whatever deal I had to, to ensure you aren't affected," I said. "You were her friend too. I could convince her."

Sammerin let out a low scoff.

"Don't be ridiculous." Then he muttered, as if to himself, "Ten years, I spent building my practice."

He shook his head, eyes to the ceiling, and a lump rose in my throat. I almost offered to back out — not that I could, of course, realistically.

"I'm sorry, Sammerin," I said.

"Good. You should be. You make my life difficult." But then he took a long sip of wine, and when he set the glass down again, his jaw was set. "But. If all this is true..." He waved his hands, as if to gesture to the whole ridiculous mess of it. "Then you are right. She cannot hold that power. And I suppose I'll take this over the alternative, if the alternative is..."

His voice trailed off, and Tisaanah provided, quietly, "The end."

We all looked at each other, the words hanging in the air.

"I won't lose," I said, more confidently than I felt.

"You are not allowed to," Tisaanah muttered.

"Yes. Not losing is a good goal." Sammerin leaned across the table, a wrinkle between his brows. "And Max, try to do it without using... that magic." He nodded to my hands, and I knew he was talking about my deeper, mysterious magic — the "gift" that Reshaye had given me. "There's something odd about it. I don't know what, yet, but..."

He lapsed off into thought, and when he blinked and looked back to me, his gaze was harder. “Just don’t lose.”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

TISAANAH



The Scar was set deep in the earth, so far down that it was partially beneath the Towers themselves. We had to journey down spiral after spiral of metal stairs, built into the rocky edges of the ravine, just to reach it. The sun was already disappearing behind the horizon by the time we embarked, but it was so dark down there that even if it had been broad daylight, it would have been near pitch black by the time we made it to the bottom. After the fourth set of stairs, I looked up to see the final sliver of a dusky sky disappearing between layers of rock.

There were Syrizen ahead of us and behind us as we descended. I peered across the expanse of stone and darkness. Somewhere over there, where the shadows made structures deteriorate into abstract, formless shapes, Nura was making the same journey down. She and Max would meet within the Scar. And the rest of us would stand at the edges and watch — helpless — while they fought for the title.

I knew Max was nervous, but he hid it carefully. He walked with long, confident strides, his chin raised and stare sharp. He wore a gold jacket embroidered with emerald trim, the sun emblem of the Order of Daybreak across his back.

He looked like a leader. He looked like a victor. He looked like an Arch Commandant.

But all I saw when I looked at him was a man who was willing to sacrifice everything that mattered to him for a chance, even a slim one, at a better world.

I refused to allow myself to think about the possibility of losing him here. It had been so much more comfortable at the Mikov estate, when *I* was the one throwing myself into the jaws of a monster. Self-sacrifice was easy. But watching Max journey so close to the fangs of a beast of his own was agonizing.

At last, the stairs stopped. I pressed my hands against the rusting metal railing. Of their own accord, my lips parted.

Before me was a massive crack in the earth. The rock was jagged and raw, like torn flesh, and strange, rippling light spilled from within it. It wasn't bright, exactly — it barely cast a glow on the stone around us. But it seemed to bend the air itself in strange and unnatural ways, like an eerie parody of the way the heat rippled the air above the plains back in Nyzerene. During the walk here, a strange magic had prickled at the back of my neck. Now, goosebumps rose all over my flesh.

“You have to go *in* that?” I whispered.

“I do indeed.”

Oh, gods. I didn't like any of this.

Down on the other side of the crack, I saw a white figure standing completely still, face tilted towards us.

Nura.

She was so far away that her features were unintelligible, but I could still feel the razors in her stare, and my own rising to meet them.

If she hurt him, I would kill her. Gods, I would make the fates of Esmaris and Ahzeen Mikov look *pleasant* compared to what I would do to her.

“Are you ready?” Sammerin said, and Max gave him a wordless glance that replied, *No, but does it matter?*

“There is a path for you this way,” Ariadnea said, gesturing to a gap in the railing.

Max nodded, then turned to me.

I had been ready to be dignified. But the force of Max's gaze made me forget all of that. I didn't have time to second guess myself before his hands were on either side of my face and his mouth on mine, and I was struck speechless not only by the kiss itself — a tender, passionate, world-ending kiss that felt far too much like a goodbye — but also by the sudden palpable possibility that it could be the last.

His lips broke from mine, then grazed over the tip of my nose, the bridge, the space of my forehead right between my eyebrows.

It was that forehead kiss, the one that seemed as if it wasn't even fully intentional, that almost broke me.

"Everyone is watching," I murmured, self-conscious not of his affection but of the way it threatened to unravel me.

"Who cares," Max replied, still close enough that I felt the words in my skin. "I'm about to become Arch Commandant."

He said it like a joke. It couldn't be a joke. It had to be reality.

I couldn't speak, even though suddenly, there was so much I wanted to say. I pulled him into one more embrace instead.

"I have a request." His voice rumbled against my ear lobe, and I choked out my response.

"Smart to ask now, when I have no choice but to say yes."

"The man with the parrot. The one that we saw in the Capital. Which came first, the bird or the coat?"

The memory made me rasp a chuckle. The man we had seen the first time I visited the Capital, what felt like a lifetime ago. A tall, bespectacled man with a green coat and a matching parrot. It had been a simple sort of joy when I ran up to him — *I must ask you, did you get bird to match coat, or coat to match bird?*

My eyes burned.

"That's a secret," I said, and he laughed as if that was a ridiculous answer. It was, really. He pulled back and we looked at each other.

“I’ll tell you when you get back,” I said.

A smile curled his mouth. Left side first, as always.
“Deal.”

“Deal.”

“Maxantarius,” Ariadnea murmured, and Max scoffed.

“Give me a minute. This is a momentous enough occasion, isn’t it?” Then his gaze slipped to Sammerin, who looked as admirably collected as ever.

“I’d tell you not to do anything stupid,” Sammerin said, “but that would be useless and outdated advice.”

“Thank you, Sammerin. I, too, treasure our friendship.”

Still, something softened in his gaze as he patted his friend on the shoulder, gave him a little nod, then turned to the gap in the rail and the rocky stairs that led down to the Scar.

“Alright,” he told the Syrizen. “I’m ready.”

Ariadnea volunteered to lead him down. He did not look back as he took his first steps. The last thing I heard as they departed was Ariadnea’s voice, solemnly saying, “Good luck, Max.”

And with those words, the match began.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN



This entire concept was the most ridiculous fucking idea.

When I was twenty-one and generally a naive idiot, I had thought there was a certain romantic appeal to the fourth trial. Now, I wanted to laugh at myself for ever having thought that way. What had once seemed natural and primal now struck me as barbaric. Sure, *this* certainly will encourage rational, compassionate leadership.

Still, even as I told myself that there was nothing mystical about this process whatsoever, I had to fight a shudder of unease as I went down the stairs and landed in the unnatural, rippling darkness of the Scar's floor. The light and air were strange here, even stranger than they looked from above. Mist that disobeyed the laws of nature swirled from the floor and the jagged rock of the walls. Shocks of light glinted in the stone that surrounded me, as if fireflies were buried within it and still, half a millennia later, were trying to dig their way out.

But more unnerving than all of that was the way it *felt*. It reminded me of how I had felt when I melded my magic with Tisaanah's, except while that had been a pleasant, alluring sensation, this was odd and saccharine, like a noise so high-pitched it left my ears ringing.

I drew my magic to the surface, readying myself. I looked out into the dark fog, and though I couldn't see Nura there, I knew she was waiting. There was a time when her magic was as familiar to me as my own, and here, in this twisted place of amplified senses, I could feel it hanging in the air.

“Do you expect me to come chase you?” I said. I did not raise my voice. She could hear.

Sure enough, her voice rolled from the darkness.

“That’s entirely up to you, Max. I wouldn’t stop you if you wanted to walk away.”

“I won’t.”

“What an interesting heel turn for you. Of all things, this is the one that makes you stay.”

I still could not see her. But her hatred — no, not hatred, *hurt* — slithered through the air like the hiss of a snake.

“I have no desire to do this,” I said, quietly. Flames thrummed at my fingertips, carefully tethered. “We don’t have to, Nura.”

“Why? Are you afraid?”

I felt her magic wrapping around me, burrowing deep, searching for fear in all the places she knew so well.

“I’m angry,” I said. “I’m tired.”

No lies there.

I turned around to see her standing there, silver stare picking me apart. Something was different about her. Something dangerous was closer to the surface.

“I showed you everything.” Her voice sounded like her knives whipping through the air. Quiet and deadly. “I showed you all of it and you still threw it back in my face like this. When we were together, all you wanted was for me to carve my fucking heart out for you. And that’s what I did. I showed you. I always have loved you. *Always.*”

It was the truth. I understood it, now — the dangerous constancy of Nura’s love. When she lifted her hand to my temple in Sarlazai, she had been utterly convinced that she loved me. Convinced, too, that she loved the people she was about to kill.

“And you love Ara,” I said.

An odd vulnerability rippled across her face. “More than I have ever loved anything.”

“Then help it be *better*, Nura. Let your love be an action, not a feeling. Love this country by sparing its people from yet another war.”

“You saw what I saw. You know I can’t avoid it.”

“You can. None of this has to happen. Not like this. Do you want people to speak of Ara the way they speak of Threll? Is that what you want to become?”

“If they’ll speak of *me* that way, I’ll let them. If someone needs to make the hard decisions to save us all from this mess, then I’ll be the tyrant and burn for it later. Hell, I already have.”

Until now, I had managed to keep my anger carefully controlled, measured against whatever scraps of compassion I had left for the girl I’d known. But now, fury ripped through me, so violently that the flames at my fingers brightened.

“*Hard decisions?*” I breathed. “*People*, Nura. These are people. What’s the difference between a life worth saving and a life worth throwing away? I saw what your hard decisions are. I lived it. Tisaanah lived it. And I won’t let it happen.”

I knew immediately that I’d said the wrong thing. One second, and the glimpse I’d seen of Nura as I knew her fifteen years ago disappeared like a corpse falling beneath black waters. In her place stood nothing but cold steel.

“I warned you back then that bleeding heart would get you killed,” she said. “But I never wanted it to be by me.”

“Nura—”

But she was gone. Shadows wrapped around her like a cloak, reducing her to a smear of darkness.

Just like that, her decision was made. And I knew her well enough to know that there would be no coming back from this — no half measures.

We had sparred hundreds, thousands, of times before. Just like she always did, she struck first. I dodged, then blocked,

then danced backwards. Even after all this time, my muscles knew her patterns intuitively. I conjured a wall of flame, bright enough to sear her outline from the shadows that hid her, and she staggered backwards, only to immediately recover. I caught a glimpse of a grim, satisfied smirk on her lips.

I saw that smile and I thought of the expression she had worn when she brought Tisaanah to my doorstep. When she told me of her Blood Pact. *Tell me I haven't been grooming her for this*, I had begged, and she had been so traitorously silent.

I blocked another strike. The familiar tendrils of Nura's magic reached for me, irrational fear nagging at the corners of my mind. Nothing compared to what she was capable of. Just as I was still keeping my flames closely restrained, far away from her flesh. We were still playing.

She thought that she knew me so well. She had claimed so many of her sparring victories because she thought she knew me better than I knew myself. Often, she was right. But she had never expected this.

I had underestimated her. But she had underestimated me, too.

I let myself slow, deliberately, backing against the stone wall.

"I don't want to do this," I said, laying out the trap of my hesitation. And just as I knew she would, she took it.

It happened in a split second. She lunged, not only with her knives, but with her magic, shadow swelling around her like wings. And in the same moment, I let mine rise to meet it. My flames roared into a river that coiled around me and lunged for her, clashing with her darkness, blinding us both.

I had never been hit with Nura's magic so directly. Even though I braced myself, it still took my breath away. To describe the sensation that flooded over me as "fear" would be like describing a monsoon as a drizzle.

One blink, and I was looking at Kira's face as she fell against the floor of her shed, fire tearing up her clothing, her hair.

I was hearing Reshaye's whisper, *{Now you have no one but me.}*

I didn't know whether the floor beneath my feet was the stone of the Scar or the bloodstained tile of my family's estate. I didn't know whether the flames at my hands were reaching towards Nura, or towards my siblings, or towards the people who had lived in Sarlazai. My mental walls, meticulously crafted, tore apart like paper.

Still, I pushed forward, resisting the urge to fall to my knees. Down here, my magic was rawer, brighter, hotter. Our power collided in a burst so wild that it consumed us both, and seconds later, we were both flung against opposite walls of the ravine.

My breath came in ragged gasps. Sweat plastered my hair to my forehead. Through the warping mist of the Scar, Nura and I looked at each other, wide-eyed — as if we had both surprised ourselves with the extent of our power.

I flexed my hands, coaxing magic back to my fingertips.

And then, we began again.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT



I was standing in my bedroom at my family's estate. *Look, Max. Just came out of its silk today.* Kira's hands held out a glass box. A little red butterfly was within it. Its wings were on fire. I looked up and Kira's face was rotting.

No.

I was in the Scar, fighting for my life, for Tisaanah's life, for a title I didn't even want. The world shook as my back slammed against the wall. No time to catch my breath. No time to hesitate. I fell back, dodging Nura's next strike, and surging towards her.

No.

I was in Sarlazai. Nura was looking up at me. I trusted her. I loved her. *If they want to shit in their own beds, they can lie in it.*

{You do always try so hard.}

No.

I was leaning over Nura, our magics roaring around us both, light and darkness and fire and fear threatening to smother each other out. She was blocking me with a blade — but my staff was more powerful. Her eyes were wide, and through her anger, her lethal determination, I caught a glimpse of fear. Her stance buckled.

For a moment, I could see an opening. One strike to her throat. I was fast enough. I could make it.

But it was a lethal shot.

I hesitated. Went for her shoulder instead of her neck. Too slow. She countered.

No.

I was in my old apartment in the wake of Sarlazai, the wake of my family's deaths. I was drowning, drowning in grief and anger and rage. Nura was there. She peeled her clothes off. Her body was decimated, covered in burn scars, disfigured. She crawled over me and whispered in my ear, *This is what you do.*

No.

Yes. And you think you can rule? You have destroyed everything you've ever touched.

Nura's scars beneath my hands.

Tisaanah's scars.

Atraclius's warped, bloody glasses.

Everything you've ever loved.

The burning butterfly. Tisaanah's face as she waved to me, the Towers' doors closing over her goodbye.

No.

No.

I was *here*. Here, in the Scar. Fighting for the title of Arch Commandant. Fighting for everything.

Magic was so thick in the air that it burned my eyes, my skin. Nura's shields against the fire that surrounded us were beginning to wear down — her cheeks were red and slick with sweat, little strands of her hair singed. If I had imagined the end of the world, I might have thought it would look something like this, with every familiar grounding force of the earth stripped away in favor of nothing but wild, uncontrolled destruction.

I lunged, she dodged, I pivoted. Struck, just enough for her to fall. But I was unstable — she brought us both down. She was on top of me, her knife clutched in one hand and magic crackling at the other. My staff flew from my grasp. I could

have called it back to me with a single thread of magic. I didn't. Just as Nura didn't use her knife. We were far past the point of steel. Past pretending that those weapons mattered.

My own memories were unraveling, Nura's magic tearing apart the fabric of my mind, but through nothing but force of will I staved her off. Her eyes were bright and glistening.

I was still holding back.

We both knew it.

She tugged on an old memory, one that made us both wince. A lonely little girl and an ill-tempered little boy, hiding from a party. *I'll just call you Max.*

"I can win," I said. "You know that I will."

"Then do it," she ground out, through clenched teeth.

Sammerin's warning rang out in the back of my head.

"I don't want to win that way," I said. The world had fallen away. There was nothing around us but our magic, and the magic of the Scar. "Yield, and this is done."

It was like talking to the winds of a hurricane. I didn't know why I bothered. There was only the faintest glimmer of hesitation on her face. Then raw fury drowned any remaining remnants of our old fond memories.

"No," she whispered.

And then the world fell apart.

I didn't have a name for what she did, then. My head felt like it had been split like an egg, memories pouring out like runny yolk. I couldn't see, couldn't breathe. Through the fog and the pain, I saw Nura's blood running down her arm. Saw a crushed glass bottle in her hand.

I knew Nura's magic. She was powerful. But this — this was something else. This was worse. How far had she made it with her experimentations in deep magics? It occurred to me that I'd never asked.

A certainty snapped into place. Seconds and I would be gone.

I saw death standing there, waiting. *I've been expecting you for so long*, it whispered. *Are you finally here?*

Not this time, I replied.

I opened my second eyelids.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE



My knuckles were white. I saw the whole Scar light up with crimson light, as if it were a wound split open, and my heart stopped.

I knew what I was seeing. And beyond that, I could *feel* it — Max’s deepest magic, the strange kind that called to the foreign powers that lived within me, too.

Sammerin hissed a curse beneath his breath. “I told him not to.”

“He *had* to,” I murmured.

Yet, a part of me was relieved. I know how powerful Max’s magic was. Nura was good, but she wasn’t *that* good. If Max had resorted to this, it meant he was desperate, yes. But it also meant he would win. He’d *have* to win.

But then, I felt something in the air shift.

There was no other way to describe it — it was like a sound I couldn’t hear was scratching the insides of my ears, vibrating and roiling within my bones. Every hair on my arms stood up. The contents of my stomach all soured at once, and I staggered back from the rail, pressing the back of my hand to my mouth.

Beneath it all, there was something more. A certain sick, slithering familiarity.

Sammerin gave me an odd look. “What’s wrong?”

The Syrizen’s stances went weak, then rigid. Even Anserra stumbled, her hands tightening around her spear. “What *is*

that?” she muttered.

Ariadnea turned her face to me. “You feel it too,” she said, and I nodded.

Dread clenched in my stomach.

I rushed to the railing and peered over. I couldn’t see anything but flickering orange light and the mist of the Scar’s magic. But a dark pressure was building, building, building in the back of my mind.

“Something is wrong,” I muttered. “I’m going down—”

I turned to Sammerin and froze.

He was looking past me, a strange expression on his face.

“Ariadnea,” he said, quietly.

I turned.

The Syrizen were standing crooked, like marionettes held by weak strings — so different than their perpetual rigid grace. It took me a moment to see what Sammerin did: that the delicate veins beneath their skin, clustering around the scars in their eye sockets, had become a familiar shade of black.

I noticed this only for a split second, before Ariadnea’s spear lit up, and she lunged for Sammerin.

CHAPTER EIGHTY



I had made a terrible mistake.

I didn't notice, at first, overwhelmed by the power that stormed through me. My body unraveled. I was everywhere and nowhere at once. The flames around us roared and billowed, the heat cracking the ground beneath us.

The force of it was enough to make Nura let out a gasp and leap backwards. Her magic was severed, like a string sliced with a rusty blade. I tried to rein in the power of it, but it was so much more than I had anticipated. Another burst, and Nura was slammed against the rock wall. She dropped to her knees, then fell to the ground in a heap, unmoving.

Dread.

One thought cut through my mind: *I didn't want to kill her.*

I didn't know if I had. I barely thought about my victory. I had won, after all. She had stopped fighting.

This realization didn't even have time to settle.

I felt raw power tear through me, yes. I felt fire and magic and strength. But I felt something else, too. A presence that had been lurking, waiting for its opportunity to step inside.

And I had just opened the door.

Something in the air shifted violently, all at once, like the world was suddenly inverted. I felt sick. I felt *wrong*.

I tried to close my eyelids — close myself off from this soured piece of magic — but it was running too hot, too fast.

Something beyond me, stronger than me, was pushing it forward. If the magic was water, then this felt like a monster had reached up from the murky depths, grabbed my ankle, and yanked me under.

One second, I was about to declare victory. The next, I was drowning.

There you are, a voice whispered, just as I lost my grip on the world.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE



Ariadnea charged towards Sammerin. Her movements were odd and choppy, but just as skilled. A split second, and that spear would have been buried in Sammerin's chest. But he was fast, too. His hands went up, and Ariadnea's body locked, twitching and fighting against his magic.

“Ariadnea...” The tone of his voice alone said everything we were both thinking — *what the hell is wrong with you?*

Neither of us had time to ruminate on that question.

The others lunged for us.

Sammerin reacted fast. But there were five of them, too many for his magic alone to stop all at once. Two dove for me. Sammerin flung his magic out to them, made them stumble just long enough for me to evade.

On instinct, I tried to use my own magic, but it sputtered weakly at my fingertips. Useless.

The tip of Anserra's spear sliced my arm. I dodged clumsily, then grabbed Ariadnea's weapon, which she still clutched with hands locked-up from Sammerin's paralysis.

Sammerin's attention faltered as another Syrizen struck him.

Shit.

I dodged another blow and gave the spear a powerful tug. Ariadnea released it just in time for me to swing it back around, use it to block Anserra's strike. But I was off-balance.

I stumbled. My back hit the ground. Anserra fell over me, blocked only by the spear braced in my hands.

She was so close now that I could see in vivid detail the dark veins around her eyes. Gods, had they spread further even in these last seconds?

“Who are you?” I demanded.

Because I knew, implicitly, that this was not Anserra. Not anymore.

She did not answer. Her face remained blank. Instead her body lurched, hand reaching for the knife at her hip — preparing to stab my unprotected midsection. But a hundred sparring sessions with Nura had taught me how to respond to such a move. I countered, throwing my weight over her. A second later, and our positions were reversed.

She thrust.

I grabbed her wrist.

It could have gone either way as we pushed against each other.

Then I tore the knife from her. Still expressionless, she moved to strike again, but I was faster. My blade met her throat, opening a river of blood down the front of her black jacket.

Anserra’s body went limp all at once, and for a moment, expression flooded back over her face, doll-like stillness giving way to a twisted gasp of dismay. She fell over me.

I acted next on nothing more than instinct.

I had no magic of my own. But I had managed to take it from Irene, and from Max — even from Stratagram ink. The Syrizen drew from deep levels, just as I did. Could I steal Anserra’s magic, too? I didn’t know. It was a ridiculous guess.

Still, it was the only one I had.

I sliced my hand, and pressed it to the wound of Anserra’s opened throat.

She let out a sickening, gargling moan. Her magic flooded me. It *hurt*, burning my veins. She went slack. When I pulled my hand away, black rot consumed her throat...and I had magic, even if only a fragment stolen from someone else's life.

I had no time to be disgusted.

I pushed her off of me, grabbed the spear, and leapt to my feet. Another Syrizen was lunging for me, and I whirled just quickly enough to block her with Anserra's spear. With considerable effort, I forced my magic through it. Il'Sahaj always took my magic beautifully, but between the unfamiliar weapon and the unfamiliar magic, this was clumsy and sluggish. Worse, I rarely fought with spears. My body still moved as if wielding a sword, and the length and weight of the weapon was awkward.

Pain lit my abdomen. I was bleeding. I stumbled. Then countered. Despite my poor fighting, I managed to land a strike. Black and red, blood and rot, bloomed over the Syrizen's side. She staggered, and I yanked her closer. Grabbed her face with my open hand. Tried and failed to ignore the sound she made when her expression came back, only for a second before decay overtook her face, and her magic flooded into me.

She fell. I whirled towards Sammerin. He had grabbed a dagger, which he was now yanking out of the limp body of one of the Syrizen. Ariadnea was the only one left, frozen mid-strike, fighting against the hold of his magic.

He turned to her, then hesitated. His magic faltered, just long enough to leave her an opening to attack.

I didn't think. My spear was through her back before her blow landed.

She fell.

The spear made a sickening sound as I pulled it out of the limp body, one that I barely heard over the staticky ringing in my ears. Sammerin slowly rose to his feet, his gaze lingering on Ariadnea's lifeless face, then rising to meet mine.

I had never seen Sammerin look outright frightened before. Once, Max had told me that during the war, he would gauge whether they were really in trouble by the expression on Sammerin's face. If Sammerin looked panicked, he'd told me, that's how he knew they were really in trouble.

We were really in trouble.

"I'm going down," I said.

"We'll cover each other," Sammerin replied, but I shook my head.

"No. Go to the surface."

His eyebrows lurched. "You can't go down there alone."

"We do not have time to argue about this."

In the distance, I could hear footsteps on the stairs. More Syrizen? They could be coming for us.

Frustration flickered across Sammerin's face. "You can barely use your magic. You can't go down there alone."

"We cannot let this become another Sarlazai," I shot back. "We're too close to the Towers. And the city. And..." My hand reached into my pocket, closing around the two feathers there. I hesitated.

I did not believe that Ishqa had lied to us. Still, that didn't mean I trusted him, or believed that he could help us. But I did know that the magic I felt in the air, the magic that had tainted the blood of the Syrizen, was different. Inhuman. Perhaps the very magic he had warned us of.

I thrust the feathers into Sammerin's palm.

"If I do not come right back, burn these," I said, and he shot me a perplexed look.

"Is this...?" And when I nodded, he let out air through his teeth. I thought he might question the decision, but he nodded grimly.

"Tell Filias and Serel," I choked out. "Tell him to get them ready to leave."

I had made such a mistake, bringing them here. Serving them up to be pawns in yet another country's wars. Stupid of me. Naive.

"I will," Sammerin said.

"And protect yourself."

"I will."

My eyes burned. "I'm sorry, Sammerin."

There was no time for me to be sorry. But I was, anyway. I wanted to tell him how sorry I was, for tearing him away from what he had built — for tearing all of the refugees away from the tentative peace they had created.

Sammerin just shook his head.

"Creating is harder than destroying. In the end it's always worth it."

Gods. When Sammerin said things, he said them like a promise. I nodded, closed my eyes until they stopped stinging. When I opened them again, I cleared away everything but focus.

"Go," I said. "Quickly."

I was already turning away by the time the words were out of my mouth. I did not know how long the energy I stole from the fallen Syrizen would last — and Max was running out of time.

I ran down the stairs. The fog grew thicker, the dense feeling in the air stronger and more painful as I descended. It built inside of me, too, a knot growing in the pit of my stomach.

I wondered if this is how Max had felt as he ran down the halls of Esmaris's estate, when he came back for me.

He had always come back for me. Just as I would always come for him.

I just had to be fast enough.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO



Hello.

This was not Reshaye.

It slithered through my head the same way, and had the same inhuman, unmarked quality. But this was a different voice. This connection was more chaotic, more tenuous. I could feel the ragged edges of the thing that was speaking to me, like a silhouette that couldn't quite step into focus. It was more real than Reshaye. More alive. And its hands were wrapped around my throat, squeezing, squeezing.

The world had fallen away. I was somewhere different now, somewhere I had only caught glimpses of during the worst of my Reshaye-induced fever dreams. A dead plain, and a starry sky. In a physical world that seemed very far away, I understood that my body was still there, time suspended, my knees on the stone ground of the Scar, surrounded by fire.

This place? This was different. Deeper than the physical world. And the voice had dragged me here.

Where are they? it asked.

Who are you? I demanded.

Where are they? Where is she?

She? Tisaanah? Nura? With my confusion, their faces shot through my mind, and the presence grabbed the images.

It paused at Tisaanah's face. Familiarity.

I didn't like that. Not one bit.

Who are you? I repeated.

I am the blood of the people that yours have stolen, the voice said. And I'm reclaiming what has been taken from me.

Focus.

If I tried very hard, I could solidify the world — or, the not-world — around me enough to see it as a physical place. If I focused, I could see the shadow as something resembling a person. My magic snaked out towards it.

The images split my vision, like a crack of lightning lighting up the sky for a fractured second at a time. A man's face, startled and angry, gone too quickly for me to recognize it. Copper gates covered in crawling vines. Overflowing bookshelves and glimpses of writing I did not recognize.

All there and gone in less than a second.

The presence flickered, like it had been struck, then charged towards me with renewed rage.

I sense her in you. In your blood and in your magic. And I will not abandon her; nor any of the others your people have taken from me. Humans are past the point of earning our forgiveness. You had mercy once and squandered it. Now I see that you have never deserved it.

Another avalanche of images. This time of bodies strewn in swampy forest. Dead faces beneath the water. A woman's face that I did not recognize, with sad violet eyes. The images merged and tangled with those of my own, the aftermath of Sarlazai, my family's burnt corpses. Tisaanah's mismatched gaze.

All at once, I realized.

I realized why this magic felt so unfamiliar, so inhuman.

I realized why I had been dragged here, the moment I opened that passageway between me and the deepest levels of magic.

You're Fey, I said. You're the Fey king.

Now I understood. The Fey that Nura held—the ones that she was trying to make into the next Reshaye—

She had created it. She had *created* the war she was trying so hard to stop.

We don't want a war with you, I said. Your people were taken by one human. One misguided human who doesn't deserve the power that she had. But her reign is over. And I swear to you that I'll return the people she took from you.

You are lying to me.

I never lie. It's a personal flaw.

A humorless chuckle shivered up my spine. *You do not know that you lie. But it is a lie, nonetheless. And even if it is not, I am past the point of trusting any word that comes from your fickle mortal minds. And how easy it has been, to turn you against each other. Humans are weak and selfish, easily-divided. My people were that way, once. Too busy squabbling over petty issues of pride to innovate, to fulfill our potential. Not anymore.*

He would not stop. He would kill for Reshaye. He would kill Tisaanah for it, and anyone else who stood in his way. He would ravage Ara, and maybe we would deserve it.

But I wouldn't let it happen.

Listen to me. My magic grabbed for his. We tangled, equally matched. He was very far away. I could feel that. The distance was the only thing keeping him from overpowering me.

A war between our peoples would be bloodier than either of us are prepared for, I said. I don't support this, and I never will. We can still stop this from happening. I will return your people to you. We will never hurt you again. I swear it.

Funny, how an hour ago, I was begging Nura for the exact same consideration.

You're right about humans, I said. So much about us is vile. But we also have the potential to be better. Give us that chance.

The presence paused in consideration.

But then the sky lit up. Both of us stopped, our attention snapping to this new intrusion: a burning thread of magic drawing from this deep, deep level.

My blood went cold. I recognized it immediately.

Tisaanah.

The king's focus on her was all-consuming. He reached out for that thread, as if examining it, pushing further. And it was only then that I realized there was something else intertwined in it, too. It was a faint little fragment of magic, so weak that I wouldn't have seen it if I wasn't looking. But once I did, I knew it. Of course I did, because once it was a part of me, too.

The king's desire was ravenous. He wanted her. He wanted *Reshaye*.

It was only a split second of distraction. Still too much. I lost my grip on the magic above, my resistance slipping. It was the only opening he needed. He forced his way through the door.

I heard the voice whisper, closer than before,

I have already given you enough chances.

My eyes snapped open. Before me was Tisaanah, emerging from the flames.

But when I stepped forward, my body was not my own.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE

TISAANAH



I ran down the stairs, cutting through bodies like they were nothing. Something in the air had shifted, the magic growing sicker and sicker. The Syrizen threw themselves at me. When one fell, another was two steps behind. If I'd had time to think about my situation, I would have been amazed I made it this far alive — though perhaps that was because the Syrizen, at least near the end, were not trying to kill me at all. At one point, a particularly strong one overpowered me. I cringed in anticipation of a blow, but it didn't come. Instead, she wrapped her arms around me and began to drag me away, and only made it a few steps before my dagger twisted in her gut, her flesh rotting.

No, they weren't trying to kill me. They were trying to *take* me.

I had no time to consider what that meant. I fought my way down the stairs, slipping on blood as stone became rougher and more uneven, as the air grew thicker and darker, as it grew harder and harder to see through the flame-dyed fog. My stolen magic was screaming at me, but I wasn't sure what it was saying.

And somewhere, far beneath all that noise, I might have thought I heard the rumblings of a familiar, wordless whisper.

I staggered down the bottom of the stairs, taking out one Syrizen, then two, and then I was able to run a few steps without being attacked. Perhaps I had killed them all. Perhaps I had simply outrun them.

Through the mist, I saw a familiar silhouette.

Max was standing there, his back to me, surrounded by flames. He wasn't moving. Wasn't fighting. I didn't see Nura. He was just standing there.

Something was wrong. So wrong.

"Max." My voice barely seemed to reach the air. The magic in it swallowed the sound of his name.

He turned around.

And I suppressed a gasp of horror. The magic that I'd maintained at my fingertips fell away in shock.

It wasn't him. I knew it immediately. I knew everything about Max, knew every pattern of his movements, and even the turn alone was enough to reek of *wrong*-ness. The way he looked at me was distant and empty. Black veins surrounded his eyes, the corners of his mouth. They peeked out from beneath his sleeve, too, on the insides of his wrists, darker than I had ever seen them before.

And yet, despite his lack of expression, I knew there was something there. Something *behind* him.

We had made an awful miscalculation. We had thought we could play with this magic, build this connection to the world below, and outrun the consequences.

At the worst possible time, it had caught up to us.

I approached, slowly. The air was so hot that my skin stung. Max did not move. His eyes, dark, fully open, looked past me.

"Max," I murmured.

He had to be in there, still. He had to be.

I have been looking for you.

I felt something reaching towards me. Something from within him — from within the magic that we both drank from, right now.

I have been looking for you, the presence whispered again.

A familiar voice inside of me stirred. A voice that I had thought was gone forever.

I barely breathed. I took another step—

—Only to nearly fall to my knees. The floor shook violently, the stone rumbling. Deep fissures opened in the walls, releasing rivers of glowing mist. Boulders tumbled down the ravine edges.

The Scar was collapsing.

I pressed my hands to the ground, threw all of my magic into stabilizing it. But my magic, stolen or not, was not built for such things. Stone didn't want to listen to me. Fire bit my cheeks. The floor was so hot that my palms burned.

I lifted my eyes, and my mouth went dry.

I thought they were just shadows, at first, slipping from between the openings in the rocks. But they were moving too strangely. It took a moment for my mind to carve out the right shapes — human, but different. Long, wrong-way limbs. Intangible forms. And faceless heads. Monsters. Like the one that had attacked us at the cottage. They crawled up the walls, reaching for the surface.

I tried to pull them back with my magic, but the second I let my attention waver, the walls began to crumble faster. Distantly, I heard footsteps behind me. The Syrizen?

And all this, while Max — not Max — paced towards me.

With every step, the sharp pain at the back of my head grew stronger. That familiar nagging whisper grew louder.

{Let me go.}

I thought I imagined it at first.

Reshaye?

{Let me go!}

“It is you,” Max said, so quietly, so calmly, despite the chaos that rained down around us. “I knew you were here.”

I couldn't speak. My magic demanded total focus. With one weak scrap of strength, I threw up a shield to keep him from me. His magic tore through it easily. He never broke his gaze from mine. Those eyes, gods, they were not Max's. They were strange and foreign. They were inhuman.

"Aefe," he murmured, "do you remember? Or have they taken your memories from you, too?"

{Aefe?}

The name speared me. And all at once, something inside of me was torn open. I felt hands reach inside my mind, pull my thoughts apart. Max's hands grabbed me. Pain bloomed over the back of my skull as it cracked against the stone wall. I barely felt it. Not with that unfamiliar magic tearing apart my mind.

Reshaye screamed, and I screamed, and our voices mingled somewhere between the physical and spiritual worlds.

{Let me die!} Reshaye wailed. *{I was dead! Let me go!}*

"You were never dead, Aefe."

One hand moved to my cheek, cradling it. His face was so close to mine that our noses nearly brushed. His palm was hot against my face, and when it pressed to my temple, his magic surged further into my mind.

The pain was unbearable. So intense I could barely breathe.

And in that moment, several worlds collided. Suddenly I was no longer in the Scar, looking into Max's familiar and unfamiliar face. I was looking, too, into a face I had never seen before, a man with dark copper hair and moss-green eyes, and pointed ears peeking through the wave of his hair.

And I was looking up, at a starry sky that I recognized as the world beneath this one, the deepest level of magic. I was looking at all the bleeding threads of magic that connected us — me, Max, Reshaye. And so many more streaks, a hundred more, tethered to this — this *thing* that held Max.

{Why do you call me that?} Reshaye whispered.

I saw Max. But I also saw this man who stood behind him, thousands of miles away and yet also *here*, his presence floating up from beneath the surface of magic like blood into water. “*Aefe*,” he whispered. “*That is your name.*”

{I do not know that name.}

A flicker of sadness. A strangely human emotion. *Yes, you do.*

The betrayal. Blond hair flowing in the wind.

Golden grass beneath my fingertips.

The warmth of an embrace, the scent of skin. The feeling of safety.

You do know, Aefe.

Aefe. The feeling of hatred — hating the way he said that name. Hating it and loving it. Knowing this person. Trusting them. Mourning them. Perhaps loving them.

You just do not remember.

Tenderness shifted to ice-cold. The threads of magic linking us went dark and malevolent. The copper-haired man’s face hardened in anger.

You do not remember because of all they did to you. But I have come to take you home.

{I have no home,} Reshaye whispered, but the words were barely formed before Max’s hands were at the sides of my face — an ugly mimicry of our goodbye — and the pain split me in two.

As he set to work ripping Reshaye from my mind.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FOUR



The world was unraveling. I threw every bit of myself, every scrap of magic, every remaining drop of willpower, into fighting it. My flames still roared, out of control. With what little strength I had left, I tried to whisper to them enough to keep them from devouring us all. But almost all of my magic was being siphoned off by this presence that had taken hold inside of me. I couldn't close myself off from the deepest level of magic — as if something had been wedged inside the door.

Tisaanah was fighting him, albeit weakly, her eyes closed, mouth twisted in a soundless scream of pain. The king reached deep into her mind. Searching. Slicing.

Stop, stop, stop—

It was like slamming my fists against a sheet of glass.

Tisaanah's eyelids fluttered. When they opened again, they flicked to me and held there, searching mine, bright with tears.

"He has roots," she choked out. "Everywhere, Max. He is connected to this world everywhere."

She could barely form the words.

The horrible realization hit me. In the world beneath this one, the world where I was trapped, I looked up at the sky — at strings of light lashed from star to star.

I realized what I was looking at.

Not stars.

They were *him*. Holes he had torn into the boundaries between magics. The little threads he had planted to draw himself to Ara.

And the biggest tear of all was within me. *I* was the opening that he was using to claw his way into this world.

Magic collided with magic, and Tisaanah's silent scream became a piercing one. I felt her magic withering. I felt him hacking away at the power that still was hidden, deep and weak, within her. Whatever was left beyond it was barely magic at all. And she was stretched so thin, going in so many different directions at once.

If he didn't stop, he would kill her.

You've destroyed everything you've ever loved.

Of course it was Nura's voice, of all things, that floated through my mind, then. Maybe under any other circumstance, I would have been angry that we were here. All of this was a result of selfishness and pettiness and stupid, Ascended-damned human selfishness.

But now, I only could think of one certainty.

Tisaanah needed to close it off — this bleeding wound within me. She could do it, perhaps, under normal circumstances. Not now, with her magic so far gone.

“Caduan.”

The voice made the king stop short.

My face turned. I felt the king's recognition, and his anger. I felt the distant, distant echoes of Reshaye's hurt.

Ishqa stood there. He had wings, now, which were tucked in close to his back, golden feathers bathed in the scarlet light of the flames. His white robes were singed. A large sword was in his hands, steel reflecting the licks of fire.

“Ishqa.” I heard the word come from my lips. One of my hands still pressed Tisaanah to the wall, where she slackened, half-conscious. “Why are you here?”

He wasn't speaking Aran. Still, I felt the words' meaning in the magic that we shared.

"This is not the way," Ishqa said. "You are making a mistake. You will only discard more lives if you do this."

Hatred spiked through me.

"How many lives have already been sacrificed because of the choices you made?"

"Too many, Caduan. Do you think I do not know that?" Ishqa stepped forward, cautiously. "It is not too late to turn around."

I felt an expression twitch in the muscles of my face — a sneer at my lip. "I am not like you. I will not leave behind the people of mine that the humans have stolen. And I will not leave her."

"Aefe is gone, Caduan. She has been gone for centuries. This thing is not her."

"It's more convenient to believe that," my voice said. "But I have had enough of leaving my blood behind. The humans have proven who they are. They have proven that they will never stop."

"You are trying to cure your *loneliness*."

"I am trying to right the wrongs that *you* have brought upon our people." Anger flooded me, and I could feel the king's grip on me weakening, as if knocked off-kilter by the sheer force of his own rage. He whirled to Ishqa, my feet pacing forward. "Perhaps to you it was always worth sacrificing some meaningless lives in the name of your petty political games. But that is not the world I have built. Our people deserve to know that *any one* of their lives are worth burning down humanity."

"You want her because of what she is. Because of the power she offers."

"I am not *you*," I spat.

And there was no time to think, no time to move, as I whirled around, pressed my hand to Tisaanah's temple, and, in

one violent burst, ripped Reshaye out of her mind.

Tisaanah screamed. Her knees buckled. The pain overtook me, too — overtook even the presence within my mind. The power it had taken to do that exhausted all of us.

There it was. An opening. Seconds. Not even.

I had no time to think. I dove for it.

My magic roared past his. Every flame in the Scar suddenly brightened, like the sun had emerged from behind a cloud.

I slid my hand over the blade still clutched in Tisaanah's shaking hand, then pried it from her grasp and did the same to hers. Her head lolled, then weakly lifted to look at me. She was bleeding magic, bleeding life. But her eyes told me she knew what I was asking her to do.

Her eyes widened. "No."

"Cut it out," I choked out.

She shook her head. "*No.*"

I felt the presence within me collect itself. Start to rise, start to reach for power again.

We had no time to argue. I pressed my palm to hers, our blood smearing together.

"Do it, Tisaanah. Take my magic and do it."

Her eyes glistened with tears, reflecting flecks of fire. My fingers closed around her hand, knuckles whitened.

"*Now,*" I choked out.

Just as I felt the fey king diving for the connection between us again.

Just as Tisaanah pressed her other hand to my cheek and whispered, "He got the parrot to match the coat."

If I had control over my own body, I would have thrown back my head and laughed. *Who the fuck even does that?*

Tisaanah's mouth formed, "I love you."

The passageway opened between us.
And I gave her all of it. All of my magic.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FIVE



It happened so quickly.

I reached deeper into Max. Deep enough to see all of the connections between us, between him and the Fey, all of the threads of corrupted magic that were flooding up from the deeper levels beneath. It was there, far inside of him, like an open wound gushing infection.

This was it. This was how the Fey king was reaching him — how he was reaching Ara. I was still bleeding, too, where Reshaye had been carved out of the deepest recesses of my mind. A crippling wound. Maybe a deadly one.

But Max's magic surged through me, strong enough to power me. Even though I could feel myself consuming it, consuming *him*, drawing upon the soul-deep connection between us.

I Wielded all of that power.

The presence, the one that lingered between all of us, lunged for me. Too slow — only barely. I yanked the passage closed just in time, even though I felt it grab me the same way I had once felt Esmaris's dying grip on my hair.

And in the last seconds, I could have sworn I saw a face. A woman's face, with pointed ears and tan skin, and deep violet eyes. She reached out only for a moment, before she, too, was gone.

Distantly, I felt Max's agony. And yet, also, I felt his determination, a wordless encouragement.

Gods, live, Max. Live, live, live.

I begged it of him. Begged it, as I buried deeper into his mind, tangled up in his memories, in his emotions, in all of the infected threads where the Fey king had tied himself to him.

Please, live.

I drew up the last of my, his, *our* power.

And I severed all of those infected threads.

Max's memories rained down over me like shattered glass.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SIX



Pain.

The scent of blood. The thickness of magic in the air. The floor was shaking. I was in Sarlazai. I was in my family home. I was here, in the Scar.

Tisaanah.

I forced my eyes open, and my second eyelids closed. The world was numb and blurry. My mind was broken.

Tisaanah.

There was a shard. I had to force the pieces together. Even then there was so much missing.

I turned my head, and saw her face pressed against the ground, unfurling mist between us. A beautiful girl, with patches of colorless and tan skin, one silver eye and one green, staring right through me. One tear falling to the ground.

Panic.

Was she dead? She looked as if she could be. And that would be— that would be—

No. No, she was not dead. Her fingers were reaching for me, weakly. And mine, of their own accord, reached back.

But before they could touch, she was lifted off the ground. I managed to look up. There was a man there — or... not a man, not human. He had wings and pointed ears.

I struggled to find the piece of my mind that knew him.

“Can you move?” he was saying. “We need to leave. Now.”

Leave? To go where? I didn't even know where we were. Behind the winged man, shadows poured from fissures in the wall. They took the shape of humans, though their forms were broken and unraveling.

“I cannot carry you both,” the winged man said, more urgently. “Get up.”

My eyes fell back to him. To Tisaanah in his arms.

“Go.”

Forming the word took all of my energy.

The man hesitated. Then looked over his shoulder, at the approaching shadows.

“Go,” I said again.

“I will come back,” he said. “Try to get to the surface.”

I wasn't even entirely sure which surface he was talking about. Not that it mattered. I nodded all the same.

The man's wings spread wide, and then he was launching into the darkness above. The shadows scattered, as if afraid of him, before righting themselves and turning faceless heads towards me.

I tried and failed, twice, to push myself to my hands and knees. The floor seemed to be tilting. The walls quaked and trembled. Stones tumbled down.

I succeeded in rising to my knees, then my feet, staggering forward.

I only made it three paces.

Something yanked me back. I fell in a heap.

And then a grey-eyed woman with silver braided hair leaned over me. There was blood on her face and hatred in her eyes.

Nura.

That name came to me fast.

My hand closed around the dagger on the ground. My body knew the movements, but my muscles wouldn't cooperate. She disarmed me in seconds. The blade went sliding across the floor.

More and more stones fell. The ravine was collapsing.

And Nura's eyes never left mine.

Figures, that this is how it would end.

The thought floated through my broken mind. And maybe it was *because* all of those individual pieces were lost that the culmination seemed suddenly so inevitable. A thousand moments leading here, to this place, this act. A million twisted pathways that all arrive at this destination.

Is this what they call fate? Me and her, destroying each other?

"You don't get to run away, Max," she said. "Not this time."

The rumbles of shifting stone swallowed her words. Her face was close to mine.

"You should have killed me," she whispered. "I warned you about that bleeding heart."

The walls collapsed.

And then, darkness.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SEVEN



Aefe

Reshaye

Aefe

Sound came first. The sound of birds. Then, the rustle of a breeze through leaves. The distant click of footsteps on a polished floor. All things that perhaps I knew once.

Then, touch. The soft sensation of cushions beneath me, of smooth fabric on aching skin. Smell. The clean scent of damp earth, of distant flowers. Of strong tea. Of lilies. How did I know it was lilies?

I opened my eyes.

I stared at a ceiling formed of intricate patterns crafted in copper, vines and moss twining around them. Those patterns framed glass, which revealed a churning grey sky.

I twitched my fingers.

My fingers.

I expected to feel someone else, here — someone else in this body who would fight me for control or linger just out of reach.

But I was met with nothing but silence. My mind was cavernous, empty, lonely. There was no one here but me.

“Aefe.”

Warm fingertips brushed my hand, and on instinct, I yanked it away. I sat up, too fast, making my head spin and stomach churn.

“You are safe,” the voice murmured.

You are safe. I heard it in Tisaanah’s voice, in her thoughts, within the mind we had once shared. My mind was empty, now.

I turned, a snarl at my lips, already lunging out of the bed. I collided with a figure and the two of us were on the ground, me crawling over him, his hands gripping my shoulders, before I even had a moment to look at him.

“It’s me, Aefe.”

“Do not call me that,” I snarled.

And then I looked at him, and stopped.

I did know him. Even though I didn’t understand how. He was a ghost from a life I no longer remembered. Someone else’s life, not my own. It was always someone else’s life. He had a sharp, angular face, a smattering of freckles across his cheeks, auburn hair that waved over his forehead. A copper crown, formed in the shape of a stag’s horns, sat upon his head. But it was his eyes that froze me. A familiar mossy green, and now, they were looking at me as if they saw me. As if they *knew* me.

I did not like it. I did not want to be seen.

I hissed and leapt away, staggering backwards until I fell against a wall. I was in a bedchamber — a fine one, from what I understood of such things. The tile was cold beneath my feet.

“Where am I?” I blurted out. “Who— what is this—”

I did not know how to word my question. I looked down at my splayed hands. They were not Tisaanah’s. They were not Maxantarius’s. They were not the withered hands of the man in the room of white and white.

The copper-haired man approached me slowly, carefully. I did not like the way he looked at me, as if I was something to

be examined, something to be understood. It was easier not to be understood.

“The body is yours,” he said, quietly. “Come. Look at it.”

“I have no body.”

“Look.”

He held out a hand, gesturing to a mirror on the other side of the room. I regarded it warily before stepping towards it.

What I saw within it made my heart clench, though I did not understand why.

A female Fey stood there, wearing a simple white shift. She had tan skin, and long deep-red hair, and a smattering of pearlescent purple across her cheeks. Her eyes were a dark violet. They were deep-set, and tired, and very afraid.

I stepped backwards.

“You recognize yourself,” the man said.

“I—”

I did not know how to answer the question. My head hurt. An image burst through my mind, an image of three beautiful people in a room of polished black stone. An image of a face in a mirror, a face that looked like this one.

“It’s alright,” the man said, gently. “You have time.”

I looked down at my hands again. My gaze trailed up, to my arms, and the expanse of smooth tan skin there. Unmarked skin. I did not understand why something about that seemed... wrong.

Then I turned my hand, and saw black ink tattooed on my inner wrist. Three symbols, swirls with varying contents. I knew they were words, but I could not understand them. Yet the sight of them hurt. I blinked, and thought of a sheet of black stone reaching towards the sky, covered in symbols just like this.

“The body is a recreation of yours,” the man said, quietly. “But only a recreation. You had tattoos, once. Telling your

story. You have already lived so many lives. It seemed wrong for you to start with none.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. Then I dropped my hand and turned to him.

“Where is this place?” I said.

The corners of his mouth lifted. “Let me show you.”



HE LED me down beautiful hallways of more gold and copper and glass ceilings, plants spilling everywhere. Other Fey passed us in the hall, dressed in inordinately complicated clothing. They cast me strange looks, and stopped to bow to Caduan as we passed.

At last, we reached the end of a hallway and stepped through a set of open glass doors, onto a balcony. The sun was bright. I had to squint. My head hurt. A breeze sent goosebumps to the surface of my skin. I was not accustomed to being so in-tuned with a body’s sensitivities. Is this how humans always felt, when they had flesh to themselves?

“This,” Caduan said, “is Ela’Dar. The One House.”

His voice changed, somewhat, when he said it. I did hear that, even if I still did not understand the nuances of what the change meant. His gaze flicked to me, watching me closely as I stepped to the railing of the balcony and looked over. A city spread out before me. It sprawled far enough to fill my vision, beautiful copper buildings intertwining with greenery. All of this was built upon the side of a mountain, the bronze of the buildings and green of the forest and slate grey of stone all pieced together, each complementing each other. There were little houses in the distance, and towering, vine-wrapped structures, and crowded roads and bridges that connected them all. In the distance, beyond the sheer drop of the slate cliffs, the calm blue-grey of the sea reached towards the horizon.

“Our world was very different,” Caduan said, quietly. “All those years ago. All of the Houses constantly fighting with

each other. When the House of Obsidian and the House of Wayward Winds went to war, it nearly destroyed the Fey race. Centuries of fragmented houses. Or no houses at all.” He was watching me. I could feel it, even though I would not look at him. “I united them. The only way we can thrive is if we do so together. And we have. All those broken pieces have been brought together for this. A unified Fey kingdom.”

My head hurt. My stomach churned.

“I do not understand why this matters to me.”

If Caduan was taken aback by this response, he did not show it. “I understand if it doesn’t, now. But I thought you might like to see your home.”

My gaze snapped to him.

Home. Home. Home.

How I had craved a home. How I had longed for one. In this place what a home was? It did not seem like what I would imagine. It seemed cold and loud and crowded. An overwhelming place to live, with a mind so cold and empty.

I looked to the city. Without my permission, memories collided. Burning cities and war. Unbearable pain. A room of white and white and white. The heartbreak of betrayal.

And then, anger.

The sudden flood of it was a relief. At last, something familiar. At last, something that filled the emptiness.

“You would never understand,” I said, through gritted teeth, “the vile things that were done to me.”

A cold silence.

“Trust me when I say that I do,” he said.

“No one came for me. For so many days.” I whirled to him. “Why? If you knew what I was, then why would you leave me?”

Pain flickered across his face.

“I tried,” he said. “I didn’t know you were alive, Aefe. And I could not find you. Not until I felt the shifts in magic. I felt you first, to the south, in Threll. And then in Ara.”

Then that pain hardened. I knew the emotion I saw there, too. An anger that reflected my own.

“They began taking us,” he said. “Shortly after that. Six fey disappeared, all while I was learning what had been done to you. I reclaimed them, but only one has survived. And what they did to you... hundreds of years of it...”

His words grew clumsy. It seemed strange, for him to speak that way. He did not seem the type to lose his grip on words, but he stopped, looked away. Then turned back to me.

“The humans thrived for so long because we allowed them to. Once, lives were only worth as much as the power of their House. But now, we are one kingdom. Every Fey life is worth it. Humans had already slaughtered hundreds of our people, long ago. They do not get to take a single life more. Not one.” A sneer formed over his nose. “I will never fail to fight for my people ever again. The world will be better off when they are gone.”

Silence. The intensity of his words seemed at odds with the gentle breeze through the leaves. Caduan looked at me, and his gaze slipped through mine like intertwining hands. Something in it, this time, made me pause. There were memories in that look. Memories that he had and I did not.

“I do not remember,” I said, quietly. “I do not remember any of it.”

His gaze softened. “I know.”

“Perhaps you are looking for Aefe. Perhaps she no longer exists.”

Another change in that stare, one that I did not have the language to understand.

“Perhaps,” he said. “But I am happy to have you here, nonetheless.”

Strange, I thought. I did not know how to describe the sensation in my chest. It was uncomfortable. Everything was uncomfortable.

“Even if I am only Reshaye?” I said.

Caduan’s hand fell over mine. This time, I did not pull away.

“Even then,” he said.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-EIGHT



Reality slipped through my fingers like falling sand. I could only catch grains of it at a time. Sometimes, I glimpsed a fragment of a memory — something big, something important — only for it to slip away like a ghost.

Consciousness swung in and out of my grasp. I awoke several times in a room so white it made my stomach turn, greeted by excruciating pain and people I didn't recognize leaning over me, looking perplexed. Those days passed in a blur. They were less vivid than the dreams. I experienced reality as if it were on the other side of foggy glass. But my dreams? My dreams were sharp, even if only in broken pieces.

I was searching for something. I was missing something. I didn't know what. In my dreams, I saw the girl with mismatched eyes and spotted skin. Sometimes, she was laughing or talking or buried in a book in utter concentration. Other times, she was leaning towards me, her face serious, her hands on either side of my cheeks.

Come back, Max. You have to come back.

And then she would lean over me, her white hair tickling my eyelids, brush her lips against my ear, and whisper something I couldn't hear.

Blink.

Making my way to consciousness was a battle every time. I fought it valiantly. But once I got there, I didn't know what to do with it. Reality shifted constantly. I was in the white room. I was in a crowded room in a little cottage. I was

crouched in a garden, surrounded by flowers, turning around as someone called my name. I was in a beautiful golden hallway, being jostled by bickering dark-haired children. I was in the same golden hallway, surrounded by dark-haired corpses.

Blink.

I was in the white room. A slender woman with braided silver hair stood there, arms crossed over her chest. “Check again,” she was saying, to other people here. “They cannot have fled that fast. They’re traitors, and we do not let traitors escape in wartime. Not alive.”

My brow furrowed. I strung together pieces of memories. Traitors. Tisaanah. The Scar. Nura — the woman in front of me was Nura. And she was trying to find Tisaanah. Trying to...

Panic leapt.

I tried to sit up, tried to say something. But the moment I moved, the word unraveled like burnt paper.

Blink.

I was walking down a long hallway. I was wearing a stiff jacket that didn’t fit me. The edges of my vision were fuzzy. My head ached. There were soldiers on either side of me. I turned my head. Two behind.

I looked down. Chains shackled my hands together. I turned my wrists and saw circular symbols tattooed on the insides of my wrists, black ink over dark veins. *Stratagrams*. The word leapt to the back of my mind with satisfying certainty. I wished my mind would produce something more useful.

“Where are we going?” I asked. The sound of my own voice surprised me. It seemed to surprise the guard beside me, too. He looked at me and opened his mouth.

Blink.

I was standing in a circular room. Hundreds and hundreds of eyes looked upon me. The light shining down on me was so

blinding that I couldn't make out their faces, only silhouettes.

The woman with braided hair was in front of me, facing them. Her voice was loud, echoing off of high ceilings, so powerful it reached even the people crowded into the back of the room.

“We face an enemy more powerful than any of us have ever imagined,” she was saying. “The Fey are monsters. And Maxantarius Farlione sold his own people out to them. We will find Tisaanah Vytezic and her fellow traitors. But today, we are able to find one shred of justice.”

Tisaanah Vytezic. The name shook something loose.

The woman turned to me.

“We should have known,” she said, “what Farlione was capable of, after he slaughtered so many innocents in the battle of Sarlazai. But so often, we do not see the ugly truth of people until it is too late.”

Sarlazai. Fire. Corpses. Decimated buildings. Blink. When I opened my eyes, I was shaken. Did *I* do that?

My knuckles were white.

Wait, I wanted to say. But I wasn't sure what I would say. I remembered so little. Perhaps I was guilty of what she accused me of.

The woman's voice cut through the air again.

“On seventy-two charges of murder, for the Syrizen killed in the battle of the Scar and the civilians killed in the collapse of the towers, we find Maxantarius Farlione guilty.”

Wait—

“On the charge of high treason, for inviting the Fey into the country of Ara, and undermining his own people in a war the likes of which we have never seen, we find Maxantarius Farlione guilty.”

No — that wasn't right. Something was very, very wrong. I just didn't have the words to describe what.

The woman with braided hair looked over her shoulder at me. Her gaze was sharp on the surface. But there, a little deeper, there was something else, something that ran deeper than cold leadership.

I closed my fingers around a fragment of memory.

“And, in light of new information, to bring justice to all those who lost loved ones in the fall of Sarlazai,” she said, “we now find Maxantarius Farlione guilty of war crimes, resulting in the slaughter of four-hundred and thirty-two known Aran lives, and countless other missing persons.”

Four-hundred and thirty-two?!

The protest that I’d been about to unleash died in my throat. The smell of burning flesh hit me so vividly that it might have been happening here, in this room. Suddenly I couldn’t breathe.

Stop. Something is wrong.

“—and in fitting punishment for the severity of these crimes —”

Wake up, Max.

“—and in light of the grotesque power obtained by ex-Captain Farlione—”

Come back.

“—for the protection of all Arans, as the Arch Commandant of the Orders and the acting Queen of Ara, I sentence him to life imprisonment in Ilyzath.”

Ilyzath.

Blink.

Salty ocean sprayed my face. I was standing on a stone walkway. My arms burned. I looked down. More Stratagrams had been tattooed on my skin. My hands were bound. So were my ankles.

The guards on either side of me pushed me forward. The woman with braided hair stood beside us. The air felt wrong, putrid. I looked up. A smooth ivory tower loomed, rising into

grey mist. The ocean thrashed against it so violently that salt sprayed over me, as if nature itself was trying to topple it.

Tall black doors opened before me like loving arms or parting jaws.

Welcome home, it whispered.

I didn't move.

Something still lingered behind curtains in my mind that I couldn't part — something so important. But my mind was a collection of broken pieces that didn't fit together. Something escaped me. Something was missing.

I peered over my shoulder. I could have sworn I saw a figure there, shrouded in fog and the mist of the sea. A woman with mismatched eyes and spotted skin, reaching out for me.

Come back, Max.

“Come on,” one of the guards muttered, and pushed me forward. The cold shadow of the prison enveloped me. It seemed to slither, a serpent of shadows, and it wrapped around me like a lover's embrace.

I told you, Ilyzath crooned, *this is where you belong.*

I did not belong here.

I stopped short, just before the doors.

“Move—” the guard growled, but I whirled around.

All at once, the broken pieces snapped together. I remembered all of it, every moment rendered in perfect, fleeting clarity.

Nura stood still, watching me.

“Does this feel good, Nura?” I ground out. “Does this feel right?”

She said nothing.

One of the guards tried to grab me, but I held my ground.

I thought of Tisaanah. I thought of Sammerin. I thought of Moth, and the people who had relied on me to lead them, to protect them.

I had let them down.

Tisaanah would keep fighting. The thought came to me with an equal measure of pride and sadness. All I'd wanted was for this world to be good enough to let her rest. Now she would be fighting forever.

I resisted the guards' grips for one more second, meeting Nura's stare.

I pitied her.

"You have made such a massive mistake," I said.

"Come *on*—" the guard growled. I pushed his grip away and turned around. I didn't hesitate as I walked into Ilyzath's open maw. It was only after the shadows enveloped me that the fear took hold. My memories withered. I was seized by sudden desperate desire to turn back one last time, to see if there was someone there reaching for me — a girl with spotted skin and mismatched eyes.

Max, come back—

Too late. The door had closed.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-NINE

TISAANAH



The garden was especially lovely today. When I looked outside the window, I saw nothing but a sun-drenched expanse of color, like paint spattered upon a canvas. It was overgrown and feral. The way I loved it most.

Day turned to sunset turned to night. The familiar clutter of our bedroom surrounded us. I felt so safe here. Max's lips were at my earlobe, my throat, my jaw. And then, at last, my mouth. Kissing him felt like coming home. Our bodies melted into each other, limbs intertwining, heat mingling, until there were no boundaries where he ended and I began.

"Tisaanah," he murmured.

"Hm?"

"What if this was always us?" Another kiss, and another. I was drunk on them.

"This?"

"All of this." He pulled away, just enough for me to look into his eyes, our lips still nearly brushing. "Do you ever think about that? What if this was us, forever?"

Gods, the way he said it. The way he looked at me. Like it was a question he truly wanted to know the answer to. Fear clenched in my stomach — the fear that I hadn't made myself into someone deserving enough of this kind of love, yet. The fear that when I opened my fingers to give him whatever I had locked away for so long, it would not be something worth taking.

But I looked at him, and I loved him, and that love was more powerful than the fear of it. I placed my hands on either side of his face.

“I think about it,” I whispered. “I think about it all the time. It is a dream so vivid that I know every detail. I know what your eyes look like surrounded by the lines of age. I know what your hand feels like beneath mine weathered by decades of life. I know the way our features look combined in our children, the cadence of their voices, the way you sound when you call their names. And I already love them.”

I kissed him again, deeply.

“You make me selfish. You make me want. And nothing has ever been enough, except for you.”

I felt his smile beneath my kiss. Felt his warmth envelop me. And whatever fear I felt in allowing myself to voice such a ridiculous dream, voice a dream that would be so painful to lose, was drowned out by his affection.

How silly of me, I thought. To ever have been afraid of something so beautiful.

But then, my eyes opened. Outside the window, where there had once been flowers, there now was only ash and a burning pile of hands. Where Max’s form had once been, there now was only cold sheets.

Dread fell over me. Dread and horrible regret.

I tore out the door, searching for him. He couldn’t leave me. I hadn’t told him the most important truths. I hadn’t given him my dream to share. There was so much he needed to know.

And I could not lose him.

I could not lose him.

I ran outside, ash still burning beneath my feet, scorching my skin.

I screamed his name.

But he was already gone.

THE SKY WAS blue and cloudless.

No — it wasn't the sky. It was fabric. The roof of a tent, made of faded blue cotton. The floor seemed to shift and move. My mouth was so dry it felt as if it was full of sand. When I jerked upright, I did it so clumsily that I tumbled out of the makeshift bed and fell in a heap on the floor.

The air smelled different. And it was hot, dry. Not the moist cool air of Ara in the winter.

Reality came back to me in pieces. The Arch Commandant battle. The attack by the Syrizen, by the shadows — by the Fey.

Cutting it out of Max's mind.

Panic suddenly overwhelmed me. I knew right away that something was wrong. Everything was wrong.

I was halfway across the tent, on my hands and knees, when the curtain parted.

"Tisaanah." Sammerin said my name in one breath of relief. "You woke up."

"Tisaanah?" I heard the shout from outside. Seconds later, and Serel pushed his way through, already on his knees beside me, wrapping me in a rough embrace. "I was so afraid you were never going to wake up. Gods below, after a month, I—"

A month?!

I was only looking at Sammerin's face. Something in it made my stomach churn with dread.

"What happened?" My voice was hoarse.

"We fled," Sammerin said, quietly. "Fast." There was a wrinkle between his brows. Something he was not saying.

Panic rose.

"Where's Max?" I asked.

Neither of them answered.

“*Where’s Max?*”

Silence. Horrifying silence.

I tried to get to my feet, stumbled. Serel tried to stabilize me, but I yanked my hand away.

“We had to leave fast,” Serel said, quietly. “After the collapse at the Scar, the Syrizen were already looking for you. And Sammerin. And all of us. Ishqa brought you back to us.”

I didn’t care about how little sense any of that made. I didn’t care about how casually Serel mentioned Ishqa’s name, or that he knew Ishqa at all. I didn’t know why he was telling me any of this when it didn’t answer my damned question.

My head whipped to Sammerin. Sammerin, who was looking at me with this terrible, terrible sadness.

“Sammerin. Tell me where he is.”

And then Sammerin said, quietly, “He is in Ara.”

In Ara?

Where were *we*?

Bile rose in my throat. I forced myself to my feet, ignoring Serel as he tried to steady me, as if I were a newborn deer about to fall. I pushed past Sammerin and stumbled outside, squinting against blinding sunshine. The smell of the ocean hit me all at once.

Ara’s ocean? No, that smelled thick and weedy. This... this was dry and salty.

When my eyes adjusted, I was looking at a beach. Large tents, like the one I had stumbled out of, were set up along it. People — men, women, children — were going about their business outside. It was clear that this was a settlement that had been here for some time.

Slowly, people stopped. Stared at me in silence.

It took me a moment to realize that these were the Threllian refugees. Only one of them approached me. Filias,

who took two steps forward, then stopped, lips parted, looking lost.

They were all looking at me with such *pity*.

“Where are we?” I demanded, to no one in particular.

“We are in Threll.” A gentle voice came from behind me. I whirled around to see Riasha, books stacked in her arms, as if she had been on her way somewhere important.

All the air left my lungs. “Threll?”

“We fled. Do you remember, child?”

I did not remember. I didn’t remember anything.

“Of course you didn’t. You were... in and out. Ishqa told us everything, as we left. He brought you to us. Told us of the Fey war, and how they have allied with the Threllian Lords.” Hatred flickered in her eyes. “The new Arch Commandant hunted everyone who had anything to do with you. Just like you feared. So we fled. Barely escaped, if I’m being honest.” Her gaze rose past me, to Filias. “And now we are here. Biding our time, until we can fight.”

No.

None of this made any sense. How could I have been unconscious for so long? How could I have made it out, but Max didn’t? The last thing I remember, we were entangled. Even our minds were locked together.

How could I have escaped without him?

My gaze fell to the horizon, to the sea. The next thing I knew, I was running down the beach, my limbs only half-cooperating. I didn’t stop until the cold rush of the surf hit my feet, then ankles, then my shins, and then I fell down to my hands and knees in the water. I tasted nothing but salt.

“Tisaanah.”

I hated how gentle Sammerin’s voice was. How calm. How could he be *calm*?

“How could you have left him?” I whirled to him. The words wrenched through me like knives. I didn’t realize I was

weeping until sobs contorted my words. “How could you have left him behind?”

Pain shuddered across Sammerin’s face. He said nothing.

“We have to go back for him.”

“We’ve tried, Tisaanah. Many times. Nura has him. She sentenced him to Ilyzath.”

I closed my eyes.

This pain put everything else to shame.

“No,” I choked out.

My love, trapped in a place that preyed upon his mind, that twisted all of his worst memories. The most precious soul imprisoned in the most horrific place. The thought of it made me want to tear out my own heart. The thought of it made me want to burn down the world.

“We will find a way to get him out, Tisaanah,” Sammerin murmured, but my rage was already bubbling over.

“We must go back now. Now, Sammerin.” My voice rose to a hysterical spike. I could barely breathe. “We cannot leave him there, not for a second longer. We cannot leave him. We can’t—”

Sobs unraveled my words. Sammerin’s arms wrapped around me, and without thinking, I clung to him, to his stability. I felt his grief, his anger, settle over mine.

“We are going to get him out,” Sammerin whispered, against my hair.

I pulled away from him and looked out across the sea. It was an endless expanse. Thousands of miles of ocean between here and Ara — thousands of miles between me and Max.

I thought of that goodbye kiss, right between my eyebrows.

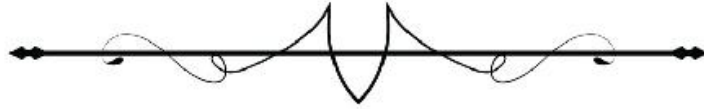
I thought of everything I didn’t tell him. Of the life we could have built together.

And I thought of the person who had taken him from me.

I had no words for this. But I sank to my knees and looked out over the sea, as if, if I tried hard enough, I could reach out over those thousands and thousands of miles, reach out for him in Ilyzath.

And I let my grief become *rage*.

EPILOGUE



Nura was tired.

She had attended several coronations. When she was very young, she attended the coronation of Sesri's father. Then the spiritual coronation of Sesri's advisors, and the official coronation of Sesri, after that. She had, thankfully, missed Zeryth's — probably best for everyone — but she could imagine the sort of affair that had been.

This? This had been unlike any of them.

She had knelt, solemn, as the head advisor placed the crown on her brow, and what she had seen in the eyes of the crowd was not excited hope, but petrified fear. The celebration, if one could call it that, had been staid and quiet, heavy with hushed whispers. It had broken up early. That was fine with her. Nura had never been good at celebrating. And now, so much weighed upon her mind that it seemed like a poor use of time, anyway.

People were terrified. How could they not be? They had just found out their country was at war with a mythological race that they had all thought to be five-hundred-years extinct. There was nothing more terrifying than that, especially when they had all already seen the reality of the danger.

The aftermath of the battle of the Scar had been horrific. Most of the Syrizen had been slaughtered. Dozens of civilians died when the Scar fell in, unsettling the Orders outbuildings built on top of it. It was a miracle that Nura had survived. Nura, and—

She pulled her mind away.

She couldn't sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw visions of destruction, of what the Fey would do to Ara if she failed.

She rose from her chair and went to the mirror. It was a gaudy thing, decorated with gold and jewels. Everything in the Palace was gold. The Towers were not exactly the most welcoming place, but over time, she had managed to make them her home. The Palace, though, was an entirely different matter. It seemed like the walls themselves were judging her. This mirror certainly was. The woman who stared back at her was gaunt and exhausted. Her burn scars were visible beneath the loose drape of her nightgown. A new scar now ran from her cheek down over her jaw, a gift from the collapse. She now had to mask a permanent limp, too, and a headache that had followed her for the last three weeks straight.

Still. She was lucky.

Unlike—

She pulled her mind away. No. She had to walk.

She put on a robe, careful to wrap it tight enough to cover the burns at the base of her throat, and slipped out the door. She padded barefoot down marble-floored hallways. The portraits on the wall seemed to follow her with disapproving stares.

She went to the throne room. It was a beautiful space. Massive stained-glass windows adorned the far wall. During the day, they cast glittering multi-colored sunlight across the entire interior. Now, the moonlight dipped the floor in a mournful blue, the world reduced to icy monochrome.

Nura reached the bottom of the stairs and turned. For a moment, her heart caught in her throat. Then she swallowed and ascended the dais. Slowly lowered herself into the throne.

The view from up here was stunning. She could see the entirety of the throne room laid out beneath her, the floor cast in immaculate mosaics. Through the windows, the moon was warped and fractured.

It was utterly silent here. Silent save for the ghosts.

The crown, a delicate creation of silver, sat beside the throne. Nura lifted it and placed it on her head.

She had sat here, like this, earlier today. Then, she'd been so nervous, so jittery, she had barely been able to think. Now, she could do nothing but think. She wasn't sure which was worse.

She had done the right thing, she told herself.

The Fey were coming — worse, they had already come. They had taken the lives of her people. Ara wouldn't be able to survive this without strong, decisive leadership. She knew this. Knew it in her bones.

She had done the right thing.

Still, here, in the shadows, she felt a looming presence. Sometimes, out of the corner of her eye, she thought he was standing there. Max, wearing the same expression he had when she sentenced him.

She reached into her pocket, deep, until her fingers hit the rough seam. Until they closed around a cold crystal shard. Morrigan's Ice. Unfinished.

She withdrew her hand and looked down at the necklace in her palm, and thought of the woman who had given it to her. That woman had loved her — loved her when no one else did, loved her when she had needed a mother so, so much.

If that woman was alive today, she would not love Nura now. Not after what she had done to her son.

Perhaps Nura did not deserve to be loved, anyway. Perhaps love was just another sacrifice.

She pushed the thought away. She folded her fingers into a fist, tighter, tighter, *tighter*, until the crystal gave and cracked, slicing her skin. When she opened her hand, only bloody shards sat in her palm.

She let them fall onto the floor.

She had done the right thing, she told herself.

And it was all worth it. Worth it to save her country. Worth it to win this war. She had what it took. This is what she had fought for. *This was power.*

But there, alone in the moonlight, the last vestiges of her old life in pieces at her feet, Nura did not feel powerful.

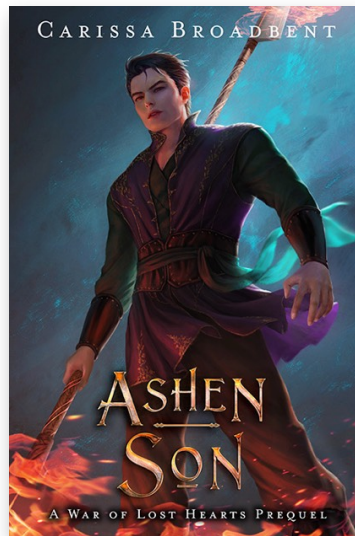
She felt nothing.

END of BOOK II

Tisaanah, Max, and Aefe's journey will come to a conclusion in Book III, coming in 2021.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Island.

Carissa Broadbent has been concerning teachers and parents with mercilessly grim tales since she was roughly nine years old. Since then, her stories have gotten (slightly) less depressing and (hopefully a lot?) more readable. Today, she writes fantasy novels with a heaping dose of badass ladies and a big pinch of romance.

Carissa works as a cybersecurity marketing professional during the harsh light of day, and is also a visual artist. She lives with her partner, one very well behaved rabbit, one very poorly behaved rabbit, and one perpetually skeptical cat in Rhode

